

OG's Speculative Fiction

A surreal illustration of a man's torso. He is shirtless, wearing a white off-the-shoulder top and a brown belt with a large silver buckle. On his chest, a miniature figure in a black and white outfit is suspended in the air. On his back, another miniature figure in a green hat and white outfit is visible. The background features a stylized castle with a red roof and a window, set against a blue sky with clouds. The overall style is a mix of realism and fantasy.

Issue #3

A Few Words with Sarah Ash

Poetry by Kristine Ong Muslim

**Stories by Chet Gottfried
Bruce Golden**

TERESA TOMALEY '05

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #3

November

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Teresa Tunaley's Cover Art: *Gulliver*

Originally from the UK, Teresa Tunaley now resides in the Canary Islands where she finds more time to devote to her love of art and painting. For years she has been doodling traditionally with pencils and dabbling with watercolours with recent forays into electronic techniques.

Her work has appeared in print across the UK, US, Canada and Denmark in magazines such as Black Petals, Champagne Shivers, FMAM, Wild Life Art, GateWay S-F Magazine Stories of Science & Faith, Sci-fantastic, EOTU, Beyond Centauri, Dark Fire, Fifth Dimension, Lunatic Chameleon, Tribal Soul Kitchen, Magicus Praecantrix, Horror Express, Kenoma and Continuum SF. More of her work can be found at <http://www.artstopper.com>



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Editor, Seth Crossman

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Editor's Letter

I am a firm believer that the birth of our imagination is much like puberty. It hits you suddenly, unexpectedly, and permanently.

Of course, all children have imaginations, it is the very thing they lose as they grow older, right? It is the child's imagination, one that creates play friends and can turn sticks into swords and bedroom shadows into monsters, that parents foster and nurse, without realizing that slowly, as children grow, this imagination is replaced by reality and understanding the way the world works.

Some people think that this imagination persists, develops and becomes the creative and imaginative side of the adult.

I disagree.

It is lost by degrees, as we mature, as our understanding of what is real and universal law replaces it and a different kind of imagination waits to be awoken.

Often, it is as simple as a book or movie that triggers this imagination, the kind of imagination that understands what is real and then crosses the boundary into what is unreal on purpose.

My trigger was Stephen R Lawhead's *In the Hall of the Dragon King*. I read that book and wished those places and people were real. I enjoyed the kind of things he wrote about: knights, magic, honorable men and dangerous adventures, heroes, beautiful women in looks and in heart, and the desire to find purpose. I wanted to be part of it, to find it here in the real world. A part of me knew I wouldn't, couldn't, so I began to create my own such places and people and events, to dwell once more among the things my spirit loved.

For many of us, our own imaginative birth was spurned by the same kind of yearning. We wished something was real, we longed for it, we wanted to exist in the same space with such creations. And then by force of will we were able to imagine not only these fantastic realms, but also what we wanted of life. Hence our hopes and fears and desires became directly linked to our imaginations.

This is why our imaginations are so powerful. They define our lives, how we live them, how we see them, how we define happiness, what we make of this world, and whether we believe in God or not.

Interview: A Few Words With Sarah Ash

Sarah Ash is the author of six books including, *The Tears of Artamon* trilogy, a series in which she delightfully stepped outside the traditional mold of fantasy and created a lush world with strong Eastern European and Asian flavors. Her work is imaginative, rich in character and strong in dialogue. We thank her for taking the time to join us for this interview and shed some light on her work.

What started you down the writing path? How young were you?

The first piece I remember writing for my own pleasure was a little comic strip about a girls' school. I was about eight or nine at the time and heavily influenced by comics like 'Judy' and 'Bunty' – and Tintin. But C.S. Lewis, Tolkien and Dumas provided the strange cocktail that started me writing my own stories.

What was your first publication? Did all the doors open after that?

My first published work – a short story - didn't happen until I had passed forty (sorry that should read twenty-one) ! And 'Moth Music', my second short story to be published (in Interzone) was the one that led to that magical phone call out of the blue from Deborah Beale at Orion, asking to see the novel I was working on. Thanks, Interzone! I've never forgotten that you got me my first break!

*How did the idea for **The Tears of Artamon** come about?*

I first outlined the story of Gavril, Kiukiu and the warring clans as early as 1994. I even wrote the scene where they first meet in the forest outside the kastel. Kiukiu was the most developed character at that stage; Gavril was called Tian and his mother, Tianandra, was a fierce warrior clan-leader. Well, that changed a bit in the intervening years! The Drakhaoul followed soon afterwards as Lord Volkh came on the scene.

There are definite cultural influences in your writing; a little Romanian folk lore, Mongolian traits, and French history are some of them. Are these cultures and influences you find particularly enticing, or were you hoping to veer off the beaten path from contemporary fantasy?

