

Eldritch Science



May 2025

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Editorial

Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm a man of wealth and taste...

All joking aside, this is the first issue in which I've taken over for George Phillis. I want to thank you all (especially George) for your patience as this issue was unacceptably delayed. Future issues will adhere to the publication schedule outlined by George in the January issue.

I have been impressed by the quality of writing generated by the members of TNFFF since joining three years ago. I knew we had some top-caliber writers in this group. I've known some of you (Jefferson Swycaffer and Wesley Kawato in particular) for many years, well before I joined this organization. Perhaps at some point I will submit my own work for publication (but not to *Eldritch Science*; I won't be so crass).

In this issue we have Andrew Akers' post-apocalyptic nautical adventure *Dawn's Edge*, which is equal parts Jules Verne and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in its approach to what is often a well-worn trope these days. Also this month is Eliot Jordan's *Song of the Teniq*, for those culinary-minded individuals who have (shall we say) exotic tastes. *Aurora's Story* by Caleb Kinsley reminds us that both our friends and our enemies are often not who we think they are, and that even in the darkness there is hope if only you take the right step. *The Out Of This World Life Of Jimmy Comet* is a tale about the miracle of found family and connection that provides a cheerful coda to this issue.

A letter to the editor (and my response) finishes this issue. Please keep in mind that any opinions expressed in here are entirely my own and are not representative of TNFFF as an organization.

Until our next issue, happy reading! And let's see what else you've got!

Eldritch Science

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Dawn's Edge

By Andrew Akers

Selected passages from the journal of
Rufus Teller, chronicler of *The Comet's Wake*

Day 138: We set sail with the morning tide. Months have passed since my departure—my *exile*—from Permadawn, and dozens of islands in the archipelago have rejected us since.

Helius, unfortunately, was no different. It was folly to believe otherwise. Though the frontier colony was no stranger to sundry pilgrims or motley crews, it was averse to something else we carried, and that fact doomed us.

I'll let the broadcast transcript from Oliver's morning show dish out the details.

Oliver: *"Good morning, Comets Wake! Ya know, I was thinking... that last island was really something. You gotta hand it to their governor: she wasn't kidding when she said she hated bread. Had we known she was allergic, we would have kept Jimmi and Jayme onboard—sorry, Jimmi, we like ya, but we would have liked staying on solid ground more. Jayme, on the other hand, well... at least you meant well! I don't think our little dwarf's mistake justified the fine folks of Helius firing a cannon at us, but eh, whatever."*

There's more, of course, but that's the pertinent bit.

Captain Ithakus claims we are only a few weeks from the next island, but Captain Hopson disagrees. The enigma of the two captains still baffles me, but I'm still afraid to ask about it. Perhaps I'll ask Filonias at some point. If anyone has an answer, it'll be the good-natured first mate.

I could use the excuse; I always look forward to our conversations.

Day 145: A week has passed, and Captain Ithakus has been proven right. Unfortunately, this

island is as hopeless as the others—too small, a detail Hopson quickly pointed out.

I finally spoke to Filonias about the situation between the two captains, and he gave some much-appreciated context. Captain Ithakus was the original captain of *The Comet's Wake*, but he gave command to Hopson when they acquired a second ship: *The Queen's Mercy*. Ithakus moved to the new ship, but it was destroyed during a freak storm. He returned to *The Comet's Wake* hoping to return to his old position, but his former first mate refused. The crew liked and respected both leaders, so a mutiny in either direction was out of the question.

The result, unbelievably, is a ship with two captains.

I haven't described these two beasts yet, perpetually battling like the squid and the whale in the stories of the Old World. Neither has shared in many exchanges with me, but that's not uncommon given the nature of our trip and the lowliness of my station. In their eyes, I am still an outsider...and a cursed creature.

Captain Ithakus is a serious man, sharpened by the loss of *The Queen's Mercy*. He's tall, weathered, and a seasoned sailor. His hair is sea salt and pepper, kept short and well-trimmed. Ithakus speaks in short, clipped sentences, as though extra words or formalities would cost him time he doesn't have. He also carries an ornate scimitar from a loop on his belt, a treasured reminder, perhaps, of the days before he became a ferryman. The old captain has a wife and at least one child, though I suspect all parties are more content with his time at sea.

Captain Hopson, on the other hand, replaces Ithakus' sharp edges with rough ones of his own. The younger captain is as sea-worn as the older man but has yet to develop the same grumpiness. Hopson is darker, shorter, and stockier. He wears his obsidian hair in a colorfully beaded ponytail. His long facial hair is

treated the same way, granting the man an air of foreign mystique. I've noticed a faint accent in Hopson's speech as well. If I had to guess, I'd suspect he is Jadhian, originating from somewhere along the Fissure with the Sundered Lands.

Of course, I can't speak of the captains without mentioning their shared first mate. Filonias is the reason I'm on this ship. He's also why things remain stable despite the contradictory orders of the rival captains. The lithe, ivory-haired man knows the name of every person on the ship and has engaged with all of them at least once. He is kind, intelligent, and well-suited for his role as an intermediary.

I have yet to meet a soul aboard who does not respect the man.

Anyway, *The Comet's Wake* sails on. I pray we discover our new home soon; the darkness on the horizon draws ever nearer and the air ever chillier. There is much to dread in the stretching darkness of our world, and we'd be better off stopping before reaching the edge of dawn.

2100: One more item to add. A fight broke out between the passengers today. On one side was the mysterious ranger, Agaston of Applegate. On the other, of course, was Jayme. Doctor Tombs is fixing the clumsy dwarf's nose as I write this.

"Jayme was trying to show off that musket-axe of his," Jimmi told me afterward. "He broke the ranger's flask in the process."

I was not there for this event, but I doubt the transgression warranted the beating. I know Jayme isn't malicious in his incompetence, but he needs to be incompetent elsewhere. Few people are more intimidating than the ranger whose missing eye weeps beneath its patch.

Day 146: Yesterday, I described the dual captains and their shared first mate. Today, I'll describe the other major players on this ship of ours.

We have roughly thirty crew, though the exact

number fluctuates between islands. Most have sailed with one captain or the other for years, and they remain close despite the disagreements between the captains. Overall, though, they remain insulated from the passengers. Phillipe, Astrid, and Midas are the only three worth mentioning for now, as they are each a shift boss.

The passengers draw my interest instead in this regard. *The Comet's Wake* has 215 voyagers who are as varied in background as they are in disposition. I've gotten to know several during our months on the float and likely commented on all of them in my earlier entries.

First, of course, is Jimmi Whitebread. He is the most popular passenger on board, so much so that even the elusive crew flock to him during their downtime. Jimmi is a baker, and his goods are more coveted than Oliver's radio show. More impressive than his goodies, however, are their after-effects. Each piece is a toss-up, leaving the eater either suffering or satiated. Sometimes, they may get hives, or gas, or flocked by gnats. At other times, they may gain intelligence, improve their mood, or learn to whittle. I've seen hundreds of side effects and never tire of it.

Neither do the others.

Next is Oliver. I've spoken at length about the half-demon. Passages of his daily radio shows appear in these pages often. He follows the news, drama, gossip, and overall pulse of the ship and broadcasts the juiciest bits for the rest of us. Corrupted blood may flow through his veins, but he is, far and away, my favorite person on this ship. We are both well acquainted with the hatred of the cursed races, and our shared suffering makes for a strong bond.

...

...

...

I've saved the... last for last. Jayme is a dwarf. He's also the most accident-prone, helpless, and frustrating person I've ever met. Ithakus' daughter vouched for him when *The Comet's Wake* stopped for supplies in Troynus, the older captain's home.

After getting to know the dwarf, I realized she was only trying to rid their island of Jayme, and her loving, sea-worn father was an easy mark.

That's it for today. Perhaps, to pass the time, I'll collect information from the others. Even if they haven't played a significant role in my story, they are main characters of their own, and the completionist in me longs to include them all in my journal.

We shall see.

Day 211: I've done it! I've collected a blurb on all the current passengers on *The Comet's Wake*. Even Avalone of Applegate, who many claimed wouldn't speak a word to me. I succeeded in getting him to speak *two* words to me, in fact, repeatedly.

I shall not include them here.

More islands have passed us by, ill-fitting of size, demographics, resources, or personal appeal. Some of the less-patient passengers have departed, reducing our number to 207. I hope our decision to press on will be proven the wiser one.

Only time will tell, and she enjoys her secrets.

Day 237: There is a storm ahead. The crew is anxious; they say it is unlike any they have seen. Only one man seems unafraid. Ithakus claims to recognize the cloud pattern and unique churning of the colorful waves we sail through. Both captains have ordered the passengers below, and everyone's been told to don a mist suit. That's concerning; only the crew have worn these before, and only when working topside during rough seas. The acidity of this water can mar us, and I have seen too many marked by its cruel hand.

Oliver alone stands without one; his corrupted blood acting as armor enough.

We sway, huddled, awaiting our fate as it's

wrestled between the hands of thirty-two men and an uncaring ocean.

Day 241: I've found my journal!

Much has happened since my last entry. My writings may be the only documentation of the events here, so I shall try to represent everything accurately.

Our vessel did not survive contact. Many blame Captain Ithakus' hubris for our predicament, but I'm not convinced. If not for him buying us time and distance by sailing into the storm directly, *The Comet's Wake* would be at the bottom of the ocean, and the acidity would have eaten all our flesh by now.

In any case, Ithakus is our *only* captain now, for better or worse.

Before I get to that, a second, more surprising person deserves credit for our survival. It was Jayme who spotted this island through the storm and, with the help of Oliver and his broadcast system, communicated the lifeline to the captains before it was too late.

It appears the dwarf isn't *always* a liability.

I was not conscious when we made landfall; few were. From my final moments of wakefulness, I retain only fragments. The captains and their crew retreated below deck. Ithakus and Hopson were arguing, and Filonias, as ever, was trying to keep the peace. I remember the cries and screams from the passengers. I remember Agaston looking for something. I remember Jimmi tending to Oliver, who was injured when a wave destroyed his announcer's booth. I remember waves like musician's hands, shuffling us like pebbles in a maraca.

I remember darkness.

When I awoke, our ship was beached, and the body of Captain Hopson was lying next to me. Unlike the other bodies, who had been bludgeoned against the inside of the ship, the young

captain's wound was exacting and deliberate. The blade was still in the man's heart, and its owner was immediately apparent.

I take no pride when I write this part; I still don't know if it was the right decision. By divine providence or simply dumb luck, I was the first to see the dead captain in the turmoil. I took a risk and removed the ornate scimitar before rolling it into my mist suit.

Through the carnage, I walked, searching for the man most would have accused. It did not take me long to find him; Captain Ithakus shouted orders to whoever could walk.

"Doctor Tombs, start a triage in the corner there! We'll move those we can save to you. Oliver, gather what surviving equipment you have; we need something for announcements and the like. Has anyone seen Filonias? Where are my shift bosses? Who's putting a census together?"

And so on.

Under normal circumstances, I would have volunteered my services immediately. My pages have become a solid alternative to the manifest lost in the collision. As it was, I had a more pressing matter to discuss with the surviving captain.

It wasn't difficult to pull Ithakus aside; I needed only mention his fallen peer. All other concerns vanished as he allowed me to lead him to Hopson's body.

"I found this with it," I told him, handing over the wrapped scimitar.

Ithakus' face went ashen. Finally, with great effort, he reclaimed his soiled weapon and whispered, "Who else knows about this?"

"No one except the one responsible," I said, looking for a change in the captain's demeanor. Had he been responsible, I would have seen evidence of it in his face. My move would have been a misstep, and his betrayal of me would have begun right then.

I write this entry two days later, and calamity has yet to befall me. I believed then, as I do now,

that Ithakus was innocent, and the weapon had been planted to frame him.

"Where is Filonias?" the lone captain said again, addressing the question to me this time.

It was then that I offered my services.

One-hundred-twelve is all we have accounted for. The bodies of another ninety-two have been recovered, which leaves the conspicuous absence of eleven individuals. Accounting for the two crewmates thrown overboard during the storm, that still leaves a startling nine missing—five crew and four passengers.

Among the missing crew are two shift bosses: Midas and Philippe. The third, Astrid, was buried with the others. First mate Filonias is also missing. The remaining missing crew are Merias Atanda and Tucker Vilby, who joined the crew at Dahlvrst.

The names of the missing passengers are included below.

Thanks to Avalone of Applegate, we've located several tracks leading away from the wrecked ship. Captain Ithakus has ordered search parties to track down our missing people and to discover what we can about our strange new home.

We leave tomorrow after the blood moon reaches its zenith.

A bit about the island. It is smaller than most other places we have visited in the archipelago. The storm continues to rage around us, but *only* around us. We stand in the eye now, a perpetual oasis at the center of a maelstrom. I have not seen anything like this, nor have the others.

"Our world is tidally locked," Doctor Tombs keeps saying. "That's why we don't have seasons or nights like our ancestors. When cyclones like this form, they tend to remain in place. This is perfectly natural."

