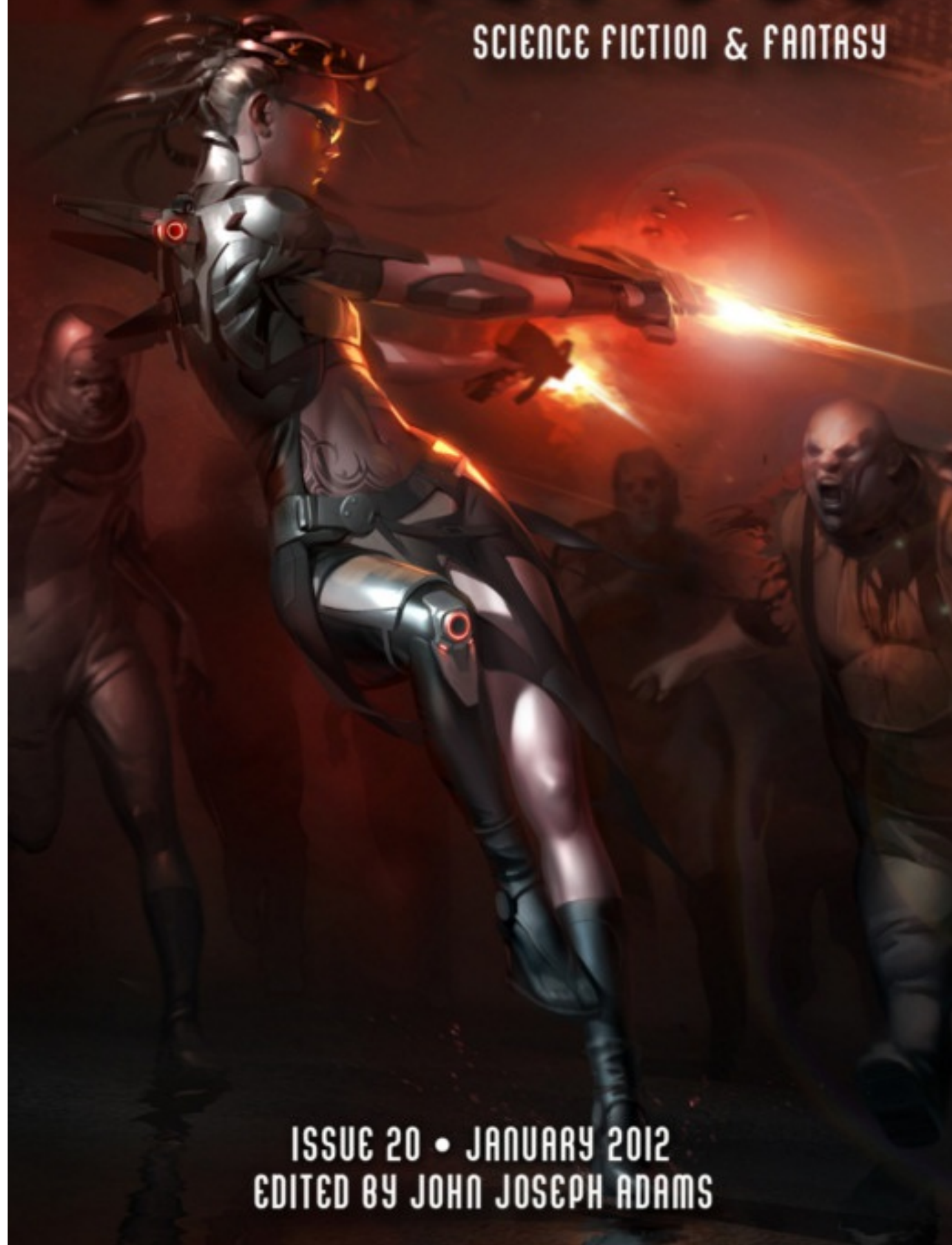


LIGHTSPEED

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY



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Editorial, January 2012

John Joseph Adams

Welcome to issue twenty of *Lightspeed*!

As we mentioned in last month's editorial, *Lightspeed* (and its sister magazine, *Fantasy*) has a new publisher—and it's me, your humble editor, John Joseph Adams. I'm excited to pick up where Prime Books left off, and I look forward to helming the magazines far into the future.

So this is our first issue under the new regime . . . and it's also the first issue featuring our new format, which combines *Lightspeed* and *Fantasy* into a single magazine. Which means, going forward, each issue of the combined magazine will contain four science fiction stories *and* four fantasy stories.

As our web readers will have noticed by now, we've revamped our website a bit to accommodate this change in our publishing model. Previously, we'd publish one new story every week on Tuesdays; from now on, we'll publish one science fiction story and one fantasy story every Tuesday (or the first four Tuesdays of the month, anyway). For our nonfiction, in the first week of the month, you'll have our editorial; in week two, you'll get

an interview with our cover artist in our Artist Showcase feature; and then in weeks three and four we'll publish our two feature interviews. (And speaking of our Artist Showcases, whereas that feature was previously only available on our website, it will now also appear in our ebook editions.)

But there are still more changes afoot. In addition to the merging of *Fantasy*'s and *Lightspeed*'s fiction content into a single magazine, from here on out, each ebook edition of *Lightspeed* will feature exclusive content that you won't find on our website—namely, in addition to the eight short stories you'll also find on our website, each ebook issue will now feature a novella-length story.

And, finally, we also have a new subscription option for you. Until now, the only way you could subscribe to *Lightspeed* was via Weightless Books. Now you can subscribe via Amazon.com and every issue of *Lightspeed* will be delivered automatically to your Kindle library (whether you use an actual Kindle or a Kindle app). Visit www.lightspeedmagazine.com/subscribe to learn more about all of our subscription options.

So! Exciting times here at *Lightspeed*. Now that we've got all that out of the way, here's what we've got on tap this month:

We have original science fiction by Megan Arkenberg

(“How Many Miles to Babylon?”) and Ken Liu (“The Five Elements of the Heart Mind”), plus SF reprints by Paul McAuley (“Gene Wars”) and Nancy Kress (“Always True to Thee, in My Fashion”). Plus, original fantasy stories by Marissa Lingen (“On the Acquisition of Phoenix Eggs (Variant)”) and Sarah Monette (“Blue Lace Agate”), and fantasy reprints by M. Rickert (“You Have Never Been Here”) and Aimee Bender (“A State of Variance”). All that plus feature interviews with bestselling author Neal Stephenson and award-winning author R. A. MacAvoy, and our usual assortment of author spotlights.

And, for our ebook readers, our ebook-exclusive novella this month is a tribute to a science fiction legend who recently passed away: We’ll be reprinting the Hugo Award-winning novella “Weyr Search” by Anne McCaffrey, the first in her iconic Dragonriders of Pern series, plus we’ll have a memorial by her son—and collaborator—Todd McCaffrey.

It’s another great issue—and the first under our new regime—so be sure to check it out. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed Magazine*!

Thanks for reading!

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as editor of *Lightspeed Magazine*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. In 2011, he was a finalist for two Hugo Awards and two World Fantasy Awards. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom* (February, Simon & Schuster), *Armored* (April, Baen Books), and *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (Fall 2012, Tor Books). John is also the co-host of io9's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

Anne McCaffrey: An Appreciation

Todd McCaffrey

Weyr Search! Oh, are you in for a treat! In fact, I'm surprised that you haven't skipped over this appreciation and dived right into the story. If you want to, do so now; I won't mind in the least. You can come back and read this later when you've found all of Mum's other books and devoured them because that, dear reader, is what you'll do if you're new to the amazing Worlds of Anne McCaffrey.

Weyr Search first appeared in *Analog*, and at the time it published, the amazing and inspiring John W. Campbell, Jr. was the editor. *Weyr Search* went on to win the fan-based Hugo Award in 1968 and the sequel, *Dragonrider*, won the Science Fiction Writers of America *Nebula* that same year.

It was an instant hit with everyone and they all wanted MORE, MORE, MORE! Fortunately, Mum managed to provide more. In fact, she wrote nearly a hundred books in all, including various collaborations with such awesome authors as Jody Lynne Nye, Elizabeth Moon, S. M. Stirling, Margaret A. Ball, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, and, indeed, myself. On Pern itself, Mum

has written over twenty books—neither of us could put an exact number on it—but it is not the quantity which matters but the *quality*, and in that she excelled.

Mum famously liked to say, “Never just return a favor, pass it on!”

She came to that honestly, as her own career was influenced by such greats as A.J. Budrys, who bought her first short story; James Blish, who encouraged her to continue writing; Judith Merrill, who included Mum’s story in *The Year’s Greatest Science Fiction*; Virginia Kidd, who was Mum’s marvelous first agent; Harlan Ellison; Isaac Asimov—the list is endless.

And she passed it on, cheerfully blurbing new authors and singing their praises, among whom are the magnificent Lois McMaster Bujold, Elizabeth Moon, Elizabeth Ann Scarborough, David Weber, David Gerrold, David Brin, Terry Pratchett—again, another endless list.

She also gladly became one of the first judges for the fledgling L. Ron Hubbard’s Writers of the Future Award (later expanded with Illustrators of the Future), just as she encouraged people to join the Science Fiction (and Fantasy) Writers of America (SFWA, the second ‘f’ is silent).

I remember how Mum and I would perform the

“collation dance” to put together SFWA Bulletins, how we’d futz with the darned mimeograph machine, cut stencils, and generally have a blast.

Mum’s house was always full of young people. When she was Secretary-Treasurer of SFWA back in Sea Cliff, Long Island, she had Gardner Dozois, Jack Dann, and many, many others over to the house to chat (and eat, for there is too much truth to the phrase “starving artist”). Years later, I attended a Clarion West writer’s workshop where Gardner, irreverent as ever, was the fifth week’s editor.

When Mum moved to Ireland she only did so with the generous help of Betty and Ian Ballantine who, perhaps more than anyone, helped the dragons to fly. Betty conceived of a cookbook of recipes from science fiction and fantasy authors and commissioned Mum to edit it, paying her such a princely advance that we could afford the move.

Before we left for Ireland, Mum had spent a long weekend with Betty Ballantine going over, line by line, what she’d written so far for *Dragonquest*, the sequel to *Dragonflight* (of which *Weyr Search* is the first part). It was Betty who said to her, “You know, Anne, I don’t think this is F’lar’s and Lessa’s story, I think this is F’nor’s and Brekke’s.” And, with that insight, Mum was

able to complete the book.

It was Andre Norton, another marvelous writer and a treasure, who said to Mum, “You should have a white dragon and it should be a sport.” And thus *The White Dragon* was born.

It was *The White Dragon* with its brilliant Michael Whelan cover that really drove Mum into prominence—and out of the “starving author” phase of life. And that, too, was started by a kind deed. The people of NESFA, the New England Science Fiction Association, invited Mum to be their guest of honor at their Boskone. It’s part of their tradition that they commission their guest of honor to write something and, marvelously, pay great money for it (it was at about this time that my younger sister said, “Gee, Mom, wouldn’t it be nice to eat pancakes for dinner because we *wanted* to?”). Mum was happy to oblige but she was in a rough patch—her mother was dying and soon died and was cremated, her only daughter had just been diagnosed with Crohn’s disease—it appeared as though all the portents were against her. She thought to herself, “It’ll be easy to write this, if I can ever find a time when I *can* write this.” And thus the title and her inspiration: *A Time When*.

And so she came to Boskone, bringing with her the ashes of her mother to lay in the family plot alongside

Mum's father, "the Kernel" as he called himself. There was a marvelous incident at Logan airport where, when asked what Mum had in a handbag, she replied, "Mother." The startled customs guy said, "Lady, I don't think you can do that."

Well, she could and she did! Perhaps that best describes her life: She could and she did.

She wanted a horse: She got a horse (Mr. Ed, and later Piemur, and Jack). She wanted a farm: She bought a farm (all forty-seven acres) and built a thriving horse livery operation on it. She wanted a house of her own design: She got a house of her own design—even though she had to dig out the better part of a hill because the county council thought it would be an eyesore . . . which is why the house is named Dragonhold-Underhill.

She was always surrounded by laughter and young people. When her own young people grew up, she filled in with *their* young people, including her grandson Owen Thomas Kennedy, and Jennifer Anne Diamond, to whom she was also godmother, and who grew up on the farm above, only a short walk through the fields.

We were lucky in that we were given plenty of warning with Mum. She had her first heart attack in 2000 and her first stroke in 2001 (mild, and it took a while to discover that it had hit her short-term memory). So, as I

told everyone, we were on “golden time” after that. I’ve had over a decade to adjust to the fact that I would lose my mother one day. So many people aren’t as lucky.

In that last decade, she and I got to write together, and she also got accolades and awards from all over, including being awarded the SFWA Grandmaster Nebula and being inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. But I’d say, her greatest thrill was not so much those as knowing that her books were flown aboard both the shuttle and the International Space Station as personal reading material by a fan, Colonel Pamela Melroy.

We have NOT lost Anne McCaffrey. You have only to read on to discover that for yourself. We’ve got her words, her hopes, her dreams—she’s shared them all with us.

So . . . what are you waiting for? Dive in! Enjoy!

Todd McCaffrey wrote his first science-fiction story when he was twelve and has been writing on and off ever since. Including the New York Times Bestselling *Dragon’s Fire*, he has written eight books in the Pern universe both solo and in collaboration with his mother, Anne McCaffrey; appeared in many anthologies, most recently with his short story, “Coward,” in *When the Hero Comes Home* (2011), and with “The Dragons of Prague” in *Dr. Who—Short Trips: Destination Prague* (2008). He is currently working on several non-Pern projects. Visit his website at www.toddmccaffrey.org.

Weyr Search

Anne McCaffrey

When is a legend legend? Why is a myth a myth? How old and disused must a fact be for it to be relegated to the category: Fairy tale? And why do certain facts remain incontrovertible, while others lose their validity to assume a shabby, unstable character?

Rukbat, in the Sagittarian sector, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets, plus one stray it had attracted and held in recent millennia. Its third planet was enveloped by air man could breathe, boasted water he could drink, and possessed a gravity which permitted man to walk confidently erect. Men discovered it, and promptly colonized it, as they did every habitable planet they came to and then . . . whether callously or through collapse of empire, the colonists never discovered, and eventually forgot to ask . . . left the colonies to fend for themselves.

When men first settled on Rukbat's third world, and named it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger-planet, swinging around its primary in a wildly erratic elliptical orbit. Within a few generations they had forgotten its existence. The desperate path the wanderer

pursued brought it close to its stepsister every two hundred [Terran] years at perihelion.

When the aspects were harmonious and the conjunction with its sister-planet close enough, as it often was, the indigenous life of the wanderer sought to bridge the space gap to the more temperate and hospitable planet.

It was during the frantic struggle to combat this menace dropping through Pern's skies like silver threads that Pern's contact with the mother-planet weakened and broke. Recollections of Earth receded further from Pernese history with each successive generation until memory of their origins degenerated past legend or myth, into oblivion.

To forestall the incursions of the dreaded Threads, the Pernese, with the ingenuity of their forgotten Yankee forebears and between first onslaught and return, developed a highly specialized variety of a life form indigenous to their adopted planet . . . the winged, tailed, and fire-breathing dragons, named for the Earth legend they resembled. Such humans as had a high empathy rating and some innate telepathic ability were trained to make use of and preserve this unusual animal whose ability to teleport was of immense value in the fierce

struggle to keep Pern bare of Threads.

The dragons and their dragonmen, a breed apart, and the shortly renewed menace they battled, created a whole new group of legends and myths.

As the menace was conquered the populace in the Holds of Pern settled into a more comfortable way of life. Most of the dragon Weyrs eventually were abandoned, and the descendants of heroes fell into disfavor, as the legends fell into disrepute.

This, then, is a tale of legends disbelieved and their restoration. Yet—how goes a legend? When is myth?

Drummer, beat, and piper, blow,

Harper, strike, and soldier, go.

Free the flame and sear the grasses

Till the dawning Red Star passes.

Lessa woke, cold. Cold with more than the chill of the everlastingly clammy stone walls. Cold with the prescience of a danger greater than when, ten full Turns ago, she had run, whimpering, to hide in the watch-wher's odorous lair.

Rigid with concentration, Lessa lay in the straw of the redolent cheese room, sleeping quarters shared with the other kitchen drudges. There was an urgency in the ominous portent unlike any other forewarning. She

touched the awareness of the watch-wher, slithering on its rounds in the courtyard. It circled at the choke-limit of its chain. It was restless, but oblivious to anything unusual in the predawn darkness.

The danger was definitely not within the walls of Hold Ruath. Nor approaching the paved perimeter without the Hold where relentless grass had forced new growth through the ancient mortar, green witness to the deterioration of the once stone-clean Hold. The danger was not advancing up the now little used causeway from the valley, nor lurking in the craftsmen's stony holdings at the foot of the Hold's cliff. It did not scent the wind that blew from Tillek's cold shores. But still it twanged sharply through her senses, vibrating every nerve in Lessa's slender frame. Fully roused, she sought to identify it before the prescient mood dissolved. She cast outward, toward the Pass, farther than she had ever pressed. Whatever threatened was not in Ruatha . . . yet. Nor did it have a familiar flavor. It was not, then, Fax.

Lessa had been cautiously pleased that Fax had not shown himself at Hold Ruath in three full Turns. The apathy of the craftsmen, the decaying farmholds, even the green-etched stones of the Hold infuriated Fax, self-styled Lord of the High Reaches, to the point where he preferred to forget the reason why he had subjugated the once

proud and profitable Hold.

Lessa picked her way among the sleeping drudges, huddled together for warmth, and glided up the worn steps to the kitchen-proper. She slipped across the cavernous kitchen to the stable-yard door. The cobbles of the yard were icy through the thin soles of her sandals and she shivered as the predawn air penetrated her patched garment.

The watch-wher slithered across the yard to greet her, pleading, as it always did, for release. Glancing fondly down at the awesome head, she promised it a good rub presently. It crouched, groaning, at the end of its chain as she continued to the grooved steps that led to the rampart over the Hold's massive gate. Atop the tower, Lessa stared toward the east where the stony breasts of the Pass rose in black relief against the gathering day.

Indecisively she swung to her left, for the sense of danger issued from that direction as well. She glanced upward, her eyes drawn to the red star which had recently begun to dominate the dawn sky. As she stared, the star radiated a final ruby pulsation before its magnificence was lost in the brightness of Pern's rising sun.

For the first time in many Turns, Lessa gave thought to matters beyond Pern, beyond her dedication to

vengeance on the murderer Fax for the annihilation of her family. Let him but come within Ruath Hold now and he would never leave.

But the brilliant ruby sparkle of the Red Star recalled the Disaster Ballads . . . grim narratives of the heroism of the dragonriders as they braved the dangers of *between* to breathe fiery death on the silver Threads that dropped through Pern's skies. Not one Thread must fall to the rich soil, to burrow deep and multiply, leaching the earth of minerals and fertility. Straining her eyes as if vision would bridge the gap between periol and person, she stared intently eastward. The watch-whet's thin, whistled question reached her just as the prescience waned.

Dawnlight illuminated the tumbled landscape, the unplowed fields in the valley below. Dawnlight fell on twisted orchards, where the sparse herds of milchbeasts hunted stray blades of spring grass. Grass in Ruatha grew where it should not, died where it should flourish. An odd brooding smile curved Lessa's lips. Fax realized no profit from his conquest of Ruatha . . . nor would he, while she, Lessa, lived. And he had not the slightest suspicion of the source of this undoing.

Or had he? Lessa wondered, her mind still reverberating from the savage prescience of danger. East lay Fax's ancestral and only legitimate Hold. Northeast

lay little but bare and stony mountains and Benden, the remaining Weyr, which protected Pern.

Lessa stretched, arching her back, inhaling the sweet, untainted wind of morning.

A cock crowed in the stableyard. Lessa whirled, her face alert, eyes darting around the outer Hold lest she be observed in such an uncharacteristic pose. She unbound her hair, letting it fall about her face concealingly. Her body drooped into the sloppy posture she affected. Quickly she thudded down the stairs, crossing to the watch-wher. It lurred piteously, its great eyes blinking against the growing daylight. Oblivious to the stench of its rank breath, she hugged the scaly head to her, scratching its ears and eye ridges. The watch-wher was ecstatic with pleasure, its long body trembling, its clipped wings rustling. It alone knew who she was or cared. And it was the only creature in all Pern she trusted since the day she had blindly sought refuge in its dark stinking lair to escape Fax's thirsty swords that had drunk so deeply of Ruathan blood.

Slowly she rose, cautioning it to remember to be as vicious to her as to all should anyone be near. It promised to obey her, swaying back and forth to emphasize its reluctance.

The first rays of the sun glanced over the Hold's outer

wall. Crying out, the watch-wher darted into its dark nest. Lessa crept back to the kitchen and into the cheese room.

From the Weyr and from the Bowl
Bronze and brown and blue and green
Rise the dragonmen of Pern,
Aloft, on wing, seen, then unseen.

F'lar on bronze Mnementh's great neck appeared first in the skies above the chief Hold of Fax, so-called Lord of the High Reaches. Behind him, in proper wedge formation, the wingmen came into sight. F'lar checked the formation automatically; as precise as at the moment of entry to *between*.

As Mnementh curved in an arc that would bring them to the perimeter of the Hold, consonant with the friendly nature of this visitation, F'lar surveyed with mounting aversion the disrepair of the ridge defences. The firestone pits were empty and the rock-cut gutters radiating from the pits were green-tinged with a mossy growth.

Was there even one lord in Pern who maintained his Hold rocky in observance of the ancient Laws? F'lar's lips tightened to a thinner line. When this Search was

over and the Impression made, there would have to be a solemn, punitive Council held at the Weyr. And by the golden shell of the queen, he, F'lar, meant to be its moderator. He would replace lethargy with industry. He would scour the green and dangerous scum from the heights of Pern, the grass blades from its stoneworks. No verdant skirt would be condoned in any farmhold. And the tithings which had been so miserly, so grudgingly presented would, under pain of firestoning, flow with decent generosity into the Dragon weyr.

Mnementh rumbled approvingly as he vanned his pinions to land lightly on the grass-etched flagstones of Fax's Hold. The bronze dragon furled his great wings, and F'lar heard the warning claxon in the Hold's Great Tower. Mnementh dropped to his knees as F'lar indicated he wished to dismount. The bronze rider stood by Mnementh's huge wedgeshaped head, politely awaiting the arrival of the Hold lord. F'lar idly gazed down the valley, hazy with warm spring sunlight. He ignored the furtive heads that peered at the dragonman from the parapet slits and the cliff windows.

F'lar did not turn as a rush of air announced the arrival of the rest of the wing. He knew, however, when F'nor, the brown rider, his half-brother, took the customary position on his left, a dragon-length to the rear.

F'lar caught a glimpse of F'nor's boot-heel twisting to death the grass crowding up between the stones.

An order, muffled to an intense whisper, issued from within the great court, beyond the open gates. Almost immediately a group of men marched into sight, led by a heavy-set man of medium height.

Mnementh arched his neck, angling his head so that his chin rested on the ground. Mnementh's many faceted eyes, on a level with F'lar's head, fastened with disconcerting interest on the approaching party. The dragons could never understand why they generated such abject fear in common folk. At only one point in his life span would a dragon attack a human and that could be excused on the grounds of simple ignorance. F'lar could not explain to the dragon the politics behind the necessity of inspiring awe in the holders, lord and craftsman alike. He could only observe that the fear and apprehension showing in the faces of the advancing squad which troubled Mnementh was oddly pleasing to him, F'lar.

“Welcome, Bronze Rider, to the Hold of Fax, Lord of the High Reaches. He is at your service,” and the man made an adequately respectful salute.

The use of the third person pronoun could be construed, by the meticulous, to be a veiled insult. This fit

in with the information F'lar had on Fax; so he ignored it. His information was also correct in describing Fax as a greedy man. It showed in the restless eyes which flicked at every detail of F'lar's clothing, at the slight frown when the intricately etched sword-hilt was noticed.

F'lar noticed, in his own turn, the several rich rings which flashed on Fax's left hand. The overlord's right hand remained slightly cocked after the habit of the professional swordsman. His tunic, of rich fabric, was stained and none too fresh. The man's feet, in heavy wher-hide boots, were solidly planted, weight balanced forward on his toes. A man to be treated cautiously, F'lar decided, as one should the conqueror of five neighboring Holds. Such greedy audacity was in itself a revelation. Fax had married into a sixth . . . and had legally inherited, however unusual the circumstances, the seventh. He was a lecherous man by reputation.

Within these seven Holds, F'lar anticipated a profitable Search. Let R'gul go southerly to pursue Search among the indolent, if lovely, women there. The Weyr needed a strong woman this time; Jora had been worse than useless with Nemorth. Adversity, uncertainty: those were the conditions that bred the qualities F'lar wanted in a weyrwoman.

“We ride in Search,” F'lar drawled softly, “and

request the hospitality of your Hold, Lord Fax.”

Fax’s eyes widened imperceptibly at mention of Search.

“I had heard Jora was dead,” Fax replied, dropping the third person abruptly as if F’lar had passed some sort of test by ignoring it. “So Nemorth has a new queen, hm-m-m?” he continued, his eyes darting across the rank of the ring, noting the disciplined stance of the riders, the healthy color of the dragons.

F’lar did not dignify the obvious with an answer.

“And, my Lord . . .” Fax hesitated, expectantly inclining his head slightly toward the dragonman.

For a pulse beat, F’lar wondered if the man were deliberately provoking him with such subtle insults. The name of bronze riders should be as well known throughout Pern as the name of the Dragonqueen and her Weyrwoman. F’lar kept his face composed, his eyes on Fax’s.

Leisurely, with the proper touch of arrogance, F’nor stepped forward, stopping slightly behind Mnementh’s head, one hand negligently touching the jaw hinge of the huge beast.

“The Bronze Rider of Mnementh, Lord F’lar, will require quarters for himself. I, F’nor, brown rider, prefer to be lodged with the wingmen. We are, in number,

twelve.”

F’lar liked that touch of F’nor’s, totting up the wing strength, as if Fax were incapable of counting. F’nor had phrased it so adroitly as to make it impossible for Fax to protest the insult.

“Lord F’lar,” Fax said through teeth fixed in a smile, “the High Reaches are honored with your Search.”

“It will be to the credit of the High Reaches,” F’lar replied smoothly, “if one of its own supplies the Weyr.”

“To our everlasting credit,” Fax replied as suavely. “In the old days, many notable weyrwomen came from my Holds.”

“Your Holds?” asked F’lar, politely smiling as he emphasized the plural. “Ah, yes, you are now overlord of Ruatha, are you not? There have been many from that Hold.”

A strange tense look crossed Fax’s face. “Nothing good comes from Ruath Hold.” Then he stepped aside, gesturing F’lar to enter the Hold.

Fax’s troop leader barked a hasty order and the men formed two lines, their metal-edged boots flicking sparks from the stones.

At unspoken orders, all the dragons rose with a great churning of air and dust. F’lar strode nonchalantly past

the welcoming files. The men were rolling their eyes in alarm as the beasts glided above to the inner courts. Someone on the high tower uttered a frightened yelp as Mnementh took his position on that vantage point. His great wings drove phosphoric-scented air across the inner court as he maneuvered his great frame onto the inadequate landing space.

Outwardly oblivious to the consternation, fear and awe the dragons inspired, F'lar was secretly amused and rather pleased by the effect. Lords of the Holds needed this reminder that they must deal with dragons, not just with riders, who were men, mortal and murderable. The ancient respect for dragonmen as well as dragonkind must be rein-stilled in modern breasts.

“The Hold has just risen from the table, Lord F'lar, if . . .” Fax suggested. His voice trailed off at F'lar's smiling refusal.

“Convey my duty to your lady, Lord Fax,” F'lar rejoined, noticing with inward satisfaction the tightening of Fax's jaw muscles at the ceremonial request.

“You would prefer to see your quarters first?” Fax countered.

F'lar flicked an imaginary speck from his soft wher-hide sleeve and shook his head. Was the man buying time to sequester his ladies as the old time lords had?

“Duty first,” he said with a rueful shrug.

“Of course,” Fax all but snapped and strode smartly ahead, his heels pounding out the anger he could not express otherwise. F’lar decided he had guessed correctly.

F’lar and F’nor followed at a slower pace through the double-doored entry with its massive metal panels, into the great hall, carved into the cliffside.

“They eat not badly,” F’nor remarked casually to F’lar, appraising the remnants still on the table.

“Better than the Weyr, it would seem,” F’lar replied dryly.

“Young roasts and tender,” F’nor said in a bitter undertone, “while the stringy, barren beasts are delivered up to us.”

“The change is overdue,” F’lar murmured, then raised his voice to conversational level. “A well-favored hall,” he was saying amiably as they reached Fax. Their reluctant host stood in the portal to the inner Hold, which, like all such Holds, burrowed deep into stone, traditional refuge of all in time of peril.

Deliberately, F’lar turned back to the banner-hung Hall. “Tell me, Lord Fax, do you adhere to the old practices and mount a dawn guard?”

Fax frowned, trying to grasp F’lar’s meaning.

“There is always a guard at the Tower.”

“An easterly guard?”

Fax’s eyes jerked toward F’lar, then to F’nor.

“There are always guards,” he answered sharply, “on all the approaches.”

“Oh, just the approaches,” and F’lar nodded wisely to F’nor.

“Where else?” demanded Fax, concerned, glancing from one dragonman to the other.

“I must ask that of your harper. You do keep a trained harper in your Hold?”

“Of course. I have several trained harpers,” and Fax jerked his shoulders straighter.

F’lar affected not to understand.

“Lord Fax is the overlord of six other Holds,” F’nor reminded his wingleader.

“Of course,” F’lar assented, with exactly the same inflection Fax had used a moment before.

The mimicry did not go unnoticed by Fax but as he was unable to construe deliberate insult out of an innocent affirmative, he stalked into the glow-lit corridors. The dragonmen followed.

The women’s quarters in Fax’s Hold had been moved from the traditional innermost corridors to those at cliff-face. Sunlight poured down from three double-shuttered,

deep-casement windows in the outside wall. F'lar noted that the bronze hinges were well oiled, and the sills regulation spearlength. Fax had not, at least, diminished the protective wall.

The chamber was richly hung with appropriately gentle scenes of women occupied in all manner of feminine tasks. Doors gave off the main chamber on both sides into smaller sleeping alcoves and from these, at Fax's bidding, his women hesitantly emerged. Fax sternly gestured to a blue-gowned woman, her hair white-streaked, her face lined with disappointments and bitterness, her body swollen with pregnancy. She advanced awkwardly, stopping several feet from her lord. From her attitude, F'lar deduced that she came no closer to Fax than was absolutely necessary.

"The Lady of Crom, mother of my heirs," Fax said without pride or cordiality.

"My Lady . . ." F'lar hesitated, waiting for her name to be supplied.

She glanced warily at her lord.

"Gemma," Fax snapped curtly.

F'lar bowed deeply. "My Lady Gemma, the Weyr is on Search and requests the Hold's hospitality."

"My Lord F'lar," the Lady Gemma replied in a low voice, "you are most welcome."

F'lar did not miss the slight slur on the adverb nor the fact that Gemma had no trouble naming him. His smile was warmer than courtesy demanded, warm with gratitude and sympathy. Looking at the number of women in these quarters, F'lar thought there might be one or two Lady Gemma could bid farewell without regret.

Fax preferred his women plump and small. There wasn't a saucy one in the lot. If there once had been, the spirit had been beaten out of her. Fax, no doubt, was stud, not lover. Some of the covey had not all winter long made much use of water, judging by the amount of sweet oil gone rancid in their hair. Of them all, if these were all, the Lady Gemma was the only willful one; and she, too old.

The amenities over, Fax ushered his unwelcome guests outside, and led the way to the quarters he had assigned the bronze rider.

"A pleasant room," F'lar acknowledged, stripping off gloves and wher-hide tunic, throwing them carelessly to the table. "I shall see to my men and the beasts. They have been fed recently," he commented, pointing up Fax's omission in inquiring. "I request liberty to wander through the crafthold."

Fax sourly granted what was a dragonman's traditional privilege.

"I shall not further disrupt your routine, Lord Fax, for

you must have many demands on you, with seven Holds to supervise.” F’lar inclined his body slightly to the overlord, turning away as a gesture of dismissal. He could imagine the infuriated expression on Fax’s face from the stamping retreat.

F’nor and the men had settled themselves in a hastily vacated barrackroom. The dragons were perched comfortably on the rocky ridges above the Hold. Each rider kept his dragon in light, but alert, charge. There were to be no incidents on a Search.

As a group, the dragonmen rose at F’lar’s entrance.

“No tricks, no troubles, but look around closely,” he said laconically. “Return by sundown with the names of any likely prospects.” He caught F’nor’s grin, remembering how Fax had slurred over some names. “Descriptions are in order and craft affiliation.”

The men nodded, their eyes glinting with understanding. They were flatteringly confident of a successful Search even as F’lar’s doubts grew now that he had seen Fax’s women. By all logic, the pick of the High Reaches should be in Fax’s chief Hold . . . but they were not. Still, there were many large craftholds not to mention the six other High Holds to visit. All the same . . .

In unspoken accord F'lar and F'nor left the barracks. The men would follow, unobtrusively, in pairs or singly, to reconnoiter the crafthold and the nearer farmholds. The men were as overtly eager to be abroad as F'lar was privately. There had been a time when dragonmen were frequent and favored guests in all the great Holds throughout Pern, from southern Fo'rt to high north Igen. This pleasant custom, too, had died along with other observances, evidence of the low regard in which the Weyr was presently held. F'lar vowed to correct this.

He forced himself to trace in memory the insidious changes. The Records, which each Weyrwoman kept, were proof of the gradual, but perceptible, decline, traceable through the past two hundred full Turns. Knowing the facts did not alleviate the condition. And F'lar was of that scant handful in the Weyr itself who did credit Records and Ballad alike. The situation might shortly reverse itself radically if the old tales were to be believed.

There was a reason, an explanation, a purpose, F'lar felt, for every one of the Weyr laws from First Impression to the Firestone: from the grass-free heights to ridge-running gutters. For elements as minor as controlling the appetite of a dragon to limiting the inhabitants of the Weyr. Although why the other five Weyrs had been

abandoned, F'lar did not know. Idly he wondered if there were records, dusty and crumbling, lodged in the disused Weyrs. He must contrive to check when next his wings flew patrol. Certainly there was no explanation in Benden Weyr.

“There is industry but no enthusiasm,” F'nor was saying, drawing F'lar's attention back to their tour of the crafthold.

They had descended the guttered ramp from the Hold into the crafthold proper, the broad roadway lined with cottages up to the imposing stone crafthalls. Silently F'lar noted moss-clogged gutters on the roofs, the vines clasping the walls. It was painful for one of his calling to witness the flagrant disregard of simple safety precautions. Growing things were forbidden near the habitations of mankind.

“News travels fast,” F'nor chuckled, nodding at a hurrying craftsman, in the smock of a baker, who gave them a mumbled good day. “Not a female in sight.”

His observation was accurate. Women should be abroad at this hour, bringing in supplies from the storehouses, washing in the river on such a bright warm day, or going out to the farmholds to help with planting. Not a gowned figure in sight.

“We used to be preferred mates,” F'nor remarked

caustically.

“We’ll visit the Clothmen’s Hall first. If my memory serves me right . . .”

“As it always does . . .” F’nor interjected wryly. He took no advantage of their blood relationship but he was more at ease with the bronze rider than most of the dragonmen, the other bronze riders included. F’lar was reserved in a close-knit society of easy equality. He flew a tightly disciplined wing but men maneuvered to serve under him. His wing always excelled in the Games. None ever floundered in *between* to disappear forever and no beast in his wing sickened, leaving a man in dragonless exile from the Weyr, a part of him numb forever.

“L’tol came this way and settled in one of the High Reaches,” F’lar continued.

“L’tol?”

“Yes, a green rider from S’lel’s wing. You remember.”

An ill-timed swerve during the Spring Games had brought L’tol and his beast into the full blast of a phosphene emission from S’lel’s bronze Tuenth. L’tol had been thrown from his beast’s neck as the dragon tried to evade the blast. Another wingmate had swooped to catch the rider but the green dragon, his left wing crisped, his body scorched, had died of shock and phosphene

poisoning.

“L’tol would aid our Search,” F’nor agreed as the two dragonmen walked up to the bronze doors of the Clothmen’s Hall. They paused on the threshold, adjusting their eyes to the dimmer light within. Glows punctuated the wall recesses and hung in clusters above the larger looms where the finer tapestries and fabrics were woven by master craftsmen. The pervading mood was one of quiet, purposeful industry.

Before their eyes had adapted, however, a figure glided to them, with a polite, if curt, request for them to follow him.

They were led to the right of the entrance, to a small office, curtained from the main hall. Their guide turned to them, his face visible in the wallglows. There was that air about him that marked him indefinably as a dragonman. But his face was lined deeply, one side seamed with old burn marks. His eyes, sick with a hungry yearning, dominated his face. He blinked constantly.

“I am now Lytol,” he said in a harsh voice.

F’lar nodded acknowledgment.

“You would be F’lar,” Lytol said, “and you, F’nor. You’ve both the look of your sire.”

F’lar nodded again.

Lytol swallowed convulsively, the muscles in his face twitching as the presence of dragonmen revived his awareness of exile. He essayed a smile.

“Dragons in the sky! The news spread faster than Threads.”

“Nemorth has a new queen.”

“Jora dead?” Lytol asked concernedly, his face cleared of its nervous movement for a second.

F’lar nodded.

Lytol grimaced bitterly. “R’gul again, huh.” He stared off in the middle distance, his eyelids quiet but the muscles along his jaw took up the constant movement. “You’ve the High Reaches? All of them?” Lytol asked, turning back to the dragonman, a slight emphasis on “all.”

F’lar gave an affirmative nod again.

“You’ve seen the women.” Lytol’s disgust showed through the words. It was a statement, not a question, for he hurried on. “Well, there are no better in all the High Reaches,” and his tone expressed utmost disdain.

“Fax likes his women comfortably fleshed and docile,” Lytol rattled on. “Even the Lady Gemma has learned. It’d be different if he didn’t need her family’s support. Ah, it would be different indeed. So he keeps her pregnant, hoping to kill her in childbed one day. And he

will. He will.”

Lytol drew himself up, squaring his shoulders, turning full to the two dragonmen. His expression was vindictive, his voice low and tense.

“Kill that tyrant, for the sake and safety of Pern. Of the Weyr. Of the queen. He only bides his time. He spreads discontent among the other lords. He” . . . Lytol’s laughter had an hysterical edge to it now . . . “he fancies himself as good as dragonmen.”

“There are no candidates then in this Hold?” F’lar said, his voice sharp enough to cut through the man’s preoccupation with his curious theory.

Lytol stared at the bronze rider. “Did I not say it?”

“What of Ruath Hold?”

Lytol stopped shaking his head and looked sharply at F’lar, his lips curling in a cunning smile. He laughed mirthlessly.

“You think to find a Torene, or a Moreta, hidden at Ruath Hold in these times? Well, all of that Blood are dead. Fax’s blade was thirsty that day. He knew the truth of those harpers’ tales, that Ruathan lords gave full measure of hospitality to dragonmen and the Ruathan were a breed apart. There were, you know,” Lytol’s voice dropped to a confiding whisper, “exiled Weyrmen like myself in that Line.”

F'lar nodded gravely, unable to contradict the man's pitiful attempt at self-esteem.

"No," and Lytol chuckled softly. "Fax gets nothing from that Hold but trouble. And the women Fax used to take . . ." his laugh turned nasty in tone. "It is rumored he was impotent for months afterward."

"Any families in the holdings with Weyr blood?"

Lytol frowned, glanced surprised at F'lar. He rubbed the scarred side of his face thoughtfully.

"There were," he admitted slowly. "There were. But I doubt if any live on." He thought a moment longer, then shook his head emphatically.

F'lar shrugged.

"I wish I had better news for you," Lytol murmured.

"No matter," F'lar reassured him, one hand poised to part the hanging in the doorway.

Lytol came up to him swiftly, his voice urgent.

"Heed what I say, Fax is ambitious. Force R'gul, or whoever is Weyrleader next, to keep watch on the High Reaches."

Lytol jabbed a finger in the direction of the Hold. "He scoffs openly at tales of the Threads. He taunts the harpers for the stupid nonsense of the old ballads and has banned from their repertoire all dragonlore. The new generation will grow up totally ignorant of duty, tradition

and precaution.”

F’lar was surprised to hear that on top of Lytol’s other disclosures. Yet the Red Star pulsed in the sky and the time was drawing near when they would hysterically reavow the old allegiances in fear for their very lives.

“Have you been abroad in the early morning of late?” asked F’nor, grinning maliciously.

“I have,” Lytol breathed out in a hushed, choked whisper. “I have . . .” A groan was wrenched from his guts and he whirled away from the dragonmen, his head bowed between hunched shoulders. “Go,” he said, gritting his teeth. And, as they hesitated, he pleaded, “Go!”

F’lar walked quickly from the room, followed by F’nor. The bronze rider crossed the quiet dim Hall with long strides and exploded into the startling sunlight. His momentum took him into the center of the square. There he stopped so abruptly that F’nor, hard on his heels, nearly collided with him.

“We will spend exactly the same time within the other Halls,” he announced in a tight voice, his face averted from F’nor’s eyes. F’lar’s throat was constricted. It was difficult, suddenly, for him to speak. He swallowed hard, several times.

“To be dragonless . . .” murmured F’nor, pityingly.

The encounter with Lytol had roiled his depths in a mournful way to which he was unaccustomed. That F'lar appeared equally shaken went far to dispel F'nor's private opinion that his half-brother was incapable of emotion.

“There is no other way once First Impression has been made. You know that,” F'lar roused himself to say curtly. He strode off to the Hall bearing the Leathermen's device.

The Hold is barred
The Hall is bare.
And men vanish.
The soil is barren,
The rock is bald.
All hope banish.

Lessa was shoveling ashes from the hearth when the agitated messenger staggered into the Great Hall. She made herself as inconspicuous as possible so the Warder would not dismiss her. She had contrived to be sent to the Great Hall that morning, knowing that the Warder intended to brutalize the Head Clothman for the shoddy quality of the goods readied for shipment to Fax.

“Fax is coming! With dragonmen!” the man gasped

out as he plunged into the dim Great Hall.

The Warder, who had been about to lash the Head Clothman, turned, stunned, from his victim. The courier, a farmholder from the edge of Ruatha, stumbled up to the Warder, so excited with his message that he grabbed the Warder's arm.

“How dare you leave your Hold?” and the Warder aimed his lash at the astonished holder. The force of the first blow knocked the man from his feet. Yelping, he scrambled out of reach of a second lashing. “Dragonmen indeed! Fax? Ha! He shuns Ruatha. There!” The Warder punctuated each denial with another blow, kicking the helpless wretch for good measure, before he turned breathless to glare at the clothman and the two underwarders. “How did he get in here with such a threadbare lie?” The Warder stalked to the great door. It was flung open just as he reached out for the iron handle. The ashenfaced guard officer rushed in, nearly toppling the Warder.

“Dragonmen! Dragons! All over Ruatha!” the man gibbered, arms flailing wildly. He, too, pulled at the Warder's arm, dragging the stupefied official toward the outer courtyard, to bear out the truth of his statement.

Lessa scooped up the last pile of ashes. Picking up her equipment, she slipped out of the Great Hall. There was a

very pleased smile on her face under the screen of matted hair.

A dragonman at Ruatha! She must somehow contrive to get Fax so humiliated, or so infuriated, that he would renounce his claim to the Hold, in the presence of a dragonman. Then she could claim her birthright.

But she would have to be extraordinarily wary. Dragonriders were men apart. Anger did not cloud their intelligence. Greed did not sully their judgment. Fear did not dull their reactions. Let the dense-witted believe human sacrifice, unnatural lusts, insane revel. She was not so gullible. And those stories went against her grain. Dragonmen were still human and there was Weyr blood in her veins. It was the same color as that of anyone else; enough of hers had been spilled to prove that.

She halted for a moment, catching a sudden shallow breath. Was this the danger she had sensed four days ago at dawn? The final encounter in her struggle to regain the Hold? No . . . there had been more to that portent than revenge.

The ash bucket banged against her shins as she shuffled down the low-ceilinged corridor to the stable door. Fax would find a cold welcome. She had laid no new fire on the hearth. Her laugh echoed back unpleasantly from the damp walls. She rested her bucket

and propped her broom and shovel as she wrestled with the heavy bronze door that gave into the new stables.

