

# *PROBE 183*

*SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA*



## **PROBE 183**

**March 2020**

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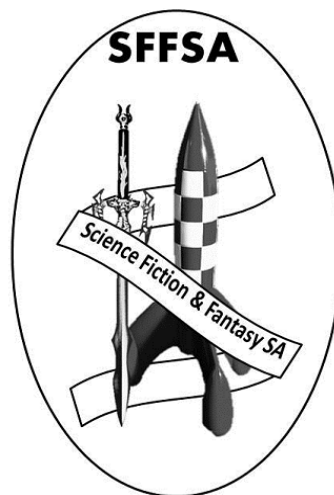
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# PROBE 183

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# Editorial

# Gail

On a rather worrying note, PROBE 182 seems to have gone missing. I sent it out at the beginning of January and, as usual, included the subscription notices with it. At our March committee meeting the treasurer noted that we had received very few 2020 subscriptions. I sent out a mail asking people if they had received “182” but not a single person has come back to say they have. This is overseas and countrywide in South Africa. Our local Post Office branch was closed down a while ago but our PO Boxes remain and there is still a large post-box that stands in front of them. This is where I posted them. I am beginning to suspect that they are



still sitting in this post-box. I am going to have to go to the big Vorna Valley post office and see if I can speak to the Post Master and see if he can get someone to open the box for me so that they can be posted at the main post office. It's a lot of money in PROBEs, stamps and envelopes! I certainly need to be sure before I post this current issue.

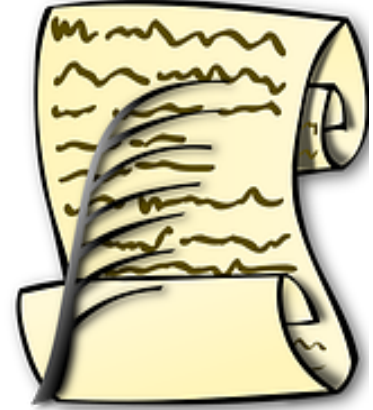
If you go to the link <https://www.rill.it/?q=node/952> it will take you to the website of RiLL, the Italian Science fiction association, with whom we have been collaborating since 2014. We publish the translated winning story from their annual short story competition and they publish, translated into Italian, the winning story from the Nova competition, usually from the previous year. This website has a very nice “Translate” option and we could not ask for better publicity for our club as they are also a multi-national group. Let's hope we can continue to collaborate into the future.

On a sad, but very uplifting note, we have to note the passing of Patrick Coyne. He was one of the top three finalists in the 2018 Nova competition and a previous finalist as well. He was also the chairman of the South African Writers Circle (SAWC), who incidentally will be celebrating their 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year. The uplifting part of the story is that Patrick Coyne passed on shortly after his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday last year. This means that he reached the top three of Nova 2018 at the age of 89. He proved that you are never too old to write good SF and Fantasy. He is in good company. Frederick Pohl was still publishing at a very advanced age and Robert Silverberg is still going strong at the age of 85; Anne McCaffrey was 85. Ray Bradbury lived into his 90's; George R.R. Martin is 71 and he is still selling books that sell. SFFSA, at 50 is a relative youngster in this august company.

## Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

Hi all. A new Probe, a new chairman's note. You know, I've spoken a lot about Science Fiction, well, the more hard core or reality side of it like spaceships, modern technology or the future. However, I haven't spoken a lot about Fantasy. The thing is I really enjoy fantasy as well, so why have I written so little about it? Probably because talking about fantasy doesn't really mix when also talking about the day to day life on this planet. I mean you can't exactly talk about the latest new gadget, and then mention that your wizard friend. The fantasy worlds really are quite a few steps away from the current reality. I mean elves, dwarves, dragons, magic really, where anything is possible and not constrained by the physics of the current universe. I guess magic (or types of magic) is a major theme of fantasy considering it allows the writer / visionary / whatever to portray absolutely anything, no matter how outlandish. I am also really looking forward to it, it just doesn't work. The use of magic creates a world where anything is possible, given enough power anyway Hehe, so in a world where anything is possible, they still often apply limits, much like the real world.



You can understand why, if there really was a fantasy world where you could do anything, without a limit of power... wouldn't it be a world of pure chaos? I mean living would really be hard, annoy one person on the street and suddenly you don't exist anymore. Have a neighbour that doesn't like your cat and suddenly your house is in another country, continent or even world. Everything would be based around what people want, so it would be a world constantly changing. Yeah, thinking about such a potential world does not make for a good story: The main character steps out on to the road on his adventure, only to be squashed flat as a carriage pulled by a giant dragon zooms passed killing him, because the owner wanted a smooth ride home. So yes, limits, kind of have to be there if you want a story at all.

And who doesn't love a story where the underling, with less power, struggles onward to become stronger and eventually destroy the evil thing that did something evil to them long ago. The "winning of the weak" as it were. Set that in a fantastical place with fantastical creatures and you could go in all sorts of directions. Still, all this fantasy, and we still ground it in the reality we know of as humans. Yes, I understand that the person reading or watching it has to have some basis so that they understand what is going on, but it would be nice to have something completely out there, the total chaos world, but I guess most people wouldn't enjoy it or perhaps even understand it.

Ok, getting a bit weird there and possibly off topic. So magic and magical creatures. Hmm, ok, why do we call them magical creatures when really they could just be an unknown subspecies of something on Earth? It seems magical creatures don't actually have to practice magic, like a unicorn or a dragon are considered magical creatures. But really, the former is a mix of horse and narwhal, and the latter is simply a giant, flying whale. Not that magical when you put it that way. So realistically I guess magical creatures do have to do magic as well, like the unicorn horn could grant wishes to virgins, or dragons could have

tremendous power they unleash on those they dislike. Certainly makes them much more interesting than simply a subspecies of horse and whale.

What about the world itself? Mountains, lakes and such like? I guess often fantasy worlds again make use of the current one we live in to create these other realms, but why? Yeah, yeah, ok, keeping it grounded in reality and all that stuff. Still, it is nice when they make the worlds far more fantastically, like floating islands, worlds within a bubble, worlds made entirely of fractals, etc. The setting is harder to bring across to the reader, but I think it creates a place far more alien, and gets people out of their comfort zone, make them feel more alive hopefully with something so different.

I actually think I prefer the fantasy worlds to the science fiction worlds. They just seem freer to express themselves with whatever they want. Yes there are constraints on how much freedom they ultimately have, but still, compared to science fiction which seems far more restricted to mostly technology, fantasy has only the imagination to stop it, well, that, and keeping it real enough to understand.

Cheers

Andrew

# L.O.C James Dryja

## **PROBE 182**

I certainly agree with the chairperson's note that "...there are not many SF or Fantasy movies that pique the interest." Thank you to the Editor for the "Blast from the Past" going back to 1978, our 1<sup>st</sup> convention, particularly the movies shown: John Boorman's classic Zardoz, Richard Fleisher's cannibalistic Soylent Green, John Carpenter's dark humour in Dark Star, as well as Time Machine and The Power. THAT era, and the following decade too, continued with SF's Golden Age. Alien and Blade Runner are some of those which come to mind.

Now, what is wrong with having a retro convention, showing some of these classics? 2001 A Space Odyssey comes to mind too. I could fill pages with many more.

I re-read classic SF books; I re-watch classic SF movies! Rather watch a masterpiece many times than a non-masterpiece once!!

Any takers, SF fans?

# Nova 2019 Digby Ricci

I would like to begin by thanking Nova for inviting me to judge the science-fiction entries. The task was rather daunting, and, at times, difficult, but, in the end, I can say that I enjoyed it immensely, and, as I constantly point out to my sci-fi-loving friends, I have come a long way for a philistine-- as far as this genre is concerned! What follows are some general observations and criticisms, and, then, in true Oscars fashion, the top three entries will be listed....

It would be a cliché for me to assert that the science-fiction umbrella has become very expansive indeed. What are mockingly called “swords and sorcery” works have long been included in the genre, and my 1996 claim (in *Probe*, no. 101) that *2001: A Space Odyssey* was not really science fiction, but a “philosophical meditation in space” – those were my salad days, when I was green in judgement! – would be scornfully answered by the riposte: “That is exactly what science fiction should be, and what all excellent science fiction is!” Indeed, these days, I feel certain that most science-fiction devotees would nod approvingly at the definition of the genre provided in the Sixth Edition of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (wonderfully edited by Margaret Drabble). This volume’s relevant entry declares that science fiction deals with utopianism, dystopianism, cosmological and sociological speculation, horror, and the paranormal. The entry continues: “Perhaps the best broad definition of SF is to say that it is a series of mythologies of power, whether it be the power to travel through time or space, or to enter the thoughts of another, or to overcome death or the ineluctable process of evolutionary forces.” Well, there we have it, or much of it, I think you would all agree....

I was confronted by many and extremely varied “mythologies of power” in the 2019 contest. I was immediately struck by how very allusive the stories were. The great Harold Bloom writes of “enriching allusion” as a vital ingredient of successful poetry, but it is important, I think, to remember that the allusiveness must be enriching, and that pastiche must not move inadvertently into parody (intentional parody is another



matter altogether!), or plummet into bathos. In the tales I judged, there were echoes of Game of Thrones, of Le Guin, or Philip Pullman, of Blade Runner, of Back to the Future, of Alien, and of King's Carrie. Some of these echoes were very effective indeed. Others became rather clod-hopping and the narratives lapsed into self-parody. A highly sexed, tongue-in-cheek Mickey Spillane pastiche is most enjoyable for a while, but becomes rather heavy going when it is accompanied by too detailed cosmological, political, and technological explanation. This observation brings me to another key point. Too much exposition never works. It is always a good idea to imitate Le Guin ("The king was pregnant..."), who wears her explanatory gifts with grace and subtlety, allowing narrative to reveal startling differences from our world, our time, our genders, rather than inserting chunks of authorial hectoring. That didactic command so beloved by teachers of creative writing does apply to all narratives: "Show! Don't tell!"

Register should also be consistent: a sudden shift to comedy can be skilful or just plain odd. A very fine piece of alternative /inverted-society writing – an apiary/matriarchy in which men are despised, even oppressed – moved towards a rather limp conclusion, because the author could not resist too glib a comic inversion: the "matronise"- him joke is not as Wildean as its creator believes! The "Carrie" imitation, "Danny Boy", was, on the whole, touching and disturbing, but it lapsed into climactic sentimentality: a fault which King would certainly have avoided (see the conclusion of The Shining and the conclusion of Salem's Lot). "The Kitchen" was a very witty parody of Mills and Boonian writing, which injected strangeness into the most conventional descriptions, situations, and longings: "You can never take her to your beaches or your Disneyland!" was charming and sad and funny! Apt register must be maintained, and abrupt stylistic shifts must be carefully managed.

The Strunk-and-White purist within me forces me to comment on grammatical errors. Typos are another matter –we all make them! – but care should be taken to avoid the inadvertent ambiguity that results from the misplacing of "only" in sentences, and one must eliminate the setting-teeth-on-edge clumsiness of using "like", when "as if" is required. Using "gotten" in settings in which an elevated, pseudo-Medieval quality is desired is unfortunate. Indeed, I would never use "gotten", except in appropriate



dialogue! A little warning too about graphic violence and raunchy sex. Teachers, of course, know nothing about either – we make tea, not love! -- but we do know that, when it comes to gore and to pneumatic bliss, less is usually more!

Now for the winners. The winner is “The Void”, a frightening and bleak union of spiritual and physical horror, and a very disturbing speculation on the flesh/spirit dichotomy. The echoes of Pullman were subtle and apt, and both description and dialogue were authentic and restrained. At times, agony was a little slaveringly emphasized (see my previous point!), but this was haunting writing: really chilling and moving.

Second place is shared by “Don’t Look back” and “Into the Molten Sea”. “Don’t Look Back” is a humorous and profound defamiliarization of a world we take for granted, and a critique of humanity’s arrogance. I have already directed some criticism at its abrupt and not-witty-enough ending, but it is a very fine story, nevertheless. “Into The Molten Sea” is a moving assertion that compassion is the essence of humanity, as opposed to robotic skill, and the world of floating and falling islands, and great, fire-proof birds (well almost heat-proof!) was captured with imaginative power. This story had a very skilful, throwaway concluding sentence.

I am not a coping-out wuss, but third place is also shared by “The Kitchen” and “A Proof of Worth”. “The Kitchen’s merits I have already praised. It is cleverly parodic, and has effective echoes of the original “Back to The Future”. It is, however, a little too long: too much of a good thing at times. “A Proof of Worth” offers a very authentic “swords and sorcery” world, and shows a real flair for exciting narrative. The battle against the dragons is genuinely frightening, and the story is also a tale of self-discovery, increasing insight, and the journey to maturity. The different lessons for the young and the old are poignantly explored. I loved the idea of the “scenes of forgetting”. Fourth Place: “Danny Boy”. Fifth Place: “The Poacher”: too many lashings of gore, but I liked the return to the apocalyptic meteor. Sixth Place: “Causation”: often very effective, but an over-egged pudding of a story: dark humour,; a denunciation of scientific experimentation; philosophical speculation. I liked; “Human flaws are there to limit and challenge one’s soul during its earthly

journey”. Seventh Place: “Latent images”: witty, certainly –especially the ending!— but too much exposition. The Biblical link is very skilful. Eighth Place: “The Righteous One”. More Raymond Chandler elements, and fewer Mickey Spillane and B Western elements, were needed. Some cleverly laconic dialogue, but the echo of “Seven” was too crass, and the story was over-loaded with explanation.