He doesn't seem too convinced, though. Neither am I.

"Where are we?" Jayme asked. "Do we know?"

"We can't see the horizon through the clouds," I replied, "so it's impossible to see how much of it is consumed by the darkness there. The storm is also wreaking havoc with the weather, so using temperature to judge our distance from the Sundered Lands is flawed. That leaves us with one conclusion."

"Which is?"

I smiled. "We have no idea where we are."

That one got laughs, which we were sorely short on.

Day 242: I awoke early this morning to make this entry before we go. Three groups have agreed to search for the missing people. One is heading north to an old dock we spotted from the mast of our ruined ship. Another is moving south to where marshlands meet the sea. Saint Elmo's fire was seen there overnight, revealing ancient structures there.

The first group—*my* group—is heading directly inland, following the tracks discovered by Agaston of Applegate, who will lead us. There is a single mountain on the path ahead, from which protrudes an ivy-adorned spire. Oliver has taken great interest in this artifact of the Old World and has agreed to accompany us, hoping our path takes us there.

In addition to Agaston, Oliver, and myself, there are two others: Jimmi Whitebread, whose increased popularity in the wake of the crash drives him to seclusion, and Jayme. We have serious reservations against the dwarf joining us, but Ithakus believes he will do less harm out there than he will if he stays around the injured. He did fall onto a patient last night while looking for a bathroom, after all.

The others are waking up. I'll try to make an

update this evening.

Later: The missing passengers are dead. Something had taken them, and their drag marks intersected with the path we had been following. They led into a misty ravine, where the four bodies lay scattered and half-devoured. We considered laying an ambush for whatever was responsible, just as we considered laying the bodies to a proper rest, but Agaston reminded us that time was not on our side.

"The longer we take," he said, "the greater the chances we lose the tracks."

This original set continued deeper into the island, and, interestingly, at least two other sets came to join it. These tracks are written in a language too foreign for me to translate, but Agaston claims these were in pursuit of the first.

We are forced to trust the ranger, and though he clearly knows his stuff, something is weighing on him that remains as enigmatic as the rest.

We've made camp for the night inside the bones of an old shack. Its original purpose remains a mystery, but I see evidence that it has been submerged at least once. Perhaps the storm does reach the island every so often, bringing enough rainfall to drown it temporarily.

But there is no utility in speculating.

Despite the mysteries and dangers of the place, there is a beauty I find difficult to describe. It is like a rose surrounded by thorns or, well, an island surrounded by storms. There are species of plants and animals here that I've never heard of. I am not well-versed in taxonomy, but the chronicler in me begs to classify them on sight. Are our eyes the first to see them in centuries? If so, would it be arrogant of me to give names to these things whose original nomenclature has been lost to time?

Yes, I think it might be.

I will name them just the same.

I have seen *Helisees*, small insects with long, skinny bodies, bulbous eyes, and papery wings the shape of an "X." I have seen *Scanners*, songbirds with blotches of red across their chest like imprints of a giant thumb. I have seen *Snarlers*, diminutive wolves with misshapen faces and odd howls. There are dozens of others—if not hundreds. Their investigation would be enough to fill a lifetime.

But not now.

A waterfall beside the structure shields our noise from whatever creatures lurk here. In the meantime, we've agreed to sleep in shifts to balance rest and security.

I pity our ancestors and their day/night cycle. I have not glimpsed true darkness but can imagine the horrors it brought. I can't imagine how much eerier this place would be if half of every day was obscured like that misty ravine today.

Day 243: Our path is lined with death, it seems.

Our day began with the discovery of ancient corpses at the bottom of the waterfall. Jayme stepped into one's chest cavity while taking his "morning wash," and Jimmi volunteered to inspect the remains. They were as old as the structure we slept in. Little had survived the decay that had taken to them, but some of the fabric they wore had survived.

"A.T.L.A.S.," read the emblems we recovered. The letters were written in Anglo-Mandarin, a prominent language of the Old World.

"How in Hades do you know that?" Oliver asked me when I translated.

I explained that it was required language at the *Cathedral of Learning* on Permadawn. That bit was truthful, even if I had never attended.

I trust the half-demon, but he doesn't need to know about my old life.

"There's something else here," Jimmi said, pulling a 3x5-inch metal card from the fabric that

held it.

It read the same thing the emblem did: *A.T.L.A.S.* We didn't know what it was at the time, but it has since rescued us—for the time being, at least.

We set out shortly after, following the tracks from the day before. They led us over an old stone bridge before separating on the other side.

The bodies of two missing crewmen waited for us here, too mutilated to identify.

"Their attackers came from the tree line," Agaston reported, pointing out the upturned grass to our left. His hand swung to a narrow footpath above the waterfall. "And they chased someone that way."

I wish we could have given these two a proper burial, but we moved on like we did with the passengers.

More bodies met us at the top of the mountain. These were as ancient as the ones at the waterfall, and they lay scattered between us and the spire we had seen from afar.

"There was a lot of movement here," Agaston observed. "Our quarry was running from something."

"Amazing," Oliver whispered. He spoke of the spire, of course, as though the bodies were no different from wildflowers or low-lying bushes.

The tower looked like the Gerry-rigged version the half-demon had constructed on *The Comet's Wake*, though the material and design were more sophisticated. Vines mingled with metal, twisting skyward in a silver, green, and rusty red spiral.

It was amazing, in a sad, forgotten kind of way.

"Radio tower," the half-demon whispered.

It sat upon a mound of artificial stone, which we entered through doors that had long surrendered. A staircase led us into the mountain proper, and flameless lights bracketed the way down.

Our torches now burn low. We have decided to light only one for minutes every day and it is by this fading fire I write this entry.

This facility looks like many of the ruins on Permadawn. In the main room, there were old office spaces, darkened screens, and maps of a world that looked very different from the one of today. There were celestial maps that depicted a single moon in the sky instead of the two we know, and it drew attention to an object coming from the direction of the sun.

I wonder over that depiction now, as I do the inspiration of the ship we arrived on. The acidic water churned by *The Comet's Wake* looked so like the tails of the heavenly things the ancients had once monitored. The approaching object on that map was larger but looked much like our second moon.

We pressed on, following a trail of upturned dust, and finally laid eyes on the creatures responsible for the bodies we had encountered. They waited in an empty cafeteria as if knowing their next meal was about to serve itself.

We recognized them immediately.

Their name is ancient, and it has been passed through generations. It's so old that no one remembers the source, but it must have been vile. These things are bloated, distended, twisted caricatures of what bodies should be. Their blood passes through the half-demon's veins, though Oliver possesses none of their ferality. We all know them... or have heard stories of them. I call them *Corrupted*, but scholars refer to them by this more ancient name: *La-Nite W-mart Shoppers*.

We fought them, at first, but our struggle drew more of the creatures. They stormed up more staircases; they climbed down the walls; they charged us from every shadow. The futility of our fight dawned on us just in time, and our retreat took us to a set of sealed double doors. Lines across the floor hinted that they had recently moved but would not do so for us. Our terrible pursuers were gaining, and there was nothing we could do!

But our despair was premature.

Jimmi solved our dilemma moments before our hourglasses drained of sand. A pad next to the door was perfectly suited for the card he had found, and once he pressed one against the other, the doors groaned open.

Here we remain, tucked into the room on the other side. This was once the helm of this place, though the island's broader purpose remains elusive. Despite the horrors waiting for us outside, Oliver is thrilled to be here.

"There is so much to discover!" he keeps saying.

Another silver lining sits here with us. We have found Midas and Phillipe, the remaining two crew members and shift bosses. Like us, their flight from the corrupted led them here, explaining how the door was recently closed. Both were injured—Midas especially so—but Jimmi gave them each a baked good, and the outcomes, fortunately for everyone, were positive.

Strength has returned to both men.

"We saw it," Midas reported, speaking of Captain Hopson's death without prompting. "H-he killed him."

"What are you talking about?" said Agaston.

"Who killed who?" said Jimmi.

I relayed my findings to the others, revealing the secret I had kept hidden until then.

"Aye," Midas said after I finished, "and the other captain did it. Five of us saw it happen, but we were worried for our safety. We ran, thinking we could regroup elsewhere on the island. Those *things* out there had other plans."

"We found Merias and Tucker on the way here," I told them. "They didn't make it."

"And Filonias?" Midas asked, perking up. "Did you come across him as well?"

"No."

The two shared a glance, then returned to their

baked goods.

There is some vestige of safety here. Our food, like our light, will not last forever, though. Sooner or later, we will need to open these doors again. I wonder if Ithakus will send another party to search for us or if he will decide it is too dangerous.

Stuck as we are, I question my earlier assertion of the captain's kindness. Is *this* how he planned to get rid of me all along, the man who had first discovered Hopson's murder? After hearing the testimony of these two men, I wonder. Ithakus had the most to gain with the murder of his co-captain. It was his blade that had killed the man. There are fewer assumptions in presuming the captain's guilt, and the thought disquiets me.

Still, I have my doubts. I have known betrayal, and this situation feels too manufactured for my tastes. In any case, I will need to be more careful. As I have said, our path is lined with death; I pray not to discover my corpse at the end of it.

Day 244? 245?: Stuck inside like we are, there is no way of telling the time of day. The moons are invisible to us, and thus, even our most rudimentary of time-keeping methods are useless. Despite this, Oliver has put on his regular radio show for our benefit. I worry that today's news may be our last, as death awaits us on either side of our decision.

"Greetings, Comet's Wake. Ya know, I was thinking... this island is really something. It has strange animals and ancient structures and teases at the secrets of the Old World...and what happened to it. Hades, If I could get this place up and running, I could broadcast my show across the archipelago!"

Its only downside is the tenants.

Now, we've experienced all manner of unfriendly folk during our journey...even if most were that way because of Jayme...sorry, my friend.

(Sigh) If only these things were allergic to

bread...

I wish there was more, but I'm afraid there is nothing left to say.

Day ??: Agaston almost strangled Jayme today. The dwarf hadn't even done anything egregious; he had just told a bad joke during one of our extended silences.

Something is wrong with the ranger from Aplegate. He was the most steadfast member of our party when we set out. Now, though, he has shed that stoicism. Agaston does not sleep. He mutters curses and gibberish beneath his breath. He sweats. His bandaged eye weeps heavier than ever. His ire is often aimless but more often directed at the clumsy dwarf.

"You broke my flask," he continues to repeat. The rest of us have offered him our canteens, but it seems the ranger craves something we can't give him.

Later: Something interesting has happened. I will spare the editorial and report exactly how it went down.

Jimmi: "Eat this, Agaston"

Agaston: "Keep your damned treats away from me."

J: "I know what you're looking for, and I'm telling you this can help. Trust me."

Oliver: "Hold up... You know what each baked good will do!? It's...not random."

J: (Chuckling) "Of course not, but it makes things interesting. Surely, you can attest to the importance of entertainment."

O: "Sure, but..."

J: (Addressing Agaston) "I know what alcohol withdrawal looks like, my friend. Look at me; look at my stomach. Those who create often partake of

their creations. I've worked with brewmasters across Permaworld and beyond—their drinks pair well with my baked goods. I have not met one of them who didn't have a drinking problem.

"You're mad at Jayme for breaking your flask; I get that, too. I saw the runes on the outside; I know it never ran dry. Eat my bread while you ween yourself from this need of yours. We deserve more than the version of you we are getting right now. Hades, even Jayme deserves better!"

The dwarf perked up at hearing his name in a positive light.

Jayme: "Jimmi, can you give me a piece of bread that'll make me into a tiger?"

We ignored him, but Agaston took what was being offered. The ranger has mellowed since then, though I suspect his road will be a long one.

If, of course, any of us survive that long.

Day ???????: We have decided to face the corrupted creatures—better that than spend another moment in this tomb. I wish to include a final word, but I have none. I am only tired.

When I go, I hope to go quickly.

Day 257: I live, and my tale has gathered more twists. We exited our ancient, mechanical tomb and faced... nothing. There were no corrupted ones, no death waiting to greet us.

"We've been sitting in there for no reason?" Jayme said. "We could have gotten out of here days ago!"

Agaston shook his head. "No. Something's lured them away." He pointed to a stairwell leading deeper into the facility. "Their tracks are leading down there."

"Great," said Jimmi. "In that case, we can go back the way we came."

The sounds of violence answered him, coming from down the stairs.

"Could be more survivors," Oliver offered.

"We were outnumbered the last time," Agaston said. "And we're weaker than before."

"We have two extra people now," I said. "Plus, we'd only be fighting on one front. No fear of them surrounding us this time."

We bickered for a moment, but the sounds of fighting beckoned us.

With Midas and Phillippe at our rear, we followed these noises to a lower level of the facility. There was a massive warehouse here, stretching beneath most of the island. Small ponds and tufts of foliage had sprung up where collapsing ceilings had spilled dirt and sunbeams. Over a dozen exits opened to the surface from here, and this new search team must have entered through one of them.

