

# Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

INC. DNA PUBLICATIONS

Spring 2005

Issue #21

Jack Williamson

Chris Bunch

Robert Reed

Allen M. Steele

Sarah A. Hoyt

Joe Haldeman

Lawrence Schoen

\$5.95 (7.95 Canada)



"Sweet Waters"  
A New Linden Story  
By Sharon Lee & Steve Miller



# Editorial Notes by Warren Lapine

$$M = m + 5 + 5 \log p$$

Welcome to *Absolute Magnitude* #21. As many of you know it's been a very busy year for us here at DNA Publications. We entered into a joint venture with the rock band KISS to publish their official magazine. KISS magazine has taken off into the publishing stratosphere allowing us to sign an advantageous deal for all of our titles with Curtis Circulation the worlds largest wholesaler of magazines. This will allow us to get into more stores than we ever have before and reach a multitude of new readers something were obviously quite pleased with.

This new distribution deal couldn't have come at a better time for us. For the last five years all of our titles had been distributed by IPD. Recently IPD was purchased by Source Interlink. Source Interlink decided that it wanted a larger percent of the money from each sale and tried to force new contracts on all of their smaller vendors. Unfortunately, their numbers and justification for this seemed quite forced to us, and frankly they offered nothing in return for the extra money they would be taking. According to their numbers our profit margin was just a bit too small for them currently and they needed to recoup a larger percentage. Now our biggest problem here was that the report that they had generated these figures with failed to take into account a price increase that we had instituted some six months previously which put us into their *safe* percentage. I was not willing to negotiate based on old numbers and they were not willing to negotiate on current numbers. So we, and apparently many other magazine, left IPD. Our choice was for Ingram as they were already working with many of our titles in their independent stores. Now Ingram is a solid company, but we had trouble right away getting our orders for the chain stores. I'm sure this was because the load of new magazines leaving IPD must have been crushing. All the same, it was very frustrating for us for years we'd had solid, steady distribution and now it was no longer running smoothly for us.

Now enter KISS. As just about everyone knows KISS is perhaps the most popular American rock band of all time. Every distributor that I spoke with wanted to do a deal to get the KISS Magazine. So once we had a deal with KISS and some page proofs we were able to chose who we wanted to deal with and insist that our other titles be tied into the deal. Curtis was our choice because no one else can reach as many markets. I've been very impressed with how quickly Curtis was able to get us back into the stores we've always been in and just how fast they've been able to grow the KISS title.

I realize that in the past when other genre magazine publishers have moved into more lucrative magazine markets they have chosen to limit the number of genre titles that they publish or leave genre publishing all together in pursuit of bigger money. After seeing what entertainment publishing has to offer, I can understand the temptation. But I want to assure everyone that DNA Publications is committed to improving genre publishing. While obviously we're in business to make money our company philosophies and priorities are different than Corporate America's. While we listen to bean counters they are not allowed to make final decisions. We will never cut a profitable magazine just because the same staff could make more money for us on a different type of title. In situations such as these we will always hire new staff for the new titles. Remember, the only reason that DNA Publications exists at all is because I love genre fiction and am committed wholeheartedly to doing whatever I can to improve the state of this field.

I'm sure everyone has noticed that this issue doesn't have our usual lavish illustrations. This is an experiment, as I wanted to get a couple of extra stories into this issue. We'd like to get your input on this. Are you happier with the extra stories or do you want the art back? Please drop us a line and let us know.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone for being here for the last twelve years. We're looking forward to many more decades. Now it's time to buckle up, this issue is going to be a great ride!

## Absolute Magnitude

Science Fiction

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# The Half Men

Jack Williamson

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**E**motion is immune to reason. I met Holaine Cardish in a universal history class and fell hard for her, against her own advice. We lived together through her final semester, but she laughed when I begged her to marry me.

"You're an idiot," she told me at breakfast on the morning after our last night together. "I like you, Gil. I love the sex, but I have a life to live."

The life she wanted was on the lost worlds.

"That's where I see the lure of history." Her eyes lit. "The conflicts of human heroism against an uncaring cosmos. Human triumph and human tragedy. Mysteries to be solved. Dramas far more exciting than sex."

Surveys had located Earth-like planets all across the galaxy, but none entirely like our mother world. Terraforming sometimes failed. Some had malignant bioforms, or developing life worth quarantine, yet most colonies survived to link themselves into the web of interstellar civilization. Her concern was those that vanished.

"I want to know what happened to the losers," she said. "The reason is often clear enough. Unpredicted catastrophe. Social breakdown. Migration to a better world. I want the stories of those that dropped out of history, fate unknown."

She graduated two years ahead of me and found a job with the Galactic Survey. I tried to keep in touch. She moved into of field work, moved again into the division of search and recontact.

"Dead worlds!" she wrote. "I'm looking for ghosts!"

An exuberant message came a year later.

"Great news! I'm bound for Q845K. A Terran-type planet far out in Octant 8. Settled 1500 years ago. Once a prosperous exporter of rare metals and fine hardwoods. Out of contact the last thousand years. Can't wait to see it! Will keep you informed."

Nothing followed.

My own career had gone nowhere. I abandoned history to study interstellar navigation and spent a few years as a copilot, but Holaine still haunted my memory. On impulse, after a dark night in too many bars, I quit my job on a freight line and set out to find her. A clerk at the survey office gave me the last-known coordinates of Q845K and warned me not to trust them.

"They're a thousand years old. The last fly-bys reported no radio contact. Nothing since." He frowned at my license badge. "As you know, sir, skip navigation and skip signals depend on very precise locations. Stars drift. You might never find the planet. More likely lose yourself."

In spite of the warning, I spent my savings for a little single-seat hyper-time skipship that had a million light-years on the log after twenty years of service, and used the survey data to plot a course out into Octant 8. The seventh skip left me within a few light-days of a bright white star. The eighth let me locate a single Earth-type planet.

The ninth skip took me down to orbit. It was Q845K, only a bit larger than Earth, a bit farther from the star. One wide continent lapped across the equator from an ice cap over the north pole. A chain of snow-capped summits curved down the west coast. Gray-brown deserts spread east across the temperate latitudes and a dense cloud cover veiled the tropics.

Scanning the radio spectrum, I got only silence. Calls to Holaine on the universal emergency bands brought nothing. I dropped low enough

to sweep the planet with binoculars and found no industrial smoke, no roads, no patterns of farms or cities.

Instead a riddle: seven silver globes flying high above the tropic ocean, holding to a neat V-formation. They looked too large for anything natural, moved too slowly for any ordinary aircraft. Balloons? I'd never seen balloons in formation. The planet's rotation took them out of view. Clouds had thickened when the ocean returned. I failed to find them again, and called myself a fool. Perhaps Holaine had never got here. Perhaps she had come and gone. She might never want me, even if I found her.

Yet I'd come too far to quit. I picked a landing spot near a fleck of green in a flat expanse of desert, skipped down into the atmosphere and flew low across a tiny oasis. Palm-like trees lined a narrow lake behind a dam on a dry streambed. I found a single building, or the ruin of one, and turned back to study it again. A thick stone column, perhaps a hundred feet tall, it stood on a barren ridge beside the lake. A spiral stair wound around it to a flat platform at the top. I saw no openings. Stones crumbling from the edge of the platform had carried sections of the stair away.

I was circling back to look again when something flashed in the cockpit. The instrument lights blinked out. The jets gone silent, the ship went into a dive. I tried to skip away and found the skip engine dead. I pulled out of the dive into a glide across the lake, looking for anywhere to land.

Something flashed again. Something in the instrument console smoked and reeked of heat. I found a big silver globe in the air over the tower and wondered if it had hit me. The ship was veering aside. I fought the controls, got across the lakeshore, and came down too fast toward a rocky ridge above it.

I don't recall the impact; I must have been knocked out, though only for a moment. The ship had slid down the summit, tipped, and stopped on its side. Hanging there, helpless, I felt an instant of insane relief. My senseless quest was over. I had nothing left except the impulse to stay alive.

I heard something dripping and caught the reek of spilled jet fuel. I unlocked the safety restraints, climbed out of the wreck, and stumbled down the hill. Before I had gone a dozen yards, I heard an explosion behind me and felt a blast of heat. I staggered farther, to a rock where I could sit and get my breath.

The flames roared high behind me. Sitting there, battered and trembling, I felt utterly helpless. I'd had food and bottled water in the luggage bin, camping equipment, even a deadly little handgun. I heard the ammunition popping, and felt myself the idiot Holaine had called me.

The fire died out and I stood up to look around me and found the silver globe again, now sinking toward that lone tower. No common balloon, it had no ropes or basket. I saw no weaponry, but I thought it must have fired whatever brought me down.

It stopped and held steady just above the tower platform. A spidery ladder folded out of it. A man-shaped figure came down. Not quite human, it was naked and gray, moving with a fluid robotic grace. Standing at the crumbled edge of the platform, it stood motionless a few minutes and climbed back into the globe. The ladder folded after it. The globe lifted and climbed away, into a cumulus tuft.

# The Half Men

I was limping down toward the lake when I heard a roll of drums and found a little group of people marching toward me in a sort of ragged order. Three drummers led, their instruments tuned to make an odd harmony. I waited, watching uneasily. They were brown-bodied and lean, half-naked, half-clad in leather and animal fur. They carried wicked-looking knives and spears. One man dragged an unwilling goat on a rope.

They halted not far from me, and dropped to their knees. The leader, an iron-bearded, hawk-faced giant in red-beaded buckskin, began a chant, timed to the rhythm of the drums. When he paused, his followers responded in chorus. The language seemed half familiar, and I thought I caught a repeated refrain.

“Oh master man, take mercy on us,” it seemed to go. “Oh master man, take mercy on us!”

I was not sure of the words, or master of anything. All I could do was stand there, wondering if Holaine had ever reached the planet, yet feeling a vast relief that my own fate now seemed to matter more than hers.

The chanting went on till my knees felt weak from standing. At last the leader stopped the chant and beckoned to the man with the bleating goat. He and another held it up by the hind legs. The leader drew his blade, slit its throat, and caught the blood in a pottery bowl. He knelt again and offered it to me.

My stomach recoiled, but I put it to my lips, handed it back, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. He rose, sipped it, passed it to the others. They gutted the dead goat, tied the legs together, ran a spear between them, hoisted it, and trotted off around the lake.

The leader beckoned for me to follow. The others fell in behind us and the drummers beat a rapid march. Limping to keep up, I fought a bewildered dread. Clearly, they had taken me for somebody I wasn't. Would I go the way of the goat when they found out the truth?

A narrow footpath took us over the dam. I saw green plots below it and water flowing in an irrigation ditch. Beyond the lake, the path led us up a long slope into to an odd little village: a score of grass-roofed huts set in a half-circle around an open space. Flat stones for seats were arranged before a crudely hewn block of some black stone, just at the foot of the tower.

The leader gestured me into a seat. They all bowed and knelt. The leader sprang to the stone block, bowed to the sky above the tower, and renewed his chant. Again I caught the phrase “master man,” and thought I'd begun to understand. If I could learn enough to play the role, it might keep me alive. If I failed—

I tried not to dwell upon that.

While the chant went on, women were skinning the goat, cutting it into chunks, roasting them on an open hearth in the center of the square. The chant stopped at last, and women brought jars of a bitter, beer-like brew. The leader knelt to offer a mug of it to me, then a slab of goat meat on a piece of tough brown bread. When the meal was over, he beckoned me into a hut.

It was one tiny windowless room, furnished with a rough wooden bench, a little table, and a narrow bed made of rawhide strips woven over a frame of something like bamboo. He left me there alone, a prisoner there. I saw no escape except to play the game of master man, with rules I would have to learn.

Night was falling. I lay there in the dark, aching from my bruises and groping for hope, trying to imagine the history of the planet, wondering what had killed its civilization, till something roused me. I saw a light and found a woman in the doorway, carrying a flickering candle.

Not speaking, she set the candle on the table and stood back to let me see her. Young and tall, she moved with a lean-featured grace.

Sleek black hair fell free to her waist, and a garland of bright red blooms filled room with fragrance. She wore a short skirt and a fringed buckskin jacket. Motionless for a moment, she stripped them off, tossed them to the floor, and stood glaring at me with a mix of dread and stolid defiance.

Clearly she expected me to rape her. If that was part of the game, it was a move I was not prepared to make. I picked up the jacket and reached to hand it to her. She shrank away, but let me drape it back around her high-breasted body. I sat back on the edge of the bed and tried to smile. She stood there, staring at me warily, till it struck me that she could be my teacher.

I began touching parts of my face, repeating the names, waiting for her to respond. She soon caught on. Relaxing a little, her hostile silence thawing, she began giving me words and correcting my accents. The lesson went on till I was groggy for sleep. I lay down and beckoned for her to leave.

Instead, she lay down beside me, nude against me in the narrow bed. Trying to ignore her live warmth and good scent, I lay awake a long time and finally fell into an uneasy sleep, haunted with nightmare dreams. I thought she was Holaine, wearing bright-beaded buckskins till she stripped them off to tempt me.

She had stolen this girl's beauty and the long black hair. She always danced away when I tried to touch her, and said she had work to do. I woke and woke again with hard erections and tried in vain to put a little distance between us. The room grew colder and she always snuggled closer.

I woke at last alone in the bed, bright sunlight falling through the open doorway. She had spread a blanket over me. Standing beside me now, she offered a hot mug of that bitter brew and then a bowl of something like oatmeal boiled with bits of goat meat. She was silent, her eyes cast down, but she ate with me when I let her share the worn metal spoon.

When I wanted to relieve myself, she showed me to a malodorous pit down below the village, waited till I was ready, walked behind me down to the lake and back. We resumed the lessons. The language was a dialect of Cosmish, the lingua franca of the starways. Words had been lost and added, accents and vowel values confusingly shifted, but she had become a bright and apt instructor.

Her name was Narayana. Her people were Sek Korar. Or was that the name of the village? Distinctions were hard to establish. She bowed and fell silent when we saw the chief mount the black stone and begin a chant. His name was Kye Kyrel. I caught the phrase “master men” again, but I felt afraid that any questions might reveal too much about me.

With no clock or calendar, I lost track of time. Narayana stayed with me day and night, a watchful slave, dutifully attentive to my every whim. Sleeping with her in the same narrow bed, I tried to deny desire and found myself imagining impossible moments of her companionship in a free life back at home.

I earned more of her language; she learned a little of mine. I asked about her own life. She had no family. Her parents had been killed by marauders she called Sek Ronar, “those who never walk.” When I asked about them, she brought a piece of slate and a lump of charcoal to draw a stick figure on a four-legged animal I took for a horse. They were rovers, she said, who had no home. They grew no food, made nothing useful, lived by killing and plunder.

Trying avoid anything that might give me away, I picked up what I could about the master men. They lived in their homes in the sky. Once, I gathered, they had been the rulers, teachers, and friends of the “half men,” as she called her own people. They had taught the arts of farming, of building, of healing. Their gray slaves had come down to

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the tower to receive the tithes, a share of the crops and the animals every year.

Now everything had changed. I couldn't ask why, but Kyrel came to me with a litany of questions.

"Master man, have we offended you?" His voice quivered, and tears shone in his pale old eyes. "Or why have you forgotten us? Why are you blind to our poor offerings and deaf to our prayers? Why have you dry up the rivers and the lakes and stop the kind rains? Why do you send the bitter dust of spring and the burning wind of summer and the killing cold of winter? Why do you take away the animals we hunted? Must you let us die?"

He wasn't stupid. I didn't know what he might believe, and I thought the whole truth could kill me.

"The decision is difficult," I said. "It is not mine to make."

He had seen my craft fall and burn. Shrewdly cautious with the questions, he wanted to know if there was trouble in the sky. I admitted that there had been for me. He escorted me back to the wreck, a little pile of burnt and broken metal, and examined bits of it when I gave permission.

The sky folk, Narayana explained, no longer brought new metal. It was precious. He knelt in gratitude when I gave him the wreckage, and took me to see a crude forge down below the village, where a grimy smith was burning charcoal to reshape old metal into tools and weapons.

Narayana woke me one morning, breathless with excitement.

The sky ship was coming!

We watched it sail out of a red eastern dawn and hang just above the tower. The ladder unfolded. A quick gray robot glided down to the platform, carrying a bag and a thick coil of something. A human figure followed, moving more slowly.

"Master man!" Narayana clutched my arm. "Here for you?"

I looked again; it was a woman.

The robot ran back up the ladder. It vanished after him. The woman stood at the edge of the platform, watching the globe lift, dwindle, disappear. I squinted and knew she was Holaine. She stood peering down at village and then off into the distance.

"They left her?" Narayana shook her head. "Why?"

I didn't know.

People were crowding around the black stone. They knelt when Kyrel climbed on it. Looking up at Holaine, he chanted a prayer. She seemed not to notice. The crowd scattered, and Kyrel sent a climber up to the first break in the stair. He found no way past it. Holaine seemed stuck there on the bare platform, left without food or water. Again he had Narayana question me. Did I know her, or why she had been abandoned?

I could only spread my hands.

Next morning we found Holaine still there, looking off into the east. I heard shouts. Narayana listened and clutched my arm, whispering that the Sek Romak were coming. We climbed the ridge to see them, a little file of horsemen winding down a trail.

Men armed themselves. Narayana found a deadly little dagger and offered me a machete. Lacking skill with it, I had more trust in my pilot's badge. Women gathered their children and prepared for flight, but the horsemen stopped beyond the lake. One lone rider came over the bridge, waving a white flag on the point of a lance.

Kyrel walked to meet him. They talked and came on together, the man leading his horse. He climbed on the black stone, waved at Holaine, spoke on a telephone. We watched her lower her bag on a rope and then rappel down the side of the tower. Kyrel brought her over to the hut where I stood with Narayana. Deeply tanned, she looked lean

and hard in well-worn buckskins, a sheathed blade and a holstered handgun on her belt.

"Gillyar! I never expected to see you here." Knowingly, she grinned at Narayana, who moved closer against me. "Gone native, I see."

I wondered why I had ever thought I loved her.

"You were with the Galactic Survey," I said. "They've been expecting some kind of report about what you had found here. You once promised to keep me informed."

"Long ago." She shrugged, but a sudden animation lit her face. "You want to know what I've found here? A new life, really. A new chapter in galactic history, if I ever get it done. Right now, I'm famished."

I asked Narayana to find a meal for her. Sitting with me at the little table in the hut, she drained a mug of beer and devoured a pone of brown bread and a cold slab of roasted goat before she paused to look up at me.

Had she met the master men?

"Dead." She shrugged. "Dead for centuries."

I asked for more, but she finished her meal with a slice of melon before she wiped her lips and spoke again. She had found the planet with no difficulty and studied it from orbit before she landed some two hundred miles east of where we were, in what had been a great city.

"Dead as the master men."

She gestured at the empty sky.

"The first colonists found a friendlier environment, the deserts yet to come. This area was dense hardwood forest they cut for export. Boom times, till they went wrong."

She pushed her empty plate at Narayana, with an imperative wave for it to be taken away.

"I set the ship down among the charred stumps of dead trees in what must have been a public park. Empty ruins all around it. I was there alone for weeks, but the nomads had seen me come down. They made a pilgrimage to the spot and received me like a goddess, as you ought to understand."

She leered at Narayana.

"The role has let me carry on my research." She nodded at the warrior waiting behind her. "Five years now. Roving the country with the nomads. Recording what they remember, which isn't much. They've lost electronics. A few of them can read and write, but they don't make paper, don't keep archives."

"I've heard legends of how the master men found an empty world and sowed it with new life. They seem to have done well at first, but things went sour. The planet wasn't so kind as it had seemed. The climate was fickle. Native microbes caused troublesome infections. People who could try to avoid them. The result was what you see."

She nodded smugly at Narayana.

"A division into two social orders. Half men and master men. The half men did the work, the master men kept the know-how and the power for themselves. They lived aboard their orbital ships or in protected villas outside the cities until they perfected the craft you've seen. They were the big riddle I had to crack."

She glanced at the old tower.

"A landing station. There's another on a hill near the city where I landed. In better shape than this. A sacred spot, where the half men still come to keep their peace with the gods. I watched the craft touching down there till I decided to take a look."

I studied her again. Though my old admiration was gone, she still looked lean and competent. I felt a flash of respect for her hardihood. She saw my glance, lifted her eyebrows at Narayana, and went on.

"When the next craft appeared, I climbed to meet it. The robots came down for my luggage as if I had been expected. I followed them

# The Half Men

up the ladder. The ship is a sort of balloon, propelled by nuclear-powered thrusters, with living quarters at the bottom. Very high-tech. It would be luxurious, even back at home.

"And all still up and running, maintained by the robots. The air had a faint edge of old decay, but I got used to it. Water still good, sanitation still working. I found a dried-up mummy in a bedroom. The last occupant; she must have left no instructions for her removal.

"That visit has filled out the story of their decline and fall. Their skycraft and the little gray robots were just too perfect. That perfection gave them their own rich golden age, but it finally killed them. They were safe from disease, rebellion, everything except their own high technology, but they were still dependent on the half men and supplies from the ground.

"They'd let the two cultures evolve apart. The half men adapted as well as they could to the surface world. They grew immune to the diseases. They tried to cope with change. But they couldn't renew the wasted planet or stop the spread of the deserts. And they couldn't save the master men.

"For their last century or so, the sky folk seem to have enjoyed an intellectual flowering. I'm still digging for more about that, but they had artists and musicians they thought were great. Poets. Mathematicians. Philosophers. Even historians who saw what was happening and got no attention. But they neglected their surface support system.

"Early on, they'd been competent governors. They and their robots were the judges, the police, the teachers. They let the half men support them, doing nothing for themselves. That finally killed them. They neglected their support system, let it decay, squabbled over what was left, finally destroyed it in an effort to crush a revolt of the half men. For control of their surf over wealth and power and nothing at all. I think the last of them starved to death."

She shook her head at the ruined tower.

"I still have a lot to learn, but that sums up the story."

I asked if she was going home.

"Sometime, of course." She shrugged. "But I'm far from finished. They left letters, journals, works of art, whole libraries that I haven't even begun to explore."

She stopped to study me, her eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"I can use you, Gil. I have bales of field notes that have to be copied and collated. I've tried to train people to do it, but none of them is really literate." Decision hardened her jaw. "I'll take you back to the office I set up where I landed." She tilted her nose at Narayana. "Get rid of her."

"I can't."

"You will." Her jaw set harder. "We're alive because they take us for gods. The masters had to keep their distance to keep respect. A very strict rule that I intend to follow."

She gave orders and a horse was brought for me. Narayana cried and clung to me until Holaine scolded her into whimpering silence. That wrenched my heart, but she stopped my protests. They put her own life in danger. Holaine was the master person now.

I'd never ridden. The horse bucked me off and set the nomads to laughing till she cut them off with a sharp command. They led the horse till I found my seat. We were five hard days on the way to the empty city. For an office, she'd had the nomads clear the space around standing walls close beside her skipper and put a straw roof over them. Improvised tables were stacked with her notes and a small museum of salvaged artifacts. She had brought computers, and she set me to work keyboarding her notes.

She stayed a week or so and left to go back into the air when another balloon touched down to station on nearby hill. I lived in the

rooms back of her office with two of her nomad helpers. They fixed meals and kept the place clean, but could give me no help.

I was trapped there, uncertain of my future and anxious for Narayana until the day she arrived, sunburnt and exhausted, her feet bleeding in worn-out boots. Her people had cast her out. Trying to follow me, she'd nearly died of thirst and hunger. A nomad band picked her up and brought her on to the sacred hill. There she heard of me, and walked again.

Her arrival crystallized my half-baked plans. Holaine had locked the ship, but left the combination in her computer files. I went aboard, found it fit to fly, found her flight plans. Narayana with me, I came home. I've told the survey that Holaine is alive and well, busy with research for a full study of the decline and fall of civilization on Q845K. They are organizing another expedition to support her work and bring her back when she is ready.

I have accepted a very minor position at the survey office, writing up the little I know of the planet. Narayana is with me, granting occasional interviews on her life there and learning to cope with technologies new to her. She seems happy as a child on holiday, amazed and delighted with the wonders around her. I'm just as happy that she seems totally devoted to me, even since she knows that I'm not a god.

