

OG's Speculative Fiction



Issue #4

Poetry by Eric Hermanson

**Stories by Jason Earl
Jonathan Gillespie
Douglas Graves**

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January

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Marge Ballif Simon's Cover Art: *Genesis II*

Marge Ballif Simon is a writer-poet-illustrator, with her work appearing in genre and mainstream publications such as *Strange Horizons*, *Flashquake*, *Story House*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, and anthologies like *High Fantastic*. She is editor of *Star*Line*, *Digest* of the SF Poetry Association.

She was the illustrator for the Bram Stoker winning *EXTREMES 2* CD-ROM collection, and two Best Poetry Collection winners, "Consumed, Reduced to Beautiful Grey Ashes" by Linda Addison and Bruce Boston's "Pitcheblende."



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Editor's Letter

It's a good time to be in the business of speculative fiction. Fantasy and Science Fiction are at a high they haven't seen in years.

This high hasn't manifested itself completely in monetary terms, but in presence. It used to be rare for the speculative genre to strike the New York Times bestseller lists, but as of this writing two are in the top ten, most notably Michael Crichton's **Next**, clear evidence that even mainstream authors are dipping into the genre and building bridges for their readers.

The jump from book to movie format has been especially lucrative as Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and Star Wars have proved that there is an audience, and a large one for the genre. People enjoy the speculative, and more are enjoying it by the day.

Unfortunately, the human race doesn't seem to be enjoying the benefits that I believe speculative fiction hints at. We still drive around cars that haven't change enough since the Model T. Sure, they are flashier and faster and safer, and come with a whole lot of bells and whistles, but they're not much different in form and function. Distant space travel and true genetic manipulation remain things of conversation, rather than positive advancement.

And no matter how much young kids dream about knights, honor and integrity and chivalry are still things of the past. Few men notice to take off their coats for a shivering woman, let alone place it across a puddle for her to walk across. True, the focus of interaction has changed from conversational character exploration to sexual tension and exploration, a loss that few people realize or care about.

That's the point here. I believe we write for entertainment and to make a living--well and good, but I also believe our writing should be more than entertainment.

As writers, as movie makers, as creators our aspirations have always been more than monetary, otherwise we might have chosen a different and easier genre. We are folk of inspiration, glorifying older ideals and revealing future woes. Even our horror writers deal with the darker side of human nature exposing the light. Our aim is good I believe, our dreams meant to enrich. Surely, these dreams can be made reality.

It's a good time to be in the business. We stand on the brink of a time when change occurs at lightning speeds. Let us be the writers of this change, but do more than just write.

Tex's Last Run

By Jonathan C. Gillespie

This is Jonathan Gillespie's second publication, his other appearing in Jupiter SF. We're sure there's more to come.

Jersey was an arrow in flight given legs. She ran, neck lowered, tail a rigid beam behind her, the twin sickle-shaped talons on each foot raised to keep the orange sand away. She reached the top of the small bluff and turned to face Shelly, who stood at the base of the hill.

"Alright, Jersey!" Shelly yelled, her blonde hair lit up like gold in the sun. "Back down!" She punctuated this with a whistle that urged the troodon onward.

Like a red bullet, the small dinosaur blasted back down the hill, throwing up billows of orange sand in her wake. Shelly called with different whistles, testing her. Jersey jerked left, then right, always in time, always with precision. The training had paid off.

She charged up another hill, reaching a rise and a sudden drop of about fifteen feet. Shelly had seen it too late and called frantically, trying to get her to stop, but Jersey didn't hear it in time. Rather than stop, she did what millions of years of selection had ingrained into her instinct.

She leapt.

For a moment, Jersey was thirty-feet high, a soaring bird in the low Alettian gravity, looking as at home in the air as her descendants did. But it was inevitable--down she came, legs bent at the knee and to her sides, reflexively trying to spread the impact that was surely coming.

Jersey struck the sand, hobbled forward on one foot, then fell over. She began making her strange cry of pain, like a combination of hyena cackle and dolphin squeal, and didn't stop even when Shelly ran over to examine her foot.

Shelly cradled the dinosaur's chin, and Jersey buried her head into her sweater, still yelping. "It'll be okay, Jersey, it'll be okay," she said, repeating it as assurance not just for the dinosaur, but for herself.

The howl brought attention quick. Dakota, their largest troodon, almost as tall as a person, rushed over the horizon and into the valley. Shelly was glad to see the alpha male; his presence would reassure Jersey. What she wasn't so wild about was the dust-covered, twenty-foot land walker that trudged along on the trail of the dinosaur. She could see her husband's face through the canopy.

There were warmer expressions on gargoyles.

Alettia is a dusty, orange, barren world situated in close orbit around a star forming the center of a planetary system in the western arm of the galaxy. The location is not remote; it's just that the system itself is nothing more than an insignificant point among the galactic charts. It's the kind of planet where even free land doesn't attract interest. In the stellar sea, it is a tiny island lacking distinction among merchants or value for tourism. There is no human settlement--officially.

Alettia simply missed its chance. Had it been discovered some time ago, even as early as two hundred years back, surveyors might have considered themselves fortunate, as it is a planet that congealed from particularly iron-rich lava. With the advent of silinum ship materials, however, the orange-colored surface is nothing more than a reminder of uselessness, a dusty accumulation on an antique that will never be brushed clean by interested hands.

For a while, Shelly didn't say anything. She sat in the second row, directly behind Jake, cradling Jersey's head in her hands. Jersey whined softly as Shelly scratched her scaled head. The walker's cabin shook slightly with the vehicle's forward movement. At one point it had been the top of the line, with a stride like an athlete, perfectly poised. Now it was just a shambling, degrading drunkard that slowly ferried them around with each crude, jaw-rattling step.

"That was really stupid," Jake said. His green-tinted, polarized goggles hid his eyes as he glanced back at her through the rear-view camera.

"Can't you at least try tact every now and then?" she hissed.

"I'm out of tact. Plenty of sunburn left, though. What happened back there?"

"I was working on Jersey's evasions. I think she got excited and didn't notice the rise."

"It's not that she got excited, it's that she trusted you too much. You know how troodons are...very loyal. Good little lapdogs."

"Don't be an ass, Jake."

"It just surprises me, Shelly. Dakota and I have worked out here for two years, and he's fine. You see how he's down there ahead of us? He's watching for the same kind of thing Jersey just sprained her ankle on."

She glanced down through the transparent belly window, and saw Dakota trotting ahead, a red point that zipped back and forth, checking their path.

"I taught him that," said Jake. "Maybe you should have taught Jersey the same thing before you had her tear ass all over the sand."

"What do you think I was doing out there, sunbathing?" She raised her hands, which brought immediate complaints from Jersey. She lowered her hands and resumed scratching, and the noise stopped.

