

Special Feature:

Interview with 2007 SFWA Grand Master James E. Gunn

By

Lesley L. Smith

Editor's Note: In Spring 2006, I was lucky enough to get into the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame's online science fiction class taught by James E. Gunn. It was a tough class, but very rewarding. We learned about such concepts as the anatomy of a short story, and the importance of character, setting, and dialogue from an expert. In November 2006, I was delighted to hear that Jim won this well-deserved and prestigious award. He was gracious enough to accept an interview for our first anniversary issue of Electric Spec. Thanks, Jim!

University of Kansas English Professor Emeritus James E. Gunn is author of 26 books, including *The Joy Makers*, *The Listeners*, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, *Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction* (1983 Hugo Award), *The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*, and *Gift from the Stars*. He has edited 10 other titles, and had nearly 100 stories published in magazines and books. In November, Gunn was chosen as the 2007 Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA). The title is bestowed upon a living author for a lifetime's achievement in science fiction and/or fantasy. He also has won many awards for literary achievement and excellence in teaching. Gunn is past president of the SFWA and of the Science Fiction Research Association. He founded the J. Wayne and Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at the University of Kansas, and helped found the website <http://www.AboutSF.com>.

Why do people read fiction?

I've written an entire essay about this question, and no doubt a book could be written. In short, though, I think fiction is a way in which we can experience other people's lives in a way that makes sense of them, and the universe in which they live. Fiction is just; life isn't. We learn our sense of right and wrong from stories. Fiction also gives us emotional release. It leads us to care about what happens to people we can identify with and then releases that caring in a way that we interpret as pleasure. It makes us feel, and the end of all fiction is to arouse and satisfy emotions in the reader. In science fiction, sometimes that is done through intellectual insights but no less an emotional response.

How is reading like sex?

I'll address fiction rather than all reading. The release we feel when the characters we have been led to care about finally achieve their resolution is akin to the release we feel from sex.

How did you first get interested in science fiction (SF)?

I started with fairy tales, Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Doolittle* books, and some juvenile historical novels in the school library while in second grade, graduated to Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan* novels that I found in my grandmother's back closet, moved from there to the hero pulp magazines, beginning with *Doc Savage*, that my father brought home during the early 1930s, then discovered SF magazines, like *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, *Astounding Stories of Super Science*, in a used magazine store in downtown Kansas City. I was hooked, and ransacked the public library for stories like these. Later, I got hooked again when, beginning in 1939, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* began reprinting the Munsey fantasies.

You started writing SF in 1948. How has SF changed over the years?

There are a lot more SF writers and fewer magazines, more opportunity to get published in books, but more difficulty in getting a short story or a novel accepted. A couple of decades ago, I was on a panel at a Kansas City convention discussing the problems of getting published, and I looked around at the half-dozen writers on the panel and said, "You're the problem." When I began writing in 1948, I was the only writer, and as far as I knew, the only SF reader, in Kansas City. I didn't meet another writer until I attended my first convention, the SF WorldCon in Chicago in 1952. Standards have climbed; opportunities have multiplied; new writers with new and better skills have emerged. But the genre experience when everybody had read everything is gone, and the brotherhood I felt in 1952 has diminished as individual writers and readers splinter into various sub-divisions of literature, film, gaming, etc. So, we can celebrate opportunity while we miss togetherness.

How has the SF market changed over the years?

When I started writing, the magazines were dominant, and this gave the field its center. Now, the books are dominant, and the center cannot hold. Maybe a dozen writers could make a living – a limited living though it may have been – writing SF in the late 1940s; most writers did it in their spare time. Now, there may be hundreds of writers working full-time. That's good, but it also means that they sometimes must write books from need rather than from desire.

With 26 books and approximately 100 stories published, what's your personal favorite book or story among those you've written?

It's hard to choose one among many. I could cite a handful that I'm particularly fond of, often for different reasons: *The Joy Makers*, *The Immortals*, *The Listeners*, *Kampus*, *The Dreamers*, and *The Millennium Blues*.

What's your favorite book or story written by someone else?

That's even tougher. I've liked different books at different times in my life. I read a lot of historical novels when I was young (Neil Swanson), detective novels (Raymond Chandler), and literary novels (Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe). Among fantasy writers, I was fond of A. Merritt's novels – any of them. Among SF writers, Heinlein, of course, particularly *The Puppet Masters*, which I still teach, anything by Fred Pohl or Clifford Simak, and Alfred Bester. Lots of others.

***The Listeners* has met with critical and commercial success over the years. To what do you attribute that?**

Critical success, maybe; commercial success, modestly at best. Certainly I was happy that Scribner's published it, and published it as a novel, not a science-fiction novel. Maybe it gained some traditional readers because of that and because it incorporated some literary virtues, and SF readers recognized it, so it got them as well. It also sold well through the Science Fiction Book Club. Some critics and other writers may have liked it because it focused on characters dealing with inter-human communication as well as alien-human communication.

If I had to guess, I'd say it was successful because it was based on other people's research and ideas, including the book *We Are Not Alone* by Walter Sullivan, and the work of Carl Sagan and many others. So, it appealed to scientists. It also tried to tell a good story, though through unconventional means, including description of a project that might have to endure for 100 years without results, so it appealed to SF readers. It developed through strong characters and literary allusions, so it appealed to mainstream readers. Paul Shuch, president of the SETI League, told me once that *The Listeners* had done more for SETI than any other book; maybe it was influential as well.

Your new book, *Gift from the Stars*, also deals with first contact. What is it about the human psyche that is so drawn to the idea of extraterrestrial intelligence?

Some of us hate the idea that we may be all alone in the universe, that the entire future of rationality in the universe depends on us. Others think it's unlikely that rational life could have happened just once on a little backwater planet, in the vast universe filled with galaxies. Others are looking for help from the stars or fearing destruction. Of course, there are just as many who think humanity represents the only rational creatures in the universe and prefer it that way. Certainly the contact with other

intelligences would be as exhilarating, or as traumatic, as anything imaginable, and how we respond to that will determine humanity's fate and maybe its transcendence. It represents a critical moment, maybe *the* critical moment, in humanity's long history, and it behooves us to contemplate it before it happens, if it happens.

What makes *The Joy Makers* a modern SF classic?

George Zebrowski called it that when he edited a series for Crown Publishers. More seriously, I have no business calling anything of mine a classic of any kind. I've always liked *The Joy Makers* and a few film makers have thought it would make good film, because it deals with a philosophical question – what would happen if we had a science of happiness? – in a dramatic narrative that seems appropriate.

What did you try to achieve with *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*?

Alternate Worlds started out as a series of lectures for my first formal SF class in 1970. An editor for Prentice-Hall came by my office and asked if I'd be interested in writing a book about fiction writing. I said no, but I have these lectures that might make a good book about SF. He wrote back a couple of months later and said he'd tried them on some SF teachers and they said they wouldn't use such a book, but what would I think about a "lavishly illustrated coffee-table book" about SF. The editor-in-chief decided it was time for a coffee-table book, and I was in the right place to provide it. As for what I was trying to do, it was to convey my love for SF, my experience in reading it, and my sense of its historicity.

Where do you think ezines stand in relation to the fanzines and prozines of yesteryear?

I think the implication of the question, that ezines occupy a position between fanzines and prozines seems accurate. Historically, fanzines offered an opportunity for fans to try out their writing, both critical and creative, before it was ready for the prozines, and the ezines serve that function today. But the prozines are declining in number, in circulation, and in influence. When I started writing, the prozines were almost all there was, and they shaped SF and SF writers. Ezines provide a broader opportunity to get published and sometimes get paid for it. Writing for pay is a critical step in a writer's evolution. Some ezines – largely newszines or reviewzines – are becoming influential, and some fiction published in ezines is now being considered for awards, but it is difficult to contemplate the development of ezines into the gatekeeper role of the 1930s-1960s prozines.

Do you think the unity of SF has disintegrated?

Certainly SF fandom and the publishing of SF itself are far different than they were when I started in the late 1940s, or even into the 1950s and the 1960s. Then, everyone had read everything, and the extended conversation that is SF could be informed and influential. Today, it is impossible to read even a small portion of what is published or viewed or gamed. SF consumers have splintered into interest groups, even within the published literature itself, which has been invaded by aliens from the viewing part until what is written specifically for publication is difficult to locate. Similarly, what is being written is created by authors more in tune with other aspects of the field and aimed at those differing audiences, a situation complicated by the merging of SF into adjacent fields, fantasy, for instance, and the mainstream, as well as writers from those areas adopting SF concepts for their own purposes. A core constituency and a core body of work still remains, and I hope it survives, because that is where the peculiar SF virtues reside.

Your six-volume series, *The Road to Science Fiction*, is an impressive overview of the SF genre. How did it come about?

After *Alternate Worlds* was published, Barry Lippman, then an editor for NAL's Mentor Books, called me, complimented me on the book, and asked if I had an idea for a book I might do for Mentor. I suggested a volume of SF theory, and, when that didn't appeal to the editorial board, suggested a historical anthology that would trace the origins of SF up to HG Wells. When that book sold well, the new editor at Mentor agreed to let me do two more volumes, which turned into #2 and #3 (#3: *From Heinlein to Here*, covering the period from 1940 to about 1980, has always been the most popular). When those sold well, the new editor (I had almost half a dozen over the history of the project) agreed to let me do #4, which considered the literary uses of SF.

I had discussed with the editor the possibility of doing a fifth volume covering British SF (a number of British stories had been included in the first four volumes, but I still felt that another entire volume could be devoted to the particular characteristics of British SF) and a sixth volume covering international SF. We were approaching agreement when New American Library took a look at sales and discovered they were running only about 2,000 copies or so a year. NAL had a standard of 5,000 copies for mass market paperbacks to continue keeping books in stock, though only 2,000 for trade paperbacks. NAL considered reprinting the books as trade paperbacks, but instead decided to drop the series. My German publisher had already approached me, asking if I had any other volumes in mind, and I agreed to do #5 and #6 for Heyne. By that time, I had been approached by White Wolf, which agreed to publish #5 and #6 in the US. White Wolf decided to drop #3 and #4 even though they were selling well and it never got around to reprinting #1 and #2. Scarecrow Press, which has published a number of my books, reprinted #1-4 in updated and expanded form, and that is the current situation. White Wolf still has copies of #5 and #6, at last accounting.

Are you still the only person to be a past president of SFWA and the Science Fiction Research Association (SFRA), and what is the significance of SFRA?

My career has seemed to span the creative and the critical areas of SF, and the fact that I was president of both associations provides a kind of validation of that. Both organizations were created within a few years of each other – SFWA to deal with writerly issues, SFRA with teaching and scholarship. Often the creative and critical functions are at odds, but a few teachers and scholars have always belonged to SFWA and a number of writers have belonged to SFRA. In addition, writers have been involved in writing criticism and reviews as well as short stories and novels, for example Damon Knight, James Blish, AJ Budrys, and others, who made significant critical contributions beginning in the 1940s and into the 1950s and beyond. The distinction between creating and critiquing is not as foreign nor as divisive as in other fields. I'm still the only person who has been president of both organizations, and won both of their career awards. Damon Knight also won both career awards.

How did speculative fiction become an accepted area of academic study?

World War II was won, in some measure, in the laboratory and its prime innovations, the rocket and the atom bomb, were identified with science fiction. Ted Sturgeon commented that SF was dismissed as "that Buck Rogers stuff." That validation created a boom in SF publication – first magazines, then books, finally films and TV, continuing through this day. Teaching also was validated, and first fans, such as Sam Moskowitz, and then long-time-fans-turned-teachers, such as Mark Hillegas at Colgate, Tom Clareson at Wooster, and Jack Williamson at Eastern New Mexico, created courses. The 1960s, it might be noted, also was a decade of students making their voices heard, first in terms of race relations, then within campus governance, and opposition to the war in Vietnam. They found the notion of taking a course in science fiction rebellious and exciting. By the time I returned to full-time teaching in 1970, the chairman of the department commented, "Some younger members of the department hope you will be willing to teach a course in science fiction." Enrollments were overwhelming. I had 165 students in my first class. Gradually, the novelty wore off, but enrollments continued around 50 as long as I was teaching the course during the regular semester.

Why did you establish the J. Wayne and Elsie M. Gunn Center for the Study of Science Fiction at KU?

I created the Center for the Study of Science Fiction (CSSF) in 1982 as a focus for our various efforts in SF at the university, including the courses I taught, like the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction in the summer; the collections the University Library put together; our film series; and our other outreach efforts. When my father died, my brother decided to honor him and my mother by endowing the Center, and the Regents agreed to name the Center in their honor.

What do you mean by "let's save the world through SF?"

It's hyperbole, of course. I'm not sure the world is in danger of destruction, though it may be, and if it is I'm not sure anyone or anything can save it. I think we need to try, not in any specific way, but in the spreading of SF's capabilities as far as we can. From my earliest contacts with SF, I recognized qualities that I did not find in other kinds of fiction: a realization of the continuity of existence from the remote past to the distant future, the relationship of present decisions and actions to the futures we and our descendants will inhabit, a recognition of mutual humanity that emphasizes species concerns above those of individuals or tribal or national groups, a willingness to work together for a better world, and general good will. HG Wells said that the world was in a race between education and catastrophe. I think SF is a major part of that education, and we all can help by introducing more people into its charms and values, particularly young people. David Brin and I, with help from SFWA, SFRA, and Tor Books, have created a website to help out, primarily through coordinating volunteer activities. It's <http://www.aboutSF.com>. Look it up. See if there is some way you, too, can help save the world through SF.

One of your many claims to fame is your definition of SF. Please remind our readers of it.

Everyone has a favorite definition, and I'm not sure mine is any better than any else's, except that I have more experience in thinking about it. In fact, it has many definitions, some long, some short. I prefer the shorter ones that I used to use for the final exam in my SF class (choose one and defend it!): science fiction is the literature of change; science fiction is the literature of the human species; science fiction is a (note not "the") literature of ideas. If I had to choose one, slightly longer, it would be: science fiction is the literature of the human condition experiencing meaningful change.

How would you differentiate between SF and fantasy?

In the same vein, while SF is the literature of change, fantasy is the literature of difference. There are many distinctions, not all of which hold for all examples. The major distinction I make is in the way we read the genres: SF skeptically, asking hard questions about how we got to the SF world and how things work there; and fantasy naively. That is, if we ask hard questions, the fantasy becomes unreadable. Of course, the more common occurrence is to read SF as if it were fantasy, without asking hard questions, and then it becomes adventure SF, even when the work responds best to the skepticism that makes the most of the author's research, imagination, and invention.