There were many of them—mostly comprised of crew members—and they were making quick work of the *Shoppers*. The skirmish was over before we reunited, and a familiar, curt voice called, "Glad you survived. Maybe we can get some answers now."

Captain Ithakus spoke both to us and to the quivering man kneeling before him.

Filonias was in comparable shape to Midas and Phillippe when we first found them. His ivory hair was matted and streaked with crimson. Dark bags surrounded his eyes, and claw marks had etched a language of pain across his arms. There was a look of relief in his eyes but a warring concern, too.

"C-captain Hopson..." Filonias began.

"Dead," Captain Ithakus replied.

The first mate nodded. He opened his mouth to speak again but a look to the other crew members stilled him. I knew that look; I had seen it before when I committed the unspeakable act that led to my exile. Filonias was terrified, waiting for something horrible to happen.

A fight? A death sentence? I did not know.

"I've known you for a long time, Filonias," Ithakus said. "I had a great deal of respect for you.

Hopson did, too. I refuse to believe you murdered him."

"Pardon, Captain," Phillipe said, stepping between me and Jimmi, "Midas and I saw the same thing—a bunch of us did. We chased him off the ship...and those things found us before we could get back.

"We think," Midas added, "that he wanted you to be the sole captain and saw an opportunity."

Filonias remained silent through the testimony, his eyes lingering on certain crewmembers. Again, I was reminded of my former life...and the truth finally clicked for me. I whispered my suspicions to the four I *knew* weren't in on what was happening. Oliver, Jimmi, Jayme, and Agaston stared back at me, eyes wide and heads cocked.

Then, I raised my suspicions to the rest.

"It appears you finally have a mutiny on your hands, Captain," I said. "Unfortunately, I don't think it's in your favor, either. You and Hopson were respected, but your way of doing things wasn't sustainable. Filonias kept the peace, and in doing so, ingratiated himself with everyone." I turned to Philippe and Midas. "Especially the crew bosses. The two of you had the clearest understanding of how untenable it was. By comparison, you *liked* Filonias and would rather see him captain...even if he didn't want it himself."

That's why they pursued him across the island.

That's why they asked about Filonias when we first found them.

That's why they were pivoting from their failed blackmailing to a second murder.

As I spoke, I sensed a change between many crew members and inconspicuously pointed them out to my three companions.

Speaking to more than just the known mutineers, I said, "There was so much chaos, and so many of us were knocked out during the crash. It wouldn't have been difficult for one of you to take one captain's sword and kill the other with it. No one would have doubted it; the two were always

fighting.

"But the man you wanted to put into power saw it happen, didn't he? So, you did the only thing you could do under the circumstances... and silence him." I turned to the captain. "Your first mate is silent for the same reason he ran: if he speaks out...he forces their hand.

"Like I just have."

Then, finally, the guilty parties exploded into action, and one surprise attack triggered another. The hidden mutineers—of which there were still four—lashed out against those they knew weren't with them.

Luckily, my quartet felled them before their violence could spread.

The closest to the captain, however, Philippe and Midas took their shot.

Filonias stopped them, putting his body between his unwanted mutineers and the captain they were trying to overthrow for his benefit. His intervention stilled their hands for only a moment, and a moment was all Captain Ithakus needed.

The last two mutineers were cut down by the very scimitar they had used to start the whole thing.

"Oh!" Jayme exclaimed once they had fallen. "They were the bad guys. I get it now!"

"How did you know?" Oliver asked me. "How did you know they were lying?"

"I've...been in a similar situation," I explained, not wanting to elaborate.

Luckily, I didn't have to.

"I found some interesting things while wandering around this place," Filonias said through a mouthful of Jimmi's healing bread. He pointed to a door next to where the five of us had descended. "That looks like it's been sealed since this place fell apart."

We explored where the first mate led us, and Jimmi again used the card he had found. Stale air and a change in pressure met our entry. So, too, did a million artifacts of the Old World, many still in working order. Like the strange animals on this island, it will take some time to go through everything. However, each of us has already discovered something we have an affinity for.

Jimmi found a recipe book bursting with goodies the world hasn't tasted in generations.

Agaston found a medicine that will finally keep his missing eye from weeping. Fighting the urge to self-medicate with his former painkiller will be an uphill battle, but he is the strongest man I know.

Jayme found a helm. He's only worn it once—and it made his nose bleed—but he claims it makes him whole. We don't know what that means, but it makes him happy. And smarter.

Oliver found blueprints to both the radio tower and the island proper. He says it will take time to go through everything but seems to believe it means something.

And I, well, to be honest, I haven't really looked yet. I am content sitting here and writing for now. I feel more at home here than I ever did in Permaworld, especially now that the worst of the island's *corrupted* have been dealt with.

I know Oliver—and maybe the others—will eventually press me on how I knew to intervene when I did. I suppose it was only a matter of time before my interest in everyone's lives prompted interest in my own. It will be unpleasant to speak of my time in slavery, of the hardships I was burdened with in *The City of the Emerald Crown*. I will have to tell them about my revolution with the other feltlings...and its grand failure. I survived only by betraying those I cared about, a mistake I will never repeat.

But the story behind my self-exile, per-

haps, is for another time.

I need to go. We're returning to the shipwreck, then bringing the injured here to recover.

Day 265: We continue to learn new and amazing things from this island... though I realize now it is disingenuous to use that moniker. This is no more an island than I am a scholar.

This is a ship.

We don't know all the details yet, but Oliver suspects he can learn everything we need from the blueprints. From what the half-demon has discovered so far, the storm we encountered was a defense system. The place moves, which also explains the encounter Ithakus had with it while captain of *The Queen's Mercy*.

In any case, this place was built before the *Sundering*. I can only speculate on the purpose, but it feels important. Perhaps, like everything else belonging to the Old World, it's beyond its time, but the optimist in me thinks otherwise. Maybe there is still a use for this place. Maybe there was a purpose behind our wreck here.

I think we have finally found a home. Even if the original purpose of this place has come and gone, it will serve well as that. We may decide to sit here a while, but I prefer we continue our journey with this new and improved *Comet's Wake*. It can take us beyond where the old ship would have taken us—to the unexplored regions where the air freezes, where most of the Old World stands encased in ice, where darkness is permanent and creatures worse than the *corrupted* walk.

It could take us beyond dawn's edge.

Song Of The Teniq

by Eliot Jordan

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Something skittered across his legs, tickling him awake. At his feet, the tiny scavenger's four eyes swiveled on antennae, alert, its six legs ready to bolt, its tubular, woody body positioned for retreat. Without moving, he breathed a soft whistle at it, and the little creature—a species of *unk*, ubiquitous and harmless—stared back, mesmerized. Then it blinked, scurried around his bare toes and out the opening. He smiled after it; he liked these voiceless wanderers, so simple and single-minded.

Stek closed his eyes again and rolled to his other side, the pallet on which he lay so hard it seemed to push back. Then the damp paperboard sagged onto his cheek, touching like an unwelcome hand. He pushed it away and sat up, breaking the shelter he'd built, trickles running off the paperboard, pooling underneath him, cold feelers on his skin. It had rained while he'd slept. He pushed the box flat. He hated to be confined.

It was late afternoon. Hunger pawed at his belly. Stek got stiffly to his feet, weak, handling his only possession, a scarred wooden cup. He tightened the rope around his waist and shuffled toward the alley's opening.

Up and down the flagstone street, clean, purposeful people strolled and strutted. The wealthiest, if not borne along within palanquins, rode by atop the backs of plodding dobines. One of these stood at the alley's mouth, a magnificent animal: a head taller than Stek, its coat glowed an immaculate, shiny ochre, with white stripes that graced its cheeks and black stripes that curved around its rump. Stek lifted a hand to the dobine's bulbous nose and spoke a few soft sounds into its squarish, hairy ear. The animal blinked its blue eyes and tilted its head down, revealing its distinctive cross-hatch yellow mane.

"Get on from there!"

Stek hadn't noticed the coach hitched behind the dobine, nor its driver perched on a high seat.

"A Western Yellow, is't it?"

The driver leaned forward. "Who told you that?"

"I know dobines. I had one, once. Not as beautiful as you," said Stek, dropping his voice and caressing the animal's cheek. He looked again to the driver. "Need a groomer?"

"You don't know nothing 'bout 'em. I know a liar when I see one. Get on with you," said the driver with a wave of his crop.

Stek backed away, fingers absentmindedly brushing the purple scar along his misaligned collarbone. Then he turned and dragged his feet forward through the crowded avenues. He watched faces, but as they neared him, each looked away. His own face felt to be tingling. He too, in the past, would've looked away from anyone who appeared as he did now. And there was little he could do to help about that, either. Stek steps slowed until he'd stopped walking; the passersby gave him wide berth. No point in trying elsewhere. He sat down where he was.

"Coins," he said, one hand shading his forehead, the other lifting the wooden cup. "Old coins."

He heard people pause their chattering as they neared, then resume a few safe paces on. He couldn't look at faces now, not while begging, so he studied the legs that moved past him. He considered the multitude of shoes treading by. He thought about the neat closets these shoes would nest in tonight, the comfortable rooms that held the closets, the elegant houses that held the rooms, the manicured lands that nestled the houses, the fences that ringed them.

You've not been raised to this, said a voice in his head. But his belly just growled.

No coin landed in his cup. Stek sagged over, then lurched to his feet, hitched up his trousers and pulled the rope tight again to cover his chest. The city was warm, but he'd still cover himself while

walking beneath the gods' eyes—he'd never fall that far.

He waited until the street traffic showed a gap then crossed over, stepping carefully around dobine dung left in the wake of the well-to-do. A bank of elegant windows only faintly reflected his approaching form as if reluctant to acknowledge him. Through the glass could be seen a stately room, each orderly table lit with cheery candles where well-dressed people were eating, drinking, laughing, and attended to by handsome young men in floor-length grey smocks. He could see the diners cutting and chewing; his stomach protested at the sight. He stopped, his silhouette blocking the reflected glare from the street, allowing a clear view to a corpulent man with a peg beard sitting at table with a white-haired matron, her freckled neck draped in emerald-colored glass. But the Stek's eyes were on their plates, as each held an upturned *teniq* sliced down the belly, a score of tiny legs on either side of oily pink flesh. He'd never tasted *teniq*, it was a delicacy for the rich—but he caught its aroma now. Unthinking, he put his fingertips to glass.

Bap! The peg-bearded gentleman's knuckles struck the glass from inside, eyes wide and intimidating, mouthing some command. Stek stepped back, watching the mute scene within as the big man turned and gestured to the attendant. Moving away, Stek caught his reflection in the glass: uncut brown hair, dirty skin and clothes alike, sandals retwined a dozen times and still falling apart. Knocking fists on his thighs, he hung his head. There was a time not so long ago when he'd have done just what the bearded man had: shoo away such as himself.

But where was he supposed to go?

The smoky aroma of roasting *teniq* flesh wafted over, stronger, and it beckoned him. At the end of a dark alley he entered a fenced lot, a combination garden and trash heap with herbs arranged in neat pots beside a pile of bones, wilted greens, and the crumpled carapaces of hundreds of *teniqs*. A few steps led up to the kitchen door, which was tied open, cooking smoke emanating from within. Stek paused at the threshold waiting to be noticed, shifting from foot to foot, inhaling the overwhelming aroma of frying vegetables and roasting flesh.

Half a dozen cooks bustled about the kitchen, stoking fires beneath huge metal pans, chopping roots and vegetables on heavy wooden blocks, shifting stout pots, or digging into earthenware jars containing dried fruit, pollens, and spices. A boy passed in front of him balancing a stack of food-soiled plates. In the center of the kitchen stood an open barrel half-filled with live *teniqs*, each the length and width of a foot, their segmented grey backs shifting in the pile. Alongside the barrel on a clean, wooden stump, a solitary *teniq* lay on its back, its score of legs crawling uselessly at air.

"What d'you want, then?" barked a burly man, twisting his head around, cleaver in hand paused mid-chop. He had a narrow black mustache, quick eyes, and wore the dark tunic and lapels of a master-rank cook.

'What d'you want, then?' repeated a thin voice.

Stek blinked stupidly. Someone in the room had imitated the master cook, but the man's gaze remained fixed, awaiting his answer.

"I'm hungry," said Stek, and immediately regretted his choice of words.

"We're working here," said the master cook, his face hard as others in the kitchen glanced between them. "As you should be."

"I can work."

"You don't look it." The man resumed chopping.

"I can."

The master cook looked up. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he shook his head.

"Sorry. No work here anyway."

Stek turned one foot away, but his aching stomach stopped him. He swallowed once.

"An old coin, then?"

The master-rank cook grimly clapped his cleaver to the board and rose to his full height, sending Stek into retreat down the steps. In the yard, shoulders drooped, Stek stared up at the

doorway. He heard a voice repeat from the kitchen: *'An old coin, then?'* followed by laughter.

