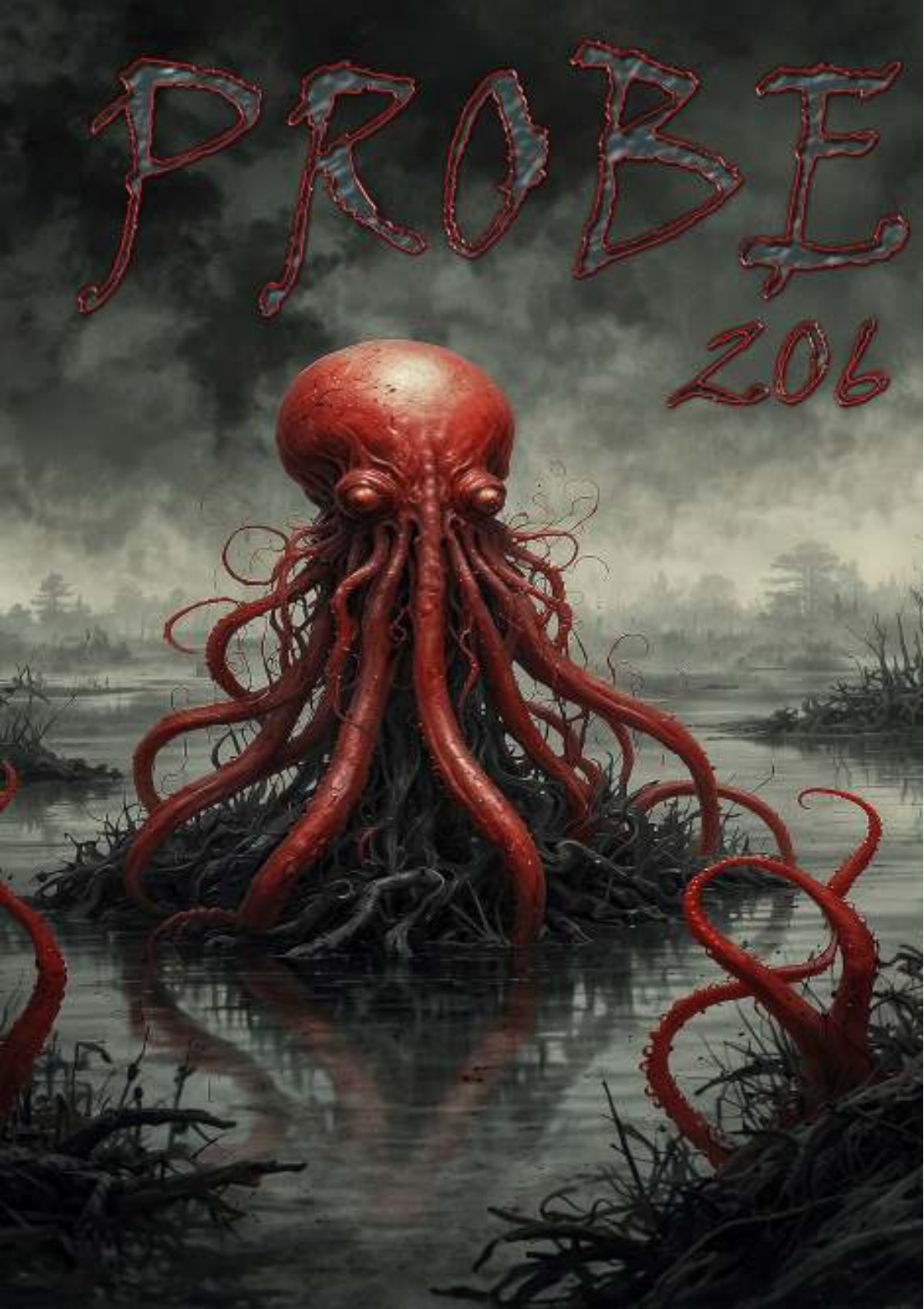
PROBE
206

PROBE 206 **December 2025**

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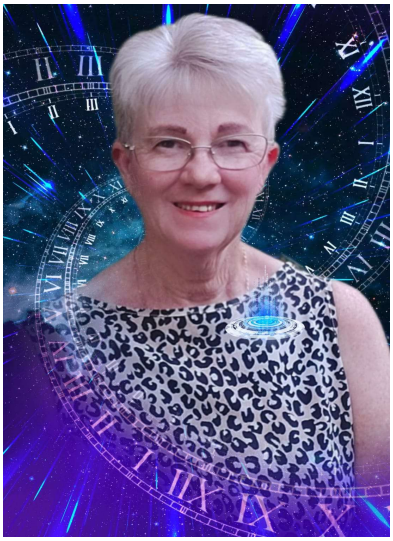
PROBE 206

December 2025

Editorial Gail



I may have mentioned in an earlier editorial that it had been difficult to narrow down the entries into a final Top Ten in 2024. This issue of PROBE contains two stories that were in contention. I felt that they should be printed as well. I hope you enjoy reading them.
And returning to the pages of PROBE, an article that has not been seen for quite a few years. We've been receiving several fanzines in exchange for ours. I asked Norman Pringle to review a couple of them. And so Norman returns to this issue with some Magazine reviews.

I was surprised and pleased to receive a mail from Justin T. O'Connor Sloane, who is publisher and Editor in-chief of the relaunched classic science fiction magazines *Worlds of IF* and *Galaxy*. He had learned of our organization recently through one of our 2024 Nova Award winners, Carmelo Rafalà. He was very surprised and pleased to hear that SFF was alive and flourishing here in SA. He asked me if I would do an interview with him for one of the magazines. He said it would help to spread the word of the existence of SFFSA as *Worlds of IF* and *Galaxy* have a very wide distribution. I was delighted to do so and completed a very detailed interview. I shall see if I can put it in PROBE once he has published it.
He has been sending me a couple of the new publications, and I was pleased and surprised to see an interview with Robert Silverberg in Galaxy Science Fiction #263. I remember meeting Robert Silverberg at the Nippon 2007 WorldCon and being impressed at what a true gentleman he was, talking to us and even consenting to have his photo taken. A true SFF icon. Now almost 20 years later he is 89 and still as articulate as always. He says that he would have been crazy to keep writing for almost 60 years if he didn't enjoy doing so. He now does what he feels like. I guess he is fully entitled to do so.

Chairperson’s Note Gavin Kreuiter

Sometimes we know exactly where or when we learnt some snippet of knowledge. But most of the time, knowledge and misinformation are absorbed osmotically; we cannot remember how we know, but we (think that we do) know that we know. Thus, it was, for me, with the claim, "SF did not predict the cell phone". This belief is widely held, as if it were a failure by SF writers in general. I have known about this "fact" for a long time, but I have no recollection of how I learnt it.

The claim is that SF writers imagined "communicators," not phones as we know them; for example, E.M. Forster’s The Machine Stops (1909), Dick Tracy’s wrist radio(1940s comics) and Star Trek’s communicator (1960s). These were more like two-way radios, not personal networked computers with texting, cameras, apps, and the internet. They did not predict the functionality that defines modern cell phones.

I would like to mention one prediction that I did find to be impressive. Mark R. Sullivan, president of the Pacific Telephone and Telegram Co, made the following prophecy in 1953: "In its final development, the telephone will be carried about by the individual, perhaps as we carry a watch today. It will probably require no dial or equivalent, and I think the users will be able to see each other, if they want, as they talk. Who knows but that it may actually translate from one language to another?"

But let us return to "SF writers did not predict the cell phone". The first point I would like to make is that it is not the goal of SF to predict the future. That is the goal of a futurist, an entirely different animal. SF writers have many goals with regard to their readers: to provoke thought, or purely for entertainment, or warnings about unrestricted science and technology, even sermonising; and yes, speculation about possible futures, which is not the same as predicting the future.

Secondly, I was unaware of SF concepts that did anticipate cell phones to some extent, until I did some research. And the examples are legion. Every single one of the following examples can be found by doing a Wikipedia search. Possibly one of the earliest visualisations of portable wireless communication was by the English caricaturist Lewis Baumer (okay, not an SF writer) who drew a cartoon

that was published in Punch magazine in 1906 (!), depicting a man and woman in London's Hyde Park, using wireless-telegraphy equipment: "The lady is receiving an amatory message, and the gentleman some racing results". Very 1906-ish. In 1914, L. Frank Baum made predictions about portable telephones. In 1923, Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg casually mentioned "pocket telephones" among contemporary technological achievements in his story collection "Thirteen Pipes" (also not SF). But probably the earliest science fiction writer to describe portable telephones was Harry Stephen Keeler in his 1915 short story "John Jones's Dollar". The story featured a pocket telephone used for wireless communication. Robert Heinlein also wrote about "pocket phones" in work published in 1941. And if we insist on talking about smartphones, Frederik Pohl's 1966 novel "The Age of the Pussyfoot" described a device called a "Joymaker," a portable computer terminal that combined functions like telephone, reference library, personal assistant… and even a drug dispenser.

If any exoteric critic makes this comment in future, you may inform them that they are ignorant. As was I, once.

Magazines Received

Ansible David Langford

September 2025 460 http://news.ansible.uk/a460.html

October 2025 461 http://news.ansible.uk/a461.html

November 2025 462 http://news.ansible.uk/a462.html

De Profundis

DeProfundis #612 September 2025 Editor: Matthew Mitchell
captmurdock@gmail.com for Los Angeles Science Fantasy society
DeProfundis #613 October 2025 Editor: Matthew Mitchell
captmurdock@gmail.com for Los Angeles Science Fantasy society
DeProfundis #614 November 2025 Editor: Matthew Mitchell
captmurdock@gmail.com for Los Angeles Science Fantasy society

Impulse

News bulletin of the Montreal Science fiction and Fantasy Association. MonSFFA

Vol 28 No: 7 September 2025 Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

News bulletin of the Montreal Science fiction and Fantasy Association. MonSFFA

Vol 28 No: 8 October 2025 Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

News bulletin of the Montreal Science fiction and Fantasy Association. MonSFFA

Vol 28 No: 9 December 2025 Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

NOVA 2024 FINALIST

Blood, Sweat and Tears

Marthinus S. Conradie

Two clues were all I needed to tell that something was wrong with my friend Eli.

I answered his call with a well-worn joke. “This is Mercy—the person, not the virtue.”

