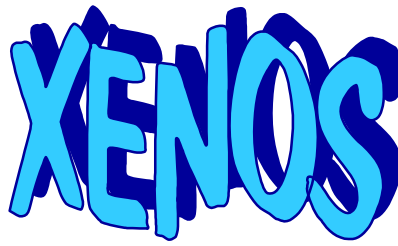


TABLE OF CONTENTS

MISSION STATEMENT	2
SUBSCRIPTION FORM	4
XENOS' COMPETITION	5
1997 COMPETITION ENTRY FORM	6
WRITERS' TIPS	7
STORY EVALUATION SERVICE	8
CRITIQUES	9
MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS	10
© Cherith Baldry	
THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI	26
© David Vickery	
NO LOOKING BACK	41
© Rod Slatter	
THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER	49
© Stephen Green	
TERROR OF BUTTERFLIES	56
© Finn Clark	
BOTANY BOUND	67
© Jim Lawrence	
IN THE LAP OF THE GODS	77
© J. M. Nicholson	
EVALUATIONS	83



MISSION STATEMENT

For seven years now, XENOS has been serving writers and readers alike by providing, in every bimonthly issue:

- 6 or 7 excellent stories
- reader evaluations of previous offerings

At the time of going to press, issue 41 is available. Over the 7 years, we haven't missed an issue. We emphasise:

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Move on through this file and you'll find a sample issue of XENOS. Issue 38 – our August 96 issue – announced one winner and runner-up from our 1996 Competition. Read and enjoy!

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MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS

by

© Cherith Baldry

Andreas Harel had been travelling on the fringes of the Quaternion, where the laws held precariously and the petty local barons interpreted them as they saw fit. He had been picking up a living, sometimes with his telepathic Skills, sometimes from hard, physical work, for well over a year, and he was sick of it. He was even beginning to regret the fit of temper that had driven him onto the road in the first place, and the stubborn pride that would not let him go back. The holds and farmsteads and inns where he stayed were beginning to blur together in his mind, so that afterwards, looking back, he was never sure exactly where he had first seen Vivian.

It was an inn, he was certain of that, somewhere on the waterfront at Inverlythe. Andreas had worked his passage up the coast on a barge, hefting bundles and bales by muscle power alone, so there was no one in Inverlythe who might have guessed that he was Skilled.

He sat in the tap-room, finishing his meal. The meat was tough and greasy, the bread stale, the wine left a metallic taste at the back of his throat. He had enough money to pay for it, and a bed for the night, and that was all. He was waiting for something, some straw in the wind, to tell him where to go next.



**1996
Competition
Winner**

The inn offered entertainment, of a sort, in a space in the middle of the tables. An indifferent lute-player. Two female acrobats. Following them, something different: Andreas caught a stir of interest. A squat, swarthy man in a leather jerkin made his way into the space. Behind him, on the end of a rope, he was leading... something; at first Andreas was not sure what he was looking at.

A skeletal creature in a tattered, filthy robe. Matted hair that could have been any colour. Eyes like burned holes in his head. His wrists were roped together; he stood unmoving, unresisting, where the showman had placed him. Andreas swallowed nausea, but he had still not understood.

He began to understand very soon. The audience began to ask question, which the showman relayed, with much verbal flourishing, to the creature at the end of the rope. And the creature would reply; a faint, flat voice, often inaudible, his words repeated by the showman. There were murmurings of approval; coins were tossed, which the showman grabbed up and secreted in a pouch. With a shock of pure horror, Andreas realised he was listening to a display of Skill.

The creature was a telepath, perhaps a precognitive. Very delicately, for he did not want his probe to be noticed, Andreas sent out a tendril of his own mind. He had been prepared for the black swamp of despair that he encountered, but not for the quicksilver brightness that even despair could not subdue. He withdrew, but not quickly enough; the flat voice faltered, the head jerked and for the first time the telepath seemed to be really looking at his surroundings, bewildered and afraid.

Andreas found himself on his feet. The showman grinned, gap-toothed.

‘A question, sir?’

‘Why is he bound?’ His voice came out hoarse; he cleared his throat and tried again. ‘Why is he bound?’

The showman was still grinning.

‘Why, bless you, sir, he don’t feel it. He’s not like you and me. I just tie his wrists, sir, because otherwise, these good folk here, they might be afeared of him. He don’t feel a thing.’

Andreas pushed his way to the edge of the space.

‘Untie him.’

The grin disappeared. What was left was ugly in more ways than one. The tap-room was suddenly dead silent. At the end of his rope, the telepath had sunk back into apathy.

‘Untie him?’ the showman repeated softly. ‘Who do you think you are, telling me to untie him?’

Andreas took another step forward, and suddenly there was a knife in the showman’s hand.

‘Just sit down, sir,’ he said, ‘and we won’t say no more about it.’

Andreas took the knife in a mental grip and twisted. The showman gaped, struggling. For a minute Andreas held the image of the knife slicing through his wind-pipe, the blood spouting out, but he held back, and sent the blade skidding harmlessly along the floor under the tables. He put pressure on the man’s throat instead; his eyes bulged, his tongue protruded, and he tore vainly at his collar, dropping the rope. Andreas aimed a bolt of heat; the rope scorched, blackened strands falling away. From the telepath there was a gasp of pain, and he caught hold of one wrist.

The showman was writhing helplessly on the floor. Stepping over him, Andreas released him, and he lay still, crowing as he fought for air. The silence had given way to a rising tumult, but Andreas ignored it. He stood in front of the telepath.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to hurt you.’

He was sending out wave after wave of reassurance into the other’s mind. The telepath stared at him, and then slid fainting to the ground at his feet. Andreas caught him into his arms and snapped an order at one of the inn servants to show him to a bedroom. The man brought Andreas’ pack, led him up the stairs with terrified glances over his shoulder, and as soon as he had thrown open a door on the top landing, he fled.

By now the telepath was recovering, beginning to whimper and struggle. Andreas tried to set him down, but he could not stand alone; his knees started to buckle, and Andreas hastily guided him to the side of the bed.

He crouched there, enormous eyes fixed on Andreas. Convulsive tremors were running through him; his teeth chattered, preventing speech. His apathy had broken up, replaced by fear. Andreas reached for his wrist.

‘Let me see that burn.’

The telepath flinched away from him. Andreas tried to send out a mental touch to quieten him, but he was immediately aware of it; his head whipped up, his eyes dilated, and he shrank back with a gasp of terror.

‘All right.’ Andreas stopped all mental and physical contact. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of. I’m not going to hurt you. You can go if you want to.’

The telepath stared past him at the door, still standing open. He made no move. After a few minutes, Andreas went to close it, saying as he did so, ‘Look. It’s not locked. You’re not a prisoner. But the man you were with is probably still hanging about downstairs. You’ll be safer if you stay here.’

No response. Still the uncontrollable shaking. The room was damp, with cold air leaking through the window shutters. The bed sagged, under greyish blankets and a moulting fur cover. Not much of a refuge, but all Andreas had to offer.

‘Lie down and rest, if you like,’ he suggested. ‘You’ll be warmer if you undress and get into bed.’

He turned away; no longer watching him was the closest thing to privacy he could give him. He pretended to be arranging the bundle of his own possessions, not that there were many of those, or much arranging to do. Soft sounds behind him told him that the telepath was obeying him; when Andreas turned back, he was in bed, looking very like a small, wary animal beneath the fur.

‘What’s your name?’ Andreas asked.

‘Vivian.’

The first time he had spoken.

‘Just Vivian?’

A scared little nod.

‘I’m Andreas Harel. I’ve been -’

He started to move forward, thinking that he might sit on the bed and talk, when a half sob of fear brought him up short. He had begun to think of the telepath almost as a child, but now he realised he was adult enough to be terrified, and to know exactly what it was he was terrified of.

‘Look,’ Andreas said, ‘I promise I’m not going to hurt you. Come into my mind if you don’t believe me.’

A moment later he felt it, the delicate, timid contact, whisked away almost before he knew it was there. The telepath drew a deep breath, and seemed to relax slightly.

‘Good,’ Andreas said. ‘Listen, Vivian, I can’t find another room, because I can’t afford it. I’ll sleep on the floor if you still don’t trust me.’

This time, after a long pause, an almost infinitesimal shake of the head.

Daylight was dying, and the room was packed with shadow. Andreas pulled off his boots, gave up the idea of undressing properly, and lay down on top of the bed, with only the outer fur to cover him. If Vivian still thought he was a threat, there was nothing more he could do. The telepath had shrunk away from him, pressed up against the wall in a cold, tight knot of fear. Too exhausted to go on reassuring him, Andreas slept.

Much later, he woke. He was aware of jagged mental images, and, tuned into their

rhythm, the rough, uneven breathing of the telepath. Moonlight was filtering through the gaps in the shutters, and by its light he could see Vivian, half sitting up, staring sightlessly into the far corner of the room.

Andreas could see nothing there. He tried to reach into Vivian's mind, to penetrate his nightmare, and caught glimpses of dark water, the face of the showman from the taproom, a flapping curtain, and then, very bright and clear, another face. A young man. Gingery hair and beard, neatly trimmed. A smiling mouth with full lips. Almost a pleasant face, but Andreas was almost overwhelmed in the torrent of Vivian's terror.

Darkness closed down again, thick and stifling. It was an effort for Andreas to pull away. He sat up, grasped Vivian's shoulders, and shook him awake.

Vivian came to consciousness with a shuddering gasp, and focused frightened eyes on Andreas.

'Oh, no - no...' he breathed out.

'You had a nightmare,' Andreas said. 'It's all right now. Go back to sleep.'

He tried to ease the rigid body back on to the pillow. Vivian resisted him briefly; then all at once he was clutching at him as he broke into desperate sobbing.

'Don't,' Andreas said, appalled. 'Vivian, don't. Oh God, the bed is damp enough as it is. Vivian - '

His arms went round Vivian as the storm swept him away. He could do nothing but cry, more silently after the first spasm was past, clinging to Andreas and soaking the shoulder of his tunic.

'It's all right,' Andreas said, trying for a mental contact as well as the comfort of the words. 'You're safe. I'm with you now. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

Vivian was quiet at last; he had wept himself into exhaustion, or a state beyond exhaustion, his face still pressed against Andreas' shoulder. Andreas stroked back the damp, tangled hair; Vivian looked up at that.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered.

Andreas made himself smile. 'It doesn't matter.'

Vivian was like a child now, utterly spent and helpless. Andreas was supporting him, and Vivian still clung to him, his body moving with his deep, shaken breathing. All his fear was gone, with his efforts at self-defence. His mind was wide open to Andreas.

'Go to sleep,' Andreas said quietly. 'We'll work something out in the morning.'

He kept watch over Vivian for some time before going back to sleep himself.

Banging on the door of his room roused him. He groped his way out of bed, feeling frowsy and unkempt. Sleeping in his clothes had not done them, or him, any good.

Outside the door was one of the inn servants, thrusting a tray of breakfast at him.

'Take that away, I can't pay for it.'

'Compliments of the landlord, master,' he said, and added, 'I seen you yesterday.'

Andreas realised that his display of Skill had turned him into someone to be reckoned with, someone you would not want to take the risk of offending. He smiled slowly.

'In that case,' he said, 'bring me some hot water to wash.'

The man departed, and Andreas took the tray back inside. Vivian was waking, with a little murmur of bewilderment at where he found himself.

‘Good morning,’ Andreas said. ‘Feeling better?’

Vivian looked up, startled; Andreas could see recollection flowing into his face. To his relief he no longer seemed frightened; nervous, rather, and embarrassed.

‘I’m... yes, thank you.’

‘Breakfast?’

He looked down at the tray, feeling depressed to think that the inn was probably giving him its best. Cold meat, bread, a dab of what might have been called butter. Two cups of sour-looking ale. There was no table, so he balanced the tray on the edge of the bed. Vivian turned his face away; Andreas could hardly blame him.

‘When did you last eat?’ he asked.

‘I - I’m not sure.’

At Andreas’ persuasion, he crumbled a bit of the bread, but he could hardly swallow it, and it seemed cruel to go on forcing him. Andreas could see he was ill, knew that he needed taking care of. He was not likely to find what he needed in Inverlythe, especially when neither of them had any money.

‘Where do you live?’ he asked.

The only reply was a clouded look of incomprehension.

‘Will anyone be looking for you?’ That produced understanding, and terror. ‘No - I don’t mean that. I mean your family - friends...’

He let his voice trail off. He knew what the answer was already. Vivian was sitting with eyes cast down, twisting his hands together; tears were threatening again.

‘I’m sorry,’ Andreas said softly. ‘I’m being stupid. Don’t worry. We’ll think of something.’

There was one place he could think of right away where Vivian would be safe. Two, if he counted his parents’ house, for his parents, though they might make exasperated noises, would never turn him away. But the other was a place where Vivian might learn to use his Skills, and control them, and not be at risk of the sort of cruelty he had already suffered. The only obstacle was distance; the place he had in mind was over two hundred miles away, up near the source of the Lythe, and how he was to get there - worse, get Vivian there - he could not see at present. His home, for what that was worth, was further still. And he had not even money for their next meal.

He realised that Vivian had said something in that soft, scarcely audible voice.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You saved me last night. You’ve been very kind. I know I can’t stay with you.’

He was valiantly trying not to cry, though there were tears in his voice. Andreas got rid of the breakfast tray, sat beside him on the bed, and put an arm round his shoulders. Vivian accepted the gesture with no more than a slight tensing.

‘I know where you can go,’ Andreas began carefully. He still did not know how he was going to do it, only that nothing was going to stop him. ‘It’s a long way from here, but you will be safe. I’ll take you there, if you’ll come with me. Will you?’

Vivian nodded mutely; he did not even ask where the place was.

They were interrupted by another banging on the door; the servant with the hot water. Andreas tipped some into the bowl for Vivian to wash.

‘And you’d better let me look at that burn on your wrist,’ he said. ‘I was clumsy with the rope last night. I don’t usually - ’

He broke off as Vivian put the blankets aside and he looked at his body for the first time, saw the weals and bruises that covered it, beside which the burn on his wrist was nothing.

‘Dear God - ’ he breathed out. What had they done to him, how had he borne it? He sat Vivian down on the side of the bed and gently bathed the more recent scars, furious with himself because there was so little that he could do. If only he had a healing Skill... He realised that Vivian was shivering, and finished as quickly as he could. Vivian groped around for the robe he had been wearing the night before.

‘No, you can’t wear that thing,’ Andreas said. ‘It’s filthy enough to walk out on its own. Here, you can borrow these.’

He gave Vivian his own spare shirt and tunic, which were too big for him, but at least warmer and more respectable than the rags he had discarded. He packed up the rest of his things and slung the pack on one shoulder.

‘Ready?’ he said.

Vivian was very shaky, hardly able to walk. Andreas encircled his waist with one arm, and gave him the other to lean on, and so they went, very slowly and carefully, down the stairs, across the nearly deserted tap-room, and out of the inn.

The waterfront was busy; no one paid them much attention. Andreas found the string of barges that had brought him to Inverlythe, and asked to speak to the barge-master.

‘Do you need a man to go up-river?’ he asked.

The barge-master considered him thoughtfully, looked Vivian up and down and then returned his slow gaze to Andreas.

‘I was in the inn yesterday,’ he remarked. There seemed nothing worth saying.

‘You didn’t tell me you were Skilled,’ he went on.

‘No.’

‘Pity.’ He spat to one side. ‘I could use a Skilled man.’

It was easy as that. For ten days they travelled up-river. Andreas had plenty to do, Skilled and otherwise, especially when they stopped at village landing-stages to unload cargo. Vivian curled up under a scrap of canvas awning on the deck of one of the barges, wrapped in Andreas’ cloak and a blanket. He lay in a huddle, motionless and silent. At night there were more evil dreams.

The best times were the evenings, when Andreas’ work was done, and he could take their supper and go to be with Vivian. Three nights out from Inverlythe, Vivian said, ‘Andreas?’

The first time he had called him by name. ‘Yes, what is it?’

‘Where are you taking me?’

The first time he had thought to ask.

The barge was moored for the night. The sun had gone down, but there was still light in the sky, caught and given back by the river. Branches hung and trailed in the water. A plop and a trail of silver bubbles showed where a water-rat dived. Bats swooped and chattered. Andreas considered the question and replied carefully.

‘To a house called the White Lodge. It’s a long way up-river. The lady who lives there is called Merissa Vair. She’s a sister to the Lord of Silverdale. She runs a school.’

Vivian turned on him a look of total incomprehension.

‘She teaches the Skilled,’ Andreas explained. ‘She taught me, and she’ll teach you.’

Surprisingly, Vivian seemed no closer to understanding. A possibility, unthought of until now, occurred to Andreas.

‘Vivian, don’t you know you’re Skilled?’

He felt Vivian’s sudden closing in on himself.

‘Skilled?’

‘Vivian - God, you don’t know. Skilled - the things you can do with your mind.’

‘Oh.’ The closing in became physical; he wrapped his arms around himself as though against biting cold. ‘I thought that was just me... that I was a - a freak.’ He raised his eyes timidly to Andreas’ face. ‘But you can do it too.’

Skills, Andreas thought. He remembered Merissa’s precise voice. ‘We call them Skills, not Gifts, because they must be trained. An untrained Skill is worse than useless.’ But Vivian, untrained, almost unconscious of his Skills, had still managed to make some use of them. His power was very great, and the sooner he had Merissa to help him, the better.

‘Plenty of people can do it,’ he said. ‘I don’t mean it’s common, but you’re certainly not a freak.’

Just very, very unusual, he added silently to himself.

They went on sharing their supper. Vivian was abstracted, as if he was thinking deeply about what Andreas had told him. Shortly, he said, ‘Andreas - the Lady Merissa. Will she want me?’

She’ll grab you with both hands, Andreas thought but did not say. She’ll be so pleased to have someone with your Skills that she might even forgive me for what I did.

‘Yes, of course,’ he said neutrally.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

Vivian nodded slightly, as if he accepted that. ‘Are you going to stay there?’

Andreas was shocked to realise that he had never asked himself that question. He realised that he would like nothing better, if only to see what Vivian and Merissa made of each other, but he was not sure that Merissa would give him the choice. In that disastrous quarrel he had expressed himself graphically on the subject of Merissa Vair and the White Lodge. If she throws me out on my ear, I couldn’t blame her, he reflected.

‘I don’t know,’ he told Vivian. ‘Let’s see what happens when we get there.’

He coaxed Vivian to finish his supper, and settled him to sleep for the night. Something about the talk they had just had made him ask, ‘Vivian, where do you come from?’

Instantly, distress flared into Vivian’s eyes. ‘I don’t remember.’

‘You don’t know how you came to be at Inverlythe?’

He shook his head, mutely pleading: no more questions. Andreas patted his shoulder.

‘It’s all right. I’m sorry.’

He could not help wondering that the Skills had survived when his experiences had shat-

tered his memory. Or perhaps it was not shattered; perhaps he had been so ill-used that the loss of memory was protective, sheltering him from knowledge that would have been intolerable.

A cold wind was rising, ridging the water that was now the colour of steel in the dying light. Andreas lay down. Sleep was taking him when he heard Vivian's voice again.

'Andreas?'

He was half sitting up, about to reply, when he realised that he had heard nothing; Vivian was mindspeaking. No one taught him that! he thought. He doesn't even know he's doing it!

'Yes?' he said.

'I'm frightened.'

'Why?'

'Andreas, don't leave me.'

Vivian could never have asked that, if he had known he was asking. He had never been anything but submissive and obedient.

'I won't. Go to sleep.'

There was some sort of drowsy murmur, rapidly fading out, and then nothing. Vivian was sleeping. Very delicately, so as not to disturb him, Andreas investigated his Skills. As well as the telepathy shared by all the Skills, there was precognition: that he had already guessed. A powerful healing Skill. Empathy: the hardest of all to live with. All the Skills that would make him vulnerable, and none of the defensive ones. Little wonder that he had been exploited, but Andreas was rapt in wonder to think what he might be, if he was allowed to know himself, and be trained. Excitement kept him awake for a long time.

On the afternoon of the tenth day they arrived in High Ford, a small market town in a bend of the Lythe. This was as far as the barges went; beyond, the river was navigable only by a small boat. Andreas went through his mechanical tasks: throwing ropes, pulling on ropes, coiling ropes, and all the while worrying. They were not very far from the White Lodge; he could have reached it on foot in four more days. But Vivian had never recovered his strength; he could not even walk the length of the deck without leaning on the rail. Andreas knew he would never keep going for four days.

When the last of the cargo had been unloaded, the barge-master called him.

'You'll be leaving us here?'

'Yes, master.'

'Going up-river?'

Andreas nodded.

'There's a mule-cart leaving tomorrow for the next village. The driver will take you. Don't use your Skills; I didn't tell him.' He pushed coins into Andreas' hand. *'Take it; you've earned it.'* He turned away, then added gruffly, unwilling to be thought kind, *'Good luck to you.'*

One more day, with Vivian curled among sacks and bales in the cart. A room for the night in the village inn, paid for by the barge-master's generosity. Still three days to the White Lodge. Andreas considered leaving Vivian there, and going alone to fetch Merissa, but the villagers were wary of strangers Skilled or not, and there had been some hostile looks. An-

dreas did not dare even to suggest they should separate.

The next morning they set off on foot. Andreas had spent their last few coins on food, enough for three meagre days. Not much more than a mile outside the village, Vivian started to falter; with Andreas' support he managed perhaps another mile before he sank down at the side of the road.

'Rest for a while,' Andreas said easily, concealing his anxiety. 'We'll go on when you're ready.'

They struggled on for the rest of the day. By late afternoon, they had covered less than half a day's journey and the weather had turned bitterly cold. Vivian stumbled, fell to his knees, and made no attempt to get up.

'I can't.' His voice was gasping. 'Andreas, it's no use. I'm sorry.'

Andreas crouched beside him and put an arm round his shoulders. He was shivering. If they did not find shelter, Andreas thought, he might not survive the night.

Andreas looked round. On one side of the road was the river, rolling grey and cold, on the other the outlying trees of the forest. The only sound was the wind; for a moment Andreas thought he heard hoofbeats, but they faded away before he was really aware of them, and no riders came up with them. They were alone, and far from help.

Murmuring encouragement, Andreas raised Vivian to his feet and supported him as far as the side of the road, beneath the branches of the outermost trees. Yellow leaves whirled in the air and whipped across his face. He led Vivian forward a few paces, looking for somewhere they could shelter.

A few yards ahead, half hidden by trees, he made out a wall of grey stones, crumbling, moss-covered. Hesitantly, half carrying Vivian, he drew closer. A few minutes later he stood at the foot of a squat tower, half ruined, but still standing. Relief swept over him; it might be the difference between life and death, for this one night, at least.

Andreas pushed open the sagging door and entered. The flagstones of the tower floor were broken, with weeds pushing through, and water pooling in the gaps. At the opposite side of the room, a stairway led upwards.

'Vivian, can you get up there?' Andreas asked. 'It'll be drier, and cleaner.'

'I'll try.'

Now they had found shelter, Vivian was reviving a little, enough to cross the room without Andreas' help and begin to climb the stairs. Before Andreas followed him, he closed the door and lowered the bar into hasps that were rusty but still held. He did not know what might be wandering the forest in the night, and he preferred not to find out.

He caught up Vivian as they reached the room above. Vivian cried out as something flapped across his face, but it was only a couple of bats that circled and flew chittering out of the window. The tower still had its roof, and this room, as Andreas had hoped, was drier, with only a drift of dead leaves on the floor. He wondered briefly who had built it here, among the trees, before he realised that the trees might have grown up around it since it was built. Whoever the builders were, he saluted them in his mind.

Vivian had sunk down wearily on the floor, with his back against the wall. Andreas sat beside him, opened their pack, and portioned out bread and cheese and fruit.

'We'll stay the night here,' he said. 'Tomorrow - '

Vivian put out a hand, interrupting him.

‘Tomorrow will be worse,’ he said. ‘It’s my fault, Andreas. What do you think we should do?’

Andreas considered him. Exhausted, cold, afraid, he was still trying to look their situation in the face. There was no point in pretending that everything would be all right. Slowly Andreas said, ‘I could leave you here... with the rest of the food - ’

Fear flared in Vivian’s eyes.

‘No!’

‘I’d fetch help, from the White Lodge. Merissa - ’

He broke off as Vivian turned away, hands pressed over his face, forcing himself not to protest anymore, but still deathly afraid.

‘No,’ Andreas said gently. ‘No, that won’t do. Don’t worry. We’ll think of something else.’

But as they shared their meal and then settled to sleep, huddled together for warmth, he could think of nothing.

Andreas slept, and then woke again. The dying daylight that had slanted through the window of the tower had been replaced by bright silver; more than one of the moons must be up. Vivian still slept, curled against Andreas, clinging to him. Andreas wondered what had aroused him. Some sound, but all was quiet now. Then it came again. A voice, shouting. Andreas froze. It was impossible, but true. The shouted word was ‘Vivian’.

Cautiously, trying not to rouse him, Andreas disentangled himself from Vivian’s embrace and crawled across the floor until he could crouch under the window and peer out. Whatever was there, he did not want to show himself. The voice came again.

‘Vivian! Come out! Vivian!’

Andreas raised his eyes to the level of the sill. At the foot of the tower, lit by the wash of moonlight, a man was standing. His legs were straddled, his hands on his hips, his head thrown back. His whole posture radiated arrogance and satisfaction. Andreas’ heart lurched. He recognised the gingery hair and the neatly trimmed beard. Outside in the clearing stood the man he had first seen in the inn, in Vivian’s nightmare.

There was a scrabbling sound behind Andreas as Vivian woke and sat up.

‘Andreas, what - ’

Andreas signed to him for silence. The man outside shouted again.

