

# SPEC

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Novel excerpt by SEAN STEWART (author of PASSION PLAY)



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HOLMES '92



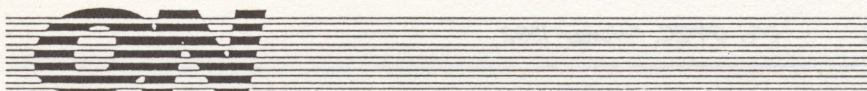
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from his new novel, *Nobody's Son*, coming in the spring of 1993!

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# THIS ISSUE

by Jena Snyder

As we move into our quarterly schedule, it seems like every time we turn around, there's either another pile of stories to read or another Fight Night or business meeting or party to plan! Four years ago when various Copper Pigs decided to quit complaining about the dearth of SF markets in Canada and DO something about it, we never realized just how much work it would be. But we all agree (even those Copper Pigs who have temporarily "retired") that it *is* worth the effort.

And parties are definitely worth the effort! At our Hallowe'en fundraiser, Mirth & Mayhem, we all had a hell of a good time, even though we didn't make a fortune (by any stretch of the imagination). In fact, it was so much fun, we're going to do it again, with a party on February 20th to launch our OVER THE EDGE issue. We don't know all the details yet, but by December/January, all *ON SPEC* personnel should be selling tickets.

Starting with our last issue (Spring '92), we added an extra 12 pages, and filled them with Lorna and Michael's Guest Essay on the trials and tribulations of editing Tesseract's<sup>4</sup>; "Ask Mr. Science"; Tim Hammell's visual musings, entitled "The Inner Mind"; and a feature on Aurora-winner Martin Springett and his art.

So what do you readers think? Do you like or hate the changes? Do you have any suggestions/complaints/compliments? We'd love to run a "Letters to the Editors" column, but we need your input first. What do you

## ON SPEC

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like/not like? What would you like to see more/less of?

Two questions we have had:

- Why don't you run longer stories? (Our top limit is currently 6,000 words.)

Obviously it's easier to cut something short and fill two extra pages than it is to take out a 10,000 word piece and be left with 20 empty pages. We had a couple of bad days during layout when it looked like one story was just not going to fit, no matter what. The problem was solved when we switched to two-column.

Besides, if we run longer stories, we will have even less variety than we do now. Which leads us to:

- Why do you publish so many different kinds of stories?

We want to continue to run the best stories we receive, no matter where they fit on the SF spectrum: hard science fiction, high fantasy, humour, horror, surrealism, magic realism, ghost stories, and so on. Certainly there's something to be said for not trying to please everyone, but we'd rather wow you with one story than leave you cold with all of them.

And if you think we're publishing too many "different" kinds of stories, all I can say is: Wait until you see our OVER THE EDGE issue. †

## Watch for . . .

. . . our OVER THE EDGE theme issue, leaping into existence in February of 1993. Not for the complacent, this issue will challenge, surprise and enthrall you! Stories include "Fish," a quirky little offering by M.A.C. Farrant; Eileen Kernaghan's "Circle Dance"; Dirk L. Schaeffer's "3 Moral Tales" (a different kind of monster story); "Kissing Hitler," by Erik Spigel; "Penis Envy," by Lyle Weis, and more. Cover art is by Kenneth Scott, whose work is guaranteed to blow your socks off.

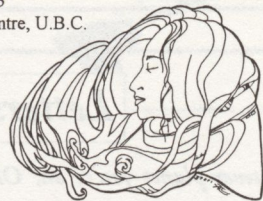
. . . and for our next FUNDRAISER, to be held February 20! Not many details are available as we go to press, but we can guarantee that it will be even bigger and better than our Hallowe'en costume extravaganza, MIRTH & MAYHEM. Ask ON SPEC personnel for details. We'd like to invite all Edmonton-area readers/contributors/friends to attend. Don't miss this one! 🎵

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(Children 12 and under, ½ price; one-day rates are also available at the door.)

**Rooms** at Totem Residence available for \$26/night and up (reserve through U.B.C. Conference Centre, [604] 822-1010). More information for writers, artists and dealers will appear in early 1993. To receive our second Progress Report, send cheque or money order to:

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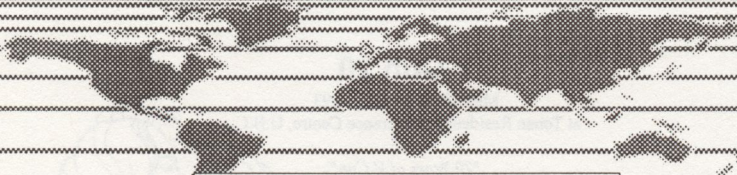
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## Letters to the Editors

Whatever planet you're on, ON SPEC wants to hear from you. Address your letters, comments, concerns, suggestions, to: Letters to the Editors, ON SPEC, Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6.




Dear Editors:

Here's a little funny. There's a tiny, little Chinese Grocery just around the corner from us where we occasionally stop for take out. There, nestled among the *PENTHOUSES*, the *HUSTLERS* and various other T&A selections, was one, lone, perky little copy of *ON SPEC*.

Am I missing something here?

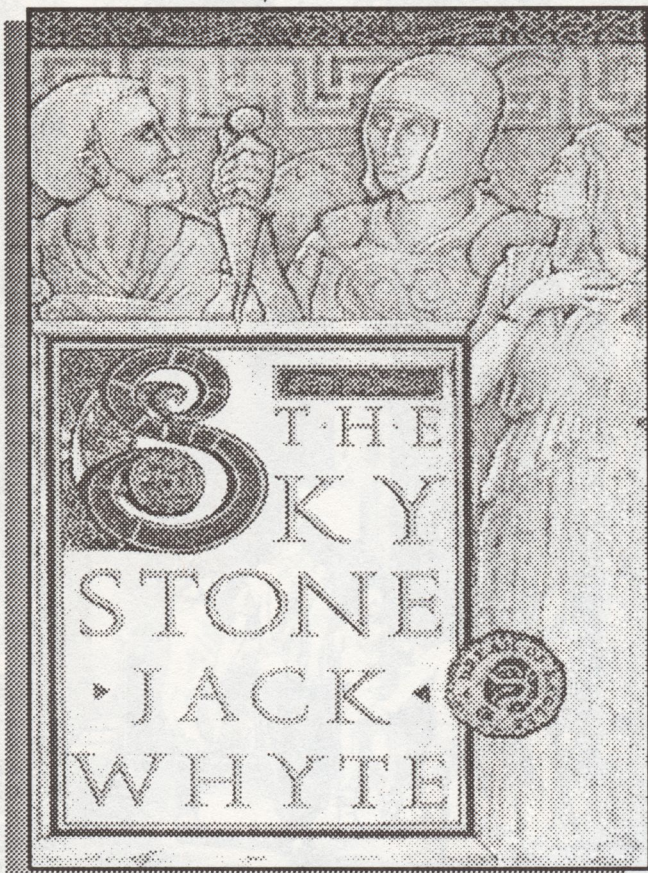
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# Saints

by J.R. Martel

illustrated by Rob Alexander

Gerald Taurus stopped to watch the dancing bear. It was a bulky creature with rheumy eyes, fading mottled-brown fur and great muddy paws the size of dinner plates. A ruddy young man wearing a frayed leather jacket controlled the creature using a wooden bat and a chain that linked to a steel hoop through the bear's nose. He gave the chain a sharp jerk, compelling the bear to rise on its weary hind legs and growl a toothless protest. As if to the sound of some strange song only it could hear, the bear shuffled from side to side, waving its forepaws for balance, and then stepped back once before returning reluctantly, fearing punishment, to all fours.

The bear's master flashed a hopeful smile at Taurus, a paunchy, grey-haired man watching with weary eyes. Taurus wore a dark brown greatcoat and held a scuffed briefcase. He pitied the bear, a once wild and powerful beast, subdued by the steel hoop through its nose and the beatings that had sapped its will, and his pity turned to a bitter and piercing rage, sweeping suddenly through him, only to still with equal suddenness. *This is Istanbul*, thought Taurus, and he abandoned the bear to its unnatural fate.

Without looking back, he continued up the narrow, cobbled side-street. Heavy branches, limp with dripping leaves, hung over the wire mesh fence separating the street from the museum compound of the Church of Saint

Sophia. Over his shoulder, Taurus saw two of the lean, erect minarets and the golden dome, capped by a light dusting of snow, which had fallen that morning. Moaning ship horns reverberated weakly from the sea-traffic, navigating the grey tumble of the Bosphorus Strait. Taurus inhaled the sharp, cool air and winced at the acrid sulphur smell from burning coal.

Only twenty minutes before he had sat in The Vitamin Restaurant. He had felt the blast of the gas heater above the jangling door, and watched the intense, dark eyes of Amir Saadi as he studied the papers draped across their tottering wooden table. Taurus had developed a new artillery system. Saadi rubbed his aristocratically-hooked nose and his thick lips formed a crooked smile: he approved of the plans.

Taurus tried to persuade Saadi into providing additional funds for an artillery piece large enough to launch satellites, or defend against incoming missiles, but Saadi merely changed the subject. He recalled that Taurus had attended a Catholic boarding school in his youth and he suggested a visit to the newly renovated Church of Saint Sophia, rumoured to be quite remarkable.

Taurus made no response to the suggestion. In fact, he longed to press again for more money, but something in Saadi's quiet, confident manner stopped him. Taurus had failed to sell his idea everywhere: in

the West, Asia and the Middle-East. No one seemed interested in anything but practical, cost-efficient weapons. Gripped by a sudden weariness throbbing through his body like the pain of fresh bruises, he shrugged his shoulders and Saadi went on to finish their business.

He could still feel the cool rage that had built within him as Saadi had disappeared into the late afternoon crowd of shuffling pedestrians waiting for the erratic, diesel-belching buses on Divan Yolu.

At the end of the lane, Taurus found the squat, tin-roofed admission booth. On the gate, a bright orange sign with black lettering in four languages—Turkish, English, German and Italian—indicated that Saint Sophia remained closed for renovations. Taurus examined the chain, fixing the gate to the fence, and discovered that it had no lock. Such indiscretions were typical of Turkish exhibits, especially in the off-season. He didn't want to waste the time he had spent walking and he knew that tourists were treated leniently by the authorities. He let himself in.

He followed the paved walkway and marvelled at the church which looked, in outline, like a giant pair of muscular shoulders jutting up from the ground, crowned by a massive golden cap instead of a head. A wooden annex, rough planks set at haphazard angles, adjoined the rear entrance of the church. Taurus en-

tered into a large antechamber and stumbled on the uneven dirt floor. A latticework of dappled sunlight filtered from the gaps in the roof. Against the far wall lay sculptures, some crumbling and broken human forms with the obligatory missing noses, a cracked stone altar and two dilapidated crosses.

Taurus expected the grumbling sounds of workers; instead he heard the faint, subtle and joyous laughter of children. A gentle tug at his hand startled him. A girl with curly blond hair and glinting brown eyes stared up at him and pulled gently at his hand. The top of her head came to his waist and he estimated her age at about eight years. She wore red plastic slippers, a pair of formless brown pants, and a bright pink T-shirt.

She led him around a darkened corner away from the relics. After a few sharp twists and turns, the girl led Taurus through a partially reconstructed wall where fractured bricks lay in a pile of sand, and into the church proper.

Taurus stood beneath one of the largest domes in the world: Saint Sophia, Church of the Holy Wisdom, constructed in the Sixth Century at the order of the Emperor Justinian, seized from the Christians by Muslims in the Turkish conquest of 1453; much later, in 1935, Ataturk made it into a museum.

Taurus' gaze trailed involuntarily upward, past the slate black candle holders suspended by cables from

above, over the double tiers of pillars, dulled brown with age, and followed the ranges of arcades to the dome, floating in the pale afternoon light.

When his gaze returned from above, he noticed a Turk leaning against a pillar and staring at him. He wore beige corduroy pants, tattered at the cuff, and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up past the elbows. He had thick, black eyebrows and a hawk nose. Finally, when the Turk smiled, he smiled with his whole face. Taurus recognized his free, accepting expression. In Istanbul, he had seen it often, preceding a request by some bystander who thought all westerners were willing to share their expertise in English, or their money.

"Are you American?" the Turk asked, walking across the worn prayer rugs covering the floor.

"Yes. My name is Gerald Taurus."

He tried to offer his hand, only to find that the girl refused to release her strong and determined grip.

"Sheila has claimed you."

"Sheila?"

"Forgive me. I forgot my manners. My name is Mesutt."

He clasped Taurus' free hand in greeting with both of his hands.

"We get few visitors. She liked none of them. Children have instincts, especially this one. Sheila, you want to give our guest a tour?"

Her blond curls bounced as she

nodded vigorously.

"May I help?" Mesutt asked.

She nodded again.

Mesutt showed Taurus the tiny alcove, on the second level overlooking the choir platform, where seven steel-framed bunk beds gave the children some place to sleep. A short distance from the sleeping area, a portable gas stove and ice box provided the only evidence of cooking facilities. Mesutt claimed to prepare the food for the dozen or so children wandering and scampering around the church. Their tiny faces reminded Taurus of a sampling of the children he had seen in his travels: Vietnam, China, South Africa, Ethiopia, Western Europe and the Middle East. They could have passed for a poster group from an international boys and girls club.

"Sheila and some other children found me," Mesutt said, leaning against the railing on the second level, Taurus beside him. "Followed me home from work. I didn't know what they wanted. It sounds ridiculous, but I took them in. I had a good job at the bank. I supervised the bids for the renovations to this church. It is difficult to explain how they made me understand. They don't speak. They wanted to fix the church."

Taurus looked away, to hide his disbelief.

"How do you support yourself and these children, do you have money?"

"No," Mesutt replied. "Not me. We have the contract to renovate the church. The first payment was fair. It will feed us. We keep the UNESCO schedule."

"How? It would take a team of dedicated workers years to restore this place," Taurus said. "Years."

"The children do it. I don't know how."

"Ridiculous." Taurus finally gave in and laughed.

"Yes, ridiculous, but this is Istanbul. East and West have collided here for centuries, Christians and Muslims. Istanbul has two legs, one in Europe, the other in Asia, and its head in the heavens. It is the gateway to the Orient. Anything can happen here."

Down on the main floor three children played. They wove a fine, silky ribbon around several pillars in a corner of the church near the Sultan's pulpit. They were dancing freely to the music of their own laughter and whoops of delight. In the corner where they played, the church appeared to be brighter. Years of neglect faded from the porphyry and verde antique pillars, but Taurus refused to trust his eyes. It had to be some kind of illusion, created by the odd lighting in the church, that made Taurus believe the stone pillars were regaining their long-dead lustre.

Taurus glanced at the large black ovals just above the second tier. Eight ovals, inscribed with the holy names of Allah, the prophet Mohammed,

the four caliphs and Mohammed's grandchildren, had been installed by the Ottoman Muslims when the church was used as a mosque. Taurus recognized the flowing Arabic script and could even read the names. He stared at the oval directly across from him and sounded out the name. Then he checked a different one. When he looked at the first oval again, the name had changed. No, he hadn't read it incorrectly: it definitely wasn't the same. Before his eyes, the black paint on the sign darkened and the yellow lettering became brighter and more stylized.

Then he saw four children in a circle, hands joined, facing outward. A parade of cast-off-clad young boys and girls departed and rejoined the spinning circle. Beneath their feet, concentric waves of colour flooded into the worn patchwork of prayer rugs. Holes, where the tile floor showed through, mended instantly.

Taurus' breath quickened and cold sweat dotted his back. The children turned in their circle. Between pillars, the ribbon slipped willfully on its own, as three children clapped in time. The hidden green and red emerged from the pillars as the dull brown of age steamed away like frost on a window struck by harsh sunlight. The laughter Taurus heard invited him not to believe, for just a few more seconds, the words issuing slowly from Mesutt's mouth.

"Ridiculous, but it happens."

Taurus sank into a comfortable chair between racks of leather coats of all colours and sizes. He glanced out the large front window and saw the busy shoppers hurrying past on their many errands at the Grand Bazaar. Taurus chose a cup of tea from the table next to him and took the lid off a dainty porcelain bowl filled with sugar cubes.

The first lump of sugar dissolved slowly, cascading like an avalanche in miniature. It was mostly in solution before reaching the bottom of the clear glass cup. Taurus dropped in another lump of sugar and watched the whole procedure again, carefully. Tiny granules remained as he swirled the apple tea with a miniature silver spoon. He appreciated the normality: the sugar dissolving as he had seen hundreds of times before, no strangeness, no suspension of physical laws, no impossibility revealing itself, no threat of a world of reliable perceptions collapsing.

Taurus hadn't been able to concentrate on the theoretical parts of his project since finding the children. His cold, perfect equations slipped away from him. He questioned the reliability of each variable, became suspicious of every previously sound assumption. An intense calculation would be interrupted by the most impossible images: artillery shells burst into bouquets of daisies, their delicate white heads crushed beneath the boots of onrushing soldiers; a satellite, about to unfold its delicate

antennae, collapsed upon itself, becoming nothing more than a golden-brown Christmas ham topped by a ring of pineapple, all in orbit around the earth; shrapnel, launched from a cannon to intercept an incoming missile, flitted off as a flock of purple martins, beaks agape, swallowing mosquitoes. The reality Taurus needed and loved was disappearing, and he couldn't allow it to escape without a fight.

Isa entered from a small door at the back of the shop. He was short, but his shoulders were wide and he looked powerful. His light brown skin matched the colour of the leather tie hanging from the collar of his neatly pressed shirt. There appeared, in the way he moved, the strained caution of a man who lived in the home of a harsh and unforgiving master. Only when Isa felt safe would he allow himself to use one of his natural Kurdish expressions, frowned upon by the Turks. Seldom had Taurus heard him speak his mother tongue.

Isa held up a leather jacket for inspection.

"The best quality," Isa said, as he held a flaming lighter against the jacket for a moment.

"Real leather," said Isa.

"I'm only interested in the best quality," Taurus replied.

"Good. Come with me."

Isa returned the jacket to the rack and led Taurus to the door at the back of the shop. The door

creaked slowly open and Taurus followed Isa inside.

"Only for our best customers," he muttered, once inside, closing the door behind them.

The walls were lined with discarded garments, outdated styles, and items needing repair. It smelled of musty leather and acrid-sweet smoke. Isa cleared a short wooden bench and motioned Taurus to sit down.

Taurus reached into his greatcoat and retrieved a thick wad of bills.

"I hope you don't mind, but I've been using pound sterling for the past few months," Taurus said, as he handed Isa the money.

Isa smiled, as he accepted it.

"British money is good. Much better than Turkish lira."

He pushed aside a pile of leather jackets on the floor and lifted a floorboard free. Squatting in front of Taurus, he withdrew a package the size of a cigar box.

"There is no metal, even a plastic timer. The longest setting is thirty minutes. It is capable of much damage. Understand?"

"Yes. I'll need a margin of safety," Taurus said.

"If you want to live."

The second item was much smaller: a cassette tape. Isa handed the larger package and the tape to Taurus.

"The smaller one is chemical. No metal except for the original parts. It will detonate in a tape player



when the play button is pressed. Not quite so powerful as the big one. I wouldn't want to be sitting next to it."

Taurus nodded in appreciation of the workmanship.

"My cousin has a shop, close. He is good with such things. My friends and family are everywhere. Some day we will not be afraid to show ourselves and speak our language." Isa waved the money in his hand.

"And the last thing I mentioned," Taurus said.

Isa hesitated, then fished into his pocket to remove a small square wrapped in brown paper. Taurus peeled the paper back and smelled the thick, black material. He nodded.

"It is not good to cloud your mind at an important time. I do not trust such men, despite their money."

"All minds are clouded, Isa. Besides, I need it for the flight, nothing else."

Isa wrapped the two devices in a leather jacket and then placed the jacket in a plastic bag. He handed the bag to Taurus as they left the room at the back of the shop.

"You drive a hard bargain," Isa said as he slapped Taurus on the shoulder. The gesture, Taurus decided, was part of Isa's manufactured salesman character.

Taurus stepped out onto the walkway of the Grand Bazaar; the moving crowd opened and people

dodged past him. Taurus slowly paced himself with the shoppers around him. He wanted to lose himself in the crowd to consider his plan.

The transformation of Saint Sophia stunned and amazed Taurus. Making an appearance from behind the clouds, the sun filled the church radiantly through the latticework of windows. The dome floated, riding upon a series of closely spaced windows, on a circle of light. The colours came to life: the staunch red and green of the porphyry and verde antique pillars, the brilliant yellow Arabic lettering contrasted against the pensive black ovals. The walls shimmered where mosaics, gone for centuries, had returned in dazzling gold, silver, emerald green, ruby red and sapphire blue. Taurus leaned down and allowed his fingers to sweep over the fine silk tapestries covering the floor. He felt the expanse of the church flooded by air, light and echoes of jubilation.

"I marvel at it," Mesutt whispered into Taurus' ear, "but I'm afraid of my wonder. I don't want this to disappear."

Taurus nodded as he searched the second tier and examined the vaulted structure holding the dome aloft. It would be best to place the explosives somewhere on the second level, thought Taurus. He needed some way to keep Mesutt and the children together.

"I need a picture. Could you get

all the children together?"

"Certainly. It will be a few minutes," Mesutt replied.

Before Mesutt's words escaped his lips, several children emerged from behind pillars. Out of shadowy corners their laughing faces appeared, as though Mesutt's intention of calling them sufficed. Taurus watched as Sheila arrived at the centre of the group. She stared at him and smiled. For a moment, Taurus believed that she motioned him upward, urging him up to the second tier and his mission there.

It took Taurus only a few minutes to reach the proper location from which to take the picture and set the explosives. He kneeled beside the pillar to remove the camera from its case. He set the timer of the bomb for seven minutes. Taurus estimated a two-minute margin of error for the inaccurate timekeeping device. Determined to be clear of the church in five minutes, he checked his watch.

Bounded by the viewfinder, with the ecclesiastical backdrop, Mesutt and the children looked like a school group on an outing. The children, in their motley, second-hand clothing, settled naturally around Mesutt, their faces turned up to Taurus. He marvelled at their wide staring eyes and grins.

For an instant he saw them differently. They could be children fathered by soldiers Taurus had, one way or another, helped to kill. For

years his shells had fallen on battlefields in many countries and, with uncanny devotion to the promises he had made to his buyers, they mangled and destroyed. His work had been necessary to finance his more important projects and prove himself to a world which doubted his ideas. Never once had he counted himself responsible. No more so than the man who had designed the armoured personnel carriers that transported young men into battle.

But these children were trying to undo his work. Taurus felt the fear again, the terror as he had watched the children playing — Saint Sophia coming alive around them; that fear pressed him to action.

