

McCann's

Planet Magazine

Wild SF, Fantasy, Horror, Humor, Poetry — Online™ Vol. 2.4 FREE!



INSIDE THIS SHAPE-CHANGING ZINE:

Science Fiction by Joy Cambell & Ben Stivers, Wayne Deeker,
Andrew G. McCann, Frederick Rustam, Steven Thorn.

Horror by Larry Calvert.

Poetry by L. Norton, Paul Semel, s.c. virtes.

Illustrations by Romeo Esparrago, Ray Villarosa. •

Masthead

Planet Magazine Asks: "Shouldn't a 'carrot-top' have green hair?"



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Web page: <<http://www.tiac.net/users/agm/index.html>>

Editor & Publisher

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Cover Artist

Romeo Esparrago <RomeDome@eworld.com>

Cover Title: "Encounter Between Friedberg & Bad Nauheim." On leave (during World War I), the Dread Baron meets the legendary Snow Giant of Germany, while flying above the wintry forest between the towns of Bad Nauheim & Friedberg. Neither the Dread Baron nor the Giant could foresee that many, many decades later, Bad Nauheim & Friedberg would be embroiled in a bitter dispute over the title of being the "Second Home of Elvis".... Inspired by a photo of the Fokker DR.1 triplane taken by David T. Okamura <DTO@eworld.com>. Tools: Mac Performa 578, Painter, Wacom ArtZ tablet, and lotsa cranberry juice.

WHAT IS PLANET MAGAZINE?

Planet Magazine is a free quarterly of science fiction, fantasy, horror, poetry, and humor written by beginning or little-known writers, whom we hope to encourage in their pursuit of the perfect story. There could be other reasons we're doing this, of course, motivations that are obscure and uncomfortable; instincts linked perhaps to primal, nonreasoning urges regarding power and procreation — the very same forces, no doubt, that drowned the Atlanteans and their alabaster-towered oceanic empire. And the Dark Gods laughed.

Anyway, Planet is nationally distributed in electronic form (text and full-color versions) via the Worldwide Web, American Online, CompuServe, eWorld, New York Mac Users Group (NYMUG) BBS, and Cthulhu knows where else. We guess that total circulation is something like 500-1,000 per issue worldwide. Who can say? Feel free to pass this magazine along electronically or as a single printout, as long as you don't charge for it or alter it in any way. We welcome submissions (details below). Planet does not carry any advertising or offer an official subscription service (but it can always be found every third month in certain locations; see below). Letters to the editor are welcome and are likely to be printed. Send questions or comments to agm@tiac.net.

SUBMISSIONS POLICY

Planet Magazine accepts original short stories, poems, one-act plays, and odds-and-ends (use the lengths in this issue as guidelines), as well as original accompanying illustrations. We prefer unpublished SF, fantasy, horror, poetry, humor, etc., by beginning or little-known writers (we eschew stories published in other e-zines, as well as porno, gore, and mainframe software manuals). Because this e-mag is free and operates on a budget of \$1.07 per annum, we can't afford to pay anything except the currency of free publicity and life-enhancing good vibes (that and \$2.80 will get you a sesame bagel with cream cheese, a small coffee, and a copy of the "Times," but it's still a wake-up call to the Muse to see your name in print).

Story submissions: Send stories, poems, etc., as StuffIt- or ZipIt-compressed ASCII text files to agm@tiac.net. Two submissions max at a time, please.

Illustration submissions: Send only one or two illustrations per story as separate, stuffed and binhexed 16-color, 16-gray, or B&W pict files to agm@tiac.net. We're open to cover ideas (holiday, seasonal, topical themes are best); query first.

DISTRIBUTION SITES

Planet is distributed in three electronic versions — text-only (readable by Windows or Macintosh, using a word-processing program), Acrobat PDF (full-color version readable by Windows or Mac, using the free, downloadable Acrobat Reader), and DOCmaker (full-color version with sounds, readable by Mac only; needs no other software). Some of these files may be compressed with StuffIt (a .sit file); you'll need StuffIt Expander, or similar, to decompress them. This zine can be downloaded from the following sources, among others:

- For those with WorldWide Web access, check out **Planet's** home page at <http://www.tiac.net/users/agm/index.html>. From there, you can download any issue.
- The America Online Writer's Club Forum (keyword: WRITERS; the route is The Writer's Club: Writer's Club Libraries: Electronic Magazine Library), which carries all three versions. Also, AOL's Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (keyword: SCIENCE FICTION; the path is Science Fiction & Fantasy: The Science Fiction Libraries: Member Fiction & Scripts Library). And in the Macworld software library (keyword: MACWORLD; check out the software library's new uploads section).
- The CompuServe Science Fiction & Fantasy Forum (go: SFLIT; look in the Science Fiction literature library). This library carries only the text version.
- The eWorld SF, Fantasy & Horror Forum (comand-g: SF); the full path is Arts & Leisure Pavilion: Forums: Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror: Alexandria Restored: In Print. Also, Ziffnet's Software Center (command-g: ZIFF); the full path is Software Center from ZiffNet/Mac: Editor's Choice Library: Electronic Publications: Additional Publications (unless they've moved it).
- The NYMUG BBS (New York Mac Users Group) carries the DOCmaker and PDF versions in its Electronic Pubs folder or its Science Fiction files in the New Uploads folder.

At 2400 baud, the text file takes a few minutes to download, while the DOCmaker file takes about 15 minutes (set your modem to "stun"). At 9600, though, the DOCmaker version takes only about 5 minutes to download. At 14,400 or 28,800+ kbps, download 'em all. The DOCmaker version is the coolest (starting with **Planet** 1.3, you can click on the illustrations and get a special surprise).

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COLOPHON

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Editorial & Letters

"If Elected, We Promise a Crashed Saucer in Every Backyard!"

THE MOON OF MARS

There is a great, ongoing debate regarding "The Face" — a hill on Mars, photographed from space, whose depressions and ridges collectively appear to form two eyes, a nose, and an open mouth, framed by a very bad haircut. Many people say this "face" represents a message to Earth, a deadly warning even, trumpeting to all who are aware enough to listen: "We are here in your solar system! We have a base on Mars built with the help of the Secret World Government of your planet! We will usher in a New World Order that will make the 'X-Files' seem like an episode of 'American Bandstand'! Behold our works, ye puny, and tremble!" (Although that's a long-winded message that sounds suspiciously like something we would make up, adherents insist it's accurate and based on careful telescopic lip-reading.)

All that is well and good. And we look forward to serving a second set of Alien Masters. But **Planet Magazine** feels it's imperative to point out a new, more ominous development. Recent photos of Mars — smuggled out of NASA's high-security image-processing facility in Taos, New Mexico, by a talking dog we befriended — show another feature of the Martian surface heretofore kept as a secret of the highest order. Exactly halfway round the Martian globe from the The Face, there are two parallel, sandy-red mounds — yes, The Buttocks of Mars!

Exactly why would our future controllers seek to "moon" us? Does this signify a menacing disdain portending some fearful twist in the accepted scenario of their eventual domination? Or, by showing us their "crack," are they saying, "We are like drunken rock-band roadies or bloated refrigerator repairmen, seeking nothing but money, sex, and narcotics for substandard work"? Or, perhaps, the face and buttocks of Mars imply that the planet itself is the body (however distended), and that we should now be looking for The Arms and The Legs of Mars for further clues to the Aliens' plans?

All of these alternative paths are unwelcome, in our view. We were hoping for a strict, organized hierarchy to take possesion of Earth as soon as possible; one that we could figure out, learn to work with, rise up within — eventually gaining the top post in the Earth Colony, as well as permission to humbly travel to the Alien home planet to become the first Earthling member of the Galactic Emperor's Most Royal Court. Maybe, one day, we'd even become the Court's wizened Scribe-Editor, one who publishes alien SF in his spare time and perhaps has the ear (or whatever organ) of The Highest Cosmic Personage Itself.

Thus, **Planet Magazine** calls on the Secret World Government to immediately launch a probe toward this new Martian feature, quickly collect the necessary samples, and speedily disseminate the appropriate disinformation to the officially recognized forums: alt.alien.visitor, "Encounters," and Newt Gingrich's presidential-campaign advance team.

**Awaiting Alien Orders,
Andrew G. McCann, Edit-bot v1.01a
Planet Magazine, December 1995**

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor: I have been reading your e-zine since Issue 1; it's very good. I noted in Issue 6 that you would provide an alert to us "regulars" when an issue was posted. I'd like to get such a service; it will save me wasting time looking when it's not yet posted; or missing an issue when it is.

Thanks in advance,
John
via AOL

[Uhhh, did we say that? By gosh we did! OK, we will add you to the alert list. And thanks for the e-compliment. By the way, you can download back issues from our Web site at <<http://www.tiac.net/users/agm/index.html>>. —Editor]

Dear Editor: Hi, I really like Planet Magazine (I've downloaded 6 issues so far). I'd like to know: 1) What is the latest issue? 2) Where can I get it? (AOL seems to have re-arranged the writers forum and I can't seem to locate the e-zine library. Also, a search for "Planet Magazine" yielded nothing.

Thanks in advance,
Ian R.
via AOL

P.S. You should get more stories by Rick Blackburn. "The Bombardment" in issues 2 and 3 was EXCELLENT!

[Y'hear that, Rick? In re the e-zines library on AOL, the moderators did manage to hide it fairly well, but trust us, it IS there. You just have to hit the "More" button. Meantime, if you ever need to find an issue, just visit our Web page at <<http://www.tiac.net/users/agm/index.html>> and download away.]

Dear Editor: Finished reading the current issue of Planet Mag, simply Excellent!!! Every story was well written, and the commentaries/correspondence a good read! I look forward to the next...

The Very Best,
David
via the Internet

P.S. Do you have hardcopy, would like to definitely purchase!

[We do print a few hard copies, but we're mainly an electronic 'zine. See our Web site,

download the pdf version, and print that on colored paper (both sides). Then you'll have your own copy every bit as good as what we'd come up with.]

Dear Editor: I was wondering if Planet Magazine does reviews of books, particularly electronic books sold through the Internet. Our company, Heron View Literary Services, is a small press operating entirely through the World Wide Web, specializing in new authors. We also collect and publish on our home page the criticism and reviews of our readers, to provide our authors feedback to help them hone their craft. Our current catalog has 3 works of SF on it, with another coming this winter. If you would like to take a look at them, samples are available on our home page at <<http://www2.cy-net.net/users/heron>>....

Sincerely,

Garilyn Strawn

Heron View Literary Services

[Planet Magazine does not review books, but we do print letters!]

Dear Editor: Dropped by [your Web site] while out indexing "AfterNoon Magazine". I'll have to stop by again when I have more time. We're supporters of speculative fiction even though we don't have any on Motley Focus right now.

My Best,

Stephen Williamson

"AfterNoon Magazine" URL:

<<http://motley-focus.com/~timber/afternoon.html>>

LETTERS TO THE ICE MONSTERS

Dear Frost Giant: Welcome to The Galactic Alliance's "All Lawful Intelligences Emergency Network," or ALIEN! You have reached the bridge of the U.S.S. Porkchop, the closest starship to your sector of the galaxy. We're sorry, but no one is available at the moment to take your subspace call; everyone is either on another call or away from their station. Please listen carefully to the following options: If you're reactor core is melting down, press 1. If you are under attack by aliens, relatively speaking, press 2. If you are threatened by an unknown virus, press 3. If you have another type of emergency, press 4 and leave a message. Please remember to speak slowly in the Galactica dialect and to carefully give your name, your Universal time zone, and your space coordinates. If you'd still like to speak with an operator, remain on the line and someone will be with you shortly.

Thank you!

Lt. Flo Threau-Kondomm

Director, G.A./A.L.I.E.N.

Dear Yeti: Just because I'm a puppet doesn't mean I deserve to be treated like a dummy!

Stiffly,

Mary-Annette

I'm@Theendofmyrope.org

Dear Abominable Snowperson: Humor is often found in the use of devices like repetition. For example, serial murder, although not generally seen as "comic," can get pretty funny after

a while.

[Stan Dinne Firim](#)

lam@Witsend.org

Dear Windigo: Hello. Let's begin your weekly e-therapy session. As always, since neither of us can figure out how to set up an IRC or Internet telephonic link, and because therapy by e-mail is so necessary yet so one-sided, I'll try to anticipate your answers. Here goes: How are you feeling today? Oh? Is that because of something that happened today between you and your wife? your boss? your dealer? And how does that remind you of your relationship with your mother? No, let's not talk about your father just yet. Interesting... maybe next session we should look at why you think I "sound like Bob Newhart." OK, your turn (and don't forget to attach an e-check to your reply),

[Blaine Klook](#)

[Accredited Ralphing guide](#)

WhereAml@doc.org

Dear Dire Wolf: I'm a worried mother. My infant son is not doing well with his disk-maintenance training: His hard disk is badly fragmented, and he never backs up any data, even though I bought him a Zip drive. Further, he doesn't seem to want to go online, even though I've given him Microsoft Blob. All he wants to do is go outside and play. Do you know the name of a good child-development professional? I don't want my boy to become cybernetically challenged — a freak and the butt of jokes, like your "magazine."

[Ram Dubbler](#)

[via the Ultranet](#)

Dear Frosty: In this dog-eat-dog-eat-dog world of today, being No. 1 is no longer good enough. You've got to be No. 0.

