

# PROBE 184

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA





## PROBE 184

June 2020

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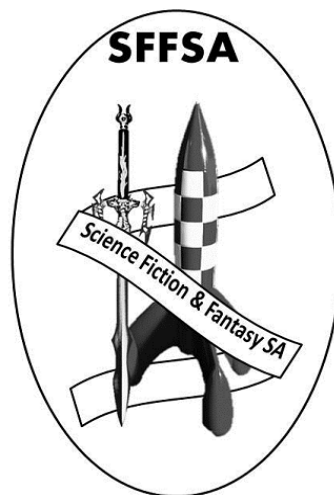
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# Editorial

# Gail

PROBE 184 is late. Our chairman says we have missed an issue but I hope to catch up by the end of the year. The good news first: I managed to find PROBE 182 which was indeed still in the Post box which had not been opened since I posted it there. My bad for not checking that there was a collection time on the box. But it was retrieved and posted so I hope it has arrived by now.

The bad news is that our world is under siege by the Covid-19 Virus. All round the world we are sitting in Lockdown and really have no idea when, or even if life will ever go back to what we were used to before.



I am one of the lucky people who has been able to work from home and while this is good I somehow have neglected to finish this issue of PROBE timeously.

This issue contains 3 of the top 10 stories from Nova 2019 and a very short one from James Dryja. It also has the winning story from the RiLL 2018 competition, fortunately translated into English from Italian.

The Blast from the Past is interesting. I was looking for something to use and I came across an article from 2011 written when William Shatner had turned 80. I wondered where he was now and I “Googled “ him and to my surprise there was an interview from him, now 89, giving his views on the Covid-19 virus. He looks, and sounds, very good for his age and is obviously still very able to give his ideas about the crisis we are undergoing.

We have not been able to meet with our fellow SFFSA friends since March and we have missed doing so. But we have set up a SFFSA WhatsApp group and have at least been able to keep in contact with those who have joined it. We spent some time going through the alphabet on Authors and Books and have now moved onto cover art. Once again I have been interested to see just how much SF and Fantasy there is available and how different people have been able to come up with books and authors even with the letters “X”, “Y” and “Z”.

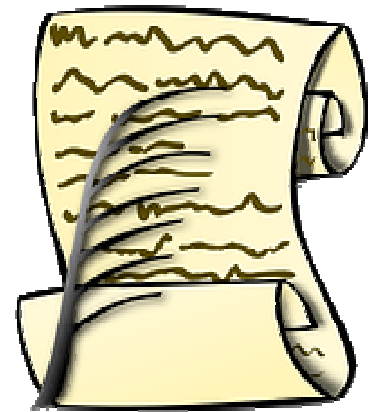
I was also lucky to be able to watch on my computer the launch of the SpaceX rocket “Dragon” and its subsequent docking with the International Space station. And proud to think that Elon Musk originally hails from South Africa. You will also see that I have added a small article on the Mars mission that SpaceX are determined to launch. I think you would have to be a very special sort of human being to want to risk your life on a journey to a foreign planet.

I hope this issue reached you in good health. Take care and stay safe



# Chairman's Note

Well hello all you dear readers on what is probably going to be the coldest night of the year so far. This morning it said -1... Real Feel -6, the wind was biting this morning. Yes, we really are in the middle of winter now and at least it being the middle of July means things should start warming up from now... never soon enough for my liking. As you can tell, I



love summer with the hot sun, open windows, little clothing and being able to enjoy any time of the day or night. I know some love winter, each to his or her own, they can enjoy this; I'll just wait a couple of months.

You may have noticed we missed our last Probe, no surprise there with the thing in the world that everyone is thinking or talking about. So COVID-19 has been with the world for the past 8 months or so, and it has taken the world by storm, literally. At over 13 million infected, no cure and a high infection rate, things aren't looking great. They say the sooner they can find a vaccine the sooner we can get over this, but this could still be years away, so this virus could potentially be around for a long.

The thing that I really find interesting goes back to the TV series Counterpart. For those of you who regularly attended our monthly meetings you may recall that last year (or was it the year before?) we showed a few of these episodes. I am not sure how many recall the background behind the show, but as a quick recap:

After discovering that the spy agency he works for is hiding a gateway to a parallel dimension, a low-level UN bureaucrat in Berlin is thrust into a shadow world of intrigue and danger.

The parallel worlds were created in 1987 by East German scientists, and the thing that I find so interesting is that the show came out in 2017, and the “

reason there is a cold war between the two worlds is because in 1996, “a deadly flu virus kills 5% of the one world’s population”, which the one side believes the other released. So go figure, a TV show came up with a premise almost 2 years before something like the real thing actually hit our own world. So how fluky is that?

We see a lot of things go from science fiction to science fact, goes to show that not everything that they come up with is good for the future, and things like viruses (think Andromeda Strain, Omega Man, 12 Monkeys, or any zombie movie) are certainly things that could happen, you just never know. One could just wish that more science fiction things could become science fact sooner to help with this. Recall Fantastic Voyage (1966) where scientists are made microscopic in order to enter a human body to fix it? Could be handy to see the actual virus up close and personal to understand and find a cure. Or Stargate with the sarcophagus that can cure any illness. Not sure how that could work if there are only a few of them and 8 billion people to fix.

Hmm, seems there are quite a lot of movies that deal with diseases and either living with it in the aftermath of it wiping out civilisation, or trying to cure it before it becomes widespread. Wikipedia even has a page of fictional diseases from literature, movies or even games

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_fictional\\_diseases](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_fictional_diseases)), so yes, certainly seems to be quite a common idea in many science fiction areas. I’m sure many avid readers could probably come up with many books that also use something like this. Let us just hope none of the serious viruses that they have come up become something real. I quite enjoy life on the planet as it is now, a pandemic of something worse that wipes out a much larger portion of the world’s population would really put a damper on things.

One of the links I was looking at mentioned some other movies like The Seventh Seal (1957) dealing with the Black Death plague, the Resident Evil movies (some of my favourites, but I suppose more for zombie lovers, still related to a virus created by a corporation), Carriers (2009) where it is now too late and they worry about becoming easily infected, Blindness (2008) where the city suddenly becomes blind,



and the last one I recalled from memory The Last Days (2013) where the virus causes agoraphobia so bad it kills people within seconds. Ok, so where are the movies where there is terrible virus, and we overcome it and it makes us stronger? I suppose that doesn't make as interesting a movie as death and destruction. Ah well, at least they are only in the movies; let us hope they stay there.

Cheers

Andrew

## Ana in the Field of the Dead

### by Maurizio Ferrero

Winner of the XXIV Trofeo RiLL (2018)

Translated by Paul Virgo

Ana was hunting vipers in the thick beech-tree forest. It was a thankless job, but a necessary one for survival. These reptiles were among the most common animals in the area around her home and definitely the easiest to catch. While rodents and birds were too elusive to be caught without proper tools, the vipers liked to bask in the midday sun, coiled around big rocks or hiding under the strawberry bushes that grew all over the forest.