“Need to talk. Mugg & Bean. Thirty minutes.”

Clue number one: he cut the call without flirting with me.

Clue number two: when I entered the M&B, I saw purple bags under his eyes. He was sitting at a corner table. Pretty much standard procedure for private investigators in supernatural circles. Only Eli’s eyes weren’t scanning the crowd. They were glued to a tiny notebook.

“Heya,” I seated myself at his table. No response. “What, no cheesy compliments today? Eli Fletcher, you’re hurting my feelings. That sour face is making me question my sex appeal.” I ran my fingers through my pink braids, displaying the silver piercings crowding my right ear. “Got some new rings. You like them?” The left one I concealed behind my hair.

“Minute,” Eli mumbled.

Five minutes of silence. I chewed the inside of my cheek and tried to focus on how the fedora on his head made him look like a noir detective. Maybe some women liked that. He didn’t smell of cloves. So, he wasn’t moody enough to start gathering his magic unconsciously.

“You’re working a case,” I grumbled. “Need me to *look* at a death scene? If past is prelude, it won’t be anything peaceful.”

He looked up and flashed his trademark grin as if nothing was wrong. “*Ja-nee*, I’m on a case, my princess, but if the Free State were a perfectly peaceful place, yours truly would have to get a regular nine-to-five like normal folks.”

My turn to say nothing. Instead, I searched his face for a tell. Zero. But that one-eighty degree change in his mood worried me. So, I folded my arms over my yellow jacket and locked eyes with him.

He winked at me and scanned my jeans. “Pity it’s such a cold day. The sight of your legs would have cheered me up, but I’ll settle for an Americano mixed with your opinion on something…sensitive. “He slipped the notebook into his denim jacket, but I caught the words: *terminal illness?*

“Murder? Suicide? Need me to look at any of those, Eli?”

“Nope. No one’s died. Not yet. Maybe no one will. If you help me.”

“Okay. What do you need?”

“Your brains and your first-hand experience with something.”

That improved my mood. I leaned back in my chair and rolled my neck, easing the nervous knots. “Fine by me. Let’s haggle over the price.”

Eli cocked an eyebrow.

“My brains and experience can be yours for the extravagant price of baked cheesecake and a flat white.”

He laughed loud enough to draw stares, before signalling a waiter. While he placed our order, his smile vanished, the lines around his eyes and mouth deepening as if he were chewing lemons. It made him look much older than thirty-nine. A new knot formed in my neck. Hell, what did he want? He seemed relieved to call on me for business unrelated to death, but something still felt off. I tried to lighten the mood. Friends do that.

“You know,” I sighed dramatically, “I really should be offended.”

“By what?”

“You,” I said, keeping the drama going. “You keep flirting with me. With all the finesse of a shotgun, despite knowing my preferences.” I pointed at the cartoon figure on my jacket: X-Men’s Cyclops, the only man I’ve ever crushed on .“Hell, you’re fifteen years older. You’re one hell of an un-PC man.”

That resurrected his lopsided grin. “*Ag,* I never liked PC-ing much.”

“Your problem, not mine. My problem is that you’re getting me into the bad habit of overlooking your patriarchal, heteronormative arrogance. Keep this up and I’ll lose my membership in the Aloof Anti-Man Club.”

His laugh pulled a smile from me.

Truth was I felt safe around Eli, which was saying something. His wife had been my age when she died, and I’d run into him during the investigation. Not that either of us had been involved, officially. I think he flirted with me because he knew I was unattainable, and I enjoyed it for the same reason. That’s people for you.

I looked up and caught him eyeing a young, little waitress, probably a student at the university, but his eyes seemed innocent of sexual interest. Why the hell was he so tense?

“Mercy,” he whispered.

The waitress noticed him stare and glowered at me, as if Eli were a bad dog and my responsibility. I stuck my tongue out at her.

“You were in a cult once. On campus, back when you were a student, right?”

It wasn’t a question. It felt like an interrogation. My cake and coffee arrived, buying me time to think. I grabbed my fork and speared the cake, brain burning to predict the direction of this conversation.

Option one, something bad had happened on campus, something cult-flavoured, and Eli was afraid that my past had caught up with me. Reasonable enough. Cults are like drugs. You might quit them long before they quit you. Option two, something cult-flavoured had happened, but Eli just needed my experience.

Looking up, I saw Eli studying my face while rotating his cup, grinding it on the saucer loud enough to make my teeth ache. He had probably guessed my thoughts, and I hated it when anyone could do that, even him. It wasn't magic. Eli just hadn't become the best PI in town by staring into his own eyelids.

"Let me be *straight* with you." He paused, hoping to win a reaction to his stupid pun. I didn't indulge him. "What if I told you there's a girl on campus who donated blood two days ago. Her donation went missing—only hers. Same girl hits the gym every weekday. Yesterday, her gym towel vanished."

I bit the inside of my cheek again while Eli watched me, eyes glittering .My guess was he wanted me to ask the right question. "Had she already used her towel when it disappeared?"

"Yes." His smile was on top form.

"Blood and sweat," I mused. "Ritual magic. Who is she?"

Eli leaned back in his chair and mimed reeling me in with a fishing rod. "Gotcha." Then he reached into his denim jacket and passed an ID photo to me. "Teresa Taljaard."

Teresa sported natural red hair and a delicate face, pale skin, and large teeth that suited her ebullient smile. Probably around twenty. And cute. Very damn cute.

"Help me out and we split the paycheque. Once we put the lid on this case, I'll ask you again about joining me as an apprentice PI."

"Where do you want to start? This isn't exactly my usual gig."

"Teresa has a professor looking out for her."

"That's who called you in?"

"He's gifted like us .After he learned about her missing blood and sweat, he figured a cult might be involved .So? You hooked?"

I stared at the picture as if it might talk. Cult or no cult, blood and sweat were glowing neon arrows pointing to ritual magic. Why would Teresa draw that kind of attention?

“Mugg & Bean has the best cake,” I said. “Sure, I’ll help. “Eli was a friend, after all.

Besides, having someone like him owe me one was never a bad idea. I’m practical that way. “Whoever our thief is, she, he or they aren’t done yet.”

“Oh? How so? Rituals aren’t my strong suit.”

I shovelled cake into my mouth and held up three fingers. “Three, five or nine. Ritual magic always works in those. One more magical substance is necessary, or more. Want to guess the most likely third fluid?”

“Blood, sweat and tears,” Eli responded, his tone pensive.

“Or vomit. Tears pack more symbolic punch, though.”

A cold smile twisted his mouth. “Which gives us an advantage. Stealing tears directly from someone’s eye is way harder than pocketing a towel from the gym.”

I grinned, “So, we’re looking at a nice, easy babysitting job? No nasty death scenes for me.” No new nightmares.

Eli nodded thoughtfully. “We watch Teresa closely. Nice and easy.”

A new angle occurred to me. “Question. When her professor called you in, could he explain why she’s being targeted?” I started on the cake’s sweet crust.

Eli rolled his eyes. “The great, grandiose Professor Motsei summoned me to his office two hours ago and gave me the barest outline of what had happened at the gym. Never even asked if I’d take the case. Just assumed. Gave me this picture of Teresa and the timetable for her classes. Then it occurred to me that maybe someone should *look* at her.”

I swallowed some crust and stretched my lips into a smile. “And that’s when you thought of me?”

Eli winked and snapped his fingers. “*Net so*! My reputation precedes me, which is fantastic for business, but I have my limits—limits you can overcome.”
“Meaning, you know a certain pink-haired girl who can spot whatever makes Teresa

special at a glance. “I finished the cake and resisted the urge to clean the plate with my tongue. “Okay, who could access the gym and the blood bank at the right times?” “Only about a hundred different people, but there’s a question you’re forgetting to ask. How did the professor know about her blood sample going missing? The bank probably just chalked that up to an accident without informing Teresa. They aren’t exactly obligated to announce it on a billboard. Towel’s a different story. The professor generally hits the gym at the same time she does.”

I blinked. Dammit. He was right. I’d missed that. “Did you ask the Professor straight out how he knew?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer but waved his hand as if challenging me to work it out.

I narrowed my eyes. “You suspect him of being involved somehow?”

Eli signalled for another Americano. “My gut doesn’t like him.”

“That all?”

“That’s all for now. Tomorrow morning, we visit campus and wrap our heads around why anyone would target Teresa, which means using your sight, my princess.”

My left ear tingled. It was missing a chunk and campus was where I’d lost it. “Access to the university is tightly controlled since the big student protests. I guess the professor gave you a special access card or something, but what about me?”

His trademark grin lit up on cue.

*

“Hmmm,” the guard mumbled, stubby fingers rifling through my gym bag for the third time. Security goons always suspect me. Chalk it up to my bad ear.

“Anything to declare?” she asked.

Bloody hell, did she think her dinky little access gate was an airport?

“Nope,” I said, affecting a terrible Texan accent. “Left all my gun sat home.” My brain tried to hit the brakes on my mouth, but it was too late. “Left my drugs at home too.”

Eli saved me and when we escaped into the morning sunlight, I sported a laminated card, pinned to my chest that read: *Mercy McLean, Apprentice Private Investigator*.

Eli grinned like the Cheshire Cat, so I thrust my chin out and said, “It’s temporary.”

He shrugged, “So was Jan van Riebeeck’s stay at the Cape.”

I rolled my eyes. “Man, you really suck at PC-ing. There’s Teresa’s gym, so make yourself scarce unless you want her to think you’re my sugar daddy, old man.”

Tension pulled his mouth into a sour knot again. No time to puzzle over that. It was show time. I settled the gym bag across my chest and rubbed at my scarred ear—for luck instead of nerves. Call me superstitious, but I do magic; I’m allowed to be.

The gym was new, all glass panes and open spaces, allowing you to gawk at bodies sweating on treadmills and padded benches, which is why I walked straight into someone. A shoulder collided with mine; red hair whipped my face. A thin black device slipped from the person’s hand. I lunged forward, caught it, lost my footing and landed flat on my ass.

“My tablet! Thank you! Are you alright?”

I looked up, straight into Teresa Taljaard’s pale face and blue eyes. Bloody hell. Eli’s picture did her no justice. She was… stunning. As in, she had literally stunned me into silence. My jaw was lolling open. Literally.

Teresa smiled self-consciously, “Mercy McLean?”

