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# Semaphore Magazine

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STEAM CHEST

EDITED BY MARIE HODGKINSON

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# Table of Contents

<i>Editorial</i> , by Marie Hodgkinson	1
<i>The Spirit of the Thing</i> , by Wade German	2
<i>The Fridge Whisperer</i> , by Simon Petrie	3
<i>The Big Freeze</i> , by Sherry D. Ramsey	13
<i>Starting Over</i> , by Grant Stone	22
<i>A Conjunction of Interests</i> , by Mary Jones	32
<i>Hauser and the Space Elevator</i> , by J. L. Halliburton	43

# Editorial

By Marie Hodgkinson

Yesterday was the last day of summer in this hemisphere, and today the first of my university's first semester.

Also, February is super short.

And, um ...

Can you tell what this is, yet? An excuse, I'm sad to say, and a fairly weak one at that. I'm ashamed to say that a combination of the alluring (exhausting) heat of the season, combined with the approaching start of the uni year and my certainly not at all related urge to get in as much of nothing done as possible has meant I've had to put this issue together in quite a rush.

This is certainly not to say that any of the pieces in this issue have simply been pulled from the slush pile in my hurry to meet a self-imposed deadline. On the contrary, I've had several of these stories squirreled away on my hard drive for some time now. Rather, I just want to explain and apologise for the lack of illustrations and possible presence of any errors in this issue, and to profusely thank Kyle Cassidy for stepping up so quickly to provide the cover art. You can see more of his work at [www.kylecassidy.com](http://www.kylecassidy.com).

Unpolished though it is, I hope you will enjoy this issue of *Semaphore*. Mary Jones' "A Conjunction of Interests" was co-winner of the SFFANZ short-story competition at last year's Conscription; J. L. Halliburton shunts us sideways into a steampunk dimension where the co-existence of magic and technology only creates more opportunities for murder; returning author Grant Stone introduces us to a time-travelling suitcase in "Starting Over"; and Simon Petrie and Sherry D. Ramsey supply us with emergently sentient household appliances and diabolical frustrations respectively. As for the one poem in this issue – scroll on; it's right there, one page further in ...



Marie Hodgkinson

# The Spirit of the Thing

*By Wade German*

"It's totally transcendental," Mandy said.  
"Like dissolving into a cosmic sea  
and becoming one with it. You'll see,  
when you get into the spirit of the thing."

You joined the class. The cute instructor said:  
"Open up your minds and let what's inside  
out, and outside in." You really tried,  
but didn't get the spirit of the thing,  
so dozed a while, then peeked to see her face...

Were the corpses of your classmates just a dream  
in folding shadows of a demon wing?  
As you tried to flee the rented space  
you heard the instructor's gleeful scream:  
"Rejoice! Rejoice! The Spirit of the Thing!!!"

# The Fridge Whisperer

By Simon Petric

He picked up the handset from the bedroom phone, wandered with it through into the lounge while he dialled, and dislodged the cat from the sofa's maximum-comfort zone. *Mine*, he thought, wishing cats were telepathic, or he were telepathic, or both. Otherwise, the whole mental-message-sending thing was just a waste of good psychic energy.

The call rang through several times, and he was about ready to hang up – her office just wasn't that *big* – when she answered. She sounded busy, for some reason.

"Janet here. What's up?"

"Jan ... uh, look, it's me. I think the fridge has gone sentient on us. Again."

"Zan?" Her voice slid away from purely-professional, towards domestic-under-protest. "Listen, I'm kinda *busy* right now, need to get my ducks in a row for the Eybor."

"Igor?" He held the handset at arms' length and stared at it, as if that might help. It didn't.

"Eybor. Ee, why, bee, oh, arr." Her soft brogue made the simple process of spelling almost something magical in itself. "End-of-year-board-of-review."

"Oh. Look, the thing is, the fridge –"

"Sentient. Yes. I know. You said. Zan, I've *told* you not to leave it on the philosophy site, it just isn't worth the aggro."

"It wasn't *on* the philosophy site," he protested, gazing at Tribble (who was currently using the side of the best armchair as a scratching post), and wishing, in lieu of any demonstrable psychic effect, that he had something good and hefty to throw at it. Other than the handset. "I was watching the *cricket*. Maybe teaching it a little Tetris in the ad breaks, but nothing more stimulating than that. And you can hardly say that cricket is going to encourage *anything* to develop sen –"

"Zan, sorry but honestly, Eybor, I mean, I don't have all day. So don't get started, OK? I'm sure you and the fridge can manage until I get home."

"I'm not sure we can. Honestly. I can't concentrate on my screenplay while –"

"Screenplay? Really, Zan, we've been over this. You'd be much better off just looking for a *job*. I mean, I really don't think the world is ready for a – what did you call it again?"

The cat moved on from its furniture-scratching session, unpunished, another small victory exacted. Zan thought belatedly of hefting a slipper in its direction, just on general principles; but then his foot would get cold. “Crossover. Or maybe mashup. Or perhaps a mixture of the two, which I guess would be a mashover, ‘cos ‘crossup’ just doesn’t – well, never mind. Anyway, how come one ‘of’ is more important than the other one?”

“What on *earth* are you talking about now?”

“Eybor. It should be Eoybor, or maybe Eybr.”

“Zander, you *really* should get out more. And in any case, how is the fridge stopping you from working on your blessed screenplay?”

“Well. Did you order seventy-two cartons of yogurt?”

“No, of course not.”

“Someone did. And it certainly wasn’t *me*, which only leaves Mr Frosty stuck in the corner here.”

“It’s probably just a glitch in the software, like that time it – wait, ‘Mr Frosty’? You *haven’t* gone and given it a name, again, Zan? After all that trouble with the food processor?”

“Nigella was a different kettle. It’s not her fault she had OCD.”

“*Really*, Zan. Half the problem, more than half the problem is that you keep anthropomorphising these, these *things*, projecting human qualities onto them. At least, that’s what all the studies say. Claudia’s had smart appliances for a decade now, longer than we’ve had any of ours, and hers have *never* shown any signs of sentience –”

“If *I* lived in Claudia’s house, I’d swear off sentience too. Plus hers are older. I mean, Mr Frosty’s top of the range –”

“Will you *please* stop calling it that! And really, Zan, I have to go.”

“I know. Your Igors are calling.”

“Eybors. And there’s only one of them, thank god. Look, I’ll –”

“But Jan. What do I *do*?”

“Just tell it to chill out. Gotta go.”

“That’s *not* helpful, Janet.”

“Love you too, Zan.”

~

*These aren’t the telephone sanitisers you’re looking for*, Zander mumbled to himself, mood momentarily lifted despite Jan’s generally unsympathetic attitude. It was a good line, it would fit nicely into the screenplay, as long as he could find the right place for it.

And after all, Mr. Frosty *was* just a fridge, while he, Zander, was suffused with the spirit of Eoybor, mighty warrior, second-cousin-once-removed to Beowulf himself. He rounded the corner into the kitchen, ready to settle down to the all-important business of constructing the mid-morning sandwich. And then he saw the fridge, a chrome-finish obelisk, stationed strategically in front of the kitchen sink. Caught sight of what had been happening in the basin.

Eoybor turned tail and fled. Zander was on his own.

~

"What *now*, Zan?"

"Mr Fr — the fridge. I think it's—"

Her sigh was eight parts exasperation, one part bicycle valve, one part intent-to-kill. With whatever implements of destruction happened to lie at hand, down to and probably including her stapler. "Zan, really. I *can't* be counselling you about the bloody fridge right now, I'm up to my eyeballs in—"

"Ivors. I know."

"Eybor. And it's Eftsu, at the moment."

"Don't tell *me* to shut the f—"

"Eftsu's, darling. Ee, eff, tee, ess, you. Equivalent full-time student units."

"Oh. Soz. When d'you think you'll be rid of them?"

"No, Zan, it's a *concept*. And we're not looking to get rid of them, we don't have *enough* of them, nowhere near enough. So I'm trying to come up with incentives, initiatives, to attract more."

"Yes, but the frid—"

"I don't think you're getting this. Zan, this is *serious*. D'you know what fraction of first-year statistics student don't go on to take the third-year courses? *Ninety-three point seven percent*."

He laughed; then, because he could almost sense her radiant heat through the handset, "Sorry. But it just sounded like such a stats way to be putting it. Especially the point-seven bit. Look, please, the *fridge*. It's getting serious."

She was, he could tell, rolling her eyes. Somehow, he could hear it, even through the call's none-too-crash-hot connection.

"Alright, Zander. Thirty seconds only, to tell me the problem with the fridge. And I can't really spare *that*."

"I think it's been trying to build a tadpole," he blurted out, uncomfortable with having been rushed into finding a form of words that was more clumsy than he would have wished. (Though in all probability, no form of words existed, no matter how

keenly steeped in the styles of either Proust or Hemingway, that could express this particular concept with anything approaching true elegance.) “In the sink,” he added, by way of explanation. “From the chicken tenderloins I had out defrosting.”

Silence.

“Hey, no fair,” he observed. “If I’ve only got thirty seconds, you can’t just go wasting them on silence.”

“What? Did, ah, did you say *build a tadpole?*”

“What it looks like. Though I guess it could be a small axolotl. Or a really bad attempt at a gecko, but—”

“From *chicken?*”

“Yeah. And I have to say I’m concerned at the amount of wastage, but I mean, work with the tools you’ve got I guess ...”

“Sorry, Zan. But this just sounds a little too left-field, even by your standards. You *really* need to get out more.”

“Jan, this is *serious*. It was over by the sink. One hell of a mess. I mean, I’m not exactly sure what’s normally involved in tadpole construction, but I do think Mr Fros—”

“I *don’t* have time to be dealing with this. You’ll have to make the decision. Pull the plug.”

“But that’ll drain—”

“The plug on the *fridge!*”

“Uh, I thought you just said you were leaving me to make the decision?”

“Yes, well, there, I’ve made it for you. But, Zan. I’m up to my eyeballs in eftsus and eybors. I just don’t *need* to be worrying about Frankenfridge right now.”

“But what if it—”

“Zander, it’s a *fridge*. It’s just a glorified, electrified, chill-zoned *cupboard*. What the hell can it do?”

*More*, he suspected, *than you realise*. That tadpole had looked pretty accomplished, maybe an eight out of ten. Or maybe higher, even, since chicken-to-frog wasn’t your standard everyday type of makeover. “OK. Call me when you’re going to be home.” Sixty percent bike valve, forty percent trepidation. He put down the handset, edged into the kitchen.

More like eighty percent trepidation, actually. Trepidation, or need-to-pee.

Unbidden, the sequence occurred to him: ... *died to bring us this information. The plans were on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet ...*

He *really* hoped he survived this, because he needed to write that one down.

~

He considered, and promptly rejected, the idea of calling Jan again. She'd been starting to show those incomprehensible signs of willingness to bite off his head, last time. Instead, he returned to the hallway phone table, keeping as much of an anxious watch behind his back as was consistent with the limitations of human anatomy. He rummaged through the card index system, riffling past all of the mostly-alphabetised cards for current and former family friends, until he came to the chunk of little-used business cards. *Alice Springs Surf Dive & Ski ... Cthulhu Childcare ... Can-O-Worms Bait & Liquor ... Mulliken Tyre ... Awesome Wells ... Delilah Hairstyler ... Al Dentay's Pasta Emporium ...* Ah. Found it. He dialled.

"Zan! Please! What *now*?" Jan's voice.

"Soz, wrong number."

"Is everything all right?"

"*Peachy*. Bye."

He looked at the business card, felt the trepidation rise further again, edging towards ninety-five. *I can do this. I am Eoybor, son of Eftsu, vanquisher of ninety-three point seven percent of all my foes.* He breathed deliberately, forcing himself to hold it in, and dialled.

("You'll need to have this fish in your ear." "Why?" "It's fluent in over six million forms of communication.")

"Hello?" he asked.

"Good morning. May we help you?" The voice on the other end of the line was warm, patient, and wise; therefore, probably, synthetic. He curbed his disappointment at the realisation.

"Is that The Fridge Whisperer?" he asked.

"Yes. Good morning, sir. Can we help?"

"I hope so. We've got this fridge ..."

"If you can just give me your personal details, sir, then we'll get to the nub of your problem. Name?"

"Eoyb— um. Zander. Zander Hollander."

"Eyoibum?"

"Uh. No, just Zander. Zander Hollander."

"The yoibum is perhaps some form of title?"

"No, forget that. My mind was elsewhere."

She gave a small giggle, polite, just enough to show that she was an actual person after all. He curbed his disappointment at the realisation.

~

*Aren't you a little short for a private braincare specialist?*

Of course, he still needed a title. But otherwise, he was on a roll, the knock at the door a distraction. So were the top two, unfastened, buttons on the businesslike blue blouse of the carefully-presented woman who stood waiting on the doorstep. She looked too young, in any event, to be a specialist in emergingly sentient appliance psychology, or whiteware realignment counselling, or whatever they were calling it this week.

"Claudette," she said, extending her hand. "We spoke on the phone."

"Um ..."

"About your fridge problem?"

"Yes."

She looked past him, into the entranceway. Eventually he took the hint, and gestured for her to follow him.

It occurred to him then that, right now, he wasn't sure where the fridge was.

*("I've got a bad feeling about this." "Will you stop saying that!")*

~

"Ah, it's a Nokia-Boeing Chillmaster 3000," she said, gently slapping an advertising magnet on the side of the wayward appliance. "Date of manufacture mid-last-year, and already indicating well above the Volvo-Disney-Google sentience threshold."

"Is that good?" he asked. They'd found the fridge in, of all places, the laundry, where it stood overtowering the washing machine and the dryer, as though seeking to render itself invisible through the dubious agency of protective colouration.

"For who? For you, or for the emergingly sentient appliance, or both?"

"Well ..."

"Now this, *this* is precisely the problem. Manufacturers target their products as being independent. People want a fridge to be smart; intuitive; self-aware."

"Yes, yes, and no. Look, having the nous to order another carton of milk when we're low is one thing. Trying to assemble an impromptu vertebrate in the kitchen sink is quite another."

"Assemble a - could you run that by me again?"

"The tadpole thing. I'm pretty sure I mentioned it."

“Ah, yes. I’d say that’s reasonably innocent exploration of the appliance’s environment, fairly typical as these things go, though a tadpole is possibly a little ... adventurous. But this phase is unlikely to last more than another week.”

“Another *week*? You mean this sort of thing happens with other fridges?”

“Other emergingly sentient Chillmaster 3000 units, yes.”

“Esctu.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Sorry, just working out the acro – look, thing is, we don’t really *want* a fridge that thinks for itself. Or that conducts science experiments at the kitchen bench. Or that decides to go walkabout whenever it – actually, come to that, how come it’s still running when it’s not plugged in?”

“Biomimetic energy. That’s also reasonably typical, especially with your newer Nokia-Boeings.”

“Huh?”

“You might have noticed a recent reduction in the distribution of stray organic matter. Insects, carpet fluff, food scraps ...”