Naturally, it was necessary to be focused on the job. Generally, the snakes were sleepy and none too reactive, but they were always ready to shoot off if they felt threatened. Mama had taught her that they were deaf and almost blind, but able to feel movements in the air and vibrations of the ground, so the best way to get near them without being noticed was to move calmly - one step at a time, never rushing, not taking any notice of whether the viper was looking in her direction. Ana was helped by the softness of her steps, as she moved around the forest barefoot and could feel the consistency of the soil before treading on it with all her weight. This was more of an obligation than a choice, because she did not have the material to make strong shoes, even if she had wanted to. She had learned that cork sandals lasted no longer than a few days before they started to fall apart due to the constant contact with the hard terrain and that making new ones each time was not worth it.

She had had a good hunt. She had captured five vipers in just a few hours in the morning and, after cutting off their heads, she had hung them on an old leather belt.

She started to feel hungry and, looking forward to a meal based on fresh meat, she promised herself to get more before she returned home. Gùgol, her trusted four-legged hunting partner, had already spotted some prey and, by keeping his ears and tail rigid, he was pointing towards it. He remained motionless; following the training Mama had given him over the years, and waited for Ana to become the predator.

The girl saw the viper's head pop out of a cluster of dark vegetation. She started to approach.

One step.

Another step.

Another step.

The viper moved slightly. Ana was paralysed for a few moments.

Then another step.

When she was near enough, she gripped her stick like a warrior would grip his favourite weapon. She thrust it through the air, faster than the reptile's sluggish reflexes.

The stick's forked tip nailed it to the ground and, while the animal writhed around, Ana got down to grip it behind its triangular head and cut it off with her knife.

She said a quick prayer, thanking the animal's spirit for having given its life to her and the spirit of the forked stick for not breaking at the key moment.

Smelling blood, Gùgol realised it was over and he could move again. He went up to his partner, cheerfully wagging his tail. Ana smiled at him, stroked his slender head and held out the viper that had just been killed. The dog grabbed it with his jaws and chewed, satisfied at having done his duty.

I've gotten good Mama, Ana thought as she returned home.

And yet, the girl knew that even the best can make mistakes.

It had happened to Mama.

"Always remember to say thanks, Ana. Nothing is free, not even that which belongs to no one. Everything in the world is possessed by something and the owners are not women or men. The wild forest has animals that live inside it, the ground has plants that feed from it, even the sun is possessed by the sky. And each time you take something that did not belong to you before, or something happens to help you, you must say thanks. Everything has a spirit, Ana. You, I, Gùgol, the fern, the rock and the roof of our house, and you must always show gratitude to the spirits".

"Does the field of the dead have a spirit too?" asked Ana.

"Yes, the field of the dead protects us from those who come from the Land Beyond, who we do not know and who do not know us and who take things without saying thanks. The field has always protected us with its spirit. Those who know what it is stay away and those who do not know it end up in the middle and die".

"But now and again you cross the field and go to the Land Beyond".

"I do so because I have to. Protection is a good thing, but solitude kills you, Ana. Out there, there are spirits that you cannot find here in our house. I go, I give thanks to them, and I bring them here to help us. The field allows small animals to enter our land, but the bigger ones meet the same fate as the men who try to cross it. Do you remember the nice pork you ate the other day? That came from the Land Beyond. If we stayed here forever, we wouldn't be able to have it".

Ana thought about Mama's words and, while she watched, Gùgol was excitedly sniffing around looking for the trail of prey.

"Will you show me how to cross the field one day?" Ana asked suddenly.

"One day... when you're older."

That was all the answer Mama gave her. They caught a couple of snakes together, giving thanks each time for what they had captured.

While they were returning home from the river, satisfied with the hunt, Gùgol pointed out another trail.

Mama signalled to Ana not to move and went in the direction indicated by the hound, gripping her forked stick. The woman stretched her neck and adjusted her focus several times, uncertain where the prey was. Only when she stopped to figure out whether the dog



had made a mistake, did a snake of a strange reddish colour, speckled black and white, fall from a tree and bite her right in the face, before vanishing in the grassy scrubs.

Ana ran to her mother, who fell to the ground. Her face, covered in little red holes around her right cheek, swelled up before her eyes.

“Mama! Mama!”, Ana shouted as she shook her while, a few steps away, Gùgol was furiously searching for the strange snake.

The dog did not find the animal and Mama died after a few minutes of agony.

Only after days of mourning and desperation did Ana realize that her mother had passed away before she had revealed the secret path to pass through the field of the dead.

She was trapped in her home.

Ana’s house stood by the river, under the old stone bridge. Once upon a time a railway had passed along the top of that bridge, but the deafening noise of the last train had been heard before Mama was born. Built out of brick and cement, the bridge had been almost completely absorbed by vegetation. None of it had fallen away and, despite many years of neglect, it was still there and had become a full-blown part of nature, like the climbing plants, the bushes and the old rocks that its solid paws stood on. High-tension trellises and old rusty pylons were still standing, even though the cables that connected them had disappeared long ago.

Ana used to ask her mother lots of questions about what those structures were, but even she could not explain. “Your grandma knew,” she would repeat each time, “she told me about them when I was young like you, but so much time has passed that I don’t remember.

“I only know that they belonged to the old Earth, to the times when women and men did not give thanks”.

“How did we lose it all?” Ana would ask then.

“People stopped thinking,” was always her mother’s answer.

Once back home, the girl revived up the embers of the fire, put a little water into an old pot from the Land Beyond and put it to boil. Then she took the skin off the vipers she had caught and, after squeezing out the blood, she put them in the water.

She ate a little stew, accompanied by some bitter pears, and she felt satisfied.

A little later she went to the river bank to wash her clothes and have a bath. While she was kneeling, focused on pounding a skirt against a smooth stone, she heard an explosion in the distance that made her jump. She looked in the direction of the forest where she had been hunting in the morning and saw a flock of terrorised birds take off in flight, followed by a strand of smoke that rose above the trees. Gùgol barked.

“The field has taken another one. We must go and give thanks,” she told the dog.

The bath would have to wait.

Ana knew perfectly well where the edges of the field of the dead were but, to be on the safe side, many years ago, her mother had marked some of the trees with incisions to show the frontier that must not be crossed. The field surrounded the whole area where Ana’s house stood, comprising the bridge, the river and the surrounding forest. Once Ana had asked if it was possible to safely arrive somewhere else by jumping into the river. Her mother shook her head. “No, dear. They put them under water too. The war ended a long time ago, but they are still there.”

Holding Gùgol by his lead to stop him getting to the forbidden area, Ana got as far as the edge and saw the source of the strand of smoke. The spirit of the field, which was sleeping under ground, had woken with the rage of a volcano when a careless traveller had set foot on her. As proof to what had happened, Ana could see the shreds of the man's body scattered for many metres around a crater that had formed amid the dirt. Her stomach turned. Even though it was something she had seen dozens of times, she had never gotten used to it.

