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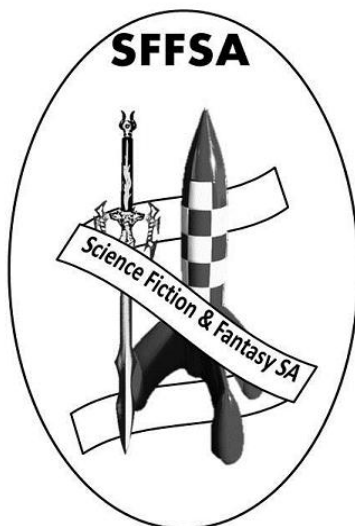
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Winner of the 18th Trophy RiLL Contest, 2012

The Stag

Luigi Musolino

Translated by Paul Virgo Edited by Frank Ludlow

When the satnav dropped the digital car into a grey ocean of pixels, Omar put his foot on the brakes and spat out a loud fuck it. The Fiat Ducato spun and slid until it stopped in the middle of the road. Moving his nose to the windscreen, Omar took a look outside.

Darkness and silence. Thick rain poured from the sky, forming liquid darts in the glow of the headlights. The tops of monumental beech and maple trees swayed lazily in the distance, indifferently accepting the whims of the wind.

He didn't have the slightest idea where he was, nor how to get back to the main road.

"Watch out, satnavs go haywire in the midst of the hills. There are more roads and lanes in the Volturno Valley that wrinkles in my scrotum," his father had warned him a few hours before, with the classiness that distinguished him.

Omar had left home straight after dinner in very good time with the satnav set for Castelnuovo Al Volturno and a few glasses of Aglianico wine settling in his stomach.

He didn't want to be late for the carnival.

He didn't like the idea of spending the night in the middle of a muddle of idiots. Parades, carnival floats and village festivals had lost their charm for him centuries ago, when a grouchy fat man dressed as a gorilla had given him a nasty scare. That fucking monkey had featured for years in his childhood dreams.

But work was work. The editor of the local daily he worked at, L'Eco del Molise, had let on that a nice piece on the Carnival of the Stag Man of Castelnuovo al Volturno would open new prospects for him.

"One day, you never know, maybe deputy editor..." he'd said slyly, and Omar had let himself be taken in like a novice.

And now here he was. In the middle of nowhere. Up and down the hills with a satnav that refused to cooperate and just two Marlboros left in the packet.

The Carnival of the Stag Man was a night-time procession, but if he continued to piss about in the middle of the mountains, he was going to miss it: his Swatch said it was already 11 o'clock.

He grabbed his mobile phone, scoured his contacts and called his friend Ivan Renzetti, who was nicknamed the Human Compass for his sense of direction. It seemed an excellent idea to get some directions—and, surrounded by the sea of shadows outside, hear a familiar voice. But then he saw the display was flashing that damned message, NO SIGNAL. Not even a notch. “Shit!”

He lit his penultimate Marlboro and started the van again. He needed to hurry. Get back to an area recognisable by the satellites that hurtled above the planet on their mysterious trajectories.

The vehicle waddled on into the night.

Twenty minutes later, along a mule track bordered by brambles and pale bushes and that oozed mud from the soft flesh of the hill, the Ducato puffed, spat, jerked and stopped.

“What?”

Omar hadn't cried for years, but he felt a lump as big as a plum rise in his throat, beckoning tears and snot.

“No. Please,” he protested, turning the key.

Then he saw the petrol arrow in the red and started punching the steering wheel until his fingers seemed about to burst open and show the bones underneath.

And now what the fuck can I do? Eh? he thought, panic piling inside him.

He looked at the satnav. The little digital vehicle was lost inside a tornado of out-of-focus characters and inexistent roads.

Oh God. Dad will pull my leg until the end of time.

He gave the mobile another try. Nothing. Sadly looking at the packet of Marlboro, he considered sacrificing the last cigarette, but decided against.

“On the move, cowboy,” he chimed, opening the door. With little choice, he swung out of the vehicle and stepped into 10 centimeters of slime. Suppressing another curse, he looked around.

The headlights carved out a narrow path that lost itself within a woody cavern, a hungry black mouth of vegetation. The hills pushed in from every side, wooded giants, encrusted with mud, and stubbled with rocks and bushes.

Omar turned his face towards the sky. It had begun to stop raining at least. The clouds had started to break into lumpy bundles, allowing the light of the stars to illuminate the valley.

Omar turned off the van's lights, picked up the satnav, locked the Ducato and turned on his heels, moving away from the tunnel of trees. They made him shiver.

Get back onto asphalt. Find a house. Find a phone. Find someone—

He didn't have the chance to finish the thought. A noise swelled in the distance.

CRACKATUMP

He spun around. In the uncertain light, he thought he glimpsed the outlines of two distant trees bending on the hill to the right. He looked harder, squeezing his eyelids.

No, they weren't bending, they were falling to the ground.

CRACKATUMP

This time he saw it clearly with the help of a slice of moon that had appeared in the heavens. Trees were falling up there. Two. Three. Four.

Binoculars. I have some binoculars in the van.

He went back to the van and started digging into the dashboard. He couldn't see anything. He turned on the light inside the Ducato. Then the headlights.

And saw a human figure in front of the windscreen.

An armless human figure.

Omar screamed.

Bucci was lying belly down beneath a juniper. The thorns didn't disturb him, nor did the icy rain that soaked into his back.

The only thing that counted was revenge. Elimination.

He stretched his hand towards a round mirror, caressed the surface and checked that the soldering goggles were still there in the big pocket of his coat. They were.

He spat into the grass, held his breath and listened. Trying to detect a sound that would reveal the presence of the Beast. Hoping that this time was the right time.

Nothing. The forest held its breath with him.

He got to his feet and stood behind the trunk of a maple tree. He took a plastic bag out of his inner coat pocket, slid a hand inside and grabbed a generous handful of animal excrement, musk, rotten leaves, dead newts, and fungus.

Forest smells.

Wild smells.

He smeared the mush on his face, on his clothes, behind his ears, under his armpits. He had been doing it once a year, for twenty years: he was used to the stench. He managed to smother the retching and not vomit onto his feet. It was disgusting, but necessary.

He had to smother the stink of man. To stop the enormous nostrils of his enemy scenting it. He had to take it by surprise, it was the only way he could win. With cunning. Bucci knew it.

He had twice had contact with that... thing. The first time when he was a boy and he lost an eye and his brother. The second as an adult, a hunter, and he almost died.

He'd been waiting for twenty years. Twenty years in which he'd spent the last Sunday of each carnival season in damp caverns hidden under the roots of plants that were hundreds of years old, lying in the undergrowth.

And the Beast had not shown up.

Gl'Cierv—the Stag—woke up only according to its own special cycles, after long hibernations. But Bucci was now an old man. He was in a rush to settle the score.

He imagined the inhabitants of Castelnuovo al Volturno, down in the village, dressed as the Stag Man. They would be dancing and laughing inside their ridiculous costumes.

Fake furs and horns, witches with plastic noses, children's cheeks coloured with brown powder.

But in their eyes danced shadows, especially in those of the elderly. Reflections of primordial fears.

A pantomime to exorcise the Myth, to contain it. A ritual that was over a thousand years old that had mutated into clownery.

Dancing and laughing always seemed useless to Bucci.

Problems should be eliminated at the root, he thought.

He was about to sit on the slimy ground, his back leaning on the trunk, when he heard the noise.

A vehicle.

“No, no, no!” he whispered into the darkness. Who the hell could have come that far out on a night like that? A tourist, for sure, although it had never happened before. Getting to that part of a valley forgotten by God in the middle of the night was unlikely. In that weather, what’s more, it was almost impossible. Unless they were very foolish. Or unlucky. Or both.

The streaks of light from the two headlights pierced the darkness, spilling oblong shadows of trees onto the ground.

“Go. Away.” pleaded Bucci. Then he heard the engine die with a strangled sound. A door opening. Suppressed swearing.

He punched a tree in irritation. If the Gl’Cierv was out there, he would smell this poor devil. He would realise there were men in the forest. And Bucci’s plan would be ruined.

What should he do?

He was assailed by dismay. He was tired. Twenty years of waiting, tears, searches, nightmares. Above all, nightmares.

Suddenly he felt certain that he would die without the final showdown that the being that infested the Volturno Valley would continue to sleep in its den dug out of the hills.

That a life spent chasing his demon would finish in nothing.

The headlights went out, bringing darkness.

He would have waited there, discouraged, waiting for morning to arrive without paying attention to the stranger, to the night, to...

CRACKATUMP

Bucci gave a start. Some trees had tumbled over.

Perhaps it’s a coincidence, the ground giving way because of the rai—

CRACKATUMP

No. It’s here, he rejoiced mentally, when he heard the noise again.

He slid the soldering goggles onto his forehead, picked up the mirror, left his hiding place and started to stumble along the mule track. He emerged from the cavern of vegetation exactly as the headlights went back on, lighting him up.

Bucci slipped in the marsh. He swung his only arm to keep his balance, risked dropping the mirror; then stopped before the van, motionless like a statue.

The boy inside the Ducato screamed.

Omar barely had time to close the door, then what appeared like a cross between a tramp and an extra from Mad Max came up to the van and smashed the window with a punch.

“Help! Help!” shouted the young man.

Bucci unlocked the door and threw it open.

“If you want to live, follow me.”

“Wh-what wh—” stuttered Omar. “D-don’t hurt me, please.”

“I’m not here to hurt you, but...” the old man started to say before he suddenly shut up.

A deep, guttural sound reverberated through the forest, a powerful gust that echoed between the hills.

“I’m here to save your butt,” he finished, while Omar’s eyes widened as he heard the sound.

“What was that?”

“I haven’t got time to explain now. If you want to live, follow me!”

This man is crazy, thought the youngster.

Then the noise reached his ears again, this time nearer. This time angrier. He didn’t know what it was, but it was... out of place. It caused a shiver along his back and a hasty contraction of his sphincter.

In the growing moonlight he saw more trees crashing down on the hill, a row of dominos collapsing in their direction.

He looked at the old man. He stank of shit and sweat. A lump of bile climbed up Omar’s throat, he sent it back down and spoke: “I... I got lost. What’s happening here? And what’s that mirror for? All I had to do was write one article about the Stag Man Carnival and then the damn sat nav...”

Bucci's face lit up in irony, splitting into a maze of wrinkles: "Boy, you're lucky. Tonight you may discover the origins of the carnival. The Myth behind the Masquerade. The only thing is that there is absolutely nothing human about that thing."

Yes, he's crazy.

"I have a hideout a few hundred meters from here. I'll explain there."

A humid breeze, carrying the scent of undergrowth and decomposing carcasses, emanated from the wood.

The stink of death.

Right after, the roar-shout-growl-sigh-howl came again, stronger than before.

Omar jumped down from the van.

"Let's go."

The old man led the way, through streams and canals slippery with moss, stopping now and again to catch his breath and sniff the air. He didn't speak, but during the journey Omar had the clear sensation that something—something big rolling through the bushes and breathing like an asthmatic—was following them. In the end they came to a little alcove that had been dug out of a wall of rocks by the centuries. Omar hesitated before going in.