How is SF writing a science?

I presume you refer to the title of my book *The Science of Science-Fiction Writing*. I took that title from an essay by John W. Campbell, Jr. in the 1947 collection *Of Worlds Beyond*, edited by Lloyd Eshbach. Campbell was discussing the principles of science

fiction writing that he had evolved during the Golden Age. I was putting together what I had learned from teaching fiction writing, science fiction, and SF writing since 1958. SF writing still may be more of an art than a science, but I think it can be taught, and in my mind that makes it a science.

What unique challenges does the SF writer face?

The mainstream author inherits the world of everyday experience; the mainstream story deals with how the particular characters interpret and interact with that world, and the reader generalizes from their special circumstances. SF authors have to create new worlds built upon the crucial change (the "novum," Darko Suvin calls it) that makes the story SF. After creating the world – the overpowering presence in any hard-core SF work – the author must work to make his characters seem real, even when they are minimized by their environment, if readers are to get the most from their reading experience.

As a teacher, do you have any tips for speculative fiction writers?

I can't help a bit of realism. An old maxim for writing teachers is that if you can discourage someone from going into writing you should because the only ones who should continue are those who can't be discouraged. Remember it doesn't pay well on average; it offers more rejection, and consequent discouragement, than most; and it isolates the writer from a good deal of normal human experience. So:

1. Don't quit your day job, even if you have sold a story or two, or even a novel.
2. Find out who you are and what makes you different from everybody else, and find a way to put that into appropriate narrative and language that communicates to other people, and you will get published and might even be successful. Note that writers become writers because they like to read, and their first impulse is to recreate their reading, but no one wants second- or third-hand (insert your favorite author here). They want first-hand you.
3. Write regularly and write with a purpose; the prime purpose is to get published, and, as Heinlein suggested, send what you have written out to someone who can publish it; and keep sending it out because...
4. Works get published because they fall into the hands of an editor who knows how to publish them.
5. In your writing, don't give the editor an excuse to say "no"; see the article on the author's strategy in *The Science Of Science-Fiction Writing*.
6. Remember the reader. Always consider the reader's expectations and either fulfill them or offend them, but never forget that everything in a work, even the most insignificant word, creates an expectation in the reader's mind that must be dealt with.

What three novels have had the most profound impact on SF in the last 20 years and why?

I won't be able to tell what novels have had a profound impact until a couple of decades have passed. So, I will pick a couple of older novels and suggest where a third might be found: William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, even though it was published in 1984; Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which goes back to 1969; and one of several recent novels dealing with the singularity, typified by Charles Stross's *Accelerando*, although it could be some other novel of this kind. The influential works are going to have SF virtues, like originality of concept executed with the craft that makes the most of those concepts, not mainstream virtues, because SF tropes will always seem like interlopers in the mainstream. They can invigorate the mainstream but they cannot influence it.

With the recent success of speculative fiction movies and TV shows, it's been said that speculative fiction has become "mainstream." Have the walls of the SF ghetto fallen?

I concluded *Alternate Worlds*, which was completed in 1972 though not published until 1975, with the following comments:

"As the science fiction writer becomes more concerned with character, with language, with technique, he will be better accepted by non-science fiction readers and critics.... Meanwhile, mainstream writers will continue their explorations of what previously was the exclusive preserve of the science fiction writer – the future and other lands unknown – and they will do so with increasing sophistication. In the middle, the two will meet and be virtually indistinguishable...."

"A genre called science fiction will continue to exist.... The unity of science fiction, however, will begin to disintegrate without the magazines as a focus; the new wave is a portent. The consensus future and the philosophical position on which it was built will begin to fall apart as science fiction splinters into a hundred markets, into a thousand disparate, individual visions.

"Beyond this, the shape of things to come grows blurred, and the long journey, the odyssey of science fiction, from Homer to Hamilton, Heinlein, Herbert, and Harlan, has reached, if not an end, at least a pause, a place to sit for a moment and contemplate the future. Tomorrow, the endless voyage begins again...."

I think those predictions have pretty much come to pass. There still is science fiction, and I think there will continue to be something uniquely SF, but mainstream writers increasingly pick up SF tropes, and SF writers are passing in the mainstream.

What does “the future isn't what it used to be” mean?

Arthur C. Clarke suggested the phrase as the motto for SFWA, comparable to the Mystery Writers of America's slogan, "Crime does not pay – enough." It means that the SF writer's task grows increasingly more difficult as science and technology catch up to the SF imagination and as old tropes get worn out.

When is your next online class through the Science Fiction Museum and Hall of Fame?

I haven't had any requests to continue the online class in SF writing since Leslie Howle left SFM. The staff is smaller and probably busier. Maybe they don't have time to handle the arrangements. I know *I'm* busier.

What's the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction and what's coming up in 2007?

In 1971-72, when I was president of SFWA, I received many letters from teachers saying, "I've been assigned to teach a course in science fiction. What do I teach?" In 1974, I created the Intensive English Institute on the Teaching of Science Fiction as a three-week (now two-week) short course to offer a background in SF. Over the years, a couple of hundred teachers have taken the course, including some from the Netherlands, Denmark, Argentina, Canada, Japan, China, New Zealand, and Australia. Now, teachers have more opportunity to study SF in college, as courses have become more common, but I still offer the three-credit-hour course for currently enrolled students and for the two or three teachers who want to enroll.

The next Institute, available for graduate or undergraduate credit, will be July 9-20, 2007.

What's the CSSF Writer's Workshop and when is the next one?

I've been offering the Writer's Workshop in Science Fiction since 1978. It's a two-week intensive workshop for people who are about ready for publication or want to publish more regularly. It operates by requiring three stories to be submitted in advance for critiquing during the two weeks, plus the revision of one of them over the first weekend. The next workshop will be June 25-July 6. We're going to condense the last two days into one to allow participants to attend the Heinlein Centennial, SFRA annual conference, and Campbell Conference all meeting in the Crown Center hotels July 6-8, 2007. Kij Johnson is offering a novel-writing workshop during the same period.

Check the Center's website <http://www.ku.edu/~sfcenter> for details.

What's the CSSF Novel Writer's Workshop and when is the next one?

See above.

What's the Campbell Conference and when is the next one?

See above for dates and places. Usually we offer several days of events, including lectures by authors and editors on Thursday evening, Campbell and Sturgeon Awards at a dinner on Friday evening, and a round-table discussion about a single topic on Saturday, ending with a session about writing with the writers present, particularly the winners of the awards. Last summer we also filmed a series of interviews on Saturday afternoon. This coming summer, we'll combine our awards with SFRA's award ceremony on Friday evening, and will have a Saturday morning roundtable on the topic of "Jack Williamson and Robert A. Heinlein and 21st Century Science Fiction."

You will be the twenty-fourth writer recognized by SFWA as a Grand Master, a monumental and deserved honor. What is the purpose of the Grand Master award, and what does this award mean to you?

When the award was created by Jerry Pournelle, then SFWA president, it was intended to honor those writers who had made lifetime contributions to SF, but may have come along too late to have their works recognized by SFWA awards. The first honoree was Robert A. Heinlein. Others who were recognized, like Clifford Simak, Arthur C. Clarke, Jack Williamson, and Isaac Asimov, did receive Nebula Awards, then or later, but the principal of honoring a lifetime career continues. For me, it represents the culmination of an involvement with SF that began when I was seven or eight, a career in writing SF that began in 1948, and a career in writing about SF that began in 1951. To join the company of the other 23 grand masters is incredible. This is as good as it gets in science fiction recognition, and I can't say I feel any more worthy of it than many others. When I looked at Isaac Asimov's trophy, commenting on the misspelling of his name ("Issac Asmimov") and asking him if he would give it back, he said, "Not on your life."

What do you hope to accomplish with this award?

I hope the honor will enhance many of the other aspects of the things I have been involved in, not only the writing *of* SF (and it would be good to get many of my older novels and collections back into traditional print though they're all available electronically and as print-on-demand), but writing *about* SF (including an updated *Alternate Worlds*), and spreading the word about SF through the non-SF portions of the culture, such as the website <http://www.aboutSF.com> to coordinate volunteer activities in behalf of SF.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell our readers?

You too can help "save the world through science fiction."

Possession Is Nine Parts

By
TW Williams

Mekkukh slipped past the spell meant to trap him, riding it like a cork bobbing in a maelstrom. He chortled, causing his skin to blush then fade. Parmian would fight, just like all the others had.

Mekkukh was counting on it.

*He needed the hot, sweet nectar of frustration-horror-fear-panic-helplessness-
rage. He burred in anticipation. After Parmian, the woman. And after her, the world.*

Parmian checked the satchel for a third time, fussing over the vials of potions, double-packed in moss and fleece, and counting the leather-bound vellum scrolls.

"You're such a fussy master," Alani said. She ran a long, scarlet-tipped nail across the nape of his neck, pressing hard enough to raise a thin, red weal. She smiled as his skin tightened into gooseflesh.

Parmian brushed away her hand with mock impatience. "And you're an impertinent apprentice." But Alani, his little Lani, was hardly an apprentice any longer, he reminded himself. Almost an equal, but tender of heart. Still, that made her a wonderful lover.

Stifling a sigh, he tied the satchel strings and checked the knots. He hoped he had everything he needed, but with demons you never knew. His teeth caught the soft edge of the hand that had stopped scratching and was resting on his neck. He bit down hard enough to draw blood.

"Let me go with you," Alani asked for the tenth time. Her full lips quivered between a pout and a smile as she licked the crimson drops. "You've never been one to react with just enough when an excess will serve. And besides, we're a team."

Parmian hesitated and then shook his head. Alani had real skill and power, more than enough to be on her own by now. If they hadn't become lovers, she would have led her own wizard's court in some other kingdom or duchy.

"I'll be fine," he said.

The king's messenger had brought the news to Parmian's tower. A score of concubines and minor wives had barricaded themselves in the harem. Laughter mingled with screams echoed through the night. When the guards managed to break in, they found 20 dead and dying women, their bodies torn by knife, nail, and tooth. By noon, the madness had started again. The officers of the palace garrison locked themselves in their quarters. Laughter and screams mingled with the clash of swords.

Parmian sighed. It would be well past dark when he got to the palace. He wasn't concerned about traveling the Pololi Trail at night – this stretch was almost civilized,

after all – but night was no ally when fighting demons. The king should have summoned him earlier.

Catching Alani's hand, he bit the fingers gently and then kissed them. "What's a day or so apart compared to the infinity of love?" he said. "Besides, you have preparations to make for your own journey, and I would be a poor master to let you shirk them."

"One day apart is one too many," Alani said, but the effect was spoiled by her out-thrust tongue.

The garrison stank of blood and bodily fluids. Something else, too, Parmian thought. Demon-sweat.

He ignored the stench, but it was harder to ignore the whimpering from behind the locked door. Whatever was in there, whatever had caused this havoc, had been careless, craving the chaos so much that it had leaked essence and left clues. Parmian could use that.

Blood ran from beneath the locked door of the officers' quarters and pooled on the flagstones. Parmian put his palm into the puddle and chanted a few terse sentences. The magic responded. The demon styled itself Mekkukh of the Sixteenth Sphere. The wizard shrugged. Not one he had heard of. The how and why of its presence here could wait, as could the question of destruction or banishment. Containment was the first priority.

Parmian had prepared for a long night, but he found answers within half of the first hour. He checked his conclusions three times and found them sound. The demon could only survive within a living host, and a dead host meant being trapped.

Parmian uttered a hard word and the barracks door splintered into fragments. The wizard willed himself not to gag as a dying general, the last soldier alive, sawed off two of his fingers and then gouged out his left eye with the bloody finger-stumps.

Mekkukh not only thrived on the death and havoc it wreaked in its host, but also seemed bent on that body's destruction. Demons were cunning and destructive enough as it was, but what kind of havoc could an insane demon cause? Parmian suppressed a shudder.

To let the demon simply lie within a dead body was no solution, Parmian knew. Eventually, some vermin or infinitesimally small beastie would consume the dead flesh, make a connection, and the demon would be loose.

The foul thing was eager to suck every last drop of terror and pain from the general's dying body. Parmian used himself as bait, knowing that the demon wouldn't be able to resist the tang of magic. Still, summoning the demon from the general was like pulling a cat from a drapery, claw by claw, hissing and scratching. Parmian waited with charm and ward and spell, and the demon, much to its raging dismay, found itself in a bottle instead of a wizard. Its quavering screech sounded like an addict deprived of his opium.

Parmian mounted his horse, barely able to throw his leg over the saddle. He just wanted to get home and into Lani's waiting arms. The warmth of that folding-in, sparkling with a few nips and scratches, would set him right.

Mekkuh gurgled impotently in the crystal bottle securely packed in Parmian's saddlebags.

The following morning, Alani ran down the tower's spiral staircase, more a giddy schoolchild than a powerful wizard. She pushed past Barthin, the simple lad who was their only servant, and threw herself into Parmian's arms.

"Did you vanquish it, Master?" she said. Her long nails reached under his robes, scoring grooves across his back.

In reply, Parmian shook the crystal bottle. Mad red lights danced within. Tossing the reins to Barthin, he followed her into the tower and up the winding stairs to their bedchamber, but not before placing the bottle on a high shelf in his workroom and putting a warding spell on it. Sleep would be welcome, but not before other things.

The sunset was a crimson and gold smear on the horizon when Alani propped herself on her elbow. Feeling her move, Parmian opened his eyes. He reluctantly tore his gaze away from the small mounds of her breasts and met her fierce gaze.

"You used *yourself* as bait?" she said, her voice rising into a yell. "Nobody to back you up? What if something had gone wrong?"

"Nothing was going to go wrong," he replied, careful not to smile at her protectiveness. "I had my soulcharm, an amulet, three bonded spells, and a prepared container. And, of course, my most secret weapon."

Lani arched an eyebrow. "If we're going to do shop talk in bed, perhaps you'll tell me of this most secret weapon." Her hand explored under the covers.

"Not that," he said, smiling as he gently pushed her hand away. "It is you, goose. Your love is the most powerful force inside of me."

"Go on with you," she answered, but she was smiling now.

They reached for each other again, and their nibblings and moanings encircled the chamber, intertwining and releasing, long into the night. Between the bouts of passion and drowsing minutes of sleep, he told her all he knew and had guessed of the demon.