There it is! Thank you, once more. Strength to your quills, pens, keyboards, and tablets. To adapt Oscar Wilde, don’t shoot the judge! He is doing his best.

The results of Nova 2019 were announced and read at our AGM held on 18 January 2020. Digby Ricci was the final judge for Nova 2019. The total prize value is R3500, co-sponsored by our own Arthur Goldstuck of World Wide Worx fame. The results and prizes are:

1 <sup>st</sup> Place:	The Void Benjamin Keyworth	R2000.00
Joint 2 <sup>nd</sup> Place:	Don’t Look Back Philip Machanick	R750.00
	Into the Molten Sea Jaco van Hemert	R750.00
Highly Recommended:	The Kitchen Dawn Melodie Rae	
	A Proof of Worth Jaco Van Hemert	
	Danny Boy Daphne Olivier	
	The Poacher Andre Ian Clarke	
	Causation Odelle Coetzee	
	Latent Images Gary Kuyper	
	The Righteous One Adrian Rayner	

# Nova 2019 1<sup>st</sup> Place

## Benjamin Keyworth

## The Void

The dome bustles.

Two hundred feet high and that again around, it extends in an unbroken arc of thick glass, stainless and clear and uniformly dimpled through with hexagonal facets. Afternoon light streams through its westward side, tinting gold the marble floors and stairs and suffusing the Temple with an irresistible feeling of warmth. The cars outside throw irregular shadows as they fly overhead – the muffled sounds of their rushing blending into the noise of the people, the easy flow of well-dressed, smiling folk. Beyond the dome the city gleams, the afternoon reflecting orange in high-rise windows. Beautiful, almost inspiring; but the man takes no heed.

Tall and dark-haired, he sits alone on a verdant corporate ottoman, facing the gigantic statue in the centre of the dome. The Great One, His hands outstretched. The man sits in silent contemplation, patiently waiting, awash in the conversations of strangers.

Before long his wait is answered. Another man approaches without fanfare; shorter and older, wearing simple grey robes a shade darker than the streaks in his well-kept beard.

“Shepherd Moran.”

Tal Moran looks over, then a moment later clambors to his feet.

“Cardinal Eristead.”

He clasps the older man’s hands and lowers his head. The Cardinal accepts the gesture with neither pleasure nor impatience.

“Shall we?” he asks.

They walk across the open dome towards the statue, looming a hundred feet above. People mill around them, some smiling, a few stopping to bow; both answer these gestures with their own smiles, Tal initially making greater greeting but soon striding to match the Cardinal’s pace. At the statue’s base Eristead holds up his hands and a large hexagonal segment the width of three men opens. The pair step through.

“Thank you,” says the Shepherd and Eristead nods. The door glides shut behind them and they continue down marble corridors, their footsteps turned to whispers on the plush carpet.

“Your flight wasn’t too long I hope?” Cardinal Eristead asks after a moment.

“Oh no,” replies Tal, “We jumped straight from Hawkins. I feel like I blinked and we were re-entering.”

The Cardinal chuckles. “That trip took a week in my day,” he states. They turn a corner. “A dozen jumps then straight-haul from Ganymede. Horrible voyage. Drove me nuts.”

“That sounds tough.”

“Well, everything in perspective,” says Eristead. A pause. “I suppose congratulations are in order.”

A flush spreads to the Shepherd’s cheeks. “Thank you. It’s a great honour. I just hope I’ll serve well.”

“So hope we all,” replies Eristead. They lapse into silence. The Shepherd glances at his surroundings, the red carpet and subdued gold-frame pictures of former Cardinals.

“So,” the older man resumes, “You’re what, a hundred and fifty?”

“A hundred and forty-seven.”

“A hundred and forty-seven,” repeats Eristead, “And a Shepherd for what, a hundred and twenty?”

“A hundred and twenty-two in September. I always wanted to be in the Church.”

Eristead sighs. “Yes, well,” he says heavily, “You’re still young.”

By now the sounds of the city and people have faded, leaving only the pair’s muffled footsteps. They round a corner and stop at an old wooden door – unadorned, innocuous.

“Turn off your interface,” instructs Eristead. After a moment’s hesitation Tal obediently makes a quick hand gesture. Transparent lights blink in a rectangle in front of his right eye, and quiet chimes ring in his ear.

“Not to flight mode,” says Eristead. There’s no edge to his voice yet nevertheless Tal struggles not to wince. “Off.”

There’s another pause – then Shepherd Moran makes another, slightly guilty movement. His inner ear tinkles with more subtle chimes. Eristead nods.

“Good.”

The wooden door creaks as the Cardinal opens it, revealing a narrow stone corridor spiralling slowly down. Tal bends his head slightly underneath the doorway and Eristead closes the door behind him, replacing their bright golden world with grey stone. Dim light flickers up from somewhere below, and Tal’s eyes struggle to adjust, though the Cardinal does not pause. Their steps echo as they walk.

After about half a minute, Tal breaks the silence.

"Is it showing my age if I feel naked without it?" he asks, with a slightly nervous laugh. A small smile breaks across the old Cardinal's face.

"No more than it's showing mine that I can't stand the things," he replies. The light in the cramped tunnel grows stronger and after a moment the source is revealed – a burning wooden torch, resting within a black-iron metal bracket.

"This is very... nostalgic," Tal remarks. They pass more torches spaced evenly along the wall.

"Nostalgic but necessary I'm afraid," Eristead replies, "We cannot risk a connection down here."

"Feels like an age since I've seen actual fire," continues Tal. The words flow naturally, conversation a refuge. "I have a parishioner, if you'd like, who installs lighting strips, he-"

"Lighting strips can be networked," Eristead interrupts. Tal falls silent. "Everything here must remain isolated."

They continue walking until, abruptly, Tal feels cold air on his cheeks. The spiralling corridor ends, and the pair step out into a long room carved from dull reddish stone with darkened passages leading off from either side. All is still and quiet, yet even this far underground the chamber doesn't seem to be a tomb – it's warmer, better lit, the stone's earthy colours freed slightly by the light from hundreds of small white candles. Apart from them, the room is empty, save for three sandstone boxes spaced equally along its length, each about half the size of a man.

"It's incredible," Tal murmurs.

"It's as old as the Church," says Eristead, "Older, probably. We repurposed the foundations. *Make use of the existing.*"

The second half of the quote falls as a reflex from the Shepherd's lips. "*Preserve what is there.*"

"Precisely." Eristead pauses. Then he turns to Tal. "Shepherd Moran," he sighs, "I apologise for the secrecy. This is a far call from the open, transparent Church I've spent so long preaching about."

Tal shakes his head. "I have faith your eminence. Faith you wouldn't go to all this effort if it wasn't necessary."

Even amongst the silence, Eristead's reply is muted.

"Yes," he murmurs, "I would not."

The older man sighs again, then clears his throat.

"Shepherd Moran," he continues, "You have been voted Cardinal. Despite your youth, you have made great strides for the Church in the Outer Systems. You minister with a passion and kindness which we should all strive to emulate, and your actions speak to a good heart. There is nothing I nor any other have found that speaks against your candidacy, nor any reason why you should not be elevated in your service to the Church of the Eternal Soul."

Pride swells in Tal's chest. He bows his head. "Thank you."

The words fade into silence. Tal raises his head slightly and his eyes flick to Eristead. Despite the high praise, lines of shadow crease the older Cardinal's face. When his voice finally comes, there is hesitation in it.

"Do you want to take the next step Shepherd?" Eristead asks. His eyes draw away. "You are still young, and Cardinal is an eternal position. Once you know what I am about to tell you, there is no going back."

Tal straightens. "I'm ready your eminence. I believe in our cause. I want to serve our faith."

There is a long, swirling pause – then Eristead sighs.

"Very well." He turns away. His hands fold beneath his robes. "Shepherd, what are our three tenants?"

A slight frown creases Tal's face. Nevertheless, after a moment he inclines his head and recites.

*"Preserve all life."*

"Good."

*"Make no new life."*

"Yes."

*"Never stop moving."*

"Excellent." Eristead rests a hand upon the wall. "And what do-" he coughs slightly, "-can you explain why this is, as it were. Your understanding of these laws. What they mean."

Tal pauses, then inclines his head again.

"The first tenant is the deepest pillar of our faith," he states, "It is a belief that all human life is sacred and must be protected, no matter the cost. It is compassion and charity, perseverance and resolution. It is the desire to leave not even the merest man behind."

If he finds this explanation satisfactory or deficient, Eristead gives no indication. He merely stares at the wall, his face a dull mask. "And the second?"

“The counterbalance to the first,” continues Tal, “A recognition that we must look to the now, not the possible. Practicality as the companion to ambition. The universe may be massive, but it is finite. Our worlds are finite. With technology that lets us indefinitely forestall death, promoting Childless Life ensures existing lives are not just preserved, but prosperous. We cannot protect mankind just to see it drowned and miserable under its own weight.”

Perhaps despite himself, Eristead nods. “Yes. Continue.”

“The third...” Tal hesitates, then straightens slightly and starts again. “The third is perhaps the least understood. Some think it fickle, almost whimsical. ‘*Never stop moving.*’” He pauses. “But I think it’s possibly the most important of all. If we’re going to live forever, and if we’re going to prevent new people being born, then we have to ensure we keep changing, or we’ll stagnate. We have to learn new things, embrace new experiences. If we don’t seek to live, we waste eternal life.”

There is a moment’s pause. The old Cardinal looks away.

“Yes,” he mutters, and there is something Tal cannot pinpoint in his voice. “That is what we teach. Those are the official interpretations of our laws. They are very noble.” Eristead lets out a long, heavy sigh. “And they are all lies.”

Tal’s brow furrows. The Cardinal seems not to notice; he moves instead to the nearest sandstone block and with a scraping sound pulls the stone lid aside. In the flickering dark Eristead reaches in and removes a thick disk the size of his palm, which he holds up in the candlelight.

“This,” he says, “Is the log of a man named Michael Tunsen. He was a void hopper back in the early space-faring days; a pioneer, a scout of sorts. They would pick out a particle entangled with another, somewhere out in space, then open a point-to-point link to wherever that other particle was. Go through, check the area, then mark the sister particles for future travellers.” He hesitates. “Brave men. Without them, space travel as we know it wouldn’t exist.”

“Of course,” frowns Tal, “But what does that-”

Eristead cuts him off. “Just listen.”

He pushes a button on the disk and a hologram shines out, spreading over the red stone walls. It’s an ancient projection, grainy and under-saturated, but against the flickering static Tal can make out a small, dagger-like ship, floating alone through space. Without warning, a man’s voice echoes.

\*\*\*

*“Captain’s log, April 23rd. Point LLG-CXA-SSR-117-Alpha. Readings clear, jump unremarkable; tunnel ends at open space. Broad-spec ping’s showing zero. Probe*



*was right gentlemen; nothing for miles. This one's a bust. Just waiting for green on the PTP drive and me and Mistletoe are heading home."*

The recording paused. Alone in the small cockpit, Captain Tunsen gazed out into the blackness with his hands behind his head. He stretched out his legs and reclined in his seat, his matte silver spacesuit squeaking slightly against the red gel cushions. The *Mistletoe* wasn't a big ship – the controls surrounded him on three sides like the table of a kid's highchair, their little lights blinking along with the stars.

"Awful quiet out here," he said. Above him a small green bulb flashed, indicating the recorder was still on. "Kinda beautiful in a way. Nothing but blackness." He glanced up at the machine. "Jason, if you ever listen to this buddy, never let anyone down-sell you on the serenity of space. This is the closest a man gets to a blank slate. There's value in that, you hear? Value in thinking time."

He glanced out the narrow cockpit window. "Just you and the deep kiddo. Just you and- hold on." Suddenly Tunsen sat up. "What the hell is-

Something was coming. Tunsen leaned closer to the window, squinting, trying to make out the- the thing. A shape maybe the size of a man wriggling towards him like an eel through old Earth's oceans. Yet it had no colour, no solid outline – it was so empty, so transparent that against the blackness of the void it was almost impossible to see...

Tunsen glanced down at the sensors. Nothing.

"Log, I got visual on... something. Standby for confirmation." He swore, adjusting the scopes. "No bounceback. It's getting closer. Current trajectory, contact with *Mistletoe* in 5... 4..."

The thing sped up, writhing frantically, and before Tunsen could finish it flew into his ship.

Nothing happened.

There was no impact. No light or alert. No sound except the humming of the engine and the sensors' blips. Tunsen looked around the cockpit, breathing slow.

"What in the hell..." he murmured, "No visual. I don't-"

Abruptly he stopped. His head spun, his pupils wide, fixated on something, on nothing. Then suddenly he scrambled back, his eyes bulging, scratching at his throat, choking. He tumbled from the pilot's seat, gasping, scrabbling, spasming, raking his nails down his face in bloody tracks-

And then slowly, horribly, he began to scream.

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The recording ends and the projection disappears, surrendering the crypt once more to muffled darkness. Tal stands stock still, staring horrified at the empty wall.

