



Special Double Issue!
OG's Speculative Fiction
Issue #24

Poetry by Bruce Golden
G.O. Clark

Stories by D. Thomas Minton
Darien Cox
David Tallerman
Jeremiah Hawkins
S. Hutson Blount
Travis Heermann

JEFF WATSON

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #24

May

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Cover Art: *The Dark Lord* by Jeff Ward

Jeff Ward has won several art show awards at Science Fiction conventions including: Tropicon XVIII, Orycon 18, and Constellation XV: Aquilla. Jeff continues to illustrate book covers and magazines. Most recently he's been focusing his abilities on creating eye-catching illustrations for the gaming industry.

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Editor's Letter

I am excited to bring you our latest issue. It is our 24th issue and one of our best to date. It is over one hundred pages of great reading, easily the biggest issue in our history.

It is also special in another sense. It marks four full years of being out on the market. I consider this a great accomplishment in the light of the way the market has changed over the years.

I remember going to the store and searching through the magazine section, hoping that there was still a copy of Asimov's or Fantasy and Science Fiction or Analog. Those were the only science fiction and fantasy magazines our local bookstore carried and perhaps an afternoon of reading enjoyment. Then it was a considerable wait (and at that age, a month took forever to pass) until there were new issues on the stands.

These days though there are more markets out there than there are fantasy and science books published in a year. The internet and the ease of creating your own site have made this possible. If you haven't checked around, do so. There are some incredible magazines out there that readers just haven't discovered yet. You could read for months and probably never read all the stories out there.

That's why we are truly thankful. You are here reading ours.

Once again we want to thank you for choosing to read our magazine, for supporting us these four years and making OG's Speculative Fiction a place writers want to see their work published.

-SC

The Fine Art of Surfacing

by D. Thomas Minton

D. Thomas Minton resides in Hawaii with his wife, daughter and three and three-quarter cats (one has only three legs!). Writing is his first passion, but it doesn't pay the bills, so he moonlights as a marine biologist and prefers to spend his work day underwater. His fiction has appeared in OG's Speculative Fiction and Kasma Magazine and he was recently a finalist in the Writers of the Future Contest.

The ferrotop applicator snorted and spat out steaming slabs of pavement. My crew, wearing thermal boots, followed behind the machine pushing the still pliable material snugly against the curb with hand spreaders.

I leaned on my spreader, staring glassy-eyed at the gravel base that stretched half a kilometer ahead. Between the stones, sprigs of frontier weed pushed upward. The weed was tough, invasive, and the main reason I was still employed. A curse in every respect.

“Yo, boss. You just going to stand there dripping on our brand-spanking new road?”

Jackson stood amid swirls of acrid steam, sweat coursing down his face. Along his jaw bone, bio-modified pores reabsorbed his sweat. Jackson was the last of my crew to have undergone the outpatient procedure at Dr. Handley's clinic, so now every spreader on Neddalan IV had the bio-modification. Except me.

My sweat sizzled and danced on the ferrotop.

Jackson's smile wilted under my gaze. He turned back to his spreader.

I wiped my brow and looked up at the sun, fuzzy and brown through the city's polarized dome. I checked my watch. Almost quitting time, and it couldn't come too soon. I needed weekends like a spacer needed his pressurized suit.

My RPD vibrated in the pocket of my work pants. Its winking orange LED told me I had an off-world info-packet waiting.

Off-world? I didn't know anyone off-world.

I raised the RPD to my left eye. After a quick calibrating scan, the device projected the video portion of the info-packet onto my retina and vibrated the audio through my orbital bones to my ears.

“Mr. Miles Alman,” said a balding, middle-aged man. “I am Bartholomew Howe, head of the zero-g design division of Interstellar Corp.—” I fumbled

my RPD but managed to catch it before it landed in the soft pavement. Why was Bartholomew Howe contacting me? How did he even know I existed?

I put the RPD back against my eye and the message resumed where it had left off.

“—I received your portfolio, and I’m impressed with your work. Your designs are refreshingly retro. You know what they say, ten years ago is the new today—”

My portfolio? I’d never submitted a portfolio.

“—I want to offer you a design position in our group working on the new solar harvester at Deneb Major. I’ve tightbeamed some information on the project and a compensation package for your review. I think you’ll find it very generous. This project is moving quickly, so I’ll need your answer within two standard days.” He left his galactic coordinates so I could contact him and signed off with a cheery, “I look forward to you joining our team.”

I continued to stare into the RPD for several minutes after the message had stopped. I didn’t know what to think except that this must be some kind of mistake. But the info-packet had been addressed to me, so it must have been genuine. It didn’t seem possible, but I had been offered a zero-g design position with the largest firm in the galactic arm.

My stomach clenched.

It had been seven years since I had done any professional design work. A quake that had opened a caustic sulfide fissure had indefinitely delayed Neddalan IV’s terraforming timeline. The set back had resulted in everyone in the planet’s now superfluous Structural Design Division to be reassigned. I had been transferred to Surface Maintenance, where I was qualified to do nothing other than spread ferrotop. At first I was bitter, but eventually I reconciled the fact I would never use my design skills again. Unless I moved off-world.

The thought of leaving gave me the shakes and would have given me the sweats if I hadn’t already been standing on fifty degree C ferrotop. Neddalan IV was my home. I’d been born and raised here. I had friends and family here.

Family.

Mary.

My jaw clenched. My sister was the only one who would have done something like this to me.

“Yo, boss. You just going to stand there all weekend lowering the property values?” Jackson asked. He stowed his spreader in the rack along the side of the ferrotop applicator. Around me the rest of the crew discussed

their weekend plans as they shed their thermal gear.

A nimbus of dread hung over me, and I struggled for air. How could Mary do this to me? I couldn't make a decision like this. Not in two days. I felt faint. My breathing slowed only when I decided that the best thing to do was to ignore it for tonight. It wasn't going anywhere, whereas I was supposed to be meeting John and Mary at Nero's in less than hour.

* * *

The band's pounding electronic barrage assaulted me as I entered Nero's Emporium. A quintet writhed on stage under a flood of multicolored lights and fake fog. Grinding feedback stabbed from the speakers towering to both sides of the stage. The band was a fission reaction gone amok, so involved in their musical "genius" that they had forgotten the crowd and embarked on an overture full of intensity, power and pomposity. It was utterly incoherent, but no one seemed to mind.

On the dance floor, the strobe lights played off bio-modified bodies. A pair of winged dancers monopolized half of the floor. A woman with four arms, each sporting phosphorescent jewelry, danced with a short man whose skin sparkled in the flashing lights. Next to them, a man undulated in a manner that defied skeletal rigidity. Three women had hair sculpted into elaborate asymmetrical displays; the coifs moved of their own accord to the music. At the edge of the dance floor, two identical-looking women argued about who was there first and which of them should leave.

John was already at our usual table. He had changed since last weekend. Gone was the chloroplast implant; his skin no longer glowed green. I hadn't expected him to keep that one for long. He prided himself on his tan, even if it was pill induced.

I slid into the chair next to him.

"Miles! You made it. You had me worried there for a while." John yelled so I could hear him. He smiled and I noted his new set of teeth.

I shrugged.

He activated the table's short range sonic impeder, and the band's noise dropped about seventy decibels. "Work got you down?"

I placed an order with the automated bartender for a new concoction that sounded fancy and whose hologram looked like something that should be on display in Neddalan IV's Museum of Classical Modern Art. A set of mechanical arms sprouted out of the table top and began to mix it.

"You should quit that job," John said. "You're over-qualified."

I took my drink from the bartender and sipped it, making sure to get a

lick of the salt and Lartratian spice that rimmed the glass. Other than the spice, it was bland, tasting like all of the other drinks at Nero's. I sighed. At least it looked good.

"You're good enough to be doing zero-g architecture with one of those big firms."

My eyes narrowed. "You knew about it?"

"Knew about what?"

John and my sister had lived together for the past two years, but other than picking up the annoying habit of offering me career advice, the two of them seemed to have nothing in common. His confused look told me he hadn't been involved in Mary's latest exploit.

"I'm just saying, you're too good for that job."

I nearly rolled my eyes. I hated it when John got onto his "you're-too-good-to-be-laying-ferrotop" rant. Fortunately, with John I had a foolproof tactic: change the topic.

"Where's Mary?"

John's face darkened. "Where else? At the lab. Something about a terraforming doodad or something or other malfunctioning." He blew out the flame on the top of his drink and sucked down about half of the sparkling liquid. He slammed the glass back on the tabletop and the flame re-lit itself with a flash and an audible *whoop*. "I never get to see her anymore, except when she drags in about a quarter to one. Then she's off again at half-past five."

I winced. I hadn't realized their hot-cold relationship had cycled into sub-artic. Time to change the topic again. "My power was out last night. I couldn't clean my paint gun or my hands." I wiggled my fingers, flashing sea green paint crusted under my nails.

"I thought you just painted your place."

I shrugged. "I did."

"You know, Miles, if you're not happy, go see Dr. Handley and get a pair of wings or something. They'll lift your spirit."

"Too superfic—" I bit off my words.

"There's nothing superficial about it." John finished his drink and slid the glass to the automated bartender for a refill.

I arched an eyebrow. "Today, my ferrotop operator shows up with a prehensile tail—"

"Kinky."

"—and he can't fit in the layer cab. What good is that? Did he need the tail?"

"Did you fire him? There's a clause in his contract isn't there?"

“No. And yes.”

“Yes, you fired him?”

“No, I didn’t. He has a family and two kids.”

“So?” John tossed a handful of Salt ‘n’ Crunchy snacks into his mouth.

“No, I didn’t fire him,” I said. “I put him on the gravel crew. It shorted us at the laying end but—”

“But now you’re short.”

“So?”

John shrugged and turned his attention toward the stage. He pretended to be interested in the music, but I could tell he was watching a woman at the next table showing off her twelve-centimeter tongue to her friends.

The band’s discordance eventually fell apart as the musicians got into an argument. The guitar player put his foot through the bass drum, triggering a fist fight. They took a break to work out their creative differences, and I suspected they wouldn’t be back until tomorrow.

I leaned closer to John. “There’s better ways to spend your money.”

“Like how?” His surprise looked genuine.

I smiled, feeling smug. “Fine art.”

“Screw you.” John slammed his drink down on the table and stumbled off into the crowd.

I felt more guilty than satisfied. I sipped my drink, but it had gone sour so I pushed it away across the table. A woman bumped into my chair and spilled her drink on me, before stumbling away without apologizing. My mood turned dark.

Any hope of a relaxing weekend was gone. This was all Mary’s fault.

* * *

I lived in a small one-bedroom flat in the last remaining pre-fab ferro-concrete building assembled by the original settlers. Twenty-story structures of newer Post-Colonial design crowded around it like fangirls on the latest holo-vid star, cutting off any breeze from the air circulators.

The elevator wasn’t working again, so I stomped my way up to the third floor. When I opened my apartment door, the reek of fresh-dried paint flooded the hallway as if my apartment were undergoing rapid decompression. I stumbled inside but left the door open. Past experience told me it would take an hour to ventilate the room to a tolerable state. It’d take less time if I could generate a cross-current, but the only window in my flat I kept tightly covered with a large hologram of the Home World’s orbiting solar harvester. Even with the unfortunate olfactory side-effect, the hologram was better

than looking at or listening to Dr. Handley's advert-board across the street.

I unloaded the contents of my pocket onto a side table and collapsed onto the drop-cloth covered couch. My RPD blinked, reminding me that I had an unopened info-packet from Bartholomew Howe. I stared at the walls instead.

Two and half walls were a pleasant sea green. The other walls in the apartment were still half white and half Sol-Sun Yellow. Originally, I had started with the yellow, but before I had finished covering the white, I knew yellow was wrong. So I started over with "Tropical Ocean Mist," which, according to the paint catalogue, was a "subtle hue capturing the liquid tranquility of the Home World oceans, guaranteed to sooth the ragged soul." I had never seen an ocean. Perhaps the color achieved its effect by triggering some primordial response buried deep in the genome of every human. Regardless of the mechanism, I knew after one wall that the green would be perfect.

I couldn't say if it was the sea green color or the infusion of fresh air from the hallway, but my mood improved. I wasn't tired so I picked up my paint gun and went to work. Several hours later, the door buzzer sounded.

I activated the vid-com. When I saw who was standing on the stoop of my building, I scowled, but quickly pushed it into a smile.

"Hi, sis. What brings you by?"

Mary leaned into the camera and her face filled the screen. "Can I come up, Miles?"

I hesitated for a moment, wondering what would happen if she came up. Then I worried that she had noticed my hesitation. Any moment, she would figure out the reason for my delay.

"Miles?"

Now she looked worried. She was my sister, and with our parents having passed away three years ago, I was the only family she had.

"Come on up," I said.

Her image crackled and went black.

My stomach began to ache. Mary was smart enough to figure out what was going on. That would lead to an argument. She would find a way to make what she had done my fault—she had a knack for that—and I'd be left guilt-ridden and without answers. I realized, however, that I didn't want answers; I wanted an apology.

"I'm sorry, Miles," Mary said.

I nearly dropped my paint gun. "You are?" I couldn't believe how easy that had been. I crossed the room, my arms outstretched to give her a hug, but she stepped back and threw out a blocking hand.

“You’ll get paint on my new suit.”

I stopped short, and that’s when I noticed a satchel and her garment bag on the carpet just inside the door.

She noticed my gaze. “I didn’t know where else to go. I’ve left John.”

I took a step back and crossed my arms in front of me. “So what are you sorry about?”

She started to say something but stopped. She studied her hands. “I know how hard it was for you the last time, so I’m sorry to intrude on you again so soon. I just need time to...”

The last time she had left John—only about a month ago—she had become my roommate for nearly two weeks. After one week, I had been ready to strap her to the belly of a space tug bound for the Procyon frontier. Fortunately, she had settled her tiff with John and had moved back into their apartment before I did something I would have regretted.

“I have no where else to go, Miles.”

I grimaced. “Come on.”

I showed her where she could store her bags and gave her a corner of the bathroom counter. She promptly filled it with bottles of squirt hair spray, nail polish, rose and melon colored eye shadow and other cosmetics that I couldn’t fathom. Half a dozen plastic lipstick cylinders rolled out of her section, cluttering up the area near my toothpaste tube. I didn’t want to see anything more coming out her bag because each item seemed to represent an additional day she would stay, so I returned to my painting.

I should have known she wasn’t here to apologize. She never did, but she had never gone this far before either. I noticed that I had been painting the same swath of wall over and over and moved on.

“Is it hot in here?” Mary asked, poking her head out of the bathroom. She disappeared back inside and I heard more bottles clatter onto the counter.

I wiped my face with the front of my shirt and muttered an invective. It was always hot in here. Another unfortunate side-effect of the hologram and a hundred-and-sixteen-year-old building with a dodgy air circulator.

Apparently finished with disgorging beauty supplies onto the bathroom counter, she came out into the living room. “Weren’t you painting the last time I was here? I thought you were going with yellow.”

“Too bright.”

“The green’s good.” She chewed her lip as she surveyed a wall. I could tell she wanted to talk, but was waiting for me to prompt her.

“So what’d John do this time?”

Mary sighed. She sat on the couch and paged through one of my dozen architecture holo-mags. After a few seconds flipping pages, she closed it,

folding the 3-D picture of Sirius V's revolutionary Apogee Lift back in between the ends. "He's acting like an ass." She blew out a puff of air, lifting her bangs. "I've been working hard lately and when I do have time, he's always busy. All he seems to have time for anymore is that stuff he calls his art. It's not like he's sold a piece in the last seven years. Our whole apartment is filled with it. When he does manage to find a few seconds, all he does is jump me in bed and then roll over.

"I told him last week that I wanted some romance. You know what he did? He went out and got a penis mod. Now he's got this thing that could pass for a landing strut on an intergalactic freighter between his legs."

Her face grew redder and redder. Eventually, the heat must have overloaded her larynx because she started to stutter around for words. Finally she just stopped talking.

I was about to reply, when the building began to tremble. Two architecture texts, collector items, fell off a shelf, landing open on the floor. A stack of scale building models tumbled off the coffee table. I tried to catch them, but they landed in a heap. Several roofs popped off.

Mary yelped.

A loud pop cracked through the room. My hologram pendulumed on its remaining bolt for two swings and then crashed to the floor. After a second in which it seemed to consider its various options, the hologram fell face down on the carpet.

The apartment lights dimmed; paint drizzled out of my spray gun and down my hand.

"Ack." I caught paint drops as I ran to the sink. "When are these quakes and brown outs going to stop?"

Mary followed me into the kitchen. She leaned on the counter, suddenly looking exhausted. Lines creased the corners of her eyes. "We're doing what we can, but that rift's got the entire terraforming team stumped. We're losing the biological converters because of rising water acidity."

The power returned and I rinsed my hands under the sonicator.

She glanced up at the light fixtures as they dimmed again. "Over where I live, the power doesn't fluctuate like this."

"You and John live in a newer building."

I struggled with the heavy hologram. Mary lent a hand, and we propped it up against the window pane. Thankfully, the hologram plate was undamaged.

"There's no reason you need to live here."

"This is what I can afford." I nearly kicked in the hologram the moment I said those words.

“You could fix that if you’d actually try to do something other than spread pavement. You’re good enough to do real architecture.” Mary picked up one of the scale models from the floor. “This stuff is good. You graduated at the top of your class—”

Out of habit, I began to tune her out. It seemed like every time I saw her these days she started into it and unlike John, once she got going there was no way to deflect her onto another topic. She was like a killer asteroid on a collision course with Planet Miles, and there was no nuclear warhead large enough to save life as I knew it.

“—I don’t know why you don’t think you’re good enough? You excelled in zero-g design. You even won the Twelve Planets Contest. That’s no small feat—”

I examined the hologram’s hanging bolts; they had been ripped clean out. Re-hanging it would not be easy.

Outside the window, Dr. Handley pointed an unusually long finger at me from his monstrous advert-board. “Need a change?” his voice blared. “Come see Dr. Handley.”

I considered throwing the bolts at him.

“—Sure, there are no zero-g firms on Neddalan IV, but you used to always talk about designing for one of the big companies—”

I felt the blood rise in my face. “You mean like Interstellar Corp?”

Mary took a step back. Her wide eyes blinked several times. I had never seen her surprised like this before. I didn’t know how to react.

“So... did you get the job?” she asked. “You did. You got an offer, didn’t you?”

I shook my hands in frustration. “You don’t get it, do you? I never asked for your help.”

She came at me and poked me in the sternum with her finger. I retreated, but she followed me into the kitchen. “You’re good enough to make that jump. It makes me sick to see you settle for working the road crew. Look at you, Miles. You’re miserable and wallowing in it. What are you afraid of?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You—”

“Let it drop.”

Mary folded her arms across her breasts. Her lips pressed into a tight line and creases furrowed her forehead.

Sweat ran down the back of my neck. Mary’s disapproving glare made the room feel twenty degrees hotter; the tension was thick enough that it was hard for me to move. I could see she wasn’t going to let this drop. She was simply regrouping for another assault. Her silence and glare were the

pre-charge artillery fire to soften my defenses.

Fortunately, a loud beeping granted me a reprieve.

Mary answered her RPD. Based on the deepening rift lines on her forehead, it wasn't good news.

"I've got to get down to the lab," she said. "That last quake damaged the vapor exchange tower in the northeast basin." She rushed around collecting her security ident-card, shuttle pass, palm interface, and a cylinder of lip gloss from the bathroom counter. She paused in the doorway and pointed a finger at me. "We'll talk more when I get back." Then she was gone.

Adrenaline had my hands shaking so hard I needed to grip the edge of the kitchen counter to steady them. My life was none of her business and she needed to stop intruding. I may not have had the best job or the nicest apartment, but at least I knew what I had. Neddellan IV was home; it was safe. Out there? Who knew what would happen.

My stomach felt like it was dissolving itself; I could almost hear the acid burning holes in it. I needed her out, but I couldn't just throw her onto street. I needed her to move back home. That meant patching things up with John.

* * *

"She sent you, didn't she?" John's holographic image floated before me. His hair was long now and strawberry blonde. He had put on a few pounds of solid bio-modified muscle since last night. "Why do you always take her side?"

"I don't. I actually hate getting involved, but she's my sister and you're my friend."

John scrunched his lips together. "Okay, come on up." His image cracked and faded.

John and Mary lived in a spacious studio apartment on the fortieth floor of a building designed by Vincent Defore. They were high enough above the surrounding allometal and reinforced titanocrete structures to view the sunrise through the dome, though I doubted either of them ever saw it. Mary was usually at work hours before light ever washed the sky, and John seldom dragged his bones from bed before noon.

John sat at his workbench and didn't stop what he was doing when I came up behind him. I hovered over his shoulder.

He paused and gave me a disapproving glare.

"She didn't send me."

"Uh-huh."

John turned back to his bench. He worked the controls, an array of knobs,

buttons and joysticks. Gradually, a sphere of blue energy expanded behind a protective shield. John fiddled a worn knob, adjusting the strength of the magnetic field until the plasma ball was the size of his head.

“Then why did you come over?” he asked.

“Just to visit. It’s the weekend you know.”

“Uh-huh.”

John worked another set of knobs and switches on the console, and a small spigot hummed as it rose up out of the bench. He pulled a silvery glove over his right hand. The spigot head floated around the plasma, mirroring John’s hand movements. Periodically, a cloud of liquid metal misted out of the end, hardening around the energy ball and forming a metal sphere. John continued to maneuver the spigot, thickening the metal crust in some areas, leaving it thin in others.

“There’s nothing to say,” he said after several minutes of work.

By then I was examining one of John’s sculptures, a reclining nude that I hoped wasn’t my sister. Although made with the exact same technique, each of John’s pieces was different. Piled on a synth-wood table near the ceiling-to-floor window were sculptures of two people making love in zero gravity, a landscape of grotesque trees that resembled twisted men, and a group of buddies sitting around a table, exchanging drinks and stories. Others, vaguely resembling people or animals that I had seen in books, filled a wall curio near the bathroom door. A collection of elaborate landscapes was neatly aligned on the couch end tables. Still more, best described as metallic personifications of the intangible, were stacked in a corner. His work was high-quality, but, as Mary had said, John hadn’t sold a piece in nearly seven years.

“She left me,” John said. “She said I was inconsiderate and didn’t care about her feelings.” He applied more atom-thick layers of metal over the plasma ball. “She said she wanted more romance in our relationship, so I went out and got a little better equipped for it. Was she happy? No. I did it because that’s what she wanted. Isn’t it?”

“Not exactly —”

“Then I’ll get it chopped off!” He spun from his chair. “How am I supposed to know what she wants? She never talks to me anymore. All she ever says to me is ‘you’ve got to change.’” He said the words in a falsetto imitation of Mary’s voice. “How much is a guy supposed to change? And what about her? All she does is work. I see her maybe twenty minutes a day, and believe me, this last week, that’s been too much.” He slumped onto his stool.

“Damn. Now she’s gone and ruined my work. That’s another thing. She

doesn't appreciate my work anymore. She thinks I sit around here all day whacking to holo-porn. I put in a good ten hours a day, and just because eighty percent of it's planning doesn't mean I'm goofing off."

"She wants to work things out," I said. "You know, change things. You want to change things, right?"

John shot me a skeptical glance.

"Look," I said, pulling over a chair and sitting down. "Both of you need to make some changes for this relationship to work. Real changes. Mary's willing to do that."