## PRAYER FOR THE EARTH

by Kendall Evans

I'd like to light a candle

in starship's chapel

Say a prayer for the distant planet

that provisioned our holds

## Portal



## PORTAL A Fairy Tale of Some Sort In Three Parts Of Varying Sizes

Once upon a time, as the beginning of tales often go, there was a man who was neither very old nor very young. He was, as he so considered himself, a ten year old thirty-four year old male growing into adulthood. This person, John Tinker by name, as he was known to the Post Office, Tinker as he was known by his friends, lived and worked not far from the rather small, isolated town of Grandeville, Oregon, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century U.S.A. He certainly wasn't prepared to live life in what he thought was a fairy tale. But that is what happened. Much to his surprise and consternation.

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*In the middle of nowhere – creativity*

# Veterans of the War

by Robert Reed

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There was one small, very quick ugliness—fists and contraband fissionables wielded with a reflexive anger; but no harm done to us, thank goodness—and afterwards, almost immediately, we bent low, whispering into their little ears, asking, “A journey? Would you like? A little wandering back towards your old home, maybe?”

That single word was the trigger. “Home.” Legends and stored images and the vague memories of their oldest few spoke of a great, beautiful Home. Emotions surged, celebrations bursting forth, voices singing while bodies wheeled, everyone drinking and fornicating with a wondrous zeal. We risked touching the scarred bodies, fondly stroking what was flesh and wet, and in the midst of those distractions, we secured their new harnesses and safety-makers. Then we took them out, out into the empty realms, and despite the darkness and cold, they yanked against their endless tethers, impatient and endlessly stubborn.

“You’ve always been stubborn,” we whispered to them, with fond voices. “You great apes. You grand little humans. Our dear, most wonderful people.”

They heard us speaking, but only barely.

*People.* That was what they had named themselves when they were small and young, scattered across their cradle. As it happened, the Great War began at that same moment, escalating rapidly and obliterating most of our military inventory in the process. We swiftly learned that every one of our prewar plans was ludicrous: Pure machines and soulless animals lacked the simple, essential instinct to survive at all costs, and without survival, no army maintains itself and its borders for long. The good soldier is a pool of selfishness and raw fear overlain with hard machine exteriors, the combination producing a tenacious blend of ego and skill bolstered with a spine of self-preserving terror. As the Great War progressed, we learned how to produce such soldiers. Sprawling farms and new industries generated the legions by the trillions. And for a long little while, the war remained horrible but distant—a flickering in someone else’s sky; a silence where there used to be song; the occasional odd disturbance, cold and a little soothing, transmuting itself along the normally obscure dimensions.

Eventually, we heard desperate appeals for new soldiers. New recruits. Fresh bodies to be thrown into the violent battles and the quiet places between.

We didn’t answer those cries of honor and sacrifice. Things were not yet that awful, we told ourselves. But they were that awful, truly. A delegation came to see our people, our little humans. “You don’t want these souls,” we argued, fighting to save what we very much loved.

“Look at them. They’re scarce and a little stupid. Maybe they fight, but always for little reasons. Or for no reason at all. And tell us if we’re wrong, but don’t you still need a certain intellect, and rage, and all those other quality qualities that go into the waging of a successful, worthy war?”

We were quite right, of course. Quite right. In a normal epoch, the matter would have been finished with our final words, and forgotten. But nothing was normal anymore, which was why one of our visitors could give us a hard, withering look, and with a million voices told us, “Fuck that attitude. Fuck all of you. You’ve got this much time left. Make your little friends ready for us, or don’t. Either way, we’re coming back and taking whatever you have for us. Do

you understand?”

Not entirely, no.

But we tried to make our people. In a blur, we replaced their elegant faith in spirits and totems with an even simpler nonsense. We spoke to them as gods, and sometimes as the Supreme God, lending them powerful memes about Eternity and Absolute Truth. We gave them mild weather and wheat, and steel, and fusion. Their numbers swelled and swelled, and naturally they learned how to fight in new ways, and in a clumsy, endearing fashion, they even learned to hate.

A few of them still remember when they were ripped away from their cradle. By then, it was a crowded and filthy and distinctly ugly place. But they were mostly ready. We held them tightly, in the end. The ones who actually took them were gentler, more considerate by a long way, prying them out of our selfish grasp and placing them in a special cage, their conversion beginning the instant that they became military property.

Twenty layers of shells lent them a small measure of protection and strength. Neural add-ons gave them swifter, more robust minds. They were fed the simple mathematics of tactics and ugly tricks garnered from a thousand generations of dead soldiers. On the modern battlefield smallness was an advantage—and they were blessedly small. Adaptability was essential, and by all accounts, they tried their best; while their organic souls, possessing fear and a desperate hunger for survival, helped a little portion of them to endure every unimaginable outrage.

And then, there was their simple, luscious luck, too. There were a thousand incidents where all of them should have perished, their species made extinct. The War’s final push is one example. The battered human army was earmarked to assault an enemy command nexus—a suicide attack by every sober estimate—but when that just about to happen, both sides had finally, reluctantly, decided to open meaningful negotiations. The scale of fighting had reached such a pitch, and the losses were so staggering, that both parties were quietly but openly preparing to throw themselves into the carnage.

As they tell the story, the humans had laughed at the prospect of fighting beside their owners. How could lumbering gods, no matter how gifted, survive two moments on their battlefield? But the prospect never became fact. Hostilities were reduced to a mild slaughter while talks were held, then after a millennia of joyous boredom, the warring sides reluctantly agreed on a return to their original borders. Within a few centuries, the surviving armies were assembled, thanked for their sacrifices, and with a modicum of dignity, the various soldiers were dismantled.

Augmented minds had to be peeled away, and with them went most of their memories as well as much of their famous humor. Fear and hunger, however, remained intact: Their twin salvations, and their demons. What they began as, pampered and confident, had been obliterated; but did we understand? Not well enough, not as we should have. We couldn’t help but wish that our carefree little friends would reemerge. Except that the creatures before us, pulling hard against their safety-makers, were free of self-deception and articulation, and even if they could have recognized the possibility of a rebirth, they most certainly wouldn’t have wanted it.

Finally, descending into their old cradle, the people whimpered and cried out, little hearts set racing. There were barely ten million



## Veterans of the War

survivors standing on the weedy plains that had replaced their cities, set beside the deep seas still dirty from their pollution, and they sniffed at the shifting winds, apish eyes peering up into the endless skies. Then they began to beg, calling to the skies, pleading with their simple little voices.

"What do you want?" we asked. "What do you need?"

Freedom! Yes! They leaped high, tearing scar tissue, fighting against those cleverly monstrous devices until we did as they wished, unfastening every last restraint.

"But be careful," we warned. "Not too much too fast, please!"

They heard nothing. Nothing.

In an instant, they were at work, scratching fiercely at the ground and dragging in stones and pieces of freshly killed tree, creating a walled roundness into which all of them entered, and sat, flesh against flesh and no one left alone. As a shelter, the structure was convincingly useless. As a fortress, the low walls couldn't protect against any genuine threat.

Then we saw what they were building was a simple and perfect church: Inarticulate souls lying together, doing nothing but enjoying the last feeble heat of the day. There was no room for us. That lesson was obvious. But we were free to watch them sharing what little food they possessed, and tending to each other's painful scars; and some tiny part of them probably remembered how once or twice, during the worst possible hells, they had lain like this, in the cold dark, shutting every kind of eye and dreaming of a moment as kind and as crystalline as this...

science shows us who we are  
by Joe Haldeman

our genome tells us the cannibal gene  
selects for itself those who shouldn't dine  
on people will die of kurus  
before they can reproduce

*the currently fastidious  
offspring of monsters  
are we*

suicide in the young deselects genes  
boys with scarves in one-way planes  
boys with vests of plastique and nails  
boys who leap first out of the trench  
who walk point for revenge

their sperm dries up and dies leaving  
by default the offspring of grieving  
sensible cowards

*it's not the noble soldier boy  
whose gallant genes survive  
but Jodie boy who stays at home  
and fucks the soldiers' wives*

ten thousand more years of this  
and we will breed peace

*among the cannibals*



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# Sweet Waters

by Sharon Lee and Steve Miller

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The trap had taken a kwevit — a fat one, too.

Slade smiled, well-pleased. Beside him, Verad, his hunting-partner and his oldest friend among the Sanilithe, saving Gineah, grunted in mingled admiration and annoyance.

“The Skylady Herself looks after you, small brother. Three times this day, your spear failed to find its target, yet you return to your tent with a fair hunting of meat.”

“The hunters before us this morning were noisy and hurried — making the game scarce and distant even for your arm,” said Slade. “My spear flies not quite so far.”

Verad waved a broad hand at the sky in a gesture meant to take in the whole of the world, and perhaps the whole of the universe.

“It is the trail we find today, hunter.”

Slade nearly smiled — Verad’s stern-voiced lesson could have as easily come from one of his merchant uncles, for all that those uncles would scarcely acknowledge Verad human and capable of thought, much less sly humor. The humor was lacking at the moment, so Slade kept his smile behind his teeth, and moved quietly toward the trap and its skewered victim.

“If I am a poor hunter,” he asked, “is it wrong to find another way to take meat?”

“The tent must eat,” Verad allowed. “Still, small brother, a hunter should keep several blades in his belt, and be equally skilled with all.”

Slade knelt on the wiry moss, put his spear down, and carefully removed his kill from the trap.

“One skill at a time,” he murmured. “‘The tent must eat’ speaks with a larger voice than ‘Slade must hunt with *erifu*.’”

From the side of his eye, he saw his friend make the sign to ward ill luck. Slade sighed. *Erifu* — “art,” or, as he sometimes thought, “magic” — was the province of women, who held knowledge, history and medicine. Men hunted, herded, and worked metal into the designs betold them by the women.

“If you are a bad hunter and discourteous, too,” Verad commented, settling onto a nearby rock. “You will be left to stand by the fire until the coals are cold.” He blinked deliberately, one eye after another.

Slade frowned, rubbing the trap with *nesom*, the herb hunters massaged into their skin so the game would not scent them.

“What if I am left unChosen?” he asked, for Gineah had been vague on this point. He situated the trap and set the release, then came to his feet in one fluid motion.

“Those left unChosen must leave the Sanilithe and find another tribe to take them.”

Slade turned and stared — but, no, Verad’s face was serious. This was no joke.

“So, I must be Chosen.” He chewed his lip. “What if I do not come to the fire?”

Now, Verad stared. “Not come to the fire? You must! It is law: All blooded hunters who are without a wife must stand at the fire on the third night after the third purification of the Dark Camp’s borders.”

*Tomorrow night, to be precise*, thought Slade. He would be there, around the fire — a son of the grandmother’s tent could do no less than obey the law. But...

“Sun’s going,” Verad said.

Slade picked up his kwevit by the long back legs and lashed the dead animal to his belt. He recovered his spear, flipped his braid behind a shoulder with a practiced jerk of his head, and nodded at his friend. “I am ready.”

The scattered tents of the Sanilithe came together for Dark Camp in a valley guarded by three-toothy mountain peaks. It was toward the third mountain, which Gineah had taught him was called “Nariachen” or “Raincatcher” that Slade journeyed, slipping out of the grandmother’s tent after the camp was asleep. He went lightly, with a hunter’s caution, and spear to hand, the cord looped ‘round his wrist; the broad ribbon of stars blazing overhead more than bright enough to light his way.

He should not, strictly speaking, be away from night camp at all. Man was prey to some few creatures on this world, several of which preferred to hunt the night. But come away he must, as he had during the last two Dark Camps — and which he might never do again, regardless of tomorrow night’s outcome.

To the left, a twisty stand of vegetation formed out of the shadow — what passed for trees. He slipped between the spindly trunks and into the shocking darkness of the glade, where he paused. When he had his night eyes, he went on, angling toward the mountain face — and shortly came to that which was not natural.

It might seem at first glance a shattered boulder, overgrown with such vegetations as were able to take root along its pitted surface.

At next glance, assuming one hailed from a civilized world, it was seen to be a ship, spine-broke and half-buried in the ungriving gray soil.

Slade moved forward. Upon reaching the remains of his ship, he fitted the fingers of both hands into an indentation of the tertiary hatch, braced himself and hauled it back on its track, until there was a gap wide enough to admit him.

Inside was deep darkness, and he went slowly, feeling his way along the broken corridor, his soft soled boots whispering against the dusty plates. His questing fingers found an indentation in the wall, he pressed and a door clicked open.

Carefully, for there was torn and broken metal even inside the one-time supply cabinet, he groped within.

His search gained him several small vials, a single cake-bar of the survival food he’d wrinkled his nose at in pilot training class, and an ironic appreciation of his situation. He had fought the ship to the plains, knowing it unable to survive a planet-fall in any of the world’s salty seas.

By the seas, he might have found a mix of food and vitamins better suited to his off-worlder needs — but the scant beaches below the cliff-lined continents were all of shale and broken rock, and he had thought an inland grounding might preserve his ship.

# Sweet Waters

Choices made. Or as Verad might put it, *this* was the trail he found today.

He unzipped the cake wrap, the burp of preservative gas letting him know it was still edible, and — though the sweetness of it was surprising — ate it as if it were a delicacy as he continued to rummage through the former larder.

One more tiny container came into his hand — the last of the wide-spectrum antibiotics. He tucked it into his pouch with the others, pushed the door shut, and crept onward in the dark.

As he moved, his back brain did the calculations: if he rationed himself to a single dose every three days, he could stretch the vitamins he needed to survive through one more migration cycle.

At last, he gained the piloting chamber, where a single go-light glowed, faint. He inched forward and sat in the chair which, with its webbing and shock absorbers had doubtless saved his life, and reached out to touch a switch.

The stats computer came up sluggishly, the screen watery and uncertain. Despite this, he felt his heart rise. His ship was alive.

Alive, yet mortally wounded. The distress beacon, its power source undamaged, gave tongue every six Standard hours, hurling ship ID and coords into the heedless chill of space. For two full turns of the Sanilithe seasons — almost three Standard Years — the distress beacon had called.

With no result.

A less stubborn man might by now have given up hope of rescue. He supposed, sitting there at the dim board, in the shattered belly of a dead ship, on the eve of being either mated or cast out, that he *ought* to give up. Surely, the choices before him were daunting.

Were he cast out of the Sanilithe and left to his own methods, he might hunt well enough to feed himself. Perhaps. Certainly, he could not expect any other nomadic, hardscrabble tribe to adopt him. It bewildered him yet, that Gineah had taken him in — undergrown, wounded, and without language as he had been.

As to the probability of being Chosen at the fire — he considered that approached negative numbers. Worse, if he were, by some passing madness of the local gods, Chosen, he would forthwith have broken every non-fraternization reg in a very substantial book.

The consequences of which were merely academic, unless he were rescued.

And, surely, he thought, flipping his braid behind a shoulder and leaning toward the board, if he were Chosen, his underfed and nutrient-lacking seed would quicken no child among the Sanilithe.

If he were, against dwindling odds, *rescued*, and left thereby the tent of his wife, she would not suffer. Her sisters would care for her, and share with her the profits of their tents, until all converged upon the wintering Dark Camp again, and she might Chose another hunter to serve her.

And if he were Chosen and remained unrescued — well. The day's trail did not always yield good things. He touched a key.

The screen blanked, then swam back into being, displaying the last entry he had made in the log, on the night before the Sanilithe broke apart into its several Light Season bands and roamed far, gathering what foodstuffs could be wrested from the sullen land.

Carefully, he placed his fingers on the pad and began, slow and hesitant over his letters, to type, giving as the date Dark Camp, Third.

*Last night, the final purification was done by the eldest and most holy of the grandmothers. Tomorrow night, I am to stand around the fire as a candidate husband, for the choice of any woman with need. If this chance comes to me, I shall seize it, in order to remain in proximity to the ship and to the beacon.*

*If I am not chosen, I will be forced away from this kin-group. Should that transpire, I will shelter in the ship for the remainder of the Dark Season. Then, if rescue has not found me, I will attempt to reach the sea. If I make that attempt, I will record my plan here.*

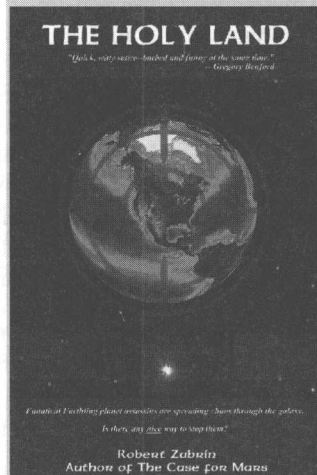
*I have this evening withdrawn the last of the nutrient drops and antibiotics from the emergency locker.*

He hesitated, his right hand rising to finger the length of metal in his right ear, which named him a son of Gineah's tent, just as the heavy braid of hair identified him as unmarried. Married hunters, such as Verad, had their hair cut short, and wore the earring of their wife's tent with pride in their left earlobe. Slade sighed, thinking that one might wish for a mating, if only to be rid of the braid.

He put his fingers back on the keys. When he had begun this log, he had filled it with observations of custom and language. There had been less of that, as odd custom became that code by

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**The Holy Land**, by Robert Zubrin Polaris Books [www.polarisbooks.net](http://www.polarisbooks.net)  
ISBN 0-9741443-0-4 304 pages \$14.95

which he lived, and the curiously nuanced language the tongue in which he dreamed. Likewise, he had previously recorded the weakness which came to him when he denied himself the supplements and ate only local food. There was no need to repeat that information for those who ...might... read what he had been written.

He moved his fingers on the keypad, laboriously spelling out his name:

*Tol Ven yo'Endoth Clan Aziel*

*Scout survey pilot*

Then, as an afterthought — though he'd done the transliteration earlier in the report — he added one more typed line:

*Slade, second named son of Gineah's tent.*

Slade stood, Arb on his right hand, Panilet on his left, before them the man-high blaze of the Choosing Fire. It was difficult to concentrate in the flame-swept darkness, for which he blamed the various brews he had been compelled to swallow during the purifications, as well as the chants and songs of those of the tribe gathered to witness the Choosings.

Briefly, he closed his eyes, seeing the flames still, dancing on the inside of his eyelids. The day had begun at sunrise, with Verad rousing him from Gineah's tent and hustling him, with neither meat nor berries to break his fast, to the far side of the encampment, where the hunters of the Sanilithe gathered, each bachelor under the patronage of a married man. Verad stood as Slade's sponsor, for which he was grateful.

There were prayers to recite, smokes to inhale, and strange beverages to drink. There was no water, nor tea, nor aught to eat. Still, he was not hungry and as the day with its duties progressed he found himself remarkably calm, if slightly lightheaded.

At last the waning sun disappeared behind toothy Nariachen. Slade, bathed and oiled by Verad, shivered in the sudden coolness, his naked skin pebbling.

"Drink," his friend said, offering yet another horn cup. Obedient, Slade drank, feeling the liquid take fire in his blood. He handed the cup back, blinking to clear the tears from his eyes.

Verad grinned. "That will put the heat of the hunt into you!"

*An aphrodisiac?* Slade wondered, as Verad carried the cup away. It seemed likely — and too late to wonder to what lusty adventures the dose in the cup, meant for a broad shouldered and heavily muscled specimen such as Verad, might incite his shorter and more slender self.

"Now..." Verad returned, bearing a strip of soft, pale leather. He showed the length between his hands. "Up with your arms, brother! I will dress you finer than any who will stand beside you." He slipped the skin 'round Slade's hips, wrapping it in an arcane pattern. "I took this one after last year's Choosing, when Gineah had held you back from the fire, saying that next year was soon enough." He worked swiftly, making the leather kilt tight.

"One throw of the spear brought it down, and I asked my wife for the skin, for I had a brother-gift to make." A final flourish and he stepped back, pride plain his wide face, his grin displaying several broken teeth.

"There, now," he said. "What woman wouldn't Choose you? That's the question!"

It was certainly, thought Slade, slowly lowering his arms, a question. He looked down at himself. The kilt was ...brief, and he suspected, from what seemed a very great distance, that he looked ridiculous.

"Don't be so long-faced," Verad said, leaning forward and slapping him on the belly. "All muscle and lithe as a finoret, too! There will be Choosers brawling to have you!" Another broad grin, then a wave of the hand. "Turn around, small brother. I have one more gift to give you."

Careful on feet gone slightly silly, Slade turned, and felt his braid tugged, loosened. Heavy, his hair unwound across his shoulders — two long seasons of growth.

"Like honey," Verad crooned, and Slade felt a comb slip down the length of his mane. "You will glow in the firelight, like a star. The eyes of the women will be dazzled. Doubt not that you will be Chosen. And when you are..." The combing and Verad's crooning whisper resonated weirdly in his head — or perhaps it was that last drink. Slade closed his eyes.

"When you are Chosen," Verad continued. "Your wife will lead you to her tent. There, she will reveal a great mystery. A very great mystery." The comb stroked downward, soft and hypnotic. "In the morning, she will cut away all of this honey-colored hair and you will return to us as a man and a husband.

"Your wife will take you to the metal worker, and she will put the hot wire through your ear and twist it into the sign of her tent. Then..." The comb whispered down once more ... stopped. "And then, we will hunt together as full brothers." He snorted, for a moment the workaday Verad. "And you will practice with your spear until it is said truly that you never miss a cast."

*Yes, very likely.* Slade tried to say that, but it was too much trouble. Behind him, he heard Verad laugh, and felt a calloused hand on his shoulder.

"To the Fire, brother."

Slade opened his eyes, and glanced quickly to each side. Arb yet stood at his right hand. Panilet was gone. Chosen. Despite the heat from the fire, Slade shivered, and closed his eyes once more.

Arb had long been Chosen, and the man who had stood beyond him.

The Fire was a black bed upon which a few red embers kept vigil. Slade frowned at them, wondering laboriously if one of the witnesses beyond the circle would come and tell him to leave; if he would be brought his spear, and his tough hunter's leathers, or if he would be cast forth weaponless and all-but-naked.

His mouth was dry, his head heavy; his blood still warm from that last draught. Altogether, he thought painfully, he was in a dangerous and most discouraged state and ought by rights to simply curl up on the moss by the dying fire and sleep off the sorrows of the day.

In the heart of the fire, an ember exploded in a rush of scarlet ash. Slade jerked — and froze.

Walking swiftly across the trampled and vacant moss came a tall reed of a woman, her dark hair braided with feathers and flowers, her short robe of soft suede, her legs and feet naked.

Forward she came, until he could see her face in what remained of the firelight. Wide, pupil-drowned eyes stared down at him from a bony, long-jawed face. Abruptly, she checked and

looked wildly about, but there were no other hunters shivering and lachrymose around the dying fire. He was the last.

As if the realization galvanized her, she jumped forward and grabbed his wrist. Her fingers were cold; her grip strong. Without a word, she turned and marched into the darkness beyond the fire. Slade, perforce, went with her; all but oblivious to exalting songs and catcalls from the standers-by.

The sounds and warmth fell away behind them, and there was dust underfoot, her shape distant in the night, and her hand, unrelenting, to guide him.

She came at last to a small tent in the next-but-last circle. Brusquely, she pushed the flap aside and ducked within, dragging him after, her fingers bruising his wrist.

Inside, he was at last released, as his captor — his wife — turned to lace the flap. Slade looked about, finding the interior of the tent as cluttered as Gineah's had been neat and shipshape. In the center, beneath the air hole, was the fire, banked for the night, bed unrolled beside it.

He felt a hand on his arm and turned to look up into the face of his wife.

In the relative brightness, he saw that she was younger than he had at first supposed — scarcely more than a girl, even by the standards of Sanilithe — her forehead high, and her jaw square. Her lean cheeks had been painted with stripes of white and yellow and red; those on her left cheek were smeared. Her eyes were the color of summer moss — gray-green — and very wide.

Still, she said nothing to him, merely reached with hands that trembled to begin working the knot in his kilt. His manhood leapt, eager, and she gasped, the first sound he had heard from her, snatching her fingers away.

