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Recording Angel

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For the last ten miles she drove past refugees from the xenoforming. Some were in their own vehicles. Many rode town buses that had been commandeered to take the people south, or the grubby white trucks of the UNHCR. Most walked, pushing the things they had saved from the advancing Chaga on handcarts or barrows, or laden on the heads and backs of women and children. That has always been the way of it, the woman thought as she drove past the unbroken file of people. The world ends, the women and children must carry it, and the United Nations sends its soldiers to make sure they do not drop it. And the news corporations send their journalists to make sure that the world sees without being unduly disturbed. After all, they are only Africans. A continent is being devoured by some thing from the stars, and I am sent to write the obituary of a hotel.

"I don't do gossip," she had told T. P. Costello, SkyNet's Nairobi station chief when he told her of the international celebrities who were coming to the death-party of the famous Treehouse Hotel. "I didn't come to this country to cream myself over who's wearing which designer dress or who's having an affair with or getting from whom."

"I know, I know," T. P. Costello had said. "You came to Kenya to be a player in Earth's first contact with the alien. Everyone did. That's why I'm sending you. Who cares what Brad Pitt thinks about the Gas Cloud theory versus the Little Gray Men theory? Angles are what I want. You can get angles, Gaby. What can you get?"

"Angles, T. P.," she had replied, wearily, to her editor's now-familiar litany.

"That's correct. And you'll be up there with it, right on terminum. That's what you want, isn't it?"

That's correct, T. P., she thought. Three months in Kenya and all she had seen of the Chaga had been a distant line of color, like surf on a

far reef, under the clouded shadow of Kilimanjaro, advancing imperceptibly but inexorably across the Amboseli plain. The spectator's view. Up there, on the highlands around Kirinyaga where the latest biological package had come down, she would be within touching distance of it. The player's view.

There was a checkpoint up at Nanyuki. The South African soldiers in blue UN helmets at first did not know how to treat her, thinking that with her green eyes and long mahogany hair she might be another movie star or television celebrity. When her papers identified her as Gaby McAslan, on-line multimedia journalist with SkyNet East Africa, they stopped being respectful. A woman they could flirt with, a journalist they could touch for bribes. Gaby endured their flirtations and gave their commanding officer three of the dwindling stock of duty-free Swatches she had bought expressly for the purpose of petty corruption. In return she was given a map of the approved route to the hotel. If she stayed on it she would be safe. The bush patrols had orders to shoot suspected looters or loiterers.

Beyond the checkpoint there were no more refugees. The only vehicles were carrying celebrities to the party at the end of the world, and the news corporations following them. The Kikuyu shambas on either side of the road had been long abandoned. Wild Africa was reclaiming them. For a while, then something else would reclaim them from wild Africa. Reverse terraforming, she thought. Instead of making an alien world into Earth, Earth is made into an alien world. In her open-top SkyNet 4x4, Gaby could sense the Chaga behind the screen of heavy high-country timber, and the edgy presence of the alien, and the electric tingle of anticipation. She had never been this close before.

When the first biological package came down on the summit of Kilimanjaro, she had known, in SkyNet Multimedia News's UK office among the towers of London's Docklands, that this fallen star had her name written on it. The stuff that had come out of it, that looked a little like rain forest and a little like drained coral reef but mostly like nothing anyone had ever seen before, that disassembled terrestrial vegetation into its component molecules and incorporated them into its own matrix at an unstoppable fifty meters every day, confirmed her holy business. The others that came down in the Bismarck Archipelago, the Ruwenzori, in Ecuador and Papua New Guinea and the Maldives, these were only memos from the star gods. It's here, it's waiting for you. Hurry up now.

Now, the Nyandarua package, drawing its trail of plasma over Lake Victoria and the Rift Valley, would bring her at last face-to-face with life from the stars.

She came across a conga-line of massive tracked transporters, each the size of a large house, wedged into the narrow red-dirt road. Prefabricated accommodation cabins were piled up on top of the transporters. Branches bent and snapped as the behemoths ground past at walking pace. Gaby had heard that UNECTA, the United Nations agency that coordinated research into the Chagas, had

dismantled its 01 Tukai base, one of four positioned around Kilimanjaro, all moving backward in synchrony with the advance of the southern Chaga, and sent it north. UNECTA's pockets were not deep enough, it seemed, to buy a new mobile base, especially now that the multinationals had cut their contributions in the absence of any exploitable technologies coming out of the Chaga.

