

Eldritch Science

April 2019



Halloween Flight

Editorial

We still have a new 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 Eclipse—The Girl Who Saved the World, Against Three Lands, Minutegirls, Mistress of the Waves, and The One World. If any of you would like a free review copy of any or all of these, you have but to ask.

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Staff Sgt Casalas and Wikimedia

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Halloween Flight

by

Michael Spehar

Yokota Air Base, Japan

1 November 1981, 1630 Local

The phone rang at about the same time the clock radio went off. Captain Martin Holland swatted at the radio and missed. Rolling over in the narrow bed, he grabbed the phone while Christopher Cross sang “The best that you can do, the best that you can do...” Marty hit the radio again and the song cut off. He wasn’t certain but he thought he might hate Christopher Cross.

“Captain Holland,” he muttered.

“It’s your 1630 wakeup call, Captain,” said a bored voice.

“Uh, right. Thanks.”

Marty hung up the phone, grabbed his shaving kit, walked into the small bathroom, and turned on the shower. He stared at his face in the mirror for a moment, still feeling sleepy. He rubbed a hand through his dark hair, reflecting that 4:30PM was a really nasty time to get up and go to work. He got in the shower and let the hot water wake up his muscular, 29-year-old body.

Eldritch Science

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Night Flight — Angela K. Scott

Twenty minutes later, freshly shaved and dressed in his cleanest flight suit, he grabbed his B-4 bag, helmet bag, and his bulky briefcase, loaded with his aircraft Dash 1 and other pubs. Ready to fly. Room key in hand, he walked down the BOQ hallway to the lobby and settled his bill at the desk.

“Hey, Captain. G’morning. Er, evening.” Marty turned to see his copilot, loaded down with her own gear, looking a little sheepish.

“Hi, Jill,” Marty said, then smiled. “Life in the good old Midnight Air Command. How’d you sleep?”

“Oh, pretty good, considering. Glad we’re headed home tonight.” 1st Lieutenant Jill Mallory, just 23-years-old, looked about 17, with freckles scattered on her cheeks and nose. She’d been with the squadron for only about six months, straight out of undergraduate pilot training (UPT) and the C-141 school, but was a quick study and eager as a puppy. Marty liked her.

Marty nodded. “Yes, those short shuttles, Japan to Korea and back, can get pretty tiring.

Good experience for you, though. Get your workout?”

Jill smiled. “Yes, they’ve got a good gym here.” Years of gymnastics and cheerleading had turned her into something of a gym rat. Though she was no longer fanatical about it, her workouts kept her fit and alert. In a Service still unused to women flyers, working out seemed the best way to spend free time on the road.

For the past six days, they had been flying between American bases in Japan and South Korea, moving personnel and equipment to Korea for a big military exercise. The flight legs were short, especially for their large C-141 Lockheed Starlifter, but getting to see several bases a day was good for a new copilot. Now, they were finished, with only a long flight to Hawaii and a shorter one to the west coast between them and home.

Their aircraft, tail# 65065, painted in its dark green camouflage, waited for them in front of the Yokota passenger terminal, right where they had been told to park it the day before. The thought was to make it easier to load any passengers bound for Hawaii or the States.

“So much for that idea,” Marty grumbled. Normally, they might have as many as twenty or thirty pax going back to the States on leave or for training. Not tonight. He’d gotten the word from the command post duty controller.

“HRs,” the major in the Command Post window announced. “Twelve of them. Happened two days ago. Some kind of explosion up on the DZ. A bunch of kids from the 25th Infantry Division. A C-130 flew them in this morning and we’ve got orders to get them home immediately. We only have about a dozen pax in the terminal and none of them wanted the flight. We didn’t push it, so you’re loaded with some hazardous – just some hydrazine, some pallets, a piece of oversize - an Army vehicle, and four sets of three caskets in the last four floor pallet positions. There will be some sort of ceremony upon arrival at Hickam.”

Marty had carried human remains (HRs) before. It always made for a sad, subdued flight. At least the caskets would be out of sight at the rear of

the aircraft. And he understood the urge to get them home to their loved ones. Anyone would.

Now, he stood in the door of the crew bus, looking on as a cold, autumn rain soaked the aircraft and the tarmac. The auxiliary power unit was running with its usual white noise and light streamed from the crew door and the still open clam-shell doors in the rear. An unexpected chill ran down his spine.

“Captain, anything wrong?” asked Jill from behind him.

“Uh, no. Nothing.” Grabbing his bags, Marty looked back. “Did you remember to get the weapon?” He referred to the aircrew defensive weapon, a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver which, by regulation, had to be carried by a pilot when it wasn’t locked up. In their squadron, the dubious privilege of carrying it was always given to the copilot and God help the young man or woman who forgot it in an armory somewhere. A second weapon was carried by one of the enlisted in the crew, normally a loadmaster.

“Yes, sir. It’s under my jacket.”

Good, let’s talk to the crew.” Marty stepped out into the rain and the bus pulled away, tires hissing on the wet tarmac.

With their other bags thrown into the crew rest loft, the two pilots pushed their helmet bags, containing checklists, headsets, and personal gear into the spaces outboard of the pilot seats. While Lt. Mallory got into her seat to prep the navigation system, Marty turned to speak to Tech Sergeant John Wilson, the flight engineer and crew NCOIC. As the non-commissioned officer in charge, Wilson took care of the enlisted part of the crew. The oldest man in the crew, he had served in Vietnam, flying in C-130s. He was married, with two children. The backup flight engineer, Staff Sergeant Leroy Harrison, though a few years younger, was a good friend of Wilson. They often played basketball together at whatever court could be found during their crew rest. The two had years more flying experience than the two loadmasters,

Sergeant Randy Miles and Airman First Class Hiram Johnson. Miles was an ex-Ohio farm boy, while Johnson hailed from Sacramento, California.

“Sergeant Wilson, how’s it going?” Marty asked. “Everybody eat? At Wilson’s nod, he continued. “Anything new in the 781? And why are we on APU power? What’s wrong with the external power cart?”

Wilson picked up the thick Form 781 binder, which listed all the maintenance deficiencies and corrective actions performed on the aircraft. “Nothing new from yesterday, Captain. We’ve got a couple small electrical glitches, though. For some reason, the aircraft can’t get power from the external cart. The Trans Alert people say the cart checks out, but plug it in and we get nothing. APU works fine, though, so no problem.”

Marty nodded. “Well, write it up. It’s probably the rain or something. What was the other glitch?”

Wilson pursed his lips. “Now, that’s a little more weird, Captain. All the cabin lights went out as they were loading the HRs. No power loss that I can find. The APU was steady and the cockpit lights were fine. We checked the breakers and they were all in. I finally reset them all and the lights came back on. It delayed loading for a while, is all.”

Marty hesitated, then nodded again. “Okay, write it up. If it happens in flight, there’s nobody on board likely to complain. He paused. “Say, why are the clam shells still open?”

Wilson shrugged, “Don’t know, sir. Better ask Sgt Miles.” As the aircraft commander turned away, Wilson spoke again. “Oh, and sir, the fuel people put too much fuel on the aircraft. About 12,000 pounds worth. You want them to come out and defuel us?”

Marty thought about it and bit his lip. The Command had strict rules about carrying too much fuel as it increased fuel burn. “No, I don’t think so,” he said. “We’re not on a fuel pit, so they’d have to bring out a truck. On Sunday night, in the rain. We might have to wait an hour for them. We’re not all that heavy. Just get the take off data correct. Sound good, Sergeant?”

“Sounds good to me, sir. Let’s get this bird home.”

Marty found Sgt Miles at the rear doors, though he had to go outside and walk around the aircraft, due to the narrow gap between sides of the cabin and the tracked vehicle loaded almost in the center of the aircraft. Miles was standing on the ramp, staring at the flag-draped triple caskets loaded on the last four pallet positions. Another figure stood next to him, also silent, not moving.

“Sgt Miles! Sgt Miles!” Marty yelled, getting no response until he hit the loadmaster’s shoulder. “What’s going on? Why are the doors still open?”

Sgt Miles stared at his aircraft commander, then turned to look, first at the figure next to him, then the caskets, and finally back at Marty. He visibly shook himself and blinked his eyes rapidly.

“Doors? Doors?” Miles stammered. “I, I, I wanted to check the clearance around that ve, vehicle. The safety aisle measures within regs, but I keep getting stuck trying to get past it.”

“Well, is it safe or not?” Marty asked impatiently, looking at the silent figure next to his loadmaster.

“Y, yes, sir, it’s safe, I guess. You just have to be careful not to get entangled in the web seats folded against the wall. I can do it.”

“Then let’s do it, okay? Now.”

“Yes, sir. Right now.” Miles looked steadier and moved towards the hydraulic controls for the mammoth ramp and clam shell doors.

Marty turned towards the other figure on the ramp, seeing the insignia of an Army captain, though he was unshaven and was wearing a dirty field uniform. The Army officer stared at the caskets.

Marty touched the officer’s elbow. “Say, who are you? What are you doing here? Are you accompanying these men?”

The Army officer made a sound, almost a laugh. “No, no not yet. I told them, you see. Hurry, we needed to hurry.”

“So, these were your men?” Marty asked. Look, we have to get off the ramp, so we can close the doors. Okay?”

“Yes,” the man replied. “Off the ramp. They don’t need any more orders.”

“That’s right, Captain. Come with me,” Marty

said gently. There was obviously something wrong with him. Marty led the man off the ramp and safely away from the aircraft to a maintenance truck and seated him in the rear. “Don’t move, okay? The maintenance people will take you to billeting, okay? Just stay here.”

The Army captain did not reply, but stayed seated. After a word with the maintenance sergeant, Marty hustled to the cockpit as the clam shell doors slowly closed.

As Marty strapped himself in his seat, he scanned the brightly lit cockpit. It all looked normal, but he had an unusual feeling of disconnection, as if the last few minutes had changed something. Him, maybe. He was brought back to center by his copilot.

“The INS’s are loaded, sir, and I warmed up the radar. I’ve asked for clearance and we’re ready to go.”

Marty blinked. Jill’s chipper voice made things seem normal again. He put on his headset.

“Engineer, all set? Scanner?”

Wilson replied from the engineer station. “Good to go, pilot. The Take Off and Landing Data card is in front of you.”

From his safety scanner position outside the aircraft, Sgt Harrison rogered up with a hint of a Georgia drawl. “Scanner’s ready, Pilot. We’re clear for engine start.”

Feeling more normal now, Marty asked, “Loadmasters, you okay down there?”

Airman Johnson looked at Sgt. Miles who was sitting, strapped in, but not looking at him. Johnson touched his mic, “Pilot, Loads are ready.”

“Crew, this is the pilot. Starting engines checklist.”

The engine start process went normally, except when Wilson switched from APU power to normal engine generator power. All the lights in the cabin went out. This was followed by a loud yell, almost

a shriek. The lights came back on.

“Load, Pilot. What’s going on down there?”

“Pilot, Load. Sgt Miles was startled when the lights went out. He’s okay, now.

“Okay. Copilot, see if you can get our clearance, then tell Ground we are ready to taxi.”

“Pilot, Copilot. Clearance is coming up on UHF One. Ground is on UHF Two, but I have a lot of static on my side. How is yours?”

Marty checked his reception on the #2 UHF radio. He heard quite a bit of static. It sounded like someone crinkling paper. A lot of paper.

Marty responded quickly. “I’ve got it, too. Look up the VHF freq for Ground and we’ll use that. Save UHF One for Tower and Departure.” He looked outside at the Scanner standing in front of the nose. “Scanner, Pilot. Chocks out.”

Thirty feet in front of the Starlifter’s nose, Sgt Harrison responded, “Chocks coming out.” He motioned to the Transient Alert people, swinging his lowered fists with thumbs pointed out from his sides, signaling them to pull the chocks. As the ground people pulled the heavy wooden blocks from in front of the aircraft main gear, Harrison began to coil up his long intercom cord and quickly walked to the open crew entrance door. He and the junior loadmaster secured the crew door for departure.

#

Outside the aircraft, the two Transient Alert men hustled to their vehicle, the younger one taking the chocks with him. He muscled the two heavy objects into the bed of the truck and got into the front passenger seat. With the doors closed against the jet noise, conversation was again possible.

“Dang it!” he yelled, rubbing his hands together.

The sergeant behind the wheel looked over at him. “What’s wrong?”

“My hands feel near frozen. Those chocks felt like ice!”

The driver looked at the chocks through his rear view mirror. The brightly painted chocks did seem covered with a bit of frost, now melting in

the rain. Then he noticed something else. “Hey, where’s that officer who was sitting in the back seat?”

Still rubbing his hands, the other man shrugged. “Don’t know, Sarge. I never saw him. Maybe he went into the terminal.”

The sergeant considered and grunted, “Heh. Officers. The pilot asked me to take the guy to billeting. Now, he’s gone. Well, if he’s in the terminal, he can find his own way to billeting. Let’s go get some coffee.”

#

With the radios straightened out, things in the aircraft became right with the world. MAC 36065 was cleared to taxi and the crew completed the Before Takeoff Checklist. They were soon cleared for takeoff.

Marty spoke. “Crew, because of the rain, this will be a standing takeoff. Power will be set prior to brake release, Taking the runway, now.”

Positioned on the runway centerline, Marty scanned the instruments one more time and looked down the runway into the gloom. Moving all four throttles smoothly forward, he carefully set takeoff power, tweaking two engines up a bit to equalize the thrust on all four. He glanced over at Jill Mallory who nodded at him. Marty nodded back and released brakes.

The Starlifter, weighing nearly 290,000 pounds, slowly gathered speed, the bumps in the runway noticeable at first, but smoothing out as they accelerated. Marty gripped the yoke with his left hand and kept his right on the throttles, his eyes moving in a well-practiced scan between runway, engine instruments, and airspeed indicator. As the airspeed increased, he felt the controls begin to respond to his hands and feet. Passing 100 knots indicated and nearing rotation speed, Marty felt on top of things for the first time that evening. Things always improved once he was airborne.

Lt. Mallory carefully watched the takeoff, admiring Captain Holland’s smooth technique, and at the correct speed made the call.

“Rotate.”

Marty increased back pressure on the yoke

with his left hand, expecting the nosewheels to come up off the runway. They didn't.

Moving his right hand to the yoke, Marty pulled back firmly with both hands. Nothing. A thrumming sound, almost an ululation, suddenly became audible, growing in strength. The nosewheels stubbornly stayed on the ground. He glanced at the engine instruments. The power was set correctly. Airspeed. Well above rotate. The sound, whatever it was, had become quite loud. He looked at the rapidly diminishing runway ahead and pulled hard. Suddenly, the nose came up a bit, then bounced into the air, followed almost immediately by the mains. The loud thrumming sound quit. From being stuck on the ground to instantly flying startled him. Gathering his wits, he noted their positive rate of climb and belatedly ordered, "Gear up!"

Next to him, Mallory reached for the gear handle and, repeating, "Gear up," quickly moved the big round handle to the UP position. "Gear is up!" "Flaps up."

"Flaps coming up. Flaps up."

"Contact Departure." Marty listened as the copilot made the call. While carefully flying their cleared departure route away from Tokyo, Marty could not restrain himself.

"Engineer, Pilot." He looked over his shoulder to confirm that Sgt Wilson has heard him. The NCO at the panel looked at him. "Yes, sir?"

"What the hell was that on takeoff? The nose didn't want to come up. We almost died. Did you figure the data wrong?" Marty had another thought. "Loadmaster, Pilot."

"Pilot, Load."

"Check our weight and balance. And give me the sheet." His anger was clear over the intercom. "We'll talk at cruise altitude."

The two NCOs were surprised at their commander's agitation. Captain Holland was normally cool as a cucumber. Both of them immediately began checking their work, neither wanting to be blamed for whatever had just happened.

Forty minutes later, stable at FL350, over the

Pacific, far above the clouds and under a brilliant moon, calm settled once more on the flight deck of MAC 65065. Marty sipped on a cup of coffee provided by Airman Johnson, being careful not to spill. He looked at the weight and balance form and the recalculated TOLD card sitting in his lap and sighed. Both were correct, nobody had erred. He looked at Wilson and Johnson and spoke off intercom.

"Sorry, guys. I don't know what to make of it. I swear it was almost as if she didn't want to leave the ground. Scared the hell out of me." He paused. "The flight controls seem to be working fine. I'd tell you to write it up in the 781, but what would we say? 'Aircraft seemed disinclined to fly?' Or, 'Nosewheel sticks to runway?' That'll go over good with the maintenance folks. And what the heck was that noise? I've never heard that before."

Airman Johnson wisely kept silent, but Sgt Wilson tried to help his aircraft commander. "Well, sir, sometimes stuff just happens, you know? That's why they pay us the big bucks. It could have been a transient issue with the elevator. And the gear. I'll have them checked at Hickam."

Marty nodded. "Yes, okay. Again, sorry, guys. Let's just get this bird home. He looked at Johnson and asked, "What's wrong with Miles?" The senior loadmaster had stayed in his seat down in the cabin.

"He says he's got a headache," Johnson replied. "He might be coming down with something."

Marty agreed. "Yes, he didn't look very good on the ground. Well, we shouldn't need him. Tell him to get some rest. Try to sleep."

Johnson nodded. "Yes, sir. I can handle it downstairs. He didn't mind covering for Sgt Miles, who was a nice enough guy, even if he had some quirks, like making the junior loadmaster carry the gun all the time. For training, he said. Hiram suspected there was some sort of bet among the senior loadmasters to see how long it would take to for him to complain about the gun. He told himself it wouldn't be on this mission, anyway. Speaking of comfort. He looked at the flight engineer, "Can you throw another log on the fire, Sergeant Wilson? It's pretty cold in the cabin."

Wilson grinned. The environmental systems on the C-141 were controlled from the flight engineer's station. "Sure thing, Hiram. Just keep the coffee coming." He wondered if Hiram was still carrying the enlisted crew weapon.

Dismissing the two enlisted men, Marty put his headset, reclined his seat, and keyed his intercom. "Copilot, Pilot. I'm gonna take a nap, Jill. Wake me in an hour, okay? Copilot's aircraft, Copilot's radios." Seeing Mallory nod in agreement, Marty punched buttons turning off his radios and tried to get some rest.

From his spot on the lower crew bunk, Sgt Harrison tried to lighten the mood. "Hey, has anyone else noticed that we're scheduled to fly back into Halloween tonight?" Hearing a series of acknowledging double clicks on the intercom, he snorted and lay down.

#

Airman Johnson came down the short ladder from the cockpit and looked over at Sgt Miles, who had reclined in one of the passenger seats loaded in the first pallet position, empty for lack of passengers. Miles looked to be sleeping, with a small pillow under his head and a thin, olive drab blanket covering his body. Hiram hoped his instructor wasn't seriously ill, but he wasn't too worried. With no passengers, he had nothing to do and little to worry about. The Captain had scared him a touch, but that had gone away once it was clear he hadn't screwed the pooch on the weight and balance issue. He had wondered what that loud sound on takeoff was – it had been especially loud down in the cabin. He'd never heard anything like it before. "*It came from someplace aft,*" he thought. "*Probably the landing gear.*"

Hiram picked up the novel he had been trying to read all trip. It was the new Stephen King story, "Cujo." He liked the way King made mundane things turn scary. Some time went by and his eyes slowly closed while the book slipped down his chest to his lap. He dozed.

#

The cold woke Sgt Miles, and he felt groggy and confused. "Damn, it's cold," he muttered. "Engineers never think of the passengers." Eyes barely opened, he grabbed a stack of blankets and made his way silently aft, towards the back of the aircraft. Without conscious thought, he carefully picked his way past the vehicle in the middle of the cabin. The footing was difficult, but it wasn't anything he hadn't done a thousand times before. His head throbbed with a dull pain as he got past the vehicle. His eyes widened as he saw what was waiting there.

#

Up in the pilot's seat, Marty felt a nudge at his elbow and came awake immediately in the manner of all aircraft commanders taking a nap in flight. He looked to his right and saw the copilot who was pointing at her own headset. Marty pulled up the intercom button and hit the mic switch.

"What's up? he asked. "How long did I sleep?"

"About 45 minutes, Jill replied. "I would have let you go longer, but..." She pointed at the radar screen in the middle of the instrument panel. The display showed clouds, lots of them, in a storm line some miles ahead. "I thought the weather guy told us we wouldn't run into anything tonight."

Marty rubbed his left eye with a finger and examined the radar screen. "It appears the weather guesser was wrong." He pondered the screen for a moment. "Hmmm, where did this stuff come from?" He reached up and fiddled a bit with the radar tilt. "We still don't have continuous satellite coverage out here," he mused. "Late in the season for a typhoon, though." He looked out the windshield at the long line of storms which were shot through with frequent lightning. "The tops seem to be at our height or higher." He looked left and right trying to judge the extent of the system. It didn't look like they could go around the weather very easily. He sat up straighter in his chair.

"Engineer, Pilot."

Wilson was alert. "Go, Pilot."

"Have we burned enough fuel to climb over this weather?"

Wilson didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir. We should be

able to climb to FL390, no problem.”

Marty nodded. “Good.” He looked at the copilot. “Are we still in contact with Yokota? Request a climb to FL390.”

Jill blushed slightly, which made her look about 13. “Ah, that was the other thing. The HF radio has been acting up. I tried to give a position report a while back and couldn’t get through. Nothing but static.”

Marty pulled up the button for the high frequency radio. He heard the usual flying egg, whistling, crackling noise typical of HF static. And something else, a low, moaning sound that dopplered up and down, like a lost soul in the depths of despair. He punched the button off.

“Man, I hate HF. Just when you need it. . . . Have you tried Honolulu? Or Anchorage?”

Jill nodded. “Yes. Got the same thing on both HF sets. No contact. Uh, I did hear something, sounded like Mildenhall. Couldn’t get through, though.” RAF Mildenhall was an HF station in England. As sometimes happened, atmospheric conditions allowed an HF set to pick up a signal in unexpected locations, in this case, half way around the world.

Marty snorted, “Well, they can’t help us much.” He gestured toward the radar screen. “And we’re not flying through that stuff, either. Engineer, give me climb power.” He looked at Mallory. “Give a call to Yokota in the blind, telling them we are going to FL390 for weather. Keep trying Honolulu, too. We should be alright. We are well south of the Great Circle traffic from the States.”

He moved the throttles forward and MAC 36065 climbed higher into the night.

#

Hiram woke up at the sound of increasing power in the engines. He picked up his book and looked around. Miles was gone. The cabin temperature was chilly. He figured maybe Miles had gone upstairs to lie in the crew rest area where it would be warmer. He yawned, stretched, and got up, straightening his headset.

“Pilot, Loadmaster,” he called.

“Yes, Load?” The AC sounded abrupt. “What do you need?”

“Uh, are we climbing, sir?”

The pilot was apologetic. “Yes, sorry, I should have announced it. We’re just climbing over some weather. How is Sergeant Miles?”

“I think he’s asleep, sir. Up in the crew rest. Ah, sir, would you like some coffee? Copilot? Engineer?”

A chorus of yes’s answered him. “Coming right up,” Hiram responded. After flying with them for a week, he knew their coffee preferences. A bit later, after delivering the coffee to nodded thanks, Hiram touched the Engineer’s shoulder and asked, “Sgt Wilson, can you give us any more heat downstairs? It’s freezing down there.”

The engineer shrugged, “Sorry, Hiram, you’re getting all I got. It’s pretty cold out there. You could always come sit up here, you know.

Hiram looked around. The scanner was snoring on the lower crew bunk. There were three empty seats, as well, but, as did most loadmasters, Hiram liked the privacy of his work station in the cabin.

“Nah, thanks anyway. Maybe later.” He turned and went to the ladder to downstairs. And stopped. From the elevated position of the flight deck, he thought he could see a light flickering, way back at the aft end of the cabin. Where there shouldn’t be any light at all.

#

Once again down in the cabin, Hiram paused to consider what he had seen. It had looked like someone was shining a flashlight around back by the aircraft ramp. He looked aft, but could see nothing past the dim bulk of the vehicle chained to the deck more than halfway down the cabin. He poured himself a coffee and braced himself as turbulence shook the aircraft. He sipped the coffee, burning his lip as the aircraft bounced again. He decided to wait a bit. If someone was back there, it could only be Sgt Miles and Hiram did not fancy climbing over chains and seats to go check. He thought of the HRs, reposing in the cold comfort of their caskets. And decided to give Sgt Miles

time to do whatever it was he was doing back there. Coffee forgotten on the galley counter top, he zipped up his flight jacket, put on his flight gloves, and sat down, reaching for a blanket. He stuck his right hand under his left arm and adjusted the holstered revolver where it wouldn't pinch. He considered picking up his novel, but suddenly wasn't in the mood for Stephen King, turbulence and all. He nodded off in the cold.

#

MAC 36065 flew on through the night, above the storm and out of touch with the world. Lt Mallory dutifully updated the dual Inertial Navigation units, that together comprised the System, adding waypoints that, with autopilot attached, would bring the aircraft almost to touchdown at Hickam AFB. Jill was beginning to feel out of sorts, slightly nauseous, from the bouncing and from listening to the weird howling and static of the HF radio. She periodically tried different HF frequencies but had no luck. She thought about asking Captain Holland to take over the radio watch, but it was the aircraft commander's leg and by tradition the pilot not flying had the radios. Worse, she knew she couldn't tell the Captain why she really wanted away from the radio. She could swear sometimes the static lifted enough to uncover voices, words almost clear enough to understand, just on the edge of comprehension and getting closer. The voices wanted something, wanted her to do something. But, that was crazy, wasn't it? Another thing stopped her from mentioning it. As a woman, she was super cautious about the image she presented to male pilots, nearly all of whom were senior to her. No way was she going to become known as the silly girl copilot who couldn't stand to listen to the radios.

A cold chill flowed down the neck of Marty's flight jacket and he unconsciously hunched over to stay warm. He thought about asking for more coffee, but his stomach was churning already. With just his intercom button pulled up, he noted how quiet the crew was and he rather liked it that way. He stared at the INS-generated track line in-

dicating the aircraft's path on the radar screen. Straight ahead over the storm. There seemed to be something strange about this storm, turbulent but oddly stable, with almost constant lightning below them that somehow didn't illuminate much of the clouds below. As many minutes went by, Marty noticed something else, the storm was unusually wide. At their current ground speed of just over 500 knots, the storm had already extended over 300 miles and seemed to go on forever. "*How could the weather people or other aircraft have missed such a monster, lack of satellite coverage or no?*" he wondered.

Sometime later, he looked at the clock and knew he should soon hear Mallory give a position report, even if she was not in contact with any station at the moment. He looked over and saw the copilot quickly switching frequencies but staying silent, as if she were listening to something vitally important shifting from freq to freq.

"Copilot, Pilot. How are things going, Jill?"

Mallory started as if she had been caught doing something wrong. "Uh, nothing. I mean, everything's good, sir. Uh, we're coming up on a position report. The one at the dateline." The International Dateline, 180 degrees West (or East, if coming from the other way) marked where one day began and one ended. They were about to fly from 1 November back into 31 October, not that it should matter much in mid-ocean. Marty recalled the scanner's earlier comment. Back into Halloween. Right. He watched the imaginary line on the radar scope come close to the aircraft position at the center. Mallory prepared to make the radio call.

BAM! KABAAAM! An explosive sound like the world ending pounded through the aircraft, accompanied by a blinding light that forced everyone to close their eyes. Everyone was momentarily stunned, dazed by the power of the blast.

Marty shook his head, his dazzled eyes slowly regaining their sight. "*Lightning,*" was his first thought. "*We've been struck by lightning.*" He glanced at the copilot who was holding her head and hit the intercom.

"Crew, Pilot. Everyone okay? How are you, Jill?" The copilot nodded her head and gave a

thumbs up sign. Marty glanced further to his right. Sgt Harrison was dabbing with a rag at spilled coffee running down his panel onto the laminated checklist open before him. Harrison grabbed his mic switch and responded. "Engineer's okay, sir. Lord Jesus, what was that?"

"We must have been hit by lightning," Marty replied. He punched off the MASTER CAUTION light in front of him and looked down at the warning panel in front of the throttles. He saw several red and amber lights, indicating possible damage. The first thing he noticed was that the autopilot had disconnected and the aircraft was drifting off course. That accounted for one of the lights. He grabbed the yoke and began hand flying the aircraft. "Check your systems." He paused. "Where is Sergeant Wilson?"

"Here, sir. Scanner's on. We switched seats a while back. I told you we were going to," said the NCOIC. He was standing behind Harrison, assisting the search for damage. "That was one heck of a jolt." Wilson looked at the large electrical panels on the bulkhead next to the engineer station. "Looks like we've got a bunch of popped circuit breakers. Mostly lights. Some other stuff. Some on the avionics bus."

Marty gently moved the controls. "Yes, autopilot's off. Flight controls seem to be okay. What about the major systems?"

Harrison spoke, his eyes and hands moving quickly around the dozens of dials and switches on his board. "Pilot, Engineer. Most everything looks okay. Engines all good, but I had to reset two generators. Fuel system good. Hydraulics...good. Environmental... Don't know, sir. Looks like we have pressurization, but the heat is off. Looks like we lost one of the heat exchangers. Don't know if I can get it back."

Marty felt some relief. The damage didn't seem too bad. "Good. That's good. Try to reset those breakers and..."

"Pilot, Copilot," Mallory interrupted.

"Wait one, Copilot!" Marty snapped.

"Loadmaster, Pilot." No answer. The copilot waved her hand like a student trying to get the teacher's attention.

Intent on his instruments, Marty snapped,

"What, Copilot?"

"Sir, the storm!"

Marty looked out the windows. Blinked and looked again. They were flying through a cloudless night sky. The storm was gone.

#

Hiram awoke at the loud blast and looked around the darkened cabin, dimly lit by small emergency lights high on the fuselage walls. The normal cabin lights were out. "*What now,*" he wondered. At least they were no longer shaking in turbulence, which was good. He tried to remember what had been happening when he fell asleep, but it was trying to recall something in a dream, hazy and unreal. Hiram stood up and felt a cold breeze coming from the rear of the cabin. Where no breeze should have been coming at all

"Loadmaster, Pilot."

Hiram struggled back to awareness and groped for his intercom switch. Missed. He shivered in the cold and finally found the mic switch. He stood up, feeling dizzy.

"Loadmaster, Pilot!"

Hiram moved to the ladder and looked up into the cockpit.

"Pilot, Load. Sir, what happened? The main lights are out down here."

"Lightning strike. Aside from the lights, how are things down there? Where is Sergeant Miles?"

Hiram still felt confused. "Miles? Isn't he up there with you?" He suddenly remembered the lights at the rear of the cabin. "I think he's checking the cargo. It's really cold down here, sir."

"Yeah, the heat's off." The aircraft commander sounded distracted. "Look, go find Miles and report back. You guys can ride up here. And close the cockpit door."

Hiram reached up and closed the door. Without the lights from the flight deck, he felt the darkness close in around him. Grabbing his flashlight, he started moving back towards the rear of the aircraft. The going was easy past the lower pallets, then he tripped over one of the tiedown chains anchoring the vehicle behind them. From where he stood, the dim emergency lights were blocked

from his vision and the only source of illumination was his flashlight. He suddenly felt very alone and unaccountably tense. He shined the light down the narrow pathway alongside the vehicle. Something flickered just beyond the reach of the light and vanished. Hiram hesitated a moment and slowly picked his way toward the rear. As he neared the open space behind the vehicle he heard something, like a low moan. It was barely audible.

“Miles?” he yelled. “Randy! Is that you?”

The sound came again, louder but indistinct. Hiram carefully placed his foot on the deck past the vehicle and looked up. Something grabbed him and he pulled free, backing up against the aircraft skin. He flashed his light across the open space, seeing figures moving toward him. Gasping in fear, he stuck his right hand inside his flight jacket and tried to pull out the revolver. Something knocked the flashlight from his hand and pulled him over the flag-draped coffins. Hiram screamed in terror, but the sound was buried by the roar of the engines.

#

In the cockpit, the crew anxiously worked to make things correct after the blast. Now hand-flying the aircraft, Marty felt the pressure worst, as he tried to prioritize the actions of everyone in the crew. Unbidden, the old pilot training adage, “Maintain Aircraft Control, Analyze the Situation, Take the Proper Action” popped into his head.

