

OG's Speculative Fiction



Issue #25

Poetry by Robert S. King

Stories by Lawrence R. Dagstine
Desmond Warzel

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July

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Cover Art: *Supernova* by Matthew Luckow

This is Matthew Luckow's first published art piece, but it certainly won't be his last. He is a student of web and digital media design at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, with a longtime passion for visual arts. His preference is space vistas and other fantastical scenes. He aspires toward work in the video game industry with concept and environmental art.

Publisher, Golden Acorn Press

Editor, Seth Crossman

Issue #25 July 2010

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Editor's Letter

Some years ago, several men sat around a table together, united for a common purpose. They met in the dark of night, but were not there for devious purposes. They came from many places, far and wide, leaving behind their family and friends. They traveled from store fronts down by the ocean, from virgin fields that stretched as far as the eye could see, from cities just beginning to thrive to determine the fate of more than just themselves. They didn't gather because of money. They didn't get paid a cent to sit at that table. No, their motivation came from much deeper, from within. From a sense of what was right not only for them but for their neighbors as well. They came because they saw a future their children could have, not necessarily one which they would live.

They had a sense of honor and integrity and a love for God that bound them together. And they made decisions that directed the course of America for two centuries. Those men sat down and signed the Declaration of Independence.

Over the years, the men that have followed have made different decisions, some good, some not so good. But America is where she is this day, a stumbling giant, burdened with her own ailments, overstretched or untapped depending upon the speaker, because of the decisions of the men and women who inhabit her.

If we as a nation, or as a people, ever want to rise up to new levels of greatness (whether it be as a nation in our world, or as a nation intent on conquering the stars, or as a beacon of prosperity and hope), then there must be better decisions. Often, better decisions begin with a moral fiber that that people adhere to. Morality is something that governs men and women's actions. It gives them a standard to measure themselves by, a standard to light their way and it draws upon more than just the lusts of the flesh. It draws upon the spirit of a man.

But there must also be sacrifice. Greatness is never achieved through selfishness. In any marriage that lasts and is good and loving, there has been sacrifice along the way. I think many in this nation have forgotten this. I am not talking just a sacrifice of blood, but a sacrifice of selfish desires.

If we want to avert crisis or restore glory, we must first be willing to stand for something more than cold hard cash and the exaltation of ourselves. We must stand with integrity as a people who draw a line in the sand about what is right and what is wrong and stick to it. And we must stand because we are hungry for more than just ourselves.

—SC

The Girl Who Dreamt Portals

by Lawrence R. Dagstine

Lawrence Dagstine is a freelance writer whose byline has appeared in hundreds of print magazines, anthologies, and webzines viewed all over the globe. Sam's Dot Publishing released his first story collection in 2009, entitled: Fresh Blood. He has since published a book with Damnation Books called Visitation Rights and one due out in mid to late 2011 called Midnight in the Library. In this steampunk tale, a young girl is capable of far more than the other girls think.

Clack-Snap.

The wooden clapstick woke her every morning at six, up in the room with the long row of beds, up on the third floor of the Ferguson Bottleneck Infirmary. She would sit on the side and look out across the row at the children who slept there with her: the one with the crutches, the one with the harelip, the simpleminded ones, the mean ones, the *orphans*—twenty in all, all wards of the county.

She tried to see them as her sisters, walking in the morning at home, but there were sounds that didn't fit: the babbling, the whimpers, the beginning of Anya's chant, *The itsy-bitsy spider crawled up the water spout... Down came the rainbow and washed the spider out.* In the nearest bed she was coming awake—Anya with her slanting eyes and slurred speech and slow, heavy body, reeking of the diapers she still wore at eight years old. Farthest away, ten beds down, stood the dreaded Prissy, fully dressed, hands on hips: at fifteen, the oldest in the room and its unquestioned tyrant.

Julianne hated Prissy.

Prissy had grown up in workhouses, but still felt she was due entitlement. Due to her know-how—not to mention her vocabulary—she sometimes had charge of waking the other children with the clapstick and goading them into their clothes: “Move, Anya, get dressed or you die of pneu-mony like the last girl... Friggin' sluggards askin' for trouble so early in the morning.”

The burn of Prissy's gaze always propelled twelve-year-old Julianne from bed, her heart beginning to jump. Moving swiftly, she covered her mattress with the blanket and stripped down to her undershift, facing the low wooden shelf behind her. To calm the fear inside her, she fixed her eyes on the things before her. She snatched up her boots and under-petticoats,

pulled her pocketless gray day shift over her head, then over the cloth bag around her neck. Prissy's footsteps stopped behind her.

"Sure you're ready to get up, snot face?"

Julianne kept her back turned.

The clapstick snapped next to her ear. "You hear me?"

Silence.

"Ah, you think you're better than me so you're ignoring me. So, too snooty to look at me in the eye, snot face?"

Clack-snap. Pain shot through the lobe of Julianne's ear as the clapstick touched it; she bit her lips tight against the yelp in her mouth. Prissy stood watching her, arms folded and eyes aglitter; her face was as stubborn and hard as a fist.

"You still dreaming about a mother?"

Julianne turned to Anya, who sucked on her thumb and sat gazing up at them.

"Oh, that's right," Prissy laughed. "No wonder you're so spaced out. In some ways, you're no different than the retard. The orphan with the wild imagination. What was it you always talk of in your sleep, or whisper to the other girls at night? Doorways? Strange portals to other dimensions?"

"Wormholes."

"Worms?"

"Wormholes!" Julianne raised her voice an octave.

"Yes, that's it, whatever they are. No doubt the dreams of a retard. And what is it you're expecting to come through this wormhole? If I remember properly, a giant wind-up teddy bear and a bulbous-nosed man at the reins of a brass buggy. They're going to take you to a new home, a new mother, aren't they?" A brief pause, then: "Well, I've got news for you, girl, you're just a twisted little brat whose heard one too many twisted fairy tales in her life and whose very, very twisted in the head. You're right at home in Bottleneck, and I'll let you know now, nobody's coming for you ever. Nobody wants you."

Julianne clenched her hands into fists. "Yes they do! They're coming back for me, bitch"—she began a high fast patter—"maybe tomorrow, maybe today, coming back through a splinter in time in a brand new buggy, with black wheels, lavish cushions, and matched horses. That's right, they're coming back for me. Wait till you see it, Prissy." She started yelling across the room. "Wait till all of you see it! And they're bringing me a brand new dress to wear home, white with a—"

Clack-snap. "Sure they are, snot face." Prissy shoved her. "I'm sure Anya here believes you. She'd believe it's raining frogs if you told her so—ugh,

she stinks! You two make a good pair, the retard and the snot face.”

One girl in the room fluffing sheets whispered to another, “If you ask me, they’ve both gone bugger.”

Prissy sidestepped as Julianne lunged at her, missed, and sprawled on all fours on the bed. “What are you? A dog now, too?”

“Yeah, a dog that’s going to tear your face apart!”

“You troublesome stinker,” Prissy hissed again. “Nevermind you. You’ll get yours soon enough.” She pulled her line of charges out of the room. Julianne, face flaming, hands shaking, had to join or miss breakfast. Prissy had no problem with letting her starve. Down the hall, down into the dimness of the stairwell, where the grown inmates joined them: the deaf ones, the blind ones, the violated ones, the half-wits, the shuffling company closing in around Julianne, marching her down to the long wooden tables in the shadowed dining hall. Her hand lifted in rhythm with theirs, spoonfuls of oatmeal rising to their lips, to hers, the grayness of their sleeves exactly alike. As always at meals she felt a flash of panic, seeing herself forever sinking into this drab, silent army. Beyond this meal the day stretched wide and the roof over her head came with a price. A sewing machine waited for her in the basement, but before that there would be five minutes of delicious respite.

Every day between breakfast and the commencement of work she slipped away alone up to the roof. She made sure no one saw her go; the pigeon coop wasn’t a haven she wished to share. She would climb up the spindly staircase, holding her breath, up into that feather-filled space, its cage only big enough for the noisy birds and one child. The place held a kind of magic. She would stand at the diamond-shaped wire, looking out and down over the infirmary’s grounds. She would watch the gray uniforms appear there: a man helping to slop the hogs, milk the cows and feed the chickens, a line of slightly older females starting to hoe the vegetable garden. But it was the curve of road that ran past the gates that held her eyes. The road that was littered with apple trees and led up past the cobblestone-bricked walls, toward somewhere.