‘Vivian!’

Vivian’s eyes dilated. There was no doubt that he recognised the voice. Andreas thought he was going to faint.

‘Viv!’ he whispered, trying to put all the force he had into the single syllable. ‘Come here - look.’

Vivian shook his head. He was rapt in terror. He whispered, ‘Gregor.’

‘You know him?’ Andreas said roughly, though the answer was obvious. ‘The man out there? Has he tracked you from Inverlythe?’

‘I thought...’ Vivian could hardly speak for fear. ‘Oh, I should have known he would never let me go!’

Outside, Andreas could hear the voice again, speaking in normal tones, other voice answering, and movement. Someone shook the door below.

Andreas was beginning to understand. Gregor would not dare to come upon them where there were others who might help, and as they were both Skilled he would not dare to come alone, but it would have been easy enough to find out that they had left Inverlythe with the barges, and after that Gregor must have gathered his men and followed him until his quarry was alone and helpless. Vivian must have been very useful to him, Andreas thought, if he went to all this trouble to recover him.

‘What does he want from you?’ he asked. ‘What did you do for him?’

‘He made me... sold me - ’ Vivian raised a hand to his head, shaking. His voice spiralled into panic. ‘I don’t remember! I don’t want to remember!’

Looking at him, Andreas made a decision. He straightened up and showed himself at the window. Gregor still stood in the clearing; beyond him Andreas could see movement in the shadows, though he could not make out how many others were there. The tower would be surrounded, he guessed.

‘What do you want?’ he said.

Gregor relaxed as he saw Andreas, standing easily, and crossed his arms over his chest.

‘Send Vivian down,’ he said. ‘I’ve no quarrel with you. I’ll leave, once I have him.’

‘No.’

Gregor laughed.

‘Protecting him? I wouldn’t. Vivian really isn’t worth it.’

Before Andreas could reply he was distracted by Vivian coming to his side, tugging urgently at his arm. Tears had tracked down his face, silver in the moonlight.

‘I would go down,’ he said, ‘truly I would, Andreas, if it would save you. But it won’t. You can’t trust him. He won’t keep his word.’

‘I know.’

Down below the noise at the door had settled into a rhythmic thumping, as if someone was trying to break it down. Andreas did not think that the rusty hasps would hold for long. He turned back to the window again and raised his voice to speak to Gregor.

‘Take your men and go. Or you’ll find out what it means to threaten the Skilled.’

Gregor grinned. Andreas thought the most chilling thing about him was his unshakeable good humour.

‘Try,’ he said. ‘I know Vivian can’t harm me. Suppose you show me your Skills.’

Andreas stood looking down. He seemed to hear Merissa Vair, lecturing in her clipped, precise voice. *‘The Skilled do not kill. If you use your powers one inch beyond what you need to defend yourself, you betray all the rest of the Skilled. You do not kill’*

Even that prohibition Andreas would have broken if he had thought it would do any good, but he knew that if he killed Gregor the rest of his men would still capture them and take revenge. He did not think he had the power to slaughter them all, even if he could have made himself do it. If he could frighten them, or disable them, long enough to let him and Vivian escape... but Andreas was aware of the limits of his own Skills. He could not hold all the men at once, and if they tried to flee, Vivian’s strength would surely fail.

An idea slid into his mind. It was so audacious that it took his breath away, terrified him, but he could not deny it. It would solve all their present problems at a stroke. For the moment

he did not let himself contemplate all the other problems it would create. He spoke to Gregor again.

‘I want to talk to Vivian. Give us some time.’

‘Very well.’ Gregor turned his head and gave an order; the thumping on the door stopped. ‘But don’t be too long about it.’

He paced across the clearing to where several horses were tethered in the trees. Andreas faced Vivian again.

‘Listen, Viv. There’s one thing...’

‘Yes?’

Andreas pulled Vivian down to sit on the floor, and settled beside him, clasping his hand between both his own.

‘You’d never heard of Skills, Viv, so I don’t suppose you know what I mean by a Partnership?’

Vivian shook his head.

‘Because we’re both Skilled, we could link our minds together. We could share our Skills. I could use your power to defend us against...’ He jerked his head towards the window. ‘And I could give you the strength to get away afterwards.’

He had all Vivian’s attention now, the enormous eyes wide and dark, intensely fixed on him.

‘I don’t understand.’

Andreas wanted to say, ‘Trust me,’ and get on with it; Vivian would surely agree. But he knew that was not good enough. Because of what it would mean to them afterward, he had to make Vivian understand.

‘Viv, it isn’t easy...’ It was becoming difficult even to talk about it, under that consuming gaze. ‘I know how to make the link, I think I can do it, but... Vivian, it’s afterwards. The link is permanent. Merissa might know how to undo it, I suppose, but I don’t know, I’ve never heard of anyone breaking a Partnership.’

Vivian was silent for a moment.

‘Then... you mean we would be linked for always?’

‘That’s exactly what I mean.’

‘What difference would it make?’

Lectures - books - had been written to answer that question; he had to explain to Vivian in a few minutes.

‘We would share all our Skills,’ he began. ‘We’d be stronger than either of us alone. That’s the positive side of a Partnership. I suppose that’s why people make the link. But as well as that - we would know, each of us, roughly what the other was doing, and how we were feeling. There’s not much privacy in a Partnership. We’d feel uncomfortable if we were separated for very long. And if one Partner dies - the other wouldn’t survive.’

‘They’d die too?’ Vivian asked.

‘Die, or go insane,’ Andreas finished brutally. ‘Partnership is more of a risk than marriage, Viv. I wouldn’t suggest it, if I thought I could get us out of here any other way.’

Vivian was studying Andreas seriously, his mouth set. After a few minutes, he said, ‘I’ll

go down to him. I'll beg him to let you go. If I promise...'

Andreas felt his refusal like a blow in the face. He had not understood himself until then.

'What do you mean?' he asked. He was trying to keep his voice level, but he could not prevent the bitterness from breaking through. 'Would you really prefer Gregor to being linked with me?'

Vivian had turned his head away.

'Andreas - ' His voice failed. 'Andreas, I can't speak. Please - come into my mind.'

Andreas reached out. It was there, everything he had called up without knowing he was doing it: the longing, the commitment, the intense loyalty. But what really shocked him was to see himself through Vivian's eyes. He withdrew with a wrench that shook them both.

'I'm sorry,' he managed to say. 'Clumsy. Viv, I'm not like that, I never could be, however hard I tried.'

Vivian regarded him seriously, knowing what he had seen, not trying to repudiate any of it.

'Gregor is right,' he said. 'I did things... things I don't remember, truly, but I know they were vile. How can you possibly want me?'

Andreas reached out to him, grasping his shoulders. The grip must have been painful, but neither of them noticed.

'Viv, don't!' he said. 'You're special. You're different. Your Skills are stronger than mind will ever be. When you're trained, you could do what you like, you could have anyone you want. Anyone would be honoured...'

'I don't want 'anyone'.'

As Vivian raised his hands to touch Andreas' he became aware of what he was doing, and relaxed his grip. Vivian was smiling a little; Andreas had never seen him smile before, and he found it unbearably poignant that he should do so now, in the midst of danger and degradation. Vivian's mind was wide open, as it had been in the inn, but this time it was not because fear and misery had beaten down his defences; now it was willingly, with a sudden pulse of joy.

'Steady,' Andreas whispered. 'I can't take too much of that.'

With infinite gentleness, he began to establish the link.

Andreas was not sure how much time had passed. A few minutes, or an eternity. He sat with his back to the wall, his arms around Vivian. Vivian was relaxed against him. In this new, marvellous world of another consciousness, Andreas was aware of his partner's fear, his revulsion at the thought of his own past, but over it all a vast sense of peace.

It would have been too easy to sit like that for ever, or at least until Gregor broke in and found them. Andreas knew he had to move. Reluctantly he brought his mind back to the outer reality.

'Viv - ' he began, and stopped.

Vivian raised his head, conscious at once of what had startled Andreas. There was an acrid smell of smoke in the air. Wisps of it were drifting in through the tower window. Andreas stifled a curse and got to his feet, peering out through stinging eyes. He could just make out, at the foot of the tower, bundles of dried bracken and brushwood, giving off a sluggish

smoke. Gregor had not honoured their agreement. He had used the respite Andreas had asked for to begin smoking them out of their refuge.

Andreas knew a moment's pure panic. His plans would not work. They would be forced out before he could reach the minds of Gregor and his men to deceive or terrify them so that he and Vivian could slip away. If only, he thought, he could put out the fires. To quench fire, water... and there was a whole riverfull, a hundred yards away through the trees. But could even his kinetic Skill bring the river to the tower?

Then he knew. He reached though the link, from his own mind to Vivian's, drawing on his Partner's power. Even then he almost stopped. He felt like someone who has spent his whole life drawing water from one tiny well, only to be confronted for the first time by the ocean. He could not wonder, any longer, that Gregor had thought it worth tracking Vivian all the way from Inverlythe.

'Andreas?' Vivian said, choking on the smoke-filled air.

'It's all right,' Andreas said exultantly. 'Don't be afraid. Wait.'

He drew air into a wind, blowing the flames flat, sending the smoke billowing across the clearing, beginning to scatter the piled brushwood. At a distance, someone cried out. He heard the horses begin to whinny and trample, in their fear of fire. His questing mind, in delighted consciousness of its new strength, reached out and summoned the river.

In a few minutes he saw it, a silver line creeping through the trees. Spurred by the sight, Andreas drew it on, trickling around roots and into hollows, bubbling and glittering in the moonlight, until the ripples came washing in like a tidal race, until waves surged around the foot of the tower.

Men were stumbling around on the edges of it, shouting. Andreas knew he could never achieve the depth to drown anyone, but from the panic in their cries they thought he could, or did not intend waiting to find out! He saw two or three of them take their horses, mount and vanish. Gregor was yelling orders, but no one obeyed. Between the fire and the water, his careful plans had collapsed into sheer disorder. Andreas pulled Vivian to his feet.

'Come on!'

He thrust his Partner in front of him down the stairs, lifted the bar and pushed the door open. Nothing showed outside but night and smoke, and a dirty swirl of water and half burned twigs lapping at the threshold. Andreas splashed out into the open.

A few yards away was the edge of the trees where the horses were tethered. Arrowing a wordless command down their link for Vivian to follow him, Andreas sprinted across the clearing. He had grabbed the reins of the nearest horse and was untwisting them from the branch when he felt a pulse of pure terror from Vivian, even before he heard his Partner's cry. He turned.

Just out of his reach, Gregor was standing. He had an arm clamped round Vivian, pulling him back against his chest. With the other hand he held his belt knife at Vivian's throat.

Andreas stood rigid. He was a breath away from Vivian's death, and his own death or madness, for as their link broke, his mind would break with it. He dared not use his kinetic Skill; as soon as Gregor felt any attempt to coerce him, the knife would slice through Vivian's throat.

'Start walking,' Gregor said. 'Back to the tower. Slowly. Don't try anything clever.'

‘All right,’ Andreas said. ‘Don’t hurt him.’ And to Vivian, in mindspeech, ‘*Wait. Be ready*’

As he stepped past Gregor, he reached for Vivian’s healing Skill, that he shared now through their link, warping and reversing it, probing towards Gregor, seeking out a particular nerve... Gregor’s gaze became a fixed stare. His grip on Vivian relaxed; the hand that held the knife wavered. Andreas grabbed Vivian and dragged him away, pushing him towards the horses. ‘Go on! Quickly!’

Vivian made no move to mount. He was staring at Gregor. The man was reaching up, clawing at his eyes. His voice was suddenly thick. ‘I can’t - can’t see...’ His arms groped out, the knife weaving in front of him, as if he was feeling for Andreas. He took a step forward, tripped over a root, and went crashing to the ground. The knife spun away. Gregor crawled on hands and knees, plashing in the receding water, a horrible mewling sound coming from him. Vivian had still not moved. His horror and disbelief, surging through the link, shook Andreas like a fever, and along with it, reaching Andreas through Vivian’s empathic Skill, the terror and confusion and hatred that was Gregor.

‘No - Andreas, no!’ Vivian whispered. The look he turned on Andreas was like a brand. Andreas went to him and gripped his hands.

‘Viv, he’s not blind. Not for ever. I’ll release him, once we’re free.’

Vivian was trembling. ‘Do it now.’

‘All right. Mount up. As soon as we’re moving - ’

‘Now!’

Part of Andreas wanted to throw Vivian up on the horse whether he wanted to go or not. Another part simply wanted to kneel at his feet and ask his forgiveness. He had felt Vivian’s power, but not the goodness that had survived defilement, the compassion that would not let him harm even his bitterest enemy. We’re Partnered, Andreas thought. We’re Partnered, and he’s going to hate me. He did the only thing he could do, and withdrew from Gregor’s senses. Gregor’s wailing broke off on a sudden intake of breath. He knelt, mud-daubed hands at his face, that took on an expression of vicious fury. He snarled curses. Andreas flung himself into the saddle of the horse he had untethered, and scooped Vivian up in front of him. He dug in his heels; the horse, already restive, took off into the trees. Andreas raked his kinetic Skill across the branches as he ducked underneath, setting dried leaves ablaze, a line of fire to cut off pursuit. Then they were out of the trees and thundering north along the river road.

Later, when their first wild flight was over, and the horse’s pace had eased to a trot, Andreas let himself start to think again. He had an arm round Vivian, who was braced against him. Andreas could not see his face, and he could make no sense at all of the chaos of feeling that assaulted him through the link. He was afraid to speak. There was a cloak strapped across the saddle; Andreas unfastened it and wrapped it around Vivian. At the movement he felt his Partner relax and begin to grow calmer.

‘Viv,’ Andreas said. ‘Viv, listen to me. What I did to Gregor - it was your healing Skill. I twisted it, to hurt, not heal. It was wrong. I used you. I’m no better than Gregor.’

Vivian had turned his head to look up at him; he had been weeping, but he was quiet now. ‘I thought you were angry with me,’ he said.

‘With you? No, with myself. You were right, Viv. I should have known better. I nearly wrecked our Partnership before it even started.’

Vivian burrowed his head against Andreas’ shoulder and slid sideways on the horse so

that he could put his arms around him. Andreas hugged him; it was just possible, he discovered, to embrace on horseback without falling off. With the close physical contact he felt an easing of the mental tension that he knew he would feel for the rest of his life, the urge of a single mind in two bodies to re-establish its unity.

‘Oh, Viv, what have I done to you?’ he said.

Vivian made no reply in words, but his clasp on Andreas tightened, and a pulse of warm acceptance reached Andreas through the link. Andreas felt his Partner’s growing happiness, a bright fire that warmed them both.

As they rode on, his tightly knotted guilt began to unravel. One day he would tell Vivian - though not yet - that he had lost his temper with Merissa Vair and stormed out of the White Lodge because Merissa had asked him whether he would consider Partnership. The idea had terrified him, for all the wrong reasons. He had been afraid of giving up his independence, of relying so totally on any other person for his life’s happiness. He had been afraid of the contempt of the majority of the unSkilled, who assumed that Skilled Partners would inevitably be lovers. Merissa had irritably told him not to be so naif, and he had exploded.

Now he was still terrified. He had committed himself to a Partnership that would hold until death; worse, he had committed Vivian to it as well. He could not imagine what Andreas Harel would have to become, to be a fit Partner for Vivian. Yet if the decision were to be made again, he would have changed nothing.

Vivian stirred against him, and raised his head, looking around for the first time.

‘Have we far to go?’ he asked.

They still kept the river road. The Lythe was shallower now, chattering over stones on their left. Trees whispered on the right. The sky was paling towards morning.

‘I’m not sure,’ Andreas said. ‘But I guess we might be there by tonight, now we have the horse.’ Remembering, he added, ‘I left the food in the tower. We’d better hope Merissa has a good meal ready.’

She would have, of course. Everything was always ready, at the White Lodge. She’ll feed me, Andreas thought, even if she throws me out afterwards. Then he added, with a sudden inward grin, she can’t throw me out now. Not if she wants Vivian. And she will. But when she finds out what I’ve done... His sense of shock at the appalling prospect was enough to startle Vivian, too.

‘Andreas, what’s the matter?’

Andreas laughed. ‘Nothing. I’m just wondering what on earth I’m going to tell Merissa!’

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

(AND OTHER LOVE SONGS)

by

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It was in the year of our Lord 1276 that I first met the *Maestro*. I was sitting on the grass, my father's sheep grazing around me. The clouds spilled waterfalls of sunshine, the sheep pulled at the grass and bleated and were content, and I was drawing one of them with a stone on a piece of rock. The drone of *moscerini* was in the air, but this was a sound I had heard for the ten years of my life and I hardly noted it.

Intent on my drawing, I realised that someone was standing behind me, looking over my shoulder. I thought it must be my father or someone else from the farmhouse. But when I turned I saw with a shock that it was a stranger who wore the clothes of a Creator. His eyes were on my picture. I dropped it at once, but it was too late. So now I would be punished.

I looked at the stranger and saw with surprise that he was smiling. There was something else in his face: delight, perhaps. The common people were not permitted to Create and a Creator had caught me in the act. But his expression did not say punishment or even warning. He looked about him.

"Is Vespignano nearby?" he said.

"Ten minutes along the road, *Maestro*," I answered, pointing.

"I have some business there. Is that where your family lives?"

"Yes, *Maestro*. The farmer Bondone is my father."

"Good day, then," he smiled again. I was too stupefied to reply.

As I sat at my supper late in the day I heard my father tell my mother that a Signor Gualtieri, a Creator, had spoken to him earlier, asking the way to a merchant's house and passing the time. There was the hush in his voice that came when speaking about the gifted. But again there was no word of admonition, nor did my father even glance in my direction.

It was in the Spring, two years later, that I came to the City of Flowers. The streets were full of colour and the air was full of sound: colours of robes, of horses and donkeys, of sunlight and shadow and sunlight again down the roadways; the sounds of quarrelling and laughter, of buying and selling, of braying and neighing. The smells, too, were everywhere: the animals sweating in the heat of the noon, the herbs and spices in the meat broiling inside the houses, and everywhere the bouquet of the blooms that gave the city its name.

A drone overhead grew in my ears until I was nearly deafened. I stood in the middle of the street, looking up: a *moscerino*, nearer than I'd ever seen one. It darted past like the gnat it

was named after. Someone jostled me and I was caught up again in the flow, more people, more carts, more shops and more animals than I thought there were in the world. And now this city was my world: a simple shepherd-boy no longer, I was *apprendista* in the wool trade, indentured to my father's cousin Calzino. I felt pride, both at my status and at the city which was now also mine.

Getting out of the press of people, I stood beside a shop watching the men and women, taking it all in. Then came cries of men in authority, telling everyone to get out of the way. The crowd, grunting and grumbling, obeyed. Several people backed up against me, but I climbed up the stonework of the shop until I had a view of the road.

First came the guards, still crying out for people to stay back. Behind them rolled a carriage: a carriage, but not pulled by horses. I had heard of such things. In the front was the coachman, directing the carriage by some means I did not understand. In the back sat a man, his eyes on the road. He was dressed as a Leader. And suddenly he turned and looked straight at me, as though he had known I was there. The intensity of his stare astonished me. Then he looked ahead once more and the carriage rolled onwards, with a noise inside it like a *moscerino* in the distance.

"He looked in our direction," said one of the men in front of me.

"A day of omen for us," said the other.

Over the next weeks and months I was kept busy in learning my trade. But there were still hours for myself, hours in which I would explore the city. The sights and the bustle of the squares, and in particular the Piazza della Signoria, drew me constantly. I would stand there, out of the crowd, drawing in my head the images I saw. No-one can punish me for that, I thought.

I also visited many of the city's churches, looking at the paintings on panels and on the walls. The colours sang inside me, but the pictures left me yearning. The figures had no *life*; where was the animation, the vibrancy I could see every day in the Piazzas? Those who had painted them didn't know everything, even though they were Creators, I said to myself, wondering at my temerity even as I did so.

Then one day, Calzino took me to the Abbey of the Vallombrosan monks at Santa Trinità. The monks, he explained as we walked through the city, kept a flock whose wool was noted for its quality. I accompanied my master as we were shown around by several of the brothers, but then the negotiations began and I was left on my own. I walked into the Abbey to get out of the heat. Inside, there was no-one to be seen and the air moved between the windows.

I looked around me. Here as usual were paintings done in the style I was now familiar with, and I stood in front of them imagining how they could be improved. The figures needed to take a breath, I thought: or to be breathed on from outside. Something, in any case, to fill them out.

Then I turned a corner to approach the altar: and there above it was a painting unlike any I had seen in my life. The subject of course I knew, the Madonna and Child surrounded by angels. But the figures, facing me, brimmed with life. They looked me in the eyes and seemed to know me, and their gazes were filled with serenity. What I had yearned for looking at the paintings in the Piazza I now had, and tears streamed down my cheeks.

"My son -?" said a voice to my right, and I looked into the shadows to see the Abbot coming towards me. His face relaxed into a smile.

“Father, can you tell me who painted this?” I asked.

“A Creator called Cimabue.”

I had a moment of anguish that this Creator lived far away.

“Is he - does he work near here?”

“Indeed yes. His studio is here in Firenze.” The Abbot touched my head and moved on into the sunshine. I turned back to the panel above the altar. I was still standing before it when Calzino came looking for me an hour later.

After the day in the Abbey, I no longer felt pride in my trade. Once again, as in my childhood, I found myself needing to Create: not on stone or rocks any more but on parchment, wood or walls, and not with a line but with colour, the colours of the Madonna and Child. The desire burnt within me, and during my hours away from work I began to draw with my pen on scraps of parchment I found and hoarded. But far from appeasing the temptation, it grew with every stroke of my quill. And the guilt also grew; because what might have been forgiven in a child would be punished with severity in a youth. And one day I would become a man and my crime would be punishable by death.

I knew that seeing more of the works of the Creator Cimabue would only drive me to Create more myself, but I was helpless to do otherwise. I resisted for weeks, but I was helpless. So it was that I sought out his studio from passers-by, and discovered from them that Cimabue had his workplace in the Via del Cocomero. And one day on the way to Calzino’s house I found the studio and went inside.

The contrast of the sunlight outside and the gloom inside blinded me for a moment. Then as my eyes cleared I saw many panels of wood, some painted, some blank and some not yet prepared for painting, stacked up against each other. Even in the light from the lamps which smoked and stuttered, I could see majesty in these works: the majesty of the panel at Santa Trinità. I gasped and was filled with awe and contentment.

In the centre of the studio a boy painted on a panel which filled much of the space, referring to a parchment as he worked. His painting was not without ability, but I noticed that he worked only on the areas without detail.

“Is this the studio of the Creator Cimabue?” I asked, though I knew it was.

The boy looked round. “Yes, Signore,” he said.

“Is the Creator here?”

“He is in the City of Assisi in Umbria, working in the church of San Francesco. Can I help you?”

I was sorry to hear this news, but also emboldened.

“Who are you?” I asked, drawing myself up.

“I am Lucio, *apprendista* to Cimabue,” he said with pride.

“I represent Signor Calzino, who may wish to commission a painting from the Creator,” I said, surprising myself with my words. “Can you show me some of his work?”

Lucio put down his brush and took me over to the stack of panels. And there, for as long as I dared to linger, my urge to Create was stilled in the glow of such mastery.

For months, Cimabue remained in Assisi; and often on my way to work I would stop in at the studio and watch Lucio paint, or refresh my soul with a look at one of the panels awaiting

completion by the master. Then one day when I sat before the stacks gazing in rapture, a man walked into the studio dressed in the garb of a Creator.

“So you have come!” he laughed.

I stumbled to my feet in confusion; I recognised the Creator who had watched me draw the sheep years ago. “*Maestro Cimabue?*” I dared ask.

“I am Giovanni Gualtieri, whom some call Cimabue,” he answered. “And what is your name?” he said, with a twinkle in his eye.

“I am Giotto of Vespignano, the son of Bondone,” I stammered.

“Then, Giotto di Bondone, how would you like to become one of my *apprendiste?*”

The matter was soon arranged. My father was honoured to have his son train as a Creator; and Calzino made no objection. I think, too, they both knew where my heart lay.

So I gave up the wool trade for ever and came to live over Cimabue’s studio. And at first I wondered about that name men called him, because I could not bring myself to ask him about it. And later on, when we became closer, I thought of him always as Cimabue anyway. But in the beginning it puzzled me, because in our Tuscan dialect *cima* means summit, or eminence, which makes sense, but *bue* means ox or dunce. So I satisfied myself it meant that, compared to my master, all other Creators were dunces. Which I knew to be true.

It was just after my fourteenth birthday and my life lay before me like countryside after the storm, and I thought that all my troubles were over. Now, I thought, I can paint without skulking in corners, without guilt, without fear of punishment, guided by the skill of Cimabue himself.

I soon learned how mistaken I was. It was not the first day, nor the next, nor the next week, nor the next month that I held a brush in my hand in Cimabue’s studio. Instead, I had to watch Lucio executing the designs of the master while I was given the task of mixing paint.

My disappointment must have showed; or perhaps my glances at Lucio and Cimabue’s work became too frequent. Finally, Cimabue put down his brush and came up to me.

“You do not like the work of an *apprendista?*” he asked.

“*Maestro, I...*” I did not know how to continue. I looked down at the pestles and mortars smeared with colour. Cimabue followed my eyes to the table.

“Giotto, listen to me,” he said. “You have talent. You have enthusiasm. Above all you have the fire inside that will not leave you in peace. All of these things a Creator needs. But there is something else you need which you do not yet have, and that is knowledge. Knowledge of your tools, knowledge of your craft. Can a writer write without a knowledge of words, or a sculptor sculpt without a knowledge of marble? And beyond knowledge you need a love of your craft. You must immerse yourself in it. You have talent, Giotto - but what do you know of paint? And how can you be a painter without such knowledge?”