"She said that?"

I feigned surprise at his doubt. I hadn't actually seen Mary since that morning. "Of course," I said. "Aren't you?"

"Real change this time?"

"Come to my place tonight and talk to her."

An uncomfortable silence ensued. I wanted him to say something, to agree or even disagree. But he just sat there, looking at me. "It doesn't look too bad," I said, nodding my head toward the metal sphere. A large glob of metal on one side made it look more oblong than round.

John's gaze drilled into me. He stabbed a button on the workbench, releasing the magnetic field. Pimples appeared on the metal surface, growing larger as the trapped plasma expanded. The thin area of the metal ball burst loudly, leaving the thick side intact. The mangled edges glowed and congealed into thick beads. The resulting sculpture looked like a melted bomb fragment.

"Nero's," he said. "That's neutral ground at least."

* * *

I found John at our usual table.

"Is Mary here yet?" I asked, sliding into the seat next to him.

I had talked to her immediately after leaving John. I had given her the same story as I had given him, and, like John, she had been skeptical. When I told her that this might be her last chance to patch things up, she agreed to meet him at Nero's at eight.

"She's probably too busy at work to come," John said.

"She'll be here." I hoped my voice had more confidence in it than I felt. I avoided John's eyes by watching the band cut through a set of generic pop songs. Between each number, I looked toward the door. Eventually they finished their set and I couldn't avoid him any longer.

"You know, that's just like her," John said. "Here I sit, a changed man,

and she doesn't even show up. Same old Mary, not concerned with *us*, but with her work. This afternoon, I went out and got... it reduced. You know, to show her I'm willing to change for her, and she doesn't even show up. I should have left it on; I could have used it with one of these other girls."

"I'm sure the shuttle's just running late." Even I didn't believe that.

"Maybe she just doesn't care anymore." John shoved his debit card into the slot on the table. He drummed his fingers as he waited. The card popped out and John snatched it from the slot. He pushed his way across the dance floor and disappeared into the swirl of bio-modified bodies.

With him went any hope of returning to my life. I didn't know what I was going to do about Mary, and that gave me a headache.

I finished my drink and ordered another; then I copped a dope stick from a neon green woman and smoked it to a stub. The mild narcotic put me in a mellow, slightly incoherent state. I dozed off for a while, dreamed about a monster with Mary's face chasing me through the streets with a ferrotop spreader, and woke up with an upset stomach. An hour later, I felt better and was ready to head home. Just as I finished paying my bill, Mary appeared at the table. Her hair was in disarray and she still wore the same powder blue suit as this morning.

"Where's John?"

"Nice of you to finally make it. You're only—" I squinted at my watch "—three hours late."

"I know." She slumped into the chair across from me. "We had a malfunction on converter seventeen and had to do a cold reset. Nothing we do is working on that sulfide leak. It just keeps spewing out from the core. Why didn't you keep him here?"

"How was I supposed to do that?"

"He's your best friend, Miles. You could have kept him here if you had wanted. Or was it too much work?"

"That's not fair."

"You may be content to sit around and mope about your lot, but some of us are working hard to make changes."

"How's that terraforming coming? Or your relationship?"

Mary flinched. "You can be mad at me all you want Miles, but at least I'm trying. You're content to sit in your crappy apartment surrounded by pictures of what you want. You've got a chance to do something you've always talked about doing. If it doesn't work out, you can always come home. But no! You're going to piss it all away so you can keep painting the same four walls over and over. What are you afraid of?"

My face got red hot and my fingers tightened around my debit card. The

plastic edge cut into my palm. How did this become about me? “I don’t have to listen to this, here or anywhere. I want you out. Tonight.” I pushed my way through the crowd leaving Mary alone at the table, her head in her hands.

* * *

My shuttle home pulled away just as I came out of Nero’s. I pounded on the side as it accelerated, but it didn’t stop. It left me standing in a swirling vortex of dust, shaking my fist and throwing curses as it veered down Eighth Avenue.

The city fell quiet, nestled in that trough of dead hours between when the working stiffs went home and the night crowd emerged. It’d be at least another hour until the next shuttle.

I had always liked this sector of the city, with its post-colonization flair and classical lines, but it gave me no comfort now. I sat on the curb to wait. My RPD pressed uncomfortably against my thigh, so I removed it from my pocket and set it on the ground next to me. In my peripheral vision I could see it blinking like a beacon.

What was I afraid of? Everything, I guess. Loneliness, failure, you name it. Mary was right. I had a chance to have what I always wanted, and if it didn’t work out, I could always come home.

“All right, Mr. Bartholomew Howe...” I put the RPD to my eye.

The compensation package was indeed generous. Interstellar Corp. would pay more in one year than I could earn in ten years on Neddalan IV. The job was a mid-level design position, responsible for serving as the on-site technical specialist during construction of the solar harvester. According to the info-packet, this would necessitate an irreversible bio-modification for low-gee living and to protect me from Deneb Major’s radiation.

It took a few minutes for the implications of this to register. With the low-gee bio-mod I would never be able to return to Neddalan IV.

I set the RPD aside. It had stopped blinking.

I sat there for a long time, staring at nothing. Numb.

Eventually, I turned my eyes skyward. The curvature of the dome distorted the pinpricks of light, but I was able to get my bearings. I located Rigel in Orion and the star Polaris, as well as the Melangar Cluster and M23. At the center of the imaginary cross formed by the four celestial bodies was Deneb Major.

My eyes fell to the roadway. In the pale lemon pools of the sodium light, I noticed cracks in the ferrotop with shoots of frontier weed pushing

through. My crew would be here soon, laying another road so the shuttles would have a smooth ride.

Smooth rides were nice.

If I went, it was forever. Who knew how that would turn out. That scared me more than living the rest of this life on Neddalan IV. I could improve my life here; all it needed was a little more “Tropical Ocean Mist” and everything would be better. Maybe John and ninety-nine point nine percent of Neddalan IV had it right. What could a prehensile tail hurt? Or wings, or a twelve centimeter tongue?

I found a public data crèche and accessed Dr. Handley’s appointment calendar. I spent nearly an hour weighing the pros and cons of various packages before settling on something popular and relatively simple: ocular implants to expand my visual acuity into the infrared and the ultraviolet and an alcohol dehydrogenase enhancement for my stomach and liver. I made an appointment for tomorrow afternoon.

As I stepped out of the data crèche, the next shuttle home went by, but I didn’t care. I was going to change everything in my life that I could. I would bio-sculpt it and paint it until it was what I wanted. For the first time in seven years, I looked forward to tomorrow.

* * *

I didn’t walk directly home; instead I went to Perimeter Park. It had been seven years since I had last visited that narrow greenbelt ringing the city at the base of the dome. That was the day I had been reassigned to Surface Maintenance and I had gone there to throw curses out at the planet that had robbed me of my world. I was angry then, but now I felt the need to go back and make peace.

I sat on a bench and looked out through the dome at the wide plain of rock and dirt, faintly blue in the moonlight. When I had last been here, the surface had been covered with a fuzz of lichen, but it had since died. I could see the vestiges of failed terraforming projects: old greenhouses, a hectare of dried and brittle woody stems, and ponds that were now filled with acidified water.

Mary and her colleagues had tried hard to change this inhospitable rock into something livable, but it had managed to resist all their efforts. I wondered if we would ever walk outside this dome and breathe fresh air. I felt sad for Mary. She was fighting a battle against a world that deep down didn’t want to change.

I hoped that she was okay. I shouldn’t have thrown her out, and a pang of

guilt stabbed me. I tried to reach her, but she didn't answer her RPD. I left a message. Maybe she was at my apartment; sometimes the RPD coverage in the building was poor.

The entry log showed that Mary hadn't been home. Her array of tubes and vials and bottles were still in the bathroom. I went to bed, but lay awake staring at the dark and straining to hear any sound of her return. I expected to get a call from city security; the vid-com even beeped once, but I didn't answer it. I was grateful when the caller didn't leave a message.

Morning eventually crawled into my flat, and I dragged myself out of bed. I called John and Mary's apartment but got no answer. I tried her lab. They put me on hold and never took me off. Asking around at Nero's produced no clues, so I returned home, worried but also growing annoyed. She could have at least called, unless this was retaliation.

I picked up my paint gun and started to paint the final wall.

The door buzzer sounded. I stumbled over several of my scale models getting to the vid-com.

"Mary! You're okay."

"Can I come up, Miles?"

I buzzed her in and waited in the open doorway. I was surprised when both she and John got off the elevator.

"After you left last night, I went and found John," she said before I could say anything. "We worked things out. I think we understand each other better. We've both changed."

And they certainly had. It looked like they had gotten Dr. Handley's "His 'n' Hers" package. Mary had shed several pounds and done away with the stress wrinkles at the corner of her eyes and mouth. She also may have been five centimeters taller; I couldn't be certain, but her shoulder seemed to nestle perfectly against John's torso as he stood there with his arm around her. Likewise, John's physique was trim and athletic, his hair short-cropped and blond.

She smiled at John, who returned her smile, and they kissed. I looked away, embarrassed by the vigor at which they went at it. I also couldn't help but notice that John's tongue had undergone elongation.

Neither said anything more to me. They entered and, while Mary collected her bags, John swept her cosmetics from the bathroom counter into a satchel. A moment later, Mary's RPD beeped. After viewing the message, she erupted into a flurry of action. Halfway down the hallway, she paused and looked back at John who had just poked his head out of the bathroom. "I have to get down to the lab. They need me," she said. "I'll see you tonight. I love—"

The elevator doors clipped off her words.

John's lips pressed into a line. He muttered under his breath and, with Mary's bags in hand, stormed out the door without even saying good-bye. He paced the elevator lobby, continuing to mutter.

I watched him ruefully, wondering how many days it would be before Mary, bags in hand, was at my door again.

After a minute, the elevator came, and John was gone.

I loaded a fresh cartridge into my paint gun and finished off the last wall. I stepped back, eager to assess my finished apartment. My smile turned downward. Like the yellow before it, and the white and blue and tan before that, "Tropical Ocean Mist" was wrong.

I tossed the paint gun onto the table and collapsed onto the couch. No matter how many coats of paint I put on it, this apartment would always be the same dilapidated flat. The only way to change that would be to rip it apart to its foundation and rebuild it from the inside out.

Through the window I could hear Dr. Handley's voice speaking to me from the advert-board. "Need a change? Come see Dr. Handley." It repeated itself over and over, every twenty-three seconds. I couldn't look at the green walls, so I looked at Dr. Handley's big face staring at me through the tiny window.

"Need a change? Come see Dr. Handley."

I did need a change, and no coat of paint, no matter how pretty or fine, was going to do it. I needed to change something deeper. I needed to change myself and I knew then that I could only do that by taking the risk to chase what I wanted. I realized suddenly that I was ready.

I checked my watch. There was still time to tightbeam an info-packet accepting Bartholomew Howe's offer. When I had finished, my hands were shaking and my stomach was tight, but I knew it was time for serious excavation.

Invited

by Darien Cox

Darien Cox is an award winning humor writer and a not so award winning science fiction author. Darien lives in Rhode Island with a spouse, a goldfish, and far too many comic books. Who is David Quibbins and what does he want? Find out in this story.

My house mate Brooksie couldn't drink alcohol because of some blood disease he'd had since childhood. The rest of us never bothered to ask about the blood disease, or what other sufferings he might endure because of it. He seemed fine otherwise. He just couldn't process alcohol, and therefore couldn't booze with us. For this, we pitied him. More than the guy with one arm who worked at the ski area; more than the girl from Archer Dorm with the severe acne; even more than the kid who went crazy the previous semester and tried to overdose on nasal spray. It was college. We had our priorities.

Today, however, I envied Brooksie, sitting at the front of the class with clear, alert eyes, cheeks pink from an early morning ski run. He was the only one of us not hung over from the Valentine's Day party at Dorrigan's Pub the night before. Dorrigan's clientele was eighty percent college, so they catered to our need to make a party out of every stupid occasion on the calendar. My stomach lurched at the memory of candy hearts floating in Bailey's Irish Cream, mixed with something red and vile to give it a festive pink tinge, like the evil mirror-universe cousin of Pepto Bismol. I promised myself that if I got into grad school, I would never again take a Saturday morning class, even if it meant career failure.

Brooksie raised his hand for the third time in five minutes. Dr. Thomas smiled, but her gaze slipped past him to the rest of the class, wanting to give someone else a chance. Joyce Thomas was my favorite professor, but today I wanted her to spontaneously combust just so I could go back home and sleep it off.

"Gordon, how about you?" She pointed a piece of yellow chalk at me. "What would you say is the theme of the story?"

I looked up at her with bloodshot eyes. She never called on me. Why today? Invisible gnomes were drumming my skull and I'd only read half

the story she assigned us for homework. My mind flipped through a mental rolodex of themes, frantically fishing for one that had at least a fifty-fifty chance of matching. Problem was, in my hindered state, I could remember nothing about the story. I took a shot in the dark.

“Um...love?”

Dr. Thomas raised an eyebrow and the class broke into laughter. Brooksie looked back at me with a smirk and shook his head.

Dr. Thomas held a hand up for quiet. “Mr. Manes, *The Cask of Amontillado* is about a man who lures his enemy to an underground catacomb and buries him alive by bricking him up in a wall. How do you get love out of that?”

I should have kept my mouth shut, but I didn't. “Well maybe he killed him because he stole his love. Or maybe he loved him and didn't want to. Or something.”

More laughter from the class, but Dr. Thomas gave me her disappointed scowl. Brooksie came to my defense.

“He brings up a good point, Dr. Thomas. I mean, Poe never reveals exactly what Fortunato did to piss the narrator off so much. Just that he vows revenge for injury and insult.”

I looked to the right when I felt someone staring, and spotted David Quibbins gazing at me with his usual rapt expression. Quibbins was the librarian's son, and the strangest kid at school. I'd made the mistake of defending him one day when I saw a couple of townies hassling him in front of the general store. David had been following me around ever since.

I was no hero of the underdog, and I usually didn't involve myself in other people's fights. But even the disturbing enigma that was David Quibbins got loyalty over townies. Students rule, townies drool, no exceptions. But as I looked warily into David Quibbins' poppy eyes, I wished I'd minded my business that day.

I turned away when Dr. Thomas announced we were done for the day, and wished us all a nice weekend.

Noise assaulted the silence as the class made a mad dash for the exit, voices cacophonous as they spilled out of Bevins Hall into the winter morning. My nostril hairs instantly froze, but I was used to that. Winter in the mountains of Northern Vermont might kill a weaker person, but we were acclimated to it. Enough so that outdoor parties were still held throughout the season, provided there was plenty of wood and fire.

Normally I'd have walked with Brooksie, but he lingered outside the building talking to a couple of frat guys, and I couldn't waste a second if I wanted to get away from Quibbins.

“Library,” I muttered to him as I passed.

Brooksie grinned. “You’d better run!”

I pushed into the crowd, falling in with the train of students traveling the path between buildings. Dodging and weaving, I finally made it to the library, climbed the stairs and ducked inside. I considered finding an obscure desk hidden in a corner on the top level, but if Quibbins found me up there, I’d be trapped. I settled for a station in the computer room just off the lobby, and ducked low, trying to hide myself behind the monitor. Feigning an expression of concentration, I tapped the keyboard.

I checked email then started a homework assignment. For five blessed minutes it seemed I was going to be spared. Then the air went still, the way it does before a hurricane. I looked up from my electronic fox hole, and saw an awkward, lanky form speed-prance through the library lobby, stack of books curled under one arm, tilting him off balance.

David Quibbins reminded me of a fetus, if you stretched it to six feet and sent it to college. It was the colossal head on long stem of neck, translucent skin, prominent overbite, and bulbous eyes housed in fleshy lids. His shaggy, white-blond hair looked wrong, mismatched, like someone had scalped Billy Idol and slapped the remains a little off center on David’s skull; a newborn duckling with a tuft of downy fluff atop its disproportionate head.

Don’t see me. Please. Keep walking. I shrank behind the monitor, hiding my face, and concentrated on the web page about Edgar Allen Poe. As a shadow fell over me, I looked up. David stared down, trembling with a nervousness so palpable it made me take a deep breath on his behalf.

“Hello, David.”

“Hello Gordon. And how are you today?”

“Gordy. My name’s Gordy.”

His fishy eyes blinked. “Dr. Thomas calls you Gordon in class.”

“I know, but I prefer Gordy. I mean, my...” I stopped short before the words left my mouth. My friends call me Gordy. The last thing I needed was Quibbins thinking I was extending an invitation of friendship.

Two of the books under his arm slipped and hit the floor. He knelt down, scrambling to slide them back into the overflowing pile he carried. I got frustrated just watching him, and my hangover tapped my temples.

“Why don’t you get a backpack, David?”

Finally getting his books in order, he stood. “I don’t believe in spending money on frivolous items. God gave us two arms to carry things.”

I met his eyes and held a poker face. “I see.”

He leaned over and glanced at my screen. “Are you studying for the Literature exam?”

I blinked at his too-close face, examining the tiny red veins that spiderwebbed through his thick eyelids. David's ugliness was mesmerizing in its perfection. It was so complete; there was no small part of him not at odds with nature; his height, his pallor, his long arms and frightening thinness, his large head and bulbous eyes. These traits were strangely synchronous in their consistency, like he was simply another species. Perhaps somewhere a whole island of David Quibbins' existed, and there he'd be considered charming and exceptionally handsome.

I looked at the computer screen. "Oh, yeah. Studying. Got a lot of studying to do. I'd better get back to it."

"I intend to study tomorrow," he said. "Isn't it a splendid class?"

I nodded. "Oh. Um, yeah, splendid."

Real people didn't talk the way David Quibbins did. They just didn't. It was like he'd gotten trapped in some cosmic grade school play, each line as formal as a Dickens novel, delivered with a mix of aristocratic formality and flat, prepubescent awkwardness.

No one knew exactly what was wrong with him. Some said he was retarded, and got to attend college only because his mother was the campus librarian. I didn't believe that. Though painfully shy and stumbling in Lit class, he functioned passably for the most part, and I'd seen him get papers back with decent grades on them.

Others claimed it was his strict religious parents and rural upbringing, but I doubted environmental factors could take all the blame.

I only knew three things about David Quibbins for certain. He looked like a fetus. He was the librarian's son. And he had unquestionably, and to my great discomfort, fixated on me. Had I been a bit more of an asshole, I'd have told him to fuck off by now. But I wasn't quite asshole enough to do it, and the kid hunted me down once a day and subjected me to these inane conversations. I could have done without it, but it wasn't a fate worse than death. Thus far he'd never pushed it, never tried to cross that barrier of casual acquaintance, so simply wincing my way through these brief exchanges had been tolerable.

But that was all about to change.

"This is for you." David pulled an envelope from one of his books and held it out to me.

I spotted Brooksie coming toward the computer room, so I waved frantically, desperate to be liberated from the fixed, boiled-egg focus of David Quibbins' eyes.

"Yo Gordy!" Brooksie hollered.

David turned to my friend, who slowed his approach, smile wilting when

he spotted my visitor.

Retracting the envelope, David slid it into his jacket like it contained government secrets.

When Brooksie reached us, David sneered. I hadn't thought he could get any uglier, but the sneer brought his thick upper lip back from his gums so he looked like an agitated horse.

"Mr. Brooks," David scolded. "This is a library, and the first rule is that you must speak softly."

I pulled my chin to my chest, trying not to laugh. Brooksie forced a somber expression.

"I apologize, David. To you and your mother. I was a careless oaf to shout like that." He did a noble bow, sweeping the floor with his outstretched hand.

David didn't seem to know how to react to the cordiality. He was used to people simply shoving him into a wall or smacking him in the head. He sputtered, then spoke.

"Well, see that you remember that." He turned back to me, hesitated, then took the envelope out of his jacket and slapped it on the desk. "Please read this when you're alone, Gordon. Good morning."

He offered Brooksie a final scowl, then, in a flounce, pranced out of the computer room with his pyramid of books, half tripping every third step.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Brooksie watched him leave, then turned to me and hitched the straps of his backpack up. "Why are you talking to Quibbins again?"

"I wasn't talking to Quibbins. Quibbins was talking to me. Quibbins is always talking to me."

"You need to tell him to fuck off."

"I'm afraid to. He's like an alien or something. He probably wants to harvest my organs."

"Yeah, exactly."

I gathered my backpack and headed out after Brooksie. "I guess I feel sorry for him."

Just as I said this, I caught Gloria Quibbins, David's mother, eyeing me from behind the book checkout. Though severe and birdlike with a perpetually sour expression, Mrs. Quibbins did not look like she could have produced David. In her late forties, she was thin and pretty, but her puritan style contradicted attractiveness in favor of priggishness. Pale yellow hair in a severe center part, girlish banana curls spilling to her shoulders, she looked like a china doll, but one that would come alive and kill you in your sleep at night.

I met her eyes as we passed, and she held my gaze for a few seconds too long before turning away and busying herself with a pile of books.

“What was that about?” Brooksie laughed as we took the stairs out into the crisp winter morning. “Quibbins’ mom stalking you too?”

I shook my head, the humor somehow hollowed out of me. “I don’t know.”

“What’s in the envelope?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s from David Quibbins, so it’s probably a pamphlet on how to save my soul.”

“You know he’s from here, right?”

My friend Brooksie, Thomas Wendell Brooks III, was the handsome and well bred son of a wealthy heart surgeon in New Jersey. You’d never know it to look at him; one of those rich kids that liked to dress like a hobo in raggy sweaters, his head a mass of blond dreadlocks. But the snob in him came out periodically, particularly when the town of Pollock came up.

It was understood that anyone actually from Pollock, not just going to school there, was a likely freak. Gossenford was a great school, but the town would have been nothing without the college. A convenience store, a diner, a small post office, a couple of churches and several grimy pubs made up the bulk of it. And a whole lot of deer hunters in flannel shirts with gun racks on their trucks. They hated us, though our existence probably kept their little town afloat. And we hated them because they hated us.

“You heard Todd and Scotty got mescaline for tonight,” I said, desperate to change the subject of Quibbins so I wouldn’t have to open the envelope in front of Brooksie. This had nothing to do with adhering to David’s request that I open it while alone. I simply wanted to read and discard it before Brooksie gained yet another Quibbins nugget to tease me about.

Brooksie’s eyes lit up. “Did you put our names in?”

Mescaline was the only mind altering substance Brooksie’s body could endure, so he was always eager to partake when the drug was around.

I nodded. “I gave Scott some money. Bonfire party in the woods tonight. We’re going, right?”

“Fuck yeah. But first...coffee.”

At the local diner, we found our friend Leah, who allowed us to share her booth. I was relieved to see she was as puffy-eyed and hung over as I was. Brooksie’s perkiness was getting on my nerves. Especially when the first thing he did was inform Leah that I’d gotten a sealed envelope from David Quibbins.

“I wouldn’t open it,” Leah said. “You should just toss it in the sink and

set it on fire.”

“Why?”

“The guy’s obsessed with you, Gordy. What if it’s a bag of jizz or something?”

I wrinkled my nose. “You are vile.”

“What? You never thought of that? There could be a big gob of baby batter in there. People do that, you know. To celebrities.”

“I’m not a celebrity.”

“To David Quibbins you are. It’s because you keep letting him talk to you.”

Brooksie smiled and waved his hand at Leah. “You see? It’s a unanimous opinion.”