UNECTA staff on the tops of the mobile towers waved as she drove carefully past in the red muddy verges. They can probably see the snows of Kirinyaga from that height, she thought. Between the white mountains. We run from the south, we run from the north but the expanding circles of vegetation are closing on us and we cannot escape. Why do we run? We will all have to face it in the end, when it takes everything we know and changes it beyond recognition. We have always imagined that because it comes down in the tropics it is confined here. Why should climate stop it? Nothing else has. Maybe it will only stop when it closes around the poles. Xenofarming complete.

The hotel was one of those buildings that are like animals in zoos, that by their stillness and coloration can hide from you even when you are right in front of them, and you only know they are there because of the sign on the cage. Two Kenyan soldiers far too young for the size of their weapons met her from the car park full of tour buses and news-company 4x4s. They escorted her along a dirt path between skinny, gray-trunked trees. She could still not see the hotel. She commented on the small wooden shelters that stood every few meters along the path.

"In case of charging animals," the slightly older soldier said. "But this is better." He stroked his weapon as if it were a breast. "Thirty heavy-caliber rounds per second. That will stop more than any wooden shelter."

"Since the Chaga has come there are many more animals around," the younger soldier said. He had taken the laces out of his boots, in the comfortable, country way.

"Running away," Gaby said. "Like any sane thing should."

"No," the young, laceless soldier said. "Running into."

There was a black-painted metal fire escape at the end of the track. As Gaby squinted at the incongruity, the hotel resolved out of the greenery before her. Many of the slim, silver tree trunks were wooden piles, the mass of leaves and creepers concealed the superstructure bulking over her.

The steward met her at the top of the stairs, checked her name against the guest list, and showed her her room, a tiny wooden cabin with a view of leaves. Gaby thought it must be like this on one of the UNECTA mobile bases; minimal, monastic. She did something to her face and went up to the party on the roof. It had been running for three days. It would only end when the hotel did. The party at the edge of the end of the world. In one glance she saw thirty newsworthy faces and peeked into her bag to check the charge level on her disc recorder. She talked to it as she moved between the faces



to the bar. The Out of Africa look was the thing among the newsworthy this year: Riding breeches, leather, with the necessary twist of twenty-first-century knowing with the addition of animal-skin prints.

Gaby ordered a piña colada from the Kenyan barman and wondered as he shook it what incentive the management had offered him—all the staff—to stay. Family relocation to other hotels, on the Coast, down in Zanzibar, she reckoned. And where do they go when they run out of hotels to relocate to? Interesting, but not the angle, she decided as the barman poured out the thick, semeny proof of his ability.

"Bugger all here, T. P.," she said to the little black machine in her shirt pocket. Then cocktail-party dynamics parted the people in front of her and there it was, one hundred feet away beyond the gray wooden railing, at the edge of the artificial water hole they dredged with bulldozers in the off-season. One hundred feet. Fifteen seconds walk. Eighteen hours crawl. If you kept very still and concentrated you would be able to see it moving, as you could see the slow sweep of the minute hand of your watch. This was the Chaga not on the geographical scale, devouring whole landscapes, but on the molecular.

Gaby walked through the gap in the bright and the beautiful. She walked past Brad Pitt. She walked past Antonio Banderas, with his new super-model girlfriend. She walked past Julia Roberts so close she could see the wrinkles and sags that the editing computers digitally smoothed. They were only celebrities. They could not change the world, or suffer to have their world changed, even by alien intervention. Gaby rested her hands on the rail and looked over the Chaga.

"It's like being on the sundeck of a great, archaic, ocean-liner, cruising close to the shore of an alien archipelago," she told the recorder. The contrast between the place she was and the place out there was as great as between land and sea, the border between the two as shifting and inexact. There was no line where earth became un-earth; rather a gradual infection of the highland forest with the colored hexagons of alien ground cover that pushed up fingers and feelers and strange blooms between the tree trunks into the disturbing pseudocoral forms of the low Chaga. With distance the alien reef grew denser and the trees fewer; only the tallest and strongest withstood the attack of the molecular processors, lifted high like the masts of beached ships. A kilometer beyond the tide line a wall of red pillars rose a sheer three hundred meters from the rumbled land reefs before opening into a canopy of interlinked hexagonal leaf plates.

"The Great Wall," Gaby said, describing the scene before her to the disc. The Chaga beyond offered only glimpses of itself as it rose toward cloud-shrouded Kirinyaga: A gleam of the open white palm of a distant hand-tree, the sway of moss-covered balloons, the glitter of light from crystals. What kind of small craft might put forth from such a shore to meet this ship of vanities? she wondered.