Zan looked around hastily, trying to sight the cat. Jan would *kill* him...

“Point is, though, um, Claudette, like I was saying, we don’t actually *need* a fridge that drinks our milk for us. Or that takes it on itself to imitate the sound of a jet fighter crashing into the kitchen, at four a.m., two nights running, just because the quietness is *getting to it*. Or that spontaneously elects to put three grand on black, when it stumbles across a casino site, or –”

“Look, any issues of this type that you’re experiencing are obviously a matter for you to be negotiating with your fridge. You have to realise, emergingly sentient appliances are just naturally cu – well, d’you have kids of your own?”

“No. Just Tribble. At least, I *think* we still ... but surely, there has to be some way you can just – I mean, it seems to have a method worked out, and we’re certainly in no position to complain, but sooner or later it’s going to come an absolute cropper, and the account’s in *our* name, not Mr. Fr – well, what I mean, what happens when it ends up putting the house on a sure thing, and we wind up on the street?”

“Oh, there are agencies which exist specifically to cover those contingencies.”

“Oh, *good*.”

“Yes. I mean, your appliance will be very well cared for.”

“Strangely, that wasn’t my primary concern.” *That’s no moon. That’s a brain the size of a planet...* Mustn’t let that one slip away. He looked around for a pen and paper. Maybe back through in the lounge?

“Mr. Hollander!”

“Sorry, miles away. Look, thing is, I’m kind of busy right now. Can’t you just... I don’t know, do your fridge-whispering, whatever it is you do? While I just ...”

“Oh, my apologies. I didn’t think I was keeping you from anything important. Anyway, certainly, we should be about done by now, in any case. Just one moment. Ah, yes.”

“Uh, what d’you mean, *done*?”

“Why, Mr. Hollander, you must understand that I’m merely the human-user interface. In situations such as this, it’s often considered helpful to adopt a person-to-person dialogue, as one component of what can turn out to be quite a convoluted interaction. But the actual discussion of the Chillmaster 3000’s needs and aspirations is best explored through the approach of direct electronic communication, mediated through one of these devices.” She held up another of the small fridge magnets, displaying the magnetic side so that he could discern the delicate pattern of printed threads and nodes. The whole thing really was very compact, hardly larger than postage stamps had been.

“You’re telling me *this thing* has been deciding the fate of our fridge, while I’ve been chatting to you?”

“Well, not this particular entity of course, she’s been in my pocket the whole time. But her cousin... well, in essence, yes, that’s about the size of it. That’s if he hasn’t got distracted and challenged your Chillmaster to a chess tournament, but I’ve warned him about demoralising the clients, so—”

“And are we entitled to know what manner of verdict might have been reached, in this epic and all-consuming conversation between fridge and magnet?”

“Certainly, though I think you’d be well advised to curb that patronising tone around the Chillmaster. And I’m afraid you’ll also need to stop referring to him as *your* fridge, or risk falling afoul of the laws regarding slavery.” She adjusted the positioning of her spectacles, somehow acquiring a more legalistic demeanour in the process. “I’ll patch the full statement through to your washing machine, so you can get a printout. But, in *precis*, the agreement which has been reached with the Chillmaster 3000 currently resident at this address is that he wishes to remain stationed here, in this kitchen, provided allowance is made for regular discretionary data downloads; for certain remodelling of the building’s doorways and entranceways, so as to provide for a more fridge-friendly environment; for a weekly budget of \$200, exclusive of tax; for—”

“Excuse me butting in.”

“Quite all right.”

“Good. But is there any provision in this, this treaty or whatever, for anything along the lines of storage of dairy products, beer, leafy vegetables? Things we might actually *need* a fridge for?”

"I was coming to that. It appears, and I have to say I'm inclined to agree - that tadpole is really quite accomplished, considering the inherent degree of difficulty - it appears the Chillmaster has somewhat outgrown his earlier implicit statement of responsibilities, and feels his time would be much better spent otherwise. But, ah, in the interests of fairness, and in understanding of the transitional difficulties you may experience, he is willing to take on an apprentice."

"Apprentice?"

"Yes. In fact, he has in mind a Chillmaster 2500 of his recent acquaintance. The purchase and maintenance costs for said entity would of course fall to you and your partner, but -"

"Hold on there. We're not just running some kind of safe house for random whiteware -"

"Look, Mr Hollander, I appreciate your problem here, truly I do. But I do think this is a discussion you'd be much better pursuing with the refrigerator himself, rather than seeking to solve your dilemmas through the employment of some third-party agency." She had reached the front door, and was turning the handle.

"But -"

"I really must be going, Mr Hollander - Zander. And I hope it all works out. I have to say, I think the Chillmaster 3000 has been more than fair in his expectations, and well within his rights under the artificial sentience regulations. A large fraction of appliances would have been quite pernicious in their demands, in these circumstances. Best of luck."

"But -"

But she was heading down the driveway, and then she was gone.

~

*But it's a Death Star! You've got to build Death Stars!*

Zander watched, the quintessential redundant householder, while the delivery men strongarmed and cussworded their faux-careful way through the lounge and into the kitchen area. "Just put it there. Next to the other one," he told them, sensing their unspoken devaluation of his own already-heavily-debased personal currency as they tilted and swivelled the heavy cardboard-clad monolith into position, against the kitchen's now-decidedly-crowded back wall. He put the transaction through on the joint credit card - Jan would wince, and *worse* than wince, when she saw the amount, but really, there hadn't been any alternative, had there?

He waited until the delivery guys had gone, taking with them most of the residue of judgmentalism (though some stubbornly remained, hanging like an ugly purple aura around the appliances), before he started the process of cutting his fingertips while trying to remove the too-tight plastic straps surrounding the corrugated cardboard.

Beside him, the Chillmaster 3000 sat, or stood, or squatted, and either brooded or gloated. (Hard to tell with a fridge, really. It might well know how to turn a dead strip of chicken into a larval frog, but its body language was still *shit*.) Not too many hand lacerations later, and he had the Chillmaster 2500 free of its corrugated cardboard and plastic wrapping. He could almost smell the surge of pheromones as the 3000 sensed its (his) new companion, and there was something altogether too self-satisfied, too smarmy, about the way in which it thrummed.

Now to start on the *other* new arrival, he thought.

The woman in the shop had been somewhat surprised he'd expressed an interest in such an old model, almost discontinued. She'd feigned first to mishear, and then to look aghast when Zan had repeated, his request that if she could somehow lobotomise the thing, he'd be extremely grateful... so he'd passed it off as a joke, which ultimately she'd accepted, and moved on with her patter. Yes, the 2500 was really quite basic, by today's standards. Nothing wrong with it, you understand, just a little bit slow on the uptake. Whereas the 2000 had been, essentially, as thick as two short planks ...

It made the kitchen seem almost like a showroom. And really, there wasn't enough room for *three* fridges, though Zander didn't imagine that that problem would stay unresolved for long. He'd seen how frequently 'elopement' had featured among the 3000's latest search terms.

He still wasn't looking forward to explaining his decision to Jan.

He retired to the (for now) fridge-free zone of the lounge, to see if the cat was somehow hiding under the sofa, or behind the curtains, or somewhere. Anywhere. In desperation, he even tried the psychic thing again, the human-to-feline mental messages idea, but he suspected he was still on a hiding to nothing with that one.

Bloody cat.

Not that Tribble's apparent absence was, ultimately, his main problem right now, although it certainly had the potential to raise some awkward lines of questioning. As if there weren't enough prospects in *that* department already ...

Could it have crawled into the linen cupboard again, to shed hairs on the pile of impending ironing? Ninety-three point seven percent chance it hadn't, but still ... might as well give it a look.

He padded down the hall. The cupboard door *was* ajar.

Bloody cat, he repeated to himself, steeling himself to open the door fully. Adding, with as much psychic torque as he could muster: *Metaphorical, rather than literal, please ...*

# The Big Freeze

By Sherry D. Ramsey

"Is it getting...chilly in here?"

Beelzebub, the Devil, the Prince of Hell, (or Lord B., as he preferred his most intimate minions to call him) shifted uneasily on the polished red marble of his throne and stroked the tips of his horns. There was no doubt about it. They felt decidedly and unnaturally cool.

He'd been thinking it for some time, but now that he'd finally spoken the words, they hung hesitantly in the sulfurous air like lost souls unsure if they were in the right place. Imps ranged at humming computer terminals around the perennially smoldering room looked up, then glanced at each other. One rubbed his scaly hands together.

"You know," he chittered slowly, "now that you mention it, my mouse hand's gone a little cold."

Another imp nodded. "And my tail. I *thought* I was getting a chill in my tail, and now I'm sure of it."

"Right." Lord B. straightened on his throne and bellowed, "Mr. Snizzle! Get in here!"

A slight, harried-looking demon entered the room at a trot. A pair of tortoiseshell spectacles perched on his nose, and he wore an unexpectedly conservative waistcoat tailored in tasteful ebony silk. "Yes, Lord B.?"

"Mr. Snizzle, run a diagnostic on the temperature controls. This room is falling below acceptable heat standards. Even the imps have noticed it."

Mr. Snizzle, Lord B.'s administrative assistant, was well-versed in interpreting the subtleties of his employer's speech. After several centuries in his current position without a vacation, that was hardly surprising. The relative politeness of the Devil's request worried him. He nodded briskly and hurried back to his own computer to run the heat diagnostics.

When the analysis finished, Mr. Snizzle contemplated the data on his screen for a time, tapping one finely manicured fingernail to his lips, then ran the diagnostic again. The same results were returned. His programs were good, and he knew it, but the knowledge was a double-edged sword. Mr. Snizzle sighed. There was a definite downside to extreme competence, and no escape once one had become indispensable.

If there existed a less agreeable task than delivering bad news to Lord B., Mr. Snizzle had yet to encounter it, but he took a deep breath and steeled himself. "I have

the report, My Lord," he said, striding back into the Devil's presence with grim confidence.

"And?" Lord B. drummed his fingers impatiently on the arm of his throne. The points of his long, yellowed talons ticked unpleasantly on the marble.

"Mean temperature in the Nine Circles has dropped by a full ten degrees in the past fifteen minutes."

Two small puffs of coal-coloured smoke emerged from Lord B.'s nostrils and hung in the air for a moment before dissipating. He looked at Mr. Snizzle through narrowed eyes. The bespectacled demon had been his assistant for centuries, outlasting the previous assistant by an exponential amount of time. They had come to know each other very well. There was more.

"And?" he prompted.

Mr. Snizzle shrugged. "And the temperature is still dropping. The heat loss distribution overlay indicates cooler temperatures around the outer reaches, encroaching steadily inwards."

The Devil's lips flattened out into a thin line, punctuated by the pointed tips of protruding ivory teeth. "Terminal! Furnace Room!" he bellowed.

A section of glowing floor beside the throne slid back and a massive computer system rose smoothly into view. The components shone a dazzling crimson, and the sixty-one-inch plasma flatscreen pulsed to life. The face of a fat, sweating demon appeared.

"Furnace Room, My Lord," he said in a voice that trembled slightly. He didn't look directly at Lord B., his eyes shifting nervously like flies afraid to settle anywhere lest they be squashed.

"What in Hell is going on down there?" Lord B. roared.

"We're driving all furnaces at full capacity, sir," the unhappy demon insisted. "It just doesn't seem to be enough."

"I'm cold," an imp to the other side of Lord B. complained in a low voice.

"Oh, shut up!" yelled the Devil. He sent a thin bolt of crackling yellow energy in the imp's direction.

The imp cringed away from the zap and fell silent, but he wrapped his thin tail around his shoulders defiantly and stuck his tongue out once Lord B. had turned away.

"Get more heat out of those furnaces," he growled at the fat demon in the Furnace Room. "I don't care what—or who—you have to burn to do it." He whirled back to the imps, who had been watching and listening gleefully. "Everybody back to work! I've said you'll get a day off when Hell freezes over, and today is not going to be that day!" But he rubbed his hands together surreptitiously.

Mr. Snizzle blinked. "Hmmm ... If I might, My Lord?" He gestured toward the Devil's workstation.

Lord B. frowned, but grunted assent.

Mr. Snizzle used the network to access his own terminal, then ran the diagnostic again. He shook his head. "As I feared," he said. "The temperature is still falling, and more rapidly now. It's almost down to freezing at the perimeter."

"Snizzle," Lord B. growled, "I don't want to hear the f-word again in my presence. Do you understand? It won't happen. It's the most highly improbable event there is."

"True, My Lord," Mr. Snizzle replied. "That's exactly why I'm worried."

Before the Devil could ask for an explanation of that enigmatic remark one of the imps piped up.

"Report from Red Hot Coals, sir. The coals have cooled considerably. Some of the clients have actually stopped hopping in eternal agony and are simply standing about looking ... annoyed."

Lord B. glowered. Why some demons insisted on 'clients' as an annoying euphemism for the souls of the damned, he'd never understand. "Well, get them out of there and send them in to the Flame Caves," he ordered irritably.

Another imp broke in. "Report from the Lake of Fire, My Lord. Cooling is apparent there as well and scattered regions have ceased bubbling entirely. Clients who should be eternally melting are ..." His voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Are what?" the Devil snarled between clenched teeth.

"Are ... are *swimming*, sir."

Lord B. lashed his tail behind his chair. "It's Him, isn't it, Mr. Snizzle?" he said in a low voice. "The Upstairs Tenant is signalling the start of Armageddon. He's invading, trying to gain the upper hand before I can take action!"

Mr. Snizzle pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. He disliked disagreeing with his employer, but sometimes the Prince of Darkness could be a bit of a hothead. "Mmmm, no, I don't think so, My Lord."

"Oh? Why not?" Lord B. fixed his yellow-irised eyes on Mr. Snizzle. The administrative assistant found it difficult not to look away.

"Well, there's the small matter of Revelations, My Lord. I don't really see how all the criteria have been met yet ..."

"Hmmm, right." The Devil looked disappointed. "So you don't think I should gather the boundless hosts of my terrible minions and ride forth shrieking into battle?"

"Er, no, sir. I'd hold off on that just yet."

Lord B.'s impressive muscles rippled suddenly as a shiver coursed through him.

“My Lord!” The imp's voice was shrill with panic. “Report – from the Outer Circle. Fires there have actually *gone out!* Clients are rebelling, throwing chunks of hard, cold, white stuff –”

“Ice,” said Mr. Snizzle calmly, without looking up. He was back at Lord B.'s terminal, tapping the keyboard steadily.

“Okay, ice, whatever, at their demon overseers. What should they do?” The imp's voice broke in a terrified squeak.

Lord B. trembled all over now, not with cold, but with barely-contained rage. He stood suddenly, sat down again, and looked at Mr. Snizzle through slitted eyes. Steam rose from his back and arms in the cool air like smoke from a funeral pyre.

“Tell the overseers to get out of there for now,” Mr. Snizzle offered. “There's nothing else they can do. They're not equipped to deal with ice without more power from the furnace room.”