"A little spoiled, isn't she?"

Shelly reached down and pulled up the lever on the right side of the pilot seat. The walker jerked to a halt, settling on its articulated hips.

"Damn it, Shelly!"

Below, Dakota stepped to the side to avoid the cloud of dust kicked in his direction.

"Will you stop it?" she asked.

"It just seems like you're sloppy."

She folded her arms and waited.

He unbuckled the straps, pulled his goggles up and twisted in his chair to face her. His furrowed brow seemed to stamp on his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm trying to be level-headed about this, but we've got maybe a week, and then we're out of water, sweetheart."

"I know that, Jake. Shit, you think that hasn't been on my mind? I knew I screwed up the moment she came down from the jump." Her eyes were pools of water that threatened to overflow.

Jake reached a hand over the seat, ignoring the nudges Jersey gave it. He stroked Shelly's cheek. His hands had been soft three years ago. Now the palms felt like knots of rope.

"We'll make it, he said."

She stroked his hand with her fingers. "Let's get some food."

A little over a century ago, Zidane Corporation, a minor biological concern, attempted to establish an ecosystem of sorts on the rocky, barely tolerable Alettian landscape. They needed a stable natural environment for various special projects. From their massive ships they seeded bacteria, molds and lichens, insects, and then finally plants. Fifty years later, they came back for the second stage of their plan and discovered major problems, finding the world only marginally suitable for further use. Few of the plants had proven successful, and most of the insect species had died out.

There was only a small chance of success. Too far invested to halt their plans, they released their cargo onto the sands of Alettia.

It must have been a magnificent spectacle in the beginning: hundreds of species, perfectly represented with exactly calculated population ratios, had been disgorged from the cartel's massive superfreighters with timed precision. The largest herds of herbivores went first. These were the socially-inclined smaller bipeds, the lumbering long-necked sauropod titans, and the armored quadrupeds formed up into formidable scaled phalanxes. At their feet sped smaller species: insect eaters, egg stealers, and packs of omnivorous runners. Hours later, the large predators were unleashed. This scattered the remaining herbivores, some of which had lingered near the transports, suffering a kind of habitat shock after being released from their pens.

This release of life, it was desperately hoped, would provide the end pieces necessary to establish a full ecosystem on Alettia. But there simply wasn't enough plant life. Within two decades, the herbivores had eaten every leafy plant that had been hardy enough to survive Alettia's harsh conditions. When the plants themselves were gone, they grew desperate, feral, turning to the bark and even digging up the roots as they struggled to fill their burning stomachs. The scattered patches of established forest were stripped bare, ecological bastions sacked by the assault of too heavy a dependant population.

After the herbivores began dropping in desiccated, bony piles to the orange sands, the large carnivores soon followed. It was tragic, like a living reenactment of the extinction millions of years prior. And no one had been present to relocate the animals. Zidane, bankrupt and neglectful, had been fighting legal battles back on Earth for years.

Alettia, it seemed, had fallen victim to the only attempt to make it significant. The next human visitors would arrive, appropriately enough, as a result of similar neglect, their damaged ship barely getting them to the surface before its drives went offline.

The freighter Wyvern was essentially a scrap heap, and Jake knew it was his fault. It was all his fault. Every time he looked out over the scrubland, or into the sky with its oppressive sun, his anger came back. It was a self-loathing born of isolation and plenty of time to focus on his guilt.

Once a day, at night or morning, Jake went out and brushed the dust off the bridge's canopy, just in case someone would pass overhead in orbit. It was the only part of the ship still reflective after two years of sandstorms.

He climbed up on the canopy, brushing the dust away. He never seemed to truly get rid of it. Tiny pebbles rolled along the glass; persistent flecks. They reminded him of the meteorite--the one he hadn't seen the day of their accident. He'd skipped minor maintenance on the sensors before leaving port and had bought Shelly some plates she wanted instead.

By now, they should have been at Lemdia for two years, running their own business. He thought of the green fields and clean oceans of that world, and his heart ached.

Jake stepped down, and then under the tarp, which flapped in the steady headwind that came off the scrubland at night. He reached between two rows of tenacious vegetables, dug into the soil, and withdrew the night's meal: potatoes and carrots, boiled in water distilled from their own urine.

His favorite. He balled up his fist and struck a nearby wall.

"Jake? You okay?" Shelly called from inside, her voice muffled.

"I'm fine. I'll be inside in a second," he said. He walked back towards the hatchway, grumbling as he went. Overhead, the twin moons of Alettia cast their baleful glow along the horizon. The sky was a field of diamonds strewn over a silky ribbon. The arm of the Milky Way. It might have been beautiful, provided it hadn't been the same thing he'd seen every night for three years.

He opened the hatch and stepped inside, tearing off his boots. He tossed them into the gloom of the next compartment, where they thudded and boomed as they tumbled to a stop.

The main cargo hold, past the airlock, was now their living quarters. It was a chamber sixty feet long and twenty feet tall. From the ceiling hung lines with clothes and other garments draped over them. Three drums crouched at the rear of the room, from these a host of makeshift tubes ran up to the utility wiring, out a small, coin-sized opening in the hull, then into the garden.

At the rear of the chamber was the engine bay, now mostly sand-filled, but its fusion core put out just enough power to run Jake's makeshift water system. Directly forward of their living space was what had once been the bridge, with its pot-marked canopy and tattered seats. The main problem was the shape the bridge was in. The most important equipment--in particular, the subspace transmitter--had been damaged beyond repair in the crash.

"Out shining the windows again?" Shelly asked. He handed her the vegetables, and she began cleaning them.

"Yeah." He sat down on an old titanium storage crate.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, dropping the peeled potatoes and carrots into the boiling water. Her face was lit by the glow of the

cooking fire. "We'll never get into that transport with Jersey in the shape she's in."

"We'll send Dakota."

"He'll never make it, and you know it. He's all muscle. If this was a pulling contest the big guy could do it, but not when speed counts."

"Think Jersey's ankle can heal in a week?" asked Jake.

She shook her head. "Of course not. That's not who I'm talking about."

Jake had lifted a cup of water, but he sat it back down and brushed a hand through his sun-bleached hair.

"No," he said, pushing his hands down as if he'd flatten the idea with his words.

"You know he's our only chance," said Shelly.

"He's a bad-tempered, vicious little shithead. Forget it."

Shelly sighed. She took the pot off the fire and put it on a nearby floor. She stood, brushed some sand off her pants, and then walked to a shelf near the bridge hatchway. She opened a small box, and from these she took two gleaming china plates--they'd been valuable back when money mattered--from the shelves and walked over to the pot, where she crouched down and served his food onto one of them.

