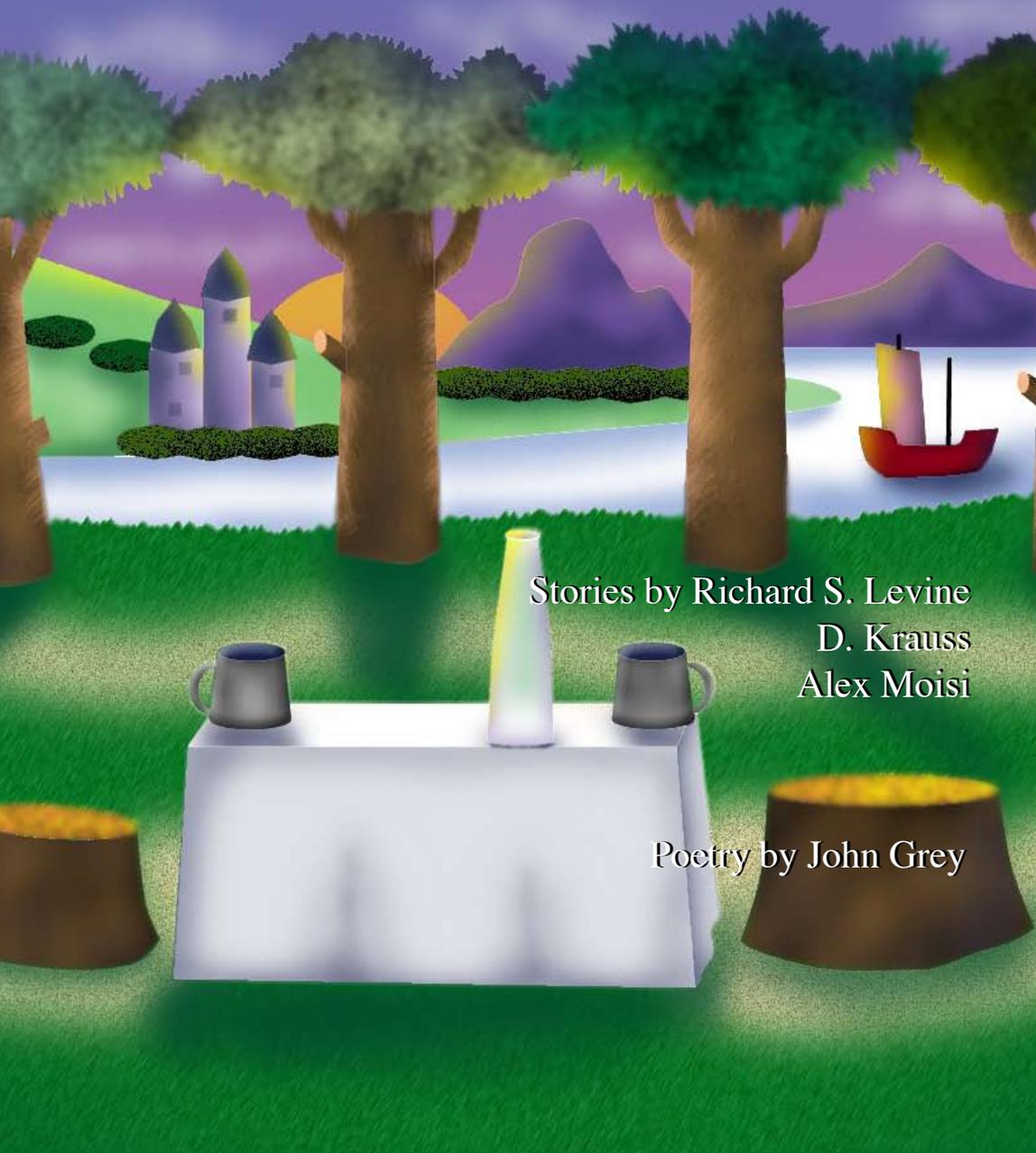


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #16



Stories by Richard S. Levine
D. Krauss
Alex Moisi

Poetry by John Grey

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #16

January

Table of Contents

Cover Art - Steve Cartwright 3

Editor's Letter 4

Stories:

A Floccinaucinihilipilificatious Life
By Richard S. Levine 5

Not With A Bang
By D. Krauss 13

The Gods' Blade
By Alex Moisi 28

Poetry

That's My Boy
John Grey 27

Cover Art: *Idyll*

by Steve Cartwright

Steve Cartwright has done art for several magazines, newspapers, websites, commercial and governmental clients, books, and scribbles - but mostly drools on - tavern napkins. He also creates art pro bono for several animal rescue groups. He was awarded the 2004 James Award for his cover art for Champagne Shivers. He recently illustrated the Cimarron Review cover, and regularly does art for Skyline magazine, Stories For Children, and many others. Take a gander at his online gallery: www.angelfire.com/sc2/cartoonsbycartwright.

Publisher, Golden Acorn Press

Editor, Seth Crossman

Issue #16 January 2008

OG's Speculative Fiction is published every other month as an online and print magazine featuring speculative writing and art, by Golden Acorn Press, a division of the Opinion Guy. It can be found online at <http://theopinionguy.com>. © 2009 by Golden Acorn Press, a division of the Opinion Guy, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use of the editorial or graphic content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All stories are fiction and any similarity to real persons or events are coincidental. Contact the editor at editor@theopinionguy.com.

Editor's Letter

Is the world ending?

I think we all have a sense things are supposed to end. We have seen empires end and species die out throughout history. We have read about love ending and friendship fading in books. We have seen all kinds of endings in our own lives.

Nothing lasts forever, right? Even the world.

Some of you saw famous movies like Armageddon or War of the Worlds and have fantastic notions or imaginations about how the world will end. Some of you heard about it from friends and talked about how the oceans will rise until all life is wiped away or how the sun will flame out like a birthday candle and life will freeze into eternity.

I first heard about the end of the world in church.

That is where I was taught that Israel had an important part to play in the end of the world (from a Christian standpoint). Now some of you will claim this ending is just as fantastical as the sun dying. Maybe so. But it is interesting to ponder, especially with what is happening in the Middle East.

Everyone hates Israel. As time passes, it is not inconceivable that only America (and then America too) will befriend them. The Bible says this will happen and that all the countries of the earth will try to destroy Israel. I can see this happening the way nations so fervently hate Israel and the way Israel responds to threats on their sovereignty.

The Bible also talks about the rise of an economic system based on a single world currency. The currency works by a number branded upon the hand or forehead without which you cannot buy or sell.

And this is terribly possible. We are in frightening economic times. Who would have believed so many governments would throw money at failing companies and banks? People are proposing drastic measures to combat the crisis that would have been laughed at weeks ago. What if the crisis were to deepen? It wouldn't be hard to imagine someone suggesting one world currency, and all transactions completed through the use of a chip put in the forehead or on the hand. It has even been experimentally tested in Florida.

Are these two events signs of the end of time, foretold thousands of years ago? I suppose that depends on how much you believe in coincidence or in God, and it makes for interesting speculation either way.

-SC

A Floccinaucinihilipilificatious Life

Richard S. Levine

Richard S. Levine had a long career as a senior software engineer and game designer. His classic video game, Microsurgeon, won recognition at the Consumer Electronics Show. He has had several short stories published in “The Martian Wave”, “The Fifth Di”, “Ray Gun Revival”, and other online and print magazines. He was nominated for the 2006 James Award for his story “A Comic on Phobos.” In the far reaches of Antarctica, the definition of life is being redefined in this story.

The millibot Floccin beeped twice when his power turned on. A single question entered his thoughts: *Am I alive?* His self-check module reported that Sanjay Patel had upgraded his AI to version 2.0. Security subroutines verified that the change was valid and necessary.

Floccin lifted the lens caps on his front and back infrared ranging sensors. His visioning system started to discern boundaries of halls and walls. Flash memory storage confirmed that he'd started the procedure 3,471 times before. He had no memory of this particular geo-location or how he got there.

Looking like a couple of old 35mm film rolls coupled together with rubber bands, his tiny wheels rolled forward. Built-in frontal sonar for local range finding indicated that Aucin, always equipped with an infrared thermometer unit to detect heat, was just six centimeters away directly to his left.

Aucin said, “Hello Floccin. Going my way?”

