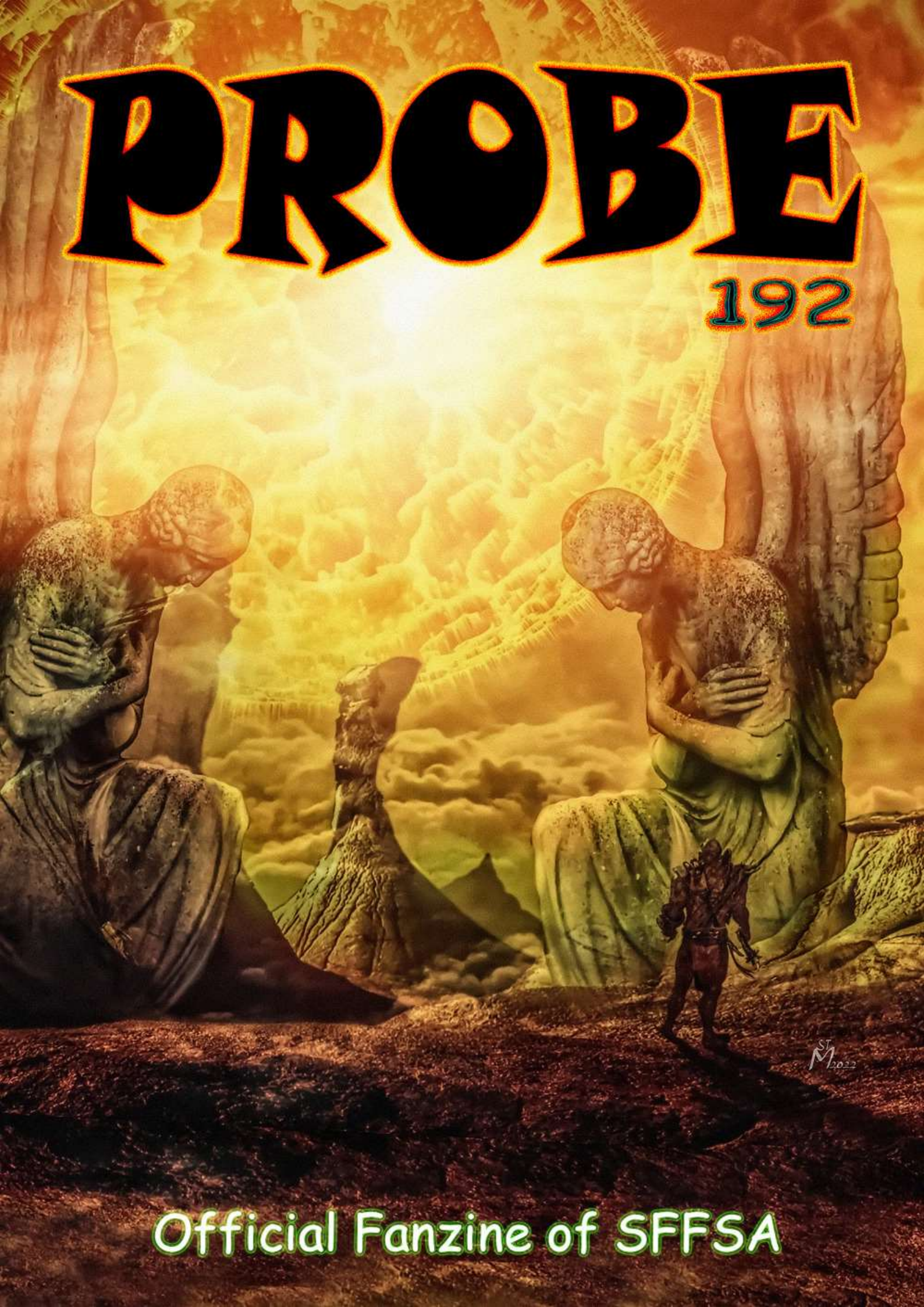


# PROBE

192



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2022

Official Fanzine of SFFSA



## PROBE 192

June 2022

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*Probe* is typed by Gail Jamieson and other contributors.

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Created in MS Word

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# PROBE 192

June 2022

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# Editorial

# Gail

It's June 2022 and after almost two and a half years of not having a "formal" live meeting of SFFSA, we will be meeting at Nexus in Randburg and having a talk by Grant Charlton. By the time you read this it will all have happened but we are hoping that a good number of people are confident enough to come out and join us. We have had a couple of social meetings that were attended by a few people but it will be a real step forward in the fight against Covid-19 to be able meet face-to-face again in an actual lecture theatre.



I have been in correspondence with Jörg Munsonius in Germany. He is planning to produce SF/Fantasy/Horror anthologies. He is looking for previously unpublished authors. And for stories written in English. The chosen stories will be translated into German. For further details please send an email to:

[edition.baerenklau@gmail.com](mailto:edition.baerenklau@gmail.com)

Also on the writing front, I mentioned the special edition of "Omenana" which will be an issue that focuses on South African speculative fiction. You can go to [www.Omenana.com](http://www.Omenana.com) for more information. They are looking for stories that are up to 5000 words long and have an African or South African slant. The stories need to be received by the 31<sup>st</sup> of July for publication in a November/December issue.

In this issue I've published Gary Kuyper's "Planet of Boulders" which was a 2021 Nova finalist. Please be sure to read his story first and then his Letter of Comment which is printed immediately afterward.

On the point of the Nova, please go to [www.sffsa.org.za](http://www.sffsa.org.za) to find an entry form. This year we are pleased to announce that James Sey, previous associate professor in English at the University of Johannesburg, is our final judge. He is a well known academic and researcher in fine Art and Culture with many published papers to his name. He has been involved with science fiction for a long time and was in fact our final judge in 2004. How time flies and SFFSA persists.

# Chairman's Note

Ah winter, why do you exist? Sigh, only a week to go before winter is here. The days are still quite warm, but we have had several nights that were really cold, showing what is to come. From my last chairman's note you will know that I love the warm to hot weather. This cold thing, eish, not my thing. Everyone has their preference, some love summer, and some love winter. I would say... most often those with extra... packing, tend to enjoy the colder months, those with less, tend to enjoy the warmer months.



Of course, there is just no standard, there is simply too much variety in the world, pretty much something for everyone. As of today (2022/05/26) the world population is estimated at 7.949 billion people, wow, not long at all before we reach the 8 billion mark. With that many people, you can believe there is a huge amount of variety, for just about everything. If you live in a city, you can go to just so many shops, which sell just so many different things. The sheer number and variety of goods is practically bewildering.

I mean, I don't read books much myself any more, but the number of books being released is still huge, with a lot of writers coming out with new books all the time. Whether you read them physically, on a kindle or a tablet, there is simply so much out there. I read comics and every month there is a catalogue of everything new that is being release in the United States, with over 400 pages dedicated to only comics. The catalogue is 600 pages long, meaning there are still almost 200 pages dedicated to manga, clothing, toys and figurines, etc. Compared to a year ago (yes, I know the pandemic caused a lot of things to slow down, but a year ago things were definitely picking up), it is 59 pages longer. This just goes to show how both the world's economy is recovering from the pandemic, as well as just how much choice people have nowadays. And this catalogue does not even include the stuff that is being released in non-English speaking countries like Europe or Asia.

Carry this over to TV series and movies, and the number of streaming sites just keeps on growing. I found that there are now 17 paid streaming sites available, that is way too many for any single person (without very deep pockets) to make use of. All of this, again, doesn't even include anime or a lot of stuff from foreign countries. Of course, here in South Africa not all of them are available, but still, so much choice, and many of the sites provide exclusive content, so if you want it all... you just have to know where to look. In fact, I used to get and watch pretty much anything that was science fiction, fantasy or horror plus anything else that took my fancy, but now... there is simply too much. Now I have to be pickier about what I watch ongoing, and what I want to get to watch later, and ignore everything else, there simply isn't time to watch everything (and don't get me started on trying to catch up on my backlog!).

I can then add gaming to my list of things to do, something that has become more and more popular over the years, so that nowadays many, many people from all ages and walks of life now play games, whether on the PC, on a console, or simply on their smartphone. Again, so much choice and variety, will we ever catch up? The obvious answer is no, there is a constant stream of new content being provided for all things, meaning that unless the world suddenly ends sometime soon (highly unlikely), then us as modern humans will continue to have a huge selection of new stuff to play with.

Well, those are the things that keep me busy, but not everyone does only watching, reading and gaming. There are many other hobbies out there like arts and crafts, exercising, baking, board games, gardening, music, etc. etc. There is literally something for everyone, all you have to do is go out there and look, you will likely find someone or some group interested in the same thing. You can therefore join like-minded people, experience the same joy of having similar tastes and hobbies, and at the same time have a fun way to simply enjoy life. I know the life expectancy of people is growing, but life still seems too short, so find something you enjoy and go for it.

Cheers

Andrew

## Magazines Received

**Stapledon Sphere** (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club])

Reece Moorhead [reecejbm@gmail.com](mailto:reecejbm@gmail.com)

Issue #58 March 2022

Issue #59 April 2022

Issue #60 May 2022

**Ansible** David Langford

March 2022 415 <http://news.ansible.uk/a415.html>

April 2022 416 <http://news.ansible.uk/a416.html>

May 2022 417 <http://news.ansible.uk/a41.html>

## Books Received

**JonathanBall Publishers**

Jennifer Saint Elektra Headline R355.00

Tara Sim The City of Dusk Hodder & Stoughton R355.00

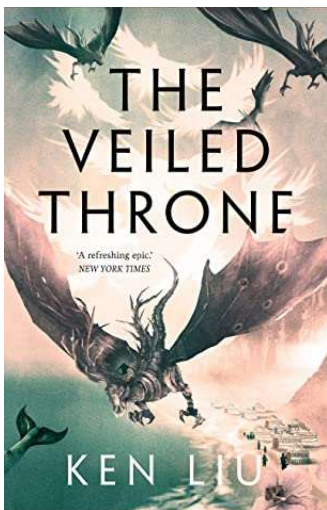
**BLAST FROM THE PAST**

WORLDCON -TORCON3 – Toronto Canada - 2003



# Book Review

## Ken Liu The Veiled Throne Book Three of the Dandelion Dynasty



This is the third book in this series and I must admit that I have not read the previous two, so at times it was a little confusing, but as usual he writes well and we find out at the end that this is not the final instalment but that there will be more to come.

It's a long book, almost 1000 pages and continues the story of Princess Thera and her Agon husband.

Book One, *Grace Of Kings*, was about rebellion and war, and Book Two, *Wall Of Storms*, was about invasion,

family dynamics and the dangerous myths inherited by the children of self-made royalty. (According to a review of the first two books by Jason Sheehan.)