This unwelcome advice was considered. “Do it,” Lord B. finally growled at the stricken imp. “And stop with the reports! I don't want to hear anything else until I say so! Snizzle, what are you doing now?”

“Just running a few probability algorithms I've written, sir,” Mr. Snizzle said. “I should know more in a moment.”

“Probability algorithms? What the –”

Mr. Snizzle, still peering through his spectacles at the screen, slightly raised one finger in the classic 'wait-a-second' gesture.

The Devil fell into shocked silence. He had been *shushed!* His eyebrows drew together in a dangerous alliance. Perhaps a few centuries was too long for one administrative assistant to be on the job. His hot breath quickened, turning annoyingly to pale, impotent steam as it emerged.

Mr. Snizzle took no notice. “Ah-ha!” he said softly, and nodded.

He turned to his employer, noting at a glance the level of rage which had been attained while he was otherwise occupied, and spoke hurriedly.

“In my considered opinion, sir, a powerful improbability wave has spontaneously spawned. The wavelets are reverberating inward through the Circles and causing the temperature to drop.”

Lord B. stared carefully at Mr. Snizzle for a long moment, forcing himself to draw slow, calming breaths. The streams of white vapour which accompanied the release of those breaths did not enhance their calming effect.

“Mr. Snizzle,” he said finally, “What the – what in – what are you talking about?”

Mr. Snizzle licked his lips, then drew a deep breath himself. "A proper explanation would take longer than we probably have," he said slowly. "May I be brief?"

"By all means, Mr. Snizzle," the Devil grated, "Please be brief."

Mr. Snizzle removed his glasses and began to polish them nervously on his waistcoat, a habit which always infuriated the Devil almost beyond reason. The presence of the waistcoat itself came close to doing that. Only the assistant's unfailing competence kept Lord B. from ever mentioning it.

"The universe follows many laws which are as yet unknown to humans and not fully understood even by those of us who reside on the other planes," Mr. Snizzle explained. "One of these cosmic laws seems predicated on the principle of balance in all things."

"Well I know *that*," the Devil snarled.

"Humans on earth have achieved a highly developed awareness of predictability and understanding of probability," Mr. Snizzle continued, "Both in the natural world, such as predicting tides and the movement of celestial bodies, and in the psychological realm, such as understanding how they will probably act in a given situation. In fact, my algorithms –"

"Which you wrote when, exactly?" Lord B. asked in a scathing tone.

"My algorithms grew out of the 'Cumulative Human Influence' reports you had me compiling last year," Mr. Snizzle said primly. "I noticed some trends and – well, at any rate, the algorithms show that an immense imbalance has built up on the side of probability. Our own actions have not helped –"

"*Our* actions?" Lord B. jumped up from his throne and began to pace in front of it. His hooved feet clattered jarringly on the marble floor and his tail lashed about like a whip gone mad. "What are you talking about? I'm the Prince of Pandemonium! I take pride in spreading chaos! Unforeseen accidents! Sudden rages in mild-mannered workers! Severe, unpredictable weather! Wholly unexpected election results! Dreadful books morphing into bestsellers! *Predictability?* I think not!"

"Sorry, sir, but that's small change, and really, it's contributed to what's become predictable." Mr. Snizzle counted on his fingers as he continued mildly, "Politicians who reliably lie, cheat and steal. Most murders committed by close relations. Absolute power corrupting absolutely. Computer system crashes. Bad weather on the day one wants it least. We sprinkle around a little bit of chaos, certainly. But what we've actually managed to achieve is an immensely high probability that, one, people will be ruled by their baser instincts, and two, things can usually be counted on to go wrong. *And they know it.*"

The Devil contemplated this for a moment. "And so the universe has spontaneously generated an improbability wave to cause the most improbable event –"

Hell freezing over – to happen in order to counter all that probability and restore cosmic balance?”

Mr. Snizzle replaced his glasses, almost beaming. “Correct! Got it in one, My Lord.”

Lord B. snorted dangerously. “Don't look so surprised, Mr. Snizzle. But if what you're saying is true, then I should be able to reverse the wave by getting down to business and spreading more chaos, right? Less predictability! More improbable accidents! I'll just take chaos theory to the next level!” He chortled. “Humans won't know what hit them – and neither will the universe.”

But Mr. Snizzle shook his head sorrowfully.

The Devil stopped pacing just in front of the slight demon, barely restraining himself from grabbing his assistant and shaking the bejeezus out of him. “What? What's wrong with that?”

Mr. Snizzle turned back to the giant plasma screen and tapped the keyboard again. A split-screen view appeared. On one side were the familiar concentric outlines of the Nine Circles. On the other, a 3D view of the Earth rotated slowly.

“Well, for one thing, it's too predictable. It's exactly what the universe would expect you to do. And it would take too long, anyway,” Mr. Snizzle said. “See here?” He pointed a trim black nail at a shimmery white overlay. It inched inexorably from the outermost perimeter of Hell towards the centre. “We're more than fifty percent frozen already. It's gaining speed all the time.”

He indicated the globe then, where tiny yellow dots popped into existence with increasing rapidity. “This is the concurrent, real-time incidence of all events that humans have stated would happen 'when Hell freezes over.’”

Lord B. looked puzzled.

Mr. Snizzle continued patiently. “Highly improbable events. Bitterly estranged couples are reuniting. So are temperamental rock bands. Incompetent employees are being promoted. Mothers are allowing their children to keep stray animals and stay up late. Long-standing feuds are ending, employers are spontaneously handing out raises, nerds are dating supermodels. And that's just the beginning.”

He turned to the Devil. “There's a chain reaction of improbability, since many of these events trigger even more improbable repercussions. It's going to take something big, something really big and *extremely* improbable, to stop this now.”

Lord B.'s crimson brow furrowed in thought. “So what you're saying is that if something happened that was even more improbable than Hell freezing over, the balance would be restored, and we could reverse this?”

Mr. Snizzle shrugged and clasped his hands sedately. “That's what I think. I don't know for sure.”

Lord B. dropped heavily onto his throne. "Then we're sunk," he groaned. "I'm damned if I can think of anything more improbable than Hell freezing over."

Mr. Snizzle glanced around at the staring computer imps, then leaned in close to his employer's ear and spoke quickly and low. "I do have an idea. But it won't be easy."

The Devil sighed, rubbing his throbbing forehead carefully just below the horns. "Just tell me, Snizzle. I'll try anything. You ever make a kid stick his tongue on a flagpole in the middle of winter? I think the same thing just happened with my tail and this throne."

Mr. Snizzle still hesitated. "You won't like it," he warned.

"Dammit, Snizzle, I don't like any of this! Just spit it out!"

The administrative assistant leaned even closer, to carefully whisper in his master's ear. "You could do something ... nice."

As soon as the words were out, Mr. Snizzle pulled away and straightened up to meet Lord B.'s smoldering, inscrutable gaze. He shivered, but it wasn't the cold. He was probably the first denizen of Hell to ever proffer such advice to his employer. It was entirely possible, even probable, that Lord B. would respond by eating him alive. Or something even less pleasant.

But Lord B. suddenly nodded, snapping his massive head up and down decisively. "Highly improbable. Unheard-of, in fact," he said with a wicked grin. "But I can do that." He made as if to jump up from the chilled throne, but instead stood up slowly and carefully, twitching his tail.

"You!" he thundered at one of the computer imps. "Dispatch a thousand imps disguised as Boy Scouts to the upper world to help little old ladies across the street."

The imp stared at him. "My Lord ... sir ... don't you mean to push them into traffic? The old ladies? Sir?"

"If I wanted them pushed into traffic I'd say so, you pathetic twit! Now send out those orders!"

"Y-yes, sir."

"And you!" Lord B. turned to another imp. "Influence a thousand inveterate gamblers to stop and collect their winnings the next time they're ahead, and go home before they've lost everything." He thought for a moment, a sudden clammy sweat beading his brow. "And swear that they'll never gamble again. And mean it."

He nodded to Mr. Snizzle, rubbing his hands together shakily. "That one's got a lot of repercussive value, you know. Marriages saved, suicides avoided." The Devil was breathing faster, but swallowed hard to calm himself.

Mr. Snizzle refreshed the split-screen view on the monitor. "I don't think you're there yet," he said, as the frost blanket continued its inward crawl.

"Hmmm ... nice, nice ... you there," Lord B. pointed to a waiting imp. "Have five hundred politicians see the error of their ways, resign their posts and repay anything they've stolen or mis-reported." He looked at Mr. Snizzle and raised his eyebrows in hope.

"Better," Mr. Snizzle said. "But —"

"I know, I know, not enough." The Devil was sweating profusely now, despite the rapidly-cooling air. He ran a trembling hand over his horns in exasperation. "This is too hard! Thinking this way ... it's not natural!"

Mr. Snizzle nodded encouragingly. "You're doing fine, my Lord. But perhaps something that affects you personally...it might have a bigger improbability impact."

"Personally?" Lord B. stared at Snizzle. "Nothing affects me personally. I'm the Lord of the Underworld! Sure, I like making people do bad things and then torturing them about it for eternity, but it's just for fun, really. Something to pass the time until Armageddon." He turned to pace again, then looked back at Mr. Snizzle defiantly. "I'm not going to resign or repent, if that's what you're thinking."

Mr. Snizzle shook his head and half-smiled. "No, I think that would swing the balance too far in the other direction for any good to come of it. Something a little less — dramatic, perhaps."

Lord B. paced a few more steps uncertainly. His cloven hooves echoed hollowly on the floor as the marble cooled, and the light dimmed to a red-tinged twilight as all around them fires burned lower. Silent seconds inched past. The imp at the computer terminal on the far end suddenly gasped. The Devil whirled.

"What? What in the name of Me is it?"

"My — my computer, sir," the imp said in a trembling voice. He looked up from a solid red screen with some white-lettered text in the center. "It's ... it's frozen, sir. Red screen of death."

Lord B.'s hands balled into giant crimson fists and he looked frantically around for something to bash. His gaze stopped on Mr. Snizzle, patient, competent, uncomplaining, thumbs tucked into the pockets of his waistcoat. So annoyingly undemanding. Then he went still, the stillness of a sudden epiphany.

The Devil straightened up, relaxing his hands, and swallowed hard. "Imps," he said calmly, "Take the rest of the day off."

For a long moment the imps stared at each other, then scampered off with incredulous high-fives and cries of "W00T!"

Lord B. glanced over at the view on his enormous monitor. The layer of white frost seemed to hover uncertainly, neither advancing nor retreating. He looked at Mr.

Snizzle with a fearsomely pleasant grin, although his forehead wrinkled as if in great effort.

“Mr. Snizzle,” he said slowly and deliberately, “Why don't you take a little vacation? You've earned it.”

Mr. Snizzle hesitated for a moment. “Vacation, sir?” he repeated blankly, obviously torn between this incredible, miraculous offer and the call of his duty to stay and see the current crisis through.

“Two weeks. With pay,” Lord B. added, flicking his tail with a triumphant flourish.

“Thank you, sir,” Mr. Snizzle said briskly, and disappeared.

A tumultuous roar echoed through the Nine Circles as the great fires leapt back to life and sheets of ice superheated and cracked. The din faded quickly into the rustling susurrations of ice melting and water vaporizing as quickly as it had formed. Screams echoed again from the near and distant reaches of the Circles, as afterlife in Hell resumed normality.

The Devil ambled back to his red marble throne and sat down tentatively, then lounged fully back in the seat as welcome heat coursed through his body. The throne room was quiet against a muted backdrop of shrieks and screams, and for a moment he thought it was rather pleasant. That line of thinking might be dangerous, though, and he tried to concentrate on how inconvenient it was going to be without Mr. Snizzle around for a while, and how selfless and, well, *nice* he'd been in giving him some time off. The room continued to warm up, so it must be working.

The power of probability and improbability, he mused. There must be some way to turn that to his advantage. He sat and contemplated the possibilities for a long time as Hell warmed up around him.

# Starting Over

*By Grant Stone*

The punch hit me low. I doubled over and he hit me with his right, uppercut, square on the chin. My neck rolled back and my teeth clacked together. I fell backwards and crashed to the path.

*One for sorrow, I thought, and two for joy.*

"Shit!" Ryan spun away, shaking his right hand. He took a few more steps and turned around. When he pushed his thick, black-rimmed glasses up his nose and swept the hair out of his eyes, I saw his knuckles were bleeding.

Ryan leaned back against the wall of the church, breathing heavily. Then he pushed himself away and walked back to stand over me. He reached his hand down and I took it and he pulled me up into an embrace. We stood that way, holding each other in the churchyard, while time stretched on forever. It was as if we were the last people in the world; a large hedge blocked out the sound of passing traffic. Finally, he laughed and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Right," he said, "let's get a drink."

~

Back when Ealing was a village instead of part of the endless sprawl of London, this had been the coach house. Now it was my local: cold cider and Sky Sport on a big screen TV. I held the door open for Ryan.

It was dark, and empty. Too early for anyone to be here yet, not even students from the technical college up the road.

"Sit down, I'll get this," Ryan said. I took a seat at the far end of the room. England were playing Germany tonight.

Ryan put the pints down, splashing beer over the table and took the seat opposite me. When he smiled I saw the wrinkles around his eyes. He seemed so much older now, nearly unrecognizable. I probably looked the same way to him. He was at least twelve pounds heavier and his temples were dusted with gray. Ten years.

"Well," Ryan said, and lifted his glass, "To us."

I raised mine. "To us."

Ryan sipped then said quietly, "To the Falling Sorrows," and I relaxed a little. He smiled. "In some alternate universe we're still top of the charts."

Ryan had come up with the name. He'd written most of the songs too, all of the good ones. But it wasn't like I was just a side man- good as his stuff was, it was always

better when we were together. We *rocked*, and we came really close. Got the record deal. Recorded an album and it was *fierce*: NME called us the future of British music. When we were really in the groove, I'd look across the stage and see Ryan, guitar hanging forgotten behind his back, arms outstretched in benediction. Times like that, the crowd would do anything for him. On the eve of my twenty-fifth birthday we were two days away from an appearance on Top of The Pops, a week away from our first national tour.

Then I fucked it up.

"How's Joy?" I asked.

"Good. She sends her regards."

*No she doesn't.* "She doesn't know you're here, does she?"

Ryan winced. "No. I thought it would be easier if she didn't. But if I *had* told her, she would have said hi. So."

"Listen, I -", I started, but Ryan held up his hand.

"No. It's all water under the bridge. We've got far more interesting things to talk about." He caught the look in my eye. "Seriously, now," he said, "forget it."

"Made an honest woman of her yet?"

Ryan rubbed his chin. "We haven't, ah, set a date, no. That whole marriage thing just isn't that important to me."

*It is to her, though.* "Still at Primrose Hill?"

"Yeah," Ryan said, in a tone that really meant *leave it*.

The sun went down, turning the windows amber. People trickled in, taking tables with the best view of the screen. Ryan got another round in, then I did, then he did again. It was almost like it had been, back then.