Turning to the alley's opening he found a man there, watching him. The man had straight blonde hair that curled along his jaw and a crooked nose that spoke of old injury. He wore a workman's dress: brown fabric, loose at his strong arms and legs, tight on the roll of fat around his middle.

"Not buying?"

Stek shook his head, and the man responded with a lopsided grin.

"Wait here."

The man climbed the stairs and was welcomed into the kitchen.

Stek stood uneasily outside, unsure of whether he should go along his way. But there was nothing for him on the avenues of the wealthy, so he stayed where he was, casting an eye toward the garbage heap for anything edible.

The man with the crooked nose bounded out and down the stairs.

"You hungry?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Stek."

"Come on, then."

Stek hesitated, running a hand down his leg. The two fellows he'd trusted on his very first night in the city had, by morning, taken his meagre stash of coins and left him bloody. It was his first lesson in the ways of the city. Stek tried to decide how to answer as his stomach growled again.

Then the master-rank cook appeared at the open doorway above, pulled out a smoking pipe, and gazed down on them both.

"Come *on*, then," said the blonde-haired man, pulling on Stek's sleeve.

Stek followed him out through the alley and into the street, hurrying to keep up. They passed through the throng, then onto a residential avenue where the homes gradually grew smaller and shabbier as they went, the stone paving under their feet eventually giving way to dirt and mud. Finally they came to a crude food stall emitting smoke.

"Get what you like," the man said with a wave of his hand, and dropped onto a stool.

Stek shuffled toward a flat chunk of iron propped over glowing coals manned by a street cook. Strips of meat, pounded meal, and root bulbs crackled and spat on the hot metal.

"This one, that one, and . . ." Stek pointed one by one. The cook drew aside each morsel with his tongs. Stek glanced over at the man, who laughed aloud and waved a hand merrily.

"All of it."

Plate piled high, Stek took a stool. The man drew a flask from his pocket and took a drink, then offered it to Stek, who was relieved to find it was plain water.

"You've an appetite, young man."

"No food since yesterday."

"Ngh," grunted the man with a half nod.

"What's your name, master?" asked Stek, chewing.

The man turned away down the road, as if looking for someone. Then he smiled briefly, to himself.

"Lathis."

"Thank you, Master Lathis."

Lathis raked his hair and rubbed his ample belly. He watched Stek eat.

"Luck's shown you no favor, it seems."

"Mm," Stek assented. He didn't want to say more; the food couldn't reach his stomach fast enough.

"Where're you from?" said Lathis, needling the gap in his front teeth. His eyes were blue-green, a bit washed by the sun, but somehow beautiful, almost epicene.

"From across West River. In the hills."

Lathis took this in, then rose and ordered some small meat strips for himself. They ate for a time in silence.

Nourishment entering his body at last, Stek began to think more clearly. He'd been hungry so long, off and on, it had crowded out everything else he used to think about. The odor of the Western Yellow's fine mane lingered on his hand, and this brought forth the memory of his family's old dobine. It was not a pretty animal, nor young, but strong and reliable—at least until last spring when it had suddenly died. He'd loved his old dobine, though he'd never named it. Mostly, now, Stek only pictured its backside as he'd followed along behind it, guiding the plow. And he remembered the sound of its heavy breathing on his shoulder as they'd hauled tree fruit to market.

"You're a long way from home," said Lathis, chewing.

"Been here all summer."

"What're you doing in the city?"

"We had orchards. But I had to leave."

"Had to leave? Why?"

"The loaners. Came with their papers and I was out."

"No," said Lathis, leaning forward, jaw dropped, elbows on knees. "Damned loaners."

"They said it was all legal, they showed me the papers, but . . ."

"You can't read."

"Oh, I can, well enough," protested Stek, his arched brow wrinkling above his long nose. "But not their papers. They like it that way, so hard-working people can't know what they're signing."

"Your parents couldn't pay the debt?"

"They're gone," said Stek. He was chewing slower now, his body settling around the rich taste and feeling of fullness. "It's just me."

It was strange how, with life so changed, Stek found he rarely thought of his parents. Ma and Da. They were both now a year lying beneath the grass of the corner orchard—the field he no longer had claim to. Rather it was their working dobine that clung to Stek's memory, maybe because it had been with him to the last. He'd always preferred animals—they were more honest than people in every way.

"Eh, loaners—hungry leeches with two legs," said Lathis, shaking his head sympathetically.

"I'd kill myself before I'd let *them* eat me alive," said Stek with a decisive shake of his head.

"And here you are in the city. All alone."

"Yes. Can't find work." Stek looked down at his dirty, worn trousers. "You've met me past flood stage, master. Can't thank you enough for the meal."

"Where'd you get that scar?"

Stek pointed to the purple at his collarbone. "This one?"

"You have others?"

"I spooked my dobine once," Stek said, and shrugged. "Got too close. Wasn't her fault. Got a powerful kick, though."

Lathis pursed his lips at this, then tipped the last scraps from his plate into the gutter. He glanced about him, but no one was nearby.

“See now, young Stek, you look strong enough,” he said, his throat moving up and down as he leaned in. “I need a hauler.”

“Hauler for what?”

Lathis pulled on his damaged nose as if to straighten it.

“You saw,” he said in a low voice. “I sell teniqs to those fancy dinnerhouses. I made a deal with the chief back there—he’ll take a hundred fresh ones. And I can get them. He’s paying forty coin apiece.”

Stek’s eyes opened wide.

“Forty coin? Each?”

“Yes. You should see what they charge in that place. People pay two hundred coin apiece to sit at table and be served,” said Lathis with wink. “The bigshots don’t care what they pay, as long as they’ve got a seat by the window and people can see they’re eating all the teniq they please.”

“That’s four thousand coin.”

“Right. But I can’t carry a hundred teniqs.”

“I’ll haul for you. What’s my bit?”

“You haul fifty, we split the coin for those.”

“Fifty for half o’ forty coin apiece?” Stek said quickly, feeling much more himself with food in his belly. He shifted in his seat, pulled at his fingers then looked up. “Make it twenty-five coin each.”

“Alright, alright,” agreed Lathis immediately, leaning back.

Stek couldn’t believe his fortune. He smiled, nodded, and looked around as if for a witness.

“But it’s my secret nest, you see,” said Lathis quietly, eyes sharp. “It *stays* secret. Understand?”

“I do,” said Stek, stuffing a lukewarm root into his mouth, chewing. “I’m your man.”

His scarred wooden cup lay forgotten under the stool when he left.

#

They met before dawn and by sunrise were beyond the city walls. Taking the wide road leading away from the river, they walked through fields of tall yellow and red grains, past great penned birds that watched them with golden eyes, past black woolly livestock grazing absentmindedly on trodden grass, and among orchards of nut trees with fat mushrooms around each trunk, ready for harvest. Between these rich lands and the great river lay the city, and occasionally Stek looked back to admire its jumble of towers, halls and estates, all growing pale in distance, showing toylike in the rising sun. He remembered his feeling of awe at glimpsing the great city for the first time not so long ago, and how the hope and industry it had seemed to promise had vanished after he’d entered its gates and fallen into its cracks. They walked a league or so, then stopped and rested at a roadside stall. Lathis again paid for food. They rose, stretched, then continued on, up into the hills, the road steepening, curving tighter and tighter.

With two real meals inside him, Stek felt his breath come more deeply, and he even began to stride like his old self. A thought struck him.

“Why don’t you use a dobine? It’s going to be a long haul back.”

“Do I look like I own a dobine?” said Lathis.

“You could rent one. Then you wouldn’t need to pay me,” said Stek, glancing over at his companion’s set mouth.

“Yes, and questions about what I’m doing, where I’m going. Maybe the owner would follow along, keep his eyes out.” Lathis shook his head. “Besides, it takes more than a strong back and legs. Harvesting needs nimble fingers, not dobine hooves.”

A group of farmers passed the other way, women with baskets of orange and pink tubers on their backs. They stared at the two men as they passed, and Stek realized how only country people did this, unlike city folk who pretended at all times

that they'd already seen everything beneath the sun.

"Lots of treasure up here, if you know where to look," said Lathis with his lopsided grin. "Fine trading."

Stek didn't know if he meant the tubers in the baskets or the farm women, a few of whom had fine carriage and a proud, attractive look about them. They'd made him newly conscious of his dirty trousers and the battered sandals on his soil-encrusted feet.

"Once I'm paid, it's proper shoes for me."

"That's right."

"Where're you from, Master Lathis?"

The answer came slowly, as if the blonde trader needed time to remember.

"Ever heard of Avatch?" he said at last, eyes forward.

Stek shook his head.

"No wonder." Lathis gave a snort. "Little town on the back of Seven-Eyes Mountain. You could throw a rock from one side to the other."

"You're a mountains man, then, like me," said Stek. "How'd y'ever get yourself on, y'know, in the city?"

"The secret," said Lathis, squinting at the sun, "is judging people. In the city, you've got to learn to judge character, and quick."

Stek nodded in silence.

"That's why I picked you," continued Lathis. "I can tell you haven't turned a hard, double-dealing, city-ways man yet."

"I won't, either," said Stek. "With all these farms, and rich, hungry folk—I've just got to find a position. Animals, orchards—that's my work, what I know."

"That's what you're doing now," said Lathis. "Feeding the rich folk."

"And never begging again."

"Begging's a job, too—but the worst kind. And you, young Stek," Lathis said with a tip of his head, "don't have a knack for it."

"Why not? I mean, I—"

"You told me your dobine put his back hoof right . . . there," Lathis said, and with the back of his hand patted the purple scar on Stek's collarbone. "You *should* 've said it was the dying strike from the man who deflowered your sister." He raised his brow theatrically. "Or, that you're a hero from the Grey Plains War, down on your luck."

"The which war?" said Stek.

"I wouldn't have believed you, of course, but some other fool might've, and loosened some coin your way."

Stek massaged his scarred, bent collarbone. It ached from sleeping on the hard streets.

"Well, I told you truth, and I'd tell any man. I wasn't born to beg—it's shame to do it—but I don't need justification." Stek linked his hands behind his back as he walked. "Least of all explaining away a dobine kick that might've killed another man."

"You're right," said Lathis, and snapped his fingers. "Your power's in telling the truth. They trust you from the look in your eyes."

Stek nodded, but he was thinking about that kick, how his old dobine gave no notice, it just struck. Some things were beyond explanation. He looked at his companion's profile.

"So, why's your nose crooked?"

Lathis didn't change his stride. He licked his lips.

"Who says it's crooked?"

"Well, first thing I see about you is—"

"You've got a fine face for a man who sleeps in a box," said Lathis crisply. "I mean, a fine, long nose, and plain, good skin. What that must feel

like when you get cleaned up, and combed, and about your business.”

Stek lifted his palms.

“Sorry.”

“Forget it,” said Lathis, and he stretched out his arms as he walked. “It’s smack square in the center of a man’s face, the nose is. Like a thumb coming out of your head. It’s there all the time, never goes away, for all the world to see.” He shook his hands in a mock applause. “And the world recognizes you by it.”

“At least, if you’ve got coin in your pocket, city folk’ll look at you like a man,” said Stek, stroking his long, straight nose in spite of himself. “People looked at me like an unk—a scavenger. Hardly worth the look.”

“Oh, they looked at you, alright. But saw a beast. I know what that’s like.”

“You didn’t look at me like that.”

“Like I said—they key to getting on is judging people.”

Looking up, Stek watched a pair of green-winged birds spiral down from the blue sky, talons linked, turning round one another in a descending dance, finally disappearing into a tree to their nest.

“Why d’people judge you when they don’t know you?” said Stek, gazing into the shadowed trees.

“Women especially. They’ll sum a man up, just like that,” and Lathis snapped again.

“Got a woman?” Stek said. “Children?”

Lathis pursed his lips and looked down. It seemed he wouldn’t answer, until he said:

“Trust is currency—don’t you agree? I mean, those rich lords dining on teniq day and night, when they should be eating something sensible.” He punctuated his speech by counting with his fingers as they walked. “*They* trust the *cook* not to make them sick. The cook trusts *me* to get him

fresh teniq. And *I* have to trust that coin goes into my pocket at the end. None of it works without coin. I can take a teniq and turn it into my next dinner. Or a new hat. Because everyone trusts coin, even more than they trust each other.”

“You could turn teniq into a woman, if you wanted,” said Stek, prompting a friendly scowl from his companion. “That’s not my way, mind you—but I know how things are. But for trust . . . I wouldn’t trust a woman who took coin to be with me.”

“Well, I can see you’re not a trusting man,” said Lathis dryly.

“Those two birds—did you see ‘em?” asked Stek. “Building a nest for themselves, twig by twig, mating, hatching eggs. That’s trust for you. And no coin exchanged to muck it up.”

“Well, they’re not people, are they?” Lathis waved a hand. “All instinct. Build a nest from sticks, open to the wind and rain. Precarious and doomed. There’s trust, and there’s simple ignorance.”

“My parents had trust. They lost our farm for it.”

