



Special Double Issue!  
**OG's Speculative Fiction**

Issue #30

Poetry by Robert S. King

Stories by Andrew Knighton

Ian Charles Douglas

Brian Hurrel

Jakob Drud



# OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #30

May

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# Cover Art: *Farmhouse* by Alex Moisi

*Alex Moisi is a published author and a learning artist. You can contact him at dracken@gmail.com and find his work scattered around the internet, a google search away.*

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## Editor's Letter

This year has made me look at mortality in a new light. It perhaps started with watching my favorite baseball team, the New York Yankees, begin their pursuit of a record 28th championship. I grew up rooting for the Yankees, listening to the games on the radio with my dad in the car because it was the only location in the house that could get reception. Now I watch the games on TV and that is probably the difference. I used to hear my favorite players play, but now I can see them. In particular, I can see them age. That is why it is hard to watch this year's team. The players I have grown to love, players like Derek Jeter, Jorge Posada, and Mariano Rivera, are growing old. They have for years been amazing ball players. Now they are looking older, slightly heavier, slightly slower and sometimes the plays or the swings they used to make with ease, they are no longer making. It is painful. Some day very soon they will hang up their cleats and leave the game of baseball to a new generation. And I will miss them.

This has coincided with a few revelations of my own mortality. I used to be able to wake up early in the morning and run six or seven miles and still feel great for the rest of the day. Now I am struggling to get up early and running three miles in a day ruins me for the rest of the day. My knees ache just walking around and I sink into couches and chairs with great groans. I don't consider myself an old timer but I can sympathize with Jeter and Posada. Its not easy to keep doing the things you could do when you were younger.

Now as a teen or a as a twenty-something this was something I knew would come, but it seemed like a long time away. I felt invincible and nothing in the physical world was telling me any different. I could stay up as late as I wanted, eat what I wanted and do what I wanted with no consequences. Now I can't. And so it makes me think.

It makes me think about the writers that we have been reading and loving for years now. I'm talking about the Asimovs, the Bears, the Tolkiens, the Eddinngs, the Brooks, Clarke's and many others. They are all great reads, ones we will talk about for generations. But there will be others who come and replace them, probably just as great, maybe even more so. I am excited about this coming generation of writers even as I am sad that these past writers can't pen any more classics for me to get lost in. It is not always easy to get excited about the new, but it is the truth about life. None of us live for ever.

-SC

# Shadows, Stones and Hungry Ghosts

## by Andrew Knighton

*Andrew has been an active writer for about five years, with over thirty science fiction and fantasy stories published in magazines such as Murky Depths, Dark Horizons, Alienskin and Jupiter, and the Steampunk II and Roll the Bones anthologies. He has stories forthcoming in Alt Hist and Bards and Sages Quarterly. In this story, an interrogator uses unique skills to get answers.*

First Swift Footstep sat on a sturdy wooden stool in a stone cell. Bronze lanterns cast a flickering light up the walls and back down into the room, occasionally glinting off the carefully oiled manacles in which he was chained. He had hoped that his jailors' diligence might be their downfall, the pig-grease that protected his chains from rust allowing him to slip free on the way here. But the cuffs were a good fit, and all his twisting and contorting had achieved was bruised wrists. He tapped a finger on the tabletop. He fancied himself resourceful, but even after sitting here for the best part of a day he could think of no way that the table and chairs might help him escape. They still gave him some comfort. The spare seat was clearly for guests. Guests might bring food, and First Swift Footstep was monstrously hungry.

He lifted his arms, chains clinking. Perhaps if he twisted them around the table leg...

With a click the door swung open. Instead of the prison's burly guards there stood a small man whose blue robes reached down to the floor. He bowed his head a fraction and stepped into the room. Even as he sank into the guest chair his movements struck First Swift Footstep. There was a simplicity at work, a minimalism that wasted no energy in bold sweeps or fidgeting. He sat perfectly still, not even turning his head to look around the cell. His eyes were fixed on First Swift Footstep.

Behind the man, the door hung open. For a moment, Footstep wondered about escape. Perhaps this man had keys. He could grab them across the table, unlock the chains and flee down the corridor before the guards arrived. There was a window at the end of the passage, and the Great Red River below that. One quick dash, a leap, and freedom.

But whatever the strengths of First Swift Footstep's character, physi-

cal bravery was not amongst them, and the thought of plunging headlong into the rushing Great Red River sent a shudder down his spine. Perhaps it would be better to wait for trial. He might not be beheaded. There was still hope.

He drummed his fingers and turned his gaze back to the little man, who sat silently studying him. Seconds stretched into minutes. Footstep glanced around nervously. What was this fellow waiting for? Was there something he didn't know? He swallowed and looked up into the man's pale grey eyes.

"Can I help?" First Swift Footstep asked as casually as he could.

The silence continued.

"Perhaps you have some questions for me?" First Swift Footstep asked. "Or an allegation to answer? I'm getting good at those now."

What was meant to be a confident laugh emerged from his throat as a nervous, warbling giggle. He looked back down at the table.

"Do you know about the balance of all things, First Swift Footstep?" the man asked.

"Harmonics of the spirit, right?" Footstep replied. "Putting furniture in its place. Fending off demons with flower arrangements, that kind of thing."

"The harmonics of a building are important," the man said. "Here, especially so. Bad men die here, and their spirits linger, looking for ways to prey on the living. So murderers are kept on the east side, away from the setting sun. Smugglers do not live in cells next to beggars. The lighting in every room is carefully balanced. It is the only way to be safe."

First Swift Footstep shrugged. He knew about harmonics. His mother was a great believer. She kept the brass pans on one shelf, the clay pots on another. Each season she moved her flower jar to a different quarter of the room and filled it with dried plants appropriate to the spirits of the month. She had made his father fill in a window that disturbed the balance of the kitchen. First Swift Footstep believed in harmonics out of habit, but he never thought about them. He gazed around the cell with renewed curiosity, looking for desiccated flowers.

"I have come from the Emerald Dragon Palace," the little man explained. "The Shogun of the Rising Sun knows of you. He knows that you were one of the baby smugglers. You will tell me where the rest may be found."

First Swift Footstep shook his head. "They'll kill me if I do," he said matter-of-factly. "I know that the magistrate might kill me too, but he will be swift and merciful as the law. My colleagues won't."

The man from the palace stood and stepped calmly away from the table. He paused, contemplating one of the bronze lantern holders embedded in the wall. Then he reached up and, with a casual twist, bent the solid metal

frame. The light shone brighter in Footstep's eyes, and surprise dazed his mind.

"The harmonics of a place are important," the little man said, "and easily disturbed." He bowed slightly and left, closing the door behind him.

\* \* \*

First Swift Footstep sat alone in the cell. The lantern glare hurt his eyes. Even if he turned away, the brightness stabbed at the edge of his vision. He was hot and hungry, and sick of sitting in the same seat. Left without distractions, he was starting to focus on the little things—the dull ache of his buttocks on the hard wood, an itch he could not reach beneath the manacles.

The itch moved. It wriggled and spread. Footstep jolted in alarm, scraping his wrists and ankles against the chains as he tumbled to the floor. The itch felt like an army of ants running up his arm. He pulled back his sleeve, but there was nothing to see. He scratched and scratched, but the itch continued. Lifting himself back onto his seat he looked up at the twisted lamp. Had it let in the evil spirits? Were they even now nibbling at his flesh?

Something moved at the edge of his vision. He twisted round to his left, but it was gone. Now something moved to the right, a shadow creeping towards him. He spun back round, and it rushed away before he got a clear view. Then something flickered in the depths of the lamp, and he heard a faint crackle of malevolent laughter.

\* \* \*

First Swift Footstep was more aware of the man's appearance this time. He was short and slight, with white hair down to his shoulders and a wispy beard. His mouth was a perfect straight line beneath a long nose.

Footstep was more aware of everything in the room. The cracks between the smooth stones of the walls. The scratches on the surface of the table. The cold seeping up from the flagstones beneath his feet. Every sensation was heightened by a nervous energy. He kept glancing around, looking for the next looming shape, the next sinister shadow. If he kept moving his eyes, taking in different views, they didn't have time to settle.

"Do you venerate your ancestors?" the man from the palace asked.

"Of course," First Swift Footstep said defensively. "I would never disrespect them. I keep a picture of my grandmother by the hearth and make offerings every day. Well, most days."

"What do your ancestors think about your activities?"

Footstep shrugged uneasily.

“And about your unwillingness to answer my question?” the man asked.

“Grandmother always said loyalty was important,” Footstep replied, scratching his elbow. “She will be pleased that I am protecting my comrades.”

The man took a sip from a wooden beaker he had brought with him. First Swift Footstep stared. His own mouth was rancid and sticky, his throat aching dry.

“Could I have some water?” he croaked as pitifully as he could. “Perhaps I will be able to talk more, after some water.”

The man ceased drinking, turned the beaker over. A trickle of cold jasmine tea dribbled onto the floor. Footstep stared at it. He welled up inside, but was too dry for tears.

“The babies you took,” the man said.

“I didn’t take them,” Footstep mumbled. “People gave them to us. People who had wanted sons but born daughters. They paid us to take them away to somewhere safe. The others told me so. They gathered the babies. So even if it isn’t true, that part’s not my fault. I’m no kidnapper.”

“Those children will never know their ancestors,” the man said. “They will not find their way at death. Some are dead already—I have seen the bodies. Their spirits cannot leave this world, First Swift Footstep. Where do you think they are now?”

The man stood. He pulled a small stone from within his robes. It was rounded, like two balls melded together, the smaller protruding from the larger. He placed it in a corner of the cell, just out of First Swift Footstep’s reach.

“What is that?” Footstep asked.

The man turned and left the room, the lock clicking into place behind him.

“What is it?”

\* \* \*

The lamps were dimmer tonight, the shadows deeper. The guards brought a little rice and water, just enough to remind First Swift Footstep how empty he was. He gobbled it down but still felt a pang in his guts. He scratched his arm, which now burnt with a raw pain when he touched it, but itched like crazy when he didn’t.

Shadow shapes menaced the edges of his vision, angry ghosts trying to sneak into the world behind his back. He kept a wary eye on them still,

glancing round when he felt them come close. They dispersed beneath his gaze, and he felt sure that he was safe as long as they didn't reach him. He had to stay alert, watchful against their approach.

The stone drew his gaze, and he found himself staring at it for longer and longer, his eyes caressing each weathered grey patch of its surface. Its calm colors and rounded shape soothed him and his body started to relax.

He snapped his head up with a start, darting looks round the room in case the ghosts had appeared. Satisfied that he was safe, he turned to the stone with a warier eye. The shape was like that of a swaddled infant, the smaller lump taking the form of a head. He remembered the babies he had helped transport, those warm little bundles wrapped in layers of off-white swaddling cotton. The sweet scent of their heads and the foul aroma of their bottoms. The smiling, the crying, the screaming, toothless mouths flung wide in that banshee howl as they stared up at him with tiny accusing eyes. He saw them circling now, floating out of the darkness, their mouths growing wider as they closed in, surrounding him, screams rising to a cacophonous choir. Their flesh became withered, pock-marked and bruised with neglect, skin sagging until they looked like grotesque old men with gigantic heads and voices that would not be silent no matter how much he pleaded and cried.

First Swift Footstep's eyes snapped open. He blinked hard, forcing back sleep. The table was hard against his cheek. Shadows flickered at the edge of his vision, hungry ghosts still waiting for their chance to pounce. And now he knew who they were.

\* \* \*

First Swift Footstep scratched at his scalp. The itch had spread. It was in his head. It was the screaming of children, calling for his blood. Their spirits filled the cell. He shuddered as their touch tickled his spine. He was too hungry and thirsty to fight back. The spirits would have him now.

"I'm sorry," he croaked at the tiny baby in the corner, still lying wrapped in its mottled swaddling. "I'm so sorry."