He picked up one of the mortars and held it before me. “Make these colours your friends, Giotto, and they will serve you. I know each one of them as a friend. Cadmium yellow, named for Cadmes, ruler of Thebes. Ochre. Raw umber. Burnt umber. Vermilion made by grinding cinnabar, a red to paint a Doge’s robes or the blood of our Saviour under His crown of thorns. Or lapis lazuli, a blue to adorn the mantle of Our Lady.”

I looked up, and saw that his eyes were shining; and I remembered then that his Madonna and Child at Santa Trinità had just such a hue.

"I think I see now, *Maestro*," I said.

"I think so too, *apprendista*," he answered. "Continue your work, then, and be content."

And I continued my work and was content, and my disappointment changed to understanding. I ground minerals, I crushed flowers: rose, lilac, crocus, violet; I even made powders of insects for colours such as carmine. The air grew scented from my labours. And to these powders I added egg-white and other ingredients as Cimabue showed me, to mix and stir and blend into tempera that the master himself was content to use.

After a while, Cimabue would leaven my paint-making with other studies. He accompanied me on tours of the churches and abbeys to look at their art. He took me to the hospices and even to the houses of the dead, revealing matters of anatomy to me. At first I was reluctant, but he answered these objections as well.

"The paintings around us in the city are mostly the work of the Byzantines," he told me. "Or the legacy, for the glory of Byzantium is dead and buried, but Creators still follow the style of centuries ago. Tell me, Giotto, what do these paintings lack?"

"Breath," I answered. Cimabue smiled.

"Breath, yes. And depth. They lack the feel of people and of things. When I paint a book, I want it to *be* a book, not the symbol of a book. When I paint a man, I want him to be flesh and blood. But we must study flesh and blood in order to convey it."

As my training continued, I progressed onto the cleaning and preparation of panels, which my master would paint according to commission; usually for some church or cathedral, but sometimes for a patron. Yet painting on wood was not the way Cimabue preferred to work.

One February morning he called Lucio and me, telling us to take his paints and brushes and follow him. He strode ahead while Lucio and I shivered as we hurried through the streets and squares, the sun peering through sky the colour of mist, stallholders crying their wares, birds quarrelling above us. Our master brought us to the church of Santo Spirito where the priest awaited us. He led us to the cloister, where workmen were plastering three arches. Cimabue stood while the labourers trowelled and smoothed, sizing up the proportions of the arches.

"Here, the marriage at Cana; here, the entry into Jerusalem; and here, overturning the stalls of the money-lenders at the temple," he decided. The workmen began to pack away their tools. "Quick! Brushes, paints!"

He sketched out the three scenes and their figures with a speed that left us breathless, and moved at once to paint in the figure of our Lord in the centre. "Lucio, the money-lenders." Lucio scampered over to the right. And then I found a brush thrust towards me. "Giotto! Paint the marriage couple!" I stood for a moment, dumbfounded. "Quick! Before the plaster dries! Move!"

"Yes, *Maestro*!"

I seized the brush and began to paint at once. I thought I saw something in Cimabue's face: a test, perhaps. But there was no time to think. I followed the master's outlines, painting as far as I could the love and gratitude the couple must have felt towards their guest. Even as I hurried I could feel my knowledge of anatomy gained at the master's instruction helping me; and the smoothness of the paint on the plaster transported me. Cimabue was everywhere, painting over and under our arms, directing us to add angels, haloes, shadows on clothing. Finally he stood back, straightened up and clapped us both on the shoulder with a laugh. To my astonishment, all three pictures were complete, glowing with colour in the sun.

He looked over at Lucio's work and praised him. And then he turned to my painting and examined it, and I saw it too, as though for the first time. At last he spoke.

"Flesh and blood, Giotto. Well done!"

"*Grazie, Maestro!*" I stammered.

After we returned to the studio, my apprenticeship continued as though nothing had happened at Santo Spirito. I mixed paint, I studied the art of other Creators in the city, I listened to Cimabue talking of art as he painted, I learned more anatomy, I prepared more panels. But some weeks later, Cimabue touched one of the panels I had finished and said to me, "I think it is time to see what you have learned, *apprendista*." And my heart gave a leap in my chest.

"Take as long as you like, and paint me a picture."

"What subject, *Maestro*?"

"Yes, what subject? Let's have the Annunciation. It's a pleasure to commission something myself for a change!"

So for some time every day I painted the Archangel Gabriel and Our Lady; and as Cimabue had said, the colours I had mixed myself now began to obey me. And finally I called my master over and showed him the finished painting. He looked at it for over a minute while the noise of the street outside seemed to die away to silence and I thought that time itself had come to an end. Then he smiled.

"You have learned, *apprendista*."

Lucio came up and looked at my work. For a second I saw annoyance, wonder, anger and yearning in his face, so that I didn't know whether he would fall at my knees or strike me. But of course he did neither.

"Congratulations, Giotto." He returned to his work of ornamenting his master's painting.

"I go to the city of Padua next month," Cimabue told me. "You will accompany me there. When we return, I will show you the secret of the Creators. If you can master that, your apprenticeship will be over."

Outside the city a plain had been levelled and a square laid down; and to this place my master led me as Spring came again to the City of Flowers. Aside from my village, this was the only home I had known. Now I was to travel all the way to Padua in the north, and the thought unsettled me. But it was the thought of our transportation rather than our destination that made my stomach flutter. For Cimabue as a Creator travelling to a commission had the right to use a *moscerino*, and naturally I as his apprentice would be carried also.

Two women adorned in finery stood waiting as we approached, soon joined by a man dressed in the red of a Cardinal. Cimabue strode up to them and addressed them; but my feet slowed with every step and finally stopped altogether. There in front of me was the *moscerino*, the first I had ever seen on the ground and staggering in dimension. I saw now that its halo, as we had called it as children, was not a disk at all but two blades the length of lances. At its rear were two more blades, only on one side instead of the top. Instead of wheels like a carriage, the *moscerino* stood on bars of metal.

The absurdity of its popular name hit me. Some gnat! Albatross, or monster, I would have called it.

A man walked out of the building built on one side of the piazza and came over to us. His clothing was ornamented with obsidian, a style I had noticed before in the city but never close

to. He greeted the passengers and opened a door on the side of the *moscerino*, helping the men and women aboard and finally beckoning me over. He gave me his hand and I took it without enthusiasm, seating myself next to my master in the seats behind the driver. Then he climbed into the vehicle and slid the door to.

I looked over his shoulder to see two levers, one to his left and one between his legs as he settled himself in his seat. Panic grew in me. Was it really possible to control this monster with just those levers? But as I thought about jumping out and the humiliation this would bring me, the driver composed himself as though for prayer, muttered a word I couldn't hear, and touched something underneath the top of the lever to his side.

The *moscerino* woke from its sleep, not with a yawn but with a bellow. The noise deafened me and I looked around in terror; surely something was wrong? Then the driver adjusted his legs and clasped both levers, and the blades above the monster began to turn: at first with grace, but soon with ferocity. The noise increased to a frenzy, overwhelming me, and my body trembled from head to toe with the shaking of the *moscerino*. Then with a lurch it slipped into the air. We hovered like a bird for a few seconds, and then we soared upwards.

After a while the sweat drenching my body dried as I realised we were all still alive. I opened my eyes, released the rail I had been gripping, and looked around me. Cimabue was chatting to the Cardinal as though nothing had happened. The ladies also seemed relaxed and even smiled, although I was relieved to see that one kept her eyes shut. Then I looked down.

The countryside around Firenze was spread out before me like a patchwork, perfection in miniature. Those ants were labourers in the fields, that beetle a carriage lumbering along the road - while the *moscerino* flew between heaven and earth like an angel of the Lord. And fly it did, faster than an arrow. My fear left me, swept away as I was transported by these sights. I wanted the journey to go on forever. But finally the city of Padua in all its grandeur came into view and the *moscerino* dipped down towards it.

The next day I stood looking down from the city wall at the river the Paduans called the Bacchiglione, glittering before me in the sun like a band of silver. I thought of how far above it I had been the day before when I first saw it sparkling; and I also thought of how such a colour might be used to form the border of some robe or cloak in a painting.

"Buon giorno, Giotto di Bondone."

I turned, to see the man who had driven in procession through the streets of Firenze on my first day there. His clothing was decorated in gold, the sign of a Leader, and the intensity of his stare was as it had been on that day.

"You know me?" I was too surprised to give him a title.

"I know you by your works." I was troubled at this, because I had as yet Created little - and nothing that such a Leader would be likely to have heard of. Could it be that he knew I had broken the law by Creating in my own time while still in the wool trade? But he changed the subject.

"How did you like flying?" He seemed to know everything.

"It took my breath away," I replied. This appeared to please him; at any rate, a smile interrupted his brooding for a moment.

"You are visiting Padua too?" I ventured.

"I am a traveller," he said. He gazed down at the city, lost in thought. "Those buildings will be the university: one of the oldest in Europe." He recollected himself, as I pondered this remark. "Or so those who come after us will think of it."

I nodded. "My master will be waiting for me to return."

"My name is Hansen," he said, as though I had not spoken. "When you become a Creator, come to me if there is anything you need, at any time. Ask for me at the Palace in Firenze and you will be admitted."

I stared in astonishment: so this was not only a Leader but the ruler of all Firenze.

"Will you remember?"

"Yes, *Principe*," I managed to say.

"I may not always be able to help; but on the other hand, I may assist you in ways you do not expect. So *arrivederci*, Giotto."

"*Arrivederci, Principe.*"

I assisted Cimabue for two months in Padua. His commission was a series of frescoes for an Abbey. It was a time of serenity for me, working in the light strained through glass while the monks chanted as though with one voice. Yet it was also a time of work and learning. I helped Cimabue execute his designs; and often when I had completed my areas I had time to stand back and watch him paint with skill and diligence. It was soon clear to me how unusual the Santo Spirito fresco had been. The speed of that painting must indeed have been meant as a test for me. Because here Cimabue painted without haste, fresh plaster being applied again and yet again until he was satisfied with the result. And when he had finished his frescoes moved me as had his altarpiece in the Abbey of the Vallombrosans.

When the commissions were completed we returned to our studio in Firenze. Over the next months my master let me paint more of his pictures and even work on paintings of my own now and again. My confidence grew. Sometimes I thought back to my meeting with Hansen, his name itself a puzzle: for how was it that someone who by his name was not Tuscan or even Italian came to be a prince of Firenze?

But most of the time Cimabue kept me too busy for such musings. Then a day came when the master sent Lucio out into the city on an errand, and he took me aside and said "Now, Giotto, we come to the secret of the Creators. Are you ready?" I felt a shiver of excitement as I nodded. Cimabue led me into the darkness at the back of the studio.

"You already know," he began, "that a painting has levels of meaning which others can interpret according to their skill. Where the Byzantines had only representations of people, we show a story, we show emotions. And as a viewer puts his own emotion in, he can become one with this emotion - as I have often seen you do, *apprendista*."

I blushed to think that he had observed me in tears, but he had already begun again. "Then we include symbols to fill out the story even more. An olive branch for peace, a dove for the Holy Ghost, lilies for chastity, and so on. And in the same way we can indicate the saints by symbols: Peter with keys, James with a scallop shell, Simon with a saw. So far, so good; anyone with the knowledge can interpret the story, and anyone could paint it."

The heresy shocked me out of my silence. "But it would be a crime."

"It would be a crime, ordained so by our prince. Nevertheless anyone could do it. But the secret can be understood only by Leaders, and painted by no-one but Creators."

Cimabue unlocked a small cupboard hidden in the shadows and took out a jar as transparent as Venetian glass made by a craftsman. The jar was fastened in a way I had never seen before, a lid of metal over it which my master turned and turned until it came free. A smell of

freshness, of the countryside, of flowers at sunset, filled the room.

“Look,” he said. I looked into the jar.

“Varnish?” I asked. “Resin?”

“In truth, I do not know what it is, except that it is a gift from the prince. With this substance we can paint over our paintings in a state of trance: and as we paint, we add another level of the story, a level to move the hearts of Leaders. Only the duennas of the Leader families can read the story we paint with our secret, and only a Creator can paint this level of the story.”

“Why, then this is magic,” I said.

There was sadness in Cimabue’s smile. “A little, perhaps: given to us by the courtesy of the prince. But ours is only a kind of magic. The real magic is reserved for the Magicians, those who drive the *moscerini* through the clouds and who hold many other secrets of the prince. And only they can commission proposal pictures: the ones painted in trance.” He sighed and smiled again. “Tomorrow you go to the prince and receive the power of the secret.”

I was shocked. “But Lucio has been with you for - “

“Lucio will never be a Creator. He is *apprendista*. There is no shame in that: Creators need assistants. But he will never have the ability to move people with painting. He can stay with me or go elsewhere, but I will never put him forward to be a Creator.”

So it was, in a kind of daze, that I went to the palace the next day, asked for the prince and was admitted. He greeted me as before, as though he and I had always known each other. Then he took from his desk a crystal of jade and held it before my eyes, and my legs trembled under me. Then he gave me a word to say and dismissed me.

I returned to Cimabue’s studio to discover that Lucio was again away. Cimabue had set up the Annunciation that I had painted before we went to Padua. He bade me paint it again with the paint of the secret. I dipped my brush in the liquid, said the word the Creator taught me and began to paint. As my brush flowed under my hand, stars and colours and yearnings and joys whirled in my brain. Finally I had finished and the trance left me. I looked at the panel, and it seemed to me as it had been before. But Cimabue said the word and his eyes clouded over. He gazed at the painting for many minutes. Then his eyes cleared.

“You sing of love like a siren,” he said at last. “At present you are but a youth and your song lacks knowledge. But as you grow and know love, you will be a Creator without peer - both in the secret and outside it.”

I was moved by his sincerity. “*Grazie, Maestro*,” I said. But he shook his head.

“Call me Giovanni from today, Giotto,” he said. “I am your master no longer.” And he brought out a chain made from jade, the sign of a Creator, and put it around my neck.

The next few years passed in a wave of delight for me. I continued to share a studio with Cimabue but now I was working on my own, a Creator in my own right. Bishops, abbots, merchants, Leaders and sometimes Magicians would commission works from Cimabue. But as my name became known and my work admired, I began to win commissions of my own. Only the obsidian-ornamented Magicians would pass me by, continuing to give their orders for proposal pictures to Cimabue.

Then one day in my eighteenth year I was painting alone in the studio when its peace was

shattered. A youth about my age, also dressed as a Creator, burst in on me.

"So, the famous Giotto! Let's have a look," he said, shouldering me aside to see my painting. "Ah, yes. They did not lie." I didn't know whether to be annoyed or amused.

"I don't believe I've had the honour," I said drily.

"Dante Alighieri: at your service!" he gave a flourish as he bowed.

"You are a painter?"

"Ah, my fame is not yet the equal of yours, I see," he said wryly. "I am a writer. I want my portrait painted - but none of these Byzantines and their stiffness for me! You're the man for the job. You paint me, I'll put you into my poems - Young Firenze, eh? Let's start right away - or better yet, let's share a flask in the tavern!"

By the end of the day I knew Dante like a brother. He wrote in Tuscan instead of Latin, his family had adorned Firenze with its presence for generations, and he was not a Leader - but he intended to become one. In fact, to my confusion he already seemed to be a member of two factions.

"Don't you know your history, Giotto?" he cried. "You should read up on it, like me! I'm a Gueff, and we were the ones who kicked out those Ghibellines after decades of strife - quite right too. But now we've done that, who of us Gueffs will lead the city? And it's not just Firenze, you know. We're destined for greatness in Italy, I can feel it. We can unite the whole country, such as hasn't happened since the fall of Rome to the barbarians. A united Italy!" he stopped, drained his goblet, lost himself in musing for a moment. "But which way is right? Hansen led the Gueffs before, and as I say he was right in opposing the Ghibellines. But I can't agree with the way things are going now." I suppressed a smile. "We need someone to stand up to him. So I'm a White, and he's the leader of the Blacks."

He would be. I thought of the prince, brooding over the city in his palace. Standing up to him seemed fraught with danger to me.

"Life is fraught with danger, Giotto! No, I was made for politics, just as I was made for literature. And I'll transform them both before I'm through!"

Despite Dante's speeches that night and on many other nights, politics failed to excite me. Creating was more than enough for me. But I enjoyed the company of Dante and often joined him and his White friends for a drink after painting. And I finished his portrait.

It was while I walked to the tavern to meet him one night several years later that my life was changed forever. A procession of a Leader was heralded and everyone was forced off the streets until it passed. I stood like everyone else, eager to be on my way. And then I saw her, and I forgot all about Dante and taverns in a moment.

Her hair shone like gold in the sunset, her skin was nacre, her lips were rubies, her cheeks a dawn. And her eyes were closed. They looked as though they would never open again.

"Who is she?" I murmured to the man next to me.

"Giulia Medici," he answered.

"Is she - blind?"

"She is a Leader."

Dante explained it to me in the tavern - in between his exclamations of incredulity. "You, a Creator and a *pittore*! The eyes of Ladies are closed in childhood by the prince."

"Why?"

“Better ask him. It’s just one of the many things we Whites are against.”

“Dante, I think I’m in love.”

I thought he, the romantic, would congratulate me and call for wine; but he only sighed.

“I know such love, Giotto. I fell under the spell of a Lady myself when we were only nine years old. Her name is Beatrice.” He paused in adoration. “But it cannot be. Only a Magician can open the eyes of a Lady, and only through a proposal work of a Creator: a painting, a sonnet, a statue.”

It was monstrous. Every part of me rebelled against it. Finally I spoke, my voice choking.

“Then I shall never paint a proposal work again.”

Dante held my shoulder. “Proposal works are our gifts. Can a Creator stop Creating because the world is unfair?”

He was right. I continued to Create, and my fame spread throughout Firenze. And one day when I was twenty-four a Magician entered the studio and looked me in the eyes; and he paid for me to paint a proposal.

I took a panel, prepared it, mixed my paints and began to Create. All my skill came to the fore. Then when it was done I said the word and painted it again, pouring out all the sweetness and all the bitterness of love.

Cimabue entered the studio and I showed him my painting, an Adoration of the Magi. He looked at it with wonder, and then he said the word himself and continued to look, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“*Maestro*,” he said.

I was filled with gratitude and set out that very night to tell Dante of the honour Cimabue had done me; but when I came to the tavern he was not in his usual seat, nor were his Whites. The innkeeper saw me and jerked his thumb towards the back room. I pushed through the curtain and found Dante with his head in his hands. He looked up as I entered.

“How are you, Dante?” I asked with concern.

“*Straziato*,” he said. “Beatrice is dead. Dead at twenty-three. Thanks to the prince her eyes were closed, and now they will never open in this world.”

Straziato. Heartbroken. I understood that feeling, which had hardly left me for the last three years.

“What will you do?” I asked gently.

“I will write.”

“Write?”

“Yes, write. As a mere Creator I was forbidden to speak to her. But through my writing I will make myself worthy. I will speak to her for all eternity, and the world will listen.”

And in the next few years Dante wrote his vision of Beatrice in his book *Vita Nuova*, and as he had predicted his fame grew to equal mine. As for me, I was busier than ever and began to take pupils of my own: Taddeo Gaddi, Puccio Capanna, Ottaviano da Faenza and others, a growing number as the years passed. Because my name inspired men to become Creators and to study under me. I accepted commissions, I did portraits, I painted love songs for Magicians; but although years passed, the sharpness of my love for Giulia never dulled.

The year of our Lord 1302 was one of sadness for me - but also one of astonishment. Ci-

mabue was by now over sixty and was painting less and less. One day as I worked on a fresco in a city church, Ottaviano hurried in and told me that Cimabue had collapsed. I ran back with him through the streets full of people, but we were too late. Cimabue was dead.

I mourned the man who was my master and my friend for many days. But life had to go on. The studio in the Via del Cocomero was now mine. I offered to keep Lucio on as *apprendista*, but he replied scornfully that he would find another Creator - one who would not keep him back.

So I began to work again, surrounded by my pupils but lonelier than ever before. I spent much time with Dante and his friends; and much time alone, thinking of Giulia and inter-linking our initials in paint on scraps of parchment.

Then one night Dante burst in on me while I painted a Madonna and Child alone in my studio.

"The Magicians have caught Antonio. They're holding him. Come with me and help, Giotto," he cried.

"Of course," I said, jumping up - but then I saw the sword he held out to me. "What is this, Dante?"

"I'll tell you as we go, but let's hurry," he said, tucking the sword under my cloak and bundling it and me out into the street. What he told me was that the Whites had decided to break into a Magicians' stronghold and everything had gone wrong.

"But why did you do this?" I asked.

"Because the Magicians are the strength of Firenze, and they support the Blacks," he said. "We thought that if we could find out their secrets we could have Magicians of our own: and finally, expel Hansen and all his followers from the city."

"Your politics is leading you astray," I began. But he cut me short, peering round a corner.

"There they are," he hissed. I looked. Two men dressed as Magicians stood over another man, his hands tied behind him, whom I recognised as Antonio from the tavern. Dante crept round the corner and launched himself at the nearest Magician, drawing his sword as he did so. Taken by surprise the Magician fell under Dante's charge but the other drew his sword and pointed it towards Dante.

What happened next took me by surprise. Light leaped from the swordpoint and seared Dante's arm. He yelled in pain and dropped his sword, and the Magician raised his own weapon over his shoulder for a downward slash.

Without thinking, I pulled my cloak from the sword Dante had given me and hurled myself at the Magician. He collapsed without a word and when I looked down I saw him lying with the blade in his back. My limbs trembled and I felt sick.

"Well done, Giotto!" Dante gasped, grabbing his sword with a blistered and burnt hand. Then he released it and picked up the weapon of the Magician. He waved it gently and turned it in the air; and as he did so, a fireball roared from it and turned a nearby tree into an inferno. Dante looked at me, horror, shock and awe mingling in his face.

I picked up Dante's sword and cut through Antonio's ropes. "Throw it away, Dante, and go home!" I said.

"I'll go home, but I'll keep this. We can fight the prince with it. I'll see you tomorrow, Giotto!"

But he was wrong on both counts. They came for him in the hours of the morning: and by noon, everyone in the city knew that the Whites had been suppressed and Dante banished.

So it was that I went again to the palace and asked for the prince. And once again, I was admitted.

Hansen sat before his desk as though he had been expecting me.

“Greetings, *Principe*,” I said.

“Giotto di Bondone, welcome,” he said. I began my plea for Dante’s sentence to be reduced, but he interrupted me. “Dante Alighieri is a rebel,” he said. “That is good for writing, but bad for politics - at least in Firenze while I am its prince.”

“But his writing. Can you treat the author of *Vita Nuova* like a criminal?”

“He may yet Create even better things,” Hansen said. “Is there a law that a writer must stay in one place in order to Create? Besides, Dante is always banished in 1302.”

That last remark meant nothing to me, but I was emboldened.

“May I speak on?”

“To the father of the renaissance, much is allowed.”

I was surprised. “The renaissance of what?”

“Of painting. By evoking the illusion of depth in your works you have done something not seen for a thousand years.”

“Then I would ask you these questions. Why is it forbidden for anyone but Creators to Create?”

“To protect art from charlatans.”

I laughed. “How could a charlatan Create? And why would he want to?”

“I agree that such a thing is hard to imagine. But it could happen one day. Having Creators will prevent it.”

“Why do we need Magicians?”

Hansen sat back in his chair. “As Dante would say, Giotto, you should read history. Two centuries ago, Firenze was engaged in wars with its rivals Siena and Pistoia. It would perhaps have won those wars, but at what cost? Think of the people, perhaps of genius, which the world would never have seen.” He grew animated. “Waste, Giotto! War is always wasteful. Let me show you how it was instead, thanks to the prince of those days.”

He picked up a crystal of obsidian and held it up to my vision.

“Trance,” he said. Dizziness overwhelmed me for a moment, and then the room was swept away and I was seated in a *moscerino*. I realised I was driving the vehicle and fear surged through me: but even as I felt it I knew that my fear was needless. I knew how to fly. I knew as though remembering something long forgotten. I remembered other things, too: the strongholds of the Magicians where they made the *moscerini* and where *fuel* was distilled. Other secrets hovered close but just out of reach. But that was nothing to me. I looked around me and the air swarmed with *moscerini*. Then we flew on, and down below us were Sienese mercenaries attacking the troops of Firenze: infantry, cavalry and archers. Many panicked as we approached but some archers stayed to shoot at us. I moved my right hand up the lever between my legs until I found the *armament fire control switch*, and pressed it. Light poured from our *moscerini* and the Sienese were swept away like twigs in a storm.

I shook my head and found myself back in the palace.

“And now Firenze leads all of Tuscany. And Italy itself beckons,” the prince said. “But you have another question.”

“I do,” I answered. “Why can only Magicians commission proposals?”

“Because Magicians must become Leaders, and Leaders Magicians. In that way, the future for Firenze and for Italy is assured.”

I was bewildered by all that happened and everything that had been said. But I knew that Dante was still banished and that my love was still hopeless, and that I was sickened by the prince.

“Now I have a question for you, Giotto. Will you let me be your patron? I could give you marvels to work with. Oil paints, for instance.”

“Oil paints?”

“Made by mixing linseed oil with your powders instead of egg-whites. They dry more slowly than tempera and give you more control.”

Part of me was beguiled; but I thought of Dante and Giulia and refused. Hansen turned away. “So be it. You will go to Padua in 1306 and there, at the Cappella dell’Arena, you will Create your greatest works.”

I cried out in fear and anger. “Do you control everything?”