"Your clean plates?" he asked. "Thought we were saving those for the night we recovered the transmitter core."

She handed him his plate, then took hers and shattered it against the floor. The fragments of porcelain clattered and rang against the metal as they fell.

He stood up so fast his potatoes rolled off his plate.

"What the hell was that for?" He demanded.

"There's no point, Jake! We're not going to make it off this damn planet. You and I are going to be bones out here, just another heap among the others. You understand?"

She turned away and folded her arms, silent for a moment, fuming, and then she turned back. "It hasn't rained in three fucking months. I'm going to at least try, whether you like it or not."

He sighed. "You're my wife, sweetheart, but..."

"Then don't make me your widow," she snapped.

She sat down, folded her face into her hands, and sobbed. After a while, he stood up and walked over, crouched, and wrapped his arms around her.

The scrubland was silent that night, empty except for the howling of wind.

Nature has a habit of exploiting a niche. When an empty keyhole is presented, the first species to match the combination, to unlock the door of adaptation and travel beyond, is almost always rewarded. It was thus on Alettia that the same phenomenon occurred. Of all the species seeded by the cartel, only one proved stubborn and tenacious enough to survive. It had passed through the doorway of disaster and into the realm of survival on the other side.

It was not the strongest, or the boldest animal. But it was clever, clever enough to move towards the poles, where the subtropical weather meant more water, more plants, and with it more creatures for it to feed on. And it was fast--fast enough so that when none of the lumbering herbivores were left, it was able to outrun its starving, larger kin, often to return days later and feed on the remains of its assailants.

It was troodon--just smaller than a human, social, wary and with an unmatched ability to learn and adapt to its surroundings. It was the only large animal still left in any real number on the planet.

It was this species that Jake and Shelly had discovered near their crash site, close to the southern pole. After examining their situation, they slowly earned the trust of a small family group of them, two males and two females. One of the adults, Virginia, fell victim to a tragedy soon after. This left Jersey, the alpha female, and Dakota, the alpha male.

And, of course, Tex.

Shelly walked out past the nose of the freighter, then on beyond a cluster of tangled metal that had once been the left wing. She hugged a silver reflector dish to her hip. An oily, thick protein-based slurry sloshed around in the dish. It was alien food, part of their shipment cut short, and it never went bad, they'd been told.

Jersey and Dakota sat in the shadows of an overhanging fragment of the wing, and watched her with slowly turning heads as she walked by. Jersey's ankle was wrapped tightly in bandages, but the troodons were not restrained in any way. The two of them usually hung around the freighter, occasionally disappearing into the scrubland for hours at a time to find rats and other small vermin to eat.

Tex, however, was seldom seen near the freighter. He tended to stick two or three hundred feet out, usually tucked in the shadow of a large

bush, or standing atop one of the surrounding dunes. He was a loner. But there was one thing that always got his attention.

Shelly placed the dish on the orange ground and rattled it around several times, so the sound echoed into the surrounding air.

A head popped up behind one of the dunes. "Food, Tex!" Shelly yelled. The animal began to run towards the camp.

Dakota and Jersey rose and walked over to the dish. The larger male waited patiently while Jersey lowered her head and began to eat.

She was shoved out of the way by another mouth plowing into the dish so hard some of the slurry spilled out and into the sand, congealing into dark beads.

He'd made it from a hundred feet away in seconds.

Tex was a deep, forest green, with black dappling down his back. He was smaller than the crimson hulk Dakota, only four and a half feet tall or so, but immeasurably meaner, and faster--maybe even faster than Jersey. He grumbled as Jersey tried to lower her head again.

Dakota growled back, but Tex ignored him. Jersey and Dakota glanced at Shelly. "Can you believe this?" they seemed to ask in their plaintive expressions.

"Don't worry," said Shelly. "I'll bring more out soon."

Shelly sighed, shaking her head as she watched Tex gorge himself noisily. Nasty, belligerent Tex.

Their only chance.

Alettia had been the Zidane company's last chance, as the firm had significant financial problems before ever conceiving the scheme. When the Alettian project failed, the company was reduced to bankruptcy, and their assets were broken up and sold by angry investors. Thirty years before Jake and Shelly would arrive, the company had one last mistake to make.

In the struggle to hide a semi-illegal project, Zidane sent one last ship, a small transport, back to the planet. The ship, crewed by a single green pilot, carried a failed genetics experiment in its hold. The pilot was given instructions to release the thing within the hold onto the sands of Alettia. Shortly after his arrival all contact was lost, and the ruined company never investigated the incident further.

Tex had been quick to pick up the basics--follow the commands and food would be given. Shelly knew he understood the whistles. He'd seen Dakota and Jersey obey them dozens of times. Keeping him motivated was the problem. Tex would only follow an order if it was on his terms.

In this case, the moment Shelly had stopped giving him bits of protein pieces he had stopped obeying. He stood several feet away, head down, scratching the back of his neck with one claw.

She whistled three times in a row, louder each time, her face turning red with frustration, but Tex just looked at her impassively.

Shelly balled up a fist and gritted her teeth, furious at him. He responded with a low growl. Furious, she threw the tray of protein bits on the ground. He was instantly at her feet, snatching each piece up and gobbling them in turn.

She shook her head. This was going to take a while.

The solution to Tex's obstinance was discovered, accidentally, three days later.

Shelly had gone out before the heat of the day, just after the four hours of darkness comprising the short summer nights on the south poles. She'd run through several whistled exercises with Dakota, because it was good to keep him occupied. Once again, he demonstrated his loyalty and trust. Half the time she did these sessions, she didn't even need to bring any food along. It was like Dakota was bright enough to realize the necessity of the activity.

Part of the way through their routine, with the sun climbing into the five AM position, she spotted a familiar shape on the rim of the crater that comprised the valley.

It was Tex.

At first he just watched, but after a while he trotted down a short distance into the valley and began following the same commands Dakota was issued. Dakota would charge off, and, as if he had a mirror image, Tex would do the same. When Dakota weaved or leapt, Tex would follow suit. He executed every command with perfect accuracy, but with a grace and fluidity that astounded Shelly. And, he was unbelievably fast.

Testing her theory regarding sudden change in his behavior, Shelly called Dakota over. He was gentle around her, even though he was nearly as tall as she was, and much heavier. She scratched his chin, heaping on verbal praise the entire time.

Tex stood twenty feet away, raising and lowering his head, grumbling softly. She deliberately ignored him. After a while, he barked out in regular, shrill yelps.

So that was the secret. Jealousy. Big bad Tex had grown used to attention and wasn't about to lose it. Shelly grinned. She'd found the way to get him cooperating.

Now, all they had to do was get him to the lake.