The cell door opened. Light streamed in past the man from the palace, casting back the hungry ghosts. He went to the corner of the cell and picked up the baby, cradling it in one wrinkled hand. Then he came to sit at the table again. First Swift Footstep stared in terror at the round form nestling in the man's palm, its head raising up in search of fresh air. Purple-veined fingers closed calmly around it, and Footstep looked up into the man's eyes with gratitude and a lingering remnant of fear.

“I’ll tell you everything,” First Swift Footstep said, choking on the tears he was too thirsty to weep. “Just make them stop.”

# The Grak Murders

by Ian Charles Douglas

*Ian lives in Nottingham, the land of Robin Hood. He writes non-fiction articles for the Internet, theatre reviews for Left Lion and book reviews for Carousel Magazine. His first book, a children's history, will be published later this year by Home Town World. He has had several short stories and poems published in anthologies and his story 'Making Grampie' won first prize in the 2008 Short Story Radio competition. He has a MA in Creative Writing and is an active member of his regional Writers Studio. He chairs an online critique group for the British wing of SCBWI. Ian lives with his wife and children and is an artist in his spare time. And sometimes, the details of a murder always tell a different story than the appearance of a murder.*

The view from the interrogation room was suitably bleak.

Flurries of methane sleet gusted across the pre-fab rooftops. Vulturinus was clearly a dead end in every sense of the word, my career notwithstanding.

Three figures were walking across the courtyard, one with manacled hands and the orange uniform of a prisoner.

“He’s on his way.”

I turned to see the duty sergeant in the doorway, a huge Afro-Vulturinian with a rash of red-hair across his skull .

I gave my best macho grunt. The sergeant hesitated. I knew what he was thinking.

“It’s ok Sergeant, you won’t need to hold my hand.”

A look of bemusement settled on his gargantuan features.

“Whatever son, just remember this guy’s a two-time killer.”

“That’s Inspector Landers to you, and I’ve handled plenty of killers.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly, as though to say ‘like I believe that, Junior.’

“Anyway, I thought those grak creatures did the killings,” I added as a distraction.

The Sergeant poked a chubby finger in his ear and scratched.

“Yep, but someone let them out. Rather convenient don’t you say. Those monsters happen to eat wifey and lover-boy and then Guthrie here wrestles them back into their pens.”

I shrugged.

“So these guys were zoologists?”

“Heck no. Performers. Grak handlers.”

I crossed the room to the desk and sat down, switching on my magnopad.

“And these graks, pretty dangerous are they?”

The Sergeant’s eyebrows went a little higher this time.

“Dangerous? Dangerous ain’t the word, son. Imagine a rhino on steroids. Give it shark teeth, a razor-plated back and a tail like an anaconda. And one helluva nasty attitude. Then you’re getting close.”

Probably an exaggeration I thought, but a good thing they lived in the distant tropics.

“Well bring him in, and fetch me some coffee. It’s gonna be a long night.”

The Sergeant stared at me for a moment. I held that stare.

“Sure thing, Inspector,” he said and walked out chuckling.

A few minutes later he returned with an espresso strong enough to wake the dead and the accused.

\* \* \*

The first thing I noticed were the wide watery eyes. Eyes longing to forget.

The prisoner was a small, powerfully built Caucasian. But plucked eyebrows and black-dyed curls softened the impact of his muscles. I’d seen scarier brutes in kindergarten.

He sat at the desk and accepted a coffee.

“Kinda young to be an inspector,” he said after a sip, his voice dry and crackly.

I ignored his remark, entered the time on the magnopad and flicked on the recorder.

He nodded at my blond hair.

“You descended from Germans or what?”

“Norwegians, actually.”

He grimaced.

“Fancy that, a long, lanky, golden boy come to Vulturinus. You piss off somebody big?”

I ignored that too and focussed on my ‘pad.

“Inspector Dag Landers, interviewing Baha Guthrie on the charge of double homicide. Victims Mella Guthrie and Burl Stein. Ok Mr. Guthrie, why don’t you take us through your version of events.”

Silence. I drained the coffee from my cup.

“Mr. Guthrie, you maintain this was all a horrible accident?”

He nodded slowly.

“So you deny murdering them?”

Another nod.

“Well, tell me how it happened.”

He gazed his watery gaze at me. I thought back to Police College and skimmed through the tricks of the trade. Alright, let’s come at it from another tack.

“How did you get into the grak business?”

He leaned forward.

“It’s more than a business boy, it’s an art.”

“I can see that. I understand you and your wife were performers?”

“The best on the planet.”

I gestured for him to continue.

“Mella and I grew up in the boondocks. She was the prettiest girl in town. Skin like velvet, hourglass figure, quality implants. The whole deal, you know. Right up to the day she died, just looking at her gave me a queasy feeling. That’s honest-to-god love sickness. Something you’re probably too young to know about.”

He smiled briefly.

“Anyways, the way I figured it, there was only one route out of the helium mines.”

“Grak-wrangling?”

His eyes blazed.

“Show business, boy.”

He paused for dramatic effect.

“We got married at eighteen. Childhood sweethearts. By twenty we’d joined a travelling sideshow. Spent ten years learning the trade. It’s not all sequins and flashy lights you know.”

“Like, how to work with animals?”

“That’s lesson number two.”

“What’s the first?”

“How to manage the audience, naturally. Keep them salivating for more. Audiences are like the wild beasts. Fine as long as you keep them on a tight leash.”

“I guess it helps to have one show stopping act. Is that where the graks came in?”

Guthrie rolled his eyes.

“Not straight away, like a lot of folk we started small and just got bigger.”

I gestured for him to continue.

“Oh my, well we tried a comedy routine and were dying every night. So we turned to dancing dogs. Bob Salaski, the dog performer, didn’t turn up one day for rehearsals. They found him dead as a stuffed deer head in his dormie. Heart attack or something. That created a vacancy. Mella jumped at the chance. Kinda child substitutes.”

“You two never had kids?”

Guthrie gave me pained look and went on.

“She loved them dogs, pampered them like babies, but you know how it is. She outgrew them. We outgrew them. The audience wanted more. So we started importing DNA from Earth and raising our own. Leopards, lions, crocs. Anything big with a jaw full of fangs. The crowds loved us. We were a hit. Left the sideshow and went solo. Toured every goddamn mining outpost and satellite town on Vulturinus. By the way, that’s how I know you’re new around here.”

I looked up.

“My accent?”

“Nope boy, you don’t recognise me, do you?”

I shook my head. Guthrie laughed.

“The world famous Grak Riders. Our ugly mugs have been on every holo-board from here to the Poles. ”

“I think you’re jumping ahead. We haven’t got to the graks yet.”

“Like you hinted, Son, we needed a crowd-puller. Something to draw the punters out of their prefabs in the long, cold, methane-drenched Vulturinian winter. Something dramatic!”

His eyes sparkled.

“Our death defying Grak routine!”

I feigned an awestruck look.

“It all began when we were gigging at Settlement Two-Four-Six. That’s on the equator. Some shady character came to see us in the motel and pulled a grakling out of a sack.”

“Grakling being a baby grak?”

“Yup.”

“So they must be reasonably cute at that stage?”

Guthrie shot me a wry smile.

“Boy, these critters claw their way out of the uterus. They don’t have a cuddly stage. But it was small enough to be trained. That was the key thing. Dumb brutes respond to two things, always, pain and reward.”

“And did Mella fall in love with this, um, grakling? Like the other animals?”

Guthrie looked down for a moment.

“I wouldn’t say that, but she knew a business opportunity when she saw one. And we both understood one thing.”

“Which was?”

“Never break eye contact. If you’re handling a grak, never.”

“And that was that?”

“We had our first grak. We christened him Brutus. Seems a bit obvious now, but the name suited. Business was good. It was like, the bigger Brutus grew, the faster the engagements were coming in. And the more we could charge.”

“And when you weren’t on the road you live at your enclosure outside town?”

“That was our home, boy, our sanctuary. Twenty long years.”

“So how did Burl get in on the act?”

Guthrie let out a deep sigh.

“Poor Burl. Well Mella found him, discovered him you might say. Apparently he’d caught one of our shows, years ago, when he was nothing but a scrawny kid growing up in Hicksville. Started sending Mella fan mail. Lotta teenagers go through that phase you know.”

“Phase?”

“I told ya already. Mella was beauty incarnate. Add sequins, the cleavage and some stage lighting, and what-do-ya-know, you got a grade A teenage fantasy. In our heyday she got fan mail by the bucket. But usually, these boys grow up and move on. Burl didn’t.”

“So what did he do?”

“He sent photos. Of himself. And he turned out to be quite the man.”

His tone of approval was not what I’d expected.

“I’ll never forget that day. I came home and Mella was at the gates to greet me, her face all flustered like she was a schoolgirl all over again. Bah’, she said, have I got a treat for you. I said, what on Vulturnus are you on about? And she said, I’ve invited someone up to meet us. He’s the new act we’ve been looking for. She took me inside and there he was. This strapping young man, all baby-faced and sinewy at the same time. Grace of a tiger. And so hungry.”

“Hungry?”

“For the spotlight, for an audience. He wanted to be up there on stage with every eye in the place fixed on him.”

“Sounds a narcissist.”

Guthrie gave me that cold look again.

“He was raw talent and ambition, that’s what he was. And Mella could

see that. She had brains as well as looks, boy.”

“So were they already having the affair, when you met him that day?”

It was my first punch. Get them to talk about themselves. Build up a rapport. Then whack them with a truth sharp enough to hurt. But my punch missed its target.

He scratched his head absentmindedly.

“Oh no, Mella wouldn’t have done that. She was too classy.”

I leaned back and studied the man before me.

“Well, what was the relationship between your wife and Stein?”

His lips curled slightly.

“Asked like a human.”

“Excuse me?”

“Humans. We’re all so obsessed with labels and explanations. My wife was no chemical equation. She wasn’t measurable. She was a performer, a free spirit.”

He was beginning to annoy me.

“You’re avoiding my question.”

“Her relationship with Chuck was the same as mine. We were a team. All three of us. Believe me, when you’re working with graks there’s no room for, um, emotional conflict. Bonding is part of survival.”

“So you want me to believe you, your wife and this younger man who adored her, were all one big happy family?”

Guthrie smirked.

I sat forward again.

“A man fifteen years younger than you? All up close and personal with your wife, handling animals, preparing for performances. And you weren’t jealous?”

Guthrie shot me a look of amusement.

“That’s right, boy. And he was fifteen years younger than Mella too.”

“Then it was professional? Strictly platonic?”

Guthrie laughed out loud.

“I didn’t say platonic now did I? But we were a family. Of sorts.”

I realized I was blushing.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Humans. Always putting labels on. Well, some of us are beyond classifications boy. We were a team, boy. Plain and simple.”

“So how did it all go so wrong?”

The light in his face died.

“Sargon.”

I stood and walked over to the side table, poured another coffee for both

of us and set the drinks down in front of him.

“That’s one of your graks I suppose.”

“Yup, named after some famous barbarian, or something. Buying him was a big mistake.”

“Why?”

Guthrie took a sidelong glance at me, as though I’d just stepped off the space transporter. In fact I’d been on Vulturinus six weeks already.

“He was a purple bull. The most colorful. The most famous.”

“I can see why you’d want him in your show.”

He laughed. “Yep, you got it. Everyone was at us to train a purple grak. The venue organizers, the ticketeers, the press. Ooh, why don’t you do a purple grak, they’re so unique.”

“And?”

“I’ll tell you one thing. Mella was against it from the start. She said, Bah’ those purple ones are the alphas, we’d just be getting in over our heads. I don’t want it.”

“Alpha? So they’re herd animals?”

Another patronising look.

“Nope, graks are solitary monsters, that’s what they are. Each one has its territory, marked out with blood. Any rival grak stray over the line, unless its mating season, and they rip each other to death. Except every hundred clicks or so, when’s there’s an alpha. The meanest toughest hombre imaginable. And alphas don’t bother staking a territory. They just wander any damn place they fancy. Criss-crossing all the other graks. And when they come to town the resident grak just yields until it moves on. Alpha graks are like king of the species.”

“And they’re always purple.”

He nodded.

“So Mella was against it.”