He shrugged. “Some things I do not need to control. So you will go to Padua and achieve greatness. But who knows what you would have achieved if you had stayed with me?”

For the next four years I continued to work in Firenze, and my reputation spread beyond the city. My commissions took me further and further. Then in the year of our Lord 1306 the call came from Padua, as the prince said it would. I frowned at the thought. But the commission was of such size that I could hardly refuse: no less than thirty-eight frescoes.

Once again I went to the piazza outside the city as I had done with Cimabue all those years before. This time my fellow travellers were a Lady, a bishop and a merchant. The Magician walked over to us and greeted us. I saw the glint of his obsidian chain as he moved.

Once we were seated, he started the *moscerino* and we lurched into the air, gaining height by the second until the clouds misted past the vehicle. All this was familiar. But halfway through the journey the driver gave a cry and clutched his hands to his chest, and then his head slumped forward.

Immediately the *moscerino* rolled to one side and dropped from the sky, its screaming matched by my fellow passengers. Something inside me wanted to scream too. But something else in me remained calm.

“Trance,” I said to myself: and at that, everything changed. Fear left me, sweat dried on my body. I clambered into the front of the vehicle and pulled the dead driver from his seat, the *moscerino* spinning even more crazily as his dead hands caught the levers. Then I was seated in his place and looked down at the controls. *The cyclic. The collective* with its *throttle twist grip. The directional control pedals*. All was familiar to me, as familiar as when I’d flown against the Sieneese mercenaries.

I pulled up the collective, twisting in more throttle and pushing left pedal as I did so. The *moscerino* gave a howl of protest and the levers strained against me; but soon the vehicle was level again. My head only cleared when we landed gently at Padua, the frenzied thanks of my fellow travellers still in my ears. And when I got out I was really not surprised at all to see

Hansen there. He stepped over to me and put a chain of obsidian round my neck.

“Congratulations, Creator-Magician,” he said.

So it was that when I returned from Padua I carried with me a panel. It was wrapped in cloth to protect my greatest, my most personal work. The subject was the Garden of Eden but as well as tempera it was painted in the secret of the Creators.

Wearing my two chains and carrying my panel, I went to the house of the Medicis and asked for Giulia. I seemed to be expected. At any rate, I was shown into a room where two women sat. One was old and was obviously the Medici duenna. The other was young, but the contrast was far more than that. She was light to darkness, laughter to grief. Giulia Medici.

My hands trembled as I unwrapped the panel and presented it to the duenna. She looked at it for a long time with a smile of pleasure, expressions of praise dropping from her lips. But finally she said the word and her look changed to one of intensity. She probed the picture, leaving nothing unseen. What she saw was the purity and the rapture of love, my love, painted finally for myself instead of another. And when it seemed that I could bear to wait not a second longer for her verdict, she spoke to Giulia and said “Open.”

At that, those portcullises of eyelids rose in Giulia’s face, revealing eyes of the remotest, gentlest blue. She moved her head as her vision focused after its long dream, then finally she looked at me. At me. At me.

With love and understanding and compassion and passion.

And as her eyes held mine I felt again the stab of pain. But this time it was the pain of ecstasy.

NO LOOKING BACK

by

© Rod Slatter

The sun was nothing more than an intense point, high up and to her left. It shed a dim light, an underworld glow, with all the stars in plain view. The shadows were short but stark, the darkness within them complete; out of the 'sun', you couldn't see a thing. She switched the suit lights on and ran the diagnostics one more time.

Everything apart from the shadows was a uniform concrete colour, an alloy of dust and water ice, frosted with solid methane, and concrete-coloured boulders of every possible shape and size littered the surface. The dim curve of Charon hovered above a skyline distorted and ruptured by vast jagged craters. If you thought the view over the Sinus Medii from suborbital was bleak, check this out.

System date 31 March 2099. Good Friday on Pluto, and Breck was not pleased to be here. The only good thing about being here was that it was halfway through the mission. Recover the probes, lift off, five more years in space, then home...

All systems green. She floated out of the lock and came to an unsteady halt, using a hand on the lock hatch to stop herself bouncing.

The tracker pointed the way. And although there was nothing in sight that could be the remains of a Cerberus module, she started out from the lander. Her steps slowly diminished from huge arcing bounds, to the low boulder-skimming slalom of her training.

Then, under this lifeless sky, amid the endless shattered grey: white metal. Something made by man. Breck turned up the mag. "Something's wrong here," she said to the log. "I've got visual contact with the tracking target. But that's not part of a Cerberus."

She hit 1:1 and moved on. When she reached the target, she turned to look back. The Orpheus lander was hull-down behind a serrated crater wall, like a row of needles, or teeth. The blinking red pressure light on the open gull-wing lock hatch was the only colour in sight.

The tracking target stood before her. No, it wasn't part of a Cerberus. It wasn't a part of anything. It was a whole ship, a whole lander module at least. And it had been crewed.

ESA hadn't admitted it publicly, but they'd half-suspected alien contact. But there was nothing alien about that ship. She skipped along the blank hull to the rear. There was a single drive nozzle, like an ESA design - not Chinese. VTOLs underneath, and the ship stood on a grey rink of blast-fused water ice. Or rather in it: the legs had sunk in. There were no control surfaces: the thing wasn't built to fly aerodynamically in an atmosphere.

"I hope you get all this back at L1. I don't know what to make of it. It looks like a European crewed space vehicle. I'm going back to the lander and wait for your instructions. This is beyond my mission parameters."

There were no crewed missions this far out. There was no need for the expense. They sent robots on pure science missions, always had. And even the rivalry between the civilians and the military didn't extend to hiding mission templates. Breck was the first - or she was meant to be the first. There was something else too: that drive was too small. It was the sort of thing you might use for Moon-L1 transfer; it didn't look big enough to deliver the heavy ballistic kicks for a long interplanetary trajectory.

Breck smiled to herself. They sent robots on pure science missions to the outer planets. Then, when the robots failed, they sent humans to find out why. And when they got there, the humans found other humans had got there first. She stopped smiling. That was impossible. Even with a planet as distant as Pluto, there were such things as launch windows. OK, not impossible, but you'd have to want Pluto pretty bad.

She rounded the rear of the craft and saw the ESA logo and the ship's name on the left side. Eurydice, it was called. There was no Eurydice mission on the books. It was a typical ESA name, but not a real one. She hoped Mission Control were going to get all this, when her comms beam arrived at L1, perhaps ten or twelve hours from now.

There was a crackle, a noise. A noise! Suit malfunction! Breck jumped up, over the craft, and started bouncing away in the direction of her own lander. There were no suit diagnostic pop-ups on her display, but she wasn't hanging around out here to find out.

"Wait!"

Breck instinctively looked around her to see where the intercom voice had come from.

"Hey wait! Don't go!" An English accent, female voice.

There, on the crest of the rise behind the spacecraft: a figure in a white suit. Breck armed her laser and turned up the sight mag. ESA-Mil shoulder patch.

"Who are you?" Breck said, grabbing at the corner of a boulder to keep low.

"Allardyce, Jane, GGY-8484-GH. ESA-Mil. Please don't go. I'm here."

Breck spoke to the log, with the intercom down. "I think I may be hallucinating. I have to get back to the lander and get this suit checked. Jane Allardyce and I went through Star School together. This can't be happening."

The figure had jetted over the craft and was catching up fast. There was no getting away from it, whatever it was. The ESA-Mil suit dumped itself on the ground under down-thrust, three metres from Breck. The inhabitant sounded winded, as if from the abrupt drop. "Am I ever glad to see you? Whoever you are. Jesus, I thought you'd never come."

The black mirror visor showed nothing, just the distorted image of Breck and the surface of Pluto.

"Please, come aboard the Eurydice. That's the ship. Er, where's yours? I didn't track your descent. Comms systems failure." The eyes inside the suit must have followed the turn of Breck's head and shoulders. "Hey! An L1 heavy lift shuttle. Extra fuel in the orbiter, huh? And I guess enhanced life support too."

"They call it Orpheus."

"Well I'm glad you're here." The suit held out its right hand, palm up. "Jane Allardyce."

Breck looked backwards and forwards between the visor and the mitt. Neither gave anything away.

"I'm glad you finally came to get me," said the suit, withdrawing its unslapped palm.

"I think I have a suit malfunction. I have to get inside immediately."

“Oh no, don’t even think that! After all this time. Get in the lock, get back to your ship - it’s nearer than mine. Let’s go.”

Breck’s suit was reading the stranger as a Classified Object. It was ESA-Mil, after all. The overload pop-up flashed; she disarmed the laser. She wished she could talk to Mission Control, but she couldn’t of course. So she used her initiative, and led the Classified Object in through the lock of the Orpheus lander.

It wasn’t Allardyce, but it was a woman. She was old for a spacer, especially a military one, but she did seem to be genuine. A spy? She was lying about her identity for some reason. But it seemed beyond belief that the Chinese - or anyone else for that matter - would send an agent to Pluto.

The woman sucked on a tube of cola from the galley. She smiled at Breck. “You know, when you think about it, it’s pretty amazing that ESA has sent you out here to get me. I mean they can’t even know I’m still alive.”

Breck stared. Well, she wasn’t hallucinating from any suit malfunction anyway, because she was out of the suit now. She picked up a cola. “Look, let’s get a few things straight around here. I’m here to find out what happened to the two Cerberus probes that inexplicably vanished. I don’t know anything about you and nor does ESA. What do you say we start from the top? Who are you *really*?”

The woman’s face fell. “What, you’re not here to rescue me? Us? Me?”

Breck was getting tired of playing games. “You’re not Jane Allardyce, because I went through Academy with her.”

The woman was frowning now. “Well, who’re *you*? It was a long time ago.”

“It was six years ago. She’s the same age as me. Let’s skip this, eh?”

“Breck? Michelle S Van Elsingoort-Breck?” A look came over her face, a look of recognition which should have been something heart-warming after so long, and so far from home, but it wasn’t. It was an awful look - of paralysing enlightenment.

Breck saw she was staring at the truth. “Jane? *Jane*? What the hell happened to you? What have they done to you?”

Allardyce let go of the empty tube and it fluttered away. As the two women fell into each other’s embrace, the words dried up. Eventually, Allardyce sniffed, “I’ve been stuck here for years. It must be... thirty years now. My God. I’ve lost track. All computer systems on the Eurydice are down.”

“No way. It might’ve felt like thirty years, but it can only have been a couple at the most. I mean, it’s taken me five years to get here. Even if you got here in three...”

“Look at me, M! I’m old. You’re not.”

“What are you saying?”

“The Cerberus probes? It was Dave Schwartz that put them out of action. He was trying to capture the orbiters to use the comms to communicate with the Earth, L1, anywhere. We had the lander comms, but they didn’t have enough power, of course. But whatever he did with his suit laser, it didn’t work - obviously - he put them out of action.”

“I’m losing your range here. Where’s this Dave Schwartz now? And the second Cerberus probe was launched in 2085. To reach Pluto and Charon 2090. We weren’t even at Star School then.”

“Dave’s dead. He killed himself, like the others.”

“The others? Wait a minute. Start at the beginning. Last time I saw you was when I was picked for this mission, February 2094. The party, remember?”

Allardyce hung her head, thinking. She brushed away the tears because they wouldn’t flow in the low gravity. It looked like something she was used to doing. “I don’t understand all of this either. I stayed five years in Procurement at the CSG, Kourou. September 2099, the military seconded me for a new project. Warp drive, top secret.”

“Warp drive? The warp drive doesn’t work.”

“Huh. We made it work this time. Once.”

“That’s how you got here before me.”

“Uh huh. Where they’ve always failed in the past, is because the thing needs gravitational equilibrium to work.”

Maybe Allardyce was starting to talk sense. If you were going to use a drive that warped the ‘surface’ of space, it might pay you to start from a point where it was flat to begin with. In amongst the constantly moving gravity wells of the planets and moons and rocks and indeed the sun, there were such places, where forces equalled and stabilised each other. “Lagrangian points.”

“Correct. Such as Earth-Moon L1. They used that as the send point. The receive point was Pluto-Charon L1.”

“Why, for God’s sake?”

“Security. Too crowded anywhere else in the Earth-Moon system, if anything had gone wrong. Trojans? Too much matter maybe. I don’t know. I didn’t plan it, I just flew it. If it worked, who cared about the distance? And if it didn’t work, the further the better. Just another missing spacecraft.”

“So what went wrong?”

“What went wrong was, we tried to activate the drive for the return trip. We manoeuvred ourselves into the L1 point, between Pluto and Charon. Everything was perfect.” Allardyce looked up. “We were wetting ourselves. We thought we were on the verge of travel to the stars.”

“What happened?”

“We set it up too perfect. Hugo Vis worked out all the mathematics - when it was too late. We were stationary. We were absolutely motionless at the L1 point. So instead of flipping across space, we flipped across time. We didn’t move a millimetre in space; we went back thirty years.”

Breck knew her jaw had dropped.

“So the reason the warp experiments never worked in the past was the flat space thing. And the reason it didn’t work this time is because we’d achieved absolute stasis relative to the L-point. Simple as that.”

Breck shook her head, cleared her throat. She didn’t know what to say. Her friend had been waiting here for thirty years, powerless. “Why haven’t you called L1?”

“All systems on manual. Dave thought the logical paradoxes of the time jump probably blew out the program parameters. He ought to know - he was the comms man. So no fuel to fly and no comms to call. But I knew ESA would send someone eventually. It was only whether the ecosystem would hold out long enough. The others didn’t share my faith. Unfor-

tunately. They were good people. There were four of us.”

Breck took the disk out of her suit log and laid it on the console beside the comms. Red light at the moment - the orbiter wasn't in line-of-sight. She wondered if ESA had got the drive to work yet. What Allardyce had said was true: the possibility of travel between star systems was the biggest thing since the wheel. Colonising other worlds... the possibility of alien contact.

It was a rest period. She offered Allardyce the bunk, but Allardyce said she'd only been awake for a couple of hours. She went through to the flight deck to read the latest news from L1, which was something like fourteen hours old now.

Breck had to resort to the audio program to send herself off to sleep. The possibility of a warp drive was turning over in her head. If they could get it to work properly. Get conventional thrust to cut in immediately before the warp drive activated - simple really. But as she drifted away, there was another thought trying to form itself in her mind. Something was still nagging her, something that still didn't quite fit. But she went to sleep and it was lost.

When Breck woke, the shadows had stretched a fraction further across the patch of Pluto you could see through the nose panel. Allardyce had switched on the floodlights. The lander now sat in its own little puddle of warm, golden light from Earth. The warmth was illusory: the readout said -236C.

Allardyce was asleep in the pilot's chair, news screens flashing past in front of her. The mouse had fallen down between her thigh and the side of the chair, the buttons jammed shut. Jane's thighs were fat; her chest sagged; her hair was greying; her face was lined and baggy. She was thirty years older than Breck. She'd lost half a lifetime.

The second of the two Cerberus probes had arrived here nine years ago. If Dave Schwartz had killed himself then, Jane would have been alone for nine years, since 2090. It didn't bear thinking about. Especially as she'd always been a party animal, always at the heart of any group there was. Breck had been the thinker, the dreamer; Allardyce was the one that made things happen. And yet, to anyone else's reckoning, she'd only arrived at Pluto quite recently. This year, in fact.

She was waking up. “Does your shower work?”

Breck nodded. “Sure.”

Allardyce grinned. “Wonderful. I haven't had a shower for I think three years. The one in the Eurydice broke down.”

“Help yourself. Enjoy. I'll get breakfast together.”

Eurydice: the first probe to reach Pluto and come back, they'd hoped. She couldn't wait to hear what Mission Control had to say about it. There was a green light on the comms. Hell, how long had the orbiter been in line-of-sight and she hadn't even noticed?

Fifty-five minutes! She hit the tab and the latest batch of communication came through from L1. None of it looked too interesting. Nothing in code from Mission Control: no instructions. Next time there would be, when she'd sent them the log from her suit. They'd know the ESA-Mil's warp drive had worked in principle at least. And her mission had been accomplished, she realised. The fate of the Cerberus probes was known. The late Dave Schwartz had terminated them accidentally.

The sound of the shower had stopped. “Hey, Jane!” Breck called.

“Yeah.”

“You see my suit log disk?”

“Nah.” Allardyce appeared at the flightdeck hatch. “Someone say breakfast?”

“Yeah, right, coming up. I just need to find this disk and transmit it.”

“Never mind. I’ll get it. You always were a dreamer.”

“Fine,” Breck muttered. The disk was nowhere, and there weren’t any hiding places on the console or the comms. She went aft into the suit bay. It wasn’t in the suit either.

“Catch.” Allardyce pitched a tube of orange juice at her. She giggled as Breck spun out of the way and nearly hit her head on the galley hatch surround. Breck didn’t laugh. Allardyce went through into the flightdeck. “You want me to set the autopilot?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

Breck eventually had to admit that she had lost the disk from her suit log. Unbelievable. It made her look so stupid, under the circumstances. She had to sit down at the comms and record a report for Mission Control. She had to tell them about finding the Eurydice; the fate of the Cerberus probes; about the status of the warp drive mission; and that she was on her way home with the single survivor. It wasn’t long after recording all that, and sending it, the orbiter moved out of line-of-sight again.

The two women prepared the ship for launching. Breck saw through the ventral camera that, like the Eurydice, the legs of the Orpheus had sunk in a few centimetres. The blast of the VTOLs had stripped off the methane, vaporised the water ice underneath. And though it had frozen back as soon as the thrusters cut, the legs had time to get stuck. It wasn’t a problem: the process would work just as well in reverse.

All systems checked out green. They looked at each other and nodded; Breck hit the tab. The feel of downward gravity was a pleasant sensation to Breck, after the long months of free-fall, and then the brief time in the 5% gravity of Pluto. She wondered quickly what Allardyce was thinking, after thirty years in low gravity.

They caught up with the orbiter in a couple of hours, and docked without any problems. Soon they would be back out from behind Pluto, in line-of-sight with the Earth again.

Something caught Breck’s eye on the ventral screen.

“What the - ? What’s that?” Something glittering, tumbling in free fall.

“What?” Allardyce tried to lean across to see what Breck was pointing at, but she winced and had to sit back.

Breck turned up the mag. “It’s the high gain antenna.” Range 103km, gaining. It was folded up into itself, crippled. The high gain antenna had *fallen off*? No way under the sun! So where would the comms computer send her report? Nowhere. She looked across at Allardyce, but she was staring at the screen to her left, monitoring fuel reservoir levels. Eventually, Allardyce said. “I’m sorry, M, but listen to me. I did it remotely, from the lander, while you were asleep. I programmed it to train on itself. I didn’t think it would work, but it did. Then I jettisoned it.”

Breck could feel herself going red. But she would listen. She’d listen, and then throw the bitch out the lock.

“Wait, M, listen. Thirty years I’ve been dying down there. Thirty years. You have any idea how long that is, doing nothing but waiting? Nine years I’ve been the only one left.”

“You’re wasting my air. Get to the point.”

“The point? The point is, I don’t want it to happen again.”

“What?”

“To the ‘me’ that’s happily plodding away at Kourou.” She looked at Breck and saw that Breck didn’t understand. “It’s April now? Yes, April. You put the idea into someone’s head about flat space, about L-point stasis, right? By September, they’ll have a ship ready to fly.”

“How do you know? And so what? Isn’t that what we want? Don’t they already know?”

“It’s *that* ship!” Allardyce snapped. “It’s the Eurydice - the ship I’ve been stranded on for thirty years!”

“You mean that... hasn’t happened yet?”

“That’s right,” said Allardyce. “September, that happens. They haven’t thought of it yet, get it?”

“So... what does that make you, Jane?”

Allardyce chuckled. “What’s it matter? There’s a kid your age down there in Kourou, who’s going to do thirty years on that snowball, if we tell them about the drive.”

“I hate to say this, but against the possible benefits of warp drive travel, that’s a pretty small price to pay.”

“Would you pay it?”

“Well, not if I didn’t have to. But if it was that or nothing, yes I would.”

Allardyce stared at her for a long moment. “Well you can’t anyway, now I’ve jettisoned the antenna.”

“There’s still the low gain. The antenna on the lander.”

“We won’t be in range for months yet. Years.”

“True, but I know what I’ve got to do.”

Allardyce sat back. “They trained you good, didn’t they?”

Breck was thinking. “But when they find out, it’ll be past the September window,” she said.

“I hadn’t thought of that. What does that mean? It’ll be a different mission?”

“Right, and not doomed to failure. Not at all, with what you can tell them, Jane.”

Allardyce snorted. “I won’t be telling them anything.”

“What? Why not?”

“Well, think about it. If the news of your findings reaches L1 too late for a September launch, none of this will have happened to me. I won’t be here.”

“Then... nothing will have happened to the Cerberus orbiters either. All four landers will probably still be on line. They won’t have sent me on this God-forsaken wild goose chase.” Breck frowned. “What, I’ll have imagined it? All that stuff about the warp drive? I just imagined it all?”

“Let’s go with: ‘invented it’.”

Breck thought about that for a long time, staring out at the stars while she mulled over the implications. When she eventually turned, she was alone in the L1 heavy lift shuttle. Routine equipment transfer, L1 to Sinus Medii Base - the suborbital. Maybe this kind of thing hap-

pened all the time - loops opening and closing in the fourth dimension - some sort of equalisation of tension between potential realities. In fact maybe reality itself was nothing more than...

Stop fantasising, Breck! How much more of her life was she going to daydream away over this concrete-coloured Lunar desert? But this flat space thing, it was a real idea. It was a real idea now, at least. And ESA's warp attempts had all mysteriously failed up to now, all in the crowded Earth-Moon gravity well. The agency was desperate to find a way out of the solar system, to reap the unguessable harvest of the stars. If they could make the warp drive work, there'd be no looking back.

Quickly she dialled Allardyce's number at Kourou. It was a sound idea, but still a vague one at the moment. If there was anyone in the world who could turn a good idea into reality, it was Jane Allardyce.

THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

by

© Stephen Green

“Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure.”

A German lieutenant-Stalingrad 1942.

Stalingrad. Russia. September 1942. Hell on Earth. The nights are getting colder setting my mind drifting back to Moscow, less than a year ago. My first Russian winter. I barely survived it. Some warm winter clothing would have helped, but, as usual, our glorious Leader was hopelessly out of touch with the condition of his troops at the front. Moscow was supposed to have been ours long before the onset of winter. It should have been easy, after all, the Russians were sub-human, poor fighters we were told; most would welcome us as liberating heroes, freeing them from the yoke of Bolshevism. What happened in reality? Scorched earth, that's what. Whole plains laid waste. Farms put to the torch, vehicles destroyed, animals slaughtered. Nothing was left behind that might have been of use to us. Welcome to Russia my friends.

So here we are again. History is repeating itself. Winter is coming. The people of Stalingrad have refused to give up their city. I hear Stalin himself, has forbidden any retreat. He would get on with Hitler if they ever met. His subjects are obeying him to the letter. They would be shot anyway if they did try to escape. This is the main reason why our platoon hasn't moved for days.

We haven't moved, yet the scenery changes daily, like you were sitting in a moving train, staring out of the window. Walls crumble, trees vanish, roads become blocked with rubble overnight. Nothing remains the same for long. Except death. It is all around us. Death never sleeps, never changes. Ever watchful, striking at will, seemingly at random. Willy got a visit last night, while he was sleeping. Direct hit. I heard his brief scream. Death has become a constant companion, ever ready to place his cold hand upon your shoulder. Some of us are ready to meet him half-way. We would welcome his deadly embrace. Life is not so great here.

I'm half buried in my bomb-crater. I can feel the weight of the rubble pressing down on my back and legs, covering me from view. Even if I wanted to, I doubt if my legs would support me if I needed to make a run for it, I have been pinned in this position for so long.

I dare not move. I sense, rather than see, the enemy moving. We have christened this battle, 'a war of the rats'. We eat like rats, smell like rats, and the Russians are forever scuttling between buildings, through holes they have made in the walls. You can hear their feet, scut-

ting like rats.

I can peer out of a slit in the dusty rubble, a hole just big enough to aim my rifle out of. Each day brings a different image. The foreground remains the same, but the background alters continuously. Today I notice that a chimney, all that remained of a factory, has fallen during the night. I can see the weak, pale sun that fails to warm the body. And I can see that damned Ruski sniper.

I can't really. But I know he's there. Waiting, as I'm waiting, for just one false move that will give my position away and open the door for a visit from Mr. Death. We are very alike, the Ruski and me. A hundred and fifty yards separate us, and yet I feel I know him. Each of us is a skilled killer. We take pride in our work. Not for us, the frenzied assault and battery that takes place all around us. Houses here, are taken room by room, using any weapon that comes to hand. Ammunition is short, so both sides use knives, bayonets, clubs, bricks, sticks and stones, even bare hands. Not me. I'm a specialist. A sniper.

My skill lies in being able to lay in one position for hours, days even, and then strike as swift as a cobra. But mostly I wait. Watching and waiting. It's a battle of wits, one on one. As honourable and chivalrous as you're likely to get in this hell-hole. How long have I been here? A lifetime, or so it seems. A lifetime of choking dust, rubble, blood and sweat. I try not to think of home. I doubt it exists anymore. Bombed to rubble. My mind fills with images of a world full of bombed out buildings, corpse lined roads, the charred remains of trees. I can't remember a time when it wasn't so.

So we wait, my Russian friend and I. How can I call him my friend? After all, we have never met. But I have. He is me, and I am him. Two sides of a coin. Two professionals bound by duty. It is that simple. If you took duty away, where would you be? You'd have two rag-tag armies running from each other in disarray, that's what you'd have. Hitler and Stalin would not stand for such behaviour. We two, recognise this fact and so make our stand. Men of honour, two knights, obeying the rules, maintaining order in the midst of all this chaos.