The following dawn, Alani sat on the edge of the bed, putting on her boots. It was a difficult task, especially since Parmian's teeth scraped her neck and his hands poked and pinched her body. Finally, she moved to a chair. Groaning in mock exasperation, he fell back among the pillows.

"I don't have to go, you know," she said, a mischievous glint in her eye as she watched his naked body among the sheets. "It's just a den of gauntwolves terrorizing the western villages, just some sheep and a few babies. I'll be gone the better part of two weeks. That's a long time apart."

Parmian smiled, knowing that her offer was shallow at best, but also aware that if he asked, Lani would stay. "I'll be fine," he said, missing her already. "I'll just putter around. Try to figure out how to get rid of that demon."

Alani shivered. "An insane demon." She started to add, "Be careful," but stopped. Parmian was the most stubborn person she knew, and she didn't want to start again the old debate over whether wishing "be careful" signaled a lack of trust in his abilities and intelligence.

He studied her. "I'll be careful," he said. "You be careful, too. Not just of the beasties infesting the village, but on the Pololi Trail. It's no trot to the picnic grove, you know."

Alani smiled, indulgent of his fretting. "I'll have your gray, and, better, three years of being under you," her phrasing made them both smile, "has prepared me for anything."

Parmian's stomach rumbled, making him wish for Alani. Two weeks of gruels and thin soups. And *he* had to make them. He started down the stairs to the laboratory, thinking about delegating Barthin to the kitchen, then shaking his head over what he might be forced to eat.

A breast of goose dripping in fat, roasted potatoes, apples sprinkled with cinnamon, sizzling beefsteaks, fresh white bread, juicy cherries, fine brandy. The images flooded into his skull, so powerful that he felt drool forming at the corner of...Barthin's mouth.

Parmian ran, leaping down the curving steps three at a time. "No!" he screamed. His hand was on the latch to the laboratory door when he felt the ward shatter.

He flung open the door. The open crystal bottle was on the table. An oldsilver dagger he had kept hidden on a deep shelf was beside it.

Barthin sprang out of the shadows. He laughed as he brought a heavy pestle down on Parmian's skull. Images swam dizzily through the wizard's mind, and he had the fleeting, irrelevant thought that Barthin, at least, had got his meal. The hand holding the pestle was missing all its nails, as if some beast had torn them off. Barthin's teeth and tongue were blood-stained.

Alani was weary and dusty, and a gauntwolf's bite throbbed painfully on her right forearm. The nestlings troubling the village hadn't been much of a challenge, but the old she-wolf that ambushed her on the homeward journey had been a close thing, as close as the difference between the beast's teeth sinking into a raised forearm instead of Alani's throat, as close as being able to gasp out a spell instead of drowning in her own blood. The wolf bitch's frenzy had seemed almost human. Suicidal. Beyond despair.

She gazed at the dark tower ahead, thinking how odd it looked after only two weeks away.

She wondered if she dared tell Parmian how close it had been with the gauntwolf. Maybe she would tell him that she reached down and used her secret weapon. She smiled. He would like that, would appreciate that she had remembered.

Alani looked at the tower and realized what was odd. The tower's pale gray stones glowed in the last shreds of twilight, but no lights showed. She smiled and shook her head. Just like Parmian to become immersed in some puzzle and forget to light a lamp. And Barthin wouldn't think of it unless reminded. It was a good thing that she was back to take care of things.

As Alani pushed open the tower door, the stink of evil clutched her. Darkness groaned. She groped her way into the laboratory. Her toe struck something soft and yielding, and she almost stumbled. She said a word, and the torches and lamps blazed.

Something on the table snagged the edge of her vision, but she focused on the form at her feet.

It was Barthin, many days dead. The ruin of one eye trailed down his cheek and his right arm was splintered, bones gaping through flesh crusted in dried blood. One shoe was missing, the toes all severed from that foot. On his left hand, each fingernail had been torn off.

Alani forced herself to look at the table, at the putrefying hulk that was Parmian.

She staggered away and heaved until her stomach was empty. Remember *your* Parmian, as he was a few days ago, she told herself. This thing is not him.

She forced herself to see the amputated legs and the left arm missing at the shoulder. The right arm was a stump ending just below the elbow. No blood, though. It was as if he had been born that way. Or reborn into this thing from the man she had left two weeks before.

Alani fingered the soulcharm around her neck. She remembered Parmian saying that the demon couldn't live on this plane except within a living host. So, the demon had somehow escaped, and her master had sacrificed himself to prevent its move to a new host. She had started to mourn when the stump of Parmian's right arm moved, beckoning her closer.

The cracked, dried lips moved in the gray face, and a thin trickle of blood trickled down his chin.

"You're next," Parmian said.

Whether it was a demon's taunt or wizard's warning, it was enough – just. Invoking the soulcharm, she deflected the demon's first attack. She felt it slip around her and reel back into Parmian's body.

Mekkuh cursed. He was tired of this game. First, the wizard had sought to trap Mekkuh inside the simpleton by putting him out of his delicious misery with a spell. And, although that spell had given him a chance to slip into Parmian's body – he congratulated himself on his slyness – it was no fun there.

Mekkuh had not foreseen the struggle. The others had been so easy, so dull. This time, in the first few seesaw minutes before the demon obtained control, the wizard had magicked away his own legs and had started on his arms. A piece of Parmian still floated through the ruined body, trying to die, trying to trap the demon.

Instead of feeding on the terror and rage of a host fighting death, Mekkuh had been using all his wiles to keep the wizard from dying, blocking one point while watching the life force ooze from another point. This cold determination to die was bitter fare.

No matter, Mekkuh thought. Parmian could die now. The woman had come back, just in time. He would overcome whatever spells she wove, and get control quickly and painfully. He would ride her to the palace, where she would scream sweet death until he found a new host. He wondered what a king's dying rage tasted like. He would find out in just a little while.

The hilt of the oldsilver dagger bit into Alani's palm. She swallowed hard. She had to thrust the blade into Parmian's heart and, at the same instant, protect herself from possession. She gritted her teeth.

She couldn't do this.

She had to.

Tears hot as any lover's embrace rolled down her cheeks. She knew she would cry forever.

Alani looked into Parmian's dull, glazed eyes, the eyes that had glittered with such passion, such a zest for living. For a moment, that familiar spark was there and she fell in love again.

It was time.

Mekkuh collected himself for his leap into the woman. He saw the gaps in her defense and giggled at her hesitation. She thought using the blade would be cunning, avoiding the magic that had allowed him to ride the boy's deathspell into the wizard, but her defenses wouldn't be enough. Love would make her pause, and he would win. She would be a tasty one. He licked his lips.

The tiny piece of Parmian's self blossomed into fury.

Mekkuh turned, letting the rage wash over him in orgasmic waves, reveling in it. So good, so good.

So intent was he on sucking dry the last dregs of the wizard's soul, that he didn't realize its taint until too late. He retched and tried to make the leap, but the repugnant flavor of love slowed him, and then it was too late. The silver dagger penetrated Parmian's heart.

Mekkuh, each mote of his being a lance of fiery agony, streaked from cell to cell in the wizard's cooling corpse. He felt Parmian's dying thought, but the concept of "teamwork" meant nothing to the demon as he tore himself apart again and again into eternity.

Alani led the horse another 20 paces. That should be enough. She swung into the saddle, thinking of Mekkuh trapped inside Parmian's corpse, lying wrapped in spell-drenched dragonspider silks inside a troll-iron coffin, inside one of ensorcelled virgin ash, inside a casket of oldsilver, under – she sketched her hand in the air, murmured a few words, and the tower crashed in upon itself – the rubble of the tower.

Taking a deep breath, she put her heels to the horse's flanks. She had galloped a few paces when she reined in sharply.

She had never tried a double microcosmos, and with all the spells she had spun through the night and into this dawn, it would hurt like the Seventeen Hells, but she did it anyway. The rubble shrunk and shrunk again. She added a chameleon charm to the tiny blot of matter, folding it inside an invisibility spell.

As she wheeled her horse, a tangled garden sprung up over her shoulder. The morning dew glistened on forget-me-nots that the world had never seen before, each blossom the size of a dinner plate, each petal tip gleaming blood-red. Folks would give the weird garden a wide berth for centuries and spread wild legends about what had

happened there. For Alani, it would always be the place where love had died and forever lived.

The Comfort of Mirrors

By

Thomas Braun

I was on the veranda, sipping absinthe and contemplating the Seine, when I received word that the first clone had killed herself. The lecture circuit had brought me and my lovely wife Rebecca to Paris in late summer. The evening's engagement was a rousing success, and a number of my colleagues had prevailed upon us to dine with them on the river. The company had been delightful, the wit as sparkling as the champagne. Then, the waiter handed me a folded note. I excused myself, walked to a private booth, and took the call.

Her name was Alena. She was 23 years old, or roughly twice that age in clone years. She was the thirteenth clone of me and the first to have been "flipped" to female. She worked the night shift at a lab in London. She lived in a small flat in Soho. She kept a ferret. She played the cello. In the small hours of the morning, she had taken a cocktail of pills smuggled from the lab, lain down in her bed, and quietly expired.

I was stunned. There were 44 clones of me, making mine one of the most replicated private genotypes in the world. In the 33 years since my first clone had been decanted, we had never lost a single one, not to mishap, not to disease, not to foul play. And certainly not to suicide. What, I asked myself, had gone wrong?

I stood in the booth and absorbed the fragments of information until the disparate bits righted themselves and assembled into a coherent whole: a woman in mid-life, single and alone. Orphaned by a car crash some years earlier which killed her adoptive parents, she had no blood relatives and no connections, unless one counted me. And I was her, surely no better comfort than looking in the mirror. She lived in a shabby flat and had worked a series of dead-end jobs. She probably had an antidepressant addiction. It was a thin, limp sort of life; one could see it tapering off anemically in a decade or two, a candle sputtering out. Instead, she had cut the thread cleanly, quickly while she still had the faculty to do so. Yes, I could see reason in her motives. I was strangely touched by the nobility of this lost, lonely clone.

Sobered and thoughtful, I went on to Milan, and then to Geneva. I was wined and dined on the principles of emergent AI, the topology of chaos theory, and the wavelength of fractals. I had just arrived in Munich when Anthony died.

Hanging's a clean death for the departed, not so for the hysterical mother who stumbles upon the macabre display after the bowels have released. But, one glimpsed in the act a rare mental acumen: a teenaged boy who understood that a well-executed knot is a quick and almost painless way to die. Of course, all of my clones are highly intelligent, but genius involves more than scoring well on some psychological exam. When I was 11, I watched ants parading around their hill and understood that there were mathematical principles behind their movements. It was the moment when the

spark ignited, setting me on a separate path from other men. In young Anthony's death, I sensed that practical turn of mind which, when combined with great intellect, should have been so potent. What a shame. What a complete waste.

A homicide investigation was opened after the third suicide, and two detectives from Interpol visited me.

"You are Dr. Alan Archer, correct?" asked the first one, a gaunt, dark-haired man.

I said that I was.

"How many clones do you have, Dr. Archer?"

"Forty-one living."

"You have been cloned 44 times."

"Yes."

"That's an extraordinary number for a private individual, Mr. Archer," said the second detective. He was sandy-haired, and grinned like a wolf. "Why so many?"

"Dr. Archer," I corrected. "When I was young, I made my genotype publicly available on the international genome market to finance my research. After my early breakthroughs drew media attention, mine became a very popular type."

"Do you have much contact with your clones, Dr. Archer?" asked the dark one.

"Almost none at all. Most I have never met."

"You don't meet your own clones?" That was the wolfish one, still with that ear-to-ear grin.

"They don't belong to me. One clone from my DNA may be brought to term every nine months. Interested buyers may bid on it. The winning bidders may request minor tweaks or customizations. The cloned child is decanted, grown, and the winners become its adoptive parents. They raise it as their own. I have no part in any of it."

"Had you ever met or had any form of contact with Alena Saddler, Anthony Hart, or Aaron Sawicki?"

"No."

"Do you have any idea what could have caused each of them to take their own lives?"

I thought for a long moment. "I don't."

Having completed the lecture tour, I threw myself into my work. I had numerous offers to participate in promising research projects, but I wanted something new, something fresh. My early breakthroughs in mathematics had often been achieved by striking out on my own into uncharted territory. I wanted to recapture that, if possible. Perhaps I would have done so, if a clone named Adam Max hadn't microwaved himself to death.

Max was a highly-paid technician, responsible for maintaining the sensitive equipment used to beam power to remote automated units. Properly arrayed, these devices are capable of transmitting gigawatts of power thousands of miles with pinpoint accuracy. Step in front of one and it cooks your internal organs instantly.

By all accounts, Adam Max was a pro. He knew the machines like he knew his own face. He was reliable, emotionally stable, and had a good reputation in his industry. So, when he set an array to full power and stepped in front of it, it wasn't accidental.

What bothered me was that I knew why he'd done it. Surely, everyone has felt that deranged impulse to steer his car into oncoming traffic, or throw himself from a balcony into a crowd below. Our sense of self-preservation prevents us from doing it, of

course; nonetheless, that nagging thought, “What would happen if...?” tugs at our minds. I’ve felt it, working around massive particle accelerators or huge electromagnetic coils. I’m not a physicist, but the tools of their trade afford me priceless glimpses into real, primal chaos. How many times have I stood beside a collision chamber furtively eyeing the access hatch and wondering what it was like on the inside. My rational mind knows that inside there is only vacuum and lethal radiation, but some residual limb of the subconscious still longs for the cold embrace.

That was the pressure point on Adam Max’s mind, the thought that weighed on him every time he focused his warm glow on a distant object. What would it be like to surrender to that soft radiance, to let its energy fill me? Certainly he knew it would kill him. Just as certainly, there came a day when he no longer cared.

I must confess I avoided driving for several weeks after that. Even ensconced securely in the passenger seat, I locked the doors and belted myself in. Who knew if some perverse impulse might become too strong, causing me to fling myself from a moving vehicle? I also buried myself feverishly in research, but instead of immersing myself in the pure realms of mathematics, I plunged into the sea of data I was accumulating on my poor, unfortunate clones. When I had plumbed those depths as best I could, I went to see my friend Dr. Marcus Haverty, renowned in psychiatry and neurolinguistics.

“There is a pattern here,” I said after laying the facts before him. “I know it, but I can’t see it.”