Mesutt waved as though Taurus was leaving on a long trip; they were all waving, sending him off.

The shutter opened and closed, opened and closed again. At the second snap, Taurus remembered the timer and his margin of error. He stepped back behind the pillars and placed the camera into his shoulder bag. The adrenaline rush started, but he had to remain calm, at least until he escaped.

He steadied his voice.

"Mesutt, I'll be down in a minute. Keep the children together for another shot."

Taurus could hear the echo of his own footsteps, at first hurried, then, as he brought himself under control, regular and seemingly re-

laxed. Down to the main level of the church, he needed only to make a left, away from the nave, and he would be through the doors, outside. Still in shadow, he had enough cover and only a few steps to the doors.

He heard Mesutt's voice calling excitedly.

"Mr. Taurus, I forgot completely about . . ."

Taurus pushed the heavy door open; he glanced back into the church. Sheila stood, framed between two pillars, and stared at him. Her eyes reached out to him, pleading: brown and shining. Mesutt, far behind her, looked up at the second tier, talked excitedly and waved sheets of paper in the air. For a moment, Taurus understood nothing. The heartbeat pounding through his body meant only the loss of seconds. Survival mattered. His survival, their deaths. Accomplishing what centuries, neglect and wars had failed to accomplish: shattering the Church of the Holy Wisdom.

Taurus crossed from shadow into light. He walked quickly toward the boulevard. He dipped his hand into the pocket of his jacket and removed a leathery black paste wrapped in paper. He removed the paper, ripped the square in two and swallowed one half. The second half he flung into the fountain as he walked past.

Parked at the curb were three cabs, drivers waiting patiently. Tau-

rus chose the newest model, an orange Volvo, and flung the passenger door open. He gestured for the driver to wait. Leaning against the door, Taurus watched the church.

Almost lost in a cacophony of honking, stuttering traffic, the explosion echoed thinly, then dissolved. Dust began to collect and rise above the church. The dome vibrated rhythmically and began a slow collapse; it deflated like an ornate balloon, falling inward onto the nave of the church. Against the rumble of fragmenting stone Taurus closed the car door. Satisfied.

"Hava Meydani. Airport. Drive."

Nodding, the taxi driver put the car into gear and the car screeched into the heavy stream of traffic. The taxi rounded a curve and Taurus looked back at Saint Sophia. He could see nothing but a lazy wisp of dustcloud dissipating in the wind and the pointed blue tips of the four minarets. At a certain gap in the buildings, Taurus saw the church, uncapped and staggered, light flowing through it from previously solid places. His stomach churned and he felt a warmth spreading to his limbs. Hazy euphoria settled behind his eyes.

A mere blink, more of a flicker, while turning his head back to the road. Taurus sensed the retinal afterimage, or less, the memory of the image: the church stood, untouched by centuries of devastation, refracted

sunlight passing through the windows around the dome, afloat on a band of light. Just as he felt it, the wave of panic ebbed. It was a trick played by the sun, a memory, the beginning of his flight. Taurus settled into the seat for the remaining ride to the airport.

Taurus had no interest in the airliner's odd vibrations and shudders. Another two hours and he would be in London's Heathrow airport, the best possible place for a connection to America. He needed to re-establish his American connections and start business afresh.

The woman in the seat next to him had tried to make polite conversation but had eventually lapsed into reading and then sleep. Her head swayed with the airplane's unpredictable motion. Taurus turned to look out the window. He watched the wing flex, straining to maintain lift. At the tip of the wing a narrow stream of chilled air swirled and tumbled. Taurus was engrossed by the sometimes gentle wobbling that shifted unexpectedly to violent flapping, then back again. The thin column of air reminded him of the ribbon the children had woven between the pillars of the church.

Taurus heard a jubilant child's laugh. He raised himself and scanned the seats in front of him. Nothing moved but the rhythmic, bouncing heads, visible above the seats. The woman next to him continued to

sleep. Across the aisle a Turk in a business suit met Taurus' gaze and smiled. He felt suddenly uncomfortable, watched. Every vibration sent a new shock through him. He removed the portable cassette player from his shoulder bag and loaded it carefully with the rigged cassette Isa had provided.

He heard the laugh again, this time behind him. Taurus left his seat, accidentally nudging the woman next to him awake as he stepped out into the aisle. Walking slowly, he searched the rear of the airplane. At the steward's station, he scanned the seats of the craft. A few rows away, a girl stood, or kneeled, on her seat and watched him. She had a mop of curly, golden-blond hair. As he moved forward, she dropped into her seat and disappeared from view.

Taurus staggered forward, struggling through an anxious haze. When he reached the seat the girl had occupied, he found it empty. She had moved to a seat farther ahead. It was Sheila. She clapped her hands together playfully and ducked down into her seat. Taurus tried to control his trembling limbs.

He returned to his seat. Giggles and hoots came from everywhere around him. No one else heard the laughter or saw the children. Taurus placed the headphones of his cassette player over his ears. A shadow fell across his lap. He couldn't force himself to look up.

His fingers curled around the cassette player. About to depress the play button, a gentle touch at his arm stopped him. He did not shrink from the contact. The woman beside him had reached out.

"Excuse me. I don't mean to be a nuisance, but I am a music enthusiast. I would like to know what you are listening to." She spoke in deferential tones, the quiet of middle-class England. Grey hair wisped out among the brown. Her hand remained poised on his arm as she awaited his response.

"Something I picked up in Istanbul," he said.

"Ethnic?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Taurus drifted, defeated. His strength ebbed away as if he were reliving every past failure in one moment. He sensed eyes peering at him, from all directions. On the wing of the aircraft the children danced, played and laughed. The headphones cut out the buzz of faraway noises, so Taurus could hear only the woman next to him. She held a set of headphones in her hand.

"Would you mind if I listened as well? I am ever so curious." She shrugged an apology, her smile hopeful.

Taurus checked the cassette, placed it back in the player and surrendered the device to the woman's outstretched hand. She plugged her headphones into the second jack.

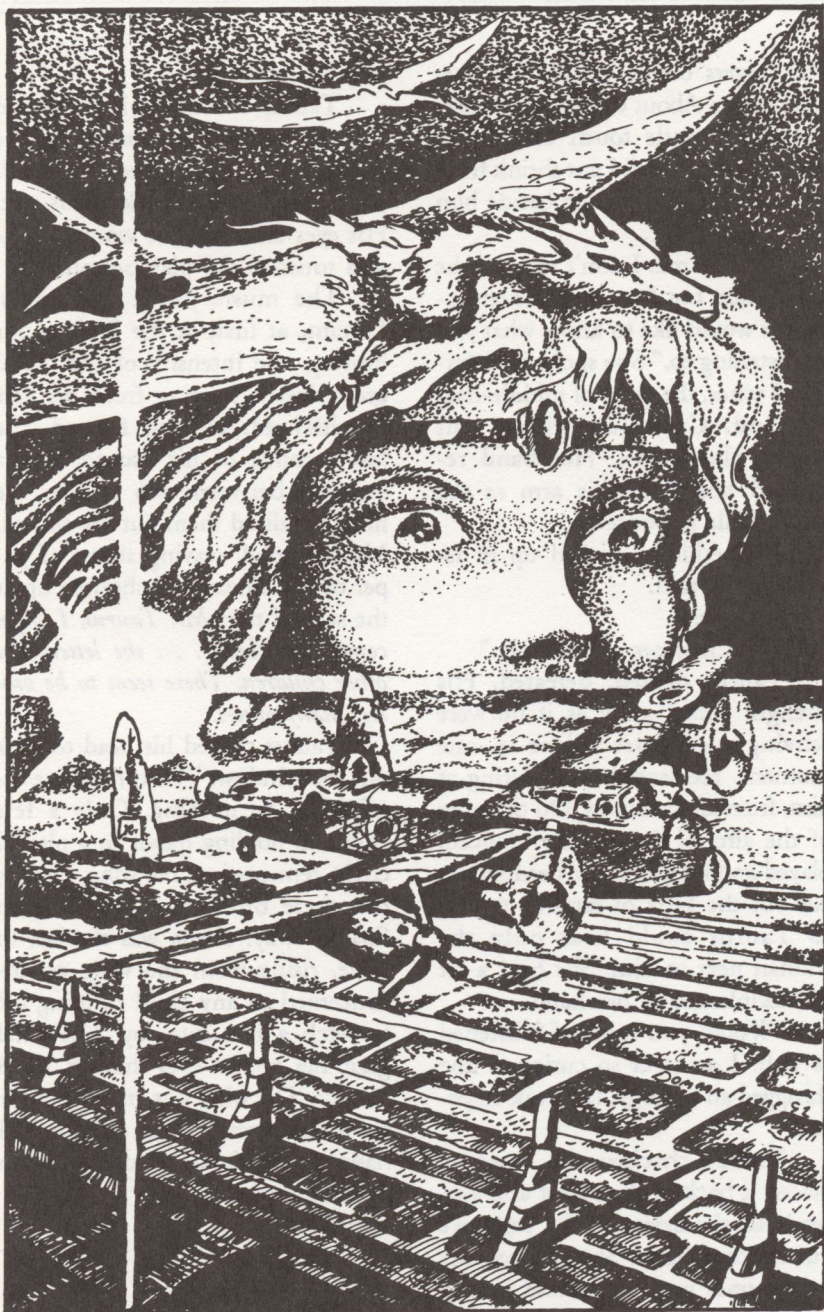
"It's all ready to go. Just hit

play," he told her.

Taurus wondered if he would feel the pain or concussion of the explosion. He adjusted his headphones and leaned back in his seat. His eyes closed as the woman's fingers touched the play button.

The music jolted his senses. Distant, at first, at the limit of his hearing, the intensity of the music grew slowly, moving from his ears into his head. An image formed. The last seconds of his escape. Sheila stopped between two pillars. He hadn't realized then, but she smiled. Mesutt stood, waving sheets of paper over his head and shouted up at the second tier: *Mr. Taurus, I forgot completely about . . . the letters, the other children. There seem to be others, many others.*

Taurus shifted his head to look out the window. The turbulence diminished to nothing. Only a few children, holding hands in a playful circle, remained on the wing. Slowly, the circle broke and the children floated away. Sheila was the last to leave, rising from the wing as unconcerned as any child running off to fetch a favourite toy. Her final gaze, her brown eyes shining, filled Taurus. The wing was empty but for the visible stream of air, swaying and flapping, the dance of adaptation, in the chaos of wind. 🌿



# Last Run

by Cheryl Merkel

illustrated by Domenic Pirone

“**M**ayday, Mayday, Mayday. Epsilon Base, this is Alpha Zero Tango, do you read?” The pilot’s voice, pitched to carry over the imagined drone of a propeller engine, was loud in Chisholm’s ears.

Professionally calm, the controller’s voice gave no hint of the frantic thudding of his heart. “Alpha Zero Tango, Epsilon Starbase. Read you five by five,” he responded. “What is the nature of your problem?” Three centuries after the word had first been coined, *Mayday* still meant *emergency*.

“I’ve lost an engine and she’s got holes in the fuselage you can drive a jeep through. Most of my instruments are out,” the strained voice added, “and it looks like I have a fuel leak in the starboard tank.” To Chisolm the pilot’s words made little sense but the urgency in them was unmistakable. He grimaced. *Bloody Linkage pilots—why couldn’t they dream up something modern for a change?*

“Uh, acknowledged, Zero Tango,” he stalled. “Stand by.”

“Roger, Base. But—the Messerschmitt that got me may still be in the area.”

Scrolling quickly through the shiplist for the transport’s data, Chisolm struggled to make sense of the unfamiliar terms. *What in hell was a Messer-what’sit?* As always, he was conscious of a sense of awe at the Linkage technology that made star travel possible. Technology that combined human

mind with computer databank, allowing human controlled ships to operate under killing stresses, to react at superhuman speeds. Somewhere within Alpha Zero Tango its pilot slept within a protective lifestation, his body monitored by machines while his mind, deep within the imagined world of his Linkage construct, translated dream images into reality.

The controller stabbed irritably at the touchpad. At least Farrell had produced a mechanical construct. Chisolm knew (and hated) pilots that preferred animate forms. With those pilots, communication became a nightmare. How did you respond to "I lost four pinfeathers and a primary"?

At last the Shiplist responded. *CSS AOT: Galaxy Class Stellar Transport/Weapons Delivery. Pilot: J. Farrell. DLink: Lancaster (Avro683) heavy bomber, RAF/UK c. 1942.* As the characters scrolled across the screen, Chisolm stared at the date in disbelief. Farrell was flying a warplane from a conflict that had ended over three centuries ago.

To Farrell, struggling with the recalcitrant controls of his damaged aircraft, Chisolm's voice sounded tinily above the hiss and crackle in his helmet earphones. He wiped his arm across his sweat-slick forehead, unsurprised when it came away wet with blood.

There had been no warning.

Farrell had reacted instinctively as the sleek black shape flashed across his path, hauling the Lancaster into a tight turn as the Messerschmitt's bullets starred the windscreen and stitched a delicate tracery of holes across the cockpit. Above the screaming rush of air he heard the dull whap of bullets striking flesh an instant before he felt the agony of his wounds, numbed almost instantly by the high-altitude cold.

The Lancaster was never meant for aerobatics but she did her best as Farrell threw the huge aircraft into evasive manoeuvres that brought protesting groans from the hull. After a second run that destroyed the Lancaster's outboard portside engine and left gaping holes along her battered sides the Messerschmitt swung away with contemptuous grace. Farrell was too busy fighting the suddenly unresponsive controls to wonder at their deliverance.

Lights flashed on his control panel and an alarm rang loudly as flames licked from the inboard port engine. Heart thudding painfully, he fumbled through the checklist, shutting the engine down when the fire extinguisher failed. Starved of fuel, the fire died and the Lancaster seemed to sigh. Farrell felt a rush of affection for the old plane.

"Last run, baby," he crooned. "I promise. Just get me home and I swear I'll never ask you again." The Lancaster shuddered. Listening to the labouring beat of her remaining two



engines, so did Farrell.

There *was* a correlation, Chisolm knew. Filtered through the computerised shipmind, events were translated into terms the pilot would find familiar. Loss of engine power must mean damage to the main stardrive, holes in the fuselage, structural damage. He made a mental note to find out how big a “jeep” was. Fuel loss—a radiation leak? His blood ran cold. It all added up to impending drive failure.

Fully loaded, the AOT massed nearly as much as a small moon, and she was on a direct course for the starbase. If the drive failed and they were unable to get her stopped in time—

Chisolm swore and hit the emergency alarm. “Better get Commodore Grissom up here,” he told a white-faced technician. “We got a hot one.”

Farrell peered blearily at the control panel. The instruments stubbornly refused to work. The Lancaster staggered through the sky, her remaining engines barely keeping her aloft. Farrell’s whole body ached with the effort of keeping the aircraft level and hopefully pointing in the right direction. *Murphy’s Law*, he thought. Both dead engines were on the same side, and whenever he relaxed the unbalanced thrust, the Lancaster wanted to roll over on her back and die.

“Turn to a heading of uh, three five zero and maintain your uh, air-speed, Zero Tango,” Chisolm ordered, stumbling over the unfamiliar terms.

“Uh, I have a small problem with that,” came the exhausted voice. “My flight instruments are out, including the compass. And every time I try to turn her she wants to roll over— It’s all I can do to keep her straight and level.”

“Roger, Zero Tango, we copy. Stand by. What’s the status on the escort?” Chisolm asked quietly.

“Moving out now, sir,” a technician replied. “Be in range of the AOT in forty minutes.”

“Zero Tango, we have a flight of— Spitfires? Spitfires,” he repeated, shaking his head, “moving to intercept in approximately forty minutes. Please advise when you have them in sight.” An indecipherable crackle issued from his comset. “Zero Tango,” he repeated, “say again. Your transmissions are garbled. I repeat, your transmissions are garbled.” He turned as Commodore Grissom strode in. “Blast it! Sir, we lost him!”

Coming in behind the Commodore, Flight Leader Aine Cantrell moved swiftly to Chisolm’s side. At a station next to the controller, Worthington, the Base’s irascible Chief Engineer, scowled at a datascreen. He had littered the workspace with hardcopy, filling screen after screen with rapidly changing schematics and the air with

invective. Aine smiled despite the urgency. As always, Worthington seemed to be taking the emergency as a personal affront.

"What's the status on the drive?" Aine asked quietly.

"Preliminary scans show a forty percent leak from the main reactor," Worthington snapped. "Total drive failure in less than two hours. His report indicates damage to the computer guidance systems—how much we won't know for certain until we can get accurate data. We're scrambling a flight out to him now, ETA thirty minutes." He frowned at the screen, now displaying a schematic of the starship. "The main datalink has failed."

"What about the backup?" Grissom queried.

Worthington's frown deepened. "Doesn't have one."

"What?!"

"Zero Tango is a converted stellar liner," Worthington patiently explained. "An old ship—she'd have been scrapped long ago if the war hadn't started. She was built back in the days when starships were controlled from a central point, known as the 'bridge.'" He tapped the screen. "Here."

Grissom whistled softly. "What shielding do they use?"

"Minimal," was the reply. "Cheapest stuff on the market. Homeair was using her for the outsystems run; supplies and miners in, miners and ore out. Relocating

the lifestation to a more protected area would have meant pretty well rewiring and replacing the existing control systems; an expensive proposition for an ore freighter. Homeair plunked the lifestation down in the middle of the existing bridge and saved themselves the credits." He paused. "Everything, and I mean everything, was run from the bridge. Backups were, and I quote, considered 'redundant.'"

He tapped a command and the image on the screen altered. The schematic now showed extensive damage; entire chunks of the starship were missing. Aine winced.

"From the pilot's description," Worthington continued, "we think the K'tarri managed to take out the first and second drive chambers, here," he pointed, "and here. The shielded chamber housing the lifestation was also hit—it looks like that part of the bridge is open to space. We have no idea how much the lifestation was damaged—they weren't built to withstand plasma weapons. Farrell's damned lucky to be alive." Aine nodded in agreement. Only the thin shell of the lifestation lay between Farrell and vacuum.

"How long will his oxygen hold out?" Grissom demanded.

Aine studied the display carefully. "Three hours max," she decided. "Probably less. The 'station is designed to self-seal and repair up to a point, but the internal supplies were never meant to last the entire run."

"The K'tarri Scorpion must have been at the edge of its range," Grissom mused. "Or it would have finished him. Looks like the main cargo bay is still intact?"

"We don't know," Worthington stated. "The payload data is secured; it'll take several hours to get the details from ComOps. All they'll tell us is that it will make a very big bang when she impacts."

"With that mass she'd take out the base even if she was running empty," Aine muttered. "What systems does he have left? Enough to make a controlled approach?"

"Very few. And no. But if we can reduce the AOT's speed enough and nudge her onto the proper trajectory, the docking computer should be able to bring her in. We think."

"You think," Grissom echoed.

Worthington shrugged. "Best we can do. But we have to act fast; in just over two hours we won't have time to—"

"Not even that," Aine interrupted, pointing to the lifestation readout. "According to this, Farrell is dying. Very soon the Zero Tango will no longer have a pilot."

Dizziness came and went in black waves. Farrell gritted his teeth and held on, feeling as though he—not the aircraft—were labouring through the air. His right arm hung uselessly at his side. The control yoke was slippery in his grip but he dared not let go, feeling the Lancaster trem-

bling on the edge of disaster.

He flinched as a slim shape whipped past, followed in swift succession by two others. Despite his fatigue he felt like cheering. *Spitfires!*

Smoothly they took up station at his wingtips, the lead plane easing into position directly ahead. Farrell grinned, obscurely comforted by their arrival. He tried the radio again, wincing at the ensuing static. Grimly Farrell concentrated on keeping his position, only too aware that if the Lancaster decided to give up the fight the most the Spitfires could do was watch him die.

Aine closed her eyes and settled back into the padded rest of her lifestation. Pressing her cranial implants firmly against the helmet contacts, she waited for the familiar tingle of linkage. She felt the mild sting at her throat as her monitor placed the medpak sensor, the faint vibration as the lifestation lid closed. Her breathing slowed as she slipped into rapport with her ship, barely conscious of a warm lassitude as the medpak flooded her system with drugs.

The dragon was waiting.

Aine slid into its mind with familiar ease and together they leapt into the storm-racked sky. She laughed aloud, the dragon's throat turning the sound into a sibilant hiss. Lightning flickered in the sky around her, rain sheeted against her slick

black hide. Wind caught her, tossing her aloft.

The sky was curiously empty. She circled, keening for her wingmates, when a distant scent borne on the stormwind cut her cries short. She wheeled, suddenly intrigued.

•

In the docking bay, guidance tractors eased the slim fighter from its moorings and gently launched it into space. Aine's monitor took up his position at her side, watching the readouts carefully, monitoring her body until her mind returned. Waiting to reclaim her soul from the dragon.

•

The scent was stronger now, more compelling, carrying the reek of blood. Within the dragon's mind the tiny core that was Aine was silently watchful. No need to urge the beast on. Its attention fairly caught by the faint echo of <Kin> to its enquiring calls, the dragon hurled itself through the air. Shipmind called to shipmind, kin to kin. Aine rested, saving her strength for the final desperate struggle.

•

Their scheme was deceptively simple. Aine's fighter would attempt to establish a datalink with the stricken transport. If it succeeded, she would be able to take control of the AOT. The timing was critical; it was imperative that she establish herself within Farrell's dream. If Farrell died

before the link was completed, the AOT's shipmind would label her an intruder and destroy itself.

Worthington had steadily maintained the absolute insanity of the idea even as he and a hand-picked team laboured to alter Aine's ship.

Her monitor had echoed him. "Aine, you could be trapped in there," he expostulated. "Farrell's lifestation is on the verge of failure. If it goes . . ."

Aine had nodded. She knew the risk, but they had very little choice. It might, she had pointed out, be academic anyway. In order to succeed, she would have to force the dragon to act against its own kind—and that would require a merger far greater than normal mission linkage. A merger that would be followed by total separation. The shock alone could kill her.

•

She could see the stranger now, a huge silver beast thrashing along only a few feet above the mountain tops. She marvelled that it could still fly. One wing was nearly stripped, thin slivers of cartilage showing through the mutilated flesh. Wounds bled sluggishly where something had torn great gouges out of its side. At its sides her wingmates glided smoothly.

The dragon spiralled down, drawn by the bloodscent, the urge to attack warring with a desire to comfort the beast who uttered those pitiful cries of <Kin, Kin, Kin>. She

keened, circling helplessly above the wounded one. Aine gathered her energy, and as the dragon hesitated, she struck.