She tied Gùgol to a nearby tree and then she kneeled down. She raised her arms to the sky and thanked the field for having protected her once again. Deep down, she thought that she would never know if the poor guy who ended up in that trap was a bad man; then she shivered, terrified, when she thought about whether the spirit had heard that disrespectful thought.

She stood up and ran towards home, taking Gùgol with her. She had nowhere else to go, but the child was growing and that golden cage was getting too small for her.

Night came and, with it, came the nightmares. This happened when the demands of survival made room for stillness and rest. Fortunately, it did not always happen, but that day the memories and the new victim of the field had disturbed her a great deal. She tried to get to sleep, comforted by the warmth of the blazing fire and the calm breathing of Gùgol beside her, but she was woken up many times by the vision of her mother's swollen face the moment before she died.

It was during those moments of nervous half-sleep that Ana realised something around her was different. She could smell a strange odour in the air, one which not even the smoke from the burning wood could cover. It was a bitter-sweet smell, of overripe fruit, of turned-over soil, of grass and sulphur. She had the bizarre sensation that she was being observed, something which was completely new to her, as in all her life she had only known her mother and her grandmother and she only had a vague recollection of the latter. She looked to see where Gùgol was, but the dog was sleeping in tranquillity. If the infallible-nosed hound - who was named by her grandmother, who said it was the name of something from ancient times that made it possible to find everything - was not agitated, then there was no reason for her to be.

She turned over under her blankets and tried to get to sleep, something which happened moments later.

But it didn't last long. Ana opened her eyes again when she felt something soft brush her cheek. Above her, there was a woman and she immediately took her for Mama, but it took only a moment for her to realise that it was someone else. She was young, a few years older than her, at most, but at the same time she seemed old and austere. Her shapely body and her delicate skin were strangely irregular, as if the limbs and some features had been hit, stretched or squeezed, but always in an imperceptible way. Her skin had deep scars and cuts that were still bleeding in some areas, around the joints of her hands, shoulders and knees.

But Ana could not take her eyes off her face. Its beauty was unique, with straight, steel-coloured hair and two eyes that sparkled like burning coal in the semi-darkness of the hut. The last thing she noticed, which instead of embarrassing her, gave her a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach, was that the bizarre woman was completely naked.

Ana did not scream. She was simply unable to because of the emotions and the questions whirling around in her head and her membranes.



“Even a chick has to work hard if it wants to fly. You can do, or die,” the strange woman said with a piercing voice that sounded like a metal scraping against stone. Then she kissed her. It wasn’t one of the kisses her mother used to give her on the cheek, or the forehead, or, occasionally, on the lips. The kiss was deep, invasive, lascivious but, at the same time, absurdly pleasurable. The sensation Ana had in the pit of her stomach intensified and became even more powerful when the woman started to run her hands over her shoulders, her side and on the child’s delicate skin. Her hands with long, metallic nails wandered to her inner thigh. Ana closed her eyes and screamed with all the strength she had in her body, but not out of pain or fear.

Gùgol barked. Ana opened her eyes.

The monstrous woman had disappeared, but Ana, with unexpected awareness, realised that she had met the spirit of the field of the dead. The sensation in the pit of her stomach, which she had felt intensely until moments ago, had turned into pain. She threw off the blanket and she saw a rivulet of blood running between her naked legs. Mama had said that sooner or later it would happen, she thought, while she looked at the crimson stain on the old straw mattress.

She made a decision.

“Come on Gùgol, you can do it. Not the snakes, don’t look for snakes! You know what you have to find!” Gùgol sniffed the air and Ana knew they were close. After nine days of failed attempts, the dog was starting to sense a new smell. Thinking again about the strange dream she’d had that night - was it really a dream? - she realized that those contraptions that blew people up in the field, those mines, must have a smell. The spirit who had visited her, and had made her experience the pleasures and pains of adulthood, had a very distinctive one. Why wouldn’t her manifestations in the physical world have them too? On the first day she walked along the edge of the field of the dead looking for a crater that was near enough. The remains of whatever it was that had passed by there, probably an animal, had become white bones a long time ago but the remnants of the explosion were still there. Ana held on to a tree and hooked a lacerated metal object with the long forked stick, secretly fearing that it might explode again. That didn’t happen. The girl sniffed but she didn’t smell anything unusual. She hoped that Gùgol’s more refined nose could.

The first attempts were complete failures with the hound insisting on following the trails of snakes, but now, after lengthy training, Ana realised something had changed.

Gùgol raised his ears, straightened his tail and headed for a thick wild bush. It was precisely the place where Ana had hidden the explosive under a thin layer of soil in the morning. She bent down, covered her dog in kisses and hugs and gave him a mouthful of dried meat to munch on. Gùgol slobbered all over her face to show his gratitude.

“Tonight we’ll go, my friend”.

The red of the sunset coloured the field of the dead. Everything was connected - the dying sun, the end of a new day, the blood of those annihilated by the mines, the blood Ana had shed on the night she came of age - everything led to that night. Soon, the canary would leave its cage. Had it learned to fly or would it fall? Even the spirits probably did not have an answer to this.

With Gùgol held tight on his lead with one hand, the stick in the other and a sack of supplies on her back, Ana took her first step over the edge and into the field.

She felt fresh, virgin grass tickle the sole of her naked feet and convinced herself that everything would be all right. After all, it was like hunting vipers.

One step at a time.

Just one step at a time.

Before she realised, she'd already taken 10 steps. She had another 60-odd more in front of her before she reached the trees on the other side of the field and, therefore, safety. Gùgol seemed tranquil.

One step at a time.

One step.

Another step.

Half way. Gùgol raised his ears and looked to his right. Ana prudently moved to the left, making the distance slightly longer, but making it safe.

Another step.

One more.

The sun would vanish from the horizon in less than 10 minutes. Ana realised that she would only see the night if she reached the other side.

She went around the hole caused by a past explosion.

Just a few metres to go. A big oak, the end of the journey, was just a few metres away.

A smashed human skull stood out in the area of a hole on her right. Ana took a deep breath.

Four more steps.

Three more.

Two more.

Click.

The feel of something sharp, of cold metal, that touched the sole of her left foot, lasted only a moment. Ana started to shake and her eyes welled with tears. The oak was in front of her.

She was so close.

"Why didn't you smell it, Gùgol?" she asked the dog in a choked voice. The hound put his tail between his legs, unable to understand the mistake he had made. Mama had taught her that the mines don't explode when trodden on, but when the trigger is released as the foot is raised. In any case, it was as if she were already dead.

Even if she decided to stay still, in a few hours she would get cramps, fall, and the field of the dead would have taken her too.

The little bird had tried to fly, but it had failed. Her brother, however, could still save himself.

Taking care not to move her left leg, she took off Gùgol's lead.

"Go, stupid, go!"

The dog whined and didn't move from where he was. Ana hit him with the stick, perhaps too delicately, because he still didn't move a muscle.

"Go away! Save yourself, you at least", she shouted with all the anger she had in her body.

She gave him another blow, and this time the dog listened to her. He went past the oak and she saw him disappear in the vegetation.