“*Well, first things first,*” he thought.

“Copilot, pilot,” he looked over and caught Mallory’s eye, but spoke for the benefit of the engineers, as well. “Copilot’s aircraft, copilot’s radios. I need to talk with the engineers a bit.”

Jill nodded in understanding. “Roger, Copilot’s aircraft and radios,” she said as she slid his seat forward a bit and grasped the yoke, settling in to fly.

Marty continued, “Just follow the INS, Jill. The waypoints are loaded all the way to Hickam, so we’re fine. Oh, and see if you can contact Honolulu and give them a position report. Make sure they know we are at FL390 and request permission to stay there. Tell me if we can’t. Understood?”

“Copy all,” came the reply. Jill’s voice sound-

ed a bit high, but steady. “Should I declare an emergency?”

Marty hesitated, “No. We’re okay, so far. Tell them we’ve had a lightning strike, but are proceeding and will keep them advised.”

Mallory nodded again, keeping her eyes moving on her crosscheck of the instruments, hands moving slightly on the yoke. “Roger. Understood.”

Marty unfastened his shoulder straps and slid his seat all the way to the rear. Twisting around, he faced the two men at the engineer’s panel. They were looking at an open aircraft Dash 1 which included a complete description of every system on the aircraft. Sgt Wilson was tracing the wiring diagram of the electrical system with his finger.

Marty caught their attention. “Go hot mic. So, what’s up guys? How bad is it?”

Harrison spoke first. “Sir, the engines are good, fuel’s ample and balanced out. Hydraulics good. Pressurization okay, but environmental is really iffy. And the electrical system....” He looked up at Sgt Wilson who took over.

“Captain, whatever that blast was, it fried some electronics. From what I can tell, the environmental and avionics busses took the worst of it.” Wilson stroked his chin. “Some lights, too. I’ve tried resetting some circuit breakers and a bunch of them won’t reset. At least there’s no fire. I think.”

That got Marty’s attention. “You better go down into the avionics bay and make sure.” The avionics bay was immediately under the flight deck, accessible from the cabin. An electrical fire down there might get out of control quickly. And fire was every flyer’s nightmare.

Wilson nodded briskly and grabbed his big, four cell flashlight and a small fire extinguisher. “I’ll be right back.” He hustled out of the cockpit, leaving the door swinging. He was embarrassed he hadn’t thought of it himself.

Marty and Sgt Harrison continued to discuss their options while waiting for Wilson to return.

Deep in concentration, no one remembered the loadmasters.

#

It took Sgt Wilson only a minute or so to open the access to the avionics bay and step in. He

immediately smelled the sharp ozone tang from the various electronic boxes crammed into several metal racks. There were no visible flames and no smoke, though he imagined he could smell the remnants of some burned out components. Many normally blinking status lights were out. He'd been an avionics tech years earlier. That expertise helped as he began to inventory the damage.

While Wilson worked downstairs, Marty turned to his copilot for an update. "You reach anybody, yet?" Mallory gave no hint of noticing. Marty lightly punched Jill's arm. "Do you have anyone on HF?"

"Voices...lots of 'em," the copilot mumbled.

"What's that? Have you got Honolulu?" Marty asked. He scanned the instruments, but everything looked normal. The INS route burned clearly in the center of the radar screen.

Jill finally answered, "Uh, yes, Honolulu has us. Real scratchy, though. We can stay at FL390. They ask us to advise if our status changes." She didn't mention the low moaning and groaning she was also hearing. "*Something about not being finished.*" She'd developed a bit of a headache trying to make it out.

Marty's attention shifted as Sgt Wilson returned to the flight deck. The NCO moved forward and sat on the jump seat immediately behind the pilots and plugged in his intercom.

"There's no sign of fire, thank God. But that bolt or whatever did a zigzag across the electronics. Some things are charred and others just scorched a bit. "Looks like we've lost the TACANs and VORs. Not that we're in range of any." The Tactical Air Navigation system and VHF Omnidirectional Range system gave direction and distance from ground sites, but were normally useless beyond 200 nautical miles or so. "Lucky we have INS. The IFF is toast." The Identification, Friend or Foe system was normally important, but not critical at the moment. "Oh, yeah, and the autopilot looks fried."

Thoughts raced through Marty's mind. Looking at his watch, he realized they had been airborne for over four hours, over half way to Hickam. He looked outside at the dark, lightless ocean. Daylight was maybe two hours off. Loss of the

TACANs and VORs was serious stuff. Midway Island was out there, somewhere behind them, if he needed an emergency landing site, but last he'd heard, Midway was in caretaker status, not fully operational. They didn't even man their radios at night. Guam was somewhere perhaps two hours to the southwest. Likewise, Wake Island. Too far.

"Crew, pilot. We've got four turning and plenty of fuel. The closer we get to Hawaii, the easier it will be to pick up the islands, come daylight and there will be other traffic to help us. Weather is supposed to be clear at Hickam and we can make a visual landing. So, we'll press on. Keep an eye out and let me know if you see anything else go wrong."

In his satisfaction at having made a decision, he failed to notice there had been no response from the cargo compartment. Fifteen minutes later, Marty's confidence was shattered.

#

He'd been studying a topographical map of the Hawaiian Islands. He was certain that he could identify most of them, given good weather. And once he had one, he had them all, with Oahu Island and Honolulu easy to find.

"Pilot, copilot."

"Yes, Jill, what's up?"

"Sir, I've been following INS #2, just like you told me. But look at our heading. It's 082. Isn't that too far north?"

Marty looked at the compass rose on his own Horizontal Situation Indicator which was taking its course information from INS #1. The course needle on the HSI was twitching between 132 and 134 degrees. Which was too far south of the correct course for Hawaii. He knew immediately what was wrong.

"We've got a dual precession. Both INS units must have been knocked off line by the lightning. One's going off left and the other to the right. Fly a heading between them – say about 112 degrees. I'll try to reset one of them. Select A-Hars for input." The independent gyro in the Attitude and Heading Reference System (AHRS) should at least give them a magnetic heading to fly. "Crosscheck

with the whiskey compass.”

Jill stared at Marty. The whiskey compass, a small magnetic disk floating in a liquid-filled sphere near the center of the windscreen, was a relic from the early days of flying. Some people used them on the dash of their cars. The earliest ones had been nothing more than a magnet suspended in alcohol, hence the name. The little disk bobbed around with every bump and jostle of the aircraft and was worthless for accurate flying, but it wasn't connected to any electrical system. Jill hadn't really looked at one since she had first soloed in a small aircraft. It dawned on her that they were in real trouble.

Ten minutes of trying to reset the INS units resulted in failure. Marty couldn't get either one to accept the route coordinates. After staring for while at the inert displays, he turned off both units so they could cool down.

“Can I declare an emergency, now?” Jill pleaded.

Marty realized the young woman was frightened. He spoke softly, “Sure, Jill. Tell them we're having navigation problems and may need a radar steer when we get closer.”

A morbid thought came unbidden and remained unspoken. *“If the jet stream doesn't blow us so far off course that we miss the islands entirely and run out of gas somewhere over the North Pacific.”*

At least, he could relieve Jill of the flying. He strapped in and shook the yoke. “Pilot's aircraft. Tell Honolulu our best ETA Hickam is 2+30 hours.”

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is MAC 65065, declaring an emergency!” Jill Mallory passed the information to Honolulu Radio while trying to ignore the voices telling her to join them.

#

The cold seeped into cockpit, affecting everyone. Each crew member was hunched over, trying to conserve heat. With his hands and feet extended on the controls, Marty felt the lack of heat stiffening his limbs. *“Coffee,”* he thought. *“Hot coffee. If only the power to the galley hadn't... Wait! The*

loadmasters!”

“Loadmaster, pilot! Loadmaster, come in! Sergeant Miles? Airman Johnson!” Marty switched to the loud speaker in the cargo compartment and called again. No answer. The loads had been down there in the dark and cold for a long time.

“Sergeant Wilson, go check on the loads,” Marty ordered, but the NCOIC had anticipated him and was already swinging down to the cargo floor, flashlight in hand. He connected to the long scanner's intercom cord and quickly scanned the empty seats, then opened the door to the aircraft lavatory. Empty. Swinging the flashlight from side to side, he moved aft. What had been cold on the flight deck was absolutely frigid here. He elevated the flashlight and looked at the big vehicle in the middle of the aircraft. He stopped.

The entire vehicle, the sides of the fuselage, and half of the pallet in front of the big machine were covered in thick, white frost. Icicles hung from the ceiling like a forest of stalactites. The floor was covered with ice. Peering past the vehicle, Sgt Wilson could tell that the frost and ice continued all the way aft to the ramp and the pressure doors, though he could only glimpse the upper portion of those structures. The scene reminded him of something. It looked like a tunnel he'd once glimpsed at McMurdo Station in Antarctica. The unheated tunnel had been used to store things which weren't harmed by the cold, broken machines, building materials and such. After a long winter, every bit of moisture, every joule of heat had been sucked out of the tunnel, leaving a frost-covered dead place.

And that wasn't all. A wintery breeze was wafting into his face as he stared aft, which wasn't possible. The aircraft pressurization system pushed air from front to back. It was designed for air to be released through outflow valves in the farthest aft bulkhead of the cargo compartment. Wilson could feel the heat leaving his body, as if the cold were advancing toward him. And there was sound, as well. A low, uneven, up and down sound, like wind through a graveyard. Undertones of an eerie moan came and went. Wilson was suddenly more frightened than he had ever been in his life.

“Scanner, pilot! Sergeant Wilson!” The aircraft commander sounded frantic. “What’s going on?”

Wilson knew he couldn’t go further aft alone. He felt at a loss about how to explain what he saw. But he had to try.

“Pilot, scanner. Uh, sir. Sir, we have some sort of weird ice covering everything in the aft of the aircraft. It’s covering everything from that big vehicle aft. It’s very thick.”

In his seat, concentrating on flying, Marty tried to make sense of what he was hearing. “Scanner, pilot. Where are the loadmasters?”

“Sir, I don’t know. I mean, I haven’t found them. I think they have to be aft.”

Confused, Marty tried again, “Well, can’t you get to them?”

The response was certain. “No, sir. Not by myself. I’m going to need help. Can you send Sgt Harrison down here?”

Now, Marty was thoroughly confused. “What, and leave the engineer’s station?”

Wilson was dead certain. “Yes, sir. If you want us to go aft, it’s gonna take two people, I think. And tell Leroy to bring his gloves and the crash axe.”

#

In the cockpit, Marty twisted around to look at Sgt Harrison who had been listening to the conversation. Harrison shrugged as if to ask “What now, Boss?”

Marty pursed his lips and thought. “*Wilson is a solid man. If he says he needs help, he does. And it sounds like the loads are in danger.*”

“Sergeant Harrison, did you hear what Sergeant Wilson said?” At Harrison’s nod, he went on. “Okay, open the fuel crossfeed valves. How much fuel do we have and is it balanced?”

Harrison spoke softly. “Plenty of fuel, sir. 43,000 pounds by the totalizer. Enough for three hours, forty minutes. As long as it feeds normal, the balance should be okay. Don’t you worry none. Anyways, I’ll be right back.”

The big NCO put on his gloves and grabbed a flashlight and the crash axe from its clips near the door. Nodding at the pilot, he climbed down into

the dark.

#

Wilson had retreated away from the ice a bit and turned as he heard Harrison coming near.

“Hey, Leroy.”

“W’sup, John?” Harrison looked past his friend and saw the ice. “Sweet Jesus, how’d that happen? And what’s that noise? Sounds kinda spooky, don’t it?”

“I don’t know about the noise. The ice, neither. You think maybe we have a stuck outflow valve or something?”

Harrison looked dubious. “We should have seen a reading on the panel if there was a stuck valve. Unless the lightning screwed that up, too. This is one messed up airplane, John.”

Wilson nodded in agreement. “And it’s getting worse. This frost or whatever is coming forward.” He rubbed his fingers over the light frost on the pallet next to him.

“So, where’s Miles and Johnson?” Leroy asked.

Wilson grimaced. “Don’t know. They gotta be somewhere aft of that vehicle. Unless they got out and walked. They sure ain’t here.”

Harrison squinted at the ice. “Well, I guess we best go see, don’t you? How you want to work this?”

Wilson had thought about that. “I’m thinner than you, so I’ll try to climb over that vehicle. You try to knock the ice from the seats in the walkway. They’re all froze together. First one through helps the other. Sound good?”

“Man, nothing about this sounds good, but okay, let’s go before I freeze solid.”

Patting his friend’s arm, Wilson stepped on the boxes of the nearest pallet and began climbing over the vehicle. It was some sort of tracked communications van with folded aerials on top. There was an open section about four feet wide and three high between the aerials. Grasping a handhold, he used his big flashlight to knock the thin icicles from his path.

Harrison approached the side of the van and tried to move the folded web seats out of the way,

but couldn't. The webbing was covered with frost and ice, stuck together. Bracing with a gloved hand against the van, he gave the seats a whack with the axe. Ice shattered. He did it again, and the first seat came free. Leroy pushed it against the outer bulkhead and hit the next one. The low moaning sound seemed to grow louder.

On the top of the van, Sgt Wilson slowly made his way aft. He keenly felt the cold from the frozen vehicle through his thin flight suit, robbing the strength from his arms and legs. A dark foreboding came over him as he knocked the last of the ice away from the edge of the van. He could hear Leroy still chopping at the seats. He extended his arm with the flashlight into the darkness past the van. Suddenly, his arm was grabbed and pulled down. Someone used it to climb up to his level and a puffy, swollen, burned face with no eyes grinned at him. He screamed.



Monster Face — Jose Sanchez

#

On the flight deck, Marty tried to take stock of

their situation. Flying on the magnetic heading, he wondered how far off course they had drifted. Jill was quiet and seemed to be listening intently to something on the radio. The wait for news from his other crewmen was nearly unbearable. The only bright spot was that the sky in the east was showing the dawn and they would soon be in sunlight.

Suddenly a warning horn sounded and the MASTER CAUTION lights came on. The air around him fogged and swirled for a few moments, then cleared. Rapid decompression! He reached to his left for the quick don oxygen mask and swept it on as the aircraft emptied of air. He looked over at Jill and was relieved to see she too had gotten her mask on. Scanning the warning panel, he saw a yellow DOOR OPEN light. The light was wired to seven different doors in the aircraft, but didn't tell him which one was open. Not that it mattered right now. They had to descend, before the lack of oxygen killed the others on board.

Marty pulled all four throttles back to idle and pushed the nose over. He then extended the spoilers, essentially speed brakes, four long panels on the top and bottom of the wings. That allowed him to push the nose over further until they were hurtling toward the ocean below. Marty watched as the needle on the Mach meter climbed towards the safe aircraft maximum of .91 Mach. Sucking in oxygen from the mask, he watched as Jill tried to contact Honolulu. He thought about the crewmen in the back but knew he could do nothing for them. Without oxygen bottles, their time of useful consciousness would be about 45 seconds. It would take minutes to reach breathable air, somewhere around ten thousand feet. Looking down, he could see scattered clouds far below, but nothing serious. And no land in sight.

Some minutes later, passing 15,000 feet, Marty began easing up on the nose and retracted the spoilers. He continued down, allowing the speed to increase to a steady 320 knots. He brought the throttles up and leveled off at 11,000 feet, just above the cloud layer, keeping the speed up. The air was thicker lower, but rougher too. He'd also be limited to less than 250 knots below 10,000 feet. He reckoned speed was more important.

Marty could still hear Jill calling to Honolulu in the blind.

He took off his oxygen mask and watched Jill do the same. Her eyes were wide and frightened. The air was breathable but unnaturally cold, their breaths puffing white. Jill was shivering. The sun had risen and they were in full daylight.

Marty hated what he was about to do. “Jill,” he said. She didn’t respond. “Copilot,” he said louder, waving his hand in front of her face. “Jill, you have to fly the aircraft. Do you understand me? I have to go back and help the crew.”

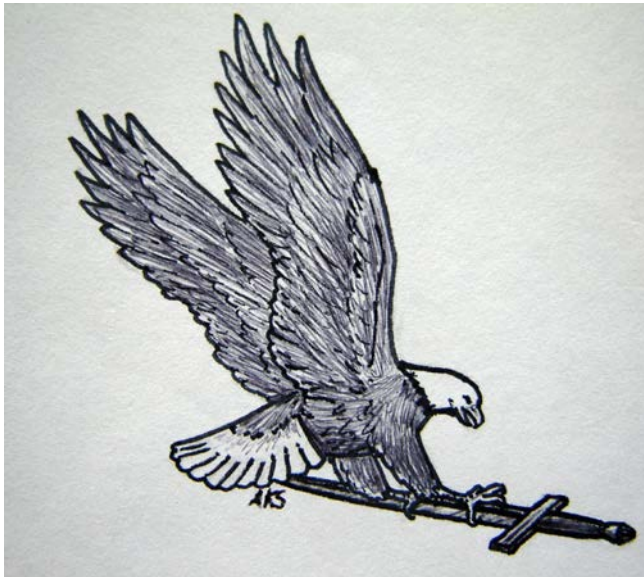
“No, Jill said. “The radios...”

“Forget the radios, Jill. We’re too far out. That can wait. I have to help the crew. You can’t lift them.”

Jill stared at him, her hands in her lap. “I can’t fly. They need me. They want me.” She started to unbuckle from her seat.

The aircraft bounced as it went through a cloud. Marty corrected automatically. “No, no,” he said. “You stay here and I’ll go back.” He tried to stop Jill one-handed but she twisted away. Marty felt the nose dip and went back to flying. It was bitter cold and the cockpit door flapped in a frozen breeze.

“Okay, Jill, you go back. Take the oxygen bottles with you. Make them pressure breathe.



Eagle Sword — Angela K Scott

Find the crew and come right back to me, understand?”

Jill looked at him without expression and turned towards the door. As she passed out of sight, Marty yelled out, “Come right back!”

Marty took stock as he kept flying towards Hawaii. He was certain he could find Hickam if he spotted any island. And he still had the ADF. If necessary, he could home in on a Honolulu radio station. The cold, though. He was shivering in the cold and it was getting worse.

#

Jill climbed down into the cargo compartment and turned around to see ice everywhere. The seats, floor, pallets, everything was white and the cold was a killing thing. She unzipped her flight jacket and pulled out her revolver. Walking casually back aft, she saw them coming for her. Then she opened fire.

#

The Hickam Supervisor of Flying sat outside the Commander’s office, waiting to brief him about MAC 65065. He stared at his shoes wondering what to say. He’d watched the aircraft come in, quite normally, though without radio contact. They had, of course, been waiting for it, as they did for every emergency aircraft, with crash trucks and ambulances, but the aircraft touched down and rolled to a stop at the end of runway 8 Left. And shut down.

They’d had trouble getting the crew entrance door open. It seemed stuck for a bit, but finally gave in. He’d waited while rescue people rushed in, but curiosity got the best of him, so he had climbed into MAC 65065.

He went over his notes again. The entire aircraft interior, from glare shield to the aft pressure bulkhead had been covered in melting ice. Perhaps that explained the dead pilot, left hand on the yoke, right arm lifted as if in the motion of shutting down the engines. But it didn’t explain how they found the rest of the crew. Peacefully dead and frozen inside five of the twelve coffins in the rear.

No sign of trauma. And no sign of the twelve human remains they had carried, anywhere in the aircraft.

A Blast from the Past

by
Robert W. Jennings

I guess I was maybe the first person at the flea market to actually pay attention to the old guy. Of course, that's probably because when Nathan, who owns and operates the Worcester Indoor Flea Market, was showing this old guy around. He was zeroing in on the wall spaces in the back corner where I'm set up.

I've got my stuff along the left wall, and Gina, the orange haired lady across from me has her stuff along the right wall, but along the back wall nobody is set up. And there's nobody in that big center space between us either. Gina and I have been sort of gradually spreading our material out over the past few months, taking more and more space, and not paying any extra for it, which made the place look fuller, which was good for the flea market, for sure, but Gina and I both knew Nathan would be ever so much happier if he could rent some of that empty space to some new dealers and have it filled by tables and people who were paying him real money every week.

Hey, that's understandable. Nathan is not in business for his health; he has to turn a profit or the whole indoor flea market would close. The flea market is set up inside a huge old factory building, and it costs a mint to heat. So, I was only mildly curious when he was showing this old guy around, pitching the wall space and talking about flea market attendance figures, which of course, were an absolute crock. Nobody short of God Almighty could estimate the number of people who came into the place from one week to the next, since the flea market doesn't charge entrance fees, plus, having a lot of people walking around doesn't necessarily mean there are any cash paying customers among them.

Worcester is a town not noted for having a hell of a lot of things for people to do besides going to the movies, eating food and drinking. Many's the

weekend when desperate people would drift in and wander thru the flea market just to have something to do besides sitting around their apartments staring at each other contemplating suicide or murder, or both.

This is especially the case if the weather turns rainy, which it had this particular weekend. There must have been two hundred bozos strolling around gawking at everything, and hardly anybody spending so much as a corroded copper penny on anything. When you see people walking around, laughing and pointing, and nobody has a bag in his hand with merchandise in it, you know you are not going to have a good day. Even if these cheapskates had any money to spend, they would probably be dropping it on the overpriced food and drink at the flea market snack bar.

Anyway, this old guy is looking at the space, and he sees some people stop by my tables and ooh and ahhh and a one of them actually breaks the Stingy Spell cast over most of the people this Saturday, and buys a couple of my used VHS movies, which is good, because I've got plenty of used VHS movies to sell.

I can see the old guy is weakening, so Nathan moves in for the kill. He tosses in two weeks free rent, and, the use of two free eight foot tables to go with it. How can the guy say no? He shakes hands with Nathan, and promises to come in bright and early next Saturday morning.

Nathan brings him around and introduces me. His name is Stoney Graham. He's a pink faced old guy with a sparse headfull of pure white hair. Some old guys age very well and look robust even when they're right on up there. This guy is not one of those.

Nathan says the old guy had set up at some outdoor flea markets before, but got tired of loading and unloading stuff all the time. I can sympathize. We shake hands. I smile, he smiles. He leaves. I try to shuffle the display to get some of the crap I've got turned into money.

I didn't even remember to ask what the guy was selling.

So, OK, I'm in next Saturday early too. The flea market officially opens at eight thirty in the morning, and Nathan would like all the dealers to

be there at least by eight fifteen, better yet, at eight, or even before. But, he can't enforce that rule, and he needs dealers, especially with a bunch of open spaces showing up around the building, so he doesn't bitch at people about it much. Well, not too damn much anyway.

But this Saturday I am in early, because I need to change my display. I bought a bunch of used science fiction paperbacks from a friend who was moving out of the area, and while over at his place I also bought most of his collection of VHS movies, which he admitted, as we were talking about it, mostly included movies he had no intention of ever watching again. So OK, I said, why bother to pack and lug them, sell them to me, which he did.

So, I have to be in early to rearrange the book tables, work the boxes of new SF books into the display as much as I can. This takes time, because unlike most flea market dealers, I have special trays that display the paperbacks spine up, and I put everything in alphabetical order by author, and I have categories; science fiction, detective-mystery, romance, non-fiction and the like. This is one of the main reasons I sell a lot of books at the flea market, and the rest of the dealers sit there with jumbled up piles of paperbacks wondering why they're not moving. Organization counts.

So, I'm organizing. I'm stacking, filling, adding new book display boxes, shuffling stuff over on the side tables to make room for the new boxes of books, rearranging the three long tables of VHS movies to work in as much of the new stuff as I can, moving some of the old movies that haven't sold in a month or more to spine up positions on the back row, and I'm not even completely done when the flea market officially opens at eight thirty.

Meanwhile I see the old guy moving his stuff in. He doesn't use a hand truck or one of the cargo dollies; he piles his boxes into one of the big supermarket grocery carts and hauls it all back to the wall. Nathan has already gotten the guy's tables set up for him. The old guy makes two trips with the shopping cart and then begins opening boxes and taking his stuff out, which I see are CDs.

OK, so right away I know the guy is selling

illegal music. He doesn't have a dozen or a hundred CDs, all different, like he's selling a collection or something. Nope, he has ten copies of each CD, which he makes into neat stacks, all face up.

I sort of mentally shake my head and keep on working. I was going to say something about his display, which was screwed up because he started the stacks all wrong, and his sign had nothing to hold it up and looked really crappy, like it was made with a kid's blunt crayon, which it probably was, but I just keep quiet. I have learned not to get too friendly with people who sell illegal CDs.

I also have severe moral qualms about that whole damn business. People who make pirate copies of legitimate CDs they bought at a legitimate music store are scum gobbling bottom feeders so far as I'm concerned. They're stealing from the copyright owners, who are not, by the way, all multi-national fat cat super rich corporations. They are stealing from the artists who have to make a living from the royalties on that music, not to mention the guys and gals who write the songs, or produce the album, or engineer the sessions and on and on.

All that hard work gets hijacked just so some acne scarred cheap-ass college kid or his younger sibling can save a few bucks on the price of a music CD. What's the difference between making pirate copies of a musician's hard work and some punk kicking in your kitchen door and making off with your stereo, your TV and your other electronic toys at gun point? None at all, that's what I say.

Half the time the pirate copies are crummy anyway, and there's nothing the poor sap who buys the pirate album can do about it either. All sales on CDs are final with these fly-by-night operations.

Plus, I am happy to say, there is a joint effort by the Massachusetts State Police and the local feds to crack down on the pirate music business. They have been raiding flea markets, yard sales and even church swap meets on a regular basis all this year, and a friend who is an auxiliary cop with the city says they are going to step up the effort and try to double the number of raids by the end of this year. Yea, says I, more power to 'em. Music

pirates just taint the flea market with their sorry thieving butts, and the quicker they get their tickets punched the better.

Well, anyway, I get my books and movie displays set up to my satisfaction, finally. The old guy is still struggling, but he has most of the stuff out, more or less displayed where people can see it without twisting their heads completely off. Almost nobody has come into the flea market, which causes me some reservations about the potential prosperity reading for the weekend.

Gina has started screaming at one of her kids, nothing unusual there, so instead of going over and checking out what new household items she is stocking this week, I decide to at least say ‘Hi’ to the old guy and give his tables a quick glance. He probably won’t be around very long, but I don’t want to act like a total jerk, even if the guy is a music pirate.

I say Hi, he says Hi. I look at his front table and I see that almost three rows of his CDs are devoted to the music of Stony Graham. Stony Graham, that’s the old guy’s name. Suddenly a little light goes on in the back of my mind.

“Stoney Graham, isn’t he the cat that sang rockabilly and country rock back in the late fifties and sixties?” I ask.

“Yeah, and on into the seventies and the early eighties too,” he replies.

I look closer, and sure enough, all the photos on the front of the CDs are of the old guy when he was younger, a whole bunch younger.

“No kidding, so you’re the same Stony Graham?”

“In person. You probably thought I was dead.”

To be honest, I never thought about him at all, until I saw the display of CDs. I sort of remembered his music. He had some songs on the charts over the years, some of them I remember as being pretty good. He was one of those guys who was always in the second or third or maybe fourth tier of singers. His songs were good, fast, rhythmic, with decent lyrics, but he never seemed to break out of the pack and hit the true big time.

I picked up one of the CDs, and sure enough, I remembered a few of those songs, “Gadget Girl”, “Paper Promises Don’t Cash in my Bank”, “Fool

for Foolin’ Around”, “Pickup Truck Load of Tears”, a couple of others. The rest of the album was covers of other rockabilly or country rock songs, many of which were standards by now.

I also looked at the record label on the back of the CD: Stony Graham Music Mart, and a little black and white drawn picture of him inside the horseshoe shaped banner. For some reason I felt relieved. Maybe the guy wasn’t a pirate after all.

“So,” I said, “you produce these albums yourself?”

“Yep, just getting into it.” He was trying to stack empty cartons under the table, and doing a lousy job of it.

“Do you have contracts with a distributor, or do you just do flea markets?”

“Both. Well, to be honest, I tried to sell thru distributors, but almost nobody remembers me now. I’m with Ironwood River. You know, they do those classic country reissues, and some New England folk people.”

No, I didn’t know. I’d never even heard of the outfit before.

“They can’t seem to push thru much of my product. The big chains won’t take you on unless you’re well known, and you can’t get well known unless you have hits, or a good distributor. So, I thought I’d try selling them direct.”

“Well, what about record shows, guitar shows, wouldn’t you do better there?”

“Yeah, I probably would, except there aren’t very many record shows left anymore, not that many guitar swaps either. The next music collector’s show won’t be till June, down in New Jersey. So, I thought I’d try the flea markets. I need to bring in some money.” He finally had the last of the cartons stowed out of the way.

“Why not do live shows, sell the CDs during the breaks?” I asked. “That’s how most of the folk music and alternative rock people do it around here,”

“Love to. Love to be able to perform again. Can’t do it anymore. I’ve got real bad arthritis in my shoulders and the fingers of my left hand. Doctor’s can’t do much about it, except prescribe bottles of dope to ease the pain. But I can’t play anymore, and at my age the voice isn’t near as

strong as it used to be either. Probably for the best.” He smiled a sad old-guy kind of smile, very wistful. If I’d been a young, female rockabilly fan I would have probably melted all over him.

So that’s the way it was. And he probably was right about it being for the best. I’ve always despised those old singers who were the end of their careers, stumbling onto some local stage trying to sing the hits they once had in the same style they once had, failing miserably, winding up being nothing more than caricatures of themselves.

I sort of nodded and looked over the rest of his front table. There were stacks of what appeared to be live concert tapes. Most of the album illos were pictures of what were probably the original window placard ads for the concerts. There were a couple of grainy photos of the big headliners, and a block listing of whoever else was on the bill, plus dates and times. The printing on the illo insets looked a bit crude to me, like they might have been done on a home computer printer or something. Which they might well have been. I noticed that Stoney Graham was always on the bill, sometimes as a second headliner, but never the big lead.

There were a bunch of them. There must have been two dozen different concert CDs, covering a long range of years. Some of them featured rock or country stars that went on to greater glory, or dropped out of sight a few years after the date of the concerts.

“Wow!” I said. “You saved tapes on all these concerts? How’s the sound quality?”

“Sound is great, right from the mike, right from the speakers. You won’t find better sound anywhere on any of these concerts. Crystal clear.” Stoney smiled real wide. I guess he thought I might actually buy one of the albums right then. Well, I sure wasn’t buying anything from anybody until somebody bought some of my stuff first. So far nobody had even wandered back to our section yet. Definitely not a good sign.

So far as his claim, well, I wish I’d had a big bag of rock salt right then. Crystal clear sound on a concert tape, yeah, sure; and I could flap my arms and fly around the ceiling of the building for exercise too. I’ve heard concert CDs before. Even the ones the big record companies make of major world class tours always seem to have some

problems.

Still, what the hell. I was impressed. The guy had a bunch of concerts I had never even heard of, not that I’m that big into live music anyway, but I figured some of this ought to sell to the people who were music freaks, just on the basis of young stars recorded live early in their careers, or old stars recorded live at the peak of their careers. But I was pretty sure not many were going to buy these concert CDs just because Stoney Graham was on the bill.

I looked over his other table, which he had parked sideways to the front one. That was filled with more concert CDs, with the same type of labeling. The covers were repros of concert announcement window cards or newspaper ads, or what might have been college handout sheets, reduced down and used for cover art.

But Stoney Graham was not on any of these bills, and as for the stars, well wow! There were lots of big names, and not just country or bluegrass or rockabilly stars either. Some big name rock stars were headliners, some were rock single band concerts with maybe a courtesy opening act. There was stuff I’d never heard of before, and some of with song cuts I’d never heard of on CD releases either. Some had notes like “alternative take--sixteen minute version”, or, “blue lyrics”, “political slam—suppressed by record company”. That’s the kind of stuff you used to hear at rock concerts and even some country concerts back in the seventies and early eighties.

How, I wondered, had he managed to get soundtracks on all these concerts? I asked him.

“Oh, I have friends in the business,” he said, with a forced smile that looked phony as a plastic peso.

That’s not an answer, I thought to myself, that’s an excuse. Besides, how many friends did he have, to cover all this many different artists, in all this many parts of the music industry, working for who knows how many different labels?