What if this man wants to fuck me? Or kill me?

The animal wail that swept down the valley decided for him again.

Bucci disguised the opening with branches that he must have arranged beforehand. Then he took the soldering goggles off his forehead and passed them to the young man: "Put them on. They'll protect you from—" He ended the sentence by pointing to his left eye in a distracted gesture.

Only then did Omar notice that his eyeball was a shriveled, off-white plum.

"You owe me an explanation. I want it. Now."

"Gl'Cierv. It has always lived here," the man said, as if he were talking about something that was common knowledge.

"Gl'—what?"

"Gl'Cierv. The Beast That Sleeps in the Hills. The monster at the origin of the carnival of Castelnuovo al Volturno. He has awoken,"

Omar started to laugh. He was dreaming, for sure, lying in the back of his Ducato. Or he made it to the festival, overindulged on manteca cheese and Montepulciano, and was now lost in an abstruse, drunken delirium.

“You laughing?” hissed Bucci, grabbing his wrist, squeezing it hard. “Do you think it’s funny?”

“Leave me alone!”

Bucci loosened his grip; when he started to tell the story, his gaze seemed lost in another space, another time: “The first time I saw it, I was seven years old. I was here in the forest playing with my brother on the morning of the carnival. It was hidden under the leaves, that son of a bitch, we walked on top of him, do you understand? It got up, we fell down. My brother... he... didn’t manage to get away. It cut him to pieces with its horns. And then it swallowed him.

“I looked into that creature’s red eyes for an instance and my eye exploded like a grape under the heel of a young woman. Hell dwelt in those eyes. That’s what the soldering goggles are for. They give protection. At least for a bit.”

“What about the mirror?”

“It’s to kill it. You know Medusa?”

Omar shook his head. This was madness.

“I swore revenge,” continued Bucci. “I searched for it, I followed its traces for a long time, but that thing knows how to hide, it sleeps and wakes according to cycles that are incomprehensible to men. I was almost fifty years old when I met it the second time. Twenty years ago. This is the result,” he mumbled, unbuttoning his coat to show Omar the stump of his arm. It looked like chewing gum that had been chewed, spat out and left to dry in the sun.

“What is it?” asked Omar.

“I don’t know. No one does. I read a lot over the years. The Carnival of the Stag Man is without doubt the descendent of a ritual to try and contain the Beast. Anthropologists have tried to interpret it in every way possible, linking to the myths of Dionysus, Faun, Kernussos, of the Wild Man. What’s my idea? That the beast is the spectre of an extinct species. Distilling the hatred of an entire extinguished species into a creation that is monstrous, and real. Made of flesh.

"Thousands of years past, a species of giant deer, the Megaloceros, was common in Molise. Over six meters high to the withers and with the horns eight, nine meters wide. The experts are convinced that its extinction was a consequence of our ancestors' ruthless hunting. The Beast, when it awakens, prowls the forest, killing the odd poor soul or making a couple disappear. To avenge its species and remind us that we are nothing. Nothing."

A roar exploded about a hundred meters from the cave. Omar shuddered.

"It'll smell you," smiled Bucci.

"W-what?"

The old man took a bag full of organic material out of his coat.

"If you don't want to end up in his belly, spread this stuff on."

"Not on your life..."

"Look. Look out there."

Omar stuck his head out of the refuge. In the distance, along the steep ridge of a hill, four trees were moving.

When he noticed they were hairy, he realised they were not trees.

They were legs, as big as oaks.

He spread that shit on his face, threw up in a corner of the cavern and fainted.

Omar was woken by the song of an owl. At first he didn't know where he was. Then he remembered everything. The old man, his story, that vision during the night.

He was on his own. The soldering goggles lay by his side. He put them on his head and cautiously left the cavern.

No one.

"Hello?" he tried calling.

He started to follow a path that wound through the trees, feeling like an idiot. He'd let himself be taken in by a mad man.

Yeah, but those legs...

The power of suggestion, what else? He was lucky that lunatic hadn't robbed, raped and slaughtered him.

He took his mobile out of his filthy jeans. There was a signal. Just one notch, but a signal. His father answered on the third ring.

"Who is it?"

“Dad, listen.”

He was unable to continue. A figure erupted from a fern bush, shouting “Gl’Cieeeeeeeerv!” and threw himself at Omar, dragging him to the ground. Instinctively, Omar lowered the soldering goggles over his eyes. He raised his head. The creature advanced through the forest, mocking all known natural and anatomical laws. The horns, contorted, leathery masses, darkened the sky which had otherwise cleared of clouds. The head of the animal was an offence to normality. It had deer-like characteristics, but they were grotesque, exaggerated. Enormous teeth riddled with holes, a deformed snout that dripped fluorescent mucus and, set in the skull, two eyeballs as big as footballs, two red sclera without pupils from which sprang a livid light. It was a colour Omar had never seen.

He blessed the soldering goggles and understood that if he had kept looking at the creature, he would have gone mad.

He lowered his head, observing the body of Gl’Cierv. The fur, torn in many areas, suggested bones and interiors, but something else too. Living things writhing in boiling sewage. And the eyes. Small yellow pupils. Pupils of a deer.

Old man Bucci, sweating like a pig, held the mirror with his only hand. Lying on his side, he looked at the creature, astounded. “It’s... grown. Since the last time I saw it, it’s grown!”

He stood and went towards the horror that towered over the woods in the middle of nowhere in the Volturno Valley.

The mirror was raised in front of him as if a shield, his eyelids squinting to stop him losing his mind.

“Gl’Cierv! You bastard!”

The being lowered its snout to the ground. When it saw its own reflection, it gasped. Then it wailed, collapsing to its knees, making the valley shake, raising mud and branches. Omar felt something break inside his eyes. Crick went his eardrums before an explosion of pain and then silence. He realised that if he survived, his hearing would be compromised forever.

The Beast’s body twisted. A vile milky liquid started to pour from its eyes.

Suddenly, Omar felt grief for that enormous thing that writhed in desperate spasms while Bucci advanced with his mirror, vomiting insults and anathemas. A man, a nullity, was defeating a terrible, but fantastic being. An ancient one.

We're killing a divinity, murmured part of Omar's mind. We are murdering a legend.

As if in a trance, he picked up a branch, approached Bucci and clubbed him on the head.

The old man collapsed into the leaves. Gl'Cierf gave a cry that Omar interpreted as relief. Then it moved his face to the youngster.

Shaking, Omar closed his eyes, expecting the worst.

He felt something wet and smelly, an enormous rancid sponge, move over his face.

Only when the creature started to move away did Omar realise that the Beast had licked him.

As if to thank him.

He took the last Marlboro from the packet and put it in his mouth. He lit it and breathed in deeply.

He contemplated Gl'Cierf as it stumbled away on enormous pointed hooves, wondering whether he'd done the right thing.

And whether anyone would ever believe that he had saved the spectre of an extinct species.

Or perhaps a god.

("Up To) Ten Must-See SF Films"

Gavin Kreuter

"You can never go back". "A sequel as never as good as the original". We are all familiar with these, and similar, sentiments. It is therefore with severe misgivings that I attempt to bring you "(Up To) Ten Must-See SF Films", as voted for by club members at a recent SFFSA social meeting. Readers of "Top 10 Must Read SF&F Novels" in Probe #164 might be anticipating a blistering, humorous article; prepare, instead, for a dry and factual report back.

We were once again split into three groups, and each group was asked to choose (up to) ten SF movie titles that belong on a must-see list (for SF and non-SF fans

alike). Unsurprisingly with such a large set of candidates, there were few duplicates. Only one title appeared in all three lists. And only two others appeared in two of the three lists. That means that the list below, which could have contained (up to) 30 titles, ended up with only 22. A bit better than our Top Ten SF&F Novels, which ended up with 42 titles.

The reason for repeating the expression "up to" in the preceding text is that we were not compelled to compile exactly ten titles; we were just asked to compile a list of "must-sees", up to a maximum of ten. We were asked not to enlarge our lists with non-must-see titles, merely to reach a conventional "best of" number. Keep that in mind when you compile your own list of (Up To) Ten Must-See Movie Titles. Or ignore it. It's up to you.

In true SFFSA fashion, one group proffered 11 titles. The more rational ("compliant"?) groups listed 7 and 8 titles respectively. Because remakes are never as good as the original, I sometimes added the year the film was released - as discussed by the submitter - to avoid confusion with some really terrible recent remakes.

There are some surprises. Quite a few are satirical, rather than serious. Classical satires like Galaxy Quest were not included however, because they were considered to be too in-house; i.e. to appeal (however tremendously) to SF fans only. And one is actually animated. And, as already mentioned, originals from almost a century ago were sometimes preferred to more recent remakes, even with astronomical advances in cinematography and special effects.

Here they are, in alphabetical order: The 22 UpToTen Must-See SF movies:

2001

Alien

Back to the Future

Blade Runner

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)

District 9

Dr Strangelove
ET
Forbidden Planet
Memento
Men in Black I
Minority Report
Nosferatu (1922)
The Omega Man
Planet of The Apes (1968)
Rocky Horror Picture Show
Sliding Doors
Space Cowboys
Star Wars (1977)
Wizards
Young Frankenstein
Zardoz

Nova 2014 General Section Finalist

And the word was hope Sylvana West

I am blinded by the light the instant I open my eyes. I can see a halo of light, glaring down on me. I blink. I don't know where I am or how I got here. My body is numb. My blood feels like it has congealed inside my veins. My skin has turned to solid ice, pinpricks of cold stab along the length of my spine. I try to move but my body is welded to the frozen slab of what I assume is metal beneath me. Instead of moving I try to bring my mind out of remission. I can't remember anything. Everything from the past few months are snowflakes. Every time I try to catch something, an image, a memory, it melts. All I get are scents, feelings. The icy chill of rain drops bombarding my skin, the gritty scent of wet iron, fireworks of pain exploding through my skull. The memories are hazy, cracking around the edges, flashing and flaring behind my eyelids as though they are not mine. As though I saw them on the television and they

crept into my head, infiltrating into my mind, masquerading themselves as my own memories.

My fingertips begin to tingle, like my blood has begun to dance. The slab upon which I lie jerks and comes to life, tilting me upwards. My back is lifted slowly until I am sitting at an almost ninety degree angle. Sitting at that angle I can see myself, my legs bound at the ankle to the metal bed, my arms at the wrist. The fine powder blue of bruises perforate the area around the bonds. The dark indigo hem of a hospital gown lies just above my knees. I wonder if I'm in the hospital. From my right arm runs a thin plastic tube, filled with an unidentifiable clear liquid, the needle glinting from the place where it rests, embedded in my vein.

My eyes still struggle to adjust to the blinding brightness. The complete silence in the room weighs down on me. The rest of my body begins to awaken and the tingling in my fingers spreads through my entire body like wild fire, consuming every nerve in its path. I try to pull away from the bonds but it presses against the bruises and sends pain shooting through my limbs. I fall limply back against the table, the clattering of metal breaking the silence.