The novel spans many years and conflicts and at times digresses rather lengthily on seemingly unrelated items, for example the Camera Obscura and the allegorical mythology of some sea creatures; that might have made an interesting short story in itself..

But there is a really entertaining naval battle with a giant puppet show in the middle of it as well as a bamboo submarine assault. Really different.

The cultures of the two factions, Lyucu and Dara are deeply interpreted and we have a lot of pages of waiting and plotting and scheming between disparate, xenophobic cultures. We begin to understand the deep seated hatred of the Dara for the Lyucu. The story spans continents and generations, involves gods and monsters, heroes and traitors, stretching from creation myth to the upending of the world. It really is a very detailed, convoluted production.

I'd suggest that it might be a good idea to find the first two books and read them first. This is obviously a very complex and interesting world picture and probably worth following up on.

Gail



# Nova 2021 3<sup>rd</sup> Place Contaminated

## Martinus Stander Conradie

I pressed the tip of my nose against the door to Professor Adeline Rossouw's study and the sour smell that filled my magically-attuned nostrils suggested two things. The occult book was in there and it had already crippled the Professor. I had dropped the ball. My probation officer was going to demand a pound of my flesh when she learned that I hadn't stopped the book from cursing a *normal*. I punched my brain into gear, opened the door and flinched.

Morning sunlight struck my eyes from a window, its curtains open. When my sight had adjusted, I stepped forward and nearly slipped on the polished floorboards. Professor Rossouw's wheelchair was facing the window, her bony hands curled into crab-claws and cupped over her ears. My stomach cart wheeled. One month ago, she had been a leading scholar on Bessie Head at the University of the Free State. Now... I stared at the back of her head, grateful that her face was turned away. One of the books leering at me from the huge shelves on either side of the window was responsible. To find it, I needed to touch her skin and expose myself to its residual malice. I set my teeth, strode forward and touched my palm to her clammy forehead.

The sour stink intensified, wafting from the shelf to the left. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Boris Pasternak and others loomed over me from floor to ceiling. I closed my eyes and nausea churned my stomach, wobbling my balance and making me lean against the shelves. I felt coarse leather under my fingertips. My eyes snapped open to see the magenta spine of a book without a title. A hissing noise erupted behind me.

A sharp wash of jasmine followed the hiss and I whirled round to face... an air-refresher sitting on the floor by the Professor's wheelchair. "Holy shit." Laughter bubbled up from my belly with the release of tension.

"Um... Mr Niemand?" said a watery voice from the doorway behind me.

Professor Rossouw's brother stared at me, a cup of coffee held out in front of him like a shield. His eyes were wide, his brow furrowed. I couldn't blame him. Hell, I had just burst out laughing next to his invalid sister. What would this guy be thinking if he knew I could have saved his sister?

"Um. Are you done valuing her, um, collection?" His face looked perfect for the dust jacket of a spy novel: blocky glasses suggesting intelligence without nerdy-ness, grey temples and grey eyes. He might have been handsome if he wasn't shaking and stammering. He fumbled the cup, spilling brown liquid and shattering the white china on the floorboards. The coffee smelled delicious, definitely Wiener Mischung. My mouth watered. I hadn't had breakfast yet.

While he bent down to the crash site, I snatched a plastic bag from my pocket and dropped the offending book inside. I shut the zip-lock and the sour smell vanished. The spilled coffee smelled more robust. Hell, the entire room suddenly felt more wholesome. I wanted to pocket the book, scarp and forget about the Professor. Instead, I returned it to the shelf. No point in getting the police after me.

"Sorry about that, man," I said as if I had fumbled his coffee. If I unnerved him, he could send me packing sans the mind-bending book. Which would upset my probation officer no end. Which would prolong my probation.

"Oh, it's not you, Mr Niemand. It's... Her... The stroke. Just... awful."

That sounded reasonable. But his behaviour still poked my instincts. Looking down at him cleaning the floor with his own tie, I sensed he was avoiding eye contact. Had he seen through my cover?

"My condolences," I said and made a sympathetic face, but his eyes stayed on the floor. "Her collection is impressive. My estimation is around R50 000. That first edition of Sol Plaatjie's *Mhudi* is ridiculously valuable. Ditto for the C.J Langenhoven set. Wait ten more years and the value will skyrocket. Incidentally," I grabbed the plastic bag containing the book, "this particular volume is interesting, but nothing

special. The title has been scraped off. Mould is eating at the illustrations,” I lied, “But I love restoration projects and, if you like, I could take it off your hands right now for... R5000? Cash.” I knew the book could easily fetch R20 000 from certain people. All communities have bad apples, which is why my probation officer assigns me to emergencies like this one, what with my cover being well established and all. I reached for my wallet and prepared to haggle.

“What a mess! Please leave the money downstairs, Mr Niemand.”

I frowned, unbalanced by his easy acquiescence and filed him under *suspicious*.

At the bottom of the stairs, I left the money on a brown box. Mr Rossouw had recently started moving into his sister’s house and every available space was crowded with boxes. Hell, I could barely walk without upsetting a stack. Now that my attention was freed from finding the book, I noticed the stench of sweat and detected notes of... embarrassment. Some magical gifts are gross, but useful. Under the embarrassment, I smelled anger and fear.

“None of our business now,” I whispered to the prisoner in my pocket. “Not my graveyard, not my zombies.”

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Outside, I set a course for the park across the street from the Professor’s house. “What a weird, little fuc...” I killed the curse, pulled the plastic bag from my jacket and scrutinised the zip lock. Plastic is practically a symbol of human technology and thus great for incarcerating the occult. But accidents happened. The lock seemed innocent of arcane leakage. I raised the bag to my nose and sniffed. Nothing. I thought I heard a hyena laugh, but then it was gone.

“What I need is a pick-me-up,” I whispered to myself.

As it happens, a certain apartment building on the other side of the park housed just the right person. The terms of my probation barred me from contacting her, but I had

devised a remedy. The book had to be delivered to the Boss, the only name by which I knew the probation officer who arranged my jobs. But the park was small. This would be quick. I stashed the book in my jacket, where it trembled against my ribs, and set off.

My heart imitated the rap-tap tempo of the book's vibrations. I lengthened my strides. Almost there. Near the far exit of the park, the grass squelched wetly underfoot. The water ruptured the tracking spell, which the Boss had woven into the soles of my army-surplus boots. Not for long. But long enough. I reached the shed near the park's exit. A pine tree between the gate and the shed created a little nook where I could hide.

Doing magic is a little like playing lawyer in the courtroom of physics. You can warp light, sound, heat and cold, provided you respected legal limits. Unlike most lawyers, you must subject your motivations to a microscope. Concealed behind the tree, I closed my eyes and envisioned my intentions as an unrealistically colossal peach tree. By their fruits, you shall know them. My motivations were clear. The Boss could not discover that I was still communicating with Laura Theron and her friends. I did not want to face trial again. Don't get me wrong, the Boss does not head the magical Gestapo. She wouldn't harm a *normal* like Laura, but I was free game. Self-preservation makes a fine motivation. The tree in my mind was tall and strong, apart from a few spoiled fruit that smelled of Professor Rossouw's study.

Step one: Bend light until I could see beyond the gate of the park and into one of the windows of the apartment building across the street, third storey, last apartment to the right. This trick has one problem. While I extended my sight, my body was unguarded. It was an easy way to get yourself mugged. That had happened before. Another time, I had returned to my body to find a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet stuffed inside my jacket's pocket. Focus. Static collected around my fingertips.

I resisted the temptation to extend my sense of smell, much though I missed Laura's perfume, and I refrained from pushing my sight past her window. Its frame represented the line I had drawn in the sand of my integrity. Laura Theron was doing



her Masters in Ancient Hebrew at the University of the Free State. Her computer screen was open to a website for something or someone called the Devout Patriots, but I focused on the way her eminently kissable mouth twisted in concentration while the freckles on her face wrinkled under her curly fringe of bright red hair. She turned in her chair and looked at the window, almost directly into my disembodied eyes. Four friends entered her room and she turned to embrace them, as they squeezed into the tiny space. I knew them all. Despite an age gap of five years, we'd gradually become friends when I discovered rare books on Hebrew for them. They'd entertained me with loud complaints over their conservative parents, most of whom owned farms around the city. Now, as far as they knew, the police were investigating me for trading in stolen antique books. I think they had all swallowed the lies, but sometimes I wondered. Laura was smart and, for some reason, she distrusted the police. Still, she agreed to keep some distance until the dust settled.

Barely a minute had died before I pulled away. Watching too long would tempt me to cross the line and carrying the book in my pocket made this a bad day for taking chances. I returned my sight to my body with all the alacrity of a kid declining chocolate, while static buzzed on the nape of my neck. Time for step two.

As I made my egress from the park, the crunch of a bicycle on the asphalt of the street sounded to my right. A postman was approaching the apartment building. We nodded to each other. I reached into the pocket of my jeans and retrieved a white envelope, along with a crumbled R10 note. The postman was nearly a twin to Morgan Freeman. He brought his bicycle to a stop, winked at me in a conspiratorial fashion and shook my hand.

"Morning Mr Makoro," I said.

We broke contact and I strolled away as nonchalantly as a teenager who had just smoked weed behind the principal's office. Postman Makoro, for his part, departed with his bribe and a letter for Laura. With any luck, he'd convey a letter to my apartment later, concealed in a newspaper. I hadn't received any letters from Laura for a while.

“Right,” I muttered to myself, trying to reset my brain to business-mode. I tapped the plastic bag’s inmate and started singing Bob Dylan’s *All Along the Watchtower*, but changed the lyrics to, “There’s no way out of there for you, said the joker to the thief.”

Static crawled over my scalp like a spider’s legs. A message flashed over my vision like a neon sign. It wasn’t words, exactly. It was an impression, like the meaning behind several words, blending seamlessly: *Lukas Niemand! It’s Isabelle!*

Someone had been waiting for me. Only, she had bent light to conceal, rather than extend sight and I clenched my fists at the intrusion.

“Holster the rage, Rambo,” a feminine voice said behind me.

“You saw?” I didn’t turn to confront her.

“I saw your James Bond impersonation with the postman.” She was passing her little espionage off as a joke.

“Why?” I spat, rounding on her. The venom lacing my voice surprised me.

“It’s just me, Lukas.” She raised her hands, palms out and fingers spread in a placating gesture. The familiarity of her happy, yellow raincoat and wheat-coloured bob should have calmed me down. It didn’t. “The Boss sent me to collect the book. She can’t make it herself. Plus, she’s offering to end your probation early.”

