

Tom the Sheller

By
Devin Miller

We're in a furniture warehouse near the coast. The products are all antiques, and so is the building—the pounding rain leaks through the tin roof in several places. This is the drop-off—the Weitzman armoires and Brasilo cabinets and Harrison credenzas are filled with the goods, awaiting relocation. It is almost one in the morning, and Peter Danilov wasn't expecting us.

Mancini circles around him while I hover in the background, half in the shadow of a tall wardrobe. Danilov is rocking slightly at the hips. A nervous tick, I'm sure, because it's doing nothing to loosen the barbed wire around his wrists. It can't be pleasant for his knees either, rubbing against the concrete floor like that. Dark maroon on his jeans.

"Tell the truth, please. It really will make things a lot easier for everyone."

"Why should I? You're just gonna kill me anyway."

"Look Peter," Mancini says, squatting so his face is at the poor man's level.

"We're going to find out. My friend over there? He's Tom the Sheller. He isn't as nice as I am. He's not gonna ask, you dig? He's not gonna ask, man. He's gonna take it from you and turn you into a vegetable. You'll probably wake up, but you won't remember your life. It's called dissociative fugue—irreversible amnesia, Pete. Maybe that sounds kinda nice to you—it'll sure take care of your little heroin problem—but what about your wife? She'll be mighty upset when her husband can't remember her name. Or her birthday. Or her favorite place to go out. Or where her sweet spot is. Or . . . oh wait, do you even know where her sweet spot is, Pete?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Mancini lets out an exaggerated sigh. He usually gets it out of them, but he prefers to fail. He wants to see me do it. He knows how much I hate myself. I cross my arms and wait. My palms tighten around the sleeves of my jacket.

Danilov is getting a maroon stripe down the ass of his jeans. At first I can't see where it's coming from, but then I see how the barbed wire perforates his lower back as he continues to sway back and forth on his knees. I don't think he even notices.

A few feet away, a line of water drips from the rafters. It collects in a small puddle on the concrete floor; all the furniture has been deftly arranged around it. I focus on the stream instead of Mancini and Danilov, looking up into the darkness as if I could find the little hole in the roof. I follow the water down and stare at the puddle, just staring, for several minutes.

"Can we cut the foreplay and skip to you killing me now?" Danilov says. The strength back in his voice makes me look away from the water. "Enough of this bullshit man. Enough. Just off me."

"Peter, my friend," Mancini says, draping an arm around Danilov's shoulders. "We've been through this. You are not going to die tonight. Relax. I'm gonna ask your sorry sniveling ass again, but I'm still gonna be nice about it. My friend's getting anxious."

He gives me a little smirk and a look from the top of his eyes. Jack Mancini is the

only man I would consider shelling just to leave him helpless. But it wouldn't help me—he has friends.

“You realize that by telling us you could help yourself. After all, we're the good guys. We obey the law. I know you're afraid of your bosses, but we could hide you. Your family too.”

“Don't play with me. You guys are no better than the people I work for. You're just as much criminals as we are, except you hide it. You play dirty, that's all. Guerrilla criminals.”

Eye contact is the important thing—they are portholes into the brain. I've known there was something special—something *powerful*—about eye contact since I was a boy, as if it briefly linked the two minds.

I put my first person in the hospital when I was eight years old. His name was Mr. Vail, my third grade teacher. He was a nice guy, I guess, I don't really remember. It's ironic that he doesn't either.

I was a terrible test taker back then. The year before, I had wet my pants and run out of the classroom crying during a science test. This time, it was multiplication tables. I thought I knew them, but when test time came I couldn't remember anything. I thought if I could just get a hint it would all come back to me. I raised my skinny, shaky, sweaty arm.

Mr. Vail shrugged and smiled and looked away, as if to say, “Sorry little buddy, wish I could help, but this is a *test*. The pressure's all on you.” Then he looked me in the eyes.

I didn't know what I was about to do, but I couldn't have stopped it anyway. I was a deep-sea diver, not an oceanographer. I took that answer.

I shelled him.

I didn't breathe for about thirty seconds. My heart didn't beat. I didn't hear the kids' pencils scraping on their tests, or smell Mr. Vail's English Leather cologne that he doused himself with every day. All senses were dull except sight. I saw everything. I saw Mr. Vail, first from memories of childhood, then throughout the bigger moments in his life—his college graduation, wedding, divorce court, oldest son's graduation from elementary school—then I was looking at myself, into my own dull, blue-green eyes, and I asked my question.

I call it shelling because it's kind of like cracking the shell off an egg. The mind has a layer around it that keeps all the other people away, but once someone breaks it, everything spills out. And once it's out, there's no getting it back in.

That's how I later thought of what happened to Mr. Vail. The other kids had no idea what was going on, didn't even notice anything was wrong until Mr. Vail started shaking and drooling and grunting. It was my first time, but it felt familiar anyway, as easy as peeling away the skin from a banana. It went down as a stroke, and I walked away unscathed except for the wet spot on my jeans. Looking back, I almost think Mr. Vail wanted to be shelled. He never seemed especially happy as a teacher. I heard he's in construction now.

I didn't shell anyone again until college. I went to a large university, the kind where there are lots of smart people and prize-winning professors and pressure to succeed. I had outgrown my test anxiety, but I found I was still susceptible to other kinds. One night sophomore year, sleep-deprived, behind in my work, and unprepared for a couple of exams the next day, I broke. My roommate, Kevin, called my name—I

think he meant to ask if I could turn the lights off, but I can't be sure because he never got that far—and I looked into his eyes. I felt it swell up inside me like hunger pains, like a cigarette craving, like the need to breathe after being underwater, and it was out before I could stop it.

I saw old birthdays, Kevin's first kiss in a dark movie theatre, a close up of his dad's fist, Kevin catching a fifteen-yard pass to send his team to the playoffs, and finally myself, sitting at my desk in my Coca-Cola pajama pants. That was it for Kevin. I fell out of my chair and threw up on the tile floor, shaking. All my muscles were tense and twitching.

Once it passed, I looked at Kevin in his lofted bed. His eyes were open and glossy. A string of drool leaked out of the corner of his mouth and onto the futon. I stood up, testing my weight, squeezing my chair for support and to keep my arms steady. I did nothing for several minutes. I grabbed the paper towels, cleaned up the vomit, and threw them away in the bathroom trashcan. I tossed my Coca-Cola pants into the hamper. Then I called 9-1-1.

The urge became too much three other times before graduation. After the second one, I was able to sense a shelling attack coming on. At those times, I stayed away from my friends and family, but I couldn't keep away from everyone. It's really hard to avoid eye contact. All it takes is a moment.

School shut down after the fourth. Teams searched all the science labs for radiation leakage, and all the buildings for any kind of fungal or mold contamination. When they found nothing, a couple of medical detectives started interviewing students. They wanted to compare the victims' lives and try to find a common link. They deemed the instances unrelated anomalies.

I decided I wanted to be in control. Every couple of months, I would travel—fly, drive, take a bus, hitchhike, whatever I could afford—to a random city, find someone who looked like they were having a bad day, and shell them. Then I would be okay for a while.

A woman in a barber shop in South Boston. A man beside me in the subway line in Baltimore. A shroomer in New York who showed me amazing, unreal images of color like a kaleidoscope. A homeless man in San Francisco, who, I discovered, was the killer in three unsolved murders. A secret service guy in D.C. who showed me the positions of all the two-man sniper teams that lurked on the rooftops while the president's limo took him across town. Only the strongest memories lingered; the weaker ones faded too deep to retrieve, like ones formed in infancy.

Sometimes on the flight home, I would wonder if some scientist was examining these cases, trying to piece together my victims' lives like the detectives had done in college. Did they have a common diet? A common chromosomal defect? No, doctor. They'd all been visited by Tom the Sheller, the vampire of memories.

I despised what I had to do. I would have preferred to be a junkie, since will power is sometimes enough for them. I needed to shell people on purpose so I wouldn't shell anyone by accident. The guilt was never enough to suggest suicide, though, and I knew it never would be unless I slipped up and accidentally shelled my grandma or my girlfriend (though I had none). Once I saw the man sitting in my favorite booth at my favorite deli, I knew I should have put a pistol to my head and pulled the trigger a long time ago. I also knew it was too late.

I remember watching him walk from my old booth to my new table. He was an ordinary man—I had no reason to fear him. But I did—real fear, the kind you get when

you're walking home in the dark and thinking about masked men jumping out and grabbing you, and one actually does. It must have been his smile. It was maniacal.

"Hello, Tom," he said. "I'm Jack. Pleasure to meet you."

"How do you know my name?" My tongue didn't feel like it was in the right spot.

"I know all about you, Tom. You and your little hobby. Have you ever heard of a man named Marcus Prouty?"

I shook my head and tried to remember to breathe. He unbuttoned his jacket, and I saw his shoulder holster.

"He was a member of the Secret Service. Not high ranking, but a good man, good agent. Last month, he inexplicably lost his memory. He had a wife and two kids, and he doesn't recognize their faces. Ring a bell yet?"

I looked him in the eyes—

"Don't try it!" he said, and the next thing I knew his holster was empty and his left hand had disappeared beneath the table. "If I start feelin' funny in my head, I'll end you right here. Even if you got me, you'd catch a bullet from a sniper rifle before you made it home tonight. Just look at your hands."

I did, barely seeing how much they trembled.

"Collin Michaels. Samuel Cortes. Sarah Webber. Richard Maxwell the Third. Your old roommate, Kevin Anderson. Nothing?"

This was a public place; there were other people here, witnesses. I glanced toward the exits and told my legs to prepare to run, but they were too stiff to listen.

"It's basically murder, Tom, what you do. You take their lives away. Have you ever considered that? No, I can see you haven't. You're just a sick little fuck who gets his kicks by killing people without actually killing them.

"But stop lookin' so tense, Tom. What am I gonna tell the judge? I could never convict you. What I could do is shoot you in your demented little brain and drop you in a river. I can do that, you know." He reached into an inside jacket pocket, retrieved some folded papers, and brandished them at me. "Orders to terminate you. If you don't cooperate, that is. Want to read them?"

He unfolded them so I could see a government seal at the top. I didn't recognize it—an eagle with a lightning bolt and a spear in its talons. He shoved them in my face, but I couldn't read anything. The letters swam together. My hands shook. My mouth was dry, my heart and breathing rates through the roof. I had to attack him, or run, or both, or something, anything. But the gun, and the papers, and that seal. I needed time to think.

"Who are you?"

"Agent Jack Mancini, Office of Acute Affairs."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a division of Homeland Security. There are no records, no history or future. We're Homeland's Delta Force. You will never meet another OAA agent unless I'm killed. Do you understand why I'm here, Tommy? I'm offering you a way out. It seems like a waste to destroy such a unique talent. If you want me to, I will, by all means, right here in this booth. The orders say, 'In any manner deemed fit by Agent Mancini'—you want to burn to death? I don't give a fuck. I've got the power behind me, Tom, I've got your death warrant. I can get away with it. You know that?"

I think I nodded.

"What do you call it?"

I looked up at him, my eyes on his mouth. "What?" My voice was meek and

trembling like my hands.

“I asked you what you called it. This talent of yours, this special thing you can do to people.”

I cleared my throat. Cracked my knuckles. “I, uh.” Cleared my throat again. Wiped my palms on my jeans. “Uh, sh-shelling. I call it shelling.”

“Shelling?” Mancini laughed. “Shelling. That’s good. Your own super ability. Tom the Sheller. Nice ring to it. You should get yourself some tights and roam the night.”

“How did you find me?”

“You think you’re the only guy with powers like this? We keep a few in a room, and once a new one surfaces, we bring the evidence to them. They can smell out their kind—your kind. That’s how they describe it. All you fucks have some kind of stench that they can pick up and we can’t. They say it reeks.”

“What do you want?”

Images of all the people Mancini has made me shell flare across my mind. The man he didn’t want remembering our faces. The teenage girl who had seen us interrogating someone. A couple of old men whose kids were in the Russian mob and active in the US. “Just to teach those Reds a lesson,” Mancini had laughed. That time I had refused, and he whipped out his nine millimeter and shot them both. “They could be blissfully forgetful now. Because of you, they’re dead.”

That was the last time I put up a fight. I shelled a mob boss’s wife and kids before his eyes so he’d give up some small bit of information. I could have just shelled the boss. But Mancini doesn’t operate like that. So I did it, because amnesia is better than death.

Mancini motions to me and I come forward. Danilov rocks faster. Mancini takes a roll of masking tape from his back pocket, and in a few seconds he has Danilov’s eyelids peeled back. He is going to show me everything he has ever known.

I slap Mancini across the face and he looks at me, eyes wide with shock, and that’s all the time I need. It’s over in less than a minute. I see Mancini as a kid, crouched in the corner as his mother storms out with a suitcase. I see him years later, smoking weed with his father and eating burgers and chips. They’re hunting, they’re boxing, they’re rock climbing, they’re shaking hands as Mancini leaves for the Marines.

Tours overseas, special operations, undercover assignments. Mancini never fails to accomplish a mission, and people are noticing. The recruiters for Homeland are noticing. One day Mancini walks into an executive office, dressed in his best blues and nervous and excited, and they are there. They have a proposition. It will be dangerous. Details are available only after acceptance. Mancini doesn’t hesitate.

I let go of his shoulders and he slumps to the floor. I start toward the exit, leaving Mancini and a tearful Danilov behind among the Weitzman armoires and Brasilo cabinets and Harrison credenzas. I stop by the leaking water and look down into the puddle. I block the drips until the puddle smooths out, then look at my reflection. Eye contact is the important thing—they are portholes into the brain.

I have just started a countdown, and I will always know it will soon reach zero. I prefer ignorance and bliss. I’ve tried a mirror, the display cases at the local jewelry store, the window of a plane as I flew home with Mancini in the seat beside me. None of them worked. This puddle doesn’t work. But I will keep trying.

What Mother Never Told You

By

D. Lynn Frazier

The Wileys birthed a zombie last week and tried to hide it. I'd known about the baby, of course. I could smell its nature during Elizabeth's rather skittish pregnancy, when either shame or hope kept them from having the amniocentesis done. I probably should have hooked them up with the underground, but such kindnesses usually backfired. So I kept my mouth shut, having a few things to hide myself.

And I was proven right when my neighbor, Arthur Tanner, told me about the intervention. I'd been working second shift at the new job and so hadn't heard about the social workers and CDC cops descending on the neighborhood around everyone else's dinner time yesterday.

"You should have seen it, Meggie," Arthur says to me as he drops beside me on the porch, where I am drinking coffee and trying to feel human. His Pomeranian, Fitz, takes the biscuit I have ready for her. These are specially home made, and the dog wolfs it down. Most dogs don't like me. Fitz, however, is swayed by the biscuits.

"Seen what?" I prompt, and he fills me in on the details.

"Lizzie's screaming and crying, and all the while that thing is snapping at the wranglers like a rabid dog. Took three guys to get it in the cage. Can you imagine what would have happened if the cops hadn't twigged before it sprouted fangs?"

"Mmm," I say. "Would've been messy." Inwardly, I wince, and wonder if Arthur was the one who'd reported our neighbors. I've always thought if he knew about me, he'd act like a fascinated teenager and ask all sorts of inappropriate questions...before tiptoeing off to call the CDC cops. Bit of a ghoul, our Arthur, but pro-human all the way.

Eventually I go inside, grateful to be rid of Arthur. I take my pills, drink my liver shake, and grimace at the flat taste of beef. I'll have to have some of the real stuff soon to keep the cravings down--blood, at the very least. Passing for human is hard enough when you cover your fix, let alone when you keep to the thin edge of starvation like I'd been doing all my life. And I have too much to lose if I let go: my husband, my life, my family.

I wonder if I should call my mother and ask her to trace the baby. But it's too high profile, a reality that is hardest to accept with infants. Those born with the syndrome

usually don't survive long. I can only hope the kid is taken to one of the Ranches that are infiltrated and run by my kind. There the baby can receive what it needs to thrive, be hidden and eventually mainstreamed like I had been.

John is still sleeping when I go into the bedroom to dress for my shift at the plastics plant. I advised against it when he'd taken the night shift job at the mortuary, but he insisted because, that way, he can bring me a judicious supply of what he jokingly refers to as 'dietary supplements.' Love is indeed a many-splendored thing. He's even managed an occasional steak, cribbed from future cremains. At least with my new job I see more of him than before.

I bend, let myself breathe in the warm, meaty scent of him until my glands start to ache and I must swallow saliva lest I drool and wake him. Being a mortician, John is difficult to gross out, but even so, drooling would be a bit much. I kiss his cheek, pull reluctantly away. He murmurs sleepily and rolls over, breath slow and calm, unworried that his wife hungers for his flesh. He trusts me.

John is the reason I manage. He's my rock in this crazy world. Without his faith, I would have lost my resolve to live a mainstreamed existence a long time ago.

At Kilgore Plastics, the office is winding down for the week. New orders are filled from our catalog if they are in stock, but most are backordered until order quantities justify another production run. My job on Fridays is to go through the orders and plan the next week's production schedule. I'm new at this, having just transferred last month from Corporate Planning, so it takes me a while.

The downside of my new job is that I'm around zombies on a day-to-day basis out on the manufacturing floor. As Assistant Quality Control manager, it falls on me to ensure the gangs are kept according to CDC and OSHA regs--clean, fed, and treated 'humanely.' Yeah, neither the irony nor the hypocrisy escapes me. But I figure that the zombies are doing better with me supervising their care. Not to mention the prevention of accidental transference, which is Fed-speak for 'keep them from biting anyone.' Not that anyone ever catches zombiism from a bite; it's either in your heritage or it isn't. A bite only converts those who have the inactive syndrome.

After I get the schedule worked out for the next week, it's eight p.m., time for lunch. I'm slurping homemade soup when a zombie wrangler comes to me with a complaint. It seems one of the dayshift gang is acting funny in the pens. The wrangler smirks behind that 70's pornstache of his as he lays out a vague line about something wrong with number six fifty-two, a new zombie just delivered.

It's part of my job to oversee the zombies, but the day-to-day stuff is the wrangler crew's responsibility. I've been out on the floor every night first and last thing, eyeballing the pens and the gangs on shift like I'm supposed to. No worries there; I've got a wrangler's license because my folks believe in protective coloration. If I ever show too much knowledge about the undead, my license covers that easy-peasy. But this guy, his name is Jubal, is this shift's new senior wrangler. Instant dislike there on both sides when we met. He likes to hurt things that can't fight back. He's gotten away with it because he's a good actor. But he can't hide his scent, which lets me read him like the proverbial book.

Smelling deception, I raise an eyebrow and tell Jubal I'll be out there in a few. Instead of heading out back, he drifts around the office, keeping an eye on me. I figure he's looking for signs of vulnerability, the old staff-versus-management angle. Not to forget plain old sexism. So, in the interest of playing one-upmanship and to make a

point, I make Jubal look obvious by drawing out the wait, straighten a couple things on the desk, make a quick phone call. When I see he's feeling uncomfortably obvious, I tilt the last of the soup down my throat and toss the cup. I touch John's picture on my desk to remind me about patience and suffering fools.

Last thing, I grab one of the scented paper respirators despite the patronizing way I'm eyeballed. Protective coloration, I remind myself. Besides, it helps-just in a different manner than they all think.

Nevertheless, my face is hot as I don the mask for this particular audience. I breathe the smell of camphor and clove and think of John, think calm thoughts.

We enter the clanging din of the production floor, me in the lead.

Swing-shift gang is fifteen strong, all wearing hot pink tunics to identify them. Day-glow pink, lime green and orange for the three crews. Seeing as it's Friday and wash day is Saturday, their knee-length clothes are covered with myriad stains; but they all appear relatively clean and cared for.