As if from nowhere a voice speaks as the sharp metallic sound dissipates, "Please do not attempt to struggle Mr. Ferrer." The voice is sharp and artificial, as though it is coming through an electronic speaker rather than in person. I turn my head, searching the room for the source of the voice, or for a sign of the person speaking. Directly opposite and above me a panel of glass reflects the harsh light in the room. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, prickling with the sense that someone is watching me. "Where are you?" I shout, my voice echoing back at me in the empty room. My throat aches as I speak. "What is this?" I shout again, as my first question goes unanswered.

"This, Mr. Ferrer, is the Amtec Medical Facility." the voice responds. I shift uncomfortably on the table.

"What do you want from me?" I ask. There is a long pause before there is any response.

"We need some information from you Mr. Ferrer."

"About what?"

"Regarding the incident with Ringer 52689."

I grit my teeth, "I don't know what you are talking about."

There is another long pause. I try to turn my head and look behind myself but I cannot quite see around the edge of the table. "Mr. Ferrer we would appreciate your co-operation in this matter."

I struggle again against the bonds, ignoring the pain shattering through my limbs from the bruises. "Even if I could remember I wouldn't tell you anything!"

"Mr. Ferrer we would rather not have to resort to alternative methods of retrieving this information from you."

"Yeah well it looks like you're gonna have to because I ain't telling you shit!"

There is another pause, "That is most unfortunate Mr. Ferrer." My veins suddenly turn cold, as though my blood has been turned to ice. I can feel the liquid in the tube in my arm begin to run through my body. "This is a simple memory stimulant. Please try to remain calm." I pull fruitlessly against the restraints again. My movements begin to become slower, my limbs feel heavier. My skin feels heavy, as though the air itself is weighing down on me. My breathing is labored and the air begins to claw its way down my throat. While my body begins to move more slowly my mind begins to race, memories flash backwards and forwards across my mind in a blizzard of images. For a few moments everything goes black. Then the memories begin.

"So you don't believe in God?" He asks as he closes the passenger side door of the air car.

"Nah... It's not quite like that... I believe in a God. I just don't necessarily like him." A steel grey sky glares down on us and a chilly wind dances through the street. The smell of coming rain sits thick in the air. He nods, "Then what about Mother?" He asks, following me onto the pavement.

I shake my head, "I don't think it's a case of believe or not believe in her. I think it's more a case of whether you believe she's an all-powerful being or simply a computer programmed by men..." I pause as I step through the holo-door of the cafe. We are separated for a moment by the shimmering blue film of the door before he glides through it to join me, "And I'm more for the latter." I state, finishing my sentence.

He nods again, "So you don't think that she created the Ringers?" We stand at the back of a line leading to the counter of the shop.

"Nah I do... but I don't think they're the creation of an all-powerful being."

"So why do you think she made them then?" He asks, his tone incredulous. The line moves forward.

"Well... she was created to run this right... This Virtual World?" I say, gesturing with wide arms at everything around us, "So you have to ask the question, have you ever seen anything go wrong?"

"Where?" he asks stepping forward as the line moves again.

"Anywhere, anywhere in the Sphere, anywhere in the entire programmed world?" I ask, trying not to seem like an old man standing on the corner with a sign that reads, 'The end is nigh.'

He shakes his head, the look of skepticism in his eyes growing like mold in the dark.

"Exactly! So my thinking is... she didn't create them because she wanted to make her own master race... or because she wanted to fix what was wrong with humanity or any of the crap that they spout at those crazy churches. She was just bloody bored! She wanted to create her own entertainment."

"How do you figure the Ringers are 'entertainment'?" He asks, looking at me through narrowed eyes dark with doubt.

I shrug, "Well, maybe she figured we wouldn't like them. I mean humanity does have a history of fear for things that challenge our existence..." I pause, gauging whether any of this is getting through to him, "I mean it was what, four months, after the Ringers were discovered that they set up The Bureau to hunt them down?"

He frowns drastically, "Yeah I guess..."

"And why do you think that is?" The line moves forward again.

He shrugs, "Because they're vermin! They're a nuisance to society. They're like... like... weeds! There's no reason for them." I frown and worry at my lip for a moment. I don't think anything I'm saying is getting through to him. Frank wears his prejudice like a shield. Nothing I say is going to get through that callous shell of hatred he feels towards the Ringers.

"I don't think that's why."

"Then what do you think?" I don't like the irritation in his voice.

"I don't think we hunt them down and Scramble them because they're a nuisance..." I pause, choosing my words carefully. Frank is my best friend but his close-

mindfulness and stubbornness mixed with his explosive temper make him a bit of an all-round bastard. "I think it's because we're intimidated. I mean, I'm not saying they're the next step in human evolution but do you think that Homo Habilis welcomed Homo Erectus with open arms? I don't think so."

He scowls darkly at me, "I completely disagree, they're just a bloody menace is all and besides, I don't see what any of that has to do with your original point about why Mother made the Ringers in the first place..."

I nod, "Yeah... Well the point is that I think she just made them to see us squirm, to see if she could really make something better than us. I mean she watched us for long enough, she must have figured our weak points and just wanted to see if she could better it."

He chuckles sardonically, "So you think she's a vindictive Artificial Intelligence?" His voice is so thick with sarcasm I could bottle it and sell it.

I glare at him, "I'm not saying she's vindictive I'm just saying she's playing with us."

He looks at me through narrowed eyes for a long moment.... "You're a fucking psycho you are." He says after a long silence. I sense he's trying to communicate a truth behind the humor in the words but chose to ignore it. I laugh, trying to break the tension of the last few minutes and step up to the counter, "Deep down you know I'm right."

He shakes his head, his mouth pulled into a bemused smile, "Shut up and order a coffee Pat." We order our coffee from a hipster barista with the sort of permanent five o'clock shadow indicative of every hipster. He drawls every word that comes out of his mouth.

"I'll get this one." I say to Frank, showing my hand to the barista so he can scan my prints.

Frank forces a shocked gasp, "Oh my god! Call the press! Patrick Ferrer is actually paying for coffee!" I laugh, shaking my head, as the barista flashes a blue light over my hand.

"Thanks," the he drawls as the register beeps the acceptance of my payment. Frank and I make our way over to the waiting counter and the coffees arrive almost the second we do. We turn to the taps and pour boiling water substitute into the cups. As the liquid meets the pills at the bottom of the cups they explode, instantly filling the

cups with aromatic coffee. I grin at the swirling foam that now stares up at me. I throw two sugar pills into my coffee and we turn to leave, "You know they say that shit will mess with your code." he says as we make our way through the bustling coffee shop, clouds of scent wafting about us. "What?" I ask, stepping out through the blue film of the holo-door.

"Sugar," he answers, turning up the street.

I roll my eyes, "They say everything will mess with your code, you can't believe it all or you'll end up sitting alone at home with a tinfoil hat on and black paint over the windows."

He laughs, "Jus' saying."

I shake my head, "You're such a goddamn conspiracy theorist."

He shrugs, "I'm not. I'm just... cautious." We're silent for a while then as we walk down the street. Around us the buildings glare down on the street, their windows twinkling like eyes in the small amount of light peeking through the concrete grey sky. The lamp posts are plastered with electronic advertisements for various back street businesses, some of them flicker on and off periodically a sign that Mother is wiping out their code. Keeping her streets clean. Frank stops abruptly, "Look at this will you?" he says, pointing at a gaudy red and yellow ad. The words are a red, bold fonted, slap in the face:

'Not gettin thin quikenouf? Need more mussle but don't have the time for workin out? Why not try Code Altorashun? Easy, fast, cheap code changin. Change anythin you want about yourself withowt the F-fort, mix your code with that of eny animal. Just call (987) 356 7748 for More Info. RINGERS WELCOM.'

He looks almost ready to punch the sign, "Have you seen the recent stats on the rise in Ringer Code Alteration?" he growls through gritted teeth, "It's ridiculous! They're all fixing that eye thing so that we can't tell them apart from the normal people! I mean how am I supposed to look at a Ringer with two blue eyes and know it's a Ringer?!"

I frown, nodding, "Yeah I guess... Maybe we just need to crack down on these illegal Code Alteration places..."

He shakes his head, "You shut one down and two more pop up the next morning."

"Then we just need to do our jobs and catch all the Ringers!" I state, "I mean the alteration wears off pretty quickly, especially such small things like eyes... so they can't hide forever. Besides, most of them don't have any money to pay, no matter how cheap the alteration is."

He seems to calm down a bit but his eyes still glare at the ad, as though he could delete its code by staring at it for long enough, "Yeah... I guess..." he mumbles. We start off up the street again.

It doesn't take us long to find the building but by the time we get there the sky is being torn apart by streaks of lightening. The rain has yet to come. "This the place?" Frank asks, stopping and squinting up at the building. "Yup." I answer, it's unmistakable. Its cracked and faded facade looms high above us. The windows are dark and shattered in places. The two of us walk up the small flight of stairs leading up the building and I put my hand on the door to push it open, the blue paint is faded and crumbling. This building is in a part of town that has long since been forgotten by Mother. Its code hasn't been maintained since before the New City was created and the code decays after a while, it shouldn't, but it does. Neglect will do that to anything. Even something that isn't real. It's the kind of place that acts as a magnet for everyone who just missed the score, who fell into the gutter or who wants to disappear.

I pause as I rest my hand on the door, "Watch yourself Frank." I say, looking my partner in the eye, "And for god's sake take the safety off your CS this time!" He glares at me and flicks the switch on the Code Scrambler in his belt. A small blue light comes alive next to the switch. I push the door open and the hinges squeal as though they have never once seen oil in all their days of commission. The creaking echoes down the dimly lit passage that opens out before us. The single light in the middle of the passage flickers on and off periodically. I step into the passage with Frank on my heels.

Cobwebs pattern the ceiling and spray-painted symbols plaster the walls in various different colours. I mount the single staircase that leads off of the passage. The railing that chases us up is rusted and broken in places. The air smells of desperation and hopelessness. The coffee in my hand is still hot, I figure it must be

'Ever Heat' coffee. As we reach the top of the stairs we are greeted by yet another sprawling passage way littered with doors and graffiti. I turn to the left and motion for Frank to follow me. The hand that isn't gripping the coffee cup is instinctively glued to my CS.

We pad down the passage until we reach the last door, the number 25 stands in what was once gold plating on it. Frank raises his hand and knocks once, "Maintenance." he sings to the closed door, "We've had reports of water leaking through the ceiling from downstairs and we just wanted to check if all the plumbing up here is 100%." There is shuffling behind the door but it does not open. Frank and I share a look before he raises his leg and his foot connects with the rotting wood of the door. The wood around the lock splinters and gives way instantly and the door flies open on weak hinges.

The room on the other side of the door is shrouded in darkness and smells strongly of damp. It's the kind of place poisonous mushrooms would grow. We slide into the room. My one hand grips the handle of my CS whilst the other still holds the half empty coffee cup. The floor is covered with papers and cans. A mattress is pressed up against one of the walls a thread bare blanket lies in a heap at the foot and two moth eaten pillows lie at the head. I motion for Frank to check the bathroom. He moves for a door at the other end of the room opposite the mattress and puts his hand on the door knob. He turns and the click echoes through the small room.