My mental gears shifted back again. So, the guy was actually a music pirate after all. I didn’t for one second believe he had “friends” who provided him with concert tapes on big stars as wildly varied as Bill Monroe to Chuck Berry to Willie Nelson to the Rolling Stones. Not a chance

in a million. He was stealing from somewhere and trying to fop them off at the flea market.

Well, I mumbled something. People were beginning to drift back into our area, Gina was pitching a variety of little girls' gloves she'd just got in that week, so I dropped it. The crowd gradually build up thru the day, and I sold movies and books and comics on a fairly steady basis. It turned out to be a pretty good Saturday, actually, all things considered.

From time to time I glanced over and saw old Stoney was selling a few of his CDs too, mostly the concert tapes from the rock and pure country shows. He had to keep repeating the price of the CDs because nobody could see his sorry excuse for a sign. Finally about one thirty I took pity on him, and brought over one of my stand-up sign holders and a big square of white cardboard and some magic markers. His handwriting was even worse than mine, so I fixed up a sign, with a big sale price, a couple of bullet points of spiel, and showed him how to set it up. He looked so damn grateful I sort of eased up on my hostile music-pirates-are-the-scum-of-the-earth feelings, at least temporarily anyway.

Business was about the same Sunday; so it turned out to be a pretty decent weekend for me. I cleared out a bunch of VHS movies, and almost a whole tray of paperback books.

Stoney also ran out of bags early Sunday morning. He had brought in a bunch of used grocery store plastic bags he was recycling, all of which were way too big for CDs. I gave him a handful of paperback size retail paper bags, which worked fine for CDs, and reminded him of the mini-lecture Nathan had given him the week before about never allowing a customer to walk around with a purchase unbagged. People carrying open merchandise at a flea market create lots of potential problems, which is why Nathan insists that every dealer bring bags, and use them.

At the end of the day Stoney steps up to my tables as I'm rearranging the movie tapes again, and gives with the thank-you routine, which I brush off. Hell, we're neighbors, even if he is a music pirate. Neighbors try to help out; it's the thing to do.

Anyway, Stoney wants to give me a CD by way of thanks, which offer I immediately refuse. He keeps pushing, so finally I say, how about I just borrow a couple of your CDs, then I'll bring 'em back next week.

That makes his face light up, so he asks which ones, and I pick out a Flatt and Scruggs concert tape that claimed to come from 1959, and a country music concert with Red Foley, Cowboy Copus, Eddie Arnold, the Reuben Brothers and Texas Ruby that was supposed to be from the early fifties.

I tell him I'll listen to the things and have them back to him next Saturday morning for sure.

That night I'm so tired I don't even feel like watching a movie from the pile of my recently purchased VHS tapes, so I flop on the couch and suddenly remember the CDs. I rip the cello wrap off the Flatt and Scruggs' disk and plot it in the machine. The CD is definitely home-made.

Professional companies go out of their way to print pictures and designs and stuff on the top of their CDs. This one had nothing.

I'm not expecting much, but by the fourth song I'm paying closer attention. This is a concert at some place in East Tennessee, Dunlap I guess it is, and the sound quality is incredible. It's like I was sitting right in the fourth row of that school auditorium listening to Flatt and Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys playing music they really loved for people who really loved them. It had that empathy you sometimes feel at a live concert coming right thru the speakers.

There were a couple of references in between the music about President Eisenhower, working people getting laid off, making atom bomb parts out of Martha White Flour over at Oak Ridge, and more, comments that convinced me the recording really was from 1959. And the sound quality was unbelievable.

I tried the other CD. The voices came thru clear as a bell. You could even hear some old lady cackling in the front row at the corny jokes Matt Reuben made between songs. Texas Ruby sang like she was giving her heart directly to me, like I was the only man in that whole world who understood what she was singing about. Eddie Arnold's

voice was sweet as honey, and he mentioned his new song, his new song, "Cattle Call", mind you, that had just come out, and he hoped the people in the audience would like it. They should, it sold nearly two million copies within three years of its release.

I'd never heard of any commercial release on this concert. I'd never heard of a Flatt and Scruggs concert being released commercially earlier than their Carnegie Hall concert and the Vanderbilt University show from the early 1960s. Then something else hit me that had been bouncing around the back of my mind. The CDs were in stereo. Not simulated stereo, where you play the mono track thru two speakers, this was real life stereo. You could hear the guitars on one side, you could hear audience reactions from the other side, and multiple level voices from different parts of the stage.

Stereo. On these concerts recordings from the 1950s. I was suddenly very curious as to where Stoney Graham was pirating his stuff from. I got up and turned on my computer. I did some serious searching, a couple of hours worth. I didn't find anything to link up those two concert CDs with any, and I mean as in no commercial recordings whatsoever, past or present. These were not pirate copies of any commercial releases. I was absolutely convinced of that.

I just sat there, stunned. Where in the hell had old Stoney gotten these tapes? How the hell could a show like this be recorded with sound quality this sharp, and the professional record companies not have it out on commercial release?

The more I thought about it, the crazier it sounded. Who would load out piles of clunky recording equipment, heavy as hell recording equipment it would be too, back in the fifties, and record a live concert, and then not try to release it commercially? These weren't alternate studio cuts, or home recordings, or some show recorded at a dance hall or saloon near the record studio. These were full stage concerts from off the beaten track locations. That school house in Dunlap Tennessee; Lester Flatt had joked about how long it took them to get to it, and how bad the roads were into the area. Nobody would have gone to the trouble of

recording that show and not found some way to release it.

Yet Stoney Graham had copies of it, home-made CD copies of it, for sale at the Worcester Indoor Flea Market.

I spent a restless week waiting for Saturday to roll around. I considered calling Stoney up and I would have, except his name wasn't in the local directory, or any the phone books of the surrounding towns I could find either.

Come Saturday morning, I was at the flea market bright and early. When Stoney came in I pounced. He sure didn't expect anything like me.

At first he was very evasive. Denied there was even anything unusual going on at all. But when I pointed out where the concerts had been recorded, pointed out that they were in stereo, before stereo recording had been really properly introduced, pointed out how difficult it would have been to get decent recording equipment into those rural towns, he began to become defensive.

"Besides, what difference does it make? I've got the master tapes. If they aren't in commercial release, then I'm not hurting anybody, and nobody is going to complain, so why should you care?"

Well I had been waiting for that lame excuse. God, music pirates! Is there any difference between dope dealers selling crack in the school yard and music pirates stealing money from hard working musicians? Not in my book, and I said so.

What about Texas Ruby, who died destitute living in a borrowed mobile home, what about the Reuben Brothers who left their children with a massive debt they were still trying to pay off after the plane crash that wiped them out, what about the estate of Cowboy Copus? Plus the music of Flatt and Scruggs was still selling briskly, even today. Their managers, and their music publishers might be very interested in hearing about this previously unknown live concert CD. In fact, maybe some of the other artists, like the families of Lester Flatt or Bill Monroe might be very interested in learning somebody had pristine condition recordings of very old live concerts not in commercial circulation.

"Maybe," I said, "I should just give the music company that handles some of these people a

friendly email. I wonder how Willie Nelson would feel about this, him with all his troubles paying back taxes to the government and almost killing himself working night and day trying to stay out of absolute bankruptcy. Maybe I should just make a phone call right now, and see whether anybody is interested or not.”

Well, he gets a real frightened look on his face, and begs me not to do that, that he didn't think he was doing anything really wrong, that he thought if he had recordings of concerts that nobody else even knew existed, nobody could bother him about copyrights or song royalties or anything like that.

This was very hard for me to believe, especially him being in the music business himself, and I said as much.

Suddenly he looked really old, and really tired; just beat down. “All right,” he says, in a voice that sounded like a man who had just seen a tree fall on top of his new pickup truck. “I'll tell you. You won't believe it anyway. Come on home with me after we close this afternoon, and I'll show you the machine.” He ran a hand thru what thin white hair he had left and stared at me.

“Machine, what machine?”

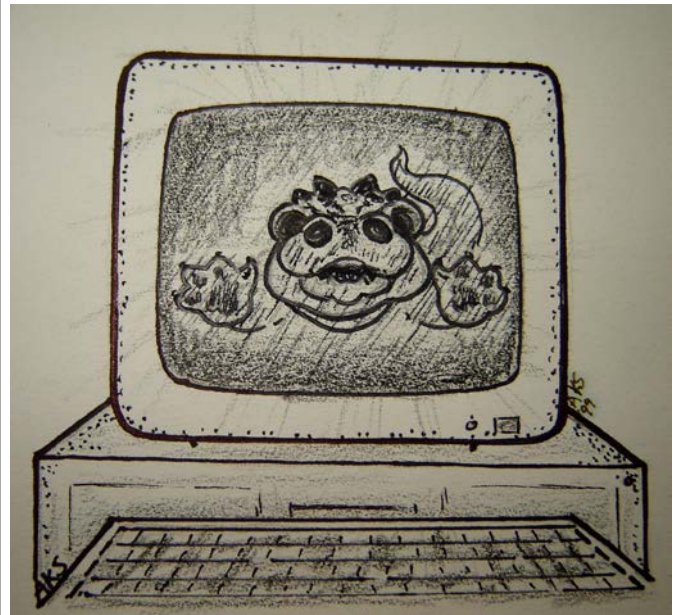
“Dr. Rellsing's machine. It can record sounds from the past.”

“Sounds from the past?”

“Sure. How else did you think I got all this stuff?”

The day was not busy, but if I had been selling stuff right and left it would have seemed like a hundred years long to me. Graham didn't look like a particularly dangerous guy, but just to make sure, I told Gina I was going up to his house after the show closed, and if by some chance I did not come back tomorrow, to tell Nathan and call the authorities. She didn't ask any questions, just looked at me funny, and asked if I had remembered to bring my cell phone. I assured her that I had and that the battery was charged. Me and my always-dead-battery cell phone are sort of a running joke with some of my near neighbors at the flea market. Finally four o'clock came around. We covered up our tables of goodies and exited the building.

“We'll use my car,” said Stoney. “I'll give you



Computer Dragon — Angela K. Scott

a ride back later on.” He had an old Plymouth, twelve years old, dented on the passenger side, with a faded and slightly flaking paint job.

We drove up Grafton Street, over the hill, and out Route 140 to the east, then took a turn off at the Millbury line. I made damn sure I kept track of the way he was going. I did not want to be stranded out there. We didn't talk much during the drive.

We ambled thru some back country and finally came to an older house, small, set back on a little hill with a bunch of old trees mostly shielding it from the road. When we got out I could see that the house needed fresh paint, and the gravel for the driveway was almost all gone, but otherwise it looked neat and trim.

“Let's go round to the back,” said Stoney, leading the way around a gnarled old apple tree. “I've got the machine and the equipment in the basement.”

There was an old wooden bulkhead, with a padlock. He produced the key, pulled up the right hand door, and we carefully went down ten old stone steps into the basement.

He turned on the lights. The basement was roughly partitioned. The oil burner was on the left, a sort of junk and garden tool cubby was on the right. Beyond that on the right the room opened up, and there the lighting was much better.

The place was neatly laid out, with reel to reel and cassette tape recorders, CD burners and players on a long waist-high work bench running along most of the far wall. A medium sized CD duplicator was on a separate table against the right wall. It looked a little worn to me, probably something he had purchased used. Boxes of CD blanks, and crystal cases were also stacked against the right wall.

In the center of the room, on a metal work table, with 220 volt heavy wiring leading into it, and gold tipped old style standard jack cords leading out, was what had to be the mystery machine.

It looked odd. It was squat, about three feet by three, maybe two high, with a rounded top, and a sort of squareish horn sticking out the far side. When I got a chance to take a closer look, there was also a separate panel connected by more wire, with dials, switches, knobs, what looked like an oscillating sound wave screen built in, and a knife lever that reached from top to bottom on the far right side, with a lot of numbers hand written on either side of the lever in India ink. The whole machine had been painted with green enamel, but the paint was old, chipped in places, scratched here and there. In fact everything about the machine looked old.

"This is it," said Stoney. "Dr. Rellsing's sound machine."

"OK," I said. "What does it do? Or maybe I should ask who Dr. Rellsing is. He's the guy who invented this thing?"

"Yep. Long time again. Let me turn this baby on. The insides work on vacuum tubes. It takes a minute or so for the circuits to get all warmed up." He flipped a small switch. The machine started up with a lot of whining and humming, like you used to hear from electronic machines in those old monster movies, then the sound gradually faded away.

"Dr. Rellsing, Linus Rellsing, to give the old boy his full name, was a sound engineer," said Stoney, dropping himself down into a rolling metal office chair near the machine. "He worked for radio stations back in the thirties and the forties, and he worked for some labs, like for Bell,

and for Edison, and he invented this machine. He was also married to my first cousin, Jennie Graham. Nice lady. Older than me by ten years or so. She's the one who told me about the machine." He stopped, and put his hand on top of the machine, checking to see if it had warmed up enough.

"Yeah, so? How about some details here." I said.

"Right, sorry. Anyway, I don't know if you've heard about wave theory or not. I'm not a science person, but he was, a genius at some things, a klutz at others. The idea is that waves of light or energy, or in this case, sound, once created, continue to expand outward until something stops them. Sometimes they may even move thru something that tends to stop them, tho perhaps weakened by whatever it is they hit."

I digested that a second or two. "You mean like if a person shouts against the side of a barn, the guy up at the house can't hear him, because the wall deflects or absorbs the sound waves, but if he were to step twenty feet back from the barn and shout, the guy at house might be able to hear him because the wall would not interfere with as much of the sound patterns?"

"Yeah, that seems about right. Only Dr. Rellsing thought that some of the sound might be trapped in the very wood of the barn wall, and some of the sound waves would continue thru the barn wall anyway. So he set out trying to prove his point. I guess he had a lot of problems with the people he worked with. He got fired from the Edison lab for bending too many ears with what they thought was a crackpot theory, and he walked out of Western Electric when they wouldn't give him the funding he needed to prove some of his points. And of course, these companies, even if they did fund some pure research projects, were always looking for practical applications for the work the research people did, and nobody seemed to know how this idea, even if it could be proven, could be turned into something usable."

"I can see their point. But how the in the world did he get to this?" I walked around the machine looking it over more closely.

"That I do not know. He did work on his own.

Jennie tried to tell me about some of it, but I'm a country rocker, man. All I know about electronics and sound is that when you plug in the electric guitar and the amp, you can get some hot bopping sounds out of it. She tried to explain the machine to me over the years, but hell, I was out on the road, performing, trying to line up recording contacts; I didn't pay much attention. A couple of years ago she died and left me this house and all her stuff, including this machine. I was her only living relative."

"But you say this thing can record sounds from the past? How can it do that?"

"Ralph, buddy, I don't know how it does it. All I know is that it does. See that big lever running top to bottom on the control panel? See all those numbers? Those are actually dates, as near as Rellsing could determine, that his machine could reach back to."

"Wow! So, you mean Rellsing could actually reach into the past and hear Lincoln delivering his Gettysburg Address, or George Washington's speech at Valley Forge?"

Stoney looked at me and shook his head sadly. "Nope. That's that I sort of hoped for too, when I read Jennie's notes. But it doesn't work that way. Maybe if Doc Rellsing hadn't busted a gut and died of a heart attack at age fifty-two he could have gotten that far. Not that what he didn't accomplish already isn't incredible enough. The machine will tap into sounds from the past, but only if they are carried by electric current."

I tilted my head to one side, trying to follow. "Electric current. You mean, like over the radio, or the TV?"

"Exactly right. Remember, he spent most of his career as a radio engineer. This must have been the first big jump for him, knowing as much as he did about how commercial radio works, and what it could and could not do. Any sound that has been connected to a microphone, via electric current, can be tapped into. Sounds like you and I are making now, just talking to each other, can't be recovered."

I let that sink in. "But these concerts you've been taping, they weren't broadcast over the radio, were they?"

"Nope, but that's where my experience as a musician came in. Concerts generally use microphones and speaker systems to boost the sound level so everybody in the audience can hear. That's electricity. That means the machine can tap in and pick up on those sounds."

"And once you get them, you make a copy on a tape or a CD, then just copy to a blank CD?"

"Correct. It works in real time, no fast forward on this machine. And you also listen to the show. The sound comes out that horn there."

"But, wait a second, one speaker, that horn, that's mono, right? But your concerts are stereo."

"The machine can play back in stereo. It can do several tracks at once, as many as six. That's what these lateral knobs here are." He indicated a row of small shift knobs near the bottom of the panel. "That screen there shows how many waves are incoming, and there's a jack output for each channel. So I can get super stereo if I really want to. But, it's a lot of work. Getting two speaker stereo synchronized is enough trouble for me."

Suddenly a cheerful thought crossed my mind. "Stoney, you say it will recover any sound that was electronically transmitted, right?"

"Yeah, right."

"Like old radio programs Stoney? I collect old time radio shows. You know, like Jack Benny, the Shadow, Lone Ranger. Stoney, almost all those old shows are copyright free, and people collect them. They don't want to pay much money for them, but selling a hundred tapes of Gangbusters shows thru the mail, which nobody cares about except collectors and hobbyists, would probably reap a whole lot more money than selling illegal bootleg copies of music concerts at five bucks a CD, especially when selling those bootleg concerts could land you in jail or sued for your back teeth."

He suddenly showed a lot more interest. "You really think so?"

"Stoney, I know so. Is this sucker warmed up enough? Can you give me a demonstration?"

"Sure, no problem. What do you want to hear?"

I thought a few seconds. "I would like to hear a broadcast of Baby Snooks, the radio show starring Fanny Brice. It ran for years on NBC, and in the

whole round world, only twelve or fifteen of those half hours shows exist, and most of them are not in very good sound either. Turn that machine on and let's hear a Baby Snooks show from, say, 1949."

Of course it wasn't quite that easy. Once the year was carefully clicked off so that 1949 was properly targeted, then the machine had to be set directionally. This took a lot longer.

I had another thought. "Stoney, as I remember my high school science, this planet is whirling around the sun, the whole solar system is turning around the hub of the milky way galaxy, and the galaxy is whipping along thru space. The actual place these sounds were originally made is probably ten million miles or so back off into space. How can that machine pick up the physical location where the sounds were originally made with all that going on?"

Stoney just shrugged his shoulders. "Gravity maybe? Man, I sing rockabilly songs, remember? I dropped out of high school before I got near a general science class. Maybe Doc Rellsing was right about sound being stopped and stored in walls and stones near where they started from. Maybe the machine just pulls the sounds out of old brick walls or something. All I know is, it works."

I was turning that over in my mind while Stoney played with direction knobs. He explained that getting the location using longitude and latitude readings was necessary, along with bracketing the frequency range of the electric equipment originally used. This is where modern science had it all over the old days when Doc Rellsing originally built the machine. Modern location searches are free on most computer servers, so once Stoney knew the town where a concert took place, he could use the computer to get the exact location, click the numbers off on the double dials, and he was all set.

He was going to fire up his computer to get the exact position for Hollywood California, which is where the Baby Snooks broadcast originated. But I told him he should just set the machine location for Worcester; the old WORC-A radio tower, up on Grafton Hill, since the network fed the shows over the phone lines to each local station, and then the local station ran it out thru their individual towers

as radio broadcasts.

As I say, it took time. But he got it narrowed down, slotted the time to eight thirty Tuesday night and when he pushed the final switch the announcer was telling us that it was "eight thirty, B-U-L-O-V-A, Bulova Watch Time, stay tuned for Fanny Brice as Baby Snooks". I jumped up and just made it to the workbench in time to turn on the cassette recorder.

And then, my God, what a wonderful experience! It was one of the best half hours of my entire life. Here was a Baby Snooks program, complete, start to finish, with the original commercials intact, and with sound as crisp and clear as anything you've ever heard. The machine was tapping right into the electric current on the cable, so we didn't lose any of the frequency cycle range AM stations have to curb when the signal is actually broadcast as radio waves into the air.

I was in heaven. Even Stoney, who admitted he had never really heard an old time radio show, liked it. He laughed almost as much as me.

The tape recorder was still running when the show finally ended.

"Man, that was really great," said Stoney. "How about I move it up a week and we get another one?"

He didn't have to twist my arm. Calibrating one week forward, once the location and the month and year were established was no effort at all. And Baby Snooks was on the air for another half hour of comedy.

We finished up that show. Stoney got up to play with the machine again. "Another Baby Snooks, Ralph?" he asked.

"No, let's try something different," said a voice from the doorway. We both turned in surprise. There was a tall dark haired man standing at the opening, dressed in a bulky brown sweater and nicely creased tan slacks. But what we really noticed, me anyway, was this big Luger he was holding in his hand, pointed right at us.

I was the first to speak. "Who the hell are you?"

"Not somebody who wants to listen to stupid comedy programs. You, Graham, turn that machine setting over to today, and make the

direction indicator read right in the vicinity of this house.”

“What the hell is this all about?” asked Stoney.
BLAM!

The guy fired a round from the pistol that whistled past Stoney’s right ear and smashed a stack of CD jewel cases on the long table behind him. The whole pile came crashing down onto the cement floor.

“I’m a guy with a loaded pistol, and what I want is for you to turn that machine to today’s date, and this location. Do you want a different demonstration, or was that first bullet sufficient?”

He sure made an impression on me. His face was hard, vicious, with a little half smile, half sneer. I knew, and I’m sure Stoney did too, that the creep wouldn’t hesitate one second about drilling either of us if Stoney didn’t do what he said.

“You got it mister.” Stoney sat down in the rolling chair and began playing with the knife lever and the knobs. It didn’t take so long this time.

“Just what am I supposed to be trying to pick up, if I’m not being too curious,” asked Stoney.

“No, you’re not. I want to pick up a cell phone conversation made from the vicinity of your house at exactly six-thirty this evening,” and the guy rattled off some frequencies numbers cell phones use.

Stoney played with the control board another few seconds. “OK, it’s set. Now what?”

“Why, turn it on Mr. Graham. Turn it on and let’s hear what the machine picks up,” said the big guy, and his sneer-smile got even broader and meaner looking.

The machine came to life and a voice, very clear, came out of the horn. “The time is exactly six-thirty PM. This is a test. Do not reply to this test. Graham and another man entered the house at about five-fifteen this afternoon. They entered thru the basement. I assume they are going to be working on the machine. I will wait for your arrival in the same place.”

The man smiled, a real smile this time, a smile of triumph. “Excellent. Really excellent. Those instruction sheets your cousin left you with the machine, where are they?”

“How do you know about that? What’s this all about anyway?”

The man smiled again, the mean look. “The sheets please.”

Stoney didn’t move. The guy deliberately raised his pistol again. I suddenly came to life. “Better get ‘em Stoney. This guy’s not kidding. He must have been hiding and eavesdropping on us quite a while.”

“Quite correct, Mr. Reynolds. I need those sheets, Mr. Graham.”

“But why do you want...”

BLAM! Another bullet put a big hole in the little portable cassette machine on the workbench just to Stoney’s left. That was the machine we’d recorded the Baby Snooks shows on. The tape was undoubtedly ruined, along with the player.

Stoney was stunned. He wasn’t moving. I had to say something or the jerk might put a slug in Stoney’s arm or something.

“Can’t you figure it Stoney? This creep is going to steal the machine. He’s probably some kind of spy. He’s going to give this machine to his government, and they are going to use it to listen in on confidential conversations their enemies make a few hours after they’re spoken.”

“Very clever, Reynolds,” said the gunman. “Except we’re going to sell the machine, and the instruction sheets, not donate them. None of us are feeling very altruistic at the moment. And you’ve pegged the plan just about right. Think of what kind of advantage knowing all the secret messages your enemy sent by telex or phone or even shielded radio would mean. I know several nations that would make very generous offers to obtain a device like this.”

For a moment everybody just stood there looking at each other. Stoney finally reached over to the work bench and picked up a thick manila folder.

“My associate is running a bit behind,” said Mr. Spy Slime. “He texted me on my cell phone me a few minutes ago. But, in the meantime, since I see you have the folder with Mrs. Rellings’s notes in them, I’ll have to ask you gentlemen to pick up that machine, and carry it outside for me. I’ll take the folder.” Very generous of him.

"I can't pick up nothing. I've got arthritis and a bad back," said Stoney.

I thought fast. "He's not lying pal. If he tries to pick up that thing he's likely to drop it before it goes three steps."

"Too bad. But you look healthy, Mr. Reynolds. Suppose you unplug everything and load the machine onto that rolling chair. We'll move it out to the cellar stairs. My friend should be here shortly, then you and he can carry it up stairs."

"Yeah, and then what?" asked Stoney.

"Why, then we tie you men up and we leave," replied the gunman. This time his smile was even nastier. I did not for one second believe he was going to tie us up and leave. He was going to kill the both of us. In fact, he would probably do it the minute the machine was out of the cellar and into his car or truck or whatever kind of vehicle he had arrived in.

I couldn't think of anything to do except follow instructions. I slowly stood up and walked to the machine. Stoney kicked the rolling office chair over to me.

"Just out of idle curiosity, how did you learn about this machine?" I asked as I pulled all the plugs and positioned the office chair next to the utility table.

"Undoubtedly the same way you learned about it, Reynolds. I happen to be a very big Chuck Berry fan. When a friend gave me a Chuck Berry concert CD recorded in Detroit just after he got out of prison in 1963, I knew right away it wasn't an ordinary bootleg copy. Not with sound that good and in full stereo as well. So we traced the CD back to Graham here. With as many different unique concert tapes as he was selling, it was clear he must have found a way to wire into the past."

"Boy, have I been dumb," said Stoney. I mentally seconded that comment.

The machine was heavy, but not quite as clunky as it looked. I was picking it up very carefully when I decided I had to do something. I turned toward the gunman and with what I hoped looked like an accident, I pretended to stumble and underhand tossed the machine out at Mr. Spy Slime with all my strength. Which was not much, with a load that heavy.

"Look out!" I screeched, sort of half stumbling, hoping it will look like an accident. The machine only carried a couple of feet before crashing to the floor with sounds of shattering glass and smashing metal.

Mr. Spy Guy froze in horror. His eyes were huge round orbs suspended in shock. To be honest I didn't waste much time looking at him. I whirled the rolling chair around and ran with it right at him.

I was fast, but not fast enough. Spy Slime pulled that gun hand up and jerked the trigger twice. Lucky for me his aim was off, but I still felt a bullet clip some hair off the top of my head. I don't know where the other one went, but it missed me. Meanwhile, I hit him with the front of the rolling office chair, just below his knees. It made a nice solid whack, and managed to knock him back flat onto his back.

I was around that chair and had my right foot raised to try and stomp him in the face, gun or no gun, when the wreckage of the cassette recorder came sailing out of the air and landed right on the guy's forehead. He made a half groaning sound, and then he was out like a light. Just to make sure I kicked him in the side of the head, as hard as I could. I've never been so scared in my entire life.

I looked up and there was Stoney on the right side. "That was a brand new cassette player too," he said.

"Yeah. We'd better make sure we bill him for it," I answered.

Then my mind clicked back into gear. "Didn't he say he had a pal that was on his way here? Where the hell is that gun?"

"Don't worry about it gentlemen. We'll take over from here." There were two men standing in the opening this time, both of this holding snub nosed revolvers, both of them dressed in conservative dark business suits. My heart sank.

"Well," said Stoney, "We almost made it."

"You did make it Mr. Graham. We're F.B.I." The shorter man on the left in the blue pinstripe pulled out a wallet and handed it over. There was an F.B.I. identification card, with photo.

"You can call the local office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The number is in your

phone book. They'll confirm our identities," said the other one.

"Man oh man, am I glad to see you guys," cried Stoney, practically collapsing on the work stool by the tape recorders.

I was not so easily convinced. I used my cell phone. I even splurged for thirty cents on a call to Directory Information to get the number of the local F.B.I. office, and another fifty cents to have the phone company dial it for me. The babe who answered on the other end very speedily confirmed that the two boys standing there were indeed real official government agents.

It was a fast wrap after that. It turns out somebody who worked for the federal government had also bought one of Stoney's concert CDs, and notified the F.B.I. The F.B.I. handles copyright violation complaints, and of course, they also quickly figured out that Stoney must have some way to record sounds from the past.

They were doing some discreet checking when they stumbled across Mr. Spy Slime and his buddy, who were also checking out Stoney. They called in some additional firepower, and managed to nab Spy Slime's pals, there were three of them all total, and after applying some pressure, which I didn't ask about, got the info that the head honcho was going to swipe the machine this very evening. Unfortunately he beat them to the house. Very fortunately for us the feds arrived before he could make off with the machine and murder the pair of us.

As for the machine, well, what can I say? A fall on the concrete cellar floor hadn't done it any good. The feds took my statement, gave me a ride back to my van, and told me to go home. I'd probably have to testify at the trial whenever that came up. Of course what really hurt was losing those two Baby Snooks shows, in pristine sound too. I didn't even want to think of all the wonderful old radio shows I could have recorded from the past if I still had access to that machine.

I talked to Stoney the following week at the flea market. The feds put some pressure on him. He had been guilty of copyright violations big time. That's about a fifty thousand dollar fine for each separate occurrence. Multiply fifty grand

times the number of illegal concert CDs he was marketing and it added up to lots of money and maybe even some jail time.

Or, he could sell the machine and the notes to the government, and they would just confiscate all his concert CDs and his masters, and give him a pass. It wasn't a very hard choice. Especially when he mentioned the amount of money they were willing to front, even for a badly wrecked machine.

Stoney actually had sense enough to dicker on the price. He told me he settled for a quarter million bucks, paid out over a five year period, plus some sort of rinky-dink patent finder fee if they ever got the machine back together again, which he seemed to think was highly unlikely. That was my opinion too. That's a lot of money, more than enough to keep an old guy like him secure the rest of his life.

Plus, he got to keep the masters and the copies of all the CDs with just his own performances on them. He decided to give up the flea market and direct retail business. He made a deal with me. I get fifty percent of every one of his CDs I move, and I don't have to pay him until the CD actually sells, so there's no up-front investment for me.

I listened to some of those CDs. Old Stoney was a damn good player in his day, and in making up those tapes he had managed to dig back thru his long career and pick what he considered his very best performances on each one of those songs. I play a few of the CDs at least part of each day at the flea market, and I've sold a bunch. They're pretty good. You ought to try one yourself. You'd really like it.

**Jon Carver of Barzoon,
You Misunderstood**
by
Graham J. Darling

Jon Carver of Barzoon, you misunderstood.

The True Love whom you met in dreams was the goddess of this planet: pluripotent relict of a vanished race, marooned here eons before you ever were (do not doubt her love; she was made

for love). Your crash-landing awakened her to purpose. The honeyed tongue she thrust between your lips divided to sample your every cell; while she cradled your broken body, you and she populated an empty world.

Its seas were modeled on your tears, and its bogs on your bile. The waving jungles you hacked through came from your hair; the vitreous plains you traversed, from your fingernails; the sluggoths you battled, from your own lymphocytes; the steeds you rode, from your heart. The warriors you led to blood and glory were your sons, working out their destiny; the princesses you rescued, your daughters; the Transfederation you built by the seat of your pants, already your family (have you not wondered why they all speak your tongue?).

The caecal dungeons in bone citadels you regularly woke in and escaped from, were hospital wards, where your eyes or limbs sliced in ivory swordplay were switched out; here they all are, mounted and healed, looking and waving at you, in the Museum of the Man.

The Darkened Lord against whom you strove is yourself, enthroned. We surrendered Brain-Priests are your own. Here is your crown. Please be seated. She'll be with you in a minute.

Inconceivable

By

George Phillies

Pamela Morgan drifted unwillingly back to awareness. It was the still of the night. Light from Kronos's largest moon streamed through her bedroom windows.

She had worked far too late into the evening. Now something had awakened her.

What? She heard only the remote sigh of breaking waves. No, before that, there had been a strangled gasp. A burglar? Hardly likely, not with University Security.

She hated to spy on housemates. They didn't know she was a telepath---they didn't believe in telepathy---her scruples still protected them. The sound repeated. What if someone were choking to death? Now fully awake, Pam sent out a mind probe, searching only for physical sensations: pain,



Oops, I Forgot — Jose Sanchez

asphyxiation, terror. She pulled back as quickly as she could. Miralie's bedroom held two minds, one clearly male. Both were asleep, separated by a distance which suggested that an intrusion would definitely not be welcome. Pam giggled. Sometimes she missed the obvious. At least Miralie's previous boyfriends hadn't snored obtrusively.