“Well, like I said, there’s trust, and there’s . . .”

“How could they’ve known?” said Stek, scrunching his face and rubbing his head. “I mean, how should they have?”

“I suppose they just couldn’t see it coming.”

Lathis stopped abruptly. He looked up and down the road, which curved away in both directions. He stepped into the trees and came back with a fallen branch, still in leaf.

“Go there,” he said, pointing into the forest.

Stek did as he was told. Lathis followed, swishing the branch back and forth on the ground as he went, obliterating their tracks. Again, Lathis checked up and down the road for travelers. Then he took Stek by the shoulder and guided him deeper into the forest.

They clambered up a steep hill, around large grey boulders, pulling themselves up on the thick, winding vines that seemed to run everywhere. Great trees as big as Stek had ever seen stood sentinel on the slope. There was no trail. From time to time, Lathis would stop, hand raised, and listen. Once, there came voices on the wind—travelers at the ravine’s bottom, following the road—and the pair waited for these to pass, far below them. Then silence, and with the return of birdsong, they continued on.

Where the land leveled out, they entered a thick patch of new trees, barely taller than themselves, and pushed into it. The land here had burned years back, and all the young trees were the same generation, overcrowded and vying for sunlight. The two men could barely see where their next steps were landing.

“Argh!” cried Lathis suddenly, clapping a hand to the side of his head.

Stek, behind him, saw the yellow-streaked, spindly arm of a ten-legged *spryda* extended from behind its webbed nest on a branch.

“Don’t move.”

Gingerly he stroked the pencil-like arm of the creature with a long leaf. It finally relaxed, lifted its sharp tip, and slowly retracted out of sight.

Lathis fell back, drops of blood on his open hand, his crooked nose turned red.

“Damn,” he hissed, and pulled out his knife to cut the nest from its branch.

“No, don’t,” said Stek softly, and reaching out he gently drew the knife from Lathis’s hand. “Let’s go ‘round. He’s worked all night on his trap.”

“Damn *spryda*,” spat Lathis, massaging his scalp and neck.

“He’s only trying to eat,” said Stek with a sympathetic gesture.

They went around, pushing through the thick branches. At last they came to a clearing before a

jumbled cliff of rock. There was no sound other than the breeze and the insects that rode on it.

“Thanks for that,” Lathis said, surveying the cliff and breathing hard from the hike, one hand on his stiff back, the other massaging the side of his head.

Stek had already forgotten about the *spryda*.

“Where now?”

“We’re here.”

Lathis strode to a nearby stand of trees and began pulling up branches. Behind him, Stek held the knife and studied it—wire brass handle, nicely fashioned. Underneath Lathis’ sweeping hands, two round forms emerged, and Stek immediately thought of his two parents lying in the corner of the old family orchard, just like this. A chill went through his body; it seemed suddenly as if they were here now, waiting for him. He’d never understood why they’d had to die on almost the same day. Just like he’d never understood why his beloved dobine had kicked him, suddenly and hard, just that one time. Stek wedged the knife under his belt.

Lathis stood to reveal a shallow pit in which two baskets lay upended. He lifted out one, shook the dirt off, and gestured for Stek to retrieve the other.

“I don’t like to be seen on the road with an empty basket,” said Lathis, tying it onto his back. “Makes the nosy think of questions.”

Carrying the second basket, Stek followed as Lathis clambered up over the shambles of boulders. They passed several shallow caves filled only with brown tree needles. Stek followed carefully in Lathis’s steps, as the fallen piles of needles could disguise an ankle-breaking hole in the rock surface. Higher and higher they went, approaching the vertical cliff. When they reached a small sandy pocket lying level amid the boulders, Lathis dropped his basket from his back.

“See anything?” he said with a grin.

Stek turned about, unsure of where he should look.

Lathis snorted and bobbed his head in a self-congratulatory way. He produced a short rope from his pocket, then climbed up a small boulder. He dropped his rope in a U-shape beneath the fronds of a thick bush splayed down the slope, gathered them and pulled slowly upward, then tied the rope fast. Between two boulders stood a door.

Lathis dropped down and began wiping dirt and leaves away from the door and its frame. He jiggled the first of two long iron bolts that were shot through rings across the doorway, then slid it back. The second bolt wouldn't budge beneath his hands, however.

"Help me."

Together they pushed and pulled on the lower bolt until it slid aside in scraping protest.

"Now pull," said Lathis.

They pulled the door until it shuddered, then opened it wide. Out came a cool, damp air laden with powerful, earthy scent of oil and decay. Stek grimaced and stepped back.

"Ugh."

"Smells like coin to me," said Lathis, and cackled at his own joke.

He produced a small torch and lit it with a match. Lathis carried it silently into the cave mouth, and Stek followed. The smell grew stronger, and now came the sound of scratching, or whispering, a hundred paper flowers rustling in a wind. Stek followed behind Lathis, peering past his silhouette, the light dancing and making the walls shift as if alive. Where the cave opened up, Lathis stopped, and Stek stood beside him, rigid.

Everywhere, floor to ceiling on the cave wall's ridges, were teniqs—many hundreds of them.

"By the gods," murmured Stek, wide-eyed.

'By the gods,' 'By the gods,' 'By the gods,' erupted the teniqs in a thousand whispers.

"They can speak!" said Stek with a jump, and gripped Lathis's arm.

'They can speak,' 'They can speak,' 'They can speak,' echoed their soulless voices.

"Shh."

Lathis laid a gentle hand onto Stek's breast. They waited silently as the voices gradually eased, then died away.

"Their defense," Lathis whispered faintly into Stek's ear. "They mimic. Just enough to confuse a predator and run away."

The teniqs had calmed and were mostly still. Recovered from his shock, Stek released Lathis's arm and studied them, stacked one on the other, crawling languidly about on their tiny rows of legs, short antennae waving, the segments of their grey carapaces buckling as they moved. The smell was overpowering, both rich and foul, like the old farm had smelled on slaughtering day.

"What do they eat?" whispered Stek.

"Anything they can," answered Lathis, fixing the torch into a notch on the cave wall.

Stek gently gripped the back of a teniq and turned it over. It had no face, it seemed, just a mouth near the front, its rows of tiny legs flailing.

"Old coin, then?" Stek whispered.

'Old coin, then?' the thing echoed, its small mouth moving, horribly facile.

"Stop that," whispered Lathis. "Let's get to work."

They brought the baskets in. Lathis pointed out the largest teniqs as the ones to take, and to leave the smallest. They worked silently in the flickering light. The creatures barely moved, allowing themselves to be picked up easily. Each one was the weight of a hand, seemingly not so heavy until the basket was nearly full. Stek counted carefully and signaled when he'd reached fifty. Then they each hauled their heavy baskets out into the light of day.

Stek stretched his back. He breathed in the fresh air, gratefully, and smiled at the birdsong on the breeze. The teniqs in his basket were nearly motionless, shocked by the bright sunlight.

Lathis checked both baskets, feeling their weight.

“We can carry at least five more,” he said. “We’ll roast them ourselves if we can’t sell ‘em.”

Stek nodded and reentered the cave. The torch still flickered, lower. He took up two more teniqs, one in each hand. Then he noticed something pale in the far back of the cave. He put the pair back where he’d found them, then lifted the torch from the wall. He had to get on his knees to look into the corner where the mountain rock met the dirt floor of the cave. Something round was there, lying on its side, an empty vessel with irregular holes.

It was a human skull.

“Lathis, there’s—!”

The faint light from the opening disappeared with a slam. Stek’s heart leapt into his throat—for a moment, he thought a piece of the cave ceiling had fallen. Then he stumbled toward the entryway, torch in hand. It was sealed. He dropped the torch and banged his hands on the heavy door.

“Lathis! Hey! Lathis!”

He called until he was hoarse. He pushed and kicked at the door, but it was heavy and fast. He stopped, breathing heavily, and listened—no sound. He banged and shouted and cursed, a roaring in his ears, heart thudding, tears streaming.

“Ma! Da!”

Again and again he battered at the door with his good shoulder. Finally, he collapsed. The torch lay on the ground beside him, dying to an orange coal. In its last light, he saw the hundreds of teniqs flow like shifting tiles, whispering, down from the walls to the floor of the cave.

#

The master-rank cook leaned on the wall outside the kitchen door and lit his pipe for a smoke. Another evening coming. Chin up, he watched a pair of birds spinning with talons linked, rising and falling in the sky, until suddenly they released each other and bore off in different directions. He sighed, smoothed his narrow black mustache and squinted into the low, orange sun. Like the power of all the gods’ eyes at once, he thought, was the sun. It saw everything that was done, the good and the bad. He blinked, offering it his silent prayer before turning back into the kitchen.

His team was already busy about their work. Near the doorway sat the covered basket of fresh teniqs, fifty in all. He’d paid the trader as agreed, and the man had promised to deliver a second basket tomorrow.

“Did you count them?” the master cook said to the kitchen boy.

“Twice, sir.”

The master cook put his hand on the basket lid. He didn’t trust Lathis—something about him. Always too keen to please, always letting on how hard he’d been working. Still, he was a good source for teniqs, no denying that. Fat and oily, with good flavor, better than what others could bring.

The master cook lifted the lid and selected a teniq from the top of the heap. He turned it over and gave it a gentle squeeze with his hand, causing the creature to wave its many legs in the air. Then, as was often heard from teniqs about to be cooked, it used its inhuman voice.

‘Old coin, then?’

The master cook studied the teniq in his hand. It repeated itself, then said no more. He placed it belly up on the chopping block, took up a knife and held it loosely, musing. Then he selected a second teniq from the basket, sliced it lengthwise, and placed it directly into a ready roasting pan.

“Boy,” he said.

“Sir?” The boy stopped sweeping and held his broom like a soldier.

“Was Lathis alone when he brought these?”

The boy nodded.

“Go find him. Bring him back here.”

“Shall I tell him why, sir?”

The master cook stared into the stack of fresh teniqs, thinking about the previous afternoon, of the trader and the beggar outside in the garden. He gave the basket swift a kick. Soulless voices prated a disjointed dialogue, echoing each other. The other cooks stopped what they were doing and looked up, knives suspended, listening to the fragments.

‘They can speak.’

‘What do they eat?’

‘Anything they can.’

‘Let’s get to work.’

The teniqs dropped silent one by one, until all were still.

“Tell him . . . that I’d like to finish a conversation,” said the master cook as he took up his largest cleaver and laid it ready on the block.

The boy left on his mission, to search by light of a dying sun, the day not yet done.

Aurora’s Story

By Caleb Knisley

If you had the opportunity to go back in time to fix something wrong you did in the past, would you take it? That was a question that has been going through my mind ever since I decided to turn my back against Lady Redheart whilst thinking back of all the horrible things I did when I was serving her. But who could blame me?

My name is Aurora Borealis. I was born and raised on the planet Harmonia along with my elder twin sister, Vanessa. Harmonia was a peaceful planet full of the most beautiful inhabitants both male and female known for their fair skin, violet-colored hair, and golden eyes and everyone wanted nothing more than to live in harmony and maintain

a peaceful. My father even told me and Vanessa at a very young age that even if someone were to disrupt our peace, there is always the tiniest spark of hope to bring it back. So obviously, as one may assume, I had a healthy relation with both of my parents and my sister was the greatest friend I could ever ask for. But unfortunately, none of that lasted very long.

Two months after Vanessa and I had our eighth birthday, Harmonia was attacked by a group of alien mercenary soldiers called the Hyenas who have hunted down every single Harmonian on the planet until no one was left but Vanessa and me, who luckily managed to not get caught by them. Although we survived, the loss of our parents and our people shocked us, our world began to change, the peace and harmony we lived for went long gone, and there was no hope, only despair... until.

Vanessa and I were later encountered by what looked like a businesswoman with red hair claiming herself to be Victoria Redheart, CEO of Redheart Industries and Chairlady of Planet Virgo. She offered us a home if we agreed to be test subjects for her super soldier program. We didn’t understand what she meant at first, but according to her it was a way to enhance the two of us with a drug to make us stronger and make it beneficial for us to get back at the soldiers who killed our people. However, we were hesitant about the program because it went against everything that our parents had taught us about living in peace. According to Redheart, however, peace is never an option. If it was, our people wouldn’t have died so easily. Those words of hers were so cold, and yet somehow they made sense. And so, we agreed to the terms, we passed the test, became her deadliest assassins, killed others in the name of Lady Redheart, turned our sisterhood into a heated rivalry, and the Harmonian philosophy of peace and harmony meant nothing to us.

Eight years after those events, I found the Hyenas located in Astrapolis on a planet called Pisces. There I met them drinking at a bar in an area infested with criminals. I let them know that I came to kill them before they started laughing their balls off. The leader even had a smug look on his face and even claimed that I’m too girly to take on someone like him and his men. In other words, they chose death.