As we approach, the line wranglers glance our way, checking to see what might distract their charges on the assembly line.

John advised against this job because I'd be around the lost ones, those lost to the Crave. And John is right; seeing them chained to the line and the wranglers slapping their shock sticks into their palms like old time jailers bothers me every time I see it, even though I know the shock collars and cattle prods are the only way to reach the gangers. But I deal with it. I've been mainstreamed since grade school and haven't lost control yet. There's too much at stake because, deprived of my fix, I'll be just like these zombie gangers in a few week's time, submerged in the Crave and fast losing intelligence and personality.

I skirt the yellow hazard zones and this shift's gang. The sour smell of zombie mingles with the petroleum odor of hot plastic and machine oils, and the heat gives it a power that a mask cannot really filter.

One zombie looks up at us and forgets what he's supposed to be doing. He stretches arms in our direction, fingers reaching, lips working over shriveled gums and broken teeth. He bumps against the end of his chain and nearly falls over backwards as his feet keep going. Then the collar zaps him and the wrangler uses the shock stick to herd him back toward the conveyer belt.

I pause to watch and let Jubal come up next to me. The look on his face, the thin smile and narrowed eyes, feed the perpetual rage in my gut. My fingers curl into claws and I press them against my thighs, making it look like a nervous gesture. Attitudes like his are poison, fostering cruelty and dangerous behavior.

The wrangler lights up the ganger once more, and quite unnecessarily, just when he is moving back into position.

Naturally, the zombie roars and turns back to the wrangler, blood in his eye and teeth bared. Saliva foams on his lips and sprays as he roars again, shaking his head against another zap. And now the other zombies moan and shuffle in distress. If not for the din of the extrusion equipment, I'd hear the wet sounds of their eyes rolling in their sockets and the back-of-the-throat sounds their thick tongues make in vague echoes of speech.

I grab the remote from the man's hand before he knows I'm there.

"What the--"

I glare at him after I see the power setting and rip the mask off. Now I want my

expression seen.

"You're breaking five government regulations that I can think of, right here," I say with a voice raised to carry over the din. "Consider the cost to the company if you fry this ganger's brain without sufficient cause. And since I didn't notice your life in danger-" I read his name tag, "-Lou, you might keep the bottom line in mind and save losing your job for another day. Now get the gang back to work before the production schedule is completely shot for the night."

I jam the collar control into his chest with force enough to drive the air from his lungs. Ooops.

"Yes, ma'am," Lou says, eyes the tiniest bit wider than normal-although the lip twitches, wanting to curl.

The zombie, no longer over-stimulated, has stopped lunging at the end of his chain to get the sadist who's hurting him without cause. I take a controller from my pocket and give him a jolt of a specifically keyed white noise that has a soothing effect on the Lost.

"Even zombies know when they are unjustly punished," I say to Lou. "Give him another reward jolt when he gets back to work." And I say to the zombie in a firm voice, "Work now."

He shuffles his weight from foot to foot, eyebrows bunched as he processes the options of pain versus no pain, then slowly turns back to the repetitive task of setting the ejected parts into the assembly racks. And now I understand why he'd been so distracted by Jubal and me walking by: Somebody with a twitchy finger on the remote, and a shift lead who's a rotten apple.

Stupid. Another thing I'll have to keep on top of. Zombies have a narrow window of focus. Don't distract them and they'll generally perform the repetitive, mind-numbing tasks they are trained for like an obsessive-compulsive with a favorite ritual. Add to that their strength and endurance and zombies are deemed indispensable to industry. Machinery would be simpler, certainly; but zombies are cheaper to maintain and last years with minimal upkeep. They never get bored, and they almost never make a mistake if their focus isn't shattered. Let's just say, the bottom line loves the undead.

I think of the Wiley kid, now going to grow up in a zombie ranch, treated like a commodity and never given the opportunity to be normal because of a stupid cultural bias. Poor little mite. He'll never even learn to talk. Once he grows enough to work, he'll be collared and chained and taught rudimentary skills before being sold as a corporate cog in the machine just like the zombies here at Kilgore Plastics. An unloved slave treated worse than a dog, no dignity or quality of life. And needless. Don't forget needless, I remind myself.

"Was that necessary...ma'am?" Jubal grinds out, his breath carrying the lingering odors of his lunch, including the beer he hopes is hidden by breath mints.

Stuffing the mask in my jacket pocket, I breathe deep to calm myself before I give him a level look. "I won't tolerate anyone damaging the gangers without cause, Jubal. I don't care how it gets your or anyone else's jollies off. They are assets and we will maintain them properly or I'll know why." The anger in my gut is a hunger that burns. It is all I can do not to rip this idiot's face off. With my teeth.

Perhaps John was right that I shouldn't have taken this job. But just thinking about him is my touchstone and it makes me less edgy. But the odor of singed zombie sickens and infuriates me still. My fingers find the mask and I put it on again.

I can see the wrangler's desire to flinch as my anger pheromones sink in, his

reaction unconscious, masked by machismo before he even recognizes the urge. It's a hind brain thing, and I must be careful not to let it go too far. Right now, he's just thinking me a raging bitch, a control freak who's caught him with his shorts down, to mix a metaphor. If I don't go too far in pushing him, it'll fade, and he'll be cursing me behind my back instead of suspecting the truth.

"Anyway," I say to distract him, "I'm sure with you being new on this shift you weren't yet aware of the infraction." Of course, I hadn't observed any infractions of this nature under the last lead wrangler's watch; but I refrain from pointing it out.

Now he wants to bristle, but because of my jibe, not from primordial fear. It's safer, anyhow.

"I'll keep an eye on it." By his expression, saying that must hurt.

"Thank you. We're both new in our jobs and don't need the black marks." I smile, friendly like, so he can see it around the mask. He looks like he wants me to choke on it, and I have to admit, I do sound patronizing.

We skirt the stacked pallets where one job is being prepped for shipment and dodge a forklift hauling the half-ton totes of plastic pellets. We go toward the steel door that guards access to the zombie pens. I hold the back of my hand against the sensor plate. The access key on my wrist lets us in.

I'm hit by the sudden drop in the noise level as we pass beyond the chillers blasting air to keep the floor just slightly cooler than Hell's antechamber. My heels clack on the concrete. Then I'm hit by the smell. Odors of feces, unwashed bodies and rot filter through the mask. It ruffles the hair on the back of my neck and I shudder lightly as the wrongness hits my sensitive nostrils despite the camphor. Jubal catches my reaction, barely hides his smirk. Doesn't matter that he's dead wrong about the cause. Protective coloration at work yet again.

I examine the row of pens. Forty-five pens, fifteen empty of the swing shift gang, fifteen with the gangs from day shift in their lime green tunics, midnight shift in orange. One zombie per pen, as well as a wall-mounted water fountain and food dispenser, a cedar-stuffed pallet--a glorified dog bed on a raised concrete pad--and a toilet in the corner. Some of our zombies actually remember their training in that regard, and others do not. The sewage odor tells me that no one has hosed the pens since shift start, or flushed the toilets.

As we pass the pens, most of the zombies barely raise a head to acknowledge us, dozing on their beds to digest their dinners. Soporiphics lace the zombie chow, a suggestion I made so the gangers are more comfortable during the off hours--or at least as comfortable as the constant craving for human flesh knifing their guts could allow.

One of them--tag number ninety-three--presses his cheek against the mesh, mushroom colored flesh bulging through the wire. His smell is musty, like yeast. What might have been a high school homecoming king's face is mottled and deformed by the slow rot already showing in scabrous patches like lichen crossed with eczema. In the way of things, he's hit half-life at approximately sixteen.

I pause to let him sniff my fingers. Zombies see the world through their noses. My scent pleases him a little too obviously, which causes Jubal to curse and reach for the shock stick.

I catch his arm before he touches the zombie's face with it.

"Don't. He doesn't know any better than a dog would. Besides, if you shock him, it might result in your getting more than you bargained for on your clothes."

Biting my lips so Jubal wouldn't see my urge to laugh, I rub the kid behind the

ear, fluffing his sandy hair. For some reason, most zombies retain nice, pettable hair no matter their age and state of decay.

The zombie makes a mewling sound and tries to sneak his mouth near my finger, despite the mesh.

"No biting," I say. I use the tone that slides through what mushy sentience remains.

The zombie tilts his head, eyes rolling sticky in thick mucous. One oozes a puss-filled tear down the lumpy flesh of his cheek. His jaw works and he makes nasal sounds in the back of his throat. No remembered words, but they are human sounds of a sort. They remind me how a deaf child sounds, their unformed groans and nasal vowels. So very human. My heart wants to break.

The image of the Wiley kid flashes in my mind. He'll be just like this teenaged zombie, never have a chance.

"No biting," I repeat, sealing away pity and tugging my fingers free. He drops his hand, backs away reluctantly. "Good fellow."

"Frigging zombie queen," Jubal mutters under his breath.

I move ahead, taking my time to check the state of the entire row of zombies and finding them not up to par. Amazing how the work standard has altered in such a short time. I've seen this before, and the best solution is the simplest: remove the problem's source. But there are the personnel policies to adhere to. Despite my threat to Lou, I'll have to document problems and counsel offenders, offer a rehabilitation plan and give second, even third, chances. Stupid, but the reality of things in the corporate world with union employees. To heck with the maltreatment of living, feeling beings who happen to share every single human DNA code, beings who technically are just another race of humanity... No, them we chain and torment.

The anger rises in me and I think of my husband and what he'd say to keep me calm, that he loves me and that we can manage, make a difference, if we are careful.

"So what's wrong with this new ganger?" I ask as we stop before pen six fifty-two.

"He ain't trained."

I cock an eyebrow. "You got his papers, right? With the certifications stamped on them?"

Jubal shrugs. "Bill of lading. Usually the invoice and all that comes separate, day or so before we get a new one."

I roll my gaze over the zombie inside. "You tried to work him and he didn't follow commands?"

"Nope. None of 'em. And we didn't shock him at all, like SOP says for the test run."

I'm not sure I believe that, but human smells are drowned out by the reek of undeath and filth around me, so I let it pass.

Six-fifty-two is standing in the middle of his pen, hands gripping his collar, his face shadowed by black hair falling over his forehead. He's still wearing the bright yellow shipping tunic with a giant barcode on front and back. The color washes out a complexion owing more to the Mediterranean than Africa, although that's there too. Dark hair that lies in crisp curls on his neck, skin that's a healthy color above the curved collar of the tunic and below the sleeves and hem. In fact, he's so healthy looking he could still pass for a thirty-something human. His posture is rounded, the head dropped like a cowed puppy. Or, I amend as dark eyes full of hate roll up to meet mine, a junkyard dog.

That gaze is aware. Sometimes a vestigial personality lingers; but this poor fellow has been passing until recently. The insanity of the Crave hasn't swallowed all of him yet.

When I walk around to the side of the pen, the zombie shifts to watch me, his stare sharpening as nostrils widen, catch my scent. Yes, I think, you recognize me.

"Hey there," I say, "want a biscuit, fella?" I pull one from my pocket. It's one of the special ones I make that Fitz likes so much. Zombies go crazy for them, too.

He moves toward me with that annoyingly musical clink of chains. I waggle the cookie. His hand reaches out, his nostrils twitch.

"Mmm good," I say, and wink with the eye Jubal cannot see. The zombie blinks, reaches out and takes the dog biscuit, jams it into his mouth and chews maybe twice before he swallows.

I hand him another one. He looks at me, eyes dark and narrowed to slits. His jaw starts to work, his lips to form words. I shake my head the tiniest bit, but he goes and speaks anyhow.

"Not. Dog. Not dog!" Like he's suddenly remembered speech. It's difficult by now, a month, month-and-a-half maybe since he got outed.

"Eat your cookie like a good boy."

A moment of stillness. He opens his mouth, lips the cookie thoughtfully, lustfully before closing his eyes and dropping it to the floor. The human flesh in them endears me to the zombies; but this one misunderstands what I'm offering by taking the edge off his Crave and starts to scream wordless, throat shredding howls as he launches against the cage, fingers straining for me where I stand inches from the ragged nails aiming to rend my flesh.

I turn to Jubal. "You're right. This one can't be used. Too fresh. Get me your paperwork immediately, and I'll dig up the rest of it and have him replaced ASAP."

Jubal eyes me differently as we head back. He thinks we'll get along. I'm planning how I'd butcher him, given the chance. For once, I find my violent zombie nature soothing. When I picture the spray of arterial blood against my face should I rip out Jubal's throat, it helps drown out the howls of six fifty-two until we leave the pens for the production floor once again.

Returned to my desk, I stare at John's picture for a moment, reassuring myself I'm doing the right thing. I can almost see his handsome head nod in agreement. Almost.

Two phone calls and six-fifty-two is picked up and another zombie placed in our gang, one truly lost to the Crave. It's all over by end of shift.

The rest of the night is thankfully dull. I'm too distracted to do any of my work justice and can only be grateful that tonight is Friday, John's night off. Today has disturbed me on so many levels.

John greets me in the garage, folds me in his warm embrace. "Dinner's ready," he says, "the wine has breathed, and I've made you your special steak-bloody, just like you like it."

I'm ushered to the table and my plate is set before me before I can even take my suit jacket off. John is a perceptive soul, but not that perceptive.

"To what do I owe this coddling?" I ask. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Well, your mother called," John says, coming around to knead the tension riding my neck. "She said to tell you the rescue went as planned."

I stiffen. "I didn't have time to consult with you. I'm sorry."
He leans around to kiss me. I purr and he grasps my chin, grins before nipping me on the nose. "It was the right thing, sweetheart."
My Johnnie understands everything perfectly.
"Thank you," I say. "He's rather handsome. I think your sister might like him. What do you think?"
John laughs. "Your mother also said to tell you your problem wrangler is on the List."
"I hope you told her to have us over for supper when his day comes."
"We're penciled in for the Fourth of July."
Revenge, after all, is a dish best served barbecued.

The Bug in the Suit

By

Steven J. Dines

Lynskey is dead.
My right eye is a war zone, but Lynskey, at least, is dead.
His shredded body lies on the desert floor among the Etanians. They're all dead, too, reduced to gore and body parts. I can only imagine the smell out there. Meanwhile, the suns have slipped all the way down the sky. Moved in for a closer look.
It will be dark soon. Dark and cold. I can't get up yet. Shock from the blast. I check my suit for punctures, but there can't be any - I'd be dead by now - so I'm really just checking my luck. Each coin-sized hole in the outer layers broadens my smile. I'm blind in my right eye, but the left is still good. And I'm alive. I'm still alive.
Then someone's foot taps my shoulder.

~

We watched the Etanian ship set down twenty clicks south of the rendezvous point. Like us, they were to make the rest of the trek on foot.
A trail leading back our ship, *The Cassandra Rhodes*, stretched out behind our squad. Privates Whitaker and Childs walked point, with Captain Lynskey and myself rear guards to the envoy, and Guderman, who took the middle spot of our five-on-a-die formation. We wore bulky environmental suits, and our heavy, treaded boots pressed deep prints in the grey sand. The holes filled rapidly, reclaimed by a desert that sought to erase our crossing. When I adjusted the tint of my headgear's visor and looked for The Sisters through a rip in the clouds, they flashed me their hot, bitchy stares.
The plug in my right ear clicked. Private Whitaker's voice sounded over the open

comms line.

“Say, Childs, what’re the chances of us reaching the dune valley before these stilt-walking sons-of-bitches?” Etanians grew to an average height of eight feet, five of which was leg, hence the nickname.

Another click.

“About the same as an ice cube lasting thirty seconds out in this roast,” Childs said.

Whitaker laughed. “That good, huh?”

“You two,” Captain Lynskey broke in. “I hear talk like that again you’re both walking back to the ship without your suits. Understood?”

“Yes-Captain-sir,” they replied in unison.

“We are not - repeat not - gonna roll and hand them the advantage.”

“No-Captain-sir.”

“Now pick up your goddamn feet. I want ETA twenty minutes.”

“And gentlemen,” envoy Guderman’s oily tones dripped inside our ears, “need I also remind you to watch your nomenclature? The political situation between our two races is frangible at this time and needs no further aggravation.”

Whitaker and Childs both laughed into their mics.

“As long as we are in agreement,” Guderman continued, unfazed. “When we reach the rendezvous point and establish contact with the Etanians, I do all the talking.”

“Those are our direct orders, Guderman,” Lynskey stated. “So you’ve nothing to worry about, at least not from us - *Lieutenant Cage!*”

I tensed.

“Yes, sir?”

“Pick it up, double-speed.”

“Yes, Captain, sir.”

The suits were not heavy, anti-grav compensators saw to that. It was me. I was out of shape, my muscles atrophied to jelly from too long stuck behind a desk. It hadn’t taken Lynskey long to notice me lagging behind as we’d climbed another steep dune.

My last outfit was a cover created by the Internal Investigations Division to get me inside Lynskey’s close circle without arousing the Captain’s suspicions. The story went like this: I was a standard transfer from the 2nd Infantry Regiment. Lynskey had trusted 2nd Infantry’s C.O. Lieutenant Colonel Dwight Swann ever since their days firing plasma rounds together in basic. So the theory was I’d walk right on in under Lynskey’s radar. To prevent any undue tip-off, Swann was currently sitting in a detention chamber back on Earth awaiting the results of my investigation. I.I.D. took no risks.

Lynskey was suspected of conduct unbecoming a Marine. I.I.D. feared he’d become the proverbial loose cannon. One thing the Earth Council did not want was an officer turning rogue and wandering the galaxy looking for a fight. My orders were unequivocal: should Lynskey in any way jeopardise preliminary talks with the Etanians, I was to use all necessary force to eliminate the problem. To that end, I carried on my person a small pistol-shaped secret...

As we reached the crest of yet another grey dune, the clouds parted once again to allow The Sisters to blast our suits and visors with their rays.

Something cast a shadow over my right eye.

Something fixed to the outside of my visor.

I held my breath as I looked for it, but those suns were dazzling and I could not see a damn thing. So, when we began our descent of the dune’s treacherous northern

slope, half walking, half sliding toward its base, I turned away from The Sisters and checked the visor again.

Nothing.

Just some desert flotsam, I thought. A leaf plucked from a plant somewhere nearby and carried to me by the playful beginnings of a sandstorm.

But I looked around and saw no plant life, only sand.

And then I saw it, once again silhouetted against the suns, jutting in from the left edge of my visor like the twitch of some nervous hand that had attempted to draw a straight line.

I saw it, and it moved.

It stepped out - as though into a spotlight to announce itself - and proceeded to walk a stop-start, meandering path all the way across the upper half of my visor. Not an errant leaf at all; a living thing.

A bug.

It was the length of my thumb but twice as broad, with six barbed legs, a pair of long coiling and uncoiling antenna, and cerci protruding from its rear-most segment like two long needles. On its carapace a bioluminescent red blemish resembling a lick of flame earned it its common name of Prometheus Roach, after the Titan who stole fire from Zeus and gave it to man. A misnomer in this case: the Prometheus Roach was known to steal from man, too; more than fire, it stole the man himself.

Unable to hold my breath a second longer, I blew it out in one gust. I watched in horror as the roach scuttled a few inches to the right as though spooked by my exhalation. Then I realised - it had been spooked. The roach was inside my suit.

I stopped in my tracks and considered my next move.

Get out of the damn suit, that's your next move.