She took control of the dragon's mind in an unstoppable rush, aware that if she faltered, the shipmind would retaliate lethally. The stranger screamed in pain and shock as Aine attacked.

She dropped down upon the stranger's back, claws sinking deeply into the torn flesh. By main force Aine hauled herself along the other's body, seeking the vulnerable place at the base of its skull. Her prey twisted weakly as her own ship tried vainly to shake her control, the unprovoked attack in violation of its deepest programming.

Hot blood flowed, filling her mouth. Her jaw locked reflexively, claws straining to hold the convulsing body beneath her as she worked to keep them both aloft in an obscene parody of mating. As the beast beneath her began to weaken, Aine felt her shipmind trying to force separation. *Not yet, not yet, the link wasn't— There!* The living body beneath her hardened into metal. Aine screamed as her shipmind flung her violently outwards.

The Lancaster suddenly lurched, rocking to a savage blow. The control yoke was wrenched out of Farrell's weakened grasp as something scraped along the fuselage. Had he collided with one of the Spitfires?

Somewhere glass shattered. Farrell cried out as he was tossed forward, his head smashing against the unyielding metal of the control panel. He slipped into a welcoming darkness with a sigh of relief.

Aine's starfighter burrowed its way into the hull of the AOT, seeking mindlessly through the tangle of wires and cables until it reached the shipmind. With something akin to agony, its own protection peeled back as Worthington's tiny drones began to link the two inextricably together.

"We'll try for gross motor function and the pilot linkage," the Chief Engineer had said. "Turn left, turn right, up, down; that sort of thing. They're pretty much standard in all ships. No time for other refinements. You'll still have control of the fighter's thrusters—it will stabilise her slightly for the turns."

*Darkness. Pain.* The Lancaster's cockpit was hell in miniature, a cacophony of noise and heat and a throat-closing mixture of scents. Beneath the smell of drying blood and frightened human was the acrid cloying scent of burning oil. The flashing red and amber of control panel alarms lit the darkness in fitful bursts, their shrilling a nerve-jarring counterpoint to the labouring reverberation of the Lancaster's engines. Aine shuddered. She was in!

Below them, the landscape of Farrell's dream was changing, moun-

tains thrusting their way out of the flat plain as the datalink strengthened. Uneasily Aine recalled the dragon's storm-racked sky; the Lancaster would be uncontrollable in the turbulence. The ground rippled as she tried to re-establish Farrell's imagery. Clouds boiled up around them, obscuring the stars as an updraft rocked the huge bomber.

Lightning scored the cloud beside them, throwing the cockpit into stark illumination. Farrell was slumped in his seat, head resting on the control yoke before him. Beneath the brim of his helmet blood trickled across the central crystal of his implant; azure darkening to indigo, its fire nearly gone. He wore a heavy brown leather jacket and trousers of dark blue, soaked now with blood. His arms hung limply at his side. Something glinted white through a rent in his sleeve, and Aine swallowed bile as she realised it was a bone.

Incredibly, Farrell was still alive. His eyelids flickered, his chest rose and fell in a ragged rhythm. At his temples, a pulse beat weakly.

The bomber surged upwards, caught in a building cumulus. Farrell's body slammed backwards, his outflung arm wedging between their seats. Aine screamed as bone grated sickeningly within her own arm. Horrified, she stared at the unconscious Farrell.

They had warned her this might happen. Somehow the datalink was joining more than the shipminds; it

was affecting the lifestation computers! Aine could feel her heart beating in an unaccustomed rhythm, feel the stabbing pain of a broken rib each time she drew breath. They were even breathing in unison! She wondered briefly what her monitor would think as her lifestation tried to compensate for Farrell's injuries. At least it had finally numbed her arm. Blackness gnawed at the edges of her vision. *If he died now*—Aine fought a rising hysteria. If Farrell died, she thought wildly, it was entirely possible she would join him.

It was no longer a case of trying to replace Farrell's dream with hers. She had to keep his dream intact and suppress her own until the docking computer took over. She needed him alive—More, she needed him awake. *Why*, she thought viciously, *did the universe always complicate things?* Aine took a deep breath and started yelling. "Farrell!"

Someone was shouting at him, demanding he wake up. Irritably Farrell hunched a shoulder, mildly surprised to find he still had one. When the noise continued, he gave in. "What the hell—?"

Hunched awkwardly next to him in the engineer's swing seat was a woman dressed in some kind of flying suit. Skin tight, and whiter than mere cloth could possibly be, it seemed vaguely familiar although he couldn't quite recall where he'd seen it before.

His gaze wandered languidly over her face. She wore a sort of crown, a tight metal band that began at her temples, curving up over her brows to meet in the centre of her forehead in a black teardrop. Crimson fire swirled in its depths, matching reflections flickering in her brilliant green eyes. *That's it, he thought. I'm dead.*

"Are you an angel?" he croaked. No, he decided, not needing her quick headshake. For one thing, her hair had been shaved to a faint stubble, and he had never heard of a bald angel. Farrell was willing to admit that, given a limited experience, he had no idea whether angels had hair or not, but this was his dream and he was damned well not going to have a bald angel. He must have said as much aloud, for she grinned briefly.

"No wings either. Flight Leader Aine Cantrell," she introduced herself. Her voice was a husky contralto.

"Lt. Jos Farrell," he responded. "I'm not dead." It was half a question and she shook her head again.

"Not yet, Lieutenant."

He rested his head wearily against the seatback. "Right," he murmured. "Wake me when I am."

"Farrell! Wake up! We have a problem!" she snapped.

He laughed weakly. "So tell me something I don't know."

"Farrell!" she repeated. "Wake up and help me! Dammit, Farrell we're not home yet." She paused. "I

haven't got time to explain, but if you die, so do I. And so do a lot of other people, Farrell! Now pull yourself together and help me!"

Farrell attempted a salute, thinking better of it immediately. "Yes, ma'am," he said obediently. "Where do I start?"

Good question. Where did they start? Aine gazed at the unfamiliar banks of instruments in front of her (none of which appeared to be working) in despair. "Well," she said wryly, "first we'd better change seats. And then you might consider teaching me to fly this thing."

"Pull back to go up, push forward to go down," Aine chanted hoarsely. "Tilt left to go left, right to go right. Stomp on the rudder to keep the turns coordinated." It had become a constant litany as she gradually mastered the difficult art of controlling the Lancaster.

Ahead of them the lead aircraft began a shallow turn and once again she coaxed the Lancaster into following. By such tiny increments they had managed to alter course until they were pointed roughly in the direction of the docking bay. Now all they had to do was slow the aircraft down without, as Farrell had put it, "dropping out of the sky like a brick." Bricks, Aine gathered, were not known for their aerodynamic properties.

It was a pilot's worst nightmare, trapped in a dream over which she

had no control. For the first time Aine had no sense of the shipmind that was her starfighter; no feeling of companionable warmth in the linkage. The AOT shipmind was alien, empty—obedient in unthinking mechanical precision. She missed the dragon, with its rage and its hate and its mad raw hunger, missed its—aliveness. She could only hope that it had not been destroyed.

Thankfully, the link with Farrell had eased, pain fading to a dim echo. *Too late*, she thought. The dragon was dead and all that remained was the Lancaster and the gathering storm.

In the distance, the lights of the base glowed dimly as the first fat drops of rain hit. Alarmed, Aine looked at Farrell, propped up beside her in the engineer's swing seat. Moving him out of the pilot's seat had taken all his strength; he had lapsed into a fitful doze and she had let him sleep, knowing he would need all his energy for the landing. In the uncertain light she could not be sure he was breathing.

Ahead, a single line of lights led away into the darkness; beyond, two lines of similar lights bordered a wider rectangular area. "Farrell," she warned. "It's time. Help me land this thing!"

Groggily he turned his head towards her. "Are we there yet, Mommy?" She shook her head, appalled. He was grey with exhaustion, his lips tinged with blue, dying be-

fore her eyes. They could only hope that Worthington's technological magic held out a few moments longer.

"'S the runway!" Farrell said, peering ahead delightedly. He blinked hard. "Runways," he corrected, as his vision swam dizzily. He tried a grin. "Relax," he advised. "Gonna be—piece of cake. 'S all in the timing."

The fighter ahead suddenly rocked its wings and accelerated in a sharp banking turn as to either side the escorts fell back, leaving their approach unobstructed. Aine's mouth was dry. The lights were coming up far too fast.

"Don't look down—look at the end of the runway," Farrell panted. "Can't tell height—in the dark. Keep her level and—in the middle of the runway." He frowned. "Whichever one you pick."

Aine nodded. The first light went by, slightly to the left of them.

"Right. We're on—final approach. Throttle back— Those levers, that's right— Gently! Feel her start to sink."

Aine's heart skipped a beat as the steady drone of the engines faltered. The control yoke felt suddenly heavy, the Lancaster wanting to put its nose down with the reduction in power. Aine snarled wordlessly, hauling back on the yoke, fighting the aircraft.

"Get. Bloody. Over," she grated.



"Stand by for docking. Transport in visual range. Speed sixty percent above optimal." Chisolm was gratified to find his voice steady. Numbers scrolled across his screen; too fast, much too fast.

Standing next to the senior controller, Commodore Grissom removed his comset and sighed. "That's it," he said quietly. "They're out." Beyond him, the display showed the evacuation fleet; every space-worthy craft they had, orbiting hopefully out of range of the starbase's destruction. He moved to join Chisolm, resting a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Commodore, next time I volunteer for something it'll be two weeks leave," the senior controller muttered, his hand over the comset mike. He took a deep breath, let it out in a sigh. Now or never. Louder, he spoke into the comset. "Command. Load program Alpha Zero Tango: Dock." Obediently, the words scrolled across his display. "Command. Initiate program."

"Now! Chop the power!" Farrell gasped, as the threshold flashed beneath them. Aine slammed the throttles closed, trying to follow his rapid orders as the Lancaster lost height. "Keep her nose up, or you'll build airspeed! Hold the centre line—you're drifting! Got to—slow down!" He pointed with his chin. "Those levers—shut 'em off."

Trembling, Aine obeyed. The

engines stuttered into silence, propellers windmilling uselessly. She clung grimly to the yoke.

"Hold her! Let her—settle onto the runway."

The lights blurred; too fast, they were too fast! A spotlight lanced out, catching them in its beam for an instant.

"First tractor," Chisolm chanted. "Speed fifty percent above optimal. One down, four to go."

Grissom replaced his comset. "Command. Load program Alpha Zero Tango: Destruct." He chose a point midway along the projected course as his decision point. If the starship hadn't slowed enough by then, Grissom would have no option but to destroy her.

By the third time the spotlight caught them, Aine was sure they had slowed; but was it enough? Her world had narrowed to the two parallel lines of lights, to the rain-slick surface below.

"Third tractor. Speed twenty percent above optimal."

Grissom hesitated. Squaring his shoulders, he spoke. "Command—"  
And time ran out.

Aine was beginning to think they would make it when the aircraft seemed to stumble in midair. The control yoke was wrenched out of her feverish grip, one wing canted

down, and the Lancaster dropped. She closed her eyes as the runway rushed up to meet them.

•  
“Ooops.” Alarms shrilled.

“Initiate—”

•  
The Lancaster met the surface with a bone-jarring crunch and a scream of tortured metal. A shower of sparks accompanied the huge plane as it slid sideways down the runway, gouging a path and crushing the few remaining lights. A pole loomed; Aine caught a glimpse of a cone-shaped orange and white flag before it was

crushed. A sign off to their right met the Lancaster's wing, holding just long enough to send the plane into a sickening spin. In horrified fascination, Aine watched the end of the runway rapidly approaching.

With a last protesting groan, the Lancaster ground to a halt. In the silence, the ping of cooling metal was loud above her own harsh breathing. Gratefully, Aine rested her head on the control yoke and gave way to her shudders. Beside her, Farrell stirred.

“See?” he mumbled. “’S all in the timing.” →

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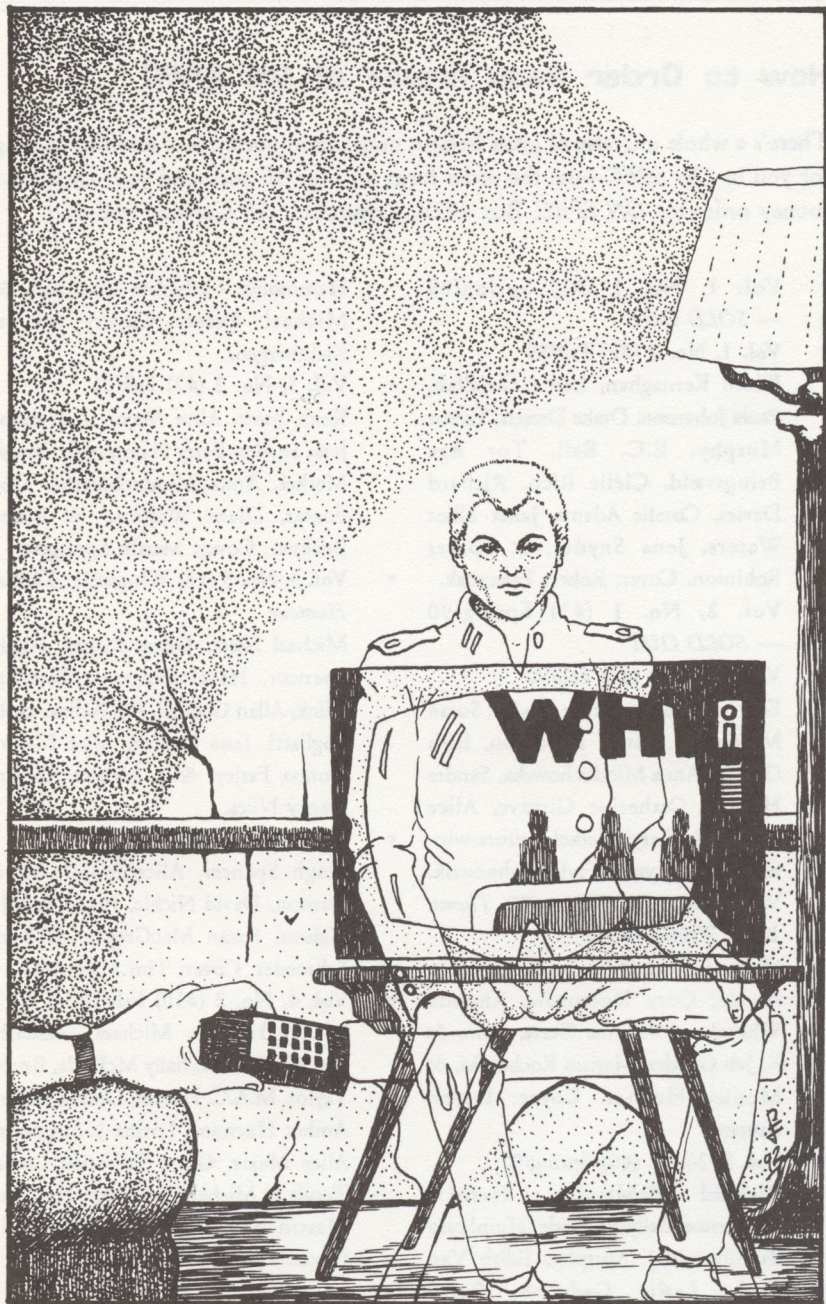
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# The Stigmata of Ann-Marie Dassault

by Preston Hapon

illustrated by Peter Francis

**I**n arms of faded flora, Ann-Marie's comfort-worn chair embraces her slack flesh. Her wrinkled dressing gown hangs like a shroud from outstretched legs propped at the heels by a mismatching foot-stool and a tightly-tucked cushion. Moisture cools from one hand, resting beside the telephone, as sweet breakfast crumbs roll from the other to her probing tongue. She lets television gameland's shifting colours writhe across her dimmed room—curtains closed against brighter worlds without—to fill her glazed eyes.

Faint laughter reaches her ears, soft applause, but Ann-Marie remains unmoved.

*"We should change course. Sir, this hole's set to chew us up."*

*"Wait."*

*Another spoke. "Captain."*

*"I know, Baker. Just do your job."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*"Navigation."*

*"Cap?"*

*"How long can we postpone the course change?"*

*"Till about thirty seconds ago, sir."*

*"I don't have time for humour, Watts. What's our escape time?"*

*"We'll be here for two months, Cap, increasing at eight hours per minute."*

Elsie jumps into her lap, pleads for attention with a purred meow. Ann-Marie affixes a sticky scratch behind the cat's ears, one hand kept lingering beside the telephone. And while the refrigerator breathes with a tapered whir, cartoon characters dance on a teacup; a man's voice speaks to her, too softly to understand. Elsie purrs more loudly.

*"A week. No, ten days. But escape time is increasing a day per minute now, sir. Soon it will be a day per second."*

*"We can afford a little time when we're finished."*

*"There they are, sir! We've got them!"*

*"Closing speed?"*

*"Eight thousand, sir."*

*"Increase to twelve."*

*"Captain!"*

*"Don't correct me, Baker! Damn you, my ass is right next to yours!"*

*"Yes, sir! Increasing to twelve, sir!"*

*"Range?"*

*"Four kilometres . . . Three . . . I'm slowing now, sir."*

*"Don't be gentle, pilot. Hit them hard! This isn't a first date. Watts, have we made contact yet?"*

*"Digital contact positive. Life-support's good, but I can't read their engine damage yet."*

*"Two kilometres. Still holding at twelve thousand, sir."*

*"Looks good. Looks good."*

*"Pilot. Have you got a fix on the event horizon?"*

*"I think we'll make it."*

*"Think?"*

*"It's close, sir. If I miss by half a metre we'll all be atom soup."*

*"Cap, we're ripping a hell of a hole through normal space. I read thirty light-years deep and lengthening fast."*

*"That won't last."*

*"Not if we get out."*

*"One kilometre."*

A car approaches outside. Ann-Marie listens. It doesn't slow, but projects ghostly shadows against the thin drapes.

Elsie rolls over, wallowing in comfort, then attacks Ann-Marie's sugary fingers with needle claws and delicious rasping.

A contestant guesses, knows it's wrong, but she's high on faith—"I'm sorry," the man says. Disappointment weights her shoulders, a false serenity masks her bitterness, but her smile weakens with her knees. The camera moves on to more uplifting visions, and sure enough, enthusiasm unbroken, there glitter the smiles of two fresh media puppets.

Transported by fantasy across electronic waves, Ann-Marie feels energy warm her tired body. She grins at the camera with her best teeth and, in dim living rooms everywhere, Ann-Marie is present, wins a prize, accepts applause, moves on to the "Big Wheel of Fate"; in dim living rooms everywhere she is seen and heard, even loved for a mo-

ment—but, unspeakably far away, Ann-Marie remains untouched.

In her own dimmed living room, Ann-Marie's lips answer the question correctly, and she wins a vicarious prize. She is pleased with herself.

*"Docking latches open. Lasers aligned."*

*"Get it right the first time, gentlemen."*

*"Roll is stable!"*

*"Pitching another two point one."*

*"Thirty metres."*

*"Slow it down, man. Just hold it a sec!"*

*"I can't 'just hold it.' "*

*"Pitching moment matched."*

*"Shit, that put us too close."*

*"This is a crash, not a docking!"*

*"Full reverse!"*

*"Everybody! Brace!"*

Ann-Marie wins the car. But she can't drive anymore. She could give it away—hard to choose a recipient for so valuable a gift. Peggy is too old to drive, too, and Ann-Marie doesn't like Fred enough to give him a dirty look. The young couple down the street—what are their names? They just bought a car. He has a good job. They seem nice.

Even if Stan phoned right now, right this very minute, she'd not give it to him.

If he knocked on her door . . .

*"Shut those alarms off! All available thrust, pilot. Bruise those tourists, but get us off this horizon!"*

*"Watch the pitch!"*

*"Vectors calculated—on line."*

*"Then let's go, go, go!"*

A young woman speaks of menstrual bleeding as if there were no men in the world. Ann-Marie feels embarrassed that men watch, think about this woman as pretty and sexual, then think about a bloodied pad between her legs—think about women in an ugly way. Ann-Marie feels ugly enough without this. But she waits, and the image goes away.

*"Nav's all green."*

*"Ops's all green."*

*"Sys has an amber and all green."*

*"Life has two reds—section 'B.' And all green."*

*"Power at seventy-three and increasing."*

*"Redirect that power to thrust!"*

*"Already doing so, sir."*

*"Com is all green."*

*"Call from the Princess D, sir."*

*"Life will be patched in a minute. Cap. Shartz is making repairs."*

*"We have maximum thrust."*

*"Cap."*

*"How long 'till we're out?"*

*"Cap!"*

*"Ninety-four days, sir."*

*"Captain!"*

*"What is it, Baker?"*

*"We aren't slowing."*

*"Verify Baker's readings."*

*"Confirmed, sir."*

*"Same here. We're not holding position."*

*"Where are we?"*

*"Give up—it's caught us."*

And condoms—what a thing for someone to wave in front of a cam-

era. All the world to see. But if Ann-Marie had known about them, if Ann-Marie had understood her choices, there'd be no children of hers to phone, or knock on the door. Small difference that would make.

She strokes Elsie's back. Static charges snap under her hand.

Small difference, but better for its retroactive revenge than giving a make-believe car. And if Stan were to phone now, right this very minute, she'd tell him so. He'd get an earful.

Cartoon characters in a teacup. A man speaks to her. A family comes out of the shower, one by one, each with a better product in hand. Ann-Marie watches as if for the first time. It doesn't matter.

And she notices, sitting between her and the TV, a man. She can see the TV through his chest, the floor through his shoes, and the pedestal supporting his chair hovers inches above the rug. He leans slightly to the right, motionless.

Elsie licks a paw.

Ann-Marie watches TV a moment, to see if the bearded man who won yesterday will win again. He guesses. They pause for drama. Then, with a solemn shake of his head, the man knows he's failed. He presses his lips together and the audience applauds to cheer him.

Then Ann-Marie looks at the ghost sitting in her living room. He stares unblinking at the air above his knees. His hair is very short, his clothes a kind of uniform. She thinks

he's in the army.

"Hello," she says to him.

*The pilot will cry like a father for a dead child—with tears, with steely acceptance, with hate.*

*The captain will have no comfort to share.*

*Baker's shaking will force him to retype his data. The computer will respond with dead facts. His hope will not be renewed.*

*Watts will fold his hands, and wait for death.*

*Then Captain Dassault will see an old woman appear: a cheap Holo, or vivid hallucination. And he will believe the source of this vision to be a fragmented memory of his grandmother, ripped free and made corporeal by terror.*

"Who are you? Elsie, get off. Young man, can you hear me? Are you a ghost?"

