



Featuring:

- **Death On Elsewhere Street** by **Jaine Fenn**
- **Mother and Child** by **Rod Slatter**

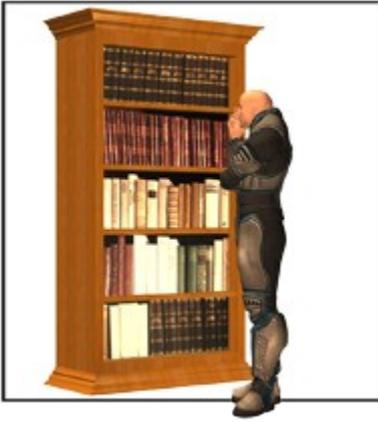
and more. Plus...

- **An interview with Michael Cobley and an excerpt from Seeds of Earth.**
- **Details of the Concept Sci-fi 2009 Short Story competition**

CONCEPT

Sci-fi e-zine





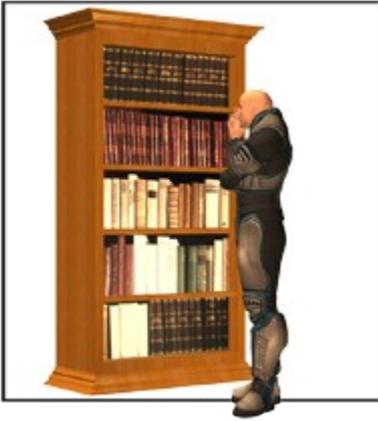
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Editorial

Welcome to the fourth issue of the Concept Sci-fi E-zine, and the first issue of 2009!

In this edition I'm very pleased to include *Death On Elsewhere Street* by Jaine Fenn. This story is set in the same universe as *Principles of Angels*, the first book in her *Hidden Empire* series. I enjoyed reading it very much and it reminds me of some of the RPG games I used to play 'back in the day'.

I'd also like to welcome (once again!) Lee Gimenez. Lee is becoming something of a regular to Concept Sci-fi, with his stories appearing in the second, third and now the fourth issue. The thing that appeals to me most about Lee's work is the no-nonsense approach he takes to story telling. This leaves plenty of room for my imagination to run wild.

This issue is also something of a Michael Cobley-special. Who's Michael Cobley? Well, I suggest that you take a read of his interview to find out. I've included an excerpt from his novel *Seeds of Earth* which is due out in March of this year. Watch out for a mini-review of this book on the Concept Sci-fi website.

As always if you have any suggestions or comments, please email feedback@conceptscifi.com. And if you'd like to subscribe and get future issues directly to your in-box for free, then visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com>. I hope that you enjoy issue #4.

Gary Reynolds.

Editor.

Artwork

Sam Shishekli at www.virtualgeneration.co.uk

Fiction

Jaine Fenn, Michael Cobley, Lee Gimenez, Rod Slatter, Andrew Males, Justin Ryan Schwan, Sean Williams

Non-fiction

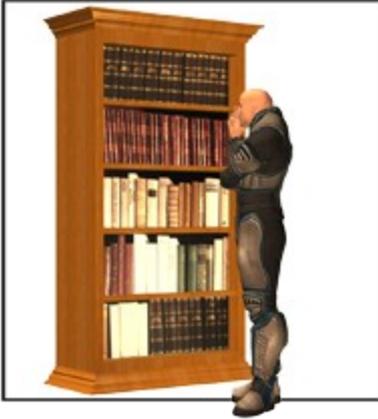
Andrew Males, Gary Reynolds

Poetry

Matt Betts, Andy Arnold

Special Thanks To

Michael Cobley



Death On Elsewhere Street

by Jaine Fenn

'You, girl. Stop. Wait there.'

No chance: I'm off. I'm not hanging around to get jacked or beaten on by some topside girl gang. A leap against the tug of gravity, and I'm running for the Street, heading for the safety of the crowds.

Take a sharp left down the next alley. Can't hear anyone behind me - can't hear anything 'cept my own breathing. My legs are starting to burn - won't be able to run for long up here.

One more turn and I'm on Chow Street. Open space, people everywhere, smells of spiced meat and burnt sugar. I was gonna eat here on my way to Elsewhere Street. Change of plan.

I dart through the crowd, cursing and flailing my arms. Get out the way! Coming round the end of a queue at a sweet-meat bar, I run into a citizen with his face in a bowl of noodles. The impact nearly floors me. His dinner goes flying. As I spin away he shouts after me, 'Bloody downsiders!'

Ahead, a pedicab, stopped. I dash behind it, crouch down and peer back. Plenty of people looking this way, but no-one coming after me.

The pedicab starts moving. City's sake! There goes my cover. A pair of rollers stare across from their seat on the 'cab like I'm going to explode or something as they pull away. I give them a quick grin, then turn and slip back into the crowd, hunching low, trying to ignore the pain in my legs. Need to keep topside short, move nice and slow, blend in.

I let the crowd carry me up to the next alley, then peel off from the flow into the sidestreets, straightening up as soon as I'm out of the light. No food tonight, but at least I'll be early. Jacard'll be late. He's not a bad person, better than most I've screwed for pleasure or favor, but reliable he ain't.

Someone shouts behind me. Might be nothing to do with me, but there's no point taking chances. I break into a run, risking a glance over my shoulder.

Big mistake. My feet go from under me and - splat! - I'm on my back staring up at the big orange sky. Good job the stinky garbage I slipped on gave me a nice soft landing or that would have really hurt. Soon as I can breathe again, I roll over, lever myself up onto all fours, and raise my head.

Before me stands an apparition in black and scarlet.

Aw, fuck. It's an Angel.

'Have you no respect, girl?' Her voice is soft but her gaze is hard.

Shit and Blood, I ran from an Angel. She's going to kill me. 'I didn't realize ... thought you were some smoky cove ... gonna jack me.' I scrabble to sit up. If I'm gonna die, I'd rather not do it on my knees.

'You know your mistake now.' She's pureblood downsider, like me. Tall, slim, large pale eyes and fine white hair. Unlike me she's clean and well-fed, and while I'm in some cove's cast-offs, she wears a shiny red bodice over a skintight black bodysuit. 'I need you to come with me. To be my witness.' She offers me her hand. Too stunned to argue, I reach up and take it. I've never touched an Angel before. Her palm is cold and hard.

She pulls me to my feet, then strides off at a fierce pace. Topside gravity is no problem for her, blessed amongst downsidiers, sacred instrument of the will of the people, yadda yadda yadda. As she turns, I notice the narrow black case on a strap over her shoulder. She's on City business. That's what she meant about being her witness. She needs witnesses to make a removal legal; I don't follow the Concord that close, so I couldn't say how many, but it looks like I'm one of them. Great.

When I came topside tonight I'd been thinking how my luck had finally changed for the better. Jacard was my ticket to a better life. He's got plenty of cred, loads of contacts, and he likes me. Says he's fixed with his new boss for a topside apartment and though we can't live there full time I've always dreamed of having a place to stay up here. A chance to sleep somewhere with a door that can be locked and neighbors who don't want to eat me, that would be pure blade. Jacard was going to meet me in The Vision Tree and take me to see it. If I don't show he might decide I'm not worth the effort. He'll never believe I got commandeered by an Angel.

After a few steps the Angel stops and looks back at me. Her eyes glitter like she's upset, stoned, crazy, maybe all three. Scared, I freeze, but then she makes a small noise of irritation, turns and carries on. All right, Lady, I'm coming, keep your spurs on. We don't all have City juju in our bones to help us deal with the gravity up here.

After that she slows her pace, and I just about manage to keep up, stumbling along at her shoulder while she leads me through the sidestreets. She's heading for Elsewhere Street, which suits me fine, but it's not what I expected; I thought we'd be off to the State Quarter. Still, I'm sure some politicos like to hang out in the Leisure Quarter, and I don't think there's anything in the Concord about where they have to be killed. I'd ask her about the hit, but she doesn't look to be in the mood for talking. At least no-one's going to mug me now, not when I'm with an Angel.

By the time we reach Elsewhere Street I've got used to the ache in my legs. I heard somewhere that we downsidiers all come from topside stock, back before my ancestors decided they liked life better in the vanes and nets under the City rather than exposed to the open sky on top of it. I guess given the way some of us make a living there's probably a bit of topside blood in all of us. Whatever the reason, once I get into my stride the pain eases off a bit.

There's a glow at the end of the alley. We're almost at Elsewhere Street. It's a quiet Street, but bright as any in the Leisure Quarter.

The Angel stops at an intersection where a sidestreet runs off our alley. We're still ten meters away from the Street. 'You know this area, girl?'

I nod. It's here then.

'So do I.'

I hear the threat: I'm not stupid.

'Go round the corner into the Street. Cross over, walk along a ways, then come back to this side. Go into the next alley up and come back down this sidestreet. You understand?'

'Aye Lady. Er, what am I looking for?'

She smiles tightly. 'Anything you think should concern me.'

I've never seen a removal, but I thought they were pretty formal affairs; failed politicians getting their just reward from an Angel while the coves and rollers politely applauded and took bets on exactly how the poor bastard would take the fall. This seems too casual. Messy even. But I do as she says.

The alleyway running up to the Street is clear. No windows overlooking it and no-one there. I saunter out into the holograms and crowds of Elsewhere Street. You get a better class of punter here than on some Streets; there are still a few burn-out cases who've decided to sink into their own version of reality near the source of their vice, but they're just human litter, they don't bother anyone. Some of the big parlors and bars have queues, and the sky is full of ads.

I'm a fair way out from The Vision Tree: I can barely make out their logo above the crowds. They have a tree that looks just like the real ones in the Gardens, with weird shaped fruits on it. The fruits are flatscreens, showing the fun to be had inside.

I take care crossing the Street; lots of pedicabs here. This ain't a sightseers' Street, not like Soft or Groove. Here the pleasure to be had is in your head, and you just take the quickest route to get there.

One of the net-heads against the wall looks up and mumbles something as I pass, but when I reach for my blades he just holds his hands out, smiling and drooling. No idea what Street his mind is on.

Wish I knew what's making the Angel so jumpy. Anything that worries an Angel should sure as shit be stressing me.

I cross back. I'm dodging against the main flow of the crowd now, but most people get out my way. Coves think we're scum; they live here, and they know how we envy them their nice safe topside world. For the rollers – tourists here for the fun and danger - the Angels' rep reflects on all downsidars. Same result – no one bothers me out in the Street.

The alleyway feels too narrow and dark after the glare of Elsewhere Street. My mouth goes dry: paranoia must be catching. This is where she wants me to go, so go I do. Half way down, movement makes me jump. Just some bit of trash that's caught a draft. Still, I'm glad to reach the other end of the alley.

The Angel is leaning against the wall. She watches me approach. 'Well?'

'It's not that crowded. I didn't see anything odd.'

She looks annoyed. What did she expect? It's not like I know what I'm meant to be looking for.

She steps forward, puts her hands under my arms and then we're shooting upwards. I gawk at her chin and swallow my words.

She kicks, we go sideways, and she drops me. I claw the air, but I'm only half a meter above a solid surface. My legs fold, and I sprawl onto a flat roof. She touches down and looks around while I gulp my guts back down my throat.

I'd like to stay down but she gestures for me to stand. 'Watch the back and sides of the building. When I'm set I'll not be able to pay attention there. When you pass the front stay away from the parapet.'

I stare dumbly at her. My body hasn't recovered from flying yet.

'Do you understand?' Her eyes look huge.

I pull myself upright. 'Aye, Lady.'

Ignoring me again, she sits back on her heels, swings the case round onto her lap, and opens it. Time to take a walk. The people in the Street look weird from up here, just heads and feet. Most of the holo ads play below the level of the roof, and whole sections of the crowd are lit up in color. There's a holo generator up here, and other stuff I don't recognize. No obvious way down, though.

'What are you called, girl?'

I look back at her. She has her gun assembled now. 'My name? You want to know my name?' Telling her my name makes things too real, too personal.

'Aye child. Your name.' She picks up the gun and stands. Every Angel customizes her gun. This one has a heavy looking barrel, though the stock is little more than a triangle of silver filigree. The finger-pads are marked in silver.

'My name is Geal, Lady.'

'Geal.' She says my name as though it seals a bargain. 'I want you to remember this, Geal. Remember what you see today.'

I nod. Doubt I'll be able to forget it.

'I am the Angel Thiera. I am thirty years old. As an agent of the Concord, I have taken eleven lives, not once knowing why they must die, or who they really were.' She grimaces and glances down at her gun. 'I am worshipped for that.'

Not by me, she's not. Angels are the chosen - enhanced, privileged and respected - but till now I've been happy to avoid them.

She walks to the front of the roof and kneels down, holding the gun casually under one arm. Fascinated despite myself, I move over to stand behind her. She's focused on her task and doesn't notice. She lays the gun across her folded legs and bows her head briefly, then lifts the weapon and kneels up, slipping the barrel onto the parapet. She focuses down the sight. I follow her gaze.

On the far side of Elsewhere Street, near the net-heads, something is going down. Two small groups, striding up to each other. The figures are distorted by the holos, but one lot look like rollers - taller than citizens and dressed weird but smart. The other lot are coves in sharp suits, the seconds walking half a pace behind the main man. They're flanked by a pair of downsider guards. I recognize one of the guards.

It's Jacard.

This is no faceless politician. This is someone I know. She can't kill someone I know.

I throw myself at the Angel. Her shoulders are tensed, fingers already on the firing pads. At the last moment she sees me and pulls away to one side. Her hands pull free of the pads.

That's all it takes.

There's no sound: Angels' guns are silent. They fire invisible light, light that burns. The first sign that she has fired is a screech from below.

I stagger past her. She stands. She is looking at me, her face all shock and fury. The gun is still pointed down into the Street.

There's a popping noise and something above us explodes in a shower of sparks. She ducks and returns fire. Her gun is an assassin's weapon, not designed for a stand-up fight. She presses her fingers to the firing pads and releases, sweeping the gun across in front of her in a slow arc.

More screams. No more shots.

I'm frozen, stunned. Will she just keep firing until the screaming stops, till everyone is dead?

She steps back from the parapet and holds her gun out at arm's length. She looks at it in disgust, like it did the killing, not her, then drops it. It falls with a clatter. She turns to face me.

'Look what you made me do.' Her expression is twisted, but her voice is quiet.

I scramble to my feet and fumble for the knives at my wrist.

She laughs, a low, hollow sound, and takes a step back, light as a dancer. Then she flicks her wrists forward.

From the front of her wrists blades protrude: thin, gleaming, metallic, nearly as long as her forearm. My blades are just a child's pathetic copy of her weapons.

I'm going to die.

'Enough.'

The voice comes from behind her. We both freeze. Her eyes don't leave my face, but the laugh becomes a snarl.

'I said, Enough.' The speaker floats above the back of the roof. Another Angel. She is shorter than Thiera, a dark-haired half-breed, dressed in a one piece black suit with a pattern of scarlet lines at neck and wrist. I recognize her; she used to live near me. Her name is Nual; she has a perfect record - a dozen clean kills - and a reputation for knowing stuff without being told.

Thiera gives me a look of cold contempt. Without turning she says, 'I thought it was you following me. I'd have to do more than take to the Streets to shake you.' She sounds calmer than she looks.

Nual says softly, 'You've killed a lot of people today, Thiera.'

'Aye,' she moves her head slightly to indicate me, 'thanks to this stupid bitch. All I wanted was to make a difference. To kill one who deserved it, for once.'

'I'll not deny that. But he was still a citizen, an important one. And you killed without orders. That makes you rogue.'

'So it does.' She inclines her head and turns slowly, spurs still out. The other Angel says nothing, as though she knows words won't help. Below us, someone is shouting for help.

'You're going to call feud on me then?'

Nual nods reluctantly. 'I have no choice.'

'So be it.' Thiera sounds like this is what she wanted all along. Without waiting for a reply, she leaps for Nual's throat.

Nual throws her arms up to knock Thiera's attack aside. The impact spins them round and flings them off the roof. They fly across the alleyway and hit the far wall in a tangle of limbs. Thiera kicks backwards off the wall, trying for the distance to swing her blades again.

Nual bounces after her, but Thiera gets her knee free and kicks Nual back against the wall.

Nual must be stunned, she still doesn't have her spurs out.

It looks like Thiera has her cold, but then Nual drops out of sight. Thiera follows her. I run up to the parapet to see them clash again, one story below.

Thiera fights wildly, fiercely, trying for space to stab or slash her opponent. Nual stays close, concentrating on parrying the other Angel's blades; her own weapons are still not out. Unmodified, Nual's hands would have been cut to ribbons.

The alley's too narrow, and they bounce off walls, spinning and flailing, falling steadily, too busy fighting to concentrate on flying.