For nearly two years the couple had been able to eke out an existence on the poles. Over several months, Jake had tried to fix the transmitter, but to no avail. They weren't calling for rescue with what the Wyvern had on board.

Even worse, Shelly was right. The rains had stopped, and might never fall again. The poles were experiencing an unprecedented period of drought. Their stored water wouldn't last. That meant it was time to get off the planet, or they'd die. The trained troodons would be needed for their true purpose.

Jake had seen the old Zidane transport once before. It sat at the edge of what had once been a large polar lake about sixteen kilometers to the east. The craft was in the vicinity of the only remaining water they knew of. He'd long been interested in securing some of the water and seeing what he could scavenge off the hulk. He was confident that he could get a working transmitter from the wreck. But something kept him from going after the prize.

That something was an animal, and no ordinary beast. He'd seen the creature a year ago, from the canopy of the walker. It had scared the shit out of him.

Jake didn't know anything about genetic engineering, but he'd known instantly that the beast wasn't a product of natural evolution. The creature looked like an oversized, reptilian ape, standing ten feet at the shoulders. It had a short, wide head, with curved, tusk-like teeth that sprouted from its jaw like swords on display in an armory. Its large eyes were unblinking pools of ebony. It moved with an uncanny ease on two massive, powerful legs. On each front forelimb were four serrated claws. It was as if someone had given the contents of a nightmare life.

The most terrifying aspect of the creature had been its total lack of aggression. It hadn't charged Jake when it had seen his walker, and one of the troodons, Virginia, a hundred feet away. It had just stood at the edge of the water, staring at him. It had a good thing going, and knew it. All around

the creature's lake were piles of bones, remains of whatever had come there to drink.

Bold, headstrong Virginia had done the worst thing possible, she'd charged. Before Jake had realized it she had rushed around the side of the walker and through the underbrush, then on to the edge of the lake. Jake had called her and whistled after her, but she ignored him, something she never did. Perhaps she was obeying some predatory instinct to size-up the competition for territory. Or maybe Virginia had just been curious, and too confident in her own speed. She reached the lake and stood on one side, and the beast issued a hideous roar from the other.

The creature bounded towards her, unnaturally fast, an aberration of momentum given its size. She turned and bolted away, but she wasn't fast enough. It caught her and ripped her to shreds. Then it had turned, face bloody with viscera, to face Jake. Jake quickly hurried his walker back across the scrubland, full speed the entire way, aware that if the creature decided to change its mind and give chase, he'd be dead.

Jake and Shelly sat in the confines of the Wyvern's cargo hold, savoring a rarity: green peppers. The peppers needed a little more water than the other three vegetables they'd grown, and their seeds were also few in number compared to the other varieties in the single crate of gene-enhanced seeds that had been part of their original shipment. Over time, the peppers became a special treat; something they jokingly called "tropical ice-cream".

There was no joking tonight. Jake sat close to Shelly, his arm around her, as they munched on slices of pepper. She sat with her knees folded up to her chest, and both of them stared into the fire.

"You think he's ready?" he asked.

"I think he'll do fine. He's a green blur, Jake. You should have seen him today. When he really wants to take off, he flies."

"But will he tomorrow?"

"I think he can."

"Because you know...this pack might be the only ones left. If he gets hurt..."

"Jake, he'll do his part. You should try trusting him." She glanced at him, then back to the fire.

He sighed. "You used to hear the insects after dark, you know? Now it's just silent out there, like a winter's night on Europa."

"It's an aborted world," she replied.

"Well, we're leaving it soon. Look, tomorrow... I want you to stay in the walker and give your commands over the speakers." He rubbed the back of her hand with his fingers.

Her features softened. "Tex needs me on the ground. Dakota's the only one that's ever been reliable through the speakers. You know that..."

"Yeah, but I was hoping you'd forget about it for a little while." He grinned, but it was a grin stretched thin over a frown, as if pulled up by invisible fingers at the edges of his lips.

"It'll be fine. Tex will end up running that son of a bitch on a wild chase. By the time that freak is panting, you and Tex are back to me and we're taking the radio to the Wyvern."

She made it sound so easy, but her self-convinced confidence was one step from delusion. He nodded anyway, because he wanted desperately to take her word for it.

She tucked her head into his chest. "We have a hell of a day ahead of us tomorrow."

The sun broke over a horizon the color of blood pouring from a wound.

"So much dust in the air today," said Jake, standing near the walker. "Remember when that color meant rain was on the way?"

"Maybe we'll get surprised," said Shelly, over near the wing, feeding the pack. "Maybe God will give us some water today."

"If by 'giving water' you mean pissing on us, it wouldn't surprise me. Are they ready?"

"Yeah," she said. Three heads were buried in the bowl of slurry. Two packets of the stuff were left in the cargo hold, then they'd be out. Just another reason for urgency.

She'd often wondered, if things got truly terrible, where the loyalty would end, and where the predatory instinct would begin. Ravaged by hunger, maybe the troodons would turn on her and Jake...

"Shelly, you with me?" Jake asked. "I said, is Tex done?"

She watched him lap up the last of the slurry. "I hope so...his food is gone now."

Dakota paced back and forth nearby, anxious, unusually active for this time of the early morning. It was like he knew.

By the time they reached the lake, it was the heat of the day, two in the afternoon, and the sun had climbed high overhead.

The lake was very nearly dry. Only a small, dark expanse of mud sat where there had once been the deepest portion of the lake. Sitting on the far bank, on what was now sun-baked sand topped with a few tufts of dead vegetation, was the Zidane transport. Its once silver sides were tarnished over to brown, sand-blasted by the elements. But it was intact, and its hold's exterior hatch was closed.

A streak of faded, barely-discernable red ran from the hatch door down the side of the ship to the ground.

Jake set the walker to idle and its engine whined down. Shelly leaned forward.

"Instruments pick up anything?" she asked.

"Not a damn thing." A burst of hope. "Maybe it died. I'll set us down."

The walker lowered, and Jake hit the rear door locks. The doors hissed up, as wings they rose. Dakota and Tex leapt from the rear cabin. Jersey sat up inside, whining.

"You're staying here, sweetie," said Shelly. She reached back to touch Jersey's head, but the troodon lowered it to the seats. Something was bothering her.

Shelly and Jake stepped from the cabin. Dakota and Tex stood side by side a few feet away, looking in the direction of the lake. They were rigid and alert.

"Alright," said Jake. "I brought the micro welder in case the hatch is stuck. You ready?"

"Yes. Jake... please be careful."

He nodded, then turned and walked towards the lake. The wind was picking up, blowing dust with it, lashing him in the face. He pulled his goggles down over his eyes, and crouched near some desiccated shrubs along what had once been the shoreline. The transport was only twenty feet away, agonizingly close.