“The human impulse to impose patterns on our environment is an effort to make sense of the world,” said Marcus. “But great care should be taken when studying behavioral patterns. These are systems of unparalleled complexity because they are made up of human minds, themselves perhaps infinitely complex. The most important difference between a human and an electron, Alan, is that a human has a mind of its own.”

“Then, why are these minds destroying themselves?” I asked.

“Ah,” he said, “if only we could ask them. Barring that, however, I do have a theory.”

“Tell me.”

“I suspect that it is all the fault of the first clone to die. Alena.”

“Alena?” I said, shocked. I could find nothing in her bio, which I now had virtually committed to memory, to indicate that she was capable of such an act. “How could she have possibly persuaded the other clones to kill themselves?”

“She didn’t persuade them,” Marcus responded gravely. “She gave them *permission*.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Before Alena died, your clones never considered killing themselves as an option. If they had difficult circumstances in their lives, they struggled through them as they supposed they must. But when one of their number took her own life, she showed them another way. She made the possible *real*, showed them that it could be done.”

And with this, I began to grasp the terrible, insidious pattern. “Alena’s suicide would mean nothing to a much more successful clone,” I began slowly. “But a clone just marginally better off than Alena would view suicide as a way out and might take it.”

“Exactly,” said Marcus.

“So, a clone in slightly more favorable circumstances would see that two other clones had self-terminated and might consider it an option for himself, even though he was not as badly off. He might wonder what the two dead clones knew that he did not? The third clone might even need less of a reason to destroy himself. And so it would go.” Eventually, I thought, seeing that large numbers of his peers were opting for death, even a highly successful clone might be induced to kill himself.

“Indeed,” said Marcus. “The suicide of a single clone could set off a chain reaction.”

“I have to put a stop to it.”

But the pattern was already unfolding, its merciless steel coils unwinding. Two more clones died during the following week, Annalise Mercedes and Anderson Patrick. Subway train and shotgun blast. Annalise ran a successful fashion boutique in New York. It eventually came to light that she had been skimming funds off the top to fuel a methamphetamine habit. Anderson took two other lives in addition to his own: his wife’s and her lover’s.

Mathematics is what I am. It is what I do. I can always escape into its flawlessly rational matrix, a place wholly separate from the twisted knots of human passion. We are all capable of violence, both to ourselves and others. If I had never known its perfect beauty, or if my faculty for it should someday desert me, to what ends might I turn to chase away the days?

I counted my blessings, as the old apophthegm goes, taking careful inventory of every good thing in my life. I had wealth, fame, respect, and influence, but over all these things I prized my lovely wife Rebecca. She put up with my frequent physical and mental absences, making every allowance for my single-minded devotion to mathematics, yet the distance between us had never weakened her resolve. I made an effort to be more attentive to her, taking her to the most beautiful places I knew and buying her anything I thought she might fancy.

At the time, I hoped to make up to Rebecca my shortcomings as a husband. Now I see that I was in fact saddling her with the weight I already wore. We didn’t speak of it much, but it crept into the silence at the end of every conversation, the darkness on the edge of every candlelit dinner.

I made myself almost deaf to the outside world, concentrating my mental effort on blocking it out, as though I were stuffing pillows in the windows to stop the sunshine, but some rays always slipped in through the cracks. I knew when five more clones died. I knew who they were, if not their particular methods of self-destruction, because by this time I had every single name of the 44 committed to memory. Thirty-three remained.

We were in the Appalachians watching the leaves turn when Alex Beverly died. Alex perhaps needs some explaining. He was the only one of my clones to rise to anywhere near my level of prominence. He did so not through science but by navigating a world of which I had only the faintest glimmer. Alex was an actor, a moderately successful one at that, appearing in a number of popular television programs. He used the wealth he accumulated to pursue ambitious philanthropic projects. He was known for his work in repopulating Africa and Indonesia with their native peoples. His charity, I understand, also translated to a certain degree of political power in Hollywood.

Alex married up. He caught the eye of model/actress Claire St. Paul. Theirs was a tabloid engagement, *Clone Woos Supermodel*. What followed was one of those rare, stable marriages on the edge of the Hollywood limelight. When I say that they had been together for 15 years, factoring in a clone's shortened life expectancy, one might begin to understand the depth of their relationship and the shock that we all felt when Alex leapt from a bridge one fine autumn evening and drowned.

Alex was one of the few clones I had actually met and the only one with which I had spent any significant time. His wife was a treasure, a rare beauty, and although I am not naturally attuned to such things, they always struck me as happy together. I wondered if she would seek me out, now that he was gone. I wondered if she would ask me, "Why?" and what I would answer.

These idle fantasies went further. I imagined us finding comfort, if not answers, in each other's arms just once, perhaps, to dull the cruel point of death's blade. Rebecca would never need to know. No. I would abandon her as Alex had abandoned Claire St. Paul. Then, the circle would be complete. I could see the pattern forming, crystallizing, enmeshing me helpless in its lattice. I had to act.

Five clones died that week, all around the world, as the effect of Alex's death spread like a shockwave. Alex was the success story that all my clones must have aspired to, thinking if he had made it, so could they. Alex's failure must have resonated with every one of them. It haunted me.

Most of the remaining clones were children or adolescents, but there were a handful of adults (of course further replication of my genome had been frozen early on in this sordid affair). By the end of the week I had sent out a letter to all six of the survivors, imploring them to join me at a private clinic. It was in fact a highly regarded institution, recommended by Dr. Haverty, under the care of reputable doctors and an excellent staff. I would personally pay for the travel expenses of any clone that would voluntarily commit themselves. We would stay there until we were all in stable psychological condition and had received a clean mental bill of health.

All six clones accepted, but only five arrived. It is probably superfluous to mention at this point that the sixth had killed herself. Apparently, she changed her mind.

The clinic was in California wine country. The climate was picture perfect, even with winter fast approaching. The grounds were well-kept and we were allowed to wander freely. The perimeter fencing and surveillance equipment were tastefully disguised.

We all sat for extensive psychological profiles ("Remarkably different," said the psychiatrist, wagging his head, "yet remarkably similar."), and attended weekly counseling sessions, but much of the time we spent in group therapy. I am not going to lie. I am not going to tell you that I enjoyed those sessions.

I believe it is usual in these sorts of settings for there to be an initial awkwardness and reticence which gradually erodes as the members get to know each other. That dynamic was not at work in therapy. Here, differences seemed inviting and refreshing, but as surface distinctions were stripped away and we saw into each other's souls, the unbearable likeness was undeniable.

"I can't sleep without taking pills."

"I dread phone calls."

"I like playing with matches."

“Sometimes I completely lose control.”

Their voices got in my head and under my skin, making me feel as though I were dirty or diseased. Each ailment, dysfunction, fear, or phobia somehow became my own.

Our initial easy camaraderie quickly gave way to wary distrust. We seldom sought out conversation with each other, but when we did, we talked about each other, behind our backs. Arthur was gay; Allison was a slut; Allen was a pervert. It was reported to me on more than one occasion that I was perceived as arrogant and controlling, although *of course* my informant never held that opinion.

Most disturbing, however, were the rumors about Anya and Aleksandr, two Russian-born clones of similar age. They were said to be lovers, a thought that sickened me. I don't know if it was really true, but looking into the eyes of a female clone was like looking into the eyes of my sister. I could not imagine desiring one in that manner. Yet, deep down, I could admit the attraction of a lover who knew me so intimately, loving my image in the mirror...was I truly capable of such narcissism?

I said earlier that Alex Beverly was my most prominent clone. This was true, at least as far as the public eye was concerned, but of all my clones Allen King was the most successful. He was also the first, and perhaps that set him apart, at least in his own mind. I knew him a little, but knew quite a lot of him. As my first clone, he had held quite a bit of fascination for me at one time.

Where I had devoted my career to pure theory, Allen took more of a practical turn. He went in for economics, where he excelled. This was, of course, partly due to the peerless pattern recognition abilities he had inherited from me, but it was also thanks largely to his complete lack of ethics. Allen had generated a great deal of controversy early in his career by studying “uncharted markets,” specifically those that are illegal or immoral. Most economists would be horrified to perform a supply and demand analysis of sex slave traffic or to estimate the relative worth of a drug mule, but Allen had discarded any such qualms. He delved into the shadowy realms of drug trafficking and human slavery, and naturally it was rumored that he dabbled in them himself. I don't know if that was true. Certainly, he was the only economist I've ever met who always kept a loaded weapon handy, but I will come to that later.

At any rate, Allen King had a great deal to teach me about economics. Of course, I knew the general theories, but Allen knew specifics. Delving into the hidden strata of human commerce had greatly enhanced his understanding of markets, not just the supply and demand that drove them, but the *need* that drove the demand. He had put this knowledge to good use in his career, building a fortune in the exchange markets with ruthless efficiency. He was probably wealthier than I was.

We were conversing one day about the cost of protecting supply chains when Anya ran through the room, sobbing. As quickly as she had come she was gone, a wailing siren receding into the distance. Astonished, I looked over at Allen, who shrugged calmly.

“I think Aleksandr is cheating on her with Allison. I've seen them together too often, whispering or walking in the garden.”

“Have you caught them at it?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” he said, “but the boy is already sleeping with one girl. Why not the other? He has the opportunity. He has the will. I said as much to Anya.”

“You told Anya that Aleksandr was unfaithful to her?”

“It seemed only fair.”

We were several weeks into the program at this point and all was going well. At least, there had been no new bodies. But, at this news, a foreboding of disaster settled in my belly. I felt as though the pendulum of a metronome, carefully balanced on end, had been tipped ever so slightly, and set in motion.

Lovers or no, Anya and Aleksandr certainly had a history together. Anya was an orphan, if such a term can be applied to a person conceived in a test tube. Her adoptive parents had been killed while she was still quite young. No one ever quite knew what to do with the young clone, whom was either a priceless asset or an expensive albatross, depending on who you asked. Shunted between relatives who were variously greedy or unfeeling, Anya ran away from home at age eight. What she did then is unclear, but we do know that she drifted, homeless and impoverished, for some time until she heard that there was another Russian clone of Alan Archer. Being naturally highly resourceful, she was able to track down Aleksandr. He took her under his wing and the two had been inseparable since.

Perhaps, then, the girl was hardly to be blamed for being intensely jealous for her only friend in the world. She attacked Allison with an implement one of the gardeners had carelessly left behind in the garden. She beat the woman senseless, then locked herself in a supply closet. There, she cut her wrists.

I won't recount the scene that followed, the staff feverishly trying to break through the door and Aleksandr screaming and sobbing. It exists with terrible clarity in my own memory and there is no need to hold it up to the light. I will simply say that when they finally broke through that barricaded door, it was too late for poor Anya.

Aleksandr was immediately placed under an intensive suicide watch. This was a good idea as far as it went, but ultimately did little good. Someone should have recalled that where one clone was at risk, all were. Aleksandr managed to break out of confinement in his room and escape the clinic grounds. His body was found, pale and peaceful, 48 hours later. He had taken his life with a sharp piece of jagged metal clasped in his right hand.

As I said, it was unfortunate that the attention of our keepers was focused exclusively on Aleksandr. Arthur killed himself as well during that period, without even having to leave the institution.

The three of us who remained, Allison, Allen, and I, were immediately committed to a maximum security ward. There were padded rooms and soft, comfortable restraining jackets, just like in the movies. Everything was pliable plastic and soothing pastels. Even the TVs were cushioned. We were under surveillance almost constantly, either by cameras or very nosy attendants. We had one with us even when using the toilet.

The worst part of this time was being constantly in close quarters with the other two clones. Their little mannerisms and their nervous tics grated on me. Even so, I found myself absorbing their unconscious gestures, their kinesics. It was miserable. I wondered how long we would have to wait this out before they let us go.

In the end, Allison found a way to kill herself. She was allowed sleeping pills for her insomnia. It later came to light that she had been palming them and storing them away secretly. The prescription was not strong, but she had saved up quite a dose. She must not have slept for weeks, but she slept very well that night, and never awakened.

With Allison's death I finally saw the pattern. I realized, given the tools of my sharp intellect and suffocating intuition, that there was nothing anyone could do to stop me from taking my own life if I had made up my mind to do it. It was simply inevitable. For the first time, I accepted this. I talked it over with Allen King, the last remaining clone.

For the next six weeks, the two of us behaved perfectly. There were no incidents, no suicide attempts, not even an argument or raised voices. We smiled at each other and greeted our attendants and struggled to come to terms with Allison's death in therapy. When we had done so to everyone's satisfaction, they released us.

Allen lived in New York City, so we took a flight to LaGuardia. Sitting side by side in first class, sipping champagne, we must have looked like twin brothers. Allen was roughly my age, as clones count it, and very similar to me in appearance.

At one point I asked him if he really wanted to go through with this.

He took a sip from his drink, smiled at me, and said, "I really think I'm a bit of a monster, don't you?"

I had to agree.

As I said, Allen always kept a loaded weapon close to hand, at least when he was not institutionalized. He had a locker full of them in his massive penthouse suite. When we arrived, he got out two pistols, and gave one to me. We both checked them to ensure that they were properly loaded. Then, we drank some wine and listened to Debussy.

When midnight came, I stretched and yawned.

Allen said, "Is it time?"

I nodded.

We both picked up our weapons and walked to the center of the room. A massive window on the city framed the scene.

I pointed my gun directly at Allan's head and he pointed his at mine. He nodded.

I took a deep breath, and we both counted to three out loud. I looked into my own face and pulled the trigger.

Careful readers will have deduced that since I am the one narrating this tale, I did not die. Allen King's weapon failed to discharge. I don't know why, as I had calculated that even partial synchronicity in the act of pulling the triggers should dispatch us both. Perhaps, at the last second, a glimmer of remorse for what he could have been held him back. More cynically, he might have believed that I would not go through with it and stayed his own hand. If so, he miscalculated because I blew his face cleanly off. I suppose the act was technically murder, but I confess that it does not trouble me much.

It was a simple thing to make Allen's death look like an ordinary suicide. We share fingerprints. The weapons were Allen's and only one was fired. A calm, practical mind could easily see to the remaining details.

As for me, I no longer fear that I will succumb to some secret impulse and destroy myself. I don't know why, exactly. No doubt Marcus would tell me that I have realized that a mirror cannot tell me who I really am.

Perhaps the truth is simpler. Having killed myself once already, I will not try to do it again.

I am done with mathematics, incidentally. Allen King ignited in me an interest in economics, although I doubt that I will practice it as ruthlessly or amorally as he did. But such a complex field could use someone with my flair for pattern recognition. I think I can forge new paths, much like I did in mathematics in my youth. One never knows, I might even do somebody some good this time.