*Gods*, Slade thought, his mind sharpening slightly within the shrouds of drugs and exhaustion. *She's terrified.*

"Wait," he said softly, catching her hands. She flinched, and looked at his face — at least she did that — and did not pull away. "Wait," he said again. "Let us trade names. I am Slade."

She swallowed, and glanced to one side. "Arika."

"Arika," he repeated, struggling toward gentleness. "It is not necessary—"

She pulled her hands free. "This tent requires a hunter."

"Yes," he said, trying to soothe her with his voice, trying to ignore the increasing demands of his body. "Yes, I will hunt for the tent. But it is not necessary to continue this, now, with both of us tired and frightened."

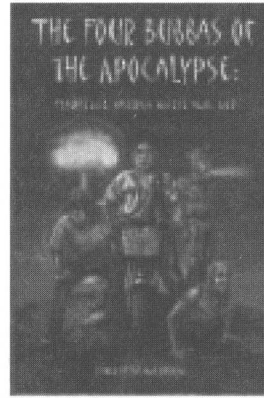
She stiffened at that, and awkwardly reached for his hands, looking sideways into his face.

"I — there is nothing to fear, inside my tent," she said, haltingly. "Slade. There is no harm here. I am — Tonight, I will teach you a mystery which will, will bond us and make us stronger for the tent."

A set piece, poorly learned, he realized, holding her cold fingers. And all honor to her, that her first thought was to soothe his fears. He smiled, carefully.

An unmarried hunter of the Sanilithe was a naive creature. He learned of the mystery of sex on the night of his Choosing, from the woman who had Chosen to become his wife. It was that same wife who would later decide how many children the tent might rejoice in — and a married hunter was not at all certain quite how those children came to be. Verad spoke of seeds, but in the

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context of a fruit eaten, perhaps from a tree known only to the *erifu* of women.

Though obviously herself terrified of the upcoming mystery, Arika would be scandalized to find that her new and unshorn husband came to her fully tutored. Still, Slade thought muzzily, he *was* the elder here, and it was his duty to ease her way as much as it was hers, to ease his fear.

"First," Arika said, breathlessly, slipping her hands away. "We must remove these skins..." Her fingers were at the knot again, somewhat steadier. Slade left her to it and reached to the laces of her robe. She froze.

"What do you?"

He smiled again, as guileless as he might, in which endeavor he was no doubt assisted by the drugs.

"If we must remove the skins, it will go quicker, if you remove mine and I remove yours." He affected a sudden shyness, dropping his eyes. "Unless there is some reason in *erifu* that I should not...?"

She frowned, as if trying to recall a long-ago and not very well attended lesson. Finally, she jerked a shoulder — the Sanilithe negative. "It does not offend *erifu*. You may continue."

Continue he did, taking care with the laces while she fumbled with his kilt. He did not wish to reveal her too soon. Best, if they became naked and equal in the same moment.

He felt the knot at his hip loosen all at once, slipped the last of the lacing free and slid his palms over her shoulders, easing the

garment up, just as the kilt fell unceremoniously to the floor. Softly, he smoothed his hands down her back, slipping the robe down and off, to pool about her feet.

She visibly swallowed, her pale eyes moving down his body in quick glances. Obviously, she hadn't the least idea what to do now.

Slade stepped forward, lifting a hand to her hair, stroking it back to reveal an exotic and enticing little ear. He heard her gasp, but she had heart, did Arika. She slid her fingers into his hair, silking it back to reveal his ear. Greatly daring, she ran her finger 'round the edge and he felt his blood flare as he copied the motion, then stroked the line of her jaw. She followed his lead, her fingers moving in a long stroke down the side of his neck.

He cupped her breast, she ran a light hand down his chest; he bent and put his lips around one pert nipple. She gasped, back arching, and it came to him that *erifu* would have required that she also drink the Choosing drugs, to be ready to welcome the new husband in fullness..

"Slade," she said huskily, and her hands were in his hair, drawing his face up, her gray-green eyes looking deep into his. "We — should lie down."

*A good idea, he thought, before one or the other of us falls into the fire.*

He stretched out beside her, and she touched him, tentative fingers warm now, and indescribably exciting. He moaned, and pulled her to him, exhaustion burning away into the brilliance of passion.

Slade opened his eyes to a tent wholly unfamiliar, a heavy weight pinning his arm to the sleeping mat. Carefully, he turned his head, and discovered his wife, Arika, deeply asleep, her head on his shoulder, hair tangled with last night's passion, lashes sooty smudges on her thin cheeks. In the spill of morning light from the fire hole, her face was aching young.

*Surely, he thought wildly, surely a child of this age ought to be with her tutor and not roistering about in the darkness, soliciting strange men into the service of her tent?*

He drew a hard breath. The Sanilith came quickly to adulthood, and quickly to old age. Gineah, revered grandmother that she was, with two daughters and a hunter-son, all grown and mated — Gineah had between fifty and fifty-five Standard Years. On the planet of his birth, she would have just reached the height of her powers, with another thirty to fifty years before her...

*The planet of his birth, he thought, suddenly bitter; which he had wished with all his heart to escape — and found his wish well-granted.*

Carefully, not wanting to awaken the girl-child asleep on his shoulder, he drew a breath, and looked about him.

It was not the largest tent he had seen among the Sanilith, nor the tidiest, though it might, considering the numerous patches in the skin walls, make some claim to the shabbiest.

Scattered around, in no order he could discern, were baskets, pots, robes, and rugs. Poles lined the walls, and from them hung familiar clusters of dried herbs and medicinal plants.

Gineah had divided her tent into sections — a place which was *erifu* and off-limits to ham-fisted sons of the tent, a place to store foodstuffs and water, a place for that same ham-fisted son to

keep his weapons, his skins, and his bedroll. The center was common area, where meals were made and where grandmother and son might dawdle over their warmed beer, talking far into the night.

Well, and Gineah's tent was as distant from him as his mother's house, now that he was married.

He sighed and brought his gaze back to the child's sleeping face. The stripes of paint adorning her cheeks were smeared and faded. The Sanilith did decorate their faces — certain signs were *erifu*, others were, as far as he understood, nothing more than exuberance. It seemed to him that he had seen stripes like these before — white, yellow, red, in alternation — and suddenly, he remembered.

Mourning stripes. Someone of this tent had died — recently. The stripes were worn only for three days after the deceased had been commended to the fire.

Outside, a woman's voice rose in the welcome-morning song. The girl asleep on his arm stirred, and opened her eyes, face tensing. He smiled, deliberately.

"Good morning, Arika," he said softly.

Her face relaxed, though she did not go so far as to smile. "Good morning, Slade," she returned, seriously, and looked upward to the patch of sullen sky visible through the smoke hole.

"We must rise," she said abruptly, snaking out of their tumbled bed and rolling to her feet. "There is much to do."

Naked, she hesitated, staring about the disordered tent, then darted to one side, where she found a tunic. She pulled it over her head; emerging, she frowned at Slade, still slugabed.

"Rise!" she snapped, and reached for the pair of leather leggings hanging over a cracked storage pot.

Sighing, he rose, found his kilt on the dirt floor by the edge of the fire, picked it up, shook it out, and wrapped it around his loins, feeling even more foolish, now that there was no kindly drug diluting his perceptions. Quickly, he knotted the leather, wishing for shirt and leggings.

"Slade."

He turned. Arika held her hands up, showing him the blade in her right, and the comb, in her left. "I will cut your hair, now, and we will go to the smith. Then we will go to the tent of Grandmother Gineah and bring away those things she allows to be yours." She smiled, very slightly. "The sooner we do these things, the sooner we may eat."

Eat. His stomach, reminded of its fast, set up a complaint, and he moved sprightly indeed and sat on the floor at her feet.

"Be still now," she said, and plied the comb, surprisingly gentle; and then the knife, in long, practiced sweeps.

Slade closed his eyes as the weight of his hair fell away, leaving the back of his neck chill.

"Done."

He lifted his hands to his head, feeling strands barely two fingers long. Gods alone knew what he looked like, but at least he was rid of the braid, which had a penchant for becoming entangled in twigs, and flirting with fires...

"Come." Arika was already unlacing the flap. "The smith."

*Indeed, the smith.* He rolled to his feet and followed his wife out into the new day.

## Sweet Waters

Some while later, earlobe stinging and stomach rumbling, he stood two paces behind his wife, before Gineah's tent.

A shadow moved and the grandmother stepped out, plump and grizzled, her arms encircled with the many bracelets of her station.

Before him, Arika spread her arms wide in the traditional greeting to one of the Wise.

"Grandmother," she murmured, respectfully.

"Daughter," Gineah replied, and moved her eyes, pinning Slade with a bright blue glance. "Hunter."

He bowed, which the Sanilithe did not do. "Grandmother."

She stepped forward, her eyes on Arika. "You could have come to me."

Arika bit her lip, and shook her hair back in what Slade was beginning to understand as a nervous gesture. "I swore to Kenepile that the tent would endure," she said, her voice not quite steady.

"And a tent must have a hunter." Gineah sighed. "Child..." She stopped.

"Please," she said, after a moment, "allow your hunter to enter my tent and collect those things which have been made ready for him."

"Yes..." Arika whispered. She straightened shoulders that had begun to sag and looked to him, chin up.

"Slade, you may find what Grandmother Gineah has left for you and bring it forth."

"Yes," he said in his turn and slipped into the tent that had been his home for two full turns of season.

Inside, all was neat and familiar; it smelled of herbs, and leather; smoke and the scent of Gineah herself. Tears rose to his eyes. Blinking them away, he turned toward the corner which had been his.

There were several bundles there, as well as his spear, his knives, and the unfinished length of braided hide he had been working on as he sat at the fire with Gineah in the evenings.

He knelt and examined the bindings of each pack, in no hurry, wanting to give Gineah as much time as possible to share what wisdom she might with his girl-wife. It came to him that it was Kenepile who had died, and who Arika mourned. The name meant nothing to him, but that was not unusual. Well as he knew the names of those with whom his tent traveled in the seasons of gathering, little did he know the names, or the faces, of those who traveled other routes.

Kneeling on the mat among his bundles, his Choosing became real to him: he was now tied to a tent that would follow a different route, come the Light Season, and which held allegiances and debts that he did not understand. The ones he would hunt beside would not be the same men he had come to know — who had come to know and accept him, with all his incomprehensible difficulties — as a brother.

He gasped. This time, the tears escaped to moisten his cheeks. To be taken from everything and everyone he knew — and, yet, what did it matter? He was the alien here, shipwrecked and dead to all he had been. To lose one tent, one old woman, half-a-dozen savage brothers — what was that, against the magnitude of his other losses?

Crouched beside the small pile of his belongings, he wept, then wiped his face with his forearm and forced himself to his feet.

He draped the bundles about himself as Verad had taught him to do, slipped his knives, carefully, into the waist of his kilt and hefted the spear.

Outside, Gineah embraced Arika, and stepped aside. "Take care of my son, who is now your hunter, daughter."

"Grandmother, I will." Arika swallowed, and Slade saw that her cheeks were also damp. "You are welcome in my tent, always."

Gineah smiled upon them, and raised her hands in blessing above their heads. Then, wordless, she re-entered her tent.

Arika licked her lips, nodded to Slade. He followed her across the camp, to their shabby and disordered home.

Kneeling on the dirt floor next to the fire pit, Slade unrolled his bundles. The first held his hunting leathers and boots, as well as a vest sewn of kwevit hides with the fur attached. He dressed quickly, rolling the kilt and putting it with the vest, then turned his attention to the rest, chewing on a strip of dried meat Arika had given him.

She was at the back of the tent; he could hear her moving things, possibly attempting to impose order upon the clutter, a project of which he heartily approved.

Opening the next bundle, he found the furs and skins of his own bed, and several sealed medicine pots. He smiled, profoundly warmed, for Gineah took care with her potions, which were genuinely soothing of bruises, cuts and strained muscles.

Another bundle gave up his second pair of leggings, three sitting mats, and pots containing dried legumes, jerked meat, and raisins. Too, there was the bag ritually made from the skin of the very first kwevit he'd taken and meant to carry what Verad called "the hunter's touch," which was the only property besides his weapons and his clothes that a hunter could be said to own. The knot was undisturbed, and inside, among the scent-masking potions, feathers, and special stones that he had been given by his brother of the hunt, was his paltry supply of Liaden nutrients. Slade smiled again, and thanked Gineah in his heart.

"Where do those things come from?" Arika's voice was shrill. He spun on his knees and looked up, seeing her face twisted with anger, her eyes blazing green fire.

"Gineah gave them," he said, keeping his voice gentle.

She was not soothed. "Return them! I am the mother of this tent — and this tent is not in need!"

Very slowly, hands loose at his sides, Slade rose. Deliberately, he looked about him, at the clutter, at the tatters, at the soot. He looked back to her angry face.

"The tent must eat," he said.

"The tent *will* eat," she snapped. "The hunter will see to it."

"Yes." He moved a hand, showing her the bounty Gineah had sent. "These were given by the grandmother, to the hunter. I have seen that the tent will eat."

She glared, lips parting, then turned and stomped away.

Sighing, Slade looked about him for an uncluttered corner to call his own.

They worked in silence, he on his side, she on hers. It was not so large a tent that they were unaware of each other, and had they been in charity, Slade thought ruefully, they might have made a merry time of it. And, really, it was wrong that they continued thus in anger. Unless he did something very stupid on a hunt, they would be partners for — some time. They needed each other's goodwill and willing cooperation — the tent could not function, else.

Sighing, he straightened from tidying away his sleeping roll, and turned.

Across the tent, Arika stood with a pot cradled in her arms, her head bent, hair obscuring her face.

Biting back a curse, Slade crossed to her side, and put a careful hand on her arm.

She gasped, and started, eyes flying to his face, her lashes damp, the remains of the mourning paint running in long, smeary lines down her cheeks.

"Peace," he said, as gently as he knew how. "Gineah meant well. We should not be at odds because of her kindness."

She swallowed, and shook her hair back from her wet cheeks. "I — Tales of Grandmother Gineah's good works are told around story fires wherever the Sanilithe gather. I will be proud to tell my own story, that the grandmother so valued her son she gave his wife-tent a Dark Season's worth of provisions, as a measure of her regard."

"A good story," he said, softly. "And nothing to weep for."

Arika snuffled, and raised a hand to scrub at her cheeks.

"I weep because—" Another gulp, and a wave around at the general chaos. "It was not like this. It was orderly and, and *erifu* and — and the babe was born dead, and Kenepile caught the milk fever, and the grandmothers did what there was to do..." The tears were flowing again, and she hugged the pot tight to her chest.

"So, she died," she whispered. "It was past time to leave for Dark Camp... They helped me with the pyre before they left. I packed the tent in haste and, and—" She bent her head, hair falling forward to shroud her face. "*erifu* has been broken, and I don't know how..."

He slipped an arm around her waist, as she cuddled her pot and wept, offering the comfort of his warmth.

Gently, he asked, "Kenepile was your mother?"

Arika sniffled. "My elder sister. Elae — her hunter — fell from a rock ledge at the Far Gathering and broke his neck. We—" Her grief overtook her, then, and there were no more words for time.

Slade stroked her hair, murmuring nonsense phrases, as he had heard Gineah murmur to soothe a sick child.

*Gods*, he thought, the tragedy unrolling before his mind's eye. *Every one of the tent dead, save herself, within the space of one summer walkabout? Mother, hunter, and hopeful babe — gone, leaving one grieving girl-child, who had promised her dying sister that she would not allow the tent to lapse...*

"Arika," he murmured. "Gineah taught me. We can together put things right. Our tent will be *erifu* and the envy of every hunter!"

She looked at him sidewise through her hair. "The grandmother taught you how to order a tent? But that is—"

"Who says no to a grandmother when she requires a thing?" he asked, smoothly.

That argument had weight. Arika straightened. "We do as the grandmother says."

"We do," he said, and smiled at her. "Let us begin in the Windward corner."

Slade shivered in the light wind and held his end of the braided leather rope loosely by the knot. The other end was tied to the most robust of the shrub-like trees in the thicket with a knot Verad would have frowned upon had he seen it, for it looked to be more *erifu* than the knots men might use. All around, the rocks, bushes and moss glittered silver in the starlight — ice, and treacherous footing for even a skilled hunter.

As had become his habit since his mating, Slade hunted alone. He regretted the loss of Verad's companionship, but the elder hunter had grown even more disapproving of Slade's methods. Hunting alone, he had perfected those methods. It was seldom, now, that their tent was without fresh meat.

Today, Slade thought, might be one of those rare days when he returned empty-handed. If the binkayli failed to swarm, if his throw went awry, if the leather parted, if the branch gave way — if, if, if...

One-handed, Slade reached to his belt and worked the knot on the hunter's touch. Though he hunted solitary, he was often enough among other hunters at the end of the day, when casual groups might form to discuss the weather, the hunting, the lie of the land for tomorrow's hunt, so he had added several odd quartz bits, the tail fur of an ontradube, and the sharply broken stub of the same creature's small antler to his collection of magical items, as further camouflage.

Finding the vial of vitamins by touch among the lot was a chore, but he succeeded, and squeezed the drops into his mouth. He grimaced at the taste, and at the state of the container, and dropped it back into the bag.

Checking his hold on the leather, his nose hair bristled. Cold, cold, cold.

From his left came a rolling rumble, as of dozens of hooves hitting the frozen ground. Slade tensed, then forced himself to relax, pushing all thought of failure — all thought — from his mind, just as the binkayli burst out of the silvered thicket, barely six paces from his crouching place, running hard across the open land.

He threw, the lasso arced into the spangled air, spun and fell about the neck of a well-grown binkayli stallion.

Oblivious, the stallion raced on. The rope stretched, the noose tightened. The branch held, held — and broke in a clatter of scattered ice.

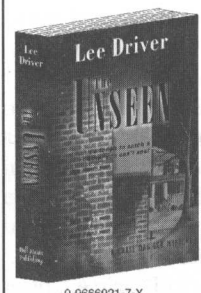
Slade swore and leapt. His boots skidded on the icy surface, he twisted, clawing for balance, and fell badly, left leg bent beneath him, head cracking against the ground.

Half-dazed, he saw the rope and the branch speed across the icy ground in the wake of the stallion. The pounding of hooves vibrated through his head, and finally faded away.

It was late when he limped back into camp, leaning heavily on his spear. He staggered to his own tent, standing silver and serene



## Sweet Waters



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**The  
UNSEEN**

'neath the changeless winter sky, pushed the flap back, ducked inside — and froze.

The air was pungent with some unfamiliar odor, and thick with smoke. Arika sat, cross-legged and naked, before the fire, eyes closed, holding a hunter's gutting knife between her palms. Two women he did not know knelt, fully clothed, facing her.

Slade moved as quietly as he was able, meaning to retire to the corner where he kept his hunter's gear, to warm himself, and rest his injured leg.

One of the strangers looked over her shoulder and leapt up, her eyes wide and angry. She grabbed his arm, none-too-gently, and shoved him toward the flap.

"You are not allowed here!" she hissed. "Go! Do not return until you are summoned!" Another shove, and a third, which sent him stumbling out into the cold, ice-rimed camp.

Slade stood for a moment, gathering his wits; shivering, aching and angry. Then, leaning hard on his spear, he limped away, toward Gineah's tent.

"Rest, tomorrow and tomorrow," Gineah said, rising from her inspection of the injured leg. "The muscles are angry, and you — you are a very fortunate hunter, young Slade. You might have broken that leg, and then you would have been a dead hunter, alone in the freezing darkness, without a brother of the hunt nearby to aid you."

He smiled up at her. "I was fortunate, I know. I will be more careful, Gineah."

She snorted and motioned him to sit up, as she crossed to the cookfire and the pot hanging there. "At least your head is hard," she said — and then, "You should not hunt alone."

"I must," he said. "My methods frighten Verad, and the others are more timid still."

Gineah ladled soup into bowls and brought them back to the hearth fire, handing one to Slade.

"Eat." She ordered. "And while you eat, tell me what your wife was about, to allow a stranger to send you from her tent."

So he ate, and told her of his strange homecoming, with Arika entranced or uncaring, the smoke, the knife, and the woman who had banished him.

"So." Gineah looked at him straightly across the fire. "Your wife, young Slade, is a Finder."

He blinked, trying to read her face, and, as usual, failing.

"What is a Finder, grandmother?"

"A woman of great *erifu*, who may cast her thought out to find that which is lost. The best Finders improve their tents many times over. Your wife is young, she has some years before she reaches the fullness of her gift. But she is already known as a Finder of great talent. The tent will improve quickly, I think, and you will no longer live on the edges of the Dark Camp."

Surely, Slade thought, *this was good news?* In the house of his mother, the birth of a Healer was cause for rejoicing. Yet, Gineah looked more doleful than joyous.

"This troubles you..." he said, tentatively.

Gineah sighed. "Finders ... do not thrive. The heat of their gift consumes them. Not all at once, but over a time. Sometimes, a very long time."

He stared at her, thinking of Arika, young and frail and fierce, and his eyes filled. "Is there no—"

"Cure?" she finished for him. "Child, there is no cure for destiny."

"Then," he asked, blinking the tears away, though the empty feeling in his chest remained. "What should I do?"

"Be the best hunter you are able. Be her friend, as I know you can be, O, wisest and most *erifu* of hunters. If children come to the tent, care for them. And pray that they were not born to be Finders."

Something moved near the flap of the tent, loud to Slade's hunter-trained ears. He came around, began to rise — and fell back as fire shot his leg.

"Rest!" Gineah hissed at him, and went to unlace the flap.

"Grandmother," he heard Arika's voice, thin and vulnerable. "Is Slade with you?"

"He is. A woman pushed him from your tent while you were finding, child. What greeting is that for a hunter returned to his tent wounded?"

"Wounded?" He heard her gasp and called out —

"A fall, nothing more. Gineah..."

She stepped back, motioning, and Arika entered.

She was wan, and unsteady on her feet, her eyes great and bruised looking.

"A fall?" she repeated, and knelt beside him, touching the leg Gineah had wrapped. "Is it broken?"

"No," he soothed her. "Not broken."

"He must rest," Gineah said. "Tomorrow and tomorrow. Eat from stores. If there is a call upon your gift, you will come to me, rather than turn this hunter out. Am I understood?"

Arika hung her head. "You are understood, grandmother." She looked up, and Slade saw tears shining in her eyes. "Slade. You should not have been cast out. Next time, I will be certain that those who watch know that your presence will not disturb me."

"Thank you," he said, sincerely, and touched her thin cheek. *The heat of their gift consumes them...* he thought, and wanted nothing more than to fold her in his arms and protect her from that fate.

"So," said Gineah, and his wife stood, to attend the grandmother with due respect, and to receive two medicine pots.

"Rub the leg with this, morning, mid-day, night. If there is swelling, three drops of this, in noginfeil tea. If there is fever, send, and I will come."

"Yes, grandmother," Arika murmured, and tucked the pots into her pouch. She looked down at him doubtfully.

"Can you walk?"

The leg was considerably stiffer, despite the warmth, but he thought he could walk. "If I can rise," he said.

Gineah held out a plump arm, and Arika offered a thin one. It took the support of both, but gain his feet he did, and stood wobbling, arm around Arika's waist for balance, while Gineah fetched his vest and his spear.

They made love, their last night in Dark Camp. After, in the soft silence, Arika snuggled against his chest, and he put his arms around her. She had gained weight since they had married, and the tent had improved as well — in some part due to his efforts; in greater part, so he had it, to hers. As the Dark wore on, more came to ask the Finder to locate this or that misplaced item, animal, or — rarely — person. They paid well, those seekers — in fur, in food, in good metal knives and spear tips. He watched her closely, having taken Gineah's words much to heart, but, truly, she seemed more well, not less.

"Slade," Arika murmured. "Tell me about your home."

He stirred, breathing in the perfume of her hair. "My home?" he repeated, lazily.

"Gineah told me that you were not of the Sanilithe," she said, nestling her head onto his shoulder. "She said you were not of the Trinari, or of the Chinpha. She said that you had fallen out of the starweb, and were no ordinary hunter at all."