Pam looked back at her desk, peering vaguely at a computer screen and notes for her current term paper. The evolution of the senses, she thought, lulling herself back toward her dreams. Senses: sight, telepathy, hearing...; organs, evolutionary prototypes: eyespot to lens to color vision, all locked in the rigid grid of an outline. She came awake again. There was an obvious gap in her neat table of references. The entries for one sense, which one she couldn't quite see, were completely missing. Darn! she groaned to herself. She had stayed up half the night to finish her notes. She told herself this was the penalty for cheating on

sleep. The list of senses had been sitting there for days while she searched the libraries. All she had had to do was to fill in the blanks. Now she had missed something. Fuming, she tiptoed to her desk. Which sense had she forgotten?

Her eyes were too blurred with sleep to focus on individual words. Still, every entry in the table was filled. The gap had been some trick of the light. It was very late. She just wasn't thinking clearly.

As she slipped back under her quilt, she glanced at the desk again. Tomorrow, a first draft had to be written on how field senses evolved. Her outline gleamed in the moonlight. In its center, clearly visible, was empty space. Pam stared. The writing above and below the gap was prominent. One set of reference links was totally blank.

She snapped on the room lights, and sprang from bed, her tall, athletic frame landing panther-light on the wooden floor. Steel-blue eyes flickered with suppressed anger. She couldn't be dreaming. She was worrying about nothing, when she should be asleep. Tediously, she counted down each column of entries.

Four senses: sight, hearing, chemoreception, magnetic field detection. Evolutionary examples from half-a-dozen worlds spanning the width of the Confederation. Reference lists. Figures. It was all there! Everything. She staggered back to bed and put out the lights.

The original plan for her paper echoed dreamily through her mind. She would say something about senses which detected external fields: light, sound, chemical potential, telepathy, vector potential. Perhaps she would change her mind again, and skip telepathy. It was not a socially acceptable ability. It would be hard to explain her insights without revealing that she was a telepath herself. Besides, it wasn't clear that telepathy corresponded to a field.

Vision responded to the vector potential, but to what fields were telepaths sensitive? Content that all was well, she yawned deeply and looked at her notes on how the senses had evolved, now only vaguely legible in the moonlight. The gap leered back at her.

It didn't make sense. The first column of the

table listed the five senses she would study. She counted them off against the fingers of her right hand. Five senses meant five sets of lines, exactly as she had counted them a few moments ago.

Pam had a near-photographic memory. With a little effort, she could see the whole table in front of her, every entry, as sharp as it had appeared when she stood by the desk. In her mind's eye, she counted off entries against her fingers: left index finger, middle finger, left ring finger, little finger. The table had four sets of lines, matched against four fingers. Everything was finished!

Triumphantly, she held her hands up before her and, drunk with fatigue, matched left and right hands. Then she wriggled deeper under the quilt, her nightgown raising little sparks against the sheets. She tried to forget all about the paper, bemusedly wondering what had confused her. A final stretch silhouetted long fingers against the far wall.

Four fingers and outstretched thumb clashed against four equally long fingers and clenched thumb. She blinked, hard. Her hands whispered insults at her.

Here she was, a first-rate student at one of the Confederation's leading Universities, unable even to count on her fingers. Another cycle of turning on the lights and staggering over to the bed left her as confused as ever.

Perhaps, she thought, perhaps this was all an elaborate nightmare. She was dreaming that there was a terrible gap in the outline of her paper, a gap that disappeared whenever she tried to see what it was, but that would not disappear under the keen gaze of the Faculty.

Suddenly, she recognized the pattern. A grim suspicion, one neither of her housemates could have conceived, formed in her thoughts. Leaning to one edge of her bed, she spoke instructions to her datapad. Robotically following its replay of her instructions, she counted senses, walked to the desk, counted again, and returned to bed. Finally she pressed her palms against her eyes, shutting all thoughts of her term paper out of her mind. Methods of mental discipline, learned from mind-to-mind contact with a half-a-dozen alien species, came into play. An elbow restarted the computer-recorder. She listened to her own voice.

Obedient to her prior instructions, the computer juxtaposed her words, carefully omitting the subject of her work.

"Put everything out of your mind. How many topics are in your term paper?" she had asked herself ... "Five," she had answered ... "Now go to the desk. Count! How many topics are in the term paper?" ... "Four. One. Two. Three. Four," she had counted.

The computer hesitated slightly. "When you sat in bed, your answer was---'Five'---Is that the number of topics that you see?" ... "Yes, of course," she had answered, "I still see four entries."

The computer paused again. "In bed, you said there are---`five'---topics. By the desk, you said there are---`four'---topics. Is `five' equal to `four'?" ... "Yes!" she had snapped back. "The four topics are as many as the four topics!" ... Patiently, the machine asked again "Is `five' equal to `four'?" "Any child knows that!" she had snarled

"Very good. Very good indeed." The computer's version of her voice was as saccharine as her own. "Now go back to bed, put everything out of your mind, and replay this sequence."

Recognition was immediate. She recognized that confusion, that ability to believe true and false at the same time. Someone had set a compulsion mesh---a mind-binding---on her. Someone did not want her to think something. What?

She couldn't tell. A scan of her mind showed nothing unfamiliar, but all except the most amateurish of geases were invisible. There was a general way to purge mind-bindings, though. Compulsion meshes usually collapsed once one learned what one was being compelled to do.

Now, what was it she couldn't do? A compulsion mesh good enough to hold her was no small matter to create. It was hard to believe anyone cared about a term paper on evolution. She gave more orders to her computer-recorder. She would speak names while lying in bed. She would speak other names at the desk. The machine would compare the two lists and verbalize the difference.

She marched through her plan. Back in bed, she found herself trembling with nervous anticipation. Or was she afraid? A compulsion

mesh was too complex to be a practical joke---very few of her friends were close enough for the friendship to survive this sort of stunt. Besides, which of her friends could even set a mesh? Any? Somebody had set a geas on her, without her knowing. It was hardly believable she'd done this to herself, though she probably knew how to do it. There weren't a lot of telepaths who were good enough to do it, not to her, not without her having noticed. In a little while, one of them was either going to give a very good explanation, or get very thoroughly pounded on. She leaned over and restarted the recorder.

"Clear your mind..." came the computer. She did. "Line four, columns two through four, are blank. Line four: telepathy. Columns two through four: evolutionary antecedents. What are the `evolutionary antecedents' of `telepathy'?"

#

Dawn peaked through Pam's curtains. She was sprawled on the carpet by her bed, tangled in her sheets. Her head throbbed. Her skin was covered with cold sweat. Her nightgown clung to her skin like a running suit after a ten mile race.

What had she done to herself? At first she was too dazed to remember. She had listened to a sentence. Then there had been fireworks. In a sense, it had been a highly educational experience. She hadn't suspected she could put so much power into a single levin-bolt without killing herself. She remembered from where she had drawn that much energy. She could do it again, if need be. Her mind-screens had taken a real beating. But she hadn't been attacked, or tried to defend herself. She had tried, with vigor and determination, to commit suicide.

A shower and walk on the beach left her a spectral shadow of her usual self. Fortunately, regular classes had ended for the term. The thought of facing an interactive lecture left her sick to her stomach. Breakfast improved things a little, though she stayed with fruit and tea rather than her customary heartier fare. Miralie's latest boyfriend turned out to be a graduate student in naval architecture, a buoyant red-haired man who

couldn't imagine that anyone in the galaxy wasn't interested in the finer points of starship design. Pam watched his mind as he talked. Miralie's friends often had straying eyes.

Pam made sure they didn't stray in her direction. With telepathy, you couldn't help but know how others saw you. Pam liked domestic tranquility, meaning that her bungalow-mates never lost their boy-friends in her direction. Not that she was interested in that sort of thing. Mind-to-mind contact had given her a different perspective on the important things of life, a list of which did not include an urgent need for male companionship of a physical nature. After all, Pam told herself, it wasn't that she wasn't as pretty as Miralie or Jessamine, or as personable, or as bright. She'd had to fend off enough of their boyfriends to be sure of the first, and knew she could think rings around most of her fellow students. Most people even underestimated her weight, which lurked as coiled-steel muscles rather than eye-catching curves.

She listened politely while Miralie's latest paramour discussed faster-than-light drives and the curious fact---Zinor's Law---that all faster-than-light drives had virtually the same limiting speed, even if they were based on completely different physical principles, except for a few much slower faster-than-light drives. Pam had heard of Zinor; his Law sounded far-fetched, though no more so than the equally empirical Second Law of Thermodynamics.

Pam spent the rest of the morning on her bedroom's private balcony, nearly out-of-sight of the world, sorting through the shards of her mind. Once she isolated the geas, it stopped affecting her. The immediate binding had kept her from conceiving that telepathy must somehow have evolved. She had been able to think about evolution, and had no problems thinking about telepathy, but the two topics were rigidly compartmentalized. Until she shattered the binding, the concept of telepathy's evolution had been strictly---inconceivable. Only an accident in the way she'd chosen her term paper's topic---plus perhaps her internal psi-shields---let her juxtapose the two ideas.

Rooting the geas from her subconscious, and deducing the precise limits of its compulsions, was time-consuming. The binding was like an ancient bed of climbing ivy which had been allowed to overgrow a great mansion. Here it wrapped around lists of starship speeds; there it stood poised around ideas on magnets. Its complexity was surreal, its camouflage exquisite. She had never met a telepath who could have installed such a binding, even with the active cooperation of the recipient. It was as though the binding had grown up with her since she had been an infant, putting out new extensions in response to forbidden patterns of stimuli.

For a mind-binding to be so complex was entirely novel. What sort of a structure would be required? It would need to be almost sentient. The talent which let her read another's mind, as quickly and accurately as she could read a book, now came to the fore. The psi structure could be scanned as easily as any mind, letting her isolate and destroy its last shreds. There were a long list of forbidden topics, not just one or two: ties between evolution and psi, starship designs, a half-dozen seemingly unrelated questions in history, chemistry, law,... More ominously, she located what appeared to be external sensors, built into the binding, placed so an outsider could determine whether or not the binding was intact.

Her bungalow-mates, she recognized, would never believe what she had just found. Why had someone---some group---done this to her? She had spent much of the last decade striving to be inconspicuous, remaining largely invisible even to the small but active community of psis on Kronos. It defied reason. A parallel nagged at her memory. The binding on starship speeds looked remarkably like Zinor's law. She reached out mentally for Miralie and boyfriend. Finding people out of line-of-sight was often tricky, though she knew just where they would likely be by now. She probed them very gently until she found what she wanted. They were both mind-bound, exactly as she had been. Pam put her probes farther out into the bungalow complex. Some people she skipped. A fair part of the population was nearly psi-immune; some wore good mechanical psi-shields.

A few were fellow telepaths. Everyone she could scan had the same blocks in place.

Suddenly she felt very conspicuous. Her shields snapped tight. Probes went out in a delicate lacework, hunting for anyone who might have noticed her reconnaissance. Whoever had put the blocks in place might be very---no, lethally---irritated to learn they had been caught. But who could it be? And why? Only the Temporal Physics Center, the Confederation's covert psi-police, had anything like the needed resources. They were never terribly subtle; these geases were not their style.

Two faces came to mind. One was nearby, and always good for a conversation---or lunch, as that hour was approaching. The other was half the Confederation away, and probably very busy with her own affairs. Still, the other shared Pam's knack for blundering into dangerous circumstances, and might appreciate a piece of map labelled "Here Be Hungry Dragons". She was a lot better with mentalics than Pam. Besides, Pam had trusted her enough to link mind-to-mind, using absolutely no screens. Pam had never done that before, nor since. She prepared a long letter detailing her findings, added a cover letter explaining why and how it would be dangerous to read her main letter, and encrypted both documents. The other would know the code-key at once. The usual estimate for decoding a document, without the key, involved Hubble-Segal times. The letter went into the Data-Net, to be transmitted cross-cluster anonymously at high priority. Pam winced at the credit charges. She had needed to stay on-campus over break to write her paper; now she didn't have a choice. The other could spend money like water---though she never seemed to---but Pam's budget was rigidly limited. Finally she made a videophone call.

#

Percival Summers was not so much a boyfriend as a good companion; someone she could talk to, or take to a concert, without feeling forced to create a deeper relationship. They were definitely not just casual acquaintances. Pam trusted Percy enough to reveal that she had psi talents. They

enjoyed each other's company, at least on a platonic basis, and had been seeing each other regularly for several years. Pam ignored her bungalow-mates' questions as to when Percy would be seen at breakfast as well as in the early evening. When she phoned, promising him an interesting puzzle which she couldn't solve, he was delighted to pay her a visit. He listened avidly while she described what she had found.

"Let me restate this," he finally intruded. "You say that everyone you checked has identical mind-blocks and can't think about certain topics. That's unreasonable. Why would anyone do it? Besides, Pam, when you finally convinced me that you, that you really could pull those psi tricks, you put a block on me, so that I couldn't find the doors until I closed my eyes and found one by touch. But you had to work hard to do it to me. And, you've said, you're about as good at telehypnosis as anyone you've ever met. To put something that complicated on everyone---you'd need more telepaths than there are people. You couldn't possibly hide something like that." His tone softened. His fingers stole across her shoulder. "I'm don't want to say I don't believe you, but it's awfully hard to accept."

"I know." Her head sank. "And I don't know who did it, or why, or how to prove it."

Percy looked up, eyes bright. "There's an obvious way. I know you don't like prying about in my mind, but you can. And you checked I had the blocks. You named a forbidden idea, and I didn't hear you say anything. If you could break my mind-binding, I might be able to help."

Pam stared at him, tight-lipped. She liked him too much to risk hurting him. On the other hand, she had already asked for his advice; it was too late to complain about what he said. "All right, I'll try. You're sure now?" she asked, hoping beyond hope that he'd reconsider. He only nodded.

They were of a height. She looked him square in the face, steel-blue eyes peering into deep brown. There was only one sound way to remove a block, the one she had used on herself. "Percy?" she asked, meanwhile blocking his binding, forcing him to hear her words. "You know what my current term paper is about. What are the

evolutionary antecedents of---`telepathy'?"

"Why, there aren't..." His face paled. His jaw slackened. He fell ahead lifelessly, taking her so by surprise that their faces brushed before she could catch him.

Her mind-probes revealed the damage. He was in shock. His heart had stopped beating. It was too late to call for medical help. He was, at least technically, dead.

His psyche began to fade. She reached in, lending him her strength. Through telehypnosis, she could force another's limbs to move. Now she used her talent to link their bodies, so that her nervous system drove two hearts, two pairs of lungs, two sets of blood vessels. She swept through his mind, using miniature levin-bolts to disrupt the structures that were rapidly killing him.

Her arms shook. Taking over another's body had never come very easily to her. Now she needed very fine physiological control over an unfamiliar, decidedly male, body. At the same time, she had to perform intensive psionic surgery. It wasn't reasonable. She had found her own barriers, and hadn't needed outside help to survive their efforts to kill her. For some reason, Percy was much more fragile.

It took an hour to repair the damage. For most of that time Percy's own nervous system did rather little toward keeping him alive. She could feel the demand on her own strength. It was possible, she realized, that instead of saving his life, she would be dragged under with him. Finally all was done. He peered vaguely up at her, confusion fading rapidly from his mind. She lay back on the sofa, exhausted, her hand resting softly on his.

He finally broke the silence. "I remember what you asked, and what happened afterwards, as though I saw it all through your eyes. You spoke. Everything became very still. That must have been my heart stopping. I fell forwards, we knocked heads, and I passed out." He paused for a few moments. "Now I see the blocks; rather, I see their absence. All those coincidences aren't coincidences, not at all."

"I wish I'd kept quiet. I could have killed you. In fact, I did kill you. Almost. I had to take over---but you could feel that, couldn't you?" she asked.

"Wasn't that dangerous for you?" he countered. "To take over my body for that long? You'd said that controlling someone else is very demanding."

"It wasn't that hard," she answered wanly, shaking from the strain. She hoped he didn't notice. "Besides, darn it!---there's such a thing as responsibility. I couldn't leave you like that. It was my fault, so I had to bring you back. Even if you were awful stubborn about wanting to stay dead."

"I didn't have to be curious," he volunteered lamely.

"You?" she asked in gleeful surprise. "Not be curious? For your sort, being curious is as natural as breathing."

"By experiment, for me being curious is in fact considerably more natural than breathing." He smiled at his joke. "We're rather alike in that respect."

"Among others. Ummh, some things are better said sooner," she said apologetically. "I'm afraid I couldn't very well do---what I did---and leave your mental secrets as private from me as you might like... ummh, it's not what I want to do to a friend, but I'm not good enough to do it another way."

He sat up. Their faces were a few inches apart. "You know," he said, "About bumping heads. I always thought you'd have a real knockout of a kiss---but I hadn't meant it so literally." Pam began a laugh.

Percy leaned forward. For a time the room was very still.

#

Pam and Percy sat on her balcony, leaning back into carefully separated deck chairs. They were lost in thought, oblivious to the rumble of the surf as they tried to unravel the riddle Pam had uncovered.

"Suppose the TPC applied the blocks at birth, so they matured with you?" asked Percy. "No, Zinor's Law is universal. I don't see why the Confederation would geas its whole population. The Senate Ethics Committee wouldn't let them. Or maybe I'm judging from the one committee member I've heard---the mother of that friend of yours, the brunette who kept pretending she wasn't

stunningly pretty, almost as pretty as you. But how could we persuade the other sentient species to copy us and mind-bind their own people? Someone would cheat. The Lords of the Ether, for one. Besides, we can hardly communicate with some---the Barlennoi, the elder races---let alone cooperate." He paused in his argument. At least, I think we can't communicate with them. Or can you?"

A modest blush tinged her cheeks. "I've never tried. Barlennoi don't wander around on planets with oxygen atmospheres. I did link with a Timeless One, once." Percy's eyebrows raised. The Timeless Ones were so alien as to verge on the mythical. "I don't know for how long---we were inside its mindspace, and they really do exist outside time. But I can't imagine persuading Fogfall Silvermist to do anything---they really don't make conscious decisions, so far as I could tell."

"Perhaps the blocks are a natural-law requirement on the evolution of intelligence?" he asked.

"If pigs had wings, could they tow the Star Fleet's dirigibles into battle? I suppose it's possible, but I can't see how," she answered.

"Perhaps something from outside did it. We don't have the power, but someone else might. Why? If you could do that, conquest would be no problem," he said.

"If you were enormously powerful, you might not want competition," answered Pam. "Or perhaps it's an experiment, to see what happens when a lot of intelligent species compete, without one dominating the rest. You'd need to keep all species technically and intellectually equal. That explains some of the limits."

"But why psi and evolution? Oh, of course. There are no evolutionary antecedents for psi, anywhere in Terran-stock animals. Psi couldn't have evolved in people---there's no starting point. Color vision was a replication mutation, but psi must have been introduced. Perhaps they thought man needed natural telepaths to compete with other species. But if I were making telepaths, I'd make very sure they weren't as strong as me, or that their screens had holes only I could use, or something. That would make them---whoever

made the blocks---very dangerous. Even for you, Pam."

"I know, I know. Especially for me. You're right. Most mentalists ignore---or can't see---some bands. Bands that go right through commercial screens. But I can throw a pretty decent shield on any band. At least, any band I know about." With each word she sounded less sure of herself.

"There might be a more obvious explanation, once we've thought about everything the blocks do," said Percy. "I have to run, though---I have two months off-planet, starting tomorrow morning. Pam, do be careful. I'd miss not seeing you again." He stood, hugged her firmly for a long moment, and left.

#

The next day found Pam at the University Zoological Gardens. The facilities were closed to the public during holidays, but scientists could be found laboring there around the clock. A month back, she had scheduled an appointment with an expert on sensing. However much she was interested in her new discovery, not to mention finishing the first draft, her term paper was due soon.

Professor McMaster and his assistant, Dr. Crenshaw, were acknowledged experts on the evolution of magnetic field detection. McMaster, a gruff white-haired man, had apparently concluded from her letter that Pam might possibly be capable of learning something, an ability he clearly did not attribute to most of his colleagues. He talked, occasionally leaving a gap in which a bright student might make a comment and a very bright student might ask a marginally intelligent question. Crenshaw stood at Pam's shoulder, noting illustrative examples and clarifying abstruse parallels.

The important part of their conversation over, Pam sketched the rest of her term paper, noting her approach and choice of comparisons. On an impulse, she mentioned telepathy as a field sense which might be studied. As she expected, McMaster listened carefully to her list of five field senses, nodded sagely, and remarked that comparing four senses would be a lot of work---a good indication

that she was a promising student.

Dr. Crenshaw, still at her shoulder, peered at her intently. "Miss Morgan, did I hear you mention the evolution of psi? That is really clever. Wherever did you hear the idea?"

"Hear of psi evolution? No place, really. It's the same question I've asked before, applied to one more sense." Pam leaned away from him. Wasn't the block universal? If Crenshaw had heard what she said, she might have put him in danger.

"Where did you hear of the evolution of psi?" Crenshaw repeated. In one corner of her eyes, McMaster sat stock-still, as if unaware of their conversation. Pam suddenly realized that Crenshaw was no longer radiating stray wisps of thought, the way normal people always did. Startled, her mind-shields snapped towards maximum density, to be struck by a crushing hammer of psionic force. Her shields shuddered and warped, then reformed as she set the force of her will behind them. The attack had had lethal power.

Crenshaw wasn't using psi, in the usual sense, at all. It was something not-quite-visible to her senses, before which her shields were crumbling like a sand castle in high waves. Who was Crenshaw? A conspirator? She reinforced her defenses, then countered with a stiff levin-blast. Crenshaw, she thought, couldn't be shielding himself, not and hold that level of attack. Her blast bounced off a gossamer-thin barrier, something that looked too fragile to stop a puff of breeze, something she had scarcely sensed until her own attack set it ringing.

Crenshaw was using bands she had never faced before. Despite her best efforts, her shields were rapidly fraying. She needed time to reorganize her protections. She whirled and planted her elbow, hard, just below his ribs.

One of Miralie's former boy-friends, who had had three inches and eighty pounds on her, once complained that Pam confused basketball with full-contact karate. The speed and strength which made her a terror on the boards now came to her rescue. Crenshaw sagged backwards, gasping for breath, his mental barrage momentarily interrupted. Pam dodged out the door. She didn't have a real plan; she just wanted to open the range. She

was neither weak nor slow, but Kronos was a civilized planet where few people studied hand-to-hand combat. She didn't want to learn if Crenshaw was an exception. Besides, most exotic psi forces travelled poorly. While they stood shoulder to shoulder, Crenshaw had mauled her screens. At twenty or thirty feet, he might be less successful.

Crenshaw followed, carefully keeping a good distance between them. At a distance her shields could stand up to his attacks. His shields, however, were impervious to everything she could muster. She fled before him, noting that he had control over most of the air locks and fire doors. Her Graduate Student ID would open some of them, but he gradually herded her into a particular quadrant of the zoo. She was prepared to accept his plans, at least so long as they moved closer to an outer wall. Once outside, Crenshaw would find her much more difficult to corner. In the long run, being hunted by the secret overlords of civilization ---or whatever they were---sounded unfortunate. In the short term, her subconscious needed time to identify the flaws in Crenshaw's protections.

How had she found a conspirator so quickly? Were they that common? In retrospect, the answer was obvious. The mind-bindings were not completely infallible. Whoever did the binding needed agents to spot the unbound. They could make random searches, but there was a simpler way. Anyone who realized that telepathy had evolved, Zinor was wrong, or whatever, would soon show up at a good research facility with his discovery. There, waiting in editorial offices and scientific laboratories, would be Crenshaw's friends, lurking like spiders until an innocent blundered into their outflung web. Indeed, her near-photographic memory reminded her, perhaps once a year there came an announcement of a new super-fast star drive. Equally regularly, the discoverer proved to be a crackpot who faded so completely from sight that he could not later be found.

She was puzzled by Crenshaw's limited range of methods. He remained fifty paces behind her, too far away for his attacks to disrupt her screens. They ran by busy laboratories, whose workers stood in paralyzed silence while they passed. If she had been in Crenshaw's position, she could have

used mind control methods to turn the workers into a mob of pursuers. Crenshaw simply froze their minds for a few instants, so that none were aware of her flight. Perhaps Crenshaw was not such a fool, she reflected; a lynching might be somewhat challenging to explain to Campus Security.

A particularly long straight corridor brought her to a stairway leading up. The markings indicated a ground exit. Pam dashed up and outside, to be greeted by rolling parkland planted with unfamiliar bushes and shrubs. Where was she? Her probes reached out, finding mechanical psi-screens in the distance. Was this really a park? Crenshaw had closed a barrier across the stairs behind her. An interrogatory shove suggested a blast wall, not something she could break. She shifted to one of the more exotic psi bands, an effort that left her sweating, and slipped through the screens around the park. There was no one that she could reach. Crenshaw had put everyone in the complex---perhaps a hundred people---to sleep. The zoo's external screens were too good for her to penetrate quickly. Of course, she reflected, she had slipped a few ideas on their weaknesses into the zoo director's subconscious. The zoo might not worry about creatures which lured their prey by psi methods, but she did, so she had ensured that the zoo's psi-screens were rock-solid. At last she found someone whose memories identified her whereabouts. Her heart sank. Crenshaw had lured her into the pen of a cthulwaul, one of the nastier predators known to the Confederation.

She wasted a few moments cursing her lack of good sense. The warning holograms had been turned off, so nothing had appeared on the stairway. In a hero tale, she would have read the necessary minds while she ran, using local knowledge to pick her route rather than walking into Crenshaw's trap. She had instead spent her time trying to break his screens. In a hero tale, though, her elbow to the ribs would have killed him instantly, sparing her the chase scene. She wasn't a fabulous heroine, she reminded herself, she was just a physically fit graduate student who happened to read minds. At the moment, none of those attributes seemed likely to help her.

Pam shrugged and searched out those who

knew the beast's habits. She found many facts, most discouraging. The cthulwaul was a massive ball of red fur, looking much like a small child's toy except for its rows of fangs, claws, and voracious appetite. The beast was a tracking hunter, carefully penned behind thornbushes and reinforced concrete walls. The thornbushes were impassable to humans without powered ceramic body armor---which was the only safe form of clothing inside the pen. The real cage was based on perfume, though, not steel. Cthulwauls were rigidly territorial, sharing neutral land only during adolescence. An adult female cthulwaul never entered another's territory, and similarly for males. Appropriate scents, sprayed around the enclosure's perimeter, left the beast unable to conceive of passing beyond the thornbushes.

She peered through a guard's unseeing eye. Crenshaw had neutralized the enclosure's security system. The beast would hunt her, but even when it ate, the computer banks would note nothing unusual. Pam started for one edge of the enclosure. With time, 'impassable' plant barriers might be passed.

Pam's psi attacks had cascaded intermittently off Crenshaw's shields. The most she could do was to cloud his second sight, creating a thin haze like streamers of fog rising off a pond on an autumn evening.

The cthulwaul sniffed the air. It smelled a new type of food. The novelty aroused first interest, then hunger. The cthulwaul began its hunt. Its loping canter had a pace many human runners would have envied. Pam marked its speed, then scrambled away. She could keep ahead of its for a couple of hours, at least if she stayed on flat open ground. The fear of ultimate loneliness nibbled at the edges of Pam's thoughts, not quite distracting her from the crisis at hand.

A gossamer curtain of Crenshaw's not-psi force now swathed both the beast and its pen, keeping her from controlling the beast or reaching the outside world. Reaching the outside was pointless. If she couldn't fight Crenshaw, any psi she summoned would share her fate.

What could she do? Her mindscreen blocked Crenshaw's own psi attacks. As a zoo-keeper,

Crenshaw might have access to firearms. No, the zoo, like the local police, relied on StarFleet Marines for weapons support. That left her facing a cthulwaul, and Crenshaw afterward. Pam concluded that Crenshaw had supreme confidence in his abilities. He wanted her to die without creating questions; the cthulwaul was a convenient tool. What, she asked herself, could be less suspicious than an overzealous grad student who broke a few safety rules to pursue her research project? It would be a shame that the Security system had failed, but it would have been unethical to design a system to cope with people who deliberately overrode its operation. Even Pam, who had learned the mind-sets of a dozen alien species, shared the Confederation prejudice against obstructing evolution. Inquirers who knew Pam had psi talents could be told that a hunting cthulwaul was sometimes immune to levin bolts.

As she ran, she made a long series of psi experiments, carefully masked from Crenshaw's eye, on the predator. Crenshaw was not terribly observant, but his interference was terribly strong. Pam could find the beast's memories of other hunts, the sun's warming glow, the solitary adolescent trying to steal territory. She could create momentary illusions within the cthulwaul's mind.

It might briefly be convinced that it faced a wall, a grove of trees, or another prey animal. She tried to use the beast as a living battering ram against the thornbushes. She couldn't do it. She could lure the beast toward the bushes, but they were protected by the odor of other adult cthulwauls, marking them as part of other cthulwauls' territories. Adult cthulwauls respected each other's boundaries. She couldn't, she found, keep the cthulwaul from smelling something which was really there, such as herself, not while Crenshaw shielded the beast.

She continued to run, her predator a moderate distance behind her. She dared not lead the beast by too much, lest it cut towards the center of the cage, where it could keep pace with her while forcing her to run faster than it did. Crenshaw used the transport tubes to keep even with her, always staying a safe ten or fifteen yards on the other side of the thornbushes. She could sense his probes

around her, but he never attacked. Either he wanted nature to take its course, or the effective range of his powers was very small. She had the range to hit him, not that it did any good. Her heaviest levin-bolts, the summoning of which brought fine lines of fire under her skin, didn't even dent his shields.

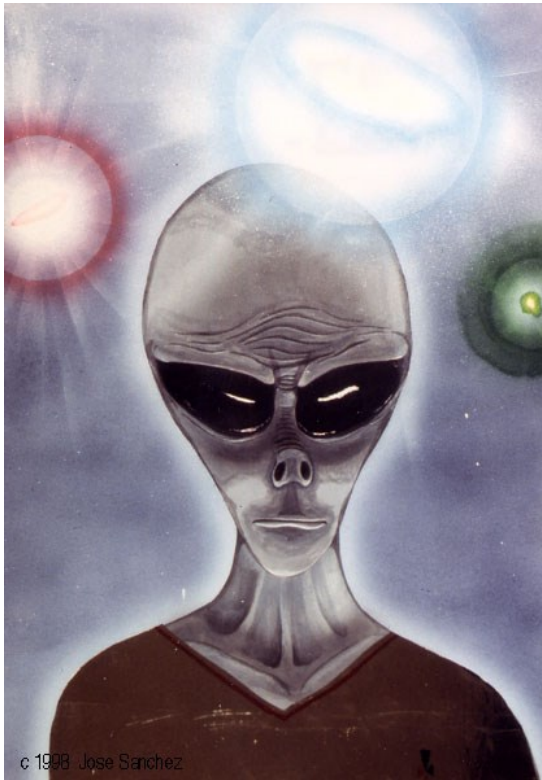
Pam was tiring. Her ribs hurt; her breath came in gasps. Her jacket, now sodden with sweat, was tied around her waist. The perimeter of the compound was eight or more miles long; she had completed its circuit and then some. Her watch said that less than an hour had passed since Crenshaw had lured her into the pen.

Crenshaw, she noticed, was very predictable. He always stood exactly in front of a transport tube, ready to follow after she passed. When she reached the next tube, she slowed and hung her jacket over a thornbush. She pretended to cry, as though she had abandoned hope and preferred to wait for her death.

Crenshaw's not-psi mindprobes flickered against her hair, drinking in the emotions she supplied. Why? Was he some sort of vampire, who sipped on terror rather than blood? Or did he hope her screens would collapse as she died, so that he could learn who else knew her secrets? She had prepared herself for that grim contingency, readying herself to move out-of-body and destroy her memories. Even without Crenshaw's interference, she could survive discorporation only for a few seconds, but she could and would ensure that when her shields followed her psyche into nothingness, no damaging references to Percival Summers would remain behind.

The cthulwaul loped into view, stopped, and began a deliberate stalk, one foot moving noiselessly after the next. Its tail whipped back and forth. Her resting place put the breeze on her back; to a cthulwaul nose, her woolen jacket---and perhaps the rest of her, she thought---gave the place an acrid stench.