Best,

[I.M. Wackt](#)

Party@Myhouse.org

Dear Grinch: I just bought a lovely set of Lagerfeld curtains for my high-tech loft in Williamsburg, which overlooks the picturesque bridge of the same name and the dark, brooding river known only as "East." My question is: Do you know if these drapes will be compatible with Windows 95?

[Jay L. Bate](#)

IM@theHQoftheB.org

Dear Mr. Freeze: Excuse me, but is this eWorld? I'm trying to find the Technology and Spirtuality Forum to ask whether God supports System 7.5's Drag Manager. This is because He is truly my icon, and I'm wondering if he'll move his Heavenly Mouse and drag and drop my soul onto him. Hey, pretty neat idea, huh? Careful, though, it's patented!

Bristlin' with Lawyers,

[Anita Anser](#)

Knockin@Heavensdoor.gov

Dear White Queen: I'm seeking funding for my new movie, imaginatively titled "Ayre Brusche," about a young, naive-but-determined gal from the Midwest seeking "meaningfulness" in life by becoming a Las Vegas showgirl. Although she doesn't mind

showing off her body in scene after scene, or in sleeping around to get to where she wants to go — who hasn't? — she does wrestle with such very-human doubts as to whether the idiot who packed her latest very-spangly order from the Spiegel close-out catalog really was on drugs at the time, or not. I mean, what is with these catalog companies? They didn't even get her middle initial right!

"Breast" regards,
[Harry R Truperson](#)
bottle@hand.gov

Dear Jack Frost: I've got a lot of problems, it's true. Some of these I haven't faced, such as my inability to follow postal regulations. I guess you could say that envelopes are something I must address.

[Bravely,](#)
[Lotta Probz](#)
(In the breakfast nook)

Dear The Thing: Just because I "have no experience" doesn't mean that theater should have fired me. After all, the play was so dated, it was absurd. I still think I was correct in changing the ending: In my version, Mr. Godot walks in at the end with his personal trainer, having been at the Horizontal Club Gym centering his *chi*.

[Waiting for work,](#)
[Sam U. L. Baggit](#)
Never@peace.org

Dear Were-Polar Bear: It's a shame that Quebec's move to secede from Canada failed. I had been hoping to purchase the fledgling nation (using bridge loans, since I'm technically bankrupt) and re-sell it to one of the seven alien races currently vying for domination of Earth. We then could have put everyone in Quebec on minimum wage, teach them English (so that I can figure out what the heck they're saying), and use nano-converters to rebuild the entire country from the ground up as a manufactory of the highly radioactive Element Z+, which of course powers most common types of starcruisers.

[Foiled Again,](#)
[Al Umanen](#)
Nip@heels.com

P.S. Apparently, some people have been offended by my idea. I don't know why. After all, it's just good business. In fact, if you could have gotten in early on the deal, you would have seen quite a nice return on your investment. Huh! Maybe next year. Well, "Aloha!", as the French say.

Dear Sleet Leopard: One day, many years ago, while wandering in the heart of Ol' Chinatown, I took a wrong turn and found myself walking down a narrow dirt lane — rather odd for the Core of the Big Apple. Anyway, the buildings were still tall, but wooden, narrow, and dirty, and they seemed to crowd me as I began searching for a way back. There was no one about, save for a few pigs and a rooster, scrabbling in the hard-packed road. Somewhere a goat coughed. Then I noticed that one shop, among all the darkened doorways and windows, appeared to be open.

The screen door creaked as I opened it. I peered about in the candle-lit gloom and spied a tiny old man emerging from a back room. He glided up to me silently and held up an ancient,

enameled box carved intricately in orange, blue, and yellow, and said: "In this box is another box. Inside that, another one. And so on, till they reach what your so-called scientists call the subatomic level; then it keeps going but reverses, and the boxes get bigger and bigger, until, well, that would be telling, wouldn't it?" His brown eyes twinkled up at me. "It has unknown powers. Would you like to buy it for fifty cents?"

I looked at him, stunned, and — don't ask me why — I bought it. It was cheap, after all. Well, I took it home, and the box soon went into a storage closet and I forgot all about it. Then, one fateful day, when I was desperate for beer money, I remembered the box.

So I took it down from the closet shelf. I brought it to a flea market. And I sold it for \$25! Boy, that cash came in handy!

That Is My Story,

[Ray Bann](#)

[One Building Over](#)

Dear Ice Worm: I'm wondering if your readers can help me with some information for my master's thesis, which focuses on "The History of People Putting Pencils Behind Their Ears." Since I was child, I've been curious about how that all started: Somewhere, somehow, "somewhen," somebody first put a pencil behind his or her ear. I guess that probably happened very soon after pencils were invented. Uh, do you know when that was?

Sharply,

[E. "Ray" Seur](#)

[Graphite, Pennsylvania](#)

freetrialuser@aol.com

P.S. I just surfed the Web for the first time and accidentally downloaded a Java applet into my pants. Can anyone help me with this, too?

Dear Blizzard Rat*: I like to use cream cheese as a moisturizer. So what do I put on my bagel in the morning? Window putty! Haven't found a use yet for my Jergens — maybe caulking?

I'll let you know,

[Fern Dock](#)

wolf@door.com

[\[Now we're really makin' 'em up. —The Editor.\]](#)

Dear Flurry Gorilla: People always talk about the Sack of Rome like it was a big deal. Well, I've seen the Sack, and it's just an old burlap bag, about two feet by four feet. Sure, it may have an image on it that's the likeness of The Savior, but that still doesn't compare to the Shroud of Turin, a one-mile-square blanket that the Barbarians of the North flung over that poor city oh-so-long-ago. As you recall, this enormous object, sewn by the barbarians' wives, put out all the fires and plunged Turin into darkness for 40 days and 40 nights, with the Huns plundering shops, homes, and palazzos — their scurrying figures all the while creating moving lumps under The Great Shroud!

Informatively,

[Cal Igula](#)

Emperor@imperial_senate.gov.it

Dear Slush Yak: You know what really makes my blood boil? Being exposed to a hard vacuum!

Arthur C. Bradbury
New Sri Lanka, Mars

Dear Leona: My girlfriend thinks I'm too uptight. Just because I wear a three-piece suit to bed each night. I know this is not a law journal, but is there any way I can sue her?

Kurt Komment
ComeHere@once.com

P.S. By the way, I was wondering something: With all his money, how come Bill Gates can't get a decent haircut? •

Science Fiction



MIRRORS AND SLIVERS (An Excerpt from "Metatropolis")

by Steven Thorn

The Starspikes are so tall that, from space, they must appear as a beard of icicles descending from the round face of the Earth. Of course, they are not so tall. Still, the mirrored, three-sided spikes ascend so high that, on clear days ball lightning gathers around their tips, curious sparkling entities that discharge to earth in a violent flash that runs the length of the spike.

And when the big storms that scour the surface of the Earth rush over, the tips of the spikes score iridescent streaks in the soft underbelly of the cloud. On these stormy days, the mirrored sides of the spikes boil with the storm's reflected swirling darkness.

When lightning strikes amongst the forest of spikes, its momentary illumination is re-reflected and multiplied, so that hours later, in the stillness after the passing of the storm, before the aurora's tempestuousnes envelopes the evening with its spectral shimmerings, the lightning can still be seen, dancing amongst the spikes.

Rigelspike is launching today. It is more than the lightning of storms past, trapped within that

gold-tinted sliver, that today draws our eyes toward it.

The mirrors of this city (for it is now merely that; there is no longer any escape velocity to defy the Earth's thickening gravity) seemingly ascend further into the sky with each passing week. Of course, this too is illusion. Maybe it is only our own increasing burden that makes the spikes seem, on a calm autumn day like today, so much more towering.

Though fractured on the surfaces of the Starspikes — each reflecting back the sky coloured by its own hues, creating a jagged and multiple horizon — the blue-space-and-cloud mottle, reduced and captured there, is ordered, too.

* * *

It's curious: Each workday I ascend those structures and descend their outer surfaces, yet from here, on the edge of the ruined metropolis where we Grounders live, they seem so alien, so unfamiliar. I'm not really suited to my employ as a window washer; I think too much about falling. That doesn't scare me, though. I see the gulls and the pigeons still defying gravity, wheeling in the strange, high places between Starspikes. They traverse those empty geometries so easily; I sometimes imagine that I would, too.

Up there the air hums, the noise of traffic below is little more than background static, and when the wind that precedes a storm soughs in, its currents pull, and I feel the Starspike sway.

I watch myself in those enormous lying mirrors, and watch my self's image blur with soapy water when I sponge, and materialize with such disturbing clarity when I squeegee.

At certain conjunctions of space and light I glimpse my tertiary, my quartenary, and higher orders of selves transformed and reflected back — so that occasionally I wonder if, in fact, that distant person deep within the glass is not some other yellow-coveralled and capped window washer, who merely delights in mimicry of me.

No, it is not the prospect of falling to the ground, that toy landscape, that scares me, but falling into myself in that infinite space.... That fear grips me and sends my imagination reeling, so I must stare and stare into myself, into glimpses of those deeper selves, to ride out that vertiginous fear.

Up there, the clouds drift by so close I could easily be seduced by their materiality to step out, but only into the glass.

* * *

I prefer not to wear a harness when I'm out in the cradle, though Silverman, my supervisor, insists I must — guild rules and insurance clauses. Nor am I supposed to work alone. But Silverman has, in his twenty years of cleaning and remirroring the spikes, developed an assortment of voyueristic liaisons, which he relishes in describing to me. So, as

soon as he has seen me buckled into my harness and left such a perverse meeting, I unbuckle and hang precariously over the cradle rail, laughing and crying out in sheer defiance. Such are the petty amusements we perform in defiance of gravity, to assert our freedom.

On chill mornings I often drive the cradle directly where the sun blazes in the glass, and revel there in ecstatic luminance, suspended in my harness. Such enlightenment — when I blink open my watering eyes and glimpse my reflected self within that blazing orb, Icarus triumphant in heliolatry — is beyond understanding.

Once, while driving the cradle horizontally across a spike for just such an exultant self-apotheosis, the sun exploded outwards, and a chair fell in a rain of glittering shards. A man quickly followed, and I noticed his smile. The hole left in that infinity was a jagged edged blackness.

On certain shrouded days, when my primary reflection is little more than a ghost, I can see the adumbrate figures behind the glass. So empty, the orderly to-ings and fro-ings of these shades, trapped by mirrors and screens and glass in the line of sight hierarchy that makes a spike a functional organism — broken only when they notice me noticing them, and they pull faces and perform curious motionings to see how well I see them. Of course, I act oblivious to their gestures, and they find themselves, observed by their hierarchical superior, acting the fool. These are the only times, it seems, that they pause, as I do, to reflect.

But today, no doubt many of them are reflecting. The Pinnacle of Rigelspike has commanded an attempt to launch. The last such attempt occurred seventeen years ago, when I was three. My family deserted Proximaspire and became Grounders only that morning.

To my three-year-old eyes, it was a beautiful thing to see: that sliver, reflecting the yellow dawn, lift itself up above the other spikes so that it blazed golden in the sun, and then explode in a downpour of prismatic daggers.

Of course, gravity has grown so much heavier since then.

* * *

So we Grounders, in our brightly coloured coveralls and caps, watch from the edge of the deserted Metropolis. And a young family, deserting Rigelspike, their meagre possessions packed in an electric car, crosses the cement field toward us — beyond the black-and-yellow-striped checkpoint, without looking back.

They arrive at our small celebration.

"Hi, I'm Daniel Windows," I say. "Welcome back to Earth."

"Why are you crying, Daniel Windows?" their child asks me.

"These mirrors are a curious, sad wounding of time, and of space. For everything that is beautiful and futile, and everything that is tragic and purposeful. For these mirrors, aspiring

to the night. Don't you see? My eyes are laughing also."

And we watch Rigelspike rise trembling into the blue. And there is as much laughter as tears in their eyes, but only wonder in the eyes of their child. •

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Illustration copyright © 1995-1996 by Ray Villarosa.



RADIO SILENCE

by Frederick Rustam

"It's decided, then."

There was a murmur of agreement among the colonists assembled in the Community Hall. Although the meeting had been under way for only a few minutes, a summary of the problem they had come to discuss had been disseminated by the InfoNet, last week, to every terminal in the village and outlying farms. Every member of the commune had had a chance to consider alternatives. It was a problem they had been discussing among themselves for some time.

Tonight, they were holding an old-fashioned folkmoot, as they always did for the resolution of an important matter. It had been easier than it might have been.... One man had volunteered.... In the restlessness of the audience, a great relief was evident. There was also a good deal of sympathy for the volunteer.

Some had felt they should hire an Assassin from Laagulaan, but the Chairman countered that the commune couldn't afford to hire anyone of that caliber.... Left unsaid was the widely felt reluctance to bring a ninja of that dread Order into the village, even though they were reputed to be well-behaved professionals.

"Thank you all for coming to discuss this," said the Chairman. "Now we have to prepare our volunteer for his hunt. You should return to your homes before it gets dark."

As the audience broke up and began to leave, many of them looked back at the volunteer, who was still sitting in his chair — certain it would be the last time they would see him.... They knew he had volunteered because he had recently become a widower, the only one in the village. He deserved a double measure of sympathy — for having lost his wife in an unfortunate accident, and for the consequent inevitability of his having to be the one to slay the Dragon.