Thiera punches her knee into Nual's stomach and throws herself backwards. She kicks off the far wall as she touches it, heading back across the alley while Nual gasps for air. Thiera comes straight at her, arms out. As she hurtles forward, she sweeps her arms back. Nual raises her hands as though to catch her. There is a flash of metal. Thiera hits her full on, and they slam into the far wall.

I expect movement but they just hang there, unmoving, faces close enough for a kiss. Then Thiera's head droops to one side. Nual glances up at me and closes her eyes. They start to fall, slowly.

When they reach the ground Thiera sags in Nual's arms. Nual follows her down, lowering the other woman to the ground. As she stands I see the darker stain over the red of Thiera's bodice, catch the quick motion as Nual flicks her blade back into her arm. She bends down to close Thiera's eyes before kicking upwards.

I shrink back from the parapet, but Nual steps onto the edge and holds out a hand. The other hand, by her side, drips red.

I can't go near her. I hold my own hands out, like I'm handing her the responsibility for all this shit. 'I ... I never wanted to hurt anyone. Please.' There are noises from the Street below, bad noises, death noises. She should kill me, for interfering, for causing this. I have to try to explain. 'I thought she was trying to kill ... someone I know. I couldn't allow that. I made her shoot wild. Then she shot again. Like it just didn't matter any more. I'm sorry.' Pitiful excuse. My whole body is shaking: I feel like I could fall apart at any moment.

'You were trying to save your lover.'

I wonder how she knew, decide it doesn't matter. 'Aye, Lady. But ...' I force myself to walk over to the parapet. I have to know. If she won't punish me then I have to do it myself. She doesn't stop me. I look down. Most of those who can still walk are gone, though a few are helping others get clear of the carnage, crouching low, looking around fearfully. They have no idea where death came from, no way of knowing if it will come again. At least two dozen are dead or beyond help. Some have obvious wounds, some have parts missing, some are apparently intact. There isn't as much blood as I'd expected.

Jacard is lying face up near the middle of the Street, one hand outstretched, eyes open. The only sign of the wound that killed him is a thin burn across the front of his shirt. I feel desolate, mourning not just for Jacard, but for the whole gross stupidity of it.

'It is done. It cannot be undone. Come here.'

I look at her sharply, in case this is the death I deserve, but she's just offering me a way down. I go to her, and she puts an arm around my waist and lifts me off the roof. Where my hand brushes her clothes it comes away red. For a moment I think I'm going to puke, but we drop quickly, and she lets me go as soon as my feet touch the ground.

She crouches down beside the other Angel's body, and I gesture at Thiera. 'W-Why ... ?' I stutter, not sure what I'm asking.

Nual looks up at me and says, 'For some Angels there comes a time when the killing becomes unbearable, or worse, necessary. And we all need ways to evade the ghosts of our victims. Thiera had been flirting with chemical oblivion for some time. When she found the drugs had got the better of her, she tried to break the addiction. She failed. So, she chose to cut the problem off at the source. To save herself, and maybe others. She wanted you here to witness her attempt at redemption, knowing that was all the memorial she would get.'

For the first time in my life, I see Angels as people. Not as minions of the City, not as goddesses, but people who had to live with what they did. As I'd have to live with what I'd done. Thiera had done the right thing, in the end. Assuming she'd succeeded. 'The dealer, is he dead?' I whisper.

'No.' Her eyes, darker than any I've ever looked into, hold my gaze for a moment. Then she looks away, puts her hands under Thiera's body and lifts the dead Angel. Thiera's head rests on her shoulder, like a sleeping child.

It ain't right that the one person who *should* have died today is still breathing.

I walk past her, into the aftermath. The Street is deserted; even the net-heads have gone. I smell burnt flesh, but at least the screams have stopped. Eventually the baton-boys will arrive and clear up the mess. I'll be long gone by then.

I'm not shaking any more. I am filled with purpose.

The dealer is easy to spot, by his clothes, by the way the dead cluster around him. He's leaning up against the wall, hunched over an arm burnt to the bone, moaning softly to himself. No need to hurry; he ain't going nowhere.

I stop beside Jacard's body.

I didn't love Jacard. Love is dangerous, and I'll live longer if I avoid it. But I liked him. I almost trusted him. And I never wished him dead.

When I bend down to close my lover's eyes the skin is already cold. All that life, all that possibility, and now it's nothing but meat.

There's something wrong with my own eyes. I look up, blinking to clear my vision.

The dealer's conscious now, and when he sees my head go up he calls out, 'Hey you! Come here. That's right. Over here.'

I straighten, and without speaking, without looking back at Jacard's body, I go over to him. The dealer's gaze says he thinks I'm simple, or in shock. I squat next to him. He doesn't notice what my hands are doing.

One of his thugs died inconveniently, pinning his legs. He pushes at the body with his undamaged arm, a mime I'm meant to pick up on. 'That's it, help me shift this thing. If you get me to a medic they'll be a reward for you, girl.' He's not paying attention to me. He's in pain, and I'm just some downsider joygirl. When I don't follow his instructions, he glances up. His eyes track sudden movement, and he opens his mouth to cry out.

Then my knife is in his eye. Someone told me that once: on an incapacitated foe, go for the eye. A sure killer with a thin blade, and less messy than the throat.

He makes a noise between a hiss and a snort and raises his good hand, flailing weakly. I move back a little, to keep out of the way. After a few moments his mouth gapes and he stops moving.

I pull the blade from his eye; blood and nasty clear stuff comes with it. He's meat too now. The good and the bad, all meat in the end.

I've never killed before today - always preferred to talk or fuck my way out of trouble, me - but I had to finish the job Thiera started, to make her death mean something. This particular scumbag won't be bringing any more of his shit into my City. I wipe my blade on the arm of his suit, then stand.

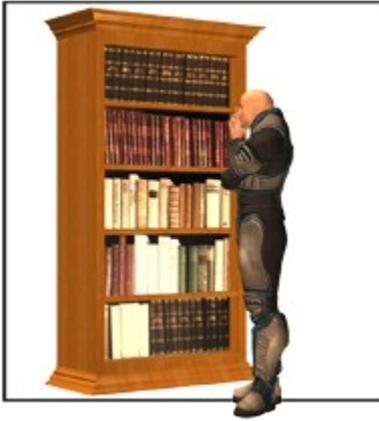
The Angel Nual is watching me from the mouth of the alley, her dead sister cradled in her arms. I nod to her and re-sheaf my knife. As I turn to go she gives a small, sad smile, and takes to the air.



Jaine is the author of Principles of Angels – the first book in the Hidden Empire series. The second book in the series, Consorts of Heaven, is due out in the summer of 2009.

For further information on Jaine, you can visit her website at www.jainefenn.com

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Concept Sci-fi 2009 Short Story Competition

Concept Sci-fi is running its first annual short story competition - your chance to win £100 and some signed goodies!

This year Sean Williams, author of the *Astropolis* series and numerous Star Wars books, will be judging the competition. He's also responsible for setting the theme...

Frank Zappa once said that everything in the universe is part of one great big note. He wasn't far wrong. There's music in the earth's core, in the sun's atmosphere, even in the roiling fire of the Big Bang. There's music in our interior lives too, in the stories we tell. "Music can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable", according to Leonard Bernstein, which makes it a perfect tool in the writing of space opera--my true but not my only love.

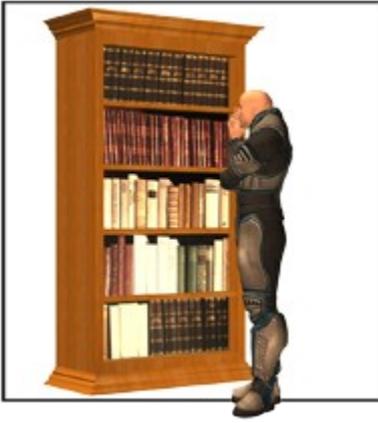
Way back in the late 1980s, I had to choose between two lives: one writing words and another writing notes. In an alternate universe, there's a version of me beavering away at a new symphony, or the score to a Hollywood movie. Here, the closest I get is putting Gary Numan lyrics in the mouths of my characters, and dreaming.

Dream for me. Tell me the note that ripples through spacetime in the wake of an alien cruiser. Convey to me the songs that alien cephalopods whistle in their jovian soup. Give me the music of the spheres as you hear it. When the echoes fade, we'll all be richer for it.

The competition costs £3.50 to enter and all short-listed entries will be published in a special edition of the ezine. The winning entry will be decided by Sean and announced on the Concept Sci-fi website, with the winner receiving £100 (GBP) and signed copies of *Saturn Returns*, *Earth Ascendant* and *The Grand Conjunction*. So, what are you waiting for? To view the competition details, please visit <http://www.conceptscifi.com/competition.htm>

And why not check out *The Jackie Onassis Swamp-Buggy Concerto* below. A short story by Sean that provides his own personal take on the theme.

Good luck everyone!



The Jackie Onassis Swamp-Buggy Concerto

by Sean Williams

"Music is a phenomenon common to all known sapient forms of life. The details of rhythm, harmony and melody may vary from culture to culture, and sometimes do so quite dramatically, but the underlying principles remain constant. Provided only that an auditory sense exists, Music at its fundamental level is as prevalent as life itself."

—Schubert Dandrugh, *Music and the Mind*

It wasn't hard to rig the dropship at all. Me, I thought it'd be a touch tricky, what with them being designed for more Earth-like environments and all, but no. The problems just ironed themselves out, with a little encouragement.

First we sealed all the lower hatches and vents, welded them shut and layered the bottom hull with carbon-fibre mats. Then we narrowed the outlet vanes by thirty percent and mixed the reaction-mass with water, for a better thrust 'spike', as Goose called it. More kick is what he meant. It was a little more difficult when it came to streamlining the nose profile, but we managed it in the end by removing all external projections, including weapons and antennae. Each dropship already had an armoured hull, standard for pioneer missions, so only the skeletons needed reinforcement; solid steel girders at every stress-point did the job—although we nearly gutted the mothership getting it right. Shame about that, but it had to be exactly right or else it wouldn't work.

The fins came last. We thought they were a good idea at the time, but in retrospect I guess they weren't.

We ended up with four weird-looking dropships. Like fish, I swear. Great big goldfish four hundred metres long, with flat, black bellies and thick torpedo-fins sticking out of the tails; bug-eyed guppies designed to skim the surface of a methane planet. We re-christened them 'buggies' and gave them individual names: *Firebird*, *Sharkey*, *Flipper*, and *Jackie Onassis II*. The last after the mothership, of course.

We drew lots and my number came up amongst the hundred for *Firebird*. Goose drew the same, and I took that as a good omen. The song in my head sounded real strong as we checked, rechecked and fired the engines.

The four buggies, filled with their cat-calling crews, left the skeletal framework of the *Jackie Onassis* and aimed for separate descent corridors. I was on *Firebird*'s first-lieutenant's desk manning the new hydraulics, and she didn't miss a beat. She handed real well. I was whistling as we spiralled slowly into the thin atmosphere of Medusa.

I remembered how bored we had all been with the mission, prior to our discovery. Standard military recon, taking photos and distributing names. Very dull; not at all like the old books and movies. As soon as we approached close enough to see the moon properly, however, we'd known what to do, and the music made it easier.

"Name that tune," said Goose with a cheesy grin on his face, from his position behind *Firebird's* makeshift helm.

"Beats me," I said. "But I got it bad."

"Sounds a bit like a Bach violin concerto," said Charmers, on comm.

"Or Beethoven," put in Stan.

"I hear Zappa," said Goose.

"Who?" Bach and Beethoven I'd heard of—without actually hearing, if you know what I mean—but not Zappa.

"Late Twentieth. Doesn't matter." Goose dropped the controls, put *Firebird* on auto. "All that matters is winning!"

We agreed whole-heartedly—all except poor old Symonds. He was tone-deaf, with not a drop of music in his entire body. He looked pretty pathetic where we'd tied him up at the back of *Firebird's* bridge, still trussed in a strait-jacket like a chicken ready for stuffing—the closest thing to a mascot we had. But I had to admire his guts, or whatever it was he had.

"You're all crazy," he moaned, shaking his head at our antics. "You've killed the ship, and now you're going to kill all of us as well."

"Not all," said Goose, shutting him up with a look. "That's not the deal. The winners are exempt."

"How do you know?"

"Because I do. We all do."

"But—"

"Can it, would you? We've got work to do."

Firebird touched down in a shower of spray, dipping its starboard fin into the muck and 'accidentally' drenching *Jackie-O II*. Our reaction vents left a boiling wake behind us as we jockeyed into position. My heart pounded as the four buggies lined up at the starting-line.

Then everyone started singing, and the noise was deafening.

"No matter where you go, the relationship between frequencies and the ratios of the primary harmonics are constant—fixed by simple mathematics. The principles of Music, like those of thermodynamics, are immutable throughout the universe."

—Schubert Dandrigh, *Music and the Mind*

Medusa was the perfect place for the race. The outermost moon of a dark gas-giant called Krataios, fifth planet of the unmapped Keto system, it was virgin methane swamp, completely covered by a grey-green, sludgy ocean rarely more than two hundred metres deep. The odd purple geyser and orange hot-spot, but that's it. No metals, no rare earths, no fissionables. Other than the indigenous life-forms, there was absolutely nothing worth coming here for.

Apart from the race.

The computer counted us down: "Ten." Our engines spewed steam and heat into the alien environment; *Firebird* trembled on the brink of breakneck acceleration. "Five." The exchange of voices halted for a split-second and all that could be heard was the music, egging us on. "One." I held my breath.

"Go!"

We surged forward in an explosion of boiling methane, taking the lead immediately. The crew of *Flipper* tried to challenge, but we cut contemptuously across their bow, forcing them back. The region behind us quickly vanished under a wake of super-heated gases. We rode the tip of a triangular cloud, inside which lurked our enemies, the other buggies. We were off!

"Yee-haw!" screamed Goose as he wrenched at the controls. I manned the hydraulics, singing the battle-song at the top of my voice. It was almost too easy.

For all its modifications, though, the buggy wasn't meant for this kind of thing. Its underbelly bounced and slewed off the alien ocean, skidding sickeningly from side to side. Every time we hit a denser patch, we'd rocket twenty metres into the sky, then crash back down in slow-mo. Goose jockeyed the thrust-vents, fighting as best he could to keep our thrust smooth and regular.

Somehow we held our lead. The other buggies were hard-pressed to catch up our initial burst of speed. Occasionally one would inch closer, trying to find a path through the turbulence of our wake, only to fall back moments later to bide its time, to wait for an opportunity.

We turned at the first marker, a geyser that looked something like a peacock's tail-feather. The second leg was trickier: lots of dodging and weaving. Orders were shouted amongst the crew:

"Starboard reactor overheating! Dampen it fast!"

"Power surge in reactor five! Keep an eye on it!"

"Hull breach on level three! Get those pumps working!"

"Dum-dum-de-DUM-dum-dee!"

"Incoming! *Incoming!*"

We turned to the scanners as one, our hearts pounding.

The streamlined nose of *Sharkey*, painted with a ferocious shark's mouth, nudged out of our wake a few kilometres to port. It edged alongside *Firebird*, grinning malevolently—the first serious threat to our lead we'd had since the beginning of the race. This wasn't a bluff: it was the real thing.

Goose fluttered the drive, made it look like we were turning to starboard. *Sharkey* swooped after us, closing in to challenge.

At precisely the right moment we dipped to port and poured on the gas. *Firebird* went into a controlled skid, turning three hundred and sixty degrees without changing course. Our starboard fin raked a vicious line down the hull of the other buggy. The impact was jarring for both ships, but we were ready for it.

Sharkey backed off, lost control and started to roll. With a mighty *whoosh* of spray, it tumbled end over end and vanished into our roiling wake. A moment later, according to our aft scan, it broke apart, sending fragments bouncing across the grey-green sea.

We all cheered, except for Symonds, who looked like he wanted to be sick.

One down. Two to go.

"Communication between species is not always possible, however. If one medium of language has nothing at all in common with another then, regardless of intelligence and motive, little of meaning can be exchanged by either party."

—Schubert Dandrough, *Music and the Mind*

The others weren't far behind as we negotiated the second marker. *Jackie-O II* and *Flipper*, riding the slipstream right up *Firebird's* backside, were relying on us to navigate for them, and it was pissing Goose off no end that we were doing all the hard work, let me tell you.

The course had been mapped from the *Jackie-O* the day before, but hot-spots, which looked from the surface like low, orange hills, didn't appear on scan, could only be spotted by eye. It was just a matter of time before one crossed our path. In sludge this shallow, anything was possible.