*Shrewd Gineah*, he thought, stroking Arika's hair; *and really — what does it matter now?*

"She said," Arika continued, "that she expected your tribe to come for you, and held you away from the Choosing. But when they did not come after two full rounds of seasons, she sent you forth, for a hunter of the Sanilithe must live by the law of the Sanilithe."

Slade sighed.

"Did you fall out of the starweb?" Arika asked him.

*What does it matter?* He thought again. For surely Gineah was correct — no one would come for him now.

"My ...starship... was caught in a storm," he murmured, which was true, if not factual. "Yes, I fell out of the starweb."

"And before it fell? Did you live on your starship?"

*As much as I was able*, he thought, and sighed again.

"Much of the time. I was ... the hunter... who went ahead, to find how the land lay, if danger crouched, or if sweet waters sang..."

This she understood, the order of march during the gathering season being: scouts, hunters, gatherers, tents. She also knew that scouts often took harm from their duty. She shifted, pressing her body against him in a long hug, and nestled her cheek more closely against his shoulder.

"Tell me about your mother's tent."

*His mother's tent* — almost he laughed. Instead, he stroked her hair and stared up into the darkness.

"My mother's tent was...full," he said slowly. "We lived in — a permanent camp. It was not necessary to wander in the Warm Days, to spread ourselves thin so that we did not strain the land. It was," he said, even more slowly, feeling his way, "a land of plenty. The camp — it was called 'Solcintra'."

"There must have been many people in your camp, Solcintra," Arika said after he had been silent for a time.

"Yes," he said, "many, many hands of people."

"What else?" she asked, and this time he did laugh.

*What else, the child asks.*

"Is my question funny?" Arika demanded, between hurt and angry.

"Not at all," he assured her, smoothing her shoulder with his hand. "Not at all. Listen, now, and I will tell you..."

And so he told her, of spaceports, and shops, and healers, and traffic, and sometime before the gray uncertain dawn wavered into being, she fell asleep. He held her then, silent, his thoughts still on the city, his kin, the sky he would never see again...

Arika gained weight into as they traveled into the light, until he was forced to believe what he had not thought possible. And one night, as they sat companionably at the fire; he mending a frayed rope, she mending a broken basket, he asked a question.

"I wonder," he said, watching her face out of the sides of his eyes. "Will the tent soon welcome a child?"

Her hands froze, and she raised her head to stare at him across the fire.

"Perhaps," she said haughtily. Arika was always haughty in fear.

He preserved his pretense of oblivious industry. "A child in the tent would be — a joy," he said. "But the hunter should be informed, if he will soon need to hunt for more."

She looked away, throat working. "As to that — it is not certain. The women of my tent ...do not always... birth well."

Her sister, he remembered, whose baby had been born dead — and who had herself died of the birth. He plaited his rope in silence for a few heartbeats, then asked, quietly, "Is it the Finder blood that puts the babes at risk?"

She swallowed. "The grandmothers believe so. They call it a 'gift', but it eats us up, even those it allows to be born."

"It does not have to be," he said, carefully. "My mother, my brother, my sister — all are gifted as you are, with an extra pair of eyes, that see what others cannot." He raised his head and met her stare across the fire.

"You have the blood," she said, with certainty.

"I do. My mother bore three healthy children; my sister and my brother, who have extra eyes; myself, who has but two. So..." Here was the dangerous ground, for hunters knew nothing of such matters. "So, Arika, my wife, if the child in your belly is one that we made together, it may be that my ...blood... will lend her strength enough to be born — and to thrive."

"It may be," she said quietly, and sighed, putting her basket aside. "Slade. How do you know these things?"

He opened his eyes wide and made a show of innocence. "Things?"

"That without a hunter, there is no child. How does a hunter put a child in a belly, Slade?"

Well, he had botched it. He sighed, then smiled at her. "Why, when we enjoy each other, and you take me into yourself..."

"Enough." She sighed in her turn. "These things are *erifu*."

"Among the Sanilithe, they are *erifu*," he allowed. "In my mother's tent, these things are common knowledge, shared among sisters and brothers."

She closed her eyes. "You make me tremble," she murmured, and looked at him once more. "But I see the fire has not leapt up to consume you, so it must be that the spirits of your grandmothers allow you this knowledge." She bent her head. "The child who — will — come to us is a child of my blood — and yours." She smiled, very slightly. "May your blood make her strong."

Arika waned as the child waxed. Slade held her at night and tried to will his strength into her, for she, his precious, for whom he hunted, did not have his blood to make her strong. Lying awake in the dark, he made plans to dose her from his dwindling supply of supplements; plans which he abandoned as morning overtook him.

# Sweet Waters

His Arika was a child of this world, and even as her world was slowly poisoning him, so his needed vitamins might very well poison her.

He did insist that she refrain from gathering, and when she protested, told her that he would gather. Gineah had taught him something of plant lore. This was true enough, though not as she heard it. Gineah had shown him the fruits of her labors in the evenings when they both had returned to the tent, laying out and naming those things she had gathered.

"I will bring everything to you, and you will decide if it is good," he told Arika. "But you will not go out alone, soft on your feet as you are! You put our daughter and yourself in danger, and I do not allow it!"

A grave breach of *erifu*, that, and, yet, strangely, she laughed. "Slade. How will you hunt and gather? Or will you give your spear to me?"

"No, never that," he said, lightly. "A tent mother must not kill." "A hunter's work fills the day — and a mother's work, too. How will you fit two days into one?"

"Let me try," he said, urgently, and took her hands. "Two days. If I fail to gather, or to hunt, we will — think of something else."

It was perhaps a measure of how weak she was that she allowed him his two days of proof.

His scheme worked well: In the morning, he set his traps; his afternoon went to gathering plant stuffs. When his sack was full; he turned toward the camp of the day, collecting game from his traps as he went.

On the morning of the sixth day, he encountered Tania, the grandmother of their group, at the edge of the camp, gather-bag in hand.

"Good-morning, hunter," she said politely.

Slade touched the tip of his spear to the ground in respect. "Good morning, grandmother."

"I see that the mother of your tent sends you to gather in her name."

*This, Slade thought, could be bad.* He allowed no trace of the thought cross his face. Instead, he replied calmly, "Grandmother, it is so. Her talent gnaws the mother of my tent to bone."

Her eyes softened. "It is a harsh gift," she said slowly. "Do you prepare the gather?"

"No, grandmother; she prepares what I bring, and shows which I should choose more of, and what is not as needful to the tent."

"So." She stood up, shaking out her bag. "*erifu* is preserved. Good hunting."

After that, no one questioned him.

And Arika grew ever more fragile.

In the evening, she sorted and prepared what he had gathered, while he performed other needful tasks. After, they would lie in each other's arms and he would stroke her until she fell into uneasy sleep.

So, the short summer proceeded. Slowly, the sky darkened, and the wind carried an edge of ice, warning that the time to turn to Dark Camp approached.

Slade returned to their tent somewhat later than usual, burdened by numerous kwevits and an especially heavy sack of gatherings.

At first, he thought the tent unoccupied, then, he saw the shape huddled, far in the back, where the medicines were kept.

Heart in mouth, he dropped his burdens and rushed forward. Arika was barely conscious, her body soaked with sweat. Carefully, he straightened her, turned her...

Her eyes opened, and she knew him. "Slade. The child comes." Her body arched, and she gasped, eyes screwing shut.

The baby had come quickly, which had been a blessing. He cleaned her and put her to Arika's breast, turned — and looked up into Tania's hard, old eyes.

"Hunters do not deliver children," she said, coldly.

"This hunter does," he snapped, perhaps unwisely.

"So I see." She stepped forward. "I will examine the mother of your tent, hunter. She is frail and I am many years your elder in the healing arts."

He took a hard breath. "Grandmother, I know it."

"Good," she said, kneeling at Arika's side. "Walk around the camp, twice. Slowly, as if you search for hunt-sign on hard rock. Then you may return."

Almost, he protested. Almost. He had just reached the entrance when he heard his name and turned back.

"Grandmother?"

"You did well," she said softly. "Now go."

The child — Kisan, their daughter — clung to her small life by will alone, and in her stubbornness Slade saw generations of Clan Aziel. She nursed, but it seemed her mother's milk nourished her only enough to keep her soul trapped in her body — and in that, too, he saw the effect of his blood.

His blood.

She sucked the supplement from the tip of his finger while he cuddled her and prayed, chaotically, expecting the tiny body at any moment to convulse, and release his child's willful spirit —

"She is stronger," Arika said next day, Kisan tucked in the carry-cloth against her breast. "Slade, does she not seem stronger to you?"

"Yes," he murmured, leaning over to stroke the small head covered already with

plentiful dark curls — her mother's blood, there. "Yes, she does."

They traveled slowly toward Dark Camp, for Arika's strength was low, and Kisan yet frail, though much improved. And truthfully, the slower pace was not only to accommodate the child and her mother. Slade walked sometimes unsteady, his legs weak, and betimes a high, busy humming in his ears, and flashes of color across his vision. The spells passed shortly, and he did not speak to Arika of the matter. And every other night, as his wife lay in the sleep of exhaustion, he would nurse Kisan from his dwindling supply of vitamins and tried not to think what would happen, when, finally, they were gone.

So they arrived at Dark Camp among the last, and pitched their tent in the fourth tier, considerably higher than last year. There was firewood waiting, and a fire-circle, built properly by women's hands, by those who owed still on Findings past.

Slade saw Arika settled by the fire, and Kisan on the nurse before he turned to stow his weapons — and heard the buzzing begin, growing until it was a black well of sound into which he toppled, head first, and swooning.

He opened his eyes to Gineah's somber face.

"He wakes," she said, and Arika was there as well, her eyes wide and frightened.

Carefully, he smiled. "Forgive me, grandmother. A stupid faint..."

"Not stupid, perhaps," another voice said, speaking the Sanilithe tongue slowly and with an odd nuance.

Slade froze, looked to Arika, who touched his face with fingers that trembled. "A woman of your mother's tent has come, Slade."

*A woman of his —*

He pushed himself into a sitting position, despite Arika's protesting hand on his shoulder, and Gineah's frown. For a heartbeat, his vision was distorted by spangles of light; when they melted, he saw her, seated like any ordinary guest by the fire, the baby's basket at her side, a horn cup cradled between her two hands.

She wore leather, and a wide Scout-issue belt, hung about with a profusion of objects. Her hair was brown and curly, her face high-boned and subtle.

"Do I find Slade, second named son of Gineah's tent?" she asked, in the native tongue.

"Hunter," he corrected, "for the tent of Arika Finder."

Her eyes flickered. "Of course. No insult was intended to the mother of the tent." She raised her cup, sipped, then looked to him, face bland. "I have come to take you back to the tent of your mother, hunter. You have been sore missed."

Arika was gripping his shoulder hard enough to bruise. He reached up and put his hand over hers.

"My mother's tent has many hunters, this tent has but one."

The Scout inclined her head. "Yet this tent's hunter is ill, and soon will die."

*Which was certainly true*, thought Slade. Death or departure equally deprived the tent of its hunter. And the hunter would rather die than depart.

"His mother, his sisters — they may heal him?" Arika's voice was thin, her hand beneath his, chill.

The Scout inclined her head respectfully. "Tent mother, they will."

"And after he is healed," Gineah — shrewd Gineah — murmured, "he will be returned to the tent of his wife."

The Scout considered her. "The grandmother knows better than that, I think," she murmured. "Between the *erifu* of the Sanilithe and the *erifu* of we who are not the Sanilithe, there is a ...disharmony. We are each correct, in our way, but not in the way of the other."

In her basket, Kizam awoke and began to cry, and Arika rose to go to her. Slade watched them for a moment, then looked back to the Scout.

"It is possible," he said to her bland and subtle eyes, "that the addition of a third *erifu* will balance the disharmony and allow health to bloom."

She raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Slade leaned forward. "Take this tent to the sea. I will give you a message for my mother and my sisters." *And for Scout Headquarters*, he thought.

"The sea will not aid you. It—" The Scout frowned, looked to Gineah. "Grandmother, I apologize for the breach of courtesy, but I must speak to Slade in the tongue of his mother's tent."

Gineah moved a hand. "Speak, then."

Yet, having gained her permission, the Scout did not at once speak, and when she did, she spoke the language of home as slowly as if it, too, were uneasy on her tongue.

"I had seen your log, and your determination to gain the sea, were you turned out. Not a bad plan, in truth, pilot, excepting only that this world lacks those things which your body must have in sufficient quantity to sustain you. I have done the scans and can show you the results. Those who are born to this world, they have adjusted to the lowered levels and function — as you see. You, who were bred upon a world rich in nutrient — you can only sicken here, and die."

So, then. Slade took a breath. "Our daughter will die soon. A few days, now."

Comprehension lit the Scout's bland eyes. "You have been giving the child your supplements."

"What would you?" he said irritably, the words feeling all odd angles in his mouth. He sighed. "If I must go, then, allow them to come. My wife, she is — a Healer of a sort, and frail. Perhaps home will heal her, too." ♦

The Scout paused, head to one side...

"Slade." Arika was back at his side, Kizam in her arms.

"What does this woman say?"

"She says that the sea will not aid us."

Arika frowned. "The sea? What do the Sanilithe have to do with the sea?"

"I thought that the *erifu* of the sea might bring the child of our tent to health, and myself."

She bent her head, her hair falling forward to shroud their child. "The little bottle," she whispered, "it is almost empty?"

He reached out and stroked the hair back from her face. "You knew?"

"I woke in the night and saw you give — it is a medicine from your mother's tent, isn't it? She shares the *erifu* of your blood."

"Yes," he whispered, stroking her hair. "Arika — come with me to my mother's tent." From the corner of his eye, he saw the Scout start, but she held her tongue. He *knew* the regs forbade just what he proposed. Damn the regs.

Arika raised her head, showing him a face wet with tears. "And then I will die, sooner than my gift would eat me."

He glanced to the Scout, saw her incline her head, very slightly, and lost her face in the wash of tears. He bent forward and gathered his heart into his arms.

"Arika..."

"No. Slade." Her arms tightened, then loosened, as she pulled away. "You must take our child, make her strong, so that she may do the work of our tent — and yours." She reached to his face, smoothing away the tears with cold fingers.

"It is the trail, hunter. The only trail that is given."

He stared at her, unable to speak. She rose, and he did — Gineah and the Scout, as well.

Arika held their daughter out; he took the small burden, numbly.

"Commend me to your mother," Arika whispered, then spun and was gone, out of their tent and into the night.

He moved, meaning to go after her — and found Gineah before him. "I will look after her, Slade. Go, now."

In his arms, his daughter whimpered. He looked down at her, and then to the Scout, standing patient and silent by the fire.

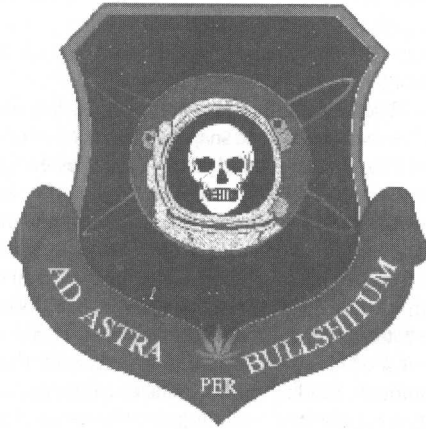
"It is time, then. My daughter and I are ready."

# Primary Ignition Halfway to Pellucidar by Allen M. Steele

Although I was born and raised in Nashville, I haven't lived there in more than twenty years; nonetheless, every summer I pay a visit to Tennessee. I seldom return to Nashville – my home town has changed so much in the last two decades, I barely recognize it anymore – but my family has a cabin in Smithville and that's where I usually take my summer vacation. Southern accents, pulled-pork barbecue sandwiches, quiet evenings illuminated by lightning bugs, the humid air filled with the sound of cicadas and tree frogs. I live in New England because, as the song goes, the climate suits my clothes, but at heart I'm still a Southern boy.

The eastern part of the state has some of the loveliest countryside this side of the Mississippi, particularly along the stretch of I-40 between Nashville and Knoxville where the terrain gradually rises to form the Cumberland Plateau. The only problem is that you can't see much of it, because every few hundred feet there's yet another billboard cluttering up the scenery. Just when you're contemplating a long expanse of farm field or a distant mountain, your view is interrupted by another roadside ad for Cracker Barrel or McDonald's, auto-racing supply shops and discount cowboy boot outlets, Dollywood — Dolly Parton's theme park in Pigeon Forge, the town just outside the Great Smoky Mountain National Park which must hold the record as the world's largest tourist trap — and Rock City, the place on Lookout Mountain where all those "See Rock City" birdhouses come from. And when the ad agencies don't have anything to put on them, they temporarily donate the space to dead Jewish carpenters (RENT THIS BILLBOARD – JESUS SAVES!). After awhile, you stop noticing these things, unless you're compelled to drop by the next fireworks stand and buy enough M-1000s to blow one of these eyesores off its beams. But if you drive long enough, eventually you'll spot one painted in gold and black: VISIT CUMBERLAND CAVERNS – TENNESSEE'S LARGEST CAVERN!

When I was a Boy Scout, Cumberland Caverns was my troop's favorite destination. Oh, we went hiking in the Smokeys and paddled canoes on the Harpath River, but nothing got us jazzed as much as a trip out to McMinnville for an night in Cumberland Caverns. Mammoth Caves in Kentucky is larger, to be sure, yet somehow it seemed tame by comparison; it had an elevator, for one thing, while the only way into Cumberland Caverns was by foot... which suited



us just fine, because every kid in Troop 217 was a hiker by nature, accustomed to carrying aluminum-frame backpacks loaded with sleeping bags, clothes, flashlights, canteens and carefully hidden packs of Marlboros. And while the Smokeys, even thirty-odd years ago, was beginning to suffer from tourism – the campgrounds were filthy with trash, and even on top of Clingman's Dome you'd find beer cans and candy wrappers – Cumberland Caverns was just unknown-enough that it still maintained a certain sense of wilderness, even mystery. There might be a gift shop out front, but once you were a hundred feet below ground, the darkness was deeper than the night, the tunnels seemingly without end.

Troop 217 visited Cumberland Caverns at least three times. Our scoutmasters – two easy-going guys from First Presbyterian Church who'd been saddled with the thankless task of shepherding a half-dozen or so hell-raising adolescents — would pack us into their cars on late Friday afternoon, and then we'd make the long drive out to the caves, usually stopping in McMinnville to grab a bite to eat. The first time out, one of the scoutmasters got lost on the highway, and so the other half of the troop had time to kill in McMinnville. It was a rainy evening in late September, so the others hung around the restaurant where we were supposed to rendezvous, but I was restless so I took a walk down Main Street, and soon found myself in a corner drugstore. It had a revolving wire book spindle, and tucked away among all the nurse novels and Carter Dickson mysteries I found a 60-cent half-size Ace paperback: *At The Earth's Core*, by Edgar Rice Burroughs.

I still have that book; it's on my desk, even as I write. The Roy Krenkel cover art depicts a man and a woman, dressed in ragged hides and carrying spears, cautiously advancing out from under jungle foliage to greet another couple riding a pair of brontosaurus (yeah, I know they're now called brachiosaurs, but these are *brontosaurus*) while pterodactyls (or whatever) glide past in the background. The back cover reads: "When David Innes and his inventor friend pierced the crust of the Earth in their new burrowing device, they broke out into a strange inner world of eternal day – a world back in the Stone Age, where prehistoric monsters still lived, and cave men and women battled against fierce inhuman monsters."

Who could resist? Not me. *At The Earth's Core* wasn't the first Burroughs novel I'd read, nor was it the best — the prize goes to *Pirates of Venus* — yet it's still my favorite, mainly because of the associational memory. For when I read it by the wan glow of a Boy Scout flashlight, curled up in a sleeping bag in a cave two hundred feet underground, it was possible to believe that you were halfway to Pellucidar, and somewhere down here was a passageway that would take you straight to the center of the earth.

But that was a long time ago, and by my last trip out to Cumberland Caverns with Troop 217, I'd reached the age when you stop thinking about earning merit badges and start worrying about how to ask a girl out on a date. In the years between, those overnight trips to the caves had become a fond memory, sometimes remembered now and then along the long road to adulthood, yet seldom examined with little more than a fond smile. And then, one day, you drive past a billboard on your way home, and you suddenly realize that you're 45 and it's time to revisit old stomping grounds.

McMinnville has grown quite a bit since then, and the drugstore where I bought that Burroughs paperback has long since vanished, yet the highway signs pointing the way to Cumberland Caverns are still there. My wife and I follow them out of town, out into Tennessee hill country; no tourist places out here, unless one counts the occasional rundown motel or Indian crafts shop; the signs get smaller, not larger, until you have to look sharp to catch the last one, pointing left to a pitted blue-asphalt road leading through farm

# Absolute Magnitude

fields toward a low ridge. The road stops at the base of a hill, where a freshly-painted red sign says Welcome to Cumberland Caverns.

Little has changed. Cumberland Caverns is now a U.S. National Landmark, complete with a bronze plaque out front of the gift shop; since the late '70s, spelunkers have discovered that they extend 32 miles, a vast labyrinth that extends both north and south of the public entrance. Yet the caves remain privately-owned, and aren't part of either the state or national park system. The parking lot is still small, the gift shop a log cabin with wooden benches on the front porch. The only thing new is a miner's sluice – a raised trough, tilted downhill, with a thin trickle of clear water flowing down the chute – where you can play prospector, using wood-frame wire screens to seine for copper nuggets. Inside the men's outhouse, I find one of the condom machines that have invaded nearly every public restroom in the rural South. Last chance buy a rubber before you go caving (*spelunking* is a Yankee word). I know it wasn't here when I was a Boy Scout, because that wasn't how I got my sex education. I grin at the thought, and save my money for a Cumberland Caverns pocket-knife.

A Bus departs from the gift shop every hour on the hour, May through October, and after Linda and I buy our tickets we join a half-dozen other tourists out on the front porch, where we meet our guide, a local kid of college age who's doing this as his summer job. There's another couple in the group, a young guy and his girlfriend, both the same age as the guide; as it turns out, he's another McMinnville native who used to hold down this same job during the summer; now he's come home for a visit, and this time he's brought his sweetheart. They're never apart for very long; noticing this, Linda and I share a secret smile; it wasn't so long ago that we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

A few brief words of introduction, then the guide leads us down a half-mile dirt trail through old-growth forest, passing a rusted-out railroad caboos that, the guide explains, the cavern's owner bought in public auction many years and had towed here ("Eventually he wants to turn into a snack bar or something, but..." a noncommittal shrug; don't hold your breath). There's a couple of entrances to the caverns, but the one used by the public, the Henshaw Entrance, is little more than a hole at the base of a limestone bluff. It's been widened a bit since then, with a locked wooden door enclosed by a cement frame fashioned to resemble the surrounding limestone, but in its original form it was probably much smaller.

It's dumb luck that Aaron Higgenbotham, the surveyor who discovered the caves in 1810, found the original entrance, about a mile south of the Henshaw Entrance. Well, perhaps he wasn't so lucky. Higgenbotham got lost in the caves

while exploring them alone, and was trapped upon a high ledge after his torch went out. Local legend, reiterated again by the guide, has it that when a rescue party eventually found him, Higgenbotham's hair had turned white. Exactly how they found him, if he was the first to enter the caves and did so on his lonesome, remains unexplained; nonetheless, when I first heard this tale, this notion didn't occur to me. A good yarn like that scares the hell out of you when you're a teenager; applying reason to it would only ruin the story.

The guide unlocks the door with his key ring, then reaches inside to snap the plastic switch of an electrical panel installed just inside. Recessed light fixtures, artfully concealed behind boulders and within crevices, come to life on either side of a dry, red-clay path that leads downward into a broad subterranean room. There's a guardrail on the left side of the path, preventing us from venturing into the wide, shallow pits that make up most of the room. He leaves us there for a few minutes, heading back outside to gather another few members of our tour party who've been left behind; apparently they thought they'd need jackets, so they'd gone back to their car.

