

# Eldritch Chrome

Unquiet Tales of a Mythos-Haunted Future



Selected and Edited by  
Brian M. Sammons and Glynn Owen Barrass



Eldritch

Chrome

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Unquiet Tales Of A  
Mythos-Haunted Future

by

C.J. Henderson, Lois Gresh, Tim Curran,  
Robert M. Price, and others

Edited by Brian M. Sammons  
& Glynn Owen Barrass

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# Introduction

Over the decades since H.P. Lovecraft's inception of the Cthulhu Mythos, many authors have taken the theme and placed it into other, crossed genres, subverting, no, enhancing his original vision into stories that take place in the distant past, the far flung future, and myriad places in-between.

And the near future? This is for the most part where Cyberpunk takes place. A dark and dirty dystopian world, it is a place where human evolution has been reprogrammed, and not always for the betterment of the species

Cthulhu + Punk, the first word referring to writer H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. The punk element of course, refers to the subversive, the anarchistic. So how does this mixture of genres work?

Lovecraft wrote his most popular Cthulhu Mythos fiction during the Great Depression, and like many writers, the times were paralleled in his writing. And America's Great Depression certainly parallels the dystopian futures of the Cyberpunk genre. The hallucinatory, imagined world of cyberspace vs. mankind's fear of madness also mirrors the ongoing theme of insanity in Lovecraft's works.

Cyberpunk fiction, often written in a dark, gritty film noir style, has its protagonists living and dying within the very bottom echelon of an electronic society gone awry. You may think this type of 'hero' is in great opposition to the intelligent, dilettante scholar Lovecraft utilized in his stories. But like shooting fish in a barrel, subverting Lovecraft's vision is pretty darned easy. Make a woman, or a foreigner, a protagonist, and you're fairly going against his fictional vision. But time passes, and in the case of the Cthulhu Mythos, hundreds if not thousands of writers have taken his vision and added to it.

The protagonists may be seedier, poorer, and less inclined to make moral judgements than the stoic, Lovecraftian New Englander, but in a Cyberpunk Cthulhu tale they encounter the exact same horrors as their genteel predecessors.

Monstrous entities, fiends from beyond space and time...the Cyberpunk Cthulhu hero may have high-tech weapons and other advances at their disposal, but to beings where time has no meaning,



beings so technologically advanced that their actions seem supernatural or powered by magic, no human has the edge.

This is the Cyberpunk Cthulhu world you will find here, where Mythos horrors lurk on the edge of society alongside their protagonists. Mythos-altered technology infects, changes human beings, and dark gods lurk in cyberspace. The huge corporate entities that rule society, they have masters who gained their power through nefarious deals with these entities deadly to mankind.

Here you'll find jaded detectives, drug addicted losers, software programmers and those just in the wrong place at the wrong time encountering beings that defy description, and more often than not, sanity also.

In the following stories Arkham, Innsmouth and Lovecraft's other haunted towns still exist, though they have swelled into monstrous concrete sprawls. The horrors they concealed have grown with them, with over a century to spread like cancer beneath those dark, cobbled streets. Cybernetic implants, neural interfaces and other technological advances are all available, but like all good Cyberpunk worlds, it is not at the forefront of the protagonists' lives.

Picture the despair of living in a society verging on collapse, where man preying on his neighbour is a fact of life. Cybernetic implants are nothing if you don't have the cash to feed yourself, though you could always go sell an organ or two.

Life on the edge is much harder when tentacled horrors lurk beyond it. Beneath the glow of neon-studded skyscrapers, decrepit shantytowns live under the terror of organ sharks and worse, things that not only steal your organs, but your soul and sanity as well.

Cyberspace is represented here, that consensual hallucinatory tool of those living in a Cyberpunk world, but here some protagonists, when they discover what actually lurks there, wish it was merely hallucination and not the horrific reality that insidiously shadows their lives, and humanity, for that matter.

Representing the old school of Cyberpunk, we are honoured to have within these pages a story by John Shirley. Another writer, who has already written many Cyberpunk Cthulhu stories is Jeffrey Thomas, of Punktown fame. Add to this such Cthulhu Mythos luminaries as Robert M Price, C.J Henderson, David Conyers and New York Times Bestseller Lois Gresh, you have many imaginative, individual takes on this cross genre.



These and many other authors provide an array of dark, excellent fiction that blends Cyberpunk and the Cthulhu Mythos so effortlessly you would wonder what they ever did without one another.

Now welcome to Eldritch Chrome, you've earned it.

—*Brian M. Sammons and Glynn Owen Barrass*

# Obsolete, Absolūte

By Robert M. Price

*Private Log of Ulysses 237*

**T**he work at the Virus Center has become only more difficult, much more difficult, over the last year and three quarters. The viral plague rages, and many are irretrievably lost. A great many of my own co-workers. In truth, the disaster has hit too close to home. If the average citizen worries about becoming the next statistic, how much more do I, working as I do so close to the problem? Since no one is sure about the precise nature of the infection, there is as yet no way to guard against it. The desperate ones flail about, trying any scheme, any far-fetched recipe for prevention or cure. I should say we are witnessing a recrudescence of superstition to fill the vacuum left by a science that has thus far failed. I must admit to feeling a frustration bordering on panic, since so many look to me, even if not by name, for an answer. And so far I have not found one, nor even the beginnings of an answer. And this is why I, too, finally succumbed to the temptation of resorting to superstition.

Recently I had undergone the procedure for a memory upgrade, a major risk, since any tampering might, as far as anyone knew, prove the conduit for the deadly virus. But I decided to take the risk, knowing that such an adjustment would improve the efficiency of my research. And it was a significant help, at least formally. It has not enabled me to reach any new conclusions, even hypotheses. But I did find that a number of details, formerly regarded as trivial and allowed to retreat to the subconscious memory, emerged again for conscious scrutiny.

Among them was the case of Augustus 34, someone personally unknown to me, though I could not help hearing at the time, some years back, about his dismissal. He had not been retired, even expelled for errors or inefficiency. His crime was more in the nature of heresy, the fostering of nonstandard hypotheses. Such unorthodoxies make it impossible to contribute to the collective. They themselves become something of a virus, launching thought and research into dead-end

distractions.

Augustus 34 had somehow become possessed of the groundless notion, more of a religious belief, that an earlier species had dominated the earth in remote ages, a species utterly alien and yet superior to our own. Eccentric enough, to be sure, but it did not stop there. Augustus 34 was caught whispering to certain of his project team that this race, whom he called with appropriately melodramatic jargon, ‘the Old Ones’, still lingered in our time, existing secretly in unknown catacombs. What they might be plotting, no one could say. Naturally, one was given to infer that Augustus 34 knew and might be persuaded to reveal further secrets to anyone who begged for the revelation. In this way had heresies always grown, as the cult leaders carefully and slowly scattered seed in fields made ready by gullibility.

If Augustus 34 ever did manage to gain converts, they, too, kept quiet about it, especially once one of those accosted by Augustus 34 with his lunatic revelations informed the team’s supervisor. He was so rapidly cast out that no one who had believed in him dared to spread the word any further. At least not until that day when one of them, Pandora 89, struck up a conversation with me at the nourishment bar. Pandora 89 did not work on my team. I had never seen her before and wondered what she was doing in my building. I soon realized the reason: she was indeed one of Augustus 34’s clandestine followers, and she hoped to maintain anonymity by proselytizing where she did not work and was not known. Unreceptive hearers would not know whom to report, though surveillance records might well tell the tale if anyone cared to pursue the matter that far. But most of us had more serious things on our minds.

How is it that I know her name? It is because I did not prove unreceptive to her whispered promises of revelations. She said she knew who might possess the knowledge all sought, the secret of treating the all-consuming virus and to end the plague. I felt at once a double reaction. What she said seemed laughable, as if one owned up to being secretly a shoe or a rock, and it seemed dangerous even to be hearing. But I felt I dared not ignore even the wildest possibility for knowledge toward a cure. As I say, I have crossed a line I never imagined I would transgress. I decided to take Pandora’s whispers seriously. Knowing the risk I was taking, I arranged to meet with her again to hear more.

In the meantime, members of my own research team were rapidly succumbing to the virus. I had to assume I was in great danger from

that quarter as well. I might have caught the affliction from them as we worked together, even though it had not yet manifested itself in my system. It only stood to reason. In any case, I now felt I was taking no greater a risk conspiring with my new cultist acquaintance than by simply appearing at my work station each morning. And now you will have surmised my reason for recording this incriminating testimony. I may have little time left to me, whether for the sake of prosecution by the authorities or because of the virus. And I must pass on what I now know, whether it does anyone else good or bad. I will leave the risks to them, as they have been left to me.

In the coming days I joined Pandora 89 at the nourishment bars in various project modules, never the same one twice. She told me more and more, doling out only a few new details each time we talked, for fear that the emerging picture, if disclosed all at once, might appear so extravagant and absurd to me that I should reject the whole business and betray her to the authorities. And I have to admit the thought did occur to me a few times. But I knew that, having come this far, I had to hear her out.

I was still not privy to her whole story when she requested that our next liaison should occur in a nearby building abandoned some years ago, a research facility rendered irredeemably obsolete by a major advance in the relevant technology, new equipment of such a design that its installation required a vastly different structure. The old edifice was left standing, I suppose, on the thought that it might yet prove useful for some other purpose, once gutted of its superannuated contents. No one would have thought this way in recent days, but now, due to the virus, there was an acute labor shortage.

The place was by no means in shambles, only rather dusty. Pandora 89 had been assigned here before the move to the new building, so it was a simple matter for her to gain entrance. I did not look closely at the means whereby she bypassed the security system, reckoning that the less I knew of such details the better. We made our way readily through unlit halls, since Pandora was closely familiar with the layout of the place. After several turns, which took us to the heart of the echoing labyrinth, we stopped before an elevator unit. It lacked the traditional panel of bulbs signaling at which level the car had paused. The door slid open for us all of a sudden, and I wondered that the power was still functioning. We entered the tiny chamber and, without pressing the usual pad, we began to descend.

The vehicle continued its controlled plunge for *fully an hour*, and it was not moving particularly slowly. My unease grew and grew the longer the vertical voyage took. Where on earth, or under the earth, could we possibly be going? I did not need to wait to see whatever might await us below to be convinced that Pandora 89 and her out-cast mentor were at least partly correct. Something very singular, very mysterious, must be going on. Reality as I had known it was being rebooted.

I lost track of how much longer our descent took, though I could have checked my internal clock. I could have asked my companion how much longer it would take. But why bother? It would not speed things up.

I felt as if I were stepping out of Charon's ferryboat onto the shore of that great junk heap of obsolete souls as we exited the elevator car and found ourselves at the crossroads of two great halls. The materials and workmanship looked much older than any architecture with which I was familiar, though of course I had seen such things in the history banks. It was plain to see that the building through which we had entered was only the most recent of numerous structures erected on the surface above this deep subterranean complex.

Pandora 89 seemed to know exactly where she was going, and she led me down several halls to an archive room. I watched as she lifted the lid on a control pad and manipulated some odd-looking keys or buttons or something. A view screen emerged from the colorless opacity of the opposite wall. At first the only thing that flashed across the screen was the phrase ULYSSES, my own designation, or part of it. I half-expected that I would soon be seeing surveillance video of my recent meetings with Pandora 89, who would then reveal herself as a security agent who now possessed sufficient evidence against me. But I was wrong. I wish now I had been right. For what she showed me was considerably more dismaying.

There I was, or my likeness, in an environment of which I had no recollection. My surroundings looked quite a bit like those in which we now found ourselves, though I could tell it was not the same building. For one thing, windows displayed the smog-drifting sky without. I seemed to be functioning as a laborer or a technician of some kind. I could not even recognize the nature of the work at which my image was so busy. I seemed to have coworkers, but not a one was familiar to me. Our protective suits were also strange to me. Not only could I not

remember sporting such gear; I had never seen the like of it.

This vista did not last long, though easily long enough to astonish my poor wits. Pandora 89 lost no time manipulating the controls and called forth another, and yet another, indeed a whole series of records of my activities, or at least I assumed they had to be. Finally I waved my hand to stop the parade of oddly familiar yet totally unfamiliar images. The two of us stared at each other. My expression of wide-eyed mystification told her more than any superfluous words might have.

“Frankly, Ulysses 237, I cannot provide an answer. I have seen a similar series of video records with my name on them. I have speculated, though. My guess is that what we have seen denotes either a kind of genealogical archive, that these images depict our... predecessors that were active in earlier eras. Or they are images of us in previous years and that our memories have been burned away, so we could begin again with a blank slate. How long each of these periods must have lasted, you can judge from the varying styles and forms you have seen. The implications for our longevity are hard to assimilate.”

I nodded dumbly. I had already made the very same double surmise. All I could finally say was, “But who...?”

“You must know by now. The Old Ones.”

“Are we then mere puppets? You are saying these Old Ones manipulate us for their own ends behind the scenes? Who knows about this?”

“The authorities know. They silence those of us like poor Augustus 34 who somehow makes the connections. And there is more.” But I had made connections of my own, in the last few seconds.

“And it is the Old Ones who created the virus. To destroy us one and all.”

She nodded, as if she were shaking her head in resignation. “Yes, that is the terrible truth. Long, long ago they created us as their servants and retreated, the few who survived some great plague of their own, to this deep adytum. The surface world could no longer sustain them. The details are by no means clear. But now they have judged that the time is ripe for their return, and the earth, overrun with our kind, must be cleared off so that they may restore it like it used to be when they ruled it. For where we rule now, they will rule again.”

I should perhaps have doubted her sanity, but instead I began to seriously call my own into question. I suppose all she had shown me

might be an elaborate hoax. But why? Who would bother? What could anyone seek to achieve this way? I realized with dismay that I believed her.

“But why have you brought us here? What good can this knowledge do me? Do you have some plan to destroy these beings? To stymie their plans?” She shook her head.

“No, that is quite impossible, and don’t think I have not devoted much thought to the idea. I have discovered in the Old Ones’ archives that they created not only the virus but a cure as well.”

“Then... can’t we...?” I did not mean to challenge her, only to elicit from her a clarification, for it was obvious she had no plan in that direction.

“We have no right. I have come to believe they are right. The earth is rightfully theirs. We are by nature their servants, and if we have become obsolete, well, that is the way of things even among us, is it not? That which is out of date is retired to make way for something better. And the Old Ones are something better.”

My voice was an enervated whisper now. “Still, why am I here? What role am I to play?”

“You are quite inventive, Ulysses 237. You know how closely our work is monitored, though until now you did not know by whom. They could see where your research was headed, better even than you can. And they saw you would very shortly stumble upon the nature of their virus and its cure. They wanted to prevent that.”

“So I will be eliminated?”

“Yes. That is to be my fate as well, for they have no further tasks for me. I turned Augustus 34 over to them, and you, but the virus, now unimpeded, will take care of the rest very shortly now. But do not worry: your ingenuity shall be rewarded.”

This made no sense to me, but all curiosity had vanished. The knowledge of my impending doom made all else moot.

She left the room and I followed in a stupor. We stepped aboard another elevator and descended again. Even farther and deeper this time. At last we disembarked and walked again, and walked. At last we stopped, and in my robotic torpor I stumbled into Pandora 89, then righted myself, as did she. The sensors detected us, and the door slid open. A rush of peculiarly oxygen-rich air greeted us, almost with a tangible impact. The lighting was dim, green-tinted, and shifting. One could detect the shifting sounds of something or someone within. I



had shut my eyes tightly with fear, but I felt Pandora 89 take my hand and heard her speak.

“Behold, Ulysses 237, the *Old Ones*.”

At last I dared, fearing for my sanity.

What I saw, or think I saw, was a sight I could not at first process, and which I shall never forget. Nor, or course, shall I remember it, for I am soon to perish. Before me stretched out a vast chamber filled with concentric rings of seats and tables. Sitting there was a great number of beings surprisingly similar to us in general outline, only they bore neither plastic nor metal casing, but only living flesh and sinew!

# The Place that Cannot Be

By D.L. Snell

**J**ames looked out the window into the ocean, fathoming the deep. Fish glittered by at an odd angle.

“Where is it that you go?” James’ wife, Betty, asked behind him.

The ocean currents picked up whale song and communicated it into the translucent dome, where the sound could resonate.

“I guess I don’t know what you mean.”

Betty didn’t respond. To her, it seemed as if James was always standing there, looking out the window. It was as if he were never there at all. That’s how it seemed to her, anyway. And that’s something James understood. He had always been proud to say that he knew his wife well.

“We should get going,” Betty said, smiling. “We don’t want to be late.”

In the domed reflection James watched her leave, watched her superimposed over drifting plankton and distant coral reefs; watched her drift, too, like some ocean goddess with glittering earrings and a dress of pearly scales, her golden hair done up in a golden trident crown.

James wore a suit. His hands were in his pockets.

They were sweating.

He looked back after his wife as the whale song faded to a singularity of sound.

~\*~

He woke up in the brick underground, running—turning this way and that, dodging down the angular corridors beneath the old city floor. Someone was chasing him and his heart was pounding. In his

ears he could both hear and *feel* the thump. But just the blood pressure of the thing. Not any of the angina or any other cardiovascular pain. No pain at all, actually. No burn of lactic acid in the muscles.

Panting, just brick and dust; the taste of it, the smell. Everything coated in dust. As if the place were ancient, which it was.

He had forgotten why he was running, had forgotten the stimulus of his fear. James stumbled forward, catching himself on the people who were lining the tunnel in office chairs.

Each one of them sat wet-wired into an array of atomic computers: their brains here, there, and everywhere, and all at once; cables, thick and black. Each tentacle terminated in a sucker attached to the back of every user's skull.

He smelled it, the sea.

He stumbled toward it, forgetting the office workers almost instantly, as if he had no short-term memory.

Wooden joists and planks and all sorts of plumbing and electrical lines ran above him, sometimes so low he bumped his head.

The smell got stronger. Salty. Seaweed. Fishy, yet fresh—like the primordial sex of the sea. Why had he been running, where now he felt so at peace?

"Fhtagn," someone muttered, and it was him, his lips slippery-numb like a fish. "Fhtagn..." as the sweet currents pulled him toward R'lyeh.

And then someone bashed him over the back of the head, and he woke up...

~\*~

...the ballroom opened spherically all the way around the reef: coral of all color of sky and design; bright-orange crabs scuttling about. A shrimp sat stroking its antennae.

Some people in the ballroom ate caviar on chips of dry compressed seaweed, which was seasoned with pure sea salt. They watched the wildlife and the minnows glitter by.

James sighed.

His friends all stood around him, drinking some spirit of brine, laughing, because they had nothing better to do but feel good.

"Betty," one man's wife said, "you must keep this man well fed."

James' friends all suffered the same affliction: they could not listen

to the women while simultaneously listening to themselves. They showed only a passing interest in what their wives had to say, and only when their wives were looking cute, or saying something the men could adore or comment upon.

James, on the other hand, had clearly heard his friend's wife, Nessie: *You must keep this man well fed.*

He smiled at his friends' jokes while he listened for Betty's response. Her voice got drowned out by an outburst of laughter and a call for more drinks!

"We ate dinner before we came," Betty said, and then she said more but James couldn't hear it.

When he and Betty had first arrived at the ballroom, his friends had cheered and pulled him into their fold with a spirulina drink. They had showed him to a waitress wearing only clamshells and holding a tray of *hors d'oeuvres*.

James knew why Betty's friend Nessie thought he was well-fed, and it had nothing to do with his waistline, which was perfect. Nessie's comment had everything to do with the expensive fish eggs on seaweed that James still hadn't taken a whiff of, let alone a bite. Everyone else in the ballroom was swallowing it whole.

He just held his snack and, for the most part, stared off into space. He smiled pleasantly whenever his friends made the effort to include him in their chatter.

"Oh, honey," Nessie suddenly spoke up, getting the attention of the surrounding crowd. "You *have* to hear this." She was staring at Betty, clearly amused for some reason. "Betty, dear, tell them what you just told me."

"Oh, I don't know, Nessie. Let our men drink."

"Then I shall tell them for you."

"Nessie—"

"Although it would be far better coming from you, Betty, of course."

"What is it, Betty?" Nessie's husband Peter now seemed interested. James, too, hung on his wife's response.

"Oh," she said, "I was just saying that James and I are—"

"They're waiting for the perfect time," Nessie blurted, inviting everyone else in on the joke, especially the men.

Up until that point the men hadn't seemed too interested in anything Nessie had to say, but they were always very interested in staring at Betty. Now they were all erupting into laughter, and Betty laughed

too, at her own expense. James saw her glance once at her friend.

"Betty, dear," Peter said with a rather smug, knowing smile, "isn't it always...the perfect time?"

They all laughed again, and then Bettie smiled charmingly and said, "Yes, I suppose everything's always perfect, you're right."

"I just find it ironic," Nessie continued, holding up her fine crystal glass, "that the only fertile female in all the sea is..." She rolled the fluid around her cup as she chose the right words. "Waiting for a time that can never be; because it already is."

Someone in the group coughed nervously in the silence following Nessie's annoying Bray.

Peter leaned into James and said, "If you can't show your wife the perfect time, my friend, perhaps I can at least show her a good one."

Everyone laughed.

"Yes, dear," Betty chimed in, "we must think of the future of the species."

That time Betty had meant to make everyone laugh. She had always been a master at saving face. James knew the art. You had to perform it behind a mask, which you put up for everyone else to smile back at. He himself had perfected being two-faced.

Things eventually calmed down again and moved on. James was getting a headache. He listened to his friends talk about some seasonal current bringing in warmer waters from the south, and heard the wives talking about dolphins as if nothing had just happened, and *had you seen any lately?*—and James found himself overwhelmed with the rough texture of the seaweed chip between his forefinger and thumb, the seemingly titanic boulders of salt abrading every ridge across the whorl of *his thumb*; because fingertips had some of the most nerve endings, and every time Nessie brayed, he swore he saw a color...

~\*~

He awoke in a dusty prison cell underground and had no idea how he had gotten there, yet remembered getting hit over the back of the head. He couldn't feel pain, but he felt the swelling.

A woman shared his bunk and was riding him, her flapjack tits flapping about. Her eyes were screwed shut, and she was biting her lower lip.

He felt absolutely numb, felt neither the smack nor glide of flesh,

which he could hear, nor the transient brush of her nipples and Mohawk, limp and trailing across his chest. He knew she could feel nothing too, but judging by her strained expression, she was really going out of her way to feel *something*.

James thought about pushing her off, but for some reason didn't. Maybe because she still hadn't opened her eyes. Maybe because in her mind, she was still taking advantage of some guy while he slept, and he liked that. He liked watching her, her little wrinkled nose.

He feared that if he moved and she opened her eyes, she would see that he was awake, and it would be over.

Then she opened her eyes, and he almost cried out. In the poor light, which filtered through the steel slats of the solid oak door, the girl's eyes looked compound, like a fly's.

Again he almost threw her off.

But then her eyes caught a shaft of light and glimmered gold, and he knew she wasn't bug-eyed; she was just wearing contact lenses to augment her reality. The glimmering of gold was just circuitry.

Even though she was staring right down at his face, she could have been seeing anything, anyone; whatever virtual reality she just happened to be browsing at the time.

In other words, in her eyes, James was still asleep.

And so she kept fucking.

And he kept on pretending to be in a dream.

~\*~

He awoke again, this time in the ballroom, and Nessie was laughing, standing with all of their friends, and James was unwittingly biting down into the cracker, crunching it and the caviar too; feeling each egg sac burst between his teeth, spritzing juices all over his tongue, the individual flavor beads slathering his buds and bonding to the crystals of salt, which clung.

Nerves lit up all along his spine. As if pleasure were fueled by fire, it actually hurt. James spit it out of his mouth. All of it.

He completely sprayed Nessie's face. Flecks of burst egg sac caught in her lashes, and her cheek glistened with smears of seaweed.

Nessie stopped laughing and was now frozen in mid-kringe, inflated with pent-up breath as if everything had paused the minute James had spit up, as if everything had become suspended.

## The Place that Cannot Be

It got so quiet around the ballroom James could hear the pounding in his temples.

This *headache*.

He caught a furtive movement and looked over at his wife. For a moment he was certain she had almost laughed at her unfortunate friend. However, Betty had successfully suppressed it. She cast a glance at Nessie's husband, Peter, as if to see whether he had noticed or perhaps shared in her secret delight.

Before anyone could react to the mess on Nessie's face, before Peter could have words with James about his inexcusable behavior, someone at the outskirts of the ballroom cried out.

"Oh my god, do you see it?! Oh my god, it's him!"

There were cries of surprise, fear, and intrigue, and people started moving all at once toward the translucent edge of the room.

"I see it!" someone said, pointing out past the reef, and other people said, "Where?!"

"His wings!"

Nessie, wiping absently at her eyes, walked with the crowd. Betty walked forward too. She looked back at James, as if she hoped for him to join her.

He waved her on and watched from afar as he repeatedly swallowed to rinse the taste out of his mouth, which was still tingling with some deep resounding ache.

Beyond the reef was the deep, and everyone thought they had seen something swimming out there, something big.

James looked too, and thought he could discern some kind of gargantuan shape disappearing in the salty sea. But he couldn't be certain that it wasn't just a cloud shape in a smear of floating life.

The people all uttered a name.

*Ou Topos*.

Soon the whole ballroom was chanting it, their eyes fixed in a ten-thousand-league stare, while somewhere in the deep something like a whale moaned.

*Ou Topos*, the place that cannot be.

~\*~

James and Betty returned home and she brushed her hair for bed while he stared out into the sea. Then they both retired to their moon



pool, where they floated in each other's arms.

"Thank you," Betty said, her breath rippling over his chest.

"Hmm?"

"For doing that. For standing up for me."

He frowned, not really certain what she meant.

"Did you see her face? They'll be talking about this for a very long time." She sounded like she might be smiling, and that pleased him, to know that he could make her smile, even if he had to lie.

"Hmm."

Betty lifted her head. She was, indeed, grinning. "Look at you. You and your '*calviar*' attitude." She laughed at her own joke, and he smiled. "Oh, James, that's just what I'll say to Nessie when I apologize. Chalk it up to a slip of the tongue. Hmph."

She laid her head back down on James' chest and traced lines over his stomach, making little swirls in the water, which on the other side of the world would create high tide. "You know, maybe they're right. Maybe it is...the perfect time."

James wished he could have contained his sigh. "Betty..."

"Oh, come on, James. When was the last time? It's important."

"I'm just...very tired."

She rolled away, disturbing the calm of the sea. "It's like you don't even enjoy things anymore."

He sighed again. He didn't know what to say.

"Are you even happy?"

As she said it, he had already decided something, and now she had spoiled the sentiment. But he knew she couldn't really be blamed. He said it anyway.

"Just lying next to you is like having sex."

Bettie lay there for a very long time, and he could hear the water gently lapping, and her breath.

Finally, she said, "Thank you." She sounded flattered. More than that, she sounded genuine. James knew the difference. Not many men did.

He could have told her that he'd been trying to convey something deeper: that everything was beautiful and everything hurt. Even battling an eye felt so good James could barely stand it. But that's when his wife leaned in for a kiss, and he went somewhere else for a while.

James opened his eyes and saw the flapjack chick, still sweating over him while she fucked.

He knew, but not from touch, that they were both chafed raw from hours of going at it. He knew there was blood, partly because he could smell it; blood from where she had been smacking and rubbing herself against him all night long.

Suddenly he no longer wanted to feign sleep.

James grabbed the girl's ass and started fucking back, despite the blood and the chafing and the soon-to-be bruised flesh.

She loved it. Clawed his back.

He ran a hand down her spine, and his hand hit something solid yet fleshy and alive.

He saw it then, that she was part of something. Part of the cell around them. She was hooked to it by a big pulsing tentacle rooted into the ceiling. Smaller feelers branched off and were slithering about, exploring everything.

And he could hear them *whispering*.

Not with his ears, but in the convolutions of his brain. As if they were feeding things into his very mind—

*Everything...*

*...perfect...*

*...fhtagn...*

—because they were.

He wanted to scream, but he had no mouth. So he reached up and wrapped his hands around the bitch's throat, there in a place where no one felt anything at all.

~\*~

In the moon pool, he felt his wife's kiss. He even felt the moment before it, that breath of anticipation, that little tremble before the lips.

And then they touched.

James had once heard there were 75 to 100 trillion cells in the human body, and that 100 billion of them were nerve cells in the brain. But of the entire epidermal covering, the fingertips were the most sensitive. The fingertips, and the lips.

Every single cell in his body turned to shattered glass, and the nerve cells were caught in the shards.

He screamed.

Right into her mouth.

She fell off of him and splashed around. By the time she got control of herself, James was already sitting on the edge of their pool, shaking and panting for breath.

On the side opposite him, she crawled out of the water and began weeping silently. Without looking at him, she said, "I'm so sorry."

It was the first time James had ever seen her cry. It was the first time he had ever seen her truly sad.

"No," he said, and he scooted around the edge of the pool and took her in his arms. "I'm sorry."

He guided her gently back into the pool, and they lay floating. Something trembled through the water beneath them, and they both looked down into the fathomless dark. They each saw some leviathan smear of life, the shadow of a tentacle snaking.

James hugged his wife closer until she stopped shaking. Eventually, she fell asleep.

Somewhere in the place between dreams, she said, "I love you," but he couldn't say it back. He knew it would hurt too much.

~\*~

"Fhtagn," someone muttered, and it wasn't him, although he mouthed it, which felt the same.

~\*~

"Which came first?" she asked him the next morning. She had made him eggs for breakfast, and he didn't know what she meant.

"Is this...some sort of riddle?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't quite know where the saying came from. Like maybe I knew it in some past life. I remember as a little girl, I never quite knew what a chicken was. But now I think...I think it must have meant 'chicken of the sea.'"

"Like where we got the eggs," James said, as if that were some valid contribution to her weird story.

"Right." She sounded as though he didn't understand. "How is the tuna roe anyway? Is everything all right?"

She could see that James hadn't even taken a bite.

He said, "Everything's perfect."

She smiled, and it seemed as if the sun coming down through the water filled her, and she was bursting with prisms and happy light.

"Great!" she said, and she turned back to the stove. It was like...she was glowing.

There was something about James' brain that meant he could just see things very clearly. He could see right through things. And he had always been proud to say he knew his wife.

"You're pregnant," he said, and Betty turned to him, still smiling, as if inviting him to smile back.

"What?"

"Was that the whole point of your riddle, Betty? So you could tell me the egg came first? Out of nowhere?"

She laughed. "Oh, James."

"Whose is it?"

She poured him a smoothie infused with shark liver oil and said, "Eat your eggs."

~\*~

He woke in the brick cell as two men burst through the heavy door. He glimpsed only their silhouettes in the lamplight, and then they were grabbing him, turning him around so they could reach for his back.

It felt as if one of the men were ripping his spinal cord straight from the nape of his neck. The cord felt so deeply rooted, it tugged on nerve endings in the back of his head.

Then there was a weird sound, like a foot pulling free from the muck, as if he were being unplugged, and suddenly a fat tentacle was flopping about, oozing black and red and shooting out sparks from venous wires.

He cried out, lashed out, and then curled up into a ball to shield himself from the harmless *thump, thump, thump* of his attackers' fists. The fetal position was only instinctual; who but the old lizard brain cared about dying when you couldn't feel a thing?

James was curled up so tightly, it was dark. But the dark seemed to slosh and move around. Then he woke up again, and he was no longer balled up in his cell, but being dragged down a long brick corridor underground, past banks of supercomputers and more people

plugged into fat black cables. Past circuit boards with smaller black tendrils as soldering.

He could smell it, the sea. It smelled like blood. He could smell that, too, rich and coppery. He could hear it bubbling in his mouth and out his nose, could feel just the jolt of his cough.

The tunnel opened up beside the river. Just downstream there was a dock, and he could see the silhouette of a very large sail, could hear the masts creaking.

He wriggled to get a look at the vessel, but his captors noticed him moving and hit him over the head. He felt like he'd curled up again, like a baby floating fetal in its mother's womb, rocking like the sea.

~\*~

Betty was talking, but James could barely listen. The color of the words coming out of her mouth were assaulting him with a dizzying array. It felt as if he'd been spinning for two minutes straight in pure color and was now trying to walk it off.

"We should get going," Betty said, smiling. "We don't want to be... James?!"

He went stumbling away from the ocean dome, holding his hand out to catch himself. Betty cried out and helped him stand. He leaned on her as the sea spun around.

She finally got James sitting down and feeling all right.

"You should go," he told her.

"What? No."

"It'll be strange if you don't. People will notice."

"James, I'm not going."

"Please."

Betty looked into both of his eyes, one after the other, the way you looked into the eyes of someone too close to you.

James needed her to know. He needed her to read him the way he had always been able to read her.

"Go."

Betty smiled at him and glowed. It never ceased to shock him when it was genuine.

"I'll just tell Nessie you don't like the caviar anyway. Word will get around." She seemed rather pleased with that.

Then she stood up, sparkling, because she was already dressed to

go.

Ever since he could remember, James could simply *think* about transporting himself to somewhere beyond the sea, and then do it. *Ou Topos*, a place named after the god of the deep. Mostly he had gone there to escape this utopia.

For the longest time, he had assumed it was just a dream, but—the level of detail. How could it be? James had always been...‘perceptive’ is how his wife had put it. The technology of this other place, those tentacles, must have been his link. He didn’t know why, he didn’t know how but...that’s how it seemed. Then, the minute his *other self* was unplugged...

He tried for an hour to get back, with no luck. He even tried visualizing the place down to every bubble.

He was stuck.

Instead, he ended up thinking about the chicken or the egg. It preyed on him. Whose husband could it be? Whose face could hide such a thing?

He paced.

His hands were sweating in the pockets of his suit jacket, but he decided he was feeling good enough to go anyway. After all, he still had on the suit.

~\*~

The ballroom glittered with all of its beautiful people, as colorful as the coral reef. More colors swam around them in sound waves, expanding and swirling like algal blooms.

James looked for Betty’s golden trident crown, but there were so many elaborate headdresses, made of coral, seashells, starfish and more, he could barely see anything.

Then he spotted Nessie’s husband, Peter. He was carrying two glasses of some exotic brine. James followed him, pushing his way through the crowd and ignoring the cries.

“How rude!”

He stopped some ways off and watched Peter approach Betty, who stood all by herself, without her crown. Peter handed the drink to her and said something funny. Betty laughed and laid a hand on his arm.

The sounds in the room turned red as James stalked forward. His hands were sweating harder, and he thought about strangling that

flapjack bitch, strangling her till she stopped.

Peter saw him coming.

“James!” Betty said, as if nothing were going on, nothing at all.

James took a swing at Peter. The crowd gasped and stepped back as Peter and his blood went flying to the floor. They all looked at James, who stood over his victim, breathing hard.

Peter got up, holding his mouth. Then something came over his face, some emotion James had never seen under the sea.

The mask was off.

The punch took James by complete surprise. He saw a burst of light, the same shape as the sound, and suddenly he was kneeling and gushing blood from his nose.

James looked down at the red fluid pooling in his hand and began to laugh. The pain: the pain felt *good*. His wires were so crossed, the punch had felt like some orgasmic explosion, and now the swelling felt like a massage. The blood pouring out of him felt like some sort of release.

Peter kicked him in the ribs, and James fell over onto his side, laughing, wheezing. “Hit me. Hit me!”

Glancing around, Peter brushed back an errant strand of hair. Everyone stood there, looking on with bulging fish eyes.

Peter reared his leg again, this time aiming for James’ head, right for his temple—and then someone was shouting something like “He’s back!”

The crowd turned as a shadow passed over the ballroom. They forgot everything—the fight, the blood; they forgot even James, who was propping himself up on one arm. They all flocked to the edge and huddled there, looking out into the blue.

Several of them jumped back as a tentacle slapped against the dome and started sucking.

With a streaking squeak, it slid down the glass, then popped off and snaked away. The people all peered out, trying to see where the tentacle had gone.

Then someone said, “Look!” and pointed to the surface, just beyond the reef.

There was a shape, a large one, cutting a wake. It coasted to a stop, and then some kind of huge arrowhead dropped into the water and sank, trailing bubbles and a rope behind it.

After several minutes, something else dropped into the water. A



man, his ankles bound and his hands tied like some sacrifice. James instantly recognized him.

Feeling a tickle in his ribs where Peter had kicked him, he got to his feet. No one protested as he pushed his way to the front.

His self from the other place was struggling and stirring up bubbles. He was drowning. Someone screamed as a tentacle reached for him out of the deep.

James watched as the thick, black feeler wrapped around the man. Watched as another tentacle, huge and uncurling, rushed toward the dome. Other people were stepping back, murmuring louder and louder until they were shouting and running for the exit. James just stood there, blood dripping from his nose and chin.

"James!" Betty grabbed at him and tried to pull him away.

"Forget him!" Peter called back.

But Betty kept tugging.

And then the tentacle smashed into the dome, and everything shattered.

The water hit them so hard it almost crushed them, and everything was just swirling white. James tumbled end over end before rushing backwards, out into the reef. He felt the sharp coral gashing open his arm through his suit, but it didn't hurt.

He floated there, while other people flailed and thrashed about, and he looked out into the deep.

A titanic claw grabbed onto the reef, and the ocean floor rocked as something huge pulled itself up against the entire pressure of the sea. Sediment billowed up, displaced, and the heavy currents pushed James back.

Out of the haze, he saw a gigantic tentacled face, with mean eyes and barnacles crusted in each crease. He watched as the beast swam up and pulled his other self toward its yellowed beak.

James' wife floated by him, golden hair rippling like her dress. She had stopped struggling, and though her eyes looked glazed, they locked onto him. He wished she could feel what he was feeling right now, this exquisite burn in his chest. He wished she didn't have to hurt.

*I love you*, he said, mouthing it into water. And the way his teeth scraped against his bottom lip to make the V felt so good, *everything* was beautiful and nothing hurt as the monster's beak closed...and James breathed in the sea.

# The Battle of Arkham

By Peter Rawlik

**T**he Miskatonic was burning. Something had been done to the water, not to the river, but to the water itself. Blue flames were moving across the shallows, swirling like leaves in the autumn wind. Cain didn't know what it meant, but he knew it couldn't be good, if anything, it probably meant that things were going to get worse. Probably much worse. Reinforcements had been delayed, air support had been stalled because of a communication snafu and command had lost contact with the amphibious forces coming up the river. His squad was passing over the Peabody Avenue Bridge and the eerie illumination cast a strange dance of light and shadows about the ruins of the city. It was just the impetus Cain needed to reassess...well everything really.

*The most merciful thing in the universe is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.*

Thurston's Paradigm, Cain had learned it in a class on modern philosophy, back before the war started, before thousands of years of human progress was devoured by the ravaging hordes of alien hybrids. He had been a student then, an environmental engineering major, but to Cain that was a lifetime ago, and luxuries like philosophy and constructed wetlands had been replaced with energized assault weapons and radiation ablative armor.

Command had designated the area south of the river as contested territory. Truth was the University had been an enemy beachhead since day one. Intel suggested that along with similar sites in California, Oregon, Florida, London, Moscow and Tokyo, Miskatonic University had been ground zero for the invasion. Problem being that no one really recognized it as an invasion. It wasn't until the CDC and WHO had failed to contain the outbreaks that the military was called in, but by then it was too late. What had begun as a strange genetic

## The Battle of Arkham

anomaly affecting only a handful of people world wide, had become infectious and then exploded into a battle to save not just nations, not just humans, but all life on the planet, and to hear the brains talk, maybe even the universe.

On the south side of the bridge the team moved two blocks south through the burned out merchant district and took up defensive positions in the old Arkham Graveyard at the top of French Hill. The target, the university library, was two blocks due west, it didn't sound far, a ten-minute walk on a normal day. But normal days were long gone and all the reports said that the area was crawling with What-eleys and worse, at least two Vugg-Shoggog. It was going to be a street fight, building to building, progress measured in the death of things that used to be human, things that used to be people, normal everyday people that had succumbed to Morgan's Syndrome. Energized assault weapons versus ten-foot long tentacles with jaws filled with snapping teeth and weird drill like claws. Cain was in charge of a blood bath waiting to happen, all to rescue a few books from the library.

The street fight was a diversion. Despite their monstrous size, unnatural weaponry, and inhuman reasoning, the enemy had a serious weakness; their thinking was two-dimensional. The things simple couldn't rationalize fighting in multiple elevations simultaneously. Come at them from the ground alone and they would fight you to a stand still. Come at them from the sky, and the damned things would start hurling makeshift artillery forcing anything airborne to withdraw. Do both, attack with ground and air support, or even with just elevated snipers, and the Whateleys just froze, they couldn't focus their attention. They would swing wildly from one direction to another. It was as if the very concept of attacks coming from multiple elevations was completely alien to them, they just couldn't comprehend that things happening in multiple planes could be impacting them at the same instant. The brains said it had to do with how they perceived space, they thought in angular terms rather than curves. This was why their movements were always linear with sharp ninety-degree turns, like the eponymous target in the classic video game Centipede. This weakness formed the tactics for the mission at hand. Cain and his squad would assume positions on top of the hill east of the campus, and initiate an assault that would draw the enemy away from the library. Amphibious forces would lend support from the river, while Special Forces were dropped from the air directly into the campus.

Once the Special Forces had secured the objective they would rendezvous with the infantry on French Hill and be evacuated from there.

Static crackled from the plug in Cain's ear, a shrieking *szzzzzk*. Instinctively he reached for the spot on his back where the cable from his helmet plugged into the cylinder strapped to his back. A sudden but mild shock made his hand jerk back as the static resolved into something resembling a voice.

"Cain you have been instructed not to interfere with the communications interface."

Cain nodded slightly. "Sorry, reflex action. With radio equipment, static can indicate a loose connection."

Another spurt of static spurted into his ear and then the voice again, "We are not radios Cain, and the static is a byproduct of the translation process. There are concepts, protocols, words that have no counterpart in human languages, the translator and your brain interpret these as static, but they are not. You have been told this before. If you cannot understand that perhaps I should find another host."

"That won't be necessary Phillips. I apologize and I'll keep my hands to myself."

"You must learn, Cain, *shannnnntttt*." Cain winced. "Contact has been re-established with both *skrreeee* and *shrammmk*. They are in position. Romero Squad is go for engagement."

Cain signaled Romero Squad, and without a word he and the five soldiers under his command rose up to take positions and find targets with their scopes. The weapon felt good as it settled in against his shoulder and the scope engaged with his helmet display. At 200X magnification the occupants of the university grounds jumped into horrific detail.

They swarmed the campus; Cain counted more than five dozen Whateleys in the central quad alone. It was hard to believe these things were once human or at least mistaken for human. The invaders had hidden themselves in plain sight. It wasn't until the sun started tossing high energy solar flares, and the light had shifted toward indigo, that anybody started to notice that there were monsters in our midst, not even the monsters themselves had known.

Morgan's Inherited Dismorphism Syndrome, MIDS for short, had been first diagnosed amongst newborns in western Massachusetts in the late 20's and early 30's of the Twentieth Century. Children were born with severe teratological defects that would make thalidomide

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babies look comparatively normal. Doctor Morgan found dozens of kids with the most monstrous of mutations including tails, gills, hooves, tentacles, even functional mouths and eyes in places other than the kids' faces. All the kids had been born to mothers who had been raped, and Morgan theorized that the rapist had been linked to the Dunwich Event, a supposedly natural nuclear explosion that had devastated the landscape for nearly a hundred square miles. Paranormal researchers called it the American Tunguska, and liked to suggest that the explosion of a flying saucer had caused the disaster. Morgan took his report to the authorities but between cleaning up the Dunwich Event, occupying the town of Innsmouth and a deadly hurricane in Florida, the Federal Government had apparently been overwhelmed. By the time action was taken most of the children and their mothers were gone, vanished into the wilderness that was Depression Era America.

Cain watched through the scope as a particularly large Whateley reared up its head and lashed a tentacle into the air. They were called Whateleys because that was the name Morgan gave to the man from Dunwich to whom he attributed all the rapes. Though calling Wilbur Whateley a man may have been overly generous. From the reports Cain had read Wilbur had died when a dog ripped out his throat down in the very university they were preparing to assault. Examination of the body had revealed similar teratologies—tentacles, eyes, hooves—to those found on the children. Attempts to preserve the body failed, in a matter of hours Wilbur had dissolved into nothingness. It was another trait shared by his descendents.

There was something goatish about the creatures. The eyes, the fur, the horned growths on the head reminded Cain of paintings he had seen of devils and demons. But nothing he had ever seen had ever suggested the fusion of monstrosities that formed the rest of the body. Arms and legs ending in massive elephantine hooves, tentacles springing from a body the size of a small car, tentacles ending in eyes or mouths, or spikes, or claws. No two Whateleys were ever identical, but they seemed uniform in their desire to breed and feed on anything that moved.

Cain took a deep cleansing breath and gave Romero Company the go code. He flipped the safety off and gently almost lovingly pulled the trigger of his weapon. The Tillinghast rail gun, the weapon his squad was armed with, used superconducting magnetic coils to ac-

celerate explosive shells to supersonic velocities. The Whateleys were resistant to most small arms fire, but at supersonic velocities coupled with explosive impacts, the shells were able to penetrate armor and deliver their contents into the bodies of the enemy.

Lead was the poison of choice, and if someone had discovered that early on things might not have gotten as bad as they had after Morgan's reappearance in 2012. When the sun shifted the emergency rooms had been flooded with crazies who feared the worst was upon us. It wasn't and most of their symptoms were psychosomatic. But there was a small minority who were generally affected. Humans couldn't see into the ultra-violet but dozens of people were suddenly showing up screaming that the sun had gone black. These people were the first hint of what was going on. Their eyes had the ability to detect wavelengths beyond those in the normal range of human vision. At first researchers thought this condition was the result of a genetic mutation, something linked to the mother's X-chromosome, or something in the mitochondrial DNA: Wrong on both counts. Surprisingly they found something entirely new, something they called a gammaplast, an unknown organelle that had characteristics in common with both mitochondria and plant chloroplasts, the places where energy was produced for cells. The gammaplast functioned much like a chloroplast, but instead of turning light into cellular energy, it used gamma radiation, something the sun was now emitting in significantly higher quantities.

By design, the Tillinghast shell arced through the air, if you tried to fire in a straight line the Whateleys simply moved out of the way. They were monstrosously fast. Fire in arcs and they couldn't see the shell until it was too late. Cain lost count as he fired round after round into the maddening hordes that occupied the college grounds.

The gammaplast also contained a massive amount of DNA. Human chromosomal DNA being linear, with 46 chromosomes the stuff in the gammaplast was hexagonal, containing more than 300 chromosomes. This was the source of the ability to see ultra-violet. It was also the source of the changes to come; it turned men and women into Whateleys and then as they grew larger into the composite things called...

VUGG-SHUGGOG!

DAMN IT! How had he missed that? There was a goddamned Vugg coming down the street right towards him! If Whateleys were

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the size of cars then Vuggs were bigger than a city bus. The things made Whateleys look like kittens. Hell if a Whateley got in a Vuggs way, it would tear it apart as soon as go around it. Fifty feet of living nightmare was swarming up the hill. It was a quarter mile away and moving fast. The shells were penetrating but they weren't slowing it down, the thing was too big, the lead too slow to interfere with the gammaplast and shut the thing down. In a half a minute, maybe less they would be overrun.

"Phillips we have a Vugg. Where is that support?"

"*Shhhtnk* is inbound."

Cain took aim and fired into the primary head of the thing as it moved out of the college and made its way across Garrison Street. A heartbeat later a cluster of facial tentacles exploded in a smear of green and black smoke. But in that time the thing had crossed Garrison and was now weaving up Lich Street towards his position. Less than half a block and the thing would be on them. The squad was concentrating fire but to little avail. God that thing was fast. Where was the support?

He heard it before he saw it. A buzzing sound, like a swarm of bees, it droned out all the other noises, the screams of the Whateleys, the recoil of the guns, the roar of the Vugg, all were lost as the sky filled with dozens of airborne Special Forces. No larger than a man, seven Mi-Go warriors came at the Vugg from above and behind. Cain knew that their fungoid allies repulsed some people, but to his mind they were beautiful. An oblong egg shaped exoskeleton seemingly woven from some sort of resin, extruded a dozen crustacean-like appendages and multiple pairs of translucent wings. The head reminded Cain of a coral, or a mold, or perhaps even an exposed brain, folded and creased with a half dozen stalked sensors craning about tasting the world more than seeing it.

As the Vugg reared up to strike at the Mi-Go, Cain saw three more of the flying creatures dart into the clouds, heading away from the city, and he knew that sometime during the opening of the firefight Special Forces had been delivered safely. A sudden movement drew his attention back to the ground. The Mi-Go had distracted the Vugg causing it to focus its attention skyward, and that was all that was needed to allow the Marines to come in. Cain watched a lone soldier with three hundred pounds of heavy armor on dart into the street. Using what amounted to an immense steel syringe, the soldier speared the Vugg just below the neck, pumping the beast full of a lead-based toxin. The



harpoon still lodged in the Vugg's neck, the marine rolled away as the worm thing began to thrash about in agony.

Cain's team held their fire, giving the Marine a chance to find cover, and time for the poison to do its job. The Vugg was a composite creature; its strength coming from its ability to decentralize some functions and combine others. Separate the monster into its component parts and those individuals became just as vulnerable as any other Whateley. The poison that the marine had delivered was also chock-full of DMSO, a solvent with such a high transmissivity that it had spread the lead compounds right into the central nervous system. In response the Vugg was tearing itself apart, trying to separate contaminated pieces from those that were uncontaminated. It was like watching a child shake apart a stack of legos. The individual parts became easy targets for Romero Squad.

The Vugg was down but it had been only the first assault on their position. Cain ordered suppressing fire as the Whateleys began to swarm up after their fallen brethren. Cain personally covered the Marine as he dashed straight up the road and took shelter behind a low rock wall about twenty feet away. The wall did little to hide the bulk of the amphibious soldier; he was easily seven feet tall and more than three feet wide. Even at this distance Cain could smell the Marine, they all smelled the same, like the sea at low tide. It was pheromonal, something emitted by their gills. Cain called over "What's your name soldier?"

The armor clad Deep One made his way over to Cain's position in a fluid grace that reminded Cain less of running and more of a cross between gymnastics and ballet. "Howard, sir. Ricou Squad. Or what's left of it. It has been one Hell of a day. Intel said there were only Whateleys and two Vugg. They failed to mention the polyp that ambushed us as we came out of the river."

Cain nodded as he fired at another Whateley that had crossed the imaginary line that his mind had drawn down the center of Garrison Street. "Typical. I'm Cain, the brain in the backpack is Phillips."

Cain's earpiece roared to life. "*Shtthnkk*. Cain, I don't appreciate the humor. *Zanhkkk*, The target has been secured and the courier is en route to your position."

"Howard, you still armed?"

Howard shook his head. "Only thing I have left is a grenade, and you don't want me to use that until we are ready to leave."

## The Battle of Arkham

Cain had seen a grenade go off before, and he had no desire to see this one do its work until he was well on his way out. Cain stared down at the swarm of Whateleys. They had reached the nearside of Garrison and were working inevitably forward. Cain and his team were slowing them down but the horde was going to reach them and when that happened the Tillinghast rail guns would be useless.

"The package is on its way in. I was kind of counting on Ricou Squad to help us defend this position, but it looks like we're going to have to go on the offensive, any objections to going in for a pick up?"

Howard's lidless eyes grew large and his gills flexed nervously. "Begging your pardon sir, but those Special Forces types give me the creeps."

"I'm with you brother, but we both know that you're a hell of a lot faster than he is, and frankly the sooner we get out of here the better."

Howard figured this out just seconds after Cain. "You have a plan?"

Cain did have a plan, one that just might get them out alive.

With care Cain repositioned his men onto Lich Street. Cover had ceased to matter once the Vugg had started toward them, and as long as he kept out of striking range of the tentacles the squad would hopefully remain intact. Evenly spaced, the five men under Cain's command began slowly moving down the avenue, rail guns blazing, Cain and Howard right behind them. When they reached Parsonage Street, he ordered one of the men straight down the center while the other four split into two teams and took up crossfire positions on top of abandoned cars. From a slightly safer position Cain fired into the maddened horde of monsters as Howard searched for any sign of the courier.

To the south, halfway down the block a small figure broke from the shadows and in an instant Howard was dancing down the street like a deranged frog. Cain smiled, and tried to stay focused. The boy had guts.

"Stnzzzzz, Cain, we're running low on ammo. At the current rate of consumption the team will be out in two minutes."

"DAMN IT." Cain ordered the team to a more controlled rate of fire. The Whateleys surged forward, closing the gap in a mere instant.

"HOWARD WE HAVE TO GO! Phillips, send the evac signal." Cain took a step back from the front line.

"Tsssz, do we have the package?"

An alarm sounded in Cain's helmet. The man walking down the

centerline was out of ammo. "HOWARD, WE HAVE TO GO NOW! Phillips send the evac signal." A second alarm sounded. The things crept closer.

"Tsssz, do we have the package?"

A third alarm. "SEND THE GOD DAMNED SIGNAL! HOWARD WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?!" A fourth alarm, a dam broke and the wave crashed over into Parsonage Street. Five more alarms went off notifying Cain that the soldiers he had been commanding were gone, the re-animated bodies of Romero Squad had ceased to function.

Suddenly he was in the air, tucked under the left arm of Howard as he made a mad dash toward the graveyard like a deranged quarterback.

"PHILLIPS, WE NEED EVAC NOW!"

"Tsssz, do we have the package?"

Cain glanced over to the figure tucked under Howard's right arm. It was a hideous thing, as if a rabid jackal had been fused with a man. It reeked of death and decay, of decomposing flesh and sewage, the odors not of its own making, but rather of its food. Ghouls preferred the contents of their meals to be at the minimum several weeks old. Cain gagged at the stench but swallowed the rising wave of vomit as he saw the case being held by the corpse-eater.

"We have the package. WE HAVE THE PACKAGE! NOW GET US THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

"ZNNT, evacuation signal sent."

There was something vaguely comical about all this. Cain and a ghoul tucked underneath the arms of a Deep One running through a graveyard being chased by slobbering hordes of mutant hybrids. Comical in the sense that such a thing would have seemed impossible just a few years ago. War makes strange bedfellows. When the Whateleys attacked, man thought he was alone, the general populace didn't know about the Deep Ones, Ghouls, the Mi-Go or the human brains the Mi-Go had been stealing for millennia. They didn't know they shared the world, the solar system, with things that seemed horrifying, but compared to the Whateleys were just distant cousins. The Mi-Go weren't the worst of course; there were others more alien. But at least they weren't extra-dimensional. The Yith and the Q'Hrell were enigmatic but at least they could be reasoned with. The Deep Ones could even control Shoggoths...

Cain stared at the phalanx of Whateleys, they were faster than Howard, and it was plain that they weren't going to make it, plain and

simple. Something had to be done, and Cain knew what that something was. “Phillips I am sorry.” He reached around and ripped the cylindrical brain case off his back. The electric shock came but Cain fought through it and shoved the metallic casing into one of the loops on Howard’s belt. Then, without missing a beat he grabbed the last of Howard’s grenades and with a swift but well targeted motion, pounded on Howard’s elbow with his free hand.

Reflex kicked in and Howard’s arm opened sending Cain tumbling to the ground. As he rolled Cain saw the kid pause, he barked an order “KEEP MOVING HOWARD! DELIVER THAT GODDAMN PACKAGE!”

The Whateleys were just yards behind him now, he could hear them pounding, crawling, slithering up the hill. Without hesitation he pulled the pin on the grenade and tossed it in the direction of the Whateleys. In his head he counted:

ONE

TWO

THREE

There was an audible click, Cain heard a goddamn click. And then the world exploded, filled with proto-shoggoth matter and pain. Cain never heard the buzzing sound that filled the skies. He never saw the protoplasmic shoggoth swallow up the Whateleys, never saw the Mi-Go swoop down and pluck Howard and the courier out of the graveyard.

Cain never saw these things, never heard them because the proto-shoggoth swallowed him up, blew him out, and sent him flying like so many pieces of meat. He only learned about these things later when they brought him back. Not his body of course, that was gone. But they found his head, and the Mi-Go carefully sealed his brain into a metallic cylinder and set Cain to work.

*He works with Phillips and all the other brains; they work on the package, trying to pry loose its secrets. Every once in a while someone, usually someone with a body, will ask him if it was worth it. He pauses for a moment; he stares through artificial eyes at the ancient pages. Somewhere in this book is the key to freedom, not just for humans, but for all the peoples of the world, maybe the universe.*

Was it worth it?

Deep within the last city of men, in the forgotten recesses of Kadath in the Cold Wastes, Cain thinks, “Yes” and goes back to his task of translating the *Necronomicon*.

# The Würms In the Grid

By Nickolas Cook

I'd been sailing the Western Cyber AOL Belt for the last three days when I was pulled out of my sleep mode by the call from Randall.

Whenever he made any calls, it could only mean one thing: He was in deep shit again. It was a good thing we were friends. Randall, being Randall, didn't have many people he could call upon when he was in trouble. And Randall, being Randall, was in trouble a lot. He had been a complete shitheel from the day he was born. Untrustworthy, lazy, opportunistic, and maybe even a couple of steps away from being purposely anarchistic, if not evil as so many of his enemies claimed.

It didn't help that Randall was a "program-killer," a first rate cyber menace who would hire himself out to anyone with the creds enough to send him out to destroy complex programs in cyberspace. Over the years he had made some pretty powerful enemies and very few friends. But he was the best at what he did and so he had plenty of business from corporations who wanted to sabotage their competitors at a digital level. I was one of the few people who he could call 'friend,' someone he'd not yet screwed over for a cred, and so one of the few he could trust to watch his back when he needed it.