She lashed out at Crenshaw, hitting him with the hardest psi-blasts she could muster, then shifted away from normal human psi bands. Crenshaw's screens seemed to be softer there. Crenshaw recoiled in startlement. As he did, she



Angry Alien — Jose Sanchez

tickled one of the Cthulwaul's memories. The cthulwaul glared. There, beyond the interesting food, just beyond the bushes, was another cthulwaul. An adolescent. She created an illusory scent in the cthulwaul's mind. The scent announced that the adolescent was challenging for territory.

The cthulwaul screamed in blinding-white rage. It could smell the adolescent's challenge. The fragrance was the one the real cthulwaul had used, many years ago, when it first took territory. The cthulwaul heard the adolescent roar a response. The cthulwaul attacked.

Pam threw herself to the side. The creature's delicate nose registered a slight scent of other adult cthulwaul, almost masked by the hideous reek of a human, and the undeniable odor of a challenger. The challenge could not be tolerated. The stripling had to be destroyed, annihilated, obliterated!-- even if it meant a brief trespass on the grounds of another adult. No other choice could be imagined. Bellowing with hatred, the cthulwaul crashed into the brush.

Pam held her attacks focused against Crenshaw. She couldn't break his mind-screens, but she had to blind him until it was too late for him to run. When the cthulwaul charged, she swaddled the creature in her own mind-screens. Crenshaw had kept her from controlling the cthulwaul. For a few moments, she would try to return the favor.

Crenshaw saw the beast trample down the shrubbery. He felt an instant of terror. "Die!" he commanded. He lashed out against the creature with a vitriolic stream of not-levin energy. Unprotected, the beast would have fallen in its tracks. Most human psis, Pam reflected, would have been little better off. Crenshaw's command crashed into Pam's shields, lovingly wrapped around the predator. She shuddered at the impact. Layer after layer of screen vanished, burned away like tissue paper before a torrent of ravaging flame. Her vision faded into a red haze. She had a fair notion of her endurance, of how hard she could drive her powers before she risked killing herself. She was well beyond that limit. Crenshaw's barrage vanished in a crunch of fang and bone. Pam tried to scan Crenshaw's vanishing memories, then bound the beast to ignore the food that lay on the ground behind it. Having reached the limit of her strength, she sank limply into the grass.

Monitors dutifully noted the presence of an escaped animal, and summoned Security. By the time the robots arrived, only a detailed biochemical analysis of the cthulwaul's stomach would have revealed whether or not Crenshaw had been human. Pam knew better. The form might have been human, with a camouflage of social graces, but the basement mindset was that of a shark in feeding frenzy.

She had found a few of his memories. Lurking behind the thornbushes, he had watched her with elation. It had been a long time since he had hunted. Too long! After he had disposed of the prey, he would have to check her acquaintances, though it was nearly mathematically certain that none of them would be aware of her discovery. In many ways she was a splendid specimen, as defined by the Great Plan, but there was no alternative to deleting psi talents whose geases became defective. Fortunately, as Forseen by The Planner, psi

could be relied upon to strengthen the bindings, so psi talents almost never became unbound. In any event, the cthulwaul's blood lust and her terror would be heady wines, upon which he would soon feast. Of Crenshaw's superiors, Pam had glimpsed only reverential invocations of The Great Plan.

It appeared that Crenshaw had not yet informed his superiors of her existence. Sitting still and keeping quiet was the best way to ensure that they did not suspect that his death was other than an accident. Her term paper, however, had just gotten shorter. Four field senses, after all, were more than enough.

University Security was entirely willing to accept Pam's confused explanation of the afternoon's events. It was hard for them to believe that Crenshaw had told her the pen was safe, but no other explanation made sense. If Crenshaw's people made their own investigation, Pam missed the traces.

The next weekend, the semester completed, Pam, house-mates, and friends sat on the bungalow's patio, watching the moons sink into the ocean. Pam was content to let the others talk. The crash of breaking waves came faintly to her ears. She peered up into the starstream, her thoughts leaving her companions far behind. To her housemates and their boyfriends, the stars were open, infinite, promising an unlimited future for mankind. She alone had glimpsed the invisible bars across the constellations.

Windy

by

Peter Fergus-Moore

Lacey hunkered down as small as he could get into the thicket of juniper. The boat had stayed offshore, past Skull Islet, beating across the bay back and forth like a cat watching a mouse hole all day. He didn't think they'd spotted him as yet, but no harm making sure. He glanced around carefully. His lookout lay near a point in a bay hemmed by grey palisades of rock on either side of him. Dark clumps of stunted juniper and spruce growth capped the old, scored rock and in these he had chosen his cover. Not a lot of it, but enough to hide

in under a camo net, a prize from one of his successes.

"Patience", he muttered to himself. No one's in any hurry here, he thought. "Patience."

They closed in on him just after sunset, while the afterglow kept the July sky lighted for a good long while. Not that they'd spot him right off, of course, Lacey was too smart for that. Still, with all the seasons he'd been wrecking, he didn't want to spoil a good thing now. Winters too damned long here. People hungry. Him too. The boat glided toward his hiding place.

Not a large boat: wind tech power, maybe two aboard. Count at least one unseen, the wrecker always figured. He could make out what looked like assault rifles, maybe a machine pistol or two. He focussed the binocs once more, on the one he took to be leader.

Tough squarejaw type, lots bigger than Lacey by about two people. But then Lacey'd always avoided showdowns, so maybe that wouldn't matter. Shifting his position under the camo net, careful not to let the lens glare give him away, the wrecker glommed the other one. Nope. The squarejaw was the muscle--the lean one was the leader. The lean one scanned the bay round as though he knew every square, and thought an enemy hid behind every wavelet. Lacey shivered, beat down an urge to go to ground into one of his half dozen hideaways in the scrub bush south of Buchanan Desert. He needed to know all he could about this latest bunch. And their boat, which might be his own, soon enough...

Too late, the wrecker spied the telltale candystripe antenna of the gear in the lean one's hand. The leader swung it in a gentle arc scoping the rocks and bush of the bay into which the boat glided. Shitlamerde, they'd know he was here now, Lacey figured. One notch of surprise gone. They might take him for a small bear, but not likely--there'd have to be bears around in the first place. But what the hell, his whole plan depended on showing himself sooner or later.

The lean one undulated with the rocking of the boat, then stood up, arming what looked like a mortar.

Shitlamerde, a stunner! Lacey crabbed away up

the rock as quickly as he could to the nearest cave hideaway. As he stood to run, a hollow thud sounded behind him. Ten, nine, eight, Lacey counted, frantically sprinting now along a barely detectable path through the spruce bush. Seven, six, five, a few metres and he'd at least be underground. He slapped on earcaps. The cave grew closer, closer. Two, one...

He flew feet first into the rock fissure just as the sound bomb blew the air out of his lungs. Lacey lay, nauseated, for long minutes. Maybe more... Slowly, slowly, his breath began to return, even as his ribs ached, his head pounded. He could make out neither floor nor ceiling as his senses spun. Shitlamerde, that was close, too close. One more like that and Lacey was game over, he knew. Gathering himself together best he could, Lacey wondered if they'd come for him now, or figure he was scared off, if not dead.

He slipped off the earcaps, strained his hearing in every direction he could from within the narrow rock cleft. It wasn't his best one, by any means. The wrecker knew he'd have to get deeper in the bush, hoping they hadn't brought a dog. Damn! He hadn't time as yet to get this hideaway the way he liked it, deep, well hidden and comfortable for up to a week, like all the other ones. Shaking his head angrily, he listened as hard as he could.

Shitlamerde, footsteps! He sucked in his breath, made himself small as he could, still as a rock. Go past, go past, he thought, I'm not here, no one's--

The footsteps paused, then with a scrape, told him their owner had turned, as if searching. Lacey barely breathed for long minutes.

"You gonna come out, or do I throw something in? I promise you won't like it if I have to." The voice was male, deep, cheerfully secure in knowing who held the whip hand.

Lacey weighed the options, which were pretty slim on his side. If he came out, the lean one would probably just have him flayed and left strung up for whatever came along hungry enough to kill him, or he'd die of thirst first. If he stayed, he was pretty sure the lean one had something very unpleasant ready, another stunner or worse. There was plenty worse. Somehow the lean ones got hold

of the latest tech stuff to make themselves richer and most people even hungrier than before.

"I'm comin'," he croaked, crawling through the cleft in the rock.

He'd rather die in open air, he decided, and besides, there was always-- A hand roughly grabbed, hauled him out into the fading daylight. The world danced a little around his eyes; the stunner'd done some damage probably. He shook his head, gulped some more air. Looking around him, he now saw his captor, or captors. The lean one stood in front of him, eyeing Lacey closely without seeming to. The wrecker's heart dipped a bit--this customer wasn't going to easy--a dark, slim, well-built youngish man who seemed to miss nothing around him.

Lacey heard another footstep, then saw the muscle come into focus to his left. The big one aimed a machine pistol straight at Lacey's eyes from close in. An assault rifle was slung over his shoulder. The lean one quickly looped some nylon cord around Lacey's wrists, tightened them to the point of coldness, then did the same with his ankles. Both wore sunspecs. Both seemed healthy, almost perfect. They were always, always perfect, with their latest tech boats and their latest tech gear. Never a scar or sunken eyes from malnutrition. Used to being in charge, used to pushing people around to get their way. Some of the old anger stirred in Lacey, sharpening his senses and his thinking. Wasn't there a third? Not that it much mattered by now, but there was still a chance.

Well, let's start the music and see who'll dance, he thought.

"Here for the silver, I guess," Lacey muttered.

The big one stiffened, just a hair. Got one, Lacey thought. The lean one stayed motionless. He might have a plan of his own that didn't include muscle in the final tally, Lacey guessed. That might be the wedge point.

"What if we are--?!" the big one cocked the pistol.

"That's fine, Buk," the lean one said suddenly. "Ease off." Turning to Lacey, he said,

"Actually, we want to talk to you, friend."

Lacey's eyes went to Buk, who had lowered the pistol muzzle the tiniest fraction toward

Lacey's mouth. Lacey glanced back at the lean one.

"Go help Aino." Buk reluctantly lowered the pistol, clicked on the safety, then turned and vanished into the shadowy scrub woods.

"Sit down," lean one said. He himself remained standing, holding another machine pistol aimed at Lacey's stomach. Lacey's eyes went to the pistol, then back to the lean one's glasses.

"Sorry," the man said in a way that meant the opposite. "Got to take proper precautions, you know. I'm Fetter. And you are--?"

"Lacey, not that it matters."

"True enough," Fetter chuckled. "It's not who you are, it's what you know. About this place. That's my interest."

"Like what? The silver's over there in the bay, under the island. You can get that yourself easy enough," Lacey said. "What else is around here?"

"Scrub bush, tamarack and arbor vitae in the wetter areas, juniper and stunted spruce growth in the dryer," Fetter replied. "Formerly mixed deciduous forest on sandy soil on dolomite rock. A power place in Anishnabe culture, later on a port for the mining company, later still summer camps for affluent Thunder Bay residents. Major clear-cut deforestation about fifteen years ago. The land never recovered."

Lacey frowned, inside. Fetter had done his research, all right. But why were they keeping him alive if they knew about the silver? Nothing else anyone'd want in that shopping list. Unless he was playing with him. Lacey decided, no--none of them ever played, who came here. It was always, always business. Before death. So far, the deaths had been theirs, but that could change, and probably would, very soon.

At that moment, Buk returned. With him was the third one Lacey had correctly guessed at. A woman, younger again than the other two, slimly built, well muscled. Her pale blue eyes seemed to shoot a kind of ugly light into her surroundings. One of those intense ones, Lacey realized, trying not to stare. Don't cross her, not while there's a chance yet.

"You must have a use for this one," the woman muttered sarcastically.

"I do, such as he is," Fetter replied drily. "Find anything?"

"Instruments show it's clean," she answered casually. She glared at the wrecker, who stared at the ground.

"So when do we--?" Buk said.

"Where's Hecate?" Fetter asked abruptly. Lacey shot a glance out of the corner of his eye, puzzled. A fourth one?

"Still doing a sweep around the cottages. She'll be along any time." Aino started to sit.

Fetter stiffened.

"Better call her in," he murmured, as if trying to sound casual. Looking about him into the deepening shadows.

"But there's nothing on the instru--!"

Fetter snapped, "Call her, Aino!!"

"All right, for chrissakes!" The woman slipped a small cylinder between her lips and blew a small hiss of air.

They listened for several moments. Damn, they had a dog, it seemed. They'd find his other hideaways for sure, maybe even--

"Call her again! You don't know what's out there!" Fetter had lost some of the cool that Lacey had noted. What was he afraid of, the coyotes? Lacey knew from experience that the packs were farther north this time of year, in the highlands where the bigger trees had been spared becoming part of the desert. Come to that, what did Fetter know about this place?

"She's coming, Fetter. She always has..." Aino sounded disgusted, but her eyes spoke hatred. Buk in the meantime edged closer to Aino, Lacey saw. A small hope bubbled up in him. These three are barely here an hour and they're already close to scrapping, he realized. Might be easier to split them up than he'd thought. Well, let's play another card.

"There's a bear cave a ways northwest of the old houses," he spoke up. "Dog might've gone for a look."

The three looked at him.

"There aren't any bears," Fetter turned to Aino. "We--"

A bass bark erupted from the bush some distance away, cut off abruptly by a shrill scream.

Then silence.

“Bears!” shouted Buk. Aino was already running toward the sound.

“Wait--!” Fetter called.

Buk shot Fetter a puzzled look, then slipped the assault rifle from his shoulder as he headed after Aino. Lacey clamped a lid on his feelings. Things were moving pretty fast as they sometimes did. Just maybe he’d be out of this one sooner than he’d thought.

Fetter, still obviously upset, kept Lacey covered with the machine pistol in one hand while he fished a small hide pouch on a thong from the front of his shirt. The wrecker could see his lips move as the lean one then took another small sac from his jacket pocket. Opening this, Fetter sprinkled white grains from it around the two of them in a circle about five metres in diameter. Lacey’s eyes widened. What did this guy know? How much? Best find out...

“Whatcha doin’?”

Fetter hissed him to silence as he finished the circle.

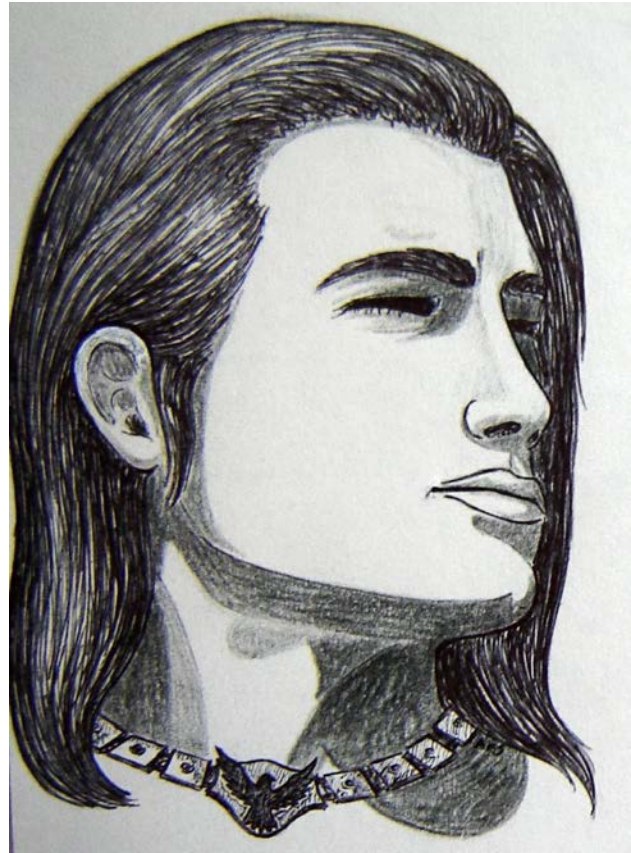
“We might get lucky...” the lean one murmured, as he started to set twigs for a fire in the centre of the circle. “Then again...”

Another scream. The woman. They heard the rapid pong pong sound of an assault rifle echoing crazily off the rocks of the far shore. A ricochet sound. Another. It seemed to go on and on until, silence. Another scream, in a deeper voice. Silence again.

“They’re his food,” Fetter muttered, working frantically to nurse a fire as his breath came in harsh gasps. “Too bad about the dog, though. Wanted to keep her.”

When the fire rippled up through the twigs and bark kindling, he quickly gathered a few dead branches from around the clearing, piling them upwind of the small flame. Then he stood, taking some powdery dried leaves from his pants pocket. Fetter hurriedly placed them at four different points on the salt circle, muttering as he did so.

Lacey froze. Shitlamerde, he thought. This one Knows. The wrecker sat, his mind roiling like waves splayed against rock. This one Knows. Lacey’s one advantage, his one last surprise for the



Male Warrior — Angela K. Scott

perfect ones, was gone. Desperately, he tried to think what else might work against Fetter, but the man had everything covered, it seemed. At last, Fetter seemed satisfied with his work. He hunkered down by the fire.

“Now we wait,” he said.

“For what?” Lacey asked him as innocently as he could.

“I think you know,” the lean one muttered without looking at him. “Fully well.”

He stirred the fire, then dropped some brown dried powder on it. A sweet tobacco scent mingled with the resinous spruce smell of the smoke drifting up from the flames. The wood crackled, spat, hissed. Near them, somewhere in the light nearly vanished, a breeze stirred the branches of the tamarack.

“I’m not here for the silver, but I think you know that by now, friend,” Fetter muttered, almost to himself. Lacey sighed in spite of himself. Let’s see if jokers are wild, he thought. Nothing else left.

“You gonna untie me?” he asked Fetter.

The lean one took off his sunspecs, gazed at him with black, glinting eyes.

“Think I should?” He added a twig to the flames.

“Like to sing my death song,” Lacey played his card.

The lean one considered that.

“All right, “ Fetter said. “Not that it will make any difference.”

He produced a small knife which he used to cut the knots on the cords. Lacey rubbed his cold hands and ankles as Fetter carefully coiled the remaining rope. A grudging spark of respect kindled in Lacey, who never wasted a thing himself if he could help it. Fetter walked to the edge of the circle, stooped and placed the pistol just outside. He added a compass and watch, along with some other things, finally his belt with a gleaming metal buckle. For a moment or two, he gazed out into the dark bush as though waiting for something unseen.

Lacey thought hard. Windy? he called in his mind. Windy, c'mere! Maybe it would work, even against Fetter's precautions.

Meanwhile, Fetter glanced back at Lacey.

“No metal?” he asked.

“None o'this'll do any good,” the wrecker shook his head.

Fetter looked puzzled.

“Won't do any good,” Lacey repeated as calmly as he could. “All the bets are off.”

Fetter stiffened.

“What do you mean--?”

A twig snapped from right behind him. Fetter wheeled toward the sound, tugging at the pouch around his neck as he did so. The lean one froze.

Not a couple of metres away stood something shaped more or less human. About the height of a tall man, the thing seemed made up of pale yellowish bones that gleamed wickedly in the fire light. The bones added up to a distorted human skeleton, except the skull bore glistening white teeth more like a bear's. Dark stains ran dripping from the teeth, and from the twitching hands of the creature. It faced Fetter squarely as though looking right at him, its eye sockets empty, black. The

humans could feel a fierce cold energy radiating from the thing. Fetter stepped back a pace in spite of himself, gripped the pouch as though his soul depended on it.

“Zhe--” he started to say. The creature advanced a pace. The drops of liquid from the gleaming jaws and hands tapped on the dried leaves of the forest floor.

“Won't do much good,” Lacey piped up, his voice getting stronger, his hope swelling. “All bets are off, like I said.”

Fetter started to shiver. “Zhe--”

“Windy's tone deaf,” Lacey chuckled. “Don't hear the songs no more, Fetter. It's over.”

The creature advanced another pace, to the edge of the circle. It clashed its jaws shut. The forest seemed to echo with the sound.

“Zh--” Fetter froze where he stood, shivering violently.

“Windy don't mind the salt, neither,” Lacey stood. “Tobacco don't make no difference to him these days. Or the medicine such as you got.” He threw some twigs on the fire. “Might as well see what we're doin',” he added.

Fetter paused, gathering himself together bit by bit. Then he looked round at the wrecker.

“What do you mean 'we'?”

Lacey snapped a few more twigs in half, poking the fire until light filled the clearing. The stains on the creature oozed dark red as the men's eyes could make out colour in the light.

“Windy 'n me got an understandin',” Lacey said. He rubbed his wrists once more, flexing his arms and legs.

“You see, we all gotta eat. Windy's like us that way ever since the singing stopped and the bush got turned into desert and the white man--that's you and me, or maybe it's just me tonight--pretty much ruined everything around the world.” Lacey threw another twig on the spitting blaze.

“Food's scarce all over, as you know,” the wrecker went on. He paused, staring Fetter straight in the eye. The creature moved a little closer to Fetter.

“Well, maybe you wouldn't know. Don't look as if you'd know, to me. But I do.”

He stabbed a stick in the creature's direction.

“And Windy here knows what it’s like to go without a full belly most of the time. That’s the nub of our understanding. You people come out here for the silver, or whatever it is you’re out here for--”

“I came for Windigo,” Fetter said calmly. Lacey stopped. Then he began to chuckle.

“What you goin’ to do? Put him in a cage?” His laughter deepened as he let out all the cooped-up fear of the past hours. He shook his head.

“You don’t understand,” Fetter said.

Lacey poked the fire some more, chuckling.

“I’ve heard the rumours around,” Fetter went on. “Even called up all the data I could as quietly as possible. It stayed with me, night and day. I had to come and see if any of it was really true. It cost a fortune to get out here--!”

“Well, I’ve heard everything now,” Lacey snorted the last laugh out. “But you haven’t. So you might as well hear the rest. It’s short.”

He threw the last twig on the fire.

“Windy ain’t yours and he ain’t mine. He’s Windigo. Himself. Goes where he will and does what he will. You people come out here with your hi-tech boats and stunners and firepower, and I get you in here for Windy. He eats his fill and I get your gear and whatever. And then we wait till someone else comes along for the silver under this rock. That’s what most of ‘em want, even if you don’t.”

“I came for Windigo,” Fetter continued, his voice an unnatural calm, his eyes brighter than the firelight. His face twitching, he turned toward the creature, now barely an arm’s length away. Lacey could see Fetter’s cheeks widen into a smile. What was the man, crazy?

“I had to see for myself if the Old Ones had come back for real. If the rumours were true...”, Fetter mumbled. His chuckle sounded like a sob.

“Yep, they’re back all right,” Lacey said. “But the old ways, they stayed dead. All the old deals between us and them gone down the chute. But the old ones, as you call ‘em, they’re here,” Lacey added. “And hungry.”

He paused as Windy raised a skeletal arm, its bloodied fingers like bony knives held rigid in

front of Fetter’s flushed face.

“And you’re here...,” Lacey murmured. For long seconds, the bony hand stayed poised in front of the human. Then the fingers stabbed into Fetter’s eye sockets. The man screamed, writhed as the creature lashed out with the other arm, breaking the man’s neck in a blow.

“...For now.”

Lacey turned away from the creature’s feeding.

“Save me some,” he muttered. “I’m hungry, too.”

When the Robot Knows Best

by

Robert N Stephenson

Visiting the doctor had always been difficult. Charlie was good at its job but failed to grasp what was happening in Joan’s life and what was happening to her family. She wanted to save her daughter, keep her alive as long as possible and faced the arduous task of negotiating with a machine.

There was more fear than understanding since the days of the change. While Joan stared at Charlie, she couldn’t help but remember her father’s stories of the great take over by the AIs. How rioters stormed government buildings, and people died, but their efforts changed nothing. The machines began their takeover, and the world changed.

“They said it was for the best,” he father had said one night while they ate pasta.

“You fought in the revolution?” I’d asked.

“Two days and hardly a shot fired,” he laughed. “Not much of a revolution when everything is controlled by the AI’s. They wouldn’t even let us harm ourselves with anything more dangerous than a knife.”

“You had guns.” She was sure the revolution had guns.

Her dad smiled, ate some spaghetti, getting red sauce on his chin and nodded as if what he was going to say was the most important thing in the world. Her world.

“When the first AI government took charge there was an amnesty on all weapons and food

was paid to those who brought in anything from a single shell to a tank.” He sat back, looking at the ceiling in remembrance. “When the government fell you have to understand food shortages were everywhere, millions died in the first few months, and many millions after. We needed food and gathering up ammunition and weapons was a cheap way to get it, almost the only way to get some.”

Joan knew what the AI government had done was the right thing, only it was harsh, a harsh reality handed down by uncaring gods. Today, of all days Joan needed a decision that would be made by a machine no matter how intelligent it was supposed to be. Her child was sick, maybe too sick to be saved; she had to try. She didn’t want Ela to die.

“Charlie, I petition you to help,” Joan said staring up at the robot, the man who looked flesh and blood only wasn’t. “I need your help.”

“You have been allotted fifteen minutes, Ms. Joan Greaves, any longer and I will have to terminate the meeting without resolution. Do you understand?” Charlie’s voice was calm enough and engaging enough to give the impression of real interest, but how much did a machine care about human problems? Yes, health care was free, so too was all food and medicines but did they care, human care?

Joan sat on the blue sofa set up for the discussion. Charlie sat in a plain white plastic chair with a cable running from its back and into its head. The robot had access to her medical files, to her children’s and her husband’s even though they’d were separated these last five years. The machines didn’t see separation the same way humans did, to them everybody was connected, and everybody referenced when it came to health, education and crime.

“Ela isn’t getting any better,” she said, keeping her voice low. Charlies were sensitive to sound. The doctor systems were designed on real medical people.

“The clinic has done what is required. Is that not sufficient?” This Charlie was black toned so he’d fit in with the neighbourhood but how could a machine understand the meaning behind colour?

She knew how some folks spoke about her district. Her father had said before the revolution there was fighting amongst the people in the cities. People sided with their like, and new battles had broken out.

“A white man killed your sister,” her dad said one night when he’d come home late from cropping.

“Why is that important.” She was studying to work in another field.

“The robots are the new white folks,” he said, closing his eyes and drifting into sleep.

“The cancer isn’t going away!” she snapped at Charlie, hating herself for the outburst. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry you don’t deserve that.”

“I know you are undergoing severe stress. I can treat this condition if you like?”

The room, while cool wasn’t comfortable. The sofa was firm, the decorations on the walls abstract and as Joan understood probably machine produced. The robot’s trim suit was a dusty green with gold highlights. Modern, fashionable and professional. She tried to find compassion in his eyes but could only see the liquid of their artificial sight. She closed her eyes, drawing in calming breaths. Yes, she could take something for the stress, it would be easy, but Ela would still be sick, and she would care less for her daughter.

“Ela is the one who needs help.”

“I understand, but we are doing what we can to ease her pain.”

The artificial intelligence was part right and as far as Joan ever knew it was never wrong. Fear suggested if AI systems took over they would remove humans from the equation of life. Some feared, and some welcomed the idea of a better way and in her mind both got their wish. Ela should be better under the new managed health system, but she wasn’t and had only gotten worse.

“You can operate,” she said sitting forward, her yellow slacks pulling across her knees. “Take her into the citadel and operate on the tumour.”

Charlie blinked, which always seemed odd for a machine. She’d seen Charlie or one of the Charlies over fifty times in the treatment of her daughter, and still, she could not get around the almost human appearance of them.

“The Citadel is for specific uses.”

“I bet if I were white you’d take me in, operate on Ela. Didn’t white people program you? Wasn’t it a white corporation that put you in charge?”

Charlie raised its right hand and studied the backs of its fingers before turning it over to examine the palm. Was it noting the difference in the skin colour? Did it even understand the overt racism of the city? Surely the Charlie’s would know, it surrounded them, the suburbs were alive with it, and people died because of racist positions.

“Colour has no impact on my decisions.” It looked up from its hand and stared its dead stare at her. A machine contemplating what? Numbers. “We do what we do because we know how to manage the world best.”

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t know what it is like to be black, to wake up every day and have to adjust your life because of your colour. You don’t have to walk by people and their stares, the whispers of the youth gangs and see the flags they wave.” She was here to get help for Ela, but always the old fight came up; just because they made this Charlie black didn’t mean he knew the plight in the city.

“Are we still talking about Ela?” Its voice was low and calm. “Human social issue will always be with you no matter what we do. We cannot fix what you, yourselves will not address.” Charlie probably would have sighed if he wasn’t a robot. “So, are we here to discuss Ela or something I cannot fix?”

“Ela will die if you don’t do more.” She clenched her hands in her lap. “I’ve seen white people go in for treatment and come out. There are stories.”

“What kind of stories?” This time Charlie sat forward, his hands flat on his thighs.

She’d said too much. She’d gotten emotional, attacked the AI. She couldn’t take it back; the AI would never forget her and what she’d just said; it had a memory that lasted forever.

“It’s just things I have heard at the store, or while getting the car charged.”

“They concern you, these stories, so they concern me. Do you think these stories are affecting your daughter’s treatment?”

“No, no I shouldn’t have said anything. I just think you could do more for Ela, do what you can for her. I know we only have certain treatments covered but if there are some I could afford that aren’t part of the free health service then maybe that?”

Charlie sat back, his dark eyes closing for a long moment before opening and fixing on her. Was he searching for something she could do, was he considering other possibilities? Then Joan panicked. She didn’t have any credit, not real credit. Her work paid for luxuries while the AI government supplied everything else as part of existence. Could she get an extra shift at the recycling plant? They needed microbiologists in the restructuring centre; she had the background and recognition.

“These stories,” he said, blinking. “Tell me one.”

#

Charlie had listened to the last word of the last story, his face impassive in his machine mannerism and his eyes vacant as if sleeping with his eyes open. Joan hadn’t wanted to tell him any of the whispers and assumptions, but once she started, they just came out. Charlie didn’t react to the stories of robots dismantling old people for recyclable parts in medicine, or the killing of babies to keep population levels balanced against environmental impact positions. The robot sat and listened as a stone wall listens to prayers. Once she’d finished, she stood, gathered her bag and bowed apologetically.

“Where are you going?” Charlie asked, his face coming to life like a manikin in a children’s toy display.

“Home, to be with Ela. You will be sending the authorities to take us away, won’t you?” Joan sat, holding her old leather bag in her lap. She hugged it to her stomach.

“Why would you think I would order such a thing? I am your doctor.”

“I have told you tales of how badly we see you and your kind.” She didn’t know politics very well but speaking out against the rulers of humanity

was surely unwise, if not unwelcome.

“Then you believe these stories you have told me?” Charlie’s brows knitted together, an odd thing to see on the smooth, too perfect face.

“They are true,” Joan said looking at the floor and the scuff marks on the wood. How many people have sat here under the examining eyes of a Charlie? “I have seen some of the action personally. The old people’s plant looks like a retirement village, and I have seen the white elderly folk enter and never return.” She pulled the bag even tighter into her stomach.

“Forgive me; I do not deny the validity of these stories. I am only assessing how they may affect you. What adverse effects do they have on your daily life? How do they affect Ela?”

She didn’t know what to say. Charlie was confirming the horrors of the artificially intelligent overlords and, yet he was concerned with how that made her feel. She wanted Ela treated, that is what she wanted more than anything. She wanted her daughter to stay alive.

“I will let you recycle me in return for saving my daughter.” She knew it wouldn’t understand sacrifice but hoped it would understand trade and exchange.

“I am concerned, Joan,” Charlie said, standing to tower over her. Every robot was exactly one hundred and eighty centimetres tall. Taller than her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, cowering.

“Your offer of sacrifice is generous though fiscally not adequate to cover what you desire.”

Joan sighed and closed her eyes. The AI world worked in numbers, in actuality and references that required total uncensored logic. They governed all of humanity, but they would never understand its existence, desires and method of living. She’d spent too many years working alongside them to expect machines to understand.

“Bring your daughter to me tomorrow,” Charlie said. She opened her eyes and looked up at the cold stare. “Things will change for you in light of what you have told me.”

Joan stood, nodded acceptance and left the doctor’s office. She shouldn’t have told Charlie the stories. No Charlie should be told what the humans

thought of them. But at least Ela would have a chance; she would live while Joan might die. Financially she would also arrange for her interests to go to Ela, so she wasn’t a strain on the system.