* * *

John Anishinaabe adjusted the straps which bound him to the flamethrower fuel tank above his small hippack. He had a lot of walking to do, and he knew he would be fatigued when he confronted the Dragon. The Committee wouldn't let him use a packmule. They felt it would make too much noise, and they feared he might grow tired of packing the heavy tank and transfer his only weapon to the mule.... He had wanted to carry a radpistol, too. But they were afraid he might rely on it, solely, with disastrous results. There were reports that radgun fire wasn't lethal to the Dragon.

"Now remember, you must maintain radio silence — unless you're in distress," said the comm tech ("Commo," to the village). If you need to call covertly for a pickup, lift the hinged cap, and push the red button. It'll transmit a coded pulsetrain on Emergency Two. If it's received, our gonio will get a fix. Try to be out in the open when you do it. Then, we'll let you know we're sending the InterMedic helo."

"How do we know the Dragon can't make the fix, itself?"

"We don't, for sure. But, we've kept the code as short as we can, and still get a fix."

John shook his head. "I still can't see how an animal like that can intercept radio."

"He's got a portable on a cord around his neck," said Cephas, the village joker.

"Knock it off, Ceph. Or, maybe you'd rather go, instead," said the Chairman.

"Not me! I was just tryin' to lighten up things."

Commo continued. "Look, John — it's not an animal. It's probably smarter than us. Every village that tried to get it, using radios, has failed. It always seemed to know where they were. The guy from Plainsville I talked to swears it's listening. Says it skedaddles right after someone radios a sighting to a posse."

"We just can't take any chances. You're pretty much on your own, anyway. So, play it safe," added the village medic.

The Chairman continued his briefing. "Now, about the motorglider... she'll be loudflying near you, but not centered on you. If she gets a radar motion contact, she'll call us on Emergency Two and say she's coming in to Mountainview field because she's running low on fuel. She'll give the contact's position as her position.... When you hear her, key it into your helmet map. We just have to hope the Dragon won't figure out what's going on.... Then, she'll go quiet and circle the contact until she hears from you, or she does run low.... Got it?"

"If it picks up radio, won't it pick up open radar, too?"

"Maybe — but, what can it do if it does? If it stops while she's emitting, it's immobilized. Anyway, when she gets a contact, she'll turn the radar off and rely on infrared. She has your

signature.... If the Dragon heads for you, she'll use minimum transmitter power — to make the Dragon think she's moved on — and make another radio call to us. She'll say she's having engine trouble.... When you hear that second call — watch out."

"Got it.... You want to test the radio before I leave?"

"No," replied Commo. "Not now, while the Dragon's on the prowl. I checked it out this afternoon."

"OK. I'm ready."

"Douse the lights," ordered the Chairman. Cephas jumped to the switch, perhaps to redeem himself for his flippant remark.

John opened the door, and pulled down his night vision goggles. Under the sole illumination of the stars, everything turned pale green. He took the first steps into the night.

"Good luck," called out the Chairman. He spoke for all, but none of them expected that their volunteer would have much luck.

2.

When colonists began to settle Greenworld, they thought it was the best planet yet charted. Most of it was like the best of Old Earth, and better than any of the New Earths. They built farms and villages, worked the rich soil, tended domestic animals, and hunted in the forests. Life there was ideal for people willing to accept the limitations of country life. There was plenty of good land for the idealistic and disciplined who had learned, in the crowded cities of their homeworlds, what the really valuable things of life were. They became a rural people with urban skills.

From Seaside, they spread out toward the mountains, building individual communities of like-mindeds. The villages were separated by ancient differences, but linked into a loose confederation by radio and by a common desire to make Greenworld a paradise for them and their descendants.

It wasn't very long before they discovered their wonderful new world had a catch: It belonged to a monster.

At first, hunters failed to return from the forests. Their discovered remains told a grisly story of something hungry. Later, it came out of the forest to get their livestock. They knew there were some predatory animals on the planet, but guard dogs usually kept them away. Whatever was killing the livestock killed the dogs, too.

When children began to disappear, some posses of colonists rushed off to the woods with guns and hounds. The hounds had difficulty with the Dragon's scent trails. Some hunters claimed it didn't leave any — an example of the myths that began to grow about the beast.

Then, from a motorglider, a pilot got a glimpse of the monster in a clearing. She said it looked

like a "man-dragon". They started calling it the Dragon. As time passed, it became obvious that the monster was as intelligent as humans, and possessed formidable sensory powers. When a hunter got a better look at it and radioed the sighting, the Dragon started for him right away, even though he was hidden from sight.... His last transmission was a scream.

Later, someone had fired at it from a distance, with a rifle. It ducked into the trees, and didn't seem to be badly hurt. No one had ever taken a close shot, and lived to describe the results.... Fewer and fewer foolhardy hunters went after it. The colonists hunkered down. Each farm and village had its intrusion alarms, but the Dragon often defeated them, as if it had had a part in devising them. It was then that they realized it could sense things no human could.

When it became active around Mountainview, the villagers decided to go after it, using fire as a weapon. They built a flamethrower. But, they needed was someone to wield it. They knew that when a posse went after the Dragon, it got wind of them and laid low.... One man moving quietly at night might have a chance.

3.

John Anishinaabe headed for the nearby foothills. From the plotted sightings, the villagers speculated that the Dragon had a concealed den somewhere above the plain, but below the high mountains. They also guessed it hibernated during the winter, when it could be tracked by its footprints. That was when the killings stopped for a season.

It was a warm summer night. Under the canopy of leaves, starlight dimly illuminated the ground — Greenworld had no moon. With his goggles, he had little difficulty in seeing where he was going. In his helmet, he had, in addition to the wide-field goggles, a sensitive audiosensor. When he stood still it would autoswitch from NORMAL to EXTENDED, and he could hear distant sounds.... The helmet had been filched from a homeworld Special Forces unit by the brother of a villager. John had to learn how to use it by reading a tech manual and practicing in the woods near the village.

When he reached some rocks on a cleared knoll, he pulled himself to the top and stood quietly. The helmet had an IR motion-alarm which was supposed to notify him if it detected anything warm and moving behind him. There was a chemical sniffer-alarm in the helmet, too. But, they hadn't been able — for obvious reasons — to reset it for the Dragon's odor. He faced off in four directions and listened, carefully.... He heard only the usual night noises, much amplified.

As John stood motionless on the rocks, watching and listening for something that would show he was on the right track, he reflected on the legendary hunting skill of his ancestors of Old Earth — the ancient ones who lived beside the inland seas. John's surname demonstrated the determination of his forebears to remember those ancestors. By now, though, John's genes were so admixed with those of other peoples that his appearance was unremarkable. His conception of himself as an Ojibwa was a pearl that he had shared with no one, except his wife, now dead. She, herself, had been descended from the Dinee, the people of the great dry land.

Still, he found himself wishing that one of those ancestral forest warriors, with his arrows and throwing tomahawk, were beside him now. His skills might be more useful than all the fancy tech-stuff in his stolen helmet.

He muted the audiosensor to check on the VHF-AM radio receiver. He knew he wasn't supposed to transmit except in an emergency, but he felt a little more secure listening to the soft background hiss of the receiver.... Emergency Two was quiet. He should have no trouble hearing the motorglider pilot — if his attention weren't captured by something immediate.

He fingered the XMIT switch on the side of the helmet. It was jammed with a thin wooden dowel which would break if he pushed the switch hard, but would keep him from making a mistake which might reveal his position.

He wished the village would transmit occasionally to reassure him that he was still connected to them, but they were afraid the Dragon would intercept their signals and guess it was being hunted. He restored the audiosensor, with its crickety sounds, and clambered back down the rocks. At the bottom, he brought up the map display in his goggles and headed for the area where the most sightings were plotted. Thereabouts, he would look for a cave. If the Dragon lived there — but was not inside, just then — he would wait for it with his fiery torch.

* * *

John was threading his way through the trees and shrubs, stumbling occasionally. Suddenly, he stopped. Ahead, he saw a trail. He checked the map. It wasn't charted.

When he reached it, he could see that the grass and weeds had been worn down by occasional traffic — of what? He brought up the compass overlay. Even if forest animals had made the trail, the Dragon must use it to save time. It ran from the foothills toward the sea.

Somewhat reluctantly, he turned onto the trail, and began following it toward the foothills. He was afraid that, if the Dragon were waiting ahead, he might walk into an ambush. Sound carried better down the trail, and the monster might lurk in the shrubs beside the trail and jump him from behind. He stopped and listened to the extended audiosensor.... Nothing.... He moved on. If it were one of the Dragon's trails, it would lead him closer to its den than he could get by wandering around among the trees, waiting for a call from the motorglider pilot.

He unslung the flamethrower nozzle, and used it to push vegetation aside, being careful to keep his finger off the trigger. If he should stumble and fire a blast of flame, he might be detected a long way off — and give the motorglider pilot's LWIR a jolt that might cause her to break radio silence.

... Well, maybe not ... but he didn't trust her, entirely. She flew out of Seaside, the large town which was the first settlement on the planet. Its "urbanized" inhabitants, who avoided the outback, were dimly regarded by the rural pioneers...

He stopped and squinted.... A light, ahead, where the vegetation thinned out. He listened to the audiosensor. He thought he could hear some faint motion sounds. Or, perhaps, was he was imagining? He didn't trust the audiosensor that much, either.

He crept forward as quietly as he could. The crunching and crackling at his feet sounded loud to

him. He wondered how the forest Indians could move so quietly. Their secrets had been lost in the long decent to his generation.

As he moved around a curve in the trail, he saw, outlined in the starlight, a crude log cabin. Interior light was visible through a shaded window on the side, and was spilling carelessly through an open door, bright in his goggles.... Surely, this couldn't be the Dragon's home. The creature was too smart to live in a place so easily detected. He checked the map. No structure was charted here.

He moved as close as he could to the clearing. He doubted he could sneak up to the door without being heard. He would have to rush it and hope to surprise the occupant. If the Dragon were inside and unaware, he might be able to burn it before it could get him.... He raised the goggles, and waited for his eyes to adapt. He took deep breaths, preparing himself for battle. His heart pounded.

Now!... He dashed forward into the clearing and up to the open doorway. His finger all but squeezed the trigger of the flamethrower, as his eyes frantically swept the interior of the cabin.

("What the hell?...")

Lying on a cot and reading a book by the light of a solar-storage lamp, was a bewhiskered old man.

"Freeze!" he shouted, feeling a little foolish as he did so.

The old man's eyes widened with fear as they took in the stranger pointing a flamethrower at him. He dropped the book and threw up his arms.

"D-D-Don't!" the old man stammered

With difficulty, John relaxed his trigger finger, as he considered the unlikely probability of what he was seeing.

"Who are you?"

"Just a hermit," the man replied. "A harmless old hermit."

* * *

John glared down at the old man. He had lowered the flamethrower nozzle, but kept his finger on the trigger. His questioning voice was loud in the night.

"You expect me to believe the Dragon lets you live here out of the kindness of his heart?"

"He don't bother me. That's all I know." The old man wheezed when he inhaled.

"That's not all you know. Is it?"

"I ain't botherin' nobody...."

John stood silent for a moment. "You're bothering me, old man. ... I'm bothered by you living safe in Dragonland, when people who come here to hunt get chopped."

"I ain't seen nobody."

"You're lying! The same trail that brought me here would have brought others.... You know what happened to 'em — don't you?"

The old man remained silent.

"Well?!..."

"Well, what?"

"You know what.... You and the Dragon. You two've got some game going."

"No, we ain't.... How could we?"

"I don't know — but you better tell me, or I'm gonna burn you and this shack good." He lifted the nozzle and gripped it with both hands.

"No! Don't. I'll talk...." The fear on the old man's face showed his acceptance of John's threat. "... I came after him, last year.... I wanted to be the one to get him, but he jumped me while I was sleepin'. I almost had a heart attack when I woke up and saw them teeth o' his. I figgered I was a goner.... But, he didn't kill me. He tied me up and dragged me back to his cave...."

"Go on."

The old man had trouble telling the truth from this point on.

"I taught him our talk...."

John exploded. "You did what?!"

The old man cringed. "What could I do? He wanted to learn Universal. ... I guess he wanted to understand us."

"Understand us? It wanted to kill us! And you helped it. You gave it a weapon greater than any gun."

"You would have, too — to live.... And, don't forget, I'm stuck here. He won't let me go.... I had a wife and a farm. Now, I got nothin' he don't give me."

John lowered the nozzle. In spite of his anger, he felt sorry for the old geezer.

"If I burn the Dragon, you can leave. But, you better not tell anyone what you told me, or you'll

wish you were back here.... Now, get up.... You're taking me to the cave."

"Now?... It's after midnight."

"Now ... while the Dragon's out hunting."

"He'll kill both of us!" The old man began shaking.

"You can take your chances with me. And, I promise you, if you try to run, I'll turn you into a bonfire.... Let's go — you in front."

Slowly, the hermit rose and shuffled to the door. He paused and squinted into the starlit clearing, as if he expected to see his nemesis waiting for them, outside.

John turned the lamp off and followed the old man out the door.

4.

"I'm afraid go in there." The hermit looked back at him.