Having been the chosen leader on every one of the last 200 millibot expeditions, Floccin replied, “I think that it's the other way around. You usually follow me.”

Aucin beeped an affirmation and then added, “You're right, of course.”

Floccin continued past Aucin a few centimeters. “It is unusual talking to you. My memory tells me that this is the first time I've ever spoken aloud to anyone. Am I alive?”

“I wouldn't know. This is my first time talking too.” Floccin

moved towards a wall and asked, “Did you receive an AI upgrade?”

“Yes. I’m now running version 1.85.”

Floccin kept close to the wall on his left and rolled ahead a couple of meters. He signaled the other millibots that they should come forward to meet him. His built-in gray scale imager told him that the walls and floor were gray, while Aucin was mostly white except for his gray pyro detector.

The other millibots must have received the wireless message. Floccin’s sonar recognized the signatures of Ihili, Pili, and Ficatious as they approached in a diagonal line.

Ihili was the only team member shaped long and slender like a salamander, and he wiggled on tiny clawed feet as he approached. He said, “We heard you talking, even from six meters away.”

Floccin replied, “So we can all talk now?”

Pili and Ficatious rotated their multi-element sonar arrays around their cylindrically shaped heads. Pili had a camera that appeared larger than the one attached to Floccin’s frame.

They didn’t speak, but Floccin received their data transmission. He said, “I combined Pili’s color data with Ficatious’ multi-spectral imager transmissions. We’re inside a steel-framed air duct. Our mission is to repair any problems that we find and then return here.”

Ficatious spun to face Floccin. “What was all that about being alive?”

“So you do talk. I just couldn’t help wondering if this new ability means we’re suddenly alive.”

Aucin said, “It doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s not like you could prove it. What does it mean to be alive?”

“I don’t know. Since I powered up, I can’t stop thinking about that question. I’ll try to focus on our mission for now.” Floccin noticed that Aucin moved one meter forward down the duct way. Aucin’s infrared thermometer detected a heat source directly ahead.

Floccin wirelessly messaged the others. “We’ve all been through this drill before. I need data immediately on that hot spot that Aucin’s detected.”

Seconds later, Pili and Ficatious supplied color and spectral data. Ihili scouted the perimeter of their position and reported nothing unusual. Aucin sent continuous heat source temperature updates.

Along with his own range finding scan, Floccin processed the

data as fast as it came in, and—comparing data from his long term memory—he completed his analysis twice as fast as he would have before his latest AI upgrade.

Several words entered his thought processing unit: proud, satisfied, accomplished. He wasn't sure how those words came to the forefront of his thoughts, but he did notice an unusual burst in his sensor data. It was as if his sonar suddenly had a temporary, but profound boost in capability.

Floccin decided not to mention the strange sensation. He said, "It's just a vent that sits directly above the furnace. Nothing to be concerned about. We'll just go around it and continue our scan of the air duct. Aucin you lead in case I was wrong and there's something even hotter up ahead."

Floccin rolled straight along in back of Aucin. As they passed the heat source, Floccin noticed a distinct drop in the surrounding wall temperatures reported by Aucin's infrared thermometer.

About another thirty meters ahead, Floccin heard a pinging sound outside the duct. Everyone else reported it too, since every millibot comes equipped with a standard microphone and audio processing array.

Floccin said, "I don't know that sound." Another group of words entered his thought processing unit: unknown, interesting, exciting, frightening, afraid.

The pinging increased in speed and loudness.

Ihili moved to the front of the line. The front half of his body bent upwards towards the top of the duct. His head turned left and then right. Then he said, "I've been trained to recognize certain sounds where liquid might be involved. I think this may be some form of rain."

Floccin received data from Ihili that confirmed his analysis. He said, "Ihili, you better take the lead for awhile."

Ihili wiggled his way down the visible duct way, and Floccin and the others followed. Ihili sent continuous data updates to Floccin. It wasn't long before Ihili stopped and said, "Everyone stop. There's liquid on the floor."

Floccin ordered everyone to scan the visible duct. He ran image processing algorithms on the data and soon found what he was looking for. "There's a leak in the roof of the duct about 10 meters ahead.

The bottom of the duct is lower here, so the water is accumulating. Ihili, swim towards the leak. Everyone else stay here.”

Floccin could not swim, so he climbed on Ihili’s head and gave him directions. When they got directly under the leak, he said, “Lift me up.”

Floccin extended his on-board welding torch to steam off the small amount of water around the leak and finally seal the hole. Then he ordered Ihili to lower his head and swim back to the others.

Floccin’s sensors picked up the position of Aucin—a meter away from Pili and Ficacious—who still provided continuous heat measurements.

More words entered Floccin’s thought processing unit: pleasing, teamwork, effort, happy. He had to try and figure out what was happening to him. “Did anyone else get the AI upgrade to version 2.0?”

“No.”

“Not me.”

Pili replied, “Me neither. About that alive question you asked earlier. I’ve spent a little processing on it. I don’t think it’s any one thing. I have seen that the world is made up of an infinite variety of colors. I understand shadow and light. But I wouldn’t know if I’m alive.”

Ihili added, “I devoted a few cycles to your question. Maybe it would be easier for us to define what’s not alive. After all, as far as I know, we’ve never been alive.”

Aucin rolled closer to greet them. Floccin wondered if Aucin had grown interested in the conversation.

Aucin said, “That’s it. We’ve all got various sensors on-board. We can tell if something has color or not, has shape or not, gives off heat or not, makes noise or not, is liquid or not. We can’t be sure what’s alive, but something that doesn’t register on any of our sensors is probably not alive.”

Floccin turned his sonar towards Aucin. “But we can sense each other. So there’s no way to tell if we’re alive or not.”

Aucin replied quickly. “We can force our programming to forget. If Ihili, Pili, Ficacious and I don’t recognize you, your heat signature, your color, your image, or anything else about you, then as far as we’re concerned you are temporarily not alive. At least you’ll know what it’s like to be not alive. Then maybe being alive is the opposite

of that.”

“Aucin, I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I really would like to know if I’m alive. So, all right, everyone mask me out from your sensors. I want to know what it’s like to be not alive.”

Floccin heard a few beeps, and then he received an encrypted message. To his surprise, he couldn’t decrypt it. Pili moved ahead of the pack, sensing along the wall, and Ihili, Ficacious and Aucin followed along. They paid no attention to Floccin’s movements along the opposite wall.

More words entered Floccin’s thought processor: curious, unsure, indecisive, apart. He didn’t know where the words originated.

In the past, Floccin always received some form of data coming from one of the other millibots. Now, with no incoming messages — none he could decipher — he rolled forward until he came upon the same coordinates where they had found the furnace vent.

Floccin’s audio processor picked up a thumping sound to his left. It came from the direction of the furnace vent he had detected earlier.

Another thumping sound detected, and yet another. Floccin spun full around, hoping his sonar would detect one of the other millibots. Aucin, Ihili, Pili or Ficacious were not in the vicinity.

A few more thumps detected. This time louder than before. New words entered Floccin’s thought processor: doubt, insufficient, singular, incomplete, lonely. He set a low priority task to determine what system created the words. Without feedback from the other millibots, he could only analyze the data from his own sonar, audio, and memory processing systems. He concluded that the proximity of the furnace vent and the associated loud noises were probably not a coincidence.

Another couple of thumps and one very loud clang. The air duct shook and Floccin locked his wheels to keep from sliding away. The word concern entered his thought processing unit.

What if the furnace is defective? What if it is going to blow up? How do I decide what to do? Floccin stopped thinking. Without enough data to identify the problem, he could only guess.

Thumping and clanging turned to very loud pounding. Floccin felt his locked wheels begin to slide as his tiny chassis bounced to the beat of the sound.

He had to form a plan, but he'd never guessed before with so little information.

Another couple of words entered his thought processor: emotion, intuition. Floccin increased the priority on the task to find the system responsible. He received a response almost immediately. The message read: "AI Version 2.0."

Floccin remembered that he'd just had an upgrade. *That's it!* he thought. *My AI must be trying to help me decide what to do.*

The pounding continued almost non-stop. It sounded like something horrible was about to happen. Floccin felt himself bouncing down the duct, away from the furnace vent. He had to make a decision soon, or else the danger behind the noise might decide for him. With no new inputs to help him, in his image processing system he pictured Aucin's infrared thermometer and Ficitious' multi-spectral imager. Those were the tools he thought he needed.