Guthrie lowered his head.

“That she was, boy. But seemed to me at the time just what the doctor ordered. Bookings were beginning to fall off. The public were growing bored of the old routine. Brutus was slowing down. We needed to freshen up the act.”

He paused to sip his drink.

“Mella was against it, that she was. So I went and sweet-talked Burl into the idea. Then it was two to one. After a few bottles of firewater and some twinkling of Chuck’s pretty boy eyes, we won Mella over.”

“So the idea to buy this perilous animal was—”

“—mine. Got it in one, Inspector. Hey you’re good!” he said, pulling a

face.

Well at least he was calling me by my rank now. Progress of a kind.

“So how long have you had Sargon?”

“Let me see,” Guthrie said. “We got him as grakling. Three years ago. Even then he was mean sonovabitch. Those lizard eyes, makes me shiver now, used to follow you across the enclosure. Watching you. Like he was as curious about us as we were about him.”

“How intelligent are these creatures?”

“Sheesh. Lord knows. Not many zoologists study graks, Inspector. Well, only the suicidal ones. Yep, Sargon was clever enough for a dumb beast. Always testing the cages for a weak link. Always waiting for you to slip up. Nothing but trouble from the start. Lost count of how many times he’d go for one of us and need pacifying with the volt-baton. And we had it to the max for Sargon.”

Guthrie yanked back the sleeve of his right arm. I took a sharp intake of air. His forearm was peppered with puncture wounds.

“And this is Sargon’s handiwork?”

“Another bulls eye, Inspector. You catch on real good. I was just pushing his feed through the little grill in his cage one day, yapping to Burl, not paying attention. I’ll tell you this, I never made that mistake again.”

He bared his gums and laughed out loud. It didn’t seem very amusing to me. Guthrie was beginning to creep me out. Time to wrap it up.

“So what mistake did Burl make?”

His face switched from levity to tragedy in a split second.

“It was, what, six weeks ago? We had to hose down the cages. Sargon was last, as ever. S’pose you could say we used to put him off. Anyways we opened the gate, I went behind and gave him a prod. Burl was in front, with a slab of cow leg in one hand and the volt baton in the other. You see, pain and reward. Burl was doing everything according to the manual. Kept his eyes pivoted on Sargon. ‘Come on boy’ he said over and over. The routine was to lure the big hunk out of his main cage and pop him in a holding cage while we washed out the main one.”

“And this was regular practice.”

“Well yep, obviously. The holding cage was on wheels, we’d positioned it around ten feet away from his main cage. You have to understand this was all very normal for us. Every week we’d go through this rigmarole.”

“So what went wrong?”

Guthrie didn’t answer. He had tears in his eyes. Whether they were real or some elaborate act I didn’t know. Even if they were, it didn’t mean he was an innocent man. On the spur of the moment I decided to try the gentle

approach. I put my hand on his forearm and squeezed.

“Please, go on. We have to know.”

“Yes, sorry, you’re quite right, Inspector. Poor old Burl was doing everything by the book. And just at that moment, in the house, Mella stubbed her toe. As easy as that. And she cried out. And Burl turned toward the house. Well he would, wouldn’t he. The way he felt about my wife. Have you ever been in love, Inspector—” he peered at my name badge for the first time. “Landers. Have you?”

I avoided his gaze.

“We’re not here to talk about me, Mr. Guthrie. So Burl took his eyes off the grak, is that it?”

He looked down at his lap. Then he lifted his head and gave me his intense stare.

“That’s pretty much it. Just a flash of distraction. A snippet of time. And Sargon bounded out of his cage, a veritable Armageddon on legs. His jaws wide open, his four chest cavities roaring like a hurricane, half a ton of Vulturnian muscle. He had human scent in his nostrils and the leash was off.”

“Must have been nasty.”

Guthrie wiped the corner of his eye.

“This sounds like a movie, but it all went slow-mo. Burl’s face as he swivelled back to see Sargon approaching! White horror. His face was painted with it. He just had enough time to think ‘gee I’m dead-meat’. Then Sargon ran him over like a tank truck.”

“And what were you doing?”

“Bringing myself to my senses. That’s what I was doing. And I ran round to the front, screaming for Mella. I zapped Sargon, I zapped him at full voltage. He reared around, blood dripping from his fangs. Those dull lizard eyes burning. And I thought ‘he’s got a taste of us, nothing’s gonna stop him now’.

“But you did?”

“Somehow I did, yeah. Battled him back into his cage. Zapping him on constant and eyeballing him like I was afraid of nothing.”

“And Burl was...?”

“Still alive.” Guthrie’s voice cracked up. “I held that boy in my arms, his throat all tomato pasta, the light in his eyes so tiny, and he said something, but I just couldn’t make out what it was. I just couldn’t.”

“And then he died?”

Guthrie nodded and looked down again.

I timed five minutes on the magnopad. Show him a little decency, some regard for his feelings. It seemed to do the trick.

“So you wanna know what happened to Mella?” he said in a calmer voice.

I grunted a yes.

“Could you take off these handcuffs. Chaffing my wrists they are Inspector. I think you know now I’m not gonna be any trouble.”

I considered for a moment. Well the interview did seem to be going well, and Guthrie, creepy as he might be, was a pussycat compared to the ruffians I’d encountered on my college placements.

“Alright.”

I unlocked the cuffs. He rubbed his swollen wrists.

“Thank you, Inspector Landers, thank you.”

I nodded for him to continue.

“Sweet, sweet Mella. Burl’s death hit us both hard, but for her. Well, she blamed herself, I think. For giving him a job, for agreeing to a purple grak, for stubbing her toe even. It was like she turned her back on the world.”

“Depression?”

“Sure thing. She took to her bed, wouldn’t come out. Stopped eating.”

“Was she drinking?”

“No, Sir. That wasn’t her style.”

Guthrie suddenly rose to his feet. I tensed and considered calling for the duty sergeant. The prisoner strode over to the window and gazed out, studying the perimeter.

“She went downhill fast,” he said. “Pretty soon she was pale as a sheet. That hourglass figure that she’d held onto all these years evaporated. She was just bones. Dainty fragile bones, but bones nonetheless.”

“Why didn’t you see a doctor?”

“She plain refused boy. Every time I broached the subject she’d tell me to mind my own. She was determined to waste away. A few days before.. before the second accident, she crept into the room where I’d moved to, to give her space like, woke me and said, ‘Bah’ I don’t wanna live anymore’. Those words came out of her dried-up lips, all matter-of-fact. Then she floated out again, more ghost than living.”

“So you decided to grant her wish?”

Guthrie wheeled round, clenching his jaw. My pulse quickened.

“You can go figure all you want, Inspector Landers, but it weren’t like that.”

“So how was it?”

He visibly shrank and returned to his seat.

“It was early evening. That damn radioactive Vulturian sun had set and the breeze was cooling fast. I thought, Guthrie old man, you gotta get Mella

out of the house and into some fresh air. Maybe it could do her some good. So I went in and coaxed and I pleaded and I begged, till she said, alright Guthrie if only to shut you up, and she came out in her bedclothes and we started the night feed.”

“How was her mood?”

“Not good. She was trembling and shaking all over. I hadn’t realized up till then just how scared she’d become of the livestock. Her confidence, shot to pieces.”

He paused.

“So there we were, feeding the dogs, and our old croc and the big cats. And all the time she’s got her eye on Sargon’s cage.”

“Fear?”

“Bulls-eye, Inspector. She just couldn’t stop looking at the monster. So I said, Mel, I’ll feed Sargon. Give me the meat. And she said, no Bah’ I wanna do it. And she tiptoed over to the cage, stopped a few feet before it and just stared at Sargon. And he stared back. He didn’t growl, or buck or nothing. They were just like that, looking at each other. Odd really.”

“Why was she doing that?”

“Lord knows. Then she upped the anti. She said ‘Sargon, you dumb bastard, I’m going have you put to sleep’. That’s when he got nasty. Started throwing himself against the cage like it was the end of the world.”

I placed my hands on the desk.

“I don’t understand. Graks are just animals. Why would her words get him steamed up?”

He looked as bewildered as me.

“You got me boy. I can’t figure it either. Unless, it wasn’t the words so much as the way she said them. The way she rolled up all her hatred into the, what’s the word, intonation, and spat it at him. That and the determination in her eye. Maybe a Grak knows a death threat when he hears one.”

“And then?”

“He gripped the bars with his teeth and snapped them in half.”

I sat forward, lifted my hand to silence him and scanned the case notes.

“Nothing in here about a damaged cage, Mr. Guthrie.”

“Call me Bah’ son. And that’s ‘cause your beef heads didn’t bother to look around the enclosure. You come with me, just the two of us and I’ll show you. The bars ripped out like matchwood.”

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Guthrie. Our ground force can check out your story. I must say it’s hard to believe an animal, however strong, could bite its way through reinforced steel.”

He gave a soft chuckle.

“You ain’t seen a grak yet have you, boy?”

“And so the grak broke out of its pen?”

His face turned sombre.

“Yup, he did. And that grit Mella was showing turned out to be just words. She didn’t run. I was screaming at her to run, but she stood there rooted to the spot. Dunno if it was fear or a death wish or what it was. But she stood there, whimpering, shivering, for the few seconds it took Sargon to crunch his way out.”

“And what were you doing?”

“I was breaking out the stun-rifle, we had one in the locker, for emergencies.”

“This was an emergency alright.”

“Yup, sure was. And in those precious few moments Sargon bust out of his cage and flew at my poor, sweet Mella.”

I saw the expression on his face and, for some reason or other, my skin turned to ice.

He struggled to speak.

“He had her by the neck, swinging her tiny little body like a rag doll, this way and that. Blood was spurting like rain and still she weren’t dead. Oh Lord, that instant lasted a lifetime.”

And then he broke down.

This time I counted ten minutes before the next question.

“How do you know she wasn’t dead? Surely she wouldn’t be able to speak, if he had her by the throat.”

He wiped his tears with the back of his hand.

“Her eyes, boy. Her eyes! There was more life in them eyes than I don’t know what. The wrong kind of life. Pain and terror and despair. But it was the same look that Burl had. At the end, just before the Grak trampled him underfoot. Maybe everyone has it, at the end.”

“Whatever happened at your enclosure I can see your grief is genuine, Mr. Guthrie, but how come your wife died and you didn’t?”

He fixed me with his watery stare.

“Told you son, weren’t you listening? After it tossed the meatloaf that was once my wife in the air it came charging for me. I fired one stun-shot. That would have felled an elephant. A second, that would have brought down a dinosaur. And then the final shot, with Sargon about to bite my head off, knocked him out. Only a minute or two mind. Long enough to muzzle and chain him and haul him into the holding cage.”

He exhaled a long, sad breath.

“The rest you know.”

I stroked my chin.

“What you thinking, son?”

“That there’s no evidence to support your story. Yep, they died in the jaws of a grak, but you could have set the whole thing up.”

Guthrie stood up.

“So you think I butchered my wife and best friend?”

I leaned back in my seat.

“That’s just it, I believe you. A hundred percent.”

Guthrie looked at me sadly.

“Then I’m doubly sorry, Inspector Landers.”

“What for?” I asked.

“For this.”

A fist flew out of nowhere and my head exploded.

\* \* \*

The police UV rumbled off the dirt road and down a dark track. A sign read ‘Dangerous Animals. No visitors.’ The way ahead disappeared into a wood of sticky-barks.

I sat in the rear nursing a prize lump on my skull. The only thing worse than the injury was my wounded ego. The duty sergeant had revived me with a told-you-so smirk and news that Guthrie had overpowered two officers and jumped the perimeter walls. He was officially on the run.

“Don’t worry,” the humongous man had said with a cocky wink. “I’ve sent alerts to Obama Space Port and all border patrols. He won’t get far.”

What the Sergeant didn’t realize, in all his basking-in-the-new-guy’s-ineptitude was that Guthrie had no desire to escape. I might be a greenhorn at risk management, but psychology had been my best subject at college. I knew exactly what he wanted, and it wasn’t freedom.

