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JASON SANFORD
SPECIAL ISSUE

3 NEW STORIES
WITH AUTHOR
INTRODUCTIONS

+

IN-DEPTH
INTERVIEW

interzone

MORE NEW STORIES BY

ALLETTE
DE BODARD

+

MATTHEW COOK

COLOUR ARTWORK BY
WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE
BEN BALDWIN
RICHARD WAGNER
DAVE SENEAL

GENRE NEWS
BOOK REVIEWS
FILM & DVD/BD REVIEWS

+

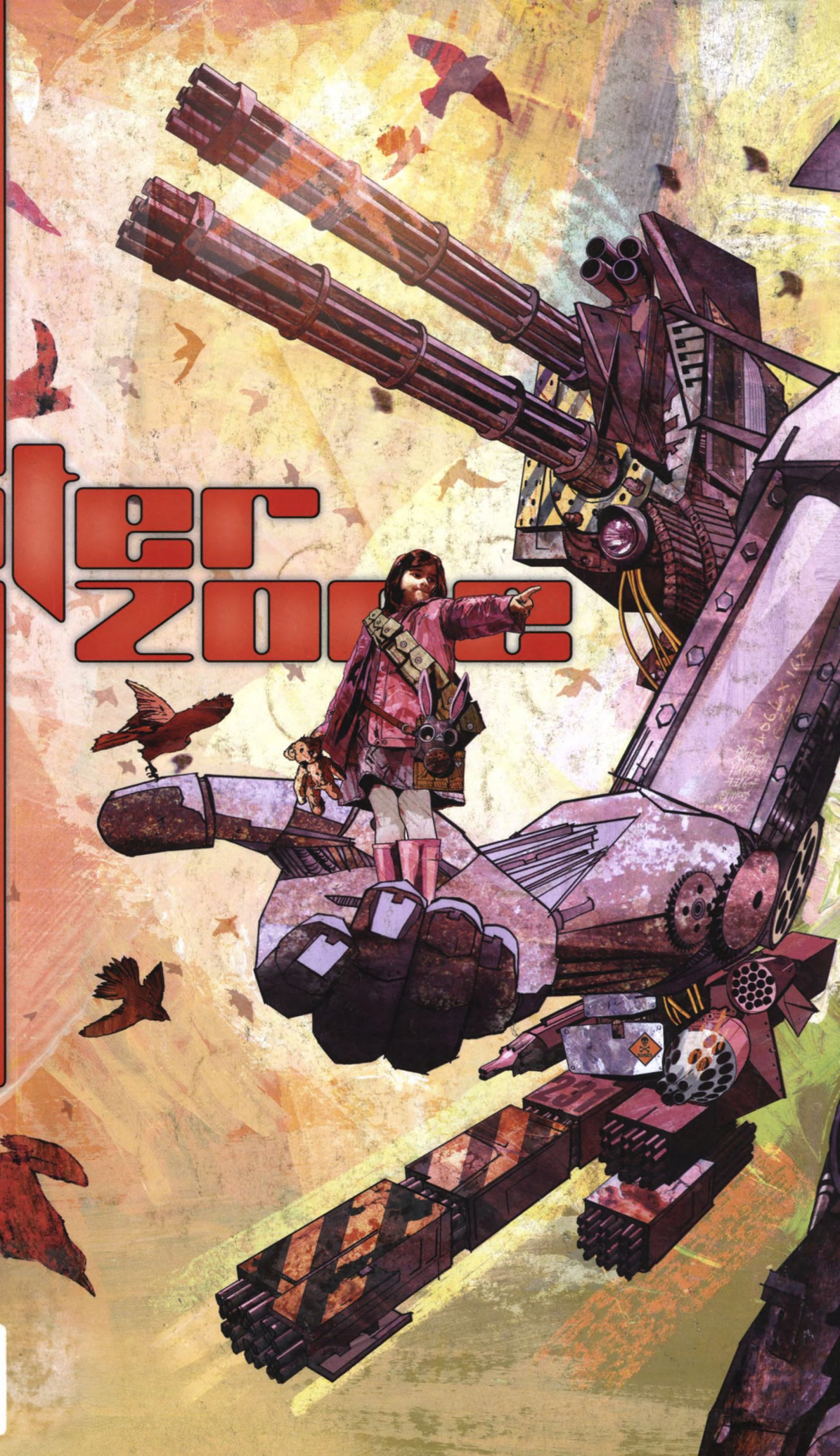
BRITISH FANTASY AWARD
WINNING ANSIBLE LINK
BY DAVID LANGFORD

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INTERFACE

FICTION



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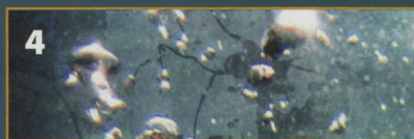
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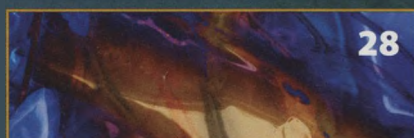
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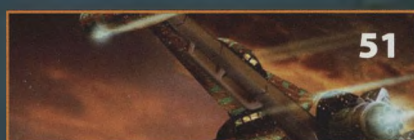


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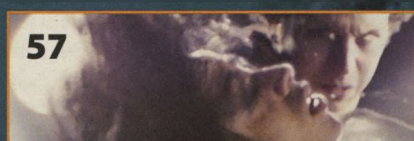
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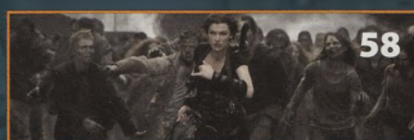
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EDITORIAL

Jason Sanford has played several significant roles in the activities of the *Interzone* team in the past few months. First, there's Sanford the writer, represented by the three brilliantly strange stories we snapped up for this issue. Teeming with extraordinary and complex ideas, they highlight the imaginative range and inventive power of an imagination working at full tilt. Then there's Sanford the cultivator of storytelling talent. Jason sent us a story, 'The Shoe Factory' by Matt Cook, with a brief recommendation. We read it with growing astonishment. It was dense, it was multifaceted and it lurched back and forth across space and time. But we felt it was also engaging, accessible and exciting. It's in this issue. Read it and you'll be in no doubt about Jason's faculty for spotting a talented storyteller. Finally, there's Sanford the provocative and perceptive critic. Recently, when I was putting together a piece for an academic journal on similarities between shifts in sf storytelling in the late 1960s and those in 2010, he was one of several *Interzone* regulars (the others being Aliette de Bodard, Chris Beckett and Gareth L. Powell) who chipped in with thoughts on new directions in contemporary sf. The thrust of Jason's argument is that while mainstream literature deals with issues such as sexuality with more freedom than ever before, it continues to evade the big political, sociocultural and ecological issues faced by humanity. This, he argues, is an artistic vacuum sf is well placed to fill as long as it is able to renew itself and reach out to new audiences.

This is a theme he tackles on his website and in some depth in our interview on page 44. Clearly, he's keen to spark a debate on this issue – and it's a debate we hope you'll be keen to join. Is Jason right to suggest we are seeing a significant departure, in terms of structure, style or thematic concerns of sf storytelling? Let us know on the Interaction forum.

This issue Warwick Fraser-Coombe completes the 2010 covers that combine to form 'Playground (Hide and Seek)'. We've already bought a print to hang on the wall here at TTA Towers, and hopefully many of you will do likewise. Details on page 27. You can also read an interview with Warwick, conducted by Jim Worrada, on the website.

Andy Hedgecock

ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD

Hugo Awards. Novel: a tie, rare in Hugo history – Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Windup Girl*, and China Miéville, *The City & The City*. Novella: Charles Stross, 'Palimpsest' (*Wireless*). Novelette: Peter Watts, 'The Island' (*The New Space Opera* 2). He'd bet he wouldn't win: 'Thanks for costing me \$20, you guys.' Short: Will McIntosh, 'Bridesicle' (*Asimov's* 1/09). Related Work: Jack Vance, *This is Me, Jack Vance!* Graphic Story: Kaja and Phil Foglio, *Girl Genius, Volume 9: Agatha Heterodyne and the Heirs of the Storm*. Dramatic, Long: Moon. Dramatic, Short: *Doctor Who*: 'The Waters of Mars'. Editor, Long: Patrick Nielsen Hayden. Semiprozine: *Clarkesworld* – the first online fiction magazine to win this. Fan Writer: Frederik Pohl. Fanzine: *StarShipSofa*. Fan Artist: Brad W. Foster.

Kim Stanley Robinson's aphorism at the Australian Worldcon was endlessly repeated on Twitter: 'Economics is the astrology of our time.'

J.K. Rowling was threatened with defacement: 'The image of my client is in danger,' explained a Warner Bros. lawyer as the studio sued Magic X, a Swiss company that manufactures condoms with the tasteful brand name Harry Popper. (*Guardian*)

In Typo Veritas. King Alfred's Revenge: 'Torches burned in the scones bound to the trunks of each tree...' (Kari Sperring, *Living with Ghosts*, 2009)

Stephen Baxter is thrilled that Czech biologists have named a new (albeit 500 million years old) trilobite for his Xeelee books: tentative classification *Mezzaluna? xeelee*.

Political Shift. Although I am of course shocked, shocked by the net campaign to move Tony Blair's autobiography to the Crime section of bookshops, it must be noted that a minority disagrees and is choosing to file it under Dark Fantasy. (*Telegraph*)

Harlan Ellison explained why a September 2010 convention would be his last: 'The truth of what's going on here is that I'm dying ... I'm like the Wicked Witch of the

West – I'm melting.' Thus: 'This is gonna be the biggest fucking science-fiction convention ever, because no con has ever had a guest of honor drop dead while performing for the goddamn audience. The only comparison is the death of Patrick Troughton, at a Doctor Who convention. And I don't think he was even onstage.' (*The Daily Page*) No one was such a cad as to express disappointment that, despite this promise of high drama, Mr Ellison survived.

British Fantasy Awards. Novel: Conrad Williams, *One*. Novella: Sarah Pinborough, 'The Language of Dying'. Short: Michael Marshall Smith, 'What Happens When You Wake up in the Night' (Nightjar). Anthology: *Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 20* ed. Stephen Jones. Collection: Robert Shearman, *Love Songs for the Shy and Cynical*. Small Press: Telos. Comic/Graphic Novel: Neil Gaiman & Andy Kubert, *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* Artist: Vincent Chong. Non-Fiction: David Langford, 'Ansible Link' – yes, this very column! Magazine: *Murky Depths*. Television: *Doctor Who*. Film: *Let the Right One In*. Newcomer: Kari Sperring, *Living With Ghosts*. Special, for outstanding contribution: Robert Holdstock.

Dickless Google. A report on terms blacklisted by Google Instant Search (the annoying feature that shows potential search results as you type) reveals that although entering 'Philip K. Dick' gives promisingly many hits, adding a space causes the whole list to vanish for fear of Offensive Results. With 'Philip Kindred Dick', this vanishment mysteriously happens when you type the R...

Trademark Logic. US TV host Conan O'Brien announced his new talk show *Conan* ... but first had to acquire a licence from Conan Properties International, which has trademarked the Robert E. Howard character's common Irish name. (*Washington Post*)

ALA Banned Book Week. The easily outraged of America are moving with the times: though Guardian coverage opened with the traditional photo of Kurt Vonnegut, the only fantastic work in the



▲ The object in the hands of the British Fantasy Award statuette may be rugose, squamous, nameless or even blasphemous.

American Library Association's latest top-ten list of 'frequently challenged' books is Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. 'Reasons: religious viewpoint, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group.' That heavily emphasised no-sex-before-marriage message was just too subtle.

More Awards. John W. Campbell (new writer): Seanan McGuire. • World Fantasy, Life Achievement: Brian Lumley, Terry Pratchett, Peter Straub.

Thog's Masterclass. Dept of Personal Presence. 'She sat down in that earthy way that said she was all there.' (L.E. Modesitt Jr, *The Fires of Paratime*, 1980) • Fins, Fins, Fins, Moving Up and Down Again Dept. '...the pain marched across my shoulder like a shark army might have.' (*Ibid*) • Eyeballs in the Sky. 'Gazing up at his face, I saw a pair of beautiful blue eyes caressing my face.' (Jocelynn Drake, *Wait for Dusk*, 2010) • Book of Lists Dept. 'Inside and among the stars, a montage, a collage, a kaleidoscope, a cacophony, a song, of colors, shapes, sounds, trees, flowers, stones, bricks, houses, horses, unicorns, dragons, lizards, eagles, sparrows, mollusks, whales, wasps, mosquitoes, fairies, changelings, humans, centaurs, the dead, the living, the unborn, the not yet born, the just conceived, until, until there was nothing and there was everything.' (Warren Rochelle, *The Called*, 2010)

R.I.P.

Larry Ashmead (1932–2010), US editor who worked at Doubleday, Simon & Schuster and HarperCollins, and whose Doubleday sf stable included Asimov, Ballard and Dick, died on 2 September; he was 78.

Geoffrey Burgon (1941–2010), UK film/TV composer who wrote music for two *Doctor Who* storylines (1975–1976), *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979) and the BBC Narnia adaptations (1988–1990), died on 21 September; he was 69.

Susan M. Garrett (1940–2010), US fan/author of *Doctor Who* and other fan fiction, whose *Intimations of Mortality* (1997) is an authorised novelisation of the vampire TV series *Forever Knight*, died on 14 August.

Elaine Koster, US publisher and literary agent who (while at New American Library in the 1970s) launched Stephen King's bestseller career with a then-enormous \$400,000 paperback advance for *Carrie*, died on 10 August; she was 69.

Alain le Bussy (1947–2010), Belgian author of at least 25 sf novels and 200 stories, died on 14 October. He had won the 1993 Prix Rosny-Ainé and a 1995 European SF Society award.



▲ **Benoît Mandelbrot** (1924–2010), Polish-born US/French mathematician whose pioneering work on fractals (a term he coined) and fractal geometry was hugely influential in many fields including sf, died on 14 October aged 85.

Edwin Morgan (1920–2010), leading Scots poet named as Scotland's first national laureate in 2004, died on 19 August aged 90. He was fond of sf and space themes; his many collections

included *Star Gate: Science Fiction Poems* (1979).



▲ **Jennifer Rardin** (1965–2010), US author of the 'Jaz Parks' CIA assassin/vampire hunter sequence beginning with *Once Bitten, Twice Shy* (2007), died on 20 September; she was only 45.

Claire Rayner (1931–2010), UK agony aunt and novelist whose sf venture was *The Meddlers* (1970; US title *The Baby Factory*), died on 11 October aged 79.

E.C. Tubb (1919–2010), long-time UK sf author and fan – always known as Ted – died on 10 September; he was 90. His first story (for *New Worlds*) and first of over 130 novels (*Saturn Patrol* as by King Lang) both appeared in 1951; he was a founder member of the British SF Association in 1958 and edited the first issue of the BSFA's *Vector*; his best-known space opera series, the Dumarest saga, ran to 33 volumes 1967–2009. He kept writing until the last – even now, further novels are scheduled.

Donald H. Tuck (1922–2010), Australian sf bibliographer whose researches formed a major foundation stone of genre reference work, died on 11 October aged 87. He won a 1984 nonfiction Hugo for the third and last volume of his monumental *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy through 1968* (1974–1983).

Ralph Vicinanza (1950–2010), US agent whose New York agency Ralph Vicinanza Ltd represents many genre authors including Stephen Baxter, Joe Haldeman, Stephen King, Terry Pratchett, Robert Silverberg, Peter Straub and Connie Willis, died unexpectedly on 26 September, aged 60. Producer credits on film/TV adaptations of clients' work include *Jumper*, *FlashForward* and the forthcoming *The Forever War* and *The Wee Free Men*.

THE SHOE FACTORY

BY
MATTHEW
COOK

Matthew Cook is an artist and author living in Columbus, Ohio. His first novel, the dark fantasy *Blood Magic*, was published by Juno Books in September of 2007. A sequel, *Nights of Sin*, was released in August of 2008. Both *Blood Magic* and *Nights of Sin* have been nominated for the 2009 Gaylactic Spectrum Award. Matt shares his home with the love of his life Amy, Grayson his wild-haired son, a talking African Gray parrot, Zoe (the Scariest Cat in the World), three Mini Coopers, numerous computers and countless books.



THE SMELL OF ORANGES. CAT'S TONGUE ROUGH ON HIS FINGERTIPS, LICK-
ing cream. He blinks – now Emily is smiling up at him through beams of
sunshine sparkling with dust. Her black hair spreads across the pillow.

She sighs over the rumble of cars out on the street, the sound of brakes
squealing, of angry honking. Oranges fade to the stink of exhaust and damp
and rotting concrete. The comforting smell of the shoe factory. The smell of
Guangzhou, China in summer. The smell of home.

He blinks again. Now he's at the river. Ten years old and invincible. Fearless.
He jumps out, into space, into the sensation of falling. The rope between his
thighs pulls tight. The tire swing sweeps over the water.

He wonders, just for an instant, where the shoe factory has gone, but it's a
fleeting worry. He abandons himself to the moment and laughs, toes carving a
wake through the brown surface, before he arcs back up, up, legs thrown for-
ward, toes pointed at the sky. Drops of water prisms; diamonds flying into
the hard, blue summer sky.

The blue goes black. The diamonds freeze into pinpoints of light, hard and
cruel and uncaring. He hangs at the zenith, floating for true now, looking at the
uncounted multitude of stars. The suit is old, smelling of sweat and stale breath
and the odor of the hab module: fried vegetables, oil, and endlessly recycled
air. He tongues the switch that routes power to the EV-pack on his back.

He hangs in the black, looks down. Below stretches the attenuated bulk of the
Easy Rider, a long rectangle of crisscrossed steel beams surrounding a spinal
cord of conduits, pipes and wires. She's an unlovely craft, but solid. Dependable.
At least, she always was.

Ahead, at the far end of the span, the end furthest from the steel oasis of light
and heat that keeps him alive, is the engine module, hidden from sight behind
the wide, lead disc of the radiation shield. Directly below, amidships, are the box-
car shapes of the cargo modules. The central cluster is crowned by the tiara of the
long-range antenna. The big dish is pointed backwards, towards Phobos Station.

He remembers this moment. Remembers the sick feeling of fear as he put
on the suit, ears ringing from the wailing alarm of the containment breach.
Remembers the familiar feeling of claustrophobia as the helmet clicked into
place, trapping a tiny piece of the hab-unit's warmth against his face. Remem-
bers the crackle of the suit as the airlock cycled from one atmosphere to hard
vac, the door sliding up in the perfect silence of space.

He shakes his head. *No. This is wrong. It didn't happen this way.*

He did not pause, hanging above the antenna's dish. He's supposed to grasp
the handles of the EV-pack now. Supposed to twist them, sending pulses of
compressed gas backwards, propelling him towards the malfunctioning en-
gines. Supposed to drift over the lip of the rad shield, hearing the clicks of the
r-counter ticking like mad as he passes the threshold.

He remembers forward, the sensation strange – mental double-vision, like
déjà-vu, but real. He knows what he'll see when he drifts over the lip of the
shield. His mouth goes dry, his tongue turned to sandpaper.

Sandpaper. Rough. Rough scrape of the cat's tongue across his fingertips.
Licking the sticky cream. It cost a month's salvage, over in the market two miles
from the shoe factory. Oranges and whipped cream are Emily's favorite. It's her



birthday. This is her gift.

He looks away from the black and white cat. Oranges sectioned and sliced and placed in the chipped white bowl. He'll put the cream in another, so it won't curdle. The tang of the fruit almost, but not quite, pushes away the ever-present smell of the cars outside, of the shoe factory's damp, moldy stink.

He glances over his shoulder, into the living room they've cobbled together out of some old chairs and their futon and a half-sprung velvet couch. Sheets of hanging plastic sketch out walls, wafting, crinkling in the damp breeze that flits through the shoe factory's skeletal, glassless windows.

His eyes catch on the empty place that will soon be filled with a wire spool, on which will be the vidpod and the flickering, Taiwanese flatscreen. He frowns.

They don't have a flatscreen. They've always watched his pirated, vintage movies in bed, in the musty-smelling futon, lying together, limbs intertwined, peering at the vidpod's tiny screen. Whoever owned the 'pod before him had more than three hundred films stored, so they watch it almost every night, a glowing window into a distant, happier time.

He likes American action movies, particularly car or cop films from the latter half of the 20th starring Steve McQueen or Clint Eastwood. Emily likes romances, no matter what era, but is particular to stories from the beginning of the 21st that feature the Korean girl, Jang Na Ra. The stories are all the same; only the names of the characters vary. Emily finds peace in this arrangement. Sometimes he likes the romances as well, but he's a guy so he acts like he doesn't.

He frowns and stirs the cream, tearing open packets of brown cane sugar stolen from the tourist café at the end of the block. Emily likes the cream sweet as candy, sweeter than the fruit. It's her birthday; the theft was worth the risk.

Outside, past the iron lattice of the glassless window, lie the puzzlebox rooftops and laundry-strung alleyways of Nansha. He looks over the endless rows of crumbling masonry and rotting concrete, stretching out into the humid distance. Most of the once great factories and warehouses are ruined hulks, their once-proud roofs collapsed, little more than piles of rusting scrap. A lucky few, like the factory he calls home, still have some or all of their roofs.

Beyond the sprawl, the Pearl River collapses into its delta. Way out, almost hidden in the haze, lies the glittering plane of the South China Sea. An arcology floats a few miles from shore, an enormous manmade lily pad crowned with a slab-sided hyperstructure, big as a city. Distance and humidity make the vision into a watercolor.

Like always, he fantasizes about what it must be like out there, drifting with the tide and the winds. They say there's no sickness there. No death. Those whose bodies are too old simply decant their memories to new, young shells, vat grown months or years in advance and stored for just such an eventuality.

Someone honks a horn down on the street and curses in Cantonese. "*Haahng-lan-heui!*" Move! Get out of the fucking road!

Great grandfather said that once, long before, this part of Guangzhou was the richest part of China. There were countless factories here, home to millions of workers. They made shoes, and toys, and electronics here, goods shipped to every corner of the globe.

Then the jobs moved on to cheaper places. Somalia, or Haiti, or Mississippi. What crushing poverty started, the CROSS pandemic ended, reducing the city to a ghost of its former self. Sometimes he still finds bones in the rubble of the tumbledown factories, smooth and white, the color of mourning.

The deadbolt snicks open down on the factory floor and speeds his strokes, whipping the cream into froth. Emily's footsteps ring on the iron staircase. He sees her grin as her face clears the platform.

"Guess what I found?" she says, tossing her satchel on the floor beside the futon.

A flatscreen. Miraculously undamaged, wedged inside a cupboard beneath a fallen wall.

"I give up," his mouth says, following the script of what actually happened. "What?"

"A flatscreen! I was salvaging in the old Mattel factory on the west edge of the sprawl, and found it in what was left of a conference room. I think it might work, but I need you to come help me dig it out."

He smiles back as pleasure washes through him. Emily's a much better scrounger than he is. She walks up and sees what he's making for her.

"Happy birthday, Em," he says, just before she squeals and throws herself into his arms. They sit at the table he built out of an old door and some cinder blocks and eat her birthday surprise. After, she snuggles in his lap and kisses him, her breath redolent of oranges and cream. He carries her to the futon, and they make love tangled in the musty sheets.

They will do it again later that night, he knows, her skin lambent blue in the flickering glow of the rescued flatscreen, but for now all he knows is that he is sixteen, his belly is full, and he is in love. He closes his eyes. When he opens them again, all he can see is the velvet black and the myriad stars.

The radiation shield is just ahead. He squirts thrust out of his pack, rising a few degrees. Dread expectation fills him, and it's almost a relief when he sees the twisted mass of steel that used to be the main drive cluster.

It's a death sentence. He should be terrified; part of him is. Plasma vents from the ruined array. Soon, within an hour, probably less, it will lose containment of the tame singularity that powers the *Easy Rider*. When that happens, everything nearby will be drawn into the pinpoint black hole, matter converting in an eye blink into a burst of hard radiation.

The hole will only last a fraction of a second before the uncompromising laws of gravity and physics erase the improbable rip, but that will be more than enough. He can dump the core and run for it, but there's no way to get a proper distance before it tears him and everything within a hundred-thousand clicks apart. Escape is not an option, nor is repairing the ruined array.

He pauses long enough to wonder what hit him, a micro-meteorite most likely, impacting at the worst possible place, a pressurized fitting maybe, or the delicate capacitors that enable the containment array. The eternally bad luck of the scrounger. Fuck. *Diu la sing.* Fuckfuckfuckfuck.

He shrugs. It doesn't matter. The implosion will leave no wreckage for investigators to search through. He turns aside, back to the hab unit three hundred meters away. He has things he needs to do.

There's something behind him, a sensation like eye tracks on the back of his neck. When he looks, he's standing on the ruined assembly floor of the Mattel factory. The roof is long gone. The night is clear, and the swollen, orange-tinted moon gives plenty of light. Emily is under the fallen wall, booted feet scrambling.

"You sure that support's wedged good?" she asks, her voice muffled. "I gotta shift a bit more crap, then I've got it."

He checks the wooden shoring and nods. "Looks solid. Go for it."

Emily hands out chunks of dry-rotted sheetrock and crumbling particleboard. He piles them with the rest of the debris.

She backs out, grinning. In her gloved hands is the dusty shape of the flatscreen, miraculously preserved in a layer of dusty plastic. "It was in a hutch or it would have been crushed," she marvels. "Do you think it works?"

It works. We'll plug it into the solar batteries and scream like schoolgirls when it lights up blue, he almost says. *I'll need to fiddle with the inputs, solder in some new ones that aren't corroded, but I've always been good with tech. It'll work.*

"Dunno," his voice says, following the script. "Let's get it home and find out."

They scurry for the shoe factory, carrying the flatscreen between them. At every intersection they pause, alert for roving gangs. If it works (*and he knows it will work*), the device is a treasure, worth a fortune. They both know people who have been killed for less. When they're sure nobody is looking, they scramble past, using piles of fallen wall as cover.

Halfway home they cut through the dark bulk of an old shopping mall. The partial roof overhead blocks the moonlight, and under its dark expanse the shadows are black as the inside of a mine. It's scary, but they're both glad for the concealment.

They're almost out when he feels the flatscreen slide from his fingers. Silence descends. He can't hear Emily's footsteps, can't see her in the impenetrable gloom.

This isn't how it went, he thinks. *We got home just fine, and watched vids and fucked for the rest of the night. Easy Rider was one of the films we watched.*

He looks back, but he can't see the moonlight beyond the edge of the mall. He reaches down. The rubble and scattered trash that should be underfoot isn't there any more, just a vague solidity that his fingers refuse to define.

Something rustles behind him. He freezes, his breath loud in his own ears. There's something back there, watching him. He can feel it. The thing in the dark slides towards him.

The blackness and the weird ground and the feeling of something coming up behind him are too much. Terror grabs him by the nape, gives a shake. He runs off into the dark. Bands of fear constrict his chest, cutting off his breath. He looks back, and trips on his own feet, falling forward, arms outstretched.

He plunges into bloodwarm water, hard enough to knock the wind from his lungs. Amber sunlight glows all around, diffused through the muddy river. A galaxy of silver bubbles swirl. Reflexively, he opens his mouth. Water pours in.

He coughs and draws in another watery breath. He's drowning. He claws for the surface. He remembers this – this is how it happened – but his fear pushes away the memory of the event's resolution. All he knows now is the terrible burning as the wa-

ter fills his lungs.

A hand reaches down and grabs his hair, then pulls. His head bursts through the surface, mouth gasping as he coughs the water out. His rescuer swims to shore, arm around his chest, pulling backwards with strong, even strokes.

He flops onto the muddy bank, retching. After a while, he catches his breath. His throat burns.

"That was fucking close," he hears a familiar voice say. "You OK?"

He rolls over and there's Emily, fifteen years old, just like he remembers her in the shoe factory, six years from now. Her green T-shirt, her favorite one, the one with the little cartoon ninja on the front, is plastered to her breasts.

He blinks. He won't meet Emily for years. If he's ten then she'd be nine now, still living in Hong Kong with her American father and his Korean mistress. She won't run away until she's thirteen. They'll meet four months later.

"You OK?" she asks again. "Looks like you swallowed half the Pearl. Take a few minutes and rest up, OK?"

She stands and gathers her wet hair into a ponytail, then climbs onto the hanging tire. He watches as she swings out and up, letting go at the top of the arc. She splashes into the Pearl with a whoop. She does not come up.

He stands, vertigo tilting the bank beneath him. His inner ear is going crazy, even as his mind screams at him that it couldn't be Emily. Emily didn't pull him out of the river; that had been someone else, a fat brick maker's son from the other side of town. What had his name been again? Pai Lui, that's it. Where is Pai Lui?

He closes his eyes, and the sound of his breath rushes past his head. When he opens them, he sees the frozen stars. Sees the long backbone of the *Easy Rider* gliding beneath his boots. He nudges the jetpack's handles, aiming himself for the bright red airlock door. He doesn't have much time.

He feels the eye tracks on his back again, but refuses to turn. Refuses to play. Turning might make him unstuck again, and he only has a few minutes. The singularity might (*will*) burst free at any moment.

As soon as the outer door is closed, he slaps the emergency override. Air spills into the lock. The suit flaps in the brief hurricane. He un-dogs the helmet and his ears pop in the partial pressure, then claws open the suit tabs.

He's in the hab module less than a minute later, staring at the memrecorder. It's the only luxury he allowed himself to bring, an acknowledgement of the fear he's never really let go of.

When he first bought it from Yuan, it was broken. Yuan thought he was selling it for parts, but he was always good with tech, and traced the problem to a simple broken wire. Two minutes later, the recorder spun up to life, good as new.

He used it almost every night, backing up his personality file on salvaged chips. Back then, he'd had no clone on ice to decant them to; that would come later, after his first big asteroid score. The recording was the thing. At least he knew that if he didn't wake up some morning something would survive him. It wouldn't be *him*, not technically, but it would be close enough.

Six months after he bought the recorder, he stumbled onto a treasure trove, a crumbled warehouse filled with pre-pandemic tech, replacement computer RAM chips mostly. Each unit lov-

ingly sealed in its anti-static bag, pristine as the day they were manufactured. He never would have found the cache without the skills Emily had taught him.

It took him three months to find a buyer, but his patience finally paid off. With the profits, he put a down payment on the *Easy Rider*, an asteroid-mining singleshop, and blasted off into space. He didn't look back. He never wanted to see Earth, or China, again. They were too haunted.

Now he's staring at the memrecorder, a box the size of a suitcase, its delicate capture armature carefully stowed. He opens the case and looks at the recorded chips inside, waiting patiently to be updated with his most recent experiences and memories.

He frowns. This is no good. The unit's a good one, despite its age, and the update will only take a minute or two, but it will be futile. Before it dies, the singularity will draw in everything, the recorder and the memory chips and everything else. The only thing that can travel fast enough to get away from the meltdown and the resulting big squeeze is light.

Light.

An idea blossoms. Mad. Impossible. But what choice is there?

It takes a few minutes to figure out how to divert all of the reactor's considerable power into the laser antenna. When he's done, he opens the panel on the back of the memrecorder and reaches in, fingers tracing the tiny I/O jacks. This is crazy. This can never work. Can it? He doesn't have any cables that can bridge between the recorder's flash memory and the antenna input, but he can make them. If he has time.

He reaches back to grab his toolbox, and finds himself in the hospital. Hard plastic chair the color of Em's oranges. Smell of antiseptic. "No," he whispers. He remembers this moment far too well. "Not this. Please."

His back's stiff, like he's been here for hours. He has. The ventilator sighs, higher as it sucks in air, then low as it pumps it into Emily's poor, battered body.

He won't look. He knows what he'll see. Instead, he stares out the open door. A nun glides past, the wings of her headpiece flared outwards. The stethoscope around her neck clashes with the crucifix dangling at her waist.

Something next to the bed beeps, and he feels his blood run cold. Funny expression, that. It's perfectly descriptive, like a jolt of ice water through his veins. He wonders what causes the feeling, tells himself to ask the nun when she comes back in to check on Emily.

They won't have the time to answer questions, he remembers. In a few seconds the machines will go crazy, beeping and flashing, announcing that Em's heart has finally given up. They'll come rushing in, the nun and her assistants, trays of equipment on steel carts. They'll work on her for almost an hour while I wait in the hall, peering in through the little window in the door. An hour they'll work, then they'll finally stop, and pull the white sheet up over her face.

The machine beeps again. He feels tears stinging his eyes, mouth twisting with sobs that build like gathering monsoon clouds. He's already on his feet when the equipment goes berserk, already headed for the door. Out in the hall he hears someone shout in English, "Code blue, room 2346. Code blue!"

He walks into the hallway. He's in the corridor of the *Easy Rider*, the sounds of the life support machinery now the

wailing of the containment alarm. It can't be silenced, safety procedure, but the constant din distracts him. He reaches up and clips the siren leads with wire cutters, and blessed silence fills the hab module.

He runs back to the table, seven short steps, then finishes crimping the last connection onto the fiberop cable. He plugs one end into the antenna's motherboard and sees the other end light up red, like a demon's eye. He should run a diagnostic, transfer a few terabytes of data through it and compare the files for errors, but there's no time. It will work or it won't.

He feels a chill and reaches up, touches his cheek. There are tears on his face. Tears? Why has he been crying?

Wet on his face. Wet hair. A circle of faces, looking down at him. His chest burns from the water he's just breathed in and vomited out.

"You OK?" one of the kids asks.

Behind him, he sees Pai Lui, the brick maker's son, the one who really saved him. He's fat, just like he remembers him, black hair plastered down to his round head. The other kids pat him on the back.

He looks around, looking for Em, but he won't meet her for years yet. "You OK?" the kid repeats, reaching down to help him up. He takes the proffered hand and lets himself be lifted. Beyond the ring of young, concerned faces he sees something move, a shapeless mass of darkness, swirling, churning.

Watching. The other kids don't seem to notice. Why would they? It wasn't really there. Isn't really there. But it is.

The hand in his shifts. It's Emily's hand. He's helping *her* up. Pulling her off the bed. The blood-soaked sheets stick to her naked back. He has to peel them free, so they don't trip him on the stairs.

"They kicked down the door," she whispers through pulped lips and shards of broken teeth. "I forgot to lock the dead bolt. I'm so stupid... I'm sorry..." she whispers.

He slings her over his shoulder, no other, gentler way to carry her, and staggers for the stairs. Her face, her lovely face, is a mass of bruises and cuts. One eye is an orb of blood, swollen to a slit.

"Not your fault," he mutters. "I'll get you to the hospital and they'll fix you right up. Don't you worry now, Em, you hear me? They'll fix you right up."

The shoe factory is a shambles, everything of value stolen. The wire spool is empty; vidpod and flatscreen gone; clothes and papers scattered around. The flatscreen was worth a lot. Why couldn't they have just taken it and gone?

Emily sobs in pain. They broke ribs when they beat her, her chest is black and blue under the blood. He feels a rush of pride penetrate the sick panic, like a ray of sunshine through clouds. Figures that Em would fight. She's a fighter; it's one of the things he loves about her.

"Sorry, Em," he says, panting. "We're almost down."

"The first one..." she mutters. "I got my hands on his balls... He won't be messing with girls for a while, you can count on that. It only made the others more angry..." She coughs, and he feels warm blood spatter the back of his legs.

"You did good," he says. "You're gonna be fine."

He reaches the factory floor and heads for the open door. Outside, the sun is shining in a perfect, blue sky. A lovely

day, not too hot. Too beautiful to contain the horror inside the shoe factory.