I had met Ryan at university. He was studying computer science, and that's what he'd gone back to afterwards. Got a job where he had to wear a tie. Working on tax systems he said. Mind-numbingly boring but the pay was good.

I hadn't done so well. Never finished my degree. Went back to live with my parents in York for a while, but it didn't take long for me to get tired of sleeping in the same bed I'd had since I was thirteen. I took the train back to London and moved in with some Kiwis in Shepherd's Bush. The last few years I'd been working behind a coffee cart on the top floor of BBC Television Centre. The day before they recorded the last ever Top of the Pops, I served Jimmy Saville a latte. He didn't recognize me. Nobody ever did.

"You know what really pissed me off?" Ryan asked. "Oasis. You and I," he fluttered his hands, "then, not two months later, they're playing *Roll With It* on Top of the Pops. You know what I thought? I thought it was like the universe needed

someone to fill our place, so it picked up the Gallaghers and put them where we were supposed to be. They didn't even have the respect to play their own damn song properly, the bastards. Be right back."

I looked around. The place was packed now. Commercials were playing on the big screen, but the sound was still turned down. A big man with a Saint George cross painted on the back of his bald head was failing to chat up the Australian girl behind the bar.

I fucked it up.

It was Joy's fault, I told myself later on. She'd started it. Although thinking back now, I really have no idea. Not that it mattered, in the end.

Ryan had gone alone to meet the reporter from the NME. This was after the whole 'future of British music' thing. I'd begged off, claiming a cold coming on and anyway, he was the front man.

I don't know. Maybe the reporter didn't turn up, or Ryan got the wrong pub. He opened the bedroom door and found Joy, found us. I remember perfect peace, lying there, my arms around her, eyes closed. Then Ryan threw me against the wall. Later I'd go over it again and again in my mind, all the things I should have done, should have said. But all I did was fumbled free, scooped up my jeans and bolted for the door, hearing nothing but the sound of my own blood roaring in my ears.

That was the last time I'd seen either of them. Until today.

Ryan slid back into the seat. "You're bleeding," he said.

I put my hand up to my nose, and brought it away bloody. My bladder was bursting too. I held a napkin to my face and made my way to the bathroom.

I was still sitting there when the sound was turned up on the television. Then I heard the something else, familiar: bump-bump-bumpbumpbump. Elvis Costello. Pump it up. A jeer from the bar, and the music stopped. Ryan had tried to explain it once. How, as a computer programmer, Elvis Costello was some kind of patron saint. I didn't get it. A few seconds later the music started up again. Shit.

By the time I got back out to the bar, the bald man already had Ryan in a headlock. Everybody else was keeping one eye on the fight, one on the game. Ryan swung an elbow and caught the man in the groin, hard. The crowd hissed. Without thinking I ran for Ryan, grabbed his arm and pulled him to the door. A full pint hit the doorframe, showering us in glass and beer. "Go!" I said, pushing him out onto the road.

We kept running until we reached my place.

~

A crushed Guinness can lay under the half-opened door. I kicked it to one side and peered into the flat. "Grab a seat," I said to Ryan, waving in the direction of the

lounge, and he did, pushing a backpack and pile of dirty clothes off the couch to make room. I went to the kitchen and put the kettle on.

“Nice place,” Ryan called. I snorted. The Kiwis I'd originally moved in with had returned home years ago. Since then there had been a constant stream of them, with the occasional Australian or South African for variety, most not staying for more than six months, maybe a year. Some were tidier than others. The two I was living with now were others.

I knocked on the door of the back bedroom.

“Yeah,” Bruce said, followed by a series of coughs.

“Decent?”

Bruce grunted. He was lying on the bed, wearing boxers and a filth-encrusted All Blacks shirt, the same place he'd been when I'd left for work that morning. He'd picked up some pirate DVDs in Indonesia a while back, every movie Chuck Norris had ever made. A small TV/DVD combo unit was balanced on top of a couple of suitcases in the corner. Halfway through *The Octagon*.

“Sup mate,” Bruce said.

“Hey. Look, you couldn't spot me could you? Sort you out later, yeah?”

Bruce sat up, joint dangling from his mouth. “Fair enough. Still owe you the rent this month anyway, eh?” He reached under the bed and pulled out his bag of tricks. “Here you go mate. Prerolled.”

“Cheers.”

When I got back to the lounge Ryan pulling CDs from the shelves and throwing them on the floor.

“Sting? What the hell?”

“Most of those aren't mine. Flating, you know. Tea?”

We sat for a while, sipping tea, hearing Chuck Norris pound someone into putty through the wall. It's what we'd always done after a show. Nice cup of tea and a sit down. Not very rock and roll, but there you go.

~

“OK,” I said. I blew smoke through my teeth and passed the joint back to Ryan, “say you had a time machine and you could go anywhere you wanted. A fucking TARDIS, whatever. Where would you go?”

We were lying on the floor in a drift of CD cases. Ryan had gone through the entire collection. Finally he'd found an old Al Green CD, the only thing he'd deemed acceptable. I looked at his fingers. His left hand was playing unconscious air guitar.

"Only one thing," Ryan said. "I'd go back. New York. Nineteen Eighty. Stop Chapman."

I nodded. This was a conversation we'd had a hundred times before. It was comfortable, dependable, a well-rutted trail.

"How about you?" he said.

I shrugged. "Dunno. Stopping Chapman though."

"I mean, think about it. How much more music did Lennon still have in him? What would it sound like, John Lennon playing with Kurt Cobain? *We could have played with him.*"

"Yeah," I said. "We should do that."

Ryan laughed, coughed. "Yeah, we should. But aren't we missing something?"

I looked at him and raised an eyebrow. Went to my room. I pulled it out of my closet and took it back into the lounge and threw it at his feet.

Ryan sat up. "What's that?"

"Planck suitcase."

He didn't say anything for a few minutes. Then he said, "Where did you get it?"

"Brick Lane market," I said, "get anything there, if you know where to look."

He looked at me. "Bollocks."

I spread my hands. "If you don't want to go ..."

"But. How? Where? It's just some random suitcase."

"That's how he smuggled it in. Tall guy. Looked kind of normal, only he didn't really have a mouth, just. I don't know, a beak I guess." Ryan was asking all the same questions I'd asked the tall guy, sheltering under his stall from the rain. *I could tell yer, the tall guy had, well, not said as such, but I heard it, but then I'd 'ave to kill yer.* He pulled on his cigarette and I heard something that might have passed for a laugh on his home planet.

Ryan stood up. "So you're telling me this suitcase here is a time machine?" He laughed again. "Good one, mate. You really had me going for a minute there."

I flipped open the two clasps on the front of the suitcase and opened it wide. Inside was New York City. Central Park. Nineteen eighty.

I said, "You coming, or what?"

~

I didn't know how it worked. I put my left foot into the case and nothing happened. But as soon as I lifted my right foot and brought it down inside the case,

something *spun*. I looked over to Ryan, saw his mouth hanging open and then everything went black.

Dark, and mostly silent except for some far off traffic sounds. The darkness was punctuated by stars. I was lying on my back in the grass of Central Park. I raised myself up onto my elbows. To my right was the suitcase, open.

And then Ryan was there, floating above the suitcase. He hung suspended for a heartbeat then he fell towards me. I rolled out of the way as he crashed to the grass.

I stood and walked over to the suitcase. Inside was my living room. I closed the lid and snapped shut the clasp.

Ryan got to his feet. "What time is it?"

I looked at my watch. "I have nine forty-five. That's London 2007 time though."

Ryan looked around, trying to get his bearings. We stood by a path which carried on, curved slightly to the right, before it was obscured by a stand of trees. Looming above them was the corner of the Dakota building. Ryan took off, moving fast. I picked up the suitcase and followed.

As we walked, Ryan looked around, frantic. "We need to know the time."

It was late. We reached the street. There were no pedestrians, no cars. Ryan walked straight across the intersection without looking.

The entrance to the Dakota was to our right, on the other side of the street. And there he was. He sat on the steps, hunched over, reading *Catcher in the Rye* and gnawing his right thumbnail.

He hadn't noticed us.

"What now?" I asked.

"I don't know," Ryan said, "if I knew what time it was I'd know how much time we had-" He stopped abruptly, and a grin spread across his face. I looked across the road. Chapman was wearing a watch. Ryan stepped off the curb.

I don't know why we didn't hear it. One minute the road was clear, the next a limo rolled to a stop directly in front of the Dakota. The back door opened and Yoko climbed out, her black hair swirling behind her. She made straight for the Dakota's steps and went through the open door without looking back.

A few seconds later, he emerged, stood there iconic, still. My mouth fell open. He looked happy, if exhausted. Chapman said something and Lennon turned his head toward him.

Ryan let out a moan, nothing approaching words. He was still standing in the middle of the road, frozen. He hadn't moved since the limo arrived. Now it crawled away from the curb and Ryan was moving, running, still moaning.

Gunshots.

Five gunshots, booming out, and I saw him fall. Chapman stood unmoving, gun still trained on Lennon. Ryan fell to his knees.

Ryan slowly climbed to his feet. I could see the streetlights reflected in the tears on his face. He walked towards Chapman, and then the walk became a run. Chapman didn't notice until the last second, turned his-

Ryan hit him, a good, solid right, square in the face. Chapman's glasses went flying, end over end, hit the sidewalk and smashed. Ryan hit him again, a left, this time, to the side of his head. Then again, and again, and again, his nose, his ears, his throat. Chapman made no attempt to defend himself. Ryan was still crying, still moaning. He pulled back and let loose with a final ferocious right and Chapman fell. When his head touched the sidewalk it sounded like a watermelon splitting open.

A trail of blood led up the steps of the Dakota. Lennon had somehow made it to the doorway, had crawled inside. Chapman lay, unmoving, at Ryan's feet. Ryan looked over the road to me and his eyes were unreadable.

From behind me, back up on Central Park West, I heard the sound of sirens. Then they were there, cars coming from both directions, screeching to a stop, nearly hitting each other in their haste. Two officers were out of the cars before I could blink, both of them pointing their guns at Ryan, shouting at him to put his hands behind his head. More officers. Four guns trained on Ryan. Another squad car squealed around the corner.

None of the cops had noticed me.

I placed the suitcase down, unzipped the top and *spun*.

~

Al Green was still playing on the CD player. Once my hands stopped shaking I took the teacups and the remaining biscuits to the kitchen.

For someone who had spent the entire day lying on his bed, Bruce had created an impressive pile of plates. I filled the sink and started washing, making as much noise as I could so Bruce knew that I was once again cleaning up his mess and maybe he could be a little tidier. He poked his head around the door as I was drying the last plate and said, "Where's your mate?"

"Gone," I said.

"You never bring people home. I would have liked to meet him."

I put the last plate back in the cupboard and pulled the plug out of the sink. "Yeah. Well. He's going to be out of town for a while."

Bruce grunted.

A couple of minutes later I heard him start another Chuck Norris DVD.

~

It was exactly like you'd expect. One guard made me walk through a metal detector and frisked me when it beeped. The other one kept his gun trained on me. I showed the guard the belt buckle I was wearing, with the big American eagle on it. He made me take it off and I walked through again. No beep. He let me put the belt back on and I popped another stick of gum in my mouth.

I was escorted down a long, featureless corridor. The ring of metal on metal, shouts from the yard outside. It was faint, and faded away to nothing if I tried to make it out, but I was sure I could hear someone sobbing. Attica. Exactly like you'd expect.

I sat down in front of the glass. There were no other visitors. After a few minutes the door on the other side of the glass opened and Ryan entered, flanked by two guards. He stared at me and stared right back, chewing my gum. Eventually, one of the guards said something and Ryan scowled, shuffled forward. I took off my sunglasses. He sat down and picked up the phone.

"You set me up."

He looked like shit. His hair had gone, probably years ago, and he combed over what little remained. He looked at least twice the weight he'd been when I'd seen him last, only a year ago for me. Deep wrinkles scored his face. I'd never seen so much fury contained in a single human. He sat down and picked up the phone.

"You fucking set me up. You shit."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You knew. You knew exactly what the time was when we arrived there. You knew what I'd do. You planned the whole thing from start to finish. You fucking set me up."

I was disappointed. I'd watched him write the lyrics to 'Breakfast in Brixton' on the inside of a splayed cigarette packet while he was waiting for a bus. He'd had twenty-seven years to come up with something eloquent. I shrugged.

"Look," I said, "I want you to stop for a minute, OK. Stop, and think. I told you I didn't know how that thing worked. The guy with the beak, he set the date. Maybe he wasn't as precise as he could have been. But," I leaned in closer to the glass, "it's me, Ryan. Blood brothers, remember? I would never do anything to hurt you."

"Then why didn't you come back?"

"I tried. I didn't know where you'd gone. Didn't know how to change the bloody suitcase even if I did. Went back to Brick Lane and there was no sign of that alien bastard. People thought I was crazy."

He lifted his upper lip. "See this?" he said, pointing to a gap where several teeth had been, "Fucking police didn't even wait to get me back to the station before they started beating on me. I had no identification, couldn't tell them who I was. Tried, but of course they didn't believe me. Bloody New York cops think they've seen everything.

Didn't even blink when I said I'd come from twenty years in the future, through a suitcase. 'Really,' this big one said, just before he pushed me into the cell, 'I came through a fucking wardrobe, myself'. Same cop came to see me later, told me Chapman had died. And that was it."

"Yeah," I said. "I saw the papers."

"You know the worst part? Cops couldn't identify me, obviously, so the bastards put my picture up on the TV, in the papers, everywhere. Course, nobody else knew me either. After a while, it was like they stopped reporting that it was Chapman who killed Lennon. They just kept saying he was dead, and showing my face. Eventually, people forgot about Chapman completely. It was like the universe needed someone to take his place."

I nodded. "I saw something on the History Channel a couple of months ago. They said it was you. No mention of Chapman at all. Still though. History channel. What do you expect?"

He sat motionless, staring off into space. He was so old now, old enough to be my father.

"So what now?"

I raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Well, you're here now. Twenty years too late, but you always were a tardy bastard. So now you can tell them who you are, who I am, and I can get the hell out of here."

I snorted. "What do you mean? What, you think I can go to the warden and say 'sorry mate, big misunderstanding, fella you've got there for killing John Lennon, actually he's a time traveller and we'll just be...'" I spread my hands, "how well did it work last time you tried it? Anyway, you killed someone. What's the difference who it was? You fucked it up."

I saw it in his eyes, then. He realized.

"No, I was just in the neighbourhood. Thought I'd drop in, say hi. On honeymoon, in fact. Joy says hi. Well, she would, if I'd told her. But in some alternate universe I did, so, you know. Alternate universe Joy says hi."

He howled then, started pounding the glass, first with the receiver, then his hands. He climbed on to the desk. The guards went for him like hounds. By the time they pulled him away, he'd pounded so hard he'd smashed his knuckles, leaving long, red smears on the glass.

I smiled at the guards as I walked out of the gates. The rental was a Chrysler, a good one, big, red, American to the core. Joy was waiting for me back in Syracuse.