I couldn't. The heat and the air were both eager to kill me. Besides, even if I survived them long enough to get the bug out of my headgear, Lynskey would put a round in my skull as a contamination risk. Again, Earth Marine Code was unequivocal on this: no mercy for possible Infecteds. Suspicion was grounds for preventative measure. Proof could always be produced later. Was it paranoia? The effect of too many barely thwarted outbreaks and invasions back home on Earth? Most definitely. But what did that matter? If the roach didn't kill me, any one of my fellow squad mates would step forward to take its place. I had to avoid drawing attention to myself.

"Lieutenant Cage!"

Too late.

"Son of a bitch...what are you doing back there? Did I give the order to break formation?"

"No, sir."

"Then what the hell are you doing? Get up here!"

My eyes locked on the roach. It twitched, and my mouth suddenly felt like it was full of sand.

"Cage! Do me the goddamn courtesy of ANSWERING ME!"

But a more important question had posed itself, overruling Lynskey. *How did this thing get inside my suit?*

Standard procedure had been meticulously followed. Xenoscience teams swept the desert weeks before this First Contact mission. They found few threats from The List: some low-risk microorganisms and poisonous reptile species, but no Prome Roaches. They did not exist on Etana IV according to official record. Therefore,

someone had brought this one in. But whom?

I cleared my throat. "Sorry, Captain. I'm getting some interference on comms. Headgear isn't functioning right either. I'm trying to fix it now, sir."

I pressed the tint switch on my sleeve and my visor went dark. I could see out, but if any of the others looked in my direction they would be met by an onyx reflection of themselves and the desert.

"What's your battery pack status?" Lynskey asked.

"Ninety-five percent, sir."

"Maybe it's this goddamn sand. This wind's really kicking it up. Which is more reason to keep moving, Lieutenant."

"I concur," Guderman dripped.

"Me and Whitaker concur on that too, sir," Childs said. "They say that shit can get everywhere and we don't want to find out..."

Laughter.

The roach scurried toward the bottom of my visor.

Droplets of sweat popped out across my forehead.

Do something.

"Sir," I said, "the interference seems to be gone now, comms is clear. Visor tint is still locked, but as long as The Sisters stay out of the clouds it shouldn't affect visibility too much."

I waited.

"Back in formation, Lieutenant," Lynskey said finally.

I closed my eyes. Breathed a sigh.

My relief, however, was short-lived. I realised I was alone in the semi-darkness of my suit with a killer, a killer I could no longer see. The roach had stepped off the visor.

I hurried after the others, and stepped back into formation. If anyone noticed my unsteadiness he kept it to himself. I looked at them all in turn. What if they all knew about the roach in my suit? What if they were all involved? I couldn't allow paranoia to feed my growing fear. I went back to looking for the roach inside my headgear, turning my head like a bird wary of predators.

Then the hair on the back of my head moved...

I wanted it to be my wife Katerina's fingertips. I wanted it to be anything but what I knew it was: the bug crawling toward my face.

I shook my head, but the roach clung on. I threw my head back, hit it against the wall of my headgear, and listened for the crunch. It did not come. The roach retreated to the crook of my neck while I tried again and again. I realised I wasn't ever going to get it that way, but there was some necessity to smacking my head, announcing my stupidity, trying to knock something - a revelation, perhaps - into my brain.

Who. Did. This? Pointless. Still, I shook and shook, struck and struck, prayed and cursed for a result. Nothing, except the roach's barbed legs itching my scalp as it rode me like a simulation bull. Which, of course, only made me try harder.

Eventually, the itching stopped, and I realised that I'd somehow managed to dislodge it. I wanted to whoop and punch the air, only I dared not risk the attention.

It dawned on me that I'd lost the roach again. Maybe it was better it hitched a ride on the back of my skull than stayed on the move. After all, where would it scuttle to next? My ears? Nose? Mouth? Suddenly, the various apertures of the human face seemed extremely vulnerable.

Guderman coughed in our ears. I flinched.

"Gentleman," he said, "a few words en route if I may -"

Bz.

"- the eventual trade agreement should prevent any hostilities between -"

Bzzbzz.

"- it's vital these preliminary talks go well. Etania IV is the second richest planet in terms of natural resources ever to be discovered -"

Bzzbzzbzz.

"- concentration of gold on this planet beggars belief: forty milligrams per ton of rock, eight times that found on Earth. And the oil - gentlemen, under these very sands lie untapped oceans of the stuff -"

Bzzzzzzzzzz...

So the roach had wings; it could fly. And fly it did, like a bat trapped inside a midnight cage, round and round my head, at first feathering the headgear's curved walls and then hurling itself at them. Strands of my hair rose and fell in its backwash. Its wings brushed my forehead, my cheek, my lower lip. Each time that thing kissed me, my skin crawled.

I walked on, powerless to do anything but listen as the sharp buzzing of the roach cut through Guderman's droning voice. By the time it landed on the visor again - directly in my eye-line this time - I felt shaken, like the assistant of some drunken knife-thrower.

The image of a knife lingered with me for a while, and then became something more: a memory. Back in basic, enjoying some down time with the other recruits. A game of pin finger. Someone volunteered to put their hand on the table while someone else took a knife and stabbed it between their splayed fingers with increasing speed. It gave me an idea.

My drink tube.

I could get my mouth to it easily enough, and if I could pull on it, detach it somehow, then I would have my knife, albeit blunt and hollow. It could work.

I craned forward and, careful not to bite down too hard, pinched the end of the clear plastic tube between my teeth. Working my lips, I walked the tube deeper inside my mouth. The tube went taut. At that moment the roach took to the air again, perhaps sensing what I meant to do. With my mouth closed around the tube, I breathed through my nose. The roach rode the warm currents that rolled back off the visor, a strange undulating dance right before my eyes.

Too close.

I turned my head to the left. The tube stretched and pulled against its fastening. A single rubber gasket near my right pectoral stood in the way of me obtaining this weapon. Closing my eyes, I prayed the tube would work itself loose. To help matters along, I jerked my head farther round to the left, like I was trying to work out a crick. The tube went thin and squealed in protest but finally broke free, returning to its normal dimensions as it whipped inside my headgear. It struck the roach and cut short its taunting dance. The bug returned to its previous position on the visor. Even without the ability to read its mind, such as it was, I sensed it was pissed at me.

Stay right where you are, I thought. Because there's more coming your way.

Wasting no time, I rolled my jaw and manoeuvred the tube into position. It jutted out of my mouth like a lance. On the visor, the roach fluttered its wings in stops and starts, still stunned. I wouldn't have much time before it regained its bearings and went back to flying around like some crazed circus act.

I clenched my teeth...

Took aim...

Jabbed my head forward like a bird...

Missed. The tube tapped a spot on the visor near the bug. Although I was disappointed, it confirmed I had enough reach.

I tried again. This time I trapped one of its legs. Not for long - the roach managed to free it from under the tube, flexing it a couple of times as though exorcising a cramp, and then scuttled a short distance to the right. I shifted my aim, thrust again, and -

Gotcha.

The end of the tube held the bug against the visor. Its splayed legs scabbled for purchase but found none. Its wings, folded like page corners, twitched uselessly.

Now to finish it.

I tried, but I couldn't crush it. Even with my neck craned fully forward it was enough only to hold the bug in place not pierce its hard shell. I held it there while I tried to think. Outside, beyond the insect, the rolling sandscape stretched out in front of me, dune after dune after dune. The longest walk of my life.

Then, a click in my ear.

"Cage, how is Swann these days?" Lynskey asked. "I haven't heard from the old goat in, what, six months..."

Guderman had finished his lecture and now, it seemed, Lynskey wanted to make small talk. *Now?* With sweat rolling down my face and a tube stuck in my mouth? I was no ventriloquist. And then, as a further reminder of what was at stake, the roach managed to free its scorpion-like tail, which had been tucked away like undercarriage, and waved it threateningly through the air.

"Sswann eez fine," I blurted around the tube. "Same az evuh."

I didn't consider beforehand just how dumb my reply would sound. The important thing was to say *something*, to avoid having dead air between us, which would only invite the Captain over. An empty-headed comment was preferable to a round in the skull, though it might lead to the same thing if I didn't learn to multitask -pin the roach, think, and speak - soon.

"Another problem, Cage?"

"Ev'thin fine," I said before I thought to agree with him.

"What's wrong with your voice?"

Don't come over. Do not come over.

"Voize, zir?"

"You sound different."

"Do uh?"

"Check the air mix in your suit, Cage. Sounds like you're out of your gourd in there. If you get back to the ship have it checked out. That's an order."

"Yez, Cah'un."

Wait, if I get back?

After a few seconds of silence, I realised the conversation was over. I'd almost lost the roach. Its bloated tail was wrapped halfway around the tube, pushing and pulling at it. And was that something...*moving* inside?

I couldn't think about that.

If Lynskey talked to me again and my voice fired his suspicions, I was dead. Watching my footing in the sand, because the last thing I could afford was to trip and fall, I used my tongue to roll the tube over to the corner of my mouth while keeping the

bug pinned. A drop of sweat slid down from my saturated eyebrow into my right eye and spread its salty sting across my cornea. I bit down hard on the tube and closed the affected eye. Which felt worse. I blinked, several times, and a tear escaped and made a run for it down my cheek, falling into the dry crevasse of my mouth. Salt in my eye; salt in my mouth. But at least the tube was in a better position, and I could talk with only the slightest distortion to my voice.

By this time, we were three dunes from our meeting with the Etanians. Guderman reminded us all again to leave the negotiations to him. Childs made another inane joke at Guderman's expense. Whitaker split a side. This time Captain Lynskey chose not to berate them but laughed right along instead.

I had my man.

I had the roach.

It wasn't over yet.

Those final three dunes passed in a haze of revenge planning. It was only by some miracle of luck and fine balancing that I ever reached the last one, by which time I felt ready to join a circus troupe back home on Earth. Would Katerina agree to my sudden and drastic career change? I wondered. Unlikely. She would probably laugh at such a suggestion. But I would be fine with that; after months apart I wanted little else.

My neck broke me out of my daze, screaming from the strain of being held in an awkward position for such a length of time. Every muscle in my body pulsed with liquid burn. My nerves suffered the most, though; they were absolutely shredded. I took some solace from knowing that our mission was nearly over and that we'd soon be heading back to *The Cassandra*, where I meant to tear off my suit and crush that damned roach under my boot over and over and over again.

The final dune's high summit went from a line slowly slipping down my visor to an untouched reality beneath my feet. The suns glared. The wind tried to topple us. I blinked more sweat from my eye and peered out through a watery film and a darkened visor at the valley floor below.

Six robed figures stood waiting in a staggered line across the sand, their widely-spaced footprints fading into the desert behind them. Hairless ectomorphs with long limbs and long necks and huge heart-shaped heads. Their skin was a slightly darker shade of grey than the ocean of sand around them. They looked up the dune slope toward us. Twelve tiny almond-shaped eyes, black as my visor, reflected back the suns, giving nothing away.

Lynskey's face appeared suddenly in front of mine and blocked my view. Had my visor not been darkened, he would have spotted the roach pressed and twitching behind.

"You okay in there, Cage?" he asked.

I thought I saw the corner of his mouth hitch, just a little. It had a knowing quality to it that sent a chill racing down my back.

"Absolutely." I looked for that smirk and saw it was gone - if it had ever been there in the first place. "Ready to help Guderman seal this deal."

Lynskey did not flinch, but turned and issued the order to descend.

I watched him for a few seconds before I fell back into formation. I wondered if he felt my gaze on his back. He had to be growing worried. I wasn't out of the way. The roach ought to have done its job by now. The desert ought to have covered my lifeless body. And no one would have cared about either of us - just a couple of insects rotting in the desert heat. But there we were, about to meet the Etanians, and I was present

and accounted for, *sir*.

Guderman began talking, running over his opening line to the Etanians in a variety of different tones and styles. I imagined he'd done the same thing earlier in front of a mirror onboard the ship. Whitaker and Childs, never ones to miss an opportunity, eagerly joined in until *future friends, I am Earth Council envoy Dominic Guderman* rang threefold in our ears.

I looked past the others at the Etanians, trying to judge the distance between us. Something - a small black object - slipped from the clutch of a set of elongated fingers and dropped onto the sand. One of the other Etanians stepped forward and kicked more sand over it, then pretended to have an innocuous conversation with the guilty Etanian. My first thought was: *weapon*. I glanced at the others, Childs, Whitaker, Guderman, Lynskey, but no one had seen what I had seen for Guderman's verbal oil slick pouring into their ears. I was about to report it to them when I noticed that my visor was once again clear.

No roach.

In that brief moment of surprise, my mouth had dropped open and the drink tube had slipped enough for the roach to pull itself completely free. Not without a sacrifice, however: one of its legs remained behind, looking like an L-shaped crack on my visor.

My neck prickled from more than fear. Was I only imagining those barbs on its legs gripping my skin a little harder than before? I thought not.

The roach moved up toward the hairline on the back of my neck, decided against that particular route, and scuttled toward the side of my face instead. Racing under my ear, it brushed my lobe. I wanted to scream, but an open mouth was an open invitation; I bit down hard on the tube instead. The bug crawled upside down along my jaw, deftly conquered the overhang of my chin, and scaled the centre of my face until it reached the slippery summit of my brow. There, it waved its bloated tail through the air like a flag.

I was breathing hard.

The Etanians were seconds away.

Hot air rolled back off my visor and dried the sweat on my face.

Lynskey - where is he?

Over there...

Etanian mouths narrowed to the size of coin slots. It was how they smiled.

...front centre with Whitaker and Childs.

Guderman turned, looked at me, concern on his face.

The roach's tail dropped to hang in front of my right eye.

One of the Etanians looked directly at me. Maybe living on a world with two suns above and dazzling sand-glare below they were irresistibly drawn to points of darkness like my visor. Or maybe he sensed my fear...

The tail dangled in front of me for a moment longer before it began to move - out, out, and away. Then, it plunged forward into my eye.

The pain was instantaneous and excruciating. I screamed inside my suit, shrieking down the open comms line as something like molten lava was pumped inside my eyeball. I clawed at my headgear, stumbled, fell, landed on the sand. The roach held on. If anything, its enthusiasm grew, and the pulses, the *spurts* increased to an almost constant stream of agony.

I lay on my side, stuck to a wall of sand that extended above and below me. The world sat askew. Against a backdrop of blue, down which fat clouds fell in slow-motion,

figures perpendicular to me moved in chaotic fashion. Giant boots thumped down in front of me, spraying sand over my visor. Weapons hidden beneath sandy robes were hurriedly unveiled, and the slotted, smiling mouths of the Etanians grew into great dark O's that consumed half their face.

We never brought weapons, I thought, forgetting for the moment the pistol I had secreted away. *We brought a bug...*

Then I laughed, even through the pain in my eye. Laughed until I heard myself scream.

I watched them slice Childs with hot emerald cutter beams. Both legs clean off with one lateral stroke, like they'd cut sheet metal instead of flesh and bone. A strong gust of wind pushed his legs one way and dropped his torso upright in the sand. While it wavered and threatened to fall, they popped his head like a thumbed bottle cap. I watched it drop and roll out of his headgear. Sand covered his face, stuck to his eyes. It got everywhere, all right.

Whitaker got keyholed what must have been a thousand times. Two of the Etanians went to work on him with their cutters on strobe. By the time he fell he was mesh.

I rolled onto my back. The Sisters flashed me a wink from behind a cloud. Apparently, the roach was done with me now. She had unfastened herself and lay sprawled out somewhere, resting. The pain was indescribable. My right eye was blind - it felt bloated, pumped up to at least twice its normal size. The war inside it was already raging; I could feel the parasites scabbling around in there. I rolled onto my side again.

Someone, Lynskey or Guderman, stood in front of me. All I could see was the heel of their boot. I heard ragged breathing over the comms line.

The Etanians gathered. Dark pinprick eyes over angry chasm mouths.

Something fell onto the sand beside the boot. The pin from a fragmentation grenade.

First there was light.

And then...darkness.

~

Lynskey is dead.

My right eye is a war zone, but Lynskey, at least, is dead.

His shredded body lies on the desert floor among the Etanians. They're all dead too, reduced to gore and body parts. I can only imagine the smell out there. Meanwhile, the suns have slipped all the way down the sky. Moved in for a closer look.

It will be dark soon. Dark and cold. I can't get up yet. Shock from the blast. I check my suit for punctures, but there can't be any - I'd be dead by now - so I'm really just checking my luck. Each coin-sized hole in the outer layers broadens my smile. I'm blind in my right eye, but the left is still good. And I'm alive. I'm still alive.

Then someone's foot taps my shoulder.

My entire body tenses as my mind opens on something terrifying: if one of the Etanians survived the blast then this feeling of aliveness is about to be cut short.

I roll onto my other side. I see a foot, a suit, headgear, and a smile. Guderman's smile. A long diagonal hairline crack on his visor puts a line through the middle of it. There's the crackle of interference over the comms line but it still works.

"How does it feel," Guderman says, "to have started a war?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Your little dance earlier has set two worlds against each other, Cage. Don't

believe me? Take a look up there...”

I roll onto my back. The sky is dulling, cloud wisps are massing to form what will become a thick rolling bank, but other than a day reaching its end I see nothing. Then a small sunburst flashes in the upper atmosphere. An exploded craft. Seconds later, another. More seconds, more sunbursts.

“But how could it happen so fast?”

“Firstly,” he says, “you’ve been unconscious for quite some time. Secondly, one of the Etanians escaped and reported back to his people.”

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

“I only had one grenade.”

“That was you? I thought -”

“Ah. You thought it was Lynskey.” He laughs coldly in my ear. “Parasites already eating through your brain, Lieutenant?”

I grab Guderman’s leg, wrap my arm around it in much the same way as the roach wrapped its tail around the tube, and twist with all my remaining strength. I don’t have enough left to break the bone, but his scream is a welcome start.

“Tell me what the hell you’ve done.”

“It’s evolution, Cage -”

Another twist.

Another scream.

“Enough,” Guderman breathes. “Enough. You’ve done us proud, Cage. Thank you. Someone once said it’s never about the destination but the journey. They were wrong - it’s all about the destination.”

“You better start making sense fast.” I encourage him with another leg-twist, and his cries leave a sweet ringing in my ears.

“I know who you are,” he says finally. “You’re I.I.D. And I know why you’re here. Lynskey. Well, he’s dead. Congratulations. No plan can ever be perfect and yet somehow things seem to have fallen into place, haven’t they? Lynskey is out of the way, the war has begun, and there’s no chance anyone will think to lay any of it at my door.”

“You can’t be working alone. Who else is involved? Who wanted this?”

Guderman laughs. “Why, everyone, Cage. Including you. I told you, it’s evolution. What I.I.D. don’t realise is that it’s bigger than all of us.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Really? My orders come direct from on high.”

“The Council would never agree to this.”

“There exists a power far greater than The Council, Lieutenant.”

“Lies. If such a power exists, why have The Council or the I.I.D. in the first place? Why not openly declare war on everyone?”

“And let chaos rule? I don’t think so. The good people of Earth would hardly stand for it. Come on, Cage, *think*. They want heroes, not warmongers.”

“So The Council is lying to them...”

“The people don’t care how things really work, otherwise wouldn’t they be more involved? No, all they want is to feel safe and free to pursue their little hedonistic pleasures. Real life, on the other hand, is about conflict and struggle. This way, they get what they want while the rest of us play our part in the expansion of the race.”

“By warmongering...”

“By doing what is necessary for us to *evolve*.”

"Spare me the 'greater good' spiel, Guderman. It's just a smokescreen for greed."

"Not at all. It's long been understood war is the unfortunate imperative, Cage, and that the machine of war must always be on the move. But wait - what am I doing here? I'm talking to a dead man."

A chill races down my back. Somehow, I resist the temptation to twist his leg clean off.