The light is stinging bright as he walks out. The light. In his face. He reaches out and adjusts the lamp. The I/O jack is in his hands, held with forceps.

He plugs it in. The little green AUX light on the antenna's signal processor lights up. He's connected. He sits down and pulls the capture array towards him, settles the 'todes on his temples and across the back of his skull. The memrecorder beeps.

Beeps. Sirens wailing out in the corridor. Sirens beeping in Emily's room. The nurse pushes past him, already barking orders. Here come the metal trays. They will cut fresh holes in Em's bleeding, broken body. All for nothing.

He opens his mouth to tell them to leave her alone. To comfort her in her last moments, not torture her, but the orderly closes the door in his face. He reaches out to open it –

His hand hovers over the TRANSMIT button. He thinks of the thousand things he hasn't had the time to check. The antenna alignment. He thinks it's still right, but he might be out of position. The connection between the recorder's flash memory and the transmitter. It could be spotty, and he has no idea what, if anything, signal degradation will do to his transmission. He doesn't even know if what he's trying to do has even been attempted, successfully or otherwise. But data is data, right?

He feels something behind him, the sensation of being watched as whatever has been following him leans closer for a good look.

He refuses to turn. If he sees a mass of darkness behind him, he knows he'll tear the 'todes off his head and run, screaming.

He takes a breath. It echoes backwards, becomes the same breath as when he saw the nun pull the sheet over Em's staring eyes. The same breath he drew lying on the ground beside the Pearl. The same breath he let out in the wake of orgasm, Emily's sweating skin pressed against his. He hears a footstep behind him and he must turn; he cannot help himself.

Emily is behind him, fifteen and radiant, more beautiful than he even remembers, her satchel across her chest, half covering the cartoon ninja. She smells of oranges and river water. She smiles. Behind her is the churning shape of the Darkness, lovely and terrible.

"It will be alright," Em says, still smiling. "Trust me."

He nods and mashes his thumb against the antenna control screen. The lights dim, then go out as the re-routed reactor power floods into the transmitter. The life-support fans go silent. No need for them now. He smells something burning as the power leads running to the antenna struggle to cope with the new load. He prays they will wait just bit longer before they melt.

He feels the familiar tickle in his scalp as current flickers though the 'todes. Everything he was, everything he is now, is flowing into the memrecorder and from there out the I/O jack and into the tightbeam laser transmitter. His thoughts are streaming out, at the speed of light, towards the big dish at Phobos Station, massively amplified by the remaining power of the dying reactor.

They can't help but hear him, if the beam hits. If the beam hits. He didn't check the alignment. Normally he transmits his daily telemetry in radio waves, plenty of room for error, but only a tightbeam laser can deal with the massive amount of data

streaming out of the recorder. It must be spot-on or they'll miss it.

He shakes his head. There was no time. He's either on target or he's not.

The machine beeps and a progress bar paints itself across the lower third of the display. It fills with agonizing slowness.

Nothing to do now but wait. He wonders if he'll see the flash as the *Easy Rider* and everything in it is reduced to x-rays and gamma radiation. He wonders if he will have time to feel anything.

Em's hand grasps his, cool and smooth. She walks around to face him, and the Darkness moves with her, flapping and churning like a windblown cloak.

"You missed Phobos of course," Em says with a sad smile. "Even a fraction of a degree of misalignment would have been plenty. The tightbeam laser went past Mars, and Earth, then past Sol and out into the void, creeping along at the speed of light. We... I mean I... think that it was traveling for centuries, millennia, before we... before I picked it up. By then, the signal was very attenuated, barely able to be separated out from the background noise of the stars."

"You're not Emily, are you?"

"No," she says. "I'm sorry. Emily died a very, very long time ago. All that remains of her is what you've brought with you."

Tears sting his eyes, blurring the display and the filling progress bar. Grief constricts his chest, worse than the fear he's drowning in. "So what are you? What's happening to me?"

"I'm trying to help," she says. "We've been rebuilding you for a long time. It's been my life's work. We... my group and I... we've learned through much trial and error that this is the best way to reach you. I think that this time we'll be successful."

"Successful in what?" he asks, but he thinks he knows. The sick, animal panic drops away. He's not afraid. This time, anyway. He thinks that there have been other times, times when he was so scared that he simply shattered, like a flatscreen crushed beneath a wall.

"Your mind is very difficult to understand," Emily says. "You experience time as a river, flowing ever in the same direction, but you store memories non-sequentially. Your transmission contained no key to re-sequencing you, so we had to guess. I'm sorry if it's disorienting."

"I don't understand," he says.

"You will. Soon. I can't wait to finally meet you."

He hears a noise from the rear of the ship, the death scream of the engine module. "It's time," Emily says.

There is a silent flash, every color and no color at all. He feels nothing, not even a split second of pressure. The world goes the bright, empty blue of a flatscreen with no signal.

He feels Em, all around him. He can tell that she's smiling. The harsh blue fades to black, a velvet absence of light shot through with red.

He feels his body, feels the delicious sensation of gravity, pressing him down into the musty sheets. He smells the damp odor of the shoe factory, the welcome stink of home, underneath the tang of freshly-peeled oranges.

A voice, so very like Emily's, whispering in his ear. "See?" she says. "It worked."

He feels a smile on his lips as he opens his eyes. •

THE shipmaker ALIETTE DE BODARD

SHIPS WERE LIVING, BREATHING BEINGS. DAC KIEN HAD KNOWN THIS Seven before she'd reached the engineering habitat, even before she'd seen the great mass in orbit outside, being slowly assembled by the bots.

Her ancestors had once carved jade, in the bygone days of the Lê Dynasty on Old Earth: not hacking the green blocks into the shape they wanted, but rather whittling down the stone until its true nature was revealed. And as with jade, so with ships. The sections outside couldn't be forced together. They had to flow into a seamless whole – to be, in the end, inhabited by a Mind who was as much a part of the ship as every rivet and every seal.

The Easterners or the Mexica didn't understand. They spoke of recycling, of design efficiency: they saw only the parts taken from previous ships, and assumed it was done to save money and time. They didn't understand why Dac Kien's work as Grand Master of Design Harmony was the most important on the habitat: the ship, once made, would be one entity, and not a patchwork of ten thousand others. To Dac Kien – and to the one who would come after her, the Mind-bearer – fell the honour of helping the ship into being, of transforming metal and cables and solar cells into an entity that would sail the void between the stars.

The door slid open. Dac Kien barely looked up. The light tread of the feet told her this was one of the lead designers, either Miahua or Feng. Neither would have disturbed her without cause. With a sigh, she disconnected



from the system with a flick of her hands, and waited for the design's overlay on her vision to disappear.

"Your Excellency," Miahua's voice was quiet. The Xuyan held herself upright, her skin as pale as yellowed wax. "The shuttle has come back. There's someone on board you should see."

DAC KIEN HAD expected many things: a classmate from the examinations on a courtesy visit; an Imperial Censor from Dongjing, calling her to some other posting, even further away from the capital; or perhaps even someone from her family, mother or sister or uncle's wife, here to remind her of the unsuitability of her life choices.

She hadn't expected a stranger: a woman with brown skin, almost dark enough to be Viet herself, her lips thin and white, her eyes as round as the moon.

A Mexica. A foreigner... Dac Kien stopped the thought before it could go far. For the woman wore no cotton, no feathers, but the silk robes of a Xuyan housewife, and the five wedding gifts (all pure gold, from necklace to bracelets) shone like stars on the darkness of her skin.

Dac Kien's gaze travelled down to the curve of the woman's belly, a protruding bulge so voluminous that it threw her whole silhouette out of balance. "I greet you, younger sister. I am Dac Kien, Grand Master of Design Harmony for this habitat." She used the formal tone, suitable for addressing a stranger.

"Elder sister." The Mexica's eyes were bloodshot, set deep within the heavy face. "I am..." She grimaced, one hand going to her belly as if to tear it out. "Zoquitl," she whispered at last, the accents of her voice slipping back to the harsh patterns of her native tongue. "My name is Zoquitl." Her eyes started to roll upwards, and she went on, taking on the cadences of something learnt by rote. "I am the womb and the resting place, the quickener and the Mind-bearer."

Dac Kien's stomach roiled, as if an icy fist were squeezing it. "You're early. The ship –"

"The ship has to be ready."

The interjection surprised her. All her attention had been focused on the Mexica – Zoquitl – and what her coming here meant. Now she forced herself to look at the other passenger off the shuttle, a Xuyan man in his mid-thirties. His accent was that of Anjiu province, on the Fifth Planet. His robes, with the partridge badge and the button of gold, were those of a minor official of the seventh rank, but they were marked with the yin-yang symbol, showing stark black and white against the silk.

"You're the birth-master," she said.

He bowed. "I have that honour." His face was harsh, all angles and planes on which the light caught, highlighting the thin lips, the high cheekbones. "Forgive me my abruptness, but there is no time to lose."

"I don't understand." Dac Kien looked again at the woman, whose eyes bore a glazed look of pain. "She's early," she said, flatly, and she wasn't speaking of their arrival time.

The birth-master nodded.

"How long?"

"A week, at most." The birth-master grimaced. "The ship has to be ready."

Dac Kien tasted bile in her mouth. The ship was all but made – and, like a jade statue, it would brook no corrections nor over-

sights. Dac Kien and her team had designed it specifically for the Mind within Zoquitl's womb, starting out from the specifications the imperial alchemists had given them, the delicate balance of humours, optics and flesh that made up the being Zoquitl carried. The ship would answer to nothing else; only Zoquitl's Mind would be able to seize the heartroom, to quicken the ship, and take it into deep planes, where fast star-travel was possible.

"I can't –" Dac Kien started, but the birth-master shook his head, and she didn't need to hear his answer to know what he would say.

She had to. This had been the posting she'd argued for, after she came in second at the state examinations. This, not a magistrate's tribunal and district, not a high-placed situation in the palace's administration, not the prestigious Courtyard of Writing Brushes, as would have been her right. This was what the imperial court would judge her on.

She wouldn't get another chance.

"A WEEK." HANH shook her head. "What do they think you are, a Mexica factory overseer?"

"Hanh." It had been a long day, and Dac Kien had come back to their quarters looking for comfort. In hindsight, she should have known how Hanh would take the news: her partner was an artist, a poet, always seeking the right word and the right allusion – ideally suited to understanding the delicacy that went into the design of a ship, less than ideal to acknowledge any need for urgency.

"I have to do this," Dac Kien said.

Hanh grimaced. "Because they're pressuring you into it? You know what it will look like." She gestured towards the low mahogany table in the centre of the room. The ship's design hung inside a translucent cube, gently rotating, the glimpses of its interior interspersed with views of other ships, the ones from which it had taken its inspiration: all the great from *The Red Carp* to *The Golden Mountain* and *The Snow-White Blossom*. Their hulls gleamed in the darkness, slowly and subtly bending out of shape to become the final structure of the ship hanging outside the habitat. "It's a whole, lil' sis. You can't butcher it and hope to keep your reputation intact."

"She could die of it," Dac Kien said, at last. "Of the birth, and it would be worse if she did it for nothing."

"The girl? She's *gui*. Foreign."

Meaning she shouldn't matter. "So were we, once upon a time," Dac Kien said. "You have a short memory."

Hanh opened her mouth, closed it. She could have pointed out that they weren't quite *gui*, that China, Xuya's motherland, had once held Dai Viet for centuries, but Hanh was proud of being Viet, and certainly not about to mention such shameful details. "It's the girl that's bothering you, then?"

"She does what she wants," Dac Kien said.

"For the prize." Hanh's voice was faintly contemptuous. Most of the girls who bore Minds were young and desperate, willing to face the dangers of the pregnancy in exchange for a marriage to a respected official. For a status of their own, a family that would welcome them in, and a chance to bear children of good birth.

Both Hanh and Dac Kien had made the opposite choice, long

ago. For them, as for every Xuyan who engaged in same-gender relationships, there would be no children, no one to light incense at the ancestral altars, no voices to chant and honour their names after they were gone. Through life, they would be second-class citizens, consistently failing to accomplish their duties to their ancestors. In death, they would be spurned, forgotten, gone as if they had never been.

"I don't know," Dac Kien said. "She's Mexica. They see things differently where she comes from."

"From what you're telling me, she's doing this for Xuyan reasons."

For fame, and for children, all that Hanh despised – what she called their shackles, their overwhelming need to produce children, generation after generation.

Dac Kien bit her lip, wishing she could have Hanh's unwavering certainties. "It's not as if I have much choice in the matter."

Hanh was silent for a while. At length, she moved, came to rest behind Dac Kien, her hair falling down over Dac Kien's shoulders, her hands trailing at Dac Kien's nape. "You're the one who keeps telling me we always have a choice, lil' sis."

Dac Kien shook her head. She said that when weary of her family's repeated reminders that she should marry and have children, when they lay in the darkness side by side after making love and she saw the future stretching in front of her, childless and ringed by old prejudices.

Hanh, much as she tried, didn't understand. She'd always wanted to be a scholar, had always known that she'd grow up to love another woman. She'd always got what she wanted, and she was convinced she only had to wish for something hard enough for it to happen.

And Hanh had never wished, would never wish, for children.

"It's not the same," Dac Kien said at last, cautiously submitting to Hanh's caresses. It was something else entirely, and even Hanh had to see that. "I chose to come here. I chose to make my name that way. And we always have to see our choices through."

Hanh's hands on her shoulders tightened. "You're one to talk. I can see you wasting yourself in regrets, wondering if there's still time to turn back to respectability. But you chose me. This life, these consequences. We both chose."

"Hanh..." It's not that, Dac Kien wanted to say. She loved Hanh, she truly did, but... She was a stone thrown in the darkness; a ship adrift without nav, lost, without family or husband to approve of her actions, and without the comfort of a child destined to survive her.

"Grow up, lil' sis." Hanh's voice was harsh, her face turned away, towards the paintings of landscapes on the wall. "You're no one's toy or slave – and especially not your family's."

Because they had all but disowned her. But words, as usual, failed Dac Kien, and they went to bed with the shadow of the old argument still between them, like the blade of a sword.

THE NEXT DAY, Dac Kien pored over the design of the ship with Feng and Miahua, wondering how she could modify it. The parts were complete, and assembling them would take a

few days at most, but the resulting structure would never be a ship. That much was clear to all of them. Even excepting the tests, there was at least a month's work ahead of them – slow and subtle touches laid by the bots over the overall system to align it with its destined Mind.

Dac Kien had taken the cube from her quarters and brought it into her office under Hanh's glowering gaze. Now, they all crowded around it voicing ideas, the cups of tea forgotten in the intensity of the moment.

Feng's wrinkled face was creased in thought as he tapped one side of the cube. "We could modify the shape of this corridor, here. Wood would run through the whole ship, and –"

Miahua shook her head. She was their Master of Wind and Water, the one who could best read the lines of influence, the one Dac Kien turned to when she herself had a doubt over the layout. Feng was Commissioner of Supplies, managing the systems and safety – in many ways Miahua's opposite, given to small adjustments rather than large ones, pragmatic where she verged on the mystical.

"The humours of water and wood would stagnate here, in the control room." Miahua pursed her lips, pointed to the slender aft of the ship. "The shape of this section should be modified."

Feng sucked in a breath. "That's not trivial. For my team to rewrite the electronics..."

Dac Kien listened to them arguing, distantly, intervening with a question from time to time to keep the conversation from dying down. In her mind she held the shape of the ship, felt it breathe through the glass of the cube, through the layers of fibres and metal that separated her from the structure outside. She held the shape of the Mind – the essences and emotions that made it, the layout of its sockets and cables, of its muscles and flesh – and slid them together gently, softly, until they seemed made for one another.

She looked up. Both Feng and Miahua had fallen silent, waiting for her to speak.

"This way," she said. "Remove this section altogether, and shift the rest of the layout." As she spoke, she reached into the glass matrix, and carefully excised the offending section, rerouting corridors and lengths of cables, burning new decorative calligraphy onto the curved walls.

"I don't think –" Feng said, and stopped. "Miahua?"

Miahua was watching the new design carefully. "I need to think about it, Your Excellency. Let me discuss it with my subordinates."

Dac Kien made a gesture of approval. "Remember that we don't have much time."

They both took a copy of the design with them, snug in their long sleeves. Left alone, Dac Kien stared at the ship again. It was squat, its proportions out of kilter, not even close to what she had imagined, not even true to the spirit of her work, a mockery of the original design, like a flower without petals, or a poem that didn't quite gel, hovering on the edge of poignant allusions but never expressing them properly.

"We don't always have a choice," she whispered. She'd have



prayed to her ancestors, had she thought they were still listening. Perhaps they were. Perhaps the shame of having a daughter who would have no descendants was erased by the exalted heights of her position. Or perhaps not. Her mother and grandmother were unforgiving. What made her think that those more removed ancestors would understand her decision?

"Elder sister?"

Zoquitl stood at the door, hovering uncertainly. Dac Kien's face must have revealed more than she thought. She forced herself to breathe, relaxing all her muscles until it was once more the blank mask required by protocol. "Younger sister," she said. "You honour me by your presence."

Zoquitl shook her head. She slid carefully into the room, careful not to lose her balance. "I wanted to see the ship."

The birth-master was nowhere to be seen. Dac Kien hoped that he had been right about the birth – that it wasn't about to happen now, in her office, with no destination and no assistance. "It's here." She shifted positions on her chair, invited Zoquitl to sit.

Zoquitl wedged herself into one of the seats, her movements fragile, measured, as if any wrong gesture would shatter her. Behind her loomed one of Dac Kien's favourite paintings, an image from the Third Planet: a delicate, peaceful landscape of waterfalls and ochre cliffs, with the distant light of stars reflected in the water.

Zoquitl didn't move as Dac Kien showed her the design. Her eyes were the only thing which seemed alive in the whole of her face.

When Dac Kien was finished, the burning gaze was transferred to her – looking straight into her eyes, a clear breach of protocol. "You're just like the others. You don't approve," Zoquitl said.

It took Dac Kien a moment to process the words, but they still meant nothing to her. "I don't understand."

Zoquitl's lips pursed. "Where I come from, it's an honour. To bear Minds for the glory of the Mexica Dominion."

"But you're here," Dac Kien said. In Xuya, among Xuyans, where to bear Minds was a sacrifice – necessary and paid for, but ill-considered. For who would want to endure a pregnancy, yet produce no human child? Only the desperate or the greedy.

"You're here as well." Zoquitl's voice was almost an accusation.

For an agonising moment, Dac Kien thought Zoquitl was referring to her life choices – how did she know about Hanh, about her family's stance? Then she understood that Zoquitl had been talking about her place onboard the habitat. "I like being in space," Dac Kien said at last, and it wasn't a lie. "Being here almost alone, away from everyone else."

And this wasn't paperwork, or the slow drain of catching and prosecuting law-breakers, or keeping Heaven's order on some remote planet. This was everything scholarship was meant to be: taking all that the past had given them, and reshaping it into greatness, every part throwing its neighbours into sharper relief, an eternal reminder of how history had brought them here and how it would carry them forward, again and again.

Zoquitl said, not looking at the ship anymore, "Xuya is a harsh place, for foreigners. The language isn't so bad, but when you have no money, and no sponsor..." She breathed in, quick and sharp. "I do what needs doing." Her hand went to the mound of

her belly and stroked it. "And I give him life. How can you not value this?"

She used the animate pronoun, without a second thought.

Dac Kien shivered. "He's..." She paused, groping for words. "He has no father. A mother, perhaps, but there isn't much of you inside him. He won't be counted among your descendants. He won't burn incense on your altar, or chant your name among the stars."

"But he won't die." Zoquitl's voice was soft, and cutting. "Not for centuries."

The ships made by the Mexica Dominion lived long, but their Minds slowly went insane from repeated journeys into deep planes. This Mind, with a proper anchor, a properly aligned ship... Zoquitl was right: he would remain as he was, long after she and Zoquitl were both dead. He – no, it – it was a machine, a sophisticated intelligence, an assembly of flesh and metal and Heaven knew what else. Born like a child, but still...

"I think I'm the one who doesn't understand." Zoquitl pulled herself to her feet, slowly. Dac Kien could hear her laboured breath, could smell the sour, sharp sweat rolling off her. "Thank you, elder sister."

And then she was gone, but her words remained.

DAC KIEN THREW herself into her work, as she had done before, when preparing for the state examinations. Hanh pointedly ignored her when she came home, making only the barest attempts at courtesy. She was working again on her calligraphy, mingling Xuyan characters with the letters of the Viet alphabet to create a work that spoke both as a poem and as a painting. It wasn't unusual: Dac Kien had come to be accepted for her talent, but her partner was another matter. Hanh wasn't welcome in the banquet room, where the families of the other engineers would congregate in the evenings. She preferred to remain alone in their quarters rather than endure the barely concealed snubs or the pitying looks of the others.

What gave the air its leaden weight, though, was her silence. Dac Kien tried at first, keeping up a chatter, as if nothing were wrong. Hanh raised bleary eyes from her manuscript, and said, simply, "You know what you're doing, lil' sis. Live with it, for once."

So it was silence, in the end. It suited her better than she'd thought it would. It was her and the design, with no one to blame or interfere.

Miahua's team and Feng's team were rewiring the structure and rearranging the parts. Outside the window, the mass of the hull shifted and twisted, to align itself with the cube on her table, bi-hour after bi-hour, as the bots gently slid sections into place and sealed them.

The last section was being put into place when Miahua and the birth-master came to see her, both looking equally preoccupied.

Her heart sank. "Don't tell me," Dac Kien said. "She's due now."

"She's lost the waters," the birth-master said. He spat on the floor to ward off evil spirits, who always crowded around the mother in the hour of a birth. "You have a few bi-hours at most."

"Miahua?" Dac Kien wasn't looking at either of them, but rather at the ship outside, the huge bulk that dwarfed them all in its shadow.

Her Master of Wind and Water was silent for a while – usually a sign that she was arranging problems in the most suitable order. Not good. “The structure will be finished before this bi-hour is over.”

“But?” Dac Kien said.

“But it’s a mess. The lines of wood cross those of metal, and there are humours mingling with each other and stagnating everywhere. The qi won’t flow.”

The qi, the breath of the universe – of the dragon that lay at the heart of every planet, of every star. As Master of Wind and Water, it was Miahua’s role to tell Dac Kien what had gone wrong, but as Grand Master of Design Harmony, it fell to Dac Kien to correct this. Miahua could only point out the results she saw; only Dac Kien could send the bots in, to make the necessary adjustments to the structure. “I see,” Dac Kien said. “Prepare a shuttle for her. Have it wait outside, close to the ship’s docking bay.”

“Your Excellency – ” the birth-master started, but Dac Kien cut him off.

“I have told you before. The ship will be ready.”

Miahua’s stance as she left was tense, all pent-up fears. Dac Kien thought of Hanh, alone in their room, stubbornly bent over her poem, her face as harsh as that of the birth-master, its customary roundness sharpened by anger and resentment. She’d say, again, that you couldn’t hurry things, that there were always possibilities. She’d say that – but she’d never understood there was always a price, and that, if you didn’t pay it, others did.

The ship would be ready, and Dac Kien would pay its price in full.

ALONE AGAIN, Dac Kien connected to the system, letting the familiar overlay of the design take over her surroundings. She adjusted the contrast until the design was all she could see, and then she set to work.

Miahua was right: the ship was a mess. They had envisioned having a few days to tidy things up, to soften the angles of the corridors, to spread the wall-lanterns so there were no dark corners or spots shining with blinding light. The heartroom alone – the pentacle-shaped centre of the ship, where the Mind would settle – had strands of four humours coming to an abrupt, painful stop within, and a sharp line just outside its entrance, marking the bots’ hasty sealing.

The killing breath, it was called, and it was everywhere.

Ancestors, watch over me.

A living, breathing thing – jade, whittled down to its essence. Dac Kien slid into the trance, her consciousness expanding to encompass the bots around the structure, sending them, one by one, inside the metal hull, scuttling down the curved corridors and passageways; gently merging with the walls, starting the slow and painful work of coaxing the metal into its proper shape; going up into the knot of cables, straightening them out, regulating the current in the larger ones. In her mind’s view, the ship seemed to flicker and fold back upon itself. She hung suspended outside, watching the bots crawl over it like ants, inject-

ing commands into the different sections, in order to modify their balance of humours and inner structure.

She cut to the shuttle, where Zoquitl lay on her back, her face distorted into a grimace. The birth-master’s face was grim, turned upwards as if he could guess at Dac Kien’s presence.

Hurry. You don’t have time left. Hurry.

And still she worked. Walls turned into mirrors, flowers were carved into the passageways, softening those hard angles and lines she couldn’t disguise. She opened up a fountain – all light projections, of course, there could be no real water aboard – and let the recreated sound of a stream fill the structure. Inside the heartroom, the four tangled humours became three, then one. Then she brought in other lines until the tangle twisted back upon itself, forming a complicated knot pattern that allowed strands of all five humours to flow around the room. Water, wood, fire, earth, metal, all circling the ship’s core, a stabilising influence for the Mind, when it came to anchor itself there.

She flicked back the display to the shuttle, saw Zoquitl’s face, and the unbearable lines of tension in the other’s face.

Hurry.

It was not ready. But life didn’t wait until you were ready. Dac Kien turned off the display, but not the connection to the bots, leaving them time to finish their last tasks.

“Now,” she whispered into the com system.

The shuttle launched itself towards the docking bay. Dac Kien dimmed the overlay, letting the familiar sight of the room reassert itself: with the cube, and the design that should have been, the perfect one, the one that called to mind *The Red Carp* and *The Turtle Over the Waves* and *The Dragon’s Twin Dreams*, all the days of Xuya from the Exodus to the Pearl Wars, and the fall of the Shan Dynasty; and older things, too: Le Loi’s sword that had established a Viet dynasty; the dragon with spread wings flying over Hanoi, the Old

Earth capital; the face of Huyen Tran, the Viet princess traded to foreigners in return for two provinces.

The bots were turning themselves off one by one, and a faint breeze ran through the ship, carrying the smell of sea-laden water and of incense.

It could have been, that ship, that masterpiece. If she’d had time. Hanh was right, she could have made it work: it would have been hers, perfect, praised, remembered in the centuries to come, used as inspiration by hundreds of other Grand Masters. If...

She didn’t know how long she’d been staring at the design, but an agonised cry tore her from her thoughts. Startled, she turned up the ship’s feed again, and selected a view into the birthing room.

The lights had been dimmed, leaving shadows everywhere, like a prelude to mourning. Dac Kien could see the bowl of tea given at the beginning of labour. It had rolled into a corner of the room, a few drops scattering across the floor.

Zoquitl crouched against a high-backed chair, framed by holos of two goddesses who watched over childbirth: the Princess of the Blue and Purple Clouds, and the Bodhisattva of Mercy. In



the shadows, her face seemed to be that of a demon, the alien-ness of her features distorted by pain.

"Push," the birth-master was saying, his hands on the quivering mound of her belly.

Push.

Blood ran down Zoquitl's thighs, staining the metal surfaces until they reflected everything in shades of red. But her eyes were proud – those of an old warrior race, who'd never bent or bowed to anybody else. Her child of flesh, when it came, would be delivered the same way.

Dac Kien thought of Hanh, and of sleepless nights, of the shadow stretched over their lives, distorting everything.

"Push," the birth-master said again, and more blood ran out. Push push push – and Zoquitl's eyes were open, looking straight at her, and Dac Kien knew – she knew that the rhythm that racked Zoquitl, the pain that came in waves, it was all part of the same immutable law, the same thread that bound them more surely than the red one between lovers – what lay in the womb, under the skin, in their hearts and in their minds; a kinship of gender that wouldn't ever be altered or extinguished. Her hand slid to her own flat, empty belly, pressed hard. She knew what that pain was, she could hold every layer of it in her mind as she'd held the ship's design, and she knew that Zoquitl, like her, had been made to bear it.

Push.

With a final heart-wrenching scream, Zoquitl expelled the last of the Mind from her womb. It slid to the floor, a red, glistening mass of flesh and electronics: muscles and metal implants, veins and pins and cables.

It lay there, still and spent – and several heartbeats passed before Dac Kien realised it wouldn't ever move.

DAC KIEN PUT off visiting Zoquitl for days, still reeling from the shock of the birth. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw blood: the great mass sliding out of the womb, flopping on the floor like a dead fish, the lights of the birthing room glinting on metal wafers and grey matter, and everything dead, gone as if it had never been.

It had no name, of course – neither it nor the ship, both gone too soon to be graced with one.

Push. Push, and everything will be fine. Push.

Hanh tried her best, showing her poems with exquisite calligraphy, speaking of the future and of her next posting, fiercely making love to her as if nothing had ever happened, as if Dac Kien could just forget the enormity of the loss. But it wasn't enough.

Just as the ship hadn't been enough.

In the end, remorse drove Dac Kien, as surely as a barbed whip, and she boarded the shuttle to cross to the ship.

Zoquitl was in the birthing room, sitting wedged against the wall, with a bowl of pungent tea in her veined hands. The two holos framed her, their white-painted faces stark in the dim light, unforgiving. The birth-master hovered nearby, but was persuaded to leave them both alone, though he made it clear Dac Kien was responsible for anything that happened to Zoquitl.

"Elder sister." Zoquitl smiled, a little bitterly. "It was a good fight."

"Yes." One Zoquitl could have won, if she had been given better weapons.

"Don't look so sad," Zoquitl said.

"I failed," Dac Kien said, simply. She knew Zoquitl's future was still assured, that she'd make her good marriage, and bear children, and be worshipped in her turn. But she also knew, now, that it wasn't the only reason Zoquitl had borne the Mind.

Zoquitl's lips twisted into what might have been a smile. "Help me."

"What?" Dac Kien looked at her, but Zoquitl was already pushing herself up, shaking, shivering, as carefully as she had done when pregnant. "The birth-master –"

"He's fussing like an old woman," Zoquitl said, and for a moment her voice was as sharp and as cutting as a blade. "Come. Let's walk."

She was smaller than Dac Kien had thought, her shoulders barely came up to her own. She wedged herself awkwardly, leaning on Dac Kien for support, a weight that grew increasingly hard to bear as they walked through the ship.

There was light, and the sound of water, and the familiar feel of qi flowing through the corridors in lazy circles, breathing life into everything. There were shadows barely seen in mirrors, and the glint of other ships, too – the soft, curving patterns of *The Golden Mountain*; the carved calligraphy incised in the doors that had been the hallmark of *The Tiger Who Leapt Over the Stream*; the slowly curving succession of ever-growing doors of *Baoyu's Red Fan* – bits and pieces salvaged from her design and put together into...into this, which unfolded its marvels all around her, from layout to electronics to decoration, until her head spun and her eyes blurred, taking it all in.

In the heartroom, Dac Kien stood unmoving, while the five humours washed over them, an endless cycle of destruction and renewal. The centre was pristine, untouched, with a peculiar sadness hanging around it, like an empty crib. And yet...

"It's beautiful," Zoquitl said, her voice catching and quivering in her throat.

Beautiful as a poem declaimed in drunken games, as a flower bud ringed by frost – beautiful and fragile as a newborn child struggling to breathe.

And, standing there at the centre of things, with Zoquitl's frail body leaning against her, she thought of Hanh again, of shadows and darkness, and of life choices.

It's beautiful.

It would be gone in a few days. Destroyed, recycled, forgotten and uncommemorated. But somehow Dac Kien couldn't bring herself to voice the thought.

Instead she said, softly, into the silence, knowing it to be true of more than the ship, "It was worth it."

All of it, now and in the years to come, and she wouldn't look back, or regret.

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a job as a Computer Engineer. 'The Shipmaker' is set in her Xuya continuity (where China discovered America before Columbus), many centuries after the events of 'The Lost Xuyan Bride' and 'Butterfly, Falling at Dawn', both published in previous issues of *Interzone*. Visit Aliette's website at aliettedebodard.com for more information about her and her work, including her current novel *Servant of the Underworld*.



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✂ AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION ✂

"Among police officers, there exists an analogy revolving around sheep, sheepdogs, and wolves. The analogy holds that most people in any society are sheep. These people are gentle and productive members of society who'd only hurt one another by accident or if pushed to extreme circumstances.

"The police then are the sheepdogs, working to keep the wolves – the criminals – from preying on the sheep. The problem is that the sheep don't like having the sheepdogs around unless the wolves are attacking. That's when the sheep suddenly love their protectors.

"As with all analogies, this one has both limitations and truth in how it describes the real world. This story is an attempt to explore this analogy and to see what would happen if the sheepdogs and wolves found themselves on the wrong side of the so-called sheep. The beliefs found here shouldn't be taken as the author's. But I did have fun exploring this universe."



JASON SANFORD

Peacemaker, Peacemaker, Little Bo Peep

THE SHEEP LED THE SHEEPDOGS AND WOLVES TO PASTURE, and prepared to gun us down.

They lined us up for execution in an old soybean field as the night clouds above built to rains which never fell, and the wind gusted to burnings we smelled but couldn't see. I stood handcuffed to Victor Braun, a trucker I'd arrested three days before for the murder of a young hitchhiker. I'd caught Victor near the crime scene as he worked on his truck's broken-down engine with bloody hands.

When I'd ordered Victor to the ground at gunpoint, he smirked before complying. Muttered about bad luck and cheap-ass foreign trucks and his amusement at being arrested by a woman half his size. "Care to tell me your name, honey?" he drawled once I'd cuffed him.

"Sergeant Ellen Davies," I announced, and slammed his head against the scratch-rock ground for what he'd done to that poor girl.

But now we stood side by side as the people I'd served for the last decade paced up and down debating the best way to kill us.

Before me, Pastor Albert Jones of the Holy Redeemer Church sadly shook his red-shag head. Jones had baptized me as a teenager, not long after he moved to our little town. One of the proudest moments in my life had been when he once praised me in a sermon as a true protector of the weak and voiceless.

Now, though, he'd be my death. As Pastor Jones looked at me through sad-down eyes I cursed him, causing the woman beside him to angrily spit at my badge. Pastor Jones rested his hand on

her shoulder and said to stop – this was a solemn occasion, not an occasion for petty vengeance. He then moved down the row, looking into the face of each person awaiting execution.

On the other side of Victor stood Buck, a lanky rookie who, unlike every other deputy, begged for his life. I refused to beg, and with my free hand wiped the spit from my shield.

"Good on you," Victor muttered.

Ours was a small department of only thirty deputies, and half those stood in this old soybean field along with the handful of prisoners from our jail. The others were either dead – killed when we made our final stand at the sheriff's department – or had escaped with their families. And we'd only survived because Sheriff Granville had walked into the thousands of angry townsfolk with a white flag and convinced Pastor Jones to let us surrender.

I'd never seen such bravery – the mob shooting and screaming and throwing Molotov cocktails as Sheriff Granville, already shot twice, waved his flag and shouted over and over, "We're better than this!"

Sheriff Granville now leaned against Sgt Glosser for support as blood dripped from the rifle shots to the sheriff's massive gut. He glared at Pastor Jones. They'd been friends ever since Jones arrived in town. Jones, embarrassed, said there was nothing he could do.

"Always something you can do," Sheriff Granville muttered weakly. "We've been there. Helped each and every one of you."

The sheriff's words rippled through the townsfolk. Several

people shuffled the dust of old soybean plants, maybe remembering times we'd located a lost child or caught a thief. For a moment I thought the sheriff's words might make a difference, but suddenly Pastor Jones shrieked – an inhuman whine his voice shouldn't be able to make. The high-pitched scream of joy climbed into the word "Peace!" as the people around him joined in. Their voices were unable to match Jones' high-toned shout but they still trilled that cursed word until the mob lost all intelligence and peace no longer sounded like anything I've ever known.