Every morning her eye would trace the road. She would stand on her knees inside the pigeon coop and put in her mouth her allotted sugar lump from breakfast, saving it for this moment. As the sugar began its delectably slow melt on her tongue, she would imagine the bulbous-nosed man coming for her in a great big buggy. She could almost see it now: the man’s cheery smile and top hat, his cape, and the great plush bear who, with its massive paws, pushed the wrought-iron gates aside. She would come smiling, whistling, skipping and hopping, speaking in her otherworldly way. It was the

old tender way, faintly dreamt about from earliest childhood and a mysterious place at the other side of a portal. This reverie would last as long as the sugar cube did. It was only after the last misting of sugar had faded from her mouth that harsher thoughts would strike her. A mother figure who hadn't talked to her in years. Perhaps *centuries*. A mother, moreover, who had come through the portal and placed her here, knowing full well what it would be like.

Teary-eyed, she went back downstairs. She was to stay here and sew. She was to stay and sew for room and board, with a few measly cents tossed her way.

She was there, in the basement of the Ferguson Bottleneck Infirmary, at the last sewing machine, every day from seven in the morning till around seven at night, to make and mend clothes for the orphans under the age of fifteen. She did it with a passion, and she did it for twenty-five cents per week. She deposited the quarters in the cloth bag around her neck.

In the sewing room it was always damp, and her nose ran. Here and there she got a chill. When it was warm the room smelled of machine oil and coal, and, oddly enough, cabbage. Cabbage was grown in great quantities on the grounds, and it accompanied every meal except breakfast. She could never digest cabbage after that. Not after being exposed to the aroma so much. She would sit quietly at the machine. She knew to sit with her back firmly against the wall so she could see everyone who came in or out. Early in her first week there, she'd learned the value of walls at her back. As she bent over a seam, she'd felt a sharp, thin pain near her neck and spun around to find it was Anya, placidly inserting a pin into her flesh. She always looked for walls after that, and seated against one, she'd prop the back legs of her chair on blocks of wood, leaning closer, lower; it was the only way she could reach the treadle and the needle at once.

Sometimes people from upstairs, strangers, would wander in as the girls were working. They'd inquire just how good the girls' sewing skills were. Anya was often touching things, tearing things, unraveling spools of thread and going to the bathroom on herself. But more often there was a kind of peacefulness to the sewing room. Part of this peace, she knew, came from a woman named Wanda, with whom she shared the room. Wanda, who worked on one of the bigger machines, was a middle-aged black woman, the daughter of a slave family who had found refuge through the Underground Railroad, a mute who loved making the young ones tea, and a skilled seamstress and herbalist. Under her gray-flecked hair, her broad face looked tranquil, and her heavy figure was somehow comforting. Her large bosom and capacious lap jutted from her like a series of balconies, and

across that bosom gleamed rows of needles and pins, thirty or forty of them, stored there for easy reach. Nevertheless, Julianne had a certain respect for Wanda, and the black woman always returned the appreciation with one of her special cups of cohash or a consoling nod. Other times she would produce stolen foods—it was a mystery how she snuck into the kitchen—an apple, a pear, a loaf of bread or a wedge of cheese. Once she had brought forth from the folds of her dress a jar half filled with marmalade. She and Julianne had devoured it together, making little noises of pleasure.

Sometimes, in the quiet of the sewing room, Julianne's thoughts would turn dark, disturbing. The dreaminess of the teddy bear and buggy at that road was never possible here. But sometimes, other thoughts came. Memories, though they felt like they didn't belong to her. Maybe Prissy was right. Maybe she wasn't normal. Still, those occasional afternoons where she got to take a break and sit with Wanda put her in mind of a motherly figure, a figure who had taught her to sew.

How did she ever learn to sew if she had not had any proper training in it?

It was the year she had learned to put a wall to her back. It was the year she had learned to hoard sugar. It was the year she had learned to empty twenty chamber pots for a hundred people in that half hour of free time between sewing and supper at the infirmary. A quarter to seven she would be up on the top floor, passing down the dim corridor to the "idiot room." The room was so named because it was the day chamber for the thirty grown inmates who couldn't work: the insane, the very old, the three who were blind or had tuberculosis; and though it was empty at that hour, unlike the other rooms, this one held a deep terror for her. It smelled like sour cheese. The close, rancid smell of the place made her stomach quiver as she moved about with her bucket. Once she was out in the hall, there was a new terror. This time in the evening was often Prissy's province.

Prissy's daily task was to help in the idiot room, and for some reason unknown to Julianne, she was its good angel, showing a gentle side to its inmates she showed no one else; it was rumored her older sister died there. At any rate, after the room's inhabitants had begun their slow descent to supper, Prissy stayed in the hall, sweeping up. Though she never menaced anyone in the room itself, the hallway was fair territory. This evening as Julianne stepped into it she stopped, glancing about. Then she lugged her slop bucket toward the dumbwaiter. She had just set the bucket down inside the lift when a hand fell on her shoulder.

"What you up to, snot face?"

Julianne turned quickly, setting her back to the wall, staring into those

mocking green eyes.

“You still drinking tea from that deaf and dumb Negro?”

“Wanda’s a nice lady.”

“Well, we know how the two of you like to accumulate sugar!”

“I’m not going to get into it with you, Prissy.”

“Really? Is it because you’re waiting for one of your doorways to appear? How about magic carpets? Oh, can I hop aboard? Pretty please?”

Julianne turned a cheek.

Prissy went on derisively, “You think you’re too good to talk to me, don’t you? Think you’re so god-a’mighty different or more special than me?”

In the silence Julianne could feel Prissy’s hand tightening on her shoulder. “You ain’t hear? You’re crazy and unwanted just like the rest of us!” Prissy reached out swiftly and, with sharp precision, pinched Julianne’s cheeks viciously, her fingers snapping like pinking shears. The pain was excruciating. Gasping, Julianne wrenched free and took the nearest exit she saw. She dodged head first into the dumbwaiter. Crouching on the platform by the bucket, she reached up and yanked the rope. The dumbwaiter sank down the shaft into what seemed like oblivion, leaving Prissy’s startled face above her. But almost as soon as she was enclosed in the blackness between floors, the dumbwaiter gave a violent jolt and lurched to a stop. The wood splintered beneath her. She crossed her fingers and closed her eyes.

“Hey, where are you?” she heard from above. “What’s going on?”

Julianne’s body glowed.

“Ah, there you are. Got you now, snot face!” Prissy’s laughter pelted her like stones. The dumbwaiter shivered and jerked on its rope, spilling the slop bucket and sending a warm wash over Julianne’s legs. She choked, pounding the walls. The darkness crowded close, dense, and then there were other voices sounding up through the shaft from the safe world below. The wood finally cracked all the way, and Julianne noticed that a portal, just like the one in her dreams, had opened up beneath her. Blinded by the flash, Prissy released her grip on the rope. The dumbwaiter began to slide faster down the shaft, and with shaking arms, Julianne tried to control it the rest of the way.

Then she blacked out.

* * *

When Julianne awoke, she lay at the foot of a staircase, staring up at a metallic sign that read LEVEL 3. This is not the infirmary, she thought immediately. She was aboard some kind of vessel. But how could she know

that?

She got up and dusted herself off. She walked around what appeared to be an oval-shaped deck, transfixed by the architecture of her environment. At one point she stopped, stood stiff and prim, breathing in delicate sips of the air. She eventually ended up in a small auditorium. She saw them now, student-types, strange-types. How grand they were in their unearthly garments—way more fashionable than her undershift—yet the outfits looked vaguely familiar. They were sitting with their backs to her, all those men and women in their peaked caps and patch-elbowed coats fused with metals and plastics, skirts slicing out among trouser legs or over long lace-up boots, their faces dull and shut against her stares. How fine they all looked in this extravagant place, tiny silver drops bobbing at the females' ears, gaslight and black gloom on the hair of the males. They seemed to possess a certain cultural sheen. Perhaps they were a secret society; perception told her otherwise. She looked at them in delight, almost disbelief. Never had she thought that such a group of people existed who dressed weird and relied on gadgetry, but she still marveled that it was so.

A silver-haired man standing in a jumper spoke: “What we are looking for is a *potential* planet.”

A dry mumble of bewilderment passed through Julianne as through a taut fishing line. She stood in the back behind one of the columns, watching.

Completely poised, the silver-haired man, who had introduced himself to his class as the Director of Operations, continued.