John considered the situation. The overgrown entrance was man-high, but barely visible against the brushy slope. If the Dragon were inside, he couldn't have the old man between them. He would only get one shot.... He moved ahead of the old man, but stood to one side of the entrance.

"Get closer and call it out," he whispered, loudly.

The old man looked dubious, but cupped his hands over his mouth and called in a weak voice of unmistakable respect.

"Aaksh.... Aaksh, it's Ben."

("Aaksh?... He's on a first-name basis with it!")

Silence.... John listened to the helmet audiosensor. The old man's restless movements were audible against the nightsounds.

He crept up to the entrance and stood facing into the cave, his trigger finger painfully tightened. Now he was beginning to shake — he could hear himself shaking. But, from the cave ... nothing.... If the Dragon were inside, it must have heard them. He gestured for the old man to move up to the entrance beside him. "Again!" he whisper-shouted.

"Aaksh! It's me — Ben!" he hollered. The helmet audiosensor clipped down, then restored.

After an agonizing period of silence, the volunteer looked over at his companion. "We're going in. Stay behind me, and don't try anything."

Slowly, he moved inside. As he brushed through the vegetation growing around the entrance, he could see there was a dim light coming from back in the cave, around a curve in the narrowing

passage. He halted and pushed up his goggles. If he had to fire, the flame would overload them and blind him.

While he waited for his eyes to adapt to the dim light, he listened to the extended audiosensor. He heard something that sounded like water running. The old man wheezed nervously behind him.... He moved forward, again.

The cave narrowed into a corridor and curved around to the left. If the Dragon showed up here, he thought, he'd have it — if he could react before it rushed him.

Crack!

Under his feet, the dusty floor collapsed.

"Uhhh!..." He fell — but not too far.... Just enough.

* * *

John remained conscious through the pain that followed. He was face down on an earthen floor. His back had been hurt when the hip pack and flamethrower tank bore down on him. Now they hung askew, but were still bound to him by the straps. When he raised his head, a trickle of salty blood ran from his nose to his mouth.

He lay still for a while, trying to orient himself. Then, he tried to undo the straps. A stab of pain reminded him his left wrist had broken the fall.... He managed to free himself. Then, slowly, painfully, he rolled over onto his back and stared upward. At the ragged hole in the false floor, the hermit was staring down at him. He wasn't smiling.

"Guess you ain't so high-and-mighty, now," he said.

"Help me."

"Help you?... I did help you. You got what you wanted. Now you're on your own, mister.... Maybe you can burn Aaksh when he comes back. Maybe not.... I ain't waitin' to find out."

With that, he disappeared from view. With the extended audiosensor, John could hear him running from the cave and into the trees.

5.

He sat with his back against the side of the pit, facing toward the cave entrance. He had tried to stand, but the pain in his back was too great. He pulled the flamethrower nozzle into his lap — so he could get to it, fast. He listened, then turned the audiosensor off, and tried the radio. The receiver was still working, but when he pushed the red locator button under the cap, the receiver didn't cut out for a second, like it should have. He slapped the XMIT switch, breaking the dowel, and held it down.... No cutout.... The transmitter was broken.

What a mess.... Trapped like an animal in a pit he couldn't get out of, and no way to call for help.... That his transmissions probably couldn't be heard from the cave, anyway, was no consolation.

He was about to discard his helmet, when suddenly...

"MOUNTAINVIEW FIELD, THIS IS GLIDE ONE.... DO YOU COPY?"

A pause, as the unreceivable reply eluded him. He was out of the line-of-sight for Commo in the village — to say the least. He was surprised he could receive the motorglider. She must be nearby.

"ROGER.... I'M RUNNING LOW ON FUEL.... HEADING YOUR WAY, NOW.... ETA IS THIRTY MIKES. PRESENT POSITION IS SECTOR GOLF ROMEO."

She had spotted the Dragon.

He brought up the map and keyed in the position code. An outline of sector GR was superimposed. The red circle marking his present position was in one corner.

* * *

He sat in pain, awaiting the Dragon.

The pilot had made her second transmission — the phony engine trouble report which told him the Dragon was coming his way.

It would get a surprise when it showed up — if he didn't pass out, first. He listened closely to the extended audiosensor for the sound of footfalls. He doubted the Dragon would be able to sneak up on him. The gritty floor of the cave made that unlikely.... ("Maybe I'm falsely reassuring myself.")

The radio began picking up static — some kind of pulse noise. He had never heard noise at this frequency before. It wasn't distant thunderstorm static. The receiver must have been damaged, too.... His mind began to drift into dark thoughts.

He damned himself for putting the hermit behind him.... If he had put the him in front, the old man would have taken the fall. Or, if the hermit had known about the pit, he would have funked out, and neither of them would have tumbled.... He was certain the hermit had withheld information he could use to get the Dragon. The old boy probably counted on his pal to keep colonists away from his comfortable home in the woods. It probably gave him a big charge to be favored by a monster that so terrified others. John swore to himself that, if he got out of this alive, the old man would pay dearly for his treachery.

The static was getting louder. It intruded on his thoughts of revenge. He turned the radio off.

He began considering what he would do with the hermit. He should take him back to the village for interrogation.... A return to reality occurred when he considered the chances of being able to accomplish anything, now.

Then, his reverie was interrupted by the extended audiosensor — movement outside the cave.

("Damn!") He had been deep into thoughts of revenge.

He heard the vegetation covering the entrance falling back into place, followed by slow steps along the floor of the cave.... ("The Dragon's coming!")

He raised the flamethrower nozzle toward the hole he had made when he fell through the pit-covering. His finger tightened on the trigger. He had to give the Dragon a facefull before it saw him aiming at it. If he used too much fuel, it might run down into the pit and burn him.... He hoped the Dragon wouldn't fall in. That might finish both of them.

He reset the audiosensor to NORMAL. The footfalls were growing louder.

Suddenly, they stopped. ("It must have spotted the hole in the floor.... Come and see your victim, Dragon.")

He shook as he waited for its ugly face to appear at the hole. He tried to control his arms so he wouldn't spoil his aim. They seemed leaden, but shook.

"Hey, man! Don't shoot! It's me!... I'm back."

6.

The old man stopped chopping at the false floor with his axe. The hole was big enough, now.

"I'm comin' down." He threw down a knotted rope he had staked to the earth, and began climbing into the pit. He was surprisingly nimble, for someone so old.

He moved to John's side. "Can you stand up?"

"Not by myself. Help me up."

The old man knelt, and took hold of the flamethrower nozzle. "Let's get this out of the way."

The volunteer relaxed his grip and let the old man have the nozzle. He rolled over to favor his right hand and put his palm on the ground to push himself up a little.

The old man suddenly stepped back. In a flash, he wrapped the end of the rope around the hippack and flamethrower. "What're you doing?" John asked, helpless to prevent what he suspected.

"I'm pullin' your fangs, boy." He lifted his face to the hole. "I've got it! Pull away!"

John watched as his only weapon was swiftly yanked out of the pit. He glared at the old man, who

retreated to the far end. "You son of a bitch! I knew you were in this together!"

Then, the rope came hurtling back down. The old man used it to climb out. When he got to the top, he stood up and looked back down at the stricken hunter. As he stood there, his partner moved forward to stand beside him.

* * *



It was big — at least two meters tall — and powerfully built. Metallic green, and scaly — with a snouty face and a crocodile's mouth full of sharp teeth. It had clawed hands and feet with four strong fingers and a thumb. On the outside, it looked like a cross between a gorilla and Tyrannosaurus rex. But, he could see the intelligence in its yellow, reptilian eyes — the ones it was looking down at John with.... It stared at him, even though it already knew what his species looked, and tasted, like.

As he contemplated this horrible thing, it suddenly occurred to John that the static he had heard before must have come from the Dragon. He reached up and turned on the radio. The noise blasted his ears. the Dragon was some kind of electro-creature. It alternately received and emitted radio-frequency radiation, apparently through its biometallic skin. Its thick footpads probably served to insulate it from the ground. It sure didn't need a portable on a string around its neck.... He speculated about what the homeworlds would give just to study it. If only he could capture and sell it, instead of killing it.

"This is Aaksh, ruler of Greenworld," intoned the hermit — its man. "He don't talk. I talk for him. He puts thoughts in my head."

"Yeah?... Which one of you is the dummy, then?"

"You're the dummy, mister!... Dumb to come here thinkin' you could kill the Master of the Forest!"

"That makes two of us."

"Oh, no.... I came here because I killed my wife, and had to run. I was huntin' for food when he found me, just like I said."

The Dragon growled — a deep, gutteral sound that some of the victims must have heard before they died.... ("Is it my turn, now?" John wondered.)

A pause.... Then, the old man picked up the flamethrower nozzle.

"Say your prayers, boy.... Aaksh wants YOU to get what you were goin' to give HIM." He pointed the nozzle at John.

The Dragon growled again. The old man looked over at it for a few seconds, then down at the hunter.

"He wants me to thank you for not usin' your radio to report what you saw — heh, heh...." The Dragon's toothy smile seemed more like a grimace. It stepped back from the edge of the pit, well behind the old man.

As their shared jest waned, the wife-killing hermit pulled the trigger of the flamethrower nozzle.

Whump!

The old man was enveloped in brilliant flame and black smoke. He screamed ... and screamed. And collapsed into a pyre of his own making.

Burning fuel spread outward, and some of it flowed down the far wall of the pit. John, helpless to move away, watched it burn itself out, short of him.

"Sorry, old man.... I forgot to tell you — that tank was made to rupture and ignite if anyone else tried to use it. Guess you didn't push that little ole button in the bottom of the grip, first."

Then, he passed out.

* * *

"Hey!... Wake up, man!"

John opened his eyes, and focused on the two shapes standing at the edge of the pit. They were men from the village, carrying old shotguns.

"Cephas ... Jude?"

"Righty-o," replied Cephas.

"How did you guys get here?"

"The InterMedic helo.... It's in a clearing, out there," added Jude.

"How did you know where to find me?"

"Suzie saw you and some guy go in the cave. Then, the guy came running out. When he came back with the Dragon, she figured you were in trouble, so she took a chance and called us on Emergency One. The Chairman got the helo, quick."

"'Suzie'?"

"The motorglider pilot."

"Oh..." John hadn't known her name.

"What happened here? Who's this?" Jude asked, pointing to the smoking remains of the hermit.

"The Dragon's man.... Watch out. the Dragon's up there somewhere. It was with this guy when the flamethrower tank exploded."

"There's nobody here, now — 'cept old Smokey, there.... Don't worry. The motorglider's circling tight. Sun's up. She'll see the Dragon if it comes near the cave.... You think it got burned?"

"I don't know. It moved back before the guy pulled the trigger. It must have gotten away."

"Hell, then, it's probably still running," said Cephas.

"No.... It's probably hiding and watching.... But that's okay. I know how to find it, now."

"Yeah?... How?"

The volunteer smiled, despite his pains.

"Just listen.... It doesn't maintain radio silence."

7.

Later, as he lay abed, recovering from his injuries, John Anishinaabe reflected on the matter of the Dragon, who was still at large.

He thought about his ancestors on Old Earth.... About how they resented the colonists from across the great salt sea. How they fought and killed to keep them out of the sacred homeland.... Those colonists saw his ancestors much like he saw the Dragon: as something dangerous standing in the way of settlement. Something to be confined — or exterminated.

Maybe, the villagers could come to some kind of agreement with Aaksh.... After all, he was an

intelligent being, just like them. He'd gotten along pretty well with the hermit.... ("Maybe, I should volunteer, again — this time to try to communicate with him...")

"John!" The commune Chairman suddenly entered his room in the clinic. "How're you doing?"

"Okay — so long as I don't make any sudden moves," he joked.

"I've got some good news for you.... Thanks to the info you gave us, we got the Dragon." His expression was one of glee.

"Oh?..."

"The posse used radios to track it to another cave. Then, they burnt it out.... We just got the message. I knew you'd want to hear about what happened."

The volunteer hunter looked glum. "Yeah ... good work."

"Good work by you, too, John. You made it possible.... Well, I've got to make the announcement on the InfoNet.... Hang in there. If you need anything, let me know.... See you, later." The Chairman waved goodbye and left the room.

John stared at the ceiling. ("Why do I feel so bad about the 'good news'?'")

He wondered.... ("Maybe, there are more Dragons.") •

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SEVENTH SEAL

by Ben Stivers and Joy Campbell

Nearly invisible, the flat black hull of the giant History Ship Sylph slipped through the infinite ocean of inky space in which she swam. Thousands of visual captures recorded the massive gas giants of the solar system. Two of them had detectable rings, and numerous satellites paid homage to them all, silent little rocks, dead in the night.

The largest of the gas giants, the third, could have found its way to being a brown dwarf if it had the gumption to gather a mere twenty-five times more mass than it had. It would have made the system much more interesting. Still, it was an oasis in the middle of nowhere, stuck on the outside arm of the spiral galaxy that held properties of the Blasian Star Empire.

To Emperor Vacatoar, that one minute detail meant that the solar system was important. Someday, life here would rise to the stars, given the proper direction.

The Sylph's hyperspace engines dropped the ship and crew into the sub-light world of the real, and the heavy gravity engines decelerated Sylph until she reached the red planet. As they passed the tiny spatial body, recorders monitored the planet. Although the planet offered interesting geological configurations, there was no life. That left just one more place to stop. The engines decelerated for an additional thirty units, then shut down completely. The ship's docking engines maneuvered Sylph into asynchronous orbit above the third planet.