“Huh? How… how do you know my name?”

She laughed and pointed at my name tag. Evidently, my brain was still awol.

“Apprentice PI?” she read. “That sounds so American. Are you American?”

My brain got back on the job and started to formulate a reply when something hit me. Suddenly, I could see why Teresa's blood, sweat and tears were so valuable. Every muscle in my body relaxed as if immersed in a soothing, steaming bath. It was the sheer magical power radiating from her body. It was the most pleasant, intoxicating sensation I had felt in… a depressingly long time.

Bloody hell. Unlike Eli, I had no trouble seeing the white sclera of her eyes go black, as if dyed in ink. No wonder someone was after her .No wonder I'd bumped into her. Teresa was a magnet for anyone with enough magical awareness. Her presence was a drug.

Like all drugs, the high never lasted. My scarred ear itched. My mouth felt like I'd gargled sour milk – a sure sign of evil magic. This was my first encounter with a real-life case of ancestral possession.

"Um. Are you okay?" Teresa's voice snapped my attention back to the moment. Instantly, the black stuff vanished from her eyes.

My brain was still on strike, because I just lay there on my ass, gawking while Teresa hurried away, throwing worried glances at me.

Eli sidled up to me. "Smooth. Real smooth, Mercy. I was just about to hold up a sign with a ten out of ten." He offered me a hand, but I got to my feet on my own, aching ass notwithstanding.

My chest tightened at his comment. Hell, it's not like I enjoyed being single, but this was no time to indulge in self-pity. "She's carrying an ancestral spirit in her body. I can't tell whether it's her own ancestor or not."

Eli's eyes widened. "So that's what makes her special. What exactly can bad guys do with her… fluids?"

"Ha! What can't they do?" I said loud enough to draw stares from a gaggle of ultra-buff guys exiting the gym. "Just about anything," I whispered. "Summon demons. Throw curses. Nothing good. We need to shadow her. Once her tears…" I paused.

Eli was watching me intently, "What?"
"The spirit hasn't possessed her yet," I said in a daze of hurried deduction. "Not yet. It's dormant."

“Which is good, right? It means Teresa’s safe?”

“For now, but that’s not what I’m thinking.”

“Then fill me in.”

“We have a clue. Our perp is no newbie to magic. It’s someone experienced and smart. Teresa’s body is buzzing with the power of an ancestral spirit, but tapping that wellspring means running the risk of drawing the spirit’s attention, waking it up. If that happens, it might zip over and possess our perp instead. So, we’re looking for someone with a seriously heavy pair of… brains if they’re rolling that die.”

“That’s our clue?” Eli asked.

“Yep.”

“Ah! Sounds more and more like a cult. Some charismatic guy or girl gets a group together to pool their abilities and make the process safer.” He frowned. “That hardly narrows the list of suspects. It’s a big campus. Lots of impressionable kids.”

“Hold on! I have an idea.” Without another word, I set off after Teresa, leaving Eli to gawk.

A huge chunk of my career involved looking at places where people had died unpleasant deaths because doing it helped people like Eli. Shockingly, this does not leave much room for a social life. I was no queen of sly seduction. Being around women like Teresa made me question my life choices, but if I was spot on about the spirit riding inside her body, then we didn’t need sly seduction. We needed more intel.

I caught up to Teresa, who wasn’t exactly hard to spot with her red hair, bright green leggings and matching knitted sweater.

“Heya!” I called out, and followed it up with, “um…”

Look if you’re better on the fly, just shut up.

She turned and regarded me, head and hip cocked to one side.

“Yes, Mercy?”

Hell, the way she said my name. “Um.” Come on, just go for it! “Coffee. I like it. You want some… with me… some time.” And without waiting for a reply, I reached out and touched one of her hands.

Teresa frowned, then smiled as the spirit inside her noticed me. It noticed my power. Sure, it was dormant, but only like a predator biding its time. For now, the only consequence was that Teresa must have felt an inexplicable affection for me. Believe me, it was a two-way street. But my heart was not only tap-tapping in response to her clear skin and full mouth. Part of me *wanted* to touch the spirit inside her, wanted to offer it a home in my head. It would enhance my power exponentially—at the risk of driving me crazy over time. Best not to dwell on that temptation.

“Here,” I said, handing her a pen.

“Okay,” she whispered dreamily, stepping close enough that I could smell her minty breath. Her free hand took the pen and wrote a cell number just under my knuckles. “I have a class now but call me later and we’ll talk.”

She looked up and grimaced. I realised she was looking at my left ear. That broke the connection. Teresa recoiled as if a snake had slithered out of my ear and hurried off without a single backwards glance.

Again, Eli sidled up to me.

“Looks to me like it’s a good thing I flirt with you. Someone needs to teach you how.”

Pain jolted my chest, but it was smothered by the excitement pulling my mouth into a grin. My hand tingled pleasantly from Teresa’s touch.

“Okay,” Eli muttered. “Are you going to explain what you just pulled off?”

The smug factor on my grin intensified. “I just created a link allowing us to watch

over Teresa. Score that, Mr Best PI In Town.”

He glanced at the number on my hand, expression neutral. “Okay.”

I frowned. “You don’t know how this works?”

Eli shrugged. “It’s a flipping big universe, Mercy. There’s a lot I know, and a lot I don’t. Whatever you’re talking about is new to me.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, pondering that revelation for a moment. “I just hung a canary around Teresa’s neck.” I watched Eli expectantly.

His lips twitched. “Ah. Like in a coal mine?”

“Yup. If evil magic gets close to her, I’ll feel a warning right here.” I waved my hand.

He frowned. “Hold on. I’ve done that before, but I needed hair, nail clippings or fresh blood. How are you pulling this off by impersonating Casanova’s idiot cousin?”

“Hair would’ve been better, I’ll admit, but this is still skin on skin contact with real feeling behind it. The ink is only symbolic.”

“No offence, but how on earth can you be sure she really felt anything for you? It might not even be her real number. That’s happened to me before.”

“Hell, I’m not surprised, but I wasn’t talking about *her* feelings. I created the link by letting that spirit riding in her body notice me.”

Eli’s eyes widened, and his right hand shivered as if yearning for the grip of his gun. “If that thing gets loose…”A whiff of cloves permeated the air around him.

I shrugged, “I’ll have trouble on my hands. What else was I supposed to do?” I crossed my arms over my chest and faced him, eyes steady, chin lifted in challenge. “The link won’t last more than twenty hours at most, and whoever wants her tears will have to be within a hundred meters before this warning on my hand goes off.”

Eli opened his mouth, looked at his feet and shook his head. “Come on. We have a meeting in ten minutes.”

“With whom?”

“Professor Motsei. It’s courtesy for PIs to update clients on the case.”

“Alright, but before we go, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?”

“Something’s nagging at me. Stealing Teresa’s sweat by swiping her towel is one thing. All it really takes is super sneakiness and access to the gym without standing out. Stealing blood is a different thing. Again, we’re looking for someone who can get around campus without arousing suspicion.”

Eli’s face remained neutral. “You suspect the professor?”

“I’m saying that when you’re in the sea, fishes go unnoticed.”

Eli snorted, then frowned. He removed his fedora and scratched the grey streaks around his temples .“Alright, but that’s not exactly hard evidence. Sorry for stabbing a needle in the balloon of your theory, but how would the professor steal tears? How would anyone? Who’s super sneaky enough for that? “He donned his fedora and grinned his lopsided grin. “Maybe our perp is waiting for Teresa to watch a chick flick.”

I punched him on the arm and, much to my satisfaction, he winced. Then he smiled, and I mirrored it. Guess we both needed some levity.

*

Eli fetched a duffel bag from his car, disappeared into a restroom, then reappeared transformed. Gone was his noir detective impersonation. Now, he looked ready to audition for James Bond, in a crisp, grey suit, matched with a white shirt.

“Wow. That purple tie really complements the bags under your eyes. You aiming to impress or intimidate your client?”

He shrugged, “Just guarding my reputation.”

“What about me? Are you hiding an evening gown in your bag?” I teased, cocking my hip and waving my hands over my body.

“You look young enough to pass for a student, and casual enough to blend in around campus. My look says we’re professional. Your look says we have a plan Now, let’s get going.”

Eli’s change of clothes turned out to be a strategic move. The office of Dr Motsei, Professor of Contemporary English Literary and Cultural Studies, screamed his status at the world. It was larger than my entire bedroom. To be fair, I rented a tiny granny flat in an old widow’s backyard, but still. The massive desk and wall panels were all dark wood married to a red carpet. Pictures of the professor festooned the walls, showing him posing in front of various buildings I didn’t recognise. Fortunately for people like me, each frame bore a white label with names like Stanford University, Oxford University, the University of Konstanz, and so on. Very considerate.

The man himself was completely bald, under average height and over average weight, with a neatly trimmed beard sharpened to a point under his chin, like a cartoon sorcerer. His round cheeks bore acne scars.

He didn’t look up as we entered, sitting hunched over a tiny laptop, fingers blurring over the keys. His desk was otherwise empty, but when I looked around the room, I spotted a towering stack of papers sitting atop a low coffee table in the corner behind the door.

“So, you’re a rebel against the system, are you?” I asked.

“Huh?” He still hadn’t looked up from his laptop.

I hooked a thumb at the pile of student essays. “I’d have thought the authorities would make everyone do their grading online.”

Eli gave me an oblique look, then leaned against the wall to watch. We were still standing since the professor hadn’t asked us to sit, despite two soft leather chairs right in front of his desk. My butt still ached from cushioning my fall, and the chairs looked like they could show my ass a great time.

Professor Motsei’s head snapped up and I swear I saw fire in his eyes when he fixed them on the pile of marking. “That,” he growled, “is a direct consequence of the chronic indolence of the creatures this university terms *students*.”

His voice rung with an American accent, powerful and sonorous, like a stage actor's. Eli stepped forward to say something, but apparently the professor was only warming up his tirade engine.

"I have been compelled to resort to traditional, pen-and-paper tests because expecting students to apply themselves to even the most rudimentary online essays is a Sisyphean undertaking that propels them into the arms of *ChatGPT*." Spittle went flying.

Eli had gone back to leaning against the wall, eyes flat, face calm as if watching a dull movie. I tried to copy his expression while our host fumed.