“How did you find me?”

She nodded at my boots without moving her hands. “You didn’t disrupt the tracking spell properly.”

“Friends don’t spy on each other!”

“True. But-”

“You were just too damn curious to respect-” I punched my acidic response down. This wasn’t fair to Isabelle. “Are you going to report me?”

“Lukas, I am still your friend. Friends talk to each other.” She grinned and injected some bluster into her next words. “You’re just chuck-full of adrenaline because I outsmarted you.”

I could feel her observing my response to the jibe. So, I treated her to a grin of my own.

Tension flooded out of her, like oil from a punctured drum. “Groovy. Now give me the book and we’ll catch some breakfast, okay? Then you can tell me all about... that.” She hooked a thumb back at the apartment building.

I expelled some air and rolled my neck a few times. “Breakfast sounds good.” Something jumped loose in my memory. “Did you mention the Boss letting me off the hook?”

.....

I sipped some Wiener Mischung and then passed the liquid heaven to Isabelle. She sipped from her glass of orange juice and passed it to me. Each of us imbibed a little of the other’s drink. Next, I bit into a corner of my toast, passed the rest to her and she did the same with her bagel. Nothing spectacular happened, but special and spectacular are not always the same. Even *normals* intuitively value this kind of practice. Perform the rite of the communal meal with commitment and you’re tapping into veins as ancient as the specie’s drive for survival. Isabelle and I renewed this conduit between us on a semi-regular basis. It wasn’t telepathy, exactly, but it lived on the same magical street. We couldn’t read each other’s thoughts, but impressions were powerful and honest.

“Has anyone guessed?” I asked. Her expression confirmed that our communion was active. She didn’t need the full question: Has anyone guessed that the reason for my suspended sentence was that I was planning to share the rite of communion with Laura and her friends?

“The transcripts of your trial are sealed. The rumour mill has been slow, but... Well, some people are saying you tried a... self-enlargement spell.”

I froze. “Self-en...”

“On your penis.”

I rubbed at my eyes and grimaced. “Let me guess, the Boss spread that one to throw folks off the scent.”

“She’s wily,” Isabelle confirmed, “and protective.” Her tone fell serious. “What you did was risky. Helping *normals* cope with our existence.”

“Five *normals*,” I corrected, “Laura and four others. That’s a tiny community. I wasn’t opening a diplomatic centre. Look at me Isabelle. Do I look like I am about to stitch an S to my shirt and buy a cape? It was just a tiny start. Hell, I wasn’t booking prime time on TV.” The book was no longer in my possession. There was no blaming my outrage on its influence.

“I know, Lukas.” She wolfed the rest of her bagel down and started on a second. “Plus, I know why you chose this year to start.” She drew a breath before continuing. “1994.” Her mouth lingered over each syllable, a chunk of bagel still caught between her teeth. “You got snared in the happy, hopeful Rainbow Nation vibe.” She swallowed and started on another. For reasons I never discovered, magic gave Isabelle the metabolism of a coal locomotive. “But let me ask you this. How many of the *normals* in your experiment were black?”

“One.”



Isabelle lifted a hand and circled it around her head to encompass the setting of our breakfast. “Look around.”

I did.

We were breakfasting at an outdoor table under huge, neon letters, which read: Chantilly Lace Jazz Club. Technically, the club was still closed, but Isabelle danced for them, as part of her cover, and the chef liked her. Inside, a trumpeter was making his practice run. “It’s an American-style jazz club. Teleport it to Chicago and it would fit right in. So, what’s it doing in Bloemfontein?”

Appealing to a white audience. I didn’t even bother to voice my answer, opting for a mouthful of coffee instead.

“My point,” she continued, “is that the road ahead is long and the wisest turns aren’t obvious. Even after changing the big laws, small potholes can still break the wheels. So, why would your tiny community make any difference?”

“Look upon my works, ye mighty and despair,” I enunciated in my most dramatic voice. “You said something about fast-tracking my probation? Pardon my cynicism, but that sounds dubious given how I had dropped the ball with Professor Rossouw.”

Isabelle’s relief at the about-face in topic lit her eyes so brightly, I thought the neon sign had been switched on. “Remember that the Boss’ favourite agent is on your side,” she pointed at her own head. “The job involves Mr Pierre Rossouw,” she enunciated each syllable of his names while slicing the air with a finger, like a conductor’s baton, “He is not an innocent bystander. Lookey here.”

She slid a brown manila folder to me, like those in Cold War spy movies. The Boss adored them. I opened it, scanned the page and felt the toast in my stomach jolt. Under a picture of Pierre Rossouw, I read the words Devout Patriots.

Isabelle snapped out information between bites into a new bagel, “One, small groups meet in private homes all over the city. Two, they take special care to avoid being followed. Three, they focus on self-defence training, at least during the meetings we’ve observed. Four, they host large seminars out on farms. So far, we have no eyes or ears on those. Five, Pierre Rossouw is a regular speaker. Six, they might be stockpiling guns, fuel and supplies. Finally, they are less optimistic than you about the political transition.”

I opened my mouth to ask the obvious question, but she forestalled me. “No, the police don’t know. In fact, some of the police might be members. Yes, we have solid reason to suspect magical tampering. These Patriots are weird. I overheard some of their self-defence gurus preaching about how the new government is part of an international cabal of devil-worshippers. I’m not exaggerating. That’s how these nut-jobs talk. The only time anything like this has happened before, some kind of mental manipulation was at play. Occam’s razor points to Rossouw.”

“Are the members male only?”

Isabelle barked a laugh that shot a chunk of bagel at my head. “With a name like the Devout Patriots, I would have thought so too. Membership is mostly male, but barely.”

I strained to shut Laura from my thoughts. “Okay, so the Boss thinks that Professor Rossouw’s book might have slipped part of itself into her brother in order to influence this cult?”

“Got it in one! You’ve seen individual *normals* play create-your-own cult before under supernatural influence.”

“Not on this scale. You’re talking about what, hundreds of members?”

“You touched the book this morning. How badly did it affect the Professor?”

I shuddered and struggled to keep my food down. “Badly.”

“Is the book powerful enough to turn the brother into a sock puppet? Or can it only cripple?”

I rubbed at my eyes. “Maybe. Do you know if Rossouw suffered some trauma recently?”

Isabelle perched her face on her hands and nodded. “He got fired for showing prejudice at work. The details are hazy, but there was a protracted lawsuit and everything.”

“In that case, yes. A book like this one can really bite into raw emotions like fear, anger and helplessness.”

Isabelle nodded slowly. “Okay, this is the Boss’ offer. You unearth what’s going on and boom,” she snapped her fingers. “Your sentence is lifted. Get us more info. The Boss determines the next step.”

“She’s offering, not ordering?”

“Yup. This gig will turn violent if Rossouw is far gone. Actually, the Boss assigned me first.”

“You didn’t want to impress her some more?”

She smiled, “My reputation is set. You need the escape route.”

I smiled back, “It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. The tracking spell in my boots would be lifted, right?”

Isabelle’s smile evaporated. “Don’t conduct the communion with *normals*.”

"I wasn't thinking about Laura at all." Or about what the hell she has to do with the Devout Patriots.

Isabelle did not resume her grin. "Where will you start?"

"I'll drive around town and see if I smell anything weird. Tonight, I'll pay a visit to Mr Rossouw." And I absolutely will not go to Laura.

"Want help?"

"Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne, he travels fastest who travels alone."

Isabelle rolled her eyes. "Pretentious prat."

.....

The temptation to visit Laura pricked my skin like an itch between the shoulder blades. The situation had become complicated. Water no longer disrupted the tracking spell. I didn't even know why, but the point was that if I rushed off to test Rossouw's influence on Laura, the Boss would know. That would not only violate my probation. The Boss might connect the dots and start investigating Laura's links with the Patriots. Did Rossouw even know Laura? Fact: If I wanted this knot untangled, Rossouw was step one. Facts are annoying when they pour ice on your impulses. Still, there I was, throwing pebbles at Laura's window at midnight.

"That which we are, we are," I muttered, "and what we are is stupid. If this were a horror movie, I'd be the idiot going: hey gang, let's split up to look for the knife-wielding killer". My unlaced boots stood beside me on the pavement and didn't offer any repartee. "Guess you weren't made for talkin".

Laura's face appeared at her window. Recognition flashed in her eyes and her smile nearly smothered my worries. This would only take a second. Just a few questions. Maybe a quick scan for any residue of Rossouw's presence in her room.



She burst out of the front door of the apartment building, reached me in two bounding steps and hugged me. “Lukas! Come in. We can’t talk out here. I got your last letter, but obviously I can’t use the postal service now.”

The Little Voice of Reason in my brain shouted an alarm, but the warm sensation of her hug slammed the mute button. The next thing I knew I was in her room. My boots were still outside, but the trick wouldn’t fool the tracking spell for long. Laura was talking at speed, like a tape recorder on fast-forward. “... then suddenly you vanished and you lied about the police and antique books; I mean what a story. We were so confused. We suspected you were involved in all kinds of real crimes, but then we discovered the Devout Patriots. Now it all makes sense. My parents are members. Most of the farming community around the city is, and it all just makes sense. I mean, the Patriots never actually mention you personally, but it all fits. The Deep State is after you and...”

Slowly, I took charge of my mental steering wheel. “Laura, wait. What are you talking about?”

“It’s okay. I know. I’m in the Patriots. I know the day of reckoning is coming and...”

My stomach felt like it was digesting needles. Laura jumped up and moved to her computer, saying something about chats and emails. “It’s all here if you dig deep enough. God, I feel so empowered now that I understand.”

I realised I was sitting on Laura’s tiny bed and the exhaustion in my bones begged me to drop down and sleep, but instead I rubbed at my eyes and collected my concentration into a tight ball. My fingers shook and my focus slipped, but I closed my eyes and repeated the searching spell I had used on Professor Rossouw’s bookshelf that morning.

Something like a hyena’s laugh flitted on the edge of my hearing. Nausea punched my stomach like a boxer, accompanied by a sour smell, suggesting that Laura was already mired in Rossouw’s influence. Then the sensation changed. A chattering,

skittering sensation ran across my scalp. Noisy chatter filled my ears like multiple voices jabbering simultaneously. I had encountered such voices once before in bundles of letters, written by mad magicians corresponding on how to create cults. But there were no letters in Laura's room. The toxic noise was emanating directly from Laura's computer screen. I kicked my brain into gear and started reading the observation like a compass, until the needle of my logic pointed to, "The Internet". I rose to my feet. Laura was still talking.