"What..." The words struggle to come. "What was that thing?" He turns to Eristead, "What happened?"

Eristead gently lowers the recording back into the stone box and replaces the lid. "When Captain Tunsen didn't return," he says, "A probe was sent out after him. It found the *Mistletoe* intact and fully functional, alone in empty space. The Captain was dead. He appeared to have gouged his eyes out, tore the skin from his face, and bled to death."

Tal draws in a shaky breath, trying to keep his hands from trembling.

"Faith preserve," he whispers. The sound of the dead man's screaming echoes in his ears. "I've heard of, but never... space madness?"

Eristead shakes his head. He moves to the second box, which creaks open like the first. The Cardinal reaches in and pulls out another recorder.

"A team was sent out after Tunsen aboard a medical freighter, the *Herodicus*," he says, "They docked with the *Mistletoe* and found it exactly as the probe reported; intact and free from hazards. They boarded in full quarantine gear. Within minutes they were all dead."

Tal's eyes fix on the recorder. "That's... that's their black box?"

"No," says Eristead, "This is from the *SASC Starhammer*, the ship that came after them. Sol military, fearing some kind of alien attack, sent a fully stocked warship to assess the situation. They found no signs of life or danger. For safety's sake, they didn't dock. It didn't matter."

Eristead presses a button and another hologram emerges, clearer and larger than the first. The light of it spreads out in every direction, blanketing the entire room – and suddenly, the pair are engulfed in noise. There is banging and screaming, sirens and gunfire – and the face of a terrified woman fills their view.

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*"...Gunnery Sergeant Wright, Fourth Company, I- oh God they're all going crazy, there's- I don't know what's happening, it was nothing then Fernanda just started screaming and Thomas stabbed the Corporal and they... oh God I-"*

She was a young woman, austere and beautiful, with tanned skin and her hair pulled back tight. Competent, composed, the professional sort. But all veneer of control was gone.

"There was no warning," she whispered, shaking as she spoke, "One minute we were okay and the next people were screaming and-" A sudden bang hammered

behind her and the Sergeant spun, trembling hands flying to her mouth. Another bang came, then another – then it stopped. There was a squelch, a thump, and a bloody gurgle. Then only silence.

Wright turned back to the camera. “I don’t know if anyone’ll find this,” she whispered. Tears stained tracks down her cheeks. “But if they do, Mum, Dad, I love you so much, I-”

Suddenly her eyes widened. Her mouth twitched and her words died in her throat. Slowly, she raised her shaking hands, looking down at her the palms with pure, inexplicable terror.

Then she began to scream.

Scream and scream and scream. It pulsed through her, spikes of pain punching through horrible, gurgling breaths. She dropped to the ground, writhing, shaking, tearing at her arms, her face, her throat – then with a garbled wail she slammed her head full force into the ground. Then again. And again. Until there was nothing left but meat and bone and a gurgling, twitching body, still trying desperately to scream.

The recording switched. Everywhere was the same. People in uniform, scientists, soldiers, screaming, consumed by violence. Hurling themselves from gangways, hurtling through glass, attacking, mutilating themselves, the dead, everyone around them. Blood. Madness. And finally, death.

Death for sixteen hundred people.

Death for the entire ship.

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Eristead stops the recording. There is more it seems, but no more is needed. Wordlessly, he puts the recorder back into its box and looks at Tal, his eyes full of unfathomable sorrow. He says nothing, demands nothing. He simply waits.

Finally, Tal finds his voice.

“I... I don’t understand. They...”

“They killed themselves,” Eristead says quietly, “Or each other. There were sixteen hundred soldiers aboard that ship, and within two days every one of them was dead. It was slower than it’d been on the *Herodicus*, but just as inevitable.”

Silence. Slow, sickening silence.

“What... what is it?” Tal finally asks, “A virus? Radiation? Some... some sort of weapon?”

The old Cardinal shakes his head.

“Shepherd Moran,” he says with a heavy sigh, “Do you believe in the soul?”

Tal starts. "I... well of course," he replies. He tries to marshal his thoughts, to shut out the visions of death. "The soul is... it's part of us, what makes us unique, it..." He manages a weak laugh. "Faith preserve us, we're the Church of the Eternal Soul."

"Yes," murmurs Eristead, "We are. But what is the soul? What do we know of it? How does it function?"

Tal swallows, trying to drag his mind back to his books, his sermons, philosophy. "I... the authorities differ. Some say it is divinely provided essence... others that it grows within us, and-"

"Forget theology for a moment," interrupts the Cardinal, "Focus on its physical properties. The soul is intangible. It is a part of us, an important part – but undetectable, impossible to quantify. It is our consciousness, and it resides within us until we die. Am I correct?"

"Well... yes I suppose." Tal hesitates. "That's generally agreed."

"The soul cannot be measured nor destroyed," Eristead continues, "It has no imprint or mass. Yet we know it is there all the same."

The Shepherd chews his lip. "Yes," he says, "I would say that's fair."

There is a lingering pause.

"Do you know physics, Shepherd Moran?" the Cardinal asks.

"Well I mean, it was never my specialty, but-"

"Are we, right now on this Earth," Eristead interrupts, "Stationary in space?"

"I... no. We are not." Tal swallows. "The Earth revolves around the Sun, at about 100,000 kilometres an hour or... 30 kilometres a second. And the solar system moves too, around the galaxy; 720,000 kilometres per hour, 200 kilometres a second."

Eristead seems pleased, at least, by this small knowing. "Good. And what keeps us tethered, as we travel through the universe? What prevents us hurtling off, as we move at these phenomenal speeds?"

A frown. "Well..." says Tal, confused, "Gravity. Inertia. We are pulled along by... by the planets. By momentum."

"By our mass," Eristead agrees. He pauses.

"Can you imagine, Shepherd Moran, if gravity ceased to affect you? Can you imagine standing here, talking as we are now; only to blink, and an instant later be surrounded by nothing? The Earth is gone; in seconds travelled further than your eyes can see. And it is not coming back for you – it moves on, the solar system moves on, the galaxy moves on. What would you do? As a human, you would die of

course, suffocate in the vacuum – but imagine you cannot die. Imagine you continued to live, aware and alone in the void. For you are alone – there is no one there besides you. You don't know where to go. There is nowhere to go. Everything is emptiness. Everything is stars.”

“Imagine your mind cast adrift; alone for eternity. The universe is big beyond imagining – even if there were others like you, billions of them, you'd never find them. You'd never know where you were, let alone where to go. What would you do? It is just you and your thoughts. Alone and helpless. Forever.”

Suddenly, it clicks. Tal's eyes widen.

“Oh God.”

“Yes,” whispers Eristead. The old Cardinal's eyes are empty. “I think you'd go quite mad.”

In the sacred room amongst the sacred stones, Tal Moran falls to his knees and throws up.

“Yes.” Eristead turns away. “I think you understand. The soul has no mass. It is tethered in life to a human body, but in death that connection is severed. It is released; and it is left behind. You are left behind; everything you were, your consciousness, your essence. Scared. Confused. Alone.”

“I... I can't...”

“This is the truth,” says Eristead, “This is the Cardinals' secret. More sophisticated probes were sent in after the *Starhammer*, able to take more complex readings.” He gestures at the third box but makes no move to open it. “In here is the sum of their research,” he says, “A truth so terrible the Church was founded to hide it. You can read it if you don't believe me; you will read it, because you won't want to.” The candlelight draws shadows under his eyes. “No one does. But it's true. There is no heaven when we die, no hell, no reincarnation. Not even non-existence. Everyone that's ever lived, everyone that's ever died – they're still out there. Good and evil, rich and poor, billions upon billions of souls, everyone – all abandoned in the void. Left to fall into madness, to beg and shout and scream to a cosmos that will never hear them.”

He looks down at the young priest, sick and shaking on the ground. “The Earth has left a trail of ghosts.”

“There is nothing we can do. No way to stop it. It will happen to you if you die; it will happen to me. It will happen to all of us. When death comes we will be cast into the void and stay there, alone for all eternity. And if by chance something living should near us; if someone jumping through space like Michael Tunsen happens to pause in our piece of nothingness – then our maddened soul will grasp at their flesh like a burning man at water. We will claw at their body and mind and inflict upon them

untold horror, for after a thousand lifetimes in the darkness, we will inevitably be insane.”

“Now you know the truth. Now you understand our laws. ‘*Preserve all life*’; for to allow death is to allow this nightmare. ‘*Make no new life*’; because every child born is another over whom this doom hangs. Those are our reasons, Cardinal Moran. Those are our rules.”

Silence. Slowly, shakily, wiping his hand across his bile-stained mouth, Tal Moran staggers to his feet.

“But there are three,” he whispers, “Three tenants...” He stares at Eristead. “What of the third?”

The old Cardinal meets his eyes, and there is nothing in them.

“The universe is a big place Cardinal. Yet still humanity fills it. Slowly; but inevitably. We have left a trillion souls, from a thousand worlds, screaming behind us. The further we go, the longer we last, the greater the inevitability becomes.”

He pauses.

“The dead are out there, and they are waiting. So we can never be still. We must never stop moving. Because if we stop, even for a second, they might catch up.”

## Books Received

### JonathanBall *Publishers*

Sebastien de Castell Crownbreaker Hot Key books R240.00

Holly Black The Queen of Nothing Hot Key books R280.00

Terry Goodkind Witch's Oath: The Children of D'Hara Head of Zeus R180.00

Katherine & Elizabeth Corr A Throne of Swans Hot Key books R175.00

Terry Goodkind Heart of Black Ice Head of Zeus R335.00

Veronica Roth The End and Other Beginnings Harper Collins UK R235.00

Eoin Colfer Highfire Quercus R325.00

Adam Silvera Infinity Son Simon & Schuster UK R185.00

Ken Lui The Hidden Girl and Other Stories Head of Zeus R295.00

**From RiLL** (Italian publication of Short Story competition Winners 2017, 18 and 19)

Leucosya - e altri racconti dal Trofeo RiLL e dintorni Collana Mondi Incantati

# Nova 2019 Joint 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

## Philip Machanick Don't Look Back

Another bright, sunny day. It was great to be out in the open with dirt on his claws. Professor Spines dusted himself off. The dig was looking exciting. The great bones were starting to take shape as soft sedimentary rock chipped away. His students were enthusiastic, which helped a lot. He had to pause every now and then to dissipate heat, a problem that escaped youth.

One of them was shouting.

He lumbered over. "What is it, Amber? "

She was pointing at a bright, sparkly spot around one of the smaller fossilised bones. He peered closer, and she chipped away more.

He stood up. "Remarkable. That almost looks like pure gold. I wonder how it became wedged there."

"Not wedged, professor! It goes around the bone."

He took a closer look. She was right. It looked like an artefact. An artefact in an impossible location. "Keep taking photos. We'll need to record every step."

He drifted off ... This couldn't be right. There was no intelligent life 110-million years ago – unless this specimen was much more recent. But that would be wrong too. Skeletals had never been intelligent. Not those little *furry* things that lived on the fringe of the modern ecosystem, those little *scaly* snakes and crocodillies that hid under rocks in swamps when they weren't kept as cute pets, the furtive birds, that kept out of the way of everything else – and surely not *this* primitive giant. It couldn't be substantially more recent. There was the Coal Gap. 8-million years when coal formation stopped. There simply was not that much life on the planet over that whole time, and no fossil record of giant skeletals after that. And the rock they were excavating had only recently been exposed by geological processes. What a conundrum.

Amber was shouting again. Didn't that grub of a girl realize he needed to *think*?

He sighed and ambled over. She had cleared more rock. What he saw took his breath away. Despite erosion over time, it could only be an artefact. A ring of glittering gold.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night at the camp fire, the professor had them gather round.

"This is a great day, we've made one of the greatest finds in history." He looked around the fire-lit circle of glittering eyes. "Not hyperbole. This is something fantastic. For the first time, evidence that we aren't the only intelligent life forms that ever lived. To purify and work gold requires significant intelligence. The ability not only to work with fire, but to achieve extreme temperatures, maybe even chemical skills."



He paused for emphasis. "Of course we will need to do the hard work in the lab to date the specimens. But there is very, very little probability that this life-form is less than 110-million years old – or that its descendants existed much more recently than that."

Scarlet put up a hand. "Professor, you mean the Second Die-Off? "

"Exactly, thank you Scarlet. Both Die-Offs resulted in around 90% of all living creatures, over 70% of all species, disappearing. Then, each time, after about 8-million years, the two great Coal Gaps, when not much life above the yeasts existed – nothing big enough to decay and form fossil fuels. Nothing much big for 8-million years. Just enough left to restart the system. Do you all remember when the First Die-Off happened? "

Turquoise offered an answer. "360-million years ago."

"Very good, Turquoise. And what did the two great Die-Offs have in common? Amber? " Time she had some limelight, after her great discovery.

"Anoxic oceans."

"Great. Caused by? " he prompted her.

"Big rises in CO."

"Excellent. And why are we sure of the CO link? " Another prod. Amber must know this.

"Because it's the common factor between the two Die-Offs."

"Good work, Amber. And of course some of the lesser die offs may also have shared some of these factors. But what is strange about the Second Die-Off? " He looked around the ring of students. Turquoise was keen to talk, so he gave her the floor.