They had been built outside the cliff of Ruatha by Fax's first Warder, a subtler man than all eight of his successors. He had achieved more than all others and Lessa had honestly regretted the necessity of his death. But he would have made her revenge impossible. He would have caught her out before she had learned how to camouflage herself and her little interferences. What had his name been? She could not recall. Well, she regretted his death.

The second man had been properly greedy and it had been easy to set up a pattern of misunderstanding between Warder and craftsmen. That one had been determined to squeeze all profit from Ruathan goods so that some of it would drop into his pocket before Fax suspected a shortage. The craftsmen who had begun to accept the skillful diplomacy of the first Warder bitterly resented the second's grasping, high-handed ways. They resented the passing of the Old Line and, even more so, the way of its passing. They were unforgiving of insult to Ruatha, its now secondary position in the High Reaches, and they resented the individual indignities that holders, craftsmen and farmers alike suffered under the second Warder. It took little manipulation to arrange for matters

at Ruatha to go from bad to worse.

The second was replaced and his successor fared no better. He was caught diverting goods, the best of the goods at that. Fax had had him executed. His bony head still hung in the main firepit above the great Tower.

The present incumbent had not been able to maintain the Hold in even the sorry condition in which he had assumed its management. Seemingly simple matters developed rapidly into disasters. Like the production of cloth . . . Contrary to his boasts to Fax, the quality had not improved, and the quantity had fallen off.

Now Fax was here. And with dragonmen! Why dragonmen? The import of the question froze Lessa, and the heavy door closing behind her barked her heels painfully. Dragonmen used to be frequent visitors at Ruatha, that she knew, and even vaguely remembered. Those memories were like a harper's tale, told of someone else, not something within her own experience. She had limited her fierce attention to Ruatha only. She could not even recall the name of Queen or Weyrwoman from the instructions of her childhood, nor could she recall hearing mention of any queen or weyrwoman by anyone in the Hold these past ten Turns.

Perhaps the dragonmen were finally going to call the lords of the Holds to task for the disgraceful show of

greenery about the Holds. Well, Lessa was to blame for much of that in Ruatha but she defied even a dragonman to confront her with her guilt. Did all Ruatha fall to the Threads it would be better than remaining dependent to Fax! The heresy shocked Lessa even as she thought it.

Wishing she could as easily unburden her conscience of such blasphemy, she ditched the ashes on the stable midden. There was a sudden change in air pressure around her. Then a fleeting shadow caused her to glance up.

From behind the cliff above glided a dragon, its enormous wings spread to their fullest as he caught the morning updraft. Turning effortlessly, he descended. A second, a third, a full wing of dragons followed in soundless flight and patterned descent, graceful and awesome. The claxon rang belatedly from the Tower and from within the kitchens there issued the screams and shrieks of the terrified drudges.

Lessa took cover. She ducked into the kitchen where she was instantly seized by the assistant cook and thrust with a buffet and a kick toward the sinks. There she was put to scrubbing grease-encrusted serving bowls with cleansing sand.

The yelping canines were already lashed to the spitrun, turning a scrawny herdbeast that had been set to

roast. The cook was ladling seasonings on the carcass, swearing at having to offer so poor a meal to so many guests, and some of them high-rank. Winter-dried fruits from the last scanty harvest had been set to soak and two of the oldest drudges were scraping roots.

An apprentice cook was kneading bread; another, carefully spicing a sauce. Looking fixedly at him, she diverted his hand from one spice box to a less appropriate one as he gave a final shake to the concoction. She added too much wood to the wall oven, insuring ruin for the breads. She controlled the canines deftly, slowing one and speeding the other so that the meat would be underdone on one side, burned on the other. That the feast should be a fiasco, the food presented found inedible, was her whole intention.

Above in the Hold, she had no doubt that certain other measures, undertaken at different times for this exact contingency, were being discovered.

Her fingers bloodied from a beating, one of the Warder's women came shrieking into the kitchen, hopeful of refuge there.

“Insects have eaten the best blankets to shreds! And a canine who had littered on the best linens snarled at me as she gave suck! And the rushes are noxious, the best chambers full of debris driven in by the winter wind.

Somebody left the shutters ajar. Just a tiny bit, but it was enough . . .” the woman wailed, clutching her hand to her breast and rocking back and forth.

Lessa bent with great industry to shine the plates.

Watch-wher, watch-wher,
In your lair,
Watch well, watch-wher!
Who goes there?

“The watch-wher is hiding something,” F’lar told F’nor as they consulted in the hastily cleaned Great Hall. The room delighted to hold the wintry chill although a generous fire now burned on the hearth.

“It was but gibbering when Canth spoke to it,” F’nor remarked. He was leaning against the mantel, turning slightly from side to side to gather some warmth. He watched his wingleader’s impatient pacing.

“Mnementh is calming it down,” F’lar replied. “He may be able to sort out the nightmare. The creature may be more senile than aware, but . . .”

“I doubt it,” F’nor concurred helpfully. He glanced with apprehension up at the webhung ceiling. He was

certain he'd found most of the crawlers, but he didn't fancy their sting. Not on top of the discomforts already experienced in this forsaken Hold. If the night stayed mild, he intended curling up with Canth on the heights. "That would be more reasonable than anything Fax or his Warder have suggested."

"Hm-m-m," F'lar muttered, frowning at the brown rider.

"Well, it's unbelievable that Ruatha could have fallen to such disrepair in ten short Turns. Every dragon caught the feeling of power and it's obvious the watch-wher had been tampered with. That takes a good deal of control."

"From someone of the Blood," F'lar reminded him.

F'nor shot his wingleader a quick look, wondering if he could possibly be serious in the light of all information to the contrary.

"I grant you there is power here, F'lar," F'nor conceded. "It could easily be a hidden male of the old Blood. But we need a female. And Fax made it plain, in his inimitable fashion, that he left none of the old Blood alive in the Hold the day he took it. No, no." The brown rider shook his head, as if he could dispel the lack of faith in his wingleader's curious insistence that the Search would end in Ruath with Ruathan blood.

"That watch-wher is hiding something and only

someone of the Blood of its Hold can arrange that,” F’lar said emphatically. He gestured around the Hall and toward the walls, bare of hangings. “Ruatha has been overcome. But she resists . . . subtly. I say it points to the old Blood, *and* power. Not power alone.”

The obstinate expression in F’lar’s eyes, the set of his jaw, suggested that F’nor seek another topic.

“The pattern was well-flown today,” F’nor suggested tentatively. “Does a dragonman good to ride a flaming beast. Does the beast good, too. Keeps the digestive process in order.”

F’lar nodded sober agreement. “Let R’gul temporize as he chooses. It is fitting and proper to ride a firespouting beast and these holders need to be reminded of Weyr power.”

“Right now, anything would help our prestige,” F’nor commented sourly. “What had Fax to say when he hailed you in the Pass?” F’nor knew his question was almost impertinent but if it were, F’lar would ignore it.

F’lar’s slight smile was unpleasant and there was an ominous glint in his amber eyes.

“We talked of rule and resistance.”

“Did he not also draw on you?” F’nor asked.

F’lar’s smile deepened. “Until he remembered I was dragon-mounted.”

“He’s considered a vicious fighter,” F’nor said.

“I am at some disadvantage?” F’lar asked, turning sharply on his brown rider, his face too controlled.

“To my knowledge, no,” F’nor reassured his leader quickly. F’lar had tumbled every man in the Weyr, efficiently and easily. “But Fax kills often and without cause.”

“And because we dragonmen do not seek blood, we are not to be feared as fighters?” snapped F’lar. “Are you ashamed of your heritage?”

“I? No!” F’nor sucked in his breath. “Nor any of our wing!” he added proudly. “But there is that in the attitude of the men in this progression of Fax’s that . . . that makes me wish some excuse to fight.”

“As you observed today, Fax seeks some excuse. And,” F’lar added thoughtfully, “there is something here in Ruatha that unnerves our noble overlord.”

He caught sight of Lady Tela, whom Fax had so courteously assigned him for comfort during the progression, waving to him from the inner Hold portal.

“A case in point. Fax’s Lady Tela is some three months gone.”

F’nor frowned at the insult to his leader.

“She giggles incessantly and appears so addlepat that one cannot decide whether she babbles out of

ignorance or at Fax's suggestion. As she has apparently not bathed all winter, and is not, in any case, my ideal, I have . . .” F'lar grinned maliciously “ . . . deprived myself of her kind offices.”

F'nor hastily cleared his throat and his expression as Lady Tela approached them. He caught the unappealing odor from the scarf or handkerchief she waved constantly. Dragonmen endured a great deal for the Weyr. He moved away, with apparent courtesy, to join the rest of the dragonmen entering the Hall.

F'lar turned with equal courtesy to Lady Tela as she jabbered away about the terrible condition of the rooms which Lady Gemma and the other ladies had been assigned.

“The shutters, both sets, were ajar all winter long and you should have seen the trash on the floors. We finally got two of the drudges to sweep it all into the fireplace. And then that smoked something fearful ‘till a man was sent up.” Lady Tela giggled. “He found the access blocked by a chimney stone fallen aslant. The rest of the chimney, for a wonder, was in good repair.”

She waved her handkerchief. F'lar held his breath as the gesture wafted an unappealing odor in his direction.

He glanced up the Hall toward the inner Hold door

and saw Lady Gemma descending, her steps slow and awkward. Some subtle difference about her gait attracted him and he stared at her, trying to identify it.

“Oh, yes, poor Lady Gemma,” Lady Tela babbled, sighing deeply. “We are so concerned. Why Lord Fax insisted on her coming, I do not know. She is not near her time and yet . . .” The lighthead’s concern sounded sincere.

F’lar’s incipient hatred for Fax and his brutality matured abruptly. He left his partner chattering to thin air and courteously extended his arm to Lady Gemma to support her down the steps and to the table. Only the brief tightening of her fingers on his forearm betrayed her gratitude. Her face was very white and drawn, the lines deeply etched around mouth and eyes, showing the effort she was expending.

“Some attempt has been made, I see, to restore order to the Hall,” she remarked in a conversational tone.

“Some,” F’lar admitted dryly, glancing around the grandly proportioned Hall, its rafter festooned with the webs of many Turns. The inhabitants of those gossamer nests dropped from time to time, with ripe splats, to the floor, onto the table and into the serving platters. Nothing replaced the old banners of the Ruathan Blood, which had been removed from the stark brown stone walls. Fresh

rushes did obscure the greasy flagstones. The trestle tables appeared recently sanded and scraped, and the platters gleamed dully in the refreshed glows.

Unfortunately, the brighter light was a mistake for it was much too unflattering.

“This was such a graceful Hall,” Lady Gemma murmured for F’lar’s ears alone.

“You were a friend?” he asked, politely.

“Yes, in my youth.” Her voice dropped expressively on the last word, evoking for F’lar a happier girlhood. “It was a noble line!”

“Think you *one* might have escaped the sword?”

Lady Gemma flashed him a startled look, then quickly composed her features, lest the exchange be noted. She gave a barely perceptible shake of her head and then shifted her awkward weight to take her place at the table. Graciously she inclined her head toward F’lar, both dismissing and thanking him.

F’lar returned to his own partner and placed her at the table on his left. As the only person of rank who would dine that night at Ruath Hold, Lady Gemma was seated on his right; Fax would be beyond her. The dragonmen and Fax’s upper soldiery would sit at the lower tables. No guildmen had been invited to Ruatha. Fax arrived just then with his current lady and two underleaders, the

Warder bowing them effusively into the Hall. The man, F'lar noticed, kept a good distance from his overlord . . . as well as a Warder might whose responsibility was in this sorry condition. F'lar flicked a crawler away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lady Gemma wince and shudder.

Fax stamped up to the raised table, his face black with suppressed rage. He pulled back his chair roughly, slamming it into Lady Gemma's before he seated himself. He pulled the chair to the table with a force that threatened to rock the none too stable trestle-top from its supporting legs. Scowling, he inspected his goblet and plate, fingering the surface, ready to throw them aside if they displeased him.

“A roast and fresh bread, Lord Fax, and such fruits and roots as are left. Had I but known of your arrival, I could have sent to Crom for . . .”

“Sent to Crom?” roared Fax, slamming the plate he was inspecting into the table so forcefully the rim bent under his hands. The Warder winced again as if he himself had been maimed.

“The day one of my Holds cannot support itself *or* the visit of its rightful overlord, I shall renounce it.”

Lady Gemma gasped. Simultaneously the dragons

roared. F'lar felt the unmistakable surge of power. His eyes instinctively sought F'nor at the lower table. The brown rider . . . all the dragonmen . . . had experienced that inexplicable shaft of exultation.

“What’s wrong, Dragonman?” snapped Fax.

F'lar, affecting unconcern, stretched his legs under the table and assumed an indolent posture in the heavy chair.

“Wrong?”

“The dragons!”

“Oh, nothing. They often roar . . . at the sunset, at a flock of passing wherries, at mealtimes,” and F'lar smiled amiably at the Lord of the High Reaches. Beside him his tablemate gave a squeak.

“Mealtimes! Have they not been fed?”

“Oh, yes. Five days ago.”

“Oh. Five . . . days ago? And are they hungry . . . now?” Her voice trailed into a whisper of fear, her eyes grew round.

“In a few days,” F'lar assured her. Under cover of his detached amusement, F'lar scanned the Hall. That surge had come from nearby. Either in the Hall or just outside. It must have been from within. It came so soon upon Fax’s speech that his words must have triggered it. And the power had had an indefinably feminine touch to it.

One of Fax’s women? F'lar found that hard to credit.

Mnementh had been close to all of them and none had shown a vestige of power. Much less, with the exception of Lady Gemma, any intelligence.

One of the Hall women? So far he had seen only the sorry drudges and the aging females the Warder had as housekeepers. The Warder's personal woman? He must discover if that man had one. One of the Hold guards' women? F'lar suppressed an intense desire to rise and search.

"You mount a guard?" he asked Fax casually.

"Double at Ruath Hold!" he was told in a tight, hard voice, ground out from somewhere deep in Fax's chest.

"Here?" F'lar all but laughed out loud, gesturing around the sadly appointed chamber.

"Here! Food!" Fax changed the subject with a roar.

Five drudges, two of them women in brown-gray rags such that F'lar hoped they had had nothing to do with the preparation of the meal, staggered in under the emplattered herdbeast. No one with so much as a trace of power would sink to such depths, unless . . .

The aroma that reached him as the platter was placed on the serving table distracted him. It reeked of singed bone and charred meat. The Warder frantically sharpened his tools as if a keen edge could somehow slice

acceptable portions from this unlikely carcass.

Lady Gemma caught her breath again and F'lar saw her hands curl tightly around the armrests. He saw the convulsive movement of her throat as she swallowed. He, too, did not look forward to this repast.

The drudges reappeared with wooden trays of bread. Burnt crusts had been scraped and cut, in some places, from the loaves before serving. As other trays were borne in, F'lar tried to catch sight of the faces of the servitors. Matted hair obscured the face of the one who presented a dish of legumes swimming in greasy liquid. Revolted, F'lar poked through the legumes to find properly cooked portions to offer Lady Gemma. She waved them aside, her face ill-concealing her discomfort.

As F'lar was about to turn and serve Lady Tela, he saw Lady Gemma's hand clutch convulsively at the chair arms. He realized that she was not merely nauseated by the unappetizing food. She was seized with labor contractions.

F'lar glanced in Fax's direction. The overlord was scowling blackly at the attempts of the Warder to find edible portions of meat to serve.

F'lar touched Lady Gemma's arm with light fingers. She turned just enough to look at F'lar from the corner of her eye. She managed a socially correct half-smile.

“I dare not leave just now, Lord F’lar. He is always dangerous at Ruatha. And it may only be false pangs.”

F’lar was dubious as he saw another shudder pass through her frame. The woman would have been a fine weyrwoman, he thought ruefully, were she but younger.

The Warder, his hands shaking, presented Fax the sliced meats. There were slivers of overdone flesh and portions of almost edible meats, but not much of either.

One furious wave of Fax’s broad fist and the Warder had the plate, meats and juice, square in the face. Despite himself, F’lar sighed, for those undoubtedly constituted the only edible portions of the entire beast.

“You call this food? *You call this food?*” Fax bellowed. His voice boomed back from the bare vault of the ceiling, shaking crawlers from their webs as the sound shattered the fragile strands. “Slop! Slop!”

F’lar rapidly brushed crawlers from Lady Gemma who was helpless in the throes of a very strong contraction.

“It’s all we had on such short notice,” the Warder squealed, juices streaking down his cheeks. Fax threw the goblet at him and the wine went streaming down the man’s chest. The steaming dish of roots followed and the man yelped as the hot liquid splashed over him.

“My lord, my lord, had I but known!”

“Obviously, Ruatha cannot support the visit of its Lord. You must renounce it,” F’lar heard himself saying.

His shock at such words issuing from his mouth was as great as that of everyone else in the Hall. Silence fell, broken by the splat of falling crawlers and the drip of root liquid from the Warder’s shoulders to the rushes. The grating of Fax’s boot-heel was clearly audible as he swung slowly around to face the bronze rider.

As F’lar conquered his own amazement and rapidly tried to predict what to do next to mend matters, he saw F’nor rise slowly to his feet, hand on dagger hilt.

“I did not hear you correctly?” Fax asked, his face blank of all expression, his eyes snapping.

Unable to comprehend how he could have uttered such an arrant challenge, F’lar managed to assume a languid pose.

“You did mention,” he drawled, “that if any of your Holds could not support itself and the visit of its rightful overlord, you would renounce it.”

Fax stared back at F’lar, his face a study of swiftly suppressed emotions, the glint of triumph dominant. F’lar, his face stiff with the forced expression of indifference, was casting swiftly about in his mind. In the name of the Egg, had he lost all sense of discretion?

Pretending utter unconcern, he stabbed some

vegetables onto his knife and began to munch on them. As he did so, he noticed F'nor glancing slowly around the Hall, scrutinizing everyone. Abruptly F'lar realized what had happened. Somehow, in making that statement, he, a dragonman, had responded to a covert use of the power. F'lar, the bronze rider, was being put into a position where he would *have* to fight Fax. Why? For what end? To get Fax to renounce the Hold? Incredible! But, there could be only one possible reason for such a turn of events. An exultation as sharp as pain swelled within F'lar. It was all he could do to maintain his pose of bored indifference, all he could do to turn his attention to thwarting Fax, should he press for a duel. A duel would serve no purpose. He, F'lar, had no time to waste on it.

A groan escaped Lady Gemma and broke the eye-locked stance of the two antagonists. Irritated, Fax looked down at her, fist clenched and half-raised to strike her for her temerity in interrupting her lord and master. The contraction that contorted the swollen belly was as obvious as the woman's pain. F'lar dared not look toward her but he wondered if she had deliberately groaned aloud to break the tension.

Incredibly, Fax began to laugh. He threw back his head, showing big, stained teeth, and roared.

“Aye, renounce it, in favor of her issue, if it is

male . . . and lives!” he crowed, laughing raucously.

“Heard and witnessed!” F’lar snapped, jumping to his feet and pointing to the riders. They were on their feet in the instant. “Heard, and witnessed!” they averred in the traditional manner.

With that movement, everyone began to babble at once in nervous relief. The other women, each reacting in her way to the imminence of birth, called orders to the servants and advice to each other. They converged toward Lady Gemma, hovering undecidedly out of Fax’s range, like silly wherries disturbed from their roosts. It was obvious they were torn between their fear of the lord and their desire to reach the laboring woman.

He gathered their intentions as well as their reluctance and, still stridently laughing, knocked back his chair. He stepped over it, strode down to the meatstand and stood hacking off pieces with his knife, stuffing them, juice dripping, into his mouth without ceasing his guffawing.

As F’lar bent toward Lady Gemma to assist her out of her chair, she grabbed his arm urgently. Their eyes met, hers clouded with pain. She pulled him closer.

“He means to kill you, Bronze Rider. He loves to kill,” she whispered.

“Dragonmen are not easily killed, but I am grateful to you.”

“I do not want you killed,” she said, softly, biting at her lip. “We have so few bronze riders.”

F’lar stared at her, startled. Did she, Fax’s lady, actually believe in the Old Laws?

F’lar beckoned to two of the Warder’s men to carry her up into the Hold. He caught Lady Tela by the arm as she fluttered past him.

“What do you need?”

“Oh, oh,” she exclaimed, her face twisted with panic; she was distractedly wringing her hands. “Water, hot. Clean cloths. And a birthing-woman. Oh, yes, we must have a birthing-woman.”

F’lar looked about for one of the Hold women, his glance sliding over the first disreputable figure who had started to mop up the spilled food. He signaled instead for the Warder and peremptorily ordered him to send for the woman. The Warder kicked at the drudge on the floor.

“You . . . you! Whatever your name is, go get her from the crafthold. You must know who she is.”

The drudge evaded the parting kick the Warder aimed in her direction with a nimbleness at odds with her appearance of extreme age and decrepitude. She scurried across the Hall and out the kitchen door.

Fax sliced and speared meat, occasionally bursting out with a louder bark of laughter as his inner thoughts

amused him. F'lar sauntered down to the carcass and, without waiting for invitation from his host, began to carve neat slices also, beckoning his men over. Fax's soldiers, however, waited until their lord had eaten his fill.

Lord of the Hold, your charge is sure

In thick walls, metal doors and no verdure.

Lessa sped from the Hall to summon the birthing-woman, seething with frustration. So close! So close! How could she come so close and yet fail? Fax should have challenged the dragonman. And the dragonman was strong and young, his face that of a fighter, stern and controlled. He should not have temporized. Was all honor dead in Pern, smothered by green grass?

And why, oh why, had Lady Gemma chosen that precious moment to go into labor? If her groan hadn't distracted Fax, the fight would have begun and not even Fax, for all his vaunted prowess as a vicious fighter, would have prevailed against a dragonman who had her . . . Lessa's . . . support! The Hold must be secured to its rightful Blood again. Fax must not leave Ruatha, alive, again!

Above her, on the High Tower, the great bronze dragon gave forth a weird croon; his many-faceted eyes

sparkling in the gathering darkness.

Unconsciously she silenced him as she would have done the watch-wher. Ah, that watch-wher. He had not come out of his den at her passing. She knew the dragons had been at him. She could hear him gibbering in panic.

The slant of the road toward the crafthold lent impetus to her flying feet and she had to brace herself to a sliding stop at the birthing-woman's stone threshold. She banged on the closed door and heard the frightened exclamation within.

“A birth. A birth at the Hold,” Lessa cried.

“A birth?” came the muffled cry and the latches were thrown up on the door. “At the Hold?”

“Fax's lady and, as you love life, hurry! For if it is male, it will be Ruatha's own lord.”

That ought to fetch her, thought Lessa, and in that instant, the door was flung open by the man of the house. Lessa could see the birthing-woman gathering up her things in haste, piling them into her shawl. Lessa hurried the woman out, up the steep road to the Hold, under the Tower gate, grabbing the woman as she tried to run at the sight of a dragon peering down at her. Lessa drew her into the Court and pushed her, resisting, into the Hall.

The woman clutched at the inner door, balking at the sight of the gathering there. Lord Fax, his feet up on the

trestle table, was paring his fingernails with his knife blade, still chuckling. The dragonmen in their wher-hide tunics were eating quietly at one table while the soldiers were having their turn at the meat.

The bronze rider noticed their entrance and pointed urgently toward the inner Hold. The birthing-woman seemed frozen to the spot. Lessa tugged futilely at her arm, urging her to cross the Hall. To her surprise, the bronze rider strode to them.

“Go quickly, woman, Lady Gemma is before her time,” he said, frowning with concern, gesturing imperatively toward the Hold entrance. He caught her by the shoulder and led her, all unwilling, Lessa tugging away at her other arm.

When they reached the stairs, he relinquished his grip, nodding to Lessa to escort her the rest of the way. Just as they reached the massive inner door, Lessa noticed how sharply the dragonman was looking at them . . . at her hand, on the birthing-woman’s arm. Warily, she glanced at her hand and saw it, as if it belonged to a stranger: the long fingers, shapely despite dirt and broken nails; her small hand, delicately boned, gracefully placed despite the urgency of the grip. She blurred it and hurried on.

Honor those the dragons heed,
In thought and favor, word and deed.
Worlds are lost or worlds are saved
By those dangers dragonbraved.
Dragonman, avoid excess;
Greed will bring the Weyr distress;
To the ancient Laws adhere,
Prosper thus the Dragon weyr.

An unintelligible ululation raised the waiting, men to their feet, startled from private meditations and diversion of Bonethrows. Only Fax remained unmoved at the alarm, save that the slight sneer, which had settled on his face hours past, deepened to smug satisfaction.

“Dead-ed-ed,” the tidings reverberated down the rocky corridors of the Hold. The weeping lady seemed to erupt out of the passage from the inner Hold, flying down the steps to sink into an hysterical heap at Fax’s feet. “She’s dead. Lady Gemma is dead. There was too much blood. It was too soon. She was too old to bear more children.”

F’lar couldn’t decide whether the woman was apologizing for, or exulting in, the woman’s death. She certainly couldn’t be criticizing her Lord for placing Lady Gemma in such peril. F’lar, however, was sincerely sorry

at Gemma's passing. She had been a brave, fine woman.

And now, what would be Fax's next move? F'lar caught F'nor's identically quizzical glance and shrugged expressively.

"The child lives!" a curiously distorted voice announced, penetrating the rising noise in the Great Hall. The words electrified the atmosphere. Every head slewed round sharply toward the portal to the inner Hold where the drudge, a totally unexpected messenger, stood poised on the top step.

"It is male!" This announcement rang triumphantly in the still Hall.

Fax jerked himself to his feet, kicking aside the wailer at his feet, scowling ominously at the drudge. "What did you say, woman?"

"The child lives. It is male," the creature repeated, descending the stairs.

Incredulity and rage suffused Fax's face. His body seemed to coil up.

"Ruatha has a new lord!" Staring intently at the overlord, she advanced, her mien purposeful, almost menacing.

The tentative cheers of the Warder's men were drowned by the roaring of the dragons.

Fax erupted into action. He leaped across the

intervening space, bellowing. Before Lessa could dodge, his fist crashed down across her face. She fell heavily to the stone floor, where she lay motionless, a bundle of dirty rags.

“Hold, Fax!” F’lar’s voice broke the silence as the Lord of the High Reaches flexed his leg to kick her.

Fax whirled, his hand automatically closing on his knife hilt.

“It was heard and witnessed, Fax,” F’lar cautioned him, one hand outstretched in warning, “by dragonmen. Stand by your sworn and witnessed oath!”

“Witnessed? By dragonmen?” cried Fax with a derisive laugh. “Dragonwomen, you mean,” he sneered, his eyes blazing with contempt, as he made one sweeping gesture of scorn.

He was momentarily taken aback by the speed with which the bronze rider’s knife appeared in his hand.

“Dragonwomen?” F’lar queried, his lips curling back over his teeth, his voice dangerously soft. Glowlight flickered off his circling knife as he advanced on Fax.

“Women! Parasites on Pern. The Weyr power is over. Over!” Fax roared, leaping forward to land in a combat crouch.

The two antagonists were dimly aware of the scurry

behind them, of tables pulled roughly aside to give the duelists space. F'lat could spare no glance at the crumpled form of the drudge. Yet he was sure, through and beyond instinct sure, that she was the source of power. He had felt it as she entered the room. The dragons' roaring confirmed it. If that fall had killed her . . . He advanced on Fax, leaping high to avoid the slashing blade as Fax unwound from the crouch with a powerful lunge.

F'lar evaded the attack easily, noticing his opponent's reach, deciding he had a slight advantage there. But not much. Fax had had much more actual hand-to-hand killing experience than had he whose duels had always ended at first blood on the practice floor. F'lar made due note to avoid closing with the burly lord. The man was heavy-chested, dangerous from sheer mass. F'lar must use agility as his weapon, not brute strength.

Fax feinted, testing F'lar for weakness, or indiscretion. The two crouched, facing each other across six feet of space, knife hands weaving, their free hands, spread-fingered, ready to grab.

Again Fax pressed the attack. F'lar allowed him to close, just near enough to dodge away with a backhanded swipe. Fabric ripped under the tip of his knife. He heard Fax snarl. The overlord was faster on his feet than his

bulk suggested and F'lar had to dodge a second time, feeling Fax's knife score his wher-hide jerkin.

Grimly the two circled, each looking for an opening in the other's defense. Fax plowed in, trying to corner the lighter, faster man between raised platform and wall.

F'lar countered, ducking low under Fax's flailing arm, slashing obliquely across Fax's side. The overlord caught at him, yanking savagely, and F'lar was trapped against the other man's side, straining desperately with his left hand to keep the knife arm up. F'lar brought up his knee, and ducked away as Fax gasped and buckled from the pain in his groin, but Fax struck in passing. Sudden fire laced F'lar's left shoulder.

Fax's face was red with anger and he wheezed from pain and shock. But the infuriated lord straightened up and charged. F'lar was forced to sidestep quickly before Fax could close with him. F'lar put the meat table between them, circling warily, flexing his shoulder to assess the extent of the knife's slash. It was painful, but the arm could be used.

Suddenly Fax scooped up some fatty scraps from the meat tray and hurled them at F'lar. The dragonman ducked and Fax came around the table with a rush. F'lar leaped sideways. Fax's flashing blade came within inches of his abdomen, as his own knife sliced down the outside

of Fax's arm. Instantly the two pivoted to face each other again, but Fax's left arm hung limply at his side.

F'lar darted in, pressing his luck as the Lord of the High Reaches staggered. But F'lar misjudged the man's condition and suffered a terrific kick in the side as he tried to dodge under the feinting knife. Doubled with pain, F'lar rolled frantically away from his charging adversary. Fax was lurching forward, trying to fall on him, to pin the lighter dragonman down for a final thrust. Somehow F'lar got to his feet, attempting to straighten to meet Fax's stumbling charge. His very position saved him. Fax overreached his mark and staggered off balance. F'lar brought his right hand over with as much strength as he could muster and his blade plunged through Fax's unprotected back until he felt the point stick in the chest plate.

The defeated lord fell flat to the flagstones. The force of his descent dislodged the dagger from his chestbone and an inch of bloody blade re-emerged.

F'lar stared down at the dead man. There was no pleasure in killing, he realized, only relief that he himself was still alive. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve and forced himself erect, his side throbbing with the pain of that last kick and his left shoulder burning. He half-stumbled to the drudge, still sprawled where she had fallen.

He gently turned her over, noting the terrible bruise spreading across her cheek under the dirty skin. He heard F'nor take command of the tumult in the Hall.

The dragonman laid a hand, trembling in spite of an effort to control himself, on the woman's breast to feel for a heartbeat . . . It was there, slow but strong.

A deep sigh escaped him for either blow or fall could have proved fatal. Fatal, perhaps, for Pern as well.

Relief was colored with disgust. There was no telling under the filth how old this creature might be. He raised her in his arms, her light body no burden even to his battle-weary strength. Knowing F'nor would handle any trouble efficiently, F'lar carried the drudge to his own chamber.

Putting the body on the high bed, he stirred up the fire and added more glows to the bedside bracket. His gorge rose at the thought of touching the filthy mat of hair but nonetheless and gently, he pushed it back from the face, turning the head this way and that. The features were small, regular. One arm, clear of rags, was reasonably clean above the elbow but marred by bruises and old scars. The skin was firm and unwrinkled. The hands, when he took them in his, were filthy but well-shaped and delicately boned.

F'lar began to smile. Yes, she had blurred that hand

so skillfully that he had actually doubted what he had first seen. And yes, beneath grime and grease, she was young. Young enough for the Weyr. And no born drab. There was no taint of common blood here. It was pure, no matter whose the line, and he rather thought she was indeed Ruathan. One who had by some unknown agency escaped the massacre ten Turns ago and bided her time for revenge. Why else force Fax to renounce the Hold?

Delighted and fascinated by this unexpected luck, F'lar reached out to tear the dress from the unconscious body and found himself constrained not to. The girl had roused. Her great, hungry eyes fastened on his, not fearful or expectant; wary.

A subtle change occurred in her face, F'lar watched, his smile deepening, as she shifted her regular features into an illusion of disagreeable ugliness and great age.

“Trying to confuse a dragonman, girl?” he chuckled. He made no further move to touch her but settled against the great carved post of the bed. He crossed his arms sternly on his chest, thought better of it immediately, and eased his sore arm. “Your name, girl, and rank, too.”

She drew herself upright slowly against the headboard, her features no longer blurred. They faced each other across the high bed.

“Fax?”

“Dead. Your name!”

A look of exulting triumph flooded her face. She slipped from the bed, standing unexpectedly tall. “Then I reclaim my own. I am of the Ruathan Blood. I claim Ruath,” she announced in a ringing voice.

F’lar stared at her a moment, delighted with her proud bearing. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“This? This crumbling heap?” He could not help but mock the disparity between her manner and her dress.

“Oh, no. Besides, Lady, we dragonmen heard and witnessed Fax’s oath renouncing the Hold in favor of his heir. Shall I challenge the babe, too, for you? And choke him with his swaddling cloth?”

Her eyes flashed, her lips parted in a terrible smile.

“There is no heir. Gemma died, the babe unborn. I lied.”

“Lied?” F’lar demanded, angry.

“Yes,” she taunted him with a toss of her chin. “I lied. There was no babe born. I merely wanted to be sure you challenged Fax.”

He grabbed her wrist, stung that he had twice fallen to her prodding.

“You provoked a dragonman to fight? To kill? *When he is on Search?*”

“Search? Why should I care about a Search? I’ve

Ruatha as my Hold again. For ten Turns, I have worked and waited, schemed and suffered for that. What could your Search mean to me?”

F’lar wanted to strike that look of haughty contempt from her face. He twisted her arm savagely, bringing her to her knees before he released his grip. She laughed at him, and scuttled to one side. She was on her feet and out the door before he could give chase.

Swearing to himself, he raced down the rocky corridors, knowing she would have to make for the Hall to get out of the Hold. However, when he reached the Hall, there was no sign of her fleeing figure among those still loitering.

“Has that creature come this way?” he called to F’nor who was, by chance, standing by the door to the Court.

“No. Is she the source of power after all?”

“Yes, she is,” F’lar answered, galled all the more. “And Ruathan Blood at that!”

“Oh ho! Does she depose the babe, then?” F’nor asked, gesturing toward the birthing-woman who occupied a seat close to the now blazing hearth.

F’lar paused, about to return to search the Hold’s myriad passages. He stared, momentarily confused, at this brown rider.

“Babe? What babe?”

“The male child Lady Gemma bore,” F’nor replied, surprised by F’lar’s uncomprehending look.

“It lives?”

“Yes. A strong babe, the woman says, for all that he was premature and taken forcibly from his dead dame’s belly.”

F’lar threw back his head with a shout of laughter. For all her scheming, she had been outdone by truth.

At that moment, he heard Mnementh roar in unmistakable elation and the curious warble of other dragons.

“Mnementh has caught her,” F’lar cried, grinning with jubilation. He strode down the steps, past the body of the former Lord of the High Reaches and out into the main court.

He saw that the bronze dragon was gone from his Tower perch and called him. An agitation drew his eyes upward. He saw Mnementh spiraling down into the Court, his front paws clasping something. Mnementh informed F’lar that he had seen her climbing from one of the high windows and had simply plucked her from the ledge, knowing the dragonman sought her. The bronze dragon settled awkwardly onto his hind legs, his wings working to keep him balanced. Carefully he set the girl on her feet and formed a precise cage around her with his

huge talons. She stood motionless within that circle, her face toward the wedge-shaped head that swayed above her.

The watch-wher, shrieking terror, anger and hatred, was lunging violently to the end of its chain, trying to come to Lessa's aid. It grabbed at F'lar as he strode to the two.

"You've courage enough, girl," he admitted, resting one hand casually on Mnementh's upper claw. Mnementh was enormously pleased with himself and swiveled his head down for his eye ridges to be scratched.

"You did not lie, you know," F'lar said, unable to resist taunting the girl.

Slowly she turned toward him, her face impassive. She was not afraid of dragons, F'lar realized with approval.

"The babe lives. And it is male."

She could not control her dismay and her shoulders sagged briefly before she pulled herself erect.

"Ruatha is mine," she insisted in a tense low voice.

"Aye, and it would have been, had you approached me directly when the wing arrived here."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"A dragonman may champion anyone whose grievance is just. By the time we reached Ruath Hold, I

was quite ready to challenge Fax given any reasonable cause, despite the Search.” This was not the whole truth but F’lar must teach this girl the folly of trying to control dragonmen. “Had you paid any attention to your harper’s songs, you’d know your rights. And,” F’lar’s voice held a vindictive edge that surprised him, “Lady Gemma might not now lie dead. She suffered far more at that tyrant’s hand than you.”

Something in his manner told him that she regretted Lady Gemma’s death, that it had affected her deeply.

“What good is Ruatha to you now?” he demanded, a broad sweep of his arm taking in the ruined court yard and the Hold, the entire unproductive valley of Ruatha. “You have indeed accomplished your ends; a profitless conquest and its conqueror’s death.” F’lar snorted; “All seven Holds will revert to their legitimate Blood, and time they did. One Hold, one lord. Of course, you might have to fight others, infected with Fax’s greed. Could you hold Ruatha against attack . . . now . . . in her decline?”

“Ruatha is mine!”

“Ruatha?” F’lar’s laugh was derisive. “When you could be Weyrwoman?”

“Weyrwoman?” she breathed, staring at him.

“Yes, little fool. I said I rode in Search . . . it’s about time you attended to more than Ruatha. And the object of

my Search is . . . you!”

She stared at the finger he pointed at her as if it were dangerous.

“By the First Egg, girl, you’ve power in you to spate when you can turn a dragonman, all unwitting, to do your bidding. Ah, but never again, for now I am on guard against you.”

Mnementh crooned approvingly, the sound a soft rumble in his throat. He arched his neck so that one eye was turned directly on the girl, gleaming in the darkness of the court.

F’lar noticed with detached pride that she neither flinched nor blanched at the proximity of an eye greater than her own head.

“He likes to have his eye ridges scratched,” F’lar remarked in a friendly tone, changing tactics.

“I know,” she said softly and reached out a hand to do that service.

“Nemorth’s queen,” F’lar continued, “is close to death. This time we must have a strong Weyrwoman.”

“This time . . . the Red Star?” the girl gasped, turning frightened eyes to F’lar.

“You understand what it means?”

“There is danger . . .” she began in a bare whisper, glancing apprehensive eastward.

F'lar did not question by what miracle she appreciated the imminence of danger. He had every intention of taking her to the Weyr by sheer force if necessary. But something within him wanted very much for her to accept the challenge voluntarily. A rebellious Weyrwoman would be even more dangerous than a stupid one. This girl had too much power and was too used to guile and strategy. It would be a calamity to antagonize her with injudicious handling.

“There is danger for all Pern. Not just Ruatha,” he said, allowing a note of entreaty to creep into his voice. “And *you* are needed. Not by Ruatha,” a wave of his hand dismissed that consideration as a negligible one compared to the total picture. “We are doomed without a strong Weyrwoman. Without you.”

“Gemma kept saying *all* the bronze riders were needed,” she murmured in a dazed whisper.

What did she mean by that statement? F'lar frowned. Had she heard a word he had said? He pressed his argument, certain only that he had already struck one responsive chord.

“You’ve won here. Let the babe,” he saw her startled rejection of that idea and ruthlessly qualified it, “. . . Gemma’s babe . . . be reared at Ruatha. You have command of all the Holds as Weyrwoman, not ruined

Ruatha alone. You've accomplished Fax's death. Leave off vengeance."

She stared at F'lar with wonder, absorbing his words.

"I never thought beyond Fax's death," she admitted slowly. "I never thought what should happen then."

Her confusion was almost childlike and struck F'lar forcibly. He had had no time, or desire, to consider her prodigious accomplishment. Now he realized some measure of her indomitable character. She could not have been much over ten Turns of age herself when Fax had murdered her family. Yet somehow, so young, she had set herself a goal and managed to survive both brutality and detection long enough to secure the usurper's death. What a Weyrwoman she would be! In the tradition of those of Ruathan blood. The light of the paler moon made her look young and vulnerable and almost pretty.

"You can be Weyrwoman," he insisted gently.

"Weyrwoman," she breathed incredulous, and gazed round the inner court bathed in soft moonlight. He thought she wavered.

"Or perhaps you enjoy rags?" he said, making his voice harsh, mocking. "And matted hair, dirty feet and cracked hands? Sleeping in straw, eating rinds? You are young . . . that is, I assume you are young," and his voice was frankly skeptical. She glared at him, her lips firmly

pressed together. “Is this the be-all and end-all of your ambition? What are you that this little corner of the great world is *all* you want?” He paused and with utter contempt added, “The blood of Ruatha has thinned, I see. You’re afraid!”

“I am Lessa, daughter of the Lord of Ruath,” she countered, stung. She drew herself erect. Her eyes flashed. “I am afraid of nothing!”

F’lar contented himself with a slight smile.

Mnementh, however, threw up his head, and stretched out his sinuous neck to its whole length. His full-throated peal rang out down the valley. The bronze dragon communicated his awareness to F’lar that Lessa had accepted the challenge. The other dragons answered back, their warbles shriller than Mnementh’s bellow. The watch-wher which had cowered at the end of its chain lifted its voice in a thin, unnerving screech until the Hold emptied of its startled occupants.

“F’nor,” the bronze rider called, waving his wingleader to him. “Leave half the flight to guard the Hold. Some nearby lord might think to emulate Fax’s example. Send one rider to the High Reaches with the glad news. You go directly to the Cloth Hall and speak to L’tol . . . Lytol.” F’lar grinned. “I think he would make an exemplary Warder and Lord Surrogate for this Hold in the

name of the Weyr and the babe.”

The brown rider’s face expressed enthusiasm for his mission as he began to comprehend his leader’s intentions. With Fax dead and Ruatha under the protection of dragonmen, particularly that same one who had dispatched Fax, the Hold would have wise management.

“She caused Ruatha’s deterioration?” he asked.

“And nearly ours with her machinations,” F’lar replied but having found the admirable object of his Search, he could not be magnanimous. “Suppress your exultation, brother,” he advised quickly as he took note of F’nor’s expression. “The new queen must also be Impressed.”

“I’ll settle arrangements here. Lytol is an excellent choice,” F’nor said.

“Who is this Lytol?” demanded Lessa pointedly. She had twisted the mass of filthy hair back from her face. In the moonlight the dirt was less noticeable. F’lar caught F’nor looking at her with an all too easily read expression. He signaled F’nor, with a peremptory gesture, to carry out his orders without delay.

“Lytol is a dragonless man,” F’lar told the girl, “no friend to Fax. He will ward the Hold well and it will prosper.” He added persuasively with a quelling stare full

on her, “Won’t it?”

She regarded him somberly, without answering, until he chuckled softly at her discomfiture.

“We’ll return to the Weyr,” he announced, proffering a hand to guide her to Mnementh’s side.

The bronze one had extended his head toward the watch-wher who now lay panting on the ground, its chain limp in the dust.

“Oh,” Lessa sighed, and dropped beside the grotesque beast. It raised its head slowly, lurring piteously.

“Mnementh says it is very old and soon will sleep itself to death.”

Lessa cradled the bestial head in her arms, scratching it behind the ears.

“Come, Lessa of Pern,” F’lar said, impatient to be up and away.

She rose slowly but obediently. “It saved me. It knew me.”

“It knows it did well,” F’lar assured her, brusquely, wondering at such an uncharacteristic show of sentiment in her.

He took her hand again, to help her to her feet and lead her back to Mnementh. As they turned, he glimpsed the watch-wher, launching itself at a dead run after Lessa. The chain, however, held fast. The beast’s neck broke,

with a sickening audible snap.

Lessa was on her knees in an instant, cradling the repulsive head in her arms.

“Why, you foolish thing, why?” she asked in a stunned whisper as the light in the beast’s green-gold eyes dimmed and died out.

Mnementh informed F’lar that the creature had lived this long only to preserve the Ruathan line. At Lessa’s imminent departure, it had welcomed death.

A convulsive shudder went through Lessa’s slim body. F’lar watched as she undid the heavy buckle that fastened the metal collar about the watch-wher’s neck. She threw the tether away with a violent motion. Tenderly she laid the watch-wher on the cobbles. With one last caress to the clipped wings, she rose in a fluid movement and walked resolutely to Mnementh without a single backward glance. She stepped calmly to the dragon’s raised leg and seated herself, as F’lar directed, on the great neck.

F’lar glanced around the courtyard at the remainder of his wing which had reformed there. The Hold folk had retreated back into the safety of the Great Hall. When his wingmen were all astride, he vaulted to Mnementh’s neck, behind the girl.