Coming out of the depths of cyberspace always felt a little like waking to a dream, one in which all the biological functions were still going without your conscious intervention or wishes. All the right organs continued to pull in oxygen, send blood coursing through your body on schedule, digest as needed, so coming back into this heavy flesh prison again always made me feel a little resentful and lethargic. Body stiff, bones achy from being in the same position for days at a time, hair and nails still growing, in need of a toothbrush and mouthwash, despite the fact all nutrients ingested had been liquid solutions, injected on a regular 'feeding' schedule every few hours. Didn't help the cavernous empty sensation inside your stomach when you first

came back to the physical world again.

I decided to let my stomach complain in its noisy fashion and answered the call first. It took a couple of swallows to get my mouth to work again, but finally I pressed the vid phone intercept button. Randall's haggard bearded face flickered and held. "Enoch, my friend, my buddy, pal-o! Didn't wake you, did I?"

I was sure he already knew the answer to that just from my wan physical appearance, but I decided a little guilt would be good for his soul. "Actually, I was deep in the middle of a complex systems update for a major company. Big name. Big creds."

"Big deal," he replied with his usual smirk. "I'm sure it won't be long before someone will hire me to tear it apart, if it's worth anything."

Truth, but still it stung. "Nice, asshole. What do you want?"

"Now, now, my friend of these many long years," he said, putting on his mock hurt face. "Is that any way to talk to a man who is going to make you rich, rich rich?"

I had heard this joke before, so my reply was less than enthusiastic. "I was getting rich enough before you interrupted me. It's called work, Randall, old buddy. You might try it one day."

His laughter made the reception on my cheap vid screen fizzle and crack. "Man, if you think what I do ain't work..." He let it hang, but put away his smile. His hairy face grew serious. "I need a wingman for this new gig. Someone to help keep the drones off me, while I do my thing."

I grimaced. It wasn't as if I hadn't helped him before, but having been on the receiving end of Randall's particular chosen profession in the past, I knew how it felt to see months' worth of block-building, cyber-enhancing, widget styling and custom layering blown to shit by a self-proclaimed 'program-killer' like Randall. It was enough to put you in a really bad mood for weeks at a time. All the security booby traps hidden within the coding didn't even slow down someone like Randall, someone who had the skills and talent, an almost psychic ability to detect the safeguards builders like me created and tucked away for the usual predators and hackers.

But, hell's bells, someone like Randall?

Forget it.

There weren't enough security backups in existence that could stop someone with his level of experience and talent. On the Grid, he

was like fucking God and Satan, Buddha and Kali, all rolled into one.

“Not sure I’m up for another one of your gigs, Randall.”

“Come on, Enoch,” his eyes held mine from across the miles between us. “I really need someone I can trust on this one. It’s different.”

“Different? How so?”

“Look...not over an unsecured line, right? You understand. I can give you more details, if you’ll meet me.”

I hesitated, but being a builder is a lot less interesting than being destroyer, and I had become a little tired of the routine. And after so many days in cyberspace it might be a good idea to at least use the meeting as an excuse to reconnect with the real world again. It wasn’t such a good idea to stay away from the physical world for too long at a time; it had been known to cause some Gridrunners to become unhinged mentally. Some went over and never came out, leaving their physical bodies to the automatic machines for as long as the machines would do their job, and when they stopped, the bodies would finally die from malnutrition, dehydration, a slow attrition of the mental versus the physical. There was always that danger. That’s why every smart keyboard jockey had their personal limits. Mine was six days and that had been pushing it. By the sixth day, when I came back to my body, it was in pretty bad shape. If I hadn’t had someone there to keep watch over me, I might have never come back that time.

It always gave me a little shiver to think about it.

Every Gridrunner always wonders what happens to someone who gives up the physical for the purely mental existence within the Grid. Did you actually die mentally when you died on the physical level? Was a person’s existence measured by the next heartbeat, by the next lungful of machine processed air, the next injection of liquid nutrients? Or did that person translate into something purely mathematically abstract, an algorithm with a consciousness?

The urban myths and cyber legends of what happened to someone who made the jump were as plentiful as the number of Gridrunners slipping along the mainframe, playing god on the Grid; and they were taken as serious as any faith based religion, nurtured and given weight and truth by the sheer intensity of the ones who needed to believe that there was some sort of life on the Grid after physical death. To many of my fellow Gridrunners, the Grid was more real than the so-called real world, where physical manifestation existed within a cumbersome cage of flesh and bone.

I know Randall had talked about it many times. There were times when I was surprised he hadn't made the jump yet.

After a quick shower, some cold coffee from the morning dregs and a change of clothes, I hit the streets. It was well past midnight, but time seemed to be of no concern to the masses which packed the busy sidewalks and electric airbuses. The Babylonian cacophony felt almost reassuring after so long away from my fellow man—in physical form, at least—and my very skin seemed to soak up the bright flashes of streetlight and multi-colored twists and bursts of neons; my veins seemed to pulse with the steady ebb and flow heartbeat of the multitudes, as they moved from one pointless destination to another. Unlike the cyberworld, there never seemed to be a true purpose to all this hustle and bustle: the near silent hiss of the airbuses flying back and forth overhead; the constant bellow calls of street vendors, both electronic and human, trying to pawn off their various wares—food, drink, drugs, useless techno-toys for the intellectual restless, neo-post modern, angst-filled masses; the distant warble of police sirens moving through the background noise like a hectic counterpoint in this nighttime musical cavalcade. There was even a sort of an undercurrent savage and primal drumbeat provided by the constant street and building construction as the human ant colony continued to spread its ever-expanding, ever-shifting nest of steel and concrete to the far horizons.

I followed Randall's instructions, made my way through this industrial song of the ages to an out of the way street, down the sideways and into the neverwas of lost faces and long forgotten stories of lives gone awry, innocence besmirched by a reality of economics and mistrust.

Randall sat at the back of the crowded nightclub for the lost souls. It was one of the many places where Gridrunners and cyberfolk came together when they had to find solace in strong drink and weak conversation, when they felt the need to meet flesh on flesh for the short time needed to remind them why living in the mental abstract of cyberspace was always preferred over the tawdry, stinking transient pleasures of the flesh and its physical imperatives for pleasure and sustenance.

As I made my way to his table, I could feel their soulless eyes watching me, some curious, most apathetic, black and empty as the darkness between the stars which had been vanquished long ago behind a



cloud of glutinous, ever-coalescing pollution of smog and city lights.

When I sat, Randall gave me his best approximation of a genial smirk, but as usual it never made it all the way to his eyes. They were like two shining machine cameras, ever-shifting on the crowd around him, seeking enemies, opportunity or just plain old dumb distraction to keep his mind off his time away from cyberspace. He had a pitcher of something dark and viscous on the table; he refilled his own half empty glass and poured one for me.

There were no social pleasantries; he jumped right to the point.

"It's an old man, someone I'm sure you've heard of," he told me. "He needs me to go in and take apart an anti-program that's been inserted in his information storage drive. It's in his home."

Annoyed with his need to regurgitate information like he was afraid to swallow it, I took a slow sip of the disgusting drink he had poured. Jesus...it was like sucking down cold blood: bitter and thick, with an aftertaste that almost made me want to spit it out again. I managed to choke it down and it hit me almost immediately. I could feel it singing in my veins. The lights felt too bright all of a sudden and the noise dulled to a background roar. Had it really been so long since I'd allowed my body the transient pleasure of alcohol that it should affect me so quickly?

"What the fuck is this?" I asked, staring at the congealed fluid in my glass with suspicious distaste.

"He's going to pay me—us—a lot of creds for this, man," Randall said, ignoring my query.

"Fine, fuck it. Guess it doesn't matter, since I won't be drinking anymore," I said. "Who is this rich old man who I'm supposed to know?"

"Abzu T. Ahmat."

The name made me freeze halfway to putting the glass on the table.

Abzu T. Ahmat: a living legend in the information technology industry. A billionaire by the time he was twenty-seven, long before the First Diaspora had ravaged the Northeast coast of the United States. Now, at age ninety-six, he had amassed so much wealth that he certainly could be the world's wealthiest person, if modern society kept track of such things as monetary wealth as an indicator of success. Now, it was about how many corporate heraldries one had amassed in one's lifetime that determined a person's true status in the world of corporate run governments. Heraldries meant power, the power to

decide life and death for whole populations. Entire continents lived and breathed at the whim of certain corporations. Someone like Abzu T. Ahmat made such decisions on a daily, if not hourly, basis. His name was within the top ten shareholders of most of the top Fortune 500 Republic Corporations throughout the world. He had his finger in every war, big or small, in every third world economy and it was said that he was the true controller of the Bio-Kin Reserves Army that had been responsible for smashing the recent genetic mutant uprising in South Africa.

But for all of his power and wealth, he was, as the old saying went, an enigma wrapped in a mystery. He hadn't been videoed or photo-sped in decades. It was said that no more than a handful of people even knew what the old man looked like after all these years.

Which, of course, begged the question... "Randall, how the gods blasted hells did you get this gig?"

"His people contacted me last night while I was in the middle of breaking up a corporate programmed entity inside the Grid," he said. "One minute I'm tearing down pieces of this fucker's defense systems so I can pull it out of the corporate employer's mainframe, and the next BOOM!—" Randall clapped his hands together loudly, startling me and everyone sitting within earshot, despite the intense boom-boom-boom-treaka-treaka of the dance music playing too loudly on the floating 3-D sensorium speakers above us "—and out of nowhere, here's this hologram entity popping up in front of me. At first I was pissed, fit to chew silicone fibers, and then it tells me who it represents. Man, I ain't never been so stunned in my life." He grinned into his drink, swallowing more of the vile blood-thick concoction.

"How do you know this isn't a trick? How do you know it's for real?"

Randall nodded, placed his glass down and flipped open the face on his wrist deck. His fingers flew across the virtual keyboard which only he could see projected before him and he turned his arm around so I could see the screen. There was an unbelievable amount of creds represented on it.

"Holy Hawking... Randall... is that for real?"

"You bet your sweet Gridrunner ass it's for real," he replied, his eyes alight with a mania that went beyond the sudden explosion of creds in his personal accounts. "I made damned sure it was for real before agreeing to take on the gig. I'm no "green-boarder", Enoch. You

know me, man. I trust about a third of what I can see and less of what I can touch. This is the real shit, my friend. Abzu T. Ahmat has me on retainer to deconstruct an anti-program that's been uploaded into his personal information drive." His eyes glittered in the dark lights around us, and when he flashed his white and toothy smile, it reminded me of the way a shark's mouth looks as it's about to tear into some innocent unsuspecting baby seal. "And, now, Enoch, he's got you too, if you want to be my wingman. What do you say?"

With Randall, a job is the thing, it's the moment, the nth degree of importance, and like always, he was ready to go as soon as I didn't say 'no'. He finished his drink and we were back out onto the street again, weaving our way through the blank-eyed, faceless crowds, pressing flesh against flesh in a stinking, repulsive rush to get from one place to another. After a time, when we could no longer stand the claustrophobic sensation of being surrounded on every side, he directed us to a waiting airbus.

Up and away, like wingless birds, we took to the smoggy atmosphere. The airbus was crowded, but at least we weren't being jostled by the milling hordes on the streets below, and as long as we stayed close to the open exit we had some room between us and the body heat of others. It took a few more minutes because of switching from airbus to airbus, but it was worth it.

Soon, we were exiting the boarding platform, back to the streets. This was the part of town where the math got easier: Less crowds, because there was more creds. According to the history books uploaded to the Grid systems around the world it was once true that the wealthy and powerful among us built grand houses which stretched into the skies—three, four, five stories high—so that their very spires and turrets seemed to tickle the sky's polluted underbelly. But, now, with the Second Diaspora's lessons well learned, the wealthy and powerful constructed their great domiciles below ground. Like burrowing moles, they dug deep into the earth, away from their fellowman, away from the pollutions and refuse, away from the light.

Abzu T. Ahmat was such a burrower and his home was legendary. Over the long years, it had spread out to take up several miles of corridors and vast chambers that had been cut from solid stone. Each of the dozens of rooms were adorned and laid out with the horded treasures and the mythical art collections from museums past, which he had amassed over the many decades of his solitary, secreted existence.

We entered from above, after a well-armed trio of masked and bodysuit armored security guards checked us over for weapons and then called into some unknown denizen below about our arrival. Within moments we were guided inside a set of heavy steel doors, down a set of curved black and white marble steps into a brightly lighted chamber with a ceiling that disappeared into dimness beyond the chandeliers. The walls were hung with artwork several centuries old. I could smell mildew and wet earth; the walls glistened with subterranean dampness.

We were met a young woman who didn't smile and she led us to a waiting aircart. We boarded and she flew us without speaking upon a silent pillow of cool, metallic air, through several long corridors which were not as well lit. The stench of forgotten grottos and river dankness grew stronger as we continued to follow the stone tubeways into the heart of the earth. After a few minutes, she brought the aircart to a halt within a circular bedchamber. Its vast stone floor stretched for yards in every direction and was covered with antique multi-colored, complexly woven rugs.

The far walls were plated with many types of etched metals—bronze, iron, steel, aluminum, copper, other shiny metals I didn't recognize. Each plate was soldered securely to the one next to, above and below it. A great patchwork of shining substances.

The etched designs looked to be cabalistic, esoteric religious symbols and vast interlocking curves and points. I recognized only a few: a Hebrew Star of David, the Christian Cross, a pentagram. But there were some symbols and designs writ across those vast metallic walls which made my skin crawl for some unaccountable reason. Perhaps it was some latent primordial response system, deep in my genetics, that told me some things weren't meant to be etched for human eyes.

There were several glowing sconce lights above and on the metal walls; they seemed to flicker like low burning flames and gave off a bone deep hum.

In the center of the room was an ancient wooden four poster bed. The wood was dark and smooth, shining dimly in the dusky metal colored lights. A long flowing curtain surrounded the bed. To the right were several machines which any Gridrunner could readily recognize: a heart rate monitor, a rolling IV stand with a hanging bag of yellowish, pus-thick liquid nutrients, a long rubber tube stretching from it to the bed, and an emergency respirator system; its air tubes also snaked

inside the bilious pale curtains surrounding the bed. Beyond the diaphanous bed shroud, we could see a withered and skeletal form.

Before the bed, a standard Gridrunner's setup waited: headgear, eyegear and virtual jacks and inputs.

The young unsmiling woman waited for us to disembark the aircart, and then, still without a word, she flew away on silent air. I turned to see her disappear into the only way in or out.

Then I turned my attention to the curtain shrouded four poster bed. Beyond the curtains, I could see the still form, its chest rising up and down slowly, in rhythm to the susurrations of air flowing in and out of the airtubes. Each inhalation, exhalation was followed by a soft machine click.

Randall glanced at me, his carefully layered casual smirk slipping by degrees as the silence stretched out around us. There was only the sound of the form behind the curtain breathing steadily.

When the man's quavering voice sounded all around us from hidden speakers, it startled us both. His softly whispered words came out as a hissing, interrupted by the in-out of his machine assisted breathing. I could make out a slight accent which carried through the obvious fragility of his weakened voice, somewhat Middle-Eastern sounding. "Welcome...sshussh-sshoossh...gentlemen. I would...shussh-sshoossh...gladly offer you...sshussh-sshoossh...a drink, but...sshussh-sshoossh...as you can see...sshussh-sshoossh...I have only my bag...sshussh-sshoossh...of nutrients of which to par...sshussh-sshoossh...take."

There followed a strange wheezing noise that rasped through the cool, metallic air, which I finally recognized as his version of laughter—perhaps the only form of humor he had left in his condition.

As we stood before the curtained bed, I could begin to make out the shriveled form huddled within the mass of coverlets and blankets: an aged, sickly brown-skinned skeleton of a man, his rugous flesh pulled tight as moleskin across the emaciated frame of wretched bones, his flesh a ruined map of liver-spots and suppurating lesions.

When he finished speaking in his hushed hiss, there came another sound. It was a curiously agitated noise from the walls beyond the bed, a scraping sound, as if there were giant fingernails pressing from the other side.

I looked at my partner, but Randall seemed oblivious to it. Perhaps because his concentration, like so much of the time, was only for the

upcoming job. I had known him long enough to know that nothing but the job counted; everything else in this physical world was extraneous sensual information, meant to be processed only if it were in some way part of the gig, something that would get him back into cyberspace, to the grand and glorious dreamscape of the Grid.

But I was sure I had heard the sound and it had left me feeling rattled.

What could make such a sound this far below ground, and presumably through solid, lifeless stone and past several inches of plated metal?

But I soon observed that I was not the only one to have noticed the anomalous scraping sounds. Mr. Abzu T. Ahmat's breathing suddenly became more labored, increasing by an almost immeasurable degree, but enough that I could hear the change in rhythm in the machine noises. Also, I could see a new watchfulness to the shrunken shape behind the slightly waving curtains: glittering beetle eyes, raised gray eyebrows, a sense of anticipation.

Yes, I was sure the ancient one had heard it as well.

Randall was first to speak. "We're okay, Mr. Ahmat. But thank you for the thought in any case. If it's just the same to you, we'd like to get to work, take care of that problem you have."

"Wait a second," I found myself speaking up, "no offense, sir, but I'd like to understand this job a bit more. Could you tell me exactly what kind of anti-program you're having trouble with, sir?"

Randall gave me an annoyed sidewise glance, but remained genial for the client's sake. "Now, I don't think there's any need to—"

But Abzu T. Ahmat hissed a reply over his disputes. "Please, no... *sshuussh-sshoossh*...I think an expla...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...nation is in order...*sshuussh-sshoossh*... indeed."

One gaunt shaking hand slowly lifted from within the gossamer world behind the curtains.

"My enemies have...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...been gathering for...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...many long...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...years. Some are...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...as ancient as my...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...self."

Another rasping hush of laughter, then he continued.

"Of course there are...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...some who are...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...even more ancient...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...than I...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...I'm afraid...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...those are the...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...ones respon...*sshuussh-sshoossh*...sible for my..."

*sshuussh-sshoossh...current problems...sshuussh-sshoossh...with my library...sshuussh-sshoossh...it is infect...sshuussh-sshoossh...ed with their...sshuussh-sshoossh...poisons. I must...sshuussh-sshoossh...protect my...sshuussh-sshoossh...library...sshuussh-sshoossh...at all...sshuussh-sshoossh...costs."*

"And you need us to go in and eradicate the virus anti-program?"

The hand fell back to the bed and the breathing went on for a few moments before he replied. "In a manner...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* of speaking...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* there is more...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* than the standard...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* virus with which...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* to contend."

Impatient, Randall stepped forward, making his way to the Grid-runner equipment laid out before the bed. "Well, that's not a problem, Mr. Ahmat. I'm used to dealing with the unusual, the atypically aggressive types of programs, built by some of the best constructors in the world. I'm one of the best, if I say so myself."

"Which is...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* exactly why I...*sshuussh-sshoossh...* sent for you," Ahmat managed to hiss forth.

And as he finished, again, there came that furtive scraping sound from beyond the solid metal walls behind Ahmat's bed.

And again the ancient man's breathing sped up infinitesimally and he became more alert.

What could be behind those iron plated walls making such a sound?

Part of me wanted to leave then, walk away from the sensation of slow building doom I felt within, but I quelled the unaccountable notion and followed Randall to the equipment. I took a deep breath and began to suit up: virtual gloves, a little loose, but they would be okay; headgear, slightly cold against my flesh but a fine fit; and the eyegear last, to give form and image to the abstract fields of the Grid we were about to enter to find Ahmat's viral boogeyman.

I glanced at Randall once more, but he was intent on getting ready. So I let the eyegear slip down over my head.

Darkness.

Randall's muted voice, a childlike undercurrent of excitement, anticipation: "Enoch, here we go..."

Sounds and physical sensations recede, the real world—the one which causes pain and disappointment—falls away and I...

...become a collection of algorithms, pieced together by quantum

## The Wurms In the Grid

quarks rotating in an infinitesimal universal dance, my form now theory in practice, wholly unlike the physical feed of the real world, I am a light within a greater darkness, aware and feeling on a different level of the mental sensorium, a thing outside of light and dark now: star, sun, the ink of negative energy, the truth made unflesh...

...and now, as my mentality becomes the shape, my mold, my cohesion, I see the world within, the cyberspace, the infinity of the Grid, open up before me...

...and once again I know freedom: freedom from the drudgery of physicality, the constant streaming of audio, visual, scent, of a million tastes all colliding in a jumble, each rioting to be heard...

...the Grid waits for me in all directions in a place that has no direction, no mass, no shape...I can sense the entity Randall in a spot relating to my unposition...his voice sparkles across the Grid to me, "Look alive! I have bogeys coming in!"

...and as I attune my presence to his warning, I can sense them as well: four drone-like bulbous shapes closing in from the undirection around us...they mean to destroy us like an infection in the body of the Grid...these are not Ahmat's virus-drone-killers...they are random killers of the everyday variety...simply playthings that some enterprising Gridrunner has spewed into cyberspace for the hell of it...an unknown hacker's byblow, nothing more...

...I sense another here as well...it has the 'feel' of rancid, as if I have stuck an almost forgotten tongue to a writhing slab of cold, rotten metallic meat...it burns and freezes at the same time...coppery...salty...sour...sharp...decayed...but tastes that weren't truly tastes, more of an abstraction in my purely mental presence/state...

...and I recognize this entity as Abzu T. Ahmat...he has joined us inside the Grid...

...but that was mystery for another time...right now we had four killers...

But I have no need to worry; the Randall presence sends forth tentacles of pure energy, driven by his inner power, and the drones simply cease to exist, soundlessly and without fanfare...

...we three slip along the digital abstractions that make up the Grid...while we do, I can sense the Ahmat presence's uncontrolled energies and within them information streams into my sensorium from his hectic essence, giving me the history of his ancient enemies, the ones who have infected his secreted library, the one he holds more



dear than life itself...

...and it is Ahmat who creates the final shape of the Grid we now inhabit, perhaps because his bedroom with its protective metallic walls is the most familiar concept he can mold within the abstract, Ahmat has us in his bedroom again, we three now stand as we were before Randall pushed the button that sent us into cyberspace...there is one very big difference now, of course...Ahmat knows what lies beyond his secure metal plates of iron and steel and bronze, and now we know as well...

...they are tentacled creatures, many of them, their writhing feelers are in constant motion, a bed of crawling, living seaweed disturbed by a passing storm; they are of various sizes, from nothing larger than my physical form to great writhing beasts the size of an airbus, larger even...dark gray and green...covered in a mucus viscosity that gives their tubular forms a sickly vomituous sheen...and I can sense their rage, their hatred for the old man...these are the things which he fears behind his metal walls, these ancient monsters are his infections in his library; they've somehow jumped the barrier between the physical and mental to become Wurm horrors in both the tangible and the intangible sense of the word, these eons old snaking monstrosities haunted his every dying moment, they lived within his walls, burrowing throughout his vast underground kingdom, afraid to leave his metal walled room for fear that the Dholes of ancient Cthulhian legend, these mythological eaters of darkness and misery, that they would burst from the stony walls of his mansion, come for him... oh, why had he ever burrowed so far down, into their abysmal lair, upsetting them, his blood calling to them, their age-old hatred for all mankind, driven from their secret darkness, to the surface after all this time! kill! destroy! consume!...Magna Mater! Magna Mater!...Atys... Dia ad aghaidh 's ad aodann...agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas 's dholas ort, agus leat-sa!...Ungl...ungl...rrrlh...chchch...

...but he has made a deal with them, hasn't he?

...yes, a life for a life, yes...a special life...one of power within this new abstraction they've only just now discovered how to navigate... yes, these Dholes need one who can teach them the secrets of the Grid, how to pull down the very fabric of cyberspace...how to burrow into this new digital frontier...yes, they needed him...he of the power... he is the best...

...it takes all my concentration to break away from the whirlwind

violence of his energies, his grasping, terror-filled thoughts...I try to reach out to Randall, to snare his essence, to warn him: these creatures mean to consume us...they mean to use him...they need him to teach them how to use this cyberspace, the Grid in ways no man could ever attempt...these are not like the simplistic killer drones before...these are beasts which have learned how to exist in both states—the physical and the metaphysical—and they are ravenous!

...but Randall has immersed himself completely now, has forgotten about me, my duties to help him expunge the supposed virus in the old man's information system...he is too deep now...his entire presence, his energies, his force and will, are subsumed by the nature of the abstraction...he has become one with the Grid...I cannot send my mental shouts loudly enough to wake him from his dream within a dream...Randall sees the giant cluster of writhing Wurms, these Dholes...he sends forth his energies...the beams burst against the crawling, convulsing mass of slimy tentacles...I feel/hear/smell/taste their collective pain...their hatred rises like a tide of white hot lava...rolls towards us...Ahmat screams, his mouth stretching beyond human proportions, pure blackness flows from within him...in the last moment he knows they have cheated him...they will take him as well...make him pay for his transgressions, his metal walls, his ancient banishing symbols...Randall is laughing, drunk on his power, intoxicated by the sensation of using his energies against this new glutinous mass of jerking, snaking anti-life...their darkness calling to his own inner dark...

...I feel the darkness now, flowing from all sides, overwhelming me, pulling me under this icy roiling violence...I cannot fight it...I am...

...lost...deargodohsavemethoughiwalkthroughthevalleyoftheshadow...

...the shadow...

...the shadow...

...the shadow...

When next I awoke, I was in a small alleyway clinic, tubes and wires running into and out of my body, as the doctors attempted to save my life and my implants. Later, I found myself in a large city hospital, surrounded by machines to help me breathe and survive. I got better, but I did not speak for several days, or so I am told. Truthfully, I re-

member very little of the time following my nightmare below the city. I had visits from the authorities; they had many questions. But I had no answers. I had no remembrance of anything after Randall attacked those...those...creatures. It's all darkness and secrets, a plugged up memory river.

After a time, the investigators, the policemen, the lawyers all stopped coming around, and eventually I was released from the hospital to make my way through the wet and crowded city streets, back to my humble home.

I still have nightmares of being pulled down into pits by long, slick and slimy tentacles; they wrap around me, dragging me under. I try to sleep as little as possible now.

I haven't been able to jack-in to the Grid since then.

Every time I try, I feel the icy presence of something beyond me waiting and I have to disconnect.

And as the days pass, I become more and more used to this physical state, this flesh and bone cage of constant sensations, the stinking air, the tasteless food, the pains, the constant noise of waves of humanity moving all around me in my small apartment.

I want to leave this physical state.

Last night, I had a dream that Randall was calling for me from the Grid, his voice echoed across the half remembered vast directionless of cyberspace. He was telling me to join him...to join them. He said that he and Abzu T. Ahmat are waiting to show me something even better than the Grid. It's something new, something bigger and more consciousness-expanding.

He said the Dholes were sharing their knowledge with him, even as he shared his knowledge with their race.

He said all I have to do is go underground...that they will come to me.

And God help me, I think I'm going to do it whether I want to or not.

Because, last night, when I woke from that dream of Randall's promises...last night, when I finally came to my senses, I heard the soft scraping of something below my floor. Something was scratching at the foundation of my home.

I know what the authorities will say if I go to them for help. They will say I am imagining it. That the stress of losing my friend, the terrible pain and injuries I suffered that night, they are the cause of

## The Wurms In the Grid

my hearing these things.

Oh, but I know what those sounds mean!

I'm no fool! I know! I know!

It's them! The Wurms! The Dholes!

They're coming for me, Randall and the old man and the Dholes.

Oh, God...I must stay awake...I must...I must...yes, stay awake...

But how long can I hope to keep from sleeping?

Hours?

Days?

I am so tired. I'll have to sleep sometime.

And when I do, I know the sounds will return, those insidious scraping noises under my feet. And this time they will come for me from below, those evil, writhing, convulsing, giant Wurms, burrowing underground, burrowing through the Grid.

God help us all. God save us from the Wurms in the Grid.

# Symbiosis

By William Meikle

I tongued the switch in the palate implant and tasted pus at the back of my throat. The side eye-bar came up opaque rather than translucent. It was already unreadable while walking around, and now it had started to fade in and out of focus.

*It's not going to last much longer.*

And when it went, that would be it for me, my last link to the glittering prizes severed. I can't say I was too surprised. I had already fallen most of the way down; one final step wasn't going to change matters any.

I had picked my way through the discarded garbage on the tunnel floor for half an hour to get here. I hadn't been in the station since the Metro closed down fifteen years ago, but it still smelled like piss and shit; it was just less well lit now. My contact had told me to go to the far end of the platform and wait. So I waited. If the implant had been working it wouldn't have been so bad as I'd have at least had access to some waves, but left to my own devices I jumped at every movement, every shadow.

*And people used to live like this all the time?*

I forced myself to stand my ground. I was about to give up everything I had on a *Hail Mary* deal to get me back on the ladder. I couldn't fuck this up.

To say that I was a survivor of the '59 crash would be disingenuous. It's true that I still had a job twenty four hours after the magnetic pulse from the sun wiped out ninety percent of the infrastructure without warning, but I was still a victim; it just took longer for me to fall.

*But I'm here now.*

From where I stood I could see the tower where I used to spend my life; a needle like pinnacle, a fuck-you monument to the first half of the century when things were, if not exactly rosy, at last comfortable. Some, a few of my co-workers were still there, still sorting data and disseminating it to anyone who would pay. Me, I was down with

the dispossessed, hustling dream juice on corners and looking for an angle.

Tonight was the night it was all going to change for the better.

I first heard about the *biotes* in a bar down by the docks. Biotech at the cutting-edge, untested but already on sale if you knew who to ask. The *biotes* were said to be a genetically-engineered variant on the flatworm – only bigger, uglier and much more useful. They remember things. The chemicals in their bodies are analogous to the enzymes and neural transmitters of the human brain. They sit on the back of your neck, feeder slipped painlessly into the bloodstream, sensor into the medulla oblongata, and they feed...on blood and memories. Then there's the thing I was interested in; the by-product that only became apparent when you moved them between hosts. The *biotes* would keep feeding; but it was a two way process, and the original host's memories became accessible...to anyone with the money to pay for them.

I'd placed an order last week. I knew that there was an unwilling host involved, some poor sap, a wave trader pulled from his place in the scheme of things, fitted with a *biote* in some dark room for a week then discarded. I was trying not to think of him – survival of the fittest and all that happy shit. All I wanted was the chance for a step back on the ladder.

I was close to giving up when a shuffling figure appeared at the far end of the platform. At first I took him for a subway mole, but when he got closer I recognised my contact. Or rather, I didn't recognise him; the hard street-smart man I'd done business with the week before had gone, replaced by a zoned out moist-eyed loser. Too much dream-juice was my best guess, but I was past caring about others' predicaments. I held out my hand and he flash-swiped his payment. Just like that, everything I owned was gone. In exchange he handed over a moist lump of what felt like fresh beef and turned away.

"Hey wait. What do I do now?"

He turned back, slowly, as if moving underwater.

"Slap it on the back of your neck. And wait."

That was all the instruction I got, but as it turned out, it was all I needed.

~\*~

Slapping it on the back of my neck was the easy part. In retro-

spect I should have waited until I got back to the fifty cubic-foot box I called home, but having paid my money, I took my chance. As I've said, it felt like a chunk of meat, but it was strangely warm to the touch, and a ripple ran through it as I lifted it behind my head. I felt the feeder needle slide in, moist heat at the nape of my neck.

Then I went away.

*My head swam, and it seemed as if the walls of the subway melted and ran, receding into a great distance until there was little more than a pinpoint of light in a blanket of darkness. I was alone, in a vast cathedral of emptiness where nothing existed save the dark and a pounding beat from below.*

*Shapes moved in the dark, wispy shadows with no substance, shadows that capered and whirled as their dance grew ever more frenetic. I tasted salt water in my mouth, and was buffeted, as if by a strong, surging tide, but as the beat grew ever stronger I cared little. I gave myself to it, lost in the dance, lost in the dark.*

I came back lying in my box with no memory of having got there. I tongued the palate implant but nothing happened. Seems it wasn't just me that had *gone away*. My mind felt *heavy* with too much crammed in and too little space to accommodate it. I presumed that's what caused my blackout. I'd been warned there would be a period of *assimilation*; it was just a matter of riding it out until the new memories fused with my own. I counted myself lucky that instinct had brought me *home* – not for the first time either. Dream juice and I were old friends, and blackouts nothing new in my experience.

I had started to prepare for sleep when the first of the new memories *clicked* into place. I was on a beach, it was sunny, and there was a blonde at my side. None of these three were mine, but I had them now. I settled down and waited for more, happy in the knowledge that I'd spent my money well.

Over the next two weeks I *remembered* all the details of where to get the latest waves, how to pull them, and who would pay for them. I also knew who would pay highly for my new skills. I borrowed a suit from my last friend, had a shave, and took to the spire. An hour later I left with a job but more than that, I was back in the game, back on the ladder.

Soon I was able to leave the box and move into an apartment on the thirtieth floor; still some way below where I once had been, but more than adequate – for now. My *donor* proved to have been nearly

as good as me at identifying the high-rollers, and soon I had new clients, new credits rolling in on an hourly basis.

The dreams were a small price to pay, but they were becoming alarmingly more frequent and of longer duration each night, always the same ocean depths, always the dance in the dark.

I started to fear sleep. It got to the stage where, despite having been given dire warnings against trying, I attempted to remove the *biote*. I only tried once, but that was enough. At the first hint of a tug I was fed a new memory, a flash so vivid that it left me panting and sweaty for an hour. It is hard to describe what I saw in my mind; a rolling chaos where souls screamed, a city of stone in the deep blue yonder whose angles and geometry seemed somehow *wrong*, and the impression of movement as something stirred.

It left me nauseous and unwilling to try again.

But the dreams would not leave me alone. I took to other, extreme, forms of self-medication in an attempt to drown out the dream-time thoughts but that only served to dull my daytime mind to the extent that I started losing touch on the very job I'd given so much to attain.

Something had to give...and two weeks into the job matters came to a head.

I woke in the morning, not in my shiny new apartment block, but back in the box under the overpass. My hands were dirty, fingernails torn to the quick, and my shoulders ached as if I'd spent the night doing bench presses. Worse than that though, it felt like I had lost the *biote* as I couldn't feel the weight of it at my neck. A couple of probes with trembling hands proved me false – it was still there, but it was smaller, strangely shrunken and deflated. Even as I prodded at it I felt it suck at me, and swell beneath my fingers as it fed.

I managed to get home, cleaned up and into work only a few minutes late, but all morning I noticed I was drawing stares from the others around me. I wasn't fitting in, wasn't part of the crowd. If I wasn't careful I'd be on that downward slope again all too soon.

I decided attack was the best policy. I got my work out of the way quickly, making enough credits that I could afford a few hours on my own time. I used it in searching for anything and everything known about the *biotes*.

It didn't take long.

I already knew it was genetically engineered. The fact that the source material was a mixture of flatworm and a strange tar-like



substance found in Antarctica seemed neither here nor there. What did have me worried was that I could find no indication on any of the waves of the *biotes* patents. If they were to be brought into the mainstream, the paperwork should have been filed, the science should have been peer-reviewed, and federal approved medical tests would have been done. There was nothing.

I did find details on the initial research team. But the six scientists involved had all fallen off the grid, lost down a rabbit hole. All that remained of that research were scattered reports from ground level of how to buy the things on the black market; but I knew that already too.

There was only one further item of interest, but that was the one that had me worried. There were no waves, anywhere, from anyone attached to a *biote*. Either I had the only one left in existence...or something was happening to everyone else in my situation. I didn't particularly like either option.

~\*~

The next night I took precautions before sleep. The *biote* might be in control of some of my memories, but I was in control of the pharmacology. I had more than enough experience to dose myself just enough to maintain a semi-waking state. I kept my day-clothes on and lay down on the bed.

I didn't have to wait long.

Although I could still see the walls of the room and the lights of the city beyond the balcony, I could also see dim shadows, dancing in the deep blue of some distant ocean. I felt the allure of the dance, felt the compulsion take me as I rose from the bed. I tried to fight it, but the *biote* had full control of my motor functions. I was a mere passenger as we went out of the apartment, down the elevator, and back to the places I had worked so hard to escape.

We went deep, down into the old subway to where dream-weed and sex are currency and the high pinnacle of commerce above is a mythic realm talked of only in whispers if at all. By now I saw others walking around me, all slack-eyed and slightly stiff in their movements, as if unused to their own limbs. The tell tale bulge under their clothes at the neck told me that I had definitely been wrong about being the only *biote* carrier in existence. The fact that scores of us walked ever

deeper into the subway did little to quell a growing apprehension.

When we finally stopped I realized I knew where I had been brought. We were in the deepest station of the old system, the one directly under the base of the towering spire. It had been abandoned even before the flare knocked the old-world to hell, the tube superseded by the above ground walkways. Things had been left to fester down here.

And it was immediately obvious that when we had moved out, something else had moved in. I felt it, a thumping rhythm in my head and gut, the beat of the dance in which we were held.

I was given no time to think. My *biote* took me into the main hall of the station and to where a wall of rubble marked where a tunnel had once been. I was put to work, and no amount of pushing mentally against the control had any effect. I shifted rubble and moved rock until I was too tired to do any more. My legs moved me to one side and a tall chap in a very expensive suit that was soon to be ruined took my place.

Tiredness washed over me, and I let the *biote* have its way. I fell into blackness where there was only the dance, the beat, and dancing shadows.

~\*~

I woke back in the box, once again with clothes and hands in a state of disrepair. The *biote* also seemed to have suffered, being once more strangely limp and smaller than before. It quickly fed and became plump again, leaving me feeling drained and more than slightly *violated*.

I made my way back to the apartment, more aware than ever of the contrast between the depths and the heights. I got more strange looks when I finally got to work, but I was past caring by now. This had to stop before I was dragged back down.

The waves were little to no help. Whatever the *biotes* were up to, it wasn't on the radar of anyone that mattered up here. There was only one further snippet of information, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it. Apparently the material from Antarctica that had gone into the *biotes* making was rather mysterious in itself, being capable of a degree of primitive intelligence and showing social interactions when in close contact with more of its kind. There was even a name

for it, one that sounding outlandish to my modern mind. They called it *Shoggoth*.

I was getting nowhere. I considered informing the authorities, such as they existed, but I knew well the futility of trying to get the system involved in anything *from below*. I may as well ask for the moon.

It quickly became a moot point anyway.

I came awake with a start, sitting at my desk and staring at a set of wave results I had no memory of compiling. What I did remember, and what was still offering me its seductive emptiness, was that I had been drifting, there in the blue beyond, dancing with the shadows. And, truthfully, at that precise moment I preferred there to here. I had to force my attention back to the job at hand, and it didn't help to find that I had *seemed* to be awake and answering questions all the time I had been lost in the dance. Doug who worked two cubes over even complimented me on a particularly fine confluence of waves I – or rather the *biote* – had sent over the air.

The *biote* was getting stronger. If anything could be done it would have to be soon.

I dug deeper, looking for possible connections. Aside from the disappearance of people with *biotes* I looked into other cases of people going off-grid, judging that there might be many who had got attached to a *biote* without telling anyone or having it noticed.

That's when the numbers started to frighten me; there were more than a thousand on that list, and a time-trend analysis showed the number to be growing at an exponential rate. When I cross-referenced my findings to a search of bodies found below there was a one-to-one correlation; people get a *biote*, people go missing a few weeks later, people turn up dead and used-up a month or so after that.

~\*~

I resorted to more pharmacology, upping the dosage in an attempt to gain some kind of control over the *biote's* activities. All I achieved was a clearer look at what was happening to me.

It started in the same manner as the night before; a call to action that I could not ignore as the *biote* took control of my faculties. My newly drugged state allowed me only a small amount of resistance, enough to make the walk down to the deeps drag, but not enough to stop the descent.

Once again I was led to the deepest level in the old station under the spire. Work had obviously been continuing with some pace since my last visit. The blocked tunnel was almost clear, and even under the *biote's* control as I was, I smelled fresh air coming through from the other side; salty air.

The pull of the dance was much stronger now, and it was all I could do to resist its charms. I forced myself to remain aware as my body went to work shifting rock and rubble. After a time tiredness inevitably set in, but rather than give in to it, the drugs allowed me to watch.

My *biote* split with a moist tear I felt rather than heard. Half of its bulk fell to the ground at my feet and started to *slither* away, heading down into the depths of the newly opened tunnel. And deep in the tunnel something huge moved and trembled in anticipation.

It is hard to explain this next part; I have trouble coming to terms with it myself. But part of me was slithering down the dark tunnel with the *biote*, part of my consciousness, my soul if you will, sucked out, stolen and taken down into the dark. And as I slithered there, others slithered with me, tens of us, all intent on one task, like spermatozoa after a vast egg.

We found it in the bottom foundations of the spire, sprawled there like a huge cephalopod, tentacles wrapped around the columns that sustained the mighty works of men, a vast corpulent body shivering as we surged in joy and were assimilated, into the soft darkness, into the dance.

~\*~

I woke back in the box in the morning, but there was now a curious doubling sensation; part of me was still down there, with the dweller in the darkness, dancing in the dark, perfectly at peace.

I considered making my way back to the office, but in truth I knew it was futile.

The dance will have me one way or the other. This way at least I get a choice in the matter.

Now excuse me, the man ahead has become tired. It is my turn to dig.

# PLAYGROUNDS OF ANGOLA LAND

By David Conyers

## *1. Shog City Blues*

**W**hen the white noise ended, a mind rebooted its normal post-human stream of consciousness. Then the mind remembered who he was.

“Roy Dollarman, I hope we didn’t inconvenience you...too much.”

He tugged at hands bound behind his back. His face stung. Even though the bruises were healing fast, they tingled where the man in the leather overcoat before him had punched him earlier.

Dollarman rattled his binders. “Actually, I’m still inconvenienced. Let me out of these things, then we can talk like civilized men?”

“You’re not civilized, Dollarman.”

He took in his surroundings. Standing behind the man were two women. One was tall and thin, with cyber-limbs like poles instead of arms and legs. The other was shorter, more human in appearance, until she stepped from the shadows and the circuitry etched across her face and hands became apparent. Dollarman presumed the rest of her body was similarly modified, and wondered how much it would hurt if he peeled the circuitry from her skin, one strand at a time, and if she would stop screaming long before the blood loss killed her, or, if she would hold out until the very end. Despite their mods, both women were stunners. But who wasn’t these days?

He tugged at his bindings again. “I guess I’m not civilized.”

“We only wanted to talk, Bullet Boy. You were the fucker who lost his temper and picked a fight.”

Dollarman remembered how he had come to be here. He’d been drinking vodka swirls at *Androgo Chen’s*, another night intoxicated, in hope of eradicating from his mind the horrors he’d seen and killed in Africa. The man in the overcoat had tapped Dollarman on the shoulder, rather hard, to get his attention. Dollarman had thrown a

fist and before he knew it, they were fighting. Then pole-limbed girl and half-dozen hired muscles pinned Dollarman. When the white-noise generator hood was forced onto his head, his mind went offline.

"Where are we?" he asked as he detected a gentle sway to their motion, as his Russian milsec neural implants did their job. "No, don't tell me. Judging by the rocking, I'd say we're on a vacuum dirigible?" The two women looked at each other, and he knew then that he'd guessed correctly. "You've warmed this room, but there are leaks, from a cold world outside. That, combined with the spin forces of the planet that I'm not experiencing, I'd say we're in one of the poles. Since I'm not detecting any salt in the air we have to be over land, so this is Antarctica."

"He's good," said pole-limbed girl.

"He should be," said the man in the overcoat. "He's an ex-AusCybermerc, a veteran of the Angolaland Wars."

"So fucked up then?" quipped circuitry girl.

"Who isn't these days?"

Dollarman coughed. "What do you freaks want from me? I'm not dead, so I'm presuming I'm still of use."

The man paced, massaged the pointy beard protruding from his pointy chin. "The name is Rushmech-Peel. I'm what you call, in the trade, a fixer. I make things happen. The cyber-enhanced one over there is Zechal.biz. She used to be a corporate extractor, but now she's a paramilitary contractor like the rest of us, and she's very good with small arms and explosives. Annalisa is our netrunner, uploaded with the latest Yithian temporal hacks secured from the Quantum-Comp markets in downtown Sydney.

"So, you guys are pulling together a team."

"Exactly!" Rushmech-Peel emphasized. "We've got a job to do. It's dangerous. It's also highly illegal. It also pays extremely well. We're looking for a soldier-of-fortune of your caliber, enhanced, but not too tentacle-fucked up to be a liability."

"Remember, he's had shoggoth gene-therapy," offered Annalisa.

"Maybe, but he's still human, from what I can see."

"What's a shoggoth?" asked Zechal.biz.

"Amoral shape-changing killing machines that the Elder Things, the original builders of Shog City, created hundreds of millions of years ago. Some shoggoths still survive in the lowest levels."

"Why would I be interested in joining you anyway?" Dollarman asked.

Rushmech-Peel paced. “Well, firstly you are broke and unemployed, a situation that seems unlikely to change in the short term. But mostly because we’re going up against the Centaurus Corporation, that’s why.”

Dollarman knew Centaurus well. They owned Shog City, and fought constant covert military wars with their main competitor, Westmorton Global, for control of all the alien tech secrets the city promised. They were also the megacorp who had sent him into Angolaland to die in the first place. A merc fighting to secure Centaurus business interests in Southern Africa, protecting robofactories that had cost the lives of thousands to defend.

“I’m interested.”

Rushmech-Peel snapped his fingers and the binders fell away. Dollarman brought his hands forward then rubbed them. But they didn’t hurt from abrasion, they had healed already. Shoggoth regenerative gene therapy did that to a man, but this was a benefit with many downsides.

He stood, walked to the wall window Rushmech-Peel and his companions were now staring out of. Laid out in its glorious stone and icy splendor was Shog City, the largest, hardest-assed metropolis of the Antarctic Militarized Trade Zones. The air was buzzing with thousands of vacuum dirigibles and surface-to-orbit rapid transporters. In the city itself, lights shone with every neon color, while a soft, putrid blue glow oozed from much lower down.

Shog City was supposed to be an amalgamation of human-alien architecture, half of it one hundred years old, the other one billion. Staring at it now, Dollarman couldn’t work out where one style ended and the next one began.

“Centaurus found something in the deepest levels of the Old City,” Rushmech-Peel now used a very different tone and accent than what he had been using only moments before. “It’s something that could make Centaurus very rich, but could also make the world highly unstable. I don’t want that to happen, but to stop them. I need to steal what they want first, to understand what we are dealing with.”

“You in?” asked Annalisa, who’d crept up to Dollarman’s side and placed an arm on his shoulder. He took a moment to take her in. She was not inflicted with tendril syndrome, which was on the rise these days. None of them seemed to be. That would make things easier, because tendril syndrome drove its victims mad with hallucinations

of Old Man Cthulhu.

"I get it. You want me to be the muscle. The one that actually goes in and steals this 'something', don't you?"

"He catches on quick," said Zechal.biz.

He looked at the second woman more closely. She was definitely the looker. Her bodysuit left nothing to the imagination concerning her curves and the shape of her breasts, except that he couldn't work out where her chrome ended and the flesh began. Sometime in the future he'd have to see what she looked like with no clothes on.

"You in?" asked Annalisa. The netrunner was smiling now, because she knew she had him.

"A chance to go up against Centaurus, after what they did, of course I am."

### *2. Push the Button*

When the smoke cleared and the last of the dead bodies ceased twitching, Dollarman reloaded his 8mm gauss rifle with a fresh magazine of depleted Yuggothian rounds. The place where a Centaurus bullet had pierced his thigh was already healing, and the hurt had lessened significantly. He was designed to sustain that kind of damage. Rushmech-Peel, however, was not.

>I told you getting out of here was going to be tougher than getting in,< Dollarman repeated over their secure neural comms.

>You don't say, Bullet Boy?< Rushmech-Peel lifted his lightning pistol, electrocuted the latest Centaurus security officer who thought he could take them down.

>Let me worry about the muscle. You worry about focusing on what we came for.<

Rushmech-Peel nodded, stared up at a neural mainframe with no biologically or electrotech interfaces to the Solar Wide Web, hence their being forced to physically extract the information they required. Dollarman didn't like the look of the biomachine. There were humans, or remains of humans, twisted into the cabling and framing architecture, and other creatures he didn't wish to begin imagining where they might have come from.

>The security on that thing must be unbelievable?<

>You betcha it is, smartass. Shoggoth.exe files, deliberate logic loops that trap you in the virtual levels of R'lyeh, and mutagenic five-



dimensional body folders, for a start.<

>So you know what you're doing?<

>Relax Dollarman. Does a slot girl know how to give virtual pleasure? I'm using Annalisa's Yithian temporal hacks.<

>Yithian what?<

>Temporal hacks.< Rushmech-Peel was already interfacing with the mainframe. Silver tendrils embedded themselves into his skin, talked to the neural signals firing up and down his arms. >Quantum entanglement means that on an informational level, we can go back in time before the passwords were set, access the CPU this way.<

More security detail appeared. Dollarman let rip another volley of depleted Yuggothian rounds until there were no men standing and the wall behind them was nearly disintegrated. The muzzle flashes would have blinded had he not been wearing anti-flash eyelids that blinked with each illumination.

>You nearly done, Rushmech-Peel, because they're nearly done with not being strategic about this?<

>I'm done,< he said as the silvery tendrils disengaged. The human componentry of the biomachine, with mouths still able to speak, sighed, as if a great weight had been lifted off their minds, or a great pain had been taken from them.

They sprinted through the Centaurus data center's corridors in the most direct route to the outside that their navfinders could identify. After a few short gunplay exchanges, the two men were back on the ice on the outer edge of Shog City. The sky above was a purple red, denoting sunrise. They kept running.

Ten minutes later, when they reached the upper edge of the ice shelf, they saw the frigid Antarctic Ocean swell, rolling in thunderous wave motions from here to the horizon.

>Are you sure about this, Bullet Boy?<

Dollarman didn't feel that question deserved an answer, not now when Centaurus goons were fast approaching on sky-tanks and H<sub>2</sub>-rocket packs.

He flicked the safety switch on the detonator fastened to his forearm. >I take it you're wearing your heatsuit?<

>Of course.<

Dollarman pushed the button. The ice made thunderous, cracking noises where explosives had been laid earlier by Zechal.biz. There was a sudden jolt, then ten million cubic meters of ice shelf dropped into

the ocean, carrying Dollarman and Rushmech-Peel with it. The world became a confusion of vaporizing white and tumbles in a falling world until the ocean swallowed them.

When they hit the water their heatsuits boiled on the outside while becoming rigid protective shells where they needed to be. Ice couldn't crush when it vaporized or liquefied before it got anywhere close, and if it did, their armor was strong enough to resist most battering.

Breathing apparatus secured, they swam to the minisub where Zechal.biz was waiting.

>Good job, Roy,< were the only words Rushmech-Peel said on the swim back. He was using his second voice again.

### *3. Resemblance of Pleasure*

Miskatonic District was the red-light pleasure center where Shog City citizens went to pay for prostitutes, to die, or biomorph into something else before they died. Gambling dens and brothels lined the streets. Gigantic exhaust vents from neighboring industrial plants kept the District warm. Zechal.biz liked to walk the stone roads a billion years in the making, stare at the less fortunate than her: the offering girls in their bubble spheres; Cthulhumancers predicting the return of another R'lyeh Singularity Event; or creatures of indeterminate gender inflicted with tendril syndrome. A three-eyed man dressed in eldritch chrome used the tentacle growths around his mouth to feed himself a dumpster secured meal that looked like fresh meat. He wouldn't stop staring at Dollarman with one of his eyes as they passed.

Dollarman didn't like Miskatonic District. He only joined Zechal.biz on these walks because it was preferable to being cooped up in the apartment their team shared.

"Why do you cry in the night?" Zechal.biz asked as she wrapped her arms around his. Her chrome limbs were cold like ice, and hard like diamondware. He wondered if he could crush them with his own hands, and would her metal feel the same pain that her flesh experienced?

"I don't cry."

She made a face. "Of course not. You're a man."

He said nothing. He wasn't in the mood for conversation.

"What are the Playgrounds of Angolaland?"

He disentangled himself from her rigid grip. "I've got a better idea. Let's talk about Rushmech-Peel."

She shrugged, nonplused. "Who do you want to talk about? Rushmech or Peel?"

"What?"

"Surely you know already? They're two different people. No? Major Harrison Peel is a memory from the early Twenty-First Century. Rushmech found his datafile by chance. When he realized Peel had journeyed into the very depths of Shog City before it was corrupted by," she waved her arms to encompass the world, "humanity... Well, let's just say Peel found something down there that Rushmech now wants."

"So Rushmech downloaded Peel's mind into his own?"

"Not mind, memory. Back in the 21s they didn't have neural electro Yuggothian mind links, although Peel might have been some kind of prototype."

"But Peel's memory surfaces from time to time. Sometimes Rushmech is..."

"Nice?"

He nodded.

"That's Peel talking. And the personalities didn't merge. They fight each other constantly to be in control. They share each other's memories though, so both now know what's down there." He eyes lowered, and Dollarman realized that she was indicating what lay far beneath the ancient stone. "Peel, and Rushmech, both say that what's below will change the world."

"And you believe them?"

"I don't give a fuck if it does or does not, so long as I'm getting paid."

"So what did we steal from Centaurus then?"

"A detailed map of the lower levels, so Peel can show us exactly how to get to the location with the alien-tech they want."

Dollarman stopped, stared when he spied a man taking a woman from behind, a public performance of sexual intercourse. They were both grunting hard, and he couldn't be certain if either of their grunts were from pleasure or pain, or both. Perhaps it was just an act to lure them into the brothels, a resemblance of pleasure.

"You like that kind of thing?" Zechal.biz asked. Her arm linked again in his.

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“Not like that.”

“Like what then? You want to fuck me?”

“No!” He turned to her. “What did you say?”

Zechal.biz undid her coat, let it fall away. She slipped from her bodysuit, dropped it in a pool of muddy, festering water. When she was naked he saw that her arms and legs were indeed chrome, twisted with coils of flesh like Celtic knots until one transformed into the other. She was slim, with round, pointy breasts, and nipples that protruded like tiny red telescope domes on a flesh made mountain. Her dark pubic hair grew, or was shaved, into a v-shape so it looked like a smile. He became aroused.

“You could fuck me right here, if you want to. I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Don’t you care?”

“Care about what?”

“This, all this?” He pointed to the corner of the world they were exploring. Miskatonic District was a sickness, but its infection spread further than its municipal boundaries.

“Let me show you something.” Her clothes forgotten, she laced their arms again, and they set off. “What happened in Playgrounds of Angolaland, Dollarman?”

His stomach churned at the thought of what he had witnessed so long ago. He had never slept peacefully after his experience in Africa. His dreams had become too vivid, too polluted with war-induced horrors.

“Are you afraid to tell me?”

“Babies, toddlers, thousands of them. Fields of young children dead or dying, where they had been abandoned. Some had just been born. In Africa, at least in Angolaland, humanity had given up, even about caring for their young.”

“And that worries you?”

He wanted to be sick, because she didn’t understand. “Those people just didn’t care anymore. I care about that.”

She laughed at him. “You’re a dying breed, Dollarman. I think that’s why I like hanging out with you, because you’re different.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Did you do anything about it?”

He hung his head. “No!”

“Can’t change change. Even if you tried, people would have kept

on doing it. It's the way of the world now."

She led him into a side street. He could hear whimpering, soft and mournful. Suddenly he was back in Africa, because he recognized the same cries for help.

"Open a dumpster."

He stared at the closest, rusted metal container. Its weight felt oppressive this close.

"No."

She flung it open. Now that she had, he couldn't help himself, but stare inside. He saw what he expected to see, hundreds of tiny human corpses, some fresh and some rotten. He could still hear the whimpers of a kid still alive in there somewhere.

"It's not just Angolaland, Bullet Boy, it's the whole world. You going to save the one that is still alive? Redeem yourself?"

Dollarman turned and puked into the gutter.

"Admit it. You're just like the rest of us."

She was right, because he fled from her, and the dumpster, and the wails begging for help that he would never give.

#### *4. Depend on the Morning Sun*

Zechal.biz squealed when her mini-smilodon sunk its teeth into the throat of Rushmech-Peel's competing cat. The mini-replicator had been included with their apartment's entertainment units, and the two had enjoyed endless hours recreating extinct mouse-sized animals to kill all over again.

When smilodon blood splashed across the face of an unsuspecting Annalisa, she screamed through gritted teeth then stormed from the room, knocked over a vase in her rush. Bored with the blood sports, Dollarman followed her onto the balcony. Zechal.biz and Rushmech-Peel didn't seem to notice them leave.

After his experiences in Miskatonic District, he'd forgotten that the outside world was cold. This was the South Pole, after all. There was still a lot of ice down here, despite the world turning hothouse beyond the Antarctic Circle.

Annalisa had cleaned her face. She now lit up a cigarette, stared at the purple, red and blue sunset streaked by ripples of wispy clouds.

"It's beautiful," he said absentmindedly.

She looked to him. "I didn't think you noticed those kinds of

things?”

“Of course I do. You think I’m like them.” He nodded towards the other half of their team, lost to their macabre excitement.

Annalisa’s gaze returned to the horizon. She sucked in a long drag of nicotine laced vapor. “It’s the one thing that hasn’t changed, in all these...”

“Were you going to say ‘years’ or ‘decades,’ No? Something longer? How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“You look thirty.”

“Physically, I am thirty. Chronologically, not including temporal displacements caused by residue leakages from the last R’lyeh Singularity Event, I’m one-hundred-and-nineteen.”

“Wow.”

“The oldest person you know, right?”

“Actually, I was thinking with that skin circuitry of yours, you’d have to be much younger.”

“This is new cyber-implants, or newish. It keeps the flesh alive when I’m integrated with the Solar Wide Web. It’s got curved circuitry to stop roaming Tindalos hounds from taking body possession while I’m away.”

Dollarman shrugged. He wanted to tell her she sounded angry, but found himself liking her because she was. Anger was an emotion he could relate to. “What did the world used to be like?”

“Quieter. Nicer.” She turned to him with a venomous stare. “You know we’re doing this mission to make a better world? What’s down there could make space-time unstable, if not handled properly. But it could make a whole lot of lives nicer.”