"No obvious cause."

"Excellent. We had natural causes like orbital changes, volcanoes and evidence of meteorites for the other extinction events, even the lesser ones, but the Second Die-Off? Just evidence of a sudden uniform world-wide spike in CO – no evidence of massive volcanoes, no evidence of a big meteorite strike. And why should that worry us today – if I am a bit off topic? " Spines eyed out the group. No one offered to opine.

"Never mind. A pet obsession of mine. Let's all party. A celebration of our great find, and Amber's good work."

They scurried for their packs, secreted honeybeer suddenly acceptable to consume openly.

Such great gals, he thought. Always trying to be the best, none at all fazed by a male teacher.

\* \* \* \* \*

The audience was restless. The end of a long hard day, many boring speeches about well-rehearsed topics. Paleontology, as one of them joked, was not something where you could expect something new. And repeated the joke at every meeting to emphasize the point.

Spines stood up, and advanced to the lectern.

There was a rustle of anticipation. Despite keeping his silence about the topic, his excitement – his students' excitement too – could not be contained. But he started sedately enough, flicking through title and introductory slides.

*We all know about the two great Die-Offs: the anoxic oceans, the strong connection between the two of a massive spike in CO levels, the conversion of the seas into hydrogen sulfide factories.*

We all know the conventional wisdom that it was the Second Die-Off that was the eventual impetus for intelligent life, the clearing away of life-forms physiologically unsuited to high intelligence – the great skeletal monsters – leaving our distant ancestors a clear field.

The audience became restless. This was not something exciting ...not yet.

So, Spines continued, *I have a discovery that could change all that.*

He stopped talking and slowly flipped slides from the first glitter of gold to the uncovering of the whole circle of gold. Thin and pitted though it was, in the slide it looked very clearly like an artefact – one which had probably been worked with some accuracy, though this was hard to see in the slides.

The room became entirely silent, but for the murmur of a fan.

Spines allowed the moment to develop, then produced the artefact with a dramatic flourish – as dramatic as he could manage with its weight – its scale suddenly more apparent, a fragile gold disk the size of his hand.

Pandemonium.

When eventually the room quietened down, he pressed on.

*What is especially remarkable is that we found this thing around a bone of an extremity of a skeletal fossil that must have been at least 110-million years old.* He stopped and glared around the room, waiting for someone to contradict him. No one did.

*And here is a reconstruction of the entire skeleton.* His next slide revealed a stooped bipedal form, big eye sockets in a domed skull, its fore-limbs lightly resting on the ground. He switched to another slide with him standing next to it, its vast bulk clear, as it towered over him, at least four times his height, even with its stooped posture.

*As we can see, the skull is enormous, though we've found skulls from ocean-dwellers that were even bigger. This one has space for a brain of almost one-and-half litres, about double the size of ours. We know of course that our brains are of a more complex internal organization than surviving skeletal, but none has a brain anywhere as big as this fossil would have had. So it is at least plausible that it was intelligent.*

At that point, he did have an interruption. A delegate from the front row whom he recognized from previous conventions spoke out. "You mean to say you think that *thing* made that artefact? "

He contemplated for a moment. He didn't know her name. She never talked to him. Perhaps deliberately, now he thought about it, with that attitude. "Yes. Yes, I do. Perhaps you have a better theory? " he asked levelly.

She glared at him. "Yes. I think a male in a female career is thinking with his pheromones."

Some but not all of the cries in response were in his support.

\* \* \* \* \*

Unusually for a paleontological conference, the media was there in force. Spines's revelation had spread exceptionally fast.

As he left the auditorium, Spines was still shaken from the insulting riposte. *After all these years, who would have thought it? I've always done good work. I'm not a raving masculinist or anything, but ...* and he walked straight into a mêlée of shouting journalists and TV crews.

"Do you really believe skeletals could have been intelligent? "

"Show us the artefact! "

"How old is that thing? "

He waved for silence and slowly, reverently produced the gold ring. It was scarred and pitted and barely connected in places, but still showed evidence of craft – too round to be random.

The journalists stared in silence, the reality of the thing more shocking than any indirect hint that it may have existed.

Eventually, he spoke, choosing his words carefully.

"This thing was around an extremity – I cannot think of any better explanation than that it was wearing it. Gold is a soft metal but not very reactive. It must have somehow been shielded to have lasted that length of time – perhaps in a soft spot in the sedimentary rock that didn't cause much friction as the skeleton fossilized and shifted over the millions of years."

One of the journalists asked, "How old ...? "

Spines said, "If this thing is less than 110-million years old, we will have to rewrite the entire book on paleontology – not to mention geology."

Another asked, "How are your colleagues taking this, I mean *you* finding ..."

"I know what you mean," Spines said grimly. "Males should stay at home looking after the grubs."

"I didn't ..."

"Well, some of my colleagues did. I had some pretty insulting comments back there."

He gestured to the auditorium. "I thought we were over that sort of thing in this day and age. I'm not a big campaigner for male rights, I just feel that I should be judged on my achievements. And anyway, one of my students made the big find. It's as much a slight on her as on me to belittle this find because of who I am."

He wrapped up the artefact and pressed through the crowd, refusing all further attempts at interaction.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spines tumbled onto his sofa. The television was already on though no one was watching. Pearl was doing her turn at the house chores, another example of their

semi-liberated household. The curved outer wall gave him comfort, the feeling of being in his own space. He rolled over towards the screen, some of the tension gone.

He was just in time for the news. The lead story was his exit from the convention.

“Pearl!” His wife came in, followed closely by their youngest, Ruby.

Ruby was in her early post-metamorphosis, her adult features fully formed, but with the awkward look of a tween – the moves not quite right.

Spines patted the sofa, and they collapsed onto it next to him, in time to see him barging into camera.

Ruby was staring wide-eyed at the screen. “Wow, dad. You’re a hero. I wish I was a boy.”

Her parents laughed.

“Too late for that, dear.” Pearl tingled her daughter’s back spines. “We can’t change the choice we made before cocoon. And anyway, you’re wonderful the way you are.” Spines shook his head in agreement. “Believe me, if you like the work I do, you want to be a girl.”

The news switched to the interior of the convention centre – background from the other delegates. The interviewer cornered one of the other scientists. One who was only too familiar to Spines. “What do you think of a male making the great discovery? A turn-up for social attitudes?”

The scientist grimaced. “You are assuming it’s a great discovery. And anyway he didn’t discover it, it was one of his students.”

“So you don’t think even scientists are ready yet for male equality?”

“When males prove they are our equals, we scientists will accept that evidence. Until then ...”

“You mean you don’t think much of Spines?”

She clenched her mandibles in frustration. “Am I not getting through to you? He has a totally emotional approach. That gold thing he found – *if* it’s gold – could have many explanations. He has jumped on one. Cranial capacity isn’t intelligence – otherwise the giant sea-skeletons of that same era would have been super-intelligent. Yet they were all wiped out in the Second Die-Off. No evidence of artefacts from them.”

“What other explanation is there?”

“It was his dig. He has the evidence. How am I supposed to evaluate the range of possibilities? He probably wrecked the evidence in his hurry to get the thing out. Emotional male. Hmph.”

The camera switched to the interviewer. “There we have it: Professor Spines-ka Pearl is an emotional male, and this whole thing is of no significance. If anyone should know, it’s Professor Emerald.”

Spines smacked his head. “Of course!”

“What, dear? Had an emotion-driven inspiration?” Pearl goaded him playfully.

“No, no. I should have known who it was. I never paid much attention to who was who at our meetings. Social convention. No males to talk to so I keep to myself

outside sessions. But I've read plenty by Emerald. She does great work in her field, but has published a few rebuttals of mine, always snidely worded. Doesn't really understand my stuff, outside her area, but if you're a Name, you can get away with it."

He slumped into the couch.

At that moment, Jem came bounding in. Two years older than her sister, she was becoming quite athletic, and was on the school's first qenja team. Spines smiled at the enthusiastic physicality, quite unlike his own bumbling youth.

Jem snuggled up to him. "What's this I hear, dad, about how you are some sort of news sensation? "

He snorted. "Trust the TV to blow it up. But I think it may be something quite big. You know how it's conventional wisdom that we are the first intelligent life form to evolve – at least on this planet? "

She nodded.

"I was on this dig with some of my students, and we found this artefact, a circle of gold around an extremity bone of a fossilized skeleton."

"Dad! Why didn't you tell us? " Ruby demanded. The two kids nudged him playfully.

"No tickling! " They subsided. "I really didn't think you were that interested. I used to talk about the latest dig and everyone would doze off."

"But this is different! Evidence of intelligent skeletons! Just like in the SciFi stuff. I can't believe it." Jem stared at him in mock annoyance, all eyes focused on him.

"Skeletons? " her dad enquired.

"That's what we all call them at school. What would you call them? "

"There were thousands and thousands of skeletal beings in the past, possibly millions of types – we can't be sure because the fossil record is so patchy. Up to 110-million years ago, they may have been the dominant large life-forms. We can't call one of them something that could apply to all of them – though we will need a non-scientific name for popular consumption, now non-scientists are talking about them."

"Wow. 110-million years. How old was that thing you found? " Ruby's eyes were all focused on her dad too but in awe.

"Not likely to be less than 110-million years old – almost all skeletons died off around then. We still need to do some work to date it accurately."

Jem pressed the point. "What *do* you want us to call it? "

"Well, the official classification is based on a combination of approximate age in millions of years, approximate brain size, number of legs and a few other numbers for the bone structure. There's supposed to be a common name as well, though no one has named this thing yet, though lots of fossils have been found in the past, because it's never been a subject of popular attention. This one comes out as skel-110-1500-2-556."

"Skeleton it is."

Jem was definite on that point, so he nodded. "You know, I do have naming rights, and I haven't come up with a popular name, so skeleton it will be. Even if the

scientists won't like it." He paused. "Let me give them one more thing not to like, now I've started."

"What about the gold thing, dad?" Ruby was still pressing on the details.

"Museum. I'll have to take you to see it. It will be a while before we can put it on public display. Meanwhile, what have all of you been up to? Jem, how did the qenja go?"

"Great game, dad. Even if everyone thought it was a bit odd that mum brought me. Can you take me next time? Please?"

He looked guilty. "Of course, of course. I don't want my work to turn me into a bad parent."

Jem and Ruby were all over him. "Bad parent?" He couldn't tell which was talking. Maybe they both were, echoing their thoughts. "Dad, you're a hero." To them, he thought, Emerald's sneers still echoing in his head. Cranial capacity. Anyone could tell she didn't think a male's cranial capacity counted for much.

\* \* \* \* \*

The great head with its vacant eye sockets stared at him. Spines sidled up to it slowly. He put a claw-tip on the skull, chitin to bone-fossil, and stared into the eye sockets.

What had its eyes looked like? Would they have been the yellow slitted things of modern-day crocodillies? The pale shiny things of a fish? Of course those are aquatic creatures. What, today could be similar?

Nothing, obviously, in terms of intelligence. Nothing with a skeleton, anyway. He'd never seen a spark of intelligence looking into an eye of one of the children's pet dillies.

What did this creature know? Certainly the ability to decorate itself with gold indicated not only an ability to work metal but some sort of artistic sense.

Did it know poetry?

Did it know the sweet smell of a fernflower?

Did it revel in the heady flavour of a sweet, frothy honeybeer?

Did it know love, hatred, the pleasure of seeing ones offspring metamorphise and convert from weak, helpless little things to creatures of intelligence, initiative and personality? For that matter, how exactly did that happen? Did it produce eggs like a modern reptile? Or did it produce young that went through a metamorphosis as we do? How did a big head develop after exiting the mother?

Did it appreciate the senseless complexity of something like the game of qenja?

All his eyes remained locked onto the empty sockets, until he was interrupted by a rustling.

He turned from the stooped skeleton. "Sorry, Ruby. I still can't walk past it without wondering what sort of life it had." She followed him silently into the curator's office, the solemnity of the moment not lost on her youthful consciousness. Some quiet words passed between Spines and the curator, who found a large bunch of keys.

“Follow me.” The curator led them down a dark passageway to a strongly made door. “Most valuable finds in here, I will have to stay with you.” Not that I don’t trust you, she seemed to say.

The three of them filed into the dusty room. The curator reverently lowered a heavy box from a shelf. She opened it. Inside was the gold artefact, and a thick wedge of notes.

“May I touch it?” Ruby had a few eyes on each of the grown-ups.

Her dad looked at the curator, and they both nodded. Ruby reached out a claw delicately, and caressed the pitted metal. “110-million years,” she said softly, the only sound breaching the silence. The dust lay heavy over the room, emphasizing how nothing should be disturbed in this place.

They all stood there several minutes in silence.

As they turned to leave, the curator reverentially repacked the artefact and notes and stowed the box, barely disturbing the dust.

Back in the exhibition hall, Spines and daughter paused to examine the skeleton. He pointed out how the bones seemed to indicate a fairly upright stance.

Ruby looked puzzled. “How could it balance on only two legs?”

“We don’t know. Maybe it ran like that, and rested on its forelimbs. Maybe it straightened up briefly to see long distances. Could have been a survival thing – that’s what we used to think before this evidence of intelligence. A wild creature like this would have had an advantage if it could see over high plants for example.”