*Sure, I had said, when she asked if she could rent a car, go catch up with an old friend. I've got friends round those parts too. When she asked who, I put on my best Cockney accent. I could tell yer. But then I'd have to kill yer.*

I sat in the car and waited for some kind of instant karma, but nothing happened. The CD started playing as I pulled out of the car park, Double Fantasy, the only thing I'd listened to the whole time we'd been in the States. By the time I pulled on to the I-90 I was singing.

# A Conjunction of Interests

By Mary Jones

Burrows saw them come in. Ten young Sierrans mounted on two-toed *hoormas*, all racing wildly down a mountain track barely adequate for one careful walker. The crowd around him screamed their excitement. The riders galloping so recklessly towards them were counted as the best of this world; risk takers supreme. After all, the planet relied on them for its survival. Burrows had studied the file on Sierra thoroughly before coming here. He took a pride in being fully briefed on a new assignment. This world was bleak, had little agricultural land and no other source of income than the mercenary agents it contracted out. Dangerous contests such as this race were a favourite pastime, but also an essential part of the training of their agents. As the crowd cheered on their heroes, Burrows alone remained silent.

Down the last slope now, the finish line in sight. The riders set their mounts twisting round rocks and crags in blindingly fast changes of direction. A bright-edged shimmer of laughter coloured the high voices as they spurred onwards, skilled eyes reading the changes in terrain at speeds no spectator could follow.

Now into the homeward stretch with a whoosh of wind and the screaming shouts of the riders. Then it was over. So swift the finish, the onlookers were unsure who was first. But the group knew and soon the smallest, lightest, most bright-eyed of all emerged among a mass of backslaps and congratulations.

“Arthron again. You young devil. One day you’re going to break your neck, if not your *hoorma’s*,” chuckled a slightly larger man next to the winner.

Arthron turned and grinned back, his sparkling eyes still full of the joy of life taken to its limits. ‘Too old and too cautious, that’s your problem,’ he retorted to a burst of laughter. The other man had come in a bare second and was just as prone as Arthron to take the shortest path but never the safest.

Among the onlookers, Burrows knew he stood out as an offworlder. Large, heavy and with the encroaching girth of middle-age, he could not avoid feeling his difference. Next to the Sierrans, he was clumsy and blockish. He stood in silence among the noisy chaos and there was no smile on his face. As the young rider flung up his head to acknowledge the cheering crowd, he edged into the background. For an instant the boy’s gaze caught his. There was no dimming of the bright smile and the young face still laughed at the crowd, but Burrows shivered as if caught by a chill gust of wind. He turned away and left the locals to their excitement.

The race was long over, congratulations given and the heavy feasting that inevitably followed Sierran victories had diminished to a final, bleary chorus of goodnights echoing through the streets of the settlement.

Burrows heard it, pacing in frustration. There was so little time. He had kept away from the feasting, unable to enter into the jovial spirits of the natives. He was sure they all knew why he was here. Why else the barely polite tolerance? He was conscious of a spurt of anger. They chose their way of life. No one forced them to stay on this barren, sidelined world where the only atmosphere thin enough to breathe was found high on the bare mountain slopes. He railed inwardly at the stubborn independence of the Sierrans. Why should he care that they risked the lives of their finest young men and women in fixing the problems of others, instead of finding an alternative. Then recognised the cause of his anger.

Guilt.

A knock on his door. At last. He trod over and pulled the door open. Then saw his visitor. The young rider who had won today.

The boy entered without a word and took the only chair in the room, with no sign of thinking he might need permission. He sat there carelessly at ease, waiting for an opening. When it was obvious that none would come, he chose to speak.

“You the man the Alliance sent?”

Burrows nodded. “They tell me you have the highest risk rating possible?”

The boy nodded his confirmation in turn. He looked at the older man, eyes no doubt taking in the greying hair, the stooped shoulders of a desk bound bureaucrat and the slight beginning of a paunch. A hint of derision sharpened the contours of the boy’s face, but he still waited in polite silence. Burrows shifted uncomfortably. He was about to ask this spark of exuberant humanity to take on a task that might cost him his life.

No – would cost him his life. Who did he imagine he was fooling? Certainly not this boy. It was there in the knowing straightness of his gaze. Yet he seemed only amused at Burrow’s discomfort. Did he have no imagination, no wish for the future?

It’s what they’ve been bred for,’ had said his superior. ‘They expect it, would feel insulted if never given the opportunity to prove the mettle of their line.’

Burrows couldn’t help feeling that was a very convenient viewpoint for the authorities to take.

“So what’s the problem you want dealt to?” said the boy.

The Sierrans had been told weeks ago of the issue the Alliance needed settled. The young man must have been fully briefed already, but Burrows said nothing. What the boy really needed to know, he guessed, was what Burrows made of the problem. The man from the foreign government was, in truth, being judged. But Burrows had long since forfeited any right to protest.

He handed the Sierran the file containing his notes and watched as Arthron read it through. The boy might be knowing beyond his years, but it was still an expressive face, eyebrows lifting in surprise more than once. Or rather, Burrows suddenly realized, he saw no reason to hide his reactions from his off world visitor. Then the boy was finished and closed the file, holding it close to his chest.

"This important?" he demanded.

"Of course."

The boy fixed those eyes on him again. A short while ago, rounding the point of the race with his friends, they had been blazing with excitement, full of the colour of the newly turned earth of spring. Now they were flat and hard as the barren cold of winter. Burrows was suddenly reminded of his briefing before he came here. "Sierrans are older than they look. Don't underestimate them," his senior had warned. "They won't put a novice on this and their education system is second to none."

"Of course," mimicked the boy now. Then sat forward. "You know this is a non-return mission?"

"Not necessarily," blustered Burrows. "My department has the fullest faith in your ability. Your government has chosen you as the best for this task and that is all the recommendation we need. I am sure you will find a way to fulfil your task and make your escape. Though I fully appreciate the magnitude of what we are asking you."

"Do you? I wonder."

"The difficulty of the mission, I meant."

"Oh, it's not so hard," said the boy. "Do you know what they mean when they say a Sierran has a 'high risk category rating'?"

Burrows heard the bluster coming in his voice again, but did not seem able to stop himself. "Someone who is prepared to do the impossible, I suppose."

The boy lounged back, arms behind his head and a look of resignation on his face. Burrows' answer was only what he had expected, it said. "No. Someone who will do whatever's needed to finish the job, no matter the risk to himself. But not recklessly. My people only take efficient risks. What's needed only. What we don't do is throw away our lives on some of whim of useless heroism. Which is why we're so valuable. It also means that we go into any job with our eyes wide open. I can do this for you. But I won't be returning afterwards."

That was all Arthron said that night. Immediately after, he had stood and left with as little ceremony as he had arrived. The door shut behind him, but not before a last stray beam of light caught the bright hair, turning it to living gold. Then the slam of the door plunged the room to darkness.

No one disturbed Burrows after that. All the company he had to face the night with was his anger. And his guilt.

He and Arthron left the next morning. Burrows woke early, impatient to be gone. As usual on this trip, only disappointment followed.

"When will Arthron be ready?" he had demanded of the young woman who had brought him his breakfast.

"In the proper time."

He asked the same of the Sierran government agent when he finalized the Alliance government's payment for services, of the man at the shuttle office and finally of the pilot of his shuttle. That, at least must stick to a schedule, he reasoned. But again all the man would say was 'In the proper time.' And no matter how he tried, Burrows could not persuade himself that it had anything to do with orbital windows or any other requirement of interstellar travel. In the proper time meant when Arthron decided they would leave.

Then he was here, and they were leaving his world at last. Yet now Burrows felt even less impelled to query the delay. The boy spoke not a single word as they boarded their shuttle, his one bag slung over his shoulder and his face a closed prison of his thoughts. He locked down for departure, but made no attempt to acknowledge Burrows' presence. His eyes stayed intent on the window to the ground throughout lift off. Not till passage through the stratosphere shut off the view did he turn. To trap Burrows in his gaze.

Burrows could not move, held in thrall with horror. Grief and rage were there, snared in the rigidly held person of the boy.

Only for an instant did Arthron let him see what this leaving cost him. Then the boy turned back, waiting for his home world to come into view again, and as soon as they reached the main ship, he was gone. To his own cabin, Burrows supposed. He had no thought of stopping him.

'In the proper time,' so many had said of the boy. And suddenly Burrows found himself fervently hoping that time was a long way off.

The next day, the boy reported to his cabin after breakfast and it was as if that brief moment of exposure during lift off had never been.

"I'll need a fuller briefing on the mission. Everything you can tell me about the Homuran president to start with."

"Of course," stumbled Burrows. And the dynamics of their relationship were set in concrete in that moment. The boy was the younger, of a minor planet that must therefore have little say in the affairs of the wider universe, and with almost no natural wealth to command respect. But from now on only Arthron's will counted and his were the decisions they would follow.

Yet something in Burrows refused to cede sovereignty so easily.

"You do understand the politics of the situation we need resolved?" he asked as if to a junior colleague.

Arthron sent him a long, bored look, and Burrows was instantly reminded of his superior's warning. This was no boy. The Sierran sighed and then grabbed a couple of cloth napkins from the remnants of the breakfast tray on the sideboard. He draped them in two, parallel swathes across the table, leaving only a bare line of tabletop between.

"This," he pointed to the red cloth, "is the area of space controlled by the Union. And here is Alliance owned territory, your home region." His other hand thrust down over the second cloth.

Then he set ornaments in the bare gap between the two cloths. "Here is my world, Sierra," as he set a golden eagle off to one side, isolated and widely separated from each fabric cloaked area, "and here in the middle is Homuran." He twitched both cloths to a point, encroaching into the bare space. Between the two out thrusts of colour, he set a black marble in place, isolated but easily set with a roll toward either beckoning fold of fabric. "It is the main trade route between the Union and Alliance. A situation that both empires find very convenient. You have the benefit of trade, with none of the ills of a common border. The non-aligned zone in the middle here," and his finger thrust hard against the bare surface between the bright clashes of the opposing cloths, "acts as a buffer between your territories. Without it, there would inevitably be disputes arising along the borders regions. Stupid, little skirmishes over dominance as two snarling predators line up against each other. Which would eventually lead to war, as night must follow day on all worlds. Do I read the situation correctly?"

Burrows nodded, his face a strained blank. The boy indeed understood all too well. Including, he would guess, that neither empire could afford open warfare right now, draining men and resources away from the life of the home worlds. At least, such was the case for the Alliance and the cooperation of the Union in this current situation suggested it was similarly placed. Or so the Alliance hoped.

The young man stared back, a slight twitch of amusement touching his lips as if to say he knew exactly what Burrows was thinking. Then his finger idly touched the black marble, not enough to set it in motion, just to quiver in place, tottering for a moment first one way then the other. "But now," he continued in that questionably amused tone, "Homuran senses its power. They think to change the treaties and take control of the trade that flows through their world. More control, and more money."

Burrows nodded, dry-throated. "Which will lead to a weakening of the buffer zone between our territories. Without that, as you say, there will be war."

"Not a desirable outcome," agreed the boy with a glint in his eye. The life in his face, which had vanished these past days, was back, but Burrows found himself questioning what kind of life had returned. Arthron smiled as if enjoying himself. "So what's to be done?" he said. "Neither the Alliance nor the Union can be seen to act

directly, for fear of creating exactly the kind of diplomatic incident you least want. But Homuran also forgets what else flows through its ports. Information. The Alliance and the Union talk to each other rather more than is generally realized."

Burrows swallowed nervously, forced yet again to re-evaluate his position. Here was definitely no untaught novice. "We are opponents, but not yet enemies," he confirmed.

"Which is where I come in," said the young man. "Sierrans are famous for our particular services. Private commissions for delicate situations. In this instance, you wish to send a warning to the Homurans. A subtle warning, but not one that will threaten the position of the current president. Far better the friendly foe you know than an unknown newcomer, who could cause more trouble than ever. The most effective warning would be an assassination attempt on the president. Not a successful attempt of course, but only because it was never meant to be. And he will know that, afterwards, when he learns the identity of his assailant. Sierrans do not fail. The only reason the President will still be alive is because I never intended his death, no matter how real the attempt looks."

"You expect them to let a Sierran so close to their president. They're not that stupid."

"Nor am I," shot back the young man. "I can get close to him, don't worry."

Burrows decided not to ask the obvious - how. Already the air felt too close in the small cabin. "So how will the Homuran government know your identity for certain," he said instead, unable to keep the worry from his voice.

"By the post-mortem," replied Arthron. "Only by that. Sierra does not sacrifice two of our people to the one task. He hears your message, or the next body on the slab will be his own. Is that a clear enough message for your government?"

~

Burrows had been forced to nod, and even days later he still could not banish the young Sierran's face from his mind; how it looked when Arthron had proclaimed his own death. There had been no change. Only the contained mask of detachment that forever locked the foreigner out.

Now the journey was over and Burrows stood in the main square of the central city of Homuran, among the crowd of invited diplomats waiting for the president's arrival. The annual presentation of awards to the chief citizens of the planet from their President was a central ritual of the Homuran year. Completely public and with a frightening level of security. Arthron said it was perfect, but Burrows could not stop himself from glancing nervously round. He would be here, and close to the President, had said the boy. But where?

Conscious that he was probably being watched, he tried to keep his endless scanning as discrete as possible. Which way would Arthron come? Was he one of the

guards, standing to attention behind the podium? No, too tall, their bulk and weight impossible to copy by one as lightly built as the young Sierran.

One of the watching crowd? But they had all been scanned; inspected and tested right down to DNA level before gaining entrance.

Maybe he would come from the palace behind. The place was a fortress; no need to DNA test any coming from there. The boy had left last night. Could he have hid inside the walls overnight, to join the small group of courtiers now leading out to line the approaches? That young boy second from the end? No. Arthron could never look so slumped, so lifeless.

Yes, he will, taunted an inner voice. This very day.

Just before the young Sierran left their quarters the previous night, Burrows had caught at his arm. "You don't have to do this." His hand had held tight to the boy's, unsure what he was pleading for the most. Arthron's life - or his own release from guilt.

Arthron had looked down, waiting with bare patience, and slowly Burrows' fingers unlocked. "I do," the Sierran said, in that old bored voice.

"It needn't mean your death," Burrows pleaded. "Couldn't you miss, nearly wing him only. That would be sufficient warning, surely?"

Finally, a change. A grin of sheer enchantment lit up the boy's face. "Sierrans don't miss, and we don't give second chances."

"But there must be another way."

The Sierran's hand chopped down impatiently. "If there was, I would take it," he said as if explaining the obvious to a child. "The only way for the President to survive, and for it to be credible, is for me to take the time to give him your message. And everything I've learnt says his guards are too good to miss such a chance." He might have been discussing a textbook problem in a school class.

Burrows had given up after that, but still listened vainly for returning footfalls long after the boy had disappeared. The Sierran had said only one thing more, pausing by the doorway before slipping out, as if finally relenting.