“Switch to stealth mode,” I instructed the UV interface. The engine’s hum faded and the vehicle silently cruised the last half klick. The sticky-barks began to thin.

“Halt!”

A large pre-fabricated building had appeared beyond the woods. Guthrie’s homestead. A twinge of fear flickered in my chest.

That’s right, I was alone. I figured I had more chance of talking Guthrie down by myself. And if I fouled up, at least there’d be none of the workforce to point at the new boy and guffaw. Maybe I just preferred working solo, who knows.

The house loomed against the starry glow of the Vulturian night like a

black tombstone. The door was wide open but not a photon was on. Nevertheless, instinct told me he was there. Somewhere. I crept up to the side of the house, dodging from tree to tree.

It was then that the smell hit me, a kind of rancid-fruit-and-shit smell. The stench of death. The anger that had propelled me this far, the humiliation, the hunger for revenge, suddenly deflated. I drew out my police pistol and adjusted the impact to max.

As I slowly made my way around the nearside of the building, the smell grew stronger. At the rear of the house a battlefield greeted me. Limbs, ripped metal, organs, uprooted canny bushes, faeces, the scattered debris of a massacre.

My body heaved and I added my stomach's contents to the carnage. A few deep breaths later I steadied my nerves and looked around. A dog's head, a crocodile's jaw, the hind legs of a lion sundered in one bite. The entire Guthrie menagerie wiped out.

Oh God..Sargon was free!

I dropped my gun, desperately picked it up and, hands shaking, scanned the area. Nothing. Only shadows and bones.

"You're a tad late, Inspector."

I wheeled round. Baha Guthrie was sitting in a rocking chair, on his porch. His eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"You—you let it out?" I asked, lowering the barrel of the gun.

"Seemed the right thing to do."

"I thought you loved your animals?"

"I do, boy, enough to spare 'em any suffering."

"Doesn't look like it from where I'm standing, knee-deep in offal."

Guthrie gave a bitter smile.

"There's no one left to look after them. You're a newcomer, you don't know what it's like on Vulturnus. My little furry pals here, well they ain't indigenous. No one will take them in. They'd end up in that goddamawful zoo."

"I'll bow to your knowledge. So you let the grak out?"

Guthrie nodded solemnly.

"And it ripped through the metal bars of their cages?"

"Yep, the trick it learned with poor Mella. You believe me now?"

"I do."

I glanced again at the smorgasbord of animal guts.

"But watching them die like, well, rats in a trap, didn't it break your heart?"

"For a cop you don't know much. A heart can only get broken once, boy."

Law of physics or something.”

“And the grak, you have killed it?”

This time Guthrie shook his head. My legs turned weak. Where the hell was it?

“I know what you’re planning to do,” I said, trying to sound calm.

“And?”

“It’s my duty to stop you. Take you back for trial. I know you’re innocent. Heck, I’ll swear it in court.”

“And if I refuse?”

I pointed the gun.

Guthrie cackled.

“You’ll be needing this boy.”

With a quick movement he tossed an enormous stun-rifle through the air. I caught it, almost tumbling under its weight. The man was stronger than he looked.

“You know how to use it?” he called.

I grunted an affirmative, clipped mine back into its holster, and switched on the charge. The rifle pinged as it reached full capacity.

“Your police boy bullets would bounce off Sargon’s scales like pea pellets.”

“Then I’ll kill it with this. Either way you’re not dying tonight.”

Guthrie stood up and sauntered down the steps.

“Like I said, you got a lot to learn, Inspector. But you’re in the right place. A few years on Vulturnus and you’ll know more than you ever wanted to.”

He stepped a little closer.

“Mella and I never had kids. All kinds of reasons. Seeing you though makes me kinda wish I had a son to leave behind.”

I straightened up.

“Really?”

“Sure. My only regret is punching a fine gentleman like you in the stomach.”

“You didn’t, it was on the head.”

Wham!

I crumpled onto the dirt.

“You got to be quicker boy,” Guthrie smirked, stepping over me and starting for the sticky bark wood.

“Wait,” I wheezed, reaching out to him.

Guthrie paused to look back, his face blazing in the light of the Milky Way.

“I loved them. I loved both of them. I shoulda saved them. Somehow.”

He vanished into the wood.

I struggled to me feet, clenched my fingers around the stun-rifle and broke into a sprint. I dived into the maze of lean, wispy trees. Their canopy of fan-shaped leaves blotted out the starlight, drowning me in inky gloom. All I could see was a criss-cross of pale branches. Where the hell was he?

An inhuman howl, followed by a scream and a squelching sound answered my question. My heart told me to turn back. My brain overruled it. The badge of the law feared nothing, not even monsters. As quietly as I could I crept deeper.

Something uncomfortably close rustled the foliage. Sargon? I peered through the void but saw nothing. The rustling noise again. It came from the ground as though something was sneaking through the undergrowth.

“Uff—” I gasped as something snakelike whipped around my calves and snatched me off my feet. With unimaginable strength it dragged me across the floor of the forest. Roots flew past me. The stun-rifle slipped from my grasp. A tree trunk banged against my shoulder and then another. A glimpse of Guthrie’s severed head whizzed by me.

I was in the grip of its tail, kicking impotently to break free. Then with a sudden jolt, I was hanging upside down as the tail coiled tighter around my legs. Blood flooded my head. The rasping of great, cavernous lungs filled my ears. And then, wrestling against its sinewy folds, I beheld the monster.

Cold, crystallized eyes of amber regarded me, windows onto the fires of Hell. Immense, alien, primeval, bloodthirsty eyes. I was dead.

My mind was hemorrhaging with images. My mother, my sister, my first girlfriend, the seashores of my childhood, my soon-to-be ripped torso, my impending funeral. Vulturian law enforcers laughing at my pathetic demise. And then another image. The police pistol clipped to my belt!

Had it fallen out in the attack? Desperately I clawed at my hip. NO! My fingers felt the steel of its barrel. The grak lifted me higher. Vast jaws opened, with row after row of incisors dripping in yellow saliva. Oh God, I had a clear shot straight through the upper palate. The brute’s hide might be bullet proof, even to my titanium shells. But the soft tissue of his upper jaw?

The drooling, sore of a mouth leapt at me.

BANG!

I fired without thinking.

The tail flung me away in a reflex action. Branches bent and snapped before me. A blow to the head caused me to briefly black out. Then I was lying in the dirt of this cruel, incomprehensible planet. Sargon’s death roar thundered through the night. He came crashing out of the trees, fountains of velvet blood pouring from his forehead. No longer aware of me, he galloped

past, a vast juggernaut of scales and blades. As beautiful as he was deadly.

I wiped my bleeding cheek. The forest air was suffocating and I staggered out into the stars. Every nerve in my body throbbed painfully. Realizing I needed a doctor and fast, I picked up my pace. Behind me the skeletal wood echoed with the cries of Guthrie's last love.

# **The Last Person on Earth Begins His Diary**

## **by Robert S. King**

*Robert S. King has published three chapbooks and two full length collections of poetry. His work also appears in hundreds of magazines including the Kenyon Review, Southern Poetry Review, Chariton Reviews and others. He is currently Director and Editor-in-Chief of FutureCycle Press.*

### **The Last Person on Earth Begins His Diary**

*March 5, 2066*

Today my PMI (Population Monitor Implant)  
clicked down to one.

I am the one, until now never the next in line.

The latest ending was quiet where I sat  
between library shelves full of history,  
the last page of every book ending in the past.

I too must live in the past,

wait for the zero when all time will end.

These heated words I write now may sum to zero,  
make no sense to the wind and trees,  
to the rivers still flowing without us.

As ink cools, a small cloud of hope  
drifts across my mind like rain in the desert.

My own tears fall in fear that it was God  
who died today, who threw up his hands,  
scattering planets, stars and galaxies  
to hurl themselves alone.

If the planet is dead of higher animals,  
then I must be King here,  
free to impose my will (but on whom?),  
free to shout anything  
from the tallest empty building.

Will my echo reach out but come back alone?

Should I write of the empty world in blue?  
Or dare I boast in bold red  
of the one who got away,  
the one who rose above his limits  
to inherit the American Dream,  
and through rockets, smog, and fevers  
became the last one standing?  
Is this diary a desperate time capsule  
scribbled in case the future still exists,  
from which puzzled aliens might come  
to decipher a lower life form millenia hence?  
Or is it just my attempt to stay alive?

If I am the only living person,  
do I even exist?

# Skin Deep

by Brian L. Hurrel

*Brian Hurrel, the son of Glaswegian immigrants, was born in Newark, NJ. He has been an avid SF fan as long as he can remember, and is especially fond of such Golden Agers as Heinlein, Harrison, Bova, Clarke, Pohl, Anderson, Niven, and Piper, to name but a few. He currently makes his living developing software for the financial industry. His previous occupations include high school English teacher, business analyst, electrical assembler, carpet installer, cab driver, and Marine infantryman. He lives in northeast New Jersey with his wife and son. His fiction has appeared in "The Jersey Devil Press" and "Daily Science Fiction", and will be featured in upcoming issues of "Bete Noire" and "Dark Valentine" magazines. This is a story of memory and being remembered.*

She watches me in silence for most of the morning. Then suddenly speaks. "It was Tuesday, and raining." She does that a lot; random reminiscences, unconnected statements, and questions plucked from the blue. Mostly I ignore her, but sometimes I take the bait.

"What was Tuesday?"

"The first time we kissed. Do you remember? On the pier in Jotunheim?"

"No, I don't."

"Of course you do, silly!" she laughs, half chuckle, half-schoolgirl giggle. "I was heading out for a three month patrol the next morning. I wasn't planning on it. I'd thought about it, but I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do right before taking off for a few months. You told me later I took you by surprise."

Persephone had indeed taken me by surprise. It had been a quick kiss, almost a peck, but on the lips and edging just over the line between friendship and..something else.

"And you said, 'Does this mean we're going steady?' and I said, 'No, I just want to leave off at a good place' and you said, 'Good place how?' and I said, 'A good place to pick up again when I get back.'" and you laughed and said—

"Like a bookmark."

"Yes, like a bookmark." She is silent for a few long seconds. "I liked

that. A bookmark is kind of like a promise, don't you think?"

Persephone had never said goodbye as long as I had known her. She said she didn't like the finality of it. And so she said, "See you when I see you," and left me on the pier as Procyon A rose over the gray rain-swept waves of the Midgard Sea.

I study her face, the delicate curve of her chin, the slightly aquiline nose (Persephone's least favorite feature), the gently arched eyebrows, generous lips..gaze down across the swell of her breasts beneath the sleeveless white T-shirt, the pleasing bulge of hips beneath blue utility trousers...

"Hey, I'm up here!" She is pointing to her eyes with both index fingers, and smiles when I look up.

If she minds that I've spent the last five months trying to kill her, it certainly doesn't show.

\* \* \*

I'll probably never live long enough get out of this place. Our relief ship was jumped by a Vegan raider squadron as soon as it entered the system. They didn't even bother with our little survey base, but they did take out our commsat before moving on. That was how I learned that we were at war again. The others were dead by then. DeLorenzo. Chandra. Ryerson.

Rescue was a possibility, but a slim one. If we were at war again, the Federation had a lot more to worry about than a small Biological Survey Mission some eight parsecs from the nearest Terran outpost. Most likely we'd already been written off for dead. It could be years before another ship landed on this planet, and it was just as likely to be Vegan as Terran.

I wouldn't last years, of course. I probably wouldn't last another month. Water was plentiful, and the power plant had enough juice to keep the shield up for another five years, but I was running out of food. Even if the animal proteins on this planet had been edible, which they weren't, I couldn't go hunting without lowering the shield. And I couldn't lower the shield.

\* \* \*

"I know something's bothering you." she says. I ignore her.

"I can tell," she continues. "I could always tell. Why don't you let me in and we can talk about it."

Nice try.

"You can't just shut me out of your life forever," she adds.

"Watch me," I reply.

“I hate it when you get like this. Communication was never an issue with us before.”

“There are no issues. There is no us. There was no before.”