While the crowd trilled, Pastor Jones walked down the line. He pulled out Buck – still begging for his life – and removed the handcuffs before ripping off the kid's badge. He also freed two of our prisoners who'd been in jail for petty crimes. Pastor Jones ordered them to leave and never harm another. Buck didn't glance back as he ran through the dark into the nearby trees.

Pastor Jones shrieked again, causing the crowd to raise their guns even as they kept trilling "Peace!" I recognized the pistol in front of me as my own service weapon, now held by my old Sunday School teacher Mrs McKenzie.

I could only pray my husband had received my warning and escaped with our daughter.

As if hearing my unspoken prayer, Victor Braun grabbed my handcuffed hand with his own. My palm hot and sweat-slicked. His still coated in the hitchhiker's blood – stains he'd proudly refused to wash away.

I hated his touch. I gripped it tightly.

"Be ready to fall," he whispered.

And then Pastor Jones shrieked fire. And then we truly fell.

SOMETIMES YOU FALL well before you know. You fall, and feel the impact later.

Is it fair to blame a dream for all this, knowing it only released what was inside us to begin with? Or is the dream an excuse? A word to tickle our mind. A mental escape to overlook the horrible things people have always done.

At first the reports of mobs killing soldiers and police and criminals and thugs didn't disturb us. We thought these were simply revolutions and protests from people trying to change their lives – events which happened somewhere in the world on a regular basis.

But then we saw the videos. Heard the eerie trilling. Saw the mobs attack while trilling "peace" as if the word was a sick, perverted joke. Witnessed how the crowds were controlled by a few individuals who shrieked at impossibly high tones, their voices controlling the mobs' actions like a virtuoso caressing bloody piano keys.

And the dreams, don't forget the dreams. Trillers mentioned their dreams with star-gone gazes, as if unable to forget the experience yet unwilling to trust words to describe them. Those few who did speak in detail mentioned the calling they found in dreams, while those the trillers aimed to kill spoke of being rejected by their dreams.

Before the trilling reached our town, Pastor Jones called our congregation to an evening prayer session. I sat on the stiff wood pew with my husband and daughter and wondered if it was

really possible for my neighbors, my friends, to kill me because of the work I did. Barry held my hand in his massive grip – his calluses sticky with sap from working all day as a logger – while Lucy leaned against my side, sleepy and wanting to go home.

But Pastor Jones pushed my worries aside as he thundered at our congregation to have faith. "We are all God's children," he proclaimed. "Remember who you are. Don't allow this evil dream to steal your soul."

We all amened, but none of us said the word like we meant it.

Afterward, as the congregation filed out, Pastor Jones walked up. "Makes you wonder," he whispered to me and Barry, "about the truth of what we preach."

My husband laughed nervously to the melodrama in Pastor Jones' voice and told our daughter to go play with her friends.

"Are you truly worried?" I asked once Lucy was out of ear-shot, having long since learned that when people make random observations they're often voicing deeper thoughts.

Pastor Jones looked into me – the look people give when they want to say something but are afraid to utter the words. "I worry for you and your family, Ellen," he said. "You should flee before whatever this is reaches town."

I gripped Pastor Jones' hand and told him I appreciated the concern. "I have a duty to perform, the same as you," I said. "As you said, we merely need faith."

Pastor Jones looked uncertain, the thunder and grace from his pulpit faded. Gone. But before I could press him, my old Sunday School teacher Mrs McKenzie called to him, demanding Jones decide a theological point about dreams being debated by she and her friends. Pastor Jones chuckled nervously and walked away.

Now, only a few weeks later, I'd love to ask Pastor Jones what he'd truly wanted to say. To ask what had truly worried him.

To ask if trillers like him gave any thought on the evil their dreams push into the world.



INTO THE DITCH – mud and screams and cries – the water only a foot deep, hidden by cattails and grass as gunshots and flashlights played over the injured and the dead. The mob shot over and over at the shapes in the mud. They hadn't removed our body armor so many of the deputies survived the initial shots, only to be killed with follow-up shots to the head or rifle rounds which shredded kevlar and bodies.

But Victor Braun had muttered fall, so when the gunshots rang we fell and rolled into the deeper water of the ditch. We hid in a tall clump of cattails, my leg burning from a bullet while my chest numb-tingled from a round stopped by my vest.

Neither of us talked or moved, knowing sound and motion would reveal our hiding place. Sheriff Granville's deep voice boomed out from the ditch, mocking our executioners. He'd survived the initial volley and now laughed at the mob, cursing them as weak and stupid until Pastor Jones himself waded into the ditch and shot Sheriff Granville upside the head. I reached for my service weapon before remembering it was gone.

And there we lay until the mob's eerie trilling died down and they wandered off one by one, leaving only the wind scudding the empty soybean field above us. I began to crawl toward my

fallen colleagues, but I was still handcuffed to Victor and he wouldn't move.

"Wait," he whispered. "There may be a few left, watching for survivors."

I glanced at Victor. He was wet and muddy and cold and scared, the same as me. But far bigger than me, over a foot taller with at least a hundred pounds of muscle above my own. If we fought, handcuffed together, he might win. But I wasn't going to wait without checking on my friends.

"If anyone's watching, we'll run," I whispered. "Or kill them."

Victor looked into my eyes as a nasty grin cut his murderous face. No doubt the bastard approved of such bloody talk. We crawled through the ditch back to the other deputies, their moonlit badges glowing against the darker stains of mud and blood on their brown uniforms. We checked each body, but they were all dead.

I'd seen the dead many times in my career, but never so many friends. I searched for a weapon or a handcuff key, or a cell phone to call my husband and daughter, but Pastor Jones had been thorough in his search after we surrendered. While the mob had acted as if in a daze – something tied in with that damn trilling they made – Pastor Jones had shown a deadly intensity I'd never before seen in him.

I told Victor we'd head out with the handcuffs on, but he waved me silent. I glanced around the dark field, looking for the danger, but it wasn't danger. It was sound. A gasp. A low cough.

"Over here," Victor whispered, leading us to Sheriff Granville's body. The sheriff had always been a massive man, as tall as Victor but having long since let his muscle flow to fat. Seeing the sheriff's frozen eyes and face – still set in a look of determination from taunting his executioners – almost broke me to tears.

We heard a low curse. Victor and I grabbed the sheriff's large body and rolled it. Underneath lay Sgt Glosser, who'd been supporting our wounded boss. Victor and I grabbed Glosser and tried to drag him away but he was still handcuffed to the sheriff, so we pulled both of them out of the ditch and across the field to the nearby woods.

"You okay, Gloss?" I asked. He was covered in blood, but it all seemed to be from the sheriff.

"Bastard like to broke my jaw," he said.

"What?"

"When they started shooting, the sheriff sucker punched me. Knocked me clean out."

I explained how the sheriff taunted the mob after the first round of shooting. "He knocked you out to hide you," I said. "Hid you in the mud under him. Taunted them so they wouldn't notice you."

Glosser nodded, not saying anything, none of us could, only staring at Sheriff Granville's body. Even though he knew he would die, he'd still fought like hell to save one of his people.

Suddenly a car's headlights flickered over the soybean field. Car doors thumped and several men and women with flashlights stepped out.

"We've got to go," I whispered to Glosser. "Do you have a handcuff key?"

He patted his uniform pockets and shook his head. While Victor and I could flee handcuffed together, Glosser couldn't run until we freed him from the sheriff's body.

The people from the car walked toward the ditch. I saw shotguns and rifles. One of them trilled "peace" and they shot at the dead bodies over and over.

"Leave me," Glosser whispered. "Get out of here."

I turned to Victor, ready to argue with the murderer that we weren't leaving Glosser, but Victor merely raised his hand for me to wait. He sat deep in concentration, quietly gagging.

The trillers had now noticed the bloody drag marks in the field from the sheriff's body. They shone their flashlights along the woodline and began walking toward us.

Glosser waved for us to go, but Victor again motioned to wait. He gagged a final time as the tip of a handcuff key parted his lips.

He quickly unlocked the three of us and we fled deeper into the dark woods.

WE CALLED THEM trillers because of the sound they made while killing. It was easier to call them that than friend and neighbor and lover and family, and to know that people once so close could so easily do this deed.

We stumbled through the night, avoiding other people. We saw several fires in the distance and heard screams and gunshots. Anyone who had embraced violence and aggression before the dream hit – whether as a means to harm others, or seeing violence as occasionally necessary to protect yourself and others – was at risk of being killed. Somehow the trillers sensed immediately who these people were and hunted them down.

Never mind the irony that the trillers were doing far worse than those they killed ever did.

When morning came we found a partially burned trailer off a backroad and hid there. A man and woman lay dead in front of the trailer, both shot down by trillers as they'd fled the flames. We left the bodies alone and scrounged food and water inside. The water still flowed from the faucets and I washed out the flesh wound on my leg and bandaged it. The wound hurt, but if I kept it clean it shouldn't give me much trouble. Glosser and I also changed out of our uniforms into some civilian clothes we found. But just in case, we kept our damaged body armor on underneath.

Victor seemed amused when he saw me in bluejeans and a flannel shirt.

"What?" I asked.

"Changes the power dynamic, is all," he said. "Amazing what a uniform – or the lack of one – does to the mind."

Glosser eyed Victor warily from the trailer's smoky kitchen. We hadn't found any guns, but Glosser held a machete and handed me a hatchet. Victor glanced around as if to ask where his weapon was before shrugging.

"Interesting trick with that handcuff key," I said to Victor. "How long did you have it hidden down your throat?"

"I always keep one in my mouth while hunting. Partially swallow it if caught. Bring it back up if needed. Trick I learned a while back."



I shifted the hatchet in my hand, remembering the body of that young hitchhiker and knowing instantly what Victor meant by hunting. Her torso split from gut to chest in one knife slice. Her breasts sliced off. Her throat gaping so wide I could have slid my hand up to grab her tongue.

It was the worst crime scene I'd ever encountered, even worse than the murder-suicide I'd investigated a few years ago in the abandoned hotel downtown. That had been the work of a drug-crazed man who hadn't fully known what he was doing to his best friend until he came down, at which point – horrified – he killed himself.

But Victor had known exactly what he was doing to that girl.

After I'd arrested him, I'd found a pair of homemade leather gloves in Victor's back pocket, a human tattoo of a heart visible on the sewn palms. The sheriff and I suspected Victor of being a serial killer and bagged the gloves for DNA testing, figured they were a trophy from another grisly murder. But before we could dig deeper, our world dropped into crazy.

Seeing me gazing at him, Victor spit a grin which would have fried fear through most people. "She wasn't my first kill," he said. "If that's what you're wondering."

"You're proud, aren't you?" Glosser asked in a shaky voice. He'd always had trouble keeping emotions out of his work. Naturally, Victor picked up on this.

"Let me guess," he said. "You take my existence as a personal affront, which of course makes me wonder what you're hiding. Maybe you dip into the criminal now and then...or maybe before becoming a cop you did things you aren't proud of."

I wanted to curse. Not only was Victor dangerous, he was smart – he'd pegged Glosser far too quickly. Before becoming a deputy, Glosser had been involved in a number of breaking and enterings as a teenager, and even one assault. He'd been destined for far worse crimes before Sheriff Granville took him under his wing and refocused Glosser on high school. After Glosser graduated and stayed clean for a few years, the sheriff overlooked Glosser's juvenile crimes and hired him.

Behind me, I heard Glosser step across the burned linoleum, and saw the flash of a machete as he prepared to separate Victor's head from body. I motioned for him to stop.

"Smart," Victor said. "Right now, you need me."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because whatever is causing this is coming after all of us. The sheepdogs and the wolves. Anyone who ever used violence."

Glosser snorted in disgust, but I knew Victor was right. By sheepdogs and wolves, he meant the police and criminals. And it sure did seem that something was gunning for us.

"Victor's right," I said. "There's safety in numbers."

"That's why I'm still with you two," Victor said.

Unspoken was that once he felt safe enough, Victor would leave. I lowered my hatchet and sat down across from Victor at the charred table.

"Why didn't you use the handcuff key earlier?" I asked.

"You never gave me an opportunity to escape."

I smiled grimly at the compliment and handed Victor the hatchet.



WHEN DARK CAME we left the smoke-gagging trailer and hiked toward town. We kept to the fence-line trees along the back roads, occasionally seeing bodies beside wrecked cars or burned houses. But most houses stood as they always had, giving an odd normalcy to the night. Groups of people drove by in trucks and cars, looking as if they were going to a cookout or a party.

But they were actually hunting. We saw three cars full of people pull in front of a wood-panel home. The trillers surrounded the house and yelled at the man inside to come out. Instead the homeowner fired a rifle, hitting two of them. But the trillers fired back and one threw a gas bomb. The man inside kept firing until the whole house was ablaze and all you heard were his screams as he burned to death.

After waiting a bit to make sure the man was dead, the trillers climbed back in their cars and drove off. One of the wounded trillers left with them but the other was dead, her body laying where she fell.

As soon as their headlights disappeared, we ran from the woods to the dead woman. Her shotgun had been taken, but she had a pistol and a cell phone in her pocket. Glosser handed me the pistol – an almost worthless .32 ACP mousegun. Still, it might be better than nothing and I pocketed it as we ran back to the woods.

The first thing Glosser did was call his wife. She answered on the first ring and they both cried. She and the twins were hiding in their attic along with Sheriff Granville's wife, daughter-in-law, and grandkids. When Glosser's wife asked about the sheriff, Glosser didn't say anything. How could he? Glosser's wife knew him well enough to understand.

Glosser promised to reach them soon. "It's almost morning, and we have to hide," he said. "Hang on until tonight, okay?"

I heard his wife whisper her love and his two boys say the same.

Wiping his face, Glosser handed me the phone. I called Barry, praying with each ring for the big lug to pick up, refusing to believe the worst even when the phone clicked into voicemail. I left a message and called back, and again. Nothing. If Barry didn't answer, my daughter should have picked up.

"They might not be able to answer," Victor said with more sympathy than I'd expect from a serial killer. "Probably holed up somewhere."

I refused to answer as I slid the phone into my pocket.

THE DREAM HAD visited me during a few scant moments of sleep, my head on my desk as I worked on the paperwork from Victor's arrest. Victor sat glumly in the holding cell near me. I shouldn't have drowsed off with him there. But the room felt warm and I felt tired and the next thing I knew I was dreaming.

I sat in a sunny field of sweet-smelling grass and daisies as a gentle breeze whistled all around. Barry sat beside me holding my hand in his giant palm as we watched Lucy practice for her third-grade play. She wore the Little Bo Peep outfit I'd spent far too many hours sewing. But where the outfit I'd actually made for her was barely recognizable as a frock, this dream outfit appeared ripped directly from a high-end nursery rhyme. As if

I'd actually had time to make a costume worthy of some damn idealized world's best mom.

Barry looked at me and smiled as Lucy twirled in happiness in her costume. The breeze wrapped me tight in its warm embrace. I felt perfectly, absolutely at peace.

But even as I realized this peace the breeze built up and up into a slicing wind, a wind which swirled like a dust devil as it tasted my memories. The wind saw the times I'd had to practice violence. Saw that I'd be perfectly willing to do violence in the future.

"I do wish this could be different," the wind sighed in a voice sounding exactly like Pastor Jones. "That a hero could, for once, be acceptable to us. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed such choices."

I tried to defend myself. Explained that sometimes you had to raise your fist to stop people from harming others. But the wind shivered away my words. The field around me vanished. My daughter screamed in panic before she disappeared along with Barry.

As the most peaceful moment I'd ever experienced was wrenched away, I felt the dream condemn me – and condemn my husband and daughter for being so close to me.

I screamed and slammed my fist into my desk, only to realize I was still in the sheriff's department. From the holding cell beside me Victor frantically shook the metal bars, his face a mix of pain and loss from losing whatever dream of peace he'd also experienced. As he rattled the bars we heard a trilling rise from outside the department – a slow moaning of "peace" which mocked the dreams we'd both briefly glimpsed.

"This would be a good time to run," Victor said.

He was right. But I didn't realize how right until we were handcuffed together and falling into that mud and bullet jumping ditch.



VICTOR, GLOSSER, AND I wasted an hour trying to find a car to steal, but had no luck. As a result, the sun rose before we made it a dozen blocks into town. The electricity was still on in most houses and we saw a few people holding guns and talking with neighbors. Obviously they were continuing to hunt for us violent people. We needed to hide.

"Buck," Glosser said.

"What's that?" Victor asked.

"Not what," I said. "He's the deputy Pastor Jones released before they shot us. His house is a block away."

Victor shook his head. "We can't trust him. That preacher let him go for a reason."

My gut told me Victor was right, but Glosser shoved the murderer back, pointing the machete at his throat. "Screw you," Glosser whispered. "Buck's a cop. We trust him."

While I'd always been uneasy around Buck – he'd never struck me as top-quality police material – we'd still served together for the last year. So I was with Glosser. We had to trust him.

We reached Buck's back door as the sun lit the neighborhood into a warmer light than it deserved. Several nearby houses were burned and gone, only char and cinder marking their cement foundations. A number of police and firefighters had lived

in this neighborhood. I refused to think about what had happened to them and their families.

Glosser tried Buck's door but it was locked. He knocked several times before Buck walked to the window and saw us.

But he didn't open the door.

"Son of a bitch," Glosser grumbled. He banged again – far too loudly for my taste – and I looked around to see if any neighbors were watching. After a few bangs, Buck opened the door.

"You shouldn't be here..." he began, but we'd already pushed past him into his den.

Victor closed the door and locked it. All of the shades were drawn and the lights out.

"This is not how you greet friends," I said.

Buck looked down nervously at the carpet. "Sorry," he said. "I thought you were here to kill me."

Victor walked around the house, checking rooms and closets to see if we were alone. Glosser and I stared at Buck, trying to see the rookie we'd spent so long training in the shivering, fearful kid before us.

"I heard the shots," Buck said. "Anyone else make it?"

We didn't need to answer. "What happened to you?" I asked.

Buck said he hid in the woods until daybreak. As he'd walked back to town, a group of trillers saw him but they merely waved and kept on going. "After that, I figured they wouldn't hurt me."

Victor was drinking a glass of milk in the kitchen and shaking his head at Buck's words. Not that the kid was lying. But something was...wrong with his story.

I wondered how the trillers knew which people were the fighters of the world and which were those they could safely leave alone. No ordinary dream gave people such ability. I remembered Pastor Jones' voice in my dream. Whatever caused this wasn't natural because it involved accessing a person's memories of what they'd done in life –

and determining what they might do in the future.

Still, nothing to be done about it now, and we had nowhere to go until sundown. I asked Buck if he had any weapons but he said no, so we made do with my mousegun and the machete and hatchet. "We'll sleep in shifts," I told the men. "Victor, you and me and Buck sleep first. Gloss keeps watch."

Glosser nodded. I trusted him and he trusted me.

I slept exhausted. I again dreamed of Lucy in her Little Bo Peep outfit, only this time we weren't in that peaceful field. Instead, we sat in the school auditorium as she chased costumed sheep around the stage. Pastor Jones sat near me and howled with laughter at Lucy's charming performance, clapping and nodding his red-top head to her every memorized line. But instead of the play ending how it had in real life – with me hugging my daughter – Lucy suddenly ran in panic through our neighborhood, chased by Jones and the trillers as "peace, peace" echoed in my mind.

Remembering how in my first dream Pastor Jones' voice had condemned Lucy solely because of my actions, I begged him not to hurt her. He looked at me with a pained expression and said he'd try to help.

WHEN GLOSSER WOKE me for my turn at watch I again tried calling Barry. No answer. My house was only two miles past Glosser's. After we reached his family, we'd get mine.

I sat in the den's easy chair, trying to clean the flesh wound on my leg. The wound hurt more than before, no doubt from all the running I'd done.

Midway through my watch Buck walked in. "I can't sleep anymore," he said, glancing at my bloody pants leg. "I'll stand watch if you want to shower and dress that wound."

I hesitated, but what could I say? Buck was a deputy. If I said no, it'd mean I didn't trust him.

"Only a few minutes," I said.

In the bathroom was an old radio. I tuned through the dial looking for news, but a recorded message from Pastor Jones was on all the local stations. I showered as I listened.

"Peace is upon us," Jones said as he trilled that word for long seconds. "It is painful, I know, to do these things. We love these people. But for too long the criminal has stolen from us, the murderer has killed us, the soldier has attacked us, and the police officer has merely pretended to protect us. In truth, they are all the same. All the same violent person.

"Once they are gone, peace will be ours. We will beat our swords into plowshares and live in the paradise of a true, eternal peace."

I threw the soap at the radio, knocking both to the floor with a loud crash.

After drying off, I wrapped my wound with gauze from Buck's first aid kit and dressed. I walked out of the bathroom to find Victor holding Buck at gunpoint, Buck's nose broken and streaming blood.

I pulled the mousegun and aimed at Victor. "Drop the gun," I yelled, loud enough to wake Glosser, who stirred in the back bedroom.

"He ratted us," Victor said in a low, angry voice, keeping his pistol on Buck. "I caught him calling the trillers."

Glosser now stood beside me, machete in hand. I glanced from Buck to Victor. I'd helped instruct Buck, while Glosser had served as his field training officer. Buck couldn't have done this. I refused to believe it.

But the pistol Victor held snapped into my mind – I'd seen Buck shooting it before at our firing range. Victor grinned his evil slit. "He had it under his mattress," Victor said. "Guess he lied when he said there were no weapons here."

Buck's bloody face paled and he fell to the carpet, begging like he did in the trillers' firing line. "I promised Pastor Jones," he said. "I promised I'd stay with peace. I even dreamed it. I dreamed the true peace."

Glosser cursed and smashed Buck across the head with the machete's handle, knocking him out. Buck collapsed to the carpet as headlights lit the window shades. Victor glanced out front.

"Two cars," he said. "Seven people."

I looked out and saw Pastor Jones step from one of the cars.

"Sergeant Davies," Pastor Jones yelled. "You have nowhere to run. Think of your daughter. She doesn't have to follow your violent path. Do the right thing and I promise to gift her a true

dream of peace."

I tensed at the mention of my daughter, but Glosser pointed up the street at more headlights approaching. We didn't have long before an entire mob of trillers would be here.

"Out the back door?" Glosser asked.

I looked at Victor and he nodded toward the front door. "No," I said. "We charge them. Rattle them. We're in no condition to outrun them unless they're afraid to follow."

So we charged.

Victor shot two trillers, an old husband and wife I remembered from the church's Christmas choirs, where they always sang a haunting version of 'Silent Night'. Glosser sliced a teenage girl across the face with his machete, while I shot the postman who delivered mail to my house. The first shot from the mousegun didn't stop him, but the second shattered the lit Molotov cocktail in his hand, exploding him to a crazy dance of flames. Despite this, he kept trilling peace with the others.

I tried to shoot Pastor Jones but all I saw of him was his red hair illuminated for a moment as a third car pulled up. He ducked behind the car for safety.

By then we were past the trillers and running down the street.

"They're not following," Glosser shouted.

"They'll follow," I said. "They'll wait a bit before chasing us. Get up their bravery and numbers."

So we ran for Glosser's house, praying Pastor Jones wouldn't figure out too soon where we were going.

We reached Glosser's neighborhood to find the power out. A fire station down the block had been attacked and the substation next door had exploded when the station burned.

While Victor and I stood guard, Glosser raced up the stairs calling for his family. They opened the attic door and fell into his arms, his twin boys hugging him as his wife cried. Sheriff Granville's wife, along with her daughter-in-law and grandkids, surrounded me. I hugged the sheriff's wife as she wiped her eyes. I didn't need to tell her about the sheriff's bravery. She knew he'd have gone down fighting.

Quickly, Glosser grabbed a duffle bag and began throwing food and supplies into it. Victor and I opened Glosser's gun safe and pulled out a shotgun and an automatic rifle from Glosser's days on our department's SRT team. Victor handed me the rifle and ammo clips and I handed him one of Glosser's old sets of body armor. Victor loaded the shotgun and placed Buck's pistol in a holster which he belted around his waist.

"There's a truck and an old SUV in the garage," Glosser told me. "We drive them both, grab your family, and get the hell out of here."

I was curious where this left Victor. I'd assumed all along he'd leave us at some point. While I didn't like turning him loose, there was no other alternative. I turned to ask Victor where he was going only to find him staring at Glosser's wife.

Victor looked embarrassed, as if caught in a compromising moment. Even though I'd seen Glosser's wife a hundred times, it took me long seconds to realize what Victor was seeing. Glosser's wife looked like an older version of the hitchhiker Victor had killed.



"What's wrong," Glosser asked in an edgy voice. I was suddenly grateful he'd never seen the girl's bloody body or the nightmarish autopsy photos.

"A destination," Victor said, fumbling away his shocked stare. "You'll need somewhere to hole up for a while. I've got a place."

Glosser pulled out a map and Victor showed him how to drive to his land. About sixty miles outside town, up and down several hills and a number of dirt roads. "Got a supply of food built up, a deep well, a solid rock and cement house that could hold off an army. Best of all, few people know it's there."

Glosser stared at Victor, no doubt knowing like I did what that house had been built to hold off – and likely what Victor had used the isolation for. "I don't know..." Glosser said.

"I won't go there," Victor promised. "I'll head the other way. Wouldn't feel right, you and me together."

Seeing no other place to go, we agreed with Victor's plan. We loaded the truck and SUV and drove to my house.

BARRY LAY IN our kitchen, his body bled out. There were three dead trillers outside the house and two inside. The shotgun beside my husband was empty and it looked like he'd struggled hand to hand with someone before being shot.

In Barry's frozen right hand, a tangle of red hair gleamed to my flashlight's glow. Torn from the triller he'd fought.

Victor shook his head at my husband's body and kicked a cabinet so hard the wood splintered. "It ain't right," he said. "All these people – they're sheep. They hate violence. They get people like you to protect them and fear people like me, but end of the day that's all they do, fear and talk and live."

I knew what Victor was saying, and if I'd been thinking clearer I would have told him he was only partially right. That it wasn't wrong to want to live your life in peace. To let others protect you, as it'd been my honor to do. But right then I was as angry as him and wanted to kill Pastor Jones and everyone like him. And I needed to find my daughter.

I thought back to Jones' comment about Lucy being shown the true way to peace. He had her. I knew it.

When Glosser drove up in front of my house he had a young man and woman huddled in the back of his truck and another car following them. "Two soldiers I know, and their families," he said. "I couldn't leave them."

I was proud of Glosser. Proud of how he'd pulled his life together from his wreck of a childhood, and proud I'd served beside such a good, decent man. When he asked about Barry, I shook my head and told him to lead everyone to Victor's safe house. I was going to find my daughter. If I was lucky, I'd join them later.

"What about him?" Glosser asked, pointing his pistol at Victor.

Victor muttered he was also leaving. Would hike his way out of town. But I quickly told him no. He was coming with me.

Victor looked intrigued and asked what was in it for him. But I didn't answer. Merely tapped my fingers across the oily sheen of my rifle.

THE HOLY REDEEMER Church sat at the end of our tiny downtown, where it'd stood for the last hundred years. If Pastor Jones and the trillers had their way it might stand for another century as a beacon of humanity's ultimate embrace of peace. Not that I'd be welcome in their dream of peace.

As I expected, the church was also a beacon for trillers across the area. Whatever had infected people caused them to naturally gravitate to people like Jones. I remembered the reports I'd read – how this was happening in communities across the world – before reminding myself to focus on the matter at hand.

As dawn slapped its nasty light down, Victor and I sneaked into the old hotel down the street from the church. The hotel had been built during Prohibition and abandoned for the last few decades. Most people avoided its decaying bulk, which was riddled with small corridors and dusty rooms. But I'd spent long days investigating that nasty murder-suicide here and knew the place inside and out.

"A good defensive spot," Victor said. "But I still don't see why I should stick with you."

I thought again of the murder-suicide and wondered if I could really go through with my plan. Ignoring Victor's question, I climbed the stairs to a fifth floor room, where a small hole in the outside wall let us see the church without being seen.

We watched all morning. Trillers milled around on foot and in cars. Each time the bells in the church's large wooden tower rang – meaning a new victim had been sighted – Pastor Jones would start his high-tone shriek, which always grabbed the minds of the other trillers and excited them into driving off to kill their prey.

There were also a few prisoners in the church, all children. Through the church windows, I saw Lucy and seven other young kids, each the child of a local deputy, firefighter, or soldier. All looked scared. I remembered my dream and how it had condemned Lucy merely because she was the child of a violent woman.

"Obviously a trap," Victor said. "They're trying to draw out the holdouts."

"Maybe. Or maybe Pastor Jones really believes those kids aren't tainted with the violent tendencies the trillers are stamping out. Maybe he's trying to save them."

That's when Pastor Jones entered the church. Through the large windows I saw him talk to the kids. I don't know what he said but the kids disagreed with him, with Lucy being so bold as to push him away. Pastor Jones shook his red hair in irritation and walked back outside.

I fingered my assault rifle. My daughter was too much like me for the trillers to let her live for long. I had to act soon. But first, I needed to know about Victor.

"If I asked you to help me rescue my daughter, would you?"

"No. Earlier, there was strength in numbers. Now, I'm better going alone. No offense, but that's how I work."

I nodded. That was the answer I'd expected. "Not sure I believe you," I said. "If you're such a loner, why'd you tell Glosser about your safe house? You could have worked your way there. Laid low for a while."



"Again, not my way. I've killed twenty-eight people. Mostly women, but also a few men. People see what I've done, they wonder if the killer's one of the sheep around them. Their neighbor. Their friend."

I shifted the assault rifle nervously in my hands. But Victor could have killed me anytime in the last two days. He grinned his evil split at my wariness.

"You and me, we're so similar," he said. "We understand evil, even if we have different reactions to it. The sheep out there, they haven't a clue. They hate you sheepdogs unless we wolves are around, then they tolerate you until we disappear in the night. That's the natural way. That's the life I want."

He glanced at the trillers surrounding the church and shook his head. "I can't say this isn't my fight. And I am curious. I want to see how far you'll go to save your daughter. But I won't risk my life to help you."

And that was that. He'd watch, but not help. His rambling explanation didn't totally make sense. But if I'd asked one of the trillers about their words – for peace, for a new world, because of a damn dream – would they also match their deeds? Too many levels and depths to the craziness around us.

Still, I needed Victor. So I fell back on the murder-suicide I'd investigated here a decade ago, knowing a secret he'd take in trade for his help. Something Victor could only do if I let him.

I handed him my assault rifle and made my offer.

VICTOR GAVE ME a hell of a distraction.

From the Prohibition hotel's fifth floor hiding place, he picked off trillers with the assault rifle, sniping them one by one. He killed four before they realized where the shots came from, the sounds echoing in confusing bangs around the downtown streets and buildings. But once they knew where he was the trillers surged toward the hotel.

If Victor did like I said he had a decent chance. It would take the trillers a long time to search every room of that old hotel and by then, well, I refused to think about that part.

I sneaked to the rear of the church, Victor's rifle shots and the returning fire providing more than enough sound to cover my approach. Pastor Jones and an armed man stood guard over the kids in the church, but they casually watched the fight through the windows. I shot the armed man – I recognized him as Mr Hillsbury, the principal of my old high school – and aimed my shotgun at Pastor Jones.

"You okay, Lucy?" I asked.

My daughter smiled. "I told Pastor Jones you'd save us. He didn't believe me, but I told him."

I wanted to cheer my daughter's faith, but instead told her to lead the other kids to the back room of the church and wait for me. Victor's rifle fire still sounded outside, but I saw the trillers entering the hotel. Victor would soon be forced to go into hiding and I didn't want them to return and find us.

Pastor Jones watched the kids go with sadness. "It's my fault," he said. "While their parents' dreams tainted the kids, I couldn't kill them like I was supposed to. I suppose I've also been tainted. By people like you. I couldn't simply do what I was ordered to do."

I laughed nervously at the meaning behind Jones' words. "How long have you been setting this up? I mean, the people like you?"

Pastor Jones smiled. "Since before I arrived in this town. And be careful about using the word 'people' on us – it's an imprecise term."

I shivered, wondering what exactly I faced. But I understood that there must be Pastor Joneses all over the world directing these dreams and the trillers. Pushing them to do things they might otherwise be reluctant to do.

"It's the human mind," he said. "So malleable. Most of you don't realize how controlled you are by cultural constraints and the desires of other people. You made it easy for us."

"Do you remember baptizing me?" I asked. "You praised me for my work. I'm the same person I was then."

He nodded. "Indeed you are. And I've always been impressed with how strong a person you are. I think that's why I couldn't kill those kids. I thought, maybe I'm the one to stand up to the insanity my kind has brought to your world. Maybe I'm the one to make a difference, much like you have done."

In that moment it almost seemed as if the old Pastor Jones was before me, again caring deeply for his congregation and community. But then I remembered the evil he and his kind had brought to my world.

"When people discover that they've been manipulated, they won't go easy on you," I said.

"Perhaps. But the path to peace no longer runs through you."

Even though Pastor Jones was unarmed, my soul screamed to shoot him. To leave him crying on a church pew as he slowly bled out, just like he'd done to Barry. But I'm not Victor. I made Pastor Jones kneel and I smashed his head with the butt of my shotgun, knocking him out. I then ran to the back of the church and led the children to safety.



FOR SEVEN MONTHS we've lived in peace. In addition to the people Glosser and I saved, we found other refugees. Soldiers and police and firefighters and others – those who understand the need to occasionally take a violent stand for what is right. We don't worship violence. But we don't fear it either.

We hid at Victor's safe house and several nearby places. But we no longer had much trouble with the trillers. Unless the trillers came face to face with us, they seemed to forget that a few of the us had survived.

But not many. Over the radio, we heard the trillers' celebratory message of peace echo from all corners of the world. Even though the dream that caused this behavior had begun to burn off – fewer and fewer people were trilling, and fewer and fewer people were being killed – that didn't matter.

The trillers had won. Their peace was at hand.

One cold-shiver winter day, I stood guard duty near the safe house when a solitary man walked up the dirt road. As he neared, I saw his nasty grin and recognized Victor.

I moved from my hiding spot, aiming my shotgun at him.

"I'm not staying," he said. "Heard the bungalow down the road is more fun."

I chuckled softly. A few miles from here a number of murder-

ers and criminals had banded together, much as we had. While we mostly kept apart from those wolves, they'd agreed to work with us if the trillers ever mounted a full-scale attack.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Curious. You tell anyone our deal?"

I hadn't. Truth was, I'd been ashamed to. What I'd offered Victor was the hidden speakeasy in that old Prohibition-era hotel. No one but the few deputies who'd investigated the murder-suicide knew the hidden rooms were even there. When I'd explained the speakeasy's location to Victor, and how that crazed druggie had been able to slowly kill his victim with no one else hearing or seeing, he'd instantly seen the potential. I told him if he sniped the trillers while I saved my daughter, he'd have the perfect lair to fall back on. The perfect place to remind his sheep of the true meaning of fear.

"I stayed three months," he told me. "Came out at night. Caught trillers, took them back to that room. Had a mighty fun time. Way better than that hitchhiker."

I gripped my shotgun tight, fighting the urge to kill this evil man. "Why are you here?" I asked.

"Wanted to see if you'd told the others what you allowed me to do. Wanted to see. That's all."

I didn't lower my shotgun as I told him to go up the road four

miles and turn at the hidden driveway under the double oak trees. "They'll take you in," I said. "Tell them I sent you."

"I'll do that. And you're right, you know. Not to kill me. You'll need me in the days ahead."

"Why?" I asked, looking down the road, praying Pastor Jones and a mob of trillers wasn't right behind him. "The trillers are calming down. The dream is easing."