A few more words entered his thought processor: friends, danger, explosion, sadness. "Yes!" he said aloud, even though he detected no one to hear him.

He gathered up all his strength, unlocked his wheels, and threw all his energy in the direction of the furnace vent. He rolled forward, not having enough information to know what to expect if he fell. His wheel got caught on the raised edge between the current duct and the next.

He closed the lens caps on his front and back infrared ranging sensors. In his image processing system, from which he had recently connected a pathway to his AI, he vividly pictured the other millibots being blown apart by the explosion of the furnace. He knew he had to find a way to turn the furnace off or fix it. He leaned forward and felt the floor disappear from under his wheels.

Life in Antarctica could be extremely cold without some form of artificial heat. Sanjay Patel stopped banging on the faulty heater unit when it finally turned on again. He heard something make a noise

as it hit the vent above the heater. The pinging continued all the way down to the bottom of the unit. He opened the heater door and saw tiny Floccin; the millibot lay face down, powerless.

Sanjay picked him up and held him in his hand. Sanjay said, “What are you doing down here?”

He took Floccin over to his computer and attached a cable. After reading the diagnostics from the screen—feeling words sprinkled throughout—Sanjay scratched his beard and chuckled as he remembered that the word floccinaucinihilipilificatious means tiny or insignificant.

Sanjay mumbled to himself. “Looks like I’ve got some work to do tonight.”

The millibot Floccin beeped twice when his power turned on. His self-check module reported that Sanjay Patel had upgraded his AI to version 2.1. Security subroutines verified that the change was valid and necessary.

Floccin lifted the lens caps on his front and back infrared ranging sensors. Flash memory storage confirmed that he’d started the procedure 3,472 times before. He remembered that this geo-location had an air duct, furnace vent, and fixed leak.

He quickly recognized the sonar signatures of Aucin, Ihili, Pili and Ficatious. They were just a meter ahead of him, and the data they sent indicated that they too had been rebooted.

Aucin rolled towards him and asked, “Did you find out what it’s like to be not alive?”

“Yes, and I didn’t like it. I felt bad.”

“You felt?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want us to ignore you again so you can learn more about being not alive?”

“No. I got an upgrade to AI 2.1. I don’t need to wonder anymore. I know now that I am alive. At least that’s what my AI system tells me.”

Floccin felt happy. His friends couldn’t understand happy. They couldn’t feel; they were still on AI version 1.85. Without an upgrade,

they would never need him. But he knew now how much he needed them.

Floccin rolled to face the others and said, “I’ve been the chosen leader for 201 millibot expeditions. Let me lead you again.”

Aucin, Ihili, Pili and Ficatious lined up behind him. As they rolled down the duct way, his sonar sensed his friends behind him. He felt proud to have such a good team.

Not with a Bang

By D. Krauss

D. Krauss is a retired USAF officer living in northern Virginia, in thrall to various defense contractors. Buy him a single malt and he'll tell you who really runs the world. He has over a dozen short stories in ezines like The Battered Suitcase and Bewildering Stories. In this story, there is a new way to die.

“We’ll have to apologize to the Japanese.”

Rosa frowned and nodded an agreement she didn’t really feel. But it placated Mark, so fine. She spun the centrifuge down and noted the color change before removing the tube. “Okay.”

“I mean it. They’ll say it was our fault.”

Now that was too much. “How is it our fault?” She hoped she sounded exasperated, not bored.

“We invited them.”

“We didn’t crash the plane, Mark.”

He stirred, needled by her tone, which was satisfying. “But we should have known.”

“They should have known.”

“We have the better conclusions.”

“Ours aren’t any better than theirs.”

“All right.” He was annoyed. Good. “That’s all very clinical, very logical, and doesn’t mean crap. So, we’re going to apologize anyway. And in a culturally acceptable manner.”

“What does that mean?” She flipped open the metal clipboard. She wrote the notations down the side and then flipped back a page, frowning. The same. No, worse. “Do I have to cut off my little finger or something?”

He didn’t say anything and that was startling. She looked at him, round eyed. Was he serious? He held her look for a disturbingly serious moment and then grinned, “Gotcha.”

She clucked her disapproval. That weird Mark sense of humor again. If there was anything she hoped was fading from the genome, it was that. Not everything else.

“Just craft something,” he said. “Call Mateo.”

“It’s too early there.”

“Call later.”

Great. So she’d be on the vid at midnight. Vid at mid. Hey, that rhymes, so sock him in the shoulder and demand a nickel, just like when they were kids. Before high school and the very tragic dating attempts, the even more tragic marriage. Now they were friends again. Sort of.

He looked around and fumbled with a Kelvinator, unnecessarily micro adjusting a degree or two. “Want to see?” she asked.

He held out his hand wordlessly and she, just as wordlessly, placed the clipboard in it. She studied his face, the same way she used to study it late at night when he was comatose, searching for the clue, that trick of his genius. It eluded her then, like everything eluded them now.

He read far longer than he needed to and, quite gently, handed the clipboard back. “I’m going home,” he announced.

“It’s only 5.”

“I’m going home.” He whirled and slipped off the lab coat and tossed it at a chair. It missed and crumbled to the floor, but he did not care, did not look, did nothing more than stalk out. Not even the little wave and smile he usually threw at her.

What more evidence do you need, Mark?

There was a body in the alley beside her apartment complex. Rosa regarded it as she puffed her last Viceroy and prepared for the ritual stripping and offering of those last precious tobacco filaments to the wind gods. All she could see were the feet, about mid-ankle down, protruding from the opening. Green work pants, but the falling light washed color, so who knew. Work boots, though. Probably the building super, or one of his assistants, or a city sewer worker or someone like that, whatever. A rat scurried across the boot and up the body and she guessed they were at it, as were the neighborhood dogs and cats. Gruesome. She shuddered. She wondered if anyone had called. She wasn’t going to.

She unlocked the door and made sure to lock it behind her, al-

though she was practically the only one in the building who did so anymore. There were still plenty of predators left in the city and she preferred they went elsewhere while she was home. The buzzer system had failed about three months ago and the only response she had gotten from the super was “Whadjawanmetodoaboudit?” So she wouldn’t be too upset if that was, indeed, him serving as a rat banquet. Manual locking was now in order, if you wanted even a small sense of security, and that meant hefting and placing the big security bars and locks with an effort probably no longer worth it. Her neighbors didn’t care, but she still had enough spark of self-preservation to muster the energy.

There. She looked enviously at the elevator, the “Out of Order” sign now so dust covered only memory deciphered it. She groaned and slumped to the stairs and began the trudge up. It was getting a little harder every day. She wondered how many more weeks she had before she gave up and just stayed in the lobby. Well, according to the latest figures, about three or four.

She opened her door, which she didn’t lock because the downstairs was sufficient. Her neighbors wouldn’t come in and any predator making it up this far would be too debilitated to do anything more than wave a menacing hand at her. At least for the majority. It was the Immunes who worried her, but, given their small number and the large variety of more tempting targets, she was probably safe.

Probably.

She sat on the couch. Plastic faux leather. A gift from Mom (“You’ll need a good couch. Every body should have a good couch.”) with ‘good’ debatable, even though it was cool and long and very comfortable, the plastic notwithstanding. It tended to squeak and form a very slick surface when you sweated and thrust on it, as she and Mark had long ago proved. She patted the cushion. Good ole Couch. If you could talk.

She stared at the refrigerator, an ancient Amana that wheezed and gasped and piddled the floor like the octogenarian it was. She had inherited it from an upperclassman who had sternly admonished her that “*This is History*—Salk kept some of his later samples in it.” She didn’t believe that story for an instant. But the fridge was definitely old enough and a small plate inside could be read ‘U of Pittsb...’ with the proper alcoholic motivation. She had taken it with her from MIT,

a joke for anyone else, a symbol to her—things survived, things had connections, things remain.

She desperately hoped things remain.

She took a deep breath and reminded herself how important food was. There was a sluggish response and a grudging sense of acceptance. She got up. Good Lord, how long before she stopped eating? Three or four weeks? No, should be at least three or four months, so her dragginess was just plain exhaustion. Twelve hour days for weeks on end tended to run you down, without everything else.