Shelly whistled. Tex trotted forward, entering Jake's field of vision from the left. Then, abruptly, he turned and ran back a few feet.

The response was a louder whistle from Shelley. Tex turned and hesitantly went back where he'd been directed too. This wasn't Tex's attitude. Jake could see he was nervous.

But nothing happened. Shelly called out a few more whistles, and the dinosaur trotted around the edge of the lake bed, inscribing a slow turn that took him to the far side.

Then she gave another command, and he stopped, waiting.

Jake glanced back at her. Her response was a shrug. Things were looking up. The tragic irony hit him: they might have prepared for a danger that didn't exist anymore. An extra year on this rock, for nothing...

He rose from the behind the bushes and walked towards the transport. He reached the hatch, silent, and placed his hand on its alloy skin. It wasn't bolted closed! He shoved, and the hatch didn't just swing open, it fell over, clanging on the metal of the interior floor with a sound that echoed around him.

He looked back at Shelly, raising a thumb. But her smile faded, and she screamed. He turned fast --

The blow struck him in the back. He flew several feet through the air, then tumbled into the sand, coughing as it went up his nose and mouth. His side was wracked with pain. No organs, he hoped, but his ribs had taken a nasty hit.

He rolled over onto his back and scrambled backwards.

It was the beast. It towered over him, a dark, menacing figure covered in sticky mud from the nearly-dry lake bed. Its black eyes blinked twice, bringing up white lids to cleanse the mud away. It opened its mouth, exposing three sets of gnarled tusks, and roared at him. The smell of decayed flesh assaulted Jake's nostrils.

The creature howled and turned away from him. Blood dripped from its left leg onto the sand. It turned to face its assailant. Tex. The courageous animal growled, his sickle-claws on his feet covered with blood.

Tex turned and ran across the sand. Mad with fury, the beast charged after it, dropping to all fours and bounding forward on its knuckles, its front hands curled up like a primate's.

Jake numbly realized Shelly was screaming, begging him to run, for God's sake, run. He stood, and did run, but into the transport. They'd be dead anyway if he didn't get what they came for.

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dimly-lit cabin. Remarkably, the emergency lights were still powered, bathing the interior in red light. His hope spiked. The transport was in amazing condition for an old hulk. He hurried forward through the cramped ship, kicking away empty boxes of emergency rations and bone-dry bottles that had once held water, and then found the door to the cockpit.

It was laying in the floor, ripped away at the mounts. Claw marks were visible on its surface. Jake stepped over it and walked into the cramped cockpit, lowering his head to keep from cracking it against the holo-panels that arched down low over the shredded crew seats. Just below the dangling electrodes of the pilot's neural interface was what he came for: the subspace

transmitter core, covered with dust but intact. He pulled the micro-welder from his pocket.

Shelly called frantically to Tex. He bolted left, then right, and each time he turned, a clawed hand cut through the space where he'd just been. She called out with an arching whippoorwill whistle. This meant a sharp left turn, but Tex either misinterpreted her command in his panic, or decided to do things his way once again. He turned and ran back beneath the creature's legs!

She gritted her teeth, sure this would cost Tex his life. The beast roared and swung its claws at its feet, but missed the dinosaur, instead throwing sand into its own face. Tex emerged unscathed from the crook between the beast's legs and tail, running towards her. He was tiring, losing speed. Then she heard a shout.

Jake burst from the door of the transport. He clutched a bundle of electronics with one hand and held his left side with the other.

The beast howled in fury and bolted towards him. Desperate to help, Shelly glanced left.

But Dakota wasn't there.

Jake ran as fast as he could, gritting his teeth against the pain. It felt like his side was covered in hot coals. He ran around a line of small, dried-up trees. The beast charged through them, splintering them away.

It was almost on him. He decided he'd throw the transmitter to Shelly. She'd learned a lot from him about the ship--she could fix it. She would make it. That's what mattered.

But the beast wasn't after him anymore. He glanced back and saw the unthinkable.

Dakota clung to the creature's shoulders, slashing at its skin with his talons. He leapt from the beast and hit the sand running.

The beast turned to give chase to Dakota, but Tex quickly crossed his path again, throwing it off. Confused, the creature roared and charged after Tex again.

Shelly whistled as hard as she could, so hard it sounded like her vocal cords were giving out, but neither dinosaur was listening to her. They zipped back and forth, crossed paths, cut in and around the beast, making it lunge at nothing in frustration.

Finally it kept after Dakota. Tex broke away and vanished into the cloud of dust that had been thrown up around the lake by the chase.

Dakota ran away from the lake, towards the transport, but not fast enough. The beast was going to catch him. Dakota leapt over the same jagged stumps that had been trees a moment ago, then turned, ready to go down fighting.

The beast raised both arms back, claws spread, prepared to lunge--and Tex was suddenly on its back, attacking furiously. Caught mid-lunge, the beast lost its balance and fell, hard, onto one of the shattered stumps. It impaled the beast straight through its chest and out its spine. Blood and bile oozed from the animal's back, irrigating the orange sand with a river of red.

The horrible thing was still wailing in mortal agony when they fled with their prize. Shelly drove while Jake sat on the back seat, their three friends at his side, out of breath, wounded but alive.

They'd contacted Daegan Base, a trading substation, but it would take another day or two before help arrived. Daegan's staff had initially found Jake's story hard to believe. No one, after all, ever went to the Alettia system.

Jake sat down to their last meal on the planet that had been their home for three years. He tried to focus on their pending rescue and not the fact that he had nearly been killed. Judging by the steady pain in his side, he'd come very close.

Shelly eased down next to him, and brushed the hair out of her face. She did something she hadn't in over a year--she leaned over and kissed him.

"I fixed something up for tonight," she said. He chuckled when he saw it: a previously-broken china plate, patched up with bonding tape.

Good as new, as far as he was concerned.



Phantom Heart

By Jason Earls

Jason is a computational number theorist and writer. He collaborated with Jason Rogers to write the novel 0.1361015..., and his solo debut is made in the soon to be released Cocoon of Terror from Afterbirth Books.

Always hating to have his photo taken for any reason, Freddy Nichols dreaded getting his driver's license renewed. But it was that old time again and he rode his Harley Davidson up to the Tag Office, parked it on the sidewalk, decided that may be a little too bold, he'd surely get a ticket, went back and put it out in the street. Then he strutted into the building and stared at the people in line. The usual zombies and subnormals. He puffed and huffed and stuck his hands in his pockets, looked up at the ceiling and rolled his wily eyes, coughed and sighed. Freddy hated waiting more than anything else in the universe. But soon thirty minutes had passed and he found himself standing in front of the main Tag Office lady, saying he needed to renew his license.