Ana decided that she would see the sun set one last time before she died. Watching the sun go down, she thanked it for having given her another day of light, she thanked the spirit of Gùgol, who had done everything possible to take her that far, and she thanked the spirit of the field too. She did not know why, but when the ancient men had stopped thinking and thanking, they created monstrosities like this place.

Then, suddenly, she realised the presence was there again. But there was something different about the spirit of the minefield, something that did not just regard her clear, sweet eyes, like coal consumed by flames. Ana breathed in, seeking the last fragment of smell in the spirit - she would never know if it was benign or malignant.

But she couldn't find it.

In that instant, the spirit had no smell.

Ana looked on with a puzzled expression, the woman nodded, and then she understood.

The girl looked at her left foot.

She lifted it.

Click.

Deafening silence.

No explosion.

The mine, corroded by the earth and degraded by time, was inert. The chemical inside had evaporated. That was why Gùgol had not smelt it.

Ana looked up, but the spirit of the field wasn't there anymore. She thanked her one last time, then, engulfed in the night, shot off to look for her dog.

*Maurizio Ferrero was born in 1987 in Vercelli, where he lives with his family and has an office job.*

*His free time is devoted to writing and role-play games. He has been an active member of Vercelli's La Stanza dei Sogni (The Room of Dreams) association, which works for the diffusion of intelligent play, for many years.*

*His fictional stories have featured in several anthologies; he has written adventures and settings in the role-play field, which have also been published by Italian publishers in the sector.*

*He won the Trofeo RiLL in 2016 (with "Everything starts from O") and in 2018 with "Ana nel Campo dei Morti", which came first out of the 348 stories submitted.*

The Trofeo RiLL is an Italian literary award for budding speculative-fiction writers. The contest has been run since 1994 by RiLL - Riflessi di Luce Lunare, a non-profit club based in Rome. Each year the Trofeo RiLL features around 300-350 short-story participants, from Italy and other countries. The winning entries are published annually in MONDI INCANTATI, anthologies that are edited and published directly by RiLL.

The Trofeo RiLL final awards ceremony takes place at Lucca Comics & Games, Italy's most important festival for festival of comics, illustration, speculative fiction, games and animation (it attracted more than 270,000 visitors in 2019).

Info: [www.rill.it](http://www.rill.it); [info@rill.it](mailto:info@rill.it)



Valeria de Caterini

## Books Received

### JonathanBall *Publishers*

Neal Stephenson Fall or Dodge in Hell Harper Collins UK R250.00

Marcus Chown The Magicians Faber and Farber R295.00

D.K Fields widow's Welcome Head of Zeus R340.00

P.C and Kirsten Cast Lost Head of Zeus R215.00

Tonke Dragt The Letter for the King Faber Factory Plus R190.00

## 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 #36 April 2020

Issue #37 May 2020

Issue #38 June 2020

**Ansible** David Langford

April 2020 392 <http://news.ansible.uk/a392.html>

May 2020 393 <http://news.ansible.uk/a393.html>

June 2020 394 <http://news.ansible.uk/a394.html>



**Dawn Melodie Rae**

**The Kitchen**

It figures, I thought. The advert seemed too good to be true.

“What do you mean, I have to share the kitchen?”

The little man, his rumpled shirt spotted with this morning’s breakfast, fiddled with his clipboard and wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“It’s nothing really,” he replied. “Just a village woman who comes in occasionally – very occasionally,” he added, “almost never. And really, Mr Gordon, you’re here to write. How much time will you spend in the kitchen?”

He did have a point. And there weren’t that many country cottages to rent on small sun-soaked islands.

“Maybe, but I don’t want to be bothered by some village woman. Write into the lease that if she becomes a nuisance I can cancel.”

“Now Mr Gordon, I can’t do that.” He tapped the clipboard with his grubby pen.

“Standard lease, you know. No alterations without the owner’s consent. And as I said, the owner is far away. It would delay things.”

He had me taped. I’d been too emphatic when I’d emailed that I needed a place urgently. Well, if the woman became disruptive, I would just abandon the cottage and the lease, and leave my agent to sort it out.

“Fine,” I muttered, “where do I sign?”

Handing me the old-fashioned key, he climbed back into his battered Ford and departed in a cloud of exhaust fumes. I pulled my own hired car – not much better than his – into the driveway and off-loaded my belongings. The midday heat made mockery of the long-sleeved shirts and warm socks filling one suitcase. I probably wouldn’t bother to unpack that one. But if the writing went well, my stay might extend into winter.

The entrance hall was dim, the only light coming from the end where the passage turned right, but at least it was cool. I opened the doors leading off on each side, and found a front room, sparsely furnished, and a dining room with a wonderful dark-wood table that would make a perfect office-cum-noveling-nest. Once I’d opened the curtains in each room, the hallway became friendlier. The agent must have been

quite sure I'd sign – he'd had someone in to clean. There wasn't a speck of dust anywhere.

The hall ended in a T-junction, the right arm leading through an open door to the kitchen. To the left was a small bathroom and the slightly larger bedchamber. The ancient bedstead groaned as I pummelled the mattress a few times. The bed might actually prove to be comfortable.

I wandered into that bone of contention, the kitchen. It was a fair size, plenty big enough for two people, and equipped with table and chairs, a dresser with sturdy white crockery, a stone sink in the far corner and terracotta flooring. The open fireplace seemed like it hadn't been used in a long time, and with temperatures soaring outside it would probably stay that way. The appliances were old but the refrigerator hummed quietly and the black-top stove gleamed.

The window over the sink looked out on a sandy yard with a few tubs of scruffy geraniums, and a small field with a cow or two drowsing in the shade of a distant tree. There was no one around, and I couldn't see any other cottages. So where was the woman who shared the kitchen? And why did she need to?

My writer's mind began composing a back story to explain the strange clause, and I played with it happily as I unpacked my few provisions into the pantry. If the stove didn't work, at least I had breakfast cereal and powdered milk to keep me going until I could shop.

And whatever the woman's story was, I'd hear it when I met her.

She was at the sink the next morning, and my first impression was that she was much younger than I had expected.

"Hello," I said, and she jumped, clutching her blouse with a sudsy hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"No, it's fine," she said. "I just wasn't expecting anyone – I didn't know..."

Her words caressed my ears with an unusual lilt and the eyes that turned my way were a most appealing shade of violet. She was exquisite.

"I thought the agent would have told you," I answered when I found my voice. She frowned slightly, annoyed it seemed at the lack of notice. "But it was quite sudden," I explained, "me taking the place. Was it you who cleaned the cottage?"

She turned back to take up a wet plate and put it in the rack before reaching for the towel. Drying her hands, she leant back against the sink to study me and I felt my face flush like a teenager under the scrutiny.

"This agent," she said, "I don't suppose he told you anything, did he? No, of course not. They never do."

"I'm confused," I said. "I thought you would know him but it sounds like you don't. Have you never met?"

"No," her mouth tightened, "which is as well for him. You'd better sit down. I'll make tea and we can talk." She hung the towel on the rail and lit the gas plate under the kettle.