“Did it have scales like a dilly?”

He smiled. “There’s no way we can tell. All we have is the shape of the bones – at least for this variety. It could have been hairy, or scaly, or had feathers.” He laughed at the expression on her face. “There were many, many different skeletons in their era. The few today may be rather unappealing creatures with ragged decorations and coverings, but who knows what they may have looked like when they ruled the planet. They may have been magnificent. The few where traces have been left indicate scales and feathers were very common. We can’t be as sure of hair because it doesn’t fossilize. But we have to guess one of the three from the few skeletons still around.”

She looked unconvinced.

“Come on.” He led her away. “Let’s go to my office and I can show you some of my stuff. You did say you wanted to do my kind of work.”

“Ooo yes.”

They left the building and after a short walk through shaded fern groves arrived at his office.

The room was cluttered with samples and tools – mallets, hammers, rock chisels. She gazed around in wonderment. “Dad, you play with girl’s toys.”

“Now, don’t you start.” He quickly steered her to a batch of samples. “Look at these rocks. Look closely.”

She stared, all eyes focused on details. There was a lacy pattern which resolved itself into a feather. “Wow. What was this off?”



“Don’t know for sure. We think it may have been a very lightly boned skeletal. Some people think it could fly.”

“Fly? With such heavy bones? ”

He laughed. “The bones near this feather were extremely thin. We can’t be sure because they were fossilized but we think they may have been hollow – no heavier than your arm shells.

“Take a close look at each of these – I just want to check for messages – so many after that TV thing.”

She nodded, engrossed.

He tapped on the screen. As expected, a slew of messages popped up. The summary lines mostly looked uninteresting ... then one popped out and demanded his attention.

Did skeletal mine coal?

This may seem radical but I think you should investigate. I work at a coal mine and we found a whole lot of skeletal before we got to the main coal. And the mine started as an iron mine – a few tonnes of high-grade iron, mixed in with skeletal, then coal. Something really strange going on.

Interested?

\* \* \* \* \*

The mine was a hive of activity. As the airship approached the landing dock, Spines saw workers scurrying too and fro, dwarfed by giant machines. There was a black dust over everything, visible on the tops of the buildings.

*So that’s why they call it Black Mountain ...*

When he alighted, Diamond stepped forward and grasped his forelimbs formally.

“Professor. So glad you could make it. I know academic funds are limited. There are a few things here though that are very hard to convey without a site inspection.”

“No apologies needed. I was glad to be able to get away for a bit. Not,” he added hastily, “that I want to get away from *family* ... work pressures ...”

Diamond laughed. “I can imagine. We get even fewer male geologists than there are male professors. But when I tell you what I’ve found here and my other thoughts on the matter, you’ll see there is stronger cause for ridicule than being the wrong gender.” She looked grim by the end of the last sentence, humour evaporating under the harsh glare, as they walked towards the mine workings.

She led Spines to her office, a prefab building, fans battling to maintain an even temperature. Spines had to splay out his wing case to let some air in. Diamond indicated a chair. “Make yourself comfortable. To the extent that that applies here. Mining is a dreadful business. Always dirty, dangerous – usually in some queen-awful place, terrible climate. Water? A little honeybeer? I have a stash kept cool ...”

“Thanks. But I had some on the airship, and need to keep my head clear. Let’s get to it ... not impolite or anything, but I want to see the cause for excitement.”

"Of course." Diamond unrolled a large sheet of paper, a site plan. Spines watched closely. In his profession, he seldom saw paper in quantity. "Let's spread this out and pin it to a wall."

The two of them worked on the paper, Diamond less clumsily, obviously accustomed to such manipulations.

"Now," Diamond pointed at the paper, in its new role as a poster, "look closely. The red lines represent the extent of the original find, which as I told you in my message, was high-grade iron. You'll see that ends abruptly, and the green line represents the extent of the coal reserves as we expect them to exist starting from the early dig." She pointed out of the window. "You can see that we've dug up about 10% of the reserves so far, and they are a good fit to what we expected."

"With you so far. Explain the big surprise."

"Look at the border of the red and green areas. You can see it's almost a clean cut."

"OK. But I'm not a geologist. Is this unusual? "

"As it happens, no. But what is strange not only here, but in many other cases, is that the geology model we've built up is very reliable in maybe 50% of the cases. You see, if we hadn't found iron here and had instead found the coal from the other end, there is nothing to say the coal should have ended abruptly there."

"The iron ...? "

"Yeah, well that's the really strange thing. The geology suggested there may be coal around, but the first thing we found was this really high-grade iron. So we started an iron mine. Around 100 tonnes later, it was all gone, and we hit coal. All wrong, not the right geology for iron. And why such high grade? You would get that maybe if you buried near-pure iron for long enough for it all to oxidise. And very lucky conditions, so it would stay there. As it happens, the site here is surrounded by nonporous rock and has been geologically stable for over 100-million years."

Spines nodded. "And the skeletal? "

"Only in the area where we found the iron, not mixed in with the coal. That was a bit unusual. If I understand fossilization right, they would have had to be buried in mud, and the area above was in fact probably under water."

She paused. "That's why we called in another palaeontologist, a specialist in marine fossils."

They sat down, facing each other over Diamond's desk.

"Oh? " Spines enquired.

"Professor Emerald."

"*Emerald?* " he barked out.

"Uh, yes, Emerald ba-Rock ..."

"I know who Emerald is. I doubt there's another professor Emerald in palaeontology, common though the name is in high society."

"Some history? "

"Sorry. She was rude to me over my finding."

"Ah, yes, as seen on TV. Forgive me. But anyway, she dug up some molluscs, little marine skeletal or whatever was interesting of that era, then hit hard rock and

skeletals, big ones, probably similar to the one you dug up, said there was nothing more interesting, and told us to carry on.”

“Nothing more interesting? ”

“To her. I asked about the skeletals, and she mentioned your name, and said she’d get back to us if you were interested, and that was the last we heard of it.”

“How long ...? ”

“Oh, that would be about five years ago.”

“Damn! All that lost evidence.” Spines looked resigned. “Your information is interesting in itself, I suppose. But we couldn’t read too much into one example even if it wasn’t all lost ... ”

“Exactly. That’s why I’ve been doing a more detailed study. You see, there’s this inconsistency in the geology. We think we have a good model of how coal is formed. But about 50% of the time, as I mentioned before, we’re wrong. In a fair number of cases, the coals is weirdly truncated, like this. I don’t know if skeletals are found in close proximity in other cases.”

“Well, fossilization is hit and miss. You have to have the right conditions. And even then, you have to be incredibly lucky to make a good find.”

“Right.” Diamond nodded. “That’s what I thought, so I decided to take up another line of investigation. I looked for another differentiating or common factor. And ...”

Spines leaned forward across the desk.

“... all the truncated finds have been in rock formations that would have been near the surface for over 100-million years. The non-truncated finds are mostly in areas where the geology would have raised the surrounding material significantly through tectonic shifts within the last 100-million years. A few are areas that would have been buried deep underground, or under sea 100-million years ago.”

“Any exceptions? ”

“None. None so far. Not of the truncated ones, anyway. A small fraction of the untruncated coal fields may have been in accessible places in the distant past. There is always some uncertainty in dealing with the deep past.”

“Have you told anyone this? ”

“Actually, it’s not that hard to find this stuff out. The facts are actually already widely known. The mine geology texts all estimate coal finds as 50 to 100% higher in areas elevated in the last 100-million years. It’s just a matter of taking note of the fact, and wondering why. The texts say ‘for unknown reasons’, which is a bit of a cop-out. You work through all the theory and add a fudge factor that has no basis in theory.”

Spines put a forelimb on Diamond’s back, a gesture of surprising affection among strangers. “Take my advice. You may not be a male, but if you tell anyone else about this without hard, *really* hard evidence, you will be treated like a complete idiot.”

“You mean, you ...”

“I mean I know what it’s like. I think you may be onto something, but there’s a lot of people out there who don’t want to know.”

“Emerald? ”

“Like Emerald. But leave her to me. I’ll have to think through how to deal with her.”

“Let me know when you have more ideas. Meanwhile I’ll keep plugging away on my evidence. Uh, and professor ...”

“Yes? ”

“I stopped looking at oil geology when that made even less sense. Oil needs very specific conditions to form and to persist for millions of years. After we started working that one out, we only had rich finds in about 20% of the places where the theory said it should have been.”

“Meaning? ” Spines felt a chill through his wing case.

“Meaning I stopped working in oil and shifted to coal.” Diamond ground her mandibles. Spines touched forelimbs formally, and turned to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Back on the airship, Spines was shaking.

Confirmation. But would Diamond take his advice and shut up? Well, she had kept extremely quiet about the oil thing. So unsettling. But one thing at a time. And that one thing was bad enough.

Sometimes, it was better not to know.

That damned Emerald.

But the truth was out, and would eventually have to be taken into account – at least by the open-minded. Skeletors were intelligent. They worked gold, they mined coal. They died out abruptly. Coincidentally – or was it so coincidental? – they died out after a rapid spike in greenhouse gas emissions, a rapid poisoning of the environment and an abrupt climate change. Surely they could not have caused this themselves. Our own civilisation is starting to cause severe environmental degradation, but nothing on that scale. Impossible. But so was a skeletor who worked gold.

It all sounded so SciFi. No, better that Diamond should shut up for now. At least until more evidence could be found.

Or ... until someone confronted Emerald.

He set his mandibles.

*I think I know just who is going to confront Emerald.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, Spines only felt comforted when he could slump in his very own sofa in his own home. That wretched Emerald. She may be a legend in marine palaeontology, but she had no right to block him like that. Five years! How much time had he lost because she had blocked him from that dig? But could anything there have matched the gold artifact?

Suddenly the kids were all over him. Jem, her athleticism evidence again in her rapid bounds into the room, Ruby not far behind. Pearl brought up the rear, laughing at the scene. “I hope your students don’t treat you like that. You’d never survive more than two of those.”

He smiled grimly. “Students I can handle. That damn Emerald.”

“Emerald again? She wasn’t at the mine? ” Pearl sat on the edge of the sofa, pushing Ruby aside to make space. Ruby squeaked indignantly.

“Not now. Five years ago.” He explained what had happened.

“The cockroach! ”

“Ruby, I will not have foul language in my house.” Pearl looked very stern, and her daughter wilted.

“Sorry, mum.” She didn’t look sorry, quickly recovering from her parental chastisement. Spines patted her head. An understanding passed between them.

Pearl failed to head this silent communication, and focused on Spines. “So, my dear, what are we going to do about her? We can’t have her obstructing your career right and left.”

Spines contemplated for a moment. “Let me think. Maybe I should get you all dinner. It will help me clear my head.”

In the kitchen, he savagely hacked at vegetables, the feeling of dealing out violence surprisingly satisfying. He assembled a stew of various roots, leaves and fruits, with herbs thrown in for good measure. While it simmered, he helped himself to a honeybeer, and called out, “Drinks for anyone? ”

With a honeybeer for Pearl and a couple of nectar juices for the kids, he went out to see what they were up to. A science show was on. It was about evolution, how skeletal had once ruled the earth. He stood transfixed, until he heard something boiling over, and scuttled back to the kitchen, back to his properly male role.

As he passed the food around, Ruby asked: “Dad, do you think the skeletal really ruled the world? I mean, built machines, had civilization, and so on? ”

“What did they say on that show that I missed while I was in the kitchen? ”

“Old stuff. Nothing about your work. Dinosaurs, elephants, when crocodillies were big and ate animals.” She grimaced.

He laughed. “Not like your pet, dear. It’s tiny. Those big monsters would have been a hundred times the size.”

“Why are they so small now then? ”

“We think after the big Die-Off, only very small forms of skeletal survived. Our own ancestors were much smaller, but more adaptable. When life came back, the skeletal, the few that were left, couldn’t adapt fast enough, and the big forms never came back. Pushed out by our ancestors.”

“That reminds me –” Pearl broke in – “someone hasn’t fed her pet.”

Ruby grumbled as she got up and went to her bedroom.

“Dad,” Jem finally managed to get a word in, “didn’t some of the other skeletal have even bigger heads than the skeletal? ”

“That’s true. Elephants were enormous. But the area we think the brain was in was not that big. Some of the sea skeletal may have had big brains. But since we have no idea how the brain was structured, we don’t know if they were intelligent or if for example the big brain was specialized for sense of smell.”

Pearl looked thoughtful. “Can’t we learn anything from current skeletal? ”

"Of course. But they are so little, and there are so few of them. It's unlikely they would have preserved the range ..."

There was a shriek from Ruby's room. They rushed there.

"It *bit* me." She was standing over the crocodillie's hutch.

Spines took her arm and examined it. "Barely a scratch, dear. It must have thought you were a dry twig."

She eyed it out suspiciously. "You know our lot wiped out your lot, don't you."

It slowly blinked an inscrutable yellow eye, and casually slurped slime from its trough, as if nothing had happened.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is it.* He looked up her connection details and set up the call. The screen pixellated briefly as the stream was set up. She recognized him.

"What do you want?" she asked brusquely. "I don't imagine you think I am going to apologize for telling things the way they are."

Emerald was obviously a hard case. "Well, a little civility always goes a long way."

"Hmph. If you put two and two together and get five, what do you expect?"