"I have to go." My voice sounded rough and raw. Laura was shouting something at my back as I raced out to find my boots.

Isabelle was waiting for me downstairs, astride a purring motorbike, perched on the sidewalk beside my empty boots. "This was idiotic, Lukas. How long did you think-"

"Get me to Professor Rossouw's house. I think I can clear this up tonight," I interrupted.

She narrowed her dark eyes. "I am not taking the fall for you Lukas. If Laura's involved, you need to tell me. You're a friend, but-"

"You won't have to," I snarled. "Just get me there."

She glowered at me, but then her features softened. I smiled wearily and hoped that our communion would let her feel the urgency burning my stomach.

"Fine. Get your boots on."

.....  
"Wait here," I whispered to Isabelle as she coasted her motorbike up to the Professor's lawn.

She hissed, "Of course I'm going to wait. This is stupid - stupider than the boots trick."

I ignored her and looked around. Dogs started barking all along the street. I felt damn sure this posh area had never heard a motorbike's growl at this time of night. Someone might call the police on pure whimsy.

"Hide yourself." I left Isabelle on the sidewalk and crept to the Professor's house.

With my light-bending spell, I located the Professor and her brother inside the house, and then scored another clue. The brown boxes in the living room were mostly untouched, as was the money I had left there that morning. Some of the boxes, however, had been opened and rifled for clothes and toiletries. Rossouw had not started moving into his sister's house just after her apparent stroke. No, he'd started after getting fired. Which meant he had been there since the book arrived. Which meant that something had convinced him to postpone unpacking. How had Rossouw spent his time? I knew, from Laura, that the book's malice was online.

Rossouw was downstairs, watching TV with a side-order of whiskey, while his sister occupied an easy chair in an adjacent room. Whether she actually slept, I could not tell. To scan his computer, I'd have to get close, and it was upstairs down a hallway from his sister's study. Breaking and entering wasn't on my CV, but today was a habit-killer anyway.

The burglar bars over the first storey windows supplied the footing I needed to gain the window to the study, where the Professor had been stationed that morning. By sending a small finger of kinetic magic through the window, I opened the latch from the inside. Abruptly, all I could think about was the withered body of the old woman, curled in on herself in front of this window. Sweat slicked my hands. I barely maintained my balance, but my ingress was done before sixty seconds were gone. From the study, I slipped into the hallway, turned left and entered a room I had only seen with my disembodied sight. It was tiny, crowded with propaganda for the Devout Patriots, and one wall sported the old South African flag. A computer waited on a disproportionately large and pamphlet-strewn desk. I narrowed my senses on the machine and my ears were instantly assaulted by a chattering cacophony, but this

time the noise, the punch of nausea and the sour smell struck a new mix, stealing my balance until I thudded to the floor. The book had not simply nested inside Rossouw. It had hedged its bets by making Rossouw transcribe and share it.

“Hey!” a quavering voice called from downstairs. “Is any... one up there?” The edges of Rossouw’s voice slurred. Something went click-clack. The slide of a pistol? “I’m... I’m...” A sound like God dropping furniture erupted. I didn’t stay to learn whether Rossouw was going to empty his gun or stammer himself into sobriety. Instead, I regained my feet, dashed for the hallway, entered the study and vaulted out the window, cushioning my fall with a burst of kinetic magic. Still, I lost my footing on the lawn and twisted my ankle.

“Move,” Isabelle hissed in my ear, before hauling me up and away to her bike. “Now will you tell me what’s going on?”

“One more stop,” I panted.

“For what?”

“Triangulation – to verify my hypothesis.” Isabelle might have muttered something uncharitable, but I was too busy praising the pain-killing effects of adrenaline.

“Take us to campus. To the library.”

“Why?”

“It has an all-night internet café. Just sidle up to the window. That should bring me close enough. Hell, that way, you can feel it for yourself.”

Streetlights zipped past. “Your voice is slower than usual,” Isabelle called over her shoulder. “That means you’ve figured this out and you don’t like it.”

The needles in my gut churned. “The library is over there. Go see for yourself.”



She parked her bike close to the glass wall of the internet café, strode over and pressed her forehead against it. One of the dozen students inside noticed her, but shrugged, probably assuming she was drunk. I was still seated on her bike, calming myself by focusing on the click-clack noises of its cooling engine and the crisp cold of the winter night. The cold was sharp enough to rattle my teeth. I didn't care. I relished this mundane sensation after a day of magically-induced nausea.

"What is that?" Isabelle whispered, "It sounds like letters, only..." She recoiled from the glass and spun round to fix her eyes on mine.

"Laura and Rossouw's computers are worse. She has recently contributed to Patriot chat rooms and his PC has an electronic copy of the damn book. These computers seem healthier," I nodded at the café, "because some students are visiting the Patriot sites while others are just doing whatever students usually do."

"Wait, the book is online, acting autonomously and creating conspiracy crap like the Patriots' beliefs?"

I rubbed at my eyes and leaned against the fuselage for balance. Hell, I needed sleep. "Yeah. Looks like it. The book, or its online incarnation, is playing the long game." I yawned. "It's having fun instead of simply crippling people. I don't know why. Either way, we can't fight this threat the normal way." I spat a bitter laugh. "Normal? What does that even mean?" Sleep wasn't all I needed. I felt like a kid watching the sandcastle he'd lovingly constructed collapse in the tide.

Suddenly, Isabelle was at my side and, to my surprise, smiling. "What's up with you? It's over. None of this is your problem."

"Oh, yeah," I snarled, "just the entire World Wide Web and a thousand ridiculous theories that even some damn smart people like Laura are willing to credit. Sure, this is no problem at all."

She raised two fingers. “One, no magic is involved that you can counteract. Conspiracy nut-jobs are as far beyond your jurisdiction as tanks. Two, you’re overreacting.”

“How’s that?”

“Lukas. These online platforms are still being developed – emails, chats, notice boards. Who knows what will be next. That stupid book, or its spirit or whatever, might run into more obstacles online than it anticipated. This is hardly the first time new tech has stirred trouble. Think of Chernobyl.”

“Or maybe the book will breed online like rats. You should have heard Laura carrying on.”

Isabelle shrugged. “Not our problem.”

My eyes ached and I closed them until I felt her fingers touch my chin. “Cheer up, man. I’ll get you some coffee or something stronger and we’ll celebrate. When I report this to the Boss, your sentence goes poof.” She frowned. “That’s what you wanted, right?”

“Right... Maybe... I need sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Isabelle looked into my eyes with the kind of expression that psychiatrists probably reserve for tricky patients. “You are not going to contact Laura again.” It wasn’t a question. It wasn’t an admonition. It was just a flat observation. Maybe there was some tacit pity mixed in, but I was too tired to notice.

“No.” I considered saying that Isabelle had been right that morning. I had been suckered into the hope thing. I had not planned anything well enough. I had not counted on the book knowing people better than I did. But all of that felt redundant.

.....

I met the Boss in the park early the next morning before the sun had even started alleviating the cold. There was a spot right in the centre, where leafless stinkwood trees created a rough circle. I watched her walk from tree to tree, touching her long fingernails to each one, summoning some kind of spell to fool observers. She was a beanpole in her fifties with a severe, yellow-hued face, all angles and creases like a scrunched up notepad. Her black suit, however, was sleek and contemporary. Isabelle stood beside me.

Finally, the Boss stopped, folded her thin arms over her chest and barked, "Explain."

I desperately needed a few more hours of sleep, but I squared my shoulders and marshalled the words I had practiced. "I am going to carry this case to the finish - with or without your help, but it would be easier if I didn't have to look over my shoulder all the time."

If she was surprised, it didn't show. "How?"

"We need *normals* to help us get tech-savvy. They don't need to know everything, hell they hardly need to know anything. But this book created a cult in the space of a month. It knew exactly what kinds of prejudice and fear to exploit. Imagine what it might do between now and, say, 2020 or something."

The Boss smiled and it was the eeriest thing. It made the wrinkles on her face web together like crones in children's books. She lifted her chin in an annoyingly arrogant fashion. "You want me to sanction the very acts for which you were tried."

"This is not what I wanted," I replied, quite surprised by the calm suffusing my voice. "This is a necessity, not an experiment."

Isabelle spoke up, "I can talk to the people at my club. My cover is established and the Internet is becoming indispensable for business. Someone will be able to help. All they need to think is that we need help dealing with viruses and hackers."

I barely controlled my urge to hug her.

The Boss whipped her attention to Isabelle, surprised for the first time. The two women locked eyes long enough to make me uncomfortable. I was seriously thinking about clearing my throat, or something, when the Boss finally spoke.

“Lukas Niemand, if I let you finish this case,” her voice was low, but her eldritch smile was back and her eyes were still on Isabelle, “then you forfeit your chance to get out, indefinitely. You will be my dog. You bark when I say so and you will bite whom I tell you to bite. You adhere to my methods and my priorities.”

I had anticipated something like this. The dog metaphor rankled, but my reply was all polished and ready. Even so, when I opened my mouth, my tongue was dry and thick.

The Boss lifted a finger to forestall me. “Even after this case is finished – assuming you live to see it finished, you are mine. You are going to encounter *normals* who feel their actions are entirely justified. You will not be able to reason with them. You will not be able to appeal to some nobler aspect.” Her smile turned sour on the last words. “I deal with people as I find them, not as I hope them to be. All decisions are mine. You carry them out. Those are my terms.” Finally, she turned her eyes back to mine, like the barrels of a shotgun. “Decide now.”

I found myself turning my back on the Boss to look in the direction of Laura’s apartment. I could almost see her window from here. My palms hurt and I realised I had been digging my nails into the soft flesh. The book understood people far better than we did. It even understood the emerging communications technology better than we did. The hyena laugh sounded on the edge of my hearing, as if the book was taunting me.

I turned back and attempted to give the Boss an insouciant smile, because you don’t let people with authority have it all their own way. “Sure. Count me in for the long

haul." My hands were sweating despite the chilly air, but I resisted the urge to wipe them on my jeans.

Her smile was gone and her eyes glittered with something I struggled to read, but I would wager she was appraising me again, judging my capabilities. Her dog metaphor sprang to mind and I clenched my fists. Pity I didn't have any hackles to raise. "You will hear from me soon," she said in a distracted tone, as if her mind was already somewhere else. "Now go get some sleep."

Isabelle grabbed my hand and pulled me towards her bike, saying something about coffee and breakfast at her club. I wasn't listening. A heavy stone was still sitting in my gut, but my fingertips felt lighter and my head was a fraction clearer. The cold air smelled clean and fresh, for now at least. It wasn't the smell of new beginnings, exactly, but something you dare not give a name for fear of throttling it.