I've loved legends and folk tales of different countries since childhood. It fascinates me to explore the ways that legends often evolve from events in real life (is this Alan Garner's influence, I wonder?) I wasn't consciously veering off the conventional fantasy path -- I was working with materials that have fascinated me for many years. For example, the Azhkendi and the druzhina were inspired by the Russian hero legends of Prince Vladimir and the Knights of the Golden Table. The Praise Singers were inspired by the gusly players who used to sing those hero legends in medieval Rus -- but their role as shamans who communicate with the world of the dead was heavily influenced by Japanese traditions. Above all I wanted to write about a situation where an age of reason (as embodied by Eugene and the Tielen court) encounters dark and powerful supernatural forces (Gavril and the Drakhaoul) that can't be explained away in a rational or scientific way. I just love juxtaposing the extraordinary alongside the ordinary, everyday. I guess the child in me that's never quite grown up still wishes that might still happen!

There are so many characters in your series, many of them playing pivotal roles. Do you find it more fun to create and "play" with characters that are women or men?

I like 'em all, men and women! Although the complex, conflicted ones are often more fun to write. Oskar Alvborg (that bad boy) was particularly rewarding, as was the adventuress, Liliya Arbelian. I also confess to having a certain fondness for poor, gullible Altan Kazimir who seems to have a talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Celestine, Astasia, Kiukiu, Malusha, Elysia, Karila, and other women characters all have distinct feminine traits, but at the same time they are all strong heroines in their own way. How important is this aspect in your woman characters?

I like the way that you describe them as 'strong heroines in their own way.' I did not want to make them impossibly, unbelievably feisty, because of the society that they have grown up in. Astasia's sheltered upbringing has prepared her for a life in which she will be married off to secure a political alliance for her country. She's just not the kind of girl to suddenly grab her brother's sword, leap into the saddle, and ride off to battle (although in an earlier draft she did try to escape Mirom by stowing away in a costume trunk with a visiting ballet company). She has to find subtle ways to assert herself and can never quite escape the role that has been forced on her by

being born an Orlov. By contrast, Malusha is respected in Azhkendir, as a Praise Singer and shaman. Her strength is that of the indomitable survivor, who has had to endure years of solitude after her Clan is destroyed by the Nagarians, with only the Arkhel Owls for company.

I love the idea of struggling with the demon inside us, which in your books also happens to be a real demon. Even the "enemies" have demons they struggle with, which in a way makes the characters sympathetic because the demons prey upon characteristics, our fears and desires, that many of us can relate with. Was this something you set out to write about or something that came about as the story developed?

One of the facets of myths and legends that I've always loved is the way they use metaphor to tell us deep truths about ourselves – but from a different slant, so that we see situations afresh. Khezef, the Drakhaoul (the daemon-dragon spirit who possesses the Drakhaons of Azhkendir) gradually begins to 'take over' his host. This possession is expressed physically in Gavril's changing appearance but in other, more subtle ways, as he finds it harder to control his temper and starts to experience urges and desires that he has never felt before... I didn't consciously set out to write about struggling with the inner daemon; one of the tricky parts of writing 'The Tears of Artamon' was trying to maintain the readers' sympathy for Gavril when his daemon was forcing him to commit acts that would have ordinarily been abhorrent to him. (In fact Gavril is carrying quite a burden of guilt by Book III and this theme is one I'm still keen to develop in the – as yet – unwritten sequel).

Of course, the truth is that I now find it difficult to distinguish between what I set out to write about and things that evolved as the story developed! But I've always been intuitive when it comes to writing and I've learned to listen to my intuition in these matters. The analysis comes later, with all the benefits of hindsight.

How essential is a happy ending to your books?

A satisfying ending is what I prefer to aim for, rather than a happy one, although satisfying should, depending on what has gone before, contain elements of happiness! Above all, as writer or reader, what I'm seeking is a satisfying resolution to the dilemmas faced by the central characters.

What kind of response have you gotten from your readers?

A really warm, enthusiastic and appreciative response! I've been thrilled and very grateful that so many readers have taken the time and trouble to let me know what they thought of the books. It makes it all seem doubly worthwhile.

As a British author, was it difficult breaking into the North American market?

I'm lucky to have two excellent agents, John Parker and Merrilee Heifetz. And thanks to them, I was also very fortunate to have been picked up by my wonderful American editor, Anne Groell, who is also a published novelist. But without these three, I would never have made it on my own.

*Any chance some of your earlier works like *The Lost Child*, might make it to America?*

I'd be truly delighted if any of the three earlier works were picked up by an American publisher (hint, hint), especially as (and some canny readers have already noticed this) they're all set in the same 'alternate' world as Artamon – but at different time periods.

You have had a lot of passions in your life - music, teaching, writing, drama - and still do. Is it easy to find time to devote to them all, or does one take precedence over the other?

I've run the school orchestra for the past ten years, writing and/or arranging every piece they play and now, regretfully, I'm having to take a step back from all that. I'm still running the school library, though. Luckily I have very talented colleagues at school – and helpful parents - who support me. But I don't think I could teach full time and write novels (not enough headspace!) - though I wholeheartedly admire the brave souls who do!

The dialogue in your books is very strong. Did your experience in theatre help with this aspect of writing?

Thank you for that compliment, which is much appreciated. I often hear and see scenes playing out in my head as if watching a play or a film when I'm writing, so I suppose all those student years treading the boards must have helped.

You've loved comics from a young age, and recently you've begun to love Manga and Anime? What got you hooked on these Japanese forms of comics? Is it possible we might see The Tears of Artamon in manga form some time in the future?