“How can you say that? After all that we’ve shared—”

“We’ve shared nothing! Alright! Nothing, you bitch! Why don’t you just fucking leave?”

“Liam...” she splutters, and her eyes well up. She is trying hard not to cry. “How can you be so hateful? You’re breaking my heart. Please don’t do this to me. What can I say? What can I do to help?”

“Help? You want to help, then die, okay? Just crawl off somewhere and die! I’d kill you myself if I could.”

A strangled cry is all that she can manage. Tears stream freely down high bronzed cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes, now red-rimmed, gape at me with a mixture of shock, despair, pity, and horror.

“I don’t even know who you are anymore!” she sobs.

“No shit!” I shout back, “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you!”

She turns away and runs down the grassy hillock, disappearing into the shadowed woods below.

For a brief moment there I almost actually feel bad about what I’ve said.

\* \* \*

DeLorenzo had been the first to go. She’d been tracking a lone kudi, one of those stilt-legged grazers with a passing resemblance to a Terran giraffe, that had somehow become separated from the herd. At some point someone, Chandra I think, realized that she hadn’t checked in for several hours. She didn’t respond to comms either. So, of course, in the best idiots-in-horror-movies tradition, Chandra had gone looking for her. Alone. She checked in every fifteen minutes after entering the forest. Then she stopped checking in.

Ryerson and I had a big argument after that. I thought we should either stay put or go looking together, but Ryerson did not want to leave the camp unattended. At the very least, he argued, the shield needed to stay up, and for the shield to stay up someone had to be inside the camp to operate it. Also, he said, there was no sense risking more than one person. If he didn’t come back, then there would be no more searches and the camp would be locked up tight until the relief ship arrived.

I finally agreed, only after insisting that we draw straws. Ryerson got the short straw. He set out with one of our two Traylorls and as many spare magazines as he could carry. As he headed down the hill towards the trees, he

called back and suggested I might want to have the other assault rifle handy, just in case. Just in case of what I didn't know, and wasn't eager to find out.

Within an hour, things seemed to be looking up. Ryerson shouted over the comm that he had spotted Chandra. She looked a little dazed, he had said, adding that there was no sign of DeLorenzo. The last thing I heard before his comm cut out was him calling to Chandra and asking if she was okay.

Then nothing.

I tried every channel for nearly an hour but received only angry static in return.

Not long after I was debating, against orders and all logic, going out after them. I even grabbed up the Traylor, locked and loaded, and began stuffing spare magazines into the breast and thigh pockets of my coveralls. I was slipping on a canteen belt and about to buckle it when movement caught my eye.

Ryerson had emerged from the tree line and was strolling up the hill towards the camp.

\* \* \*

She comes back, as she always does. No matter how much abuse and bile and invective I pile on her, she always comes back. Slowly, hesitantly, sadly, shuffling, head down...

Unthinking, I walk to the edge of the shield to meet her.

"I don't want to fight, Liam."

I laugh. "Then you came to the wrong place."

"I know that's not you talking, Liam."

"Okay, what have you got now? Another fond recollection? Want to re-hash the first time we went out for dinner? The first time we kayaked over to Tyr's Point? You're running out of recycled memories, babe. Time you got some new material. The past is past. I'm over it, and its time you got over it too."

"I don't deserve that," she actually looks angry when she says it.

"Look, if you have a problem with me, why do you keep coming back? No one's begging you to stick around. In fact, I'd like nothing more than for you to leave."

"You said you wanted me to die. Did you mean that?" she sits down and hugs her knees miserably to her chest, eyes downcast.

"What difference does it make?"

She starts crying again. Actual tears for chrissakes. "If you just said it

out of anger, I can handle that. But if you mean it, really mean it, I don't know if I can stand it.”

She buries her face between her knees and weeps, her shoulders heaving and shuddering as her weeping grows into tortured, wracking sobs. Her breath comes in ragged gasps, and at one point she lets out an anguished moan that is more animal than human.

Years ago, if I'd seen Persephone in such a state, it would have ripped my heart to shreds. I'd have done anything to console her, anything to take her into my arms and let her know, let her feel, that everything was alright. But not now, not here, not her. Just the fact that the thought of lowering the shield has entered my head is dangerous enough. I have to remind myself what I am dealing with, why she is out there and why I am in here.

Not that it mattered, if you really thought about it. Even if a Federation ship does happen to come along before I starve to death, as soon as they find out what is going on down here they won't dare land. They'll quarantine the entire planet, possibly even nuke the site from orbit. They'll apologize to me beforehand with all due sincerity, but protocols are protocols, and that is part of the risk you take when you sign on. They cannot ever, ever, take the chance of allowing what is down here to get off-planet.

I go back inside the shelter and shut the door so I don't have to listen to her cry.

\* \* \*

I'd almost dropped the shield. I'd watched Ryerson come out of the tree line and start strolling up the hill to the camp. I asked him what was going on, where was Chandra, had he seen DeLorenzo? He didn't answer, but when he got near the top of the knoll and close to the perimeter marker I reached over to switch off the shield...

That's when he said, "Chandra, are you okay?"

Huh? I hesitated.

And Ryerson walked right into the shield.

In retrospect, I should have sensed something was amiss. His coveralls were torn and holed in places and he no longer had his Traylor, not to mention the fact that he was alone, but this didn't register at the time.

So Ryerson walked into the shield and was thrown back, the shield flashing a glowing man-shaped silhouette through the spectrum where he'd hit it. The shield wasn't particularly dangerous to touch, though you could feel the power, a bit like static electricity, and if you hit it hard you might get a little jolt. Ryerson merely stepped back a few feet.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I said, and was actually about to lower the shield again when Ryerson spoke again.

“Chandra, are you okay?” Then he walked right into the shield again.

Ryerson paused and stood for a moment looking at me. Then he side-stepped about a yard to the right, said, “Chandra, are you okay?” and walked into the force field again.

This process repeated about fifty or so times all the way around the perimeter until Ryerson was back in the same spot where he had first walked into the barrier. At some point I had unslung my Traylor and thumbed off the safety, but it didn’t look like Ryerson was getting through the field any time soon. Knowing this did not make me feel any safer, nor did the fact that the shield was often completely transparent. I kept checking the console to make sure it was actually on.

After his circuit, Ryerson stood like a mannequin and stared at me for an uncomfortably long time. He still wore that typical half-smirk he always wore, as if he were on the verge of telling a joke. But there was no humor in this Ryerson’s eyes.

\* \* \*

I stay inside for the rest of the day. Night falls. I try to sleep. Can’t. Step outside. She is still there, a small somber shadow, huddled on the ground, hugging her knees to her chin. She doesn’t look up.

I sit down a few feet from her on an equipment crate that has been serving as a stool for these past months. As I do, I wonder why I am even bothering. What the hell am I doing? Just making a bad situation worse, most likely. Above stretches night sky, cloudless and black. Stars shimmer faintly through the shield haze. Wind whispers soft among the swaying trees below, ebbs and flows in low waves across the grassy hill, through stray strands of her auburn hair. I can hear the wind, see its effects, but can not feel it, not through the shield. I wish I could, imagine its cool caress across my skin, salt tinge of sea-spray, faint electric undercurrent of approaching storm.. ridiculous, of course. There is no approaching storm, no clouds, no smell of ozone outside of memory, the nearest ocean is thousands of miles from here, and it contains barely a trace of salt.

She sings, a faint whisper barely rising above the breeze, a tuneless but rhythmic murmur, gentle waves advancing, hissing, receding over trackless sands. I strain to listen, catch a word here, a phrase there.

“...siren song catches your soul and sets you dancing, dancing, sweet romancing, chancing the silver waves, and twilight, endless twilight, is call-

ing...”

Silence save for the wind. She tilts her head, looks up at me.

Silence.

Tilts her head, looks up at the stars.

Whispers. I have to lean closer to hear.

“I never felt alone on the beach,” she says. Pauses, but she is not waiting for me to speak or comment. “The big summer storms on Fenris always came from the east, over the Midgard Sea. At twilight I’d stand in the breakers and watch as the clouds rolled in under Tyr’s Ribbon. The sea would shift, gray-green to gray to gray-black. The wind would stop, like the whole world was holding its breath, waiting, waiting..and the only sound was the sea, hissing, whispering, rolling in, sliding out, in, out, tugging me, pulling me, calling me, and sometimes I wanted to answer that call, but I stood firm, and my feet would sink slowly under the sand, a little more with each ebbing wave.

“The clouds would roll closer, rolling, roiling, lightning flashing from within, like landing strobes in fog, still too far distant to be heard. Building, building, you could feel it in your blood, in your heart, pulsing, electric, alive and feral. I’d raise my arms and lift my head up to feel the first kiss of rain, like some pagan high priestess in some kind of ritual. And then the sky would bust open, that first stroke of thunder would shake the sand, and the lightning split sea and sky in white fire...”

Silence. She laughs a delicate laugh, silver wind chimes riding the night breeze. “And then I would run like hell to get back inside.”

\* \* \*

It was obvious that something bad had happened to Ryerson and the others before him. Despite the tears in his coveralls there is no blood or sign of injury. Some sort of disease? A parasite? Hallucinogen? Whatever Ryerson had, it had obviously affected his brain. The others were likely already dead, and the bug, whatever it was, would probably kill him fairly quickly as well. If it didn’t, a lack of food and water would eventually do him in. I didn’t feel good about having to leave him out there, but I simply didn’t have the equipment or knowledge to deal with an unknown disease. Letting him in would just lead to my death as well. No one ever said life in the Exploratory Corps would be easy.

I hadn’t slept well that first night after Ryerson came back. At daybreak I checked the shield and it was fine. When I went outside I saw no sign of Ryerson.

That was when I noticed the dirt. A circular trench about a yard wide and of varying depth ringed the camp, along with a low wall of displaced soil, a foot or two in some places, nearly four feet in others. It looked like it had been dug by bare hands. Could one person have moved so much dirt in that period of time, even with a shovel?

I didn't really need to be worried. The shield was spherical, and extended down and under the camp as well as above. Can't jump over it, can't dig under it. But just thinking about Ryerson moving all that dirt quietly in the night..the how of it was bad enough, but the why was something else entirely.

I watched and waited for Ryerson to return, but it was DeLorenzo, not Ryerson, who walked out of the forest a few days later and ambled up the hill.

She smiled and said, "Chandra, are you okay?"

\* \* \*

She isn't there the next morning. I'd left her sitting on the ground outside the perimeter, still huddled, knees still up, still staring at the stars. Neither of us had spoken after she had finished reminiscing. Except when I had gotten up and headed back to the shelter.

Softly, "Good night, Liam."

I hadn't looked back.

And now she is gone. I should be relieved. Am relieved, but a part of me is actually..disappointed? No, that isn't possible. It's just a matter of having an established routine upset. I've simply gotten used to her. It will be fine by me if she never comes back, but that's too much to hope for.

I spend the day performing routine tasks. Inventory. Water? Good. Power? Fine. Food? Not so good. Long range comms? Nothing but static. Every so often I look towards the treeline.

In the twilight before sunset it begins to rain.

\* \* \*

DeLorenzo seemed to be suffering from the same thing Ryerson had. She didn't try to walk through the shield, though. Just smiled, and still smiling, began to unzip the front of her coveralls. As I followed her fingers drawing the zipper past her breasts, I noticed the name tag above the left chest pocket.

RYERSON.

Zipper down to the crotch, she slipped the top of her coverall off her shoulders, slid her arms out, then grabbed the bottom of her T-shirt and pulled it up, thrusting her exposed breasts towards me. Except the breasts were smooth and featureless. Not a single blemish. Not even nipples. Doll's breasts. She wriggled out of the lower half of the coveralls, exposing a pair of men's boxers. Ryerson's boxers.

These were slid down as well, and all the while she watched me, pouting her lips. Between the legs? Nothing. Just a blank featureless Y at the joining of legs and crotch. The skin was waxy, almost as plastic looking as the genitalia-challenged action figures it resembled. I noticed for the first time that she had no fingernails, no body hair, no freckles. Her teeth were not individual teeth, but two solid strips of white clinging to the upper and lower jaw. Her white blond hair seemed to consist of a single jelled mass with a vague ribbed texture to suggest strands of hair.