*A gamma flare will spray x-rays through both ships as the graceful Princess D helplessly grazes the horizon. Her hull will twist like chromium dough, her protons devoured, stripped of electrons as she passes through the ebony mirror into the black hole. Disintegrating into quarks, the very fabric of her existence will dissipate in a hellish vortex—she will plunge with agonized weariness into the gravitational grinding wheel designated BH-647.*

*The Captain will turn from the Com Panel leaving Princess D's call unanswered. He'll quiet his panic, soothe the desperate urge to order*



*undocking—it would do no good. As surely as the ships will be drawn as one, they will be drawn as two. Instead, he'll watch violet plasma halo Princess D, see flashes of light inside his eyeballs as fragmented elementary particles pass through. Brain cells will short and die, leave him with unfamiliar smells and memories of faces he once knew. He will gaze upon his grandmother's startled mouth.*

*Hours will pass to witness his death, though he will not live an instant.*

"In my living room. Yes, Peggy, I know it's coming on next. You can watch it here, if you want. The ghost won't mind. I'm sure. He doesn't seem to see anything at all. I don't know . . . Come see for yourself."

Peggy sways her corpulence through the door and blindly kicks off her loafers. "I smell coffee, and I hope there's some for me."

"I made it for you."

Elsie dodges into the bedroom.

"Is he still here?"

"Peggy, you won't believe this! Look!"

"There's three of them!"

"Peg, I've never seen . . ."

"Where are they from?"

". . . anything like them before."

"Are they ghosts? Who . . ."

"Darned if I know."

"Who are they? Can you touch them?"

"They don't move. At least not . . ."

"Oh, it's weird!"

". . . like normal people move. They stretch in a funny way."

"Did you try that?"

"They get taller and . . ."

"Did you try to touch them?"

". . . sort of twist. You can see . . ."

"You have to try it!"

". . . the way this one's face is shifted off to one side."

"You get a weird, tingly feeling . . ."

"See? His face looks kind of crooked."

"Give me your hand."

"No, just look at what I'm saying."

"Relax. I'll show you."

"Let go."

"Come here!"

"Peggy!"

"Touch right here."

"I don't want to!"

"Come on."

"Let go . . ."

"Feel it?"

"Yowch! Hey!"

"Feel it?"

"Yes!"

"Told you."

Ann-Marie rubs her arm. Cartoon characters dance on a teacup.

"They do look funny."

"This one was the first."

"They look scared."

"Then that one."

"Like soldiers caught by the enemy . . ."

"That one came next."

“. . . and scared to die.”

“And finally, him. Standing there like that, sliding through my wall.”

“They have no feet.”

“Soldiers? But that one’s crying.”

“So? They’re usually the first to cry.”

“Look out!”

*Like a television switched off in mid-scan, a moment distorts then collapses into a tiny bright star. Swirling eddies in the windy void carry it and countless other time-motes to the edges of darkness.*

*On each side of time’s black mirror, another face appears and then is gone.*

•

“I think one of them looked like you.”

“Here’s your coffee.”

“The one in the wall. Did you have a relative who died in the war?”

“Who didn’t?”

“Me. Anyway, I bet that was

him.”

“My father’s uncle?”

“He and a bunch of his buddies come back to haunt awhile.”

“He died a hero, Dad said.”

“How?”

“Rescue mission. Shell hit their plane. Killed three others.”

“See? I bet it was them! That was your father’s uncle, right there in your living room, come to say farewell.”

“But the uniform . . .”

Family members stepped from the same shower, each cleaner than the one before—each smarter.

“Didn’t look like a uniform I’d ever seen.”


“Me neither.”

“I have a picture of him, somewhere. Let me go get it.”

“Oh, look—it’s on.”

“Turn it up if you want, and stay. Watch it with me.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll get that picture.” 

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# ASK Mr. Science

compiled by Al Betz

**MS. LTF of Edmonton, AB:**

Are CFC's (Freon) responsible for the hole in the ozone layer?

**A:** Experiments funded privately by the Mr. Science Research Council have shown conclusively that the thinning of the ozone layer is caused primarily by the high-velocity escape from the earth's atmosphere of vast amounts of helium gas leaking from the incredibly large numbers of balloons given out at birthdays, supermarket openings and similar events.

**Mr. ST of Vancouver, BC:**

How can the earth be saved from the coming environmental holocaust?

**A:** It can't. The necessary improved technology will not be available in time. If, however, all computer owners will make back-up copies of the portion of the world to which they have access, the back-ups can be re-installed when the new technology is available and we can then start over.

**Mr. SF of Coquitlam, BC:**

Why do people not believe that the dirty dishes in my sink are part of an "origin of life" experiment?

**A:** Mr. Science does not believe you, either. Your friends know that the independent creation of life in your sink will likely be masked by contamination from earth's biosphere. Your experiment will be much more

credible if you purchase a Mr. Science Kitchen Gamma Ray Sterilizer Unit. Write for a price list, and be sure to specify whether you prefer the gamma ray source to be cobalt-60, cesium-137 or mixed nuclear waste.

**Mr. CB of Vancouver, BC:**

What is the origin of white mice?

**A:** During the early experiments leading to the development of bleached wheat for the purpose of making white bread, some of this nearly nutritionless material and excess bleach were disposed of improperly and became the main food of an already inbred cluster of ordinary brown mice. The resulting genetic damage caused future generations to be born with white fur and a propensity toward malignant growths. The unscrupulous scientists involved then passed off these unfortunate white mice as a genetically superior strain.

**Mr. BH of Burnaby, BC:**

What causes algebra?

**A:** Fear of the unknowns. ☹

*"Ask Mr. Science" is compiled by Al Betz, Mr. Science's social secretary. More questions and answers can be found on page 47!*



# Frosty

by Jason Kapalka

illustrated by Andrea Baeza

**T**here must have been some magic in that old silk hat they found, for when they placed it on his head, he began to curse and growl.

But as soon as he noticed all the children staring up at him in wonder, he calmed right down and apologized, and told them that he'd just been a little cranky after waking up.

None of the kids had ever seen a live snowman before. It was awfully neat, the way he talked, like his mouth was full of soggy cereal. But he made them promise not to tell their parents, because then he'd have to go away and he wouldn't be able to tell them any of the fun stories he knew.

The children swore to die with a needle in their eye before they'd tell. Frosty (for that was what he said his name was) smiled a little at this and twinkled his bottlecap eyes.

Then he got them all to sit down, and he started to tell them one of his stories. It was about a man who had lived in town a long time ago, a man who did fun magic things. But the other people in town were mean and didn't like fun things, so they called him a lot of bad names, and then they took the man and burned him up because they thought he was a witch (the children were confused by this a little, because they thought witches were old ladies who flew through the air on sticks). Frosty stopped here and looked mad for a while, though he could have been sad. It was hard to tell with his

face all made out of snow.

The boys liked hearing about the man getting burnt up, but one of the girls pouted because there hadn't been a happy ending. Frosty patted her on the head and told her that maybe there would be a happy ending, after all, but that would be another story.

It was getting late then, so Frosty told them to go home and come back tomorrow, but not to tell anybody about him, or he wouldn't talk to them anymore. The children crossed their hearts again before they left.

The next day Frosty was very happy. He popped off his head and put it back on, and rolled around on the ground until he was just a great big snowball, and showed them lots of other tricks. He told them how great it was being a snowman, because he could stay out all day and all night playing in the snow, and he never had to eat vegetables or pork chops. All the kids were jealous.

Then Frosty told them another story. It was a story about a little boy whose parents were the meanest in the world. They never let him stay up past his bedtime, and they made him eat all sorts of awful food, and when the little boy showed them some of the magic tricks he had learned, they beat him with a stick.

But one day the boy snuck out of the house and ran into the forest. His parents chased after him, but the boy was friends with all the animals in the woods, and so when his par-

ents came running into the forest they got eaten up by the wolves, and the boy lived happily ever after. All the kids cheered.

After the story, Frosty asked the children if they could bring him some things he needed. He said to get them from their parents without letting them find out. The kids promised they'd be careful, because even though Frosty wanted boring stuff like pencils and calendars and books and paper, it really was kind of fun to do things in secret, without their parents knowing.

They came back with the things the next day, though they brought crayons since they couldn't find any pencils. Frosty picked up a calendar and asked them what day it was, and then he looked at the calendar and frowned. The kids asked him what was wrong, but he smiled and said it was nothing. The children begged him for another story, and he eventually agreed, but first he said he was going to teach them some new words, some magic words.

Frosty wanted them to repeat the words after him, but the words were hard like the ones they had to learn in school. The kids tried, but Frosty kept getting more and more frustrated. Finally he gave up and told them to sit down, and he'd tell them a story. That made the children happy again.

He told them about way back long ago, when all kids ever did was play and there were no such things

as bedtimes. But then all the Moms and Dads in the world got together at a big meeting and decided that the children were having too much fun, and they had better do something about it. So they invented spankings and cough medicine and school, and forever after they made all the children go to bed by eight o'clock. This was a true story, Frosty whispered.

The story scared the children and made them sad. One little blonde girl was crying, she was so sad. She told Frosty that she didn't want to have fun all the time. For just a second, Frosty looked like he was angry, terribly angry, but then he smiled, sort of, and told her that sometimes it wasn't fun being a snowman. He said sometimes it was like you had gotten snow inside your boots and your gloves and down your neck, except that you could never go inside and get warm again. The little girl snuffled back a tear and hugged Frosty, because she was sorry for him.

The next time the kids came back Frosty was playing with some dead rabbits and squirrels. He said it was a lot of fun. The kids thought that was neat, and persuaded him to let them play too, all except for a couple of girls who thought it was too gooshy since some of the animals' parts had come off. Frosty tried to show the children some games to play with the animals, but they were complicated, and too icky for even

the boys to enjoy them very much.

Then he tried to teach magic words to the kids again, but pretty soon he had to give up and tell them stories instead. He told them about more kids who had mean parents, and all the stories had happy endings. The kids clapped and cheered.

Then Frosty became very serious and told them that he wouldn't be around for very much longer. The kids were sad when they heard this, but Frosty said not to be, because he'd be back again some day—if they did him one special favour after he was gone. He wouldn't tell them what the special favour was, but he told them that when they did it, it would always be winter in the town, or that the town would go to where it was always winter, the kids couldn't quite figure it out, but Frosty made it sound like it would be great fun. When they had done that, then Frosty would be able to come back, and he'd send all the mean parents away for good, and he could even play with the children again. *I'll be able to play with you forever*, he said. *Forever, and ever, and ever.*

The very next day was the beginning of spring, and it was warm enough that the snow started to thaw. Suddenly scared, the children all rushed out to see Frosty, and they were almost too late, because, sure enough, he was melting too. Just about all the girls and even some of the boys started bawling then, since

Frosty was dripping and getting slushy, and his bottlecap eyes fell off. With all the water rolling off his face it looked like he was crying too.

Then Frosty told all the kids to be quiet and listen to him carefully. First he told them to take care of his hat when he was gone, very good care. Then he gave them some pieces of paper with crayon-writing all over them, and said that it was a *rich-ool*. He said that when the calendar told them it was the right day they had to do the things the rich-ool told them to do. It was hard to understand what he was saying, because his mouth was getting all mushy. *You have to promise to do it and not tell your parents*, he said, *cross your heart and hope to die*, and he looked really awful now, with pieces of him falling off onto the ground all over, so the children managed to stop crying long enough to promise Frosty they'd do it, they'd do whatever he told them.

After everyone was done with all the promising, Frosty seemed to quiet down. He said a few more things, but since his mouth was almost melted right off, no one could understand him. It sounded a little like he was laughing. Finally he fell over and broke up into little pieces, and then the pieces shrank away, and then all that was left was his old silk hat.

The kids stood around and cried for a bit, but it was getting late and

dinner would be ready soon. They passed the rich-ool around to see if anyone could understand it—but it turned out that nobody could read very well yet. They just hadn't had the heart to tell that to Frosty. All they could make out were some stars and triangles and some pictures of more gooshy animals. They would have asked their parents what it meant, but they had promised not to let them see it. Finally they gave the rich-ool to a boy who said that he would take it home, staple it together, put a nice title page on it, and take care of it as if it were one of the most important assignments his teacher had ever given him. It was soon lost and was never seen again.

The little blonde girl took Frosty's hat, and she really meant to take good care of it, but when she tried to put it on her dog's head, he grabbed it in his mouth and ran away. She found it again a few days later, but it was all torn up and covered in dog drool, so she had to throw it out.

But still, all the children remembered their snowman friend, though they sometimes forgot some of the stuff he'd done, and sometimes remembered other stuff that he actually hadn't done, and when they grew up and had children of their own, they told them all the wonderful story of Frosty the snowman, and how he came to life one day. ☀



## More Questions for Mr. Science!

**Mr. LG of Crawford Bay, BC:**  
Why are humans at the top of the food chain?

**A:** Mr. Science regrets to inform you that the top of the food chain is not occupied by humans. This "honour" belongs instead to worms and bacteria.

**Mr. LT of Toronto, ON:**  
What causes the "pins and needles" sensation when one of my limbs "goes to sleep"?

**A:** The release of the compression of certain nerves and reduction of blood circulation caused by having your limb in an abnormal position causes a greatly increased sensitivity to some of the ten trillion neutrinos that cross every square centimetre of your body surface each second. You will notice that this effect is somewhat milder in times of high sunspot activity.

**Mr. DW of Maple Ridge, BC:**  
What is meant by the expression "time flies"?

**A:** Haven't you ever wondered where flies go in the winter? Using a process called "temporal sublimation," flies go directly from late autumn to early spring of the follow-

ing year. Hence all of those annoying species of insects, which could not otherwise survive winter, are properly called "Time Flies."

**Twenty-three persons have written to ask:**  
What is the Caramilk Secret?

**A:** It would be highly unethical for Mr. Science to directly divulge this information. He is not above giving a hint, however. What do you suppose would be the result if liquid caramel were to be poured into hollow moulds, cooled in liquid nitrogen, and then chocolate coated?

**Ms. FB of Vancouver:**  
What is the difference between a ginkgo and a gecko?

**A:** The ginkgo tree, represented by the single remaining species *ginkgo biloba*, is a primitive "living fossil" which constituted a major portion of the diet of vegetarian dinosaurs. Existing finally only in China, whose progressive people burned down their only remaining natural ginkgo forests over a thousand years ago, so that they could claim ecological superiority by saving them in cultivation. A gecko is, of course, a small grove of twelve or more ginkgoes.





# Changeling

by Linda Smith

illustrated by Nancy Niles

**T**ravellers rarely ventured near Balair. They were warned away with meaningful looks and dark hints. No that there was anything wrong with the inhabitants of the area, good sturdy farmers and craftsfolk all.

But Balair lay next to Hawthorn Wood, and strange tales were told of Hawthorn Wood. "The door to Other. The Fair Folk," people said, with cautious glances over their shoulders.

Peter the peddler shrugged off the warnings. Peter shrugged off most things. Including responsibilities, a certain brown-haired woman told anyone who cared to listen. Peter liked his carefree, wandering life. He had lived to early middle-age with no strings, no attachments, and he planned to keep it that way.

It was a fair, smiling day in late autumn when Peter dropped over the brow of a hill and entered the valley of Balair. He could see the village nestled beside a clear stream, surrounded by the golden stubble of harvested fields. Beyond the town stretched Hawthorn Wood, flaming gold and crimson under a deep blue sky. It was an inviting sight for anyone with an eye for beauty, and Peter whistled as he strode down the hill, swinging his heavy pack blithely. The pack held the usual pots and pans and cloth, but it also

contained ribbons and trinkets and a tin whistle or two, for even stolid farmers need some joy in their lives.

On the outskirts of town, a group of children were playing a game with balls and sticks that generated running, shrieking, and much laughter. Then he noticed a boy standing on the sidelines also watching.

"Good day to you, youngster," Peter greeted him cheerfully.

The boy turned his face to look at him, startled. It was a thin brown face with large eyes, topped by a thatch of straw-coloured hair, a pleasant enough face, except for the vivid purple birthmark that ran jaggedly down one cheek. Despite his small stature and slight build, Peter judged him to be around twelve or thirteen.

"You don't care to join in?" Peter swept his hand at the oblivious players.

The boy's eyes widened. He shook his head mutely, then turned away and headed towards the village. It was only then that Peter noticed his drooping left shoulder and withered arm. Cursing himself, Peter followed the boy leisurely.

The village consisted of a cluster of houses built around a low stone church and a wooden blacksmith shop. A man stood outside the shop, waiting for his horse to be shod.

"God's greeting to you, good sir. My name is Peter, and I've come with the finest wares your fair town has ever seen."

The man looked him up and down, then spat on the dirt road. "A peddler, are you? Much good you'll get here."

Peter raised his brows. "Oh? Your town has no need for sturdy pots and fine woven cloth?"

"As for that, we've need enough," the other said grudgingly. "Few enough peddlers come here. But you'll get little for your pains, the harvest we've had."

"It looks as though your crops have all come off."

"Oh, they've come off, right enough. But they've come off rotten. It's as though the earth itself is sick. As though—" He threw a hasty glance at the woods behind the village, and stopped.

When he said nothing more, Peter shrugged. "Be that as it may, I must try to sell my wares now I'm here." He began to unload his pack and place his merchandise around him.

They came reluctantly, in ones and twos, but they came, eyeing the pots, touching the cloth with long-fingers. They were even hungrier for news of the outside world, and Peter obliged them, relaying information, passing on gossip, telling the odd joke, talking easily while his shrewd eyes watched the women finger his goods.

He broke off to hand a red ribbon to a girl with dark brown curls. "Here. A pretty ribbon for a pretty maid."

She drew back. "I have no coins."

"A gift. For the day you wed some lucky man."

She accepted it with a shy smile. The woman with her, obviously her mother, suddenly made up her mind and bought the pot she'd been examining.

So it went. By the end of the day, Peter reckoned he had made, if not a large profit—he couldn't bring himself to ask very much—at least enough to justify his trip.

"Will you be staying another day?" a small, middle-aged woman with dark eyes and a lined, anxious face asked. She had arrived late, and had been eyeing some warm red cloth.

"I doubt it."

Her face fell. "There are those on outlying farms who have not had a chance to see your wares. My friend Mary will be most dismayed."

He hesitated.

"I would be glad to offer you shelter for the night. Our Joan has wed recently, so we have an extra bed. It's not fancy, mind."

"Any bed is a luxury for a man who wanders the roads. I accept your hospitality gratefully, and will be glad to stay over to meet your good friend." He picked up the red cloth and put it in her arms. "A return for your kindness."

She drew back, flushing. "I did not mean . . . I can pay."

A proud woman. Peter charged

her half what the cloth cost, and followed her to her house, which lay at the rim of the village, at the forest's edge.

Supper, a plain but nourishing meal of bread and soup, was subdued. The woman's husband, who had slumped into a chair as soon as he entered the dark, low-beamed room, had only grunted tiredly when told Peter would be staying. He had been accompanied by a sturdy boy in his late teens. A moment later, a slight figure darted in and sat at the table, head bent. Peter recognized the boy he'd met earlier, the boy with the birthmark and withered arm. He ate in silence, using his one good arm deftly.

After supper, Peter brought out his tin whistle in an attempt to dispel the gloom that seemed to pervade the house. As he played the familiar, merry, lively tunes, the faces around him lightened. After a while, a sweet, true soprano joined in. Peter stopped in surprise.

"Shut up, Matt." The older boy nudged the younger in the ribs.

"Harry, leave your brother be," their mother said sharply.

"Harry's right, Alice. We don't want his noise disturbing our guest." The man scowled.

"On the contrary. You are perhaps used to his singing and no longer appreciate it, but I would be delighted to hear such a fine voice." Peter smiled at Matt, but the boy, head down, only shrank further into

himself.

"Anyway, he's not my brother," Harry muttered. The woman stirred, but no one spoke. In the heavy silence that followed, Peter put his whistle away and wished he were sleeping under the cold stars that night.

Word must have spread by a mysterious grapevine, for Peter was busy off and on the next day, as people from remote farms trickled in to look and occasionally buy. Alice's friend Mary bought a pot and a length of brown cloth.

"My mother will be so sorry to have missed you. She's laid up on their farm just beyond ours. Do you think . . . ?"

Peter got directions to the farm and promised he'd call there on his way out of Balair next day.

It was already beginning to get dark by the time he re-packed his belongings and headed for a nearby field to sleep. He had politely declined Alice's offer of a second night's shelter, and she hadn't insisted.

As he approached the field, he heard children's voices, raised this time not in play but in ugly shouts and loud, mocking jeers. He started to run.

A ring of children was gathered in a tight circle, pushing and punching something in the middle. Even in the dim light, he could see the twisted glee that distorted their faces. And the thing in the centre . . . He peered into the dusk. It was Matt.

Peter's stomach lurched.

He looked around wildly then gasped with relief, spying a black cassock in the distance. He ran to the priest.

"Father, you must come. Tell them to stop."

"I heard cries. What is going on?"

"The children. They're hurting Matt."

The priest's face changed.

"You must come."

"I am sure it is only childish fun. They will not harm the boy."

He turned to go. Peter grabbed his arm. "But, Father—"

"Please let go of me."

Peter did. "But, Father . . . You must come. Your Christian duty—"

"My Christian duty is to Christians." The priest strode back down the road. Peter stared after the disappearing black robe. He bit his lip, then hurried back.

The circle had tightened. At first he couldn't see Matt. Then he realized that the boy had fallen to the ground. He hesitated. A child raised his leg to kick. Peter ran.

"How dare you? How dare you kick someone who is down?"

The children heard the rage in his voice and fell silent. Peter heard it himself with vague surprise. He was trembling.

"Go home. Go home where you belong and leave him alone."

The children shuffled uneasily, the twisted hate dying on their faces.

One boy raised a feeble protest.

"He's not one of us. Father says he's—"

"Go home." Peter spoke softly, but there was something in his voice that made them turn and go. He watched them leave, then knelt.

"Matt? Are you all right?"

The figure stirred, then slowly rolled over and sat up. Peter winced. Even in the gathering dark, he could see the blood and bruises.

"Are you all right?" he repeated. Matt nodded.

"I'll help you up."

After a moment, Matt shook his head and struggled to his feet. He swayed. Peter grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Let's get you home, lad."

They walked slowly up the road. A wind had risen and blew against them. Peter shivered. He kept hold of the boy's arm. Matt didn't shake it off. Just before they reached his house, the boy stopped and turned to face Peter.

"Why?" The word came a bit distorted through his bruised mouth.

"Why? I don't know why they—"

"No. Why did you help me?"