The professor took a deep breath, counted to ten out loud and continued in calmer tones, "My apologies, but over the years I have become accustomed to somewhat more advanced minds than those available on this campus." He waved a hand at the pictures of foreign universities.

I nearly said this university was my alma mater, but this time my brain stopped my mouth in time. Witness me growing.

"The case," Eli said. That was all, but the words soothed Professor Motsei. For the first time, he actually looked at us.

"Of course. Sit down. What have you discovered?"

"We are investigating possible motives, and to that end, we are placing her under surveillance."

Professor Motsei stared at Eli, and I thought I saw tiny lines of light flicker between them like fencing blades. The professor broke eye contact first.

"We?" he asked, and his dark eyes tracked to me like gun barrels.

"My assistant," Eli answered.

The professor's face broke into a bright, diplomatic smile, and I didn't need any peculiar talent with the sight to see that it held all the sincerity of a politician's

promise. “Thank you, Mr Fletcher. Your professionalism is sincerely valued. May I speak to your apprentice for a moment? Alone.”

Eli, to his credit, didn’t answer for me. Instead, he shifted his gaze in my direction without turning his head. He didn’t seem surprised by the request, which certainly surprised me, since I was completely wrong-footed.

“It’s been a long time since any professor called me to his office,” I replied cheerily. “I’m in a nostalgic mood, so, why not.”

Eli turned on his heel and closed the door behind him.

Professor Motsei turned his simulacra of a smile on me, scratching absently at his acne scars. “Anagnorisis,” he said in his resonant voice.

I smiled at him and said nothing because I knew this game. People on the streets play it rougher, but it was still all about intimidation. Mr Professor Mega Brains was trying to kick me off kilter. Why, I didn’t know yet, but behind the placid mask of my face, my guts clenched with resolve to remain perfectly on-kilter. His grin faltered and I almost punched the air in triumph.

“Anagnorisis,” he repeated, “I harbour no special esteem for the Ancient Greeks, but that is a compelling term. It designates the moment when…”

“A protagonist discovers the unvarnished truth of their circumstances. Like this, ”I tried to impersonate a frightened child and whispered, “‘I see dead people. Only, they don’t know they’re dead.’”

Professor Motsei’s face went flat, but I was having too much fun squirting lemon juice into the eye of his hubris to stop.

“Alright,” I sighed dramatically, “Let’s go for the obvious one instead. ‘Luke, I’m your father.’”

Seconds ticked by in silence.

Finally, the professor grinned coldly, making my guts clench, but I prevented the

sensation from reaching my face. “I discouraged Teresa’s grandfather from enlisting Mr Fletcher’s services, but they have something of a relationship and my counsel was disregarded.”

I don’t know if my face revealed anything, but at least I stopped short of chewing the inside of my cheek. He stared meaningfully at the card on my chest.

“All apprentices dream of leaving the nest and striking out on their own. My influence in our community is not inconsiderable.” He flicked one finger and the air pressure in the room suddenly fluxed. “I offer you an opportunity to impress me. Imagine what kind of seat that would secure for you at the table of our community.”

That surprised me. This man knew zero about me, yet here he was offering me an opportunity. Why?

He flicked a finger and the air pressured fluctuated again, but only enough to pop my ears. Just another cheap trick I’d encountered a million times before from thugs on the street who had just discovered their talent. So, I leaned back in my chair, enjoying the feel of the plush seat on my bruised bum, and steepled my fingers like a cartoon villain. “What a tempting offer. But the thing is, Eli’s always been loyal to me. Loyalty calls forth loyalty. With me, anyway. Maybe you know a literary term for that too.”

“Commendable. That’s what I call it.” His voice was flat as Table Mountain. “Irrational, but commendable. However, you’re not seeing the whole picture. Otherwise, you’d favour the transactional value of my offer. You see, Mr Fletcher is tarnished. He possessed a great gift for his trade once, I concede, but the loss of his wife has weakened him. Perhaps you are too young to know this, but trauma can diminish one’s arcane acuity. He has passed his prime. What would such a man do to prolong his relevance?”

It didn’t take a literary scholar to grasp his insinuation. Even so, the wind bag carried on, “Would he take an interest in a certain young woman?”

I crossed my arms. “Are you demonstrating patronage politics to me? I hear it’s in vogue in *our* community these days.”

“Ms McLean, how long can anyone do what Mr Fletcher has done without being

marked? How long can anyone expose themselves to horrors without being compromised?" He spread his arms to encompass his office. "More lucrative options exist."

My left ear itched. Nasty memories whispered into it. How many death sites had I examined this year alone? Then I remembered that Professor Motsei knew nothing about my real job or my past. Eli could have revealed my entanglement with cults. He hadn't. He had kept my secrets. But it was looking like Eli had also lied about Teresa's grandfather.

I smiled brightly. "We will keep you apprised of the investigation as required by the professional, transactional nature of our relationship."

With that, I quit his office, feeling in my bones that my stupid mouth had just won me an enemy with more power and connections than I had movie quotes.

Eli suggested we catch an early lunch, but I declined.

"I need to take care of something. It'll take about two hours. If I get any warnings about Teresa, I'll let you know and come running." I waved my hand, and Eli acquiesced without further questions.

*

Had Eli lied to me? Maybe I should have confronted him head on. Just asked about his relationship with Teresa's grandfather. But in case you missed it, I have trust issues.

Besides, my brain was far too scrambled, given the place we had chosen for keeping watch over Teresa. I had lost part of my left ear in this exact spot, about the same time: midnight. It was a low hill on campus, adorned with huge, old trees and ornamental flowerbeds. The hill looked down on a women-only student residence. Teresa had a room on the third floor.

Standing on the hill, I felt stained somehow, as if my past were a smudge of oil, but I elbowed the bad memories aside. Time to focus on Teresa.

"Smell that?" Eli asked. "Rubber on fire. The wheels in your brain are smoking. "He

poured steaming coffee from a thermos into a paper cup. “Pretty much standard procedure for a brain like yours, I know, but how about sharing your thoughts with your partner?”

“That clue I mentioned earlier. Something still doesn’t track. “I looked down at Teresa’s number on my skin. It hadn’t tingled all day.

“Yeah?” He passed some coffee my way and I took it gratefully, enjoying the heat more than the rich smell and taste. Free State winters are no joke.

“The risk factor. Sure, the spirit inside Teresa’s body supercharges her blood, sweat and tears, but there are a thousand safer ways of calling down curses, communing with ghosts or whatever. Why risk getting possessed? Even with a cult of twenty people, the risk is serious as hell.”

“Unless the risk is the point. What if pulling it off adds some lustre to our perp’s CV.”

I sipped more coffee. “Maybe. “His argument was reasonable, but something still felt off.

“Or what if…” Eli trailed off.

I looked at his face. My turn to hear the gears whirring inside his head.

“Mercy,” he whispered, “You said that blood, sweat and tears are good for calling demons, right? But don’t some demons also demand special offerings for showing up? Sort of like… payment upon arrival?”

“What are you getting at? “I swear I could smell the gears in his head burning.

“If someone was willing to use their own blood, sweat and tears to call a demon—would Teresa’s special blood and sweat make a good enough offering to a newly summoned demon? Would tears really be necessary?”

I opened my mouth, but then I really did smell something burning. It came from somewhere down the slope of the hill. The smell intensified. I spotted a figure looking like a male student, clad in a yellow track suit with long dreadlocks flowing from his head. He threw his hands into the air and screamed like a witch on fire. Headlights flicked on. The bright beams came from a campus security vehicle. Had it just been

waiting there? The headlights caught the yellow tracksuit just as the student darted to one side, still hollering like crazy. I saw a flash of fire and the figure vanished, along with the smell.

“An illusion,” Eli growled and the air around him suddenly vibrated, smelling of cloves. He was gathering power.

“Who’s up there!” barked a rough voice. Car doors slammed and flashlights joined the headlights, revealing two figures in uniform trotting up the slope.

“Go deal with the professor,” Eli growled.

“You’re not pulling a Boromir on me,” I stalled, mind racing to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. Lights appeared in several windows of the residence, including Teresa’s.

“Go!” he growled, voice stern and rock solid.

I didn’t appreciate that tone of voice. Had he lied to me? Could I trust him? My hand gave no warning that Teresa was in danger, but if Eli and I had arrived at the correct conclusion, I had no time to waste. So, I skedaddled down the opposite slope of the hill, away from the approaching security personnel, only to spot five more flashlights bobbing towards me through the trees and flowerbeds.

Someone had played their cards well. Sure, I could have summoned a gust of wind and blown the hapless goons off their feet, but it was dark and if I smashed them into a car or something, bones might break, maybe a neck. But that someone had underestimated me. So, I grinned in the dark and played the ace up my sleeve. It had taken me two hours to craft, but life had taught me hard lessons about the value of backup plans.

I dove to the ground when one flashlight nearly caught me, banging my knee painfully against the corner of a fountain. Biting my tongue and keeping my head low, I rummaged in the pockets of my coat, retrieving a small Tupperware container, and opening it. The contents smelled like cat sick, but I held my breath and dabbed some of it on my eyelids. Then, I grabbed my metal whiskey flask and unscrewed the lid – carefully. A substance like liquid smoke flowed out, black as night and odourless. It rose over my head and formed a small cloud. Suddenly, every light in a two-hundred-meter radius was sucked into the cloud like dust into a vacuum.

Darkness fell over the gardens. The security goons shouted and screamed, but my eyes could see in the gloom like a cat. I jumped to my feet, ignoring my injured knee, pushing on, dodging between the confused goons. Soon, they were far behind, and I punched the air in triumph.

“There goes the easy part.”

*

Only the light in Motsei’s office still burned. With any luck, he would assume that his stunt with the security personnel had paid off, meaning he won’t be expecting a visit from me. Pausing outside his door, my left ear started itching like mad, while the taste of sour milk flooded my mouth. There was no time for clever strategy now, so I called a ball of kinetic energy into my hand and smashed the door off its hinges. Then I reformed the energy into a shield, charged into the room and shuddered.

A circle of white salt had been drawn on the floor in front of Motsei’s desk. Inside the circle, I saw the pile of student essays and two porcelain cups. One contained a strip of red towel, the other held blood. Looming over both the cups and the essays was a demon. It might have been two meters tall standing up, but now it was kneeling awkwardly inside the cramped circle. Yellow skin hung in flabby loops from its arms and face, making the bone beneath visible. Goat’s horns curled away from a nearly human face, resembling an old man’s, complete with round spectacles on a hooked nose. Its black eyes contained all the humanity of a tax return.