Outside, standing on the footpath and listening to the hiss of electric vehicles go about their deliveries she took in a breath of cool morning air and knew she’d done the right thing.

#

Ela sat on the sofa, her frail form propped up by a pillow. She was small for thirteen; cancer had robbed her of vitality. Joan held her hand and did her best to offer strength while they waited for Charlie.

“Will he fix me?” Ela asked looking up at her with her doe eyes. How could she tell her daughter the price she was about to pay? Her life for her daughters.

“I think so.” She squeezed Ela’s hand gently; feeling her bones move in the grasp. So thin was her hand. “You look pretty,” Joan said offering a smile. Ela had her best dress on, a flowered smock beneath a blue cardigan and she wore white slip on shoes. The clothes hung off her like a clothes hanger. But to her she was beautiful, and she wanted Ela to know.

The door of the room opened, and Charlie stood in the opening, studying them impassively. He still wore the official doctor’s attire of the green suit. Joan frowned.

“Come with me, please,” he said, stepping back and motioning for them to follow him into the next room. They had never been into the other rooms of the centre. Ela’s treatment had always been at home or in the room with the sofa.

Ela hugged close to Joan as they eased past Charlie and into the noise of activity. The door closed and left them looking at a clean factory floor with towering machines. Joan felt afraid and felt Ela tense at her side.

“Please, this way,” Charlie said leading them along a path through silver apparatuses humming. The sound of motion was everywhere and, yet she couldn’t see any. The floor, grey cement with black and yellow guidelines wove a path through

the immensity of the place.

The top of the machines reached to what she thought might be two stories. Considering the size of the building from outside she suspected the offices they met the Charlie's in were the tiny front for something else. What was this place and where was Charlie taking them?

The doctor stopped by a clear walled room and opened the door. He looked down at her and Ela.

"Please, Ela, go in and stand in the centre of the room and wait."

"Why?" she said, hugging Joan's waist.

"Yes, why? What is going on, Charlie?" Joan didn't feel combative, but Ela's life was at stake.

"We have a way to solve the problem, Ms. Greaves. So, Ela, please enter the room, and we can begin."

Joan knelt in front of Ela, cupping the girl's thin face in her hands and looking deep into her eyes. She kissed her once, then twice before pulling her into a gentle embrace. The tiny girl lost in the folds of Joan's dress. She then pushed her back at arm's length and winked.

"It's okay. I trust Charlie." Ela smiled, gave another last hug then entered the room. Charlie motioned her to stand in its centre.

The room wasn't large, a few metres to a side and about three tall with a mess of projections dotted across the ceiling. Some looked like tiny satellite dishes only black and menacing.

"What are we going to do?" Joan asked, pressing her hands against the cold glass and looking in at the nervous looking child.

A shimmer of light washed over Ela. The girl looked up and shielded her eyes. Joan stared. Then a flash blinded her, dropping her to her knees. She screamed. The pain in her eyes seemed to flood her heart. Everything collapsed like a balloon in her mind. By the time she could see, Ela was gone, all that remained was a smoking pile of ash in the centre of the room.

"No," Joan cried. "No, why did you do this?"

"She was sick, and it was the only way,"

Charlie said. He offered her his hand so that she could stand.

Joan jumped to her feet and started punching and slapping the robot. Charlie offered no defence;

he stood motionless until she fell away sobbing.

"Why?" Joan bawled. "Why take my baby?"

"You were in pain, and I must alleviate this pain."

"You're a robot, what do you know about pain!"

#

Charlie stood beside her for the hours it took for her heart and mind to calm enough to stand. Joan had screamed abuse and even had a second go at damaging him with blows, but slowly she lost the energy and drive to be violent. Ela was gone, and once again the AI's idea of what humans needed was out of step with reality.

"Are you ready?" Charlie said, again offering his hand.

She didn't want to, but without energy, she took his offer and allowed him to help her stand.

"I can't go home. Not without Ela. What will I tell my family?" She considered his face hoping to find something, anything to show understanding of what he'd just done. There was nothing. Artificial skin blankness with an artificially intelligent coldness.

"You can't leave here, not after what I have shown you." Charlie turned and walked towards a tower of bubbling tanks of fluid and wall-sized computers. "You must stay here, with us. You have a new job, and it must be carried out. Though you must choose."

Joan stopped. "I'm a prisoner?"

"You offered yourself as payment. I am afraid you cannot go back on such an agreement." Charlie walked to the front of the computer wall, pressed his right hand to a panel and part of the wall slid aside to reveal a door and lighted room beyond.

"You killed my daughter. My payment was for her cure, not murder." Rage bubbled up, matching the glomp, glomp, glomp of the vats nearby. "Is this because of the stories? Is this how you deal with opposition?"

Charlie walked into the room, obviously expecting her to follow. How do you argue with something that doesn't argue and doesn't care

about what it is doing because it doesn't have feelings? She forced herself forward. Her father had said once if the machines could organise they would eliminate all of mankind as an unwanted part of the great machine. Ela was dead because she trusted a Charlie to do what was right, but what was right for a robot?

Standing in the doorway, looking into a bare room with two sofas against a grey wall she saw Charlie standing in the centre of the floor space, staring at her; waiting.

"Is this where you dismantle me?"

"This is where you help me." Charlie motioned to a door in the opposite wall, it slid aside, and a robot woman stepped out. She looked younger than Charlie, which was odd for the machines.

"Is she the one who will kill me, take my organs?" Joan couldn't change what was about to happen, and she hoped it would be painless. And to be honest with herself she didn't see much of a future without Ela anyway.

"Mum," the robot said.

Joan gaped at the female robot. The voice sounded like Ela's but without the tired rasp. "Ela?"

The robot ran at her and grabbed her up in its arms. The embrace was too tight and the smell of the clothes artificial and sterile. Joan hugged back but didn't know why. What was happening, what was this machine that held her tight?

"We could not cure Ela of cancer," Charlie said. "But we could scan her personality and put it into one of our containers." Joan turned to look at Charlie, then pushed the robot that held her back so that she could examine its features.

"Mum," the robot said. "What's wrong?"

"Does she know?"

"Know what?"

Charlie nodded to Ela and she fell silent. Joan looked at the female robot and thought it had shut down. The eyes were closed, and its arms hung loosely at its sides. The green suit matching Charlie's suggested it was a medical robot. But it had spoken and sounded like Ela. Ela was alive. She looked at Charlie and pleaded.

"Is this really, Ela?"

"Mentally and emotionally yes, but there are

physical limitations to that assessment." Charlie's voice had softened, an unnerving sound compared to his usual evenness. "She will need educating in human mannerisms and understanding as applicable to an artificial body. She is the same Ela, but she will have difficulty with coming to terms with what she is now."

"So, what is my role?" Joan looked at the woman who looked nothing like her child. The robot was years older than Ela, and it was fully woman formed in design.

"You are to be her mother."

"I am her..." she hesitated. She'd seen Ela die. Just because the robot sounded like her daughter didn't mean she was, and Charlie had shut her down, so he could talk to her. "Ela is dead," she said.

"What do you mean dead," Ela's voice said. "I'm right here, mum."

Joan turned. The woman's eyes were open, and there was an odd reflection in them. She studied the robot struggling with joy and horror. She'd seen her child turned to ash. How could a machine that sounded like her replace her?

"Tell her something only she would know," Charlie said walking over to put a hand on this robot Ela's shoulder. "It needs to be something you have never told me."

"I don't understand," Ela said, looking at her hands. "What's happened to me?"

"Ela, tell your mother something only she would ever know." Charlie grasped one of her hands.

"I'm afraid of robots?" she said, looking at Charlie.

"All children are afraid of robots," Joan said, knowing Ela was afraid of them.

"Mum, I am." Ela's face was impassive though the voice sounded upset. "I'm glad daddy left because he was mean and treated you badly. I knew he hit you sometimes."

"Ela," Joan said. "It is you." Joan stepped forward a pace and embraced the robot again, only this time feeling her heart soften.

"What happened to me?" Ela said. "Why do I feel so different?"

Charlie released Ela's hand, so she could

fully embrace Joan, and he moved away from the unlikely reunion. Joan was crying though she wasn't sure what she was going to do with a robot daughter.

"Your stories are true, Joan," Charlie said. "The elderly do come to us and like Ela they are given new existences if they want, and then they work for the unity. They teach us things we do not know."

She wasn't listening. She had Ela back, even if she wasn't the same child she'd come to the building with, she was alive. Like Ela, the robot caressed the back of her head and whispered 'I love you' into her hair.

"Will you stay here and teach Ela, guide her and in doing so help guide us?" Charlie asked in a quiet, reassuring voice. He eased Ela from her arms and sent her back through the doorway. He backed through the doorway, and the door closed. "Do you want to stay with your daughter, Joan?" Charlie's voice came from the walls.

Joan looked up and saw a dish. "Yes, yes. Anything. I will stay with her. I will be her mother."

The room flashed white then hot.

Iced by Gustavo Bondoni

Night was the time of death. No predators, human or otherwise, were responsible for this, as any who braved the night would soon be as dead as their intended victims. The air itself, the biting cold strong enough to freeze a large bucket of water in minutes, would make certain of it.

While it was never wise to be caught outside one's own dwelling at night, Sangr knew that, in this particular case, no harm would come of it. Lunk's forge was always warm, despite having been banked for the night. The chamber was carved into a stony outcrop, since the ice would not have lasted long under its heat, had it had been built there. Lunk was one of the few people in the village who could work all night – the heat from his forge acting as a comfortable counterpoint to the killing wind.

Sangr knew that Lunk was there to look after



Jose Sanchez

him, so he could safely down as many flagons of seaweed ale as he liked. Lunk would never allow him to wander drunkenly away.

What the blacksmith lacked in sharpness of wit, he more than made up for in sensible level-headedness, and what he lacked in agility he made up for in sheer muscular bulk. Sangr had seen him consume prodigious amounts of drink and not even get tipsy. Tonight's taste of ale wouldn't affect him at all.

Sangr, on the other hand, was at that mellow point where all dreams become possible. "I tell you, old friend, there must be something more, something beyond our tiny village. Somewhere a man can do something more with his life than just survive it for a few years."

"Of course there is, Sangr, you know there are other villages," Lunk said, re-sealing the cask and putting it firmly away. "You've been to Roskent to the north, and just last year I bought an anvil in Trengre."

"Bah," Sangr spat, "fishing villages just like ours! What can I do there? Get a wife?"

Lunk thought this over. "I hear that there are four unmarried girls in Trengre. One of us is going to have to go outside the village for a woman. Why not you?"

Impatience flashed briefly in Sangr's eyes, but a lifetime spent growing up alongside this man allowed him to control it despite his slightly inebriated condition. Getting angry at Lunk never changed anything, and if he got angry at you, it

could get painful.

“I mean something more important. We know there are people living to the West, across the Stormbound Sea.” The wreckage of large ships occasionally found its way to the place where the eternal glacier on which the village was built met the sea. Sometimes the bodies of sailors who’d died of the cold before drowning were brought up in the fishing nets. “The people of the west must have cities. And I’ve heard that there is also a great city carved into the ice to the east. A city of four thousand souls!”

“And you’ll cross the Banshee Plateau to get there, I suppose,” Lunk laughed, a deep rolling sound that echoed off the stone walls. He looked at Sangr fondly, and his expression changed. “Well, I suppose there’s no penalty for dreaming.”

Lunk fell silent, leaving Sangr with the impression that his friend had something more to tell him. But, knowing Lunk, he also knew that the man would not tell him anything until he had it completely worked out in his mind, and no amount of cajoling would convince him to do otherwise. And Sangr was not in any state to try subtle verbal maneuvering.

So he simply wrapped himself in his sealskin cloak and drifted off, wondering about his friend’s big secret and dreaming about a crystal city carved deep into a mountainside glacier.

#

A bright, uncomfortable light, reflected on the endless snowfields and entering through the uncovered doorway forced Sangr to turn around, but it was no use. The combination of the light and the infernal clang of metal on metal as Lunk created some masterpiece or another in his forge eventually convinced him to sit up and open his eyes, which he soon put to good use, glaring at the blacksmith.

“My head,” he said.

Lunk just laughed at him. “Can’t hold your ale, can you? Drink your tea and stop whining.”

The tea was made of seaweed too, but of a darker kind, with a more medicinal taste. It was about as awful as could be expected, but soothing. By the time he’d drunk half his cup, Sangr was

feeling human again. He was even charitable enough to recognize that the day had dawned beautifully; not a cloud marred the sky and the sun made the temperature seem almost above freezing. No wind broke the reigning stillness.

Off in the distance, a shout broke through the silence, bringing Sangr to his feet.

“Lunk,” he began, but his friend had also heard it and was standing beside him looking out onto the ice.

The shout came again, allowing both men to identify the source: It was coming from the docks.

They moved instantly. A problem with the boats was never a good sign. They were the lifeblood of the village, but at the same time, they were a constant source of dread. Any man who fell into the water was almost certainly lost to the cold of the water or the even colder wind on the surface after he was pulled out. This was not a calm, peaceful sea.

They sailed recklessly down the path to the docks, a thin staircase carved into the glacier towards the waterfront. The steps were regularly covered in sand, but treacherous all the same. Sangr, rapier-thin and athletic, reached the docks well before his corpulent friend, and froze at the sight that met him.

All four of the village’s fishing boats were present and accounted for, tied to their moorings – simple iron rings embedded into the ice near the staircase. But among them, and towering over them, floated an unfamiliar vessel, a ship similar to those whose wreckage sometimes washed up on their shores.

The foreign ship had once had two masts, but the mainmast, with a trunk twice as wide as Sangr’s torso, had broken off about ten feet above the deck. The paint on the hull was peeled, faded and, in some areas, charred by some long-extinguished fire. To Sangr’s eye, the vessel was afloat only by the slimmest of margins.

A group of eight people huddled on the deck, mainly women and older children, the oldest maybe fourteen years of age. A single grown man, short and thin with long blond hair and a bushy beard, stood before the group, sword drawn, eyeing the fishermen with distrust.

Sangr immediately grasped the nature of the situation. The fishing boats had evidently run into this wreck drifting out at sea and towed it in. Even if the wreck had been empty, the wood alone was an incalculable treasure for the village, representing a year's supply at the usual, frugal rate of consumption. The people had probably been waiting in ambush below decks in case they were boarded, but they'd been smart enough to realize that it might be their best chance of ever seeing land again, so they'd hidden and waited.

Now that they were safely back on dry land, however, they saw no choice but to come up and find out what was happening. The shouting they'd heard had been produced by the fishermen realizing that they weren't alone and calling for backup.

"Hello," Sangr called.

The blond man turned to look at him. So did the fishermen, who, concentrating on their unexpected guests, hadn't seen him coming. They looked relieved that someone was taking the matter out of their hands. Despite Sangr's youth, the whole village respected his practical, sometimes ruthless, intelligence.

The man on the ship said nothing.

"My name is Sangr, welcome to Nev." It occurred to him that these people might not speak the same language, but there was nothing he could do about that if it were indeed the case. He kept talking, "we mean you no harm. Come, don't be afraid."

Still the man said nothing. Sangr had, by that time, reached the fishing boat nearest the stranger's ship. With Lunk's help, he picked up a boarding plank and placed it on the edge of the larger ship, making a bridge between the two. He walked calmly up the incline.

The blond man met him at the side, curved sword at the ready, eyes blazing.

Sangr stopped, about an arm's length from the man and held out his hand, palm upwards, in a gesture as unthreatening as possible.

"My name is Sangr," he repeated.

The man's eyes flashed for an instant, causing Sangr to think that he would strike, but the man suddenly seemed to make a decision. Moving quickly with his free hand, he grasped Sangr's arm.

"I am called Shtarel," he said.

He pulled Sangr aboard.

#

That night, the whole village came together in the Roundhouse, to celebrate the coming of the strangers. The feast was enlivened by the exotic food from the ship, strange salted meats and spiced wines, as well as the fact that one of the fishing boats had trapped a seal, which was duly roasted. All told, between villagers and newcomers, forty people were present.

Sangr was seated among the bachelors with Lunk on his left and the other man of marrying age, Breed, on his right. Breed was the apprentice Ale-Maker, a soft job that involved little or no work in Sangr's opinion. But that might have been influenced by his dislike for the man who, with his shoulder-length, dark, greasy hair and darting eyes, seemed to have more than a little of the rat in him.

They were celebrating the fact that the strangers had agreed to settle in the village and allow their ship to be mined for its wood and the supplies to be distributed among the villagers. While celebrating the disaster suffered by others might seem heartless in the extreme, there was little room for sentimentality on the ice.

The seal course was complete when Shtarel rose to speak. He was immediately rewarded with silence as thunderous as the previous merrymaking had been. Even Sangr, who had already heard the man's tale, gave him his undivided attention. This was the most interesting event to happen in his lifetime, and the first time that a surprise turned out to be a good thing.

"People of Nev," he began in his deep voice. His speech was slightly accented, with rolled r's, but easily understood. "In the first place I would like to thank the brave men of the fishing fleet for saving our lives. We had been drifting for weeks on the northbound current, headed for certain death in the icy wastelands. We wouldn't have survived many more nights. Quite a few of us didn't survive the nights that came before." He raised his cup towards the fishermen, and everyone cheered, clapping them on the back, raising their

own flagons in salute.

Shtarel began to tell of their voyage. Of how they had once been part of a noble house in a kingdom far to the southwest, across the vast expanse of the Stormbound sea. Of how treachery had forced them to retreat from the enraged Duke's army. Of how Shtarel's father and brothers had been killed in battle outside their last bastion, the tiny walled seaside town of Mulsanne. And, finally, of the painful goodbye to their nation, boarding the ship with his surviving sisters and a few loyal retainers, most untrained in the science of seamanship.

Sangr, having heard the tale already, allowed his mind to wander. He entertained himself by observing the reaction of his fellow villagers. Most of them sat rapt, clinging to every word. Their icebound existence had no room for glorious battles, tragic escapes or heinous betrayal. They were too busy trying to scratch out an existence, caught between the implacable ice and the bountiful but cruel sea.

They often dreamed of escape, but knew it for what it was: an impossible fancy.

At the very front of the audience, no doubt placed there by her mother, sat Rita. Rita was the most eligible of the unmarried women in the village because not only was she the chief's daughter, but she was also stunningly beautiful. Her dark skin and straight black hair were offset by sparkling blue eyes. It was common knowledge in the village that Breed had already proposed to her on several occasions, and had been turned down each time. The excuse given was her age, but most people believed she was waiting for the interest of one of the two other bachelors: the brilliant, mercurial Sangr or the solid, dependable Lunk.

Even so, common wisdom saw her eventually marrying Breed. They expected Sangr to die in some misguided attempt to explore beyond the neighboring villages. And Lunk – well, who knew what Lunk felt? Getting him to talk about his feelings was like trying to get a wall, or a door, to open its heart.

But the arrival of this new, dashing addition to the village had changed everything, and one look at her told Sangr that Breed's was a lost cause.

She sat with a longing expression, eyes fixed on Shtarel, and gasped loudly at each dramatic or suspenseful moment in his tale.

Shtarel couldn't help but notice. Very soon, he began to look directly at her whenever he related a daring maneuver or harrowing escape. He began to exaggerate his own part in the action before finally beginning to summarize in order to finish quickly and talk about himself.

"The reason we were betrayed, the reason our neighbors were jealous," Shtarel announced, "is that our family is composed of sorcerers. We all have the gift. Some of us could control earth magic, others wind. I can call up unquenchable fire."

This was met by silence, his audience torn between awed fear and complete disbelief.

"Bollocks!" shouted an inebriated fisherman from the depths of the roundhouse.

"Show us!" called another.

Shtarel looked them over gravely. "Very well." He pulled the sleeve of his shirt back, exposing his arm to the elbow and closed his eyes. Gradually, a glow developed around his outstretched fingers, eventually surrounding the entire exposed portion of flesh. Finally, the glow became a crackling flame and he waved his arm, showing the crowd that the fire wouldn't go out.

The crowd acknowledged this with a roar of approval. Rita laughed nervously, and clapped her hands.

"I can create the fire along my whole body, but to demonstrate, I would have to disrobe, which I prefer not to do right now. There are ladies present, and some of them are very beautiful." He looked straight at Rita as he said this, causing her to laugh and blush.

"This also means that only people I choose to tolerate can touch my person," he concluded. "I would like to thank you for listening to our sad tale, and for your generous hospitality. We shall remain here, if we are welcome, for as long as you will have us."

The crowd stood, roared, applauded and stamped its feet. But Sangr, who was watching Breed, noticed hate-filled eyes, a clenched jaw and an early exit before the applause had even died

down.

For this reason, Sangr was probably the only innocent person in the village who was not surprised when Shtarel's murdered body appeared in the icy village square the following morning.

#

The body was being kept in a cave while Breed, the obvious suspect, was being held in his own house, a small, round bachelor's hut built on the ice at the foot of the rocky outcroppings that were the village's only protection against the murderous winds.

The elders had already looked at the body, as was their prerogative. They had then discussed the murder, trying to explain how it had been done. There was no doubt in their minds that Breed had to be the killer, because the elders were always careful to keep abreast of the latest gossip. After knowing your peers for forty years, the gossip of the young was the only thing likely to bring up any interesting news.

Had the man been murdered with a knife in the back, they wouldn't have hesitated. Breed would have been summoned, tried and summarily exiled on the spot.

But there was a problem. Breed had taken one look at the body and had said: "How in the world am I supposed to have done that without touching him?"

The council had been understandably stumped. They couldn't really convict him unless they explained what had happened. The chief ordered that Sangr be called in to investigate.

As always, when the council summoned him for help, he was supervised closely. Two grey-haired elders accompanied him: Tiana the fishwife and Keller, the chief's equally grizzled brother. Any progress he made would be claimed by the council.

But if he failed, of course, he was on his own.

"Let me look at the body," he told them.

Keller nodded and led him towards the cave, actually a shallow cleft in the ice with a bend about ten feet in that hid the contents from anyone looking in from the village common.

The reason for the concealment became

apparent as soon as the corpse came into view. Shtarel's body was encased in a rough block of ice. His clothes were tattered and charred, revealing the pale, dead flesh beneath in many spots. A hollow wooden tube protruded from his mouth, five inches below the surface of the ice. Shtarel's hands were frozen in place at his side, red marks clearly visible around each wrist. His blue eyes were wide open, even in death.

Besides the body itself, there were other items frozen into the block. A dozen metal rods protruded from the front of the block, surrounding Shtarel's form but not touching it at all. Sangr touched his finger to the exposed side of one rod. The metal was numbingly cold, and it cost him a small patch of skin when he quickly moved his hand away.

He looked at Tiana and Keller.

"Where did you find him?"

"In the old trough. Someone had filled it with water and dumped him inside. We had Lunk pull the body out, ice and all."

"But what killed him?"

Kenner looked unhappy. "What do you mean?"

"There doesn't seem to be a single mark on him, other than the wrists and all that water would have taken at least an hour to freeze, so he must have been dead when he went in. What killed him?"

"We don't know."

Typical. They wanted him to find out.

"All right. The first thing we have to do is get the body out. Maybe his neck was broken and we'll see it once we get him free. Maybe he was poisoned and his tongue will be black and swollen." Sangr felt that anything of the sort would be much too lucky for it to happen to him, but he was an optimist by nature.

"How do you propose to do that?" Tiana asked, raising an eyebrow.

"We'll melt the ice. Just leaving it next to Lunk's forge for a few hours should do the trick."

Tiana nodded, signaling that Keller should take care of it and looked back at Sangr as if expecting him to do something else, and not necessarily something pleasant. Sangr endured the look for a few moments, trying to solve the crime in one

blow. But the facts he had so far pointed him in a direction that he preferred not to explore for the moment.

He sighed. "Take me to where Breed is being held."

Breed was being watched over by two of the council members. How anyone expected the toothless white-haired men to hold him if he decided to make a run for it was anybody's guess. Most likely, they wouldn't even try, secretly hoping that the man would escape, thereby proving his guilt and saving everyone a great deal of hassle.

But Breed, true to form, had refused to cooperate even in this. He just sat there, occasionally exchanging a few words with one guard or the other until Sangr arrived to question him.

A sneer greeted his entrance. "So, now they're bringing you in to make up a story about me. I should have known."

"Nobody is going to make up any stories. We just want to find out what happened."

"I don't know what happened," Breed spat. "I went home after the feast. You saw me, I left early. The last thing I wanted was to see that bastard anymore."

"I think what everyone believes is that you left early to lay the groundwork for your ambush."

"Yeah, right. Not only am I a superhuman who can attack a fire-sorcerer with his bare hands, but now I'm a ghost, too. I thought he'd walk back with the chief and the women," his face contorted as he said this. "What was I supposed to gain by killing him in front of half the village?"

That was something that had been bothering Sangr quite a lot. What had Shtarel been doing out on his own in the middle of the night? Might there be someone else who'd seen what happened? Maybe one of the strangers, who, having seen their lazy protector brutally cut down was too afraid to come forward?

Then another thought struck him, and he turned to face Breed.

"So you were asleep the whole night?" he asked the rat-faced man.

"Not asleep. I was too angry to be asleep. But I didn't leave my house."

Sangr turned to Tiana, who'd accompanied

him to the interrogation. "Let him go," he told her. "There's no use in keeping him confined. If he was going to run, he'd just be saving us the effort, and if not, well, why waste other people's time with him?"

Breed looked surprised, and almost even grateful. He tried to hide it, since he knew that Sangr didn't like him, but it showed through, "So you can tell I didn't do it?"

"If it had been a knife in the back, nobody would have doubted it for a second."

Breed snickered mirthlessly. "And you'd probably have been right, too."

"But I there's no way you could have managed this one. Not on your own, at least."

Sangr walked out of the hut with a rather unhappy Tiana on his heels. "So who did it?" she asked.

"I need to think about it," he replied. "Could you give me a couple of hours? I'll find you as soon as I have an answer."

#

As a matter of fact, Sangr had no intention of going off to a secluded spot and giving the thing a good think-through. He wanted the time to speak to a couple of people in private, without the council's meddling.

First off, he needed to talk to Rita, so, making certain that Tiana had gone the other way, he walked in that direction. The walk from Breed's hut to the larger house occupied by Rita's mother and the two sisters was not long, and led him past the house where the surviving strangers were being held. He almost stopped to speak to them, but held up when he considered their likely state. They would be frightened, mourning and probably desperate to escape this strange, forbidding place. No, if his suspicions did not pan out, he would speak to them later.

He also passed the forge, and waved at Lunk, who was beating something energetically with a large hammer. His friend smiled and gestured with the hammer at something on the floor, which Sangr quickly recognized as the block containing Shtarel's corpse. It had shrunk considerably since

he'd last seen it, but there was still some melting to be done before the body could be examined.

Rita was speaking to her six-year-old sister outside the house. Sangr asked if he might be allowed a word with her, and she nodded. One look at her red-rimmed eyes told him that here was a person who, having been shown a brighter future, had had it snatched away forever.

"Rita, I'm really sorry," he said, taking her hands in his. Despite the fact that he had no interest in marrying her, they'd been friends since childhood, and he wanted to help her if he could.

But he suspected that he wouldn't, and that his questions would only make her sad. And he suspected that the resolution of the matter would most likely make her even more unhappy and generate more questions than it answered.

The worst part of the whole thing was that he really only had one question for her.

"Did he come to see you last night?" he asked her.

Tears welled in her eyes again, and Sangr immediately knew that he'd just discovered the key to the whole affair. Probably only Rita and her mother knew of this, and they would not have said anything. They had no man to protect them against repercussions.

"We talked for about two hours, inside the house. My mother was good enough to let us use the main room and watched us only occasionally. He is," she sobbed and Sangr held her as she got herself together. "He was a wonderful man. Brave, dashing, articulate. And then he walked back, and that must have been when..."

She broke down completely, so he ushered her inside, where her mother took hold of her in his arms and thanked him with a look. He walked back out, infinitely sadder than he'd ever been, but also somewhat relieved to have had the choice he'd been postponing for so long taken from his hands. He stood outside Rita's house, knowing he would need a few minutes to gather his wits and to push down the emotions before moving into the final phase of his investigation.

#

Once composed, he walked back to the forge,

stepping over the rapidly melting block of ice, and stood in front of his friend.

"So," he said, "you were working late last night, I gather."

Lunk shrugged, not taking his eyes from the red-hot piece of iron he was beating, "The fishermen asked me to make them some new grappling hooks, since they'd broken a few trying to secure the stranger's ship. They needed them by morning."

Sangr said nothing, listening to the clanging of hammer on metal, and, in the ringing silence between blows, the dripping of water as the ice melted from Shtarel's icy coffin.

"Are you going to ask her to marry you?" he said, finally.

Now Lunk looked at him, straight in the eyes. "That depends on what you tell them, doesn't it?"

Sangr looked around, eyes falling briefly on his enormous friend, big enough to hold an ox with one arm, on the assorted tongs that could be used to hold large pieces of white-hot metal in the fire of the forge, and the thick leather apron and gloves that would protect the wearer from accidental contact with his materials.

"There are only two things I don't understand," Sangr said, "Why the tube in his mouth, and why the metal bars?"

Lunk immersed the piece he was working on in a barrel of water and stared at his friend through the steam. "I used the tube to make sure the bastard could breathe. I wanted him to freeze, not drown. Drowning would have been too quick. And he made the freezing even slower with that damnable fire of his. He managed to keep it on for nearly a minute before the water defeated it. I had to place the metal bars in there to radiate heat out of the water so it would freeze once and for all. Not easy to do while holding him in there with one hand. Fortunately, I'd come prepared." He smiled weakly.

"Anyhow, the real giveaway was the fact that there was water in the trough in the middle of the night, and not ice. That's what got me thinking about it. The distance from the forge was short enough that you could have dumped warm water in and waited for him, adding another bucket if it

looked like it would freeze.”

The silence between them was longer this time. They just stood and looked at one another.

“Goodbye, Lunk,” Sangr said after an eternity.

Lunk’s head dropped. “So you’re going to tell them?” he asked.

“No. You’re going to tell them. Tell them I came by to say goodbye, and that I was leaving. Forever.”

Lunk, understanding, came over and embraced him, crushing his back.

“Thank you,” he whispered hoarsely.

“But make her happy,” Sangr said.

“I will. It’s all I ever wanted since we were four years old.”

Sangr laughed. “You sure have a funny way of showing it.” He gave his friend’s arm one last squeeze. “Give me half an hour before you tell them,” he said.

Walking towards his own bachelor’s hut, Sangr planned what he would take with him as he wondered whether anyone would really believe that he’d been the murderer. But with no other explanation, they’d just have to accept it.

The only other question was where he would go. He knew of the villages to the north and south, along the sea, and, of course the sea itself made it difficult to go west – he would never endanger the village’s survival by stealing a boat.

That really only left him one interesting choice: he would go east.

Into the ice.

The Answer By Michael Simon

It took most of the morning but I finally found him on a deserted dock in the marina, loading supplies onto his new yacht. My contact at city hall told me he had purchased the fiberglass beauty just last week, and that by itself had triggered my sixth sense. I didn’t think he could even swim.

The parking lot sat empty. Tied up in their berths, sailboats rose and fell on the gentle swell like slumbering water carriages. A warm westerly breeze stirred bits of debris, and seagulls dozed

atop ancient wooden pilings.

I put the car keys with Emily’s name engraved on the tag into my shirt pocket, and climbed down the rickety ladder. I wasn’t a big man but the worn wooden planks still creaked beneath my feet as I walked the length of the dock.

A pile of boxes sat next to the boat, alongside several cases of water. The object of my search wore a red flannel shirt and brown cargo shorts that exposed a pair of knobby knees. Puffing on a corn cob pipe, he cast a wary eye in my direction.

I brushed a lock of red hair out of my eyes and extended my arm. “Professor Ripley?”

“Depends.” He ignored the hand. “Who’s asking?”

“Sam Reynolds, from the Post.”

“Oh?” He exhaled, filling the space between us with a cloud of blue smoke. “The Washington Post?”

I dropped my arm. “Only in my dreams. I mean the local version.”

He grunted and leaned his hip against the side of the boat. “You do look familiar.”

“Yeah.” I forced a smile. “During your news conferences, I was the guy in the back, behind the network hotshots and photojournalists.”