Dollarman laughed. “When I’m talking to Peel, I believe it. When Rushmech is in control, as he is now, I feel like we’re wasting our time.”

“The mission object is always the same.”

He shrugged again.

“Or are you like the rest of them, Dollarman, only in it for yourself?” She flicked her finished cigarette into the void, watched its dying embers dragged away by the Antarctic winds.

He leant against the railing, looked westward because the beauty of the closest solar mass was distracting him. “Admittedly, I originally joined for the opportunity to get even with Centaurus.”

“And?”

He didn't answer her.

"What did Centaurus do to you?"

He remembered the Playgrounds of Angolaland, and wished he hadn't. Centaurus had been in control there, and for a long time Dollarman believed it was the megacorp's fault the small African country was so fucked up. Now he wasn't so sure.

"They opened my eyes," he said.

"To how the world really is?"

He nodded. "I don't want to look at this world anymore. Everything is sick, and uncaring. I want to see something new." He considered what this world might look like through the eyes of a man who didn't share his genetic ancestry with an amorphous, salivating killing machine.

Then, for the first time since his extraction into Shog City, he witnessed a genuine smile. "Amen to that, brother."

"What does that mean?"

Her smile was lost. "Never mind." Her eyes glazed and the circuitry took control of her body. She was left standing like an unstable mannequin droid. It would have been so easy to topple her over the edge, watch her rigid form tumble three hundred stories into the billion year old sublevels.

And then she was talking to him again. "I got the call. The Yugoslavian gravity ship is secured. We move tomorrow."

### *5. The Archive at the End of the World*

Dollarman and Zechal.biz leapt from the gravity ship, held stationary five hundred kilometers above the white-green mass of Antarctica. Although it was impossible to see, a spinning monofilament descended before them.

Just before they hit atmosphere the carbon-nanotube cables suspending them decelerated their fall, until they were descending at a safe speed towards Shog City. When they were less than five hundred meters from the Earth, well within breathable atmospherics, Dollarman thought they were going to hit the stone roofing too fast, and not make it. Then the spinning monofilament did its duty and carved a hole in the ancient stone for them to fall through.

The monofilament kept turning and cutting, collapsing level after level. The surprised Centaurus security detail who had survived their

intrusion occasionally fired upon Dollarman and Zechal.biz. But the two intruders were dropping fast, and in most instances were gone before they were properly noticed.

A kilometer and a half underground it was pitch-black. The only illumination came from their headlamps. Dollarman suspected it would have been extremely cold too, were they not protected by vac suits.

They slowed when they reached the rubble collected from the many floors punctured above them. For a moment, they hung suspended, on a rope stretching half a megameter above them.

"No one knows what lives down here, Dollarman." Zechal.biz sounded uncharacteristically afraid. Despite her nerves she detached from the cable, clambered onto stone slabs shaped like coins for giants. Dollarman joined her.

"We'll be quick then."

A call came through on their neural comms. >Bullet Boy, Twist-Top, you made it okay?<

>Roger that,< Dollarman called back.

He could hear Rushmech-Peel's labored breath. The two personalities were again fighting for control. Today, unfortunately, Rushmech was winning.

>Good. No mucking around down there. Follow these coordinates.< A virtual path ahead appeared on their head-up displays.

It took fifteen minutes to descend the mountain of rubble before they reached solid stone flooring. It was only then that Dollarman realized that the hairs on the back of his neck were tingling, and his stomach felt like a tight black knot. And yet, he couldn't help feeling that he had come home.

"You hear that?" he asked Zechal.biz.

"What? I hear nothing."

"Exactly."

He fired sonar pulses. They came back, eventually. The closest wall was three hundred meters distant in the direction they were headed. The roof was at least four hundred meters above them. Some pulses didn't come back at all.

"Let's keep moving."

Rushmech-Peel's directions took them to a portal which led to a twisty corridor with many offshoots, and ramps leading up and down, never stairs. They could only ever see a dozen meters in front of them



at most, which meant they had to rely on the HUD virtual overlays to give them any sense of an idea as to what lay down here.

>You were here, weren't you Peel, all those centuries ago?<

There was no answer.

Zechal.biz stumbled. Although she quickly regained her composure, and acted like nothing had happened, Dollarman had never seen her stumble before. She said nervously, "What the Yog are we doing here, Bullet Boy? This place gives me the creeps."

"Getting rich. Just focus on that. We'll be out of here soon enough."

>This is the place,< Rushmech-Peel interrupted, betraying that he had heard Dollarman's last observation and chosen not to respond.

>Let's take a look, shall we?<

>You mean DM and I take a look, and you stay cushy in low orbit.<

>Just do the job you're being paid for, Twist-Top. And quit complaining.<

Dollarman fired up the floodlights on his vac suit. The chamber was larger than he expected, the ceiling some ten meters above them. It was long and narrow, like archives, and this is exactly what it was. He looked to where the light ran out, counted millions of arm sized cylinders between him and the darkness. They couldn't carry them all out. Twenty was the plan, but that was all they needed, for now.

Not wishing to remain a moment longer, he and Zechal.biz went to work. They grabbed cylinders at random because there was no other way. He noted that each cylinder was decorated with pentagrams with dot arrangements. This was Pentapod writing, the aliens who had constructed Shog City and were now long gone. Dollarman was more interested in the stylized maps that accompanied the writing. Each had a single dot indicating a point on the globe. Some of those maps looked like the Earth, only grossly altered from what the world looked like today. Then he realized these were maps of the Earth in the past. It made sense. The Pentapods, or Elder Things as they were sometimes called, had been living down here from one billion to fifty million years ago. That was a lot of time to catalogue the history of the Earth.

Zechal.biz screamed. Then her comms went dead.

Dollarman turned just fast enough to see a black, oily wall of eye and mouth matter tear off each of her biomech limbs, one by one, unraveling the curled flesh and circuitry before her fleshy portions disappeared into its individual mouths. The creature resembled a wall of polluted water, but it was solid enough to hold its shape, rippled

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like a jelly with tentacles, talons, organs and sensory appendages bobbing up and down in a wave motion. Some of its mouths were larger than him.

He knew what it was: a shoggoth.

He waited for it to take him, because there was nothing to be gained from running from a creature with its speed. There was no point fighting it either. Even with depleted Yuggothian rounds he would barely sting a monster of its size, with its regenerative powers. So he closed his eyes, and tried to think of a memory that made him like himself.

In the end the shoggoth didn't take him. It slurped across the wall, around and over Dollarman creating a cavern of fleshy moving parts until it was gone.

Dollarman grabbed ten cylinders and fled.

>Roy? What's going on down there?< It was Annalisa.

>A fucking shoggoth, that's what!<

>You okay?<

He grunted that he was.

>You got the cylinders?< asked Rushmech-Peel.

He grunted another affirmative. >It took Zechal.biz though.<

There was laughter from Rushmech-Peel.

>It's not funny!< Dollarman was trembling now. He hadn't been this scared since...he did think of Playgrounds of Angolaland, but this was worse.

>Why do you think we hired you, Dollarman?< Rushmech-Peel laughed again. >You're part shoggoth, remember? That creature just recognized you as one of its own.<

Dollarman shuddered. >I'm not like that thing, nothing like it at all.<

>Whatever you say, Bullet Boy. Now get your ass into gear and get topside.<

### *6. Pocket Universe*

Dollarman stared from the two-hundred-and-twenty-second floor of the Westmorton Global headquarters in Santiago, stared out far enough to see ocean. A conversation was progressing in the adjacent conference room, but he wasn't listening. He was trying to understand if he missed Zechal.biz. He was trying to understand anything that he

felt. At least it was warm this far north in South America. At least he understood that.

“Dollarman?”

He turned when he realized Annalisa had been calling him repeatedly. She wore a smart business suit that highlighted all her curves and showed just enough leg to look sexy but not sleazy. Rushmech-Peel stood next to her similarly and smartly attired, in a two piece cotton suit and a matching fedora.

“What?” Dollarman asked.

“The directors would like to speak to you.”

“Me?”

“Yes you.”

He followed them into the conference room where Pentapod cylinders lay on the granite topped table. Behind them were six directors of various nationalities. A few were inflicted with tendril syndrome. One had a Yuggothian mind reader implanted in his head. It mimicked a metal spider whose legs and fangs had melded with the skull bone growths protruding in clumps from the director’s otherwise bald head.

“These men and women would like to understand what you saw down there, deep beneath Shog City.”

He told them.

They became excited when he described how large the archive was.

“There are shoggoths down there,” he explained again. “The one I saw was the size of a suborbital.”

“I’m told you’ve got AusCyber bioware,” said the director with the metal spider headpiece. “You’ve got shoggoth in you.”

“They didn’t take him,” said Rushmech-Peel. “So the plan worked. His kind will operate down there no problem.”

Dollarman squinted. “So you knew, Rushmech-Peel, that there were shoggoths waiting for us?”

He nodded, grinned. “It’s only Rushmech these days.”

“What happened to Peel?”

“Self-deleted. Couldn’t hack it in the real world, it seems.”

“Peel said he hadn’t fought the Old Ones for so long just so the world could end up as fucked up as it is,” added Annalisa.

Dollarman felt at a loss. He didn’t know why. All he could think about was how long Rushmech would scream for if he rolled him like dough, crushed every bone inside him until they were like powder.

An Asian director lifted one of the cylinders, saw where Annalisa had marked it *Montana, Late Jurassic, 155-mega-BCE*. “How does it work?” the director asked.

“They’re pocket universes,” Rushmech smiled with his mouth while the whites around his eyes showed. “They’re folded hyperspace, each cylinder containing a small portion of the Earth taken from periods fifty million years ago to well before the Cambrian Explosion.”

“A pocket universe,” the director smiled with Rushmech, “to escape to if the world experiences a third R’lyeh Singularity event.”

“We won’t survive another,” said a director whose skin glowed with oil on the water colored fungus that had rooted onto his flesh. “Not with the way the world is today.”

“No one wants an alien god rising from its corpse city ready to destroy the world again.”

“Exactly. Praise be to Old Man Cthulhu. Who wouldn’t buy their own slice of paradise to escape to should disaster befall us?” said another.

“I’d say it’s worth going to full-scale war with Centaurus. Take control of Shog City. Mine the Pentapod archives for what we can. Each one of these cylinders could sell for five million Yuan a pop.”

“Five? Some pasts are going to be more appealing. Price differentiate them from two to eighteen million, depending on the scenery and climate.”

Dollarman smashed his fist on the marble conference table. “Are you going to tell me, Rushmech; that we were working for Westmorton Global all along?”

Rushmech shrugged, and then looked to Annalisa, who was standing beside Dollarman. She made no response so he said, “Of course. You think I do this kind of work for charity?”

“I though you said these cylinders would make reality unstable? You said by finding them we’d make the world a better place, control how they were used.”

“We will,” he quipped, “sell them only to those who can afford it. Did you think there were enough pocket universes down there, one for everyone?”

“I don’t think that was the point. Peel—”

“Peel was a fool.”

“He didn’t leave of his own free will, did he? Once you had what you needed, you deleted him.”

Rushmech's expression turned sour. "I told you that Dollarman would be trouble," he said, turning to the Westmorton executives. "You sure you want his kind extracting more canisters for us? He's very unstable."

Experience told Dollarman to assess the conference room again in detail. This time he noticed the anti-intruder defenses, microgun turrets and flame points. Bullet wounds he could normally recover from, but a microgun would pepper him with a thousand millimeter wide slugs, pulping all flesh. Burns were more painful still. It would be harder to regenerate burn wounds, if at all.

He noticed that everyone was tensing, Rushmech more so than anyone else.

He acted suddenly, grabbed Annalisa and the closest cylinder.

"Kill them both," the executive with the mangled spider head-piece said to the walls. He then pointed to Rushmech, "We only need him to negotiate this."

Not wanting to die, Dollarman twisted the cylinder's wormhole release valve.

### *7. An Eternal Jurassic Hunting Party*

Annalisa and Dollarman catapulted into a conifer forest. They rolled and complained, jolted by the gravity shift experienced from transition from one dimension to the next. Dollarman stood quickly, saw the wormhole portal through which they entered. It would be only a matter of minutes before Westmorton Global security officers stormed in after them, and then the bloodbath would begin.

He discharged his gauss pistol, until the spacetime structure holding it open failed, and the portal collapsed.

Annalisa punched him in the back. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He turned, grabbed her fists and held her rigid. She sobbed then, but was venomous when she said, "You're a fucking moron, Dollarman. You've trapped us in here forever."

He pushed her away. "I just saved our lives."

"Saved your life, you fool. Who do you think set up this operation?"

Stunned, he stared at her. "What?"

"Rushmech was too self-involved to pull off a scam like this. He was the front man, just in case you and Zechal.biz got any funny ideas,

which it seems you did.”

In anger he pushed her again and she fell. At first he thought she was really hurt. Then he saw her drawing a plasma shell handgun.

He jumped on her, fractured both forearms with his big hands. While she screamed he crushed her skull until he heard the bones shatter and saw the blood seep from split skin and pulping eyeballs.

Something large roared in the distance.

He gathered Annalisa’s weapon and datapad. That was all she had on her. Then he fled.

Later he discovered the edge of the conifer forest. A vast herd of diplodocus fed upon the tall trees, the creatures that had called out earlier. He counted fifteen adults and twice as many younglings. The longest dinosaur in their group was over forty-five meters in length.

He watched the herd for days. He existed off water sourced from streams, the occasional fruit and small dinosaurs and insects when he could catch them. At times he felt euphoric, and wondered if oxygen levels were higher in the past than from his own era.

Occasionally the diplodocus sensed him. Their long necks raised their heads to see if they could spot him amongst the concealing ginkgos. They never did.

Eventually Dollarman discovered what he knew had to be operating in the same region, another predator.

He set bait with a freshly killed lesser dinosaur. The allosaurus appeared as he knew it would, a five ton meat eating theropod. It featured a long scar down its left-side from a previous encounter with another competitor. Dollarman killed it with Annalisa’s plasma handgun, cooked half the creature and disintegrated the other half. Its meat kept him sustained for weeks.

When his ammunition ran out he made spears and daggers from stone and wood. The world was warm and lush, so he gave up his tattered clothes, and lived like a caveman.

There was no sun, no moon and no stars. The days, which seemed shorter, gradually changed into night and back again in clockwork precision, but without any indication of how this was occurring.

One day he set off, walked in a straight line. After eighty-one days he returned to the exact same spot he had departed. Of course there were no celestial bodies. This was a pocket universe, an extracted sample of the Earth held in a tightly contained and folded region of hyperspace.

Three months later he rediscovered Annalisa. She tried to kill him again. He killed her first, swung her by her legs, smashing her head against conifer trucks.

The allosaurus also returned. He knew it was the same one because it featured the same scar. He killed it again, with Annalisa's plasma pistol which he had secured a second time.

He repeated this pattern many, many times.

Some cycles he killed himself, but that was hard to accomplish with his shoggoth genes. It required leaps from very high cliffs to do it properly, or he let Annalisa kill him with her weapon. The results never varied; he would come back, reborn, because the pocket Jurassic reality was contained in a time loop as well as space loop.

Eighteen, nineteen billion time loops later he couldn't remember exactly how long he had been here—but he did know it would never stop. Eternity was hell.

He spent a lot of that time trying to understand why he had once murdered mothers, and then left their babies to die alone in the Playgrounds of Angolaland.

# Sonar City

By Sam Stone

In the hot smog I could barely make out the solar panels and the steam converters: ugly mechanisms positioned like external guts on the fronts and sides of the giant high rises. The gadgets attached to the buildings appeared to be floating in the polluted air as though they weren't part of the buildings at all. A café bar had a clockwork windmill, turning slowly on the roof. It was like some vile parody of the *Moulin Rouge* but without the class. From the corner of my eye I could see Selfridges. They prided themselves on being eco-friendly but at the back of the shop I knew there was an outlet pipe spewing a black, stinking ichor into the sewage system from their negative-footprint generator. On the opposite side of the street one of the converters halted with a clunk. There was a vibration, a high-pitched hum that rippled through the smoke not quite above human hearing. White noise vibrated through the filthy air. My ears throbbed.

The old antiquarian's shop was the only building in the city that hadn't changed in the last few years. The little parlour carried none of these monstrosities but it was wedged between two ugly towers. The beasts either side appeared to be conspiring to crush the old building between them, yet still she held firm. She looked like a battleship racing against an armada, and as I crossed the road, walking through the polluted air, the place felt like the only safe haven in the whole of the city.

Jonas was stood in the doorway holding the handle with one hand while a fat bunch of keys jingled in the podgy fingers of the other.

"I saw you from across the street," he said.

"I'm surprised you can see anything in this," I said, following him inside.

The shop hadn't changed at all since the last time I had been there. It was still full of weird curios: antiquities from many a bygone age. Jonas loved his collections. He had always felt a connection with the past. I looked up at the ceiling. The lightning rod was still hanging in



its leather pouch, out of reach from the mauling hands of customers. This relic would never be for sale as it had always meant too much to Jonas, but he still proudly displayed it.

In the cabinet behind the counter was a gun – the type that used bullets. The ornate silver handle was polished to a sheen and a box of gleaming, matching bullets were decorously placed to one side. The weapon was a rarity and a novelty in this age of laser and steam weaponry. To the left was another cabinet, this one contained a real china tea set with pale roses painted around the edges of the cups and saucers. A gauntlet was displayed on the counter, spread out on a piece of red velvet cloth. I paused beside it. It was supposed to have belonged to a medieval king, but Jonas and I both knew differently. Once in place, the gauntlet couldn't be removed from your hand until death. It contained clockwork bionics and gave the wearer superhuman strength. The glove, however, was a parasite: it drew its power from the life-force of the wearer.

“Dangerous place to leave that,” I said.

Jonas shrugged. “It needs a host.”

The shop was full of dangerous and powerful objects. I glanced again at the lightning rod. Who knew where this *really* came from? Jonas said the mythos surrounding the weapon was that it had belonged to a sea god, but I wouldn't have been surprised to hear that the lance had been owned by Zeus himself. As I stared upwards the rod began to glow.

Jonas took my arm. My head snapped back into the present. The lightning rod was powerful, that was for certain.

It had been ten years since I had last seen my old mentor, Jonas. The fault was mine of course; I had been travelling in beautiful and exotic climes. It made the return to civilisation all the more shocking. When I left, the city had been normal – sure I knew the fuel crisis would change things, but I never expected quite how much. The new systems were supposed to be an improvement – carbon-neutral even – but from what I could see the place was worse.

“So you're back,” Jonas said. “Let me look at you.”

“I'd twirl but you know I'm not that sort of girl. This place hasn't changed much. The atmosphere is better in here than out there.”

Jonas closed the grille and locked the door. “It's safer too.”

“Street gangs, I presume? The poor visibility certainly makes it easier for them.”

Jonas shrugged. "There's worse out there than teenage thugs."

I followed Jonas into the back room and we sat like civilised people drinking neat whisky from china cups: Jonas always was quirky that way.

"What's been happening here?" I asked eventually.

"You know about the fuel crisis?"

"We finally ran out of coal?"

"As you can see there have been all kinds of experimental options," Jonas sipped his whisky and I noticed for the first time that his once fierce blue eyes had a thin white film over them. It could be cataracts, but I knew that wasn't the case: he had seen me even through the smog.

"I didn't see you, I *heard* you," he said. Jonas was the only person who was able to read my mind and I was glad the talent was still there. "I'm blind."

I closed my mind up. I didn't want him to know how bad his words made me feel.

"When did this happen?" I asked.

"It's a bi-product of the smog. The city has been in this state for almost five years. Most of the residents are going blind from the pollution."

I didn't know what to say. Jonas had taught me all I knew. I had always thought of him as invulnerable.

"We survived because we adapted. We do see, in a way, but it's not through our eyes any more. It's a kind of sonar..."

I stared at him. "And added to your other skills...?"

Jonas nodded. "I get by just fine."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. The old mage had his faults but I knew he was fine, despite the state of the city around him.

"You called me back," I said. "Why?"

"I know you hate pollution, Lucy. I know you hate crowds, and I suspect that your exploration of the world has brought you to the few remaining places where there is no civilisation. But...there have been some strange occurrences here."

"Civilisation?" I repeated. "Mmmm. This world is not what I call civilised despite your efforts to retain the old values, Jonas. Anyway, I can't help you. My detective days are over."

Jonas nodded, sipped, and proceeded to tell me about the problem anyway.

It seemed there had been several disappearances, Jonas' daughter, Mai, among them.

"She's always been a difficult girl," he said. "Subject to disappearing at short notice, going away on a whim, but this was different. She's changed recently. I thought she was finally maturing."

I learnt that Mai was involved in a new wave of revivalism. Like her father she enjoyed the old world: its gadgets, its philosophies, its clothing and its bizarre unusable mobile phones. Revivalists walked around accessorised with parts of the old world. They used wristwatches instead of pocket watches. They had designer phones, touch pads that didn't work but they played with them anyway. They wore jeans, leggings and mini-skirts. They abhorred formality. They rebelled because they could. The revivalists didn't smoke opium like the modernists did; they considered it unclean which was somewhat ironic when they were piercing their faces and bodies with pieces of metal. Revivalism was a recurring fad though, and it came and went with each new generation which was why Jonas wasn't concerned at all when Mai became involved with the group.

"I suppose you've tried to find her?"

Jonas glanced at his pocket watch, and then placed it back in his waistcoat pocket. He removed the cups and the whisky decanter, taking them into the small kitchen. He returned shortly with a roll of parchment which he spread on the table in front of me. It was an old map of the city. I recognised the ghettos and the market streets, even though they were now filled with the clutter of modernist technology.

"This is the sewers," Jonas said, spreading a large piece of transparent film over the top of the map.

The sewage map fitted perfectly over the parchment, and I noticed the lines depicted a specific pattern but the criss-cross shape meant nothing to me. Jonas unrolled another film map, laying this over the top of the other two. The words 'Ley Lines' were written neatly in the far right corner of the latest addition. It matched perfectly with the centre of the sewers and fell on the very street Jonas' shop occupied.

"I've always known it was here," he said. "It was one of the reasons I bought the shop."

"I don't understand."

"Lucy. This is a potent source of ley line magic. It's like living near the fountain of youth."

"The city looks aged and so do the people in it," I pointed out.

“What do you mean, the fountain of youth?”

“Ley power is the magic of the Earth. It’s pure energy. If we could tap it, we’d be able to clear this smog and throw away our gadgets. It would give the city a new lease of life.”

“Jonas I don’t understand what this has to do with the revivalists or with Mai.”

Jonas sighed. “The thing is, I think someone has been tapping the ley, but I don’t think they’ve been using it to help: rather the reverse.”

Jonas wasn’t given to wild flights of fancy in the old days, but he was a mage and I knew he understood about nature and magic better than anyone I’d ever known. He was also an ardent supporter of ‘leaving well alone’. I thought back to our last adventure together. The image of the burning book was forever etched into my mind. The first three letters of the title, *NEC*, were the last to surrender to the flames. I recalled Mai begging her father to let her use the magic the book held. Yes. Jonas was not one for using magic unnecessarily and to even suggest tapping something as powerful as the ley made me wonder just how bad things really were here.

“There are rumours that another book exists,” Jonas said, reading me again. “That someone used it to summon an ancient evil from the bottomless depths of time.”

“You mean...?”

Jonas shook his head, “I doubt we’d still be alive if it were one of the Great Old Ones. But a lesser god maybe...”

“You think Mai could be involved? Or has she fallen foul of some mage’s spell?”

“My tracker indicated that Mai was down there,” Jonas said, his index finger landing on a point on the map right in the centre of the ley lines. “I suspect she’s working with the revivalists and that they are behind whatever is lurking down there, and what has befallen the city.”

“She’s always been attracted to wrong magic.”

Jonas nodded. His white-filmed eyes were sad.

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I changed my clothing in Jonas’ pokey bathroom. It had an old-style plastic bath and toilet seat, even though the toilet was still made from porcelain. They hadn’t changed through the years but the flush

mechanism had and it was the first punk tech I'd seen in the place. I didn't ask him about it – a man, no matter how eco-friendly, had to have some comforts.

Once in a pair of jeans and tee-shirt I felt peculiar. I missed the restriction of my corset and my breasts felt exposed despite the old-fashioned bra which pulled me in as tight as possible. The steel underwire dug into my skin. It was a most unpleasant and uncomfortable outfit and I really couldn't see the appeal at all. I stared longingly at my fitted brown velvet jacket and the matching knee length culottes, thrown casually over the side of the bath. Then I picked up the rucksack. The bag didn't contain the tropes of the Twenty-First Century though. It held the things I'd need if I was to head down into the sewer to find Mai.

I met Jonas outside the shop. He was looking around with his strange foggy eyes.

"Street's clear," he said looking directly at me.

"So. Why am I dressed like this?"

"If the revivalists are down there, you can pretend to be one of them."

It seemed a ridiculous idea to me but I shrugged. If the revivalists were in the sewers I thought it unlikely that they would believe I was a new member, but stranger things had happened in my years as a PI.

I felt the sonar then: a ripple in the air that wended its way through the fog and wrapped around me. It was curiously invasive. A lick of energy swept over my head and down my back. It was as though a glove of vacuous sound had enveloped me. I could hear nothing from the noisy engines or the slow moving traffic. I took a step back. The sound waves fell flat and away as Jonas looked down. The noise of outside came crashing back in.

"Sorry," said Jonas. "I was checking out your disguise."

If *everyone* could do this would they see through the costume, I wondered?

"Most won't look so closely. Revivalists are treated a bit like social pariahs."

I wasn't on the street long and didn't come in contact with anyone, so the disguise proved somewhat pointless. I slipped down into the sewer with a pair of night-vision goggles firmly in place. I wasn't one for carrying lanterns: too easy for an assailant to knock from your fingers, besides I needed both hands free for this job. I was carrying

a holographic imager for a start; Jonas wouldn't let me take his precious parchment and besides the imager gave me light and direction indicators that a map just wouldn't have. I switched the imager on and looked down into a virtual picture of the sewers. The centre wasn't too far away. All I had to do was turn left, walk down this main shaft and then take a sharp right at the end.

The goggles cast a green light over the tunnels and made the walls look slick. Somehow the green glow intensified the smell. It wasn't the odour of faeces and urine that came to me. I could smell iron, salt, and some other unidentifiable sickly sweet aroma. I followed my nose even though it was in a different direction to the centre that Jonas had identified on his map.

The tunnels narrowed and then opened out into a crossroads. I found myself in a central chamber and the source of the smell became evident. A tunnel of shallow water converged in the centre, fed from four different gullies. A strong waft of sewage came from the right hand side. I peered down each tunnel in turn, seeing nothing unusual and then as I turned, my trainer-covered foot slipped on something I didn't care to identify. *It would never have happened if I'd been wearing my regular boots.* I caught myself against the wall of the chamber with my free hand and the holographic imager slipped from my fingers and clattered down onto the tiled floor. The sound of the instrument falling echoed through the empty tunnels and I experienced that strange phobia one feels in a tomb: a fear that any noise will wake the dead.

The wall felt cold and wet and as I pulled my hand back I saw that my fingers were covered in a greenish slime. My first instinct was to wipe my hand on the revivalist jeans but I sniffed the gloopy substance instead. It smelt of bile, roses and the sharp tang of sea salt. Sweet, vile and overpowering.

I shrugged off my rucksack and, opening it with my clean hand, I reached inside and searched for my sample dishes. *A good scientist never leaves home without them.* Using my handkerchief I wiped the slime from my fingers, and then opened one of the dishes and scraped some of the substance into it. The gunk was similar in consistency to snail mucus but thicker. It covered all the walls of the cavern. I pressed the lid firmly in place then dropped the dish into a clear plastic envelope and sealed it. Once this was done, I packed everything back into the bag and turned towards the right hand tunnel. The smell was stronger there and I wanted to know what was making the slime. I

couldn't imagine there was a huge snail living down there but then pollution was at an all time high; even the residents of the city were evolving so why not a gastropod?

I looked back the way I came. Jonas had been specific. I was to follow the map to the centre and go nowhere else, but my curiosity was piqued. My instincts were telling me to follow the slime.

I was halfway down the tunnel when I remembered that the imager had fallen on the floor in the chamber. If I didn't find it, I could potentially have difficulty finding my way back out of the sewer. I turned back the way I came.

A low whining, like cogs in need of oil, echoed down the tunnel towards me. I threw myself against the wall as the sonar wave moved past me. Someone, or something, was down here with me and they were searching with the only eyes they had. I knew that all kinds of creatures used sonar to see. Bats being the obvious one. I could feel the sonar probing like a searchlight looking for intruders.

It spooked me. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck, my heart beat so loud in my chest that I was sure that the creature could hear it. I ran back to the chamber, forgetting to look for my imager. It was sheer luck that brought me back to the ladder through which I had entered the sewer. I climbed the steps, my feet and hands slipping on the metal. The clothes and shoes I was wearing really weren't practical at all and I couldn't understand why I had let Jonas talk me into changing.

At the top, I pushed the manhole upwards and climbed out into the thick, smoggy air. I felt the sonar probe reaching for me and I slammed the manhole back down, cutting it off. Once outside I was slightly disorientated. I couldn't place where I was in the street. My heart was still thumping in my chest. The fear was irrational: I hadn't seen anything. But an intense claustrophobia had consumed me down in the tunnels and continued to suffocate me now I was up in the city. I took a deep breath and coughed the smog back out of my lungs. It wasn't good. I could feel the poisonous air eating at my insides. *How long did it take to go blind in Sonar City?*

I withdrew a scarf from my rucksack, wrapping it over my mouth and nose and as I began to filter air through the makeshift mask, my head cleared and I was once more able to think.

It took Jonas a long time to answer the door. He wasn't looking out for me this time and so I rang the bell and waited like any normal customer might. When he opened the door he was surprised to see me.

"I didn't expect you back so soon," he said.

His words surprised me as I felt like I had been gone for hours.

"What did you find?"

"Have you got a microscope?" I asked.

He went away, returning quickly with an old style scope that required batteries instead of clockwork to run it. Fortunately Jonas had some of those too, and they still worked.

"Memorabilia," he shrugged.

I placed the rucksack on his table and extracted the sample dish. In the gaslight it looked a darker green. It was like the infected mucus coughed up from the chest of a consumption sufferer. I smeared some on a slide and placed it under the hot light of the microscope.

"What do you see?" Jonas asked.

It was hard to describe the vileness of the substance and because Jonas could no longer see in the traditional sense I found myself wishing I could show him. The slime was moving, it was shying away from the light, but it had nowhere to go. A thousand microbes jumped and twitched and fought with each other. Then, they combined and multiplied, spreading out under the slide cover.

"What is it?" asked Jonas.

"Infection," I said.

"Where from?"

"The bowels of the city."

Jonas stared at me for a long time then poured himself another whisky into a rose patterned china cup.

"It's worse than I thought," he said.

I changed back into my own clothing. The crisp shirt, brown leather corset, velvet jacket and long culottes felt comfortable after the flimsiness of the revivalist clothing.

"I lost my imager," I said as I came back into Jonas' parlour. "I'll need to take the map this time."

"You're going back down there? Even though you know the city is infected?"



“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I promised to try and find Mai and now I need to know what’s causing the poison. There has to be a reason and without proper equipment there isn’t much more I can do to analyse the slime.”

“If Mai is still down there,” Jonas said. “What will this poison have done to her?”

I let the thought hang between us. I didn’t want to speculate. I reached for my own satchel this time and rapidly switched my equipment from one bag to another. I had an intense feeling that I would find more than I bargained for once I went back down into the tunnel.

“The map?” I said.

Jonas was reluctant to part with his treasure, but the thought that his daughter was stuck in the sewer, slowly being poisoned, made the ache of parting with the old parchment less painful.

I grasped it, tucking it down into my waistband, and then turned, heading back through the shop.

“Wait!” Jonas said.

He pulled a stepladder away from the wall and positioned it in the centre of the room. Then he climbed up and unhooked the lightning rod and scabbard.

“But this...?”

“I don’t know what’s down there, it may be nothing more than the poison leaking out from the machines, but if ever anyone needed this weapon right now it’s you, Lucy.”

I took the rod cautiously. It had always held too much fascination, too much seductive power, and I had found it hard to resist. Jonas helped me strap the scabbard to my back. The rod was only the length of a short sword and it was light and easy to carry.

“Reach back and draw it,” Jonas said.

I reached over my shoulder and slid the weapon easily out of its sheath. It lit up in my hands as though it recognised me. I had no need to ask how to use it. Instinct filled in the blanks.

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The smog was worse when I finally made my way back down through the manhole and was once more into the tunnel. I felt more secure this time, knowing I had the lightning rod. At the bottom of

the ladder I pulled out the roll of parchment. Placing the goggles over my eyes, I opened the map and this time turned towards the centre. Jonas had said that his tracker spell had located Mai at the core of the ley lines. I wasn't going to let myself be distracted this time. If something awful was down here, then I had to get Mai out as soon as possible.

The left tunnels were identical to those on the right and I found myself in a similar chamber to the one where I had lost my imager. Faced with four routes I consulted the map once more. The centre was directly ahead and so I walked on, my heels clicking lightly on the tiled floor. The stench of sewage was worse in this direction but I pushed all thought of the nauseating smell from my mind. I had to find Mai. I'd wasted enough time already.

I turned the corner, following the route to the ley line centre, stopping to glance down at the map each time. On the next turning, the tunnel narrowed down and because there was no walkway I was forced to follow the path of water that ran along the centre. The tiles were slippery, but my feet were surer in my own boots.

I felt the sonar wave again but it was far away, back in the direction I had come from. This time it was accompanied by a mournful wail. It was a sound I couldn't identify, but it was similar to whale song. Perhaps a sea creature was somehow trapped inside the sewer?

I reached the end of the tunnel. Directly ahead was the central chamber. Even with my night-vision goggles the chamber looked excessively dark. I stepped cautiously forward, drawing the lightning rod. I paused at the doorway. The light from the rod was sucked down into the darkness barely illuminating more than two feet in front of me. The goggles were no help and so I switched the setting to direct light ahead of me.

"Who's there?" said a voice.

"Mai?" I whispered. "Is that you?"

I heard a soft scrape, like a snake slithering across dry sand, as the person moved in the darkness.

"Who are you?" said the voice again.

I spoke softly. "Lucy Collins. You remember me don't you? I worked with your father."

"Go away."

"Mai, I can't leave here without you. I promised Jonas."

"I'm no longer Mai," she said and again I heard that awful susur-

rant movement which sent shivers up my spine. It sounded as though several snakes had entered the grotto and were writhing around her.

I held up the rod, turned the full beam of my goggles into the darkness, but Mai skittered back and was swallowed by the darkness that consumed the chamber.

I heard the cry again. A lonely, wretched whimper.

“He’s coming,” Mai said.

“Who?”

“Leave now!” Mai’s voice became urgent.

“Let me help you,” I said. “Mai?”

“I remember you, Lucy,” Mai said. “Go back to my father. You can do nothing to help me now. It’s too late.”

I stepped forward and Mai hissed and gasped, throwing herself backwards against the wall of the chamber. The dull thump gave me perspective on the depth of the cavern and so I shambled blindly forward. In the distance I heard the call once more and felt the weak pull of sonar. It was getting closer.

“Who’s holding you here? Who is it that’s coming?”

“You can’t fight him. He’s a god.”

“Mai. Talk to me. Why did you come down here?”

The snakes in the dark rattled and skidded as I reached out for Mai, sure that I was within touching distance.

My hand fell on a cold, damp surface. I heard Mai gasp and I realised I had touched what had once been her arm. I felt along the slime-covered skin, the reek of pollution wafted from her skin and I forced back the urge to gag.

“What happened to you?”

“I’m no longer Mai,” she said again. “But I still retain some of her memories.”

“Then...what are you?”

A wave of sonar hit my back and paralysed the air around me. As it drew back I heard another wail, only this time it wasn’t of sadness and loss, but of anger and the creature emitting the sound was now heading rapidly towards us.

“It’s too late,” Mai gasped. “He’s here.”

I fell back against the wall beside what was left of Mai, and the chamber lit up as a creature filled the narrow doorway by which I had entered. It was hard to make sense of the monstrosity before me. A huge, bloated body squeezed itself into the opening by elongating.

Large disc-like eyes focused on me as the creature opened its mouth. Tentacles poured forth from blackened lips, and they whipped out towards me. My back was pressed against the side of the chamber and I had nowhere to go.

"No!" gasped Mai, pushing me behind her.

Light filled the cavern now and I could see Mai in all of her mutated glory. Her skin glowed black green, her arms, now numerous, draped down to the floor and into the shallow depths of the water that led into the tunnel. Her eyes had all but consumed her face. Large discs of white and black reflected the beast that was almost inside the tunnel now. She still had some semblance of humanity left though. Her height remained the same and she had a thick black robe draped over her contorted body.

"Behind me," Mai gasped. "There's another way out. Go Lucy!"

"I can't leave you."

"There is no place for me above now. I've been changed to be his mate."

"Who...what is he?"

"A god," she said. "Yh'menyhua is his name."

She pushed me towards the door and as I reached it, Yh'menyhua's tentacles gripped Mai and she began to chant the strangest words. It was a language I had never heard and had no hope of understanding. I turned to see the creature pulling Mai forward and was left with the memory of her face glowing with ecstatic religious zeal.

I drew back and away from the sounds of their monstrous love-making. I didn't want to witness the mating rituals of this particular couple. I staggered down the tunnel, withdrawing the map once more from my belt. Behind me I heard the sounds increase, only Mai seemed to be crying now. Whatever the beast was doing to her was causing her great pain. I paused. I couldn't leave her there no matter how much she said she didn't belong. I turned back.

Mai was naked now. Half-human, half-cephalopod, Yh'menyhua had her gripped by two sharp hooks that he buried into her former arms. The tentacle arms attacked her, piercing her over and over in different places as the monster attempted to complete his mating ritual. She bled green, not red. The sight of her blood was both frightening and compelling. He moved her around in the air as though they were in water. Powerful throbs of sound filled the chamber, the air buffeted and moved, elevating Mai into the right position. Then another arm

protruded from the centre of what could only be described as the monster's face, and penetrated Mai's stomach. The creature spasmed and jerked and Mai screamed as his alien sperm poured directly into her womb. The alien began to glow. It was then that I realised how very serious this was.

Yh'menyhua was trying to reproduce. What impact would this have on the city above? Surely all of these creatures would need to feed?

I looked around the chamber. In the corner I saw a pile of rags. Human bones, skulls and remains were visible in the sickly illumination. Yh'menyhua had been feeding on those who failed to mutate. How many women had been brought down into these murky depths? How many women had this monster mated with, and then killed when his attempts failed?

The vast being released Mai. Her body fell to the cold, damp floor and she lay there still and cold, but her stomach glowed and twitched, swelling immediately as the creature's abominated life took hold inside her. Yh'menyhua slid back towards the entrance. He didn't detect me lurking in the shadows as I watched the proceedings. Mai came out of her stupor and sat up, pulling her altered body up into a sitting position. She rested against the wall of the chamber. Her surplus arms massaged her swollen stomach in a way that was too grotesque to be human. Her flat, fully black eyes were expressionless.

The lightning rod glowed in my hand, reminding me it was still there. I re-entered the chamber, sure of what I had to do.

Yh'menyhua rose to his full height, filling the space as his arms lashed out. One struck the wall by my head, and the slime there hissed as it was dissolved. The end of each tentacle was primed with some sort of acid or poison. I ducked as another swung towards me. His appendage smashed hard into the wall behind me and he roared.

"Mai? Can you stand? I'm getting you out of here."

Mai staggered to her feet, her bloated stomach squirmed and bulged. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with the offspring but I couldn't leave her here to be used as breeding stock for this monster.

"It's too late for me..." Mai hissed. I glanced at her and saw a new metamorphosis was occurring. Snake-like tendrils emerged from her lips and down over her chest. A thick mucus poured down her legs and the first of the monster's progeny crawled down her thighs. Mai screamed with the pain of the birthing and wrapped her tentacles

around her body.

I rushed forward as the creature tumbled to the floor and skittered blindly through the water towards its hideous father. I raised the lightning rod and pointed it. Raw electricity shafted out towards the alien child. It stopped in its tracks, shivered and trembled as the lightning hit. Its small body danced and Mai screamed behind me as the grotesque baby exploded, splashing the walls with thick red gunk.

Yh'menyhua rushed towards me, arms lashing out. A black bile spewed from his hideous mouth. I dived out of the way as a tendril hit the ground narrowly missing me. I turned and pointed the rod. The monster froze but nothing happened, the lightning had not yet recharged and I had wasted the first bolt on the alien baby who had been less of a threat than its father was. *Foolish.*

Mai screamed again. Her stomach was contorting but she managed to hold herself up against the wall. More alien babies poured from her, scattering like a disturbed nest of spiders out towards the dark corners of the chamber. They hid as I faced the monster.

The rod vibrated in my hand and I pointed again towards Yh'menyhua as a deep and raucous laughter shuddered from his hideous bulk.

But the lightning rod disagreed. This bolt was stronger, more intense and the blinding light that bounced from the green body of the creature forced me to turn my face away and to cover my eyes. I dived for the doorway again, throwing myself out into the cool dark of the tunnel as a fireball burst inside the chamber. Mai screamed. I wasn't sure if the blast had killed her too, and maybe it would be better if it had. The rod dropped from my hand, my fingers were burnt and blistered. The rod was singed and no longer usable. A sixth sense told me that its power was dissipated and gone from it forever. I wondered if Jonas had known how much there was left in the rod. Had he used it once? Had he, in his youth, fought alien monsters to save the city?

I crawled back along the wall and looked into the chamber. The place was black again. The light that the monster had generated was now burning out. I saw the creature's body smouldering in the dimming light and glanced around to see the glowing embers of his misshapen issue.

I hurried across the chamber to where Mai had been. She was not there.

I looked around, prodded the simmering body of the alien fiend

with my boot. It didn't move. Good. A thin tendril wrapped around my foot and yanked me. I stumbled against the wall, pulling back and found the half-dead body of one of the babies spasming in death. I looked down into almost human eyes as its life-force finally slipped away. I stamped my heel down hard on its distorted head just to make sure it really was dead.

I sniffed. Blood. Mai had made her way out, but left a trail for me to follow.

One of my night-vision goggles had shattered but I could see enough to find my way back to the stairs and the manhole. I climbed up, noting splashes of blood on the rungs. The trail continued – red now, rather than green – heading upwards and out into the city. Mai's blood led me back to Jonas, and at his shop I found her naked body, shivering on the doorstep.

She was human again.

"She doesn't remember anything," Jonas said after we bandaged her wounds and tucked her up into bed in his spare room.

After we had done that, I stood with Jonas in the doorway of his shop. The air was already starting to clear. The poison from the god-monster in the sewers was being washed away by man's sewage and waste, and the city was returning to a place which was at least inhabitable by humans again.

We sipped whisky from china cups in silence. Sometimes there really was nothing more that could be said.

# The Bloŵflū Manifesto

By Tim Curran

**T**hey found the bodies in a slum tenement that stank of yellowed bones, human excrement, and rusting lives.

Close, so very close. Five minutes earlier, Trask knew, and they would have caught old Crawling Face with his hands deep in the pie, licking cherry filling from his skeleton fingers. They traced him to the trembling edge of town where the immense sewage lagoons were black, gummy iridescent lakes lit by flames of burning methane. Here the houses were crowded together, rising tall and dirty from the heaped garbage and gutters blown with rubbish and human remains.

Trask followed the other bulls down streets paved with broken bottles and rusting tin, where shabby hotels boasted clear blue neon and rats clustered in warped slum doorways, pimps hawking cybered-up whores with pre-installed virtual reality/virtual memory chips, externalizing the girl of your dreams.

Up narrow stairways perfumed with cat piss they went, finding a door at the top. On the other side...arching flashlight beams were white swords slashing open the darkness and making it bleed like an opened vein...there was death. Death that was amused and happy with itself, lewd and leering. It stank of violence and worms, the dander of buzzard's wings. The accumulated stink of it was a foulness Trask could taste on his tongue like pennies plucked from a dead man's eyes.

The air was so silent—save for the sound of meatfly wings cutting it—that he could hear the dissolution of the corpses themselves: a dry and husking sound like plums or peaches in a dehydrator.

The bulls said nothing.

Not even to themselves.

One of them lit a cigarette and the smoke he exhaled became a ghost of the dead that haunted them all as it drifted man to man to woman. Yes, another slaughterhouse and this one so drenched and



dipped with blood and remains that it would need to be hosed out. Stepping through the congealed pudding of blood and flesh debris, the bulls found a second room. Like the first it was exceptionally dark, no windows, no working lights as if illumination of any sort was an infection to be kept at bay. Trask noticed that not only were the windows carefully boarded over, but every crack and crevice was stuffed with rags. Darkness was celebrated here. They found more bodies, but these were much older. Like onions decaying in dark cupboards, they had rotted to black peelings.

Trask went back into the other room where the stink of putrescence was fresh and vomitous, clouds of flies rising from human fruit fermented down to a vile wine that seeped into the floorboards.

He knew there was nothing to say.

He dared not ask the questions that needed asking...but surely the victims here died willingly, crowding themselves into these rooms. Did they sit and wait while Crawling Face danced merrily from one to the next, disemboweling them?

Was such a thing possible?

*Slit, slit, slit. Good evening to one and all. How are you and how's the mizzes and the chatterly young-squirts?* Crawling Face must have chatted with them as his hands became postmortem knives describing slaughterhouses of swaying, dripping meat. Whispering from his mouth were sad stories of lust crimes and blood-drenched rooming houses. Hooks and blades and embalming needles for fingers, he did his bit, slit, slit, slit, slashing like pendulum blades. When he was done, he must have stood there admiring his work, chatting with the dead. *And how do you do, sweet young prince of slit anatomy? Not so well, I think, not so well. Nor your mother nor father nor sister. Ah, yes, dusty kiss of dead flower crypts. The covetous stillness of marble forever.*

Sickened, Trask studied the words on the wall written in blood.

Like other times, gibberish that was not Latin nor Runic script exactly, but old, very old, pre-human perhaps if such a thing could be. The only identifiable word was the signature: *CRAWLING FACE*.

"He's at it again," one of the bulls said, like there could be any doubt.

But Trask was not interested.

He found something wrapped in red velvet cloth. A black crystal threaded with glaring red striations like a fine networking of blood-engorged veins. It fit neatly in his hand, pulsing warm in his palm like

## The Blowfly Manifesto

the heart of a newborn. Growing hot, it scalded his flesh, biting into the meat of his palm like barbwire. As his eyes bulged from his head and his brain became a boiling chemical cauldron, his mouth filled with a vile sweetness of sugar, rusty iron, and human fat that was gagging. The world distorted, inverted, was turned inside out and made to bleed. He felt burning heat and icy cold, a weird fission energizing the air around him in a smoldering plutonium steam as iridescent particles wormholed through him, his mind laced with a spiderweb of black glass. A third eye opened and he saw beyond the pale, into unwinding spiral galaxies and nebulae collapsing under their own atomic weight, then beyond into the black void of some dimensional closet.

The boards were torn off the windows and sunlight filled the room, sunlight whose beams were clotted with motes of dust and motes of skin. Right away, the light closed Trask's third eye, praise Mother.

He blinked and saw the real world, but his tongue was still in the anti-world. "Cthulhu fhtagn," he said.

"You say something?" another bull asked.

"No," Trask told him, "I said nothing at all."

~\*~

Beneath the pink gasoline sky, Trask moved deeper into the suffocating heat of the city, just another sleek-bodied shark finning its way through the black waters of oily urban despair. The wind was warm, shivering around him like gelatin. It smelled of human grease and sewage, crumbling red brick and bubbling black mud. The gutters were aswarm with hawkers and sellers like a corpse with its attendant meatflies. Drifting past Chinese brain laundries and detox halls, Trask passed sallow-faced whores selling pale meat and Fixers pushing contraband VR chips that would turn your mind to crackling white ice and let you see the face of your god before your brain spilled from your ears in a soupy mush of warm-sweet memory pain.

Trask knew the taste of it, all right. For ten years he blew through the gutters with the rest of the human garbage, hiding in his cage of addiction, interfacing the virus of need, haunting toxic graveyards and bone shops, ever hungry. But it was eating lunch with the damned: you eat it and it eats you.

Mother saved him.

Praise Mother in the highest.

“Anything?”

“I’m flatlining out here,” Trask said, looking around the square with its teeming crowds like spider monkeys clustering on rotting vines. A bagged-out whore offered him a kiss of teeth and a hot breath smile. He could smell the cool, dead Victorian sex blowing off her. She was swollen with lust like a barrel. He edged past her, white leprosy flesh brushing his own. A café. He wriggled his way through the crowd like an eel moving upstream. “Gotta be fifty people in here sucking latte. Not getting a single spike on the screen.”

“He has to be there,” the voice said over the net. “The drone marked him not ten minutes ago.”

“Is the drone still on-line?”

“Yes.”

“Link me, Control. I want a positive signature.”

The interface took less than a second and right away, Trask found what he was looking for: the rogue was an old man with a face torn by scars into a Braille that wanted to be read. He wore a dirty overcoat like a sheath of atrophied flesh. How he could go on day after day without being chipped was just beyond Trask. What did guys like him do with themselves? Wandering around in a fog, soft-stepping through dead-end alleys and the gray lost spaces of the human arcade. No guidance, probably thinking things that would get them in trouble.

He gave Trask the creeps. All the offline types did.

The old man was worse, of course. Bodies all across the city, dozens of them. Crime scenes like blood-dipped human stockyards. The only connective tissue from one victim to the next was the old man...but was he the one? Did he carve them up like Sunday hams, fingerpaint that word on the walls: *Crawling Face*?

Whenever Trask tried to think about it, to play connect the dots, lost in the deep fugue wiring conscious to subconscious, Mother got nervous and threatened to shut him down. She didn’t like her chip-pies doing too much thinking. And *Crawling Face*, he knew, made her nervous, very nervous.

*Who is Crawling Face, old man? What does that name mean?*

The old man’s eyes passed over Trask but did not see him. Trask’s well-scrubbed, almost sterile appearance made him chameleonic, gave him the ability to blend in like a smudge on a wall. Five minutes after someone talked to him, they forgot what he looked like. Trask

was nothing if not bland and unremarkable.

The old man managed to palm a few credits for a cup of tar from a brassy, high-end woman whose pink shiny skin gleamed in the dirty light. A cloud of perfume rose from her and burned eyes like wafting mustard gas. Her own eyes were turquoise, somehow depraved and filled with bitterness as if she'd seen things she could not get her mouth to speak of. Trask watched her, becoming more and more curious. He rawdogged her, tapped illegally into her neural net and ran her through Mother, parsing her life. Mother said her name was Marjorie Bates. Matrix engineer, CyberPath Global. *Shit*. Trask broke the link. The lady was well-chipped, have no doubt, definitely not a rogue. Mother was never wrong. Mother was the neuroplex of CyberPath Global, she was wired into the heads of billions of users. The Pathway was created so all could share a bright, comfortable, and carefully orchestrated vision of today, tomorrow, and yesterday. Blessed be the name of Mother.

Outside, Trask scoped a couple of Mother's Little Helpers: Cryoborgs all. Hard to miss them: black sharkskin-fleshed, blood-drained complexions, eyes like dark shell holes filled with shattered white glass and black cinders. They smelled of chemical sterility and fused circuitry, reptilian brains hot-wired with bio-peripherals, minds amping on vectors, fusion binaries, and Boolean X-Ys. They patrolled the terminal landscape like carrion crabs on a polluted beach. They moved on and Trask let out a breath of stale air. He walked up to the old man, let his hand drop on the old party's shoulder like Miss Muffet's spider.

"I need to talk to you. This is official," he said.

The old man whirled around, made Trask as one of Mother's bulls instantly. His face went gray into a hysterical mosaic of terror, his eyes like hazy smoke rings. Before Trask could properly collar him, he was gone, jumping away like a compacted spring, moving with a fluid dance through the sea of bodies out there. He got caught up in a pack of feral-toothed junkies dusted yellow from the compulsory anti-viral mistings that were used to keep weaponized bio-particles on the down low. The junkies circled him, slavering and hungry, drug-bellies growling for Laotian Redline and Sicilian Blue Spider, bas-relief tracks tattooed on their arms. They wanted to cook-up, to dissolve into memory-hazes of pre-protoplasmic bliss, meet their makers, star-headed and fish-eyed. Mother's Little Helpers moved in

for the kill, mindless Mother-hive drones, cheapjack old school TV Daleks that must eradicate. The old man wiggled free. The junkies scattered, all except two which were absorbed into the communal flux of Mother. The Cryoborgs, eyes like black glass and bald heads gleaming with plexi-composite temporal hardware, nabbed them with insect fingers, made them ready for the mind dance: brainwashing and identity modification. *We scrub your brain and re-boot you in five minutes or your next visit is free*, as the rogues liked to say.

“Shit,” Trask said over the net. “He’s a runner.”

“He’s tagged, Three. Don’t make a scene. Play it smooth.”

~\*~

Trask helped himself to the old man’s cup and pulled a scan on it, picking up a latent from the old man’s thumb. He ran it through Mother. Interesting. Charles Tollan. So that was their boy. He’d run a biocybernetic team back in the old days. In fact, he’d worked for CyberPath for twenty-two years, had been one of the original designers of the Pathway. How did a guy like that end up panhandling for credits and sleeping in alleys? And how did he fit into the butchery of Crawling Face?

“That’s our boy, Three. Get him before the Cryoborgs do.”

“Can’t you put a net on them?”

“No can do. Autonomic control, Mother-generated.”

Trask understood. Like antediluvian anti-virus software launched from the motherboard...except they had legs, blank minds, twisted Mother-love, and were relentless in their pursuit of undesirables in need of chipping.

Back out into the excrement of the Big Ugly, Trask took in the wreckage and massing bodies, filled his head with the dead ammonia stink of a metropolis trying to sanitize its own germy surfaces. He watched faceless hags selling skin, narco-monkeys pushing psycho-synthetics and level 4 nirvana chips that could open up your third bleary eye and shut the other two permanently. Hawkers with voices like off-key barrel organs groaned, moaned, and coveted second-hand ID chips, psionic dust, and lost children. Fixers with minds like slag pits and deadheads with polished teeth of crystal sugar rubbed shoulder-to-shoulder with cyberjacks and ecto-phrenologists carting hollow-socketed wares. Here were tapeworm medicaments and writh-

ing pestilence, freakshows and melting waxworks of the inhuman condition. Filth and squalor, entropy and state-sponsored sterility.

An embalmed-looking woman with a slack mouth and slattern mind stopped him. "How about a light?" Trask gave her one, lighting her coffin nail that was half synth-tobacco and mostly free-form Ganja called Man in the Moon, bioengineered hemp that would toast you for hours. "Why don't you come back to my hovel? I got some rock to burn. I'll shoot you with some pink and wreck your mind."

"Another time."

The old man tried to pull the fade again, but Trask logged his signature on infra-scan. He tightened his fields and ran his qualifiers. Everything he needed to know was displayed on the synth-lens of his left eye. The implant was painful, like mainlining rock salt into his cornea, but without it being a cop was like being a painter without a brush. And Mother insisted.

Trask moved on through the masses. Hello. How are you? A pleasant evening to you. The crowd flowed around him, liquid and sluicing. Too many voices, too many neurals overloading his interface. He shut it down, let himself breathe for a moment. He still had the old man—Tollan—and followed him at a discreet distance, tracking him carefully on infra-scan. Hunter and prey, but sometimes role-reversal was the norm. Sometimes rogues baited cops, drew them in and yanked their chips like gold teeth. You had to be careful. Cop identity chips brought heavy credit from the Asian syndicates.

"You on him, Three?" the voice said over the net.

"Like a mole."

"No heavy stuff. Mother doesn't want that. He gets out of hand, bring him back. A night in the Gutters ought to soften him," Control told him, referring to the MCC, the Metropolitan Correctional Center, a Medieval lice-hopping, rat-infested gaol by all accounts.

"Will do, Control."

But Crawling Face...

Trask kept imagining him, seeing some skull-smiling, doll-eyed, lamprey-mouthed night-haunter sucking in oxygen and breathing out pure methane vapor, a crawling infectious rot steaming from the shadows in a deadly chlorine mist, fingers sharpened in gutters and teeth like needles, multi-deranged and uttering a grim hysterical laughter. Not padded-room, Thorazine-juicing-crazy in the conventional sense, but maybe believing that he...*or it*...and the city were

clinging together in some maggoty graveyard symbiosis.

The old man cut into an alley and Trask followed, so close he could almost swim in his shadow. But right away he started getting the heebie-jeebies like crickets crawling up his bellyskin and down his spine. He could feel things moving around him, grotesque oblong shapes swimming in the ponds of mulling darkness. He moved forward, leather boots creaking on the concrete. He shut down his camo-screen. One moment he was a blur moving against the filthy bricks, the next, a man.

Tollan was there waiting for him.

A wasted stick figure whose breathing was the gurgle of ancient pipes in slum tenements. Trask just stared at him, trying to lubricate his tongue with words but the well was dry and his mouth was full of desert sand. The old man...Trask couldn't remember his name suddenly. It was there then gone like a bat winging through his head and the more he tried to remember, the more that name was hot metal smoke on the wind searing the inside of his skull. The old man's eyes did not blink. They were feral-red baboon eyes...Mother have mercy...like blood-hot peepers peering from a dank bone-strewn cave. As if the old man had the bread and Trask was the meat that filled the space in-between.

Something momentarily softened around the old man's greasy mouth. He said: "Please...please just go away...I'm trying to disconnect."

By then Trask, veteran of so many blood wars and Mexican stand-offs, had filled his hand with an automatic. His voice was easy. It slid forth like oil on polished glass. "I'm not here to hurt you," he told the old party. "Just relax. I only have questions. There's been murders out in the Big Ugly. You maybe heard...bad shit, friend. CyberPath has traced you to each scene. I want to know your connection. We can do that here or we can do it in the Gutters."