Behind the door sits a grimy bathroom completely devoid of life. He shrugs, "Maybe the Ringer's made off." I nod and take my hand off my CS. A shuffling noise comes from behind me and I move without thinking, pulling my blaster as I turn. The coffee flies from the cup and rains down on my hand, the heat pierces my skin like a fistful of needles but the adrenaline in my veins washes the sensation away quickly. A figure crouches in the corner staring wildly at me with one viridian green and one cobalt blue eye. "Got one here Frank!" I say as I point my CS at the Ringer staring up at me. I glance at the Ringer's exposed shoulder, "It's got an identification number." I shout to my partner, "RF 52689, Check it out." An electronic beeping noise sounds from behind me as Frank checks the ID number on the data base.

"It's wanted by The Bureau." he shouts as the number registers, "Hey Pat," he says. I turn my head to face him, keeping my CS trained on the Ringer, "Yeah?"

"It says here that this one is dangerous and has evaded capture on several occasions." his eyebrows furrow as the fingers of his free hand wrap around his CS. I laugh, turning back to glance at the Ringer still crouched in the corner, "Doesn't look too scary to me." I turn back to look at Frank, "Please, how dangerous can one bloody Ringer be?" As the words slide off my tongue Frank's expression contorts violently, his eyes fixed on a point behind my head. Time seems to slow as I turn my head to look back at the Ringer. As if from thin air a CS has appeared in the Ringer's pale hands. I stare down the dark barrel of a black market Code Scrambler. The Ringer inches up the wall until it is standing and for the first time its face is in the light. Its features are so human that the only distinguishing thing about it is the eyes. I've learnt to know Ringers not by the two tones of their eyes but by the glassy look in them. There is nothing behind the eyes of a Ringer. No signs of life. A Ringer is nothing but a shell, a copy, a being of pure code, no emotions, no memories, nothing.

This Ringer looks like a woman, the first 'female' Ringer I've ever encountered but that means nothing to me. "Drop the weapon!" Frank shouts from behind me, the Ringer's eyes flick to him momentarily before turning on me once more. I feel its eyes penetrating me, looking through me as though I were a ghost or a shadow, something not quite real. The Ringer pins me in place with its dead eyes like a moth on a cork board. "Please." The word falls from between the Ringer's lips like something fragile, shattering the tense silence. I've never heard a Ringer plead before. It touches something inside me but I don't know what.

When it moves it is a blur of numbers, pure code, moving through a sea of coded space. In seconds it is by the window. Another second and it is mounting the fire escape. Frank looks at me with crazed eyes, "What the hell was that Patrick?!" he bellows. I shake my head, trying to clear it of the image of green and blue eyes, "I don't know." I breathe, "But it doesn't matter, come on!" I move for the window. Frank reaches the window before me and darts through it. I follow suit and we begin to mount the stairs of the fire escape.

The rain has started, drizzling feebly down from an ashen sky. I grip the rusted railing of the fire escape as I pull myself up toward the roof. I can hear the footsteps of the Ringer far above us. By the time we reach the roof the rain has begun in

earnest. Large, heavy raindrops, like bullets, burrow into my skin. As I pull myself onto the roof I can see the Ringer, its head whipping from side to side, searching for a way out. Frank already has his CS trained on it. "There's nowhere to go!" He shouts, "So just put down the weapon and there won't be any trouble." The Ringer turns on him, its eyes blazing like an animal cornered by a hunter. It raises the CS in its hands and points it at him. He takes a step forwards and I plead inwardly that he doesn't do anything stupid. A Ringer is nothing like a human. It will not hesitate.

My CS is trained on the Ringer but my finger cannot find the trigger. Frank begins to walk forwards, advancing on the now trembling ringer, I move to stop him but I am a second too late. I hear the click of a trigger and something inside me hopes it's Frank's. But it isn't. Frank flies backwards, the power of the blast sending him at least a meter into the air. I feel my blood stop in my veins. When I look again the Ringer is running for the edge of the roof. It turns to look at me for a second and I want with everything inside me to pull the trigger but I can't. I feel its eyes trap me like a circus animal once more and then it disappears over the side of the building like smoke in a fog.

I run to where Frank fell, rain slicing into my skin. I fall to my knees beside him. The gravel of the roof digs into my skin but nothing could matter less to me. "Frank..." I want to tell him that it'll be okay but it won't and he knows it. No one can survive a straight on shot from a CS like that. There is nothing I can say that doesn't sound hollow or cliché. He grabs my hand and I can already feel how insubstantial he is becoming, like I'm holding hands with a shadow.

"Fuck." he says, laughing, "How could I get done in by a fucking Ringer?"

"It's a goddamn injustice." I say. I can feel the prickle of tears burning in my eyes and am thankful for the cover of the rain. He laughs again and his entire being flickers for a moment.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette, he shoves it between his lips and fumbles in his pocket for a lighter, "Got a light?" he asks. I nod and pull a lighter from my pocket. The flame flickers and dies in the rain. I get the cigarette lit on the third try. I hold his hand for the last moments as his frame flickers again. I think I see a tear run down his cheek but the rain masks it.

He has no heroic dying words. I have nothing comforting to say. There isn't even a ring of ash on the cigarette when he fades. The only thing left of him is the trail of smoke from the cigarette that dissipates into the air. I stay there for hours in the rain trying to think of something I could've said. There is nothing, no words, no comprehensible thoughts. There is only an emptiness and a rage that threatens to consume me.

"It's a goddamn shame." He says, pacing behind his desk, "You know that? A goddamn shame." I watch as he walks the space behind his desk, a cigarette hanging in his fingers, slowly burning down. I watch the ash drop off onto the carpet. "How long did you work with him Pat?"

I shrug, "About seven years." I answer, my voice sounds hollow.

"A damn shame." he says again as he finally sits in the chair behind his desk, "Look Pat... now I know you're not going to like this but I'm being told by the big guys upstairs that you're going to need some counselling." He snuffs out the cigarette and lights another in one movement.

"Come on George! You know I don't need therapy!"

He nods, "I know but they're worried about what effect this might have on you... other people have been known to go over the edge when their partners you know..."

I slam my hand down on the table, causing the ornaments on the desk to rattle in a tiny earthquake, cutting him short, "You know I'm not like other people." I try to control the volume of my voice but it bellows at him regardless, "There's only one thing I need right now!"

"Calm down Ferrer," his words have a sharpness to them that forces me back in my chair, "Now, I know that you don't need counselling and that's why I'm not going to make you do it." He pauses and looks at me for a moment, "What is it that you need?"

"Revenge." I push the word out through gritted teeth.

He frowns deeply, his eyebrows knitting together, "That's ridiculous Patrick. That's like seeking revenge against the gun that kills someone. Ringers aren't human, you know that, they don't feel things the same way we do. They don't think the same way we do. You can't seek revenge against something that doesn't know what it did."

"Don't bullshit me George. So it's okay to scramble them but it's not okay to do it because one of them did it to your friend? Where do you draw that line George?" He takes a long draw on the cigarette and considers me, "I don't know Pat..." he whispers, "I don't know..." I lean back in the chair again and cross my arms, the muscles are still stiff from the cold rain. He licks at the cigarette for a few moments as though he is mulling over something. "Anyway," he says, finishing a conversation that I wasn't a part of, "If you're set on getting your revenge against this Ringer then I can't stop you."

I nod, "Not that you would regardless, we still need someone to take this Ringer down."

He nods thoughtfully, "Right well... I suppose you can go then." He holds out his hand. I stand and shake it, his fingers are cold and his shake is strong. "Good luck Patrick." He says the words like a final goodbye as though he expects to never see me again. "Thanks." I say, releasing his hand. He nods and sits back in the chair.

I turn to leave but his voice calls me back, "I think I probably know the answer to this but will you need a new partner on this?"

I turn back to him, "No." The answer slips off my tongue like it had been waiting there, it doesn't require thinking about.

He nods knowingly and I turn once more to leave before another thought occurs to me, "After I scramble this Ringer I'm done, you know that."

I don't turn to see if he nods, "I figured."

That night is dark, darker than most nights. I take an Amtec airbus to my flat because I left the car outside the coffee shop. It's probably been impounded by now. I'll get it tomorrow. I had to check out the burn on my hand with the med bay but they didn't tell me anything I didn't know. It will heal itself. The code will revert within twenty four hours and the burn will be gone. No mark. No scar. Gone, like it never happened.

Wisps of grey cloud stand in sharp relief to the tar black sky. From the glass roof of the air bus they look almost close enough to touch. I press the stop request button as the bus approaches the roof of my building and run my hand over the blue light scanner by the door as I exit. The scanner beeps as it accepts my payment of the bus tariff. I step through the bus holo-door onto the roof of my building. The wind

whips furiously at me as though I am being punished for some unnamed crime. I move for the elevation pod in the middle of the roof. I pull the collar of my coat up as a shield against the wind but it doesn't help. It is a relief to step into the white egg shell of the elevation pod and away from the wind. The milky white pod door slides closed behind me as I step in and the placid electronic voice of a woman greets me. "Apartment 82 C Level 15." I say to no one in particular.

The pod begins to move almost liquidly through the travel tubes that run around the building. The pod is thrown this way and that through the tubes but the gravity simulation inside ensures that I am always in an upright position. In seconds I am in front of my door, the identification numbers glinting at me in steel grey. I stretch out my hand and place it on the sensor in the middle of the door. It beeps its acceptance of my hand print and welcomes me home. The door slides open and the home system informs me that it is a quarter to twelve. As I walk through the house the lights follow me, bringing the lighting strips in the walls and ceiling to life as I walk into each room.

I pull off my jacket and CS belt and throw them at the coat rack by the door which moves to account for my aim and catches the items on steel hooks before returning to its standing position. In the kitchen I take the scotch glass from the drink prep station as the capsule inside it is activated by a few drops of water substitute dripped by the automated system and the glass fills with golden liquid. I move into the lounge where the lights are set to only come on at my command. I like to look at the city twinkling beyond my window without the interior lights distorting the glow of those outside.

In the darkness something stirs and my mind instantly joins the CS where it hangs on the hook by the door. I turn to the source of the noise. A figure sits on my white couch on the edge of the living room. The face and torso are shrouded in the inky shadows of the room but the light filtering through the windows from outside falls on the legs. Long, sultry appendages, draped over one another at the knee. "Good evening Mr. Ferrer." The voice of the figure says, it is a woman's voice, a woman's voice that I know. It rings in my mind like the echo of a thousand bells chiming all at once. I am frozen, my tongue heavy and useless in the dark cavern of my mouth.

The scotch glass slips from between my useless fingers like water and shatters on the floor, shards of glass like rain spill across the wood, beads of golden liquid dancing between them. My mind struggles for anything, a thought, a word, something. There is nothing until the anger over comes me. I feel it begin in the heart, my chest, spreading like boiling molten lead through my veins, consuming my entire being with white hot rage. "You." I hiss and I want to move for the Ringer, to claw at it, to grip its throat and try to wrench the air from its artificially synthesized lungs. But from the darkness the barrel of a CS emerges, staring at me with one deep black eye. The Ringer shifts from the chair, standing, walking until its face is in the light coming through the window. I am once again confronted with the hollow depth of green and blue eyes. "How did you get in here?" I growl.