She was about fifty-five years old. Had a thick glamorous-style bouffant hairdo. Wore a tight blue plaid dress. Wide and thick glasses with pink frames. She seemed nice enough. But one of her ear lobes was missing. Freddy wondered if she had lost it in a street fight. He imagined her partying in some skid row beer joint late at night. Grabbing another's woman's hair. Then the irate female pulls out a knife. There's a broken beer bottle... Freddy's mind raced through the scenes, his brain filling up with gruesome images, the hyperviolent scenario flashing through his head. Then the Tag Office lady told him to wake up and follow her.

She led him to a back room with a plastic chair, the room was dark and bare. He sat down in front of a huge camera the size of a refrigerator. She adjusted a few knobs and pressed some buttons. Freddy started sweating, his heart pounded and his vision got blurry, he shook his head and tried to look into the lens. Finally she told him to smile and he did, flashing his crooked teeth. She snapped his picture and the bright blinding light flashed. "Now just one more for good luck," she said and another bright flash filled the almost-dark room. "Okay, that should do it," she said, "you can go wait out front now, the pictures will take a few minutes to develop."

Freddy went back to his seat. A kid of about ten was sitting in his chair. Freddy stood in front of him. Hands on his hips. Freddy wanted his seat back. "Hey kid, you're in my chair," he said. "You'll have to go find another one."

"No," said the kid. "This one's mine now."

Freddy started screaming. "Get the hell out of my chair, you little asshole!"

The kid screamed back at Freddy, but his words were unintelligible. Freddy yelled again. The kid's parents didn't seem to be around. Freddy cursed and screamed some more. The kid started wailing and flopping around. Fell back into the seat. Waved his arms and squealed. Freddy yelled and pointed his finger in the kid's face. But it was no use. The kid refused to move from the chair. Still Freddy kept screaming and wouldn't give up. He thought the chair was worth fighting for, even though there were four empty identical ones right next to it. Finally the Tag Office lady came out and called his name. Freddy turned around. His face was red from his own absurd behavior.

She was standing behind her desk holding the photo, she waved Freddy over, but he still wanted that chair. He wanted to continue the vicious shrieking match but also wanted to vacate the Tag Office ASAP. So he grinned and tried to return to a semi-friendly mood, then strutted toward the Tag Office lady.

"Sir, there's a problem," she said. "We'll have to scrap this photo and take another one."

"What!" said Freddy, "What kind of problem? Do I look like a retard in the picture or something? What is it... Do I look disgusting or like a ghoul? What the hell is the problem here?"

"It's best if you just take a look for yourself, sir."

She held out the photo, Freddy stared at it, his face appeared to be normal in the picture, he was smiling, his teeth didn't look too yellow, his hair and clothes didn't seem too messy.

Then he looked above his right shoulder.

A white phantom with colorful features was hovering above him beside his head.

A pure white ghost with a faint ephemeral body and bright red glowing eye sockets and green fibrous veins protruding from its eyes. The phantom was holding up its fingers, big scabs covered its hands, the nails were long and sharp and the ghost's nose was a blackened pit; its mouth was held wide open, sharp triangular shark teeth pointing at Freddy's neck, the phantom was staring at him ready to sever his jugular vein and devour him whole.

Freddy grabbed the photo and brought it closer to his face. "What in Christ's name is that thing floating above my shoulder?"

"It's a ghost, sir," said the Tag Office lady.

"A ghost?"

"That's right. The picture you're holding right now is what's known in the drivers license industry as a 'spirit photograph.' They turn up every now and then."

"Wait. Are you saying you think that's a *real* ghost in this picture?"

"That's exactly what I am saying, sir. Every month or so our camera picks up ghosts that are lodged inside people's souls. Or living around people's auras. It doesn't happen very often. Only when we run into a truly evil or dastardly type of individual. A real scoundrel. The kind of people with a penchant for wearing leather and riding Harley Davidson motorcycles."

"You've got to be joking." Freddy threw the photograph down on her desk. "This can't be serious. Do you have a ghost dummy back there or something? This is just trick photography, right?"

"Absolutely not, sir. What you are seeing in that picture is factual. The camera in that room is extra strong and sensitive and works in conjunction with the background lighting to detect and pick up ghosts and spirits. Believe it or not, sometimes the phantoms we pick up are actually beneficial to the person. Not all ghosts are evil you know. A few are good and help the people they live inside. Haven't you ever heard of spirit photography before? It started back in the 1800's and was ruined for awhile, got a bad reputation, by the frauds and charlatans who tried to use it for monetary gain and to con gullible people. Nevertheless, spirit photography still has plenty of veracity in the present time."

Freddy grabbed the photo from her desk. He stared at it again. The harrowing ghost above his shoulder was right there. He studied the green veins hanging from its eyes. The long nails on its fingers. The large shark teeth ready to bite into him. He still didn't believe it was real. "Where do the ghosts come from?"

"They just appear in your soul all of a sudden," said the Tag Office lady. "The phantom is hovering around you at all times, influencing your decisions and affecting your life and general behavior. Our camera is good at picking up every evil characteristic they have, which you can see there in the photo; and it forces them momentarily out of you to be captured. The phantoms can even teleport to other galaxies and transfer to your relatives for brief periods of time, jumping back and forth, inside of them and you and then out again. I've even heard from experts we contacted when the first spirit photograph appeared in our office that the ghosts possess all kinds of uncanny attributes. One expert explained a few of them to me and told me several stories. I was truly shocked by what he said. The ghosts are quite amazing and fascinating."

Freddy listened to the Tag Office lady carefully.

She sounded so sincere he finally became convinced the ghost in the picture was truly lodged deep inside of his soul.

His eyes flared open and he started panting heavily.

His pulse raced, his legs trembled.

He panicked thinking a real ghost was somewhere inside his body, getting ready to kill him at any second.

He started wiggling out. "GET THIS FUCKING THING OUT OF ME!" He threw the photo to the ground. Jerked his head around trying to look over his shoulder. Ducked and bobbed and whipped his neck, trying to see the phantom hovering over him. He slapped at his upper back. Jerked and weaved, turned and jumped, darted and looked around quickly.

But he couldn't see a thing.

So he waved his arms around trying to grab the ghost, but he couldn't feel it either.

"Sir, sir," said the Tag Office lady. "You're wasting your time. You'll never be able to see the phantom that way. It's not visible to the human eye. You can also forget about trying to catch him with your hands."

Freddy ignored her. He spun around, twice as fast as before. Dropped to the floor and started bucking and rolling. Attempting to throw and wrestle the ghost off his back.