I'm grateful for this interruption, for it gives me a chance to look around, see things I hadn't seen since I was a boy. The remnants of a calcium nitrate mine, complete with an ancient wheelbarrow and some pick-axes, that had been used during the Civil War when Confederates dug it up and used to make saltpeter, one of the components of gunpowder. A broken-down moonshine still, originally discovered on the hillside above us but brought down here for show, represents the outlaw activity of a different age. The air is cold and humid, the rock walls maintaining a constant temperature of 56 degrees, and smells of limestone, quartz and clay. On the dark silence, every movement anyone makes, every murmured comment, can be clearly heard by all the others.

The guide presently returns, bringing with him the family who thought they'd need heavy jackets down here. He escorts us from the first room, up a narrow path so close to the ceiling that we have to duck our heads. Turning on another set of hidden lights, we descend into a second chamber, this one far more strange than the first. In the center of the room is a shallow pool of water, and looming above it is an immense stalagmite called Moby Dick. At least that's what it looked like to those who found it; it more closely resembles a giant heap of half-melted wax, one layer dripping down upon another, until one realizes its limestone, and this sculpture is the result of subsurface water carrying sediments down from the hillside above us.

Look into the pool, and within the pale blue light cast by the recessed lamps, you see a small white crawdaddy moving across the sand. One of

the cavern's natives, an albino crayfish; born blind, there's only smooth carapace at the front of its head where there should be tiny black eyes. It pauses at the bottom of the pool, its whiskers moving back and forth. Someone in the group speaks too loudly, and the vibrations of his voice travel through the still, cool waters; a blur of dust, and the blind crawdaddy vanishes, seeking shelter beneath a stone overhang.

Leaving Moby Dick behind, we venture further into the cave system. By now we're more than a hundred and fifty feet underground; tiny stalactites hanging from long fissures that run across the smooth sandstone ceiling show where groundwater has carried sediment down from the surface far above. Here we pause while the guide goes back to switch off the lights, and the former guide – who, it turns out, is a chemistry major – gives us an impromptu lecture in cave geology. During the course of this, I learn a handy mnemonic for remembering the difference between stalactites and stalagmites: stalagmites hang *tight* against the ceiling, while stalagmites *might* reach the ceiling. I probably heard this when I was a Scout, but if I did, I forgot it a long time ago; in any case, it's good to know these things. Never know when you might be a contestant on "Jeopardy."

Nearby, within a narrow gallery, is an enormous stalactite, nearly twenty feet long. Rounded at the top, descending in a thick, graceful shaft to become a broad taper at the end, it has a fanciful name of the Paintbrush. Other formations are less benign. A narrow passage, called the Meat Grinder, is easy to walk through in single-file, but it wasn't always this way; before it was widened by dynamite charges, it was a narrow crawlspace barely wide for someone to shimmy through, its floor and ceiling with jagged rocks. The first men to explore this passageway came out the other side with cuts across their hands and feet and their clothing in shreds, hence the name. The guide shines his flashlight down an undeveloped side-tunnel for me, and it's like staring down the throat of a shark. Another reminder, this time of what it must have been to have explored these caves, back when the country was new and much of America was still a frontier.

We emerge from a tunnel onto a ledge overlooking an immense chamber, 40 feet high and over 500 feet in length. Called the Grand Hall, it could easily serve as a ballroom; indeed, an enormous crystal chandelier, an antique from a European theater, has been suspended it from the high ceiling. It hangs above the long rows of tables where I recall eating breakfast when I was a Scout. Back then, it was cold cereal and orange juice, but

# Primary Ignition

since then a small cafeteria has been set up, complete with a kitchen and a serving line nearly 200 feet underground: nothing could be more surreal. Another tour group is seated at the tables, and while our group waits on the ledge, they're treated to a light show projected by the chandelier's bulbs flashing on and off in computer-arranged sequence, accompanied by the "Spring" movement of Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" coming over the speakers arranged here and there around the chamber. This tour is getting stranger by the minute...

Once the light show is over, we walk around the ledge until we enter a tunnel that leads us into the largest room of the caverns. Known as the Hall of the Mountain King, or alternately as the Ten Acre Room, it's measured as being 600 feet long and 140 feet high, yet the cave doesn't seem nearly that large until you realize that it's mostly filled with a small hill: a vast pile of rocky debris, the result of "sheet breakdowns" that have occurred when the ceiling has eroded and collapsed, time and again, over the course of millennia. A vivid demonstration that, even down here, hundreds of feet beneath the earth's surface, nothing remains permanent for very long.

We come upon a steep trail that leads up the hill; steps have been cut into rubble, and wooden rails have been placed here and there. At the bottom of the hill, the guide pauses to shine his light upon the ceiling near a high ledge nearly sixty feet above us: the name "Shelah Waters" and the date "1869" are inscribed on the ceiling, etched there by an oil lamp by an early explorer, reportedly a local desperado who dodged the law by hiding out in the caverns. His signature has also found elsewhere, in more remote parts of the caverns. I ask if anyone has found the name "Arne Saknussemm," but the guide gives me a blank look, as does everyone else. No one reads Jules Verne anymore. I wonder if Shelah Waters did.

The guide tells us that the trail will take us to the other side of the Ten Acre Room, where we'll see the largest formation in the caverns. Then he adds, in rather cautious terms, that this part of the tour is accompanied by a fifteen-minute audiovisual presentation, "God of the Mountains," that has religious connotations and which some may find offensive. If anyone wishes to remain behind, he says, they can do so, but now is the time to say so. A few uncertain glances, but no one opts out, and so we ascend the trail.

It's a short, steep hike to the top of the hill, one which gives me a chance to talk to the chemistry major and get a scientific perspective on the natural forces that shaped the caverns. But it doesn't last very long, because we lag

behind and have to hurry to catch up with the rest of the group as they descend the trail to the other side of the debris pile. A small plateau has been excavated here; upon it are several benches, along with a projection booth. Once we're seated, the guide steps into the booth; the room grows dark, and the show begins.

The plateau faces an immense formation called the Mountain King. A natural edifice of gypsum and limestone, off-white and tinted in faint earth tones of red and orange, it flows down from the ceiling and upward from the floor to comprise an enormous rock sculpture. Its rounded pillars defies dimension, resembling anything the mind projects upon it. The organ pipes of a long-lost cathedral. The towers of Mordor. A wedding cake left out in the sun for too long. An alien city. A thing of great beauty, carved of living rock over time unimaginable by human reckoning.

After the lights go out, there's a few seconds of absolute darkness and silence, like nothing else save for the bottom of the ocean. The darkness is haunting; in those moments, you can hear your own heartbeat. Then a deep voice – sounding very much like that of James Earl Jones, or perhaps Nat King Cole — comes over loudspeakers and begins a countrified, down-on-the-old-plantation retelling of the creation story from Book of Genesis, while concealed spotlights come to life around the base of the Mountain King, painting it in hues of magenta and burnt-orange, flashing on and off in preset sequence.

It's the same tape I heard when I was a Boy Scout. It didn't offend me then, nor does it offend me very much now. A little hokey, to be sure, but otherwise it's quaint and rather charming, and non-sectarian enough that it could be enjoyed by anyone regardless of religious faith. But then the tape ends, and as colored gells bath the Mountain King in stark red hues, a new tape begins. This one done more recently, and it features a voice more like that a Baptist preacher in a revival tent: "And then the world turned away from Jesus..."

You can imagine the rest. When the presentation eventually reaches its end and the lights come up again, someone behind me says "Amen," but everyone else remains quiet. I'm sure there are some who come away from this presentation with a newfound sense of spiritual enlightenment. Altogether, though, I could have spent the same fifteen minutes admiring the Mountain King in peace and quiet, without a tape admonishing me for my sins.

After leaving the Hall of the Mountain King, the path moves downward, winding through narrow crevices with great massifs of stone rising on either side of us. Linda and I deliberately hang back in order to take pictures,

but eventually we emerge into a long, smooth-walled tunnel that leads back to the Grand Hall. In a few minutes, we'll be seated at the tables we saw earlier from above, watching the chandelier lightshow, and that will be the end of the tour. But before that happens, I take a little trip of my own.

For the instant we enter the tunnel, I recognize it as being the same place where Troop 217 spent the night during our overnight trips to Cumberland Caverns. Surrounded by quiet stone, in the dust of countless ages, we curled up in our sleeping bags, using our backpacks and boots for pillows. As the rest of the tour group follows the guide to the Grand Hall, I linger for a moment. Gazing into the darkness, for an instant I can see Carl and Kent, Robert and Cory, Gary and Lee, Phil and Jeff. My best friends, the guys with whom I shared countless adventures: long lost, but never forgotten.

And for a second, I see myself: a skinny kid in a sleeping bag, its hood up over my head, reading a science fiction novel by faint glow of my flashlight. My wife impatiently pulls at my sleeve, and I reluctantly return to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, sooner than I wanted. Turning away from the past, I follow her through the underground passageway, out of a tunnel that, I'm still sure, will eventually take me to a mystical land of dinosaurs and cavemen, somewhere in the center of the earth.

## SEVEN STARSHIPS WAITING

By Kendall Evens

Seven starships waiting  
Have they any fuel?  
According to the A.I.'s gauges  
Seven starships full

One ship for attorneys  
In litigated berths  
The second for old astronauts  
Grown weary of the earth

Starships for the statesmen,  
The pious and the vain  
Each with lock-down chambers  
For the criminally sane

Sixth is for the wicked,  
Sixth is for the cruel  
That leaves one remaining  
For me, perhaps for you

But what about the little boy  
On the streets of Singapore?  
Seven starships wait in orbit  
Not a starship more

# Triton

## by Chris Bunch

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The villagers were afraid of him, didn't trust him, even though there was no visible reason for fear.

The man kept to himself, buying rice, vegetables, eggs in the bazaar, cooking them in the tiny hut he'd rented just outside the village. He never bought fish, meat or poultry.

He was young, barely in his 30's, but walked stooped over, and moved slowly, like an old man.

He had no vid, received no mail, and showed no vices. He had one glass of wine in the evening at one of the village's two taverns, spoke to no one, answered politely if spoken to, didn't allow himself to be drawn into any conversations.

The man arose at dawn, fishermen reported, seeing him walk along the edge of the great river that ran inland to the decaying capital, two days travel distant.

He almost never walked along the ocean.

He paid no mind to anyone, keeping his eyes on the water's edge. A woman, bolder than most, asked him if he was looking for something.

He smiled slightly, as if the expression came hard, nodded, said, with a foreign accent, that he was looking for something he'd lost, but he didn't think he'd ever find it.

She started to ask why he was looking, but stopped herself, not sure of the reason.

Boatmen reported they'd seen him sitting on a hill a day's journey upriver, watching as work crews slowly salvaged the great, ruined submersible skewed across the once-dredged channel, that kept the river unnavigable, although there were few ships wanting passage to a city that was mostly abandoned, that had little except scrap to sell, and the war had produced more than enough of that for anyone.

The people of the village finally went to the old man, who was as much government as they had, or wanted, and asked him if they should drive the strange man away.

He said he would think on the matter.

Jon Anders grew up on the beach, in California, on Old Earth. His parents taught at the centuries-old Scripps Oceanographic Institute, and bought Jon his first surfboard when he was six.

They didn't worry about his wanderings, and so he looked for waves from above the old Imperial Slough to the jutting seamounds that marked where the city of Los Angeles had been, before the great quakes of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Century sent the coast of California slumping into the ocean.

Most of the Southern California surf spots had vanished — Lunada Bay, Malibu, Rincon. Steamer Lane, near where Santa Cruz had been, still sent enormous boomers smashing into the shore. He found more satisfaction in the danger of riding big surf than of styling on the small, perfect wave, as others did. Nor did he find any pleasure in surfing contests, since he couldn't figure how you could compete with another surfer, when the competition was with the wave itself.

He had dreams, dreams of somehow finding the past in the present, when the islands of the Pacific weren't either submerged by the melting icecaps or shrill tourist havens for tourists visiting the home world.

Twice he managed to get to the single island that remained of the Hawaiian chain, and learned to respect and fear the monstrous waves that reared and crashed on the North Shore. The world's, and his own,

troubles vanished watching the curl lift behind and above him, as his feet worked to keep the old-fashioned long board in the cup, in the slot.

But there was no Tahiti, no Moorea, no Bora Bora, at least not as he'd dreamed of them — languorous natives who made love their pastime, fish that would swim into your net, fruit that ripened by itself and fell into your lap, long sleepy days and romantic nights.

And Earth itself showed its age, its exhaustion. He spent a year as a tour guide, taking visitors up the California peninsula to the village of San Francisco, then inland and down the Great San Joaquin Sea.

These people were different than the Earth natives he'd grown up with. They were vibrant, alive, interested, interesting, curious.

They were the kind of people Jon felt himself to be like, and he was afraid if he stayed on Earth he'd become like the others.

He determined to emigrate, as so many millions had over the past few centuries.

He researched well, he thought, and found the planet of Calypso, the fourth world of a system catalogued as Langnes 713.

A world sparsely settled, with thousands of islands scattered across the northern temperate zone, a few smallish continents where most of the colonists lived, a world of, he thought, tropical languor, or so the vids suggested.

Dreaming of Robert Louis Stevenson, a land baron in the tropics he'd read of, he put through his papers, and was accepted.

But things didn't work out as he'd thought.

There is little place in any pioneer society for slackers. There was work, good hard physical labor that paid well on Calypso.

But that wasn't quite Anders' dream.

He wanted the endless roar of surf against a reef, a full moon, trees swaying in the soft trade winds, and a life where one day slid seamlessly into the next.

He found that Calypso was divided into two social groups — the fishermen and farmers of the islands, and the industrialites of the continents.

Anders went out to the islands, but there wasn't much in the way of decent work. There was harvesting, in season, paying minimal wage, or possibly indenturing himself to a fisherman. He tried that, once, and found not only is a fisherman's life dangerous and not all that well paid, but the hours start well before dawn and end at midnight or later.

That left little time for lounging on the beach, being fed peeled grapes by nubile maidens.

There were a few cities in the islands, but those who found work in them tended to be dedicated workers determined to carve out an empire to rival the mainlanders.

Again, not for him.

Then he heard of what sounded like a great job.

Robotic undersea mining.

He could, he thought, loll on a comfortable bed, wearing a helmet that resembled an Earthling Teutonic knight, and actually "be" underwater, with the fish and creatures he loved. Better even than being in a diving suit, cramped, cold and waiting for something to break and drown him.



# Triton

Being very bright, and highly coordinated, he tested well, and was enrolled, at an excellent salary, in the mining corporation's training program.

His first day underwater was wonderful. Wearing the helmet, he became the mining machine, a squat, beetling robot on crawlers with fish eyes and scoop shovels on extendable booms. Within a few hours, he had a feel for the machine, and, even though he was very tired when the day ended, he thought he'd found his niche.

That first day had been spent in a very large pool.

The second was at sea, practicing in an actual mine.

There the problems began.

The robot was linked to Anders own musculature by kinesthesia. To move ahead or back, Anders would "crawl." Which, by the end of a shift, produced grating pains in the knees. Similarly, his digging buckets were his hands, and there was a link that ensured if he happened to start clawing at a boulder, it would feel just as if he was clawing with his real hands and "hurt."

It was all psychological, but what of that?

He hurt badly, almost too badly to find a pharm store and buy two tubes of their strongest liniment.

The woman who was foreman of his shift told him, not very sympathetically, that he'd get used to it in three or four months, and then, maybe, if he was sharp enough, he could be promoted. To an ore carrier or even an undersea troubleshooter on the robots. In three or four years, he might be a supervisor, like she was, and permitted to flash around the digging site in one of the little "eyes," which looked like googly-eyed fish he'd seen as a boy at the Scripps museum.

And so that job came to an end, and he drifted here, there, taking jobs that required little loyalty but paid accordingly.

He barely noticed that war was approaching. It would be an absurd war as all are, ultimately.

The islanders were tired of being dictated to by the mainlanders, yet still didn't want to become a mechanized culture. The industrialists wanted the islanders to show some sense, and put some energy into their lives, and really make Calypso start to pay off. They *knew*, absolutely knew, if anyone looked, there would be tons of precious metals to be found on the islands or in the shallows nearby. If the islanders refused to look, the mainlanders would. There were other exploitables on the islands, from exotic timbers to small friendly creatures that would make most exportable pets.

No one knew who actually fired the first shot, but then there was war. The mainlanders thought they could walk over the lazy men and women of the islands, but those natives fought back hard, driving their enemies back into the sea.

The mainlanders regrouped, rethought, and instituted a draft.

Jon Anders, not only being at the tassel end of society, but an offworlder, was one of the first taken.

He tried to duck the military, but without success. Anders thought of declaring himself a conscientious objector, but he really had no ethical or religious objection to war, he merely didn't want to get killed.

At the induction center, realizing he was one step from becoming an infantryman, he listed, in panic, every conceivable talent and job.

The brief stint as an undersea miner paid off.

He was summoned to a room away from the other recruits, where a man in uniform, but without a nametag or rank sat. The man asked Anders if he'd liked "being" a robot. Anders told the truth. The man asked why he hadn't stayed on the job. Anders lied, said he'd fallen and broken a leg, and, well...

The man nodded understandingly, asked Jon if he'd care to volunteer for an "interesting and dangerous assignment."

Anders hesitated, then said yes.

The man said he'd go back to the others, be rushed through basic training, and, if he hadn't made any mistakes, move on to this "interesting and dangerous" duty. He was not to talk to anyone about this conversation. All Anders was told was that he'd been put on the list to become a Project Triton operative.

Anders did as he was told, worked hard, and kept his head down. His instructors were sure he'd be offered a chance to go to Officer Candidate School, were surprised when an unmarked lifter showed up at the graduation ceremony, whisking Jon away.

The training camp had been a small fish processing plant on the distant side of the mainland. The buildings were prefab, and the winds blew through them at night. The food was rations, heated without imagination.

Half of the volunteers were clearly looking for anything other than grunting, the others were women and men fascinated by either the sea or robotics.

Jon Anders started in the first group, quickly moved to the second, after his first time piloting a Triton.

He'd seen the vids, so he knew what the training would be like — advanced basic, with brutal drill sergeants, route marches, obstacle courses and such, all having nothing to do with the mission, of which he still was completely ignorant.

Instead, the instructors were marine biologists, divers, technicians. Many of them had spent time in the islands, and some were even islanders.

Anders decided he might like the way the islanders lived, but he wasn't going to get involved in the politics of this war. All he wanted to do was live through it, and see if he couldn't still find a career as a beachcomber.

Then he rode a Triton.

The robot was a flattened ovoid, about 8 meters long, and 2 meters in diameter. It was smooth, except for protuberances on top and bottom for TV and sonar eyes and passive night viewing lenses. Two arms retracted behind the nose. A single screw mounted in a Flettner drive drove the Triton to a top speed of about 80kph, and fuel cells could keep the device running for at least two Earth-years.

Triton's purpose was a small, limited-yield nuclear device in the nose, that could either be automatically detonated or triggered by the operator, who would be in a safe location up to 20 kilometers distant.

Triton was quite a device.

Anders, ignoring that damned bomb in the nose, loved it, loved to take it out, chasing the sleek reptiles that could have been Earth seals or being chased by them, cavorting close inshore, letting the waves lift, almost take him. Or else diving deep, into mysterious depths where no human had ever been.

He adopted certain schools of fish, used his Triton to ram predators that would attack them.

One he grew particularly fond of, because the fish would follow his Triton to reefs teeming with smaller fish to feed on.

He loved to go out before dawn, surface, and watch the sun rise, or delay returning to his slip in a concealed bunker until after dark, and then use his night vision to come home.

Anders could have spent years playing with Tritons in the oceans of Calypso. He dreamed of, after the war, to buy one at surplus, plus enough spare fuel cells, and navigate into Calypso's almost-landless

# Absolute Magnitude

southern hemisphere, where monstrous waves rose and, unobstructed, swept around the world, growing larger as they moved.

It might be, he dreamed, like being able to surf the Southern Forties on Earth, where the greatest waves were born, waves unconquerable by ship or board.

The instructors set problems for the students, and Triton would track Triton, and make a mock kill. The noses of the robots held dummy charges, so there was no danger of an explosion.

The attrition began — some students didn't have the coordination, or the ability to visualize themselves in the Triton, and have immediate responses to any problem.

The problems drove others out. Tritons were deliberately trapped in nets, or marine traps, and their operators left to get them out, somehow.

Two students had nervous breakdowns, unable to realize they weren't *really* coiled in a metal mesh 30 meters down, a mesh sinking into the depths of the ocean.

Some of the students thought this was bizarre.

But not Anders.

He understood, but knew it couldn't happen to him.

Besides, he was far too clever an operator to be trapped by anyone.

There were twenty students left in the program, and then the surprising shocker came, when they were trained in their transporters.

The transporters were larger, non-metallic ships, just large enough for one person to exist in, with just enough comforts to keep him on track.

Unless he or she was claustrophobic. The transporters were only about twice the size and four times the diameter of the Tritons they'd carry until they found a hiding place to send the robots in against a target.

Seven of the almost-survivors couldn't stand the tiny ships, and were failed out of the course.

Anders thought his ship was cozy, wonderful, like being buried under the covers as a child when a Pacific storm boomed against the windows of his parents' cliff house.

The tubes that connected him to the excretory system weren't comfortable, but he could live with a little discomfort. At least no one was trying to make them live on liquids.

The instructors said an operator could live in his transporter for two months, although one admitted "it might get a little gamy in there. Not that you'd notice it by then. But when you're relieved, no one will want to be the one who unpops the hatch, and people might stay upwind of you for awhile."

In an emergency, the transporter had a small, self-contained rebreathing apparatus, intended for escape and evasion.

A little shocked at the loss of seven, the instructors tried to be as helpful as they could during the E&E training the military forced the operators to take.

One woman sneered at what she called jungle-bashing, saying that "if the bastards get to me, I don't see any way I'll be able to get out of my womb in time, so all this shit's a waste of time."

The instructors said the students were ready, and as a final exercise they sent the Tritons in against a naval base. All Tritons found targets without being discovered, and the base would have been obliterated when the nukes went off.

Anders, who was growing more excited as he dreamed of being free, out in the ocean, roaming with his Triton, was second from the top graduate.

The head of the class, a stubby woman from one of the mainland slums, quit the day of graduation, saying, "you should only die once, and if your Triton gets killed, a part of you's gonna die as well."

Anders didn't understand, thought the woman slightly mad.

But that wasn't important. Now it was time to go to war.

Within two weeks, Triton operators began disappearing, vanishing with their transporters and Tritons aboard more conventional submarines with hangers for secret destinations.

Within days, reports of strange sinkings came. Mainland intelligence, to preserve the secrecy of the Tritons, claimed the success of the new aerial mining program.

This was a war that was fought mostly underwater.

Calypto's oceans, away from the islands or continents, were fearsome, and so a lot of commercial shipping was submersible.

Both sides had very sophisticated cruise missiles bought from arms worlds, and those missiles constantly patrolled the oceans.

Military surface ships weren't much larger than patrol boats, not wanting to give the cruise missiles a target.

Air transport, and surface shipping, were heavily escorted.

Calypto's cities, both on the continents and islands, were ringed with anti-aircraft missiles.

So the war was fought underwater, and not exactly in the fiercest fashion, since neither side wanted to obliterate the other, just make him "think reasonably," which meant change their opinions and plans for Calypto for the others' view.

But the mainlanders were growing tired of the near stalemate, and that created the Tritons.

The islanders, too, wanted things over with.

War may start with some pretence of chivalry, but as the death lists grow, it automatically grows more and more brutal.

Jon Anders was called into the operations section, and given a target. As befitted his performance in school, it was a very important one, that might bring the war closer to an end.

The islanders were building a great submarine missile carrier, four times the size of the biggest submersible the mainlanders had. It was intended to close on continents, and then launch wave after wave of cruise missiles.

These would overwhelm a city's defenses, and leave it open to either destruction or surrender.

The submarine would be launched within the month, at the shipyard upriver from the islanders' capital.

Jon Anders was to find a hiding place near that river's mouth, and then take his Triton up the river, and destroy the submarine.

If he failed, there would be a screen of submarines out at sea, waiting.