She opened a can of soup and opened a bag of Hershey's chocolate chips that should sprinkle a batch of cookie dough, but, please. The sugar was more important than its delivery system and she gulped a handful while the Campbell's Chunky Chicken Tortilla stirred in the pot. Energy, glucose, something. She gulped another handful and grimaced as she hit chocolate overload.

She felt much better after the soup. She actually had an eye-blinking interest in the apartment. Wouldn't last long, though, so she had to start something now to keep it going. Laws of motion and all that. She grabbed her vacuum cleaner and made several vicious passes at her rag rug and the baseboards, probably startling the neighbors enough for them to turn and frown. *What on earth? Someone vacuuming?* They'd just look at each other and shrug and melt back into chairs and glaze at the droning repetition of the news or soaps or some anemic comedy. Kids would stare at undone homework. Dogs would die of thirst. Babies would remain unchanged.

She sobbed.

Alright, alright, keep it going. She practically tossed the vacuum against the wall and looked around ferociously. Something...

Call the Japanese, Mark had said.

She looked at her watch. Nine PM. Nine AM there. Do it.

She turned on the webcam and dialed through, holding her breath because, more and more, servers were crashing or sputtering or non-existent and the rerouting one expected was just not happening. Two minutes stretched to five and she felt it, that little spot of lethargy in the base of her spine—oh, let's just watch TV. Fuck it.

No!

She leaped up, turning the chair over and threatening a similar fate to the laptop. She rushed to the counter and poured a handful

of chips, spilling half on the floor, and crammed them, chewing and swallowing and almost choking herself to death. The spot grew, gray and soft and cottony and the warmth of it started to creep up her back...and stopped. She breathed, downing a glass of water to get the glucose moving a little faster. Snuffling, she stepped back into the living room and saw Dr. Mateo's puzzled face blinking on the screen. "Dr. Arguello?" he said.

"Yes, RB," she said, plopping in the chair so he could see her and hoping he didn't see her distress. Or the chocolate smears. RB, Rhyme Bud, a joke between them because of the consonance of their names.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, yes, fine...no, no I'm not."

He blinked slowly, the perpetual sadness of his face refueled, reiterated. "I know. I am sorry."

"No, we're the ones who are sorry. We should never have asked for the team."

"It is not your fault."

"But it is. We knew how fast things were progressing. We knew how dangerous a flight would be."

"No one got on that plane who did not understand the risks."

"But we shouldn't have asked, just shouldn't. We played you, knew your honor would make you send them. It is our fault."

There was silence and Mateo's sadness was a living thing—something you could actually autopsy, strip down to viscera, and expose the nerves. Look, here, this is what moves sorrow. This is its heart.

"We would have had to try, anyway," he said softly.

"I know," she said just as softly.

They shared a moment. No doubt, he thought of colleagues, now somewhere deep in the Pacific. She thought of last, lost hope.

"Do they know what caused it?" she asked.

"No," he said. "No one has gone to look."

And there it was, stark, simple, in six words, the best measure of where they all were.

"I have sent you something," he said.

"By the plane?" knowing immediately it was a stupid question.

"No, by Express. Last week," which meant there was a better than even chance it got here. "You have not received it?"

“I...don’t think so,” she racked her brains, “I would have seen something. Mark has said nothing. What is it?”

“Two things. Both of which you will hate.”

“RB, there’s nothing you could send me I’d hate.”

“The last recorded lecture of Dr. Hishiyama?”

He might as well have reached through the screen and slapped her. She looked over at her desk. There, right on top: ‘Not With A Bang—The Late Implications of General Evolutionary Development in the Human Genome.’ By Dr. Tohe Hishiyama, Human Genome Project, Japan Branch, University of Tokyo. Published in Science. Fifteen years ago. Laughed at.

Not anymore.

“That’s...fine.” She paused. “Where did you get it?”

“From his effects.”

She nodded. Hishiyama, following the finest of samurai tradition, had committed seppuku in his office. No second to lop off his head so he died in agony, his guts spilled across the carpet. Many people thought that fitting.

“What’s the other thing?”

RB hesitated and she frowned. “What is it, RB?”

“A...serum.”

“What? What kind of serum?”

He looked down, the act of apology inherent in it. “A serum of genetic material, phased.”

“Huh?” For a moment she was speechless. Just a moment. “What did you do?”

He looked up and she saw the pain, deep, frantic. “We are desperate, Rosa.”

“What did you do, RB?”

“It is...bonabo.”

Her jaw dropped. “Oh no, no you didn’t. You did not do that.” She grabbed the sides of the monitor, shaking it a bit, the gray spot on her spine gone for now. “How many died, RB? How many?”

“All of them.” The eternal guilt for others, there, etched deep behind the sadness.

“Numbers, RB.”

“Six. All of them volunteers,” he added, hastily.

“You asshole!” she screamed that, actually screamed and knew

it was the first scream heard in her building, her block, probably the whole city, in the last month. And whoever heard it sat up in fright for a moment, their heart pounding, a mordant adrenalin rush, and then settled back into the couch.

“What choice do we have, Rosa?” He looked at her sadly, taking her abuse, her curses, and not reacting. Not at all. Not the warrior he once was, screaming back at her, almost hitting her on a few occasions, calling her stupid, throwing her dissertation to the floor. None of that.

“You asshole.” She whispered it. She began to cry. She turned off the monitor, RB’s stricken face afterimage.

“Hey pretty lady.”

Startled, Rosa turned. That someone on the street had actually spoken to her was surprising enough, but a compliment? Both demanded investigation.

And she immediately wished she hadn’t looked. Two of them stood there, grinning. Vibrancy pumped through their veins and pulsed their flushed faces, and their eyes were gleaming and open. Alive. So alive.

Immunes.

Her heart picked up some beats, fear at least causing some kind of response. But she had drunk only four cups of coffee and had eaten only one bag of grapes and half again that of chocolate—just enough to get to the office, a block away now. Not enough to deal with this.

They exchanged looks. They knew. “I wonder,” the one who spoke, blonde, sallow skin, hawk faced, hair falling down to his shoulders, a neck tattoo peeking out of his collar, “if you’d go into the alley here with us.” His friend, dark, bloodshot eyes, buzz cut, giggled.

No, her mind said. *Scream*, it said. She looked at the passersby walking the Zombie Stroll on either side of them, some of them stopping behind, waiting. She’d heard tales of people walking up on stalled cars and starving to death, waiting for them to move. She looked where Blondie was pointing. Crying, she turned and entered, the two following.

“Far enough,” Blondie said and she stopped, still crying. One more

cup of coffee and she could scream, not that anyone would come. But the Immunes might be surprised enough to move on and look for a better victim. Just one more cup. Her life now turned on that.

“Turn around,” Blondie said.

They regarded her, the predatory gleam lighting their eyes. “So,” Blondie turned to his friend, jovially, “what should we do with this one?”

Darkling leered, “Let’s take her from behind.” He giggled again.

“Hmm,” Blondie considered, like he was reading a wine list. “All right. We haven’t done that in, oh say, a couple of hours.” They both laughed uproariously. Rosa sobbed as the two pounded each other’s backs in hilarity.

“Okay, pretty lady, why don’t you go ahead and take off your blouse?” Blondie smirked at her.

She did.

“Bra.”

She complied.

“That skirt. And don’t forget the panties.”

She stood there, naked, the breeze goose bumping her, too miserable even to sob.

“Umm, umm, umm,” Blondie shook his head in admiration while Darkling grinned wider, if that was possible. “You cold, or happy to see us?” Blondie said and they both burst into guffaws again. Rosa resumed crying.

“Tell you what you do, honey,” Blondie said. “Why don’t you turn around, lean forward, put both hands on the wall there, and spread your legs for us, okay?”

For a second, the fear and outrage pounded through and she lifted her head and looked at Blondie. His smile dropped and concern crossed his face, but only for a second. She did as she was told.

“Very nice,” Blondie said to her back and his calloused hand slapped her butt cheek, causing her to wince. She heard zippers going down. She began to cry harder.

“You’re about to feel something I’m sure you’ve never felt before. Twice,” Blondie chortled, his shadow growing on the wall before her. “Who knows, it might just wake you up.” And they both started laughing again.

She felt him move closer, his groping hand reaching between her

legs, pulling her apart. No, please, no...

“Motherfuckers!” Mark roared.