Even as I watched, reddish brown circles appeared in the center of each breast, a small slit formed at the base of the crotch, a strip of wiry hair emerged. And all the while the crude display of sexual gestures continued. At least Ryerson hadn't tried that. Not as Ryerson, at least.

It didn't take long to connect the dots and figure out what I was looking at, and what had happened to the rest of the team. Nor did I have any illusions about our relative places in the local food chain.

\* \* \*

She comes back the next day. She always comes back. She is lying on the ground, hands locked behind her head, knees upraised, each leg an inverted V. She grins broadly when she sees me exit the shelter, hazel eyes smiling, no hint that anything unpleasant has passed between us.

"You're up early," she says. I shrug.

"Is everything alright? You look like something's bothering you."

"That's an understatement. But thanks for asking."

"You could use a good shave, too." She turns her face back to the sky, closes her eyes. Breathes deeply. Exhales slowly.

Speaks, eyes still closed. "Why do you shut me out?"

"You have to ask?"

"It's not good to be alone all the time."

"Who's alone? I've got you. Whether I want you or not."

"But you do want me."

"No. I thought I made that clear."

"You didn't mean it."

“Um, yeah. I did mean it.”

“You were just speaking in anger. Believe me, if I thought you’d meant it, I would be long gone.”

“I tried to kill you.”

“That’s not funny.”

“I tried to kill you, and if I had a chance, I’d try again.”

“We always kill what we love. Or so the saying goes. Is that it?”

“No we don’t. That’s a stupid saying anyway. We, meaning I, only kill things that threaten my life. You’re a threat, which is why you’re out there and I’m in here.”

“Don’t you think if I had some kind of disease it would have killed me by now?”

She stands, stretches, comes closer to the shield. Spreads her arms and looks down, inviting me to scan her lithe form in all its deliciously curved glory.

“Does this body look unhealthy to you?”

“Of course not. And that’s part of the problem.”

She shrugs, throws up her hands in mock defeat. “There’s just no pleasing some people.”

She steps forward, presses her palms against the shield. Rainbow hues ripple outward from her hands in concentric circles.

“Don’t do that.” I reach for the Traylor leaning against equipment case.

“What are you afraid of?” She leans forward, presses her lips against the wall of energy. A circle of shifting color forms, like the prismatic colors swirling across the surface of a soap bubble, spreads out in rings, blends and merges with the ripples caused by her palms. Stray strands of hair crackling with static rise from her scalp.

I step back. Raise the assault rifle to my shoulder.

She steps back and the light show fades. Shakes her head, tosses her hair. Smiles. Blows me a kiss. Then walks away, hips swaying, pausing at the tree line for a single backwards glance.

\* \* \*

Mimicry hadn’t worked, nor had brute force, and after a time the crude attempts at sexual seduction had been discarded. Finally it had simply given up all pretense of humanity beyond basic form. It had stood motionless, a featureless gray mannequin, hands and feet solid and lacking digits, the head a smooth sphere with no hint of ears, nose, or mouth; only two slight depressions suggesting eyes.

I tried to think about how it might feed. There was no blood on Ryerson's coverall, though they were torn. Which suggested that it somehow merged...

I tried not to think about how it might feed.

For hours it had stood that way, and for hours I'd watched, unwilling or unable to turn away. I doubted that this was its true form, assuming it even had a form.

Then, it shifted. Colors washed over its surface in various hues, from darkest ebony through golden brown through bronze and on to pasty white. Features appeared, spread, faded like running wax. Some I thought I recognized. Some I definitely recognized. My father's prominent Roman nose, my sister's strawberry blond locks, my mother's delicately arched eyebrows, one slightly raised in what could only mean, "You're not telling me everything young man."

I saw the faded eagle which had graced the forearm of my boot camp drill instructor appear, fade, turn into the Ying-Yang tattoo of my college roommate. On one cheek a wine-dark blemish spread, coalesced, solidified, a birthmark resembling—or so I had thought—Finland. It had belonged to Vickie Torsiello, my first teenage crush. Other shifts and changes had followed in rapid succession, most of them too fast to follow.

And then it had stopped. Stood still and silent and motionless, featureless once more. I waited, waited for a long time, but nothing else happened. Finally, exhausted, I went back to the shelter, not before checking the shield of course, and fell into a troubled sleep.

In the gray light of dawn someone called my name.

\* \* \*

"Liam?"

I look but do not answer.

"You told me once that no one ever really dies as long as someone is still around that remembers them." She sits cross-legged in the grass beyond the shield, hands braiding an assortment of yellow and white flowers into a tiara.

"In some African cultures," she continues, "They don't consider someone really dead until everyone who had a living memory of that person is gone."

I sit on my box, watching, listening, but not answering.

"There are the living of course, then the living-dead, and then the truly dead."

"What's your point," I finally say.

She looks up from her nearly-finished garland. “Do you remember the words?”

I can’t. Not consciously, at least, but of course, she can.

“I don’t know if there’s a term for the regular living people. But those who die, but still exist in living memory, the living-dead, are Sasha.”

“If you say so.”

“As long as someone is alive who knew them personally, or has personal memories of them, that person is still alive in a way. And once the last person who knew a Sasha is gone—”

“Zamani.” I say as the other term suddenly comes to mind. “They become Zamani. Truly dead.”

“But not forgotten.” She smiles, stands, places the flowered tiara atop her head. Spins once around slowly for approval.

“Do you think Persephone wore one of these?”

“What did you say?”

“It makes sense. After all, her mother was the goddess of grain and fertility and the green earth. That’s how I always pictured her.”

She stops, smile changing to frown of concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just thought you meant..I thought you were talking about someone..something else.”

\* \* \*

The figure outside the shield was familiar. Far too familiar. I’d known every curve, every graceful sweeping line, every inch of olive tinged bronze on that body. The voice, though, hadn’t quite finished forming. It was not Persephone’s lyric, rolling lilt; subtly Mediterranean, rich, but slightly deeper than you’d expect from one so soft featured and supple. No, this was a dry rasping, a voice of dust and ages, hoarse and harsh. It was barely intelligible, but my name was clear enough.

“Liam.”

I stared and it stared back.

“Liam.”

Not fair. Not fair at all. The lowest of low blows.

“Liam.”

I had lost my mind then, any fear and dread far eclipsed by building rage.

“Liam.”

Someone was howling. Me.

“Liam.”

I picked up the Traylor.

“Liam.” I turned off the shield.

“Liam.” The figure shimmered, blurred, faded, suddenly became clear and sharp.

“Liam.” It stepped forward.

“Liam.”

I pulled the trigger.

\* \* \*

“Do you remember what I said about soul mates?”

I say nothing.

“I didn’t mean it,” she adds.

She waits. Looks at me, then beyond me.

“We’d kayaked to Tyr’s Point that day. It started raining when we were halfway across the fjord.” Pauses. Sits cross-legged in the grass. Twirls an auburn lock with one finger. “That was the first time we made love. Right there on the beach. You were worried someone might see us. I told you I didn’t care.” Smiles, shakes her head. “That was also the second and third time we made love.

“She looks up. “You asked me if I believed in soul mates. I said yes, then I said that I didn’t want to be yours. I remember how hurt you looked. Then I explained. I said that I didn’t want you to be my soul mate because soul mates never end up together. It’s just one of those unbreakable laws of the universe.

“Some people never meet their soul mates. If they do, they either meet them too early in life or too late. Or at just the wrong time. Like during a war. I remember telling you when we first met not to get too attached, especially with someone in the service. You asked if I was worried about the fraternization policy, and I said ‘Fuck the fraternization policy, there just might be no future in it.’

“You smiled and said ‘Carpe diem’, and I said, ‘Caveat emptor,’ and you said, ‘That pretty much exhausts my knowledge of Latin. What do we do now?’ and we laughed and then we kissed. Right in front of half the squadron.”

She stands, places a small hand against the shield. Blue halo washes across her palm, indigo flickers and winds about her fingertips, becomes a violet halo.

“We are though, aren’t we, Liam? Soulmates?”

I reach out a hand, press it against the inside of the shield. Fingertip to fingertip, palm to palm. Bare millimeters of shifting energies separate flesh

from flesh. Resistance barring final contact, pushing back, the matching poles of two powerful magnets. Colors swirl, the spectrum reverses, flares, sky of Fenris, ferns on the rocks of Tyr's Point, flowered tiaras, Procyon reflected atop silver waves, wind-rippled tresses limned in sunset, darkening, fading, frozen twilight.

"Were." I finally say.

\* \* \*

Twenty-eight rounds. Ten millimeter armor piercing.

Twenty-eight rounds. Snapped the field off and emptied the entire magazine into it. Knocked it back and down and ripped it into shredded meat.

It didn't even bleed.

I barely got the field back on before it crawled back to the perimeter.

I once saw a hunting guide on Prometheus take down a crested jabberwock with a Traylor using half that many rounds.

It crawled back to the perimeter and stood up. Even as it crawled the torn flaps of flesh folded together. The holes shrank and filled and smoothed over. By the time it reached the shield it was almost fully back into its most recent form. Then it just stood there, holes in its coveralls, fabric hanging in ragged strips. The wounds in the skin beneath soon became flawless once more. Before they'd closed fully I saw that there was no visible blood, muscle, or bone inside the injuries, just some sort of grey pebbly tissue. I could see clean through one of the chest wounds to the forest beyond before it finally closed up.

The unsmiling eyes stared.

But on the face a slight half-grin remained.

\* \* \*

I'd never told Persephone that I loved her, and she'd never told me. Not in so many words, at least, and not that it mattered if the words had been said or not. It was there. I don't know when or how, but it just so happened that one day I knew. When did physical attraction turn into fondness? Fondness into friendship? Friendship into—not love, no, not at first. Something both deeper and less intense. Understanding? Connection?

Knowing, I think. Not the usual knowing, like who the first man on Mars was or who won the Federation Cup in '66, but the kind of knowing that penetrates your heart and soul far down deep beneath conscious thought. Then again, it might all be pheromones and hormones, vomeronasal organs

and oxytocin, pure instinct and programmed response with all the poor fools in the universe unaware that free will is simply an illusion.

Half the time I'm not even sure I know what I'm talking about. But I do know one thing. I loved Persephone. I came close to telling her once. It was just a few weeks before Tau Ceti, in a civvy pub called, rather grandly, 'The Earl of Sandwich Pub and Grille', though everyone just called it 'The Earl'.

It was a Tuesday afternoon, and it was raining. The place was nearly empty, which was probably a good thing, as we were and had been violating nearly every single article of the Terran Federation Navy Fraternization Code for the past year.

"What do you think you'll do after the war?" I asked.

"I haven't given it much thought. Could be a long time. What about you?"

"I don't know. Go back home, I guess. Maybe go see Terra first. After that, just pick up where I left off. Settle down and get a job that doesn't involve getting shot at."

"I think I might go career. Or join the Exploratory Corps. I mean, can you imagine me settling down with a mortgage, three kids, and a nice white picket fence?"

"No," I lied.

'Twilight Calling' was playing—not Van Helsing's original, but a cover (and far superior, I thought) by Rosha Trivedi. We'd hit a moment of silence, a comfortable moment of silence, and my world had been reduced to that song, the hiss of rain outside the window, and Persephone, radiant, sitting across from me.

"Perse." I said, then stopped.

She raised her eyebrows and the corners of her lips turned up a fraction.

"Look," I blurted, "There's never an easy way to say this, but.." I stopped, unable to continue, unable to even process my thoughts into anything resembling coherence.

She stopped me, pressed a single finger to my lips, whispered "Shhhh."  
Rosha Trivedi sang of silver waves and twilight.

Persephone smiled.

Said, "I know."

Said, "I do too."