I fingered the envelope. “It’s not like I solicit conversations with the guy. He talks to me because I stuck up for him that day, what am I supposed to do, tell him to go away and not speak to me?”

“Yes.” Brooksie and Leah said the word simultaneously.

Brooksie tapped a finger. “But first, you’re opening that envelope. The suspense is killing me.”

Sighing, I tore it open and pulled out what was inside; a small white card with a clown holding a cluster of balloons. Above the clown, printed in rainbow glitter were the words ‘You’re Invited!’

“Oh crap.”

Brooksie and Leah leaned forward. I opened the card and read.

What: A 21st birthday party!

When: Saturday, February 16th at 4pm

Where: 274 Steeple Street, Pollock.

RSVP: Regrets only.

“What is it?” Leah demanded.

“I believe I’ve been invited to David Quibbins’ twenty-first birthday party. This afternoon. At least I was an afterthought.”

“Give me that!” Brooksie snatched the invitation. He and Leah examined it. “Oh my fucking god, is that a clown?”

“Dude.” Leah shook her head. “Better brush up on your pin the tail on the donkey skills. Cuz this ain’t gonna be no kegger.”

“I am NOT going.”

“So what are you going to tell him?”

I winced. “Do I have to tell him anything? Can’t I just blow it off?”

Brooksie smirked. “Sure, you could blow it off. But you’d still have to

see him at school. Imagine, sitting in Lit class, those wide bulging eyes, staring you down for the whole hour and a half.”

Brooksie made his eyes big and stuck his face in mine. “Why, Gordy? Why did you not come to my birthday party? Don’t you know I’ll be forced to kidnap you and eat your spleen as a sacrifice to Jesus now?”

I shrugged. “I’ll just pretend I never opened it. If David asks next week why I didn’t show, I’ll just say I put the envelope in my bag and forgot all about it. I mean, who invites someone to a party the day of, anyway?”

“Someone who has no friends or sense of social etiquette,” Leah said.

“I think you should go,” Brooksie said. “It would be a trip.”

I shook my head. “Easy for you to say. He doesn’t want to make a hat out of your liver.”

“I’ll go with you!” Brooksie said.

I cocked my head. “Why in the name of all that is holy would you want to go to David Quibbins’ birthday party?”

“We’re getting mescaline from Scott. We’ll take it early. What better place for pure visual insanity when your trip kicks in than David Quibbins fucking birthday party? Besides, it’ll give us a funny story to tell at the bon-fire later tonight.”

Leah grinned. “No way. You guys are actually gonna go?”

“No.” I crumpled the invitation into a ball.

“Yes we are,” Brooksie said.

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are.”

“No, we’re fucking not.”

Five hours and two tabs of mescaline later, Brooksie and I stood on the porch of David Quibbins charming country home. I held a gift wrapped box containing a sweater we’d bought at the mall. Brooksie giggled at the garden gnomes on the porch and the balloons tied to the lamp post. My buzz had only just hinted at kicking in, so I had a bit more control. I knocked.

Gloria Quibbins opened the door, and for a few seconds before she processed who we were, she looked radiant. And radiant is not a word I’d ever used in reference to our priggish librarian. But gone was the puritan skirt and high collared blouse. Instead she wore jeans, a baby blue cardigan, with a pointed party hat atop her head. Her schoolmarm banana curls were nowhere in sight, blond hair falling loose and straight to her shoulders. But the most surprising thing: she wore a smile. A smile that wilted when she recognized us.

“Yes?” Her lips formed a straight line, and I had the same feeling I’d had

earlier when she looked at me in the library. Gloria Quibbins didn't like me.

"Hi, Mrs. Quibbins. We're here for David's birthday." I thrust the gift box at her to bolster my point.

"Hello, Mrs. Quibbins," Brooksie said. He seemed to regain his control, and I was grateful. Gloria Quibbins already looked like she wanted to eat us. If Brooksie fell into drug-induced giggles, I was certain we were going to be spanked with a ruler.

I heard voices and laughter from deeper inside the house, and smelled food cooking. Gloria glanced over her shoulder, then stepped out onto the porch, closing the door behind her. She rubbed her arms.

"What are you doing here, Gordon?"

I shrugged. "I...I was invited."

She stared up at me, eyes hard. I felt the need to keep talking, if only to make that look on her face go away.

"He gave me an invitation. I was invited." I tried handing her the gift again, but she only glared at me.

"Yes, you said that already. But that doesn't answer my question, Gordon. WHY are you here?"

Brooksie and I looked at each other. I wasn't sure if the question was as confusing as I thought, or if I was just a bit stoned. Thankfully, Gloria clarified it, or we might have been standing there all night, scratching our heads.

"Have you come to make fun of David?" She raised her eyebrows.

"What?" I shook my head. "No. Of course not."

She clenched her jaw. "David doesn't need this. Just go. Before he sees you."

Brooksie turned and left the porch. I stood my ground, feeling judged and not liking it. "Mrs. Quibbins, you don't know me. And I don't appreciate you implying that I—"

"What are you going to do, Gordon?" Her smile was as cold as the coming night. "After this...novelty is over for you, and you've had your fun? Will you pal around with David at school? Introduce him to your friends?"

I said nothing. She had me.

"Stay away from my son." She turned to go back in the house. As she pushed open the front door, I saw David standing at the end of a hallway, wearing a party hat that matched his mother's. And David saw me. Then all hell broke loose.

He sprinted down the hall and tried to get to the door before his mother shut it, but he was too late. I stepped off the porch. Brooksie and I stared at the closed door, listening to David shriek. There was banging and yelling and the doorknob rattled.

Then the door burst open, and David's cone shaped party hat appeared, followed by his fetus face, which was flushed and pinched in rage. "Gordon, don't leave!" he shouted.

Then Gloria was there, pulling on him. "Get in the house, David. NOW!" "I don't wanna!" he screamed. "Let him in, Mom!"

Gloria lost her balance as David pushed her off, and she slipped in the foyer and fell on her ass.

A stocky, gray-haired man came around the corner. David stepped away from his mother, shrinking from the man. "It wasn't my fault, Dad! She started it."

The big man grabbed David by the hair and yanked him inside. His mother climbed to her feet. As Gloria slammed the door on us a final time, the last thing we saw was Mr. Quibbins slam David's head against the wall.

"Holy shit." Brooksie said when we got back in the car. "Did that just happen?"

I sat with hands on the steering wheel, reeling, still too shaken to drive away. "Okay, THAT was not good for my state of mind."

"No shit. I think I lost my buzz."

I looked at Brooksie. "Let's head down to the woods. Scott should be getting ready to light the bonfire, and I need a beer to purge myself of this experience."

We both jumped when David Quibbins rapped on the driver's side window. I lowered it warily. David bent his lanky form over and tilted his huge head.

"Gordon, I apologize for my parents."

He had red stress blotches on his cheeks, which did nothing to enhance his already ghastly appearance. He wore a puffy blue snorkel jacket, green wool pants that were too short and black rubber boots. The pointed birthday hat was gone, but evidence of it rumbled his hair into a disheveled pompadour.

"Don't worry about it, David," I said. "No big deal."

He wiped his nose and glanced over at the house.

"Oh, here, we got you something." I reached behind me and got the wrapped package, handing it through the window to David. I shrugged. "It's a sweater."

David took the package from me, straightened up, and frowned.

"Why don't you open it?" Brooksie asked.

"Yeah, go ahead."

I was worried his mother was going to come storming out of the house

any second to drag David back by his ear, but I refrained from looking nervously over my shoulder. It was an effort.

“The sweater has a clown on it,” Brooksie said, and snickered like a fool. David scowled at Brooksie. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t listen to him, David,” I said. “It doesn’t have a clown on it.”

David’s scowl deepened, folding his weird face almost in half. The mesaline had a hold of me, and I had to pinch my own leg hard enough to cause severe pain in order to block out Brooksie’s snickering, lest I start up myself.

“Fucking clown sweater,” Brooksie muttered between giggles. “That would have been great.”

David handed the box back to me. “I don’t mean to be ungracious, Gordon, but I don’t need another sweater. I’m twenty-one today. What I need is a beer. And to get the dang heck away from my parents. Pardon my language.”

Brooksie stopped laughing. We stared slack jawed at Quibbins.

His face flushed as he glanced over his shoulder toward his house. He turned back to us, shaking his head. “I apologize, Gordon. I—”

“Do you want to come to a bonfire party?” Brooksie said.

My head whipped around and I glared at my friend. I mouthed the words “Are you crazy?”

Brooksie shrugged.

Then David Quibbins got in the car.

“Why, Gordy, why did you bring David fucking Quibbins to my party?”

I stood with Scott and we both watched Quibbins sucking down a keg beer in a plastic cup like it was water and he’d walked thirty miles through the desert.

“I felt bad for him, you weren’t there, his parents are nuts. The guy’s never been to a real party, he deserved to go out.”

Scott snorted and pointed his cigarette at me. “Listen, Kofi Annan, David Quibbins is a stray dog. He’s pathetic and you feel bad for him and maybe his parents are these monsters you say. But he’s still a stray dog. And you know what happens when you bring home strays? They shit on your rug.”

“He’ll be fine. I take full responsibility.” But even as I said the words, I winced as I watched David through the crowd, pouring his third beer. I was starting to get a bad feeling.

“This guy better not pass out and drown in his own puke, Gordy. I’m not gonna be involved in some school scandal because you brought fucking Jethro to my party.”

Scott was a tall beefy redhead with plans to go on to Harvard Law School next year, and was therefore perpetually concerned about his reputation, lest Harvard Admissions find a stain on his character. Despite this, he seemed heedless of the risk in purchasing mescaline from a local pig farmer, then distributing said drugs to thirty five of his closest friends.

“Look, Scotty, don’t wig out. Brooksie was the one who invited him anyway, not me.”

Scott laughed. “Brooksie is over there having a conversation with a tree. Don’t talk to me about Brooksie being responsible.”

I scanned the surrounding woods and spotted Brooksie, his blond hair flickering orange in the firelight. He was indeed talking to a tree. I was feeling pretty tweaked myself, and my eyes lingered on the snow covered branches, thinking how beautiful it all was. And that’s when I saw David Quibbins’ father.

Or at least I thought I saw him. He stood in the woods, ten feet out, diagonally behind Brooksie and his new tree friend. The moonlight illuminated his gray hair, and he wore a thick wool coat, checkered black and white.

But then he was gone. I blinked, scanning the surrounding woods. Had I seen him? My eye was drawn back to the branches, which seemed to dance and wave. It was the drug, I decided. I’d only imagined I’d seen him. Still, I went to check on David, feeling unsettled.

A couple of girls from Archer Dorm were talking to him. I could see in their dilated pupils and ventriloquist dummy grins that they were tripping, and treating David like an amusement novelty.

“Do you have a girlfriend, David?” The short blond one asked this, as her friend suppressed giggles.

“My mother won’t let me have friends,” he slurred. “She says I can’t socialize till I...” He hiccupped. “Finish my edu...cation.”

“Well that’s too bad,” the blond continued. “A guy like you should have a girlfriend.”

She looked up as I approached. “Hi. Gordon, right? I’m Penny and this is Amber.”

I grinned, nodding. “Hi Penny.” I shook her hand, and as I did, leaned into her ear and whispered. “Freakshow’s over. Move on.”

She blinked at me, then blew a puff of air. “Whatever, man. I wasn’t doing anything.”

She and her friend moved on. David filled another beer. I’d lost count of how many he’d had. I wanted to take David back to his house now. I wanted to be done babysitting him so I could enjoy myself. I’d only had one beer, so I was legally all right to drive, but the mescaline had kicked in, and I wasn’t

sure it was a good idea. I weighed the options, and decided to bring David home. He only lived five minutes away, I could make it.

“How you doing David, ready to call it a night?”

David looked at me with blood shot eyes. Next to the bonfire, they gleamed amber. “The party’s not over, Gordon.”

I nodded. “I know. But won’t your parents be worried?”

His forehead lowered. “Fudge them, I don’t care.”

I sighed, stuffing my hands in my pockets. Now I’d made the decision, I was almost desperate to be rid of Quibbins. This was Brooksie’s fault. He’s the one that invited him. Why should I have to baby sit? I looked around for Brooksie. He’d abandoned his tree friend, and was back among the humans, flirting with Deb Randolph a few yards away.

“Gordon, are you trying to get rid of me?”

I looked into David’s eyes, and for just a moment, I was afraid. I vowed never to mix mescaline with socially retarded Pollock locals again.

“No, of course not,” I said.

“I think you are. You don’t want me to talk to people. You sent those two women away. You don’t want me to have any friends. You’re just like my mother!”

His voice bellowed above the crowd chatter, and a few heads turned.

“No, no, David, that’s not it,” I said in a hushed tone, trying to comfort him. “I just thought you might be tired. I mean, I’m a little tired.”

“I’m sure you stay out far later than this when I’m not with you. You just don’t want to feel responsible for me, and you’re afraid I’ll embarrass you.”

I scowled. Fucking Quibbins had a brain after all. “David, come on. That’s stupid.”

He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. “Now you’re calling me stupid!”

I shoved him off me. “Hey, take it easy! You’ve had too much to drink, David, and I think we should take you home now. That’s all there is to it.”

David glared at me, his fat lip curled up, and tears streamed down his cheeks. “I hate you!” he screamed, and ran off into the woods.

“David, come on!” I shouted, but he was already out of sight.

Scott got a couple flashlights from the dorm and he, Brooksie and I trudged through the snowy woods looking for David Quibbins. All the while, Scott cursed me for inviting him, and assured me that I would take the fall for this. He accepted no responsibility for losing the librarian’s son.

Brooksie had gotten up ahead of us, but suddenly he stopped. “Oh shit. Oh...you guys! Over here!”

Scott and I ran, and aimed our flashlights to line up with Brooksie’s. A

ledge of rocks descended in stepping stones about twenty feet down to the campus pond. It wasn't a steep drop, and easily maneuverable if you were scaling it intentionally. But in the dark, at a full run, if you didn't know it was there...

David Quibbins lay at the edge of the pond, face down. A trickle of blood stained the rock he'd landed on.

"David!" I shouted. He didn't move.

"Oh no," Scott said. "Oh no no, this is not happening."

Brooksie just stared. Even in the darkness, I could see his complexion was bordering on green."

I climbed down the rocks, careful not to slip on the ice and snow. I'd never come down here in the winter before. Finally reaching him, I knelt down next to David, turning his head. He groaned. His cheekbone had a nasty gash, but it didn't look serious.

"You okay, David?"

He groaned again, but didn't open his eyes. I had no way of knowing if he had a concussion or was just shithouse drunk and not used to being so.

"I'll be right back, okay David?"

He didn't respond. I climbed back up to where Brooksie and Scott stood on the edge of the embankment.

"Is he dead?" Brooksie asked, trembling.

"He's not dead. He's drunk and he hit his noggin but I think he'll be okay. We should call an ambulance just in case though."

"What?" Scott said. "Oh no, fuck that. No ambulance, then the cops will get involved and suddenly it's out that some kid got hurt at one of Scott Workman's parties."

"Think about someone beside yourself, Scott!" I shouted. "The kid's hurt! He could have a broken back for all we know!"

"Fuck you, Gordon, you brought the freak to my party, you handle this! No ambulance."

"Oh and what am I supposed to do, carry a drunk, wet Quibbins on my back all the way to the car?"

"I'll help you carry him, but no ambulance. Let's just get him back to the car, drop him on his doorstep, ring the bell and be done with it."

"Guys..." Brooksie said again.

We both turned to him.

"Quibbins is gone."

After an hour of searching, we had no choice but to call the police. Quibbins was drunk, injured, and nowhere in sight. The temperatures were be-

low freezing. And we were all in a panic.

The police had brought Mr. and Mrs. Quibbins to the woods now, and they sat in the back of a cruiser while officers scanned the area around the pond. Brooksie, Scott and I stood nearby. The party was over, and we'd been answering the cops' questions for what seemed like an eternity. In the world of worst possible experiences to have while under the influence of chemicals, this had to be top of the list.

Brooksie and I were finally allowed to return home. We lay in our beds, staring at the ceiling, awake. Shadows danced on the walls from the sway-ing trees, and I thought of David out in the frigid woods, alone and helpless.

I had done this. I had lost, possibly killed the librarian's son. I wondered if I could be charged with kidnapping as well. Then I remembered that David was twenty-one, a legal adult. Twenty-one today. Happy Birthday, David.

The next morning, Brooksie and I grabbed a coffee and went directly to the police station. I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut by a horse when they told me the news. They'd searched all night. They were still searching. They'd dragged the pond. They hadn't found David.

"Is there anywhere he might have gone?" I asked Gloria Quibbins as I sat in her living room. I hadn't thought she'd let me in, even considered she might kill me on sight, but she waved me inside. I followed her into a cozy den, where a neighbor woman sat with her, making her tea, rubbing her shoulders. A police cruiser sat in the driveway, in case there was news.

"I told the police already, Gordon," she said, sounding tired. "David has no friends. The only place he would even think to go is the campus, and they're checking all the buildings now."

I nodded. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Quibbins. I just...he wanted to come with us. He said he wanted to get out for his birthday."

She looked at the floor for a long time. I was just about to leave, thinking I'd overstayed my welcome, when she spoke again.

"David is on medication. Strong medication. He's not supposed to drink alcohol."

She looked at me. I stared back at her. "Oh. I didn't know that."

"Neither did David," she said with a sad smile. "David had some trouble when he was a child. He spent time in a facility. But they let us take him home eventually, as long as it was guaranteed he'd take his medication." She paused, taking a sip of tea. "David refused to take it. So we've been putting it in his food. For years now."

I didn't know what to say.

"The doctors have had to adjust the medication every few years. When it's working, David is fine. Docile. Focused. But when he's off...well, he can be violent. Unpredictable."

I nodded.

"I'm not an ogre, Gordon. I keep my son away from people for his own protection. And for theirs." She stood, and her friend did the same, wrapping an arm around her tiny shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sure they're going to find him, safe and sound."

Gloria looked sad. "I'm not. Now if you don't mind, I'd like you to leave my house."

On my way out I passed a closet, and something made me stop in my tracks. Hanging on a hook was a man's wool coat, white and black checkered.

I walked around to the garage and found Mr. Quibbins hunched over the open hood of an old truck. He straightened up when he heard me come in. A strand of his gray hair was blackened with engine grease, his face was flushed.

"What in the name of God do you want?"

"You were there."

"What?"

"Last night in the woods. Before David had his accident. I saw you. In the trees."

He stared at me, fury tightening the chords in his neck. "Get off my property."

"Did you kill him?"

He looked like I'd kicked him in the groin. "You little son of a bitch!" He came at me, stopping just before grabbing me. He glanced out at the cruiser parked in his driveway, then pointed at my face. "You better watch your back, boy, and you better hope my son is dead."

I laughed. "What?"

Mr. Quibbins grabbed my wrist, squeezing tight, and pulled me back inside the garage, out of sight of the cop. "Listen to me, buddy boy. Let's say for argument's sake I was in those woods last night. Let's say I'm tired of seeing my wife suffer year after year because of that devil child. Let's just say I saw David get into your car, saw an opportunity, and followed you."

I shook my head. "You...you killed him?"

"I didn't kill him," he said, giving me a shove. He rolled up his sleeve and showed me his forearm. It had a fresh gash with deep teeth marks. "But let's just say, hypothetically, that I tried to kill him, and he bit me and got

away.”

My breathing hitched, and the air in the garage seemed to heat up. “I don’t understand. Why would you do that?”

“Did you know David was in an institution when he was a child?”

“Your wife told me, yes.”

“She tell you he killed his brother?”

I swallowed. “No.”

He turned away and walked back to the truck engine, picked up a wrench and started tinkering. “He was five. Jason was eight. David always wanted to be with Jason. Followed him around, never gave him a moment’s peace. Then one day, Jason didn’t want to play with David. He wanted to go off with some neighborhood kids, and refused to take David along. So after dinner that night, David went into his room and stabbed him in the eye with a kitchen knife. Killed him.”

“Fuck!” The word came out of my mouth before I could stop it.

He turned around and looked at me. “Every time his body chemistry changes, his medication stops working. We have to have to sedate him, take his blood and have the doctor update his prescription. Last time his medication started to fail, he tried to kill his mother.”

Sweat ran in streams down my back, though the garage door was open to the winter morning. I didn’t know what to say, so I simply nodded.

“I heard the story you told the police,” he said. “Is it true? What set David off at the party? That you were done with him, and wanted to take him home?”

“Yes.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Then I suggest you pray they find that boy frozen to the earth somewhere out in those woods. If not...lock your doors at night, son. Lock em up tight.”

Weeks went by, the semester edging toward winter break, and no one ever saw or heard from David Quibbins again. No body was found. There were a thousand speculations. Some students actually thought Brooksie and I had killed him, something that drove Brooksie to withdraw and stay in the dorm most of the time. School was not a fun place to be anymore. For either of us.

I was looking forward to the winter break, going home to be with my folks, something I never thought I’d be happy to do.

On a Thursday night, with one day of classes left before winter break, I got stupidly drunk at Dorrigans, and stumbled into my dorm room half blind, falling onto the bed fully clothed. I passed out, stinking of guilt and

cheap vodka.

At around four in the morning, I woke with a start. I was thirsty as hell and disoriented. My eyes flicked to the window as I thought I saw a shape move by, a shadow with a bent back and large head. I stumbled to the window and looked out, but saw only the trees, swaying in the wind.

Brooksie wasn't in his bed. He'd been sleeping at his girlfriend's almost nightly, with barely a word spoken to me. I went into our small fridge and stole one of his Pepsis, popping it open and chugging half of it down. Then I went into the bathroom and relieved myself. I was washing my hands when I heard the dorm room door creak open. And that's when I realized I'd forgotten to lock it.

"Brooksie?" I shouted.

I pushed the bathroom door open a crack and peeked into the room. A tall shadow stood at the edge of the bed.

"Hello, Gordon."

David Quibbins stepped in front of the window. Moonlight glinted off the knife.

A Curious Creature

by Bruce Golden

After more than 20 years as a journalist, publishing more than 200 articles, working as a magazine editor, radio reporter, and television producer, Bruce Golden decided to walk away from journalism and concentrate all his efforts on his first love—writing speculative fiction. Since then his short stories have garnered several awards and more than 80 sales across seven countries. Asimov’s Science Fiction described his second novel, “If Mickey Spillane had collaborated with both Frederik Pohl and Philip K. Dick, he might have produced Bruce Golden’s Better Than Chocolate.” His latest novel, Evergreen, takes readers to alien world full of ancient secrets and a strange intelligence, populated with characters motivated by revenge, redemption, and obsession, on a quest to find the City of God.

A Curious Creature

A billion years ago
A curious fish
With gills and scales
And little round eyes
Defied his elders.
Off he went
Into the forbidden zone.
“Come back!” they cried
“Come back and we’ll be worms again!
It’s easier that way.”
“Don’t be silly,” he replied.
“We can’t be worms again.
We’re fish.”

Into the unknown,
Eyes blinded,
Gills choking,
Brain burning,
Waiting to die.
Only not dying,

Only changing,
Learning —
To breathe,
To crawl,
To see,
To stand,
To think.

A second ago,
A curious creature
With nostrils and skin
And little round eyes,
Defied his elders.
Off he went
Into the forbidden zone.
“Come back!” they cried.
“Come back into the water
And be a fish again.
It’s easier that way.”
“Don’t be silly,” he answered.
“We can’t be fish anymore.
We’re men.”