Every ounce of training, every experiment, everything that I went through for Lady Redheart has paid off when I stood my ground against them. With my sword in one hand, and my gun in the other, I forced every single Hyena to share the same fate as the Harmonians until their leader was the only one left standing. This was by no means any act of mercy, I did so for the sake of interrogating him, because I still needed to know more of what happened back then. I asked him why he and his men have killed my people to which he replied, "We're mercenaries, we kill anyone and anything if we get paid enough."

"Who paid you!?" I asked while gripping his neck tightly.

"V-Victoria... Redheart."

I let him go after he stopped talking. But when he said that name, my whole world began to change yet again. The sudden realization of everything that I worked for, the people I killed, the lies about peace never being an option, and the empty-hearted rivalry with my sister who I used be friends with had all been for nothing other than the satisfaction of the one who I viewed as my mother who tricked me into becoming the one thing I swore to get my revenge on. And worst of all, I once again have lost any amount of hope I yearned for. So I took what looked like a silver cuff that the leader seemed to be trying to protect, and then I ran, from the guilt and that witch so that she'll never take advantage of me ever again.

Two years after that incident, I found myself partnering with a young boy named Max Jones from a planet called Earth who met me at planet Aquarius along with his robot companion and his sister. Unlike me, he seemed upbeat and carefree and yet is also aware of how cruel life is at times. He prefers to live in the present, while I spent the rest of my life living in the past. And he doesn't seem to mind that I used to work for Victoria Redheart. When I asked him if it's possible for someone like me to find hope, even after all the cruel things I did, he responded by saying, "It depends on whether or not you have the will to do so. It's kinda like this: hope is an empowering emotion, but it's also obsolete without the will to act on it. You get what I'm saying?" I responded yes, and hearing him say all of that made me think that

maybe there is hope for someone like me, a hope I could find by journeying with him. Or maybe... the hope I'm truly looking for... was him all along.

The Out Of This World Life Of Jimmy Comet

By Kenneth Moore

1

The coffee bubbled in Nalee's mug as she sipped it carefully with a sigh. Next to her was a slew of adoption forms piled up with a large red stamp on each and every one of them decreeing one word REJECTED. The Indian lady just pushed the papers to the side, not wanting to linger on them for too long.

"Good morning honey, how are you feeling?" A tall African American man with round glasses and eye-catching pink and black dreads asked.

"Oh Jazz, not well if I'm being honest. But I guess we knew the risks going into this." She sighed.

He kneeled and hugged her where she sat. "I'm sorry I can't give us a child. I really am..."

"It's nothing to apologize for. That and the issues with our adoption forms just happen to couples like us," She forced a smile and looked at her garden in the backyard. "We'll find a way to have our bundle of joy no matter what."

As the grey morning storm clouds began to roll in, Nalee wasted no time tending to her garden in the backyard. Eager to finish trimming the hedges before the rain.

"Good morning, Nalee," her neighbor greeted. A near elderly woman pushing 75 with graying blonde hair and green long sleeved gardening gloves that she always loved to wear whether she was in the yard or at church. She set a few bags in her truck along with a dog bed.

"Ah hello Christina. Going somewhere?" Nalee waved.

The neighbor chipperly scurried up to her from the other side of the fence. "My husband and I are going to Mexico for a few days for a gathering with his side of the family, so I won't be around for a while," Nalee just nodded somberly which clued her in. "I take it the adoption forms were officially turned down."

"I don't even know what we did wrong. Maybe we just aren't meant to be parents."

Christina reached over the fence and patted her on the back. "Hey now, don't speak like that. I was adopted myself. My parents went through a myriad of troubles before I finally walked into their lives. It can be a difficult process sometimes. Just hold your head up and you'll meet your bundle of joy one day."

Nalee finished the last hedge and tucked away her sheers. "Let's hope God is willing at this point." She muttered dejectedly and headed back inside. Christina just sighed before hearing her dog bark and left to finish getting ready for the trip. She and her family pulled out as the dreary morning rain began to come down.

Nalee and Jazz spent their day doing various tasks around the house. Whether it be cooking, cleaning, grading papers or working on a project for work. All they wanted was to make the time fly by and get as far away from yesterday as they could.

Eventually night fell as Nalee finished grading the last of her students' papers, relieved to see so few getting below a 70%. The pitter patter of the rain stopped and though that soggy outdoor smell lingered, she looked out the window to notice the bright and colorful tapestry of the night sky's stars. A far cry of the day which was just gray and wet, the same color of their hearts.

She sighed and looked at them, getting lost in the beauty before an ear-splitting alert jolted her out of her seat. On her phone as well as the TV next to her, an Emergency Alert blared warning of an incoming meteor impact and to take shelter from the blast waves.

"Nalee, are you seeing this too?" Jazz asked as he ran up the stairs to his wife.

"I do but, I've been looking out the window for the last few minutes and I don't see anything. Plus, don't they warn about these types of events months in advance?"

"Yes, but the alert said that it was a sudden appearance," He smirked. "Sounds to me like NASA isn't paying their people enough and this is how they get back at them," He turned to find Nalee sticking her head out the window. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"I don't see anything, are they sure it was for here-" As if right on time, a bright ball of space rock covered in blindly bright purple flames flashed into the sky, briefly bringing daylight to the night. Jazz snatched Nalee into a clutch and flipped her around. Shielding her with himself as the meteor crashed into a nearby hill in their backyard, sending a furious wave of wind into their house as well as throughout the entire town.

"Are you okay?" Jazz asked, slowly loosening his grip and stepping back.

"I am, sorry about that."

"You complain about your students not taking fire drills seriously and then you go and do that?" He pouted. "That was an intense blast, good thing Christina wasn't here for it. We should go check on the other neighbors."

"Agreed."

Quickly, they grabbed their coats and headed out. Immediately being greeted to the symphony of hundreds of car alarms and people wading into the streets chatting about the explosion.

Behind the houses in the hill among the small forest. The purple meteor laid cloaked in its flames. Undisturbed for a brief while before a small hand reached out from the crater among the fire. Out the smoke and ash, a tiny figure walked while covered in flames of about 3,000 degrees. Each step it took left behind a tiny little flame in the shape of a footprint as it headed for the neighborhood.

"I'm glad everyone's okay but it is just like Shane to see a meteor crashing and still say this is somehow linked to immigrants." Nalee sighed as she walked in the door and threw her coat on the rack.

"It must be a law that every town has to have a crazy conspiracy theorist," Jazz shook his head before snapping to attention. Throughout the house, steam wafted in the air as if something was burning and the smell did not help either.

"Did I leave the stove on again?" He wondered.

"No, I mean you did but I turned it off for you." She glared briefly before beginning to investigate. Spotting their fridge open with ice cubes trickled all over the floor, some already began to melt.

Along the ice cubes were small dark footprints seemingly burned into the wooden floor like ash. She followed them all the way to their back patio where they came from outside and the door's latch was seemingly heated off to near melting.

"I'll call the police; those weird footsteps go upstairs." Jazz said, already having his phone ready.

Carefully, they each picked a weapon; Nalee with a bat and Jazz with pepper spray. They followed the steps upstairs where the smoke got thicker and the hiss of something boiling could be heard from the bathroom.

On the count of three, they carefully threw open the door to the restroom and coughed as a plume of the smoke hit them square in the face. When it cleared just enough, they both lowered their weapons in sheer confusion.

Before them was a bathtub filled to the brim with fast melting ice and surrounded by over twelve empty ice bags, pink towels were strewn about on the floor and above them was an arm sticking out of the water as it boiled the ice away. Nalee was slack jawed as she saw the arm and got closer, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. Along the arm was a series of glowing blue

and gold stars along his arms like tattoos but with weight to them.

Much to Jazz's protests, she inched closer and nearly reached out to feel the arm before a figure lurched up from the boiling ice water taking deep breaths. He wiped his eyes which were the same gradient color as the stars along his arm. His purple hair was matted as he looked at the couple with a shy smile as they returned it with absolute bewilderment.

In the boiling tub was a dark-skinned boy who looked no older than eight with glowing stars on both his eyes. "Hi, I'm Jimmy."

2

After helping him cool off more, Nalee brought in some clothes she had bought in advanced for their previous failed adoption attempts and quickly carried Jimmy to the living room. "No officer, I don't know where he came from. He was just in our bathroom and for some reason, he's burning up." Jazz said to 911 over the phone as he paced.

Nalee sat in front of Jimmy and a small pile of melted thermometers and fans surrounding them blowing at max speed. The latest one sticking out his mouth was already beginning to sizzle. "Okay, let me see it," She slipped on a glove and plucked it from his lips. "950 degrees... well, at least it went down a bit. But for now, we should probably keep all these fans on you," She sighed and carefully felt along his arms. They were still hot on the outside but not steaming like before. "And you really don't feel sick even with a temperature like that?"

"No, it's supposed to be this way. I'll cool off for good eventually." Jimmy smiled.

"Okay I'm asking him now," Jazz approached them and cleared his throat. "Well sport, we'll figure out your temperature issue later. For now, can you just tell us where you're from?"

"Up there." He giggled, simply pointing up in the air.

"I'm sorry?"

"To be more specific. I'm from there." He pointed again, this time between the two of them.

Jazz looked behind him in confusion and carefully followed his finger until seemingly finding it aimed at a trophy placed under one of their big paintings. An Idaho Potato Peeler champion trophy. Immediately, his eyes went starry with pride for his home state. "Oh, so you're from Idaho as well are you?" He handed him the award to look at and put a hand on his hip with pride. "Yeah, I won that for peeling 228 potatoes in one-hour, impressive right?"

Nalee rolled her eyes at his boasting. "Yes it was very majestic, can you finish talking to the authorities before you go on about that again?" He scoffed and sat the trophy back before walking off to continue over the phone. "So what's the situation Jimmy? Did you lose your parents? Are you lost or did you runaway?" she asked.

"None of the above. I'm here with my parents right now."

"They're in town?"

He shook his head and leapt from the chair, snatching her in a sudden hug. She was really thankful his skin was no longer burning. "I'm here with you mom."

The lady just went blank-eyed as seconds passed without saying anything. Eventually, she summoned the courage to entertain his words. "Uh, I think there's been a mix up. You probably just hit your head or something, why don't you rest for a while?"

Jazz headed back towards them, hanging up the phone as Nalee eased Jimmy's head to the table, seeing him take a little yawn. "Okay the cops are offering to take him into custody for now or we can keep him here with us for now. Either way the report has been filed."

"That boy just said we're his parents. He called me mom," She revealed much to Jazz's confusion. For now, I think we should keep him with us, he must've hit his head or something. And be-

sides..." She glanced at the bizarre glowing stars along his arms that were also on his legs as well. "Between that and that pattern along his limbs, I don't think we should send him to just anywhere yet."

"Makes sense. The cops just thought I was describing tattoos," Jazz said but then eyed their house in disappointment. "But if that's what we're doing then we need to move fast. We had those clothes ready should we be cleared to try for adoption but that's it. He doesn't even have a bed to sleep on."

His wife nodded. "We'll get everything needed for a kid to feel at home. More clothes, tasty cereal, ice cream, movies, toys, board games, all that stuff. Though maybe hold on before we pick up something expensive like an Immersion game console."

Jazz chuckled. "Yeah, in the meantime he can stay in the main bed upstairs. I'll take the basement tonight since I'll be working late on my Gulf of Mexico model for work, then I'll order a cot online for same day delivery first thing in the morning.

They both eyed the boy that was already beginning to drift off into slumber in the kitchen. Jazz carefully hoisted him into his arms and began heading upstairs. "Try not to drool and burn our sheets while you're up there kiddo." He snickered quietly.

Nalee just rubbed her head with a sly smile as he headed upstairs. "What a strange night."

Over the next few days, the Comet couple did exactly what they planned and got Jimmy everything they believed a young boy would love and he did. Jimmy's gravitating optimism and joy was impossible to escape. Every morning started with him waking them up and taking an interest in their day to day lives. He was so grateful they took the week off from their jobs to take care of him and vice versa.

ing in comedic awe as he scarfed down his pancakes like they were straight out of another world.

“Slow down there Jimmy, you act like you haven’t eaten any of these before.” Nalee chuckled, wiping the syrup dripping down his shirt.

“I haven’t! Can I drink the syrup when I’m done?” He muffled with a full mouth.

He reached over halfway over the table to claw at the bottle before Jazz eased it away from him with a snicker. “That’ll get you sick, trust me. I uh... tried it when I was your age.”

“So Jimmy, how are you liking it here in Dougville so far?” Nalee asked.

“It’s great, I can’t even begin to explain how thankful I am for you guys taking me in,” He jumped down from his seat and snatched them both in a hug from behind quickly. “Love you mom and dad.”

“You’re an absolute delight Jimmy. We... aren’t really able to have kid of our own, so it’s been a blessing to have you here with us lately.”

“Sure you can, I’m right here!”

Nalee and Jazz eyed each other hesitantly. “And you still don’t remember anything about your other family?”

“I told you there never was one before you guys.” Jimmy pouted, seemingly looking a bit upset at the doubt.