But, his CO told him, the new sub, which they were appropriately calling Leviathan, would most likely be escorted by a heavy screen and, if it was able to lose itself at sea... who knew what could happen.

Anders was to destroy it in its lair.

His transporter, and the Triton, were transhipped into a submarine, and they set out.

The crewmen of the sub looked at Anders as if he were a little mad. Certainly none of them would consider doing what he'd volunteered for.

Anders, on the other hand, thought the idea of being cramped in a big cigar, seldom seeing the sun or the outside water, unless it was the onrushing deathwave from a depth charge or surface-to-subsurface missile, totally unbearable, and so didn't bother talking to the sailors.

# Triton

Besides, he was busy looking at holograms of the capital, the shipyard, the river from the yard to the mouth. He saw a tiny village there, and wistfully thought it might be nice to live there someday, far from the war.

Then he remembered he would be bringing the war, if not home, at least very close to them, and forced himself to quit thinking about them.

There were satellite shots from above, and he studied those carefully.

Then he thought he was ready.

There were two alarms as they approached the target island. Both times the sub went very deep, and ran silently, avoiding contact.

Then a small camera-equipped torpedo, slaved to the ship with a cable, was sent up, the new style periscope.

The sub's navigator had brought the ship in perfectly. Just ahead of the ship's bow, about five kilometers distant, was the river, its bar showing white across.

The sub's captain apologized. There were patrol ships keeping watch on the river mouth, and he didn't want to jeopardize the mission by coming within detection range.

That was perfectly fine with Anders.

He made his farewells, probably, he realized later, appearing cold, distant. His mind was actually beyond the sub, planning his entrance into the river.

He went into the hangar, opened the hatch of the transporter, and slid inside, welcoming the cold, sterile smell. Even a nuclear-powered, air conditioned submarine started smelling like used people after a time.

His intercom came on.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready," he said, glad there wasn't the hint of a tremor in his voice.

The intercom went dead, and the outside lights went out. The transporter shuddered as water boiled into the hangar, and the rear wall slid open.

Anders shut off the magnetic couplers, fed a little air from his pressurized supply into the ballast tanks, and the transporter floated free.

He gave it a little drive, and the transporter slid out of the hangar, was free in the ocean.

Anders put on more power, watching all his screens.

The sub vanished behind him, and Anders felt the river current take him, trying to push him further out to sea.

He would rendezvous with the sub after finishing his mission, returning to the ocean and broadcasting very low frequency signals that could travel for many kilometers underwater.

He stopped that with some power, then began scanning various screens that showed the ocean and surface around him.

There was nothing, except, on extreme navigation, three dots that were the patrol ships.

He blew ballast, let the transporter sink toward the bottom.

Now he would wait.

It was only a few hours when an alarm buzzed, and he saw, coming up from the south, some sort of surface ship. Probably a small coaster or fishing boat that wasn't worth anybody's missile.

He let his sonar narrow on that ship, and confirmed it as a fisherman. No bigger than 50 meters long, but big enough for his purposes.

Anders brought the transporter off the bottom, went to speed until he was almost on the fishing boat. He killed his drive, let the boat move

past him, then steered the transporter into the fishing boat's wake, keeping about 20 meters down.

The channel had been well dredged. His fathometer showed a good fifteen meters under him.

He set an alarm to go off if it got more than ten meters shallower, concentrated on the fishing boat.

Secure in the burble of the wake, he watched two of the patrol ships close on the fisherman, come alongside, and make a perfunctory search.

Then the fishing boat speeded up, and Anders followed, into the mouth of the river.

The first obstacle was crossed.

Anders unreeled his periscope. He recognized the small village from his holographs, and sailed past it.

A kilometer upriver, the fishing boat turned in to a small dock where two other boats were moored with a warehouse behind it.

Anders went on another half kilometer, spotted, on the far shore, the narrow inlet he'd noted on a holograph.

It had looked like a perfect hideaway for him, and his transporter, and was just that. It had rocky walls, and was quite deep.

Anders put on his control helmet, released the Triton, then reversed his transporter into the inlet, and let it ground on the bottom. It would take a very sharp pair of eyes on the surface to look into the murky water and spot his tiny ship.

From here, he would be the Triton.

He took a chilled bottle of tea from the small refrigerator, put it close at hand. He put the control helmet on, and touched its sensor.

Quite suddenly, he was outside the transporter, it no more than a background echo in his mind of warmth and comfort.

He was now a creature of the sea.

A hunting creature.

He knew, under his helmet, he was smiling as he sent the Triton up the river, toward its destiny.

Anders saw it was getting dark, brought the Triton just to the surface, watched the day become night, something he hadn't seen in that long submarine journey.

The islanders weren't very efficient with their blackout, and so it was easy for him to sail on.

One of the seal-like creatures saw him. Anders wished he had an audio pickup on the outside of the Triton, to hear its honk of surprise.

The animal rolled, swam away, and behind it swam twin babies and its mate.

Jon thought of sea lions on the rocks of his native Earth.

He moved until almost midnight, went to the bottom, and rested, taking the helmet off, and leaving the Triton on automatic alert.

Anders realized the tea bottle was empty, got another, opened a ration pack, and ate, not tasting the food. He put the empty pack in the crusher, brushed his teeth and spat into a pickup, then rolled over, into the transporter's sleeping niche, and actually was able to sleep for three hours.

He woke, looked at a clock, realized it would be dawn in another hour. Again, he ate, and washed his face and hands, put the helmet back on.

The Triton "woke," lifted from the bottom, was moving on, traveling just below the surface to avoid grounding on any shoals his screens saw here and there.

He went on, feeling at once like a warrior, and like an innocent voyeur, watching the life on the river, without ever being observed.

# Absolute Magnitude

Flocks of birds swarmed around a fishing boat, its crew busily gutting their catch and throwing it overboard.

There were other fishermen, boys with improvised poles, old men with elaborate outfits.

A school of fish, moving upriver, swept past him, silver mirror bits jumping, playing.

He moved cautiously past two larger villages, going as deep as the dredged channel would let him.

On the holograms, he'd seen one particular area where trouble could be waiting.

It was. The river narrowed between high rock walls, a choke point close enough to increase the river's speed. Here there was a heavy steel net.

Anders let himself slip to the bottom, let out the Triton's real time visual "periscope," which looked like a small chunk of debris connected to the Triton by a thin cable, with an adjustable, variable-power scope. He scanned the sky, saw a pair of patrol lifters swoop past, a thousand meters over the river.

The net was tended by a pair of small patrol boats, converted tugs it appeared, and on shore there were barracks on either shore, the troops manning missile and depth bomb launching stations.

He waited patiently, hoping that no one noticed his periscope never floated on downriver, hoping anyone who saw the bit of flotsam would think the ripples merely meant the debris had stranded on a shoal, rather than that it was tethered to the control cable leading down to the Triton.

He passed the time dreamily watching fish jump, and birds swoop in and out of the rich vegetation ashore, feeding on ripening fruit.

It took several hours, but a small freighter bumped into sight. Its credentials were established, and the patrol boats dragged the net aside.

Anders brought down his periscope, followed the freighter in its wake, and was through.

He increased his speed, went around the freighter, and continued.

There were more boats and ships on the river, moving between larger villages.

The villages became suburbs, and he entered the huge basin that was the capital's harbor.

Again, he went to the bottom, used his screens and periscope to scan the harbor.

There was no sign of the great submersible.

He considered going to the far end of the basin, where the river continued on toward the shipyard where the submarine lay.

But there were too many patrol boats, too many warships to chance discovery when he was this close.

He could wait.

Anders scanned the harbor again, found a huge slip where, in peacetime, tourist ships docked.

There was one liner, tied up, rusting, waiting for peace.

That was perfect.

He sent the Triton into the dock, spun it about, and let it sink into the bottom muck. He set his screens to alert him if something the estimated size of the submarine carrier showed up, ate and slept.

He wasn't bored, waiting.

He'd send up his periscope periodically watch the harbor life.

Or the rich underwater life about him through external sensors on the Triton.

He was particularly fascinated by one creature that could have been a crab, except all its legs were equal length, and it was

covered with long filaments, almost like an underwater spider nearly a meter across.

It crawled over the Triton, feelers twiddling, investigating the strange craft, then, feeling no threat, continued looking for food.

It seemed to particularly savor the barnacles that grew on the liner's bottom, only a few meters behind and above him.

Time passed. Anders reluctantly took off the helmet from time to time, brought his log up to date, ate, defecated, drowsed.

An unpleasant thought came. What would happen if...no, when...that submarine came down the river, and he struck?

He didn't much care about the crew, nor about the people who might be escorting it.

But what would the bomb do to his crabs, or his fish, or his seal family?

That was not a thought to be endured.

He thought of other things, the waves on Earth, the waves that might sweep Calypso below the land masses, wondered if the Triton apparatus could be modified to fit in or on some kind of surfboard that would let him ride those monstrous waves. There would need to be additional sensors used, ones that would let him hear the ocean's crashing, smell the salt spray.

He reluctantly decided that would take a rich man's resources, for he didn't see many other people interested in such a super board.

The alarm gonged in his ear, and he came out of his daydream.

His screens were showing a swarm of traffic, all moving toward the river's upstream source.

He narrowed the sweep, grinned tightly.

An object, almost 300 meters long, and 20 meters wide, was onscreen.

Anders unreeled the periscope.

Coming across the harbor was a huge ship, one that looked like his transporter, writ very large. Its frontal profile was a flattened ovoid. There was a small conning tower that looked as if it was a popup, men on the bridge. Nothing else marred the sleek deadliness of the ship.

Anders grinned wryly. So much for the supposed mechanical ineptness of the islanders.

The sub was draped in bunting, and there were many boats thronging about it. Anders knew the sub's CO and Officer of the Deck would be frothing, trying to keep from ramming anyone on this celebratory day.

A pair of lifters settled toward the submarine's deck, and a hatch opened, and took them inboard. So it held lifters as well as missiles.

The sub accelerated, and Anders noted it left a marked wake. Also, his sound sensor was almost pegged.

The submarine clearly wasn't perfect. The hull shouldn't have left that big a wake, nor should the engine/engines be that noisy.

But it was still a very deadly beast of the oceans.

Leviathan was an excellent name.

It passed the slip Anders' Triton was in, moved downriver, either on its way to its first patrol, or, more likely, for sea trials.

Anders brought his periscope in, swore as a gull perched on it splashed into the water. But no one noticed.

# Triton

He fed air into the ballast tanks. But the Triton had been sitting in the muck too long, and refused to lift.

Anders felt a twitch of panic.

Leviathan was moving out of range.

He put a bit of power on the drive, and the Triton stirred, and came free of the mud.

Anders was about to turn on the targeting computer, then a better idea came.

He followed the sub, secure in its wake.

The yachts and harbor craft slowly trailed off, returned to the capital.

There were still half a dozen patrol ships hugging the ship, minesweepers most likely, making sure the enemy hadn't dropped aerial mines in the river as mainland intelligence had suggested.

Anders brought the Triton up to speed, slid past the huge sub.

He realized he was sweating, and holding his breath.

They'd told him Tritons couldn't be picked up by most sensing devices, being non-metallic, non-magnetic. But he never quite believed them, even though he'd taken his Triton past several subchasers on exercise without being detected.

But then he was past, in front of the sub and its escorts. Only a few meters below the surface, sped downriver.

He reached the net, just as a pair of fishing boats were approaching. The patrol boats opened the net without even going close to the boats. Clearly they were known entities, and besides, waiting for the approaching sub would be the only thing on their minds.

Anders moved through the net, to the end of the narrows, where the cliffs gave way to jungle vegetation again.

He spun the Triton, took it almost into the shallows, then, with buoyancy neutral, and just enough power to keep the river from washing the Triton out of position, held his position.

Again he waited, the stalking creature.

He lifted his periscope, against his training. But he wanted to see.

His detectors showed the huge Leviathan before he picked it up on the 'scope.

It was impossibly huge.

The ship slowed as it passed the cliffs. The patrol boats had the net wide open, and Anders imagined a band playing ashore, and the guards all drawn up at attention in their drillfield best.

But those were sidethoughts.

He brought the periscope in, and turned on the target computer.

There was no need to pay attention to the escorts. None of them were in front of the great submersible, and he would be making a down-the-throat attack.

The Triton was ten meters below the surface.

The target computer beeped at him.

It had the sub locked in.

Anders gave the Triton power, brought it to full speed. Above him there would be a wake, but it was too late for anyone seeing it to do anything.

He put a screen on realtime infrared, saw the nose of the submarine getting larger, filling the screen, as if it were rushing toward him.

The Triton smashed into the sub's bow low down, at over 50kph, and the bomb exploded.

Water cascaded as Leviathan reared, a sea monster harpooned, almost coming out of the water, its forward third vaporized by the blast. It rolled, spun sideways, its out of control drive sending the twin propellers spinning frantically.

The blast wave caught the escorts, knocked them over like bathtub toys, crashed ashore, across the guard stations, and the assembled troops, obliterating them.

Just behind the blast wave came a great wave, a manmade tsunami, rolling up and down river at 300 kph.

Anders, downriver in the transporter, managed to jerk the helmet off his head.

All that he could see was those final seconds as his Triton died, killing Leviathan.

He managed to find his controls, had power ready.

The wave came, washed into the inlet, and the transporter bucked, almost came out of the water.

Then Anders had control again.

He wanted to laugh, to cheer, but felt himself crying.

He remembered what that woman had said, when she quit the training course, about machine-death being man-death.

But there was no time for that.

He brought the transporter out of its hiding place, sent it downriver at full speed.

There would be no one watching for it, not after the tsunami struck.

Ahead was the mouth of the river, open ocean, his recovery sub, and medals and other patrols.

But none of it particularly mattered.

It was if he saw the world through a gray veil.

He'd lost something upriver, something he knew he could never find, but would spend forever looking for.

The old man reached a decision, and sent for two trusted men, men of size and strength, gave his decision.

The two went to the hut Anders had rented.

His few belongings were still there.

But there was no sign of Anders.

They asked the villagers.

One man, who'd been up early, mending nets, said he saw Anders walking, almost stumbling, upriver.

Anders hadn't returned the man's greeting, seemed not to have seen him.

His eyes were fixed on the river.

The two men followed.

Here and there, they found tracks of bare feet.

Then the tracks vanished into the river, possibly washed away by a passing ship.

They went on for half a kilometer, saw no sign, turned back and told the village's old man what they'd found, or not found.

"Perhaps," the old man said softly, almost to himself, "perhaps that woman heard right, and he was looking for something.

"Perhaps he found it.

"But I do not think we shall ever see him again."

# Sugerbush Soul

by Sarah A. Hoyt

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Lindy Bradmer, plenipotentiary inspector for the Bureau of Narcotics on Earth, walked across the receiving area of Madrasta's InterWorld Spaceport, with its towering columns and broad arches that fairly screamed colonial architecture.

Outside the broad gates of the Spaceport, she blinked in surprise.

"Is it always like this?" she asked me, as her shocked gaze swept around at the dirt street, the gaggles of begging children who clustered around her, the grown beggars — all of them looking old — who sat by the street side, barely out of the path of the speeding, smoking ground cars, and all too close to the overflowing open gutters.

She'd given me the same disbelieving look, when I'd introduced myself as Eustacio Reis, superintendent and representative of the Horticultural Cooperative of Aguas Quentes.

She'd stared at me as if I were not what she expected; as if I were, in fact, some strange alien being. Of course, it was too early to tell the source of her surprise: my mocha complexion, my straight black hair — both rare in an Earth from which all minorities had emigrated or been deported — or the fact that I wore an impeccable white suit, of good cut. Perhaps she expected colonials to go about dressed in fur and tatters.

I also couldn't tell which way she meant her question about this scene, her first exposure to Madrasta. Immediately outside the spaceport lay a large street, busy with speeding traffic, but shaded by tall buildings with elaborate and colorful -- if decrepit -- tile facades. Pedlars swarmed the space between road and gutter, stepping gingerly amid seated beggars, and offering everything and anything for sale, from lynkcoms to handfuls of dusty grapes.

At midday, it was a good ninety degrees in the shade, and clouds of flies swarmed all around, forming a moving curtain that hid the worst details of the scene: the sores on the beggars' faces, the suppurating ulcers on the legs of unemployed farm workers. Above the buildings, on the sky, fat letters formed ephemeral skysigns, their neon-colors advertising all manner of products, most of them imports from Earth. They cast an eerily colorful glow over the dirt of the street and the speeding cars.

"No," I said, curtly as I picked up Lindy's suitcase that she'd set on the ground, beside herself, and that a half-naked urchin had started lifting. I waved away the rest of the pack of little human scavengers. "It's not always like this. Sometimes it's worse."

I spoke curtly because she was not what I'd expected. To begin with, there was the gender thing. Every other inspector we'd endured in our lifetime had been male. Then there was the fact that this particular woman was exotically blond, slim, fragile and very pretty, with a face like a china doll's and wide, enamel blue eyes.

Sometimes one wondered what the government of Earth played at, and what they thought the colonies were. A recreation camp for the bored daughters of diplomats? Didn't they know there were revolutionaries, wild-eyed idealists planning all sorts of things in these far-flung colonies? Didn't they know that every once in a while an envoy from Earth — inspector, ambassador, missionary — got killed, just because he came from Earth? Didn't they know they were endangering her?

I thought of Miguel and Paulo, and the rest of our little band, and the careful, secret plans we'd made, and looked at this woman, who wore

a knee length dress in some shimmery pink fabric and matching thin-strap sandals.

I felt my mouth go dry.

Dragging Lindy, I carried her suitcase across the street at a trot, just after a dusty grey ground car had passed and before the next mad speeder could run us over.

The car I'd driven into the city was a farm worker transport vehicle. Large enough to seat twelve, the boxy, squarish contraption sat on six much too high wheels. This brand had a deserved reputation for rolling over, but they were Madrastian made, and, therefore, affordable. At least affordable to the Cooperatives, of course, not to any particular individual.

Even I, a middle-aged and relatively well-off manager of a twenty-farm Cooperative, couldn't hope to own one. But at least I got to drive my plantation's third-hand model. Wouldn't want to bring a prettier or more modern car into the city, anyway. It would have been stripped in no time. Even this old can had to be protected with repulsion fields, alarms and automated theft taggers.

I turned off the car's repulsion fields with the command I wore on my watchband, and, working fast, before any of the ever-present beggars and hoodlums could push in and steal it, opened the door to my passenger and then clambered in, squeezing past her, as she flinched away, into the ratty brown seat. I closed the door, threw her suitcase in the back, turned on the repulsion shields again and watched them push the crowding masses away with the violence of a good shove. Even then, one or two burly unemployed, young, able bodied men who, for whatever reason, couldn't or wouldn't work, pushed forward, against the fields, with persistence that would overcome them, given enough time. One, burlier than the others, with pitch black eyes and greasy black hair reached for the doorhandle.

"Buckle up," I said, as I dropped onto the dusty brown seat, feeling the give of the broken springs. The seatbelt on the driver's side had been cut by some idiot who'd owned the car previously, so I made do with a length of rope that held to the seat with hooks.

The woman, though she had a perfectly good seat belt, seemed to have trouble buckling it, as if she'd never seen anything similar. I supposed on Earth they used anti-grav fields, or whatever, no doubt more comfortable and activated effortlessly when needed. Hard to tell.

All I had to go on about Earth was the word of my great-grandparents who'd been transported and who, at any rate, had never come close to state-of-the-art technology. They'd told me over and over how Earth had only one moon, and contented themselves with this one wonder, to capture my Madrasta-born imagination.

I took off at full speed, the only way to ensure that no hijackers could get hold of the car. It was getting so that it simply wasn't safe to drive in the city at all. One heard about people murdered — murdered — at stop lights. Murdered for the few car parts and pocket change their attackers could grab before the Colonial Police arrived — and took the remainder.

As we drove in a cloud of dust down the shady streets hemmed in by the very tall, stone buildings, the Earther said, "Why such tall buildings? Porto Novo has a population of what? A hundred thousand people?"

# Sugarbush Soul

I nodded. Porto Novo, capital and largest city of the world of Madrasta, did, indeed, have only a hundred thousand souls. "It was the colonization bureau," I told her, as I swerved to avoid a kid in a ragged shirt who crossed the street in front of us without looking. Not that the little beggar would have much to live for, but then again, maybe he would, if the Liberation succeeded. I thought of Miguel again. I would have to tell him the inspector was a woman and pretty, and I could almost hear him laugh at me. But she was a woman and she was pretty and I didn't think we could get the sympathy of any of our colonial brothers by killing pretty blonde women. We'd have to keep our secret some other way.

I came perilously close to the gutters and the line of beggars along them, then swerved again to the main stream of traffic. "When Madrasta was first colonized, the officials in charge of the project had only so much money to prepare advance accommodations for the first colonists. They could either build a thousand small farmhouses, out in the middle of land that had yet to be cleared of alien plants, or they could build a couple hundred really tall buildings in the city. They thought the buildings were better. They showed better to their superiors. Encouraged tourism."

Lindy took my irony without smiling. Her hair shone, a startling white-gold, even under the attenuated light coming through the refracting windows. She smelled of something light and flowery. "Oh," she said. "Do you have much tourism?"

"No," I said, and my voice almost tasted the bitterness in the word, a taste of unripe fruit and the ashes of long lost dreams.

She looked at me, her enamel-blue eyes immense, then she twisted her lips in a funny way and sat in silence until we got out of the city.

Most changes in landscape came abruptly in this colony that had existed for less than a hundred years. Between one breath and the next, at the turn of a curve, we left streets hemmed in by tall buildings, destitute beggars, dirty children and glowing skysigns, and emerged into unconfined wilderness the street below our wheels showed as the only sign of human occupation. On either side of that black strip of dimatough paving, the primeval jungle of this world reigned. Out here, dimatough had to be used; the only material that held jungle growth at bay.

We'd never understood much about the local flora — of course,

neither we, the natives, nor our ancestors who had unwillingly been shipped to this world, were paid to study the environment. Instead, our livelihood depended on slashing it and burning it so that vineyards and coffee plantations could flourish instead.

Most of the native plants seemed to be some odd sort of fungoid. They came in all the colors of the rainbow, from baby blue to bright, screaming red, and in a multitude of forms ranging from your classic mushroom to an odd bush composed of tentacles.

My passenger came to life, and leaned towards the wide, refracting side window, staring out with something akin to hunger. She laid both her hands flat, palm out, on the windows. "Do you think there's sugarbush out there?" she asked.

"No, ma'am," I told her. And added, for the sake of verisimilitude. "Sugarbush is an Earth plant."

And to her wide, unbelieving eyes, I sighed. "Some sort of bush that someone brought, either by accident, like they brought the flies and the rats, or because they thought it was pretty."

"But we don't have sugarbush on Earth," she said.

"Um... Look it up. Bet you do. They'd just have changed the name, now that Sugarbush from Madrasta is causing that much trouble." She still looked disbelieving. Oh, Lord. You'd think an inspector come to make sure that the farmers in Madrasta weren't cultivating sugarbush would know something of the history of the plant. "It mutated in Madrasta," I said. "Some things do. I don't know what Sugarbush was like on Earth, but the fruit here is poisonous. Can be used to make an hallucinogenic."

She looked at me long and hard, as if suspecting me of fibbing, and I sighed and concentrated on driving. No use to anybody my showing her that I knew a lot about sugarbush. No use my showing her I knew a lot about anything. Had I already said too much?

As abruptly as we had left the city, we left the native jungle behind. The riotous profusion of pastel colors and wild forms gave way to bare black Earth planted with row upon neat row of vines. Amid the vines, the workers of the cooperative worked — the women in their colorful blouses and head scarves, the men in bright embroidered vests, each carrying a tall basket for the grape harvest.

Lindy leaned towards the window. "How pretty," she said, and inhaled deeply. "Nothing like... nothing at all like Porto Novo."

I kept my mouth shut. Sometimes starvation was just not quite so obvious. But let her keep her illusions. They hurt nobody.

"How long till the harvest?" I asked Miguel.

We walked in a field tall with sugarbush, row upon row, upon row of it, the berries glowing fat and red against the dark green leaves.