“Hold tightly to my arms,” he ordered her as he took

hold of the smallest neck ridge and gave the command to fly.

Her fingers closed spasmodically around his forearm as the great bronze dragon took off, the enormous wings working to achieve height from the vertical takeoff. Mnementh preferred to fall into flight from a cliff or tower. Like all dragons, he tended to indolence. F'lar glanced behind him, saw the other dragonmen form the flight line, spread out to cover those still on guard at Ruatha Hold.

When they had reached a sufficient altitude, he told Mnementh to transfer, going *between* to the Weyr.

Only a gasp indicated the girl's astonishment as they hung *between*. Accustomed as he was to the sting of the profound cold, to the awesome utter lack of light and sound, F'lar still found the sensations unnerving. Yet the uncommon transfer spanned no more time than it took to cough thrice.

Mnementh rumbled approval of this candidate's calm reaction as they flicked out of the eerie *between*.

And then they were above the Weyr, Mnementh setting his wings to glide in the bright daylight, half a world away from night-time Ruatha.

As they circled above the great stony trough of the Weyr,

F'lar peered at Lessa's face; pleased with the delight mirrored there; she showed no trace of fear as they hung a thousand lengths above the high Benden mountain range. Then, as the seven dragons roared their incoming cry, an incredulous smile lit her face.

The other wingmen dropped into a wide spiral, down, down while Mnementh elected to descend in lazy circles. The dragonmen peeled off smartly and dropped, each to his own tier in the caves of the Weyr. Mnementh finally completed his leisurely approach to their quarters, whistling shrilly to himself as he braked his forward speed with a twist of his wings, dropping lightly at last to the ledge. He crouched as F'lar swung the girl to the rough rock, scored from thousands of clawed landings.

"This leads only to our quarters," he told her as they entered the corridor, vaulted and wide for the easy passage of great bronze dragons.

As they reached the huge natural cavern that had been his since Mnementh achieved maturity, F'lar looked about him with eyes fresh from his first prolonged absence from the Weyr. The huge chamber was unquestionably big, certainly larger than most of the halls he had visited in Fax's procession. Those halls were intended as gathering places for men, not the habitations of dragons. But suddenly he saw his own quarters were

nearly as shabby as all Ruatha. Benden was, of a certainty, one of the oldest dragon weyrs, as Ruatha was one of the oldest Holds, but that excused nothing. How many dragons had bedded in that hollow to make solid rock conform to dragon proportions! How many feet had worn the path past the dragon's weyr into the sleeping chamber, to the bathing room beyond where the natural warm spring provided ever-fresh water! But the wall hangings were faded and unraveling and there were grease stains on lintel and floor that should be sanded away.

He noticed the wary expression on Lessa's face as he paused in the sleeping room.

"I must feed Mnementh immediately. So you may bathe first," he said, rummaging in a chest and finding clean clothes for her, discards of other previous occupants of his quarters, but far more presentable than her present covering. He carefully laid back in the chest the white wool robe that was traditional Impression garb. She would wear that later. He tossed several garments at her feet and a bag of sweetsand, gesturing to the hanging that obscured the way to the bath.

He left her, then, the clothes in a heap at her feet, for she made no effort to catch anything.

Mnementh informed him that F'nor was feeding

Canth and that he, Mnementh, was hungry, too. *She* didn't trust F'lar but she wasn't afraid of himself.

“Why should she be afraid of you?” F'lar asked.
“You're cousin to the watch-wher who was her only friend.”

Mnementh informed F'lar that he, a fully matured bronze dragon, was no relation to any scrawny, crawling, chained, and wing-clipped watch-wher.

F'lar, pleased at having been able to tease the bronze one, chuckled to himself. With great dignity, Mnementh curved down to the feeding ground.

By the Golden Egg of Faranth
By the Weyrwoman, wise and true,
Breed a flight of bronze and brown wings,
Breed a flight of green and blue.
Breed riders, strong and daring,
Dragon-loving, born as hatched,
Flight of hundreds soaring skyward,
Man and dragon fully matched.

Lessa waited until the sound of the dragonman's footsteps proved he had really gone away. She rushed quickly

through the big cavern, heard the scrape of claw and the *whoosh* of the mighty wings. She raced down the short passageway, right to the edge of the yawning entrance. There was the bronze dragon circling down to the wider end of the mile-long barren oval was the Benden Weyr. She had heard of the Weyrs, as any Pernese had, but to be in one was quite a different matter.

She peered up, around, down that sheer rock face. There was no way off but by dragon wing. The nearest cave mouths were an unhandy distance above her; to one side, below her on the other. She was neatly secluded here.

Weyrwoman, he had told her. His woman? In his weyr? Was that what he had meant? No, that was not the impression she got from the dragon. It occurred to her, suddenly, that it was odd she had understood the dragon. Were common folk able to? Or was it the dragonman blood in her line? At all events, Mnementh had inferred something greater, some special rank. She remembered vaguely that, when dragonmen went on Search, they looked for certain women. Ah, certain women. She was one, then, of several contenders. Yet the bronze rider had offered her the position as if she and she, alone, qualified. He had his own generous portion of conceit, that one, Lessa decided. Arrogant he was, though not a bully like

Fax.

She could see the bronze dragon swoop down to the running herdbeasts, saw the strike, saw the dragon wheel up to settle on a far ledge to feed. Instinctively she drew back from the opening, back into the dark and relative safety of the corridor.

The feeding dragon evoked scores of horrid tales. Tales at which she had scoffed but now . . . Was it true, then, that dragons did eat human flesh? Did . . . Lessa halted that trend of thought. Dragonkind was no less cruel than mankind. The dragon, at least, acted from bestial need rather than bestial greed.

Assured that the dragonman would be occupied a while, she crossed the larger cave into the sleeping room. She scooped up the clothing and the bag of cleansing sand and proceeded to the bathing room.

To be clean! To be completely clean and to be able to stay that way. With distaste, she stripped off the remains of the rags, kicking them to one side. She made a soft mud with the sweetsand and scrubbed her entire body until she drew blood from various half-healed cuts. Then she jumped into the pool, gasping as the warm water made the sweetsand foam in the lacerations.

It was a ritual cleansing of more than surface soil. The luxury of cleanliness was ecstasy.

Finally satisfied she was as clean as one long soaking could make her, she left the pool, reluctantly. Wringing out her hair she tucked it up on her head as she dried herself. She shook out the clothing and held one garment against her experimentally. The fabric, a soft green, felt smooth under her water-shrunken fingers, although the nap caught on her roughened hands. She pulled it over her head. It was loose but the darker-green over-tunic had a sash which she pulled in tight at the waist. The unusual sensation of softness against her bare skin made her wriggle with voluptuous pleasure. The skirt, no longer a ragged hem of tatters, swirled heavily around her, ankles. She smiled. She took up a fresh drying cloth and began to work on her hair.

A muted sound came to her ears and she stopped, hands poised, head bent to one side. Straining, she listened. Yes, there were sounds without. The dragonman and his beast must have returned. She grimaced to herself with annoyance at this untimely interruption and rubbed harder at her hair. She ran fingers through the half-dry tangles, the motions arrested as she encountered snarls. Vexed, she rummaged on the shelves until she found, as she had hoped to, a coarse-toothed metal comb.

Dry, her hair had a life of its own suddenly, crackling about her hands and clinging to face and comb and dress.

It was difficult to get the silky stuff under control. And her hair was longer than she had thought, for, clean and unmatted, it fell to her waist . . . when it did not cling to her hands.

She paused, listening, and heard no sound at all. Apprehensively, she stepped to the curtain and glanced warily into the sleeping room. It was empty. She listened and caught the perceptible thoughts of the sleepy dragon. Well, she would rather meet the man in the presence of a sleepy dragon than in a sleeping room. She started across the floor and, out of the corner of her eye, caught sight of a strange woman as she passed a polished piece of metal hanging on the wall.

Amazed, she stopped short, staring, incredulous, at the face the metal reflected. Only when she put her hands to her prominent cheekbones in a gesture of involuntary surprise and the reflection imitated the gesture, did she realize she looked at herself.

Why, that girl in the reflector was prettier than Lady Tela, than the clothman's daughter! But so thin. Her hands of their own volition dropped to her neck, to the protruding collarbones, to her breasts which did not entirely accord with the gauntness of the rest of her. The dress was too large for her frame, she noted with an unexpected emergence of conceit born in that instant of

delighted appraisal. And her hair . . . it stood out around her head like an aureole. It wouldn't lie contained. She smoothed it down with impatient fingers, automatically bringing locks forward to hang around her face. As she irritably pushed them back, dismissing a need for disguise, the hair drifted up again.

A slight sound, the scrape of a boot against stone, caught her back from her bemusement. She waited, momentarily expecting him to appear. She was suddenly timid. With her face bare to the world, her hair behind her ears, her body outlined by a clinging fabric, she was stripped of her accustomed anonymity and was, therefore, in her estimation, vulnerable.

She controlled the desire to run away . . . the irrational fear. Observing herself in the looking metal, she drew her shoulders back, tilted her head high, chin up; the movement caused her hair to crackle and cling and shift about her head. She was Lessa of Ruatha, of a fine old Blood. She no longer needed artifice to preserve herself; she must stand proudly bare-faced before the world . . . and that dragonman.

Resolutely she crossed the room, pushing aside the hanging on the doorway to the great cavern.

He was there, beside the head of the dragon, scratching its eye ridges, a curiously tender expression on

his face. The tableau was at variance with all she had heard of dragonmen.

She had, of course, heard of the strange affinity between rider and dragon but this was the first time she realized that love was part of that bond. Or that this reserved, cold man was capable of such deep emotion.

He turned slowly, as if loath to leave the bronze beast. He caught sight of her and pivoted completely round, his eyes intense as he took note of her altered appearance. With quick, light steps, he closed the distance between them and ushered her back into the sleeping room, one strong hand holding her by the elbow.

“Mnementh has fed lightly and will need quiet to rest,” he said in a low voice. He pulled the heavy hanging into place across the opening.

Then he held her away from him, turning her this way and that, scrutinizing her closely, curious and slightly surprised.

“You wash up . . . pretty, yes, almost pretty,” he said, amused condescension in his voice. She pulled roughly away from him, piqued. His low laugh mocked her. “After all, how could one guess what was under the grime of . . . ten full Turns?”

At length he said, “No matter. We must eat and I shall require your services.” At her startled exclamation,

he turned, grinning maliciously now as his movement revealed the caked blood on his left sleeve. “The least you can do is bathe wounds honorably received fighting your battle.”

He pushed aside a portion of the drape that curtained the inner wall. “Food for two!” he roared down a black gap in the sheer stone.

She heard a subterranean echo far below as his voice resounded down what must be a long shaft.

“Nemorth is nearly rigid,” he was saying as he took supplies from another drape-hidden shelf, “and the Hatching will soon begin anyhow.”

A coldness settled in Lessa’s stomach at the mention of a Hatching. The mildest tales she had heard about that part of dragonlore were chilling, the worst dismayingly macabre. She took the things he handed her numbly.

“What? Frightened?” the dragonman taunted, pausing as he stripped off his torn and bloodied shirt.

With a shake of her head, Lessa turned her attention to the wide-shouldered, well-muscled back he presented her, the paler skin of his body decorated with random bloody streaks. Fresh blood welled from the point of his shoulder for the removal of his shirt had broken the tender scabs.

“I will need water,” she said and saw she had a flat

pan among the items he had given her. She went swiftly to the pool for water, wondering how she had come to agree to venture so far from Ruatha. Ruined though it was, it had been hers and was familiar to her from Tower to deep cellar. At the moment the idea had been proposed and insidiously prosecuted by the dragonman, she had felt capable of anything, having achieved, at last, Fax's death. Now, it was all she could do to keep the water from slopping out of the pan that shook unaccountably in her hands.

She forced herself to deal only with the wound. It was a nasty gash, deep where the point had entered and torn downward in a gradually shallower slice. His skin felt smooth under her fingers as she cleansed the wound. In spite of herself, she noticed the masculine odor of him, compounded not unpleasantly of sweat, leather, and an unusual muskiness which must be from close association with dragons.

She stood back when she had finished her ministrations. He flexed his arm experimentally in the constricting bandage and the motion set the muscles rippling along side and back.

When he faced her, his eyes were dark and thoughtful.

“Gently done. My thanks.” His smile was ironic.

She backed away as he rose but he only went to the

chest to take out a clean, white shirt.

A muted rumble sounded, growing quickly louder.

Dragons roaring? Lessa wondered, trying to conquer the ridiculous fear that rose within her. Had the Hatching started? There was no watch-wher's lair to secrete herself in, here.

As if he understood her confusion, the dragonman laughed good-humoredly and, his eyes on hers, drew aside the wall covering just as some noisy mechanism inside the shaft propelled a tray of food into sight.

Ashamed of her unbased fright and furious that he had witnessed it Lessa sat rebelliously down on the fur-covered wall seat, heartily wishing him a variety of serious and painful injuries which she could dress with inconsiderate hands. She would not waste future opportunities.

He placed the tray on the low table in front of her, throwing down a heap of furs for his own seat. There was meat, bread, a tempting yellow cheese and even a few pieces of winter fruit. He made no move to eat nor did she, though the thought of a piece of fruit that was ripe, instead of rotten, set her mouth to watering. He glanced up at her, and frowned.

“Even in the Weyr, the lady breaks bread first,” he said, and inclined his head politely to her.

Lessa flushed, unused to any courtesy and certainly unused to being first to eat. She broke off a chunk of bread. It was nothing she remembered having tasted before. For one thing, it was fresh baked. The flour had been finely sifted, without trace of sand or hull. She took the slice of cheese he proffered her and it, too, had an uncommonly delicious sharpness. Made bold by this indication of her changed status, Lessa reached for the plumpest piece of fruit.

“Now,” the dragonman began, his hand touching hers to get her attention.

Guiltily she dropped the fruit, thinking she had erred. She stared at him, wondering at her fault. He retrieved the fruit and placed it back in her hand as he continued to speak. Wide-eyed, disarmed, she nibbled, and gave him her full attention.

“Listen to me. You must not show a moment’s fear, whatever happens on the Hatching Ground. And you must not let her overeat.” A wry expression crossed his face. “One of our main functions is to keep a dragon from excessive eating.”

Lessa lost interest in the taste of the fruit. She placed it carefully back in the bowl and tried to sort out not what he had said, but what his tone of voice implied. She looked at the dragonman’s face, seeing him as a person,

not a symbol, for the first time.

There was a blackness about him that was not malevolent; it was a brooding sort of patience. Heavy black hair, heavy black brows; his eyes, a brown light enough to seem golden, were all too expressive of cynical emotions, or cold hauteur. His lips were thin but well-shaped and in repose almost gentle. Why must he always pull his mouth to one side in disapproval or in one of those sardonic smiles? At this moment, he was completely unaffected.

He meant what he was saying. He did not want her to be afraid. There was no reason for her, Lessa, to fear.

He very much wanted her to succeed. In keeping whom from overeating what? Herd animals? A newly hatched dragon certainly wasn't capable of eating a full beast. That seemed a simple enough task to Lessa . . . Main function? *Our* main function?

The dragonman was looking at her expectantly.

"Our main function?" she repeated, an unspoken request for more information inherent in her inflection.

"More of that later, first things first." he said, impatiently waving off other questions.

"But what happens?" she insisted.

"As I was told so I tell you. No more, no less. Remember these two points. No fear, and no overeating."

“But . . .”

“You, however, need to eat. Here.” He speared a piece of meat on his knife and thrust it at her, frowning until she managed to choke it down. He was about to force more on her but she grabbed up her half-eaten fruit and bit down into the firm sweet sphere instead. She had already eaten more at this one meal than she was accustomed to having all day at the Hold.

“We shall soon eat better at the Weyr,” he remarked, regarding the tray with a jaundiced eye.

Lessa was surprised. This was a feast, in her opinion.

“More than you’re used to? Yes, I forgot you left Ruatha with bare bones indeed.”

She stiffened.

“You did well at Ruatha. I mean no criticism,” he added, smiling at her reaction. “But look at you,” and he gestured at her body, that curious expression crossing his face, half-amused, half-contemplative. “I should not have guessed you’d clean up pretty,” he remarked. “Nor with such hair.” This time his expression was frankly admiring.

Involuntarily she put one hand to her head, the hair crackling over her fingers. But what reply she might have made him, indignant as she was, died aborning. An unearthly keening filled the chamber.

The sounds set up a vibration that ran down the bones behind her ear to her spine. She clapped both hands to her ears. The noise rang through her skull despite her defending hands. As abruptly as it started, it ceased.

Before she knew what he was about, the dragonman had grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her over to the chest.

“Take those off,” he ordered, indicating dress and tunic. While she stared at him stupidly, he held up a loose white robe, sleeveless and beltless, a matter of two lengths of fine cloth fastened at shoulder and side seams. “Take it off, or do I assist you?” he asked, with no patience at all.

The wild, sound was repeated and its unnerving tone made her fingers fly faster. She had no sooner loosened the garments she wore, letting them slide to her feet, than he had thrown the other over her head. She managed to get her arms in the proper places before he grabbed her wrist again and was speeding with her out of the room, her hair whipping out behind her, alive with static.

As they reached the outer chamber, the bronze dragon was standing in the center of the cavern, his head turned to watch the sleeping room door. He seemed impatient to Lessa; his great eyes, which fascinated her so, sparkled iridescently. His manner breathed an inner excitement of

great proportions and from his throat a high-pitched croon issued, several octaves below the unnerving cry that had roused them all.

With a yank that rocked her head on her neck, the dragonman pulled her along the passage. The dragon padded beside them at such speed that Lessa fully expected they would all catapult off the ledge. Somehow, at the crucial stride, she was a-perch the bronze neck, the dragonman holding her firmly about the waist. In the same fluid movement, they were gliding across the great bowl of the Weyr to the higher wall opposite. The air was full of wings and dragon tails, rent with a chorus of sounds, echoing and re-echoing across the stony valley.

Mnementh set what Lessa was certain would be a collision course with other dragons, straight for a huge round blackness in the cliff-face, high up. Magically, the beasts filed in, the greater wingspread of Mnementh just clearing the sides of the entrance.

The passageway reverberated with the thunder of wings. The air compressed around her thickly. Then they broke out into a gigantic cavern.

Why, the entire mountain must be hollow, thought Lessa, incredulous. Around the enormous cavern, dragons perched in serried ranks blues, greens, browns and only two great bronze beasts like Mnementh, on ledges meant

to accommodate hundreds. Lessa gripped the bronze neck scales before her, instinctively aware of the imminence of a great event.

Mnementh wheeled downward, disregarding the ledge of the bronze ones. Then all Lessa could see was what lay on the sandy floor of the great cavern: dragon eggs. A clutch of ten monstrous, mottled eggs, their shells moving spasmodically as the fledglings within tapped their way out. To one side, on a raised portion of the floor, was a golden egg, larger by half again the size of the mottled ones. Just beyond the golden egg lay the motionless ochre hulk of the old queen.

Just as she realized Mnementh was hovering over the floor in the vicinity of that egg, Lessa felt the dragonman's hands on her, lifting her from Mnementh's neck.

Apprehensively, she grabbed at him. His hands tightened and inexorably swung her down. His eyes, fierce and gray, locked with hers.

“Remember, Lessa!”

Mnementh added an encouragement, one great compound eye turned on her. Then he rose from the floor. Lessa half-raised one hand in entreaty, bereft of all support, even that of the sure inner compulsion which had sustained her in her struggle for revenge on Fax. She saw

the bronze dragon settle on the first ledge, at some distance from the other two bronze beasts. The dragonman dismounted and Mnementh curved his sinuous neck until his head was beside his rider. The man reached up absently, it seemed to Lessa, and caressed his mount.

Loud screams and wailings diverted Lessa and she saw more dragons descend to hover just above the cavern floor, each rider depositing a young woman until there were twelve girls, including Lessa. She remained a little apart from them as they clung to each other. She regarded them curiously. The girls were not injured in any way she could see, so why such weeping? She took a deep breath against the coldness within her. Let *them* be afraid. She was Lessa of Ruatha and did not need to be afraid.

Just then, the golden egg moved convulsively. Gasping as one, the girls edged away from it, back against the rocky wall. One, a lovely blonde, her heavy plait of golden hair swinging just above the ground, started to step off the raised floor and stopped, shrieking, backing fearfully toward the scant comfort of her peers.

Lessa wheeled to see what cause there might be for the look of horror on the girl's face. She stepped back involuntarily herself.

In the main section of the sandy arena, several of the handful of eggs had already cracked wide open. The fledglings, crowing weakly, were moving toward . . . and Lessa gulped . . . the young boys standing stolidly in a semi-circle. Some of them were no older than she had been when Fax's army had swooped down on Ruath Hold.

The shrieking of the women subsided to muffled gasps. A fledgling reached out with claw and beak to grab a boy.

Lessa forced herself to watch as the young dragon mauled the youth, throwing him roughly aside as if unsatisfied in some way. The boy did not move and Lessa could see blood seeping onto the sand from dragon-inflicted wounds.

A second fledgling lurched against another boy and halted, flapping its damp wings impotently, raising its scrawny neck and croaking a parody of the encouraging croon Mnementh often gave. The boy uncertainly lifted a hand and began to scratch the eye ridge. Incredulous, Lessa watched as the fledgling, its crooning increasingly more mellow, ducked its head, pushing at the boy. The child's face broke into an unbelieving smile of elation.

Tearing her eyes from this astounding sight, Lessa saw that another fledgling was beginning the same

performance with another boy; Two more dragons had emerged in the interim. One had knocked a boy down and was walking over him, oblivious to the fact that its claws were raking great gashes. The fledgling who followed its hatch-mate stopped by the wounded child, ducking its head to the boy's face; crooning anxiously. As Lessa watched, the boy managed to struggle to his feet, tears of pain streaming down his cheeks. She could hear him pleading with the dragon not to worry, that he was only scratched a little.

It was over very soon. The young dragons paired off with boys? Green riders dropped down to carry off the unacceptable. Blue riders settled to the floor with their beasts and led the couples out of the cavern, the young dragons squealing, crooning, flapping wet wings as they staggered off, encouraged by their newly acquired weyrmates.

Lessa turned resolutely back to the rocking golden egg, knowing what to expect and trying to divine what the successful boys had, or had not done, that caused the baby dragons to single them out.

A crack appeared in the golden shell and was greeted by the terrified screams of the girls. Some had fallen into little heaps of white fabric, others embraced tightly in

their mutual fear. The crack widened and the wedge-head broke through, followed quickly by the neck, gleaming gold. Lessa wondered with unexpected detachment how long it would take the beast to mature, considering its by no means small size at birth. For the head was larger than that of the male dragons and they had been large enough to overwhelm sturdy boys of ten full Turns.

Lessa was aware of a loud hum within the Hall. Glancing up at the audience, she realized it emanated from the watching bronze dragons, for this was the birth of their mate, their queen. The hum increased in volume as the shell shattered into fragments and the golden, glistening body of the new female emerged. It staggered out, dipping its sharp beak into the soft sand, momentarily trapped. Flapping its wet wings, it righted itself, ludicrous in its weak awkwardness. With sudden and unexpected swiftness, it dashed toward the terror-stricken girls.

Before Lessa could blink, it shook the first girl with such violence, her head snapped audibly and she fell limply to the sand. Disregarding her, the dragon leaped toward the second girl but misjudged the distance and fell, grabbing out with one claw for support and raking the girl's body from shoulder to thigh. The screaming of the mortally injured girl distracted the dragon and

released the others from their horrified trance. They scattered in panicky confusion, racing, running, tripping, stumbling, falling across the sand toward the exit the boys had used.

As the golden beast, crying piteously, lurched down from the raised arena toward the scattered women, Lessa moved. Why hadn't that silly clunk-headed girl stepped side, Lessa thought, grabbing for the wedge-head, at birth not much larger than her own torso. The dragon's so clumsy and weak she's her own worst enemy.

Lessa swung the head round so that the many-faceted eyes were forced to look at her . . . and found herself lost in that rainbow regard.

A feeling of joy suffused Lessa, a feeling of warmth, tenderness, unalloyed affection and instant respect and admiration flooded mind and heart and soul. Never again would Lessa lack an advocate, a defender, an intimate, aware instantly of the temper of her mind and heart, of her desires. How wonderful was Lessa, the thought intruded into Lessa's reflections, how pretty, how kind, how thoughtful, how brave and clever!

Mechanically, Lessa reached out to scratch the exact spot on the soft eye ridge.

The dragon blinked at her wistfully, extremely sad that she had distressed Lessa. Lessa reassuringly patted

the slightly damp, soft neck that curved trustingly toward her. The dragon reeled to one side and one wing fouled on the hind claw. It hurt. Carefully, Lessa lifted the erring foot, freed the wing, folding it back across the dorsal ridge with a pat.

The dragon began to croon in her throat, her eyes following Lessa's every move. She nudged at Lessa and Lessa obediently attended the other eye ridge.

The dragon let it be known she was hungry.

"We'll get you something to eat directly," Lessa assured her briskly and blinked back at the dragon in amazement. How could she be so callous? It was a fact that this little menace had just now seriously injured, if not killed, two women.

She wouldn't have believed her sympathies could swing so alarmingly toward the beast. Yet it was the most natural thing in the world for her to wish to protect this fledgling.

The dragon arched her neck to look Lessa squarely in the eyes. Ramoth repeated wistfully how exceedingly hungry she was, confined so long in that shell without nourishment.

Lessa wondered how she knew the golden dragon's name and Ramoth replied: Why shouldn't she know her own name since it was her and no one else's? And then

Lessa was lost again in the wonder of those expressive eyes.

Oblivious to the descending bronze dragons, uncaring of the presence of their riders, Lessa stood caressing the head of the most wonderful creature on all Pern, fully prescient of troubles and glories, but most immediately aware that Lessa of Pern was Weyrwoman to Ramoth the Golden, for now and forever.

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Anne McCaffrey is a winner of both the Hugo and Nebula Awards, a SFWA Grand Master, and an inductee into the SF Hall of Fame. Her work is beloved by generations of readers. She is best known for authoring the Dragonriders of Pern series, but she has also written dozens of other novels. She was born in Cambridge, Mass. in 1926 and currently makes her home in Ireland, in a home named Dragonhold-Underhill.

Feature Interview: R.A. MacAvoy

Steven Gould

R.A. MacAvoy's first novel won the Locus Poll's First Novel Award and hooked her the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. *Tea With the Black Dragon* (1983, Bantam) is a contemporary fantasy, a hard-boiled detective mystery, and a love story. Its protagonists are a middle-aged musician and a centuries-old dragon now in human form. *Tea* was a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Compton Crook, World Fantasy, and Philip K. Dick Awards and received a special citation from the Philip K. Dick jury. It was selected for David Pringle's *Modern Fantasy: The 100 Best Novels, An English-Language Selection, 1946-1987*.

In this genre, that is what's known as a "good start."

Damiano started one of her two fantasy trilogies, followed by *Twisting the Rope* (sequel to *Tea With the Black Dragon*). She followed that with three other stand-alone novels, *The Book of Kells*, *The Grey Horse*, and her one foray into science fiction, *The Third Eagle*. Then came Nazhuret of Sordaling, the protagonist of her second fantasy trilogy, the last of which, *The Belly of the Wolf*, was published in 1993. Nazhuret is an orphan,

philosopher, scientist, lens grinder, and deadly martial artist who mostly just wants to be left alone. He is a rationalist in an irrational world. In the words of Powl, Nazhuret's teacher in *The Lens of the World*, he is "the lens of the world: the lens through which the world may become aware of itself."

In December, Prime Books will publish *Death and Resurrection*, her first novel-length work in eighteen years. This book's main protagonist is Ewen Young, an artist and reluctant teacher of kung fu who finds himself able to enter the Bardo, the realm that the dead pass through on their way to death or reincarnation. Like *Tea With the Black Dragon*, it is a fantasy set in our world where mysteries are both mundane and fantastic.

I talked to her about *Death and Resurrection* and why it's been eighteen years since her last novel.

When John Joseph Adams asked (on Twitter) if there were any R.A. MacAvoy fans out there I responded by saying, "Me. I reread *The Grey Horse* every year or so." He said I could read your next book (a full four months before it was scheduled) if I'd do an interview with you.

Your most recent trilogy was published between 1990 and 1993. Could you describe these novels and what happened with them?

They are the Nazhuret trilogy: *Lens of the World*, *King of the Dead* and *Belly of the Wolf*. They were done through Morrow, and were actually about the history of science taking place in a different world, though it was published as fantasy. Like most of my books, they fell in between genres.

A lot of folks missed them, as they had the promotion worthy of a private chapbook. Morrow makes (made?) lovely editions, but treated them with all the protestant theology that was their first field of publication. The three were first person and in epistolary form, which isn't exactly directed to the seventeen-year-old market, but *Lens* is my favorite book. I think its promotion problem was mostly that my hero had a self-image of being very ugly, and said so frequently. I did not intend for the reader to believe him, but evidently Nazhuret was too persuasive, as the cover was an out-and-out horror.

The series dealt heavily with gender confusion, racial identity and other stuff I think is neat, but it still had *lots* of market-acceptable sex and violence. Lots. I still think if they were reissued with better covers, they'd find

audiences equal to *Book of Kells* or *The Grey Horse*—though I’m grateful that you like *Grey Horse*. It’s one of my favorites, too. I raised Connemara ponies for many years, and Rory was actually a character portrait of a small stallion I had, who was really named Emmett. He has a lot of descendents over California. All in pony form.

It’s been eighteen years since *The Belly of the Wolf* (also published as *Winter of the Wolf*), your last novel-length work, was published. In this period you published a novella-length work, “In Between,” with Subterranean Press. The work is the first part of your upcoming novel, *Death and Resurrection* (Dec. 2011, Prime Books). The fan in me screams out, what have you been doing with yourself? In other words, why have you been depriving me of your books these last two decades!? (This question is asked with the full understanding that it takes writers months to years to write books that are read in a single day.)

As for why nothing came between *The Belly of the Wolf* and the Ewen stories, well, Dystonia came between them. It’s a rare neuromuscular disease characterized by paralysis and pain. Or vice versa. There was (and still is) almost no research as to the cause of it. My own guess is

that I came off too many bucking horses in the mountains and landed on the back of my head, or that I took too many spectacular falls on the kung fu mat, with similar results. For about ten years they threw one set of pills after another into me, just to see what would happen. Of five of those years I have little or no memory. I finally decided to stop taking all those nasty things and just endure it. Meanwhile, some doctors who usually deal with Parkinson's (not related, except for being a neuromuscular disease and also progressive) developed a treatment for cervical and spinal muscles which had gone into permanent charley-horse by a Very Careful series of injections of Botox into the muscles right along the spinal column, to partially paralyze them. The idea is to find a mid-position between spasm and paralysis that approaches normality. This takes a real artist with the needle, and a repeated series of eighteen injections of poison right next to the vital muscles which involve breathing and swallowing as well as holding the head up and other good things. I tried a number of doctors and survived them, before I found one that really did some good. Now that the evil pills have worn off, I can run and jump and play again (and actually walk and drive some).

And write! Quite honestly, I expected to be dead by now, not productive. I'm a very grateful old kid. Much of

the pain is still there—Botox doesn't stop that part—but I can look straight at you for at least two out of three months in my Botox cycle. I've learned a lot about life in an unexpected manner. I'm especially grateful to Paula from Prime for taking a chance on someone so many people believe to be long passed on.

Interesting that martial arts ties together *Death and Resurrection* and the Nazhuret books and, oddly enough, your *Dystonia*. I did karate in my youth, but for the last sixteen and a half years I've been doing aikido and iaido. Early on in my studies, I found myself including techniques in my books, but as I've gone on, I'm far more interested in writing about the student/teacher relationship and dojo culture. How did your (pre-*Dystonia*) martial arts progress affect your writing, both in content and practice?

I have been *sooo* careful to write clean, do-able and easy-to-understand techniques in all my books, and in *Death and Resurrection* I had my teacher (last teacher, as I was a fair-to-middlin' wreck by that time) help me invent them and drag advanced students over to make them happen so I could observe and take notes, and ya know what? I find serious martial arts students don't read

adventure fantasy, and serious readers of fantasy don't bother to work out the moves in their heads. Bummer!

Regarding master/student relationship—that was half the emotional centre of *Lens*, down to the moment Powl tells Nazhuret that he was the stone (or arrow. I don't remember and my husband thinks I should find a copy and look it up. Well, I won't!) Anyway, Nazhuret was the implement of some sort that Powl threw to places he could not reach himself. Of course there was also the moment Nazhuret's devotion for his teacher got so heavy Powl threw him a gold coin and told him to hire a whore and get it out of his system. Both are, I guess, aspects of the student/teacher relationship. Perhaps you shouldn't quote me on the second one, though. I don't know who you're writing for. Evidently you do. I sure hope you've not let me offend a bunch of people, Steven.

We try to avoid that.

***Death and Resurrection* is about the head of a garage-front kwoon, so we get to see things from the other end. Ewen Young is Dictator-against-his-will, Brow-beaten-mystic-master. It's a much lighter-hearted book despite (or because) of the title. Actually, there is quite a bit of Death, but Resurrection is the name of a**

cadaver dog. We had one in this bleak area, home of Bundy and Ridgeway, and her name was Sorrow. I thought that was so perfect I had to find a meaningful name for mine, leading to the book's title.

As far as dojo culture, I must have studied in eight different schools in my life, from Tai-Chi to Rip-out-your-opponent's-vocal-chords-in-the-Puerto-Rican-Style (my favorite), and never found the dedication and fellowship I hoped for. Or at least not that lasted more than three years, before the management would turn over, or my teacher would join the police, or *his* teacher would decide to change the style utterly. I guess all that is good training for life as it is, however. I hope you've had better luck.

Since you mention this, one of the things that greatly interested me in the Nazhuret series is the bisexual nature of Nazhuret. Besides the incident you mention between him and Powl, his early experience with sexuality was in boys' school and apparently not always consensual. There is also his attraction to Powl, then his "traditional" family relations with his wife Arlin, then, in *The Belly of the Wolf*, ending with a new relationship with Count Dinaos of Lowcanton. This was an early time in the world of fantasy for

examinations of bisexuality. Did this come naturally to you in the writing? Was there much editorial or reader opposition to it?

In regards to the sexuality in the Nazhuret series, I have two things to say—very different things. First, the seventies and eighties were roiling pots of sexual experimentation (on paper as well as in life). It makes me want to ask if you are young, Steven. [Alas, not that young.] Beginning (arbitrarily) with the great *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the relationships of male to female and different explorations of either seemed to be the central interest of SF and fantasy, mostly written by women. Maybe the reason these stood out to you was that I had always written so conservatively until this. In fact, when I wrote *Book of Kells*, which was actually a collaboration, (although Sharon was not permitted by Bantam to have her name on the binding,) I got a lot of letters from my older fans saying (for example), “Agatha Christie *never* had to use language like *that!*” Oh my!

And Nazhuret’s “bisexuality”? Well, the military school stuff is just what I gleaned from studying military school writings of the eighteenth century and beyond. The Arlin-Charlan thing was simple Shakespeare. Updated and with some purposeful stench added for realism, and

the student/teacher sexuality was not invented by me. Just watch the faces of high-ranking students being blissfully put into submission by revered “masters.” I have. Since I am female and most of my teachers were male, I could only be an observer in this (teachers aren’t fools!) and I doubt it often goes past momentary flashes of feeling between young, strong and physically heated guys—but remember Nazhuret was alone in that abandoned observatory for years. Powl had all the power. That created a physical bond, even if only the sort based on the Stockholm Syndrome.

The other thing I have to mention is that Nazhuret was as close to a self-portrait as I have ever created. Not an autobiography; nothing in my life happened that way except the moment with the raindrop, but writing myself into a male character had certain unavoidable side-effects. I admit without much shame that I’m attracted to guys. There. I said it.

Why did he go off with a man in the end? Well, an old friend of ours read my first two books and the first draft of the third and said “You *are* rather homophobic, you know.”

I did not know and was shamed and disturbed to think it might be true. Especially, since this friend had just told us he had AIDS. He said Nazhuret was

obviously gay, and if I were honest I'd write him that way. So I changed the ending. I am now sorry I did, but I did not want our friend to die thinking I despised him.

Our friend is now doing very well. Last I heard, he was in the martial arts! How things change.

That's the story of the peculiar sexuality of Nazhuret. I'd be sorry to know that's what stayed with people about the books, though. They were supposed to be about the history of science as people really did discover it, floundering about, and the nature of reality, as best I know it. I am weary of writing about such ponderous things, though. I think I liked the ol' sex and violence better.

Besides characters with sexual diversity, you have also been good about persons of color in your works. I am thinking particularly of the Berber woman, Djoura in *Raphael*, but obviously we have Asiatics as well, and, in *Death and Resurrection*, Rez's handler/owner/partner Susan Sundown is Nez Perce, a Native American. My own second novel is awfully white-washed American (though there is sexual diversity). Do you have any thoughts on race in our genre?

Though a faded blonde, I don't particularly identify as white. I've been told by an orthopedist and by a physical anthropologist that my skeleton is Asiatic, and that if discovered in the ultimate state of undress, I would be misclassified in a museum's dusty storage. It's all because my mother was genetically Sami, (or Lappish, to the impolite), and I'm actually one of Santa's reindeer tenders. You don't wanna mess with me lest the little sleigh misses your roof!

No offense to the real, not just "genetic" Sami, who have had a lot to endure over the years.

Those two small conversations, plus growing up in a neighborhood where I was a minority, set me thinking. Now I live in a region (outside Seattle) where there *are* no majorities. All interesting minority groups. Some are Indians from New Delhi. Some are Indians from the Rez outside Walla-Walla. I love different cultures and ways of life. I especially love them when they begin to dance together.

The structure of *Death and Resurrection* is episodic, and that makes sense now that I know the first section was published separately. There was an excerpt from *The Book of Kells* published separately, but that

book's structure doesn't have that episodic feeling. Have any of your other works grown from short works? I think of you primarily as a novelist, but this last book is making me reexamine that assumption.

Death and Resurrection was originally meant to be connected novellas, to be sold (I hoped) in one of the new zines or e-zines. That was an idea my agent Richard and I came up with. Then he shipped the beginning around and found that anyone who was interested was interested in it only as a novel. So, I rewrote, and reconstructed, but I didn't want to lose the idea of it being divided into seasonal sections, because they have four different moods and four different emotional directions.

Another interesting thing about the progression of *Death and Resurrection* is that the use of Ewen's talents actually decreases as the book goes along. They are used the least in the last section, the investigation of some gnawed remains near the hospice. Yet, at the same time there is another form of "magic" introduced. Without going into specific details, this is the magic that grows out of loving relationships and an appreciation of renewal in everyday life. In particular it contrasts quite a bit with the first and

second sections of the book in a way that first made me say, “Where’s the magic?” then made me go, “Oh, there’s the magic.” Am I way off-base here? Can you answer the question in a way that doesn’t spoil the book for someone who hasn’t read it yet?

As far as Ewen’s magic—remember, it came to him involuntarily, and he did his best to avoid it always. So I shared it out. The fourth episode is definitely Lynn and Susan’s. I did *not* want to have the continuing light-hearted adventures of Ewen the Bardo-hopper.

Why do I keep changing things? I get embarrassed repeating myself. I am now writing more about the same basic people, in case it turns out folks are interested in my Washington Woods characters, but this one will not focus so much on Ewen. What’s coming out so far is mostly Petersen’s book. It occurred to me only after completion that I repeatedly describe the man as a poet and never include a blessed line of his poetry. Mea Culpa.

***Tea With the Black Dragon* and its sequel have contemporary American settings. *The Book of Kells* goes from contemporary to seventh-century Ireland. *The Grey Horse* is set in Ireland during the struggle for Irish independence, the Damiano trilogy is set**

during the Renaissance (Italy, then Moorish Spain), the Nazhuret of Sordaling trilogy, while dealing with a roughly cavalier period in technology, is set outside of our world altogether, and finally, with *Death and Resurrection*, you come full circle to contemporary America. I'd love for you to contrast the work required for your two trilogies, one specifically anchored in history and one definitely not. Also, do contemporary settings help or hinder a tale that depends on the fantastic?

As for all the different settings and types of plots—again, I don't like to repeat myself. I always feel I'm cheating when I do. Though I'm very happy to read other peoples' serial novels. Very happy. I just can't myself. And one setting is no easier or harder than another. My choice has mostly to do with what period, place or activity is interesting me at the moment, whether it's horse training or my own environment. I throw in the kitchen sink.

I'm grateful to you, Steven, for finding time to prod me back out into public attention again. As a very successful twenty-first-century writer, it was kind of you to help me get my rhetorical feet under me again. I'm not that old, but haven't been playing the "public person" game for some years now. It's been fun!

It has indeed.

Steven Gould is the SF writer best known for his novels *Jumper* and *Reflex* (which were the source materials for the 2008 feature film *Jumper* starring Hayden Christensen, Samuel L. Jackson, Jamie Bell, and Rachel Bilson.) His most recently published novel is *7th Sigma* (July 2011) and he has just turned in *Impulse* (the sequel to *Reflex*) to be published in 2012. He is the winner of the Hal Clement Award for YA Science Fiction (for *Wildside*, 1995), and has been on the Hugo ballot twice, and the Nebula Ballot once for his short fiction. Several of his novels were chosen as Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico with SF writer Laura J. Mixon (aka M.J. Locke), two daughters, two dogs, and five chickens. He blogs infrequently at <http://eatourbrains.com/steve> and tweets too often as @StevenGould.

Feature Interview: Neal Stephenson

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy

Neal Stephenson is the author of such books as *Snow Crash*, *The Diamond Age*, *The Cryptonomicon*, *The Baroque Cycle*, and *Anathem*. He is currently collaborating with Greg Bear and others on an online fiction project called *The Mongoliad*. And his latest novel, *Reamde*, is about a money-making scam in an online role-playing game that spins wildly out of control.

This interview first appeared in io9's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, which is hosted by John Joseph Adams and David Barr Kirtley. Visit io9.com/geeksguide to listen to the entire interview and the rest of the show, in which the hosts discuss various geeky topics.

Tell us about your new novel *Reamde*. What's it about?

It's a thriller—I guess a techno-thriller is how you would pigeonhole it, if you had to pigeonhole it. The title refers to a virus that gets loose in a fictional, extremely popular

massively multi-player online role-playing game, and becomes the trigger for a pretty complicated multi-threaded plotline that involves a lot of international espionage and organized crime and skullduggery of various descriptions.

The phenomenon of gold farming features prominently in this book. What is gold farming and what made you want to write a story about it?

This is a thing that, when I first became aware of it a few years ago, I simply couldn't believe anything that weird could be real, and it really is; it's an actual thing. In most of these online massively multi-player games, there are various kinds of virtual property that are highly prized by the hardcore players, and typically they can be purchased for gold pieces or some in-game pieces of imaginary gold. And so, if you've got more money than time, you can actually purchase pretend gold pieces for real money from people, typically in China but they could be anywhere, who just make it their profession to sit there all day long playing these games and acquiring as much gold and valuable virtual property as they can get their hands on, and then selling it on the open market.

So what was it about that that made you want to write about it?

Just the sheer oddity that such an industry could exist, and it's actually quite a large industry—billions of dollars a year. The notion of working the boundary line between a real currency and a virtual currency is inherently interesting to me. I've been writing books for a while now that have ideas in them about gold and currency and money and what those things are, and so this dovetailed pretty naturally with that. And finally it solved a problem that I needed to have solved, which was that I'd been wanting for a while to write a story about a virus creator in an Asian country, just a kid who mischievously creates a virus that spreads all over the world and gets him into serious trouble with people from far away, and I needed a mechanism that would render that plot device logical, and in the whole virtual property economy I found that mechanism. And so by combining those two elements together I was able to create a basis for this plot that worked better than either one of those two things considered separately.

So this book revolves around an imaginary online game called T'rain. How did you dream up T'rain,

and what are some of its most distinctive features?