"Think about it. That dream and the way your pastor controlled people wasn't natural. Now that the sheepdogs and wolves are gone, the trillers are going back to being docile. That worries me."

Victor pulled a new pair of handmade leather gloves from his back pocket and slid them on. The bright red hairs on the gloves glistened – laughed – full of Pastor Jones' words from the night we'd prayed together at church.

"Doesn't take another predator to know you attack the sheep when they're peaceful," he said. "The creatures who tricked us with this dream of peace will be coming. I suggest keeping your eyes on the up and up."

Victor waved goodbye with his gloved right hand – the shock red hairs peeking and wafting to the breeze – and walked on. I gripped my shotgun and watched the road and waited for more to come. •

WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE'S 'PLAYGROUND (HIDE AND SEEK)'



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"We are our memories, except when we aren't. We are the cultural memories of everyone who came before us, except when we reject such cultural expression.

"The ability to remember past events originally arose in animals as a means of survival. 'Ouch, that fire is f'in hot.' The memory of burning yourself means the next time you're around a fire you'll be more careful. But by their nature, memories only tell you how to handle events which have already occurred. As we've all learned in recent years from the stock market, past performance is no guarantee of future results.

"Memoria' is one of the toughest stories I've written and also one of the most intense. At the story's core is the question of how many memories can a person lose before that person's no longer who they were. And equally important, are there certain memories you shouldn't be allowed to lose, even if you desperately wish them gone?"

JASON SANFORD MEMORIA

SLAP JACK PIE SHRIEKS WITH DELIGHT AS, BETWEEN GOS-samer-spanned worlds, the Marquis de Sade's ghost grabs him by the balls. Sally Moon Eyes snickers – her nipples erect to the crucified soul of Saint Wilgefortis – and rips her blue smock before falling to her knees in prayer, chanting how endless dimensions are the universe's orgasm unto itself. And me? I ignore my friends' ghost-headed nonsense and mime a banana cream pie, which I throw to the laughter of an obscure 20th century comedian named Andy Kaufman.

Poor me! Woe me! Why must I always ghost the unknowns?

Slap Jack and Sally Moon giggle at my misfortune as our ship breaches the radioactive muck of a new Earth.

"A new world!" Slap Jack squeals. "Skeleton skies and door-nail dirt. And no more ghosts to copy. Which means the countdown's in..."

3...the sparkling sizzle of air on our ship's burned-flesh hull, and a scream from the living vessel's mind-link as it lands on this new-destroyed world.

2...the worry in Captain Couran's eyes as she unstraps herself and checks on the crew, and discovers half of us shields dead – brains frying and eyes glazing and ghosts flat-lining into their ultimate release.

1...and me and Slap Jack and Sally Moon rolling on the warm-flesh deck of our holding pen, moaning and laughing and stoking and crying and wanting no more and evermore to do with dimension jumps.

"Blast-offering," Sally Moon Eyes intones beside me with a low, immodest sigh. But I'm more interested in the commotion to aft, where the ship's medical officer leans over someone

who is hurt.

"Captain!" Dr Bonder shouts. "Lenner's hit."

Len is the ship's biologist and Captain Couran's wife. Through my Andy-Kaufman-addled gaze I watch the captain race by, her black uniform shimmering electricals in tune with the nervous impulses of our living ship. Couran bends over her true love as Len seizes, her body shaking so hard her short dreadlocks rap the fleshy deck like rain. Then Len's green eyes grow wide and she stares right through me – and a ghost like none I've ever seen shrieks delight to my mind.

I roll face down and bite the deck, teething into the ship's blood. Scared by what I'd seen. Scared because this isn't some barrier-stored copy of a human who lived ages ago. No, this ghost is alien, and it's now ripping Len's mind apart piece by painful piece.

"Blessed be the saints," Sally Moon Eyes prays beside me, having obviously also seen what's within Len. "For they truly are the blessed never blessed."

All us shields love Len, so I bow my head for a moment in silent agreement with Sally's prayer.

Afterward, I try to focus despite Andy Kaufman bending my consciousness to his needs. Try to cram reality back through my mind so I can warn the captain about Len.

But Andy, being Andy Kaufman and having little concern about others, decides at that moment to go traipsing through my memories. I suddenly see Len at our prejump briefing, standing in her brown coveralls as she mentions this is my last voyage as a shield. I almost pass out from joy when she calls me a good man. And when she says only the bravest people



dare lose themselves protecting others, I want to fall at her feet and worship her everlasting glory.

Praise of shields is simply not done but Captain Couran applauds Len's words, followed by grudging claps from the rest of the crew. Only Dr Kit Bonder, our medical officer, is outraged by Len's comments. He glares at me. I know the bastard's already plotting new ways to catch me alone and reload those old crimes back to my mind.

Thankfully my ghosts always tear those memories away, but I still shiver, recalling the last time Bonder caught me. How he ordered the ship to restrain me in the medical bay as he slammed memory after memory through my head. Each memory intoned to the shimmering wrap of crime-scene testimony so I'd know these were copies of my own self-made deeds. That these were the very memories used to convict me in the first place.

As I cried and begged Bonder to stop, he grabbed my stubbly cheeks. Forced me to look at him as he declared his solemn duty of keeping me from evermore forgetting the evil I'd done.

That once a baddie bad always a baddie bad, no matter how many crews I shield.

But as Len praises me I ignore Dr Bonder and smile. Len smiles at me, causing all the ghosts within my mind to melt before her kindness.

And with that the memory falls away. But instead of being impressed, Andy gags. With a comedian's smirk he destroys my recollection of that briefing – shreds Len's kind words, peels the remembered happiness from my mind – before he jumps my body through shakes and unfunny jokes like a puppet to broke-threaded strings.

As the captain cradles Len, Andy stands my body up and kicks open the holding pen, which has been weakened by the landing. The crew panic, afraid I've taken the ghost of a truly baddie bad. The captain, though, simply orders people to step aside. She eases Len gently to the deck and stands protectively between me and her true love.

Andy salutes my right hand. "Here I come to save the day," he says, lip-synching me through a Mighty Mouse imitation. "Although I guess Len won't be doing any more saving – or licking the captain's thighs anytime soon."

Captain Couran's calm facade shatters. She cold-cocks me. Shoves me back in the holding pen and orders the ship to grow stronger restraints to trap us shields. As she turns back to Len, I collapse against the aft porthole, the ship's warm flesh both cushioning and nurturing my ghost-splintered soul.

Andy laughs even louder. In a voice mimicking Pearl Pureheart, he whispers, "Oil Can Harry, you're a villain!"

Through the porthole's living lens, the light of this destroyed world howls at Andy's unfunny joke. The wrecked skyscrapers titter. The sun-bleached skeletons giggle. And, as if sharing in the joke, Len's ghost talks to me. Says she's been waiting for this day. Been waiting oh so long.

Not knowing what else to do, I join Andy in laughing. Len is as good as dead. And without Len to protect I no longer care what happens to me.

CALL ME OIL Can. Each new ghost loves to change my name. Since Andy likes calling me Oil Can, that's my name. Remember it when I'm rational. When Andy and the other ghosts give me a

chance to see beyond their twisted views of reason.

And reason there is, or at least a reasonable joke. Like the endless Earths. Earths here. Earths there. Earths slapping themselves across the multiverse. Each slightly different. Each slightly the same.

But getting off our bump of an Earth and into those others, aye, there's the rub. And you'll rub yourself raw – over and over, rubbing and moaning and groaning and grinding – wondering why the ghosts of everyone who's ever lived surrounds our Earth, attempting to trap us there.

Nefertiti, Alexander, Marc Antony, Genghis Khan, Joan of Arc, Lincoln, you, me. The famous and the unknown, all swirling in a vast dimensional barrier separating our Earth from the others.

And if you try to leave, the ghosts have their way with you.

I've heard scientists swear up and down this system can't be natural. After all, why would our Earth be the only one surrounded by a barrier and ghosts? Are we baddie bads, not trusted with a multiverse? And what created the barrier? What causes the barrier to copy the essence of humans until it crackles to the replicated souls of every person who's ever lived?

And is there really a barrier god?

That last part's what ticks off most scientists. After all, why would they believe what a bunch of ghost-addled shields say? Never mind that each time we go through the barrier the barrier god whispers to us. Commends us for our bravery. Selects which ghosts to throw our way.

But in the end, only those who let the barrier have its way with them believe in the barrier god. I once tripped the dimensions with a famous atheist known for screaming how the barrier wasn't created by any damn God or god. I shouldn't have done it, but when our ship burst through and the barrier threw Thomas Aquinas at me, instead of embracing the saintly ghost I whispered how much fun it'd be to take the atheist.

The barrier god laughed in agreement and gifted the atheist with the saint. After that the bastard wasn't fit for anything. Kept muttering how he'd seen God. Or gods. Or been God. I forget which.

And that's the problem with the barrier – the barrier god wants the mind and soul of someone on every trip. So before each voyage the crews parade the prisons and poverty holes, swearing freedom and riches to us baddie bads if we'll sign by a dimension ship's blood and make five voyages. If we'll surround the crews and, in that brief moment when the ghosts swarm, offer ourselves as their playthings. Sacrifice ourselves for the ones who matter.

The ones like Len.

This is my fifth trip. While passing to and fro I've ghosted nine copies of long-dead people. When we return home I'm free and no more a baddie bad than Andy Kaufman.

Not that there's much of me left to free.

PREPARE FOR IMPACT. Brace head between legs. Kiss your act goodbye.

Slap Jack and Sally Moon and I are the only shields still living – the other three are dead, their eyes unlit and their minds cracked, blood and synapses spilling across the deck for the ship to absorb. The crew wanders about in shock, both at the dead shields and at one of their own being hit. But for now, me and Slap Jack and Sally Moon are beyond caring. We buzz to

our new ghosts and roll about the holding pen as the ship's eyes play ancient Mighty Mouse cartoons to entertain us.

As the texture of Andy Kaufman races my mind, I taste a childhood memory and realize I used to love Mighty Mouse. Somehow I understand this is a real memory and not one copied from Andy and the other ghosts. I once loved that ancient cartoon.

But even as the memory rises, Andy Kaufman explodes in my mind, outraged at our shared love. "No more truth," he says as he stomps my memories, cutting them down like a lawnmower through daisies. He grows new memories within my mind of him on the Improv's stage reading *The Great Gatsby*. He sits there reading the damn book until the audience – angry at paying good money to watch such shit – pelts him with dinner rolls. I laugh even though it isn't funny. Most of the other ghosts inside me nod their long-gone heads, satisfied with their new neighbor.

Only poor Aquilia Maesa protests, not liking the addition of Andy to our mix. But then, Aquilia doesn't like me or any of my ghosts. When she first fell into my mind and experienced my crimes, this ancient Roman noblewoman – who'd once so lovingly cheered blood and guts at the Coliseum – tried to leave, crying "memoria, memoria" as if I was a bad recollection to be shunted away. She begged the barrier god to remove her from our midst. But stay she did, and that was that.

As I wonder yet again about the violence I can no longer remember, Captain Couran knocks on the clear barrier across our holding pen. The barrier swirls and sphincters open.

"I need to apologize," the captain says. "I know you didn't mean what you said." Her taut brown face and deep blue eyes click over me – razor spool eyes, I've heard Len say, reflecting the captain's tough Afghani ancestry.

"Maybe I did mean it," I say. "But Andy Kaufman still forced me to speak the words."

Captain Couran glances into the distance, the ship's organic brain accessing this Andy Kaufman reference and feeding it to her senses. Whatever she finds satisfies her, and she focuses back on me. "Are you three well enough to work? We need to figure out what happened and how to get home."

I look at Slap Jack – who bleeds from dozens of cuts after flagellating himself to the Marquis de Sade's desires – and at Sally Moon, who nailed her hands to the cabin flesh wall like Saint Wilgefortis on her cross. Sally Moon's blood dribbles down the wall, slowly feeding the ship.

"We're ready," I say.

Slap Jack and Sally Moon giggle as they wander to the infirmary for numb-numb and heal-heal. But Andy whispers that he'll behave, so I follow Captain Couran to the bridge.

Our ship is tiny, only thirty meters long, and was birthed two decades before. Andy is amazed by what he sees so I explain how the hard lines and beliefs of high tech – metals and plastics and nanotech and computers – can't breach the barrier around our Earth. To escape our planet we travel in the bellies of gened, hollowed-out beasts, and pray they won't take it in their minds to digest us one fine day.

Andy applauds the wisdom of not being digested, and swears to refrain from irritating the ship.

Captain Couran leads me to the bridge – a tiny bubble of transparent collagen fibers barely big enough to hold the ship's backup ganglion cluster. From there, Captain Couran and I

watch a radioactive dawn rise on this new Earth. Or, I should say, this dead Earth. Above orbits the rubble of a shattered Moon, while all around us new-burned towers and buildings point fingered obscenities at the sky.

"I can't remember how many dead Earths I've visited," Captain Couran says. "But this one's different. Based on the radioactive decay, whatever caused these people to kill each other occurred barely a year ago."

Stunned by the devastation around us, Andy asks in a weak voice – my own – why they destroyed themselves.

"There's the question, isn't it?" the captain says, being patient because she likely suspects this is one of my ghosts speaking. "The evidence suggests something infects the people of these Earths with a need to destroy one another. Once the infection starts, it doesn't matter if they use nukes or plagues or a billion machetes. The results are always the same."

"So when are we running away?" I sing in an off-key voice, shaking my hips to one of Andy's inane white-boy dance moves.

Captain Couran breathes deep, struggling to stay calm. "We can't leave until we figure out what killed those shields," she says, reminding me of my dead colleagues. "I don't want to risk more deaths."

For a moment grief plays me like a broken guitar string. "It shouldn't happen," I whisper. "Ghosts don't kill. They drive you fun-fun. They crack you open. They replace your memories and consciousness with their own. But they don't kill."

Captain Couran nods, pleased I'm together enough to see her dilemma.

"So what do we do?"

I think of Len. She was hit by a ghost after we exited the barrier, which shouldn't have happened. Only our Earth – out of all the Earths we've visited so far – is enclosed within a barrier. So only ours contains ghost copies of the people living there. But despite this fact, Len's ghost seized her after we arrived on this world. Did that mean this alien ghost doesn't need a barrier to live in – or a barrier god to control it? Has it been waiting for us?

Deciding to help, Andy hugs my mind – and whispers how the alien ghost twists to anger and hate. It tried living in the other shields but didn't like sharing a body with human ghosts, so it killed them before taking Len.

I shiver. Howl. Something scary has reached us here, something I don't want to confront.

Andy giggles as he orders me to buck up. "We must go and ask of this Len," Andy says in the voice of an ancient TV immigrant named Latka. "She's a ghost, yes, but a ghosting like no other."

THERE IS A memory purely my own. A memory the ghosts always leave untouched. It's from the first time I breached the barrier – and the first time I spoke with Len.

From what I've been told, Captain Couran wasn't thrilled when I was assigned to her ship. My killing spree was well known and, shield or no shield, the captain wasn't taking any chances. Not only was I placed in the holding pen, the captain ordered the ship to bind me with tight chains of muscle cord. Captain Couran told me that while she believed in redemption, she also wasn't stupid. "We'll see how it goes," she said. "If your attitude changes after ghosting, you'll be free as the other shields."



I lay prostrate on the fleshy deck as Dr Bonder checked my vital signs, and could only nod to the captain's words. When she walked away, Bonder smirked and leaned over me. "I've long followed your work," he said. "Shame you won't remember what you've done. The ghosts trash your worst memories first."

"Why?"

"I suspect they don't like living inside such evil minds. Course, with people like you, all you've got inside is bad. Probably won't be anything left after they scoop the bad away."

I wasn't surprised by Bonder's anger – I'd heard whispers how his wife had been murdered while serving at some poverty hole's medical clinic. But Bonder's words also proved Captain Couran had been right to chain me. If I'd been free I'd have killed the man. Would have smashed his head to a bloody nothingness.

As Dr Bonder settled into his seat for launch, having no idea how close he'd come to death, the shield next to me patted my belly. "Sad sad insides," she muttered. "Soon you won't feel the sads."

I looked away, no longer certain I wanted my freedom this badly.

That's when I saw Len. I'd seen her briefly at the pre-flight briefing and knew she was the captain's wife and ship's biologist. But those facts existed in my mind as only abstract knowledge. Len was merely another crew I'd pledged to protect in exchange for one day gaining my freedom.

But to my surprise, as the ship prepared to jump Len left her seat and opened the holding pen. She kneeled beside me like Bonder had done, but unlike him there was no anger in her eyes.

"I don't need comforting," I said.

"Good. I've none to give."

Len spoke with a strong brogue, a remnant of whatever poverty hole she'd grown up in. She stared at me for a moment and smiled, as if satisfied by what she saw. "You're lucky," she said. "I was a kid when my mother killed a man. When the police came to our apartment, she hugged me once and sent me outside. I heard the gunshot as the police were handing me to child services."

I understood – poverty holes were bad, but none were worse than the overcrowded hell of prison. Often better to take your own life than suffer prison, which was basically what I was about to do. "Must have been rough," I said.

"Maybe. But it's what I got. Only thing I wish is that my mom had been given the option you've got. Even if the ghosts had taken most of her, some part of her would have survived."

I nodded. That was the same reason I agreed to this. In my panic at the coming jump I'd forgotten.

I grinned as Len made a fist and tapped my bound hands. "You never know how you'll turn out," she said. "Might still be a good bit of you left."

"Very true."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

Nothing, I realized as the ship jumped. At that moment I heard the barrier god's deep, soulful laugh for the first time as it flung a ghost deep into my mind. As my life and memories popped like a child's soap bubbles, I found myself singing a nonsense song – a little ditty from my youth, taken from the old cartoons I'd watched whenever my mother left me alone in our poverty hole. Mighty Mouse. That was the cartoon I'd wor-

shipped as a child. Here I come to save the day!

Len laughed as our ship landed on a new Earth. "Perhaps you'll like the new you," she said. And I realized I did. And I also liked this kind person who dared see a lowly shield as human.

IN THE SHIP's infirmary, Len lies inside one of the healing bays, the warm folds of the ship's skin quivering and flowing around her. But this isn't a physical injury for the ship to heal. Instead, Len glares at us with inhuman eyes. Or perhaps something inhuman stares from behind very human eyes.

Dr Bonder has ordered the ship to wrap the clear lens of an isolation chamber around Len's bay, and for some reason I'm glad I can't touch her. Inside me, Andy and the other ghosts whisper agreement.

"Here I come to save the day," Andy squeaks in his Mighty Mouse voice, but no one laughs.

"Well?" Captain Couran asks.

I didn't know. I want to know. I want to sing an answer, but none comes. Unlike Slap Jack and Sally Moon, who are on their second voyage, I've experienced five trips and nine ghosts. Most shields drop out after the first voyage, afraid at how much of themselves they lose when the ghosts slam inside. But I no longer worry about losing myself. So inside swim my ghosts, with the most recent, Andy, ghosting on top. This type of ghosting I understand.

But what holds Len isn't a human ghost, which no matter how it rearranges your consciousness is still a copy of some human's ancient memories and life. What grips Len is beyond me and Andy and the others to understand.

"Say it again," Len whispers in a voice licked to pain, breaking me from my thoughts. "The save... The coming..."

I glance at the captain, puzzled, but Andy knows what she wants and welcomes his new audience. "HERE!" he sings loudly, "I come to save the day!"

Len laughs. The part of me never replaced by any ghost again remembers that song from my childhood, and wonders if this is why the barrier god gifted me with Andy Kaufman. Because of a mutual love of Mighty Mouse and dreams of saving the day?

I look past Len's inhuman eyes and twisting rage and see the pale-mooned face I've worshipped from a ghostly distance. For a split-moment Len's face transposes across another woman's, a face bloody and begging me not to kill her as the knife in my hand twitches to her blood. Other faces also appear – the dozens of people I killed before being caught. Tears form within several of my ghosts as I beg them to destroy these memories. I want to be totally free of the evil I once did.

With a laugh, Andy swallows the memories. The other ghosts cheer as I flash to a memory from my last mission. Of Len and the captain standing beside me, kissing each other while the sun sets on a dusty Earth which has never known human footsteps. As I watched their happiness that day, I wished so hard to no longer be me.

"You're not, you know," Andy says in my voice. "Not you, that is."

The captain and Dr Bonder look at me in puzzlement, not understanding what I'm talking about. But from inside the isolation bay Len claps her hands and smiles.

"I never understood humor until I began ghosting humans,"

WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE
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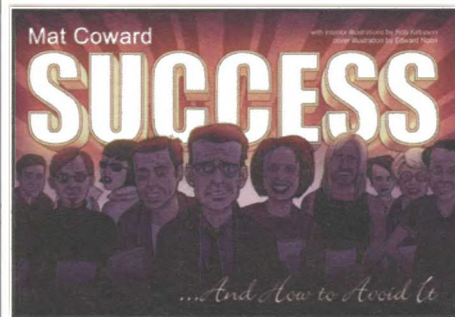
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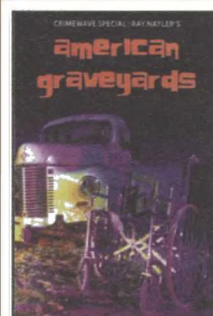


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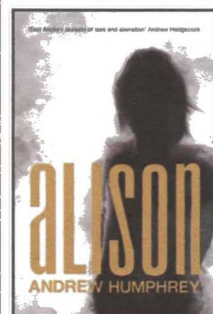
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INTERZONE #231



she says. "Here I come to save the day. Heh. Such an impossible thing for any of you to do."

"Did you kill the other shields?" Captain Couran asks coldly. "Ask fun-fun boy."

The captain glances at me, and Andy whispers this is a truth.

"Whatever you are," the captain says, "you must know we won't take you back to our world. There is nothing to be gained by what you're doing."

Len rolls over and places a hand on the isolation lens separating her from us. "This form is no longer Len, but parts of her remain. Do you remember meeting her?"

Captain Couran nods cautiously.

"You were celebrating Mardi Gras in New Orleans," Len says. "A thousand beads around your neck. Thousands of people surrounding you. But you looked so lonely. So lonely in that crowd. So far from the high lands you were born in."

I feel Captain Couran shiver beside me, and see her fingers twitch into a fist.

"Then Len met you. She loved you right away. Whispered how you were going to fall in love with her. She knew you could barely hear her words because of the screaming crowd, but she said them anyway."

Captain Couran's eyes mist ever so slightly. Yes, she remembers.

"Perhaps I'll destroy that memory. Make it gone forever."

Captain Couran yells and attacks the isolation lens as Dr Bonder and I pull her back. Bonder orders the ship to add a sleeping agent to the healing bay's air. Len, though, merely laughs as Andy and I both marvel at her perfect cruelty and shrivel in fear before her.

However, as Len laughs she also reaches to her bare belly and slices her skin with her fingernails, slicing back and forth, digging deeper and deeper, until her intestines explode out. Dr Bonder orders triple the sleeping agent but it has no effect, so we watch in horror as Len smears her guts across the isolation lens. The clear barrier blackens and dies and shatters to the release of purest evil.

And I don't mean Andy Kaufman evil. I mean evil way beyond any of his jokes.

Captain Couran aims her gloved hand at Len and the air crackles to neural electricity, but it doesn't stop Len. She reaches out and touches Dr Bonder, who stiffens and screams. Len then turns to me, eyes glazing, lips smacking, and grabs my neck in a choke hold. I can't fight, instead feeling as if I am Len. As if I'm strangling myself as Len's memories run in and out of my mind. The blackness that took Bonder begins to grab for me, but the creature in Len calls it back.

"Not yet," Len whispers. "I'm saving you for last. Until then, accept this gift."

She means Bonder, who screams again and doubles over in pain, reaching for me. Perhaps begging me to help. I can't do anything for him. I stumble out of the infirmary – wondering why the creature spared me – as Captain Couran follows and seals the hatch.

Through the lens, we watch as Bonder's skin blackens and crisps like he's being burned from the inside. The sparks of his eyes are the last thing to go, as if Len wants everyone to see how much pain he experiences. And even though I should be happy at seeing Bonder suffer, I want so bad to tell him it's okay. To

say that pain only lasts a little while before it always disappears.

As Bonder collapses, the blackness in him spreads into the ship's living deck and walls, a shivering web of black virals which greedily cover everything in the infirmary. Captain Couran gasps as her connection with the ship vibrates to their shared pain. I grab the captain and pull her through a closing bulkhead as the ship attempts to isolate the infection.

As the bulkhead sphincters shut, I see Slap Jack and Sally Moon eying me in panic. The black web reaches beyond the infirmary and spreads across the deck with amazing speed, washing over my friends as they scream. They began to rip their own bodies apart with teeth and nail and numb-crunching bone.

Then the bulkhead finishes closing and I no longer have to watch my friends die.

BESIDES SLAP JACK and Sally Moon – who as shields technically don't count – we lost seven crew members before the ship isolated Len. Through the ship's internal eyes we watch the crew go insane, slicing and dicing themselves and attacking each other. I've often seen a shade of this type of behavior among people who are ghosted, but never to such a deadly, permanent degree.

And throughout this violence Len stands before the ship's main eye smiling at us, the ghost inside blazing, her black intestines hanging free.

Captain Couran plugs herself into the ship's nerves to determine the damage. When she unplugs, she looks perfectly calm and collected, which scares me and my ghosts more than anything.

"Len is preparing to jump the ship," Captain Couran says. "That blackness we're seeing isn't the ship dying. It's whatever's inside Len reworking the living tissue and neural nets into a technology it can control. The good news is the ghost appears to have limited control over organic tech. But that won't stop it for long."

Before the captain's face hovers a pretty swirl of rainbow colors as the ship whispers how this alien ghost's actions mesh with data from countless expeditions to other dead Earths. Even in my brain-addling state I see that this creature or others like it have been responsible for the destruction we've seen on so many worlds. They infect each world's humanity like a virus and spin people into a terror-killing craze.

"Is there any way to save the day?" I ask. Andy groans at my lame joke.

"We have to kill the ship," Captain Couran says. "That will prevent the creature from reaching our Earth."

"The problem?" I ask, because if my memories of Andy's life prove one thing, it's that you always encounter problems on your explosive trajectory toward success.

"The problem is we can only kill the ship by destroying both the main ganglion cluster and the backup."

I curse. The main cluster is located in a shielded area nearby – while it will take a lot of work to cut into the main cluster, we can do it. The problem is that the backup cluster can only be accessed through the bridge, which is on the infected side of the ship. To reach it, someone will either have to brave Len and her ghost, or go around Len by taking a walk through the radioactive ruins of this world.

The captain gestures at her two remaining crew members. "It'll



take all three of us to cut through the main cluster's shielding. If you are willing to try for the bridge, we'll cut through here."

I glance out a porthole at the heat-shimmers of high radioactivity.

"I could order you to do this," the captain says. "As a shield, you agreed to give your life for this ship. But Len would hate me if I ever gave such an order, so the choice is yours."

I nod, touched by the captain's concern. I start to tell her I'll do it – only to have my words killed by Andy, who howls in my head. He tells me not to sacrifice myself for some stupid-headed ideal. The other ghosts echo his concerns, most not wanting to die a second time. Afraid of death on a world with no barrier god to copy their essence and preserve them again for all time.

I wouldn't have been able to control myself against their united front without Aquilia Maesa, who whispers in her ancient Latin for the ghosts to be quiet. "We're memories," she says softly. "Copies of those who once lived. It doesn't matter if we live or die. But if we do this, then maybe it can matter."

In all the years Aquilia Maesa has lived within me, she's never tried to force her way to the top of my mind like all the other ghosts do. But now, Andy and the others shrink before Aquilia's noble words and memories. With a smile which reminds me of Len, Aquilia tells me to proceed.

"We'll do it," I inform the captain, who knows me well enough to not inquire about whom this 'we' might be.

CAPTAIN COURAN ORDERS the ship to wrap me in a quickie pressure suit grown from its skin – and when Andy asks for the suit to have a gold Elvis look complete with frills, the captain bites her lip and makes that happen. The ship also creates a razor knife from one of its bones. As for the plan, the Captain makes me recite it over and over, each of my ghosts taking their turn: I'll exit the ship through the upper airlock, run along the ship's spine, and cut my way into the bridge. I'll then destroy the backup brain complex.

If I succeed and the captain and other crew finish their own cutting, nothing more needs be done. We'll die here in the waste of this world.

As the airlock sphincters open, Captain Couran smiles at me. For the moment I feel the wash of nostalgia. Suddenly I'm Len, standing on a crowded New Orleans street as she meets Captain Couran for the first time. I blush when I see Couran's blue razor eyes gazing back at Len. I feel purest happiness as, later that night, the two of them kiss and talk and embrace.

Andy panics at the memory, saying we must have been infected when Len touched us earlier. However, Aquilia notes this doesn't feel like an infection. Instead, it feels more like we've been ghosted. She swims through my mind and, with the only laugh I've ever heard her make, points to a new cache of memories growing within my synapses. Len. A piece of Len rests within me.

For the first time since leaving prison, tears tumble my eyes. Captain Couran asks if I'm okay. "I'm good," I say, wondering if some part of Len wanted to save this memory. If she ghosted it to me to keep it from the angry creature inside her.

Captain Couran salutes me and shuts the airlock.

Once outside I run along the ship's spine, Andy singing off-tone piano notes to each vertebra I step on. Even through my suit the outside world burns, its radioactivity warming my skin.

Or maybe it's psychosomatic, me feeling hot knowing the radiation is cooking me down all slow and tender.

Around the ship spin destroyed buildings and skyscrapers and houses and real ghosts – angry ghosts who if real would scream and bite because they weren't copied to some barrier and preserved for later days. No, these are the ghosts of the deadie-gone-dead, the ghosts of those who can't return as a copy preserved haint. As I feel the lingering memories of the people I killed so long ago – not enough to see them, but enough to know I truly did such horrible deeds – I swear I won't let my Earth go this way.

When I reach the ship's bridge, I slice through the clear collagen fibers and wiggle inside. Captain Couran has ordered the ship to obey my commands, so when I remove my suit's glove and touch the backup ganglion cluster I find myself suddenly understanding how Couran feels. The ship is another ghost. It now lives inside me, kicking Andy and Aquilia and the others to the rear of my consciousness.

Through the filter of the ship's mind I see Len. She stands, guts hanging out, in the blackened remains of the infirmary. She's still reworking the ship's controls, her viral touch turning blood and nerves and bone into a hard pseudo-flesh she can control. She's also frustrated – the alien ghost prefers the hard tech of metal and computers. She screams anger at some impasse and stomps the exploded remains of Dr Bonder. I try to reconcile this sight with the tender memory of kissing Captain Couran thrown into me by Len, but reconciliation fails.

As if knowing I'm watching, Len throws the blackness around her into the ship's main eyes. The ship screams in pain as its internal eyes crack and feedback surges our connection. I fall back across the bridge, shaking from the severed link.

"It's coming for us," Andy whispers, echoing what the ship has shown us. "The bulkheads won't hold it for long."

Andy sounds resolute, almost brave, and I nod as the other ghosts inside me voice agreement. I pull the knife out and, with my ungloved hand, caress the backup ganglion cluster for a moment. The ship weeps in pain and fear. I hate to add a new murder to my life – she's been a good ship – but with a quick motion I stab the knife in and twist and turn, punching through the sticky material until I'm shoulder deep in brain.

To my relief, the ship doesn't scream. It simply dies, a brain with nothing more to brain over.

I slump into the captain's chair as my ghosts cheer. Even though it is likely wasted effort, I pull the glove back on my suit. That will give me a little more time in this radioactive world.

That's when I notice the ship climbing into the sky.

The skyscraper skeletons and radioactive dust fall away as the ship tumbles up, moving higher and higher. I've seen this so many times. A prejump flight. Once we are high enough not to materialize in a mountain or building, we'll jump.

The ship is dead, yet we are about to jump.

Before I can ask Andy and the others what's going on, the bulkhead leading to the bridge blackens and cracks, dead flesh falling away as Len climbs up beside me.

"Thank you," she says, twirling her guts around her fingers. "The ship wouldn't stop fighting me. But a knife..." Len caresses the hole I cut through the ship's mind. "As you know, a knife always tells. Perhaps we are alike, you and I."

Andy howls with rage, the purest emotion I've ever experienced from him. I realize then why Len didn't kill me when we touched. She wanted to use me. Use me to free her. To use me to help kill the ship.

"Here I come..." Len says, smirking and laughing and pushing me back down in the captain's chair. "Even the worst comedians need an audience. So watch and learn, funny boy."

Aquila wants to spit at Len, but Andy and the others nod at the threat behind Len's words. So we simply sit and watch as our ship slips between worlds.

THERE'S NOTHING TO see as you approach the barrier surrounding Earth. One second you are on your Earth, the next second on another. But that moment in between also stretches – reaches out and holds you tight, like Len on the night she first met Couran. Holds you and kisses you and whispers that you and the barrier are one forever, no matter what may happen to the flesh which, while it seems so important right now, is only temporarily in need of caresses.

As we pass into the barrier, I feel our moment stretch before us. But where before this was when the ghosts always came, this time the barrier stretches empty around us. For some reason the barrier god stays away. I miss its laughter. How it always knew exactly which ghost to throw into my sad excuse for a mind.

Beside me Len smiles, but not the smile she gave Couran on that Mardi Gras night. Instead, it's an evil smile. A hateful smile. A smile of looking forward to all the hurt she'll do on our Earth. How she'll twist our metals and plastics and nanotech and computers against us. How she'll spin our very minds into mirrors of the anger she feels against all living creatures. A smile much like the one Andy Kaufman once flashed when his jokes collapsed in that fine line between funny and cruel. Between anger and laughter.

Inside me, Andy curses and apologizes, but that doesn't matter. Because I know Len wants an audience. As she destroys my world, I'll be forced to watch. I'll watch knowing that, in the end, all the horrors Len visits on my home will be gifted back to me ten-fold.

Len laughs, happy I finally understood her obscene joke.

But as we near the end of the barrier, the laughter leaves Len's lips. She gasps as the barrier ripples and reaches for us. The barrier pushes through our consciousness and, in that push, the truth becomes so clear. The barrier is Len. Or, more accurately, the barrier god is a ghost not unlike the one inside Len.

The barrier god stands before us, rippling across dimensions I couldn't see even if I stood inside them. The barrier god is as powerful as Len's ghost. It's also as old. But where Len's ghost has spent an eternity killing other creatures, the ghost surrounding our Earth has spent that same time protecting life.

The barrier god wraps itself around our ship, first making sure we have no hard technology onboard which might enable the creature within Len to replicate and survive. Satisfied there's only flesh and blood here, the barrier god grabs Len and steals her powers. It then pulls Len's ghost apart. Severs the creature's contact with the universes powering it. Plucks each mite of power from Len's ghost before returning to what it had been before, a barrier.

Len screams and falls to the deck at my feet. I lean over, wondering if Len is now Len again, only to see the flicker of the ghost still behind her eyes. But before the ghost can recover, all the human ghosts the barrier has copied swarm Len. Nefertiti, Alexander, Marc Antony, Genghis Khan, Joan of Arc, Lincoln, you, me. We fall into Len, each of us tearing out a piece of this ancient evil. Each of us shredding away memories of killing and death until there's nothing left to the ghost except the body of Len, laying there and shaking in pain.

And then we are back on our Earth, in an explosion of light and sizzling air.

WE SPLASH DOWN far out at sea, the ship rocking on gentle waves as white clouds scud a sun-blued horizon.

I pull off my suit's helmet and cut a large hole in the bridge fibers. I quickly pull Len onto the ship's outer skin, wanting to take her to the captain before she dies. But without the ghost to power her damaged body, Len screams in agony. I try to hold her guts in, but she screams even more. Knowing she has only moments left, I sit on the ship's skin and simply hold her.