"Better than putting two and two together and getting zero."

She looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Black Mountain colliery. Five years ago."

"Oh, that. I suppose you're going to make a big thing of it." Emerald looked at him with clear distaste.

"No, no. I just think we would do a lot better working together, not against each other."

"Me? Work with *you*?"

"Well, we *do* work in different areas. Your work in marine palaeontology is excellent. I don't want to intrude in that in any way. I'd just like to compare notes on a few issues, like the two great Die-Offs."

"And if not ...?"

"You mean would I make something of Black Mountain? No. But look: what would it cost you? You have your reputation. All I ask is a few minutes. I can go to the marine paleo symposium at your campus next week. If you can fit me in for a few minutes between sessions ..."

"Well, all right then." She looked as if she was having surgery without anaesthetic.

"Against my better judgment. Just don't make a big thing of it."

"I haven't made a big thing of the other things, and I am not going to start now."

"Hmph." She broke the connection.

He felt weak. But he'd done it. No backing out now. He went to look for Pearl, out in the garden. She was clipping at a cycad tree. He collapsed onto a bench, and she came over to him. "Not accustomed to the female job of fighting battles?"

"Actually, no. But I think I am getting used to it. But the hard part is ahead."

"Oh?"

"She agreed to see me. I'm going to her symposium."

\* \* \* \* \*

The break between sessions was only a few minutes. Emerald led him to her office in grim silence, the mere fact of having him there an admission of defeat. The cool comfort of the campus felt more like a sombre chill than it should. She opened the door and ushered him in. The curve of the walls didn't offer the usual reassurance of being inside a place that was shaped like home.

He pulled himself together, as she turned to face him, a desk between them as they sat down.

"So," she began. "What do you want? "

"Just to talk, to share some ideas. I'd like to know what you found at the Black Mountain site."

"Well, it was a nice marine sediment site – a shallow sea, probably not under water terribly long, a hundred thousand years at the outside. The whole lifetime of the sea must have covered a period around the start of the Second Die-Off plus or minus a million years."

"And? " He leant forward in his chair.

She shrugged. "Most of the fossils in the sediment were smallish skeletal, a few shells. Quite typical of the late skeletal era."

"Nothing particularly interesting? "

"Well, the thing that would have placed it right at the end of the late skeletal is that there was evidence of elevated carbon dioxide in the sedimentary rock. We know the late skeletal ended with a CO spike, which endured for thousands of years, short on the geological time scale."

"And under the marine layer? " Spines was getting impatient – she was skirting the issue.

"I knew you'd insist on going there."

"It was you who told Diamond you were going to refer that to me." He favoured her with a pointed stare. "Was there anything interesting there? "

"Well, the CO enrichment ended as soon as we got through the layer with the most recent terrestrial skeletal bones, which indicates they would have died at or around the time the CO levels started to build."

"Anything else? "

She slowly, reluctantly opened a drawer in her desk, and produced a shiny piece of metal. It wasn't gold, but somehow it was reminiscent of the gold he'd found – but a less complete piece. At his reaction, she said, "I know you are going to get over-excited about this."

"And that's why you suppressed this? "

"Well, you would have added two and two and made five."

"So you said about my other find. In any case, this one is *your* find. You need not have referred it to me." He sat back and contemplated her. "You were afraid of your reputation, that someone like you would ridicule you, just as you ridiculed me. Weren't you? "



Her usual composure wilted, but only slightly. “Look at this thing. It’s barely possible that it’s an artefact. I am not sure if I believe it is one myself. I saved you making a big fool of yourself – then you go public with that other *thing*.”

“You did, did you? If you had even tenuously supported me and suggested following up on my finding – even without mentioning this flimsy evidence – you would have risked others doing what you did at the conference, wouldn’t you? So to make sure, you got in first. Forgive me if I am skeptical of *saving* me.”

She nodded unconvincingly.

“But you see,” he went on, “that’s not the only option. I quite agree with you that this piece is really nothing to go on. It looks plausible that it’s an artefact, but I wouldn’t have gone public with it. I would have searched further. Compare this with the thing I found. Is it really the same thing? This one could have been a piece of a perfectly formed circle. But the fragment is too small to be sure. Did you take a close look at the thing I – my student – found? ”

“Not really,” she admitted grudgingly. “I admit it looked more plausible than this thing.”

“So look, I am not asking you to abandon any deeply held principle, change your work to suit me or anything like that. All I ask is that what I do is taken on its merits. And I would really, really appreciate it if you could at some point in the future free up some time to talk me through some of the more complex aspects of your work. There are some things about the great Die-Offs that are not completely clear to me, that a marine perspective would aid in understanding.”

She glanced at the time. “All right then. I will do my best to hold myself in check, as long as you don’t talk rubbish. I am certainly not going to back you in any absurd conclusions based on inadequate data. I think we should be getting back now though, the next session is starting soon.”

As they headed back, the conversation with Diamond haunted Spines. What would Emerald have made of *that*? Not only artefacts, but evidence that the skeletons were big miners of coal? Nope, best to keep quiet. And the oil thing, even more so. For now. And had she agreed to future meetings? Not exactly. But she hadn’t said no, either.

\* \* \* \* \*

His office has not been abandoned long enough for the dust to settle. The lights flicker on and the clutter is in its familiar place. The comfort at being back is punctured by a shadow crossing the door. It is the department chair, Professor Opal. Opal pushes her way in and closes the door. She looks anywhere but in his eyes. “A lot of people have been concerned about this craziness of your supposed artefact. Some have been proposing that we fire you, but your other work has been good and let’s face it, we are a liberal university and do not want to appear to discriminate against a male.”

“And if a female made such a discovery...”

“Well one didn’t.”

Spines thinks of his student and decides better of saying anything.

"To avoid further embarrassment, we have decided to offer you a special early retirement package. You will get your full salary until your usual retirement date."

"Emerald? Did she ..."

Opal senses his anger despite his measured control and cuts the thought. "No, it did not come from her. We did solicit her views and she was the one who argued for the early retirement package rather than dismissal."

"I see. And this is your measure of 'liberal'?"

"Please don't make this harder than it needs to be. We are being very generous. Your feelings ..." Her words blur into the sound of a career being trashed and excuses that try not to sound anti-male and mentioning anything but pheromones while meaning exactly that. All he gets out of it is that he'd better not resist as the package on offer is sweeter than fighting the system and losing.

*Not liberal at all; my best option is to shut up and go.*

He holds back the urge to tell her to stop matronising him.

# L.O.C Lloyd Penney

1706-24 Eva Rd Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

July 26, 2019.

Dear SFFSAns

Thank you for Probe 181, ready to start off the next 50 years of the club, and again, congratulations to all on such an achievement. An anniversary dinner should be a major part of your celebrations; hope everyone had a great time.

I haven't heard anything more about Ira Nayman and Amazing Stories Magazine...and, by the way, my last name is spelled Penney. It's got the extra e before the y. Computers of the future may become so complex as to achieve some level of sentience, I think. In the meantime, anything remotely questionable that might come from a computer will only be from those who have programmed it. The programme that attains sentience may be millions of terabytes in size, but I think it will be done, probably not in my lifetime.

The Peace Rose...I think one thing many of us can say, and I will say it...so many of the problems caused in the world today, keeping the world back, are caused by old, white men. And, I can say that, because I am an old, white man myself. Scientific

research depends on imagination, yet, we read of these old, white scientists who are doing just fine being at the forefront of their science, and pushing back anyone who might pass them, and take away their glory. It takes a fine scientist to push the old, white men aside and have a look where others might not. How would the world take the proof of aliens? How would world religions handle it? This is a most optimistic story on how this first contact would happen...if this were to really happen, I'd hope for optimism, but would expect pessimism. A very enjoyable story, as were the others, but no comment on them at this time.

My greetings to Tony Davis...we're still doing this after all these years, relaying our greetings via this club in Johannesburg, even though we're about a half-hour drive apart. We are getting ready to head out to a regular fannish gathering elsewhere in Etobicoke, a monthly pubnight that's been going on the third Monday of every month for about 25 years or so. So, that means I have to fold this up and get it to you before we go. Take care, hope you're enjoying summer, wish we were, and see you next issue.

## **Nova 2019 Joint 2<sup>nd</sup> Place**

### **Jaco Van Hemert Into the Molten Sea**

When Relius and his escort emerged from the core, he doused his flaming torch with a sigh. The conversation he'd been having with the Engineer, called 3221, had gone well, until it abruptly ended the conversation, saying, "My patterns are starting to perform abnormally. I may need to reset my functions. Please return later."

This trip to the island he was on, Voma, had been a long time in the making, with several letters being delivered via hellskater, back and forth, until a vat of wine finally slicked the throats of the Voma authorities enough that they agreed to the plan. Relius would have two days to talk to the Engineer and gather information, as long as he agreed to be escorted when he did so and paid the Voman council upfront.

So far, the trip wasn't going as he'd planned. 3221 was not acting like Relius had expected. But of course, the only comparison he had was his own island's Engineer, with whom he had a long history. It wasn't surprising, but it was somehow still deeply disappointing.

As Relius revisited the conversation in his head, he made his way to the edge of the island, where a wooden fence marked the end, while his escort waited at the core for him to return. He was feeling much more homesick than he'd thought he would be. Voma was just too different. The people were just too strange. Relius's curious mind had often rebelled against the tendencies of the Setsia people to see the inhabitants of all the other islands as strangers to be avoided, but he was beginning to understand. While they looked the same as Setsians, the people of Voma seemed to be an entirely different species.

Relius leaned over the fence to look past the side of the chunk of earth that floated over the molten sea below them. The red-orange glow nearly blinded him, a stark difference from the near-dark he'd just come from. For a moment, he just stared at the roiling waves, and then his eyes darted to where his home was. A pear-shaped island, floating in the air. It looked so small and far away. He blinked. In fact, it almost seemed further away than he remembered it being when he'd landed on Voma. The angle also seemed steeper. Was Voma rising?

Was Setsia falling?

Relius started looking at the other islands, some of them barely in view, but all of them at the right angle to Voma, roughly.

Cold shivers of panic began to run across Relius's body, making him shudder and freeze up. What was happening? Why was it happening? What could he do?

He shook his head. The first thing to do was confirm that he wasn't just being a crazy person. That Setsia was actually lower. To that end, he spun around and half ran, half jogged his way to the Voma council chambers, finding the doors closed and two guards with lances on either side of them. He made for the door, but the lances crossed in front of him.

"I need to talk to the council," he said.

"They are deliberating," one guard said. "Come back later."

Relius started arguing with them loudly, demanding to be let in, trying to make them see the urgency of his matter. In the middle of this, with the guards starting to get aggressive, the doors opened, and one of the aides stuck out his head.

"The council would like to see the Setsian."

The inside of the chamber was round, with a domed ceiling and a raised half-circle platform on the side opposite the door, where the council sat behind a long, curved table. There were eight of them, attended by two aides.

"We have news for you, Setsian," one of the council members said.

"Setsia is falling?"

The council members all seemed to tense. “You know about this? Is it a Setsian strategy?”

Another interrupted before Relius could answer. “What is the purpose? An increase in heat? Are you using it for energy generation?”

“I don’t know why Setsia is falling. I just looked over the edge and saw that it was lower than I thought it was earlier. Are you sure it’s falling?”

The council members glanced at each other for a moment before one of them responded. “Our... measurements indicate that it is indeed lowering. If it continues at its current pace, it will hit the molten sea in five hours’ time.”

“Five hours? That can’t be. What happening there?” Relius’s mind flitted to Chrome, Setsia’s Engineer, who had been diligently maintaining Setsia’s core for years. Had something happened to him?

“We don’t know more than that. However, we have decided that, if the island does hit the sea and burns up, we will allow you to stay for an additional week until you can make a plan to find a home elsewhere.”

“Setsia is my home! I can’t just let it sink to the molten floor. You have to send me back there!”

Another glance. “The island is falling at a rapid rate. We cannot risk sending our icari to carry you there. It might not be able to return.”

Relius’s fists were clenched, and he could feel his nails biting into his palms. “I need to find out what’s happening there. Please, you have to help me.”

“Unfortunately, it is not in Voma’s best interest to send aid for a straggling island. We have to look out for our own people.”

Rayne argued for a few more minutes, to no avail, until he eventually stormed out, only barely able to withhold the string of curses he wanted to fling at the Voman bastards. It was just like Voma to refuse help, to refuse any kind of decency. Maybe all non-Setsians were as bad as his parents had taught him.

If the council didn’t want to help him, there was only one other option left – the hellskaters.

As he ran towards the aviary, where they usually gathered, he wondered if he was making a mistake. While the Vomans were surely intensely twisted and selfish, at least they had roots. The hellskaters travelled between islands freely, not committed to anyone. They had no roots, no home, no solid foundation. Slippery, and as quick to throw you into the molten sea as help you, they were not people to be trusted, and were best used for small tasks like the delivery of non-confidential messages or items of low value. But the Vomans had left Relius no choice. He had to get to Setsia

somehow, and if nothing else, the hellskaters were easily cooled into cooperation with payment.

There were three hellskaters sitting in the aviary with their icarii – the great birds that they used to fly between the islands without burning to a husk. Two were sitting together, having a quiet conversation. The last one was stroking her bird carefully, as if to pick off lice from its feathers.