"I'm not dead yet," I say. "I'm taking you back to the ship. We're going to fix this thing."

I'm not thinking about how we're getting back. I don't know if my legs are strong enough to carry me ten feet never mind the distance back to *The Cassandra*. All I'm thinking about is making it out of this desert alive and getting home to my Katerina. "I didn't start this war. I'll make them see that, and you - you'll help me. Let's go."

Guderman laughs again. "You're going nowhere, Cage. You're an Infected traitor." He laughs harder. Before I can cut him off, the laughter catches in his throat as though he's choking on something. It sounds like he's coughing up blood.

"Come on," I say, "we're running out of time. Get up."

"Yes, we are," he says, and I listen to him spit something out. I turn my head to look at him and there's a running splash of red on his visor. "She's done with you, isn't she? Tell me - where'd she drop them? In your ear? Down your throat? Where?"

I see no reason not to tell him.

"What does it feel like," he continues, "having those little bastards crawling around inside your eyeball?"

I take a long look at him. "Like an itch I can't scratch."

"Too bad," he says. "Once they're finished fighting in there the one who's left will head straight for your brain. I don't know how they know where to find it, but they always do." He smiles at me. "Then it's the headaches...the seizures...and finally cerebral embolism and death. It really couldn't have worked out any better, don't you agree?"

I feel them. Their tiny carcasses floating in my vitreous humor. A thousand microscopic legs pointing accusingly at each other. The remaining parasites scurrying around in their fight to the end. For the victor the spoils. The spoils of me.

I release my hold on Guderman's leg and roll over again. The sand at my back rushes me forward as the sky collapses toward us. I'm falling, falling...

"When I return to address The Council," Guderman says, "I will tell them the Etanians violated our agreement by bringing weapons to the table, which is a truth. I will tell them they were extremely trigger-happy, which is also a truth. I will tell them how the one to instigate the breakdown of the meeting was the very officer I.I.D. sent to investigate Lynskey for conduct unbecoming. And it is at this precise point that I will drop in the part about you being infected by a Listed species. When they hear *that*, the Council will fall over themselves to cover this whole mess up rather than admit their own incompetence. The war will continue with enthusiasm. We shall win. And Etanian lands and resources will belong to Earth."

I have to stop this, I think. But how? What can one man do?

He can start a war, comes the reply. He can do that.

Guderman shimmies on his back through the sand, out of my reach. He spits another dark crimson flower onto his visor. Among its petals there are gobbets of bloody tissue.

"They say you're able to hear it in there," he says. "Inside your skull. Hear it tearing out every tiny mouthful. Soon you'll forget a word here, a memory there. Maybe

it'll stim an old sense impression, something like the perfume your wife wore on your first date. You'll even smell it, as though she was standing right in front of you. Of course, all this will happen a few minutes before you forget what perfume is and that your wife ever existed. A unique way to go, Cage, I'm sure you'll agree."

Don't listen to him. You know what he's doing. He's trying to stop you thinking. Keep you from doing what you need to do. Don't listen to him. Admit what you know - there's a way. It's getting colder...

"Stay, Lieutenant," Guderman says. "Lie awhile. Let nature take its course. It won't be long now. It's funny, isn't it, the power that even the smallest of us can wield. Man over machine. Insect over man."

"There's no difference between you and this bug, Guderman. First chance I get, I'm squashing both of you."

"That's not quite what I meant. Besides, there *is* a difference. That insect fights only to preserve itself and by doing that its own kind. Man is far nobler. Our aim is not only to preserve our kind but all life everywhere. With the following postscript, of course: let all live but allow the strongest to thrive. What is so wrong with that?"

Guderman clammers to his feet, staggers one way then the other. He starts to scramble up the dune slope. It's a long way back to the ship, and I know he has to at least try.

But he will never make it.

The far skies are filling up with infantry dropships. From this distance, they look like a plague of locusts. The ground conflict is beginning, too. The machine of war rolls fast.

Take out your eye.

What?

Take it out. It's colder now, the heat won't kill you. Do it.

But the air...

Hold your breath.

But -

Are you just going to roll over and give yourself to this thing? Let it win so easily?

No...

Let it turn you into some soulless thing? A bug? What about your wife? Your home? Your future children?

They're waiting for me.

You are not an insect. You feel. You love -

Yes. Yes, I love Katerina.

You want to live.

I want to live.

Climbing onto my feet, the world spins so that I'm not sure which way is up, or left from right.

I'm coming home, my sweet.

The suns are low in the sky. The temperature is falling.

I take the largest breath, hold it. Remove my headgear.

The heat scalds my face, but it won't kill me, at least not before I do what I have to do.

The Prometheus Roach drops out of the headgear onto the sand. I instinctively raise my foot to crush it...but decide to let it go instead. I am not a heartless killer, a soulless thing. It was merely carrying out its function. The roach picks itself up and flies

off into the desert, the red bioluminescent blemish on its back a tiny diminishing flame.

I turn and look up the dune at Guderman.

He is halfway to the top, crawling on his stomach like a bug. He grabs a fistful of sand in one hand, then pushes with the opposite leg, grabs another fistful in the other hand, then pushes with the opposite leg, and so on. Despite his head start, he will not get far. He knows too much. And what he knows can hurt me.

It's time.

Yes, it is. I can't hold this breath much longer.

Far away, the ground forces are engaging each other. Fires light up the evening sky. Hundreds, maybe thousands are dying.

But as my fingers push their way into my eye I'm unable to hear anyone's screams except my own.

The Wild Night

By

Aaron C. Brown

Dahva could not make his hands stop shaking. He rubbed his throbbing knuckles and glanced around the table to see if his friends noticed. Jondin watched the door of the inn while leaning on the table and bouncing one leg. Hoff rested his head against the wall, listening to the minstrel on a small stage. Faer, one leg thrown over the arm of his chair, looked from Dahva's hands to Dahva's eyes. A smile tugged at his lips.

"We shouldn't have done that," Dahva said.

Faer tugged at the lace spilling from his cuffs. "We did the right thing."

Then why does my guild threaten to overwhelm me? Dahva thought.

Faer leaned forward. "I think you will long remember this night, Dahva."

"How could I forget? How did I let you talk me into this?" Acids bubbled in his stomach. "How could I have done such a thing?"

Faer shrugged. "I don't know what you're so worried about. She's just a Wildling girl."

"Keep your voice down," Jondin said, shooting a dark look around the inn. "Just act normal."

A modest crowd filled the common room of the Emperor's Best. Laughter and shouting rose above the low rumble of voices that floated on the smoky air. Meat and fresh baked bread tantalized patrons with their scents every time a serving girl pushed open the kitchen door. No one seemed to have heard Faer's careless remark.

"She didn't deserve that," Dahva said.

"Of course she did," said Faer. "They're perversions, witches and shamans who come across the Stone Wall and infest our kingdom like lice on a peasant child's head. They live in our cities, breed with our families. It's sick." He snorted. "I don't know why they bother to cross the Wall. It isn't as though they can work their charms over here. My father says we should pack them all up and execute them, the filthy beasts. Maybe then they'll stay where they belong."

Dahva only half-listened. He'd heard it before and once even agreed with most of it, despite his Wildling ancestry. That was a secret he guarded with his life. He didn't want to think about what would happen to him if Faer found out. Being looked on with pity, disgust and revulsion did not suit him. Normalcy and friendship filled his life, and he liked it just fine. Dahva and his family hid their lineage and did what they could to assimilate into Ten Kingdoms society. But this was too much. Even for Faer, whose propensity for cruelty was higher than most.

At least, after tonight, the facade of his Ten Kingdoms descent would not be questioned. But the price had been steep.

Faer spoke again. "Have you heard the latest reports from the Wall? We sent a peace envoy to the Wildlands, and the bodies were returned headless, with charms and beads and all manner of primitive sigils attached to their clothing. Savages."

"We could have killed her," said Hoff.

“And if we had?” Faer’s eyes shone in the firelight. “Who would miss her? Not I. One less degenerate creature to soil our kingdom. And anyway, she isn’t just some random Wildling girl I found in the street. Her family has lived in Emperor’s Crossing for more than two generations. The father disguises himself as a fur trader to travel to the Wildlands and helps more of them cross over.”

A needle of cold stabbed Dahva’s gut. Something wasn’t right.

“And if that isn’t bad enough,” Faer continued, “he gives them money and sets them up with places to live right here in Emperor’s Crossing. They poison our bloodlines, and how are we to know? They look just like us.”

Jondin shook his head. “That’s disgusting.”

Dahva scowled. Why couldn’t they understand that Wildlings were human beings just like them?

Faer looked at him strangely. “Who do you love most in this world?”

“Anya,” Dahva said. But you know that. You practically smother her with your attention.

His sister’s rejection of Faer’s many advances were legendary in their corner of the city.

Faer nodded. “Yes, of course, your strong-willed sister. And what does Anya plan to do with her life?”

Dahva narrowed his eyes. “She is my father’s apprentice. She will take over his mercantile business. You know this.”

Faer held up one finger. “I do, but I have a point. What if dear Anya cannot become a merchant because Wildlings have taken all the good trade routes and stolen the customers? What if they become so numerous they begin to trade in the Wildlands? If enough of them cross, the barriers will not hold and they will be able to cast their magic over here. There will be no stopping them, my friends. Mark my words, the Ten Kingdoms will be laid to waste.”

“It is time I left, gentlemen,” Hoff said.

Faer waved his hand. “Yes, run along. I’m sure the guards have given up on looking for the culprits, if they even put much effort into it. You will be safe. My father will guarantee it.”

Hoff tossed a few coins on the table and left without another word. Jondin followed, throwing glances over his shoulder.

“I should go, too,” Dahva said. “My father will be waiting.” A lame excuse, but something nagged at him that he should get home, just to check on things.

Dahva stepped into the street, pausing to let the cool night air envelop him. Darkness prompted memories of a slim body suffering blow after blow by four pairs of fists, grunting and muffled screams, mixed scents of sweat and fear and sex.

Only Faer had seen her face. The nobleman captured her earlier in the evening and wrapped her head tightly in thin linen, painting on it a grotesque caricature of barbarian ferocity. After they beat her and— Dahva tried not to think of it. He failed. After they raped her, they pushed her into the street in a Wildling neighborhood as blood ran down her legs. She delivered their message with her broken body.

Dahva’s chest tightened and he grimaced. He was the worst kind of thing: a traitor to his people, his blood. But he had lived his entire life hiding who he was. From a small boy lying about where he was from to now, resorting to crime to hide his shameful heritage. He was born a coward.

He examined his busted knuckles and the hands that finally started to settle. He

wanted to cut them off.

Sighing, he began the walk home. Only a few people roamed the streets at this hour, drunks and miscreants. Every pair of eyes bored into him, bringing to light his maleficent atrocities. With hunched shoulders he waited for the cry of damnation that would surely rise from the depths of his murky surroundings and denounce him for what he was. Traitor. Rapist. Unkind and unclean.

Dahva clenched his jaw to hold the sobs at bay, but could not stop the flow of tears. What had he done? Evil. Oh, such an evil, hateful thing. It was not his way. Faer's words had incited a burning hostility in Dahva he didn't know existed. He felt as though if he didn't act, he was betraying his country. But by his actions he betrayed himself.

Dahva resolved never to speak to Faer again. The man was a menace, an anathema to every value Dahva held dear. Anya would be pleased.

He quickened his pace, wanting nothing so badly as to get home to her. She would comfort him, though he would never tell her of his actions tonight. If he needed to cry, his older sister would lend her shoulder.

Inside his home, lamps cast the common room in a muted yellow glow, illuminating the plush red carpet and glinting off the silver goblets on the mantle. Paintings of forests and seascapes adorned the walls.

Dahva's mother and father sat in chairs of pale blue upholstery beneath a wispy stream of smoke wafting from a burning stick of incense that spiced the air. His mother bowed her head and cried.

"Son," his father said with a voice heavy with emotion, "I'm glad you're home. Come. Sit. We must talk."

Dahva paused in the doorway. "What happened?"

"Please." His father waved him inside. "Please sit, son."

Dahva lowered himself into a chair and waited for the hammer to come smashing down on his spirit. Deep within, he knew what was coming.

"Dahva," his father began. He covered his mouth and stared at the floor as his eyes welled with tears. One slid down the crags of his face, following curves, snagging on wrinkles, and let go of his jaw to fall, sparkling with refracted candlelight, and splashed onto the floor where the carpet absorbed it and the sorrow it carried, creating a permanent stain of misery.

"Please," Dahva said. "What's going on?"

His father gripped one of Dahva's hands, unaware or indifferent to the scrapes on his knuckles.

"It's Anya."

No, Dahva thought. Please God no. Don't say it.

"She's dead."

Something withered inside him, a thing once green and vibrant recoiling from the light and shrinking into a black umbilical cord of anguish. An essential part of him once alive with bright-eyed inquisitiveness now lay dead and shriveled, creating a blank spot of emptiness in his soul.

"No," he said. He shook his head and repeated the denial in a dead voice. "You're wrong."

I didn't do it. It wasn't me. It wasn't me.

His father looked up. "She was m-" He tried again. "She was m-"

Dahva muttered, "Murdered."

"Yes!" A cry of pain broke the word in two, separating a whisper and a shout. The

old man's agony ripped the air into shreds, leaving tatters of invisible despair to float around them.

Dahva snatched his hand away. "Where is she?"

His mother spoke. "Upstairs. In your room. She died in your bed. She thought to see you before . . ." She trailed off and looked away.

"What happened?"

"She was attacked," his father said.

His mother gave voice to her grief, her sobs filling the room, a tangible, oppressive substance that settled on Dahva's shoulders and pressed down on him as if pushing him to hell.

"They beat her," his father continued. "R—they, they rrr—they left her in the street . . ."

Dahva stood. A cold certainty rose in him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, darkness gathered. He pushed it away. "I must see her."

His father shook his head. "Wait. Not just yet, please." He reached for Dahva's hand but Dahva stepped away, afraid that some sort of taint would transfer to his father through the bond of touch.

"I must see her!"

He bounded up the stairs two at a time, flung open his bedroom door and stopped. Anya lay on the bed, covers drawn to her chest; swollen face black and blue, arms outside the covers, one of them bent where there was no joint.

Dahva's mouth worked but no sounds came out. He stumbled to her side, collapsed to his knees, and took one of her cool, lifeless hands in his.

I killed her.

Convulsions wracked his stomach, and he vomited. The room spun. His head refused to work. He forgot where he was. Darkness reached for him, but he pushed it away lest he be engulfed in oblivion. The world trembled.

His eyes found her and he screamed. Pain and rage attacked him, invading his veins and coursing through his blood, spreading to the tips of his fingers and tingling along his scalp. Memories raced through his mind, flashes in the dark. Clothes ripping, tearing. Muffled screams as a virgin was raped. A figure yanked to her feet and thrust into a faceless crowd, terrified, crying, in agony, bouncing off walls as she stumbled down the street, slipping in her own blood.

How could he not have known? His ruptured knuckles burned to life as if to emphasize his treachery. Face buried in the sheets, he knelt by her side for a long time.

His father's voice startled him. "Dahva."

"What?" He did not turn.

"Someone knows."

Dahva nodded.

"We must flee," his father said. "It is not safe for us here anymore. We'll take her with us, give her a proper burial, but we cannot stay here."

Dahva nodded again. Then, unbidden, a memory returned to him. Faer, leaning forward and saying: I think you will long remember this night, Dahva.

Everything snapped into place. Faer knew. Of course he knew. Faer and his family loathed Wildlings. Faer could not understand why Anya rejected him. Any common girl should be overjoyed by the attentions of a noble. It must have raised suspicion. He would have had her followed. Checked on her. Investigated her past. When Faer discovered Anya was a Wildling it probably came close to destroying him.

Being rejected by a filthy Wildling because, of all reasons, he was not good enough for her? It must have driven him mad.

Madness or no, Dahva vowed revenge. Faer would pay. After that, Dahva would dispose of himself, the only just punishment for an act so vile.

Dahva stood.

"Where are you going?" his father asked.

Dahva did not answer but strode to the door.

"Dahva!"

He turned.

"Where are you going?"

Dahva's vision blurred and a quivering surrounded him. He blinked, and it went away.

"I know who did this. I'm going to avenge her."

Eyes wide, his father said, "Who?"

Me.

Dahva left without answering. Down the stairs, out the door, into the street, buildings blurring by in his peripheral, legs pumping, breath heaving, to the palace wall that surrounded the royal families.

Saffron's Gate was the closest palace gate to Dahva's home. Two guards stood watch, helms and spear tips glinting in the torchlight. Dahva stalked forth.

"I demand entry," he said.

The guards looked at each other, then at Dahva.

"On whose authority?" asked one.

"There is no need," came a voice. "I am who this man seeks."

Dahva whirled. Faer stood twenty paces away. The nobleman spread his hands at his waist and smiled.

"Well, Wildling," he said. "How fares your sweet sister?"

Dahva's heart pounded, slamming blood into his extremities, and the darkness that had been gathering in his mind crowded the edges of his vision, nearly overtaking him. The world around him shook like an orange leaf clinging with desperate hope to a thin branch.

How could they not see it?

"Faer," he whispered. "You set this whole thing up you traitorous bastard! You made me kill her!"

"A Wildling!" Spittle flew from Faer's twisted lips. "Just like you! Just like your whole family! I trusted you, Dahva! I loved you like a brother! And you lied to me, betrayed me, made a fool of me!"

The darkness forced Dahva to take a step forward but he stopped. Faer looked incredulous.

"Are you going to kill me now, Wildling? I am not a bound and gagged girl. You don't have three friends to help you."

Dahva clenched his teeth shut, but a groan escaped. His hands opened and closed, aching to rip away the lace at Faer's collar and wrap around his throat.

"You sicken me," Faer continued. "Why must you come into my kingdom and take my land, my women, my life?"

Tendrils of black tentacles around Faer, groping and searching like blind snakes scenting food. Writhing ebony lines, thin wisps of thick smoke, curled around buildings, lampposts, eddied along pavestones and byways like a dark and sinister fog. It moved

toward Dahva and began to coalesce around him. He pushed it back and the world trembled like a frightened child.

Dahva took another halting step, pushed by the darkness, the wild, living night.

Faer drew his sword. "You, guards!" he shouted. "I am Faer Navinhill, and I command you to stand aside. Do not interfere with me."

The guards looked at each other again. One of them disappeared through the gate.

"Come, Dahva," Faer said. "Come kill me."

Dahva dropped all his mental defenses and let the night flow into him, joining to his spirit, clicking into place like two pieces of a puzzle. It surged, filling his body as the world quaked. Mighty ocean waves broke against jagged cliffs. Boulders rumbled down a mountainside.

He almost laughed.

Dahva saw his father running toward them. The old man skidded to a halt several paces behind Faer.

"Release it, Dahva!" his father shouted. "Release it now!"

Release it? This? Why? What possible reason could he have to do that? Never.

Faer glanced over his shoulder. "Ah, treacherous smuggler." He looked back at Dahva, eyes narrow. "Release what?"

"He killed her, Father!" Dahva cried, pointing. The night pulsed and breathed around his outstretched arm.

"You are not innocent!" Faer shouted. "Just because you did not cast the first blow does not mean you are without fault!"

"You have broken the barrier, son!" His father pleaded. "You have no idea what you've done! Let it go before you destroy us all!"

With an anguished cry Dahva charged Faer. The nobleman was ready and his sword slid easily into Dahva's chest, but the breathing darkness would not be stopped. Dahva forced his way down the blade, reveling in the screaming pain that pierced him like the white hot fire of God's wrath, ignoring Faer's wide-eyed expression of horror, knowing that he only need touch him, just one touch, and Dahva would have his vengeance.