"I'd prefer coffee if that's okay," I said, watching her move around the kitchen with a familiarity I was yet to experience. "I brought some instant, it's in the pantry."

She said nothing while she made the drinks, and I was loathe to break the silence, preferring instead to study her lovely form. Chestnut curls in a ribbon at her neck, the curve of her cheek, the rosy sheen of lips, compressed now in ire but which could as easily smile with abandon, I was sure.

The cup she placed before me was delicate and floral, a woman's cup, quite unlike the mug I had used the night before, and it felt wrong to be drinking coffee from such a receptacle.

"What do you do?" she asked as she took the seat across from me.

"*How* do you do?" I said, stretching out a hand. "I'm McAffrey Gordon, but my friends call me Mac. And you are...?"

"I'm sorry," she took my hand, "I'm Belgaye."

"Belgaye." I savoured the feel of it on my tongue. "And what do you do, Belgaye?"

"Oh no, Mr Gordon, I asked first." She smiled, and I found I had been correct.

"I'm a writer. Novels mostly. Three published so far and one in the pipeline."

"Indeed? So you have an imagination," she mused. "Well then, maybe this time it will be alright. Let me get some biscuits to go with your coffee, and then I'll tell you what I know."

"About what?"

"About this kitchen."

I charged through the shop door and the bell jangled with the same fury I was feeling. Behind the grocery counter that doubled as post office, an elderly woman peered at me with faded eyes, and I almost apologised. I would have, but the estate agent chose that moment to come out of his office behind her.

He blanched when he saw me and beat a hasty retreat. I beat a hastier advance and my shoulder stopped his door from closing.

“Care to explain?” I growled, stepping into his personal space. He scuttled behind the tiny desk like a crab. I leant over it, almost nose to nose. “Explain!”

“Now Mr Gordon, calm down. I don’t know why you’re so upset.”

“Really? You don’t? How about we start with the kitchen. You know, the one I share ‘occasionally’ with a ‘village woman’.” I didn’t bother with air quotes. My tone did it for me.

He cleared his throat but no words came forth. I think he would have liked to break eye contact but he was afraid of what I might do if he did.

“Exactly what village is she from? Does she live close by?”

“Um, in a manner of speaking yes. Yes, she does.”

“Ah. And the name of the village?”

“I – I’ve heard... I believe it’s called Tuareg.”

“That’s the village, is it?” I dropped my voice but did nothing to curb the malice in it.

“Are you sure that’s not the *planet*? Or *galaxy*? Or maybe it’s a completely different *dimension*?”

He deflated into his rickety chair.

“Sit down, please, Mr Gordon,” he said, indicating a straight-back chair in the corner.

I grabbed it, not very gently, and sat glaring at the sweaty face across from me. The man seemed to reach a decision. He straightened his shoulders and glared back.

“You said you were a writer,” he challenged, “and you wanted somewhere to write.”

“So?” I countered.

“Well, surely the kitchen suggests all sorts of story lines to you? I mean, where else will you find a room that straddles two dimensions – *and* where you can interact with a denizen from that other world?” He sat back, crossing his arms. “I really think you’ve got a steal here, don’t you? The owner should have charged you double.”

“Then why didn’t he?”



"The truth is, over the years most people have struggled with the concept. Even the owner's great grandmother was... well, let's just say, the villagers of the time weren't very understanding."

"What time?" I was stunned. "How long has this been happening?"

"Centuries, as far as I know," he replied. "Apparently whatever has been built in that spot since time immemorial has shared space with that other world. Our town records only go back about two hundred years, but the old men of those days had some strange tales. My great grandfather was a child back then and he passed down what he heard."

"So," I asked, calmer now, more curious than furious, "the village woman, Belgaye, how old is she? Centuries too?"

"I really have no idea, we've never met." He leant forward on the desk, a little too eager for my liking. "So, how does she look? Pretty? I've heard many conflicting stories over the years."

His smile brought to mind piranhas and I left without answering.

Belgaye sat, dribbling sugar granules from a spoon into intricate patterns on the table. I stood just back from doorway, wanting to feel detached but not succeeding. "I can't see you but I know you're there," she said, sweeping the sugar onto the floor. "Come in or stay out, but don't hover."

I stepped into the kitchen, my hands clenched in my pockets, and when she looked up I swear there was a jolt of electricity between us. But there were also so many questions.

"So, you came back."

"Yeah. Sorry for the fuss earlier. I was a bit overwhelmed." Not much of an apology, but she just smiled. "Plus I had to go and do some serious damage to someone."

"You didn't?" she gasped.

"No," I replied, "I managed to hold myself in check." I filled the kettle and put it on to boil before sitting. "I do have questions, though." She nodded encouragement so I jumped in. "Who are you, exactly?"

"I'm Belgaye, daughter of Uzolda and a man from your world. He heard the stories and came looking. When he found my mother here, he... well, let's just say he was

vicious with his favours.” She glanced away. “She stayed out of the kitchen until she was sure he wouldn’t return.”

“When was that?” I asked. “How long ago?”

“Many agons.”

“Agons? What’s an agon?”

“It’s how long Tuareg takes to go around our twin suns. I don’t know how it translates into your world.”

I looked at this lovely young woman before me – she was about twenty-five or so by my estimation – and I decided it didn’t matter how agons translated into Earth years. She was here and I was here, wherever here was, and that was enough.

My next visit to the agent, a few days later, was received with cautious optimism.

“Mr Gordon?” he said. “Everything alright at the cottage?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. Listen, you said there were some written records about the kitchen. Can I see them?”

“Oh I’m not sure,” he fumbled. “I’ll have to check with the owner – no one’s ever asked before... and he’s away, you know.”

“Yes, I remember. How soon can you find out?” I saw him look across at the old woman, who glared back at him. Some unspoken conversation was going on and I didn’t like being excluded. “How soon?” I pushed. “I need them for my research.”

The woman lambasted the agent in her unintelligible tongue, and he replied in similar fashion before stomping off up the narrow stairs.

“He go get now,” she grinned. “He silly old man, sometime he need -” and she smacked a fist into her other palm before collapsing in toothless laughter. I was mulling over what the relationship might be between these two, when the agent came back down with a cardboard box. A few more un-pleasantries were exchanged between them as he hustled me out to the pavement.

“You must forgive my mother,” he said, shoving the box into my chest, “she thinks she knows everything. I will come tomorrow to collect these. Please take care of them, they’re the only documentation we have.”

We spent the afternoon and evening side by side with the documents spread across the kitchen table. I used my mobile phone to photograph those that interested me.

Belgaye was like a kid in a candy store, bouncing in her seat with each new page she picked up. She had almost as many questions as I did, and she gave me an idea.

“Belgaye, do you have books?”

“Of course I have books,” she laughed, “I did go to school, you know.”

“Next time you come, would you bring some?”

“Alright,” she narrowed her eyes, “but only if you bring me one of yours – that you wrote. I want to read your own writing.”

“I didn’t bring any actual books with me,” I replied, “but I have them on my laptop.”

The same laptop I’d hardly opened since I’d been here. And that started another long avenue of enquiry that only ended when I went to fetch the machine to show her.