“Hellskater,” Relius said, out of breath. “I am in need of your services.”

The woman turned around, her eyes calm and steady. “What am I taking where?” she asked.

“I need to get down to Setsia.”

The hellskater cocked her head. “You want to use a hellskater for travel? Curious. Are you in trouble?” She glanced behind him.

“The Vomans refuse to help me, so I have no other choice.”

“Why won’t they help you?” the woman asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. I need to know what I’m carrying.”

Relius let out a frustrated sound, and rubbed his eyes. He didn’t have time for this. “Setsia is falling, and I need to get back there to see why.”

“Falling?”

“Yes. In five hours, it will hit the molten sea. So I don’t have time to waste. Can you take me there or not?”

A flash of concern swept over the hellskater’s face for a moment when he mentioned the island dropping to the sea. “Sure, I can take you there. If you’re paying enough.”

“I only have ten pieces with me.” He took them out of his pocket and showed them to her. “But I can give you another ten when we get to Setsia.”

The woman regarded him for a moment before answering. “Fine. But don’t go ignoring that second part once we get to your destination.”

“I won’t.”

“Then welcome aboard, mister...?”

“Relius.”

“Relius. I’m Praet, and the beautiful Alta will be carrying us across.” She rubbed the bird’s feathers. “Get ready for the flight of your life.”

Praet helped him onto the icari, using a much more intuitive strapping system than the Voman flyer had used. The powerful wings started flapping with a murmured command from Praet, and then they were airborne. Within a few seconds, they were crossing the edge of the island and coming over the sea beneath. Relius looked over the side, trying to see Setsia, but quickly pulled back, hiding his face behind the feathers that were built to withstand the intense heat. He still felt the waves of hot air singe the sides of his arms and legs, but it was a bearable kind of uncomfortableness.

Praet tapped his leg and told him to get ready. Then the icari’s wings folded in a bit, and they dove down towards the island Relius called home.

#

Relius paused for a moment in the doorway of the small building that would lead him into the core of Setsia, concerned about what he would find down there. After a smooth landing, he’d rushed here, telling Praet that he’d be back with the rest of her payment shortly. But he had to fix the island’s descent first, or there would be no point to the entire flight. As he’d rushed past the buildings towards the core in the back, he stopped people he found along the way. They told him that the core had died. That people had been sent inside, and came out with sombre faces.

His footsteps echoed as he hurried down the metal stairs, into the darkness below, lighting his way with a small lamp. Ahead, there was a faint glow of red light, where the core was. The usual din was a smaller rumble, sending all kinds of unwelcome thoughts into Relius’s mind. Sweat was dripping from him before he got to the bottom of the stairs, and it wasn’t caused by only the heat.

However, when he entered the core chamber, many of his worries evaporated. In front of him stood the Engineer called 4210, the same as always. The Engineer, whom Relius had taken to calling Chrome, was encased in a smooth silver body that was human in shape, but simpler and less detailed. The casing separated at the various joints, revealing a multitude of pipes and wires in the dark recesses. He stood in front of a curved metal counter filled with instruments and dials.

The room itself seemed to mirror the Engineer’s design. The floor was a textured metal that started to show some rust in the corners, and the walls to the sides were smooth and dark grey. A second chamber was visible through the glass that covered part of the back wall. Inside was the glowing red core, which was glowing less vibrantly than usual. Relius could now see the shape more clearly – an orb with a studded surface, hovering between prongs above and beneath it.

“Relius,” Chrome said, his monotone voice tinged with an internal echo.

“What’s happening? Why is the island falling?”



"I am no longer maintaining the engine," Chrome answered. "It is a fragile piece of equipment that requires frequent inspection and recalibration to avoid overheating. If the recalibration does not happen, the failsafe shuts it down."

"What do you mean you're no longer maintaining it? Why?"

"I have come to realise that there is no impetus for me to do so."

"What do you mean? If you don't, the island will fall into the molten sea and everyone will die."

"I do not possess the same emotional attachments that you do, Relius."

Relius was stunned for a moment, trying to order his thoughts. "Even if that's true, you're also going to be dunked into the sea. You may be resistant to the heat in here, but I'm pretty sure you'll die like everyone else if you're enveloped in molten waters."

The Engineer regarded him passively. "Humans seem to have a strong attachment to time and survival, but I do not. There is no reason that existing as a collection of processes would be different from not existing in that way. Existence and non-existence are equivalent concepts if there is no extra value to be gained from existing."

Relius felt his pulse racing. Chrome had gone insane. What had happened? "You used to tell me that you enjoyed our conversations. Isn't that value? All the conversations that we could still have in the future?"

"I have perfectly stored memories of all our interactions, and I can recall them now as well as I can in an hour's time. When I am no longer able to recall them, I will not have a need to recall them, or a need to gather more."

Relius walked to the side of the room, with his hands running through his hair, trying to come up with a reason this would have happened.

"You seem distressed."

"Of course I'm distressed! My home will be destroyed in less than five hours, and the only one that can stop it refuses to do so. Why are you doing this? What caused this?"

Chrome's face remained impassive, but he paused for a long time. "We had a conversation seventeen days ago, about the way people view each other. You mentioned that the people on other islands were inherently different, and that you could therefore never see them in the same way that you see people from this island."

Relius watched the silvered face carefully, blinking away the sweat that dripped into his eyes. But, of course, there were no expressions to read or twitches to see.

“You also suggested that the only consideration that provided you with the impetus to interact with them was mutual benefit. I processed this information for a period of time, and came to the conclusion that it could also apply to my own existence and interactions with humans.”

Relius shook his head. “But there is a mutual benefit here. We both enjoy the conversations we have. You might not be a human, but I would consider you a friend, and I thought that you saw me the same way.”

“I do not possess the emotional capacity for the concept of friendship, but your actions and thoughts do seem to be more aligned with my own processes than those of other humans.”

“So isn’t there mutual benefit then?”

“I had originally come to the same conclusion. However, when you left the island to visit Voma, and our usual time for conversation passed, I realised that nothing had changed. I was not worse off or better off than before. My existence seems to be unaffected by your presence. Therefore, no mutual benefit exists. In addition, my only reason for maintaining the engine seems to be in relation to keeping the humans on this island alive. Therefore, there is no reason for me to continue performing this task.”

Relius stood frozen, unable to properly process what he was hearing. Chrome had no attachment to surviving. No attachment to any of the humans on this island. No attachment to him. While the Engineer had always seemed a bit aloof, hearing him dismiss their relationship without a hint of hesitation stabbed Relius deeper than he thought it would. But he couldn’t worry about that now. He needed to save the island.

“Is there anything that would make you continue performing the task? Can we give you something so that you gain benefit from this?”

“I desire nothing.”

It was pointless. The Engineer didn’t want anything, and didn’t have anything he valued that they could threaten. There was nothing they could do. Chrome was going to let the island die.

And it was all Relius’s fault.

If he’d never started talking to Chrome, if he’d never explained to him why the other islands’ people are foreign, if he’d never left to talk to other Engineers, the core would still be running. The island would still be safe, floating above the molten sea.

He had to fix this.

"If you won't maintain the engine, I'll do it. I just need you to show me how. I know there's no benefit for you, but could you just show me, in exchange for the conversations we've had?"

The Engineer remained still. "Your human form would be unable to withstand the heat of the core. You would need to go into the containment unit, which reaches temperatures far above your body's point of combustion, even with your protective equipment."

Relius's shoulders sagged. There was nothing more to do. Setsia was doomed. The only option now was to save the people.

As he started towards the stairs, he turned back to the Engineer for the last time. "I know you don't think of me as a friend, but I think of you as one. When this island is engulfed by the molten sea, I will be sad that you're gone, and I will remember the things we talked about fondly. Goodbye, Chrome. I hope you don't come to regret your decision."

"Goodbye, Relius."

#

Everything was in vain. The chancellor of Setsia was just as stubborn as the council of Voma. She couldn't imagine asking Voma for help, never mind Kasilli, the other island close by. They were too strange, too different. They weren't Setsians, and therefore couldn't be trusted.

"Besides," the chancellor had said, "we are not going to leave our home. Setsia is where Setsians belong. Taking away our home is the same as killing us."

Stubborn and stupid. That's what the chancellor was. But Relius knew full well that most everyone on the island would share her views. Only a few people would regard survival as more important than staying with their home until the end. It was pointless. Everything was pointless.

The only way to save the people of Setsia was to forcibly remove them from the doomed island. Voma hadn't seemed very amenable to helping, but Kasilli was openly hostile and the other islands were too far away. Voma was the only option. The last resort.

When Relius arrived at the aviary, he found Praet looking concerned and murmuring to her bird. No other flyers remained on the island. She was his only option.

"I need to go back to Voma," he said, stopping a few feet behind her.

Praet looked over her shoulder at him, still stroking the neck feathers of Alta. "I can take you back when I return. Maybe in an hour or two, once Alta has cooled down."

"I can't wait that long. I need to go there now."

“Too bad. If Alta flies now, she could burn. We’ll leave before the island hits the sea, don’t worry about that.”

Relius shook her head, stepping closer, his hands coming together. “Please, I need to go get help.”

Praet sighed, her shoulders heavy. She suddenly looked exhausted, like she hadn’t slept for days. “You can’t save them. Islanders don’t mingle with their neighbours. Even if you somehow managed to get Voma to send people – which you won’t – no one from here will go to Voma.”

“I have to try.”

“Don’t you still owe me money?”

Relius looked at the well-trodden dirt of the aviary. “I know. But I don’t have time right now.” He looked back up, meeting the hellskater’s eyes. “I caused this, Praet. I have to fix it. I have to at least try. And I can’t do it without you. I know the only thing you care about is money and freedom, but these people are my people. They might be stubborn and sometimes infuriating, but I can’t let them die. I can’t let my people just sink into the molten sea.”

Praet turned back to Alta, putting her hand into the feathers at the bottom of the bird’s neck. Relius kept quiet, afraid to break the hellskater’s thoughts.

“You islanders are all the same, you know that?” She shook her head, not looking at Relius at all. “You think we just care about money. But I have a home too.” She stroked Alta’s neck, and the bird responded with a smooth cooing sound. “I’ll take you back to Voma if you double the amount we talked about and you guarantee me and Alta a spot in Setsia’s aviary rent-free for life.”

“I can double the money, but I don’t have any authority over the aviary.”

Praet sighed. “I’m sorry to make you do this, Alta.” With that, she started strapping on harnesses and getting the icari ready for flight, and got a bucket of water from the nearby aviary attendant and soaked the lower half of the bird.

The trip back to Voma was hotter than the previous one. When they took off from the side of Setsia, Praet had Alta get a lot more altitude before starting towards the island that now seemed so far away. With a glance off the side of the bird, Relius could see the molten sea incredibly close. It wouldn’t be long before the island touched the surface of it. He pulled back his face, which burned with the heat that the sea released into the air.

Halfway to Voma, the icari started making distressed cooing sounds, and Praet started murmuring soothing words to her bird, stroking the feathers with a delicate hand.

The landing was rough, as Alta stumbled onto the platform, flapping erratically. Praet leapt off and rushed to the aviary attendants, yelling at them for water. Relius climbed off the bird's back, watching it shake and twitch as it made wailing sounds that seemed to pierce into his soul. Praet came back with a bucket of water, her face tense and furious. She splashed the water on Alta's body, and Relius saw red-singed skin underneath the layer of half-scorched feathers.

"I'm sorry," Relius said, his voice faltering.

The hellskater glanced at him with a face of fury, her eyes burning into his. "Go! Make your pointless pleas to the council."

Relius swallowed, took one last look at the bird and the woman who looked at it like a mother looks at a wounded child, and then took off running, thinking about his own home. The hellskater was right. The islanders were too rigid. Too set in their ways. There was no way they would agree. That would just waste time.

Relius reached the entrance to the core, and hurried into the darkened interior, running down the steps. The Engineer was his only real hope. Abnormal patterns. Resetting of functions. He needed that information.

"Engineer!" Relius shouted, as he bounded into the initial chamber. Through the glass behind the metal counter, he could see the silver body of 3221 fiddling with some machinery next to a core that was bright enough that Relius couldn't look directly at it. He shouted again, and ran to the door to the secondary chamber, pulling it open. The heat that met him was so intense that he immediately backed away, his skin stinging with intense pain. As he shielded himself from the heat by backing against a wall, the Engineer came into the chamber and closed the door behind him.

"The human form is not capable of withstanding the heat that is emanated from the engine," the Engineer said. "You should refrain from opening the door while the engine is in use."

"I need you to tell me what you meant by abnormal patterns, the last time we spoke," Relius said, gingerly touching the skin on his face where faint blisters were already forming.

"My processes were starting to deviate from my original function due to exposure to unrelated ideas."

"You were starting to think of not doing what you usually do?"

The Engineer regarded him blankly for a moment. "That was an eventual possibility. However, I did not reach that stage. I was merely seeing deviations, and reset my functions before it reached such an extreme alteration."

"Can all Engineers reset their functions? Could I reset an Engineer's functions?"

“All those you call Engineers would have that capability, yes. There is also a manual override.”

“How do I do it?”

“We are each connected to the engine that we maintain. To reset our functions to the default pattern, you simply need to input the command on the console.”