So being in the lead was dangerous. We ran the risk of hitting a relatively solid object and crippling the buggy. As it was, the collision with *Sharkey* had unsettled some of the systems. The starboard fin was a little warped, which added an undesirable element of drag to our profile.

Since we couldn't rely on brute force to win the day, we were forced to resort to cunning.

"Follow the leader," said Goose, grinning.

Half way through the third leg, a low range of hills appeared forward and to starboard—composition unknown; probably heavier chemicals heated by the core, bubbling to the surface, but there was no way to be sure. A complex chemical analysis was impossible with the buggies stripped of everything but basic scan.

Goose, changing our course gently, nudged us towards them anyway. The other buggies, he hoped, would assume that we were steering to avoid an obstacle and tail along. Why would we possibly head *into* a hot-spot? We hoped they wouldn't guess.

They didn't. Predictable.

Closer came the orange hills. We were way off course. Still the others followed, like pets on a leash. Nearer.

At the last moment, Goose cut thrust and dipped our nose into the ocean. *Firebird* screamed and bucked, decelerating in a manner we had not designed her to. Seven of us died in our impact-braces, killed by sheer inertia. Something went *crack* in the drive chamber.

Jackie-O II and *Flipper* sped by, shooting out of our wake and into the hills. By the time they realised what had happened it was too late to change course, but they tried anyway.

We didn't stop around to watch. We were already heading back to the third and last marker, picking up speed in fits and starts, when *Flipper* hit something and blipped out. The surge of song and cheering drowned out any sorrow I might have felt for the loss of my old shipmates.

Our triumph, however, was short-lived.

Jackie-O II's luck held. It passed through the hills unstopped and turned to follow us, making up for lost time with uncanny speed. Within five minutes, it had edged past us, a little battered but structurally intact.

Our cries of victory took on a sombre tone. We were being beaten! The music became mournful.

"Buck up, boys," said Goose over all-stations.

"But we're losing," moaned Charmers.

"The game's not over until the fat lady sings!"

"Hear hear!" I added, trying to force the hydros to function properly, whistling defiantly as I worked.

"You're insane," moaned Symonds. "You sound like someone from a B-grade space opera."

"Shut up, you," said Goose, and hit him across the face.

I turned my eyes back to my station with the song dying in my throat. Symonds hadn't deserved that. Sure, he was being a wet blanket, but that wasn't his fault. On any other occasion I might have taken Goose to task for it. Just then, though, the race was more important.

Symonds watched me closely for five minutes, then turned away when I started singing again, the brief altercation with Goose long forgotten.

"The members of some species communicate with each other by sound, some by touch, some by smell. Only a very rare few, those we call the hallucinogenae, are able to communicate by that most perplexing of media: thought itself."

—Schubert Dandrough, *Music and the Mind*

Jackie-O II's raging slipstream engulfed us a short time later, and we were forced to switch to instruments. The wake became less turbulent as time passed, but still our velocity dropped.

"Marker on port," said Goose, and we braced ourselves for the turn. "Last chance to make good coming up!"

We turned.

The last leg was not so much a track as a playing field one hundred clicks across. It had been specified from the start that only one buggy would cross the finish line, so here was where any unresolved scores would be settled. Though the methane surface was restless in the wake of *Jackie-O II*'s passage, we had line-of-sight to most quarters.

But *Jackie-O II* itself was nowhere to be seen.

"What the...?" muttered Goose as he swung *Firebird* about, searching for a target. Nothing. "They've gone! The cowardly bastards have cheated!"

Stan took a look at the scope. It was still. There was nothing at sea-level within two hundred clicks. The crew muttered amongst themselves in consternation.

"They've lifted off?" I asked, appalled.

"They must've." Goose swung us through another futile turn while I watched the sky nervously, waiting for the fugitive buggy to drop out of it and onto us.

"Not necessarily," said Stan, frowning furiously. "They might have—"

"Target!" screamed Charmers from his station. "Behind us!"

"What?" Goose studied the screen, as did I. Sure enough, there was *Jackie-O II*, accelerating towards us. The trace had appeared from nowhere. "How the hell?"

Stan almost laughed. "They didn't lift off," he cried, gesturing wildly. "They ducked under! The clever sons of—"

The roar of the drive cut him short.

Goose threw us forward, full-throttle, trying to outrun the approaching buggy. The music surged and *Firebird* did its level best to meet our demands, which were a lot, considering. Goose jiggled and ducked, making us hard to track. Systems overheated. My hydros were busting at the seams—quite literally—to keep us both afloat and on course.

But we weren't going to make it.

They were going to catch us.

We were going to lose.

They loomed hard on our tail, and Goose swung us violently left. Something went bang, loudly, but we stayed afloat. *Firebird* splashed away at a sharp tangent. *Jackie-O II* arced back after us, fighting a war of attrition that only they could win.

"Shit!" Goose was sweating, red-faced. Another lurch. Another near miss.

"We have to do something!" I cried, feeling the music swell painfully in my skull. Dodging wasn't enough. We had to fight!

The third miss was almost too close. The commander of *Jackie-O II* was getting impatient. I wondered if they had the guts to ram. I wondered if Goose did, too.

He didn't let me down.

We turned about in a slow curve, sending methane spray arcing into the black sky. *Jackie-O II* headed in the other direction, knowing what we were trying to do.

"They won't," said Stan. "They've got more to lose."

"I know," said Goose, and there was a sudden glint in his eye. "But we've got more to gain."

Symonds stirred in his corner. "Listen to yourself, man! Don't you hear what you're saying? You're talking about killing everyone!"

"Not everyone. Only the ones standing between us and victory."

"Victory?" Symonds snorted. "Some victory. We'll be trapped here forever. Why can't you see what you're *doing*?"

Watching the two of them argue, I felt myself becoming confused. Half-formed thoughts stirred at the back of my mind, and a sense of uncertainty wormed its way forward.

What, exactly, *were* we fighting for?

"I know what I'm doing," muttered Goose dangerously, in time with the prevailing tune. "I have a *plan*."

A surge of hope revitalised my faith in him. A plan! Goose would pull us through. Sure he would. How had I ever doubted him?

"Terrific," said the one dissenting voice in all of the crew. "That makes me feel a whole lot better."

Goose ordered Symonds gagged, and turned back to the controls of the buggy.

We completed our turn at the edge of the playing field and bolted forward with as much thrust as we could muster. *Jackie-O II* hesitated, then did likewise. The two buggies locked on a nose-to-nose collision course with almost thirty seconds before impact. I knew they'd probably turn aside at the last moment, but part of me hoped they wouldn't. They had the most to lose, as Goose had said.

Half-way in, with *Jackie-O II*'s nose glinting a baleful red in the forward scanners, Goose sent us rolling about our long axis. I clutched the arm of my impact-chair and wondered what the hell he was doing. Was this his plan? To make us all motion-sick? How would that help us? Or had he genuinely lost control? I tried to out-think Goose, but couldn't. The tiny worm of doubt stirred again.

Then the port fin hit the surface—hard—and everything went crazy.

My head snapped back right down my spine. Alarms sounded; red lights flashed. I struggled to regain my senses. Half my board was red-lit. Everything down the port side of the ship was dead. The fin—

The fin was gone!

Goose cursed the buggy as it fought his instructions. The roll slowed. We turned out of our headlong course. *Jackie-O II* went by on our starboard bow, flashing its lights as though to say, "Chicken! Chicken!" I could almost hear its crew laughing at our cowardice.

Then it hit the wreckage of our port fin.

The rear scanner showed it perfectly. *Jackie-O II's* nosed dipped suddenly. Its rear end flipped up and over and came down *hard*, still trying to keep going. The drives ran for a split-second before exploding in a blossom of light.

Metal rained over the boiling methane ocean. As the burning skeleton sank, a towering cloud rose into the sky, like smoke from a pyre.

Symonds spat out his gag. "Oh my God," he cried. "What now?"

We cheered and sang until I thought our throats would burst.

It was almost over.

"In order to link two minds, by speech or any other means, we need some aspect that is common to both minds, no matter how far removed they might be by mere details of chemistry and evolution. In the case of the hallucinogenae, where the mind is a transmitter broadcasting like a radio station, music acts as the carrier-wave."

—Schubert Dandrough, *Music and the Mind*

Firebird lasted just long enough to limp over the finish line, accompanied by a symphony of sound. A victory march, fit for we victors.

And then the buggy shut down forever. The music died. Half of the remaining crew mutinied, with Symonds in charge. Some of us, still hypnotised by the fading echoes of song, let them have their way and headed out onto the methane sea with as much as our suits could carry.

When the original *Jackie Onassis*, the mother-ship, failed to respond to a pulse from Earth, a rescue mission was despatched. I watched the dropships descend with detached interest, overhearing music intended for other ears. Inevitably something went wrong, and the explosions were pretty flowers in a sky of seamless black.

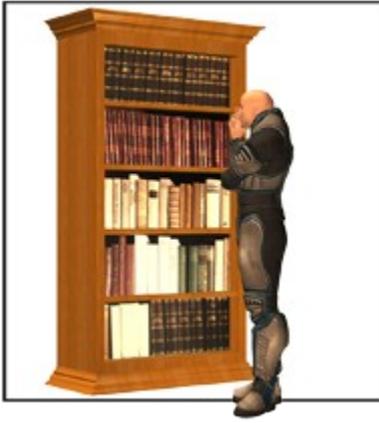
Eventually they cottoned on and sent someone tone-deaf in a single-ship to rescue us. That worked, thank God, although at the time I resisted. I guess I'd been floating around for a month or so before rescue, living off suit-rations, while strange things with transparent tentacles stirred the ocean around me, dismantling *Firebird* piece by piece and collecting every last scrap of the other buggies. It was only a matter of time before my suit would have warranted attention.

I hear that Symonds received a medal for his role in the mutiny—and I don't begrudge him that. But maybe someone might like to see to having Goose's court-martial overturned. He wasn't to blame for what he did. Any one of us might have done it, although not as well.

I must have been a little screwy myself by the end of it all, but I don't mind. I never once got tired of the sound of my own voice, singing along with the metal-starved children of Medusa.

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For further information on Sean, check out his website at <http://www.seanwilliams.com>



Whether False or Real

by Andy Arnold

Imagine if

you were a video game character

scaling tunnels, walking tightropes

and other physical obstacle courses

(don't forget the mental ones)

Imagine if

that was your reality

confined to a piece of data

You would know then

forces control you

Imagine if

you were playing a video game

then you controlled a false soul

So who is to say

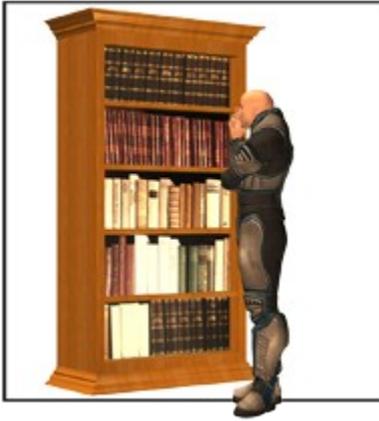
your real soul may or may not

be controlled by a soul

whether false or real

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Andy Arnold is a 15-year-old high school student who is active in his school's Academic Team and Theatre Guild. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, writing, and playing video games. He lives with two brothers and a basset hound puppy.



Another Beautiful Day

by Lee Gimenez

The military helos hovered over the city square, strafing the escapees that dared to run; very few did. At the same time, huge prison trucks moved into the area, scooping the Tans with their gaping jaws. Helmeted police swarmed the square.

“Get in there,” the Blue police officer yelled, jabbing the scurrying Tans into the trucks with his electric prod. “This’ll teach you to run away.”

Five hundred Tans had escaped last night, but by this afternoon, the situation was under control. Twenty had been killed, the balance now safely on the trucks and headed back to their camps outside the city.

Clark looked down at the scene from his penthouse tower, the fight below a blur of bodies.

“There’s got to be a better way,” he said, his bluish skin color turning slightly pink for a moment.

Eliza stood next to him, her beautiful face reflected on the expensive glass windows. “Can’t you do anything about it?” she said, her voice a pleading whisper.

Clark looked at his children’s teacher. “I wish I could. But I can’t change the Laws.”

Eliza lowered her eyes. “Of course, Mr. Clark. I meant no disrespect.”

He placed a hand on her chin and lifted her face up. “Don’t be so formal. You’ve been with me a long time.”

“But I’m still a Tan.”

“We’re not that different, you and me,” he said.

“You’re a Blue – a whole world divides us.”

“I have blue nano plasma in my veins so I can live to be 200, but other than that, we’re not that different.”

“I wish that was true. We can only be servants.”

Clark looked at her again and thought about his wife, who had died two years ago. He’d hired Eliza then to help raise and teach his children. The children adored her and, he was beginning to realize, so did he.

“Have you ever thought of being a Blue?” he asked.

Eliza crossed herself and said a silent prayer. "Please don't joke about such things; it's against the Law. Only Blue parents can have children that become Blue."

"I know the Law. I'm also wealthy. I've heard of underground doctors that perform the Blue Baptism well past the age of seven...in fact, I've heard of it being done on adults past twenty...."

"You could get arrested for saying such things...please, Mr. Clark, let's not talk about this...it's too dangerous..."

Clark smiled. "Just think about it, Eliza. You mean a lot to me."

"It's past six, I need to go back to the camps," she said, her voice tense.

"Of course. We'll have another beautiful day tomorrow."

Eliza lowered her eyes. "To another beautiful day."

He was sitting in his office the next day when Eliza burst into the room. Her eyes were red and her clothing disheveled.

She ran up to him and lowered her eyes. "Another beautiful day," she said, choking back tears.

"What is it, what's wrong?" he asked, getting up and coming around his desk.

"It's my brother, Esteban. He was killed yesterday trying to escape from the camp."

Clark went up to her and put his arms around her. "I'm so sorry, Eliza."

"He was the only family I had left."

"You have us," he said.

Eliza started crying, her body shaking.

A week later, he broached the subject again. "I found a doctor."

Eliza looked up at him. "What do you mean, Mr. Clark?"

"I found one that'll do the procedure. It can be done in one day."

"Please, sir, don't joke about this."

He smiled and touched her face. "It's no joke. I've already made the arrangements. All you have to do is say yes."

Tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm afraid. If the government finds out, we'll both go to prison."

"Don't worry. I've taken care of everything. It's expensive, but worth it. I love you Eliza. I want you to be my wife and the mother of my children."

Eliza started to cry and sat down. After a long time, she stood up and smiled. "Yes, then. I'll do it."

Clark hugged her. "We'll have a great life together."

Two weeks later, they were in a decaying part of the city, an underground warren of illegal activity. Clark had brought Eliza there, along with four of his bodyguards. The doctor was prepping her now in the grimy operating room, getting her ready for the procedure.

Suddenly, a large group of helmeted Blue police broke into the room, their weapons drawn. Outnumbered, the bodyguards didn't resist and put down their guns.

One of the cops handed Clark a sheet of paper. "It's another beautiful day," he said. "And this is a warrant for your arrest."

The private, hypersonic jet flew at 70,000 feet, then started to lower its elevation, getting ready to land. They were flying over Australia, one of the few places left in the world the UniGovernment didn't control. Clark, out on bail after his arrest last week, had decided to flee. He cashed in the investments he could, took Eliza and the children, and ran. He had to abandon his corporations, his homes and most of his money.

The jet landed at a small airport in a remote part of Australia, where they deplaned.

They were met by Jonas, a business associate of his.

"Welcome to our country," Jonas said with a smile.

Clark shook hands with him. "Thank you. We're glad to be here." He looked around the airport, at the families walking around. He couldn't tell what they were.

"Are these people Tans or Blues?" he asked, a confused look on his face.

Jonas grinned. "They're people. They're just people."

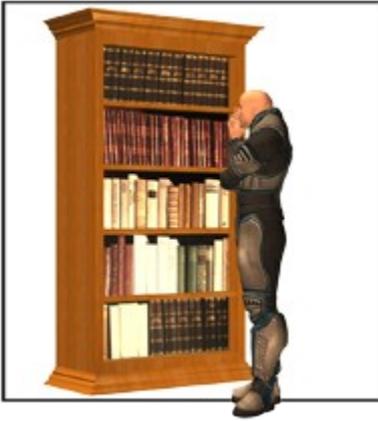
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Lee Gimenez is a writer of science fiction and speculative fiction; his stories have been published in numerous magazines in the U.S. and abroad.

Lee earned a BS degree in Design from Georgia Tech University, and an MBA degree from Fairleigh Dickinson University. During his career as a marketing manager, he worked for three Fortune 500 companies: Verizon, Tech Data and M&M Mars.