He gripped Faer's shoulders and poured living night into him. Faer stiffened, his back arched, mouth wide open as he looked to the sky. His skin blackened and cracked, curling at the edges like sun-baked earth. Steam hissed from the fissures. One of his arms snapped off, fell to the ground and crumbled to dust. Somewhere, someone was screaming, or perhaps many people, a vague scratching at Dahva's awareness. He ignored it as the world shook around him.

Faer's body collapsed into pieces at Dahva's feet.

Dahva looked down at the hilt protruding from his chest. He fell. Darkness claimed him.

When he opened his eyes, the sun stung them. He tried to lift a hand to block the glare but his arm would not obey him. Something rocked him gently as he lay on his back. Sounds converged. Horse hooves clopping on packed dirt. Rickety wood creaking. He realized he was in a moving wagon.

"Where am I?"

A shadow passed over him. He looked up into his father's face. The man gazed down on him with cold eyes.

"We are fleeing Imperial pursuit. We're on the road to the Wildlands, though we

probably won't make it."

He turned away.

Dahva tried to remember what happened. Anya. Faer. The darkness. Ah, the night. Such power. Unimaginable force. Unstoppable.

"What have I become, Father?"

"Do not call me that. You murdered my daughter, and for that I hate you. You are not my son. You are a Wildling to the very core of your being, and I am getting rid of you. Everything I have worked for over the past forty years you have destroyed in a single night. Once we reach the Wildlands I care not what you do, but do not look at me and do not talk to me. I never want to see you again."

He contemplated his father's words with a calmness that surprised him. They were right to be afraid. All of them, every soul in the Ten Kingdoms, should flutter in fear of the power he commanded.

A slow smile spread over his mouth. The wild night had changed him. They would tremble with the world for taking his beloved sister away. They would learn fear.

I will teach them.

Late Night Guardians and Heroes at the Wawa

By

Chris Doerner

I peered past the overhang and watched the Dark Urge pull into the gas station parking lot underneath my viewpoint. The late night hour had dimmed my essence to an almost invisible outline so I wasn't sure I'd been spotted until it thumbed its nose at me before disappearing under the pump awning. Typical of the sort and not beneath adding to my nightly agitation.

Gigi leaned over to me. "What's up boss?"

"I don't know yet. Did you see it?"

"Naw. I was ogling the blonde hunk that just pulled outta the lot. He got into the Spyder."

Gigi always lusted after the young studs. She watched a few too many movies and wanted her Heroes to be cut from the Hollywood mold. Me, I always look for something else.

Tonight Gigi was garbed like an anime' heroine. White leather hip boots and long gloves. A tight mesh bodice with silver-flashed rapier and dirk tucked in one side. Her wings were the iridescent sparkle of peacock's feathers mixed with the downy white of swan's wings. She looked like Sailor Moon on LSD.

I peered back over the awning. Yup. The Urge had latched onto some sickly looking kid driving a faded beater. You know the kind of ride. Body putty and rust holding an oil-smoker together. Probably needed to pop-start the clutch half the time. And yet, always outfitted with five hundred dollar tires. It never fails. You could see the kid wasn't holding it together much better. Through the windshield I could see stricken-looking eyes and a forehead wrinkled with deep stress lines. His fists clenched the steering wheel.

The Urge hovered near the kid like a Rose Bowl float from Hell. Ropy, stringed tentacles pushed deep inside him near the center of his chest. The suckers on those tentacles each had a mouth like a leech's, but slimier and full of sharper teeth. This Urge had the kid bad, and I knew it was going to blow soon.

"See it now?" I murmured.

"Hmm-oooh. Ugly fuck."

"Gigi, please."

"Well, are we gonna go do 'im? *Canwe, canwe please?*"

"We can't touch it yet. All it's going to do is laugh at you. It knows we're here, and it knows we're helpless until we Connect."

Gigi pouted in disappointment. She was a good kid, but still green. And a little too eager for my taste. But that was due to her relatively recent assignment. In the 60's, Gigi was tapped

for duty on her way upstairs. Seems the Big Man liked the way she held her own during the Watts riots. It took some guts to face down a gang that had the power of Dark Urges floating over them like evil piñatas.

During the riots it was bad news to be the wrong color in the wrong neighborhood. They had cornered a fireman carrying a baby out of a burning building. He got turned around and wound up on the backside end of the building, isolated from the other units trying to dodge bullets and put out fires. The fireman already was a Hero, but couldn't put the baby down and defend himself. Those five punks wanted that fireman and nothing was going to stop them. Until Gigi stepped up. Needless to say, the fireman made it out with the baby, intact. And Gigi was now on assignment and still in training.

"I want to move to the other roof."

I spread my wings and floated the thirty feet to the top of the convenience store. Gigi followed in virtual silence. The Urge watched us in feigned disinterest. They have no real reaction to us unless we accost them at close range or are on the same plane. Guardians and Urges need to be either Connected or Disconnected. As long as the Urge had attached and we had not, we would not be able to stop whatever nasty it was cobbling up. If Gigi and I wanted to remove this parasite from the boy, we needed to find some Heroes and fast.

"It's making its move!" Gigi shouted.

Shit. And the parking lot was almost empty. Only now did I see that the kid actually had two girls sitting with him in the back of the car. The Urge kept them blocked from our sight. Damn creatures are not very intelligent, but they do have some animal cunning. You could see the Urge swell as it began to dump its poisons into the kid. Black lights and ribbons of sickness peeled off the thing every time it pumped itself into the kid's chest. It was a horrible kind of anti-sex act, with the Urge reveling every time its tentacles spasmed juices into him.

"We've gotta move! Now!" Gigi was frantic.

"Gigi - wait a second!"

She swooped up and disappeared over the side. Mumbling a curse, I followed close on her heels. She was headed to a tight little blonde that had pulled her red SUV halfway around the building. I glanced back toward the kid and his car. He was out and had pulled open the rear door, screaming. The Urge pulsed and throbbed. By now it had puffed up a bit in size. It was just egging the kid on. He reached in and pulled one of the girls, probably his girlfriend, out by the hair.

Suddenly I saw a blur of form rush past me. Gigi must have gotten her Hero. Looking back, I saw the blond move toward the kid and girlfriend. A little tentative, but movement nonetheless. Blondie was going to need to move faster to get to the kid before something bad happened. It looked like she wasn't going to make it. Not that that mattered to Gigi, she had caught her Connection. Silky golden threads stretched between the two ladies, thinning a bit but not breaking. A good sign. There's old Guardian tales of Heroes that Disconnect. That's always an ugly proposition and never ends well. As Blondie walked past me, I was able to breathe in her Essence. Sweet and tangy soul, like the first waft of a light sparkly wine. Hers was pretty straightforward. Charlene, 26 years old. Surprise, not a real blonde. Healthy non-smoker with a five day a week workout. Single and still unsure if she was going to go out with the married guy that was hitting on her at work. Just the kind of Hero that Gigi would go for. Not that she had a lot of choice tonight.

Charlene's Distractions clustered thick and fluttered around her like small prismatic gnats, occasionally forming a solid wall. Distractions can be a Guardian's bane. They are all the worries, grief and assorted baggage that people carry with them every day, and that build up over the course of their lives. They can create a disharmonic short circuit that bars a

Guardian from releasing the potential hero inherent in all human beings. Too many Distractions can form a wall that makes it impossible to connect. Over the last decade it seemed everyone had too many.

The kid was still screaming incoherently at his girlfriend, hand tangling even further in her hair. The girlfriend blubbered; tracks of mascara ran down both cheeks. This just seemed to enrage the boy and he caught her with a fist right under the chin. Two more hits followed in quick succession. Blood and mascara mixed together as he shook her around.

Charlene caught the exchange and that decided things for her. She made a beeline for the car. It might have been Charlene's natural inclination or Gigi's influence, but Charlene strode forward in righteous fury. Simultaneously, Gigi blazed toward the Urge in fiery light, sword and dirk drawn ahead of her. The Urge moved a little way away from the car. Dead-looking fish eyes wept tears of malice. Black talons erupted from the creature's forearms and fingers as it set itself to wait for Gigi to come near. Always overeager, Gigi flew right toward it, with no thought for defense. Right behind her came Charlene.

"Is everything alright?"

"Get the FUCK out of here." From the kid.

"Let the girl go."

"I'll fuck you up, too, you don't go away!"

Charlene's Distractions thickened and thinned in response.

"Can't do that...boy. No man hits a girl."

The girlfriend wailed and tried to pull away.

~

Gigi closed with the Urge and made contact. A flurry of strikes and counterblows landed and were blocked, almost faster than even a Guardian could see. Just as fast, Gigi swooped by, curled her wings and landed lightly a few feet behind the creature. She had a really solid connection with Charlene based on her speed and illumination. The Urge just burped out a mucousy chuckle. Claws flashed behind its back and caught Gigi's rapier, flinging it out into the darkness. Urges look soft and slug-like, but are incredibly fast and agile. A foot claw crunched into the mesh on Gigi's bodice, throwing her back about a dozen yards and rolling her into a ball. The creature oozed toward her, tentacled connection stretching like worms being pulled apart. Stretching, but not disconnecting. Gigi was slow in getting up as it drew near.

"Let go of the girl," Charlene said again.

"Fuckin' bitch, this has nothing to do with you." This time the kid shook his fist at her.

Charlene turned a little to one side. I could see the wheels spinning in her head. The kid looked a little surprised but did let go of the girlfriend. She retreated back into the car.

Charlene turned to her and yelled, "Get out of the car—go inside the store!"

I leapt in phantom response, but couldn't help Charlene before that kid's fist landed on the top of her head. A foot came up and caught her in the thigh, knocking her back. Stumbling, Charlene caught up with herself and replanted. The kid came forward for a grab. This time Charlene was ready and blocked him, striking him hard on the nose. He huffed once and blew out a stream of snot and blood. Then the kid was all over her, all arms and legs and screams. She went down under a flurry of hammering. Nothing serious yet, but the kid had her overpowered.

Gigi was in trouble, too. The Urge's kick caught her unprepared. She was bleeding across the chest and her white outfit was stained with a widening fan of leaking blood. Gi held her dirk in one hand as she tried to rise. She coughed once and hacked up blood. The Urge spread two clawed feet and leapt at her, in a mocking parody of Gigi's first attack. As the creature came by he raked along one of Gigi's wings. I heard a sickening crack as it broke her

wing at the joint.

Charlene covered up with both arms and kicked for all she was worth. The kid caught one in the crotch and turned red, then blue. He pulled Charlene up by her blouse and dragged her over to the car. The two girls inside stared in horror as the kid maneuvered Charlene close and opened the door. He placed her head just inside and started to slam the door on her head.

I looked back into the store, desperate for someone to Connect with. Too far away, and after that kid starting throwing fists, all the store patron's Distractions lined up tight. No connection was possible with them now. No-one even ventured outside. Torn between Gigi and Charlene, I howled in frustration and flew toward the store door, determined to force my way inside and demand a Connection.

Thank God! A car pulled up. Far side of the entryway door. Looked like the kind of cars they use for deliveries and such. A rotund man ventured out, looking haggard and exhausted. His Distractions wheeled thick and furious around him, more like angry bees than Charlene's. He started for the Wawa doors in a mesmerized daze, not realizing the drama that was playing out on the other side of the parking lot. I shot toward him in desperation, needing to beat him to the front. Three steps, two, and I had his measure. John Kenneth, 43 years old, a Distribution Manager for the local newspaper. About a hundred pounds overweight and asthmatic to boot. Two tweener kids, a wife, and all the worries an older father has about job security. Insecure about the future. Probably with good cause. He had the thickest wall of Distractions I'd seen tonight. But there was something else there. A tough layer inside, maybe.

Charlene was barely conscious after the beating with the door. Blood stained her face, clothes and most of the parking lot around the boy's car. He turned back toward the girlfriend to scream at her again.

"SEE, SEE what you made me do, Beth. You bitches are all alike. Always mouthing off and not knowin' when to stop."

"Tony, stop man, she dint mean nothin'."

Saucer eyes, the other girl in the car, was rooted to the back seat. Probably glad she was being ignored. Tony transferred Charlene's blood matted head from his right to his left hand and awkwardly pulled out a small bottle from his jeans. Popped the top with a thumb and poured out the contents right into his mouth, chewing hard.

Gigi staggered toward the store at her best speed, the Urge following close behind her. One broken wing flapped loosely at her side, while the other fluttered frantically, a feeble attempt to get her airborne. She'd lost both her swords in her effort to get vertical and was staying up only by sheer force of will. Blood, grease and paper wrappers festooned her tunic.

The humiliating image of a Guardian bloodied, messy, and stained was not lost on the Urge. It laughed with glee and turned a sarcastic eye toward me as if daring me to Connect and come after it.

It kicked Gigi again. She landed in a heap and turned over. She turned her plaintive eyes in my direction. The Urge slowly raised an arm and extended its claws, fingertips to forearm. They bristled in a prickly array before plunging deep into Gigi's stomach and then quickly ripping away.

I turned back to Kenneth. He had stopped a few steps from the front doors and looked around in a distracted way. I was close enough to hear the laundry list of thoughts going through his head. Linda, the Missus, wanted something and Kenneth was damned if he could remember what it was. A Rolodex of other half-formed thoughts made a guest appearance and then disappeared just as fast. He was one tired man. As I closed, his Distractions fluttered nervously, turning and wheeling. Their multi-colored skins reflected the diffuse light like dragonfly wings, making walls, diamonds and a chiaroscuro of other patterns. But in spots you

could see clear holes form momentarily in their wall of protection. Carefully I extended my essence in an effort to Connect. A length of golden cord carefully worked its way through the Distractions. They batted it around and buffeted it in an effort to block us. I reset my resolve and pushed a little. Harder. Only feeble movement from Gigi. Finally. A Connection! The tentative contact firmed up and glowed with the incandescent sparkle of jewels.

Kenneth felt a momentary flash of light-headedness and then shook his head to clear it. The lighter-than-air feeling left him a little breathless. He fumbled with a pocket, pulled out his asthma inhaler and took a pull. Tightened up his coat and fumbled to check what pocket he left his wallet in. A quick self-frisk and he found it in the last pocket he would have expected. As he looked up he saw a commotion at the other end of the parking lot. The screaming finally registered.

I turned and felt the solid Earth beneath my feet. All the weight of mortality coursed through me. All the smells, sights and touch of the human momentarily disoriented me. I grew fuzzy, and then solidified into the plane. And lofted into the air.

Charlene hung mostly limp and bloodied, pinned between Tony and the door. In the interim between his fight with Charlene, the two girls had tried to exit the car and get somewhere, anywhere else. They hadn't gotten far before Tony's wild eyes caught them again. He stepped around the car and shambled forward. They were caught like a couple of does in high beams when a large shadow crossed in front of the kid.

"What do YOU want, old man?"

Kenneth lumbered forward and interposed himself between Tony and the retreating girls.

"Just coming over for a look and to make sure everyone's all right."

"I took care da bitch and she was in a lot better shape than you - you don't look so tough..."

Kenneth shifted his feet, a little unsure of himself and frowned a bit.

"I outweigh ya by 100 pounds, kid. But I don't want to be a tough. Everybody just needs to settle down a bit."

Tony tensed his thin frame, made a muscle, and took a step toward the older man. Kenneth's hands came forward in a half-remembered martial arts movie move. Something in his stance seemed to get through to Tony and his eyes widened. It sunk in then just how big this older man was.

Beth, the girlfriend, shouted to Kenneth, "He just lost his mom and he been trippin' for like the last two days tryin' to forget."

The older man looked past Tony and through the car window. He took in Beth and Saucer-Eyes and then down to Charlene's bloodied head.

"Go inside the store - I'll try and talk to this guy."

"His name's Tony." From Beth.

"Okay."

The girls dragged Charlene's limp form away from the car. Kenneth stayed between them and Tony.

"I din't tell them they could leave," Tony said.

"They're only going into the store to get some help for the young woman that's bleeding."

"Nobody leaves until I say they leave." Tony's face tightened again in anger.

"Just give them a few minutes – besides, I'm sure the police will be here shortly."

"I said *nobody's - goin' - nowhere!*" Tony threw his car keys high. They landed on the gas pump awning. "But I'm going." And then ran off into the shadowy underbrush.

From the doorway of the store Beth shouted, "Tony said he wants to kill himself. Said he wants to join his ma. Ya gotta find him." Her voice quivered and she added, "I just know he's gonna off himself."

Kenneth kept looking back and forth between the inviting light of the friendly looking convenience store entryway and the clammy darkness by the furthest set of gasoline pumps. The darkness suddenly looked a bit more threatening. He threw one last forlorn look at the entry-doors and then turned and lumbered off into the night.

~

Once airborne I was able to scan the area and get a visual on the scene. My Connection stretched thin but secure. Kenneth moved toward Tony while the Urge slumped in his direction to intercept the big man. I gained a little more height, reached for the short sword secured on my back and pulled my wings in to dive. I couldn't see Gigi moving anymore. The Urge looked up, stared right at me, and sped up to get near Tony. As I closed, it reared up on splayed feet and bristled its forearm claws. I passed over its head and took a quick cut near the Urge's neck. I supposed it thought I was going to plow right into it and wasn't quite prepared for the last second pass. The sword gashed open a shallow head wound and inky blood splashed up in a cloudburst.

~

Kenneth could hear Tony moving noisily through the brush and even see him from moment to moment as the headlights of the cars on the nearby turnpike fractured beams of light into the meadow below.

"Tony!" Kenneth shouted, then stopped, bent over in a coughing fit. A crackle of movement flanked him on the right. "Your girlfriend told me about your mom - I know how you feel."

From the rushes a hoarse voice answered, "What do you know about it?"

"I lost my Dad a year ago. I'm still dealing with it." Another cough and then Kenneth said, "Whatever you're feeling..."

"No-one knows how I feel."

Kenneth was at a loss. Tired. Thirsty. And a bit turned around in the dark.

"Look kid, your girlfriend's back at the store, and she's worried about you."

"The ONLY one who ever worried or cared was Ma." Tony sounded close.

"What would your mom think of you acting like this? She only would have wanted what was best for you."

"I know what's best for me. I've, I've been talking to my ma for the last two hours. She's been telling me what I need to do."

"Crap," Kenneth murmured, "that sounds like the worst kind of idea."

A siren's wail was getting closer. Finally.

"Kid, the cops will be here soon. They'll be able to help, to get you some help."

"No. Ma's told me what I need to do. And she's always right."

~

The second I passed, the Urge fanned out both arms and flailed. I brushed by it and it only slashed at my tunic. I glided around and gained height again. Tried to get it into the air and away from Tony. If I could coax it up and away, it would need to relinquish some of its hold on the boy. Maybe Kenneth would have a chance to get through to him.

Unfortunately the Urge didn't want to cooperate. It stayed on the ground and beckoned. I landed a dozen feet away in a clearing of rushes. Sword held in front of me, I advanced on balanced feet. Then a sudden rush as the Urge charged. Both the creature's arms extended with horned spikes and they tangled the sword, trying to pull it from my grip. Unlike Gigi's

rapier, my short sword was a bit too wide for it to catch. I yanked hard, was able to pull it loose and thrust in deep. The Urge countered and kicked with a foot, pushing me back. Attacks and parries came quick and relentless, neither of us able to get in more than a shallow cut or glancing blow. As we danced around each other I could hear Kenneth floundering around in the dark.

~

Kenneth was almost on top of the voice.

"Come with me, Tony. Beth will want to see you and get you to a hospital."