Why had he indeed, he who made it a habit never to get involved in others' affairs? He shrugged lamely. "Anyone would have."

Matt stared at him for a long moment. Then a smile spread over his face, warming it, transforming it. "Thank you," he said softly.

Tears filled Alice's eyes at the sight of her son, but she asked no questions as she washed his battered face, hands shaking. Peter noticed that Matt never flinched, and recalled that he had uttered no sound while the children baited and hurt him. His father and brother made no comment at all. Watching the boy drag himself up the ladder to his bed in the loft, Peter felt an unwonted stab of pity.

It was taken for granted that Peter would stay there that night. He had an uneasy sleep, broken by dreams and by the lonely howl of the wind. He woke in the morning to find a white, desolate world. The wind's savagery had stripped the trees of their flaming glory, and laid a skiff of snow on the ground.

Alice's husband shook his head. "Bad," he said. "Very bad. An early winter on top of a poor harvest." He seemed sunk in gloom.

Alice looked more worried than ever. Her frown deepened when her eyes fell on her younger son, moving stiffly. She said nothing, however, until Peter announced his departure and thanked her for her hospitality.

"You're never leaving today?"

"Why, yes, I thought—"

"Do you not know what day it is?"

"All Hallow's Eve. But—"

"He neither knows nor cares about *them*, that's plain," Harry said, with a glance at his brother.

"*They're* abroad tonight. Best

others not be," Alice told Peter.

All the more reason to be long gone from Balair, Peter thought, but all he said was, "I don't bother them, so there's no reason they should bother me. I must be off. God's blessing on this house and all within." He looked directly at Matt, but the boy's head was lowered.

•

Either his directions weren't clear, or Peter's mind was distracted, for it took him till well past noon to locate the farmstead he had promised to visit. Mary's mother was glad indeed to see him, and kept him a good while, exclaiming over his goods and demanding his news. The sun was far to the west by the time he left.

The old farmer, Mary's father, was digging up his potato patch when Peter came out the door. He looked at the potato in his hand and threw it to the ground with a curse.

"Rotten. Damn stinking rotten."

Peter halted. "Trouble?"

"Stinking potatoes. Half of them are rotten. The other half the frost probably killed."

"I'm sorry."

The man spat. "Nothing's right this year. Folks say *they're* mad at us. Want their price."

"What price?"

"The old price. The blood price. The seven year tithé."

Peter's blood chilled.

"That's nonsense," He said through stiff lips.

"Is it?" The old man looked at him, then shrugged. "You can say what you like—yes, and the priest too. But us folk, who've lived here all our lives, we know what we know. And we know it don't do to take in one of them neither."

"What do you mean?" Peter asked sharply. But the old man would say nothing more. Peter stared at him bleakly for some time before turning away. It was time to be gone.

But as he trudged away from the valley, he couldn't get the farmer's words out of his mind. Those and others. Harry's words — "Anyway, he's not my brother"; the village boys' — "He's not one of us."

Nonsense. What was he thinking? He was letting his imagination get the better of him. And it was none of his business. But the words echoed.

It was cold and getting dark. It would only be sensible to return to Balair and sleep inside tonight.

With a sigh of mingled relief and annoyance, Peter swung on his heels and started back down the valley.

It was completely dark by the time he reached the village. Only the light of the moon, shining palely through snow-laden clouds, lit his way. No betraying candles shone from any of the dark houses. Poor frightened folk, Peter thought, and hesitated before tapping gently on Alice's door.

There was a noise, hastily suppressed. He called softly, "It's just



me. Peter."

After a long pause, the door opened a crack. He slipped inside, and the door closed behind him.

The room was darker and almost as cold as the night outside. Only a few embers burned low in the hearth.

"I hope I'm not intruding. I decided you were right. This is no night to be out."

A minute ticked away. Another. Then Alice said, her voice dull, flat, "No. This is no night to be out."

"Alice—"

Something in Alice's voice, a barely suppressed—what? bitterness? anguish?—raised the hairs on Peter's arms.

"Where's Matt?" he demanded.

There was another pause before Alice's voice came from the shadows. "They've taken him away, to Hawthorn Wood. They've taken our boy to the Fair Folk."

"They? Who—"

"He's not our boy, Alice. He's never been our boy. You know that. Everyone knows that. The Fair Folk took our own boy years ago, and left their misshapen whelp in his place. He's none of ours."

Peter thought Matt bore a marked resemblance to Alice, but held his peace.

"He's a changeling," Harry's voice came from beside the door. "He doesn't belong here."

"Oh yes, you've made that clear to him all his life," Alice said wearily. "And tonight, when they—our

friends and neighbours, so I always thought—came for him, neither of you lifted a finger to help him."

"Alice—"

"Did you see his face when they left? Did you?"

Peter closed his eyes. Long moments passed. Tom cleared his throat.

"He's one of their own. The Fair Folk won't harm him."

"How do you know?"

"When— How long ago did they take him?" Peter asked hoarsely.

"An hour. Maybe more."

"Where in the forest?"

"As far inside as they dare go on All Hallow's Eve, I daresay."

There was no way he could find the boy. And if he did, he'd be too late. It was none of his business. Maybe Tom was right. Maybe the Fair Folk would do Matt no harm, maybe he'd be happier with them. And it was none of his business. But he was dropping his pack on the floor, tearing open the door, running down the path, crashing through the undergrowth and fallen branches of Hawthorn Wood, blindly going—where? To what? *Fool*, he cursed himself. *Fool, fool, fool*. But he kept going, running, stumbling, panting.

Then he did know where he was going, for a new light, a silvery light not of the moon, glowed from deep inside the forest, and a low melodic chant vibrated through the night, accompanying Peter's ragged breaths, his thundering heart. He stopped.

Took a backwards step, almost falling over an unseen log. Caught his breath. Stood. *Turn, you fool. Turn while you can. The boy has nothing to do with you.* Then he took one step forward. Another. Another. He walked slowly, very slowly. But he walked on.

He stepped into a clearing, and knew he was in the heart of the wood. It was filled with silvery, uncanny light. Figures shimmered in and out of focus beside the trees. Music filled the air. Peter caught his breath, dazed and dazzled.

Then he saw Matt standing in the centre of the clearing, looking small and alone, more alone than anyone should ever be.

"Matt."

The boy didn't seem to hear.

"Matt."

He turned slowly. He stood as straight as his sagging left shoulder permitted, but his eyes were glazed, almost unseeing. They widened as Peter moved to his side.

"Why . . . why are you here?"

"I came for you. Let's go."

"For me? But—"

"Why are you here? It was another voice—or not a voice. Peter could never afterwards decide, nor describe it. It rang through the clearing and through his head. He caught his breath again, this time in fear.

"Why are you here?" the voice repeated.

"I . . . I've come for the boy. For Matt."

"He was given to us. He is ours."

"No."

"Yes. No one wants him."

Beside him, Matt flinched. Peter flinched in sympathy.

"Come to us, boy."

Matt stood, trembling, the purple scar the only colour in his face.

"Come." The voice invited, insisted. The chanting pulsed with power.

Matt moved slowly, draggingly, towards the voice as though pulled.

"No!" Peter grabbed his arm, held him.

"No?" the voice mocked, laughed. "Why not?"

"He must . . . Matt, you must not listen. Return with me."

"Return?" the voice murmured.

"Return to what?" It ached with sadness. "No one wants you, boy. No one." It died away. At the same time the music stopped. In the clear cold silence, Matt took another step forward. Peter's hand dropped. Matt took another step.

"I want you." Peter's voice was hoarse, ragged. He cleared his throat. "I want you."

The silence tightened. When the voice spoke again, it was very cold, very precise. "You claim him?"

Peter shivered. He took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Yes?" the voice mocked. "And you, boy? Will you trust this man, this stranger, when your own reject you?" It gentled. "Or will you come with us, find peace?" The words were

coloured with the promise of mossy shade, cool lake waters, enfolding sleep. Peter felt them tug at his own heart.

Matt swayed. Slowly, as though moving in heavy water, he turned and looked at Peter. Minutes dragged by. Then he turned back to face the unseen speaker.

"No. I will not come with you."

His voice was small but clear.

"No?"

The chanting started again, rose and rose in pitch, broke into jagged, jarring notes—laughter, anger, scorn. Dead leaves whirled in sudden eddies. The light sharpened, became more brilliant. For a moment, Peter saw the misty shapes solidify, loom, draw closer and closer. He wanted to run, to flee wildly through the forest. But Matt took a step backwards and stood beside him. Peter gripped his shoulder. Together, they stood fast.

Then it was gone—the voice, the music, the light. He and Matt stood alone in the middle of a dead wood.

"Why?" Matt's voice was hoarse, strained.

This time, Peter knew what Matt was asking. "I had to." It was the only answer he had.

Matt was shaking.

"We'd better get you home," Peter said.

"I can't. I can't go back there."

Of course he couldn't. Not to a place where he wasn't wanted, where even his mother didn't deny he was

a changeling. Peter was silent.

Matt spoke through chattering teeth. "I don't know where I'll go. But I won't go back there."

He had claimed Matt. In front of the Fair Folk, he had claimed him. How foolish to think he could assume partial responsibility only. Celie, the brown-haired woman he had loved and left, would laugh if she ever heard of this—Peter the Peddler, carefree, irresponsible Peter, adopting a twelve—or was it thirteen—year-old son.

"You'll come with me, of course."

"With you? But—"

"You don't have to stay forever. It's not the most comfortable of lives. But for now, I think it's best."

The boy was silent for a long time. At last he said slowly, "When you said . . . when you told them . . . I believed you. I wanted to. But you don't have to . . . I don't want—I don't need pity. I can manage by myself."

"You just might at that," Peter agreed. For a moment he was tempted. Then he laughed. "But of course I want you to come with me. Do you think I'd lie to the Fair Folk? I'll enjoy your singing on the road. And your company," he added, and found he meant it.

Matt took a deep, shaking breath.

"We'll have to return to your parents' home to pick up my pack and some warm extra clothes for you.

But you can stay outside while I get them."

"No."

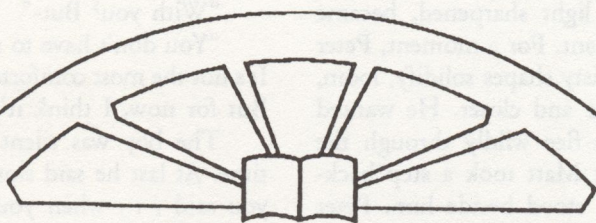
"No?" Peter raised his eyebrows.

"I can't go back to stay, but I must tell my parents and Harry I'm all right, and bid them farewell."

Despite their rejection . . . Peter

looked at him with surprised respect. "I see you'll be changing my life even more than I thought. Come on then. I'd like to be far away by morning."

As they walked back through the forest, snow started to fall, soft, feathery flakes, landing like gentle benedictions on their heads. \*



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Linda Dunne '92

# The Pleiades Cat

by Catherine Girczyc

illustrated by Linda Dunn

## **R**EPORT: Subset 4, Note 25: Faint traces of ComBeam observed from Old Earth to Fel Satellite.

When the beam was traced to its source, Fel recording materials were discovered. The following was translated by our Scientific Officer: Ms. Gee. Ms. Gee places the date of contact at around the year 2000, old reckoning, give or take a decade. All materials have been sent to Science Central for verification. Doubtless this find is remarkable in Old Earth archeology and should be preserved.

### **TRANSCRIPT:**

#### **Day 27 Slave Elalna's Home.**

I have explained this before. At first the cat—

I'm sorry, Colonel Gordon, I think of her as a cat. It just doesn't seem to me to be another sort of creature.

I admit "Merope" is an unusual name. You could say she picked it for herself.

Well, I was reading a book on the myths of Corinthian Greece. When I left the room, she ripped eleven occurrences of the name "Merope" out of the book. I took the hint.

I teach in the Classics Department at the University. Not a tenure track position, just sessional. But someday, maybe I'll get a permanent job. That is if they don't lay me off first. Lots of talk of that, at school. Layoffs.

Oh, yes, the cat: when I got home from the Luxor Dig in late August, and

walked up the steps of the house, she hid under the bushes, making meow sounds. I thought she was a cat. She looked like a cat.

She became more aggressive over time, hanging off my back door screen like some absurd sloth; caterwauling.

I didn't pet her (cats normally make me itch). So why all this attention to me and my cat-free house? I'll never know. Except, of course, I'm not allergic to her at all.

I think that the Pleiades Star Cluster is a bit far for a small grey tabby to journey from. I don't mean to tell you your military business—

No, sir. I am not military myself. Graduate school, archeological digs in Greece and Egypt, an academic sort of life. Quite poor though, I'm only hired on a session-by-session basis.

The house belongs to my parents. They live in Arizona now and still subsidize my academic lifestyle. There is a point though. I'm thirty years old and I make less than a secretary. I think I took a wrong turn somewhere.

Oh, the cat. Yes. She got into the house once at a Sunday afternoon barbecue. A friend let her in, thinking she was my cat. I didn't notice Merope till later. Then I fed her. She looked starved. She meowed at the fridge door. I fed her, turned around and found the word "EXTRA" spelled out in guacamole dip on my kitchen floor.

I put her out. It didn't occur to me, no. Not many cats can spell

"extraterrestrial," Colonel.

No, this is not my idea of a hoax. It was Dr. Saduj, my next-door neighbour, who called you people in. I hadn't any notion of involving anyone. I thought the cat was a little strange, that's all.

### **Day 35 Slave Elaina's Home.**

As far as I'm concerned, you can leave any time, Colonel.

Well, not with the cat. She's mine now.

Well, I'm not a normal human either, am I? And I'd create an outcry. Some of the graduate students I know volunteer for the SPCA and the Animal Rights League.

Good. I'm glad we've got that straight. Back to my story, right? Okay.

In August, she took to sitting in the road, directly in front of my driveway, daring cars to attack her. None of them did, which says a lot for the careful drivers. I watched people stop their cars and get out and physically move the beast so they could pass.

I turned the water hose on her.

She seemed to me to belong to a new couple who lived across the road and weren't often home. I had never actually seen these people. I surmised their existence. Someone put bells on her last summer, though I had never seen her climb a tree or move with any speed.

Constant noise could drive a sensitive animal crazy.

Cheap brass bells could be a spy weapon. But your scientists haven't



found any indication of any sophistication in them. I felt I did the right thing by replacing the bells with a cat tag.

Well, it is the law, sir. And she does look like a cat.

Dr. Saduj has some military connections. He felt the cat to be unusual. I thought all cats were diabolically clever.

Yes, it was strange that she typed "HELLO ALIENS" on Dr. Saduj's keyboard, but only he saw that.

She would chase and fight with other cats in the area. Cat fights and loud hissing noises filled the wee hours. She mutilated my morning paper, most days. Also my mail. I fed her, thinking she was having strange food desires. She did stop destroying newspapers. Now it's upholstery.

No, I never thought of calling you people in, I assumed teenagers were responsible for the large letters V-I-S-I-T burned into my lawn with an overdose of fertilizer.

Why would I assume it was a cat visiting from outer space?

The extraterrestrial business really surprises me. I do kind of feel she might be lying to you people, Colonel.

No, I trust your researchers completely, sir. But the Los Alamos experience, you know? Would she be likely to cause cancer or anything?

Calm down, sir. I just meant, that, well, if she's some kind of experiment—

Yes, I do want to keep her. She's

my cat.

I don't know. It's a strong compulsion to take care of her. Repressed maternal instincts is what I think it is, but I could be wrong. I never felt the slightest need to have a child.

Do you really believe she's from the High Command of The Pleiades Star Cluster, Colonel? There's no chance she's a tourist, or something? Some of my friends in Classics get a long way in Europe by pretending to be professors—

#### **Day 42 Slave Elaina's Home.**

Colonel, how's the tea? Nice isn't it? I made it with the mint from my back yard here. Mother planted it years ago. Merope loves the catnip we have here too. I hope she won't mind when we sell this place.

Didn't the researchers tell you? My parents want to liquidate and move permanently to Arizona. I can't afford it here; I'll have to share an apartment in the city.

I hesitate to mention this, but my sofa's clawed to shreds and Merope is a very bad cat when it comes to my personal belongings. She wants me to sleep on the floor while she gets into my bed. Could she be a sort of a deportee, you know, like in old Australia?

Of course not. Sorry. Emissary from another Planet. Right.

And while we're discussing the cat—er—being—could you please try to keep your staff from feeding her? That trout she likes is bad enough to

afford, but I'll never keep her in salmon. I'm only a poor sessional lecturer.

I could find my way around Ancient Egypt or Greece but I know very little about outer space.

This is not a hotel. It is secure, as your people often point out, simply by being in an obscure suburban neighbourhood. It's a very long drive into the University from here, for one thing.

Yes, Colonel, please. It would really ruin my academic career if "Merope the Cat from Pleiades" appeared on the evening news. The Dean would see it and think I was some kind of absolute lunatic. I think so myself some days, when I get back here from classes and find nerdy scientist types talking to my cat like she cares.

Dr. Saduj next door is bad enough; I swear he's got telescopes trained on every inch of my lot. It's unnerving to go in the back yard any more.

I think Dr. Saduj is hurt that Merope didn't choose his house.

Why? He has a dog, that's why, if you ask me.

It's very straining having a Space Being tearing the heck out of your furniture and rugs while grownups watch and make little notes in notebooks.

The house is nice, yes. No, I've never noticed any direct interplanetary transfer vibrations here either. Are you quite sure she's telling your science

officers the truth? This business about her disappearing the instant she leaves this lot is a bit much, don't you think?

Trust her? I seem to be the only human being around who DOESN'T TRUST her!

She's certainly smarter than your average tabby. Though all my friends say that about their cats.

As a matter of fact, most of their cats don't have a battery of scientists eating out of their little paws, no.

Yes, she is a lot of trouble, but I like her. I have no idea why she prefers me to you or your researchers. I might even let her leave, but you'll recall she viciously attacked a scientist last week. By the way, did he get the flowers I sent?

### **Day 50 Slave Elaina's Home.**

What an interesting idea. A stipend for the cat. Her idea? Oh, right. So she's protecting my parents' house from interstellar invaders? My dear Colonel, I am somewhat dismayed that you people take her word for everything.

Well, I wouldn't call your researchers crazy, sir—

No, not the easy chair—no, Merope! You bad cat! Not the Colonel! No!

Sorry, sir, she's out of control again.

Oh, dear, what a nasty scratch you have there. Funny she attacked you, not me. I mean, I was the one who insulted her.

It is true that the furniture has

taken a terrible beating. Look, let's clean this cut up. It's nasty.

I would have thought, Colonel, that anyone in the business of ferreting out extraterrestrials would have at least entertained the possibility that they may have come from a world where the Cats reign and the Humans are the pets.

Humans innately superior? No, sir, not at all. Hold still while I bandage this. You'll find that the ancient Egyptians revered cats. They were held to be sacred.

Wait, there she is—here kitty, kitty, kitty! You've been a naughty kitty today! Oh, look, she's purring. Good girl. I'll go get you a nice plate of fish. There's a pretty Merope!

Why yes, I would accept military funding. What harm could it mean? I'm not selling weapons am I? Only harbouring a highly developed feline who is quite possibly a pathological liar.

Buy my house for me? That's really very nice. Does the government know what you're doing with the money?

Well, of course I'm grateful. Merope can stay, after all. I won't have to get rid of her. And I do hope you come to visit more often, Colonel Gordon.

Oh, may I call you Henry, then? How nice. You can call me Elaina. That Ms. Fowless stuff is too formal, isn't it? Look, I'd swear that cat can understand us. She's standing by the door, waiting to go to the Safeway

for salmon.

Later? Sure, I'd love to see a movie. I hear there's a new *Aliens* out. Imagine, nasty things from outer space. Not like our Merope.

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REPORT: Subset 4, Note 26 Faint traces of Com Beam observed from Old Earth to Fel Satellite. Ms. Gee located a set of notes, written in FEL, apparently an addendum to the above. She has generously translated this as well:

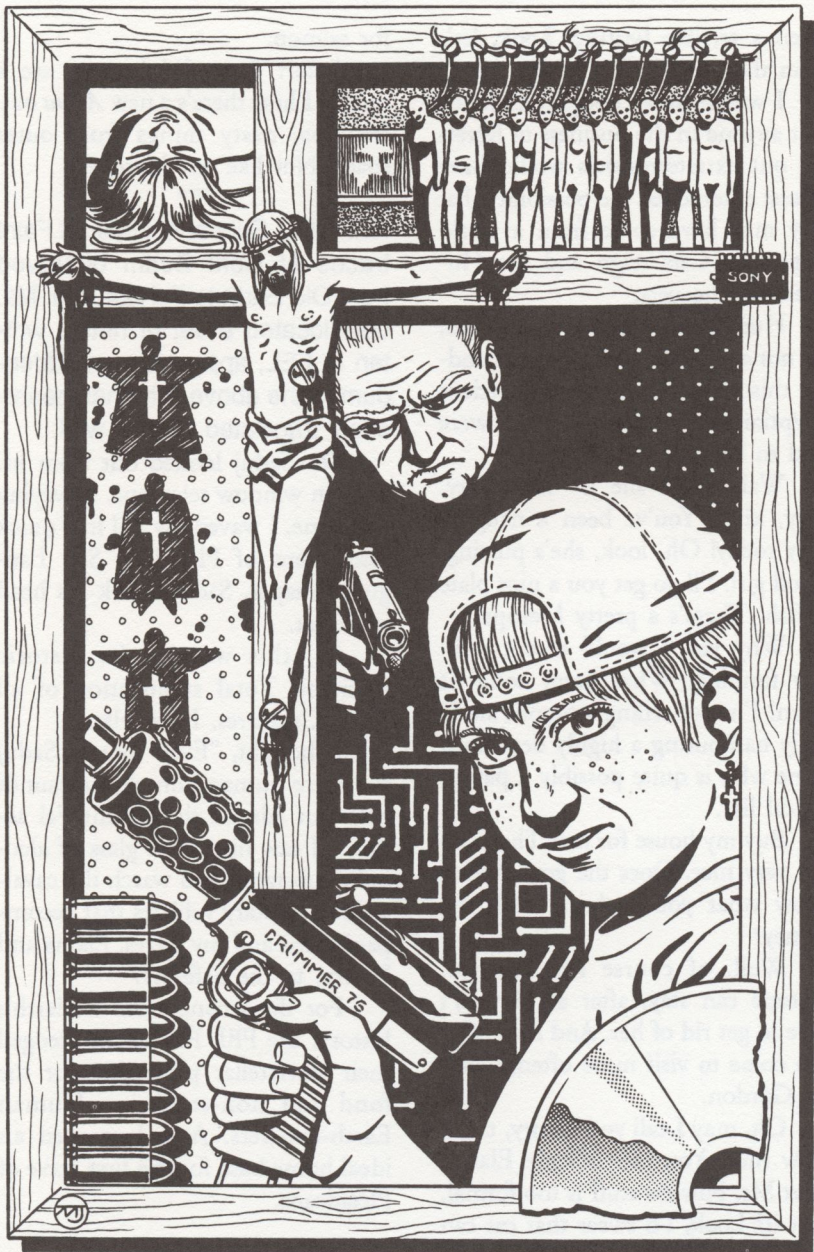
Dr. Saduj looked out from his kitchen window telescope, surveying the scene. I waved my tail in a quick assortment of Pleiadean Spy Language shapes. Saduj shook his head in defeat.