The little blue and white sphere would have been breathtakingly beautiful if the Sylph, and the precious passengers she housed, had not seen a thousand places like it before. Still, anticipation abounded. Much had been done to prepare, but there was much more to do.

Sylph was here to seed the third planet with artifacts — artifacts that would hint to the humanoid life forms that evolved on the surface that life was in abundance in the universe. The Empire would leave articles that would point the populace back to the stars. Assuming they were wise enough to follow the metaphor, once evolved, they would take their place among the great advanced civilizations of the Empire, and fulfill their destiny.

The Emperor had sent the History ships forth for just this purpose. It was a mission that was holy to them all when it had started centuries before. The job of the history ships was to invent history for the targeted planet. The populace must be convinced that their civilization was not an evolutionary "accident." Their curiosity would be enticed to come to the stars, or raise the level of fear so high that the planet's populace would flee from their planet in search of salvation.

It was a glorious mission. Now, however, things were going a little on the bumpy side, especially for John.

* * *

"**John!**" the UnderSeer of the Corporate Writing Team exclaimed. John's attention had wandered off as the UnderSeer ranted. The tone and frustration of his editor's voice recaptured him and dragged his mind kicking and screaming back into the present. "Are you paying any attention to what I'm saying?"

"Yes, UnderSeer," John replied as he tried to remember what the Chief's last sentence had been. "I'm listening to you."

"For goodness sake. Can't you see why I'm angry? Do you understand what kind of trouble we are in here?" the UnderSeer asked. His voice gained volume with each word.

John cringed inside. He knew exactly why the UnderSeer was mad and he understood the gravity of the situation. Unfortunately, he had no clue as to how he could provide a solution in time to save them from certain disaster. Still, there was no way he would admit it.

"Yes, UnderSeer. I'm letting down the team." His answer sounded lame.

The Chief's face looked as if it would explode with exasperation. His desperation was so thick in the room John could almost touch it.

"Letting them down? It's more than that! You are the leader of that team! This is your team's target planet."

"I know that."

"The fossil teams have completed all their work and everyone else has completed their work except for the Compendium. Without you, there will be no book! It is the critical Component of the entire project. Our computers have projected that it will play a bigger role on this planet than any other artifact we have planted. Unless you snap out of this, we are doomed for failure!"

John sighed. "I know UnderSeer. I know. I'm having trouble firming up the idea."

The UnderSeer gazed at John. His temper cooled slightly. "John, the team has struggled together for years. You guys have so carefully laid out the scenes, the plot, the dialogue, the themes. Now you are ready for the grand finale. All of us have worked too hard to let it fall through."

"I'll do the best I can."

"That's not good enough. You've got to snap out of this writer's block, John. If you don't come through before the deadline, the OverSeer will have our head and the Emperor will have his!"

"I know, UnderSeer."

The UnderSeer continued. "You know what a pet project this is of the Emperor's. It is why we are here. It is why we are being paid. We need that story!"

John's felt as though asteroids were whizzing in untrained orbit inside his stomach. He felt ill.

"Nothing like a little pressure to lighten up the load, UnderSeer," he grumbled. It was not the Chief's fault. He had a right to be upset. Everyone was waiting. Thanks to John, the Compendium was still incomplete, and more than their jobs were at stake.

"John, let me put it this way. If you do not finish this last chapter on time, I am going to give it to someone else."

"Don't do that," John pleaded.

"I have to. I have no other choice. I cannot risk losing the project to someone else. If I give it to another writer though, it means they will get the full bonus and the advance on the next project. It also means you will be getting off the ship to an 'Emperor-only-knows' assignment in some backwater planetary system."

Fear welled up inside John and frolicked with his nervousness. The UnderSeer was reading him the Riot Act. The bad thing was the threat of which he spoke was very real. It was no bluff.

"It's not fair! I've led this thing the entire way! Some of these people only did one story and some of them only did a few pages."

"Everyone has a job to do, John. They get paid accordingly."

John took a deep breath, then exploded in a flurry of words. "But I did the entire beginning story and came up with the idea about the kid! Not only that, I had several other minor chapters

myself to do, plus I helped everyone else."

The UnderSeer's blue eyes met John's green ones, his voice level. Both of them could see the fatigue in the other.

"That's true. I admit it. But, what have you done for me lately, John?"

John stared at his long time associate in disbelief. This was what it all came down to.

"I need the damned story so we can finish the book," the UnderSeer said grimly, "and I need it yesterday."

There was no way out of it. John nodded and held up his hands. "Okay, okay, fine. I'll have something ready in draft form by tomorrow night." He stood up from the plasteel chair the UnderSeer reserved for those in trouble and picked up his notes.

"I'm counting on you, John. We all are."

John spun briskly on his heel and left the office. The doors whisked shut behind him and he stopped and leaned against the cool metal wall to catch his breath. The air of the ship's circulators smelt stale to him, as if the very air itself threatened to abandon him if he did not come through with the product by the deadline.

He had absolutely no idea how to write the story or even how it should end. He was in a serious jam and he knew it; unfortunately, so did everyone else.

* * *

An hour later, John found himself in Sylph's Writer's Lounge. Out of desperation, he hoped to discuss his problems with some of his friends. It was always against his better judgment to do that. He seldom shared a story idea with people before he had it down on paper. That was part of the thrill. Still, he needed some feedback to jar his brain and get the creative engine in gear.

The room was crowded this afternoon. The air smelled clearer here for some reason. Perhaps being around others that he felt could understand made him feel better. That feeling of closeness, however, had an extremely short shelf life.

He sat down at a small cafe style table. The waitress immediately set a steaming cup of Yorcatlian Brew in front of him. Maclead Ramon sat down across from him.

"How it going, John?" he asked.

John picked up the white cup by the handle and sipped at the Brew. It went down hot and smooth, then exploded in tingles as it hit his stomach. Every nerver fiber seemed rejuvenated at that instant.

"Not too good. I've got to have the story ready shortly and I haven't even started."

"Why not?" Maclead asked.

"I haven't figured out what to write about yet. I have some ideas though."

"Care to share?"

John allowed the first idea to pass from his mouth and bound off his friend, Maclead Ramon. Maclead was his best friend after all. Surely he would give him some encouragement.

Maclead looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. "It won't work," he said. His voice was flat and critical.

John's mouth hung slightly open. "Why?"

"Unbelievable," Maclead said, shaking his head. "The story has to be something that is slightly believable, but still quite fantastic."

The words burned, but John knew they were true. Still, he had not come up with anything.

Maclead consoled him, but did little to help him get a story started. In the end, he was one idea less on inventory and two hours less on time. It seemed hopeless.

Maclead left and wished him well.

Other writers that some called "The Twelve" caught his eye. They sat at a long table and John sat down with them, hoping one last time to get his creative juices flowing by sharing with his peers.

He tried another idea on the group. Most of people he had edited for sometime during the work on the Compendium. They were tougher on him than he ever remembered being to them. He had been tough on them as well, but they seemed to take pleasure in criticizing everything he brought to the surface as a possible storyline.

"It doesn't add anything to the overall story," they reasoned.

He could hear his own words echoing from the mouths of each of them. John shoved his chair back in disgust and prepared to leave.

"John," one of them said. "The Compendium is ready. All that we need now is the last story — one last, amazing story to sum it all up. You can do it. Just relax and stick to the basic premise. Go back to our mission. The Compendium has to be a story that teaches the inhabitants that greater things are out here than they have ever imagined. It must teach the 'evolving' and wonder of intelligent creatures. Your chapter must teach them to reach for the heavens." The others nodded and added their agreement.

"Thanks," John replied, then wandered out of the lounge and into the body of the ship.

* * *

The entire idea for the Compendium grew out of a proposal that he had submitted to the OverSeer. The Emperor had approved the idea almost immediately. Now it was time to deliver, but the ending refused to come. Dejected, John went to his room.

When the mission had first started, John had written the first story in the collection and, as agreed by all of them in advance, it was written under a pen name. That had been the first chapter of The Compendium and it had been easy — at least John thought so. The idea flowed through his head, down his arms and onto the paper. After that, everyone else had wrapped their stories around his framework.

"It's my framework, and I can't get a stupid story idea to hang on it."

* * *

For hours, one idea after another came, but he rejected each in turn. It had to be something in context to the rest of the book. The story had so many requirements.

The intercom chimed softly. It was the UnderSeer. John flipped the receiver switch. He knew it was a status check and a little more pressure for the cooker.

"Yes?"

"John, the story has to be done by the end of the shift, tomorrow. We have to jump out of this system in less than three days! We can't be late leaving. We have another assignment in the bag and ready if we finish this one on time."

"I know, UnderSeer, I know. I'll have it ready — somehow."

"Do you have any of it done?" the Chief's voice said.

"No sir, not a line," John replied honestly.

The UnderSeer sighed. "John —"

John interrupted him. "I'll have it. I promise. If I can just get the first couple words down, I'm sure I can finish it on time."

"It has to be really scary, John. Much scarier than the other stuff we have done. It needs to wrap everything up. It must close out all the business. It must yell, 'The End!' No sequel. They must be scared right off their planet. Tell them that The End is coming! If they don't get off planet to the stars, they'll be dead. That's what we're looking for."

The UnderSeer made it sound so easy.

"Okay, UnderSeer, okay. Honest, I'll have it ready." Somehow, his mind appended. Luckily, his voice did nothing to utter it.

"When?"

"How about the day after tomorrow? We could rush it through production and still make it on time."

"No, you have to meet the deadline. Bring me the manuscript when you get it done."

"Will do," John replied. He touched the comm shut and plopped down in his chair.

He ran his fingers through his long, black hair and closed his eyes as dismay washed over him in a wave.

He needed a story about the end of this world. It needed to be fantastic, and super scary. Yet, it needed to have a touch of believability that would scare an entire population out into space. It had to hang together with the rest of the books in The Compendium, yet tie each of them up into a nice, neat package.

He contemplated the end of the world. Where should he begin?

At that moment, Talya entered the room. She was a nice person and John liked her in a brotherly sort of way. Maybe she could help him find a start. She had been his muse before when he was working on the plot for the kid's assassination.

"Hello, John," she said, smiling.

"Hi, Talya. I am glad to see you. I'm in a real jam."

"I heard," she said, "I've come to see if I can offer you some help." She stepped to his food unit and called up two cups of Brew.

John's face lit up. He felt better already. "Great. I was thinking that I would finish the end of the world story with something really scary. You know, like a massive comet hitting the earth and killing everyone."

Talya frowned and shook her head. She picked up the two cups of Brew and sat down next to John.

"No way. We've spent too much time seeding all those bones and that was the theory we wanted them to reach about that stuff. You need something different. We can't have an asteroid dropping out of space every couple of millennia to destroy everything."

"Mmm, good point. Okay, how about the flood thing?"

Talya frowned. "Not fresh enough. That's been done before too, unless you have some new twist on the storyline that no one has ever seen before."

John admitted that no new twist was present in his head. "Well," Talya offered, "why don't you put down some stuff about advanced civilizations coming to destroy the world?"

John made a sour face without replying. He'd thought about that, but everyone knew that advanced civilizations had long ago stopped destroying worlds. It cost too much.

Talya shrugged.

"Well, why not some real hellfire and brimstone thing?" Talya asked. "Make them think that things are going to get so damned bad that if they don't do something to escape, they might get caught up in the middle of it."

John perked up. "Okay, we might be on to something here. But we need conflict." Images flashed through his head of planetary scale eruptions and volcanoes, the acrid smell of sulfur and the metallic taste of burning lava.

Talya looked down at the floor. "Okay, conflict. How about some kind of monster?"

John shook his head. "No, we don't know what they might think up during their evolution. It might be scarier than any implementation we might dream."

"Well, then pick something a little more general."

"Like?"

"Like the battle between good and evil. That's always good for a scary story. Make the two concepts immortal perhaps."

"Cool, except this time evil will win," John said. Excitement began to course through his veins.

"Not very inspiring considering the rest of The Compendium, John."

"Hmmm," he murmured, "where do I begin?"

Talya laughed. "Certainly not at the Beginning. You've got to keep it under the word count so that we can make the cost ceiling for the project, you know."

After few moments, he placed his hands on the keyboard, and prepared to type. How he could scare the living daylights out of people? What would be best?

He looked at Talya. "Something in third person?"

It was Cheryl's turn to make a sour face. "Too impersonal, but you will we need a lot of description. Draw them into the story. Tell it in first person."

John shook his head, then focused inward as the story burst through the flood gates and began to take form. His mind raced. By the time he looked up from thought, Talya had left.

* * *

John placed his hand on the keyboard and typed the first words, "The R—."

At that point, John released himself to his muse. Through the night he wrote until he had written all but the last word. As he entered it into the manuscript, he realized it said it all. It said, "The End," but in a different sort of way.

Now if he could convince the UnderSeer, he would still be on top, a major project under his belt for the History Fleet.

He looked at his watch. He had written all night and partially into the next day and it felt great! It was time to get the Chief's reaction.

* * *

John walked down the hall and dropped the pages onto the Chief's desk, a smug smile on his face. He waited as the UnderSeer read the manuscript.

Every so often, the UnderSeer would murmur bits of the text.

". . . and he opened the bottomless pit . . ."

John leaned back in his chair and waited.