Those black eyes ignored me completely, focusing on the essays. The demon gripped a large feather pen in one talon, whirring over the papers at… well supernatural speed. I started laughing, despite the danger. This was what he was using evil magic for? Marking! The distraction cost me.

Noise erupted, as if a referee was blowing a whistle directly into my ear. The pain was excruciating. My injured knee buckled. I went down like lights during load shedding. My cheek hit the floor. I screamed. My shield collapsed – I had designed it to block physical attacks, not sound. I sensed Motsei gathering his magic just before the bastard struck, popping my left arm from its socket. Turns out, I’d underestimated him. Worse still, he was just warming up.
Words blazed like neon signs behind my eyes. *You are hallucinating. Unstable.*

Crazy. You need help. Professional help.

Bloody, damn hell! I tried to summon mental defences. The ringing pain in my ears fractured every attempt. I was down and helpless. If I didn't do something, this asshole would shatter my sanity.

One solution occurred to me. It would shatter my sanity anyway – but it would take longer. I focused on Teresa's number – and called the spirit inside her, begging it to help me, begging it to possess me.

Nothing answered. No, wait! A faint tingling.

The sound vanished. The pain dulled.

I opened my eyes and saw Teresa standing in the doorway to Motsei's office, dressed in nothing but yellow boxer shorts and a matching T-shirt with the X-Men symbol over her chest. Her eyes were completely black. Her mouth opened, but the voice that spoke was not hers.

"Bastard!" she roared in a voice that clearly belonged to an old man. "Look after my grandchild! That was all I asked for, and you stooped to… to this! "She pointed a shaking hand at the demon, who was still marking speedily and calmly.

"You?" Motsei asked from somewhere behind me. "But you're alive. In hospital. Cancer."

"Not anymore," Teresa snarled. "Not for days!"

Someone giggled. Much to my embarrassment, I realised it was me. "Anagnorisis," I heard myself say, voice cracking with hysteria. "The unvarnished truth. Take that Professor Mega Brains."

Teresa reached out, fingers curled like claws, and I heard a loud thump behind me. Motsei grunted. She had pinned him to the wall, I thought, but then she pulled her hand back to her chest and flicked it out again. A grunt sounded again, followed by a scream. She was bouncing him off the wall.
"Wait," I whispered while my head started spinning. My body was shutting down to

protect itself. "Keep this up and you'll possess her."

Yes, protect me, I heard Motsei's voice in my head. *Get her grandfather off me!*

“She’s right, Francis,” I heard Eli’s voice just before he stepped into view behind Teresa. “The longer you sling magic around like that, the sooner it’ll happen. Is that what you want for Teresa?”

The young woman’s body turned to Eli while one arm remained pointed behind her in an awkward angle, presumably to keep Motsei pinned.

Francis waved Teresa’s other hand to indicate her body. “Eli… Didn’t mean for this to happen.”

My vision was dimming, but I saw Eli wince as if in physical pain.

“I’m sorry for not figuring it out sooner, old friend. Not my area. I figure Teresa came to see you in the hospital and…” he trailed off. “But you need to let go now. I’ll take care of her and our friend up there. He’s a narcissistic idiot, but he didn’t mean to do any lasting harm. Looks like he had no idea it was you inside Teresa. All he noticed was the sudden power inside her and he figured he could tap some of it for this,” Eli gestured to the demon, still marking assiduously.

Protect me!

“Eli,” I whispered. “Little help here. The professor… in my head.”

*

Campus doesn’t have a Mugg & Bean, only a semi-decent copy called the *Milky Bean.* Ridiculous, right? It’s glass doors allowed me to stare at the hill where all the fun had played out last night. It was obvious why Eli wanted to talk here. He was reminding me that he was not the only one who had made some bad decisions. He wasn’t being mean. Getting a psychological advantage was standard procedure for PIs like him. Even so, I wanted to look angry and distant. I wanted him to feel crap for not playing it straight with me, but my anger-tank was almost empty.

This morning, I’d woken up in Eli’s house, arm strapped in a neoprene brace. He’d brought me here for breakfast—and an explanation. Neither of us had said much on the way over. He was sitting across from me, and we kept our eyes off each other. I

wanted to force him to kick start the conversation, but after ten minutes of silence I couldn't stand it any longer.

"You knew Teresa's granddad had died in the hospital and you brought me on without telling me."

Eli winced. "He died a week ago. Cancer. Teresa called me just after her blood was stolen. She told me about the blood, not Motsei. Only, I think it was her granddad speaking through her. I don't know how he managed to order Motsei to appoint me as investigator, maybe an email or something. Either way, Motsei was a little too self-involved to even know Francis had died."

Curiosity was giving my anger a run for its money, despite myself. I connected a few more dots. "Teresa's granddad couldn't exactly use her like a sock puppet and just tell you what had happened, not without risking a full possession." I frowned. "But then, why did he… she… I mean the two of them show up at Motsei's office last night?"

Eli smiled cautiously, a shadow of his trademark grin, making him look like a shy child. "I think Teresa's subconscious forced Francis to act when you were in danger. Did it occur to you that the link you created cuts both ways? You were in danger, and she sensed it. Maybe she was asleep or something, but somehow, she forced Francis to act. What does that tell you?"

I started chewing the inside of my cheek. The ink on my hand was gone now, but thinking about it made my chest feel fuzzy and warm and sore.

"And Motsei," Eli continued, "figured that if he tapped Teresa for something as trivial as marking assistance, no one would notice or care. After all, he wasn't harming her or anyone else, and he wasn't running the risk of getting possessed himself."

"A victimless crime," I muttered. Then a darker thought occurred to me. "What happened to him last night after I, um, shut down?"

Eli grinned, the expression vulpine and alien on his face. "Oh, he got bounced off the walls and nearly scared to death. He won't be sending campus security after us again, and he won't go near Teresa either, but no bones were broken. Francis Taljaard isn't like that."

The inside of my mouth hurt from getting chewed. “What I don’t get is why Francis didn’t ask you to look after Teresa. Why turn to Motsei?”

“When Francis was diagnosed, I wasn’t entirely available at the time, if you get what I mean,” he pointed at his head.

“You mean, the arrangements were made when your wife…”

“Yeah.” Eli looked away, towards the hill. “A lot of people have been making bad calls for a while now.”

A waiter brought a flat white and a slice of baked cheesecake to our table.

Eli perked up. “I thought I could twist your arm to forgive me for not putting all the cards on the table from the get-go.”

I looked down at the cake – the peace offering. Eli was one of the few people around whom I felt safe. I guess I could forgive a little. So, I looked him in the eye and wriggled my injured arm. “In case you haven’t noticed, my arm comes pre-twisted today.”

Eli laughed his usual laugh, reaching into the chest pocket of his denim jacket. “In that case, maybe you’d be interested in getting this back too.”

It was a tiny slip of paper with a number on it.

“I copied it down before washing the ink off your hand last night.” Eli winked at me.

When I saw that number, I felt a surge of something pleasant yet painful in my gut, something molten and raw, but almost instantly it warped into something sour that made me sick.

“What’s wrong, princess?” Eli asked.

I wasn’t looking at his face, but I could hear the frown in his voice. “It’s something Motsei said. Something he said about you. How long can anyone expose
Themselves to horrors without being compromised?” I kept my eyes on the number.

There was real hurt in Eli's voice when he finally responded. "You don't want to work with me, do you?" A pause. "No. That's not it." Another pause. "What happened last night when you were down on the floor?"

Teresa's number, scrawled on the paper in Eli's solid handwriting, became blurry as stupid tears filled my stupid eyes. "I called Francis' spirit. I was willing to let him get me. I got lucky. If he'd been malicious…"

I felt Eli's hand on my shoulder and expected him to say something like: *Next time, you'll make better choices*. He said nothing, and that frightened me most of all.

L.O.C Lloyd Penney

1706-24 Eva Rd
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11 July 2025

Dear SFFSA Members:

I have Probe 205 here…it's been sitting for a while. I seem to be occupied editing stories and anticipating new projects. I hope to get these comments to you before another issue is launched into the Web.

(Checking the POBox…I thought you still had a box in Vorna Valley?)

(The Post Box Saga – better than anything you'll read in a SFF novel! I went to clear the PO Box about 3 months ago and there was a large horse trailer loading all the PO Boxes onto it. I could not find any information as to where they were going so Nial, our secretary, who said his P.O. Box was still receiving post, kindly offered to allow SFFSA to use it. So, I changed the address in PROBE and wrote it by hand onto all the envelopes. Last week I happened to notice that the PO Boxes were back. In a different position, but still in the Vorna Valley parking lot. I went along to see if there was actually anything in our PO Box, only to find that our PO Box number was not there. I found the man who was sorting the post and asked him what was going on. He said" The Post Office is not doing very well." Somewhat of an understatement. I asked where our PO Boxes were. He said he thought they might be in Olifantsfontein, which is about 12 km from here. So not much use to me. His

suggestion was to go to the last working Post Office in our area and ask them to change one of the numbers that is here in Vorna Valley to our number. He said he would then change that number on one of the boxes that is here to our number and hopefully we would, by some intervention of the Post Office gods, actually get our post. I somehow doubt it.

I think we'll stick to Nial's P.O .Box. If it wasn't so sad, it might be funny! – Gail)

You're in summer? So lucky. We moved into fall, and it is suddenly cold and wet, making us think that our winter will be harsh. I sincerely hope I'm wrong! I will ask you here…we have our memberships for the Anaheim/LA Worldcon in 2026 but will not go because of the politics in the US, and the threat of abduction because of rogue government forces. However, the 2027 Worldcon will be in Montréal. Anyone in the club hoping to go to Montréal? Also, happy birthday to the club. It is good to see new people stepping in to help and take on some club responsibilities.

Hands by Surya Pillai…this story is difficult to sum up. An overworked by obedient you woman is trying to make a life for herself against many opposing forces. Many Russian overtones here. She becomes a baba yaga to achieve her independence from those others who seem to demand all her labour and time. There are many stories of women who fight against outside efforts and win to have the life she truly wants, but this story doesn't seem to be one of those.