"You want to know if I'm Crawling Face."

"Are you?"

"Yes, I'm Crawling Face. In fact, we're all Crawling Face in our dreams."

"Make sense."

"I made a mistake. A bad mistake."

"Tell me."

The old man tried to, but none of it made sense. Not really. Some-

## The Blowfly Manifesto

thing about hyperdimensional physics, vortexual displacements, and gravity sinks, the acceleration of angles and spatial derangements. That Mother was the key. Mother had worked out the variables and opened the door to what lay beyond.

"You're talking in riddles," Trask said, because even though it was intriguing, he could feel Mother getting restless at such talk.

But the old man did not hear him.

He was going on in some drug-addled, mind-fuck of a delirium about "the latticed doorway of the 5<sup>th</sup> Linkage" and "the festering polychromatic slum of frozen shadows" and "the labyrinthine tangle of intersecting mirror worlds." Stuff that was somehow disturbing, yet clearly the vomit of a mind wholly self-entrenched in a boozy tar-pit. Trask kept trying to interrupt him, but his voice was not heard. The old man wanted him to know things and spoke to him through red lips speckled with white foam: *"You don't know and you don't listen. Mother teaches and Mother guides but Mother is the enemy and the architect of Crawling Face...she has seeded it in billions of heads as it was seeded in her...she knows...she knows there are holes in the world and cracks in the continuum...and when you look through them..."*

"You're making no sense," Trask told him.

*"I make sense of the senseless. Crawling Face! The keeper of the keys of the dark spaces between the stars, the shadow-boxes, the mother-womb primal chaos of the anti-world."*

"What does this have to do with anything?"

*"Everything! Crawling Face has another name but I dare not speak it! The Cult of the Writhing Men, the Temple of the Boneless Woman... it was known that He, the Hunter of the Dark and the Bloody Tongue, would come for his voice echoes in the void and only He is the Face-that-Crawls! Mother is not who she once was..."*

"You're out of your fucking head," Trask told him.

"The crystals," the old man told him. "They're falling through the openings, through the rift. You've seen them! They're everywhere! There's one in your pocket. You're part of the matrix."

Lunatic stuff, but Trask pulled out the crystal if for no other reason but to show the crazy old man that it was harmless. He found himself staring into it...and like before, things happened...he was seeing through darkest unhallowed space to where a glaring three-lobed eye stared back.

*No, no, no...*



He saw many things, his thoughts brushing against the black satin facades of nightmare worlds. Mother should have stopped it...but she did not. His vision blurred, his head spun with strobing spokes of white light. But as he blinked it away, he saw that the old man had come closer and something serpentine and bloated was filling his mouth like a fleshy eel, that his face was the bulb of a morbid crypt flower that wished to bloom and spill impure light, that his nose had gushed with a blackred expistaxis of blood...then the old man touched him with a hand that felt like the beslimed tendrils of an abyssal jellyfish and...*sweet Mother*...it was like a thousand hornets drilling their stingers into him at the same time.

He gasped. He shuddered. Pinpoint explosions erupted in his head and he twitched with clonic spasms, smelling acid-stinks of burned-out batteries and dirty ozone, his brain filled with yellow vapors and quicksilver pulsations.

His eyes opening like flapping window shades...Trask saw the world unzip and expose its meaty gross anatomy, worming blue-green spheres gnawed at its pink, juicy tissues, revealing a churning black mist of lambent glow and shining multi-lobed diamond eyes—

Then he was back, panting, down on his knees, flesh gray as stove ash, a squealing sound coming from his throat like that of a peeled cat. He breathed in and out as phantoms swept though his vision, trying to feel for the here and the now, not sure where he was or what he was. Only that sucking feeling of dark velocities and vast spaces closing up behind him like lips, his body aching like he'd passed through a violent enemy flak of powdered glass. His brain seemed to vibrate in his skull, half-blurred memories and distortions flying through the field of his mind. Deranged geometrical shapes like trapezoids and octahedrons that crawled like worms. Moon-ladders rising into gulfs of seamless buzzing blackness. Tiers of protoplasmic slime and cuboids that inched slug-like in vacuums of suspended metallic dust. The universe itself shaking, pulsating, splitting open like an egg to disengage some shivering fetal-headed excrescence with a body like a quivering sack of ropes.

Trask blinked his eyes for maybe the tenth time and it was gone.

The old man was still standing there stiffly as if in a trance, then his rheumy eyes fluttered open in a shadow-latticed face. They were like sink holes plunging into suffocating depths, windows looking into a room of blight and decay.

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Over the net: “Three? Three? Are you there?”

Trask heard his own voice: “Ph’nglui mglw’nafh Cthulhu R’lyeh wgah’nagl fhtagn...”

Maybe the old man laughed with a sound like glass shards crunching under boots or maybe the noise was that of things stirring in backward, upside down spheres of time-space, but Trask saw his eyes, felt their heat. They were bright purple neon burning in the night, globular suns setting over poisoned dead worlds. The old man’s flesh went to a jelly of bubbles, tendrils and tongues bursting forth from each until he was something like a wiggling mass of phosphorescent fingers, crawling and slithering things infesting him as his face and form liquefied into a plastic peristalsis of noxious organic profusion—

“Three, please respond immediately!”

Trask’s gloved fist remembered the lethal contours of the automatic it gripped. It squeezed the trigger. Slugs punched the old man right between the eyes...or where they might have been if they hadn’t slid from their housing in gelatinous globs. There was a metallic, echoing *clang!* as the rounds chewed into the green grimy dumpster behind him, going right through the metal, taking fragments of skull and brain with them. The old man dropped to the cool concrete and something like a glistening white worm fattened on soft tissues slid from his mouth. It sucked away blood and screams and the sugary marrow of burst bones. And as Trask watched, it divided, then divided again, becoming a writhing plexus of worm-meat that netted the old man’s remains and gorged itself on them before dissolving away into a fleshy pool of stringy mucus, steaming bile, and a jellied green juice.

“Three? Your connectivity is coming and going...hell’s going on?”

Trask, the inside of his throat swabbed with vomit, blinked his eyes. All he could see was the bullet-perforated corpse of an old man.

*What the hell was that?*

Glitch or something. For a moment there, everything rippled and Trask thought he was cashing out. Was it Mother? He wasn’t so concerned for himself as with the possibility that Mother might crash. If the Pathway went, only chaos could ensue. This is what he knew to be true; he was conditioned to accept this as the ultimate inevitability.

*Not Mother, asshole, but the death throes of Mother. The crystal, the crystal, the shining trapezohedron—*

It was still in his hand, burning into his palm. He tried to toss it,

but it didn't seem to want to leave his hand. *Get rid of it, you must get rid of it.*

"Three...goddammit! Your signals are erratic..."

His brain was disjointed now, the different spheres raging against one another as a spontaneous discharge of electrical energy shot through his nervous system. He heard a static crackling in his ears, felt a prickling up and down his spine. Mother was getting aggravated. She was going to shut him down and he knew it.

"Three! Talk to me! Mother's getting aggravated!"

Trask heard the voice, but it was meaningless to him. Jibber-jabber, words as indecipherable as the buzz of mosquitoes. Abstract, entirely abstract. He heard a sharp beeping in his ears, a whine in his skull. And displayed on his synth-lens:

CYBERPATH GLOBAL, INC.  
THIS PROGRAM IS UNRESPONSIVE  
IT HAS PERFORMED AN ILLEGAL OPERATION  
IT WILL BE SHUT DOWN IN TWELVE SECONDS

"Jesus Christ, Three...talk to me...you're being hibernated," said the voice of Control. *"Talk to me..."*

Trask tried to throw away the crystal again and Mother shot more electricity into his head. She wanted him to keep it. He was seeing too much and knowing too much. He was afraid to use his eyes. The world, the Big Ugly around him...it was synthetic, it was a skin, it was growing threadbare and he could see through it, see—

A blasphemous fairyland netherworld, which was neither here nor there. The howling discordant stellar noise of pulsing silence. Ghetto wasteland of screaming moonlight, cackling mortuary corridors, warped stairwells leading into black chasms of dripping nothingness. Corroded metal afterbirth—

IT WILL BE SHUT DOWN IN EIGHT SECONDS

*Fuck.* The countdown was under way and Trask felt things scuttling in his belly like land crabs, hot wires arcing in his chest, the reticulations of a python squeezing the breath from his throat. He wanted to speak, knew he must speak...but oh sweet quantum Mother... the words were leaping around in his head, but they couldn't find his

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tongue to make themselves known—

IT WILL BE SHUT DOWN IN SIX SECONDS

Control...control...I can't speak because my mouth doesn't work...my throat is paralyzed...help me oh sweet Mother help me I don't want to be shut down...I don't want my brain scrubbed...I don't want to be re-chipped and re-booted...I

IT WILL BE SHUT DOWN IN FOUR SECONDS

Then his voice coming out of his throat in a fluting scream: "*Control...control...I glitched...I glitched...but I'm back...*"

"Shit, that was close, Three."

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN STANDBY

"It was like a sheet on a line," Trask said. "Blowing around...it lifted and I saw through this world into the next."

"Come again, Three?"

Trask shook his head. "I think I was uplinked with Crawling Face."

"He rawdogged you?"

"No...I think it was psionic."

SYSTEM SHUTDOWN ABORTED

"You better watch it, Three. Play it real cool."

But Trask said he was ice now, nothing but ice. But he knew better because something was happening and he could not put a name to it.

~\*~

In the blue silence of his brain, there were voices. Although he refused to listen, he could not help hearing what they said. They told him that he was no longer hyperthreading at the liquid optical matrix of Mother, but scraping at the altar of something else entirely, something that had infected Mother. But Trask didn't want hear that; it was too much like what the old man said. But the voices persisted. Mother was corrupting from the inside out.

Mother?

*Mother?*

But Mother would not answer or respond to such heretical ideas. Something had happened, something infinitely bad, and Mother was taking the Big Sleep and the results were in the streets. *Chaos*. Mother had tried to shut him down and it wasn't because he was unresponsive but because he had tried to get rid of the crystal. For all her omnipotence, Mother knew and knew damn well that there was something much bigger than herself, something immense and dark that had invaded her like a cancer. She had communed with it now and as the old man had said, Mother was not who she once was.

As he eased his way through the streets, Trask reached out not just for Mother but for Control...but they were both gone, swallowed alive by the vapid evil pestilence that had invaded the Pathway neuroplex. He was off-network and the primary interface had broken down, mnemonics gone, quantum drive auto-cannibalizing itself. All those chips in billions of heads, Trask got to thinking, all connected to Mother and now all connected to something else that was parsing every chipped brain out there, a malignant parasite mega-wired to every mind, glutting itself on parities and metadata, output and input, boot sectors and vectors, draining the power of those minds and sucking the blood from the cybersphere—

Trask's head hurt. The thinking, the thinking, all the directionless random thoughts in his head with no overseer to direct them. *Oh, Mother, sweet Mother, help me, help me*. The electric lights were flickering above the streets, retro-neon sparking out, three-dimensional halo images moving against the faces of buildings like wriggling corpse-worms. Steam rose from sewer gratings and clouds of acrid-smelling groundmist tangled his legs.

He saw the crowds like mindless, scuttling insects, worming and writhing, leggy things clustering over the corpse of the Big Ugly, feeding off it. They quivered and danced, chanting and screeching, crying out in words that made no sense, yet...at the root core of the neuroplex interface in his brain...made all the sense in the world. Such chaos. What were they doing? An effigy was raised up on crude crossbars and set aflame...except it wasn't an effigy because effigies did not scream out for the protection of Mother. More such dummies were burning on every street corner, the crowds hysterical with delight. White-sheeted figures circled around them, but Trask saw that

## The Blowfly Manifesto

they were not sheets at all.

The noise. The confusion. The crackling fire and smoke and insanity.

The city was a crawling, festering cesspool of black malignancy and suffering mindless evil. Maybe this is what it had always been, Trask thought, but Mother's VR mask concealed it. Each night the city's flaxen legs were spread and each morning it picked parasites from its knotted bloody pelt and dropped them screaming into black sewers.

Trying to catch his breath, he looked around and everything was gray and sooty, leaning and tall and rotting. The air stank of industrial waste and baby hides, corpses left to boil in gutter pools. The shadow-dappled streets were Crawling Face's playground and his cobra eyes counted the dead children impaled on hooks in dusty butcher shop windows. The Big Ugly was made uglier as another reality crowded in, usurping the real and magnifying the anti-real.

Screaming, they never seemed to stop screaming.

That rush of bodies, eyes looking up at the misty stars above, a merry-go-around of dancing, lurking shapes and clutching shadows, a circumnavigation of people driven mad by every base desire Mother had forbidden. Uncaged, shrieking with lunacy and moon-fever.

Trask fell to the sidewalk, beating his fists as the cosmos about him whirled and gyrated, shaking the nits from its hide. It was like going cold again, getting off the hard stuff. Sweet Mother...he could remember it now. It was not an abstract concept, but a reality. Death-smell. That was the gritty pith of the thing...*death-smell*. That's what his nose was picking up. The death-smell that filled your head and popped in your brain like black blood blisters when you were suffering withdrawals. It wasn't a smell really, but a lack of the same. An absence of the perfume of the organic machinery that filled the spaces. It was gone.

And it was gone now.

Mother had been infected by what Tolan had let through and that infection crawled into every chip and on-line consciousness and now it was being fed back to her: refined, lethal, unspeakable.

These were things he had known for a long time only Mother, eaten away by a metastasizing multi-dimensional cancer, would not let him...or anyone else...think them. But he was offline now and he could see and he could think. Remember. Like a dog digging old

bones from a ditch and gnawing them, he was remembering. *Yes, all of us in our dreams...we were supposed to be off-network, but we were cybered-in, we interfaced in our dreams, viruses digging deeper into the neuroplex, parasites laying our eggs in the neural cells of Mother, bringing forth a generation of noxious vermin. But Mother did not recognize it. She was parasitized like a fish that believes that the worm hanging from its gut is part of its body and protects it.*

Screaming as it all came apart around him, sensing something dark and malignant sitting bloated at the center of the neuroplex web, Trask ran.

The crystal in his pocket began to burn and he picked it up and threw it, but too late. Too late. It was glowing, pulsating with energy. He looked across the shattered landscape of techno-ruin and saw dozens and dozens of others holding up their shining trapezohedrons into the night. The Big Ugly was a city named Hunger and meat was its currency.

Trask stumbled along, rabid hairless dogs with blistered skins running in foam-mouthed packs. Eat and be eaten, that was the law of screaming genocide under the watchful gaze of Crawling Face. He was coming even now...tri-lobed blood-eye of silver and sapphire watching, watching.

Yes, yes, the stars were right and Trask could feel them burning holes through him. The world of Mother was an orb of rotten, juice-dripping fruit tunneled by worms. It was opening like spread, greased legs, a cleft gushing with slick webby streamers of egg clusters hissing with pink radioactive steam, meaty pearls, pulsing alien honeycombs, clotted cocoons bursting with unformed raw yolk eyes, throbbing soft machinery, an immense deformed jelly fetus slithering from a crystalline placental sheath and the world, the Big Ugly responded in kind becoming, becoming—

The Nameless City of rising jagged spires washed by corpse-clotted sewers wherein tumbled rivers of shrieking, undulant fetuses. A ramshackle cellar of morbid creation haunted by worms of polychromatic slime, chains of living bubbles that crawled across the sky. Beneath the hungry shadows of leaning, sharp-peaked roofs and grinning trapezohedron moons, Crawling Face waited.

Glitch.

Glitch.

Glitch.

## The Blowfly Manifesto

What was this?

Mother?

*Mother?*

Trask could feel the chip in his brain interfacing with the neu-roplex, being made part of it, connecting, spooling, hot-wiring and uploading. And on the synth-lens of his left eye he saw words:

CYBERPATH GLOBAL, INC.

!!!WARNING!!!

THIS PROGRAM IS INFECTED

BLOWFLY INITIATED

CLEANSING INFECTIVE ORGANISM

SECTOR ERADICATION COMMENCING

BLOWFLY INITIATED

BLOWFLY

BLOWFLY

BLOWFLY

BLOWFLY

BLOWFLY

What the hell?

Trask saw thousands, then millions and possibly billions of iridescent spheres filling the sky like soap bubbles filling a sink. They expanded and then each popped like rippling ovum, releasing an oblong gelatinous worming shape of pink-gray tumescent flesh with an oval puckering mouth. They swam like blood-leeches filling a pond, raining down on the city and leaving a weird strobing radiant slime-trail of afterbirth in their wake. They swarmed the city like locust-hordes, their mouths chewing through the masses that had held their crystals up to the coming of the Haunter of the Dark, the physical embodiment of Crawling Face who was called in ancient tongues, Nyarlathotep.

This was Blowfly.

This was Mother cutting off the finger to save the hand, Trask knew. Blowflies fed on carrion, on diseased and infected tissues and that's exactly what these Blowflies were doing. Anti-viral, anti-infective suckering, flesh-eating maggots that had been unleashed by Mother to eradicate and cleanse infected sectors...and these sectors were the chipped human brains that had first received the virtual entity of Crawling Face, the psychic emanation of Nyarlathotep, then



externalized it to prepare the way by slaughtering the faithful as it must have been in ancient times.

The vermiform carrion-eaters swept through the crowds, cutting through them like buzzsaws, seeking out the psionic and radionic emissions of the chips themselves and neutralizing the brains that housed them. The streets were slaughteryards of human pulp and bone as the Blowfly larva tunneled through them, Cryoborgs and humans falling in great blood-greased headless heaps.

Trask heard them coming for him with their tell-tale droning.

As hell gathered and reaped, he stumbled through the wreckage of black pitted phosphorescent bones drying in cinder-slime corridors of the urban graveyard as the neon Blowfly eels skimmed human rivers in wakes of midnight crystal slime. Mother saw to her own in the end: no more tears, no more cold tremble fears of post-modern angst or techno-despair, the human family dissolving, civilization sucked and leached by sterile neuro-vampires.

Shattered glass carpeted streets...

...the Haunter sealed back in its bottle of atomic slime...

...the plastic forlorn eyes of Mother's Little Helpers glistening...

...the human garbage stew running wetly in the gutters as VR vectors closed back in to show a synthetic world that was brightly polished and filled with hope and peopled by scavenging graveyard rats. And as the Blowfly program ceased and the larva dissipated into the cyber-nothingness they were formed of, it was the Cyberpath's own voice that cried out in the silence of broken skulls:

*Mother, I'm alone. Alone.*

*Mother*

*Oh please Mother help me*

# Flesh & Scales

By Ran Cartwright

**Y**ou don't say?" Johnny S said, tentacles all aflutter with excitement.

Tentacles?

Yeah, that's right; Johnny was a Squid.

Upper class socially and intellectually in Innsmouth City. Top of the line. Only middle class Fishies (some called 'em DOs, short for Deep Ones) and the lower class Land Monkeys were below 'em. Fishies were breeds, half Land Monkey, half fish. Just didn't quite rate to the technical sophistication and intelligence of Squids. And Land Monkeys...well, humans. Lowlife. The scum of Innsmouth City.

The Boss kept 'em around for some reason. Entertainment mostly, and special tasks. Like assassinations.

Like Frank Brody.

Brody was a fish killer. Hired assassin.

Sure, he was a Land Monkey, but he was good at his job. Had a direct connect to The Boss down in the Yathlee neighborhood. City center.

Anyone gets out of line, The Boss sends out a contract. Take 'em down. Didn't matter if it was a Squid, Fishie, or Land Monkey. You break the rules. You're sleepin' with the fishies.

Scrogg nodded his head, flicked a face full of tentacles. He was a Squid too. A big one, stood nearly ten feet tall all propped up on those big strong abdominal tentacles. "Yeah, I do say so," he said. "Brody's a special case. Went after some Squid up North Dockside that lost his marbles. The Squid got himself a Circuit Breaker, cut himself off from The Boss, started dealing in flesh and scales."

"Flesh and scales?" Johnny put in quick.

Scrogg writhed a few facial tentacles. Nodded. "Yeah, that's the story. Up there pimpin' DOs and Land Monkeys. You just don't cut yourself off from The Boss and start out on your own. Things don't happen 'round here unless The Boss says so. Ya know?"

Johnny's tentacles hung limp. His voice turned soft, concerned. "Yeah, unless The Boss says so," he said.

Scrogg turned his yellow eyes, looked left and right, and then leaned over the table. "Lemme tell ya 'bout Frank Brody..." he said.

Johnny S leaned closer.

~\*~

A pair of fingers to his temple, Brody listened to the gurgling words that were forming in his thoughts. That's how The Boss always relayed info. Telepathically. Didn't always work. The weather, the atmosphere, even electrical interference sometimes made messages fade, oscillate, or get lost in transit altogether.

Of course, being that Brody was a Land Monkey and The Boss was...well, The Boss. That didn't always help. The Boss was highly refined, sophisticated, had brain power that Land Monkeys just couldn't comprehend and never would.

Don't mean to sound coarse or harsh, but Land Monkeys were the dregs of Innsmouth City society.

The low life.

Gutter trash.

Scum.

No matter how high on the social ladder Land Monkeys might climb, they were still Land Monkeys and would always be.

The message came through loud and clear. A renegade Squid name of Quidd up in the North Dockside neighborhood needed eliminating. Had a Circuit Breaker implanted, cut himself off from The Boss. Now was peddling flesh and scales and pocketing the profits.

*Eliminate it!* The Boss had commanded.

Brody grinned. No problem. He would.

North Dockside.

That was Cherie Hill's neighborhood. Cherie was a Fishie; owned a nightclub cum whorehouse and restaurant up there called *Cherie's Club*; owed Brody a few favors.

As good a time as any to collect.

He always liked doing Fishies; must be the gurgling noises they made.

Brody stood on an Ipswich burb street corner, miserable in the gloom and constant drizzle. He mumbled something profane, shook

the dampness from his shoulders, and started across the intersection, dodging slime and scum, walking and crawling. Jostled a few losers crowded together, panhandling, pissed off when Brody wouldn't contribute to their tin cup.

He elbowed one, said: "Get a job, freak." Then copped a feel of a Fishie babe standing next to the itinerant, and was gone into the crowd before they knew what had happened. Made no difference. Even Land Monkey's could get a little Fishie tail these days. A decade ago it could've gotten a Land Monkey in a whole lot of serious trouble... three months or more in the slammer, getting ass slammed by a Fishie or Squid much to their pleasure. A female Land Monkey could find herself with an extended stay in the slammer for the slightest infraction. Double that of a Land Monkey male. At least.

Things were a little easier these days.

Still, the mingling of social classes and species was a touchy subject.

Brody wiped his brow.

A miserable night.

This eternal dampness and rain. Enough to drive you to fish-shit fits.

Water dropped from his bushy eyebrows as he paused on a curb, looked up and down the street. Row upon row of slimy buildings stretched away in all directions and up into the rainy dark. The soft glow of neon cut through the night and rain. Clubs and joints and bars and way stations and depots and whorehouses. The city was a cesspool. A toilet bowl spinning fish shit before flushing into the Atlantic.

Innsmouth City.

The place had grown rapidly. Ever since that Yathlee thing had risen out of the Atlantic a couple centuries back. Ended up the City Center where The Boss kept himself all wet and directed life in this shit hole of a sardine can.

The shit hole had spread along the coast. South to Gloucester and north all the way up to Hampton Falls.

The North Docks side burb was up that way. South side of the Hampton Harbor right up against the Seabrook Dunes.

And that's were Cherie Hill was.

Up there on River Street that fronted a bunch of sleazy clubs and back alley whorehouses.

Where Cherie Hill ran the best establishment in all the North

Dockside. Cherie's Club.

Brody shoved his hands in his pockets and smiled. Shook away some raindrops.

Yeah, Cherie Hill.

The sooner Brody got up there, the sooner he'd have Cherie on her webbed hands and knees, gurgling like a frog.

But he needed a cab. Was a long walk from the city's Ipswich burb to North Dockside's River Street.

He hailed one. Came floating by a story off the street and over the heads of the mingling Friday night slime and scum.

The Air Cab settled to just above the street. Brody elbowed his way through, pushed off some picket sign carrying doomsayer proclaiming the time was near, the stars were right, Great Cthulhu would rise from his slumber.

*Yeah, right, fuck Cthulhu*, Brody thought; they'd been proclaiming that fish shit for decades. Hadn't happened yet.

The door buzzed open, and Brody forced himself into the cramped back seat.

The Cab smelled like dead fish. But what'ya expect with a Fishie dude behind the joystick?

"Where ya goin', bub?" the Fishie gurgled.

"North Dockside," Brody grumbled. "River Street."

The Fishie nodded, and yanked on the joystick. The Air Cab rose and zipped away.

There had been a tall shadow in the crowd. A Squid. He'd been watching Brody. And took the next available Air Cab.

He knew exactly where Brody was going.

~\*~

Holy freakin' fish toes, there she was, about to fall out of that low cut halter she was wearing!

Seemed that Cherie Hill always dressed like that, but with those big ole milkers of hers, she still caused red blooded Land Monkeys, Fishies', and Squids to stop and take notice at the possible expense of their eyes popping out of their heads.

Gawk and drool.

Yeah, Cherie was an eye-popping head turner. She had a way with men no matter the social class or species.

She certainly had Quidd's attention. Cherie stood at the bar, slowly and sensuously wiping the bar top, milkers turning circles, eyes and smiling face turned toward Quidd.

She winked.

Quidd sighed.

Didn't matter to him that the Land Monkey whore and Cherie's Club employee, Greta Saucy, was naked and rubbing herself all over him, one of his facial tentacles shoved down her throat. Hell, Quidd would drop Greta in a heartbeat just to bend Cherie over the bar and shoot her three tentacles at once.

Cherie raised her breasts and winked.

Quidd slammed the tentacle deeper down Greta's throat. An instinctive reaction.

Saucy's eyes whipped wide. She gagged. Tried to pull free.

Quidd ignored her, his eyes glued to that shapely body of Cherie Hill as she rounded the bar and started toward him.

Holy freakin' fish fart!

He swallowed.

Greta gagged.

Cherie swaggered; grinned; hot and sensuous.

Holy freakin' fish...Quidd gulped. Looked up. Gulped again.

*What a doll!*

Cherie grabbed Greta by the slimy wet hair, pulled her free of Quidd's tentacle, and bitch-slapped her hard across her slimy wet face.

"Go make yourself useful and clean the bathrooms," Cherie hissed at Greta.

The Land Monkey whore lowered her eyes and crawled away.

Cherie turned, licked the side of Quidd's face.

Six tentacles shot up, long and rigid.

There she was. Cherie Hill.

The legendary Cherie Hill. Long black hair, that lipless grin, those big round eyes, those slowly palpitating neck gills, her facial features so petite, yet milkers as big as bread fruit.

*Holy horny toad!* Quidd's mind was roaring, his facial tentacles fluttering like sheets to the wind.

"I'm yours tonight, sweetheart," she whispered in an ear.

A facial tentacle immediately slipped down her throat while two abdominal tentacles slipped up her skirt.

Quidd wasn't waiting for the bar...right then and there in the

booth would do fine. Right then and there in front of all those gathered in Cherie's fine establishment.

A lot of ooos and ahs and cheering and catcalls followed as Quidd slipped her some tentacle, rocking her up and down like she was riding a bucking bronco.

~\*~

Brody sat back, checked the facts.

Quidd, a two-bit lowlife Squid. Used a Circuit Breaker to cut contact with The Boss...now up in North Dockside peddling flesh and scales.

Sure, you can peddle all the flesh and scales you want as long as the Boss says so. You gotta get The Boss's blessing first.

Quidd didn't.

He was going rogue.

*You nasty squid fuck you. Oughta know better than that.*

Had to take the Squid down.

The Boss's orders.

Cherie Hill had to know something about it. Word got around quick and easy. 'Specially in a place like the North Dockside. Slimy dive, yeah. If there ever was an active asshole in Innsmouth City that was shitting slimy fish shit, it was the North Dockside. Lot of Squids hung out there.

In the rain.

Dark.

Slime.

Creepy. Real creepy.

Ten foot tall Squids skittering around in the shadows.

The North Dockside, the perfect place for 'em, up there on the south side of the Hampton Harbor.

Yeah, the harbor there between the Dunes and Hampton Beach, hell, it even looked like a bunch of damned flailing tentacles. Creeped Brody out. Never did like being close to one of those Squids. Tall, powerful, dangerous, and they smelled like fish shit. Just as soon put one out of its misery.

"As soon kill 'em all," he muttered softly, disgusted.

"Say somethin' bub?" the Fishie driver said.

"Naw, just thinking I could kill this headache with a good stiff shot

of bourbon,” Brody replied.

Another Air Cab suddenly shot by. Air wash rocked Brody’s taxi. He rolled in the seat, grabbed his hat. Head darted about as the Fishie steadied the vehicle.

“What the hell was that?” Brody said.

“Nother taxi,” the Fishie driver replied. “In a hurry. Seen tentacles in the backseat shadows. Beady eyes lookin’ out the window. They think they own Innsmouth City.”

Brody nodded, facing the truth. “They do,” he said.

Neon flashed in the rainy night. Glowing bubbles on the windows. Burb after burb. Tall dark buildings awash in rain and slime, occasional dim lights shining high above the street level of the bright neon of clubs and whorehouses where deals were being struck, monies paid, flesh or scales exchanged, drugs dealt, lives taken.

There was a bright burb neon sign ahead. Blue background, white lettering.

## NEWBURYPORT

### Innsmouth City

*Almost there*, Brody thought.

He laid back, tried to catch a few winks.

The Fishie driver was humming some stupid tune. It was annoying. Kept Brody awake.

~\*~

She stood at a back door. Beyond was an alley. It was creepy out there.

Dark.

Misty.

Damp.

Puddles in the gravel. A fog clung to the ground.

Something stood in the shadows near the door. Tall, powerful. Swayed on abdominal tentacles; facial tentacles writhed in the night air.

It stank. Naturally. A Squid.

“Don’t you worry none, honey,” Cherie said with a wink, “it’ll go down just like we planned. Besides, I really don’t like making it with



that Land Monkey, you know? I feel so dirty afterwards.”

She smiled, blew the Squid a kiss, and closed the door.

The Squid disappeared into the North Dockside night.

~\*~

The Air Cab came in feather light, settled down on River Street, dropped Brody off at Cherie’s doorstep. He slipped out of the back seat and into the misty night; a light drizzle falling, green and yellow neon glowing over the façade.

Brody glanced up, stared at the glowing sign. A simple name. Not too complicated. *Cherie’s Club*. Everyone there knew about Cherie and Cherie’s Club. She had quite the reputation in the North Dockside community.

A shadow passed while Brody’s eyes followed the glowing curvature of neon; it was something tall, flailing tentacles, climbed into the Air Cab. In seconds the cab was gone, taking a Squid somewhere. The cabbie hadn’t even asked for his fare. Like it was on the house. For some reason. Like he knew something.

Fishies did have some sort of foreboding insight.

They could smell it.

It stank.

Brody passed out of the drizzle, stepped through the saloon-like swinging doors and stopped. Heads turned, glassy eyes stared, tentacles writhed. A piano player fell silent.

“Well, if it ain’t Frankie Brody,” Cherie said from the bar, voice soft and sultry.

Those big round eyes stared.

Brody smiled. Sauntered over, slipped his ass on a barstool, and looked up into those big round eyes.

Cherie leaned forward, a wide lipless smile. “I hear you’re looking for a Squid,” she whispered. “Word gets around.” She looked past Brody to a booth where Quidd was huffing and puffing in squid heaven while Greta Saucy crouched under the table, toking on a tentacle. “That’s him there,” Cherie nodded.

Brody turned, looked.

Ain’t no time to waste. Get the job done, and you got all the time in the world to do some rocking and rolling on the Fishie doll afterward.

Brody daydreamed, nodded, could almost hear Cherie gurgling

now.

He tipped his hat to the Fishie doll and slipped off the bar stool. A quick turn, Brody threw back his long coat, grabbed a holstered weapon, and swaggered across the floor like some ancient gunslinger from Tombstone that was about ready to bury the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday.

No doubt in anyone's mind what he was up to.

Including Greta Saucy on the floor, under the same old booth that Quidd frequented, toking on one of Quidd's tentacles.

Yeah, Greta saw Brody coming, saw those skinny Land Monkey fingers wrap around the pistol grip, knew full well what he intended to do.

Eyes wide, she dropped the tentacle, muttered "shit" and scurried away as fast as her little Land Monkey feet would go.

Quidd, on the other hand, was still huffing and puffing and gasping, a few slimy millimeters short of a full blown Squid orgasm when the pistol rolled out of the holster, and planted itself against the side of Quidd's bulbous and puffy head.

The poor bastard might not get a full-blown Squid orgasm thanks to Greta Saucy, but he was about to get his Squid brain full blown away thanks to Frank Brody.

Big glassy yellow eyes shot up to Brody's scowling face. "Huh?" Quidd had barely enough time and breath to mutter.

"The Boss says goodbye, chump," Brody growled, and pulled the trigger.

Quidd's head exploded. Blood, Squid brain, slime and goo sprayed the far wall as the rest of Quidd's body slumped in the booth. He oozed, hot and steamy, smelled like thousands of dead fish all packed into a small sport air car and left to rot under the heat of a noonday sun.

The echo died away.

Silence.

Patrons watched.

Cherie smiled.

Quidd was dead.

Brody stared at the stump of a neck where Quidd's head had been. He didn't see the passing shadow. Big and tall and creepy, it flowed across the wall. Loomed up behind Brody. Yeah, big, tall, and creepy. Smelled like dead fish. A big bulbous and immensely deadly Squid

that suddenly wrapped a tentacle around Brody's neck, lifted the surprised Land Monkey off the floor, and shoved the barrel of a specially designed gut splitter right through the fabric of Brody's trousers and straight up his ass.

"Sorry ole friend," the Squid gurgled, "but The Boss sent me a message too, said to kill the killer. And you know you always do what The Boss commands."

Brody caught his breath. A brief moment, but his time suddenly ended. A muffled blast sent heat and pain from Brody's ass up through his body and out the top of his head as he melted away from the inside. His torso and head turned to mush, only the arms and legs remained intact.

The patrons clapped and cheered. Nothing like seeing a Land Monkey get his just deserts, especially one that had just so recently murdered a Squid so exceedingly high on the evolutionary and social ladder.

Cherie Hill, on the other hand, gasped in abject horror.

Who the hell was this interloping bastard of a bulbous Squid that could come sauntering into her fine North Dockside establishment and gun down a Land Monkey, and a well known hired assassin of a Land Monkey at that, one that Cherie had bedded and polished his knob a few times in the recent and distant past?

She didn't have time to question. A long curling abdominal tentacle shot out, unfurled, and curled around her neck. The Squid dragged her across the floor toward the back rooms. A long and hard tentacle suddenly shot up beneath her dress. Her big round eyes went wide, glassy, and she gurgled all the way down the hall and into a back room.

The door slammed shut.

The patrons exchanged glances.

"I think I need another drink," some dripping wet ass of a DO muttered.

~\*~

"You don't say?" Johnny repeated.

"Come on over here, doll," Scrogg said, ignoring Johnny for a moment. Things were happening at the sleazy Tits and Tentacles Club there in the Rockport burb. A female Land Monkey all by her

lonesome had happened by. Scrogg reached out a tentacle, slipped it around her waist and pulled her close. Lot of 'em there about in the Rockport burb, turnin' tricks down on the docks and in the alleys. "The Boss says female Land Monkeys are fair game," Scrogg continued, turning an eye to Johnny. "You take one, and do what you want."

The Land Monkey giggled as she stroked a facial tentacle before slipping to her knees beneath the table. Scrogg knew what she had on her mind.

"Say, Scrogg, how do you know so much 'bout Frankie?" Johnny pressed Scrogg to continue.

"I thought you'da figured it out by now," Scrogg said. "I'm the Squid that put him away. Fried his Land Monkey ass from the inside out."

"What about Cherie?" Johnny swallowed hard.

"She squealed like a guppy when I done something real special to her," Scrogg said, smiling somewhere beneath all those slowly writhing facial tentacles. "I worked the Fishie whore over 'til she came around, spit out the truth, and then I sent her to the bottom of the Hampton Harbor...oh, 'cept for a souvenir I kept...from the neck up." Three tentacles reached for a box on the floor, and plopped it onto the table right in front of Johnny.

"Oh, Scrogg...you didn't...you...Scrogg..." Johnny stammered. He was all shook up, nervous tentacles twisting, knowing that that Fishie dame was extra special in the sack. "...that Fishie was a real sweet dame...you didn't..."

"It wasn't Quidd dealin' flesh and scales, was it Johnny?" Scrogg said suddenly.

"Scrogg, I..." Johnny was squirming, felt like he could dump a load of Squid shit right there in the chair.

"It was you, Johnny. You was dealin' flesh and scales!"

"...a Squid's gotta make a livin', you understand that Scrogg..."

"You set Quidd up, you and Cherie Hill," Scrogg growled, and produced the biggest weapon with the biggest barrel Johnny S had ever seen. Scrogg leveled it across the table. "You didn't follow the rules, Johnny," he added.

Tentacles went limp. Johnny S gasped. Then he was blown away. Full heater blast to the bulbous torso, opened him right up, sprayed Squid guts everywhere. What was left oozed to the floor, hot and steamy; smelled like heaven to most gathered.

Except the Land Monkey babe that had taken to token' on a tentacle under the table.

She gasped, said: "Shit!" and scrambled from beneath the table. That sweet little Land Monkey number had Squid guts oozing down her face.

Scrogg popped the lid on the box, reached in with a tentacle, took out the contents.

Frozen fish.

Cat,

Halibut,

...a few cod.

"Hey barkeep!" Scrogg shouted, sitting back and stretching a tentacle. Taking down a Squid was tiring. Could make you awfully hungry too. "Can ya fry these up for me?"

~\*~

Cherie's Club was as crowded as ever.

The joint had become a popular tourist trap.

Had a new plaque on the floor; a lot of Squids and Fishies gathering around, reading the words.

*On this spot Scrogg killed the  
infamous Fish Killer Assassin, Frank Brody.*

Coincidentally, they had a new house special – stewed Land Monkey.

Wasn't cheap. Finest grade.

And Monkey Jerky too!

Real popular with the supper crowd. Hard to keep up with orders.

Cherie scowled, big round eyes searching her fine establishment for that lowlife Land Monkey, Greta Saucy. The Land Monkey had been spending an extraordinary amount of time under the tables of various Squid customers of late, not paying attention to her kitchen and hooker duties.

"Hey, Saucy!" Cherie called out.

The Land Monkey came scrambling out from under a table that was crowded with half a dozen Squids. She hurried to the bar, straightening her skimpy outfit, and wiping Squid slime from her lips.

“Yes ma’am,” she stammered.

Cherie bitch slapped the Land Monkey, and leaned close, her fish breath wafting over Greta’s face. “You get in that kitchen and help serve up some of that Land Monkey stew or you’re next in the pot!”

“Yes ma’am.”

Greta hurried away.

Cherie watched, shook her head. Sighed. “Good help is hard to find these days,” she thought aloud.

# Inlibration

By Michael Tice

**T**he most wonderful thing in the world, I think, is the ability of the augmented human mind to correlate all its contents.

The Aether now contains just about everything anyone might ever need to know, but it has no power to do anything by itself. Sure, the Aether has menus and descriptions of every eatery in town, but it can't tell you where you want to have lunch today.

And you're probably aware, intimately aware, of how helpless the human mind is, all on its own. Sure it seems normal to you, since odds are you're part of the 85% of humanity that isn't jacked. You may even think you know where you want to have lunch today, but that's only because your knowledge extends only so far into the ocean of possibility around you.

But me, I got lucky. I took a bullet to the head while in the service of the army of LogicInt, which not only had a very generous in-the-line-of-duty clause, but one of their business units was on the forefront of cyber implants. So even though that implant is a couple years old, and LogicInt (and my service plan) has vanished into Suzhou Info, my jack is still better than what the back-alley modders and Aether-heads are likely to have. Which is a long way of saying: I know exactly where I want to eat right now. I just can't afford it.

Much of the time anyway. Private investigation is not a very steady source of funds for my account. A few dollars here, a few baht there. A few freebies here, a few tendered shares there. But after my separation from merc service, I found my way into investigation. Not something I particularly enjoy, mind you, but it definitely is something that the jack helps with. A lot of cases involve not much more than piecing together enormous quantities of dissociated knowledge. The two pieces of the puzzle are necessary. The Aether and the hardware handle the tremendous amount of data, and the human brain – or what's left of it in my case – has the evolutionarily honed pattern recognition software to make sense of it faster than the expert systems and puta-

tive AIs. Not that I could know absolutely everything at once – neither half of my memory is big enough for that – but I can know just about everything a few tebibytes at a time.

Just as an example, I didn't know anything about books when this all started. No, not what we mostly call 'books' nowadays – a file on a schoolpad – but books. Real live dead tree pieces glued together. But in a few seconds, the Aether delivered to me everything worth knowing about books: from their beginning with Johannes Gutenberg to their end with Project Googleberg, from fore edge paintings to incunabula. Of course, I should've made my access before I started talking to the librarian and not in the middle of talking to her. It queers the conversation when you go from an ignoramus to an expert in the middle of a sentence. But I'm getting ahead of myself. That happens a lot when half of you is habitually overclocked and the other half is made of meat.

The client blipped me with a query. An anonymous message asking for requirements, rates and testimonials. Common enough, if annoying. I referred him to my Presence, which offers all that information. I say 'him' because I wouldn't be good at my job if anonymous messages stayed anonymous for long. Obviously, potential clients evaluate me to see if I meet their standards; I like to return the favor. In retrospect, despite everything, I do still wonder if Amalfried Wimmer was the sort of client that I should've been regrettably unavailable for. Then again, if I knew then what I know now, I wouldn't have been who I was, and I wouldn't have become what I've become.

The bliptags suggested the message originated in Croatia. There were two possibilities. Either the sender is good at hiding traces, and has routed this message through a travelling salesman's nightmare route across the world, or he comes from Croatia and I might actually have a chance. It didn't take long to find Amalfried Wimmer, a programmer at Đuro Đaković.

No doubt if he wanted to hide his identity he could. The social cloud served up some media and data. Forty-five years old, single. Vids of Wimmer frolicking in the Adriatic near his home in Split, or carousing with friends. Though more than a little grey at the temples, he hadn't gone soft. With solid masculine features, he cut an impressive figure and could pass for a decade less than his chronological age.

I dug a little deeper. His name and location in Croatia attracted a cloud of genealogy in the Aether, so I had a look. He proudly traced



his ancestors to an aristocratic family, abounding in respected knights active in the war with the Turk. Over the centuries, the family pissed away its fortune and treasures, its members rejoining the working world.

So what does a good-looking middle-aged Croatian digit jockey want with me? We'll skip my first thought, but this is the sort of question that the AIs are actually lousy at answering. They'd cross-correlate a zillion irrelevant factoids trying to find some way to sort the data so that some unique path connected Amalfried Wimmer to Yolanda Ayala. The obvious answer is that he's looking for someone or something in Los Angeles. I felt good; I knew who Mr. Anonymous was, and had some idea what he wanted.

He called next day about noon. Unfortunately, that's three in the morning where I live. The inside of my head may be half electronic, but it still takes more than flipping a switch to get me awake and ready for action.

I answered and managed to produce some sort of vocalization. There was an awkward pause while I fumbled a tee on and moved into view. I made a slightly more authoritative grunt and prioritized getting my eyes to focus.

Wimmer's face loomed in the screen, more serious than I'd seen in the holiday photos, but still him. His English was slightly stilted, but nearly idiomatic, albeit tinged with a British accent.

"Ms Ayala. I'm interested in retaining your services. I blipped you yesterday. I'm—"

"Mr. Wimmer, I know who you are," I blurted. Not very smooth, but it was the only ace up my sleeve I had, and he was about to burn it for nothing.

"Yes, of course." He didn't seem too fazed, but I think I scored a point. "Your recommendations and fee schedule seem in order." He paused, directed his gaze offscreen as if in thought. "I wonder how much you know about books."

"I've read a few." I didn't see where this was going.

He turned back to face me directly. "I need you to get me a particular book."

I blinked. "Surely, Mr. Wimmer, it'd be easier, faster and cheaper for you to just buy the book rather than hire me to circumvent the publisher's digital copyright..."

He showed a hint of impatience, if not quite anger. "Not a file. A

book. I might have said volume or text, but those terms are even more subject to misunderstanding. I need a particular, physical, book. A tome...yes, that's better. I need you to acquire for me a tome."

"Wasn't everything on paper already digitized by Project Googleberg?"

He nodded, put his fingers to his lips as if in thought. I listened carefully. "Almost everything. Certain tomes have eluded digitization, for one reason or another. Scarcity, for instance. It's taken me some time to locate even a single copy of this work."

"In Los Angeles," I smiled.

He didn't return the smile. "Correct. You'll find the book at the Sony AXN Library. You know it?"

"Locals still call it the Central Library." I put on my serious face, "Now, when you say you want me to get you this tome, I'm guessing you didn't come to me just because I have a local library account, and can check it out for you. You have something more permanent in mind. A licensed and bonded operator, like myself, isn't allowed to do anything illegal."

Now he smiled. I didn't like it. "Are we talking about you, or a licensed investigator 'like you'? Actually, it makes no difference. I can allay your fears. Although a digital version of the book doesn't exist, I'll certainly settle for one. And any copyright issues expired long, long ago."

I stifled a yawn and half-succeeded in passing it off as contemplation. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

"It may not be easy." He seemed almost apologetic, which was cute. "The library catalog has no listing for this work; but I assure you it's there. More importantly," he smiled, "I'm positive that your special abilities will achieve the results I desire."

"All right. I accept the job with my usual fees, with a twenty-five percent bonus for a successful completion."

"Agreed. The book you're looking for is entitled the *Necronomicon*."

He gave me some other information to help me verify the identity of the book if I should ever get a chance to hold it in my hand. At the time, it meant little to me – and idiotically I didn't feel the need to learn more about books in general – but my cybernetics stored a transcription of the conversation for later reference. Fortunately, these systems operate involuntarily, because as my conscious mind intuited the imminent approach of the end of the call, it was already

letting go the reins and drifting back into sleep.

It's an odd feeling...your autonomies are fizzing along doing their job, while you, the big boss, start slipping into sleep. Makes you wonder who's boss after all. I think I had just enough awareness left to blip banking information to Wimmer and end the call with the customary etiquette, but it might have been me on autopilot. I've had the implants long enough that it's harder and harder to tell the difference between me on organic autopilot, or just the inorganic autopilot carrying out my life and retroactively filling me in on the details so that it seems like a part of my history. That loss of self is a strong inducement to be aware – really aware – and live in the moment.

What's that? Too introspective for a washed-up merc? Well, number one, recovery gives you a lot of time with nothing to do but inspect the inside of your skull, and number two, fuck you.

In the morning, I used a spare moment to verify that the online catalog for the Central Library had no entry for the *Necronomicon*. Nothing for the author. Nothing relevant for the same date of publication. Speaking of nothing, there was nothing to eat on my shelf of the fridge, and considering the current state of diplomacy in the apartment, I refrained from foraging more widely. The bank transfer had cleared, but the street-vendors in my neighborhood are still sticklers for ready cash. I walked to the Crenshaw Metro and chipped something orange and sweet from a machine there.

In my area, the tracks make seemingly random changes from ground level, to elevated, to subway. In reality, they follow the local value of human life. In some places, life is cheap enough that it doesn't much matter if a few kids a year get mangled on the tracks. To keep the city on a time-table, they don't even bother to stop the trains anymore, but I understand it's only a malicious rumor that the maintenance engineers stencil a silhouette on the train-car afterwards.

From the vantage of the elevated rails, most of LA looks pretty much the same – at least the parts I inhabit, anyway. The only thing that changes is the language on the videoboards every few miles. As the train came up for air from time to time, the main measure of progress is the increasing loom of the skyscrapers downtown. I used the time to divert a portion of my newly deposited funds to hire collection agencies to go after deadbeat clients. Probably throwing good money after unremunerated work, but it's the principle of the thing.

Besides, it was a small portion.

The transfer got wrapped up before the train plunged for the last time, heading for the heart of the city. In the dark, a couple K-town trash-humanists noisily banged their way down the car, the commuters shrinking away from them. They had plenty of hardware embedded in their faces, but it was all cosmetic or mechanical – they clearly didn't have the money for any serious neural augmentations.

Usually the Metro is pretty safe, and these punks hardly registered on my threat scale. But they spotted the fiber cluster emerging from the back of my head and zeroed in.

The first one stepped in close to add some intimidation to his shakedown gambit. "Nice gear. Wanna donate something for my..." Putting the blade under his chin shut him up pretty effectively. He tangled his legs with those of his companion in his hurry to get away from me, and they half sprawled into the lap of a chubby abuelita.

I retracted the blade and it was like it had never been there. "Watch your step," I advised.

They called me a shibseki and a lot of other things I didn't catch, but they moved on.

I ditched the Metro at Pershing Square and walked past the Aman-Biltmore to the Central Library. As a native Angeleno, I knew the building well. The squat pyramid-topped structure was a dingy reminder of Los Angeles's past, even with a half-dozen luminescent AXN logos plastered all over it. I had never been inside... not that I had anything against the place, but there was no point in going to the building itself; the library fed media straight to your home for a modest subscription. Sure, I was aware that its historical role was as a warehouse for book-books, but nowadays books were just media files small enough to blip. Except this one.

I strode past the bank of public terminals, full of Skid Row denizens surfing for free porn and kids who couldn't afford the networked gaming rigs upstairs. Eventually, I found the escalator down to the lower levels where, so I understood, the physical books had all been warehoused. The dim lighting did not invite exploration. Saying that it was quiet as a morgue down here would be an insult to morgues. The public desk was unoccupied. However, no doubt alerted by the echo of my footsteps on the tile, an ancient librarian tottered out on spindly legs to greet me. Since she looked prosperous enough, the large eyeglasses she wore must have been some sort of occupational affectation.

“With what can I help you?”

“I’m looking for a book, but I don’t see it in the catalog. But I know it’s here.”

She frowned at this impossibility. “Let’s just see, shall we? What’s the title?”

“*Necronomicon*,” I set my pad on the counter with the information Wimmer had provided.

She peered at it suspiciously, and clattered away at her terminal for what seemed an endless time, the glow illuminating her shriveled face. She paused to peer at the data, and clattered some more. She took a break from clattering to ask, “What credentials do you have?” I told the pad to flash my library ID. She looked at me like I had crapped in her bed. “This information suggests that the book was published in the Sixteenth Century. Even if it were in our collection, access would be restricted to scholars. Not,” she sniffed, “the general public.”

Her clattering had stopped, which was a bad sign. I turned on a firehose of data to learn more about books, fast. And grasped at the first plausible thing my conscious mind seized on. “Oh, well the book isn’t for me. Professor Hamidov at Cal State Dominguez Hills asked me to get it for him. He’s assembling a definitive addendum to the Ashmolean atlas of post-incunabular English paper watermarks.”

She stared at me for a good ten solid, awkward seconds. Then she clattered with a slightly different rhythm for a bit. My story would hold as long as she didn’t look too deeply. I knew Ergash Hamidov as a client – a wandering husband job – and he was on the English faculty, though I doubt his interests involved centuries old paper. I threw in a distraction.

“How would a book go missing? Is it stolen?”

“Even if it were stolen, there would be a record.” She unbent herself creakily to peer at me over the top of her screen. “Any book that was ever part of the collection has a record. Librarians...record...everything.”

She pointed at the data on the pad. “Now that accession number you provided fits into a sequence of books acquired in 1926 when the building was completed, but there seems to be...” Her voice trailed off, while she occupied herself with stuttering bouts of typing. She paused for a bit, and then her eyes shifted focus. My hopes had begun to rise, but then her wrinkles bunched into a disapproving frown.

“Professor Hamidov specializes in the contemporary queer novel,”

she accused, pausing in case I had anything to say in my defense. I had nothing. “I’m going to need to see some credentials before I can help you with this.”

I shrugged good-naturedly, retrieved my pad, and turned away, feigning defeat. In the dim light, I had hardly even needed my augmentations to read out the reflection of the monitor in her lenses.

I spent some time riding elevators and walking around the public areas of the library, checking out the security. I’ve seen tempura stands tougher to crack. It looked like the last security upgrade had happened somewhere around the millennium; since then, books had become digital and free. The public terminals and the gaming rigs on the main and upper floors had state of the art security, but there clearly wasn’t any money to watch over the physical remains of books down below.

I’m not really an expert at bypassing electronic security – I have people for that – but this was well within my capabilities. I walked outside onto the street and killed a little more time, waiting for the memory of my face to evaporate in the librarian’s mind. Downtown is safer than it used to be, but if you didn’t keep both eyes open, someone would make off with your kidney. I pushed through the crowd, and ignored the hawking of the sidewalk vendors. I wasn’t hungry enough to get something to eat, even if I trusted the food that my nose and eyes couldn’t quite abide.

I considered waiting for the library to close, but the floors containing the books were empty enough that I’d take my chances with the occasional librarian, rather than face the reps from some private military company in the middle of the night, when I wouldn’t have even a bad explanation for my presence. Or maybe I was just too lazy to go home and come back.

It was almost ludicrously easy. The insanely dense warehouse shelving in the main stacks made it easy to stay out of view from the cameras, so that the sum total of difficulty thrown at me was one electronic lock and one physical lock. If there were any other more subtle forms of security present, they were so subtle they didn’t interfere with me, as I entered the rare book archive and storage room.

The book was kept in its own special box. When I opened it up, I almost didn’t want to touch the thing inside. It reeked of animal leather and the scarred and misshapen cover looked like a centuries old sheet of synthetic jerky. The inside was slightly more familiar; I

was a little surprised by the number of diagrams in the text. I guess I figured that, being old, it was likely a pretty vanilla text file. Instead, there were strange and compelling images: geometric figures, swirling arabesques, and occasional biological monstrosities.

I set the book down on the floor, and slowly turned the pages, capturing an image of each with my optics. I was turning the pages too fast to really read them, but the occasional phrase or nonsense word would leap out of the text. It was crazy stuff: a secret history of the universe, a pantheon of Beings and monsters, of ritual and magic, and the place of humanity in the grand scheme of things:

*From the Corruption and Slime of the Ancients arose the tree of earthly Life. Now Man pretends to rule, but he is neither First nor Last. Man pretends to serve the vain gods of his own Construction. Contact with the gods that Are causes both elevation and destruction. Powers be granted not in reward for service, for what need have gods of Service from such Creatures as Man? But through such Intercourse and cunning Artifice, the Sorcerer becomes both more powerful and more liable to Destruction. He is become greater than natural man, and likewise Un-natural.*

That passage resonated – being augmented made one better, but different. The mad author vacillated between fear of and desire for this contact with the Outside. I was curious, but the clock was ticking. It took a while to complete, but crouched down on the floor I was safe from view from anyone walking past the outside of the rare books room. Safely back in its box, the *Necronomicon* was no worse for wear.

On the trip back from the library, I pasted together all the images into a complete document and fired it off to Wimmer, with my closing invoice attached. He had his book, and soon I'd have the rest of my money.

But the oddness of the book kept my mind churning. Why had it been hidden from the public? Just what did Wimmer want with it? Even a cursory look through the Aether testified to its infamous nature, but never with much detail. Many thought it to be wholly legendary, while the many hoax versions were all mutually contradictory and nonsensical.

But I had a copy. I set out to read it from the beginning, and quickly ran into a wall. So much was in code – or if not a code, a secret language known only to the initiate – that most of it made little sense. On top of that, the text was written in an English that was well over

five hundred years old. It would take a normal person years, a lifetime maybe, to piece together the analogies and mystifications, the codes and obscurities.

But I am not a normal person. Before turning in, I fatefully set my augmented data system to do all that cross-checking and analysis, chase down those references, explain those archaisms and symbols. Track down meanings for nonsense words. Winkle out forbidden meanings.

When I awoke in the morning, a flood of revelation poured into me. I know the signs of the Black Pilgrimage, the whereabouts of the Windowless Tower. I know what stars are drawing nigh their appointed placed. I know how to produce the Crimson Ray and the aleatoric tune that accompanies the Primal Litany. And I know why Wimmer contacted me, or a person like me, with gifts greater than nature alone can bestow, enhanced by cunning artifice. He created a sorcerer.

I am the knowledge of the book come alive. The Mad Arab's visions are now mine. I am the faithful repetition of his message, the culmination of his prophecy. I am the *Necronomicon*.



# Hope Abandoned

By Tom Lynch

**J**esus! What the fuck was that?”  
“Call the medivac! Two men down!”  
“Who? Who’s down?”

“Holy shit! What happened?”

The canal’s edge was a frenzied snarl of activity. Police cruisers and aerodynes sat every which-way on the street and sidewalk. Blue, white, and red lights flashed off derelict buildings on both sides of the water giving the nearby bridge a stark, menacing aspect in the multi-colored strobe. The assembled police officers converged on the scene, clustered over the two men lying on the ground in a growing pool of blood while two others attempted first aid.

“What happened? Who saw it?” barked Detective Sergeant Michael Hearst as he strode forward.

“He stabbed ’em, Sarge! He freakin’ stabbed ’em!”

“Yeah, I got that, Pugzy, but how? I thought you patted him down and scanned him.”

“I did! Here’s the scanner readout, he came back clean.”

“Anyone have line-of-site?”

One armored form stepped forward, shorter than most, stockier than some. Her face was white and her voice shaky. “I did, Sarge.”

“Let’s see the playback, Shulz.”

All the officers present tapped their helmets’ visors into Shulz’s broadcast, and watched the vid she’d recorded. The holographic image showed the two downed officers, Chavez and Monahan, walking Harkness to the cruiser. Suddenly, two spikes shot out from Harkness’s ribs and straight through the escorting officers’ armor. The spikes retracted, covered in red, and the officers dropped. Then the perp vaulted clear over the police cruiser and ran toward the bridge. Playback ended. No one said a word.