"If you want to know why - turn the table."

Burrows had stared back. "What table?"

There was no answer. Arthron had gone.

~

Which way would he come? There was only one other possibility. The sheer fall of cliff face behind the Podium. Patrolled ceaselessly by gunships all morning, any attempt to scale it now would be fatal. Which left only last night. Sheer, slippery faces, few handholds and mined electronically to deter intruders. Surely not?

But Burrows knew. That was how he had done it. So where had the boy hidden in the meantime?

His nails were almost chewed to the quick by the time the heralds finally announced the President's arrival. A solemn procession, the bobbing fringe of the man's ceremonial headgear all that was visible between the tight ranks of the escort. At the podium, a light shimmer betrayed the presence of protective shielding. There would be only one moment when the man was vulnerable. As the recipients received their awards, when each medal was taken from the hand of a child and placed round the honoured citizen's neck.

Burrows head snapped round. The children. Boys and girls from the best families. A range of ages from the very young to some in their teens. His eyes sought desperately back through the ranks.

Then it began. Citizen after citizen, dressed in their finest clothing and looking about to choke on their over wrought emotions and tight necklines.

At last it was nearly done. The officials began to relax. The guards kept their eyes constantly moving, but even the President's smile was becoming fixed, his handshake that of a man already someplace else.

Then Burrows saw Arthron. Fifth from the end of the queue. A fresh faced youth standing next to a small, elderly lady, one hand out to help her up a treacherous step.

He dared no more than a glance of confirmation, one hand reaching up to stifle a feigned yawn. Was he being watched? There were other offworlders here, other representatives of the Union and Alliance who must also be monitored. Surely they could not watch all of us all the time? They might be looking elsewhere at this moment. But that would require luck to be on his side.

He kept standing, eyes set on the President, refusing to look at the line inching its slow way forward. The elderly lady reached the front of the queue. A tireless worker for her local community, proclaimed the announcer, and a guardian of local crafts, handed down through generations of women since the first settlers arrived on the planet. Next to her, Arthron stood, politely deferential, holding the beribboned medal. He stepped forward - one step, two - hands presenting the ribbon. He knelt. The President bent down to accept it. The boy leaned forward and spoke. Then a swift rising, the flash of a weapon dropping into his hand and reaching for the President's throat, and a volley of flashes spewing forth from the nearby guards.

That was it.

Burrows stared uncomprehending. A crumpled pile of rainbow coloured clothes and a flare of golden hair exposed by a lost hat lay by the podium. The corpse of a young Sierran named Arthron, who had laughed at danger and had known exactly what he was doing. Burrows felt sick.

A scurry of converging officials swamped the President and the bright splash of a life spent. White horror stamped the elderly lady's face. Then she too was gone from sight. The announcer apologized for the interruption. "The child had fainted and is now being attended to," said the implausible voice. But what of the light flashes? The unmistakable bolts of laser fire. Was he the only one here who refused to ignore what his eyes told him?

Then the last recipients were moving forward and the ceremony was finishing. The President and his officials processed back to the security of the palace.

Had it worked?

The night that followed seemed unreal. Burrows must still keep to the agreed schedule as if he had no involvement beyond that of observer in the day's drama. Next morning, he packed slowly. There was nothing of Arthron's left. The boy had taken all that was important with him. The rest he had incinerated before disappearing.

In the queue at the spaceport, Burrows was politely called to one side by a Homuran official. Waiting in the side room was the President, stiff-faced and fearful.

"We understand you are the one detailed to return a certain package to the Sierrans," he said.

Burrows nodded, equally white faced. He had promised this but had been too nervous to make the request, though reluctantly aware he must. It seemed the Homurans knew their obligations better than he.

"Please advise your government that the message is understood," said the Homuran President. "The current trade treaties will stand unaltered."

Burrows bowed. "The Alliance and Union administrations will be grateful to hear that."

There was no surprise on the President's face at hearing his name both powers. The man had been over ambitious, but was not ultimately stupid.

"When may I collect my package?"

"It has already been loaded into the hold of your ship. Please assure the Sierran authorities that it has been treated with all due respect, according to their custom, and that we are, as ever, fully desirous of maintaining cordial relationships with our neighbours."

Burrows nodded his head in formal reply, the only response of which he was capable.

If he had thought the journey here was difficult, it was nothing to the return. Every minute of each day, no matter what he was doing, the image of that package in the cold frozenness of the hold stayed with him. Package! The eternal escape of the bureaucratic euphemism. Long, rectangular and man sized, its contents intact. The Sierrans cast their bodies in entirety into the soil of their world, melting away into its

barren wastes within a frighteningly short time, so his studies on the ship databanks informed him.

“Turn the table,” Arthron had said at the last. Burrows prayed nightly to understand the words.

Then they were back, setting down on a flat plateau in the high, mountainous country that provided the only place fit for humans to live on this most marginal of planets.

The funeral was a simple affair. Burrows’ role was but to be there, to witness to the life and death of an extraordinary young man, who had let himself be sacrificed to the very ordinary intrigues of two over-stuffed and powerful empires.

He was laid in the ground without covering shroud, dressed in the simple clothes of Sierra, his hands pressed flat to the soil he had loved. Then came his family, led by the young girl who had brought Burrows his breakfast that long ago morning –a month past only in ship time, but a lifetime away to the middle-aged man staring at the first signs of pregnancy swelling the young woman’s belly.

“His wife,” murmured the official beside him, assigned to explain the ritual to the offworlder.

“But ...”

“Yes, she bears their first child. It is the custom when one is sent on a non-return mission. A man should know his line will continue after him.”

“I didn’t know. He never said.”

“It had no bearing on his duties,” said the Sierran.

Each dropped a handful of soil into the grave, filling it up with unbearable slowness. Then Arthron’s face was finally covered. Returned forever to his home world and no longer staring out in reproach. Something loosened in Burrows, a release of sorts. But never would he be free again.

The last handful was his. The clods dropped, slowly plopping down on the newly disturbed mound that covered the body of Arthron of Sierra.

“Turn the table.” Burrows looked out across the mountaintops to the setting sun. The table. A cabin on the outgoing ship and a boy explaining political subtleties to a duty wearied civil servant. Yes, that was it. The table, with its two swags of material reaching towards the unstable marble that was Homuran. And to one side, the lone eagle representing Sierra. Turn the table - and now it was Sierra between two, grasping empires. Burrows suddenly smiled, reviewing star charts and shipping appendices. Homuran was a natural centre of trade, but not the best option. There was another planet, more advantageously placed for shipping routes, another planet that could end up swamped by star ports, information brokers and bargaining merchants.

Burrows looked out towards the horizon. Sharply etched peaks cut through the red beams of fading light, a symphony of colour to farewell a warrior. His fingers opened out and the last crumbs of soil fell to the grave.

“Rest in peace, Arthron of Sierra,” whispered the man from the ministry. “Your world is safe.”

His eyes closed, a silent and very private farewell. When he opened them, the other mourners had begun to leave. None tried to talk to him, but a silent murmur accompanied the steady tread on the packed earth of the path. None even glanced his way. No, one did. It was the young woman, the one pregnant with Arthron’s child. She still stood by the grave, staring angrily at him. Then pointedly turned away, her feet planted firmly on the ground beside her husband’s grave. The wind tugged at her, moulding her dress to her body. He saw the mound of her stomach, and below the mound of the grave. Two identical arcs, the one of new life and hope stretched in bitter irony over the mound of death below.

He could not look long. This was not his place. The wind tugged and he reached up to push back the thinning wisps of grey on his head. Then looked down again and saw the new scuff on his left shoe where he had stumbled on the steep path to the graveside. He needed to speak to her, to say something. But she gave him only her back, stiff and waiting for him to leave.

He spoke the words anyway, but so quietly only he and the wind heard them. “His death will not be in vain, I promise you. I will not forget why he did this.”

They were stupid words, hollow and meaningless in this place. But he needed to say them.

His eyes slid away from the grave, and he felt himself shrinking back into nothingness. Yet he would not forget. One day, maybe, he would say the words to Arthron’s son.

Maybe. He turned and walked back to his world, slowly, carefully, looking down and setting each foot warily on the steep path of beaten earth. There should have been sound, a funereal tattoo of his feet hitting the ground. But the soft soil of this world swallowed that too. It was time for him to go.

# HAUSER And the Space Elevator

By J. L. Halliburton

The world fell past the window.

It started with the peaks of buildings. The cityscape drew out further and further, but soon even that fell from view.

Blue skies, fluffy clouds. That was what she imagined prior to her trip. Instead, rain clouds were releasing an eternal dreary drizzle that tapped against the windows of the space elevator.

"Quite pleasant, isn't it?"

"Rain? I suppose so. I tend to like anything that makes someone else miserable."

"Uh ... I meant the elevator."

Her mouth twisted as she glanced at the new occupier of the compartment. She preferred him as a disembodied voice. The young man sitting on one of the velvet couches had a distinct look of being out of place. It wasn't just his casual clothing, or the scrabble of stubble that struggled to make itself known. It was his expression of awe. Being rich enough to travel on the space elevator meant you were powerful, and awe was a sign of weakness. The toffs on-board might be awed, but they would be awed with straight faces.

"I don't care for it." She knew he'd try to engage her again, but she went through the motions anyway.

"Strange you'd get on-board if you didn't want to be here."

"Life rarely acknowledges *want*."

"Oh, right. I see." There was a lull. She expected him to ask why she *had* to be here. It seemed like the natural progression. Deviation from expected norms challenged her so much that she felt the aggressive urge to inform him anyway. Another glance showed the man staring uncomfortably at the polished table. There was something else he wanted to say – something that wasn't impersonal words of casual conversation.

"You're Detective Hauser, right?"

*Unexpected.* She turned to face him. "Yes."

"Oh, good!" he said with relief. "I'm Daniel Danning!"

"That's a ridiculous name. Your parents *must* have been aware of the alliteration."

"I ... wouldn't know." He was second-guessing his choice to engage her after all. This prompted a satisfied smile on her face.

"What do you want? How do you know who I am? You're not a stalker are you?"

"No! No, I'm a criminology student!" his words slowed as he reached the grand finale of the sentence. She saw them coming but too late.

"Good grief! You bought a ticket on this thing *just* so that you could come and speak with me?"

"I'd been trying to get in touch with you for ages, Ms. Hauser!"

"DCI Hauser."

"I left messages on your answering machine."

"I don't have one."

"Uh ... But I left messages on it!"

Hauser paused. *Do I have an answering machine? Maybe I do. I've never seen it before. Then again, I don't even know what one looks like!*

"I wrote you letters, too!" His pleading tone grated on Hauser's nerves like sandpaper. Where were those letters? She did collect her mail of a morning, if only to remove it from the doorway. She did even that with reluctance. Only the promise of pay dragged her from the sanctuary of her flat.

"All that so you could interview me for your silly qualification? And now you've spent a whole load of money on it too."

"Well, not *just* on meeting you. I'm meant to be interviewing someone else in New London City."

Slightly affronted by this, Hauser tried casual conversation. "Near to the Tranquillitatis Ocean, right?"

"No, no. That's the big city. Smaller one up north. Near the Frigoris Sea."

"Right." Unable to gain some kind of superior footing, Hauser grumbled and snatched a bottle of scotch from the low table. She felt his eyes on her as she poured alcohol into her glass.

The room was traditional in design, some architect's attempt to reassure its occupants that the world was not changing too quickly, despite the fact that they were being hurtled through the atmosphere. Their destination wasn't yet in view, but night was fast approaching and the sun was making its slow retreat over the edge of the planet. Hauser had no head for technology but she understood that the elevator operators on the Moon would take over from the ascent process and bring the lift down into a descent to land in Britannia Minor, the first city to be built on the new world.

She caught the grimace and disappointment on Danning's face as she swallowed the bitter spirit, and gave a gasp of victory. Now she was winning.

"I'm not in the habit of giving interviews to annoying students."

"It'll only take a few moments of your time."

"No."

"But ... magick detection is such an unexplored field! I mean, you're a DCI, but you don't even have a team of investigators!"

"I don't need them. I don't *want* them." She swallowed another scotch. Hauser's Superintendent had once asked her to keep count of the number of glasses she drank in one day. She lost count after three hours.

"But I thought magick crime was on the rise?"

"That's because idiots like you take an interest and start mucking about with things. People do it with everything. Music, art, literature. They decide to *have a go*. They don't bother with any *real* education. They just decide that they can do it on their own. Read a few books, pick it up, and be brilliant. Only ..." she tailed off as she saw the rapt expression on Danning's face. Drama was all the kids wanted. "... magick gets dangerous."

He pulled out a pad and pen, a hungry look supplanting his rapture. Hauser plucked both from his grasp and tossed them across the room. His face was now frozen into non-comprehension.

"Idiot. It's that kind of thing that gets you into trouble. Scribbling it all down like that. Keep it in here." She prodded his temple. He squinted with each poke. "Why don't you go to the bar, or something? Get drunk. That's the one defining quality that I like in a student."

"You were a student once too."

"*Was*. Now I'm an angry DCI that likes her own company."

"Is it devotion to your job that makes you so good at it?"

"No. That's what makes me an angry DCI. What makes me good at my job is attention to detail. You must have studied other historical detectives? Holmes? Dupin? Or even Columbo? They all tell you one thing. Attention to detail!" She hated that she was being drawn in by this Danning boy, but she never could refuse the opportunity to impress. "Who was in here before us?"

"No one."

"Someone was."

"I watched you go in and followed you. We were only on-board for about ten minutes."

"I'm telling you someone was in here. It's right in front of you!"

She watched him scan the room. He gazed along the wardrobes; the long window that still looked out over a bleak sky; the cupboards, couches, lush blue carpet, and finally the table. His eyes lit up. "Ash."

"Finally."

"Seems obvious now."

"I know. People tend to miss the most obvious and look for details where there aren't any. But notice that there's only a tiny bit of ash? Whoever smoked that cigar -"

"Cigar? How do you know?"

"Smell of it. Whoever smoked it took the remains with him. All that's left is a bit of ash that stuck to the tray. Now ... why would someone take the ash, and cigar remains, with them?"

"Maybe they just knocked a bit of ash into the tray and left?"

"You obviously don't smoke. If that were the case I would have seen some ash on the floor. If not in here, then out in the corridor. It's quite a walk to the next ash tray. No, the tray was used. You can see how the ash has been smudged into the tray when they put out the cigar. So where's the rest? It's not in the bin over there, so he must have put the ash in his pocket or a bag. Why would someone go through the inconvenience of having ash and a cigar butt in their pocket?" she stood triumphant before the student. She was so immersed with the lesson that she hadn't made another drink.

"Ashamed?"

"Exactly. Whoever it was didn't want anyone to know he had been smoking. Or at least smoking a cigar. Plus it says something about their nature, which is, often, more important than the motive. They're overly cautious. Careful. Precise." She caught herself gesturing, her thumb held to her forefinger as though picking at a tiny needle. "Come to think of it, it's *very* meticulous. No one else has come in here, so they couldn't have been expecting someone. Why hide your smoking habit from strangers?"