Today the War Ended, Tonight the Sky Burned

by David Tallerman

David Tallerman has been writing seriously for about four years. In that time he has published numerous reviews, poetry, a comic strip and more than thirty stories across a variety of genres. Highlights include appearances in Flash Fiction Online, Space and Time, Chiaroscuro and John Joseph Adam's zombie best-of anthology "Night of the Living Dead." In this story a woman struggles to understand the sudden change that confronts her.

Rosalie propped herself against the pillows and stared at her husband. "You're not serious. What do you mean, I'm leaving?"

She shot a desperate glance at Andrea, knowing she would be no help. To her credit, the small, plump nurse, for all that she was cowering in the corner of the room, spoke up. "General Dyson, you must understand—"

"Shut up," he said, and she did. He stopped to glare at her; then his expression softened. "I'm sorry. I want to take my wife away. There's no reason for her to be here any more." He brushed long fingers across his eyes and seemed, just for a moment, to waver. "The thing is, it's over."

"What—"

"The war."

Rosalie struggled to find her voice. "That's impossible."

"It's true."

"Why would you say such a thing?"

"Because it's true." He turned back to the cowering nurse. "Pack her clothes. We're leaving in ten minutes."

"Andrea, you'll do no such thing."

Andrea glanced between them, like a rabbit frozen by the choice of which approaching headlight to run from. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Dyson," she said finally, and scurried out the door.

Rosalie fell back into her pillows. "You heartless bastard," she murmured into the starched cotton.

What did he want? Three months without as much as a word, and now this, this unannounced arrival and absurd announcement. She'd suffered many cruelties, but hope? That was too much. The war didn't end. Of all the qualities that had defined it these last three decades, that was the worst. It ground on and on, unchanging except for the occasional new pitch of hor-

ror. It had pushed against her sanity, just as he had, until finally there'd been no resistance left.

"I just want peace." Saying it reminded her how that had been her mantra, before the hospital. But she hadn't meant in any global sense, not really; just quiet, a brief surcease. "Can't you leave me alone?"

"It's over. You don't have to be here."

"I *want* to be here. And, why do you keep saying that? We would have heard. Andrea would have known."

"The official cease fire announcement is in—" he glanced at his watch,"—eight minutes. I can't go into details, not here, but it really is over. You have to believe me."

"Do I have any choice?"

To his credit, he paused to consider it. "No, I suppose you don't."

* * *

A dull crack overhead, barely deadened by the fragile shell of metal and plastic, reminded her what limited protection the staff car offered. Through the window she watched the explosion blossom lazily before splitting into a shower of red and yellow sparks. The noise dissolved into a rattle like popcorn bursting. A moment later, streaks of green-tinged fire jutted up in a line. Even inside, the air reeked of smoke.

It was yet more proof, if she needed it, of her husband's duplicity. Why would he lie? What did he hope to gain? In the past, his cruelties had been mostly of neglect. This sadism was something altogether new.

Beyond the screen that separated driver and passenger he was talking, presumably to her, but his voice was muffled and she was doing her best to ignore it. Still, she couldn't help but catch parts:

"...Wanted me there, but I refused. I told them I had to see my wife, and to be here for this. I told them it was important. People need to heal. I don't imagine they listened."

She tuned him out again, though not before noticing another odd detail; he was driving himself. What could he be planning that required an absence of witnesses? Beyond the glass, streaks of blue fire shuddered up the sky before ending in a burst of glittering white. Perhaps a plane had been hit, or perhaps they'd just misfired.

As the car rounded a corner, she glimpsed a glimmer of red in the distance—wreckage maybe, or a building burning. She realized with brief shock that the sight didn't seem at all strange. She'd almost forgotten that terrifying acceptance, bordering on apathy, which the war had steadily de-

veloped in her.

The car was obviously old, despite fresh paint. That was another characteristic of the war. At first, the weapons had been terrifying in their newness, clinical in their precision, smart and elaborate. Back then, vehicles like this were relics, almost extinct.

As the years dragged by, as supplies ran low and economies declined, so the techniques of warfare and the advances of society drifted backwards correspondingly. The technologies that survived were cheap, proven, and easily maintained. By the third decade, men were fighting face to face again, and cars were back on what remained of the streets.

“Perhaps it’s inappropriate,” he said, from the driver’s seat, “but they were the only thing we had. We found a great warehouse full a couple of weeks ago, near some village you’ve never heard of. Still, it’s beyond a miracle it survived. I first thought of doing something like this then. Then the date, of course...do you think it’s in bad taste?”

Rosalie had no idea what her husband was talking about. “No,” she said, “I wouldn’t call it that.”

“I’m glad.” He really did sound relieved. His voice seemed to crack. She wondered what could possibly be so important to him, and for an instant, regretted not listening. Then a deafening bang erupted to their left, seeming to shake the car. Sharp yellow light made half the world momentarily bright as day, and she remembered that whatever he was saying was almost certainly a lie.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked bitterly.

“You *do* think it’s in bad taste. I knew you would. But as much as I wanted you to be here I didn’t do this for you.” He seemed to have misunderstood the question, and suddenly she felt too exhausted to press it. She thought of the hospital, buried deep behind the lines of the war, quiet most nights and only rarely disrupted by the clatter of shells falling. She’d been—not happy there, but almost at peace.

To the right, a sequence of small ivory bursts spread diagonally down the sky, seeming almost deliberate, almost designed. There was something beautiful about them, like water lilies springing open in a line. She shuddered. Was she so far gone that she could find beauty in this horror? Still, as the lights dimmed and flickered out, she couldn’t shake the sense of something transiently lovely.

Abruptly they left the main highway for a side road. Gaunt pines were whipping past the windscreen, and she could only see the combustions above them as intermittent changes in the quality of the light, though the clamor was no less loud. They seemed to be climbing up into the hills.

“We’re almost there,” he said. There was a quality in his voice she hadn’t heard in a long time, that she barely remembered. It struck her how long it had been since she’d seen him happy, or anything except consumed by the business of war. Two decades ago or more, his face had set like concrete; a chill had seemed to settle. She’d never dared let herself consider what the burden he carried was like. Now, for just a moment, it was all she could think about.

Without her noticing, an amber glow had been building to their left, its source disguised by the dark columns of the forest. Here, higher up, the trees were thinning, and on the opposite side from the glows he saw blacked-out silhouettes of buildings. This must be one of the evacuation towns—temporary solutions that had quickly become permanent, despite their total inadequacy. They’d been built in mountainous areas, which had seemed safer at the time; there were only a few dozen left now in the entire country.

“Where are we?”

“The locals call it Six Month City, because that’s how long they were supposed to be here. Look...”

“What?” she asked, startled. Then they turned another corner and she saw it. “Oh god, what was it? A bomb? Was that a house or...why are they all gathered around like that? Why are they—?”

“Calm down,” he replied softly. “It’s only a bonfire.”

As he pulled the car up on the verge and climbed out, she struggled with the word, which hovered just out of reach on the edge of memory. Bonfire, *bonfire*... it was pre-war, redolent with meaning and yet long ago abandoned. She saw that he stood waiting on the grassy hem of the road, glancing between her and the conflagration. She stepped out, and the heat hit her, even at such a distance, like the blast from an open furnace. Her skin prickled, and for an instant the word seemed closer.

Streaks of red and green flame leaped up from their left, juddered through the dark and shattered into a cascade of scarlet and emerald glitter. This time she simply accepted its beauty. When the last fleck of brightness faded she wrenched her eyes down, to where the flames had originated. There were two uniformed men there, hunched in the blackness with flashlights, beside an array of short poles apparently driven into the earth.

“Bonfire,” she whispered, feeling the sounds in her mouth. The word was whole again, meaningful, and she wanted to savor it. Then, out loud: “Fireworks. They’re fireworks.”

“Of course,” he said. She hadn’t noticed him move to stand beside her.

“I’d forgotten it all. It was every year, wasn’t it? On...”

“The fifth of November. Guy Fawkes Night. Tonight.”

“Yes.” She looked at him. “Did you really organise all this?”

“We gave them a little food as well, and the men supervising are from my division.” He pointed to the left, and she saw a glimmer of deep orange in the blackness. “There’s another one over there; nearly a hundred in all, up and down the country. Do they seem happy?”

They were far back from the crowd, and she could only see the shapes of figures, cast in sharp relief. “I don’t know. They’ve all lost people haven’t they? And suffered, for such a long time.”

Yet there *was* a current of excitement in the air, which reached her even so far back from the crowd, and a susurrus of voices that turned to cries of awe with each loud bang and shimmering torrent of color.

She was startled to feel a hand slip against hers, and cold fingers entwined. Her first urge was to pull away, but she fought against it. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” he said. “It’s no excuse, but ... I thought I could make it end. I thought if I only worked harder I could stop it, and you’d be happy and well again. It was very stupid of me.”

“Shush,” Rosalie replied. “Later.”

She gripped his hand, edged a fraction closer, and craned her head back to watch the sky burn.

From the Shadows

by Jeremiah Hawkins

Jeremiah Hawkins is a philosophy connoisseur and emerging writer who currently resides in Texas. He has just recently finished his first novel, an effort of six years and one that will take him North to Alaska this summer. This story digs into the mystery and madness of Adolf Hitler.

Lambach, Austria 1898

A young boy sits reading in a monastery garden beneath a mid-April sun. He clumsily hums the notes he sees strung across the pages. He delights in the fresh smell of the many colored flowers and the ambience of distant birds. He likes it here. It's so much nicer than Fischlham.

"Good morning, my dear Adolf," a soft female voice sounds from behind the boy.

He turns and looks up. The sun blinds him, compelling him to raise his hand to block the rays. Seeing only the shadowed silhouette of a nun, he says, "Good morning, Sister." He turns back to his book. He doesn't know which Sister this is, and doesn't care. He must learn the assigned hymn for Sister Claire before this afternoon's choir practice.

"I hear your birthday is in a few days," she says, kneeling beside him.

"Yes." He looks at her again and sees her face. He doesn't recognize her. He would have remembered the deep-seated blue eyes, the thick jaw line, the aged appearance unusually absent of wrinkles. Unlike the other Sisters, her robe bears the crest that adorns so many walls of the monastery, the crest with that strange cross in the middle. The swastika, he thinks it's called. She must be a high-ranking nun to be wearing such a distinguished robe.

"How old will you be?" the nun asks.

"Nine."

"Well, that's something," she says and then runs her hand through the boy's hair. "Nine is a very special number."

The boy's focused gaze relaxes, as do his fingers. He wonders what sort of nun this is who wears such a robe and touches him as if she's his mother. He's been at Lambach Abbey for a few months and all the nuns were quite nice, but they never touched him like this.

"Who are you?" the boy asks.

“I’m your friend.”

“I’ve never seen you before.”

“That doesn’t mean I haven’t seen you. I’m always watching you.”

“You are?” the boy asks, staring forward with lazy eyes at the array of flowers as the nun continues to caress his hair.

“Oh, of course. You’re a very special boy.”

“Me?”

“Oh yes. May I show you something?”

The boy nods.

She reaches into her robe and pulls out a candle. She moves it slowly in front of the boy’s face. “You are this flame,” she says.

“What flame?”

“This one.” She blows on the wick and a high flame quickly flashes to life.

The boy flinches. “How did you do that?”

“Try to blow it out.”

The nun holds the candle close to the boy’s face. He blows on it, but it remains. He tries again and fails again. The flame is unaffected, not even pushed by the blowing. He blows as hard as he can. Nothing. The nun chuckles. The boy’s face goes red and he spits on the flame. A hissing sound emanates as the saliva is burnt off.

The boy’s shoulders drop. “I... I can’t.”

“Here, you hold it. Now, blow.”

With the candle in the boy’s hand, he blows and the flame is extinguished easily.

“Now give it back to me.”

The boy hands the candle to the nun and the flame immediately returns.

“How do you do that?” he asks.

“My dear Adolph, listen to me. Just as this candle is like no other, you are like no other. You are different, my boy, you’re special. You know this to be true, don’t you?”

The boy nods his head, his eyes wide.

“The way you lead the other boys, the way you use your imagination and intelligence in your little war games, the way you stand out. You are to be a great man someday. I can see it. Do you know what I mean when I say that?”

The boy shakes his head.

“I have the gift of prophecy, my dear Adolph. I can see what you are to become. And I shall help you. I will visit you from time to time. Even when your family moves to Leonding, which will be very soon, I will be close by.

Do you believe me?"

The boy nods.

"Good. Now, get back to your hymn. Sister Claire will be very disappointed if you don't know it. You do, after all, have such a fine voice. A fine voice, indeed."

Leonding, Austria 1900

Within a modest home, sitting in brown armchairs placed close together in front of a wood-burning stove, a mother and father mourn their loss. In one arm the woman cradles her four-year old daughter, and with the other reaches out to the adjacent chair and clinches her husband's hand.

"My poor Edmund," she continually says between the constant wetting of her daughter's forehead with kisses. She turns to her left to see her eleven-year boy sitting on the floor in a corner next to a thick wooden table, his knees pulled in. He's rocking and staring at nothing, and too far away from the heat of the stove. "Come here, Adolf. Oh please, come here. You'll catch fever. Do you hear me?" She turns to her husband. "Alios, tell the boy to come warm himself. He'll catch fever and...he could... Oh please, Alios, tell him to come closer."

Her husband doesn't respond, but remains gazing out of a window by the front door. "The snow's coming down too hard," he says. "The priest won't come."

"Edmund's dead, my love. What can a priest do now? Oh Alios, tell the boy to come."

She kisses her daughter's forehead once again and rises with the girl still in her arms. With strong arms and back, she gently lowers the girl to the chair. She walks over to her only surviving son, leans low and begins kissing him. "Come, my son. Come get warm."

He appears not to hear her, but responds to her gentle tug on his arm. He stands without losing his lost stare. They walk over to the chair and the woman takes both children in her arms and pulls them onto her lap as she sits. She resumes her routine of kisses on her two children.

A forceful knock on the door is heard. "The priest. It must be the priest," the man says as he leaps up and strides to the door.

Stomping his feet at the threshold to the house, a priest enters. The boy looks over. A nun with a large crest on her chest follows the priest in. The boy—not having seen her since that magical meeting two years prior in Lambach—recognizes her. As she walks in she stares into the boy's eyes

and he stares back. The priest introduces the nun to the boy's mother and father. To the boy, everything in the house begins to fade into a shadowy background behind the nun's presence. He no longer hears the exchange between the priest and his parents.

The man and woman lead the priest to Edmund's room. The mother tightly carries her long-legged four-year old daughter, leaving the boy behind sitting in her chair. The nun takes two logs from a pile against a wall and throws them into the stove. Then, she sits next to the boy where his father sat.

"Hello, my dear Adolph," the nun says.

"Hello, Sister."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

The boy looks down. "It was the measles."

"Yes, the measles," she says. "The result of impure blood."

"Impure—"

"You like to draw, I hear."

"How did you hear that? I haven't seen you in such a long time."

"That's because I had some business to tend to. I travel."

"Where did you go?"

"To the Soviet Union, and then America. You know America, don't you?"

"Yes. Have you ever been to Germany?"

"Of course."

They pause but never lose eye contact.

The nun then says, "You remember what I said to you in Lambach?"

"Yes."

"Do you still believe it?"

"Yes. ... Well, sometimes."

The nun leans closer to the boy. "You must never forget. You remember the candle?"

"Yes. I never forgot that."

"You are that candle. You are special. Your brother, whom you loved, died today, but you mustn't allow that to hinder your passions. If you like to draw, if you want to be an artist, don't let anyone advise you otherwise."

"My father doesn't like it," the boy says.

"Your father will be dead in three years. What then? Listen to me. Your life is your life. Don't allow anyone to extinguish the flame. Your passion shall make you great."

The boy shivers and pulls his knees to his chest.

"You're cold," says the nun.

“Yes.”

She then raises her hand to the stove, and within a second, the fire begins to rage. The boy is almost instantly warmed. He looks at her and lowers his legs.

“Is it true?” he says.

“That your father will die in three years?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid so. Blood is impure, my dear Adolph. Races have mixed causing defects and disease.”

“Edmund died because his blood’s impure?”

“Yes.”

The boy looks away from the nun and stares into the fire. They remain silent, listening to the crackling within the stove.

She then says, “I must leave again. They will be done with your brother in less than a minute.”

“Where will you go?”

“To Vienna. Tomorrow. It’s a nice city, full of artists and beautiful scenery, but I won’t stay long. I must return to America and remain there until a great panic overtakes the economy.”

“When are—”

Just then the boy’s parents and the priest return. The nun slowly waves at the fire and it calms to its prior state. The boy’s mother approaches his chair and lowers his sister, seating her next to him. She kisses the boy on the forehead and caresses his head.

The boy’s eyes remain locked on the nun. He barely hears anything else, just muffled mutterings of his parents and the priest. Before he knows it, his father stands with the door open allowing cold air and snow flurries to rush in. As the nun and priest put on their coats, the nun pierces through the muffled background noise.

Still looking at the boy, she says, “I will see you again, my dear Adolph.”

Vienna, Austria 1907

The sky is overcast with lumpy grayness. The ground, covered with dirty heavily trodden snow, mirrors the sky. It’s morning and the streets are quiet. A slight breeze ruffles the hair of a solitary figure shivering on a street bench facing a popular opera house. He holds up his painting, piercing every detail with focused eyes. He compares it to the structure before him. Did he perfect it? Is there any flaw to be found?

He looks up. He's still very much alone. He stares down at the hardened footprints in the snow. He sighs and watches his gray breath dissipate into the wintry day. He shakes his head violently and glares back at the painting.

"Merry Christmas, my dear Adolph," a female voice says from behind the bench.

The young man turns around. Upon seeing the nun with the crest, he feels a flash of redemptive exuberance. But, it doesn't last.

"It's you," he says in a near whisper and places the painting on the ground, leaning it against the side of the bench.

She sits, joining him in his quiet stare at the opera house.

"It's been a long time," he says.

"Yes. How have you been?"

"I was rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts," he says without hesitation.

"I know."

"My mother died earlier this week."

"I know."

He turns to the nun, looks her over and says, "You look the same. Glad to see the years have treated you well."

"They always do."

"Have you been traveling?"

"Yes."

"America?"

"Yes, America. You have a good memory."

"How can I forget? Your words and your magic tricks are... Did your great panic take place?"

"Yes, this very year," she says and looks over at him with a smile.

"Have you come to tell me I'm special or great or..." The young man winces from the cold, as well as his burgeoning emotion. He folds his arms tightly in front of his chest and hunches over slightly. The nun notices and places her hand on his shoulder. Within seconds the young man sits straight again and his arms relax. He no longer shivers. He looks over at her with the same boyish bright eyes of their last two meetings.

"You could have prevented her death, couldn't you?" he asks.

The nun doesn't answer.

"You could have helped me get into the Academy, couldn't you?"

The nun doesn't answer.

"Well?" the young man says.

The nun merely looks over at him, connecting her blue eyes with his.

"Why won't you speak?" the young man says. "You came to me twice

in two different cities, you put strange ideas in my head, you wow me with magic. Speak. Tell me what you'll have me do now? I'm listening."

"Be patient and continue the pursuit of your passions," she calmly says. "I see you've been educating yourself in history and politics."

"Yeah. So?"

"Have you read the works of the German philosopher, Nietzsche?"

"No!" The young man quickly stands. "What does it matter? What does any of that matter? Why do you remain so elusive? I don't need chitchat right now! I can't stomach it!"

"You speak to a nun this way?"

"I speak to anyone in any fashion I wish!"

"Very good." She nods and smirks. "Now sit and let me speak to you of things to come."

The young man glares at her. He looks away and then sits with enough force to shake the bench. He now looks at the nun with red eyes, undisturbed by the subtle sound of his painting falling flat on the rough, dirty snow.

The nun turns her body toward him and says, "You must be patient. I'm certain you are to be a great man, but you must wait for it. You must build and prepare yourself. ... You have a mind for architecture, don't you? Well, good foundations must be set if the structure is to last, my dear Adolph. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But, is that all? You've said all that before."

The nun looks back to the opera house and doesn't respond quickly.

"There will be a great war and you will fight," she says. "You will be injured, but you will not die. I will make sure of that."

"When?"

"It is years away still."

"Years? What about tomorrow and the next day?"

"Be patient. You mustn't let the death of your mother or the rejections you've received deflate your passion. Do you remember what I said about your brother's death?"

The young man looks down at his knees. "Yes. Impure blood."

"Yes," she says. "Your mother as well."

"I don't understand."

"It shall pass to you to fix this someday."

"What, the purity of blood?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By listening to me."

"I am listening, but you say nothing."

She sweeps the young man's shoulder with her hand as if to rid it of dust. Suddenly, his entire body contracts and his face contorts. He shivers.

"Be patient and trust me."

The young man lowers his head, and nods. He takes a deep breath.

The nun rises.

"Merry Christmas," she says, and then begins walking away.

"Merry Christmas to you, Sister. I'm sure I will see you again. Someday."

Vienna, Austria 1913

Pedestrians frolic through Schiller Square of the Ringstraße, bathing in the warmth and beauty of the spring day. A rough looking man in his mid-twenties dressed in rags leans his paintings against the base of Schiller Memorial outside the Academy of Fine Arts. He casts low-browed glances at the frothy populace.

These people, he says to himself, they know nothing of the beautiful and sublime. They merely bounce about oblivious to anything of real consequence. He looks up at the statues of Schiller and Goethe and wishes he were alive in their time. He would have some respect then. People wouldn't have merely walked past him ignoring his art. There was more purity back then. Now people are a dirty cluster of culture and blood.

The man leans against the base next to his paintings and watches the people. He watches families with children discussing what fun activity they'll do next, young romantic couples lost in their revealing conversations, solitary ones marching with strong resolve.

Then, the man spots a group of odd-looking characters, the ones with those odd ways and religion. He stares at their dark side-locks curling down past their ears to their jaw lines, their lengthy caftans, and their large noses. They're so different. Their features are unsmooth, bulging and blotchy. This must be the appearance of impurity. He thinks about how they very well could be as evil as the Viennese papers portray them to be.

The man then sees five wealthy men in serious discourse with a nun. The nun is speaking and the men are hanging on every word. They're walking toward him. It's been six years, and the poor painter probably would not have recognized her if it hadn't been for the crest. He hopes she sees him.

The nun stops near him. She tells the wealthy men to go on without her, that she will meet them later in the afternoon. They nod and stroll on.

She looks at the painter in front of the statue and walks toward him.

“Happy Birthday,” she says.

“It’s not for a couple days.”

“I know,” she says, looking down at his paintings. “They’re good. Not anything remarkable, but good.”

“I copied them from postcards.”

“Of course you did.” She looks up at the Academy of Fine Arts and says, “You got rejected again, didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“You’re homeless, living in shelters. And you smell.”

“Yes.”

She nods in what appears to be approval. “Well, I don’t have much time today.”

“As usual,” he says. “Who were those men?”

“Some European and American bankers.”

“What did they want with you?”

“What did I want with them, you mean.”

“Very well.”

“Big plans, my dear Adolf, big plans.”

“For what?”

“For the world. And for you! This is a year to remember. It is the year of the creation of the Federal Reserve in America, a central banking system. A great milestone.”

“What does a bank in America have to do with me?”

“You see those statues?”

The man nods without looking up at Schiller and Goethe.