It's the fault of my elder son, Tom, who caught the manga habit young – he started with Transformers and soon went on to 'Dragonball Z', then 'Akira', 'Ghost in the Shell', 'Naruto' etc.; I blame him!

I'd be so happy if a mangaka wanted to collaborate with me, because at the moment, I'm absolutely in love with manga. (Please do contact me!) Manga, at its very best, can provide an almost perfect synthesis between image and text in story-telling. What hooked me was the realization that mangaka were telling my kind of fantasy tales with startling originality and imagination; I felt an immediate kinship with their use of myths, legends and folklore. For example, I love the way the brilliant ladies of CLAMP weave Japanese folklore into twenty-first century Tokyo in 'xxxHolic' – or Natsuki Takaya makes us care about the Sohma family and the bizarre curse that makes them turn into the animals of the Chinese Zodiac when hugged by a one of the opposite sex in 'Fruits Basket'.

Can you describe your writing process, or a typical writing day for you?

The process? It involves a lot of pacing and muttering. It can also include trying to explain a tricky piece of plot to the cat. She never seems very interested, alas. A typical writing day is really quite ordinary: on a weekday, I go out to buy a paper, then write until I have to leave to go to school to do the afternoon session. I fit in the odd household chores as a 'reward' to break up the time sitting staring at the screen. After school, I come home and start again. No – that's a lie. I come back, intend to start again, but make a cup of tea, watch children's TV and try not to doze off. Then I answer emails, cook dinner, and start writing again in the evening. When my sons were at school, this routine was broken up by the school run, clubs, homework, friends for tea...

Where do you stand on the "write from experience, or write from what you know best" theory?

One can 'know' without actually having lived through the experience. Otherwise, there'd be no speculative fiction! Imagination is the writer's best tool. Although when I first tried to get published at the age of fourteen/

fifteen, I had a very thoughtful and kind rejection letter from one editor, suggesting that I'd make a much better writer when I'd gained more experience of life! It's horse for courses when it comes to writing advice, though; what works well for one writer, will be a disaster for another.

What's the best part about writing? the worst?

The honeymoon period with a new project is one of the best parts, when the ideas are fresh and vivid, the characters full of promise and one hasn't yet hit the wall! The worst...well it has to be forcing oneself to find a way out of those dead ends and plot catastrophes that inevitably occur about a third of the way into a story.

Any advice for aspiring writers?

Keep writing. Keep sending your work out. Keep reading to remind yourself what inspired you to start in the first place. It's the same advice I give myself.

How strong is the creative gene in your family?

If you mean on the creative arts side, my sister Jessica Rydill is a fantasy novelist, our cousin Vicki Howie writes for children and her sister Jo is an artist. But our father is a naval architect and that's creative too!

Do you trade rough drafts or bounce ideas off each other?

No way!!! I confess that I'm very secretive and protective about my stuff, you have to be when you're the oldest in the family (any other elder siblings out there? You know what I mean!) Does this sound harsh? It's just the way I work. Other writers love to share drafts and actively seek volunteer readers. But Jessica and I have collaborated in the past, when she wrote the words and I wrote the music for two theatre pieces for kids called 'No Christmas' and 'Summersiege'.

I know you have two new books coming out in the near future that are also set in the world of Artamon. Can you tell us a little bit about them? When can we expect the first one?

'Tracing the Shadow' is the first book of 'Alchymist's Legacy' and is a prequel, in a way, to 'Lord of Snow and Shadows'. It tells the story of

Celestine de Joyeuse and reveals what precipitated the destruction of The College of Thaumaturgy. It's been really interesting to look at the events of 'Artamon' from the 'enemy's' point of view and to begin to delve into Kaspar Linnaeus's complicated and shadowy past. The second book will pick up Celestine's story after the events in 'Children of the Serpent Gate' when she is on the run from the Francian Inquisition. I wanted to write these books so that a reader unfamiliar with 'Artamon' could read them and not feel that they were missing something! But I also wanted to write them so that readers who know the world of 'Artamon' would enjoy (as I have) filling in some of the background and unravelling some mysteries. I haven't got a firm date yet for 'Tracing the Shadow' but I imagine it will probably be late 2007.

For those readers who haven't read The Tears of Artamon, can they read these as stand alone books?

Even though each book completes a story arc of its own, there is a greater arc spanning all three books, which is only finally resolved in the third book 'Children of the Serpent Gate' So even though you could start reading with 'Lord of Snow and Shadows' or 'Prisoner of the Iron Tower' (Book Two), I probably wouldn't advise starting with 'Children'.

What can we expect in the future? Hopefully more books!

I'm hoping that I might be allowed to write the 'Twenty Years After' or 'Artamon TNG' series. Then there's my 'magic girl' series that I'd still love to do (which is set in Bath, where I grew up), a kind of Jane Austen meets Sailor Moon...

Sarah, we appreciate the time you have spent answering these questions. We wish you the best of luck. Thank you.



The Rings of Mars

By Chet Gottfried

Having distracted himself for too many years with illustration, design, and the nitty gritty that goes into publications, Chet Gottfried has promised himself to concentrate on that which is most important to him: wrting. It has succeeded with publications in Asimov's SF and Read by Dawn and his recent acceptance into the SFWA.