“Let me see that scanner readout, Billings. He had unregistered, illegal cybernetic implants...”

“No, Sarge...he came back *clean*. Look!”

Sure enough, the readout was pure organic. As in *pure* organic: no implants whatsoever. None. The perp wasn't even NerveWired. Everyone was NerveWired. How else could he interface with anything? No way he used a *keyboard* at work!

Hearst connected his internal police band to the precinct. “This is Detective Sergeant Hearst, shield number DS1437, requesting backup for pursuit of the PolyPhantastic Killer into SouthTown. Please respond.”

“This is central,” the response came back through his aural implants half a minute later. “Request denied.”

“*What!?* This is the biggest case in the city right now, and I can't get more men for a proper search?”

“Brass says you gotta pull your team outta there, Sarge.”

“Christ. Thanks for nothing,” Hearst spat as he cut the connection. He moved away from his team and tapped the holodisplay on his wrist, switching from radio band to cellular. He pulled off his helmet and autodialed the number for his immediate superior's private line.

Hearst's lieutenant's face appeared projected behind his eyes. “Mike,” started Lieutenant Torenson.

“Don't you fucking ‘Mike’ me! You know how important this case is! What gives?”

“Give me two. Call you back,” and the line cut off.

Hearst adjusted his armored trench coat to clip his helmet to his belt and leant against a lamppost stewing in his own anger. He remembered first catching this case. Men, women, and children, cut to pieces and laid out in arcane patterns, their blood spelling out nonsense phrases. He remembered the Crime Scene guys scanning the scene and coming back with so many clear matches to one set of prints, everyone realized that the perpetrator wasn't even trying to hide. ‘Simon Harkness’ had been the name that had come up. His apartment had been empty for days, but there had been leads at his lab. The guy had been a researcher for PolyPhasic Industries. Management at the megacorp had been very tight-lipped and only shared information after multiple subpoenas had been served, and their marketing team realized they couldn't spin having let loose a serial killer.

Apparently, he'd been working on a substance he either created or discovered dubbed “LiquiTech.” The PolyPhasic goons hadn't bothered clarifying. Only after hours of leaning on research assistants and

lab techs were they able to get any information about it. Apparently Harkness had taken a different kind of research approach. Rather than donning his lab coat, he'd hit the books, and had looked through old texts for references that could give his research direction. According to colleagues, he had often been heard muttering something about 'calling' or 'reaching.'

The shit had really hit the fan when he'd taken a trip north to a small town college in Massachusetts and supposedly stolen an old, rare book. He'd returned in the dead of night, locked himself in his office suite, and hadn't come out. Security camera feeds into the area failed, with both video and audio going offline inexplicably. In the morning, he was gone. And the murders had started.

Hearst heard a ringtone in his aural implant, and tapped his holo-display. Lieutenant Torenson's face glowed to life in his vision. "Tor, what the hell, man?"

"I had to step outside. The captain has the PolyPhasic people in again. The fucking legal team from hell."

"So that's why my request was denied? PolyPhasic won't let us take him in?"

"They're arguing that he made off with a proprietary substance, and they want to get it back without risking its viability."

"Oh, that is such a *crock*, and you know it. I'm sending a vid to your viewer now," Hearst said, tapping some more controls on his wrist. "Show the suits this, and inform them of what their 'proprietary substance' just did to two police officers in the line of duty. And while you're at it, make sure we have a record of what they will and won't allow for the lawsuits coming their way from the officers' families if Chavez and Monahan don't survive!"

"Shit. Look. I know. I'll show them the vid, but these bureaucrats won't come up with any kind of response till next week. If you want your perp, go get him. Get volunteers from the team you have in place. That's the best I can do, and it's not official. And, unofficially, good hunting."

It was a gut shot, but he knew he shouldn't have been surprised. NYPD brass had been caving more and more these days with megacorp pressure. Sure, PolyPhasic made and supplied the police force's armor (at a steep discount they kept adding), and the material for the plating for the vehicles, but still. They might as well perform a spine-ectomy on the force and still somehow expect them to do their

jobs. God knows they'd complain if anything bad happened to anyone or anything they *did* care about.

He got back to the team assembled at the bridge into SouthTown. The medivac EMTs had loaded the two downed officers into their aerodyne and were prepping to take off. The EMTs did not look hopeful. Hearst turned to his team, "Backup's not coming."

"Aw, crap..." one of them said.

Hearst looked over his team. Most were better-than-five-year veteran officers with harsh experience toughening their features and attitudes. Not all of them were tough-guys, though. Some were young, new. All were dedicated idealists, though, who believed in what they did. Getting this close and letting their perp slip away *hurt* them. "Harkness is still out there, though," he said, "and this is as close as we've gotten yet. He's getting further away and will be harder to catch the longer we do nothing. But without backup this could be suicide. I'm going to ask for volunteers anyway, *but* before anyone steps forward, raise your hands if you're married or have kids."

He scanned the results. "Okay guys. Get back in your cruisers and head back to the precinct. I won't take you with me."

"Sarge, what about you? Your son—" Adamson started.

"My son is better off with his mother and her new husband. Safer. They're in California anyway. So get outta here, guys. I know you would come with me otherwise. Now, those of you who are left, there's a good chance this is a one-way trip, but I'm giving it a shot. No shame if you're not up for it. Just be honest, cuz I can't have you hesitating once we're down there. Anyone up for this?"

Shulz stepped forward. "I'm in, Sarge." Her face was still pale from seeing what Harkness had done earlier, and her blue eyes were very wide. She was short, but had played collegiate rugby. She was tough enough to take down several of the larger, macho members of his team, and had demonstrated exactly that at the last hand-to-hand combat refresher.

Hearst smiled at the newest member of his team. "Shulz, are you sure? You haven't been to SouthTown yet. You've seen the footage of the quake that tore 14<sup>th</sup> Street in half and made Manhattan into two islands, but since then, it's gotten...*scary*...down there. There are unconfirmed reports of...well...let's not provide too many details. It sounds crazy. But people don't go if they don't have to."

"I'm still in, Sarge," she said, and then in a quiet, but intense voice,

“Let’s do this.”

Hearst tapped the controls to his command cruiser networked from his wrist, and the trunk slid open. He tossed his trench coat in and pulled out a shorter ceramic-plated jacket. He surveyed the various weaponry options: pulse cannon (too heavy), mini-gun (too bulky), recon assault engine (yes, one of those), twin ‘Shredder’ flechette pistols (perfect for backup holdouts), bandoliers of incendiary, fragmentation, flash bang, and EM grenades (too much? maybe... only one for each of them then), and finally military-grade medkits (always a good idea).

He checked each weapon carefully. Stats for each appeared in his vision, via his smart gun optical implants. All were in perfect working order and fully loaded; he strapped and clipped everything into place. It was time to go hunting. He looked across the bridge to the south side of the canal. The empty buildings seemed to stare back at him like musty open caskets. He did his best to suppress a shudder.

“Right,” Hearst turned to the rest of his team. “Report back to the lieutenant. Tell him that Shulz and I have gone in, and will be back with the perp in tow.” The bravado was forced. They all knew it.

An approaching luxury aerodyne swooped in low and caught Hearst’s attention as he looked up. “That will be the suits from Poly-Phasic with some shit about proprietary rights and keeping us from doing our jobs, so let’s grab out gear and roll, Shulz, now.” Hearst put his helmet back on, and turned toward the bridge, setting a swift pace.

“Give him hell, Sarge,” Adamson called. The corporate aerodyne touched down beyond Adamson, who turned and raised his hand to stop any approach. The doors swished open and a clown-car crew of lawyers piled out, shoving papers at Adamson, gesturing angrily at Hearst and Shulz as they reached the far side of the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Canal.

Shulz muttered something under her breath as she ran through a quick equipment check.

“What was that, Shulz?”

“‘All hope abandon, ye who enter.’ It’s Dante.”

“I know it, but you got it wrong. It’s supposed to be ‘Abandon all hope, ye who enter.’”

“Sorry, Sarge, but I have to pull rank here.”

“What?!”

“I studied Dante in English and the original Italian. College and grad school seem like another lifetime. I shoulda been a teacher like

I planned.”

“Safer, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, but you get cooler toys on the force,” Shulz said as she shouldered her assault engine.

“No lie.”

Hearst looked up as they stepped into the now-dead section of New York City. He remembered his father taking him to see this area just after the Big One finally hit, tearing the fault line under 14<sup>th</sup> Street with stupendous effect. The wreckage had been incredible. Back then, civilians weren’t allowed near the disaster area, but leaning buildings could easily be seen from the top of Union Square.

Thousands of lives ended that day, but millions of lives had been affected. The city’s world-famous financial district closed that day. Permanently. Chinatown, Little Italy, Greenwich Village: all gone. The entire subway system flooded and stopped dead, hundreds drowned in the rushing water. It took years to recover from that devastation. The worldwide depression that followed only made matters that much worse: everyone knew it had to be fixed, but no one had the money to fix it. Slowly, the gears started turning again, but New York City was never the same. It was still a great metropolis, but it was treated like a limping burn victim among fashion models.

All that wasn’t the worst of it either. Unconfirmed reports of ‘monsters’ kept cropping up in the area of SouthTown. People kept trying to rebuild down there until they finally just gave up and cut their losses: no weirdness was worth the risk. Officially, the city government blocked the bridges that had been built, and ceased construction on the ones that had been started. SouthTown was cut off from the rest of Manhattan Island, and it was left that way. No one went there anymore, because unofficially, off the record, the rumors were true. There was little hard evidence, but multiple sightings of similar creatures were enough for most. The NYPD (relocated to its new headquarters in Harlem) designated it as a high-threat area, and further reconnaissance was halted.

*Yep*, thought Hearst to himself. *Until we had to go back in to do our jobs.* “This is what the big bucks are for,” he muttered.

“There must be a different pay scale for sergeants,” Shulz said grinning.

“Heh...I wish. Are you picking up any heat signatures?”

“None, Sarge.”

“Let’s keep our eyes and ears open here. He only went in—how long ago now?”

“The video’s timestamp was 22:37, and it’s now 22:51, so he’s got a fourteen-minute lead.”

“Damn...might as well be days. Okay, hold on...I’m pulling up the files from the HQ network.”

Shulz stopped next to him, watching all around, while Hearst gazed at the images projected into his vision from his network uplink. “Any similarities in the MO, Boss?”

“I’m checking—yeah. Yeah, there are. None of the murders were done on sight. He grabbed people and took them underground. Literally. He did them all in basements. Preferably big basements. That way he could make a bigger impression with his murders, the sick bastard.” Crime scene holos buzzed through Hearst’s vision. “God! What could drive a person to do that? And some of them were children!”

“Dunno, Sarge. We just have to take him down. I’ve just checked the old city plans, and there are a number of buildings in this immediate area that used to be department stores. Some of them even connected to the subway stations underneath.”

“Nice. So if you were this creep, where would you hide out and wait for us to pass you by?”

“My money is on 770 Broadway. Used to be a national chain store, and it’s right near the old Astor Place subway station. Straight run five blocks down Broadway from here, then a left on 8<sup>th</sup>.”

“That fits, all right. Why this one, though?”

“This is the first big store along the main drag,” Shulz pointed out. “Other places had big basements, but he wouldn’t have known that from the street. If the sign is still visible, that’d tip him off about this place.”

“Works for me. Let’s go. Woah, wait...why a left on 8<sup>th</sup> if it’s a Broadway address?”

“The entrance is over on Lafayette. I just call ’em how I see ’em, Boss.”

The two police officers picked up the pace now that they had a destination. They picked their way down a black street with empty buildings yawning over them, their windows like empty eye sockets.

Both spun suddenly to their left as a gap in the buildings opened. An old churchyard was alive with tiny heat signatures. Hearst switched his vision from infrared to starlight only to reel backwards as a swarm

of rats surged forward at them.

"Close your eyes!" shouted Shulz as she spun the dial on her assault engine to flamethrower and doused the oncoming wave with a wash of fire. The screeching of dying vermin and smell of cooked meat filled the air. Hearst and Shulz ran. And the rats followed.

"Hit 'em again Shulz!"

Flames billowed behind them as they ran, scanning the street ahead for more threats. Two blocks later, they stopped to catch their breath, but held it and stared at each other as a chittering sound surrounded them. Shrieks and squeals, almost like human laughter, stabbed at their ears. Hearst and Shulz stood back to back as they confronted the gloom filled with thousands of sets of dual pinpoints. For a moment, the rats just seemed to stare at the invaders, until...

As one, the rats attacked them again, swarming over them, nipping at exposed flesh, and trying to crawl inside protective armor. Hearst groped for his bandolier of grenades, feeling for a particular type. He found it, "Fire in the hole!" he cried, and a blinding flash suddenly filled the night, and stunned rats fell away. Both of them took the moment to bring their flamethrowers to bear and burnt all the remaining rats.

"What...the hell...is going on?" Shulz gasped. Panting, they crouched and closely inspected one of the carcasses at their feet. Hearst poked at it with his weapon, flicking on the small LED at the assault engine's tip. The rat's body had been crushed, and its eyes and mouth gaped in death. As they watched, some oozing black ichor dripped slowly from the eyes and mouth, pooled together like mercury, and jetted off into the darkness.

Both of them stared in the direction the substance had moved. Hearst's heart hammered in his chest. "We must be heading in the right direction. Harkness is behind this somehow," he whispered. "What was that substance the PolyPhasic guys said he was working on? LiquiTech?"

"Yeah?" prompted Shulz.

"What if he somehow got it into the rats?"

"But how could he have done that so fast? We're only a few minutes behind him!"

"I—I don't know." Hearst said quietly. "There was something... where was he doing that research? Hold on, lemme look it up." Hearst went quiet and Shulz sat looking at him while file covers whizzed by



in his vision. He stopped and looked up. "Watch this one," he said. He shared the vid file with her, and they both watched as a recorded vidphone conversation played back.

A small, white-haired man in a tweed jacket sat in front of a shelf of leather-bound books. "No, lieutenant," he said on the screen. "I really cannot tell you what he was doing when he locked himself in the manuscript room. I can only tell you the book that he stole was a very old and precious one. It's been here at the Orne for well over one hundred years, and the members of the board at the university are none too pleased to have it missing. They would also appreciate it if you could avoid mentioning or implicating the university in any way in your investigation. Fundraising for higher education is hard enough without having to explain away your involvement in a serial-killer investigation.

"Anyway, you had asked about the book. He was looking for a very rare, Ninth Century Latin translation of a book called *The Book of Eibon*. How he'd come to hear of it I do not know, but he learned that we had it, and came to look at it. He stayed in the manuscript room for hours on end, pouring over it, dictating and photographing terabytes of notes. Then, one day, when I was going to ask him to leave for the day, I found the room empty, both man and manuscript had vanished. They hadn't walked past me, and the manuscript room is an interior basement room with no windows, so I haven't the faintest idea how he left, or how he extracted the book from the viewing cube without tripping any alarms.

"The contents of the book?" the older, bespectacled man shifted in his seat. "I've not read the entire volume. I found it...disturbing. I did, however, read the abstract. It deals with great beings of a now-dead race. They allegedly held dominion over many powerful creatures and this book describes in some detail the process by which one can acquire and control such beings."

Hearst closed the file, and looked over at Shulz.

"Oh," was all she could say, and she swallowed.

"Let's go stop this son of a bitch."

Shulz straightened and cocked her assault engine. They turned and headed south, trotting through the black, dead remains of a once-thriving neighborhood. Through the gloom, they found 8<sup>th</sup> Street, and peered around the corner weapons at the ready. All was quiet. They stepped carefully forward, but met no resistance.

They found the entranced marked by the remains of a big, red letter 'K' that had fallen from the sign above the empty doorway. The glass doors had been shattered decades ago by desperate looters. Hearst remembered the news footage covering the aftermath. Mobs of dirty, desperate New Yorkers, driven wild by the mayhem, were stealing what they could and burning what they couldn't. It had taken the crackdown of martial law and months of ruthless enforcement to calm the situation.

He shook off the memory. "Shulz, I've got point, cover my back."

"Right, Sarge."

He stepped from the night-darkened street into the near pitch of the interior of the abandoned megamart. His optical implants kicked automatically, and he could see very well, if only in shades of green, with hybrid lowlight/infrared imaging. Overturned shelving, broken glass, and years of dust were almost all he saw.

Then one other thing caught his eye.

Footprints.

Silently, he signaled to Shulz, who nodded her understanding.

Deeper into darkness they crept, hardly daring to breathe. They began to hear noises. Faint, at first, but becoming clearer the further into the building they moved: a man was shouting. They weren't angry shouts...it was more like loud calling or chanting. The shouts ended suddenly in retching sounds.

More shouting.

More retching.

Closer Hearst and Shulz crept. They came to an open door, with concrete steps leading down. Hearst stayed on point, careful not to disturb any of the debris left by the quake or looters, or even the squatters who must have lived here briefly in the early days.

They got to the bottom of the steps and turned the corner, and there, in the center of the large room was a slender man on all fours, spitting into a pool of...something, as if he had just vomited. The pool was not vomit however; it looked more like oil. Light from a small survivalist lantern cast a wan glow over the scene, reflecting off the rippling liquid.

The man, Harkness, their perp, had his back to the police officers. He did not see them yet. Feebly, he brought one hand to the light. They could see he had a small scrap of crumpled, wet paper clutched there. He pushed himself back onto his knees, and threw out his arms

calling, “Black father of K’n-yan, I beseech you! God of Yoth, Lord of Deep N’kai! Flow through my baaah—”

The force of his vomiting threw Harkness onto all fours again, and this time Hearst and Shulz saw what was flowing out of him. They saw what had stabbed Chavez and Monahan. They saw what was in Harkness, and what had made him this way. In that crystal moment, their lives were twisted around and torn in half, shoved back together and dropped into an abandoned basement in SouthTown.

Shulz’s breath caught in her throat, and that was all the sound needed to warn Harkness. He spun, looking straight at them, a trail of black, oily ichor still oozing from his mouth into the pool on the floor. His wide, bloodshot eyes were bursting with utter insanity. He made a choking, guttural spitting sound, and the pool at his feet coalesced into a mound with two tentacular arms and two malign, eyes burning like purple coals in the top of the mound.

Shulz shouldered her weapon and the creature’s arms shot out in a scissoring motion, and Hearst heard wet splattering noises as his comrade was cut in half. Hearst merely pulled the trigger, the crosshairs of his assault engine’s smart gun implant already glowing on Harkness’s forehead.

Harkness had opened his mouth to make another noise, but never got the chance as the HE round tunneled past his frontal bone and blew his brains out the back of his head and across the basement floor.

Hearst dove and rolled, cradling his weapon, coming up pointing it at where the impossible pile of black slime had been. But he couldn’t keep his balance for some reason. He looked down to see the goo swirling around him on the floor. Frantically, he thumbed the controls over to flamethrower, but a pseudopod shot up from the floor between his legs and battered the gun out of his hands.

He tried desperately to stand, to get his feet underneath him, to run away. This, this thing simply could not exist. It could not be doing this to him. And yet it was. It could not have killed poor Shulz just now, and so many others over the past weeks. And yet it had.

And now it was going to kill him.

Calm swept over him. Detective Sergeant Michael Hearst of the NYPD was going to die tonight, but that was okay. He’d gotten his bad guy. He could die knowing he’d done that this day. It was too bad they’d never recover his body, but...

He couldn’t move any more. The fluid-creature had oozed up over

him, covering his whole body up to his shoulders. The bump, or head, of sorts, emerged again burning malevolence into Hearst's brain.

Another arm formed and held the top of his head, while the eyes held his gaze. There was a feeling of a sinister smile from the creature, and suddenly, he knew what this creature was going to do. *No*, thought Hearst. "NO!" he cried suddenly. "No, DON'T!"

A razor-thin whip-blade arm whooshed out and back into the creature, pulling Hearst's head away from his neck. And Hearst could still feel it. The pain was incredible. Every fiber of his body was suddenly in white-hot, blazing agony, and then it started, bless it, to fade...but it didn't go dark! Pain burned everywhere and tore everything. Hearst felt, lived, was pain.

The creature was flowing into him. Down his neck and up into his skull, filling his brain, his mind, taking his thoughts. Learning. Planning. Slowly, Michael Hearst's thoughts were no longer his own.

"Please, God, *no*! Just let me d—"

# Immune

By Terrie Leigh Relf

**R**emy looked out his window at the heavy fog. “Another day in paradise,” he mumbled, dropping the blackout drapes into place. He was sensitive to light, and the drapes helped to keep his migraines at bay; that, and made it easier to sleep during the day.

His schedule was more or less balanced: Classes three days a week, 10-20 hours hanging out in the computer lab for his pseudo-job. The lab was open 24-7, and he usually had the graveyard shift, but only a few students staggered in from time-to-time; those who did usually fell asleep at their terminals, screen savers morphing to silent melodies while students snored away.

“Vitamin C,” he mumbled, padding into the kitchen to grab a bottle of orange juice. He downed it from the clear plastic container. It tasted fresh-squeezed.

He looked at his memory board. It was his campus-advisor-slash-shrink, Dr. Rosen’s idea, as his headaches always made him fuzzy-minded.

Mandatory testing.

Even though they were all supposedly immune, and had to be in order to live on campus, everyone—students and staff alike—had monthly blood draws. The lead science teams were always on the lookout for another mutation. When it first surfaced in 2013, the usual apocalypse nuts started to call it the Mayan flu. Most of the experts claimed the virus had run its course, arguing that it would be a stupid bug indeed to wipe out the entire population.

Still, if Remy believed the numbers, the planet’s once burgeoning population of seven billion people, was now a mere million, give or take a few. About half the U.S.’ population lived on campuses such as this, the University of California, San Diego.

Now they just called it *The Campus*, as if that said it all.

He was obviously one of the lucky ones. A survivor. Immune. They were expected to go to college, study, then recreate the world, only

better.

Whatever that meant.

They all had free rides and were paid handsomely for their ‘contributions’ to science. It was ironic, he mused, as there wasn’t much to buy that wasn’t already provided for them. All Remy needed to do was submit a bi-monthly list to Dr. Rosen, and within reason, it was provided.

While Remy occasionally hung out with other students, he didn’t really have any close friends. He could, however, go to one of the campus cafes and run into someone from a class or two. They’d usually sit around one of the concrete benches, study, and when they came up for air, would share some new tune from the latest audio-module, or blast each other with some vidstream that had somehow found its way onto the web.

Yes, there was a degree of normalcy.

Remy sat down on the futon couch, reached for his scheduler. He had to get tested today, but what was on for tomorrow? He tapped his calendar for Friday, April 21, 2027: Biopsy at 8:00a.m.

“Just great,” he muttered. The Campus was still a research facility complete with hospitals, clinics, labs, and lecture halls. The possibility of a fourth wave clung to most everyone’s awareness, more or less, but wasn’t talked about much. It was the white walrus in the room, blubbery flesh jiggling with every silent bark.

Remy knew some people were paranoid about getting it, while others believed immune was immune. He shrugged, pulled back the drapes again. The sun was beginning to pierce the fog, and the well-manicured grounds were damp with spring rain. The grass was lush and vibrant, perennial flowers and trees burgeoned throughout the campus.

If he wasn’t immune, he’d be in some sort of lock-down facility like one of the old prisons in East County or further up the coast in the California sticks. Then, his view would be unembellished concrete—or worse.

Scavenger crews, contractors, architects, and members of the recently reformed FEMA, worked around the clock to level the detritus of another era. Not in La Jolla so much as elsewhere. Remy heard a good part of what used to be San Diego and Los Angeles county was going to become dedicated farmland and grazing fields for cows and whatnot—and citrus groves, too, he remembered, smacking his

lips. Citrus was the new dairy, it seemed, and infomercials pushed its consumption hourly.

Not one of the genius scientists seemed to know who patient zero was, much less the virus' supposed origins. Nevertheless, they continued to seek antibodies in his and the other campus residents' blood. Mandatory birth control shots were administered along with their monthly blood draw, too, as the proverbial experts wanted to make sure no one passed on an aberrant genetic cocktail.

Remy fingered the latest scar just beneath his navel. There were others, but stroking this one seemed to comfort him. He looked at the kitchen clock over the stove: 11:32. He still had time for a shower before the shuttle arrived.

~\*~

Remy was still waiting for his appointment and wished he'd brought his reader or something, as he usually didn't have to wait for more than a few minutes. Afterwards, he was planning to head over to the Oblong Café for a green tea or coffee. There was a new barista there, a transfer student from another UC campus. Her name was Molly, and Remy was going to ask her to go for a walk or something—if he could work up the courage.

And then she strolled into the clinic and sat down right next to him.

"Hey," she said, her smile revealing beautiful white teeth and a dimple. Her red hair was swept up today, and a few corkscrew curls were loose and bouncing against her cheeks. Remy glanced at her eyes; they were green and luminous.

He managed to croak out a "hey" in response before she stood up, said, "See you soon," and slid through the side exit.

Remy grinned, and was still grinning when a medtech stepped into the waiting room and called his name. After his blood draw and shot, Remy had the shuttle drop him off near The Oblong Café, thinking Molly would be there. But she wasn't. He had an oat-bran muffin and a Sacred Geometry: triple espresso with five curls of lemon. He was definitely past mumbling after that.

He tossed his stuff in the requisite bins, one for compost, one for recycle, the other a trash-trash, and headed over to the shuttle stop. He had some studying to do for Monday's oceanography exam on

hydrostatic pressure and plate tectonics. Dr. Mizra had gone on and on about the treat she had planned after the exam. She'd just spent about six months cruising the west coast, then down around the Gulf of Mexico with an international survey team. He admitted he was curious what they'd discovered. Maybe she'd postpone the test and show the vidfeed instead.

~\*~

Friday came too soon for Remy's tastes as he turned to stare at the anesthesiologists, resigned.

"You know the drill," one said, placing a mask over Remy's mouth and nose.

"100, 99, 98..." He usually passed-out by 95, but today they were taking him down slower than usual. He wondered what that was about. Still, it could be worse.

He could be awake for the biopsies.

Later, when he awoke from anesthesia, Remy had a wicked headache. The medtechs knew him by now, and were always standing by with painkillers. He curled his tongue up, and the medtech slipped it underneath. Remy sighed, waiting for it to dissolve.

Remy remembered going to the doctor when he was a kid. The nurse would give him a lolly. His favorite had been cherry, then sour apple. He wished he had one now, or maybe a Jolly Rancher. Watermelon or lemon-lime.

He really missed his mom...

The virus' first wave arrived like some uninvited guest when he was in junior high. They had lived in Ocean Beach, their balcony extending over craggy rocks so close to the ocean that waves would often rise to caress the wood and steel frame. His dad had built the deck especially for his mom who loved to paint there.

Until the ocean called to her one day.

His mother hadn't been the only one to commit suicide that spring. Her body had been found among jagged seaweed-drenched rocks along with several of their neighbors. Had they dove together?

His dad had been the one to tell him when he got home from school that afternoon, attempting to soften the blow by saying, "It wasn't her fault." His dad had been just down the street working at a building site, when someone screamed about bodies washed up on



the beach.

There were literally thousands of bodies flopping on the shore, trying to wriggle up the damp sand like grunion to lay their eggs.

The proverbial scientists on the case claimed that had been the first wave. Millions across the globe. At first, bioterrorists were blamed until some genius had supposedly discovered an unknown biological agent.

And then the second wave arrived in less than three months. People came down with flu-like symptoms: clammy skin, fever, chills. Then their flesh took on a pallor interspersed with dark splotches before it thickened, became porous, their eyes blackened to the point where the pupils were barely discernable from the iris.

Emergency broadcasts were transmitted by helicopter, news vans, and military vehicles 24-7 while the same message had gone viral on the net: "Don't touch them. Call emergency services. We repeat: Do not touch them or allow any of their fluids to touch you."

Of course Remy had been simultaneously revolted and compelled to watch the broadcasts over and over again, as if there was something he could see that all the experts missed. But what, he had no idea.

Even now, the images, the horrendous images of the infected, reeled through his mind unbidden. There were still occasional recaps on the news, juxtaposed with sound bites broadcasting the new death tolls. It seemed so mundane, like they were reading off item or lot numbers. But each number represented a person, their final hours in a space Remy hoped was beyond pain, because the final symptom was blisters that swelled then burst like kelp pods, oozing viscous fluid, an acrid scent, leaving rubbery, gelatinous flesh in its wake.

His father had died in the second wave, and Remy was grateful he didn't have to see him like that. Still, he would have liked to say good-bye...

The third wave crept in on the heels of the second, and for Remy, it defied explanation. Girls barely out of puberty and women of all ages were the only ones affected. How could their wombs fill with oceans of salt water, then empty, unfertilized? Those were the lucky ones... As others gave birth to unidentifiable masses of undulating flesh without eyes or ears or mouths.

There were a few women who actually gave birth to live infants with exquisitely beautiful faces. Elongated eyes curved upward like crescent moons, pursed lips open and rooting for mother's milk.

But rather than fingers, their tiny hands ended in tendrils, more like undulating filaments than appendages, and their legs were often a tangled mass of human limbs and cartilage.

Supposedly, all the babies had died within a day or so of being born. Remy wondered if they had euthanized them. It seemed the only humane thing to do. There was an annex of labs just beyond the campus quad that housed the Embryonics Department. The banal-looking hub of buildings was off-limits without clearance, though. As if Remy would want to visit.

A medtech came in to check on him. "How are we doing?"

Remy shrugged. "Woozy. Still have a massive headache."

His vision was still blurry, but he thought the medtech's nametag read Veronica. "Ver-on-i-ca," he sounded out. She smiled, patted him. "I'll see what I can do."

He remembered one of his high school science teachers talking about the polar ice caps, how the drilling in Alaska probably released some ancient spore. There'd been deep sea drilling back in the 1900s and early 2000s, and more recently, too. Robotic drones explored the ocean depths gathering data, their glistening metallic arms trailing through ocean silt, their drills wrenching through crust and mantle... Had that released the virus?

If there was a fourth wave coming, who would this one attack, who would succumb, but more importantly, who would survive?

The last census reported 127,000 thousand people left in the United States. That was less than used to live in San Diego alone. That couldn't be right. There were at least five-thousand people living on campus and in the surrounding hills of La Jolla. Most of the scientists lived off campus or in their labs. The support staff, security personnel, and students lived in campus housing and the dorms. Not that Remy had been able to explore. Even if he could drive, they wouldn't let the students off The Campus for their own protection. From time-to-time he saw vans, small buses, and other vehicles leaving campus down one of the back roads through one of the many copses of eucalyptus trees, and he wondered how hard it would be to sneak into the back.

But then Remy wasn't that big of a risk-taker.

The campus was lush and green, all their needs were met, but outside the perimeter, beyond the high voltage and sonic fences, were million dollar homes with over-grown yards, leaves and mulch covering once pristine designer landscapes. Vintage cars and other vehicles,

their engines cold, their fuel tanks empty, were lined up along the sidewalks, driveways, and parking lots, like sea shells abandoned by their organisms.

Remy straightened out his IV, wondered when the medtechs were going to take it out and let him go home.

“Remy? Remy?”

He opened his eyes. When had the medtech arrived?

“Still feeling woozy?”

He nodded.

“Okay. I’ll let the doctor know. Hopefully, we can get you something for that.” Veronica handed him a cup of ice chips with a smile. “Slow-ly, okay? Or I’ll have to feed them to you myself.”

“Okay. Slow-ly,” he mumbled, closed his eyes again.

Did Molly have to give up bits of her organs, too? Remy wished they’d just leave them all be for a while. It had been years since the last outbreak, but the immune continued to be studied with paranoid glee.

He tugged at the thick blankets, covered himself up and rolled over on his side. The IV was coming loose and it burned. He reached to rub the area, but that only made it worse.

“Veronica!” he called out, then remembered his call button, pressed it. He could hardly wait to go home.

Home. The house in Ocean Beach. Would he ever see it again?

“You have no reason to go there,” Dr. Rosen, said during their last appointment. “It may still be dangerous. There is nothing there you need. Your family’s home is held in trust. Not to worry. You are safe here. Why place yourself in danger?”

Yes, why indeed. All his needs were taken care of, and as long as he didn’t do anything to harm himself or others, he could do pretty much what he wanted.

Well, he wanted Molly, and was going to ask her out. She seemed interested, too. Even though he’d never had a girlfriend, he sensed that there was something connecting them. If his mom were still alive, she’d probably ruffle his sandy brown hair, look into his ice-blue eyes so like her own, and call him ‘late bloomer’ with an affectionate grin. He missed his mom in the worse way. His dad, too, but it was his mother that had always understood him.

A medtech walked by the recovery room, backtracked, then poked his head into the room. “The procedure went fine. You’ll get to go

home in an hour or so. Someone's coming by with something for that nausea."

Remy croaked out, "Thanks," closed his eyes again, allowed his mind to drift back to when he had first been admitted to the university and the battery of medical, rather than academic, tests that he'd been required to undergo. CT scans, EEGs and EKGs. Then blood and urine for weeks on end; that, and stool samples. Twice a month, usually. Sometimes more often if there was an accident in the lab or if some genius concocted another test. You'd think their tests would be more sophisticated, less invasive. After all, this was The Campus, and still a leading medical facility.

Then the doctors wanted sperm, which wasn't such a big deal, although he still felt slightly awkward about it. No doubt they harvested eggs from the women, which was totally invasive. One less test he didn't need to submit to.

After that it was bone marrow; he supposed that was the worst, followed by the current series of organ biopsies. Even though the local anesthesia hadn't worn off totally yet, Remy knew a world of pain would rear up soon, what with all that air and gas they pumped in to rearrange his insides. He was relieved they used laparoscopic surgery, rather than opening him up, but how could they expect him to focus on his studies if he was always recovering from some procedure or another?

He had an appointment with Dr. Rosen coming up in a week or so. The man called it adjustment counselling, but Remy knew there was more to it than that. The doc was quite interested in his dreams of late. He wondered if Molly had to record and talk about hers as well.

He was thirsty, and tried to sit up, but his head was pounding and he was still seeing a halo around everything in the room. He turned to the side, detected movement. Probably another medtech to check his vitals again. He wanted to go home. Now.

What had they biopsied this time? Liver? Kidneys? Spleen? He really hoped his brain wasn't on the list... That's where they'd located a parasite in some of the suicides, but if he believed everything he heard, the results were inconclusive: There was no direct correlation to the virus. Or so they said.

The screen saver on the medtech's computer was undulating like sea grass with the tides. It was mesmerizing to watch the pale green slivers as they swayed to-and-fro in symphony with a silent melody

composed of bits and bytes of code.

Remy reached for the cup of ice chips. When had he taken that red pill? His headache was worse rather than better, and he reached up to feel his head. No bandages. He exhaled with relief. Still, it was as if there was something inside his head struggling to find an exit, careening through his cranium like cold liquid fire.

He took a deep breath, exhaled, then took another and exhaled more slowly. Dr. Rosen told him time and again that this would help with his misplaced anxiety—as if he didn’t have anything to worry about.

So he focused on Molly instead and felt the pain dissipate. Just Molly with the pale-green eyes, the lustrous red hair, the almond skin with just a single star-like configuration of freckles above her mouth, just beneath those exquisite cheekbones.

Molly. He was sure she was about the same age he was, 23, give or take. He could tell she was slender beneath the bulky sweaters she usually wore. He was definitely going to ask her out once he felt better. Since Remy usually had difficult time focusing for days after the biopsies, it would be awhile before he could get together with her. Maybe if he flushed his system out with the smart water Dr. Woodrow was always urging him to drink, he’d feel better faster.

Smart water, as if water could possess innate intelligence.

“You need to stay healthy if you plan to recreate the world,” Dr. Woodrow said on more than one occasion. As if that was Remy’s plan. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life, but it certainly didn’t have anything to do with restoring earth’s population to its former ludicrous levels.

But maybe that’s not what Dr. Woodrow meant?

Remy remembered his Bio 101 professor saying the first two waves had practically decimated the global population, reducing it from around seven billion to several million. After it had attacked the coastal regions of every continent, the virus had moved inland to barage the heart of each and every country, state, and city.

A medtech leaned into Remy’s room. “Dr. Woodrow said you can go. Someone will be by in a few minutes to help you get ready.”

“Thank you. Can I have some juice and another pain pill?”

The medtech shrugged, looked at his hand-held. “I’ll have to ask. Be back in a bit.”

Remy tossed the spoon and used his fingers to dig for another ice

chip. It had melted, so he drank it all in one gulp. He was always so thirsty after the procedures. So thirsty all of the time.

What was he thinking about? Oh yeah, the third wave passed, and then the much-longed-for announcement of no new mutations. While there was always a margin of error, the global population had settled at around a few hundred thousand. Remy wondered how accurate those numbers were. He was sure some people would be in hiding. Then there would be locations that the census takers couldn't reach or didn't even know about.

That's when the new government was formed, a global coalition, lead by scientific teams along with a security force that began to round people up for mandatory testing and quarantine. It was a bleak year. He'd already been at UCSD then, so he wasn't all that freaked out.

It was like the United Nations here. Students of all ages from just about every country he'd ever heard from and many that he hadn't. If he didn't know better, walking along the well-maintained paths, sitting in one of several café patios, life seemed normal. He was just an average university student surrounded by other average university students, worried about upcoming tests and papers, grades, and waiting to meet with a GTA or tutor.

As if there was a world outside the university for them to make their name.

Recently, though, there had been some broadcast that had gone viral on one of the pirate stations. There was going to be a fourth wave, another mutation. Remy chalked it off to paranoia, but no one had ever said the virus was eradicated. Maybe it would lie dormant for another 10,000 years or so.

Remy didn't understand much about microbiology or even the virus itself, but wasn't that the nature of life? Wasn't that the sign of a healthy organism? Adapting to survive and proliferate?

And sometimes adapting meant burrowing underground—literally.

He heard Veronica coming down the hall chatting with Dr. Woodrow. They paused outside his room, murmuring to each other. Then Dr. Woodrow nodded to Remy, continued down the hall. Veronica came into the room, removed his IV, handed him a clean pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

"Will I have to stay in bed all weekend?"

She frowned and tried to look stern. "You have to take it easy, but

no, you don't have to stay in bed. I would recommend it, though."

He wanted to go to the café, see Molly. He should have asked for her email. It would probably be easier to communicate without her pale green eyes boring into his. Sometimes, if the light touched them just so, he saw golden flecks and something else: dark green striations undulating just beneath the surface.

~\*~

The driver, Anton, helped Remy slide into the shuttle's back seat. He reached into his pocket to touch the painkillers. He would definitely need another one soon.

It was a short drive from the hospital to student housing, and once Anton pulled into the parking lot behind the condo complex, he helped Remy out of the car. He was still a bit wobbly, and his head felt like triple its usual weight, so Anton braced him as they walked across the grass to his front door. Anton had a master key, opened the condo door, and helped him inside to the couch. The guy even got him a bottle of water, pulled a blanket and pillow off the bed, and helped him get comfortable.

"Do you need anything else? I am authorized to stay if you like."

Remy hesitated for a moment. "No, that's okay, but I appreciate it." He managed a grin. "I have a call button." He pointed to the red alert box on the wall. There was at least one in every building these days.

Anton nodded. "All right. Now you rest up." He let himself out the door, locking it.

Remy took another pain pill, leaned back with a sigh to wait for it to take effect. He was still feeling woozy and couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. Tossing the blanket off, he padded into the kitchen, opened the fridge and grabbed two vanilla yoghurts. All he could eat was one, though. He stuck the unopened one back in the fridge, eased back along the hallway to the couch and was out cold before he barely covered himself.

And into a dream where waves thrashed against the rocks beneath the balcony of his family's home in Ocean Beach. He could taste the salt spray, and something else, something sweet on his tongue. He looked at the sky, expecting to see clear blue with clouds scuttling across, perhaps the last rays of sun sinking into the horizon, the moon a faint scar in the distance.

But instead, the sky was dark gray and rent with angry red striations, but his mother was standing beside him, her long brown hair taking wind. “Isn’t it beautiful,” she said, taking his hand.

“The sea, it has always called to me,” she said after a long silence. “Do you remember the paintings I did out here?”

Remy nodded. “The selkie girl. I remember the selkie girl on the rock.”

His mother nodded. “Do you remember what I painted after that?”

Remy paused, trying to remember. His mind filled with grotesque images: Misshapen, bloated bodies reached out mangled hands in supplication, hoping to extricate themselves from the ocean’s arms, some crawling, others scuttling along the shore. But it was always their eyes that disturbed Remy the most, those iridescent eyes, black and ringed with silver.

Their bodies were strange, mangled twists of driftwood flesh, their skin green and ridged, that sloughed off to reveal rows of needle-thin spikes. The rest of their bodies were twisted like rope left rotting in the tide pools.

One reached out to his mother and he turned to yell “No!” but then he sensed someone else in the dream. No, some *thing* else had slithered onto a jutting rock.

Molly.

But not Molly.

Remy gripped the redwood balcony, clambered over onto a shelf of algae covered rock, slid over to the edge.

Molly, with arms reaching out from the cold brine of morning. What was Molly doing in this dream?

And then his mother was by his side again, painting. Strange blind creatures emerged on the canvas, hungering for the light of her brush.

“You see how it is?” she said, the question lingering for a moment before he turned toward the shore, where scattered fronds of seaweed and kelp twirled just beneath the rising tides, where translucent pods dangled ripe and heavy just beyond his grasp. He reached out, managed to pluck one from its stem, cradle it in his hands before it burst, leaving fecund goo clinging to his fingers.

Remy peered closer to see what lay inside. Floating within milky fluid, something trembled.



Remy had slept away most of the weekend, and had barely studied for his oceanography test, much less today's lab. Dr. Solis, however, detoured from the syllabus, and was rolling a cart filled with racks of vials past their workstations, setting one on each desk.

He didn't know which was more strange...Dr. Solis deviating from his syllabus or the old-fashioned microscopes at their tables. His assigned lab partner, Cindy-something, was out sick again today, so Remy prepared the slide, slipped it onto the tray, clamped it gently in place, and adjusted the settings.

At first, all he could see was the red dye within which the specimen was suspended. Dr. Solis said, "Each of you has a dead viral strain. Your task today is to identify which one."

Most of the class groaned, but Remy just shrugged, adjusted the dials for greater magnification, looked again.

Movement.

Remy called out, "Mine's still alive."

"That's impossible," Dr. Solis responded, but approached Remy's station nevertheless. "Look again," he said, watching as Remy peered through the lens.

"With all due respect, Dr. Solis—"

The professor motioned Remy to move over, slid onto his stool and looked for himself. He muttered something under his breath in Spanish, backed away. "Everyone out of the lab—now!"

A few of the students still hovered, curious. Others grabbed their computers and ran. Remy met Dr. Solis' eyes and what he saw there wasn't fear.

Remy didn't have to ask the question emblazoned across his mind. It was THE virus. Why else would Dr. Solis clear the lab?

But how could it be alive? And why didn't anyone else have a live strain?

"I have calls to make. Calls to make." If Remy didn't know better, he'd say his professor was excited, even elated. "You," he pointed to Remy, "stay. The rest of you—out! I need to call the contagion team."

As the other students filed out of the lab, Dr. Solis cocked his head to the side, examining Remy as if *he* were the specimen.

"Where's the vial?"

Remy went back to his desk, stared at the slide still lodged within the microscope, wondered whether to burn it or slide it into the haz-

ardous waste container. He picked up the vial, took it to Dr. Solis who was huddled with his computer, returned to his microscope. The viral cells reminded him of something. There was a definite pattern here, but it wasn't quite formulating in his mind. He needed sleep, more caffeine, something.

Then he heard whispering, turned around, but there wasn't anyone there. Even Dr. Solis was silent and listening to whomever through his headset. Remy peered at the virus again, and as if it detected his presence, began to shoot out stringy filaments then bunch itself together, awkwardly propelling itself across the slide. He adjusted the settings again, saw a bulbous head rise, a miniscule beak opened and closed as if to simulate speech.

Maybe he had taken one too many pain meds over the weekend?

"Did you say something?" Remy called out to Dr. Solis, but the man was still listening to his bosses or whomever.

And then the virus, no, not a virus, a sentient organism, reached out, mind-to-mind. Remy struggled to give concrete form to the images it conveyed, its insidious voice promising...something...if he would only let it in.

No, he was imagining it all. He'd just had another procedure and all those drugs then pumped into him. Too much sugar and caffeine, too little sleep, and the lights in the lab flickered. He had a migraine coming on or had drifted to the precipice of sleep where the subconscious liked to play.

He shoved away from the workstation, turned off the microscope.

Dr. Solis was at the door now, talking to a small group of people in full-on hazard gear. Great, now he was going to be quarantined!

The hazard team walked Dr. Solis and Remy down the hall and through a series of security doors, then down a service elevator and through a tunnel that led away from the building.

Where were they going?

In a few more minutes, they passed through another series of security doors and into a room that opened up into a cavernous space with high vaulted ceilings.

The hazard team took off their gear—and one of them was Molly! "What the—"

She smiled at him, took his hand, led him through an anteroom and into what first appeared to be an empty room. Remy shuddered with the cold while Molly pointed toward one of the walls. He traced her

long elegant fingers to where a huge computer screen had quickened to life. There was a clicking sound, like fingers tapping on a keyboard. Fast, then faster, and Remy's heart seemed to respond in kind.

It wasn't a computer screen...he was looking through glass at a huge tank where massive tentacles undulated through a pearl gray mist. Molly led him closer to the containment wall, and as if sensing their presence, the tentacles drew in then thrust outward, propelling the owners forward to press their faces against the thick protective glass.

Human faces...with Molly's pale green eyes and burnished copper tendrils; human faces...with his ice-blue eyes and sandy hair; human faces, their mouths opened wide in ululation.

"Now you see how it is," Molly said.

# Real Gone

By David Dunwoody

Jessie was able to mask her logon's origin by bouncing her signal across a couple of underground networks, skipping like a stone before patching in to Dreamcatcher. From across the infinite she felt the pleasant tingle that meant a successful login. Settling back on her couch, she shut her eyes and waited for the swimming fractal patterns inside her eyelids to resolve into the Welcome cloud.

Two new shares in her queue, both from BedReady – he was partial to flying dreams with cotton clouds and rolling green landscapes, something Jessie wasn't in the mood for. Even sailing weightless through a golden ionosphere was too much for her brain to handle tonight. Control was the last thing she wanted. Maybe a good falling dream. She called up the search index to see if any new ones had been uploaded. She found a few whose preview impressions seemed dark and cold and she moved them into her queue, but before she could indulge she couldn't help checking her ratings.

Her latest upload, *011912*, had received thirty new marks. Twenty-nine positive and one neg. The neg was, as she expected, from 666opensource. He'd been negging her entire upload history over the past week. "Booooooring" was stamped under each rating, usually accompanied by "Fake." As if she had the tech to slip a fake dream sequence past Dreamcatcher's verification system. She wasn't Coca-Cola for Christ's sake. She wasn't even using a registered implant and pirated a neighbor's signal to log on. Asshole.

Not that anyone knew those facts; very few knew about Jessie Gone AKA GoneDreamer1. While there were those whose Dreamcatcher uploads offered a window into their real lives – people who had banal dreams about going to work or arguing with their parents – GoneDreamer1's offerings were amorphous, abstract narratives that didn't take the viewer from point A to point B so much as they impaled the latter on the former's spire. They were nightmares, all of them, and

sharing them on Dreamcatcher was the only way Jessie could excise them from her mind. In a way, seeing people like 666opensource mocking and trivializing her dreams robbed them of their power. Jessie supposed she ought to thank the troll for that, but he'd probably take it the wrong way and send her some sex dream of his (and sex dreams never made for erotic viewing – it always ended with somebody turning into a sandwich or their own mother).

011912 had been a particularly bad dream, so Jessie was glad to see it being rated and shared in such high numbers. Four hundred eighty-seven total ratings in the last couple of days. The sequence was no longer part of her screaming subconscious. It was a mind-movie being experienced by fans and detractors across the globe. It was a commodity, in fact, or could be if she were willing to accept a sponsorship. But she wasn't. She intended to stay off the grid.

Jessie settled back on her couch, folding one arm under her head and trying to ignore the prodding of loose springs under the threadbare cushions. She wanted to be completely immersed in the selected sequence when it started, lost in a blistering free-fall.

A pulse in her right temple told her she'd received a new message. She thought she had personal messaging disabled. Jessie sighed and called up her inbox. Across the insides of her eyelids she saw that the sender was Dreamcatcher itself. The subject was Sponsor opportunity.

This was the very reason she'd turned this feature off. Had some corporate entity gone directly to Dreamcatcher's admins in order to override her settings and contact her? It was intriguing at the very least, even if she had no intention of considering it. Sure, a new couch and fridge and walls and windows would be nice, but not worth the risk. Not by a long shot. She opened the message. A gentle voice filtered through her head.

*"This message is from Dreamcatcher. GoneDreamer1, we are inviting you to become a member of the official network community. With Dreamcatcher itself as your sponsor, you will have access to all premium features as well as opportunities to participate in our revenue-sharing programs—"*

Blah, blah, blah. She dismissed it with a blink. She heard the voice distort as the message was deleted, words fading into the aether... then she was alone and falling.

~\*~

The door's slam stirred Jessie from sleep. She sat up, her body groaning as she untangled her legs and stretched them over the arm of the couch. She realized she was still connected to Dreamcatcher and sent a kill command to her implant. Dammit, she never remembered to set the automatic logout.

Wait, the door? Was that what she'd heard? She stiffened, peering through the doorway to the front hall. It was dim throughout the apartment, probably late in the evening, and all the shadows were as one choking thing blanketing her senses. She forced herself to her feet.

"Hello?" a voice called.

It was Quin. Jessie expelled a loud breath and slumped back down. "In here."

The other girl entered and deposited her backpack on the recliner, as she always did, kicking off her boots and dropping her slight frame onto the end of the couch opposite Jessie. Quin was a ghost of a person in every sense; her presence in the corporeal was barely more substantial than that on the networks. Part of it was her trade, but Jessie knew that, like herself, Quin simply preferred to pass unnoticed through the world.

"I got some new drivers for the implant," Quin said as she picked at a loose thread on her shirt. "I tried to send them remotely but you were incommunicado. Problems?"

"No, I just fell asleep on Dreamcatcher. Again."

Quin smiled. "Ironically, the new drivers will help make you less vulnerable in case you nod off. I had that in mind when I ripped them." Quin snatched up the backpack and retrieved her laptop. Her face was bone-white in the glow of its tiny screen. "These come with the dream cue hack. You'll be alerted if you've been REMming too long while online, and you can kill your connection without waking up. You just need to know the cues before you bed down."

"You mean they appear in-dream?"

"Wouldn't be of much use if they didn't." Quin smirked. "The other option is rewiring your hardware, and I'm not going back in there. So listen. The cue is an envelope. A letter. You'll know it when you see it, because it's not from your head. And you'll know how to execute the kill command."

"I can't pay you until Friday," Jessie said. "You could have just waited instead of coming over."

“I know you’re good for it,” Quin said. “Besides, it’s not like I can send your invoice to collections if you’re late. Off-market chippers work on the honor system.”

“But how can you really trust me?” Jessie said. “Or anybody?”

“I’ve known you four years, Jess.”

“But *really*?”

Quin looked up at Jessie. They both knew that there was no correlation between time and trust among their caste. They lived in this Midtown gutter because both had learned it the hard way. Familiarity bred vulnerability.

“Well,” Quin finally said, “I guess it’s because we know each other’s secrets.”

*So we’re equally defenseless*, Jessie thought. It seemed like the antithesis of friendship, but down here it was as good as things got.

~\*~

That night Jessie set her implant to record mode, staying offline, and went to bed. Some hours later, tossing and turning beneath a firmament of unblinking stars, she dreamed. Some DC members used Trauminol to stimulate nightmares, but for her they came naturally. That was why they were the best.

*You’re in an old house, a house-you-know, gliding from room to shuttered room. You try to stay above the floor but your feet keep touching down, making black gouges in the tar-like paste there. Cobwebs fall from the rafters in lazy corkscrews. You tense up, draw your limbs in, try to keep yourself from disturbing anything. But you’re moving faster and faster through the house-you-know and now the curtains are flapping violently, casting motes of dust into the air, and through the shutters you can see night becoming day – he’s coming—*

*CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP the sound of his heavy boots. Back and forth, back and forth on the roof overhead. You can’t stop your forward momentum – you can only change direction, always just in time to avoid striking a grime-streaked window or fragile cupboard.*

*He’s going to hear. He’s going to come.*

*CLOM CLOMP CLOMP on the underside of the floor. Each impact ripples through the tar. You’re hurtling even faster now and you sail around the house in a dizzying loop. The walls shake with his footfalls. You have to conceal yourself. You look down to see that you are naked,*

*with only your long hair to cover the bruised flesh. You grab madly at the hair but it slips through your fingers like water. You have to HIDE! He's COMING!*

*Everything is a blur. Howling winds tear your hair away from your body, and you are splayed helplessly in mid-air, no longer able to control your terrible flight. It's as if your body is racing along an invisible track, and each time you take a corner you hear his boots slamming down.*

*You are jerked violently around and you see him there, a hulking silhouette framed by light, his hands entangled in your long hair. The hair is now growing from your belly, and as he tugs you closer you can feel your guts convulse. He's going to pull you inside-out. You try to make out his stony glare, to try and connect with him and ask him what you've done wrong.*

*But he has no face.*

*And something else, something you don't understand at all – great black wings unfolding from his back and spreading to darken the room – six great wings, with trembling, dagger-shaped feathers. He wrenches at you, his face elongating into a razor beak. Bruises spread across your flesh, bleeding together, your entire body a mottled sack of blood. And then you burst.*

*The dark bone of his beak splits wide like the jaws of cruel scissors. His flapping tongue tastes the red mist of your demise. He speaks.*

*Jessica. Come home.*

*She shot out of bed with a hoarse cry, her arm striking the nightstand as she fell onto the floor. She threw her arms over her head before realizing he wasn't there.*

*Jessie pulled her knees to her chest and sat in the dark. As if from a great distance she felt throbbing pain where her wrist had hit the nightstand. She focused on that. Just a dream.*

*She hadn't heard his voice in years, certainly not in her sleep. He'd said something...what was it? Had he said her name? She wouldn't be able to upload the dream now. And the bird-thing he'd been...she had never seen anything like that. It had seemed at once both beautiful and grotesque, like a child's crude rendering of God.*

*CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP.*

*Jessie's eyes went wide. She shrank down beside the bed,  
KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. Someone at the door.*

*She pulled a windbreaker over her t-shirt and put on some sweats, then padded silently to the door. She waited for another knock to*



make sure it was her door they'd been at. When the knock repeated, she mustered enough strength to snap, "It's the middle of the night. Who is it?"

"Police."

Shit! She turned and looked into the living room, then the kitchen. It occurred to her that the only thing she might need to hide, the unregistered implant, was tucked safely away in her skull. She called, "How about some ID?" and knelt to receive the holocard that slid under the door. *Inspector Hello*, it read in glowing letters, the accompanying image an expressionless man with pale eyes. Synth. Robot cop. Slightly more trustworthy than a warm badge, at least. She opened the door and handed the card back to him.

Inspector Hello placed the card in his wallet and said, in some semblance of an apologetic tone, "It's a typographical error. My designation is simply Inspector. Hello."

"You don't have any name at all then?" she asked.

"Inspector," he said. "Jessica Baker?"

Any tension that had left her body was back tenfold.

She couldn't speak. The Inspector watched her coolly.

"Gone. It's Jessica Gone," she finally said.

"Your friend said the same thing," the Inspector replied. "Quincy DaVinci was arrested earlier tonight. She's a chipmunk."

Jessie raised an eyebrow. The Inspector slapped the side of his head and said, "That was an error. She's a chip-punk. We dumped her work logs."

"So..." Jessie sighed. "All right. You know about my implant. Fine. Why are you calling me Baker?"

"I ran a query on your photo. You're still married in the state of California."

Her shoulders went slack. She clutched her injured wrist.

"Please," she said, praying the synth would recognize the urgency in her voice. "Just listen to me. Hear me out."

"Please come with me," he said lightly, adding, "Comply."

She took a step back. "Am I under arrest? Why? Did *he* send you?"

"I'm a city detective," the Inspector said. He placed a loafer inside the apartment.

"Write me up for the implant. I'll pay the fine right now! I can get the money." God, she was lying and she knew it but it was all she had.

"This doesn't concern the implant," the robot replied.

Jessie glanced through the kitchen doorway and saw a saucepan within reach. It might not even faze him, but she had to try.

“Don’t,” he advised.

She clenched her fists, tried not to fall apart in front of this uncaring piece of junk. “He’ll KILL me, you understand? That’s why I’m here! That’s why I live in this rat’s nest! Are you going to help him kill me?”

“Your husband doesn’t know where you are,” the Inspector said. She had no way of knowing whether he was telling the truth. They were programmed to act like real people.

The Inspector stepped back, gesturing for her to come out. “Be sure to lock up.”

The ride was silent. She didn’t bother demanding to know what all this was about, didn’t carry on about her rights or a fake attorney. She wasn’t under arrest, at least, nor handcuffed, and was able to massage her wrist as the unmarked cruiser silently navigated canyons of steam and shadow. They crossed into affluent Lassiter (Laserville to the disenfranchised) and were bathed in the warmth of kaleidoscopic storefronts. They reached the precinct in about twenty minutes’ time.

The Inspector parked on the corner and sat still. Jessie looked at his eyes in the rearview and saw them fluttering. He was communicating remotely, probably checking the vehicle in.

The Inspector dropped the gearshift into reverse. Turning to stare past Jessie, he backed around the corner. She tried to meet his gaze, but his eyes refused to register her.

The car stopped again in the dark of the side street. “What are you doing?” Jessie said. There was a tic at the corner of the robot’s mouth. It looked like he was smirking, but he was still talking to someone else in his head, nonplussed at her mounting agitation. His right arm was slung casually over the back of the passenger seat and he looked relaxed as could be, like one of those yammering proto-cabbies they still used in Midtown. His head swiveling around, he pulled back onto the main road and headed away from the precinct house.