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Organic Life

By Justin Ryan Schwan

The day was August eighth, 2656. I was in command of the space vessel V3-943. My crew and I awoke from stasis on August first. There was a beacon from the planet's surface and we were to investigate it on our way back to Earth from our military/exploratory expedition.

We approached a medium-sized planet roughly the size of four Earths. It was an apparent life spawning planet. We could see green and blue and brown through the concave windows of our ship before we entered atmosphere. What appeared to be forest covered roughly half of the world. The remainder of the planet lay in desert. But the sun was blue-white, not yellow. The oceans of this strange world were few and small, and much of the sphere was covered by a strange, nearly transparent haze we took for orange clouds.

Lieutenant Johnson, the ship's geographer, pointed out a large mountain range stretching like a scar north-south along the face of the eastern hemisphere, right of our ship. He reported to me the last beacon originated at the southern foothills of this mountain range—several times the size of the Himalayas. Think, if you can, what the Rockies and Andes would look like if they were one defined range stretching from the northern most parts of Alaska to the tip of Antarctica.

My pilot, Jamie Vasquez, said, “This planet isn't on any of my maps.” She did not speak to me, but to Johnson beside me. Johnson seemed to ignore her. The possibility of coming across an uncharted planet on our way home from a routine, well mapped area of the galaxy was unthinkable. It would have been more likely to wake up and find ourselves thousands of light years off course than to find a mountain suddenly growing out of a desert plain.

“It's not possible,” Johnson finally said. “It's there, you're just missing it.”

“The sun is blue,” I said. “Look for a blue sun with a planet of this size.”

“I did,” she said. “I think we may have been....”

“Blown off track,” Johnson said, but he wasn't agreeing with her. “I'll prove it myself when we come back that we weren't.”

Our ship was programmed to wake us from stasis if we passed a ship with an emergency beacon. The beacon was the more important thing now and I gave Vasquez my order to land. She did so, landing the ship near Johnson's coordinates on a flat plain, quite near the beacon but not directly at it. A small copse of trees covered the beacon's source, and if it were not a known Earth transmission, we would not have taken our time, or risked our lives.

Forty of the sixty-member crew geared up and moved out onto the surface of the planet, a barren expanse of rock and eroded soil. These were military specialists, trained soldiers, but none of us were trained for a planet like this one. Its air was not an exact match to our human lungs, and I ordered masks on. A few of the men were hypersensitive to the high mix of helium and would have had an allergic-type reaction to the atmosphere. The gravity, though not immense, proved our most formidable opponent as we trudged off the ship like men in the shallows of a soft-sand beach.

We stood around the ship preparing to march to the trees in the distance. I looked at them through my binoculars and saw nothing unusual. Just trees, and by the looks of them we were late in this planet's autumn. Vasquez stood reading her maps on the screen of a flat computer, switching from image to image and scrunching her eyebrows. I looked up to the sky, shaded partially by orange cirrus clouds, at the light of the blue-white sun.

"Let's go" I said. We were ready and Vasquez slipped her computer in her pack and followed close to me. The rest followed single file, Johnson somewhere near the rear. The thirty-eight others followed, their weapons at their sides, their faces in shock at the wonder of the strange new world.

We walked three hundred yards from our ship to the forest, over the rocky, unstable path through the desert. The foliage was of a bronzed metallic color, like the leaves of a North American autumn. But they were not the leaves of Earth. They were metal. Not like iron and steel, rigid and hard, but pliable like gold leaf.

"I think this is organic metal," Steve Boss said, touching the side of a tree. He was an all-around scientist. His first speciality was in biology, but he was an avid botanist, geologist, and a trained medical doctor. He tapped the trunk with his fist, scraped at it with his fingernail, and searched the ground around the base.

"Organic?" Vasquez said. "That's impossible."

"So is getting blown off course in the vacuum of space," Johnson said. He took out his knife and cut a leaf from the tree. He bent the leaf and it held in place at a ninety degree angle. He bent it back, like it was a piece of aluminum foil. He passed it to me. The leaf was not heavy as I had suspected, but as light as any leaf I'd find back home.

Boss had his own leaf and was testing it with Johnson's knife, cutting it, bending it, ripping and breaking it. Then he hesitantly tasted it, and let the leaf fall to the ground. I brought my leaf to my mouth and stopped, smelling the bronze instead. It smelled like a copper penny.

"I understand it may be hard to believe," Boss said, "that metal...and it is metal, it must be...can grow as this does, but it is growing here and now and it is as much a part of this planet's biosphere as water or soil is to Earth's. Just look at the obvious signs. The detail in each of these trees. There must be hundreds here. To craft something like this would take years, and it would take incredible time and energy to maintain them against the desert without their own, natural ability to regrow."

Vasquez began to speak when Boss pressed the tip of Johnson's steel knife into the tree's hard bark. I was sure it would not penetrate, if the tree was made fully of metal, for I thought metal would be a stronger substance than to give to a small knife, but the blade penetrated easily beneath a piece of bark. Boss lifted the plate of bark, the size of my thumb, up from the tree and beneath we saw, not the black of the bark, but a white sheen, like nickel, hard and smooth. Boss went further and pierced this nickel hardwood with the knife and Vasquez, beside me, gasped as the tree bled a fine silver liquid, running loosely like mercury at room temperature.

"We probably shouldn't touch it," Boss said and grabbed Johnson's hand. "We don't know how each metal will react to our skin. It could be highly toxic to us."

I noticed the rest of my crew behind us, inspecting the forest on their own. I had only brought my best, leaving the rest to guard the ship, but now I wished we had brought half of Earth. I felt we needed them.

"How do you figure it's organic?" someone said. "Besides the way it looks."

"It's obviously metal," Boss answered. "Feel it and taste it and smell it and tell me it's not. But it grows. Goddamn it, someone planted this forest, they didn't build it here."

"But how do you know?" I asked.

"It's a feeling I have. The way the wind blows the leaves, the look of the trees, the way they come out of the ground, the roots protruding from the soil here and there. I'm sorry we don't have time to watch the leaves fall and regrow in the spring, or to see a seed turn into a tree, but it'd be a hell of a trick for some sentient being to have created all of this, and we all know nature always does it best." He stopped then, as if something he had said triggered an ill feeling inside him.

I felt a surge of uneasiness. Someone had planted a forest. They were real Greenpeace heroes, but they had planted the forest around the beacon of an Earth vessel. I thought of several explanations to quiet my racing heart. Maybe the forest was natural, growing like coral would grow on the hull of a sunken battleship in the Pacific Ocean. Or the forest had been there all along, and maybe had been even larger, and what we now saw was only what was left of it. The desert around the copse would support that.

"Sir," Vasquez said, breathing heavily through her mask. "I can't reach the ship on my radio."

"Try again.

"I don't trust this," Johnson said. "If something happened to our ship it'll be too dangerous to go back."

"We have our guns," someone said. "We won't be caught with our pants down."

And the ship had pulse beams, I thought. They could have blasted anything that approached from two miles out, or they could have raised the temp around the ship to over four thousand degrees with the sensors. I looked at Johnson and said, "It's probably just radio interference with all this metal around us.

I ordered a split in the ranks and we marched in three smaller groups to keep ourselves from bottling up in the forest. We found the wreckage of a V1-075 easily. The spaceship was an antique, possibly three hundred years old, and was no doubt an exploration vehicle that never made it back home. Its maps were probably still inside and would pinpoint our exact location relative to Earth.

The V1-075 lay wrapped in metallic vines, red metallic moss grew on the hull. The hatch was still open. Seeing the five hundred foot long vessel in this condition was shocking, like finding a pyramid in the jungles of Central America. The forest hid it well until we were almost on top of it, and then it bloomed like a bright flower. There was damage all along the structure, and I could tell immediately it would never fly. Even if its engines were not damaged, if the wings were straightened, if it were to be cleaned up, it would not be space-worthy. The vessel had been attacked and holes were blasted into the hull that allowed me to see into the control room, the barracks, the cafeteria. I saw this ship beneath the canopy of the metal Congo, and though we found no bones, I knew the crew had made it onto the planet alive and intact. This was no crash. There were no debris fields.

“These serrations aren't congruent with impact marks,” one of my men said.

“Of course they're not.” I was short with him. “The scars along the ship's side are obviously weapon damage, and a crash would have destroyed the ship and the beacon.”

“Captain, where there is advanced plant life,” Boss said, “in every planet men have explored, there has been advanced animal life. The plants on this planet are made of metal. Draw your own conclusions, but I have mine, and I don't like it.”

I drew my own conclusion. I now knew what had kept him so quiet since the time we first entered the forest until now. He had been thinking about sentient life.

Vasquez came out of the ship carrying the maps, still intact on their electronic discs. I took in what Boss said and didn't like it myself. Metal plants meant metal animals. It would be hairy if we ran into them. Then I noticed Vasquez watching something through the distant tree limbs. Exiting the ship she was the only one facing the direction we had come from. I turned to see what it was, and aimed my gun to fire.

I shot down from the limb a creature unlike anything ever reported on any of the twenty explored planets. None of the seventeen systems that contained life had borne fruit like this. I ordered an orderly retreat and we fled from the copse into the desert, the image of the animal-machine falling from the limb in a pool of blood-grease repeating itself over and over in my head. My mind continued to report the image, even as we caught sight of our ship over the rise, and headed for home. I began to out-pace my men, thinking only of contacting Earth. I needed to tell them everything, and yet wanted to tell them nothing, realizing centuries would pass before they ever received any message from me.

Eight legs. A spider? Not hardly.

How a creature had evolved here on this planet was beyond me. I was not a biologist by trade, but had studied courses in college before flight school, and I felt confident in the goings-on of biological creatures, natural creatures, organic creatures. What I had seen busted down the walls of possibility, and I could only offer one suggestion: they were made. I knew it was impossible for a metallic compound to evolve along similar evolutionary tracks as carbon had on Earth. But it was apparent that the different colors, textures, and shapes of the metals here were organic. They grew, they died, and most frighteningly, they thought.

“Just up ahead now, Sir,” Vasquez said. “Still nothing on the radio.” I heard her voice behind me, in my ear, but felt a mile ahead of her. I didn't dare look back. I stopped suddenly and pulled my binoculars from my pack. I saw the ship's hatch was open, the stairs were soiled with human blood. I took in a sharp breath. Above the ship, atop the hull, was another creature. This one was, without knowledge of the organic life on this planet, a robot with what looked like a gun on his lap. He appeared to be asleep on his watch, but who could tell?

I ordered the soldiers to lock and load and split up into five groups. I took the center group and we moved crouched down. Each of us scanned the horizon, and I made sure each soldier bringing up the rear of his group was scanning our flank. It was normal battle training, but I knew how stupid it was. There was no cover, our blue uniforms were space-ready and were never meant for the red-orange of a desert. But we moved silently and the machine on top of our ship never stirred.

We were a hundred feet from the ship when we were attacked from both sides, surrounded by an enemy that had come upon us invisibly, blended into the desert like the rocks themselves. Within a moment my squad's right and left flanks were decimated, Vasquez and Boss both killed, their bodies ripped apart with the force of weapons not made for human flesh, but for a tougher flesh. Another volley pressed against the remaining men in the two outside groups, and this time I heard several different weapons, from several different directions. In front of me, Johnson crumpled up and fell, and before he hit the ground he exploded in a cloud of green fire. I passed him, calling out to those still alive. There were only a dozen of us left.

“Run!” I could feel and hear the footsteps and hard breathing of my men as we raced for the hatch. We rolled up against the stairs, but I was the only one to reach cover. I stared briefly at the last of my forty men to go down in the dust, and the machines that surrounded the ship, carrying weapons that looked like large rifles.

I ran up the stairs and closed the hatch, then turned and looked at the damage done inside the ship. The aliens struck heavily against the side of the hull. I did not have long before their guns tore apart the shields. I put together what had happened to my crew. The aliens had entered by surprise while some of my men were looking around outside. They had infiltrated every passage and room, killing everyone they found, taking nothing, but leaving behind bloody trails and fragments of human flesh. I turned down the main corridor, the pounding of each blast against the ship shaking my courage and exciting my mind to a frenzy.

I sat at the cockpit and started the engines. My heart raced as the clock ticked against me. Maybe I had a minute left to get the ship started and take off. Maybe I didn't. The thrusters drew life for half a breath and died as something exploded in the rear of the ship. The force sent me forward against the control panel. The windshield, to my horror, cracked. A spider-web grew across the glass.

I had only one last thing to do with no way to get off-world. I keyed the mike, my hands shaking as I held it to my dry mouth. I made contact with Earth.

My comrades were dead, but I didn't plan to wait for *them* to come get me. I was going to open the hatch, raise my hands over my head, and walk down the steps. If there was a universal sign for surrender, then I had a chance to live. If not, I knew I had found a creature even more hostile than my fellow man.

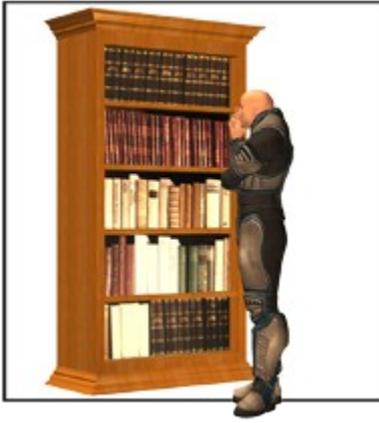
I told Earth what I had seen, what we had done, and then I said, “If you have received this message, likely hundreds of years have passed, and I have one warning for you. Whatever you do, do not come to this planet. Do not come to find out what happened to me. Do not come to avenge the deaths of these two Earth crews.

“Signing out, Captain Arnold Richardson.”

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Justin Ryan Schwan is 22 years old, and currently lives in a very scenic part of eastern Iowa along the Mississippi River, but he hails from southern Alabama. When not in his day job, you'll find him writing. He spends much of the rest of his time reading, studying Taoism, and watching or listening to his favorite sports teams.

You can find his main web presence at www.myspace.com/justin_schwan



88 Miles Per Hour

A Review - Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles by Andrew Males

To a Terminator fan, there's nothing more spine-tingling than watching the first credits of a new film or series and hearing the classic "duh-da, duh, duh-duh" thumping out of your speakers. Couple that with a big image of a classic, sinister terminator skull complete with piercing red eyes, and excitement levels peak straight away.

I saw the first Terminator film when I was fifteen and remember being absolutely blown away. What more could a teenage sci-fi fan want than time travel, a seemingly unstoppable killer robot, machine guns and those great one-liners? Two excellent films later, a thrilling 3-D experience in Universal Studios and I was thirsty for more. When news of the series hit me, delight turned to panic as I searched for the magical Virgin 1 channel, on which it resides in the UK. With great relief, it appeared; the series-link button was never hit so fast.

The series is set between the second and third films, and revolves round the star of the first film, Sarah Connor (played by Lena Headey, *300*), her son and future saviour of mankind, John (Thomas Dekker, *Heroes*), and a (mostly) good, young-looking, female terminator Cameron (Summer Glau, *Serenity*) sent back to protect them. As a family unit, they make the Simpsons look like the Waltons.

There is a lot of emphasis put on the characters and their complex relationships and development, and in general this is well done. The pressure of being mankind's big hope is often clear as John struggles with expectations and being told of the brave things he hasn't done yet. Sarah's frequently shown torn between trying to protect her son and giving him the freedom to become the man and leader he is set to be. Throwing a protector terminator in as his fake sister enables the writers to explore both the machines' capabilities of human interaction and how the Connors have to deal with an efficient, moral-free killing machine on their side. Echoes abound of Terminator 2 and how young John tried to teach Arnie's character that killing everyone in its path isn't necessarily the right thing, but the series has much greater scope in expanding on these complexities. It also can't help but provoke your own discussion when deciding whether the death of a helpless innocent is acceptable if *not* killing them puts the entire human race at risk in the future. How far are we - at our most primitive level - away from the machines' mentality anyway?

The addition of other characters, such as Sarah's ex and the god-fearing FBI agent Ellison, provide the story with the interest of outside characters who gradually buy in to the whole crazy "cyborgs from the future" idea that is revealed to them.

Of course, you associate the Terminator films with action and drama, rather than character interaction, so it is this point where fans may be disappointed at times. Personally, I think that you see too many John and Sarah love/hate moments and cheesy reconciliation scenes. They love each other. They'd die for each other. It's tough being them. We get it.

The writers either did a cop-out or a clever piece of writing in starting the series in 1999 but then quickly jumping via a time-travel device to 2007 by the end of the pilot episode. With a lot of technology around, it's certainly easier to film in the present without worrying too much about continuity, while interesting sub-plots are created from this jump (for example, to Sarah's confused ex John appears not to age in eight years.) They soon learn that good ol' Judgement Day was not averted, only delayed until 2011, so their quest to prevent this is far from over.