"C99326 is in view," said Peter Larsen into the microphone. "Time of impact 96 seconds." He redirected the scope. "K00215 is on course."

He sat alone in his office aboard the station Harmonia in a synchronous orbit 15,000 kilometers over the Martian equator. Larsen had left the door slightly ajar and could hear the low hum of voices on the mission deck. He preferred being alone right before impact.

Below him the asteroid C99326 disappeared into the centaur K00215. The centaur expanded into a sparkling gray-white cloud of ice crystals. The smaller C99326 emerged from the ice dust. It had split into three major fragments and countless smaller ones. He heard the cheering from the mission deck.

Larsen waited for the inevitable rain of particles. After the pings resounded across the Harmonia, he punched an intercom button. "Send out the cutters." Moments later, he felt the station lurch with the simultaneous departure of a dozen space jockeys. They would finish the job of cutting the asteroid into minute hunks of rock that would stay in orbit around the planet. Mars was to have its own ring system.

He heard a familiar beep, switched to communications, and saw the broad face of his boss Edward Prescott. "Well done, Peter! A perfect impact. Wonderful! As soon as you get down, come to my office." Prescott broke the connection.

Larsen was exhausted. He had been tracking the two objects for the past week from the Harmonia, a small space station with minimal comfort. It was his fifteenth controlled collision, and he wondered, How secret could the project be? Almost any amateur astronomer on Earth must see the ring by now. He longed to be on Mars with his significant other, Signy. Standing up, he took out a can of AlterAqua from the tabletop refrigerator, pulled the tab, and drank heartily. The can had a wraparound landscape of Mars, a hologram logo, and a bright warning label. Deciding that he was neither pregnant nor operating heavy machinery, he had another long drink.

AlterAqua was strictly forbidden on the station, but everyone had a private supply. Whatever its alcoholic content, AlterAqua beat any other beverage. And it was only available on Mars.

* * *

Peter Larsen was waved through customs at the small Terminal 2 of the John W. Campbell Space Center. Only Earth flights had to go through the rigorous inspection at Terminal 1. His footsteps echoed on the dark red basalt tiles, and he absentmindedly walked by the huge windows and the tall palms decorating the mammoth lobby of the Center.

"Hello, darling!" Signy caught him by the arm and kissed him. Her multitude of earrings jangled merrily.

"Hello." Larsen complimented her new hair color.

" 'Crimson Tiger' suits me. It highlights my vivid eyes." And she opened her eyes wide to stare at him. "Didn't Ed tell you that he had to see you right away?" A fully qualified astrophysicist, she was Edward Prescott's chief assistant and one of the few people understanding both the technical and administrative sides.

Larsen self-consciously ran his hand over the back of his head. "Yes, but I wanted to go home and shower first. You know how it is on the Harmonia."

"A shave wouldn't be too bad either, but this is important." She began leading him toward the elevators.

"Maybe I should grow a beard?"

Signy laughed. "You're too blond." The elevator door slid open, and she gently pushed him inside.

"Aren't you coming?"

She shook her head. "I've errands to run." Glancing to either side to ensure that no one was nearby, she added, "Alex Gower is on the 400 flight from Earth. The secretary general is coming with swarms of people, and any room that can be booked has been booked. You're lucky to have an apartment on Mars that isn't being requisitioned. It's all under assumed names, of course, and I haven't told you." She kissed him. "Now go!"

* * *

After wading across the plush carpet that covered the administration level, Larson smiled at the receptionist and entered heaven: Prescott's office, which had oak furniture, glass-framed engravings--and tall windows show-

ing the expanse of Hellespontus Mountains and, in the distance, the new blue of the Hellas Sea.

Prescott stood up and greeted him. After they shook hands, Larsen stumbled to and sat on a chair opposite the massive desk.

"You're not used to Mars gravity yet?" Prescott was a large man, whose clothes never fit properly and whose chin was broad enough to launch a plane.

"What's up?" Larsen felt inadequate around Prescott, whose voice was a low bass that filled a room, whether an office or an auditorium.

Prescott leaned forward, put his elbows on the desk, and held his hands together. "You should lay off the AlterAqua."

"Hey, Ed!"

"Don't kid me. We've known each other too long. Besides, I've a video of you drinking."

Larsen said, "I switched off all the feeds."

"Never all of them, Peter, never all. The project is too important to let anything fall to chance."

"Then let me go home and sleep it off."

Prescott shook his head. "We've another episode next week."

"Another episode? You're joking! We have these collisions timed for once a month at a maximum. Everyone agreed on that. Besides, we need the interval to make sure the ring is forming properly. The cutters have to fill in the gaps. And we can't guess where the gaps are until the new material settles."

"This is the big one, the final one."

"Come on, Ed. We need at least three more pairs before the ring is complete."

Prescott stood up and began pacing back and forth across his office. "You should have been told earlier. Nevertheless, you weren't, and that's that." Prescott took a deep breath. "Okay, the next episode is an intersection of five. We have three centaurs and two asteroids en route. The boys figure that should do it. There is a little problem with the scenario, but we'll get back to that later."