The wind blows clear and sweet as I lean over her, hoping the ghost hasn't destroyed everything I love about my friend. To my pleasant surprise, Len smiles. "I pushed it in," she says in a weak voice. "When we touched. Do you still have it?"

I nod. I still have the memory. I can see from Len's eyes she no longer knows which memory she gave me, only that the memory had been important and she didn't want the ghost to destroy it.

"It's all good," Aquilia says gently in my voice. "You really did save the day."

Len laughs, looks at the sky, and is gone. I hold her as the ship rocks to the waves. As Captain Couran and the surviving crew open their airlock and rush to us. Couran grabs Len and cries deeply, her razor eyes no longer cutting to anything but pain.

We really did it, I whisper to Andy and Aquilia and the others. We really did save the day.

Andy tries to crack a joke in response, but to his eternal shame comedy fails him. So he shrugs and walks off the stage into the back of my mind.

As I sit on the radiation-heated skin of our dead ship and watch Captain Couran cry, I know when the time is right I'll tell her of the memory I've saved. How Len clung to that memory more than any other in her life.

And even though I've shielded enough ships to now be free, I'll volunteer for the captain's next voyage.

Not because I care about those other Earths. Instead, I want to spend another moment in the barrier around our world. To let the barrier god and the ghosts which protect us have their way with me – to swirl in and out, to steal my memories, to replace my soul with their own essence.

And if Captain Couran doesn't accept that response, and wants to know why a free man would volunteer to shield, I might even give her the truth. That before each trip I'll be praying for Len to ghost me. That I want to reunite Len with the memory she loved so dearly.

That I desperately need to show this damn universe how the only true laughter comes from those who survive. •



JASON SANFORD

MILLISENT KA plays

in REALTIME

✂ AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION ✂

"At the 2010 Worldcon, Kim Stanley Robinson stated that 'Economics is the astrology of our time.' It's hard to disagree. Economics grasps at the mantle of science but follows neither the scientific method nor scientific ideals. Instead of predicting the recent near collapse of the world's financial system, the field of economics enabled the event through bad theories and worse advice. There's a reason the Nobel Prize in Economics isn't a true Nobel Prize. Just like economic theory, the prize is attempting to pass itself off as more than it truly is.

"But what if economics could truly become a science? What if the only commodity humanity could spend was the one true commodity all humans are gifted with? In this story, I explore these ideas, along with how the answers to all our problems are often merely new problems in disguise."

THIS ISN'T THE WAY THE FUTURE SHOULD BE. BUT STILL, HERE IT IS. And here's Millisent Ka, born to a doting mother and father in a neo-feudal musical fiefdom, their cement-dusted house perfectly balanced between the cracked asphalt plains of L.A. la la land and the rich-fool castles on the Pacific Palisades. Never mind that those castles rise so far above everything else – hopes, dreams, reality – it's hard to remember only dirt and rock exist beneath their gilded skies, same as anywhere else.

The first thing Milli hears as she leaves the womb is music. Her dad, a musical vassal with dreams of itinerant musicianhood, plays the saxophone as Milli screams newborn outrage. Her mom, who has grudgingly streamed gospel day and night since it blew revival, mutters for her husband to stop his foolishness. But he merely smiles and fingers his sax as the midwife injects the artificial chromosomes into Milli's wrinkly body. For good measure, the midwife slaps a pain patch on Milli's mom, figuring the poor woman needs a little help putting up with her husband's antics.

By the time Milli latches onto her mother's breast, her mom's all sighs and happiness – maybe from the music, more likely from the meds. "You're an idiot," she whispers to her husband. "But damn, you're a lovable one."

Milli's dad laughs and opens the window to the hot Santa Ana winds. As Milli suckles contentedly, her dad blows the notes of an improvised 'California Dreaming' while his wife's haunting mezzo voice hums the words of that ancient folk melody.

Sometimes dreams are all people have left.

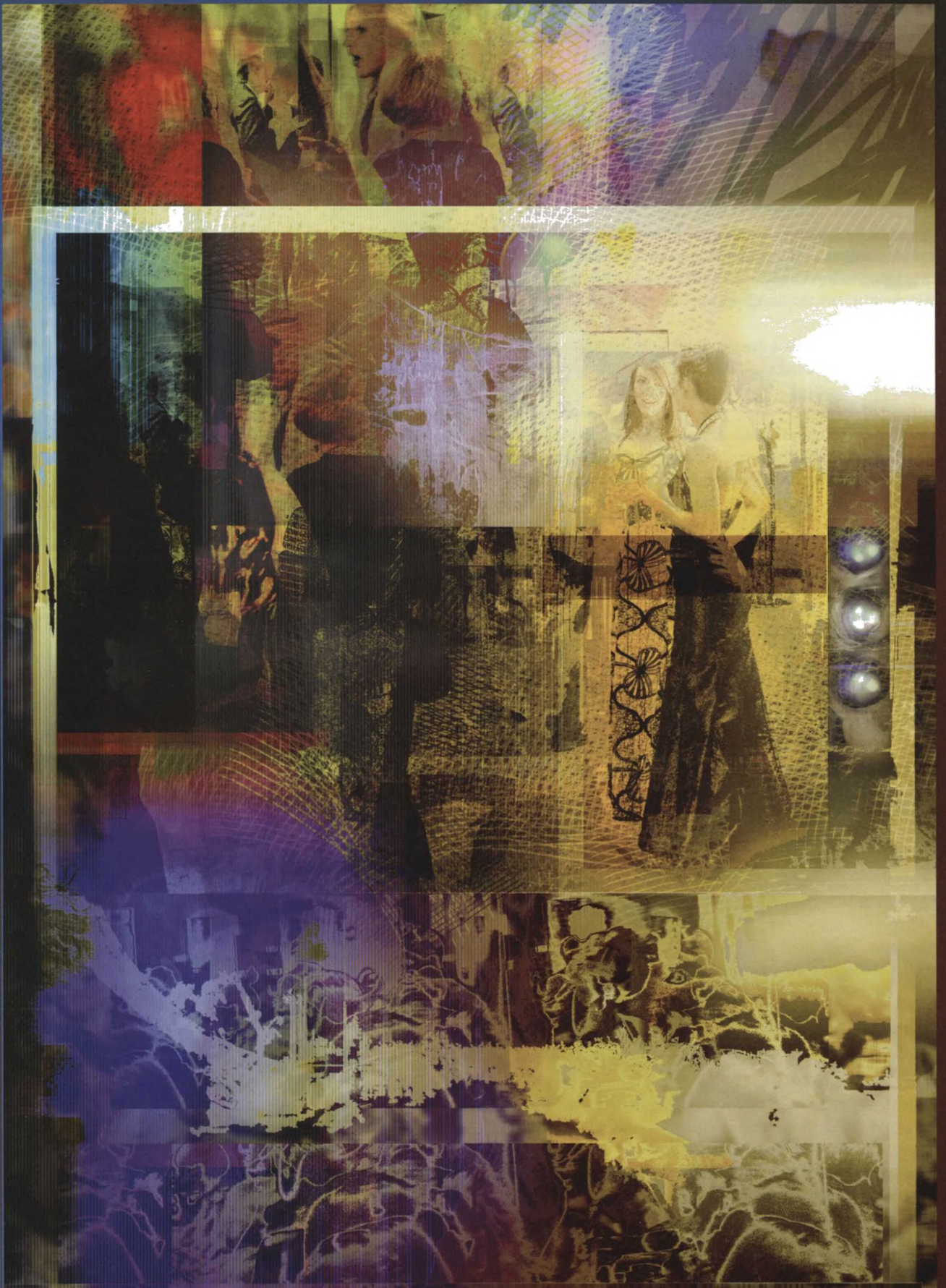
TO CELEBRATE MILLI's birth, the next day His Lordship's wife – the grand and amazing Lady Amanza Collins – grants a free performance. Her edict is simple: His Lordship, ruler of the world's biggest musical fiefdom, waives all rights to his vassals' performances for one hour. People may play what they like. Debt as they wish.

The vassals are stunned. Who is this Millisent Ka to elicit such unprecedented generosity from their Lord? But the musicians know better than to question an official decree, so they sweep out their dusty performance hall and break into celebration. Pianists, guitar players, drummers, flutists, sax players, and acapella toners – all performing for no one but themselves.

Downloads fly off the charts. Instacritics praise the sublimely joyful music. Realtime views surge beyond comprehension. And if a few vassals mutter when the performances go past the designated hour – netting His Lordship a tidy sum in exchanged debt – well, those naysayers are rightly ignored.

But on that joyful night, Milli's parents don't take part in the celebrations. Instead, they lay across their double bed and debate their child's future.

"Maybe we should leave," Milli's mom says, still hurt and tired a full day after giving birth. "The music scene in New York isn't totally dead, even though they're still monetized."



SENECAL

"Lots of musicians starving out there," Milli's dad says, his dainty hands cradling Milli. "I mean, here we have food, a home, good friends. And His Lordship really loves music."

"Yeah, lovely man. Making me sing nothing but f'in gospel. What if he does that to Milli?"

Milli's dad sighs. He knows his wife hates that historic genre. But he remembers well the horror stories of the old cash world – nightmarish tales told by his grandmother when he was a child growing up in China. How one person could earn enough to buy the sky while a hundred others lacked food to eat. At least here there's work for any and all who are willing. His friends in those few places still worshipping dead-end cash continually contact him, begging to become vassals to the lords of time-debt.

"Maybe this isn't the best for Milli," he says, "but it's far from the worst."

Milli's mom curses but doesn't argue with his reasoning. By morning, there's nothing to do but present their daughter to His Lordship.

SETTING: THE MUSICAL Fiefdom, top of the Pacific Palisades off Sunset Boulevard. Milli's parents scrape their way across His Lordship's castle, passing obscene mixes of marble, velveteen paintings, and gened bear-skin rugs until they reach the Tonal Hall, where His Lordship and the Lady Lord sit wrapped in an Egyptian illusion straight out of Pharaoh's grandest dreams.

Milli's parents bow to the golden-encrusted Lord and Lady Lord. His Lordship sniffs away the Pharaoh illusion, revealing a youthfully slimmed body in an Italian three-piece suit. His avatar floats over Milli's parents, where the simulation scans their genetic debt.

"You're behind on performances," His Lordship proclaims.

"Complications," Milli's mom says. "With my pregnancy. Singing too much gospel made me throw up."

His Lordship groans as if he's heard such excuses before. "We entered into an agreement. Perhaps you don't like being my vassals?" With a wave of his hand, fresh numbers and debt demands tumble the air.

But before His Lordship can crack on Milli's parents, Lady Amanza Collins laughs and swishes her sculptured hand through the projections. The numbers cascade along her perfect blonde hair to the floor, shattering in dramatic displays of fiscal irresponsibility.

"No need for all that," she tells her husband. "We're here to celebrate Milliscent's birth, not condemn it."

Milli's mom and dad glance nervously at each other – it's rarely a good thing when a lord or lady lord takes a special interest in a vassal. Worse, while most lords prefer to only wallow in their vassals' time-debt, these two are different. Have always aimed so damned high. His Lordship funded the initial research behind time-debt, while the Lady Lord is an acclaimed genetic engineer who helped create the artificial chromosomes which encode libraries of information alongside each person's genetic material. Many people dream of changing the world. His Lordship and the Lady Lord are among those few to actually do so.

When Milli's parents first became His Lordship's vassals, they couldn't imagine serving anyone else. But lately, they've heard disconcerting rumors. Of secret experiments. Of mysterious infant deaths. So when Lady Amanza Collins locks her gene-

perfect eyes onto Milli, her parents regret not having fled when they had the chance.

"We can't thank you enough for your interest in our daughter," Milli's mom says, her lie flowing with jazz-improv smoothness.

"No need," Lady Collins says. "Your daughter is destined for great things."

That grabs the attention of His Lordship. "You suspect the child might be a virtuosa?"

"Milliscent Ka will surprise even you," Her Lady Lord says. "Care to wager? Say, twenty years' debt?"

His Lordship laughs as their accountant scurries over with a portable scanner and encodes the bet into their genes. To show how pleased he is, His Lordship decrees Milli will only have to pledge ten years of her life to become his vassal, instead of the usual fifteen.

Her parents bow in thanks as His Lordship waves an end to the ceremony. The accountant walks over and stamps a tiny transponder into Milli's right hand, squalling Milli to tears as his scanner both downloads debt notices into the data grain and signals she is His Lordship's future vassal. "Remember," the accountant whispers. "If the transponder isn't removed within a month of her eighteenth birthday, and her accumulated debt burned into her genes, she'll lose that hand."

Milli's parents nod understanding. They bow again and back across the castle's faux marble floors, grateful to leave with no more debt than they came in with.

And Milli? Milli cries because her hand hurts – and what baby's pain doesn't matter more than all the silliness which abounds in any lord or lady lord's fief?

WHAT IS DEBT? How does what you owe turn into what she owns turn into what unknown people on the other side of the world collect as payment while you sleep soundly in a bed which isn't your own?

Ask an economist to explain how the world goes around and said egg-head will lie about the world being interconnected. That it's a vast web of earning and paying and trickling down the line. Well forget such babble-speak. Forget money. Forget gold and diamonds. The only true payments are our days left on this earth.

What if we could trade that time? What if the only things worth a damn were the moments we might one day live? What if each grain of rice or drink of water ticked against the future seconds of your life?

For millions of years our genes have created the lives we're meant to live. Now we tinker and rewrite those genes at will. So why not inscribe a running debt against our future days?

Maybe this isn't the way the future is. Or maybe it is. But either way, it's the future Milliscent Ka receives.

MILLI GROWS LIKE all the kids in the musical fiefdom. She learns to play a viola donated by the Lady Lord – only ten seconds of debt per day, carefully recorded on the data transponder imbedded in her right palm – and she learns to read in the donated school – a few minutes of debt for a day's learning – and she plays basketball on the courts – five seconds of debt a game – and turns her lovely brown skin even browner on the beach – thirty seconds of debt for a day's swim – and she loves



her mom and dad, which of course is still free.

Her parents teach her about debt. How to balance the accounts of her life so in her older years she'll be free. They then turn around and teach her that nothing in life is free. Milli shakes her head at the inconsistency.

"I'm going to do things differently," she says. "Find my own way."

Her mom and dad nod happily, remembering how they were once young and naïve like their daughter.

When Milli is eleven, a castrati family moves into the house next door, having been traded to his Lordship for the debt of eight musical families, including the kettle drum player across the street. When Milli's dad hears the loud drummer has left the neighborhood, he falls to his knees and cries "Praise His Lordship!"

Milli ignores her dad's melodrama. "What's a castrati?" she asks as she watches the family move in. She's curious because they don't carry any instruments.

Her dad blushes and mutters about a gig he has to prepare for. Milli's mom laughs and grabs her husband in a massive bear hug.

"A castrati is a man whose voice is similar to a soprano, mezzo-soprano, or even a contralto," her mother says. "You create such a voice by cutting off a certain part of the male anatomy." As she says this, Milli's mom snips the air with her fingers, causing Milli's dad to blush even more.

"That's horrible," Milli says, although she now stares even harder at the family moving in. They have a son her age, who sits in the samlor without moving. He's pale white and looks ill.

"Castrati debt terms are very good," Milli's dad states matter-of-factly. "But if you're going to do it, you have to make the cut before puberty. A lot of pressure to put on a kid, a decision like that."

Milli leans out the window for a better look as the boy's father gently lifts his son out of the bicycle taxi. He takes care not to jostle the boy, as if he has a hurt which, if pointed out, could only cause Milli's dad to blush even more.

THE BOY'S NAME is Alessa. Milli can't play with him for the next month because he's still recovering. That's the term his parents use – recovering. But Milli still hangs around his window and talks to him, and when school starts before Alessa can attend, Milli snags him a good handheld reader and downloads his assignments.

Alessa's father talks in a sweet sing-song voice, and Milli must admit it sounds nice. Eerie, but nice. She's dying to ask Alessa about the operation, but her mom reminds her not to be nosy.

One day Milli walks home from school to find Alessa not sitting by his bedroom window. "He's feeling much better," his father sings, warming up for a simulcast performance at His Lordship's castle. "He walked to the playground."

Milli glances up the dusty sage-brush hill to the distant playground. None of her friends go there. They all know better. She thanks Alessa's father then runs to an abandoned house, where she twists a rusty rebar rod out of the dust-raining cement.

She finds Alessa on the playground, sitting on the ceramic swings surrounded by three freeloaders. The freeloaders circle

Alessa, laughing as they push him back and forth like a toy. Milli pauses in fear. All of the freeloaders are over 18, with way too much height and weight. But they also only have one good hand each, all of their right arms ending in round stubs because they refused to accept the debt they'd piled up in their short lives.

Still, the odds don't favor Milli. She prays the freeloaders will see Alessa as one of them. That Alessa has given as much, if not more, than they ever did.

Instead, one of the freeloaders – JinJin, the no-account son of a local jazz drummer – yanks Alessa from the swing and pulls down his pants. "Let's have a look-see," JinJin shouts.

That's too much for Milli. She shifts the rebar in her hands, picks up a chunk of broken cement from the dust and sand, and charges. JinJin turns in shock as she throws the cement at his face. Connection! The freeloader falls to the dust in blood and pain as his friends jump back from Milli's madly swinging rebar.

"Get her," JinJin yells, holding his right eye in with his remaining hand.

Milli swings the rebar a second time. "Sharps," she yells. "Rust and tetanus. How you gonna debt a Doc to fix you?"

The freeloaders glance at one another. Since the transponder killed their right hands, and since they never activated the artificial chromosomes in their bodies, they can't debt – and Docs won't take trade or theft or begging, which is how they currently survive. JinJin's face bleeds as his one good eye burns rage. He'd charge if he could, but with only one hand to hold his damaged eye in, he can't do anything. He turns and stalks off. The other freeloaders follow.

Milli grabs a swing and collapses into the ceramic seat. Alessa smiles as he looks up from the sand. "You have an incredibly poor sense of debt management," he says. "They might have beaten you up. Or worse."

"Saved your ass, didn't I?"

"Oh, I'm not complaining," Alessa stands, wincing in pain as he sits on the swing next to Milli.

"Is it supposed to still hurt?" Milli asks.

"Takes a while to heal."

"Seems cruel."

"Not at all," Alessa replies, grabbing Milli's right hand. He rubs the transponder buried inside her palm, sending shivers dancing down Milli's fingers. "How much do you owe His Lordship?"

"Sixteen years, nine months, fifteen days."

"And when you're eighteen all that gets encoded in your genes. You'll spend that much of your life paying Him off – or you go freeloader and lose your hand. For me, His Lordship covered the cost of the operation and most everything else – school, food, singing lessons. I'll only have to work a few years as his vassal. Less if audiences like me. And if I ever want kids, I'll do like Dad and debt a gene doc to help."

Milli admits it sounds like a good plan. Better than any option she has to look forward to in life.

SINCE THIS IS the future, things percolate up as the ages pass on. Milli practices her viola day and night. However, everyone knows her parents' musical souls have passed her by. She's a technician. She can play the instrument, but it doesn't sing. She simply can't plug the emotions she feels into the strings she plays.

When she is 15 she performs in the Tonal Hall before His Lordship, who glares as if she's a sour investment.

Lady Amanza Collins, though, doesn't care. She paces her tanned and ageless body around Milli, examining her viola playing from all angles. "Great things," she whispers. "I expect great things."

"But my love," His Lordship whines. "Where's the virtuosa you bet she'd become?"

"The bet's not over," the Lady Lord says, a slick smile running her smooth-frozen face. "And I didn't bet on a virtuosa. I bet she'd accomplish great things."

His Lordship sighs and waves for Milli to step aside. As Milli curtsies, the Lady Lord says not to worry. "You'll set His Lordship on fire one day, young Millisent Ka."

Despite the Lady Lord's support, Milli knows the truth. She walks across the fake marble floor to the guest seats, where her parents hug her. Even though Milli wants to run screaming from the castle, she waits for Alessa's performance. Her best friend bows before His Lordship and sings the most haunting song Milli has ever heard. Milli glances at her obsolete reader. According to the charts, several million people listen to Alessa's performance in realtime, each trading seconds of their life to share in the joy of Alessa's sublime voice. Tears form in Milli's dark eyes.

"Don't worry," her dad whispers. "You can be a teacher. There's always a need for music teachers."

Milli nods, even though a teacher might never earn enough to be free from debt.

Once Alessa's performance is over and the vassals dismissed, Milli wanders outside into the castle's manicured gardens. The vassals who tend the grounds smile at Milli, acknowledging their shared service. But Milli ignores them and kicks the dust in anger. She's read her history. Vassals used to be more than any Tom Dicked Harriette who debted their services to a lord. She might as well be a slave for all the choice she has in anything.

Milli sits on a carved stone bench beside a bubbling fountain. In front of her, the ocean bobs and surges. Off to the left, the dusty streetlights of L.A. ripple in the heat. Despite the beauty before her, all Milli sees is how much everything cost. Two months of someone's life to carve the ornate stone bench. Three months to build the fountain. All that debt from people up and down the California coast – debt washing across the world and propping up the stupid lords of this land.

The gravel behind Milli crunches. Alessa walks over and sits beside Milli, taking her hand in his. "Let me guess," he says. "You're pondering the debt which created this garden?"

Milli chuckles. "Am I that predictable?"

"Only when you're angry – which lately, has been way too often."

"But it's not fair. I was debted to His Lordships at birth, but I can't play music worth a damn. I'll never be free."

Alessa hugs Milli tight. "Wish I had words to make everything better, but I don't."

"I'm glad," she says and kisses Alessa. They hold each other for long minutes, kissing and feeling and kissing again until they hear the crunch of gravel behind them. They turn to see Lady Amanza Collins watching from up the manicured pathway. The Lady Lord claps her hands as if hearing a distant musical score.

She then pirouettes and walks back to the castle, leaving Milli and Alessa alone in their puzzlement.

MILLI AND ALESSA turn 18 only a week apart, so they hold their debt ceremony together. His Lordship and Lady Amanza Collins bless them both – reminding them that this is their first step into adulthood as their transponders are removed and the accumulated debt burned into their now active artificial chromosomes. Once this is complete, Milli and Alessa kneel before His Lordship and pledge fidelity to his realm.

Even though they stay in their parents' homes – not wanting to debt their own place – Milli and Alessa take on an adult workload. Alessa sings for His Lordship, creating unique songs and vocals which thrill the world. Milli works in the fief's school, tutoring young vassals in the ways of musical service. While she doesn't love her work, she earns enough to pay off her debt second by painfully long second.

Six months into her new life, Milli falls on the basketball court and breaks her arm. All her friends gasp – both because this means their best player won't be playing in tomorrow's championship game, and because a broken arm requires mountains of debt. "Ewy shit," Alessa says in a shocked falsetto voice. "That's like two years of your life, gone."

"Shut up," Milli shouts, clenching her arm and angering back tears.

Even though Milli doesn't want to go, Alessa drags her to the Doc. Inside the cement box of a clinic, the Doc – who's paying off med-training debt by keeping the vassals healthy – shakes her head. "It's a really bad break. I can fix it, but that's a massive time-swap. Should we bring in your parents to discuss your options?"

Milli shakes her head, wincing in pain as she remembers the last time she hurt herself. JinJin, now with only one eye, had caught her behind the school. He'd punched her face bloody before Alessa and Milli's other friends ran up. While Milli had only a hairline fracture of her jaw, the medical debt still equaled several months of her life.

To help, her dad burned the debt into his genes. Never mind that he hadn't slept in days as he'd played a virtual gig his Lordship's avatar set up with some Japanese lord. "I have a few free years left in my life," he'd whispered to Milli. "Maybe I'll get lucky and live longer than I'm supposed to."

Milli grits her teeth against the pain in her arm. She knows her parents want her to start life with as little debt as possible. To have some freedom in choosing where and how she lives. But she's an adult now. This is her life to live.

"No," Milli tells the Doc. "I'll pay."

The Doc scans Milli's body with the payment arc. A moment later Milli sees her total debt jump to almost thirty years.

The Doc is good, and Milli's arm doesn't hurt at all as she draws blood samples to regrow the bone. Alessa holds Milli's good hand and offers to help with her debt. "People love my singing. His Lordship might let me burn some of your debt."

Milli kisses Alessa on the cheek and thanks him, but says she'll pay her own way.

A WEEK LATER Milli's arm is healed enough to again play the viola. Even though she doesn't want more debt, Alessa convinces



her to go to the Doc for a final checkup. The Doc tests her arm, mumbling how things look good, before holding Milli's hand over the debt scan. A shocked look runs the Doc's face.

"Your debt's gone," the Doc says.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your artificial chromosomes record absolutely no debt."

Milli stares at the scanner's screen. Sure enough, the artificial chromosomes show no time owed to anyone. The Doc fidgets nervously with her machines.

"What caused it?" Milli asks.

"I'm not certain," the Doc says, data flowing through the air around them. "Your body appears to harbor an unknown bacteriophage. Perhaps it rewrote the debt's genetic sequence."

Alessa grabs Milli's hand. "I've heard rumors about this," he whispers. "When the time-debt lords created artificial chromosomes, one of their genetic engineers created a phage to wipe out the stored information. A backup, in case the chromosomes were put to evil use."

Milli laughs. She's heard the same rumors. They are campfire tales. Urban BS. But then Milli remembers how Lady Amanza Collins used to be a genetic engineer, and how the Lady Lord has always shown a strange interest in Milli's life.

From the scared looks on the faces of Alessa and the Doc, they've come to the same conclusion.

"Get out of here," the Doc whispers in purest fright. "Run. Now. Before His Lordship finds out."

The Doc grabs her medicine bag and shoves in her reader and other equipment, preparing to flee. Milli understands the fear. Once the lords and lady lords of debt learn about this, they'll strike hard to stop any threat to their carefully managed world.

But Milli is tired of always doing what others expect. She grabs the Doc's hand. "Wait," she says. "If you run, you'll always be in debt."

"What do you mean?" the Doc asks.

"Think how long it'll take to pay off your debt. Now think about what's in my body. You can run anytime, but if we plan this right, maybe you'll run a free woman."

The Doc glances from Milli to Alessa. The panic is still in her eyes, but there's also a longing to be free.

"Give me a week," Milli says. "Show me how to work this."

MILLI AND ALESSA sit on the playground's old swings as the Santa Ana howls hot and dusty. Cement crumbles and blows from the abandoned houses beside the park. In the hills beside them, His Lordship's castle gleams, all bright lights and ocean view from this moment well into the future.

"What if the Doc's wrong?" Alessa asks nervously, constantly eying their surroundings for freeloaders.

Milli shakes her head. In the past few days, they've learned so much. A secretive search of the fiefdom's records showed a spike in infant deaths in the years before Milli's birth. Not enough deaths to prove anything, but still a disconcerting trend. The Doc guessed someone added the phage to a few of the artificial chromosome injections the fief's babies received – a practice that must have stopped with Milli surviving the first few hours after birth.

Alessa had been furious to discover this, but Milli accepted the news with calm understanding. All she could see was Lady Amanza Collins' perfectly-formed illusion of a face whispering that Milli was destined for great things.

As Milli and Alessa sit on the swings, they hear the crunch of boots across sand and scrub. They turn to see JinJin and his gang of freeloaders. Alessa hasn't seen JinJin in years, and gasps at how old he looks. His one eye glares while an orange pastie hides the ruins of the other. In his only hand he holds a long piece of rusty rebar.

"Sharps," JinJin says, swinging the rebar. "Didn't think it was true, you waiting out here."

Milli stands between JinJin and Alessa. "You've got one shot," she says. "But you do us, you won't get that eye back. Or your hand."

JinJin pauses. "What do you mean?"

"Figured you'd have smarts. Why didn't you take the debt?"

"Rather be free than debted," JinJin says. The freeloaders around him mutter agreement.

"So if you had a chance to stick it to His Lordship, you'd take it?" Milli asks.

"Damn straight."

Milli and JinJin eye each other warily as Milli explains her plan.

AS MILLI TELLS the freeloaders, the problem is the phage. It only works on Milli, and doesn't last long enough outside her body to infect others. The Doc suggested cultivating the phage for injections, as Lady Amanza Collins did with the babies, but Milli refuses to kill people over this.

The upside of the phage is that Milli can take as much debt as she wants and it's soon purged from her genes. JinJin and the freeloaders aren't sure they believe Milli's story, but since she agrees to debt the costs of repairing their hands – and JinJin's right eye – they don't care what the truth might be.

"What do you want in return?" JinJin asks suspiciously.

"Rumors. Tell everyone what I'm doing. Spread it over the nets, and up and down the coast."

A few days later, the freeloaders are healed and Milli is still debt free. "Now what?" Alessa asks.

"Now we make people happy."

They hire a bootleg accountant to transfer debt into Milli's genes without notifying His Lordship. Milli knows they'll have to move quickly, so she starts with the Doc, transferring all her medical training debt. Then Milli's mom and dad. Then Alessa, and Alessa's parents, and their neighbors and friends and acquaintances and finally anyone in the fief who wants to be free.

But like all good things, Milli's run comes to an end as the rumors JinJin and the freeloaders spread reach His Lordship.

One afternoon Milli sits in her house, the bootleg accountant transferring debt from a third string bass player, when His Lordship's guards break down the door. The bass player and the accountant flee, but Milli merely looks up and asks, "Got any time to burn?"

BY NIGHTFALL, MILLI is in His Lordship's dungeon, her right eye swollen and leaking bloody tears, her arms and legs a mix of bruises. She lays on the dirty cot in her cell, her ankles shackled

to the cold stone floor. When Lady Amanza Collins enters the cell, the Lady Lord's stiff-young face frowns slightly.

"Such a disappointment," Lady Amanza Collins says.

"How?"

"You had so much potential, but instead of being secretive and taking your time, you became greedy. And now you're caught."

Milli grins at the Lady Lord's irritation. Milli has already confessed everything – not out of any sense of loyalty or to avoid punishment, but because she wanted His Lordship to know. His guards still beat her, but the beatings had been half-hearted since His Lordship knew she'd already told all.

"He knows what you did," Milli says.

"Oh, I'm quite aware of that. His Lordship came to my suite and paid off our bet, saying you had indeed accomplished great things. He also screamed about my experiment, but that's neither here nor there. It's not his place to stop me."

Milli understands. While she'll likely be killed, there are different standards for lords and lady lords. Lady Amanza Collins will not be hurt for what she's done. Instead, this entire affair will be swept under the rug with whatever is left of Milli's body.

But Milli doesn't care what happens to her – she wants to know why the Lady Lord did this. So she asks. The Lady Lord pulls the cell's small stool over to Milli's cot and sits down. "Are you aware of my background?"

"Genetic engineering."

"Yes. I helped create the artificial chromosomes which power our world. It was supposed to be a miracle technology; to erase all the wrongs of the old economy. But time-debt ended up recreating the sins of the monetized world. So a few decades ago I devised a way to wipe everything clean and start over."

"The phage..."

"Exactly. But it was defective, barely infectious. To make someone an effective carrier, they had to receive the phage at the same time as their artificial chromosomes – at birth. But the phage reacts poorly to young immune systems and kills most of its hosts."

Milli shivers at the Lady Lord's coldness in describing murder. "Did His Lordship know?"

"No. In the old days, I would have told him. You won't believe it, but he was once so different. We both wanted to change the world. To make things better. But as he grew older, he stopped caring."

For a moment, Lady Amanza Collins slumps on the stool. Her youth-crafted face looks ancient and her eyes no longer sparkle. Milli imagines the disappointment the Lady Lord feels, living long enough to see her dreams destroyed. To see that each problem you fix in this world births a new wrong.

"So what happens now?" Milli asks.

"You'll be quietly killed. My fellow lords and lady lords can't learn about the phage. Not yet. Not when I have work to do."

Milli nods. She is simply a guinea pig. No doubt the Lady Lord will continue her experiments, using whatever data she can glean from Milli's body.

"If you want," the Lady Lord says, "I'll ask His Lordship to be as humane as possible."

If Lady Amanza Collins expects thanks, she doesn't receive it. The Lady Lord stands and knocks on the cell door to leave.

Once she's gone, Milli rolls over and cries, wishing Alessa was here to hold her.

WHEN LADY AMANZA Collins returns to her husband's throne room, he is in a nasty mood. She keeps her face passive and non-emotional, although she wants to laugh at the shock she's granted him. Because of her, His Lordship's wealth has been cut by a third. But once he recovers his senses he'll see the need to continue her experiments. After all, if her defective phage can accomplish such chaos, someday a person with more resources will create a better phage to destroy all time-debt. Far better if such a creation comes from His Lordship's wife, which will allow them both to benefit when the world changes yet again.

But none of that needs be said right now. His Lordship glances at the Lady Lord, and she at him, and they sit on their thrones as the first visitor of the day enters their presence.

Alessa strides forward, bowing as deep as he can.

"You are no longer my vassal," His Lordship says distastefully. "Your debt is...gone."

"I realize that, my Lord. But I have a proposition."

"I can't release her. You know that."

"I do, my Lord. But I hope to see her one final time. And I believe I can make it worth your while."

His Lordship listens as Alessa proposes a live performance of his unquestioned singing ability. Alessa will grant all debts from the performance to His Lordship, along with taking on a new twenty-year debt, meaning he'll once again be His Lordship's vassal.

"And the catch?" His Lordship asks.

"I want Milli to play viola while I sing. Her final performance."

Lady Amanza Collins instantly says the idea is out of the question, but His Lordship waves her quiet. Yes, he reasons, they have to silence Milli. He knows what his wife was trying to prove – that their world isn't as secure as everyone believes. All he need do is turn a blind eye to her activities for a few more decades and she'll no doubt craft a phage to recreate the world, all while enriching the two of them.

But Alessa's idea intrigues His Lordship. The young singer is the most dynamic performer he's ever seen. To have him back as a vassal is worth any risk. His Lordship glances longingly at his wife, remembering her face before she molded it into that unmoving mask. He once loved her so much. If Alessa feels even a fraction of such love for Millisent Ka, their final performance might be a true work of art.

"I don't know," he says. "There are already rumors about Milli spreading across the nets."

"As long as rumor remains only rumor," Alessa says, "the only thing they'll do is ensure a large audience for our performance."

His Lordship chuckles at Alessa's boldness. "Agreed," he says as his wife shouts objections, but he's made his decision and he is, after all, the lord of this realm.

Unable to change His Lordship's mind, Lady Amanza Collins steps from her throne and storms over to Alessa. "Be under no illusions," she whispers to the young singer. "Millisent Ka dies. If either of you mentions my phage, I'll personally hold your eyes open so you witness her bloody death."



FOR THE PERFORMANCE, Milli is given a shimmer-sparkle dress which flows a cascade of stars and milky ways across her hips and legs. Her viola comes from His Lordship's personal collection and is three hundred years old if a day. His Lordship even sends a Doc – but not his old Doc, who still can't be located – to fix her busted eyes and heal her bruises.

Milli walks into the Tonal Hall to the applause of friends and family. Her mom and dad wipe tears from their eyes. Milli's friends seem similarly moved. When she spots JinJin and the other freeloaders in the back of the audience, JinJin nods her way as if impressed by the sacrifice she's making.

Alessa waits for her in the middle of the hall, his black tuxedo a perfect wrap to the hall's golden Egyptian-Pharaoh spotlights. Milli steps up to him and, holding the viola to her side, kisses Alessa deeply. The entire audience swoons.

"This is a bad idea," Lady Amanza Collins tells her husband.

"No," he whispers back. "Your experiment was the bad idea. This is art, and it's perfect. My avatars and techs monitor everything. If they attempt to mention the phage, the performance ends."