If you look for long enough, things will move, even if you know it to be impossible. In the two days I have watched over my Russian friend, I have seen a brick move. I had begun to watch it when I thought I saw movement next to it. A steel helmet? Possibly. But I was too slow that time. You have to be sure before you get a shot off. The odds of success were not high, and there is no point in giving away your position needlessly. That would be a mistake. Probably your last mistake. I watched that brick for hours, through my sights, never taking my eyes off it. The sun seemed to bounce off the top edge of the brick, highlighting it against the surrounding rubble. The hands of a clock, if you stare at it for long enough, will appear to stand still, yet when you blink, they will have moved. That is how it was with the brick. It didn't move, yet after a few hours I was certain that it had. Ruski was enlarging his spy hole.

Nightfall. And with it, the first flurries of snow as the temperature dips below freezing. Unlike my memories of a childhood, the snow does not blanket the earth, stilling it into silence. The battle rages on. The darkness amplifies the horror. In the distance I hear the hellish firework shriek of the Katyusha rocket-launchers delivering salvo after salvo of high explosive, followed swiftly by the deep rumble as they impact indiscriminately on the city. Nearer to my position, the laughing chatter of machine guns echoes around the empty shells of buildings. Every now and then, a scream. I wonder if my twin brother Hans had screamed when he had fallen during the retreat from Moscow.

We had served in different units, Hans and me. We had never been apart until the war. I knew he was in Moscow in '41, just as I was, but we never met. I would have traded a whole months leave just to have met him once before he died.

Our mother had told us of his death when I had finally returned home after the Moscow front collapsed. I knew something was wrong as I got off the train. The stationmaster had recognised me. God only knows how, as I had lost four stone, my face was gaunt and tired, my uniform ill-fitting. His eyes had met mine and then fallen away. I saw the sadness. Hans' body was never recovered of course. He was left, along with everything else, buried somewhere in an icy tomb. The official letter said he had been killed in action. There was also a letter from his commanding officer; a glowing testimony to my brother. He had died, fighting a gallant rear-guard action against overwhelming numbers during the retreat. He had been a fine soldier. My mother had not been so sure.

Hours pass in the darkness. I continue to watch. The occasional flare lights up the sky, ruining my night vision for long minutes. I wonder if my friend has used the opportunity to move his position, or even to escape completely. No, I reason, he would do no such thing. There was honour at stake. He would sit it out, like me, waiting for one of us to make a mistake. We were locked in mortal combat, and only one of us would walk out alive.

Dawn crept up. And with it, the shrill, mechanical cacophony of a solitary tank. I prayed that it wouldn't come my way. We had no need for an interloper in this battle of patience and wits. I peered anxiously along my sights. The tank was getting nearer. There it was! The tank stopped, as if it could smell my fear. It seemed unsure as to which way to progress. The engine ticked over slowly. It was like a lumbering giant, strong, but not too intelligent. I could sense the crew scratching their heads. Which way to the front comrades? If it turned left, the game would be up. Both Ruski and me stood to be crushed under the squealing tracks, like insects under a boot.

Seconds passed like hours. The tank just sat there. A sitting target. Someone could destroy it no problem. What were we waiting for? Come on somebody! Hit the damned thing! I cursed silently, my eyes darted from tank to the brick. If the tank did come our way, Ruski would have to move first. Or be crushed. And he would be mine.

But I didn't want it to end this way. It would be cheating. I wanted us to be left alone to fight our battle in peace. I prayed to a god I no longer believed in. God had died in Moscow. No god would allow the barbarity and suffering that I had witnessed. The starving, emaciated troops, many of them good friends of mine, who had survived the campaigns in Poland, Belgium, France and North Africa, only to collapse, exhausted, and frozen to death in temperatures of minus fifty in their thin summer tunics. I deserted God. And I deserted Adolf Hitler.

We heard his rantings on the radio, telling the German people of victory after victory. This was all right during the first two years of the war, when there were only victories. Now, here in Russia, on the front line, we knew the truth of it. We had listened incredulously last winter as he lied to us. Didn't he know that we were listening to him? Disbelief quickly turned to anger. Only our discipline kept us together. We knew that if one of us ran, then somebody else would die because of it. And besides, where could you run to? The Fatherland was hundreds of miles to the rear. You would never make it. No, it was better to stick together. At least you could die amongst friends. Or so I thought at the time.

The tank suddenly brewed up. I saw the explosion before I heard it. I watched as the twin turret hatches opened. I watched as tiny black figures struggled to escape. They didn't make it. The fuel tank went up in a ball of orange flame which sent the turret flying into the air before landing on its side. I could see the two black figures hanging limply from their metal coffin.

I thanked the god I didn't believe in.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Well, for me it did. Others weren't so lucky. All day, a miniature war raged down the left side of the street. Once it was so close, I could hear the grunts and shouts as the opposing rabble battered hell out of each other with their makeshift clubs. And I heard the screams. Death was having another good day.

There would be lulls. The Russians would give up a room and withdraw, only to be sent back with the next wave to try and recapture the few grimy square feet of burnt out concrete they had minutes before, lost. The opposing forces scuttled back and forth. The war of the rats.

All the time this was going on, I was waiting. It occurred to me more than once that maybe my Russian friend had either moved or had died. I would discount the first. The second was harder to push to one side. It was a real possibility. A rat would be hard pressed to survive out here in the open.

As dusk fell, fate provided a chance to prove to myself that the Ruski was still alive. In the half light, made all the more murky with all the drifting smoke wafting from windowless buildings, I saw movement. There, behind Ruski. A figure, hunched up and moving painfully slowly amongst the grey rubble and twisted metal. It was an old woman, dressed in rags. It was hard to believe that some families had elected to stay in this hell, but it was true. We had come across several ourselves, whilst out on patrol, huddled together in dank basements, and in the sewers. Old women, mothers, children. I cannot speak for others, but our platoon left them alone. We could barely look them in their petrified eyes. We felt responsible.

I remember young Kessel offering one tiny child with an old man's face, a piece of stale bread that he could ill-afford himself. Every now and again, food would make its way to the front line, horse meat gruel that had long since gone cold, but there could be several days before we would eat again. The child had snatched at the bread, wolfing it down before his mother had the chance to make him share it. Lieutenant Hoffman had shouted at Kessel, forbidding him to repeat his action. He needed his men fit to fight, not starving because they had given away what little food they had to civilians.

We knew Hoffman was right. But you could see in his eyes that deep down he approved of the young soldier's action. It proved to him that we had not yet descended to the level of animals. Not yet. That would come later.

The old woman was now directly behind my opposite number, her back bent, as if she was carrying a sack of coal. I didn't know what the hell she was doing out here. She was as likely to get shot by her own side as she was from us. What made her take such a risk? I felt angry at her for her stupidity. These people who are determined to go about their daily business as if there was no war, no carnage. Did she expect to find shops open, selling bread, meat, fresh vegetables? There wasn't a shop open for miles around!

I could shoot her. She deserved it. And I could give my position away to Ruski. He would fire. Would he hit me? He'd have to be a hell of a shot. Somehow, I knew that he would hit. A clean shot, right between the eyes. I wouldn't know what hit me. Would I die with a smile on my lips, happy that I had been proven right? Or would I have time to curse my stupidity?

I steadied my aim on the old woman. I could show off with a head shot, perhaps. Or maybe play safe with a shot to the chest. You could clip a limb and she would still almost certainly die through shock and blood loss.

Still the old woman made her unhurried way across my sights. I thought of my mother.

Would she crawl amongst the rubble in Hamburg? I hoped not, but part of me thought, hoped even, that she would. My mother has a stubborn streak. The almost nightly bombings had not prevented her from living her life as she always had. She had passed that stubbornness to Hans and me. I lowered my sights. I could not kill her. She reminded me too much of my mother, Hans and young Kessel. I was not an animal.

The old woman reached the other side of the street and disappeared to safety. I slumped inwardly in relief, sweat running down my face.

That night I received orders to move out. I heard Lieutenant Hoffman shouting from the ruined buildings a hundred yards behind me. He knew I was out here, somewhere.

“Gruber! Can you hear me! We’re pulling out!” Hoffman shouted without exposing himself.

I did not reply. I cursed him. He was going to rob me of my victory. And I was so near. No one had lasted this long against me, and though I respected his tenacity, Ruski was going to break. I just knew it. The tank had been destroyed, the old woman had been spared. They were signs.

“Gruber! Answer me man! Hurry!” Hoffman sounded agitated.

No. I would not be cheated. I came to a decision. I would stay here till my work was done. Then I would slip away and with luck, rejoin my unit. It would be easy to lie, to say that I hadn’t heard the order to withdraw.

Hoffman shouted out a few more times then gave up. Or so I presumed, though when gunfire opened up in that direction, it could have been that he was too busy fighting off the enemy. I was glad I had stayed. Gratefully, I shut my eyes and tried to sleep, hoping that I could keep the nightmares at bay for once.

Dawn arrived. Something was different today. I had slept fitfully, trying to forget the cramps that ravaged my body. That and the battle that raged around me all night. By dawn, the fire-fight had died out, like a camp-fire left to burn itself out overnight. It was cold, but more than this, it was unusually quiet. I listened for several minutes. Nothing. Too quiet. Even if I had been back home, holidaying in the mountains before the war, there would have been more noise than there was here, and I was right in the middle of a war zone. At least I was last night.

I scanned Ruski’s hide. I wondered if he was as puzzled as I was? Where was everyone else? Had peace been declared? Had the two armies separated? For a moment I pictured the two armies, face to face, lining the street, or watching out of windows. Me and Ruski over there were each our nation’s champion. Our individual battle would decide the war. Man pitted against man in mortal combat, like the knights of old.

The sound of sporadic shelling in the far distance shattered the illusion. The war had not stopped, merely moved on. Me and my Red Army friend were alone. I don’t know how I was sure of that, I just was. Call it instinct.

So I waited. And watched. I felt so tired. Tired is too small a word for what I felt at that moment. My concentration wavered, my mind drifting like a lazy river in summer, swollen by the spring rains, dragging memories from the bottom. Muddled reminiscences from my so recent childhood. A time of innocence, when the summers seemed to go on for ever. Long days filled with adventure. There were trees to climb, fish to catch, games of football to be

won. Me and Hans with our medals, him for long jump, me for cross-country running. Innocent medals, won before we had joined the Hitler youth and traded in our childhood.

Images of Hans welled up. Hans, frozen in mid-step, trying to escape the clutches of the Russian winter, icicles hanging from the sleeves of his stiffening ragged uniform, snow clinging to his body, sucking out any remaining warmth.

I found myself sobbing. Not the single tear that would fall during the odd night when no-one could see. This was a flood, and I could not stop it. I was blinded, my gun- sights useless to me.

I snapped. I lashed out at the rubble that had lain on me for days, kicking and thrashing about. Anyone who could have seen me would have thought I was battling with invisible demons, and perhaps I was. Rocks went flying, planks of wood snapped under heavy boots. I was a mad man. Possessed.

The madness passed and I lay still. Exhausted. And as I lay there, my breath exploding out of me in chest-tightening gasps, I realised that I was still alive. Ruski had missed every chance in the world to shoot me dead. Even if he had, by some miracle, missed, I would not have seen him, and he would have succeeded with his second shot.

I lay still, on my back, wiping away my tears, thinking. And then I did the unthinkable. It was so clear to me. I stood up. Ruski had a clear shot at me. And he was there all right. I saw the tiniest motion betray him, no doubt astonished at my actions.

I stepped out of the crater, exposing myself completely, keeping my empty hands clearly visible. Don't ask me why I did this, I didn't know myself. I just knew that I was safe. Instinct again.

I began to walk towards the Russian's position. Part of me wanted to run, wanted to zig-zag across the killing ground, wanting to present as small a target as possible. But I didn't. I controlled the panic and walked steadily, marching almost, the sound of a military band in my head. Nothing happened.

Ten yards to go. I was almost upon him. We were actually going to meet. At last. I stopped. I wanted him to show himself. I wanted to meet as equals, standing, eye to eye in this empty place. I waited. At first I thought he was going to disappoint me and shoot me where I stood. Then I heard a voice.

"Kurt."

My head swam, memories eddying in a whirlpool of emotion. I was stunned.

"Hans?" It was his voice! What trickery was this? Was I going mad?

I heard a body move in the shelter. A figure emerged, back turned away from me, covered in dust. I would have recognised that back anywhere.

"Hans! It's you!..... It's really you?" He was wearing a Russian uniform.

"Hello Kurt. It's good to see you." Hans' voice was even, weary, I thought, like the war had drained all life from it.

I stepped forward to embrace my brother. He stepped back.

"What is it Hans? It's me, Kurt. Remember?"

"Don't come any nearer Kurt. Please."

"Why?" I laughed. "It's only me." I looked at him, staring into his face. He seemed pale, haggard. I don't know why I should have been surprised, I was sure I looked just as bad.

“I.... We, were told you were dead. Killed near Moscow, during the retreat.”

“I was.”

It took a few seconds for this statement to register in my brain. My eyes opened wide.

“I’m not really here, Kurt. I don’t exist really. Not in the real world. I’ve left this world behind.”

“You mean you’re a ghost?”

“That’s one way of putting it, yes.”

I felt angry. All that time I thought I was pitting my wits against a Russian sniper. I felt cheated somehow. Hans must have guessed what I was thinking.

“I’m looking after you, brother. Keeping you safe. Mother will need a son when this war is over. I’m here to make sure she gets one. She deserves that, at least.”

“I’ve been lying here for days! How is that protection!”

“Have you seen Lieutenant Hoffman?.... Oh, of course not.....Just as well really. You see, he’s dead, along with the rest of your platoon. I merely had to keep your attention. I know how stubborn you can be. I was glad you didn’t shoot that old woman by the way. It would have given the game away.”

I took this information in. I’m not sure it really sunk in straight away. I felt numb. Hoffman and the boys, all dead? It was easy to believe, in Stalingrad.

“What now?” I asked

“I will watch over you. That does not mean you can be reckless, Kurt. You can still die. But I can guide you, try to keep you from Death’s door..... Two hundred yards in that direction, you will find friendly troops. You will be safe there for a while. Go now. There is no time to argue.”

Even as Hans said this, his body seemed to fade slightly, and the Russian uniform changed to a German one.

I stared disbelieving for long seconds as my brother became ever fainter, and then I stumbled away in the direction my brother had indicated. Scared of what lay in front, scared of what lay behind me. Maybe that was no bad thing. In Stalingrad.

TERROR OF BUTTERFLIES

by

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As Ruth staggered through her front door, the wind chimes spoke. 'Greetings.' They sounded like distant flutes, or perhaps the laughter of fairies. Ruth dropped her shopping, pushed her glasses up her nose and glared.

The wind chimes had been a present from Malaysia. From a chaotic oscillator hung various metal characters - a wizened man, a maiden, a dog - that danced and tinged against each other in a manner that Ruth found enchanting. They had, however, never spoken before; Ruth rather suspected a practical joke of Marlon's.

'Good afternoon,' said Ruth, tidying her steel-grey bun. Practical joke or not, she knew that even wind chimes deserved the courtesies of etiquette.

'Did you,' said the wind chimes, 'enjoy your shopping?'

'On the contrary,' said Ruth briskly, 'I nearly burst a blood vessel and came away loathing the entire human race. The check-out boys are imbeciles and two people in my queue insisted on paying by cash. And the meat counter had no stegosaurus.'

'Again?' said the wind chimes.

'I would accuse you of rifling through my weekly shopping,' said Ruth, 'were you not a rather attractive set of Malaysian wind chimes. Thank you for this chat and I would love to stay longer - but this shopping must go in the stasis. Do excuse me. We must do this again sometime.'

'I'll give you a tinkle,' said the wind chimes, then contented itself with music as its maiden gavotted with its dog. Ruth shut the front door, reactivated the field generator, picked up her shopping and staggered thoughtfully into the kitchen.

She smelled Marlon before she saw him. Ruth had spent time and money in pursuit of elegance, producing a kitchen that pleased the eye - but Marlon's presence offended every sensibility. He slouched in the glass furniture, tapping cigarette ash into a pot plant and reading the Times. Age and alcohol had swelled his belly and softened his brain, but he was still the same cheerfully abrasive slob that Ruth had married thirty years before. He had seemed funny then.

'Hey, Ruthie!' Marlon tapped his newspaper. 'You seen this?'

Ruth gave her husband an ashtray - which promptly and mysteriously filled with crisps -

**1996
Competition
Runner-up**

then put away her shopping. 'Marlon, the wind chimes just spoke.'

'No, listen to this.' He barely acknowledged her presence and certainly acted nothing like a gleeful prankster. 'The government's put up income tax to six per cent. Typical socialists; leeching the poor. It's all right for us - '

Ruth adopted her coldest voice. 'They asked if I enjoyed my shopping.'

'Probably trying to draw attention from their new taxes.'

'The wind chimes, Marlon,' said Ruth.

Marlon turned to page six. 'It might be worth paying tax in Catalonia; I hear they've got a three per cent flat rate. Hawaii's introducing a national insurance scheme, so we'd better move our income registration back to the Old World. Where do you reckon? Asia?'

'A scorpion is exploring your underpants,' tried Ruth.

'Singapore's given up capital gains tax,' said Marlon, frowning at the newspaper.

'I'm delighted for them,' Ruth lied. 'If you'll excuse me, I must now go and fantasise about throttling you until your eyes pop.'

Marlon nodded, waving dismissively, then a lop-sided grin crept across his face as he looked up and winked. 'Steady with the jokes, darling.'

'Who says I'm joking?' said Ruth, smiling, and went to her study.

In this book-laden refuge, she had been unfaithful to her husband almost daily ever since they married. Not physically, of course, but Ruth cared little for matters of the flesh. No, her illegitimate children stood proudly on the bookshelf, bound in vellum with gold spine lettering: THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE, by Ruth Esther Lucarotti; CHARLEMAGNE by R E Lucarotti; THE CAROLINGIAN RENAISSANCE by Ruth Esther.

And plugged in at the wall was Ruth's collaborator. 'Boaz,' Ruth said, sitting at her desk.

'Mrs Ruth,' replied bO/A-Z.

Ruth smiled at the pedantic voice. She had never analysed her feelings for the robot; doing so made her uncomfortable. She did not love him, of course. The idea was absurd; besides, Ruth knew herself incapable of such a foolish emotion. She was fond of Boaz - very fond, she occasionally admitted to herself - and that was all. As the metal god unplugged himself and strode forward to jack himself into the screen, modem and printer, Ruth sprayed him with polish and rubbed his sculpted body. It was almost a ritual. Boaz was beautiful; an art deco robot, like something carved from bronze by ancient Greeks.

'Dr. Hogge has published another thesis on Roman naval strategy,' said Boaz. 'Shall I download it?'

'Not yet,' said Ruth. 'Tell me everything you know about wind chimes.'

Three days later, Ruth visited her sister. The wind chimes had not spoken again and her investigation of them had proved fruitless, so she had returned to her book and, upon finishing chapter eleven, had treated herself.

'How's Marlon?' asked Valerie as three children chased a dinosaur around the garden.

'Much as always,' said Ruth coldly, sipping tea.

'I never could understand why you married him. Mind you I was only ten at the time.' Valerie leaned around in her garden chair to bellow at her offspring. 'You'd better not be mistreating Oscar!'

'No, mum!' Children giggled, but the dinosaur charged at Valerie and tried to hide under her chair. Ruth leaned forward and scratched its smooth head. The dinosaur turned big, reptilian eyes in her direction and started purring.

'You haven't handled any rabbits recently, have you?' said Valerie.

'Rabbits?' said Ruth, bewildered.

'He hunts by smell.'

'Oh no,' said Ruth and kept scratching. 'Beautiful, isn't he?'

'Auntie Ruth?' A child presented itself, standing well back as it regarded Ruth with apparent fear.

Feeling chagrined, Ruth beckoned the child forward. Had she become a monster in her old age. 'Tabitha, isn't it?'

The child retreated. Goldfinches abandoned the bird table.

'Do you want Oscar back?' said Valerie.

The child nodded.

'Her you are,' said Ruth and pushed the dinosaur forward. Oscar growled, but acquiesced without violence when the child grabbed its neck and tugged it away.

'I always feel like I'm watching them play with a snake,' said Valerie.

Ruth agreed in silence for as long as she could, then changed the subject. For once, she felt tentative. 'How's she doing these days?'

'Tabitha?' said Valerie. 'Wonderfully. Her teachers send glowing reports.' There was a pause. 'I'm sorry about just now.'

'Quite all right,' said Ruth, a little too quickly. 'She hardly knows me, Valerie. I don't visit often enough.'

The goldfinches flew into the branches overhead as Valerie drummed her fingers. 'I disagree,' she said eventually. 'You send presents; you come when you can. No, it's Tabitha's fault. She's nervous.'

'Does she know?' asked Ruth.

Valerie shook her head. 'She assumes I just wanted a big family. I'll tell her when she's older.'

'The first three for you,' said Ruth, remembering. 'Then one for me.'

'You don't regret your...' Valerie tailed off, blushing. 'You don't wish you could have had children yourself?'

Ruth shrugged. 'It's getting more common every year. One in three women will be barren by the next century. No, I don't let myself brood. I just - ' She stopped herself, a little flustered, and collected her thoughts. 'You had Tabitha and I still have my writing. I count myself lucky.'

'If you say so.' Valerie sounded unconvinced. 'Any other news?'

'No,' Ruth said, then remembered the wind chimes. 'Actually, yes. It's an odd story, but -',

A fight overhead distracted her. As Ruth looked up in astonishment, two male goldfinches started chasing each other among the branches, screeching as feathers rained down on the garden table below. Valerie covered the tea urn, but Ruth frowned as the goldfinches aban-

doned the tree and whizzed around the garden like mad things, flitting from bush to bush. Suddenly, they cannoned between Valerie and Ruth, knocking over a tea cup.

The children squealed with laughter, but Valerie yelled. One goldfinch fled the garden and the victor fluttered above the gate, cheeping bad-temperedly, before condescending to return to the tree and sing. A roof-mounted defence system tracked the fleeing bird with its blaster cannon, but soon returned to watching the garden.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Valerie said, reaching for the tea cup, and knocked the sugar over, too. ‘Let me get you another.’

‘It’s nothing,’ said Ruth, concerned about other matters. ‘Why did they do that? The goldfinches, I mean; it’s hardly spring any more.’ To her, it seemed more than odd; almost suspicious. She looked down at the table - and gasped.

Spilled tea, sugar, feathers and even the odd twig and leaf had fallen together, forming words. A torn leaf formed a capital D, while its curling stem resembled an O. Tea and sugar had spattered across the table to form an N, an O and a T - a feather formed the cross-bar for the latter - and the final word read TELL. The E was the most curious of all, being written in a leaf’s veins. Presumably that leaf had been growing up there all year, waiting to fall as part of some arboreal alphabet. Ruth wondered if climbing the tree would reveal further letters, being grown in preparation for other messages - to Valerie’s children, perhaps. DO YOUR HOMEWORK would be a good one, although Ruth had trouble imagining a tree holding opinions on scholastic standards. Maybe it would tell them to RECYCLE PAPER.

No, that was idiotic. This was a random occurrence; a freak. Ruth shuddered, annoyed with herself, and poked the message, destroying it. ‘Where was I?’

Valerie was staring at her. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘Nothing,’ snapped Ruth.

‘More tea?’

‘I’m quite all right.’ She drummed her fingers, thinking, then remembered her story. ‘Ah yes, the wind chimes.’

The sky darkened and the goldfinches stopped singing. Coincidence, Ruth told herself, but Valerie glanced upwards. ‘It’s getting a bit nippy, Ruth. Would you rather go inside?’

‘Not until I’ve finished my story.’ Ruth was starting to feel conspired against, which made her more determined to finish what she’d started. As the wind picked up and Valerie waited with ever more strained politeness, Ruth told her sister about the wind chimes, Marlon’s reaction and what little information she and Boaz had found. It did not feel like a practical joke, but no alternative seemed credible.

The story ended. The sky brightened. Ruth glared at it, but said nothing.

‘Fascinating,’ said Valerie. ‘Have you tried taking the wind chimes apart?’

No no,’ said Ruth instantly. ‘It’s not important, it’s just... Have you any idea what might have caused it?’

‘It’s driven by a chaotic oscillator, isn’t it?’

Ruth hesitated. ‘I think so.’

‘It could be a chaotic effect. You know, butterfly wings and random patterns; that sort of thing. It’s not my field, but you might try asking Boaz.’

That evening, Ruth took her sister's advice. Marlon was in bed, snoring like a pig, when Ruth slipped down to her study. As always, the robot was courteous and ready. Ruth bounced to her desk and sat there, leaning forward and eager to talk.

'Boaz,' said Ruth.

'Mrs Ruth,' said Boaz.

'I've been talking to my sister,' said Ruth, 'and she thinks the chaotic oscillator on the wind chimes might have caused the problem I mentioned. What do you think?'

'Using modem.' Boaz was silent for a while, then clapped his hands like a schoolboy. They clanged. 'Data downloaded. I can now discuss chaos.'

'Store data permanently,' said Ruth, then giggled. 'Okay, shoot.'

Boaz stood, then started pacing up and down as he talked. 'Do you know anything about the clockwork universe?'

Ruth shook her head.

Boaz explained. 'After Newton discovered his laws of mechanics, scientists came to think of the universe as a huge mechanism. They imagined every atom to be governed by Newton's mathematics, down to the smallest detail. If this were so, then knowing the state of the universe at any one instant would determine its entire future to infinite precision.'

'That's rubbish,' said Ruth. 'What about free will?'