“A ruined waste of a planet in a system light years away—anything remotely like Earth during its primordial stages—is useless for our purposes. But a planet which has already evolved its own life is equally irrelevant for our purpose.” He gestured to a window facing into space. There were a series of blazing orbs and a needle-like spire in the distance. “Somewhere among those ultra-hot, hydrogenous worlds—some hundreds of times the size of Jupiter—is a place we can call home. The resources are there. Like using a fresh batch of clay, we just have to sculpt it. It’s all a matter of mixing the right building blocks. Adding a little bit of this, and sprinkling a touch of that. Between these interstellar conditions there is a state I like to call ‘biocapability.’ In short, we want a planet capable of sustaining life—*actual* living forms which we ourselves will help evolve, and with which future colonies will be familiar.”

A hand in the audience flew up. “But sir!”

“Yes, Garner?”

“Does that not question the current intergalactic laws of creation and

ethics? Since when have we become God?"

"Garner, our home world is dead—a dried-up husk! There's no room for God in this journey. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Let me rephrase that." The student, who looked to be about twenty, cleared his throat and began again: "We search endlessly for a planet in which carbon and not silicon will be remanufactured, thus becoming the ultimate bonding element; in which water, rather than, say, ammonia or methane, will be the medium of molecular interaction. Are you serious? You're a fine teacher, Harding, but I'd rather leave these matters to Mother to go over with you and the rest of us in more detail."

"*Mother* has already warned me," the old man assured him. "Finding a planet to meet our demanding specifications will be like finding a grain of sugar in a salt bed. It can be done. Mankind has come a long way. Who would have ever thought temporal engineering and dependence on organic metals would become reality? When was the last time you met a human who didn't have virtual information constantly upgraded and fed to them through tiny chips in the back of their necks?" The Director paced back and forth across the podium, hands behind his back. It was as if he was expecting an answer. "We have the technology and means to do it. But we may die of exhaustion in the process. The statistical improbability of such a discovery rolls like an ocean over our heads, an empty sea whose imponderable dead mass threatens to crush the purpose out of us. For I tell you this: without the discovery of just such a planet, all my promises to you will have been for nothing."

"And what about the girl?" a woman in the third row asked.

Julianne crept closer.

"She is not reunited with Mother. But we are trying to retrieve her. We even have a woman masquerading and looking after her until help arrives. All of you listening to me are potentially a day older and a day wiser. Not yet, but the *probability* is there. Like the 'yesterday-you', the 'tomorrow-you' is on the *brink* of existence. Matter of fact, it is no longer *nonexistent*! It is already somewhere between Nothing and Existence." He looked up quizzically, the holo-specks he had donned far down on his nose. "Follow me thus far?"

There were no questions.

"Good. Then I continue. As our mothership has indicated, the improbability of our finding a biocapable planet is overwhelming. And so," he added with a twinkle, "we are offered an interesting gift." From behind the lectern the man produced a small tray with a piping hot jug of liquid. "Tea."

"Tea?" Garner said.

“Tea?” Julianne thought.

Hereupon, the old man launched into an ocean of biochemistry and biophysics which, scientifically trained though the class was, left them all a little intellectually confused.

“That is part of the solution,” he went on. “Not just any tea. All that is needed is its properties for a powerful source of energy. Like when we’re sick and we need plenty of fluids and bed rest. So you see ladies and gentlemen, that within non-life there exists a directed probability toward life. Our former planet of Earth, in its primitive collective, enveloped by ammonia, methane, hydrogen, water vapor, and probably a hundred other elements, was definitely biocapable—‘life-prone’, if I may use the expression—awaiting only fluid energy-shock to start the process going.” He fell into a quiet reverie. “Perhaps an entire planet,” he mused, “with its veins and arteries (the streams and rivers); its inhalations and exhalations (the winds and gaseous vapors); its flesh of silicon and carbon; and bones of iron, nickel, and magnesium.”

There was a prolonged silence.

Finally the Director caught himself and said, “Life does emerge from tea. That, and a living organism which is immersed in the micro-particles of ancient life. Else how would we have selected the girl? To orphan an unborn child and send the fetus floating through time and space only helps in the problems of life’s origin. It pushes our cause one step forward. I am getting old, and these intellectual discussions come upon me. In any case, I am done with generalities. We must now consider, in more technical detail, how, with the application of girl and fluid energy to an appropriate atmosphere, there emerges a wealth of organic acid, aldehydes, ketones, nucleotides, nucleotide polymers and amino acid polymers—all the primary building blocks. Ladies and gentlemen, initiate your data feeds and make yourselves comfortable, because we’re going to be here for a while.”

* * *

By the time Julianne tried to encompass everything the silver-haired man said—to her ears it was foreign, gibberish, yet in a *Déjà vu* sort of way it explained a vital role and made perfect sense—she realized she was no longer standing in the vessel auditorium. She lay bruised and scraped at the bottom of a tiny shaft, back within the confines of the splintered dumb-waiter, back at the Ferguson Bottleneck Infirmary.

She finally emerged, dripping, reeling. Prissy wasn’t around; *thank goodness*. She ran out back, her knees wobbling, as she dragged the bucket

behind her. She dumped it down the privy and then crouched by the pump, trying to clean herself off, trying to stop the trembling. When another hand fell on her shoulder, she lurched forward against the pump handle, heart racing, not knowing what to expect this time. Above her was the stern face of Matilda Bottleneck, Ferguson's sister, a tight-lipped attendant—some say her brother felt sorry for her since she was so ugly she couldn't find real work—who grabbed her by the collar and marched her into supper.

She took her place at the long table, watching the others lean away from her. As soon as the meal was over, she was running for Mr. Bottleneck's office, ignoring the odor still hanging about her, powering herself over the threshold, across the thick rug and up to Mr. Bottleneck's desk. He was busy, pince-nez glasses firmly on face and quill-tip pen in hand, doing his weekly bookkeeping. The words rushed out of her: could she go home, she didn't want to stay, when could she *please* go home.

Mr. Bottleneck's dodo bird-like body seemed to hover behind the desk, as if on some invisible perch. His eyes behind the spectacles were kind. He put his pen down and removed them now to say, "Well, I find this sudden urge to leave rather odd."

"Please, I want to go home," Julianne begged.

"I can understand your desire to be removed, child," he said, "but you really have no home to go to. You're a charge of this community now."

"What about the people who brought me here? The people I have no memory of?"

"My goodness, that was so long ago. Didn't they ever tell you, child? You're to stay here with us a good while. They must have told you that."

Julianne shook her head. "I just learned recently it wouldn't be long."

Mr. Bottleneck seemed slightly taken aback.

"Are you sure Wanda didn't tell you, Julianne? She's not really a mute. She only pretends not to speak."

"What? No, I didn't even know Wanda—"

"Because we talked about it very carefully. Why, she was absent from sewing and here all one afternoon. Matter of fact, not too long ago. We talked it through over tea. She really knows how to pick and brew, that woman. Still, she saw where you'd sleep, where you'd take your meals, where—"

"Oversee my progress!" Julianne shouted.

"No—she couldn't have!" Mr. Bottleneck hesitated a moment. "Are we even talking about the same thing? Because I can't help but feel there is a miscommunication here. Perhaps you've been having bad dreams again or you just don't remember. There are no arrangements for you to go home,

Julianne. I am so sorry. We'll be your home now, how is that? Isn't it a fine thing to have a roof over your head and children your own age to help guide you?"

Julianne didn't hear the rest. She didn't bother to explain the portals. She turned and ran for the door, the hall beyond blurred by her tears. *You see how this one's different? Confused and troubled?* The voices of indifference whispered words in her head. The smell from her clothes seemed to stem from deep within her, from some darkness where a mother she should have been able to call her own could see, Wanda could see, Prissy could see. *Think you're so god-a'mighty different or more special?* Maybe the portals were a figment of her imagination. She was here in this place for people no one wanted, for people who did not think sane thoughts, and now she wasn't different from them, not anymore.

Her legs carried her back up the stairs to the third floor, to the next, and on to the roof. She could barely see as she emerged into the pigeon coop; it was bathed in twilight and her feathered friends were fast asleep. She paused, hearing a sound: the scuttle of a rat rather than the usual deep cooing. She exited the pen toward the water tower on the opposite ledge, held up by a canopy, tight rope and wooden beams. Something drifted past her cheek; she brushed back the cobwebs and moved alongside the tower. For a moment she stood there looking at the curve of the road against the dimming land. Then she put her fist into one of the beams beside her, cutting her knuckles. Her view was ruined forever now. She was so confused and fed up she would never be tempted to stare at that road again.