My loc… Amazing Stories is truly keeping me busy right now. You did mention the Best of the year… The Best of 2024 came out this past July, and I am already working on the Best of 2025 volume.

No Time Like the Future by Deon Schneider. The Web will be the last remains of humanity? Sentience, possibly through AI? I think that sounds more dystopian than was planned. A good effort in imagining a far, far distant future.

I think I have written about all I can, so off in the e-mails to get it to you asap. Enjoy the heat, for it will beat what we're about to get here. Traces of snow… Many thanks!

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

NOVA 2024

Preliminary Judges Choice

Second Person Jonathan Gordon Grant

It’s one am.
Am stands for ante meridiem - before the middle of the day. You know that but can't remember where you first heard it. Something else, a detail, is emerging. Through the foggy haze of your memory.
Or should I say: our memory?
You know I've been in here all along, don't you? Biding my time, waiting to strike.
And just when you thought you were in control, I took the wheel. And now, here we are.
Here is what looks like a forest. Dark but you glimpse a distant moonlit mountain through the trees. The light that comes through the dappled leaves reflects on something sticky on your hands.
I know where we are, but I'm not telling.
You want to scream. I let you. We've got to take turns, you know. We can't both be in control here.
You raise your fingers to your lips. They feel sticky and wet. You taste earth and an unmistakable metallic tang.
Blood.
Yours?
You run your hands over our body. Lots of aches and sharp, stabbing pains, but nothing... gushing.
You shudder.
This place feels familiar somehow. Have you been here before? Or are you remembering the things I did.
Tricky, isn't it?
You decide to start walking, away from the mountains you reckon is the safest bet.
To find the edge of the forest. To escape.
But of course, there isn't really a way to escape this. You're trapped in this place like I am in your body.
But unlike you I'm going to find a way out.
You're probably wondering where I came from. You're thinking back and trying to remember when you first started seeing things on the edge of your vision; started

feeling like there was someone standing behind you all the time, even when you were alone. You might even have had a sense of foreboding.
You're lost now.
The forest is getting darker, thicker.
You think about going back, but the stabbing pain under your knee is getting worse.
It's almost pitch black and you walk forward with your arms outstretched in front of you. Occasionally you trip. But you keep getting up.
Is there something that you know that I don't?
But that's not possible. We both share this mind. I have access to everything you know.
So, what are you doing? Why are you carrying on?
If I was in your situation I would've stopped.
The pain would've gotten to me by now.
I'm worried now that you have access to me the way I have access to you.
But that's impossible, isn't it?
I would know, we would both know.
And yet...
There's something wrong. I can feel it. And it's a feeling particular to me. I can tell that you're not sensing it.
It's starting to get lighter up ahead.
I feel our pulse quicken. And that's when it happens. The mud under our left foot is thick, but as you put your weight on it - on the aching knee - it slides away. And we go crashing down with it.
And just as I'm holding our breath and we're about to hit the ground.
Black.
Some time has passed.
I don't know how long but I can see our facial hair is thicker. We seem dishevelled. But somehow the rings under our eyes are less dark.
"Hello again," I hear you say, with our mouth.
I can still taste the metallic tang of blood and earth.
You look back in the mirror. At you. At me.
And then with a flash your hand pistons back and slams into the mirror.
This time I hear the glass shattering before everything goes away again.
You've figured out how to keep me at bay.
But for how long?
I'm back as you open the blinds. The sun stings our eyes, and I blink back unbidden tears.
I don't know how long I've been gone this time, but it feels like it's been a while.

I glance down at our fingernails. They've gotten longer and there's black grime underneath them.
I look around the room. It's small and filthy and dark. A sweat-stained mattress on the floor, a rickety- looking wooden table and a plastic jug of water is all I see.
As my eyes adjust to the light, I start to hear how busy it is outside. Traffic and people everywhere.
And that's when I notice the lack.
You're not here.
I can't feel you anymore. It feels like, for the first time, that I'm completely in control.
I'm immediately suspicious. Something has gone wrong to keep me gone for so long.
And something has gone right, now that you're gone.
But I'm not sure what...
If only I could sense you.
But then, I have an idea.
I try the door of the room. Locked.
But there is a window, high up and narrow, but it's there.
Would our body, my body, fit through it?
Only one way to tell.
I push the table to the far corner of the room underneath the window.
I wince as I get up to stand on it. My knees both aching. And my back.
Looks like you're getting old.
I try to jump up and grab the bottom of the window, but I'm not quite tall enough to get a grip.
I look around. Nothing else in the room. Except the useless mattress and the water jug.
You've removed everything of course. That's part of our game now. A locked room mystery you might say.
Nothing else for it.
I tip the table over, so that it now sits lengthways against the wall. I try to climb up onto one of the highest legs, but it's hard without anything to keep it steady.
I fall, try again.
The dull ache behind my knees is now a scream.
I manage, just, to stand on the edge of the top of the table.
I can feel it vibrating underneath me.
Very unstable.
Not good.
I grab the ring at the bottom of the window to open it. It budges, but barely.
I pull again, harder.
It comes free. And so, do I.

With a crash I fall to the floor and the table follows, narrowly missing me.
I taste blood in my mouth, sour and metallic.
I'm not sure how much harder I can push this body. Whatever you did before you gifted it back to me has certainly taken its toll.
I move myself to the mattress. I need to rest. And then in a blink, time passes.
The table is gone.
So, you are here, aren't you?
Hiding where I can't find you.
I try to remember back to that night in the forest, but it's all fading the more I try to recall it. Branches, a body, blood.
Something happens after we fall. I can only see a glimpse of it.
A hand reaching out. A path. Somebody else?
"I know," I say out loud.
"I know what you're trying to do but it's not going to work. I was here first..."
I wait for an answer.
A faint rumble of disagreement within.
There you are.
I feel you take control, and as you do I sense your feelings.
Confusion. Rage. Curiosity.
Odd.
You push us up, off the mattress.
The aches feel duller at least. That's something.
I'm trying not to think it out loud. But it's too late, you're now as aware of me as I am of you.
But it's that old thing, isn't it?
Whatever you're trying to not think of most. That's always the first thing that pops into your head.
Completely unbidden.
Well now you know. There's a third.
***
"How are you feeling Michael?" A voice says.
A man lying on a metallic grey bed opens his eyes. Blinks slowly.
"Like I've been hit by a bus."
He exhales.
"Not unexpected," the first voice responds, seemingly amused.
There's a pause as the source of the first voice - a stern-looking blonde woman - adjusts some tubes and cables that run out from under the man's bed to a large monitoring station.
Everything is shiny and metallic and new.

State of the art.
"Did things go as expected then?"
The man grimaces.
"Not exactly. The machinery is all there; the threads are laid out. But the neurons don't want to fire together."
The stern woman nods as if expecting this.
"This is what you wanted. You wanted it to be hard..."
The man seems to begin to nod, then closes his eyes.
"I need to rest before I go back under."
Now it's the stern woman's turn to nod.
"Yes, yes you do."
***
You wake up and you're nowhere.
No, not exactly nowhere. Everything is white on white. A blank space.
A metaphor for the two of us, maybe?
But I don't see you. Because we're back - one-on-one - sharing. And I can feel you probing, prodding. The build up to the inevitable tug of war which is our lives together.
"Why did you bring us here?" I ask.
And the voice inside replies, "Not me, this is all you..."
But it's not me. I know it isn't. It's just... Why would I create this place?
I can feel you wanting to answer. To say something. But I'm in control now, so I let you stew.
I can feel your frustration, and partly it amuses me, but I also feel frustrated, because of course, we share everything.
I try and think back and try to remember where I was before this happened.
There's a glimpse of a forest, but that's not right. Too long ago. False. I can feel it.
There's something wrong here, something that's been erased. I search for it, casting my mind back.
And then it comes to me. To us.
Our voice as one voice, we ask, "What was your name?"
And there in the room where everything is white in white, it comes.
Michael.
***
Michael wakes up.
The stern-looking woman is standing over him.
"Progress?" she asks.
The man looks exhausted, but he nods.
"Finally."

He exhales.
***
Exit interview - Subject 2914.A3-A5432:
I: Do you think you have expanded our understanding of how the mute part of the brain works?
S: Yes, and no. The problem is integration. When we bisected the corpus callosum we split the two communicating halves in two.
You have to understand that we've taken a complete organism that works in tandem with itself, without us being consciously aware of it, and created two new entirely separate entities.
I: Do you still feel both versions in your head?
S: Yes, they're both here. While I was under, they were two clearly definable wholes. And now that I'm awake again they've created a third "personality". But it's not new. It's the subjective "I" that we began this experiment with. The difference is that instead of experiencing this continuous subjective" I", I now experience all three personalities simultaneously.
I: And you still think this is the origin of consciousness - these two primal wholes creating a third?
S: That's my best working theory. It's unfortunate that this kind of work is considered unethical in [redacted]. I could discover so much more with a larger sample size. Without just myself to experiment on... and it's become more complicated now – with all three of us in here.
[Silence, then the sound of shuffling papers]
A click as the camera shuts off.
"Are you sure you want to do this?" Michael asks.
Amy, the stern-looking woman, nods.
"I'm ready. If this works, this might be the only way we can bring them back..."
***
In a hospital corridor can be heard beeping.
In an isolated room there are two young children. They seem completely at rest and still, despite the tubes and pipes going through them and stuck into them.
And then the first child, a blonde-haired boy with a familiarly stern expression, blinks awake.

Magazine Reviews Norman Pringle

Online versions of SF fanzines are keeping us in touch with international activities. Here are a couple of the zines recently received.

IMPULSE

Contact: Keith Braithwaite keith1958@live.ca

This is from the Montreal SF club MonSFFA, which we find is currently promoting its hands-on, how-to, Fan Craft workshops --- for paper scale models, sf and fantasy hand puppets, cosplay props and spaceships scratch-built from household odds and ends. And an outing was made to a museum exhibiting 250 pieces of exquisite weaponry and armour, on loan from an Italian museum.

A different issue of the zine records a visit to a presentation of sf/fantasy themed "cultural cartoons" by the Scottish cartoonist Tom Gauld. You will have seen his work if you read the Guardian online --- they are my favourite!