“Do you see the size of the pedestal on which they stand, the very pedestal on which you and your paintings lean?”

“I know, I know,” he says. “Foundation.”

“Yes. It’s being built. Free trade and foreign markets have been strewn across the world. The stock exchanges are in place. The New York Stock Exchange, in particular, has grown to an unprecedented degree. And now, our long envisioned Great Bank is being put in place to govern it all from the shadows. Do you see the magnitude, yet?” The nun glides in close to the man and says, “I’m setting it all up for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

“Why? I don’t understand.”

“Blood is impure. Don’t you see? The world is corrupt. Christianity is tainted. Even from the first Christians—those dirty disciples—they had it all wrong. They lived in their communes and shared everything. They re-

mained weak and powerless. Constantine, now there was a real Christian. I liked him very much. But you shall be greater.”

“I don’t—”

“Go to Germany, my dear Adolph, to Munich. It’s time. The Great War I spoke of will begin next year—the tensions on the webbing of Imperial endeavors and the stock exchanges will pull the nations violently into each other. Now, you must wait for Germany to declare war. And then enlist.”

“But you’re—”

“You will soon receive the remainder of your father’s estate. That will get you going. Listen to me. It’s begun. It’s time to move.”

The nun then waves her hand behind a passing elderly couple. Before the poor painter can collect himself and speak, the elderly couple stops and begins ranting their admiration of his art. They’re frantic, fiery even, striding up to the poor painter and questioning him about the plain paintings copied from postcards. How long did they take to complete? How much do they cost? Is there a name for the style? The painter looks at the elderly man and spouts out a price. When he turns back, the nun is gone.

Pasewalk, Germany

November 11, 1918

“Hey,” a one-legged soldier says, “I overheard the doc tell the nurse that it wasn’t the gas but something in your head that has caused your blindness.” He reaches over to the adjacent cot and waves his hand in front of his comrade’s face. No response. “He said he’s confident your sight will return soon. Also, I heard people saying the war will be over any day now. Do you hear me?”

The blind soldier remains silent, staring into the darkness within his mind. He pushes from his consciousness the incessant blubbing and moans of his many wounded comrades on all sides as visions begin filtering through the blackness.

He was a good soldier, a dispatch runner, responsible for delivering messages to and from the front. It was a dangerous job, and he liked that. He accepted his commands and performed his duties hungrily, earning a name for himself.

The visions become more vivid and his emotions rise. He’s near Belgium running to the front. He knows the message is important, he knew it when he heard the call—“Lance Corporeal!”—yelled with such fervor. “Go! Do not delay!” The message was jammed into his hand.

Yes, it was an important message, but he shouldn't have lived to deliver it. The shell landed right in his midst, killing everyone in close proximity, everyone except him. He was merely knocked down, miraculously unscathed. The only effect on him was a ringing in his ear, a ringing that birthed within him a feeling of detachment, a sensation that he wasn't running but gliding, that he was a phantom floating amongst the eruptive chaos. The deafening thunder of war that could so easily cripple one's manhood was buried within an impermeable ringing. He wasn't disorientated in the least. He felt no pain. The shell did nothing but strengthen him.

And this was not the first time. The blind soldier remembers other similar occurrences of cheating death. He won medals and earned great respect for his valor—respected to such an extent that his superiors tolerated his often sloppy appearance. He was a soldier who grew to love death's edge. He was a real soldier, not a fraud in a well-ironed uniform.

But there were questions that often plagued his mind. The nun he hadn't seen since before the war—that mystical woman—was she looking after him? Was the lowly dispatch runner truly invincible, protected by Providence?

A voice calls from the other end of the hospital, "The war, it's over! Over!" The sound of much squirming and shifting can be heard, but no one says anything—no cheers, no hint of hooray.

Germany has lost and no one is surprised.

The blind soldier rolls over on his side and sighs. His medals mean nothing now. All his great deeds will sink into an abyss of collective cowardice, surrender and failure. Four treacherously long years of warfare and death for nothing. The soldier feels closer to death now than ever before.

At this precise moment, a familiar voice paralyzes him with slithering whispers:

"It's time, my dear Adolph. No, don't try to turn over. You're not able, and you won't be able to see me anyway. Just remain still and silent, and take leave of the moans of pain and broken spirits that surround you.

"You've seen much, haven't you? Look at you, blind and hopeless. You've seen your dear brother die, then your mother. In the last four years you've seen comrade after comrade—close friends—fall in battle.

"It's time, my dear Adolph. It's time to stop using only your eyes. It's time to cease observing and begin acting. It's time to cease recreating onto canvas the realities of your eyes, and begin creating in actuality the visions of your hopes and dreams. It's time to speak. You've seen and learned enough. You've seen beauty and destruction, pain and elation. You've seen the scowl of death all your life. It's no longer time to input, but output.

Speak, my dear Adolph. Speak. Grow your following. The time is ripe.

“This war was my doing. The fall of Germany was mine. Why did I do this? For the emergence of the great leader that will propel the world into the next chapter of humanity, a chapter of great men—super men—not like those first disciples, those communists, those weak men who lived powerless and poor existences. No! Great men, great creators, that’s the next stage of evolution, great men of masonry to build a tower to the heavens. That’s the destiny of Man, my dear Adolph. But the race must be purified and strengthened. Every man must be of one blood, one language, one global purpose. This is why Germany had to fall: too much impurity and corruption, so much that the only solution was to tear it down and rebuild.

“It’s time. The German people are disgraced. Right now—as I speak!—a treaty is being written in Versailles that will enslave Germany. The shame will be great. It shall tear their spirit anew every time the piercing remembrance re-emerges. So, you know what I want you to do? Make it re-emerge. Remind them of this dishonor with great force of words. Tear their spirits until they follow you, until they want blood.

“Never doubt, and fear nothing. I will watch over you as I have your entire life. And I will continue to do my work elsewhere. ...Oh, my dear Adolph, my webbed temple is growing in power. My Great Bank I spoke of during our last meeting is rooted in place. When the time is right, I will not just simply start a panic, but I shall crash the whole thing with a slight toggle of a simple switch and thrust the world into a tailspin. When that happens you will be but a few years from the throne of Germany. It will happen. Do not fear. Never doubt. When your present darkness fades, unleash your voice like fire from the deep loins of a dragon.

“Listen. Listen to those moans. The whole nation moans like that, they moan for the reparation of not only their cities, but their very spirits. Their moans plead for relief, to be saved from inner ruin, from hopelessness, from darkness. Listen to them, my son, and receive your purpose.

“Save Germany.”

Uffing, Germany 1923

In a second-story den, furnished and decorated with an eye for respectability, a married couple sits on a blue sofa next to an unlit fireplace opposite their demoralized political leader. The politician buries his face in his hands, a posture they’ve never seen from him. The woman stands and goes to the window to draw the thick curtains shut, preventing the curious eyes

of the night from peeking in.

The politician rants, and then mumbles, and then rants again, his emotions riding the peaks and troughs of heartbreak.

Providence! Certainty! Failure!

During his rants, he repeats particular words often, sounding much like he did during his rallies that so captivated people. But then, as his voice loses volume and intensity, he sinks into self-pity and doubt, his sentences often beginning with, “If only...” and “But she said...”

The husband sits patiently concerned, looking upon his leader, despite it all, with respect and support. His wife, however, seems to fear for her leader with fidgets and shifts and rapid rising and sinking of the lungs within her chest. His words appear to cut into her.

Then, for no evident reason and before the couple have a chance to say anything, the leader demands immediate solitude. The man rises without hesitation, but the wife remains. Her leader looks at her, softens his eyes and requests politely to be left alone. And so they depart, closing the door behind them. As they walk away, the politician can hear the wife begin tugging on her husband’s ear, telling him that she fears their leader shall hurt himself, says she can sense these things. He should not be left alone.

The leader stands and begins to pace, his hands held tightly behind his back. How could this have happened? Was he crazy? Did the nun not say that she would watch over him and that he’d save Germany?

He kicks the bottom of a dark green upholstered chair. How humiliating! All that work, all those speeches, all for naught. He was successful. He raised a small army of passionate followers. He recruited leaders of all kinds, distinguished men of every sort, even policemen. He thought he could do as Mussolini had done: march in and assume power by force. Mussolini led his army straight into Rome and took it over. Italy is now his. He’s their sole leader. Absolute power! How did he succeed so easily?

He continues to pace, his arms flailing about, gesturing alongside his thoughts.

And now they’re after him while he hides in this den with the curtains drawn. He’ll be arrested, sentenced to prison. High treason shall be the charge. There’s nothing to be done. It’s over. To run would be cowardice. To fight would be a shameful shedding of German blood, the very blood he was trying to save, purify and protect. No, he shall end this the only honorable way he can.

He sits, and sinks into his chair. He stares into the dark, empty fireplace. He begins feeling strangely drowsy. His breathing slows and body goes limp. Then, a slow wavy flame begins to rise from nothing. It undulates like

a serpent enchanted by a simple tune. The politician hypnotically stares. He knows this flame; he knows its source.

She's here.

He waits for her to speak, but she does not. Instead she shows him things in the flame, scenes of future happenings. He first sees a courtroom with many people. Powerful people. He sees himself speaking in his own defense. He can't hear what he says, but he sees the faces of the listeners and knows he plays them the tune they've yearned to hear for so long.

The flame flickers and he sees a jail cell. He sees himself sitting. He's writing. He writes many pages, telling the story of his struggle, of Germany's struggle.

The flame jerks again and he sees himself leaving prison. He sits upon a beast of burden as the German people kneel down, forming two rows on either side of him, throwing petals to the ground for his beast to walk upon. He sees himself, his own face. He's confident and strong. He looks straight ahead. He looks to the place he plans to lead Germany. He then looks at himself, the one sitting in the den contemplating suicide. He smirks. The politician in the den shudders at the uncanny eye contact.

The flame broadens as another vision comes. He sees two separate crowds standing in a circular cluster around their particular leader in a large field surrounded by forest. It is raining and thundering, but a massive canopy hovers above sheltering those in the field. The canopy is not bare, but is adorned with numerous crests of many sizes randomly placed. It is the crest of the nun. Also, printed repeatedly along the entire perimeter of the grand canopy are the letters NYSE. The politician's eyes widen as he remembers the nun's mention of the New York Stock Exchange. Her words now echo in his mind: "crash the temple with the slight toggle of a simple switch... slight toggle... simple switch... crash."

In the center of one of the crowds, the politician sees himself. His is the smaller of the two, but grows. People walk out from the forest and join his group. But his is still smaller.

Then the politician sees a great earthquake. The canopy begins to rock. The people brace themselves against each other. A corner of the canopy breaks loose from the ground and begins flapping violently in the storm. The people scream. A great gust of wind comes and sweeps the canopy away. The heavy tarp whips and slaps as it flies, creating its own thundering cries. The rain falls heavy upon the people as they begin to shiver and cough and sneeze.

The people, shriveled within their drenched clothes, look to their respective leaders. The current leader of Germany is dumbfounded and says

nothing. The other leader, however, begins to speak, and does so with great passion and volume. He thunders back at the sky. And, it is quieted. He rouses the dormant strength of his people, who now stand straight and strong. Those of the other crowd straggle over, and continue to do so until the people are united around one leader. Him.

And with that, the vision leaves. The flame dies out slowly as cold darkness returns to the fireplace.

The once suicidal politician lifts his gaze to the ceiling as the smallest hint of a smile lightens his face.

Berlin, Germany

January 30, 1933

The crowd looks upon their new leader with hopeful eyes. He looks back with a subtle, but ambitious grin. He stands in a second-storey window with spotlights aimed at him.

He's the new Chancellor of Germany. Finally.

He waves and presents his mighty salute. He is happy and ready. He basks in the moment, but also can't wait until the crowd disperses. He knows she will come tonight. He had one of his men set up a back room for a late night encounter. Candles throughout, the smell of incense, a small fire, the best tea.

Ten long years she's been absent while he lived out the visions he saw in the flame. Fifteen years since he last heard her voice, twenty since he last saw her. She will come to me tonight, the Chancellor says to himself as he looks down on his people. His Germany.

Finally, the parades slow and the people disperse. The spotlights are shut off. He has a final cup of tea with his men, and then retires to his candlelit room.

An hour passes and he yawns. He sits in a padded armchair reading the book he wrote about himself while in prison. He lifts his cup from a small table and sips his tea. He looks over at the vacant chair on the other side of the small table and sighs.

Then, out from a shadowy corner near his bed, she appears.

"Well done, my dear Adolph."

She walks forward as the dim firelight illuminates her face. The Chancellor is stunned by her youthful appearance. Is it possible she's gotten younger? No, it must be the time elapse.

"I knew you'd come, and I'm very glad you did."

“I know,” she says and sits in the chair intended for her.

“Would you like some tea?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

He stands and goes over to a counter.

“We’ve come a long way, haven’t we,” she says as he pours the tea.

“I’d say.” He brings a cup back to her and sits.

“But this is just the beginning. You realize that don’t you?”

“Yes.”

She sips her tea. “Everything up until now has been foreplay, the setting of the stage. The foundation has been laid, and now it’s time to build the structure.”

He smiles and she looks him over.

“You’re definitely ready,” she says. “You’ve been groomed to such a degree that you can do the rest on your own. But I do have one thing to say. Your impatience shall serve you now. Seize absolute power quickly, my dear Adolph. Burn down all opposition. You mustn’t have any competition, or separation of powers.”

“No,” he says, “that form of government is weak and inefficient.”

“Exactly. You once marched on Berlin, but the timing was bad. Now the timing is right. March. Tear down the walls that restrain you. However, do nothing that can risk losing the love of your people. Be smart. Gain absolute power now, but once you get it, work strategically. You must then build another foundation. We both know the end we seek. But to get there successfully will require stealth. Line everything up before you strike. During rearmament, let your propaganda be of peace and prosperity. Don’t give anything away. Be smart.”

“I’ve come a long way, Sister,” the Chancellor says. “I know exactly what needs to be done.”

“Of course, you do. I’m very proud of you. I want you to know that.” She takes another sip of tea and smiles. “How about we speak of simpler things. We’ve never done that. Would you like that?”

“Yes, I would.”

They both then relax their postures and begin speaking as comrades. Friends even. She asks him if he still paints. He tells her that he doesn’t have time anymore, but still enjoys the arts. He asks her what inspired her to become a nun and she says it all had to do with the book of Acts. She asks him about the blonde woman he’s in love with, and he spends much time describing her.

They continue to speak of simple things throughout the night until the Chancellor can no longer keep his eyes open. Before the dawn, he climbs

into bed. She tucks him in and then disappears into the corner from which she appeared.

Berlin, Germany 1937

“The pain is bad tonight,” says the Führer. “I’m glad you’re here. Say something. Please.”

“Your blood is impure. Like your parents before you, you will die early.”

The Führer reels in his reclined chair, covered by a thick wool blanket. Beads of sweat stand firm on his forehead and upper lip. He grabs his stomach and grimaces. “Then, this must begin soon. How long do I have?”

“Years still, but no more than ten.”

“I’m told we’re not fully prepared for war. Rearmament is incomplete. The economy suffers. And, Britain... she’s not what I had hoped. She will fight against me.”

“She will. But Italy will come to your side, as will Japan. And the Americans and Russians will stay out of it for a time.”

The Führer closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He reaches for a glass of water and a pill on the table next to him. Holding the glass in one hand and the pill in the other, he says, “Will we win?”

“If I have anything to do with it, yes. I shall be hard at work, never doubt that. Though you will not see me again until the end, I will be near. Fear nothing.” She walks to him, leans down and wipes the sweat from his face. “You’ve been patient long enough.”

He clasps her hand and looks up at her. Through clinched teeth, he says, “It’s time, isn’t it.”

“Yes, my dear Adolph. Do it. Unleash the machine.”

Führerbunker
Berlin, Germany
April 30, 1945

An explosion quakes the building. Dust falls from the ceiling of the bunker onto the heads of Adolph Hitler and his wife, Eva. Eva cries and he holds her. He tries to protect her, but knows there is no use. He’d done well over the years to shield her from the mass destruction and death he poured upon Europe. But now that his war machine has wilted to rubble and the bloodshed has reached Berlin, he knows there is no way to protect Eva’s

innocent eyes from the explosive storm that is upon them.

Another bomb lands nearby, piercing their ears and shaking the ground, knocking over a couple of candles they lit when the electricity went out. Eva convulses sharply and buries her head in her husband's chest. Her entire body vibrates from fear and she kneads his coat with desperate, tense fingers. He tries to calm her, but he can't. He rocks. He rubs her hair. But her fear grows.

Another bomb cracks the ceiling, sending a thick blanket of dust floating down. The bass booming sound causes her to convulse again. She can't handle anymore. She lifts her head and begins screaming uncontrollably. She pulls away as her husband attempts to maintain the embrace. He tries to tell her to calm herself, but she's screaming incessantly. He yells his commands. Another bomb hits. They're both screaming now. The bunker shimmies and rocks. Hitler reaches into his pockets for the two capsules he had been saving.

Then, in an instant, everything stops. The bombs stop. The ground stills. The dust dissipates. Eva's wild movements and cries cease. Dizzied by the abrupt silence and stillness, Hitler looks down at his wife. She's unconscious, breathing peacefully, her head resting on his chest.

"Hello, my dear Adolph," a woman says from a distant, dark stairwell.

Hitler doesn't respond. He merely stares into the shadow from which the sound came, unsure if the far away voice was real.

Then, she appears.

He stares at her, blinking and squinting his eyes to clear away the daze. The nun says nothing more, but simply strides slowly toward him in her heavy, black robe. As he begins regaining his presence of mind, his emotions begin to awaken. The anger of betrayal begins to burn within him. He slides out from underneath Eva and guides her head to the floor.

He looks up at the nun and violently stands. He speaks. His volume increases rapidly until he's yelling. He verbally thrashes her for her betrayal, for her weakness, for her incompetence, for her stupidity. He stomps toward her, his fists clinched tightly. When he closes in within five feet, he raises his right hand to strike.

Suddenly, the nun thrashes the empty space between them. Without being touched, Hitler is hurled backward. His head snaps back at impact, thumping hard against the floor. He rolls onto his side in pain.

He opens his eyes to see the bottom of her robe within inches of his face. He looks up and sees her peering down at him with large, incendiary eyes.

"I'm here to save you and this is how you treat me," she says.

Hitler rolls onto his back and the nun sits down on the floor beside him.

She places her hand on his shoulder as a numbing sensation courses through his body that paralyzes his arms and legs. She commands him to sit up. Seemingly independent of his volition, Hitler's body obeys.

"It had to come to this, my son," she says.

She flicks something luminous—a flimsy flame, a paper-like incandescence that lands in front of them on the floor. He stares into it.

Within the flame he sees a bald eagle gripping thirteen arrows and an olive branch. It flies above pockmarked Germany heading west. It flies over Britain, and then over the Atlantic Ocean before reaching land where it approaches a towering pyramid reaching to the heavens. Engraved upon the base stones are the words: The Federal Reserve. The eagle ascends to the top of the pyramid where a colossal capstone floats—a capstone with an eye. The stone hovers and turns and gently rises and falls, as if floating on the sea. It blinks and then looks at the small, barely visible eagle.

"What is it?" he asks.

"It is the Kingdom," the nun says. "It's not yet complete, but, thanks to you, we're entering the final stage of creation. Your war machine has plowed the way, setting much of the world ablaze, and thus providing the proper soil for what is to come. The rise of the two feuding superpowers—the Communists and Capitalists—that's the next phase. Oh, but I have much yet to do. So much to do."

The nun leans back against the wall while Hitler remains upright. She crosses her arms and continues speaking.

"You see, a century ago I fused Communism with Atheism with a simple Manifesto, a set of ideas that has spawned today's Soviet Union. That was quite easy, to be honest. What I've done here with you, however, was much harder. But well worth it, let me tell you. Soon, I shall begin whispering the name Hitler into the ears of both the Capitalists and Soviets, causing anxiety to build. They shall fear each other because of their opposing ideologies and the remembrance of your dark deeds. A scramble for allies and markets and the spread of their ideals will consume them like hot embers in their guts. They shall battle each other in a new form of war. In but ten years, the atheism of the Communists will compel the Capitalists to disregard their separation of church and state and declare their belief in the true God. And thus, the fusion of Capitalism with Christianity."

The nun begins running her fingers through Hitler's hair.

"That's what all this was for, my dear Adolph. To rid my Christian people of the beliefs of those first disciples and deliver them to the true God so they can finally reach their potential and rule this world. You see, all durable empires must have a single God, whether it's a man, a statue, or an idea. It

unifies their belief system and focuses their power, leading to purity.”

The nun waves her hand over the flame and Hitler looks down at it.

The vision is still of the pyramid and the eagle flying freely in front of it. Then, from the eye of the capstone, Hitler sees visible vibrations radiating out like waves of air and sound. The vibrations soon coalesce into massive discernible shapes. Words.

Hitler reads: In God We Trust.

“I don’t understand,” he says.

“Money, my dear boy. Money is power, and power shall be their God. Their purity. It is the way, the truth, and the life. It has always been. And in 1955, my Great Church—the Federal Reserve—will establish this creed by printing those very words on every coin and bill. Don’t you see? I’m not interested in the purity of a fluid that runs through their veins. No, I want to purify their souls; I want to purify the deepest levels of who they are, those levels that only ideas can touch. Then, and only then, will my work be complete.”

The nun blows on the small fire, easily extinguishing it. She smooths out the front of her robe and leans forward. She rubs her hands together and says, “We’ll have plenty of time to talk further. But, as for now, we must depart.”

She stands, turns to Hitler, and holds out her hand. Hitler feels his paralysis lift, but nevertheless remains still.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ve taken care of everything. History will read that you killed yourself and your body was cremated and tossed to the winds. You’re safe. Rise to your feet, my dear Adolph.”

He then places his hand in hers and looks up at her with wide eyes. “Who are you? Who are you really?”

The nun smiles and pulls him to his feet. “I’m the one who leads from the shadows. ...And, I’m your friend. Now, come. The land of opportunity awaits.”

Queen of All the Ocean

by S. Hutson Blount

S. Hutson Blount graduated from the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2005 and began writing actively shortly afterward. His stories have appeared in Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Aeon Speculative Fiction, Electric Spec, Aoife's Kiss, and Ray Gun Revival. In this story, the dark waters off the coast of Japan hold more than just sunken warships.

“Wait, is that a shark?” Hunter cycled back through the stills taken earlier by the Remote Underwater Vehicle. He spun in his chair, trying to make Deb appear in the compartment behind him. “Did you see this?” he yelled.

“See what?” came a faint reply from the deck above.

“Fucking shark is disturbing our debris! I think it’s a shark, anyway.”

“Just a minute, I’ve gotta get the reel sorted out.”

Deb clattered down the steep ladderway a few minutes later, salt and sweat and sunscreen wrapped in sports logos. “Did you say there’s something in the field?”

“Look,” Hunter said, scratching his weedy blonde beard. “It’s moved those personal effects and fragments we’d ID’ed yesterday, right there in left of center.”

He pointed at one of a stack of monitors that formed their improvised command center. The compartment had originally been intended to process the catch off the jig lines in Gojira Maru’s previous career as a squid boat. The former gutting table held their racks of equipment. Deb squinted at the image.

“All I can see is a cloud of silt.”

“Wait.” Hunter dialed back through the stills. “There.”