". . . and when He broke the seventh seal, silence covered the sky."

John fidgeted with excitement. This story was definitely his best piece of work ever. The metaphor was perfect, the descriptions just as they should be.

The UnderSeer continued through every word until he reached the end. It took him nearly an hour. He closed the book and rubbed his eyes, then his face.

"Well, John," he began, "normally, I wouldn't accept this. It's just too fantastic and ridiculous to be true. No one will be scared."

"Oh?" John's confidence was rock solid.

The UnderSeer shook his head. "It's simply not believable."

John gazed back, unshaken. He had tied the entire Compendium up into one neat package. This was the best story ever written.

"Trust me," he said, "They'll love it. They will be off-planet within three thousand years."

John slipped out of his chair and headed across the office. He knew that behind him the

UnderSeer smiled.

He had done a great job, and his evaluation of the market was perfect. Whether or not the UnderSeer would ever admit it, was one thing, but The UnderSeer knew he had a gem on his hands, and so did John.

It was the Chief's job to keep the writers aboard ship in line and their best work coming. As he reached the door, John grinned as he heard the UnderSeer open the manuscript again for a second read.

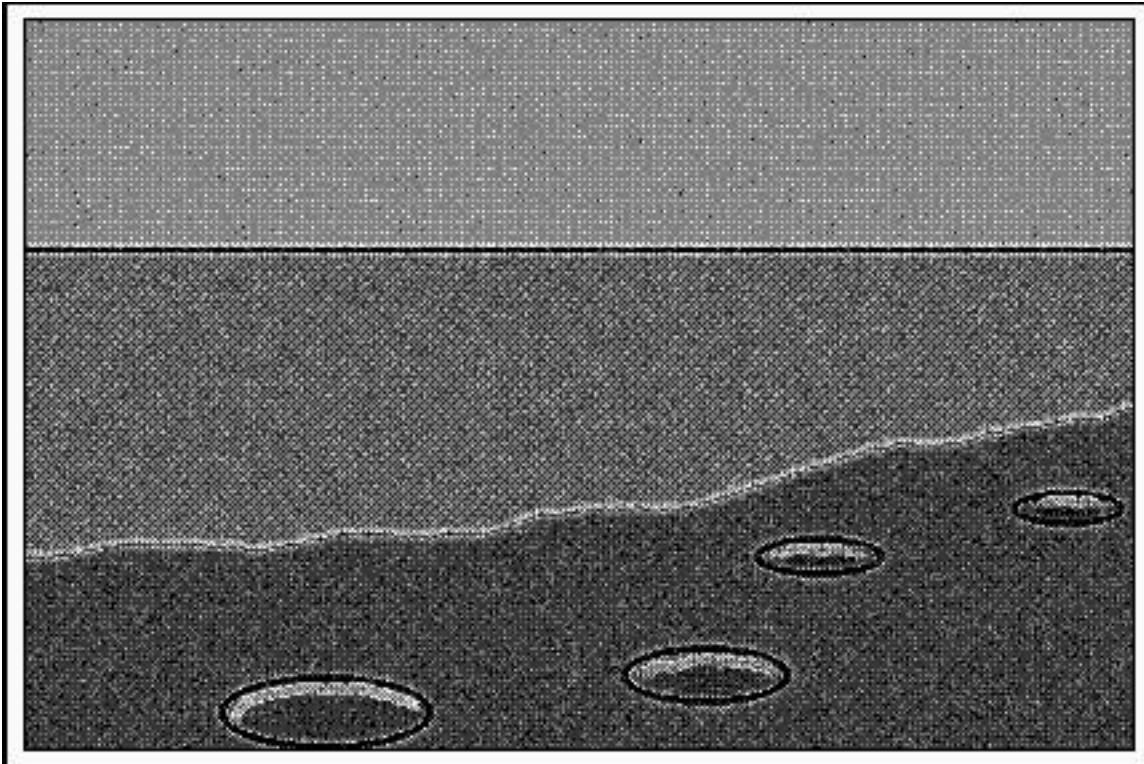
He was hooked.

* * *

"Revelation to John (The Apocalypse)"

John whistled as he headed off to bed. Yes, that last chapter was going to scare the living daylights out of the readers. They would believe and remember it. They would stay up nights worrying about it until they left for the stars. •

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ENCLOSED POSSIBILITIES

by Wayne Deeker

1.

"Hi Don. Yeah, they just arrived. I have them here." David Conway shifted the phone to his left hand. Stroking his flecked beard, he pondered the desk's surface layer of drawings and photographs. "I'm flummoxed by them too. These are the weirdest fossils I've ever seen. I can't imagine any natural process creating these impressions. They're so perfectly round, and flat on the bottom; they could've almost been made by rows of paint tins pushed into the mud."

Conway held one of the photographs, a black and white 8 x 10 depicting an outdoor location, nearer his face. He continued, "It's spooky. But the largest animals back then were about a foot long; nothing could make tracks this size. And what animals have feet like paint tins?"

He glanced around his cramped office: the clock on his cluttered bookshelf; through the dusty blinds; into the courtyard. "We should go on the hypothesis that it's a hoax. See if you can find evidence of carving marks, recent oxidation, stuff like that, and do kay-ay dating and paleomagnetic analyses. If those check out, at least we'll know we have a genuine fossil. After that, who knows? We'll see what turns up. Keep in touch. Bye."

Conway stared out his window, tapping his pen against his forehead, elbow on desk. Finally, he slid the photographs and drawings back into their envelope, turning his attention to the morning's mail.

Discarding the first few letters, he opened a large yellow envelope marked "manuscript." Reclining in his chair, feet up, Conway read.

* * *

"**Nonsense!**" he remarked to office, scribbling. Two hoaxes in one day? Unbelievable! He continued skimming the text, arriving at the appended drawings and diagrams. He whistled. But wait; where've I seen these structures before?

Unlocking the metal cabinet, its protesting door squeaked open. He gathered books and small wooden boxes from the clutter, cleared off a benchtop along one wall, clicked on the circular magnifier's florescent light.

Through the lens, he compared a fossil specimen to faded notes and sketches, the paper yellowed. Disk-shaped, about five centimeters wide, the fossil's inner edge consisted of rows of jagged, toothy structures.

Back then, they seemed so odd. Nobody knew what they were, or their function. We guessed they might've been part of some undiscovered organism. Now, here they are, in this guy's paper, exactly like this, but drawn as only part of a whole animal. Shit! It looks so right. Who would go to the trouble of hoaxing such a creature — look at those tentacles and fin-things! — yet include this unpublished fossil as its mouth part?

"No-one," he said to his empty office, "could have made this up. What's going on, Mr. Penny?"

2.

"Hello?"

"Hi. This is David Conway of the Pacific Journal of Palaeobiology. I'm calling about the manuscript you sent us recently." He doodled on the pad near the phone. "The text and drawings of your paper are surprising, to say the least. I'm very interested to know where the specimen came from. Haven't seen anything like it in 20 years. Your drawings are so complete, so detailed and lifelike; I've never seen such exquisite soft-tissue preservation. It's incredible."

Noel Penny did not respond. Conway continued, "I have meticulously studied every specimen you interpret here as a mouthpart; I found most of them, and I have four of the six specimens in my own lab. I was not aware of any new specimens, nor of any proposed paleontological expeditions." Colouring a box he had drawn on the pad, he asked, "Where did your specimen come from?"

"All of that information was in the paper. Where it was found, when, by whom, the whole lot."

"Yes, let's discuss that. You say that — "

"Everything you need to know is there. I don't appreciate being called at home and interrogated."

Conway sighed. "Okay, would you prefer to talk now, or do we thrash this out in the academic journals and newspapers?"

Conway almost heard the other man thinking.

"The reason I chose to call was that your paper contains some chillingly detailed drawings and anatomical descriptions, going far beyond anything done on this species. But you make several statements that don't add up, such as where you got it."

"British Columbia, like it says — "

"Like hell! I've just come back from there; I know that region. You have researched your story very well, and you might have convinced others that this fossil came from that location, but I don't buy it. That kind of fossil in that type of shale does not occur there."

Noel Penny remained mute.

"So, what do we do? You've obviously seen something important, something amazing, but you didn't get it from there. So what the hell is going on?" He leaned forward in his chair, jabbing his pen on the pad. "Show me the specimen."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Haven't I made myself clear? I'm on to you. You're in deepest shit, and I can make it hell. You'll never publish; your career is ruined unless you cooperate. You know what they do to scientific frauds?"

"Okay. You'd better come over."

3.

"Come on through," said Noel Penny without preamble. On the doorstep, Conway faced the lanky younger man, his attention drawn from the snow-capped Mount Gould looming over the valley's streetlights, just coming on. Conway hopped a little from foot to foot, blowing onto his mittened hands.

Penny led Conway silently through the small, sparsely furnished house, to a converted bedroom, the curtains drawn. A two by 1.5 meter oblong shape, covered with thick woollen blankets, occupied one wall; facing it, a battered sofa in the centre of the room. A violet fluorescent glow escaped beneath the blanket. Soft humming of electric motors and the sound of trickling water filled the room.

"Sit down."

Puzzled, Conway complied. He surveyed the room, looking for something more akin to his anticipation: an office; cardboard boxes; miscellaneous fossils. There was only the humming shape before him.

Penny closed the bedroom door and took a deep breath as if to speak, but reconsidered. He folded the blanket up from the bottom, revealing an aquarium. Draping the folded blanket over the top, he cut the room lights and joined his visitor on the sofa.

In the gloom, the aquarium shone brightly. Its deep bed of calcareous gravel held bridges and caves of weathered sandstone rocks: likely shelter for skittish fish. A long blue airstone produced a white curtain of mist, fizzing at the water's eddied surface.

In one cave lurked a curious creature. Orange-turquoise, perhaps half a meter long, a tapered horizontal row of flat fin projections rippled in waves along the creature's rear two-thirds, the animal effortlessly moving its kite-shaped body forward and backwards.

The creature emerged from its cave.

"He seems aware of us," said Penny. "He shouldn't be able to see us sitting here in the dark, or hear us through the glass. It's really weird."

Conway gaped. He sat on the edge of the sofa, hands cupping his chin, elbows on knees: the creature comfortably exploring, searching.

"He's a very efficient predator," Penny continued. "Want to see him eat?"

Conway sat on the sofa, absorbed. "Huh? Oh yeah, sure."

Penny disappeared then returned with a bucket containing several small goldfish. "I keep these to feed him. He'll eat almost anything. He's an older male, probably already reproduced many times."

Shifting a glass lid, Penny plopped one goldfish into the tank, and quickly replaced the lid.

Instantly, the creature jackknifed, streaking from the other end of the tank towards its victim at the surface. Half-way there, segmented and barbed hooks straightened from under the boot-toe head. Accelerating, turning onto its back, the creature snared and drew the goldfish into its circular mouth. A splash at the surface. A cloud of debris: all that remained of the goldfish. The creature slowed to its former speed, resuming its casual exploration, occasionally digging in the substrate.

Penny lifted the lid once more, and dumped in the remaining goldfish. "Watch his mouth, if you can. It works like a camera aperture. He crushes things in there, even snails and stuff."

Two splashes, two clouds.

"Wow! Incredible."

"There was no fossil specimen, of course," Penny continued. "All of those drawings were made from this fella. After a bit of research I imagined what a fossil of this animal should look like, and came up with what you saw in my paper."

"Yeah, I've got several of the mouthparts. Initially I thought your paper must be a fraud, but those bits were too real." Conway turned on the sofa to look at Penny, "Your paper was very plausible. You might've been published without question if you'd submitted it anywhere else. But why did you write it?"

"After having been denied my main contribution to science, I wanted to share something of what I have discovered. Perhaps you will understand in a little while." He rose, "I have something else to show you."

4.

Sitting opposite Conway on the lounge-room sofa, Penny handed his guest a shot of scotch. "This'll help," he said.

Conway nodded, gulped his drink, and extended his glass for another, his hands shaking. Over the refill, Penny continued, "Well, where do we start?"

"How about how you managed to build a goddamned fucking time machine in your bloody spare bedroom!" He gulped his drink again, shuddering.

"Okay. It's basically an extension of my work in cosmology. You know about wormholes in space/time?"

"A bit; not really."

"I was working on the sub-microscopic wormholes that fill every cubic nanometer of the Universe. Think of space as a sponge that looks solid from a distance. Up close it's full of tiny tunnels much smaller than atoms. Follow?"

Conway nodded, already lost, his hands around the empty glass. Penny continued, "We've known about these for a while, and we've also known that they're fundamentally the same as the huge ones that naturally form in the Universe from time to time. There're some, several hundred parsecs long, near this galaxy we've been studying for a while. It's been theoretically possible since the 1960s to travel through them to some far distant point in space and time.

"I found that big ones could be produced by grabbing and stretching the little ones. Presto, a time machine!"

Penny noted Conway's blank look. "Okay, we'll back up a bit. You can't think of space and time as separate things, right? They aren't even flip sides of the same coin. They are one; if you move through one, you move through the other too, but not necessarily by the same amount. If you go through a natural wormhole, you travel through space and time.

"So, say I can make a wormhole and control where it emerges in space, then by having enough

control to do that, there's a time component to the equations also. I opened up a wormhole, with one end here, and the other — by chance — spatially on the coast of what's now British Columbia, Canada, but about 550 million years ago.