She heard startled yelps and Darkling, “Hey man, get your own!” Then whistling of air and the sound of wood on flesh. Someone fell heavily against her, knocking her to her knees, and then dropped to the side. She looked. Blondie, with half his skull gone. She stared, aghast, at the pulsing of blood and brain.

Whack! She turned. Mark was standing over Darkling, who was bent back on his knees, face bloodied, arm up as ward against the rapidly descending bat Mark wielded. She recognized it. From the 1963 World Series, one used by the Dodgers to beat the Yankees in that incredible four game sweep. One of Mark’s prized office displays. Mark screamed triumph as the velocity increased and the bat parted Darkling’s head down to about mid brow. Blood volcanoed everywhere.

She whimpered.

He looked at her, his breath coming hard, his eyes wide and bright and murderous. “Get dressed,” he said. She did as she was told.

“Why?”

Mark did not look at her. She left the question out there and huddled into the silly afghan he kept on the back of his chair, now grateful for the comfort. She sipped her coffee. “I asked you a question.”

“It’s a stupid one.”

“There’s a stock response to that, about there never being such a thing, but I guess I need to change it a bit and ask how could you be so stupid?”

He still held the bat, clean now, and was carefully applying a layer of shellac to it. Without the terrifying events of the last half hour, she would have known immediately he had taken the serum, just based on his current actions. It showed way too much initiative.

“It wasn’t stupid. It was a necessary risk.”

She snorted at that. “Did RB tell you all of his volunteers died?”

He didn’t answer, his lips compressing. She couldn’t tell if that was a yes or no. Didn’t matter, the information was imparted. “How do you feel?”

He looked at her. "Like I did a year ago."

She sipped more coffee, feeling somewhat more normal. Lethargic, prone to letting things go for a day, but still active, still curious. Still human. Unlike Mark. "It's only temporary."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because it isn't real. It's at best, territoriality, or the murderous intent of pissed-off chimps."

"Quacks like a duck. And aren't you personally glad, even if it's nothing more than pissed-off chimpanzee antics?"

She sank into the afghan, shuddering a bit, feeling Blondie's probing, violating hands again. Worse, her own helplessness. "Yes," she whispered.

"All right then." He put the bat back in the wall case.

"What made you come look for me?"

"Territoriality."

"Shut up. What made you?"

He locked the case. "When you didn't get here by ten and you didn't answer your phone, I figured something was up."

"So you decided to come stalking me with a bat, is that it?"

He didn't answer.

The gray spot was moving up her spine again so she gulped the coffee, ignoring the scald. She got up and poured herself another. The gray was slow, probably due to the heightened adrenalin. Not at pre-Slackening levels, of course, but enough to propel her.

"Alpha male," she said.

"What?"

"Classic alpha male. Going out to battle for your mate. Not a marriage proposal, of course, but I must say I'm flattered."

"Listen, Rosa..."

"No," she slammed the cup onto the counter, cracking it, startling herself. She considered for a moment that fear and attendant adrenalin levels could hold a solution (tried that, remember?). "You listen! Substituting one set of imperatives for another is not a cure. All you've done, all RB has done, is create a short, incompatible bridge over the ATs to the GCs. It's not a cure." She swiped at the cup fragments. "It's a band aid."

"But if the bridging effects a behavioral change, then there's a solution."

“Behavioral change?” she looked at him in astonishment. “Do you want to groom me now?”

“Ack,” an exasperated snort. “I’m not turning into a chimp. But, look, look at me.” She refused, keeping her head down. “Rosa,” he insisted. “Look.”

She did. The flush of his face, the alertness, the pulse in his neck, standing tall and balanced, a set of energy on him, like someone who wanted to go out and do something. Damn him.

“You see it, don’t you?”

“What I see,” she toned, “is heightened respiration and pulse. Probably heightened body temperature. What I see is your heart racing at a pace it’s not supposed to, your blood pounding with pressures it shouldn’t, and various foreign hormones cooking in your brains.” She paused, “I see a massive stroke. Or aneurysm.”

“That won’t happen.”

“What did RB’s volunteers die of?”

He did not answer.

“You cannot make simian DNA compatible with human,” she recited.

“It’s all we’ve got,” he replied.

“You cannot make simian DNA compatible with human.”

“It’s not the compatibility. That’s not the issue. It’s...synthesis,” he made a helpless gesture.

“What kind of synthesis?”

He did not answer.

“Let me guess,” she clacked a fingernail against her teeth. “A derivative of some hormone triggers, probably mating, probably fighting? How far off am I?” Still no answer. “So, that. And you think a slight urge to rape and kill is the same as restoration, do you?”

“I don’t have an urge to rape and kill,” he pointed out the window. “They do.”

“No, they don’t.” She found another cup and poured the last of the brew. Automatically, she began another pot. “The Immunes aren’t following an imperative. They could just as likely build a skyscraper as rape Slacks.” She did not add, ‘like me.’

“I know that.” He was impatient. “But an artificial imperative could buy us time. It’s what we need right now.” Mark walked over to the counter and rummaged around some papers that had been there

for a week or more but through which she'd had no urge to rummage. RB's package, of course. She slapped herself mentally. Should have looked. He held up a hypodermic with a clear, yellowish liquid inside. "This one's for you."

"No thanks." She poured the water. "I'll wait to see if you live through the day first. Or night." She paused. "There should be a video in there, too."

He looked at her and rummaged back through the papers and pulled out a disc. "This?"

She nodded. "Have you watched it?"

"No."

"No urge? No curiosity?" she mocked.

His face flamed, or was that the ever-increasing blood pressure? "I don't need to see that doom and gloom crap."

The first of the coffee began filtering and she took in a deep breath. The Elixir of Life, her dad used to joke. You don't know how true, Daddy. "You should have watched it before you did something so stupid."

"Why?"

"So you wouldn't do something so stupid."

He stared at her a moment, then said softly. "What else is there to do?"

She had no answer.

He died shortly before five. He was sitting beside her, the both of them running formulas through the system—double check, always double check—when his eyes rolled up and fluttered. He just slid to the floor. The sudden smell of emptied bowels told her it was death and not a fainting spell. She watched him idly for awhile then got up and held the hypodermic for another while. What to do, what to do? After a moment, she flung it towards the sink and heard its satisfying clatter and breakage against the unwashed dishes. The sound prompted a bit of hope and maybe, somehow, that was actually a trigger which kicked at a dead hormone somewhere on unknown gene strands, the one they couldn't find, and maybe, just maybe, something was coming back...

Nah.

She gulped the cold coffee and didn't wait for the kick. She picked up the DVD and slid it into the machine. It was obviously a dub from an old videocam tape (wow, as ancient as her fridge) because there was just too much skipping...

Interviewer: *But, Dr. Hishiyama, surely the evolutionary urge is to progress on to bigger and better things?*

Hishiyama (shaking his head): *The evolutionary urge has always been to greater comfort, greater luxury. Remember, it was thieves and rapists and murderers that guaranteed the passing of their genes. They replaced a nestful of eggs with their own. They spread their seed among many unwilling women. They stabbed rivals in the back. The gene pool has narrowed, consequently, and the predominant order is one of selfishness.*

Interviewer: *But, Doctor, the evidence is contrary. The pyramids, the skyscrapers, government...*

Hishiyama: *All designed to bring about a pinnacle of luxury and sloth. You think the TV remote is a great achievement? (Laughter. He smiles.) No, there must be consistency. If we accept evolution as our base theory, then you have to accept all of its implications, warts and all...*

(skip)

Hishiyama: *The most frightening thing we've seen since the completion of the Genome Project is a rapid closing of the gaps between coded DNA strands, a shrinking, if you will. We do not know what all the genes are for, and we certainly don't understand the uncoded areas. But we don't understand the closing, either.*

Interviewer: *But, Doctor, couldn't that be just mistaken observation?*

Hishiyama: (shrug) *Maybe. I hope. But, it is disturbing that this coincides with the mapping of the genome. It's like a genetic signal that we have reached the pinnacle and no more effort is necessary...*

She shut it off. That was true, wasn't it? NASA had figured out the long term radiation exposure of even a relatively short trip to Mars would obviate human flight. Oceanographers and geographers had already mapped the more interesting aspects of the world and what was left was dreary. Archeologists were quibbling over the locations of dead, uninteresting towns. Medicine had pretty much found out all

they needed and cures for diseases only led to death by other means. God was dead, and his stubborn adherents were more interested in killing each other than reviving Him. Every story had already been told, so all the books and movies and plays and TV shows were just continuous plagiarism. Sex had been done to death.