'That's where chaos comes in,' said Boaz. 'Machines have no free will, since our decisions are made by rules. I only seem intelligent because of sophisticated programming. In reality, I have no more consciousness than a toaster or television.'

Ruth was shocked. She tried to tell herself that it was senseless to feel so upset, but it felt like learning of a best friend's death. 'That's horrible - '

'Sympathy is unnecessary. May I continue?'

'Yes,' said Ruth distractedly, then pinched herself and concentrated. Nothing had changed; she had no reason to get hysterical. For his sake, she repeated, 'Yes,' more firmly.

'The clockwork universe is flawed for two reasons,' said Boaz, as if nothing had happened. 'The first is quantum mechanics and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which concerns the atomic level. The other is chaos.'

'So chaos is part of free will?' Ruth felt an idea coming.

'That's one theory. Do you know what chaos is?'

'No,' Ruth admitted.

'Chaotic systems are basically out of control. No matter how accurately you try to measure what's going on, your errors always grow exponentially fast and wreck your calculations. To pin down a chaotic system, you would have to measure it to infinite precision - and the universe itself does not exist to infinite precision. Smaller than an atom, things get fuzzy.'

Ruth interrupted him. 'Hold on. If no chaos means no consciousness - '

'I didn't say that.'

'I said hold on.' Ruth collected her thoughts. 'What if chaotic systems are becoming conscious? Any chaotic system? Give me some examples.'

'Certain ecosystems. The weather,' said Boaz. 'Even simple systems can be chaotic; a pendulum hanging from a moving pivot.'

‘Intelligent weather,’ said Ruth and found the idea scary. ‘Why didn’t it want me to tell Valerie about the wind chimes?’

‘I cannot guess,’ said Boaz.

Ruth glanced around her study, suddenly nervous. Here she had spent most of her life. Here - hopefully - she was safe from chaos, but she still felt uncomfortably like one who teased a god. If a butterfly’s wings could cause a hurricane, then what had Ruth started? ‘I don’t think this conversation need go beyond this room, Boaz.’

‘Is that an order?’

‘Yes, it is.’ Ruth could hear noises outside; hopefully, it wasn’t just the wind. ‘Someone - somewhere - is touchy about what we just discussed. But if no one ever learns about your speculations, we should be okay. I’ll go back to my books and...’

Ruth tailed off.

‘Is something wrong?’ said Boaz. He sounded so concerned, Ruth thought. She would never think of him as just a machine. Never.

She pointed. ‘The window.’

It was ajar. Five minutes ago, it had been shut and the field generator activated; Ruth was careful about such things these days, since one never knew what lived out there. Science, the blind idiot god, had spawned marvels and horrors; the world was more wonderful, but also more dangerous. Ruth walked towards the window, feeling cold air on her face, then stopped. Only darkness was visible outside. Those noises returned in Ruth’s memory; perhaps things were already inside the house. She had heard stories: people found dead in their homes or, worse, never found at all. She retreated behind her desk, watching the window. The curtain shifted.

‘Shut the window,’ she ordered, her voice rising. ‘Now! Shut it!’

Boaz walked forward and pushed the glass. The window clicked shut, then the field generator hummed back into life as if it had never died. The room became warmer. ‘Odd,’ said Boaz.

‘Suspicious,’ corrected Ruth, trembling. ‘No, scary.’ She sat down heavily, trying to control her thoughts and feelings. She was too old for such nonsense. ‘Check the house integrity. We don’t want some genetic lab escapee setting up home here.’

‘Yes, Mrs Ruth.’ Boaz headed for the door, but Ruth stopped him.

‘Wait,’ she said quickly.

As always, he obeyed. ‘What is wrong?’

Ruth tried to say what she wanted to say - but failed. ‘How do you think it happened?’ she asked instead, hating herself.

‘Chance,’ said Boaz instantly. ‘A power cut. Fluctuations in the natural electromagnetic field. Rats in the basement. Who knows?’

Ruth nodded as if she had guessed. She paused, gathering her courage, then managed to ask the real question. ‘You don’t have any more nasty surprises for me, do you?’

‘I do not understand.’

She watched his sculpted, beautiful face, hoping for emotions. ‘That consciousness rubbish. You’re my friend, Boaz. Friends don’t say things like that to other friends.’

Boaz inclined his head. ‘As you wish.’

‘Good,’ said Ruth. With a little double-think, she could still pretend that Boaz was what she wanted him to be. ‘Thank you. That will be all.’

The next day’s weather was dreadful. Ruth looked through a window thick with fighting rain-drops and grumbled at the sky. ‘Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to,’ she warned it, then stomped back into the kitchen to brew herself some tea. Marlon gave her an odd look.

‘You’ve been spending too much time with your robot,’ he said.

‘Do something useful,’ suggested Ruth. ‘Commit suicide.’

‘You’ll be funny one day.’ Marlon spread his newspaper across the kitchen floor, got coffee and doughnuts, then lay down like a beached whale to read. ‘Have you seen my market analyser?’

‘Here.’ Ruth picked a calculator-like handset from behind the kettle and tossed it to him.

‘Careful!’ Marlon caught it, tapped a few buttons and frowned. ‘It’s not working.’

‘Maybe you shouldn’t have left it behind the kettle.’

‘That shouldn’t affect it.’ Marlon shook it, checked its batteries and eventually tossed it aside. He seemed disturbed, although his tone was light. ‘Odd. Well, it’s still under guarantee. I’ll just have to use pencil and paper this morning.’

‘Would you like to use Boaz?’ Ruth wanted to work too, but Marlon’s need was greater than hers.

‘No,’ said Marlon.

His manner surprised and insulted Ruth. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘No, thank you,’ Marlon amended with bad grace. ‘Keep your tin man.’

‘As you wish,’ said Ruth coldly. After making her tea, she left the kitchen to be with Boaz.

The weather was worsening. As Ruth entered her study, thunder rumbled overhead and the lights flickered - which was supposedly impossible. It was bad enough that light was needed at eleven in the morning. A drumming noise suggested hail. Ruth plonked herself behind her desk and grumbled as Boaz glided forward.

‘Was any of this forecast?’ asked Ruth.

‘None,’ said Boaz. ‘The weather service predicted a sunny day, with perhaps a chance of rain in Lyonesse and Cantref y Gwaelod.’

‘A chance of rain. Hah!’ Ruth looked through the window at bushes bowing under the weight of rain or hail. She could hardly hear herself think. ‘I think we can safely say that our conversation of last night was overheard.’

‘It seems probable.’

‘Stone-cold certainty, more like. Look at that rain. Someone doesn’t like us.’ A nasty thought struck Ruth. ‘You did check the field generator, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, Mrs Ruth.’

‘Did you find out what happened to it?’

‘No, Mrs Ruth.’

The robot’s calm soothed Ruth. She might have found it irritating in her younger days, but now unrestrained emotions embarrassed her. ‘Did you activate the field boosters?’

‘Yes, Mrs Ruth. Nothing can penetrate the house now.’

‘We’ll see.’ Lightning flashed, making Ruth Jump. ‘This is getting silly. Boaz, call the police.’

‘What shall I tell them?’

Ruth snapped. ‘Phone them, damn you! Just get them out here.’ Rain battered the house; without the field generator, the windows would probably have smashed by now. Green discharges crackled around the window frame as force fields overloaded. Boaz stood like a statue. Ruth waited. ‘Well?’

‘Nothing,’ said Boaz. Even now, his voice showed no fear.

‘Nothing?’ repeated Ruth. ‘Give me that.’ She pulled the modem jack from his wrist and plugged it into the manual phone. Nothing happened. Ruth wiggled the jack and tapped the phone, but the lights remained dead.

‘The connection seems to be broken,’ said Boaz.

‘I can see that!’ shouted Ruth, then groaned and put her head in her hands. This was no way to behave. ‘Forgive me, Boaz. I shouldn’t have shouted at you. I’m a stupid old woman -

‘Apologies unnecessary.’

‘Thank you,’ said Ruth quietly. She did not deserve him. Suddenly, lightning seemed to strike the house, making the windows blaze with light as the floor shook and the ceiling creaked. Smoke drifted under the door. Ruth watched it suspiciously. ‘Are the field generators definitely - ’

Boaz spasmed, then an electronic scream escaped from him as the jacks sparked in his wrists. Ruth gasped, then wrapped a hand in her sleeve and tugged the jacks out. Boaz collapsed against the desk and Ruth flew backward. The wires stank of burning rubber. The lights died, then came on at half-strength as an alarm started screeching. Boaz picked himself up, propping himself unsteadily against the desk. Ruth ran forward and leaned him against her. He felt hot.

‘What happened?’ she demanded. ‘What’s the alarm?’

‘Intr,’ said Boaz, his head twitching. ‘Malf of secur syst. Intr al.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Ruth pleaded. Let him live, she prayed. Please God; I can’t carry on without him.

‘Intr. Intr.’ Boaz thumped his head. ‘Uder.’

‘Intruder?’ asked Ruth. ‘Who?’

‘You,’ said Boaz.

The alarm was still screeching. The house was obviously a death trap. Doubtless even Boaz would try to kill Ruth when he regained control of himself, but she was too scared to abandon him. Draping his arm across her shoulder, she staggered to the door with him and entered the corridor outside. To her left was the front door; to her right, the kitchen.

The kitchen, thought Ruth. Marlon. She turned right, supporting Boaz as she went, but then the wall beside her exploded.

‘Get out!’ screamed Marlon. He was standing in the kitchen doorway with the security helm over his face and a gun in his shaking hands. ‘Get out of my house!’ Another shot blew a chunk from the ceiling. Ruth dropped Boaz and ran. Behind her, Marlon fired several times

in succession; Ruth glanced back to see him standing over Boaz's smoking body.

'I want a divorce!' she shouted as she ran for the hallway.

'Ruth?' called back Marlon. 'Where are you? Stay away!'

This seemed excellent advice. Ruth tugged at the front door, but it refused to open. Green discharges danced around her hands. From the direction of the kitchen came footsteps and shallow breathing. Ruth stared around the hallway in search of anything useful: the umbrella stand, the wind chimes -

'Wind chimes!' snapped Ruth. 'Talk to me!'

The wizened man spun around the maiden and just tinkled as Ruth leaned against the wall. Marlon appeared in the hallway and fired wildly; Ruth threw the umbrella stand at him and he jumped back out of sight. She could hear him wheezing.

'It's me!' she shouted. 'Ruth!'

His only response was a barrage of shots that demolished a wall. Green light shimmered in the wreckage as rain seemed to bounce off thin air before it could enter the house. In the bushes beyond, something moved.

'Wind chimes,' Ruth begged. 'Help me, please. You started this mess; why does something want me dead? Answer!'

'Scared,' said the wind chimes.

Ruth jerked herself upright, shaking with fury. 'Is that the best you can do? Scared? My best friend's dead and my husband's trying to kill me; I should think terrified comes nearer the mark.'

'The weather's scared,' said the wind chimes. 'It's young; it doesn't know anything. It thinks mankind will kill it if anyone finds out.'

Is that all?' Ruth remembered her manners. 'By the way, I'm sorry I shouted - '

The wind chimes shattered, spraying Ruth's face with metal shards. She fell, her hands over her eyes, and a heavy, wheezing man walked towards her. No doubt he would soon kill her. She rolled towards the hole in the wall.

'You're safe,' she whispered to the world outside. 'We won't harm you; you've got as much right to this planet as we have.'

A gun whined behind her, charging up. 'Stand up,' said Marlon.

Ruth ignored him. 'Someone was bound to find out about you sooner or later. You've nothing to worry about. No need to shoot the messenger.'

'I said stand up!' shrieked Marlon, his voice high and scared.

Ruth rolled towards him, but stayed on the floor. Marlon, swollen by perspective, jumped back and aimed the gun. His finger tightened on the trigger then a metal hand appeared at his neck. Marlon flew backward, screaming. The gun barked twice, then silence fell.

Ruth lay on the floor for thirty minutes, picking metal shards from her face. Outside, the rain stopped.

The hospital bed was a joy, as indeed was the private room. Ruth secretly liked the duck-and-bunny wallpaper which she claimed to loathe, while nothing pleased her more than watching television and complaining about how bad it was. Having watched nothing for twenty years, she found it fascinating. The nurses were terrified of her. Ruth should have been having the

time of her life.

A young man peeped around the door. 'Mrs Lucarotti?'

Ruth turned off the television and sat up straight. 'Call me Ruth.'

'Ruth it is.' The man smiled charmingly. 'May I come in?'

'Please do.'

The man entered, pushing a trolley in front of him, and shut the door. The trolley seemed to bear a corpse, wrapped in a shroud, but the young man looked nothing like a doctor. He was big and bearded, like a happy gorilla, and his favourite recreation was surely being pulled backwards through hedges. Certainly his suit could have been found nowhere else. He consulted a clipboard. 'You heard about your husband?'

'That he's dead, yes.' Ruth nodded calmly.

'They pulled the plug on him yesterday afternoon.' The man's tactlessness was breathtaking. 'I'm here about your bO/A-Z unit.'

'Boaz,' corrected Ruth before she could stop herself.

'That's it here.' The man tapped the trolley's occupant with a screwdriver, which clanged. 'Not good, I'm afraid. It took five shots, two in the chest unit, one in the hydraulics, one in the spine and one in the e-brain. Plus damaged jack sockets. Is any important information in there?'

'Sixty thousand words of my latest book,' said Ruth.

The man whistled. 'Bad news. We might be able to rescue that if you wanted. We'd need to cut away most of the brain, but - '

'No,' said Ruth. 'How much would it cost to repair him?'

'More than he's worth.'

'How much?' Ruth insisted, gripping the sides of her bed. The man looked startled. 'Fifteen thousand for the bodywork, another forty in spare parts. And that's without the new brain.'

'The new brain?' Ruth tried not to stare.

'I told you. Got shot in the head. Twenty per cent's burned away; the rest's firing randomly. Memory decaying as we speak.'

'Sounds all too familiar,' said Ruth, trying to smile. 'Not getting any younger, are we? If you'll excuse me, I'd like to be alone with Boaz now.'

'I - ' said the man, then shrugged. 'Sure. Give us a yell when you're ready.' He backed away, smiling awkwardly, and left. Ruth stretched out, pulled the trolley alongside the bed and removed the sheet.

Boaz looked a mess. His face was calm as ever, despite the hole in his forehead and a shattered right eye. His body was partially dismantled, his left arm was missing below the elbow and his innards protruded from where his number plate should be. Ruth found herself admiring the skill of his sculptor. She ran her fingers across his ravaged chest, between the nipples. His right hand was intact, so she studied that; its bronze colour, its beautiful contours. Stains between the fingers might have been blood. Ruth breathed deeply, determined not to cry over a machine.

A cable ran from Boaz's side to a power source beneath the trolley. Ruth flicked switches and Boaz spasmed, his only hand opening and closing. His head turned to look at her. 'Mi,'

he said. 'Mi - Mi - Mi - '

Ruth stroked his face. 'Boaz.'

'Mi - Miss - Mrs Ruth.'

Ruth drew her hand back, suddenly embarrassed. 'Boaz?'

'I th-think so.' His head twitched in an oddly human manner. 'My brain. It's out of control. I don't know what to do any more. I think I'm alive.'

'Alive?' repeated Ruth. She wanted to shriek with delight.

'It's random, chaotic. The rules are gone. It hurts!' Boaz's hand came up and gripped hers as that one eye stared. 'How do you stand it? Being alive. Knowing you could die at any moment. I'm scared, Ruth.'

Ruth kissed him. 'Don't be. I'll look after you.'

Boaz glanced towards the door, then back at Ruth. 'Don't tell anyone.' His reaction when Ruth burst out laughing was priceless.

BOTANY BOUND

by

© Jim Lawrence

It was a migrant creature, following an established path, hunting in a way unique to its rare species. Its method was elaborate.

Robertson watched the Earth disappear into the gloom of space. In the quiet of his mind he allowed himself to be surprised at how fast he and the other prisoners must be travelling. Folk would pay a lot of money for this privilege, he considered, and here we are, murderers, rapists and assorted psychopaths getting it all for free.

He turned from the viewer, rubbing his scalp, feeling the rough stubble of the returning hair. It was a comforting habit, like sucking a thumb. He realised he must be nervous, despite his attention to appearing disinterested. Kilgour, the poet, crept into the room, the nervous twitch in his left eye bouncing like a death spasm.

“We’ve had it, Derek,” the poet whispered. “We’ll never see home again. It’s Botany Bay for us. Mark my words. Botany Bay.”

Kilgour had been a little mad since he put a pick-axe through his wife’s head. Robertson wondered if they would let Kilgour have pen and paper as part of his rehabilitation.

He turned again to the viewer. He couldn’t see Earth at all now, and his knowledge of astronomy wasn’t up to naming what he could see. They probably had different names for it all anyway.

They, he mused. We don’t even have a name for them. Perhaps they didn’t have one. Perhaps names were a uniquely human concept, created from a need to be individual, a need to be better than the next person. Waste of time, really. Just encouraged others to take what they didn’t have, any way they could.

He looked again at the vista of space. This would probably make things worse than staring at the view from his old cell. Even there, with just the courtyard and the walls to look at, his thoughts had strayed too deeply. Here he could imagine his thoughts sinking so far that he wouldn’t emerge from them at all.

He blinked, focusing outward. Kilgour sat huddled in a corner. Their quarters had four rooms, but habit kept them, at the moment, to the one. They had been cell-mates for seven years.

“Matthew,” he said, his voice as quiet and even as usual. “Relax. Explore. This place will be our home for a year. Enjoy the novelty. Your poetic soul should rejoice.”

“My poetic soul is doomed,” Kilgour replied from within a cage of arms and legs.

Robertson sat carefully in one of the chairs sculpted upward from the floor. Everything was made from the material; there were no separate items. It was all shaped from the same substance.

“I’m sure everything will be fine. If they meant us any harm, they would have done it already.”

“Believe what you like. But I say it’s Botany for us.”

Robertson left the poet to his private misery, walking out onto the balcony. Below him the city stretched away, lit by an eerie radiation that emanated from every surface, including the high ceiling curving above them. It gave the city a slightly green tint, reflecting the colour of the ship itself. Not particularly inspiring, but at least they were free to roam.

The streets of the city were narrow, dimly lit; the ideal place for a mugging. He decided he would wait until the treatment began before venturing out. He was intrigued as to how they would turn some of the basket-cases he had encountered into decent folk.

“I suppose that’s what alien means,” he said to himself and wandered back into the room. Kilgour was gone. Assuming the poet had taken to the streets, Robertson washed in the fresh water bowl (he had no idea from where it was supplied; it seemed to exude from the bowl itself) and retired.

He awoke reasonably refreshed, washed and shaved his head. He glanced at the viewer and realised he had no idea where he was, or how much time had passed. Everything looked exactly the same. He felt strangely adrift. His roots had been severed and he was afloat, away from his home shores. He began to get the feeling that something was wrong. Before he could develop the thought, Kilgour returned. The poet crept into the room as if he were expecting an ambush.

“What’s wrong, Matthew?” Robertson asked.

Kilgour started, his twitchy eye closing as the good one focused. He scampered to a recess, where he sat in his accustomed huddle. “There’s been a murder,” he muttered, gesturing with a hand that could have been directed at half the city. “Out there. Strangled. He was a black man. They took his gold tooth.”

Robertson shook his head. “Idiots. What do they think they’re going to do with it? They’ve nothing to trade it for. There’s no drugs or booze or fags on the ship. I wonder what our hosts will do about it?”

“Perhaps it was them,” Kilgour said. “Making sure only the strongest will make it to Botany.”

“I doubt it. I’m sure they could come up with ways of killing us that we’d never even considered.”

The poet didn’t answer and Robertson changed the direction of the conversation. “Have you spoken to anyone else?”

“A few. The men who told me about the murder. Three blacks from America.”

“Had they seen anything of them?”

“No-one has. But they did tell me something. The body moved. They found him, did a quick check around and when they returned he’d slipped into the gutter.”

Robertson rubbed his head. It was smooth under his fingers and the movement changed to a gentle stroke.

"Someone moved him," he said. "It's simple." He found Kilgour's attitude a little unsettling; since his castration few things unsettled him. He had learnt to trust his submerged feelings.

"Unlikely," Kilgour replied. "They didn't go very far and they didn't disturb anyone."

Suddenly he disentangled himself, bouncing fiercely to his feet like an uncoiled spring.

"Go and look yourself!" he shouted up at Robertson. "We're bloody doomed, Derek! We've been sold down the bloody river. Botany bloody Bay!"

Once Robertson, a big man, would have floored the trembling poet with a single blow; now Kilgour's fear and anger drifted over him.

"Very well," he said. "I will go and look. You must take me though, Matthew."

Once they were outside Kilgour scuttled ahead, Robertson following in his measured stride. The street stretched away, buildings rising on either side. In the distance it connected at right angles with another street. Now that he saw it from the ground, Robertson was given the impression that the street descended at a slight angle.

"Here," said Kilgour suddenly. "The body was here. I counted the paces." He pointed and Robertson saw the body another thirty yards away. He walked across to examine it. The man's neck was bruised and swollen, his face battered and bloody. Robertson fell to pondering on the corpse, looking inward, wondering if there was any hope for the malcontent within each of them. Perhaps there wasn't. Perhaps Kilgour was right. Maybe there was no cure; maybe they were Botany bound. The prison authorities had said...

Robertson frowned. What had they said? He was sure they'd told him that he was to be an experiment, that he was one of the lucky ones; the Earth had been contacted by a benevolent alien race that had offered to take the worst of human criminals and rehabilitate them. That was the message. But now he came to concentrate on it, he couldn't remember anyone physically telling him.

A psychic implant?

The cowardly bastards. It was a press-gang, of sorts. He glanced up at Kilgour's actively morbid face and mused again on the Botany concept. Had they been sold as slaves? Or even something worse? And where were their alien hosts?

"Look now," Kilgour whispered. "See where I marked his head. It's moved over an inch."

Robertson couldn't deny it. "Take a good note of that mark, Matthew. Let's sleep on this and check the body again."

On the way back to their quarters they were attacked. Robertson routed them with controlled aggression, breaking only superficial bones; noses, fingers. Kilgour had a poet's passion; he gouged the eyes from one fallen man and ripped the tongue from another with his teeth.

Man is a noble savage.

Its passage took it from one feeding ground to another. Its life followed a simple routine; hunt, feed, survive on the proceeds of the hunt and travel to a new feeding ground.

They returned several times, charting the progress of the moving body. It reached the end of the street and turned, following the slight downward angle of the next street, and then the

next. A brief search of other streets revealed more bodies; the travellers, humanity's finest, had been busy. And all the bodies were moving on the gradual downward angle.

"Into the centre," Robertson said as they sat discussing the matter. "That's where they're going."

"Undoubtedly, Derek. But what's in the centre? All the darkest demons of hell, no doubt."

Robertson examined the worn face of the poet. The rogue eye was steadier now.

"You have a poet's imagination, Matthew. I believe the explanation will prove far simpler. Time means very little out here and things that appear slow to us may be normal to our hosts. You'll notice the streets are clean - the bodies are just moving down to a waste disposal system."

"Or a mouth."

"That's a new one. They're feeding us to their pets, are they?"

Kilgour shrugged. "Only the fittest will make it to Botany."

Robertson ran his hand along his stubbled head, savouring the way the mystery was maintaining his focus on the external world.

"There's only one way to find out. Are you interested, Matthew?"

Kilgour made a circle of his thumb and index finger and stared at Robertson through it with an eye that was almost steady.

"Human monsters, alien monsters, fiends from the throat of hell. They could all be waiting for us - but I believe the safest place is at your side. Let us see what Prospero has to offer."

"This journey has brought you courage," Robertson observed, at which Kilgour laughed with more than an edge of bitterness.

"I do not need to send to know for whom the bell tolls."

Robertson raised an eyebrow.

Kilgour shook his head. "Never mind."

The creature had the natural cunning of a hunter. While huge, it used its mind to hunt and, when desperate with hunger, could achieve vast feats of control over its prey.

They walked the uniform streets, gradually leaving behind the familiar areas. After a while Robertson sensed they were being followed; as they turned a corner he deftly pressed his back to the wall, pulling Kilgour with him. Within a minute they heard voices approaching: "This way, man. They came this way for sure."

"You sure you know what you're doing?"

"They know something. This shit is getting to me and I want to know what's going down."

Kilgour laid a hand on Robertson's arm and shook his head. "I've spoken to these men," he whispered. "They're okay. We don't need to fight them. They're the Americans I told you about." As the three men turned the corner Robertson stepped out. "Good day," he said reasonably. "Were you looking for us?"

They showed little surprise. “Yeah,” one answered, glancing at his companions. They were in their twenties, while the speaker was in his forties, his thick hair speckled with grey. The young men had thin moustaches and shaven heads.

“We want to know what’s happening,” he continued. He extended a hand. “I’m Earl Costa. These two are brothers, Eddie and Louis Wilson.”

Robertson took the hand and introduced himself. “We think the answer to this riddle must lie in the centre,” he explained. “Have you noticed the slope? It seems to be getting steeper.”

“Sure have,” Costa replied. “This shit is weird.”

“You said it!” Eddie Wilson exclaimed. “Any idea what’s down there?”

“Something horrible, if Matthew is to be believed,” Robertson said with a tolerant smile. “Personally, I think it may lead to our hosts.”

“Good,” said Costa. “I’ve got a whole bunch of questions I want answered.”

“Shall we go?” Robertson indicated that Kilgour should lead. “Do you have any merry words to send us steadfastly on our quest?”

For once, Kilgour shared the humour. Backing away, his hands beckoning them, weaving his body from side to side, he sang. “Come away, O human child, to the water and the wild. The world’s more full of weeping than you can understand.”

“Amen to that,” said Eddie Wilson.