INTERMISSION

Contact: Ahrvrid Engholm ahrvrid@hotmail.com

Ahrvrid Engholm is a Swedish conrunning fan and writer and has edited a dozen fanzines. Probe received three issues of his 18-page zine Intermission, issues 156-158.

Issue 156 features "History Corner", about the 1930's New York Futurians and the FBI's suspicions that Isaac Asimov was a Russian spy. A copy of an informant's letter is presented, accusing him of being the Soviet agent codenamed ROBPROF. Ray Bradbury was also investigated for "being critical of the US government".

Ahrvrid also addresses another interesting topic: the stalled attempt to create a Soviet internet, the All-State Automated System. Then we have a run-through of early SF television programmes, with black-and white screen images, and finally a huge wodge of replies, some abusive, to letters of comment – LOC's.

Issue 157: like all three issues, it opens with an exultant review of Russia's failures in Putin's war.
"History Corner" starts with discussion of SF Folks Who Have Contributed to Science and then phases into Inventions Inspired By This Cheap Space Adventure Stuff. That's a remarkably long list.
And then there's a report on Eurocon 2025, held on the Baltic island of Aland.

In Issue 158, after some amusing rants against Microsoft and Putin's war on Ukraine, Ahrvid notes that Los Angeles SF's Atomicon in 1946 (AE van Vogt, speaker) was the first atomic conference not aimed at atomic professionals and politicians, and he gives a detailed account of the proceedings.
He then offers a list of nineteen atomic-related sf stories published before 1945 (he excludes Del Rey and Heinlein because their stories are so well known).

Ahrvid Engholm's Intermission zine is a lot of fun. Let's see more!

NOVA 2024

Preliminary Judges Choice

The Lyric of the Vuldonic Songbird
Luke James Fourie

The Kingdom of Vuldonia had entered an era of unprecedented peace. Having slaughtered all of their enemies, there was nothing left to stand in the way of the Vuldonic vision of the world. They knew the Deity had chosen them, for their strip of land was abundant in iron and the venomous viper plant. These divine gifts, when worked by the hands of man, became unparalleled weapons of war. And it was these very weapons that had won them their freedom from the foes that surrounded them. But it was not an easy victory. Their enemies would scream "Monsters" and "Child-killers", but when the last of their foes was felled, the echoes of their screams grew faint.

The next great challenge for the Vuldonians was finding what to do with their time. Having spent generations on war and brutality, there was a deep void at the centre of their souls. At first, they exercised their martial prowess in great tournaments. But the contests proved too bloody; feuds and grudges began to take root, and this growing division troubled the King of Vuldonia. He decided that the venom-laced

weapons of war should be stored away in a great vault beneath the earth and so it was done. The King then decreed that the most spirited peoples of Vuldonia should go out and settle the many lands they had cleansed, bring back stories of strange places and further their Vuldonic influence. And so great hosts of Vuldonians ventured beyond their high walls, setting out in every direction.

Their journey was perilous in those early days of expansion. Their war had been so complete that there was little left of the conquered lands besides the rubble, charcoal and salted earth they had left in their wake. Many of the settlers died from starvation, thirst or inhalation of the noxious fumes emanating from the envenomed corpses. Others were lost to the growing swamp that had formed when the rivers became dammed with the countless dead. They were not prepared for their fate. The Kingdom of Vuldonia abounded in bush pigs and goats, prolific breeders that had ensured the peoples of Vuldonia never starved. This fortune would prove their undoing when it came time to farm the stubborn and unyielding lands of the foe.

Their knowledge of war did little to prepare them for the harsh realities of cultivating a land they had so grievously poisoned. The foes had known the secrets of harnessing toil, soil and water. Even so, their skill was not enough to save them from the Vuldonian war. Even trees bore the gnawing marks of teeth where the starving had desperately sought succour. It was in many such broken farms and fallen mills that the Vuldonians laboured fruitlessly now. And as their dried meats dwindled and the land yielded nothing, many began to doubt their cause.

But there was one ray of hope. Passing through the sprawling forests of the north, some Vuldonian settlers came upon a hidden valley. Their maps offered no explanation, so they ventured into the depths of the mysterious forest dale. There was no sign of death or battle; the land had clearly been overlooked by their conquering forebears. And, to their surprise, they even found foes they had never seen before. When the last of their foes' heads was dashed against the moss-covered rocks, the settlers claimed the valley as their new home.

They held their first feast and, dining on strange food, gave the valley its true name: Hisravul, the cleft that missed the blade.

Hisravul had few resources to offer the capital. The surrounding lands and rivers were much too diseased with putrefying bodies to support any more than the few wretches who had lived there. In fact, it was a miracle the foes had managed to survive at all. Yet, while the land was empty of material worth, it did have a creature of bewitching beauty: a songbird. Vuldonia had no birds but vultures, so the songbird was an enchanting, almost otherworldly being to the Vuldonian folk. The settlers of Hisravul set about capturing one of the birds to send back to the capital. Alas, the creatures proved too fragile, breaking upon their hands and dying at the slightest touch. Even the nimble Vuldonian children could not hold the birds without crushing their lungs or breaking their wings. To their chagrin, they realised the creature had to be free in order to live and sing its beautiful song. And so, until they could discover a way to capture it, only stories reached the capital.

These stories proved the new lifeblood of the warlike Vuldonians, now bereft of purpose. Many undertook pilgrimages to Hisravul, abandoning their dying settlements and travelling north in hopes of finding the sacred bird. None left that place unsatisfied, for all who heard the bird felt despair turn to joy. Even those blighted soldiers who had nicked themselves with their venom-laced blades and lost their minds were quieted by the lyric of the songbird.

Untrodden grasslands became thoroughfares in the wake of the pilgrims, rivers were drained of bodies and filth, meat was cured in new ways to last the journey, and common campsites along the route became villages in their own right. Many would return home as eagerly as they had left it, impatient to recount how they had made the journey. Their recollections of the songbird were spoken with equal parts glee and vainglory.

And then, due to some divine interference or perhaps some unknown quality of the flighty bird, everyone who told the story of the songbird suddenly differed in their emulation of its song. Some spoke of the tune as something like wik-wik-wak while others insisted it was tuli tuli. Outraged by the contradictions, many pilgrims would return to the holy site to record the sounds. In a short span of three years, the

illiterate Vuldonians had developed no less than seven different writing systems to represent the melody and lyric of the Vuldonic songbird.

They scratched the song as lines into bark, poked it into handfuls of clay, carved it into stone with hammer and chisel, blotted it onto pulped wood and some even tattooed it into their skin. Now, even those who agreed would differ in their representation of shared sounds.

To the people of Vuldonia, news of the songbird came every day. Fresh pilgrims would return with some story of how all they thought they knew of the songbird was wrong. While all had agreed that the plumage of the songbird was an impressive blue, new pilgrims would arrive saying it was actually green and that the blue colouring was only a trick of the light.

Others brought news that their flying patterns were determined not by the shape of their wing but the current season. There were even arguments about the number of speckles upon the eggs, and whether that number was based on diet or the temperature at conception. Before long, nothing was known about the bird. To know anything at all was simply to know some combination of interwoven lies. Stories that contradicted each other led to brawls in the street. Old and young alike beat each other with fist and stone in defence of what they knew to be true. The void crept once more into their hearts, yearning and yawning. The locks on the great vault rattled and the few who guarded it slept restlessly.

The King stepped in at last, saying there should be a single account of the Vuldonic songbird and that said account would be the incontestable truth. At first, people quibbled over which writing form should be used to record the account. The King, frustrated with the endless bickering, decided the account should be spoken out loud by himself and no other. He gathered the many peoples and groups of Vuldonia to his castle. When they were still and he was satisfied, he spoke thusly:

“The Vuldonic Songbird is a blue wingèd beast of the north.” Some cheers and rankling from the crowd.

“They were liberated from the cages of the enemy. It is the most beautiful creature in all the land and all who hear its song are filled with joy and delight. It mates in

summer, and the speckling of its eggs is a product of heavenly whims." Some exclamations of acceptance issued forth, but also some of confusion.

"Its unique beauty has drawn the admiration and worship of many. But those who adore it too much should remember their loyalty to their King!"

The people nodded and shrugged and jeered but did not move from their standing places.

"Why do you remain?" The King bellowed. "My accounting is complete. Now begone."

"My liege, but it is not." His daughter-princess corrected, stepping forward from his side.

"You have not clarified the song of the songbird, your eminence. Surely, this is the most crucial element. Will you leave your people so unsatisfied?"

"The song…" The King said, obscuring his mouth with his large palm so that he could curse silently.

"I am the King, and I have heard the song." He said, raising a hand above his head. The thrumming crowd leaned in closer, their eyes lit up with anticipation.

"Some think it is wik-wik-wak. Others think it is tuli-tuli. I have even heard pilgrims describe it as luk-luk-luk. They are, all of them, deceived by misconception. I have heard the call more than most and know the secret truth of the bird."

Sweat dripped down his forehead as he tried to think of an answer that would soothe the greater part of his people. In truth, he had never left the castle to hear the bird sing. His royal cloak was lined with its iridescent plumage, but that was where his interest in the creature ended. Nevertheless, he would have to know and decide. If he were to say it was wik-wik-wak, he would surely earn the favour of the grey pilgrims. They were a pious bunch most of the time, appreciating the beauty of the bird, but also the first to draw blood when contradicted. The proponents of tuli-tuli were the crazed head-shaving sky pilgrims, who painted their heads like the eggs of the songbird in hopes of attracting their attention and favour. While the king detested their pseudo-religious ceremonies, he feared their viciousness even more. Finally, if he were to say luk-luk-luk, the bird men would follow him. They consisted of the

poison-dealers who lived at the foot of the mountain where the viper plant grew. Disappointing them would mean his next meal would be his last. He stood silent for some time contemplating his fate.

The weight of the decision made his head feel dizzy. He had felt more certain in his many conquests of the surrounding lands. The King indulged himself in a fleeting memory of a speech he once gave. How easy it had been to rile them up to hatred. He could feel the edge of that hatred against his throat. His head spun and an idea came to him.

“If I were to fake a dizzy spell, I could surely be excused.” He thought. “That would save me some time, and I could escape these mad fools.” The King couldn’t help but smile at the thought of his own cunning. He began to shake and wobble. The crowd gasped.