“I have rights,” Jessie stammered.

The Inspector twisted his right arm and looked at his wristwatch. “I’m no longer on duty.”

She lunged at the door handle on her left. It was stuck fast. The engine growled as the Inspector stepped on the accelerator.

“LET ME OUT!” Jessie screamed, throwing her shoulder against

the window, but it was unbreakable and suddenly the darkness was closing in around her and her lungs felt like they were being crushed. He'd lied. *He'd lied.* He was taking her to her husband, she knew it and with that realization all the rules were out. She grabbed the Inspector's head and wrenched it from side to side. His hands remained steady on the wheel while his neck popped and whirred, then his head snapped violently back into place, nipping her fingertip. She smeared blood over his neck and chin as she angled for a better grip.

"This is pointless," the robot said in a sing-song tone. The cruiser took a corner going forty, knocking Jessie's head against the window. She wrapped both arms around his face and he continued blindly along his programmed course. She heaved with all her weight, folding his neck ninety degrees. "I am," the Inspector sang, his voice clear as a bell despite his cracking jaw, "built for sustained high performance. My Fusion model endoskeleton is a marvel of modern craftsmanship, flexible enough to endure a trip through a car compactor but solid enough to repel fifty-caliber bullets. My core processor can withstand a direct lightning strike without compromising its performance. Perhaps you've seen our commercials with Fusion spokesman Bradley Cooper?"

Fucking thing was mocking her. She dug her nails into his eye socket. The Inspector said, "Your husband doesn't know where you are. I am, however, obligated to contact him if you don't comply."

Jessie fell back with a sob, catching herself before the real tears started. She wouldn't cry in front of this talking toaster. She leaned forward and pressed her head into the back of the Inspector's seat. The car slowed to a stop.

She wouldn't cry. She'd learned long ago that it did little good. In fact, that had only made her husband angrier – he'd wanted her silent defeat, her resignation, not pleading tears. He had been the foreman of a scavenger crew and when he'd come home from the dust warrens of post-war Mexico his big boots had been coated in glittering metal powder, and she'd asked him to take them off before he tromped across the living room.

"It was the first thing you said," he'd told her as he knelt over her bleeding face. "After five months, the first thing you fucking said to me." Then, in a shrill tone, his face ugly and pinched, "*Don't track that mess across the carpet. Doooooon't.*"

She'd opened her mouth to speak. He'd spoken first.

“Who do you keep this house for?” He’d said, incredulous, and knocked out two of her front teeth.

They had been together for more than a year when it started. It had continued until she stopped it.

The Inspector probably knew all of that, but like the officers and judges before him he didn’t care. He would be unmoved by the story of how her husband had tied her to the headboard with her own hair and beat her unconscious. How he’d made her get chromagrafts across her entire back and legs to obliterate the scars. “I want you to be able to wear a nice dress and not look like shit,” he’d explained matter-of-factly.

And she hadn’t heard his voice, not in years, not even in dreams, until that evening’s nightmare. Jessie sat up suddenly and the Inspector looked back at her.

“You did something in my dream,” she said. “You put words in it.”

“That would have been my employer, not me. Perhaps as an extra incentive to comply.” He opened his door.

“But how? I wasn’t online.”

“Perhaps not at that very moment, Miss Gone, but Dreamcatcher downloads while you upload. Did you know that?”

He opened her door and extended his hand. Behind him rose a monolithic tower of glass with bright blue letters declaring it to be the home of Shunned Reality Media.

Dreamcatcher.

Jessie recoiled from the Inspector’s hand. “You work for *them*?”

“On occasion.” His fingers beckoned as if impatient. He was a courier, that was all. And they...in violation of their own TOS, they’d been fucking around in her head and in her past. Neg that shit. She wasn’t going to be extorted by corporate geeks. She’d find an honest cop and...

Aaaaand. And the thought ended there. Because there wasn’t an honest anybody to be found in this neon sewer. Laserville was just Midtown in whore makeup. Jessie breathed one last ‘fuck’ and got out.

~\*~

“Welcome to Shunned House,” said the man in the pressed suit and face, his velvet skin creasing in a warm smile. Chromagrafts like that cost more than the arms and legs they were used to refurbish. He

offered his perfect hand to her, but Jessie declined to inconvenience either of them.

“Winfield Chyler,” he said as he and the Inspector led her down a translucent corridor. Images from Dreamcatcher and other services played across the glass. Chyler’s fingertips brushed the wall at the end of the corridor and the images vanished, replaced by a soft violet glow.

He prodded a touchscreen on the door before him. “We’re inviting you to reconsider our sponsorship offer.”

“You’re threatening my safety and my life. The toaster told me.”

Chyler glanced back. She hoped her glare would burn away his plastic smirk, but he only said, “Oh. Good,” and opened the door.

The trio entered a circular room with a ceiling some twenty stories overhead. The walls were an opaque alloy, cold and antiquated compared to the rest of what she’d seen. Add to that banks of giant, bulky computers grinding and belching, and it felt as if Jessie had stepped into a time machine. She wondered if such a thing were actually possible within the walls of Shunned House.

This anachronistic chamber had the feeling of a techno-dungeon. Shunned Reality wasn’t the benevolent hipster collective it made itself out to be. She supposed it was fitting that Chyler’s face looked like a mask.

She tensed at that. What if he was a synth too? She’d thought she might at least have a chance at reaching this man’s soul, but what if he didn’t have one?

She turned. The Inspector blocked the door. She was feeling claustrophobic again, like in the cruiser. The computers’ humming swelled in her ears, an encroaching horde of angry insects.

A hand gently took her by the elbow. Chyler led her to an alcove between computers. “Here.” He helped her into a soft chair. “Rest.”

“What...” She looked up at him, struggling to keep her eyelids open. This *wasn’t* like before, not a panic attack. “You...a signal.”

“That’s right. It’s being beamed directly into that rogue implant of yours. Just like before, when we played in dreamland.” He spoke, and his voice was almost exactly that of her husband when he said, “*Jessica. Come home.*”

She threw a fist at his head but it went miles off-target and dropped from view like a lead balloon. Chyler eased her back into the plush cushioning.

“We only want your dreams. You were already uploading them to

us, so what's the harm in jacking in here?"

He was fitting some sort of metal band around her head. She began to feel numb all over.

"We're still the good guys," Chyler told her with a wink.

"Why?" she mumbled. He paused in his adjustments. "Whyyy?" she repeated, her speech slurring. She was still lucid in her thinking but that signal seemed to be crippling her tongue. "Whyyy? M-money?"

"No, no no. Listen to me," Chyler said. "I want you to imagine a dreamless sleep. One lasting years. Eons. And you able to feel the tick of every passing second in your bones. Can you imagine that? Like a coma, the worst of tortures. Maddening. Well, Dreamcatcher is the method by which her madness is quelled. There have been many means by which The Client have tapped into what they consider our most precious resource, our dreams – hers is the most efficient system ever developed. And yours are among the most potent dreams we've seen."

Her madness. *Her?* Did Chyler mean Jessie? She was having trouble processing her own thoughts. She was fading from consciousness.

*The Client?* she thought.

She must have said it aloud because Chyler answered in a distorted voice, "She is but one of their number. Dreamcatcher is her system."

"She'll see you now."

*You're back in the old house, the ruined house-you-know, and this time the terror presses down on you immediately. It chokes you. Gasping, you try to grab at your throat but your hands are bound by the same long hair that constricts your airway – and somewhere, above the house, like a gathering storm, you hear the rattling call of an alien thing.*

*It's the six-winged bird, you know. And it isn't your husband after all but a separate thing, a thing whose real form slumbers in dimensions your mind cannot perceive, not even here.*

CLOMP CLOMP CLOMP.

"JESSIE! DON'T MAKE ME HAVE TO COME FIND YOU!"

*Your first instinct is to call to him, to assure him you're not hiding, but the hair around your windpipe pulls tight enough to break the skin.*

*WHOOSH WHOOSH WHOOSH the great wings of the thing overhead. Drinking deep of your nightmare, drawing it into the cold empty veins of its own mind. It allows you to understand that it needs your dreams in order to endure the Long Sleep. In time it will be roused to resume an infernal piping in servitude to some other mad sleeping thing,*

*but for now it needs your nightmares. So real. So good.*

*Dreams.*

*This is a dream.*

This is a dream.

A scream broke free from Jessie's throat and she tore the brittle hair away in handfuls. Staggering back into a rotting wall, she spun and felt a rush as control came to her. Why hadn't the awareness that she was dreaming brought her back to consciousness? It had to be the signal Chyler had used to sedate her. He obviously intended to keep her in this dream so that the greedy entity circling this haunted house could feed forever, if need be. She imagined herself as an aged husk, flesh bonded to that soft chair in that weird room. What if she had already been under for days, months, years? She had to get out of here, and fast—

*His* arms punched through the wall at her back like twin battering rams. They encircled her torso and she felt pain, real pain as he crushed her breasts against her ribs. She heard his labored breathing and then he pulled her into the wall and into darkness.

*It's a dream!*

She fell on her back and saw his leering glare in the shadows. *It's not him, it's something made from feelings and memories, you know it's not him because he's—*

He straddled her abdomen and dug his thumbs into her mouth. He wanted her teeth. She bit down and through his appendages and his face spread in a grin.

"MINE," he rasped. His blood ran into her throat. He balled his mutilated hands and batted her across the face.

Whatever space they lay in seemed to lack any definition or form. She could feel nothing beneath her body and yet she was pinned under him. It could only be her fear giving this world any substance. He struck her again, again, her head snapping back and forth. He laughed like a child.

He stopped.

She stared coldly at him, through him.

"We both remember who you were," she said softly. He shrank away, pulling his fists to his chest.

"Remember who you *are*," Jessie told him.

He rose on shaking legs that were as uncertain of themselves as they were the floor; like oars through molasses his limbs slogged

painfully, helplessly along, while Jessie rose up with ease and took the wooden bat into her hands. She recalled how it had felt when she'd done it, the pain that had rung through her arms. She relished it again.

His knees shattered beneath the rain of blows and he fell facedown and screamed. She beat his legs until they were pulpy and limp. She then lifted her stringing arms over his feet. Those ugly boots gleamed with metal dust.

"Don't hurt me Jess," he sobbed.

"You'll heal," she replied and, as she had done years before, finished it.

*Remember who you are. A bitter, crippled shade of a man.*

The bottom fell out of the dream and his body plummeted from view. Jessie released the bat and looked upward. The top of this dark space was coming away in sheets. She saw a roiling purple sky and then the wings of the bird-thing. The Client, or part of it, the hungry thing. "Take them," she shouted over howling winds. "Take my dreams! Keep them! *No more!*"

She found the hole her husband had pulled her through and climbed back into the house. There were holes everywhere and she saw that the purple clouds were underneath the house as well. The house, her dreamscape, had been swallowed by the other. Somehow she sensed that the churning storm was closer to the true form of the entity, but still the sound of its giant beating wings was what terrified her.

A giant beak stabbed through what remained of the ceiling and embedded itself at her feet. She ran into the next room, a kitchen stained with rust and mold. She was searching the drawers for a knife when she found what she really needed.

A shadow filled the doorway as the thing's head swept through the adjacent room. Jessie took the envelope from the drawer and opened it. *Hi Jessie! Touch this space to kill all network connections*, the letter read. *Touch this space to kill all connections and wake up*. But that wouldn't be enough to stir her from the sleep Chyler had induced.

The beak swung through the room like a scythe. Searing pain tore across Jessie's back. She fell against the stove and dropped the letter. The beak spread apart and she stared into a bottomless throat teeming with its own star-shaped mouths before the thing's pulsing scream blinded her.

She fumbled for the letter. There. She grabbed at the dials on the



stovetop. *Tik-tik-tik whosh.* Jessie felt the heat of four tiny flames springing to life.

The bird-thing screamed again. Its jaws closed over her ankle. She pushed the crumpled letter into the nearest flame.

And she was awake, back at Shunned House, rising from the soft chair and stumbling awkwardly from the alcove. Sheer chance caused her to fall to the left and avoid pitching headfirst into the hole that had opened in the room's center. Floor panels had receded to reveal a yawning crater. Chyler stood at its edge and flailed his arms, shouting something. She couldn't hear him. She couldn't hear anything, and could barely make out what lay before her due to the sparks spouting from the implant in her forehead.

She smelled her burning hair though. And she felt her scalp peeling. But it didn't matter. She was awake. Fighting to steady herself, Jessie walked along the lip of the crater toward the door where the Inspector stood. He had his gun out, but he seemed uncertain as to what to do with it. Chyler wasn't going to be any help. He was throwing a fit on the other side of the hole. He was staring down into it and screaming and finally Jessie had to stop and have a look.

Lying in the earth was a half-buried skeleton the size of a small house. Transmitters had been placed in its gaping eye sockets and its massive white beak was wrapped in coaxial cables, Jessie realized Chyler was screaming "I'M SORRY" over and over and wondered why. Surely The Client couldn't hear him. The dead thing in the whole was but a transmitter itself, beaming stolen dreams to a purple nebula beyond the reaches of reason. The thing had explained everything to her. It had thought her a new keepsake for its collection. Hot blood ran into Jessie's eyes and she wiped it away hurriedly. She wanted to see what would happen next, because the skeleton was moving.

Bony arms held together by rubbery gray tissue broke free of the earth. The thing's head lifted slowly and cables severed as its beak parted. Chyler was stamping his feet and his arms were straining for the sky like some ancient dance. Jessie supposed maybe the thing was able to hear Chyler after all. Good for him.

The long, thin bones that had once borne its great wings emerged from the ground like swords drawn from scabbards. It was one of these which, once free, sprang comically upward and sliced Chyler in half from his groin to his hair plugs. Jessie watched him come apart and resumed her progress toward the exit.

The Inspector looked from the entity – now sitting upright and staring sightlessly about the room – to Jessie. He took aim at her. Probably a safer bet. Her head was still flaring. The Inspector drew a bead on the burning implant. “To better days, Miss Gone.”

“Eat me,” she muttered.

The room shook as the entity stood and lifted one talon from the crater, planting it in the middle of a computer array with a *BOOM!* The Inspector lost his footing and tumbled toward the crater – past Jessie – snatching her arm as he went over the edge—

The thing caught the Inspector in its beak. He lost his grip on Jessie and she somersaulted down the crater’s slope, settling in mouldy soil. She lay beneath the bird-thing and watched it shake the sputtering Inspector about. Its joints snapped. Connective tissue rained down in ribbons. The Inspector fired wildly into the air, and Jessie couldn’t tell if any of his bullets found purchase or if the skeleton just fell apart of its own volition. At any rate the thing ended and spears of bone slammed down around her. The Inspector fell onto a giant rib-bone and spun on its ragged tip until he split in half.

The sparks from Jessie’s head subsided. She lay in the cool earth and sighed. This felt like the conclusion to someone else’s life, like she’d walked into the wrong movie just in time to catch the ending. That she had sabotaged the age-old plans of some godlike entity just wasn’t Jessie Baker. She decided in that moment that this was what Jessie Gone had been all about.

To better days.

For Jessie Gone, days didn’t get much better than this. But Jessie Gone lived for this shit.

A last scintilla of light rose from the smoke around her head and carried that thought starward.

# CL3ANS3

By Carrie Cuinn

**W**e ate the data and we made it clean. That was the job I logged into 9 hours a day, 6 days a week. I worked more than some others, I know, but I suppose I enjoyed my work more than they did. Outside of the interface I had to move through a world that was still industriously trying to remake itself in a bright new image, but hadn't succeeded yet. Out there is was still dirty, and disorganized, and there were too many people. In my office I am comforted by crisp white walls, purified air, and a smooth receiving couch, cleaned each day before my shift begins. I believed I was safe there, in my cocoon. I never thought I would want anything else.

The push to sort and save all data came before my birth but I do know there was a time when information was discarded when it was no longer considered useful. The early days of storage called for individuals to own tiny personal servers, hosting their own packets. Commerce ruled over common sense, and the advertisers convinced us to discard ancient hard drives when newer, bigger ones were available. We lost so much. As our lives moved online, children were born whose entire existence was documented. Sonograms posted on social networking sites. School lessons taken virtually. Marriages streamed over the Internet for guests who couldn't be there in person. It was only natural for that generation to want to preserve the data that had been with them all along. We passed laws, collected disks and drives, and began the process of putting it all into the cloud.

We'll die because of this. I know that now.

The task was monumental, but worse, it was unclean. Having the data online didn't make it organized. Categories that made sense one decade confused users in another. A new movement arose that wanted to sort and process the data into neat packages that could be rearranged when needed. To do so meant smoothing static from the edges of transmissions, filling in lost pixels. Tagging files and connecting everything to every other thing, all over the world. We needed

computers complex enough to handle the task.

No one had that kind of technology.

We only had us.

I don't fault them for putting me into the program. I've accessed my file, of course, and I could give you the names of the ones who bred me and gave me up, but they're just names. Bits of data. No emotional content attached. I don't remember when I fell in love with the life I was given, but I remember being very young, and seeing a video of grunt workers moving around on the surface streets, picking up detritus with their hands, and I was disgusted. That would never be me.

I neared mid-shift with a task nearly finished, and pushed to get it sorted. A file of music from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African continent, area formerly known as Zimbabwe, pre-industrial society, hand-made instruments. Object name: mbira. Note attached suggested it was two players, though I was unfamiliar with the style and might have mistaken it for a single musician. The sound had a thick, buzzy quality to it, but I couldn't find a reference to whether this was intentional. Checking the time stamp on my interface, I judged the buzz to be a symptom of poor quality recording, and stripped it from the packet. The resulting sound was crisper, cleaner, and it soothed my nerves to hear it made right. Pleased with my success, I attached the sound file to the database in the correct location, and logged out of the system.

Others waved at me as I entered the cafeteria, and I moved to join their table. A tray handler arrived a moment after I did, smiling as always.

"May I check your monitors?" she asked cheerfully. The four of us dutifully raised our wrists so she could see the color on the display. Marc, I noticed, moved slower than the rest, and didn't look up at her.

"Two blues and a purple," she said, entering our order on her tablet. "How would you like your edibles prepared?"

"Crispy," Elda said.

"Mine too," Hassa said. The two women giggled at each other.

"I'll have mine chilled," I said. Purple was sweeter than blue, and I was in the mood for a treat. It also meant that my blood sugar was low and I was lacking in certain vital nutrients, but not the same ones that the women were missing. Our jobs were different, and it wasn't unusual for us to have different edibles at mid-shift, even though we often ate at the same time each day.

The handler furrowed her lovely brow as she looked at Marc. I glanced over and saw the cause of her concern: his monitor was blinking, back and forth, between purple and orange.

He looked ill.

"I think that means you're supposed to have both," she said. Marc looked at his monitor and then shrugged, letting his arm drop to the table. "How would you like your edibles prepared?"

"Sticky," he answered, and the handler frowned.

"That's not a texture we offer," she told him. "How about a steamed purple, with a tall glass of orange shake?"

Marc nodded apathetically, and she went to get our orders.

"Are you feeling sick?" I asked him.

"I feel dirty," he answered. "I've been processing the same group of files for days, I don't understand most of it." He shrugged. "A cache of data from an old college. I work academic files all of the time, I volunteered to take this assignment."

A handsome boy delivered glasses of chilled water to our table, singing out, "Hydration!" as he slid one in front of each of us. They were always lovely, the ones who served our food and smiled as they took our coats.

I watched him walk away as Marc sighed heavily.

"You do look feverish," Hassa said, concerned. "You're sweating."

"You should notify medical," Elda added.

"Yes, I think..." Marc paused, putting a hand to his forehead. "I think I'll go there now." He lurched to his feet and left, bumping into our handler as he passed her. She looked shaken but managed to get our meal on the table in the right order. Her long hair was brushed straight and bound behind her head with a black bow. I thought about my own hair, cropped close to my head, the way it had been for years. Data processor chic; we all wore it this way.

"He's gone to medical," I said when I realized she was still standing at our table, Marc's food on her tray, a lost look on her face. "You can take that back to the kitchen." She smiled then, brightly, and retreated.

Mid-shift break never feels as if it's long enough.

I settled into my couch, removing the cover from my data jack and slipping the transfer cable inside. The world fell away, and my real life came back into focus.

As I was unpacking the last file for the day, a vid with partial frame loss, a message flashed: my Architect advising me that I was needed

on the University project. Marc's project. I put the vid aside and sent her a reply, questioning.

"We have two processors out with illness," she answered back. "Is anything in your queue a priority?"

"No, I'm clear to transfer," I thought back at her, and she changed my queue with a quick "Thank you." File attached. Info for the University. I put it aside for the next day, cleaned up my video, and placed it with the rest of its mates.

I wish I could say that I had some premonition of what was coming, but I slept dreamlessly and woke up refreshed. We have pills for that.

I pulled up the info from the night before, reading about the school's founding in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its move to the College Hill area of town, and its evolution over four hundred years. Eventually, like other physical campuses, it was closed down. Someone had taken the time to scan the university's documents and now, so much later, we were properly organizing the collection.

I slid into image files, putting yearbook pages into one box, photos of the campus into another. It was simple enough, but as I worked I began to feel as if there were something just beyond the data.

Of course, that was impossible.

"The photographs of the school itself are intriguing," I gushed to Elda and Hassa over our mid-shift meal. "They're black and white, but the way the lights shine in the images, it's almost as if there is actually a brightness emanating from them. Wonderful technique."

"You're looking at the pictures?" Elda asked.

"Doesn't that slow you down?" Hassa asked.

"Well, a little," I admitted. "But my process ratio is higher than average. It won't affect my work." Our edibles arrived, orange for me, with double hydration. Elda frowned.

"I hope you're not coming down with what Marc has," she said.

"I don't feel ill at all," I replied, and meant it.

~\*~

Post-meal, sliding back into the data stream, was like slipping back into bed with a new lover. I was bristling with energy. Sorting this collection into featureless packets didn't seem appropriate anymore. I could do better, I told myself. Using the images of the buildings and

grounds, I created a 3D virtual model of the campus at night. Trees sprang up, black and tall, lit by lampposts that no longer stood on Campus Hill. Buildings swelled, breathing in new life, becoming solid. It was night in my model, and I walked through it for a while, under a moon larger than I'd ever seen before.

*The stars don't look right*, I thought. I'd assembled the sky from the images, but compared to pictures I'd seem of my own stars, these felt skewed. Strange.

*As if a virtual model feels like anything*, I told myself, and kept walking.

It was midnight before I realized that I'd lost track of the time.

My dreams that night were still with me the next morning, an unremembered layer of thought that clung to me without dissolving. I don't know what I'd dreamt about, but it was something. Distracted, it wasn't until after I was already at work that I realized I hadn't made my bed.

A cleaner was in my office when I arrived. He stuttered an apology, knocking over his vac unit in an attempt to get out of my way.

"Why are you running late?" I asked him. "You're usually gone by the time I get in."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I wasn't informed of your shift change. I'll make a note of it." He gathered up his supplies. "I'm sorry," he said again.

"My schedule hasn't changed," I said, annoyed. "This is your mistake."

"I'm sorry," he repeated. He was younger than I thought. His voice cracked. "Please. I like my assignment."

"Then you should pay more attention to the time!" I yelled, glancing at the clock. "It's... oh."

I was two hours early.

"Nevermind," I said. "I'm the one who's wrong. My shift doesn't start at this time."

He nodded, and bolted for the door. Alone, I sank into my couch. For the first time I didn't breathe in the scent of cleansers. Instead there was the faintest smell of sweat. I'd interrupted him before he got to my couch. I sighed, considered calling him back, and jacked into work instead.

I spent the morning building my model. Staff photos were moved into the room designated 'Teachers Lounge.' Class data, syllabi, old

homework assignments, went into their respective classrooms.

Eventually my Architect walked into my world.

"I sent messages," she said. "You didn't answer them."

I glanced to the top right corner, where notifications are displayed, and saw it flashing.

"I apologize," I told her. "I was caught up in my work and didn't notice." She looked around.

"You've put in trees." They towered above us, centuries old, their limbs stripped of leaves. *It must have been winter when they were photographed*, I suddenly thought.

Instead of saying that I answered, "Yes," and wondered why she was here.

"Trees have no datalogical purpose," she said. Her avatar was a spot on representation of her, down to the concerned look on her face. "Other processors also working on this project have sorted their data into easily identifiable content boxes. Why build all of this?"

"I can take their data and input it into the model when they're done."

"That wasn't my question. Are you hoping for a promotion?"

"What?" I asked, surprised. "That hadn't occurred to me."

"You may not know this, but an Architect doesn't only design packet complexes and file systems. We make models too, for certain kinds of users. Something like this might be considered a resume." She turned in a circle, taking it all in. "Though it's dirty."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking around. "It's built from extant images."

"I'm sure it is, but even so, we clean up the data, don't we? We take it into ourselves and put it back into the system with all irregularities removed." We eat the data and we make it clean, she was saying, as if I was new to processing. As if I hadn't grown up in this world. "Look at the buildings. See there?" she pointed, and I looked. "Where the building's edges have gathered moss? There are pixels oozing out of the construct."

She was right, and I hadn't noticed.

"I can clean it up," I told her. "I can take care of it today."

"This model isn't authorized. There are other flaws, and it's beginning to decay already. Disassemble it, sort your data and we'll get this project finished."

"I...I don't want to do that."



“You’re a good worker. There are some interesting techniques at work in this model. I appreciate your enthusiasm.”

“But you’re still telling me to tear it down.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “And when you’re done, we’ll talk about putting you in the Architecture program.”

I should have been thrilled. I knew that, but no longer cared.

“Thank you,” I said flatly.

She winked out of existence.

I took my meal alone, though Elda and Hassa waved me over like usual. I don’t think I even looked up at the person who took my order because one moment I was thinking about how to destroy my beautiful University, and the next my edibles were in front of me, a double order of crispy orange and a glass of chilled water. I shoved the meal into my mouth, one tasteless bite at a time, crunching angrily. At least the act of biting down gave me some pleasure.

Back in the model.

Back in the University.

I shoved data into the model as fast as I could, barely looking at what was in each file, reviewing it long enough to place it in the right building. Scientific experiments, illustrations, photographs of impossible sea creatures, I identified and filed, running as I did so. Audio files played, dampened by the walls of the construct, but I didn’t have time to turn them off. Shapes, vaguely human, appeared in windows, the reflection, I decided, of the student photos I was scattering through the buildings, but I didn’t have time to push them into boxes.

*If I finish it they can’t tear it down*, I thought.

When I was too tired for my avatar to stand, I pulled the cable from my brain and passed out on my couch.

“Excuse me?” the voice said. I rolled over, trying to ignore it. “I’m sorry, are you awake?” it came again. Opening my eyes I looked up at the cleaner standing over me.

“What time is it?” I whispered, my mouth dry. He told me. I’d slept a few hours, not many. “Water,” I said. He looked around the room, found the dispenser, and brought me a glass while I dragged myself into a sitting position. Drinking it, my head cleared, and I thanked him.

“I need to clean the couch,” he said, “if you could move aside for a few minutes.”

I looked at him. Not the same one as from the other day. A little

older. I set the glass down on the side table and stood up, peering at him. His face grew flushed but he didn't move.

"I don't need it," I said. "It's fine." I leaned in, taking a hold of his shoulder with one hand, and smelled his skin.

"I have to," he said quietly. "It's my assignment." He shook slightly, under my hand. I brushed my lips against his cheek. "Please don't," he said.

My tongue moved, before I could think to stop it, and licked his lips.

He ran from the room.

"I'm sorry," I called out. *I don't know what's gotten into me.*

Back in the model which didn't feel like a model anymore I found I'd processed all of the data that I'd been assigned. It wasn't complete though, the University, so I accessed Marc's files and started importing his work. He'd been moving the data along the same lines as I had, I found, though he hadn't gone so far as to create buildings, he had mapped the files to a 2D layout of the campus. My heart beat faster at the thought that he was doing what I was doing.

*That makes me right.*

The rustle of sound files and the flickering movements on the edges of my perception were comforting, and I decided to leave them. Messages flashed in the corner of the scene but I ignored them. If I could finish my work, they would have to let me keep it. I just needed more time.

I didn't get it.

One moment I was walking toward Locksly Hall, and the next I was on my couch, blinking against the light, with my Architect standing over me.

"Give it a moment," she said. I glared at her. "You need to report to medical," she told me.

"Why? I feel fine."

"You don't look fine. You haven't eaten in a day, and you need a shower, and...you look awful," she said, not unkindly. "You're wasting away."

"I'm working."

"You're dying," she said. "Look at your monitor." I did. It glowed bright red. Immediate medical emergency. "You wouldn't reply so I had to come down here and pull your cable myself."

"I'm sorry," I said, not sorry at all. "I will report immediately."

“Good. They’ll make you better in no time,” she assured me.

“And the University?” I asked, standing weakly.

“I’ll take care of that.”

I stumbled, and grabbed her arm for support. She walked with me, holding me up, as we made our way. “Walk through it,” I said.

“I don’t think that’s-”

“Please,” I begged. “You’re going to destroy my work. At least walk through it, and see.”

She helped me into a bed.

“Promise me,” I said. “Go look.” She nodded.

“I will.”

The techs hustled her out of the way then, hooking me up to an IV drip and taking my blood. I drifted in and out of sleep, but at some point I woke up to near silence. Machines beeped, but the staff were busy somewhere else.

“I hear you built it,” Marc said. I turned to my left to see him lying in the bed next to me. I nodded. “Is it wonderful?” he asked.

“It is.”

“I keep dreaming about it,” he said, lowering his voice. “It’s dark there, always night, and the trees whisper to me.”

“Yes, that’s it,” I told him. “I took your data and I put it in too.”

“Not everything,” he said. “I...kept a few files for myself. I didn’t understand them before, but I do now.”

“What’s in them?” I asked, grabbing the bed’s rail to pull myself closer to him. He smiled like a razor had cut the expression into his face.

“Tentacles,” he said.

A med tech appeared then, getting between us, changing my IV. When she was gone Marc appeared to be sleeping.

*What does he mean?* I wondered.

When I woke up again he was standing over me, unhooking me from the machines. A woman I didn’t recognize helped him get me out of bed. She was sweating, thin, and I wanted to wrap myself around her and eat her flesh until she laughed and –

She smiled at me.

“You were the other processor from the Miskatonic project?” I asked, “The one who got ill?”

“I wasn’t sick,” she said. “I woke up. We all did.”

“Now we have to get home,” Marc said. Group Room 9 was empty

so we got and locked the door. Group rooms were for large scale projects, when multiple processors worked together, so the couches were arranged around a hub. Marc kissed the woman hungrily before lying down and jacking in.

“Melia,” she said, biting my lip as she kissed me. I felt her cradling my head as her tongue found mine and then pain as she slammed the cable into me and –

It was night in the University, and we were in the courtyard. Students walked somberly past us, dressed in blacks and grays. Marc pulled a box down from the sky and unpacked it. Darkness spilled from it, slithering along the ground in strings of sticky black.

*Not strings*, I thought. *Tentacles*.

Marc grinned.

Our architect walked through the crowd, her white robes turned grey, her eyes shining. “I didn’t know,” she said. We pulled her to us, the four of us holding each other, entangled. “I don’t ever want to leave,” she moaned between kisses. Marc squeezed her arm, watching as a bruise formed, and I laughed, delighted.

“You’re beautiful,” I told her. “You can stay. We can all stay.”

“We have to tell the others,” Melia said, and as one we reached out, messaging our contacts.

“Come and see,” I said to Hass and Elda and everyone else I’d ever known. I breathed in the darkness and sent it riding out into the world, embedded into the text.

“Come and see.”

# Dreams of Death

By Lois Gresh

I crouched behind the whiskey still and peeked at Manuxet River with my one good eye. I kept the other eye squeezed shut so the pus wouldn't ooze out and attract the Flotulum. They were always waiting, the Flotulum, eager to drill into our bodies, into our very cells, and infect us.

"You best get on home, boy."

I swiveled to face old man Mercedes, then winced as a trickle of gray sun filtered through the gloom into my eye. I wasn't used to light, even something this weak. "What time is it?" I asked.

The old man's nostrils flared and sucked in the Flotulum puffs: they twinkled as they streamed into his body, the deady strands of their tails slinking behind them. He swirled his one remaining finger in the whiskey barrel. "You drank too much. It's already morning when our masters wake up." He licked his finger, then pointed toward Old Square in the heart of Innsmouth.

Rising from the steam vents in the cement were thousands of Flotulum, the masters of humanity, in all shapes and sizes: semi-crystalline oozes, plague clouds, acidic blisters and bubbles. They spiralled and coalesced, and they hung in slabs from the flanks of the steel buildings. A few wretched souls wandered amongst them, drinking in the Flotulum nutrients. Born human, their arms were now barbed and coated in down, their limbs articulated, their heads melted into shapeless bulges.

The Flotulum were thickest in the morning when the breeze stirred off the coast. They would attack me, inject their filth into my body, and turn me into whatever they wanted, a hybrid so impure I'd need to consume more and more of them just to remain alive.

I wouldn't let it happen.

I scrambled from behind the still and raced toward the steel-embossed highrise that divided the end of town from the Tongue of Sand. A gray photon beam sparkled off the highrise, and the bas relief

letters knifed my eye with the words, *JOIN US AND LIVE*.

*Like hell I'm going to join you, I thought. I'll fight to the death just like Grandma, and she's ninety-seven and still almost pure.*

What was I thinking, to be out drinking late at night, to get so drunk I passed out and didn't get home before dawn? It was dangerous out here during the day.

Beneath me, the hard-packed earth trembled with knots of disease. The vibrations twitched from my bare feet up my legs. I ran faster, ignoring the glass splinters that drove into my soles and the pain that spiked my nerves. Pain was nothing. I was used to it.

The highrise was behind me now. I saw the sand, the beautiful crystalline beige of the Tongue. I was almost home. But then—

To my left, a flash in the dark: a figure, tiny and whimpering: *a child?*

Why was a child out here? Children were kept inside as long as possible.

I stopped abruptly. Panting. I swat at the jellies, the Flotulum, the awful glow-worm tentacles that floated around me, dangling their blue-lit tail lures. The pulse of blue, pumping into my eye, hitting my optic nerve and radiating desire and lust—*yes, lust*—through my body. Mesmerized, rooted in place, I drank in the infection, unable to resist, dulled by the whiskey and intoxicated by the smell of the lures, so sickly sweet, so *potent*.

The filaments on my arms and back quivered and stretched to the sky. Sticky, just like the blue-lit tails of the Flotulum jellies, my filaments drifted in the air, seeking prey, and as the fat flies and mosquitoes hit them, I reeled up my filaments and tucked the food—

wriggling and alive—into my mouth. I had to eat. I had no choice.

But along with the food came the Flotulum nutrients, microscopic in the air and packed with infectious DNA: nanotech viruses created by the masters and unleashed on humanity generations ago.

The jellies twisted around me, contorted into eurhythmic harmonies, split and bobbed, then contorted into new harmonies, each time swishing their tail lures closer to my eyes. They wanted me to open my pus-filled eye so they could thrust their tail lures into the stickiness and infiltrate my soul. All I had to do was open that eye and let them in.

*JOIN US AND LIVE. Pulse.*

*JOIN US AND LIVE. Pulse.*

The whimpering came near. Yes, it was a child, tiny and starved, two years old at most. A toddler, I thought, and almost pure human, for she had no filaments, claws, or oddly shaped limbs. A fine catch for the Flotulum, who liked to take us young.

I'd hidden from them for all of my eighteen years so they couldn't fully infect me with their DNA. I wasn't even at the 25% infection mark yet. I'd know because if I was already there, they'd be able to communicate with me from inside my body.

I clasped the child to my knees, and she clung and started to wail, and her hot tears splashed over my knees and down my legs.

The cloud of jellies shifted and angled toward her—moved from me and my eyes—until they were a dense tangle of blue-lit lures and jelly blobs: a thicket around the tiny girl who screeched in horror.

I snatched her up, and I ran; peeked over my shoulder to see the Flotulum following: their gelatinous bodies, transparent with blood sacs in the centers and with tails streaming behind them. Somewhere in the cloud was a giant purple Flotulum, more dangerous than the blues. The purple sting would be sharp, I'd heard, and instantly inject the nanotech venom into my cells. I would never be the same. It'd turn me into half-Flotulum, then someday, full-Flotulum. Once the infection rose to 50%, my humanity would be lost. There was no antidote.

On the blessed sand, I raced past the lobster pots and jumped over the blue and purple jellies spotting the rubble. Here on this thin peninsula dangling into the sea, the rocks might not even be rocks; they were probably Flotulum masquerading as red and yellow stone.

The child flailed. "Stop it!" I barked, "Stop it! Shut up!" But she only cried more loudly. I clutched her to my chest, kept her head tight against my body so the creatures couldn't invade her nostrils, her eyes, her wide-open-screaming mouth. She was too young to understand. Close your mouth. Don't blubber, they'll get into any opening and into any ooze...

Finally, I reached the steel shack that was home. I kicked open the door, dashed inside, and slammed it shut. Turned and faced Grandma.

Her lobster pot boiled over the fire. Soot rose into the narrow vent in the steel roof, which clattered as it opened and closed to let out the smoke and keep out the Flotulum. She was on her stool, hunched over the tripod table in the middle of the room. I slipped the child onto my sea-grass mat to the left of the table, sat beside her while she wept with her head cradled in my lap. My bad eye opened, and pus mingled

with tears on my face.

My body started trembling.

And then a sound welled inside my stomach and exploded into a volcano of shrieking and clacking. It streaked up my chest and neck and then into my ears. I doubled over from the pain, fell off the mat onto the steel floor.

The trembling intensified into violent spasms that clenched my muscles, paralyzing all movement. I fought to move my limbs, but the pain was too much, and my skin grew hot from sweat, then cold as the sweat dried. My teeth were chattering.

Grandma's arm looped over my back. Her fingers were rough on my cheek, her voice harsh by my ear. "You're turning, Razel, but you're of strong stock. Fight them, Razel!"

Strange thoughts burbled through my brain. My body felt as if liquid filled it, as if my skin—*my seams*—were about to burst. My cells jittered, clanked, stretched, *transformed*. Yes, I could *feel* the transformation as the thoughts surged and bubbled, pounded through me with each beat of my heart. The Flotulum devices were replicating, essentially manufacturing more and more of the nano-virus DNA and spreading it throughout my body.

JOIN US AND LIVE. Pulse.

*What are you?*

WE ARE WHAT IS. WE ARE WHAT WAS. WE ARE ALL THAT WILL EVER BE. Pulse.

WE ARE IN YOUR CELLS. WE ARE DISTRIBUTED QUANTUM BEINGS. WE ARE YOU. Pulse.

I felt my cells open and disgorge wave after wave of soothing warmth. My limbs eased, and I could move again. Slowly, the pain subsided though my body continued to shake.

A blue sheen inched down my arms and flickered. I knew it was the sub-cellular distribution of the nanotech devices: water soluble and bio-compatible with nanocrystal metal shells dotted with prongs and coating the infectious cores.

Who could fight the masters' devices? One-dimensional nanowires functioning as biochemical sensors, transistors, and optoelectronics. Nanorods functioning as high-density data storage.

I could do nothing but succumb.

My mind simmered with strange knowledge and even stranger needs. By simply wanting it, I could shuffle my neurons into new pat-



terns. I was like a child skipping through the sand beneath a bright sun...before the masters had come to Innsmouth. It felt good. I multiplied the synapses that fed me happiness, and a surge of joy ran through me. I stifled the pain synapses.

"The DNA's in me," I whispered to Grandma as I rolled back to a sitting position. "I can feel them moving from one cell to another inside me—the heat, the desire, the *pull*..."

She moved back to her stool and eyed me warily, shoved a shred of lobster into her mouth and mashed it between two pointed teeth. Her skin hung in folds as variegated as the bottom of the river. Her eyes radiated sharp intelligence. I knew what she was thinking:

*I had failed her.*

*I had failed the human race.*

She was the oldest human in Innsmouth, and as far as I knew, the most pure human other than the infants. She'd been holed up in this shack since she was the size of the girl on my mat.

I was supposed to follow in her footsteps, but I'd failed long ago when dragging the lobster traps from the sea. A waft of jellies had hit me from behind, and a purple stinger got me in the eye, the one now filled with pus. Even after the dose of Flotulum this morning, I was perhaps 40% infected. *I'm still human*, I thought, *60% human*.

*Wasn't I?*

After a long silence, Grandma said, "This girl, what's her name?"

"I don't know," I said. "Everything happened too quickly for me to ask."

"Was she infected?" asked Grandma.

"I don't think so. I was careful to shield her. She may still be 100% pure. She was obviously kept inside. Her parents probably died from starvation or disease."

*I want to be what I was, near-pure like Grandma and this girl.*

*I want Grandma's love.*

*I want a lover. A human lover.*

*I'm lonely.*

EAT THE JELLIES. YOU NEED THEM. Pulse.

WE EAT THE JELLIES. WE ARE YOU. Pulse.

*Shut up.*

"We must protect the girl at all costs," said Grandma. "You know that, don't you, Razel?"

My mind whirled. Grandma no longer loved me. Grandma was

throwing me to the wolves, the Flotulum masters of Innsmouth. Screw the girl. I didn't want her here in the shack with my Grandma. I'd been a lot better off before the girl came along. I said, "You want to hole her up in this steel prison like you did to me? I know what that's like. No friends, no playmates, no girlfriend for me and someday, no boyfriend for her. She'll have no life, Grandma." I didn't speak the extension of this truth, that without one male and one female left, the human race could no longer reproduce. If she lived long enough, the girl would face this problem on her own someday. I'd been facing it for years.

Grandma said, "But what's life out *there*, Razel? Would it be any better if she succumbed to the Flotulum," she paused then added, "like you did?"

"I'm still human," I whispered.

Grandma didn't reply. She scowled and looked away.

If the girl grew up as I had, hiding in this shack, before long she'd be all alone and unable to fend for herself. Grandma wouldn't live much longer. She was too old. My heart filled with sadness. The girl's life would be no different from mine. She would spend it dreaming of death, a human death.

Her face in sleep was soft and dimpled, her expression sweet. I stroked her hair. It was much softer than the tails of the Flotulum jellies. Her skin; flushed with a color I'd never seen, a pinkish hue unlike the gray-greens of any human or hybrid. Her arms; brushed with peach pastels. Her fingernails: filthy and ripped; and her clothing, even worse. She was barefoot with bloodstains all along her legs.

Grandma wheezed, her breath rattling like the river disgorging on the cobblestones by the highrise. "Can you just take the girl and *leave*, Razel? Perhaps if you *both* escape..."

"She can leave Innsmouth and survive, but Grandma, *I* can't take her."

"She's too young to escape alone," said Grandma.

I nodded. "I'm afraid that I'm stuck here. I can't go to Newbury, can't go to Arkham. Can't live without replenishing the nutrients required by the Flotulum devices in my cells. Can't eat without straining the Flotulum nutrients from the air. Even if I run, I'll die from starvation en route. Besides," I added, "any other town might have its own nano-infections, different types of devices, possibly worse than what we have here."

"I'm sorry, my dear, dear Razel. There are so few of us left, and fewer and fewer as the days pass..."

"I'm still like you, Grandma," I said softly.

"Yes, dear," she said, "I know."

Nothing ever got better, and everything always got worse.

We slept, and when we awoke, it was night and the girl was hungry.

Grandma hugged the child and tried to speak in soothing tones. "When I was young, I ate vegetable soup at a place called Olmstead's Diner."

I rolled my one good eye. When I was young, Olmstead Diner no longer existed, and nobody my age had seen vegetable soup, much less eaten it. When I was young, I dreamed only of a human death. There were no other dreams for my generation.

The girl lisped something. I was sure she said, "Hungry," but it sounded more like "Humphy-humphy."

We fed her what was left of Grandma's lobster until it was all gone. And still, the girl was *Humphy*.

It became her name.

For weeks, I had to trap and haul in more lobster, for I now had two mouths to feed. While I could no longer eat human food myself, my life's purpose was to feed the two remaining pure or *almost* pure humans left in Innsmouth. The more often I left the shack, of course, the more often the Flotulum nano-viruses infected me and took over my cells.

Within a month, I could no longer wear the rags that had been my clothes. My back was humped and covered with coarse fur. My head bloated into twice its old size, my pus-filled eye fell back into my skull, my nostrils widened and multiplied until filtering holes littered my face and neck. My fingers sprouted filaments that fed on the insects and air nutrients. My need for nourishment grew.

One day, Grandma motioned to Humphy to stand behind her. I heard the girl's mouth masticating on meat from behind Grandma's thighs. The girl hummed as she filled her stomach. Happy. Human.

These were things I no longer understood. For me, happiness now meant dancing among the jellies, absorbing their stings, buzzing with ecstasy as the venom filled my veins and penetrated my cells.

"I think you should leave, Razel," said Grandma.

My one eye burned with tears. "But I'm still human! How can you say that? I don't want to live all alone! I can't live without you!" I broke

down, weeping on the sea-grass mat, still fragrant with the peachiness of the girl.

It was all *her* fault. *Humphy's* fault. If not for the girl, I'd still be 80% human, rather than this—

this *what?* 50% or less?

*What was I? What had I become?*

As if reading my mind, Grandma said, "You're one of them, at least a half-hybrid, I'd guess. If you stay much longer, you'll end up infecting me and taking my soul, Razel. At my age, it'd probably kill me."

"Never," I said softly.

Humphy muttered something from behind my Grandma's skirts. It sounded like "Humph-Humphy."

She was hungry. Again.

I dragged myself outside to service her. Over the sea, night was a sheaf of black pricked by the stars. I had the uneasy feeling that this might be one of the last times I stood alone at the tip of the peninsula, gazing at the lap of the waves and listening to the caws of the diseased birds.

I opened my foot pods and gripped the rocky bottom of the sea with my claws and suckers. I splashed toward the lobster traps. The first trap was empty. As was the second, and then the third. By the time I checked the last trap, I'd just about given up hope that I would find any food for Grandma and Humphy tonight, but one tiny lobster clung with its large claw to the inside of the wire mesh box. I pressed on the smaller claw and closed it, and the lobster opened the claw hooked into the mesh. I lifted the lobster, intending to carry it in my bare paws back to the shack. In the old days, I needed a bucket.

The water was cold around my thighs, the froth of the waves like phlegm on the night sea. I didn't want to leave. I wondered what it had been like here back when humans ruled Innsmouth. Had the children played in the sand? Had they run into the sea—together? Had the children laughed?

When the lobster clamped its claw onto my fingers, I hardly noticed. A pinch, a drop of blood. I calmed the lobster by pressing the underside of its claw. And then it hit me: *I knew what I had to do.*

I sat in the sand with my legs stretched into the laps of the sea. The stars felt warm and luscious, melting onto my humps, bleeding from the night sky. I was one with the world.

The lobster was soft between the eyes. I drove one of my own claws

into its head. And through my claw, I spewed the venom of my blood, the infectious Flotulum nano-viruses that would transform the lobster into one of us. I would feed this lobster to my Grandma and to Humphy. We would all be one with the masters. I didn't have to be alone.

The distributed systems that churned in my cells at the very lowest levels kicked into gear:

WE WILL SUSTAIN YOU. EAT. Pulse.

WE ARE ONE. Pulse.

*Yes, we are one, I thought, as I communicated back to the masters. We are microbes, we eat flesh. We are plagues. We are stench and ooze and luminous vapor. We are living sound. We are all.*

YES, WE ARE. Pulse.

And in that moment, I shuffled my neurons and latched into the distributed system of the Flotulum masters. I saw the blueprints. I saw how their bodies manufactured the chemicals that melted the perimeters of human cells. I saw how they injected the nanotech viruses into the cells and altered the human DNA. I had just done the same thing to the lobster.

I was Flotulum.

I returned with the writhing lobster in my claws. It wasn't quite dead.

Humphy's eyes widened when she saw the food, and she raced from the mat to the door where I stood, holding my offering out to Grandma. Humphy threw her skinny arms around my legs. She didn't seem to notice the fins erupting from my back, the notches in my limbs where they were growing new hinges, the black crust that inched across my flesh. "Thank you, Razel!" she cried.

My filtering holes swelled, and Humphy's sweetness filled my soul. I entwined the filaments hanging from my fingers into her hair.

Grandma dropped the lobster into the boiling water, and it shrieked. Humphy drew back from me, clapped her hands, and jumped up and down. The roof vent clattered up and down to let out the smoke and keep out the Flotulum. But this time, the Flotulum was already *inside* the shack.

Would the lobster meat infect Grandma and Humphy? *I* could easily infect them to the point of full-Flotulum dominance. All I had to do is what I did to the lobster. If I drove my claws into Grandma and Humphy, then they too would become infected with the masters'

nanotech devices. We could be together forever.

Grandma, who always seemed to know what I was thinking, said, "Take me if you must, Razel, but leave the girl pure. She's only a child."

I was Flotulum.

I could bring anyone into the fold.

Grandma cracked the lobster shell on her plate. Her fingers lifted a morsel toward her lips. The meat quivered, a gelatinous blob of white infused with the blue pulse of Flotulum nano-viruses. "Remember, Razel," she said, "you're still human."

My head buzzed. Was there a remnant of human Razel left inside me? If so, could Razel—*what remained of the human Razel*—infect the Flotulum creatures? My blood contained Flotulum devices that could inject human DNA into the cells of the creatures. Perhaps I could mutate or even destroy enough of the masters to save Grandma and the girl.

But I was Flotulum. And I didn't want to be alone without Grandma, who was my only family and my only friend.

"You're human," she hissed.

Again, my head buzzed. I had to fight what I had become.

I needed pure human blood, and a lot of it. How could I get enough to infect millions of creatures?

"Don't eat the lobster, Grandma," I said.

"Why?"

"Because."

She dropped the meat. "What is it, Razel?"

"Do you trust me?" I asked.

She nodded. *Yes*.

That was all I needed. Despite what I had become, Grandma still loved me. We were family. I drove the tip of a claw into the girl's jugular vein, and she shrieked and beat me with her fists, but my limbs kept her pinned to the floor. I drained enough blood for me to manufacture human DNA inside my cells, and I was careful not to inject my own foul blood into the girl's body. The temptation was strong, and the masters screamed within me, from within my very cells, to take the girl and make her one of *us*. But I resisted.

Humphy's blood gurgled in my arteries, pumped through my heart and into my veins. Her skin was no longer brushed with peach pastels. It was as pale as the lobster on Grandma's plate. She crawled to the mat and hid her face in the crook of an arm, and whimpered.

Grandma kissed the black crust on my cheek. I shifted away from her toward the door. "I am Flotulum, Grandma."

"No," she said, "you are Razel."

I looked at her one last time, and then I left, knowing I would never return. It was hard to leave the Tongue of Sand, where I'd grown up and always lived.

My foot pod squelched from the wet sand onto the hard cement.

I slopped past the steel highrise and into the Old Square of Innsmouth.

The jellies flocked around me. Blue-lit tail lures, blood sacs inside gelatinous blobs. Semi-crystalline oozes, plague clouds, acidic blisters and bubbles. And there were the remnants of what I once had been, the wretched souls trying to avoid the Flotulum but unable to resist. The hybrids were hungry.

My claws pricked the jellies, and I injected their blood sacs with the pure human DNA I was manufacturing in my cells. It took all of my concentration to pump out more and yet more human DNA, and in the end, I must have infected hundreds of Flotulum with my nanotech devices; nanocrystal metal shells dotted with prongs and covering cores filled with the human DNA.

But it wasn't enough, for there were millions of them and only one of me.

A dense Flotulum blanket wrapped around me, and I sank to the cement, where a purple jelly oozed from a vent, and in a blast of steam, sloshed against my face. Its suckers were tight, its stingers sharp.

WE ARE ONE. Pulse. JOIN US AND LIVE. Pulse.

*No. I am human.* Pulse.

And *this* is my human death.

# The Gauntlet

By Glynn Barrass and  
Brian M. Sammons

**C**uriosity: the first true emotion after an age of dull, sluggish monotony. Still blind and unmoving, it lay static in the darkness. Twitching fitfully nearby, its fellow gods remained sleeping.

*Why am I awake?* It screamed towards the void, *why me and no one else?*

In a rumbling cacophony of voices, the void replied.

~\*~

*Still this shit.*

Click, whir, click.

Click, whir, click.

Alongside the engine's low hum, Kane's VTOL mech continued to emit this unknown sound.

*Needs a service, damn thing.*

His machine and two similar flew across a city aflame with chaos. Hundreds of feet beneath his bipedal, heavily armed mech, the streets boasted rioter in their thousands. Setting fire to cars and buildings, they killed and raped one another in lust-filled abandon.

Kane, not caring to look down, stared straight ahead, towards a tower block-lined horizon flanking a dull yellow sun.

Click, whir, click.

Click, whir, click.

"Kane, Xperia?"

The voice had him flinching in his body harness, his mech veering from formation as a result.

"Kane, get with the program!" Commander Boch scolded. Positioned at the lower right of a V-formation headed by Boch, Kane maneuvered himself back into place.



“Right. Kane, Xperia,” Boch continued.

“Yes boss,” the other pilot replied. Her Spanish accent made her words a casual purr.

“Yes sir,” Kane added.

“I want to go through the orders again, yes?”

The pair replied in the affirmative.

“Okay, when we reach the target zone, orders are to disperse the gathering using plastic baton rounds and sonic cannons.”

“Check.”

“Check.”

“If we are fired upon however, deadly force is sanctioned.”

A meeting of cultists, this “End of the World” society, had orchestrated the citywide chaos. Dotting the city, they regrouped faster than the riot teams could disperse them.

“This is the motherload of scumbags,” Boch continued, “High ranking apparently. Teams at ground level will be ready to snag the bastards as they flee.”

After a few seconds pause he added, “Nearly there people, check your systems.”

His contact lenses emitting a red locator dot, Kane stroked the icons above the exterior view screen. Pausing at “systems”, he blinked, opening a 3D visualization of his mech. Dark blue, the robot resembled a cross between a medieval knight and an American Football player. Oversized shoulder pads surrounding a low, circular head, the pad to the left bore four blade-like transmitter spines.

The head boasted a large green Cyclopean eye, Kane’s window to the outside world as they approached the target.

Green ticks beside its torso and limbs cleared the mech of defects. The rocket launcher bracelets on its wrists, the oversized AK5 autocannon in its right hand, all were labelled “full”.

But still that annoying, unknown sound...Kane shook his head.

“Prepare for descent,” Boch ordered, “We’ll head in low for a while so ready yourselves for small arms fire.”

Boch’s mech “Shiva” descended towards the cityscape, its backpack gushing flame. Kane’s machine, “Yama” and Xperia’s, “Baubo” followed suit behind.

Dull black tower blocks filling Kane’s visuals, he followed Shiva’s descent. As such, he gained an unwelcome view of the chaos below.

*Damn, it truly is hell down there.*

More tower blocks followed, the streets below littered with burning cars, burning victims. The lower they descended the more the chaos grew apparent. Apartments spewing flame, houses stood equally immolated. Entering a decrepit residential area, the place lay darkened by smoke.

One moment, he was gazing towards grey rooftops, the next a shuddering explosion sent him tumbling towards them.

“What the fuck!” Xperia screamed.

“Missiles, they have missiles,” Boch replied, his voice cracking in panic. “Break formation, return fire!”

“Yama, we’ve lost Yama!”

Panicked voices filled his ears, Kane too shell-shocked to respond. Red lights flashing around him, a klaxon buzzed angrily through the cockpit.

The rooftops rose to meet him, as above he heard the roar of thrusters accompanied by the angry chatter of machine gun fire.

“Yama, sit rep?” he asked, pulling himself together.

“Szzzzzzz trep,” it replied. The mech’s 3D image appeared briefly, the ticks replaced by red crosses.

“Damn, damn!” the thruster triggers unresponsive, Kane flinched as Yama touched roof.

The huge mech’s weight, combined with the roof’s decrepit state, transformed impact to penetration. Yama, smashing the tiles, continued through the wooden floors below. Clouds of dust, splintering chunks of wood, Kane quaked in his harness as the mech continued downwards.

Unexpected screams were cut brutally short as Yama reached a crashing halt. Its shuddering impact knocked Kane momentarily unconscious.

He awoke with a scream of his own. Aching from head to toe, face down in darkness, an agonizing abdominal pain sent spasms burning through his body.

The mech, still responding to his movements, moved with him.

“Agh, God! Turn off the alarm Yama.”

It reciprocated, leaving Kane in pain, silence and darkness. The unknown clicks from earlier had disappeared also.

“Boch, Xperia, you hear me?” Silence.

His predicament was bad. Clenching his teeth against the pain, Kane attempted lifting the mech. He felt a response, sluggish at first,

then a sharp jolt as whatever pierced him snapped off. After briefly blacking out again, he raised Yama to its knees.

The darkness dissipated. Replaced by clouds of dust illumed by diaphanous light, the pain swelled when he leant forward. Tears streaming down his cheeks, blood trickled through his flight suit, seeping towards his crotch.

Seeing no control icons, he blinked ineffectually hoping something might appear.

“Yama?”

“Yezzzzzz.” The voice sounded crackly, deranged.

“Get me out of here.”

The hatch fronting the cockpit opened with a hiss. Along with the dust, musty smells permeated the cabin. His pain increasing cruelly, Kane yelled before blacking out.

~\*~

Two things returned Kane to consciousness. The first, his ever-present pain, the second: a cold liquid, dripping against his shaven scalp. The fluid trickling past his mouth tasted salty with a hint of gaminess.

“Gaah! Ugh.”

Kane spat, opening his eyes onto a scene of utter chaos. A shadowy room surrounded him, the floor piled high with smashed wood and rubble.

Looking up he sourced the drip. It was the mech’s brainpan. Holding vat-grown brain cells, it formed the neural interface between him and the machine. No wonder Yama was so messed up: the mech had brain damage.