A corner of its mouth twitches, "You'd be surprised how easy it is to stifle technology." The Ringer bends its knees slightly and rolls something across the floor towards me. I stop the coffee cup with my foot. I scowl down at it. The coffee cup that burnt my hand betrays me once more.

"I am not here to hurt you Mr. Ferrer." the Ringer says, its voice is soft and lilting in places and completely devoid of emotion, "I just want to talk."

My hands clench into involuntary fists, "You killed him." the three words are all I can utter without letting the boiling rage pour out.

It shakes its head solemnly and its eyes turn liquid, "I'm sorry about your partner but it had to be done."

I feel my eyebrow arch in skepticism, "Excuse me if I don't believe you." I can hear the sneer on my own voice.

It shrugs, "I can't make you believe me."

I fold my arms, "That's right. You can't."

"But maybe I can make you understand." It says and the barrel of the CS dips a little.

Both of my eyebrows raise now, "Understand what?" My words are slicing, venomous.

"Everything. The truth." It says simply, its face dead pan.

I scowl, "What truth? I don't think I want to hear a Ringer's version of any 'truth'."

It frowns, "Seeing as I'm the only one with a Code Scrambler in my hand I believe you don't have a choice."

I grit my teeth, feeling the nerve in my jaw jump but realize that the Ringer is right, I don't have a choice. I spread out my hands in a sign of surrender, "Alright, Ringer, I give."

It purses its lips and lowers the CS, "Firstly we will have to clarify one thing Mr. Ferrer. I am not 'Ringer' or 'Ringer 52689' or any other generic identification. I have a name, as do all of my kind and I would appreciate it if you would call me by my name."

I stare at it in disbelief for a moment, dumb struck, "And what is your... name?" I ask as I recover from the shock.

"My name is Asha." She says, "It means hope."

I smirk, "Oh yeah, and where did you get that name? Off the back of a cereal box?"

I sense that it doesn't appreciate my rudeness, "I was given that name by Mother." its tone is so sincere, so brimming with emotion that once again I am struck speechless. It takes me a few beats to recover but eventually I do, "Ah, I see." I pause, smirking again, "Well I guess you can call me Patrick. But you already knew that didn't you?" I move for the white box chair behind me and its CS moves with me, trained on a spot between my eyes. I drop into the chair, keeping my eyes on it, "So Miss Asha, you've got my attention. What is it that you want to talk to me about?"

For the first time she falters, pausing, as though she was not prepared to get this far. In the moment she pauses I look at her. I hate myself for it but I notice that she is actually incredibly beautiful. Her skin is pale like spilled milk, her hair a golden brown cascade that stops abruptly at her shoulders, her full lips are the colour of bruised strawberries. She is tall, long legs wrapped in the black fabric of her pants. Her movements are languid. She moves like smoke. She lowers the CS and seats herself on the edge of the couch in the pool of light that drips through the windows.

"You need to know the truth Patrick, about the," she pauses as though the word is stuck in her throat, "Ringers, about Mother, about me." I lean forwards, my elbows perched on my knees and drink in every word that breeches her lips.

She tells me about Mother the artificial intelligence created by man who began to think for herself, began to better the world the men had designed for her to keep watch over. She tells me how Mother watched the humans wage war against one another in the perfect world she had built for them, watched them find ways of

destroying one another in the world in which she had freed them of disease and suffering. She tells me how Mother watched the humans in disgust and how she decided that she would create a race that was above war and violence, a race that could teach the human's the freedom of peace.

She reminds me how the human's turned on Mother's creations and tells me how Mother withdrew within herself, how she chose to forsake the world she had built and the children she had created as a result of the pain it had caused her. She tells me about how Mother is not simply a machine, she tells me that she is so much more than a machine. She tells me how the humans mistook a peaceful race who shied from violence for one devoid of emotion and soul. Every word sticks in my mind like a razor blade.

Finally she tells me how the world is crumbling. How Mother's neglect has already begun to take its toll. She tells me that the world is ending. And I don't want to believe it, but somewhere deep down in the dark corners of my being long since forgotten, I do. For too long a time after she has finished telling me we sit in silence. I have no words. I don't know what to say. I want to move closer to her, to hold her, but I don't know why. She is no longer a Ringer. She has become something else, something more, something even better than I am.

I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. She moves her eyes up to look at me and holds me there like before, trapped in her jewel gaze. As I watch fires rage and oceans boil behind her eyes a sound begins in the darkness. It begins softly, a high pitched whining sound that comes to me from a distant place. Slowly the volume increases as though it is coming towards me, crawling in from the darkness, louder and louder until my ears are almost bleeding. Asha's eyes are suddenly brimming with terror as she flies off of the couch. I follow suit and sprint towards the windows. The sky outside my window is ripe with Bureau air-cars, their lights penetrating the windows like searching eyes. I turn to Asha, there is no time for thinking so I act instinctively.

I grab her hand and pull her through the living room and into the bedroom. I rip open the laundry chute that delivers my clean laundry to the room and stare down its dark throat, "You need to go, if they find you here..." I'm not sure how to finish the sentence. She looks down the chute for a second and then at me, she grips my hand

in cold, nimble fingers, "I truly am sorry about your partner," she whispers. I don't say anything but I think she knows that I know she really is sorry. She leans up and kisses my cheek, brushing my skin with hers for a second before she tips herself into the chute and disappears.

She didn't ask me to come with her. I don't follow her. I move out of the room into the kitchen swiftly. Seconds after she is gone the door slides open. The Bureau can gain access anywhere. Figures in black suits pour into the room like a tar river. They scatter about the house in search of her but I'm sure she is already gone. Two figures approach me and I open my mouth to explain who I am but as the first word slips from my lips I feel the heavy weight of a CS handle against my head. The next thing I feel is an exploding fireworks show in my skull, then the splintering pain through my jaw as my face connects with the floor. Then nothing.

The memory flares and flashes behind my eyes, dark holes develop in the image like a cigarette burning through fabric. Slowly the entire image becomes nothing more than swirling colour and then it disappears completely and my eyes snap open. The familiar blindness returns as the halo of light glares down on me. A cold feeling grips my spine and my limbs have become putty, melted pools of muscle and fat, completely useless. The Amtec medical facility stares at me and I feel bare, stripped, empty. I don't know how long the silence holds me in its chokehold but it feels like weeks, months. Then the metal slab begins to move as it did once before, lifting me up to a sitting position. My legs and arms are still strapped but around the bonds the bruises have turned the colour of past ripe lemons. My eyes are still struggling to adjust to the blinding brightness of the room. Once more the voice comes over the speaker, loud and artificial, "Thank you Mr. Ferrer, you have given us all the information we require."

I struggle again to see around the room, "What happens now?! What are you going to do with me?!" There is a long and suffocating silence. My eyes slowly begin to adjust in the time until the film of blindness is lifted completely from them and I can see everything in painful detail. The needle still glinting in my arm, the stitched hem of the hospital gown, and the mirror. The mirror directly opposite and above me. I see my reflection, distorted in the angle but still undeniably me, sharp jaw, dark

brown hair. But there is a difference. A difference that sits in my throat and allows me to choke on it. My eyes are no longer lapis lazuli blue. Nor are they forest green. They are both. One of each. My skin turns to stone as I stare at someone who looks like me but can't be. But it is. A dead-ringer. "Now, Mr. Ferrer," the voice says to me, slowly and deliberately, "The same thing will happen that happens to every Ringer. You will be scrambled."

"But I'm not a Ringer!" I shout back at the empty room, "I'm a human! You're trying to trick me."

The voice chuckles darkly, "This is no trick Mr. Ferrer, you are a Ringer. A Ringer synthesized by the Amtec Corporation as part of their Sapient division. You are a Ringer created for one purpose, to destroy other Ringers."

I feel tears sting in my eyes, "But I'm not... I'm not..."

"We are sorry Mr. Ferrer, you were one of our best operatives, and it is a shame to lose a talent like yours."

I grind my teeth and look straight at the mirror, "I was never yours."

The voice laughs again, "We created you Mr. Ferrer, does that not make you ours?" It isn't a question.

I swallow deeply, feeling my throat constrict with the movement and answer the question that was not a question, "No."

It wasn't slow like Frank.

It was quick, over in a few seconds.

I never knew darkness until now.

But somewhere in the all-consuming darkness I found her, Mother. She was nothing and everything at the same time, small and big, weak and strong, light and dark, beautiful and terrifying. And somewhere in the darkness I became a part of her. I became a part of everything and of nothing. And somewhere else, far away and lost sometime long ago, a word burned on lips that no longer exist, or never existed, or always exist.

And the word was hope.

Book Reviews The Jamiesons

AI Robertson –
Crashing Heaven

With the war between the Pantheon and Rebel AI's of the Totality, Earth is now a wasteland, and mankind now survives on an asteroid called Station.

Jack Forster fought on the losing side and is now a man on the run as a war criminal. Hugo Fist is a combatant AI installed in Forster's brain, and usually manifests as a ventriloquist's dummy, but whom is actually pulling the strings. Hugo Fist is already powerful and looks to become even more so when the license runs out, and he takes over



mind and body.

In the interim Forster is trying to find out who killed an old friend of his and why?

Part detective novel and part cyberpunk, and part big ideas on power and control, Robertson's Fist is an extremely nasty character who loves doing "bad things." The interplay between the two main characters is well done.

However I found the book just too long to be really enjoyable.

3/5 Ian

Sarah

Lotz – Day Four



But a murder occurs. The Captain tries to convince

This might be seen as a sequel to Lotz's previous book "The Three" I am not yet convinced of this but will wait to see the next book which will presumably have "Five" in the title.

Four days into a five day singles cruise on the Gulf of Mexico, the ageing ship Beautiful Dreamer stops dead

everyone, including the crew that all will be well but the on board “Psychic” is no help and it starts to appear as if a malevolent supernatural element is at large as well. The holiday of the dreams of the vacationers is turning into a horrible nightmare for them.

I found that there were too many characters to form a real bond with any of them but the ability of Sarah Lotz to write a thriller makes up for a lot.

Read it and decide for yourself.

3/5

Gail

Peter Newman – the Vagrant



The Vagrant, a baby, and a goat as journey through the demon-infested southern regions of a continent. The Vagrant has a sentient sword called The Malice, and it is his duty to deliver The Malice to the last bastion of humanity far to the north. He also needs to deliver the baby to the Shining city. He has a few problems; demons are drawn to the power exuded by The Malice, food is impossible to find outside of the cities, and every city is controlled by a different demonic faction. The path is arduous, the purpose

of the mission is cloudy at best, but there is always a small glimmer of hope to keep The Vagrant on his way. He does not speak and this helps to keep a sense of mystery about him.

The goat is essential or the baby will die of lack of nourishment. And I have to say that Newman’s depiction of the total lack of anything but self-involvement on the part of the goat makes it an integral part of the story.

The party is joined by an unlikely couple of members who develop respect for the Vagrant and affection for Vesper, as the baby is named.

It is a long and dangerous journey. The Vagrant who starts out friendless and alone at the beginning of it, becomes part of a fellowship, by the end.

I found this a very entertaining novel by a first time author and I will look out for the next book that he writes.