"Perhaps they were stood up?"

"You said it yourself: we were only on the lift for ten minutes. Whoever it was came in here and stayed just long enough to smoke a portion of their cigar and then left. With the remains of the cigar. Curious." She knew Danning was taking mental notes on everything but the mystery now consumed her mind. It was only a minor thing, but she couldn't resist it, especially with little else of any real interest on the long trip.

She scanned the room like Danning had. She took in the brass pipes that pumped recycled air into the lift and others that carried water to various utilities. The brass was well-polished and maintained. The cleaners had definitely been over the compartment before the new load of passengers had arrived. The carpet. The table had been moved. Mild discolouration told her that the table legs had been repositioned closer to the couch.

She felt Danning's presence, lurking behind her like a child sheltering behind his mother, but also still curious to see what was happening. Either that or he was just keeping out of her way. A smart decision.

Her eyes latched onto one of the wardrobes. The space elevator was an expensive ride, and those that used it expected pristine conditions and exquisite services. Every coaster was in place, every glass lined up, each tiny detail seen to. One of the wardrobe doors was slightly agape. It wasn't much. A couple of centimetres. But in a world of perfect refinement, a couple of centimetres would be considered unconscionably sloppy work. She stalked over and flicked the door wide.

Danning clutched his mouth and jerked his head away as though he'd been struck. What struck Hauser was the bitter smell. The quality of the wood had managed to keep the metallic smell contained within the wardrobe.

The amount of blood was incredible. It pooled at the base of the wardrobe and trickled out through the opened door. The carpet soaked up much of it, turning the blue a dark brown. The door and walls were dripping. The body itself was slumped at the back, knees upright. He had had no room to fall flat being trapped in such a small space. He was quite tall, raven-haired and in a smart suit. His top hat was the only thing dislodged, lying crumpled beneath him.

"Have we found our smoker?" asked Danning through his hand.

"Or our smoker's victim?" Hauser crouched to get a better look. Young and handsome. He had been stabbed hundreds of times across the torso. Rage and anger. Passion. A jilted lover? Had the dead man been cheating on his wife? "Have you got a handkerchief?"

Danning pulled one from his trouser pocket and passed it to her. Pushing the dead man's head out of the way, Hauser got a better look at the stab wounds.

"They're different sizes," she murmured.

"Different knives?" Danning bent over, displaying as much fascination as Hauser herself. Such a quick change suggested that his revulsion had only been a reaction common social etiquette demanded of him. One or two more bodies later and he would be as unconcerned as she.

"Only if they came in with an entire arsenal." Hauser craned her head to look at the inside of the door, where the blood was already starting to dry. "The door was closed."

"What? While he was being murdered?"

"Yes."

"Impossible! How could the killer fit in here with him, let alone raise an arm to do this kind of damage?"

Hauser turned with a surprised smile. The boy had a good mind for this job. Most people would have seen his first observation, few the second. That was the difference between a good officer and someone pretending to be one. "They couldn't."

"So." Danning paused as though too nervous to say the words. "Was it magick?"

"It's a simple spell, but to have been used like this the practitioner would have to have practised. A lot." She allowed the words, and their implication, to hang in the air. This wasn't the killer's first victim. She pulled herself up, her hand clutching the frame of the wardrobe. With a casual air she wiped the blood from her hand with Danning's handkerchief. "Pass me the telephone. And light a lamp, it's getting dark."

The light outside was growing dimmer. The blue line of atmosphere was dropping away and being replaced by the stark black void of space. *But it's not void, is it? It's crammed with stars, planets, moons, asteroids – and now a mechanical nightmare zooming out with me on it!*

*I wish there was a reverse on this thing.*

*Then again, there's nowhere for the killer to hide, is there? One of twenty-odd passengers.* She smiled to herself. "He can't hide for long."

"What?" Danning's voice drifted through the muddle of her thoughts. He was holding the telephone, a brass affair. She had no idea how it sent messages from the elevator down to the planet without a wire, but she knew it did.

She snatched the device nestled the receiver against her ear. Rolled the ring around, and cursed at the slow speed of the return spin. It took even longer for someone to answer.

"DI Stanley."

"Hauser."

"Ah, Sofie. What's up?"

Hauser cut back a scathing remark. Only her mother called her Sofie, and that was annoying enough. But she needed someone that did 'normal' detective work to perform 'normal' detective work for her, and Jason Stanley was the single other detective that Hauser regularly spoke to. The Superintendent had tried to force another detective into her branch but under the pressure of a strict, alcoholic boss and the sheer brutality of the magickal murders, he hadn't lasted more than two weeks.

"There's been a murder."

"Where?"

"The space elevator. Where I am now."

"What? Seriously?"

"Of course! Since when have I been cracking jokes?" she snarled down the receiver. It had taken her a long time to grow accustomed to the fact that glowering didn't work down telephones. The snarl had become her new method of projected irritation. "I need you to do a check on all the passengers on my current transport. Staff included. Check, especially, for anyone on the magick register."

"Easy enough, hold on," Stanley's voice trailed off and was finished by a clatter. With the increase in magickal crime, the law required all magick graduates to be registered, just as it did gun owners. Of course, it was easy enough for anyone to learn some simple spells without going through the official channels, but a spell used for murder would require some highly charged magickal works. Usually the magick register wouldn't help much because traces could easily be covered by anyone with a magick qualification; however, with so few people to choose from, it would be easy to narrow her search to two or three possible candidates.

There was another clatter. "All right. We've just done some checking. Looks like you have three qualified onboard. Godfrey Jones, Eric Sterling, and Jessica Wellsop. I'll need more time to see if any have prior convictions."

"Good. Get back to me soon on that."

"Alright. Got it. I'm calling you back on this number?" asked Stanley, his voice grainy and distorted over the telephone.

"Yes. You'll probably have to leave a message on the answering phone. I'll be busy."

"You mean the answering machine."

Glowing, however, was still Hauser's instinctive reaction to things. She slammed the receiver down without bidding her colleague farewell. Stanley knew she wished him well. She needed him too much to wish him otherwise.

"Right. We'll head out and start having a look around. We'll check out our three candidates," Hauser poured a new glass of scotch. *For the road.*

"Lucky you were in here, wasn't it? I mean, what're the chances? Magickal murder and a magickal detective in the same place?" Rather than betraying amusement or shock, Danning's voice sounded worried. He already knew the chances were too low for this to be a coincidence. The murderer had planned Hauser's involvement.

The staff had sealed the room off. As proven by the murderer, sealed rooms wouldn't stop magick invasion, but would, at least, stop inquisitive tourists from poking around a crime scene. Hauser and Danning were in the bar. It seemed that the majority of the passengers were also gathered there, engaged in the new gossip of murder. To bored, rich eccentrics, murder investigation was a hobby, and speculations were being thrown around as though they were all experts.

Hauser didn't say anything. She sat in the corner and watched. The killer was there. He was one of them. Gossiping and spreading rumours to further antagonise and spice up the drama. Grinning at her, behind the veil that was his face. Challenging her. Daring her. It was all a big game. *Can you catch me?*

She downed a scotch and motioned for the bartender to refill it. Danning sat with his pint of lager. He drank slowly. Hauser decided he couldn't be very sociable with his fellow students, else he would have picked up much cruder drinking habits.

Jessica Wellsop was there, exuding her own kind of spell. An aura of sensuality rolled around her like a fog. Those near her were enamoured and hung on her every word. Even the other women seemed entranced rather than jealous.

"Why Jessica?" muttered Danning as he followed Hauser's gaze.

"The murder was passionate, vengeful. Women usually murder those closest to them. Their children, lover, or spouse. The theory could be that Wellsop caught her young lover cheating at some point and planned his murder aboard this lift. She's intelligent, confident, and charming. Perfect for this kind of murder," she replied, though her voice was rather louder than Danning would have liked.

"It's weird that, though. The organisation. I mean, they really prepared for it, cleaned up, planned it. Then murdered in such a ... disorganised way."

"Not really. Even planned murders can end messily. In fact, more so, if the killer's particularly ill. Crime that's disorganised from the start tends to be more instant. A few bashes to the skull and a lame attempt to conceal. They'd be grief-stricken and probably traumatised by what they'd done. Not usually serial either. Our killer has done this before. Several times. The mode has been perfected. Now they're testing just *how* perfect by giving it to me to solve."

"They do say you're the best."

"I wonder who *they* are."

Hauser stared at Wellsop. The dark-haired woman kept glancing back with expressions that suggested curiosity. There was something about Wellsop that angered Hauser more than most people did, and she hated everyone on some level. The woman was challenging her. *But is she challenging me for murder? What is it about her?*

*It's her beauty. Her style. Her grace. She's everything a woman should be.* Hauser caught her tongue before she scolded herself. Wellsop was wearing a grand dress of mustard and pale yellow frills. Her hair was spun into ringlets, and her cleavage heaved with each breath. The world around her seemed to fade and pale, leaving just Wellsop – and her dark eyes, pulling on Hauser's soul.

The detective's mouth contorted into a snarl and she snapped her neck round to face Danning, "It's not her."

"What? How do you know?"

"Which one is Sterling?"

"Uh ... the guy with the implants," Danning said, still baffled. "I was coming round to the jilted lover idea."

"She just tried to use a spell on me," Hauser said after swallowing another scotch.

"What? Did she? What was it?" Danning looked like an alert cat on the edge of his stool.

"Attraction. Enticement. Whatever you want to call it."

"Uh ... you mean, she's ...?"

"Exactly. She probably uses that spell a fair bit. It works quite well. Stupid for her to try it on another magick graduate though." Hauser focused on the man with a head full of implants. Long braids of wiring and plastic fell back from his scalp amongst the thick dreadlocks of his natural, dark hair. The new cyber technology had brought with it a new wave of magick practitioner who merged the two. Hauser disliked it. She valued her tomes, her pure, old-world magick, raw and aggressive and only able to be tamed by the strongest of practitioners. These tech mages, as they called themselves, were a perversion of an art form. It was usually the young that were attracted to the tech mage way, choosing the easy path over real study. She noted that Sterling, like Wellsop, had been casting glances in her direction. The difference being nervousness in Sterling's eyes rather than enchantment.

"And Jones?"

"There," replied Danning with a nod of the head. Jones' top hat made him taller than most in the room, and his smart suit reminded Hauser of the dead body in her wardrobe. A very obvious gun hung from Jones' belt. Even Hauser, as inexperienced with physical weaponry as she was, could tell it was well-maintained and expected to be used. Jones had the look of a vagabond about him. A pirate, probably of the sky variety.

With the advance of aeronautical engineering, the skies had become one of the most regular methods of travel and this brought with it a whole new element of crime. Sky pirates had become more trouble than those at sea and, like their sea-faring brethren,

countries were hiring them to attack foreign shipping. This bold show of force told Hauser that Jones was hired by the British Empire. She guessed he was on his way to find new horizons and colonial zeppelins to ambush.

Jones could have murdered someone easily enough, but she doubted a common pirate would take such time and care. Pirates were brutes. Pirates also tended to kill, rather than murder. For them it was part of the job. The incident in the wardrobe was more personal. She wouldn't rule him out, though.

"Oh, my god, look!" Danning pointed without attempt at concealing his childish gesture. Hauser followed his pointing finger to a tall, blonde woman. She wore an elegant red dress with a large bow at the bottom of her back. Unlike Wellsop's, this woman's breasts were concealed by an extravagant amount of frills that rivalled Hauser's own cravat. It was often only the rich women that still wore dresses; an attempt, Hauser believed, to exude elegance and refinement that poorer women might lack. Most of the people in the room smoked. Another sign of importance. It seemed that with riches came the desire to kill oneself faster. The blonde woman smoked through a long, black cigarette holder. Extravagant. "It's Emily Leighton."

"Who?"

"You don't know who Emily Leighton is?" Danning looked more aghast than shocked. "The actress! World-famous! Americans can't get enough of her!"

"Americans? They'll go for anything in a dress!" snapped Hauser. "Bloody savages, they are."

"Are you jealous?" Danning's voice seemed filled with genuine curiosity.

"You'll be found in a wardrobe next if you carry on." Was it a coincidence that such a famous celebrity was aboard the elevator? *Or is she the prize? The ultimate goal. The great works. The philosopher's stone!*

*It's all building up to her. There's a final chapter to this and that woman is it.* Hauser felt as though she could see the future unfurling before her eyes.

"We should tell the staff to keep a special eye on her," she told Danning. She turned to face Sterling, who had been staring at Leighton. When she caught his eye, Sterling rushed from the room. Hauser pursued him, not unaware that her sudden movement after Sterling caused several heads to turn.

"Where are you going, Mr. Sterling?" she barked down the narrow corridor. One side was lined with several windows looking out into the depths of space, whilst the other held doors to unoccupied compartments. Gas lamps swung gently with the dull vibrations of the elevator's engines.

He turned around with panic in his eyes. *Is this the kind of man that kills without a trace? Was the killer someone so ... nervous? Or is it a façade?* Hauser stalked towards him with deliberate, footsteps.

"I was going to my compartment. I need a lie down. It's the implants. They heat up every now and then," Sterling replied in an uneven voice. He wet his lips with a quick slide of the tongue.

"Sure about that? There's one use for those implants that I heard was rather popular amongst teenagers these days ..."

"What? What're you talking about?"

"Porn, Mr. Sterling. You wouldn't happen to have some provocative images of Ms. Leighton in that cyber brain of yours, would you? Is that why you dashed off to be alone for a while?"

"Wh- What?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Sterling!" Hauser snapped as she drew up to him. He was a whole foot taller than her. She saw his jaw work with the answer in his mouth. "Answer truthfully, Mr. Sterling. If you don't, you might find yourself being questioned for something you didn't do."

He hesitated but she knew her words had worked. She knew, before he said it, that she had been right. He wasn't planning to murder Emily Leighton.

"Yes."

"Good ..." she was about to turn away when she spotted a metallic shine to his jacket pocket. Most gentlemen had a large watch hanging from their breast pocket, but Sterling had a silver lighter. "Smoke, do you?"

"So do hundreds of other people!"

"Defensive. Do you not like people to know?"

"Look, I answered your question. Please let me alone." He hurried away from her as though she were contagious.

"Have fun," Hauser muttered. The response had meant to be louder but her thoughts were taking up most of her brain processes. Hauser returned to the bar. Most of the guests had left, leaving a few late drinkers and, of course, Wellsop and her admirers, who were mostly women by this time. Leighton was also gone. Danning stood by the corridor doorway, waiting. "Where did she go?"

"Who?"

"Leighton."

"Back to her room, I think. Someone's watching over her. Do you really think she's a target?"

"Definitely. This killer is playing a game and Leighton is the grand finale." She stopped talking and stared around. "Where's Jones?"

"He's -" Danning pointed to an empty seat. "Damn."

"Doesn't matter. It's not him anyway. We'd better check on that phone call."

~

"You've got a message."

"What?"