She never talked about the portals again, or that anyone was coming for her, or that she had some purpose greater than anyone could possibly imagine. Besides, the only person who listened and seemed to understand was Wanda. She dragged around listless, getting more like the others. Prissy stopped picking on her. There was just one little string of things that she did every night, which she held to. She brushed her hair fifty times. She rinsed her face ten times. And she never said no to a cup of Wanda's tea, with whom she invested all her trust. After she was in bed she took out her cloth bag and shined her quarters, and gobbled up whatever sugar lumps she had collected. Every night she memorized the names of everyone in that auditorium, or at least tried to, as if they were brothers or sisters, imagining each face as she muttered the name, to make sure she'd remember them if, by some miracle, she met them again.

Mr. Bottleneck had felt so sorry for her that the following Christmas he splurged for two gifts. One for her and one for Anya. Anya got a dollhouse. Julianne got a great big wind-up teddy bear that, when you twisted

him up, he played a little melody and said: “Let’s go on an adventure.” The other children received stockings filled with candy canes and chocolate. The teddy bear’s music and words were the most soothing, and she made his melodies go on as long as she could, until she finally fell asleep. That got her through the nights for well over a year. When she wasn’t sewing, she didn’t know what got her through the days. Maybe it was some hidden resolve. Maybe it was Wanda. She’d even asked her, “Am I from the future?”

“You just might be,” Wanda replied, no longer acting the mute.

“Am I someone important, someone special?”

“I think so.” Wanda smiled. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about this.”

“That’s my problem. I think too much.”

“Such an imagination,” Wanda laughed. “What you need is a good cup of tea.”

“It’s always tea, isn’t it?”

“Regardless of my mother’s days with the slave movement, she used to tell me that if it wasn’t for teatime, people would never coexist.”

“Do you think life comes from tea?”

“I don’t know about that. But I do know that’s where many friendships are born.”

By the time Julianne reached her fourteenth year, she was like a sleep-walker. No wishes, no will. At times she was frightened she would become like Prissy—who had now moved in with the older inmates—adopt the same attitude and scoff at the newcomers, and take command of the clapstick. But then one day a bulbous-nosed man drove up and asked to see the girls, to see them for hiring, and took a shine to Julianne. The infirmary staff perceived him as loud, ostentatious, and, among other things, jovial.

There he was, in this handsome red coat and driving gloves, a tall, fine-looking man of about fifty, round-cheeked and smiling, slightly balding beneath his top hat, but still boyish for what it was worth. He had a big laugh. The girls figured him for some kind of entrepreneur or stage entertainer. They were all lined up, and he looked them all over. He looked at Matilda Bottleneck, then he looked at Julianne. He stared deep into her eyes and said, “Perfect.” He said it twice. “Perfect. She’s the one I want.” Julianne was flabbergasted that somebody actually wanted her, that somebody with a bulbous nose had come for her at last. In back of her mind there was something *familiar* about this man, but the sudden wash of excitement, and just the thought that she would be leaving for good, caused her to forget much of everything else.

“Somebody wants to adopt me,” she hurried and told Wanda. “Some-

body has finally come to get me out of this godforsaken place!”

Wanda hugged her real tight. “And here you were giving up on yourself. What did I tell you? I believed in you all along.”

“But—but what about you? I’ll be leaving you. You’re my best friend in the entire world.”

“You’ll make new friends, learn new skills. There’s a lot waiting for you out there.”

“But I don’t want new friends. I want you!”

Wanda laughed. “Oh, don’t worry, child. I’m sure we’ll be reunited soon enough. If not in this life, then some other.”

Julianne didn’t know what to say.

Mr. Bottleneck and the man were in his office going through all the necessary paperwork. “Congratulations, she’s all yours,” he said, giving his stamp of approval. “This is a blessing too remarkable for words. It’s very rare that somebody visits here actually wanting a child so old. You’ll find that Julianne is a very gifted teenager.”

“Oh, I know,” the man said. “I could spot her body makeup from a whole universe away. Her molecules are the most fascinating. They are a heady brew, make no mistake. Even now, I feel released from the terrible responsibility and weight of such a long cosmic journey.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What I meant to say was I knew she was special the moment I laid eyes on her.”

“Yes, of course.” A moment’s silence. “Right, then. Take good care of her.” Mr. Bottleneck stood up and extended a hand. “There’s nobody quite like her.”

* * *

Julianne waited anxiously, teddy bear in hand, in the infirmary parlor the day he came back for her. She waited by the lobby window till the buggy came into sight, with its large black wheels and copious seating, growing larger, clearer, on that curve of road she had gazed so many times. “What a wonderful opportunity,” everyone had said. Even Prissy was slightly jealous. Anya had beamed, and Matilda Bottleneck had exclaimed, “Out of all the girls in this facility, this one gets chosen.” That great big buggy—brand-new, nickel-plated, brass headlamps and lavishly red velvet cushioning—it was coming there for her. It was coming to take her far away.

On this particular day the man on its seat had driving gloves the same color as the reins, a rich honey color. She saw the fine weave in his jacket,

his shirt; she saw the gleam of his watch chain in the sun. The buggy and the man, and the chestnut-colored horse that propelled it. The man, Matilda Bottleneck had said, who would be like a father and guide to her, called himself *Garner*.

She was breathless as she climbed up beside him, speechless all the way up to the gates. The fields were opened up before them. He smiled at her, ruffling her hair. There was a grand airiness about him, just as there had been his younger self. Her destination wasn't far, not much above five or six miles from the infirmary, but it seemed to her that she was crossing a line into a different landscape entirely.

"Don't you have something for me?" she asked him.

"Like?"

"Like a pretty white dress?"

As the horse trotted on, he went into a storage box in back of him. He handed her a white jumpsuit. It was made of a strange insulated material. "Do you mean this?"

"What is it?"

"It's what you'll be wearing eventually," he said.

"Is this all?"

"Actually, no." He also handed her a jug—the same jug the silver-haired man had produced that day from behind the lectern—and it was filled with tea. "A very special woman named Wanda wanted you to have this. She probably knew you'd be embarking on a very long journey."

Julianne wept. "She was like a mother to me. Will I get to see my new mother?" she inquired.

"No, but your new mothership *awaits*."

The rest of the trip was silent. The fields slid past, enchanted, the seasons rapidly changing, and then a great air vessel was rising up before them, a fine metal craft sitting back on a small crater of land. She was mesmerized, speechless, as she crossed its steel threshold into its mazelike corridors.

"How long have you been searching for me?" she asked.

The man smiled. "It was like waiting a whole eternity." A wave of enthusiasm—almost familial in nature—swept over her. Already bound by the adventures and molecules of this girl's past, their destinies now were further interlocked.

"Not only will great labor and sacrifice be demanded of this girl, but of us all as well. Try and make her feel as comfortable as possible. Every day we spend in our current gravitational range subtracts a day, of course, from our biological lifespan. Only through her properties and on her terms are we immune to the ravages of time. Only through her can we find a place we

can finally call home.”

Julianne struggled to remember the events she'd dreamt of all through her childhood. In her mind there she was, in the brass buggy going through this immense portal, on a morning as plainly outlined in her memory as a flower pressed in a book. She acknowledged that she was part of one great colony, and the atoms of her existence were what would shape and hold other people's futures together. They called her the child of election, the child of great desire, the child of destiny.

Toward the Ancient Light

by Robert S. King

Robert S. King lives in the countryside near Cave Spring, Georgia USA. His poems have appeared in hundreds of magazines, including The Kenyon Review, Southern Poetry Review, Lullwater Review, Chariton Review, Main Street Rag, and others. His latest books are The Hunted River and The Gravedigger's Roots, both from Shared Roads Press, 2009. He is currently Director of FutureCycle Press, www.futurecycle.org.

Toward the Ancient Light

This clear night of fall hangs jewels on the limbs.
Diamonds of distant stars replace the leaves,
a gift of light show to bathe our dark eyes
in the watery light of vision,
bright scars to remember
as the past catches up at last
to our conflicted world.

A comet smokes by, almost firefly close.
A spider web ripples between the branches,
almost a spiral galaxy turning clockwise.
The moon hides its scars behind the mountain,
no match for brighter skies tonight.
The distant firecrackers of battle redden our sky
that now blends into the calming cosmic clouds.
Everything stirs toward truth: a shade of white.
The mixture of everything is harmony, is eternity.

Still our fears thicken the dark wind blowing.
Still our metal arms reach out across the battlefields.

Lightning from our own arms splits the moon
in our final show of power.
Photons from long ago probe our hearts,
regulating the rhythm of us all,

turning us inside out as they pass.
The galaxy arms reach out for us,
we who always fought for love,
we who always loved to fight.
We peel now our uniforms to the skin
and go at last toward the only lasting light.