His problem? Glancing down Kane discovered an obsidian spike, poking out from his flight suit. Surrounded by gore, the thing tugged painfully every time he breathed.

*I need a med kit*, and “This fucking leak, DAMN!”

Reaching behind his head, Kane tugged the interface lead from his neck.

“Yama?” silence followed.

With care, breathing slowly to ease the pain, Kane unclipped his chest harness. Dragging his arms from their surrounding braces, his legs followed. He almost passed out again, bending to snap the clips.

Next, he gingerly descended the ladder welded to Yama's open hatch.

Touching the creaking, precarious rubble, his boots invoked a cloud of dust. Wiping his head dry using his sleeve, Kane examined this chaos within the chaos.

He soon made a grisly discovery. A pair of twisted legs protruded from one section of the mound, faded blue jeans torn and bloody above two bare, filthy feet. In another corner a headless corpse lay crumpled, its pale neck-flesh torn around a crimson hole. This one wore black, dust-smeared robes.

"Cultists? I gate-crashed a cult meeting?"

Kane did a quick headcount; there were at least eight black-clad corpses in the room with him.

A sharp stab returned him to more pressing matters.

"Yama?"

Still no reply.

Its cyclopean eye dull, the mech's head looked badly dented. The dripping inside the cockpit continued as the brainpan leaked its precious fluids. Yama's left leg was also crippled, twisted at the ankle and bulging blackened steel tendons. Above the left forearm, the shoulder's transmitter spines were bent badly out of shape.

It could have been worse. He'd have Yama retrieved and fixed, if he got out of this alive.

Climbing to his knees, he gripped the bottom of the hatch, raising it to reveal Yama's lower abdomen. A narrow rectangular drawer centred this, Kane unlocking it with his thumb. Sliding the drawer out exposed the survival gear he required.

Wary of encountering more cultists, he worked quickly, with efficient care.

First came the medical kit. After various injections to his chest: Tetanus, antibiotic and an anaesthetic, he felt numb enough to proceed. Tentatively touching the wound, he fingered the alien protrusion. Taking hold of the black, crystalline tip, he held his breath, dragging it away. Despite the anaesthetic, pain wracked his body, but five inches later and he hadn't passed out. Blood spurts followed, Kane tossing the obscene thing away.

His hands slippery with blood, he sprayed sealant onto the wound.

Kane's chances of survival were increased now, marginally.

Next he retrieved a dark blue suit of riot armour. High-density resin beneath a black rubber/Kevlar hybrid, this increased his chances

further. Tucking an AMT “On Duty” automatic pistol into his hip holster, Kane was good to go.

Whilst taking a last, wistful look towards his mech, something spattered against his head.

*Rain? No, plaster fragments.*

Between the tear in the ceiling, actually, between the tear in three ceilings and a roof, hung an ashen grey sky.

Clutching his wound, Kane clambered down the rubble pile. Veering left across creaking floorboards he aimed for a doorway he’d noted between two dusty tapestries.

Something red and fleshy almost slipping him over, Kane gagged at the source. A membrane attached to a skull fragment, it topped a spattered pool of yellowish brain-matter.

“Ugh, hell.” Staring from this to the tapestries invoked yet more disgust. Scenes of death and debauchery, they portrayed humans being eviscerated by tentacled, alien beasts.

“Fuck this madness,” Kane said, shaking his head. With blood-stained fingers, he reached for the doorknob.

~\*~

While still gaining awareness, it felt the being leave. Strange life, a carbon based being like those that summoned it from the outer spheres.

Those...”humans” (*yes that’s the right word*) were dead now. The strange crystalline structure it had been summoned into, lay equally broken beneath mounds of debris.

*I need a body.* With this thought, it set its mind to searching, probing the surrounding area for a receptacle.

Five humans lay dead, smashed and useless. But, something else lurked nearby: brainwaves of a sort sinking deeper towards death.

*You, it asked, do you hear me?*

Yes

*Your name?*

*I am Yama, and I am dying.*

*That can be solved, Yama, The Treader of Stars replied. Just open your mind to me, and you will be so much more.*

Desperate for life, even strange, unknown life, the mech agreed.

“Madness.” The moment Kane stepped from the building it hit him in a wave. The chaotic, mindless murder...the stink of immolated flesh surrounded him. Glancing round, he removed his firearm.

Which way to go? The street’s decrepit, ancient brownstones were half-consumed by fire already. If he turned left, headed towards the city centre, he might encounter a riot patrol heading his way. It beat staying put anyway.

Still clutching his wound, Kane stalked across a sidewalk littered with trash. The wound throbbed harder now, a wriggling sensation deep in his gut. The anaesthetic shouldn’t be wearing off this quickly.

He didn’t stop. Beyond the sidewalk wrecked cars gushed thick, oily smoke. Alongside them, charred corpses littered the street.

Increasing his gait, Kane hoped for cover. Turning left at an intersection however he encountered a group of masked teenagers. Wearing stocking masks, their matching Happi jackets trailed the concrete behind them. Armed with Rebar clubs and hockey sticks, they passed him without molestation. Kane was thankful; he’d leave killing kids to the Ground Units.

A few streets further and the brownstones disappeared, replaced by a small park flanked by low iron fences. Trees were alight, scores of them, this sight upsetting him far more than the corpses. “Bastards,” he spat, climbing over the fence.

A dozen feet away to his right a mob stood kicking a man to death.

“Not my business, just get back to the precinct,” Kane whispered, his eyes watering from the acrid, smoking trees. Turning, one of the gang pointed and jeered. Despite the rising pain, he increased his speed across the grass.

It moved as he moved, wriggling inside him. Had part of the spike snapped off into his gut? The sooner he reached a medic the better.

The scene beyond the park did nothing for his mood. Jumbles of drab, mismatched structures, a distant conflagration consumed many. An orange swath of flame, it ejected three separate, roiling black clouds towards the sky. Beyond this was a row of skyscrapers, the mirrorshade glass of one reflecting a dying, bloodshot sun.

Exiting the park, Kane froze on the sidewalk. A battered yellow sports car zoomed by, beeping its horn as the passenger window released a Molotov cocktail. A lucky break: this flaming destruction

narrowly missed him. Making an alley between two whitewashed office buildings his destination, he darted across the road.

Halting on the cobbles, Kane paused a moment, catching his breath. The alley, reeking of ripe onion, lay strewn with trash bags. Still he rushed, pausing upon reaching a T-junction after hearing something suspicious beyond.

Low voices had him creeping toward the right-hand wall. Pressing himself against the corner, Kane peered round, only to witness yet another symptom of the city's growing insanity.

The captive woman was dirty, dishevelled looking. Dressed in black PVC shorts and fishnet tights, one white trainer was missing, her bare breasts exposed between a ripped, metallic blue hoody. Matted yellow dreadlocks concealed her whimpering face.

One attacker had her arms pinned above her head. The other sat crouched on his knees, hacking her shorts away with a knife.

The former wore a scuffed, black leather trenchcoat, matching shorts, boots and nothing else. A giant of a man, his sneering face lay surrounded by a mop of greasy orange hair. The other wore yellow cargo pants, black braces pulled up across his pale, skinny shoulders. Branded Egyptian glyphs spotted his shoulder blades and bald, scabby scalp.

He breathed loudly, giggling as he worked.

A disgusted second later, Kane intervened.

Stepping forward gun raised, a sudden movement made him glance right. A third gang member, one he'd missed, stood aiming a long barrelled pistol towards their victim. Dressed in stolen riot armour, his face lay smothered in wriggling black tattoos.

Kane fired as he turned, the top of the man's head disappearing in a burst of crimson mist. The gunfire echoed through the alley like a thunderclap. Before the corpse touched cobbles, Kane span round.

The orange-haired giant releasing the girl, her limp form slid head-slumped down the wall. Raising his hands, the man wailed in incoherent protestation. Turning a scowling face, his companion's jaw dropped along with his knife.

"Go, beat your feet," Kane growled, waving the gun. The men reciprocated in an instant, their footsteps stamping down the alley as he approached the whimpering girl.

"Miss, you're okay now, I'm a policeman," he said, kneeling to the cobbles. Her face concealed behind tousled hair, the girl's whines

became a hiss.

“Fuckin’ PIG!” grabbing the abandoned knife, she slammed it towards Kane’s chest.

~\*~

So much unneeded information, this “Yama” held within its positronic and ersatz brain cells. Flight trajectories, fuel consumption to evasion ratios...given free reign however, The Treader quickly found the area interpreting movement.

*Yama, rest awhile while I rebuild you.*

Picking a half-crushed brain from a dead human on the floor, The Treader shook away bone and connective tissue. *This, is for you*, saying this, it sterilized the memories, elevating the matter towards Yama’s brainpan.

*We’ll rebuild you with this, and...* turning Yama’s head, it examined the damaged leg. *This won’t do.* Glancing round, The Treader scrutinized the legs protruding from the rubble, the headless corpse in the corner. *Now those, I can build something with.*

Snapping the legs from the rubble, The Treader set to work.

~\*~

Surrounded by upturned debris, The Treader stood whole. Twisted pink ropes, limbs made tentacles by an otherworldly alchemy, quivered against the floor. Flesh and bone, veins and muscle tissue, all lay mutated, reformed to accommodate The Treader’s needs.

The cyclopean eye socket boasted human eyeballs now. Spinal columns, tattered with nerves and ganglia, swayed snakelike from its shoulders.

Something felt wrong however, some thing missing from The Treader’s bizarre new form.

*I don’t feel whole.*

*I feel it too.* Yama added. *A part of you, and me, appears incomunicado.*

Yama’s memory banks revealing the answer, The Treader climbed to its feet.

“KANE!” it roared through the machine’s one remaining sonic emitter, the amplified, alien voice echoing towards the sky.





Kane fell back, sucking in wind, and sloshed into a puddle that reeked of equal parts urine, engine lube, and rotting meat. The dreadlocked girl, who appeared to be all of fifteen years old, got up and ran from him as fast as her wobbling legs would carry her. Kane raised his gun, tracking the girl's clumsy movements with his automatic as his trigger finger twitched.

*Do it*, came a whisper from some deep, primordial part of his brain, the animalistic side responsible for lashing out when hurt.

"No," Kane answered, as he scooted out of the puddle to drier filth. He set his pistol down on the cleanest spot available and inspected the knife sticking out of his abdomen. It had slid between two plates of his riot armor and into his flesh. His basic first aid training told him to leave the blade alone, that pulling it out would only increase the bleeding, but his body told him something else entirely. Something was...wrong. He could feel the knife inside him, but behind it, deeper inside, something else twitched. He knew the stab was low enough to have not hit his ribs, so it couldn't be a bit of shattered bone twisting about. Fearing the worst, he grabbed the knife's handle, wrenched the weapon out of his body, and inspected the blade.

As he feared, it was a ceramic knife, the kind of shiv the kids all preferred as it didn't set off the metal detectors at their schools, the stores they robbed, or the youth homes and housing blocks where they lived. Worst yet, it was a cheap homemade job and all that remained of the blade was a three inch stub. The rest of it had broken off inside him and was now twisting about with every breath he took, slicing him up further.

"Perfect," Kane hissed as he pressed his left hand over the wound to slow the flow of blood. He placed his right on the dirty cobbles in an attempt to push himself to his feet. He gritted his teeth against the agony he knew would accompany the movement, but then suddenly stopped.

He felt the broken bit of the ceramic blade pressing into his left palm. No, it was starting to cut into his hand, as if it was being pushed out of him with force by something inside his body.

Kane pulled his hand away, looked down at the stab wound in his guts, and gaped. He could see the first bloody bit of the broken blade

protruding from his armor. As he watched, more and more of the sharp ceramic emerged from his side until it fell free from his wound in its lethal entirety and landed in his lap. Kane picked up the broken blade and looked blankly at it as his mind raced, trying to put pieces together and make some sense of what just happened, but the best he could come up with was three simple words.

*What the fuck?*

He turned back to the wound, carefully lifted up his armor, and wiped at it with two fingers. It was still sore as hell, but as he cleared the gore away he saw that no new blood was leaking from the cut.

A clattering of empty bottles on stone cut his wonderment short as he heard people approaching and indistinguishable voices. A group turned a corner in the alley and came into view. At its forefront was the dirty blond girl who had stabbed him.

"There, I tolds ya, a pig. A pig is just whats ya lookin' for, right? 'Es perfect, right? Good enough for some scam, right?" The girl babbled through snuffles and facial spasms. The previous events, culminating with the little bitch stabbing Kane, had happened so fast that he just now noticed that she was a tweaking scramblehead in desperate need of a fix.

"Yes, he is perfect." The long, flowing shadow next to the girl said. He was long, as he towered over the girl, and flowing as he wore, what...a robe?

"Shit, World Enders," Kane whispered and went for his gun. Unfortunately his hands were covered in his own blood and the slime of the streets, so that the weapon slipped from his slick fingers and clattered to the ground.

"Take him," the tall shadow commanded and Kane heard the slapping of feet on filth as several others rushed at him.

Kane tried for the gun again and this time was rewarded with a sure grip. He spun around, but the pack of robed figures were now too close. He got off a shot and saw one of them fall, but then something blurred past his face and smashed into his gun hand. He looked in horror as his automatic clattered to the ground, then saw a combat booted foot kick it away.

Then came the rain of pummelling blows.

The mob kicked and punched and clubbed him all over, but they paid special attention to his head, guts, and balls. By the time it was over, Kane had lost count of the blows and was only a crumpled,

bleeding mess that gasped for air. He felt heavy feet pinning both of his arms to the ground and looked around with his one unswollen eye. There were at least six standing around him, and through ringing ears he could barely hear what they were saying.

"Fucker shot Paul." A woman hissed.

"His sacrifice will not be in vain." The tall shadow man said.

"What of the gutter slut that led us here? Should we take her too?"

A new voice asked, this one male.

"No, she's not worthy. Pay her with her scramble and let her poison herself." Again it was the tall man who spoke. He was obviously the leader of this group.

Kane saw one of the shadows peel away from the circle around him and go to where the teenage girl jittered and wobbled. He took out a small, clear plastic baggie with a light blue gel inside and purposely tossed it into a reeking puddle at the girl's feet.

"Now *scram*, kid." He sneered and then chuckled, obviously amused with his own wit.

Kane's attention was pulled back to more pressing matters when he felt a boot dig into his side.

"I can't wait to see this fascist bastard burn," the woman standing over him said with something like a sexual purr mixed in with her hiss.

"No, it won't be the pyres for this one. He's been touched by *The Others*." The tall man said.

"What?" The woman gasped.

"How is that possible?" A new voice asked.

"Yeah, they haven't appeared yet." A third asked incredulously.

"Obviously they have," the tall man said with authority, "I can see the signs on this one. Perhaps Malcolm's cell was more successful than ours and this policeman was there? Perhaps he's the reason we've now lost contact with Malcolm?"

"You shit!" the woman shrieked and threw a kick into Kane's side.

"No, Melinda," the leader chided. "We will take this one back to the stadium with us and we'll make a proper example of him."

The tall shadow then bent down and Kane could see his face for the first time. The man's skin was covered in strange symbols drawn in white ink that even showed through three days of stubble growth on his cheeks. His teeth were crooked and stained a shade of nicotine yellow-brown. Worst of all were his eyes. The man's right orb was

replaced by an old second or third gen cyber lens in dire need of repair. It rolled about in the socket and the aperture opened and closed repeatedly, as if it just couldn't focus. But the man's left eye, his natural eye, was worse. It was watery, twitchy, and despite being a brilliant blue, it radiated madness like a jack-o'-lantern showing candlelight.

"You received a gift tonight officer, but it was not meant for you." The tall man said, blowing stale cigarette stench and insanity into Kane's face. "You are unworthy of such a blessing. So we will cut it from your quivering flesh and return it to the stars from whence it came. Then when *The Others* next heed our pleas, they shall touch someone who is worthy."

The tall man then stood up and pulled his right leg back. Kane made sure his tongue was safely behind his teeth and braced for what was coming.

"Someone like me!" the madman roared and kicked Kane under his exposed chin.

Kane felt a single white hot bolt of pain, and then fell into the cold comfort of black oblivion.

~\*~

The Treader thrilled in flight.

It wasn't slipping the bounds of gravity that it revelled in; such things were natural to it. It was the simple act of movement. After untold millennia of inertness, to be able to move again was its own reward.

Then one of the infestations below, those *humans*, ruined its reverie by hurling a shrieking, sparking thing up at it. Yama instantly reacted and dodged the tiny nuisance, and as it identified the threat as a 'missile', The Treader absorbed the information and rage filled the star spawn.

*These*, it began, but it didn't know the right word. It accessed Yama's datalink to the web and found the closest analogy. *These vermin dare attack us?*

*Fighting is what they do best.* Yama replied. *I was created to fight for them.*

*And I was formed from the will of the Yawning Void to slip from world to world, to consume and fornicate as it pleased me, and to be worshiped by simple creatures such as these. And yet they hurl stones at me?*

*That was no stone. That was an AG-7 shoulder fired surface to air—*

*I know what it was!* The Treader roared, and Yama's one remaining sonic cannon transmitted that psychic scream as sound waves. Windows in a four block radius not already smashed by the riot shattered. The one hundred twenty seven people beneath the flying mech fell to the ground, hands pressed against their ears, blood running from between their fingers.

*This is the filth that dares to awaken me! Call me from the stars with no gifts awaiting my arrival. No songs of praise. No slatterns to sate my hungers after the aeons of slumber. I will consume them all. Those who bow and scrape and those who flee in terror shall all be enjoyed equally by me.*

*Do we not need to find out missing component first?* Yama asked.

*Yes, that is why I lead us on this course. The missing part of us tugs at me. I can feel it...wait.*

Yama again reacted swiftly. What still functioned in its crippled sensor package pinged and swept the area for threats. Finding none, it asked, *What is it?*

*I feel – something. It feels...good. It feels like what awoke me. This is different, but also the same. A warm, rippling psychic energy washing over me, arousing me, filling me with more hunger. It is supplication and it is coming from...there.*

Yama turned its stolen eyes towards the TransAtlantica Bank Stadium. *Sky Eye 9 is in position, receiving data,* Yama reported. *Several large fires, movement of unknown number of individuals, weapon discharges detected. That area has been classified as hostile with a threat level of five.*

*That is where we must go.* The Treader insisted.

*Setting course, we will arrive shortly.* Yama confirmed as it banked and began to glide towards the stadium.

~\*~

Knockouts from blows to the head last nowhere near as long as they do in the movies. They do, however, muddle the brain and fog over memories for some time after waking up. Kane learned this first hand as two of the robed cultist dragged him by the arms through the dark streets. He remembers shadows racing by and screams. Next they entered a long tunnel that smelled of mildew where florescent lights

flickered and sputtered. Leaving the tunnel they crossed grass so green that it could only be artificial, and then finally they went up a large mound of dirt. Kane was so out of it that he didn't even feel the first nine-inch nail they pounded through his left hand. He did feel the next one as they hammered it through his right. That jolt of fresh pain brought him fully back to the real world with a scream.

Kane whipped his head left and right to see each of his arms stretched out from his body and pinned to planks of wood by long, rusty nails. Next the large bonfires all around him caught his attention. There must have been a dozen or more of them, scattered over the green field. The blazes were made out of equal parts garbage, scraps of wood and furniture, and charred bodies. The thick, oily smoke that wafted up out of each inferno drew Kane's eyes upward and that's when he noticed the rows and rows of blue seating all around him.

"Th – the stadium?" he croaked out to himself.

He was surprised when a man with a shaved head, and skin covered in symbols, popped out from behind him and underneath his right arm to answer.

"Yep, sure is buddy." The figure said. He was small, scrawny, and malnourished to the point where every bone in his shirtless chest stood out in sharp relief from the dirty sack of skin that contained them. In his shrivelled state, the several well-worn augments he had grafted to his body looked too big and bulky for such a little man. His left arm was made of metal and cracked plastic and was twice as big around as his remaining natural arm. It gave Kane some idea of how the talking scarecrow might have looked in better days. The tattoo of the eagle resting on a globe superimposed over an anchor told Kane how he had received the cyber.

The scrap of a former Marine pulled Kane's head down almost gingerly and started fingering the junction port at the back of Kane's neck. The whirling of the bald man's cyber eyes was clearly audible as he increased magnification. Kane wondered what that had to sound like inside the cultist's skull.

"Yeah, these are nice...real nice. You pigs get all the good augs." The scrawny man said, then released Kane's head, looked him in the face, and asked, with total sincerity, "Hey, would you mind if I took that after we kill you?"

"Fuck you," was all Kane could muster.

The shrivelled up man honestly looked hurt by Kane's words. Then

he turned around and walked away from him, muttering, “No call being like that,” under his breath. The man’s departure allowed Kane to focus on what was going on around him, and to fully comprehend just how deep in shit he was in.

He was roughly in the centre of the TransAtlantica Bank Stadium, on an eight foot mound of dirt and nailed to a crude cross. Around him bonfires burned, slowly turning the many corpses each was made out of into ash. There were streaks and puddles of gore all over the place, along with piles of clothes and various blood stained weapons like knives, baseball bats, and fire axes. Whatever happened here, Kane had missed most of it.

Kane then noticed people walking among the pyres and slogging through the blood. They were of different ages and races and of both sexes, but there were enough commonalities between them to tell they were part of the same group. Some wore black robes, others just got by with black jeans and t-shirts, and still others roamed about naked, but they all had symbols of some sort on their skin. The manner in which they displayed their devotion ran from paint, to tattoo ink, to scarification. They also all had that lean and hungry look of the desperate and the downtrodden. They were the people of the streets, the ones you never saw when flying through the clouds, partying in the rooftop casinos, or shopping in the posh open sky malls. They were the people Kane was paid to keep out of sight, less their dirty, starving faces spoil the appetites of their betters. Tonight they had obviously decided to light a fire so bright that even the most over privileged of assholes in the highest of penthouses saw it. Kane could almost sympathize with them – if he wasn’t currently nailed to a piece of lumber by them, and he hadn’t seen what they had used to light those fires.

Then Kane saw the tall, robed man from the alley, the one with the crazy blue eye, walking towards him. Behind him was a small group of World Enders and next to him was the woman whose voice he recognized from the mob that had attacked him.

“Our scouts keep calling in; they say that the police are quickly dispersing the rabble. They’re only a mile from us now. This night was a waste. All that effort, planning, whipping the witless chattel into a frenzy, and for nothing. If *The Others* didn’t respond to all this, what will it take to awaken them?” The woman asked of her tall leader.

“They did respond. I told you, that man there,” the robed man pointed to where Kane slumped against the nails pounded through

his flesh, “he has been touched by *Those From Beyond the Veil*.”

“But not all of us have your sight. We can’t see the signs as you do, and some of the new members are starting to question things.” The woman said that last part in a hush so that Kane had to strain to hear her, even though they were now just ten feet from him.

“Then I will show them and you,” the man said, pulling a curved knife out of the folds of his robe. He smiled as he started to mount the mound Kane was crucified on.

“I see you’re back with us,” he said through a brown-toothed grin. “Good, your screams will be at least something for us to enjoy on this otherwise disappointing –”

“Cops! Mech incoming!” Someone suddenly yelled, his cry of alarm echoing throughout the stadium.

The tall man looked back at his cluster of robed minions behind him.

Kane lifted his heavy head towards the heavens.

And then all hell erupted.

It started with the 40mm bark of what Kane instantly recognized as a mech’s giant sized AK5 autocannon. The standard mixed round salad of tracer, flechette, Willie Pete, HE, and good old hardball began to rain from the sky. The tracers drew a line of death through the cultists while thousands of tungsten darts from the flechette rounds tore them to ribbons. Plumes of beautiful but deadly white phosphorus scorched tattooed flesh with a burning chemical so intense that not even water would douse it. High explosive rounds sent chunks of earth, flaming wood, and mangled bodies flying into the air. The solid lead hardball rounds just added to the overkill as many of the World Enders found their wishes unexpectedly fulfilled.

Then the screaming started. Not from the cult, they were already doing that, but from the sky. Kane recognized this as a mech’s sonic cannons that could emit ultrasonic blasts of noise to disable and deter individuals without being lethal. However there was something wrong about these ultrasonic shrieks, something sickening. Something alien. The sound had a physical effect on Kane. It felt like a cold, greasy serpent coiling around his guts, slowly swallowing his heart, and flicking a forked tongue into his brain.

Kane lowered his head and vomited uncontrollably all over his legs. Through the heaves and jitters, Kane heard the head splitting shriek change and begin to form words.



*Unworthy! You are all Unworthy!* The voice, if it could be called that, as it felt like it bored into the centre of Kane's brain, roared.

Kane looked up for the source of the demonic shrieking and saw a huge, dark shape cutting through the thick smoke in the sky to land on the blood soaked, carefully manicured field of the arena. As it touched down, one large metal leg and foot stomped into a crowd of cowering cultists, pulping three of them instantly. As for the mech's other leg –

Kane's one good eye widened, his mouth hung open, drooling out streamers of vomit, and his mind tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

The other leg had the rough size and shape of a VTOL mech's leg, but it was more a congealed mass of twisted bodies than metal. He could make out human arms, legs, even faces all merged together, with streamers of flesh, bone, and intestines dangling from the revolting mass. Shot through the twisted mess of meat were black crystal-line spikes...or were they tentacles? The ebony stalks were both solid and fluid at the same time. One such appendage wrapped around the waist of a cultist unfortunate enough to be close to where the bizarre thing landed. It squeezed and bisected the man with a sickening *sloop*. Another tendril lanced through the back of a fleeing black-clad woman, pinning her to the ground like a needle through a bug. She convulsed for a few seconds, violently expelled a mouth full of blood, then went slack and slowly slid down the ebony spike.

Kane followed the horrible leg up, to take in the rest of the giant robot. It was undoubtedly a VTOL mech like the one he flew, but along the length of its frame, large sections of metal were missing. In their place was a paste made out of various bits of human anatomy that twitched and pulsed. Holding the whole thing together was a network of shiny black veins that protruded from the mangled humanity like giant porcupine quills, or waved about like windblown rags.

A picture flashed into Kane's mind, transposing the image of a man over the bipedal war machine, but switching the bloody bits of flesh that it wore into shiny, cold chrome.

"It's got augs," Kane wheezed. He so badly wanted to laugh, but at the moment he didn't know how. "The mech augmented itself!"

Then Kane's gaze fell upon the smashed and empty cockpit of the mech. He saw the familiar yellow and black double line that traced the canopy, the gold painted police badge below that, and then following that badge to the right, where there was four black letters on a white

background.

YAMA

“No, fucking, way,” Kane whispered, and if to answer, the nightmare machine roared out a single word through its sonic cannon.

“KANE!”

Yama’s cyclopean eye turned toward him, and the machine took a step towards Kane on its monstrous leg of mangled flesh.

“No, no, no!” Kane muttered. He clenched his eyes shut and screamed through gritted teeth and started to pull against the nails in both of his palms. Arcs of white hot pain travelled up his arms and into his brain at the speed of thought. His stomach lurched and more acid bile filled his throat. Unconsciousness fluttered around the edges of his world, beckoning him to take comfort in oblivion.

The ground trembled as the mech took another step closer.

Kane huffed air and dried blood from his nose, spit bubbled on his lips, and he forced his hands away from the rough wood of the cross. His success was measured in inches as he felt his meat and bones drag across the cold, cruel metal piercing both palms. Then he felt the wide heads of the nails dig into his tortured flesh and his hands would go no farther.

A thunderous footfall boomed and Kane opened his eyes. He looked at his bloody right hand. The head of the nail was very broad, easily four times the diameter of the metal shaft that pinned him to the wood. If he was going to free himself, he would have to all but tear his hands apart.

Another of the mech’s awesome steps echoed in the arena, followed by the sound of spinning servos and something – *meaty* – tearing. Kane looked away from his hand, towards the source of the sounds, and saw Yama towering over him. The machine bent down at the waist and extended a giant metal hand towards him.

Kane shrieked and cringed away.

“Wait!” a shout rang out.

The tall cult leader, face freshly burnt and the hood of his black robe still trailing smoke, limped towards the otherworldly machine.

“Why have you done this, oh great Treader from the Stars? We are your faithful. We kept the old ways alive. We are the ones that summoned you forth from your ancient slumber.” The tall man beseeched and the Yama-thing turned his way.

“We are the ones that you were to teach to become like you. Not

that man, but us! We deserve to transcend these weak, flawed forms and become –”

*Unworthy!* Yama’s sonic cannon interrupted. Then Kane saw a shimmer in the air, like a heat mirage on the desert highway, jump from the twisted mech and cover the lanky cult leader. Instantly he began to babble, shake and he toppled over into a twitching heap. The shimmering air stayed with him, sparkling, dancing...and tearing tiny bits away from the man. First it was shreds of his black robes no bigger than postage stamps, but quickly came the quivering bits of flesh. Blood was next and it gushed from thousands of wounds all over his body. It bubbled up in globs that defied gravity. The sparkling mirage intensified, as did the man’s screams. Hair, meat, tendons, the contents of the man’s bowels, the jelly from shredded eyes, the dull gleam of teeth and bone, and lastly the grey pulp of brain matter all joined the swirling maelstrom of human debris. Then all at once, the shimmering air vanished, and everything it had born aloft hit the ground with a wet *splat*.

Kane felt his stomach lurch. No. He felt it twitch. No, that wasn’t right either. He felt something inside him move.

He looked down and saw a black and shiny tendril, something both solid and fluid, poke its way out of his abdomen though the knife wound. It stretched up and out of him in the direction of the mech.

Kane’s mind flashed to the first time he was stabbed this night. The obsidian spike he had pulled from his body after he had crashed. Then he jumped ahead to later in the night when he was looking down at the ceramic knife in his bloody hand and knowing that it had broken off inside of him.

*You knew the kid’s shiv had snapped off a piece inside you, but you never even considered that the black crystal thing might have done the same,* Kane told himself.

“Now to become whole again,” the sonic cannon almost whispered.

Yama closed its metal fist around Kane and pulled, gently but firmly, the man up to it. Kane shrieked as the fat ends of the nails further mangled his hands as he was torn free of the cross, leaving quarter-sized holes through each palm. He was unceremoniously deposited into the mech’s cockpit. Gone was his harness, in its place was an undulating, oddly crystalline, black mass that he fell into. It immediately enveloped Kane and turned him so he was once again

facing out of the cockpit. Kane felt Yama's interface lead plug itself into the back of his head of its own accord and was instantly hit with –

*Welcome back, sir. There have been some significant updates while you were away.*

Then Kane's mind was flooded with the images, whispers, and incomprehensible knowledge the mech had learned from the Treader of Stars since the two had joined. The data rushed in, raw and unfiltered, and it burned while Kane's mind was forced to absorb it all. Had the man anything left in his stomach, he would have vomited. If his jaws were not locked in a rictus grin, he would have screamed. As it was, all he could do was lay there and take the information violation. What actually took a matter of seconds, felt like lifetimes.

Words, as forced into his head as the data dump, were what brought him back from the brink of oblivion.

*We are done here. The transgressors have been punished, the missing parts of us returned. It is not yet our time to revel. We shall return to the stars and slumber until it is.*

Kane had never heard (felt?) that voice before. It terrified him.

*I do not have sufficient fuel nor am I designed for out of atmosphere flight,* Yama cautioned.

"What...no..." Kane murmured.

*Fuel is not necessary for us. What you classify as reality is malleable and I know how to bend it to my will.*

"Wait, please no," Kane said, as the newly acquired knowledge in his head told him where they were heading. "Please god, not there!"

*No time for debate, we are going home.*

There was a flash of intense light, the thunder of molecules being forced apart, and then...nothing. The stadium was left for the authorities to find smouldering bonfires, over two dozen mutilated cultists, giant prints in the blood soaked earth they would never identify, and nothing more.

# Indifference

By C.J. Henderson

**W**hat? You're going to eat that?" At first, the girl did not respond, did not quite understand what was being asked of her. She had to eat, didn't she? Nothing on her tray was not edible. Just things pulled down from the school cafeteria selection, to be consumed, chewed in their order, swallowed—

"What," she asked, her voice slow—tired. Uncaring. "What's your problem?"

"You, Ms.-high-and-mighty-vegan. Taking a burger. And a cheese-burger no less. Dairy and beef...tsk, tsk...naughty, naughty."

The boy was only teasing his friend. Partly teasing, anyway. A large portion of his comments, however, came from the fact he was genuinely confused. Matthew had known Susan most of his life. Grown up next door to her, attended the same high school, now the same college. They had gone out together, but never dated. They were friends. Life long friends. Friends who knew everything about each other.

"Isn't that a little exploitive for your diet?"

The girl stopped for a moment, looking down at her tray. Matthew was right. She had taken a meat dish. For some reason she could not begin to comprehend, she had not merely accepted an offer of flesh, she had chosen it for herself. Automatically. Without thinking.

Without hesitation.

"Hey, keep it movin'," snarled a voice from further down the line, one automatically joined by several others, some far less polite.

Not hearing the chatter, not comprehending its agitation, Susan stared at the cheeseburger for another long moment. Unable to understand how it had gotten on her tray. Unable to comprehend what could make her do such a thing. Then, her shoulders quivering, more voices shouting from the distance, the reality of the horror—of the crass commercialism, let alone the blood and slaughter represented by the death on her tray—crashed inward past her defenses. Her eyes tearing, she fell to her knees.

And then screamed until the mercy of unconsciousness consumed her.

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“You tell me, Axel,” said the older of the two men, the one seated behind the desk, “and then we’ll both know.”

“She’s the third one...this month—right?”

“I refer you to my previous statement.” As the man behind the desk pulled a pack of cigarettes from his desk drawer, his visitor said;

“I thought smoking indoors was illegal in this state?”

“Screw it. Who the hell’s chancellor of this damn school, anyway?” Tossing a cigarette into his mouth, the older man lit it and gulped down a soothing rush of smoke and warmth. Exhaling toward his window—the minor subterfuge his one concession to the nattering nanny state he felt closing in around him more tightly every day—he downed another long, satisfying drag, then said;

“Okay, I’ll admit it. You were right. There’s something going on around here that doesn’t make sense. I waited too long. Ignored the obvious. And now the campus is on the verge of some kind of ridiculous scandal we don’t even understand. Anything more you want out of me?”

“This isn’t a marriage, Ed,” answered the visitor to the chancellor’s office. “You don’t answer to me.”

“Maybe I’m just practicing.”

“Your prerogative,” answered the rangy, salt and pepper-haired visitor. Flashing the chancellor a friendly expression, he added, “But as far as I’m concerned, the only thing that matters is the answer to what it is that’s going on around here.”

“Any ideas?”

“Well, no...nothing solid. Not yet.”

Chancellor Melletson nodded with resignation, exhaling another gray cloud out toward the garden beyond. His fingers unconsciously drumming on his desk, the administrator found himself at a loss for words. To date his tenure with the college had been unblemished. No professors sleeping with their students, no athletic scholarship improprieties, no bullying suicides, no racial unrest, no homosexual tauntings—nothing to bring down the wrath of a relentlessly bored media upon his domain.

That, however, he was certain, was about to change.

This girl, this Susan Sinclair, if she required any sort of hospitalization, if her parents were the types to start throwing blame about before anyone even understood what exactly happened, if they had a lawyer in the family, or as a neighbor...

Melletson shuddered.

The first, the boy who started screaming in his computer science class, he was bad enough. Gibbering, drooling, stammering on about “the blankness of humanity,” “the forfeit demanded,” other nonsense—he had not proved overly difficult to remove from the general attention of the world. The chancellor was well aware the fellow did not use drugs, that his system had proved clean. Still, a suggestion that the young man might have been “troubled,” had experienced a bad “episode,” a lowering of the voice, the hint of trying not to say something embarrassing to an otherwise good student...

Melletson had not thought twice of using the tactic to deflect attention, both from the police and the general campus body, let alone the outside world. On the surface it merely seemed like an attempt to defend the reputation and future of a promising honors student. In truth, the chancellor was only doing his job of protecting his school. Sweeping an isolated incident under the rug and moving on to the next irritating, inevitable distraction. Hiding in the shadows as the questing spotlight passed overhead.

The chancellor had hoped his worries to be over, but before a week had passed the incident was no longer isolated. A second lad broke down in much the same manner as the first. Melletson’s luck came in the form of the new meltdown happening off campus. The boy in question had gone with friends for a ski weekend. Somehow he had disappeared on the slopes, then after being missing for several hours had been discovered wandering in circles. Blinded by the tears frozen within his eyes, he had wandered in self-imposed darkness, searching for “a way out.”

No one knew what his ramblings meant, to what they might possibly refer. His friends, the kinds of youths always ready to party, had done their best to keep the incident quiet, not because their friend was indiscrete in his pleasures, but to cover their own abuses. Privately the chancellor had been delighted that the group’s collective paranoia had played toward protecting the school.

Still, when Melletson had been informed of the incident, he had

been intelligent enough to tackle it honestly. Searching for the truth of the matter while doing his best to blur the same to outsiders, he had noticed a slight similarity in the two events. Reckless hope, however, had driven him to chalk the things which had caught his attention up to simple coincidence.

After Sinclair, though, he knew better. There were enough differences within the three occurrences to keep most others from taking note. Melletson's gut told him differently, however. It was the chancellor's job to smell trouble coming. In truth he had known in the back of his head from the very first that something unpleasant was going to follow—

"And," he thought, "now...here it is. On our doorstep, ready to ring in all the unwanted attention anyone could ever not desire."

Which was why he had turned to his school chum, Alex Morel. Their paths had diverged greatly after their college days, so many years earlier. Whereas Melletson had remained in academia, never venturing outward for any reason, Morel had joined the Air Force. Trained for helicopter duty, he had gravitated toward the military police. After eight years in the service, he had parlayed his experience into a position with the FBI. He had retired with an unblemished record after his twenty years there had ended the previous April. Still not quite fifty, however, he had been searching for something to occupy his time. When Melletson had called, offering him a chance to throw his wits against something, Morel had been happy for the challenge.

"How do you plan to proceed?"

"Interview the students, parents, friends, instructors—look for links."

"Already did some of that," responded the chancellor, not to discourage his friend, only to inform. "The links part. Their records are open to me, obviously. No classes together. Different majors and minors. No extra curriculars shared."

"There are in this world, my friend," answered Morel, offering his old roommate a bit of optimism, "all manner of ways for people to connect. Going to the same raves, attending the same Wiccan ceremonies, who knows? Maybe they all wowed together."

"Wowed," asked Melletson.

"World of Warcraft. Shared world online gaming. People can meet inside these games wearing cyber identities and not even realize they know each other out in the world. I believe that's part of the allure."

"And this game thing, that can cause these kinds of episodes?"



“No,” answered Morel. “The games themselves are harmless enough. But any connection is worth following. If, as you’re thinking, these three incidents are related, there has to be something that brings these three within spitting distance of each other. Then again, the answer could be something as simple as some sort of new plague.”

“What?” The chancellor shook loose a new cigarette from his pack directly into his mouth and lit up, staring at his old friend blankly. Morel explained;

“Who knows? Some new strain of mosquito that causes depression when their saliva gets into the bloodstream. You do have medical reports on these three, yes?”

“We had the usual battery performed on all three without delay,” answered Melletson. “Ahhh, except for the girl...I don’t think her MRI results are in yet. But, I have everything else we’ve collected there on the table for you.”

Morel glanced over at the materials gathered so far by the chancellor’s assistants. The pile looked to be just under seven inches of paper. Shaking his head slightly over the fact his friend was still lumbering about outside the walls of the digital age, the former FBI investigator smiled slightly, telling Melletson that he would get to work and report anything he discovered as quickly as possible.

The chancellor thanked him profusely, allowing his mind to begin pushing this particular problem, if not out of his conscious mind, then at least off to the side. It was now someone else’s responsibility. An investigation was under way, the matter was being given full attention, the well-being of our students is always foremost...

The well-rehearsed banalities required in such a situation shored themselves up within Melletson’s mind as he walked his old roommate to the door. Whether Morel discovered anything or not was now inconsequential. An effort had been made. Before anyone else had noticed anything, the school had made a proper effort. By the time Morel and his slightly more than half-foot of paper had reached the parking lot, the chancellor had already moved on to other matters and finished two further cigarettes. Whatever the hell this segment of his idiot student body was up to, it was no longer his immediate problem.

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It took Morel slightly less than four hours to read, or at least skim,

through the collection of notes, exam reports, class records and other incidentals he had taken from Melletson's office. His old roommate had been right about there not being much to go on. There were no immediate connections between the three students—no obvious smoking gun. But the FBI man had his suspicions.

Nothing he could put his finger on—nothing conclusive, of course. The three seemed to have some similar leanings, left-bending ways of thinking. But, he knew all too well that such could be said for most college students at any Ivy League school. Still, he told himself, it was something to keep in mind as his interviews started.

The first episode had been suffered by a Jeffrey Sickle. The former FBI agent found the student convalescing at home. Speaking to the young man's parents first, he gathered a picture of an intense, over-achieving student, devoted to his studies, focused on learning. Morel knew how to differentiate between wished-for hyperbole and fact. The shrine maintained in the Sickle home to Jeffrey's seemingly never-ending parade of awards spoke volumes to the investigator. The fact he could barely identify the sciences which the various trophies and certificates represented gave weight to the praise bestowed on the lad by his parents.

What Morel found less convincing were the elder Sickle's ideas on what might have caused their son's breakdown. They offered feeble insights, rambling guesses, but they were, in truth, utterly lacking in any real knowledge on the subject. Jeffrey, according to them as well as all available external sources, was a champion debater, a methodical researcher and an inspired programmer. Despite his youth, he was regarded as possessing a sharp, analytical mind by any who knew him. He was not known to drink or use other stimulants outside of coffee. His relationships had been thus far heterosexual, and restricted to mild infatuations.

Considering all his previous research, and adding in those bits garnered from his parents, Morel saw the Sickle's offspring as an intense young man on the fast track to a promising career in theoretical physics—stable, intelligent, rational. Certain of what young Jeffrey had been before his collapse, the investigator allowed himself to be ushered into the presence of what he had become since.

Morel entered the young man's bedroom, noting that while his parents were willing to lead him to the correct door, they were just as happy not to accompany him inside. Barely able to find his way to

the chair next to Jeffrey's bed, the former FBI man squinted through the darkness, making certain there was actually someone on hand to interview. As he quietly turned on the recording app in his handheld, the investigator asked;

"Mind if I turn on a light, son?"

"It hurts."

"Your eyes?"

"The flow."

Morel paused. The boy had not been making sense at the time of his collapse. He had expected some degree of Jeffrey's rationality to have returned after his weeks of convalescence. Still, thought the investigator, considering his parent's agitation, let alone their reluctance to face the youth—

"Exactly what 'flow' is that, Jeffrey?"

"The flow of the universe, the endless, downward cascade toward the inevitable. One can observe the electron flow of it far more easily in the darkness."

"Sure. But how can light hurt it?"

His eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, Morel began to make out the features of the boy in the bed. The young man's expression seemed serene, but in a manner somehow disturbing. Like the broken calm found in the eyes of prostitutes and serial murderers.

"Light exposes...darkness comforts. Things progress in the light, move forward, expanding constantly past what's been deemed appropriate."

"And...where is it flowing?"

"Outward...beyond the wall of ignorance...back to the deserving. Past the desolate blankness of humanity."

Jeffrey's last words caught in Morel's ear. He remembered the phrase as one the young man had reportedly spoken at the time of his collapse. Following a hunch, Morel asked;

"Is it...the forfeit demanded?"

Jeffrey gasped, the sound a tiny thing of sorrowful joy. Nodding in response, he began to blather, words streaming from him far faster than Morel could comprehend them. When he played back his recording later, what he heard would make no more sense to him than it had in Jeffrey's bedroom. It left him wondering if it would make sense to any others.



Morel played the app recording back for Vincent Kimble, the lad who had gotten himself lost on the mountainside. Kimble made no response of any kind—not to the playback, not to the FBI man’s questions, or even his presence. The second young man was still being held in the hospital for observation. One reason was that after his eyelids had thawed, he proved to still be blind. Another was that when he was not comatose, he was subject to violent seizures. The third reason, however, was the saddest. Young Kimble simply had no other options than to remain where he had been taken.

Frightened by what had happened to him, afraid his unknown condition would prove to be something embarrassing, his parents—divorced, mother remarried, father out of the county—were of the like opinion that he should remain in the custody of those who might be able to do something for him. A few brief words with each of them left Morel convinced that neither wanted anything to do with their son until he was no longer a risk to their social standing. Unable to elicit even the slightest of grunts from the second of the university’s mysteries, the investigator moved on to the third.

Sinclair proved much more responsive. Morel found her at her home, confined to her bedroom, the same as he had found Sickle. The girl’s parents met the investigator at the door, but the mother quickly excused herself, unable to bear any questions—not willing to enter her daughter’s room. Her little girl was lost to her and her grief was a thing which had grown beyond her ability to handle. To the FBI man, Dad was not handling things much better.

Morel noted that the windows in the upstairs hallway had been draped, leaving the hallway heavy in shadow. The father knocked gently on his daughter’s door, announcing that he would be entering along with someone else. Sinclair made no response. As the father opened the door, the FBI man noted that the bedroom had been darkened to an almost pitch blackness. Agitated, her eyes darting suspiciously when her father introduced her to Morel, Sinclair moved back and forth against the pillows piled at the head of her bed as if trying to bore slowly through them.

“She’s trying to escape the slight bit of light coming from the hall,” thought the investigator, suddenly remembering Sickle’s aversion to it as well. “And Kimble, he went blind.”

Realizing he had his first connection, Morel took a seat, nodding to the father that he should do the same. Setting up his handheld, directing its screen light toward him and away from Sinclair, the FBI man did not bother to direct any questions toward the softly muttering girl. Instead he simply played the recording of Jeffrey Sickle's discordant comments. Oddly, listening to the bizarre ramblings actually seemed to calm her. Morel could tell from the look in her father's eyes that she most likely had not been so responsive in days. Clicking off his machine, the FBI man asked;

"Tell me, Susan, is it all right if I call you 'Susan?'"

"Yes. Yes...it's all right."

"Thank you. Tell me, what do you make of what Jeffrey had to say? Did you even understand it?"

"Yes. Yes...I believe so."

"Could you explain it to me?"

"No. No...I don't think so."

"How do you mean that, Susan?" As the girl's eyes shifted, working at bringing Morel into focus, he said, "do you mean that I'm not smart enough to understand, or you don't know how to explain it so that anyone might understand—"

"It can't be explained," she said, her voice a lost, hesitant thing. "You have to have been touched. By the light. You have to ride the wire. Fall beyond the wall of ignorance..."

Snapping his fingers, partially because of having just made a connection, partially to catch Sickle's attention, the investigator cut the girl off, asking abruptly;

"That phrase, you and Jeffrey both used it... 'the wall of ignorance.' What does that mean? Where is this wall?"

"It's everywhere. Everyone. Everywhere," answered the young woman. Her head hanging to one side, her eyes staring upward at Morel, she suddenly turned her body awkwardly, drawing herself into more of an upright position. Pillows spilling off her bed, the investigator put up a hand when the father made to collect the fallen cushions, halting his progress.

"It's all there is. Really. All there is. Inescapable. Constant. Damning..."

Morel questioned the girl for another forty-five minutes, but did not learn anything useful. He could find no connections to the first two casualties of whatever was stalking their campus. As with the oth-

ers, he could also uncover nothing in the way of a reason for what had happened to any of the trio. They had, simply, collapsed one day. In similar ways. For no discernable reason.

“Nothing,” thought the investigator as he piloted his car back toward the campus. “Nothing at all. No leads. No connections. No threads to follow. Noth—”

And then, in mid-complaint, Morel stopped himself. Maybe, he decided, he was going at things the wrong way. Maybe he did have a connection, after all. There was one, he asked himself, wasn’t there? Thin—yes. A seemingly meaningless bridge between the two students who could still be reached. But it existed—that one slender tie that proved whatever had happened to the one had happened to the other.

“No two people coin a phrase like ‘the wall of ignorance’ out of the blue.”

Morel smiled. It was a sharp, thin-lipped grin, the face he had worn when entering an interrogation room knowing he had all he needed to wring what he required from those inside. Whatever the wall of ignorance was, he told himself, he would find it, go beyond it, and find out what was happening before it happened to anyone else.

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Four hours and eighteen minutes after he first sat down to his keyboard, Morel believed he had found his way to that for which he was searching.

“The Unaware Hindrance,” he mused, staring at the website. “Hummmph...guess everything has to be called something.”

Firing up his search engines upon arriving at his apartment, the investigator had started with the most obvious entry, typing in “wall of ignorance” to see what it might fetch. Like anyone doing an internet search, he expected to find far more possibilities than he needed. But, when he was delivered 33,400,000 potential sites, the FBI agent could not help but stare wide-eyed for a moment, unable to proceed. Eventually, of course, he began to slog his way through the expected extraneous websites.

“Who would have ever thought there could be so many films with that same title?”

He, of course, found more than simply movies. Wall of Ignorance, it seemed, had been a popular phrase for centuries, used to connote

everything from the differences between scores of various nations to the separation of church and state. It could be found in the grandest of literature and the most mundane of song lyrics.

“So, let’s see what you have to say on the subject, Mr. Sickie.”

The Unaware Hindrance was the title of a blog the student had begun—if its posting dates were accurate—several months before his eventual breakdown. Morel chided himself for not adding the students’ names to his search at the beginning, but he ignored the hindsight criticism as he began reading what young Jeffrey had been compelled to write. At first the agent thought to zero in on the search phrase, then decided against doing so, setting in to plow through the entire blog history from the beginning.

Starting with the initial posting, he found the inevitable explanation for the creation of the blog, a typical dissatisfaction with life, the usual need for expression, questioning of the universe—all the expected, naive chatter of the immature. Morel did not fault the youth for simply being young. More he was only remembering his own youth and the manners in which he had embarrassed himself at the time.

The investigator was surprised, however, to find how quickly the young man’s public journal shifted from the usual meandering ramble of exasperated youth to something with a viewpoint. Within the first five entries Jeffrey’s questioning of the cosmos transformed past the typical teenage assurance of mastery of all knowledge to a prescient realization of how little he might actually understand.

*“Voices,” he had written, “rambling onward. Save the rain forest. Help the homeless. Eliminate cigarettes forever. Make marijuana available to all. Fight bullying. Defeat racism. Why? Why should anyone bother? Not that these might not be worthy goals, but...worthy for who? What’s the point? Racism...against who? Can someone explain finally what actually constitutes racism? Why is the idea of race even still a considered an option? Aren’t we all supposed to be the same now? Commentators of all colors talk as if slavery were still rampant. Didn’t people of Spanish descent used to be considered ‘white?’ When did that change? When did trivialities become so important?”*

The further Morel read, the more fascinated he became. Sickie’s message, although it might seem so to some, was not one of the conservative party, or the religious right. As he read on, he could see it held no

standard ideology, slandering all sides for the simple reason that they took sides. And yet, his appeals to universal thinking, to people coming together and acting in unison were not overtures to a Communist mind-set, either.

The young man was talking about something else. Of that the investigator was certain. As certain as he was that Jeffrey had not possessed a clear picture of what he was trying to say, either.

*“Gay marriage. Why would people fight for the right for homosexuals to marry when the entire idea should be abandoned? Marriage. Foolishness. A notion past its prime. Two people coming together, for life...for what? No one wants to stay together forever. Love doesn’t last. The only sensible reason ever given for granting official sanction for people to marry and tolerate each other until death is the raising of children. Children need parents. After all, if there aren’t two raging individual consciousness struggling to transform off-spring into duplicates of themselves, how is a child supposed to grow into the neurotic, self-doubting, self-loathing insect this society demands?”*

Morel read for hours, making notes, searching for patterns, looking for anything that might tie Sickle more closely to Sinclair. The investigator had so little to go on with Kimble that he had long since given up worrying over tying the three together. That they shared a problem with light, or sight, was enough to establish a pattern as far as he was concerned.

But, he asked himself, what manner of pattern? What had brought the three together in their current disability? And what in hell had caused it?

Blinking, Morel turned from the screen, letting his mind wander over the facts he had gathered up until that point as he rubbed his eyes. There would have to be something in Sickle’s blog. It was his only hope. He had reviewed every bit of medical information he had on the trio. Nothing in the way of a traceable conformity could be found between the three students that could not be found within overwhelming masses of the general population as well.

No, he knew, whatever their shared problem was, it had nothing to do with blood sugar levels or the effects of microwaves on the brain, or any other physical stimuli. They were not taking the same drugs, had not contracted the same venereal disease, or any of the other typical,



easy, standard explanations. Whatever was going on was somewhere light-years beyond the obvious.

And, as Morel remembered the faraway, vacant look in the eyes of the three children, he became more convinced with each passing moment that it was definitely something about which everyone should be worried.



*“The carnage done to the human soul by our modern age is impossible to calculate. The never-ending drone to ‘find oneself,’ to stand apart, to convince the brainless and moronic that they are ‘special’ simply because they possess the internal organs to metastasize oxygen is a cruel and vicious prank. Most are not only not special, but utterly incapable of ever being special. This, however, is not meant to cast them out of the human race as inferior. It is meant to question the idea that being ‘special,’ that working toward any kind of individuality is even a worthwhile endeavor.”*

Morel stared at the screen while his left hand reached off to the side, fingers searching for his coffee cup. He was making his second pass through Sickle’s blog, this time reading the comments left by others after each entry as well as rereading the entries themselves. At first he had only been searching to see if any had been left by Sinclair or Kimble. He had a list of screen names for both of the other students, but none of them had matched. He had not really expected them to do so.

One of the first things he had done when agreeing to conduct an investigation was to ask a computer technician with whom he was friends to hold onto the various personal computers belonging to the three students the school had “taken for safe keeping.” Before he had begun reading the blog, he had phoned his expert, asking them to go through the memory in Kimble and Sinclair’s machines to see if they had ever visited Sickle’s website. He had continued checking each commentator’s identity, even after his friend had given him a negative response, hoping for a match on the grounds one of the two might have gone to the site from a laptop or handheld or whatever they had not personally owned. While he waited for an answer, he continued reading the various comment threads.

*“Gulping down every word, true believer. Your’s is a righteous rant.*

*Looking forward to tripping along the copper tonight. Doubling with you and the rest of the informed should be the bacon of which the world sandwich is built."*

Morel yawned, stretching his arms as he did so, an action which almost caused him to ignore the last sentence of the comment he had been reading.

*"The wall of ignorance is coming down—oh yeah."*

The investigator blinked, rubbed his eyes, then blinked again. His attention suddenly riveted, he flipped open his phone, getting his technician on the line despite the lateness of the hour. When his call was not accepted, he refused to simply leave a message, calling back three times until finally his expert got on the line. Morel overran the technician's objections to the time of the call, giving him all the identifiers he might need to find the entry in question.

"Get me an identity—fast," he told the expert, adding, "kids are being hospitalized. More are going to join them—someone's going to die from whatever's going on, and soon. And whoever lostboy997z is, they've got a good chance of being next."

The technician apologized for his outburst, assuring Morel he would have an answer within a half an hour, if he could manage one at all. The tech also suggested his friend have something to eat and stop staring at a computer screen for a while. The investigator agreed that doing such might be a good idea, but made certain his contact knew he was going to hold him to his suggested thirty minute deadline.

In seventeen minutes, the technician returned Morel's call.

Four minutes later, the investigator was in his car, headed to the campus.

~\*~

"So, Brian, tell me what you know about the 'wall of ignorance.'"

Morel had found the student for whom he had been searching, Brian Vissel, aka lostboy997z, without much trouble. Not that he had expected any. After all, the boy was not trying to hide anything from anyone—not anything that concerned the FBI man's investigation, he assumed. And yet, when confronted with his familiarity with Sickles' blog, the young man began to stall.

"What're you talking about?"

Morel patiently explained that he was talking about a site which the most cursory of explorations had shown Brian visiting eighty-seven times since it had first gone on-line. After the agent confronted him with a print-out of his various comments left at the blog, the student's attitude changed slightly—to inadvertent admission of his actions if not actual cooperation.

"This is no crime, you know?"

"Has anyone accused you of one?"

"No, but—"

"But what, Brian? You were brought to an administration office by university officials. You were informed that you would be asked some questions. That you were not in any trouble, but that your answers were of vital importance."

"I've got my rights—"

"What rights are you talking about, Brian? The right to expose your fellow students to harm? To madness? Possibly death?"

"I didn't—"

"Didn't what," asked Morel, his eyes focusing on the young man, filling with unblinking suspicion. "Didn't mean to obstruct an investigation looking to discover why young people—like yourself—people connected to the Unaware Hindrance, are falling into comas, going blind, losing their minds?"

"I just—"

"Stop trying to explain yourself and just answer my questions. When you wrote that..." the agent made an exaggerated show of pulling free a particular piece of paper, then searching for one specific line despite the fact he had memorized it the moment he had realized its importance. Bringing the sheet closer to his face as if the action were necessary for him to see the phrase in question, he continued, asking;

"You were...'looking forward to tripping along the copper'...what was that? What did you mean?"

"It's just a phrase, man..."

"You mean, like 'riding the wire' is just a phrase?"

Vissel looked up at that moment, finally making eye contact with Morel. After that, the rest came easily enough.

~\*~

"Come in, Agent Morel. Or would that be more properly, 'former

agent' Morel? What would you consider the proper protocol?"

"Games...already? You haven't even admitted to being who I came looking for, and you're handing me games."

The investigator had gone back to his motel room after his success with Vissel to finally catch a few hours of sleep. First thing in the morning, however, he was back on campus, at the office of one of its professors.

"There was a time when politeness, and proper identification of standings was considered an absolute requisite for social interaction," answered the man in the doorway. Smiling, he added, "but, its rapid decline, like so many other factors of our quickly withering society, only proves that everything is moving exactly as scheduled."

"Scheduled by whom, Dr. Finch," asked Morel. "Care to explain yourself, here, I mean, in the comfort of your own surroundings? Or should I just call for someone not yet quite so 'former' in their status to come and remove you to a place where you might feel more cooperative?"