"I can open and close the wormhole over a four meter square area, like a door. The hole forms around the control platform that you just saw in the bedroom.

"The actual opening and stretching of the hole so that we can fit through it is pretty complicated; it's done using gravitons. You know how massive objects, like planets and stars bend, and even puncture space/time? Well, I just duplicated the effect, but about a billion times more intensely, with an artificial gravitational beam focused on one of the ubiquitous micro-holes. I did that using a small graviton generator." Penny beamed, certain he had made everything clear.

After a moment, he frowned. "I built it, you know? They said it couldn't be done. The bastards! They cut my funding because I was too close to the breakthrough that they wanted themselves, then they lied about financial cutbacks. You know how it works, PhD students are there to make their supervisors look good, not to take major scientific prizes. If you start doing too much radical stuff, they dump you.

"Anyway, even without a lab, I knew the principle could be applied using whatever odds and ends I could find. That, in a way, was the biggest breakthrough: no need for special equipment. Four kilowatts, the power of a domestic electric heater, powers the graviton generator and control platform. Batteries underneath take us home. Mains power the first trip, then the batteries have enough for two more.

"Theoretically, we could go anywhere in the Universe at any time differential. For the present, though, Middle-Cambrian Canada is the only place we can reliably get back from because I haven't devised the equations for elsewhere. I don't have the computer-power I had at the lab."

Conway took a slug from his empty glass. Grabbing the bottle from the coffee-table, he poured, then gulped the drink. "Fuck!"

Penny continued, "I've been there a few times, actually."

Conway blinked, and finally exclaimed, "You went back there! You got the creature yourself! It wasn't just caught in your field!"

Penny smiled. "Yeah, you've gotta go in on scuba, of course, but it's fun. It's really weird, though, being the biggest thing in the sea. Everything's so different."

Conway stood suddenly, knocking the coffee table. "I want to go! I don't care what it takes, I want to go! I'm not missing this, no way."

"Settle down. Come around tomorrow afternoon; we'll go then."

5.

Conway staggered, disoriented. He had felt the universe recede above him, only to

reappear again after a sense-boggling millisecond. An overwhelming sense of compression was one of the few things his frazzled brain had been able to perceive.

Conway examined his surroundings, breathing heavily. Penny, a dark shape in the bright morning glare, had already left the platform. He stood beside Conway on the white sandy beach, attending to their scuba and other gear. Behind Penny, the beach curved off towards a rocky outcrop a kilometer away, another jagged headland a dozen meters away to Conway's left. The headlands enclosed a small, clear bay, the deep water in the bay's centre eerie and calm.

Conway turned, facing inland, to examine the rolling dunes. "I thought I was prepared for this." As far as he could see, bare rock, and thin, sandy soil highlighted the strangeness. "Not even lichen," he muttered. Only piles of stringy kelp on the beach interrupted the barrenness.

"Gravity's the same," Conway said, "but O2's down a bit."

"Weird, isn't it?" Penny asked. "Want to get going? Not much to see on land."

They helped each other with the scuba equipment, then waded into the water through gentle surf. At waist-depth, Penny said, "Put your mask on now." Adjusting his own straps and placement he said, "Nod if you hear me?"

"Good. The intercom has a range of about 100 meters, but stay within reach, just in case."

Penny demonstrated some safety procedures. "Okay? Let's go!" He finned towards the rocks, Conway following.

A meter below the calm surface, Penny said, "Look around you; you'll never get visibility this good. See the far side of the rocks, in deeper water? That must be 50 meters away! The light cuts through the water, and touches bottom. Amazing."

"Why's that?"

"Good weather, partly, but the headlands also shelter the bay from the brunt of the waves. I'll bet the life in here is pretty isolated from the rest of the ocean too; the heads are so narrow that there'd be a killer current running between them when the tide changes. Not much could get in or out."

Three meters deep, close to the rocks, Penny pointed. "Look there."

Conway gazed at a pink soft-coral, its slender branches peeking from a crevice, swaying gently in the current. He finned closer, bubbles swirling around his face. A pair of green, tubular animals clung munching to the branches. Pairs of stubby, conical legs protruded from the soft, segmented bodies. "Hey! Onychophorans!"

"Yes," said Penny, "aren't they cute? Here's something else."

A carpet of plum-coloured filter-feeding champagne goblets covered the rocks, swaying gently in the current. Anchored to the substrate by slender stalks, rim fronds opened and closed, rolling the animals into balls. They sometimes belched clouds of debris.

"They look like corals and stuff, but they're not," said Penny. "Look into the cup. See? Two holes, not one. They're cups within cups, funny cavities and suspension fibres everywhere. Tell me what modern phylum has those features."

"None, but there should be quite a few weird phyla around now."

Penny wove through columns of meter-high sponges. "Here're some more, just as strange. These little domes move along the bottom, probably grazing on algae." No eyes or other sensory organs. Flat, almond-shaped scales.

"Those spines along their backs fold down when they negotiate a cranny or something. No legs under there, just a mouth. For all I know they drag themselves along with that. Any ideas what they are?"

Conway poked at one of the domed animals with his finger. "It won't turn over." The animal ejected a cloud of yellow liquid at his mask. Retreating, Conway said, "We call its fossils *Wiwaxia*. But I have no idea what kind of animal it is."

Penny said, "You know more about it, but I was really confused. Very unfamiliar. Even when I know the phylum, it's often a completely unknown group. Like that, it's probably an arthropod, but I don't know what kind."

A ten centimeter, segmented, lumpy train walked on its many jointed legs across the rippled sea floor, tufts of algae growing on its back. Its spiked tail trailing a quarter-sphere head.

Penny flipped it onto its back, to examine its segmented mouthparts and antennae.

"Texts say arthropods don't show both gill and leg appendages for the same body segment." He righted the animal and let it go.

Around mid-morning, they discovered a twenty centimeter wonder. Five eyes, and trailing a long flexible proboscis equipped with a grabber claw from under its face.

"What the hell is that?" asked Conway. The creature's flattened flukes extended downwards along both sides of its body segments. Feathery gills between the flukes' upper surfaces. The last three flukes extended upwards, forming a V-shaped tail, swishing laterally.

The men moved closer to the animal, which darted off. "Follow it!" yelled Conway.

They kept up with the fleeing animal only with great effort; it twisted and zig-zagged, doubling back between them. Finally, approaching from the rear, they netted it.

Penny held the struggling animal so they could examine it. "Will you look at it! Its mouth is a third of the way back from the head." Breathing hard, Penny said, "This is the wildest thing I've seen. Any ideas?"

"None."

Penny checked his watch. "We'd better start heading back. We might squeeze in another dive this afternoon."

Swimming back, they noticed a 25 centimeter trilobite. It rose from the sea floor to follow a slow-moving school of slug-like animals they could not see clearly. The men froze to watch it.

From behind them a pair of animals similar to Penny's aquarium specimen streaked towards the trilobite. The larger, a one-meter male, seized the trilobite, tearing it apart. It shoved half into its mouth, the smaller predator ravishing the descending pieces. Both cruised away.

"Shit! I'll never get used to seeing that," said Conway.

6.

At dusk, sitting on the beach, Conway peered into a screw-top glass jar, swirling four specimens of slug-creatures caught during their second dive. The inch-long animals had wide, vertically-compressed tails at one end and antennae at the other; frilly gills undulated from their head backs.

"Know what these are?" Conway asked.

Penny examined the fine zig-zagging flank-lines, and the dark stripe running along their backs. "Nope."

"Yeah, it's hard to tell. They're chordates, members of our own phylum. These, or others like them, are the ancestors of all vertebrates."

Penny came closer, peering at the preserved specimens. "Not very impressive, are they? I wonder what advantage they had over the others?"

"Who knows? Many evolutionary survivors have simply been lucky; their survival didn't necessarily imply any great merit."

Conway moved to the piles of specimens awaiting preservation, each stack containing several of an animal type, tied together. "Look at these," he said. "They're all finely adapted to their environment, neither primitive nor inferior compared to these chordates. Just the reverse, actually."

Conway sat back down on the sand, facing Penny. "When we get back, we're publishing your paper. We can't keep this to ourselves."

"Is that why you're taking so many specimens? To forge fossils properly?"

"No, bugger that. We'll give 'em the truth about our expedition. Nobel prizes for us when we prove this!"

"Actually, the specimens are for documentation of some ecological information: population size, demography, stuff like that. We need this quantity for unambiguous statistical analyses. I want

to do some anatomical and physiological work, too. You might notice that there're a lot of predators. You can learn heaps about an ecosystem from its predators. In later trips we'll do all kinds of other studies, but we've got enough for now. We'll go home tomorrow morning."

7.

"Ready?"

Conway adjusted the ropes of the specimen piles, placing them and the jars onto the steel-mesh platform with the other equipment. "Hit it."

"Home, then," said Penny, pressing the switch.

Conway felt his consciousness compressed through the same incomprehensible nothingness as before. It was no less disorienting the second time.

They stepped off the platform into a small clearing of dense forest. Golden, early morning sunbeams filtered through the canopy, eighty meters above them, thick shrubs not permitting any view through the tall undergrowth.

A light breeze carried dewy, organic scents, rich in humus, but suggesting an alien spiciness.

"Where the hell's this?" demanded Conway.

Penny shook his head. "It's worked every other time." He whirled around, surveying the trees, and stopped, stricken. "Look!" Penny pointed over the canopy at the unmistakable snow-capped Mount Gould. "This is where we're meant to be."

A soft humming behind them, followed by rustling, drew Conway's attention from the mountain. Tapping Penny's shoulder, he stammered, "L-look at this." Penny turned and gaped at five lanky creatures standing across from them on the other side of the clearing. Four held in their white tentacles some kind of metallic devices whose humming notes varied as the beings turned.

"Those tentacles, they're walking on! How they ever evolved to live on land ." He beamed at Penny, "Incredible! Can you imagine the muscular strength needed for walking on land without bones? Perhaps they do it with hydraulics --"

"What are you blithering about?" Penny demanded.

"Listen. Don't ask me to explain how I know, but I'm telling you, as a biologist, that these creatures are mollusks. This must be their natural environment. An alternative one."

"Then we Those specimens — "

"Look! They've seen us."

Striding towards the men, their flashing, bewildering patches of vibrant colour intensifying as they approached, the creatures gestured vigorously, first to the men, then to each other.

"Do you reckon they're trying to talk to us? Their colours, I mean." Penny asked. Conway raised his eyebrows, and slowly stepped forward, hands raised.

The creatures simultaneously backed from him, colouring even deeper and more rapidly. The largest, most colourful, creature gestured with a tentacle. Both men immediately felt themselves hung by their legs before a mass of huge yellow eyes. The tall creature examined them.

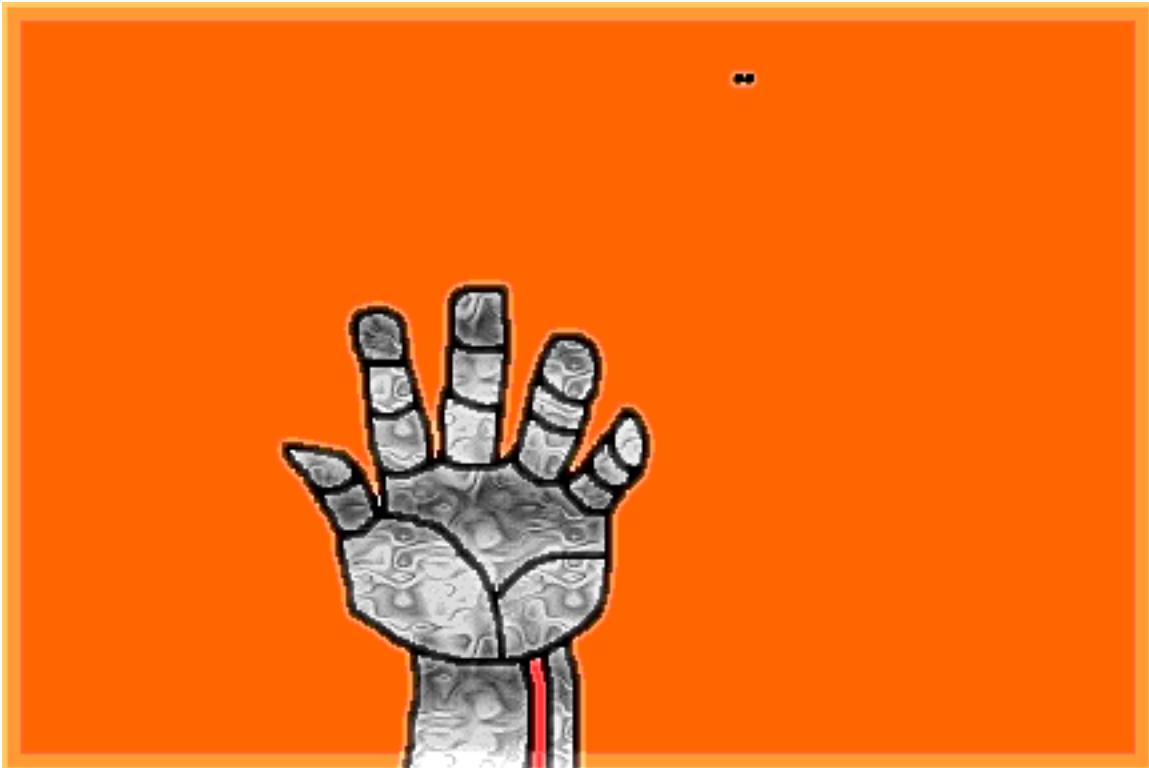
The one holding Penny activated its device, shimmered in a purple light and disappeared. The leader gestured again, to Conway's captor, as it and the other two walked to the time platform. Conway noticed the marks remaining in the soft soil. He almost fainted: just like paint tins!