Assumption

by Desmond Warzel

Desmond Warzel's first short story was published in 2007. Since then, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Redstone Science Fiction, Abyss & Apex, Shroud, Alternative Coordinates, and various other periodicals and anthologies. When not writing, he roots for the Cleveland Indians or engages in other, equally futile, pursuits. In this story an interstellar rescue crew gets more of an adventure than they planned for.

This job began as they always begin. Belasco was off in her little corner of the ship, praying silently to herself. Occasionally, the rest of us were invited to join her; we each inevitably declined, with varying degrees of civility. Across from me, Reinhagen triple-checked everyone's equipment, while Mahaffey sat next to him, nitpicking.

Though Mahaffey disliked humanity in general, he hated mild-mannered Reinhagen quite specifically, and yet he'd never leave the guy alone. I often wondered what had happened to Mahaffey, that he felt the need for male collectivity in a group in which we women outnumbered the guys by a whopping three to two.

As for me, I've always been a contrarian. My pre-mission ritual is not to engage in one (except to snicker at Reinhagen and Mahaffey; both men habitually shaved their heads, and when Mahaffey's black scalp was proximate to Reinhagen's pale dome, they resembled the concluding shot of a game of eight-ball).

And all the while, Florence, our intrepid pilot, sat in the cockpit working her incomprehensible wizardry at the ship's controls.

In fact, we'd been in orbit less than an hour when she located our target.

"But don't be too impressed," she said. "It's the only artificial structure down there."

"Nice to catch a break for a change," I said. I peered over Florence's shoulder, but I'm no pilot, and her readings were gibberish to me.

"Target's in the woods," continued Florence. "But there's some nice, open ground about ten kilometers to the east. You guys in the mood for some exercise?" She turned to face us. "From where I sit, you could use it."

"I was hired for my brains," said Reinhagen. "And I've never heard anyone say otherwise. Any people around?"

“Can’t get a reading,” said Florence. “Might be something atmospheric, a mineral deposit, who knows? But there’s no file on this rock; not even a name, much less a settlement history, so I wouldn’t expect to bump into anyone. Survivors excepted, of course.”

“Good enough,” said Reinhagen. “Are we ready to do this thing, ladies and gentlemen?”

* * *

“This thing” was our current mission, which was this: the *Roadrunner*, a small transport vessel much like our own *Fortunate Sun*, had set down on this world to effect some external repairs and never lifted off again. Our objective was its sole item of cargo: a small shipping container belonging to our client, Anvari-Hugenberg Innovations, an impressive-sounding firm that was actually a two-man start-up operating out of Hugenberg’s bachelor apartment on Threshold. The container, on its way to some industrial bigwig on Gehenna, bore a sample of their latest development and instructions for its synthesis, and was sure to result in the early and very comfortable retirement of both Anvari and Hugenberg—provided, naturally, that we rescued it from its unforeseen diversion.

Assuming the *Roadrunner* crew’s survival, we’d rescue them as well, provided it didn’t jeopardize our retrieval of the container. The contract was for the container, and the philosophy of today’s young, ambitious mercenary is one of unrepentant pragmatism.

* * *

The familiar heaviness started in my feet and worked upward; we were decelerating. I unconsciously braced for a shock that I knew wasn’t coming. Florence’s landings were so smooth, you’d be hard pressed to tell whether we’d landed at all.

Reinhagen finished his checklists and pronounced us fit. Florence opened the doors and Reinhagen, Belasco, and Mahaffey filed out. I brought up the rear. “You need anything while we’re out?” I asked Florence over my shoulder as I stepped out onto spongy alien grass.

“Yeah, if you pass a newsstand, see if the latest *New Yorker* is out yet.”

“Roger that,” I said. “Try not to get too bored up there.”

“Think I’ll read a book.”

“Well, make it a short one,” interjected Mahaffey, leaning back through the doorway. “I’m guaranteeing a quick resolution on this job.” By way of a

response, Florence slammed the doors shut. Mahaffey barely dodged them.

Florence took the *Fortunate Sun* back to orbit (it was our most valuable asset by far, so we never risked leaving it where hostiles might get at it, lest we be well and thoroughly screwed); as the ship receded into the clear sky, the four of us fanned out, weapons at the ready, and advanced into the forest, heartened by our rare dalliance with good fortune. We were looking at the easiest money we'd ever made.

The *Roadrunner* was indeed ten kilometers in, just as Florence had said. We fought our way through a stand of particularly dense brush and there it lay, fifty meters off, beat to hell, having sheared off dozens of trees during its approach despite all that nearby open ground. This was a crash, not a landing.

We found the container, too: a gleaming spheroid of gold-colored metal, unmarred except for a seam at the equator. This took no great effort on our part; it had been unloaded and placed carefully atop the wreckage of the ship.

"Well, that's odd," Reinhagen said helpfully.

"Probably a signal that they're alive somewhere," speculated Belasco. "Thank God."

"Whatever," said Mahaffey. "Anyone home?"

Reinhagen unslung his scanner and manipulated it, muttering to himself all the while and growing ever more perturbed. Finally, he threw it down in disgust. "I got a reading—a big one—but I couldn't zero in on it, or even confirm it. Then the thing ceased to function altogether."

"We should really have someone in charge of maintaining the equipment," said Mahaffey cheerfully. "Oh, wait, that's you, Reinhagen."

"So file a grievance with the shop steward," Reinhagen shot back.

"You think there's any danger?" I asked.

"Can't say," replied Reinhagen. "It was probably a glitch. Way too big a reading for a ship that size. Let's just secure the container, I guess."

"Then we'll fan out and look for the crew," added Belasco.

"Or not," said Mahaffey.

"Let's just do it," I said. "We could have been gone already."

"Fine," said Mahaffey. "You became the boss when I wasn't looking, apparently. Let's go."

"We might want to hold off on that," said Belasco, her voice suddenly dropping to a whisper. She crouched behind a stand of trees, and we did likewise. "There's your reading, Reinhagen."

She was right. The crash site, once deserted, had in our few moments of distraction become a hotbed of activity. No fewer than two dozen men and

women had emerged from the forest and now milled about the *Roadrunner*. And their unheralded appearance was not the strangest thing about them. All were naked. All were filthy from head to toe. Tangled manes of unkempt hair crowned male and female alike. They occasionally hailed one another in a language we couldn't make out, but most of their attention seemed occupied by the container, and they occasionally gestured in its direction.

We could only stare.

"Smugglers?" volunteered Belasco tentatively. "This planet would make a great hideout."

"Yeah, except smugglers don't usually walk around bare-assed," said Mahaffey.

"An unregistered settlement, then?"

"Probably a damn commune or something," muttered Mahaffey. "Good luck for us. I'd been thinking about sprucing up the ship with some macramé."

"I knew this was going too smoothly," said Reinhagen.

"We should parley," said Belasco. "Try and reason with them. They might not know the container's value. We can still come out of this with a profit."

Suddenly a single syllable echoed through the woods, and the entire group sank immediately to their knees.

"No way," said Mahaffey. "You've got to be *kidding* me."

"Are they doing what I think they're doing?" Reinhagen asked.

They were. Worshipping the container. Doing the whole bit, in fact; chanting in low tones, arms above their heads, bobbing up and down, like some jungle tribe in an old movie. Worshipping in that cartoonish manner I didn't think existed in real life. The container, needless to say, did not respond. Its silence failed to deter its worshippers, who seemed quite earnest in their prostrations.

I laughed. I could do nothing else. "There's nothing in the manual that covers this."

"Hey, Belasco," said Mahaffey, "got your Bible on you? I think I remember this chapter."

"Mahaffey, you wouldn't know a Bible if someone hit you in the face with one. Which I might."

"Threaten all you like, my dear. But this job just got a whole lot easier."

"How?"

"Well, I don't know what those nuts are doing, but it's no salvage operation. If they're not selling that thing or returning it to its owner, they have no claim on it. It's ours."

“I hate to admit it,” said Reinhagen, “but Mahaffey’s done his homework.”

“Suits me,” I said, “but how do we get it out of there?”

“We just open fire,” said Mahaffey. “Why waste time?”

“You’re not serious,” I said.

“We’re not shooting anyone unless absolutely necessary,” declared Reinhagen. “I’m in no mood for the paperwork.”

“There isn’t going to *be* any damn paperwork,” protested Mahaffey. “How can you file paperwork for an operation on a planet that nobody knows is here?”

There would, in fact, be plenty of paperwork; we didn’t make a move without proper documentation. For your working mercenary, the most important directive, even above “complete the mission,” is “protect the license.” And for all of Reinhagen’s protestations, he’d never fill out a single form anyway. That usually fell to me, and it had gradually become a tacit part of my job description.