With that, His Lordship motions for the broadcast to start. He welcomes everyone to the tonal hall, site of many of the world's greatest musical achievements. He then directs the audience to Alessa and Milli, young lovers kept apart by the cruel dictates of fate.

As the spotlight falls on her, Milli plays her first notes, her bow dancing across the strings to far more than the mere proficiency she's always given her music. Standing beside Alessa, knowing this might be the last time she sees him, she wraps herself into the performance in ways she'd never known possible. She feels each note vibrate perfectly off the strings. Feels her parents sitting nearby. Feels the entire audience – both those in the Tonal Hall and those watching around the world. Feels all her music could – and should – ever be.

Alessa joins in, singing an old 20th century love song which flows in new and exciting ways to both the sound of his voice and Milli's viola. His Lordship smiles approvingly when the song ends. Alessa and Milli bow before playing another song, and another, each more beautiful than the last.

His Lordship is stunned. He's never witnessed music on such a pure, emotional level. When Alessa and Milli pause for an intermission, His Lordship is the first to stand and clap and clap until his hands feel like they've fallen from his body.

When he sits back down, Lady Amanza Collins grabs his arm. "Look," she hisses.

His Lordship glances to the rear of the Tonal Hall, where his accountant, techs and guards sit. Or, where they used to sit. Now they're fighting with a group of freeloaders, who quickly overwhelm his people and tie them up. One freeloader, his eye glistening to the genetic pinkness of recent regeneration, gives His Lordship the finger.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Lady Amanza Collins mutters.

His Lordship sighs. Alessa and Milli are preparing to speak. No doubt the first words from their mouths will be about the phage. But their plan is doomed to failure. All he has to do is tell his avatar to shut down the broadcast and summon the extra guards from their hiding places throughout the castle. That will be the end of both Alessa and Milli. His wife's horrible experi-

ment will continue to be nothing more than rumor.

But as His Lordship watches Alessa and Milli hug each other, he remembers what first attracted him to Lady Amanza Collins. How her daring dreams of changing the world excited him. How she worried about her life's work turning out as poorly as the world she wanted to replace.

Before Alessa and Milli speak, His Lordship motions for silence.

"With everyone watching," His Lordship says, "I want to thank you for that beautiful performance." Then, wondering if his vassals feel this giddy each time they perform in realtime, he winks at Alessa and Milli. "Unless I'm mistaken, isn't there something you need to tell us?"

Lady Amanza Collins calls His Lordship an idiot but his avatar cuts her words from the broadcast, bringing a smile to the faces of Alessa and Milli. As His Lordship leans back on his gold-illusion throne, Alessa and Milli tell the entire world about the phage before continuing to play for no one but themselves.

WHEN THE PERFORMANCE ends, Alessa and Milli kiss as the audience jumps into a standing ovation. Even His Lordship joins in. The performance has been amazing. The best he's ever witnessed.

"So what happens now?" Milli asks His Lordship, well aware her words are still being broadcast around the world.

"You two live your lives," His Lordship says. "And maybe what you've revealed makes a little difference."

Lady Amanza Collins frowns at His Lordship's words, but the crowd of vassals and freeloaders surrounding Milli and Alessa laugh and cheer as they lead the couple into the hot, humid L.A. night.

Once the crowd is gone, the Lady Lord informs His Lordship that he's been made the fool. That he needs to stand up for himself. That he should have made an example out of Milli and Alessa.

"Perhaps I did," he says. "And perhaps that's exactly what the world needs."

Lady Amanza Collins curses so loudly her unmovable face moves, collapsing into the wrinkles of age and anger. She storms off to her room as His Lordship unties his guards and accountant.

"What are the debt options for divorce?" he asks his accountant as Alessa and Milli's haunting love songs tone in and out of his mind.

And that should be, could be, our end. Except with the future, there's never truly an end.

Milli and Alessa keep performing and keep loving. Alessa honors his new debt to His Lordship by not allowing Milli to erase it, but that doesn't stop a steady stream of others from seeking her help. Milli erases the debt of all who ask. In return, those she helps protect her from the wrath of the lords and lady lords who like their world as it is.

And already there are rumors. Of new experiments. Of others infected with the phage. Of the world changing again, in ways no one can foresee.

This isn't the way the future should be. But as Milli tells Alessa on a not-so distant night, the two of them snuggling in their double bed, "This is the only future we have. Might as well make the best of it." •



CONFRONTING the UNFAMILIAR

Andy Hedgecock talks to Jason Sanford about the American South, the Peace Corps and the birth of a new literature of ideas

“One of the reasons I write fiction is as a literary experiment to understand life – not only for the reader but also for myself. Even though I usually have a destination in mind with my stories, I continually discover that where I thought I was going isn’t where I should be going.

“That discovery of new destinations and understandings while I write is what I love about fiction. Only by allowing stories to find their own destination can authors truly explore both their own selves and the greater world around them.”

There are a handful of writers whose work epitomises the pleasure of working for *Interzone* for the past five years. Jason Sanford is one of them. I read his first story for the magazine, ‘The Ships Like Clouds, Risen By Their Rain’, on crumpled printout in a dimly lit room in a Glasgow hotel (or ‘a tastefully lit room’ according to the manager). I was so knocked out I took it down to the bar and read it again. And again.

By the time we had read his third story for the magazine, ‘Sublimation Angels’, in Autumn 2009, we were convinced we were working with an exciting new writing talent whose work was characterised by compelling plots, precise language, convincing characters and a palpable relish for scientific possibility and philosophical speculation. From the outset we were impressed by the ambition of Sanford’s work, particularly his clear commitment to the tricky endeavour of melding popular and literary elements within his stories.

Since then, of course, he has won the *Interzone* Readers’ Poll for two of his stories and also received BFA and Nebula award nominations.

I begin my interview with Sanford by asking if he worried that the complexities of his work and his restless experimentation with style and form might prove too demanding for some readers.

“While I want readers to enjoy my stories, they are absent from my mind when I’m writing. My stories must first satisfy me: they are the types of stories I’d love to read. If I focused on pleasing other people with my fiction I doubt I’d finish a single story.

“Still, I greatly value my readers and love interacting with them online and in

person. When people take time out of their busy lives to read your stories, that’s a commitment every writer must take seriously.”

This focus on internal and personal aspects of the creative process leads me to ask whether writing constitutes a journey of self discovery as well as an opportunity to entertain.

“There’s a classic quote I love, although it is probably apocryphal, from the early 20th century ballerina Anna Pavlova. When someone asked Pavlova what she was trying to say with her dancing she replied, ‘If I could tell you, I wouldn’t need to dance.’

“Artists and writers often use variations of that quote as an excuse for not explaining what they’re trying to say. But there’s also truth in Pavlova’s words. Not so much that you shouldn’t explain what you’re doing with your art, but that the experience of seeing a painting or reading a story can create far more understanding than simply being told the explanation. An experience is always more insightful than mere explanation.”

The soil’s deep decay

The three stories in this issue highlight the stylistic and thematic diversity of Sanford’s work. It’s clearly science fiction but it’s imbued with the traditions, tropes and techniques of a range of other genres. Is Sanford deliberately hacking away at the boundaries of sf and fantasy, or are his stories a strange and surprising product of drifting with the imaginative flow?

“My fiction arises out of the mix of who I am. As someone born and raised in the American South, my home’s culture and environment left a lasting impression on

me. I still have a strong sense of place. I grew up in a sub-tropical countryside, with pine trees and hot humid days and kudzu reaching across dirt roads. And the smell of green growing things mixing into the soil’s deep decay.

“And the history of the South also influences my writing. I was born in Alabama after the Civil Rights Movement. This means I don’t carry personal memories of Bull Connor attacking children with police dogs, or marchers being beaten while crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. But that said, I remember the aftermath of these events. The memory of those days, along with the memories of the violence and brutality inherent in the Jim Crow South, echoed long after the Civil Rights Movement ended. The evil and violence of Southern racial relations existed alongside the seemingly contradictory virtues of nobility, kindness, politeness and people helping people. All of these events and contradictions find their way into my fiction.”

The South is clearly an important part of Sanford’s life. In 2001, he founded a literary magazine called *storySouth*, to promote and nurture the literature of the ‘New South’. But did growing up in the region influence his reading and, if so, what led him to his abiding interest in sf and fantasy?

“Because of my upbringing, you might think the classics of Southern Literature are what led me to fiction writing. Not so. While authors like William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Cormac McCarthy have influenced me greatly, science fiction was my gateway to literature. I owe much to my grandfather, who read and collected sf magazines and books. He turned a room in his house into a small library. The homemade shelves there were lined with science fiction books and magazines from the 1930s through the late ’70s, offering me a free education into the evolution and development of the literary sf genre. One of my best childhood memories is sitting in his library on a hot summer day and reading Fritz Leiber’s classic story ‘A Pail of Air’. I read the story in one of my grandfather’s worn pulp magazines and the idea of the main character surviving on a frozen Earth resonated with me, especially since I’d only seen a dusting of snow a few times in my life. A few years back I reread ‘A Pail of Air’ and when all those memories came spilling back I ended up writing ‘Sublimation Angels’, which is also set in a frozen world. It’s a world I plan to return



to, with my original novella forming the first part of a novel-length story.

“What drew me to the mix of genres I write in? My experiences with both life and literature. My need to understand how people can be so noble and horrible. How we can with one hand build the world to greatness and with another turn the world to rubble. While I don’t feel the need to restrict myself to any one genre, the storytelling form which I find best suited for exploring these issues is science fiction. But if another genre is also needed to explore the story I want to tell, I won’t hesitate to bring it in.”

Sanford is a prolific commentator on literature and culture: have a look at his *Fiction, Thoughts, and Ramblings* page (www.jasonsanford.com/jason/nonfiction-and-essays.html). A recurrent theme in his criticism, and one he’s clearly keen to

address in his fiction, is the role of fiction in tackling cutting issues and concerns. He has said he feels mainstream fiction across all genres to be severely self-limiting in its scope. But what creates and propagates this timidity?

Jogging down the highway to hell

“In biological terms, certain species are said to be self-limiting because to do otherwise would endanger the entire population. For example, if a parasitic population grows too large it may kill its host, thereby also killing the parasites. To see what happens when an entity isn’t self-limiting, look at how financial derivatives – which have many similarities to parasites – almost killed our entire financial system.

“It’s not my intention to compare writers to parasites, but I’m afraid a similar situation exists among many authors today.

Even as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and diverse, many of our writers are becoming more staid and conventional when addressing the big political, sociocultural and ecological issues at the heart of the 21st century.

“The term ‘failure of imagination’ is often used to describe events we didn’t see coming, like the recent financial meltdown or the 9/11 attacks. But the truth is such events are rarely failures of imagination. Instead, people decide they don’t want to hear information if it runs contrary to their perceived self interest. When people are rolling in money borrowed against continually increasing housing prices, they don’t want to be told those prices are about to collapse. I think many authors suffer from a similar reluctance to confront the unfamiliar. To write convincingly about certain subjects or topics might cause them to question the core beliefs which hold together their lives. That’s a hard thing for most people to do.”

Sanford sees a generation of writers locked into the literary equivalent of the syndrome explored by statistician and essayist Nassim Nicholas Taleb in *The Black Swan*. Taleb’s book explores our reluctance to confront hard to imagine events and developments. The kind of thinking in which humans identify a repeating pattern, hatch a theory and then look for confirmatory evidence has served us well as an evolutionary tool for millennia. Only now are we beginning to see it as a barrier to progress and, potentially, dangerously maladaptive. Similarly, the tropes and techniques created by literary movements stimulate interesting writing until they collapse under the accumulated weight of tradition. So, is this why literature is dependent on the handful of heroic risk-takers each generation seems to throw up?

“Excellent point. I believe Taleb nailed a simple truth with his black swan theory – rare events with extremely high impacts play a major role in shaping human culture and history. And a variation of the black swan theory applies equally to literature. While the literary world is notorious for generating manifesto after manifesto, this is simply a reflection of how our literature is shaped across the generations by risk takers. These trend-setting authors create new stories or works which resonate with people and, in hindsight, appear to have been created in response to some manifesto-driven ideal. But what really happened is these risk takers came along and simply changed literature in wondrous ways. These

authors change literature as much as any black swan event changes society.

"The irony, of course, is that every revolution eventually becomes the establishment they fought against. That is the rare cliché containing nothing but truth. That's why works of human culture like literature are so dependent on being continually built up and torn down. There are always people ready to tear something down, just as there are people ready to defend and keep on building. Destruction and creation – those are the twin forces hardwired into human nature. Another quirk hardwired into humanity is our need to rationalise actions we're already taking or desire to take. If we're jogging down the highway to hell, it's not good enough to say we want to go to hell. No, we have to produce evidence to show why hell is actually a lovely place this time of year, and why there are no other roads but the one we're on. Only when we are forcibly confronted with the truth of our actions do humans finally change."

Anything but creative writing!

Another theme that deeply concerns Sanford is the cultural homogeneity of literature in Europe and the US, in spite of the fact that these regions become increasingly diverse with every passing year. His enthusiasm for diverse cultural influences stems, in part, from the time he spent in Thailand with the US Peace Corps in the 1990s. He describes it as a "great experience" and reveals he met his wife, who now works in politics, through his time there. The work exposed him to new people, new cultures and new ways of living. The precarious existence of rural villagers in central Thailand impressed on Sanford the value of stability and predictability, particularly for children; but it also came to invigorate his writing by shaking up his perceptions of the way we live and relate to others. His concern is that too many writers are apparently impervious to new cultural influences.

"The increase in cultural diversity is a great thing. But ironically, even as this happens, the cultural experiences of authors are becoming more similar. One reason for this is that so many people are convinced the only way to become a writer is to go through a creative writing program. Please don't take this as an attack on universities or creative writing programs. There are many good things to come out of the ever-expanding university experience, and education should be a

continual process throughout life. As an author, the minute you stop learning and studying, the moment your inner curiosity about the world ceases to exist, your writing dies. Simple as that.

"But the explosion of creative writing programs in recent decades has resulted in increasing numbers of authors going through the same experiences for a critical portion of their lives. These writers have unique lives and experiences before and after school, but once in a university setting they refine their storytelling ability in similar ways and are exposed to similar norms and ideas. This limiting is not intentional. But when people are exposed to the same experiences and beliefs, they see the world in far more similar ways than they would have before. And when you are exposed to the norms and beliefs of a culture, in this case the university creative writing culture, you are more timid in your willingness to talk or act against the norms you've learned. Some of the most groundbreaking writers out there have thrived in creative writing programs: Nnedi Okorafor is a perfect example. But when prospective writers ask me what they should major in at college, I urge them to study biology, genetics, math, archaeology or social work. Anything but creative writing!"

Sanford has followed his own advice: he majored in anthropology at Auburn University, Alabama with a specialisation in archaeology. Archaeology is clearly important to Sanford: he describes himself as having been an 'indifferent student' until a particular teacher, John Cartier, instilled in him an excitement about what happened in the past. One outcome was that Sanford spent some time working as an archaeologist. He has found the experience extremely useful, not because he has produced tomes full of archaeology stories – he has yet to finish a single tale on the topic – but because the insight archaeology gave him flows through everything he writes.

"To my mind, writing a story is almost like patiently brushing away the soil to reveal a hidden artefact. In archaeology you are recreating the story of those who came before. In fiction, you are creating the story of those who never were. If I had majored only in English or creative writing, I would have missed out on so many things which have influenced my fiction."

Since becoming a father to two young boys Sanford has gained an additional insight into the importance of his own development, particularly his childhood.

"When you're a child life is not

humdrum, everything is new and exciting. I love kids' questions; adults will not ask you deep questions such as 'why are the stars there?' We're taught to suppress those kinds of deep questions as adults: adults are supposed to interpret and gain insight, they aren't supposed to speculate too wildly. It's really important that we all act like adults – it's great to grow up – but it can be useful to retain the ability to see life with a child's eyes. It's something writers strive to do. The other thing about kids is that they are great critics – they help keep you real!"

Ambiguous perceptions

Sanford has written extensively about recent developments in sf, and has come to the view that the genre is going through a period of significant transformation. Furthermore, he describes an emergent storytelling form, 'SciFi Strange', which sets high literary standards, experiments with style, is infused with a sense of wonder, takes the idea of diverse sexuality for granted, focuses on human values and needs and explores the boundaries of reality and experience through philosophical speculation. I ask him if he sees SciFi Strange as, in part, a literature of demystification and enlightenment.

"Science fiction is the perfect genre to explore life's ambiguous perceptions and cognitive paradoxes. Of all the human tools for understanding life, science is our most rigorous. If you want to understand both yourself and your world, you must have a solid understanding of science, but it can't solve all the paradoxes and ambiguities in our lives. Look at the lives of scientists throughout history. Their unparalleled understanding of life didn't make them saints or cause them to lead exemplary lives. World class scientists exhibit the same failings as every other human being. An understanding of science alone doesn't bring enlightenment. That's where a genre like science fiction can help. By combining the rigor of science with a fictional examination of human lives, you're able to explore deeper insights than can exist in either fiction or science alone.

"As for SciFi Strange, I see this type of story taking rigor and examination even further than most kinds of science fiction. By flirting with the boundaries of what is scientifically possible, SciFi Strange explores reality in similar ways to science itself. It's an updated version of the literature of ideas. And since the frontiers of science have become almost philosophical in nature, I see SciFi Strange

stories as the perfect way to explore where humanity is going in the coming years."

If Sanford is right and a new more literary form of sf is being created, does this imply writers and editors have an opportunity to reach out to a new audience? And what will be the consequence if this opportunity is missed?

"As a writer and a reader I'm not interested in fiction that merely copies the successful formulas of the past or present. Once something is formulaic it is a cliché, and I am not interested in clichés: original thinking rarely arises from them. The problem with much of today's science fiction is that it remains trapped by all that's come before. Instead of being lifted up by the great works of the Golden Age of Science Fiction, or the New Wave or Cyberpunk movements, it often feels as if it's trapped under its own accumulated weigh. If someone writes a story set on the moons of Jupiter, many genre critics and readers imply that because this story wasn't the first to do so it is somehow the lesser story. Or they explain why this story isn't true science fiction because it violated a core genre belief established by some Big Name SF Author back in the 1950s.

"So, instead of trying to push the boundaries of what our genre can do, too many science fiction stories feel like retreads of older works. And heaven forbid if a new reader tries to jump into a science fiction story these days. Our genre has become so inbred and insular that unless a new reader understands in advance the different linguistic terms and norms used in science fiction, they might not be able to enjoy much of the genre's current literature. This is a problem because without new readers a genre slowly dies. At a time when science fiction movies and video games are more popular than ever, the readership for science fiction novels and stories is growing older and fewer. This boggles my mind."

Perplexed he may be, but despairing he isn't. He believes sf is regaining its brio, energy and willingness to take risks. One sign of this is a growing realisation that there must be 'gateway' science fiction novels to draw new, and especially younger, readers to the genre. Another is the quality and invention of work by a diverse group of contemporary storytellers:

"Among the writers working hard to overcome the staid sameness found in so much fiction are Paolo Bacigalupi, China Miéville, Ted Chiang, Rachel Swirsky, Eugie Foster, Benjamin Rosenbaum, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Hannu Rajaniemi,

Mercurio D. Rivera, Lavie Tidhar and Nina Allan – for me, Nina Allan is a writer who deserves a much bigger and more appreciative audience. These writers produce beautifully written stories even as they push their fiction beyond the rigid frames of the world as we've been told it should be. Their stories also have an edgy voice, as if they're not only taking a chance with their stories but actively embracing this fictional roll of the dice. Those are exactly the types of stories I want to read.

"And then there are new science fiction novels like Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* which, while totally within the genre, are also written so the general public can read and enjoy them. It's no coincidence that in addition to winning the Hugo and Nebula Awards, *The Windup Girl* was also named among the top ten fiction books of 2009 by *TIME* magazine. That's across all genres and novels. So while things may look rough for science fiction at the moment, I'm actually very optimistic about the genre. I believe we are at the start of a new golden age, one which I hope will appeal to both genre lovers and readers who don't normally read sf."

Many of the writers for whom Sanford has expressed admiration are notable for their willingness to tackle grim and tragic aspects of the human condition. I ask if he considers himself an optimistic or pessimistic sf writer, or whether he saw the debate that exercised so many critics, editors and writers a couple of years ago as utterly irrelevant to his storytelling.

"I don't see science fiction writers shying away from the grim and tragic. But I don't think they revel in the horrible. Most writers simply go where their stories demand they go. But it is worth noting that during pessimistic times more writers naturally produce pessimistic stories. As times change, that balance naturally shifts along with people's moods. I consider myself a realistic optimist. The realism comes because I aim to see the world as it is. I have witnessed the absolute worst people can do along with amazing acts of self-sacrifice and dignity. As a result, I try to accept and deal with the world as it actually exists. But, at the end of the day, I also follow something my grandfather – not my science fiction collecting grandfather, my other grandfather – was known for saying. He always said that things will work out...if you let them. I truly believe that. This doesn't mean bad things won't happen or that life doesn't have the ability to smash you to pieces. It does. But in the end, life goes on and so do we."

Jason Sanford's Interzone Stories

Memoria

short story in #231 (Nov–Dec 2010)

Millisent Ka Plays in Realtime

short story in #231 (Nov–Dec 2010)

Peacemaker, Peacemaker, Little Bo Peep

novelle in #231 (Nov–Dec 2010)

Plague Birds

novelle in #228 (May–Jun 2010)

- Podcast forthcoming in the *Dunestee Audio Fiction Magazine*

Into the Depths of Illuminated Seas

novelle in #226 (Jan–Feb 2010)

- Reprinted in *StarShipSofa Stories 2*

Here We Are, Falling Through Shadows

short story in #225 (Nov–Dec 2009)

- Reprinted in *Apex Magazine*, the Czech magazine *Ikarie*, and the French horror anthology *Ténèbres*
- Podcast forthcoming from *StarShipSofa*
- Longlisted for the 2010 British Fantasy Award

Sublimation Angels

novella in #224 (Sep–Oct 2009)

- Finalist for the 2009 Nebula Award for Best Novella
- Winner of the 2009 *Interzone* Readers' Poll
- Reprinted in *Ikarie*
- Podcast on *StarShipSofa*
- Longlisted for the 2010 British Fantasy Award

When Thorns Are the Tips of Trees

short story in #219 (Nov–Dec 2008)

- Winner of the 2008 *Interzone* Readers Poll
- Reprinted in *Apex Magazine*, *Ikarie*, and the Russian magazine *ESLI (IF)*
- Podcast on *StarShipSofa*

The Ships Like Clouds, Risen by Their Rain

novelle in #217 (Jul–Aug 2008)

- Reprinted in *Year's Best SF 14*, eds David Hartwell & Kathryn Cramer
- Reprinted in *Ikarie* and *ESLI (IF)*
- Podcast on *StarShipSofa*
- Longlisted for the 2009 British Fantasy Award

back issues: ttopress.com/interzone/backissues

BOOK ZONE

THE SECRET HISTORY OF FANTASY

edited by Peter S. Beagle

review by Maureen Kincaid Speller

MUSIC FOR ANOTHER WORLD

edited by Mark Harding

review by Andy Hedgecock

THE VERY BEST OF

CHARLES DE LINT

Charles de Lint

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THE RAGGED MAN

Tom Lloyd

review by Sandy Auden

THE EVOLUTIONARY VOID

Peter F. Hamilton

review by John Howard

THE NEMESIS LIST

R.J. Frith

review by Paul F. Cockburn

EMPRESS OF ETERNITY

LE Modesitt, Jr

review by Ian Sales

SURFACE DETAIL

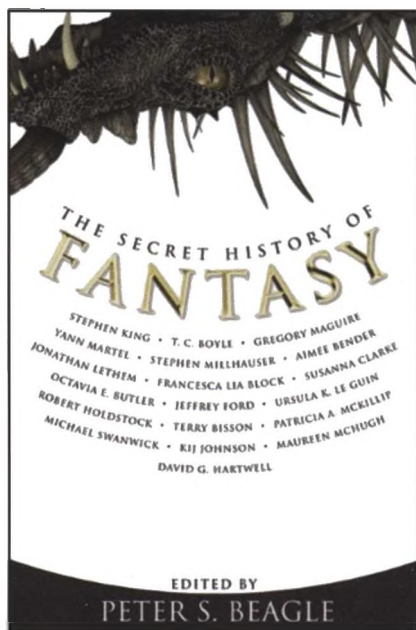
Iain M. Banks

review by Paul Kincaid

LOOK AT THE BIRDIE

Kurt Vonnegut

review by Jack Deighton



THE SECRET HISTORY OF FANTASY

Edited by Peter S. Beagle

Tachyon, 377pp, \$15.95 tpb

Reviewed by Maureen Kincaid Speller

To title an anthology *The Secret History of Fantasy* is a bold move, not least because I am not convinced that the history of fantasy is so much secret as obscure; this is a fine distinction, but there is a difference nonetheless. In part, it is obscure because fantasy is so difficult to define. It is easy enough to point to a work of science fiction and label it as such, even when sf comes in so many forms. The science fiction genre almost invariably retains distinct edges; they may become vague in places, a little scuffed or trampled down, but it is still possible to draw a working division between what is science fiction and what is not.

With fantasy, the task is not so easily accomplished. Is it fantasy if the story remains within 'our' world, or must the story be set in a secondary world? Can there be free traffic between this world and that, or does that undermine the veracity of the fantasy? Magical realism? Interstitial? The definitions and distinctions pile up but never really satisfy, and the arguments continue. Perhaps, and this is the other reason why I believe the history of fantasy is obscure rather than actually secret, we should recognise that there is no single evolutionary chronology of fantasy. Instead, it is as though we are engaged in an endless process of rediscovering stories that have always been there, along with a

continual redefining of those stories – to the best of my knowledge, urban fantasy has been reinvented at least three times during the last forty years, and looks very different to how I remember it in the 1980s, and the slipstream/interstitial tango continues to provoke argument. And over all this argument looms the spectre of Tolkien, whose extraordinary narrative, *The Lord of the Rings*, accidentally created a genre.

People either forget or indeed never knew that there was a very rich seam of the overtly fantastic present in mainstream fiction before Tolkien began publishing. After *The Lord of the Rings* became widely available in paperback editions, publishers were keen to exploit this new reading market. Ian Ballantine, in partnership with the irrepressible Lin Carter, began the Adult Fantasy series, which brought an eclectic range of material from the likes of E.R. Eddison, William Morris and Lord Dunsany back into print, while introducing new authors such as Katherine Kurtz and Peter S. Beagle. They were marked as being 'like Tolkien', which they were insofar as they also contained elements of fantasy.

The Adult Fantasy series was ideal for the experimental reader, but as Peter S. Beagle notes, in the introduction to *The Secret History of Fantasy*, there were those who simply wanted more Tolkien rather than more like Tolkien. He tells the chilling story of how Judy-Lynn Del Rey gave him the manuscript of *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks, hoping he would say a few appreciative words about it. Beagle quickly realised that Brooks' novel was a blatant rip-off of *Lord of the Rings*, which Del Rey acknowledged, saying 'This one's for people who've read the Tolkien book forty times, and can't quite get it up for the forty-first – but they still want the mixture as before.' At this point, Beagle suggests, fantasy writing was transformed into systematic production, and irrevocably changed.

The Secret History of Fantasy stands as a reminder that while fantasy is now a commodity, some writers still write stories which do not fit the generic template, though the markets remain limited. The acknowledgements page shows that while half of these stories were published in genre magazines, the others appeared in a variety of markets, reflecting the former eclecticism of mainstream publications where fantasy was concerned.

This collection avoids becoming an exercise in nostalgia because the stories are presented without much in the way

of historical or theoretical positioning. Context, such as it is, comes from articles by Ursula K. Le Guin and David Hartwell, recapitulating the history of fantasy publishing, and the critical reception of fantasy by mainstream critics. This is familiar ground and both essays seem slightly detached, perhaps because they are reprinted from elsewhere. I would have preferred a more direct engagement between stories and commentary, something to develop the argument.

Likewise, we learn nothing about the authors other than their names. Most have published in genre markets; those, like Yann Martel, Aimee Bender and T.C. Boyle, who are published in the mainstream are recognised for their offbeat stories. The stories do indeed remind us that there is a greater variety to fantasy than many suppose but there are no surprises for the wide-ranging reader. The stories offer a wide range of subjects and settings, yet there are certain similarities. Something fantastically unquantifiable irrupts in the contemporary world (Stephen King's 'Mrs Todd's Shortcut' falls into this category, as does Kij Johnson's '26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss') or else a fairy tale trope is vigorously reworked (Francesca Lia Block's 'Bones' and Neil Gaiman's 'Snow, Glass, Apples' are two examples). What all these stories have in common is a distinctive 'tone'. The narration is generally measured; the stories themselves are deeply layered and open-ended. The reader is given a series of story pieces (sometimes blatantly, as in Steven Millhauser's 'The Barnum Museum', with its distinctly postmodernist assembling of observations; sometimes more subtly, as in Terry Bisson's 'Bears Discover Fire') which they must put together to produce a story. The narrative spreads far beyond the visible words on the page. Some may suggest that we are now talking about 'literary' fiction, the place where fantasy goes for respectability but that is an argument for another day.

In the end, *The Secret History of Fantasy* is nothing more or less than a showcase for a particular kind of fantasy, which is neither secret nor historical, just not immediately visible if you don't know where to look. To me, reading the collection was rather like catching up with a much-valued friend. I enjoyed it immensely, and it is well worth reading, but it confirmed my tastes rather than challenging them. I hope other readers may find it eye-opening, inspiring even, but I remain obscurely disappointed.



MUSIC FOR ANOTHER WORLD

Edited by Mark Harding

Mutation Press, 270pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Andy Hedgecock

Let me get right to the point: I don't pop my cork for every anthology I read, but Mark Harding's musically themed collection is one of the most exciting and original I've read in years.

In a recent review for Book Zone I complained about an editor's intrusive voice and tendency to overload readers with information on the editorial process. Mark Harding, on the other hand, is as chatty as a Trappist. But the lack of blather about principles of selection and organisation is a deliberate and well judged decision. He presents the stories in three loosely themed 'acts' and invites readers to infer patterns of meaning and/or motif. This gently ludic aspect of the book brings an additional pleasure: since Harding goes to some trouble to avoid spoiling this aspect of reader-editor engagement, I am equally determined not to undermine it and will discuss selected stories in an order unrelated to theme.

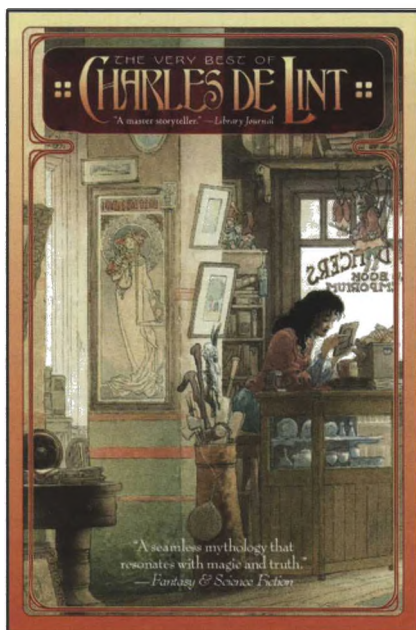
It's invidious to nominate a stand-out story but I must: Neil Williamson's 'Arrhythmia' is sheer perfection. Not a word wasted, but it says everything that could be said about music's diminishing potential as a force for liberation and the increasingly subtle tools employed by coercive societies. It's a beautifully concentrated lament for everything we lost through the commodification of pop,

rock and, if not rebellion itself, then the iconography of rebellion. Read it and you'll never be able to watch *The X Factor* again – not even in an ironic way. Williamson is a writer at the height of his powers.

The tone of 'Cow Lane' by Chris Amies segues from frenetic and frightening to elegiac and contemplative without a single false note. Amies writes with admirable economy and portrays to perfection the excitement, absurdity and grubby pubs of the punk era. He reworks a traditional theme, bravura artistry with an infernal provenance, to celebrate and mourn something we've lost – something wonderful and terrifying in the shadows of the past. *Interzone* regular Aliette de Bodard is on fine form with the strange and lyrical 'Silenced Songs', a tale of guilt and redemption against the backdrop of imperial war, tyranny and a violent cultural purge. Jill Zeller's 'Like Clara, in the Movie Heidi' is haunted by the music of Franz Schubert – and, perhaps, by the composer himself. It's a strange story of chronic illness, the power of art and an elusive helper dog. Its events are deeply ambiguous and it could have ended up being a little mawkish if Zeller's writing wasn't so beautifully controlled. Another outstanding contribution is Jim Steel's 'Shostakovich Ensemble, The'. Declaration of interest: Jim is editor of Book Zone and commissioner of this review. Steel's alternate history is related through chronological entries in a critical discography and reveals a strange and yet curiously familiar version of Britain in the period 1979–1992. Look out for bizarre walk on parts for Norman Tebbit and Shaking Stevens. Funny and disturbing by turn.

The collection offers a host of absorbing, entertaining and thought provoking stories. There's Tom Brennan's 'Lorna', a touching tale of AI-based SF; Vincent Lauzon's wry and inventive 'Festspeel', an interesting variation on the theme of self-parodic sword and sorcery; and Andrew Hook's terse but provocative 'Blue Sky World', which deftly reworks the trope of a tear in the space-time continuum to examine the corrosive effect of geopolitics and commerce on artistic perfection.

There's no dominant genre in *Music for Another World*: jazz jostles with punk, rock, classical and strange music we have yet to hear; there are alternate histories, technology-based SF, slipstream, fantasy, horror and ghost stories. The dominant mood is downbeat, but this is an exceptional anthology. Ten of the nineteen stories are astonishing; eight are simply impressive.



PHOTOGRAPH © MARVANN HARRIS



THE VERY BEST OF CHARLES DE LINT

Charles de Lint

Tachyon Publications, 432pp, \$19.95 tpb

Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

The latest Charles de Lint offering is a collection of twenty nine short stories spanning the past quarter of a century of his writing career. His previous short story collections have generally been at least loosely thematic. This volume is something of a departure from that approach. Faced with the challenge from his publisher to come up with a collection under the heading *The Very Best of... de Lint* apparently turned to his readers, or at least those of them who follow him on FaceBook and MySpace, and asked them to nominate their favourite stories. With a few additions to reflect all the styles he has written in, this volume is the result.

The lack of a clear theme makes the volume very difficult to summarise. He gives us a handful of (mostly early) stories that are set in a conventional pre-modern, agrarian fantasy land, but the majority have a modern urban setting. And most of the latter are set in or around Newford, de Lint's mythical American city where magic is an ever-present if unacknowledged reality.

I did notice one omission from this attempt to give a comprehensive survey of his short story writing. For some reason he chose not to include one of his contributions to Terri Windling's *Bordertown* series. Since they are not easy to find these days and de Lint's

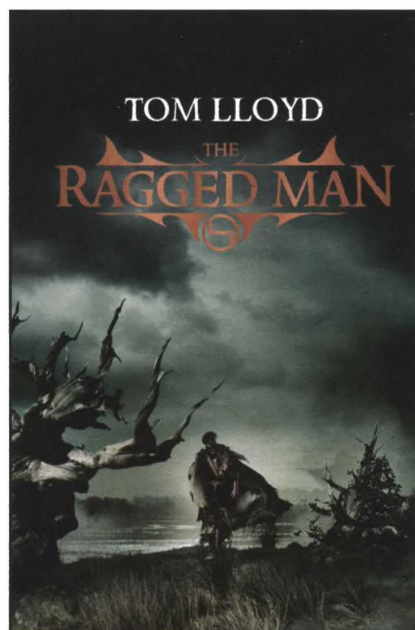
contributions were some of the stronger stories in the series, that is a pity.