"I've found the cure I need." Now Tony's voice sounded close but muffled at the same time.

Branches creaked and moaned in the wind. Kenneth drew near.

"What the -"

Tony had climbed a few feet into one of the those low branched junk trees common on small fields and lots. He'd found an old rope and wrapped it around his neck.

Kenneth shouted, "Tony! Don't."

Tony stepped right off into space and hung there, revolving at the end of the rope.

Shit! Kenneth lunged forward and grabbed the choking youth around the waist. And lifted.

~

I chanced a look and could see Kenneth had come almost within arm's reach of Tony. As I did, the Urge launched itself right on top of me. Arms pummeled and foot claws scrabbled between my own legs to scratch for a lethal belly wound. I clapped my hands on its ears and stunned it for a split second. Was able to get my legs under and heave, throwing it off me. I rolled and came to my feet. Stepped back and flew right at it and then tried for some height. I tried simultaneously to make a quick grab for the creature's arms and get airborne. My wings flapped heavily to get both of us into the air. Steely-horned spikes kept popping in and out of the creatures' wrists to try and make me to let go. I continued to rise higher and screamed every time those spikes plunged deep into my hands.

I had the Urge leveraged into an angle so that at least it couldn't get to my vitals. All it could do was snarl and splatter me with blackened drool. The spittle coated my body from my chest down to my leather boots. But still I rose into the air, ascending until it seemed we were hovering a mile away from the two mortals below.

~

Tony was tall, and though emaciated from non-stop drug use, grew heavy after a minute or two.

"Help. Somebody help," Kenneth panted.

He tried to hold Tony up in the air with one hand while trying to reach the rope with the other. The boy's body kept twisting itself around on the end of the rope and threatened to squirm right out of Kenneth's arms. Kenneth launched a kick at the base of the tree. No avail. A slight arm tremor became a slow burn from the strain. Then his back and legs joined in as well.

"Help me," Kenneth croaked again.

Siren's sound and red flashing lights were visible right in the store parking lot. He could also see a large fire engine pulling in from the other lot entryway. Rescue was fifty yards away and no one could see them.

~

I had gained so much height that both our connections were stretched into thin, almost transparent threads. The distance weakened the Urge and consequently it struggled all the

harder to get loose. My hands had been bloodied into raw hamburger. Eyes narrowing in sudden comprehension, the Urge stopped extending its spikes and started to twist in my grasp. The blood and leathery texture of the creature's skin made it impossible for me to hold on any longer. It chuckled as it levered itself free and free-fell to its back, smug and happy. The connection trailed loosely behind it like a streamer. After a moment of hesitation, I reached into my tunic, pulled a leaf blade knife from my harness, and sliced through both connections.

~

Tony's face purpled and his body went limp right in Kenneth's hands. The big man could barely see around the body to gauge how close they were to rescue. Official sounding voices and those red-flashing lights were excruciatingly near. Kenneth's arms quivered violently from the strain.

~

Twin threads of gold and wormy gray snapped back toward the ground. The Urge's grin turned to a snarl as it realized what I had done. I pulled in my wings in a hawk's dive to catch up to it. Collided into it and started pummeling. We struggled fist and claw as I rode him down. The marshy ground jumped up to meet us. At the last second, I stretched out my wings, lofted up and released the Urge like a torpedo. It hit the ground so hard I thought even Tony and Kenneth felt it. As I landed, hands throbbing and dripping blood, I saw Kenneth still standing underneath Tony, trying to hold him up. He looked ready to drop.

~

"Think of something John, anything," Kenneth muttered to himself.

Suddenly his chest constricted.

"God, no." Kenneth's asthma. "I c-can't..."

The unexpected exertion ratcheted up his breath to a wheezy trill. Tony's tortured breath rattled in eerie harmony. Spots danced in front of the big man's eyes and his heartbeat thudded in his ears. But something else as well. Voices. Close now. Kenneth was almost out. He had tried to save one total stranger's life and was in danger of losing his own.

~

The Urge was broken in half a dozen places, bleeding its brackish life force slowly into the marsh grass. I limped over to where it lay and with a quick twist, broke its neck. The remains of the creature's slimy connection shrank like a dried-out worm. My knees wobbled with fatigue as I started back to Kenneth. I stopped short. Kenneth was holding Tony on a little less rope slack than it took to finally do the kid in. I saw that the older man was almost out of it and needed a little extra help. Exhausted as I was, as against the rules as it was, I made one last attempt to Connect.

~

"Hurry up, you damn heroes-stop taking your fucking time." Kenneth's feet were falling away. He dropped to his knees. Saw the splintering lights as his body continued to fall. And at the last, saw a man in gladiator's armor, golden aura shining around his body, and a sad half-smile as the lights went out.

~

Gigi lay unmoving in the back part of the lot. The bright phosphor of her life force pooled underneath her body. I squatted down on my one good knee and felt for a pulse.

"Still kickin' Boss," she whispered weakly.

"I know."

"The Urge?"

"Dead. Back in the meadow."

"Good. Man, did that hurt." She clutched at my arm. Pain-filled eyes met mine.

I whispered gently. "Gi. You ready to go home?"

One more nod in assent.

I gathered her up in my mangled arms and held her tightly against my chest. Spread my wings and...

~

"...Hear me, Mr. Kenneth?"

Kenneth took a deep pull of the pure oxygen through the mask. For a second he didn't know if he was still standing or laid out flat. A blurry but smiling face belonging to an EMT loomed over Kenneth's head like an angel.

"Pulse almost down to normal. BP, still a little high, but much better now. Can you tell me how you're feeling, John?"

Kenneth's vision cleared.

"Wings. I saw wings."

"Probably hallucinations from oxygen deprivation. Gives you all kinds of wacky sights and sounds. Take another deep breath."

"What about the boy? Tony. Is he all right?" Kenneth tried to sit up. And gave it up as a bad job.

"He's alive," replied the EMT. "I don't know how you did it. None of the boys here believe that you were actually able to hold that kid up for as long as you did. You weren't even conscious."

Kenneth tried a second time to rise.

"The police that found you couldn't get you to release your hold off that kid. You were wrapped so tightly around his body. And you wouldn't relax until they cut him down and actually had him on the ground." The EMT pulled off his rubber gloves. "You saved his life. Twice. By the time that kid stepped off the tree, he was already overdosed. He was pretty much in a coma when he hit the end of the rope."

"How about the girlfriend - I think her name was Beth. Oh, and the blonde-haired lady."

"They're both at the other end of the parking lot with the firemen. Charlene, the blonde will be fine, all things considered. She has a minor concussion and some scalp lacerations. Those are always heavy bleeders. But they look worse than they are."

Kenneth winced anyway.

"The girlfriend has some old contusions and bruising. Those three girls claimed you saved them all."

"Na. I just happened to come by and keep things from getting worse."

The EMT helped John sit up on the gurney. "Mr. Kenneth, would you like us to take you to the hospital?"

Kenneth thought about it for a second and did a quick internal inventory. "No." After all, it was just an asthma attack. His lungs seemed to be fine. In fact, he took a deep breath. "I feel pretty good.."

Kenneth levered himself off the gurney and walked the length of the parking lot toward his car. From the doorway and through the store windows, twenty pairs of customer's eyes followed him.

Charlene, a bit groggy, body beaten and head bandaged, was up and flirting with a gaggle of twenty-something firemen. All were glued to her every word about the fight with the perp. They all were vying to show her their first aid prowess and perhaps get a phone number.

Beth and her girlfriend, bruised and a bit bloody, were encased in blankets. Beth watched Kenneth wander over to his car, fish in his pockets for his keys, drop them and then have to bend over to retrieve them. He opened the door and plunked himself tiredly into the

seat, keying the ignition. His car cruised slowly toward the exit of the lot, past the young people. He took a long final look through his side window at Tony's girlfriend. In his heart, he knew that Beth would stay with that kid, no matter what. Fists, faith, drugs or whatever, he could only hope that she would survive long enough to live.

Kenneth came back, shook himself and sped off into the warm summer night, toward his own family. He never caught sight of Beth in his rearview mirror, waving a shy hand and mouth the words *thank you*.

~

The dead Urge lay in a twisted heap piled up by the junk tree and tall marsh grasses. Smaller Urges waited like hungry rats, waiting to consume the carcass. And in their small pitiful brains, hoping to grow as large and dangerous.

Namug

By

Gustavo Bondoni

The ever-present weight dragged on her arms. Every movement, every keystroke seemed to require ten times the effort that Ruth was willing to supply. Epsilon Eridani II simply wasn't meant for human habitation; even those humans genetically modified for high-gravity environments found three times Earth-mass a bit of a stretch.

Living on this planet was torture – not the torture of agonizing pain, but the torture of continuous slight discomfort during every moment, waking or sleeping.

Colonel Ruth Khazak knew that the gravity wouldn't hurt her, and that it wouldn't hurt any of the other genetically modified colonists, but the pressure to find a solution was mounting: even people who volunteered to move to the most inhospitable regions in the galaxy needed some comfort. And it was her job to find the way, which wasn't helping her sleep any easier at night.

"Damn," she said, and turned to her lab assistant, whose flat, broad features and squat high-gee build had grown on her to the point in which their relationship had gone well past what was proper. She couldn't care less – no one among the colonists would complain, and none of those fragile one-gravity idiots from Earth could stand on the surface of the planet without more discomfort than they'd care to endure. "Any luck?"

It was a rhetorical question. She knew what he was working on and, though it might be a promising avenue, they wouldn't know whether it was actually viable for a few days at least. But Kinney still thought about it before answering. "About the same as yesterday. We can graft heek legs to human nervous systems with no problems, but the arms are useless unless I can get human hands to work at the end of them – and the muscles just aren't there." The heeks were large, feathered primates, slow moving and strong, perfectly adapted to life on the surface – but which had never developed opposable thumbs.

Ruth was working on trying to make the second colony on the planet a viable one. Her specific assignment was to find a way to adapt the human body to the environment without having to use prohibitively expensive imported bionics.

The first set of colonists had, logically enough, been aquatic. It was much easier to modify a human to breathe through gills than it was to make them comfortable in high gravity, and life in the sea was an immediate solution to gravity – natural buoyancy helped offset part of the extra weight from Newton's law.

Unfortunately, humans, who tended to ignore any kind of carbon-based unintelligent life, had overlooked the enormous squid-like creatures which prowled the depths of the oceans that covered ninety percent of the surface. They'd paid for this oversight with their lives when a huge phalanx of the creatures had come out of the depths and, despite high-tech resistance from the colonists, destroyed every structure in the colony. The colonists themselves, deprived of their metal walls, had quickly been picked off and, as far as anyone could tell, eaten.

Of course, the first thing Ruth's wave of colonists had done was to capture one of the creatures and test it for intelligence. The only thing that even remotely resembled a brain, a structure in the central trunk of the squid-like being, was the size of an apple. No intelligence there. The attack had been written off as an instinctive reaction to the intrusion, not a coordinated action at all.

Namug felt the cool, caressing flow of the water on his surface. He could dimly sense the ripples that his neighbor was making nearby. Dwuugag could probably feel Namug's own happiness in the secretions he'd been leaving all this way. It was a good thing that his neighbor was a nice sort, or this open display of emotion would have been a cause for strife.

Even so, it would have been pointless for Namug to try to hide his emotion. He recognized this part of the sea by the temperature, the taste of the water. The colony was nearing the migration point where they always met Yunnin's colony. Sweet-scented Yunnin of the strong embrace. It would not be long until they were together again.

Namug was content.

Ruth's eyes opened suddenly. That's it, she thought. And then she agonized a little. She'd promised Kinney that, whenever a sudden inspiration struck at – she checked the glowing face of the status display – four fifteen in the morning, she would jot it down on a pad that he'd given her for precisely that purpose and go back to sleep. He argued that she was having these midnight flashes of brilliance often enough that her sleep cycles were shot to hell.

She smiled, glanced at the unused pad beside the display and got up carefully. It wasn't actually necessary to be silent, since Kinney was the type who could sleep through a meteor strike, but old habits died hard.

Five minutes later, she was in the lab, seated at one of the mainframe workstations. This wasn't the place where she preferred to work – the Stylus tablets were much more comfortable for lab work – but in this particular instance, she wanted to use the forty-inch screen on the workstation.

It took her less than a minute to find the recordings she needed, and she was soon watching the feed from one of the recorders salvaged from the wreckage of the original Epsilon Eridani settlement. The feed was 2-D and a bit cloudy, but that couldn't be helped: all they'd been able to recover were a pair of recordings from security cameras that had been hastily converted to underwater use.

The resolution, such as it was, should be more than enough to show her what she wanted to see. The creatures, after all, were huge.

She sat back, coffee mug in hand, and studied the attack on the old colony. Despite what she herself had concluded after dissecting a number of the things, the attack definitely did look coordinated by some kind of intelligent agency. She watched as they first demolished the power cables and then systematically went about removing all the remaining heavy weaponry. The people, dressed in body armor and armed with various harpoon and projectile weapons, they left for last. They represented the smallest threat. Long before she could see what had happened to them, the camera was pushed away, facing into the depths of the ocean.

The second recording showed the flooded interior of one of the habitation spheres. A single tentacle entered the camera's sight through an aperture in the wall, attempting to capture one of the colonists, armed with a harpoon gun, who was huddled next to a wall.

The amazing thing was that the tentacle wrapped itself around the gun, tore it out of the helpless colonist's grasp and, with a mighty wrench, tore it in two. Then, it withdrew, leaving her alive.

After forcing herself to watch the destruction of the underwater habitat a few times, she watched more footage of the monsters, taken with better quality equipment, filmed after the arrival of the land colonists. For some reason, the creatures didn't see the submersible film cameras as a threat – probably too small – and never attacked one.

Although they referred to the animals as squids, there were some significant differences with their earthly analogues. In the first place, these creatures were organized radially, like giant starfish, and the central hub was just a small, flattish dome in the center, as opposed to an elongated cone. This layout precluded quick movement, but, when not attacking large stationary targets, these starfish seemed to enjoy lolling horizontally about on the currents, submerged at immense depths like gigantic floating plates. There were air bladders on the tentacles so that they could be maintained at the same altitude as the rest of the body.

The tentacles themselves were the second major difference. Long and slim, they held no suction cups, being instead covered in long, strong cilia. They seemed much too thin to have caused the damage she'd seen on the tapes, but one had to remember that on this high-gravity world, the pressure in the ocean depths was unbelievable. The tentacles had to be extremely strong, just to be able to move effectively.

Once she'd re-familiarized herself in how the starfish looked, she activated the final set of recordings. These were the ones she was most interested in.

Namug had changed states. Before, he'd been content, now he was ecstatic. Yunnin had agreed to disengage, to join his colony. That she'd agreed to undergo such pain to be with him was a dream come true. The fact that he'd have to wait until the next migratory round for her excision to be complete was torture. But the torture went well with the ecstasy – he'd have something to dream about as the colony drifted along the great circle it had established since times immemorial.

He could await the currents, could await the time. Fulfillment would be his, very, very soon.

Kinney entered the lab to find Ruth's head resting on one of the consoles. She was sound asleep, and, rolling his eyes, he almost left the lab in order to avoid disturbing her. Heaven knew she needed to rest.

But he'd left a correlation program running last night, and was anxious to see what results, if any, it had delivered. He was a scientist, too, after all. Maybe not as mad Ruth was, but mad enough to volunteer for the terraforming of an extremely uncomfortable place in the galaxy, a place which had killed off the first group of people to try it. He might be able to resist his nature better than she could, but ignoring it altogether was out of the question.

He initiated the active mode on his Stylus tablet, and heard the soft humming of the memory core as everything came back on line.

Ruth stirred, moved slightly, and finally displaced a light pen which rolled off the table and clacked onto the floor. She woke immediately and sat up with a start, looking around as if surprised to find herself in the lab. When her gaze settled on Kinney, she shrugged and gave him a sheepish smile. "I know, I know," she said. "I should get my sleep. But I think I've found a way to solve our little gravity problem."

Kinney tried to glare at her, but his heart just wasn't in it. Why bother? He knew that she'd never change, especially when dealing with a challenge. Anyhow, her hangdog expression was so completely inappropriate to such a forceful woman that it would have been impossible to stay mad at her. "Tell me," he said with a slight smile.

"We need to go aquatic again," she said, all business once more.

"What? That certainly wasn't what I expected. I assume you have a plan for dealing with the squid-things."

"I shouldn't even dignify that with an answer. Of course I have a plan. You should know me well enough by now not to ask such silly questions."

That was more like the Ruth he knew. He grinned. "Well, are you going to enlighten me or do I have to figure it out for myself?"

"No, I'll tell you. If we wait for you to figure it out by yourself, we'll be here until the end of time." Her smile belied the words. "Look here."

Ruth punched the replay command and the mainframe's screen lit up. It showed an underwater scene, which, though slightly murky, had to have been computer-enhanced; the light under the ocean was too slight to get the contrasts that they were seeing. And the scene must have been filmed at a considerable depth, since it showed not one, but two of the giant tentacled monsters. Kinney knew they never came together near the surface.

"The mating tape," he said. "I've seen it."

"Yes, you've seen it. But did you notice that the central section of the bodies never come together?" She pointed at the screen, in which the two creatures had fused into what looked like a bowl of spaghetti. How they managed to interact without becoming hopelessly tangled was a mystery.

Kinney immediately realized that she was right. Some of the tentacles wrapped around a tentacle from the other creature. They were perfectly paired up, always one from each creature in a group, and the distribution seemed to be random, as opposed to having adjacent tentacles pair off. Still other tentacles floated free, seemingly uninterested in the proceedings. But the central sections, where both the nervous system and the reproductive organs were presumed to be located, never came into contact with one another.

"I see it," he said. "But I still don't understand how it's going to solve our problems."

"Even with clues..." Ruth said in mock exasperation. She was in a great mood, which boded well for the success of the Colony. Colonel Ruth Khazak was very seldom wrong – if her gut told her she had the solution, Kinney would be willing to wager that she did. "Look at the evidence. We know the squids will attack anything large that invades their territory, but don't attack each other. The only contact between them is tentacle to tentacle, right?"

"Yes."

"And we haven't seen eyes, right?"

"Nothing we can identify, anyway."

"Oh come on!" she exclaimed, as if lecturing a particularly slow student. "You know as well as I do that there's absolutely no reason for a species living in that lightless water to have developed eyes."

He held up his hands, palms out. "All right, all right! No eyes."

"So if they can't see each other, they must identify each other either through sound – and we haven't found much on them that would indicate a vibratory membrane of the type you'd use to project sound underwater – or through some kind of chemical

fingerprinting.”

“They taste each other?”

“The tentacles taste each other. The hairs – cilia – must have specialized taste organs. They must be able to sense the presence of one of their kind in the water around them. And I’m also willing to bet that the tentacles themselves secrete the telltales.”

“So how does this help us?”

She rolled her eyes. “If we graft one of the tentacles onto a gilled human, we should be able to fool the squids into thinking that one of us is one of them.”

“That’s ridiculous! Those tentacles must be fifty feet long. They weigh two tons each!”

“So? They’ll be in the water, remember? Buoyancy will help, and they’ve got their bladders for flotation – all we really have to work out is how to graft them to a human nervous system, and how to keep them secreting the right kind of chemicals.”

Kinney had his reservations, but held his peace. Ruth had done this kind of thing often enough that he preferred to keep his mouth shut. It wasn’t fun to be proven wrong.

Namug writhed in agony in the lukewarm water – impure, bathed in chemicals he couldn’t identify. He tried to break free of the pain. But to no avail – he was being held immobile by giant metallic structures clamped painfully to his body.