Belgaye was a bright woman and she mastered the operation of the laptop, even though she had no concept of computers. Over the next few days we accumulated a small library in the kitchen. She brought books from her home and I added others I found in an ancient trunk in the corner of the front room, plus a few purchased in the small town or purloined from the estate agent. It was one of the peculiarities of the kitchen that nothing from one world could cross over into the other, so we kept all the books there.

She read avidly at one end of the kitchen table while I made a show of working at the other end. Frequently I gave up the pretence and went to sit beside her instead. I recall the exact moment I reached across and took her hand, and she froze for an instant before squeezing back, all the while never taking her eyes from the page. And I remember the day I came into the kitchen to find her at the sink, humming under her breath and glowing in the light of the setting sun. How natural it felt to slip my arms around her waist and bury my face in her curls, and have her turn into my embrace. She lifted her face to mine, and when our lips met it was as if the universes – both of them – stood still.

There was no longer any point in denying it. I was in love.

The cottage got no internet signal, but I suppose that wasn’t surprising.

The agent had asked me one day, over coffee in the deserted café, whether I’d noticed that the cottage never got dusty. I hadn’t really, of course, since I spent most

of my time in the kitchen, but I didn't tell him that. He said he thought it was because there was some 'electrical-magnetism' surrounding the kitchen that drove all the dirt away. I had noticed the kitchen never got dirty but I'd assumed Belgaye cleaned it when I wasn't around.

The lack of connectivity didn't worry me much – since I wasn't really writing, I also wasn't researching – but it meant I had to go into town whenever I wanted to make contact with the outside world. Fortunately, my literary agent thought I was writing up a storm and left me alone.

But my three-month lease was coming to an end, and since I couldn't see a future without Belgaye, I needed a plan. My first step was to extend my lease, and that proved easy.

Winter began to make its presence felt and my tiny bedroom became less comfortable. The small window, sufficient in the heat of summer, now made the room dark. The air felt damp and my sheets were cold. We started making fires in the kitchen fireplace in the evenings. One particularly cold night, when I couldn't sleep, I wrestled my mattress into the kitchen, stirred up the fire, and settled down in front of it.

I woke early and was watching over the rim of my coffee mug as Belgaye came in. After all these months, I still wasn't really comfortable with the fact that when she opened the kitchen's back door, the other side showed a paneled room with knick-knacks and portraits of unfamiliar faces. Yet when I opened the same door it led into the bare backyard with the field and its cows in the distance. And yes, I had tried once to go through the door as she opened it, even though she had told me I couldn't. It was like walking into a transparent wall, but it was worth it for the way she laughed.

"So," she smiled that morning, "you've moved in I see, and without as much as a by-your-leave."

"I would have asked first, but when I opened the door you weren't there."

She ruffled my hair and kissed my forehead.

"I don't mind," she murmured, "it's your kitchen too."

So the mattress was stacked against the wall in the day, and in front of the fire at night, until we moved things around to accommodate the bedstead as well. Belgaye would cuddle up to my side and we would speak of many things, well into the wee



hours. One night she fell asleep, and I with her. She was annoyed in the morning and stayed away most of the day. She'd had other things to do, she said when she returned.

And then a night came when, in the early hours, she climbed in beside me, shivering in her gossamer sleepwear and with icy feet. That was the first time we made love, and neither of us slept that night.

We settled into a routine where Belgaye would go back to her world in the early evening – she said she had responsibilities, though she never expanded on them – and late at night she would slip back into the kitchen and into my bed.

The next step seemed obvious to me. I wanted to buy the property and live there always.

That met with unforeseen resistance.

"You what?" Belgaye's eyes were like saucers. "Why?" she asked. "Whatever for?" That wasn't quite the reaction I was expecting.

"I love you," I replied. "I want to live here with you always."

She climbed off the bed, dragging the duvet with her, leaving me exposed. I shivered, outside and inside.

"I thought you loved me," I whined through chattering teeth.

"Why? Because we kissed a few times? Because we had sex?"

"Actually, yes." I stood and started dressing. "That's how it works in my world."

"Really? And in *your* world is it normal to want to spend the rest of your life in a *kitchen*? Because that doesn't feature high on my list of goals." She flounced back and forth, punctuating her tirade with gesticulations. "You ridiculous man, how long do you think it would take before it lost its glamour? An agon? Three? Five?"

I couldn't answer. I still didn't know what an agon really was.

"And then what?" she persisted. "We share custody of the kitchen? Set up a roster for visiting it? Take alternate weekends?"

I was regretting letting her read my books; she was throwing my own words back at me. Finally I'd had enough.

"Okay!" I growled. "So I won't buy the damned cottage, and in a month I'll go back to *my* world and you can have *your* damned kitchen all to yourself."

I'd already stormed out of the kitchen before I realised my bed was still in there. And she had my duvet. But I wasn't going back for it. So I spent a really miserable night

on the lumpy sofa in the cold front room, broken-hearted, bitter and angry.  
And by morning I'd reached the decision to cut my losses and leave.

I managed to stay away for a year. An incredibly long and totally unproductive year, filled alternately with wretched regret and insufferable pride. By the end of the year I was completely broke and about to be sued by my publishers if I didn't produce a best-seller before the next season.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't write, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't even be civil to people I'd known my whole life. And I couldn't stay away from the booze because it helped to blot out everything else.

"Mac," my agent said one day, over the phone because she couldn't get me to leave my apartment, "whatever happened out there, it's killing you. You need to go back and sort it out. I'll even advance you the airfare. But for heaven's sake, go."

I laughed at her turn of phrase, 'for heaven's sake'. But she didn't see the joke. No one did, because I hadn't told anyone. How could I? Who would have believed me? *Belgaye*, whispered the traitorous voice in my head. *Belgaye would believe you*. And I knew it was true.

"Fine," I conceded. I had nothing left to lose. "I'll go back and I'll sort it out, one way or another. But you will need to provide the airfare. And you know there's no guarantee you'll ever get it back, don't you?"

"Hell," she said, "right now that's the least of my worries."

This time I packed light. I would only stay a day or two, depending.

*Depending on what?* the voice sneered.

Depending on Belgaye, I replied.

I was met at the front gate by the same estate agent, wearing what looked like the same suit. Without a word he put the key in my hand and watched me all the way to the front door.

The cottage was exactly the same, as if I had just popped out to the post office. There still wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. From the hall I could hear someone in the kitchen and my heart leapt. I dropped my bag on the floor and turned the corner.

The woman in the kitchen was older, grey and more rounded. She was singing quietly as she peeled potatoes, and a chubby little golden-haired baby sat on a blanket, playing in the sunlight from the window.

The woman turned and saw me, and I sighed in relief. For a moment I'd thought those damned agons had aged Belgaye beyond measure, but this wasn't her. A relation perhaps, but not my Belgaye.

The woman said something and reached out. The child turned to stare, grabbing the woman's hand and pulling herself up on sturdy little legs. I would know those eyes anywhere: this was Belgaye's daughter. I judged the child to be about a year and a half, too old to be mine. Yet even so, my heart knew she was.