“And since when is shooting people our tactic of first resort, anyway?” inquired Belasco testily.

“What people? These are cavemen. Look at them. You’re telling me the law applies to them? You call this civilization?”

“So now you’re an anthropologist?”

“You’re right, Belasco, I’m sorry. Nonsensical prayers to unresponsive gods fall within your area of expertise.”

“You should be thankful, Mahaffey,” said Belasco. “My beliefs are all that have kept me from shooting *you*.”

Reinhagen had drifted away from the argument and returned to watching the ceremony. “Look,” he whispered.

Several of the worshippers had left the ritual proper and had begun fetching arm loads of dry branches and were stacking them in front of the ship. They repeated this chore several times until the pile was shoulder-high, after which a woman bearing a burning branch emerged from the woods and set it ablaze. When every stick of fuel had caught, three more men joined the proceedings. Even from a distance, even hampered by the glare from the fire, we could all readily identify the burdens they carried. Three bodies, barely recognizable as human, flayed so thoroughly that even their sexes weren’t apparent. A few shreds of fabric still clinging to them marked them as the *Roadrunner* crew. A great roar went up from the assembled throng, and all three bodies were thrown on the fire. They were consumed within moments.

“Open fire,” said Reinhagen quietly.

The deed was done quickly, but not as quickly as it should have been. Reinhagen, Mahaffey, and I fired almost simultaneously, on my mark, but the tableau we had just witnessed must have touched something primal in us. Our trademark precision had absented itself, and beams that should have pierced the rising and falling torsos of the devout instead struck the *Roadrunner* or one of the slender alien trees, or vanished in the bonfire.

Belasco paused—for a short prayer?—then opened fire herself, carefully striking down the three corpse-bearers with one beam apiece before methodically targeting the remainder of the panicking congregation, who now scurried to and fro. The two men and I were by now firing essentially at random, but Belasco's aimed shots lent a degree of order, weaving our beams into a web that none escaped.

If that all seems a little callous, try looking at it as self-defense. We certainly did. And they got a few good licks in, too. Right at the conclusion of the proceedings, Belasco took a volleyball-sized rock to the side of her head and went down like a marionette with severed strings.

When we were sure there were none left, Mahaffey advanced on the *Roadrunner*, stepped over the filth-ridden bodies and skirted the fire in which the ashes of the crew now mingled inextricably with those of the forest. While we tended to Belasco, he clambered up the side of the ship and retrieved the container.

There was a little swelling, but no blood. Belasco was groggy and kept sliding in and out of intelligibility. Reinhagen and I worked out a comfortable means of sharing her weight between us and, with Mahaffey taking point, we began the ten-kilometer hike back to open ground without a further word.

We remained unmolested all the way to the edge of the woods. For safety's sake, we put another kilometer between ourselves and the trees. I found myself barely able to stifle a joke about all the paperwork we were going to have to file. Though I was no fatalist or black humorist, it beat thinking about what we'd just seen and done.

When we judged our position to be as safe as was immediately likely, we unpacked the beacon. When emplaced and activated, it would provide Florence a steadier homing signal than handheld communications devices, whose intermittent signals were subject to interference.

Except that when I activated it, nothing happened. The thing might as well have been made of stone.

“It’s not working,” I said.

“Like hell it isn’t,” said Mahaffey. “Get with the program.”

“What do you want from me? There’s no juice.”

“Check your radios,” said Reinhagen. None of us had activated ours, as we’d never left sight of one another. Four radios emerged from four pockets, and all failed to respond.

“Check weapons,” I said, already sure what we would find. We lined up facing back toward the trees and fired. I got two quick bursts from Belasco’s weapon before it died. My own rifle managed one pathetic beam that wouldn’t have killed a mouse, before giving up its ghost. Neither Mahaffey nor Reinhagen even got one.

“This isn’t happening,” said Mahaffey.

“The powersat must have gone down,” mused Reinhagen. Powersats were small disposable satellites that beamed converted solar energy directly to our weapons and gear, saving us the trouble of lugging extra powerpacks. Florence usually carried a dozen, and would have placed one in orbit immediately after dropping us off.

“Hope it burned up,” said Mahaffey. “If it survived, someone’s gonna be worshipping it this time next week.” I snickered involuntarily. “Of course,” he went on, “that assumes something didn’t happen to her before she had a chance to launch the thing.” Reinhagen winced a little. Only I noticed. I’d always suspected that Reinhagen was a little sweet on Florence, though I’d never tried to get him to admit it.

“So what’s the move?” asked Reinhagen.

“Back to the woods,” I replied.

“My ass,” said Mahaffey. “You want to wind up like the *Roadrunner* crew?”

“In the woods, there’s cover, Mahaffey, and we can improvise some weapons if we have to.”

So back we went, lugging our gear in hope of its functioning once again, although I suspected that any future utility it demonstrated would be as doorstops and paperweights. Mahaffey cradled the container securely; he would have put a Notre Dame quarterback to shame. We settled just inside the woods, so we could break for open ground if we had to, and found a miniscule clearing, ringed by close-growing trees, that seemed to be the most defensible spot to make our stand.

* * *

Having no idea what the nights on this planet might be like, Mahaffey

and I began collecting tinder and kindling for a fire, trying not to dwell on the other fire that likely still smoldered some kilometers away. After several fumbled attempts, we managed a spark, and soon had a decent little blaze going, just in time for sundown. Reinhagen put down the communicator he had been fruitlessly taking apart and reassembling, and passed out rations and water bottles. Belasco had unsheathed her knife and now fashioned some of the straighter pieces of extra kindling into rudimentary spears, in between sips of water. The shipping container lay at her feet.

We ate in silence. I picked up one of Belasco's spears and idly tested the point with my thumb. A single drop of blood welled up. "Not bad, Belasco." I'd been trying to keep her alert by engaging her in conversation when I could. She seemed to be slurring a little, which had me concerned.

"I figure these will give us a longer reach than we'd have with the knives themselves. In the future, we really ought to pack a few low-tech weapons, just in case. I'd give anything for a shotgun right now, or a bow. Even a good hunting slingshot. My dad and I used to go out...what?" Belasco had looked up from her work and noticed Mahaffey staring at her incredulously.

"We're really going to do it, aren't we? We're really going to sit around making small talk until we starve or get our throats cut."

"Something you'd rather discuss, Mahaffey?" inquired Reinhagen archly. "I admit today's business raises any number of questions..."

"None of which are relevant. The only germane question is what exactly we think we're sitting here waiting for."

"For Florence."

"Well, forget it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Florence and I don't get along, but I'll admit she's no idiot. She's not landing until she gets the signal, and when she doesn't, she's out of here. That's the procedure."

"You don't think she'll come down?" asked Belasco.

"Florence is cocky," replied Mahaffey, "but she knows that if something's incapacitated all four of us, she doesn't stand a chance on her own. In three days, we're out of food and water; by noon on day four, she'll be on the nearest settled world, assuming sole ownership of the firm and hiring a new team. And who'd blame her?"

"I suppose I'd be wasting my breath," sighed Belasco, "if I asked you to have a little faith."

"On what grounds?"

Belasco winced, clutching at her head. "I don't know," she finally murmured. "I can't think. But—"

“Faith is what got us into this,” said Mahaffey. “Hell, the *Roadrunner* crew, they probably had faith that they’d be rescued, too. After all, their cargo was so valuable, someone would have to come after it eventually. Well, they were right about that, weren’t they?”

It occurred to me that Mahaffey had just inadvertently made Belasco’s point. “If Florence hires a new team, they’ll come looking for that container, right? Then we’ll be rescued. Out of a job, though.”

Mahaffey was quiet for a long moment, then answered, “It’ll be too late by then.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Who cares what he means?” interrupted Belasco. “It doesn’t matter. She’ll come.”

“Hope all you want,” retorted Mahaffey. “Hell, pray all you want. But let’s keep the human sacrifices to a minimum, shall we?”

“Enough for now, okay?” I interrupted finally. “You guys cool down and get some rest. I’ll take first watch.” Belasco sat in stony silence. Mahaffey affected a half-hearted defiance, but soon lay down, using his pack as a pillow. Reinhagen put away his tools and did likewise. I hefted one of Belasco’s homemade spears, left three by the fire for the others, and stuck the rest in the ground at regular intervals around the perimeter of the clearing, assuring myself a ready weapon in every direction.