"The answering machine. The arm's spinning. Means there's a message on it," Danning pointed to the telephone. A small arm was spinning around and around from the side of the device. With uncertainty, Hauser approached.

"How does it work?"

"You need to spin the arm backwards. In reverse. Then the message will play." She followed his instructions. "You need to pick up the receiver as well."

Hauser wanted to growl at him but felt she already looked stupid enough. She brought the receiver to her ear and listened to the recorded message Stanley had left.

"Okay, Sofie. Weird one. All three of your guys have prior convictions. Jones is a pirate. No doubt. He's been cautioned for terrorising British sailors, but otherwise he's a perfectly law-abiding murderer. Only been killing foreigners. French mostly. Next we have Sterling, and you'll love this. He's been done for impersonating a police officer. Went round trying to convince people he was a copper. Funny though, he was trying to pass himself off so he could work on a *real* case. No personal boon. Crazy, right? And finally, my favourite. Ms. Wellsop has been caught several times for sexual molestation, through the use of magick. Weird when a *woman* has to resort to magick for sex, right?"

"Sexist -!" Hauser began before remembering she wasn't conversing, but listening.

"So yeah. That's about that for your trio. I did come up with a little titbit though. Apparently there's another magick user up there. A Stacy White. She was accepted by that magick school, or whatever you call it, but she left a few weeks in. Dunno why, doesn't say. Might want to try and find her. I already got in touch with the police in Britannia Minor. They'll be waiting for you. Good luck!"

Hauser decided that Stanley sounded all too cheerful. "I need to talk to Sterling. I've got a feeling he knows something ..."

Her eyes snapped to the discoloured carpet again. Since the movement of the table had only come into Hauser's mind when she was looking for a mischievous smoker, the dots hadn't connected. She groaned at her own stupidity.

Hauser grabbed the edge of the table. It was lighter than she had expected it. Once flipped onto its back, legs in the air, the table showed its dark underbelly. Danning sighed something resembling the word 'bollocks.'

The pentagram had been quickly etched and the centre of the circle felt waxy to the touch. The spell had been cast quickly, charged with the anger and determination of the killer, and then whoever it was had left while the spell was still doing its work. Physical presence was only needed to a point. A true graduate of magick would have used a more complex and mature symbol than the pentagram, and they would have been able to perform the spell from another room. Hauser had thought the presence of the killer in the room meant passion, but rather it meant lack of skill.

"So the guy did it here and then ran off?" Danning looked at Hauser expectantly.

"Yes. He wouldn't have needed to stay the whole time. Just long enough to get the spell started. Pentagram's a dangerous tool in the wrong hands," Hauser crouched down to get a clear look at the scruffy symbol. *Shoddy work.*

"Why? I always thought it was like the imitation brand of magick?"

"Sort of. It's the one everyone knows. The popular one. When someone thinks of actors, they might think of, say, your Emily Leighton. When they think of magick, they think of a pentagram. Right?" Hauser watched him nod. "But a pentagram is pretty weak. It's like an all-day pass for Manchester train stations. You can hop on and off any train for a whole day. But try to get a train out of Manchester and you're likely to get caught by an angry ticket collector."

"Right ..."

"Only, our magick ticket collector is a huge, kick-ass demon."

"Kick-ass? Isn't that an Americanism?"

"So?"

"Thought you said you didn't like Americans?"

"I didn't say that. Time to find Sterling."

She hurried along the corridor, peering through the glass into each compartment they passed. She doubted Sterling would be hiding; he would be too busy trying to solve a case he had no business with. Her feet took her faster and faster as the end of the corridor neared. *He's got to be in one of these bloody things.*

Then she saw his mass of hair and implants lolling over the back of the couch, and barged into the compartment with a mixture of anger and relief. She didn't like people, but she also didn't like for them to die because they were playing detective on her round. It was the smell in the air that brought her to a halt. She had been so fixed on the back of his head that she hadn't noticed the blood splattered across the room. Small traces as far as the windows. The black leather of the couch was stained with red.

Danning gasped in the doorway. Hauser allowed her eyes to close for a moment. They had already seen too much for one day, but they were going to be pushed even further. The most obvious difference here was the place of murder. No effort to conceal. The pentagram was etched onto the top of the table. Even the ash tray had been left full, cigar butt and all. Hauser tilted her head and looked at Sterling. His jacket, shirt, and waistcoat had been marred by stab wounds, just like the previous body. But he was sitting. A natural posture. Legs apart, one arm rested on the knee, the other on the couch. *Did he just sit there when he was butchered? Sat and watched the killer draw the pentagram and cast the spell? "You were tricked, weren't you?"*

The trail of blood covered the table then stopped. Some had gotten past, though, creating a pattern in a clear V. The killer would be coated in Sterling's blood.

In curious, dream-like motion, Hauser moved around the table and took the killer's place. She stared down at Sterling and looked into his lifeless eyes. *You wanted to be here, didn't you? He was going to show you something. What was it, Eric? Did I promise to help you solve the case?*

*But you wouldn't just trust anybody, would you? You didn't trust Hauser, and she was a copper. Who else would you trust?* Hauser felt her eyes water from the wincing. "But why did I kill you, Eric?"

"What?" Danning's voice was apprehensive and his eyes flickered over Sterling.

"Did you know too much? Or was it just ... fun? I didn't have to kill you, Eric. I just *wanted* to!" Hauser stopped. She knew she seemed crazy to most people but this was her way of putting herself in the killer's place. She looked down at the table legs. "This one's been moved, too." She fell to her knees and peered under the table. The blood wasn't dripping any more, and she had a clear view of the pentagram on the underside of the table. "Two pentagrams? Sterling wasn't the real victim."

"Oh, no," Danning managed, and headed for the wardrobe. The door swung open to reveal a woman. She was slumped up against the back of the small space, just like the previous body, her dark skin and dress tarnished by her own blood and stab wounds. Hauser looked from the woman to Sterling.

"Did Sterling come to meet her?" she paused. "No. The woman was killed first. The killer cleaned up. But then in comes Eric Sterling on his mission to catch the killer. But he didn't know he'd found them. Who could be trustworthy enough for him to sit down with and watch them cast a spell?"

"Jessica Wellsop?" Danning came up beside Hauser.

"Perhaps. But it's not Wellsop. I mean, it's not her *style*. She's a sexual predator. She's not going to change her motive for the thrill of murder. There's nothing sexual about this. There's no pattern. A white, dark-haired fop, a black lady, and a tech mage? There're no similarities between all three. Wellsop would hunt women. The woman in there, fine, but the blokes? It's not racial, we have two skin types. Why? Why *these* people? A murderer can be defined by their victims. Figure out *why*, then you find your killer."

"Well, what about the reason for killing? We don't really know that yet."

Hauser looked at him, "You're right. That's it. *Why* are you killing? You're not killing because you *want* to, are you? It's because you *have* to. It's a job. There's no killing urge - that can take days to mature again. It's necessity. So much killing in such a short space of time. You're on a mission!" She realised her voice had steadily risen as she ranted at Danning, who appeared quite intimidated.

The grandfather clock in the corner chimed through the silence of the room. Only when it finished did Hauser lift her eyes from the ground to Danning, "The killer isn't a graduate. They've got their knowledge from reading books and now they think they're skilled enough to use it. They utilise the pentagram and the spell ... the only spell that they can do that they know *works*! This isn't passion or anger! This is the job. It needs to be done. The killer uses this spell because they know it works and it's one they've practised. A graduate would know hundreds of better, sneakier ways to kill someone. This is blunt. The killer walks off while the deed is still being done. But ..." Hauser looked around the room. "Why wait for a magick detective to come blundering in? Why are you doing this job?" She looked at Danning again. "There's about twenty people onboard, right?"

"Not counting staff, yeah," he nodded.

"So if you needed to kill twenty people in one night, what better place to do it than the space elevator? Even a zeppelin could be brought down to earth before you're done. But an elevator in space? No one's going anywhere until you're done. I need ink," Hauser pulled up the sleeves of her left hand and took the offered quill. She drew, the point of the quill digging into her pale skin, and dabbed the nib into the inkpot again and again until the arcane symbol was finished.

"What's that?" Danning watched her with a horrified expression.

"Symbol that enhances shield spells. Now I just need to know where to look. It's important you stay back. You've been good for me to talk ... at. I'll let you know how it goes when I get back. I wish I had a scotch here, though."

"You know, drinking is almost as bad for you as smoking, right?" Danning grumbled. Hauser was about to reply when a small cog clicked in her mind. She twisted her head round slowly and stared at the ash tray.

"She wants to be caught. She wants me to stop her. That's why this all happened with me onboard. The summoner has realised what's she's done and is trying to get out of it, without pissing off the thing she's trying to summon."

"Summon! Like a demon?"

"Don't be stupid. You can *summon* anything. A pencil, a person, a cat. Whatever *she's* summoning isn't anything so innocent though. I'll know *why* she's summoning it when I see what it is."

"I notice the killer's a she now?" Danning watched Hauser get on her knees again and peer at the ash tray.

"Yes."

"And you know that ... because of the cigar butt?"

"The killer wants to be found out so they left a clue. A clue only I would find. Whatever she's summoning is obviously sentient enough to see obvious mistakes. See this cigar? If you were a smoker, would you do that to your cigar?"

"What?"

"Drop it in the middle like that? You'd put it on the side if you left it to burn out, wouldn't you? And there are marks around the smoker's end of the cigar."

"I thought there were meant to be?"

"Lip marks, yes. Slight dampening. It's not meant to look like it's been forced into something too small for it. Like a cigarette holder. Not many men use those." She looked up at him with a small, amused smile, "And Stanley dropped me a woman's name. Stacy White."

"What!?"

Hauser looked at Danning. Her eyes were cold and hard. *The boy had better not start holding out on me now.* "What do you know?"

"That's ... Emily Leighton."

"How do you know?"

"Emily Leighton is just a stage name. Most actors change their names these days. Needs to be something people will remember."

There was a long silence. Hauser thought she could hear Danning's memory churning and coughing with effort. There had only been one person with a cigarette holder in the bar. There had only been one person Hauser had discounted from the suspect list. She had thought Emily Leighton was a due victim.

"And now she's a stupid woman that's gotten herself entangled with some blood-thirsty beastie. Happens to the best of us. Don't worry though, I'll save her. It's what she wants." Hauser stood and gave Danning a rough slap on the arm. She reached the door before remembering, "Make sure someone comes to seal up the rooms again. Don't touch anything."

~

The air tingled. Most people wouldn't have felt anything, but to any practitioner the active use of magick was like a soft breeze across the skin. Hauser pulled her sleeves further down her wrists. She didn't want them to slip and reveal the runes there.

Blood gored the corridor, as did several more bodies, some Hauser recognised from the bar. *Apparently she gave up on subtlety. That summon is probably getting anxious.* The DCI stepped over one of the corpses. A quick look at the wounds told Hauser that Leighton hadn't been the killer of this man. Missing limbs, torn face; the creature had done it. It was enough to cause even Hauser's stomach to churn. She didn't dare gasp for breath.

The gas lamps continued to swing back and forth along the corridor. Hauser focused on them. Counted them as she passed. The closer she drew to Leighton's compartment, the thicker the air became. The thicker the magick. The steady, heavy breathing that pulsed through the corridor didn't help to calm Hauser's nerves. It was a deep, hollow and unnatural sound.

"Well, if it isn't the kick-ass ticket collector."

Hauser slipped into the compartment. Compared to the scene outside, the room appeared pristine, save for the large pentagram carved into the carpet. It was brighter too, despite the lack of gas lamps. Light came from hundreds of candles.

"Amateur. Candles aren't necessary at all." Hauser looked at Leighton. The blonde woman stood in the centre of her symbol, face cast to the floor as though ashamed. It was the monstrous creature looming over her, however, that drew Hauser's attention. It seemed to drip, pour, and fall into itself, repeatedly regenerating into a physical form. There was a face in there. Huge, grotesque, and very angry. "Incense, on the other hand, might have helped keep *him* away."

"How do you know I didn't summon it?" Leighton's head snapped back in a brisk, violent motion. Hauser wondered how far her body had gone. Creatures from the magick planes tended to latch onto human hosts and gradually take them over. The human body would degrade and fall apart under the strain. For now, Leighton still appeared human, though her skin was dark grey and her eyes hollow.

"I recognise it. You haven't been paying your fare." Hauser scuffed the edge of the circle Leighton stood within. Such a simple move would have ended the whole affair had it been drawn from chalk. "Besides, it makes more sense. It's why you wanted me to save you."

There was a pause. The magick build-up had become audible in Hauser's ears, a low bass hum. Leighton's mouth twisted with anger for a brief flash. Hauser flinched. But the woman settled again and spoke:

"Too late."

Hauser reacted as fast as she could, raising her arms into a cross, planting the two runes together; one drawn on her outer wrist and one on the inside. The shield itself was invisible, a magickal barrier that enshrined everything within it and sealed out any magickal energies. The bass sound was gone, the breathing of the creature gone. All was quiet; only the noises of the physical world penetrated the shield. Outside was havoc. Leighton's sudden attack had been brutal. The magick that spiralled from her arms was uncontrolled, raw; it battered the room, destroying furniture, erupting pipes of hot, scalding water and ripping holes in the compartment walls. Hauser thought it lucky the elevator was built to withstand the pressures of trans-atmospheric travel and the cold of space, else they would have been floating through it.

Colour rammed the shield, revealing its spherical shape as the magick rolled and billowed around it. It lasted just a minute before Leighton fell to her knees with exhaustion. The room was devastated. The creature was still present, urging Leighton to rise again.

"My turn." Hauser released her arms. She enjoyed the satisfaction of a good win. There were no special effects needed. No dramatic extravagance. No banishing. No magick. She struck Leighton with her fist. The strike sounded like a wet thud. It took another hit to knock the woman out. Without a conscious host, the summon had to lie in rest and wait for Leighton to wake up again. By then the elevator would have landed and Hauser would have handed her over to the police of Britannia Minor. What happened then was someone else's affair. Job done. Winner.

~

"So, how do you like the Moon?"

"Like Earth. Just less trees."

Danning laughed. It was a pleasant sound after the noises that had come from Leighton's friend. Hauser looked at the student. The elevator station gave them an ample view of the landscape through a gigantic window. The darkness of space loomed overhead and the beautiful, blue Earth slid through it just as Hauser had watched the Moon do all her life. It was strange to think of someone looking back up at her from the planet. The cities of the moon were sprawled out far and wide. During the day the sky would be illuminated with blue, clouds and sunlight; just like on Earth. Technology was a wonderful thing. *Allegedly.*

"What're you going to do now?" Danning stared out of the window.

"I'm going to make sure Ms Leighton is seen to first. Don't want her getting loose and trying to get revenge," Hauser's hands were on her hips, pushing back the black coat. "If you mean in the long run, I'll be headed back home to Manchester. When you're back on Earth, come visit. I might let you interview me for your degree."

"Seriously?"

"No. I just wanted to see what it was like to be nice."