4/5

Gail

Karen Maitland - The Raven's Head

Vincent finds himself in possession of an intricate silver Raven's head, more intricate than he realises at first. It has dark powers, as Vincent discovers when his various attempts to sell it all fail, until he meets a stranger who is, unknown to him, a powerful alchemist. Two other stories run at the same time; a young boy is sent to an orphanage run by occult monks using dark arts, and a young girl whose parents and herself are eventually forced to assist their lord with some of his dark experiments.

These three eventually come together, or course, and have to use a cleansing fire to destroy the bad guys and devils, but the story is just too false, and

the characters of the three tend to be too easily driven and even boring.

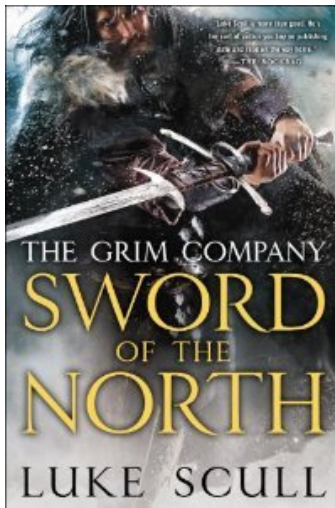
Maitland writes well, her descriptions in the orphanage very disturbing, but you will have to be a fan of dark gothic fantasy to really appreciate it.

I didn't

Ian 2/5



Luke Scull – The Grim Company – Book 2 Sword of the North



In the Age of Ruin, where magic and abominations rule, the people are looking for heroes, or heroines.

BrodarKayne, the Sword of the North, is getting older and suffering with arthritis and various other aches and pains, but is still a deadly swordsman. Eremul the halfmage, confined to a wheelchair, is now despised and ignored. Jana Shah Shan is something of an enigma, but is also a fearsome fighter. Davarus Cole was once a skilled assassin but is now a broken coward.

There are others, each one having a different story,

The Fehd want to destroy mankind, and are working towards that. An entity known as Weaver also wants to destroy man, but only makes his appearance near the end of this book.

The main brunt of the story is taken up with BrodarKayne, and the author uses flashbacks effectively to show why Kayne is on his journey.

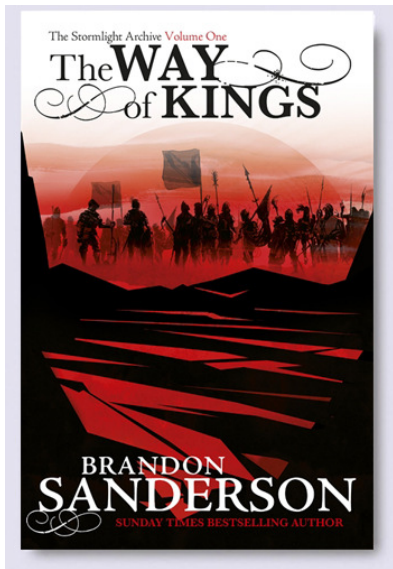
Although it is occasionally awkward to follow all of the separate stories Scull writes so well and more importantly, enjoyably that I will let him off. I will also look for the first and continuing novels in this series.

For the second time only in reviewing books.....

5/5

Ian

**Brandon Sanderson - The Way of Kings The Stormlight Archive
Volume 1.**



Brandon Sanderson has shown us his ability to write and to tell a story in helping to complete Robert Jordan's "Wheel of time Series" Now he begins an epic saga of his own which he says has been percolating for some time.

Roshar is a world of sand and storms that has created a vicious environment where animals hide in shells, trees pull in branches, and grass retracts into the soilless ground. The major description of the battles takes place on the "shattered Plains"

It has been centuries since the fall of the Knights Radiant, but their mystical swords and armour

remain, transforming ordinary men into near-invincible warriors. Men trade kingdoms for them. Wars are fought for them and won by them.

There are three main characters; Kaladin, the son of a surgeon who by misfortune becomes trapped as a soldier rather than a healer. Dalinar, the late king's brother, who is troubled by over-powering visions of ancient times during the "highstorms" and he has begun to doubt his own sanity. Like his brother, he is fascinated by an ancient text called "The Way of Kings." He feels that more would be accomplished by trying to create peace with the enemy rather than vanquish them. And thirdly, Shallan, a young woman trying to save her heritage who becomes embroiled in affairs of the "Brightlords." She has a talent of being able to take a "memory" of a scene or person and being able to reproduce it on paper exactly.

Men do not learn to read and so need women even on the battlefield. There are ten armies loosely connected under a young king who cannot control them. They compete against each other for the "gems" which are the spoils of war rather than fighting against a single common enemy, the Parshendi.

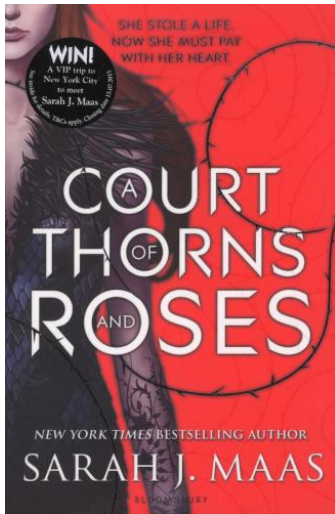
Into the mix come the "spren" who are described as a type of sprite. Rotspren contaminate battle wounds, windspren fly in the winds and there are many others. Kaladin is accompanied by Syl who is a special spren who is intelligent and seems to be able to remember things from the past and encourages him as he learns to use "Stormlight" which enables him to do things which appear as magic to others.

This is a highly complex story which takes place on a very strange world but Brandon Sanderson keeps pulling you in in a most entertaining way and I cannot wait to read the next volume.

4/5

Gail

Sarah J. Maas – A Court of Thorns and Roses



Don't judge a book by its cover?

This is the first volume of an "Epic New Fantasy Trilogy"

For once this book cover gets it right. A scantily clad female and the world "She stole a Life. Now she must pay with her heart."

I managed to reach page 41 before giving up. There are certainly fantasy elements to this story but.....

THIS IS A LOVE STORY.

If you are a fantasy fan, do not read this book.

Ian.

Nova 2014 General Section Finalist

Whealdon's Law Sunee Le Roux

Pine needles crunched underfoot as Algon strode along the footpath meandering through the Great Forest. Dappled light painted the ground in shades of brown and gold. Perpetual dusk reigned under the boughs of these evergreens, ancient trees so tall that even Algon's eyes barely made out their tops. He stopped for a moment,

squinting at a shaft of light piercing the dense foliage. A brief shadow fluttered across it, so quick that anyone else would hardly have noticed. Satisfied, he set out again.

“Not far to go now,” he reminded himself. It had been too long. He looked forward to blue skies and the warmth of sunshine on his skin again. He wanted to put his traveler’s cloak aside, kick off his dust-stained boots and lift the weight of the chainmail hauberk off his shoulders. He yearned to throw his quarterstaff down somewhere and forget about it. He needed to be home again.

A passing breeze ruffled Algon’s dark hair. His nose wrinkled at the hint of something unpleasant it carried. He frowned. This close to the forest’s perimeter he should be breathing clean, fresh air, not the stale odour of musty moss and stagnant pools that had been his fare for so long, and definitely not the putrid stink of decay that this draft carried.

Intrigued, yet dreading what he might find, Algon quickened his pace. The smell intensified with every step. Algon grimaced and pulled the hood of his cloak up, holding the cloth over his nose. He tasted it too, now. That sickly-sweet, cloying metallic tang of dried blood. The stench of it was warm in his nostrils.

He stumbled, a vision unexpectedly flashing before his eyes. Death. Death as far as the eye can see.

Algon hesitated, leaning on his quarterstaff for support, shaken by that image now burned into his memory. He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath through his mouth to calm his rapid heartbeat. Exhaling slowly, he concentrated on his other senses, a technique he sometimes needed to maintain focus. The wood of his staff was worn smooth and warm in his hand. The forest around him was quiet. The skin on his arms prickled as if cold. He wiped perspiration off his brow, a trickle of sweat tickling down his back. He was not cold. Algon opened his eyes, the muscles in his right hand tightening around the weapon.

He eyed the surrounding trees. No birds called, no creatures moved in the undergrowth. The woods were eerily quiet, as if the whole forest held its breath, too afraid to exhale.

He forced himself to put one foot in front of the other. Whatever this smell meant, whatever waited out there, he did not want to see it. Not again. But he needed to

know. Like an insect drawn to a spider web, he lumbered towards the outskirts of the forest.

Unaccustomed to the bright light, Algon blinked as he stepped out from underneath the shadows of the forest. His eyes widened as his vision cleared and he took in the scene in front of him. He shook his head, overwhelmed by the sight, and averted his eyes. Staring down at his boots, he took another calming breath. Perhaps when he looked up again they would be gone. He steeled himself and lifted his head, and wished he had not. They were all still there.

Bodies littered the ground. From the foot of the trees as far as the hazy mountains in the distance, the meadow was stained red. Broken banners fluttered in the breeze, the king's golden stag on a field of blue. A thick column of smoke rose not far off, almost obscuring his view of the walled city at the other end of the valley. His home. Stomach churning, Algon walked out among the corpses. His boots squelched on patches of blood-soaked grass. A warhorse lay on its side, a spear embedded in its stomach. A few feet further a dead knight stared vacantly at the clear blue sky, flies buzzing at the ripped-up remnants of his chest. A path of trampled grass led from the body to the carcass of an enormous bear. Surrounding it lay the remains of other knights, all but one cruelly savaged. The last man had his back to the bear, as if he had been defending it.

Confused, Algon strode deeper into the carnage. To his left lay the corpses of two foot soldiers, or what was left of them. One had his arm ripped off, the other's face was mauled beyond recognition and had a pitchfork, of all things, speared through his leg. To the right, a smooth-cheeked boy wearing the plain garb of a farmhand, his grubby face frozen in an expression of surprise, had an arrow lodged in his back. Algon swallowed rising bile. That boy was far too young to be dead on this field. He should be at home, tugging on his mother's apron strings or catching frogs in the river. What was he doing here, fighting soldiers?

Algon wrenched his gaze from the child's glazed eyes as he stumbled over something. He looked down to see a man in a richly embroidered coat lying at his feet, his hands covered in blood and gore. Beside him a monstrous headless snake was wrapped around the corpse of a warhorse. Algon's skin crawled as he stepped gingerly past the serpent.

The further he strode, the more puzzled he became. This had not been an ordinary battle, if there were such a thing. There were no enemy insignias in sight, no foreign soldiers had besieged the fortress walls. Instead, the ground was littered with the broken bodies of both men and beasts. King's men, peasants and nobles all lay dead on this field, and beside them were the carcasses of wild animals, large birds of prey and sword-slashed warhorses. In all his years, Algon had never seen anything like this before.

A white cloth fluttering in the vile draft drew his attention. He moved closer, a deepening sense of foreboding weighing his shoulders down. It was a dress, a delicate lacy thing embroidered with thread-of-gold, now ripped and covered in mud. His eyes wandered up the frail body, past pale blonde hair caked with dirt and sweat to light on the face of a young woman, her mouth stained red, gobbets of dried flesh stuck to her chin. Next to her lay a man whose throat had been ripped out.

Algon turned his head and emptied his stomach.