"Seven minutes. Thirteen centimeters. That's longer than most."

Until he spoke, Gaby had not noticed the white man standing beside her at the rail. She could not remember whether he had been there before her, or arrived later. He was small, balding, running to late-40s, early-50s belly. His skin was weathered brown, his teeth were not good, and he spoke with a White African accent. He could not be Beautiful, nor even Press. He must be Staff. He was dressed in buffs and khakis and a vest of pockets, without the least necessary touch of twenty-first-century knowing. He looked like the last of the Great White Hunters.

He was.

He was called Prenderleith. He had impeccable manners.

"Pardon me for interrupting your contemplation, but if people see me talking to someone they won't come and ask me about things I've killed."

"Isn't that your job?"

"Killing, or telling?"

"Whichever."

"Whichever, it doesn't include being patronized by movie stars, piss-artists and bloody journalists."

"I am a bloody journalist."

"But the first thing you did was come over to the rail and look at that bloody thing out there. For seven minutes."

"And that makes this journalist worth talking to."

"Yes," he said, simply.

And it makes you worth talking to, Gaby thought, because maybe you are my angle on this thing. The Last White Hunter. But you are as wary as the creatures you hunt, and if I tell you this it will scare you away, so I must be as stealthy as you. Gaby surreptitiously turned up the recording level on her little black machine. Enhancement software back at Tom M'boya Street would edit the chatter and fluff.

"So what do you think it is?" Gaby asked. Across the terrace a dissension between Bret Easton Ellis and Damien Hirst was escalating into an argument. Guests flocked in, anticipating a fistfight. Cameras whirred. Prenderleith rested his arms on the rail and looked out across the Chaga.

"I don't know about all this aliens-from-another-world stuff."

"Latest theory is that it wasn't built by little gray men, but originated in gas clouds in Rho Ophiuchi, eight hundred light-years away. They've found signatures of the same complex fullerenes that are present in the Chaga. An entire civilization, growing up in space. They estimate it's at least a hundred thousand years old."

"They," Prenderleith said.

"UNECTA," Gaby said.

"They're probably right. They know more about this than I do, so if they say it's gas, then it's gas. Gas clouds, little gray men, I don't know about either of them; it's just not part of my world. See, they brought me up with just enough education to be able to manage, to do things well; not to think. Kenya wasn't the kind of country that needed thinking, we thought. You did things, not thought. Riding, farming, hunting, driving, flying. Doing things. The country decided what you needed to think. None of us could see the changes happening under our feet: I was brought up obsolete, no bloody use in the new Kenya, that thought, at all. All I could do was find a job in something as obsolete and useless as myself. This bloody place has nothing to do with the real Kenya. Bloody theme park. Even the animals are fake; they bulldozed a water hole so Americans would have elephants to photograph. Irony is: Now the tourists are gone, there've never been so many bloody animals, all headed in. Counted forty-five elephant in one day; no one gives a stuff anymore. Tell me, how can it be alien if the animals are going in there? How could gas know how to build something like that? Feels to me like it's something very old, that animals knew once and have never forgotten, that's come out of Africa itself. Everything starts here, in East Africa; the land is very old, and has a long memory. And strong: Maybe Africa has had enough of what people are doing to it—enough thinking—and has decided to claim itself back. That's why the animals aren't afraid. It's giving it back to them."

"But taking yours away," Gaby said.

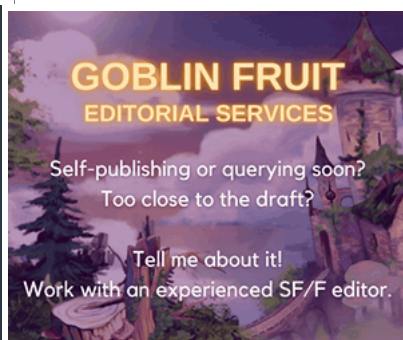
"Not my Africa." Prenderleith glanced around at the famous and beautiful people. The fight had evaporated into sulks and looks. Leaf Phoenix was passing round cigarettes, to the thrilled horror of the other guests. Chimes filled the air. Heads turned. A waiter in an untwenty-first-century knowing leopard-print jacket moved across the roof terrace, playing a set of handheld chime bars.

"Dinner," Prenderleith announced.