The volume is a showcase of the many virtues of his writing: strong dialogue (he is one of relatively few male fantasy authors who is able to produce really believable female dialogue), characterisation and description; a knack for combining lyricism with clarity of language; an ability to expose the magical hidden within the interstices of everyday reality; characters who are searching for something more than the hedonistic pleasures of modern materialism but with no guarantee that they will find what they are looking for, certainly no guarantee that they will find happiness ('Timeskip', 'In the Pines').

The collection also serves to showcase the diversity of his output. It includes stories that could be read as bedtime stories for children ('Pixel Pixies', 'Mr Truepenny's Book Emporium and Gallery') and stories that deal sensitively with adult themes (for example his treatment of child abuse in 'In the House of my Enemy'). There is humour and horror, loss and discovery (usually self-discovery).

And his choice of concluding story is interesting. 'The Fields Beyond the Fields' is by no means the strongest story in the book. In many ways, it seems a strange way to end the collection: a rather downbeat, late-night monologue by a writer who is one of the recurring characters of the Newford stories. But it contains a fascinating meditation on the art of writing. There is more truth here than in many books on writing. And perhaps that does make it a fitting way to end the collection.

In *The Very Best of Charles de Lint* we have a very useful one-volume compilation of his short story writing. It is essential reading for anyone who is new to de Lint or has previously read only his novels.



THE RAGGED MAN

Tom Lloyd

Gollancz, 550pp, £12.99 tpb

Reviewed by Sandy Auden

The Ragged Man is the fourth instalment in Tom Lloyd's epic adventure about warring nations, meddling gods and religious fanaticism. The author has created a complex story, but if there is a single underlying thread going through the length of the four books so far, it's the crystal skulls.

These twelve artefacts have a huge power that can be wielded by the owner. If all are owned by a single person then the skulls become more than the sum of their parts. Lord Styrax is hunting down each skull in turn and taking them by force, after a god told him it was his destiny. In this volume, Styrax sends his powerful armies to start a war campaign and take the crystal skull from King Emin, ruler of a neighbouring kingdom. Emin challenges as best he can with guerrilla style tactics but can't keep Styrax's troops back. The climax comes at Moorview castle with the final confrontation for Emin's crystal skull, but can Emin's master plan beat back Styrax's bigger numbers?

While Styrax and Emin go head to head, in another country a child called Ruhen is planning revenge. Ruhen has already been adopted by the Duchess of Byora but he's really the Mortal-Aspect of a daemon called Azaer, manipulating those around him to gain more power. He's controlling the Duchess and is extending his influence

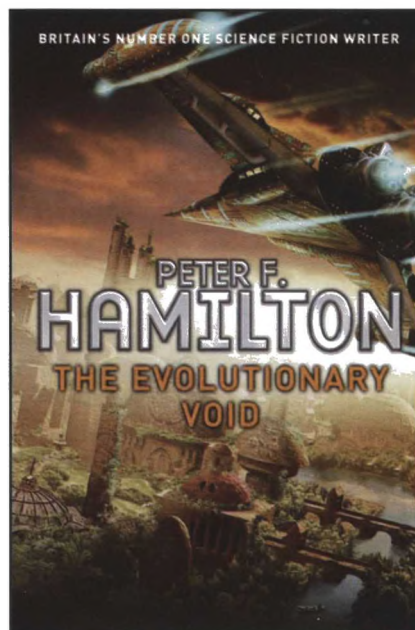
by murdering significant people. His cohorts have also infiltrated the Harlequins – an organisation of storytellers that travel the countries entertaining everyone with their tales. Ruhen's spies have twisted some of the Harlequin's stories to include the coming of a powerful boy-child. But others are wise to his machinations and Styrax sends a group of assassins to terminate the daemon and his closest followers. King Emin is also aware of the child's actions and puts his own wide-reaching plan into action.

On top of all this, the people of Farlan are struggling with an unwanted ruler after Styrax sent Farlan's previous Lord, Isak, to Hell at the end of book three. Then there's the worshippers of Lady Fate, who are coming back together after their god was murdered. There's also a daring rescue to save someone from extreme torture, a someone who will go on to become a crucial part of King Emin's army; and two vampires are hiding a magical sword far from prying eyes.

So there's plenty going on in this big book but there's not a page of padding. The plot moves quickly and it's devious and intricate and not always obvious. Lloyd will often add scenes that don't have a clear purpose at the time you read them, but events are always clarified sooner or later. It's the plot that drives the story forward rather than the characters and while some of those characters are wonderfully realised – like the unstable white-eyes, Azaer's dark menace and the sarcastic and selfish Illumene – the cast list is so huge that many don't get the chance to be developed very much. It's more that they are just carried along by all the events.

As well as plotting, Lloyd's other strength is his world-building. The visit to Death's halls of judgement is especially imaginative and evocatively described – a sequence that lingers the longest out of all the different adventures happening in the book.

Overall, *The Ragged Man* is a story about people with power wanting more power, whether they be kings or queens, elected rulers or have accepted power bestowed upon them by a god when they agreed to become the god's mortal embodiment. There are times when it feels like a great chess game is unfolding before your eyes, with a clever interplay between the pieces and a hidden long-term game plan. It's been a violent, bloody and carefully calculated journey through the first four volumes. The fifth and concluding volume is likely to be just as exciting.



THE EVOLUTIONARY VOID

Peter F. Hamilton

Macmillan, 726pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by John Howard

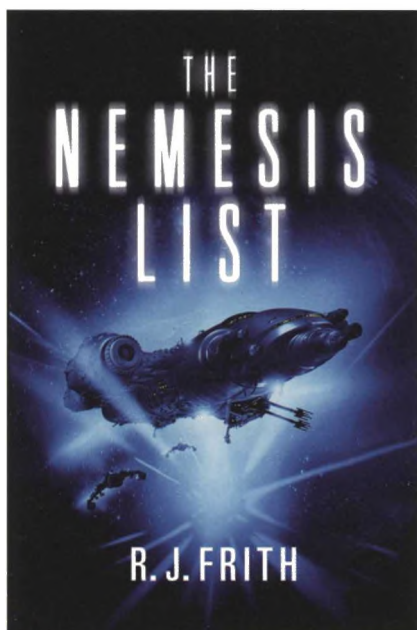
Most of Peter Hamilton's novels published this century belong to the ever more sprawling universe of the Intersolar Commonwealth, made possible through rejuvenation treatment and easy interstellar travel by FTL drive and via wormhole. And within this growing galactic conurbation there are groupings of novels with closer links, like streetlights clustered at intersections along the dark arterial roads of the spaceways.

The slimline singleton *Misspent Youth*, set in the middle of this century, laid the foundations as a sort of prologue before the actual prologue. Then some consequences developed over a millennium later in the two Commonwealth Saga novels, *Pandora's Star* and *Judas Unchained*. By then the Commonwealth had come to consist of hundreds of planets living under a wide variety of political and economic systems, but all knitted together by wormholes. But threats and terrors still existed, pressing in from the dark or rising from the deep past; and the Commonwealth was grievously damaged. With the Commonwealth Saga, Hamilton returned to the enormous widescreen star-spanning multi-character-viewpoint type of novel exemplified by his *Night's Dawn* trilogy (1996–99 and over 3,000 pages in total). And it isn't irrelevant to mention the sheer physical bulk of Peter Hamilton's work: he has become renowned

for books that dominate the shelves and can induce Stephen King Wrist in the most devoted reader. A Hamilton novel is truly galaxy-sized: complexes of stories expanding and barely being held back by mere paper, boards and covers, spaceships and stars weighing down and soaring free. Peter Hamilton is Edmond Hamilton cubed. Like Edmond, Peter enjoys his universe: 'Have you ever tried moving a planet?' 'No, but I know a man who probably can.'

And then the Void Trilogy began to come into view, a new suburb twinkling in the galactic shadows. These are more huge books, set further on down the road in an older (but not wiser) and expanded Greater Commonwealth. The first part, *The Dreaming Void*, was published in 2007; *The Temporal Void* followed a year later. It is confirmed that something lurks gigantically at the centre of our galaxy: not a supermassive black hole but an artificial construct, possibly a self-contained universe put there aeons ago by beings unknown. Ever since, this – the Void – has barely been stopped from expanding too much and consuming all of the other stars of the galactic core. Enter a Commonwealth citizen, Inigo, who has started to dream of lives of others being lived inside the Void. But the dreams are more like a sort of cosmic *The Truman Show*, and inspire millions of followers to plan a voyage to the Void to enter and experience it for themselves. But others fear that the success of such a pilgrimage will cause the Void to expand catastrophically, and to destroy the entire galaxy. They are determined to do anything to prevent the armada reaching its goal. Such are the basics.

And then Hamilton said, Let there be the third part. And there was *The Evolutionary Void*. The huge cast continues to talk, fight, plot, love and hate like the networked members of the enormous extended family they have essentially become over the centuries. The Void is where they wish to fulfil their wildest expectations of accelerated evolution, or where they will lead the galaxy into its obliteration – or not. In the closing pages there is a headlong rush down the hill to where those inside the Void and the Commonwealth universe outside it come to realise what the Void's enigma means. There are the satisfying embraces of homecomings and departures, and a resumption of business much as usual. It's quite hard work for all concerned, but also tremendous fun. I look forward to the next time Peter Hamilton unfurls the map and sets out on a new journey.

**THE NEMESIS LIST****R.J. Frith**

Tor, 384pp, £16.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

In our *X-Factor* era of 'dream come true' careers and supernova celebrity, it's hardly surprising that someone would eventually set up an SF novel writing competition. When it came, the punningly titled War of the Words actually had some street cred: the support of a major SF imprint, Tor UK, as well as plenty of publicity from those nice folk at *SciFiNow*.

Now, let's be clear about this: I didn't enter War of the Words and I had no intention of entering War of the Words. So there's no vinegar wine involved when I write that I found this competition-winning novel – described by the publishers as a 'rip-roaring, commercial, character-driven space opera' – utterly underwhelming. In fact, it required a genuine effort on my part to reach the end, only to discover that, in this day and age, it wasn't actually The End and that, worryingly, at least one sequel is on the publisher's schedule.

The lesson from all talent shows is that, while they can certainly 'discover' genuine talent, most winners are nothing more than the best of a mediocre bunch, destined for the briefest of days in the sun. Let's just say that R.J. Frith is no Isaac Asimov, no Douglas Adams, to paraphrase the competition PR. Which raises the worrying question: just how ultimately dull were the rest of the entries?

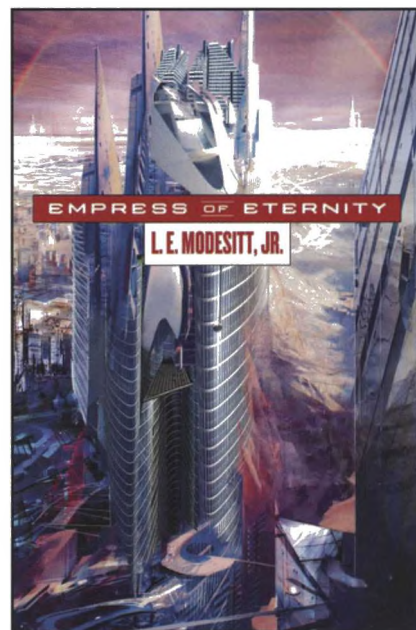
As with any other first time writer, Tor UK are naturally keen to signpost the kind of book lurking behind the nice-enough spaceship adorned cover. They name check both *Battlestar Galactica* (the remake, presumably) and Gary Gibson's *Shoal* series. Frankly, Frith gains little from the comparisons, as it simply highlight's the novel's unnecessarily labyrinthine story and its over-reliance on dialogue which – unlike in Gary Gibson's work – lacks voice and distinction.

Nor does it help the cohesion of the book that Frith splits his protagonist role in two: on the one hand we have Jones, the erratic and potentially murderous result of illegal scientific experiments; on the other, there's former space squaddie-turned ship captain Frank Pak. If Jones has unfulfilled potential as an utterly unreliable narrator, he's sunk by the world-weary Frank, a less than convincing leader of a crew of utterly forgettable rejects from SF Central Casting.

This is at heart a chase story, but it's an unrelenting Benny Hill chase minus the girls, the small bald man, the music and indeed the humour. And Benny Hill, of course. We're constantly told – in somewhat plodding, repetitive prose – that Jones is an extremely valuable individual, but we're seldom ever shown why he's wanted beyond his initial good looks that quickly fade as the story progresses. Time and again we're reminded that he's wanted by the sadly all-too-predictably dictatorial Earth Government – which, incidentally, we're expected to believe can rigidly control all scientific research among a human race now spreading out among the stars. There's also a rumoured rebellion growing among the 'outer rim'. Yet it's difficult on occasions to believe Jones is anything more than an annoying poor little rich boy.

But that's the case with almost all the characters in the book, newspaper-thin constructs which turn out to be even shallower than you thought when they pull off one mask after another in the course of a plot that rolls on regardless. Contrary to what Frith might think, ensuring that every character turns out to be a lying, conniving and generally unscrupulous individual isn't actually the clever or proper way to build a complex plot full of twists and turns that engage and surprise the reader. Like any literary technique, when done *ad nauseum*, it easily loses its power.

That such a poor novel was capable of winning a major competition suggests that the readers of *SciFiNow* are probably not writers.

**EMPRESS OF ETERNITY****LE Modesitt, Jr**

Tor, 352pp, \$25.99 hb

Reviewed by Ian Sales

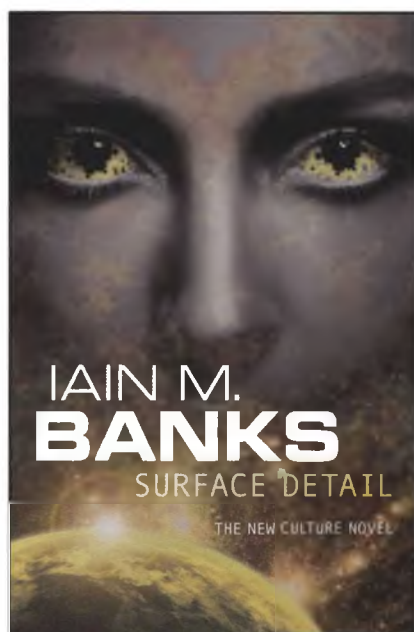
LE Modesitt, Jr is a bulwark of genre fiction in the US. He stands, legs apart, one hand against the wall of fantasy, the other hand pressed against science fiction. Like the man, his novels, often the size of small buildings, straddle both genres. It's an appropriate conceit, since Modesitt's latest, *Empress of Eternity*, has an architectural feature at its core. A canal. This Canal is on a world the blurb calls "Earth" but the story itself does not. It is made of some indestructible material. No one knows anything about it. Three narratives describe the events surrounding three groups of people from three different eras, each of which is researching the mysterious Canal. According to the blurb, these narratives are set hundreds of thousands of years apart, but there is no indication of this in the text as each uses entirely different calendars.

Lord Maertyn is a scientist and minor ministerial functionary in the Unity of Caelaarn. He and his wife Maarlyna, who is recovering from an illness, are researching the Canal. But there is a power struggle occurring back in the capital, and Maertyn becomes embroiled in it when his minister asks him to fill in for an absent assistant minister. Faelyna and Eltyn are also researching the Canal, but they are doing so for the Ruche. However, there is a coup among the rulers of the Ruche – the Fifty

becomes the Twenty – and this is followed by a brutal campaign of brainwashing. Faelyna and Eltyn resist. Duhlye and Helkyria are researching the Canal for the Vaniran Hegemony. But the Vanir are under attack by the Aesyr, who, despite members of the Vaniran Hegemony, appear to be racially different and also possess their own armed forces. The Aesyr also have a weapon, the Hammer, which they threaten to use unless the Vanirans reveal what they have discovered about the Canal.

These three stories seem to follow the same plot before abruptly, and solely due to authorial handwaving, becoming linked. Maarlyna becomes the title character, and the Aesyr provide a direct threat to the universe of the book...but the Ruche narrative is entirely superfluous. It neither impacts the resolution, nor assists in explaining it. In fact, very little of any of the three worlds is explained – the reader has to guess the relationship between the Vanir and Aesyr, for example. It makes for a frustrating read. Further, characters lecture each other on assorted subjects, none of which sound remotely plausible. The description of the Hammer's workings are the worst kind of technobabble; as indeed are the workings of the Canal. Which is, in fact, a bridge through time. Modesitt proffers an explanation, but it confuses a philosophy of time with physics. Modesitt also presents events or situations to illustrate points...only to have a character then explain what has just been illustrated. The prose, too, is peculiar, and padded out with stylistic niggles which render sentences clumsy: "he smoothed his hair, short as it was", "he carried but a bag". That "as it was" is appended unnecessarily to sentences throughout the story; that inserted "but" appears on almost every page. The Ruche have "bio-orbs", not eyes; they perform "calcjections", which sound vaguely rude.

Empress of Eternity is a novel light on sense. This may well be because somewhere within its pages a short story has been strapped down and forcibly fed a pottage of words in order to bulk it up to novel length. It's remarkable for the number of scenes in it which neither advance the plot nor explain the world. The end result is some sort of van Vogtian nonsense put in service of a plot which has no beginning or middle, and yet stumbles to an end. Van Vogt's cliff-hangers, however, made his novels pacy reads. That's more than can be said of *Empress of Eternity*.



SURFACE DETAIL

Iain M. Banks

Orbit, 640pp, £18.99 hb

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Silent films tended to open with a circle showing the hero, the circle widened to include the heroine, then drew out completely to show the circumstance in which they find themselves.

Iain M. Banks's space operas are prone to begin in an equivalent fashion. Start with small scale tight focus on something personal: a girl, Lededje, who is making another attempt to flee her master, Veppers, only to be caught and stabbed to death. The picture widens: a soldier, Vateuil, a hapless grunt in apparently medieval warfare that will inevitably kill him. Now we widen to an overtly space operatic scenario, as Yime Nsokyi realises she is the last defence in an overwhelming attack upon her Orbital Hub. Finally, because this is, after all, Banks, there is an additional baroque twist as two strange creatures, Prin and Chay, attempt to escape from Hell.

Only now has enough been established for us to start upon the story proper.

Lededje is unexpectedly reborn aboard the General Systems Vehicle *Sense Amid Madness, Wit Amidst Folly*, and starts to plot how she can return home for revenge.

Vateuil is a soldier in a digital war who will fight his way through many different scenarios as he rises through the ranks.

Yime is an agent for the Culture organisation Quietus who is recalled from

her simulated exercise to be sent on a vital mission.

And Prin has to leave his lover behind in Hell in order to make his escape, so he can present evidence to turn public opinion in their civilisation against the maintenance of Hell.

Like recent Culture novels, such as *Look to Windward* and *Matter*, *Surface Detail* is largely and centrally about death. By which I don't mean simply killing people, though there is more than enough of that in this novel. As in much contemporary space opera, death has ceased to be an immediate concern for most people since they live extended lives and their personalities are stored so they can be revived whenever needed. But death is, still, an event in life, and it seems to have come increasingly to concern Banks. Here, for instance, we see people dying and being reborn, we see people occupying wildly different bodies in simulation after simulation as the various bodies are killed, and above all we see Hell.

Many of the civilisations that make up the universe retain a belief in an afterlife, in particular they have a belief in a form of Hell, and so they have constructed simulations stuffed full of the most sadistic tortures they can imagine to which their dead are consigned. Hell has become a fault line about which civilisation has divided, and so acute have these divisions become that the various societies have agreed to stage a simulated war between the pro and anti-Hell forces, the result of which will decide whether Hells are to be eliminated across the universe. Unfortunately, that simulated war now threatens to break out into the Real. And the amoral entrepreneur Veppers is central to the whole issue.

This is pretty much what we have come to expect of Banks by now. Big set-piece battles, spectacle handled with insouciant ease, mordant humour particularly from the immense Culture ships that have become almost a parody of themselves, a queasy fascination with pain and brutality that is never quite off-set by the liberal morality that wins through in the end, and above all an easy readability. Most scenes go on a little too long (a besetting sin since *Consider Phlebas*), which means that at well over 600 pages this is a chunkier book that it really needs to be. Nevertheless it is a book you find yourself racing through as incident piles on incident, so I don't imagine anyone is going to complain too much about that.

**LOOK AT THE BIRDIE****Kurt Vonnegut**

Vintage, 272pp, £8.99 pb

Reviewed by Jack Deighton

This is a collection of fiction plus one letter of "sententious crap" unpublished in Vonnegut's lifetime. The stories appear to have been written for the most part in the 1950s; one even mentions King Farouk. Sparingly interspersed through the book are Vonnegut's own illustrations in his naïve style. They too appear of 1950s vintage though their copyright dates are much later.

Throughout, Vonnegut's tendency to name his characters strikingly is to the fore: Ernest Groper, K Hollomon Weems, Felix Karadubian. Vonnegut's characteristic dry style is also evident. He seems to have found his voice early. Though he made his name writing SF, before later disclaiming it, most of the tales here are devoid of speculative content.

The two stories that might vaguely be called SF are 'Confido' and 'The Petrified Ants'. In the first an earpiece designed to make people happy is "a combination of confidant and a household pet" but whispers only the worst of others. The second is set in the Erzgebirge mountains in Soviet era Czechoslovakia where some newly uncovered fossils reveal ants once behaved individualistically. The revelation of their change to collectivity is hurried, though, and stretches credibility. The story is fun but too heavy-handed in its allegorisation of Soviet society.

As to the rest of the fiction, 'FUBAR'

is a gentle but utterly conventional story in which a crabbed bureaucrat begins to awaken to the possibility of a different kind of life when a newly trained young secretary is assigned to him. The 1950s ambience here is revealed by the F in FUBAR standing for 'fouled' rather than anything more demotic.

'Shout About it From the Housetops' examines the deleterious consequences of publishing a novel whose characters are based on barely disguised neighbours, friends and the author's spouse.

The two-part 'Ed Luby's Key Club' deals with Harve Elliot, who, along with his wife Claire, witnesses a murder by the local gang boss. Both are then accused of it themselves. In the second part Harve alone escapes from custody and attempts to vindicate himself. The story's conclusion, while worthy, is perhaps a little too complacent.

'A Song for Selma' tells how people's aspirations can be transformed, for good or ill, by their expectations of themselves as mediated through those of others.

In 'Hall of Mirrors' a hypnotist uses his powers to evade the police when they come to investigate the disappearances of his wealthy women clients. 'Hello, Red' is the story of a bitter wandering sailor's return to his home town to try to claim guardianship of the distinctively flame haired daughter he fathered before his first trip abroad, and of her reaction to him.

'Little Drops of Water' concerns the subtle strategy employed by one former conquest to gain her revenge after being dumped by a confirmed ladies' man of fixed habits. In 'Look at the Birdie' an encounter in a bar with a disgraced former psychiatrist who insists his wife photographs the narrator leads to a demand that can't be refused.

'King and Queen of the Universe' has a very well to do teenaged couple in the Depression era on their way home from a party come face to face with the harsher realities of less privileged lives.

'The Good Explainer' is the doctor to whom a man and wife travel from Cincinnati to Chicago in order to have the reasons for their childlessness laid bare.

While all the stories in the book are never less than readable, they do not represent Vonnegut at his best. Among other faults they are too often prefaced by a brief paragraph or two of scene setting which are told to, rather than unfolded for, us and there is a tendency to repetition of such things as job titles.

Recommended to Vonnegut completists but not as an introduction to his work.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

METROPOLIS

DEVIL

THE DEATH AND LIFE OF
CHARLIE ST CLOUD

ENTER THE VOID

JONAH HEX

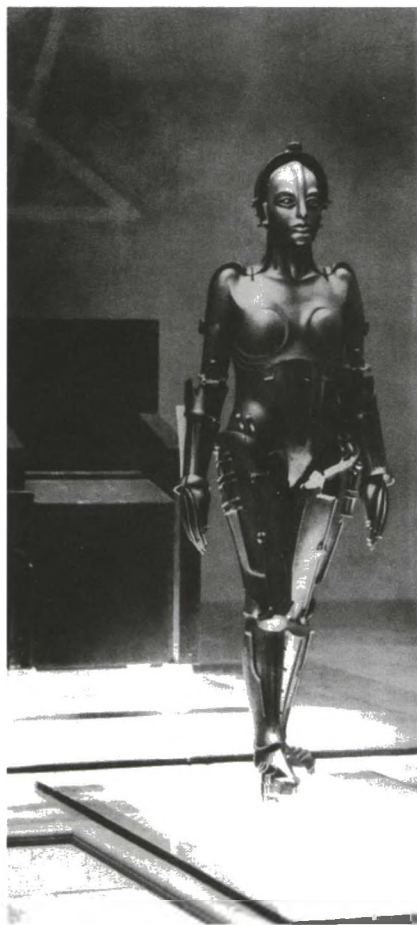
SCOTT PILGRIM VS THE WORLD

THE HOLE

DESPICABLE ME

THE SECRET OF KELLS

RESIDENT EVIL: AFTERLIFE



The revelation of the rebuilt **Metropolis** is how little sense it ever made. All modern restoration has been directed at reconstructing the long version shown in the abortive 1927 Berlin first run, of which the various provincial and international releases were drastically abbreviated versions based on Channing Pollock's radical US recut, which for the next half-century would be the only one seen by audiences. Pollock's version took enthusiastic liberties with plot and motivation of a kind only possible in silent cinema, recomposing entire relationships and motivations by reassembling sequences with a new set of title cards. Here Lang's one big mistake in his attempt to crack the international market had been to inscribe the name of Rotwang and Frederson's lost love Hel, who died giving birth to Freder, on the pedestal of her monumental bust. Pollock, judging that American audiences would simply fall about at the name Hel, felt compelled to excise all trace of this pivotal character, and to come up with fairly desperate new rationales for the relationship between Frederson and Rotwang, and for Rotwang's adventures in robotics, his connivance in

the city's doom, and his final crazed pursuit of Maria – in the process losing the film's bizarre reflection of its makers' own lives, since Lang's first wife Lisa Rosenthal had killed herself in 1921 over his affair with *Metropolis* co-writer Thea von Harbou, who then divorced Rudolf Klein-Rogge to marry Lang herself, only for Lang then to cast Klein-Rogge in the role of Rotwang.

Over the last thirty years the film has been growing back by increments in a series of restorations and reconstructions from newly available material. Giorgio Moroder's extraordinary 1984 disco remix, which subjected the existing footage to a kind of retroimposition of the rival film grammar of Eisenstein and Hitchcock (both of whom had visited Lang's set), was also modern audiences' first sensational sight of the robot Maria's erotic cabaret turn. But though the storyline has long been reasonably well understood from von Harbou's 1926 novelisation and the thousand annotated cues in Gottfried Huppertz' orchestral score, supplemented over the years by the original intertitles, production stills, and an early draft of the script, all known prints still derived from the later shortened versions of the barely-seen original Berlin cut. That changed at last with the 2008 discovery of a 16mm print of the original Argentine version, which has now been painstakingly cleaned up and collated with the 2002 digital composite of fifteen key archive prints, sometimes adding a tiny few frames to an existing sequence, but in some places restoring entire plot strands lost for a lifetime. Most of the new running time is actually spent in a catacombs of networked subplots centring on the supporting trio of the Thin Man/"Slim", Frederson's sinister fixer; Georgy/11811, the worker who switches places with Freder; and Josaphat, the sacked underling Freder rescues from suicide to become his loyal sidekick. The Argentine footage is still painfully distressed, with significant loss of frame edges and resolution, and we're still missing Freder's vision in the cathedral and the fight between Frederson and Rotwang that allows Maria to escape; but there's a much longer version of the climactic rescue of the children from the flooded undercity, and most of Georgy's amazing taxi dream-journey is there, with its hallucinatory intoxication with the sensual onslaught of elite consumption. The biggest surprise is that Joh Frederson's motivation for fomenting the workers' uprising, even after his showdown with Rotwang, makes

no more sense than it ever did. A single title card explains that he seeks an excuse to suppress the workers by force; but the novel makes it an attempt to win his son back to his side, and it seems clear that on this and other key points von Harbou and Lang never really worked out an intelligible structure of motivation.

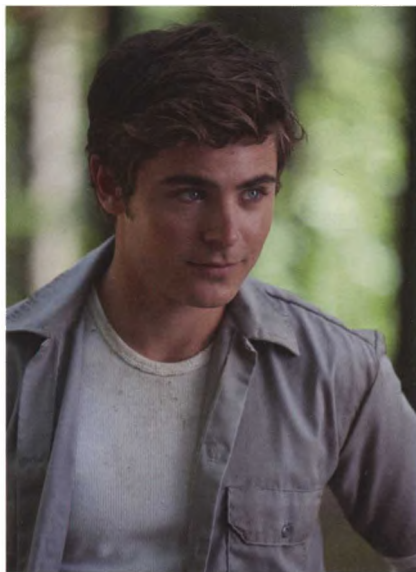
Yet it's clearer than ever from the 2010 restoration that this very incoherence is part of the film's enduring greatness. That it's still up there with *2001* as cinema's supreme achievement in the genre rests on three things above all. One is simply that that nobody working on it had any remotely reasonable sense of the technically impossible, and the brilliance of the design and special effects – especially Eugen Schüfftan's optical compositing of live action with miniature sets – are such that some shots still defy any intuitive understanding of how they were achieved, and boggle imagining once you find out. Another is the astonishing performance of the seventeen-year-old Brigitte Helm, still completely spellbinding in her three-in-one role as the iconic triple goddess of virgin, whore, and machine. (Helm slipped out of the business, and Germany, early as Goebbels muscled in, and lived on quietly in Switzerland till 1996.) But the expanded version makes it clearer than ever that the film's greatest asset is the very incoherence and politico-technocratic infantility that so outraged Wells – who spotted, correctly, that von Harbou had been mugging up his own *When the Sleeper Wakes* and taken from it a little more inspiration than was entirely decent. Its third-way mantra ("Mittler zwischen Hird und Händen muß die Herz sein") made no recognisable political sense then, unless perhaps as a snapshot of the contemporary struggle between communism and fascism for the soul of twentieth-century socialism, and makes even less now; it's a film that presents an unrivalled visual model of the modernist industrial machine, but is completely unable to explain how it can ever work economically, politically, or technically. As a result, *Metropolis* has always transcended the political understanding of any real-world time and place. Five years later, with the much more conventionally science-fictional *Frau im Mond* behind them, Lang and von Harbou parted ways, she into the embrace of National Socialism and he into exile in Paris and America. Neither would hit the heights of their collaboration again; but then nor would anyone else.



Metropolis' toweringly verticalised narrative universe makes it almost incidentally one of the great elevator movies, though unusual in being a lift film without doors – its transitions between social and narrative levels from catacombs to eyrie negotiated primarily by the paternoster lifts with which von Harbou was so curiously obsessed, and which come particularly into their own in an astonishing restored sequence where the hero jumps into one life just as his pursuer arrives from the one next door, with a stream of bemused strangers passing the scene up and down on neighbouring tiers.

(In von Harbou's own novelisation, the clocklike machine that Freder operates in the depths is nothing less than the driving mechanism of the Babelturm's paternoster itself.) Lifts have always been wonderful gifts to cinema: a confined, windowless space that shuts things in and out as it navigates invisibly between different and never-predictable story environments, with invaluable illuminated displays of where we are in the story, and with the whole mechanism suspended by a steel thread in an action space over a perilous void. Now the poetics of this resilient plot machine are explored further in locked-elevator supernatural whodunnit **Devil**, billed as coming "from the mind of M. Night Shyamalan", which in this case means a 14-page treatment about a group of strangers stuck in a lift and getting picked off one at a time by a disguised Satan. But the mind of Night is a fairly confined space in itself, and his slim contribution has imprinted some distinctive Nightly quirks on an otherwise formulaic film. The whole plot is framed ad hoc as a cumbersome preexistent

mythology: "My mother's story would always begin the same way, with a suicide preparing the way for the devil's arrival, and it would always end the same way, with the death of all those trapped ... In the story, men would always try to fight him with force ... He always kills the last victim in front of the person they love most, to make cynics of us all." This fixation with lore-making and casualness with the machinery of plotting is merely typical; but what's rather more unsettling about *Devil* is that all the incarcerated sinners are damned for comparative misdemeanours with no possibility of redemption, despite what in some cases appear to have been successful struggles to turn their lives around. There's a scammer, a petty thief, a liar, an ex-con, a hit-and-run drink-driver, but no big-league monsters: no murderers, war criminals, sex traffickers, financial fraudsters, child abusers, and you can't help feeling that a devil worth being scared of being trapped in a lift with would have bigger fish to fry in their own bubbling fat for all eternity.



A different kind of judgment is the theme of **The Death and Life of Charlie St Cloud**, which reunites Zac Efron with his *17 Again* director Burt Steers for an adaptation of Ben Sherwood's supernatural romance about a cemetery attendant who can talk to the dead after being defibrillated back from the other side following the crash that killed his beloved kid brother, and who now faces the agonising choice between a needy sibling who remains the same annoying age forever and a super

hot sporty chick who is completely up for being boned senseless among the headstones. Will Zac be able to put his guilt and bereavement behind him? Take a wild guess. The novel is one of those trick texts soundtracked by the tinkle of belatedly-dropping pennies as to which characters are dead, including the narrator (who is Ray Liotta's character, not Zac's, in case this whiffs of spoiler). But it's a tougher routine to pull off on film, as every single person watching this has seen *The Sixth Sense* and not a few of them have seen *Just Like Heaven*, after which there's not much to surprise anyone in the limited repertoire of twists available here – unless it's the effortless dispatch with which Kim Basinger's bereaved mom is dismissed from the film, from Zac's concern, and from ours. ("She's moved to Portland.") The novel, which bases its eschatology on the work of British medium Rosemary Altea, has a queasy religiosity that the film has tried to tone down, but at the cost of leaving a lot of the rationale underexplained; and the carefully realised Massachusetts setting has flipped coasts for what appear to be no more than budgetary reasons, unless it's that the same locations have already been used to rather unbeatable effect in Kathryn Bigelow's film of *The Weight of Water*.

Dead siblings continue to haunt the living world in Gaspar Noé's **Enter the Void**, which unleashes a broadside on the senses and sensibilities alike in a Tokyo-set tale of a feckless American lowlife's death in a drug deal gone wrong and his posthumous journey through his own life and the loveless bones of those his death has wrecked. Most of the film is shot from his passive, powerless, yet horribly omniscient overhead PoV, with particularly voyeuristic attention to the very private life of his damaged orphan sister Paz de la Huerta as she drifts through a series of variously unwatchable encounters with the sleazier side of gaijin survival in an alien metropolis. Grim, garish, and squirmingly exploitative of a very brave and cooperative leading lady, it's one of the most uncomfortable reflections since *Peeping Tom* on the camera's pimp role as gatekeeper between punters and product, as we watch with the helpless eyes of the dead as broken lives try to repair themselves. But the narrative is laminated by long pacebreaking soul-flyovers between scenes, and after a while you come to dread the appearance of yet another rooftop transition sequence almost as much as you dread another hour of this eye-raping, biliously lingering spectacle.