I miss my wife Rebecca. I know she is waiting for me out there, as she always does. I can't wait to get home.

Any Given Shadow

By

Justin Stanchfield

Music pulsed in waves, balanced upon crystal points embedded in the walls. Light refracted in rainbow spears that spilled across the floor. Dancers swayed to the undulating bass. They were locked as tightly to the rhythm as the tiny moon upon which the ballroom stood was locked to the cold, dead world far below. Jon Coffin struggled to keep up with the rest of the band. The ragga was unlike anything he had played before, and his guitar sounded a discordant counterpoint to the other players. It had been too long, ages since he had felt the tipsy euphoria of playing with other musicians. As the drums neared another zenith, he played a descending series of arpeggios, C into A minor into open G, and then let the strings feedback until the music became a wall of force.

On the floor, the dancers circled each other, duelists daring each other to touch, each pressing to reveal their partner without unmasking themselves. The optic fields around their bodies flared. The mad auroras caressed their torsos as they spun in ever tighter circles. As the dancers swung past the low stage, only sweat-soaked musk of aroused bodies and stale alcohol confirmed they were flesh and blood and not a company of gods. A tall, blonde woman pirouetted so close to Jon that he felt the breeze from her hair as she swung her head in exaggerated arcs. Out of habit, he tipped his head down and tried to catch a glimpse of the person beneath the computer-enhanced facade.

“It won’t work.”

Startled, Jon stepped back from the edge of the stage.

Kimmy Torneau, the violinist, grinned, her black eyes bright with amusement. She leaned close to his ear. “If you’re trying to see through their cute suits, forget it. This ain’t no high school prom. There’s enough processor power out there to keep this station alive for years.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Jon said.

Unlike the cheap field generators sold by the millions in every city and habitat across the solar system, the equipment on the floor tonight was seamless, the illusion complete. The music shifted again, modulating from C into B flat before it collapsed into a frenetic congregation of single note runs.

Again, Kimmy leaned close. “Watch the guy next to the column out of the corner of your eye.”

She drew her bow down the G string and pushed it up into a long double stop. Her foot tapped a pedal and the note dropped so low the floor hummed. Jon turned his head until he could just see the figure dancing with abandon in front of the speaker column. The man’s field broke apart like drops of paint spilled on a pool of wind-spun

water. The dark, chiseled features vanished, replaced by a paunchy, balding man with hair so thick on his shoulders Jon could see it beneath the gossamer body-suit. Blissfully unaware, the man moved away from the speaker and once again became a portrait of computer-generated perfection.

Jon turned toward Kimmy and raised an eyebrow. She grinned and threw her bow into a storm of notes so fast they blurred into a single, winding stream. The song reached a final peak and broke apart. The drums felt like explosions. Jon struck a final chord. He was glad simply to end in the same key.

"We shall take a brief pause," the singer, Nikos, said into the microphone in a deliberately exaggerated Trans-Martian accent. The dancers slipped into the shadowed alcoves and private rooms. Exhausted, Jon leaned his guitar against a stand and followed the rest of the band out a side door.

"How did you do that?" John asked Kimmy.

"Magic." She smiled with elfin glee. "Hold a D five octaves below middle C and the optic generators pick it up as a sympathetic vibration. It distorts the field. You'd be amazed at what you see under the cute suits around here."

"Just don't let them see you looking," Nikos said without a trace of humor. "The patrons in this club take their privacy seriously."

"So I've noticed." Jon rubbed the small, half-moon nick on his wrist where the glowering, tuxedoed giant guarding the door had pressed a sampler against his skin. The unspoken warning was plain: *We know who you are. Talk, and we will find you.*

The corridor opened into a small lounge dominated by an enormous window that looked down on the featureless face of Uranus. The room was tastefully furnished. The chairs and low tables, like most things on Miranda, were spun from the clouds of hydrocarbon thousands of kilometers below. Jon stepped to the window. His face was a pale ghost in the thick glass, superimposed on the softly glowing planet. The effect was dizzying.

"Impressive, isn't it?" A second ghost appeared in the glass. Nikos's sharp features were framed by a tangle of dark ringlets that spilled down his shoulders. He stared at the faint bands of gas. "I like what you did with the distortion on the last set."

"Thanks." Jon doubted the singer's sincerity. More than once, Jon had stumbled because the music was unfamiliar and demanding. "Been a while since I played."

"I'll send you a disc of some old shows so you can catch up." Nikos paused. "Maybe you should wear a dot until you've had a chance to get familiar with our playlist."

Jon recoiled. The very idea that he should use a prompter was a slap to his pride. Children at their first recitals wore dots, not seasoned players. Never mind that he had set music aside to pursue his wanderlust. The hum of a ship's engine was almost as satisfying as a song. "That's okay," he said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "I'll keep up."

"Suit yourself." Nikos shrugged, his eyes still locked on the cloudscape below. "Can I give you a little piece of advice? Don't pry into what happens off the dance floor. The management relies on our discretion as much as our music. Maybe more so. These people pay us very well for our silence. I'm sure you appreciate how important it is to them that their identities never be revealed?"

"I'm beginning to," Jon said.

“Good.” Nikos wandered toward a buffet spread with fruit and bottled drinks chilling in buckets of ice.

Jon glared. Though he had only known Nikos a few days, he already nursed a heavy resentment. He didn’t like being lectured to, especially by an effete. Still seething, Jon left the window and slumped onto a nearby couch. He leaned his head against the back and closed his eyes.

“Don’t let the little shit get to you,” Kimmy whispered.

Jon’s eyes opened in time to see her wink. She sank down beside him, a glass in hand. Her breath smelled faintly of sweet wine as she leaned closer. “Nikos thinks those rich bastards out there actually notice us. We’re just background music to them. All they want is to pair off in the back rooms.”

“Yeah.” Jon smiled ruefully. “I don’t see what the big thing about privacy is anyhow. Once they take off their clothes, it’s kind of hard to hide what’s underneath.”

“Oh, don’t get your hopes up. The suits never come off in this place. I don’t know what goes on when the doors close, but you can bet it’s not good, old-fashioned slippy-slippy. Sex is too tame for this lot. They’re way past that.” She gave his leg a gentle squeeze suggesting *she* might not be against a bit of recreational sex. “Come on, it’s time we got back on stage.”

A warm mist, scented with a hint of pine, filled the dance floor. The lights dimmed until the room became a moonlit glade torn from an Elysium vision. The music, so driven in the last set, now wove a sense of awe. John struggled to anticipate the changes until, in frustration, he pulled a glass slide from his pocket and slipped the small tube over his ring finger. He shut his eyes and ran the slide down the strings. A swell of pain and longing leapt above the rest of the music. Jon let the music carry him. The scream in his guitar was a primal thing, a cry of despair that chilled the blood, so pure he almost doubted he had created it.

The music dipped. The others now followed him. Jon tore into the solo. His guitar was a razor, a scalpel to part the veil. He let the note fade and opened his eyes. Kimmy stared at him, her eyes wide as if the solo had rocked her to the core. She tipped her head in acknowledgment, threw her violin under her chin, and tried to recapture what he had done. Exhausted, he let his attention wander across the room. Gone were the wild gyrations, replaced by a stately procession of couples marching in time down an ever tightening spiral toward the center of the floor. They met and formed a circle. He tried to identify the faces, but most of the dancers had changed during the break into new ideals of loveliness, draped in dark robes that flowed like ink down their bodies.

A cold glow built in the center of the room, as if a full moon poked through October clouds to bathe Earth. Dim holograms framed the chamber. Slim marble columns capped by an intricate lattice of vines swayed on untouched breezes. A low hum rose above the music as the dancers chanted in unison.

“What the hell is going on?” he whispered.

Kimmy shook her head, a warning to remain silent. On the other side of the stage, Nikos approached the ornate microphone and picked up the chant, his voice diamond clear. Jon hated to admit it, but the man could sing. He filled every phrase with emotion as he held a perfect fifth above the tonic. The rest of the band fell silent as the

chanting deepened. Jon tried to identify the language, but the words were unlike any he had ever heard. As one, the dancers turned and faced the center of the room, arms above their heads. They bowed, knelt to the floor, pressed their foreheads against the polished surface, and rose again. Inward they drew, so close to one another the glow from their fields lit the thickening mist, and then they bounded outward once more. The chant became a drone, an insect buzz. Only Nikos's voice carried as the tempo rose.

Without cue, Kimmy tipped her head to the side and slipped the violin beneath her chin. She drew the bow down the strings. As she had done earlier, she tapped the pedal and let the note drop so low and loud the air pulsed with vibrato. Lost in the strangeness, Jon watched the dancers near the stage. A slender woman, her cowl thrown back to reveal a cap of short blonde curls, stood near the speaker column. As the computer-enhanced note dropped further, her cloak seemed to melt, revealing the person behind the screen. Jon stepped back, shocked. She turned toward him and smiled before the illusion reformed. He felt sick.

The face he had seen was not human.

Time hung on a pinhead, balanced against chaos. Jon, his equilibrium shattered, stumbled away from the edge of the stage. Even Miranda's weak gravity felt as if it might pull him through the floor. He shut his eyes, but the face waited for him, burned into his memory. The skin was hairless and smooth as polished mahogany. Only a tiny pair of blunted horns broke the skull's narrow, androgynous symmetry. But the eyes burned the deepest. They were cobalt blue, the centers so black they seemed to suck the light from the room. Jon sensed the creature's presence in his head like a rush of ice-strewn wind.

He opened his eyes, but the creature was gone.

Cowled figures retreated to the alcoves beyond the dance floor. Something brushed his arm. He jumped.

"Come on," she said. "Set's over."

"We just got up," Jon replied, his voice thick.

"Don't argue, okay?" She tried to take his hand, but he pulled away.

"What the hell was that thing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Kimmy glanced over her shoulder at Nikos and grabbed Jon's sleeve. "For God's sake, come on."

She lead him offstage and back into the lounge. Only after he heard the door sigh shut behind him did he realize he was still clutching his guitar by the neck. Kimmy hurried to the table, found a dark green bottle among the ice buckets and opened it. Jon leaned his guitar against the couch, but before he could speak, she pressed the bottle into his hand.

"Have a drink," she said. "Take a breath."

His hand shook as he raised the bottle and took a long swallow. The wine was sweet, slightly effervescent, and it warmed him as it spread down his throat. Calmer, he asked again. "What in the hell was that? And don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. You showed it to me on purpose."

"Not now." Again, she shot a look at Nikos. "Ask me later, all right?"

“Bullshit.” Jon stomped across the room to Nikos. “Mind telling me what’s going on around here?”

“How should I know,” Nikos said. “It’s a private club. What they do behind closed doors is their business, not mine.” He turned away, but Jon grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

“What were you chanting? What language was that?”

“I have no idea.” Nikos drew himself taller, a vain attempt to reclaim his dignity. He swept his long hair away from his left temple and gently pried a small black dot off his skin. He placed the micro-transducer in a padded case and tucked the prompter in the inside pocket of his jacket. “I sing what they ask me to sing. I don’t need to know what it means.”

“This is insane. I don’t know what kind of freak show you’re running, but you can count me out.” Jon snatched his guitar and marched to the door, but it refused to open. He pounded against the thick plastic slab. “Hey, out there! Open this God damned door!”

“You might as well quit acting like a child,” Nikos said, his arrogance once more firmly in place. “The door will open when it’s time to leave, not before.”

Jon stared at the people around him, but they all turned away. Only Kimmy paid him any heed. She took his hand and wrapped her fingers in his. “Sit down with me.”

“But—”

“Shhh.” She placed her index finger against his lips and smiled shyly. “Nothing bad is going to happen. I promise.” She led him to the couch and eased him down beside her. Her hand remained in his, warm and trembling. “Some questions are just better left alone.”

“You don’t believe that anymore than I do.” Jon shuddered as the face rose once more through his memory. He had thought himself lucky when he had found this gig, a profitable sideline during a long layover while the ship’s engines were overhauled. Now he wanted to roll back the hours and pretend none of what he had seen tonight was real. “You made sure I saw that thing. You wanted me to find out, and now you tell me to pretend it didn’t happen?”

“Please...” Her dark eyes were glazed with fear. She cast a swift glance at Nikos, then lowered her voice. “It’s more complicated than you realize.”

“Complicated?” He began to laugh as he stood up and walked toward a small corridor.

“Where are you going?” Kimmy asked.

“I’m going to take a leak. Or is that off limits, too?”

A dim antechamber led to the lavatory. Jon stepped inside the bathroom and locked the door behind him. The scent of lavender was strong in the gently circulating air. Like everything else he had seen inside the suite, the bathroom was plush, almost gaudy. A shallow sink lay beneath a gilt-framed mirror. He cupped water in his hand and splashed it across his face. The droplets clung to his skin in the weak gravity and sparkled jewel-like in the mirror, as if his skin had broken out in diamonds. The thought made him smile as he wiped his face dry with a soft towel.

Jon paused to check himself in the mirror and opened the door. Kimmy stood in the antechamber.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

He nodded, but before he could say more she placed her finger to her lips. She closed the antechamber door, sealing them off from the lounge. The violinist took his hands in hers. Gone was her fear, replaced by a confidence he hadn't suspected, as if she had been acting a part earlier and only now let her true self poke through the veneer.

"I like what you did with the music tonight." She leaned closer, so near he felt her body heat raging as if she was fevered. A faint cinnamon scent whispered off her skin. "You're not like the others. You have an artist's soul."

The change in topic caught him by surprise. He tried to step away, but she held tight. Her supple fingers were stronger than they looked. Slowly, deliberately, she drew his right hand to her mouth and brushed her lips across the back of his fingers, then guided them down to the front of her dress. Despite everything that had happened, he was aroused. His breath shortened as she pressed his palm to her body. He let his hand slide over her as he searched for the soft swell of her breast and the expected hardness of her nipples. Hunger turned to horror. The flesh beneath the dark fabric was unfamiliar and strange. No breasts, only hard ribs that curved in exaggerated arcs toward a bony ridge where her sternum should be.

Kimmy's face smiled at him even as her voice modulated into something alien. A trace of the chant he had heard earlier was buried in her accent. "Not quite what you expected?"

"Leave me alone." He barely managed to get the words out. Terrified, he tried to pull his hand free, but her grip was too strong.