Like a lot of people, I played *Dungeons & Dragons* a little bit when I was in college. And it has to be explained, I guess, that when I was in college it was pre-personal computer, pre-internet, so there's been this ongoing process ever since then, taking games of that type and transferring them into the virtual world and making them run on computers. And it started out with very simple text-based adventures and has culminated in well-known, fully-rendered three-dimensional games like *World of Warcraft*, and it's no doubt going to continue into the future. So I've been following that development ever since I was in college, which is thirty years or so. One of the ideas I played with a long time ago, when I got my first Macintosh, was trying to create imaginary land forms, imaginary terrain. There's a fairly simple algorithm that you can use. You start with a flat triangle and you take the midpoint of each side of that triangle and randomly move it up or down a bit. And then you recursively apply the same treatment to the four new little triangles you first created, and if you keep that up long enough, you can create a very rough random-looking fractal landform that, to the untutored eye, kind of looks like a real landform. So I played around with that a little

bit, when I got my first Mac a long time ago, and enjoyed writing this program that would generate little imaginary islands, and had thoughts of trying to build that into a role-playing game since a lot of the drudgery that goes into creating such a game has to do with building maps and trying to make realistic-looking landforms. And eventually I had to go work on other things that would actually reward my efforts a little more, but it stuck with me. And so essentially what I've done in *Reamde* is a little bit of fictional wish-fulfillment, in that I've taken some of those ideas and said, okay, what if those had been carried forward in a really serious way, with serious backing and serious engineering talent behind it, and turned into a really cool really fun-to-play game.

One of the fictional conceits here is that these guys decided to embrace the practice of gold farming rather than discourage it, because they know it's going to happen anyway and they see it actually as a desirable thing, to have millions and millions of people in China playing this game all the time and creating this hard cash economy, so rather than try to suppress it they've integrated it into the game at the most basic level. That means that they're interacting all the time with the real world economy and they're settling transactions for hard currency. So that's a cool feature of the game, and it's a

fun thing to think about, but it gets them into trouble when a criminal element starts using that feature of the game as a money-laundering system.

So is T'rain your idea of the ultimate video game, or is it just what it needs to be in order to tell the story?

I'm a little bit cautious about saying "ultimate," because as soon as anybody says ultimate anything, something better comes around. It's some semi-informed speculation about what a next-generation game might look like. I think there's probably some ideas in it that could be implemented with realistic engineering resources, but I'm sure some other elements of the thing would be difficult if not impossible to actually do, either for engineering reasons or legal/regulatory reasons. I wanted it to be plausible enough to work as an element of this book's plot that people would accept and find interesting, but I didn't want to be so fastidious about having it be realistic and feasible as to take all the fun out of it.

You mentioned you played *D&D* in college. Are you still a gamer, and if so what are some of your favorite games?

I play Halo when I'm exercising. See, I had these two problems. One was that when I played Halo or similar games, time would vanish. Suddenly it's three hours later and I'm still sitting there, and I haven't really accomplished anything other than killed a lot of aliens. So that's a problem with video games. And another problem I was having that seemed unrelated was that technically you're supposed to get a certain amount of aerobic exercise every day, and really the only way really to get it is to either go outside and run or else stay indoors and use a treadmill or an elliptical trainer or some other kind of apparatus like that, which is so boring that I just can't stand it. The minutes crawl by like hours. So I thought if I combine those two things, if I play Halo while I'm exercising, then the ability of Halo to make time disappear actually becomes a huge advantage. So I set up a rig where I've got an Xbox in front of an elliptical trainer, and indeed it works really well. I can play the game while I'm running the trainer and I'm not conscious of the excruciating dullness, and I'm not conscious of the exercise.

And actually you incorporated that idea into *Reamde*.

Right. In the book we've got two staff writers who create the universe of the fictional game. One is a well-known fantasy novelist who used to be morbidly obese, but to save his life he started doing his work while operating a treadmill, and now he's got such a dangerously low body fat percentage that behind his back people call him "Skeletor." The other writer is known as D-squared, and he's a Cambridge don who writes very elevated high fantasy stuff. The one thing they have in common is that they're disturbingly prolific, and so both of those writers are essentially parodies of myself. They're kind of like the angel and the devil that sit on my shoulders all day long, trying to get my attention.

Have you ever done any sort of game design? Or is that something you might do in the future?

I've been working on a game design project related to *The Mongoliad*, which is a serialized novel revolving around the concept of Western martial arts.

We interviewed Greg Bear last winter and he talked about *The Mongoliad*. What's the current status of that project?

We're a few chapters away from being done with what we're calling "Season One." It's an epic historical quasi-fantasy novel set in the year 1241, and it's got a beginning and an end, but after that end we're going to carry it forward and have a "Season Two" and maybe a "Season Three" that'll be sequels to the first year's story. So we've been slowly pulling it together and bringing the different plot lines to their conclusion.

On Wikipedia it says that *The Mongoliad* grew out of you feeling dissatisfied with the authenticity of some of the sword-fighting scenes from your *Baroque Cycle*. What sort of details you felt like weren't authentic enough?

In *The Baroque Cycle* there were some swordfight sequences, typically involving rapier and dagger, which is an extraordinarily complicated and difficult kind of sword fighting. I mean, sword fighting is hard enough just with one weapon, but when you've got two weapons and they're very different—one's a short range, one's a long range weapon—you're dealing with a really advanced type of martial art. And so I was trying to get information on how people actually fought with these weapons, and I

wasn't really able to find anything that felt right to me. I was writing these scenes and I felt like I was just going through the motions, and that there were obvious logical errors or inconsistencies in the scenario that I was presenting. So in the course of trying to do better research on that and learn more about it, I began just trying to act out some of these movements with a friend of mine, Pablos Holman. We made safe padded weapons and put on protective gear, and started trying to act out some of these sequences and that, to make a long story short, led us into the world of what is called "Western Martial Arts" or "Historical European Martial Arts," which is a burgeoning field over the last ten or fifteen years. There are groups in a number of cities around the world, where people are reconstructing the martial arts that were practiced by medieval and renaissance Europeans, by going over old treatises and looking at old pictures and manuscripts and doing research on the weapons that were used—their weight, their balance, how they were handled—and reconstituting martial arts that once were extremely sophisticated and highly developed and widely practiced, but which had been dead for centuries, in many cases. So it's out of that background that some of us got the idea that it would make sense to start building stories and legends around the great practitioners of those arts in days

of yore that would be analogous to or parallel to what we're all familiar with from the Asian martial arts world. Everyone's seen Kung Fu movies. Everyone's seen movies in which Japanese martial arts are presented as being these almost supernaturally highly developed techniques, and that's fine, we don't begrudge them that, but we think there's plenty of room to do similar work with the Western styles of martial arts.

You mentioned that in *Reamde* there are these two fantasy writers, and there's this absolutely hilarious scene about the use of apostrophes in fantasy names. Could you talk about how you came up with that scene?

There's a tendency to use typography as a way to suggest exoticism or barbarity, and so any word that has apostrophes just sort of randomly stuck into it, or letters jammed up against each other that don't make any sense like a q with no u after it, or a large number of consonants in a row, is used as a cheap shorthand in some cases to suggest that you're dealing with some wild-ass alien being or some hyper-exotic fantasy culture. And so I think everyone who reads this kind of literature or plays games sees that all over the place, and we all just accept it as a

well-known business practice, and as such I thought it would be ripe for some parody.

There are a few points in the book where characters suggest that fantasy tropes such as elves, dwarves, and magic rings are popular because they're embedded in the collective unconscious. What do you actually think about that idea?

That's just me coming out and saying things that I, at some level, believe. As an example, people seem strongly drawn to the idea of different humanoid races co-existing—elves, dwarves, gnomes, what have you—and that some of them are inherently more advanced, and others kind of live in the caves and in the woods and they're benighted creatures in some sense. And so when you see that kind of thing showing up repeatedly in literature, and you see that readers are keen on accepting it—they're immediately willing to embrace that as the basis for a world—it makes you wonder why. What is there about our culture that we find that kind of thing immediately plausible? And one possibility is that it dates all the way back to the time when Cro-Magnons were supplanting Neanderthals in northern Europe, and they could easily have told stories about these primitive, squat, powerful

beings that lived in the caves and in the woods, and that had an uneasy relationship with the more gracile, advanced Cro-Magnons.

The title *Reamde* is an intentional misspelling of “Readme.” How did you decide to make that the title, and has there been any confusion with people assuming it’s a typo and correcting it?

Reamde was the first title, and then when we started talking about the book to a wider assortment of people in the publishing industry, I immediately got tired of having to tediously explain over and over again that it was a deliberate misspelling. And so for a while we were thinking of just calling it “Readme” so we wouldn’t have to keep explaining it, but after some consideration we decided maybe that wasn’t distinctive enough, and maybe a little too plaintive, and so we went back to *Reamde*, and I’m happy with that choice of title. The one thing that we kind of missed is that amongst ourselves we had spent so long discussing these options over the phone and what not that we all knew how it was pronounced, and it didn’t occur to us that lots of people would be a little unclear on the correct pronunciation, so during the last couple of

weeks we've had to do a lot of explaining of how to say the name. But those are the breaks, I guess.

You recently published a piece called “Innovation Starvation” over at the World Policy Institute. What’s that article about?

It’s about the perception, which turns out to be shared by a lot of people right now, that as a society we’ve lost the ability to execute on the big stuff. So in the first two-thirds of the Twentieth Century we went from not having airplanes to walking on the moon, and we went from not having cars to cars everywhere, and many, many other examples of huge changes in our landscape created by technology. And since then it seems like, you know, we’ve had the Internet, but that’s about it, and so it’s just me asking the question of what’s going on. I don’t claim to be able to really answer that question, but one thing I can do is write science fiction stories, and so part of the idea we’re talking about now is organizing an anthology of new science fiction stories that in a sense would be throwbacks to the techno-optimistic fiction of the Golden Age, and that would present some plausible innovations that a young engineer or scientist who was just starting their career could look at and say, “Hmm, you know, if I

start working on this thing today, then by the time I retire maybe it'll actually exist.”

I heard that the people who created *Second Life* were inspired to do it after reading *Snow Crash*. Do you know if that's true, and if any of your other works have inspired developments in the real world?

It was commonly said after *Snow Crash* was published that people were throwing it onto conference room tables on Sand Hill Road and saying, “This is our business plan.” I don't know if that's true, but I think it's a way of saying that a lot of people did organize around it, in a certain sense. This is part of what I'm getting at with *Hieroglyph*. I should have mentioned before that the working title for the anthology that I mentioned is Hieroglyph, and the name comes from the notion that certain iconic inventions in science fiction stories serve kind of like hieroglyphs, and that there are these symbols on the meaning of which everyone agrees—the Clarke communications satellite, the Heinlein rocket ship that lands on its fins, the Asimov robot, and so on. And I think that what science fiction can do in cases like this is provide not just an idea for some specific technical

innovation, but also supply a coherent picture of that innovation being integrated into a society and an economy. A lot of times that's the missing element that engineers or business people need in order to actually come up with a workable plan. So in the case of *Snow Crash*, I think, to the extent it affected things at all, I think it did so by presenting people with a template for saying, "Okay, if we take the following list of new technologies, you know, the internet, three-dimensional rendering capabilities on computers, and a couple of other things, and we put them together in the right way, then here's a coherent picture of what might emerge from that." That's what may have happened in the case of *Snow Crash*, if you believe some people, and who knows, maybe it could happen again in the case of some of the things that we write about in the *Hieroglyph* anthology.

The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy is a science fiction/fantasy talk show podcast that airs on io9.com. It is hosted by:

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as editor of *Lightspeed*, is the bestselling editor of many anthologies, such as *Brave New Worlds*, *Wastelands*, *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, *By Blood We Live*, *Federations*, *The Improbable Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. In 2011, he was a finalist for two Hugo Awards and two World Fantasy Awards. Forthcoming anthologies include: *Under the Moons of Mars: New Adventures on Barsoom* (February, Simon & Schuster),

Armored (April, Baen Books), and *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination* (Fall 2012, Tor Books). John is also the co-host of io9's *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.

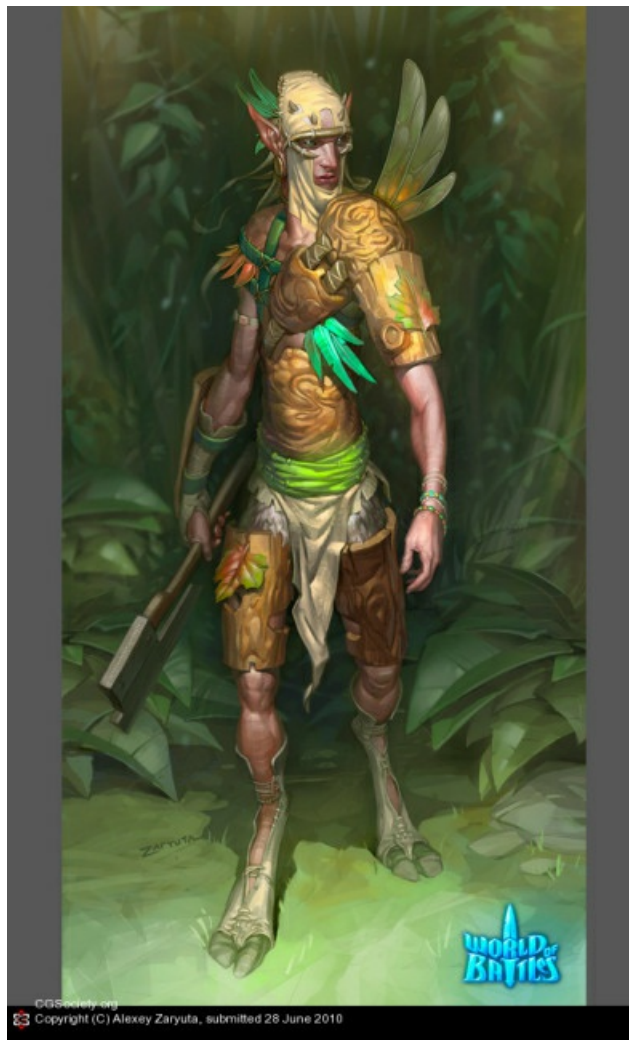
David Barr Kirtley has published fiction in magazines such as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Weird Tales*, *Lightspeed*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, *On Spec*, and *Cicada*, and in anthologies such as *New Voices in Science Fiction*, *Fantasy: The Best of the Year*, and *The Dragon Done It*. Recently he's contributed stories to several of John Joseph Adams's anthologies, including *The Living Dead*, *The Living Dead 2*, and *The Way of the Wizard*. He's attended numerous writing workshops, including Clarion, Odyssey, Viable Paradise, James Gunn's Center for the Study of Science Fiction, and Orson Scott Card's Writers Bootcamp, and he holds an MFA in screenwriting and fiction from the University of Southern California. He also teaches regularly at Alpha, a Pittsburgh-area science fiction workshop for young writers, and is the other co-host of *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy*. He lives in New York.

Artist Gallery: Alexey Zaryuta









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Artist Interview: Alexey Zaryuta

J. T. Glover

Alexey Zaryuta is a Ukraine-based professional artist who works primarily in the gaming industry on a variety of fantasy and science fiction properties. His paintings often capture characters at moments of high tension, with subdued backgrounds and splashes of bright color drawing your eye to the central figure. He enjoys working with challenging compositions and has learned from both Giger and Sargent, and he brings a deep appreciation for traditional methods to illustrating strange worlds . . .

How did you choose the scene you illustrated in “Pandemia?”

The idea for this work came to me quite a long time ago, because I am a fan of dark SF and zombie apocalypse settings. Merging these two universes came easily to me.

Can you describe your approach to it?

The process was very fluid all the way through, because I

was confident and knew what I wanted. The approach I chose left some room for experimentation. Usually I begin with outlines and perfect them, and then do the painting. This time I decided to begin with a tonal sketch without the outlining. Then I continued to add details up to the point that it looked finished.

What are your favorite types of genre scenes to paint?

I enjoy scenes that give me a challenge. For example, I enjoy working with characters in poses that are difficult to draw, or representing complex objects in perspective.

What elements do you think are necessary to illustrate a genre scene successfully?

Skill, will, and a bit of imagination.

Which artists have inspired you and contributed to the development of your style?

Giger and Vallejo have inspired me, and Sargent and J. C. Leyendecker both contributed to my style.

Where do you see CG art going in the next five years?

I don't like this "CG" prefix we are using. It's just a tool, nothing more. We don't say oil art or pastel art. Maybe in next five years we'll get rid of this nonsense.

What do you think were the most important parts of your education as an artist?

I had to educate myself, so I think the most important aspect was comprehending the indispensability of learning the classical academic approach and grasping the basics.

Do you have time for personal work, and if so, is it similar to or different from your work for Frogwares?

I don't have very much spare time, but if I do, I prefer to spend it learning things that might be helpful in my work. When I do something for myself, it's similar to what I do at Frogwares. Maybe a bit more guts and less boobs. (Marketing guys tend to think that a certain boobs/image ratio is good for sales.)

How did you get into the games industry? How has gaming, fantasy or otherwise, influenced your art?

I am a gamer and have some artistic talent, so it was inevitable, but it took me a long time to accept it and start to do what I want rather than what's considered prestigious. When I was twenty-five I made a kamikaze run into gamedev and started learning to draw at that age too. For the second part of your question, I don't even know what to say . . . Maybe "totally" would be the right answer!

What are some of your current projects?

Right now I'm working on *World of Battles* and *NYC* (working name), two projects by Frogwares. The first is fantasy online tactical strategy and the second is cyberpunk adventure. In my spare time I do some freelance work.

J. T. Glover has published fiction, non-fiction, and poetry in *Dark Recesses* and *Underground Voices*, among other venues. Born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, he currently resides in Richmond, Virginia with his wife and a not inconsiderable number of aquatic friends. By day he is an academic reference librarian specializing in the Humanities.

How Many Miles to Babylon?

Megan Arkenberg

And he cried out in a mighty voice:
Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
She had become a dwelling place for demons,
a haunt for every unclean bird,
a haunt for every unclean and hateful beast.
—*Revelation 18:2*

The Goliath halogen died today. We hoped at first that it was only the battery, that if we changed it out and cursed and tapped it hard against our thighs we could get it flickering again, then shining steadily. We went through half our stock of batteries before we admitted that the light itself was shot.

“Fuck,” I said. “Fucking mother of a goddamn fuck.” I was holding the battery case. I shook out the pack of double-As we had stuffed inside and flung the worthless chunk of plastic into the trees.

David didn’t say anything. He went around to the back of the truck and found a pair of xenon flashlights, thin and red, behind the box of canned soup. They take half the batteries, but aren’t a third as bright as the

Goliath.

It's getting harder and harder to pretend we aren't racing along the edge of a knife, one box of flashlights and a fistful of batteries away from the mercy of the things in the darkness. Beyond the reach of our headlights, the highway and the undergrowth are both as black as the empty sky. We know all too well what's hiding there, both the things that came from the stars, and the things that waited countless centuries in caves and cellars and tangled forests for the Darkening to claim the Earth. I sit on the roof of the truck, a flashlight in each hand. It's my turn for the watch, but I know David isn't sleeping. I can hear the fizz and crackle of static as he flips through dead radio stations, looking for guidance. Looking for Babylon.

But the city has fallen silent tonight. We can only hope it hasn't fallen dark.

Today, tonight—David has convinced himself that these words have lost any meaning, that the changing numbers on his wristwatch are as arbitrary as the patterns the intermittent rain traces on our windshield. I'm not so sure. I half believe that the sun and the moon and the stars are still there, making unfathomed cycles behind the veil that fell with the Darkening. Wouldn't it be colder, if

the sun were dead?

I am beginning to hate the trees. They grew up—overnight, I would say, and David would object—they grew up too quickly in the first hours of the Darkening, closing in the roads, smelling like earthworms and rot. It's been months since I've seen an empty field. The branches that I break down for our fires are leafless, their bark sloughing off in my hands, strangely and unpleasantly damp. Still, we need the firelight, and so we need the trees.

The end of the world has a funny way of teaching you about necessity.

David shakes me awake near three in the morning. I can see the fluorescent numerals blinking on his wrist, illuminated but not illuminating. His face is as unfathomable as always in the firelight, planes and angles and shadows like a patchwork of misery. "Listen," he says.

The radio reception flickers and burbles, nearly incomprehensible, but we've been listening so hard for this that I could repeat the words in my sleep. The message is the same every time.

Hello? Hello? A high-pitched voice, a young woman or child. *This is Babylon. We have light. We have—*

Static, like a purring beast, and then, *Hello? Is anybody there? Hello?*

“Coordinates?” I murmur, groping on the truck floor for my jacket. “Location, anything?”

“FM waves. We’ve gotta be within thirty miles.”

“We’ve been within thirty miles for weeks. It’s like searching for a needle in a haystack.”

He shrugs, a motion I hear rather than see. Crinkling of his windbreaker, dull creak of the tired bones in his shoulders. “Then we keep looking,” he says. The static crackles, and though we strain our ears listening, we hear no more from Babylon.

We haven’t seen a town in months. I think the trees consumed them, swallowed them up. I’m not sure how literally I mean that.

Sometimes we see something sticking out of the mud and the twisted roots—a slab of concrete, a mile marker, a once-fluorescent bar sign with scorch marks around the edge. It was fire that drove us out of Sommer’s Grove in the first place, a dome of orange and crimson swallowing the sky over the strip malls and the faux-Victorian duplexes. Flames rained down like bullets, smelling acrid, chemical. Now I think we should have stayed in the ashes—that whatever threw the fire down on us was

really on our side, fighting against the darkness.

At noon, the Horseman attacks.

David named them all according to what we could hear: Runners, with long loping pauses between the scuffing of their heavy paws against the earth; Batmen, who descend with the flapping of wings and the smell of new leather; Horsemen, whose six legs beat like hooves against the crumbling remains of the road. The Horsemen are the worst. Their feet are sharp and cold as steel, and their teeth are like needles, breaking off in your flesh.

A Horseman is what killed Salem.

This one is smarter than most. It launches itself at me while we're checking our taillights, in the momentary dimness. But the flinty click of hooves against the truck bed is all the warning David needs. He flicks on the brights. I draw all my flashlights at once—the blue rectangular diving light, the two thin reds that replaced the Goliath, the fistful of tiny LED penlights strung on a keyring. It's taken some practice, but I've learned to get them all lit in a blink, switch after switch sliding beneath my thumbs.

The Horseman shrieks like breaking glass. I can see its silhouette for a fraction of a second, the long spindly legs, the bulbous, eyeless head, and then it's gone,

dissolved in the light. My chest heaves, my heart pounding in my ears. Above my head, the truck's side is pocked with six-inch dents.

“That was . . . too damn close,” I pant.

David nods, leaning out the driver's window. “We can't . . . dim . . . the lights,” he says breathlessly. “Not even . . . for a second.”

Salem died on the first day of the Darkening.

It had all happened in an instant, the sun swallowed up, satellites wiped out of existence, as though the world had been locked in a black-sided box. Freighters and bridges plunged into the sea. Planes dropped from the sky, their sides puckered by the marks of gigantic claws.

In the darkness, we never saw the ships, but we heard the hollow, bone-deep sounds of their landing.

In a little town twenty miles north of Milwaukee, while she walked from her car to the doors of the library, my husband's sixteen-year-old daughter was shredded with steel-bladed hooves and needle-fine teeth.

Mikhaila, David's ex, made the call herself. We'd never spoken before, but she told the story to me, wouldn't let me pass the phone to David. Her voice was ragged and eerily calm. I hated her for it, for making *me* listen, but I understood. How do you tell a man that the

thing he loves most in the world is gone?

So I was the one who told him, who watched the news work like venom through to his heart. I caught him when he pitched forward, screaming, and half-carried him to the couch.

When he was thoroughly unconscious, surrounded by empty cans and plastic bottles, I tried to call Mikhaila back. The phone rang for fifteen minutes before I gave up.

The next night, a ball of flame ignited the roof of our neighbor's house. We threw what we could into the back of our truck and sped out of the burning town, stopping only to break the windows of a battery store and grab everything we could carry. We could see skeletal, winged figures writhing in the fire-lit sky.

“We’ll drive until dawn,” David said thickly, forgetting in our grief and adrenaline that dawn would never come again.

“What do you think we’ll find there?” I ask. David’s driving with one hand on the wheel, the other flipping through radio channels. Everything is static.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Safety, I guess. Others who survived.”

There have to be other survivors, I know. But we’ve

never seen them, not another car on the road, not even a light on a hill in the distance.

For the space of a moment, the radio receives something, a deep male voice booming out of the upper nineties. “. . . and the light of a lamp shall shine no more in thee.” I should recognize the quotation, but I don’t.

David spends the rest of the evening going back and forth over that empty patch of static.

I’ve stopped asking if he’s all right.

First, because it’s a stupid question. Of course he’s not all right, his daughter and most of the world is dead, and we’re pawing through the darkness and the monsters with a supply of soup and batteries and flashlights that won’t last forever.

Second, because I hate the way he looks when I ask it. Frowning, sick to his stomach, like he doesn’t think I should care.

The end of the world has a funny way of teaching you to stop asking questions. You get the same answers every time, over and over. The song has no second verse.

How many miles to Babylon?

Four score and ten.

Will we get there by candlelight?

Yes, and back again.

(Over and over again.)

A pair of Runners has been following us since we killed the Horseman. I haven't mentioned it to David; I just perk up my ears every now and then, when the sound of the engine dims, and I hear that heavy thumping in the near-distance. *Thump-thump, thump-thump*, like a pair of heartbeats.

I wonder if monsters understand the concept of revenge.

“Getting tired?” I ask.

David shrugs.

“Here, let me drive,” I say. “You need to rest.”

“I’m fine.”

“You haven’t slept in thirty-six hours.”

“I said I’m fine.”

I lean back against the headrest. “You’re not fine, David.”

He pushes down on the accelerator. Behind us, the sounds pick up. *Thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump*.

David takes first watch, and I don’t fight him on it. I’m hoping he’ll exhaust himself and his body will force him into sleep. I lie awake across the seats in the truck cabin,

eyes closed, listening for all I'm worth.

He's trying his pocket radio. *Static, static, static*, punctuated by the click of the turning dial. What a waste of batteries, I think, and then it comes. *This is Babylon*, clear as crystal in the darkness. Then nothing.

He doesn't come to wake me. I try not to let it sting.

I think the Runners have to stop and rest. Either that, or the light from our campfire is steady enough to frighten them back into the trees. They don't come and they don't come, and finally David nudges me out of feigned sleep, and lays himself down to rest.

He's really sleeping, too. I trail my hand over his face, down his neck and across the firm rise and fall of his chest, and he doesn't stir, doesn't respond at all. It's been months since we've really touched. I can't remember the last time he kissed me.

Before we left Sommer's Grove, while David was vandalizing our pantry for canned goods, I took a bottle of magnesium tablets from the medicine cabinet. Burning magnesium is too bright to look at. I thought, at the time, that it would remind me of the sun.

There's a third Runner now. *Thump-thump, thump-*

thump, thump-thump. I wonder how much longer I can wait.

When I'm sure David is sleeping soundly, I climb up on top of the truck with his little radio and flip to the AM stations. Coarser reception, longer-distance. I know exactly what I'm looking for, in the middle of the six-hundreds.

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. It is a woman's voice, clear and cold as steel. This is the dozenth time I've listened for her while David is asleep. It feels, somehow, like a betrayal. *It has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and hateful beast.*

David sighs in his sleep. I want to believe it's my name he murmurs, but it could be Salem's, it could be a wordless moan of pain. I turn the radio back the way he left it, back to the voiceless wilderness, the valley of bones.

This is Babylon, the voice says. The static chops the message like a blunt knife. *We have (crackle) anybody (crackle) Hello? Hello?* And the radio battery dies.

I never met Salem. Custody fell to Mikhaila, a thousand miles away, and the three or four times that Salem visited

her father, I made myself scarce. Women's club retreats, weekends with my parents or my girlfriends. I was terrified of becoming the wicked stepmother; an absent one seemed preferable.

I know that Salem got excellent report cards, loved art classes, played soccer for three years in grade school, and shattered her knee so badly that she needed to sit out through junior high. She adored whales and dolphins, and the year David and I got married, we sent her a fat plush orca for her birthday. Its eyes were huge, with cartoonishly feminine lashes.

She sent us a terse, polite, hand-written thank-you card. It was illustrated in watercolor with an orca's eye, beautiful and dark.

When she died, she was carrying a backpack full of books on Picasso, for a school project, and Rossetti, for recreational reading. She also had a box of colored pencils, professional-quality, a masculine leather wallet with her learner's license and twenty dollars cash. And a plush orca, loved to flatness, one huge plastic eye crushed by the Horseman's hooves.

I wonder if monsters understand the concept of revenge.

Nimrod was the king of Babylon, and a mighty hunter before the Lord. Of course, no one ever says what he hunted.

Something rustles in the leaves on the side of the road. I would turn up the headlights, but David is asleep in the driver's seat, his chest rising and falling as heavily as if it pushed against the weight of the world. I don't want to disturb him by reaching through the window. Instead, I throw more damp and foul-smelling wood onto the fire.

The steady *thump-thumping* stopped thirty minutes ago. Either the Runners are resting, or they've come too close to run.

I finger the powdered magnesium tablets in my pocket.

Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. The words ring in my head, as repetitive as a nursery rhyme. What if it's true? What if Babylon is not our new Jerusalem with angels at the gates, but a charred skeleton city, a ruin with monsters nesting in its bones?

There are too many logs on the fire. The flames burn low, dull red, only the heart of them hot enough for my undertaking. For the last time, I look at David through the open driver's window. His eyes roll beneath his lids; he is dreaming.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” I say to the monsters.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Three Runners step into the road, at the feathery edge of the firelight. More rustle through the trees behind them. They are horrible, spindly things, smelling of rotten meat. Charred bones tear out of their gray and purple flesh. Their empty eye sockets are like the blackness of the pit.

Fool, says the middle one. It is longer and fatter than the others. It speaks with the voice from the AM radio station, female and icy. *What business could a daughter of the light have with the children of darkness?*

She is looking for Babylon, says the one on the left. *The men who thought they could fight us with prayers and candle flames.*

The one on the right licks its bloated lips with a thin black tongue. *The birds of midheaven have feasted on their flesh.*

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Daughter of men, says the middle one, *what do you think you are doing?*

You are alone in the world. The one on the left tilts its head, like a vulture eyeing carrion. *Who do you think will protect you?*

Why do you not speak?

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I smile, crouching before the fire. I spit on the asphalt at their scaly feet. And I take the bottle of magnesium from my pocket, unscrewing the cap.

There is an unendurable brightness, a burning pain across my face. The Runners shriek like the damned. The ones in the forest scramble for safety, but their scrambling does not go on for long. The stench of charring flesh fills my nose and mouth.

Then silence, and darkness.

David is clicking through stations on the truck radio. *Static, static.* All the voices of Babylon are dead.

“That was foolish,” he says again.

I touch the cool bandages across my eyes. They are wet—with what, I don’t know.

“I saved your life,” I say. “I killed God knows how many monsters. The least you can do is thank me.”

Click, click, click. He turns the radio dial. Static crackles from the speaker by my ear. Then, “Thank you.”

“David?”

He swallows hard. “So what do we do now?”

It is a question full of questions.

Should we continue searching? Did Babylon ever exist, or was it a trap devised by the creatures of darkness? And who were its citizens, who fought with prayers and candle flames? How many monsters are left in the wilderness—and how many people? Will I ever see again?

How many miles to Babylon?

I cup my hand over David's knee. The denim beneath my fingertips is rough and warm.

“We keep hunting,” I say.

A voice cries out through the radio static, a single word, too bright and fast and sharp for us to understand.

Megan Arkenberg is a student in Wisconsin, where she spends more time writing than studying, more time reading than writing, and entirely too much time doing research. Her work has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Ideomancer*, and dozens of other places. She edits the online magazines *Mirror Dance* and *Lacuna*.

Gene Wars

Paul McAuley

1.

On Evan's eighth birthday, his aunt sent him the latest smash-hit biokit, *Splicing Your Own Semisentients*. The box-lid depicted an alien swamp throbbing with weird, amorphous life; a double helix spiralling out of a test-tube was embossed in one corner. Don't let your father see that, his mother said, so Evan took it out to the old barn, set up the plastic culture trays and vials of chemicals and retroviruses on a dusty workbench in the shadow of the shrouded combine.

His father found Evan there two days later. The slime mould he'd created, a million amoebae aggregated around a drop of cyclic AMP, had been transformed with a retrovirus and was budding little blue-furred blobs. Evan's father dumped culture trays and vials in the yard and made Evan pour a litre of industrial grade bleach over them. More than fear or anger, it was the acrid stench that made Evan cry.

That summer, the leasing company foreclosed on the livestock. The rep who supervised repossession of the

supercows drove off in a big car with the test-tube and double-helix logo on its gull-wing door. The next year the wheat failed, blighted by a particularly virulent rust. Evan's father couldn't afford the new resistant strain, and the farm went under.

2.

Evan lived with his aunt, in the capital. He was fifteen. He had a street bike, a plug-in computer, and a pet microsauro, a triceratops in purple funfur. Buying the special porridge which was all the microsauro could eat took half of Evan's weekly allowance; that was why he let his best friend inject the pet with a bootleg virus to edit out its dietary dependence. It was only a partial success: the triceratops no longer needed its porridge, but developed epilepsy triggered by sunlight. Evan had to keep it in his wardrobe. When it started shedding fur in great swatches, he abandoned it in a nearby park. Microsauros were out of fashion, anyway. Dozens could be found wandering the park, nibbling at leaves, grass, discarded scraps of fast food. Quite soon they disappeared, starved to extinction.

3.

The day before Evan graduated, his sponsor firm called to tell him that he wouldn't be doing research after all.

There had been a change of policy: The covert gene wars were going public. When Evan started to protest, the woman said sharply, "You're better off than many long-term employees. With a degree in molecular genetics you'll make sergeant at least."

4.

The jungle was a vivid green blanket in which rivers made silvery forked lightnings. Warm wind rushed around Evan as he leaned out the helicopter's hatch; the harness dug into his shoulders. He was twenty-three, a tech sergeant. It was his second tour of duty.

His goggles laid icons over the view, tracking the target. Two villages a klick apart, linked by a red dirt road narrow as a capillary that suddenly widened to an artery as the helicopter dove.

Muzzle-flashes on the ground: Evan hoped the peasants only had Kalashnikovs: Last week some gook had downed a copter with an antiquated SAM. Then he was too busy laying the pattern, virus-suspension in a sticky spray that fogged the maize fields.

Afterwards, the pilot, an old-timer, said over the

intercom, “Things get tougher every day. We used just to take a leaf, cloning did the rest. You couldn’t even call it theft. And this stuff . . . I always thought war was bad for business.”

Evan said, “The company owns copyright to the maize genome. Those peasants aren’t licensed to grow it.”

The pilot said admiringly, “Man, you’re a real company guy. I bet you don’t even know what country this is.”

Evan thought about that. He said, “Since when were countries important?”

5.

Rice fields spread across the floodplain, dense as a hand-stitched quilt. In every paddy, peasants bent over their own reflections, planting seedlings for the winter crop.

In the centre of the UNESCO delegation, the Minister for Agriculture stood under a black umbrella held by an aide. He was explaining that his country was starving to death after a record rice crop.

Evan was at the back of the little crowd, bareheaded in warm drizzle. He wore a smart one-piece suit, yellow overshoes. He was twenty-eight, had spent two years

infiltrating UNESCO for his company.

The minister was saying, “We have to buy seed gene-spliced for pesticide resistance to compete with our neighbours, but my people can’t afford to buy the rice they grow. It must all be exported to service our debt. We are starving in the midst of plenty.”

Evan stifled a yawn. Later, at a reception in some crumbling embassy, he managed to get the minister on his own. The man was drunk, unaccustomed to hard liquor. Evan told him he was very moved by what he had seen.

“Look in our cities,” the minister said, slurring his words. “Every day a thousand more refugees pour in from the countryside. We have kwashiorkor, beri-beri.”

Evan popped a *canapé* into his mouth. One of his company’s new lines, it squirmed with delicious lasciviousness before he swallowed it. “I may be able to help you,” he said. “The people I represent have a new yeast that completely fulfils dietary requirements and will grow on a simple medium.”

“How simple?” As Evan explained, the minister, no longer as drunk as he had seemed, steered him onto the terrace. The minister said, “You understand this must be confidential. Under UNESCO rules . . . “

“There are ways around that. We have lease

arrangements with five countries that have . . . trade imbalances similar to your own. We lease the genome as a loss-leader, to support governments who look favourably on our other products . . . “

6.

The gene pirate was showing Evan his editing facility when the slow poison finally hit him. They were aboard an ancient ICBM submarine grounded somewhere off the Philippines. Missile tubes had been converted into fermenters. The bridge was crammed with the latest manipulation technology, virtual reality gear which let the wearer directly control molecule-sized cutting robots as they travelled along DNA helices.

“It’s not facilities I need,” the pirate told Evan, “it’s distribution.”

“No problem,” Evan said. The pirate’s security had been pathetically easy to penetrate. He’d tried to infect Evan with a zombie virus, but Evan’s gene-spliced designer immune system had easily dealt with it. Slow poison was so much more subtle: By the time it could be detected it was too late. Evan was thirty-two. He was posing as a Swiss grey market broker.

“This is where I keep my old stuff,” the pirate said,

rapping a stainless steel cryogenic vat. “Stuff from before I went big time. A free luciferase gene complex, for instance. Remember when the Brazilian rainforest started to glow? That was me.” He dashed sweat from his forehead, frowned at the room’s complicated thermostat. Grossly fat and completely hairless, he wore nothing but Bermuda shorts and shower sandals. He’d been targeted because he was about to break the big time with a novel HIV cure. The company was still making a lot of money from its own cure: They made sure AIDS had never been completely eradicated in third world countries.

Evan said, “I remember the Brazilian government was overthrown—the population took it as a bad omen.”

“Hey, what can I say? I was only a kid. Transforming the gene was easy, only difficulty was finding a vector. Old stuff. Somatic mutation really is going to be the next big thing, believe me. Why breed new strains when you can rework a genome cell by cell?” He rapped the thermostat. His hands were shaking. “Hey, is it hot in here, or what?”

“That’s the first symptom,” Evan said. He stepped out of the way as the gene pirate crashed to the decking. “And that’s the second.”

The company had taken the precaution of buying the pirate’s security chief: Evan had plenty of time to fix the

fermenters. By the time he was ashore, they would have boiled dry. On impulse, against orders, he took a microgram sample of the HIV cure with him.

7.

“The territory between piracy and legitimacy is a minefield,” the assassin told Evan. “It’s also where paradigm shifts are most likely to occur, and that’s where I come in. My company likes stability. Another year and you’d have gone public, and most likely the share issue would have made you a billionaire—a minor player, but still a player. Those cats, no one else has them. The genome was supposed to have been wiped out back in the twenties. Very astute, quitting the grey medical market and going for luxury goods.” She frowned. “Why am I talking so much?”

“For the same reason you’re not going to kill me,” Evan said.

“It seems such a silly thing to want to do,” the assassin admitted.

Evan smiled. He’d long ago decoded the two-stage virus the gene-pirate had used on him: one a Trojan horse which kept his T-lymphocytes busy while the other rewrote loyalty genes companies implanted in their

employees. Once again it had proven its worth. He said, “I need someone like you in my organization. And since you spent so long getting close enough to seduce me, perhaps you’d do the honour of becoming my wife. I’ll need one.”

“You don’t mind being married to a killer?”

“Oh, that. I used to be one myself.”

8.

Evan saw the market crash coming. Gene wars had winnowed basic food crops to soy beans, rice and dole yeast: Tailored ever-mutating diseases had reduced cereals and many other cash crops to nucleotide sequences stored in computer vaults. Three global biotechnology companies held patents on the calorific input of ninety-eight percent of humanity, but they had lost control of the technology. Pressures of the war economy had simplified it to the point where anyone could directly manipulate her own genome, and hence her own body form.

Evan had made a fortune in the fashion industry, selling templates and microscopic self-replicating robots which edited DNA. But he guessed that sooner or later someone would come up with a direct photosynthesis

system, and his stock market expert systems were programmed to correlate research in the field. He and his wife sold controlling interest in their company three months before the first green people appeared.

9.

“I remember when you knew what a human being was,” Evan said sadly. “I suppose I’m old-fashioned, but there it is.”

From her cradle, inside a mist of spray, his wife said, “Is that why you never went green? I always thought it was a fashion statement.”

“Old habits die hard.” The truth was, he liked his body the way it was. These days, going green involved somatic mutation which grew a metre-high black cowl to absorb sufficient light energy. Most people lived in the tropics, swarms of black-caped anarchists. Work was no longer a necessity, but an indulgence. Evan added, “I’m going to miss you.”

“Let’s face it,” his wife said, “we never were in love. But I’ll miss you, too.” With a flick of her powerful tail she launched her streamlined body into the sea.

10.

Black-cowled post-humans, gliding slowly in the sun, aggregating and re-aggregating like amoebae.

Dolphinoids, tentacles sheathed under fins, rocking in tanks of cloudy water. Ambulatory starfish; tumbling bushes of spikes; snakes with a single arm, a single leg; flocks of tiny birds, brilliant as emeralds, each flock a single entity.

People, grown strange, infected with myriads of microscopic machines which re-engraved their body form at will.

Evan lived in a secluded estate. He was revered as a founding father of the posthuman revolution. A purple funfur microsauro followed him everywhere. It was recording him because he had elected to die.

“I don’t regret anything,” Evan said, “except perhaps not following my wife when she changed. I saw it coming, you know. All this. Once the technology became simple enough, cheap enough, the companies lost control. Like television or computers, but I suppose you don’t remember those.” He sighed. He had the vague feeling he’d said all this before. He’d had no new thoughts for a century, except the desire to put an end to thought.

The microsauro said, “In a way, I suppose I am a computer. Will you see the colonial delegation now?”

“Later.” Evan hobbled to a bench and slowly sat

down. In the last couple of months he had developed mild arthritis, liver spots on the backs of his hands: death finally expressing parts of his genome that had been suppressed for so long. Hot sunlight fell through the velvet streamers of the tree things; Evan dozed, woke to find a group of starfish watching him. They had blue, human eyes, one at the tip of each muscular arm.

“They wish to honour you by taking your genome to Mars,” the little purple triceratops said.

Evan sighed. “I just want peace. To rest. To die.”

“Oh Evan,” the little triceratops said patiently, “surely even you know that nothing really dies anymore.”

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Always True to Thee, in My Fashion

Nancy Kress

Relationships for the autumn season were casual and unconstructed, following a summer where fashion had been unusually colorful and intense. Suzanne liked wearing the new feelings. They were light and cool, allowing her a lot of freedom of movement. The off-hand affection made her feel unencumbered, graceful.

Cade wasn't so sure.

"It sounds bloody boring," he said to Suzanne, holding the pills in his hand. "Love isn't supposed to be so boring. At least the summer fashions offered a few surprises."

Boxes from the couture houses spilled around their bedroom. Suzanne, of course, had done the ordering. Karl Lagerfeld, Galliano, Enkia for Christian LaCroix, and of course Suzanne's own special designer and friend, Sendil. Cade stood in the middle of an explosion of slouchy tweeds and off-white linen, wearing his underwear and his stubborn look.

"But the summer feelings were so heavy," Suzanne said. She dropped a casual kiss on the top of Cade's head. "Come on, Cadie, at least give it a try. You have the body

for casual emotions, you know. They look so good on you.”

This was true. Cade was lean and loose-jointed, with a small head on a long neck: a body made for easy carelessness. Backlit by their wide bedroom windows, he already looked coolly nonchalant: an Edwardian aristocrat, perhaps, or one of those marvelously blasé American riverboat gamblers who couldn’t be bothered to sweat. The environment helped, of course. Suzanne always did their V-R, and for autumn she’d programmed unlined curtains, cool terra cotta tiles, oyster-white walls. All very informal and composed, nothing trying very hard. But she’d left the windows natural. That, too, was perfect: too nonchalant about the view of London to bother reprogramming its ugliness. Only Suzanne would have thought of this touch. Their friends would be so jealous.

“Come on, Cade, try the feelings on.” But he only went on looking troubled, holding the pills in his long-fingered hand.

Suzanne began to feel impatient. Cade was wonderful, of course, but he could be so conservative. He really hadn’t liked the summer fashions—and they had been so much fun! Suzanne knew she looked good in those kinds of dramatic, highly colored feelings. They

went well with her voluptuous body and small, sharp teeth. People had noticed. She'd had two passionate adulteries, one knife-fight with Kittery, one duel fought over her, two midnight reconciliations, and one weepy parting from Cade at sunset on the edge of a sea, which had been V-R'd into wine-dark roils for the occasion. Very satisfying.

But the summer was over. Really, Cade should be more willing to vary his emotional wardrobe. Sometimes she even wondered if she might be better off with another lover . . . Mikhail, maybe, or even Jastinder . . . but no, of course not. She loved Cade. They belonged to each other forever. Cade was the bedrock of her life. If only he weren't so stubborn!