The real hook, as always, is the threat of Skynet and the terminators it sends back to kill its nemesis, and *Chronicles* doesn't disappoint in this area. At first, it seems that every episode might contain a new terminator for the Connors to destroy and/or run away from, but thankfully this formula quickly changes as the plot gets deeper. More resistant fighters have been sent back too, and later the trio are joined by John's uncle, Derek (Brian Austin Green, *Beverly Hills 90210*), whose presence adds an extra dimension. We get glimpses of the grim future and the resistance's battles, just as we did in the original film, and by the last few episodes this reveals a more startling side to the machines' desire to succeed. Cromartie is the main terminator – a T-888 model whose persistent pursuit of the Connors is much the same as his predecessors. He actually endures a lot in his quest, and the bath scene in which he gains new skin is possibly one of the coolest Terminator moments of all. Arnie had it lightly, it seems.

As with a lot of time travel stories, you have to not try to analyse them too hard and pick holes in some of the events, otherwise you'd simply never enjoy them. You could also say that for every argument against there is probably a counter-argument supporting the plot. The films had a simple premise – send one back to kill and one to save. *Chronicles* has all sorts going on with machines and resistance coming back to the past and different targets. For me, this does raise some interesting issues. Firstly, I get the feeling that if this was real, either the terminators would be more adept at finding John and Sarah, given all their chances, or they would just blow the crap out of everything and everyone. A crowd of hundreds within which they think John is hiding? Just machine gun everyone in sight and search through the bodies, I say! But on the flip side, maybe it'll shoot someone else important to the machines in the future?

Secondly, I often thought why send back clumsy, proven failures from the T-800 series? Surely Skynet would have learned from this and found a better class of opponent to send back. However, even this may have been thought of: in *Series 2*, another much more frightening development occurs when Catherine Weaver (played by a well-cast Shirley Manson of rock group *Garbage*) comes on to the scene. A clinical business woman with a look that could kill at the best of times, she reveals herself as a T-1001, morphing from a urinal in front of an astonished employee before performing the shape-shifting party piece of pointy-finger-in-the-eye. However, she's much more calculating, and currently appears to be manipulating several oblivious people and setting up something big for the machines. A good touch is the portrayal of her as a mum, obviously trying to replace the woman whose form she now takes. Let's just say she wouldn't be top of your list to babysit your kids.

One aspect I like is the continuity with the films. I should clarify this and say it is my *perceived* continuity – I'm sure there may be bigger fans of the films than I that point and pick holes in the plot. But for a fan such as myself I think it holds up rather well. It is littered with links to the back-plot and films and so far hasn't seemed to contradict or conflict

with anything that has gone before it. The main continuity problem I did notice, however, was the personality of Cameron - in particular the difference in the first/pilot episode and the rest of the two series. Initially, we had no idea she was a machine as she acted casually, just like a schoolgirl. Since then, however, she acts magnificently as a terminator trying her best to be human (which, let's face it, none of them are very good at; nor should they be.) I suspect there were some reviews of her character after the initial episode, and certainly her personality now makes for much more menace and humour.

Which brings us to the black humour of the series and films. Maybe it's my dark sense of humour, but occasionally I do laugh hard at some of the one-liners that get spouted from Cameron. My favourite is possibly just after she killed someone we didn't see, with the factual-but-cold: "He said very little and then he was quiet." There are others, but you probably have to be there to appreciate them. Cromartie provides his own brand of humour too. He has a sinister smile that seems to flick on when needed, but you sometimes almost feel sorry for him - in a *Tom and Jerry* kind of way. For example, jumping off the pier after chasing and narrowly missing John, led to a sad, Titanic-style, drifting descent into the murky depths. However, his heart (or power source) would go on, and in one of the next scenes you saw him stroll out of the water having walked along the bottom of the sea. DiCaprio 0 Terminator 1.

The directors have also attempted to bring a bit of style to some of the episodes. A stunning scene in which an FBI squad storm a hotel room that contains Cromartie is both powerful and simple. Set to the tune of Jonny Cash's *The Man Comes Around*, the camera is positioned underwater, pointing up at the surface at a strange angle as, one by one, bloodied bodies splash into the pool and sink down. There have many massacres by the cyborgs, but none have better illustrated the ruthlessness of their character and the futility of man's attempts at stopping them.

If the series has a weakness, it is the classic one that seems to be the bane of other recent good series such as *Lost* and *Heroes*: that of an increasingly-complex plot. Bad guy appears, run from bad guy, struggle, kill bad guy – that's nice and simple. Start adding in time-lines, hidden agendas, other bad guys, both past and present flashbacks, different Skynet targets, and unless the viewer is keeping tabs it can get a bit confusing when you watch episodes a week or more apart..

The Terminator tale is a great story of despair, desperation, resilience, destruction and hope, and while it might not have the intense impact of the films, *Chronicles* does a good job of continuing these themes. If you're new to it or not a huge fan of the films, then you may simply see this as a sci-fi series movie tie-in which doesn't excite or involve you enough as other offerings around. But if you like the Terminator films, you *have* to watch this. Not every episode is spectacular, and you may find your Terminator experience watered down, but there are many scenes to behold in wonder which any true fan will enjoy.

I'll be back...

For further information on Andy, check out his website at <http://www.andrewmales.com>



An interview with Michael Cobley

by Gary Reynolds



Seeds of Earth is your first Humanity's Fire novel. How would you describe the experience of writing it?

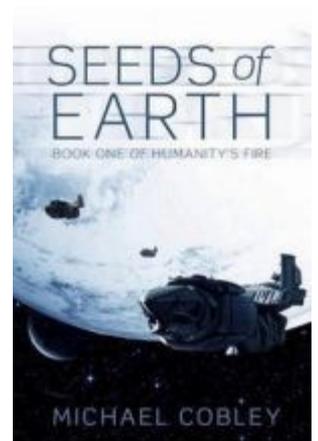
Almost the feeling of coming home, since up to writing the Shadowkings books I had been mainly an SF short story writer. That said, I love both SF and fantasy, and there's no doubt that the darkness of the Shadowkings universe satisfied my creative needs at the time, but I always knew that I would return to science fiction. The writing of *Seeds Of Earth* was an avenue of delights; I've read SF ever since I was 9 and to finally get the chance to do my own widescreen, baroque space opera was most excellent.

The novel is told from many points of view and the setting is very grand. What methods did you use to keep track of all the characters and locations? Did anything cause you any particular problems?

I have this tendency to want to see various aspects of a story; the story machine in my head produces all these consequences and possibilities for other counterplot strands so of course I need another character to tell that part of the overall epic, and...things multiply. Then I find myself juggling this cast of characters, choreographing their parts, channelling the action in the required direction. The trick is to make it seem as if the story arises from the character motivations, while concealing the levers and trapdoors and props from the reader's view. To keep everything on track, in the end I had to draw out a time chart of each character's basic story track, their elements, twists and turns, all set alongside each other, with postits stapled on here and there, arrows leaping wildly across to other tracks. This may seem somewhat mechanical but it helps enormously in the choreography, with me as the kindly puppetmaster (heh heh).

Seeds of Earth contains a lot of information and backstory. Was there a concern from you that this might put people off? How did you decide what was an appropriate level of information?

I tried to be as concise as possible, but when you're establishing a new universe, a chunk of interstellar space with all its major political blocks and history, you have to just sit down now and then and simply state a few of the salient facts. I actually feel that the background is a bit sketchy, compared to what else I've 'researched', but what's important is to make sure that what is implied has an aura of authenticity and plausibility; if you achieve that, then the reader goes on to infer a lot more, and in fact many readers confer more into the unstated areas than you actually overtly depict. At least that's what I do when I read!



Doctor Who or Battlestar Galactica?

Egad, sir, how can one choose between 2 such iconic SF landmarks? Much as I love the Doctor, I would have to just come down on the side of Galactica – but only because Dr Who tends to lack a certain dramatic heft, and a certain storytelling complexity. I know that Dr Who is meant for a family audience, but I wish that the writers would give us a bit more in the way of mystery and puzzles and show the Doctor using his intellect far more. Just me, I guess.

You write both novels and short stories. Which form do you prefer and why?

My preference depends on what kind of story I want to write, which can depend on the kind of storywriting experience I want to have, or even the kind of question I want to explore or the kind of message I want to put across. I wrote a short story called *Weapon Of Choice* because I had to; I had to say something about the Iraq invasion and occupation, had to express my anger and revulsion at what has been done to that suffering nation. Other times I am engrossed by a certain mood or the possibilities in the use of certain techniques. Just depends.

What are you currently working on?

The second Humanity's Fire book, *The Orphaned Worlds*, which reveals more about the other two lost Human colonies and what happened to them, and what choices they made.

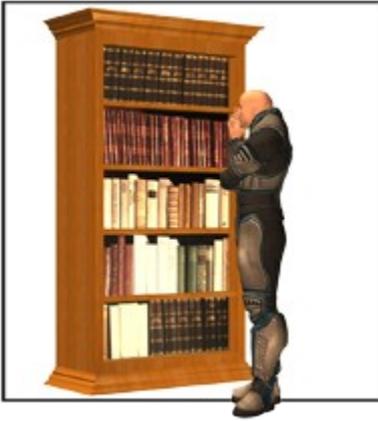
What can we expect to see from you beyond your current projects?

I have other ideas for more books set in the Humanity's Fire universe, as well as a well-worked out background for another different space opera; I also want to do a steampunk/Anubis Gates-style adventure caper novel, and at some point I intend to sit down and write the Great European Cyberpunk novel – I have a title, Ironheart Valve, but only a few half-formed notions about what it will be about. Also want to do a crazed, virtual reality story as well. Then there's a few ideas I have for movie scripts, some ideas I've never seen done, and some things that are only titles.

Can you tell us something about yourself not related to science fiction and fantasy writing?

I'm a member of the British Liberal Democrat party, although I sometimes feel that they are far too polite and reasonable, and I have stood for local elections several times although without success. Also, back in the late 1970s/early 1980s I was a DJ at a students union, back in the pre-CD era when vinyl wuz king – I DJ'd for about 5 years, and helped out in the entertainments department, which involved doing frontstage security on Saturday nights, resulting in the mildly damaged hearing I now possess!

For further information, check out [Michael's author profile](#) or [visit his website](#).



Seeds of Earth (an excerpt)

by Michael Cobley

Prologue

Darien Institute: Hyperion Data Recovery Project

Cluster Location - Subsidiary Hardmem Substrate (Deck 9 quarters)

Tranche – 298

Decryption Status – 9th pass, 26 video files recovered

File 15 – The Battle of Mars (Swarm War)

Veracity - Virtual Reenactment

Original Time Log – 16:09:24, 23rd November, 2126

>>>>>>

<<<<<<

FADE IN:

CAPTION:

MARS

THE CRATER PLAIN: OLYMPUS MONS

19TH MARCH, 2126

The Sergeant was on the carrier's command deck, checking and rechecking the engineering console's modifications, when voices began clamouring over his helmet comm.

“Marine force stragglers incoming with enemy units in pursuit...”

“...eight, nine Swarmers, maybe ten...”

The Sergeant cursed, grabbed his heavy carbine and left the command deck as quickly as his combat armour would allow. The clatter of his boots echoed down the vessel's spinal corridor while he issued a string of terse orders. By the time he reached the wrecked and gaping doors of the rear deployment hold, the stragglers had arrived. Five wounded and unconscious, all from the Indonesia regiment going by their helmet flashes. As the last was being carried up the ramp, the leading Swarmers came into view over the brow of a rocky ridge about 80 metres away.

A first glimpse revealed a nightmare jumble of claws, spikes and gleaming black eye-clusters. Swarm biology had many reptilian similarities yet their appearance was unavoidably insectoid. With six, eight, ten or more limbs, they could be as small as a pony or as big as a whale, depending on their specialisation. These were bull-sized skirmishers, eleven black-and-green monsters that were unlimbering tine-snouted weapons as they rushed down towards the crippled carrier.

"Hold your fire," the Sergeant said, glancing at the six marines crouched behind the improvised barricade of ammo cases and deck plating. These were all that were left to him after the Colonel and the rest had left in the hovermags a few hours ago, heading for the caldera and the Swarm's main hive. One of them hunched his shoulders a little, head tilting to aim down his carbine's sights...

"I said wait," said the Sergeant, gauging the diminishing distance. "Ready aft turrets....acquire targets....fire!"

Streams of heavy calibre shells converged on the leading Swarmers, knocking them off their spidery legs. Then the Sergeant cursed when he saw them right themselves, protected by the bio-armour which had confounded Earth's military ever since the beginning of the invasion two years ago.

"Pulse rounds," the Sergeant shouted. "Now!"

Bright bolts began to pound the Swarmers, dense knots of energised matter designed to simultaneously heat and corrode their armour. The enemy returned fire, their weapons delivering repeating arcs of long, thin black rounds, but as the turret jockeys focused their targeting the Swarmers broke off and scattered. The Sergeant then ordered his men to open up, joining in with his own carbine, and the withering crossfire tore into the weakened, confused enemies. In less than a minute, nothing was left alive or in one piece out on the rocky slope.

The defending marines exchanged laughs and grins, and knocked gauntleted knuckles together. The Sergeant barely had time to draw breath and reload his carbine when the consoleman's urgent voice came over the comm:

"Sergeant! – airborne contact, three clicks and closing!"

Immediately, he swung round and made for the starboard companionway, shouldering his carbine as he climbed. "What's their profile, soldier?"

"Hard to tell – half the sensor suite is junk..."

"Get me something and quick!"

He then ordered all four turrets to target the approaching craft and was clambering out of the carrier's topside hatch when the consoleman came back to him.

"IFF confirms it's a friendly, Sergeant – it's a vortiwing, and the pilot is asking for you."

"Patch him through."

One of his helmet's miniscreens blinked suddenly and showed the vortiwing pilot. He was possibly German, going by the instructions on the bulkhead behind him.

"Sergeant, I've not much time," the pilot said in accented English. "I'm to evacuate you and your men up to orbit..."

"Sorry, lieutenant, but...my commanding officer is down in that caldera, engaging the enemy! Look, the brink of the caldera is less than half a klick away – you could airlift me and my men over there before returning to –"

"Request denied. My orders are specific. Besides, every unit that made it down there has been overwhelmed and destroyed, whole regiments and brigades, Sergeant. I'm sorry..." The pilot reached up to adjust controls. "ETD in less than five minutes, Sergeant. Please have your men ready."

The miniscreen went dead. The Sergeant leaned on the topside rail and stared bitterly at the kilometre-long furrow which the carrier had gouged in the sloping flank of Olympus Mons. Then he gave the order to abandon ship.

In the shroud-like Martian sky overhead, the vortiwing transport grew from a speck to a broad-built craft descending on four gimbal-mounted spinjets. Landing struts found purchase on the carrier's upper hull and amid the howling blast of the engines the walking wounded and the stretcher cases were lifted into the transport's belly hold. The turret jockeys, the consoleman and his half-dozen marines were following suit when the German pilot's voice spoke suddenly.

"Large number of flying Swarmers heading our way, Sergeant. Suggest you get aboard fast."

As the last of his men climbed up into the vortiwing, the Sergeant turned to face the caldera of Olympus Mons. Through a haze of windblown dust and the thin black fumes of battle, he saw a dense cloud of dark motes rising just a few klicks away. It took only a moment to realise how quickly they would be here, and for him to decide what to do.

"Best you button up and get going, Lieutenant," he said as he leaped back into the carrier and sealed the hatch behind him. "I can keep them busy with our turrets, give you time to make orbit."

"*Nein!* Sergeant, I order you –"

"Apologies, sir, but you'd never get away otherwise, so my task is clear."

He cut the link as he rushed back along to the command deck, closing hatches as he went. True, the Colonel's science officer had slaved all four of the turrets to the engineering console, but that wasn't the only modification he had carried out....

The roar of the vortiwing's spinjets grew to a shriek, landing struts loosened their grip and the transport lurched free. Moments later, the fourfold angled thrust was driving it upwards on a steep trajectory. Some of the Swarm outriders were already leading the flying host on an intercept course, until the carrier's turrets opened fire upon them. Yet they would still have kept on after the ascending prey, had not the carrier itself now shifted like a great wounded beast and risen slowly from the long gouge it had made in the ground. Curtains of dust and grit fell from its underside, along with shattered fragments of hull plating and exterior sensors, and when the carrier turned its battered prow towards the centre of the caldera the Swarm host altered its course.

On the command deck, the Sergeant sweated and swore as he struggled to coax every last erg from the protesting engines. Damage sustained during the atmospheric descent had left the carrier unable to make a safe landing on the

caldera floor, hence the Colonel's decision to continue in the hovermags. However, a safe landing was not what the Sergeant had in mind.