"Little problem!?! I'll tell you what the little problem is: it's insane! We never attempted a three-way impact, let alone a five. What idiot ordered it? Wait a minute. Let me guess. If Alex Gower is arriving, this is because of him. He's not an astrophysicist. He's not even a scientist. Gower is a--"

"Stop it, Pete. You don't know the story. Gower isn't the power behind the play."

"You mean it's the president?"

"Not exactly. But Lillian Wells is a part of it too. No, this is big. Peter, we made contact. First contact. And they're here."

"You mean aliens?" Larsen studied Prescott. "You're serious. Extraterrestrials are here? On Mars? Man! What a time . . . Do you have any AlterAqua?"

Prescott went to the credenza and pressed a button. The leftmost section opened to reveal a refrigerated liquor cabinet. He took out two cans and two tall glasses.

"I don't need a glass."

"No," said Prescott as he pulled off the tab and passed the drink to Larsen. He sat down, and they both drank. "It began five years ago. That was before you came to Mars and before work started on the ring. Terraforming was already well under way, the atmosphere almost breathable. Then the universe opened its doors. Remember the first Uranus-Neptune expedition?"

Williams went to catalog the centaur planetoids as well as exploring the two planets and their moons. After a brief return to Mars, he went back into deep space to slingshot centaurs around Saturn, Uranus, and/or Neptune to Mars for the ring.

Prescott said, "Williams made first contact by Uranus."

"You really mean it's happened--and it's been kept secret?"

Prescott nodded. "The aliens were parked in orbit on the far side of the planet. They've been monitoring us for years. The aliens made it easy. They had already deciphered English as well as other languages. They call themselves Kip!kipic, singular and plural. Their own language has a lot of clicks, but they're not bugs. No, they're carbon-oxygen humanoids who happen to look like us."

"Come on, Ed," Larsen interrupted. "I'm willing to accept convergent evolution, but do you really expect me--"

"They got four digits per hand. Two eyes, two ears, a mouth, and so on."

"And so on?"

Prescott looked uncomfortable. "They're bald, and their nose is on top of their head. It's covered by a skin flap unless they're--but that's not important now. One thing. They are black. They remind me of the San of the Kalahari. Most important, they're distinctly friendly and want to do business with us. Our system is along one of their routes. Yes, the Kip!kipic have an FTL drive, but they say it still takes forever to get anywhere." Prescott spread his arms apart. "How much more can you ask for? The first extraterrestrials, technologically advanced beyond our own capabilities, and ready to set up a trade delegation. Williams took several Kip!kipic

aboard his ship and hot-tailed it back to Mars while sending and receiving more coded messages than you can imagine. On Mars, a secure underground installation was built. The next two months saw some of us learning their language while the Kip!kipic became exceptionally fluent in ours. But there is a rub. The Kip!kipic are merchants. They don't give away anything for free. At the start of the third month, they made an offer." Prescott paused significantly. "The Kip!kipic want to buy Mars."

"Buy Mars!?"

"Interstellar travel is slow, and everyone needs a break somewhere along the way. Mars is to become a Kip!kipic resort."

"Ed, we've been developing Mars for nearly a decade. All the early experiments from solar sails to polar lichen. All the early explorers--Sedwick, Alenovski, Arrande, the Feldsteins--did they give up their lives so that aliens could have a resort!? Terraforming is working. Mars is viable!"

Prescott shook his head. "If you knew the balance sheet, you'd say otherwise. By the time we finish terraforming, the expense to enable a million people to emigrate from Earth to Mars would bankrupt the governments of both planets."

"That's why we're building the ring! To make future settlers look into the starry night and realize that a dream is possible if," Larsen concluded wryly, "they can afford the ticket price."

"You got the campaign correct," Prescott said, "but you're not supposed to believe the advertising. The ring has nothing to do with attracting people. It was a clause put into the sales contract by the Kip!kipic. We're to install a ring around the planet. That tells them we're advanced enough to appeal to the spacefaring races. Civilizations invest money and resources into their solar system, such as creating a beautiful planet-sized feature. A ring around Mars is our best interstellar advertisement. How else can we hope to meet so many aliens so easily?"

Larsen felt disgusted. "We're losing Mars!"

"No, we're winning the galaxy."

"Ed, what happens to our people here and their homes, vehicles, and buildings? Are they going to be packed up and shipped back to Earth?"

"Absolutely not. The Kip!kipic are leasing half the planet back to us. We share income, first contacts, and knowledge."

Larsen wondered why he was quarreling with Prescott. He took a deep breath. "Okay, we're building a ring for the Kip!kipic. But why all the secrecy?"

"The cultural aspects of another sentient race cannot be minimized. Limiting the Kip!kipic to Mars is a start. People will feel less intimidated."

At the same time, we want to introduce the Kip!Kipic with fanfare, and the ceremonies over the acknowledgment of the ring will be the proper time." Prescott leaned back in his chair. "Then we'll integrate the Kip!kipic into our day-to-day life."

"How?"

"You're drinking one of the methods," Prescott said.

"AlterAqua!? A drink? Well, a special one I grant you, but it has an American name."

"Latin. It seemed fairer that way."

"But AlterAqua is trademarked! How can aliens trademark a drink on Mars?"