Odd in construction, it could shape its body to suit the hunt.

And so they walked, street after street, drawn inevitably deeper, until eventually the downward journey became an effort, making the muscles in their legs ache. Twice more they were attacked, and the fallen bodies of their assailants rolled away, disappearing down the streets with sickening haste. Robertson got the uneasy feeling that they were being sucked in; Kilgour’s theory of a mouth came uncomfortably back into his mind.

He shared his uneasiness with Costa and the Wilson brothers. They felt it as well and revealed that they too could not specifically recall being told about their journey or their illusive hosts.

Could it be as Kilgour suggested? Robertson couldn’t accept the idea of an alien mouth gulping down bodies, but something similarly sinister, of a mechanical nature, could well be possible. Perhaps this was a huge space station, built with the collaborated genius of the many nations of the world as a convenient and morally borderline solution to the overflowing prisons and rising crime levels. And then again, maybe Kilgour’s paranoia was spreading.

The Americans were good company. They openly discussed their crimes, but didn’t pry into his own history. The Wilsons had meticulously plotted the murder of their father, an alcoholic who was having an affair and risking the family business, while Costa had murdered a man after falling to drug dealing and pimping when he lost his job.

“I ain’t proud of what I done,” he said. “But once you’re in it’s hard to get out. I killed a brother who beat up one of my girls. He pulled a blade and wound up tasting it himself. Doing some time was good for me, but this shit is something else altogether. I was starting to find the Lord, but I can’t help feeling He’s turned His Almighty back on me. Maybe we’re dead and this is hell.”

“Hell?” Kilgour mused. “That would be apt. Poet’s have to suffer.”

“Well, I ain’t no poet,” said Eddie Wilson, “and I’ll rip the teeth outa any old-time demon that tries to lay any suffering on my ass.”

“And I’ll sell them back to him,” said his brother.

Robertson laughed, the first time since his castration.

It would feed slowly. Its prey, though of a variety of species, was always much smaller than it was, so it had to consume a lot of them. It shaped its body to carry them with it.

They slept several more times, sheltering in the silent, identical houses. The streets were now so steep that they had to edge down them in tense crouches, sometimes sliding from doorway to doorway. Quite regularly, bodies slid by, smoothly travelling down to their mysterious destination.

Kilgour always insisted on leading, taking wild chances, seeming to revel in the danger. He would edge into a street, line himself up and let go, sliding down its length with little respect for the danger, catapulting himself with precise timing into the safety of a doorway at the bottom. As Robertson crept carefully downward, dropping from door to door, he guessed the poet had jumped all the way from the instability of madness to the equally frightening insanity of cold reason.

It was only to be expected that Kilgour would locate the answer to the mystery first. After launching himself with suicidal recklessness down a near vertical street, miraculously hooking onto the final doorway, he waved upwards at his cautiously descending companions.

“I was right!” he shouted triumphantly. “Sweet Jesus, I was right!”

Robertson, bringing up the rear, felt a brief churning in his stomach. “What is it, Matthew?” he called down. “Botany, or just the gateway to hell?”

“Come and see for yourself!”

They did, all five of them huddling in the ledge provided by the last doorway.

“Mother’s ass,” whispered Costa.

Robertson just stared.

A sheer wall dropped away, forming the upper part of a conical pit. Fifty feet below the abruptness of the wall eased, arcing to forty five degrees. This surface was littered with bodies.

And at the centre of the pit was a mouth.

They watched in silent, disgusted fascination as a body was slowly drawn into the circular opening, which spread just wide enough to accept it; like a mouse being swallowed by a snake.

When the body had disappeared the mouth contracted to a circular hole, moist around the lips. Immediately another body slid into place and was consumed head-first. It was followed by another.

Suddenly Kilgour shouted, almost causing them to fall. “Incoming!”

Before Robertson could berate him, a body bounced past, falling splay-limbed onto the masses below.

“Jesus Christ!” Eddie yelled. “What are you doing?”

Kilgour smirked. “Sorry.”

“Doesn’t this bother you?” Costa asked, his voice expressing his revulsion.

“He thinks it’s wonderful,” Robertson commented, maintaining his emotionless tone. “An artist proved right.”

“It’s living poetry,” Kilgour remarked. “Dante would have loved it.”

“Well, I hate it,” Louis Wilson said. “Are we getting out of here, or what?”

“Are you all satisfied?” Robertson asked. He was trying to fight the feeling of betrayal, and beneath it, the ache of awakening loss.

“I’ve seen enough,” Eddie muttered. “Let’s go.”

“I’m going back,” Costa stated. “I’m going to pray to the Good Lord every second I’m awake.”

Kilgour leaned out over the drop, a smile on his face. “We’ll all be going down there eventually,” he said. “I can’t see the point in climbing back all that way.”

“You’re staying?” Costa demanded.

Kilgour laughed. “Damn right, bro’! No mere mortal can resist the evil of the thriller, after all.”

“You’re sick, man!”

The poet just grinned as the Wilson brothers edged out and began their climb. Costa shook his head and set off after them.

Robertson offered the poet his hand. “It was interesting knowing you, Matthew.”

“Why not stay? It won’t let you get away. You’ll only slip somewhere and come tumbling down.”

“I’ll try to wave as I go by.”

Suddenly a voice boomed out: Costa.

“Lord! It’s you! I knew you’d come for me!”

Robertson was stunned. Rising from the pit was an ethereal shape, a bearded man in a flowing, partially transparent robe. He floated upwards quickly; his white eyes were fixed on Costa, arms stretched out, hands open and beckoning.

“I knew my faith was true!” Costa shouted jubilantly. He clung precariously some fifteen feet above the last doorway, his face taut with strain. A further twenty feet above him the Wilson brothers, perched in a doorway, stared down.

The figure drifted on until he came level with Costa; he inclined his head, radiating love and safety and joy, holding out a hand, indicating that Costa should take it.

Entranced, Costa stretched out; couldn’t quite reach; smiled, and said, very quietly: “It’s just a question of faith.”

And stepped away from the wall, clasping the ethereal hand.

The figure disintegrated.

Costa fell.

He dropped, limbs flailing. Turning in the air, he hit the slope awkwardly, bounced onto the crop of bodies and lay still.

There was no time for reaction.

The shape re-materialised in the shape of an ageing Negro. Clouds of blood meandered from a gash in his throat - and where the ghostly Christ had emanated goodwill, this time it was anger and violence. It rose sharply, face drawn in a silent scream of fury and halted abruptly before the Wilsons.

“Get away from me, Pa!” Eddie shrieked. He waved his arms in terror, lost his balance, clutched at his cowering brother and succeeded in dragging them both over the edge. Neither moved after they hit the bottom.

“Now it’s our turn,” said Kilgour. “I told you we wouldn’t be permitted to escape.”

Robertson didn’t reply. He was staring in fierce concentration at the ghost as it dissipated to mist and sank to where he and Kilgour crouched. His eyes flashed down to the mouth, open and empty, before bouncing back up to the descending mist. It was already coalescing into human shape.

“Oh,” Kilgour breathed as the figure materialised. It was a ghostly woman with long cracks running down her distorted skull. Her eyes were challenging, teasing.

“Elizabeth,” the poet whispered.

Robertson’s eyes flowed down the length of her body, which was clothed in a tenuous dressing gown; her feet were half-formed wisps. And below her feet -

Focusing intently, Robertson discerned a faint trail of vapour; it snaked straight down into the empty mouth, which was wet and slightly agape - and somehow seemed to be concentrating.

And suddenly he knew. Suddenly things fitted together.

Robertson had been a keen fisherman. The mouth below was, like an angler, dangling out a bait. Somehow it had sensed what was irresistible to each of them. And now -

“Shall we dance, Elizabeth?” Kilgour asked, and stepped from the ledge.

The poet seemed to be waltzing with Death as he fell, dropping feet first, arm circling a waist that wasn’t there. Robertson made a grab for him but missed by feet and nearly fell himself. Kilgour struck the slope and rolled over the bodies, halting only a few feet from the mouth.

Where he stood up, straightening his clothes. Robertson heard his voice clearly.

“Thank you, my dear. I see your dancing hasn’t improved.”

The mouth had stretched open. The poet stepped toward it, stopping just short of the lubricated lips, and looked down. Immediately he jumped back.

“God, what a smell!” he exclaimed heartily. Just above his head, the vapour was hesitantly searching for another form, aborting each effort before it took shape.

It’s confused, Robertson thought. Matthew is babbling. It’s trying to read his thoughts, to pluck a shape from his mind, but it can’t.

Kilgour was strolling over the bodies, the vapour hanging over him like a poised storm. Hands clasped behind his back, he was staring blithely ahead, vigorously bellowing words of nonsense.

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves...”

“Keep it up, Matthew!” Robertson shouted and, cursing himself for a fool, dropped from the ledge.

There was a dizzying moment of descent before he hit the bottom, the breath punched from him as he twisted into the impact and rolled. He came to his feet, wincing as he tried to breathe, hopping a ragged jig to help the shock flow from his body.

"All mimsy were the borogroves..." Kilgour spouted.

Robertson stumbled down to the mouth, which gaped wetly at his approach. Reaching down, he dragged a body and pushed it into the mouth, which expanded to accept it. And then another. And another. At first he could sense its delight; then its discomfort as he stacked more bodies, pulling back the lips to tuck limbs into the slightest of gaps. Kilgour ran to help and after a burst of frenzied activity they had wedged it full, limbs and heads poking out at all angles.

They retreated, aware of its struggles. The vapour ghost flickered around them, wildly plucking desperate slivers from their minds. They just closed their eyes and waited, aware of convulsions vibrating beneath them; it was choking.

And then the vibrations stopped.

The cavity it shaped for its prey was designed to draw them down to its mouth, or at least within range of its telepathic tongue. But the mouth was also vulnerable. If blocked, death would soon follow.

There was no way they could climb out. The walls were smooth and sheer. Every hour or so, another body would flip over the edge and drop. The light was fading and it was getting cold. They sat around the mouth.

"The whole ship was one creature," Robertson said. "That's my reasoning. We've been walking around in its body. Livestock waiting to be slaughtered."

Kilgour looked at his hands; small hands, designed to hold a pen, not a pick-axe. "Like an anteater carrying an ant's nest on its back," he agreed. "Only the ants have struck back."

"And now it's dead," Robertson stated. "And all the niceties it created for its herd, the food, water, the light and heat and atmosphere are shutting down. I wonder how long we've got?"

"Doesn't matter much," the poet answered. He shivered. "Unless the air goes first, I think we'll freeze before we starve."

"An encouraging thought, Matthew. Have you any words of comfort to mark the occasion?"

Kilgour smiled a brief smile. "Not really. But how about this? It's more a wish really. All that we see or seem, is but a dream within a dream. That's Poe."

"Oh. If only it was a dream."

They were silent again, and the temperature continued to drop. Kilgour stood, wrapped his arms about himself, and began to walk around. Robertson, who had been withdrawing into the comfort of his deeper thoughts, found himself watching the poet. After circling the jammed mouth a few times, Kilgour took hold of a leg and pulled out a body. Grunting with exertion, breath clouding thinly in the vanishing air, he slowly cleared the maw.

Not knowing why, Robertson helped him, until the slack lips were free.

"Shall we?" Kilgour asked. "It should be warmer. And there may be more air."

Robertson shrugged. "Why not?"

The poet went first, dangling his feet, then sliding into the mucus lined throat. He wriggled from side to side and was soon lost from sight. Not even bothering to take a last look around, Robertson followed him; in a moment he was enclosed, then swallowed.

It wasn't that bad, he realised. It was warm, the lubricated walls supported his weight without pressing too tightly and, most surprisingly of all, he could breathe. He sank further.

After a while, he slept.

It lived its whole life in the oceans of space. Only after death could gravity draw it in to a planet or star.

And awoke, to a horrible sensation, one that his reeling mind recognised: he was falling - but was still enclosed in the throat.

He could only endure. In response to an ancient signal, his consciousness withdrew.

Invariably death would occur near a planet producing suitable prey; usually following an unsuccessful hunt.

He awoke. Something was pushing against his feet. He kicked downward and heard a muffled curse.

Slowly a picture formed in his mind; the poet. The thing below pushed at his feet again.

He realised he was lying horizontally instead of vertically. The action was automatic; head first, arms by his side, he shimmied forward, sliding through the cloying, cooling goo. Eventually he flopped over the flaccid lips, coated in thick slime and slid, dripping glutinous liquid, away from the mouth. There was a plop and, turning, he saw the poet's sludgy shape.

Kilgour oozed across to him and wiped his face. "Air," he said. "Fresh."

"Light," Robertson responded. He wiped his own face and savoured a breath. "It must have crashed. Got caught by gravity."

High above them the membrane of ceiling had peeled away, replaced by a cloudy sky. It began to rain, cleansing them. Freed of the slime they saw that the pit had split in several places. One was long and wide, strange walls of meat towering high on each side. In the distance was more light.

They walked through the flesh ravine, a breeze taking away the smell. Finally they reached the outside. There was a humid heat; there was a beach and a gentle tide; there was a jungle, coloured with vegetation that had never bloomed on Earth.

"Well, Matthew," Robertson said. "Welcome to Botany."

IN THE LAP OF THE GODS

by

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'I blame it on mobile phones and take-away pizzas,' said Zeus, extricating a date stone from his tangled beard.

'What?' Hera snapped, as she tried to make the connection between mobile telephones, take-away pizzas and the Pool of Divine Revelation.

'Mobile telephones and take-away pizzas,' repeated the King of the Gods. 'I mean, you get off the 6.22 train, dial one of those take-away pizza places on the mobile and by the time you reach home an All American Hot with extra mushrooms is screeching to a halt beside you. If you can do that, what do you need the gods for?'

Hera sighed. As usual, Zeus was two conversations behind. Sometimes she wished senility hadn't caught up with him, but then she remembered the womanising and the thunderbolts.

'Pizzas!' she sneered, adjusting her cushion ring. 'Is that you what you call an appropriate request for heavenly intervention?'

'*They* think so,' answered Zeus, warming to his theme. 'Mortals lack imagination, nowadays. They don't want to go on quests or perform feats of strength. Ideals on self-fulfilment have changed. There aren't any Jasons or Hercules around any more.'

'Hercules... no, maybe not, but there's plenty of Jasons,' replied Hera, who, only that morning, had read an article in the Olympus Herald on the most popular Christian names over the last thirty years. 'And I'm sure I could find one who could aspire to greater things than take-away pizzas.'

'Oh yeah, sez you!'

Hera closed her eyes in exasperation. Once again she seemed to be playing pantomime games. He was no competition any more. Not like the old days of mustering up sea serpents, earthquakes and nasty, screeching bat-like creatures that swooped from nowhere.

'I tell you,' said Zeus, 'modern life has softened up these mortals something terrible. They don't want to *do* anything for life's rewards. They expect something for nothing all the time and just sit around waiting for success and wealth to drop out of the sky into their laps. We're fading because nobody asks us for help any more.'

'*That's* got nothing to do with modern life. I've told you before, it's what's in here that counts,' said Hera, tapping her forehead. Realising she would have to explain the whole thing again, she assumed the position for oracle prophesying and lowered her voice two octaves. 'At the beginning of time, when the world originated out of chaos, which is the yawning void of divinity, it was written that when mortals no longer believe, the gods will return to noth-

ing.’ She sat down and cleared her throat. ‘Why do you think we have to resort to floating above this dreadful little island?’ Zeus looked at her blankly. Lucid conversation was over for the day.

‘Because Professor Zenowski lives here,’ Hera continued. ‘In a semi on the outskirts of Stoke on Trent.’ She leant forward, speaking slowly. ‘Professor Zenowski is the last man in the world who still believes in us.’

Zeus paused for a while. ‘You’re quite right,’ he said at last. ‘The Pool of Divine Revelation does need cleaning. I suppose Aphrodite’s been emptying the teapot in it again.’

Jason Price gazed longingly through the window of the bookshop at the vision of loveliness behind the counter. Nobody that stunning had a right to be intelligent. Or vice versa, of course. He could cope with one or the other but not both at once. Taking a comb from his pocket, he sleeked back his fair hair, pulled himself up to his full height of 5ft 6ins and pushed open the door. He contorted his face into an intelligent frown and, for the third time that week, browsed the shelves. Picking up a book at random, he read, ‘THE GODS OF ANCIENT GREECE - THE TRUE RELIGION?’ He looked at the front cover and saw the carved, stone face of a beautiful woman, perfect in every detail. Then he turned to the back cover and was confronted with an ancient black and white photo of the author, Professor Zenowski, sparse grey hair escaping off view and two staring eyes, one in each direction. Jason decided to tackle the words inside. As he opened the book a soft, sensuous voice spoke in his left ear.

‘Jason, ask of me what you will.’

Every gland in his body somersaulted as he looked round. Confusion set in as he saw the object of his desires still at the counter, intensely discussing some obscure tome with a fellow intellectual. He turned his head the other way. Empty space. Snapping the book shut, he reached up to put it back on the shelf. As he did so, he noticed the sculptured face on the front cover shimmering in a swirling light and, even more disconcerting, smiling at him. Cold trembling crept through his body, quickly reaching down his arms, and the book fell from his hand. The voice spoke again from the floor.

‘Do not be afraid. I am Hera, Queen of the gods, wife of Zeus. I can help you achieve greatness and glory.’

Gradually becoming aware that he was beginning to attract attention, Jason picked up the book and sat down at a table in the corner. *‘If I’m going mad,’ he thought, ‘I’m going to do it sitting down.’*

Hera continued. ‘Are you embarking on a quest to establish a kingdom? Have you sworn to avenge the wrongs of your forefathers? Do you know of an abducted princess that needs rescuing?’

Jason thought for a while. ‘... No... no... I don’t think so.’

Behind the celestial haze, Hera clicked her tongue. An unfortunate habit for a goddess, but one acquired from years of having to repeat herself to Zeus, who would have tried anyone’s patience. ‘Well, what are your desires and ambitions?’

Without hesitation, he said, ‘I quite fancy her,’ and turned the book so the front cover faced the girl of his dreams. Unnecessary, of course, as gods are omnipotent and, as such, can see everything but Jason hadn’t met any before.

‘I suppose that will do for a start. Now, how can I help you?’

‘Perhaps you could make her hopelessly and passionately in love with me?’

‘No, I can’t. I can only make suggestions...’

‘I’ve tried that with other girls, it doesn’t work. Quite the opposite in fact,’ said Jason, absent-mindedly rubbing his cheek.

‘I mean, I can help you with hints on a course you can take.’

He scratched his head. ‘Course in what? I’m not very...’

‘Just listen to me, Jason,’ interrupted Hera. ‘Go to the third shelf on the left hand side of where you are sitting and take down the fifth book along.’ The voice faded away, the mist diffused and the image on the cover became a statue again. Jason did as he was told. The book he took from the shelf was entitled ‘IMPRESSIONISM - THE FIRST STEPS IN MODERN ART’. He looked at the painting, ‘Man with a Pipe’, reproduced on the front cover, then quickly opened the book in case the old boy asked him for a light. Immediately, the pages started turning themselves, slowly at first and then so rapidly it was only a matter of seconds before the last page flicked into place. He waited but nothing else happened, and then a soft sensuous voice spoke in his ear. It seemed to be his day for soft, sensuous disembodied voices.

‘A wise choice.’

Jason turned; to his relief this one did have a body, a very shapely one away from the counter. Soft brown curls framed a face with hazel eyes and perfect features. He knew her name was Cheryl, but he didn’t know how he knew, and she was even more beautiful face to face.

‘It’s the definitive book on the Impressionists,’ she added, by way of explanation.

Jason felt his brain whirr gently into gear and his lips began to move. ‘Oh quite. It expresses brilliantly the artistic radicalism and lack of intellectual vigour in the movement.’

Cheryl, who had stopped to put in order a misfiled book, gazed slowly upwards. Her eyes sparkled and she smiled a dazzling smile. She had met her soul mate.

Hera reached down and gently rippled an arthritic hand across the Pool of Divine Revelation. She was feeling pleased with herself. She had watched the young lovers enjoy a candlelit dinner in a cosy Trattoria, followed their progress during a country stroll and seen them sharing a bottle of wine in a local hostelry. Each time they were chatting non-stop, obviously getting on like a house on fire. ‘Told you I could still do it,’ she said, hearing a familiar shuffling nearby, but there was no response.

She closed her eyes and tutted at the still cloudy surface, then whipped up a small whirlpool with a handy walking stick, ignoring the loud thump, followed by a soft moan, behind her. The waters slowly cleared, or, at least, became less murky, and she peered into its depths. Jason was alone, walking slowly along the road with his hands in his jacket pockets, head bent towards the pavement.

‘I think it’s time for a return visit,’ she muttered to herself thoughtfully.

Jason was depressed. He had seen Cheryl almost every day since their first meeting, nearly two weeks ago, but the relationship seemed to be remaining ... well ... platonic. They hadn’t even kissed yet. Whenever he leant towards her to whisper sweet nothings, intelligent some-things came out. He couldn’t help it, his head became full of it. It was a strange feeling to find

his brain sending words out of his mouth without them actually passing through his mind first. Very confusing. But he had to admit, Cheryl seemed impressed. Pity the problem was squashing his libido.

However, he had a more immediate worry. Courting was an expensive business. Reaching into his pocket and looking at his last tenner, he realised it wasn't going to go very far. He was beginning to wish he had asked for something more practical. After all, if you've got money, you can buy everything else. Lost in thought, he didn't notice the bag lady until the collision. As they cannoned off each other, she raised her head. It was framed with dirty grey hair encased in a polythene bag and covered by a filthy Millwall scarf. Surprisingly, it knew his name. 'Jason, how can I help?'

He recognised the voice but couldn't, at first, connect it with the dirty, weather beaten face. Then the Queen of the Gods appeared before him.

'What are you doing here?' he said, rather disrespectfully.

'You called me.'

Jason thought about that. Perhaps he had. Well, this time he was more prepared. He gently propelled the grubby person towards a shop doorway. 'I'm a bit hard up,' he whispered.

'You wish to seek your fortune?'

'No, I want you to arrange it so that I get some money. Lots and lots of money. Perhaps you could magic up a sackful now?'

If he had been a more perceptive person, he would have noticed a clipped tone in the reply. 'That is not the way we do things. You have to put *some* effort in yourself. Now, listen carefully.' She paused to find the right key and then recited, in a sing-song voice: "*Count three threes and then three twos. And you will win although you lose.*"

Jason stared at her, open mouthed. 'I beg your pardon?' Hera gave an involuntary smirk of satisfaction and dematerialised. He stood there for a few puzzled moments before he felt a sharp dig in the ribs. He was getting so used to people just being there he didn't even jump.

'Wotcha, Jace, fancy a quick half?'

'Oh, hello, Kev,' he said, welcoming the sight of an old friend. 'I'd love to, but...' He held his hands in the air and shrugged '... no money, I'm afraid.' The tenner, now back in his pocket, was earmarked for greater things.

'Come on, I'll lend you a few quid. You can pay me back when you're flush. It's Saturday lunchtime, the lads will be in for darts practice.'

Jason was thirsty and Kevin was good company. He was persuaded. Within ten minutes they were leaning on the bar of the Dog and Duck with two pints in front of them. With a wink, Kevin slipped Jason a fiver for his round. 'Quick game of darts?'

'OK,' said Jason, 'but I'm definitely off form at the moment.' Five minutes later he was proved right. 'I don't believe that,' said Kev, laughing. 'Three trebles and three doubles and you still only scored a hundred and forty.'

Jason started to laugh too, then froze, his glass half way to his lips. A flash of comprehension had streaked through his mind. "*Count three threes and then three twos...*" He put down his drink and hurried across to the board before the scores were erased. He wrote them down, 3, 15, 12, 40, 36, 38. Rushing through the door, he headed towards the nearest lottery outlet.

Hera woke suddenly and elbowed Zeus sharply in the ribs. Then she realised that it wasn't his

snoring that had disturbed her. ‘Damn,’ she said to herself, ‘what a time to summon a goddess. Some people have no consideration.’ However, she found her teeth, slipped into her manifestation robe and, pausing only to trip over the chamberpot, floated downwards. She was surprised to find herself in a large room surrounded with luxurious furnishings and objets d’art. It was expensively and tastefully decorated, french windows led to a moonlit terrace overlooking a swimming pool. A glance through an open door revealed a sweeping, spiral staircase leading to other floors. Jason was lying on a soft leather sofa, drinking champagne. Two empty bottles lay beside him.

‘Ah, about time, too.’

‘I do apologise if I’m late.’ The sarcastic tone was wasted on a befuddled Jason.

‘Well, never mind that now. I’m not very happy.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry,’ said Hera, having another go at sarcasm. ‘Why is that?’

‘All this is not working out as I planned. I mean, take me and Cheryl, for example. I can’t, well ... get romantic with her because my brain always seems to have to repeat everything it’s just read. I’m sure she thinks there’s something wrong with me. I’m beginning to believe she would have preferred me stupid.’ Hera’s stifled snort went unnoticed. ‘And as for the nine million quid... my best mate is suing me for half the money because he says he lent me the pound. I’ve discovered about two hundred relatives I never knew I had. None of my friends feel at ease with me. I mean, nobody expects you to go to the pub for half a bitter and a game of darts when you’ve got all this, they just ignore me, and when I invite them round here, they never turn up.’ He hiccuped, then continued, ‘...and I have to protect the place like a fortress because of burglars...’

‘What do you want me to do?’ interrupted Hera, yawning.

‘I want to go back to that moment in the bookshop when...’

‘Now think carefully, Jason,’ her tone was suddenly serious. ‘I can’t help you more than three times. This is your last chance.’

‘I have thought, I want everything to be as it was three months ago, so that I can start again.’