\* \* \*

The illusion was perfect in its beauty. A little too perfect. The almond shaped eyes just a little larger, the lips fuller, more sultry, the breasts a

little more pronounced, the hips a little curvier, the proud aquiline nose far less pronounced, and the legs a little longer in proportion to the torso. This was an idealized version of Persephone, airbrushed, digitized, and flawless in symmetry. A downloaded pin-up girl, a teenager's fantasy of the rough and tumble, kick-ass, no-nonsense Frontier Beauty who wouldn't be caught dead in Core Worlds fashions, much less mar herself with cosmetic enhancements.

Its speech was far less developed. For an entire day it said nothing but my name. By the second day, it began using short phrases; all were completely random and devoid of context or apparent intelligent intent. Some I remembered as snatches of conversation, and not all were things Persephone had said. Some I remembered from old friends and family members, others from grade school teachers or sitcom characters, and still others I had no conscious recollection of.

I tried to communicate with it—that was part of my job description after all—but would receive only random nonsense in response. Stock phrases, smiles, a nod and a wink, snatches of song, once an odd sort of chicken dance, a primal scream, a two-fingered V for victory, a tongue run slowly over a moist upper lip, a long quote from Marcus Aurelius, a mime-trapped-in-a-glass-box routine, and even the recitation of a recipe for Tauran bush-runner dumplings.

Every so often it would disappear into the woods, sometimes for hours, sometimes for two or three days. Feeding, I assumed. I took advantage of one such absence to leave out a set of spare clothing. I didn't want to keep looking at Ryerson's shredded coveralls. I had no way to communicate this to it, but sure enough one morning it had discarded all but Ryerson's boots and was wearing the trousers and T-shirt I had left outside the shield. This was probably a mistake, as those ruined garments and Ryerson's name tag had provided a vivid visual reminder of the creature's nature.

Then not a sound or gesture for nearly three entire days. It stood silent, not even following me with its eyes, not reacting to questions or gestures. It didn't even react when I aimed the Traylor at it once or twice.

And then, close to sunset, ice clear, "Liam. Don't leave me out here. Please."

"What are you?"

"Every spacer's fantasy, of course."

"I'm not joking around. What are you?"

She frowns, narrows her eyes, raises one eyebrow. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, cut the crap. Talk straight with me. Persephone would have."

“Are you talking about the goddess, or are you talking about me in the third person?”

“Alright, who are you?”

Smiles. “What are you, a census taker?” Recites in mock monotone. “Persephone Ciara Cardella, Petty Officer First Class, Terran Federation Navy, Service ID 131649021. That’s all you’re getting from me, you Vegan scum!”

She laughs. I don’t.

“What is your birth date?”

“June 6th, 2330.”

“How old are you?”

“I just turned 30.” I remembered Persephone’s thirtieth birthday. She had been eight years older than me, and I remembered her as a mature, serious, but striking older woman. I was looking now at a supple, nubile, often giddy youngster who looked barely out of her teens.

“How old am I?”

“You’re twenty-two. Just a babe in the woods.”

She smiles.

I don’t.

“I’m thirty-seven years old. Persephone would be turning forty-five in a couple of months.”

She tilts her head forward, stares at the ground.

“You’re not Persephone. You’re a construct, a collection of memories, albeit a very complex and convincing construct, I’ve got to admit, but you’re not real.”

Soft. Insistent. “I am real.”

“You’re only skin deep. Everything else is borrowed.”

A single tear wells up at the corner of one eye, reaches critical mass, courses down one cheek.

Programmed response, of course.

“You might even really believe you’re Persephone. But you’re not.”

Sniffs. A stifled sob. Voice cracking. “Then who am I?”

“You’re whoever I need you to be.”

Looks up, tear-streaked cheek catches the sun.

Whispers. “Why is that so wrong?”

\* \* \*

I shave for the first time in weeks and use the clippers to get my mop-top back to regulation length. She smiles when I step out into the morning.

“You’re looking sharp. A date? Or a court date?”

I try not to smile, but smile anyway and sit down on my box. She is sitting on a length of log; she must have dragged it out of the forest during the night.

“I’m not going to starve to death,” I tell her.

“Not with those love-handles you’re not.” I ignore the good-natured jab. “Four or five more weeks of living in this cage isn’t going to count for much, and the last two weeks would be really unpleasant.”

She is silent. Waiting. Watching.

“There’s enough drugs and chemicals in the camp supplies to take care of things pretty painlessly, but I don’t think that would be right for me.”

Silence.

“The Traylor and one round will do the trick very nicely, thank you very much.” I pick the assault rifle off of the equipment box, pat the butt twice for emphasis.

She shrugs. “It’s not going to work.”

“Huh? It’ll work more than adequately. Believe me.”

“Oh, I’m not talking about the gun. I’m talking about you’re little charade here. I know you too well. You’d never off yourself. Not like this anyway.”

“And you know that?”

“I know that and I know you. You might ram your ship into a Vegan cruiser, or use your last round to keep from getting captured, but premeditated suicide?”

“I won’t do it in front of you. That just doesn’t seem right somehow.

She shrugs, yawns, stretches her arms above her head. “Not in your stars.”

She waits. Then, “I hope you weren’t expecting me to beg you not to, or something.”

“No. Maybe. What difference does it make?”

She stands, approaches the shield.

“Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“You don’t know either way, but you like to think there is.”

“That’s about it.”

“All that is body is as coursing waters...”

I finish the quote. “All that is of the soul as dreams and vapors. John Donne.”

“Marcus Aurelius,” she corrects. “Do you still think that?”

“Pretty much.”

“And the Sasha?”

“The living-dead? That’s not an afterlife. That’s just memory. Other people’s memories.”

She raises one small hand to the shield, absently traces glowing circles of light against its curved surface with her index finger.

“Isn’t that all we are in the long run, really? Coursing waters. Dreams.”

She withdraws her finger from the barrier, watches the swirling violet spirals evaporate.

“Memories are all that will ever be left of us.” Looks up.

“They’re the only things that are real, Liam.”

Turns. Walks down the hill and into the forest. Fades into the morning shade beneath the trees.

\* \* \*

She is not there the next morning. Nor noon. Nor afternoon. Early evening the wind rises, cloud shadows roll across the rippling grass, while the forest sways and sighs. Under a burgundy sunset she appears, glides from the forest and up the hill. Stops just shy of the boundary.

Waits.

“Well,” I say, “I guess this is goodbye.”

“I never say goodbye. I don’t—”

“I know. You don’t like the finality of it.”

“So I’ll see you when I see you.”

“No, Persephone. You won’t.”

I sit on my box. She sits on her log. I pull a faded, folded printout from my breast pocket. Unfold it. “Your sister sent me this.”

I hold it up to the edge of the screen. I’m not even sure if she can read.

She can, and does. “The Navy Department deeply regrets to inform you that your daughter, Persephone Ciara Cardella, Petty Officer First Class, TFN, was—”

“Finish it.”

“No.”

“Then I will.” I flip the paper around. “Was killed in action in the performance of her duty and in the service of the Federation. The department extends to you its sincerest sympathy in your great loss. Due to exigencies of war memorial service and committal in space was necessary. Further details are not now available but will be communicated to you promptly when received. To prevent possible aid to our enemies please do not divulge the name of her ship.”

I fold the paper. Place it back in my pocket.

“You died on October 24th, 2350. It was a Tuesday. I didn’t find out until mid-December. I traced back everything I had done that day, what I was doing at that exact moment. Somehow I feel like I should have known. Should have felt something. I don’t know what, but a sign. You hear about that, people who just know when something bad happens to someone close. A vision, a dream, a pang of loss..but there was nothing. You know what I was doing when you died? Laundry. Ironing my dress grays. And Hoytman’s too. I couldn’t shine boots for shit, and he couldn’t iron for shit, so we worked out—

“I didn’t cry when I found out. I even wondered why I didn’t. I cried when my dog died, cried like a baby, and I was sixteen, but I didn’t for you—for her. I didn’t feel anything for a long time. And then...

“When it did come, it was, I don’t know, like something physical. Not like, but actual physical pain gnawing the inside of my gut. Like something had been ripped out, but slowly, and I guess something had.

“I have no regrets. I never felt like there was something more I could have done or something I could have said. I’d said everything that needed to be said to her. And there was nothing I could think of that you left unsaid. Our time together was as much as, more than, any guy could have wished for.

“I guess I just wanted you back. Wanted her back. And now...”

“Liam.”

“And now I have to go.”

\* \* \*

My last thought before I pulled the trigger, was, absurdly, “Shit, I’m in the middle of a book.”

I remember saying to Persephone that out there was one book, maybe not even written yet, that I would never finish. The same is true for any avid reader. In my whole lifetime of memories I could not think of a single period of time when I was not in the middle of a book. Even during eleven weeks of boot-camp, where all electronic devices were banned, and I wasn’t actually reading, I still had a book that I was part-way through, and had to pick up again after graduation.

And the book? Spacedog Sirius and the Pirates of the Procyon. Not Plato, not Aurelius, not Cervantes nor Twain, Marquez or King. But a novelization of a feature film about a genetically enhanced dog based on a children’s cartoon which itself was based on a line of toys.

I smiled and it was perfect. Far better to go with a smile.

The tip of the Traylor's barrel was cool against my forehead.

What was Spacedog Sirius' catchphrase?

Ah, who gives a shit. That was me, not Sirius.

I felt a knot of chill in my intestines and a tremor stirring in my hands and knew I had to act quickly.

I pulled the trigger.

\* \* \*

In boot camp our drill instructor had told us that the Traylor Arms M-4 Assault Rifle was the single most reliable firearm in human history. You could drop it, kick it, crack a Vegan skull with it, bury it in the mud, and shit down the barrel, and it would, gentlemen, still fire and never let you down.

Apparently not.

After that dry steel click I am frozen, every muscle and fiber run through with cold fire. Something inside breaks and I double over and shudder and shake and retch in great dry heaves. And then I weep. I weep in relief and I weep in frustration. I weep for starlight and silver waves, bookmarks and sunsets, things lost and things found, bodies and souls entwined in the sands below the gray rocks of Tyr's point.

I weep for myself. I weep for her.

And for a long time after can only lay there on the floor as the sky outside dims into evening.

There is a sound of thunder.

Scattered raindrops fall, splash, hiss on the flickering arc of the shield outside, flashing rings of cyan, rippling, spreading, merging.

For the first time in a long time I check the calendar display above the computer station.

It is Tuesday.

It is Tuesday and it is raining and outside the twilight is calling. She is there, waiting in the summer rain, once luxurious auburn mane now flat and clinging darkly on neck and shoulders, water streaming, shining, beading on soft copper skin. The shield. The switch. A fading hiss. I let the rain fall in.

There are no more barriers to keep us apart, but she does not come to me. She waits.

Words fail and the wind comes alive.

I go to her and I don't need to tell her I love her, because she already knows, and yes, she does too.

She loves. A love freely given and returned.

Love eternal.

Everlasting.

All consuming.

# Magician at the Court

by Jakob Drud

*Jakob Drud lives in Aarhus, Denmark, where he writes advertising copy for a living and science fiction and fantasy for fun. He writes in English because of the many interesting writers and people involved in the SF web community. So far he has sold fourteen stories to various webzines and anthologies, including Space & Time Magazine and Flash Fiction Online. This is a story of magic and a kingdom's rise and fall.*

When the young magician Albaret first came to King Sigil's castle, he had to seek work as a stable boy. Magic was abhorred at court because a prophecy had predicted the realm would crumble if a magician came too close to the King, but Albaret was not afraid to take a chance. The King's castle was large, and though the walls had plenty of ears, a lad could make his fortune there as long as nobody whispered the word magic.

So Albaret mucked out the stables, always efficient, never complaining, and the Stable Master's journeymen all said, "That boy sure knows how to move shit around." They made rude jokes about his pretty face as well, but they never openly speculated how Albaret could do the work of ten men in one day. Airing suspicions about magic would only get the boy burned at the stake, or crucified, or both, and they all knew that being a Stable Master's journeyman is a lot more fun when you don't have to move shit around yourself.