The cloud was smaller, but had a distinctively one-lobed tail sticking out of it. “So, that’s a shark, all right. Why do you think it’s moving stuff around?”

The screen moved a few more frames back in time. “See?”

“Huh. What about video?”

“Mapping video wasn’t on, just the still cam.”

“That doesn’t tell us much, then.”

“Deb, we barely have time to do this survey once. I really don’t like doing all this just to have the local wildlife come through and make all our

work for nothing.”

“Why would a shark rearrange that stuff?”

“I’m not an ichthyologist. No matter why, I just don’t like doing unnecessary work. Besides, I don’t want to hear about this from the IMAC or the JMSDF guys. The war grave paperwork is the worst of it.”

“Look, if they want to subpoena a shark, that’s their problem. Anyway, it’s not really important how accurate the survey is, since this is all just proof-of-concept. If they’d wanted a real survey, they’d have sent more than just the two of us and that remote-controlled toy to do it.”

“I guess there’s time,” Hunter said, waving at the monitor. “Tsugaru isn’t going anywhere in a hurry.”

* * *

Water, tortured by the passage of Tsugaru’s four screws, roared from beneath her transom into the foam of the wake. It became a horizontal waterfall that consumed Keiichi’s senses. The hypnotic movement of the white water lured him here to the ship’s fantail more and more frequently, to watch the phosphorescence of the sea instead of think. Tsugaru was pulling along as fast as she could, thirty-five knots if she was moving at all, carving a swell that rose as high as her own main deck. There were no escorts left for them, and only speed and darkness were available to protect them from the American submarines that seemed to be lurking in every inlet and strait.

Gone were the days of Savo Island, when Keiichi had been a junior warrant in Goto’s invincible squadron. The Imperial Navy was reduced to stealing about like bandits, even in the Home Islands. The war was no longer about victory, or defiance of the West, or the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Nihon now fought only to keep from being swept aside into history. He wondered what the spirits of warlords and emperors past would think of that.

His grandmother had told him scary stories about spirits and monsters when he was a boy, doing a better job than his parents had managed because Keiichi could tell she believed. Her stories were warnings, not entertainments. The tales of ningyo, the mermaids who wept pearls and presaged wars, were banished far back his mind by the education of the boy into man and then fighting man, but never fully exiled.

His old ships had been made in more elegant times, with dragon-like curves and the craftsmanship of master steelworkers. Tsugaru was all straight lines and spot welds. Her shape was further marred by anti-aircraft guns attached on every available surface; the Americans had total command

of the skies, as well.

Keiichi leaned against one of the kaiten, the huge manned torpedoes that they were transporting to Okinawa to attack the American invasion fleet. He wished he could smoke a cigarette.

Over the wake noise, boots sounded on the linoleum deck behind him. Teak was too precious now. "Warrant Officer Omori!"

His isolation never lasted. "Good evening, Seaman Sakakibara."

Sakakibara saluted vigorously in the darkness. "A beautiful night, sir! No moon and the promise of clouds later. We should have an uneventful watch."

Keiichi was glad the boy had learned enough not to wish for action. "So it is, Seaman."

* * *

Deb's "remote-controlled toy" was back in the water, and she was back on the spool, paying out the umbilical to keep it from fouling. They were hoping to finish the survey in record time, before they ran out of funding or the Korean, Japanese, or Chinese governments decided to pull their permits. The wreck was in disputed waters.

They were also hoping to get it over with before they went crazy living in each other's pockets. The *Gojira Maru* wasn't built with luxury in mind, and even with a fraction of the original crew aboard, Hunter and Deb had to struggle to make the old bucket livable, naturally on their own money.

For instance, the crew quarters had a grand total of one shower, and it didn't originally have a curtain or door. They were pretty open-minded and all, but eventually decided to spring for a cheapo shower curtain to reduce any potential weirdness between them. They'd stayed out of each other's way in the few moments a day they weren't spending keeping up with the boat, the RUV, and the paperwork.

"You look like you do this for a living."

Deb looked up from the umbilical to see Hunter lounging against the railing, watching her. "I worked with RUV's all last summer, in the Aegean," she said, feeding the cables hand-over-hand into the ocean. "Does that count? Shouldn't you be driving, by the way?"

Hunter made a show of checking his watch. "We've got ten, fifteen minutes before anything happens. The RUV is a slow mover." They had an undeclared duel going, where she kept pronouncing the acronym as, "Are You Vee," and he said, "Roov."

"You bored?" Deb asked.

“Not any more.”

She held a slightly puzzled, slightly amused expression on her face for a few more meters of cable. “I could have sworn you didn’t like me.”

“Why’d you think that?”

“Just body language, little things. Back in Fukuoka.”

“That wasn’t you. That was me getting irritated with everyone who insisted on speaking only to you, even when I had to translate.”

Deb laughed. “You’ll never get around that. Half-blood is good enough to look the part. I still can’t convince anyone that I’m no good at reading kanji. I ask directions, and they point at signs.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll always be the trained bear to them, and you’ll be the person.”

“Harsh.”

“True.”

“You were looking pretty peaked when we were talking to the State Department wonks, too.”

“That’s just futile mad-at-the-world-itis. It sticks in me that they’d imply that the Korean Coast Guard or whoever would think that you’re a Japanese spy if they saw your last name.”

“Maybe he’s right. We aren’t in California any more, Toto.”

“It’s showboating bullshit. We’re carrying more weight in papers than in gear. And that’s just for a week of work.”

The seas shoved Gojira Maru around on her anchor line for a while longer.

“I’m glad to hear it wasn’t me,” Deb said, finally. “This would have been a long week to do nothing but hate each other’s guts. In other news, I think we’re getting close to the wreck.”

* * *

The two men were still standing in awkward silence, Keiichi suffering his privacy invaded, when the bells for watch change sounded. “Come on,” he told Sakakibara. “Let’s get up to the bridge.”

They’d taken a step each when the ship staggered and the seas lit beneath the bow like a strobe. A dirty pillar of seawater suddenly loomed over the other end of the ship, towering above the superstructure even from their vantage. It roared louder than the wake as it came back down on the forecastle.

Another flash and explosion shook Tsugaru again, this time along the starboard side. Black smoke and flame poured out of rents in the main deck.

Keiichi picked himself up from where he'd been thrown to the deck among the kaiten, which shook ominously against their tiedowns. Horribly, the bow was already decks awash but the funnels continued to smoke as they had been: the ship was going down rapidly by the bow, and her own engines were now driving her under even faster.

He'd seen this happen to a destroyer in the Solomons, and knew that Tsugaru had seconds left to live.

* * *

Hunter was alone with the monitors again, watching the soft, undulating seafloor creep past as the RUV paddled along. He had a table full of books opened for quick reference, all of them broken-backed and feathered with pastel sticky notes: *Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1868-1945*; *Conway's Anatomy of the Ship*; *Suicide Weapons, An Illustrated History*; *Anderson's Marine Geology*, and several more lower in the pile. They rested on an untidy nest of contour maps, most stamped either "NOAA" or "Nippon Sekiyu."

The first signs of the wreck were the little things, debris that had either been blown off in whatever trauma had sunk the ship, or stuff that had a high surface area-to-weight ratio and could glide a long way underwater.

* * *

It was still raining bits of metal—and what Keiichi hoped was metal—when the forward turrets went under. The ship pitched sickeningly as the sea rushed in through the gunhouse openings. There was shouting and movement amidships as Keiichi grabbed the young sailor by the scruff of his jumper uniform. He dragged him away from the fantail and over to the starboard side. The ship wasn't listing yet that he could tell, and this side was closer. He pitched Sakakibara over the side, then jumped himself, following the younger man's shriek of panic.

* * *

The first of the kaiten loomed into view, nose-down in the pale mud. They'd already tagged it as Number Eight, based on its presumed location on the deck. The ship would still be a ways ahead. Tsugaru's debris field was long and narrow, reflecting the high speed the ship had been traveling and the relatively short drop from the surface. Hunter re-checked the RUV's

course on their wreck map, but Kaiten Eight had appeared right when he'd predicted. It looked like nothing so much as a big piece of pipe stuck out of the seafloor, fins and propellers on the exposed end pitted and hanging.

The suicide subs gave Hunter the creeps. He could just wrap his mind around the idea of kamikaze—a blur of motion outside your window, a flash of fire and it would be over. You'd have a commit point beyond which the pilot couldn't change his mind. The kaiten was different. It kept the pilot in a long, slow approach with plenty of time to think about the process all the way in. According to Suicide Weapons, on the older models there was a way to detach the warhead and let the pilot escape, but it was never used.

* * *

Tsugaru had finished going under, and it was going to take hard swimming to keep the ship from taking them with it. Steam explosions would kill anyone close to the wreck who wasn't sucked under as air spaces in the hull filled. Keiichi treaded water and waited for what would come up. He could hear splashes that sounded like others were moving away, too. He hoped it were true.

* * *

Kaiten Seven and Six were where he expected them, too. Closer in, there were bigger pieces of debris, fittings that had been ripped off by the wash of water as the ship sank. There was a pair of railing fragments, twisted like wire. A slight mound was all that was left of 14-Meter Boat One, its wood dissolved and only the engine and propeller left identifiable.

The stern of the ship loomed into view. The name was still visible after sixty years, three hiragana symbols: RU GA TSU. They were arranged right-to-left, as was the practice in prewar Japan.

She'd come down with her head up. Whatever had hit her had flooded the ship so quickly that she hadn't rolled over, like most ships. That was about the only good news from Hunter's standpoint. The fall had been far and fast enough that the impact with the bottom had largely broken up the structure of the hull. The remainder of the ship's kaiten brood were scattered like bowling pins. The elevator in the rear deck yawned open, having never been used for the seaplanes it had been designed to service.

* * *

Keiichi pulled himself up on the balsa raft and looked at the night sky. He could hear voices in the distance, other survivors who had escaped the explosions and the sinking and the whirlpool. Keiichi remembered the long nights near Guadalcanal, and how many sharks you could count just by watching the wake. He'd wait until morning to move.

When he heard Sakakibara spluttering and splashing nearby, a flash of resentment gripped Keiichi. He would prefer to remain lying here and let the boy get up on the raft on his own. The feeling passed, and he stirred himself to sit up and help the terrified sailor out of the sea. He fell back to the planks, exhausted. Sakakibara began paddling with his hands, not making any noticeable progress against the raft's bulk and square lines.

"What are you doing?" Keiichi asked.

"We have to save them! Sir, the survivors!"

"Sit down, Seaman. If you keep rocking this raft, I'll throw you off. We aren't going to try to find anyone until dawn, and we aren't going to head into a mass of desperate men who will pull us under."

To his disgust, Keiichi heard Sakakibara start crying.

"Shut up," Keiichi said. "Save your energy."

"What will we do, Warrant Officer? We've failed!" Sakakibara blubbered the last of it almost beyond hearing.

"What's your name, Seaman? Your given name, I mean."

"Taro, sir."

"Sakakibara Taro, Omori Keiichi. We aren't in the war any more, Taro. Not until someone finds us."

"What sunk us, sir?"

"Submarine, maybe, though I didn't see any torpedoes. Maybe a high-flying bomber. It doesn't matter any more."

* * *

Hunter took a last "beauty pass" over the wreck with video and stills running. Tsugaru made for a picturesque wreck, of the kind that would make good copy for budget request presentations. It was just at the lowest depth that would grow anything, so the uppermost portions of the tower superstructure had a fairy-castle frosting of soft corals and sea stars.

Deb came in from the weather deck, chugging on a water bottle. "We back in business?"

Hunter grunted by way of reply, steering the RUV towards the last grid square they'd covered. It was only a theoretical grid. If this had been a proper expedition, divers would have laid a real one, a framework of PVC pipes

that would give a frame of reference for every artifact found. Of course, real divers wouldn't have gotten permission to go into a wreck still loaded with explosives, which was where the Gojira Maru and her intrepid crew came in.

Deb was ready with her drafting pencils and their draft of the site map. As the RUV settled towards the bottom, her eyes were on the downward-looking mapping video monitor, Hunter watching the forward-looking one to steer by.

"Square A30," Hunter said, reading off the map. "I'm slowing it down now."

They watched the monitors in near-silence, the slap of the waves and the rattle of loose gear lulling them in the blue glow.

"So," Deb said, waiting for something to cross her screen, "what are you going to do once we fly back?"

"You mean after we get this shit written up? Wait around and see if we get the go-ahead, proolly. I got some buds down in Santa Barbara I could hang with. You?"

Deb doodled on her scratch pad. "Parents. They wanted to fly out to meet us in Kyushu. It took some doing to talk them out of that. I agreed to spend my downtime with them at their house in Mountain View."

"Why'd they want to fly out?"

"They weren't real happy to hear I was spending a week at sea alone with a guy. Don't laugh! They're just old-fashioned."

Hunter still looked pretty pleased with himself. "I thought you'd been on that Aegean gig."

"There were a bunch of us. Apparently, that didn't count. They keep getting less and less excited about having a marine archaeologist for a daughter."

"My folks didn't care, as long as it kept me gone. You can assure your folks that your virtue is perfectly safe."

Deb glanced away from her monitor. "You have someone back home?"

"I'm between girlfriends at the moment. No offense, but you're not really my type."

"Thanks loads."

"See? I said, 'no offense,' and it's like it never works."

"Do you really expect it to?" Deb's face didn't show any reaction, but her voice went up an octave.

"I have very specific tastes in women," Hunter said, more defensively than he'd meant to.

"Let me guess. Blond hair, big boobs, long legs."

“Too general, but you’re getting there. Blonde—natural blonde, you understand—not too platinum and not strawberry or sandy blonde. Legs are important, and I have a minimum allowable aspect ratio between calf and ankle, and no weird kneecaps. Ideal breast size is equivalent to her own balled fist.”

Deb gaped. “Did you make this up?”

“The breast size thing was from Marie Antoinette, I think. There’s more. I have it all written down somewhere.”

“Innie or outie?”

“Innies only. Outies are gross.”

“... You’re serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be? Don’t tell me you don’t have some picture of what the Ultimate Guy would look like.”

“I’ve got things I like. I don’t have, like, benchmarks or anything.”

Hunter settled back in his swivel chair, just far enough that he could touch the RUV controls with his fingertips. “So, hit me with it. What’s your idea of the Ultimate Guy?”

Deb was quiet for several seconds, hoping this conversation would spontaneously cease to exist. “Okay,” she blurted, relenting, “he shouldn’t be too much taller than me, and not too heavily muscled. He shouldn’t have much body hair. Oh, and he should think cunnilingus is the best thing ever invented.”

“So, a woman, then.”

There was a breathless second when neither of them was sure if violence would follow. Hunter suppressed a laugh, his shoulders shaking.

Deb tried to grit her teeth, unsuccessful in avoiding the contagious giggle. “You’ve been waiting years to use that line, haven’t you?”

“I have, indeed. I have to thank you, Madam, for walking into it. I can cross it off my list now.”

“Maybe we better restart the survey from A30.”

* * *

The raft was getting lower in the water. Keiichi wasn’t surprised. The balsa floats waterlogged eventually. The rafts were only supposed to keep the survivors out of the water until a nearby ship could pick them up. There were no nearby ships. There was no nearby anything.

Dawn had revealed no other survivors, only bodies, foamy brown oil, and other floating debris. The sea stank, despite a breeze fresh enough to ripple the surface of every wave and give the drenched men on the raft

gooseflesh. It wasn't soon enough for the bodies to have ripened, but Keiichi could smell shit over the petroleum stink anyway.

Taro had stopped vomiting in the night, having purged all the salt water and oil he was going to. Keiichi wondered how long they had. With no water, he'd seen delirium overcome survivors in less than a day. Keiichi feared becoming like the men he'd seen fished out of the ocean. He feared madness more than death or dishonor.

"Keiichi," Taro croaked. "Will they come for us?"

Keiichi had begun to regret making their relationship informal enough to use given names. "There probably wasn't time for the radiomen to get a signal out. I don't know when we were supposed to check in next. Squadron will figure something out after that."

Taro lay on his back, arm shading his eyes, cracked lips never quite closing. "I want Hanako to know I've been killed. I don't want her to wait and not know if it's true or not."

Hanako. Keiichi tried to picture what Taro's woman was like. Probably a plump town girl, with a Hokkaido accent similar to Taro's, and perhaps a reddish tinge to her hair from a recent Ainu ancestor. She'd be a simple girl, one Taro still remembered from school in whichever suburb of Sapporo or Wakkanai or whichever else hind end of Nihon they were from.

In the end, the girl's picture was too hazy in his mind, and he kept reconstructing Yuri. Elegant, indolent Yuri, with her long-stemmed cigarette holder and her Chinese dresses. A rich man's broken daughter, who'd taken an insane fascination with a tin toy in uniform. Keiichi thought she'd married him as a joke, just to taunt the society that scorned her. She was away in the country, as most women her age were, pressed into farm work to keep the nation from starving now that no ships came and went from the ports. Keiichi could imagine her thigh-deep in the rice fields, still clamping that cigarette filter and doing her atrocious Roosevelt impression. He wondered how long it would take for her to get the letter from the Navy Ministry about the loss of Tsugaru.

"She can hear me, Keiichi," Taro said. "She's coming to me. She swam all this way." Taro's voice was dreamy, despite his rasping. "So beautiful, Hanako."

I will not push him from the raft, Keiichi thought. He saw that Taro had rolled on his side, away from him.

"Cover yourself, Hanako. Don't look, Keiichi. She had to take off all her clothes to swim here from Hokkaido. You can have my shirt, Hanako." And then he rolled off the raft into the water, and was gone.

It happened so quickly and quietly that Keiichi was alone before he

could sit up and focus his eyes against the glare.

“Taro!”

It wasn't his fault. He hadn't pushed the boy. He'd held his tongue and hadn't even scolded him for his rambling. “Sakakibara!” The sound of Kei-ichi's shouting disappeared echolessly across the seascape.

* * *

“Square G14,” Hunter said, less tonelessly than in the last couple of hours. “Coming up on the bow, get ready.”

“I'm ready, already. Just keep it going in straight lines.”

It had been boring work, combing the mostly-empty mud flats to either side of the ship's axis of motion. The only objects of interest had been several small anchors, like boat anchors, and lengths of badly-rusted chain. They'd argued over the identity of the mystery objects for a couple of minutes, accomplishing little but staving off boredom.

Now they were getting to the ship itself, and it would take a lot of camera work. Things would happen too quickly for plotting manually, so they'd have to reconstruct a chart later from a photo mosaic.

Deb was triggering the mapping still camera every few seconds, jotting shorthand notes in a logbook. Her gaze flickered around from the monitor, to the rough map, to her notes with strobe rapidity.

Hunter watched her precise, bird-like motions as she worked. The RUV was barely moving, requiring only occasional input from him. He'd rather look at her than the hulk of the old ship. The wreck looked like the ones he'd daydreamed when he was a kid, but he didn't like them now—too unsettling when they were still identifiable as ships.

He'd much rather watch Deb. He'd only been half-joking with her earlier. She wasn't what he usually looked for, though he knew plenty of guys who fixated on Asian features, sometimes to creepy fetish levels. Hunter supposed the reason he didn't was that he had too much tribal indoctrination in the Barbie totem, but keeping objectivity about the source of his fixation didn't dilute its power. Still, Deb was certainly not unattractive. It didn't hurt his opinion of her that she didn't complain about the Spartan living conditions and knew her way around boats, either. Taking in the view, and the pleasing secondary effects of her rapid movements, placed him in position to notice immediately when she froze up, staring at the monitor.

“What's wrong?” he asked. “We miss something?”

“It's nothing. I just saw your shark again.”

“Bullshit.” Hunter dialed the RUV's thruster speed to zero. “What did

you see?"

Deb's jaw worked for a second before words came out. "It was in the foredeck fissure we just passed over. It was moving around."

"Do you want me to back up?"

"No!" Deb blurted, then continued more normally. "We need to get moving. It's getting late, and we're going to need time to reel in and sleep." Deb looked completely un-rattled now, and sounded wholly rational, as if the look of terror that had passed over her seconds ago had never happened.

"Sure," Hunter said, and got the RUV moving again.

* * *

Taro never came back up.

As the sun lowered, Keiichi gave up his attempts to paddle the raft eastward. It was entirely awash now; though the balsa wouldn't ever really sink, it no longer kept him from constant immersion. The Pacific cold would kill him before dehydration would, provided he wasn't swept off the raft by a wave and drowned. Drowning was supposed to be a peaceful death, though Keiichi didn't think that seemed likely.

He wondered what Yuri would say when she heard. He supposed that she still loved him. Her attraction to him was mystifying, now just as much as it had been before the war. Who would take care of her now, with no one to shield her against the effects of her own disregard for propriety? The wife of an officer, even one with a warrant instead of a commission, had implicit power at her disposal. A widow had none. Perhaps it was just as well that there were no children.

So intent was Keiichi on the unhappy fate of his wife that the muttering growl on the horizon had sharpened to the sound of aircraft motors before he recognized it. He tried to stand, and reconsidered given his precarious island, and how weak his legs were already. He settled for sitting up, struggling out of his uniform jacket. He spotted the dark speck crossing the reddening lines of cloud, waved his jacket like a flag. As it passed by, he could make out the dark blue-over-light blue coloration: American. He waved anyway. The plane never wavered from its course, headed southeast into the darkening sky.

From a distance, Keiichi appeared to be sitting directly on the water, the raft invisibly submerged beneath him. He screamed at the Americans, at the sky, at the world. Hope, he knew, was the cruelest of the human frailties. He'd let it hurt him anyway. He flung his jacket onto the water, but he would not weep.

When the scratching sound started, he began to reconsider. Something was underneath the raft. He knew sharks had scratchy skins; he checked himself carefully for cuts in the fading light, to make sure his blood was not attracting them. He found no open wounds. The scratching didn't sound like sandpaper, though, and he hadn't felt anything bumping the raft. It sounded like fingernails on a door.

With the sky darkening to indigo in the east, the sunset clouds were painting the waves pink and dark gray. Keiichi squinted at the water, only able to focus on the reflections before he saw her.

She was only a shape at first, a lighter-colored patch moving past the edge of the raft ghostly, soundlessly. As she came shallower, closer to him, the veil of distortion thinned. At first, he was afraid it would really turn out to be Yuri, that he had really gone mad.

She looped around to pass by the raft, rolling onto her back just over an arm's length away. She was barely submerged now, so that Keiichi could see the curves of her. He'd expected a mermaid would have flukes like a dolphin, but she didn't—she was shark like from the hips down, swaying sinuously to propel herself in languid circles around the raft. Keiichi thought she was emaciated despite her full bosom, at first seeing her ribs stand out, but they weren't ribs at all, but gill slits like a shark's. He expected a sharp division between woman and fish halves, but didn't see that, either. She was a single color overall, gray-brown except for the long black hair trailing behind her head and a dark triangle between her pelvic fins. And her eyes—not the solid, empty black of shark's eyes, but pale jewels with pupils slitted against the dying light.

Keiichi saw her eyes and was terrified and in love.

Come to me, she said.

* * *

The RUV came back aboard without incident. Dangling from the crane, it didn't resemble a submarine so much as a piece of luggage merged with a portable generator. Hunter and Deb had debated giving the thing a name, but couldn't agree on one. He'd been disappointed that she hadn't gotten the joke when he'd wanted to name it "Minya." She'd been vaguely offended when he implied that Godzilla movies were culturally relevant.