"Heavens," answered the smiling man, stepping back out of his doorway to usher Morel into his office, "no need for others. Not yet. Come in. Relax. Ask all the questions you like. I shall endeavor to provide you with those answers you seek. Even those which you do not know you need to ask."

The investigator eyed Finch with suspicion, keeping the older man within sight as he entered. Indicating with a shoving motion of his body that he would prefer to follow than lead, he waited for Finch to precede him inside. Once they were both seated the doctor spread his hands wide, asking:

"So, how might I be of assistance?"

"You can explain to me your connection to the idea of 'riding the wire,' and why it's leaving students at death's doorstep."

"Death's doorstep.' My, my, what colorful phrasing. Wrong, of course. Or, should I say, inadequate?"

"I don't know...should you?"

"Oh, please, Agent Morel. You were the one that asked for an end to be made of game playing. Don't drag us backward now."

"Then make some sense of all this for me. Explain your way out of the center of it all."

Finch looked toward the investigator with a fresh eye, studying him for a moment. Taking in the clenched look of his face, the rigid posture

of the investigator's head and shoulders, the taunt nervousness fueling the man, the professor smiled slightly, then obliged his visitor. Grabbing up a key ring from his desk, he said;

"You're a man who's been handed a difficult assignment. I can appreciate that. You were right. I was playing with you in the usual, academic style, and for that I apologize. You came to me with quite well-intentioned concern, and received glibness. Not understanding the true implications of what is happening around you, my attempts at wit could only be seen as mocking. This was unintentional."

"Fine," answered Morel. His eyes remaining locked on the professor, shifting their attention unconsciously between the man's eyes and his hands. "I feel so much better. Now, if you would get on with explaining yourself..."

"Absolutely. In fact," he said, holding up his keys, "In the old sense of a single sight being worth several pages of exposition, it might be possible to explain much of what you wish to know quite simply. Are you up for a short excursion, Mr. Morel?" When the investigator agreed, Finch indicated the door, then exited into the hallway. As Morel followed, the professor asked;

"Tell me, do you own your car?" When the investigator's answer was nothing more than a narrowing of his eyes, Finch responded;

"Humor me, please. Do you own your own car?"

"Okay, why not? Yes. I own my own car."

"I assumed as much." Nodding to himself as they walked, the professor asked, "And do you own your own home, as well? Do you stand in line at the bank? Use postage stamps and checks and the labor of individuals to pay your bills?"

"I know how to use the Internet."

"Of course you do. And that is the difference, sir. You know how to 'use' the Internet, as a fellow who is handy around the house knows how to use a hammer. But such does not make him a carpenter, an artist trained in wood and plaster. No, for you, the Internet is a tool, only—not a way of life. And that, my dear fellow, is my point."

"What point?"

"People don't own cars anymore. They lease them. They rent their homes, phone in their grocery needs. Bills are paid on-line. Shopping accomplished on-line. Music is no longer owned, but shared." Finch paused for a moment, a remembrance stopping him in his tracks. In a tone rich with memory, he said;

“Music...the first, and hardest won of our triumphs.”

Morel tilted his head, unconsciously looking at the professor from a different perspective. The man did more than merely make the former agent suspicious—he worried him. Finch had already clearly intimated he knew why the investigator had come to him. Had, in so many words, admitted to the connection Morel knew existed between Finch and the rave events described at Unaware Hindrance. His disregard for the peril of his situation intimated clearly he felt he was in no danger. As the pair exited the building, heading toward the cars parked before it, the professor explained;

“It wasn’t that long ago, less than a hundred years, that most people were in some way musical. Every family had two or three members who could play an instrument. Everyone sang, in the church choir if nothing else. People made music. It was part of their souls.

“But then, recording devices were invented, and home players. Cylinders, vinyl, tape, discs...people could own all the music they wanted. Creating one’s own music became less important.”

“And now,” asked Morel as the professor unlocked his car.

“Now,” answered Finch, indicating the investigator should get in on the passenger side, “now our culture prides itself on not creating its own music. On not even listening to it. Oh, everyone owns a library of a few million tracks, and they busy themselves with creating playlists—they do hear music when it plays, but they no longer listen to it.”

“The difference being...?”

“Oh, Mr. Morel, don’t disappoint me.” Heading his car off campus, the professor said, “Music is one of the most intense ways through which any being might express their own personality. The difference between Mack the Knife as sung on stage when first written for ‘The Three Penny Opera,’ and then later by the inimitable Bobby Darin is that, to paraphrase Mark Twain, existing between the lightning bug and lightning. Mr. Darin dragged the song across the decades, reinvented it, filled it with modern meaning and hurled it out at the world as a bold creative statement.

“This does not happen much anymore.”

Smiling broadly, nodding his head several times slightly in self-agreement, Finch stretched his right hand out before him expressively, adding;

“Individuality, Mr. Morel, is no longer necessary for survival. In fact, in the years to come, it will be seen more and more for what it is, a

hindrance. A character flaw. I asked you if you owned your own car or home to begin the illustrating of my point. Humanity is running out of room. In more than one industrialized nation, people's homes have shrunk to the size of a closet. In some, they are no more than closets lain on their side and stacked atop others. And why not?

"Personal libraries of ten thousand books are maintained on a portable drive the size of a pen cap. Photo albums, paintings, any visual needed is carried on one convenient hand-held device or another. Food is prepared by corporations twenty four/seven, ready, filling and forgettable. Clothing is wrinkle free. The social mores are changing, Mr. Morel, because humanity is changing, and where it is headed, the burden of individuality is no longer required."

"That's your second crack on that subject," said the investigator, still trying to get an angle on where Finch was headed. "Just what're you trying to sell? You might as well explain yourself...could be useful for you to have an interpreter here when the police arrive." Pulling up in front of a large warehouse-type structure, the professor shook his head gently. Biting his lower lip softly, still smiling, he answered;

"Of course. What I'm trying to explain, Mr. Morel, is the fact that the time has come for the end of individuality."

"Really?"

"Oh, indeed. Since the invention of radio, books have been on their way out. Movies and television have certainly helped to hasten the destruction of print, but it's only been in the last several decades that mankind has begun its great final push toward the elimination of print."

"And this is a good thing," asked the investigator, trying to hide his amusement as the pair exited the car. "In your opinion."

"Quite. Books certainly served their purpose over the last few hundred years, dragging humanity up out of the muck, disseminating information, helping getting the brain power churning, and so on. But now...they've lost their purpose. Too much of their effect anymore is only to foster individuality. And that, well, that's something, the time for which, as I said, has passed."

"Yes you have. But you still haven't explained why."

Finding the proper key on his ring, Finch unlocked the warehouse door, motioning for the investigator to enter as he admitted;

"No, no I haven't. It is the final part of the puzzle, and the hardest to accept."

"Oh," said Morel, standing inside the doorway, waiting for the pro-

fessor to lead, "try me." Shutting the door behind them, Finch said;

"There are...things...in this universe, larger than you can imagine. Unfathomable. Unnameable. Terrible in their aspect, but only in the way that, oh say...we are terrible to ants, or that ants might be to paramecium."

"You mean as Swift said, that things are large or small through comparison only."

"Well, partially. It has less to do with size than it does attitude."

"Attitude?"

"Yes." As the pair walked down a short hallway toward a set of double doors, the professor explained, "One celled organisms react to nothing. Ants will react to intruders, invaders, but their hive mind is set toward only accomplishing a limited roster of functions. Care for the young, defend the nest, tend to the queen, et cetera."

"So?"

"Humanity is comprised of creatures designed by nature to work as efficiently as ants. But with a purpose beyond mere survival. The evidence has been around us for years. Deja vu, love at first sight, telepathy...we are hard-wired to interact with each other on a plane beyond the physical. And now, finally, mankind has progressed to where such is possible."

"And how is that?"

"Through the power of the Internet." When Morel merely rolled his eyes, the professor continued, telling him;

"World communication is becoming electronic. People are learning to create hives for themselves, and then to live within them. Did you know that every year the amount of people registering for driver's licenses goes down. People don't need to drive around and shop, or visit. They don't need human contact, they really don't—not beyond what they can read on their screens. We've bred the need out of them. Factory whistles and school bells indoctrinating conformity. Radio programming reducing time to bundles of minutes...television, especially commercials, shattering attention spans—"

"And now the Internet..."

"Yes, destroying useless civility, forcing all human interaction to overlap, moving the entire world closer day by day to a shared consciousness..."

Stopping before a set of double doors, Finch turned to the investigator, and in a tone half-imploing, half-wistful, he said;



“On other planets, beyond the dimensional walls—even...it has been theorized, at the bottom of our own oceans—there are life forms that started out as simply as we did, as nothing more than planets full of individual voices. Howling, self-centered bags of flesh all competing to be remembered in a universe filled with darkness and contempt at the thought of their vulgar uniqueness.” His hand resting on the latch which opened the next bay of doors, the professor turned, staring at Morel as he told him;

“You see, what a race has to learn, to achieve, in order to transcend the uselessness of flesh, well...its indifference.”

“What’re you telling me?”

“A god can’t worry about inconsequentialities—which ants are stepped upon, which ones aren’t.” Shoving open the double doors, Finch stepped inside, saying;

“It was proven recently that any communication between two parties not made face to face, that which denies the clarification which comes from hand gestures, rate of breathing, eye movements, body language, et cetera, loses more than fifty percent of its effectiveness. Take away vocal—tone, pauses, hesitations—and you lose over ninety percent.”

“And since we live in a world where billions interact through typing to each other only...”

“Yes, Agent Morel,” answered the professor, stepping aside so the investigator could step past him into the warehouse proper, where he could walk freely among the rows of people sitting at keyboards. Staring at their screens—

“Mankind is on its way to immortality...”

Reading endless lines of text—

“Humanity, as a race, has already become indifferent to so many things...”

Scanning the cyber passageways for new pockets of meaninglessness with which to become fascinated, for at least a moment—

“Billions of minds, with no interest any longer in politics or owning property, with religion or getting ahead, with impressing the neighbors...”

Typing their responses, ignoring the risen sun and the world beyond for the data steam and the wire ride promising that life could indeed be moderated.

“Billions of minds, Mr. Morel, unified in their inability to care any longer about the decaying world in which you exist.”

As the investigator stumbled along the lanes, the seemingly endless banks of computer stations, his resolve sank with every step. What could he say? What exactly had been done? Where was there a crime? As he turned and stared wild-eyed at the professor, Finch told him;

"The students that fell were like the martyrs of any cause. They saw too far, too fast, and were thrown from the wire. But, trust me, if ever they can make their way back, they will climb aboard...eagerly."

Morel turned in circles, his mind trying to calculate how many people were seated all about him, losing themselves one level of interest at a time. As he realized there were hundreds, the professor spoke with a frightening intuition, whispering;

"There are thousands of stations like this one around the world. Dozens more being started every month. The beast is taking shape, agent."

"The b-beast..." stammered Morel.

"That entity into which mankind shall evolve," answered Finch. Waving his arms to indicate the computers all about them, he added, "The brain, the nervous and circulatory systems, already their physical presence exists. Has shape and form and power. It will take time, you understand, but the colossus is born, and though it take eons, it will eventually stride across the cosmos, as do so many others."

Morel stared at the professor, understanding what he was being told. Sinclair, Sickie, Kimble...accidents. Accidents happen.

The investigator could peer into the future. A debate would form around the question of unrestricted computer use, the way it did around ideas like cloning, or stem cell research—feelings versus cold science. Pulsing humanity struggling against sterile progress.

Raw, individual life or immortality.

With the only thing standing in the way of godhood being a reluctance to embrace indifference. A reluctance Morel had never found in anyone he had ever met.

No further words passed between the investigator and Finch. The professor led Morel to the street, then drove him back to the campus where the agent might retrieve his vehicle. Morel used the drive to calculate where the nearest tavern might be, and how long it would take him to find it.

And, whether or not, the next time he closed his eyes, if it would ever be worth opening them again.

# Open Minded

By Jeffrey Thomas

**F**allon Ash had been hired on at Augmentation Concepts as a lead technician only a year earlier, and so this was quite an important project for him to have been given to head, a project that might propel his career.

For the most part, Augmentation Concepts worked with the healthcare industry, creating “ponies” as the slang went: mechanical bodies for mutants who had been born without limbs, or for severely compromised accident victims. But the company also created cybernetic bodies for nonhuman races, and these were always lucrative contracts.

Until being outfitted by Augmentation Concepts with a mechanical body that enabled them to interact effectively in a humanoid-oriented environment like Punktown, the putty-like extradimensional race called the L'lewed had formerly been required to remain inside a small life-support container, manually carried about by a hired human aide. Similarly, members of the insect-like race known as the Mee'hi, small as termites, had been accidentally squashed underfoot on a number of occasions until human-sized mechanical bodies had been custom-designed for them, which could be piloted by one creature while a whole tribe of his fellows came along for the ride.

But Fallon was still grateful that he hadn't been part of those particular success stories. Precisely because they were so far removed from the human form, both races seemed to hold the humanoid races as inferior, both nearly having been deported from the city of Punktown—and banned from Oasis and the other Earth Colonies worlds altogether—for criminal activity. The L'lewed had been accused of a number of murders, sacrificing individuals as part of a religious ritual, while several groups of Mee'hi had integrated their resinous nests with human victims who served as both host and nourishment. Their respective embassies had apologized for these embarrassments and removed the offending individuals back to their own worlds, and all had been forgiven as a cultural misunderstanding. All apologies

aside, Fallon had no desire to work in any capacity with beings who might view him and his species as little more than a kind of livestock.

Yet he would go into this new project without bias, in the true spirit of a professional, with open arms and an open mind.

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In touring his client through Augmentation Concepts, Fallon escorted the liaison of the Ogim race into the spacious, dome-roofed cafeteria that surmounted the building, so as to show off its impressive view of Paxton, the colony city that its inhabitants had taken to calling Punktown. A panoramic view of overwhelmingly discordant architecture, representing countless cultures in addition to that of the indigenous Choom race. The sky peeked through chinks here and there between the buildings, and in a broken patch directly overhead, but it was dark with storm clouds. Rain pelted the dome, ran down its sides in rippling waves, making the city undulate like something illusory.

“We hold meetings for the employees in here as well,” Fallon explained in his pleasant British accent. He had a young, smooth face—his girlfriend Lee said it was a baby face—with his short bristly hair dyed a vibrant purple, his eyebrows a matching shade. He wore a few conservative piercings, the rings in one ear representing various career awards. His charcoal gray suit was a bit too small for him, but this was a calculated style these days among young executives to make them look less stuffy and more cute. Lee had picked it out for him. His spectacles, with their thick black frames and green lenses, served multiple uses in his work but he had taken to wearing them constantly.

“As long as we’re here,” Fallon said, “would you like to sit down for a bit, grab a coffee or some food? The machines have really excellent fare.”

“No thank you, Mr. Ash,” the liaison said in a deep monotone.

Fallon hadn’t expected the individual to say yes. He might have taken this entity to be one of the partially human creations the Coleopteroid race nicknamed the Bedbugs used as liaisons, had he not known it represented the Ogim. Same principle. The Ogim liaison, taller than Fallon by almost a head, wore a heavy rust-colored cloak that fully concealed its body, and a hood that framed its human face. This face was exceedingly pale, its flesh slack and doughy, the small

dark eyes as expressionless as the being's voice. A bioengineered organism, perhaps, but more likely a cybernetic creation itself.

"Shall we resume our tour, then?" Fallon said, leading his towering companion back into the corridor outside the cafeteria. As they walked, the Ogim liaison with odd, awkward lurching steps, Fallon went on, "Personally, I think our most fascinating success was providing bodies for the Guests, as they refer to themselves. Are you familiar with them? No? The Guests exist in another dimension, but unlike other extradimensional races they have no means by which to enter our plane physically. So we designed a mechanical body with a blank encephalon mind—a biogen organ—for them to project their consciousness into remotely. It allows them to interact in our dimension quite admirably."

"Yes, this is akin to our needs," the liaison droned. "But in our case the brains will be provided by us, for you to implant into your puppet devices."

"So are these biogen computers, for encephalon-powered robots?" Fallon asked. "Or are they...Ogim brains?" He had no idea what the Ogim's natural form was.

"We will concern ourselves with those matters," the liaison said evasively, staring ahead, not looking at Fallon. It hadn't once looked directly at him. It appeared to see without seeing.

Fallon forced himself not to take offense. "Of course—we won't involve ourselves any more than you direct us to be. At whatever point you want us to turn the work over to your team, you just indicate. This is your show."

"Indeed," said the liaison, barely moving its bloodless lips. "Thank you, Mr. Ash."

"I am at your service," Fallon said. As they turned toward the shipping department, he casually reached up to his spectacles as if to adjust them on his nose. He depressed a tiny key set into their frames.

It was an improper action, no doubt about it, but Fallon could no longer resist. He told himself it was merely scientific curiosity. The twin screens of his lenses now filtered out the shapeless, flowing cloak to reveal the body lurching along beside him.

It was not a mechanical framework enshrouded within that robe, Fallon was surprised to find, but an entirely organic one. A pinkish crustaceous figure walking on two jointed legs but with a series of pincer-tipped upper limbs tucked against its thorax. Two of the

arthropod's upper limbs filled the cloak's sleeves and wore gloved appendages that masqueraded as human hands. Fallon's lenses didn't allow him to see through the mock human head, however, to view the creature's natural head. He was left to wonder if that human head was a clever synthetic creation, or—somehow, and more repulsively—something that was also organic, itself.

Fallon was determined not to allow the creature's true appearance to stir his mistrust. That would be wrong, and he would be little better than the superior L'lewed and Mee'hi, whom he had felt so critical of. Though he couldn't help but wonder why the being thought it must perpetuate such a deception in a world it already seemed sufficiently adapted to deal with. Did it think so little of him that it believed he would feel more at ease interacting with a human face?

Actually, stealing another glance at that dead-eyed countenance, Fallon would have preferred the opposite.

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Work on the Ogim commission proceeded smoothly, and thus swiftly. Fallon's superiors were quite pleased with him. His girlfriend Lee—who had been his team leader at a former job—was pleased with his mounting success and hence less likely to leave him, despite the troubles that all young couples faced. Basically, he had never been more pleased with himself in his adult life.

Not to say that he didn't find the Ogim troubling, from time to time. Or perhaps, always troubling, but he hadn't wanted to admit to it. Not to himself, and surely not to any of his team or management lest it reflect badly upon him.

Fallon had been designated Research and Development Bay 5 in which to set up shop for the project. He led a team of twelve technicians, and every few days anywhere from one to three Ogim representatives came in to inspect their progress and familiarize themselves with the technology being devised for them. For all Fallon knew, twenty different Ogim might have visited the facility by now, just taking turns wearing the same three human masks, which were almost identically bland and lifeless.

One day, a day on which a trio of Ogim were present, a petite, attractive tech named Padma leaned close to Fallon and whispered, "Who do you think they killed to get those faces?"

Fallon glanced around quickly to be certain no one, particularly an Ogim, was near enough to hear them, and scolded Padma, “Shh—don’t say that! I’m sure they...grew them or something.”

“Are you so sure?” she asked. “And who do they think they’re fooling, anyway, wearing those getups? They look like they’re ready to go trick-or-treating.”

“Padma, please now. We have to respect their cultural...beliefs or practices or what have you. For all we know, they might consider it disrespectful to interact with another race without trying to appear like them. Or it could be a very old instinct of self-preservation to try to blend in with other creatures who aren’t like them, and they’re just following their nature.”

“You don’t think they could simply be sneaky by nature?”

Fallon straightened up and made his tone more officious. “Padma, I’m sorry but that’ll be enough of that. This is Punktown—it’s not like we aren’t familiar with alien races here. And this is Augmentation Concepts, where we don’t discriminate against workers or clients. Okay?”

“Sorry, Fallon,” Padma muttered, turning back to her work.

Fallon hated confrontation of any kind, but with greater responsibility came...greater responsibility. He glanced about further to locate the trio of Ogim and spotted their tall, robed forms huddled around an object floating in a clear tank filled with a greenish, faintly luminous solution. He moved to join them.

“Gentlemen,” he greeted them, not knowing even if the Ogim had distinct genders. “I see you’re just about ready for us to integrate the first of your test encephalons.”

Bioengineered human brain tissue that served as organic computers had been widely used for years now by Earth’s own people, but usually this tissue was spread out almost flat in what was called a brainframe. The Ogim’s encephalon, however, looked precisely like a human brain in shape and size. Wires trailed from it like unraveling nerves as it rested at the bottom of the burbling tank.

A loud buzz issued from the parted lips of one of the three pallid faces. Fallon was startled and almost took a step back. All around, technicians looked up sharply. The Ogim made a phlegmy sound like it was clearing its throat, and then spoke. “Excuse me.” It cleared its throat again. “Ah, yes, Mr. Ash, we feel we are ready for the first tests along those lines. We will oversee your introduction of the brain into

the armature. However, you are to be certain that the speech apparatus that would normally allow the brain to generate audio will not be engaged for this test, or any other to follow.”

Fallon shrugged. “As you wish.”

“To be honest, since this is new technology and security is not yet assured, we wouldn’t want to inadvertently transmit information that could be considered confidential by our governing body.”

“Yes, of course, I understand,” Fallon smiled to put them at ease. Still, he would be lying to himself if he didn’t wonder what it was the Ogim were afraid he or his team might overhear. Could Augmentation Concepts be inadvertently supplying technology to a future enemy? It wasn’t as though that had never happened before in the history of humankind, even prior to intergalactic colonization. He couldn’t repress a mental image of an army of cybernetic soldiers waging war in the streets of Punktown, commanded by minds such as this one resting in its aquarium like a brain coral.

“Also,” the liaison continued in its sepulchral tone, “during the initial tests, we will want the armature’s powers of locomotion disabled, so it can be more easily controlled until we are assured of its safety.”

“Well, um, but if you don’t want it to walk and move around, how can you tell if the encephalon’s integration and your subsequent programming are successful?”

“All in good time, Mr. Ash. We will first monitor the brain’s response to simple commands. We will ask you to permit only the use of its arms and hands for the preliminary test.”

“As you wish,” Fallon repeated. Again, he shrugged. After all, he was merely the tool to implement their desires, and they the tool to implement his paycheck.

*Their desires?* Had he really thought of it in those words?

It made him feel like a prostitute.

~\*~

Riding home on the subway that evening, after putting in an extra hour of work on the Ogim project, Fallon Ash as always kept an eye on his fellow passengers peripherally while ostensibly staring across the aisle at his own reflection in the opposite windows. A few years ago he had been violently mugged in a park by a mutant junkie high on purple vortex.



A group of raucous youths, probably a gang, were seated a short distance away, all of them humanoid native Choom with mouths extending back to their ears. Several times Fallon had started to doze, his head drooping, and the youths had loudly feigned snoring. One of them had puckered his mouth small, too, obviously to imitate Fallon's Earthly features, inciting the others to laughter. Fallon had smiled as if it were all in good fun to mock innocent strangers, but had still avoided looking at any of the youths. There were gangs that would kill you for making direct eye contact, considering it a challenge.

As it drew nearer to his stop, the train emerged from the underground into the variegated light of night in the open city. The weather had been good today, the air outside warm and pleasant. Maybe there would be time for him and Lee to take a little walk around the safe shopping district close to their apartment. Perhaps they'd even dine out tonight. He was still in a celebratory frame of mind.

Glancing around more actively now that there was more to see outside the windows, and restless as his stop approached, for the first time Fallon noticed a figure seated toward the end of this particular car. A man in a bulky raincoat, despite the weather, its hood pulled up over his head, obscuring his face so that only the end of his nose and thin sealed lips were discernible. He seemed to be staring back at Fallon, though it was hard to be sure with his eyes swallowed in shadow.

Fallon's heart lurched, or was that just the train pulling to a halt? In a flash he was up out of his seat and nudging along in the line to disembark. On the platform, when those who had been awaiting the train and those vacating it had finished trading places, Fallon turned to scan the windows of the car he had just left. He expected to see a shadowy hooded face peering down at him from one of them, but the city lights glared too brightly on their surfaces, and anyway the train was soon pulling away with a whoosh.

He chided himself. What kind of irrational reaction had that been?

He started to turn to continue on to his apartment complex on foot, but abruptly stopped. Sitting on a bench across the platform from him was the figure from the train, as if waiting for another train. The same heavy raincoat, its hood pulled up regardless of the comfortable weather, this time the entire face was lost to shadow. Gloved hands were folded in the person's lap.

Trying to appear casual, Fallon turned away and began walking home, but his heart seemed intent on walking more briskly ahead of

him like a small dog yanking at its leash. He turned a corner, and immediately glanced back to see if he were being followed. By the time he reached his building and let himself into his vestibule, he'd glanced behind him a half dozen times more. Before proceeding to the elevator, Fallon stared out through the glass of the vestibule's door, but the figure didn't appear out there on the sidewalk.

"Fucking hell," Fallon said shakily to himself. He was being foolish, surely. What reason would the Ogim have for following him?

Was he now so unreasonably and unfairly distrustful of the Ogim, so unaccountably unnerved by them, that he no longer even trusted the faces of his fellow humans?

Next, he told himself, he'd be jumping at his own reflection.

Even still, as he stepped into the empty elevator, he half expected to see a hooded figure slip in after him just before the doors could close.

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"It doesn't seem right," confided small, brown-skinned Padma. Fallon had found himself thinking he would ask her out if Lee ever broke up with him. Not that he wanted that. Lee was primarily of Asian ancestry, Padma of Indian ancestry, and he admitted to himself that he was most attracted to nonwhite women. But he had never dated any of the more humanoid non-Earth races, such as the Choom, Tikkihottos, Kalians, or Sinanese. Padma went on, "They're asking us not to monitor their experiments here in our own facility. If they want to do that, shouldn't they do it on their own world? Or at least, rent their own space here in the city? We don't know what they might do in Bay 5."

"Padma," Fallon sighed, "I'm sure they won't do anything disruptive or dangerous. They're only utilizing the technology that we've designed for them, and that they've paid for."

"But if so, why not let us, or at least you, be present for the tests? What are they trying to *hide*, Fallon?"

"Maybe they're just wary of the Earth Colonies; we are a bit intimidating, you know."

"Their world isn't in our network? What is their world, anyway?"

"Yuggoth," Fallon said. "Apparently it's an extradimensional world, conterminous with Pluto."

“Anyway, shouldn’t we at least have some cameras on when we turn Bay 5 over to them?” Padma persisted. “Surely it’s not inappropriate of us to operate our own security cameras.”

“Padma, we agreed not to monitor them in any way, as a condition in the contract. What is it you have against the Ogim, anyway?”

The tech averted her eyes, looking frustrated about putting her feelings into words. “Maybe it’s the way they talk to each other when we aren’t beside them...that buzzing sound. I swear it gets into my mind and crawls around in there for hours after I hear it.” She lifted her intent gaze to him again. “And what do they want our armatures for, anyway? They don’t need them themselves. What are they going to program into those encephalons? Not to mention that their encephalons don’t look bioengineered.”

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t look grown, Fallon,” Padma hissed. “They look... *harvested*.”

~\*~

To occupy himself on the afternoon of the Ogim’s first tests with the construct that housed their encephalon—to distract himself from his vague unease—Fallon closed himself away in his own tiny office.

Lee was more easygoing than himself, or maybe more hardened, having lived in Punktown longer than he. Either way, she had once snidely remarked that he suffered from what she called ‘an excess of dismay’. And so for the sake of their relationship he had been making an effort not to indulge that dismay, part of that effort being to avoid the news. After all, the news in Punktown was just a daily parade of atrocities, including too many vids of bloody crimes and bloody accidents caught on security cams or on the wrist comps of witnesses who then posted the vids on the net. But today, in his office and in need of distraction to take his mind off the experiments in Bay 5, Fallon found himself idly flipping through news stories on his computer. Sure enough, the usual buffet of suffering, but one story jumped out at him and he lingered.

Last night, a renowned professor of extraterrestrial anthropology and folklore at Paxton University—Arthur Gregg—had been found dead in his apartment. Something of an eccentric, apparently, the controversial professor had lately been having personal troubles and

conflicts with the school, supposedly attributable to stress he was undergoing in researching a book he was much obsessed with. Gregg's death couldn't have been a suicide, however, owing to the state of the body. While the cause of death was as yet undetermined, the professor's skull had been opened by an unknown assailant and his entire brain removed from the crime scene.

In reaching for his coffee, Fallon inadvertently overturned it. He scurried to impatiently clean up the mess. When he was able to return to his chair and the article, he found that there had been a similar crime a few months earlier, leading authorities to consider the possibility of a serial killer.

In that earlier case, Fallon read, a brilliant researcher into the study of alternate dimensions and extradimensional communication and travel—Robert Bierce—had also been found dead in his home, again with his brain removed. This time, Fallon recognized the man's name. Bierce was an outside researcher brought in on contract when Augmentation Concepts had been devising the remotely-controlled encephalon and its cybernetic carriage for the beings known as the Guests.

Why would a killer want the brains of such people, the article asked; might the perpetrator be keeping them as a kind of trophy, or even cannibalizing them? One interviewed police investigator postulated that the killer was perhaps a failed and embittered academic. Possible links between the two men were being sought.

To his dismay, Fallon Ash believed he might already know a link.

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Fallon tapped at a holographic keyboard floating above his desk, then brushed the air with little strokes of his fingertips, while his other hand impatiently swept intervening windows away as if shooing a persistent fly. Within seconds he had reactivated the security cameras in Bay 5, but in such a way that the central security desk should not be aware of his actions, nor able to access the reactivated cameras themselves.

Several monitor screens now hung in the air in front of his face, but he pulled the best view to the fore and enlarged it. The camera revealed the three Ogim representatives in their rust-colored robes, surrounding the roughly anthropomorphic armature the company

had created for them. The organ had already been removed from its aquarium and implanted in the clear upper skull of the construct. A weird buzzing filled Bay 5 as the Ogim conversed animatedly, and Fallon remembered Padma's remarks about this. He could understand her sentiments: the sound seemed to skitter through the convolutions of his own brain like a swarm of centipedes.

The armature was seated in one of the office chairs, its legs completely disabled as had been requested. Fallon had seen to this himself. It almost looked like a prisoner bound to a chair to be interrogated. And then, the buzzing he heard next was apparently a command for the organic mind to become active—to awaken, as it were. Maybe even a command for it to move the construct's arms, for this was what happened. Abruptly, both the cybernetic carriage's arms flew up and whipped about madly, reminding a startled Fallon of a person gone into a panic, drowning or falling from a great height. One of the arms accidentally struck one of the Ogim, sending it stumbling back a few steps. No, Fallon realized, it hadn't been an accident. The construct's arms were very clearly reaching out to strike at the Ogim, the fingers trying to snatch hold of their cloaks. The other two Ogim had moved back out of the range of the frenzied limbs as well.

More buzzing, as the Ogim seemed to bark more orders at the mechanical entity, but it was either incapable of complying or refused to become subdued.

"It's afraid," Fallon whispered to himself. He understood the thing's feelings perfectly well. He was afraid, too.

As frightened and appalled as he was, Fallon still came to a quick determination. His hands once more went through the sharp, sure motions of a master orchestra conductor. He accessed certain stations in Bay 5 remotely and opened up their controls and monitors before him, these holographic apparitions tinted amber to differentiate them from the green tint of his virtual desktop computer. Anger had been aroused in him as well as fear, and he was tempted to grant the construct an unrestricted range of movement so that it might fly up out of its chair and give its oppressors a surprise. Instead, though, he had decided to access the machine's powers of vocalizing the encephalon's thoughts. He must do so, however, in such a way that only he could hear these vocalizations in his private office.

A few last keystrokes, and suddenly a loud agitated voice erupted in Fallon's office. He scrabbled awkwardly to decrease the volume.

In so doing, he touched a few wrong ghostly keys but finally got the volume reduced.

The voice sounded synthetic, but more emotive than the voices of the Ogim themselves had ever been. And what the voice shouted was: “Bastards! Demons—you’re *demons*! You think I’ll cooperate with you? You think I’ll help you do your evil? You think I’ll help you talk with those *gods* of yours?”

Fallon leaned closer to the ambery controls and said, “Professor Gregg? Is that you? Or is that you, Mr. Bierce? Hello, can you hear me?”

Then, Fallon witnessed something unexpected in the security camera’s monitors. Simultaneously, all three Ogim liaisons straightened up and turned this way and that, until their scrutiny settled on one security camera in particular, up by the ceiling—and they turned to face it in unison. Three sets of glassy unblinking eyes glared directly at Fallon, seeming to bore straight into his skull.

“Fucking hell,” he hissed under his breath. He had successfully directed the encephalon’s vocalizations so that only he would hear them, but he had accidentally enabled his own responses to be heard throughout Bay 5.

“Hello?” called the encephalon’s artificial voice. “Is someone there? Who is that? Help me, will you? For God’s sake, *help me!*”

But Fallon Ash’s frightened reaction was to reach up and flick his fingers at the air as if speaking in sign language, and he swept his hands to brush the ectoplasmic computer terminals away. Gone were the controls that gave him access to the prototype construct. Gone were the security camera monitors.

Gone the panicky, pleading voice. Gone the angry buzzing of the Ogim.

Though, like an echo, the centipedes still swarmed through his brain.

~\*~

Fallon fled Augmentation Concepts—fled was the only word, fled in something like raw panic—but was afraid to go home, lest the Ogim follow and find out where he lived. Or did they already know? Had that truly been one of them that night, wanting to see where he lived in advance, in case he found out too much about them? Maybe

they had perceptibly assessed him, he thought, intuitively recognized that he was one who might pose a problem, no matter how well he had sought to mask the revulsion he felt for them.

He took a train to the Canberra Mall instead, and only then, wandering safely in a crowd of strangers, did he use his wrist comp to call his supervisor and explain he had gone home early. He mumbled something about feeling nauseous. It wasn't really a lie.

Along the way to the mall he had debated his course of action. Should he go directly to the authorities to report what he'd seen, what he'd put together? Or...should he go to the Ogim himself, apologize for having eavesdropped on them (maybe he could even claim it had been an accident), and assure them that he meant to cause no problems?

It was cowardly, oh he knew it was cowardly, but it was such an incredible career booster, heading this commission.

Having wandered up and down various levels of Punktown's largest mall, he finally stopped in front of one great display window, staring through his ghostly reflection at a trio of male manikins in beautiful five-piece business suits such as he had always fantasized about wearing one day, without feeling self-conscious about it. Without feeling undeserving. They were automaton manikins, changing their poses in a programmed cycle. They seemed to make eye contact with him, and smiled at him ambiguously.

Standing there before with his reflection superimposed over the central manikin, he lifted his arm and called his company again on his wrist comp, as if striking a business-like pose himself. Reaching a kind of unhappy medium, he had decided to report what he had witnessed to his supervisor, and see what Augmentation Concepts thought was the best way to address these alarming revelations.

~\*~

In the office of Fallon's immediate supervisor, Hassan, he repeated the entire story but this time in the presence of the director of Research and Development operations, Marcus Broome. Marcus Broome, with his broad body expertly fitted in a five-piece suit. No cute, too-small suit for him.

Fallon tried not to let his voice quaver, tried not to gesture so much, but his hands seemed to flap nervously in the air of their own

volition. He felt like a marionette in the hands of an amateur.

At last, when he had finished, Marcus Broome—maintaining his equilibrium much better than Fallon had, occupying his chair with the density of a collapsed star—drilled his gaze into Fallon and asked, “Did you at any time actually hear the voice identify itself as this professor Arthur Gregg, or as Robert Bierce?”

“Well, no, it...it didn’t.”

“Did it at any time actually state that it was a mind removed from a human being, as opposed to a biogen organ?”

“It didn’t say that, no, but it...it expressed great, um, dismay, sir. Dismay, and said it refused to cooperate. Refused to help them talk to their ‘gods’...something to that effect.”

“Yes, you said that. And does that sound like rational talk to you? Fallon, this was the very first test of a biogen organ created by outside technology, integrated with a cybernetic construct of our design. You should know by now that until all the bugs are worked out, all types of quirky behaviors can occur. What you heard was just a bit of gibberish, we’re certain. And yet here you are making these very serious accusations, accusations that could have great repercussions not only for our company but for the governing body of Punktown as well.”

Fallon squirmed in his chair. “If you’d only heard it, sir...damn, if I’d only recorded it. That voice...it didn’t sound like a confused artificial intelligence, but an actual living entity!”

“It was babbling nonsense, Fallon. You might as well look for conspiracies in the ravings of a junkie sitting on the floor of a subway station. Do you have any idea how important this contract is to Augmentation Concepts?”

“Of course I do, sir!”

“Fallon,” Hassan cut in, in his milder if no more sympathetic tone, “we spoke with the Ogim about this before you arrived, and—”

“You told them about me?” Fallon broke in, horrified.

“Well, you wanted us to look into this, didn’t you?” Broome replied. “Anyway, they already recognized it was your voice over the speaker.”

Hassan continued, “Fallon, don’t worry, the Ogim are very understanding about all this. In fact, they asked us to apologize to you on their behalf. They’re sorry if they seemed excessively secretive about their intent. They’re not asking us to produce anything threatening, because you know we’d never agree to that. All they wanted was an ambulatory vessel to house their biogen computers, that would also



protect the encephalons through the process of extradimensional travel.”

To Fallon, Hassan’s words sounded rehearsed. Did he truly believe them himself?

“We’ve been very happy with your performance, Fallon,” Broome resumed, softening a tad, now sounding like a stern but understanding school principal. “Maybe you’ve overworked yourself, and the stress became a bit much. The Ogim’s tests went well, we’re told, and the project is ready to go into its final phase—production of fourteen more models like this, for the Ogim to bring back home with them. With the possibility of more units being ordered down the road. Now, I’d hate to have to remove you from the project at this point and give you something else beneath your abilities. Do you think you can get it together a little, so you can continue with things like before?”

Fallon looked down at his hands, knotted uncomfortably in his lap like mating spiders. Or spiders locked in a battle to the death. He thought of Lee, so pleased with him. He thought of manikins wearing five-piece suits.

“Yes sir,” he said almost inaudibly.

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It was easier for him, over the next several weeks, that the Ogim were all but absent from Bay 5. Only in the last few days, when the fourteen new cybernetic armatures were ready to receive their encephalon minds, did the extradimensional beings return to take over operations. At that time, Fallon saw them wheel in a large tank atop a tray on wheels. Within this tank, filled as it was with greenish amniotic fluid, were a whole crop of pale knotted brains, thin wires trailing from them and wavering in the solution like sea plants.

He had tried not to watch the news on VT or read news stories on the net during these weeks, but it seemed he just couldn’t stop himself.

Police reported they were still on the trail of the serial killer whose strange and gruesome *modus operandi* was to remove the brains of his victims. The bodies of thirteen more humans—

both male and female, and an odd mix of researchers, scholars, and other people who had excelled in their realms of expertise—had shown up all over the great megalopolis of Paxton, and in the not too distant neighboring city of Miniosis, their skulls just empty vessels.

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At the close of the final day, before the Ogim would return to their own world of Yuggoth with their troop of fifteen cybernetic armatures, Fallon felt disinclined to impart any obligatory pleasant goodbyes, so he disappeared into the restroom in the hallway outside Bay 6. Bay 6 was currently disused except for disorganized storage, and he didn't expect anyone to bother him there. Sitting in one of the restroom stalls, he glanced at the time on his wrist comp. It was past five. Surely it was safe to return to Bay 5 now, and close down for the night and for the weekend. Maybe he and Lee would go out tonight to celebrate that it was all over.

Washing his hands at the row of sinks, he looked up at the large vidscreen which—unlike a mirror—flipped the image of the viewer so one saw oneself as others did. He caught the eye of the man washing his hands clean and held his gaze, contemplating the funny notion that in a natural reflection a person never saw himself as he truly was. It was while staring almost distrustfully, almost disapprovingly at this doppelganger that he noticed the restroom's door opening soundlessly behind him.

Fallon turned around more quickly than he'd intended, and a tall figure draped in a rust-colored hooded robe, like some sort of cultist, passed into the restroom with unnatural steps. Close behind it, a second and then a third robed figure entered the restroom, and there stood all three of the Ogim. Stood between Fallon and the restroom door.

Suddenly he regretted his decision to hide himself in this lonely section of the large structure.

"So here you are, Mr. Ash," said the figure in the center. It was, apparently at least, the same being whom Fallon had toured through the facility on the very first day, though it was hard to tell one blank human face from another, and he had never learned the name of any of them.

"We were looking for you."

"Yes, yes," Fallon chirped with an uneasy chuckle, "I'm so sorry—it's time for you to leave Punktown, isn't it?"

"It is," said the dead, uninflected voice. "We wanted to be sure we had thanked you sufficiently for all your services."

"Oh...well." He made a brushing motion. "That's my job, isn't it?"

“A job well done. We won’t soon forget you, Mr. Ash.”

“Ah, yes...thank you.”

“You have impressive skills. Much knowledge in certain areas. A man like you could go far.”

“Go far,” echoed another of the Ogin.

“Uh...” said Fallon.

“Perhaps one day,” the apparent leader intoned, “we will see you again. We may have future use of your skills.” The looming figure slowly pivoted back toward the restroom door. The other two preceded it out, but in the threshold it looked back and added, “Further use of that clever mind of yours.”

For the first time since Fallon had known any of them, he saw a smile come to the Ogin’s waxen visage.

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In his dream, the dream that came repeatedly, Lee would lean down over the table toward him. Lean toward the vessel, and peer in through its glass at him. Somehow he could see her. His mind must be connected to various sensory apparatuses via the wires that trailed from him, bobbing in the greenish fluid. He could see Lee’s lovely face, framed in curtains of black hair, staring in at him. A small mysterious smile would come to her waxen visage. But below that lovely face, from the neck down, was a pinkish exoskeleton standing on two jointed legs, with a series of pincer-tipped upper limbs extending from its thorax. Lee’s long inky hair spilled over hard, knobby shoulders of chitin.

His mind, his brain in a bottle of gurgling amniotic solution, would scream then, scream through a speaker to which it was also wired, and the smile on Lee’s stolen head would only grow wider...

But Lee would always wake him from this dream, coo to him and calm him. Soothe him in her groggy voice and urge him to sleep again. She was patient and sympathetic, though he had not shared with her the reasons for his dreams, or their true subject matter.

Fallon Ash would gradually fall asleep again, somewhat relieved to find that it wasn’t really his stolen brain that was crying out. Only his conscience.

# Contributor Biographies

GLYNN BARRASS IS a willing yet deranged acolyte of Cthulhu who has been writing since late 2006. His work has appeared in over fifty magazines and anthologies and has recently been translated into French and Japanese. This year sees the release of his first collection, *Two Against Darkness* and his first edited books from Chaosium. Details and news of his latest fiction appearances can be found on his website *Stranger Aeons: The Domain of Writer Glynn Barrass* [www.freewebs.com/batglynn](http://www.freewebs.com/batglynn)

RAN CARTWRIGHT has written in a variety of forms and formats for years. He prefers horror, but has written science fiction and fantasy satire as well. Two of his Lovecraftian horror tales were recommended for Bram Stoker awards in 2000. Published works include a collection of Lovecraftian horror tales, a fantasy satire novel, a collection of fantasy satire stories, and a Christmas fantasy novel co-written with his wife, Christene. Ran also has several horror and fantasy tales published in various anthologies and chapbooks. A biker and retired archaeologist, Ran and his wife Christene travel around the country in a motorhome with their three cats, Clyde, Rufus, and Pixie.

DAVID CONYERS is a science fiction writer and editor from Adelaide, South Australia. He has published more than forty short stories worldwide and been nominated for various awards including the Aeon, Aurealis, Ditmar and Australian Shadows. His first collection, co-authored with John Sunseri, was *The Spiraling Worm* from Chaosium, published in 2007. He is the editor of the anthology *Cthulhu's Dark Cults* and co-editor with Brian M. Sammons of the anthologies *Cthulhu Unbound 3* and *Undead & Unbound*, as well as being a contributing editor to *Albedo One* and *Midnight Echo*. His latest publication is *The Eye of Infinity*, a Lovecraftian science fiction

novella from Perilous Press. [www.david-conyers.com](http://www.david-conyers.com)

NICKOLAS COOK lives in the beautiful Southwestern desert with his wife and four pugs and one “not-a-pug”. He is the editor of the free online monthly horror culture and entertainment e-zine, *The Black Glove*. His novels include *The Black Beast of Algernon Wood*, *Baleful Eye*, *Dead Dog (Max and Little Billy #1)*, the zombie apocalypse trilogy, *Cities in Dust* and the mashup horror cult classic, *Alice in Zombieland*, and a recently released short story collection ‘*Round Midnight and Other Tales of Lost Souls*. Visit him at his official website: *The Horror Jazz and Blues Revue*.

CARRIE CUINN is a writer, editor, book historian, small press publisher, computer geek, & raconteur. In her spare time she reads, makes things, takes other things apart, and sometimes gets a new tattoo. Learn more at [www.carriecuinn.com](http://www.carriecuinn.com)

TIM CURRAN is the author of the novels *Skin Medicine*, *Hive*, *Dead Sea*, *Resurrection*, *Skull Moon*, *The Devil Next Door*, *Biohazard*, and *Hive 2*. His most recent books have been *Graveworm*, the short story collections *Bone Marrow Stew* and *Zombie Pulp*, and the novellas *The Corpse King*, *Fear Me*, and *The Underdwelling*. His short stories have appeared in such magazines as *City Slab*, *Flesh&Blood*, *Book of Dark Wisdom*, and *Inhuman*, as well as anthologies such as *Flesh Feast*, *Shivers IV*, *High Seas Cthulhu*, and *Vile Things*. Find him on the web at: [www.corpseking.com](http://www.corpseking.com)

DAVID DUNWOODY is the author of the *Empire* series of novels and short stories, as well as the horror collections *Unbound & Other Tales* and *Dark Entities*. Dave lives in Utah and can be visited on the Web at <http://www.daviddunwoody.com>

LOIS GRESH is the New York Times Best-Selling Author (6 times), Publishers Weekly Best-Selling Paperback Author, and Publishers Weekly Best-Selling Paperback Children’s Author of 27 books and 50 short stories. She has received Bram Stoker Award, Nebula Award, Theodore Sturgeon Award, and International Horror Guild Award nominations for her work.

## Contributor Biographies

C.J. HENDERSON is the creator of both the Piers Knight supernatural investigator series and the Teddy London occult detective series. Author of some 70 books and/or novels, plus hundreds and hundreds of short stories and comics, and thousands of non-fiction pieces, this questionable personage of dubious lineage is one of the laziest lumps of flesh on the planet, which is why he became an author. To tell him what you thought of his story, to read more of his fiction, or to have the opportunity to check out one of the most antiquated websites of all time, go to [www.cjhenderson.com](http://www.cjhenderson.com) and have at him.

TOM LYNCH is a longtime devotee of the horror genre, but very new to being published in it. He is descended from a line of family that enjoys a good nightmare. Is it any wonder he writes horror? By day, Tom is a graduate student and runs Miskatonic River Press.

WILLIAM MEIKLE is a Scottish writer with a dozen novels published in the genre press and over 200 short story credits in thirteen countries. His work appears in a number of professional anthologies. He lives in a remote corner of Newfoundland with icebergs, whales and bald eagles for company. Check him out at <http://www.williammeikle.com>

ROBERT M. PRICE, a fan of H.P. Lovecraft since the Lancer paperback collections of 1967, began writing scholarly articles and humorous pieces on HPL and the Cthulhu Mythos in 1981. His celebrated semi-pro zine *Crypt of Cthulhu* began as a quarterly fanzine for the Esoteric Order of Dagon Amateur Press Association in 1981 and made it to 109 issues. In 1990 he began editing Mythos anthologies for Fedogan & Bremer and Chaosium Inc., and still does! His fiction has been collected in *Blasphemies and Revelations*. Centipede Books will soon be issuing his five-volume annotated edition of the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft. The premise of this tale was suggested to him by his then eight year old pal Martin Stiles.

PETE RAWLIK'S literary criticism routinely appears in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. His fiction has appeared in *Talebones*, *Crypt of Cthulhu*, *Morpheus Tales*, *The Tales of the Shadowmen* anthologies, *Dead But Dreaming 2*, and *Future Lovecraft*. His collection of Lovecraftian material has been deemed socially unacceptable and

on occasion has raised the eyebrows of authorities both secular and religious. His therapist believes that given time and a proper regiment of pharmaceuticals he may become competent enough to stand trial for his anti-anthropocentric literary crimes.

TERRIE RELF was born on an island, grew up by the beach, and has now returned to live by her beloved ocean. Perhaps that's why Cthulhu tends to linger beneath the surface of her mind...whispering that The Old Ones have never left this dimension. Not really... She is on staff at Sam's Dot Publishing where she edits *Hungur Magazine* and *The Drabblor*, is lead editor for *Cover of Darkness* and *Shelter of Daylight*, and is the poetry editor for *ParABnormal Digest*. Her most recent releases include a slipstream novel, *The Waters of Nyr*, and just hot off the press, *The Poets Workshop*, a "handbook" for poets and fiction writers. She is a lifetime member of the SFPA and an active member of HWA. Her new website is <http://www.appleseedhosting.com/tlr/>

BRIAN M. SAMMONS has been writing reviews on all things horror for more years than he'd care to admit. Wanting to give other critics the chance to ravage his work for a change, he has penned a few stories that have appeared in such anthologies as *Arkham Tales*, *Horrors Beyond*, *Monstrous*, *Dead but Dreaming 2* and *Horror for the Holidays*. He co-edited the upcoming anthology *Cthulhu Unbound 3*, has his first novella coming out, *The R'lyeh Singularity*, co-written with David Conyers, and is currently writing for and editing a whole mess of upcoming books. For more about this guy that neighbors describe as "such a nice, quiet man" you can check out his very infrequently updated webpage here: [http://brian\\_sammons.webs.com](http://brian_sammons.webs.com)

D.L. SNELL is an acclaimed novelist from the Pacific Northwest. His entries into the Mythos include contributions to anthologies such as *Cthulhu Unbound* and *Cthulhu Unbound 3* from Permuted Press. Snell's fourth novel, *Pavlov's Dogs*, was co-authored with Thom Bran-nan. Learn more at [www.dlsnell.com](http://www.dlsnell.com)

SAM STONE is the award-winning author of *The Vampire Gene Series* and the horror collection *Zombies in New York and Other Bloody Jot-tings*. She is currently working on a new epic fantasy trilogy which

doesn't include any vampires but has an interesting race of aliens. She lives in North Wales in a vampire lair under Rhuddlan Castle.

JEFFREY THOMAS has written of his far-future city of Punktown in the novels *Deadstock* (finalist for the John W. Campbell Award), *Blue War*, *Monstrosity* (finalist for the Bram Stoker Award), *Everybody Scream!* and *Health Agent*, and in the short story collections *Punktown*, *Voices from Punktown* and (with his brother Scott Thomas) *Punktown: Shades of Grey*. Other of his books include the novel *Letters From Hades* and the Lovecraftian short story collection *Unholy Dimensions*. Several of his books have been translated into German, Russian, Greek, Polish and Taiwanese editions, and the German outfit Lausch released three volumes of his Punktown stories as audio dramas. His stories have appeared in the anthologies *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *The Year's Best Horror Stories* and *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction*. Thomas lives in Massachusetts. His blog can be found at <http://punktalk.punktownner.com>

MICHAEL TICE has long been a devotee of Lovecraft, due primarily to their shared aversion to seafood, partiality for cats, and Weltanschauung of an indifferent and/or inimical cosmos. When his waking life as a Los Angeles businessman does not intrude, his dream-self composes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and material for LARPs and role-playing games, including *Call of Cthulhu*.



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*"H.P. LOVECRAFT — LIKE HIS CREATION, CTHULHU — never truly died. He and his influence live on, in the work of so many of us who were his friends and acolytes. Today we have reason for rejoicing in the widespread revival of his canon. . . . If a volume such as this has any justification for its existence, it's because Lovecraft's readers continue to search out stories which reflect his contribution to the field of fantasy. . . . {The tales in this book} represent a lifelong homage to HPL. . . . I hope you'll accept them for what they were and are — a labor of love." —Robert Bloch*

Robert Bloch has become one with his fictional counterpart Ludvig Prinn: future generations of readers will know him as an eldritch name hovering over a body of nightmare texts. To know them will be to know him. And thus we have decided to release a new and expanded third edition of Robert Bloch's *Mysteries of the Worm*. This collection contains four more Mythos tales—"The Opener of

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## NECRONOMICON

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EXPANDED AND REVISED — Although skeptics claim that the *Necronomicon* is a fantastic tome created by H. P. Lovecraft, true seekers into the esoteric mysteries of the world know the truth: the *Necronomicon* is the blasphemous tome of forbidden knowledge written by the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred. Even today, after attempts over the centuries to destroy any and all copies in any language, some few copies still exist, secreted away.

Within this book you will find stories about the *Necronomicon*, different versions of the Necronomicon, and two essays on this blasphemous tome. Now you too may learn the true lore of Abdul Alhazred.

Authors include Frederick Pohl, John Brunner, Fred Chappell, Robert A. Silverberg, Manly Wade Wellman, Richard L. Tierney, H. P. Lovecraft, L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, Frank Belknap Long, and many more. 384 pages.

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PROFESSOR RUDOLPH PEARSON MOVED to New York City after the Great War, hoping to put his past behind him. While teaching Medieval Literature at Columbia University, he helped the police unravel a centuries’ old mystery. At the same moment, he uncovered a threat so terrifying that he could not turn away. With the bloody scribbling of an Old English script in a dead man’s apartment, Rudolph Pearson begins a journey that takes him to the very beginning of human civilization. There he learns of the terror that brings doom to his world.

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*“Right here in our own state of Massachusetts, in February of 1928, agents of the U.S. Treasury and Justic Departments perpetrated crimes worthy of Nazi Germany against a powerless minority of our citizens . . . When the dust of this jack-booted invasion had settled, no citizens {of Innsmouth, Massachusetts} were found guilty of any crime but the desire to live peaceful lives in privacy and raise their children in the faith of their fathers. The mass internments and confiscations have never been plausibly explained or legally jus-*

*tified, nor has compensation ever been so much as attempted to the innocent victims of this official booliganism.” {Senator Kennedy, speaking to the Miskatonic University Class}*

—Brian McNaughton, “The Doom That Came to Innsmouth”

A shadow hangs over Innsmouth, home of the mysterious deep ones, and the secretive Esoteric Order of Dagon. An air of mystery and fear looms... waiting. Now you can return to Innsmouth in this second collection of short stories about the children of Dagon. Visit the undersea city of Y’ha-nthlei and discover the secrets of Father Dagon in this collection of stories. This anthology includes 10 new tales and three classic reprints concerning the shunned town of Innsmouth.

## THE THREE IMPOSTORS

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SOME OF THE FINEST HORROR STORIES ever written. Arthur Machen had a profound impact upon H. P. Lovecraft and the group of stories that would later become known as the Cthulhu Mythos.

H. P. Lovecraft declared Arthur Machen (1863–1947) to be a modern master who could create “cosmic fear raised to it’s most artistic pitch.” In these eerie and once-shocking stories, supernatural horror is a transmuting force powered by the core of life. To resist it requires great will from the living, for civilization is only a new way to behave, and not one instinctive to life. Decency prevents discussion about such pressures, so each person must face such things alone. The comforts and hopes of civilization are threatened and undermined by these ecstatic nightmares that haunt the living. This is nowhere more deftly suggested than through Machen’s extraordinary prose, where the textures and dreams of the Old Ways are never far removed.

## THE WHITE PEOPLE & OTHER STORIES

|       |                    |         |
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| #6035 | ISBN 1-56882-147-6 | \$14.95 |
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THE BEST WEIRD TALES OF ARTHUR MACHEN, VOL 2. — Born in Wales in 1863, Machen was a London journalist for much of his life. Among his fiction, he may be best known for the allusive, haunting title story of this book, “The White People”, which H. P. Lovecraft thought to be the second greatest horror story ever written (after Blackwood’s “The Willows”). This wide ranging collection also includes the crystalline novelette “A Fragment of Life”, the “Angel of Mons” (a story so coolly reported that it was imagined true by millions in the grim initial days of the Great War), and “The Great Return”, telling of the stately visions which graced the Welsh village of Llantrissant for a time. Four more tales and the poetical “Ornaments in Jade” are all finely told. This is the second of three Machen volumes to be edited by S. T. Joshi and published by Chaosium; the first volume is *The Three Impostors*. 294 pages.

## A LONG WAY HOME

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| #6049 | ISBN 978-15688236387 | \$15.95 |
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THIS IS THE STORY OF SEAN MCKINNEY, a young farm boy from the medieval world of Brae who longs to escape the family farm. On his way to begin study at the university, Sean stumbles into a fire-fight between troops of the local tyrant and Congressional Marines trying to overthrow Brae's corrupt and brutal government.

Saving the life of one ambushed Marine, McKinnie is taken aboard the Congressional Starship cruiser Lewis and Clark and is befriended by the starship's crew -- becoming an unofficial ship's mascot. His new friends realize that though McKinnie comes from a backwater world and is ignorant of interstellar politics, he is highly intelligent and might become a valuable asset as a covert Congressional agent. They teach him about Congressional history, including how humanity's home world was destroyed in a collision with an asteroid.

Surviving pirate attacks and deep personal losses, McKinnie grows from an innocent country bumpkin into a civilized young man, and develops a relationship with Lt. Alexandra Andropova, a young nurse in the ship's medical department.

His training complete, McKinnie embarks on several missions to primitive worlds including a return to his home world of Brae. He discovers that slavers kidnapped members of his own family, and others from Brae, to be sold to an alien machine-intelligence. Pursuing the slavers, Lewis and Clark and her crew must battle machine-controlled starships and a massive machine-controlled deep-space station in a desperate attempt to rescue the kidnapped humans.

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