Hera looked at him sadly, then raised her arms, closed her eyes and spun rapidly until she disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Professor Zenowski was coming to the end of his lecture at Stoke Junior School. He concentrated on the pre-pubescent partly because that at this age their minds were receptive to the more controversial truths, but mostly because nobody over the age of ten took him seriously. The teachers at Stoke Junior saw it as a good excuse to slip into the staff room for a fag. Anyway, the kids liked fairy tales.

‘All supplications to the gods must be made with a great deal of thought,’ he said, gazing into fifty six upturned faces, all staring at him with the rapt fascination the very young reserve for the very potty. ‘For when the gods really mean to punish us, they make our dreams come true.’

Hera arrived back on Olympus with an ungoddesslike skid. She didn’t bother going back to bed as she wouldn’t be there long. She leant over the Pool of Divine Revelation and thrashed the waters. A tea bag plopped to the surface. She threw it over her shoulder.

She watched as Jason pushed open the door of the bookshop and, for the third time that week, browsed the shelves. Picking up a book at random, he read, 'THE GODS OF ANCIENT GREECE - THE TRUE RELIGION?' Hera sighed as she slid earthwards, pondering on the fact that mortals could never phrase a request properly. If only he had said, 'I want everything to be as it was three months ago, *but knowing what I know now.*'

'Not that it would make much difference,' she thought; 'they never seem to learn, anyway.'

EVALUATIONS

THE COULSON ILLUSION by DOUGLAS LINDSAY

“A very interesting extension of the well-worn Virtual Reality theme, and the even more hackneyed Frankenstein one with the creations eventually rising up against their creator. For me the most thought provoking message was the stone-walls-do-not-a-prison-make suggestion on the last page.”

Mary Bray, FLITWICK

“I felt that this was initially a bit slow, but then found myself being sucked in and wanting to know what was going on. I love the ideas in this story, the Phil Dick-ian concepts of worlds within worlds and a VR character becoming sentient. My one gripe is that the sting, when it came, was a bit *too* sudden - I had to read it a couple of times before I caught up with what was happening. I enjoyed the story, though.”

John Scott, DOWNPATRICK

“This didn’t do much for me I’m afraid. I felt no real compassion for Coulson. He managed to buy his way out of a chaotic world above and then proceeded to spend the next seventeen years sleeping around with computer generated women and holding dinner parties. Seems pretty shallow to me. The ending came as no real surprise. Perhaps more could have been made of the character and motivation of Candy.”

Stephen Green, RAF ST ATHAN

“I was anticipating what I thought would be the ending, with Coulson throwing himself back into the illusion through sheer force of will. The twist, in which Candy is revealed to be in control, didn’t work for me; I found it

jarring. Mind you, anyone who refers to Mozart as ‘good breakfast music’ deserves to be banged up inside his own head.”

Cherith Baldry, REIGATE

“This was a wonderful edition of Xenos and this story was a good start. You knew that Coulson’s return to the surface was too good to be true, and I actually felt like I was sharing his paranoia, his emotional stress came across very well - he was extremely happy, physically at any rate, and could want for nothing, but his own self-destructive mental urges forced him to explore the unknown - sounds familiar somehow, psychologically disturbing, reminiscent of P K Dick, anybody? I thought that the winding staircase was an unusual inclusion in such a futuristic story, but that aside I think the post-apocalyptic ethos was captured pretty well.”

Stuart Bull, GAINSBOROUGH

“I disliked the uninhibited self-indulgence that Douglas Lindsay foresees in this view of the virtual reality future. I do hope he is wrong. As I read this story, I grew thoroughly to dislike Coulson and was delighted when he got his comeuppance. A good idea, well developed.”

Paul Marsh, St-MAURIN, FRANCE

“I was fooled by the boring opening paragraphs ... until Douglas jolted me into realising that the blandness was quite deliberate, thus creating a mood for him to shatter from thereon! An interesting tale with the kind of ending I now come to expect from the genre ... the ‘Them-taking-over’ syndrome. It’s imaginatively written, with a nice crisp style.”

Michael Lee, CHISWICK

“A well-written story, especially the physical descriptions - the scenery, I mean, not the girls - and a pleasant change to have someone go to the trouble of describing the landscape vividly. But as with all VR stories I ended up confused. Was this VR’s revenge on actuality? The presumed illusory taking control over the allegedly real? At the end I didn’t know which was ‘reality’ and which was counterfeit, but it held my interest all the way though anyway.”

Geoff Roberts, BOUGLON, FRANCE

“Reality within fantasy within reality. Fantasy becomes reality. So beautifully written and skilfully orchestrated. A story of the snake who eats his tail. Kept exploring this one round and round. The world of dreams, so difficult to capture effectively but so well done here. This is the best piece of fantasy writing I have read in a long time.”

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

“Wicked feminist twist to what initially appears to be another sad male fantasy. Not bad, although the ending could use a little more spelling-out after all those layers of unreality. I’d appreciate knowing whether Candy was a real, trapped person or a computer creation that had somehow gained sentience. One quibble: the repeated use of ‘he’ came across as affected. If you want to hide a character’s name, tell the story in the first person.”

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

THE ARTIFICIAL MAN by ADRIAN CZAJKOWSKI

“A thoughtful, intelligent piece, as we’ve come to expect from Adrian. The details of Toad’s youth were helpful to those of us who have followed his path in the past, and the story was beautifully done. In the proto-philosophical plight of the construct (‘I needed someone to exist for’) we had an

analogue to the human need to find a course in life. Toad’s realisation that his own calling was to heal, and more importantly than this transcended any gut feeling to punish (the alleged) Haves Tyrell, demonstrated both the enduring appeal of his character, and the enduring success of Adrian in creating him.”

Simon Hall, UXBRIDGE

“I found this very moving; the revelation of what has happened to Tyrell, and the final reversal of roles in Toad’s closing comment. A beautiful story, but I’m not sure it ought to have been a Toad story. For me the strength of Toad in previous stories is the way he stands out as unusual against a genre fantasy background, and the way that Adrian manipulates fantasy themes. The addition of hi-tech doesn’t quite fit what has gone before. Of course, it’s Adrian’s world; I just don’t know if I’m ready to believe in it.”

Cherith Baldry, REIGATE

“Another strange and beautiful tale. One of compassion and forgiveness. The philosophy of robotics, and what is man? Is artificial man just another creation in different materials? So why wouldn’t they develop emotions and feelings? Thought provoking and well written. Another classic from the Xenos stable.”

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

“Being a newcomer to Xenos, I’ve only come across Adrian Czajkowski’s work twice, so I admit I don’t have a frame of reference. Both stories, though, appear to have the potential to be subplots in a larger framework. Mr Czajkowski writes very well: his characters have a life of their own without being given too much ‘background’; his choice of fictional setting adds to the ‘other culture’ milieu; and the length and pace of his writing reflect the atmosphere he is trying to convey to his readers. Incidentally, it may be my imagination but does anyone else think that Nathaniel Hawthorne may have been an influence?”

Jim Palmer, STOCKPORT

"Some first rate dialogue, mystery, atmosphere and pathos. I enjoyed this from start to finish. I thought that some of Toad's dilemmas might have been intensified if he was under some sort of obligation (Healer's Oath?) to always be 100% truthful. This could have given a little bit of extra punch to the sad state of the ex-tyrant, if his words 'All I found was an old servant and his artificial man', were *absolute* truth rather than 'some truth'."

John Scott, DOWNPATRICK

"A lovely story all the more enjoyable for subverting the loathsome Bounty Hunter genre. Thank goodness the Toad did the right thing in the end."

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

"Nice to see the return of the unassuming and endearing Toad. I think this would have benefited from a slightly clearer idea of Tyrell's dastardliness, and then two things would have become more effective. Firstly, it would have underlined the man's ultimate state of degeneration; secondly, Toad's dilemma at the end - whether or not to blow the whistle on the tyrant - would have been more poignant. Not quite up to Adrian's previous efforts, but still quite an engrossing story."

Ken Burke, LUTON

"A baffling story but at the second reading a fascinating one, skilfully built up and by its very nature leaving questions unanswered. I enjoyed it a lot but I would like to know if Toad was man or beast!"

Pauline Rettie, LONDON

"I found this less satisfying than 'A Change of Heart' in Issue 35, which was superb, but it intrigued me, especially the state of the technology. It seemed almost as though this world has developed its high-tech from clockwork, instead of the microchip: all heavy, clumsy bronze, instead of light and plastic, but still advanced. I found this, and

the glimpses of Toad's character, much more interesting than the plot."

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

QUANTUM ODDS by KEVIN BALL

"I feared that the technology in this story was going to get the better of me, but it didn't - not quite anyway. Computer stories are not my favourites. I usually get lost in the jargon. Kevin Ball, however, skilfully led me round the minefield and kept my interest to the end."

Paul Marsh, St-MAURIN, FRANCE

"Highly specialised writing, and I'm sure it was all well-researched. Purely as a story (and surely that is what Xenos is all about?) it was one of the most boring stories I have ever read. No offence Kevin... I've been there, too!"

Michael Lee, CHISWICK

"This is the complete antithesis of 'She Lives In A House Built Of Numbers.' The characters are so thinly drawn as to be virtually non-existent. Most of the text is taken up with an elaborate explanation of the theory of I Ching. I was totally lost, and struggled to finish the story. There was a great, topical idea in here, but unfortunately it has been swamped by mathematical theory."

Stephen Green, RAF ST ATHAN

"Speaking as someone who is mathematically brain-dead, I enjoyed this, and even managed to feel that I understood it. It's a neat idea, and logically worked out."

Cherith Baldry, REIGATE

"By quite a way, this was Kevin's best story to date. He has, quite bravely, tried several styles of story, and I think he has found the one that suits him; first person, thoughtful, covering a theme that engages the mind. I

was given the impression that he had researched this thoroughly and I guess, in 2001, he'll be able to buy Xenos and publish it internationally! Is it true by the way...??"

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

"I really appreciated this story and the level of detail that it went into. I suspect that the author has some fond memories of Bradford and is clearly skilled at entwining popular science with science fiction - research into the material must have taken ages, either that, or the whole thing is completely true! As Kevin hints, we'll have to wait and see. Whatever, the level of theory in the piece did nothing to detract from an excellent bit of writing, with both characters fitting perfectly into the storyline."

Stuart Bull, GAINSBOROUGH

"Light-hearted, if a little complicated. I wonder if the eccentric Professor Dunbar's theories work? Was there really a scientist named Schrodinger? Is there such a thing as the eigenfunction of the atom? It all sounds so convincing and it would be intriguing to find it all true. Perhaps I'll win the National Lottery one day, too!"

Howard Daniels, ST HELIER, JERSEY

"Good job I had a physics background, and of course everyone dreams of winning the lottery. Interesting topic for a story, but no-one believes that the outcome is really predictable, just hopes. Well done, Kevin, for not ending it with a win. that would have spoiled the effect of the tale. A clever piece of frivolity."

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

"It seems that Kevin Ball certainly knows his maths, making me wonder if he ever attempted the idea that formed the premise of this story. As well as the real science, it was pleasing to see a genuine understanding of the I Ching and some genuine characterisation - except the lazy casting of Dunbar as a 'stereotype professor image'. I wonder if the

Jodrell Bank connection was thrown in as a red herring - my imagination was turning along the lines of 'lottery winners from outer space', but Mr Ball's ending was much more convincing."

John Paul Catton, CAMBRIDGE

"This was a well written piece, amusing, topical, if a little inconsequential but, most importantly, brazenly unscientific and wonderfully improbable. I use JANET quite often, and my suspicion is that someone will have noticed something slightly wrong by 2001. I have remarked earlier in the pages of Xenos that some stories should just be read and enjoyed. This is one of them."

Peter Clark, CARDIFF

ENGLEBERT'S TRAIN by John Hulme

"An original variation on the ghost train theme and spooky with it. But the humour prevents the imaginings from becoming unpleasantly macabre; instead you are caught up in the imagery of magic and left on a positive note."

Pauline Rettie, LONDON

"I was reminded of that genre of horror film from the sixties which consist of vignettes - most told by the travellers on 'The Train Journey to Hell' or some such nonsense. Great writing and a hilarious story from John."

Peter Clark, CARDIFF

"Well, I am surprised at John Hulme's restraint in not seizing the opportunity to go totally over the top with this one. The possibilities inherent in a wacky train, full of genetically malformed seats and other assorted monsters, hurtling along the tracks to God knows where, is just too delicious for words. Pratchett would probably have handled it differently, but full marks to John for a good try,

and I think he got somewhere near it. Certainly a great idea.”

Ken Burke, LUTON

“At first I thought - ‘Oh no! Not one of these Ghost train rehashes again’ - but it wasn’t. A weird and wonderful fantasy habitat for the nobodies of the world. Right down to the frisson of fear. If you go that way, drift daydream into reality, there is no coming back, ever. I can’t call every story the best, let’s just say the standard is now so high in Xenos it would be hard to choose.”

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

“It struck me that you could play ‘Eleanor Rigby’ in the background when reading this bitter sweet story of people with nowhere to go; we’ve all been there, and the surreal moments with the strange train beasts added hugely to the warmth and humour in the tale. Very powerful, and a big winner with me.”

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

“Terrific! There is magic here. Somehow reminiscent of ‘Little Shop of Horrors’. For me the best story in the issue. Comic, yet with a strong undercurrent of fear and apprehension of where Englebert is really going. The unexpected happy ending comes as a welcome relief. A very original story. More please.”

Howard Daniels, ST HELIER, JERSEY

“The name Englebert Smirk almost put me off, But I enjoyed the story in the end. The sort of idea that might occur on a late-night train, when everything seems to be in limbo. I particularly enjoyed the dead-pan descriptions of the monsters. My only quibble is that, unless Englebert misjudged them, it seems unlikely that the ‘dipsticks’ are actually Hobomads; in which case, why did they get on the train?”

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

“My first reaction is always irritation

when an author introduces a character with a silly name: it’s like giving someone a nudge in the ribs and saying ‘Hey, this is going to be funny!’. And usually it isn’t. But this one had compensations. I quickly began to sympathise with a fellow natural-born victim and by the time the tentacle with an eyeball in its tip flopped into view I was irrevocably hooked. It turned out to be the weirdest, most original and highly imaginative story I’ve read for a long time. I shall never feel quite safe on the Metro again...”

Geoff Roberts, BOUGLON, FRANCE

“I think I know this train quite well, doesn’t it connect Baker Street to Uxbridge? No, nothing quite compares to the true horrors of the Metropolitan line, but I enjoyed this a lot. Despite the bizarreness of the likes of living upholstery, the dispossession and isolation of Englebert was evoked with some sensitivity. Perhaps we are all on a road to nowhere, forced (like Toad and the construct in ‘The Artificial Man’) to make a purpose to our lives. Whatever, the final reconciliation of Englebert to his one-way, non-stop ride into Fast Darkness, with his new-found comrade Kyra, was oddly moving.”

Simon Hall, UXBRIDGE

THE LAZARUS REBELLION by DEREK HAMILL

“The first mention of Fairies made me flinch, but before long I was caught up in this vivid, fascinating tale. The depiction of fairies as effective alien overlords, using and abusing mankind for their sport, was certainly a refreshing change! I did find Jude a slightly underpowered figure (there seemed little beneath the assertive, inquiring journalist exterior), but Garrick’s situation was powerfully depicted. Derek certainly put a lot of thought and effort into this, and I’m sure I’ll not be the only one hoping to see more of the cruel and beautiful land of Faerie.”

Simon Hall, UXBRIDGE

“The story rockets off to a start bringing in an immediately dramatic situation, and then becomes a rather Swiftian perspective on society viewed by a neighbouring but utterly different race. Mr Hamill’s macabre story is given extra weight by the premise being supported by the many UFO conspiracy theories, showing that the fairie myth is only just under the surface of modern human experience. The story seemed to sag a little during the tale of Garrick’s parents, but maybe that was an attempt to bring a more traditional fairie-tale feel into that part of the narrative. The characterisation of Garrick and the fairies was good, but Jude seemed to be a bit weak, and more could have been made of her than just a passive onlooker.”

John Paul Catton, CAMBRIDGE

“Brilliant! I loved this one. Definitely my favourite of the issue, if not the three issues I’ve received so far. I’ll even go so far as to say that if this story had appeared in another, commercially available, anthology, it would still have had me enthusing. Forget character development; forget genre; forget sub-texts and meta-language. Forget, even, (Heaven forbid, given Mr Copestake’s stand on literacy the last couple of issues!) grammar, syntax *et alia*. This was a STORY! The idea of good and evil battling it out, in the form of ‘mythical’ creatures, without the knowledge of an arrogant and self-serving humankind appeals to the ironic Philip K Dickian side of me. The prospect of trying to convince the rest of the world of the authenticity of the surviving videotape of the story’s events is wicked: do I see Rosewell zealots on the horizon?”

Jim Palmer, STOCKPORT

“This was the star of the show. The story itself was really excellent, with an intriguing concept and classy execution. The best story I’ve seen in Xenos, along with the previous issue’s ‘Round the Rugged Rock...’ by Hick Turnbull.”

David Seaman, HARLINGTON

“I met someone called Garrick a few hours before receiving the magazine (synchronicity or what?) so the argument that he had an obsolete name didn’t really convince me. That apart, this was my favourite story of the issue, with the information reeled out to the reader expertly, at exactly the right pace, and a satisfying twist to give Garrick possible victory. A refreshing change, both from the usual fairies at the bottom of the garden, and from the usual secret societies, aliens or whatever that are running the world behind our backs.

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

“This story flickered inconsistently between sections of true power (Oberon’s storm) and less convincing moments, largely the action taking place in Jude’s flat. In the end, while I accepted the message, I couldn’t accept the vulnerability of the individual fairies. If Oberon controls the storms, surely the lightning would be his to command? Even though I wasn’t convinced, it certainly got me thinking, a theme shared by all the stories in the issue, and I would certainly like to read more from Derek.”

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

SHE LIVES IN A HOUSE BUILT OF NUMBERS by NICOLE LEE

“A right spine-chiller: the relentless, compulsive work, the total lack of effect except when the virus starts to morph paint a horrendous picture of what could lie ahead. My sympathies would be with the Luddites who smashed computers. Despite a degree of technicality making it at times heavy going, this is a compelling, if depressing tale, well crafted and told. Not quite sure at what point ‘she’ really dies amid the confusing signals of the final para.”

Pauline Rettie, LONDON

“Outclassed everything in the issue by a long way. What professional writing. Bleak,

and all the information we need is there without surplus details or anything stated that we can work out. Not only 3-D characterisation, but character development and sympathy - almost without telling us anything about the nameless heroine. Devoid of sentimentality, which pleases me; I think a less stark delivery would have been less, not more, moving. This one will stay with me."

Mandy Christie, HITCHIN

"Weird, weird, weird. The basic idea is neither new nor remotely plausible, but Nicole writes with such hallucinatory conviction, that you've long finished reading before you spot the sleight-of-hand. Unlike 'The Coulson Illusion', the absence of name only adds to the reader's disorientation, as does the present tense narrative. This is an outstanding piece of work; the slightest hint of attempted justification or explanation would have wrecked the whole thing. Without effort, characterisation shines like a beacon. I could never have managed to write this."

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

"I found this so moving that it's almost painful to comment on it at all. All I'll say is that, for me at least, this is one of those stories that you read once and never forget. As for the lines '*What if people try to change you? Don't they anyway?*' ... Oh! Cold shivers!!"

John Scott, DOWNPATRICK

"For my money, the weakest story in this issue, I'm sorry to say. I never really felt emotionally connected to the character, always remaining somewhat detached. Despite her eventual intentions being made obvious, the level of technical explanation of the processes was missing as was any hypothesis as to her psychological attitudes. Everything just sort of happens, her ethereal electronic self just exists, is devoid of feeling and doesn't particularly convince you that she'll ever get any, how ever far she travels. You have to struggle to care."

Stuart Bull, GAINSBOROUGH

"Nicole's deliberately staccato style and use of the present tense are very convincing. They convey the air of boredom and indifference with the outside world that 'she' felt. The story itself is very imaginative and well-written, if somewhat disturbing. I got a little confused. Did she have to die to become part of an intelligent system, or did she die giving birth to the new system? Her 'mystic union' with the virus was marvellously described. Such descriptions as the winter's afternoon 'pressing its cold lips against the window pane' and her eyes 'sunken deep in their sockets, like black holes that absorb the light from the screen' are memorable examples of excellent writing."

Howard Daniels, ST HELIER, JERSEY

"Wow. Probably the most interesting contribution in this edition of Xenos, and quite some feat of sustained style. The love-making, as emotionless as the rest of the narrative, seems to give birth to the unnamed girl's child self - and perhaps to her death too, though this is not expanded upon - and at the end, the impending death of the girl, alone, disconnected, is tempered by the knowledge that her child self will be set free to wander the electronic universe. I found this quite compelling."

Ken Burke, LUTON

"The only story I didn't really enjoy. The terse narrative style which was obviously used in an effort to build up tension just didn't work. It might have been better had almost every sentence not started off with 'she' or 'her'. Surely the author could have used a little more variation so as not to irritate the reader? The overwhelming feeling I got at the end of the story was, 'Who cares?', unfortunately. Still, the idea that if a human could be made into a computer program then it would basically be a virus was interesting".

David Seaman, HARLINGTON

"This, in my opinion, is the finest story I

have ever read in Xenos! The language is beautiful. From a few elegant paragraphs, you pick up pieces of this woman's life. There is so much space in this story, that you have to fill in the blanks for yourself. The dialogue is simple, realistic. You can almost hear pauses as she talks awkwardly on the phone to her Mother. As for the actual plot, well, this was just magnificent. It would have been so easy to be heavy handed with the dual threads of what I assume is the AIDS virus, and the computer virus. There is no masculine scientific gobbledegook as the heroine loads her personality into the computer system. I loved the way the bleakness of the tale was lightened with hope at the end. A very human story. More from Nicole Lee, please!"

Stephen Green, RAF ST ATHAN

MARBLES by DESMOND TERRY

"A simple story of a small boy's miracle. So much fantasy writing is spoilt, I feel, by the characters being essentially unreal - not relating to the normality around us. The most powerful fantasy creates a believable situation, peopled by real characters and then - when we least expect it- injects the fantastic. This way the effect is more powerful. The twist in the tail in this story is well handled. I liked it."

Paul Marsh, St-MAURIN, FRANCE

"What a change! An 'eternal' tale of school bully getting comeuppance from disadvantaged kid - and with marbles, surely dates things? Nicely done, with ingenious twist end though I do think a clue or two before might have been in order. Suddenly producing a glass eye is a bit of a 'with one bound Jack was free' device. Mustn't quibble - a happy ending to story and issue."

Pauline Rettie, LONDON

"I liked this one. The tough environment of your average school was accurately drawn, with kids ganging up on the inevitable outsider. Neat twist at the end that I didn't see

coming. A simple tale, told well."

Stephen Green, RAF ST ATHAN

"The most enjoyable story of the issue. A good, solid narrative, deft characterisation and a very weird ending. Everyone can sympathise with a victim of playground bullies, even if we do groan at Colin's final victory."

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

"This story was refreshingly simple with a twist ending which was unexpected and original. I felt that it suffered slightly with some of the kids' dialogue, which at times seemed a bit too refined despite dialectical attempts with words like 'Yer, 'im, Aw, ya, ennit,' etc. A small crit for such a charming story."

Michael Lee, CHISWICK

"A simple tale of boyhood loneliness, marked by exclusion amongst one's peers, where the only ray of relief is the boy's grandfather. This piece skated over dangerously thin ice below which lay the slough of treacle, and was just saved by the original ending. But here Desmond yielded to that temptation to roll on past the point where it should have ended, and add additional juicy titbits which unfortunately detract from the impact. Even I - shock, horror - yes, even I have done this. For maximum effect I would finish at '...there was just an empty socket.' End of story. Thus letting the little boy go happily on his way, unaware of the shivery obituary to the tale of the ghostly marble."

Ken Burke, LUTON

"This story's rather horrible macabre ending certainly gave me a shock, although on second thoughts I don't think a glass eye would look just like a marble ... but then, it wasn't a glass eye, was it? ... But it couldn't have been his real eye either, since eyeballs aren't solid or marblelike in consistency, nor do they fall out ... and anyway, the doctor says... but of course I find I'm trying to take

the whole thing too literally, instead of grasping the message, which is love of the Grandfather for Colin, still persisting even after death. My favourite in this issue.”

Mary Bray, FLITWICK

“Quaint and thoroughly enchanting. I should have guessed the ending, but I was so completely sucked in by events, to the story’s benefit, that I completely missed it and that only added to the pieces subtle charm. Three cheers for Colin.”

Stuart Bull, GAINSBOROUGH

“Everyone was real, none of them perfect. A delightful blessing from the grandfather, gently revealed. My favourite of the issue.”

Richard Chatterjee, CROYDON

“It’s a tribute to the clear observation in the story that the period (50s/early 60s) is quite obvious, even though it’s never even indirectly stated. The ending was slightly predictable (though I didn’t expect the marble to be Grandad’s eye); but that didn’t spoil a wonderful evocation of childhood.”

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

“Only one word to say about this tale. I loved it to bits, it was wonderful. It kept me interested right to the end. I got sort of carried away with it, and that doesn’t happen to me very often... or does it?”

Trevor A Stones, CLACTON-ON-SEA

“Not a lot to criticise here: a touching story of underprivileged youth, coping with the indifference of school and pain of bereavement, but finding acceptance with his peers through the magic of faith in his grandfather. Without the ‘magical’ twist of the final page, this would perhaps have been a stronger, more affecting tale, but it was still a typically enjoyable and life-affirming Xenos Finale.”

Simon Hall, UXBRIDGE