“Okay okay, you can get more waffles from the kitchen if you’re still hungry,” Jimmy’s eyes sparkled at Jazz’s offer. He fist pumped and hurried with his plate to get more. Once he was out of earshot, he leaned in towards Nalee. “You know, I called the police office yesterday and they say CPS still hasn’t found any records of him. They’ve taken DNA samples, his pictures and everything but they still haven’t been able to trace a link... isn’t that weird?”

“We did have him wear long johns to cover his star marks. Maybe his parents have stuff like that,” She sighed and sipped her water. “Oh what am I saying? Finding his parents will be the least of his concerns if the wrong eyes spot those things. Plus it doesn’t help anyway that he claims not to have a last name.”

“Yeah he just took ours. My best guess is he got serious head drama after being lost. But between his lack of records and why he was literally burning up when we first met him, that doesn’t explain anything.”

“Maybe he should just stay here for a little while longer.”

Jazz reached out to hold her hand. “Believe me, this past week has been the most fun I’ve had in a while. I just feel it would be best to prepare for whatever this circumstance may lead to.”

“Mom! Can I go to school?” Jimmy suddenly blurted out much to her bewilderment.

“W-What?”

Looked out the kitchen window on his tippy toes. “I see people going out and waiting by the school buses all the time. I think that would be fun.”

“Well...” They shared a glance before Nalee continued. “If you’re going to be staying here for an indefinite amount of time then I suppose it would help for you to get some experience out of the house every now and then. Plus, I can’t keep taking off of work.”

He gripped her hands and jumped up and down with glee. “Yes yes! Can I come to your school mom? You’re a teacher right!”

“Hold on there. I can give you a speedy enrollment due to my connections there, but I teach at a Christian school. That means there will be frequent bible studies and more regarding religion wired into every facet of the school.”

But Jimmy just shrugged. “Okay and?”

Nalee ran her fingers through his poofy hair, trying to soothe him down. "Well we don't know what religion you practice or if you do. I just don't want you to be uncomfortable."

Jimmy smiled and let his thoughts bubble at all the things he planned to take on his first day of school. "That's perfectly fine."

Nalee sighed in defeat and whipped out her phone. "Okay, I'll touch base with the principal now to see if you can be enrolled starting Monday. If you're really okay with it, then we can go out and pick a backpack and lunchbox for you when I'm done."

"Yes! Love you guys so much!" He bounced like a ball of absolute joy as Nalee tried to stuff down her worries.

Once the weekend had passed, Jimmy found himself proudly and excitedly strolling into the large posh white and gold academy. His arms and legs hugged tight with long johns and extra wrappings in his backpack should anything happen to hide his stars. "My so you're the little Jimmy that fell into Nalee's life. The principal greeted him in her office. She was a tall middle-aged woman with graying green hair and violet thin glasses. "It's a pleasure to finally put a face to the name. Where were you from before coming here to Dougville?"

Nalee cleared her throat, not wanting to risk Jimmy being uncomfortable. "Actually, he doesn't quite remem-

"Heaven."

The accidental mom froze in place at his answer. She just looked at him for a second before back at the principal to see her sharing the same wide-eyed look of joy he had the other day. "Oh, aren't we all? Welcome to Gated Stars Christian Academy! I know this enrollment was sudden but your mother, I and all the staff here will do everything we can to help you have a smooth transition. Just let us do all we can do to help. They shook hands with the same eagerness as Nalee just didn't know how to feel.

Nalee returned to teaching her classes with ease, however her mind grew into turmoil the entire time. She taught 6th grade while Jimmy was placed in 3rd several floors under and their lunch breaks were different. As the hours went on, she fought the temptation to call the principal or the teachers watching the 3rd graders to ask how he was doing.

As soon as the clock struck 2:30 PM and classes let out, she nearly blitzed down to the first floor and asked for Jimmy where she was soon pointed to his current room that was running a bit late wrapping up a bible study. "Oh hey Nalee, this is your boy right?" The 3rd grade scripture teacher, Mr. Mustang greeted her as she walked in to see Jimmy effortlessly reading several verses from the bible and explaining them to fellow kids surrounded who listened eagerly. "Jimmy here is truly amazing. People gravitate to him, he's always eager to answer questions, he shared part of his lunch with someone who dropped his and not to mention he's a whiz at the Bible. Are you sure he wasn't already a Christian? Because it's like he walked right out of the book himself with his knowledge."

"So you think everything went well?"

He patted her on the back. "Only me and all of his other teachers, we've been discussing him for a bit. I'm happy the adoption thing went through for you." He smiled before clapping his hands. "Okay guys it's time to pack up for the day. You don't want to miss the busses or your parents picking you up right?"

Nalee thought long and hard to herself as Jimmy spotted her and ran up for a hug. She simply patted his curly purple head before an idea snapped into her's.

As Jimmy cheerfully helped Jazz make dinner in the other room, Nalee stood before the chair where they sat the boy on the first night of meeting him.

Up there.

To be more specific, I'm from there.

Jazz followed his finger that night and saw his Idaho trophy. Nalee on the other hand thought it over in her head nonstop, adamant that there was more to it. She replayed in her mind where his finger pointed and traced it, continuing the angle past the trophy where she believed Jazz's bias had stopped him. Going upwards until stopping short at the painting they had just above it.

She gasped as the words replayed in her mind again.

I'm from there.

Up there.

She looked at the seat where he was in and confirmed the angle. That Jimmy's finger was aimed at their framed oil painting of the Earth with heaven hovering in the cosmos over it in an ethereal hue of white and gold.

A thousand thoughts crashed through her mind as she tried to process the theory. It was so much, too much. With a deep breath, she set it all to the side and calmed her racing heart. "No... that can't be. Come on Nalee, don't be an idiot here."

She went back and joined them with a smile and helped in demonstrating to Jimmy how to make spaghetti for all the excuses and reasons in her head, there was nothing she could say to explain away the stars on his limbs.

4

The following few days were more joyous times with Jimmy. As he was finishing up taking a bath one night, Jazz and Nalee were gleefully chilling in beds "He's been here for a while Nalee." Jazz said suddenly one night as they settled in bed.

"Yes he has." Nalee smiled back, still unsure what to make of her theory about his origins.

The husband twiddled his thumbs. "And nobody has called back about his records or claimed him. Soon he'll be... you know."

"Available to be taken in full time." She finished.

"Are you up for it?"

Nalee listened as Jimmy brushed his teeth down the hall. "He's an angel. In more ways than one... I would love to if we'd be able to."

Jazz smiled warmly. But as if by a cruel play of the lord, Jazz's phone called. It was CPS. They exchanged glances before he picked it up and turned away. "Hello? Yes this is Jazz Comet."

"Yes? He has?"

His voice grew heavier with each passing sentence. "I see... thank you. We will- will give Jimmy the good news. "

He hung up and dropped the phone. "What was that about?" Nalee asked with bitterness in her voice. She already felt this pain just over a week ago. Overhearing news from the phone that was sure to stab her heart.

"That was CPS. Someone has responded to Jimmy's missing report and verified that they live in the area. We are... we are to bring Jimmy to the police station tomorrow so they can confirm if he's their son. If he is, then that's it." Just like with the adoption rejection, Jazz attempted to deliver it with a monotone voice while looking away to be strong for his wife, but his voice choked up with every other sentence.

"Oh... I see," Nalee stuttered. "That timing though," She chuckled grimly as her eyes already began to water. "Isn't that just something?"

They quickly embraced each other on the bed, both doing their best to not cry and alert Jimmy. Not knowing that he was already standing there by the door, watching them through the creak as his stars began to radiate brighter than usual.

5

The next day, Jimmy silently awaited his parents in his room only to be shocked when they

suddenly barged in. "Good morning Jimmy!" They both greeted with blindingly bright smiles.

"When is your birthday again?"

"The day you found me." Jimmy robbed his eyes with a yawn.

"Well whatever it is, pretend its today! We're treating you to a day around town. Hurry, get dressed!" Jazz chuckled, tossing him an already ironed pair of clothes to wear.

Jimmy's ever present smile returned and he hopped to his feet, catching the clothes. "Okay, let's do it!"

And so the couple did exactly as they promised. Starting by taking him to the pancake emporium, the ultimate breakfast treat in town where he ate his own body weight in them until nearly puking. Followed by a stroll through Credit Park where they fed ducks and read the bible together. The day consisted of gifts from the mall, ice cream, sight seeing and so much more. It really was the best day of Jimmy's life so far. He just wished the same could be said for his parents. Despite their smiles, he could see clear through them the entire time but simply waited for them to come clean.

After hours and hours of a fun day. Jimmy finished setting the last of his gifts from the mall down in his room and joined his parents back in the car. The smiles they wore began to fade as the sun set as they inevitable was coming. "Where are we going now mom? I'm getting pretty tired to be honest."

"Well sweetie we..." She looked at Jazz who just nodded grimly. "We have to take you to meet your possible real parents."

"That again? What are you talking about?" He asked, crossing his arms. There was a twinge of annoyance in his voice but Nalee didn't care. She wanted a child more than anything but she refused to risk depriving someone of theirs even if said child didn't remember them.

"The authorities called and said that someone reported you theirs. Thus we are legally obligated to bring you to the police station so you can meet with them. If they can identify you're theirs and have the records to prove it, well then... then you will have to go with them soon."

"Don't worry about your stuff and all the gifts we bought. We'll help pack them up for you." Jazz added bitterly, holding back his real feelings.

Jimmy just sighed before giggling. "Okay. It won't go through but we can look into it."

Nalee looked back at him saddened. "Jimmy..."

But he rebuked the sadness with his own optimistic smile. "Mom, dad, I'm yours. I was literally made to be raised by you." He just laughed. Jazz raised his eyebrow at the comment before driving off.

There in the police station lobby, they waited with Jimmy as he kicked his legs eagerly in his seat. "Mom, can we have McGeralds for dinner tonight?"

"We'll have you for a few more days so sure." She said warmly.

"Can we play a game?" He asked. She nodded confused. "When this person turns out to be the wrong parent, you guys have to stop mentioning other people being mine. It's only you guys." He grinned cheekily. "Also, why do you guys want to be parents so much anyways? I remember you saying you've been trying to adopt for a while and that you can't have one between the two of you guys."

Nalee and Jazz smiled bitterly at each other before holding each other's hand. "Because we just have too much love to give." Jimmy smiled ear to ear at the answer and snuggled up to their side.

Not too long after, an officer with long braided hair walked up to them and tipped his hat, upset

at having to interrupt the moment. "Mr. and Mrs. Comet, the parent of Jimmy has arrived."

Nalee sighed and helped Jimmy to his feet, waiting in front of the automatic doors along with Jazz. They both, gripped Jimmy's shoulder. "I know we only had a couple weeks together, but I just want to thank you for coming into our lives."

Soon loud footsteps echoed outside and in ran someone whose appearance sent both parents' heads spinning. "Where is he? Where's my sun?!" Christina roared as she blitzed into the station.

"Christina?" Nalee stuttered. Even then she was wearing those favorite gloves of hers. It was no doubt her.

Jazz held up a shaking finger, absolutely flabbergasted. "What's going on here? You have a son, yes, but he graduated college and moved out of the house years ago!"

Through deep breaths, the neighbor eyed them with surprise. "The Comets? Of course, my son is doing just fine in Seattle with a lovely fiancé but I'm talking about my Sun. You know, the name of my dog? I saw a missing report for someone with purple hair and part blue eyes, so I pounced on it!"

A vein popped on Nalee's head as she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Careful to avoid giving away her frustration, she pinched her nose. "Did... did you not pay attention to the report? That was for a missing child from CPS, not a dog!"

"Oh my bad..." Groaned one of the younger officers clearly still new at the job. He tucked his blonde hair from before his eyes and started typing rapidly.

"Ed, what did you do?" The other asked him annoyed.

Ed just gulped and looked at the party with a nervous chuckle. "It would seem that glitch mixing up Animal Control and our other missing persons systems is still ongoing. Ma'am exactly how fast did you respond to that inquiry?"

Christina sighed, biting her lip in disappointment. "Well I saw some descriptions relating to my dog so I wasted no time."

"And you have no intentions of identifying this boy here?"

She turned to face Jimmy who just looked at her with wide eyes. "You got the purple hair that my husband likes to dye Sun with but other than that, nope. I've never seen this boy before in my life. Nalee, did the adoption agency overturn your previous status after all?" Christina asked only to be greeted with snuffles.

Tears slowly dropped past Jimmy's shoulder as he looked up to find Nalee smiling with quivering lips as her eyes watered with joy. "Maybe... maybe someone higher did."

Jazz grinned brightly at his wife's smile before turning to Christina with a sympathetic look. "I am sorry to hear about Sun. Where was the last time you guys saw him?"

"He vanished on the way back from our Mexico trip. He must've hopped out of the car sometime on the road trip back so it's been hard to pinpoint exactly when he vanished."

Nalee wiped her tears and patted her neighbor on the back. "It's okay, I'm sure you'll find him soon. He's a tough pup."