So, this was it, the historic moment! Total subjugation of all Earth Creatures. I was elated.

I thought, "Even though Saduj is a mere human himself, he cannot help but admire the gallant Fel action." I saw him lift a glass of alcoholic substance and watch the cavalcade of military vehicles that accompanied me and my slaves, Elaina and Henry, to the Safeway.

For the second time in Earth's history, the FEL Pleiadeans pledged their interstellar protection for the fond and non-starfaring Human Earth-dwellers. And I secured an ideal home base for the first wave of Pleiadeans.

—Signed MEROPE,  
FEL Intelligence Agent 



# Silent Night

by Robert Baillie

illustrated by Mike Jackson

Cardinal Jack backed into his office carrying a piece of toast and a mug of I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Coffee. Cardinal John and Cardinal Zeke were already there, standing beside the Religious Predictions Terminal impatiently. Cardinal Zeke had improved the Terminal using biochips salvaged from one of the war machines that lay out in the desert beyond the Sprawl. It predicted stranger things now, but more accurately. Sometimes it achieved nominal accuracies as high as twenty-five percent.

"All right, I'm here. I don't know what you two scan out of all this. We're a wasted bunch, the last three representatives of the Church on this side of the ocean just sitting here watching this nuclear toaster for a sign." Cardinal Jack sipped his Icbinc reflectively and flipped on the RPT. It chirped feebly as it tried to uplink with the Vatican commsat.

"Damn. The friggin' maser's whacked. Zeke?"

"Yeah, hold on a sec." Zeke went to the window and bent over the maser. He drew back, startled. "Hey, come here for a sec!"

Jack and John joined him at the window. Jack's eyes automatically sought out the Vatican commsat in the evening sky. Usually only barely visible through the smog that hung over the Sprawl, it was unusually bright tonight.

"Weird," said Cardinal Jack, "probably a solar flare or somethin'." He went back to the RPT. "You got that thing synced?"

"Yeah, go ahead." Cardinal Jack hit the reset button and the RPT whirred purposefully. A small piece of durofilm shot out into the hopper. Cardinal Jack looked over at the other two, surprised. This was a first. He snatched it up and scanned it rapidly.

"Sweet Mother of God," he said softly. Wordlessly he passed the film:

12-24-2023—

Vatcom#63836548

Based on data from Worldbank, Vatican orbital

mainframe predicts that the Son of God will

return at 06:17 hours EST at coordinates

253-763:385-732.

Nominal accuracy; 99.99%

"Where the hell is 253-763:385-732?" asked Zeke.

"The South Bronx, I think," replied John.

•

"Ahhhhh," said Jimmy as he took a long hit from the inhaler. He passed it to Jake, who did likewise.

"Ahhhhh," said Jake.

"Jake, we hurry to piss and shit the zombies then party soon, AO?"

"AO, Jimmy." Jake grabbed the puppet box and stood up quickly. Jimmy followed him from the reception area for Fantasies 'R' Us into

the zombie room. Here, in columns twenty deep, sat the zombies. They were all different, men, women, a few teens. Each had a long silver lead plugged into a socket at the nape of the neck dribbling electrical fantasies straight into their neural paths.

Jake punched a code into the box and they all stood up as one. He punched another and, as one, they all turned ninety degrees to the left and squatted over the trough. The sounds and smells of defecation filled the air around them.

"XO, Jake," Jimmy screwed up his face. "Inhaler." Jake passed over the inhaler and Jimmy breathed deeply.

"Ahhhhh Waa?" said Jimmy. Jake looked over and found Jimmy staring at the holotank set into the wall.

"Looking?" asked Jake.

"Saw," replied Jimmy.

"Crazy Jimmy, blinkered set for ages."

"Know. Saw." Jimmy gestured at the tank again. Jake stared confused at the tank as an image struggled to form in it. He looked again at the loose wires that ran from the tank to nowhere and shook his head.

"Old interface type . . . Tricky . . . Lucifer damn this thing . . ." muttered the holotank speaker. Jimmy and Jake slowly backed away from the image forming in the tank. It depicted a man dressed in white who drifted back and forth eerily. "Oh yeah," said the man in white,

"the 3D hold. Got it!" The man stopped drifting.

"Whoa," said Jake, dropping the command box.

"Yo, you two!" said the man in white. Jake and Jimmy looked at each other. "Yeah, you, I need a favour so listen up. Something very big is going down in the South Bronx this morning and I need you guys to be there and look after things. It's kind of a rough neighbourhood."

"Where?" asked Jake.

"Follow the light from the Vatican commsat. Thanks, guys." The man in white disappeared. Jake reached into the supply cabinet and took out two shotguns. He tossed one to Jimmy and shrugged.

"Jah is what Jah does."

•

"This is never going to work," said Ed.

"Just shut up will you? I'm almost done here." Derek pressed the last of the chips into the board very carefully. It wasn't every day you stumbled across Sony biochips, even in his line of work.

"This will never work," said Ed again and gestured at the body lying on the table. "I mean, this girl's dead."

"Suspended," corrected Derek, "and if it does work we'll both be very rich."

"You expect to catch someone's soul with this thing?" asked Ed, pointing at the fine network of superconductors that hung on a frame

out the window.

"Not a soul, Ed, a psycho-energy pattern. And no, not with just that. The web is just to attract the nearest pattern. Then it gets drawn in and digitized and placed on CD." He held up a shiny disk for emphasis. "Once stored, it automatically gets played back into the blank neural paths of the host."

Ed looked at the body and shivered. "That thing is creepy. It's not right. Not on Christmas day."

"Look Ed, I got this chick strictly legit under the Vagrancy Act. You know they have no rights. Maybe we can do something good with her." Derek lit a cigarette. "Christmas, is it? Well, we better get on with it; once the sun comes up there will be too much solar interference." Derek carefully laid his cigarette on the edge of the console and typed the sequence that activated the equipment. There was a soft hum and the video displayed a single word.

SEARCHING . . . Derek held his breath; if his math was right, it wouldn't be too long.

PSYCHO ENERGY MATRIX LOCATED . . . Derek let out a whoop and Ed looked over his shoulder.

"Holy Shit." Said Ed.

UPLOADING . . .

PROCESSING . . .

WRITING TO CD . . . The CD unit hummed oddly.

MATRIX VERIFIED . . .

DOWNLOADING TO  
HOST . . .

TRANSFER COMPLETE.  
HAVE A NICE DAY.

•

"You sure this is the place?"  
asked the old man.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm positive. They  
got tons of live power cables runnin'  
in there. This has got to be where  
they took my chips," replied the lit-  
tle boy.

"Groovy," said the old man.  
"You packin'?"

"Yeah, Drummer model 75  
recoilless." The little kid displayed  
the machine pistol proudly.

"Jesus," said the old man. The  
little kid gripped his arm suddenly.

"Hey, you hear something?"

"Nah, you're just jumpy. Let's  
go."

"Thought I heard something."

"Forget it."

•

"It worked," whispered Derek.  
He walked quickly over to the Host  
body. "Ed, get over here; time to  
earn your keep." Ed hurried over and  
scanned the vitals monitor.

"She's sleeping."

"Well, wake her up, I want to  
see who's home." Ed prepared a sy-  
ringe from his bag and injected it  
into the arm of the Host. The Host  
groaned and her eyelids fluttered,  
then snapped open. She stared at  
Derek uncomprehendingly.

"Who are you?" asked Ed.

"Jesus Christ," said the woman

on the table.

"No, I mean who are you?"

"Jesus Christ," said the Son of  
God.

"Uh, Happy Birthday," said  
Derek.

•

"Are you sure you know where  
you're going?" asked Cardinal Zeke,  
narrowly missing a broken bottle  
with his foot.

"Positive," said Cardinal Jack.  
He glanced at his wrist. "It's got to  
be this building right here. There  
must be some way in."

"Let's try around back," sug-  
gested Cardinal John.

"Right."

•

"You brought back Jesus  
Christ?" screamed Ed, throwing his  
bag on the floor.

"How was I supposed to know?"  
Derek screamed back. "I'm a fuckin'  
atheist!"

"Better start believing quick,  
asshole. You might offend the Son  
of God over there."

"Relax, Ed. Just take care of her,  
okay?" Derek walked over to the CD  
unit and popped out the silver disk.  
He carefully printed "Jesus Christ"  
on the label and placed it in its case.  
He was about to put it back on the  
table when multiple explosions  
ripped off the door to the lab.

"Everybody freeze!" yelled the  
little kid brandishing the machine  
pistol. The old man stood beside  
him, casually pointing a handgun at



no one in particular. Nobody moved. "You," the kid pointed at Christ, "pull the chips out of that console and bring them over here." Derek watched helplessly as the Son of God lifted the access cover and reached inside.

"XO, kid," said a new voice.

Derek started as two black men suddenly appeared in the ruined doorway behind the kid and the old man.

"Drop," said the first one.

"Now," said the other. Two weapons hit the floor simultaneously.

"Split," said the first one.

"Now," said the other. The old man and the kid fled into the early morning.

"Who are you guys?" asked Derek.

"Jimmy," said the first one.

"Jake," said the other one. Jake took out an inhaler and dragged a hit out of it. "Ahhhhh."

"Well, I guess I owe you one. How did you find this place?"

"Guided." Explained Jake.

"Light." Affirmed Jimmy.

"Oh," said Derek, confused. He turned to Christ, who was wiping dust off her hands. "Hey, Jesus! How come you don't speak Latin or Hebrew or something?" he demanded.

"Hey, I'm the Messiah," she smiled. "Communication's a big thing with me, and call me Jessie."

Derek sat down heavily in his chair and lit another cigarette. His head hurt. For the first time he noticed three men in long red robes standing just inside the doorway. They stood there wringing their hands and looking around in dismay.

"You know," he said conversationally, "this place used to be a secret."

"Which one of you is Him?" one robed man asked Derek anxiously.

Derek pointed at Christ. "You mean Her."


"My Lord," they said at the same time and dropped to their knees.

"Call me Jessie, please. Now relax, guys, and get up. We have a lot of ground to cover tonight." Jessie turned to Derek. "Thanks, man, I owe you one." Derek waved his cigarette noncommittally.

"It was nothing really."

"Jimmy! Jake! You guys ready to move out?" Jessie was already moving towards the door.

"But My Lord," protested one of the guys in the robes, "it's very different now, so many things have changed."

"Don't sweat it, Zeke," said the Son of God as she scooped up the fallen Drummer Model 75, "this time I got a whole new plan." 



*Everybody knows the story of the king who offers the hand of his daughter to the young hero who can rid his kingdom of some dire menace. The hero performs the deed, weds the girl, and they live happily ever after. In this excerpt from Nobody's Son, coming this spring from Maxwell Macmillan, the hero, Shielder's Mark, begins to discover that happily-ever-after isn't all it's cracked up to be . . .*

# Swangard Palace

by Sean Stewart

illustrated by Steve Goetze

**W**hat a bloody joke, Mark thought sourly as two beefy fellows in livery started forward to escort him out of Swangard Palace. *What ever happened to happily-ever-after?*

It had taken him two weeks to trudge back from the Ghostwood, two long, cold, hungry weeks without his pack and blankets. Each night he had eaten just a morsel of daydream to fill his belly, and warmed his hands over the thought of his triumphant reception before the Crown.

But here he was before the King at last, and it was beginning to occur to him, as the sentries drew their broadswords, that things weren't going to get any better for a dirty country boy in this rich man's world.

*'Art tha not cloddish, i' sooth?' . . . I guess this means no parade.*

*Bastards.*

Mark was hungry. Weary. Filthy. Enraged. And really tired of beefy men in livery. "Stand back, damn your eyes!" he swore.

Then he drew Sweetness.

For one eternal instant, time stood stiller in Swangard Palace than it ever had at the Red Keep. Across the room the King froze, halfway out of his chair. Beside him the Queen's fleshy face sagged in shock. Her eldest daughter recoiled, her second gasped.

The youngest princess grinned.

On the King's other side his two councillors, gaunt Anujel and stout Vultemar, glowered in outrage. Behind the throne Sir William, the King's champion, looked on, greying eyebrows raised with interest.

Sweetness murmured its grim enchantments, freezing the ladies and gentlemen of the court who stood between Mark and his King. *Whole village wouldn't pawn one lady's dress or one Jack's cloak and boots*, Mark thought, stuck between awe and anger. The men were dressed soldier-style, all epaulets and medals and braid. The monstrosly-thin women wore hoop-skirts with rigid hems just below their knees: *They look like butter churns wi' legs. But you must admit that all the girls are handsome, and all the fellows pretty.*

"Thanks for your attention," he growled.

Shielder's Mark was not a pretty young man. His brown hair was shaggy and unwashed. His long narrow jaw was covered with black stubble that looked like a boy's bad first beard. His hands were too hard; his fingernails were blunt and dirty. His cloak was travel-stained; the leathers on his boots were parting from their soles. And frankly, he stank.

He bowed with a flourish and raised his magic blade above his head, so that every corner of the room was filled with its keening, crying song. "This is Sweetness, greatest sword of grandfather days. I picked it from next to Stargad's bones in the Red Keep, where he died. I've broke the Ghostwood's spell, and come to claim my reward. I've had two weeks walk, little food, less sleep, and no thanks.

I've spent half the day trying to get past your bloody doormen and stewards and under-ministers of this and bloody that, and I'm sick of being polite.

"I will be heard, and I will get what's owed me! If any man doubts my word, he's welcome to come wi' me to the Ghostwood, and look for himself."

He dropped his sword-point, and the spell was broken; everyone started jabbering at once.

At a glance from the King, Vultemar bellowed for silence.

Sinking slowly into his throne, His Munificence Astin IV, his spare frame draped in the royal black, studied Mark with deep unhappiness. "And do you know those harsh and rigid medicines the Law prescribes in case your claim be proven false?" He nodded at Sir William, who alone among the men in the room was plainly dressed, in brown silks without lace or military honours. "In such a case would we our champion ask to chastise your impertinence."

"If I were lying, he could try," Mark growled. "But can you doubt your ears? There's only one sword as sings: Sweetness, that was lost in the Ghostwood as everyone knows."

Eyes glanced across the chamber; whispers twittered from every corner. Mark looked slowly around the room, feeling dirty and wild and fierce. Like songbirds under a hawk's shadow, courtiers cringed beneath his gaze.

The King's champion stirred, dropping his hand from his sword-hilt. "The boy speaks sooth."

Astin IV turned in astonishment. "Sir William! Are you mad? One thou-

sand years has darkness lain upon that Wood, and spilled its gloom upon our hearts, a tristeful tributary, fouling with its melancholy spring the shining Sea that is our kingdom. Stargad tried to break this spell, and thumbless Philip; Silverhand and countless others. Can that blot not even Aron could erase have now been lifted by—" The King waved an angry hand at Mark. "—By a ragged cloak and pair of mildewed boots?"

Sir William shrugged. "One sword only ever sang, Your Majesty. I must believe my ears."

Mark's fierce elation drained away before the older man's level gaze; he felt like a boy, and a bragging boy at that. Sir William gave him the ghost of a smile. "Beside this, I am a fair judge of young men; my heart says he tells the truth."

Mark looked at him gratefully. *Now that's more like a knight should be. When you're a Duke, make that man welcome in your castle any time.*

"We . . ." The King faltered. "We confess ourselves amazed. Anujel, Vultemar: advise us." Two heads bowed down to whisper in his ears, one gaunt and grey, the other pink and fat.

The Queen waved her ample arms. "Well, if he must remain, at least he should be clean. Lord Peridot, your honour and your courtesy would like arise in our esteem were you to be a gentleman and give this boy your cloak."

A courtier in fawn and peach coloured silks bowed, a smile quirking his thin face, and unbuckled a flowing apricot cloak, trimmed with ermine.

The Queen turned to a lady-in-waiting. "Cousin Lissa, an' you will,

take the mantle from this gentleman—" her nose wrinkled, "—and have it burned. Bring back a bowl of steaming rosewater, and a ball of soap." She frowned at Mark. "Perhaps two balls." A smile lit Her Majesty's plump face. "You *swear* that this is not some prank, set to tease the humour of the Court? 'Tis very like your sense of wit, Lord Peridot, to send a cloddish knave to us, enwreathed in borrowed glories."

*Can't you hear the sword, you daft awd sow?* "No joke, Your Majesty, though I look like a scarecrow and stink like a sty."

The Queen clapped her hands. "Ooh! And witty to boot!"

*O Lord.*

*Should I have bowed when she yapped at me?*

Mark had felt strong and free when he despised them all, all the preening courtiers. But now his moment was slipping away, sinking between the King's scowl and the Queen's silly smile. He glanced at Her Highness, trying to guess if she was waiting for him to kneel or something . . .

. . . and found his eyes caught by the youngest princess, the one who had grinned when he burst into the room.

Mark had always imagined princesses as tall and willowy, with straw-coloured hair and a distant expression. But Princess Gail was short and stocky; she had a vixen's face, shrewd and small, with short brown hair and gold-brown eyes. She wore tights and tunic of the royal black, belted with a gold sash at the waist: *Too short for the butter-churn style*, he guessed. She even had a knife jammed through her sash; no toy neither, but a good dagger like the one

he'd left in the Wood, with a broad blade and a worn bone handle.

Gail looked at him like an archer staring down a target.

Mark's heart stopped; jumped; and died, a stag shot leaping.

"What fun!" the Queen exclaimed. "Lissa, also Master Civet find, and Master Bolt. By their craft those tasteful gentlemen must turn this Shielder's Mark from duckling into swan, if he will paddle in our pond."

Lord Peridot was bowing to Mark. Mark's jaw snapped shut and with a supreme act of will he dragged his eyes off the Princess.

Peridot was a small man, and slender. As he bowed he held his right hand across his chest; Mark saw that he was missing the index finger. "My greetings, cousin. May I offer you my cloak while yours is . . . on its way?"

"Th-thanks," Mark stammered.

"Is something wrong?" Peridot's thin lips quirked once more into a sharp smile. "Perhaps, my country cousin, you find in my disfigurement the footprint of the Devil. Do you long to hold your fingers horned to ward against my Eye, or step so that my shadow does not fall across your own? You would not be the first to blanch at my affliction."

"No, no—not at all," Mark said, flushing. His eyes fled Lord Peridot's hand.

Sir William was staring at him.

So was the princess.

He wished himself under the earth.

. . . *No, goddammit!*

He had braved the Ghostwood, and broken the spell not even Aron could undo. *Is the man who holds Sweetness to piss himself before a roomful of*

*perfume and ruffles?*

Stocky Vultemar and slender Anujel stepped back and stood quietly behind the King. The King stroked his pointed beard with fretful fingers. "Attend us, Shielder's Mark. Perhaps you *have* done what you claim. We shall this day a troop dispatch to investigate your tale." A smile flickered briefly across Astin's face. "But Sir William have we trusted in farming many boys, and never found a better husbandman to harvest from them rich crops of men. If he believes you, then so will we—for now. And if you speak true, then ancient law is clear: what you ask, the Crown must give." He laughed without great warmth. "Great will be your name, boy: it will all the honoured titles in this room outlast, including ours. The fourth to bear the name of Astin later years will know but by his gift to you. So tell him: what will you have?"

*O, fine fields and orchards heavy with fruit; tall stone walls walked by men in blue and silver livery.* Mark drew his breath. "Your Majesty, I thank you. An' you will, I'll take . . ."

He faltered, feeling a pair of narrow eyes trained on him. "I'll take . . ."

Half against his will, he turned to face the Princess.

Like a spear her gaze passed through him, heart and soul, and he was lost.

"You'll take *what?*" she asked, her eyes aflash with triumph.

"Hush, Gail!" the Queen fussed. "No time is this for boldness!"

"The King is waiting," Anujel said.

Mark's life, his whole life and all his plans, went spinning out from under his feet. He was a wild man in this

court, shaggy-haired and stinking of the road. A keen wind blew through him, lifting him up like the spring breeze under a hawk's wing. Daring, he felt; fresh and brave as rainbows. "Your Majesty," he said, bowing with a flourish of his borrowed apricot cloak, "I guess I'll take your daughter."

The crowd gasped. Lord Peridot stiffened. Slender Anujel bent to whisper outrage in his sovereign's ear. The Queen stared at Mark's travel-beaten gear, then looked anxiously to her youngest daughter.

The Princess smirked. "Which daughter, bold stranger? The King has three."

"Shall I say the fairest?"

Gail laughed. "Oh no! That would be Teris, and she's already married to Duke Gerald."

When Gail laughed, her narrow brown eyes got even narrower, shrewder, and more mischievous. Mark felt as if he and she were two children sharing a joke no grown-up could understand.

The King's councillors conferred in anxious whispers. A thunderhead was building on the brow of His August Majesty, Astin IV.

Mark didn't care; he had eyes only for Gail. "Then I'll marry the cleverest," he said.

Gail shook her head. "That would be Willan. She reads three books a week, if you'll believe it, and talks to the Bishop about—ooh, deep things. But alas! She is married to Count Pietro." Gail pointed to a portly man of middle years, who bowed coldly in return.

Mark threw up his hands. "Well,

then—I guess I must ask for the *bold-est* daughter of Astin IV."

"Ah!" Clad in matching black hoop-skirts, the two older princesses nodded drily. "Now that," said Willan, who was slightly pregnant, "would be Ered's Gallant's Reynold's Ferdinand's Royal's Gail."

Gail curtsied as well as she could in a tunic.

There was a long, tense silence.

Lord Peridot, resplendent in peach, his slight chest gleaming with his grandfather's medals, caught the King's eye and coughed, twice.

The King shook his head. "Now listen, Shielder's Mark. While we are charged to offer you the choice and pick of this our kingdom, what you ask exceeds the bounds of all impertinence. You cannot require the last unpluck'd fruit from the royal tree, our daughter, she to whom the kingdom's greatest men years of anxious courtship have addressed, to wed—forgive us—so far beneath her station." He glanced at Lord Peridot. "Though you could not know when first you made this startling request, there have for years been . . . expectations in this matter. Gail is to another purpos'd; stealing her beneath the sable cloak of hoary statute were no honour nor no credit to you, and could not help but foul that pure baptismal water that your deeds have earned to cleanse away your commonness."