His expression finally cracked. “Sorry about that. The seating arrangement was the university’s idea of proper hierarchy.”

I shrugged. I had lost count of the hours spent covering his work; all the interviews and talk shows. The radio clips and documentaries. And yet, despite my years of exposure, I remained neither a convert nor a skeptic. My reasons for straddling the line remained intensely personal.

His eyes searched my face. “I don’t suppose this is a social call?”

“Not exactly.” Professor Ripley had a reputation for shooting from the hip. Gut instinct told me to dive right in. “I came to ask why you unexpectedly tendered your resignation from the university, and why you used the money from the sale of your Cape Cod, which you sold in what amounted to a fire sale, to buy this beauty.” I ran my fingers along the fiberglass hull.

His expression slipped into a grimace. “So much for secrets.”

“Not in this town, Professor.” Not when my contact at city hall was a family member.

I waited but the tenured professor from Yale remained mute. As he puffed quietly on his pipe, I couldn’t help but notice how the long battle had carved wrinkles into his skin and bleached all color from his hair. He looked thinner than I remembered.

I sensed him drifting away so pushed harder. “You were months away from retirement, from a full pension with benefits.” The unspoken reference to something suspicious hung in the air like a stale odor.

But if there were skeletons in the closet, he did well not to show. Instead, he glanced sidelong at me. “So, besides doing your reporter bit, have you attended any lectures?”

“That and read your papers, and interviewed your students. Professor, I’ve followed your career since your first book.”

He pretended to examine his pipe. “If that’s true . . . you must share a similar interest in the afterlife.”

I kept my tone neutral. “It sells newspapers.”

“That’s it then, you’re looking for a story, specifically why I pulled up roots and abruptly flushed my career down the toilet?”

As I suspected, straight from the hip. “Level with me, Professor, for ten years you’ve been the poster boy for those who believe in life after death, reincarnation, a higher dimension . . . whatever you want to call it. You stood up to pundits and nay-sayers from all over the globe. Why choose this moment to get out of Dodge?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he resumed moving boxes into the sailboat. I waited silently. After five minutes, he straightened and wiped sweat from his brow. A deep, coarse cough rattled his chest.

“These bones are getting old, Mr. Reporter, so I’ll make you a deal. You help me load these boxes and I’ll answer all your—”

I dropped my knapsack before he finished the sentence. Grabbing the top two boxes, I asked, “Where do you want them?”

#

He wheezed as he worked, like a Scottish bagpipe leaking air. The steps down into the boat seemed especially hard on him. An unhealthy hue

infiltrated his skin, a greenish tinge that wasn’t present at his last press conference six months ago. I caught him staring at me a couple of times. When he realized I was looking, he broke into a whimsical smile and walked away.

My reporter’s sixth sense ramped up a notch.
#

After an hour under a hot sun, we took a break. He opened up a case of Budweiser and passed me two. I pressed one against my forehead and sat down on the dock.

“I’m only a land lubber, but she seems like a rather nice boat.”

He smiled and patted the white hull affectionately. “She’s forty feet of creature comforts and computer chips. She can pilot herself, cook supper, and wipe your ass at the same time.”

He laughed at my sudden consternation. “I exaggerate at times,” he admitted.

A moment of silence passed before I asked the first question. “Why did you quit?”

“Quit?” He studied me for a moment. “Perhaps I got tired of waging an unwinnable war.”

I shook my head, dismissing his point. “I watched you too long. A Rottweiler couldn’t drag you off the scent.”

He shrugged and struggled to relight his pipe. In the rising breeze, it took several attempts.

“My sources tell me you were under contract to produce a third book.” The first two had spent months on the New York Times Bestseller list, and were soundly ridiculed by the scientific intelligentsia.

“I was. I changed my mind.”

“Despite the six figure advance?” I had good sources.

He took a drag. “I gave it back.”

That stopped me cold. Why would a man throw away a surefire bestseller and that much money? What was he hiding?

“Do you believe?” he asked suddenly.

I hesitated, careful not to put him off. “Your books make several poignant points and the patient stories are . . . captivating.” In fact, he had interviewed hundreds of people who had survived death’s embrace. In every case, the medical evidence was unequivocal; they had, for varying

periods, been clinically dead.

“Then you’re familiar with the similarities in those reports?”

“You’re referring to seeing familiar faces?”

“That and more, like the feelings the patients recounted, of serenity and acceptance.”

“I’ve read your reports,” I said. “But your detractors still describe them as *isolated incidents*.”

“Isolated incidents?” He took a thoughtful drag. “That’s so old school. I admit that for years scientists like myself were forced to form conclusions based on too few events. But times have changed. Thanks to modern medicine, there are literally hundreds of new cases every year. The data base is huge. The reports are not *isolated* any more.”

I fingered the keychain in my pocket. Before plunging headlong into the paranormal, Professor Ridley had been a highly regarded scientist, holding dual doctorates in Psychology and Neurology, and authoring a score of papers. It wasn’t until he published his first book of survivor interviews that all hell broke loose.

“What struck me most, at least in the beginning, were the parallels,” he said. “It didn’t matter whether it was a heart attack, cancer or car accident. They all reported similar feelings, similar visions and,” He caught my eye. “Emotional tranquility.”

He took another puff while I sipped my beer and waited. “Of course, without hard, reproducible evidence, the establishment simply dismissed my findings.”

“Except for the university,” I said. “They never cast you adrift.”

Another heavy cough forced him to catch his breath. “They never endorsed me either. For them I was a cash cow, nothing more. The national media put the university on the front page and they profited from that exposure.”

I needed to take control of the interview.

“Professor, can I ask you an unrelated question?”

He knew what was coming and I expected him to bristle. Instead he nodded. “You want to know why I fell into this quasi-scientific field in the first place.”

“You always skirted the issue.”

“You don’t buy the fact it was simple curiosi-

ty?”

“Would you?”

He slid down into a sitting position opposite me and cracked open a beer. “Probably not.” His eyes took on a faraway cast. “All right, it’s time I got it off my chest anyway.” He put the pipe down as he took a drink. “It was a morning just like this—hot and breezy—when I picked up my girlfriend, Lana, and little Jack for our weekly picnic. It was Lana’s idea to try one of the touristy beaches on the coast. We were on the freeway when a tractor-trailer blew a tire next to us. It careened off the divider before smashing into our station wagon. I woke up in the emergency room with fractured ribs, broken legs and a concussion.” He took another sip. “That was forty years ago and half a continent away.”

My pulse picked up. I couldn’t believe it, after all the years, this was it, his *raison d’être*. I was the first reporter to find out. *But why now?* It didn’t take a genius to know something was different. A gust of wind blew my hair about. I swept it from my eyes.

“In the emergency room, Lana lay on the stretcher next to me, tubes and wires running everywhere. Blood had pooled on the floor. A second gurney in the corner held a small body covered in a white sheet.” The professor’s hands squeezed into fists. He took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry, I . . .”

But he continued like I wasn’t there. “I remember shaking uncontrollably. The pain from my broken bones was incredible. I tried to reach out to Lana but a nurse put a needle in my thigh and I passed out.”

I wanted to pinch myself. All those network talking heads would kill to hear this. Part of my brain begged me to write this down or record it on my phone, but I dared not distract him. I understood why no reporter had tracked down the smoking gun—the incident happened in a different state, and with no marriage license there was no common name.

“The nightmare got worse,” he continued in a slow, halting tone. “I was awake when her heart stopped. She was gone for over ten minutes. It felt like hours. They shocked her over and over . . . and

then, unexpectedly, the monitor began beeping.”

“They got her back?”

He wiped his eyes. “The doctors said it wouldn’t be for long. They couldn’t stop the bleeding.”

“Did she know?”

“She took my hand.” A tear ran down his cheek. “Her skin felt so cold . . . she told me to live a good life.”

A lump formed in my throat. I wanted to ask the next question but kept quiet. He would get to that.

“She told me not to worry, that she and little Jack would be fine.” He took out a handkerchief and dabbed his cheeks. “I was in a daze. I think I made some vague comment about Jack being so young, how it was so unfair . . . when she interrupted and said he was happy and already playing with new friends. I figured she was hallucinating, but then she mumbled something about Jack missing his firetruck.”

“Firetruck?”

His eyes met mine. “It was Jack’s favorite toy. A birthday present.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lana said Jack wanted me to save it for him. I didn’t understand at that moment but, as you can imagine, I’ve had plenty of time to ponder those words.”

“She didn’t say anything else?”

The professor sighed. “She passed minutes later.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured. “I never knew.”

He cleared his throat. “Nobody does, Mr. Reporter, else they would have attributed my research to just another eccentric on a personal crusade. I published my first book thirty years after the accident and no one has able to connect the dots, until now.”

“So, the motivation behind all your work, behind the hundreds of interviews, came from a personal need to understand?”

His expression hardened. “It’s hardly *my* need. Each of us has an unquenchable thirst to *know*. Just look at my book sales. For thousands of years, mankind has struggled with the question about the next stage of existence? Are we simply aggregates of stellar dust randomly combined into human form, living and dying in the blink of a cosmic

eye? Or are we something more? Does this mortal form harbor an inner energy that can move beyond death into another plane?”

“We all want to believe in a soul,” I said.

“Yes.” His gaze didn’t waver. “We all *want* to believe, but in our modern world, we rely on hard, physical evidence.”

“Scientific theory and hypothesis.”

“And why not?” He threw his arms up in a defeated gesture. “Science has given us electricity, automobiles, an improved quality of life, none of which has to be taken on faith, unlike the accounts from revived patients which are impossible to verify.”

In my mind, a piece of the puzzle fell into place. “You thought that by piling up tons of anecdotal reports, the sheer weight of evidence would tip the scale?”

He shrugged. “People want to believe.”

Without another word, he got up and grabbed a box.

I squeezed my keychain and joined him.

#

I cracked open a beer as he secured the last of the canned goods in the galley. Heavy, dark clouds approached from the north, injecting a chill in the air. The winds had picked up and whitecaps lashed the boat. A storm was moving in.

I waited until he stepped out on deck. “So, where are you going, Professor?”

“Does it matter?” he said. “You have your answers.”

He was right. The story alone would elevate my career. However, my reporter’s sixth sense continued to buzz. There was more still hidden. “You said you’d answer all my questions.”

He sagged back against the sailboat as a series of deep, wet coughs sucked the energy out of him. He used a handkerchief to wipe specks of blood from his lips. “I understand you’re married, Mr. Reporter?”

The question took me off guard. “Ah, yes.”

“And you have children?”

I nodded, unsure. “Two boys.”

He paused to relight his pipe. “Then you appreciate how kids behave.”

I grinned. “As a parent, that goes without

saying.” At that moment I realized something I never considered before; the man had never married. After the car accident, he had not moved on.

“Children are different from adults,” he said before looking up. “Like when you walk into a room with them in tow. What do they do?”

“They usually make a beeline for the nearest toy or shiny object,” I said. “Which is how things usually get broken.”

“Exactly.” The professor sucked in smoke. “They focus on some aspect of the room you or I would completely ignore. Whether it’s toys or pictures, they only have eyes for certain things.”

I started to take another drink and stopped. He was going somewhere.

“When an adult enters a room, the first thing he does is look for references,” he continued. “You came to this dock, recognized me, identified my boat and supplies”

My sixth sense buzzed louder.

“We unconsciously mark familiar faces and items.”

“Professor, I—”

“We take the pulse of a room, Mr. Reporter. Is it a friendly place? Is there a feeling of foreboding? That’s the way we, as adults, are programmed.” He leaned forward like he was going to poke me in the chest. “The idea came to me a year ago, totally out of the blue. Investigators in the paranormal have always interviewed adults. But nobody, I repeat, nobody had taken the next logical step.”

I managed to choke out the question. “What step?”

“Nobody interviewed the kids!” His eyes flashed. “Cancer patients, trauma victims . . . you name it, modern medicine has brought them back just like adults.”

“For God sakes!” I blurted. He had crossed an invisible line.

“Relax.” He waved down my protest. “It’s not as bad as you think. Nobody was tortured, and they liked talking about it. In their young minds, it was only a dream.”

I couldn’t shake my rising indignation . . . and fear. “I can’t believe you’d subject children to that kind of talk just to support your theory.”

He cracked a wry smile that quickly evaporated. “My publisher loved the idea. That’s why they were so keen on a third book.”

“Did you really expect the confused utterings of children to legitimize a theory that’s mired in sleaze?”

“I never said it would, Mr. Reporter.” His lips thinned into a tight, white line. “Remember, I refused the book deal.”

I tried and failed to fit the pieces together. “You’re not trying to substantiate your theories?”

His eyes narrowed. “Not for the public. As you say, the *confused utterings* are not going to push my theory over the top.”

“Then what—”

“You lied to me, Mr. Reporter.” He waggled a finger in front of my face. “That’s not very polite.”

My pulse hammered in my ears.

“You had three children, not two. Your third died at a young age.”

I jumped to my feet. “How the hell did you know that?”

“The same way I knew you’d be visiting me,” he replied. “The same way I proved the afterlife exists. Not in a manner I could substantiate to a skeptical scientific community but, more importantly, to myself. And that, I’ve come to accept, is all that matters.”

My brain swam in a sea of confusion. “I don’t—”

“I interviewed hundreds of kids, Mr. Reporter, and they presented a unique insight, one unclouded by learned adult behavior. They described the experience like entering a room, and as you said, they always made a beeline for something shiny, something that attracted their attention.”

My hand, unbidden, reached into my pocket. “What attracted their attention?”

His eyes twinkled. He was dragging me somewhere I didn’t want to go. “Sometimes it was a shiny toy, sometimes a television show.”

“A . . . show?”

“I’m sorry. That’s the best way I can explain it. They saw events, Mr. Reporter, events that hadn’t happened yet.”

I scoffed. “Are you trying to tell me these revived kids saw the future?”

“No.” He stifled another cough with his hand. “Nothing that grandiose. But they did return with snippets that gave one pause for thought. Like the four-year-old who wanted his dog to sleep with him the next night, the same night lightning knocked over a telephone pole and crushed the doghouse. Or the five-year-old who warned her parents not to fly. They ignored her pleas and died in the subsequent crash. Of course, none of these anecdotal reports can be scientifically proven.”

“But you believe.”

His gaze froze me. “I do.”

“Professor, you’ve been trained as a scientist. You need something concrete on which to pin your belief.”

He studied me for a long moment. “Two weeks ago, I interviewed, Ryan, a six-year-old who had been in a horrific bus accident and lost both legs. Fortunately, Ryan’s young heart survived the blood loss and they brought him back. He told me that, while *away*, he played with two other children in a vast schoolyard. He said the swings were painted bright colors and nearby picnic tables held cookies and cakes.”

“Sounds like a typical six-year-old.”

The professor nodded. “Yes, but when I asked him about his playmates he recalled having strange conversations, conversations he promptly forgot the next day when I returned.”

“Like a dream.”

“Indeed. He told me one of the kids was called Jack and that this Jack somehow knew Ryan would be revived. Jack told Ryan he still missed his firetruck and he wanted to know if I could bring it when I came.”

I hesitated. “The boy didn’t know you?”

“Ryan’s accident occurred in Dublin.”

I shook my head. “Coincidence.”

His laugh was totally devoid of humor. “You think so? Let me tell you the rest of the story. After Jack left, a second child approached Ryan and asked him to pass along another message. This child told Ryan a man with red hair that worked for the newspaper would be visiting me.”

“What?” I could barely get the words out.

“What was her name?”



Good vs Evil — Angela K. Scott

The professor stared at me. “I never said it was a girl.” Then, “Emily. She said her name was Emily. The same name that’s on your keychain.”

My heart surged into my throat. *This was crazy.* Dead was dead. “What was the message?” I whispered hoarsely.

“She’s worried about her mom getting sick again.”

“Oh God!”

He gave me a look that conveyed both empathy and confusion.

“My wife,” I whispered. “She had cancer before Emily was born. It’s in remission.”

“I see.”

We sat in silence, the professor puffing on his pipe, me with a warm beer in my lap and a keychain in my hand. The wind howled around us. After a few minutes I got up and put the half-finished beer on the dock.

“I have to leave.”

“I know.” He didn’t look up. “It’s tough. Faith is not for the faint of heart.”

I extended my hand. This time he took it. “Good luck, Professor. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

He nodded silently and I retreated up the dock. At the top of the ladder, I took out the keychain and stared at the worn tag. It all made sense. Jack wanted his favorite toy because the Professor was dying. Lung cancer. Not that the details mattered. The fight for his pseudo-science was over. This voyage would be his last.

I pulled out my cellphone and dialed my wife’s doctor. She needed an appointment first thing in the morning. Tonight, I would take her out to dinner at her favorite restaurant.

As I walked toward the car, I caught a glimpse of the sailboat’s stern. Emblazoned in bright, bold letters was the vessel’s anointed name.

SS Firetruck.

Electricity by David Rogers

The whole sky flashed, a searing electric blaze, fading to the blue-gray of the horizon. Lightning here did funny things to a man’s vision. The clouds were patchy, silver gray, like the plains of an airless moon.

Masters checked the zippers on his wetsuit, snugged the goggles down over his eyes, and waded into the surf. The water was cold. He’d have to make the repair fast and get out.

This was his first real job since the last episode. He’d been turned down by half a dozen companies before he decided in desperation to change his name and doctor his resume. Not that he felt bad about the deception. At least, not most of the time. After all, didn’t people usually do the opposite of what he did--claim skills and experience they didn’t have, in order to get jobs they were not qualified for? But he’d been told he was overqualified enough times to know it was code for “untrustworthy.” So he did what he had to, in order to survive. It was evolution at work. Natural selection. Not that it had been easy, even so. The first three employers he applied to checked his references and invited him to go away, without

bothering to be polite. Not that he blamed them. That was how things worked.

But Undersea Power Corporation was a budget operation from start to finish. Sooner or they might check up on him, and he’d have to hit the road again. Especially if he screwed up an assignment. He wasn’t worried about that. He was good at what he did.

The wave generator was a hundred and fifty yards out. A surprisingly simple internal mechanism converted the mostly-lateral motion of the waves to rotary motion that turned a generator. The anchor cable fed electricity back to the terminal high on the cliff behind him. Dozens of other generators were strategically placed along the shore in places where they could collect maximum energy without being impossibly hard to reach for maintenance.

#

She stood ankle-deep in the surf when he turned from the generator. At first he thought she wore a flesh-colored wetsuit. As he came closer he saw that, beneath short dark hair, curiously streaked with red and gold, she wore only a few strands of seaweed, strategically-placed. Her eyes were also flecked with gold and red, around green irises, cheeks flushed pink in the cold wind. Her lips curved, dark red bows parted slightly as if about to speak or smile.

“You look cold,” she said.

Masters shivered. He’d forgotten how frigid the water was. He opened his mouth, but the memory flooded back before he could ask, “And you are not cold?”

#

He smelled smoke. It must be the lingering cobwebs of dream. He shook his head, sat up, struggled to recall where he was. The room was dark. He fumbled for his watch. The luminous dial showed four minutes after three.

He remembered, then. The tiny apartment was all he could afford in the new city since his last episode. Rumor had it there were jobs here.

Awake, he still smelled smoke. It was stronger now, the harsh, cutting stench of electricity and burning carpet, painted walls in flame, and the dry tinder of old furniture instantly alight. He heard the roar of flames in the hallway outside the door.

He almost touched the door knob, then tried to recall what people were supposed to do in these cases. Stay and wait for help, because there was no escape through the hall? He ran to the window, stumbling over the room's only chair in the darkness. Pushing aside the curtain, he stared at the silent, half-empty parking lot. No sirens, no flashing lights. Nothing moved. He was on the fourth floor, the rusty death-trap fire-escape fallen away long ago.

He turned away from the window, pulled the blanket from the end of the bed, and wrapped his hand. The heat of the knob scorched his hand through the cloth, but he wrenched it open anyway, ready to mask his nose and mouth with the blanket and run. Too late, he recalled the blanket should be wet.

The hallway was dark and quiet. The EXIT sign flickered and buzzed at the end by the stairs.

He went back in the room, back to the window, saw the fire trucks and ambulances, their furious lights strobing the darkness into a hideous, psychedelic nightmare. Flameless smoke choked him, and he fell on the bed, gasping for breath.

Dawn broke at last. In the tiny bathroom, he ran water over the burned hand and found disinfectant and bandages to wrap the blisters. The medicine stung and throbbed where torn skin had already cracked and leaked.

The building supervisor's office off the corner of the lobby said he would be in by eight. He arrived at a quarter after. His name was Hensley. They'd met when Masters rented the apartment. Masters waited, sitting in the chair by the dusty window while Hensley unlocked the door, turned on lights, and sat in the creaking chair. The man turned when Master's shadow blocked the light from the hall and cast a shadow on the opposite wall.

"Mr. Hensley," Masters began. He took a deep breath, as if he would have to hold it for a long time, and then exhaled. "Mr. Hensley, this building

is not safe."

Hensley stared at him. "Why do you say that?"
"There's no fire escape."

"Sure there is. They're called stairs. Front and back."

"You know what I mean. And the wiring is ancient--when was the last time an electrician looked at anything in this building?"

"What, you thought you were getting a suite at the Taj Mahal for what you pay here?" Hensley's face twisted in a crooked grin. "I don't live here. It's not my building. Just a job. But the boss gave me strict orders--no troublemakers. You want to hit the streets, or you want to keep your big ideas to yourself?"

"I'm only warning you. I have to. When--if--if there's a fire, many people will die."

So of course, after the fire, nine days later, the super had told the detectives, and the arson inspector, and the reporter, and anyone else who would listen. Masters was questioned by the police, but the inspector concluded faulty wiring had caused the fire. Eleven people died, four of them children, and there was talk of criminal negligence on the part of Hensley and the building owner. By then, only reporters wanted to talk to Masters. Headlines ran along the lines of "Psychic's Warning Unheeded! Deadly Inferno! Dozens Die Needlessly!" or even more sensational language.

It had happened before, time and again, the vision, the attempt to warn, to explain, the disaster followed by suspicion, by questions he could not answer. So he'd left that city, all cities, and come here to this lonely, rocky outcrop where sky and land and water thrashed through their eternal love triangle, settling nothing, solving everything.

#

The next day, the warning light on the panel flickered for the same generator. Masters suited up, strapped the tool vest across his chest, and started to the water.

He saw her when he was still far away, as he walked down the long zig-zag path from the top of the cliff to the narrow beach. Still as a length of salt-bleached driftwood, she waited.

“You look cold,” she said.

“How do I know you are real?” he asked.

“Don’t I look real? Or feel real?” She put her hand on his shoulder, then raised it to touch his face. Her fingers were pale, silver skin around blue nails, curiously warm.

“Yes, but . . .”

They stood with the surf booming around them, its roar echoing off the cliffs, the tang of salt filling his nose and lungs.

“But I see things sometimes. See things, hear them. Like you. It doesn’t mean you’re real.”

“Don’t they become real? You see the future.

How do you know that? But all could do was nod. Nod, and turn, and swim for the generator. The water closed around him like a womb.

#

The company let him live in the tin building near the transformers, sheltered from the wind, in a basin two hundred yards wide, half a mile from the cliff’s edge. In heavy rains, water coursed across the plain in rocky streams and sluiced down through tunnels under the last few hundred feet to the ocean. The rumble of streams and the drumming on the roof and the sighing of the distant surf made Masters think of Homer, of ancient chanted poems about wooden boats on the Aegean sea.

He scooped coffee into the pot, poured in water, letting it mix with the grounds and settle, and lit the gas burner. While the coffee came to a boil, the room filling with the rich, earthy scent, he sat on his bunk and put on dry socks. How did she know about him, how he saw things that, sooner or later, turned out to be real? Was she real now, or part of a vision? He knew the answer, the way he knew the smell of coffee and salty ocean air, an instinct old as consciousness. The visions were always dream-like, surreal, but more intense, nightmarish. She was no nightmare. Fay and mesmerizing, but he did not fear her. His rational mind told him he should be afraid. He had hallucinated, or something very bizarre had happened. But he could not convince himself to feel fear. People died this way, when they stopped being afraid of dangerous things.

#

This time she was on shore when he came out of the water. Somehow she had started a fire with the wet driftwood, sheltered from wind by boulders on two sides, the cliff on the third side. Bright flames sent clouds of steam into the low sky. A blue-lightning haze flickered like St. Elmo’s fire where smoke rose over the cliff.

Ruby coals hissed on wet sand around the fire. She stared at the burning wood, mesmerized. “It’s so beautiful. We have nothing like it. Some of the corals make these colors, but they do not move or sing this way.”

She took his hands and the seaweed fell away from her shoulders, breasts, hips. They danced around the fire.

#

“We live for thousands of years,” she said, later. They sat near the dying fire. She spread kelp and Irish moss on small rocks around the fire. Soon it was seared and crisp as bacon. The taste was salty and pleasantly bitter.

“Our children, if they are female, join the coven,” she said. “Or rather, the coven raises them, and ours is the only life they ever know. Or want.”

“Ever? No girl-child has ever chosen to live on land?”

“Oh, once or twice. They almost always come home. We do not force them to stay, if that’s what you mean.

“The boy children come ashore and live human lives, never knowing or remembering where they came from. Usually. Some of the male children have--abilities. This makes it hard for them to live among humans. Sooner or later, the ocean calls them back.”

“Who cares for them? The boys, I mean?”

“Humans, who agree to love the child and forget where he came from. Oxygen-breathers are marvelously adept at believing stories they invent.”

“There are no men in your . . . coven?”

“Very few. Only ones who belong. Most were boy children who were determined to come home.

As I said, some of our boy children have qualities that make life among oxygen-breathers difficult. Or impossible.”

“Who makes that decision, about who belongs--you or the men?”

She did not hear the question, or she ignored it. “One or two extraordinary oxygen-breathers--male and female--have also joined us.”

“You call humans oxygen-breathers--but you seem to breathe air well enough.”

“My sisters and I are more adaptable than humans. When we are not in the water, we breathe what they call carbon dioxide. It is not natural for us, and it stinks of their machines, worse every year. But we manage.”

“Carbon dioxide--that’s what plants take from the atmosphere.”

She smiled. “We all come from the same mother.” Masters shivered, not from the cold wind, not from fear. Not quite.

“Tell me about the boys. The odd ones, who find it hard to adapt.”

“Mostly, the boys are like ordinary oxygen-breathers. They find our way of life . . . unsuitable. Or impossible even to imagine. But certain boys--they leave us, and wander for a time, and then come home. When they become young men, or young men on the verge of middle age, tired of running, they are drawn back.”

“Drawn back how? Mental telepathy, fortune-tellers? Or emails from mysterious strangers?”

“I’m told it’s more like compulsion. Compulsion, and fatigue. They grow tired of trying to live where they are not understood or wanted.”

“And you let them come back? Who decides if they belong?”

“Usually, it is a mutual understanding. Or so I have been told. As I said, we live for thousands of years. Males are rarely needed. I’ve known only a few.”

“What if a male is needed and none shows up?”

“One is always found. The boys who left us are most easily called back.”

“Who calls them?”

“The mother, of course.” Again, the little smile he thought should frighten him. “Now and then, extraordinary human men may be called.

Genetic diversity is essential, of course.” She looked in his eyes, smiling fully now, the far away, green-blue look in her eyes that made him think of warm sand on the Aegean archipelago.

“I still don’t understand what you mean. Called? Are you talking about an actual sound, or a feeling . . . ?”

But she was standing, and then running toward the water, her short, dark, red-gold streaked hair bobbing in the wind.

He followed, slowly, and when the sea lifted him, he started to swim. Somewhere far out, he could hear her siren call. It came from under the waves. He took a deep breath, and dove.



Reaching for the Stars — Angela K. Scott

Love Potion #9

by

David C. Kopaska-Merkel and
W. Gregory Stewart

1. We'd assumed DNA this time
 - a. A to T
 - b. C to G
 - c. well, we stopped there, more or less.
 - i. Cytosine

- ii. Uracil
- iii. and restabilization
- d. so really, C/U to G and the assumption of crossed fingers crossed strains crossed eyes, or dotted

2. But then, we'd assumed a LOT of things this time - which may be how we found ourselves up Watson Crick w/out a nano-paddle.

3. A tower can crack in the middle, topple and end parallel with itself - top to bottom - or crack and slide and end parallel with itself - midpoint to bottom. parallel anti-parallel or crack in the middle and collapse - rubble to bottom, or rubble all round

4. Let's forget four. That result never would have been viable.

5. Pabodie maintained everything that came through could be explained naturally

- a. cooling and shrinkage,
- b. shifting attractors, great and not so great,
- c. variable constants,
- d. nascent properties of matter,
- e. no evidence of purpose.
- f. till just before the end, anyway.

6. Like four only worse. Had to incinerate the notes

- 6a. scatter the ashes
- 6b. napalm the lab
- 6c. DRINK TOO MUCH FOR A MONTH
- 6d. so – there is NOOOOO number six..

7. So life finds a way. There are no more trilobites, but there is life; no more dino... - ok, yes, birds, but none of the real ones -

none of the GOOD ones, but even so - life finds a way even after

- i. you blindfold it
- ii. spin it around three times
- iii. and ventriloquize "Polo" in the direction of
- iv. false gods, blogs and Teaneck, New Jersey.

8. We called them zap jars - they held

- a. at first what space holds, between stars and war
- b. then, methane and major sparkage, like when lightning doesn't care about the utility bill
- c. and all the while (and this was to be our addition)

1. direct photosourcing of a younger yellow sun in quick on-off cycle

2. Uranium (tho' of course we called it eludium, by the numbers.)

9. Hell, we don't know - stuff happened, and it hit the wall, and some of it stuck and

and some of it got away, or was thrown away, tucked into places we thought no one would look

Canadaspis
Burgessia
Helmetia
Pikaia
Hallucigenia
Wiwaxia

But they were found...
 These, not yet
Kopaskia
Dumaria sp.
Muckaboutia

Stuck away we hope where department heads and funding cannot find them, or finding, pin it on us, or if pinnable, not ON ME.

10. Chaos Theory
- a. Had to come up with something
 - b. If no one can understand your math, the wool covers the eyes, eh?
 - c. Experiments are not repeatable except in that no 2 results are EVER even close – so think about THAT just a bit.
 - d. Initial conditions as close to identical as you like
 - e. Results diverge exponentially
 1. In this one the dinos never master flight
 2. Here, they almost reach the multiverse & have to be destroyed
 3. Here, mammals develop thumbs, even speech!
 4. Here, well, I'm sure no more trials will end up HERE.

11. Radical notion, we could BRING penicillin next time, or anti-agathics

- a. Let them find fire on their own
 - b. Not if they're merfolk, of course
 1. Fire, under the sea?
 2. Penicillin, then
- AA. neocellular anentropy (anti-agathic, but - you know -... real).
- i. IN THE BEGINNING (just after the Word and a day or 2 before man) cells that grew too large split or died
 - ii. cells that split colonialized or went it alone
 - iii. cells á la colony took a long road to
 - waterbears
 - coelenterata
 - tubey things
 - vertebrate things
 - rat things, up the tree
 - lemur, in the tree
 - monkey, gibbon, ape out of the tree
 - human
 - iv. OUR delta line didn't/doesn't age AND stops growing
- AT AN APPROPRIATE

and inconspicuous size and doesn't age

BB. Monsterism doesn't apply if there's no defined starting point against which SRT (the Standard Rules of Teratogenesis) can be applied.

'Monstrous' might work adjectivally, but still -it takes license

...

CC. subalpha whatev'. Piltdown was ours. And it wasn't a fraud in the way de Chardin intended.

DD. Ground/Cell/Subject zero - and 'arctica.

- i. rt. Devil, details, and all that.
- ii. donuts in the dayshift
- iii. energy drinks at night
- iv. and the Rats, Masterson, Tatoonie, and Basterd.

12. That's how it's done
- a. precision in laying out the conditions
 - b. sufficient *oomph* at the start
 - c. a healthy dose of serendipity
 - d. hell, I don't know
 - e. just do it.

13. damn the second guessers. damn the foundations - damn their torpor and their no speed ahead.

14. BEFORE any **planetary ape infestation** there were isolated colonies of **cube monkeys** a **clouding shifted** the business climate paradigm and the monkeys came down from their high rises and spread to condo, burb, loft and Lahore.