This was the first opportunity I’d had to collect my thoughts without the distraction of pointless arguments or uncomfortable silences. And as I tried to assimilate the day’s events, I realized that none of it added up. Inconsistencies that I’d put aside at the time now came flooding back, inconsistencies, not only in the behavior of those savage people who had revered a piece of luggage, but in their very presence here.

I wasn’t the only one vexed by that puzzle, apparently, because less than a minute later, Reinhagen’s tentative voice broke the stillness. “You know...”

“I was that close to being asleep, Reinhagen,” grumbled Mahaffey.

“This whole thing makes no sense. How could such primitive humans have gotten here? And if they’re not human, what are they? Why do they love that container so much? Were we right to shoot them, no matter what they’d done? And what about all these mechanical malfunctions?”

“Don’t get all weepy about opening fire, Reinhagen, it was the first sensible decision you’ve made in months.”

“And what did you mean when you said that if Florence came back with replacements, it would be too late for us?”

“Exactly what I said. And, fortunately, the fact of your latter question eliminates our need for answers to the rest of them.”

“You have answers, then?”

“For Christ’s sake,” said Mahaffey, struggling upright. “Are you guys this dumb? You people act like I’m the stupidest man alive, but I’m the only one who’s figured this out.”

“Then enlighten us, Mahaffey,” I said, staring out into the darkened forest.

“First off,” he began, “they’re *Homo sapiens*. They look like humans, they act like humans. They bleed like humans. How did they get here? Same way we did. Might have been settlers, might have been pirates like Belasco said. Or they crashed like the *Roadrunner*. Doesn’t matter. What matters is that something here caused them to degenerate. A virus; something in the sunlight; something in the food; maybe something missing from the food. No telling how many generations ago it was, either, or what the total population is now. But they haven’t been here long enough to become homogeneous. Or was I the only one who noticed that that ‘tribe’ consisted of at least four different races?”

I certainly hadn’t noticed that, but in fairness they had presented a united front in their head-to-toe filth.

Mahaffey went on without a pause. “As far as their ‘religious practices’ go, they must have retained some rudimentary understanding of their origin: they came from another star. Thus, the sky is sacred. So the *Roadrunner*, having fallen from the sky, becomes a holy place, and its cargo, which is also the shiniest thing they’ve ever seen, becomes a relic. They must have encountered the crew some distance from the crash, which is why they sacrificed them instead of revering them.

“As for rescue, Reinhagen, it doesn’t matter who shows up because we’ll be too far gone by then. There’s no reason to think we won’t go as nuts as those others did. Whatever the cause.”

I continued my patrol of the clearing, trying to decide if that held water. Belasco sat with her mouth hanging open. Reinhagen just lay, staring straight up. “Good lord,” Belasco breathed finally, “you’ve actually got a mind in there somewhere, Mahaffey.”

He’d missed one, though. “What about the equipment failures?” I asked.

“Probably the same thing that interfered with Florence’s scans. Radiation, sunspots, how should I know? Strange things happen on alien planets; that’s why they’re called ‘alien.’

“Anyway, all the more reason not to get your hopes up. Any so-called ‘rescue ship’ that spends more than a couple of hours on the surface is going to turn into the world’s most expensive outhouse.”

The conversation died as we digested all that Mahaffey had said. I think

we came to a silent consensus that even if he'd gotten some of the particulars wrong, his basic thesis seemed sound. At any rate, no one proffered an alternate interpretation.

I didn't wake anybody else for their turn on watch. I continued my slow circuit of the clearing until dawn.

* * *

The next morning, we picked at our rations. It was obvious to all of us that we would have to scout out some alternate food source soon, but given Mahaffey's conjectures of the previous night, nobody was particularly motivated. After breakfast, I left to gather more wood, figuring it would be easier to keep the fire going than to constantly restart it. None of the brush surrounding our makeshift camp was disturbed. If there were any locals left in the vicinity, they hadn't been alerted by our fire or our conversation. Or they'd discovered the remains of their fellows and been too spooked to approach strangers.

We tried valiantly to occupy ourselves. We fiddled with the equipment, which remained inert. We napped. We ate lunch. We played cards, when Belasco felt up to it; casino to start with, but when the vital deuce of spades blew into the fire, we tossed the low cards altogether and switched to euchre. We changed partners three times, but I lost every game, whether with Mahaffey, Belasco, or Reinhagen. Partner games are a bad idea when nobody feels much like looking anyone else in the eye.

This desperate embrace of normal activity was every bit as pointless a demonstration of ritual behavior as the savages' entreaties to the shipping container had been; this would have been evident even if Mahaffey hadn't reiterated it once per hour. I could stand my guard post until my feet were numb; Reinhagen could fuss with the equipment until his fingers bled; we could play cards until the pips wore off; none of it mattered, because our strategy of acting as though we would not only survive, but actually complete our mission, was just a way of taking comfort in the familiar.

Two more days we went through those motions. I didn't get a wink of sleep for the entire duration; concerned about the increasing listlessness and disinterest of the others, especially Belasco. I insisted on maintaining the entire night's vigil myself rather than entrust my existence, however little of it remained, to them. I got no argument.

Though my first night as sentinel had been tranquil, by the following sundown I felt like someone had filed a quarter-inch off the ends of my nerves. Rustling leaves, breezes, the crackling fire; any disturbance, real

or imagined, caused me to grip my spear with the grim determination of a hoplite and crouch at the ready, waiting for the enemy to spring.

The third day was so excruciating, I couldn't wait for it to end, whatever the night might bring. Except for the occasional outburst from Belasco, which inevitably trailed off before it had a chance to become intelligible, nobody said a word. Mahaffey and Reinhagen spent the day scratching at their formerly pristine scalps, which had begun to sprout once again. I could sympathize; my former company had mandated shaved heads for all personnel, even women. I'd kept trying to brush it out of my face anyway. Some amputees experience phantom limbs; I had phantom hair.

As darkness fell for the third time, I tried to relax, intending to let instinct sort out the dangerous from the mundane. I was determined not to pass another night squinting into the dark after phantom intruders.

It turned out not to matter, because when they came, there were at least a hundred of them, and they didn't make a sound until they were right on top of me.

They poured through the gaps between the trees like water sluicing through a drain. I speared two of them before their sheer mass carried me backward. The force of their impact knocked my spear away and bore me up and over the fire before slamming me into one of the trees on the opposite side. Something cracked. Though I didn't feel any pain just then, I suspected it wasn't the tree. I crumpled to the ground, fumbling for my knife as two dozen filthy, calloused hands took hold of me. I heard the others' muffled voices, and the war party's shrieks of glee as they reclaimed their idol. As my captors dragged me along the forest floor, my shoulder hit a rock and the once-absent pain from my encounter with the tree made its belated arrival.

* * *

I blacked out, and though it was the first sleep I'd had since our landing, it didn't last. When I came around we were back in open country, at the forest's edge. I was flat on my back, and four men held me immobile, kneeling on my hands and feet, while a woman stood over me with one of Belasco's spears at my throat. I could feel its needle-sharp tip grazing my skin. I looked up at that lined face, and gazed into those wild green eyes, searching in vain for some recognition of the heritage we shared or the ancestors we had in common. But there was nothing. So much for sisterhood.

On my left was Belasco, similarly restrained. Beyond her, Mahaffey and Reinhagen. On my right, atop a slight rise, rested the container, and behind

it several men and women were hastily assembling a duplicate of the bonfire of three nights ago. It seemed we were to be the centerpieces of a hastily-arranged encore of the ceremony we had interrupted. Next to the fire, a woman with an almost comical expression of concentration was examining a pile of tapered, wedge-shaped stones. If these people ever became capable of bettering themselves, this sort of stone would, some centuries hence, be lashed to a stout stick and become an axe. At the moment, I suspected, its primary function was to slice us to ribbons in preparation for our sacrifice, as they had done to our predecessors. I very nearly had to laugh; having relieved me of all my equipment, our hosts now had somewhere in their possession one of the finest knives made. I wondered if they would ever discover how much less taxing their butchery might be.

The construction of the bonfire continued. It was now twice the size of the first. And that was hardly the limit of their ambition. When they'd finished, more wood was fetched and four smaller fires were assembled in a circle at the base of the rise, ninety degrees apart. It appeared we would each be afforded our own.

These tasks accomplished, the majority of our captors went and dropped prone in front of the container, prostrating themselves and chanting just as their fellows had done. Our guards had evidently been granted dispensation; none of them moved an inch.

Their chanting, which three days ago had been a muddled lowing, at this close distance resolved itself into individual words. They were nonsense to me, but the preponderance of monosyllables and hard consonants, and the short phrasing, made their speech sound like the beginnings of a language. We knew, of course, that it was really the end of one.