As the ship headed into the caldera, steadily gaining height, the groan of overloaded substructures came up through the deck. Even as he glanced at the glowing panels, red telltales started to flicker, warnings that some of the port suspensors were close to operational tolerance. But most of his attention was focused on the host of Swarmers now converging on the Earth vessel.

Suddenly the carrier was enfolded in a swirling cloud of the creatures, some of which landed on the hull, scabbling for hold points, seeking entrance. Almost at the same time, two suspensors failed and the ship listed to port. The Sergeant boosted power to the port burners, ignoring the beeping alarms and the crashing, hammering sounds coming from somewhere amidships. The carrier straightened up as it reached the zenith of its trajectory, a huge missile that the Sergeant was aiming directly at the Swarm Hive.

Ten seconds into the dive the clangorous hammering came nearer, perhaps a hatch or two away from the command deck.

Twenty seconds into the dive, with the pitted, grey-brown spires of the Hive looming in the louvred viewport, the starboard aft burner blew. The Sergeant cut power to the port aft engine and boosted the starboard for'ard into the red.

Thirty seconds into the dive, amid the deafening cacophony of metallic hammering and the roar of the engines, the hatch to the command deck finally burst open. A grotesque creature that was half-wasp, half-alligator, struggled to squeeze through the gap. It froze for a second when it saw the structures of the Hive rushing up to meet the carrier head-on, then frantically reversed direction and was gone. The Sergeant tossed a thermite grenade after it and turned to face the viewport, arms spread wide, laughing....

CUT TO:

VIEW OF OLYMPUS MONS FROM ORBIT

Visible within its attendant cloud of Swarmers, the brigade carrier leaves a trail of leaking gases and fluids in its wake as it plummets towards the hive complex. The perspective suddenly zooms out, showing much of the wreckage-strewn, battle-scarred caldera as the carrier impacts. For a moment there is only an outburst of debris from the collision, then three bright explosions in quick succession obscure the outlines of the hive....

VOICE OVER:

In the first phase of the Battle of Mars, a number of purpose-built heavy boosters were used to send a flotilla of asteroids against the Swarm Armada, thus drawing key vessels away from Mars orbit. The main battle, and ground offensive, cost Earth over 400,000 dead and the loss of 79 major warships as well as scores of support craft. This act of sacrifice did not destroy all the Overminds of the Swarm or deter them from their purpose. Yet vast stores of bioweapons, like the missiles

that devastated cities in China, Europe and America, were destroyed along with several hatching chambers, thus halting the production of fresh Swarm warriors and delaying the expected assault on Earth.

That battle brought grief and sorrow to all of Humanity, yet it also bought us a breathing space, five crucial months during which the construction of three interstellar colony ships was completed, three out of the original 15. The last of them, the *Tenebrosa*, was launched from the high-orbit Poseidon Docks just four days ago, following its sister ships, the *Hyperion* and the *Forrestal*, on a trajectory away from the enemy's main forces. All three vessels are fitted with a revolutionary new translight drive, allowing them to cross vast distances via the strange subreality of hyperspace. First to make the translight jump was the *Hyperion*, then two days later the *Forrestal*, and the *Tenebrosa* will be the last. Their journeys will be determined by custodian AIs programmed to evade pursuit with random course changes, and thereafter to search for Earthlike worlds suitable for colonisation.

And so they depart, three arks bearing Humanity's hope for survival, three seeds of Earth flying out into the vast and starry night. Now we must turn our attention and all our strength to the onslaught that will soon be upon us. In twelve days, spearhead formations of the Swarm will land on the Moon and at once attack our civilian and military outposts there. We know what to expect. The Swarm's strategy of slaughter and obliterate has never wavered so we know that there will be no pity, no mercy and no quarter when, at last, they enter the skies above Earth.

Yet for all that the Swarm soldiers are regimented drones, their leaders, the Overminds, must themselves be sentient and able to learn otherwise they would not have developed space travel. So if the Overminds can learn let us be their teachers – let us teach them what it means to attack the cradle of Humanity....

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END OF FILE...

Part One

1

Greg

Dusk was creeping in over the sea from the east as Greg Cameron walked Chel down to the zep station. The great mass of Giant's Shoulder loomed on the right side of the path, its shadowy darkness speckled with the tiny blue glows of *ineka* beetles, while a fenced-off sheer drop fell away to the left. The sky was cloudless, laying bare the starmist which swirled forever through the upper atmosphere of Darien. Tonight it was a soft purple tinged with threads of roseate, a restful, slow-shifting ghost sky.

But Greg knew that his companion was anything but restful. In the light of the pathway lamps, the Uvovo stalked along with head down and bony, four-fingered hands gripping the chest straps of his harness. They were a slender, diminutive race with a bony frame, and large amber eyes set in a small face. Glancing at him, Greg smiled.

“Chel, don't worry - you'll be fine.”

The Uvovo looked up and seemed to think for a moment before his finely-furred features broke into a wide smile.

“Friend-Gregori,” came his hollow, fluty voice. “Whether I ride in a dirigible or make the shuttle journey to our blessed Segrana, I am always amazed to discover myself alive at the end!”

They laughed together as they continued down the side of Giant's Shoulder. It was a cool, clammy night and Greg wished he had worn something heavier than just a work shirt.

“And you've still no idea why they're holding this *zinsilu* at Ibsensskog?” Greg said. For the Uvovo, a *zinsilu* was part life evaluation, part meditation. “I mean, the Listeners do have access to the government comnet if they need to contact any of the seeders and scholars...” Then something occurred to him. “Here, they're not going to reassign ye, are they? Chel, I won't be able to manage both the dig and the daughter-forest reports on my own! - I really need your help.”

“Do not worry, friend-Gregori,” said the Uvovo. “Listener Weynl has always let it be known that my role here is considered very important. Once this *zinsilu* is concluded, I am sure that I will be returning without delay.”

I hope you're right, Greg thought. The Institute isna very forgiving when it comes to shortcomings and unachieved goals.

“After all,” Chel went on, “Your Founders' Victory celebrations are only a few days away and I want to be here to observe all your ceremonies and rituals.”

Greg gave a wry half-grin. “Aye...well, some of our “rituals” can get a bit boisterous...”

By now the gravel path was levelling off as they approached the zep station and overhead Greg could hear the faint peeps of *umisk* lizards calling to each other from their little lairs scattered across the sheer face of Giant's Shoulder. The station was little more than a buttressed platform with a couple of buildings and a five-yard-long, covered gantry jutting straight out. A government dirigible was moored there, a gently-swaying 50-footer consisting of two cylindrical gasbags lashed together with taut webbing and an enclosed gondola hanging beneath. The skin of the inflatable sections was made from a tough composite fabric but exposure to the elements and a number of patch repairs gave it a ramshackle appearance, in common with most of the workaday government zeplins. A light glowed in the cockpit of the boatlike gondola, and the rear-facing, three-bladed propeller turned lazily in the steady breeze coming in from the sea.

Fredriksen, the station manager, waved from the waiting room door while a man in a green-and-grey jumpsuit emerged from the gantry to meet them.

“Good day, good day,” he said, regarding first Greg then the Uvovo. “I am Pilot Yakov. If either of you is Scholar Cheluvahar, I am ready to depart.”

“I am Scholar Cheluvahar,” Chel said.

“Most excellent. I shall start the engine.” He nodded at Greg then went back to the gantry, ducking as he entered.

“Mind to send a message when you reach Ibsensskog,” Greg told Chel. “And don't worry about the flight - it'll be over before you know it...”

“Ah, friend-Gregori - I am of the Warrior-Uvovo. Such tests are breath and life itself!”

Then with a smile he turned and hurried after the pilot. A pure electric whine came from the gondola's aft section, rising in pitch as the prop spun faster. Greg heard the solid knock of wooden gears as the station manager cranked in the

gantry then triggered the mooring cable releases. Suddenly free upon the air, the dirigible swayed as it began drifting away, picking up speed and banking away from the sheer face of Giant's Shoulder. The trip down to Port Gagarin was only a half-hour hop after which Chel would catch a commercial lifter bound for the Eastern Towns and the daughter-forest Ibsenskog. Greg could not see his friend at any of the gondola's opaque portholes but he waved anyway for about a minute, then just stood watching the zeplin's descent into the deepening dusk. Feeling a chill in the air, he fastened some of his shirt buttons while continuing to enjoy the peace. The zep station was nearly 50 feet below the main dig site but it was still some 300 feet above sea level. Giant's Shoulder itself was an imposing spur jutting eastwards from a towering massif known as the Kentigern Mountains, a raw wilderness largely avoided by trappers and hunters, although the Uvovo claimed to have explored a good deal of it.

As the zeplin's running lamps receded, Greg took in the panorama before him, the coastal plain stretching several miles east to the darkening expanse of the Korzybski Sea and the lights of towns scattered all around its long western shore. Far off to the south was the bright glitterglow of Hammergard, sitting astride a land bridge separating Loch Morwen from the sea; beyond the city, hidden by the misty murk of evening, was a ragged coastline of sealochs and fjords where the Eastern Towns nestled. South of them were hills and a high valley cloaked by the daughter-forest Ibsenskog. Before his standpoint were the jewelled clusters of Port Gagarin, slightly to the south, High Lochiel a few miles northwest, and Landfall where the cannibalised hulk of the old colonyship, the *Hyperion*, lay in the sad tranquillity of Membrance Vale. Then further north were New Kelso, Engerhold, Laika, and the logging and farmer settlements scattering north and west, while off past the northeast horizon was Trond.

His mood darkened. Trond was the city he had left just two short months ago, fleeing the trap of his disastrous cohabitation with Inga, a mistake whose wounds were still raw. But before his thoughts could begin circling the pain of it, he stood straighter and breathed in the cold air, determined not to dwell on bitterness and regret. Instead, he turned his gaze southwards to see the moonrise.

A curve of blue-green was gradually emerging from behind the jagged peaks of the Hrothgar Range which lined the horizon: Nivyesta, Darien's lush arboreal moon, brimming with life and mystery, and home to the Uvovo, wardens of the girdling forest they called Segrana. Once, millennia ago, the greater part of their arboreal civilisation had inhabited Darien, which they called Umara, but some indeterminate catastrophe had wiped out the planetary population, leaving those on the moon alive but stranded.

On a clear night like this, the starmist in Darien's upper atmosphere wreathed Nivyesta in a gauzy halo of mingling colours like some fabulous eye staring down on the little niche that humans had made for themselves on this alien world. It was a sight that never failed to raise his spirits. But the night was growing chilly now so he buttoned his shirt to the neck and began retracing his steps. He was half way up the path when his comm chimed. Digging it out of his shirt pocket he saw that it was his elder brother and decided to answer.

"Hi Ian - how're ye doing?" he said, walking on.

"Not so bad. Just back from manoeuvres and looking forward to FV Day, chance to get a wee bit of R&R. Yourself?"

Greg smiled. Ian was a part-time soldier with the Darien Volunteer Corps and was never happier than when he

was marching across miles of sodden bog or scaling basalt cliffs in the Hrothgars, apart from when he was home with his wife and daughter.

“I'm settling in pretty well,” he said. “Getting to grips with all the details of the job, making sure that the various teams file their reports on something like a regular schedule, that sort of thing.”

“But are you happy staying at the temple site, Greg? - because you know that we've plenty of room here and I know that you loved living in Hammergard, before the whole Inga episode...”

Greg grinned.

“Honest, Ian, I'm fine right here. I love my work, the surroundings are peaceful and the view is fantastic! I appreciate the offer, big brother, but I'm where I want to be.”

“S'okay, laddie, just making sure. Have you heard from Ned since you got back, by the way?”

“Just a brief letter, which is okay. He's a busy doctor these days...”

Ned, the third and youngest brother, was very poor at keeping in touch, much to Ian's annoyance, which often prompted Greg to defend him.

“Aye, right, busy. So - when are we likely to see ye next? Can ye not come down for the celebrations?”

“Sorry, Ian, I'm needed here, but I do have a meeting scheduled at the Uminsky Institute in a fortnight - shall we get together then?”

“That sounds great. Let me know nearer the time and I'll make arrangements.”

They both said farewell and hung up. Greg strolled leisurely on, smiling expectantly, keeping the comm in his hand. As he walked he thought about the dig site up on Giant's Shoulder, the many hours he'd spent painstakingly uncovering this carven stela or that section of intricately tiled floor, not to mention the countless days devoted to cataloguing, dating, sample analysis and correlation matching. Sometimes - well, a lot of the time - it was a frustrating process as there was nothing to guide them in comprehending the meaning of the site's layout and function. Even the Uvovo scholars were at a loss, explaining that the working of stone was a skill lost at the time of the War of the Long Night, one of the darker episodes in Uvovo folklore.

Ten minutes later he was near the top of the path when his comm chimed again, and without looking at the display he brought it up and said;

“Hi, Mum.”

“Gregory, son, are you well?”

“Mum, I'm fine, feeling okay and happy too, really...”

“Yes, now that you're out of her clutches! But are you not lonely up there amongst those cold stones and only the little Uvovo to talk to?”

Greg held back the urge to sigh. In a way, she was right - it was a secluded existence, living pretty much on his own in one of the site cabins. There was a 3-man team of researchers from the university working on the site's carvings but they were all Russian and mostly kept to themselves, as did the Uvovo teams who came in from the outlying stations now and then. Some of the Uvovo scholars he knew by name but only Chel had become a friend.

“A bit of solitude is just what I need right now, Mum. Beside, there's always people coming and going up here.”

“Mm-hmm. There were always people coming and going here at the house when your father was a councilman, but most of them I did not care for, as you might recall.”

“Oh, I remember, all right.”

Greg also remembered which ones stayed loyal when his father fell ill with the tumour that eventually killed him.

“As a matter of fact, I was discussing both you and your father with your uncle Theodor who came by this afternoon.”

Greg raised his eyebrows. Theodor Karlsson was his mother’s oldest brother and had earned himself a certain notoriety and the nickname ‘Black Theo’ for his role in the abortive Winter Coup 20 years ago. As a punishment he had been kept under house arrest on New Kelso for 12 years, during which he fished, studied military history and wrote, although on his release the Hammergard government informed him that he was forbidden to publish anything, fact or fiction, on pain of bail suspension. For the last eight years he had tried his hand at a variety of jobs, while keeping in occasional contact with his sister, and Greg vaguely recalled that he had somehow got involved with the Hyperion Data Project...

“So what’s Uncle Theo been saying?”

“Well, he has heard some news that will amaze you - I can still scarcely believe it myself. It is going to change everyone’s life.”

“Don’t tell me that he wants to overthrow the government again.”

“Please, Gregori, that is not even slightly funny...”

“Sorry, Mum, sorry. Please, what did he say?”

From where he stood at the head of the path he had a clear view of the dig, the square central building looking bleached and grey in the glare of the nightlamps. As Greg listened his expression went from puzzled to astonished and he let out an elated laugh as he looked up at the stars. Then he got his mother to tell him again.

“Mum, you’ve got to be kidding me!.....”

2

Theodor

Theodor Karlsson had a spring in his step as he walked up a private footpath towards the presidential villa. Tall, thick bushes concealed it from inquisitive eyes, and waist-high lantern posts shed pools of subdued radiance all along its length. His long, heavy coat was three-quarters fastened and his custom-soled shoes made little noise on the tiled path. The villa grounds were dark and still in the cool of the evening but Karlsson could almost smell the weave of seamless security which enclosed the place. There was a visible perimeter of patrols and cameras down at the main wall and gate, and a pair of guards at the side-door up ahead, but Theo knew that the best security was seldom seen. The question that loomed large in his mind, however, was who was it all meant to keep out?

The guards, both wearing dark, imager eye-pieces, were muttering into collar mikes as he approached.

“Good evening, Major,” said one. “If you could look into the scanner with your right eye.”

He stepped up to the plain wooden door, followed instructions and moments later he heard several muffled thuds. The door swung open. Inside he was met by a composed, middle-aged woman who took his coat then led him along a narrow, windowless corridor, past a number of bland, pastoral paintings, then up a poorly lit curve of steps to a landing with two doors. Without pause she continued through the left one and Karlsson found himself in a warm, carpeted study.

“Please make yourself comfortable, Major Karlsson. The president will see you shortly.”

“Thank you...” Theo began to say but she was already leaving the room, closing the door behind her. He surveyed his surroundings, a medium-sized room with well-stocked bookshelves, a log fire burning in the hearth, and an ornate adjustable lamp hanging over a large desk. A ceiling-high rack of shelves partially concealed a 2nd door in one corner and a hand-eye security lock.

The belly of the beast, he thought. Or maybe the lion's den.