"My graveyard – my zombies," I muttered.

## **Nova 2021 Finalist**

### **PLANET of BOULDERS**

#### **Gary Kuyper**

Many lonx consider him to have a mind ahead of its time - in short, a *genius*. Even as a grub it was evident that Renmar was different from the rest of his playmates. At an age of only three cycles he had improved on the lever-and-fulcrum devices that had been used by the lonx for aeons to lift and move boulders. At ten cycles he developed a remarkable adhesive that cemented boulders together and made it possible to build great architectural marvels far superior to the carved and etched walls of the caves and caverns in which the lonx have always dwelt.

Renmar had once theorized that were it possible to achieve enough heat it would be possible to fuse boulders into a more permanent bond. Some of the great

contemporary minds had scoffed at this notion, but only because they knew that his theory could never be proven.

Renmar had lamented, “The temperature needed to fuse boulders would have to be five *thousand* times greater than what any of our appliances now produce. Still, it’s a probability!”

“You mean, ‘*Possibility*,’” Dumar had sniffed.

The leg muscles of lonx are exceptionally well-developed. This is due to the fact that they spend a great deal of time leaping from boulder to boulder. Their natural affinity towards balance is somewhat phenomenal.

Solisia, the name given to their planet by some forgotten ancestor, is a *planet of boulders*; boulders upon boulders upon boulders.

At times when the wind on the surface rages strong enough to shift boulders around, the lonx crawl deep into the caves and caverns to wait out the storm’s passing.

The storms on Solisia are never wet – always scorching blasts of parched air that materialise without warning.

Renmar had once seen a friend carried away by a sudden gust that had lifted and flung him into one of the great gloss lakes surrounding the surface area above their subterranean dwellings.

Renmar had known that his friend was doomed the moment he had struck and broken the surface of the liquid that filled the lake. No lonx is strong enough to overcome the sucking action of the fluid they call *gloss*, let alone breach its surface where natural forces, not too unlike magnetism, create a viscous membrane.

The incident, to say the least, was traumatic. So much so that Renmar developed an intense form of agoraphobia. He rarely, if ever, ventured from his deep dwelling.

Fortunately there is an abundance of sustenance to be had below in the caverns. The lonx get most of their nutritional requirements by simply licking the surfaces of boulders or cavern walls. The minerals gained in this fashion are almost sufficient to sustain their lengthy lives. *Almost*, for without gloss from the lakes, the lonx become desiccated cocoons in a state of cryptobiosis - a form of self-preservation mummification. But even so, if rehydration is passed up for too lengthy a period, a lonx will certainly expire.

Many aged lonx, who lost the will to *go on*, chose to forego the consumption of gloss. It is believed to be a peaceful and painless method to exit life. It is also considered morally acceptable within lonx culture. The husks of these *dearly departed* are placed in neatly stacked rows inside the *Great Hall of Remembrance*.

One exceptionally hot season had seen the gloss lakes diminish considerably. Fearing extinction, they had built enormous reservoirs, cisterns, into which large quantities of gloss were channelled using the convenience of gravity.

Renmar was glad of the trouble that his fellow lonx had gone to in order to preserve their species. It afforded him the convenience of *never* having to journey to the surface.

Although the lakes had once diminished, they somehow filled again. There were no rivers or rain on Solisia. Renmar theorized that the lakes were fed by a subterranean source that managed to force the gloss upward by means of naturally-generated pressure. He also purported that the size of this source must be far larger than all the lakes combined. His contemporaries had again mocked him when he suggested a subterranean *ocean* of immense proportions, but at a depth that would be impossible to reach, let alone prove.

“It’s a probability,” Renmar had said.

“You mean, ‘A *possibility*,’” Dumar had sniffed.

All lonx have large eyes which make it easier to see in the sparsely lit environment beneath Solisia. Renmar’s eyes widened even more as he spied movement beneath the surface of the gloss in the main reservoir. A *slig* had been carried into the cistern along the crude aqueduct.

He watched as the creature used its flagella, fine dexterous tentacles, to propel itself about in search of sustenance. The simple creature had no eyes and yet was somehow able to sense the presence of food.

Renmar gave a shudder of disgust as he watched the creature attempting to reach him through the viscous membrane. The slig had no mouth, but Renmar knew that if it could attach itself to him it would suck nutritious fluid from his body through the myriad of miniscule suckers that ran along the length of its flagella.

He lifted a large boulder and dropped it into the cistern directly above the slig. Large globules of the liquid splashed onto the floor beside him.

He retrieved one of the shimmering spheres and speared it with his proboscis-like tongue.

Lonx have a unique tongue that can flatten for licking or speech, or become stiff, tubular and pointed when penetrating and sucking gloss. Lonx also have the ability to produce varied whistling sounds from the proboscis, not too unlike the tunes that can be heard from a flute. The *songs* generated by a Lonx choir, resonating through the caverns, can be both awesome as well as awe-inspiring.

Renmar could immediately sense the liquid rehydrating his near-desiccated frame. He had forgone taking in gloss due to his enthusiasm on his latest project. It was only when his joints began to creak that he realised that he had deprived himself of the precious liquid.

He gazed at the magnified, yet inverted, image created by the large biconvex-lensed globule in his hand. He could clearly see one of the slig's flagella thrashing violently in its death throes as it lay crushed beneath the boulder.

For an instant his disgust was replaced with shame and regret. After all he had once suggested that it was highly probable that the lonx had evolved from similar aquatic life forms. His intellectual contemporaries had, of course, yet again, mocked him.

"It's a probability," Renmar had said.

"You mean, 'A *possibility*,'" Dumar had sniffed.

Renmar was used to the constant gibes and derision. He knew that it stemmed mostly from an acute envy of his many successful accomplishments. And his latest invention was going to be his crowning glory, his ultimate gift to lonxkind.

"This is the *converter-emitter*," announced Renmar. "The device in the next chamber, where Lorimar is patiently waiting, I call the *receiver-converter*."

"As most of you know, energy is indestructible. Energy cannot be destroyed but it can be transformed from one form of energy into another. For instance, if I clap my hands..." He clapped his hands. "...kinetic energy is converted into sound energy."

Dumar sniffed indignantly and said, "Have you gathered us all here today to give us a lecture in basic physics?"

Renmar ignored the question and said, "As my rhetoric is boring some of the less patient members of this faculty, I'll get to the point." He walked over to the converter-



emitter. “This device that I have painstakingly tinkered together is able to convert sound energy into, well, as we don’t yet have a name for it, may I be so bold as to designate it *Renmar energy*? Or perhaps, more precisely, *Renmar waves*?” There was a hubbub of disapproval from the gathering. Renmar raised his voice. “These *Renmar waves* are silent and invisible, that is, outside our visible spectrum.”

“How convenient!” blurted Dumar.

Renmar indicated towards the emitter. “As you all can see, the converter is connected to the *emitter*. The emitter...*emits* the converted sound energy through space. These *Renmar waves*, as you will soon discover, are able to pass through solid objects.

“In the adjoining chamber is the receiver-converter which is connected to a similar converter as the one you see here. The receiver...*receives* the emitted waves and passes them to the converter which converts the *Renmar waves* back into sound waves.

“In other words, Lorimar, who is in the adjoining chamber, will hear my voice coming from the second converter as if I were in that chamber standing before him.”

The muffled hubbub of the gathering now rose to a clamorous din. Renmar raised his hand and waited for the group to become silent. He flipped a switch on the converter-emitter and spoke loudly into it.

“Lorimar, come here. I want to see you. Oh, and bring the receiver-converter with you.”

Moments later Lorimar appeared at the entrance to the chamber where the faculty members were gathered. He was holding what could only be the receiver-converter. He walked over to Renmar and placed the device on a table opposite to the converter-emitter.

Dumar stood up and growled, “Do you expect us to believe your cheap...”

The receiver-converter growled even louder, “Do you expect us to believe your cheap...”

“My apologies,” smirked Renmar. “It would seem I inadvertently forgot to switch off the converter-emitter.” He proceeded to switch it off as his own voice boomed from the receiver-converter. “I also need to find a means to control the volume of the sound emitted from the receiver-converter, but that should prove a simple task.”

The entire faculty rose but were flabbergasted into stunned silence.

It was Grewmar who eventually spluttered, “*Incredible! Astounding!* Over what distance can these devices of yours operate?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Renmar. “But I have reason to believe that Renmar waves can not only pass through solid objects but are able to traverse the vacuum of outer space.”

Dumar was about to contest the claim when the receiver-converter crackled and spat.

“Hello...hello...signal received...apologies for delay in response...was waiting for universal translator to...tranzzz. Damn! Request more data in order to improve blxtrx zzzz. Why you lousy piece of junk!” There was a sound of metallic banging and thumping. “Work! Work! Work! Hsss!” Next came a beeping sound followed again by a coherent voice. “That’s better! Sorry about that. Hello? Hello, you guys still out there? Hellooo!”

Renmar flipped the switch on the converter-emitter and said, “Hello, can you hear me?”

The entire faculty, Renmar included, held their breath.

After a short delay the receiver-converter announced, “I wish I could say those grand old words, ‘Loud and clear,’ but I’m afraid you’re coming through pretty much...well, soft and...vague.”

“Who are you?” asked Renmar.

Another short delay then, “Billy-Joe Brown. I’m one of farmer McDonald’s many astro boys.”

“Please clarify?”

“I’m a willing and able volunteer of the EIEIO – Earth’s Interstellar Exploration International Organization.”

“*Interstellar?* You’re capable of reaching numerous solar systems?”

“Yip! We jump across the ol’ Milky Way like frogs leaping from lily pad to lily pad across a pond.”

“Milky Way?”

“The name some forgotten human gave to this ol’ galaxy of ours.”

Renmar’s reaction echoed that of Grewmar. “*Incredible! Astounding!*”

“Downright *boring* if you ask me?”

“Ah, such is the nature of most intelligent beings once the...*novelty* wears off.”

"I guess. Still, when I happen to chance upon that intelligent life, and am able to have a jolly ol' chinwag, it all becomes worthwhile. These single-person crafts tend to become cramped after a while. And prolonged isolation tends to gnaw on the ol' nerves and mental well-being. Listening to music or playing games on the holo-tor helps but they have their limits."

"Where are you?"

"In outer space, baby! Where else would I be?"

"How?" muttered Renmar.

"That's a long story. The *why* is far more important."

"Why?"

"To seek out intelligent life my cerebral, inquisitive, friend." There was a short silence followed by, "You guys are...*friendly*? Please say you're *friendly*! You ain't gonna try eat me like that last bunch I encountered in sector thirty-four?"