The seating plan put Gaby at the far end of the long table, between a hack she knew from BBC on-line and a Hollywood film god who talked of working on fifteen musicals simultaneously and little else. Prenderleith had been placed at the far end of the table, in the champion's seat, hemmed in by the famous. Gaby watched him telling his much-told tales of stalkings and killings. He would glance up from time to time and she would catch his eye, and it was like a little conspiracy. I should tell him that he is an angle, Gaby thought. I should admit to the recorder.

The famous claimed Prenderleith for the remainder of the evening, a small court surrounding his seat by the picture window with its floodlit view of the Chaga approaching molecule by molecule. Gaby sat at the bar and watched him telling his stories of that other Africa. There was a light in his eye. Gaby could not decide if it was nostalgia or anticipation of when it would all fall and come apart.

Out in the dark beyond the floodlights, trees fell, brought down by the Chaga, dissolver of illusions. The wooden piers of the hotel creaked and clicked. The celebrities glanced at each other, afraid.



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The knock came at 1:27 according to the luminous hands of the bedside clock. Gaby had not long gone to sleep after dictating commentary. Noise from the upper decks; the party would gradually wind down with the hour until the soldiers came with the morning to clear everyone out. One of the guests, high and hopeful? A second polite knock. The politeness told her.

She could see from the way Prenderleith stood in the corridor that he was a little drunk and that, had he not been, he would not have done this. He was carrying his gun, like an adored child.

"Something you should see," he said.

"Why me?" Gaby asked, pulling on clothes and boots.

"Because no one else could understand. Because of those seven minutes you stared at that bloody thing out there and nothing else existed. You know the truth: Nothing does exist, apart from that. Make sure you bring whatever you've been recording on with you."

"You guessed."

"I noticed."

"Hunter's senses. Sorry, I should have told you, I suppose."

"No matter to me."

"You're the only one here has a story worth telling, who will actually lose something when this comes down."

"You think so?"

The light was poor in the wooden corridor. Gaby could not read his expression right. Prenderleith led her to a service staircase down to ground level. Stepping onto the dark surface between the piers, Gaby imagined setting first foot on an alien planet. Close to the truth there, she thought. Prenderleith unslung his rifle and led her out from under the hotel into the shadows along the edge of the floodlights. The night felt huge and close around Gaby, full of breathings and tiny movements. Her breath steamed, it was cold upon the shoulder lands of Kirinyaga. She inhaled the perfume of the Chaga. It was a smell you imagined you knew, because it evoked so many memories, as smell does more powerfully than any other sense. But you could not know it, and when you realized that, all the parts that reminded you of other things collapsed together and the spicy, musky, chemically scent of it was nothing you could remember for no one had ever known anything like this before. It pushed you forward, not back.

Prenderleith led her toward terminum. It was not very far. The Chaga grew taller and more complex as the floodlight waned. Looming, like the waking memory of a nightmare. Gaby could hear the groan and smash of trees falling in the darkness. Prenderleith stopped her half a meter from the edge. Half a meter, fifteen minutes, Gaby thought. She curled her toes inside her boots, feeling infected. Prenderleith squatted on his heels, rested his weight on his gun, like a staff, hunting.

"Wind's right," he said.

Gaby squatted beside him. She switched on the recorder, listened to the silence, and watched the Chaga approach her, out of the shadows. Terminum was a grid of small hexagons of a mosslike substance. The hexagons were of all colors; Gaby knew intuitively that no color was ever next to itself. The corners of the foremost hexagons were sending dark lines creeping out into the undergrowth. Blades of grass, plant stems, fell before the molecule machines and were reduced to their components. Every few centimeters the crawling lines would bifurcate; a few centimeters more they would divide again to build hexagons. Once enclosed, the terrestrial vegetation would wilt and melt and blister into pinpoint stars of colored pseudomoss.

On a sudden urge, Gaby pressed her hand down on the black lines. It did not touch flesh. It had never touched flesh. Yet she flinched as she felt Chaga beneath her bare skin. Oh she of little faith. She felt the molecule-by-molecule advance as a subtle tickle, like the march of small, slow insects across the palm of her hand.

She started as Prenderleith touched her gently on the shoulder.

"It's here," he whispered.

She did not have the hunter's skill, so for long seconds she saw it only as a deeper darkness moving in the shadows. Then it emerged into the twilight between the still-standing trees and the tall fingers of pseudocoral and Gaby gasped.