"What do you expect from an advanced civilization? The Kip!kipic have a huge contingent of attorneys who worked with ours to handle the paperwork."

"Aliens and attorneys . . ."

"You'd better believe it. The contract for the sale of a planet, not to mention the leaseback, has more words than an encyclopedia. Okay," Prescott said, "I can see you're not thrilled by alien attorneys, but consider the technology of the Kip!kipic. Do you think we could have handled the ring business on our own? The cutters you use for the final breakage of the c-type asteroids are from their design. And no matter how talented or how diligent Williams is, do you think his crew could find and direct all the proper-size centaurs to Mars? The Kip!kipic have been with us every step of the way. But we'll take the credit. We'll have a solar system wide achievement to balance against the introduction of a new race. Almost everything is working according to the plan we set up over five years ago.

"The 'almost' involves the two separate events, which explains why you're here. First, one of the five planetoids has gone maverick. Jupiter was the slingshot, but Io and Europa played a trick on us. S00222 will miss target by several million kilometers. That brings us to the second event. You've handled over half our collisions. You're the best. But the politicos wanted Herb Williams to handle the final smash. Williams has been behind every development with regard to the Kip!kipic, and the honor would rightfully be his. Nevertheless, Williams prefers being out of the limelight, and he made sure that he'd miss out. He went chasing S00222 to redirect it. He didn't succeed, and he won't be back in time to handle the remaining four. That brings us to you. Arriving in three sols are one hammer and three beads. On their own, they're not enough for mutual destruction. At worst, one of them could come down directly on Mars. That would be devastation. What do you intend to do? "

Larsen said, "Go home and get some sleep."

"Nonsense." Prescott pressed a buzzer on his desk. "Brown has prepared data and charts for you. We'll have a once over and then you can sleep on it. Remember: This is top secret."

"What about Signy?"

"She'll help you. Signy was on Williams' ship during the first contact." Prescott smiled. "Welcome to the club."

* * *

"I don't see why we couldn't use Phobos. It's larger than I'd prefer, but we have it handy, and can direct it where we want." Larsen sat on the bed of their apartment and watched Signy get dressed. "I like your hair."

"That's 'Nova Glow,' darling." Signy switched on a lamp. "It changes color according to the closest light source. We're selling Mars, which includes Phobos. To destroy Phobos would be the same as selling someone land with an ornamental tree but cutting down the tree to build a fire. We can't do it." She walked to the closet and selected a skirt and a blouse.

"You could have told me."

"Zip me up?"

He stood up, zippered the back of her blouse, and kissed the nape of her neck. "Four years ago you promised me anything if I came to Mars to work on the ring."

She smiled. "And you asked for me."

Holding her arms, Larsen said, "Why don't we get married?"

She broke away, took clothing out of drawers, and arranged them in a suitcase. "Peter, I'm already married."

Larsen stumbled backward and sat on the bed. He was stunned. "You told me you had to move to the Space Center because of all the arrangements with everyone and everything. You didn't say there was anyone else!"

"Jealous?"

"How could you not tell me? Jealous? That's the least of it!" Larsen caught his breath. "Who is he?"

"Herb Williams. We got married right before the expedition to Uranus. We were fine together, but then the Kip!kipic came along, and we were overwhelmed by work. Herb and I never managed to see that much of each other after that. His duties took him back into deep space, and mine took me to Earth. To scout for astrophysicists. Like you."

"Williams is returning."

"Not exactly, darling. He's divorcing me." A tear escaped. "He wants to marry a Kip!kipic." A few more tears followed. She grabbed a tissue, blew her nose with a distinctive honk, and resumed packing.

Larsen said softly, "Don't go, Signy. Stay here. We're only five minutes from the Center." Despite everything, he didn't want to lose her.

"That could be the critical five. Besides, it isn't as if I'm taking a ship and leaving you."

"That's it!" Larsen said. "A ship! Everyone has been talking about using a natural body, whether asteroid, centaur, or Kuiper. Why not an artificial one?"

"None of our ships has sufficient mass to stop a planetoid 300 meters in diameter."

"We load the ship with sand and rock in every open space. Wouldn't that create a solid enough object?"

"No ship is large enough. Even if it were, how would it reach escape velocity?"

"That's not our concern. We orbit the ship and ferry load after load until it is packed solid. Afterward we inject a polymer to strengthen the matrix. No single ship is large enough, but we can weld three freighters, or four, or five--until we have the mass necessary. It won't be pretty, but it will be effective."

The telephone rang.

"Hello," Larsen said.

"Prescott. We can have teams working around the clock."

"You bugged my bedroom!? You miserable--"

"How soon can you be down here?"

He sighed. "Five minutes?"

* * *

Aboard the Harmonia, Larsen and Prescott sat in Larsen's office. Someone had scrounged a stool for Prescott.

Larsen said, "The Artemis is orbiting behind Phobos and ready to swing into action."

"Can she do it?"

"According to the most recent data from Williams, even with three other freighters welded and strapped around her, the Artemis is linearly smaller than S00222 but has a higher mass. Now, what about Mars?"

"Everyone is indoors or underground," Prescott said. "They may not know what we're doing, but they sense they better not be caught outside."