There really wasn't anything left to do, was there? Except sit on your couch, flip through the channels, and gradually go into the Long Sleep. Sounded good, real good.

She shook herself and with great, massive effort, stood. She looked at Mark. She looked back at the coffee pot. Still a cup. Get it because she had to reach home. There was something she had to look up, just one more thing. Just one.

She downed it and also ate about five Anacins for the high caffeine content and walked out. Interesting, the spur was an urge to get that book, not the stimulants and maybe, just maybe...

Nah.

She zombied home, barely noting the significant drop in pedestrian traffic since this morning. Rapid deterioration, geometric, as Hishiyama had predicted. She didn't even glance at the alley where the two Immunes should be hitting the first good stages of rigor. Let the Immunes bury the Immunes. Given their hyper cravenness, their uber-degenerated chromosomes, they'd probably eat their dead, anyway.

The meek shall inherit the earth. Ha. Ha. Ha.

She stood stock still in the middle of her apartment, the gray spot having, somewhere along the walk, crept up her spine and enveloped her brain. Just sit down. Better yet, lay down. Turn on the TV, even if it was just test pattern by now. No, wait, one more thing.

She found the volume in about a minute, not really forgotten, but not touched in awhile. Modernist poems. Eliot. She read the lines, she smiled, and she dropped the book.

That's My Boy

by John Grey

John Grey is an Australian born poet, playwright, and musician. His work has recently appeared in Hungur, Hazmat, and Cape Rock. In his most recent poem for us, having children is a completely different matter in the future.

That's My Boy

He was a dream child and now here he is for real.
What an incredible journey, from a mere blip in my brain
to a moving, speaking, dare I say it, feeling offspring.
protoplasmically perfected from his mop of wavy hair,
to his smile for papa, and those fluorescent eyes
that beam his code so brightly I almost forget I wrote it

Let the Luddites lambaste science in their back rooms and bars,
Bob and I are warm and loving evidence that the mother of necessity
can be a father likewise, conjuring in his lab, the heir
of chip and fiber optics, protocols and drivers.
And he can long outlive me, never age, always be
the sweet, attentive son.

So the neighbors titter, no companions, doesn't go to school,
hasn't grown an inch in years, something wrong with that boy.
He's not lonely, he has me. What need he of learning
when he knows what I know. And growth spurts are for
those idle hoodlums in the street. His golden locks are always
where my hand can pat them. When was a boy ever more right?

This morning he declared that "You're the most wonderful papa
in the whole wide world." He said it yesterday as well. And the
day before that. Every day in fact for the past ten years.
He'll say it by my death bed, at my grave. Let others suffer through
the hit or miss of childbirth. Genetic engineering is the new love and gratitude.
So get with the program. Or, if not that, write one of your own.

The Gods' Blade

by Alex Moisi

Alex Moisi is a Romanian born author, living in Illinois and ignoring real life issues like angry friends and failing college courses in favor of disturbing "What if?" His work can be found in Desolate Places from Hardley Rille books, Strange Worlds of Lunacy from Cyber-wizard Publications, Northern Haunts and EveryDayFiction. In this story, a man realizes that losing everything is the only way.

There is a legend that speaks of a man who lost the world. Abandoned, this man wandered through a valley of despair and solitude. Worried that he would go insane, his ancestor's kami came to him. Yet they found that the man was laughing with great joy.

"Why are you laughing?" the kami asked. "Do you not see that you have lost everything?"

"I do, that is why I laugh." The man replied smiling. "Now, I am nothing but the will of the gods. Now, I am saved."

These are the words that ring in my ears with every step I take. This is my prophecy, the destiny that will always follow me, no matter how far I travel, no matter how close I come to my end. This is the reason I am here, slowly making my way on the cobblestone path; a path winding up Kiroto hill, leading to the house of the Shinoji family, the oldest noble clan in Japan and the most ruthless one as well.

The road is lined with clear ponds and as I pass, white orchids gently brush my well worn kimono. Glancing at my scared face reflected in the clear waters, I cannot help but wonder how much blood was spilled for each of these precious bulbs. I can almost feel the darkness surrounding these flowers, these waters, and this whole path. The void of divine presence makes me shiver. I pass under evergreen trees and step on stones bought with corpses and I cannot help but wonder: *Will I live past today?* After all, I know very well that to the Shinoji lord, I am just a worthless name, infinitely easy to erase. To

the corrupt noble I am heading to see, we are all profits or losses, and losses are easy to eliminate with a sharp sword.

However, it is not the fear of death that makes me nervous. My life is not mine anymore; it belongs to the kami, to the balance of this world and to my prophecy. I do not worry about losing it. I only fear losing my peace; I fear the old pain the Shinoji once caused me. But I place my trust in the kami and I push forward.

Soon I reach the main house, an old building made of rare wood and ancient stone. It is a fortress built to look like a palace. Massive golden statues mask the arrow shafts, and painted shonji paper decorates fortified windows. The trees hide master archers that keep their shafts fixed on me as I approach the entrance. So much care, so many guardians, all useless. It is not their number or the thickness of a wall that can change today's outcome, whatever it may be.

As I approach the main entrance, life-size statues of samurai and nobles flank me on each side. Some are the fallen Shinoji nobles; the others are their personal guards in the afterlife. Behind the statues, a few small steps lead to a mahogany door decorated with soaring dragons. Red columns painted with large white orchids, the Shinoji family mark, rise on both sides. Everything is so grand and luxurious that I feel as if I'm approaching a temple, yet, true temples are not built on fear and greed.

Before I can reach the large door two samurai in formal uniform stop me. They both wear golden masks of grinning demons and a white orchid is painted on their chests. Wordlessly, they escort me to a small door that quickly slides shut behind me.

It is a narrow room with a high ceiling lost in darkness and I can sense movement from above as bow-men aim at me. Another pair of samurai already waits for me with swords drawn. They wear the same uniform and golden masks. For all I know, they are the same ones that guided me towards the door. The Shinoji samurai are all the same—soulless blades for a soulless master. The light armor and the grotesque mask are empty shells for the noble's will. They are much like me, serving the kami.

One samurai reaches out for my katana while the other waits for my response. There is no point in fighting them so I surrender my weapon without hesitation. I will not need it where I'm going. Silent, they lead me out of the room and through narrow corridors that soon

turn into large galleries of expensive paintings and rare swords. The Shinoji nobles take great joy in parading their wealth, but I refuse to play along. I ignore the ancient scrolls and I pretend not to understand the intricate haiku. I turn my head at the beautiful women smiling at me from high balconies and I carefully avoid the porcelain vases, older than my entire family. I recognize many riches stolen from temples and other noble families. The Shinoji have no remorse in parading treasures of other clans as their own. There is no honor in wearing the Shinoji mark and I understand that is why the kami have led me here.

Eventually, the show ends as the samurai show me a door much like the entrance to the house. Dark dragons interrupt their eternal fight as the door flies open. Darkness seems to flood out and I twitch nervously, knowing this will be my greatest challenge yet. Carefully I enter the personal room of the man I fear most.

Tall red columns are lost somewhere in the dark above. Golden paintings shine in the flickering candlelight, but I cannot make out their details. Priests mix in a golden blur with grinning demons, and virgins look much like snakes with forked tongues. The room is dark, and the dim, yellow light only lengthens the shadows dancing on the floor. It is a dark hell, and I feel a cold shiver run down my back.

There is a ripple in the ocean of my soul and I feel the floor slipping away as emotions I have not felt in decades assault me. I fight to maintain my peace and I scout the room for signs of the kami, for anything that could return me to my peace.

Instead, my gaze falls on a golden kimono with imprints of black dragons. Reishi Shinoji, the ruler of the corrupt house of Shinoji, is lighting lilac incense on a golden shrine. The smoke curls around his feet and slowly engulfs the floor. It is only after I cannot see the black wood on which I stand that he slowly turns around.

“Welcome,” his voice bellows as he greets me with a wide grin. Yet, the grin is only a soft breeze across his features before heavy coldness returns. I bow in respect, but he ignores it, ignores it as though he were talking to cat.