Miguel, thirty years old but looking fifty, small and brown and almost completely bald, pulled one of the berries off the branch, smashed it between his thumb and forefinger. Red juice stained his fingers like blood. "Another two days," he said. "Should be another two days. If you can keep long legs out of here long enough, she won't find no sugarbush to incriminate us.

I nodded. For all that I had a higher post in the cooperative, Miguel was the soul of the movement of Liberation in this area. His thirty years had been hard lived, since he'd started as the son of an indentured worker, almost a slave. Without ever getting enough to eat — always difficult in Madrasta but even more difficult in the lower classes — or education of any kind, he'd taught himself to read and, somewhere, stumbled on enough ideas on economy and politics to know that Madrasta would be poor as long as Earth controlled us and fed upon us.

## ATTACK ON CELLIUS

Tony Giovia

### A Clarified Universe A War of Visions Dimensional Thinking

It is the dawn of a new century, one hundred years since the The Great Realization. Cellius has established The School of Consciousness to symbolize the new era. Virulius The UnBalancer, Leader of the Robot Nations, sees the School as a threat and leads his antigen hordes in an attack on Cellius. Divinar The Analogist constructs a Cellian response.

The struggle brings together Divinar's daughter, Princess Marina, and Tyronal, leader of the outlaw Amino Gang. Their love story unfolds against a background of desperate conflict: Mitochondrians, Ribosomians, Histones and Aminos join forces to resist a Virulian blitzkrieg aimed at destroying Cellius' delicate ecological balance.

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"The main character Divinar is a hero for our time - brave, modest and two levels higher and deeper than everybody else. He states that 'Answers Do Exist', and proves it by supplying amazing solutions to amazing problems." Charlie Ridge

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# Absolute Magnitude

Like fat leeches, he'd said, feeding on a wounded animal.

Now he looked at me, by the reddish light of the twin moons. "You're not afraid, are you?" he asked.

I shook my head. Not afraid. Worried. We needed money to start our revolution, so that an independent Madrasta could one day feed its own children. But if the inspector found the sugarbush, Earth would refuse the stipend that Madrasta counted on to keep its people from starving.

Lindy laughed, as we drove down the road, taking in the vineyards, the people picking grapes, the far distant dots of white stone plantation houses. "I do believe you wish to spend time with me, superintendent."

She had on a white dress, and looked now at the landscape, now at me, with a small smile.

I smiled back, wondering if my smile looked natural. I felt as if the tension lines in my face would make my skin crack. "Why do you say that?" I asked, in my best tone of light-hearted flirting. Not a very good light-hearted tone, I was afraid. I hadn't courted anyone since I'd courted Ana, and won her, when we were both just seventeen. I'd been married for fifteen years, before I'd lost Ana, two years ago. She'd died of childbirth of our tenth child. Third living one. Her family had taken the children to raise. My small house echoed, too empty and seemingly too large without her.

I was too old to flirt. But let the Earther think I was a lecherous old man.

"Oh," she said. "Just because." The tone of her voice made my stomach contract. Who had she talked to? What had she done? I'd spent the night at home, in one of the outbuildings of the plantation. She'd spent the night in the plantation main house — a large foursquare stone building, a good half a mile from the employee lodgings. When I'd got there in the morning, I'd found that she'd gotten up earlier and had been wandering about the plantation yards and the grape pressing warehouses, talking to people.

But I couldn't afford to ask her what she suspected. So I chuckled and shook my head. "You Earthers. Too sophisticated for me."

She'd asked to go up in a flycar, of course. The cooperative owned one flycar, and we had to offer it to her. But if she went up in the flycar, she would see the sugarbush plantation ensconced between the vineyards and the forest. I'd fed her some line about the flycar being out of order. Just another couple of days. Another couple of days.

"Do you know why I became and inspector with the controlled substances bureau, Eustacio?" she asked, looking at the landscape, the workers waving at her from the fields.

I shook my head.

"I'm the oldest of two sisters," she said. "Or used to be. I was the outgoing, party girl. My sister was quiet, shy. She never had many friends. When she was fifteen, she started doing Madrastan sugar. We never found out until it was too late. She died at eighteen. I was in college then, and I chose diplomacy, immediately. I graduated last year and applied to the CSB."

"I am sorry," I said. "About your sister." Did she know how many fifteen year olds died everyday in Madrastan streets, because they just couldn't get enough to eat? Or how many lived on, having done unthinkable things to stay alive — begging, prostitution, robbery, murder? How many lived on with tainted souls, more tainted than a body could be, by sugarbush? All because Earth controlled the price at which we could sell our products and which products we cultivated —

mainly coffee and wine — while everything else had to come from Earth at a prohibitive price.

We'd reached the inhabited end of Aguas Quentes and, before reaching the forest, I turned around.

"Do you ever go into the forest?" she asked, her eyes on the distant blur of pink and blue tentacles and fungoids.

I felt hair raise at the back of my neck. "No. Nobody does. No one ventures into the jungle here. Leastwise not without a flame thrower ahead of him. Some of those plants are carnivorous and most of them just plain poisonous to humans."

All of which was true, but with the right clothing you could cross a small strip of the forest, and — with a flame thrower — clear a space within the forest for sugarbush.

She raised her pale eyebrow, but only said, "It seems such a waste," she said. "To live in an alien world and know nothing of it."

I smiled, despite myself. "My grandparents weren't sent here as botanists or xenobiologists. And the rest of us are much too busy surviving."

She smiled, in return, but her smile hid something else, something brittle, odd. "You speak like an educated man." Her smile hesitated, flickered off, flickered back on, in an appeasing mode, "Don't misunderstand me. I meant, considering that the people deported here were not educated people." Her face was all soft planes covered in rosy-fair skin shining with something like peach fuzz. Like the fine peaches the rich imported from Earth, once a year as a special treat. I'd had one, once, as a child, at my uncle's house.

They were especially treated, of course, so they couldn't be planted in Madrasta. Wouldn't grow. Earth said it was to prevent ecological damage to Madrasta. Wine and coffee plantations, apparently, caused no harm at all.

"We have a library," I said. "And all the writings of mankind on gem. We can learn. If we're willing to."

"If you're willing to learn..." She spoke in a dreamy tone, and she smelled of peach, too, a warm, fruity smell.

Miguel and Pedro and I wore our heavy clothing, three layers of it, the outer layer the ceramic weave we wore when spraying insecticide on the vineyards.

Miguel felt the sugarbush berry between his thumb and forefinger, and squashed it, red juice flowing.

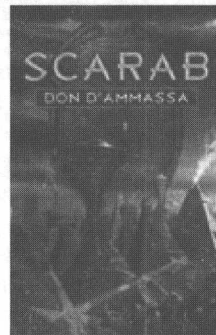
"Is it ripe?" I asked.

"Yes, yes." He frowned.

"But..."

He shook his head. "Just one more day and it would be perfect."

"Not one more day," I said. "Not one more hour. Now, now. The



The city of Soshambe on the planet Tashista has been tormented by a serial killer nicknamed Scarab. Tashista employs an economically determined caste system and since Scarab's victims have all been from the bottom of the social effort, there has been little serious effort made to capture him. When the son of a prominent citizen becomes the latest victim, offworlder Sandor Dyle decides to help out. Available from Five Star Books through Amazon.com and elsewhere.



## Sugarbush Soul

woman suspects, I tell you.”

Miguel looked at me, his eyes hard as pebbles. “You like the woman, do you?”

Did I like the woman? I looked at Miguel and at Pedro, who looked much like Miguel, and who, like him, had been born to indentured servants, though he’d paid off his indenture and was now a free farmer. Well... as free as anyone who worked for the cooperative, which is to say, for Earth.

“She doesn’t matter,” Miguel said. “She’ll be gone. Only Madrasta matters.”

“She says her sister died from sugarbush.” I knew it was stupid before I said it, and the stupidity of it just echoed back to my own ears.

“Her sister died of being too wealthy,” Pedro said. “It is the wealthy Earthers that keep up the demand for sugarbush. We just supply the demand. If we didn’t, someone else would.”

We harvested the sugarbush through the night. By dawn, we’d collected every single berry, harvested it, set it in a deep pit at the edge of the forest.

“Who collects it?” I asked Miguel.

He shrugged. “You don’t know, I don’t know. Someone does. Someone else working for the liberation of Madrasta. That’s all you need to know. That way, they question you, you don’t babble.”

“Those berries,” I said. “So many basketfuls. How much... how many dosages does it make, you think?”

He shrugged. “I don’t make the Madrasta sugar,” he said. “Someone else does.” He looked at me with curious, wondering eyes. “But it would make a lot, I think. I think a dosage is just a drop.”

I slept for an hour or two, after going home and washing. In my too-large bed, in the coolness of dawn, I dreamed of many, many pretty golden-haired Earth girls, each dead from a drop of sugarbush.

“Have you ever seen a long-time addict?” Lindy asked.

I still stalled on the flycar. One more day. Let someone collect the berries in peace. We wouldn’t want them observed. So, she’d insisted on going out, amid the vineyards, and taking random samples of the soil. She said her tests could tell her if there were sugarbush growing nearby. She wore tight black pants, a loose white top and a broad brimmed hat and looked like something in an antique illustration from a book about Earth. She carried a large bag with vials and, every time she stopped, she took a sample of dirt into her vial. Her arms, exposed to the sun, were turning a deep shade of pink, and sweat beaded her small nose.

“No,” I said. “There are no addicts in Madrasta. Madrastans can’t afford to use sugar.” I wondered how accurate those tests would be. The sugarbush grew a good three miles down the road. Surely, she couldn’t detect it from this far.

“At first it’s imperceptible,” she said. She squatted to get a soil sample into a vial and corked it. “Then you start ... fading. Madrasta sugar eats away at the muscles, the major organs. In the end you’re nothing but a shell, eaten away.” She spoke in a distant voice, like someone reading an obituary.

I remembered my dreams in the night, and I shook. So many pretty, golden haired Earth girls, with small breasts and skin that burned easily in the sun — and they would all die from the sugarbush berries we’d harvested last night. But the revolution needed the money, the liberation did. Without the liberation, my sons would be prisoners forever. They’d grow up to be

slaves to Earth, to grow wine and coffee for the elites of Earth, but never to enjoy any of it themselves.

Lindy stood up, and stared at me, as though reading my thoughts, then sighed. “After seeing all those beggars in Porto Novo, you know what I thought?”

I shook my head, slowly.

“I thought, it is the revenge of Madrasta on Earth. Madrasta sugar is. I didn’t know Madrasta was so poor.”

“Few people do,” I said, and looked away, unable to bear the intent scrutiny of those intense enamel-blue eyes.

“She’s been to the field, I tell you,” Miguel said. We met at his house, in his living room. Like me, he lived alone. Unlike me, he’d never married. The liberation was his only spouse, his only love. His house was spare, as all of our houses were, the walls made of native stone, the floor paved with fine sheets of a clay-like material, also local. It all glowed golden by the light of the fire in the fireplace.

“How?” I asked. “I was with her, all day.”

“Then she went at night,” Miguel said, and his mouth closed hard, like a trapdoor.

“You’re asking me to believe that an Earth woman went traipsing around an alien planet at night, that she crossed the forest, for no reason, that she—”

“Idiot,” Miguel said. “Idiot. You believe she’s innocent because she’s female and young and pretty. She’s an inspector. They have equipment that tells them where the sugarbush is. They know...”

I thought of how innocent she’d looked when I’d told her that sugarbush had originated on Earth. Had she been faking? Why? To make me feel confident?

“And besides, there were marks on the field,” Miguel said. His hard, black eyes looked like pebbles, hard and dead. “The marks of her shoes. No one on Madrasta owns shoes with sculpted soles like that.”

“What does it matter?” I almost shouted. The idea that I might have been taken for a dupe stung. She looked so innocent. She seemed to like me. She had flirted with me. “I thought you said that your friends would torch the field, in the night.”

“Yes,” Miguel said. “And that would be fine to prevent it being seen from the air. But not if she came down and took samples of the ash. Then she’ll know. She’ll have evidence.”

Evidence. Evidence enough to put Miguel and Pedro and me, too, away for a good many years. Evidence enough to deny the money that Madrasta desperately needed, to keep its population alive. They called it cultural development subsidies, but most of it went to medicine and childcare, and milk for babies whose mothers died giving birth.

“Thank you for finally showing me Aguas Quentes from the air, supervisor,” she said. She sat in my office, holding a cup of tea in her small, almost transparent fingers.

The bone-white cup was one of the few luxuries Ana had ever bought — a porcelain tea set for my office. Tea was another of my luxuries, a vice, an indulgence.

Lindy’s fingers shone against the cup, just a shade darker than it.

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She hadn't mentioned sugarbush. If she knew about it, she hadn't mentioned it. She just drank my tea, and looked gravely at me across my old, cluttered desk — a large wooden desk, imported from Earth by who knows whom, to serve one of my predecessors.

"When I get back to Earth..." she said, and hesitated. She sat on an antique white canvas folding chair, smeared and grey from many years of use.

"Yes?" My heart beat near my throat. She left the next day, early morning. What was she about to say? That our trade was ended? I shifted on my own chair, an old plastic chair that shifted oddly on legs that had worn unevenly.

"When I get back to Earth, I might... I'd like to use my contacts, make the plight of Madrasta known. Perhaps... a charitable organization could..."

"We don't want charity." My own vehemence astonished me. I sounded like Miguel in one of his mad moments. "Madrasta doesn't need charity. We have good black soil, and we produce good coffee, good wine. If Earth allowed us to trade with the other colonies... If all the ships didn't go to Earth first... If we were allowed to grow our own food, we wouldn't need Earth's charity."

She looked at me a long time, her enamel-blue eyes showing nothing, no offense at my outburst, no shock at being yelled at.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head. "You might want to know," she said. "That the Madrasta sugar trade on Earth has increased five times in the last five years. Analysts have tracked it to the spread of the movement of liberation in Madrasta. The pattern seems to be that the movement penetrates into a new area, recruits a few idealistic souls, gets them to aid and abet the growing of sugarbush for the good of the liberation. And then the head traffickers in Madrasta cash out on the crop, and send it to Earth, with the aid of their secret network, and put the money in secret bank accounts, presumably on Earth. Not a cent of it goes to the liberation movement, which is always the same, always a grassroots movement struggling for money. And none of the locals can get revenge or turn the swindlers in, because of the structure of the movement, where no one knows all the principals, no one knows who they really work for."

"Why are you telling me this?"

She looked at me over the rim of her porcelain cup, intently grave, then suddenly lowered the cup and smiled. "Oh, because you talked of having spaceships, establishing your own trading contracts. Don't you see that Madrasta sugar sells for astronomical amounts on Earth, that an harvest basket full of sugarbush berries would be enough to buy a spaceship? If that was intended..." She nodded to me. "I thought you'd want to know, because you're a good man, and idealistic." She stood up, set the cup down on the edge of my desk, stretched. "I'll go up to bed now. Tomorrow I'll leave early to go to the city. Will you be driving me?"

"No. I have to stay in the plantation. Someone else will drive you." Miguel had insisted on it, insisted on driving her. So he could interrogate her, he said, and find out how much she really knew. I was an idiot, he said, and blinded by the woman's charms.

For just a moment, watching her walk out of my office, I thought to warn her, to tell her that Miguel was idealistic, too, but more of a fanatic than I'd ever be. That I worked for the liberation because of my sons, but Miguel worked for the liberation for its own sake, and it was the first thing to excite his interest, ever, like no human being ever had.

I almost told her that Miguel was dangerous.

But she turned, at the door, and smiled at me. "I'm sure you wouldn't get involved with something like that anyway. Not you, Eustacio. You have too good a heart to live with the sacrifice of anonymous Earthers, even for a good cause." She wore a tight red dress, and her blonde hair, pulled back, gave her face slightly severe lines, that made her look like an eternal icon, something not quite human.

On Earth, they took prisoners accused of drug trafficking and brain-washed them, with a combination of drugs that erased all memory, all knowledge. And then they sent them to a different colony, adult babies who could only do the dullest manual labor.

If I spoke, she would know I knew.

"You're right," I said. "Good night Lindy."

It wasn't so much of a surprise when the car overturned, on the way to Porto Novo. The damn things overturned all the time. Earth didn't even bat an eye at the news. They wouldn't, anyway, since Miguel, the native driver, died with Lindy, and Earthers, with their soft ways, their self-serving culture, have trouble envisioning sacrifice for a cause.

I never saw Lindy after death. Functionaries from Porto Novo came and took her away, back to Earth, presumably back to her family.

Sometimes, late at night, I wonder if she had any brothers or if, in losing her, her parents lost their last child.

And sometimes, in my office, laboring over accounts, I look across the paper-strewn desk and could swear I see her there, on the dirty folding chair, holding a porcelain cup between her too-white fingers.

For many months I waited for some big event, something important to be done by the liberation movement. Something that would justify all those Earth girls dying of Madrasta sugar. I was never sure what the big action would be, but I would have settled for anything: armed fighting, demonstrations, alternative space ports operating from the countryside, food and learning materials secretly distributed to the starving children of indentured servants.

After a year I stopped waiting.

Life goes on, but I feel curiously dried up. My boys are growing, but I'm not raising them, and they don't have much future to look forward to. If they're lucky and smart and hard working they'll be like me, white collar workers in the hierarchy of the wine growing cooperatives of Madrasta, serving the bureaucracy of Earth.

But none of it matters much. Perhaps it's all as it should be. Nothing seems to matter anymore.

I remember what Lindy said about the effects of sugarbush. I feel as if I, too, wasted away from that sugarbush I helped grow. But it was not my body or my muscles that it ate. It was my soul.

# Requiem

by Lawrence M. Schoen

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The three men on stage snapped to attention, and began belting out the planetary anthem of the Ice Lords of Sneth, those benevolent purveyors of frozen foodstuffs to the denizens of the Crab Nebula. The audience howled with laughter. I stood next to the trio and wished I was a bit deaf. Each man sang an entirely different tune using completely unrelated nonsense words. There is no Sneth. No planetary anthem, and no aristocracy. I'd made it all up just a few moments before. I invented the whole thing, even down to the bit about frozen food. It's what I do. I'm the Amazing Conroy, Hypnotist Extraordinaire.

As the men finished singing I leaned in and spoke to each, reinforcing their respective trigger phrases. Then I awakened them from the trance, waved them offstage to the applause of the audience, and took my final bow. Ten minutes later I was sitting comfortably in my dressing room, sipping a chilled bottle of Uncle Waldo's™ Raspberry Rootbeer. I heard a knock at my door.

"It's open," I called, and removed my feet from where I'd crossed them on the edge of a table. I sat up.

*Khan*

One of the former 'Ice Lords of Sneth' stepped into the room. In his right hand he gestured expansively, waving a meerschaum pipe intricately carved in the likeness of a majestic swan. A cloud of sweet smelling tobacco smoke entered with him, which caused the room's exhaust fan to kick in. "That was amazing, Conroy, simply amazing."

I laughed. "It goes with the name, Donny. Have a seat."

The fellow with the pipe was Donald Swansye, a megabillionaire from the outer colonies. We'd met at a corporate fundraiser two nights before, and afterwards over poker and cigars I'd invited him to see my show.

"I still can't believe it," he said. "All the way through I kept thinking I was fooling you, just going along with the gag."

"That's a common response to being hypnotized," I said. "It's easy to deny what's really happening to you, but trust me, you were well under."

He settled into the only other chair and looked at me, really studied my face, for the better part of a minute. "I don't understand, Conroy. What are you doing here? This... show. You're a wealthy man, why are you performing at all?"

I bought a little time by turning and opening the tiny refrigerator under my makeup table. I tossed Donny a frosted Uncle Waldo's™ which he looked at with an expression of bemusement before opening. He smiled at the first sip, and his grin broadened as he drank more. As I said, I liked Donny, and he deserved an honest answer. "Immortality," I said.

Donny chuckled and lifted his bottle in salute. "Trust me, Conroy, you'll go down in history for breaking the buffalo dog monopoly. You're one of the wealthiest men on Earth, but hypnotism? I doubt that talent will be your legacy."

I clinked my bottle to his. "I didn't say it was my own immortality."

"Then whose?"

I chuckled. "An alien criminal who re-introduced me to my great aunt Fiona."

He shook his head. "I don't understand."

I set my rootbeer down and asked, "Do you remember the destruction of a starship, the *Kubla Khan*, about fifteen years ago?"

Donny frowned. "The smartship disaster? Didn't the vessel's captain go mad? He imploded the engines, or some such, killing himself and his crew."

"There wasn't much of a crew. Other than the ship's automatons, it was just Captain Coelacanth and me."

Donny lowered his bottle and gaped at me. "You?"

I nodded. "I wasn't a hypnotist back then, just a college sophomore majoring in xeno-religious studies, with a minor in psychology. I'd grown up hearing stories of my great Aunt Fiona. She'd been among the first Terran missionaries, back when space travel first opened up. But Fiona gave up the religious work after just a few encounters with cultures and recorded histories far richer and older than anything on Earth. She never stopped traveling. Before she died she had probably stood on more alien worlds, spoke more alien languages, than any other Terran. Her exploits shaped my life."

"It sounds like she made quite an impression on you," said Donny.

"She did," I said. "Her adventures were the talk of my family. They generally disapproved of her, particularly her parting with the church. I grew up on tales of exotic alien cultures, and every snippet of her escapades just made me hunger for more. Small wonder then, that between my own devout upbringing and the stories of distant peoples, my studies took me into the study of alien belief systems."

"One of my professors recommended me for a job as alter-shift crew on a smartship. Captain Coelacanth was a vat-grown husk close to ripening, and the ship expected to transfer its own personality into him by the end of the voyage. Other than the ship's automatons, there was just the captain and me, with literally no work to do. Sometimes the captain finished his downtime early and came in during my shift, usually carrying a bowl of pudding. We'd chat a bit while he ate."

The pay was almost nonexistent, but we were scheduled to stop at a dozen different worlds and I had days to explore on each of them. Coelacanth never took a shuttle downworld with me. He just stayed in his cabin, brooding and eating pudding. Sometimes he'd have these weird little panic attacks and back away from some cable or other and scream something about worms. When that happened the ship would medicate him, and moments later the captain'd be fine. I probably should have been more compassionate, but I was overwhelmed by the incredible things I was experiencing at each new port.

"On Krackleburr I witnessed birthing ceremonies from ten alien species. During my time on Venton I was invited to participate in an adulthood rite of Blueie triplets on the rim of an active volcano. And on Kelspar, I actually received payment for serving as an usher at an Arcturan wedding, and tasted twenty-

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six hour vanilla eel cake served to me by a Taosian bride. The wonders and richness of the galaxy had been laid before me, courtesy of the smartship and crazy Captain Coelacanth.

"The port of call I most longed to see was Hesnarij, oldest of the known mausoleum worlds. Thousands of civilizations perform their rituals and services for death and departure on Hesnarij, and my aunt had herself buried there. Our ship, the *Kubla Khan*, had only just been granted clearance by the orbiting station. I climbed aboard the first of our shuttles taking cargo downworld. It had just disengaged from the *Khan* when I heard Coelacanth shouting about giant worms over the com. That's when the ship blew up..."

I awoke in the hospital with little more than a scratch. My shuttle had caught the edge of the explosion and tumbled into the atmosphere amidst thousands of tons of debris from the *Khan*. That's how quickly your world can change. The doctors all told me how lucky I was to be have survived, and left me to rest. The next day I removed the monitoring patches, changed into my own clothes, and checked myself out of the hospital. I had a chit in my pocket to present to the Terran Consul General which would get me passage back to Earth, but Hesnarij wasn't a human world. The Consul covered forty planets in this region of space and his next visit was five months away.

Beggars and panhandlers don't do well on a mausoleum world; the bereaved rarely notice them, and the zealots have no time for them. I needed to find a job if I expected to keep body and soul together until the next Earth-bound ship arrived. That would have been the mature, responsible course. Instead, I set off to get stinking drunk.