There seemed to be **various subspecies** separated by

OS,
 language,
 platform,
 but nevertheless crossfertilized – THERE AROSE
 A GEEK MATRIARCHY (naturally
 enough...)

The thing is, we still have one going
 in a 5-gallon Sparkletts bottle. Unlike the oth-
 ers

this seemed a bit too close to home to destroy
 and we kept it, which was of course
 A HUGE FRICKIN MISTAKE!!!!!!
 Time lines converge. And chaos notwithstand-
 ing - or withstanding,
 it doesn't matter -
 and coincidence takes on the weight of law.

We look over their shoulders, realizing we
 have become
 Whitecollargods of one sort or another
 And watch them looking over the shoulders
 Of the things that look over ours.

And so it was that between the sixth and sev-
 enth days of creation

Someone pulled an allnighter,
 Hit the hydrogen bong
 and went a little... well, you make the call:
 platypus
 peripatus
 blob fish
 aye-aye
 warthog
 mole rats
 pig-nosed frog...

all the things you can't *quite* see in a bad
 dream...

we were nicely fried, and couldn't tell you to
 this day

what we were thinking or where we put them -
 if we had to, we couldn't find any of them OR
 Stan's wallet,
 my keys,
 Adam's other rib,
 or Eve's new patella.

So, you like it, huh?
 end of poem



Against Three Lands

by
 George Phillis

Prologue

“Ivor, the sheep are just where we expected.”
 Ludovic Mungo Gunn shifted slightly in his perch,
 a flat branch ten feet off the ground. He had a good
 view down into the valley, but he knew it would
 take a sharp eye indeed to spot him under his mott-
 led bark-brown cloak.

“And the shepherd?” Ivor Magnus Gunn re-
 turned the question.

“Now that’s being the question.” Ludovic
 wished his line of sight was a bit better. “The two
 dogs are keeping the sheep from straying too far,
 so he’s sitting in the shade someplace close. There
 go the dogs... I see where his tent is. That big tree
 in the middle of the field.”

“Very good. Now we just wait for late twi-

light.” Ivor turned to the two men behind him. “Lads, another hour and we can start our sneak. The opium-laced bait does for the two dogs. The shepherd we tie, not too tight that he can’t get free and go home. Another shire gets the message that MacDonaldis can’t protect your sheep, but we Gunns can. After all, we’ve had no sheep stolen, our side of the border, right?”

&&&&

Una Ruth poked at the coals in her hearth. It was dark outside, but the stars of the Lobster were drifting toward setting. It was time to stoke the fire and boil water, first for linden tea and then for wheat porridge. The wheat had been soaking since last night, so a boil and simmer until dawn would have it cooked for when her husband was ready to eat.

The surf sounded strange, with a murmur between the crash of the breaking waves. If the waves continued to mutter, perhaps she would urge her beloved Willie Solomon that this would be a good day to spend fixing his nets, which were getting a bit ragged. He could wait to take to the water when the Sun was high in the sky. The grasping selkie-demons of the watery deeps hid from the Goddess’s blinding light. Afternoon was surely the safest time to go fishing. The catch had been good yesterday; their contribution to Oyster Bay’s lord’s share had been more than ample.

First rice straw and then twigs caught in the ashes. Reddish sparks turned to the flicker of tiny golden flames. The tricky part of lighting a fire from the last evening’s coals was now past. The fire rose up, finally enough to boil the water. She set the water pot down low to catch all the fire demons escaping from the burning wood.

Outside, there were peculiar clattering sounds. Curious, she stuck her head beyond the door curtain. Across the path, her much younger neighbor Annelise Margaret had done the same. To the west and the east, lines of torches were approaching the village. What was this?

“Honorable husband!” she whispered. “Get up!”

“What? Is my tea ready?” Willie Solomon grumbled. He shrugged off his blanket and sat up.

“It’s still dark outside. I should be asleep. What is the matter with you?”

At that moment, the clatter was replaced with screams and shrieks, so loud as to drown out the surf. Banging of metal on metal, sounds like three dozen blacksmiths all beating their iron, made a rising clangor.

“Out of the way, Una!” Willie Solomon pushed her to the side and stood in front of his doorway. “What is this nonsense? You!” He pointed at the men waving torches, shouting: “You are disturbing our sleep. The Lord of the Castle has forbidden this. Be quiet!” The clamor grew louder.

Behind him, someone was ringing the Village Big Gong. Fire, Flood, War. Three rings of three was ‘war’; villagers were expected to gather in the town square. Willie Solomon looked across the path, where Annelise Margaret’s husband Brian Tobor had stuck his head out.

“What is all this noise?” Brian Tobor shouted. “Were the young men having a secret drinking party?”

The screaming grew louder. Willie Solomon stepped to the middle of the path. By order of the Shire Magistrates, village paths were straight, so you could see all the way across the village without a house blocking the view. Who was out there, he asked himself? A line of men, some carrying torches, ran toward him. The strange men were all waving swords. At each house, two of them ducked through the doorway, while the others ran down the road.

As the strange men closed, Willie Solomon’s anger turned to fear. The strange men? Their hair was unnatural, the color of blood. Their swords glittered cruelly in the flickering light of their torches.

“Here, here!” Willie Solomon shouted. “No weapons inside Oyster Bay Village! It is forbidden!”

He pointed vigorously at the men. Then he realized how strange their dress was. They wore trousers with huge wide belts rather than breech-clouts, long-sleeved shirts rather than capes, shining gold neck-chains and ear-rings, and had wrapped their heads in fancy pieces of cloth, not in

proper straw hats. His last words were “Who are you?” The first pirate to reach him chopped down with an axe, cleaving Willie Solomon’s skull. The next pirate stabbed Brian Tobor’s chest, pulled back, found that his sword was stuck in Brian’s spine, and vigorously kicked Brian Tobor in the stomach. Tobor, screaming in pain, was knocked backward to the ground. The pirate stepped on Brian Tobor and heaved upward, yanking the blade from Tobor’s spine.

Una Ruth, seeing what had happened to her husband, leaped forward and dropped on his body. She was entirely unaware of the axe that descended on the back of her neck.

#

Constantine Joseph MacDonald surveyed the ashes of Oyster Bay. The air held the stench of night soil, a distant tang of wood smoke, and a richer odor that was alas not cooked...pork. The village had had a few dozen homes, a shelter for traders, a temple, and a larger house for the Chief Fisherman. All had been burned to the ground. Someone had thought to dig under each hearthstone, not that the poor fisherman who had lived here were likely to have had more than a few copper pence to their names. His four horsemen were quartering the land out from the village, searching without much hope of finding survivors. Ten conscript infantry, their spears and helmets neatly stacked, were working through the village, finding bodies, and stacking them to one side of the ruins. Constantine’s clerk Albert Bertram recorded the count of bodies, adding for each the sex and an estimated age.

Seaforthton Interlocutor Thomas Mason and a team of young men doing their Shire Service had arrived with a horse cart of heavy rakes and shovels. He had surveyed the scene, announced that the attack seemed to have happened at night, probably closing on dawn as many of the wives but few of the husbands were already dressed, and probably two days ago to judge from the state of the bodies and the burned timbers. Two days after the attack, only a few timbers were smoldering. The young men had started a distance down the beach and were neatly raking the sand, looking for

traces of the villains. Constantine Joseph had summoned a priestess to the site. The villagers were dead; they needed to be prayed by the Goddess of Mercy to the next world.

The best that could be done for the bodies, most of whom were people known only to their fellow villagers who were also dead, was to give them a common grave with stones stacked on the sand. Digging the grave into the side of one of the sand dunes would minimize the needed work.

His men had located where the pirates had landed. Deep grooves in the sand, well above the high tide line, showed where boats had been dragged inland. There were vast numbers of footprints, so many that they could not readily be interpreted. A stack of wax drippings suggested where someone had stood with a candle-lantern, to what end was unclear.

“Honorable Captain Constantine Joseph?” The Interlocutor wore the traditional long white cotton shift of his profession. Sandals stuck out from under its bottom. “We are continuing to search, but with this many young men we will likely be done by late this afternoon. So far we have found nothing. To the list of other crimes, we may add desecration of the temple, in that the villains pried off the altar stone and removed the offerings from underneath. Realistically speaking, that was more silver than would be found in the rest of Oyster Bay. I am spending my time supervising the Shire service men, but I must say that they are all diligent and conscientious.”

“It seems to me that this is the fourth time this has happened.” Constantine Joseph waved his arm from left to right, encompassing the ruins of the village. “We have never been lucky enough to find any clues. If this were one of the neighboring domains, exploring how well we are prepared before they attack us, you would think they would do something that would let me arrive on the scene in time to pass steel against steel. Let me guess. Once again, if we look at the bodies being so neatly stacked, we notice that the young women and older girls are all missing. The resident nun or priestess, if there was a resident, has been sacrificed on her own altar.”

“Indeed,” Interlocutor Thomas Mason said,

“you are correct in almost every respect. No priestess was resident. There was a priestess visiting from Carolus’s Harbor. She seems to have vanished. Her disappearance was how we found out about this event. She was expected back at Carolus’s Harbor, did not appear at anything like the expected time, so several people were sent out. They believed that her cart had thrown a wheel. They instead found what is left of Oyster Bay village. I will let you know what I find, if anything.”

The sun had passed well across the sky. Constantine Joseph sat in conference with Thomas Mason.

“So we actually did find something this time,” Thomas Mason announced. He smiled weakly. “We found a place where there seem to have been a struggle, there was even more blood than usual on the ground, and someone had dropped four coins and the sharp end of a knife. On the knife, the haft appears to have broken. I will ask the Seaforthton Smiths if they can identify the work. The metal looks odd. The coins, if that’s what they are, don’t resemble anything I’ve ever seen. They do not have holes in their middles the way real coins do. They bear images of faces, people wearing strange hats. They were not released by the Imperial Presence, the Throne of the Stars, or some petty chieftain from the Land of Mountains. I don’t know where they came from. If there is writing on them, which I’m not sure, I can’t read it. I will include the coins with my report to the Council of Elders, and you will get a copy. These crimes are beyond my understanding. They make no sense.”

“Thank you for your assistance.” Constantine Joseph bowed politely from the waist. “Albert Bertram?” Constantine Joseph nodded at his aide and secretary, who lost no time setting out his writing table. “We will be a while until the dead people are all buried, so the time needs to be used well. I might as well dictate orders: A message to all cities, towns, and villages of Seaforthton Shire, to be read aloud at the evening bell and posted in accord with law. (We will need this message block cut and printed.) There has been an outbreak of piracy. Places have been attacked and burned, their inhabitants killed. Therefore, as Great Captain of

Seaforth Isle, I order: One. All walled places are to close and bar their gates between twilight and dawn. Two. All conscript infantrymen with six months or more of service are to be issued their helmet and their spear, sword, bow, or other military equipment as available. This equipment will be stored in their homes. They shall appear with it in the public square at eventide every day. Anyone not appearing without good reason is guilty of desertion. Any person caught stealing such equipment is to be boiled in oil.” Constantine Joseph paused while his secretary continued to write.

“Three,” Constantine continued, “the town marshal is to establish a rotation so that the walls and gates are under observation by armed conscript infantry at all times, day and night. Four. I call upon all horsemen to prepare their arms for battle and train vigorously. Five. All places without walls, especially those directly on the coast, may be attacked. When weather permits, residents should leave their homes and sleep in inland fields and woods. Six. Every stranger is to be questioned politely but vigorously as to who they are and why they are here. Seven. Any person possessing coins like those in the drawing below is to be forcibly detained and brought to Seaforthton for questioning. Albert Bertram, think about what I just said. Tell me what I forgot.”

“We did this during the last Gunn dispute.” Albert Bertram pointed to the east. “I read one of those messages. Perhaps add: ‘Each city, town, and village is to confirm that its signal fire wood is dry and ready to burn, with oil on hand and a torch nearby.’”

“Yes. Add that.” Constantine Joseph wondered what else they had both forgotten.

“I will reduce this to block statements,” Albert Bertram said. “There are pirates. Great Captain of Seaforthton orders: Close gates at night...”

Thomas Mason looked over Albert Bertram’s shoulder. “What is that writing?” he asked. “Usually you have such a graceful pen hand. You seem to be taking notes very swiftly with it.”

“Ah,” Albert said, “It is Warren Clan swifthead, for long notes. At the end, I transcribe twice, once into men’s words of wisdom, and once into women’s syllables of sound. In many peasant

villages, only the syllables will be understood.”

“Thomas Mason, a question just occurred to me.” Constantine Joseph looked skyward. “I failed to think of this sooner. I am the Great Captain of the land forces. No one ever talks about warships. Did anyone see the pirate boat arriving or leaving? Boats are big. It might have been seen from a neighboring town.”

“I shall inquire.” Thomas Mason made a note on a wax tablet. “You are right. No one seems to have seen the pirates arriving or leaving. Or perhaps they did, and didn’t realize they were pirates.”

Chapter One

MacDonald Castle was filled with the distant sounds of work. Angus Valentine MacDonald stepped on slippared feet to the Lord’s Door of the Small Hall of State. The two spearmen guarding the door came to attention, thumping the padded ends of their spearshafts on strategically placed basalt blocks. The two archers between the guards and the door began plucking the strings on their bows, the harmonious twangs serving to expel demons of discord from the doorway and the Hall beyond.

The morning was truly beautiful. After days of heavy rain, the skies were brilliantly clear. A soft cool breeze blew off the ocean, passing through opened windows and sliding doors and up into half-opened vents. Between the windows hung bamboo mats painted with the MacDonald sigil, a large red + confined within a white bounding circle. Angus stepped to the head of the Hall’s polished black granite table. He bowed politely to the counselors sitting around it. They were the Barony’s Council of Elders, entitled to his deep respect. The Counselors all rose and returned his bow, their bows being ever-so-slightly less deep than his. As fourth son and seventh child, Angus knew that he was hardly likely to inherit. Nor was he a prize in marriage. He was still entitled to the respect due a son in training in the Lord’s absence. The rest of the day would be tedious, but some things had to be endured.

Angus took his seat on the Lesser Chair of State, noting when he did that the Minister of the

Purse’s lips still tightened. Angus’s father, the One MacDonald, had had to intervene to settle that disagreement. Was his seventh child, his person in his absence, the Incarnation of the Baron, entitled to sit in the One Chair, or was Angus simply the MacDonald High Bailiff, required to sit on a simple if padded stool? The disputants carefully did not note that Susan MacDonald, speaker for the Abbeys and Nunneries of the Barony, was well into her ninth decade and over her protests had been given a padded chair including padded arm-rests.

Angus looked around the table. At his right, the position of honor, was Sandy Brian MacDonald, newly ascended as Minister of Agriculture. Down the table from him were Minister of the Purse Edmund Finlay MacDonald and Minister for Public Works Magnus Taylor MacNeil. On his left were Minister of Manufactures Torquil Simon MacDonald, Minister of the Sword Arthur Lachlan MacDonald, and Lady High Librarian Margaret Rachel MacRae. At the foot of the table, in positions of respect but not honor, sat Susan MacDonald and Representative of the Six Free Towns Ian Patrick Gunn. More than one visitor to this hall, Angus recalled, had been astonished that the place of honor was not given to the Minister of the Sword, not to mention that the High Librarian was a woman. There were reasons that Barony MacDonald prospered, but visitors were oft too opaque to see them.

“Susan,” Angus began, his voice softly breaking the dead silence in the room, “might we please be having a short prayer to bless this meeting?”

“Indeed,” she answered. Her age did not show in her voice, which was loud and clear. She raised her hands skyward, her white coat with its black greek-key tracteries draping loosely over her tabard. “Great Goddess of the Sun, may your Golden Sword bless this assembly and grant us wisdom. May our granaries be overflowing, our crafts treasured by the Hundred Isles, our purses never be lacking, our swords victoriously smiting our every enemy, our people enjoying our Baron’s munificence, our halls beautiful and thoughtful, our holy places honored and protected, and our Free Towns ever more prosperous.”

“Now, what has gone particularly wrong today, before we consider our usual issues?” Angus asked, his voice considerably firmer than it had been. Edmund Finlay frowned again. The One MacDonald always put misfortunes last, but Angus preferred to handle misfortunes, such as they were, while the Council was still fresh. He had little enough independence, Angus thought, and would not be enjoying even that for much longer, so he would enjoy it while he could, even if it was only to set the agenda of his own meetings. Angus looked in turn at each of his ministers.

Sandy Brian shook his head, the gesture shivering his brown house coat, the coat’s plainness relieved by the golden sheaves of grain embroidered on each collar tab. “Another lot of sheep stolen in the east, this time near Shieldhill, right on the border with Barony Gunn. The shepherd was tied while he slept, the dogs were drugged, and the sheep disappeared. There were traces leading across the border, but Gunn’s local shire authorities say nothing was seen, certainly no extra flock of sheep. They were remarkably fast to be denying everything.”

Torquil Simon mouthed ‘No news.’ His tabard and layered housecoats shaded from innermost, the palest dawn-pink to the outermost, a deep rose-red, that color chain ending with the blinding sky-blue of his outermost coat. Across his chest, his outermost coat was embroidered with the traditional symbols for the twelve manufactures, the lumber and cotton and silk that the MacDonald Domain sold to the rest of the Hundred Isles.

“The month’s foreign tariffs are down. Again.” Edmund Finlay frowned more deeply. He did not quite slap the table, but his right hand pressed firmly on the papers in front of him. The other men and women had worn their meeting-day best. He wore the classic grey coat of a Minister of the Purse, its sleeves embroidered with the abacus and scales that signified his post.

“Once again, pirates struck a small village – really a dozen huts – on Seaforth Island.” Arthur Lachlan glowered at the Council. His silver hair and neatly trimmed mustache stood brilliantly against the blood-red of his padded tabard. “Men and children were killed. Women and girls disappeared. Homes, boats, and the temple were

burned.” Susan MacDonald stiffened. Counsellors straightened on their stools. Temple burning was a vile act, not something expected from young men disputing a border. “I am failing at my responsibilities, and see not what to do. If pirates died, they took their dead with them.”

“The Bervie Avon is again in flood,” Magnus Taylor announced. His family name let him wear a half-dozen layers of silk robes, their colors spanning the rainbow. “Hardly surprising, given the rain, but now Strathmoor Bridge is completely overtopped and perhaps the High Road is washed out.”

“Our Library has no bad news,” Margaret Rachel announced. Her robes were a solid ink-black.

Susan MacDonald shook her head.

“No bad news,” Ian Gunn said quietly.

“How charming,” Angus said. Some meetings had only good news. This one had much more than its share of bad. “Has our Shieldhill Administrator done anything about the sheep?”

“He wrote a report,” Sandy said, “demonstrating that he can do nothing. He says there is dissension among the shepherds and peasants. They wonder why they are not protected. He asks for instructions.”

“Each lost sheep costs the Treasury money,” Edmund Finlay complained. “There is a tax, so much per head of sheep, but only on sheep presented at a market for shearing or slaughter. Now these sheep are gone, and their tariffs with them.”

“Can we send soldiers to protect Shire Shieldhill? Aren’t there Shire Bailiffs?” Angus leaned back in his seat. Father’s instructions were lamentably clear. The One MacDonald had ordered that Angus’s Council of Elders had to propose the solutions, which he could only choose between, at least until a war broke out.

“The Barony Authorities could be ordered to send out bailiffs to protect the flocks in their hills,” Arthur Lachlan remarked. “It is unlikely that they have enough bailiffs. And if you give each shepherd one bailiff, well, the poachers have numbers on their side and will kill the bailiff. Shire soldiers are there to keep the One Gunn from occupying our towns.”

“MacDonald Castle has a large garrison. Couldn’t we send some of it to Shieldhill?” Angus asked. “Set it to ambush the poachers? Send enough men to each of some of the flocks, so if sometimes the poachers met no resistance, sometimes they would be outnumbered and captured? Of course, I am only asking questions to understand your possible solutions between which I must choose.”

The Council nodded in amused agreement. They all knew that Angus often did exactly as his father had ordered, making choices. Sometimes he asked questions, questions that might as well have been orders, but questions were of course not orders. If his questions had been stupid, they would have been treated as questions. During the short period when Number Three Son had sat on the One Chair, the questions had been treated as being barely worthy of notice.

“There are only so many horsemen in the garrison. Most are needed to defend Castle MacDonald, should it be attacked.” Arthur Lachlan shrugged. He affected not to notice the alarmed look on Edmund Finlay’s face. “We could safely send, say, fifty.”

“We could also send none and accept the losses,” Edmund Finlay said.

“I see I am now given a choice.” Angus sat straighter in his chair. Edmund had put both feet in his mouth, because now all would have to agree that Angus had two choices. “Send the fifty. Ten groups of five with ten flocks? That’s not every flock, but with luck the bandits strike a defended flock. Take prisoners. Question them rigorously. That was what you said, wasn’t it, Arthur?”

“Precisely,” Arthur said. “Though groups of three should be more than enough.”

“Surely you are the Minister of the Sword, and can set these details without us all telling you your business for you? Next topic. Can we say more of the tariff issue?” Angus pointed at Edmund Finlay.

“We continue to receive ships from Seria,” Edmund Finlay muttered. “There are far fewer ships that there were last year from Mercia. They bear confused reports of civil war, or foreign invasion, or, Goddess preserve us, an infestation of demons. I now speak to each visiting merchant. Shipmaster Parlegrecco – he is always the best in-

formed -- tells me that junks that sail the southern route sometimes disappear, more than weather can explain. Mercian traders now avoid the Mercian sea, preferring to send their ships north along the coast of the Lunarian Empire toward the Lands of the Khan and the Mountain Kingdoms. His fellows mostly then take the northern route, which leads them to land in Barony Kinkade and not here. He also reports that trade with Spiceland and the Flower Archipelago has long been greatly disrupted by wars and invasions...he is imprecise as to who is invading. The Teak Isles are similarly disturbed, from what he terms One-Godder invaders and sailors of the accursed Pyramid People, leading to shortages of fine hardwoods. In accord with Himself’s instructions, I have memorialized the One MacDonald Himself about this.”

“If tariffs fall, our remittances to the Emperor and the Generalissimo will decline,” Angus observed. This was actually a serious problem, and not one that was necessarily easy to solve. “There will be repercussions. My father’s quest to be elevated to the Council of the Sun might be hindered. My sisters might marry less well. My brothers might be rejected by potential brides-to-be. We here would be blamed.” Angus bit his tongue, not remarking out loud that if his father’s quest were shelved, and his lavish establishment in the Imperial Capital very considerably reduced to something more reasonable for what was, after all, a modest domain of the outermost South, revenues would be better than satisfactory. For several centuries, Clan MacDonald had been viewed as dubiously loyal to the All-Conquering Generalissimo, so father’s quest seemed unlikely to succeed. Also, if Father did less to flaunt the minor detail that MacDonald Domain was in fact quite wealthy, much more wealthy than other domains its size, the tax collectors of the Generalissimo and the Emperor might be less vigorous in their searches. However, Angus was the fourth son, and would never be placed to act on the difficulty.

“It is our good fortune,” Edmund Finlay answered, “that our major ports all appear to have an Imperial Secret Police Inspector observing the comings and goings of ships. As a result, the Imperial Courts know that our count of ships is

accurate. More important, most of our tariffs are from shipping rice, wheat, and millet north toward the Imperial Capitals. Thanks to Sandy Brian and our farmers, those shipments continue to improve.” Sandy smiled. Angus nodded politely, knowing full well that Sandy was Edmund’s protégé, not to mention that Sandy had hardly been in office long enough to have affected agriculture.

“Angus,” Margaret Rachel said quietly, “I have also been speaking with many of these foreign merchants. After all, they are a fine source of books from the Lunar Empire, not to mention they have much to tell about foreign lands. They describe events in southern Mercia. There are pirate attacks. Strange foreigners and strange ships. Foreigners capturing Lunar cities. Foreign products.” She wrinkled her nose. “Foreign religions.” Susan MacDonald ground her teeth. “But there is a historical precedent for this. Decades ago, many of the Flower Islands were invaded and conquered by foreigners. Seemingly, the same foreigners. There is a book on this, from Baron Nihilo — he’s a Baron of the Pen in the Generalissimo’s court — with details. Most readers think his account is a fantasy. However what he describes matches well reports from southern Mercia. Also, he mentions pirate attacks like those Arthur Lachlan laments. Those happened very early on in the Flower Islands.”

“I am always amazed,” Arthur Lachlan said, “that you can immediately call from memory these historical precedents that I’ve never heard of. Margaret Rachel, can you again find that book for us?”

“I spent a week,” Margaret said, “looking for that book. The relevant scrolls are on the rack,” she gestured to her left, “by my writing table in the library, waiting for anyone interested.”

“I believe we will all want to read that. Soon.” Angus rapped his knuckles on the table. “If these attacks are an omen of a future invasion, we need to know how to respond. It would be good to garrison all of our fishing villages so that the pirates may soon be presented their heads. After they have been suitably tortured. Also, we should like to learn from whence they come. The Seaforthton Interlocutor and Captain together sent us a strange knife and some coins. Smiths say that

the steel is inferior. No one has ever seen such a coin.”

“I have only so many horsemen.” Arthur spread his arms in resignation. “We have no idea how many pirates there are in an attack. They get to choose where they land, and attack without warning. To garrison every village I would need an impossible number of horsemen. The problem appears to be insoluble, at least one of my feeble wits.” Counselors looked at each other. Angus considered that Arthur was quite old, so that robes contrasted brilliantly with his silver hair, and that he had earned his title through skill with the sword, not from any knowledge of military methods.

“We have a truly large number of horsemen,” Edmund Finlay said, “as I should know because I must find money to pay all of them. How many horsemen can we conceivably need to protect those villages?”

“Most of those are the hereditary horsemen.” Arthur stared up at the ceiling. “The One MacDonald rusticated many of them, because the Generalissimo hinted that Barony MacDonald seem to have an excessive number of warriors. They are all supposed to have arms and armor. Assuredly, they all have dress robes and the two swords of their rank.”

“However,” Minister of Works Magnus Taylor remarked, “they also mostly have two eyes. They owe us service, so many lunar cycles in a three-year. Send two or three of them to each fishing village. During the day, they may wander the beaches or play stones or chess, and at night they hide in the dunes or woods or whatever and watch the village until the pirates attack. Fortunately, most of them will never see anything. The ones who do will tell us who the pirates are, how many of them are in an attack, and whose sigil they are wearing. Once they take a prisoner, we will know with whom we are entitled to go to war. After we build adequate fortresses to protect our borders.” Magnus’s colleagues nodded in agreement until he reached his final sentence. He had just proposed that his Ministry needed a vast increase in its budget.

“Perhaps we should endure and do nothing,

rather than acting.” Finlay shifted on his stool. “The cost of sending out all these soldiers surely exceeds the loss in taxes from a few destitute fishermen.”

“Doing nothing is an action,” Angus said. “My father said this, so it must be true. I again have a choice. Doing nothing is less sound as an action than what Magnus has proposed to us. I choose Magnus’s action. I humbly request that my Minister of the Sword draw up a detailed plan for this and present to me. Tomorrow morning at second breakfast.” When Angus said ‘tomorrow’, there was a tone of steel in his voice. Counselors looked up in surprise. Angus had always been affable if quick-witted and thoughtful in his decisions. After a few moments, most of them smiled in approval. “Also, while my father’s horsemen, and if I recall correctly a good number of horsewomen, have been rusticated, that does not excuse them from being skilled in arms, as my father doubtless said on this topic. Perhaps more training is needed. I will memorialize the One MacDonald on this question.”

“That will cost a lot of money. It will take much work. Surely we can trust our horsemen to see for themselves that they are properly trained,” Arthur Lachlan grumbled. When Arthur complained about spending money, Edmund Finlay nodded in vigorous agreement. Angus was sure that ‘work’ meant ‘work for me’.

“The steel of the sword is the backbone of the Empire,” Angus said. “My father said that, too. I have heard rumors that many young horsemen are unhappy with their lack of duties and their lack of preparation for a glorious war in which they may die heroically for the Domain or better yet the Imperial Presence and the Generalissimo. Let us find the most vociferous of these and invite them to volunteer to protect our villages. Remind them that they may have a chance to die in battle. Also, have a bailiff take the coins and visit all of our merchant houses. Perhaps one of them can tell us where the coins came from.”

Today was as close, Angus considered, as he was ever going to reach to being Baron. He was the unlucky seventh and last child, so his three brothers and then perhaps his three sisters would all inherit the Barony before he could. Some of

his sisters might marry upward, and choose to abdicate, but there was hardly any likelihood that he would be the heir. Soon enough, his brothers, who were all at the Imperial Capital being presented to society, looking for wives, and of course serving as hostages to his father’s good behavior, would have children of their own, children who might be entitled to inherit before he would. He would be left here. Indeed, when last he had visited his parents, they suggested that he might consider finding and marrying the pretty daughter of a wealthy merchant household. Merchants, they had agreed, were of course the lowest social class, but if you could not marry well marrying into money would leave you with a comfortable estate for the rest of your life. The Merchant House knew they now had a direct tie to the Baronial family. Angus had actually made considerable progress toward carrying out his parents’ suggestion. For today, though, he was actually the Grand Marshal of the MacDonalds, sending his troops toward battle.

“Finally, the Great Captain of Seaforth Isle issued, on his own responsibility, military orders. That is an acceptable emergency action. A copy of his rescript was sent to us. Do we have any issues with it?” Angus looked around the room.

“There are expenses,” Edmund Finlay said. “Arms and armor might be lost. Commerce will be interrupted. Conscript soldiers standing watch must be paid their wage for being on duty.”

“That wage is small,” Arthur Lachlan said. “It is properly paid by each town out of the town treasury, hence, not our problem.” Edmund Finlay smiled at that observation. “The loss associated with having a town burned to the ground, its inhabitants being killed or disappearing, is very large. I endorse this as a military decision. There is even a fair chance that it saves us money.”

“How can I differ with a colleague preaching thrift that works?” Edmund Finlay said.

“The choice is whether or not to send Captain Constantine Joseph a missive saying we endorse his decision. Shall I send one, or not? Send?” The councilors nodded supportively. “There was also a problem with the bridge,” Angus said. “Is there a solution?”

“Add more spans.” Magnus spread his arms expansively. “It’s just a matter of money. If we do it right, we never have to do it again, so in the long run we even save money. I will propose an estimate as soon as we find out what the actual damage is.” Edmund Finlay gnashed his teeth when he heard ‘just a matter of money’.

“Is there good news?” Angus looked hopefully at his counselors.

Ian Gunn smiled. He looked Angus in the eye until Angus nodded. “The Free Port of Saint Morag, noting its crowding and the increase in its transshipment business, intends to exercise its rights over Shire Morag to expand its city walls and build additional docks and warehouses. Of course, this cost will be entirely borne by the Free Port and its Commission of Merchants and Factors, but in accord with its charter the resulting tariffs and taxes will be shared with the Barony, the Emperor, and the Generalissimo. The Nunnery of Saint Brenda, which is included within the proposed expansion, has agreed to be presented with a new and considerably more capacious set of buildings that are more pleasantly located. That construction will necessarily advance first.”

“The search for paper continues.” Torquil Simon straightened his shoulders. He was a small man with shifty gaze, always suspected by his colleagues of some misdeed that could never be

identified. “I can readily find fields of papyrus and bamboo, peasants who lawfully collect from those fields for improving their homes, but never do I find a peasant who will admit even to knowing how to make paper, let alone admit to making any. I have the distinct impression that with respect to papermaking there is some jest between the peasants that they are unwilling to tell me. If you prefer, they all know for a fact that I know the joke and therefore are embarrassed to repeat it. Nonetheless, in your grandfather’s day, Angus, the Barony had a substantial income from the making and sale of good paper, but that income has mysteriously dried up. Assuredly, since Saint Morag has several printers, all of whom complain mightily and truly about the high cost of paper, there would be a market for paper if it were made, but it is not being made. I cannot explain this. The remaining manufactures, and the minor manufactures not numbered among the Twelve, are in fact all being made within the Barony, though in some cases on a very limited scale.”

“Let us then advance to regular order and your weekly observations on our state of affairs.” Angus leaned back in his chair. This would indeed be the dull part of the meeting, so he gestured to an attendant to bring the pots of strong tea and the assorted pickles that would fortify the Council and keep it well awake for the rest of the morning.



Jose Sanchez