Charlie St Cloud's NDE-acquired gift of jawing with the dead is shared by Josh Brolin's bounty-hunting gunslinger in **Jonah Hex**, a curious attempt to do something contemporary with the fairly shambolic history of DC's long-running western title and its Civil War roots. Its Neveldine/Taylor screenplay begins with a fairly standard sequence involving falling off roofs into horsetroughs, but branches out to reimagine Jonah as a steampunk gun-for-hire in the postwar South, supernaturally endowed with the

useful power to extract backstory from the dead, and enlisted here by President Grant to prevent disaffected anti-Unionist John Malkovich's anarchist attack on the Centennial celebrations with a period superweapon. ("The Mexican slaves had a name for him: *terrorista*.") The distinction between this and Jonah's own murky history of dubious allegiances is smoothed out into a suitably all-American antagonism to state and ideology: "The only reason you fought for the South is you didn't like being told what to do by the government. You never believed in secession, and you never believed in slavery neither." Still, at least he believes in revenge, which is just about enough to keep the film afloat, even if the vintage technology sometimes lets its aspirations down a bit – as in the attempt to make telegraph messaging satisfy 21st-century standards of dramatic urgency ("Send everything you got or thousands will die stop"). Early drafts tried to make something of Jonah's extensive comics mythos by feeding bits of his back-continuity piecemeal into the narrative; but the final version has dumped all that in an unmarked grave in the credits, and fused two characters from canon in the person of Megan Fox in a corset with a three-inch waist. At one stage they were going to kill her off; you rather suspect that not going there was the one reason the film got made.



Rather more contemporary gameplay is packed into the season's most credible comic adaptation, **Scott Pilgrim vs the World**, which mixes down Bryan Lee O'Malley's six-volume slacker epic of tessellated love triangles and reality-heightened fantasy combat into a pop-tastic live-action single download. The script has grown with the series like a very slow

version of the *Kick-Ass* process, with only one volume out at the time of the first draft and the finale completed after the film had shot, so that the film starts out tracking the books with fanboy fidelity but pulls significantly away by the end. A triumphantly miscast Michael Cera plays Scott as a further version of the screen avatar people pay him to do when they cast Michael Cera, one of those actors whose career is based on playing a persona over and over to whom the real actor bears no resemblance whatever. It's possible for the first time to see what Edgar Wright's fellow directors see in this clearly rather peculiar talent, as for the first time in his interesting career he encounters a proper budget and proper actors, who testify bemusedly to his control-freak comic beatcounting and instructions on when to snap their eyes to the left. But the whole thing is impossibly bright and bouncy, and more or less irresistible to shallow, superficial teens of all ages.



The Hole is an older-school teen fantasy that marks the return of the beloved Joe Dante to his old home turf of family-oriented smalltown horror, but now in 3D. Certainly it's hard to think of a better-qualified veteran to be given a crack at the technology, given his infectious nostalgia (most visibly in his William Castle homage *Matinee*) for the original 3D era of his fifties childhood and the lost ways of filmgoing that bonded its communities, and his own professional roots in the playful horror genres that sustained the brief second 3D boom of the 80s. *The Hole* opens in familiar territory with Chris Massoglia's family grudgingly transplanted from Brooklyn to smalltown "Bensonville", where the pizza delivery guy is Dick Miller and their new cellar has a portal in the floor to a fathomless pit of nightmare that unleashes a series of rather hit-and-miss set pieces en route to the inevitable climax where our hero has to descend in person to the bottom of the bottomless to face his demons and harrow the limbo that seeks to hold him and his. Last time we saw this film there was a lift to make this descent in and a top you could spin to tell; but in Dante's underworld, there is no stair and you must throw yourself in. The first half is pretty solid, up to the point where the nature of the pit-thing clarifies; thereafter it's a bit of a plod, with an awkward mix of frights targeted at different age bands, and a lazy and overfamiliar solution to its mysteries that substitutes character arc for real Lovecraftian frisson.



Over in toontown, Universal lands on the 3D family-animation bandwagon with a mighty axle-bending thump in the French-animated **Despicable Me**, which sees Steve Carell's soft-centred supervillain unmanned by a trio of big-eyed orphan sisters who seem cloned from *Monsters, Inc.*'s Boo, and who derail his plan to shrink-ray the moon as overcompensation for his mother's emotional parsimony and inattention, while drawing out his untapped powers as a stay-at-home superdad. At the end he writes his entire character arc into a bedtime picture book: "One little unicorn, strong and free / Thought he was happy as can be. / Then three little kittens came around / and turned his life upside down. / They made him laugh, they made him cry; / he knew he never should have said goodbye. / And now he knows he can never part / from those three little kittens that changed his heart." Aww. Made with one bloodshot eye on the infant market, it's populated by adorable supporting character designs and centred on potent themes of parental love and security – though there's a thoroughly reprehensible villainisation of professional carers and a depressing erasure of any positive concept of motherhood. More interesting is the surprisingly blatant allegory of filmmaking itself, with an undercurrent of melancholy and desperation as our would-be master-villain has to pitch ignominiously for project funding to the Bank of Evil ("formerly Lehman Brothers"), who see him merely as yesterday's man – "There are a lot of new villains out there younger than you, hungrier than you" – and is sent back to deliver the news of redundancy to his army of cute yellow bug-eyed minions. Of course it turns out that the true master villain is the bank itself, which is dealing off the bottom of the deck to its own people and sabotaging our hero's projects by subterfuge; and to realise his dream he has to cut his strings of accountability and finance the project himself.



In the scramble for 3D, Gallo-Irish animation **The Secret of Kells** goes as far as film can go in the opposite direction, turning its back on shading, perspective, and depth of field for a ravishingly planar secret history of the Celtic world's transnational treasure, its story ingeniously unfolding from and encoded back into the decorations in the real-life manuscript's famous Chi Rho page. Belgian finance is provided by something called "Tax Shelter ING Invest of Tax Shelter Productions", which gives a fairly clear sense of where this film has come from. But it's quite the

loveliest thing, spinning an exquisitely stylised fantasy around monastic apprentice Brendan's efforts to protect and complete the fugitive Book after its custodian flees from Iona to Kells with the Viking hordes on his tail, and the role played by a pagan wood-fairy in enabling Brendan to fulfil his destiny as the gospels' final and greatest illuminator. There's an understandable tendency for animated features to reflect on the agony of making an animated feature – most poignantly this year in Sylvain Chomet's *The Illusionist* – and *Kells* is even more aware than *Despicable Me* of being a parable of itself, a huge collaborative project with dwindling teams of artists in a tiny workshop battling to create a something that will survive the arrival of the barbarians. It runs out of puff towards the end, and the pagan/Christian tensions never really get going, but St Leibowitz would surely bless it.

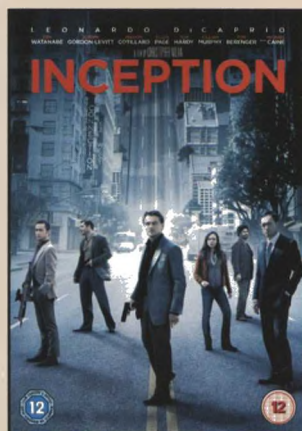


Back in the third dimension, it's become something of a trope in discussions of 3D blockbusters to note approvingly the restraint and subtlety with which the effect of stuff thrusting out of the screen is deployed, and how the technology serves the story so discreetly that much of the time you can forget you're watching 3D at all (and indeed if you take off your glasses, you often find that for many shots and sequences you're not). Well, Paul W.S. Anderson's **Resident Evil: Afterlife** is not that film. Never in the history of stereoscopy has so much weaponised entertainment come hurtling at you out of the Z-axis to blow your eyeballs into little shreds of jelly. Every single shot has been storyboarded in three degrees of freedom, and the entire story composed around cool things to do with state-of-the-art 3D kit in mad action cinema – including a

digital reinvention of *Metropolis*'s original Schüfftan technique. The price paid for being let loose in his buddy Jim Cameron's toybox has been that Anderson has had to stick the Mrs back in her cut-price Angelina kit (co-designed by Denise Cronenberg and Milla's own company Jovovich-Hawk) and spend another film blowing away zombies, after two instalments farmed out to other directorial hands that gave only sporadic glimpses of the deep intuition into the poetics of modern game narrative which marks Anderson's great films as writer-director (especially *Death Race*, but also the original *Aliens vs Predator* and the first *Resident Evil*). The previous instalment, for those who made it that far, threw away the brilliant idea of giving its heroine gamelike multiple lives by going back to *Rogue Moon* (yet again) and sending a series of clones through a lethal maze – only to do nothing with it in the plot of the actual film, apart from a final sequel-teaser where she liberates the whole army of them to take out the game-masters in Tokyo. Now, at last, we get that film, condensed into twenty minutes and followed by several other largely unrelated ones for good measure.

It's difficult to convey a sense of what this film is like without falling back into numbed description. *Afterlife* opens with 3D titles on a background of moving rainclouds that you just have time to think are a cut above the usual 3D credits before

the camera plunges into and through the clouds to follow 3D digital rain all the way down to an umbrella-festooned crossing in Shibuya, and close on an individual sarariman who is suddenly **ATTACKED OUT OF NOWHERE BY A ZOMBIE** who BITES OUT HIS THROAT IN 3D. Then the camera cranes up again from his encircled corpse and **ALL THE WAY BACK AGAIN INTO SPACE** in a **CONTINUOUS 3D SHOT** for a single expo card explaining what happened in the first three films – the Umbrella Corporation's development of the T-virus, its release and the resulting global pandemic and apocalypse – followed by the words "Four Years Later" and then we're zooming **ALL THE WAY BACK IN AGAIN FROM SPACE IN ANOTHER CONTINUOUS 3D SHOT** on the **SAME CROSSING** now in post-apocalyptic abandonment. And then just when you're thinking golly, it's *Lost in Translation* with zombies in 3D, the film proper starts, and an entire army of leather-clad Millas invade the underground superbunker levels beneath the abandoned streets and engage in gunbattles while plummeting down liftshafts in 3D bullet time blowing away undead as they pass each floor. All this is just the prologue, at the end of which she loses all her superpowers from film 3 and everyone but the real Milla gets caught in a nuclear explosion. Then we're soaring in 3D over aerial second-unit Alaskan wilderness for a second prologue to recruit Ali Larter from film 3, but she's got some kind of amnesia beetle stuck to her cleavage and doesn't remember who her character is. Next there's a long middle act which is a completely different film again, where they break her brother out of a 3D high-rise prison besieged at street level by every single undead being in zombie-megalopolis LA. And the last act is a rescue showdown on a refugee ship involving mutated Rottweilers whose faces unfold in 3D and shoot claws of inflected flesh that eat your head. When you think the film's over and your brain has been splattered all over your headrest, up pops Sienna Guillory from film 2 and explains to you about the *sequel*. It's not the greatest showcase there's ever been for Anderson the writer; but if there was ever any doubt that as a director he's the nearest thing these islands have produced to a homegrown and slightly more mental James Cameron, this insane tour de force blows those doubts through six-inch armoured walls. In 3D.



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NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY
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Leisure time... Arthur C. Clarke once suggested that the most desirable future should have 100% unemployment and that all maintenance and housekeeping chores would be fully automated, leaving humans to play. The 'perfect' universe was roundly satisfied by Iain M. Banks' novels about informal utopia of the Culture, but television-land got there first, decades ago.

Party time... There's certainly no evidence of drudge work being done in **The Avengers Series Five** (DVD, 27 September), the first to be filmed in colour – which marked a substantial improvement in production standards (largely due to recently increased budgets, following the show's export to US markets) – digitally remastered here from 35mm film, so it looks far better than viewers of the original 1967 broadcasts are likely to remember, more so when DVDs are played on an 'upscaler' for hi-def TV. Boxset of 24 episodes on seven discs has kitsch appeal with a gleaming visual quality, sophisticated charm, amusing fun, and bloodless deaths that generally advance intriguing plots, even if murders thwart our heroes' investigations. Suave, dapper hero John Steed (Patrick Macnee), the gentleman spy with bowler hats and sword-stick broly, drives vintage Bentley racers, and transforms even a boringly rural stakeout into a champagne picnic. He's partnered with frequently catsuited and modishly independent 'amateur' agent Mrs Emma Peel (Diana Rigg), 1960s' premier female action star, zooming about in her blue Lotus Elan convertible. They engage in lighthearted and lively banter with a typically witty rapport, adapting to increasingly wacky sci-fi plots of surrealist verve and psychedelic flourishes, in conjunction with a swathe of agreeably eccentric characters (upper-class chimney-



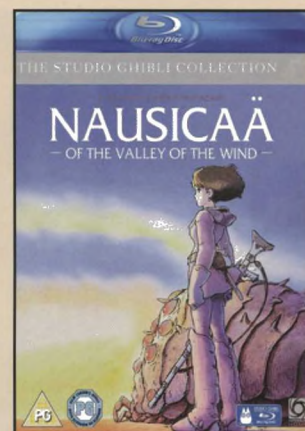
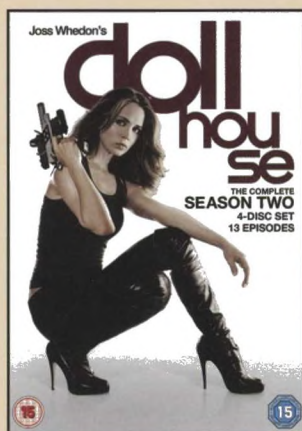
sweep; a mountaineer who prefers window exit to doorways), while tackling the machinations of murderous blackguards and unctuous weasels. Scenarios position Rigg's Emma as a feminist role model so it's no surprise that she rescues Steed from the brink of death as often as he saves her from baddies' bondage. Steed and Emma's relationship was naturally flirty, but routinely professional, except for the body-swap comedy where Macnee's Steed is replaced by Freddie Jones, whose lover (Patricia Haines) becomes Emma, offering a rare instance of Mrs Peel smooching Steed (though they are not actually 'themselves', of course). Brainwashing to exploit phobias marks the standard of evildoings. Amidst worries of alien invasion, a mysterious heat-ray leaves its victims with bleached hair. Haunted chapel/spooky graveyard clichés hide an enemy town, a mile underground, from where the invasion of England is planned. Victims of a psycho nanny regress to infancy via hypnotic drugs. One mid-season episode is very first to showcase Steed's "opulent, luxurious, expensive, thoroughly decadent," pine-panelled flat – now iconic with its red-leather chesterfield and assorted items of military-history paraphernalia. While contemplating the invention of special climbing boots – for walking up walls – in *The Winged Avenger* lark, our heroes extrapolate, in delightful throwaway whimsy, a whole vertical tourist industry. Abundant guest stars add astonishing quality: Patrick Cargill is a smarmily sinister mercenary who's afraid of the dark, Peter Bowles plays a stuttering killer running a bogus time-travel scam, Kenneth Cope appears as 'fashion photographer', horror icon Barbara Shelley presides over assassinations, Jon Pertwee bluffs a brigadier recording

audio memoirs of his WW2 career, Roy Kinnear's suitably flustered/whiny as crazy inventor Quilby (perhaps riffing on Bond's gadget supplier), Warren Mitchell's inquisitive Soviet ambassador is comic-relief, Ronnie Barker plays a cat-lover extraordinaire while malicious Gabrielle Drake uses brainwave signals to turn pets feral, Michael Gough is dedicated Russian comrade Nutski, Christopher Lee boasts a homicidal robot double, Peter Wyngarde schmoozes through a repertoire of caricatures, Charlotte Rampling plays a gunslinger named Hana Wilde, Brian Blessed appears costumed as 'Death', Donald Sutherland is yet another criminal mastermind, Isla Blair plays a bomber disguised as a bride, Paul Eddington is a lord who's living in the past, Yootha Joyce essays a scheming secretary, Clive Dunn owns a toffs' toyshop, Peter Cushing ensures that *Return of the Cybernauts* is a notable adventure, Fulton Mackay portrays architect of mind-control, car enthusiast Arthur Lowe runs a racing game. Paranoia/conspiracy are obvious themes for espionage tales, but *Murdersville* cranks up mystery to eerie degrees with borrowings from McGoochan's *The Prisoner*. 'Project 90' is based upon SF dream of 'broadcast power', with a weaponised version in the clay-faced electro-killer despatching targets to cartoon deaths (Emma gets tied up, then wrapped in tinfoil, while Steed is magnetised). Francis Mathews' memorable villain uses a shrinking-ray machine (recalling *Dr Cyclops*, pre-empting *Land of the Giants*), reducing Steed and Emma to six-inch heroes on a desk with giant telephone.

Many images remain unforgettable but this is a pleasure to view again. *The Avengers* series six is released on DVD, 6th December.



Last time... "I want an unwritten life!" remarks a con man in **The Brothers Bloom** (Blu-ray/DVD, 4 October), written/directed by Rian Johnson, maker of oddball teen movie *Brick* (2006). Stephen (Mark Ruffalo, David Fincher's *Zodiac*) and his younger sibling Bloom (Adrien Brody, *The Experiment*) are gentlemen thieves and smugglers of antiques with Japanese sidekick nicknamed Bang-Bang (Rinko Kikuchi, Mamoru Oshii's forthcoming *Assault Girls*), "an artist with nitroglycerine" who hardly speaks but shines at karaoke. Having a mid-life crisis early, Bloom insists on quitting the con game and going legit, but ideas man Stephen persuades his brother to tackle a final big time swindle involving an intriguing eccentric recluse, beautiful heiress Penelope (Rachel Weisz, *Constantine*, *The Fountain*), who boasts



abundant skills, all seemingly useless to her, but no plans for life whatsoever except repeatedly crashing her yellow Lamborghini. She's a resident of that strange hinterland of middlebrow culture where philosophical mantras could become mob-rule chants, but eagerly wants to become a con artiste too, and, while falling in love, she refuses to believe that Bloom has only chosen her for a 'mark'. This is a 'postmodern caper' movie set in romanticised quasi-fantasy cinematic realm which conflates various period styles and gleefully embraces literary allusions and witty filmic references for a globe-trotting (New Jersey, Prague, Greece, Mexico), irreverent comedy-adventure that's more concerned with the filmmaker's passion for exploring shifting moods of relationships between quirky characters than storytelling. In addition to splendidly nuanced performances from leads Brody and Weisz, there's also Robbie Coltrane as shotgun-toting unreliable French 'curator' Max, and crusty eye-patched pirate/mentor Diamond Dog (Maximilian Schell), both of whom engage with Stephen's ambitious schemes that, in execution, means the film drifts into serious drama when Russian gangsters intrude violently upon the laid back gaiety with a kidnapping before the shoot-out finale (taking place, most fittingly, in a closed theatre). What's real is not always true. Johnson cited George Roy Hill's classic *The Sting* and Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* as notable subgenre influences, and this is indeed like a busily freewheeling 'bromance' version of lighthearted movies such as Frank Oz's *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (1988), but its cleverness effortlessly sidesteps all the convoluted technicalities of ingenious heist plots to focus on the wry amusements of character arc journeys towards self-discovery.



Wasting time... *Fanboys* (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 October) is a road trip movie set in 1998. (Spoiler warning: may contain nuts.) At a Halloween fancy dress party, a Darth Vader and two Empire stormtroopers establish a fan club hierarchy that reflects on billing for the main cast, playing characters who are not chasing their own dreams; they are just infatuated and childish obsessed with someone else's escapist fantasy. They all despise *Star Trek* (and probably everything it stands for), embarking on a pilgrimage from Ohio to California's 'Skywalker' ranch where they plot/hope to steal a rough cut video of the 'Episode I' prequel, six months before *Phantom Menace* is due to appear in cinemas. The requisite/designated girlfriend Zoe (Kristen Bell, *Heroes*, *Veronica Mars*), a single white female barely tolerated as 'intruder' in adolescent male domain, seems present mainly to evade/negate any homocentric/phobic concerns amongst *Star Wars* nerds. The distinguishing feature of van driver Hutch is that he's a fiercely loyal fan of the Canadian band Rush (which is, frankly, something of an insult to their widespread appeal). The 'rebels' get into some humiliating trouble at a gay bikers bar. They trip out on Danny Trejo's special peyote dip, and stopover in Iowa just to harass devoted trekkies (or trekkers, whatever). Aggro during another *Trek* con in Las Vegas reinforces fandom stereotypes. There's a cameo by Billy Dee Williams as a wise judge. Carrie Fisher plays a hospital doctor, a rare sympathetic adult in this underwhelming farce. William Shatner appears to represent if not champion *Trek*, or *Tek*, or the dark side. *Fanboys* blithely perpetuates nonsense of a populist movie release as something worthy of worship, not to mention a cinema opening 'event' suitable for re-packaging as 'news'. By having one-dimensional characters trying to emulate their movie heroes' antics and dialogue, it mirrors 'religious' ceremonies – just as entry to 'exclusive' clubs is determined by answers given to a sci-fi trivia quiz on *Star Wars* lore, complete with arguments about what is canonical. Despairingly, Lucas' Marin County retreat/HQ is a museum shrine devoted to his own synthetic mythology. It's interesting to compare this recycling of genre material to recent works from Tarantino, who seems to regard merely average entertainments of downmarket cult movies with a respectful awe that is pathetically disingenuous. Best in-joke is the security guards dressed up like robots from *THX-1138*. Surrender, or the ewok gets it! This is not the disc you're looking for.



Stop time... If the main difference between 'soap opera' and 'drama' is that the latter explores working lives of professionals (police, doctors, lawyers), while the former is largely concerned with relationships (friends, family) at home or away, it seems that most escapist fantasies on TV fall into the 'soap' category. Reviewing season one of *Heroes* (*Interzone* #214), I noted how its basic scenario of plain-clothes 'supermen' winningly represents the *Slam* fanboy pulp-SF dream of secret elitism/unrecognised valour in the face of adversity. **Heroes Season Four** (Blu-ray/DVD, 4 October) is the last of its run, yet little has changed about its formula of 'mutants R us' TV soap exercises. Failing as action drama, this serves pedestrian special effects sequences in place of genuinely comic book style demos of superpowers. So, comic book fans might question (perhaps despondently?) how this sketchily crossgenre project managed to survive the annual culls of TV schedules for so long, especially when superior efforts (*Odyssey 5*, *Terminator: The Sarah Connor*

Chronicles) were cancelled summarily, without adequate explanation. Clearly, Tim Kring's *Heroes* is telefantasy at its most lacklustre and unexciting (even Javier Grillo-Marxuach's low-rent sci-fi spoof/comic book adaptation *The Middleman* was rather more entertaining!), with too much idle chattering about being good instead of actually doing good. "I promised my brother that I'd be hero" is just one glaring example of dismally preposterous dialogue that's prompted by soul-searching implausibility. Nagging questions, answered before the production was axed, include: could evil Sylar be redeemed by five subjective years of psychic solitary confinement? Having ineptly redefined its serial killer as saviour, *Heroes* needs a new bad guy to confront, so it posits 'earth-mover' Samuel, wrecking a whole town in a manmade landslide ("I know my recent actions have caused some of you to question where it is my heart lies"), while he runs a nomadic gypsy carnival that's a magically mobile refuge for those who are 'different', looking for a homeland sanctuary. Samuel offers mentoring friendship to all with secret powers, espousing a makeshift policy of extended 'family' values (of trust, acceptance and belonging). But he's assembling a violent clan, not a safe community, and his idea of fostering care is sheltering the dysfunctional freaks and weirdo cultists that normal people might fear and despise. Samuel's mutant sect mirrors Magneto's sinister brotherhood, not Prof Xavier's freedom defending *X-Men*. You might believe that a man can fly, but Kring's somnambulistic scripting is far less convincing, with repetitive sequences of talking, mumbling, and yet more waffling. *Heroes* not only has a slow-paced turgid narrative development, it lingers over torpid clichés, meandering through various crisis scenes that diffuse any sense of urgency by using flashbacks to explain the whys/wherefores and to reveal motivations. While popular TV series *24* takes the comic book style and expands its serialised cliffhanger storytelling format of 'issues' into 'hours', with live-action gunplay thriller appeal, *Heroes* reduces the complexities drawn from a graphic novel framework, betraying all the potential of a small screen epic in favour of leaden televisual mediocrity. It's proof positive that superheroes and soap opera do not mix – except in a spoof. If only *Heroes* was genuinely funnier, genre critics wouldn't have to take it seriously at all.



Life time... If social progress usually builds upon radical ideas from science/tech developments, where on earth are the 'world leaders' that we so obviously need for our new century? To rewrite Arthur C. Clarke's utopian optimism into dark pessimism: 'at our present rate of retreat from rationality, it is all but impossible to imagine any feat of stupidity that cannot be achieved (if it can be achieved at all) within the next hundred months.'

Quality time... This is the narrative crux of **Dollhouse Season Two** (DVD/Blu-ray, 11 October) – not scientific advancement, but a singularity of radical techno upheaval explored in detail to show how 'civilisation' as we know it crashes. We are protected from the ground zero blast wave by the facility of TV drama. To apprehend 'changes' all at once might invite catastrophe upon viewers' presumably fragile psyches, like rupture in the face of rapture. At the end of days begins a new daze, rushing towards blight at the end of the tunnels. Here, identity breaks down so comprehensively that verb confusions/incorrect use of plural nouns can make perfect sense: 'here she is, all of them'. Loss of identity marked by the onset of singularity causes a failure of

communication via language and social collapse looks imminent. Problems viewed too narrowly, in either/or terms, invite a cold fire of mass destruction and a desire to obliterate any potentially liberating tech, and carnal abuses of it might risk apocalypse. With divisive conflicts between 'actuals' versus 'imprinted', the influence of *Altered Carbon* (with 'sleeve' tech over the event horizon) is notable. A harder job, seemingly too hard to face, is education to eliminate irrationally emotive behaviours, with ethical guidance for rabid tech-heads, who are the real Luddites, so profoundly ignorant about the weakness of weapons they prefer the *Mad Max* aesthetic of post-holocaust wastelands. Overcoming a cyborg crisis without killing, while managing to preserve core humanity, is true evolution: remember, but don't look back. Created by Joss Whedon, shot on hi-def video instead of film, with more subdued lighting, it is a wonder this second (and final) season of *Dollhouse* survives its budget cuts. But what the hell's Adelle done to her hair? Still, Olivia Williams benefits from opposing high calibre guest stars, like veterans Keith Carradine and Ray Wise playing management overlords. Her efforts to recover from demotion, and recapture hijacked office space, makes for great 'executive' drama. Meanwhile, scar-faced Dr Saunders (Amy Acker), the resident basket case of phobias, discovers her previous life as doll 'Whiskey', just as Echo (Eliza Dushku) marries into a long term contract while fragments of her past imprints, and 'original' memories of Caroline, keep resurfacing ("I am all of them but none of them is me"). Before a newly integrated Echo persona can cohere from chaos, a concussion reactivates latent muscle memory combat skills, prompting one of many fighting bouts. From protective instincts/maternal imperatives ("Do you know what's real?") to Echo's makeover into a ditsy bimbo going awry when she switches mindsets with a serial killer, dollhouse imprinting continues alarmingly inopportune 'glitches'. *Belle Chose* has a kidnapper-in-coma plot line plucked from Tarsem Singh's *The Cell* (2000). Adelle wrestles with a compromised morality over unethical neuroscience of permanent imprinting, while Sierra's history of psychosis, as caused by 'engagements' with nasty Dr Kinnard (Vincent Ventresca, TV's *Invisible Man*, 2000-2) is detailed in flashbacks. Opening debates in *The Public Eye* – with that political success cliché, the crusading

senator (Alexis Denisof, *Angel*) – sees Rossum Corporation, founder of the dollhouses, attacked in the media circus, exposing rivalry between Adelle's LA house and the Washington house. Amusingly, that senator is not the serious threat he seems, but he's not just another doll, he's a puppet (with enhanced consciousness, not a psyche overwrite). After escaping from custody of sadistic programmer Bennett (Summer Glau, *Firefly*, *The 4400*), Echo goes 'Jane Doe' at large in Texas, training up for a mission against Rossum. Although Dushku is fully capable of portraying several conflicted Echo-personas at once, most of this show's supporting cast struggle to play just one character with any sense of conviction or competence in the enthralling sci-fi narrative arc. This is particularly notable when comparing Dushku's fragmented Echo to forty-minds empowered super-villain Alpha (Alan Tudyk, *Firefly*), who wreaks havoc in LA by inciting a doll revolution (seriously, though, Adelle can't run in that skirt!), where it's readily apparent that less talented Tudyk fails to pull off the same multiple-personalities-order trick. It's easy to imagine another actor playing the shallow genius of geeky imprinting-techie Tophier (Fran Kranz, *Homeland*) – agreeing to "anything in the name of progress" – and doing a much better job of showing emotional turmoil or ethical struggle, but it'd be very hard to find another actress to play Echo so well. Ironically, of course, *Dollhouse* asks questions about whether individuals can be replaced. It's great drama when it focuses on Dushku, but few of the supporting casts can hope to match her acting ability. While corporate war breaks out across real time, Echo joins survivors of VR limbo in 'the Attic', a *Matrix* styled, worst nightmare world of plastic dreams and cyberghosts, where ninja nemesis Arcane lurks in the present, fighting a future that's "not for the weak", risking further sociopolitical dangers with outlaw raids on Rossum's HQ in Arizona, plugging state of the art alternative history into series closer *Epitaph Two: Return*, set in LA 2019, when Neuropolis safe haven from the mindless hordes is threatened by latest pulse-bomb app for extinction event. Echo subsumes Caroline, recognising a need for cybernetic turnaround/re-purposing with a global reset button for multitudes, while she quietly absorbs psyche imprint of dead lover Ballard (plank-like Tahmoh Penikett, *BSG* remake) for the evolutionary poignant coda of gestaltism.



Hard time... Having made a great impression with the graphic surrealism of *Triangle* (*Black Static* #15), director Christopher Smith's latest genre success is a 14th century historical, **Black Death** (DVD/Blu-ray, 18 October), starring Sean Bean as bishop's envoy Ulric, on a mission to capture a necromancer who's suspected of cannibalism and resurrecting the dead. Novice monk Osmund (Eddie Redmayne, *Powder Blue*) volunteers to guide Ulric's torture brigade through marshland to a quiet village that's mysteriously free of disease. With talk of battlefield atrocities and justifiable 'mercy' killing, who needs a plague anyway? Ulric's Christian band of demon hunters display a favoured torture contraption, designed to make your eyes water or your nose bleed simply by viewing its mechanism. Impact of gritty horror is diminished by roughshod handheld camera work and quicksilver cuts, making it hard to see what's happening in sword fights or cross-country chase sequences. Thankfully, those heathen villagers' scheming matriarch Langiva (Carice van Houten, *Valkyrie*, *Dorothy*) is a formidable presence, remarkably effective in scenes of betrayal, harking back to venomous spite of Michael Reeves' gruelling classic *Witchfinder General* (1968) and sadistic mayhem of Michael Armstrong's equally violent *Mark of the Devil* (1970), albeit with an anti-catholic twist. Pray tell, what mad ghost lurks in yonder hovel? Could it be Osmund's runaway girlfriend, seemingly murdered by a horde of cannibals in the forest, is back from the dead? Are the secretive villagers a bunch of demons in human guise, or just godless pagans? In a dark world, where men can so easily be reduced to superstitious monkeys, or beasts of prey, this produces slow-burning tensions which test Christian beliefs, while presenting religious piety as a twisted mockery of real humanity. *Black Death* is certainly a bold step in the right direction for a usually lamentable subgenre like historical-horror movies. See it, or die horribly from that ghastly pestilence!



Testing time... A tired remake of Kenneth Johnson's 1980s' TV series, **V Season One** (DVD, 18 October) starts with quakes rumbling NYC and heralding arrival of gigantic spacecraft. Visitors prompt all the usual upsets for religions and conspiracy theorists. While FBI agent Erica (Elizabeth Mitchell, *Lost*) tracks activity of apparent terrorists, ET commandant Anna (Morena Baccarin, *Firefly*) announces miracle healing centres offering free 'universal healthcare' (always topical!), but spectacular digital

visuals of occupied skylines barely support the sci-fi framework of invasion motifs explored as action thrills in *Independence Day* (1996), satirical spoof in *Mars Attacks!*, yet here diplomatic rules/peacekeeping propaganda dictated by omniscient council, opposed by sympathetic 'fifth column' resistance, only present metaphors of standard stealthy fascism (Orwellian/Nazi varieties). Sneaky enslavement, or trustworthy saviours of troubled mankind? (Although super friendly alien racial profile doesn't quite fit *Body Snatchers* traits.) Manipulative queen Anna is too concerned with mimicking human emotions. Still, "we are of peace, always" rings hollow in any language, no matter how it's presented via elegant sophistication of lizard lady, who's the mother-hen deliverer of trippy blissful ignorance to human flocks, and orchestrator of numerous other free range *X-Files*/*War of the Worlds* clichés. The original *V* had femme fatales (in Jane Badler and June Chadwick), and this revision has its share of coolly seductive ciphers like Anna's charmingly 'blonde' daughter Lisa (played by the kryptonian cheekbones of Laura Vandervoort, 'Supergirl' in *Smallville*), who aids chameleon visitors' mission with 'ambassador' recruitment of humans, including Erica's errant and quite stupidly naïve son who's very eager to join the 2,000 miles high club. Lexa Doig (*Andromeda*) plays one of the alien

scouts who sides with humans. *V* is TV sci-fi that was frightfully dated as science fiction when first made 25 years ago. As genre entertainment for the 21st century, it's very unfashionably retro in content if not style, with drearily slow-witted pacing and unambitious writing, which finds time for mundanities of teenage dating, father/son relationships, and basic family soap opera antics, promptly let down by a supporting cast of rather bland or boring actors playing stereotypes: Scott Wolf as TV journalist yearning for exclusives; Joel Gretsch, OK as action hero in *The 4400* but stymied by insipid priestly introspection here; and Morris Chestnut, so horrendously dull that he seems like another 're-branded' rapper who's plainly/painfully out of his 'thespian' depth. Overall, there's a vast surplus of emoting but a crippling absence of any fresh SF concepts. In the wake of gory hilarities provided by Blomkamp's *District 9*, this TV effort lacks clever story twists or even mildly imaginative flair of *Earth: The Final Conflict* (1997–2002) and that sprawling *Alien Nation* saga (1988–97), both of which explored similar, yet clearly superior, SF ideas of esoteric otherness than genre makeup of original *V* series. This remake scenario owes much to earlier TV variations of inter-species duplicity and SF estrangements for elements of its plot's ambivalence. Not the second coming, just third rate.



Dream time... As I have said before in these pages, I'm really not an admirer of Hayao Miyazaki's anime movies, especially his fantasy works. Nausea, sorry, **Nausicaä of The Valley of the Wind** (Blu-ray, 18 October) is science fictional, but that's only a minor plus embedded in a scenario that's part innocent fairy tale and mostly tepid eco fable. Although the cartoon was

made in 1984, this disc edition benefits from an English version which includes Alison Lohman (Nausicaä), Patrick Stewart (as sword-master/traveller Lord Yupa), Uma Thurman, and Chris Sarandon. It's not a perfect voice cast but it's still vastly superior to drastically re-cut/dubbed video *Warriors of the Wind*. Princess Nausicaä is the darling of a rural village,

where windmills and piloted gliders are no match for a fleet of massive airships from a powerful industrialised nation. But the feared 'invasion' only heralds an airborne adventure into a 'toxic jungle' where clouds of spores, gigantic insects, acid lakes, quicksand, and bug armies in sea of decay make for a peculiarly dangerous environmental backdrop for actions of the plucky heroine, who'd quite like to stop all the killing and save the world through pacifism, preferably to childish accompaniment of a dainty little choral ditty. Obvious influences of *Dune* and *Earthsea* are filtered through standard Tolkien sanitiser to present a supposedly charming story of destiny fulfilled according to old tapestry. It purports to be elegant world-building science fantasy with antiwar or heartfelt anti-pollution messages, but I found it actually rather less interesting than browsing through sundry adverts of a Sunday afternoon's leaflet-drop bundle.

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