The nightmare had started on the day the colony had first been taken. A huge artificial structure had enclosed them, so strong that the combined efforts of the entire colony had been unable to make even the smallest of dents in flat, dull surface.

And the pain. It was unbearable, as if some unknown agency was attempting an excision. But didn’t they know that separation was the work of many days, that it should be an act of love, never an act of violence? He felt another wave of agony as his body shredded before the onslaught of something sharp. And then he felt a severance, a loss.

As he drifted into unconsciousness, he wondered if sweet Yunin would ever learn what had become of him.

The water in the tank had just subsided following her victory lap when Kinney walked up the steps to the causeway that circled the enclosure.

Ruth looked up at him, nearly exhausted, but not unhappy. She could see all the lab equipment arrayed around her: scanners, readouts, and even film equipment. Everything seemed to agree that things were getting better and better, that the discomfort of the operations and the hard work of the bio-integration had been worth it after all. “Watch this,” she said.

She dived under the surface and pushed herself along with the tentacle. It was the latest in a series of movements she’d mastered and it wasn’t yet second nature. She could still feel the skin of her back, just above her buttocks – where the tentacle had been attached, grafted onto her spinal chord – stretch with the movement. She also noted that breathing no longer presented any problems – her body had finally accepted the gills.

On resurfacing, Ruth found Kinney watching her with a slightly amused expression. “What?” she demanded.

“You look like a giant tadpole,” he said, chuckling.

She swung the tentacle – it was so tempting to call it a tail – around and showered him with water. “I’ve just managed the first successful melding of alien and human bodies in which the extraterrestrial component outweighs the terrestrial by such a large factor and all you can say is that I look like a tadpole? I ought to have you expelled from the

colony for contempt of science.”

“At least I wasn’t the one who decided that all this equipment would work better wet than dry,” he replied, shaking the water out of his hair. “Anyhow, how’s it coming?”

How could she possibly describe the feeling of relief that came with no longer being subjected to the eternal crushing of the planet’s gravity? But he knew how it felt. He’d spent a few nights in the tank with her. But the tentacle, now that she was finally mastering it, gave her a speed of movement she hadn’t known since coming to Epsilon Eridani. “Better now,” she said. “At least I don’t feel like the damned thing is fighting me anymore. I’m the one controlling the motion.”

“Well, I suppose you weren’t expecting it to be easy.”

“No, but I wasn’t expecting it to be this tiring. It isn’t fun trying to get two tons of alien muscle to bow to your will, let me tell you.”

“I still can’t believe it worked.”

“You realize that this might be useful on other worlds as well – a great bit of defensive biology for aquatic colonists on high gee planets?”

“And another promotion for the great Ruth Khazak?”

She swished her tail – tentacle – contemplatively, coquettishly, she thought. “Probably not. You need to have commanded combat troops for them to make you a general.”

“Pity. I can just imagine the name of the army: ‘Khazak’s Tadpoles.’” This earned him another sluice of water from the tank.

“Stop clowning and listen. I think I’ve got enough control over this thing so that I won’t get pulled to the bottom of the ocean. Now we’ve got to get out there and test it, to make sure that it works as a way of communicating with the squids.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. You’ve shown that it can be done. Why don’t you let someone else do the testing. We’ve got a full complement of colony marines that were specifically assigned to us to take the risky jobs. Why can’t you graft a tentacle on to one of them and let them test it?”

She shuddered inwardly. There was no way she was going to return to the hellish gravity of the surface, and if someone else was testing the squid’s reaction, she’d have no excuse to keep the tentacle. “It would take too long. Think about it, a marine would take the same amount of time to get used to it as I have – those are weeks we simple don’t have to spare. And I just need a few more day’s practice. No. I have to be the one to do it.” She paused, making certain that he wouldn’t voice any further protests. “Now get in this tank before I use this tentacle to pull you in. I feel like celebrating.”

The next two weeks were a blur. Everything had to be coordinated. Her tank had to be transported to the ocean’s edge, she had to undergo a period of acclimatization to the ocean’s temperature and salinity. And there was another unexpected snag: as soon as the tentacle hit the ocean, it seemed to regain part of the independence that had characterized it in the days immediately following the graft. A frustrating few days were spent in the shallows getting her full command back.

But, soon enough, she was ready for the final test. Ready to go out into the open ocean to find one of these behemoths, to confront it and see whether her experiment would insure the continued survival of the colony.

Kinney made some noises about accompanying her with a squadron of helicopters – massive things that flew with difficulty in the high gravity. Knowing they would certainly frighten the squids into acting violently, she just smiled. Right after sunrise the following morning, set out without telling him. She’d make it up to him later.

She swam straight to the point where the continental shelf suddenly ended, and dived. She wanted to find one of the squids right now. And, somehow, she felt that her own eagerness was complemented by a sense of elation was actually coming from the tentacle itself.

This stopped her cold. If her tail acted up now, the weight would drag her to the bottom of the ocean. And she'd be crushed long before getting there.

But there didn't seem to be any problem, other than the feeling of well-being coming from the tail. She briefly wondered what it was: feedback from some instinctive reaction to temperature and salinity parameters? Something else? She quickly dismissed it and got back to the matter at hand, namely finding and... befriending?... one of the giant aquatic monsters. Her tail pushed her on, further and further from the shore, deeper and deeper into the dark water until a shadow, large and tentacular, appeared in the distance.

She was nearly there.

Namug felt the cool water caressing his surface, something he thought was lost to him forever. He was back where he belonged, in the timeless expanse of the deep ocean. But this, he knew, was merely the illusion of freedom. He had no control over his own movements: no matter how hard he struggled against it, his body would not react to his commands. He was anchored to something unspeakably alien, sundered forever from the joyous interaction with his colony – were they even still alive? – and unable, even in the glorious deep water, to move freely.

He remembered the happiness that accompanied the endless wandering of the colony. He longed for just one more chance to meet one of his people, to feel once more the caress of another surface on his. He didn't even ask for Yunin; that would be too much. But he would give what remained of his life to be in the presence of any of his people once more.

And his wish, suddenly, unexpectedly, was granted. He sensed a that there was a colony in the water with them – he could taste it on the current. And the monstrosity he was attached to, instead of denying him this one last wish, swam straight towards the thickest concentration of colony-taste.

Soon, incredibly soon, his body was being ordered to extend towards the outstretched body of one of the colony's members. The approach, under alien control, was a clumsy thing, and it was a familiar approach inappropriate for greeting a stranger. But in the end, the stranger accepted it, and they intertwined in the accepted fashion.

"Greetings," the other said, by moving the hairs on her surface. "I am Guniod of the Carinaa colony."

"Greetings. I am Namug of the Woogen."

"You are alone. Are you the only member of the Woogen?"

"No. The Woogen are many."

"They are not here. Your hub has only one individual. How can this be?"

"My root is not a hub. It is a sentient creature, like one of us. But it is evil. It has taken my colony and excised me forcefully. It has damaged me beyond repair, and it controls my movements."

"But not your words."

"Not my words."

Guniod was still for a few moments. "Can you be transplanted to another colony?"

"No. I have been maimed."

"Do you wish to continue with your new hub?"

"No."

"What do you wish?"

"You are a strong colony. Destroy this atrocity."

"You will die."

"I am already gone. Do it quickly."

She signaled assent. "We will do it. Your name will echo in the ocean, Namug."

"May knowledge of this come to Yunin of the Raugee."

"It shall. Goodbye."

"Thank you. Please do it quickly."

The entire colony wrapped around the monstrous creature that had planted his base on its skin. Each individual applying his or her strength to the alien, crushing it and tearing it into tiny globules of flesh and droplets of blood.

And, as he sank to the bottom of the dark, murky ocean, Namug was at peace.

The Dog that Broke the Camel's Back

By

David E. Hughes and Lesley L. Smith

Pete didn't believe in life after death, but still he wondered if crazy old Uncle Herman was looking down on him. Maybe he was watching right now, as Pete bounded up the steps to his dull, two-bedroom condo, feeling like the world was his octopus. The familiar dread that usually came over him as he opened the front door was gone. Not even Barb would be able to bring him down tonight.

"Luuucy, I'm home," said Pete in his best Ricky Ricardo voice.

Barb scowled at him from her perch on the designer couch--the one she would never let him sit on. "You're late." She took a swallow of chardonnay from a long-stemmed glass.

He gulped. Barb drinking like a fish on a bicycle before dinner was never a good sign, but Pete refused to be rattled. "I told you I had to meet that lawyer after work." Come to think of it, it was getting pretty late, and Pete was hungry. "Uh, what's for dinner?"

"You tell me," Barb said. "I had no idea when you'd be home and there was a crisis here, which you missed." She waved her manicured hand dismissively. "I'm too upset to think about making dinner."

Pete sank down on "his" brown chair across from the couch. What now? "A crisis?"

"The bank called. They've initiated foreclosure proceedings on the condo!" Barb's voice took on that shrill tone it got when she was really upset and not just pretending to be upset.

For a change, Pete's thoughts didn't dwell on Barb's hundred-dollar hairdos or weekly mud massages. He didn't even think about the mind-numbing hours he was putting in at Lombardi Realty trying to pay for it all. Instead, he suppressed a smile. "Oh. That."

"Oh, that!" Barb shrieked. "What's wrong with you? We're about to be thrown out on the street and you look like the cat that swallowed the canary! How can we have kids if we're living in a cardboard box?"

Pete sighed. "If you didn't spend so much money, maybe we wouldn't have these problems." He had to get Barb off this foreclosure thing, or she would stick with it like a dog chewing up the wrong tree. "I have great news, honey," he said. "Uncle Herman died!"

Barb put down her glass and stared at him. "Pete! That's unkind. He may have been a bit cuckoo, but I can't believe you said that!"

"Uh. No. That came out wrong," Pete said, flustered. "It's not great that he died. It's great that he left us his house!"

Barb narrowed her eyes. "What's the catch?"

"Uh, no catch," Pete said, not looking at her. The ghost pet boarding business that came with the house was a catch Barb didn't need to know about--at least not in her present state.

"Oh," Barb said. "That is good news. I mean it's too bad about Uncle Herman, but Shelia Muffport will be just green with envy when she finds out I'll be living in an old Victorian on Spruce Street." She gave Pete a look that might be interpreted as a smile. "What would you like for dinner?"

At first, Pete thought about cashing in by selling the assets and letting the business just fade into the sunset along with his uncle. Uncle Herman was the black sheep of the family in wolf's clothing. But once Pete saw the income stream the business generated, he changed his mind. Uncle Herman might have been nuts, but he wasn't stupid. Hell, bump up the number of boarders and in ten years, Pete would be sitting on a cool million. Not even Barb could spend that kind of dough.

Uncle Herman's instructions to Pete in the will were specific: "To my nephew Peter J. Hertzmyer, I leave my home business, Comfort Ghost Pet Boarding, including my home at 123 Spruce Street in Boulder, Colorado and all personal and real property associated with the business. The business shall be operated in the same manner that I operated said business." The lawyer told Pete that "manner and conditions" stuff wasn't really enforceable, so he didn't worry about that too much.

The first thing Pete did when he reopened Uncle Herman's biz was to change the ad. Herman had placed a small ad in the Daily Camera: Boarding for Ghost House Pets, reasonable rates. Class 3 and 4 housetrained ghosts only." Yawn. No wonder Herman's client list was so small. Pete snazzed it up: "Ghost Pet Boarding! Low rates! All pets welcome!"

Sure enough, Pete got a new customer the first day he ran the ad. A man pulled up in a pick-up with a horse trailer hitched to it. He wore a flannel shirt, jeans, work boots, and a dirty John Deere baseball cap. "You board large animals?" asked the man when Pete answered the door.

Pete smiled. "Only the ghostly variety."

The man shifted his weight. "I need to go to Houston for a week and I can't take ol' Buck with me. How much?"

"Seven hundred," Pete said. "In advance."

The man didn't blanch. "Fine. You'll take good care of him?"

Pete nodded, trying to look sage and dignified. "Of course."

The man paid in crumpled bills of small denominations.

"Where shall I put him?" he asked.

"The back yard is fine."

Pete watched in amazement as the man carefully opened the horse trailer, grabbed some invisible reins, and walked to the backyard. He talked soothingly over his shoulder the whole time. A strange sight, but Pete supposed it was the kind of thing he'd get used to.

The next morning, Barb, trowel in hand, sauntered into the kitchen from the backyard while Pete was finishing his morning coffee. "Wouldn't you know it; something's been eating the vegetables in the garden."

Pete put on his slippers and followed her outside. Sure enough, some carrots had been pulled from the ground, lettuce had been chewed on, and a few of the tomato plants had been trampled.

"Hmm," Pete said. "Rabbits. Big ones. Looks like we're going to have to build a

rabbit fence." Pete wondered why Uncle Herman had never mentioned the rabbit problem.

"Thanks, Pete," Barb said. "Today, okay?"

Pete stood still, a goofy smile plastered on his face. Wow; Barb actually said 'thanks'. For a moment, it felt like the relationship he and Barb used to have, an easy intimacy that could blossom into passion at any moment. He'd missed those days, but maybe now they were coming back.

But Pete never got around to building the fence that day. Business was booming. A nice couple from Denver wanted to board an empty leash they called "Mr. Kibbles." Pete took their money and stuck the leash in his kitchen drawer. A man who looked like he was on his way to Sturges brought in a big cage with a label on it that read "Bruno." The woman identified herself only as "Ms. Boston" brought a fishbowl filled with everything you'd want in a modern aquarium except fish. And they kept coming: dogs, cats, gerbils, and even a snake.

By the time the sun went down, Pete was too tired to build that rabbit fence-but not too tired to total his receipts. Nearly ten thousand dollars! That'd keep the wolf from the window! He felt guilty about taking these kooky people's money, but heck, it was their choice.

When Barb got home from her trip to the hairdresser, she wasn't in as good a mood as Pete, but then she didn't know about the ten grand. "Ugh. My dogs are barking," she said as she kicked off her Italian pumps and headed into the kitchen. She glanced into the backyard. "You promised to build a rabbit fence," she said and reached for the wine bottle.

"Don't skin your kittens," Pete said. "I'll do it tomorrow."

"Well, you better do it early. Mom and dad are coming over after breakfast to see the new house."

"Really?" That was strange. Barb's parents had basically disowned him when he'd bombed his LSATs and couldn't get into law school. In fact, he suspected they were out to sabotage the marriage. He was convinced they were responsible for the *Raw Men* magazine subscription that had started coming in the mail and for the scuba instruction that Barbara had "won" from a sexy Brazilian. "Why?"

Barb raised her eyebrows. "They seem to believe that our new address means you're moving up in the world. I didn't tell them about Uncle Herman. I thought it might be better if they thought you actually earned it."

"Thanks, I guess."

"Just try not to blow it this time."

Pete sighed.

After dinner, Barb fell asleep while they were watching TV. Pete thought she looked calm and beautiful--just like the girl he married, until a loud commercial woke her up.

"I had the most vivid dream," she said with a strange expression on her face. "I dreamt we had a dog and he was lying on my feet, keeping them warm." She looked down at her feet. "I can still feel him. It's so weird."

Pete felt a sudden surge of passion. "You think that's warm, wait until I take you upstairs and . . . and-achoo!" His sneeze reverberated through the whole house.

Barb nearly jumped off the couch, but a coy smile crept across her face. "You were saying?" She stretched, thrusting her arms back and her chest out.

Pete couldn't wait to get upstairs. "I was saying, I've got a hot . . . a hot . . .

achoo!" Damn! His eyes and nose were itching like a hound with bees. What was wrong with him?

Barb frowned. "You okay?" she asked. She actually sounded concerned. "Maybe you should take some Benadryl or something."

"Good idea," said Pete. Now where had he put his allergy medication when they moved in? He opened a drawer in the kitchen, but found only Mr. Kibbles' leash. Maybe that's what was causing his reaction. Perhaps Mr. Kibbles had left some dog hair behind. No use taking risks. He threw the leash in the back yard. He's deal with the damn thing in the morning. He'd better find that Benadryl so he could go upstairs and make love with Barb like a couple of mongooses.

Even with the ten grand tucked away in his desk drawer and a hefty dose of Benadryl, Pete felt like crap the next morning. Much to Barb's amusement last night, he was sneezing so much he couldn't wake his little beast. He's never had that problem before. His allergies had gotten worse as the night went on, but Barb claimed she had her best night of sleep in a long time because her feet were so warm. Go figure.

Pete had barely finished slurping down some breakfast when the doorbell rang. It was the nice couple from Denver. Already? Dang. They better not ask for a refund.

"I know we said we'd be gone three nights," said the woman. "But we decided we missed Mr. Kibbles too much."

The man smiled. "You know how it is."

Pete forced a grin. "Oh, I sure do. Mr. Kibbles is a joy. Why don't you two wait here on the porch while I go and get him?"

Pete went to the drawer where he'd stuck the leash, but it wasn't there. Then he remembered the Benedryl incident. Crap! He sprinted into the back yard, but didn't see the leash. He was sure he hadn't thrown it that far; it should be right by the back door.

"Everything okay?" called the woman from the front door.

"Just fine!" Pete shouted. "It seems Mr. Kibbles is having such a good time he doesn't want to leave." Where the hell was that leash?

After a frantic search of the backyard, Pete found the leash near the vegetable garden. He couldn't possibly have thrown it that far, and he noticed the garden was even more torn up than it had been yesterday. And then it hit him: the rabbits. Those giant rabbits must have taken the leash. He wondered why rabbits would be interested in a dog leash, but who the heck knew the ways of wild animals? He'd have to get to that fence today.

Back on the front porch, Pete said, "Here you go." He tried not to look frazzled as he handed the couple their leash . . . er, dog.

"Mr. Kibbles!" exclaimed the woman. "You're a mess! What have you gotten into?"

Pete smiled lamishly. "He loved our backyard."

The man stared at him appraisingly. "You sure this operation is legit?"

"Yes sir," Pete said. "We've been in business over twenty years." Or at least Uncle Herman had. And it was a cash bull. He needed it with Barb around.

Pete barely had time to take a shower before the doorbell rang again. A short, balding man with a badge and a clipboard stood at the door. "I'm from the City of Boulder Code Enforcement Department. We received a complaint that you are keeping a horse on this property."

Pete pretended to laugh. "A horse? Who would keep a horse on property like

mine? In the middle of the city?"

"Petey?" called Barb from the top of the stairs inside. "How about finishing what you started last night?"

Yowza! Talk about an invitation he couldn't resist. "I'll be up in two shakes of a lark's tail, hon!"

The man didn't even blink. "You may not have a horse in your back yard now, but you clearly DID have a horse back there!" the little man said, shaking. "There are piles of evidence."

"What evidence?"

"Horse shit. I took pictures."

Pete didn't have time to wonder about a job that entailed sneaking into people's back yards and taking pictures of shit, and he tried not to think about a city inspector who couldn't tell the difference between horse and rabbit turds. "Just tell me what you want, quick." He glanced down the side yard into the backyard and for a second, he thought he saw something big and dark. He shook his head. It must have been a shadow; yeah, that's what it was.

"I'm giving you a code violation ticket," the paper-pusher said, "for--"

"Petey," floated down the stairs. "Hurry up."

"Sure," Pete said. "Whatever. It's water off a chicken's back to me. Just give it over." He grabbed the piece of paper the guy was waving in his face. "Now, go away." Pete slammed the door and ran back upstairs determined not to let the inspector's little ticket result in the need for a Viagra moment. He wanted to take advantage of Barb's rare good mood.

Trying something he hadn't practiced since college, he flung himself into the bed as he pulled down his pants. Unfortunately, his aim wasn't what it used to be, and he bonked his head on the headboard. "Owww!"