Just beneath the harsh tones of the chants were more familiar syllables, in a higher register. Though I couldn't make them out, I knew I was eavesdropping on what Belasco assumed was the last prayer of her life. Such a faint little voice. One wondered how she could think her words could withstand the battery of a hundred rough entreaties to an idol of cold metal. I wished I could reach over and take her hand.

"Belasco, can't you even face death with a little dignity?" bellowed Mahaffey suddenly. Though his voice carried strongly, none of the worshippers took any notice. For my part, I was beyond anger. That was Mahaffey. At the root of it, that was why we kept him around. He was constancy.

From somewhere out of my sight came a torchbearer, who thrust his burning branch into the gargantuan central woodpile, and then into the four smaller ones. A cheer went up as the kindling began to catch fire, and those assembled continued their genuflections, arms above their heads as though

they were signaling touchdowns.

The chanting and cheering reached an apotheosis as the fires climbed to the tops of the woodpiles and, thus liberated, threw forked tongues of flame into the night sky.

X marks the spot, I thought to myself, taking note once again of the fires' arrangement. I wondered if that particular shred of culture had managed to stay with these people in spite of their degeneracy. What other bits and pieces still remained? What would we have retained, had we managed to prolong our survival here?

Suddenly, almost simultaneously, everyone went quiet. I could hear nothing but the crackling of the rapidly-growing fire, Belasco's prayer—which had receded to a whisper, but which was no less earnest—and a stiff wind somewhere in the distance.

Distracted from the proceedings, the worshippers, in ones and twos, rose to their feet and looked up at the sky. Flat on my back and surrounded by my five captors, I had no way of ascertaining what it was they were looking at. But the sound of the wind grew stronger, though I felt no breeze. And when the entire area was, in the space of an instant, bathed in circle of white light, I knew what that sound really was: the timid roar of the *Fortunate Sun's* engines. Florence had not only come looking for us, she had set down right in the midst of the proceedings.

Any other set of circumstances, and she'd have been on the bread line the next day for so blatantly defying our carefully-honed protocols. She knew it too. So why?

As the ship set down, the throng slowly backed away in all directions, forming a wide crescent. The doors opened, and a whisper circulated through the crowd.

Florence stepped out, rifle in hand. Her eyes widened. She'd assessed the scene from above and had been expecting these primitives to scatter like rabbits when she landed. Instead, they stood, staring at her. She met their gaze, the flickering bonfire casting dancing shadows across her features. Her eyes swept back and forth across the macabre tableau in front of her. She was deciding whether to shoot. She probably had enough juice to take them all out, but not before they ran us through.

Suddenly, as one, they dropped to their knees and began their prostrations again, only this time Florence was the object of their veneration. And now there were no chants, and the silence lent a new dignity to the proceedings. As for Florence herself, she could do little but stand there and try to read the situation.

One of the congregation broke off from the pack. I was positive it was

the woman who I'd seen regarding the pile of sharpened rocks like a surgeon selecting a scalpel. She ran to the bonfire, which now launched great tongues of flame into the night sky, and gently picked up the shipping container in both hands. She made her way carefully back and approached Florence almost abashedly. Florence reflexively raised her weapon a few centimeters before catching herself. The woman placed the container gently at Florence's feet, then scampered backward a few steps and looked up expectantly.

Florence's eyes widened in understanding. She nodded benevolently at the woman, then raised her arm with an even, deliberate motion and pointed at each of us, indicating that we should be brought forward. The woman standing over me withdrew her spear from my throat and laid it aside, and the men who knelt on my extremities released them. All five quickly scampered to join their fellows at worship. Those holding Belasco, Mahaffey, and Reinhaben all did likewise. I struggled to stand; the pain in my shoulder, which had receded while I lay still, suddenly returned and raced down my left side. The others nursed similar injuries. We walked, slowly, carefully, making no sudden moves, wearing neutral expressions. The people, still on their knees, shuffled awkwardly to clear a path for us.

We reached the *Fortunate Sun* and stepped inside, one by one. Florence's expression suggested she was going to enjoy listening to us explain ourselves. Outwardly, she maintained her serene demeanor, not wanting to provoke any further actions on the part of the faithful.

When we were aboard, she picked up the container, with as much care as its previous bearer had taken, and placed it in the doorway of the ship. Standing upright again, she raised her arms, perhaps offering a blessing, and slowly stepped inside. The people were calm; they seemed to think they understood what they were seeing.

But understood what? As messiahs went, the container lacked the usual charisma. It had spoken no gospel, performed no miracles. But it had come down from the sky. It had received their sacrifices with benign quietude. It had survived a harrowing ordeal, and now it ascended once again, borne by a being not of their reality. The entire fact of their existence now made slightly more sense to them than it had three days ago. Whether their new outlook would be erased by the depredations of their environment, and whether that would even matter, I couldn't say. But, for now at least, they understood.

And what were we, now, to them? Did they still see us as a sacrifice, only now taken skyward to be flayed and burned in person before their supreme being? Were we demons, captured and delivered up by the valiant faithful

and now bound for an eternity of damnation for our actions? Or were we just miserable sinners, upon whom undeserved redemption and grace had been bestowed as an example of what might await them if their faith was strong?

I couldn't read their minds. But I knew which theory I leaned toward.

* * *

Florence closed the doors, breathed a sigh of relief, and hurried to the cockpit with a nervous urgency I had never seen from her. There would be time for pleasantries when we reached open space. I soon felt the pressure of liftoff.

Mahaffey took a seat and regarded the container, which sat innocuously where Florence had placed it. He was mentally filing this episode away under "Mission Accomplished" and would probably never think about it again. He'd doubtless already begun deciding how he was going to spend his share of the fee.

We went interstellar, headed for civilization so we could get Belasco checked out. The *Fortunate Sun's* computer had pronounced her fit, but better safe than sorry.

Mahaffey was already sacked out. So were Belasco and Reinhagen.

I couldn't help noticing we were all in desperate need of a bath.

I made my way up to the cockpit. Florence looked up from her unfathomable manipulations and handed me a coffee, its heating element already activated. I took it and sat. She turned her attention back to her console for some interminable interval before she was satisfied enough to give me her full attention.

"Question?"

"Just the one," I said. "Why?"

"What if I were to say it was women's intuition?"

"I wouldn't, unless you want this coffee upside your head."

"How about plain old clairvoyance?"

"In the absence of anything more substantial, I wouldn't press the issue."

"You really don't know?"

"Should I?"

"Shame on you. Someone hasn't read her operations manual. I'd expect that kind of laxity from the guys, but I'm surprised at you."

"Have you seen the size of that tome? I might have skimmed some of the minutiae, but I know the pertinent stuff backward and forward."

Florence retrieved a battered copy from the closest of several mis-

matched, aftermarket storage units that lined the cockpit wall. She tossed it to me.

“Have a look at page 511.”

That page was near the center of the manual. I’d never laid eyes on it before. I’d have remembered if I had.

“A last-ditch distress signal. Overriding all other protocols.” And right in the middle of a hundred-page section headed “Definition of Terms.”

“Belasco and I came up with it years back. Before your time. Before Mahaffey and Reinhaven’s time, too. And we hid it in a hundred pages of legal pig-Latin in case the manual fell into shady hands.”

“A cross?”

“Belasco’s idea, needless to say. But it’s easy to make, recognizably artificial in a natural environment, and common enough in settled areas not to arouse suspicion.”

“I still don’t get it. How did we signal? Belasco didn’t say a word about it. Of course, she got clocked pretty good; she wasn’t all there.”

“The fires.”

“Fires?”

“On the hill.”

“You saw those, but you couldn’t see a horde of slaving lunatics ready to flay us alive?”

“Detecting life signs is touch-and-go even at the best of times. On the other hand, fire is just heat and light. You can’t miss it.”

Fires. Sure. One in the center, four spaced equally around. I’d seen an X, but rotate that forty-five degrees and you had something. Only...

“We didn’t make those fires.”

“Well, yeah, I know that *now*.” Florence smirked and turned back to her console. “But I’ll go back and drop you off again, if it’ll make you feel better.”

I drained my coffee, stood, and stretched. “Let me see what the paperwork looks like, and I’ll let you know.”

I made my way back to the others, trying to work out in my head what I would write. Fortunately, bureaucrats were concerned with facts rather than truth. The facts of our ordeal, though unique, were simple and straightforward, easily recounted in a few minutes’ time.

Getting at the truth of it, I suspected, would take a lot longer.