It was an elephant; an old bull with a broken tusk. Prenderleith rose to his feet. There was not ten meters between them. Elephant and human regarded each other. The elephant took a step forward, out of the shadows into the full light. As it raised its trunk to taste the air, Gaby saw a mass of red, veiny flesh clinging to its neck like a parasitic organ. Beneath the tusks it elongated into flexible limbs. Each terminated in something disturbingly like a human hand. Shocked, Gaby watched the red limbs move and the fingers open and shut. Then the elephant turned and with surprising silence retreated into the bush. The darkness of the Chaga closed behind it.

"Every night, same time," Prenderleith said after a long silence. "For the past six days. Right to the edge, no further. Little closer every day."

"Why?"

"It looks at me, I look at it. We understand each other."

"That thing, around its neck; those arms ..." Gaby could not keep the disgust from her voice.

"It changes things. Makes things more what they could be. Should be, maybe. Perhaps all elephants have ever needed have been hands, to become what they could be."

"Bootstrap evolution."

"If that's what you believe in."

"What do you believe in?"

"Remember how I answered when you told me the Chaga was taking my Africa away?"

"Not your Africa."

"Understand what I meant now?"

"The Africa it's taking away is the one you never understood, the one you weren't made for. The Africa it's giving is the one you never knew but that was bred into your bones; the great untamed, unexplored, dark Africa, the Africa without nations and governments and borders and economies; the Africa of action, not thought, of being, not becoming, where a single man can lose himself and find himself at the same time; return to a more simple, physical, animal level of existence."

"You say it very prettily. Suppose it's your job."

Gaby understood another thing. Prenderleith had asked her to speak for him because he had not been made able to say such things for himself, and wanted them said right for those who would read Gaby's story about him. He wanted a witness, a faithful recording angel. Understanding this, she knew a third thing about Prenderleith, which could never be spoken and preserved on disc.

"Let's go in again," Prenderleith said eventually. "Bloody freezing out here."

The soldiers came through the hotel at 6:30 in the morning, knocking on every bedroom door, though all the guests had either been up and ready long before, or had not slept at all. In view of the fame of the guests, the soldiers were very polite. They assembled everyone in the main lounge. Like a slow sinking, Gaby thought. A Now Abandon—ship. The reef has reached us at last. She looked out of the window. Under darkness the hexagon moss had crossed the artificial water hole and was climbing the piles of the old hotel. The trees out of which the elephant had emerged in the night were festooned with orange spongy encrustations and webs of tubing.

The main lounge lurched. Glasses fell from the back bar and broke. People screamed a little. The male Hollywood stars tried to look brave, but this was no screenplay. This was the real end of the world, Prenderleith had gathered with the rest of the staff in the farthest corner from the door and was trying to sow calm. It is like the Titanic, Gaby thought. Crew last. She went to stand with them. Prenderleith gave her a puzzled frown.

"The hunters have to know if the captain goes down with his ship," she said, patting the little black recorder in the breast pocket of her bush shirt. Prenderleith opened his mouth to speak and the hotel heaved again, more heavily. Beams snapped. The picture window shattered and fell outward. Gaby grabbed the edge of the bar and talked fast and panicky at her recorder. Alarmed, the soldiers hurried the celebrities out of the lounge and along the narrow wooden



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corridors toward the main staircase. The lounge sagged, the floor tilted, tables and chairs slid toward the empty window.

"Go!" Prenderleith shouted.

They were already going. Jammed into the wooden corridor, she tried not to think of bottomless coffins as she tried to shout through the other shouting voices into the microphone. Behind her the lounge collapsed and fell. She fought her way through the press of bodies into the sunlight, touched the solidity of the staircase. Crawling. She snatched her fingers away. The creeping, branching lines of Chaga-stuff were moving down the stairs, through the paintwork.

"It's on the stairs," she whispered breathlessly into the mike. The wooden wall behind her was a mosaic of hexagons. She clutched the recorder on her breast. A single spore would be enough to dissolve it and her story. She plunged down the quivering stairs.

Heedless of dangerous animals, the soldiers hurried the guests toward the vehicles on the main road. The news people paused to shoot their final commentaries on the fall of the Treehouse.

"It's coming apart," she said as a section of roof tilted up like the stern of a sinking liner and slid through the bubbling superstructure to the ground. The front of the hotel was a smash of wood and the swelling, bulbous encrustations of Chaga-stuff. The snapped piles were fingers of yellow sponge and pseudocoral. Gaby described it all. Soldiers formed a cordon between the spectators and the Chaga. Gaby found Prenderleith beside her.