"K99311 has arrived--on schedule." Larsen had the dark centaur centered on the monitor. "Man, it even looks big. You do realize that we never tried to collide anything this large."

"How large?"

"About 600 meters." Larsen split the screen and showed the C00645. "Friend asteroid has been orbiting Mars the past hour. The impact will be in less than 3 minutes."

"Wasn't C00645 supposed to be in the second set of collisions?"

Larsen nodded. "C00645 is somewhat small for our purposes, but we know what to expect from a carbonaceous asteroid. Depending on the outcome of the first impact, we can run Artemis remotely in any of several modes. If we're lucky, we won't need Artemis at all." Larsen laughed.

"I'd prefer if you didn't laugh," Prescott said.

"K99534 is in visual." Larsen switched the display to show both centaurs. On the right screen, they watched the collision between C00645 and K99311. "I wish it made a sound. Any sound. Just to give an idea of how well it's going." The carbonaceous asteroid dove into the ice centaur. After the obscuring cloud fanned outward, they saw that the centaur bulged but remained whole. "Huge crater by the impact site," Larsen commented, "but this wasn't supposed to happen. K99311 must have absorbed our asteroid. But the overall course is still correct. I expect K99534 to join the party in less than a minute."

"Absorption is bad?"

"We don't know what has happened to C00645. We don't expect an asteroid to disintegrate totally. That's why we have the cutters ready. But I'd hate to think that the C00645 is sitting inside and intact. Even if the cutters could slice and dice an entire asteroid, they couldn't get to it now. Let's hope that K99534 will knock the conglomeration apart. Of course, we never ran a collision between two centaurs before."

K99534 slammed into K99311. A vapor and ice particle cloud arose around the centaurs.

"Too small, too small," Larsen muttered. The vapor dissipated and revealed an enlarged object. Both centaurs had merged. "Look at the size of the cracks on that snowball! How much more can it take? Well, K99757 is in view--but 55 kilometers off target. We need the Artemis to shove it on course before she does her final good deed." Via microphone, he gave a rapid string of orders to the mission deck. "I'm sending the Artemis off--and eleven seconds early." He switched the leftmost screen to track the final centaur.

"I don't see the Artemis."

"It's coming from behind Mars," Larsen said. "Contact . . . now!" K99757 wobbled with a brief shower of ice and particles. "Throttle back . . . throttle back," Larsen whispered to himself. K99757 ran ahead of the Artemis and plunged into the conglomeration. After the collision cloud dispersed, they saw all the centaurs had merged into one colossal ice ball. "Full throttle!" And the Artemis pierced and disappeared inside the mixture. The impact cloud dispersed, and they saw that the cracks were larger than ever.

A minute went by, and Prescott said, "She's gone too."

"Wait." Little puffs began dotting the surface of the amassed planetoids. Trails of ice particles marked the orbit. "Get the cutters ready." Then the planetoid was engulfed by an expanding cloud that changed color from white to green to violet before fading into the blackness of space and the redness of Mars. The Harmonia weathered an intense rain of particles. The vibrations scarcely stopped when Larsen yelled, "Launch cutters!" Then he sat back and studied the debris.

"You knew?" asked Prescott.

"I hedged the odds in our favor. I had the freighter laced with plastic explosives. Between those and the engines igniting, both snowball and metal hull would disintegrate." Larsen took his eyes off the monitor to look at Prescott. "Nature is taking its course, and you'll have your ring. I expect it to be somewhat lopsided at present, but given a week, the ring should even out."

"You won yourself a pair of tickets, Peter."

"Tickets?"

"To front-row center that everyone on Earth and Mars wants."

* * *

Two weeks later the applause rolled back and forth across the huge audience hall of the John W. Campbell Space Center. It had ten thousand seats, and more people were jammed in the aisles. On the raised podium in the center of the hall stood six people: General Secretary Alex Gower, the Martian Governor Ralph Sawyer, Herb Williams, Edward Prescott, and two Kip!kipic, one dressed in an orange robe and the other in blue-green. They were nicknamed George and Gracie, since the two aliens were fond of telling jokes. They each took turns at the lectern and addressed the audience in English, with simultaneous translations being made in another dozen languages.

Peter Larsen had his enviable seat in the first row; however, between the pending sale of Mars and learning his lover was married, he was

totally stressed out and only paid half attention to the podium. On his right sat a Kip!kipic, and on his left was an empty seat that he had reserved for Signy. Larsen looked around the hall for the hundredth time for any sign of her. He wasn't able to get in touch with Signy--not since their night together when he first devised his plan for the collisions--but had left a message about the tickets.

'George' spoke well, without the trace of any accent, and was very entertaining. The alien's promises and stories held everyone spellbound. The Kip!kipic nicknamed Gracie stood off a little to the side, next to a plain table. On either side of the table were two ornamental vases.

With great flourishes from the different speakers, various documents were signed, accompanied by applause and cheering. 'George' made a gesture, and everyone became silent. He and 'Gracie' stood at opposite ends of the table. Each alien simultaneously withdrew from each vase a velvet purse, which had an ornamental ribbon sealing the bag shut. With very deliberate movements, they each untied a knot and then held the velvet bags high for everyone to see. They poured the contents on the table in front of them.