"We're not so different. We all want the same things. Good food, good music, the company of like minds. A few centuries ago, you would have worshiped me, but now we can sit together like grown-ups." She whispered in his ear, her breath hot against his cheek. "I like this way much better, don't you?"

"Where did you come from?" Jon asked.

"Come from? We've always been here."

The optic field around the woman shimmered and faded. Kimmy's heart-shaped face dissolved into the narrow, vulpine features he had glimpsed on the dance floor. Too frightened to move, Jon gaped as the creature raised her face and covered his mouth with hers. The kiss was brief, and she broke it with a laugh. When the field around her engaged once more, the statuesque blond he had seen in front of the speaker column appeared where the creature had been. Then, even that was gone, with nothing left behind but the fading scent of cinnamon.

He returned to the lounge. The rest of the band glanced at him but quickly looked away. Only Kimmy, and, to Jon's surprise, Nikos, met his eyes.

"Would you have believed us if we had told you earlier?" the singer asked.

Jon felt sick, the revulsion ready to overcome him. "You knew?"

"We've been playing here a long time." Nikos wandered away.

Kimmy drifted closer but made no attempt to touch him. She had been crying. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "It's hardest the first time."

"How...?"

“How did I find out? Sometimes, a patron asks to sit in. We’re not supposed to know, but you can always tell when it’s one of them.” Her smile returned. “They really are good musicians.”

Jon closed his eyes. The stark truth was more than he wanted to bear. Confused, he walked to the broad window and stared at the placid clouds of Uranus. His tension leached away as he leaned his forehead against the thick glass. It pressed cool against his skin, a reminder of how cold the universe could be. Small wonder a band of wanderers might flock to an oasis like this. The plastic confines of the club were a sanctuary against the emptiness beyond. He straightened and caught a glimpse of his reflection. To his amazement, he smiled.

Kimmy’s reflection joined his, and for a long while they stood side by side. “What now?” she asked.

“We finish the gig.” Jon shrugged. “I’ve never walked out in the middle of a job before. Guess I won’t do it tonight, either.”

“And tomorrow night?”

Her fingers slipped inside his. He didn’t pull away. “Tomorrow’s a long way off.” He caught a faint whiff of cinnamon. Jon squeezed Kimmy’s fingers, grateful for their warmth. Then, he laughed softly. “I’ll be here. Who am I to stop the music?”

A slight change in pressure swept through the lounge as the door opened. Together, they started back to the stage, stopping only to grab his guitar. He strummed a chord and noticed the B string had gone flat. Better tune up, he reminded himself. It was still an hour until closing time.

Perfect Soldier

By
Todd Thorne

The back of the Wal-Mart erupted, a volcanic spew of cinder block ash, particles, and molten chunks. The shockwave nearly tumbled Sergeant Michael Edwards from his vantage point atop the deserted I-35 overpass. The HARM skittered through the dust and across the rubble to a meadow behind the former low-price leader.

"I hate robots," Mike muttered as he crouched behind the guardrail, skin crisping in the mid-morning Dallas sun. In particular, he hated ones about to kill him.

"Target in sight." Gus Pritchard, the contractor, stabbed at the satcam image of the HARM.

"No shit, Gus," Colonel Benjamin Yancy replied, staring over Pritchard's shoulder at the same laptop display. "For a second, I thought that was the goddamn stock boy hauling out the trash."

A blue icon blinked insistently in the laptop's system tray. Pritchard thumbed the laptop's omni-directional mic. "Delta Nova. Uh-huh. Hold." He addressed Yancy, "Colonel, Fort Hood indicates candidate two-four is ready. Awaiting your orders."

"De-metaled?"

The contractor nodded.

"Standby. Helo him here on my signal only." Yancy's voice echoed in the dusty air of the abandoned warehouse.

Pritchard relayed the command. His stubble-free jaw, crisp Dockers, and Banana Republic freshness contrasted with Yancy's burning eyes, tarnished eagle, and fatigues wrinkled from far too many fully-clothed naps throughout the three-month state of emergency.

Fucking idiot civilian, Yancy thought. The profusion of United Defense Alliance corporate logos emblazoned on the left tit of Pritchard's polo shirt didn't make him any less of one. Yet, Yancy knew his own job existed because of Pritchard and everyone else who never had pledged their lives in service to Duty, Honor, and Homeland. Those who took the oath gave everything for those who didn't.

The satcam image pulled back, revealing a naked man sneaking across a highway overpass. The current volunteer, candidate number 23 – distinguished combat veteran, career soldier, husband, and father of two Cub Scouts – initiated his final assault, a valiant attempt at mission completion and most likely a suicide effort.

That, too, was due to Yancy's job. The weight of the world rested on those damn squawking avian insignia he bore. He refilled his mug with the evil sludge liberated at

dawn from the wrecked Seven-Eleven. By lunch, he could have the “Dear Mrs. Edwards” letter typed and sent before mission prep commenced with candidate 24.

The HARM, in precise Army parlance, Heavy Armored Response Mechanized, serial number 00000001, looked fit, if a bit blistered and scarred from its nonstop three-month rampage. At rest atop the last of the spring's bluebonnets, it reminded Mike of an oversized stainless steel Dempsey Dumpster adorned with interlaced pipes and yawning cowls in multiple diameters, a trashman's heroin-induced nightmare.

It jerked away from its crushed azure carpet, reconfiguring its bipedal supports for open ground traversal. Joints swung and merged with appendages as the legs extended, hoisting the HARM to its full, two-story height. It tilted left then right before unleashing a tight spectrum pulse at the stucco houses across the meadow. Homes, trees, privacy fences, patio umbrellas, play forts – everything raked by the pulse – flared into a raging blowtorch.

"Bastard," Mike hissed. "Just give me an opening. One clear shot at you."

The HARM lurched forward. Mike shadowed it across the overpass before bolting the wrong way down an on-ramp, leaving bloody footprints baking in the Texas heat.

Carry out your mission, soldier. Do your Duty.

And so he would, with everything inside him aligned to this one task, a singular purpose now dictating his existence.

Before the Bradley had dropped him off in the Denton morning gloom, the scrawny colonel had asked him once more about doing the mission in the buff.

Mike's response seemed obvious, almost scripted. "I came into the world that way, Colonel. I can go out the same way," which satisfied the old officer who curtly nodded a tired face. As he doffed his bathrobe and dove out of the vehicle, Mike's respect, already high-flying for the 22 grunts who'd gone before, shot through the stratosphere. Each had perished in only the skin God had given him. Now came his turn.

"Delta Nova," Pritchard's voice droned. "Colonel, Command Ops is asking for a mission assessment report."

"Tell them we're not Tango Uniform yet. No, wait...." Fuckwads at the Joint Chiefs scrutinized the same real-time satellite feeds he did. Mustn't show weakness or incompetence. "Assault two-three engaging target. No resolution prejudice yet. Status update in fifteen."

Pritchard transmitted the report.

If this strategy didn't work, one of the upcoming missions would fall from high in megaton form. It amounted to torching city and county to eradicate a single termite infestation. Crude. Effective. And utterly stupid.

Today's Army excelled at surgically precise warfare, killing a squad of terrorists in a Waterford store without so much as a single chime from the crystal on display. Perfect death mated with point destruction – the twitchy world of capitalism demanded it. But area-wide obliteration, Yancy thought, that solution smacked of the very terrorism it purported to eliminate. The irony churned in his gut as he contemplated his fateful

decision three months prior....

"Excuse me, Colonel."

Pritchard, hands clenched in his lap, headset off, sat facing him. When their eyes met, he continued in a low voice. "I've been reviewing the profile and scoring of candidate two-four." His breath caught. "There's something you really should know."

"Oh? Well, let's see. His name is Stuart, though he prefers just 'Stu'. Master Sergeant. Career soldier. Twice decorated in Iraq, once in Iran. Exemplary service record with a long string of promotion recommendations from his COs. His Myers-Briggs scores are extraordinary, particularly indicating strong leadership. Married to a lovely woman named Susan. Three kids. Always had dogs, including one now, a skinny rescue greyhound named Slick by his eldest daughter, who thought it would be cute to hear Daddy say, 'Slick, sit'. Likes fly fishing, model trains, Chinese food buffets, and the Chicago Cubs for some ungodly reason I can't fathom. Has a jagged scar on his left forearm from colliding with a little league sandlot fence when he was ten, trying for a home-run ball. He made that catch, by the way. Kept the other team from scoring the decisive run. The only win for his team the whole season." Yancy glared at him. "What else should I know?"

Pritchard's head dipped. "I just thought," he said, fidgeting in his seat, "you might consider changing the prep, maybe giving him a few more details about the mission, a little better insight, considering—"

"Fathers have ordered their children to war for centuries, and endured the consequences. It's called Duty, with a capital 'D'. No less important now than it ever has been. Why should this time be different? He gets the same training and information all the other volunteers get, so he can perform his own Duty. No more. No less. That's how it is." Nothing else was possible, though Yancy knew the civilian across from him could never comprehend that.

Fifty feet away, the HARM chugged toward the neighborhood inferno. Mike saw his best opportunity approaching. Crouching, he darted into the meadow, circling to come up behind the thing, dancing through years of accumulated cockleburs mowed into a matted carpet.

On the crest of a deep slough, the HARM stiffened. Mike slowed, prepared to flatten himself on the dirt if the thing showed any sign of swinging about. Side panels flared over the power compartment, followed by the banshee wail of the chillers, which vented their waste heat and byproducts extracted off the HARM's micro-breeder reactor heart. Mike ducked into the roiling steam cloud, closing the distance.

A sudden breeze whisked the steam away.

Mike froze.

The HARM had swiveled. Death now stared at him with an array of spectrum emitters. One micro pulse and he'd evaporate, adding his failed attempt to the next training vidcast.

You're a shrub, Sergeant, an inconsequential life form. No metals, fibers, or plastics distinguish you from the background clutter of native life. Safe to ignore. Insignificant.

He became a tree and braced for death.

On the laptop, the juggernaut prepared to claim its twenty-third victim.

That should be me, thought Yancy, as he had every time before at this instant. Countless letters signed with his scrawl extolled pride and admiration to newly-made widows and fatherless children, when all he could think was that the very first letter should have gone to a modest colonial structure in Maryland that had been in his family for generations.

During what seemed a lifetime ago, he'd applied that same scrawl atop a thousand-page contract authorizing a certain black program. Out of his pen a defense consortium was born. The might of capitalism backed by insane amounts of tax dollars yielded a HARM conceptual prototype about the time a radical faction made landfall in Redondo Beach, holding off a Navy SEAL assault long enough to trigger a small-yield thermonuclear device. America incurred a West coast terrorism tragedy that day, a bookend to the one on the East coast over a decade earlier. Yancy compounded the LA disaster by rushing the HARMs into production, consenting to manned vehicles in place of full automation. Only elite soldiers – those the Army considered nearly perfect – qualified as operators, but as a last-minute precaution, Yancy directed UDA to include an undisclosed capability. It would forcibly replace the operator and was intended only for dire situations.

The first squad had emerged three months ago, serial numbers one through 10, near-invincible weapons of absolute power for urban and low-conflict settings.

Mike sold it, the understated performance of a lifetime.

His audience rewarded him with total indifference.

The HARM spun about and crested the lip of a deep ditch. Its cab dropped as it descended.

Now!

Mike bolted forward. As he reached the lip, the misshapen box hung a few feet up and before him, silhouetted against peals of smoke. He sprung, arced through the air, and smacked the base of the cab, snatching a tenuous handhold on a slender pipe just before falling into the HARM's churning treads. His bare flesh sizzled against buffed metal, the machine's polarized armored skin. He held on. Twisting, jerking, shoulder screaming in protest, Mike endured the torturous carnival ride up the other slope before hauling himself onto the narrow catwalk underneath the rear service doors.

Almost home.

An embossed UDA logo decorated the pair of doors facing him. The "D" split in half as he threw the release lever. He staggered into the cramped service alcove. Outside, the HARM unleashed fresh spectrum pulses, escalating the wanton carnage of its rampage.

"Time to shut you down, robot," Mike muttered through clenched teeth. Aching fingers flew across several panels, entering confidential override and security disengagement codes.

As the last was accepted, multiple amber strobes flickered, accompanied by a siren's warble.

"Cry all you want, it's over." He reached for a pair of switches, thinking of the woman's face he loved and the two tiny faces he adored. "This is for you guys," he

announced as he slammed home the knobs. "Your world just got a little safer." The pair of service doors slid shut behind him as the HARM ground to a halt. The cab began quaking, escalating to violent shakes as suffocating heat built around him. At the edge of tolerance, he heard muffled screaming resonating within the HARM's rattling walls. Then, the screams cut off and the chillers quieted. The trembling stilled. Indicators winked out.

Something was horribly wrong.

Before him the control panels parted, revealing another, deeper alcove. The stench of burnt flesh gagged him as he glimpsed an empty, man-shaped, padded cocoon. Something smacked his back. He fell into the cocoon's black caress, which constricted like a second skin. Tubes probed and invaded. A thousand needles burrowed under his flesh. Tingles shot from toes to brain stem before obliterating all conscious thought from the man once called Edwards.

"Readings?" Yancy demanded.

"Nominal," Pritchard replied. "At least for stage one of rehosting."

"Do we have control?"

"Too soon to know, Colonel. Let the rehosting complete."

"Ready destruct command. Issue on my order if control waivers." Yancy stood back and waited for the HARM to finish engaging its new operator.

Three months ago, in response to cryptic intelligence of some unspecified threat to Washington, DC, Yancy'd ordered the first soldier into HARM 00000001. The reported threat to the nation's capitol never materialized. Instead, the manned HARM created a new menace. Absolute power indeed conformed to the ancient adage, especially in the clutches of a human mind invaded, occupied, and subsumed by a specialized war-fighting machine. The subsequent loss of life and property was unfortunate, but the unit's emergency operator replacement capability gave Yancy and a successive string of volunteer candidates repeated opportunities to pilot the unit back to its Fort Hood base for permanent deactivation. They were performing their Duty, no more, no less, as best as they could. Yancy would repeat it all unchanged, if the chance to redo it materialized. That's how it was.

"Unit oh-one, acknowledge voice command on secure channel omega," Pritchard droned. "Unit oh-one, this is Delta Nova Field Ops. Acknowledge."

For Yancy, the worst aspect was the futility. In the war on terrorism, to do nothing meant the terrorist won. If one fought like a terrorist, then, again, the terrorist won. The only way to triumph was to deny the terrorist admission to the fray in the first place. Unfortunately, that option eluded Yancy, being far outside of his job scope. Indeed, sometimes defeat was inevitable and only Duty remained.