"Have you ever thought," he said, not looking at her, "that we might skip a fashion season? Just let it go by and wear something old, off alone together? Or even go naked?"

"What an idea," she said lightly.

"We could try it, Suzanne."

"We could also move out of the towers and live down there along the Thames among the starving and dirty-mattressed thugs. Equally appealing."

Wrong, wrong. Cade turned away from her. In another minute he would put the pills back in their little

bottle. Suzanne decided to try playfulness. She twined her arms around his neck, and flashed her eyes at him. “You are vast, Cade. You contain multitudes. Do you really think it’s fair, mmmm, that you deny me all your multitudes, when I’m so ready to love them all?”

Reluctantly, he smiled. “‘Multitudes,’ is it?”

“And I *want* them all. All the Cades. I’m greedy, you know.” She rubbed against him.

“Well . . .”

“Come on, Cade. For me.” Another rub, and after it she danced away, laughing.

He could never resist her. He swallowed the pills, then reached out his arms. Suzanne eluded them.

“Not yet. After they take effect.”

“Suzanne . . .”

“Tomorrow.” Casually, she blew him an affectionate kiss and sauntered toward the door, leaving him gazing after her. Cade wanting her, and she off-hand and insouciant.

It was going to be a wonderful autumn.

The next day was unbelievably exciting, more arousing even than when she’d walked in on Cade and Kittery in the summer bedroom and they’d had the shouting and pleading and knife fight. This was arousing in a different

way. Suzanne had strolled into the apartment in mid-morning, half an hour late. “There you are, then,” she’d said casually to Cade.

He looked up from his reader, his long-limbed body sprawled across the chair. “Oh, hallo.”

“How are you?”

He shrugged, then made a negligent gesture with one graceful slim-fingered hand.

Suzanne draped herself across his lap, gazing abstractedly out the window. Today London looked even uglier than usual: cold, gray, dirty.

“Do you mind awfully?” Cade said. “I’m in the middle of this article.”

“And so absorbed that you don’t notice me, mmmmm?” Suzanne moved against him.

Cade smiled, pecked her cheek, and gave her a careless nudge. “Off you go, then.” He returned to his reader. Suzanne stood and stretched.

The rush of blood to her nipples and thighs startled her. He really was indifferent to her! She would have to actually work at getting him interested, winning him from his casual reading . . . God, it was exciting!

She would succeed, of course. She always did. But why hadn’t she ever realized before how much more interesting the victory was when she’d have to struggle

for it? She hadn't been this aroused in years.

"Cade . . ." She leaned over him and nibbled on his ear. "Sweet Cade . . ."

He tilted his head to look up at her, eyebrows raised. The drugs had done something to his eyes, or to her perception of them; they looked lighter, more opaque. Suzanne laughed softly. "Come on, it will be so good . . ."

"Oh, all right. If you insist."

He rose from his chair, turned to pick up the dropped reader. He nudged an antique vase a quarter inch to the right on one of Sendil's occasional tables. He rubbed his left elbow, gazing out the window. Suzanne took his hand, and they ambled toward the bedroom.

And it was wonderful. The most interesting show in years. Really, the fashion designers were geniuses.

"Cade, Flavia and Mikhail have invited us to a water fete on Saturday. Do you want to go?"

He looked up from his screen, where he was checking his portfolio on the New York Stock Exchange. He didn't even look annoyed that she'd interrupted. "Do you want to go?"

"I asked *you*."

"I don't care."

Suzanne bit her lip. "Well, what shall I tell Flavia?"

“Whatever you like, love.”

“Well, then . . . I thought I might fly to Paris this weekend.” She paused. “To see Guillaume.”

He didn’t even twitch. “Whatever you like, love.”

“Cade—do you care if I visit Guillaume? For an entire weekend?” In the summer, a threat to visit Guillaume, a former lover who still adored Suzanne, had produced drama that went on for sixteen straight hours.

“Oh, Suzanne, don’t be tiresome. Of course you can visit Guillaume if you want.” Cade blew her a casual kiss.

She charged across the room, seized his hand, and dragged him away from the terminal. His eyebrows rose slightly.

But afterward, as Cade lay deeply asleep, Suzanne wondered. Maybe he’d actually been right, after all, about the current fashions. Not that it hadn’t been exciting to work at arousing him, but . . . she wasn’t supposed to be working. She was supposed to feel just as detached and casual as Cade. That was the bloody trouble with fashion—no matter what the designers said, one size never did fit all. The individual drug responses were too different. Well, no matter. Tomorrow she’d just increase her dosage. Until she, and not Cade, was the more casual. The sought after, rather than the seeker.

The way it was supposed to be.

“Cade . . . Cade?”

“Oh, Suzanne. Do come in.”

He sat up in bed, unselfconscious, unruffled. Beside him, Flavia emerged languidly from the off-white sheets. She said, “Suzanne, darling. I am sorry. We didn’t expect you so soon. Shall I leave?”

Suzanne crossed the room to the dresser. This was more like it. A little movement, for a change—a little *action*. Really, casual was all very well, but how many evenings could one spend in off-hand conversation? Almost she was grateful to Flavia. Not that she would show it, of course. But Flavia was giving her the perfect excuse to put on an entirely different demeanor. She had rather missed changing for dinner.

From the dresser top she picked up a string of pearls and toyed with them, a careful appearance of anger suppressed under a facade of sophisticated control.

“Cade . . . how could you?”

Flavia said, “Perhaps I *had* better leave, hadn’t I? See you later, darlings.” She activated a V-R dress from her necklace—easy unrestricting lines in a subtle taupe, Suzanne noted—and left.

Cade said, “Suzanne—”

“I trusted you, Cade!”

“Oh, rot,” he said. “You’re making a fuss over nothing.”

“Nothing! You call—”

“Really, Suzanne. Flavia hardly matters.”

“‘Hardly’? And just what does that mean?”

“Oh, Suzanne, you know what it means. Really, don’t make yourself ridiculous over trifles.” And Cade yawned, stretched, and went to sleep.

To sleep.

Suzanne thought of waking him. She thought of pounding on him with her small fists, of dumping him on the floor, of packing her bags and leaving a note. But, really, all those things *would* look rather ridiculous. People would hear about it, snicker . . . and even if they didn’t, even if Cade kept her bad taste to himself, there was still the fact that the two of them would know it had happened. Suzanne had lost her cool poise. She had been as embarrassing as Kittery, the season Kittery showed up at a geisha party dressed in the crude emotions of a political revolutionary. Even if Cade were to keep this incident private, Suzanne winced at the idea of his thinking her as gauche as Kittery, as capable of such a major fashion faux pas. No, no. Better to let it pass.

Cade snored softly. Suzanne lay beside him, fists

clenched, waiting for winter.

Finally, the new fashions were out! Suzanne went to Paris for the preseason shows, sitting in the first row at each important couture house, exultant. She saw, and was seen, and was happy.

The designers had outdone themselves, especially Suwela for Karl Lagerfeld. The feeling was tremulous, ingenué, all the tentative sharp sweetness of virgin love. Pink, pale blue, white—lots of white—with indrawn gasps and wide-eyed sexual exploration. Ruffles and flowers and heart flutterings at a lingering look. Gianfranco Ferré showed a marvelous silk, flowing biocloth abloom with living forget-me-knots, accessorized with innocence barely daring to touch the male model's hand. At Galliano, the jackets were matched with flounced bonnets and a blushing fear that a too-passionate kiss would lead . . . where? The models' knees trembled with nervous anticipation. And the ever-faithful Sendil showed an empire-waist ballgown in muslin—muslin!—that, he whispered to Suzanne, had been inspired solely by her.

Suzanne wanted everything. She spent more money than ever before at a preview. She could hardly wait for the official opening of the season. Cade and she, once

more thirteen years old, with love new and sparkling and fraught with sweet tension . . . While she waited for opening day, she had her hair grown long, her hips slimmed, and her eyes widened and colored, to huge blue orbs.

Maybe they could give a party. Everyone tremulous with anticipation and virgin hopes . . . wasn't there something called "spin the bottle"? She could ask the computer.

It was going to be a wonderful winter.

"No," Cade said.

"No?"

"Oh, don't look so crushed, love. Well, maybe, then. I mean, what does it matter, really?"

"What does it *matter*?" Suzanne cried. "Cade, it's the start of the season!"

He eyed her with amusement. But under the amusement was something else, the now-familiar feeling that he found her faintly ridiculous, casually distasteful. God, she couldn't wait to get him out of this wretched understated nonchalance.

Suzanne made an effort to speak lightly. "Well, if it doesn't matter, then there's no reason not to go for a bit of a change, is there?"

He flicked at a speck of dust on his sleeve. “I suppose not. But, then, love, no reason to go for change either, is there? This suits us well enough, don’t you think?”

Suzanne tried not to bite her lip clear through. It was too close to opening day for tissue repair. “Well, perhaps, but one wants some variety, all the same . . .”

He shrugged. “I don’t, actually.”

She cried, “But, Cade—!”

“Oh, Suzanne, don’t get so worked up, it’s quite tiresome. Can’t we discuss it later?”

“But—”

“I have lunch with Jastinder. Or Kittery. Or somebody. Care to come? No? Well, suit yourself, love.”

He waved to her and sauntered out.

She couldn’t budge him. He didn’t resist her; he just wasn’t interested. Careless. Indifferent.

Opening day came. Suzanne stood in the bedroom, biting her bottom lip. What to do? Everything was ready. She’d programmed the room for pale pink walls with white wood molding, filmy curtains fluttering in the breeze, a view of gardens filled with lavender and June roses and wisteria and anything else the computer said was old-fashioned. The scent simulator was running overtime. Around Suzanne were the half-unpacked boxes

of flouncy silks and sweet girlish slip-dresses and little kid slippers. Plus, of course, the white jackets and copper-toed boots for Cade. Who had glanced at the entire thing with amused negligence, and then gone out somewhere for a stroll.

“But you can’t!” Suzanne had cried. “It’s opening day! And you’re still dressed in . . . *that*.”

“Oh, love, what does it matter?” Cade had said. “I’m comfortable. And isn’t all this stuff just a bit . . . twee? Isn’t it, now?”

“But Cade—”

“I rather like what I’m used to.”

“You’re not used to it!” Suzanne had cried in anguish. “You can’t be! You’ve only had it for a season!”

“Really? I guess so. Seems longer,” Cade said. “See you later, love. Or not.”

Now Suzanne scowled at the pills in her hand. There was a real problem here. If she took them, she would be garbed in the gentle sweet tremulousness of youth. Gentle, sweet, tremulous—and ineffective. That was the whole point. Ingenues were acted upon, not actors. But without the whole force of her will, could she persuade Cade to stop being such an ass?

On the other hand, if she didn’t take the pills, she would be dressed wrong for the occasion. She pictured

showing up at the Donnison lunch in the Alliani Towers, at the afternoon reception in the Artificial Islands, at Kittery's party tonight, dressed badly, shabbily, in last season's worn-out feelings . . . no, no. She couldn't. She had a reputation to maintain. And everyone would think that she couldn't afford new feelings, that she had lost all her money in data-atoll speculation or some other ghastly nouveau thing . . . damn Cade!

He came back from his stroll a few hours later, whistling carelessly. The vid was already crammed with "Where are you?" messages from their friends at the Donnison lunch. Breathless, ingenue messages, from people having a wonderful youthful time. And there was Cade, cool and off-hand in those detestable boring tweeds, daring to *whistle*. . . .

"Where have you *been*?" Suzanne said. "Don't you know how late we are? Come on, get dressed!"

"Don't whine, Suzanne, it's terribly unattractive."

"I never whine!" she cried, stung.

"Well, then, don't do whatever you're doing. Come lie down beside me instead."

It was the most assertive thing he'd said in months. Encouraged, Suzanne lay with him on the bed, trying to control her panic. Maybe if she were sweet enough to him. . . .

“You haven’t dressed yet, either, have you, love?” Cade said. He was smiling. “That isn’t the tentative embrace of an ingenue.”

“Would you like that?” Suzanne said hopefully. “I can just change. . . .”

“Actually, no. I’ve been thinking, Suzanne. I don’t want to get all tricked out as some sort of ersatz boy-child, and you don’t want to go on wearing these casual emotions. So what about what I suggested at the end of last summer? Let’s just go naked for a while. See what it’s like.”

“No!” Suzanne shrieked.

She hadn’t known she was going to do it. She never shrieked like that—not she, Suzanne! Except, of course, when fashion decreed it, and that didn’t really count . . . What was she thinking? Of course it counted, it was the only thing that kept them all safe. To go *naked* in front of each other! Good God, what was Cade *thinking*? Civilized people didn’t parade around naked, everything personal on display for any passing observer to pick over and chortle at, nude and helplessly exposed in their deepest feelings!

Or lack of them.

She struggled to sound casual. And she succeeded—or last season’s pills did. “Cade . . . I don’t want to go

naked. Really, I don't think you're being very fair. We had it your way for a season. Now it should be my turn."

A long silence. For a moment Suzanne thought he'd actually fallen asleep. If he had *dared* . . .

"Suzanne," he said finally, "it's my detached impression that you always have it your way."

It hurt so much that Suzanne's legs trembled as she climbed off the bed. How could he say that? She always thought in terms of the two of them! Always! She went into the bathroom and closed the door. Shaky, she leaned against the wall, and caught sight of herself in the mirror. She looked lovely. Blue eyes wide with surprised hurt, pale lip trembling, like a young girl suddenly cut to her vulnerable heart . . .

And she hadn't even yet taken the season's pills!

Cade would have to come around. He would simply *have* to.

He didn't. Suzanne argued. She stormed. She begged. Finally, after missing three days of wonderful parties—irreplaceable parties, a season only opened once, after all—she dressed herself in the pills and a white cotton frock, and pleaded with him tremulously, weeping delicate sweet tears. Cade only laughed affectionately, and hugged her casually, and went off to do something else off-hand

and detestable.

She dissolved the pills in his burgundy.

It bothered her, a little. They had always been honest with each other. And besides, it was such a scary thing for a young girl to do, her fingers shook the whole time as she broke open the capsules and a single shining crystalline tear dropped into the glass (how much salt would one tear add? Cade had a keen palate). But she did it. And, wide-eyed, she handed him the glass, her girlish bosom heaving with silent emotion. Then she excused herself and went to take a scented bath in pink bubbles and to do her hair in long drooping ringlets.

By the time she came out, Cade was waiting for her. He held a single pink rose, and his eyes met hers shyly, for just a moment, as he handed it to her. They went for a walk before dinner along a beach, and the stars came out one by one, and when he took her hand, Suzanne thought her heart would burst. At the thought that he might kiss her, the V-R waves blurred a little, and her breath came faster.

It was going to be a wonderful winter.

“Suzanne,” Cade said, very low. “Sweet Suzanne . . .”

“Yes, Cade?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Yes?” Emotion thrilled through her.

“I don’t like burgundy.”

“What . . . but you . . .”

“At least not that burgundy. I didn’t drink it. But I did run it through the molecular analyzer.”

She pulled away from his hand. Suddenly, she was very afraid.

“I’m so disappointed in you, Suzanne. I rather hoped that whatever fashion said, we at least trusted each other.”

“What . . .” she had trouble getting the words out, damn this tremulous high-pitched voice—“What are you going to do?”

“Do?” He laughed carelessly. “Why do anything? It’s not really worth making a fuss over, is it?”

Relief washed over her. It was last season’s fashion. He was still wearing it, and it was keeping him casual about her betrayal. Nonchalant, offhand. Oh, thank heavens . . .

“But I think maybe we should live apart for a bit. Till things sort themselves out. Don’t you think that would be best?”

“Oh no! No!” Girlish protest, in a high sweet girlish voice. When what she wanted was to grab him and force her body against his and convince him to change his mind by sheer brute sexuality . . . but she couldn’t. Not dressed

like this. It would be ludicrous.

“Cade . . .”

“Oh, don’t take it so hard, love. I mean, it’s not the end of the world, is it? You’re still you, and I’m still me. Be good, now.” And he loped off down the beach and out the apartment door.

Suzanne turned off the V-R. She sat in the bare-walled apartment and cried. She loved Cade, she really did. Maybe if she agreed to go naked for a season . . . but, no. That wasn’t how she loved Cade, or how he loved her, either. They loved each other for their multiplicity of selves, their basic and true complexity, expressed outwardly and so well through the art of change. That was what kept love fresh and romantic, wasn’t it? Change. Growth. Variety.

Suzanne cried until she had no tears left, until she was completely drained. (It felt rather good, actually. Ingenues were allowed so much wild sorrow.) Then she called Sendil, at home, on a shielded frequency.

“Sendil? Suzanne.”

“Suzanne? What is it? I can’t see you, my dear.”

“The vid’s malfunctioning, I have audio only. Sendil, I’ve got some rather awful news.”

“What? Oh, are you all right?”

“I’m . . . oh, please understand! I’m so alone! I need

you!” Her voice trembled. She had his complete attention.

“Anything, love. Anything at all!”

“I’m . . .” Her girlish voice dropped to a whisper drenched in shame. “I’m . . . *enceinte*. And Cade . . . Cade won’t marry me!”

“Suzanne!” Sendil cried. “Oh my God! What a master stroke! Are you going to keep it going all season?”

“I’m . . . I’m going away. I can’t . . . face anyone.”

“No, of course not. Oh my God, darling, this will just *make* your reputation!”

Suzanne said acidly, “I was under the impression it was already made,” realized her mistake, and dropped back into ingenue. It wasn’t hard, really; all she had to do was take a deep breath and give herself up to the drugs. She said gaspingly, “But I can’t . . . I can’t face it completely by myself. I’m just not strong enough. So you’re the only person I’m telling. Will you come see me in my shame?”

“Oh, Suzanne, of course I’ll stand by you,” Sendil said, boyish emotion making his voice husky. Sendil always took a dose and a half of fashion.

“I leave tomorrow,” Suzanne gasped. “I’ll write you, dear faithful Sendil, to tell you where to visit me . . .” She’d get a holo of her body looking pregnant custom-made. “Oh, he just threw me away! I feel so wretched!”

“Of course you do,” Sendil breathed. “Poor innocent! Seduced and abandoned! What can I do to cheer you up?”

“Nothing. Oh, wait . . . maybe if I know my shame won’t go on forever . . . but, oh, Sendil, I couldn’t ask you what follows this season! I know you’d never let out a peep in advance!”

“Well, not ordinarily, of course, but in this case, for you . . .”

“You’re the *only* one I’m going to let visit me, to hear about everything that happens. Everyone else will simply have to play along with you.”

“Ahh.” Sendil’s voice thickened with emotion. “I’d do anything to cheer you up, darling. And believe me, you’ll love the next season. After a whole season away, everyone will be panting to see how you look, every eye will be trained on you . . . and the look is going to be a return to military! You’re just made for it, darling, and it for you!”

“Military,” Suzanne breathed. Sendil was right. It was perfect. Uniforms and swords and guns and stern, disciplined command breaking into bawdy barracks-room physicality at night . . . Officers pulling rank in the bedroom . . . *That’s an order, soldier—Yes, sir!* . . . The sexual and social possibilities were tremendous. And Cade would never skip two seasons of fashion. She would

come back from the winter's exile with everyone buzzing about her, and then Cade in the uniform of, say, the old Royal Guards . . . and herself outranking him (she'd find out somehow what rank he'd chosen, bribery or something), able to command his allegiance, keeping a military bearing and so having to give away nothing of herself . . .

It was going to be a wonderful spring.

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Nancy Kress is the author of twenty-six books: three fantasy novels, twelve SF novels, three thrillers, four collections of short stories, one YA novel, and three books on writing fiction. She is perhaps best known for the Sleepless trilogy that began with *Beggars in Spain*, which was based on the Nebula- and Hugo-winning novella of the same name. She won her second Hugo in 2009 in Montreal, for the novella "The Erdmann Nexus." Kress has also won three additional Nebulas, a Sturgeon, and the 2003 John W. Campbell Award (for her novel *Probability Space*). Her most recent books are a collection of short stories, *Nano Comes to Clifford Falls and Other Stories*; a bio-thriller, *Dogs*; and an SF novel, *Steal Across the Sky*. Kress's fiction, much of which concerns genetic engineering, has been translated into twenty languages. She often teaches writing at various venues around the country and blogs at nancykress.blogspot.com.

The Five Elements of the Heart Mind

Ken Liu

Tyra

Day 52:

This is Junior Science Officer Tyra Hayes, still alive, still recording.

Maybe no one will ever see these entries. But I have nothing else to do, alone in this escape pod.

—I am here.

Thanks, Artie. I didn't mean to slight you. You've been a great help, the best personal AI anyone can ask for. I just wish that another person . . . also survived.

—You have been moving around constantly during the last twenty-four hours: pacing in place, tossing and turning. I recommend that you conserve your energy. You are already on one-third rations.

I need to move while wearing your case on a lanyard so I can generate the electricity to keep you and the recorder powered, remember?

—Your movements have far exceeded my energy requirements and do not fit your established pattern. What has changed?

—Tyra?

It's the water recycler.

—*Has it slowed down even more?*

It stopped completely yesterday.

—*Then you have been pretending to drink all day? I do not understand.*

You told me three days ago that you didn't know how to fix it. I didn't want to make you feel bad.

—*I see. Then I recommend that SEED Explorations Ltd. look into remedying this lacuna in AI programming for the next release.*

Ever the optimist. You're still planning for the future. But hyperradio scans show no signs of a rescue ship.

—*Unsurprising. The Dandelion lost structural integrity so quickly that I doubt the bridge even had time for a distress call, and this escape pod's radio is only sub-light. Most likely, no one even knows that two hundred sixty-five men and women on the survey ship are already dead.*

Soon to be two hundred sixty-six.

Day 53:

Artie, if I continue to wait here, I'll soon die of thirst. If I use all the power left in the pod for a final jump, I may end up in a system with no inhabitable planets.

Advice?

—I have no close match for the parameters of your current condition in my database of survival scenarios.

This is where my dad would tell me, “Trust your gut.”

—Your mind resides in the brain, not the gastrointestinal tract.

When I used to go to him for advice, he always said that I overanalyzed everything and didn’t trust my instincts enough. Should I go to one of the ancient universities on Earth for the prestige, or take the full scholarship offered by a scrappy no-name upstart in the Rim? “Go with your gut.” Should I switch my major to AeroAstro because spacefaring jobs paid better or stick with Terraforming because I liked living with gravity? “Go with your gut.”

—He does not sound very helpful.

Actually, just talking to him often got me to see things in a different light, and then the right decision would seem obvious. He used to tease me by saying that with me, he never had to worry about boys because I always wanted more data about how I felt, and . . .

—Tyra?

Oh, I miss him, Artie. I miss him so much right now.

—I have no close match in my database for suitable words to use when you are crying, Tyra. I am sorry.

Day 54:

I can't let despondency take over. Have to be rational.

Fact: I'm more than sixty light years from the nearest inhabited world.

Fact: I won't last another week without water.

Fact: There's no reason to think rescuers will show up soon.

Fact: The escape pod contains enough power to make one and only one hyperspace jump of up to five light years.

Fact: There's only one system within range that might contain a habitable planet—Tycho 409A. And it's unsurveyed.

Conclusion: the only sensible course of action is to take my chances and jump there.

Dad, if you ever get this, I love you.

Fazen

The sky suddenly breaks open and a bright streak hurls out of the clouds, heading straight toward me. The air around me crackles and heats up like a blacksmith's furnace. Even through shut eyelids, I can see a blazing streak of fire pass over my head. Then there is a tremendous roar of water as a giant wave tosses me out of

my canoe and into the lake.

A sphere of polished iron as bright as the sun and as large as the Headman's house suddenly pops up out of the water and falls back down with another loud splash.

I had been out on the peaceful water, hoping that a bit of salted plum tea would calm the wild fire in my stomach and refine the raw iron in my lungs, and restore my body back to *wuwei*, but it seems that the gods have other plans. I struggle back into the canoe and paddle toward the sphere. What do the gods have in mind? I have already an excess of iron and fire, and they send me more?

Up close, I see that the bobbing sphere is full of indentations and protrusions, handholds and outlines of circular doors and windows. Heat from the sphere turns the water around it into steam so that it seems to float on a cloud drifting over the lake. After recovering my wits, I tie one end of a rope to one of the handholds so that I can tow the sphere back to land.

As I approach the shore, Headman Outay is there to greet me, along with a large crowd. Everyone must have seen the ball of fire falling out of the sky.

Headman Outay narrows his eyes. "Fazen, that is a sky canoe, like the great sky ark of our ancestors."

From childhood, I've heard the legends of the First

Ancestors arriving in a sky ark that glided through the stars as easily as our wooden canoes over water. Could the stories that parents tell children to lull them to sleep actually be true?

The sky canoe now rests against the soft mud at the edge of the lake. Suddenly, one part of the sphere, a circular door, begins to glow with a cold, white light. Several of the observers gasp.

“Stay away,” Headman Outay shouts. “We don’t know what’s inside!”

But I ignore him. I put my hands inside the indentations in that circular door and turn with all my strength. The skin of my palms and fingers sizzle against the still-hot iron surface. I grit my teeth at the pain and continue to turn the door.

My lower belly, the *dantian*, the abode of the Heart Mind, remains calm. My reckless courage may be the result of my body still being out of balance, but it feels purposeful, feels *right*.

The door pops open and falls into the water.

Inside, I see the unconscious figure of a young woman in her twenties, about my age. She has bright red hair and pale skin full of freckles. Her lips are parched and cracked.

Everyone watches as I carry her to my hut. No one

speaks.

For two days I give the woman water in her sleep. She gulps it like a fish, but does not open her eyes.

I touch my forehead to hers. It feels as hot as the door of her sky canoe when I opened it. I hold her wrist. Even through the burn scars on my fingers, I can feel her pulse jumping and skipping wildly, like a trapped hare.

Through feverish dreams, she turns and shouts in her sleep. I cannot make out her words save one: a short syllable that she repeats again and again. I have often seen grown men and women cry out just like that for their parents in the delirium of illness. Is she crying out for a parent too?

She may be from the sky, yet she is not so strange after all.

Her sickness, however, is beyond my skill.

I run to Headman Outay and bring him with me back to her side. He is our best healer.

He sits beside her, but does not touch her.

“Perhaps it is the will of the gods that she not wake up.”

In his voice I hear fear.

“Have you ever seen iron such as that used in her sky canoe?” he asks.

I think back to the heft of the iron door in my hands. It had felt light, much lighter than I expected. And it must be incredibly strong to have survived a fall from the sky. I'm certain that even the greatest blacksmith in the world could not forge iron like that.

“We have forgotten much of the wisdom of our ancestors, Fazen. She may see us as little more than savages. She may bring us great danger and sorrow.”

I look at her sleeping form. I only know that she is ill and helpless. I only know what is *right*.

“We must save her,” I say.

He sighs and places three fingers on the pulse point on the inside of her right wrist. He half-closes his eyes, concentrating on every subtle shift in her life force.

“Too much fire . . . weak iron . . . excess of wood . . . but wait, how . . .?”

I hold my breath.

“Her *dantian* was empty . . . !”

Headman Outay frowns. Beads of sweat appear on his forehead. His frail body trembles. He strains to detect the hidden root cause of the warring elements in her body.

Finally he releases her wrist and wipes the sweat from his face. He can barely stand.

“Within her was an emptiness, into which the elements had surged. Now they're fighting in chaos for

dominance. We must channel them and bring them into balance, and rekindle the flickering light of her Heart Mind.”

He dictates to me a complex cure recipe.

Tyra

Day 56:

Woke up wrapped in rough sheets with a terrible fever. Stomach churning like I’ve been punched there. Threw up. Lost count of how many times.

Then I felt around my neck. The familiar lanyard and weight were absent. Artie was gone.

I panicked, rummaged around the blankets desperately, broke down and cried.

A man dressed in a floor-length robe rushed into the room. He tried to comfort me but his speech was gibberish. I couldn’t understand a single word. Then he saw my hands seeking in vain in the empty space around my neck. He ran out, came back, and handed Artie to me.

I was so happy I kissed Artie’s shell.

—I did not realize you had grown so attached to me. I think I am . . . touched. I will thus refrain from commenting on your escape pod piloting skills.

You’re my only friend in the world now, Artie.

—Perhaps that man, whom I have heard others call Fazen, can also be trusted. I am still working on deciphering his language, but I believe he took me away only to allow you to sleep more comfortably.

He also made me drink a bowl of bitter soup. It tasted vile. I shook my head but he kept on pushing it at me. I looked into his dark, warm eyes, and I decided that it was easier to just give in.

He's also got high cheekbones and a strong jaw, with long straight black hair that hangs down his back like a heavy silk curtain. Nice smile too, if you look past the lack of dental care. I want to trust him.

—The characteristics you cite do not seem relevant to your conclusion.

Dad used to say that how you feel about someone within the first ten seconds you meet is how you'll always feel. But you're right. I never trust first impressions. I need more data.

Still, it was nice the way he held my hair out of the way as I retched, then cradled my head and sang to me, his voice low and deep, like the comforting rumbling of the engine on the *Dandelion*.

Now for more sleep.

Day 58:

More disgusting, bitter soup.

More people have come to visit me and the man—Fazen. Everyone is friendly and solicitous, but I worry about the level of technology here. They light the place with candles!

—There is no record of a colony on Tycho 409A. Maybe these people are criminals in hiding.

Thanks, Artie. You're always so reassuring.

Stomach does feel better. Even managed to eat a few mouthfuls of some starchy dumpling-thing. Fazen saw that I was too weak to chew. So he chewed the food and fed the mush to me. Yeah, I know. I'm not going to think too hard about it lest my stomach start churning again.

Fazen

“Can you tell me the ingredients in your soup?”

I'm so startled that I almost drop the medicine bowl. The voice is strangely accented, like a man from the coast who learned to speak our dialect late in life. It comes out of the black amulet around the woman's neck, the amulet that is so important to her.

“Do not be afraid,” the voice continues. “I help Tyra.”

“Her name is Tyra? And what is your name?”

“I am an artificial intelligence created by SEED

Explorations Ltd., Model ML-1067B.”

“What?”

“Call me Artie.”

Now it is clear why Tyra cares so much about the amulet. It is the home of her friend.

It is wondrous to actually speak to a spirit, yet the spirit wishes to learn from me! I am utterly humbled, and I carefully explain the various components of the medicine, as well as how they adhere to the Principles of the Reciprocal Generation and Destruction of the Five Elements.

Artie makes non-committal noises as I explain. He seems to neither approve nor disapprove.

Tyra

Day 59:

That’s impossible, Artie.

—I have run the cladistic analysis multiple times.

The speech of Fazen and his people is a dialect of English, but it has diverged from Standard for more than a thousand years.

We’ve had the jumpships for less than a century. How could Fazen’s people have been isolated for a millennium?

—That is a question outside of my domains of expertise.

What else have you found out?

—Based on phonetic analysis and the medicine they have been giving you, I speculate with 95% confidence that they are descended from a founding group that was predominantly sinitic in culture, though with strains of other influences. Perhaps due to isolation, their technological development has regressed.

Getting out of here will be difficult.

Day 62:

Managed to stay awake long enough to make some progress with speaking to Fazen. Artie still has to translate, but I can pick out some words and phrases.

Fazen is very patient with me, repeating himself and speaking slowly. Trying to understand him also gives me a concrete problem to solve, and that calms me down, makes me forget that I'm stuck light years from civilization, alone among strangers.

I'm surprised by how comfortable I feel when talking to him, considering that our worlds and frames of reference are so far apart and we still can't convey much in the way of nuances through Artie.

—I am doing my best.

I know. Of course I can tell that he's interested in me. Sometimes I catch him staring at me . . . but this will never work out. It's a distraction from what should be my primary goal: survive and get back home. I have to be logical.

—You rank within the top one percentile for rationality and stability among all humans I have worked with.

Let's hope I stay that way. We'll need to think carefully if we're going to get off this rock.

—I have a new theory about the people here. Although I am cut off from the All-Net, I have discovered a reference in my database to ancient ships capable only of relativistic speeds being sent out from Earth as long as a thousand years ago, during a time of turmoil when people believed that life on Earth was on the verge of catastrophic extinction.

I remember reading about that! There was such desperate faith behind those ships. Even assuming that the unspaceworthy vessels somehow survived the journey, it was doubtful that the tiny population aboard would have been able to sustain an advanced technological civilization across multiple generations.

Fazen's people would be the first confirmed case of such a ship surviving.

—During the centuries it took them to arrive, they seemed to have lost all knowledge more advanced than ironworking.

Artie, Fazen thinks you're a spirit of some sort. I think in the minds of his people, superstition has reclaimed the space that should be filled with rational knowledge.

Day 64:

—You are doing much better. That was a very severe bacterial infection.

Was that what I went through?

—Your symptoms match the descriptions in my database. I understand that, centuries ago, when your ancestors were confined to Earth, most human bodies were habitats for trillions upon trillions of bacteria. They lived in the gastrointestinal tract, on the skin, in the hair, and often caused diseases.

Repulsive!

—Eventually, you developed the technology to manage these parasites. And when you began to move to the stars, you made a serious effort to eradicate all remaining germs so that mankind would start afresh on new worlds, freed permanently from ancient diseases.

Fazen's ancestors probably weren't that careful and

carried their bugs here, and they got to me. Do you know what was in that awful soup? It did seem to make me better.

—It is more likely your body simply recovered on its own. The soup contained no antibiotics or other known pharmaceutical ingredients. Their medical theory seems to be based on long-discredited superstitions derived from Far Eastern mysticism.

Fazen

Tyra assures me that she is a mortal just like me, but I sometimes doubt this. Her skin is as smooth as a newborn babe's, and her features are delicate, graceful, as though she grew up only drinking fog and dew. She has no scars, no imperfections, like a painting of a woman rather than an actual woman.

“I've had *genetic therapy* and *modern medical care* since birth, and the *gravity* on my birth *planet* is lighter than here,” she says, when I point out how special she is. I don't understand many of the words, and Artie is not always able to translate.

So I think what she means is that she began life as an angel. When the sky canoe fell, she was reborn as a mortal. Why? I do not know. But the thought moves me.

“Can’t you get me something to eat that tastes better?” she asks. “All the food I’ve had so far is either bland or bitter. I’m craving some sweets.”

“But you have too much fire and too little iron,” I say.

She has no idea what I’m talking about. Patiently, I explain, “The Five Elements of your body correspond to the Five Tastes: Iron is bitter, wood is sour, water is salty —”

“Like the sea,” she murmurs. She is getting better at speaking the way we do.

“—Yes, exactly. Fire is sweet, and earth is savory. When I first carried you out of the sky canoe, your *dantian* was strangely empty, and the elements fought in you for domination. You fell sick because there was too much fire in you, which restrained the iron, which then threw the rest of the system into imbalance. We have to feed you more bitterness to restore the domain of iron so as to cut back the excess wood.”

Her expression is strained.

“Of course, every person is different, and the right therapy must channel and guide a person’s blend of elements in accordance with that person’s own nature. As your nature is fiery, maybe a little sweetness now will do some good. Fire sometimes can be used to cure an excess of fire.”

She drops her face into her hands and rubs her forehead hard. After a while, she looks up. “Fazen, where I come from, we no longer think the world works the way you say. We know that the body is a *biological* machine, and diseases are *malfunctions* due to *foreign irritants* that require *chemical interventions* and *genetic corrections* . . . “

Her voice is gentle, but her tone is condescending. I see that she does not trust our medicine, even though it has made her better.

I’m angry and more than a little sad. Our knowledge about healing is based on ancient wisdom, but we have always worked hard to improve our art through trial and experience. Our histories speak of the First Ancestors who arrived in the sky ark with herb seeds and recipe books. Some herbs thrived, but many died, and they had to find substitutes in this new world.

Every generation, brave men and women have died while trying to discover more ways of healing. They refined the techniques for guiding a body’s mix of elements to suit the person’s particular nature. Headman Outay himself has fallen sick many times from testing herbs and minerals on his own body. Tyra’s contempt disrespects them all.

She sees the expression on my face. “I’m sorry,

Fazen. I don't know why your medicine works, which is why I'm frustrated. It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't wish to be angry with you," I say. "So I will take some salted plum tea to empty my mind and restore balance to my *dantian*. Would you like some as well?"

She sighs and nods. After taking a sip from my cup, she smiles.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask.

"My father always said that no dispute should ever get in the way of sharing a drink. Now I finally understand what he meant."

We both drink to that.

Tyra

Day 110:

Is there a way to get off this rock with only medieval technology?

Just asking the question that way makes me want to give up in despair.

I try to see myself through Fazen's eyes: much of my time is spent drawing symbols and figures on paper and quizzing him about the existence of glowing rocks and rare metals. He must think I'm mad (or that I'm a witch).

To try to distract me from visible frustration, he takes

me on fishing and hiking trips where we eat what we catch and gather.

—I do not think it is wise for you to continue to consume so much raw, unsterilized food.

I don't exactly have a lot of choices, do I? Actually, I've come to like this diet of unprocessed foods. Sure, the fish and herbs and mushrooms are nothing like the nutritiously balanced meals of home, but there is a kind of wild flavor to everything that delights the tongue, and the food sits well in the belly after working for your dinner.

And it's fun to hear Fazen talk to me about the food. He has a story about everything: this fish is good for the kidneys, and he once prescribed it for a boy who peed green; that berry is a good match for my fiery heart, and he used to feed them to baby birds who were cold and hungry in winter; these mushrooms are of the domain of iron, and he ate them when he was little to gain courage.

Sometimes I wish these hikes would never end.

Fazen

The loud crashing beats of the gong interrupt the quiet conversation between Tyra and me. We rush out of my hut.

“Fire, fire!” Everyone gazes west, where thick plumes

of smoke are rising into the sky. The summer has been unusually hot and dry. The wind is strong and will bring the fire to the village in no time.

The Headman organizes everyone for evacuation into the lake. I reach for Tyra's hand so that we can run to the water.

But she doesn't move. She glances around at the villagers rushing about, at the scared children crying for comfort.

"What about your houses and crops?" she asks.

"Nothing can be done about them," I tell her. "The fire can't be stopped."

She looks at the approaching flames. Then she turns to me.

"We can stop the fire."

Something in her eyes, fiery amber like her spirit, tells me to trust her.

Surprisingly, Headman Outay, who has grown to like her in the last few months, agrees to listen to her.

Tyra directs the villagers to clear out a strip of fields to the west of the village. "Cut everything down; leave nothing that can burn."

"But with the wind, the powerful flames will easily jump over the narrow strip."

"Don't worry about that," she says. "We must start a

fire on the other side of the strip ourselves.”

She’s crazy, I think. Don’t we have enough fire already?

But Headman Outay grabs a torch and follows her across the strip. “She is from the sky,” he says, quietly. After a moment, the other villagers follow.

The main fire is now much closer. Smoke fills the air, and the heat.

The grass is so dry that our new fire roars into life. But like children welcoming parents returning from the fields, it rushes away from the village towards the main fire, leaving charred trunks and empty burnt earth behind.

By the time our fire joins the main fire, there is a mile-wide empty swath of land between us. The fire rages but can come no closer. The villagers cheer.

“How?” I look at Tyra in wonder.

Tyra explains that a great fire heats the air above, drawing the colder air toward it. When we started our own fire, the power of the great fire drew the new fire away from us and formed the firebreak.

“You are a magician,” I say.

“It is simple *physics*,” she says. “Using fire to fight fire, isn’t that something you’ve taught me, too?” And I see that she channeled and directed the flames just as our medicine channeled and directed the fire within her.

Seeing her smile fills my heart with its own flame.

Tyra

Day 140:

—Have you given much thought to constructing a hyperradio beacon here?

Out of what? Sticks and mud?

—So far, we have been discreet about our knowledge in order to avoid open conflict with the predominant belief system here. But if you decide to direct the population on an accelerated program of technological advancement, the planet should have a greater than 80% chance of achieving the necessary industrial and technological expertise to produce a hyperradio beacon in one-hundred eighty-five years.

Thanks, Artie. I'll just declare myself Queen of the Planet and get them started. I guess my great-great-great-grand kids can then call home.

Anyway, where is Fazen? He's supposed to meet me here so we can go fishing.

—There is also a point zero zero zero three percent chance that the task can be accomplished in less than sixty years.

You sure know how to cheer a girl up.

Do you think Fazen's been delayed by the Headman?
I hope he hasn't forgotten.

—It is unclear to me how Fazen's whereabouts can be relevant to the important matter of planning your rescue.

Will you give it a rest?

—Are you actually contemplating settling here?

I . . . That is the most rational course of action right now, isn't it?

—I do not understand. All my survival models indicate that being away from modern science will reduce your life expectancy significantly.

Look, I'm . . . happy here, primitive though things are. Is it the air? The food? I feel more alive, like I've discovered a part of myself I hadn't even known existed.

Knowledge about atoms and quarks and hyperspace and gene expression regulation isn't as useful here as knowing that sweet foods give you more igneous humor.

Sometimes it's rational to be irrational. When everyone around you believes the world works a certain way, there are advantages to at least pretending that the world does work that way.

—This is a most peculiar line of argument.

Maybe I'm not thinking straight. I've been feeling strange. My stomach seems to have a mind of its own

these days, tightening up or loosening depending on its mood. It's almost like I have another amygdala down there. I get unexplained urges; my mood lifts and shifts. I should ask Fazen about this.

—I think the source of your change of perspective is not the air or the food. I have detected elevated levels of oxytocin and vasopressin in your breath, as well as a raised heart rate and dilated pupils when Fazen is around. These are clear physiological signs.

If you're implying that . . . that . . .

—You are in love, Tyra.

Fazen

We're on top of the mountain, looking up at the stars.

Tyra points to the west, at the brightest star in the sky, Baitou, the tail of the Great Kite. "That's where my ship—a very large sky canoe—floundered."

I squint to see if I can see the light from her broken ship.

"You won't see anything," Tyra says. "Even if you had the sharpest eyes, the light from that explosion won't get here for another five years."

This confuses me. But it doesn't matter. I don't have to understand everything she says. Sometimes it's enough

to simply listen to her voice, to be in her presence.

She turns back and blushes. “You’re staring again.”

I turn away, embarrassed.

But she reaches out and holds my face steady between her hands. “I don’t understand this,” she murmurs.

Then she speaks very fast and in her own dialect. *I don’t fall in love easily. This is so unlike me. I should feel abandoned, depressed, hopeless. The world, the people I have always known may be lost to me forever, and I’m thrown thousands of years into the past. Yet I feel happy, almost giddy. I can’t explain it by reason. I just know that I’ll be fine. I feel it in my gut.*

“I don’t understand many of your words,” I tell her, “except the first thing you said. I love you too. And I will give us lotus seeds mixed with all the flavors of the world so that our love will never grow tiresome.”

The next sensation I feel are her lips on mine. My eyes are open but I don’t see anything. The world shrinks down into our kiss, our breaths, the tips of our tongues. I savor the taste of her, the smell, hot, fiery, like her nature. The world even seems to glow brighter, as though the stars have brightened in sympathy.

She pulls away, her eyes wide open in shock.

“What’s wrong?”

She doesn’t answer. Her eyes are focused on the sky

behind me.

I turn around, and half the sky is on fire. In the heart of the flames sits a great ship, golden red, like molten iron.

Then a wave of sound and heat strikes me like a great fist, and it is all I can do to try to reach out and put myself between it and Tyra.

Tyra

Date unknown:

Woke up in a cozy all-white room, naked, with a thin white sheet covering me.

“You gave us quite a scare.”

My head felt woozy and it took me a few tries to locate the source of the voice—a balding man in a white robe standing behind me. Trying to twist around so that I could see him made me groan.

“Sorry,” he said, walking around to make it easier for me. “They always put the life sign monitors back here. I’ve been saying for years that it makes it hard to talk to patients.”

“Where . . . what . . . who . . .” It was hard to decide what question to ask first. An image of Fazen came to mind, but the image felt like a stranger, unreal, like I

made him up or read about him in a book.

Something was missing. I checked myself: my arms, my legs, my fingers and toes, all present. Yet it was as though I had a phantom limb, a void in my gut.

“Peter Saltz, ship’s doctor. You’re aboard the *Shamrock*.”

That’s the *Dandelion*’s sister ship. “How?”

“We grew concerned when the *Dandelion* didn’t radio in any reports for more than a month. But we only had a general idea of where the ship was and it took a while before we located the wreckage and picked up the signal from your sub-light beacon.”

I had left behind in that beacon the coordinates of Tycho 409A.

“What happened to your ship was . . . terrible.” He stopped, at a loss for words.

I closed my eyes. The memory of the two hundred sixty-five friends, gone forever, was overwhelming.