I found a bar without difficulty. It looked like it had stood there for centuries. Almost everything in the world's mourning cities was bland, so as to avoid offending any particular culture's taste. Most buildings had been constructed by stacking slabs of flat gray basalt, one atop the other. It was actually more of a lounge than a bar. The polyglot sign out front indicated it served double duty as an eatery during the mornings and early afternoons. Not that I cared; a quick meal wasn't among my plans.

I wandered in and settled onto a bench gracing one side of a stone counter. It was second afternoon of the Hesnarij fifty-seven hour day and the place was packed with mourners, the soon-to-be-interred, thanosists, and a few of the local residents who had decided to draw out lunch and start their drinking early. The air held the faintest of traces of morbidity blossoms, a pleasant mix of vanilla and jasmine that most found restful. The room buzzed with dozens of conversations, which was comforting as well. It looked like an excellent place to get quietly soused and wallow for a while in anonymous self-pity. Anonymity was never an option. My face had been all over the planetary newsfeed, the *Kubla Khan*'s blessed survivor.

I no sooner sat down than a trio of Clarksons appeared at my elbow. They had raspberry hair and fishbelly complexions, and grinned at me like hillbilly lottery winners.

"We buy drink," one of them said in the Traveler pidgin. "Drink for lucky man."

I shrugged and let them. My limited cash would last that much longer if someone else was willing to pay to get me drunk.

Others came up to me. Some just wanted to touch me, rub off some luck; most seemed to feel that buying me a drink ensured them a share of my good fortune. It wasn't until my third drink that I started telling them about the smartship, Captain Coelacanth, the explosion, and being marooned. I poured out my heart, pausing only to sob and drink, then wailed some more. It being a mourning city, almost everyone around me had his own story of sorrow to tell.

At some point I excused myself and managed to stand. It was well past local midnight and except for my personal group of co-mourners the place had emptied out. I staggered off in search of the establishment's facilities, following the floor arrows to a clearly marked door. I relieved myself and turned to retrace my steps, passing someone else who had just entered. Before I could open the door to leave, a sack had been pulled over my head. Hands spun me violently around and it was all I could do not to puke. My assailant shoved me. I toppled backwards, struck my head against the wall, and the world went away.

I regained consciousness, courtesy of a bucket of water the lounge's owner threw into my face. He was my first sight as I spluttered awake, a gangly, bright yellow humanoid wearing a bartender's apron. I sat up and immediately wished I hadn't. The bathroom spun. The cloth sack that had blinded me was gone. So were my shoes, my identification, my travel chit, and all my money.

"I've been robbed," I said, voicing the obvious.

My awakener made a noncommittal grunt and helped me to my feet. I followed him out into the main room and back to the bar. The lights had been brightened and only three other customers remained. The ceiling chron showed early first morning. I'd been out for hours. I sat on the bench and rubbed my head, wondering if I had a concussion or just a viscious hangover. The lounge owner pattered behind the counter and set a mug of fizzing blue gel in front of me.

"Drink," he said. "For head. Drink."

I complied, and with the first sip I felt better.

"Thanks, um..."

"Rarst," he said, slapping one lemony hand against his chest and nodding. "No charge." Then he turned away, ladled something into a bowl and popped it into a waver.

The drunken fog began to clear from my brain, chased by throbs of pain. I was in even worse straits than before, having gone from little to nothing in the course of a mugging. And I still needed a job.

"Thanks, Rarst," I said, and straightened up on the bench. "I appreciate your kindness. I, uh, don't suppose you're hiring?"

He turned back around.

"What can do?" Rarst appraised me from the other side of the counter. His jaundiced expression reminded me of my paternal grandfather who used to bounce me on his knee; except my granddad didn't have slit pupils like a cat. Maybe Rarst felt a twinge of compassion because I'd been mugged in his bar. It didn't make him charitable, just open-minded. "Can sing?" he asked. "Make music?"

I had no marketable skills. I did my best to look pathetic. It wasn't hard.

Rarst scowled and any resemblance to a long-dead relative vanished. "I need entertainment. You figure talent by first

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evening, I give meals and room in back. You entertain, we got deal, okay?" He took a bowl of paella out of the waver and shoved it in front of me, and then waddled off to tend his real customers, leaving me to 'figure' my talent.

I began reviewing things I'd learned in my two years of college. The lounge served a dozen alien races, with nary a human among them. I needed something with broad appeal. It seemed very unlikely that leading a discussion comparing and contrasting various religious practices would qualify as entertainment in the current venue. My college major just didn't lend itself to performance.

Then I remembered a psych course from the Fall semester and the week we'd spent discussing hypnosis. I'd been fascinated, even written my final paper on the subject of multimodal induction techniques. During finals' week I had hypnotized my roommate, and planted suggestions that improved his study habits and test scores. Encouraged for the first time since waking up in the hospital, I picked up my spoon and amid mouthfuls of paella began formulating my act.

"...and when I snap my fingers you'll awaken, with no conscious memory of anything I've said. But what I've told you remains true; the number eight no longer exists in any form."

I snapped my fingers and the half-ton saurian opened its eyes and straightened up on its reinforced stool. We were alone on the lounge's makeshift stage and the attention of the entire audience, all thirty-seven of them, throbbed with a heartbeat of its own. Time hung suspended in the silence. None of them had ever seen a hypnotist before. I smiled and winked at them. Then I returned my attention to the saurian.

"Your people are responsible for the design and construction of most of the cenotaphs here on Hesnarij; I'm sure that requires tremendous engineering knowledge and mathematical acumen. I wonder if you'd mind giving us a demonstration. What's one plus one?"

The saurian glared at me. "Two," it snorted.

"Two plus two?"

"Four."

"Four plus four?"

It froze, tiny eyes squinching in calculation. "Whah?"

"Four plus four," I repeated.

The saurian squirmed; its spinal plates quivered. It whuffed out acrid air from a trio of nostrils. It rumbled deep counterpoint in two of its stomachs. Finally, with a look of total stupefaction it muttered, "Can't be done!"

The audience howled with laughter and pounded the tables in approval. I'd found my talent.

By the end of the week I was doing two shows a night. I spent the mornings developing new material for my routines, and the rest of the day trying to figure out what to do with my life. Comparative religion had lost its allure, and more than anything else I found myself wishing I could talk with great aunt Fiona about it. I needed someone to discuss my future with, to find some perspective and direction, maybe even real purpose. I couldn't even visit my aunt's tomb; it was half a world away on another continent. I didn't have the funds to travel there, not yet.

News of my act spread and the lounge filled with the motley

visitors and bored residents of a world dedicated to housing the dead. Rarst raised his prices, put in a real stage, and even began paying me. The success was a welcome distraction and I threw myself into the work. My technique improved, as did my fluency in Traveler. My patter grew polished and I began mastering an assortment of gestures and body language from other worlds. More importantly, I quickly learned that some alien races could not be readily hypnotized, and that others were almost criminally suggestible. I started saving money toward a ticket to visit the southern continent and my aunt's final resting place.

Some two months into my run, during the second show of the night, I met Kwarum. He was 'pebbly,' that's the only way I can describe him. Imagine dipping someone in glue and then rolling him around in a gravel bed, with each and every grain polished river smooth. I'd never seen his kind before, but that night there'd been two of them in the audience. One had volunteered, along with a rare human and a Clarkson.

The show proceeded smoothly; the audience laughed and applauded in all the right spots. Along with my usual induced forgetfulness, invisible objects, and dog-barking, I had decided to end that night with something new. A minor scandal had circulated through the city in the last few days; a prominent embalmer had mixed up two clients of vastly different biologies and the resulting stench had necessitated the temporary evacuation of several city blocks. My three volunteers sat entranced upon the stage, calmly discussing the event. When I was convinced that each was familiar with the details I instructed them to believe they were actually the individuals in question. In an instant I had two offended corpses loudly complaining with a pompous and ineffectively defensive embalmer, none of whom was actually the correct race for the part he played. The audience ate it up, and even somber Rarst cracked a smile.

After the show the lounge emptied quickly. I left the stage and headed toward my back room to plan the next day's shows. The other pebbly alien, the one from the audience, stopped me along the way.

"At the end of your performance," she said, "would you explain what you did to my kinsman, please?" She spoke crisply, clipping each word.

I looked her over. She hadn't done anything overtly threatening, but I had an uncomfortable feeling. People routinely approached me with questions after a show, curious and delighted. This woman didn't look happy.

"I told him he was Karsten of Belscape, the former plenipotentiary of the far Arcturan colony."

"This individual you named, he is deceased?" asked the alien.

"That's safe to assume, or they wouldn't have embalmed him." I said it with a smile, hoping she'd catch the joke. She was far too serious.

"You admit it," she said. "You named the deceased and made my kinsman invoke him. There is no higher blasphemy."

"Blasphemy? Hold on, I think there's been a misunderstanding. All I'm guilty of is a little harmless entertainment."

Her hands closed around my arm then, with a grip as unyielding as stone. She leaned in and I could smell her breath, all garlic and shellfish. The pebbly skin of her forehead gleamed

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with perspiration.

"No misunderstanding. You instructed my kin to invoke another being, one not of our kind. You named the being. You knew him to be dead. You told my kinsman to become a deceased alien. Do you deny any of this?"

"No, but... it was all just a hypnotic suggestion. A bit of pretend..."

The pebbly nodded to herself. "You admit to blasphemy. There can be no question of your guilt. When I am through, none will find your remains nor speak your name."

Just like that, she lifted me off my feet and carried me out of the lounge. It happened so swiftly, I was through the door before I thought to shout. Outside, the street was deserted. The alien hustled me in the direction of a parked groundcar. A second pebbly stepped around it as we came closer. I recognized him, my volunteer from the show. He raised a hand, pointed at me with his little finger, and said "Let him go."

"Step aside," said my captor. "Your own blasphemy is only slightly less egregious than his. Were we not the only Svenkali on Hesnarj, I would convene a tribunal to denounce you as well."

"Perhaps," replied the new arrival, "but as there are only we two, a tribunal resulting in my early death is unlikely. Now, let him go!"

I winced as her grip tightened instead.

"You may have forsaken our laws and ways, Kwarum, but I have not. The blasphemer must die." The pebbly brought her free hand to my throat. I caught a glimpse of something faceted and shiny clutched between her fingers.

"I can't allow you to kill him," said Kwarum. "Remember and bring forth Hallovesht Funedap Swlekti."

My captor froze. A shudder rippled through her. I felt her fingers loosen and then fall away. She swept a hand across her forehead and then down the left side of her face. Her posture shifted, and when she spoke her voice had changed.

"Kwarum?"

"Hello, Hallo. I'm pleased to see you again. Thank you for coming."

The pebbly snorted with laughter. "As if any of us never arrived once invoked. But why invoke me in another host? Why not simply name me yourself? This is hardly a formal ceremony

"My apologies; I needed to suppress Shastma from her own zeal." Kwarum gestured to me, and continued. "Yours was the first name that came to mind."

"I'm honored and flattered. It's been many years since I've walked and not just watched. And this is a world I've never seen before."

Kwarum smiled. "Then I encourage you to explore, while you remain. All I ask is that you take your host far from here, before Shastma can reassert herself."

My abductor looked at me and then nodded back at Kwarum. "You have always been fastidious about loose ends. I respected that in all our conversations."

She turned abruptly, and walked away. I watched her, mouth agape, until she rounded a street corner and was lost to view. I turned back to the remaining pebbly.

"What just happened? Did she really intend to kill me?"

"Oh yes, which is why I intervened."

"And now you're just going to let her walk away?"

"No, the one walking away is Hallo. It was Shastma who sat in the audience earlier, but Hall never saw your show, and so her assessment is based on her host's episodic memory rather than an emotional reaction."

"Reaction?" I said. "Reaction to what?"

"Your inducement that I invoke a non-Svenkali."

"What are you talking about?"

"Plenipotentiary Karsten. You told me to become him, and you spoke his name. A full name and title, with sufficient additional detail to identify him as unique in the universe. That was all I needed to pull him back."

"What, are you saying just because I said his name that you somehow channeled the real Karsten? That's impossible."

He smiled again. "Impossible? Perhaps. But that is the way of the Svenkali. When Shastma held the peeler to your throat, it was my use of Hallo's full name that pushed her away and spared you."

"And this Hallo person you keep talking about?"

"A teacher from my youth," he said, and gazed off in the direction the other pebbly had gone. "And an old friend. I hadn't realized how long it's been since we spoke."

"Why so long?" I said, "and why did you finally meet her on this world of all places?"

"Hallo came at the invocation of her name, as she always has, since her death more than thirty thousand years ago."

I must have looked as stupefied as a saurian engineer who can't recall the numeral eight. Kwarum chuckled and put an arm around my shoulders, guiding me into the groundcar.

"Come," he said, "let us find a conversation house with refreshment and long hours. I have an idea I wish to discuss with you..."

*Kahn*

*Kahn*

"All sentience survives beyond physical death, forming a vast energy field of memory and personality." Kwarum's fingers danced in the air as he spoke, tracing patterns I couldn't follow. "Some races, such as the Svenkali, can tap that field, and enmesh individuals who have long since left corporeal life behind. My people are so in tune with this field that we need only hear the unique name of a forebear to automatically bring her forth. Do you understand?"

We sat around a basalt table in a curved alcove of a local conversation house. The bereaved need places where they can sit and talk, recounting their experiences of the deceased. Imagine a coffeeshop that specializes in wakes and you're pretty close.

A pig-sized robot scuttled up to our table. It deposited cups of the house specialty, a protein broth with a wicked kick to it, a cross between chicken soup and vodka. I swallowed half my cup at a single toss; I had the feeling I'd need it.

"You're talking about ghosts," I said. "Spirits. Like that?"

"No, merely what has gone before. We coexist with our ancestors, learning from them, benefiting from their insights."

I laughed; blame it on the chicken soup. "We've got people who claim to channel the dead. They surrender their own bodies as vessels to them. Most are frauds, preying on the emotions of grieving relatives." I finished the rest of my drink. "You're

## Requiem

saying you can channel any member of your race who ever existed?"

He nodded. "We are a long lived people, and we have kept meticulous genealogies from our earliest recorded history. I know the complete and unique names of several million Svenkali, and I could call upon any of them from memory in an instant."

I set my cup down. It didn't seem possible, the ability to conjure up any ancestor at will.

"What does this have to do with my act? Why did Shastma accuse me of blasphemy?"

"The invocation of another is an integral part of our belief system. It assures us immortality. So long as some other can speak our names, we know we will continue to live on in the universe. But my people believe this is reserved for the Svenkali. From infancy we are taught to ignore the rhythms of alien names. No other race shares our facility to blend so readily with those who have gone before us. Thus, to invoke one who is not of our kind constitutes an abomination."

"So when I told you you were Karsten of Belscape..."

"I became Karsten of Belscape, or I would have if the fellow's personality had been stronger. He found the invocation so disorienting and confusing that he receded into the blending. Normally both share the body, or when a third person forces the invocation, as I did with Shastma, the host gives way."

"I'm terribly sorry," I said. "If I had known I would never have taken my act in that direction."

"You have no need to apologize; few Terrans have met Svenkali or know of our gifts. Besides, the experience inspired me. Perhaps I required such a radical event to jar me free of traditional patterns of thought."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow..."

"I have a proposal for you," he said. "You see, I am dying, dying the absolute death."

"Absolute death? But you just said that your people were immortal, after a fashion. Won't other Svenkali invoke you as you have done for your own predecessors?"

The corners of his mouth curled in a faint grin, though his eyes burned with a more somber emotion than I could label. "Alas, no. Among my own kind I am a criminal. My name has been struck from the genealogies, and any of my kin foolish enough to speak it after my death would likewise be outcast."

"What was your crime?"

He dropped his gaze and studied his cup of broth before replying. "Talking," he said, "to people like you. Telling them of the Svenkali gift. That was offensive enough for disapproval, but I didn't stop there. Those conversations fueled another desire, even more debased, and I gave into it. I invoked other races. I enflashed the surviving sentience of alien beings."

He sighed and lifted his head. His eyes glistened with milky white tears. "I was near the end of a long life, but before I left the physical world I wanted to know the feel of a non-Svenkali mind, to host a consciousness that had never been host itself. It should have been the high point of my life, but my people did not regard it as such. Instead, they have decreed it to be the end of my existence."

I couldn't think what to say. How do you respond to being told an immortal alien is being denied immortality? I stared

down into my cup, and waited.

"You are still young, even for your kind, and so you might not understand me. I feel cheated, Mr. Conroy, as simple as that. Every previous generation has lived on through others, and I shall not. Once my flesh has failed, no Svenkali will invoke me. All my life I have participated in the immortality of others, and now it is to be denied me. I thought I had reconciled myself to it, accepted it, until your show."

"My show?" I said.

He nodded. "The inspiration I spoke of, a revolutionary idea. What if members of other races invoked me? Think of the adventure! Not only would I achieve my promised immortality, I would blend again with beings who share experiences none of my kind has ever known."

"But who besides the Svenkali have the ability to invoke you?"

He paused and sighed. "Alas, none really, not to full mutual awareness. But I believe that if an alien were to speak my name, knew who I was distinct from any other being who had ever lived, that would be enough to gather my energies. It would pull my essence from the field of sentience, and for a time let me live again. I would again perceive the physical world, existing for a time in the thoughts and senses of other beings, though they might be utterly unaware of me."

I stared at him. "Are you asking me to do this? To say your name some time after you're dead?"

"Not quite," he said, and the smile was back. "It would hardly be immortality if it lasted only till the end of your own days. But you could tell others, just a few, here and there, when you have them hypnotized. And you could instruct them to do likewise. You could tell them this tale. Along with my name, that would be sufficient to single me out among all who have been. And you could slip in a small suggestion, encourage them to pass the tale along to other generations. Do you see? I would continue to live, long beyond just your span."

"How can you even know this will work?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Faith, perhaps? I admit, this possibility of surviving occurred to me only hours ago. It might fail, but I have nothing to lose if it does, and immortality if it succeeds. Will you do this for me?"

"Why me? I don't know anyone. I'm not really even a hypnotist. In a few months I'll be back on Earth, back in school. I'm not the man you want."

"I believe otherwise. You are the individual best suited to my needs because you are someone who can use the only coin with which I have to pay. I know I am asking much, but I offer you what none but the Svenkali can."

"Coin?" I said. "What do you mean?"

He out his palms together, laced his fingers, and leaned forward. His expression was serious, even somber, but his eyes twinkled with inner merriment. "The facility exists within you. I can sense it, though it is weak. Your people could manage to do this, albeit only infrequently. All you lack is guidance. I could help you to invoke someone, only once and briefly. After some years you might be able to manage it again on your own. But one time at least, I can promise. A few minutes, blended with someone who has died. Is that sufficient payment for what I ask?"

I found it hard to speak, a lump rose in my throat. "You could do

# Absolute Magnitude

that? Anyone at all?"

He nodded, eyes still smiling. "Anyone you can name as a unique individual. Payment in full and in advance, in exchange for your word to share this tale and have others do likewise and invoke me. This is the sole chance at immortality which remains to me. I only wish I could offer you more."

"You have a deal," I said. "How soon can you, um, provide payment."

His pebbly face relaxed and he sat back. "Immediately, if you wish. You need only place your hands in mine, and speak the name of your intended, distinguishing this individual from all others."

I reached across the table and grasped both of his hands. You might think I had a difficult time making my choice. With all of Earth history, all those famous personalities to choose from. I never gave a thought to any of that; my selection came to me without effort. I closed my eyes. Then I whispered her name, the woman whose adventures had shaped my childhood and brought me to this point. "Fiona Katherine St. Vincent Wyndmoor."

His fingers tightened on mine and a shudder ran up my spine. The idea of her filled my thoughts. I felt awash in memories, catching glimpses of a life that wasn't mine. I saw her laughing as she an infant upside down by one foot, dipping him -- dipping me! -- in a lake like a young Achilles. There she was as a young woman, respectful, all in black at a family funeral. Then again, aged as I had last seen her, irreverent and proud as she recounted her tales of travel in my father's study a dozen years ago. Images from her life played out across my mind as a silken current coursed in my brain. I could almost feel neurons firing in patterns and streams that the human brain never experiences. I discovered a new kind of pain and realized I had done something suicidally foolish. An alien was manipulating my mind, poking around in my consciousness. What had I been thinking?

And then the memories fell away and she surrounded me, enveloped me. My great Aunt Fiona was there, in my head. I could sense her surprise, her wonderment, and then her joy. It was like she had never died; she was with me now, the adventure of her life not yet ended. I tried to recall all the things I'd always wanted to say to her, but came up blank.

"I'm sorry," I said at last.

"Hush, boy, you've nothing to feel sorry for."

"But you're dead."

I heard her laugh, the sound echoing softly in my mind. "I've had more of a life than any seven people I ever met put together." She paused and smiled. "Excepting maybe yourself."

"I don't understand."

"Nephew, look where you are. Recognize what you're doing. Books and lectures are fine things, wonderful things, but they're not the same as the people who inspired them. Your family never understood, but I always hoped you might, that of all of them, you just might make the leap.

"The leap? I said. "The leap where?"

"Off Earth," she said, laughing, and I could have sworn I felt her hand ruffling my hair. "Away from home and safety, removed from the comfortable and familiar. And now you have. I can see it in you, you've left that parochial world and that provincial boy behind you. You've dared, deliberately or not, to embrace all that lies beyond."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

She laughed again. "Says the young man talking to his dead

aunt! But enough, tell me while we've time, tell me of the people you've been meeting and the things you've been doing."

And I did. I recounted all the shows I'd done in Rarst's lounge, all the aliens I'd met, from Coelacanth up through Kwarum.

We shared an eternity that lasted only minutes. I felt her start to fade, and I opened my eyes. Aunt Fiona gazed with me at the Svenkali sitting across the table. My mouth moved and we said "thank you, Kwarum," and then she was gone.

"Thank you, Kwarum," I repeated, unable to stop the flow of tears down my cheeks. "Thank you for doing this thing."

He released my hands, patted them gently. "There is no need," he said. "You did it yourself, I merely guided the way. If anything, I thank you, for immortality."

"And that's why I'm still a hypnotist," I said, sitting back in my chair and draining the last of my raspberry rootbeer.

Donny cleared his throat. "That's quite a story, Conroy. So, did this Kwarum fellow die yet?"

"Twelve years ago," I said.

"And you've invoked him as he asked. Has it worked?"

I shrugged. "The human mind doesn't easily go where the Svenkali wandered at will. But I like to think he's here, that telling you his story like this has brought him back. He might be peering out of my eyes, this very moment, looking right at you."

Donny nodded and moved to relight his pipe. "You astound me, Conroy. Keeping faith with a telepathic criminal member of an alien race. I doubt I would have done the same."

"I disagree. I think you'd have liked him, Donny, and he you. I'm certain you'd have told his story if our positions had been reversed."

"Nice of you to say so," Donny replied. "It's a flattering speculation." He puffed on his pipe and put the lighter away.

"Ganesha hazelnut," I said, and smiled to myself as Donald Swansey slumped into a deep trance in response to the trigger phrase I'd implanted earlier in the evening.

"Trust your judgment, Donny, and in the years to come when you meet someone of character and caring, someone whom you know in your gut will believe or at least want to believe, tell them the story I have just told you. And when you have done so, charge them to do the same, on and on. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Donny murmured.

"Very good. Now I'm going to count to three, and when I reach three you'll awaken with no memory of what just occurred, though the compulsion will remain. But before I do, I want you to do one thing for me now. Repeat this name with me; you'll need to know it so you can pass it along when you tell this story. Repeat it and invite him in, Kwarum Sivtinzi Lapalla, the only Svenkali ever to be hypnotized."

"Kwarum Sivtinzi Lapalla," said Donny, "only Svenkali ever hypnotized. Come forth" A shiver rippled through him.

I thought of Fiona for an instant, as I always did when I passed Kwarum along. I felt an echo of her, warm and comforting in my memory. I smiled and searched Donny's eyes for signs of someone looking back. Was there an answering twinkle there? "Hello Kwarum," I said, and counted to three.

Donny took a deep draw on his pipe. He frowned down at it and reached again for his lighter.

"Well," he said, "either way, it's a hell of a story."