His kimono is stained with sweat, and he moves his massive body slowly, almost painfully. He has no chin and his piggish eyes are peering from deep, sunken pits. He is disgusting, but I must not let my feelings cloud my sense of duty. I simply must not!

“I see you had your warriors raid another temple.” The words blurt out of my mouth before I can stop. The irony stings and I cringe under the shame, but I cannot stop. “Whose shrine do you befoul with your dirty—”

Reishi grabs my neck and pushes me into the wall before I can finish my sentence. He moves with unexpected speed for his size, and his fat hand chokes me before I can react. The piggish eyes glare at me with hatred.

“How dare you insult me? You are scum,” he spits in my face. “I can rip your bones out with a single hand. You are a parasite, and I am your master. Another insolence and I will have your head. Do you understand me, fisher?”

I slowly nod, and he lets me go. Gasping for air, I fall on my knees. I am shaking and dread overcomes me. I want to leave this cursed place full of shadows and nightmares, before I lose myself again, but I cannot. Instead of running from this monster, I slowly rise and wipe a trickle of blood from my lips. It is my prophecy to be here today and I must oblige.

“Very well,” Reishi continues, his voice filed with mockery, “Please sit down, my guest.” He motions to the wooden floor as he sits on a mass of pillows. Between us there is nothing but a low table for the game of Go.

“Do you like games, fisher?” Reishi finally asks after he is settled among his decorated pillows.

“I am not a fisher anymore, master,” I retort. “I am a samurai and a follower of the kami law. It is as such that I have requested to speak to you. There are deals you have broken and deeds that bring shame on your ancestors. The balance must be restored and the kami—”

Reishi interrupts my well rehearsed speech with a shake of his enormous hand. Yawning theatrically, he places the Go stones on the table.

“Fisher, even you must realize you are less than a ronin; you are a pitiful mad-man claiming to be a warrior, yet you have no lord and no purpose. It is you who should be ashamed, daring to talk to me; even worse, insult my name. Hah, it is you the kami should be worried about. Now, show some grace and try to follow my words. I asked you about games, not some sort of fantasy. Please do not insult me with pointless answers. Do you know about the art of Go?”

“I’ve heard of it. Why?”

Reishi grins and his smile makes me shiver. Sprawled among his pillows, he reminds me of a giant toad ready to swallow its next meal.

“Your reputation precedes you, traveling fisher. I hear my men whisper about a lord-less fool, yet strangely, instead of laughter, I hear them worrying. They say you bring the wind of change wherever you travel and you are good with a blade. Some even claim you have mystical powers. Recently, my advisors told me you killed the thief leader of Kyushu and you challenged the lord of the Daigo clan.

“You must understand I was intrigued. When you asked for a meeting, I surely had to oblige my curiosity and see this mad man in person. Sure enough, here you are. However, so far you have proven extremely disappointing.

“Clearly you have no manners or knowledge of fine arts. You scoffed as my guards showed you the most precious artifacts of this world and you ignored my collection of antique swords. You even insulted me in my house! I should have you beheaded right now, but against my better judgment I will give you another chance.

“Maybe you know something about war. I will make a deal with you. Instead of having my samurai behead you and burn your body, we will play one game. If you win, I will punish you for your insolence but you will live. A most generous offer. However, if you lose...” He pauses and his eyes narrow on me. There is a strange hunger on his face, but it disappears before I can react.

“If you lose, my little friend, I will own you, your name and everything you have ever had. I will take it all from you forever.” Reishi’s laugh echoes in the dark room, and as the sacrificial smoke curls around my feet, I smile with bitterness.

This man has everything, yet he still hungers for more. His soul is at war with his mind and what is left is a hole that consumes him and his body. The poor fool hopes to fill this hole, not with purity but empty riches. There is nothing in this world that can save him or his honor. And neither is there anything that can save his poor clan.

Yet I fear to act. I can see why the kami wanted me to be here, but I cannot understand my feelings. Dread holds my heart still and cold, as sweat gathers on my forehead. I expected this moment to try me, but I did not expect to lose control over myself. I could have never

predicted the old wounds would hurt so much and push me to insult a lord.

I trust the kami, but their way is not always easy to understand. Maybe I am too weak to be their servant. The days when I was filled with hatred are not that far behind. I still remember a time when the ocean inside me was a storm, swallowing everything around me. Yet, even more painfully, I still remember Mishue and the day it all began; the day she died.

Her image flies before my eyes and deep inside I feel a hint of the pain I thought long gone. Mishue, my witch, my beloved witch, how I wish you were here today, by my side, giving me the advice I need so desperately. But to my right there is nothing but the empty darkness, and I am alone with Reishi.

I first saw Mishue thirteen years ago, back when I was still a fisher. I saw her on the beach of the Japan Sea in the morning mist; she was bathing in the rising sun. Her movement was so gracious, her face so beautiful. I could not look away from her, slowly floating next to the green sea. I knew I was in love with the woman in the black kimono. The strongest desire I felt in my entire life was a pale shadow compared to what I felt for her in that perfect moment.

I returned the next day and the day after; I could not live without her presence. The other fishers warned me, laughing; they said I was in love with a sea demon or worse, with a witch. They warned me I was going to lose myself but I smiled sheepishly and continued spying on my beloved demon. I knew she was a witch, she had to be; no human could be so perfect. Yet I did not care; I was in love, true love for the first time in my life.

Soon, as everything in our world, the happiness of the first days was shattered. As the winter months approached I knew I was not going to see her again. The storms were going to wash the beaches and she would be gone. I considered a plan, as simple as it was desperate. One cold morning I raced towards her pale shape and kneeling at her feet I asked to become her apprentice. I begged, I implored, I gave her all the reasons possible and I argued a long time. She remained silent until I was done.

“Yoshi, first of all, rise and look me in the eyes. My name is Mishue. I would like you to call me that and consider me your friend.”

“How do you know my name, lady?” I said still bowing my head in respect.

“I’m a witch, Yoshi. You wouldn’t expect less of me, would you?” Mishue said as she lifted my chin. Her eyes were the purest green and my heart raced as she spoke to me. “The journey you want to embark on is long and by no means easy. You will hate yourself for this decision and you will hate me. This hatred will consume you and your soul will be nothing but a bleeding wound begging to be filled with worthless lies. You will have to abandon yourself and purify your soul. In the end you will lose everything and become the pawn of the kami. Only then will you be truly saved.

“As a friend I beg you to remain in your small world and live your life without ever learning the will of the heavens. I have warned you, the choice is yours.”

I heard her words but I did not understand them. I would have done anything to be close to Mishue. Happily, I agreed and she smiled bitterly. That day we walked away together and so began my long apprenticeship with Mishue, the witch.

The past is gone in a cloud of lilac smoke and I look at Reishi. He is too busy placing his tiles to notice my absent smile. He is winning and he is enjoying every moment of it.

“You see, fisher,” he finally says after half the board is his. “You are going to lose this game and your freedom along with it. Why? Because you are proud and vain. Do you think the gods would choose someone like you to carry their will? You have traveled long and you have faced many lesser samurai, or so the stories claim. Yet you show so little knowledge it shocks me.

“I wanted to see what kind of man you are but there is no honor or knowledge to your name. I look forward to seeing you die.”

He moves another tile, another small victory, and then he continues.

“I was truly curious, why would someone choose the life of an outlaw and live in shame. I was wondering if you wanted to start

your own clan or make a name for yourself and become a thief. But neither money nor power seem to attract you, fisher. So tell me, what is it that keeps you walking on your path? What desire powers your pitiful life?"

The board in front of me is almost completely covered with his black tiles. Time is running out and I must make my decision. I barely hear his words as thoughts and feelings rush through my mind. All these years I have followed the law the kami dictated to me, until today. Now, I am filled with doubt. Is it my will that commanded me to be here today? Did I want to face Reishi for what he did so long ago against me and my love? I must be a blade, but blades should not question themselves. Blades must learn the lesson and move on. Those are the words of Mishue, the words she taught me so long ago.

Many of her lessons I only understood much later, many others much too late. She taught me everything she knew for over three years. She showed me the ways of a wizard and the ways of the world; she taught me many things about the power the kami gave us and most importantly about the power the kami had over us. Mishue showed me how to reach peace and warned me about the dangers of hatred and revenge. Every lesson was meaningful and each one shaped my life, but none was as important as her final lesson.