“I’ve gone through some of your logs. Tyra, your story is incredible. First drifting alone in deep space, then a desperate jump to a colony lost to history, and finally living among savages! When we found you, your body was teeming with the most incredible collection of bacteria. I couldn’t believe that you survived. You’re lucky that the *Shamrock* just happened to have . . .

anyway I had to keep you asleep while I quarantined you and got you cleaned up. You're lucky we were able to get you out of there; the natives were quite hostile when we rescued you . . .”

I wanted to ask him about the “natives,” but I couldn't summon the anxiety that I thought I ought to feel, and that frightened me. I tried to hold onto the memory of Fazen's voice: “lotus seeds . . . our love . . . never tiresome.” But the words didn't warm my heart like I expected. They sounded trite, trivial, meaningless.

Then I thought about my father, and the pang of missing him hit me like a punch in the stomach. I was relieved that I was at least still human. I hadn't lost the ability to feel.

Suddenly I was very tired, and I closed my eyes.

Fazen

The strangers took Tyra away a week ago. But their great ship has remained in the sky. I haven't been able to eat or sleep properly. I wait on the mountain, hoping that she will return just as suddenly.

A sky canoe only a bit bigger than Tyra's sphere descends from the great ship. As it lands, the force from its whirling wings knocks me to the ground. When I

finally open my eyes, I cry with joy. My Tyra is back.

But she's not alone. Two men are with her. They're covered head to toe in iron suits that glitter in the sun, and crystal bubbles surround their heads.

Through the crystal bubble, I look into her eyes.

Something is wrong. The eyes are cold, vacant. It's like looking into the eyes of a stranger, a shell. She is not fiery; she is not earthy; she is not anything at all. She is a hollow shell.

Silently, she moves her lips behind her crystal bubble. Artie's voice comes out of her amulet, translating. Even the spirit sounds strange—clipped, formal, like the way the bellman reads the judges' decisions at the winter court sessions. "I come to give you important news. This planet belongs to SEED Explorations, my employer."

"Tyra! What happened to you?"

Doggedly, she goes on. "SEED purchased the settlement rights here fifty years ago, but they never got around to exercising them. Now that they know this planet doesn't need any terraforming, they're eager to develop it. Your presence here has no legal authority, and SEED wanted to remove you. But in light of how you cared for me during my sickness, I convinced SEED to grant you some plots as reservation land if you'll agree to an exclusive contract to allow SEED to operate an

anthropological experience park for off-world tourists in your settlements.”

“Tyra, you belong here. You belong with us.”

She hesitates for a moment, and then, gently, adds, “It is time for you to rejoin the rest of the human race and reclaim your lost legacy.”

I wish to speak to her without the strange men in iron suits watching. I want to place my hands around her face, to gaze into her eyes. But the crystal bubble around her head, cold and hard, stops my hands.

What little I do understand of Tyra’s speech makes me angry. My stomach churns. Headman Outay was right. The sky men have brought us danger and sorrow.

“We will not give up our world,” I shout at the sky men. “We will fill our veins with fire and iron. And you will taste nothing but the stench of rotting earth, the taste of death and defeat.”

The two men grab me by my arms and pull me away from her. At first I struggle, but then I see the fear in her eyes, and I let go.

I feel ill. The elements rage in my body, warring in chaos.

Tyra

Artie, what is wrong with me? When I was down there, it was like I didn't even know Fazen. I felt nothing for him. I feel *nothing* for him now.

—*Your hormonal levels are indeed . . . abnormal, in light of what I had observed to be your norm during the time you were on Tycho 409A.*

Hypothesis?

—*Love, or the lack of it, is not within my domains of expertise.*

It's got to have something to do with what Dr. Saltz did. Retrieve my medical records and analyze them.

—*It appears you are correct. There was a massive drop-off in the levels of PNDF, theta-GF, endobesin, motinorphin, and several other neurotransmitters and neurotrophins within the first forty-eight hours after you were taken aboard.*

What did they give me?

—*As far as I can ascertain, you were only given large doses of antibiotics during that time.*

What are those?

—*Antibiotics were your ancestors' primary weapons against bacterial infections. They have not been needed for a long time. It is curious that the Shamrock has a supply.*

Can you find out why?

—Let me discreetly probe the ship's records . . . ah, I think I understand. Recently there were a few mass bacterial outbreaks on some of the Rim planets owned by SEED, so a small supply of antibiotics had to be manufactured. It seems that news of these outbreaks is being censored out of concern that it may lead to mass panic.

Fazen's people always lived with bacteria, which was why I got sick when I landed. But the bacteria were in me even when I didn't feel sick . . . Artie, did these bacteria living in me do anything other than causing disease?

—I do not know. But now that I am reconnected to the All-Net, I can run a deep search in the old archives. Interesting: some ancient scientists believed that a healthy human body needed an array of bacterial species living in balance. Different individuals had different bacterial mixes, called enterotypes, similar to blood types. They saw the bacteria as symbiotes, not parasites.

What exactly did the bacteria do?

—Supposedly, they helped people digest food, fight against disease, even changed their mood and personality.

What? How?

—By releasing chemicals into the bloodstream that

suppressed or activated neurotransmitters, regulated gene expression, modified neurochemistry.

So back on Tycho 409A, I was . . . infected. I wasn't even myself.

—It appears that your father was right. On the planet, you literally thought with your gut. Fazen's people figured out a way not only to live in harmony with their gut flora, but to direct them with food and drink, and so regulate their own moods.

Things living in me were doing my thinking. Was *I* in love or were the bacteria?

—I do not think the distinction is so stark. Let me read you a quote from an ancient scientist: "The human mind is a physical phenomenon, in this world and of it. The bacteria in your gut are but another component in the machinery that produces the totality of your thoughts. You are already a community of trillions of cells, can you not contemplate adding a few trillions more?"

So what should I do now? I don't know how I feel about Fazen. I don't know what to think. What is *right*?

—That, of course, is outside my domains of expertise.

Fazen

Tyra has come back to us: alone, naked, without her crystal bubble or iron suit.

She falls sick again.

Headman Outay and I work for three days to restore balance to her body, introducing the elements of iron, wood, water, fire, and earth in careful measure until they take hold in her body and breed true, until she is again a universe complete in itself.

“You understand,” she says, “what I’m telling you?”

When Tyra is earnest like this, she has a little frown, like a bough weighed down with fresh dew in the morning. “You are speaking of the Balance of the Elements.”

“The food-therapy that you practice,” she says, “is no mere superstition. Somehow you have invented a probiotic diet that helps you regulate the bacterial colonies that came with you to this new world. By changing what you eat, you can stay healthy and also control your moods.”

“Many people have died over the years to gain this knowledge.”

She nods, somber. “The elemental theory that you use to explain *why* the techniques work may not make sense to me and may be metaphorical, but the techniques *do*

work. They should be preserved and taught to the rest of humanity, who have forgotten how to live and think with their ancient symbiotes.”

“I believe that the plagues on the Rim planets may be a consequence of overly aggressive efforts to eliminate all microbiomes in humans,” Artie says. “You cannot, it seems, live too clean and pure a life.”

Tyra continues, “I explained to SEED that if they insisted on enforcing their claims to Tycho 409A, I would go public with the information about how people are dying on their colony planets. But if they were willing to leave you alone, I would help SEED adapt your food-therapy techniques into a long-term cure for these outbreaks, and assign the patent rights to them.”

I don’t understand everything she and Artie are saying. But it is enough that when I now look into her eyes, I see the real Tyra.

“I’m a different person when I have these creatures living in me,” she says. “I’m more adventurous, more impulsive, happier.”

“This is the true you,” I tell her, “the way you were meant to be.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” she says. “I’m still trying to get used to the idea that my mind is embodied not only in my own cells, but also in the cells of trillions

of tiny organisms who live on me the same way we live on this planet, of me but *not me*. I'm not sure who *I* am. But I chose to come back because I like this me better. It's a visceral feeling. My father will be proud."

"I'd like meet him," I say. I want to meet him not only because Tyra has spoken so much of him, but also because I'd like to have his blessing before I ask Tyra a question.

"I'd like that," she says. "I haven't visited him in a while, and I have a feeling he'll like you. He'll enjoy hearing about my negotiations with SEED."

"My simulations indicated only a 52.26% chance that SEED would have seen the wisdom of your solution and accepted your deal," Artie says. "You took quite a risk."

"I guess you could say I trusted my gut."

Author's Notes:

The idea of gut bacteria affecting mood and brain chemistry is based on the research described in Denou, E., et al. "The Intestinal Microbiota Determines Mouse Behavior and Brain BDNF Levels." *Gastroenterology*, Vol. 140, Issue 5, Supplement 1, Page S-57 (abstract available at tinyurl.com/lightspeed-gastroenterology).

A summary of the scientific paper may be found in

McMaster University (2011, May 17). “Gut bacteria linked to behavior: That anxiety may be in your gut, not in your head,” *ScienceDaily*. retrieved July 8, 2011, from tinyurl.com/lightspeed-gut-bacteria.

Besides writing and translating speculative fiction, **Ken Liu** (<http://kenliu.name>) also practices law and develops software for iOS and Android devices. His fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *TRSF*, and *Panverse 3*, among other places. He lives near Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife, artist Lisa Tang Liu, and they are collaborating on their first novel.

On the Acquisition of Phoenix Eggs (Variant)

Marissa Lingen

The geopolitical and economic effects of the fall of the Soviet Union cannot, of course, be overstated. But for collectors like myself, the greatest of them was the explosion onto the market of phoenix eggs. Even with this comparative boom in the market, we had nothing like a glut, and bidding remained fiercely competitive. I anticipated that this would be the case in the Samoilenko affair and so I arrived prepared.

The usual bidders were there, of course: Dame Eleanor in her sensible pantsuit, Miss Hawes and Miss Singh in their black leather jackets, the full brocade skirts of Mrs. Perriwhite. For whatever reason, we women have always made up the majority of phoenix egg collectors, and nowadays we did not have to send male proxies to do our bidding for us; now we could cordially hate each other directly.

There were other women, less serious than we five, and three men in the auction room: the auction house manager, Mr. Samoilenko himself, and John Weadsleigh. John was one of us, and we accorded him the respect of cordially hating him without regard to his gender. Even

Miss Hawes, whom I suspect of hating men in general, did John the courtesy of hating him individually, as a competitor for phoenix eggs rather than as a man, which may be the most generous thing I have ever known her to do.

This was not a situation that encouraged generosity.

Mr. Samoilenko had not, it appeared, resigned himself to the idea that, one way or another, the egg would not belong to him at the end of the afternoon. He fussed over it in a way that might well have made it uncomfortable: Phoenixes are not chickens. They do not brood, and they have sensibility. I know how it can be to attach to one's eggs—naturally I would—but displaying that tendency at auction seemed to me to be of questionable taste.

Still, what he had forgotten, I would not: The egg was no longer his.

Lloyds was not willing to insure a phoenix egg, not even of the most impeccable pedigree. Hence the inspection of the purchase became a great deal more important. In this case, each would-be bidder had a chance to bring in one expert. Those of us who have been serious collectors have become our own experts; it saves trouble and affords many opportunities in circumstances less comfortable than a London auction house. Besides

which, the scopes and lenses used by the amateurs' supposed experts are of little to no use in determining the status of the phoenix inside.

“Dearest Louisa,” purred Dame Eleanor at my elbow.

“Darling El,” I said, offering air kisses for each of her lean cheeks.

“We should have spoken before we came here. Surely we could have come to an arrangement.”

“I’m still amenable, if you have something worth my time.” I spoke only the truth: Of my fellow collectors, Dame Eleanor was the one who was the most likely to compete with me not just on a financial level but on a magical level as well.

For a seller would have to be a fool to offer up a phoenix egg for only earthly riches. No, the spell component had to be something truly original, something truly spectacular, to even come close to the loss of a phoenix egg. Occasionally a rich dilettante without connections will attempt to make a monetary bid large enough to obviate the need for a magical component, but this only works at the lowest levels, the cheapest and most common of eggs. The level of magical artifact needed to bid on a phoenix egg is almost always bartered or obtained through a dodgy bargain like a wish exchange.

This is why ours was not a pastime for the poor or dilettante: One or two adventurers in a generation may, through their luck and skill with wish exchanges and other shifty behaviors, obtain the necessary stakes through means other than their own labors. We lost the most recent of these, a Miss Foss, in a tragic crossroads accident in the autumn of last year. The rest of us made these talismans ourselves—and, for balance, we tended to have more use for them than the average person.

In a less civilized age we would have been called witches, or at best, wizards. Modern times allow collectors to focus on their collections without having to waste attention on angry mobs, who with a certain rough enlightenment viewed us as no more interesting than collectors of Red Army jackets or propaganda posters.

Mr. Samoilenko was an unknown to us, so the talismans we had brought were all very portable and easily used by a generalist. When we were trying to sell to each other, things could get very profitable—or very unpleasant.

“What did you bring?” asked Dame Eleanor, entirely too casually.

“Just a trifle,” I said.

She sighed. “Oh, Louisa. Not everything has to be a contest between us.”

“No,” I agreed, “not everything. But I believe this, by definition, does.”

I felt a little guilty, but only for a moment. Dame Eleanor—even before she was a Dame—had always known how to make me feel a little low. But the egg could only go to one of us. I meant it to be me.

The auctioneer called us to order at that point, and I was saved from further conversation. An auction house employee took the egg around for each of us to examine. It was perfect, golden and smooth to the touch, with the look of a crackled red glaze. Were it pottery, we should call it crazed, but one could hope to avoid crazed firebirds. Mrs. Perriwhite made a show of pursing her lips and looking skeptical, as though it was a defective forgery she might well decide was beneath her attention.

But of course she did not. Bidding was brisk but not at all beyond my means. When half the bidders dropped out and we were to compare magical offerings, it was myself and Dame Eleanor, as I had known it would be, and also Miss Singh.

Miss Singh had brought a cloak of invisibility. It was blue velvet, beautifully embroidered with silver. Amateurish in concept and in execution: Who needs a *beautiful* invisibility cloak? It was beneath her, quite frankly, and I wondered if she'd had a hard winter.

Perhaps I would have to ask around to see if any of her collection might be available. She had the eccentric habit of *keeping* the phoenixes after they hatched, and that could get very expensive indeed.

Dame Eleanor's was a simple ring set with a perfect pink pearl. She had always had such an exacting hand that she didn't need the structure of a more ornate design to give her spells a place to hold to the ring. "The ring gives the wearer power to hear conversations at great distances," she said. "Simply speak the topic you wish to hear, and you will hear the most expert conversation the world has ever had upon the topic."

Miss Singh sniffed loudly. "What if no one of note happens to be conversing at the time?"

"I didn't say *at the time*," said Dame Eleanor, with a peevishness that neither became her nor surprised me.

"Experts are a great and good thing," I agreed, and Dame Eleanor gave me a dark look that said she was waiting for the catch. "I suppose there are a great many topics on which you would rather hear the expert than, say, the most relevant party."

Mr. Samoilenko looked thoughtful; Dame Eleanor, annoyed. She always did try for too much subtlety. It's the easiest way to trip over your own feet.

I offered a soapstone box carven in sweeping curves.

The hand longed to touch it. “The rains,” I said. “You offer me fire? I offer you water in return. I know how the Ukrainian people suffer when the droughts come. You are the breadbasket of Europe! But no bread without wheat, yes? And no wheat without rain.”

“Oh, come now,” said Dame Eleanor impatiently. “You can’t control *all the rains* with one little box.”

“Naturally not,” I said, and Mr. Samoilenko nodded at my reasonable tone. I demonstrated how many rains it stored, how often they restored themselves, how to feel in the curve of the box that they had restored, and as he watched I could tell: The egg was mine.

Back at home, I hummed to myself as I puttered around my display crèches, rearranging the previous eggs so that there was room for the red gold to fit in its place in the spectrum. There was a filigreed green case that would complement this egg better than the plain gold one it currently held, and though I hated to displace the plain one—it was one of my first purchases as a teenager, the last remaining one that had not shown signs of hatching and been sold to collectors of full-fledged birds—it seemed to go with any display, whereas the filigreed green case would fit the latest addition like nothing else.

I was so intent on holding the new acquisition

carefully that I almost didn't notice that it, too, was humming.

Phoenix eggs do not hum.

They occasionally emit a warm glow, but they make no noises whatsoever. I am an *expert*, and I know these things. And yet—I am an expert. I know a phoenix egg from a mere roc or a painted bird egg. I know what I am about here. I will not be taken in. Louisa Pickering knows her phoenix eggs, and I have never been wrong. I gave it another look, and again with my wizard's loupe.

It was not a fake. No, worse. It was a *variant*. And as I had just bought it at auction, I was stuck with it for at least another few months, unless I could come up with a clever scheme for getting rid of it. In that time, it might hatch, or it might do whatever its variant did, or I might discover that the care that is perfectly good for an ordinary phoenix egg was nothing like good enough for a variant.

Damn, damn, damn.

I hate variants.

For a Pickering, it is a long, multi-course meal to swallow one's pride. It often takes a selection of wines, possibly with brandy to follow. I called for the car to take me around to the only place I *could* go. She was naturally surprised to see me standing on the hearth rug, as I had not visited her on a social occasion in many years.

“Changed your mind so quickly, Louisa?” said Dame Eleanor. “It wasn’t a *fake*, was it?”

I said nothing, not trusting to my voice. But Eleanor had known me too long. She tapped her finger on her lips, judging my face and posture. “Not a fake. A variant! And so you come to me.”

“Your tastes are known to be varied,” I said bitterly.

“I don’t know that *I* want to take it off your hands,” she said. “I’ve already had my fill of bailing you out of scrapes, haven’t I?”

I gritted my teeth. “That was *twenty-five years ago*, I was *eleven*, and the worst that would have happened to me was getting sent to bed without supper.”

“That’s what you think,” said El. “Aunt St. James smacks *hard*.”

“Not hard enough to be worth two decades of you holding it over my head, I don’t think,” I said. “In fact I have been tempted twice to find her and confess and take my punishment, just to get you to shut up about it.”

“How persuasive you are,” said El. “Why, when you put it in that light, how I would love to help you with your unexpectedly variant phoenix egg!”

Cousins are a great trial. Many lucky people have cousins with whom they have very little in common, who are not close to their own age and who did not share

childhood holidays with them. They can feel a fond familial glow towards these cousins, safe in the knowledge that they will be safe from each other's meddling, that no cousinly nose will be poked into their business, that their cousins, in fact, do not give a toss for their affairs.

That is not the kind of cousin I have.

"Look, I can do this myself," I said. "I just thought you might be interested—"

"Let me give it a look," said El.

"You wanted to buy it yesterday."

"And today I want to give it a look."

I bit my tongue. Arguing with El when she gets like this has never, ever had any point. I shouldn't like to think she would refuse an egg she wanted just to thwart me, but I have had to think a great many things of my relatives over the years, and not all of them were what I'd like.

Meekly, I took her back to my home, into my collection room. She looked around her and gave a great sigh as if a burden had been taken from her, but I didn't know what. I decided not to ask and simply took her to the variant. It hummed louder when El put her hands on it. She frowned thoughtfully. "That's—"

I waited for her to say *amazing* or *charming* or

fascinating.

“—really obnoxious,” she finished.

“You like that sort of thing!”

“It’s almost a buzzing,” she said, taking her hands away and looking at them as though I’d thrust them into something vile. “I like that sort of thing? Oh, now really, Loulou. Don’t be childish. Collectors who enjoy variants are still not indiscriminate. You know that.”

“So you don’t want it, then?”

“Of course I don’t want it! I am not a dumping ground for your defectives!”

“It’s not defective!” I protested. “It’s just . . . enthusiastic.”

“*Loud*,” said El, “and annoying.”

“I don’t know why it wasn’t doing this before,” I said. “It didn’t make a single noise at auction.”

El frowned, and I knew I’d got her. One thing she and her brother have always had in common was that they could never, ever resist a puzzle.

“Perhaps Terence,” she started, and I hid a smile. My cousin Terence thought even less of me than his sister did. But he adored El, despite their differences, and he adored puzzles more.

El even had some idea where to find him at that hour, which was more than I ever had. Possibly this was

because her tastes were less fastidious than mine: The low dive we entered was by no means my usual sort of establishment. I thought of making a remark about what Aunt St. James would think if she caught word that we had been so lowering ourselves, but El twists that kind of comment beyond what is reasonable for social discourse, so I kept my lips pressed firmly together. She asked the barkeep the whereabouts of her brother, and apparently she had been in looking for him before: She did not have to specify which patron was her brother.

Then again, Eleanor and Terence did look remarkably alike, if it was not too unflattering to a woman to say how her long, narrow features resembled her brother's. Considering where the two of them had led me, I was not concerned with flattery.

Terence had rented a private room, to which the barman directed us with no particular concern for the niceties of his customers' privacy. If we had merely pushed our way down the dark hallway, we would have guessed at once which one was Terence's: It smelled not of tobacco or opium, but of gunpowder and salts, and as we contemplated knocking on the door, a deep thump and crunch from within made the decision for us.

El threw the door open. "Terry, what on Earth . . . " she said in exasperation.

He was sitting on the floor with a dazed expression and a smudged face, both of which had been his habitual condition since we were very small—indeed, since before I could remember.

“Doubly unexpected,” he said. “Both the explosion and *you*. Loulou, what are you doing here? Hadn’t you better go somewhere more comfortable?”

“Loulou needs our help, Terry,” said El sweetly.

For my part, I did not kill them both on the spot, which is as much forbearance as I think a person ought to be expected to have, or possibly more.

“Little Loulou needs our help?” said Terence from the superior height of three entire years. “Why then, she shall have it. On what matter do you beg for our help, Lou?”

I ground my teeth. “I have been sold a variant egg. I didn’t spot it in time. Eleanor thought you might help us —”

“Help *you*,” El put in most unbecomingly.

“Very well, help *me* to discover how it was done, and whether it might be done again, and how I might dispose of the egg if possible, or care for it properly if not.” I felt a bit breathless when I finished that mouthful. Terence was cocking his head and regarding me in that damp and birdlike manner that has always come so naturally to him. When one has played with the firebird, it is a great trial to

have a cousin who resembles a waterfowl.

“Lou, you have *never* had a proper appreciation for phlogistics,” he said.

I tossed my head and did not do him the courtesy of a response. My cousin Terence has *long* been obsessed with the motions of phlogiston, which can be, at best, an approximation of the true flows of magic. But there he was, in a seedy dive smelling of gunpowder, and his crackpot theories were my best hope.

El helped him to his feet, and I offered, with some reluctance, my handkerchief for him to tidy himself before we ventured onto the public thoroughfare. He refused it, the cad, and off we went, two respectable ladies and a chimneysweep, by all appearances.

When we got back to my house, Terence took an unconscionable length of time fiddling with his tea, scrubbing his face on one of my white washcloths, and generally making a nuisance of himself. When he finally got to look at the egg, he made a distressed noise.

“Oh, the poor thing, what on Earth is wrong with it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” I said, trying, as always, to remain pleasant. “That’s what I need you to tell me.”

He gave me the lopsided grin that I’m sure is very popular with the patrons of the establishments such as the

one in which we found him; for me it did nothing, or, I should say, nothing *positive*. Then the grin turned to a more genuine smile for the phoenix egg.

“Shh, shh, there,” he crooned to it. The humming did not seem to change. I felt a crisping of the air, as though the edges of everything had gotten faintly singed. Lifting my wizard’s loupe to my eye, I could see that Terence was doing *unspeakably* clumsy things to coax more magic to flow into the spells around the egg. To my way of thinking this was the last thing called for, but El put a restraining hand on my arm, and I reminded myself that I had called in my cousins for help because I didn’t know what to do with the wretched thing.

Terence clearly had some ideas. One of the things he did made the humming shift to a high-pitched whine. El took her hand off my arm in order to cover her ears on her way out of the room. Wincing, I shouted over the noise, “I don’t call that a success!”

“Nor do I,” Terence shouted back, and he did something else to the spells. The noise stopped completely. El poked her head back in.

“Did you fix it?” she asked.

“In a manner of speaking,” he said. “It should keep quiet for a while, at least.”

“A while?” I said. “What good does a while do us?”

“It gives us room to think without being driven mad enough to smash the damned thing,” he said, and I had to concede the point. I examined the egg and the spells around it. While phlogistics was, of course, nonsense, Terence did seem to have done something rather clever to give the phoenix and ourselves mutual breathing room.

I looked more closely at the spells. They were cunning—impossible to prove that they had been in place to conceal the variant nature of the thing, rather than to protect it, and the lack of insurance continues to be a problem in situations such as this.

“I see what they did,” said El a few minutes later, gratifying me with her slower response. “Clever bastards. I mean, better you than me, Loulou, but it would have tricked anyone. And of course you can’t get your money back, and another auction soon will be suspicious. Have you considered keeping it?”

“It had better be a quick sale,” said Terence. “The wretched thing may hatch, and then you’ll have a variant phoenix on your hands, and if there’s anything harder to take care of than a variant egg . . . “

“Shut up, Terry,” I said absently. I was running over my mental list of contacts in the community. I would not have gone to Eleanor in the first place if it had struck me that someone else might want the horrid thing in its

present condition—well, its immediately *pre*-present condition, the bit with the awful noise—and yet there would have to be someone. There would have to be.

The question was, of course, how much of a hit my reputation would take if it was known that I was unloading questionable variants upon unsuspecting fellow collectors. I feared that if that was the case, my previous wary *détente* with other collectors would become open warfare.

“Loulou is trying to figure out how she can get out of this and still convince anybody to buy from her ever again,” El said to her brother, smiling knowingly. “I still think that if you considered keeping it after it hatched—”

“Out of the question,” said Terence. “She hasn’t the facilities or the training to care for a canary, much less an ordinary phoenix, much less—whatever this turns out to be. Better to dump it and run.”

“Of course I would scarcely like for some other poor soul to be forced to—”

“We know you, El,” said Terence. “We know what you would like. But no matter. If you can stabilize the working I did, I think I can arrange for a resale for you tomorrow. It won’t be the price you paid—it may not have a magic component at all—but I think it will preserve your reputation more or less intact.”

I hesitated. But there was no help for it; I couldn't see any other way out, and who knew what would hatch from that egg? What kind of deformed thing, barely cousins with the beautiful phoenixes the rest of my collection held dormant?

"I'll strengthen the spells," I said. "You do as you must."

His smile broadened. "Grand." He gave me a location and time, and he and El let themselves out, leaving me staring glumly at the egg.

The spell, once Terence's crackpot theories had shown the way, was not hard, particularly if I didn't need for the wretched thing to keep quiet more than a day and a night. I massaged the flow of magic surrounding the egg, until the crackling in the shell glowed with what I could mistake for good health and bonhomie.

I left it in the collection vault and went to sleep.

The location Terence had named was a formal one, so I dressed carefully, every bit the sober and serious collector, no hint of the louche or arcane. I put the variant egg in a very firmly protective case, and off I went.

While I had surmised the dress code correctly, the guest list I had not. I could not understand what my cousin Terence was doing, but it appeared that the room

was full of rich foreigners, very few of them with more than a pinch of magic talent, some of them significantly shady-looking. I found one of my cousins, though not the one I'd sought.

"Who are these people?" I asked El in undertones.

"Goodness knows," she said, smoothing her palazzo pants over her hips and giving a cool nod to some grizzled "businessman" in a hand-tailored suit. "This is Terence's thing, not mine."

Samoilenko was there. I acknowledged him with a nod at least as chilly as El's. He did not take the hint and came over with an overly familiar smile. "My treasure has found a protector in a woman who is herself a treasure," he said, taking my hand.

I snatched it away, ready to remonstrate, but El was speaking to him before I could say anything that would give my trouble away.

"My cousin is a gem, is she not?" said El. "But so shy. Truly, she is most at home with the phoenix herself."

"They burn so brightly," said Samoilenko, breathing out a wistful sigh. I had seen this before: those forced by circumstance to sell off their eggs—or worse, eggs that were only in their keeping, never their own—but still in love with the allure of the phoenix. I could hardly blame a man like Samoilenko for having such exquisite taste. It

was only a shame for him that it was not matched by equal magical skill. But he was looking at *me* when he said it, and I had difficulty not pulling out one of the protective spells I had so carefully constructed for situations such as this one.

I spotted Terence. I made excuses that may even have sounded plausible and made my way over to him.

“What are you doing?” I muttered. “Who are these people?”

“Ukrainians,” he said back, barely moving his lips around his fixed smile. “A few Belorussians. Possibly a Georgian or two.”

“What? Why?”

“I put it about that you were hoping to restore some of the rare phoenix eggs to their original home regions,” said Terence. “Your compassion for impoverished areas is being discussed in most admiring terms over much of the auction field, I imagine.”

“Where by admiring, you mean—”

“Condescending and skeptical, yes.” He grinned at me. “You people are quite the cozy lot.”

You people! I glared at him. He was used to it, I suppose, and in his life circumstances would have to harden himself to the disapproval of his own class. “What do they know of collection?”

“The top bidder—though it’s understood that these bids are merely pro forma, as this is essentially a charity affair—is your Mr. Samoilenko. Who surely knew the egg for what it was.”

“And he—” I felt a rush of indignation. What I had taken for an untalented amateur was a man who had performed spells that deceived the finest collectors in the business—that is to say: me. And who knew what other crimes he had committed? If my cousin Terence had acquaintance with him, that did not speak well.

I looked again at Samoilenko, across the room where I had left him. He smiled at me, but his gaze kept returning to the egg.

He was getting exactly what he wanted. He had never let go of that egg—I could see it in the first auction—and he had made sure I would not want to keep it once I had it. And that I would have no way out but to ruin my own reputation as a collector and a judge of promising eggs.

I could not let him get away with it.

“Tell him the deal is off,” I said to Terence.

“I can’t,” he said. “As your agent I’ve already accepted his money.”

“Tell him—”

“It’s his egg now, Loulou. And he says you may find something you like better next time you meet him at

auction.”

I felt a rush of fury distantly, unconnected to myself proper. I conceived of the heartfelt wish that the variant phoenix egg would hatch, and that its variation would turn out to be a penchant for consuming my cousin Terence in gouts of flame.

Phoenix eggs never, ever respond to heartfelt wishes. It is beneath them. It’s one of the reasons I have always admired them and not something more tinpot and pedestrian like djinni lamps.

So I sat there and fumed and smiled, and the variant egg cracked.

I knew a moment of futile, ridiculous hope.

The crack spread through the beautiful shell, and the humming started up again, louder. The variant phoenix gave the egg another good whack with its eggtooth, and I could see the brilliant blue of the eggtooth itself.

Phoenixes are not blue.

Never in recorded history has there been a blue one. Oh, perhaps in some secret Soviet archives—but among serious collectors who are willing to share their records, never once a blue phoenix.

And I had sold mine. My cousin Terence had helped me to sell mine, and my cousin Eleanor had brought him to it. But no, it was not Terence, it was not Eleanor. *I* had

done this. I.

When it emerged, the bird burned with the blue flame of propane. And it *sang*. It sat on Samoilenko's shoulder and politely did not consume his hair with its flame or its beak, and the noises that had been muted into an obnoxious buzz by the shell became glorious song. Samoilenko and all the rest of them beamed upon me as their generous benefactor, when they could take their eyes off the blue phoenix at all.

When the blue phoenix stopped singing, it cocked its head and looked at me, directly at me. Its eyes were clever and brilliant. I stretched out my hand, and it stretched out its wings in return.

Samoilenko put up a restraining hand and reached for the cage one of his flunkys provided. "We do thank you so much," he said with a patronizing smile. "Our benefactress."

"I wonder if I might—"

"Thank you," he repeated, and then a cloth went over the cage and he stalked off with my phoenix.

My phoenix. Mine.

El found me sitting on the back step of the building, tearing a cocktail napkin to shreds. "Loulou," she started, and then she saw my face. "Louisa. Oh, Louisa."

I realized then that I was crying. My cousin sat down

next to me and put an arm around me, and for the first time since I was ten, I let her. We sat there like that without saying anything for awhile. I don't know how long. Then Terence came out and said, "Oh, you've found—oh."

"*Oh*," I mimicked savagely.

"I see you've found that the world is not so easily—"

"Ter," said El. "Stop."

"She should—"

"Not the time," said El, and I was too grateful to let myself be snide. "We'll get it back for you, Louisa. We will."

"We just went to all this trouble to—" Terence saw his sister's face and shut up. That can be very useful sometimes. I resent it when it works on me, and I've been fighting letting it work on me since adolescence. Still: useful.

They took me home very carefully in a cab, like I was very young or very drunk. El made hot chocolate the real way, on the stove, like their nanny used to do when we were children. The sound of the spoon scraping the bottom of the pan, slowly and rhythmically, was very comforting, and then she gave me the hot chocolate in a deep red mug.

"I had an egg the color of this mug," I said distantly.

“It looked to hatch, so I sold it. I sold them all.”

“Loulou—” El began.

“This is my last,” I said very distinctly. “No more sales. Done. Once I get this phoenix back, I will never sell another egg.”

“I can get you the things you need. For the hatched phoenix,” said El. “The food—or fuel, however you want to look at it. The, uh. Enrichment.”

“Phoenix toys,” I said. “Good.”

“The two of you,” Terence began, and this time it was I who stopped him with a glare.

“You have friends,” I said to him. “Not just the swanky friends from today. You and your disreputable friends.”

He swept a mocking bow. “Reputable, I’d say, if you’re now demanding that I help you on the strength of their reputations.”

“It’s not time to be cute, Ter,” said El. “This is serious.”

It was. “Do you have your ring still?” I said to El. “The one you made for the auction. They took my rain box, the bastards.”

“Sure,” said El. She slipped out to get it, passing it to me when she returned. “What expert conversation do you want to listen to?”

“The conversation that tells me how to get the phoenix back,” I said, putting the ring on. It slid around on my finger, too large for me. Nothing happened.

“Is it just giving the conversation to you instead of all of us?” El said.

“Of all of us?” the ring repeated.

“I think it’s broken, El,” said Terence.

“Broken El,” said the ring.

I smacked myself lightly on the forehead. “No one knows anything more about this than we do, is that it, ring?” And with a slight lag, it was repeating my words back. Lovely. No help there.

“Try something slightly different,” said Terence, interested despite himself. “The conversation about the security Samoilenko has around the phoenix.”

Having a faintly disreputable cousin is apparently good for something. The ring, when prodded, started spilling forth all kinds of details about who was standing guard where, what kind of bars the windows had, and like that. I was lost, but Terence nodded along in an alarmingly knowledgeable fashion, and when the conversation was over, he smiled at El and me.

“Well,” he said. “We have a plan.”

“We do?” said El.

“Sure. As long as you can get the bird not to light you

on fire. You think you can handle that, Loul—uh, Louisa?”

“If I can’t, I don’t deserve him,” I said.

“Well, you probably don’t deserve him,” said El practically. “He’s a magical creature. There’s no more reason you should deserve him than anyone else. Still, we can hope he’s not thinking in those terms.”

“Quite,” I said faintly. “What is this plan we have, Ter?”

“Oh, you’re going to love it,” he said. “I love it. I don’t know when I’ve last had the opportunity for this much fun.”

That did not make me want to leap up and sing, but when Terence outlined his plan to me, I felt like an adventuress from an outdated children’s novel. It was an unexpectedly pleasant feeling. I hoped I did not acquire a taste for it; that could grow extremely inconvenient.

We all got dressed in dark, sensible clothing. Plain dark trousers and pullover seemed the order of the day: inconspicuous, not incognito. When we reached the hotel in which Samoilenko and his cronies had stashed the phoenix, Terence stopped the car, and I concentrated on the rain spell I had used to purchase the egg in the first place.

“This is legal, right?” El said to Terence.

“Shut up,” I said.

“Technically no,” said Terence.

“Technically?”

“Well, technically Louisa could be imprisoned in a magic-blocking cell for the rest of her life for building creator control backdoors into a spell she was intending to sell. I mean, technically.”

“Shut *up*,” I said.

“But that’s only if she gets caught,” said Terence.

“And I’m manipulating the phlogistics so that she doesn’t get caught. So we’re fine.”

El banged her head softly against the car window.

“Ter,” she began.

“El, we are *stealing it*,” I said. “Now is *not* the time to find higher sensibilities.”

“I don’t have to look long for mine,” El began, and then stopped. “No, you’re right, if we’re going to do this, we should do it.”

“I’m glad you think so,” I said, “as I have already released the rains.”

We hurried out of the car and into the hotel, moving as though we were running out of the rain rather than into it. Inside the hotel, the employees were trying to figure out how to make the sprinkler system shut off. But of

course it wasn't the sprinkler system that was raining torrents down on their heads; it was my spell.

El's ring had given us access to the guard shifts on Samoilenko's suites, and Ter's ridiculous manipulation of phlogistics actually worked to let us yank the power to the guards' supplemental magic protections so that he could blow lightly on them and send them to sleep. With that kind of control, I wondered why on Earth he was so insistent on playing with gunpowder, but we didn't have the time for that conversation at the moment. El synched her powers with the electronic lock on the door, and we were inside.

And there he was, damp and shivering under the rains that had taken out the protective magics that had confined him. The phoenix was wet and blue and dripping, burning tiny flames at the ends of his claws to keep himself warm. He had been caged for good measure—caged!—and I swore to myself that never would a glorious creature such as this suffer confinement under *my* roof.

On the way to my roof was another story.

“It's your show, Loulou,” said Ter softly. He and El took up guard positions on either side of the door. I stepped forward. The phoenix turned and looked at me. When our eyes met, there was a spark—immediately

extinguished by the rains—and the poor, miserable thing tried to sing.

If the sight of a wet phoenix was pathetic, his attempt at song was even more so. He croaked and creaked and slaughtered the notes. It still sounded exactly right to my ears.

“Come on,” I crooned, unlatching the cage and gesturing for him to get into the large suitcase I was holding. “Come on, now. Just for a minute.”

He cocked his head and chirruped miserably at me, but the suitcase was dry, so even if he had not sparked upon seeing me, I suspect we might have gotten him that way. I shut it and hurried out into the hall.

As we crossed the hotel lobby, one of the flunkeys in hotel uniform shouted, “Wait!”

We all kept walking at moderate speeds.

“You three!”

“I beg your pardon?” I said.

“We’ve had a security breach in the . . . um . . . “ He looked at us doubtfully.

I drew myself up. “What exactly are you implying?”

The flunkey took in my clothes, my diction, my posture. Suddenly the dark plain clothes that had made us unobtrusive transformed us into simple chic rich women—and even Terence had cleaned up well.

“Really, Cousin Louisa,” he drawled. “I don’t think this place will do for Mother’s reception *at all*.”

El sniffed. “*Hardly*.”

“We had best be on our way before another of their mishaps befalls us,” I said. The flunkey opened his mouth to speak, and I silenced him with an eyebrow. “Was there something else?”

“We—you have caught us in the worst of circumstances,” he said.

“I can see that.”

“Please encourage your mother—er, aunt—to reconsider.”

“We can think it over, I suppose,” I said, and with that we were off, out and away and free. We hopped in the car, unveiled the phoenix so that it wouldn’t be uncomfortable, and set off, obeying all traffic laws to the letter.

“My beauty, my beauty,” I crooned, and the bird sang back.

Terence and Eleanor could not stop giggling. They sounded like children, but for once it reminded me of the children we’d been, and I looked away from my phoenix long enough to favor them with a smile.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“Don’t mention it,” said El.

“Really don’t,” said Ter. “It would become tedious very quickly.”

I wanted to snap back at them, but the phoenix was there, embellishing a new melody, and I just couldn’t put my heart into our squabbles.

From time to time I feel obliged to have my cousins over for dinner and drinks, and they always want to say hello to my blue phoenix. It would be churlish of me under the circumstances to fail to oblige them. They still drive me mad at least half the time, and no doubt I annoy them a trifle as well, but we are learning to get on together. The bird insists upon it, and that helps.

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You Have Never Been Here

M. Rickert

You are on the train, considering the tips of your clean fingers against the dirty glass through which you watch the small shapes of bodies, the silhouettes on the street, hurrying past in long coats, clutching briefcases, or there, that one in jeans and a sweater, hunched shoulders beneath a backpack. Any one of them would do. You resist the temptation to look at faces because faces can be deceiving, faces can make you think there is such a thing as a person, the mass illusion everyone falls for until they learn what you have come to learn (too young, you are too young for such terrible knowledge) there are no people here, there are only bodies, separate from what they contain, husks. Useless, eventually.

Yours is useless now, or most nearly, though it doesn't feel like it, the Doctors have assured you it is true, your body is moving towards disintegration even as it sits here with you on this train, behaving normally, moving with your breath and at your will. See, there, you move your hand against the glass *because you decided to*, you wipe your eyes *because you wanted to* (and your eyes are tired, but that is not a matter of alarm, you were up all

night, so of course your eyes are tired), you sink further into the vague cushion of the seat, you do that, or your body does that because you tell it to, so no wonder you fell for the illusion of a body that belongs to you, no wonder you believed it, no wonder you loved it. Oh! How you love it still!

You look out the dirty window, blinking away the tears that have so quickly formed. You are leaving the city now. What city is this anyways? You have lost track. Later, you'll ask someone. Where are we? And, not understanding, he will say, We're on a train. The edge of the city is littered with trash, the sharp scrawls of bright graffiti, houses with tiny lawns, laundry hanging on the line, Christmas lights strung across a porch, though it is too late or too early for that. You close your eyes. Let me sleep, you say to your body. Right? But no, you must admit, your body needs sleep so the body's eyes close and it swallows you, the way it's always done, the body says sleep so you sleep, just like that, you are gone.

The hospital, the Doctors say, has been here for a long time. It's one of those wonderful secrets, like the tiny, still undiscovered insects, like several sea creatures, like the rumored, but not proven aliens from other planets, like angels, like God, the hospital is one of the mysteries,

something many people know for a fact which others discount variously as illusion, indigestion, dreams, spiritual hunger, fantasy, science fiction, rumor, lies, insanity.

It is made of brick and stucco (architecturally unfortunate but a reflection of the need for expansion) and it has a staff of a hundred and fifty. With a population that large, the rotating roster of patients, the salespeople who wander in offering medical supplies (not understanding what they do to sick bodies here) the food vendors, the occasional lost traveler (never returned to the world in quite the same way) it is remarkable that the hospital remains a secret.

The patients come to the auditorium for an orientation. Some, naively, bring suitcases. The Doctors do nothing about this. There is a point in the process when the familiar clothes are discarded. It's not the same for everyone and the Doctors have learned that it's best not to rush things.

The Doctors appear to be watching with bored disinterest as the patients file in. But this is not, in fact, the case. The Doctors are taking notes. They don't need pen and paper to do this, of course. They have developed their skills of observation quite keenly. They remember you, when you come in, skulking at the back of the room,

like the teenager you so recently were, sliding into the auditorium chair, and crouching over as though afraid you will be singled out as being too young to be here, but that is ridiculous as there are several children in the group flocking around that lady, the one with orangey-red hair and the red and yellow kimono draped loosely over purple blouse and pants, a long purple scarf wrapped around her bloody neck. For some reason she is laughing while everyone else is solemn, even the Doctors standing there in their white lab coats, their eyes hooded as though supremely bored. (Though you are wrong about this. The Doctors are never bored.)

The Doctors introduce themselves. They hope everyone had a good trip. They know there is some confusion and fear. That's ok. It's normal. It's ok if there is none as well. That's normal too. All the feelings are normal and no one should worry about them.

The Doctors explain that the doors are locked but anyone can leave at any time. Just ring the bell and we will let you out.

The orangey-red haired lady with the bloody neck raises her hand and the Doctors nod. You have to lean over to hear her raspy voice.

How often does that happen? How often does someone leave without going through with the procedure?

The Doctors confer amongst themselves. Never, they say in unison. It never happens.

The Doctors pass out room assignments and a folder that contains information about the dining hall (open for breakfast from six to nine, lunch from eleven-thirty to two, and dinner from five-thirty to eight) the swimming pool (towels and suits provided) the chapel (various denominational services offered throughout the week). The folder contains a map that designates these areas as well as the site of the operating rooms (marked with giant red smiley faces) and the areas that house the Doctors which are marked Private, though, the Doctors say, if there is an emergency it would be all right to enter the halls which, on the map have thick black lines across them.

Finally, the Doctors say, there is an assignment. This is the first step in the operation. The procedure cannot go any further until the first step is complete. The Doctors glance at each other and nod. Don't be afraid, they say. Things are different here. Everything will be all right, and then, as an afterthought, almost as though they'd forgotten what they had been talking about, they say, find someone to love.

The auditorium is suddenly weirdly silent. As though the bodies have forgotten to breathe.