"We lick rocks for sustenance."

"Say again?"

Renmar slowly enunciated, "We...lick...rocks...for...sus...te ...nance."

"Ookay! You won't be having any notions to lick me? I'm worried you just might fancy the salty Southern flavour."

"You're planning to visit us?"

"Damn right! I've been floating around in this tin can for longer than I can recall. I need to breathe some air that ain't been recycled. It's gotten a little ripe in here. Uh, ignore that last remark! Let's just say, 'I need to put my feet on some terra firma for a change.'"

"When?"

"ASAP! I'm hoping you boys will be willing to entertain yours truly as...soon...as...possible?"

"How can we be certain that *you*, Earthlings, are not *hostile*?"

"Hell, we ain't had a war since the big one of twenty-one-twenty. I guess humankind finally learned its lesson after that. Besides, I'm only *one* man. One *hu-man*! What harm could I possibly do?"

"*Humankind*?"

"The name of our species. Two arms, two legs, two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, one mouth, two butt-cheeks and one butt-hole. Our ins and outs are limited to one. It

helps to limit the amount of crap that tends to go in or come outta us at times, especially when we talk before thinking...like my pappy say I got the habit o' doin."

"We are the lonx. By your description we seem...similar."

"Good to hear. I was afraid you might have two heads and long slimy tentacles. Makes it difficult to shake hands or know which head to talk to." This was followed by some muffled laughter.

"When can we expect your arrival?"

"Ah, therein lies the rub, my lonx friend. Although I managed to track your broadcast to this planet, I'm having difficulty getting a definite lock on your location. Your transmission is too damn weak. Can you boost the signal?"

"Impossible! The power source I'm using is the best we've got."

"From where are you transmitting?"

"A subterranean facility between the great gloss lakes."

"Ah, well that explains it, Clyde! You need to get your antennae in the clear, and as high up as possible. And I don't mean those two wiggly thingamajigs you might have on top of your head."

Renmar swallowed nervously. "You're suggesting I place my converter-emitter out on the surface?"

"Give the guy a cigar! That's the truth, fella. And it needs to be high. The higher the better."

"The surface of Solisia is a somewhat...dangerous place."

"Oh?" There was concern in the tone. "How so?"

"Windstorms capable of lifting large boulders can suddenly arise."

"Did you say, '*Boulders?*'"

"Correct!"

"Sweet merciful mother o' mayhem! Hang on a sec!" There were clicking and clacking sounds. "My monitors and instruments show...Solisia, I believe you called it, to have a rather thin atmosphere. Strange that it could produce windstorms of such magnitude. One mo!" There was more clicking and clacking. "My meteorology instruments show that conditions are very calm in the general area of your signal, absolutely no significant pressure fronts on the move."

“That may well be, but our closest highest point is Black Mountain which is at least one revolution’s journey away. A most difficult and taxing journey across the boulder-strewn terrain.”

There was more clicking and clacking. “According to this, a day on Solisia is almost the same as one on Earth.” There was a heavy sigh. “My instruments and scanners ain’t picking up any life signs or indications of civilized constructs. My guess is that these windstorms you mentioned have driven all the lonx underground.”

“As far as we know, we here by the great gloss lakes are the only intelligent life forms on...or *in* Solisia. No lonx has ever had the courage, or should I say *foolishness* to journey away from the life-giving lakes. I have not even heard of any lonx who was brave enough to travel to *Black Mountain* and back.”

There now seemed to be a hint of disgust in the voice that said, “Seems you guys got no pioneer spirit...no *call of the wild* surging through your bloodstreams...if you got any *blood*?”

“To be honest, if any lonx have ventured...out there, none have ever returned to tell the story.”

“Then now’s the time, Clyde. A chance to write your name in the lonx history books.”

“I was hoping I had already achieved that with my receiver-converter.”

“No time to be resting on your laurels. Think about it, all it’ll take is a couple o’ days - a trip to Black Mountain...and back. Hell, fella, they’re gonna erect statues of your likeness in all the town squares.”

“Is there no other way for you to find us?”

“Ain’t no use me putting down in the hope of landing close enough to your...settlement. Geez, I could end up five or five *hundred* miles away. And if what you’ve told me is true about the boulders, I don’t see any chance of traversing that sort of terrain just for a little tête-à-tête with tea and crumpets.” There was a short silence then, “Tell you what! I’m gonna orbit your dear, dangerous, Solisia for a couple o’ days whilst listening to some classical hillbilly fiddling and playing *Dragonslayer* on the ol’ holo-tor. If I don’t hear anything good from you by then...I’m outta here!”

“I’ll do it!” blurted Renmar.

“Attaboy, Clyde. I knew you had it in you!”

“If you don’t hear anything from me within...a day...know that at least *I tried!*”

“Damn, you’re making me all goose bumpy, fella. This is definitely gonna be history in the making!”

#

At the end of the twenty third century humans had developed a space-folding technology based on tachyon research. These FTL, *faster than light*, developments had yielded what mankind had dreamed of doing for over three hundred years – deep space or interstellar exploration. If there was life out there, now it could be found. More importantly, if there were planets capable of supporting human life, it was now possible to spread out and populate the vast Milky Way galaxy.

Sure there were many failures in the FTL development. Many accidents and many deaths, some being rather horrendous whilst others were splendidly spectacular. These mostly occurred after the powers-that-be demanded that human astronauts replace simians as it was felt that, ‘*A human, not some goddamned monkey, should be the first to make a successful space-jump.*’

That honour finally went to Natasha Gagarin, a great-great-great-great-granddaughter of the first man to make a successful space flight back in the twentieth century, although his achievement was successfully overshadowed by the American propaganda machine when their Neil Armstrong announced, ‘*That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*’

After the success of Natasha’s jump, almost every government on Earth had approved funding for further study and development of the FTL drives. Suddenly everyone wanted to be the first to step onto and annex foreign soil, especially the foreign soil of a lucrative planet many light years from Mother Earth.

All the designs and innovations had one common feature, the craft worked best as a small, compact, capsule that carried a crew of four or less. In time it was discovered that the single-person crafts were not only more practical and efficient but also far more economically forgiving on the already heavily stretched budgets.

Iko Osanaka had been the first to pick up intelligent signals from a planet in a solar system only twenty light years from the position of his maiden space-jump. But on reaching the planet from where the signal had originated found a lifeless husk that had been ravaged by what could only have been a nuclear war – a war that had begun and ended over fifty thousand years ago. It had also ended with the complete

destruction of all and any life that had once thrived upon the surface or in its sulphur-rich oceans.

That was not a secluded incident. Many other EIEIO astronauts encountered similar situations. For such is the nature and *fate* of relatively slow-moving radio signals.

Most times when life *was* discovered it was far from intelligent, and very often hostile. These were encounters with organisms mainly intent on satisfying their insatiable appetites. All too often too eager and careless EIEIO explorers had ended up exploring the inside of these seemingly perpetually hungry creatures and organisms. Consider what extraterrestrial's might have encountered if they had landed here on Earth during the Jurassic Period.

#

It is said that, '*Necessity is the mother of invention.*' Due to Solisia's terrain and unpredictable weather, the lonx never had need nor desire to travel far from their place of safety and sustenance. This is why neither the wheel nor contraptions capable of flight have ever been devised, let alone built.

Renmar managed to reach the safety of a crag, an overhang, only a short distance from the summit of Black Mountain. He was pleased to have completed the trip more rapidly than predicted.

A few flurries had impeded progress of his demanding journey by threatening to knock him from his chosen path along the tops of the boulders. He had, fortunately, kept his balance and was spurred on to increase his pace.

He had a constant fear, not of being harmed by the unpredictable gusts, but of the damage that might occur to the sensitive equipment he carried upon his broad back. If either device were damaged, his arduous journey would have been in vain. He had brought tools in the event that repairs might be necessary; their weight adding to the strain on his muscles.

The faculty had expressed concern at Renmar's decision to reach Black Mountain. He knew that their trepidation was not for him but for the *incredible* and *astounding* devices that he had recently shown to be beyond *possible* or *probable*. They definitely worked.

They worked well enough to convince his intellectual contemporaries of his genius. Unfortunately they did not work well enough to satisfy the needs of the somewhat talkative alien that had contacted them by means of what must be similar, yet obviously superior, devices.

Renmar was eager to meet this man from outer space, but was even more excited about all he could learn about his advanced technology. The human was right about history being written - the future of lonxkind was surely about to change dramatically.

Renmar's place of concealment afforded him the necessary protection he needed from any sudden gusts. Thankfully the summit was near-void of boulders so that the solid stretch of shiny black rock towards the top could be swiftly traversed.

He removed the devices from his back and inspected them. He was pleased to note that they were in fine condition. Then he took a deep breath before bounding towards the summit.

At the top he looked about for some scattered boulders that he could use to anchor the converter-emitter. He found the exercise ironic, if not amusing; he had never been in short supply of boulders on this vast *planet of boulders*.

He instinctively knew that the unpredictable blasts would be more severe upon the exposed summit where there were no windbreaks. Any sudden gust would see him flung to his doom far below.

He flipped the switches of both devices and spoke loudly and clearly into the anchored converter-emitter.

"Hello, Billy-Joe Brown! Hello! Hello! Can you hear me, human?"

"Loud and clear, Clyde! No need to bust my eardrums," came the response from the device in Renmar's hands. "I take it you made it to your...Black Mountain?"

"Yes, are you now able to get a...lock on my position?"

"One mo!" There were more of the clicking and clacking sounds followed by, "Hoo-whee! Big *affirmative*, buddy! I'm now able to zero in within half a click of your position."

"Splendid! I suggest you look for the great gloss lakes. You can't miss them. The entrances to our subterranean cities are located at the centre of the eight great lakes. It should be a simple matter for you to...zero in on it."



“Roger that! Eight great lakes in a circular formation about the entrances. I hope there are some level spots where it will be safe to put down.”

“Yes, we regularly move any boulders that fall onto or near the entrances. The members of my faculty will have prepared for your arrival by informing all the lonx in our many subterranean facilities.”

“The friendly welcoming committee, hey?”

Renmar had to bite his proboscis. He had never considered any of the faculty members to be *friendly*. *Arrogant, self-conceited, slig-slime* was a more appropriate description. He hoped that the lonx that received this visitor from the stars would at least be amiably *diplomatic*.

“Uh, yes,” said Renmar, trusting that most lonx would present themselves as being gracious and hospitable in accepting and entertaining this important guest.