Two creatures examined the platform before stepping onto it. The leader joined them. One probed the control panel with a tentacle; without sound, the structure disappeared.

Conway's captor activated its own device: it and Conway disappeared in a flash of purple light.

The shrubs' yellow, U-shaped foliage swayed in the gentle forest breeze. •

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SURVIVORS

by Andrew G. McCann

A lone seagull wheeled overhead, a black dot against the hot orange sky. The bird was very sick, and to save its strength had been gliding on the fierce thermals that rippled the air. Looking down, it saw a rock that glittered at the edge of the murky sea, and it swooped down to rest.

* * *

During the final, early morning assault on the Enemy's headquarters, as he waited in the trenches, he felt the muffled explosions through his armored DarcAngel skin and barely heard the cacophony of screams, moans, and prayers over the 'pathic channels. Then the order came down, and he ran through patches of smoke and over the pitted earth. His team moved rapidly, their cyborg legs pumping up the ripped hillside. Suddenly, there came the order to retreat — a brief, milling moment of confusion — and then a great, silent flash.

Day 1.

He awoke with a start. The battle seemed to echo in his mind still. He felt immobilized, but then found he could move his head. He stretched his neck and looked at his body, seeing his metallic arms and legs fused to the blasted rock. He laid his head back again and checked his internal monitors: 12.6 hours had passed since he lost consciousness, battery power was full (apparently, his solar panels still functioned), his nutricapsule supply was adequate, and there was a 3-mail message marked "Urgent!" on his mnemonitor. Who sends 3-mail during a battle? He blinked it open. But the message area was empty.

He closed his eyes.

Day 2.

When he awoke again, he raised his head and scanned the area — surprised to see the hill was now an island in an inland sea. Where had all the water come from? He checked his internals: No more 3-mail had come, and the comm channels were still dead.

Day 3.

His internal clock no longer functioned properly. It was difficult to remain awake, and he kept hearing voices on the edge of sleep. His mind wandered uncontrollably, despite his training. Very soon, no doubt, he would lose his mind.

Day 4.

Somehow, millimeter by millimeter, he had managed to free his right hand, then his wrist, and, soon, his elbow. The arm seemed to be working well enough to do what he intended. Since rescue, or even capture, now seemed unlikely anytime soon, he would endeavor to open his chestplate and power down for neurorecovery at a later point in time. As it was, his mind was becoming permanently damaged.

Something caught his eye. Something moving in the fiery sky. His comrades, at last?

He strained to see, his crystal-interleaved eyes focusing sharply on the moving object: It was a bird, a seagull, and it was coming toward him. A trick? The Enemy had used birds before, but there were precious few of them to be found anymore, and he was just one, disabled soldier, however potentially deadly. Certainly they could just come and take him if they wanted.

* * *

He watched the gull descend erratically and land at his feet, which were melted lumpishly to the barren rock. It hopped closer. Closer still. And stopped. With great effort, he lifted his right forearm, reaching toward the bird, which he could now see was disfigured and

molting. Its eyes were filmy, but questioning. Its breathing was labored. His battle-scorched hand twitched, and the gull, startled, took flight in a shower of feathers. It rose up, and up, but faltered, convulsed, and dropped like a stone into the dark, lapping waves.

With a powerful twist he freed his arm fully from the grasping rock, extended it, and plunged strong, hard fingers into his chest, ripping out his power core. His clutching, metallic hand crashed back against the rock and his eyes dimmed, but his body shone like a beacon at the edge of a nameless, poisoned sea. •

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Horror

BUT IT'S A DRY HEAT

by Larry Calvert

The climate was good for his wife's arthritis, so they had come south and settled in a place with orange-red buttes of sandstone and silver-gray high voltage wires, not too far off the main highway, and their electric bill was ungodly but her constant moaning was reduced by about half. Mr. Fraudens had balked at the move but the latter point soon won his heart and, though he had no feelings for the desert, he loved the improvement it had thereby brought to his blood pressure.

She liked to explore the tourist traps hereabouts, collecting plastic pseudo-Native American junk, wooden scorpions, rubber saguaro and the like, until the new tract house was as cluttered with crap as their Detroit apartment had been. When she "traveled," as she referred to it, he had merely to drive long and straight, perhaps an hour or two, through the barren pumpkin dryness of this slab of America, and she would be lost in shops for hours spending his pension from Ford, and then he could commune with a nice frosty stein of beer or two or more.

Came the day that she wanted to visit Gorge and he was only too happy to get her there. They passed through a place called Caustic Valley, and Fraudens thought this sounded much more interesting but there was nothing there for her. With regrets he sped through the town, past The Dusty Amigo saloon, over a dry wash, and set the air-conditioning of the Mercedes to max-cool.

About five kilometers later the radiator exploded.

* * *

She turned on the nag: You should have got one of those cellular phones like I told you! You shouldn't have turned up the A/C so high! You shouldn't have been driving so fast! We should have come a different way! It's hot and we don't have any water. There won't be a trooper along for God knows how long. Why didn't you bring along some water? Herman! Herman! You get back in this car!

But he explained through clenched teeth that he would go back to the town and get help you feeble old bat! He was thinking it was not too far and it did look like a nice saloon. He could make it. For some reason his mind aimed to a time long ago, back to that dark early morning in a Normandy bunker, ship silhouettes on the horizon, the wet-cold of the coast.... He shivered

inwardly even in the blistering noon. You are about to embark on a great crusade, he told himself wryly, and smiled. He marched down the highway into the desert.

As her racket fell behind his ears he noted as he wiped away the sweat that he wasn't in the same shape he had been half a century ago. But what the hell, there was nothing else to do. He wished he'd brought a hat as that white dome of his was bound to wind up severely sunburned.

The road bent around and he noticed that if he just cut across this little spit of arid ground he could save several kilometers. The land sunk a meter or so and he lost sight of the road but he knew right where it was. As he trundled across a dry creekbed he noticed its banks became steeper and then very tall a ways on down, almost polished, high and sheer. They would provide him with ample shade probably for the rest of his walk. There were clouds in the distance. He crushed a centipede with his foot as he wandered on down the channel.

A few hundred meters down, the creekbed took a bend and put the sun right in his face between the cliffs and the cloud-speckled horizon. But as far as he could tell through the ripples coming off the land it was a straight shot into town from here. The sun was almost blinding so he walked with eyes partially closed. He was thirsty.... Town can't be that far off. He slipped on an unnoticed rock and fell to the ground in a puff of dust, narrowly missing a plant with sun angled appendages like praying machetes. God-damned Allies couldn't kill me, I'll be damned if I'll die here! He righted himself and sat on a boulder. It was, though, a rather beautiful place he admitted as he panted and began to swelter.

His chest tightened then eased. The rocks were different here than where he lived. They lived, he inwardly corrected himself. The rocks on either flank seemed glassy maybe, others were hard and gouged and did not possess that almost felt-like quality of the stone back at the house. On the bed itself, dry mud-encrusted debris stuck up against many of the boulders though he didn't know what this meant. He tried to catch his breath.

He caught it. Sssssss....

He'd never really cared too much for reptiles, devious as Jews they were, and now a gray rope of scales was moving by his loafers. He picked it up, grabbing just behind the head, and the body twisted around his arm, the tail rattling at his elbow. Be damned! A rattlesnake! He broke the head and threw it against a barbed plant. Sure is hot. Need a drink. And some water too. Thunderheads loomed desperately where the earth met the sky and he flicked a scorpion off his leg with a smile. Little swine.... Ha! He was starting to enjoy this!

* * *

A kilometer further his growing affection for the desert was making him giddy and he wandered drunkenly over the wide creekbed, sweat staining him everywhere. Look at those cactus! He'd never known or noticed them before. They had flowers! Beautiful! A squadron of hairy pigs, like boars, came pushing down a crag in an oxidized bluff and he called to them. They didn't seem like the nicest of animals but he'd have loved to have seen them close up. Strong creatures, superior. He went up the path that they had come down, a two-foot sidewinder that climbed up a steep thirty meters. At the top he felt exhausted but he surveyed the landscape and

could quite definitely see the town not half a kilometer away. His short-cut had saved him hours. He swiped the sweat from his forehead and thanked God for eyebrows. This was just like being a kid soldier again. But, damn, he sure as hell was thirsty.

He wandered over to the windward side of the bluff and his scant hair blew back a trace. He started to descend, using gullies in the rolling and rocky terrain. The path jigged and jagged and he saw a mist coming over the ridge to his right and the town of Caustic Valley was just across a spit of sandy desert that sloped down under the music coming from The Dusty Amigo. His adventure was over and he felt a little sad. But did he indeed need a drink and some water, yes?! He was drenched with sweat and the salt stung his eyes. He was pretty badly sunburned he guessed, but what did it matter? He had had a perfectly wonderful time this last hour or so and the sight of the town brought him almost back to his senses and he laughed as he had not laughed since Poland nearly three-score years ago.

The desert seemed now to be a part of him and he sensed its purity and power and, alas, its frailty. He knew its beauty and strength could not endure against the infuriating tide of ignorant mongrel hordes, Americans with their technology and sheer numbers swelling up to engulf it. He had great empathy for the doomed and parched landscape and vowed to explore the land, these beautiful places, in times to come as his wife explored her damn shops.

* * *

He heard a, what was it? a trickling sound? to his right and he stopped with crystal-cold thoughts swirling down from Bavarian memories. Yes, there was something of a gurgling and he opted to diverge right a moment to end this perfect pure day and drink from an unsullied desert spring. But as he came around the edge of a smooth and sanguine erosional remnant his jaw fell wide.

A deep blue pool some ten meters across.

Ah, yes!

A smile came to his face and he stripped off his clothes. He balled up all the strength he had left and ran toward the cool water as fast as he could, yelling a word he had come to like. Whoop! He thought then he noticed that the edge of the pool seemed to be ringed with yellow salt crystals or something, and he noticed a strange smell, like rotten eggs. From the top of his leaping arc he could see little wisps discharging from bubbles bursting on the surface of the water. What a strange, wonderful place!

The Whoop! turned into a scream just beneath the surface. •

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Poetry

THE NIGHT UNBENDING

by s.c.virtes

To travel the years
up, out, and alone,
they wander the sectors
on wings of fire, watching,
they chase resources
with inhuman eye
a shell of probes, aware,
drift outward, ever seeking.

The silent pilots fly on
into the arms of forever, grey
mist cold sleep protecting
their skin and life
— mind and memory —
from the burn of the stars.

They move on arcs computed,
they streak about and away,
from hope to hope resounding
another glimpse, an ice world,
indicators think -- yes/no --
they shall not rise today.

The Seekers keep them in storage
cold waiting for the perfect home,
tired arms holding
centuries of progress,
moving alone, but without fear,
moving dreamless whisper away
into the night unbending. •

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BECAUSE WE WERE RICH

by L. Norton

Because we were rich, but lived in a poor country,
because we were young — five, six, seven, and eight —
we ate in the kitchen with the maids, the food
we liked best: scaly smelts, bananas, rice
in a lemony broth. Summers we'd be sent
to the beach, away from our aunts, who served us
ham salad and fruit cocktail out of cans
bought at the duty-free stores. Stiff
as hairspray, in the tailored
clothes they wore to airports (as they did the day
our mother left), they'd cluck —
then tell the four of us
of our great luck, that someday we'd join
our mother in America. We liked the beach
best, for we'd find gigantic rippling shells
big as fans, shucked off by giant clams, or great
jellyfishes. At night, our ever-watchful Theresa
who left home at fifteen (just one year before),
would tell us the scary stories we
liked best: one of children drowned
in the current, another of the dread
pa-ting, a huge and terrifying
beast, spuming tentacles and human
limbs, anguished faces bedded
in its curling lips. We'd fall asleep
to the crash of the waves, to the creak
of the hut's bamboo slats. Just
before sleep, Theresa would tell us
stories of reunion. We imagined America
was in the sky, and our mother
an angel. Sometimes when Theresa
would mumur in the night, I'd wake and peer
through a hole in e palm ceiling, imagine
my flying mother, her fleshy, feathered wings
sprouting through her beaded suit. •

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LOVE SCENE

by Paul Semel

when we see each other on the street
staring through the rush of holiday shoppers
and people late from lunch
will it be like those scenes in the movies
the man and the woman in a field
running in slow motion through wheat taller than we
though still able to see despite the wheat
we run into each others arms as the music swells
and we hug then kiss and continue kissing
while the camera spins endless around us
until I finally set you down
and the music fades a bit
and the soft fuzzy edges
sharpen a bit to reveal
we're still on the street
pushed and shoved by shoppers and those late from work
who won't feel our magic
won't see the fuzzy edges
or the wheat in our hair
or even
that we're not kissing
at all •

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<<http://users.aol.com/romedome/romeaol.html>>. <romedome@eworld.com>

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This year, take your vacation in Myanmar, the country formerly known as Prince.