Slowly, carefully, thoughtfully, Mark spat on the King's floor. "Is the lass engaged or isn't she?"

"Well—"

"No, I certainly am not," Gail snapped, glaring at her father.

Behind the throne, Vultemar and Anujel were shifting like nervous hens. Astin stilled them with a wave of his hand. "Consider, boy: imagine us reversed, you King, and I petitioning the hand of your last daughter. Ask and we will grant you what you will—but girlish hearts are not ours to give."

"But your daughter's girlish hand is," Gail said. Smiling. Lethal.

Mark bowed as coldly as he could. How dare, how *dare* they treat him like dirt—the man who broke the Ghostwood's spell! "The Princess is not engaged. I've asked for her hand and now you get to grant it. Or has some witchery turned the King's gold word to lead? If your daughter can't marry an honest man without a title, then make me Prince o' Pigsties."

The court held its breath, shocked.

Hunched in his great plush-covered chair, Astin the Magnanimous chewed moodily on his moustache. At last he sighed. "We will not be forsworn, boy; king's words *are* gold, and must be honoured more than any coin. Our statutes clearly state that we must give you what you ask. But they do not force respect, nor amity, nor friendliness between us. Nor do they ask us to rejoice in wedding our great line to yours."

"No doubt we'll get on better once I've won your daughter's heart," Mark said, shrugging.

Gail looked a flight of arrows through him. "My heart cannot be won," she snapped. "It's mine to give."

Mark gulped.

Beside him, Lord Peridot allowed himself the pleasure of a thin smile. "Young man," he murmured, "time I think will prove to you that winning

women's hearts is harder oft than taking castles—and far less permanent."

Turning to the King, Peridot bowed with a flourish. "My liege, were Duke Richard here, my noble patron and my lord, sure I am that he would want to make the first congratulations on this startling felicity! How glad, how happy must a father be, to graft a noble daughter to such a legend-making tree!" His eyes lingered on Gail. "From so fair a bud, what ripe fruit must swell!"

Willan and Teris glanced away, shivering with distaste; Gail looked to be throttling Peridot in her imagination, slowly and with great thoroughness.

The courtier continued unperturbed. "And too I must confess a certain satisfaction for my master. Sweetness, so long lost from Stargad's line, has now returned against all expectation, fetched hither from the Ghostwood by your future son-in-law." Turning, he made another deep bow to Mark. "Duke Richard will be pleased indeed to meet the man who found his long-lost property!"

Mark started, his hand straying to the precious sword belted at his side. "What do you mean? Sweetness is—"

"You need not be concerned," Lord Peridot said, dismissing him as if he were a stable boy. "The Duke is known for his munificence: your pockets will be heavier by a flock of Swans, no doubt. Or payment can be made in any form which better suits your needs: raiment, beer, or what you like."

Mark felt himself go white with rage. "I am not a village beggar, lord. I won this sword fairly, and if your pre-



cious Duke Richard wants it, he'll have to take it from me."

"We will no longer stand these threats!" the King roared. "Shall you now add banditry and boasting to the tally of indignities you thrust upon this court? We have no assurance how you came upon this blade, by theft or duel or dicing. We *do* know Sweetness was for Stargad made, and Stargad's line. Your one request you made and we will grant it should your tale prove true. Now unless you wish to face the peril of our direst wrath, yield up the sword that it may straight unto its lawful owner go."

"Straight *into* would be more like it," Gail muttered.

Carefully Mark drew Sweetness from his sheath. The room once more was filled with steelsong. "Make me. Sire."

The room went deathly quiet. Tension danced like lightning round the ancient blade. The King looked to his champion.

Sir William sighed. "Well, sorry am I, Shielder's Mark, but I am sworn to act for Astin and his court. A fine blade, Sweetness is, and finer too I guess the man who won her: but give her up you must." He stepped forward from the royal dais, making no move to draw his sword.

"You know this is crooked as a witch's back," Mark cried. "I won it fair!" He and Sir William were suddenly alone: Lord Peridot and all the other be-medalled men had melted back, to watch from the edges of the room. Mark gestured at Sir William to keep his distance. "I know how to use this," he warned.

"I'm sure you do, my lad. And I know how to use mine." Sir William shrugged. "And if we fight, perhaps I win: then you give up the sword. Or perhaps you win, and wed, and hang for killing me. Either way, this madness leads to blood, for your pride may stand no stiffer than the honour I have pledged unto my King. That honour owns the last drop of my blood: does your pride cost you so much?" A small smile showed in Sir William's beard. "Too old am I, and you too young, to die for a yard of hammered steel. Humour me, lad, and give it up: what honour comes from killing old men with grey beards and creaking joints?"

Mark flushed with shame. "I— . . . That isn't what I wanted." He looked at Sweetness, and its song filled him with longing. He ached to grasp it, and the high, noble, magical world it meant, so different from his village past. It seemed to him now, even surrounded by princesses and palaces, that in this one blade, clean honest steel that sang of battles gloriously fought, and nobly lost, was all that he had striven for those cold mornings in the Commons. Was everything his heart had longed to be.

He held the sword out, hilt first. Sir William took it from him, but beneath greying brows his eyes were grave. He smiled and shook his head, gripping Sweetness with the ease of a man well-used to weapons. "Good work, lad."

A queer, shaky gratitude filled Mark's breast. That smile and those three words from a man like Sir William almost made up for losing Sweetness.

Almost.

The Queen clapped her hands. "Oh good! I *do* like weddings more than funerals!"

The King nodded coolly at Mark. "Our third and youngest daughter is engaged, and stands to wed the man who—perhaps—has lifted up a curse that has upon our Kingdom lain from grandfather days. Whatever were our differences, tonight we should rejoice! Prepare the Halls for banqueting, and we will the pledge of our forefathers begin redeeming in coin of meat and wine."

Buzzing and glittering like a nest of wasps, the gentefolks swarmed from the Spring Room, scrambling to prepare for the unexpected ball.

"Princess Gail is famous for her . . . spirit," Lord Peridot murmured, suddenly at Mark's elbow. A delicate honeysuckle scent clung to his neatly trimmed beard. "I am sure that were my Patron, Richard of Duke of High Holt here, he would be the first to wish you well." Peridot's thin, elegant face crimped into a smile as he watched the Princess stride off behind Willan, her sister. "Indeed, coz, I admire your boldness. Your progress I shall savour like a work of art: it promises to enlighten while it entertains."

Mark's heart sank. He had always imagined they would hold a banquet in his honour, but now that he was here, he was getting the feeling that nothing that happened in the Palace was going to be much fun. Watching the courtiers mince and flounce and slither away, he couldn't help feeling that to them he seemed like the village fool, not the Hero he had always longed to be.

*Maybe the damn food will be good, anyway.*

"I'm a hero, not a whore," Shielder's Mark snapped at his unhappy valet, striding from his room without so much as choosing his epaulets or pinning up his hair. "I'll wear my worth on my heart and hands, not my back!" *And damned if I'll pull a village around my shoulders, or belt a town about my waist.*

And yet . . . And yet, when he reached the Dining Hall where supper was to be, and saw the glistening throng within, he found himself lingering at the threshold. He was dressed in a cinnamon-coloured cloak and tights, and a fawn-coloured tunic. All his clothes smelled of hibiscus flowers, and they'd put rose-water in his shaving bowl. *Rose ower dung-heap still smells like sweet shit,* he thought sourly.

He'd never given a tinker's damn about his clothes—until now. But watching the courtiers bow and chat, he realized there was an art to dressing that he didn't grasp, a way of standing to advantage, of moving well. There were no pockets in his tunic and he didn't know what to do with his hands.

Without military medals, he pulled out the talisman Queen Lerelil had given him and let it dangle on his breast. In this room of twittering birds, the ruby-eyed serpent seemed old, cold, and brutal.

*You're in ower your head, lad. You know less than nowt about this world, and you haven't been making friends since you got here.*

It went against all his instincts to fight on his enemy's terms. And so he

hesitated under an archway, studying the gentlemen of fashion for some clue as to what to do with his hands, his movements, his words.

To Mark's left, Anujel and Count Pietro met and bowed. The Count had changed into a round-bodied tunic of red-brown velvet with gleaming gold buttons. Ribbons and medals adorned his chest. His round, high-browed head sat atop a platter of lace. "My dearest Anujel: how fares your honoured father?"

"Well, well. I only hope to be as fit as he is now, when I at last permitted am to drop the load of Policy, and retire to that good garden that the ancients of my line maintain upon our small estate."

"A happy man is he who turns his back upon the fray," the Count said mechanically, as if he didn't believe his words and didn't particularly care whether anyone else did either. He was married to the middle Princess, Mark remembered. The clever one.

"Of your honoured father I must ask in turn: how fares he?" Anujel inquired.

"Splendid, I believe. Angling is his passion of the moment." Count Pietro's fingers toyed with the jewelled hilt of a dagger that hung at his hip. He glanced momentarily at Mark, then looked away. The tiniest hint of a smile crept to his lips. "So—the last and boldest Princess is to wed. The King must be a happy man."

Anujel's eyebrows rose. "I doubt his happiness outstrips your own in any way, or that of Gerald, Duke and consort to his eldest heir," the councillor remarked.

Count Pietro's cold eyes twinkled. "Of course, the Duke and I must joy to see our sovereign glad."

"Of course," Anujel said drily. He bowed before an imposing dowager. "Duchess."

Quickly Count Pietro bowed. "Here I take my leave of you, dear coz. Your health, and health unto your father." And then, "Duchess! Your servant. Could you condescend to take a turn about the room with me?"

The Duchess, a grim, horse-faced woman in her late fifties, nodded imperceptibly and continued her stately cruise with Count Pietro behind her like a round-bellied merchantman in tow to a battleship.

Mark stepped back from the threshold as Anujel walked by; they pretended not to notice one another.

*What the hell? The Count's smug as a pig in mud ower you wedding Gail, but why? And why should Duke Gerald be whistling too, as that stick Anujel seemed to say?*

*Gerald and Pietro are about to be your brothers-in-law. Don't seem the types to be happy about having a workman in the woodpile, and yet . . .*

Mark shook his head, puzzled.

His fingers fretted for a bit of string or a loop of wire to fiddle with. *Wish they had pockets in these damn tunics.* He settled for resting his right hand on the butt of the black dagger belted at his side. It was cool to the touch, real as stones, sure as winter: it made the scene before him seem to fade, as if he were standing outside in a cold street, with a wind blowing and rain starting to spatter on the cobbles, peering into the Dining Hall through the slats in a

shuttered window. All those cloaks and candles meant less to the real world than a breath of wind . . .

Mark shook his head again. "If you get drunk from standing, what's the use of beer?" he growled, rubbing his eyes. He held on to the dagger, as if it could shield him from the plots he felt weaving round him. *They're waiting for you, Mark, my lad. There'll be a bow bent behind every bush for you, you can bet on it. You're not a sportsman, you're not Somebody's son—you've poached on their hunt.*

*Ah! —And there's the fox you beat them to!*

Followed by Lissa, her serving-woman, the Princess Gail entered through another archway. Mark guessed her mother must have been working on her, for now she wore a fashionable knee-length hoop-skirt and high-necked black doublet on which gleamed a golden necklace. A circlet of golden wire held back her short brown hair. Two more drops of gold, like dragon's tears, hung from her ears; they shivered as she strode into the room.

*Brass-bold and sharp as steel*, Mark thought admiringly. *What lambs a ram could make, on such a ewe!*

At last, his one ally in the court had made it to the Dining Hall. Mark squared his shoulders, tossed his cinnamon-coloured cloak gallantly over his left shoulder, and strode into the room.

"Princess!" he said when he caught her, bowing low.

His cloak piled in cinnamon folds on the tile floor; he stepped on one corner of it and almost fell.

There must be a trick to this bloody bowing business.

*Steady on, steady on—probably she never noticed; try a little charm. Show her you've got the hang of the gentle speaking.* "May I have the honour of your company for a turn around the room?"

Gail's lips pressed together in annoyance. They were thin lips, he noticed: more used to commands than kisses. "Lissa," Gail said. "Inform the honoured gentleman that his conduct is improper."

The lady-in-waiting curtsied respectfully to Mark. "Sir, with all respect unto the customs of your birthing-place, in Swangard, prior to an introduction by a friend or member of the family, one may not importune an unknown lady."

"But she's to be my bride!"

(Soothingly.) "Of course she is! Which makes it all the more important you conduct yourselves impeccably until the jointure of your single states into a wedded sanctity. Any impropriety that touches on a Princess is sweet to Scandal's tongue. Would you subject your bride-to-be to calumny, or allow the Gossip's dirty fingers to leave stains upon her honour?"

"Oh great," Mark growled. "Fine. Whatever. Please, madam, would you do me the honour of introducing me to your mistress?" Tall, awkward, and swathed in his horrible cloak Mark felt like a cinnamon-coloured lighthouse. He flung the bloody thing savagely back over his shoulder.

Lissa's voice was soft, her manners pleasing. "Only a gentleman, one known to both the Princess and her kin, could make this introduction with propriety."

"Bull-pizzles!" Mark snapped,

looking directly at Gail. "We're to wed! You can't tell me we can't chat about the bloody likelihood of rain."

Eyes were fastening on them like leeches.

Lissa turned to the princess. "Claiming an acquaintance on the strength of pending marriage, Shielder's Mark believes no harm could come from brief and clearly innocent remarks when made in full view of the Court."

"Tell the gentleman he does neither of us credit by making a public jackass of himself," Gail hissed.

Lissa turned politely back to Mark. "The Princess has observed that while you—"

"Shite and swan's-piss! I'm going, all right? I'm going!" Holding his cloak out with one arm to keep it from piling on the floor Mark bowed, *a bloody cinnamon bat*, and fled to the appetizer tables at the back of the room. Here, standing before trestles laden with food and drink, he stared fixedly at bits of fruit bobbing in tureens of bright pink punch.

This was it: he had hit bottom. All his life he had looked forward to this day, his triumphant return, his hero's welcome. Instead, he was alone among strangers and enemies.

*So much for happily ever after.*

Wasn't it every boy's dream, to marry a princess with flashing eyes?

He'd been so sure Gail wanted him to ask for her hand. *Dammit, she made me do it!* But now she was acting like any other high-born lady, despising his manners, his birth, his breeding. The feast he had come to so hungry, after so many years of lonely toil, had turned to ashes in his mouth.

"Delicious, isn't it?"

The speaker was perhaps five years older than Mark: a young man still. His clothes were soft, comfortable, and expensive-looking. His small mouth was all but hidden by a magnificent beard, carefully trimmed, of warm brown hair soft and silky as ermine. He frowned at a pair of silver epaulets on his forest green tunic, as if they were a brace of toads he'd found squatting unexpectedly on his round shoulders. His hands were soft and pale; on his little finger he wore a silver ring set with an emerald. Instead of a dagger, he carried at his hip an odd copper cylinder, narrower at the top than at the bottom.

Most remarkably, he wore a strange contraption on his nose: a bridge and two circles of wire, holding disks of glass through which peered his pale grey eyes. His arched eyebrows gave him an eternal look of faint surprise.

He seemed friendly. "I prefer the trout, myself. Some like the almond-spears: too sweet before a meal, I think." As he spoke he turned a flake of trout deftly onto a small cracker. A round pink-rimmed hole appeared in his silky beard; he popped the cracker in.

Mark wondered how long it would take him on handyman's wages to buy just one of those crackers, topped with flaked trout. He felt his hackles rising.

The courtier finished his cracker, looking like a small brown owl snapping down a mouse. "Magnificent! Atrexides' Avayar's Valerian's Archibald's Valerian," he said with a bow. "*Your* name, of course, is known

to all. May I have the honour to inquire on how your honoured father fares?"

"Dead," Mark snapped.

Valerian blinked. "Er. Um. Allow me to express my—"

"I don't *know* he's dead: I only hope so. Like as not he just abandoned us."

Valerian took the contraption from his face, and polished the glass disks with his satin tunic-hem. "The only trial of spectacles: they get so easily smirched." He frowned, held them to the light, settled them back on his nose. Then he peered at Mark as if trying to work out a difficult sum. "At Court the Truth, like vinegar, is a better garnish than a beverage," he remarked, biting into a second cracker. Bits of flaked trout clung to his beard. "For instance, when I inquire about your honoured father, you say 'As well as we could hope'. You shake your head in sorrow, to give me time to sympathize, without encouraging a further question. Then in turn you question me about my honoured father; listen; nod; and echo my trivialities."

Mark smiled in spite of himself. "Tell me, sir: how is your honoured father?"

Valerian swallowed. "Cross as a crab and sick of the sight of me," he said frankly. "Would you stalk one angry leftward stride? I'd like to try the punch."

Deftly Valerian ladled pinkness into a crystal cup. He nodded to Mark, blinked, and smiled. "Advice unsought I know is rarely welcome. Yet allow me one cautionary word. Every person in this room is drawn to you like filings

to a magnet. Greatness is the breeding-ground of flattery, and intrigue, and all the other plagues that power can bestow. Well it were for you to know that these courtiers are not your friends: they mean to use you, if they can."

"Except *you* of course! *You* want to help me from the goodness of your heart, right?"

Valerian laughed. "Of course not. Actually, I do mean well, but I also have a use for you. A drink?" he asked, holding up a ladleful of punch. Mark nodded; Valerian poured. His hand trembled, and behind his spectacles his pale grey eyes blinked more rapidly. "But unlike these others, I don't want your power. I will aid you any way I can; if my service seems of use, then all I ask is leave to attend you when at last you settle on your new estate, wherever that may be."

"Estate?"

"Of course. Was that not your master-stroke? A princess cannot wed a commoner; in asking for his daughter's hand, you force the King to make you son and noble too. A lesser man would not have played his card so well." Valerian goggled anxiously at Mark. "That *was* what you were thinking, was it not?"

"Um, —of course."

Valerian seemed relieved. *Nervous ower summat else, though: he's blinking like a bat in sunshine.* "You were telling me how you meant to use me," Mark prompted.

"Er, right. Who's near to you is near to Gail—and who's near to Gail is near to—Lissa," Valerian confessed. He said her name as if it were a butterfly he meant to pick up with his breath.

Mark chuckled. "And you're the ram who's out to straddle her." He glanced over at Gail's lady-in-waiting. Blond, willowy, discreet: come to think of it, Lissa would make a better princess than the Princess did.

"St-st-st-straddle!" Valerian squeaked. Above his beard his cheeks flushed punch-pink with agonies of embarrassment. "Allow me to assure you, sir, that my intentions to that fairest of all women—that shaft of sunshine! She upon whose brow discretion vies with wisdom! She who—"

Mark waved his hands, smirking. "No straddling, then. But you want to come w' me, to, er, warm yourself in that shapely shaft o' sunshine, right?"

Valerian puffed his feathers; blinked; shifted from claw to claw. "Er . . . more or less."

Mark guffawed. "At last. Someone in this bloody place I understand."

Valerian shrugged. "I am small, and have no power, so I am the first to greet you. Some have more to lose, and thusly more to fear. When they have drunk a tumblerful of courage, they will find you."

"Fear? Why should any man fear me?"

Valerian frowned. "You underestimate yourself. Why, every cheek you look upon turns white beneath its powder. Ladies blanch beneath your gaze, and fair hearts speed—but not for love."

"But why?"

"Why!" Val drained his glass and filled it up again. "You broke the spell that lay upon the Ghostwood! Where you succeeded, Stargad and Philip and Aron Duke of Swans had failed. You came before the King in boots begrimed

with Red Keep dust. From your sheath you drew a weapon out of legend, claimed the greatest prize in Astin's realm, and dared him break his direst oath!" Valerian waved a hand out at the room of nobles. "You think this happens every day? Can you not see that you are terrible?"

"Oh." Sheepishly, Mark shrugged. "I guess I forgot."

"Hmmp! . . . Then too, there is the matter of the crown." Thoughtfully Val stroked his soft brown beard. "One of Astin's daughters will be Queen. That daughter's husband will be consort, second greatest power in the land. Duke Gerald and Pietro, Count of Maltis, worked for years to win their places. We know them, and they know us. But you! We know nothing of you."

"That reminds me—" and Mark told Valerian about what Anujel and Count Pietro had said.

Valerian bobbed owlwise, like a schoolmaster. "The Count and Duke believe the King will never make you consort, nor let your blood besmirch the royal line. Gail seemed once a likely choice for Queen: there is steel in her. Gerald and Pietro and the other dukes fought like dogs for years to keep great Richard, Duke of High Holt, from forcing Gail's engagement to himself. It seemed that they had lost when Anujel came in on Richard's side. But Lo! in Shielder's Mark a hope unlooked-for! They think the King will not allow a workman's child to sit astride the throne. The Duke and Count must now believe they have the contest to themselves."

"So the buggers have no reason to

fear me," Mark said, anger edging his voice. He caught a glimpse of Pietro across the room, his round head riding on its plate of lace, talking to a Bishop.

He found Valerian looking at him. "To underestimate a man like you is not the kind of error those men make," Valerian said, frowning. "Nor will Duke Richard. The powerful will think: a man so great as he must be, who broke the Ghostwood from its ancient spell, once having married Astin's daughter may find it no great matter to reach out and pluck the Crown as well. — Greatness will not sleep tonight, my friend, but pace its floor with furrowed brow, and gaze upon the moon, and curse at fate for bringing peril to the palace, shaped as Shielder's Mark. Can you imagine Astin has thought of aught since you arrived, but how to keep his kingdom from your clutches, and your knife out of his back?"

"But I didn't mean . . . I didn't know—"

Valerian grinned. "Poor Mark," he drawled. "My eyes drop millstones for you, thrust abruptly into greatness, power, wealth and wife."

*Eh?*

Mark grappled with the idea of himself as one of the great, wrestling for power and influence.

Power.

All he'd ever wanted was to break the curse and earn a safe place for himself and his family. But how safe were grey stones and soldiers in livery if he still had enemies?

But if he used his position well, took advantage of the power it offered him, he and his could be safer still.

He looked thoughtfully at

Valerian. "Is that why the King filched Sweetness? He didn't want its name added to my own?"

Valerian sipped his punch. "A voice would carry further, that sang to Sweetness' song. And his Majesty knew something must be salvaged for his vassal, Richard."

"Who is this Duke Richard? Everyone seems to be watching over shoulders for him."