It's simple really, the Doctors say. Love someone.

You look around. Are they nuts?

At the front of the room the Doctors are laughing. No one is sure what to do. You see everyone looking around nervously, you catch a couple people looking at you but they look away immediately. You're not insulted by this. You expect it even.

The bloody neck lady raises her hand again. The Doctors nod.

Just one? she rasps.

The Doctors say, no, no, it can be one. It can be many. And what happens next?

The Doctors shrug. They are organizing their papers and making their own plans for the evening. Apparently the meeting is over. Several patients stand, staring at the map in their hands, squinting at the exit signs.

Excuse me? the lady says again.

You can't decide if you admire her persistence or find it annoying but you wish she'd do something about her throat, suck on a lozenge maybe.

The Doctors nod.

After we find people to love, what do we do?

The Doctors shrug. Love them, they say.

This seems to make perfect sense to her. She stands up. The children stand too. They leave in a group, like a

kindergarten class, you think. Actually, you kind of want to go with them. But you can't. You look at the map in your hand. You find your exit and you walk towards it, only glancing up to avoid colliding with the others. Love someone? What's this shit all about? Love someone? Let someone love me, you think, angry at first and then, sadly. Let someone love me.

The bodies move down the long hallways, weaving around each other, pausing at doors with numbers and pictures on them. (Later, you find out the pictures are for the children who are too young to know their numbers.) The bodies open unlocked doors and the bodies see pleasant rooms painted yellow, wallpapered with roses, cream colored, pale blue, soft green, furnished with antiques and wicker. The bodies walk to the locked windows and stare out at the courtyard, a pleasant scene of grass and fountain, flowering fruit trees. The bodies open the closets filled with an odd assortment of clothes, plaid pants, striped shirts, flowery dresses, A-line skirts, knickers, hand-knit sweaters, and rain coats, all in various sizes. The bodies flick on the bathroom lights, which reveal toilets, sinks, tubs and showers, large white towels hanging from heated towel racks. The bodies look at the beds with feather pillows and down comforters. The

bodies breathe, the bodies breathe, the bodies breathe.
The bodies are perfect breathers. For now.

What if this is the strangest dream you ever had? What if none of this is true? The Doctors have not told you that your body has its own agenda, your mother has not held your hand and squeezed it tight, tears in her eyes, your father has never hugged you as though he thought you might suddenly float away, your hair has not fallen out, your skin become so dry it hurts, your swallowing blistered? What if all of this is only that you are having a strange dream? What if you aren't sick at all, only sleeping?

The Doctors eat pepperoni and discuss astronomy, bowling, liposuction and who has been seen kissing when someone's spouse was away at a seminar. The Doctors drink red wine and eat pheasant stuffed with gooseberries and cornbread, a side of golden-hashed potatoes, green beans with slivered almonds and too much butter. They discuss spectral philosophy, spiritual monasticity, and biological relativism. They lean back in their chairs and loosen belts and buttons surreptitiously, burping behind hands or into napkins. Dessert is served on pink plates, chocolate cake with raspberry filling and chocolate

frosting. Coffee and tea is served in individual pots. The Doctors say they couldn't possibly and then they pick up thin silver forks and slice into the cake, the raspberry gooing out. "What do you think they are doing now?" someone says. "Oh, they are crying," several of the Doctors respond. The Doctors nod their knowledgeable heads. Yes. On this first night, the bodies are crying.

That first night is followed by other days and other nights and all around you life happens. There are barbecues, movies, tea parties and dances. The scent of seared meat, popcorn, and earl gray tea wafts through the halls. You are amazed to observe everyone behaving as if this is all just the usual thing. Even the children, sickly pale, more ears and feet than anything, seem to have relaxed into the spirit of their surroundings. They ride bicycles, scooters, and skateboards down the hall, shouting, Excuse me, mister! Excuse me! You can never walk in a line from one end to the other and this is how, distracted and mumbling under your breath, you come face to face with the strange orange-haired woman. She no longer wears the kimono but the scarf remains around her throat, bloodied purple silk trailing down a black, white and yellow daisy dress. Her head, topped with a paper crown, is haloed with orange feathers, downy as those from a pillow.

Where you going in such a hurry? she wheezes.

Upon closer inspection you see they are not feathers at all, but wisps of hair, her scalp spotted with drops of blood.

Name's Renata, she thrusts her freckled fleshy hand towards you.

Excuse me! Excuse me!

You step aside to let a girl on a bicycle and a boy on roller skates pass. When you turn back to her, Renata is running after them, her bloodied scarf dangling down her back, feathers of orangey-red hair floating through the air behind her.

She's as loony as a tune, wouldn't you say?

You hadn't seen the young man approaching behind the bicycle child and the roller-skating one. You haven't seen him before at all. He stares at you with blue eyes, like a dog.

You don't got a cigarette, do you?

You shake your head, vigorously. No. Of course not. It goes without saying.

In spite of his stunning white hair, he's no more than five years older than you. He leans closer. I do, he says. Come on.

He doesn't look back. You follow him, stepping aside occasionally for the racing children. You follow him

through a labyrinth of halls. After awhile he begins to walk slowly, slinking almost. There are no children here, no noise at all. You follow his cue, pressing against the walls. You have an idea you have entered the forbidden area but what are they going to do anyway. Kill you? You snort and he turns those ghost-blue dog eyes on you as though with threat of attack.

You are a body following another body. Your heart is beating against your chest. Hard. Like the fist of a dying man. Let me out, let me out, let me out. You are a body and you are breathing but your breath is not your own.

The body in front of you quickly turns his head, left, right, looking down the long white hall. The body runs, and your body follows. Because he has your breath now.

What is love? The Doctors ponder this question in various meetings throughout the week. We have been discussing this for years, one of them points out, and still have come to no conclusion. The Doctors agree. There is no formula. No chemical examination. No certainty.

There's been a breach, the Doctor in charge of such matters reports.

The Doctors smile. Let me guess, one of them says, Farino?

But the others don't wait for a confirmation. They

know it's Farino.

Who's he with?

They are surprised that it is you. Several of them say this.

The Doctors have a big debate. It lasts for several hours, but in the end, the pragmatists win out. They will not interfere. They must let things run their course. They end with the same question they began with. What is love?

It's quick as the strike of a match to flame. One minute you are a dying body, alone in all the world, and the next you are crouched in a small windowless room beside a boy whose blue eyes make you tremble, whose breathing, somehow, involves your own. Of course it isn't love. How could it be, so soon? But the possibility exists. He passes the cigarette to you and you hesitate but he says, What's a matter? Afraid you're going to get cancer? You place the cigarette between your lips, you draw breath. You do that. He watches you, his blue eyes clouded with smoke.

Thanks. You hand the cigarette back. He flicks the ash onto the floor. The floor is covered with ash. From wall to wall there is ash.

This isn't all mine, you know.

You nod. You don't want to look stupid so you nod. He hands the cigarette to you and your fingers touch

momentarily. You are surprised by the thrill this sends through your body. I sing the body electric.

What's that?

You hadn't realized you'd spoken out loud. I sing the body electric, you say. It's from a poem.

You a fucking poet? he says.

You hand the cigarette back to him. Any moment now the Doctors could come and take you away. Any breath could be the last breath. His blue eyes remain locked on yours.

I mean, are you? A fucking poet? He doesn't look away, and you don't either.

You nod.

He grins. He crushes the precious cigarette into the ashy floor. He leans over and his lips meet your lips. He tastes like ash and smoke. The gray powder floats up in the tumble of tossed clothes and writhing bodies. The bodies are coated with a faint gray film and maybe this isn't love, maybe it's only desire, loneliness, infatuation, maybe it's just the body's need, maybe it isn't even happening, maybe you have already been cremated and you are bits of ash creating this strange dream but maybe you are really here, flesh to flesh, ash to ash, alive, breathing, in the possibility of love.

Later, you lie alone on the clean white sheets in your room. You are waiting. Either he will come for you or they will. You stare at the ceiling. It is dimpled plaster dotted with specks of gold. You think it is beautiful.

Suddenly there is knocking on the door.

You open it but it isn't the Doctors or the police and it isn't him, it's Renata.

Are you naked or dead? she says.

You slam the door. Your ash print remains on the bed, a silhouette of your body, or *the* body. She is knocking and knocking. You tell her to go away but she won't. Exasperated, you grab your ash pants from the floor, step into them, zip and button the fly, open the door.

She is almost entirely bald now, but she still wears that ridiculous paper crown. She sees you looking at it. She reaches up to fondle the point. One of the children made it for me. Behind her you see the evidence of your indiscretion. Your ash footprints reveal your exact course. The hallway is eerily empty.

Where are the children now?

They're gone, she croaks, stepping into the room, a few orange hairs wisping around her. Haven't you noticed how quiet it is?

It is. It is very quiet. All you can hear is her breath, which is surprisingly loud. This place . . . you say, but

you don't continue. You were going to say it gives you the creeps but then you remember Farino. Where is he now? How can you hate this place when this is where you found him? You may as well relax. Enjoy this while you can. Soon you will be out there again. Just another dying body without any more chances left.

She opens your closet and begins searching through it. Have you seen my kimono? The one I was wearing when I arrived?

You tell her no. She steps out of the closet, shuts the door. They say it's just like changing clothes, you know.

You nod. You've heard that as well, though you have your doubts.

She sighs. If you see it, will you let me know? She doesn't wait for your reply. She just walks out the door.

You count to ten and then you look down the hall. There is only one set of ash footprints, your own. Are you there? you whisper. Are you there? Are you? Is anyone?

You cannot control the panic. It rises through your body on its own accord. Your throat tightens and suddenly it's as though you are breathing through a straw. Your heart beats wildly against your chest, Let me out, let me out. The body is screaming now. Anyone? Anyone? Is anyone here? But the hall remains empty except for your footprints, the silent ashy steps of your life, and this is

when you realize you have not loved enough, you have not breathed enough, you have not even hated enough and just when you think, well, now it's over, the Doctors come for you, dressed in white smocks spotted with roses of blood and you are pleading with them not to send you back out there with this hopeless body and they murmur hush, hush, and don't worry. But, though they say the right things the words are cold.

They take you down the long white halls, following your footprints, which, you can only hope (is it possible?) they have not noticed, until, eventually, you pass the room your footprints come out of, smudged into a Rorschach of ash as though several people have walked over them.

Hush, hush. Don't worry. It won't hurt any more than life. That's a little joke. Ok, we're turning here. Yes, that's right. That door. Could you open it, please? No, no, don't back out now. The instruments are sharp but you will be asleep. When you wake up the worst will be over. Here, just lie down. How's that? Ok, now hold still. Don't let the straps alarm you. The body, you know, has its own will to survive. Is that too tight? It is? We don't want it too loose. Once, this was a long time ago, before we perfected the procedure, a body got up right in the middle of it. The body has a tremendous will to survive even when it goes against all reason. What's that? Let's

just say it was a big mess and leave it at that. The cigarette? Yes, we know about that. Don't mind the noise, all right? We're just shaving your head. What? Why aren't we angry? Can you just turn this way a little bit? Not really much left here to shave is there? We're not angry; you did your assignment. What's that? Oh, Farino. Of course we know about him. He's right there, didn't you notice? Oh, hey, hey, stop it. Don't be like that. He's fine. He just got here first. He's knocked out already. That's what we're going to do for you now. This might—look, you knew what you were getting into. You already agreed. What do you want? Life or death? You want Farino? Ok, then relax. You've got him.

You are on a train. Your whole body aches. The body is a wound. You groan as you turn your head away from the hard glass. The body is in agony. Your head throbs. You reach up and feel the bald scalp. Oh! The body! The dream of the body! The hope of the body for some miracle world where you will no longer suffer. You press your open palms against your face. You are not weeping. You are not breathing. You are not even here. Someone taps the body's shoulder.

You look up into the hound face of the train conductor. Ticket? he says.

I already gave it to you.

He shakes his head.

You search through your pockets and find a wallet. The wallet is filled with bills but there is no ticket. I seem to have lost it, you say, but look, here, I can pay you.

The conductor lifts the large walkie-talkie to his long mouth and says some words you don't listen to. Then he just stands there, looking at you. You realize he thinks he exists and you do too. The train screams to a long slow stop. He escorts you off.

You can't just leave me here, you say. I'm not well.

Here's your ride now, he says.

The police cruiser comes to a halt. The policeman gets out. He tilts the brim of his hat at the conductor. When he gets close to you, he looks up with interest. Well, well, he says.

There's been some sort of mistake, you say. Please, I'm not well.

The conductor steps back onto the train. The windows are filled with the faces of passengers. A child with enormous ears points at you and waves. For a second you think you see Farino. But that isn't possible. Is it?

The policeman says, Put your hands behind your back.

These aren't my hands.

He slaps the cuffs on you. Too tight. You tell him they are too tight.

The whistle screams over your words. The train slowly moves away.

Aren't you going to read me my rights?

The policeman leans into your face with bratwurst breath. Just 'cause you shaved your head you think I don't know who you are, he says. He steers you to the cruiser. Places one hand on your head as you crouch to sit in the backseat.

I know my rights, you insist.

He radios the station. Hey, he says, I'm bringing something special.

You drive past cows and cornfields, farmhouses and old barns. The handcuffs burn into your wrists. The head hurts, the arms hurt, the whole body hurts. You groan.

Whatsa matter? The policeman looks at you in the rearview mirror.

I'm not well.

You sure do look beat up.

I've been in a hospital, you say.

Is that right?

You look out the window at an old white farmhouse on a distant hill. You wonder who loves there.

The station is a little brick building surrounded by

scrubby brown grass and pastures. The policeman behind the desk and the policewoman pouring coffee both come over to look at you.

Fucken A, they say.

Can I make my phone call?

The policewoman takes off the handcuffs. She presses the thumb into a pad of ink. She tells you where to stand for your picture. Smile, she says, we got you now Farino.

What?

What is this body doing with you? What has happened? They list the crimes he's committed. You insist it was never you. You never did those things. You are incapable of it. You tell them about the hospital, the Doctors, you tell them how Farino tricked you.

They tell you terrible things. They talk about fingerprints and blood.

But it wasn't me, you insist.

Farino, they say, cut this shit and confess. Maybe we can give you a deal, life, instead of death. How about that?

But I didn't, you say. I'm not like that.

You fucking monster! Why don't you show a little decency? Tell us what you did with the bodies.

I was in a hospital. He switched bodies with me. He

tricked me.

Oh fuck it. He's going for the fuckin' insanity shit, ain't he? Fuck it all anyway. How long he been here? Oh, fuck, give him the fuckin phone call. Let him call his fuckin lawyer, the fuckin bastard.

You don't know who to call. They give you the public defender's number. No, you say, I have money. In my wallet.

That ain't your money to spend, you worthless piece of shit. That belonged to Renata King, ok?

Renata?

What? Is it coming back to you now? Your little amnesia starting to clear up?

How'd I end up with Renata's wallet?

You fuckin ape. You know what you did.

But you don't. You only know that you want to live. You want to live more than you want anything else at all. You want life, you want life, you want life. All you want is life.

What if this is really happening? What if you are really here? What if out of all the bodies, all the possibilities, you are in this body and what if it has done terrible things?

Listen, you say. You look up at the three stern faces.

They hate you, you think, but no, they hate this body. You are not this body. The stern faces turn away from you. What can you say anyway? How can you explain? You sit, waiting, as though this were an ordinary matter, this beautiful thing, this body, breathing. This body. This past. This terrible judgment. This wonderful knowledge. The body breathes. It breathes and it doesn't matter what you want, when the body wants to, it breathes. It breathes in the hospital, it breathes in the jail, it breathes in your dreams and it breathes in your nightmares, it breathes in love and it breathes in hate and there's not much you can do about any of it, you are on a train, you are in an operating room, you are in a jail, you are innocent, you are guilty, you are not even here. None of this is about you, and it never was.

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M. Rickert's stories have been appearing regularly in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* for several years, starting in 1999 with her first publication, "The Girl Who Ate Butterflies." Her work has also appeared in *SCI FICTION* and the anthologies *Wastelands*, *Poe*, and *Feeling Very Strange*. A new collection of her short fiction, *Holiday*, came out in November. Her first collection, *Map of Dreams*, won the World Fantasy

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Blue Lace Agate

Sarah Monette

Jamie Keller and his partner hadn't found the shoggoth larva smugglers yet, but his boss, the head of the Bureau of Paranormal Investigation's southeast hub, had other things on his mind: "And, ah, how are you and Sharpton doing, Keller?"

It was a loaded question, and Jamie considered it carefully before he answered. "Me and Sharpton—Sharpton and I, sorry, sir—are doing just fine."

Jespersion's eyebrows went up. He knew it was a lie. But Jamie met his eyes steadily.

"I'm not complaining, sir."

"No, you're not. Another two days and you'll beat the record, you know."

"Yessir." Jamie had been Mick Sharpton's partner for two weeks and three days. He knew why no one lasted longer than that.

"Well, all right then. Be off with you."

"Thank you, sir," Jamie said, and was not surprised, when he got back to the office the six junior-most agents shared, to discover that his partner had already left for the day.

He grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair, turned off the lights on his way out the door. Shrugged into his jacket in the elevator. He checked his watch and booked it to the bus stop, just in time to catch the southbound M that would get him home.

Where Lila would be waiting.

The elderly white lady sitting across from him gave him a funny look, and he knew she was probably afraid his smile—incongruous on a man 6'4", black, homely, tattooed, and built like a Mack truck—meant he was high on something and about to start ripping chunks out of the bus. He nodded at her, and she looked quickly away.

He got off the bus at Lindale and Davis and walked another five blocks to the ugly concrete apartment building he currently called home. The guys in 1A had left the front door propped open again, and Jamie sighed, foreseeing yet another unpleasant conversation about why the safety of the building's thirty other tenants was more important than the convenience of their lazy asses. But for now, he just kicked the wedge free and went upstairs.

Third floor, apartment 3B. Lila was on the phone, and after ten seconds and an exasperated eyeroll, he deduced that the person on the other end was her mother. Jamie kissed the back of Lila's neck as he edged past her into the kitchen, and started scrubbing potatoes.

He wondered if there was something wrong with being so happy with this rather tawdry domesticity, and decided he didn't care.

Three days of nothing, and today promised to be more of the same. Mick Sharpton sat fuming in the passenger seat of the Skylark—he didn't drive, and Jamie had decided early on not to ask if “didn't” meant “wouldn't,” “couldn't,” or “shouldn't.”

Jamie drove as an alternative to engaging with Mick's anger. He was, as it happened, perfectly capable of driving and holding a conversation at the same time, but Mick seemed to want to believe Jamie was a big dumb lump, without a thought in his head that Jesperson didn't approve first. And if that was what Mick wanted to believe, Jamie was happy to play along. It made his life easier.

And he didn't want to fight with Mick. He didn't want to compete with Mick, didn't want to threaten Mick. He wanted to keep this job—more than that, for the first time in his life, he'd found something he wanted to do *well*. And having had a chance to evaluate the other junior agents, he knew Mick Sharpton was his best hope of being not merely good at his job, but *remarkable*.

Three years older than Jamie, Mick Sharpton was a

sharp-boned, pale-skinned man with long dyed-black hair and long lacquer-black fingernails. The left side of his face bore evidence of reconstructive surgery: the cheekbone that didn't quite match, the skin that responded stiffly when he smiled. Jamie had not asked what had happened, and Mick showed no signs of wanting to tell him.

Mick Sharpton was also a clairvoyant. That was why Jesperson had hired him, had kept him on despite the trouble he caused—why Jamie was willing to put up with a great deal to keep Mick as his partner.

Mick's esper rating was 3(8); most of the time his clairvoyance meant only that his hunches were unusually good, that it was useless to try to lie to him. But that latent eight meant he was liable to precognitive and retrocognitive flashes, telepathy, rescognition, all the usual occult trappings of seeing ghosts and auras. Unfortunately, the latent eight also meant none of it was under his conscious control, a fact which irritated Jesperson profoundly. Thus far, Mick had refused to take esper training—and made his decision stick by daring Jesperson to fire him. Jamie was just as glad to have missed the resulting explosion; he'd gotten several gleeful eyewitness accounts from agents happy in their schadenfreude that he was the one saddled with Sharpton

now.

Jamie parked the Skylark in the lot of the Tree of Life. The next informant on their seemingly endless list was the proprietor: Charlene Pruitt, better known as Madame Anastasia. She used the hippy-dippy froufrou of her store to camouflage a much darker and more serious class of transactions. She was very careful, and therefore never prosecutable—at least, not yet—but her desire to keep on the Bureau’s good side made her frequently quite helpful as a source of information.

“Oh, fuck it, Keller. Not here!”

Jamie turned off the engine and looked over at Mick. “She’s next on the list.”

Mick rolled his eyes and muttered, “Fucking Jesperson,” but he didn’t argue, and Jamie smothered a smile as he got out of the car.

“Your door locked?”

“*Yes*, the fucking door’s locked. Come on!”

Jamie followed his partner’s nervy, arrogant stride across the parking lot and into the Tree of Life, where they were greeted by the sweet jangle of a string of tiny bells. Sitar music permeated the air, as strong and characterless as the incense. Mick muttered something under his breath and stalked away to glare at the Tarot decks. Jamie went up to the counter and asked if Madame

Anastasia was available.

The white college-age clerk, pierced in eyebrow, nostril, and lip, and wearing enough sandalwood to choke a phoenix, looked up at Jamie, at the broad, unlovely lines of his face, at the octopus tattooed on the shaved side of his head and down his neck, black swirling lines on skin nearly as dark, and said, “I’ll, um, go see, okay?”

She scurried off in a flap of Birkenstocks and long shapeless skirt, and Mick prowled over to say, “Charlene sure can pick ‘em, can’t she?” then began running his fingers restlessly through a basket of cheap silver rings: Celtic knots, snakes, dolphins, pentacles, hearts.

Jamie noticed the bitterness in Mick’s voice, and was just deciding, again, that it would do more harm than good to ask, when Mick said, “Hey! This one doesn’t—”

Glancing at the ring Mick had picked up—silver set with blue lace agate—Jamie was about to ask what on Earth Mick thought was wrong with it, when he saw the wear on the edges of the band, the brass showing through the thin silver wash.

He looked up, but whatever he would have said died in his throat at the expression on Mick’s face. Mick’s eyes had gone wide, his mouth a little slack. He said, “We have to go now,” in a voice unlike anything Jamie had heard from Mick Sharpton before, the voice of a child

who is frightened and trying to hide it.

Jamie couldn't argue with that voice. "Okay," he said and shepherded Mick to the door, calling over his shoulder, "We'll come back later," as the rattle of the beaded curtain announced the clerk's return.

Jamie unlocked the passenger-side door first, which normally would have provoked a sharp comment from Mick about not being that kind of girl. This time, it barely seemed to register; Mick got in and fastened his seat-belt, and then simply waited, pale blue eyes staring a hole in the dashboard, until Jamie, seat-belt buckled and engine started, said, as gently as he could, "Where are we going?"

Mick said, his voice not much louder than a whisper, "She's in the river."

"Oh, *Christ*." Jamie considered for a fraction of a second telling Mick to call it in, but he didn't think Dispatch would be able to make heads or tails of Mick in his current state. He grabbed the handset and reported November Echo and November Foxtrot en route on a rescog.

Heading west toward the river, Jamie counted. Thirty-four seconds after he cradled the handset, the radio crackled to life with Jesperson's voice: "November Foxtrot and Echo, report!"

“Mick had a flash, sir.”

“A flash of what?”

“I don’t rightly know. We were in the Tree of Life, waiting for Ms. Pruitt, and he picked a ring up out of a basket. And now we’re on our way to the river.”

“Latent bloody clairvoyance. All right, Foxtrot-niner. You two go check it out. I’ll give Juliet Victor and Mike the rest of the list.”

“Yessir. We didn’t get a chance at Ms. Pruitt.”

“Duly noted. Able out.”

Mick gave him directions as they went, leading them to a residential neighborhood: one-story houses, most in dire need of new siding, and decrepit docks sticking out into the muddy river like half-rotted teeth. Everything shabby, faded, cars rusting, grass dying, and the river behind it all like a stain that won’t come out.

But there were children playing in the yards and on the sidewalks, mostly white, although some black and some Hispanic. A pair of long jump-ropes were being wielded with professional aplomb by two teenage girls, and the little girls standing giggling in line for their turn were every shade from as white as Mick to as black as Jamie.

All at once, Mick said, “Here!” his voice so urgent that Jamie slammed on the brakes in instinctive response,

hard enough to throw them both forward against their seat belts. He swerved the car over against the curb; Mick was already clawing at the door, scrambling out, leaving the door not only unlocked but flapping open. Jamie locked the car and followed him more slowly, knowing that it wasn't going to matter. Not precognition or telepathy—Jamie'd never scored higher than a two on the esper equivalencies—just brutal truth. The woman who had worn that ring was dead, and he didn't need to find her to know that.

But he went after Mick, picking his way through the crabgrass and old Coke cans. Mick was down by one of the docks, up to his knees in river water, tugging at something that seemed to be trapped in the dock's underpinnings, something limp and pale and horrible.

“Mick,” Jamie said. “Mick, come away. We need to call the police.”

Mick wasn't listening, his breath coming in sobs, but he wasn't making any progress, either. She was well and truly stuck. Jamie's imagination offered him a hideous picture of Mick trying to dive under the dock to get her loose, and that was enough to make him step off the bank himself, to take Mick's arm and say gently, “Come on, Mick.”

Normally, Mick reacted to being touched with a

sidestep and a snarl. But this time, he let himself be led out of the water and then back to the car, where he sat obediently in the back, his wet feet dripping onto the curb, while Jamie, sitting likewise in the front, called Dispatch and got them to notify the police. For once, Mick wouldn't be sneering at him for doing things by the book.

After a thoughtful look at Mick, he did not suggest that they leave. They waited quietly; Mick's eyes had not regained their customary sharp, shuttered expression, and Jamie knew it was only his own presence in the car that kept Mick from going back down to the dock and the poor, gruesome thing trapped under it.

After a few minutes, he noticed the blue lace agate ring lying on the floor of the car and picked it up. It told him nothing, just a cheap graceless ring—there were probably thousands like it in this city alone. Blue lace agate was supposed to be protection; it hadn't even done that much for the girl who had worn it.

He twisted to hand the ring to Mick. "What else do you know about her?"

Mick held the ring on his palm as if it were some strange, possibly poisonous insect. "She was with her friends. Excited, laughing. They were going to—oh Jesus!" He shuddered, his fingers closing hard over the

ring.

“Mick?”

“They figured they’d found a way to live forever. One of them—a boy—had a book. He said it told them everything they needed to know. But they didn’t tell *her*.”

“What was her name?”

“Don’t know. She thought they were all drinking, but they weren’t. Just her. And he kissed her—Bobby kissed her, and he never had before. And she was so happy. She thought they were playing when they tied her to the chair. But they weren’t. They all had knives, and they took turns cutting her until she died. That was the ritual. Then they each took something of hers, so her death would defend them, and dumped her in the river, chair and all. Please take this ring away from me.”

His tone didn’t change, nor did his pained frown, so it took Jamie a moment to realize what he’d said. When he did, he came immediately around to kneel in front of Mick, whose hand was cramped so hard around the ring that prying his fingers loose took some effort, even with Mick trying to help. Finally Mick’s hand was open, and none of the fingers broken, and Jamie took the ring, wincing in sympathy at the angry red welt where it had dug into Mick’s palm.

“I hate this,” Mick said, his voice so soft Jamie could

almost believe he'd imagined it. And before he could decide what to say—or if he should say anything at all—the police had arrived, in a whoop of sirens and spatter of lights as if that would make some difference to the thing wedged beneath the decaying dock.

It was two hours before Jamie was finally able to get Mick away. Partly that was Mick's own fault—it seemed he could not be satisfied until the body, still tied to an ugly old wooden office chair with all its casters missing, had been pulled out of the river. Then Jamie got distracted by an officer who wanted an account of how two ghoulish hunters had come to find a murdered girl, and when he managed to get away, the detective in charge of the case had Mick all but pinned against the police car, snarling questions at him as if she thought she could lever answers out of him by sheer nastiness.

Something seemed to have drained out of Mick with the recovery of the body; Jamie could see the tremor running through him, the unprotected wideness of the pale eyes. Another man might have left Mick Sharpton to be flayed by the police detective. Jamie intervened, patiently, gently, putting his own bulk between the detective and her prey, insisting that her questions could wait, that Mick had told her all he could. Finally, she

grudgingly acquiesced, and Jamie dragged Mick to the Skylark before she could change her mind.

Jamie called Dispatch to say November Foxtrot and Echo were emphatically off-duty for the day, and drove to Mick's apartment, which was in a part of the city as shabby as Jamie's own neighborhood, but older, still clutching its fading gentility to its bosom. Mick lived on the second floor of a looming brick monstrosity. Jamie had never been inside.

He found a parking place directly in front of Mick's building and touched the luck charm hanging from the rearview in thanks. He killed the engine, looked across at his partner. Mick was a huddle of long limbs, his head down, and he was still shaking, a fine shiver like a scared cat.

Jamie heaved a sigh. "Come on then, blue eyes. Let's get you home."

He supposed it would have looked funny to an observer: the massive black man and the long-limbed white ragdoll he was trying to maneuver. Mick didn't fight him, exactly, but he was clearly disoriented, confused, and very frightened. He responded to Jamie's quiet-voiced coaxing, though, and was even able, when they at last made it up onto the porch, to fish his keys out of his pocket.

He promptly dropped them and flinched; Jamie couldn't tell whether it was from the sound, or from an expectation that Jamie would whack him one. Jamie picked up the keys, unlocked the door and propelled Mick inside with a hand between the shoulder blades. It wasn't quite a shove.

He followed, made sure the door latched behind him, and then chivvied Mick up the stairs, grateful there was only one flight. Another round with keys and locks, and finally Jamie was able to urge Mick into the apartment, so close behind him he almost stepped on his heels. He locked the door before he did anything else, then turned and examined Mick's home.

It was a studio apartment—one room, not overlarge, with sink and stove and refrigerator and a minuscule amount of counter space along one wall. Nice big windows, at least. There was a futon mattress on the floor, a chair, a card table, a lamp, and a motley assortment of bookcases, cinderblock and plywood shelving, milk crates, and cardboard boxes, some of which seemed to contain clothes, but most of which housed stacks upon stacks of books and CDs. The only thing in the room that looked like it would be worth the bother of stealing was the stereo, and even at that, Jamie thought, any sensible thief would just let himself right

back out again and go try somebody else's place.

Jamie steered Mick to the bathroom, which was directly across from the front door. A shower, a toilet, a sink with a mirror. No room to swing even the smallest and most patient of cats. Clean, though, and Jamie said firmly, "You need a shower. Can you manage? Because honestly, I don't think both of us are gonna fit."

A wide-eyed stare, and then Mick nodded. "Good," Jamie said. "I'm gonna use your phone. Okay?"

"You won't . . . leave?" A creaky little whisper.

Jamie smiled at him. "Nah. Won't go noplacе. You go clean up."

Mick nodded; Jamie hoped this eerie tractability would wear off soon. Then Mick was in the bathroom, the door firmly closed, and Jamie went to call Lila and let her know he'd be home late.

Mick went straight from the shower to the mattress on the floor, long white nude body so skinny Jamie could have counted the knobs of his spine if he'd wanted to. Mick dragged the sheet up over himself, both eyes shut tight, and said again, "You won't leave?"

"Staying right here," Jamie said from the chair by the card table. "'Til you tell me you want me gone."

"Okay," Mick said and was immediately asleep.

Jamie sat in that uncomfortable chair, one elbow propped on the card table, and read, rather slowly, a book he'd found on Mick's shelves called *The League of Frightened Men*. At five o'clock, he called in—very quietly, although it was clear that nothing short of a tactical nuke was going to rouse Mick—and got an update: the girl's name had been Bethany Timms. She was twenty-two, a record-store clerk; her boss hadn't liked her gothy friends. The clerk at the Tree of Life, who might have known something about the ring, had gone off shift before the Juliet team got there; Charlene Pruitt denied emphatically that she had ever seen the blue lace agate ring before in her life and was not much more helpful on the question of shoggoth larvae.

When it got dark, Jamie turned the lamp on. It was a couple hours after that when Mick rolled over, said, "Fuck me gently with a chainsaw," and sat up, his hair in tangles down his back.

Jamie raised his eyebrows at him. "You better?"

"Yeah." Mick ran his fingers vigorously through his hair, said, "Christ, what time is it?"

"Quarter after eight."

"You must be wanting to get home. Girlfriend waiting, right?"

It wasn't quite a sneer, but the walls were going back

up.

“You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” A hesitation, quite palpable, although Jamie didn’t think he was supposed to notice it, and Mick said carelessly, “It takes me like that sometimes, when I get something really strong. No big deal.”

“Okay,” Jamie said; he didn’t need esper to know Mick was lying, especially about the “no big deal” part, and he thought, as he got to his feet and replaced Mick’s book on the shelf, that that went a long way toward explaining why Mick was so allergic to esper training.

“See you tomorrow, then,” Jamie said to Mick, and Mick, rummaging for clean clothes, ostentatiously preoccupied, said, “Yeah.”

And that was that.

In the morning, Mick looked like cold leftover death, and Jamie knew without either of them having to say a word that he hadn’t slept. Jesperson noticed it, too, but did not comment beyond a dubious quirk of one eyebrow.

He was bringing them up to speed on what Gonzales and Peters had accomplished the afternoon before, when Mick said abruptly, “What about the Timms case?”

Jesperson gave Mick a dry look over the tops of his

glasses. “Not our jurisdiction.”

“It was an occult murder. Doesn’t that make it ours?”

“She was killed by living human beings.”

“Practicing unlicensed necromancy.”

“We have no direct evidence—”

“Rescog is admissible.”

“Not as hearsay.”

“So give me the goddamned ring and a tape recorder,” Mick said between his teeth.

Jamie said, trying not to sound like he was intervening, “Have the police caught up with that little clerk yet?”

“No,” Jesperson said. “Natalie Vowell didn’t go home last night, and didn’t show up for work this morning.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to listen to the police band, sir,” Mick said nastily.

“I don’t.”

Jamie said, “You could give us another day off from the shoggoths, sir. I did see Miss Vowell face to face, after all, which’ll be a help in finding her.”

“We don’t know the girl had anything to do with it,” Jesperson said.

“Why the hell else would the ring have ended up where it did?” Mick demanded.

“If we find Miss Vowell, we can ask her,” Jamie said to Jesperson, trying desperately to pretend both to Jesperson and himself that Mick wasn’t being unreasonable, trying to forestall another shouting match. But Jesperson’s attention seemed to be somewhere else, for after a moment he said thoughtfully, looking at Jamie rather than Mick, “All right. You can have the morning to track this errant clerk. But I go no farther than that.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jamie said before Mick could get his mouth open. “Come on, Mick,” And Mick was sensible enough to see he’d won as much ground as he was going to; he followed Jamie without demur, down to the garage to get the Skylark.

As he was backing out, Jamie said, “Where do we start?”

He had half expected to get snapped at for asking something so stupid, but Mick said, “Tree of Life. Lord knows I don’t *want* to do another rescog, but if we can find something of hers there . . .” He trailed off, then muttered unhappily, “Christ, I feel like a fucking bloodhound. Just give me something with her scent on it and watch me go.”

“If you think she was one of the people who murdered Bethany Timms, then we want to bring her in. Don’t matter how we do it.”

“No, I suppose not. Tree of Life, then, and let’s hope Charlene isn’t there.”

Mick’s luck was not in. Madame Anastasia was minding the counter, and as soon as they walked through the door, Jamie understood why Mick had been trying to avoid her. “Mitchell, darling!” caroled Madame Anastasia, a big white bosomy woman with her hair dyed henna-red. “How delightful to see you again! And who is your very large friend?”

“Didn’t know your name was Mitchell,” Jamie said out of the side of his mouth.

“And if you like your balls where they are, you’ll pretend you still don’t,” Mick muttered back, then said with bright, false cheer, “Charlene! Don’t tell me I forgot to let you know I’d gone to work for the BPI.”

The expensively made-up face of Madame Anastasia fell so fast it was a wonder her foundation didn’t crack. “The . . . the BPI? Mitchell . . .”

“We were here yesterday,” Jamie said politely, and did not let himself smile at her double-take. A lot of white people reacted that way, as if a man his size and color oughtn’t to be able to code-switch. “We didn’t get a chance to speak with you.”

“I told those two other agents everything I know,” she said, rather shrilly.

“Of course you did,” Mick agreed, hitching one buttock up onto the counter in a way that suggested he was settling in for the duration. “We’re not here to ask you more questions, Charlene. We just want to know if Natalie Vowell left any of her personal belongings lying around.”

She stared at him for a long moment; then her eyes narrowed in vindictive triumph, and she said, “I *knew* you could rescog.”

Mick didn’t miss a beat, just smiled back and said, “Actually, that’s my partner. *Things*, Charlene. Did she leave any?”

She looked from Mick to Jamie. “I should ask to see your ID. I know you, Mitchell. I know how far—”

Mick, with a long-suffering sigh, flapped his badge at her.

She was turning red. Fury, Jamie thought, and remembered Mick’s bitter crack of the day before: *Charlene sure can pick ‘em, can’t she?* He wondered how long Mick had worked for Charlene Pruitt, and filed it away with the rest of the questions he was never under any circumstances going to ask.

“I’ll go see,” she said in a tight voice. Her heels beat a hard staccato rhythm into the back of the store.

Mick turned to Jamie, poised to say something, and

Jamie said, “Man, you don’t need to tell me how much you hate her.”

It was almost funny, watching Mick trip over his own tongue. Finally he said, “Oh. Good.” Then a sudden frown pulled his eyebrows together, and he said accusingly, “You’re not nearly as stupid as you like to make out.”

“Well,” Jamie said, grinning, “I guess you caught me.”

Mick’s jaw sagged, and Jamie would have quite liked to find out what he would have said, but the trip-trap of Madame Anastasia’s returning heels brought them both sharply back to business.

Natalie Vowell had left her umbrella at the Tree of Life; after last week’s rain, it was hardly surprising. Jamie thanked Madame Anastasia with great politeness, took the umbrella in one hand and Mick’s elbow in the other, and marched them out of the store before Mick had time to object. Once in the parking lot, he let Mick pull away and tossed the umbrella at him. “You want to do your bloodhound thing, now’s a good time.”

“I don’t,” Mick began, trying for indignation, and then his hands clamped on the umbrella and he said, “*Fuck.*”

“It bad again?”

“Not as much. It’s just—God! The people who have touched this thing! Let’s hurry, okay?”

“You got it,” Jamie said, unlocking the Skylark. “Just tell me where to go.”

“She’s at the Greyhound station,” Mick said, slinging himself and the umbrella into the car. “Panhandling to get enough money for a ticket.”

“She getting close?”

“Not very.”

“All right then,” said Jamie, and put the Skylark into gear.

They had no difficulty in either finding or apprehending Natalie Vowell. She panicked when she saw Jamie looming through the plastic benches and crumpled travelers, and tried to run. Mick caught her easily, shoved her one-handed up against the nearest wall, his long nails threatening to tear the limp cotton of her blouse. “Okay, princess,” he said, in a low, controlled voice. “I think we all know why we’re here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Oh, please. You can’t lie to me, princess, so don’t even try. Tell me about the ring.”

She was starting to cry, not the pretty tears girls of her age sometimes used to get their own way, but big,

gulping, snotty sobs. Jamie didn't blame her, though he wished she'd be quieter about it. He smiled pleasantly at the approaching station official and showed his badge, which caused both that man and several others to back off in a hurry.

"Mick," he said under his breath. "Not our jurisdiction."

"I want to know first," Mick said, leaning close enough to Natalie Vowell to kiss her. "I want to *know*, Natalie. And you're going to tell me. All about Bethany Timms and that blue lace agate ring."

There was a long moment, queerly intimate, silent except for Natalie Vowell's sobbing breaths as she stared into Mick's pale, fanatical eyes. Then, as suddenly as if someone had flipped a switch, she howled, "It was Bobby's idea!" and the rest of her confession poured out of her. She'd helped murder Bethany Timms, taken the blue lace agate ring. But then she'd had second thoughts, yesterday morning; she'd wanted to get rid of the ring and its load of guilt, and hadn't been able to think of any better way to do it than to add it to that basket of cheap rings in the Tree of Life.

Poor silly bitch, Jamie thought without any sympathy, and Mick said, "Let's find some goddamn cops."

Their afternoon was chewed up by the police and the paperwork and the great disgruntlement of the detective at having her suspect nabbed by ghoulish hunters, unameliorated by her officers' steady success at collecting the people Natalie Vowell had named as participants in the ritual, the murderers of Bethany Timms.

Mick kept his composure this time—clearly the umbrella really hadn't been as bad as the ring—although that was a mixed blessing at best. Jamie finally had to invoke Jesperson to dispel the threat of being brought up on charges.

“The Old Man wouldn't like knowing you're taking his name in vain,” Mick said, sliding into the Skylark.

“If you tell him, I won't ever give you a ride home before turning the car in again,” Jamie said mildly, and grinned at Mick's startled glance.

The same spot in front of Mick's building was free. Jamie pulled in. Mick made no move to get out, and after a moment, Jamie gave him a sidelong glance, eyebrows raised.

Mick was staring down at his hands. “I, um. I need to say thanks.”

“You're welcome. What'd I do?”

“Um.” He was blushing now—a thing which Jamie had never expected to see, no matter how long they were

partners—and he shook his head so his hair fell to shield his face. “You, um. Yesterday. You took care of me. Nobody’s ever . . . oh *fuck* I am not talking about this.”

“You don’t have to. I don’t need to know.”

One bright pale eye peered at him from behind the curtain of dyed-black hair.

“Mick,” Jamie said patiently. “I am not out to get you. I don’t care what shit you pull or how hard you ride me. I don’t care that you’re white, I don’t care that you’re gay, I don’t care that you’re a son of a bitch, and I don’t care that your fucking esper ratings can kick my ass. You’re my partner, and that means we’re on the same side. You read me?”

Mick pushed his hair back behind his ears, looking at Jamie strangely. “You really think it’s that easy?”

Jamie burst out laughing, a great bass roar that had Mick trying and failing not to join in. “Oh hell no. ‘Course it ain’t that easy. It’s just the way it is.”

“Oh,” Mick said and grinned at him, nothing held back. “Okay then.”

“Get your skinny white ass out of the car and go get some sleep,” Jamie said, grinning in return. “We’re back to them shoggoth larvae tomorrow.”

Sarah Monette grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, one of the three secret cities of the Manhattan Project, and now lives in a 105-year-old house in the Upper Midwest with a great many books, two cats, one grand piano, and one husband. Her Ph.D. diploma (English Literature, 2004) hangs in the kitchen. She has published more than forty short stories and has two short story collections out: *The Bone Key* (Prime Books, 2007 — with a shiny second edition in 2011) and *Somewhere Beneath Those Waves* (Prime Books, 2011). She has written two novels (*A Companion to Wolves*, Tor Books, 2007; *The Tempering of Men*, Tor Books, 2011) and three short stories with Elizabeth Bear, and hopes to write more. Her first four novels (*Melusine*, *The Virtu*, *The Mirador*, *Corambis*) were published by Ace. Her next novel, *The Goblin Emperor*, will come out from Tor under the name Katherine Addison. Visit her online at www.sarahmonette.com.

A State of Variance

Aimee Bender

On her fortieth birthday, the woman lost the ability to sleep for more than a single hour. She did not accumulate a tired feeling; in fact, that one hour served the purpose of eight, and she awoke refreshed. But because that hour was full of only the most intense, involving sleep, the sleep beyond rapid eye movement, the only consequence was that she had no time in her sleep hours for dreams. So, during the day, she would experience moments when the rules of the world would shift and she would see, inside her teakettle, a frog floating, dead. And then blink and it would be gone. Or she would greet the mailman and he would hand her a basket of sea water, dripping, with stamps floating wetly on top. And then she would smile and bring in the mail. These moments were sprinkled throughout every day; she still had a driver's license and wondered if she should revoke it herself, as the zombies who passed through the crosswalk and disappeared into the lamppost were confusing.

She assumed she would die at eighty. She figured this because the sleep shift began on her fortieth birthday and all her life, things had happened symmetrically like that.