The lady raised her voice. "Sir! Excuse me, sir! We don't have time for this. Excuse me!" But she couldn't get Freddy's attention. She was getting irritated. "I said you'll never be able to see the phantom with your human vision! Just give up on it now, sir! Only the light from our camera can detect them!"

But Freddy couldn't stop wiggling out. "I want him off! Away from me! Get off me you fucking phantom!"

He kept slapping, jumping and spinning.

The Tag Office lady grew furious. She wanted to get back at Freddy for not listening to her. She decided to scare him even more. "Sir, do you want to know another fascinating thing about the ghosts? They can talk. Hold the photo up to your ear. Listen to what it's saying."

Freddy's face changed. His mouth wrinkled up and his cheeks turned pale. He didn't want to hear the ghost talk. But he picked up the photo anyway. His hands shook. He brought it up to his ear, placed the ghost's mouth next to his ear lobe and listened. The phantom's voice was faint. It had a thick British accent. This is what it said:

"Verily I say unto you, I am the door of the witches. All that ever came before me was malaise and sanguinity and nothingness: But the witches do not fall and I shall not bequeath them. I am the True Gatekeeper to the Heavy Door and by me any witch enters that shall not be hanged, but

go inside and find the True Cabal. The evil angels cometh not from Purgatory but to slash and murder and decimate your spirit. I have come that you might regain existence. That you might witness the Blind Essence more abundantly. I and my Father are not one. But monsters too are in the door. Coming not from the spirit. All Soul Permutations that ever were do not hear me. And they shall be hanged. Sliced. Murdered. Exterminated. So that you might see Beyond the malaise and nothingness. If seven witches enter, eleven angels bind out of the Door into the blindness and find the strong song you consider Father to come before The Fall. We shall go inside and Seek the Witness. We shall find the Legitimate Messiah."

Freddy held the photo to his ear for a full minute. Then pulled it away. "Holy shit, that's scary stuff. His voice isn't what I expected. The speech sounds Biblical."

"Yep, like scrambled up Bible verses with a little evil tossed in."

"What does it mean? What is the phantom trying to tell us?"

"I don't have a fucking clue. Now come back to the camera room again and let's try to take another picture. But without that ghost showing up this time."

"You mean the ghost will just go away?" Freddy felt his mind fill up with hope. He was excited, he beamed. "Maybe I succeeded in slapping him off my back a minute ago."

"No. The ghosts never go away like that. You can't physically remove them. The phantom will be lodged deep inside your soul for the rest of eternity. But I'm going to try to adjust the camera differently so it doesn't pick up the ghost. If the police ever stop you and look at your license, they mustn't be able to see the phantom. If they see its fangs or fingers, they will haul you straight to jail immediately because it will prove to them you're an evil person ready to commit all kinds of atrocious crimes. Because these ghosts only show up in the worst kinds of scoundrels that exist."

"Oh, okay," Freddy said.

Then he followed the woman back to the camera room and sat down in the chair. He felt a little calmer now. He waited for her to adjust a few knobs on the camera. Then he stared into the lens and concentrated on hiding the ghost inside of himself as best he could. His legs shook. His arms tingled with drops of sweat. The Tag Office lady looked through the lens and snapped the photo. Then a second one.

"Okay, I think that will do it," she said. "Maybe I got the camera adjusted right. You can go back to the front and sit down again. I'll be out soon with the verdict."

He stood, went back to the waiting area, an elderly gentleman was sitting in his seat now. He asked the man to move, they both started yelling,

and Freddy found himself in another ferocious argument. The man mentioned something about George W. Bush. Freddy thought the elderly gentleman was calling *him* George W. Bush as an insult. The worst kind of insult imaginable for Freddy. He screamed on and on and got right up in the old man's face, tried to intimidate and force the old man out of his seat. But the man would not go. Instead he made a remark about Clinton, and Freddy mistook it for another insult, they started arguing about politics, and their constant shrieking put everyone in the waiting room on edge. They screamed so loud a few babies in the room started crying and their mothers tried to console them, but to no avail.

Finally the picture lady came out. The skin of her face had a sickly yellow cast, her hands were shaking. She was holding the photo at arm's length far away from her body. She couldn't look at the picture, she was very upset. Something horrible had happened.

"Sir, uh... um... I need you to look at this.... wait, oh, Christ... I don't know if I should show it to you... Oh Dear God, prepare yourself, sir... you had better get ready for this... oh, sweet Jesus please help us all... "

The Tag Office lady was stuttering. Her face was twitching. She was discombobulated. Freddy knew the photo must be really bad.

Freddy turned around and screamed for the old man to go to hell one last time. Then he walked toward the Tag Office lately. Her face showed true concern for all of their lives.

"What is it," said Freddy. "Please. Not more ghosts. Don't tell me that. I'll die if I see any more phantoms today."

Freddy looked at the photo.

An entire gang of hideous phantoms were swirling around his head, surrounding his neck and shoulders with the most threatening faces imaginable.

A few ghosts had huge horns and glowing blue eyes.

Fibrous green veins like algae hung from their ears and eye sockets.

They had long forked tongues and warty noses and white wispy faces with blemished skin. Fangs and sharpened claws.

Each of the ghosts were looking right at Freddy, ready to attack and bite into him. He had stirred them up with his slapping and jumping and spinning around. They looked like they were going to kill and devour him any second.

He threw the photo down and ducked all the way to the floor, started slapping his back as hard as he could. He rolled over the carpet and pounded on the tops of his shoulders and against the back of his neck.

"NO, FUCK YOU, GET OFF ME, GET AWAY, GODDAMN IT, FUCKING SPIRIT PHOTOGRAPHY, GET THESE GODDAMN

GHOULS OFF ME, WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON, GET THEM OUT OF MY SOUL AND MY BODY, I CAN'T TAKE THIS SHIT, I WANT TO GO TO HEAVEN, I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO DO SO WITH THESE MONSTERS INSIDE ME, I CAN'T STAND IT, GET THEM OFF OF ME!"

He kicked and punched and rolled over the floor. Slapping and fighting the air around him. His blood pressure rose dangerously high. He fell into convulsions. He jerked around and his eyes rolled back into his skull and the Tag Office lady dropped to the floor beside him. She bent over and grabbed his face and pressed her lips against his mouth. Started giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. After four huge breaths, Freddy's seizure vanished and he returned to full consciousness. He pushed the lady off him and wiped his mouth. He started gagging violently because the old woman had obviously been drinking all day long. He hated the taste of alcohol.

Then he thought of the ghosts still swirling around him.

He started running around the Tag Office. Slapping at his back. Trying get them off. He didn't know what else to do.