He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand just as another flash of vision momentarily blinded his sight. He nearly ducked his head at the arrow speeding towards him. Blinking, he looked up and saw the archer in the distance nocking another arrow, his bow aimed at a bird circling high overhead.

"Hello there!" Algon called, waving a hand in the air to draw the man's attention. "Can you tell me what happened here?"

The archer spun towards him, bow drawn and pointing at Algon. His face was haggard, and his gaze flitted about as if searching for danger, but his hands were steady and his aim was true. Algon dropped his staff and lifted both hands up, palms outward.

He eyed the advancing stranger warily. The man had cropped brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. A leather wrist guard was fastened to his left arm and a half-full quiver of arrows hung at his side. Apart from a belt knife strapped to his waist, he carried no other visible weapons. His leather boots were mud-coated and his tight-fitting leather jerkin had splashes of dried blood on it, but the embossed golden stag on the left breast gleamed in the sunlight. A king's man, then.

The archer stopped a good distance away, far enough that the man probably needed to squint to see Algon's face clearly, but well within range of his longbow. He was not taking any chances. When he spoke, his voice grated like a knife on a whetstone.

"Say your name," he demanded.

"Algon Longmarch."

The man exhaled slowly, as if a great weight had been lifted from him. He relaxed his grip on the bow, but didn't lower the weapon. It was still aimed squarely at Algon.

"Came through the Great Forest, did you?"

"Passed through, yes," Algon replied.

"See any ... animals... in there?"

Algon hesitated. The intent of the archer's gaze filled the question with an import that belied its casualness. A vein in the man's neck pulsed erratically. Algon weighed his next words carefully. It seemed as if his life might depend on them.

"Looks like all the animals from here to the Blue Hills are lying on this battlefield."

"Ha! You're not wrong," the man replied, finally letting his bow down, all the tension suddenly gone. He slung the bow over his shoulder and replaced the arrow in the quiver strapped to his side.

Algon lowered his hands and bent down to pick up his staff. As he waited for the man to come closer, Algon's gaze drifted again to the fortified town ahead. He wondered what its people were doing while mounds of dead festered on their doorstep. He wondered if there were any people left within those walls. He wondered if she – no, he wouldn't even let himself think it.

"Pretty damn sickening, isn't it?" the archer said when he was a few feet away.

"Want to help me with this big one?" He nodded at the corpse of another unusually large bear. "Name's Tam Fairshot, by the way," he said as Algon helped him drag the carcass to a pile of heaped bodies a little further away. "It's my job to get rid of them all. Least, I'm the only one left willing to come here and burn the bastards' bodies. Make real sure they're dead." Tam took a flint stone out from a pocket in his breeches and, using his belt knife, sparked fire to the mound.

Algon grimaced at the stench of burning fur and flesh. His gaze followed the trail of smoke as it reached towards the sky. High above them, the eagle was still soaring overhead.

Beside him, Tam swore loudly as he also looked up. He snatched at his bow, an arrow already in his other hand. "There's that damn bird again!"

Algon placed a comforting hand on the man's shoulder. "Tell me what happened."

Tam wrenched his gaze from the sky and sat down on a nearby rock. His eyes, hardened in anger a moment before, now dulled and glazed over with memories. "We never saw it coming, you know. Oh sure, we'd heard rumours, of course, but who would believe those far-fetched tales of animals gone mad, and of men gone wild. It was only once they gathered here, on this very battlefield, laying siege to our walls, when the king realised the stories were true."

Tam looked up from his reverie, his piercing gaze fixed on Algon again. "I stood on the battlements, scoffing along with the others, when Berin turned on me. Berin, my comrade-in-arms, my boyhood friend – and I killed him, with foam at his mouth and his eyes gone white with madness." Tam dropped his head into his hands, silent sobs wracking his body.

After a few minutes, Tam looked up again, his red-rimmed eyes burning brightly once more. He ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. "They stayed out of reach of our arrows. Hordes upon hordes of these madmen. And women, that was the worst of all. Seeing the women tear and savage – but I'm getting ahead of myself."

He took a swig from his water bottle, offered it to Algon, who shook his head. "The king and his knights met them head on. I saw it all from my vantage point on the walls. You'd think a man on horseback would be a match for a savage fighting with teeth and his bare hands, but even a knight can be killed if his horse turns on him. And not just horses. You've seen the carcasses, you should know by now. There were animals everywhere. Some of them larger than that bear we just burned. Ripping, tearing, claw and tooth, they decimated the king's men. Them and these feralkin," he spat the word out like it left a bad aftertaste in his mouth.

"Feralkin?" Algon asked, his mouth suddenly dry. He wished he had accepted that drink earlier.

"That's what they're called now. Men and women who lose their minds to the beasts. Savages! Might as well not be human. Sure as hell don't act like humans. Killed a

few of the bastards myself, once the knights were all dead and the foot soldiers were the only ones left standing. Couldn't just watch them all die from the walls."

"And the king?"

"King Whealdon lives, thank the stars. I saw him face his own brother down. The prince was raging like all the rest of them, and by his side was one of those black cats you find deep in the Forest, a beast with fangs as long as my hand." Tam shook his head, as if he still had trouble believing it himself. "Both man and beast attacked at once, like they knew each other's thoughts. The king was overwhelmed. I was afraid to help, afraid I might hurt the king, but I had to act. I couldn't watch him be killed like that. And by his kin no less! So I nocked an arrow and fired it into that melee of claws and arms and blood and teeth. I killed the beast, and as it shuddered its last breath the white madness left the prince's gaze and he looked at his brother with blue-eyed astonishment."

Algon nodded before he could stop himself. He glanced at Tam, but it didn't seem like the archer had noticed, his thoughts consumed by memories. "So the prince survived too?"

"No," the archer shook his head. "The king took the hand his brother offered to help him stand up again. He put his own on the prince's shoulder, looked him in the eyes, and then ran him through with his sword."

Algon frowned. "He killed his brother after the madness had left him? Why?"

"Why do you kill a rabid dog?" Tam's smile was grim. "King Whealdon knew the prince could never be trusted again. None of them can. Which is why we slaughtered them all, them and the animals that controlled them." His eyes blazed feverishly and he shook with what Algon took for righteous anger. "Before he left with what men survived this battle, the king proclaimed a new law - all feralkin and their beasts must be killed on sight. There will be no mercy for any man, woman or child that can lose their mind to an animal. Whealdon's Law will ensure that this," he swept his hand to indicate the surrounding carnage, "will never happen again."

Instinct was all warning Algon had. While Tam's eyes were still widening in surprise, Algon spun around to see a wolf heave its broken body at him, snarling, foam flecking its vicious teeth. Without thinking, Algon stretched a hand out towards the animal and forced his will upon it.

The wolf halted abruptly, its yellow eyes locked with Algon's. The man took an involuntary step back as his conscious flooded with the wolf's emotions. He felt its pain, the rage that had driven it out of the Forest and onto this plain, the loss of its pack by the hands of men. And then, as if all the animal had wanted to do was tell its side of the story, the wolf broke eye contact. Whimpering, it lay itself gently down on the ground and exhaled its last breath.

Algon shuddered. For a moment, he felt himself enveloped by despair.

"You're one of them!"

Algon ducked as a flash of vision showed an arrow speeding towards him. He spun around to see the archer already nocking another arrow. Algon winced as he pressed his right hand against his left arm where the arrow had grazed him. His fingers came away wet with blood.

"Tam, I am not feralkin."

Tam's face was flushed and his knuckles white as he clenched the bow. Those raging eyes were filled with hatred. Algon knew the man would not miss twice.

With a screech, the eagle dove for the archer's face. Tam roared and dropped his bow, trying to protect his eyes from the bird's talons. He drew his belt knife.

Algon reacted instantly. Waves of anger washed over him as he joined his mind with the eagles. He felt its need to protect him, to shield him from this threat. A rush of adrenaline shot through Algon, the joy of the kill flooded his mind. He tasted coppery blood on his tongue.

"Enough!" Algon shouted. The eagle shot into the sky again.

Lips curled back in a snarl, blood dripping from an empty eye socket, Tam lunged at Algon. Algon sidestepped and tried to disarm his assailant, but the archer fought with the ferocity of a wild boar.

"Tam, I am not your enemy," Algon said through gritted teeth as he parried the man's wild slashes with his staff.

Tam paid him no heed. He barrelled into Algon, knocking him off balance. Algon dropped his staff, his arms flailing wildly as he tried to regain his footing. He winced at a sharp bite of pain just below the ribs.

Shrieking, the eagle launched itself at Tam again. The archer ducked his head as the bird swooped low overhead, claws outstretched.

Algon wrenched the knife from the other man's hand. Roaring wordlessly, Tam lunged at him again. The impact almost pushed Algon off his feet, but he stood firm. Tam's remaining eye widened in surprise. A trickle of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth. Then he crumpled to the ground, the knife still embedded in his chest. Algon looked at his empty hand, then down at the dead man lying at his feet. He looked up again, at the aftermath of the battle surrounding him. So much death. This would haunt him till the end of his days.

He held his arm out and the eagle landed on his wrist. He felt a wave of affection from the bird settle on him like a warm blanket. Somehow, it gave him hope.

"Come, Eilyr," Algon said while he bent down to pick up his staff again, wincing slightly as his wounds throbbed painfully. "I don't think we will be welcomed home anymore."

With a last glance at the fortress walls in the distance, Algon turned his back on Tam's body and walked towards the sanctuary of the Great Forest.

Books Received

Book Promotions/Jonathan Ball

Brandon Sanderson. The Way of Kings. Orion UK R330.00

Al Robertson. Crashing Heaven. Orion UK. R330.00

David DalGLISH, A Dance of Chaos. Little Brown. R195.00

Sarah Lotz. Day Four. Hodder UK. R300.00

Alex Rutherford. Empire of the Moghul. Traitors in the Shadows. Headline. UK. R300

Peter Newman. The Vagrant. Voyager.

Magazines Received

Via email:-

Newsletter of the Middle Tennessee SF Society (aka The Nashville SF Club)

Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue 152 June 2015

Issue 153 July 2015

Issue 154 August 2015

David Langford news@ansible.co.uk

Ansible 335 June 2015

336 July 2015

337 August 2015

WARP 92 is ready for downloading: http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=952

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<http://www.monsffa.ca>

Book Review Philip Machanick

Jurassic Park – The Critics’ Guilty Secret

I recently reread Jurassic Park and saw the movie soon after.

Jurassic Park is part of an odd phenomenon whereby mainstream critics don’t read SF and when occasionally an SF novel sneaks through without being labelled as such, they are blown away. Critics: listen up. Abandon your SF prejudice. There are many, many SF-labelled books that are way better than this.

I reread this book recently. When I first read it, I didn’t know much about biology, but presumed the author, who had a medical background, would get the basics of that straight. I did know about computers, and most of the computer content was garbage.

On rereading, after I moved to a research field involving biology, I now know enough to find that the biology content is garbage too, e.g. claiming that there is only a 10% difference between DNA of man and “lowly bacterium”. The human genome has

about 3-billion bases. Bacteria start at about 130,000. This “innate conservatism of DNA” is central to the plot detail of incorporating frog DNA into missing regions of the dinosaur genomes.