Her birthdate was 11.25.52 and that was not notable until she realized that she had been born in Amsterdam and there the day comes first: 25.11.52; the address of the only house she could afford for miles and miles was 1441, on a street named Circle Road on the edges of Berkeley. She had a son the day her father died. Her son's face was almost a perfect mirror of itself, in such a way that one realized how imperfections created trust because no one trusted her son, with that perfect symmetry in his face; contrary to the magazine articles that stated women would arch and flex easily above him, beneath him, due to that symmetry, no—his symmetry was too much, and women shied away, certain he was a player. Certain he would dump them. And because no one approached him, when he did have a girlfriend every now and again he *would* dump them, because he found he did not trust them either, because they were always looking at him so furtively—making, with their faces, the action of holding up your hands in front of your chest to block a blow.

He told his mother he could not seem to meet a woman that had a core strength to her, and his mother, studying geometry at the kitchen table with cut-outs of triangles and squares, said she was sorry for what her pregnancy had done.

“What did it do?” he asked.

She held a mirror up to his nose. He saw his face in the hinged reflection. “What?” he said. Then she did it to herself, and the sight of his mother in perfect matched halves so disturbed him that he went and made himself a huge ham sandwich.

“So what are you saying?” he asked, mouth full of meat.

“I am saying that your face repels trust,” she said. “Because it is too exact. I am saying,” she told him, “that I will die on my eightieth birthday, because I stopped sleeping at forty.”

He knew, in a vague way, about the sleeping. The shapes on the table danced in front of her and slipped into her mouth, large mints. Then they were regular again. The mirror on the table was a mouth. She put a finger in and it bit her, wet. She’d finally told her son about the sleeping when he complained that she had made him too many colorful crocheted blankets and he had no more room for them in his apartment. “Take them to the shelter,” he’d pleaded, and then asked, “How are you making all these, anyway? Are you taking drugs?” (He himself had been taking overdoses of B vitamins to relieve stress to take the edge off how he felt when he smiled at another person who seemed to have an inordinately tough time smiling back.) His mother had laughed. She told him not about

the dreaming aspect but about the one hour, the way she didn't feel tired, and how it began promptly on her fortieth birthday.

He finished his sandwich and touched the blob of mustard left on the plate with the tip of his finger.

“Are you saying you believe in some kind of grand plan?” he asked. “Because I never thought you raised me to believe in any kind of overarching concept.”

“I'm just noticing the patterns,” she said. But her voice was so doubtful that he made a mental note with a sponge in his hand to be sure to be there on that eightieth birthday itself, so that she would not try to do anything herself, so interested in the pattern that she might let herself be a sacrifice to it.

Neither missed their father/husband who travelled so often he was unrecognizable when he returned. He came back from the latest trip with his hair dyed black and a deadly cough that landed him in the hospital. He lay there for weeks and weeks, and his hair grew in long and brown. The cough got worse. Above him, before death, stood his symmetrical son, whom even he did not trust, and his wife who he could not sleep next to anymore, as she read until all hours and wanted to talk to him about what she was reading, and had forgotten that other people needed more than an hour. She resented the world, he felt,

resented that all people were not exactly like her in this way. She was so lonely for those seven hours, and when he awoke he always felt that she was slightly blaming him for sleeping. After she turned forty-five, he traveled more, for years, so that those eight hours could be his alone, and in different cities he loved different beds—his mistresses not flesh and blood but made of pillows and sheets and the wide open feeling of waking up without alarm or expectation. As he died, as he looked at these two people he had loved most, he only thought: What a curious pair they are, aren't they? And then it was the white light, and he felt fine about succumbing to it. He was not, by nature, a big fighter.

A year or so after his father died, the son felt a strong desire to get his mother a suitor, so that his mother would not lean on him as the main man in her life. He knew a son's role could be confused that way, just as he'd felt the tugging from inside all those crocheted blankets, and he was too keenly vulnerable himself to the attention. He could see it, marriage to Mom, never official or blessed, and yet as implicit as breakfast or dinner. He did not want that. For all the lack of trust the world had bestowed upon him, he still had hope that something would happen to his face that would soften its appearance to others, and allow him into the palm of love. So he went on a dating search

for his mother. He answered several personal ads on Craigslist for men who were looking for women that sounded, more or less, like her, and so he wrote them, explaining that he was looking for his mother, and invited them, one by one, over to the house at 1441 Circle Road, under the guise of landscape gardener. The men were skeptical about the idea, which seemed untrustworthy, and even more skeptical once they met the kid, who seemed untrustworthy, but they all fell for his mother, almost elegantly, and in contrast to the general lore that good men were difficult to find, here were four, almost instantly, who were ready to take her mourning and knead it into their hearts. Two became her weekend companions: one on Sunday day, one on Friday evening. She did not tell them of the sleeping, or of how when watching a movie, another movie often superimposed itself onto the screen so that when he asked, after, how she'd liked it, she wasn't sure which movie he had seen and which was her dream addition.

The son, now, had some space to do things. His father was gone. Which was sad but his father had never trusted him, and that had always been a problem. He went to the Grind It Up coffee shop down the street from his apartment in Oakland and ordered himself a raisin scone and a black tea. Then he sat down at the table of a large

man, a man with tattoos but the old kind, before tattoos became dainty and about spiritual life. This man wore tattoos from the time when tattoos meant you liked to kick people around.

“Yes?” the man said, moving his newspaper aside.

The young man didn’t move. He sipped his tea.

“I’m sitting here?” said the man. He was a big man too. He took up most of the table. There were plenty of other free tables in the cafe. The young man trembled inside but he kept his hand steady. He steadied his symmetrical face.

“You a homo or something?” asked the man.

The son didn’t respond. But he could see the man digesting the face, the perfect face, and the man lifted the table gently, and the scone slid down into the boy’s lap, and the tea wobbled, and the boy just put the scone back on the now slanted table and kept his eyes on the scrawny facial hair of the large man.

The man, Marty, was tired. He did not want to fight. He had done that so many times before. He was tired of it, and he was taking classes now, and they told him to acknowledge how he was really hurt inside, not angry at all. He read his paper high over his head and stopped looking at the young man. So, it was a homo. So, he was picked up today at the cafe by a homo. This was new for

him. He decided to do what that lady said, and try to find the humor in it, and when he did he really did find it funny and behind his paper, he started to laugh.

Well, the young man was stuck. He'd wanted a hit, a real hit, a hit that would complicate his face. Finally he put a hand on the man's newspaper, folding it down. "Listen," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I just want to get hit." Marty laughed and laughed some more. His arm tattoo read Skull Keeper, and had an illustration of bones wrapped in ribbons. "You want to get hit?" he said. "Too bad. I'm done with that shit."

"Please?" said the young man, and Marty said no, but the tight businessman eavesdropping at the next table with an iced mocha blend said he'd do it, sure, a hit?

"Right on the cheek," said the young man, and he asked Marty to oversee because now he trusted Marty far more than the tight businessman whose smile was far too pleased at the idea. "Let's all go out back? Please?" he asked Marty, who folded up his paper and agreed, because it was the modern world, and he was old but open-minded, and being the protector was a better role for him anyway, maybe a role to consider, in fact, for the future. And the tight businessman looked so tightly delighted and the boy said, "Cheek please," but he did not know the tight businessman had poor centering

perception, and had never, in fact, hit another man although he'd wanted to, his whole life, ever since he had been teased everyday on the walk to school by that bastard boy, Adam Vermouth, who had told him in a squawking voice that he was useless, useless, useless. The tight businessman played with his hands as fists all the time at the office, but when put in the actual situation, aiming for the cheek, what he got instead was the nose, and he slammed the boy straight on and broke the bone, blood pouring out of his nostrils. "Okay?" said Marty, holding his arms out flat like a referee. "Are we done?" "That's good," gasped the boy, reeling with pain, and the tight businessman was just warming up, was dancing on his toes, ready to pummel this handsome young man into the brick of the cafe's back wall, but Marty clamped one soft big paw on the businessman's shoulder, and said, "You're done now, son." The tight businessman relaxed under Marty's hand, and the young man, too, relaxed under Marty's voice, and later, Marty did decide that it had been a far better day for him, being the fight mediator, the protective bulldog, and when he told the lady he had figured something out, tears broke in his eyes, like eggs cracking, bright and fresh. She was proud of him. He was such a good man inside, underneath all the butt-kicking and bravado.

The young man, bleeding all over the wall, waved off offers to go to the hospital or the doctor. “No, thank you, thank you,” he said, stumbling inside, using up a pile of brown recycled napkins, then holding the cafe’s one pint of coffee ice cream to his nose, and the businessman kept saying, “It will heal poorly,” and the young man said that was the point. And he shook the hand of the tight businessman who was feeling cheated, like a taste of nectar one could hardly even feel in the mouth. The young man waved at Marty, who was at the payphone telling about his revelation, and he headed home. There, he tended to his nose for days, hoping and hoping, and he went over to his mother’s on the day he was ready to really look at it straight on, ready to remove the band-aids making a little pattern all over his face. She was in the kitchen, eating jelly beans off the counter—eating them even when they turned into tiny tractors and then back again—and she helped him peel each band-aid off, one at a time, and then they both went to the bathroom mirror. She put a hand on his shoulder. They stared at his face for a long, long time.

What had happened of course is that it had healed symmetrically. The nose was severely broken and bumpy, but the bump was a band over the middle of his nose. It had complicated the vertical planes of his face, but

horizontally, he still matched himself exactly. The young man's eyes filled and he felt the despair rushing into his throat, but his mother, wiping his cheeks clear of the leftover crusted blood, breath smelling of jelly beans, listened to the story and laughed, and said, "Son, my sweet, sweet son, it's just that you are a butterfly. That's just what you are. I don't think you can do anything about it."

Finally, he was eating a hamburger one afternoon and when licking the ketchup off the knife, he cut open the side of his lip. It was a small mark, but it needed stitches, and when they took out the stitches he had a small raised area above the left side of his lip which provided the desperately needed window. He met a woman—Sherrie Marla—in a week. True, about a month or two later, she, while kissing him passionately, bit the other side, creating an identical mark. She dabbed ice on his lip, apologizing, and he dreaded it, dreaded her change, his eyes filling with tears in advance of her leaving, but the fact was Sherrie Marla trusted him already. When he took the ice off, and showed to her his new symmetry, she didn't flinch. His face was him to her now; it was not a map or an indicator of some abstract idea. Turned out it was only the first impression he'd needed to alter.

His mother came over for brunch with her Sunday suitor, and when she saw Sherrie Marla take her son's hand and kiss it on the thumb, a circle completed inside her.

In bed, after the brunch, Sherrie Marla turned to him with bright eyes, touching his lip wound with her fingertips, her head propped on her open hand.

“You have movie star lips now,” Sherrie Marla told him, smiling, as he leaned in to kiss her, tenderly, her kisses very very gentle on the sore area, just pillows in the air between them.

Her own face was wildly asymmetrical. One eye much higher than the other. A nostril tilted. The smile lopsided. The front right tooth chipped. The dented chin. The larger right breast. The slightly gnarled foot. It had caused her her own share of problems. We are all, generally, symmetrical: ants, elephants, lions, fish, flowers, leaves. But she was a tree. No one expects a tree to be symmetrical at all. It opens its arms, in its unevenness, and he, the butterfly, flew inside.

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Aimee Bender is the author of four books, including *The Girl in the Flammable Skirt* and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. Her short fiction has been published in *Granta*, *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *Opium*, *The Paris Review* and more, as well as heard on "This American Life" and "Studio 360." She lives in Los Angeles.

Author Spotlight: Megan Arkenberg

Robyn Lupo

You've been successful as a short story writer for some time now. What's your story? How did you get into writing?

Like many writers, I started as a voracious and unsatisfied reader. I'd read a novel and think, "I could do better." (Did I mention I was in middle school at the time?) I memorized every book my library had about writing science fiction and fantasy and wrote a hundred thousand words or so of a truly abominable novel. (The first in a trilogy, naturally.) In high school, I began writing short stories to experiment with point-of-view and other techniques, and the rest is history.

Can you tell us about how you came up with your story for us this month, "How Many Miles to Babylon?"?

In the June 2011 issue of *Mirror Dance*, I published Sylvia Adams' enchanting poem "Babylon," which opens with the famous nursery rhyme. I couldn't get it out of my

head: Why are they going to Babylon? Why do they need to travel by candlelight? And as M. R. James' protagonist asks in one of my all-time favorite short stories, "Doesn't Isaiah say something about night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon?" It took me a while to flesh out the protagonist—I knew from the beginning that I wanted a post-apocalyptic monster hunter—but once I knew about her deceased stepdaughter, the story came together pretty quickly.

Lovecraft wrote "The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim." How do you think your story fits with Lovecraft's test?

Well, the monsters are weird, but they're certainly not as cosmic or incomprehensible as Cthulhu. They're at least "human" enough to work a radio and understand (and manipulate) Biblical quotations. But I guess they're creepy in a different sense—something thoroughly inhuman behaving in almost-human ways. Lovecraft's

dexterous blending of science fiction and horror was certainly an inspiration for this story, but I can't claim to produce anything near his level of cosmic dread.

There's an interesting tension between the partnership and marriage of David and the narrator—she speaks for him, but seems uncertain herself. For example, she says “We haven't seen a town in months. I think the trees consumed them, swallowed them up. I'm not sure how literally I mean that . . .” but her views on David seem to be concrete. What made you choose this?

It's always difficult to write dysfunctional or semi-functional relationships, because to a certain extent you have to defend how these characters got together in the first place. I really wanted to avoid that kind of question about David and the narrator. She really *knows* him—they've been partners for years. The strain on their relationship comes from being thrust into a completely unknown situation with the monsters and, in the narrator's case, from not being able to fully empathize with David's loss of his daughter. She's completely uncertain about how to understand the Darkening or Salem's death, but she still knows and loves the man she

married.

The narrator tells us that no one talks about what Nimrod hunted, and it seems like at that point in the story, the narrator transforms from being a runner to a hunter. It's wonderful. Why do you think she chose to fight, and why then?

It's at the point in the story where she really has nothing more to lose by seeking revenge. Their flashlights are dying, and without the possibility of resupplying in Babylon, they'll soon be lost in complete darkness. David is profoundly depressed and has begun to distance himself from the narrator. She realizes she needs to do something desperate to save him, and decides to take revenge for Salem's death.

As I mentioned earlier, I knew from the beginning that this story was going to be about a monster hunter, but it wasn't until I created David and Salem that I understood her motivations enough to finish the first draft.

Anything you want to tell us about your upcoming work?

A science-fantasy story of mine has been accepted for an upcoming issue of *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, and two post-apocalyptic pieces—one story and one poem—will appear in *Asimov's* next year. I've also got a weird little reworking of the Persephone myth coming up in *Shimmer*, and poems and short stuff slated for a number of smaller magazines throughout 2012.

Robyn Lupo has been known to frequent southwestern Ontario with her graduate student husband and elderly dog. She writes, reads, and plays video games. She is personal assistant to three cats.

Author Spotlight: Paul McAuley

Andrew Liptak

Hi Paul, first off, thanks for talking with us about your story in this month's issue, "Gene Wars." What inspired it?

At the time, I was a working biologist (I'd just started my first and last permanent job, as a lecturer at St. Andrews University) and a youngish would-be hot-shot SF writer.

New Internationalist, a British, left-leaning, anti-corporate, pro-environment magazine, got in touch and asked me to write a story about the perils and horrors of genetic engineering. They gave me a list of topics they wanted me to cover, and a limit of 2000 words. I had already been thinking about genetic engineering (I'd just written a biohacking story, "The Invisible Country," for Lew Shiner's anthology *When The Music's Over*), and there's nothing like a constraint or two to get the imagination working. I borrowed the structure from J.G. Ballard's condensed novels and Bruce Sterling's "Twenty Evocations," and strung as many ideas as I could on to the rise and fall of a corporate drone in the biohacking trade. *New Internationalist's* editorial collective liked

everything about the story except the ending, which they truncated to make it seem more nightmarish than it actually is. Well, it is a kind of nightmare for the protagonist, who has lost control of the technology that made his fortune, but maybe not for everyone else.

Your story was written over twenty years ago, and covers a generation in and of itself. Has the field of genetic research surprised you with what it's found during that time?

It would be very disappointing if the future wasn't surprising. Two things, I guess, stand out. First, the speed at which gene sequencing has taken off. How fast and cheap it has become. How quickly, once the basic techniques were developed, entire genomes were sequenced. You can go to the Wellcome Collection here in London and skim through about thirty books the size of telephone directories (remember telephone directories?) that contain in print form the entire sequence of the human genome. At the turn of the century it cost three billion dollars to produce the first draft of the human genome using first generation techniques. Sanger sequencing, and so on. It was biology's equivalent of the Manhattan Project. A decade later, we're into second

generation sequencing, and commercial companies are offering to produce full genome sequences for less than \$30,000. And targeted sequencing of significant genes costs far less than that.

Of course, the cost of sequencing doesn't include the cost of analysis—of what the genetic information means as far as the individual is concerned. And the second surprise is the complexity and resilience of information coding and gene expression in DNA. The idea that one gene is responsible for the production of one enzyme that affects a single step in a metabolic pathway has turned out to be a massive oversimplification of what really goes on. For every effective example of human gene therapy (such as relieving chronic pain by using the herpes simplex virus to deliver to peripheral nerve cells a gene for the production of a natural painkiller), there's another where insertion of the "correct" gene has led to only short-lived effects, or reaction to the delivery system, or some other kind of unforeseen side effect. And while there has been a lot of progress in genetically engineering bacteria and yeast to mass-produce antibiotics, useful proteins, and so on, engineering of the genomes of plants and animals is still mostly at the golden vapourware stage. Either because it's more difficult and more expensive than was originally thought, or because of

concerns about food safety, or because commercial companies have gone for quick and easy fixes, most often to do with improving shelf life of their product, or preventing what they consider to be piracy of seed lines, rather than improving quality.

All of which means that the hoary old science-fiction notion of using gene-transfer techniques to patch a trait from one species into another, to manufacture chicken-fish chimeras or nitrogen-fixing strains of wheat and rice or whatever, turns out to be incredibly simple-minded. As usual, reality is richer and more complicated than we first imagined.

There seems to be a resurgence recently in stories centered around bioengineering and the environment, such as Rob Zeigler's novel *Seed*, and Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Windup Girl*. What are your thoughts on the stories that can be told in this biopunk subgenre?

A lot of the new stuff seems to be in a pretty deeply dystopian mode. My bioshock novel *Fairyland* was published back in 1996, and like a lot of current bioshock novels it has the effects of climate change in the background, and the cultural and political effects of

genetic engineering in the foreground. But I think the milieu of *Fairyland* is fairly hopeful, while the new stuff is much grimmer. Partly, perhaps, because the present seems so uncertain; partly because a lot of current SF reflects a fundamental loss of faith in technology and technological fixes. When it comes to dealing with the consequences of cheap, out-of-control, universally available genetic engineering, we're still in the Frankenstein mode, rather than exploring the full spectrum of possibilities.

In some instances, things that seemed purely in the realm of science fiction are coming back to life, such as the idea of patent infringement during cross pollination. What is it like to have a story turn from science fiction to science fact?

Back in 1991, when I wrote "Gene Wars," there were already concerns about patenting genes and genomes, and raids by companies based in the west on the biological richness of so-called developing countries. The latter, of course, has been going on for centuries. Bligh's ill-fated voyage on *The Bounty* was intended to bring breadfruit plants from Tahiti to the Caribbean, to discover if they could be grown as a foodstuff for slaves in sugar-cane

plantations. Even earlier, John Tradescant was importing plants from the New World, via his American agent John Smith, and using them to prettify English gardens. But appropriating a few seeds or seedlings is very different from a company based in one country preemptively copyrighting the genomes of plants traditionally used as crops or a source of medicines in another. I took that idea of biopiracy, and pushed it as hard as I could, but I don't think I can claim any real prescience. It's more a question of noticing what's going on around you, and thinking about its implications, rather than trying to play the prediction game.

What do you think the future holds in the next 20 years? Will “Gene Wars” continue to be relevant, or increase in its relevance?

I think genetic engineering will definitely continue to be important, so I guess “Gene Wars” may continue to ride in its slipstream for a little while longer. As to where genetic engineering is headed, it will become cheaper, and more ubiquitous, and it may well become more important in the developing world than in the US or Europe. There's a kind of Luddite resistance to genetic

engineering, here. It's become mixed up in environmental politics, and the politics of fundamentalists. Some aspects of genetic engineering definitely present ethical and moral challenges, but the entire field is in danger of being defined by problematic outliers. The developing world, which not only has serious problems with food and energy supply, but is also at the sharp edge of climate change, doesn't have the luxury of such scruples. The biggest and best biotech labs aren't in the US or the UK; they're in places like the technological pressure-cooker of the Pearl River Delta, in China. That's where the action is going to be.

Andrew Liptak is a freelance writer and historian from Vermont. He has written for such places as *io9*, *Tor.com*, *SF Signal*, *Blastr*, *Kirkus* and *Armchair General*. He can be found over at andrewliptak.wordpress.com and at [@AndrewLiptak](https://twitter.com/AndrewLiptak) on Twitter.

Author Spotlight: Nancy Kress

John Nakamura Remy

In your story in this month's issue, "Always True to Thee, in My Fashion," there's the line: "The models' knees trembled with nervous anticipation." This contrasts delightfully with what a Galliano or Vera Wang model's knees would do on a Paris catwalk in our own day. What was your inspiration for this intriguing future world of designer emotions?

I think that even today models might be nervous—not on the catwalk, but as they prepare backstage—or, at least, new and inexperienced models might be. Since I wrote the story, the TV reality show *America's Next Top Model* seems to confirm that. But I was working mostly from the experience of my sister, an actress, who says (despite a lot of stage experience) that she is nervous before a performance, but nervousness evaporates as soon as she is out on stage.

"Always True to Thee" was a lot of fun to read aloud, in part because the characters' voices (and the narrative) transform with each season's fashionable

drugs and emotions. What challenges did you encounter in trying to balance these seasonal changes while maintaining your characters' core identities?

For me, the characters always come first. I sort of inhabit them, and it's natural that they then move through successive scenes, whether seasonal or not. For me, writing is very akin to Method acting, in which the actor tries to become the role. This is not a very efficient way to write, in that it makes plot, which is primary to most readers, secondary during the writing. But it's the only way I can work.

Suzanne and Cade are remarkably vivid characters, and for me, evoked not only people I know in real life, but also characters in a Fitzgerald or Maugham story. Did you have any particular characters in mind while you were writing this story? Also, did the dynamic between Suzanne and Cade play out exactly the way you imagined when you started writing, or did they surprise you in any way?

I didn't have any particular real people in mind, no. The dynamic between them sort of developed as I wrote. I knew at the start that she would embrace fashion

completely—even to making sure her personality matched the season’s trends—and he would have doubts, but that’s all I knew. The rest developed as I went along. But Maugham is one of my very favorite authors, and favorite and oft-read authors always influence the unconscious in ways we (or at least I) don’t understand directly.

We catch occasional bleak glimpses of the impoverished world outside of Suzanne and Cade’s expensive towers and VR bubble. What do these windows reveal about the setting and about the characters? Towards the end of “Always True to Thee,” Suzanne expresses surprise at her emotional reaction when “she hadn’t yet taken this season’s pills.” She and Cade are aware (in different ways) of how their fashion drugs influence who they are and how they appear to others. How much do you think fashion influences who we are?

Fashion—like alcohol, drugs, gambling, exercise, anything pursued obsessively—can be used to keep reality at bay, pushing away having to face problems both in the world and in ourselves. This is what Suzanne is doing. If she takes fashion to the extreme, altering her personality (including sexual thrills) to match her outfits,

she does not have to deal with who she is underneath, or with what the world is. That's basically what the story is about. The glimpses of a world in deep economic trouble show some of the things she is using fashion to avoid having to see. Some—not all—of the super-rich are not so different today.

I hope it's okay to say that you have a great sense of color and style yourself. Do you see a bit of the fashion-loving Suzanne in yourself? Or do you share some of Cade's sense of exasperation?

Thank you for the compliment! I like clothes but I am not fashion-forward; my taste is more classic than trendy, and my budget limited by choice. There are more interesting things to spend money on (books, for instance. Or SF cons!)

John Nakamura Remy is a graduate of the Clarion West 2010 workshop. He has fiction published in the *Rigor Amortis* and *Broken Time Blues* anthologies, a graphic novel collaboration with Galen Dara released in the *Mormons & Monsters* anthology, and has a story forthcoming in the *Pseudopod* horror podcast. John blogs with the Inkpunks, the Functional Nerds and at mindonfire.com. He lives in Southern California with his two Dalek-loving children and partner and fellow SF-writer Tracie Welser.

Author Spotlight: Ken Liu

Christie Yant

Ken, welcome back to *Lightspeed*! “The Five Elements of the Heart Mind” is the second story of yours to appear here, and once again you’ve given us a story that centers around a tough concept. The complex relationship between humans and the various life forms that consider us “home” is something few people are aware of. You cite a paper on the subject in your Author’s Note. What was it like for you to come across this paper, and the concept that we are, in part, other creatures?

Thank you. It’s great to be back!

I’ve been following the research on the effects of commensal microbiota on our physical and mental states for a while, and the paper cited was among the latest in this area.

Part of my interest comes from questioning the concept of the “individual.” The assumption that there is an indivisible, unified self, capable of rational cogitation and distinct from all other agents in the universe, is core to a lot of our modern ideas about politics, about fairness

and justice, about what it means to be happy and fulfilled.

Yet the more we probe into how the mind works, how consciousness arises, how rational we really are, the more we seem to discover that casts doubt on this foundational assumption. We find that many of our ideals may be reducible to the driving force of individual genes pressing for survival. We find that our mental processes involve such complex chemical pathways that it's impossible to tell where "the mind" merges into "the environment" and where one mind begins and another ends. We find that our thoughts emerge, messy, inchoate, incipient, from countless cells locked in a complex, chaotic dance—and as the research I cited shows, some of these cells aren't even "ours."

I don't know what any of this really means except that perhaps we should be a little bit less arrogant about our powers of reason, and a little less certain about what we think we know about our selves, our individuality, our separateness from this world and all the creatures in it.

What kind of cultural research and experience did you draw upon to paint the vivid character of Fazen? Can you tell us about the roots of his belief system and world view?

Fazen and his people have a world view that is largely based on folk Chinese beliefs, specifically those that form the theoretical basis for traditional Chinese medicine.

When I was a kid, my grandparents and doctors made me drink a lot of “bitter soup” whenever I got sick, so that part required no research at all. But to write this story, I had to study some of the theories behind the bitter soups.

Traditional Chinese medicine relies on a very rich, intricate explanatory system that divides the world into five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, earth. The five elements are paired off in cycles of mutual opposition and generation, and they can be mapped to organs, emotions, tastes, grains, animals, planets—really, anything in the world. Diseases are explained by reference to the lack of balance among the elements, and cures are designed to restore such balance. The story only gives a very shallow hint of this background.

The system of five elements isn’t just important to traditional Chinese medicine, but seeps deeply into many other aspects of Chinese language and culture. I tried to convey in the story a bit of how these metaphors and idioms are woven into everyday life.

I also grew up on a steady diet of *wuxia* novels, literary martial arts fantasies that bear little resemblance to the cinematic versions that may be more familiar to

Western audiences. A theme that recurs in many of these novels is the concept of a community or family “lost in time” (a common trope in classical Chinese literature too). A group of people becomes separated from the larger world, whether by choice or happenstance, and over time, their beliefs evolve down a separate path, and drama ensues when they reconnect with the larger world. This story pays homage to that tradition.

For many years, I wanted to write a story about the five elements. There were lots of false starts and dead ends. I couldn’t figure out how to support the fantasy with the science. Then I realized that the *wuxia* tone and palette would be perfect.

I love stories that pit science and technology against an abstract like love or an impossibility like magic, and struggles to find harmony. This story went through two other titles that I know of, that leaned toward the science end of things. I don’t know if you want to share those with our readers, but ultimately “The Five Elements of the Heart Mind” is very different from other titles you had considered. What was the thought process you went through before settling on this title?

The tale began life as “Gut Feeling,” and then evolved to “Visceral,” before settling on the current title. I was never all that happy with the previous titles, since they seemed to give so much of the story away. John Joseph Adams then suggested this title, and I thought it was perfect.

I like it partly because it evokes those *wuxia* novels that I love so much. Besides epic fights between good and evil, many *wuxia* novels contain digressions on classical Chinese poetry, vignettes on Daoist and Buddhist philosophy, interpretations of the Classics, and try to connect these to various schools of fighting in the form of flowery, poetic names for techniques, stances, formations.

Because of the densely allusive and abbreviated nature of these Chinese phrases, most of them lose their flavor entirely in translation (and become easily parodied), but sometimes it’s possible to write a phrase in English that gives a taste of the poetry behind their Chinese counterparts. This title I think accomplishes that.

Also, since this is a story (partly) about how a metaphorical explanation that doesn’t make sense at first may nonetheless turn out to be true about the world, I thought a title that leaned more towards the fantasy side of things was a better fit.

What was the hardest part of writing this story for you?

The character of Tyra.

At first, I tried to write her in a way that I thought would make more readers like her, and she ended up being very boring and flat. Then I remembered what Jane Austen thought of Emma: “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like.” I tried to write that, and it worked much better.

Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about “The Five Elements of the Heart Mind?” And can you tell us what you’re working on next?

The five elements play a big role in Chinese cooking too. I tried to give a sense of that in the story. Maybe next time you go to a Chinese restaurant, you can try to imagine the theory being applied.

I often get story ideas that seem impossible to execute for a long time. For example, right now I’m kicking around the notion of writing a story based on this concept in computer programming called “call-with-current-continuation” (often abbreviated to call/cc). It’s a really mind-blowing way to think about time, the future, control

flow, and I just know it would make a great story. But it might take me years to figure out how to do it right, much like this one.

Christie Yant is a science fiction and fantasy writer, Assistant Editor for *Lightspeed Magazine*, occasional narrator for *StarShipSofa*, and co-blogger at Inkpunks.com, a site for new, nearly new, and newly pro writers. Her fiction can be found in the anthology *The Way of the Wizard*, and *Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy*—both from Prime Books—and forthcoming in *Daily Science Fiction* and the Baen anthology *Armored*. She lives on the central coast of California with her two amazing daughters, her husband, and assorted four-legged nuisances. Her website is inkhaven.net. Follow her on twitter [@inkhaven](https://twitter.com/inkhaven).

Author Spotlight: Marissa Lingen Jennifer Konieczny

What inspired your story in this issue, “On the Acquisition of Phoenix Eggs (Variant)”?

I was at a convention wandering through the dealer’s room, and one of the merchants was selling Russian kitsch—Communist-era pins and trinkets, that sort of thing. And I had read this book about the arts in pre-Communist Russia, and then there was Louisa’s voice in my head talking about how much easier it was to get these things after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Could you tell us about the process of writing it?

I had a draft that was about half of what you see now, and I knew it was not getting there somehow, but I didn’t know where exactly *there* was. So I shipped the half-written draft off to my writing partner, Alec Austin, and we kicked some ideas back and forth, and suddenly there was this new ending I liked much better.

Louisa's voice is very distinctive. What advice could you give aspiring writers about finding a character's voice?

Jo Walton told me writers all get one thing for “free,” and voice seems to be mine. So I might not be the best person to ask on this—usually it comes pretty easily for me. In this case I have been writing a bunch of stuff from the perspective of a young male hockey player—very, very culturally different place than Louisa, resulting in a very, very different voice. I think sometimes a distinctive voice comes from saying, “Let's try someone a little different.” Different from yourself, different from your other characters, whatever works. I also figure if you can't say what drives people absolutely crazy about your point-of-view character, you probably haven't nailed their voice yet.

Louisa's relationship with her cousins is tempestuous. She notes that, “Cousins are a great trial. Many lucky people have cousins with whom they have very little in common, who are not close to their own age and who did not share childhood holidays with them.” Did you draw from any specific family memories when creating the relationships in the story?

What, are you trying to get me in trouble with my grandma?

Seriously, I'm in kind of a weird family position. My mother has fifty-some first cousins, but she's an only child and so am I. So on that side of the family she has that many first cousins, and I have zero. We would have these giant family reunions, and all of my second and third cousins had siblings and first cousins they were closer to. So I got to witness pretty much any cousin relationship you could name, but all from the outside as an observer.

I do have two women I refer to as my cousins. They are my parents' best friends' daughters, and we grew up doing a lot of the sorts of things cousins do if their families live in the same city. We were always *nice* to each other, though, so not very much like these characters except that we always have each other's backs. Kari and I had a lot in common from a pretty young age—she gave me Douglas Adams to read when she was 14 and I was 12—and we both felt very protective of Mary, who is the “baby” of us girls and probably wishes I would remember to stop calling her Marmar, at least in public. (Sorry, Mar.)

What would you trade for a phoenix egg?

I'm really not a collector personality myself, so I'd have to make sure it was the right one, because I wouldn't do it much. But the only things I make other than stories that people ever describe as magical are things like pumpkin muffins, rye buns, or strawberry cake, so I guess I'd have to go with my strengths there.

What's next for you?

I write both science fiction and fantasy, but in 2011 it was more fantasy. I'm feeling like doing more short science fiction in 2012. I also think it's time to start a brand-new novel, but what novel that is may change by the time I get around to it.

Jennifer Konieczny hails from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. An alumna of Villanova University, she now pursues her doctorate in medieval studies at the University of Toronto. She enjoys working with fourteenth-century Latin legal texts, slushing for *Lightspeed Magazine*, and scanning bookshelves for new authors to read.

Author Spotlight: M. Rickert T.J. McIntyre

John Kessel referred to your story featured in this month's issue, "You Have Never Been Here," as the "quintessential slipstream" story. I know it's a slippery definition, but how would you define "slipstream" as a genre? Do you feel this is a fair assessment of your story? Did you set out to write a slipstream piece?

I did set out to write a slipstream piece when I wrote this, so I am very comfortable with that assessment. How to define the genre, however, is not so easy. In general terms, I think of slipstream as fiction that doesn't fit neatly into category. But you know, none of these categories are real, they don't actually exist, and they dissolve under close scrutiny. In some ways slipstream plays with that dissolution.

I'm going to do something a little different and let you interview yourself now. In an interview in *Strange Horizons*, you noted several questions in relation to this story: "This awakened an old question of mine;

can someone who has lived a horrible life and done horrible things have a moment of spiritual realization? Can an intense exploration of hell deliver heaven? What would this small moment feel like, would it feel small, or would it feel boundless, beyond borders of space and time, beyond the borders of body and mind? What would it be like to become, even for just a few moments, a completely different person than the one you've always been? What if you really came to understand reality in an entirely different way than the way you had been previously understood it? Is the worst prison of all the body?"

Lots of questions. Answers? I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.

Why did you decide to use a second-person narration for this story?

The way I work, I basically just start writing and see what comes out. So there was no decision, on a conscious level. Once I finish a draft, and have some understanding of what I'm working with, I'll ask myself if there is good reason for the things I've done. On that level, I felt like second-person was perfect for a slipstream story, as it is

the voice of dissolution.

In many of your stories I have read, a somewhat unreliable narrator seems to be dealing with some form of terminal illness. “The Deer Woman” comes immediately to mind as a good example. Why do you think this theme occurs frequently in your writing? Why use terminal illness, a very serious topic, as a jumping-off point for a fantasy story?

Hmmm, first off I don't think there is any topic too serious for fantasy. The type of fantasy that I most enjoy is a fantasy of revelation, a lifting of the veil, much more than a literature of escape. I think we are all living a big dream called reality, and I think fantasy is an opportunity to explore that. As to why I write about terminal illness, well at my age (I'm fifty-one-years-old), I've known people who have had to deal with terminal illness, and it is a very compelling state.

In many ways, “You Have Never Been Here” reads as an unconventional love story. Love is a central theme. The doctors tell their patients to love but then go on to ask “What is love?” Why ask others to love if they do

not know what it is? What, exactly, does it mean to love within the context of this story?

Well, within the context of this story, as well as, to some extent, in life, love is the emotion of dissolution.

So, what's next for M. Rickert? When we last talked, you noted your most recent short fiction collection, *Holiday*, had been released and that you were working on a novel. How is the novel coming along?

Thanks for asking about the novel. I am really pleased with it, actually. I have been trying to write novels for twenty-five years. I had actually given up on novel writing (and it was a relief to do so) when I sat down and started working on this ... thing, which I realized might be a novel. I'm so glad I gave myself one more chance. I'm still working on it, but I think I'm at the finishing stages now. It turns out that it's been really difficult for me to judge how long each draft takes, but I think I should be finished in the next few months. Not sure what will happen after that, but I have loved working with the form and the characters.

T.J. McIntyre writes from a busy household in rural Alabama. His poems and short stories have been featured in numerous publications including recent appearances in *Moon Milk Review*, *M-Brane SF*, *The Red Penny Papers*, and *Tales of the Talisman*. His debut poetry collection, *Isotropes: A Collection of Speculative Haibun*, was released in 2010 by Philistine Press. In addition to writing poetry and short fiction, he writes a monthly column for the Apex Books Blog and regularly contributes reviews for *Skull Salad Reviews*.

Author Spotlight: Sarah Monette

Theodore Quester

In your story for us this month, “Blue Lace Agate,” what was the inspiration for evil hippies?

Well, first of all, I wouldn't describe them as “evil hippies” (although Jamie might). The murderers are college kids dabbling in necromancy, and one of them happens to work at the Tree of Life. Charlene Pruitt is *not* a nice person, but I wouldn't call her evil, and she isn't a hippie. She's the proprietor of her world's equivalent of a New Age store and also a con artist and a smuggler and a bunch of other things. The inspiration for Charlene was probably really fake mediums like the Fox sisters and the people that Harry Houdini and James Randi debunk. Although of course, with Charlene, she's a fraud playing around the edges of something that is absolutely real and extremely dangerous—as the plot of the story demonstrates.

You are best known as a writer of fantasy and horror. How were you inspired to write this type of genre-crossing story? Are you a reader of crime fiction?

I am a reader of detective fiction, yes. As best I can remember, I thought at some point, “Wouldn’t it be cool to write a Lovecraftian police procedural?” and it was all downhill from there.

One of your characters has tattoos; the other a reconstructed face, dyed hair and painted nails. To what extent do the changes to their appearance symbolize their reaction to their world (which seems to reflect our own)?

Mick’s gender performance is all about genderfuck, about screwing with the established categories of gender. He’s also what our world would probably call a Goth. So certainly his dyed hair and painted nails are about rebelling against his society—in ways that are perfectly recognizable to anyone in our world. (The fact that his face had to be rebuilt is a different part of his backstory, and it’s one I hope to write a story about soon.) Jamie’s tattoos are more about his own self-image, about making himself feel less ugly, although there of course his self-image is shaped by his society, so again, yes.

Your characters in “Blue Lace Agate” both seem to

have a history and a future. Have you written other stories with these characters? In this fantasy world? Do you intend to?

Yes, and yes. There are two other finished stories with Mick and Jamie, “A Night in Electric Squidland” and “Impostors,” both of which are in my short story collection, *Somewhere Beneath Those Waves*, which came out from Prime in November. And I have a bunch of ideas for more stories about them.

So what else is coming down the pipeline?

My next novel will be *The Goblin Emperor*, which will come out from Tor under a pen name, Katherine Addison. I have a lot of short stories I want to write—about Mick and Jamie, about Kyle Murchison Booth (the protagonist of my collection, *The Bone Key*), about other characters and worlds.

Anything else you’d like us to know?

I had three books out in 2011: *The Tempering of Men* (written with Elizabeth Bear), which is the sequel to *A*

Companion to Wolves; Somewhere Beneath Those Waves, a short story collection; and a second edition of *The Bone Key*, with a new introduction, new story notes, and a beautiful new cover. My only short story publication was “The Devil in Gaylord’s Creek” (*Fantasy 50*), but I hope to do better in 2012!

Theodore Quester spent three years after college in Europe and now speaks seven languages; he spends his days teaching two of them to high school students. He is obsessed with all things coffee—roasting, grinding, pulling espresso—and with food, especially organic and locally grown. He earned his geek street credentials decades ago, publishing an article in 2600 magazine as a young teenager, then writing reviews for SF Eye and interning at Omni magazine. In his spare time, he swims, bikes, runs, and reads a little bit of everything; when inspired, he writes fiction, mostly for children and young adults.

Author Spotlight: Aimee Bender

Wendy N. Wagner

Your story in this issue, “State of Variance,” is the story of a woman who has been troubled by symmetry in her life and then watches her son struggle through life because his face is too symmetrical. The launching-off point of this story seems to be the way a mother’s health and lifestyle during pregnancy can influence a child’s entire life. What inspired you to dig into this topic?

I think it was largely an interest in patterns and what patterns get passed along unexpectedly. I had actually read some article once in a magazine that said women responded more to men who had symmetrical faces, which just seemed bizarre and awfully hard to track. And, I can think of strange moments in my life when I saw a loved one’s face in a mirror and for whatever reason, they looked like a Picasso. Have you had this? Mirrors can change symmetry somehow—I have no idea why or if this is a common experience.

I really enjoy the surreal moments when the mother

mixes her dreams into her waking life, little hallucinations and confusions. Have you ever had any moments like that?

Thanks! I definitely have had those moments where a dream from the night before surfaces briefly in my mind while I'm doing something ordinary and I can just barely hold it and then it's gone. A reminder of this whole other life we have spent sleeping, in that elusive image-based world. I love that that is a basic part of being human: living in both worlds at once, at any given moment.

The family in this story stands out as interesting and slightly disjointed. What are some of your favorite dysfunctional families in literature or film?

I just saw *The Squid and the Whale* again, which is a favorite film of mine—there's real beauty in the way the kids are portrayed and so much genuine pain. Also I'm about to teach one of my favorite novels, *Cruddy*, which is about a stupendously dysfunctional father/daughter relationship that is so funny and ridiculously dark. I've never taught it before and I love Lynda Barry and feel a little nervous— sometimes teaching something I love so much is not always the best move. If the students don't

like it, I'll have to make an effort not to get offended. I also just love George Saunders' family in "Sea Oak" which takes the idea of resentful martyrdom to a new stratosphere.

My favorite part of this story is the scene in the coffeehouse, with Marty and the tight businessman. It's a fight scene, in a way, but it's a very civilized and methodical fight. It reminds me very much of *Fight Club* or perhaps a friendly local boxing club, someplace where aggression has been carefully structured. What do you think about activities (like very competitive sports or the martial arts) which provide a supervised, ritualized outlet for violence?

I think it's my favorite part too. When I read it aloud once I was struck by the fact that Marty is the only named character until Sherrie-Marla enters the scene. So he stands out to me—he's fully himself, and arrived on the scene named and whole. I do think those kinds of sports are crucial—a way to safely express what can easily get turned into something awful. I've never been a fan of watching boxing but I used to think it was horrible and now I can see how it's actually a better alternative in a lot of ways for people who have grown up with violence. At

least it's less chaotic. I did want to hint that that businessman guy didn't like the structure and would've loved to finally release all that anger on the young man, but Marty, at that point, knew better.

It's silly, but I can't help wondering how things progressed with the mother's suitors after the end of this story. I like imagining her dating the two weekend companions forever. Do you know what happened to them?

I don't know!—I'm left where you are at the end of a story. But I like what you imagine—seems highly possible.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about this story? And do you have anything coming up that you'd like to tell our readers about?

I don't think so. Good questions. I believe I'll have a story out in *One Story* sometime in the next year but I'm not sure when.

Wendy N. Wagner's short fiction is forthcoming or has appeared in *Armored*, *The Way of the Wizard*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* magazine. Her first novel, *Dark Depths*, will be released summer 2012 from Dagan Press. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her very understanding family, and you can follow her exploits at operabuffo.blogspot.com.

Coming Attractions

Coming up in February, in *Lightspeed*, is the second of our super-sized issues incorporating our sister publication *Fantasy Magazine*.

In that issue, we will have original fantasy by new writer Brooke Bolander (“Her Words Like Hunting Vixens Spring”) and *Fantasy*-favorite Genevieve Valentine (“The Gravedigger of Konstan Spring”), along with fantasy reprints by Chris Willrich (“The Mermaid and the Mortal Thing”) and the legendary Robert Silverberg (“Not Our Brother”).

Plus, we have original science fiction by Keith Brooke (“War 3.01”) and bestselling author Carrie Vaughn (“Harry and Marlowe and the Talisman of the Cult of Egil”), plus SF reprints by award-winning authors Gregory Benford (“Dark Sanctuary”) and Kristine Kathryn Rusch (“Craters”). All that plus our artist gallery, our usual assortment of author spotlights, and feature interviews with bestselling authors Chuck Palahniuk and Daniel H. Wilson.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out. And while you’re at it, tell a friend about *Lightspeed Magazine*!

Thanks for reading!