"Got it, Colonel!"

"And?"

"Self-preservation's already peaked. No destruct possible, but we do have some control, except—"

"Except what?"

"The projections from Edwards' qualification scoring are way off. Mental stability readings are trending poorly against the baseline. He's gonna go fast. We might have a

day. Maybe."

Yancy's fist smacked his palm. The pain felt good. Appropriate. "I'm sick of this, Gus. Sick to death. What's it going to take to finally end it?"

"A saint. A goddamn saint."

"Too bad we didn't spec that requirement from the start. Well, you can go call the Vatican, because we don't have any of those in our ranks. Never will. Let me speak to Edwards."

Pritchard activated the mic and nodded.

"Unit oh-one, acknowledge. Delta Nova here."

"Read," came the flat, expressionless voice.

"Mission accomplished. Dallas metropolis secured. Orders are to return to base. Best possible speed. Coordinates pending. Acknowledge."

"Confirm."

After Pritchard transmitted the lat-lon coordinates of Fort Hood, Yancy watched with him as the HARM reconfigured for flight. It rose on a tongue of white flame and angled into the sky. Perhaps Edwards could accomplish the second part of his mission, to force the unit home, safe and secured, before what remained of his mortal mind succumbed, and he became the target for the next volunteer.

"Fucking robots. I hate 'em," Yancy said, staring at the satcam track of the HARM.

"Colonel? I don't understand. I mean, if you'd just funded the fully automated unit, we wouldn't be here now."

"That's exactly what pisses me off. Pack up."

The Rainbow Bridge

By
Hank Quense

Gary Helgeson, holding an ancient amulet, watched in bafflement as the mirror and picture jumped off the wall for no discernable reason. After a blast of thunder rattled the dishes piled in the sink, the wall exploded inward, shattered by a solid-looking rainbow that stopped at the floor of his apartment. Gary dove under the kitchen table with the amulet still in his hands. A cloud of sheet-rock debris filled the air, dimming the brightness of the rainbow. Quaking in terror, Gary coughed at the pungent stink of ozone and dust. He covered his nose and mouth with a hand towel.

Two figures grappled on the rainbow. One, tall with a slender build and wind-blown reddish-brown hair, held a second in a headlock, pulling him along. The second struggled and bleated.

Once they stumbled off the end of the rainbow, it disappeared and the wall reassembled itself, like a film run backwards. The mirror and picture flew back onto their hooks and the dust disappeared.

The first visitor released the second, a short figure with a fierce expression and a paunch that protruded from a sleeveless, open vest.

"Truce?" the first said. "We have business here." The speaker looked at Gary and raised an eyebrow. "Thrall! Why are you holding my amulet?" The man wore a sky-blue tunic, red hose, and a forest-green cloak. Heat radiated from him in waves.

Gary gawked at them.

"Don't be stupid," the short one said. "Look at the treasures in this hall. He can't be a thrall."

"Well, he can't be a warrior. Not with that scrawny build. And warriors don't cringe under a table."

Gary pushed his fears aside and, with some trepidation, climbed out from under the table. "Wh...who are you? Where did you come from?"

"Bah! Why the questions?" the first replied. "After all, you summoned me."

"I did?" Gary understood the visitors even though they talked an unknown language. The words he heard were out of sync with their lip movements, as if he watched a dubbed movie.

"Of course. You used my amulet to summon the crafty Loki, and here I am. I dragged him along," Loki jerked a thumb at his companion, "so he wouldn't steal treasure from my hall while I'm gone."

"Andward the Dwarf." The second figure, only as tall as Gary's belt, bowed from the waist. "I am renowned as the owner of the Rhinegold that this despicable wretch stole." The dark-eyed dwarf was the hairiest creature Gary had ever seen; brown hair

and beard flowed in all directions. An enormous hammer stuck out of his belt. "I'm sure he still has some of it."

Gary groaned. Loki! Andward! And the Rhinegold! The tale of the gold hoard was the aunt's favorite opera. As a child, he often listened to her opera tales about the gods and myths from her birthplace in Northern Germany. But those tales were fictional. So, how did a mythical god get into his living room?

"I told you. I used the gold to ransom my brother Wodan. All of it." Loki turned to Gary. "What's the quest?"

"What are you talking about?"

"When called by the amulet, the great Loki undertakes a quest for the summoner."

"I . . . I don't have a quest."

"Then, why did you summon me?"

"I didn't know I was doing it. I just wiped some dirt off this thing I found in my aunt's attic," Gary indicated the amulet, "and you showed up."

"Your aunt!" Loki's face darkened. "A woman possessed the amulet of the noble Loki?"

"Let's go back to Asgard." Andward looked around the apartment. "I don't like it here. It's too...too light and airy. I like dark caves."

"I can't call the Rainbow Bridge." Loki spoke through clenched teeth. "Not until I complete the mission for which I was summoned. If this fool doesn't have one, we're trapped."

"Trapped?" The dwarf clutched the handle of his hammer.

"I know." Gary had an idea. "Your mission is to clean the kitchen."

Loki's eyes smoldered and threads of steam issued from his ears.

Gary cringed and edged toward the phone in the living room to call 911.

"You dare to suggest that the immortal Loki do kitchen drudgery," he advanced on Gary, "as if I am a *serf*?"

"Don't!" Andward grabbed Loki's arm. "We need him to come up with a quest."

"Not to worry. The amulet protects him from my wrath." Loki turned from Gary and paced the apartment. Electric cords popped out of sockets as he walked. So did the phone cord.

"I have a quest!" Andward said. "Give us the location of a treasure and we'll steal it."

"Excellent!" Loki stopped pacing and grinned at the dwarf. "I like stealing treasure. Reminds me of all the fun I had stealing yours."

"You are *not* stealing treasure," Gary said.

Loki resumed his pacing. After a few minutes, he looked at Andward. "The wily Loki knows how to settle this." He plopped down on a chair. A puff of smoke rose from the fabric. "You! Make a list of enemies. Andward and I'll slaughter them."

"Why do I have to work?" Andward crossed his arms on his chest. "I'm not the one who was summoned."

"That's barbarous," Gary said. He tried to get the phone jack back into the wall socket, even if he couldn't think of a way to explain the situation to the 911 operator. "Besides, I don't have any enemies." How was he supposed to get rid of these two maniacs? They'd probably all end up in jail sooner or later.

"We'll never get out of here!" Andward wailed. He stamped his feet and spit in the direction of a trash basket. He missed.

"Hold on." Gary felt a surge of relief. "I have a quest."

"Yes?"

"Find your way home."

"Good one." Andward nodded his oversized head.

"It's a stupid quest," Loki said. "Only a lackey could come up with it."

"What's wrong with it?" Gary asked.

"I can't go back to Asgard until I complete this quest and I can't complete this quest until I go back to Asgard. It's circular, that's what the problem is."

"Well, it's the best I can do."

"I hope you've laid in a large supply of mead," Loki said. "We claim guest-right until we can return to Asgard."

"I like boar meat," Andward added.

Loki and Andward refused to leave the house because of cars. To them, a wagon that moved without an animal pulling it was necromancy. However, they accepted light bulbs as magically ensnared sunlight and television as an advanced form of scrying.

On the third day of their stay, Gary came home from his job as an architectural draftsman. He kicked his way through empty cans to get to the bathroom where he gagged at the stench and flushed the toilet. Loki and Andward liked the indoor facility but claimed that removing night soil was slave work and refused to flush.

In the living room, a red-faced Loki sat on the sofa, twitching. Steam issued from the can of ale he held while a soap blared from the TV.

"By Thor's Hammer," Loki growled. "How dare that *nothing* take orders from an insignificant woman." He threw the can over his shoulder, made a rune, and changed into a falcon.

"Loki!" Gary called. "Don't!"

The falcon flapped to the TV and deposited a blob of white droppings. It squawked in victory, returned to the couch, and changed back to Loki.

"Damn it," Gary said. "Stop doing that." He fetched a paper towel from the kitchen.

"It's artistic criticism." Loki plucked a gray feather from his hair.

"So is changing the channel."

"What's for dinner?" Andward asked. "Pizza, I hope." Both visitors had abandoned their demands for boar meat after tasting pepperoni pizza.

"You're almost out of ale," Loki said. In place of mead, they each drank a case of ale a day while watching TV.

Gary cleaned the TV and sighed. "I'll go out and get both. Have you figured out how to leave?"

"No," Loki growled. "This idiotic quest is destroying my reputation. That stupid Thor will laugh himself sick when he learns of this. Everyone in Asgard will be saying I've lost my edge."

"Everyone there says you never had an edge," Andward said.

"It's all your fault." Loki shook his fist at Gary. "But the wily Loki will succeed."

“Don’t hold your breath,” Andward said.

When Gary returned from shopping, they watched a wrestling match, their favorite sports show. Gary dropped the pizzas on the living room floor and sat down. His visitors grabbed pieces without taking their eyes from the screen where two over-muscled men danced through their programmed match.

When it was over, Loki said, “The next match is the one I’ve been waiting for.”

“Why?” Gary asked.

“It’s two women and one is named ‘Vikki the Viking Vixen’. I’m sure she’s an impostor.”

Once the commercials ended, the TV showed a long shot of the arena from a high angle. In an aisle, a fur-robed woman brandished a bull whip, cracking it over the heads of the crowd. The camera closed in to show a tall and robust figure. Near the ring, she snapped the end of the whip around a post and hauled herself into the ring. She had a gorgeous face with blonde hair braided into buns around her ears.

Loki sprayed a mouthful of ale. “Andward! Look who it is! *Gerhilde!*”

Andward stared at the screen, then at Loki with disbelief on his face. “Gerhilde?”

“Who’s Gerhilde?” Gary asked.

“A Valkyre who was exiled to Mid-Garth by Wodan,” Loki said.

Vikki the Viking Vixen – née Gerhilde – pranced around the ring, snapping her whip at the referee’s feet. Beneath her robe, she wore a silk outfit patterned to resemble armor.

“Why was she exiled?” Gary asked.

“She had an affair with a hero in Valhalla.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Wodan is very straight-laced. At times.”

“What happened to the guy?”

“Nothing of course.” Loki gave Gary a puzzled look. “He’s a hero, after all.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Gary replied. “Hey! Wait a minute! Can a Valkyre call the Bridge?”

Loki looked stunned for a moment. “Hah!” He pounded his right fist into the palm of his left hand. “The cunning Loki does it again! I’ll command her to summon the Rainbow Bridge.”

“What a fraud you are,” Andward said. “You never have any ideas. You always steal someone else’s and claim it’s yours.”

Loki glared at Andward.

Gary jumped up and walked over to his computer. “Let’s see if I can find her on the Internet.” With any luck, he would soon be rid of them.

Vikki lived in northern New Jersey, only a few towns away from where Gary lived. The web site listed her wrestling schedule. They had just watched a match taped a week ago, and she had no more scheduled for a few days.

“We need to hire horses,” Loki said.

“We should walk,” Andward said. “Horses are too big for me.”

“Get in the truck,” Gary said. “It’s the only way to get to Vikki’s house.

Loki and Andward exchanged apprehensive looks.

“To get back to Asgard, you’ll have to ride in my truck,” Gary said. “Make believe it’s an old-fashioned wagon, with a few extras added.”

Loki reluctantly agreed and dragged the squealing Andward into the SUV.

Not long afterward, Gary parked outside the stone-walled gate of Vikki’s estate. Both Andward and Loki climbed out of the truck and staggered around like kids after their first roller coaster ride.

“Vikki has a lot of money,” Gary said, looking at the large colonial house and the formal gardens.

Loki sketched a rune on the gate lock. It turned cherry-red and melted. He kicked open the gate and led them to the front door. “She’ll be stunned to see her old friend, Loki.”

After he pounded on the door a third time, Vikki, in jeans and a sweat shirt, opened it. She wore her shoulder-length hair loose and cradled a white and black kitten in one arm.

The closeness of Vikki turned Gary’s brain to mush. He had trouble thinking. Besides the physical beauty of her face and figure, she exuded an aura of self-assurance and vivaciousness.

“Loki?” She looked puzzled.

“At your service.” Loki grinned and bowed.

Beyond Vikki, Gary noticed an enormous room with a white rug and white, over-stuffed furniture. A stereo played Wagner.

Vikki placed the kitten on the rug and shooed it away. She stood and smiled. “At last!” She grabbed Loki’s tunic and yanked him into the room. While holding him with her left hand, she punched him in the stomach with her right. Loki folded up, and Vikki clouted him on the side of the head. He fell to the floor. She turned back to the doorway. “Andward, you little shit! Helping your arch-enemy, are you?” She grabbed him by the beard and threw the dwarf against the far wall. Facing Gary, she growled, “Who the hell are you?”

“I’m just the driver.” Gary held up his hands and backed away. “I’m sorry I brought them.” Gary’s hopes of getting rid of Loki crashed in the face of Vikki’s hostility.

Loki jumped on her back and wrapped his arms about her throat. Vikki whirled around twice, pried loose his grip, and threw him over her shoulder. Loki landed on his back and Vikki fell on him, knees first. She climbed to her feet and lined up Loki’s quivering body for another blow.

Gary rushed through the doorway. “Wait!” He had to do something to calm Vikki down. “He came here to ask a favor!”

“Loki?” Vikki blinked. “He wants *me* to do *him* a favor?”

Loki staggered to his feet and clutched her arm. “Listen to me for a moment.”

Vikki glared at him.

He pointed at Gary. “This thrall summoned me by mistake, and I can’t get back to Asgard unless you call the Rainbow Bridge. That’s all I want you to do for your old friend.”

“You want me to help you out, do you?” Vikki gave Loki a ravishing smile.

“You’ll have my eternal gratitude.” Loki returned her smile and loosened his grip.

“Sure, I’ll help you out.” Vikki grabbed Loki and slung him over her shoulder. She ran to the door and heaved him onto the lawn. “You sleazebag! How dare you ask me for help!”

Andward ran after Loki and Gary followed but Vikki grabbed his shoulder as he ran past. “You summoned him? *Why?*”

Gary’s heart threatened to break his ribs. Her musky fragrance short-circuited his brain. “I...it was an accident. And now I’m stuck with him in my apartment.”

“Too bad.” Vikki shook her head. “I can’t imagine what it’s like putting up with that arrogant bastard.” She gave him a gentle push towards the door.