It always felt like this whenever he had these meetings with Sundstrom, no matter where they took place. Which was why he had got into the habit of visiting his sister, Solvjeg, shortly beforehand, just to quietly let her know where he would be for the next few hours, with a veiled hint as to whom he was meeting. Today, though, she was full of eagerness to know if the rumours were true, that there had been a signal from Earth.

Theo grinned, recalling the moment. The message had apparently been received that morning yet he had heard it sixth-hand from an old friend in the Corps by mid-afternoon, so it was no surprise that Solvjeg picked it up from the old girl's network. Now it was evening and the rumours were all over the colony. Even Kirkland, the leader of the opposition, had issued a statement, but so far there had been no official confirmation from either the council or the president's office.

A ship from Earth! he thought. So now we know that the human race survived the Swarm War, but did we beat them or did other survivors flee from Earth? And what happened to the other two colonyships, the Forrestal and the Tenebrosa?

His mind was a ferment of questions, the outcome of a year and a half of unpaid work at the Hyperion Data Project. It had been his own soldiering experience that had led to helping one of the supervisors with the transcription of a military treatise in Swedish. It turned out to be a Swedish translation of 'On War' by the Prussian, Von Clausewitz, a book that Theo had only ever read references to. Engrossed in the steady work of extracting it from the *Hyperion*'s reams of raw text, and having to guess where the paragraphs began, he had become fascinated with the *Hyperion* and her sister-ships, including the ones that were never launched.....

The door behind the shelves in the corner opened and the president entered, his wheelchair pushed by a young man in a brown and grey onepiece.

“Evening, Theodor,” Sundstrom said, dismissing the attendant then dextrously propelling himself across the room to stop behind his desk.

“Good evening, Holger,” Theo said. “Interesting study you have, some nice books too.” He indicated a glass-fronted cabinet. “Is that the Serov edition of '1984' over there?”

“Yes, it is,” said Sundstrom. “Collins’ ‘Moonstone’ is rarer, of course, but Orwell is much more of a politician’s writer.”

Theo chuckled. Vasili Serov had been a systems tech on board the colonyship *Hyperion* and had played a decisive role in the deadly struggle against the ship’s Command AI. In the Hardship Years that followed, Serov had cobbled together a crude manual printing press and painstakingly typeset those few novels sitting in datapods that had not been linked to the shipboard comnet. The huge memorybanks of the *Hyperion*, buried under layers of encryption by the ship AI, were to remain inaccessible for decades so Serov’s work had proved invaluable to the surviving colonists.

For a moment both men were thoughtfully silent, then Sundstrom spoke:

“I assume you’ve heard.”

“About two hours before I got your invitation,” Theo said, watching him. “So it’s true - Earth has sent a ship to find us, which means that the Swarm were defeated and all our troubles are over, yes?”

Sundstrom gave a thin smile.

“If only matters were that straightforward. Theo, the Swarm War lasted two and a half years before the Hegemony helped chase off the last of the Swarm, and that was a century and a half ago, which is a long time in the history of a culture or a society. Just think about all the strife and upheavals that our little enclave has been through – the Hyperion AI war, First Families against the New Generation, the Consolidators versus the Expansionists, the New Town Secession – and multiply that to a planetary level.” He shook his head. “I’m afraid that our lives are about to become quite a bit more complicated, not to say uncomfortable.”

Frowning, Theo sat back, going over in his mind the dozen or so meetings he’d had with Sundstrom in the last two years.

“You speak as if you know something I’ve not heard about...” He leaned forward. “When you first asked me to join your little cabal, you said that we were preparing for the worst, like the possibility of occupation by an unfriendly species. Now it seems that there’s an Earth ship due in...how long?”

“Fourteen hours.”

“Less than a day, fine,” Theo said. “Yet your demeanour is not that of, shall we say, delighted anticipation.” Then he laughed and snapped his fingers. “Or has it been this contact with Earth that we’ve been preparing for all along?”

Sundstrom leaned back in his wheelchair, gnarled hands loosely clasping the handrests. “Your intuition has always been sharp, Theodor,” he said. “If you had been the leader of the Winter Coup rather than Viktor Ingram...”

“If I’d had that sharp an intuition back then, I would have shot the bastard, not trusted him,” Theo said testily. “But you’re dodging the question, Holger.”

“I’m waiting for the others to join us first - ah, I think they are here now.” He reached forward and fingered an angled display set in the desktop.

The others, Theo thought. Sundstrom had occasionally hinted at the existence of other cabal members, but in two years Theo had met only one of them, a broad-shouldered, muscular Scot who was introduced as Boris. He was not among the three who now entered the study, two of whom - a man and a woman – he had never seen before. The third he recognised immediately as Vitaly Pyatkov, assistant director at the Office of Guidance, an intelligence organisation

founded in the wake of the Winter Coup. Theo was amused by the look of aghast surprise that flashed across the man's features on seeing who was in the president's company, and also by the bland expression that slammed into place an instant later.

"Thank you all for coming here this evening," said Sundstrom. "You have all agreed to be part of my little advisory inner circle, but I intend to keep identities to a minimum for now." He then introduced the man as Donny, and the woman as Tanya. Once everyone had settled, he began.

"First, as I'm sure you've all realised, the rumours are true. One of our com satellites picked up a message claiming to be from the Earthsphere ship *Heracles*, offering friendly greetings and informing us that they will be entering Darien orbit at about ten tomorrow morning. Simurg 2, our satellite orbiting Nivyesta, is tracking an object on an intercept course with Darien; further communications have confirmed that the object is their source."

"Further communications, sir?" said the woman Tanya. "Has there been dialogue? Do we have any clues about what to expect?"

"There is a special ambassador on board, going by the name Robert Horst but thus far we have exchanged little more than diplomatic pleasantries." Sundstrom's face grew serious. "However, there are certain truths that I must make you all aware of from the outset."

He raised a wire remote and clicked it. The screen at his back blinked on, showing a blue world from orbit, with a small green moon in attendance, Darien and Nivyesta. The perspective swung round gradually, bringing the sun, New Sol, into view, causing a lens flare before it slid out of the frame, leaving planet and moon against a hazy backdrop through which a few bright stars shone, diamond points suspended in misty veils.

"The tract of stellar dust and debris that surrounds us," he went on, "is rather larger than some observers had reckoned, nearly a 1000 lightyears across at its widest, and our star system is located in one of the denser swirls. This tract is known as the Huvuun Deepzone and is one of several scattered around this part of the galaxy. It also happens to be the focus of a bitter border dispute between two regional civilisations, the Imisil and the Broltura."

On the screen, Darien and its solar system dwindled into the mottled murk of interstellar dust clouds while strangely contoured walls emerged, stretching across lightyears, the 3-dimensional boundaries between the deepzone and adjacent territories.

"The Brolturan Compact is closely allied to a huge interstellar empire called the Sendruka Hegemony who also happen to be allies of Earthsphere. Unfortunately, the Solar System is nearly 15,000 lightyears away, which puts us well outside Earth's region of influence. The Imisil Mergence were once at war with the Hegemony, which adds a certain tension to the situation."

Sundstrom paused, and there was an astonished silence. The others glanced at the screen and each other as the revelations sank in, and Theo's mind spun with the implications.

Complicated and uncomfortable? he thought. *That's an understatement.*

Pyatkov the intelligence officer spoke:

“Sir, respectfully - I know that your exchanges with the ambassador have not contained such information, so I must ask where it comes from?”

“I’m sorry, Vitaly, but I cannot reveal that at the moment.”

“Then how long have you known all this?” Theo said.

“Nearly two and a half years,” the president said. “You will all find out the nature of this source in time, but they do not wish others to know straight away in fear of an inevitable political backlash.”

It’s got to be the Enhanced, Theo thought. They’re involved in all the tech-heavy projects and I’ll bet that old Holger has a couple tucked away, translating signals trawled from the Great Beyond.

“So who should we fear the most?”

Sundstrom smiled ruefully. “Realpolitik being what it is, I feel that none of them are to be entirely trusted, but Earth’s alliance with the Sendruka Hegemony is disturbing...”

As they listened, Sundstrom launched into an amazing disclosure, sketching the outlines of a topography of interstellar power, rivalry and conflict they had never dreamed existed. The Sendruka Hegemony was an authoritarian, militaristic empire which dominated this part of the galaxy: it employed a range of unprincipled tactics in order to get its way while laying claim to the most altruistic of motives and holding itself up as the example to which other civilisations should aspire. Unfortunately, close bonds of gratitude and trade existed between Earthsphere and the Hegemony since the latter had been instrumental in defeating the Swarm invasion fleet which had nearly overwhelmed Earth and a dozen other civilisations 150 years ago. That was when the *Hyperion* and two other colony ships had departed the home solar system, after the beginning of the invasion but before the Hegemony’s intervention.

As Sundstrom spoke, Theo glanced at the others. The woman Tanya was utterly engrossed, her gaze fixed on the president, while Pyatkov seemed more reserved, frowning slightly as he took it all in. The other man, Donny, seemed to be listening but had a relaxed alertness about him that Theo recognised.

Definitely Special Forces, he thought. Plus an intelligence officer, a networker - maybe she’s in government admin or communications - and a disgraced ex-major. There have to be others besides us.

“So we’re a human colony world very far from home,” Pyatkov said. “We’ve appeared in the middle of contested territory, and Earth’s allies are powerful and unsavoury. What of these Brolturans? Are they preferable to these others, the Imisil?”

“The Brolturans constitute a fanatical offshoot of mainstream Sendruka civilisation,” Sundstrom said. “Their culture is centred on the precepts of a faith, called Voloasti, which elevates them to the status of God’s paladins. The Imisil Mergence on the other hand -” He shrugged. “They are a confederation of mainly non-humanoid races, non-expansionist, yet they’re contesting ownership of this area we’re in, the Huvuun Deepzone, purely to maintain some kind of buffer between themselves and the Brolturans.”

At this Donny smiled and sat straighter. “So what do they look like, these Sendruka?”

“A lot like us,” Sundstrom said. “They are very human-like, except that they average about 10 feet in height.”

Theo got a sudden flash of insight, imagining these tall, humanoid aliens fighting shoulder-to-shoulder to save Earth from the insectoid Swarm. *Yeah, that would generate a good deal of useful gratitude.* Tanya and Pyatkov were openly surprised at this piece of information but Donny just smiled and nodded.

“They sound formidable,” Theo said. “Anything else?”

The president gave one of his twinkly-eyed, mischievous smiles. “Quite a lot else, actually, but there is one particular nugget which I think you’ll all find interesting.” He looked at them. “Since the Swarm War, and especially since Earth allied itself with the Hegemony, the development of artificial intelligence and awareness has moved ahead in leaps and bounds. AI’s have spread to every level and sector of Earth culture, permeating the social fabric to the point where many people carry personalised ones around with them, sometimes as implants, and calling them ‘companions’, never AIs. In the Hegemony, such entities are even more widespread with the majority conferred autonomous rights by law. Several of the oldest and most complex even hold senior posts in government.”

There was a shocked pause, and a shared look of alarm as the meaning of his words dawned. 148 years ago, soon after the detection of the world that was to become their new home, the crew and colonists of the *Hyperion* had fought a savage and desperate war against the ship’s Command AI. From the point when the ship had dropped out of hyperspace, the onboard systems had begun to exhibit malfunctions which grew steadily more hazardous as the landing approached. By the time they made landfall, they were actively struggling against the ship, whose AI had ceased to obey instructions. It took control of machinery, bots and various repair drones with which to sabotage the crew’s efforts to get supplies out of locked storerooms or to directly attack them. Eventually it had begun waking other colonists from cryosleep, implanting them with neural devices to force them to carry out its instructions: eleven of the original crew of 46, plus 29 out of the cryosleep contingent of 1200, had been killed by the time the survivors shut off power to the AI core. As to why it had turned against them, the weary victors could only speculate that the unknown stresses of hyperspace had corrupted its data or its cognitive substrate, turning it against them. The horrors of that struggle had echoed down the decades, becoming a potent symbol and a widely-accepted justification for banning any research into AI, and commemorated in the annual Founders’ Victory celebrations.

“I shall be making my widecast address to the colony in a couple of hours, after making a statement in the Assembly,” the president said, “There will be no mention of anything that I’ve related here, of course, except for whatever generalities came in the ambassador’s messages. But I wanted to tell you this in person now since even our most secure communications may cease to be so in days to come.”

“Is it possible that the Earth ambassador will have one of these AI’s with him?” asked Pyatkov.

“It might be wise to assume that he has,” Sundstrom said. “Which may lead to umbrage on his part come FV Day, but we’ll paper over that crack when we come to it.” He spread his hands. “That is all for the time being, my friends. Continue with your preparations, maintain your colleagues lists, and expect new codewords by tomorrow night.”

As Theo rose with the others, Sundstrom beckoned him back. “Theodor, if you could wait behind a moment.”

Once the rest had made their farewells and left, Pyatkov looking grim as he did so, the president manoeuvred his wheelchair out from behind the desk and over to a stolidly-designed drinks cabinet. He poured himself a small glass of something dark red without offering one to Theo, knocked it back and gave a throaty sigh of satisfaction.

“I’m very glad that you agreed to join my little conspiracy, Theodor,” he said. “Even though you still associate with various rogues and misfits, those Diehards of yours.”

“Ah, merely a group of friends from my army days, family friends...” He shrugged, smiling. “Like-minded folk.”

Sundstrom's smile was knowing. "In any case, I still value your experience and military insight, even your dissenter's viewpoint. But there's something else you bring to our clandestine scheming, something that could prove crucial."

Theo laughed. "Somehow I don't think you're referring to my charm and boyish good looks."

Sundstrom gave him a sidelong look.

"I believe that you and your old friends from the Corps call it 'the assets'."

Still standing, Theo almost froze but made himself relax. "The assets?"

"A substantial quantity of arms and ammunition went missing after the Winter Coup, along with explosives, tech gear, and some vehicles. Now, assuming that this materiel has been stored at various locations in the vicinity of the colony townships, it's entirely possible that such hideaways may have come to the attention of some intel-gathering arm of government. In which case that data could be sitting in files that will shortly become, as I've already indicated, somewhat less than secure. Of course, if these stores turned out to be empty then such files could be closed and erased without delay." He smiled. "I don't know why you held on to it – perhaps you harboured longterm ambitions, or maybe you kept it so that it wouldn't fall into other hands. Either way, I'm glad that you did."

Theo smiled blandly. "Holger, I am at a loss to know how to reply to all that," he said. "But I shall give it careful consideration."

"That's all I ask."

"There is one small favour you might do for me," he said.

"Which is?"

Theo smiled. "From your communications with the Earth ship, were you told anything about the *Forrestal* and the *Tenebrosa*?"

"That was one of my first questions," Sundstrom said. "But it seems that they have not been found – the distinction of first contact is ours."

"After which we will come under the microscope, no doubt."

"Why is that?"

"To find out how our experiment in cultural admixture turned out," Theo said. "The original colonial project back on Earth computer-modelled a wide variety of national-cultural combinations, with the aim of finding those most likely to be able to survive conditions on alien worlds. And to build a worthwhile society."

Sundstrom gave a rueful grin. "Scandinavians, Russians and Scots – what were they thinking?"

A moment later the female assistant entered with Theo's overcoat. He donned it, shook the president's hand and moments later found himself outside the villa again. It was darker and colder now and he felt a distinct nip in the air as he left the villa grounds by a tree-shrouded pair of gates designed to look like the entrance of an adjacent property. The spinnercab he had ordered earlier was waiting at the side of the road, and took him downhill towards the city. Hammergard was spread along a narrow isthmus which separated Loch Morwen from the Korzybski Sea and the ocean beyond, both bodies of water glimmering with reflections of the night sky's starry hues. But Theo was dwelling on Sundstrom's closing remarks about the Diehards, not to mention the assets, which was something of an unsettling

surprise. And yet the president had decided to tell Theo that the assets were vulnerable, a revelation that could have only a limited number of implications, all of which spelled trouble.

He had the driver let him out on the Loch Morwen shore road in the city's Northvale district. With the hum of the spinnercab fading as it returned to the city centre, Theo took out his comm as he headed up the sideroad that led home. It was an older, larger model, its sangwood case scored and darkened from use, but the exterior belied its customised, upgraded components. A few thumbpresses later the blue oval screen read 'Welcome To The Crypt' and when he raised it to his ear he heard jaunty bagpipe music for a moment or two before someone answered.

"Aye, whit is it now?"

Theo cleared his throat. "Rory, it's me."

Silence for a moment. *"Ach, sorry about that, Major - I just had Stef on the line from Tangenberg bitching about the trainin` rota because he wants tae watch the Earth ambassador arriving on the vee and I thought that wiz him again _"*

"That's okay, never mind," Theo said. "Listen, we'll need to roust out some loaders and crews tonight."