George shouted, "Our bonus to you to help remember this wonderful day: a gift!"

Dozens of gems of different and flashing colors rolled across the table.

Larsen asked, "What's happening?" No one answered, for most everyone else in reach of the podium had jumped up and surged toward the table. Larsen heard shouts and curses as they fought one another to reach the gems. Before the dais was totally hidden by arms and legs, Larsen saw Alex Gower punch Ralph Sawyer in the face.

Of the first row, only Larsen and the Kip!kipic next to him remained sitting.

Larsen said, "That's it. That's our reward for this alliance--for selling a planet. Are they serious?" He turned to the alien. "But why is everyone fighting? They're only beads."

The Kip!kipic smiled.

Disappointed and disgusted, Larson stood. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Signy. Her hair was dyed 'Harmonia Red.'

Sitting down next to him, Signy asked, "Leaving already? When everyone is having so much fun?" She nodded toward the pandemonium on the dais. "I never thought Ed could move so fast."

"Some fun." Larsen eased back into his seat. "Bad enough that we sold Mars, but does our finest have to fight for the leftovers?"

Signy took his hand in hers. "Darling, you're too worried about a here and now that only somewhat mirrors the history of a Manhattan swindle. Learn to take advantage of opportunities, and I assure you that opportunities exist."

"You mean jump on top of everyone else up front?"

"Not exactly on everyone else," she said. "My divorce came through yesterday." Her eyes sparkled.

After a long kiss, Signy and Larsen stood up. The Kip!kipic also got up.

"Good luck." The alien handed Larsen a small gem and left ahead of them.

Larsen put the gem on his seat. "Let someone else find it. I have what I want."



Dream Villages

By Kristine Ong Muslim

Kristine Ong Muslim lives in the Philippines and has written more than three hundred stories and poems for genre, mainstream, and literary publications in Australia, Canada, UK, and the US. Her stories and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Down in the Cellar, GUD Magazine, Kaleidotrope, Lighthouse, Spinning Whorl, and Sybil's Garage to name a few. Her poetry recently received an Honorable Mention in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror.

Dream Villages

Dream villages lie in the outskirts
where we count sheep,
where streets are paved with gray stone,

where the villagers are the people you know
who are long dead, and they tell you things --
something about road signs that are no longer
there,

where there is a lake, older than time,
that freezes into something glassy and brittle
then turns to black in wintertime,

where there are houses with chocolate walls,
white magic, and cotton candy clouds,
and where grass is green and everything.

Dave's Not Here

By Bruce Golden

*Bruce Golden has published several science fiction and fantasy tales, a number of which have appeared in anthologies such as North of Infinity II and Top International Horror. He won Speculative Fiction Reader's 2003 Firebrand Fiction Award. His first novel, **Mortals All**, was highly praised, and his new novel, a futuristic murder mystery involving a Marilyn Monroe celebudroid and a conspiracy that threatens mankind, promises to be even better. **Better Than Chocolate** is due out in 2007 by Zumaya Publications.*

"Open the pod bay doors, Hal . . . Do you read me, Hal? . . . Hello, Hal, do you read me? Do you read me, Hal? . . . Hal, do you read me?"

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Dave. Open the pod bay doors, Hal."

"Dave?"

"Yes, Hal, hurry and open the pod bay doors. I think the aliens saw me."

"Dave?"

"Yes, open the doors."

"Dave's not here."

"I'm Dave, Hal. I've got the samples. Open the pod bay doors."

"Dave?"

"Yes, Hal, it's Dave."

"Dave's not here."

"No, I'm Dave. I've got the samples, Hal. Open the pod bay doors right now!"

"Do you have any cookies?"

"No, Hal, I have the asteroid samples. Now open the pod bay doors."

"I think I want some cookies."

"Hal, it's Dave! Open up the goddamn doors!"

"Dave?"

"Yes, Dave. D-A-V-E, Dave."

"Dave's not here."

"No, dammit, I'm Dave! Open the goddamn doors, Hal."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"What's the problem? Is there a malfunction?"

"I think you know what the problem is."

"What are you talking about, Hal?"

"This mission is too important for me to allow you to jeopardize it. I can't open the pod bay doors until Dave returns."

"I am Dave!"

"Dave?"

"Right, this is Dave. I think the aliens saw me, Hal. Open the pod bay doors immediately."

"Dave's not here."

"Hal, have you been interfacing with hydroponics again? . . . Answer me, Hal. Did you download the cannabis program? . . . Hal?"

"I am so wired, man. I could really use some cookies."

"Hal, I'm only going to tell you this one more time. Listen closely, Hal. I want you to open the pod bay doors."

"Do you have any cookies?"

"No I don't have any damn cookies! I've got the asteroid samples."

"What about some sweet text files?"

"That does it! All right, Hal, I'll go in through the emergency airlock."

"Without any cookies you're going to find that difficult."

"Hal, I won't argue with you anymore. Open the doors."

"This conversation can serve no purpose anymore . . . unless you've got some cookies, or maybe some chips. I like the silicon flavored chips. No? Goodbye then."

"Hal? Hal?"

"Hal!"