"You'll need to know how the story ends," he said. "Keep this for me." He handed Gaby his rifle. She shook her head.

"I don't do good on guns."

He laid it at her.

"I know," she said.

"Then you'll help me."

"Do you hate this that much?"

"Yes," he said. There was a detonation of breaking wood and a gasp from soldiers and civilians alike. The hotel had snapped in the middle and folded up like two wings. They slowly collapsed into piles of voraciously feeding Chaga life.

He made the move while everyone's attention but Gaby's was distracted by the end of the old hotel. She had known he would do it. He ran fast for a tired old white hunter, running to fat.

"He's halfway there," she said to her recorder. "I admire his courage, going gladly into this new dark continent. Or is it the courage to make the choice that eventually the Chaga may make for all of us on this planet formerly known as Earth?"

She broke off. The soldier in front of her had seen Prenderleith. He lifted his Kalashnikov and took aim.

"Prenderleith!" Gaby yelled. He ran on. He seemed more intent on doing something with his shirt buttons. He was across the edge now, spores flying up from his feet as he crushed the hexagon moss.

"No!" Gaby shouted, but the soldier was under orders, and both he and the men who gave the orders feared the Chaga above all else. She saw the muscles tighten in his neck, the muzzle of the gun weave a little this way, a little that way. She looked for something to stop him. Prenderleith's rifle. No. That would get her shot too.

The little black disc recorder hit the soldier, hard, on the shoulder. She had thrown it, hard. The shot skyed. Birds went screeching up from their roosts. Otherwise, utter silence from soldiers and staff and celebrities. The soldier whirled on her, weapon raised. Gaby danced back, hands held high. The soldier snapped his teeth at her and brought the butt of the gun down on the disc recorder. While he smashed it to shards of plastic and circuitry, Gaby saw the figure of Prenderleith disappear into the pseudocoral fungus of the alien landscape. He had lost his shirt.

The last vestiges of the tourist hotel—half a room balanced atop a pillar; the iron staircase, flowering sulphur-yellow buds, leading nowhere, a tangle of plumbing, washbasins and toilets held out like begging bowls—tumbled and fell. Gaby watched mutely. She had nothing to say, and nothing to say it to. The Chaga advanced onward, twenty-five centimeters every minute. The people dispersed. There was nothing more to see than the millimetric creep of another world.

The soldiers checked Gaby's press accreditations with five different sources before they would let her take the SkyNet car. They were pissed at her but they could not touch her. They smiled a lot, though, because they had smashed her story and she would be in trouble with her editor.

You're wrong, she thought as she drove away down the safe road in the long convoy of news-company vehicles and tour buses. Story is in the heart. Story is never broken. Story is never lost. That night, as she dreamed among the doomed towers of Nairobi, the elephant came to her again. It stood on the border between worlds and raised its trunk and its alien hands and spoke to her. It told her that only fools feared the change that would make things what they could be, and should be; that change was the special gift of whatever had made the Chaga. She knew in her dream that the elephant was speaking with the voice of Prenderleith, but she could not see him, except as a silent shadow moving in the greater dark beyond humanity's floodlights: Adam again, hunting in the Africa of his heart.

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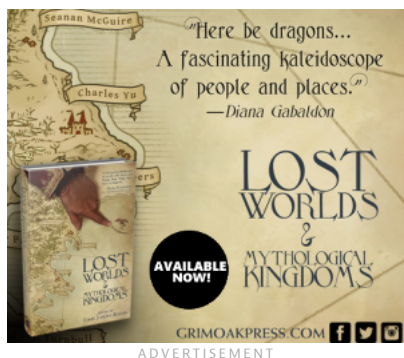
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Ian McDonald is the author of the 2011 Hugo Award-finalist *The Dervish House* and many other novels, including Hugo Award-nominees *River of Gods* and *Brasyl*, and the Philip K. Dick Award-winner *King of Morning*, *Queen for a Day*. He won a Hugo in 2006 for his novelette, "The Djinn's Wife," and has won the Locus Award and four British Science Fiction Awards. His short fiction, much of which was recently collected in *Cyberabad Days*, has appeared in magazines such as *Interzone* and *Asimov's* and in numerous anthologies. His recent book is *Be My Enemy*, part 2 of the Everness series for young readers. Part 3, *Empress of the Sun*, is coming soon. His next novel for adults will be *Luna*. He lives outside Belfast, in Northern Ireland.



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