Valerian nibbled a piece of crumbly Rhenant cheese. "Duke of High Holt, Richard is, and greatest noble in the land. He has many friends at Court. His strings are fine as cobweb: hard to see, but sticky, running everywhere. He's like to be your closest, kindest, deadliest enemy." Mark blanched. "No great act is without its consequences, good and evil," Valerian said quietly. "If you will set free a shadow chained a thousand years, there will be changes in the land, and in your life, and nothing says those changes will be good. Or had you never thought of that?"

"You—you make it sound very complicated," Mark said.

"Power is rarely simple," Valerian replied. "At least, not around here."

As Mark digested this unpleasant thought a bell rang to announce dinner, and they were seated.

*How do the lasses sit while wearing those hoop-skirts?* Mark wondered, mystified. But manage it they did, and flawlessly.

The King and Queen sat at the head table, along with their daughters, Duke Gerald, Count Pietro, and the horse-faced woman Mark had seen earlier, whom Val identified as the Duchess of Fenwold. "Heavier than lead and



tougher than mutton," he whispered.

The rest of the company was arranged six to a table. Mark and Valerian were to dine with the Countess Malahat; Talyard Cirton, the Bishop; a sharp-featured young woman named Janseni ("Brilliant musician!"); and Lord Peridot, dressed in a peach doublet with blueberry lace and hose. "He looks like dessert," Mark muttered as they sat down.

Val stifled a smirk.

If nothing else about Mark's reception had been what he had hoped, the dinner at least lived up to expectation. Seven magnificent courses, punctuated with excellent wines and ices; truly a feast worthy of a hero.

And the hero needed it. Still, after the turtle soup and the wildflower salad, the stuffed quail and the braised peacock in mustard sauce, Mark began to slow down, trying to savour the glorious food.

*You might eat like this the rest of your life, you lucky bastard!*

*Never go hungry again. Never wake up w' belly snarling at darkness, knowing there isn't a mite for breakfast. Never hammer your face into a smile and shake your head at someone's charity while your legs feel like willow-wands from hunger. Never forage for sloes and fiddleheads to throw in the pot because you have neither bread nor grain.* At the thought, a looseness spread from his belly to his back, as if his stomach had been clenched around hunger all his life and only now relaxed its grip.

He spied on his tablemates. They had smooth skin and soft hands that had never known a plow or scythe or hammer. They did not know how spe-

cial, how *holy* a wonder this dinner was that their servants set before them, platter after plate.

Lord Peridot controlled the conversation at their table, Mark soon saw, always ready with a well-placed question to start someone talking, or a well-placed thrust to finish them off. As the butlers served the fifth course, pheasant braised in garlic butter on a bed of watercress, Peridot was asking Janseni her opinion of Sir Avedut, composer to the court and songmaster in the employ of Councillor Anujel.

"His work is . . . well-proportioned," she said cautiously. "It always gives the ear what it expects, which satisfies an audience."

"But can, perhaps, not *move* them?"

"Precisely my thought too, mi'lord," Janseni said with some relief. The musician leaned forward with increasing passion. "Is it the place of art to merely give the people what they want? Or should we teach them to want more, expect more, *hear* more! Art, real art, something more than balance and proportion must possess. It must have fire, and passion. Art must have a vision, a challenge and a lesson to bring before its audience."

"I like a challenge too—but not at dinner!" Lord Peridot remarked. The Countess Malahat smiled, half *for* him, half *at* her.

"Not a challenge then—I mis-spoke myself. Say rather, I would hope my music held a hand out to its audience, and led them to a place where they had never been before."

Valerian nodded. "Or seen once long ago; or dreamed; but thought they

had forgotten."

"Exactly," Janseni said. "Just so." She coloured, and abased her eyes beneath Peridot's amused smile. "Of course I cannot promise that the piece your Lordship asked from me will reach these lofty goals; perhaps at least it will amuse."

"Oh, it will at least amuse, dear girl. Have no fear of *that*." And though Peridot's smile seemed kindly, Janseni blanched. After that she spoke seldom and reluctantly.

All dinner long, Mark noticed, Janseni was constantly watched by a young man two tables away, whose wan face and ardent gaze told everyone in the hall how desperately he loved her.

The Countess Malahat was what Cooper's Bill called a Rain-in-April Woman: one who could stir even the deadiest root. *Must use wire in the bosom of her gown to push 'em up*, Mark thought. *You want to knock 'em with your knuckles to see if they're ripe*.

He chatted a little with her, and then a little more, and cupped his hands around the sparkle in her eyes. There was a moment, as their glances met and tangled over the remains of the cold snipe, when he found himself thinking wistfully that if only he had known about the amiable Countess, he might not have been in such a hurry to dicker for Astin's strong-willed daughter.

The Bishop was going on at length about angling, a passion of his, and Mark tried to pay attention. Much better to think about fish, than to let his mind wander in the dangerous direction of the Countess Malahat's bewitching green eyes.

Mark caught the Bishop looking

at him, old eyes cold and bright with lazy amusement. Mark blushed and looked at his hands, twisted together on the tabletop, his muscled fingers monstrous by the delicate dessert spoons.

"I lust for trout," the Bishop remarked. "The cunning lures, the careful seduction of a teasing fly or wriggling spoon, the strike's fierce consumption!"

Like soft fingers Mark felt the Countess' eyes running over his back, his neck, his arms.

"—And the desperate, hungry battle between the angler and his prey . . . Ah," the Bishop sighed, eyes sparkling like frost. "Nothing like it."

"Ha! The Queen is tristeful," Val said, cutting the Bishop off.

All eyes darted to the head table. The Queen *was* frowning at a butler, but just as Mark looked up, Gail happened to be looking at *him*. Her brown eyes were fierce and alarmed.

Her look ran through him like a crossbow bolt; his nerveless fingers went numb upon the table.

Valerian blinked blandly at him. "Remember something?"

Sharply Mark drew in a breath, tried to smile, shook his head.

*Steady on, steady on. You and Princess Gail were meant for one another, lad.* He remembered that afternoon, the feeling just before he asked for her, taking his life into his hands like a jug of ale he meant to drain at a gulp. He sat, stricken to the heart that he could even have thought of turning his back on her.

*She won't be easy, I guess: but to turn away from her would be base trea-*

son, breaking faith wi' all that's fierce and proud and free in both of you.

A silence dragged out for quite some time before he realized everyone was waiting for him to speak. "Beg pardon?" he gasped.

"I asked you your opinion on the Ghostwood's game," the Bishop asked, "and if there would be hunting there, now that the spell is ended."

"Uh—well. Squirrels, of course. Good hunting if you like squirrel pie." The Bishop's nose wrinkled. *You're babbling, lad.* "Some nice trout in the Boundary though."

"A fine little river," the Bishop reflected. "Fine trout I had there, three years ago, and carp, too, if you can believe it. But as for game, now, I should like to try the wood itself. Picture it! To hunt a glade no man has swept with hounds before!"

Countess Malahat shuddered provocatively; Mark watched the shiver travel from her closed eyes down past her ripe mouth, her soft throat, her silky shoulders, and, some long time later, down into the folds of her plum-coloured gown. When he looked up he found her watching him, and smiling. "Would you not think it dangerous, to seek your sport in a—*forbidden place?*"

The Bishop chuckled. "Not after what our friend has done. We sportsmen all owe him a debt, for making good another great preserve. The spell is broken, the wood is safe."

"Think you so?" Janseni said softly. "I think so long a song of mourning must an echo leave."

Mark nodded. He did not think that sunlight soon would gladden the Ghostwood's eaves. Too much lay bur-

ied under dry needles there. Too many years lost. Too many lives.

He shuddered. *By God, you let some loneliness out when you broke that spell, Shielder's Mark, and it's followed you home. No great deed without its consequences, good and bad,* he thought, looking at Valerian. For the first time doubt blew into his heart like a puff of wet spring wind, damp and cold and cloudy. Could he have been wrong to break the spell? *'A mad quest to wake the dark'—that's what Stargad said.* Under the table Mark touched the cold black handle of the iron dagger. *'Stay the dagger must, or the heart will bleed.'*

The Bishop chuckled. "It is a woman's place to shiver at a name, a past, or anything which local legend has invested with an awe and sense of dread." He smiled at the Countess, reaching for his wineglass. "This curse was laid in grandfather days: the time of Aron, Duke of Swans, has long since passed. From out of superstition's dusk to daylight have we come since then. How runs the ancient adage? — 'Faith is a candle, where Reason is the sun.'"

"I have heard it," the Countess said, smiling and widening her eyes, "But I never thought a Bishop said it, Father!"

The Bishop smiled again and swallowed his wine. "That I do not know."

"Ask Valerian," Lord Peridot suggested. "He knows everything."

Valerian frowned warily. "Why tease me, cousin? Never have I made that claim, nor never will. My moiety of wisdom exceeds not by one drop the portion held by any at this table."

Peridot grinned. "Of course! You

surpass us all in all, including modesty. . . . And you *do* know whom the Bishop quotes, I wager."

"Well, yes," Valerian admitted. "It was Aredwyth the Sage, a theologian of Duke Aron's court."

Lord Peridot raised his hands to the rest of the table. "You see? I told you he knows everything."

"Not a fraction of a fraction of it," Valerian protested. "Theology, by chance, is one of my amusements, and Aredwyth a writer not easily ignored."

"He can't be that important if the Bishop didn't know him," Mark pointed out.

There was a long moment of silence around the table as everyone but Mark looked away from Bishop Cirdon, who was studying something at the bottom of his wine glass with great care.

*Oops.*

*Shite.*

As Mark began to blush, Valerian dove into the silence. "The passage—though obscure—is interesting because nobody remembers the second half. In full, the famous line of Aredwyth should read:

'Faith is a candle where reason is the sun;

No-one needs a candle—until darkness falls.'

"You see, the meaning of the adage changes quite a lot in the context of the whole."

"Yes," said the Bishop at last, turning to signal a steward for more wine. "I see that."

As the remains of the seventh course were being cleared away and a last round of lemon ices served, the

King stood to make a speech. It was about the dawning of a new age, and seemed to take one. The lemon ice was consumed, the bowls removed and replaced with salvers of rosewater. Heads were nodding by the time the King announced that before the wedding Mark was to be knighted and given charge of Borders, the keep that stood across the river from the Ghostwood. He would be made a Duke, and the dark wood itself would be his preserve, including the Red Keep, should he choose to restore it, although the King's men would first sweep through and make sure anything lost there was restored to its proper owners.

Mark leaned over to Valerian. "That means they're going to loot it before they turn it over, right?"

Val nodded.

The King then congratulated Mark upon his title, his land, his heroism, and his choice, if he did say so himself, in brides-to-be. Everyone sipped from their glasses, and there was a scattered round of polite applause.

Lord Peridot clapped the loudest. Pushing back his chair he stood and bowed. "Your Majesty! Allow me to present a present to the Crown." The King nodded; Janseni tensed. "In honour of your daughter and your new-found son-in-law-to-be, may I present the first recital of a song commissioned from Janseni, the wonderful young woman whose tunes propose to teach us all a lesson!" Turning, he signalled to a far archway.

The sound of flutes wound into the room, two of them, laughing and quarrelling. Finally, a kind of harmony emerged from their strife; the same

notes that had struggled the moment before were now part of a beautiful melody, merry and haunting at once, like children seen playing from a distance.

It was strange music. At first Mark thought it odd for oddness' sake, and ugly at that: typical of the Court. But when the melody popped out, he realized that it had really been a tune he'd known all his life, sung by the children in his village. Only here it was richer and more complex.

He glanced over at Valerian, who smiled and shook his head in wonder.

Two flutists entered and stood on either side of the archway leading into the hall. Marching in behind them, dressed in sombre robes and grave expressions, came three midgets. They waddled, trying their best to keep in step. As the flutes began their melody for a second time, the dwarfs began to sing. Or rather, to croak.

Midgets Two and Three looked frankly scared to be parading before so glittering a company; their voices faltered. Their leader kept grimly at his task, but he was hopelessly tone-deaf, and each note was agonizingly off.

A nervous titter started from the back of the Hall. The lead singer frowned, but his juniors, clearly trained as clowns, clutched for that laughter like drowning men. They began to caper, bellowing their parts and making droll faces.

The laughter grew, and their antics with it, until soon the flutes were lost, and all that was left of the song was the first midget's part, yelled above the crowd.

The clowns clambered up on a

table now, dancing together. The aristocrats of Astin's court laughed until tears streamed down their cheeks. *Twice as funny because the bastards were embarrassed first*, Mark thought, revolted.

Janseni was deathly pale. "Why?" she whispered, unable to meet Lord Peridot's lazy eyes.

"Come come, girl. Your music is a hit! See the merriment it brings before the Court."

Countess Malahat laughed, bright as sun on ice. "I must admit that something in this music took my hand, and led me where I'd never been before."

Two tables over, Janseni's lover flung back his chair with a crash. The flutes faltered and the crowd fell silent as he strode over to their table. "Lord Peridot?"

Peridot glanced up at him. "Deron, is it not? Count Berkeley's son. The passing of your father was a wound this kingdom will not easily survive."

Deron's handsome young face was white with rage. "Sir, you are no gentleman."

Peridot shrugged. "A matter of opinion, sir. You are free to yours."

"He's giving you an out," Janseni said in a low voice. "Take it, Deron."

Deron stood a moment longer, jaw working. "I do not think I can," he said at last. And then he slapped Lord Peridot so hard it snapped his head around.

Peridot rubbed his cheek thoughtfully with his right hand, displaying his missing finger. His voice was light, but he gazed at Deron with serpent's eyes. "Is it now in fashion, striking cripples? Or is it only old Count Berkeley's son who is so brave? Well well, 'tis clear I

am no man of arms. A sword I will be forced to borrow. Your Majesty," he called, turning to the throne. "I hate to bother you, but this young man has challenged me, cripple though I am. I must petition for Sir William's loan."

Deron swallowed, but said nothing.

"Sir William!" Gail cried. "Father! Letting Lord Peachblossom mock my wedding is one thing, but giving him the satisfaction of murdering a young

man in the bargain is too much!"

"Be quiet!" Astin roared. "This squire before us all did willfully challenge Lord Peridot while knowing him to be unfit for combat. It was a churlish act, and if Duke Richard's trusted man begs of us the service of our champion, he shall have it!"

Janseni's head sunk into her hands. "There, Deron, what did I tell you?" she said listlessly. "With one night's work he's killed us both." ❖



## OUR CONTRIBUTORS

### FICTION

Robert Baillie (*Silent Night*) is a writer studying at York University.

Catherine Girczyc (*The Pleiades Cat*) is an Edmonton writer and reviewer who writes plays, poetry, and prose. She loves her dog. Cats have always made her nervous.

Preston Hapon (*The Stigmata of Ann-Marie Dassault*) teaches in Edmonton, but lives in the country with a very patient English teacher named Sharon.

Jason Kapalka (*Frosty*) is one of the editors of *Dead Tree Product*, published in Edmonton.

J.R. Martel (*Saints*) is a Clarion graduate living in Saskatoon.

Cheryl Merkel (*Last Run*) is studying air traffic control in Lethbridge. Two previous stories based in the same world as "Last Run" have appeared in *ON SPEC*.

Linda Smith (*Changeling*) works in Grande Prairie, Alberta, as a children's librarian. Two of her stories have been broadcast on *Alberta Anthology*.

### NOVEL EXCERPT

Sean Stewart (*Swangard Palace*) lives in Vancouver with his wife and young daughter. *Nobody's Son* is his second published novel. His first novel, *Passion Play*, released earlier this year, has garnered excellent reviews.

## NONFICTION

*Ask Mr. Science* — Al Betz is the social secretary for Mr. Science, who would be pleased to address your questions on matters scientific. Write to him c/o ON SPEC.

## ARTISTS

**COVER ART** — Marc Holmes of Calgary, Alberta, is attending college, finishing his degree in Graphic Arts, and trying to survive a ten-month-old son.

Rob Alexander (*Saints*) of Seattle recently completed a cover for *Deathscape* from Berkely, as well as illustrations for *Amazing Stories*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, and Pulphouse Publishing.

Andrea Baeza (*Frosty*) is an Edmonton artist looking for a day job. She is currently working on a one-page comic called "Randy's Biceps" for *Slur* magazine.

Linda Dunn (*The Pleiades Cat*) of Edmonton is a graduate of Alberta College of Art, majoring in Textile Art. She makes her living as a graphic artist, part-part-part-time illustrator, jewelry designer, and furniture re-creator.

Peter Francis (*The Stigmata of Ann-Marie Dassault*) of Halifax was a quarterly winner in the 1991 L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators for the Future contest. Peter graduated with a BFA

from NSCAD in 1983.

Steve Goetze (*Swangard Palace*) is an Ontario animator and illustrator currently working as an assistant Properties Head for Theatre Sheridan of Oakville, Ontario, where he will design sets and props for their production of *Twelfth Night*.

Tim Hammell (*The Inner Mind*) was awarded second place in the photo retouching category for *Airbrush Action* magazine's airbrush competition.

Mike Jackson (*Silent Night*) is a megalomaniac who plans to achieve world domination through messages hidden in science fiction artwork. So far, *Horizons SF*, *Challenge* magazine, *ON SPEC*, and various games from GDW and FASA have fallen prey to his mad schemes. We can only hope he'll be stopped before it's too late.

Nancy Niles (*Changeling*) of Calgary has done illustrations and a cover (Humour issue) for *ON SPEC*. Her work can also be found in fanzines, calendars, SF & F artshows, craft designs and illuminated scrolls.

Domenic Pirone (*Last Run*) of Toronto feels art is a need to communicate, and a way to speak to people using images and symbols to convey an idea or an emotional response. Besides communicating with his audience, he would like to make a living from his art. ¶¶

# CONS — CANADIAN CONVENTION CALENDAR

When contacting conventions for more information, include a Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope for their reply. Abbreviation code: GoH = Guest of Honour, TM = Toastmaster.

1993

• **MAR 5-7 – WOLFCON VI**

Old Orchard Inn, Wolfville. GoH: Gordon Dickson. Info: Box 796, Wolfville NS, B0P 1X0.

• **MAR 12-14 – S.T. CON 93**

Ramada Hotel, Calgary. GoHs: Margaret Wander Bonanno, Tanya Huff, Ronald Moore, Michelle Sagara. Memb: \$25 now, \$30 at the door. Info: 44 Scenic Road NW, Calgary AB, T3L 1B9.

• **MAY 14-16 – CONCON 93**

Delta Ottawa, Ottawa. GoHs: Karen Wehrstein, Shirley Meier, Robert Sawyer. FanGoH: Bink. Memb: \$20 to Dec 31 1992. Info: Box 105, 220 Woodridge Cres, Nepean ON, K2B 8G1.

• **MAY 21-23 – KEYCON 10**

Marlborough Inn, Winnipeg. GoHs: Roger Zelazny, Fred Saberhagen. Art GoH: Bob Eglington. Memb: \$30 to Apr 30 1993, \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 3178, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4E6.

• **MAY 28-30 – V-CON 20**

Totem Residence, UBC, Vancouver. GoH: Charles de Lint, ArtGoH: Rob Alexander, TM: Michael Coney. Memb: \$30 to Apr 30 1993, \$35 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 48478, Bentall Centre, Vancouver BC, V7X 1A2.

• **JUNE 4-6 – AD ASTRA 13**

Sheraton East, Toronto. GoHs: Anne McCaffrey, Dave Duncan. ArtGoH: Robin Wood. Memb: \$26 to May 15 1993, \$32 at

the door. Info: P.O. Box 7276, Station A, Toronto ON, M5W 1X9.

• **JULY 16-18 – CONVERSION X**

Marlborough Inn, Calgary. GoHs: L. Sprague and Catherine de Camp, others TBA. Memb: \$30 to Jan 31 1993, \$35 to June 30 1993, \$40 at the door. Info: P.O. Box 1088, Station M, Calgary AB, T2P 2K9.

• **JULY 17-19 – RHINOCON 3**

Radisson London Centre, London. Info: Box 1451, Stn B, London ON, N6A 5M2.

• **OCT 15-17 – I-CON 3** (*postponed from 1992, all 1992 memberships will be honoured*)

Harbour Towers Hotel, Victoria. GoH: Dave Duncan, ArtGoH: Julia Laquement, ScienceGoH: Dr. J.G. Cramer, FanGoH: Betty Bigelow. Memb: \$25. Info: P.O. Box 30004, #104 - 3995 Quadra St., Victoria BC, V8X 5E1.

1994

**SEPT 1-5 – CONADIAN (Worldcon)**

Winnipeg Convention Centre, Winnipeg. GoH: Anne McCaffrey, Art GoH: George Barr, TM: Barry Longyear, FanGoH: Robert Runté. Memb: \$85 to Dec 31 1992. Info: PO Box 2430, Winnipeg MB, R3C 4A7.

*ON SPEC would like to print your Canadian convention and author readings information. Send us details of your event at least 5 months in advance (to Box 4727, Edmonton AB, T6E 5G6), and we'll run it free of charge.*

*The bulk of the information in this column is courtesy of ConTRACT, the Canadian convention newsletter, available from 321 Portage Ave, Winnipeg MB, R3B 2B9 (subscriptions \$7 / 6 issues). Send your convention info directly to them, as well.*



## GENERAL INFORMATION

*ON SPEC* is seeking original science fiction, fantasy, horror, ghost or fairy stories, magic realism, etc. Strong preference is given to submissions by Canadians. Send your short stories (max. 6000 words), short short stories (under 1000 words) or poetry (max. 100 lines) to the *ON SPEC* address below.

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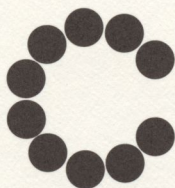
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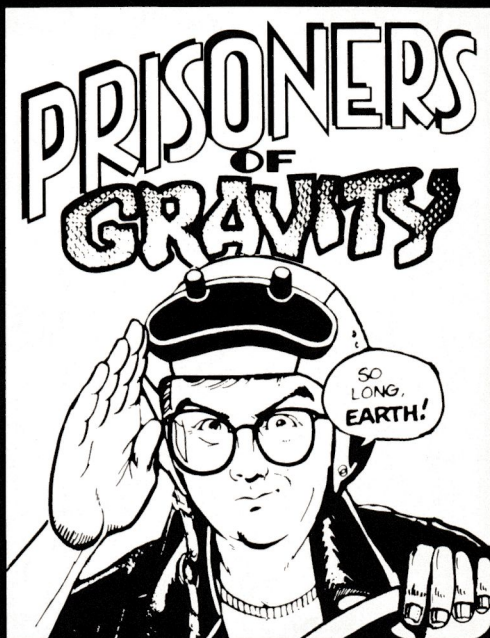
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