One week, when the Viscount de Pomansky paid a visit of fealty to the King, the Master of Ceremonies decided it would be wise to keep beautiful boys, girls, and women around to draw the Viscount's eyes away from the Queen. This led him to the stables, from where the rumors of Albaret's pretty face had spread.

"Go to the Mistress of the Linens and get yourself scrubbed as clean as the royal bed sheets," the Master of Ceremonies told Albaret, who took off to remove the stink of stable.

Upon his return, the Master of Ceremonies sniffed. "You have the scent of roses about you," he said. Knowing the rankness of the soaps employed by the Mistress of the Linens, this seemed strange to him, perhaps even magical.

Albaret's soul had early shown a love of beauty, aesthetics and joy, and that much he said to the Master of Ceremonies. "I hoped a pleasant smell would bring more delight to the royal halls."

The Master of Ceremonies agreed and in his heart decided that the scent of roses, magic or not, would not be worth the mention. On the contrary, it might further distract the Viscount's attention from the Queen.

As it happened, the Master of Ceremonies could have spared his worries. The Viscount had brought his own wife this time, a dark beauty from the eastern lands he had conquered in the King's name. Instead of staring at the Queen, he groped his wife and drank until he dropped. Before his servants hauled him off, he smashed every glass that he touched to his lips, a practice he had picked up among eastern nobles. Each time, Albaret swept the shards together and promptly handed the Master of Personal Assistance a glass as good as new.

For a minute the Master of Personal Assistance debated if he should inform the Master of Ceremonies, but as the King took up the custom from the eastern lands and the courtiers followed suit, the Master of Personal Assistance let Albaret work his broom.

After that night and many others like it, Albaret steadily swept the King's banquet hall. The King gained much prestige for his merrymaking, and the Mistress of the Glassware put aside a nice dowry for her daughter with the money she should have spent replacing broken crystal.

When months had passed, and smashing crystal was no longer enough to keep the banquets in high spirits, the Master of Entertainment asked Albaret to juggle fire, and the sparks in his hands and eyes drew heated stares from the ladies of the court. More than once he found the eyes of the Queen lingering on his face, and though his hands were never blistered from his fires, he often left the royal halls with a scorched heart.

These were dangerous times for Albaret, for there were courtiers who claimed the fire in their young wives' eyes was lit by a filthy kind of magic. But those claims came from balding old noblemen, and all in all it was the opinion of the court that Albaret merely wielded the magic of youth, the one magic allowed near the King.

Only one of the courtiers, the Master of the Faith, Berhardo, remained wary of Albaret's entertainment. He called Albaret to his chambers, which had the starkly chalked walls favored by truly pious men, and told him: "Your fire-juggling I might, most graciously, dismiss as a lad's way of preparing himself for the Hell that awaits him. But you strike fire in the eyes of ladies, and that is sinful."

"I just do my part to lift the spirits at the court," Albaret said. "And the

fires in the eyes of ladies will only warm their husbands' bedchambers."

The Master of the Faith scowled, for among the women of the court were also maidens in no state of marriage, and when magic made such girls forget The Faith, their Master had a responsibility. "Your escapades mark you as a peasant," he said. "If you must be so mean, at least be mean in the stables."

Such was the false forgiveness of the Master of the Faith. For though he might have sent the boy away, or burnt him at the crucifix, he knew the boons that might come from whispering the word 'magic' in the King's ear at exactly the right time.

\* \* \*

A year passed, and the Viscount de Pomansky's friends and vassals were now called rebels, and the King began to style himself Emperor. The parties became less and less boisterous until only the Emperor, his Master of Arms, and his Generals were drinking around a small table in the evenings. They pored over maps and supply routes instead of visiting their wives and mistresses, and the Emperor's eyes took on a shade of darkness that many courtiers took as a sign that he no longer shared the Queen's bed.

Nobody had thought to style the Queen an Empress, as she was yet to bear the Emperor a son, despite being young and in good health. Earlier, some might have called her lifeless womb the result of witchcraft, and at the Emperor's behest they might still be called upon to do so. However, the talk was more and more that witchcraft had struck the Emperor, and the Master of the Faith, Berhardo, noted the talk and made plans for using it to make people Believe.

Come spring, the Emperor left the castle with his generals, the Masters, and his army. The courtiers, too, donned their armor, or had their squires don it for them. They followed the Emperor, not because they liked war or believed that battle would earn them favors, but because staying behind would earn them scorn.

None of them spared Albaret a thought, for he had been enrolled in a regimen of footmen. Elsewhere magicians would have been sought for and promoted and put on special duties, but the Master of the Draft was solely concerned that the Emperor must have a larger army now that he was no longer a mere King. Only the Master of the Faith spared Albaret's magic any thought, and he only did so because he knew that when in danger, a soldier might turn from Faith to magic to save his life.

For Albaret the summer was long and lacked for pleasant beauty. The sergeant's cursing did not bother him—he was accustomed to peasants call-

ing him accursed, so being styled a diseased dog seemed an improvement—but the absence of pretty women was hard to endure. Fortunately (though Fortune did not work alone) Albaret's regiment was often sent on procurement raids in the villages with the prettiest lasses and the most secluded haylofts.

Rebel Pomansky and his eastern warriors did not seek battle, but waited in the impregnable fortress of Perusa in the mountains of Marchi, and since the imperial army had little to do but plunder the countryside, enraged peasants soon swelled Rebel Pomansky's ranks.

Preparing for a somewhat longer siege than expected the Emperor's army pitched camp for the winter and occupied the passes that led to the fortress. Sappers began the arduous task of blasting tunnels through the rock beneath the fortress walls, and cannonballs tore chunks from battlements and towers. Inside the fortress Rebel Pomansky looked at his filled larders and laughed and said, "The old fool will spend his powder while we wine and dine."

With the advent of winter Albaret's regiment was taken off foraging duty, and the lack of beauty became so unbearable that he started experimenting with fireworks one night. Great balls of ocher and yellow blossomed over the Emperor's army, and even stars of green and blue and lilac, the hardest colors to perfect. The explosions were so powerful that The Master of the Powder died from shock believing that his stores had been lit by saboteurs.

The soldiers liked the entertainment, and Albaret found amusement in varying his shows. Every night the sky bloomed with new colors and louder explosions that made the soldiers swear they had never seen the likes of it in their lives. The survivors of the campaign would tell their children and grandchildren of the fireworks at Perusa, and in time the spectacle became more famous than the siege itself.

The Master of the Faith, however, sought to stop the nightly pyrotechnics through all means, fearing rightly that the show would make the soldiers enjoy life and forget about death, and hence the Faith. He sermonized to the generals about the detriments to the Faith and the disasters that would come of upsetting God. The generals nodded gravely and addressed their captains, who passed orders to their sergeants, who swore at their men. But Albaret's sergeant had not sworn at all since Albaret introduced him to a young farmer's daughter in a village so close by that he could sneak off to see her in lieu of the fireworks, and therefore the orders never reached him.

When the spectacle continued, The Master of the Faith, already suspecting magic, sought Albaret out. "Wars are won with blood and bullets," he warned the lad. "Simple soldiers must endure such hell in contemplation of

death and Faith, not as witnesses to fiery exhibitions.”

Against this Albaret could have said a lot of things, since he actually knew the common footmen. But he saw the vehemence in Berhardo’s face, and so he weighed his words to be true yet pleasing. “I thought that we must practice to understand the wonders of God and this world,” he said. “If all we see is blood and bullets, won’t we forget the beauty of wisdom and creation, and lose the ability to enjoy the life God has given us?”

“Leave the preaching to me and put a stop to your false beauty, or your regiment will soon charge the most well defended walls of Perusa.” With that the Master of the Faith left, believing his warning to have settled the matter.

That night Albaret took defiant pride in making the soldiers laugh and clap at the wondrous shapes of his fire. He lit every ball of ochre and purple with the happiest memories he had, and every explosion made the camp resound with cheers until the light of the sun chased the night away.

So angered became the Master of the Faith that he almost, almost whispered in the Emperor’s ear. But on that morning the peasants who had sided with Rebel Pomansky began to leave the fortress through secret supply tunnels and disappear back to their farms. The eastern warriors, though fierce at heart, had also begun to fear for their lives if they stayed, for if the Emperor could spend his powder so lavishly on entertaining his soldiers, surely he could blast away at the walls until not a single stone was left. So on that morning the garrison surrendered Rebel Pomansky in chains to the Emperor, who showed the benevolence of his rule by killing only one in three of the surrendering soldiers. This victory, of course, was too glorious for anyone to ascribe to magic, so the Master of the Faith held his tongue a little longer.

\* \* \*

The Master of the Faith felt very much alone on the march home. Everybody should have attributed the glorious victory to the Faith, or at the very least to the Emperor, but all that the soldiers could talk of was fireworks.

The surrender ailed the Emperor as well. He had brooded over strategies and tactics for so long. Why had they not gained him victory?

Upon his return to the castle he stopped holding court, and all affairs had to be conducted by the Master of Ceremonies. Every night he plotted to take over all known and unknown lands, and when he read books they were mostly prophecies of his realm’s demise. It was all anybody could do not to whisper ‘bewitchment’.

Albaret was careful not to put magic on show in those days. There was no need for entertainment, or rather, nobody dared cross the Master of the Faith, who had declared that the debauchment at court and in camp had harmed the Emperor. Instead, Albaret returned to moving shit in the stables and on free afternoons took walks in the nearby woods and meadows.

The Queen enjoyed outings in the countryside as well, so it could easily be ascribed to happenstance when one afternoon she and her entourage of maidens met Albaret by a deep and quiet forest pond, where he had washed the stink of horse away. Tales of Perusa had often included Albaret's name, and neither had the Queen forgotten the young fire juggler who had for a while made a lively place of the court, so she reined in her horse and said to Albaret, "Tell me about magic."

"There is no magic," Albaret said for the benefit of the maidens who rode with the Queen. "But if there were, it would be a splendid thing made for a single purpose."

"To serve the realm?" the Queen asked, coyly in part, but wryly too. Her husband—who was the realm, so all agreed—had not treated her kindly of late.

"To serve the heart, my Queen. For what use would magic be if it didn't spark joy in other people?"

As Fate and perhaps other powers would have it, the Queen's maidens found joy in gossiping by the pond while Albaret escorted the Queen on a walk in the forest, where he kindled the glow in her eyes and she the glow in his.

That night the Queen and her maidens returned home before nightfall with flushed cheeks and happy faces. Other chance encounters followed the first, and other embers ignited in their company until it became apparent that the Queen was with child. The glow in her cheeks from her afternoon rides deepened into the permanent rosy hue that graces the happy few who do not suffer morning sickness.

The Emperor did not take the news gently, even though his people cheered the prospect of a long-awaited heir. One morning, wearing only his bathrobe and swinging his longsword, he staggered into the throne room, scattering the stooges, and began howling at the Master of the Faith that the Empire must be Heavenly, Heavenly, and that the Master had failed to tie the knot between the heavens and the earth under his reign.

The Master of the Faith fell to his knees and dared not look further up than the Emperor's bony shins when he said: "My lord, the Faith has never failed you. But magic has poisoned the court and left the realm in shambles." After that, with little regret, he let a name drop from his lips and kept quiet.

Albaret did not stay long enough to see the Emperor's white legs stick out of his bathrobe as he strutted around the courtyard, waving his sword and cursing all magic. The Queen had sent him word long before that, and though he had no particular place to go, he heeded her advice not to stay.

Eventually he found his way across the frontier into a land where magic suffered no distrust. He called this place home, for though he missed the son he never saw, he made friends there, who appreciated his gifts.

The Empire didn't crumble or succumb to magic as the prophecies had spoken, for prophecies are seldom true, even when they speak of doom and destruction. The greatest disaster was that piety ruled supreme for two decades, during which the womenfolk were locked away and the Master of the Faith was promoted to Master of the Inquisition. But such days are never meant to last forever, and after twenty-one years the new heir ascended to the throne to the sound of cheers and sighed relief. After that the Empire flourished again for hundreds of years, not least because the rulers always had a certain spark in their eyes.