“Hang on!” blurted Billy-Joe. There was more clicking and clacking. “Outstanding! According to my instruments there still ain’t any ill winds a-blowing in your area at present or any likely to arise shortly. Therefore Mrs. Brown’s bouncin’ boy will be seein’ you *shortly!*”

“Well, not me, but my fellow lonx. If all goes well, I’ll see you in a day when I get back.”

“*If* all goes well?” scoffed Billy-Joe. “Don’t be cursing yourself with them negative vibes, baby! I want to shake the hand that shook Solisia. We’re gonna celebrate your success with a couple of ice-cold brews *or...* maybe lick a few rocks together.”

“Right!” said Renmar forcing a more positive tone into his voice. “I’m going to rest for a short while before heading back. I’ll leave the converter-emitter on the summit of Black Mountain in case you need to do any extra calibrations or adjustments, but I’ll be taking the receiver-converter with me. This means that I won’t be able to speak to you, but I’ll still be able to hear anything important that you might have to say.”

“Roger that! I’ll be sure to keep you abreast of things, especially as I make my final approach. If you’re still on that mountain you should be able to clearly see my ship coming down. Its landing boosters make an impressive fiery display.”

“I’ll keep a look out. Goodbye for now, Billy-Joe.”

“Over and out, baby, over and out!”

The silver craft landed gently on Solisia, its landing boosters evaporating a few small puddles before their heat turned the sand below into a thin layer of molten glass.

Billy-Joe waited for the engines and immediate surroundings to cool down before opening the hatch at the base of the ship. He stared through the Plexiglass visor of his helmet as the ladder's hydraulics lowered it slowly towards the ground. Then he activated his radio from a wrist-control.

"Time to meet and greet, Clyde!" he said gazing down at the thin sheet of solidified glass. "This is gonna be one small step for man...and all o' that spam!" The glass crunched under his boot as he put it down on the surface. He walked slowly out from under the craft and surveyed the terrain. "What the hell, Clyde," he muttered. "Either my instruments are seriously off or you been a-lyin' ta me!" As far as the eye could see there was sand in all directions. "Solisia ain't nothing but one big ugly desert o'dunes, baby." Then he shook his head and laughed. "Ah, hell, I know what this is. This is another o' your crazy pranks, Frank Henry flippin' Jones. I don't know how you managed to pull it off but I *know* it's *you*!" He walked over and sat down on a large black rock protruding from the sand. "Well, I'm still happy to stretch my legs for a change. And although the atmosphere is thin it'll be good ta vent all them noxious vapours from Ol' Kitty and get the compressors to fill up her tanks with some clean, fresh, air." He laughed again. "Good one, Jonesey! You gotta tell me how you did it, over an ice-cold brew, when I get back to Mama Earth."

#

Renmar rushed for the protection of the crag as the impossibly large craft thrust towards sepia sky and black space beyond.

He cried in pain as the air about him shimmered into a searing heat wave whilst boulders flew past at incredible velocity.

Only when the roar of the craft had sufficiently diminished did he muster enough courage to move from his protected spot.

He watched until the trail marking the ship's passage dissipated before moving to the edge of Black Mountain. He gazed at the impressive yet terrible sight.

"I'm the last lonx," he choked. Then he added loudly with no small hint of cynicism, "It's a probability!"

No Dumar or any other lonx would ever...*could ever* contradict his statement, yet he felt no joy...no satisfaction. "And it's an undeniable fact that Frank Henry flippin' Jones won't know what the hell you're talking about, Billy-Joe Brown."

Renmar would shortly die knowing too that one of his constantly derided theories had been proven true! But this, too, gave him no pleasure as he gazed forlornly towards where there had once been great gloss lakes and boulders.

Stretched out before him was now an immense, smooth, solid, sea of impenetrable glass.

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Dear Editor and Members of SFFSA

Firstly I want to congratulate all the winners of the 2021 Nova competition who are well-deserving of the praise and accolades showered upon their prestigious works – well done to all of you.

As a professional writer one of the cardinal rules of writing that I seriously adhere to is: *Don't underestimate your readers' intelligence.*

I never thought it possible that the rule would backfire so superbly as it has done with my short story *Planet of Boulders*. I truly believed that all the hints and clues were clearly there to fully explain the *twist in the tale*.

I was obviously wrong!

So, in the end it was *my intelligence* that was brought into serious question by the final judge – and perhaps others as well?

She did, however, mention that 'the story conceals too much information' so I will forgive her for thinking me idiotic enough to believe that a spaceship's rocket thrusters could turn an *entire* planet into glass. No, that was certainly not my intention or the actual outcome in the story. I am also uncertain as to why the judge ever imagined that the lonx, Renmar, was trying to *kill* Billy-Joe Brown by giving him the *wrong* co-ordinates – most puzzling indeed!

Anyway – here are the facts!

\*\*\* SPOILER ALERT \*\*\* (It would be preferable to read the story first before reading beyond this point)!

The co-ordinates received were absolutely correct. Billy-Joe landed his spaceship at the exact and correct co-ordinates received from Renmar's device. In doing so the

spaceship evaporated several puddles and turned only the sand below the thrusters to glass. After exiting the spaceship Billy-Joe Brown sat on a large black rock.

Here is the rub!

To a flea-sized (Actually even smaller) lonx's perspective, a desert of sand would appear to be, well, a planet of boulders. Several puddles would be seen as several lakes, and a large black rock (A boulder to a normal-sized human) would be an immense black mountain.

Sand, not boulders, when heated turns to glass. Water's cohesive property makes it form globules (Consider dew drops). Sudden gusts can move dust and sand about, but even an extremely strong gale-force (Spelling should be *Gail-force*, not so, ed?) wind would have difficulty shifting a boulder. I thought all those facts, plus other hints, would have made the *twist* quite evident – evidently not!

I hope the story now makes more sense to all those readers who failed to gather the fact that there was a *size-issue* involved between a miniscule lonx and a 'gargantuan' human.

Yours sincerely Gary Kuyper Strand Western Cape

## ***Hubert Haensel & Marten Munsonius, 2022***

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### **ARE WE DEAD BEFORE WE ARE BORN?**

Repeatedly in the course of this day, the only day, Ferdinand K. strokes his bare forehead with the back of his hand. It was early morning – the summer sun was still suspiciously low behind the distant tops of the surrounding mountains when it was not yet so muggy and oppressive, and he simply forgot to carry a hat.

The tourist actually had little sense for the beauties of the old P., which he could visit again for the second time during a business trip.

So K. had set out that morning without any special preparations. His head was still buzzing with facts and figures from the evening, when it had been a matter of representing the overriding interests of a globally active corporation called S. For this reason, he had to spend most of his time on P. for a few days.

Nevertheless, he made an effort – seemingly untroubled by the oppressive daytime heat – to stroll through the high, narrow streets of old P. like a tourist. His hand wiped the filigree web of sweat from his forehead. He felt a little weary in general; no devotee of the sun culture, with pale complexion and dark, high eyebrows; he did not resemble a day-tripper at all.

The high position of the sun drew an almost shadowless picture of the stream of people flowing down the narrow alleys toward their unknown destinations. The tourist followed the main stream of human traffic; he let himself be pulled along, drifting – the sun burned his unprotected head.

He hoped that something would happen. Something that would distract him from the pitilessly simple, pitilessly bleak, pitilessly unimportant little life he had led so far.

All at once the glistening sun caught itself as if by chance between one canyon of houses and the precipice of the next. K. Stopped as if rooted to the spot. He could gather his thoughts only with difficulty under the pressure of the heat on his forehead, but he felt that something was happening.

"Can you help me...?" he began, turning to the nearest passerby in search of help. The latter raised his hands and declined without a word. "Do you know where...?" he kept trying.

But the man next to him simply pulled his cap deeper onto his face and immediately disappeared again in the hustle and bustle of colourful clothing.

The tourist was probably very engrossed in observing the indifference of the people here, nevertheless his eye had spied a small cafe, with its awning just barely venturing out of the sphere of influence of the ancient, but still imposing looking house, which reminded him of the tales of G.M., which he had devoured like mad in his youth.

The cafe had only a few tables outside, and even fewer visitors, it also didn't seem quite inviting with its dull awning, no longer white nor gray in appearance, meant to protect its visitors from the glaring sun. Even the characters were faded.

But K. Suddenly felt liberated, drawn by the rays of the sun in the alley that made everything appear in a romantic light.

"Please take a seat", said the waiter, who appeared as if from nowhere, nimbly pulling a chair for Mr. K., on which he immediately sat down.

"Thank you, sir...", the tourist breathed, and the waiter replied in accent-free German, "You're welcome. What would you like?"

In his hands, as if by magic, a leather menu appeared. Two pages only, with food and drinks. Not an agonizingly long moment, not a thirsty moment passed, and there was the mineral water on the table, running down the tourist's throat in hurried draughts.

At the next table, an elderly gentleman was playing chess with himself. K. Watched the leisurely back-and-forth movement of the pieces.

The tourist saw the old man sitting in the sun only indistinctly; he kept his head tilted to the right side, nevertheless the movements of the executed moves seemed full of tension and not marked by age.

Sometimes the older man's lips moved as if he had to object to the move he himself was executing.

The ashen hair hung in thin wisps and slightly sweaty on the old man's head. K. spontaneously had a question; the black rook moved alongside across all squares, when a scream broke the "loud" silence. The tourist raised his head, whirled around, but realized, that he himself was in no immediate danger.

Not necessarily (a defence of his startled intellect, perhaps?) his full attention was now focused on the scene unfolding before his eyes in the narrow Old Town alley. An elderly woman - her wrinkled face seemed strange to the tourist K. – collapsed without warning.

The woman, wrapped in gray cloth, buckled slowly, bent to the endlessly old pavement, and then collapsed with a jerk, her forehead and mouth touching the dry, hot stone in a humble final gesture.

The stream of passersby noticed nothing. Almost no one delayed even one of his important steps. No movement on the faces that glided by aloofly.

Their looks wander uncertainly, and remain also on the tourist. Meanwhile, a faint stream of blood begins to trickle, a thin trickle indeed, following the path of least resistance. A boy shows with his fingers the coming way.

K. feels (at this question?!) transported back to the chessboard.

Although he sees through dozens of moves of his opponents, infinity runs into dark depths. K. Rises almost weightlessly.

A few steps into the alley. A soft, haunting music resounds, which the tourist perceives only subconsciously.

Bodies tug at him, hinder him, push him off the path. Like a blind man, he feels his way forward in the sun – sweat again on his forehead, while behind him the rest of his iced drink seeps into the tablecloth.

To his horror, he realizes that he is losing sight of the old woman. K. wants to shout at the top of his voice in his impotent rage, but eventually he gets lost in the labyrinthine branches of the sparse stream of blood, (the incident still before his eyes) which is already beginning to dry up.