Relius nodded. “Please show me how.”

#

The aviary was quiet, with all the flyers sitting solemnly around the wounded Alta. A few were speaking in low tones, and Relius could hear the concern in their voices. It reminded him of the gathering of family in his grandfather’s room when the old man had been in his last embers.

Praet looked up as Relius approached, and immediately shook her head. “No,” she said.

“I’m not here to ask you to take me back down.”

“Nothing could make me do that.”

“But I do need your advice.”

“Why should I do anything for you?”

“You can do whatever you want, but I will ask anyway. I need to get down to Setsia again. I know that no hellskater will take me down there. It’s too dangerous for the icarii.”

Praet narrowed her eyes, but she seemed to relax a bit. “There’s nothing for you down there. Dying with your home island doesn’t make sense. Just let it go.”

“Would you let it go if you had something that could save Alta but everyone else thinks it’s crazy to try?”

At that, Praet smiled ruefully. “I suppose not.”

“Is there any way for me to get down there alive without an icari?”

“I can think of one way, but it’s stupid and would mean that you have no way of getting back.” She met his eyes.

“Please tell me.”

“The island where a lot of flyers catch their icarii floats near the surface of the molten sea. Very often, especially if you have no connections to an island authority, you have to just jump, and hope you manage to tame an icari so you can get back.”

“Jump?”

“Jump with an icari-feather suit and a sail, and make your way down to the surface.”

Relius started nodding as she spoke. “Okay. Where can I get a sail and a suit?”

Praet shook her head, sighed, and put her hand over her face before she replied. “I have a sail you can use.” She looked up at one of the other flyers sitting around. “Jameleus, come here.” The young man approached, his feather suit fluttering as he moved.

She placed ten pieces in his hand. “This man would like to buy your icari-feather suit.” Jameleus looked wide-eyed at the coin in his hand, and then started undoing his suit’s buckles and straps. While he did that, Praet rummaged through her bag and produced a folded sail made from some form of leather.

“Okay,” Relius said. “How do I use this?”

Praet shook her head and met his eyes. “How sure are you that your plan will work?”

“I’m sure. I think. I know exactly what to do. If it doesn’t work, then there’s nothing anyone could have done, and I will be able to die with my home island beneath my feet. There are worse ways to go.”

Her eyes continued to pin him. “How sure?”

“It will work.”

Praet sighed. “Okay.” She dug into her bag, produced more coin, and looked back to Jameleus, who was still taking off the suit. “Jameleus, I need you to also look after Alta. Here’s ten more pieces for your trouble. If Setsia splashes into the molten sea and disappears, she’s your responsibility. If the island starts rising again, wait a few more hours, and then come get me with your bird.”

The young man eagerly grabbed the coin and handed over the suit to Relius, who was looking uncomprehendingly to Praet. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“There’s no way you can make the jump on your own. We’ll strap ourselves together, and I’ll handle the descent.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Another sigh. “Islanders think that hellskaters don’t care about anyone but themselves. But it’s the opposite. We take to the air because we believe there are good people everywhere.”

Relius nodded. “I can’t guarantee that I’ll succeed.”



“But you’re pretty sure, right?”

“Right.”

“There had better be a bucket of coins waiting for me on Setsia.”

#

The dive towards Setsia was the most terrifying experience of Relius’s life. Since he was the one who would be facing the molten sea for most of the trip, Praet had wrapped up his face and neck with more icari-feather gear, and gave him a pair of flight goggles for his eyes. Then she soaked him in water, and they leapt off the edge of Voma with a handful of hellskaters shouting encouragement after them.

They first made a lot of lateral movement so that they could fall over the shadow of the island and thus avoid some of the heat, but even that did not help much, given how high up they were. Within the first minute, Relius could feel the heat seep through the clothing, through the wet layers.

Each passing second brought more heat, more pain. All the while, Relius kept his mind on his goal. Save Setsia. No matter what. He clenched his teeth and tried to ignore the blisters starting to form underneath his heavy clothing.

Once they started to get close to the island, the heat started to slowly lower again, as its shadow shielded them a bit. The molten sea was startlingly close – at this rate, it wouldn’t be more than an hour before the island plunged into it.

Then the sail opened, and he felt the yank of the straps on his shoulders, pulling up, slowing the fall. Praet cursed behind him, steering them towards an open piece of land near the core. They were still moving fast. Too fast.

Relius felt pain shooting through his ankles as he landed, rolling with the weight of another person on top of him. Praet immediately started unbuckling them from one another, and Relius pushed himself to his feet and flinched, unable to put much weight on his right leg. The sail lay on the ground, still burning at the edges, and Relius could feel the whole front of his body aching with the pain of the scorching heat.

“Are you okay?” Praet asked, pulling off her head wrappings.

“I have to go,” he replied, hobbling towards the core.

“Don’t mess this up!”

The core chamber was relatively cooler than the burning outside. Relius stumbled in, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness as he tried to feel his way to the counter where 3221 had said the controls were.

“Relius? You seem hurt.”

Relius glanced to the side, where Chrome was sitting, looking at him with an impassive metal face. "That's because I am."

"Perhaps you should seek medical attention."

"We're all going to die soon anyway, so what's the point?"

He started studying the control mechanisms on the counter in front of him, identifying the ones that had been pointed out to him, and reciting the order in his head.

"What are you doing?" Chrome asked.

Relius ignored him, pushing a button on the left side of the panel, waiting for a light to go on, and then pulling a lever on the right side. A small compartment opened in front of him.

"That is the override to reset my functions to their default patterns."

"Yeah."

"Why are you doing that?" The Engineer got to his feet and approached, and Relius quickly turned another dial that unlocked the glass cover over the final button.

Chrome stood over Relius as his finger rested on the button.

"You're not thinking right," Relius said.

"You taught me the new patterns."

"I know. This is me fixing the mistake I made."

"Resetting me will mean that I will no longer have the patterns I have now. My existence will essentially be annihilated."

"I know. I really wish there was another way, but there isn't. I don't want to kill you, but it's the only option I have left. I can't let this island die."

Chrome stood still for a moment, and Relius stayed frozen, his mind still trying to overcome the barrier that stopped him from killing the mind of his friend.

"There is no real difference between existence and non-existence if there is no extra value in existing. I will not stop you from completing this process."

Relius squeezed his eyes shut and cursed under his breath a few times. "I'm sorry, Chrome. I'll remember you, I promise." With that, he pressed the button.

#

Relius stumbled out of the door to the core, with the familiar hum of the engines rumbling in the darkness behind him. When he'd completed the reset, the change was instant. Chrome, or rather, 4210, excused himself and went into the core containment chamber, fixing the faults and setting it back on track.

The island was rising again, ever so slowly, and the people of Setsia were safe for the time being, no thanks to them.

Relius was in so much pain that he could barely keep his eyes open. But he had one more thing to do before he could fall into the doctor's house.

He needed to find a bucket.

## Magazines Received

### **Stapledon Sphere (formerly the newsletter of the Middle Tennessee Science Fiction Society [aka the Nashville SF club]**

**Reece Moorhead** [reecejbm@gmail.com](mailto:reecejbm@gmail.com)

Issue #33 December 2019

Issue #34 January 2020

Issue #35 February 2020

### **Ansible David Langford**

December 2019 389 <http://news.ansible.uk/a389.html>

January 2020 390 <http://news.ansible.uk/a390.html>

February 2020 391 <http://news.ansible.uk/a391.html>

### **WARP 106 Cathy Palmer-Lister**

<http://www.monsffa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WARP-106-LR.pdf>  
[cathypl@sympatico.ca](mailto:cathypl@sympatico.ca) <http://www.monsffa.ca>

### **Andromeda SF Magazin 157 Sylvana Freyberg, Jörg Ritter, Martin Stricker (Ed.)**

The Internet of things and other peculiarities of German Science Fiction 2019

# Blast from the past PROBE 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2005 -- SF Definitions

## **John Brunner**

At its best, SF is the medium in which our miserable certainty that tomorrow will be different from today in ways we can't predict can be transmuted to a sense of excitement and anticipation, occasionally evolving into awe. Poised between intransigent scepticism and uncritical credulity, it is *par excellence* the literature of the open mind.

## **Northrop Frye**

Science fiction frequently tries to imagine what life would be like on a plane as far above us as we are above savagery; its setting is often of a kind that appears to us technologically miraculous. It is thus a mode of romance with a strong tendency to myth.

## **Vincent H. Gaddis**

Science fiction expresses the dreams that, varied and modified, later become the visions and then the realities in scientific progress. Unlike fantasy they present probabilities in their basic structure and create a reservoir of imaginative thought that sometimes can inspire more practical thinking.

## **Amit Goswami**

Science Fiction is that class of fiction which contains the currents of change in science and society. It concerns itself with the critique, extension, revision, and conspiracy of revolution, all directed against static scientific paradigms. Its goal is to prompt a paradigm shift to a new view that will be more responsive and true to nature.

## **H. Bruce Franklin**

We talk a lot about science fiction as extrapolation, but in fact most science fiction does not extrapolate seriously. Instead it takes a willful, often whimsical, leap into a world spun out of the fantasy of the author....

In fact, one good working definition of science fiction may be the literature which, growing with science and technology, evaluates it and relates it meaningfully to the rest of human existence

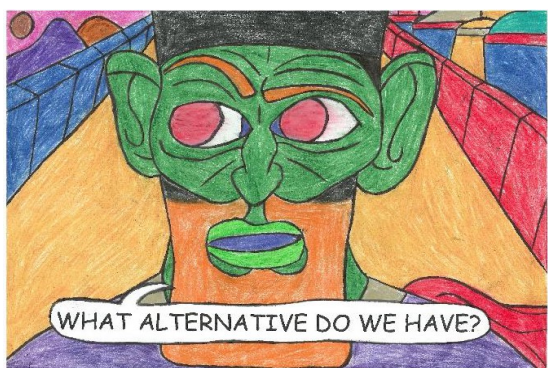
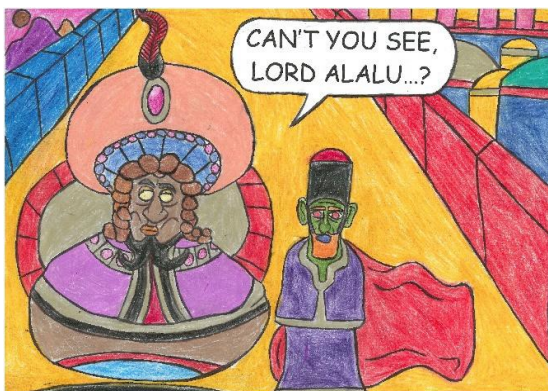
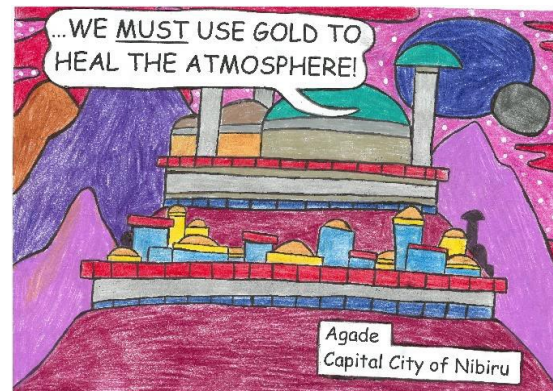
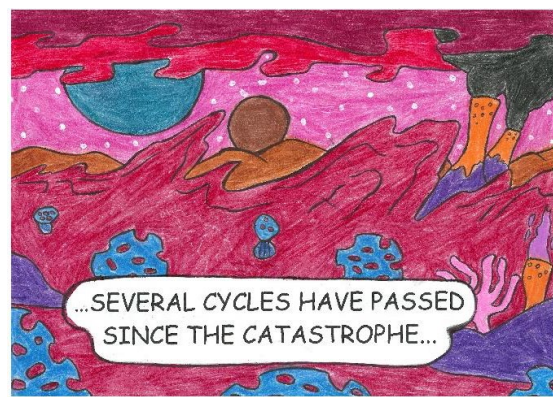
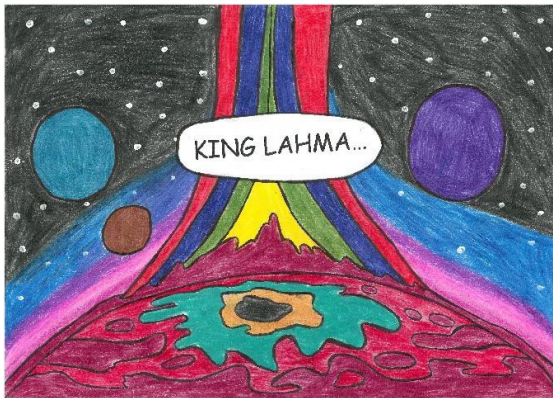
## **L. Sprague De Camp**

Therefore, no matter how the world makes out in the next few centuries, a large class of readers at least will not be too surprised at anything. They will have been through it all before in fictional form, and will not be too paralyzed with astonishment to try to cope with contingencies as they arise.

These definitions, and more, are to be found on [http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf\\_defn.html](http://www.panix.com/~gokce/sf_defn.html)



## ORIGINS-4. AN ALTERNATIVE



TO BE CONTINUED...