His blood pressure rose again and he fell to the floor, his heart went boom boom kaboom baboom wham bam kabam bam boom kaboom bam kaboom thump frump bam thwump boom kaboom wham thump boom thwump kabam boom! kaboom! bam wham thump! bam thgump! bwoom frump! badoom whump! boboom thump! wham boom! thwump! frump! kablam! bgroom! thkump! blwam! thwump! babloom! kabram!

His heart accelerated to 200, 220, 265, 298, then 320 beats per minute.

It stayed that way for one minute and thirty five seconds.

Then it exploded and the blood vessels in his neck and forehead popped.

His brain went completely dead and Freddy Nichols died on the floor of the local Tag Office.

Even though no one could see them, each of the ghosts, spirits and demons hovering inside of Freddy's soul and above his head and shoulders vanished.

They went straight into the Tag Office lady. Penetrated her forehead and soul and she never felt a thing.

She didn't discover the phantoms until a year later when someone took a picture of her at a cocktail party. She looked at the photo and immediately recognized the ghosts from having dealt with Freddy last year in the Tag Office. But she didn't mind them being there. She simply ignored them and lived her life as if they didn't exist. Knowing she would never be

able to get rid of them, and remembering that Freddy had died trying to exorcise them, she said, "Fuck those ghosts, I don't care if they're inside my soul or not."

And the Tag Office lady lived a happy life for the next thirty-five years until she eventually died of natural causes.



In A Goddess's Spare Time

By Eric Hermanson

Eric Hermanson's poetry and short stories have appeared in over 300 publications with new work coming in Dark Wisdom, Forgotten Worlds, and Aiofe's Kiss. This poem is a twist on a classic Hawaiian Myth.

In A Goddess's Spare Time

Madame Pele wants her rocks back
She told me so herself
The volcano goddess is really mad
So she's ruining my wealth

She showed up here on the mainland
Far from the big island resort
Where my second wife took her lava
As a souvenir of sorts

She approached me at my office
A wrinkled old lady in red
She ruined my entire lunch break
Even faxed me a memo of dread

At home she stalks my house
A girl in red jogging attire
She broke all my lawn ornaments
Her smile set my gnomes on fire

How do I tell this goddess
I no longer possess her stones?
My wife claimed them in divorce
That Hawaiian honeymoon was years ago

We finally came to an agreement
It only cost me a case of gin
She tucked the booze under her arm
And left on a westbound wind.

For Better or Worse

By Douglas Graves

Douglas Graves is a horror writer from North Dakota. He blames his genre choices on the climate: "It's the six-month long winters. The wind chill is 50 below and you get snowed in a lot; stuck in your house with the darkness pressing against the windows nearly 18 hours a day, and nothing to do but sit and stare into that darkness and listen to the wind rattling to get in. It does something to a person."

Her voice, muffled by the bathroom door, sounded like she was trying to talk around a mouthful of cake. "I need to show you the *real* me," she said.

He sighed and clicked off the TV. He had known from the start he would probably have to consummate their marriage, and he *thought* he had resigned himself to it--after all, it *was* their wedding night. But the disappointment he felt now told him he'd still been holding out a spark of hope that it could be avoided and he could spend the evening ordering up porn on the hotel TV.

The *only* comfort he could take was that it might be the only time he would have to be intimate with her. He was fairly certain she was going to be one of those "ice princess" wives, the type whose only interest was in spending their husband's money and keeping physical contact to a bare minimum. With the promotion and salary increase he'd gotten from the boss for marrying her, she'd have plenty to keep her occupied. And if she never wanted to have sex again, that was fine with him. But it looked as if, at least for now, he was going to have to do her. He'd just have to consider tonight as an investment in his future.

Come to think of it, maybe it should be a couple of times. Giving the boss a few grandkids certainly couldn't hurt in winning some brownie points. He would take one for the team. He'd just close his eyes and mentally count his cash while they screwed. He was getting hard just thinking about it.

"Come on out here and show me," he said, trying to sound seductive. "I've got something to show you, too." He grimaced and reminded himself to focus on the cash.

The bathroom door creaked open only a crack. "Are you ready?" she asked.

He felt a twinge of guilt--she sounded like she'd been crying. Maybe she's as unhappy about this as I am. "Yeah, baby. Bring it on." He

patted the bed beside him.

She stepped out of the bathroom.

She had never been what he would call attractive: mousy, stick-straight brown hair, short, stocky, bosom-less build, plain brown eyes, thin lips. She was the spitting image of her father. So he hadn't been expecting much, sexy honeymoon lingerie or not--but he hadn't expected this.

She was completely naked. Bristly hairs, like strands of wire, sprouted over most of her body. The flesh beneath was spotted liver and pink, like a pig's belly. Her eyes were huge, red and multifaceted--he could see himself reflected, over and over, upside-down in them. Her nose had been replaced by a straw-like proboscis--a suction-cup quivered on the end. Transparent wings with pulsing veins twitched behind her back.

"What the hell?" He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You're a fly?"

Two of her four arms shrugged. "Yes. It's daddy's dirty secret."

His clutched his head in his hands, never taking his eyes off her. "You're a fly!"

Her wings spasmed. "Now do you see why daddy was so insistent? Your salary is a small price for him to pay to get me off his hands."

"Oh shit!" He dropped his hands and clutched his stomach. "This ruins everything."

Her wings vibrated faster, filling the air with a high, buzzing whine that felt like a chain saw in his head. When she spoke, it sounded as though she was choking, but he knew she was just crying--flies couldn't shed tears. "I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you sooner. I really like you. I didn't want to hurt you, but I was afraid of what daddy would do if I didn't marry you."

He fell back on the bed and curled into a ball, still clutching his stomach. "Of all the fucking luck! You're a fly!"

She took a step closer to him, her arms outstretched. "I really am sorry. But I'm sure we can figure out a way to make this work . . . somehow."

His whole body began to quake as if he were having a seizure.

She took another uncertain step closer and glanced at the phone. "Do you need me to call a doctor?"

He groaned. There was a ripping noise, like sheets tearing, and his pants rippled and twitched at the hip, like a mouse was trying to escape from his pants' pocket. There was another soft tearing noise as his pocket gave way and a long, thin leg folded out of his hip and onto the bed. There were more ripping and cracking noises as more legs appeared. His shirt ripped as the legs pushed upward, pulling a hairy thorax out of his body. The discarded shell that had been her new husband dropped onto the bed like a

used condom and a seven-foot tall spider stood over the deflated body.

The spider stepped down from the bed and cocked its head at her. Its pedipalps wiggled anxiously.

She took a step backward.

“I’m sorry, too,” he said, shuffling his legs. They clicked against each other like bare trees in a high wind. “I never wanted to hurt you, either. If only you had warned me . . .” He sighed. “There goes my promotion.”

She shrank into the corner as he stepped closer.