“Oh… I suddenly feel an illness taking over me.” The King said, his voice quavering but still loud enough to be heard by all his people. “I fear I cannot stand.” He gave a few more jerking and erratic movements of his body, so that none could doubt him. He approached his conclusion, where he would fall in a heap. But, just as he let himself go, a pair of hands grasped him around the middle.

“Father, I have you!” cried his daughter-princess. “I recall this illness affecting you on the eve of our greatest siege. Allow me to hold your body so that your voice may be heard by our people, and the secret of the bird may be known.”

The bitter profanities of the King were drowned out by the jubilant crowd who applauded the princess’s spirit.

With nowhere left to go, the King swallowed down the lump in his throat.

“It is surely wik-tuli-luk.” He said at last, his voice faltering with obvious fear.

“Coward!” His daughter-princess screamed, removing her arms so that he fell to his knees.

She grasped her fringe and whipped off her hair. Tossing the hairpiece aside, she revealed the painted scalp of a sky pilgrim.

“Tuli-tuli!” she howled to an uproarious third of the crowd.

Taken aback by the outburst of his sweet child, the King’s jaw dropped. He did not

notice the people bend down to pick up stones. He did not resist when his daughter -princess snatched the ceremonial sword from his hip. And he could not believe his eyes when she charged at him with the blade, cleaving his heart in two. They both fell from their royal pedestal, toppling over and onto the crowd of pilgrims and Vuldonian folk. There was a great thrashing of bodies and hurling of tongues as the King's life was stamped out. Then they began to strike each other and slip on their own blood so that before long half the crowd was dead and trampled. The other half, incensed by the betrayal and aroused by the glut of blood, stormed the vault beneath the earth. The envenomed blades saw the light of day again and before the sunset of that same day, the fighting was done and no human lived except for those that lingered on the edge of death. The poison eventually melted them too and the kingdom of Vuldonia became a reeking grave of the dead.

In Hisravul, the news of the tragedy broke their hearts. The original settlers fell on their swords in honour of their fallen kingdom so that only some lucky pilgrims, the young, and the cowardly oath breakers remained. In a fit of rage, these last few turned on the songbirds.

Yet, when the crowd sought to crush their bodies and smash their eggs, there was no sign of the Vuldonic songbird. Instead, the green-breasted warbler, the blue-breasted weaver and the speckled robin darted between the trees. Sensing a change in the wind and repulsed by the growing stink of the dried poison, they took to the skies.

Unsated and wrathful, the people of Hisravul finally turned their violence on each other as the birds grew distant in their memories and the sky.

Blast from the past …… from PROBE 57 November 1983 – the "Banned Issue"

(Dedicated with love and respect to our late Chairman and author, Tex Cooper)

South Africa in the '70's and '80's was still a strange place to live. Tony Davis (now living in Canada did a long article on the SF and F novels that were banned here. In the mid 50's among the most famous banned authors were Robert A Heinlein, Brian Aldiss, Frederick Pohl and J G Ballard.

Some of the reasons for banning included: Sex and sexy books or paper book covers, religious themes, drug related issues and as might have been expected - political themes. Titles like Brian Aldiss's "The Hand Reared Boy" and "The Primal Urge" were enough to get them banned. Tony Davis gives a long list of Banned titles and if anyone wants to read the article in its entirety, you are welcome to contact me, and I'll send you a scanned copy of issue 57.

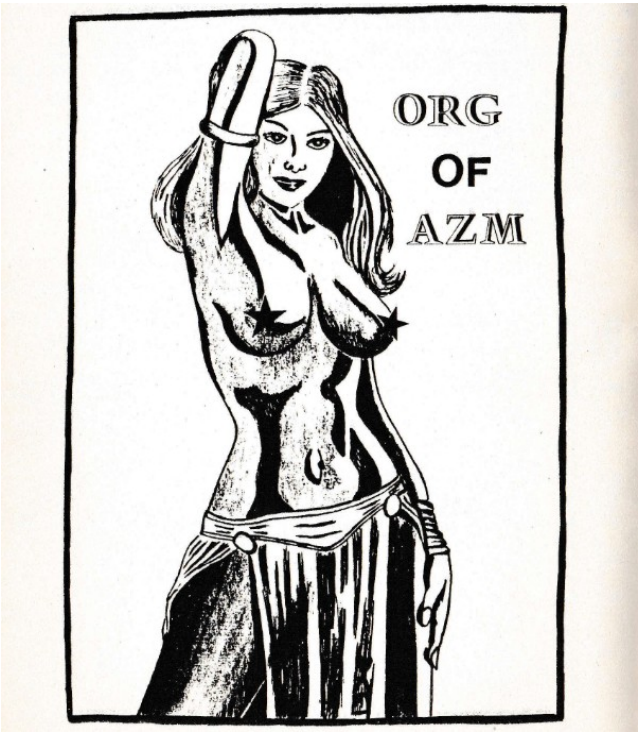
I was the editor, and I note the rather tongue -in -cheek comment that introduced a story by the famous E. C. Butt (I hope that the numerous novels by E.C. Tubb, about a character called Dumerest's search for Earth have not vanished too far into the mists of time for you to be able to appreciate the following")

And I quote"
Seeing as this issue deals with banned Science Fiction we were able to persuade, at great expense, the author of the "Neverest" series, E.C. Butt, to write Neverest No.4.5 for us. We did feel however that he took his task a little too literally so, in some places so we have, in order to avoid getting PROBE banned, done a little censorship of our own, which we feel does not detract from the story. We have been doubly lucky in that we were able to obtain he services of that famous alien illustrator, Xet, to do the illustrations for this episode of "Neverest" for us. We are sure that you will be delighted with the combined result – the illustrated "Org of Asm."

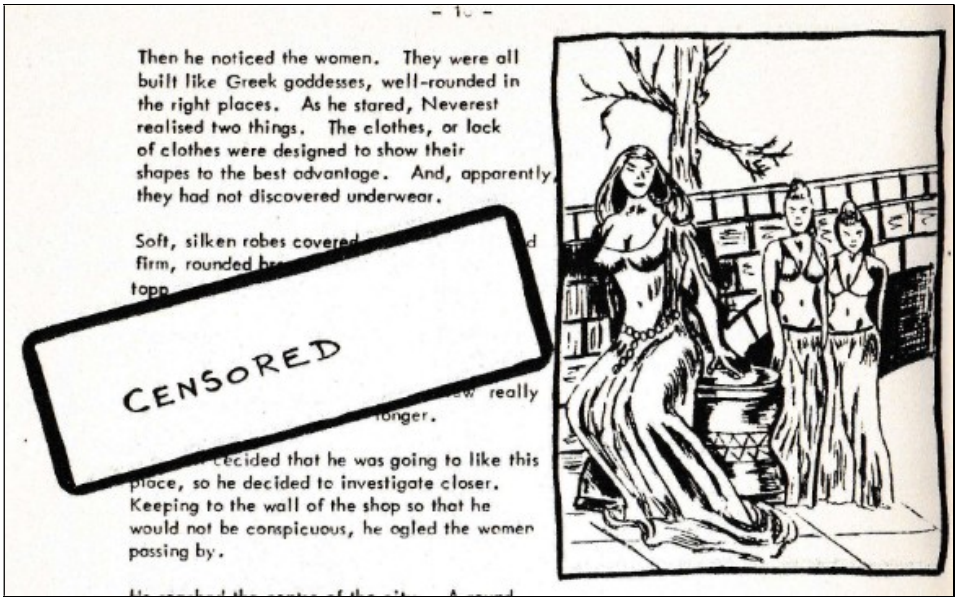
I've reprinted the front cover of the story and an excerpt from the text for you.

At great risk and threat to loss of life and limb, PROBE is proud to announce the first publication of a heretofore unpublished story of that intrepid wanderer of the star ways of the Universe - ***Neverest of Earth***

Org of Asm : Neverest of Earth 4.5
By E.C. Butt
Illustrations by Xet



The Front cover



One of the pages

And a final comment by Neil van Niekerk

NASA US Space and Rocket Center -- Grant Kruger

I've been to the U.S. Space & rocket Center several times. It's an incredible place for space travel nerds. Huntsville is where it all began for the US space program, with Wernher von Braun and his team who brought all their German V-2 rocket know-how. Initially they worked on missiles for the US army, but then led the space program after the US entered the space race.

In the Center you can sit in actual space capsules, stand next to authentique rockets (including an unused Apollo Rocket), see the back-up units of rovers and the like, and there are replicas of certain things, like a full-sized Shuttle replica with the iconic genuine unused fuel tanks.

SF fans love the place of course and all my visits were related to SF Convention visits in Huntsville.

My first time in Huntsville was for a DeepSouthCon (DSVC), an annual travelling SF Conventon which is held in different cities in the Southern US. DSC is often, but not always, held in conjunction with an existing annual convention in a southern city, but then Huntsville fans were purists and hosted it as a stand alone Con, as was originally intended for all DSC's. I was there with Vincent Dochertt promoting "Interaction" (maybe we were still bidding for), the 2005 Worldcon in Glasgow,which he chaired. We had a fan table and we hosted the best party of the weekend and we also visited the Space Center for my first time.

Hunstville's local SF convention at the time was, ConStellation, where each year's con name included both a number and a constellation name, e.g. ConStellation XXIX:Leo.

During those years I attended about six cons a year (WorldCon and DSC)most years, sometimes as a refugee from the bible belt and sometimes to promote particular Worldcons I was working on. At one of these cons I had a long chat to the guy who was chair of the next ConStellation about SA fandom and WorldCons. (I used to run SFFSA parties every year back then when it was still SFSA) and it led to him asking to be the next ConStellantion's Fan Guest of Honour…a first one for me. It was also my first ConStellantion. Being FGOH included yet another trip to the Space Center.

I ended going back to ConStellantion several times, while I lived in the US South, and back to the Space Center too. Later I gafiated from the too-political fannish scene and also moved to the West coast where I have remained because I'm better suited to more progressive places. I went back one last time in 2017 for the final ConStellantion, after they asked all former GOH to come back and help say goodbye to the Cob. That was the last time that I visited the Space Center. At that point they had a lot of SpaceX stuff, as well as a Retro-Hugo award trophy on display, I located on the desk of Wernher von Braun's replicate office exhibit.

I may go back again someday if DSC is ever again in Huntsville . I think most of you would love both