Only with difficulty he finds his way back to the tables of the restaurant from the denser drifting crowd. In doing so, he is surprised by the haunting music, which he had noticed only once before. Hastily he takes the few steps in front of him.

The old man first reaches into the figures, sweeps them off the board and silently points to his ears.

K. now bows his head like the old man who disappears in front of him inside the restaurant, pricks up his ears - but he still lacks understanding.

He enters as well. First of all, he notices that it is much cooler than outside. His eye glasses fog up, overshadowing what's going on in the spacious establishment with the fog clouding his thoughts as well.

He takes off his glasses, cleans them with devotion, because he feels the eeriness creeping up on him - but it's nothing, just the chill of the experience.

He feels the sudden silence almost physically; it frightens him and is so frighteningly different. K. Wants to go back, out into the sun-drenched alleys of old P., but he can't, searches in the hopeless confusion of his thoughts for what led him to this place, to this pub that is probably denied to tourists.

The mustiness of time weighs suffocatingly on the furniture and the worn pale carpets, he feels that.

Dull eyes look at him, staring dumbly and yet so expressively, as if they wanted to tell him many things he does not yet know. He runs his hand under his collar and loosens it.

How long has he been here? Seconds only? And where is the old man, the chess player, who disappeared behind the door before him? He doesn't know, doesn't ask anymore.

His foot turns, turns towards the exit, as if he knows exactly what to do; floorboards creak, a frightening sound that pierces the silence like the groaning of an ancient tree in the wind.

Ferdinand K. shivers in his loneliness in this place where he is a stranger. He still stands there undecided and wordless, the centre of a surreal painting that the master's brushstroke is preparing to complete.

Then the door slams. It falls into the latch with a thud, a sign for the music to continue where it seems to have paused in the melody for an indefinite time. People are talking, laughing, not paying attention to K.

Old their faces, some bitter, weathered in any case by a long and restless life. It seems strange to K. that he cannot hold on to any of these impressions, but then he is distracted.

A waiter leads him to a free table in an alcove, far from the people of the old P., who already pay no attention to him. A stranger he is, one whose path leads here today and there tomorrow, as restless as he has always been, and he knows, even before he sits down at the table and buries his face in his hands, that he will not stay here. He just nods silently to the waiter's words, orders something, anything at all, and finally rediscovers the chess player. Lost in thought, the old man sits in front of pieces made of rough pored wood, valuable no doubt, and some of them lie fallen next to the board. The queen moves. Big and powerful, invincible, it wants to seem, and in addition the music gets louder.

A shrill treble, painful almost, jolts through the tourist's chest. He watches as the white knight is placed on the table.

No, he doesn't like it here anymore, and the waiter has disappeared somewhere among the many guests. People push past, squeeze down a narrow staircase into the deeper rooms of the restaurant, and Ferdinand K. Joins them without caring. He sees their expectant faces and longs to know what makes them so hopeful, despite their palpable melancholy.

Chords of another music surround him, louder and livelier, and he involuntarily quickens his pace.

Many tables are down here, everything is clean, somehow orderly. The band is playing for the dance.

Hands touch his arm; Ferdinand K. feels warm fingers nestling in his left hand.



Strange, he had almost forgotten what the warmth of a human being feels like. He is whirled around, finds himself again in time with the rousing melody, and the woman leading him (why does he let this happen to him, he rarely dances) laughs.

"It's lovely here, isn't it?"

Strange, but K. hasn't thought about that at all, he accepts that he is here, that the music sends him into a frenzy, in which the woman in his arms seems malleable at will.

He has not yet recognized her face, it appears like a washed-out pale blur, but nevertheless he believes he has always known her. Everything is so strangely familiar to him, as if he's finally coming home after a long absence.

"It's wonderful here, isn't it?"

Ferdinand K. dances. Faster and faster the stomping of his feet, following the melody. Everything around him sinks into the whirl of emotions, memories of earlier times burst forth; past and present mingle, become one.

It is wonderful...!

The whirl gets faster and faster. Ferdinand K. No longer thinks of the old P., not of the sunlit alleys, here and now he lives.

Wonderful...

A shrill treble breaks through the melody. He has turned awkwardly, bumped into a table. The wooden figures fall over loudly, they have fallen over, have been tossed about in the middle of the game, and a trembling hand sweeps the last figures aside. K. looks into the old man's eyes. He believes he reads sadness in them, confusion as well, about the fact that the game was not finished.

"I'm sorry," K. wants to say, but no sound passes his lips.

The band has also stopped playing. No more laughter, no more stamping feet, no more joy.

All around, everything seems frozen. Only the old man, the chess player, raises his right hand and, points to K. and then over to a mighty gate, to which more well-worn steps lead down.

"Go!" he seems to say. "You have disturbed the dance and the game, now go!"

Ferdinand K. can't help himself. He descends the stairs, suddenly wondering what awaits him there behind the mighty gate. He senses the familiar and the strange at the same time.

Hesitantly, he feels his way forward.

He can do nothing else.

He closes his eyes and continues walking, senses that he has reached the last step and stretches his arms forward.

The light. It is cold.

A scream shatters the silence...

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## **A Reinterpretation of the Milky Way's evolution and nature?**

### **- From The Daily Galaxy**

"We always thought of our Galaxy as an inactive galaxy, with a not so bright centre," said Magda Guglielmo from the University of Sydney about 2019 Hubble Space Telescope data showing that a titanic, expanding beam of energy sprang from close to the SgrA\*, the super massive black hole in the centre of the Milky Way, 3.5 million years ago, shooting a cone-shaped burst of radiation through both poles of the Galaxy and beyond into deep space.

In cosmic time, that is astonishingly recent. On Earth at that point, the asteroid that triggered the extinction of the dinosaurs was already 63 million years in the past, and humanity's ancient ancestors, the Australopithecines, were afoot on the vast savannas of Africa.

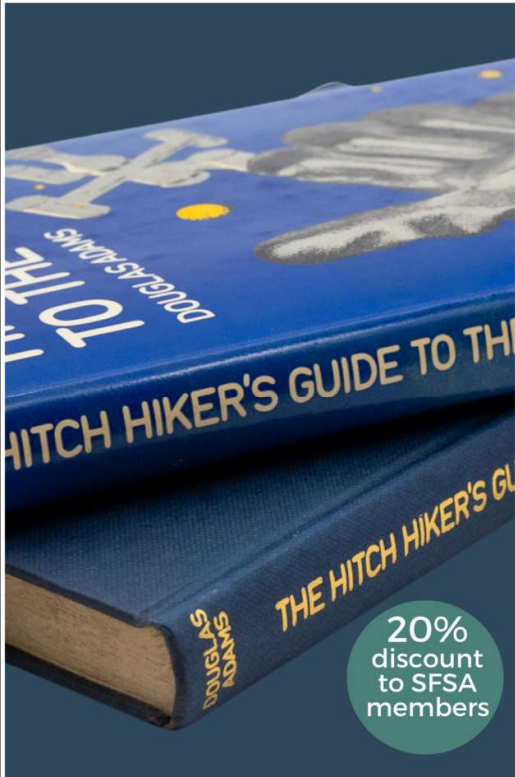
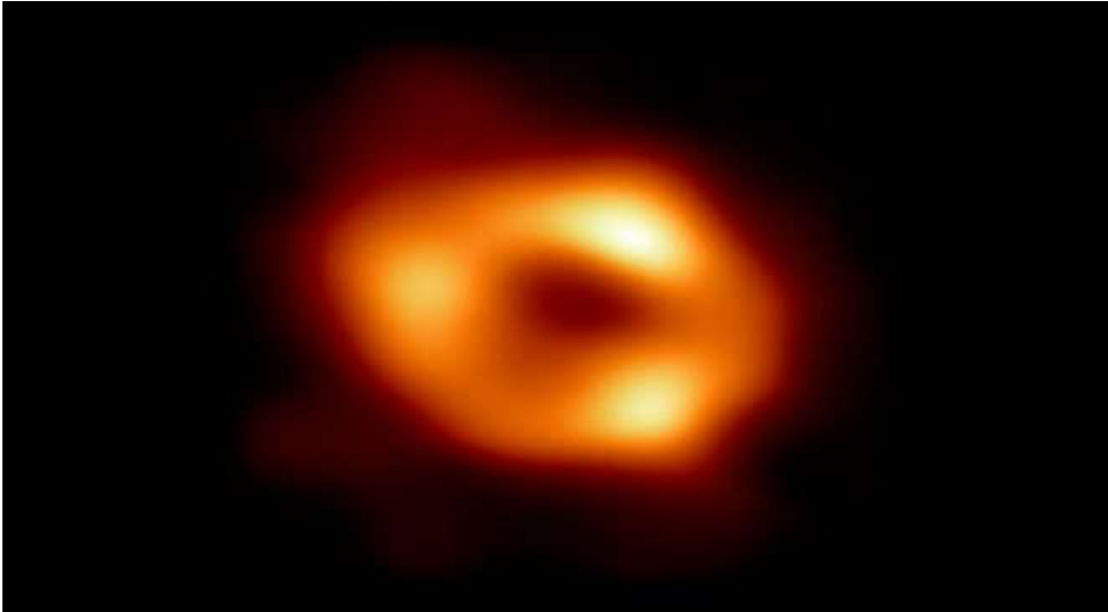
"These new results instead open the possibility of a complete reinterpretation of its evolution and nature," Guglielmo added. "The flare event that occurred three million years ago was so powerful that it had consequences on the surrounding of our Galaxy. We are the witness to the awakening of the sleeping beauty."

That's the finding arising from research conducted by a team of scientists led by Joss Bland-Hawthorn from Australia's ARC Centre of Excellence for All Sky Astrophysics in 3 Dimensions (ASTRO 3D) and soon to be published in The Astrophysical Journal.

"In 2021, the evidence is now overwhelming that the huge x-ray and gamma ray bubbles emanating from the central regions of the Milky Way were powered by a massive outburst from the Galactic nucleus," Joss Bland-Hawthorn, Director of the Sydney Institute for Astronomy, wrote in an email to *The Daily Galaxy*. "A super massive black hole with 4 million times the mass of our Sun is known to lurk there, and indeed the 2020 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded for work that confirmed this to be true. All this happened about 3-4 million years ago, when cave people walked the Earth. We can only imagine what they saw."

A long trail of gas extending from nearby dwarf galaxies called the Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. The Magellanic Stream lies at an average 200,000 light years from the Milky Way.

**Sagittarius A\* - the Black hole at the Centre of our Milky Way - from the Planet wide Event Horizon Telescope**



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