The helicopter surprised both of them, appearing out of the setting sun to thunder overhead seemingly at mast-top height. Deb looked up only momentarily, adjusted her baseball cap, and worked faster. Hunter watched as the chopper executed a racing-pylon turn and came back at them, slowing

down to take a closer look at the anchored squid boat. The helicopter displayed its South Korean markings clearly in the redness of the sunset.

“Fuck you,” Hunter said, smiling and waving. “We got a license.”

“Go see if they’re calling on the radio,” Deb said. “I can get this tied down.”

She’s only pretending not to be freaked out, Hunter thought on his way to the pilothouse. What had she seen? There weren’t any identifiable bodies down there after sixty years of scavenging—probably not even any bones left. She hadn’t struck him as the type to get squeamish about personal effects. If the Koreans wanted them on the horn, they weren’t terribly persistent about repeating calls. The helicopter was already bugging out westward, and all the channels were quiet.

Hunter checked their position on the GPS set, a piece of equipment about twenty years younger than anything permanently installed aboard *Gojira Maru*. They hadn’t dragged anchor during the day, and their swing circle was still well clear of the field of Tsugaru’s unexploded ordnance. He looked at the tiny liquid crystal display screen on the GPS, and wondered what had sunk the ship in the first place.

Before leaving the pilothouse, Hunter switched on the string of floodlights strung on a cable over the length of the boat, another relic of her former career. It would keep them from being run over in the night. He headed for the cabins to bathe and turn in.

Hunter did some pretty good thinking in the shower, even if it used up more than his share of the hot water. He let his mind drift as he watched the water make long ellipses past the drain as it responded to the boat’s rocking.

Tsugaru had been a mystery for a number of years. Japanese record-keeping in 1945 was not working at peak efficiency even before taking into account the effects of two nukes and a blizzard of conventional explosives. The US Navy hadn’t even been sure the ship had existed until 1953, and no one was sure to this day what had sunk it. Hunter knew. It had lurked in the back of his mind, bothering him for a couple of days, but suddenly he knew. The objects they couldn’t identify, the ones that were so much more corroded than the wreck, were mine anchors. No one had found any records of a Japanese or American minefield laid here during the war, but they were looking at the wrong war.

Hunter was, with the fevered certainty of religious convert, certain to find a record of a Japanese or Russian minefield—but one laid in 1905. He just had to get to the records. This was it. He was going to turn in the marine archaeology paper of the decade.

He put on a pair of swim trunks and sandals and made his way back to

the processing room/command center, looking for a book. Deb was there, tapping away at a keyboard.

“Look at you, being industrious,” he said.

She didn’t look up. “I’m just getting rid of some extraneous shots. Junk.” Deb struck the keys with a little more force than necessary, deleting picture files from the day’s shoot.

“You want to be famous?” When that didn’t get a response, he continued, “I’m going to prove that Tsugaru was the last casualty of the Russo-Japanese War. Your name should be on that paper, too.”

Deb looked at him with absolute intensity, a look so frozen that he wondered what he’d fucked up. It wasn’t a look of hatred, though. It was absolute detachment, the cessation of all outside contact; it was a woman laying the last stones of a fortress wall.

“You’re right,” she said. “Let’s celebrate. I was saving some Bourbon in the camera footlocker.” She pointed at the tied-down cases behind Hunter.

“You are a lifesaver, young lady. If that’s decent Bourbon, I’ll give you top billing.” Hunter looked around at the stack of locked cases. “Which camera case?”

He turned to ask Deb, but she wasn’t pointing any more; she was holding a utility knife over her head in both hands.

* * *

Deb stepped onto the deck, bathed in the glow of the boat’s old floodlights. She moved slowly, uncertainly, as if unsure why she had come out into the night with no clothes on. Blood squished out of her formerly white shoes as she moved to the railing.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the ocean. “I couldn’t show him your face. I didn’t want to share you.” Deb dropped the bloody knife over the side.

A wealth of sea creatures had swarmed up to the boat’s light to feed, but scattered shortly. Deb saw the mermaid again, just peeking out of the waves at the edge of the light.

You’ve done well, the mermaid said. Come to me.

Deb slipped out of her sodden top-siders and sat on the railing, then swung her legs over the side. The lightest of splashes, and the clean seawater was scrubbing away all the blood.

“You have to get away,” Deb spluttered between waves. “They’ll come looking. There’s satellites.”

The mermaid was with her, blue-green cat’s eyes locking with hers as Deb took her into her arms. Her skin was rougher than her own, but not

abrasive like a shark's. Deb held on, arms and legs, more secure than she'd ever felt with anyone. The kiss happened without Deb even realizing it was starting. She tasted salt and crabmeat, and their tongues touched and fluttered and caressed.

I'll take you with me, the mermaid said. We'll leave together.

She kissed her again, harder, and Deb felt a tiny cut on her tongue from one of the serrated, shellfish-crushing teeth. Then her head lolled back and the mermaid released her.

The shell of Deb's body obeyed one final command, squeezing all the air out of its lungs. It descended into the abyss.

* * *

Pregnancy always took a few hours, but she guessed she could wait at least that long. In her nest in what had been Tsugaru's seaplane hangar, the mermaid waited the process out, thinking about the relation of stars and tides and where the next den would be.

When it was time, she pushed a little and used her fingers to take hold of one of the tendrils of the egg case. She pulled it out, smaller than her palm.

Deb.

She placed it with the dozen others, in a pouch she'd woven from salvaged aluminum wire. There were other wrecks, other places to hide, and her lovers would hatch into her new daughters someday when she was ready.

They Sing

by G.O. Clark

G.O. Clark is retired and lives in Davis, CA. His work has appeared in Asimov's, Talebones and many other publications over the past thirty years. He is the author of eight poetry collections, including the most recent "Strange Vegetables" and one fiction collection, "The Saucer Under My Bed and Other Tales" from Sam's Dot Press.

They Sing

Beneath the dying sun,
they sing while tilling the fields.

They sing while foraging in
the wild for sparse fruits and berries.

They sing when hunting
the rare herd of split-hoofed beasts.

They sing at the miracle of birth,
and, when death depletes their numbers.

They sing to drown out the sad
inner voices of their slave ancestors.

They sing to their children songs
of a bright, but questionable future.

Beneath the dying sun they fill the sky
with soulful choruses of hope.

The Hammer

by Travis Heermann

Travis Heermann is a freelance writer, author, and a 2009 graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop. He has sold short fiction to Cemetery Dance magazine, The Harrow and On the Premises. His second novel, a historical fantasy set in medieval Japan, Heart of the Ronin, was released in February 2009, as a library-edition hardcover from Five Star Publishing. Besides fiction, he has contributed to dozens of role-playing game supplements for Alderac Entertainment Group and EVE Online. This is a story of an aging pit fighter and his failing heart.

Horace “The Hammer” Harkness stared the Fight Doctor in the face. “What the hell are you talking about? I’ve died twenty-seven times.”

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Hammer.”

Horace sat up on the exam table and rested his forehead in his hands. If he wasn’t feeling like he’d just had his guts strewn in ribbons across the floor, he might have put this little man through the nearest wall. “I’m a pit fighter, Doc.”

“And you’re the only active pit fighter who’s ever made the age of fifty. Regenites can only repair organs so many times.”

“You know better than giving me that bullshit.”

The round-faced, round-bodied man cleared his throat and wiped sweat from his forehead. “Truth is you’ve had too many years in the minor franchises . . .”

“Too many hack doctors who don’t know how to program a treatment.”

“It’s not just your heart. Your entire regenerative system is failing.”

“How did it get this far? Why now?”

“Well, frankly, because you have the pain tolerance of a mammoth. I’m surprised you haven’t keeled over before now, permanently. I’m afraid you’re off the card.”

“Whatever happened to ‘the show must go on?’”

The Fight Doctor sniffed. “Nobody wants to see a sick old man die, Hammer.”

Horace slammed his chitin-hardened fist into the glasteel exam table. The biometric readouts flickered with the force of his blow. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? Do you have any idea how much all those treatments

cost me? Do you know how many favors I had to cash in just to be here tonight?” Not to mention how much money he had had to borrow to build himself up enough to have a chance against Gaston “The Freak” Rousseau. The Fight Doctor was right about too many years in the minor franchises. Even the bonuses from victories and confirmed kills often didn’t cover the cost of his regeneration. He had had to heal too many wounds naturally, and they had taken their toll.

“Sorry, Hammer. I don’t make the rules.” The Fight Doctor clutched his clip-pad like a shield to his chest, edging back.

“The fuck you don’t!” Horace’s spiked boot sent the EKG monitor spinning away to crash into the wall.

“Hammer, please, calm down. If you die . . .”

Twenty-seven times the world had gone black, sometimes slow, like going to sleep, other times in an explosion of pain. And never a white light to be seen. “What’s one more time? After fifteen years, I’m the Main Fucking Event!”

“I know it means a lot to you—”

“It means a lot to them! There are thousands out there who remember, who came to see me! Me and a few guys like me built this fucking sport! Do you want to go out there and tell them they can’t see The Hammer’s comeback just because he had a dizzy spell during warm-up?”

“I’d hardly call it a dizzy spell. And this time could be for good—”

“What’s that?” Horace cupped a hand behind his ear.

“—known each other a long time—”

“I can’t understand you.”

“—But—”

“You got Regenicorp’s cock in your mouth. I’m surprised you don’t have lockjaw by now.” With a swat of his paw, he cleared a tray of ointments and instruments and bottles. He would never, ever admit to Ferris Wilton, M.D.—a.k.a. the Fight Doctor, complete with action figure and trading card—that moving his left elbow just right sent pain up his arm that would incapacitate lesser men. Back in ‘72, at Trauma in Tokyo XIV, Andre the Titan had thought it should bend just as far in the wrong direction.

“You can’t intimidate me into letting you fight tonight,” the Fight Doctor said, “not this time.” But the quaver in his voice said precisely the opposite.

If Horace didn’t fight tonight, his life would just as well be over anyway. When Death Match Unlimited had quietly floated the idea of a twentieth anniversary rematch between The Hammer and The Freak, a rivalry that was still legendary, Horace had seen the dollar signs. Enough dollar signs to fix a lot of things.

He stood to his full height, his head brushing the underside of the light fixture in the center of the room. “Then let me put it to you this way. I’ll sign whatever the fuck you want me to sign. Waiver, whatever. In blood if you want. When I’m dead, there isn’t a soul on this fucking planet going to give a shit about who’s liable. But I gotta fight The Freak tonight.”

The Fight Doctor sighed a little too deeply. “I hate to see you do this to yourself, Horace. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You do that.”

The doctor trundled out, rubbing the sweat off his bald pate.

If Horace actually managed to survive, the purse would be enough to buy him a whole new heart grown from his old one, despite the fact that it cost more than the G.D.P. of half the countries he’d been fighting in.

The pain in his chest and left shoulder returned. He rubbed his chest as he sat on the table again, reached for his duffel bag, and fished out his iHub. The icons on the screen were too small for his meaty fingers, but he managed to snag the one he wanted.

Lilly. A picture of her and him, silken cheek to tattooed jowl, both smiling under a rain of sparkling light and neon. He had never seen eyes so big and brown before, the kind of eyes that could make a man forget his pain. If only they didn’t have walls behind them. He felt a stab not unlike a blade punching through his sternum. The iHub pinged. Pinged again.

The connection clicked, and a man’s voice said, “Titty Twister.”

“Hey, Max. This is Hammer.”

“Hammer! My man! How’s it hangin’!” The beat of background music pulsed behind Max’s voice.

“To the knee, brother. Listen, I need to talk to Lilly.”

“She ain’t here. Ain’t seen her since last week.”

“Last week?” Horace rubbed the old, deep scar on his forehead, where Gaston “The Freak” Rousseau’s kukri had nearly taken the top of his skull clean off. That had been death number fourteen. Lost a few childhood memories from that one, too.

“Yeah, don’t know what to tell you. Hey, I tried to get tickets for tonight, man, but S-O-L. We’re gonna have the pay-per-view up on the big screen though.”

“It’ll be a hell of a show. Listen, if you hear from her, tell her to call me. It’s important.”

“You got it. She have your number?”

“Yeah, she’s got my number all right.” Another stab.

“Kick Freak’s ass, man. I got a Roosevelt on you.”

“You got it, brother.” Horace thumbed the d-conn and tossed the iHub

into his bag.

The doctor came back with a sheaf of papers a centimeter thick. Horace shook his head; that hadn't taken nearly enough time. Cocksucker had those papers already prepared. Either way, it didn't matter. The doctor laid them on the exam table and offered a pen in a trembling hand.

* * *

The thunder of the seventy thousand fans filtered through several feet of concrete into his dressing room, and the heavy beat of the music pounded on his skull like a fist. He hadn't fought in front of a crowd this large in over a decade; since then, the attendance at his bouts had dwindled from a few thousand in the B-list venues to a few hundred at venues like the Rumble in Rockport. There weren't even bonuses for getting a clean, resurrectable kill at those places. Sometimes the purse didn't even pay the rent. In the big venues, there was always someone new on the rise, the hungry young ones headed for the spotlight. The trouble with up-and-comers was they created just as many down-and-outers.

The screen on the wall came alive with the start of the broadcast.

"Live from Caesar's Coliseum in New Vegas, Death Match Unlimited presents Fury Dome XXIV!"

In faux 3D, the camera swept over the fighting pit in the center of the coliseum up toward the rows of cheering fans.

"Ten spectacular bouts! Twenty bloodthirsty warriors! And the rematch twenty years in the making between two of the greatest pit fighters in history!"

His iHub pinged at him. Lilly's face leaped into mind, but as he fished it out he saw that the incoming address was blocked.

He answered it. "Yeah, who is this?"

"Hammer. Dmitri."

"You're calling me now?"

The voice was thick with a Russian accent. "Just a reminder from Papa—"

"Listen, asshole. I told you, I'll have your money tonight."

"I know you're good for it, Hammer. It's just that Papa, he gets nervous, you know? Too many guys like you have tried to fuck him. Too many guys, all smarter than you. We'll have car waiting outside. Get 'lost,' and there aren't many places 'Hammer' Harkness can hide, you know?"

"I'll be out back, the guy with blood all over him."

"Watch your mouth, smartass. Regenites can't put your head back on.

How's that stripper you go to see so often? What's her name, 'Daisy'? Do you know where she is right now? I do."

Horace bit back a threat, then d-conned and tossed the iHub into his bag again.

If he won tonight, he would have enough cash to pay off the Russians and grow himself a new heart. If he lost, he would be able to pay for only a bout-related regeneration and his debt to Dmitri, with maybe enough money left for cab fare home.

His ravaged knees ground with pain as he stepped into the hallway. His stomach still felt queasy.

A lanky, buck-toothed, teenaged kid squeezed against the wall to let him by in the narrow concrete tunnel. The kid's eyes glowed with reverence. "Go get him, Hammer. Hammer Time!" He clutched his fists together above his head into the Thunder Hammer™.

"Thanks, brother." He stopped and extended his hand to the young man.

A grin spread like sunrise across the kid's face as he stuck his hand out. "Can I have your autograph?"

Horace's hand engulfed his. "Sure."

"Awesome! My dad always talks about seeing you and the Freak in L.A."

"Which time?"

The kid looked away. "I don't remember, but you lost that one. He was rooting for you, though." The kid pulled a Death Match Unlimited magazine out of his back pocket, this week's issue with a montage of twenty-year-old animated holos depicting the last time The Hammer and The Freak faced each other. The caption read "DEATH MATCH OF THE CENTURY PART II." "Sign it to Larry. That's my dad."

"You tell your old man to keep raising you right." He scribbled his signature on the cover with the gel-tip from his pocket.

"Thanks, Hammer! He'll be so stoked!"

"No problem, brother." They shook hands again. He had to be careful with the strength of his grip; he could crush a normal human's hand into crunchy red paste.

"Hammer Time!"

"Hammer Time," Horace said.

The young man practically floated away.

Horace's iHub pinged. The screen showed an incoming address he didn't recognize. He answered.

"Hey, Hammer, what's up?" Lilly's voice, neutral, polite, without video.

His heart skipped a beat.

“I heard you were trying to reach me.” There was an unfamiliar tremor in her voice. She sniffed.

“Well, I— You crying or something?”

“You said it was important.”

“It’s just— Where are you anyway? You okay? Are you safe? You don’t sound like you.”

“I’m fine. What’s up?”

“Well, I got this big fight tonight, you know, the Coliseum, biggest in a long time, maybe ever, and I thought you might be able to come. Just this once, you know, outside the club. I got a couple seats reserved, see, and—”

“Oh, Hammer, I told you—”

“Listen. Lilly. I know. I get it. I, uh . . .” He leaned against the wall. “We’ve known each other for a while, and . . . it would mean a lot if you was here tonight.” A wave of dizziness washed over him. His heart rattled and strained against the inside of his ribcage, and something was cinching his lungs closed. He covered the iHub with his hand and gritted his teeth.

She sighed. “Hammer, I would like to come, it’s sweet of you to ask, but I can’t. Look, I gotta—”

“Just this one time.”

The words hovered on her lips for several seconds. “How do I find you?”

“I’ll leave word with the guards at the back entrance to bring you to the locker room.”

“No guarantees, Hammer. I’m kind of in the middle of something now.”

“I get it.”

“Bye, Hammer.” The connection went dead.

* * *

“Now there is the ugliest motherfucker I ever seen, eh?” Gaston “The Freak” Rousseau’s voice sounded like he gargled with hot asphalt.

Horace crossed Gaston’s dressing room in three strides, extending his hand. “My god, you look like the inside of an elephant’s ass.”

Gaston’s hairy paw clasped it like a vise. “You smell like one, eh?”

“Must be your breath.” They embraced, laughing. Gaston only came up to Horace’s sternum, but the fifteen-centimeter flaming-orange Mohawk made up some of the difference. The David-and-Goliath aspect of their comparative statures was one reason their matches had been so popular back in the day. “You are still the hairiest sumbitch I ever seen. Now you’re all old and wrinkled, you’re starting to look like a scrotum.”

Gaston punched him in the breadbasket, a blow that would have likely ruptured the spleen of that kid in the hallway, but among pit fighters, it was a mere love tap. “Fuck you, eh? As long as I don’t look like your scrotum. I come out of retirement for this?”

Horace’s stomach surged and roiled, and a throbbing ache spread through his left shoulder. He forced a smile. “You can’t get this kind of abuse anywhere else. Fucking good to see you, man. How’s Montreal?”

“Safer, Hark. Much safer than the Business.”

“Still running that gym?”

“Ah, oui. I stay in shape, don’t have to get killed, and the little ones think I am God. It is a good life. By the way, my offer is still open. Come and help me groom young retards for the pit.”

“Thanks all the same, but I don’t speak Pussy.”

“Yah, you The Hammer. The man who never stay dead, eh? Twenty-seven?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“And five of those belong to me.”

“Fuck you, I still have you by two.”

“Maybe not after tonight, eh?”

“Maybe.” Horace stepped away and leaned against the prep table. The air smelled of rubbing alcohol, ointment, and petroleum jelly, and his head again brushed the bank of light fixtures above, making their shadows sway. The cinder block walls were painted white, but somehow started to gray. The light dimmed.

Gaston’s voice sounded like it was coming through a steel culvert. “You okay, Hark?”

* * *

A voice floated into his consciousness that he hadn’t heard in . . . far too long. “What is your malfunction, pansy ass? Lying down on the job?”

His labored heartbeat thundered so loud in his ears he could barely hear her voice. “Naw, Amanda darlin’, I’m just resting.”

“Get up, Horace.”

“Not just yet. Need to rest a minute.” His voice sounded farther away than hers.

An image of the most beautiful face he had ever seen swam through the gray fog. Long sweeping dark curls, eyes like propane flames, and that silly golden tiara with the red star in the center.

He said, “Where you been all this time, darlin’?”

A warm, callused hand soft on his face. “Watching you, baby. You need to get up. Right now.”

“Just need to lay here a little longer.”

“Now, fuck face.”

“No need to get all hostile, darlin’. God, I missed you.”

She swallowed hard, hovering over him. Had a tear just brushed his cheek? “Me, too.”

“You never told me his name . . .”

Another voice intruded, male, familiar, nearer. “Hark, you need a doctor?”

“I know, baby,” she said. “I couldn’t.”

“That was kinda mean, you know?”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice receded as if through a thickening fog. Then she was gone.

“Hark, let me help you up, eh.”

Horace felt himself lifted to his feet as if he was a doll.

Gaston’s gravelly voice was clear. “There you go. Upright.”

Horace rubbed his eyes and tried to clear his vision. The blood-thunder in his ears subsided to a distant storm. Another man was there. Horace managed to focus. “Why, Johnny Valentine, when did you get here?”

The massive shaven-headed warrior helped Gaston ease Horace against the prep table. “Freak here called me in. Y’all right?”

“It’s nothing. Just a little under the weather is all. Thanks, Johnny.”

“Anything for you, Hammer.”

“Listen, Johnny,” Horace said, “your slot must be coming up soon. Me and The Freak here gotta go over the spots.”

Johnny released Horace’s right arm. “Yeah, number five on the card. Anything y’all need, fellas, just holler.” He picked up his ceramic vibro-axe and headed for the door.

“Kick some ass, kid,” Horace called after him.

The enormous axe man opened the door, then stood back as the familiar rattle and squeak of gurney and medical equipment whisked a fallen fighter to the infirmary. Through the open door, the smells of blood and viscera wafted into the room, mixing with the aromas of alcohol, oiled steel, and leather.

Valentine squeezed through the doorway and disappeared.

Gaston gripped Horace’s shoulder. “That a drug reaction? Who were you talking to?”

Horace chose the easier question to answer. “Amanda Reckinwith. Her parents had a sick sense of humor. She tried to kill me once.”

“Name’s familiar . . .”

“Chromosome Clash III. I was the only man who ever beat her.”

“You talking about ‘Wonder Woman’?” Gaston said.

“Yeah, that’s her.” She had even licensed the tiara and lasso from the media company, except the tiara was titanium and the lasso was bioengineered spider silk laced with micro-razors. She’d nearly severed his left arm with that lasso, and he’d taken her down by getting close enough to shatter her molded ceramic breastplate—and her rib cage—with a one-handed Thunder Hammer™. Afterward, as they lay in the infirmary, waiting for their bodies to regenerate from the ghastly wounds they had given each other, they had shared a glance, then later a shower, then a solid month in Caesar’s Palace Tower, drunk on Dom Perignon, during which time she’d done her damndest to wear him down to a nub. He’d had a hundred (and twelve?) groupies and pit girls—plus a few Fortune 500 CEOs and even a Siamese princess—in the fifteen years since then, but Amanda had been the real deal. Tastes of strawberry lip-gloss and the saltiness of her throat floated out of the dark. “She started hating me when she found out she was pregnant.”

Gaston ran kielbasa-like fingers through the thick orange braids of his beard. “Always wondered why she quit. She was on top.”

“I suggested an abortion if she was so sore about being disqualified, but . . .” He shrugged. Something in her had shifted, something biological, instinctive. “I wanted her to have the kid, you know? But she had to get away from the life. I couldn’t quit back then any more than I can quit now.” Horace took a deep breath and started to walk around the room, feeling his bearings return, thinking about all the messages and phone calls that had gone unanswered. “Back in ‘68, I got an envelope with a Singapore postmark but no return address.”

“Back in ‘68,” Gaston blew out his breath and shook his head.