Christina's disappointment was evident on her face. "Yeah, I hope so."

Jimmy took a deep breath and raised his hand at the officers. "Can I go to the bathroom? Uh, where is it?"

Ed got up with his seat with welcomed him towards the back, showing him where it was. Once inside, Jimmy removed his long johns to let his stars breathe. He got on the floors and crossed legs in a meditation stance and waited. Soon his stars radiated brilliantly like the night before and began to strobe. It wasn't long before even his eyes began to repeat the process.

"Jimmy?" Nalee waded her way into the back after he had been gone for quite some time. She glanced at light strobing around the corner and ran towards it, finding the bathroom with the source behind it. Hearing the sudden rush of footsteps, Jazz snuck past the cops as they were talking further with Christina and joined his wife around the corner.

"Do you think that is..?" He started.

"If we're asking that, it probably is our Jimmy." She hurried over and threw open the door to find Jimmy meditating with glowing eyes and stars strobing. Jazz quickly shut the door to avoid suspicion from the cops before joining Nalee in hugging the boy tightly. "Hey, Jimmy what's wrong?!"

"Nothing... I just feel tired. Don't worry this is normal. It will end soon."

As promised after about another minute, the lightshow began to subside. Eventually he raised his head, still in their grips. Slowly he raised his hands and held them back. "There done. But I feel so..."

"You're right. You win." Nalee suddenly mumbled.

"Huh?"

"We're your parents sport. I can feel it." Jazz said with a watery eyed smile.

"Yes, I've seen too many signs. You're ours, miracle child. I don't care where you came from, only that you'll be here with us from now on."

Jimmy giggled with his own watery eyes and held them tighter. "Of all the gifts you've given me today, this one right here is the best one."

After collecting themselves, Nalee scooped Jimmy up into her arms and made their way for the exit. Upon the doors, they heard excited cooing and hurried to check it out. There by the door was a golden corgi with purple fur at the top of its head dyed, panting happily as Christina cuddled him on the floor. "Oh Sun you've returned! What the- how did you find me here?!"

"What happened?" Jazz asked.

"It's like a miracle, right as we were discussing ways to help her with the dog there he appears barking outside the door." Ed answered.

"Unbelievable."

"Agreed. Speaking of miracles, this was the only lead or response for Jimmy and there still aren't any records of his found. So if you're interested in adopting him, feel free to proceed with the process." Nalee hugged the sleepy boy tightly as they walked out the exit.

"Yes, we will."

Nalee gently set Jimmy on his bed and tucked him in. For the first time, she gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek and prepared to turn on the TV for him to sleep to when he stopped her hand. "Mom can I hear a bedtime story?"

Jazz who was nearby happily looked through the books they bought for an idea but Nalee stopped her. "Sure, but there's no need for a book, I've got it right up here." She tapped her head. "It's called The Boy who Blessed Us." And so she proceeded with the story. The first of many they'd read to him for many days, months and years to come as their son truly and utterly became Jimmy Comet.

6

At home, Christina drank down a scalding cup of coffee. Far too excited by the return of her dog to care. "Oh Sun, I'm so happy you're back!" She patted him on the head and was greeted with happy barks. Her husband shared her smile and cleaned his glasses as the pup rested in his lap.

"While I like to believe he just followed the scent of my perfume, it's clear that something miraculous here happened tonight," She sipped her coffee again, descending into thought. "Sun was reported missing several states over and yet he suddenly appeared moments after I explained my

predicament when that boy was around. Not to mention where did that boy with the Comet couple come from? I heard that one officer say he had no records and nobody claimed him for a long time.”

Her husband swayed his sharp gray bangs and slipped his glasses back on. “I also heard that there was a meteor crash somewhere in town shortly after we left.”

Christina nodded. “That boy was wearing accessories to cover his limbs.”

“So, you think he’s like you?” He asked with a curious smile.

Christina got up and looked down at the long -sleeved garden gloves she always wore. “No doubt. That woozy look he had while being carried away soon after our Sun showed up, it was the same feeling I had with my ability back when I was younger,” Slowly, she slipped her arm wear off to reveal her own set of green and red stars gently illuminating dimly. “I never thought that one of us would fall to this town from up there. Though then again, the Comets have long been trying for their own bundle of joy I shouldn’t really be surprised.”

“Will you tell him?” Her husband stroked his chin in curiosity. “You said yourself that the odds of one of your people meeting another in the world are near nonexistent right?”

Christina thought to herself before shaking her head. “Not right now. His mission is as clear as mine was back when I fell to Earth and was adopted all those decades ago as well as all the other Comet Angels who are sent here to be with human families,” She crossed her arms with a proud grin. “To spread the joy of parenthood. If he ever needs help, then I’ll lend a hand and show him he’s got a fellow neighbor from up there and a potential mentor next door. Until then, I think he’s already succeeding with flying colors.” She thought back to Nalee’s tears of joy at the mere thought of being able to keep Jimmy.

Christina whistled for Sun to join her as she looked up at Jimmy’s still-lit room from her window. “Congratulations Comets. I wish the three of you a new and beautiful life together.”

LOC—Bob Jennings

I was glad to see a new issue of *Eldritch Science* show up a few days ago. It took me a bit longer than usual to read thru it this time, but I thot I’d send along a few comments.

First, I have to ask what happened with the format? Something(s) clearly went wrong with this particular issue. The contents box says there should be 39 pages all total, but the issue logged thru at 82 pages, of which pages 40 thru 82 were presented with headers and borders, but were otherwise blank. Then there is the matter of the third story, “Everything that Glitters” which was repeated in total from pages 28 thru 38. What is going on here?

This was a good solid number with solid enjoyable stories thruout. I am not a big fan of queer fiction, but “We Follow Dragons” by Miranda Rain was an excellent story, very well written, featuring strong characterization of the main protagonist, along with an interesting involved fantasy background that fully complimented the story plot without overrunning it. I thot the handling of the theme of the potential dangers/disasters that might occur when two dragons happen to meet was well developed, and the conversations between Hako and Naharatsa were carefully and subtlety handled. The twist ending came as a surprise to me and it worked very well. This is good writing, all the way thru. The story is so good I would be surprised if Ms Rain were not able to place it somewhere, either with a pro or a semi-pro mag, even in today’s very tight market situation. It’s easy to see why this won first place in the club’s contest.

The second story “A Part From Reality” by Robin Rose Graves was also very well written. She managed to make her central character interesting, and the core situation held my interest. However, I have to say that this was not really a science fiction story. Yes, the back-plot deals with the revelation that the protagonist and her world are a computer simulation, but that isn’t the actual plot.

The plot is how Goldie reacts to this stun-

ning revelation and how she adjusts to its possible consequences. All well and good, but, the exact same story with the exact same reactions and the exact same soul searching and final decisions could have been made if the shocking revelation was, for instance, that customer Olive had revealed that Goldie was adopted and Olive was her real parent, or that Goldie's beloved father was actually an escaped vicious criminal and Olive had to tell her the truth because the state was about to close the case and make all that information public, or that Goldie was an escaped mental patient that Olive has been following for a while and now tells Goldie that she has adapted so well that there will be no further effort to recapture her and return her to the institution. Or, for that matter, the revelation might have been that Goldie's knowledge of reality was actually a drug induced dream and Olive was a doctor pulling her back to reality.

The thing is that the so-called science fiction element in this is just tacked onto the core story plot. In order for a story to be genuine science fiction, the science fictional element must be a central, integral and essential part of the unfolding plot, and in this particular case the SF backdrop is just an insignificant backdrop against which to paint the real plot.

Let me say again that the story was very well written. I was easily able to involve myself with the central characters, and if Ms Graves dropped the SF elements and substituted some other shocking real-world type revelation she might be able to place this tale with one of the many internet women's fiction zines.

I enjoyed the first two stories, but I liked the third one the best. "All That Glitters, Can be Sold" by Jordon Kirton was great fun, an amusing fantasy adventure with interesting characters that fit nicely into the solid fantasy background, and that fantasy background was the very fabric of the story plot. I think that Magpie may have been drawn just a little too conniving and dishonest for the situation. Real traveling wagon peddlers usually made circular routes, coming back again to the places they had been successful plying their trade six months or a year or so afterwards, the better to make more profits selling goods to people who were already satisfied customers.

I thot the tale unfolded really well, with new interesting elements being tossed in constantly to complicate Magpie's situation, and the twist that resolved his dilemma was carefully designed. Again, I really enjoyed this. It was my favorite story of the entire issue.

My only problem with the issue, besides the weird formatting, was the final story, "Sigil". It's not that the basic plot idea is bad; it's that this isn't really a story. The author sets things up, then stops. Where is the tale of what actually happens after he magically endows his football buddies with extraordinary magic abilities? What we have here are the opening paragraphs of what should have been a complete story, but the rest of it is missing.

A small complaint: You mention that the third place contest winning story "The Universe is a Capacious Place" was sold to a professional market, BUT---you don't say what the magazine was or how we might be able to find it. Congratulations to author Charles Walter, but I am sure I am not the only reader who would like to know how to find this award winning tale.

I enjoyed the issue, bur I miss the longer fiction. As I recall the original idea was to use *Eldritch Science* as a place where longer stories could be showcased. I again suggest rummaging around in the pages of older magazines to find forgotten (and copyright free) tales that could be represented to a new audience. I hope to see a new issue from the new editor in a couple of months.

---Bob Jennings

Bob—thank you for your feedback. We apologize for the error in formatting in the January issue. As an all-volunteer organization all of us who put together the zines are having to balance our paying jobs, our families, and other responsibilities in addition to facilitating the content you've enjoyed. Errors are bound to happen even from the best of us. I am sure the omission of the publication which picked up Mr. Walter's story was in a similar vein; if we can track down this information it will appear in a future issue.

Secondly, it is a great day we live in that we can now read more diverse voices in the genres we love. Of course not everything is going to be to everyone's tastes, but that's true of any genre. It is the mark of a great writer that their product can transcend these preferences, and Miranda definitely fits that category.

To specifically address your comments regarding Robin Rose Graves' story 'A Part From Reality': I found the story to be science fiction at its core, akin to the old Twilight Zone episodes (and for that matter more than a few Star Trek episodes). While it's true that the plot twist is the only science fiction element, and that the story would work just as well without it, that can be said of many classic works in science fiction. Heinlein's Starship Troopers could just as easily be about the US Marines fighting the Japanese in the Pacific in World War II. Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles (like many, many other classic science fiction stories from the last century) is a reskinned Western. The fact that certain tropes tend to be commonplace across stories featuring the human element only means that they tend to be commonplace across the human race.

(Incidentally, to dismiss this or any of the other entries in the January issue as 'queer fiction' or 'women's fiction' is quite unfair. Good writing transcends such arbitrary categories that exist only for marketing purposes.)

Science fiction is, among other things, the exploration of how science impacts (and impinges upon) our lives. The characters in Graves' story have had science impinge upon their lives to the point that it has created an existential crisis: what does it mean to exist? Does existence in itself actually have meaning beyond what we ascribe to it? The characters find out that they've been created by an external actor. This is not dissimilar to the religious leanings of a large percentage of humanity (undoubtedly including many of our readers). More to the point, they learn that simulation they live in is no longer being actively controlled but instead has been abandoned to its fate as its creator pursues new projects (again, not that dissimilar to what many people actually believe).

Now, consider another classic science fiction story: Robert Heinlein's Orphans Of The Sky. The discovery by the central characters that their world is, in fact, an enormous spacecraft carrying humanity to another star over the course of generations forces them to make a decision on that knowledge. The story is by anyone's definition science fiction, but at its core completely human.

Substitute 'computer simulation' for 'generation ship' and the situation is much the same in this story. Ultimately in both cases the characters decide that, regardless of how they entered the universe (or who created what up to that point they considered their universe), how they respond to it is up to them. To crib from Epictetus, they've discovered what is in their control and what is not in their control, and the key to happiness is to not concern themselves with what is outside their control.

The debate over what constitutes science fiction has been going on for over a century now and won't be resolved anytime soon. In the meantime, let's just enjoy the ride and acknowledge that there are going to be as many definitions as there are writers (and readers). If it doesn't meet one's own personal definition of 'science fiction' but was enjoyed nonetheless, why render criticism?

As far as republishing older stories from other publications is concerned, copyright is a very sticky issue that a nonprofit volunteer organization that doesn't have its own legal staff shouldn't try to engage. The essence of a zine is that it's by amateurs, for amateurs. It's best to stick to our roots and let any lawyers and judges read our content for pleasure rather than in a professional context.

There will be more long-form fiction coming in the July issue. There are already two great stories lined up, and I am currently getting permission from the authors for more. I wanted to get this issue out because it had been delayed long enough, and the readers of Eldritch Science deserve better.

So be sure to look forward to the July issue (which I promise will come out closer to the beginning of the month than the end!) and you will be happy with the results! — Ed.



Wolfoid by Jose Sanchez