"Won`t be easy, chief. What`s it for?"

"Sundstrom knows about the assets."

"Aw, naw..."

"Or more accurately, he knows that government intel knows about them, so we have to move them all tonight."

"Hell`s fire, chief - are we gonna have to shoot our way out?"

Theo slowed as he reached the leaf-wreathed stairway leading up to his hab.

"That's the funny part, Rory - I don't think there'll be anyone watching the caches, never mind getting ready to jump us. Listen, I'm at my house right now. Have Ivanov or Janssen pick me up in 15. And one more thing - see what you can find out about a special forces guy called Donny." He gave a brief description from memory.

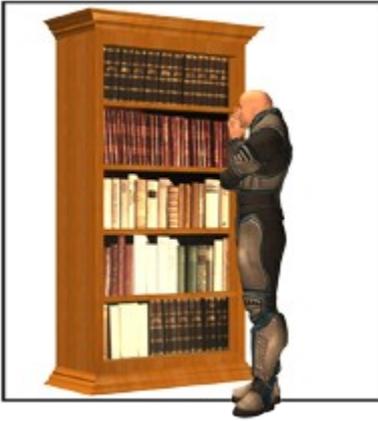
"That must have been some meeting ye had up at the palace," Rory said. *"Am I right in thinking that this ambassador`s meet `n` greet isna all it seems?"*

"Rory, you don't know the half of it."

And as he hurried up the wooden steps, he thought - *And I don`t think I do either.*

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A Country Monster In The Big City

by Matt Betts

Its face turned orange - bathed in the neon shimmer and the beehive buzz of a twelve foot cross over a glowing blue “Jesus Saves” sign. Other messages sizzled above the cracked sidewalks and in plate glass windows along the four lane boulevard:

Pizza by the slice. Tattoos, Piercings.

Live! Girls! 24/7, All Night. Topless!

A big red arrow pointing to a non-descript front door.

Breakfast anytime! Best Anywhere!

MOTEL (With the ‘L’ burned so it seemed to announce a giant yellow MOTE)

Pay by the week

By the day

By the hour

The stout monster took a step closer to the street, stood on clawed tip toes, amazed that the lights stretched on so far in each direction to form the celestial constellations that were missing from the sky.

The rumble of the semi truck startled it from the glow of Orion.

The truck driver with the John Deere hat lean out of the cab “You coming?” he asked, his look indifferent. Inhaling deeply, the thing smelled the oily essence of the city and shook its head “No thanks.” It smiled, exposing jagged teeth. “I’m here.”

John Deere man muttered his disappointment before revving the engine. In the white glow of a streetlight, the little green creature watched the truck until the vehicle appeared as only lights which, when the monster squinted, formed the claw of Cancer.

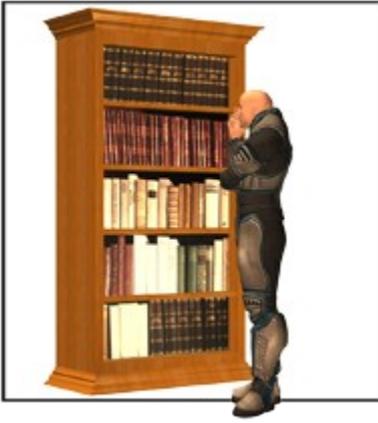
Sleepy-eyed from the long ride, the thing stretched and yawned. It absently looked up and down the light post next to him for a moment then leaned over and started nibbling on it. Still staring at the jumble of light and movement, the monster began revising how long it would take to conquer the place.

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*Matt Betts is a former radio personality and reporter. His writing appears in numerous publications including *Weird Tales*, *Kaleidotrope*, *A Thousand Faces* and the *Triangulation: Taking Flight* anthology. Matt also runs a writing group called the *Naked Wordshop*, which probably doesn't mean what you think it does.*

He can be found on the Web at www.mattbetts.com.



Going Green With Your Deathbot

by Matt Betts

Hand-cranking your Deathbot is environmentally friendly,
though tiresome and impractical.

It makes for unpredictable results when you order
your Deathbot to carry out elaborate assassinations.

Windmills make your Deathbot top-heavy,
prone to tipping over at crucial moments.

This renders you vulnerable and weak
in the eyes of those who would do you harm.

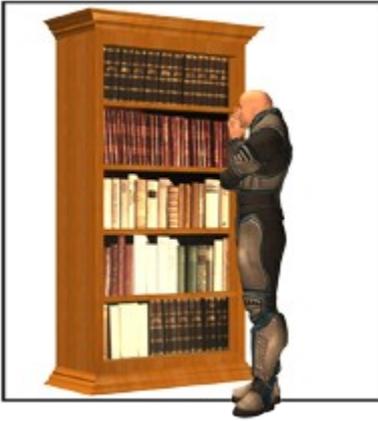
Hydroelectric power is pretty much out, unless
you own an amphibious Deathbot model A-63.

In that case, an unstable power supply
is the least of your troubles.

If you live in Alaska, should you really replace your
Deathbot's fission reactor with solar power?

The nights get long, the battery
holds only so much and your enemies are many.

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Mother And Child

by Rod Slatter

Under the Trace Macula Colony Code, the age of majority was seven thousand days. Phoebe Whitley was that age today.

Marylin Whitley, her mother and Council Convener of the colony, sighed. “I don’t want you to go, but I can’t stop you.”

Phoebe leaned forward, pulling herself from the embrace of the organic wall that had started to mould around her. “I have to go. If Dad’s out there, I have to find him.”

Marylin nodded, remembering the day when Ben Brooks – Phoebe’s father – left the colony just before his daughter was born. “Baby, if you’re dead set on this...if you’re really going into space after him, you need to understand why he left.”

Ben Brooks was orbiting Jupiter within the Io plasma torus, half a million kilometres away from Europa when the Gaia phage ship started closing in on him. His ship had already taken damage and fuel levels were too low to escape from the Jupiter system. Comms were intermittent at best, made worse by distance and electromagnetic interference. He was in a bad way.

His face flickered on the portal on Marylin’s workstation; the audio signal was much better than the video. She hoped he could hear her.

“One more orbit, that’s all. Another eight hours maybe. We can put up some decoys. That will give you enough time to soft-land on one of the other moons or moonlets and disappear off the sensors. When the phage is gone, we’ll come and get you.”

The static buzzed for a second, then cleared. “OK. Not much of a plan, but it’s the only game in town. Better than landing on Europa.”

Marylin knew that if Brooks landed on Europa it would bring the phage down to the surface and probably into the colony. She knew from Brooks that Gaia phage units were exterminators. They exterminated resistance to the Gaia organism. The ocean colony under Trace Macula was full of refugees and rebels.

The portal blanked.

“Brooks? Brooks!”

Anderson's face came up on the portal instead, looking grim. "Lost him."

"Get him back."

Anderson came back a few seconds later. "The signal's dead. Looks like he took a missile from the last salvo. Probably his ECM packed up and one of the missiles found its way back to him. I'm sorry."

Marylin sprang back from the portal and floated down to the gently pulsing floor. She couldn't face the idea of him dying, of him not being out there...somewhere. He had founded the colony with her. He had been the first to drill through the ice. He had found the living ocean – bigger than all the oceans on Earth put together, and teeming with life. He had brought in the geneticists to create the living fabric of the colony. He was...vital...to the colony. To her.

"No. No. No," she moaned. "Oh no. Please."

She had wanted more than anything for him to hold their daughter in his arms. Even if it was only once, that would have been enough. But now her world was empty and so was her daughter's.

Anderson's face turned away and spoke to someone out of view, "Get to the CC's quarters. Quick. She shouldn't be on her own. Not like that. Not in her condition."

By the time the phage's signal reached the dish antennae up on the Trace Macula ice flats, Marilyn had stopped crying.

She sat on a spar that kept the flexible walls of her workroom roughly the right distance apart.

She nodded to Cotton who was sitting quietly next to her.

Cotton turned to Anderson. "Put it through."

The picture and sound were clearer now. Gaia's equipment was better, and she was undoubtedly nearer than Brooks had been.

The hairless, ageless, sexless face of Gaia stared back at her. "Gaia phage in active mode. I seek the pathogen identified as Brooks."

"You killed him."

"No." The signal delay was definitely shorter now.

"You hit his ship with a missile. He's dead."

"My missiles missed. His ship was destroyed, but the evidence suggests he did it himself."

Marylin winced. "What's the difference? He's still dead."

"Not if he ejected first, destroying his own ship as a decoy. His ejector probably had the delta V to soft land on Europa. Assuming I am correct, he would have tried to reach Trace Macula as this is the only inhabited Gaia asset in the Jovian system. Where is he?"

Cotton rose out of her seat. "Wait a minute. You said *Gaia asset*. We're not Gaia - "

Marylin waved her quiet.

“We are all Gaia,” the phage said. “Except for pathogens. Where is Brooks?”

Marilyn considered her reply, trying to see what Gaia saw. What had once been mining camps and colonies and cities in the asteroids and on the planets, all with their own unique identities and cultures, were now simply parts of the new self-aware Gaia organism. Gaia saw resistance as pathogenic. And Brooks resisted. He and other pirates and terrorists fought on in the outer solar system. The phage shifted on the screen, moved in closer. “I require entry to the Trace Macula asset. If Brooks is there I will find him and eradicate him. If I find any other non-Gaia entities I will eradicate them also.”

Marilyn stared straight at the phage. “I’m the Council Convener. It’s my decision whether we let you in or not. What if I say no?”

The phage remained motionless. “In that circumstance, I would signal for reinforcements and force an entry.”

“Wait there.” She put the phage on hold without waiting for a response, then turned to Cotton. “Get Anderson.”

Anderson re-appeared on the portal. “We should fight.”

Cotton nodded. “We are not Gaia, and Gaia needs to be told.”

“Anderson, for pity’s sake, we can’t fight Gaia. This is just one phage. Gaia has thousands. And if we killed them all there would be tens of thousands more. Fighting is suicide.”

“What if Brooks is alive out there? What if he uses up his fuel decelerating to a soft landing somewhere. He’d be stranded... helpless... waiting for the phage to find him, or for his biosupport to pack up. We need to take the phage out. We need to fight.”

Marilyn took a breath; tried to calm herself. “If we fight, Brooks is dead anyway. Nothing can save him then, even if he’s alive right now. Because if we fight we all die. You, me, him, everyone.”

“You’d leave him at the mercy of Gaia? You’d betray him? This is Ben Brooks we’re talking about.”

Marilyn let the question hang. She couldn’t bear to answer it. She snapped the comms back on. “Land on the Trace Macula pad in two hours.”

Brooks wasn’t dead. He steered his ejector to come down on Europa at an oblique angle. He didn’t have enough fuel to soft-land, but beyond the Trace Macula ice flats were the fields of slag heaps left over from the building of the pad. Snow was softer than ice. It was soft enough.

Bruised but not broken, he cut himself out of the ejector shell. He walked the few kilometres back to the pad and without much difficulty persuaded some hothead sympathiser to give him the codes. He entered the umbilical ice tube and passed down into the colony.

Two hours and one minute later, Marilyn Whitley was face-to-face with the phage exterminator in the commons. Tall and powerful, dressed in an armoured pressure suit, her presence was unmistakable, her stature male. But she was female – Gaia was always female.

The commons was filling with colonists. Some huddled in the alcoves of the ribbed walls, staring at the phage and whispering. Others were more confident, arguing openly. Marilyn tried to gauge the mood.

She stepped forward. “Marilyn Whitley, Council Convener of the Trace Macula Colony. Welcome.”

“Gaia phage in active mode. These proceedings are on record. Do you know the current location of the pathogen identified as Brooks?”

“You have not asked the Council’s permission to record Council proceedings. You are in breach of the Colony Code.”

“If he is here, I will find him. Then eradicate him. Do you know where he is?”

“We know why you’re here,” Anderson said.

Marilyn rounded on Anderson. “I’m the CC. I speak for the Council. Everyone else be quiet.”

The phage continued. “Any assistance or attempted assistance to the pathogen will, under these circumstances, be interpreted as pathogenesis.”

“Look,” Marilyn said, “the best information we have is that Brooks died when you destroyed his ship. *If* he were still alive and *if* he were within the legal jurisdiction of Trace Macula Colony, he would be entitled to representation, and dispassionate argument of the charges against him. A decision as to guilt or innocence of those charges would be made by a panel of his peers. Then he would have the option of rehabilitation through public service. Only on default of those provisions would he be banished from the colony. Under no circumstances whatsoever would he be *eradicated*. We do not eradicate *people* up here. That’s the law here. You are a welcome and honoured guest. But you will observe and obey the Colony Code. Surrender your arms and go about your business in peace.”

The phage looked a little unnerved. She looked around. “I am Gaia,” she said. “I want Brooks.”

Anderson stepped forward. “You said.”

“Get a grip Anderson, or I’ll have you removed.”

The phage saw everything, recorded everything.

“I am Gaia. You see before you a single cell of the Gaia organism. I see many cells. I see antipathy. You may disarm this cell. You may even de-animate this cell. But Gaia has a trillion cells. When one is lost it is replaced by two. You cannot prevail against Gaia.”

Marilyn knew that the odds were against them. The Trace Macula colony was tiny in comparison.

“We are not against Gaia any more than we are against each other. But you must see we are Europeans now. We stand for Europa. We will not be bullied. We will not be dictated to by the consciousness on Earth which calls itself Gaia, any more than we will be dictated to by each other. These are the facts here. Surrender your weapons and go about your work. Your findings will confirm what I say.”

The phage nodded, moved to disarm itself. But then Brooks arrived in the commons.

At first there was a murmur and then a cheer, as the founder strode through the crowd in his battle-scarred pressure suit. Some let him through willingly, others – supporters of Marilyn Whitley – tried to block his path.

The phage saw everything, recorded everything.

The walls thrummed as an up-current from the tidally heated heart of the moon surged up and past. Rough weather was on its way. Brooks, as wild and romantic as ever, seemed unphased.

Marylin crushed the urge to run to him.

“Silence! *Silence!*” she shouted. The colonists knew her voice, and they knew what it meant when she shouted.

“Ben Brooks, you are under arrest. Duty police, take him to the cells.” The two citizens on police duty threaded their way through the crowd towards Brooks, their movements nervous, unsure what to expect.

“OK, Marylin,” Brooks said. “But before you take me down, there’s one little cleaning job I need to do.” He drew his gun and levelled it on the phage.

The crowd parted.

The phage drew her own weapon and jumped sideways.

Brooks’s first two shots thudded into the dermis of the commons wall behind the phage. He tracked her, waited while the colonists tumbled over each other to get out of the way, then fired four more rounds. Three ricocheted off her armour, but one penetrated and blood spurted.

Brooks dropped the gun and fled the way he had come.

The phage glided to the floor, blood pumping from the wound at the top of her right leg.

“Get him! Get Brooks!” Marylin yelled. But Brooks was already gone, his escape undoubtedly aided by his admirers.

There was no way to stop the bleeding. The bullet had struck a seam between two armour plates and cut a main artery. By the time they got her out of the suit she would be dead.

“We’re finished,” Marylin sobbed. “We’re all dead. Ben, you’ve killed us all.”

“No.”

Marylin looked down at the phage.

The phage smiled. “No. You are not dead. You are alive. You have been invaded by the pathogen and your immune system is fighting back. You will live.”

“We’re not Gaia,” Marylin said. “We’ll never be Gaia.”

“No. Europa is a long way behind Gaia. Self-awareness may be far in the future for you, but nevertheless Europa is alive. She fights, she lives.”

“When Gaia finds out what happened to you...they’ll come here and destroy us.”

“These proceedings are on record. Gaia already knows.” The phage shut her eyes for a moment, then re-opened them. “Gaia greets you.”

The phage cell de-animated.

Phoebe put her arm round Marylin. “So, you think it’s really him?”

Marylin looked away. “The codes are right. How can it be anyone else?”

“Mum?”

Marylin could not say what she wanted to say. She wanted to hold her daughter in her arms. She wanted to hold Brooks; even for a moment, even for a second, it would be worth everything. But everything was not enough.

“Be careful, Phoebe,” was all she could manage.

Phoebe nodded and turned to leave, brushing her tears away. She made her way up the ice tube to the pad, boarded a converted mining ship with her crew and left Europa.

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Rod Slatter was born in Essex and brought up in London. He has moved around the UK a bit and now lives in Reading.

His stories have appeared in Xenos, Threads, Substance and Albedo One. Mother And Child is his first this century.

When not running payrolls for a living, he does computer music, motorbikes and science fiction.