"Smooth move. You okay?" Barb didn't sound quite as concerned as she pretended to be, but he noticed her bra on the floor next to the bed. A very good sign.

"Fine. Fine." Pete wriggled his pants and boxers off the rest of the way. He ignored the ache in his skull. No time for distractions. He needed to get down to business.

"Oh, Pete!" said Barb. "You really were ready! Wow!"

What the heck was she talking about? His little beast had not awakened from its slumber yet.

"Petey?" asked Barb. Have you been doing . . . er, exercises or something? It feels longer . . . and kind of wiggly."

Wiggly? Oddly, Pete didn't feel a thing. Maybe the beast was sleepwalking or something. That hadn't happened before. He peaked beneath the sheets and went rigid—or at last most of him went rigid. Was that a snake? He'd better hope Barb didn't see what he saw or she would—

"Ahhhhh!" screamed Barb, pointing at the snake shape outlined under the sheet. "A snake, a snake!" She leapt out of the bed, still dressed only in her panties, and threw the sheet off the bed. "Wait. Where'd it go?"

Pete stared at the giant green reptile slithering next to him. How could she not see it? Finally, he unfroze enough to jump out of the bed.

Barb put her hands on her hips. "I should have known you'd screw this up like you screw up everything." She jogged for the bedroom door.

"Wait!" Pete shouted, running after her. "Where are you going?" And why was

Barb always so negative?

But Barb didn't listen. He'd never seen her in such a state before. He looked down and noticed his personal beast had finally woken, probably from some repressed Natasha Kinski fantasy buried someplace in his brain. Thanks a lot, Beast. Great timing.

Then the doorbell rang.

Damn. That stupid code enforcement guy probably forgot to have Pete sign a form or something. Pete had half a mind to write the mayor about this invasion of his constipational rights.

Pete pulled on his boxers, but they didn't do much to hide his beast's efforts at clamoring for attention. Barb always seemed to work him up and then leave in a snit. He grabbed a pillow off the bed and stuck it in front of him. It would have to do.

The doorbell rang again.

"Hold your ponies!" shouted Pete. "I'm coming."

He bounded down the stairs and yanked open the door. "God damnit! If I have too--"

Pete's jaw hung slack. Standing at the door were his in-laws.

Reflexively, Pete pulled the pillow closer to his body. He tried to stretch his face into a smile. "Jeffery! Melinda! What a pleasant surprise."

Melinda pulled off her huge Oscar de Lorenta sunglasses and stared at Pete. Her beige pantsuit hung off of her like she was some magazine model. She was twenty years older than Pete, but she still had a killer body, maybe better than Barb's. The beast shifted uncomfortably.

"Didn't Barb tell you we were going to drop by?" asked Melinda.

Had she? That's right. Pete was supposed to work on the rabbit fence before they got here. So much for that. Right now he had bigger fish to broil.

"Of course she did," said Pete. "I just thought you were coming a little later."

Jeffery waved his Rolex-laden hand. "No big deal." He smiled, showing off his incredible dental work. If anyone was a match for Melinda, it was Jeffery. He was over fifty-five, but his waist was slimmer than most twenty-year-olds. "We're all family here, right?"

Pete blinked. He'd never heard Jeffery make a public admission that Pete was actually married to their precious daughter. Then Pete noticed Jeffery was staring at his bare chest. What was that all about?"

"Well, are you going to invite us in?" asked Jeffery.

"Uh, yes," said Pete. "Barb was just straightening up."

As he showed them in, Barb sprinted out of the kitchen. She was still naked. Her breasts bounced wildly as she moved, and Pete's beast cheered her on.

Pete himself was a little concerned about the twelve-inch chopping knife she held in her hand.

"I'm gonna kill that damned snake!" she shouted. She'd called him a snake on more than one occasion.

Then Barb noticed her parents, squeaked and sprinted back into the kitchen.

Pete laughed nervously. "We have a little pest problem."

"Cockroaches," said Melinda with her nose curled.

"Rabbits," he said. "And snakes."

Pete felt something soft and furry brush against his leg. He looked down and saw nothing. What the heck?

Muffled drawers slamming and pot-rattling sounds started coming from behind

the kitchen door.

"Maybe I'd better-achoo!" Pete put his hands to his nose. The pillow dropped, and Pete's little beast made its dazzling appearance in the spotlight, obscured only by the paisley boxers.

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Melinda.

Jeffery stared unabashedly. When Pete looked at him, he winked.

Pete leaned down, grabbing for the pillow and felt only fur. He blinked. Was that a dog? It appeared to be a golden lab. He snatched up the pillow and stood up. "Does anyone else see...?" He glanced at his family. They were ignoring him and the dog that had appeared out of thin air. Pete scratched his head, almost losing his grip on the pillow.

Barb made her reappearance dressed in a 'Kiss the Cook' apron—and not much else. "Momma, Daddy, I'm sorry you had to see me like that. It was all Pete's fault, as usual."

The three of them turned as one and frowned at him.

"You know, he can't even get it up," Barb said. "He can't do that, just like he can't do anything else."

Jeffery cleared his throat. "Actually..."

Melinda poked him with her elbow.

Pete tried to focus on what Barb was saying, but more and more pets kept popping into view. They were surrounded. He suppressed a sneeze.

Melinda said, "But what about your new house?"

"The loser *inherited* it," Barb said with a smirk.

"Oh," both Jeffrey and Melinda said.

"That explains a lot," Jeffrey said.

Pete turned his gaze to Barb. He never noticed before, but she had mean little piggy eyes. "You know, Barb," he said. "You're a bitch."

Barb, Jeffrey and Melinda gasped.

"I make a perfectly good living; you just spend money until we're as poor as church rats. I don't know why I put up with you. You treat me like shit." He glanced down at the dog whose wagging tail seemed to be egging him on. "In fact, I want a divorce. Get the hell out of here!" He pointed out the front door.

Barb's mouth fell open.

"Get out!" Pete looked down at the dog. "Sic her, Fido!"

The dog enthusiastically lunged for Barb.

She shrieked. "Oh, my God! What's happening?"

"What's wrong, sweetie?" Jeffrey asked.

"Help!" Barb yelled. The dog clamped onto her apron and tore it from her body. Pete shook his head. Why had he been so crazy about her chest all these years? They'd probably be rated at the very bottom on RateHerRack.com.

"Get me out of here!" shouted Barb.

The three of them flew out the front door like bats out of a bowling alley. Barb and Melinda rushed ahead, and Jeffery hung behind. He held his hand to his ear and mouthed *call me*. Then he was gone, too. Pete slammed the door behind them.

Pete petted the dog enthusiastically. "And aren't you a good girl!"

Uncle Herman hadn't been crazy after all, thought Pete. He'd stayed away from women and spent his life taking care of beloved pets and working in his garden. "That sounds perfect, doesn't it Fido?"

The ghost at Pete's feet wagged her tail in agreement.

**Special Feature:
Interview with author Stuart Neville**

By
Betsy Dornbusch

Stuart Neville is the author of *The Twelve*, scheduled for European release in a couple of days and for US release in October as *The Ghosts of Belfast*. This debut novel follows a paramilitary assassin from The Troubles goaded by the ghosts of his victims into committing revenge killings. During the course of the story, we learn in shuddering detail what Fegan did to deserve such a fate, as well as what he must do to find the bloody sort of peace only a killer can achieve.

Because Stuart and I are friends, we engaged in more of a conversation than a formal interview. Stuart lives in Northern Ireland. He speaks softly enough I have to lean into the phone, and he dedicated his book to his mother. He can be found online at <http://stuartneville.com> and he starts our talk with a discussion of writing *The Twelve*.

The Twelve started as a short story. I woke up one morning with the image of a man sitting drinking in a bar, surrounded by all the people he'd killed. I started writing it on my mobile phone's word processor, and finished it later that day. It was called "Followers". It got a great response at the online critique group I frequented at the time, but I didn't submit it anywhere. I found the idea wouldn't leave me alone, and about a month later I sat down to turn it into a novel. Roughly ten weeks later, I had a first draft. It was a very fast process. With the help of some excellent beta readers, you included, I polished it and rewrote it over the course of the next nine months or so.

I didn't query agents very widely because I wasn't sure how to pitch it, seeing as it was somewhere in that gray area between thriller and horror. It took my agent, Nat Sobel, to help me focus on what the book really was.

You must have gotten a cramp in your thumb from typing a story on your phone!

Tell us about Nat and how he found you.

I wrote another short story featuring *The Twelve*'s protagonist, Gerry Fegan, just to

revisit him for a little while. After some good critique and polishing, I let the story lie for about six months. Then one Sunday afternoon, just on a whim, I submitted it to *Thuglit.com*, the crime fiction zine. I got an email on my birthday telling me it had been accepted and would appear in the February issue. I was delighted and thought the t-shirt would be all that came of it. I was working late one evening in my office a couple of weeks after the story appeared, when I got an email from a man called Nat Sobel. The name was familiar, and as I read the email, I realised why. He was not only a top literary agent, he also represented my favourite author, James Ellroy. Nat said he'd seen my story in *Thuglit* and would I send him the novel mentioned in the bio. To my shock, he offered me representation shortly after receiving the manuscript.

What is working with him like and how did it affect your approach to your book?

Nat is a very hands-on agent, and he loves to nurture new talent. At the same time, he's tough, and very hard to please. If he doesn't think you're giving your best work, he isn't shy about saying so. I often advise hopefuls to get critique for exactly this reason; if you're lucky enough to get the chance to work with a great agent, you can't be precious about your writing. I worked on revisions for another three months or so before Nat felt the novel was ready to go out on submission.

Speaking of Ellroy, every time I see his quote on the front of your ARC "This is some guy to watch out for in a dark alley," it cracks me up.

Whether he's talking about you or Fegan, it's sometimes tough to connect you to the characters you write. They're just so nasty and you're so decent. For instance, all your talk about friendships between writers. You risked getting...what was the term you just used on your blog? Wussy? Wouldn't want that. So, what's something about writing and the process of bringing a book to publication that you *don't* like?

At the moment, it's the writing itself, to be honest. I'm finding book two to be a bit of a slog, whereas the first book just kind of came out in one big rush. I've spoken to a few more experienced novelists over the last couple of months, and they've told me book two is the toughest. As a couple of people have put it, you have your whole life to write book one, then just a few months to write the next. Not that I'm complaining, it's not like I'm shoveling coal all day long. I just need to keep my head down and get on with it.

I've so been there - especially when writing short stories. They've paved the road to your novel writing career, though. You've even released an accompanying volume for free download on your website cleverly entitled *The Six* in which you say embarrassing things about me. (There, that should get readers to go seek it out if the idea of FREE doesn't.) What attracts you to short fiction?

I've always liked reading short stories, though funnily enough, I hadn't written one since I was at school until I wrote the story that wound up in *Electric Spec*. But since then I've found I like the quick fix of a short story. My shorts do tend to be short, though; the longest I've written is around 4000 words, I think. For me it's either short, or it's not. I can't do a long short, if that makes sense, in the way someone like Stephen King or

James Ellroy can. If I can't get the story wrapped up with ten to twenty pages, then it's not going to work. I recently abandoned a story whose premise I loved simply because I couldn't make it short enough. I may revisit it as a novella.

One of the things I like about short stories is how they can act as springboards to bigger ideas. *The Twelve* started life as a short story, for instance, and a story that appears in the free collection – "The Craftsman" - has given me inspiration for a novel, which I'm just starting to explore.

I find it interesting to think of short stories as springboards for books. Of course, ideas come from everywhere, right? One of my biggest inspirations for stories has been music. I wonder if it has been for you, too, since you're a musician. How does your experience with music inform your writing and your life as a writer?

Music kind of interrupted my ambitions of being a writer. When I was kid, I wanted to write books. But along came puberty, and guitars seemed more fun. So the plan was then to become a rock star, and once I got too old for that, start writing books. So, in a round about way, it kind of worked out - except I skipped the becoming a rock star bit! A surprising number of authors are musicians, or are heavily into music. Take Stephen King, for example. I think writers' and musicians' brains are wired in a similar way. There's a similar blend of the mechanical and the intuitive in both areas.

In a more practical sense, I always have a guitar to hand when I write. I pick one up and noodle on it to help me think, the same way most people doodle with a pen and paper.

So will you play at your release party? Some guitar riffs would be cool.

I'm afraid not, unless John Connolly fancies doing a duet! I will be filming some highlights from the evening, though, and you never know - I might supply some backing music.

Didn't you write the music for your trailer?

I did. Actually, now that you mention it, I wrote that music while the novel's first draft was nearing completion. The actual title on my computer is "Fegan's Theme." Funny you should point that out - such a direct relationship between the character and a piece of music hadn't really occurred to me. Actually, I spent a few years trying to break into composing music for film. I got a little bit of work, but it's a tough business. I guess something of that experience must have stuck with me. Maybe I'll try writing themes for the characters in the new book...

Okay, you walked right into that one. What's the next book about?

The sequel, the title of which I can almost exclusively reveal is *Collusion*, picks up a few months after *The Twelve* left off, and it focuses on a cover up of the events of the first book. Some characters will return, but the main protagonist will be different. It'll be quite a different book, with a less linear plot, and more characters to keep track of. I'm especially happy with the chief villain. He's a seriously nasty piece of work, and great

fun to write. He swears a lot, for one thing. He's a killer, but with no finesse. He's not one of the more refined baddies we've gotten used to in recent fiction. He's just out-and-out brute force, too primitive to be called evil, but he's also a family man. You'll like him, I think.

No doubt I will.

It sounds as if you're stretching the contrast between brutality and humanity so prevalent in *The Twelve*. If your characters are any indication, you seem to accept brutality as part of the human condition, and have a knack at portraying such characters without prejudice. From this American's standpoint, *The Twelve* feels foreign and fresh to me because violence is so often portrayed in American fiction and film in one of two fashions: gladiators at the Coliseum or to reinforce a moral message. How do you think your treatment of evil and brutality influenced the sale of your book at home and abroad?

I enjoy exploring the grey areas of life, rather than the absolutes. I don't judge characters, and that's a lesson I've taken primarily from James Ellroy. They are who they are, and they act as they will within the fictional world. Having said that, there is a limit to how much a reader will tolerate. You can stretch empathy to breaking point. That was one of the most important aspects my agent guided me on. Nat was keen that Fegan should be as human as possible, given his past and current actions. We spent a lot of time building up his back story and his relationships with other people so that the reader could relate to him as a man first, and a killer second.

There was still an issue with some editors, though. A few, particularly in America, found the character hard to take. And the blurring of genre lines was an issue too. I think American publishers think in terms of stricter genre boundaries than Europeans do. More than one editor complained it was too literary to be a thriller, and too thrilling to be literary. But I think perhaps they underestimate the reader's capacity to stretch their imagination.

I'm delighted with how things have turned out. In the UK, I have the best of both worlds, in that I'm with a smaller imprint within a massive company, so I have the personal attention of a dedicated team coupled with the clout of Random House. In the US, I'm with a smaller independent publisher, but they have proved to be anything but small when it comes to getting behind the book. I've spoken with a few Irish authors who have been picked up by majors in America only to find their books more or less cast to the wind. One author friend called it 'fishing' - just throwing the book out there to see if anything bites. Soho, on the other hand, are passionate about getting the book out there, even as far as organising an American tour for October.

And I'm especially excited for your tour because you and I get to have a visit and even attend a convention together with the rest of *Electric Spec's* staff. Maybe if I'm really lucky, you'll bring along a guitar.

Readers, visit Stuart's website to download *The Six* and for more information on *The Twelve* and his forthcoming appearances.

**Telling What's Real About Vampires:
Let the Right One In ... to your Netflix queue**

By

Marty Mapes

When I was six, I was pretty sure that Santa Claus did not exist, but I wasn't certain. There were so many stories, and they were all consistent. Was it just coincidence that each report corroborated the last? I knew that flying reindeer, a fat man in narrow chimneys, and visiting every house on Earth were all implausible, but I didn't have any way to find out for sure whether the winks of grownups meant Santa was a hoax, or whether there was some grain of truth to the myths. Maybe each neighborhood had its own Santa Claus who had keys to all the houses on the block.

First-time director Tomas Alfredson, working from a screenplay by John Ajvide Lindqvist (who also wrote the novel), captures that cusp between believing childhood myths and understanding how the world works. Oskar (Kåre Hedebrant) is twelve years old, and he thinks he has discovered vampires.

Oskar's striking blond hair might have made him popular in the U.S., but it doesn't help him in Sweden where he lives. He's scrawny and poor, and the other kids bully him, so he prefers solitude. He works on his Rubik's cube or sits on the playground equipment in the courtyard of his apartment building in the long, cold, dark evening. He is a little too interested in knives, but he doesn't go around killing cats or anything. He's afraid of violence, but he is fascinated by death.

Oskar has noticed a new girl (Lina Leandersson) in his apartment complex. Eli is shy and quiet too, and she might be poor because she doesn't wear shoes in the snow. And she doesn't treat Oskar like a freak, so maybe she could be a friend.

Let the Right One In follows some other characters too, without telling us who is important to the story or why. For instance, there's a normal-seeming old man who murders people in the park. That's partly why the movie is so engrossing; it doesn't tell you anything directly. It shows you characters and their behavior, but it leaves it to you to piece together what it all means. That's not to say that it's vague; rather, it asks you

to participate. It gives you two and two and leaves it to you to come up with four.

For example (and without revealing too much), there isn't a specific moment when the entire audience will collectively connect the murderous old man to the story of the kids. But ask anyone who has seen the movie and they will be able to tell you how the old man fits in. We all figure it out at different moments. And when we do, it's a satisfying "aha" moment.

That approach to storytelling--asking the audience to learn by watching and deducing--fits nicely with the Oskar's age. He's figuring out how the world works. He probably knows that Santa Claus isn't real, but he's not sure about vampires yet. If they're not real, why are there rules, like garlic bulbs or having to be invited into a room? Being a twelve-year-old, he doesn't have any way to find out for sure whether they exist, but he's eager to learn the *how* of vampires, regardless of whether they are real or make-believe.

I won't spoil any of the movie's surprises. Suffice it to say that a satisfying story lies at the heart of *Let the Right One In* involving Oskar, Eli, vampires, bullies, and the murderous old man.

If good storytelling and a smart, observant character were all *Let the Right One In* had to offer, it would earn a recommendation. But a half-dozen shots leap off the screen as gorgeous, surprising, or perfectly staged. There is a scene in a swimming pool that is both beautiful and surprising, there is a scene with motion in the shadows you thought were flat, and there is a sudden conflagration that only appears on screen for a blink, which makes it all the more tantalizingly effective.

One quick shot that generated conversation among my friends was of some computer-generated nudity. The shot was too short for me to understand what I was supposed to get from it (maybe I blinked), but I read it as another example of Oskar's curiosity about the world. He's probably never seen what it is that makes girls different from boys. One shouldn't peek, and yet his curiosity is only natural; he's on the cusp of puberty. For me the scene made the character of Oskar seem all the more real. Yet others thought the shot conveyed information from the filmmaker to the audience about the nude character. If I were Oskar's age, I might go back and look at the freeze-frame to try to figure out what it all means.

As the movie ends, Oskar has learned the truth about the existence of vampires (you wouldn't want me to tell, would you?). Meanwhile, the writer and director haven't set aside their storytelling style. The final scene is calm, with Oskar moving on to unravel the next of life's mysteries. But as the quiet scene plays out it raises questions for attentive audiences to ponder as the credits roll. Where is Oskar going? What is he taking with him? What is he doing? One last satisfying time, the film gives you two and two and leaves it to you to come up with a number.