A few minutes later, leaning against the truck outside the gate, Loki said, “I know women have long memories, but this is ludicrous.”

“I recall,” Andward said, “something about you being involved with her exile.”

Loki looked annoyed.

“What did you do?” Gary asked.

“It was so long ago, I don’t remember.”

“You never forget anything,” Andward said. “Tell us why she hates you.”

Loki cleared his throat. “I’m the one who told Wodan about her affair.”

“That’s nasty,” Gary said.

“Well, it was a dull evening. I thought I’d liven things up with a little gossip.” He winced as he touched his ear where she had punched him.

“If you’re a god, how come Vikki could hurt you?” Gary asked.

“It’s the price we pay for assuming mortal form.”

Gary felt depressed. Without Vikki’s help, he looked forward to a life of fetching ale for these two. What would happen once he ran out of money? “How long has she been exiled?”

“Since that crazy guy was running around,” Andward said. “What’s his name? Something Hun.”

“*Attila?*”

“That’s him.”

It explained Vikki’s antagonism. “That’s a long time to be exiled.”

Loki snapped his fingers and a spark landed on the grass. “Clever Loki does it again. I know how to convince her to help. Back to the house.”

Andward snorted.

“Are you nuts?” Gary said. “She’ll kill you...if she can.”

“Nonsense. Even a woman will understand my offer.”

On the porch, Loki banged his fist on the door. Andward shielded himself behind Gary.

“Come in,” Vikki called out in a pleasant voice.

Loki opened the door. “My dear, I have an off—”

The bull whip whirred through the air and wrapped around Loki’s neck. Vikki jerked it. Gurgling, Loki stumbled into the room and fell to the floor. Vikki released the whip, placed a foot on Loki’s chest, and glared at Gary and Andward. The dwarf whimpered and clutched Gary’s arm.

“I have no quarrel with you two. Stay out of this and I’ll leave you alone.” She reached down, grabbed Loki’s throat in her left hand, hauled him upright.

As much as Gary feared going near the furious Valkyre, he entered the living room and waved a hand to get her attention.

"What?" she growled to him, her right fist cocked.

"Loki has an offer he wants you to hear."

"He does?" She gave Loki a puzzled look. "What?"

"I'll make it worth your while to call the Bridge," Loki said.

"How?"

"Once I get back to Asgard, I'll tell Wodan that you've been exiled long enough. You can come back."

"This is his offer?" she said to Gary. "Can you believe this idiot?" Vikki grabbed Loki's shirt in both hands and shook him. "Listen to me, stupid. I wrestle because I want to. I can do anything I want. I'm the richest woman in the world, and I have been for centuries. I live in luxury no one in Asgard can even dream about. I'm not going back to live in a mud hovel and follow the orders of that one-eyed wimp. Here, in Mid-Garth, I'm free. But you wouldn't understand that. So, you can take your offer and stick it where the sun don't shine." She stepped towards the door and threw Loki back out. He landed on the sidewalk with a body-crunching noise.

Before she closed the door, Vikki winked at Gary.

After returning home, Gary and Loki discussed the events for hours. Loki couldn't understand why Vikki wanted to stay here instead of returning to Asgard and why she wouldn't help him. "Doesn't she realize she's damaging my name?" He stopped pacing around the living room and looked at Gary. "Women are so selfish. They only consider their own interests, no one else's." He raised a hand with one finger extended. "Her refusal cannot be ignored. She must be punished before I return to Asgard. My reputation demands it." He resumed his pacing.

"If you want Vikki to help," Gary said, "you'll have to find a way to apply pressure on her. You have to convince her it's better to call the Bridge than to have you around."

"I suppose your right. The tricky Loki will have to outfox her. But how?"

Gary had different matter to ponder. Why did Vikki wink at him? He hoped it meant she wasn't mad at him. Maybe she wouldn't try to get even with him for summoning Loki. Maybe they could exchange e-mails or something when this was over.

Gary spent the night dreaming about Vikki. He couldn't clear his mind of her gorgeous image. When he got up, he found Loki sitting around, too depressed to watch the soaps. He slumped on the couch and stared at the wall. In his black mood, he refused to drink or eat. Andward, in his own fashion, cleaned up the apartment. He hammered ale cans into flattened metal circles and saved them in a plastic garbage bag. He planned to nail them to a piece of wood to make a shield that would be unique in Asgard.

In mid-afternoon, Loki leaped up, seized Andward, held the dwarf over his head and spun around a half-dozen times while shouting a battle cry. He body-slammed Andward onto the floor and pranced around in a victory dance.

“Loki does it again! I know how to get that bitch to help.” He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed. “After I’m finished, she’ll beg to help me. Only the brilliant Loki could come up with such a plan.” Loki grinned. “Find out when her next match is.”

Gary parked his truck in an open lot a few blocks from Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. He had spent another night dreaming of Vikki. This time they were on a dance floor and spent hours doing the tango, the rumba, and the waltz, which was strange because Gary couldn’t do any of those dances. When he awoke, he was exhausted as if he hadn’t slept at all and his legs hurt.

They found their fifth row seats in the partially-filled arena and watched three matches before Vikki and Lucita the Latin Lumberjack came on. Vikki made her whip-snapping entrance while Lucita swung a long-handled axe to loosen up. The black-haired Latin Lumberjack wore calf-high boots and a checkered flannel shirt.

Once the match started, Gary gnawed his fingernails waiting for Loki to act. After a few minutes, he drew an air-rune, changed to a falcon and swooped down to the ring.

Gary bit his lip. He had to act. He stood up and yelled, “Vikki! Watch out!”

Vikki shoved Lucita away and glanced towards the sound of the warning. When the falcon swooped into the ring, she swatted it. The bird tumbled backward, losing a few feathers. It recovered and landed on a post. The wrestlers and the referee stared at the bird. Vikki turned to her manager and said, “Give me my whip.”

Lucita gave Vikki an elbow to the windpipe. Vikki collapsed to the canvas, gasping for air. The falcon cried out and flew to another post, dodging beer containers and balled-up hot dog wrappers thrown by the fans. They shrieked in delight. Vikki climbed to her feet, holding her throat. The falcon flew down to Vikki’s head and grabbed a braid in both claws. Vikki screeched as the bird flew away with a chunk of hair. Blood oozed from the side of Vikki’s head. Red with fury, she shook her fist at the bird darting around the ring. Lucita charged Vikki, leaped in the air, and hit her in the back with both feet. Vikki exploded forward and tangled herself in the ropes. Lucita pounced on her. Less than a minute later, the referee declared Vikki too dazed to continue. From Vikki’s stunned expression, Gary didn’t think she realized she had lost the match.

Lucita danced around the ring.

The falcon returned to its seat and changed back to Loki. “You shouted a warning to her! Treachery is punishable by death. Only the amulet shields you from Loki’s vengeance.” His mood brightened. “Later tonight, we’ll visit Vikki again. This time, she’ll help me.”

In the early morning hours, Gary drove his truck to the mansion. The living room lights were on. “Vikki’s going to rip your head off, you know,” Gary said to Loki.

“She can try.” Loki chuckled as he opened the truck door. “I’m too smart. I have a plan to get inside the house without her touching me. This is my most delightful victory. I can’t wait to retell it in Valhalla. I can already hear the cheers of the heroes as they raise horns of mead in my honor.”

Loki strode to the front door and rapped his fist on it.

The idea of seeing Vikki again made Gary's breath ragged.

Andward followed with his bag of flattened ale cans.

Vikki, in shorts and t-shirt, threw open the door. She had a bandage on the side of her head. "You sonuvabitch!" She lunged at Loki.

Loki changed to the falcon, flew underneath her grasping arms, and landed on the blade of a ceiling fan.

Vikki looked bewildered at Loki's disappearance and Gary saw she had been drinking. "You brought him back! Why?" Her face contorted with rage. "Why are you helping him?"

"I'm not *helping* him, I just want to get *rid* of him!"

"Oh." Her face relaxed. "Where'd he go?"

Gary pointed to the fan. "Up there."

Vikki saw the bird, ran to a wall switch, and punched a button. The fan whirled into high-speed action. Loki held on for half a revolution and slipped off. His wing caught on the following blade. It hurled him into a corner. He smacked into the wall and slid down behind a couch, leaving a cloud of gray and white feathers drifting in the air.

Seconds later, Loki – no longer in falcon form – climbed off the floor, clutching the couch for support. "Wait?"

"No!" Vikki pulled a baseball bat out of a closet.

"Call the Bridge!"

"No way." She took a few practice swings and advanced towards the couch.

"Call the Bridge!" Loki held up a hand. "Or, I'll show up at every match until you do."

Vikki stopped wagging the bat, scrunched up her face, and pondered the threat.

Gary felt sorry for anyone who crossed Loki. The guy had a mean streak in him. Vikki had suffered enough for an indiscretion so long ago.

To Gary's surprise, a fleeting look of delight flashed across Vikki's face, but immediately gave way to a solemn mien. "All right. You win. I should have know better than to try to beat Loki."

"That's right. No one beats the sly Loki. I'm the master of trickery."

"Do you want to leave right now?"

"Yes!"

"We'll use the back yard."

They followed her through the house and came to a large, fenced-in area with a pool, a cabana, and a patio. Vikki leaned against a patio chair, closed her eyes and mumbled a few words while etching runes in the air.

An ozone stench filled the area. Thunder boomed. The air shimmered and took on substance and colors. The Rainbow Bridge touched the ground at Vikki's feet. The hump, hundreds of feet high, disappeared into a cloud.

"Andward should go first," Vikki told Loki. "To prepare Asgard for your return. And to tell them to start a feast in celebration."

"Excellent! Do it, Andward."

Andward gave her a deep bow, hefted his clanking bag of ale cans, and trotted up the Bridge.

Gary couldn't pull his eyes away Vikki's face. She struggled to conceal some deep emotion. Perhaps, the pull of Asgard still had some strength.

After Andward disappeared from sight, Loki cackled and smacked Vikki on the backside as he passed her. He climbed the Bridge but stopped after a few paces and turned to Gary. "Don't use the amulet again, if you know what's good for you." He continued up the rainbow.

Vikki giggled.

"I guess you're happy to see the last of Loki," Gary said.

Wide-eyed, Vikki looked at Gary while her body shook with stifled laughter. She etched a rune and the Bridge disappeared. Vikki guffawed, hiccupped twice, and finally broke into a belly laugh. Tears filled her eyes. She held on to the table to maintain her balance.

"What did you do?" Gary asked.

Vikki took a deep breath to regain some control and said, "I withdrew the Bridge." She went into a paroxysm of laughter again.

"But...Loki was on it."

"I know." Vikki wiped tears from eyes. "He's trapped until someone calls it again. And that sure as hell won't be me."

"I guess Loki isn't so crafty after all." Gary laughed with her.

"Finally," she said. "I get even with him for lying to Wodan."

Gary's mouth dropped open. "Loki made up the story?"

"He told you about me? About the so-called affair?"

Gary nodded. "What an evil creature."

"He made a pass at me." She crossed her arms. "That's why he lied to Wodan."

"That's terrible!"

"But now, everything has changed. Thanks to Loki." Her smile made his knees buckle.

"How so?" Gary shook his head, trying to make sense of Vikki's comments.

"The worst thing about my exile is not having anyone to talk to. I'm always afraid I'll let something slip so I don't get friendly with people. I get so lonely at times. But now you know about me, about Asgard, about Loki. You're someone I can talk to."

Gary had trouble breathing. She wanted to be friends? Even in his wildest dreams that hadn't happened.

"And you aren't like those boring heroes in Valhalla. All they ever talk about is the battles they were in. They make them sound like wars when they were nothing but cattle raids." She took a deep breath. "I have a match tomorrow night at the Garden. Want to go?"

Gary stared at her. For all his dreaming of Vikki, did he really want to get involved with another being from Asgard? Didn't he learn from Loki to stay away from the gods?

Vikki saw his hesitation and sniffed. Her eyes watered.

Gary felt like he had been punched in the stomach. His indecision disappeared. "Sure...I'll go."

"Great!" She took his arm and squeezed it. "I'll leave a ticket for a ring-side seat at the box office. And after the match, we'll have dinner and then go dancing. But now, let's go for a swim."

Death by Submission

By
Betsy Dornbusch

Primed by a cold beer, I sit at my computer in my office, staring at my divvy of submissions for our magazine. They blur into an electric glow and I blink. The letters transform into words:

SUBMISSION: *This Is Your Death. Rec. 08/24/06 23:59*

I'm jaded, and I've always got deadlines that have nothing to do with the magazine, but I like to respond to our writers as quickly as possible. I'm stalled on my own short story. I'm too exhausted for the deep revisions required by my novel, three weeks late to the publisher. It's too cold and late to walk the dog. I'm only reading tonight because of my stupid compulsion that demands a completion this day.

I bring up our form rejection in Word to jinx my needing it. Every editor loves the orgasm of creative deliverance when they read a really good story. We hope we won't reject a story almost as much as its author does. I open the file and tap my fingers against my silver beer can as I wait for the computer to comply. It's less than a page long and it starts with the words:

Tonight you die.

Second person and flash besides. Not promising. But my other kindness as an editor is reading to the end. They bothered to write it and send it in. The least I can do is read it.

You don't believe yet, of course. You're sitting at your crumb-laden desk with a drink in your hand and you read on only because you're waiting to disprove the opening line.

I take a pull of beer and sigh.

You think it's absurd, of course, but absurdity never precludes truth. You think you're going to reject this story and go to bed happy you ate that healthy salad for dinner because you're watching your weight.

I swallow more beer and glance at the lo-cal Italian congealing around the bits of lettuce on the plate by my elbow.

But fat is fat, even when you're dead. You won't lose weight until you're on the mortician's table, and everyone will be much too busy studying your wounds to notice your thighs anyway.

The dog sighs, asleep on her rug by the sliding glass door. She doesn't so much as flick an ear. The only bright spot in the night glass is the glow of my computer screen. I go back to the story. I'll send it on for a second review if the ending doesn't disappoint.

Now you're coming around. Might have been worth staying up after all. And it is worth it because tonight you die, and you wouldn't want to miss it, would you?

The dog emits a low growl. Her golden hackles make an uneven ridge on her back. A shadow hovers behind me, reflected in the glass, the glow of my monitor shining in a curved blade. My chest closes around my heart. The words on the screen transform into a whisper against the back of my neck:

"Good stories about death are usually longer than this one, you think. But the best stories take the fewest words. Like this one, for example. The words have run out, and yet, the story is just beginning."