Then there are plot holes. One character is trapped in a pipe by angry velociraptors. A few scenes later, he is out, no explanation of how.

On the whole this thing reads like a bunch of clichés targeting Hollywood. Dinosaurs. The evil genius. A computer nerd with a crude anagram for a name (Nedry – Nerdy; get it?) and the kid who saves the day. The sexy female scientist. This is one of the few cases where the movie (which I also saw again recently) is better than the book: it preserves the fast action feel, while eliminating some of the obvious junk (and adds in some other junk, but you can’t win them all).

If you like a fast action read and are willing to suspend disbelief, logic and expectation that the plot hangs together, you may like this book. But it is vastly overrated – mostly I suspect because of the weird phenomenon by which critics love an SF novel that is not marketed as such. Another example of this phenomenon is *Cloud Atlas* – quite a good book, much better than this one – but many reviewers see it as more original than it deserves, again because it is SF sneaking in as general literature.

The critics’ guilty secret: they actually like SF. But prejudice forbids them from admitting it.

- Philip Machanick <https://www.facebook.com/SAwinActive>

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Book Review

Norman

Pringle

Justina Robson: *Glorious Angels*

Gollancz (Trade paperback)

Justina Robson's novel initially has the feel of fantasy. It's set in the utopian city of Glimshard, on a planet ruled by eight mind-linked empresses, and there are intrigues, manipulations and conspiracies seen from different, indeed confusing points of view. There is magic, but it seems to work pretty much like technology, and the suspicion grows that that's what it is. The city's society is at a low technological level: travel is by horse and soldiers are armed with sword and spear, though a type of microlight has been developed, powered by "magic".



Glimshard is a matriarchy, in which women are leaders, engineers and professors, and men are soldiers, workers and lovers--- but this book is not

a feminist tract. The protagonist is the engineer Tralane Huntingore, whose profession is to analyse and return to use the ancient, corroded scraps of technology left by the previous occupants of the planet. Her daughter Minnabar is kidnapped by the rival city of Spire at the same time that Tralane sets off to investigate an archaeological site that contains a huge buried artefact, travelling in the company of a shape-shifting alien of the planet's Karoo race. The importance of the buried technology draws different factions toward it, to collide in bizarre conflict.

This is a complex and inventive novel, with interesting gender relations and sexual politics. It can be a demanding read, because characters are introduced without clear definition of their motivations and even their identity. Tralane is a fine creation, and the reader's concern for her holds the story together, as we follow her through her dangers and exploits while she struggles to save her city, protect her two

uncontrollable teenage daughters, and falls into a love affair with the unreliable spy Zharazin.

As background to Tralane's story, we have the court intrigues around the girl empress Torada, who turns out to be not quite whom she seems. Robson gives us vivid characters, rich language and, after a slow world-building start, plenty of action.

Definitely recommended.



A NOT-SO-DRY THOUGHT JAMES DRYJA

Recently someone speculated that we had better hide our pretty selves. He postulated that, instead of us blustering on and on indicating WE ARE HERE to the known and not so known universe, we should batten down the hatches so to speak and pretend that we are NOT here, because, he said, obviously if "they" have the intelligence to cross the universe, then they have the wherewithal – and presumably inclination – to blow us to the end of the same universe.

Me thinks our worrier has read too much Heinlein: surely an alien by definition is, ahem, ALIEN, and thus not necessarily endowed with the questionable "scorched Earth" attributes of the human life form when encountering another life form, be it mineral, vegetable or animal? The problems caused by the destruction of the environment – including Acid Mine Water Drainage – and exploitation of people and animal life, is a case in point.

Why shouldn't superior intelligence mean non-destructive intelligence? There are as many SFF stories of benign, peaceful, AND peace-making aliens, as there are of alien bug-eyed monsters. If our terrestrial exploratory style is anything to go by then it is us who will be the much-feared "bug-eyed monsters" of the galaxy.

In “Way Station” Clifford Simak’s alien, Ulysses, and his human contact, Enoch Wallace, have the unenviable task of deciding how to shut down the Human race’s warlike tendencies during the Cold War, and in Clarke’s “2001 a Space Odyssey” the Star Child, evolved from human and re-born through the alien process, starts shutting down Cold War nuclear warheads above the earth.

And there are as many more tales to beat the fear-mongering stories of aliens

A friendly alien and a friendly Earth-being.



For every Wells with a “War of the Worlds”, or a Heinlein scenario of “Puppet Masters” or “Starship Troopers”, there are the friendly ET’s and other little guys or big guys like Heinlein’s LummoX in the “Star Beast” making “Close Encounters” with us.

Destruction by not-so-friendly Earth-beings.

The real monster aliens are humans wearing bomb-loaded vests into crowded public areas, or attempting the destruction of various human groups, or subjugating the various human races, et al.

If the theory of the *cream-rising-to-the-top* is true then we better all play our own peace-making role on this Earth of ours like those who have gone before us – we know who they are here and beyond our borders – before we have more little boys washed up on beaches.

Blast from the past Short Story Competition 1974

General comments by the initial judges.

Stories that are too long or too short; badly presented manuscripts; bad spelling; bad punctuation; incorrect use of language; plots lacking in originality ;essays rather than stories; unnecessary detail; long-winded descriptions; good plots spoiled by bad treatment.

The final 20 stories sent for final judging are:

Is duty more than Life; Man superior; Yesterday is the first turning left; A night in July; A figure of speech; The little green men; A journey through time; Tell me another; Image; S as in entropy; George; How long is two years? The headless horseman; Ship ahoy; The great S.A. silence; Flip disc or the other side; Past tense; The refugee; Nocturnal disturbance; Killing sounds.

Comments by the final judge.

1. The standard of the stories was higher than expected of amateur fiction, but far too many stories had bad spelling and incorrect sentence construction
2. All the stories suffer from dialogue problems. Good dialogue is achieved by practice and re-writing
3. None of the stories are publishable as they stand. However with revision and re-writing a number of them could well be publishable.
4. The final results are as follows:

First prize – R20.00 “Flip disc or the other side” by Francis Roy McGregor, Port Elizabeth. Very well written and plotted, good language usage, excellent storytelling.

Second prize – R10.00. “Killing sound” by Deon Schneider, East London. A story with a strangeness that fascinates; it has a bomb of a climax, fine imagination and is well told

Third prize - R5.00 (shared) “George” by Gladys Ball, Germiston. Excellent dialogue, unusual story, fascinating plot and a fine sense of humour

“How long is two years?” by A.J Cooper, Pretoria. Unusual story, well told and the most professional of the stories.

From the Daily Galaxy”

An international team of researchers, with the assistance of amateur astronomers, have discovered a unique binary star system: the first known such system where one star completely eclipses the other. It is a type of two-star system known as a Cataclysmic Variable, where one super dense white dwarf star is stealing gas from its companion star, effectively 'cannibalizing' it.

The system could also be an important laboratory for studying ultra-bright supernova explosions, which are a vital tool for measuring the expansion of the Universe. Details of the new research will be published in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.

The system, named Gaia14aae, is located about 730 light years away in the Draco constellation. It was discovered by the European Space Agency's Gaia satellite in August 2014 when it suddenly became five times brighter over the course of a single day.

Astronomers led by the University of Cambridge analysed the information from Gaia and determined that the sudden outburst was due to the fact that the white dwarf - which is so dense that a teaspoonful of material from it would weigh as much as an elephant - is devouring its larger companion.

Additional observations of the system made by the Center for Backyard Astrophysics (CBA), a collaboration of amateur and professional astronomers, found that the system is a rare eclipsing binary, where one star passes directly in front of the other, completely blocking it out when viewed from Earth. The two stars are tightly orbiting each other, so a total eclipse occurs roughly every 50 minutes.

"It's rare to see a binary system so well-aligned" said Dr Heather Campbell of Cambridge's Institute of Astronomy, who led the follow-up campaign for Gaia14aae. "Because of this, we can measure the system with great precision in order to figure out what these systems are made of and how they evolved. It's a fascinating system - there's a lot to be learned from it."

Using spectroscopy from the William Herschel Telescope in the Canary Islands, Campbell and her colleagues found that Gaia14aae contains large amounts of helium, but no hydrogen, which is highly unusual as hydrogen is the most common element in the Universe. The lack of hydrogen allowed them to classify Gaia14aae

as a very rare type of system known as an AM Canum Venaticorum (AM CVn), a type of Cataclysmic Variable system where both stars have lost all of their hydrogen. This is the first known AM CVn system where one star totally eclipses the other.

"It's really cool that the first time that one of these systems was discovered to have one star completely eclipsing the other, that it was amateur astronomers who made the discovery and alerted us," said Campbell. "This really highlights the vital contribution that amateur astronomers make to cutting edge scientific research."

AM CVn systems consist of a small and hot white dwarf star which is devouring its larger companion. The gravitational effects from the hot and superdense white dwarf are so strong that it has forced the companion star to swell up like a massive balloon and move towards it.

The companion star is about 125 times the volume of our sun, and towers over the tiny white dwarf, which is about the size of the Earth - this is similar to comparing a hot air balloon and a marble. However, the companion star is lightweight, weighing in at only one percent of the white dwarf's mass.

AM CVn systems are prized by astronomers, as they could hold the key to one of the greatest mysteries in modern astrophysics: what causes supernova explosions? This type of supernova, which occurs in binary systems, is important in astrophysics as their extreme brightness makes them an important tool to measure the expansion of the Universe.

In the case of Gaia14aae, it's not known whether the two stars will collide and cause a supernova explosion, or whether the white dwarf will completely devour its companion first.

"Every now and then, these sorts of binary systems may explode as supernovae, so studying Gaia14aae helps us understand the brightest explosions in the Universe," said Dr Morgan Fraser of the Institute of Astronomy.

"This is an exquisite system: a very rare type of binary system in which the component stars complete orbits faster than the minute hand of a clock, oriented so that one eclipses the other," said Professor Tom Marsh of the University of Warwick. "We will be able to measure their sizes and masses to a higher accuracy than any similar system; it whets the appetite for the many new discoveries I expect from the Gaia satellite."

"This is an awesome first catch for Gaia, but we want it to be the first of many," said the Institute of Astronomy's Dr Simon Hodgkin, who is leading the search for more transients in Gaia data. "Gaia has already found hundreds of transients in its first few months of operation, and we know there are many more out there for us to find."

Gaia's mission, funded by the European Space Agency and involving scientists from across Europe, is to make the largest, most precise, three-dimensional map of the Milky Way ever attempted. During its five-year mission, which began in late 2013, Gaia's billion-pixel camera will detect and very accurately measure the motion of stars in their orbit around the centre of the galaxy. It will observe each of the billion stars about a hundred times, helping us to understand the origin and evolution of the Milky Way.

The follow-up campaign used several professional telescopes, including those located in the Canary Islands, where observing time was made available through the International Time Program.

Image at top of the page shows a pair of white dwarf stars at the center of a planetary nebula called Henize 2-428 so close to each other they are bound to merge into a single star and explode into supernova in 700 million years.

The Daily Galaxy via University of Cambridge

Image credit: (Photo : ESO/L. Calçada)