"Good day," the woman said. "Mr...?"

"I'm Mac. Mac Gordon."

"Ah," she replied. "We didn't expect to see you again."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Belgaye? She's busy elsewhere. But I'll tell her you're here."

"Is this -"

"I need to get the little one down for a nap," she said, avoiding my question as she abandoned the potatoes and headed for the door.

I wandered the kitchen as I waited, touching surfaces and indulging in nostalgia. Memories crowded me. The shadows lengthened and dark came, but I didn't turn on the light. Instead, I sat at the table, put my head on my arms and slept better than I had in... well, in agons.

I woke with a start, unsure what had disturbed me.

It was almost morning. Belgaye had come into the kitchen, our kitchen. She ignored me as she gathered the makings for tea and brewed it. She put a mug down on the table before me, pulled out a chair and sat down opposite.

"So," she said, "you're back. Again."

"I am," I muttered, pushing hair out of my eyes and trying not to think about how wretched I must look. "What's this?"

"Green tea. I'm afraid there's no coffee this time."

I took a tentative sip. "That's okay, it's fine," I said, "perfect." It wasn't, it was positively foul, but that was the last thing on my mind. I'd hoped she would be elated

to see me again, that she would have missed me as I had missed her. But that wasn't the vibe I was picking up. We were silent while I forced the drink down and got up to rinse out the mug.

"So," I started as I sat down again, "we have a daughter."

Belgaye studied me with violet eyes that had once shone with love. At least, I'd thought so.

"No," she finally replied. "I have a daughter."

"But she must be -"

She held up a hand and my words ground to a halt.

"There's something I never told you," she said, "and I would have, eventually. But I didn't get the chance." She looked away, choosing her words, I thought, and when she spoke I wasn't sure I'd heard right.

"What?"

"I said, there are no men in my world. No males. No one to make babies with. And we need children. That's why the ancients created these spaces, where two worlds overlap. So we could have sex and make babies." "Why didn't you tell me?" I asked. "If I was only a baby-maker, why didn't you just say so? Why let me fall in love with you?" "I couldn't say anything before I was sure I was pregnant, and then you went crazy and wanted to buy this place."

I nodded. "And then I left," I added.

"Yes. You left before I knew for certain."

"Well, okay," I conceded, "but still, she's my daughter, too."

"No." Her eyes were solemn. "I thank you for her, but she's one of us. She can never enter your world. You can never take her to your beaches or your Disneyland. She belongs here on Tuareg. She will grow up loved and cherished, until the time comes when she will do her duty as we all have."

If I'd been a cartoon character, I would have had a light bulb in a word bubble over my head.

"You never loved me." It was suddenly crystal clear. "You used me, and then deliberately chased me away." She had the grace to look a little uncomfortable but she didn't break eye contact. "Would it have been so bad if I'd decided to stay here forever? Am I such a poor companion? Lousy lover? What?"



“Oh Mac,” she smiled, “no. You were a most enlightening companion, and a very satisfying lover. No,” she sighed, “that’s not it at all.”

“What then?”

“It’s the kitchen. Many daughters have been conceived in this kitchen.”

“How many of them were yours?” There was still a bit of residual resentment.

“Some,” she said, “but that’s not the point. The thing is, we can’t have the kitchen belong to just one man. That wouldn’t be good for our bloodline. For our people.”

Silence descended as I absorbed what I’d heard. My heart still ached for what might have been, for the daughter I would never know. But when I examined myself, my feelings, honestly, I found I wasn’t nearly as hurt as I had believed. Perhaps, underneath it all, a part of me had known.

“Just one last question,” I said. “Why a kitchen? Why not a bedroom – surely that would have been easier. And quicker,” I laughed.

“It hasn’t always been a kitchen,” she said.

On the flight home I started plotting my new novel. I would tell this story, and no one would believe it because they would think it was fiction. I even had a working title already.

I would call it, simply, ‘The Kitchen’



## Jaco Van Hemert

## A Proof of Worth

Mahd walked with her pupil, Radul, to the target, stopping when she was ten feet away.

“Acceptable,” she said. “But not good enough yet.” The arrow was just off centre, on the edge of the kill zone.

“You must be joking. That was three hundred feet,” Radul said. “That’s a good hit.” The boy was just past fifteen years of age, and his lack of respect had grown stronger every year since he’d turned ten. Mahd fondly recalled the early years when he’d looked at her with awe in his eyes. Now his eyes were that of a predator smelling blood.

“It’s a stationary target. You need to do better.”

“It was a good hit.”

Mahd sighed. Her old bones were tired already, and it wasn’t even noon yet. She pulled the arrow from the target and took the bow from Radul, nocking the arrow and showing the correct form. She pulled back the bowstring, keeping her eyes on the target on the other side of the strip of ground they’d turned into the target range. Her vision was blurry at best, and she had no sight of the red spot that would indicate a hit.

“Your stance was off again. You need to stand square to the target and keep you—”

“The fletching is pointed the wrong way,” Radul said, his mouth curling up ever so slightly, into an expression that might be a sneer, but might not.

Mahd lowered the bow immediately, relaxing the bowstring and taking out the arrow.

“I wasn’t showing you the positioning for the arrow, boy. If you ever paid attention to what I teach you, you’d be a much better archer by now.” She handed both back to him.

“If you still had the skill you once had, knocking the arrow would be second nature.”

“Keep your mouth, boy! I’m a far better draker than you can ever dream to be.” The insolent child was going to drive her to murder one day. What pupil would disrespect their master like that? She sometimes wished she’d never found him.

“I bet you couldn’t make a better shot from here than I could,” he said.

"I don't have to prove myself to you."

Radul knocked the arrow and loosed it with nothing but a quick glance at the target at the far end of the range. Mahd heard the thunk of an arrow hitting the target, but her eyes were not good enough to make out anything from where she was. He held out the bow to her.

"I'm not playing this game, boy." She started walking towards the targets, hoping the arrow was on the edge of the target, far outside the kill zone. Radul followed.

She wanted desperately to make a display of skill that would force the boy to respect her, but her eyesight had gotten so bad that she was sure he'd do better than her.

She wasn't even sure she'd be able to hit the target at all. As they walked in silence, Mahd looked over to the side of the range, where some of the grandmothers had gathered, drawing in the desert sand with their fingers. They called it scenes of forgetting. Something about capturing the frailties of life in a medium that blew away before long. A meaningless exercise. But if anyone ever found out about her blindness, she would be one of them, an old woman, shamed and with nothing useful to do, drawing pointless pictures in the sand.

When they were halfway down the range, they heard the roar. It was a sound like a thousand hawks combined with a sandstorm, and it struck every nerve in Mahd's body. She knew it well, as did most every person in the camp.

Mahd and Radul immediately started running. The grandmothers left their doodles and ran towards their tents. Mahd grabbed her bow off the table on the far end before following the boy in a dash towards the chief's tent in the centre of the camp. As she passed the targets, she couldn't help but notice the arrow sticking just off-centre in the kill zone.