“The only thing inside was a photo of a ten-year-old boy.” He pointed to his chin. “No mistaking this jaw, or the eyes.”

“Were they still in Singapore during the bombing?”

“I don’t know.”

“You look through the databases?”

“I searched for six months, hired P.I.s, even went to Singapore. Spent most everything I had. You saw the news feeds. All that was left was radioactive glass and a big empty crater.”

“And they never caught the fuckers.”

“When I came back, I’d been gone just a little too long.”

“Oui, Eric ‘The Slaughterer’ had all the top billing by then.”

“I was old meat.”

“That kid was a punk.”

“Naw, he was a good kid.”

“He was doping.”

“So was I. So were you.”

“Oui, but our shit wasn’t as good as his shit, eh?”

They laughed together, then stood in silence for a while.

Gaston gave him a hard, hard stare. “So why you doing this, man? I appreciate being here again, after all these years, eh? Feels like old times. But you can’t fight me, the shape you’re in. You can barely stand.”

Horace sighed and looked at his iron-hard hands and thick, chitinous forearms with the wraps of gray barbed-wire tattoos that went all the way up and across his shoulders and chest. “When I was a kid, my dear old granddad told me about his pro wrestling days. There was this guy, Lex Luger, used to say that if you could walk to the ring, you could wrestle.” He looked Gaston in the eye, and Gaston nodded. “This is what I do.” And because his only friends in the world were people who had tried to kill him. Some of them had even succeeded. How fucking sad was that? “Listen, brother, don’t tell anyone about this, all right? By horn-time, I’ll be ready to eat your heart.”

Gaston’s eyes narrowed. “Whatever you say.”

The sound of the roaring crowd, the pulsing thunder of the bass beat, filtered down into the room. Horace glanced at the 3D screen on the wall. The announcer thundered to the masses: “Resurrection Watch is now underway for Randy ‘The Wrecker’ Washington. The Samurai’s katana really did some damage. Regencorp physicians are even now struggling to restore The Wrecker’s life.” The video feed cut to the infirmary where the Fight Doctor and a bevy of medical techs huddled around the fighter’s ensanguined corpse. Flashing lights and readouts blazed self-importantly, and nests of tubes pierced the fighter’s flesh at various points. Montage of concerned faces in the crowd, kids and women looking pensive over the fate of the downed fighter.

A caption box appeared at the bottom of the screen, flashing:

RESURRECTION WATCH: ODDS OF SUCCESSFUL RESURRECTION 1:3 AGAINST. PLACE YOUR BETS NOW BY TEXTING DM55588767. BETTING WINDOW CLOSSES IN 1:37.

The timer counted down the seconds.

The video feed cut back to the octagonal enclosure in the center of the stadium, and the timer retreated to an upper corner. Searchlights speared the black New Vegas sky and spotlights swept silver discs across the multi-colored tapestry of fans.

Gaston said to the screen, “Pull it through, kid.”

Horace took a deep breath. “How about we go through the spots.”

Gaston perked up. “Sure. I’ve got the two kukris of course. I saw you been using the spiked baseball bats lately.”

“Yeah, but those won’t stand up when they drop in the bucklers for Round Two. After the No-Weapons Round, I’m going with a vibro-cleaver.”

“How about surprises?”

“Retractable punch dagger in my left bracer. You?”

Gaston smiled and lifted his chin and raised his thick orange beard, revealing a small sheath woven into the braids. “Electro-fiber dagger.” He pulled out a strip of gray cloth.

“Nice!”

Gaston thumbed the switch, and the micro-battery sent a current through the memory fibers, snapping them straight and rigid. From a supple strap of cloth to deadly weapon in less than a millisecond. “I’ll bet that cost you.”

“Endorsement deal from the manufacturer. It’s a sample.”

“Sharp?”

“You can shave with it, if you’re careful. Care to try it on your balls?”

“I’ll pass. Still using ‘em.”

“I’ll make ‘em look good.”

“You always do.”

Gaston’s white teeth grinned between flaming orange beard and mustache. “Good to be working with you again, mon ami.”

Horace clapped him on the shoulder. “Let’s give ‘em their money’s worth.”

* * *

Back in his own dressing room, Horace clomped the massive aluminum case up on the prep table, unsnapped the heavy latches and opened it up like a clamshell. His signature body armor with its yellow-orange flames, scored and repaired and re-stitched, waited inside to offer him whatever meager protection it could from weapons designed, at least in part, to penetrate it. Just like his body, every scar told a story.

He typically needed about ten minutes to strap on the lightweight ceramic plates embedded in carbon-nano-fiber-impregnated leather, but tonight his hands kept fumbling over the buckles and snaps. It didn’t fit right, wasn’t falling into place like it always did.

Gripping the edges of the table to steady himself, he wished the eels in his head would quit squirming. He had to get his shit together. Lilly’s voice

slid like a silken scarf through his mind.

He extracted a hypodermic from his case, pulled out a little bottle of his Go Juice, as he liked to call it, a potent cocktail of steroids, amino acids, enzymes, hormones, and god knew what else. It was too soon before the fight, but it had enough adrenaline in it that it might keep his heart going for a little while longer. Standard dose plus fifty percent ought to do it. Strange how the prick of a needle could be so exquisite compared to the sheer volume of physical torture he had endured, but nevertheless it was a rush when it went up into the vein.

Sheer power and ferocity surged like lightning up his arm and spread crackling through his left shoulder into his chest. His heart roared like an antique V-8. The struggle in its rhythm disappeared, all cylinders firing in perfect powerful rhythm like a turbo-charger dumping fuel and air by the bucket into every cylinder. He squeezed his fist and savored the familiar rush.

Starting with his arm, the grayish tattoos across his body began to glimmer with a blue-green light as the enzymes in the Go Juice energized the bioluminescent ink. Now he glowed in the dark, just like his action figure, complete with Thunder Hammer™ action and removable entrails. Too bad it had been discontinued ten years ago. Maybe after tonight they would make another batch.

He took a deep breath, let it out. He was almost starting to feel like himself. All he had to do was beat Gaston tonight, and his worries were over. New heart, clean slate.

The intercom dinged with a guard's voice. "Hammer to the rear entrance. Hammer to the rear entrance."

* * *

Two security guards stood at the rear entrance to the coliseum. The limousines of V.I.P.s filled the small parking lot like carefully stacked dominoes. Horace scanned the limousines for anything that smacked of danger, but all was quiet compared to the roar seeping over the coliseum wall.

He hardly recognized her. She was wearing sandals, faded jeans, and an off-the-shoulder T-shirt from some musical he'd barely heard of, quite unlike the skimpy straps, lace, and high heels he knew so well. Her hair, pulled into a stubby ponytail, was back to brown again, one of the many colors he'd seen, but those big, brown eyes were still Lilly, and the square of her shoulders and curve of her neck were so like Amanda they could be two halves of the same person.

He cracked a grin. “You look shorter.”

She smiled back, feebly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. Dark circles ringed her eyes, and she thrust both hands into her pockets. She cocked a foot. “No heels.” Even without heels, she was tall, over 180 centimeters, willowy. “I’ve never seen you glowing like that before. Kind of creepy.”

How many times had he imagined the inner glow pulsing out of her as she danced? He extended his hand. “Come on, I got a V.I.P. box.”

She swallowed hard. “I can’t. The sight of blood makes me sick. I just . . . I just came because I needed some air. And it’s only a ten-minute walk.”

“From where?”

She shrugged off the question. “How soon before you go on?”

“Maybe an hour. Why don’t you come inside?” He scanned the parking lot again. How could he tell her that she might be in danger, because of him?

Her eyes glistened. “Even if I could—”

“Don’t bullshit me. Not tonight. What’s going on? How come you haven’t been to work in a week? I stopped down there once to give you a ticket.”

Her voice cracked. “It’s my son. He’s in the hospital. He’s sleeping now, so I had to get out of there for a while and—”

“You have a son?”

“Yeah. I have a son. A daughter, too.”

“Wow.”

“Look, it’s not something you tell customers, you know? It’s not sexy, but I’m not at work now and—”

“No, it’s not that.” His chest felt like Gaston had just punched him again. He hoped she didn’t hear the weakness in his voice. “How old is he?”

She hesitated.

“Come on, tell me about him.”

“He’s thirteen. And he’s the most awesome kid, and . . . I don’t know, I . . . I’ve been there with him for four days solid and I’m just so tired and . . . Cassie is staying with my mom, but . . . I’m just so tired. And I’m scared. And you don’t want to hear this shit from me and—”

“Lilly.”

“—got your big comeback and—”

“Lilly. What’s his name?”

“His name? His name is James. Jimmy.”

“What’s the problem with him?”

“I . . . I can’t even say it. Something with his bones. He got in a fight at school, and some kid broke his arm in three places, and the doctors . . .

they found something with his bones. It's like they're soft or something, not enough calcium and . . .”

“He's gonna be okay though, right?” Through the silence for five labored heartbeats, ten, her face slowly collapsed, eyes squeezing shut. “Aw, darlin'.” He sighed and reached out to put his arm around her.

She sniffled it away. “I gotta go. I'm sorry. You take care of yourself.” She spun and walked off across the concrete.

“Hey, wait! Listen!”

She kept going, shaking her head.

He scanned the limousines again, half-expecting a Russian to jump out and nab her. He could pick her up and carry her inside for her own safety, but that wouldn't work. Eventually she passed out of sight around the corner of the coliseum.

* * *

He headed down the hallway toward his dressing room, clenching his fists, stomping hard enough to crack floor tiles. He came around a corner as the Fight Doctor come out of Gaston's dressing room. The Fight Doctor looked like a cat caught with a paw in the birdcage.

Horace flipped him the bird.

The Fight Doctor spun and hurried away.

Horace stopped and watched him go. What the hell was that all about? It was well past time for the pre-fight checks.

The intercom dinged and called out the fighters for the sixth bout.

Fuck, he still had to finish prepping, so he hurried to his dressing room.

He was standing at the mirror in his dressing room, shaving the last of the salt-and-pepper stubble from his skull, when the screen announced that “The Wrecker” had successfully resurrected.

“Good boy.”

The camera flicked around to happy faces everywhere, and applause rippled through the crowd, except those who had bet against it.

Horace stretched and paced and swung his arms. They felt so heavy, and not just from the thick slabs of muscle he'd spent decades and hundreds of thousands of dollars building. The minutes ticked by. He watched bits of the matches. The fighters ground through battle after battle. Pummeling, slashing, gouging, hacking, roaring their gore-spattered triumphs and screaming their agonies to the chorused thunder of the crowd. He mumbled advice to them with only the deaf ears of the 3D screen to hear.

Maybe Gaston had the right idea. If Horace survived tonight, maybe

he'd take Gaston up on his offer. He could teach the next generation about not only how to kill and not be killed, but also how to feed the crowd what they wanted and let the crowd feed it back. It was a skill the great ones had. A great fighter could walk out there and feel the vibration of the crowd. He could take that energy, manipulate it, make the crowd feel it, take them up, take them up more, then finally build them into a frenzy of roaring bloodlust. It was how stars were made.

The dressing room P.A. dinged with the pit captain's voice, "Hammer to Tunnel One. Freak to Tunnel Two."

Horace took a deep breath and let it out. He pulled out his iHub again and thumbed an old address. He hoped Jack was home watching the show, not drunk in a strip club somewhere. P.I. friends could be useful in a lot of ways. It was time to call in one last favor.

All that remained of his life now was one last supercharge of Go Juice and the tunnel walk.

* * *

The Hammer walked alone down the concrete tunnel toward the rising wall of sound. He stopped behind the black and crimson curtain emblazoned with the Death Match Unlimited™ logo, and he heard it begin. His theme song. He breathed deep and let it wash through him.

The guitar riff of "Thunderstruck" tore through the coliseum. He liked the old AC/DC version better, but the big wigs had commissioned the cover by Death Tread. Rock n' roll wasn't just great-grandpa's music anymore.

The stirring crowd came fully alive.

He counted the seconds, waiting for his moment.

The music rose, then exploded. "THUN-DER!"

He charged through the curtain.

The crowd went wild.

He threw his arms high as he strode down the long ramp toward the pit.

"THUN-DER!"

A forest of hands reached toward him and he touched every single one, smiling, shaking, meeting their eyes as if they were long-lost friends. A lump formed in his throat.

"THUN-DER!"

There was no drug, no sex, no experience that compared to that juice generated by seventy-thousand fans screaming his name.

"THUN-DER!"

The energy of the crowd washed over him, and every pain and sorrow

he had ever felt in his life disappeared in the tumult. His knees were made of steel, his back rod-straight, his shoulders well-oiled pistons. His tattoos burned blue.

“THUN-DER!”

The drums sounded like twin cannons. On the screens, his face blazed forty feet high.

“THUN-DER!”

Fans chanted “Hammer Time!” and raised their hands into the Thunder Hammer™. Two teenage girls flashed their breasts as he passed. Three boys nearby saw this, cheered and flashed theirs too.

“THUN-DER!”

Pyrotechnics blazed and crackled in time with the music, in time with his footsteps, in time with this heartbeat.

“THUN-DER!”

He strode through the gate into the pit, returning the Thunder Hammer™ to the crowd. Sponsorship logos stippled the black chain-link octagon.

“THUN-DER!”

He threw back his head and roared into the searchlight-dappled sky.

“THUN-DER!”

The announcer’s deep tones bellowed over the noise of the crowd. “And now, announcing our main event of the evening. In the red corner, hailing from the independent city of New Vegas, weighing in at 168.7 kilos, standing 210.4 centimeters, with a record of 287 victories, 192 confirmed kills, 78 losses, and 27 resurrections, Hooorrrr-uuuus ‘THE HAM-MER’ HAAAARK-NEEEESSSS!”

As the stadium exploded into frenzy around him, he knelt, humbly, in the center of the pit, and let it fill him. He took a long deep breath, then another. The floor of the pit was pale, dry clay, soaked and splattered now with the blood and fluids of eighteen other men. He ran his fingers through the coarse powder. The air smelled of earth and ozone, blood and sweat.

He wondered if Amanda would be waiting for him, assuming there was actually a fucking white light to be found at the end of all this bullshit, along with the son he had never met. He thought about Lilly and the dozens of times she’d writhed naked in his lap under neon bar-lights, never once exposing herself.

He knelt there until Gaston’s thick-laced black boots kicked up puffs of dust in his field of vision.

While the announcer called out Gaston’s particulars, Gaston paid his homage to the fans with his Freak Dance™, which looked like nothing Horace had seen anywhere else, part rooster, part gorilla, part Shaolin monk.

When it was over, Horace met Gaston's gaze. The friendly camaraderie was gone; now there was only ferocity and determination.

Horace smiled grimly. "Let's get it on, stubby."

"Bring it, cupcake," Gaston said, but before they turned away, Horace caught a strange, knowing look in Gaston's eye.

The pit gate swung closed and a horn blared through the stadium at 180 decibels, initiating Round 1.

The two fighters lunged at each other. Without weapons, Horace had the advantage of longer reach and fists augmented with hardened plates, the perfect biological hammers, but Gaston was too smart to come into range of those weapons. The Freak's style was to bounce and dart and roll, always strike from surprise and misdirection. Horace had a few tricks of his own, but his style was to charge in headlong, crushing skulls and bones, and pummeling his opponents into paste.

They feinted and struck, lunged and blocked. Three minutes in, Horace's breath was growing ragged and he could feel his heart laboring even through the veil of Go Juice. Round One was just for feeling the opponent out, wearing him down. They were both heavily armored, and besides, it was bad form for the main event to end too quickly. Neither of the fighters was done with this crowd.

His lungs began to burn, and he started counting the seconds to the horn for Round 2. Gaston was giving him no quarter. The Freak had thirty years of pit experience, too, plus a healthy ticker. Fists and spiked boots came at him, but Horace gave it back. Twice his fists fell like piledrivers, smashing Gaston to the earth, and only Gaston's nimbleness kept him out of Horace's deadly grasp.

Finally the horn sounded, and Horace went to his corner, gasping, spasms of pain shooting through his left shoulder. A trainer swabbed the blood from his face, applied styptics to the cuts, and poured water and electrolytes into his mouth. A bevy of pit girls carried the next round's weapons into the ring and presented them: Horace's vibro-cleaver and Gaston's kukris. Another brought out the platter-sized bucklers painted with each fighter's personal logo.

Horace took the water bottle from the trainer's hand and guzzled it. He gasped for breath, knowing the next bell was coming far too soon. The strength began to drain out of his knees.

"Fuck! Not now."

"You okay, Hammer?" the trainer asked blithely.

"Peachy."

The horn sounded.

Horace picked up the buckler in his left hand and took up the vibro-cleaver in his right. He snapped the cleaver's switch. The ultrasonic vibrations would have turned any dog within a hundred meters into a whimpering wreck, but Horace just felt a faint buzz. The weapon's edge was now a molecular-level electric carving knife, capable, with sufficient effort, of splitting ceramic armor, to say nothing of going through flesh and bone like cotton candy.

Horace met the coiled knot of straining muscle in the middle of the pit, swinging, blocking, dodging, hacking. The crowd surged and cheered with each blow. The clang of metal echoed with the fans. Gaston's kukri licked and slashed. Horace swung the cleaver, but each blow went further and further astray. He met Gaston's gaze, and the ferocity in The Freak's eyes softened.

Horace swore something vile at him and redoubled his attack. But it was no good. He missed, badly, and flung himself off balance.

This was it. Against an opponent like Gaston, this was an ender.

But it wasn't.

Gaston's boot glanced off the back of Horace's head. Horace sprawled onto his face, his vision going dark. He blindly swung the edge of his buckler behind him and followed with the cleaver, but Gaston was not there. His vision returned just in time for what felt like a hairy tree trunk to encircle his neck from behind.

His hand weapons skittered onto the clay as he grabbed Gaston's chokehold with both fists to prevent Gaston from snapping his neck.

A sputtering surge of strength, and he was able to face his opponent. They went down onto the earth, straining, grunting, gasping. The reversal had been too easy.

Then he was able to get the fingers of his left hand into the crease at the top of Gaston's breastplate.

Horace's right-hand squeezed Gaston's carotid artery, and Gaston's fingers dug into Horace's trachea.

Their eyes met.

Gaston nodded almost imperceptibly, his face turning purple. "Do it!" he whispered. "See you on the other side."

As Gaston's words sunk into Horace's addled brain, his grip must have slackened, giving Gaston an opening to punch him in the ear, hard. Adrenaline surged.

They clinched again, straining.

"Do it!" Gaston said.

Horace touched a pad on his left bracer. The punch-dagger sprang out

and speared up into Gaston's throat, through his tongue and palate and up into his medulla oblongata. His eyes spasmed in different directions, and his body went as limp as chunk of sirloin.

A lump of sadness choked off the rest of Horace's breath and he collapsed onto the pit floor on top of his friend. It was never easy. Never.

The crowd went berserk in a tumult of noise.

Let it end now. He was ready.

The Fight Judge came into the ring to help Horace to his feet, and the medical techs whisked in to cart Gaston away for Resurrection Watch. Horace sagged against the Fight Judge, raising his good arm to the crowd, basking in the chant of "Hammer!"

By god, he was going to walk out of here.

The announcer's booming voice proclaimed him the victor, but he could hardly hear it through the roaring in his ears.

He collapsed halfway to the dressing room.

* * *

Horace awoke slowly to the sounds he knew so well. Biometrics, respirators, all beeping and whooshing and cold. He pulled aside the oxygen mask and looked around. Gaston lay on a bed not far away.

He was breathing.

A sigh of relief washed out of Horace's chest, and he wiped his face with a heavy hand. The contusions Gaston had given him had healed. He stood up, testing his own weight. The clock on the wall told him he'd been unconscious for about an hour. After this length of time, the regenites had already repaired Gaston's nervous system. He was probably just sedated now, sleeping. The bone would take longer. He would be on soft food for a few days.

Horace stood over him, laying a hand on his chest. An oxygen mask covered Gaston's face, and all the tubes from the treatment were still attached like octopus arms to his body.

Gaston's eyes fluttered open. His voice was a gravelly ghost of its former self, thick from the injuries to his mouth. "Now there's . . . the ugliest motherfucker . . . I ever saw."

"Why'd you do it?"

"Talked to Fight Doctor . . . Told me . . . about your heart. You can't work for me . . . if you're fucking dead, eh, dumbass . . ."

Horace grinned. "Like I would work for a stubby fucker like you."

But Gaston had faded away again.

And so might Horace.

The med techs didn't give him any trouble as he wobbled back to his dressing room. He had won. He was a rich man. He could grow a new heart. And he had to get out of here, find Dmitri before he could hurt Lilly. Back in his dressing room, he gathered up his equipment. He could be on a plane to Hawaii by morning.

His iHub pinged a waiting message from inside his bag. He picked it up and saw the text message from Jack: "FOUND THE KID. WASNT 2 HARD. THEY GOIN 2 DSCHRG HIM 2MRW." At the end of the message was a large dollar figure, almost as much as what he had won tonight.

"Fuck." His heart fell to somewhere near his feet. "Fuck!" He sat down on the prep table and rested his forehead in his hands.

* * *

Horace hadn't expected to leave the stadium alive, much less walk out under his own power, but hours later, after the fans had dispersed, the winners had been paid, and the losers had been sent to hospitals to convalesce, he did just that.

A long black limousine hovered near the rear entrance, quiescent, but patient. He walked up to it, each step feeling like he had just run ten miles. A man got out, almost as big as Horace. The man was an ex-pit fighter.

Horace grinned at him. "Hey, aren't you Joey Luca?"

The man nodded grimly and shoved Horace up against the car, frisking him for weapons.

"What, you don't trust me?"

When Luca was satisfied, the door opened, and Dmitri's voice wafted out with a cloud of smoke. "Get in."

Horace squeezed in and sat across from him and two of the pit girls from the show.

One of them had her hand in Dmitri's pants. "Hey, Hammer," she purred. Luca shouldered in and sat beside him, a hulking presence.

"Hell of a fight, Hammer," Dmitri said, blowing another lungful of smoke. "Didn't think you'd show."

"Told you I would."

"You have the money."

"Kiss my ass."

It took a couple of moments for the words to register in Dmitri's fogged brain. Then he sat up straight. "What?"

"I said, kiss my fucking white pimply ass."

Rage flared in Dmitri's eyes.

"The money's gone."

Luca reached into his jacket.

Horace threw himself into him, pinning his elbow and his pistol against his torso. The girls screamed. The electro-fiber dagger made a little snap sound as Horace pressed the switch while holding the soft strip of cloth against Luca's chest. The dagger stiffened instantaneously, and the monofilament edge snicked out and cut through Luca's sternum, two ribs, aorta, and half a lung. The massive slug-thrower in Luca's hand tumbled onto the seat and Luca's chin fell to his chest. Horace lunged across the back of the limousine onto Dmitri. The girls screamed again and flung themselves away.

The Russian was well-built, strong, stoned, and didn't have a prayer. It didn't take long for Horace to finish cutting.

He left Dmitri's head propped between his legs, then got out, waved goodbye as the hover's turbine whined up and it sped away. If they hurried, Joey Luca could resurrect.

Horace probably wouldn't see morning. Either the Russian mob would find him and cut out his heart or his heart would give out when he crossed the street. Either way was fine by him.

But he did have enough money left for a little while, and there was a boy who would live a good life, and a mother who would be grateful for it, even if her walls might never come down.

First, however, a hose to wash off all the blood.