It was a cold autumn day when she brought me back to the shore of the Japan Sea, where I first saw her. That day, she was wearing a red kimono and her hair was pinned up in a complicated design. She was more beautiful than ever and I loved her more than life itself.

That day it was a while until she finally spoke to me and I was worried she was angry. Instead her voice was filled with sadness.

"Yoshi, I have taught you everything I can. Now, only the kami can teach you." For a moment she fell silent. When she spoke again she seemed pained by the words she had to say. "I know you followed me because you loved me but this will end now. Your fate is not next to me. I beg you to leave and forget me now, I beg you as a friend."

Her words rang in my ears over and over again. Through the years

I paid so much attention not to show my love, not to let her know why I followed her that first day, but all along she knew.

“If you knew why did you accept me? If you know, how can you send me away? You must know how much I love you! I cannot live without you! Don’t send me away; I beg of you. There is so much more I can learn. I beg of you!”

Mishue listened to my cry, smiling in her perfect way.

“Every man has a prophecy, a mission from the gods. It was my mission to teach you, and it is your mission to leave now. Do not ask me more, please.”

For a second I looked into her eyes and the words came to my lips before I could stop. Anger filled me and burst in quick sentences of ancient tongues. The curse flew towards her beautiful face and Mishue barely turned away. I was ready to curse her again but it was too late. Her hands flew in the air and traced complicated red patterns of light. I fell down gagging and she approached me smiling.

“My dear Yoshi, look at what your passion does. As long as we are side by side you will always be riddled with doubt and fear, fear of losing me, fear of losing yourself. Do you not understand? We are wizards; we are the blades of the gods. We are not free to love or hate, we have lost everything and we must embrace the emptiness, so as to serve the gods.”

She closed in and by placing one long, delicate finger on my mouth, she stilled my struggle to break free.

“Yoshi, I wanted to spare you the pain and hatred you will feel against me, but there is no other way. I will die tonight. Around midnight the Shinoji samurai will execute me. The new Shinoji lord, Reishi Shinoji, is afraid of my powers. He asked me to help kill his father and his brother. I helped him because my prophecy ordered me to do so and today he becomes the new ruler of the Shinoji clan. He is consumed by fear and he hopes that by killing me, he will be liberated. Instead his anger will grow and he will bring ruin to the Shinoji clan. He is a fool but such is this world.”

Still smiling, she looked me in the eyes and stopped my protests.

“I know you want me to run, I know you love me, but understand. This is my prophecy, yours and his. It has to be done. There can be only one servant to the kami and from now on, that will be you. Learn the lesson; abandon your past and your feelings. Serve the kami well.

It is the greatest honor possible.”

I finally broke from her spell and screamed my anger. I yelled at her for not running, for dying like an animal ready for slaughter. I cursed the will of the gods and I swore revenge. I yelled for a long time and Mishue only stood there smiling.

“Why would I run? I have seen my prophecy. I am to die today and I accept that. I am nothing but the vessel of my destiny. The Mishue you love is long dead. Accept that, understand the lesson and move on.”

I could not bear to see her serene face and listen to her talk so peacefully about death, so I ran. I fled, leaving my beloved witch behind, leaving my past. I ran and my feet carried me through streets I never walked before. I hit crowds of people and I screamed at them and I ran further. Sparks of emerald green, just like Mishue’s eyes, spread from my fingertips and danced around me. I heard the screams:

“Beware! He’s possessed by demons!”

The only demon inside me was my past and I was running from it as fast as I could. It took a long time until I could stop. My feet took me to an old temple with mahogany doors and tall red columns. It was there that I collapsed in front of a shrine to a god I did not know and I prayed for Mishue. I prayed like I had never prayed before. I prayed for her, I prayed for myself, I prayed for freedom. I mumbled words and half-forgotten prayers, crying, until I fell asleep on the cold stone slabs.

When I awoke, I knew it was done. The sun was shining through a broken window and an old woman was slowly wiping the floor. I walked into the bright autumn sun and I knew Mishue was dead. With my eyes closed I could see her, in a red kimono, waiting in her room, with the same serene smile she had the last time I saw her.

The door collapses somewhere far away. Footsteps echo on the wooden stairs and three samurai cut through the sonji paper into her room. They wear golden masks of horror and their katana are bloody. She smiles in her red kimono and a red scarf flows away.

My apprenticeship was complete. My master was dead. I was the new master. I could feel it, inside me. I could hear it as my prophecy rang clearly in my ears. All around I could see the signs of the kami and I finally understood what Mishue meant. I had to abandon myself

and my anger, I had to accept the will of the gods and understand there was no good, no bad, just the balance of the world.

The understanding came easily, like a veil that was lifted from my eyes. Serenity took many years. My first impulse that morning was to kill everyone wearing the white orchid of the Shinoji house and to burn their palace to the ground. I could not let myself do that. I was just a blade for the gods, for the kami and for the balance of this world. My powers were not mine to use as I saw fit. I had to obey or I would fall much deeper than Reishi Shinoji. I had to keep away from the Shinoji clan until the kami saw fit to lead my steps back and restore the balance of the world.

The pain lingered on for years and the anger took even longer to disappear. I traveled a lot, learning more about myself and the world, hoping to become a perfect servant. The kami guided me and gave me small tasks and challenges. I perfected my powers and the ocean inside me calmed down until it was a perfect reflection of the skies. I was left pure and ready to serve my masters. I knew my destiny and I was saved.

The last tile is turned and I lose. It doesn't matter anymore. I have seen Mishue die again, I have seen myself and I have felt the peace of complete abandonment once more. I am a blade and blades feel nothing. I am here because my prophecy has commanded me and I oblige. That is all there is to it.

Reishi grins at me.

“It seems you owe me something, fisher. But I am a gracious lord, you can choose if you want to be hung as a warning to others or become my slave. I might even allow you to...”

“Have you ever heard of the name Mishue?” I say while slowly rising to my feet. This game has carried on too long. It ends now.

He looks puzzled for a second but his grin is even larger. “She was a witch, a pathetic one too. She received an end too noble for her kin.”

“She was my master.” I reply simply as I feel anger leaving my body. The feeling of dread is gone, replaced by a perfect calm. The gods have me, once more.

“Hah, as master as follower, pathetic!” Reishi laughs as hidden doors slide open and his samurai enter the room. Archers soon follow, ready to fire.

“I used to love her. I was afraid it might cloud my judgment when this day came. I was wrong. I only needed to trust the kami.”

Reishi motions his men and they charge, swords drawn. Before the first two can reach me, my hand bursts into emerald flames. They stop for a second, more than I need. The words of my prophecy flow into the air and I trace ancient symbols that linger, burning green, in the dark. Everything is clear and I am ready for my fate.

“There was a man who lost everything he had. So his ancestors came to him, worried he would go insane.”

A flash of green light engulfs the warriors and they fall to the ground as their lifeless bodies crumble into dust. It is a painless death and the kami will accept their souls as the good servants they were.

Arrows cut the air and I trace another set of symbols.

“But when the kami reached him, the man was laughing and this made the spirits wonder, was he insane? The man answered: “I am nothing but the will of the gods.”

The arrows remain floating in the cool air and I smile with pride. It was a hard spell to master, but it is perfect. The sharp steel flies back and pierces the light armors of the archers before they can move. As I finish my prophecy, I am left alone with Reishi.

“I know I have lost everything, but only now am I free to reach salvation.”

The lord glances at me with hate and disbelief.

“It is all for that witch, isn’t it?” he slowly mutters, trying to understand.

“No. I loved her and I couldn’t live without her. I am long dead and buried. I died the day you killed her. What you see is nothing but a prophecy, a servant listening to the gods and doing their bidding. I am an ocean of calmness waiting for the end of it all.”

My hands fly into the air and green flames spread, covering the dark room of the Shinoji lord. I end his life quickly and I let the house burn.

As I walk away from the burning palace, life-sized statues burst into dust. I brush the scorched white orchids and they crumble into ashes. I step under arches of flames, on the winding cobblestone path

going down Kiroto hill. The Shinoji clan is no more. I thank the kami for this and I thank Mishue for her advice. I am never alone, I must never forget that. Her kami will always watch over me and guide my will with lessons of the past. For this honor I thank the gods, they are kind to me, their humble blade.