The boy, insolent as he was, had grown into a spectacular archer.

But her thoughts soon blew over that as she started focusing on the source of the roar. Her enemy. Her reason for living. Around them, as they ran, people were hammering down pens and taking cover in secure or insecure places. Tension hung in the air. Danger was close.

A sand drake had arrived.

#

The chief met Mahd and the boy with a grave face, but with no lines of worry etched into it. His billowing robes caught in the wind and emphasized the danger everyone

was in. Around him, the camp was still, as everyone hunkered down, waiting for the draker to save them. Waiting for Mahd.

"The draker smells the blood of her enemy, I see," the chief said, ushering them back towards his tent. "I was just about to send for you."

"I came as soon as I heard it."

By now, the howl of a storm was in the air, along with the faint crackling of static. The work of her enemy – of her people's enemy.

The chief sat down, his wide chin and wobbling as he adjusted his jaw. Dark eyebrows furrowed over his eyes and his tone turned serious. "Are you fit and ready to go out there to save the camp yet again?"

"Of course I am," Mahd said. Was he doubting her skill? Could he see her eyes squint to make out his face? "I've never been better."

"Really?" the boy asked, his monotone voice piercing into her head. "I haven't seen you loose an arrow for months." His insolence knew no bounds. How dare he speak poorly of her in front of the chief?

"Keep your mouth, scorpion," she snapped. "I'm not the one that has to be watched when practising."

"Maybe you should be," he replied immediately, his mouth curving into that slight, almost imperceptible sneer.

Mahd couldn't let this kind of disobedience and lack of respect continue. "Enough!" He flinched momentarily, perhaps because of the sheer volume of her voice. She stared him down, watching his eyes narrow for moment, as if to retort, and then look away.

She looked back at the chief. "I'm ready."

The chief eyed her for a few seconds before he turned to accept an ornate box from an aide who appeared at his shoulder. "You should teach the boy to behave, Mahd."

Mahd clenched her jaw, glancing at the boy. Hours of intense training awaited him. She would make him work until he collapsed or begged for release. He was calm and maintained his sneer. Her insides burned.

The chief held out the box, made from dark brown wood, inlaid with gold etchings that depicted the crest of the Talwari people – a volcano overlooking a wide river, flanked by two mirrored phoenixes. He opened the lid, revealing two arrows inside. The arrow shafts and fletching were normal hard wood and hawk feather, replaced

multiple times over years of use. But the arrowheads were something else. Finely made, black stone. Obsidian. Once sharper than any of the camp's equivalents, the arrow heads had, over time, dulled as they sank into the necks of dozens of sand drakes. But more importantly, they were not metal. The static fields that drakes generated meant that any metal arrows were flung about at random, and essentially useless. The obsidian arrows were the only ones that could be used in the static storms the creatures created.

Mahd reached out to take the arrows, but hesitated for a moment.

A third arrow slot in the box was empty; years ago, that arrowhead had shattered against drake hide. Its broken remains were now displayed in the chief's tent as a reminder of the importance of the draker – an archer that wouldn't miss the one spot where a drake's hide was thin enough to penetrate.

What if she missed? What if she shattered another of the arrowheads?

"Master," the boy said. "Are you going to hesitate like that when the time comes to kill the drake too?"

Mahd felt her face heat up as she forced herself to stay calm, and reverently lifted the arrows from their resting place. "Watch your tongue, boy," she said, managing to keep her voice steady. "You would be pale as the sands if you saw my skill first hand."

Radul opened his mouth to respond, but the chief interrupted. "You should show your master some respect, boy. She is better than you will be for several years." He paused, rubbing his wiry beard. "In fact, your childish arrogance should be humbled. Mahd, take him with you to observe."

At first, the boy flared with an anger that brought Mahd joy. He had no retorts for the chief of the camp. But then the instruction sank in for both of them, and Mahd was the one who paled. "He... he'll be in the way," she said.

"I'll stay behind you," Radul said quickly.

"There you have it," the chief said. "Good luck, draker. Don't let us down."

#

The storm was already howling, biting at Mahd's face despite the heavy cloth she had wrapped around her head. She squinted to protect her eyes, watching the fury of statically charged sands in front of her for any sign of the drake. The obsidian arrows felt heavy in her quiver. The responsibility they held.

What if she did miss? What if she lost the arrows and the camp was destroyed? The drake had already made a few passes, sweeping the sand into two or more concentric circles. Mahd couldn't see well enough to make out how many there were. With each pass, it released static into the wind, swirling the sand into a storm that would eventually become dark and vicious. So fast and thick that it could rip through tents and skin. And in that chaos, it would pick its prey. It was imperative to kill it before it got to that part of its attack. Before it reached the camp.

What if the boy saw her miss? That kind of dishonour would seep into her skin and parch her life in the camp forever. What kind of a life could she lead with such shame hanging over her? There was no choice. She couldn't miss.

The two of them made it to a rock that would provide them with a bit of cover from both the sand and the drake's eyes. From here they would take the shot.

Just as they nestled themselves in, the familiar black and grey shadow swept past in the circle ahead of them. One sighting. She relaxed against the stone, waiting for the second.

"Aren't you getting ready?" Radul asked. "It's going to come past now."

"You should know better than that, boy. The first step is to make two sightings to determine where in the pattern it is. We saw it go by in the second circle. It could be going outward or inward, depending on where it is in its pattern. Being patient and collecting all the information is part of—"

"We already saw two. It went by in the third circle while we were coming up."

"It did not."

"It definitely did. You just missed it."

Had she missed it? "You're just seeing things. It takes a discerning eye to separate the debris from the drake. We wait for another sighting."

"You just weren't paying attention. You never pay attention."

Mahd hesitated, and considered nocking the arrow and getting ready, just in case. But she couldn't do that, because that would mean admitting that Radul was right. So instead, she let her hands relax and leaned back against the rock. "We wait for another sighting."

The boy was fuming, as usual, letting his emotions get the better of him. Trying to chip away at her authority. If he wasn't such a good archer, she'd have kicked him out a long time ago.

The swoop of wings shook both of them out of their states, but Mahd calmly held her position, not moving. It was too late to do anything now anyway. They would have to wait for it to come back.

“Idiot!” the boy shouted. He lunged forward faster than Mahd expected, and grabbed towards her quiver as the shadow flew over them and the crackle of static followed.

Mahd’s old bones and leaning position made it impossible for her to stop him.

The drake’s huge, jagged black body came into view, its wings twice wider than its body, carrying it through the whirling sands as if it was one of the grains.

“It’s too late!” she shouted as he slipped an obsidian arrow into his bow.

As the static tingling in her muscles started, Mahd watched the arrow go short, and then get whipped away into the storm with the trailing gusts. The boy was frozen in place, his hand still where he’d let the bowstring go.

“You insolent, idiotic child!” Mahd yelled, as her emotions boiled. She clenched both hands into fists, holding them out toward the boy like weapons. “What is wrong with you? You know that you can’t take a shot in the moment like that! You should know that!”

For the first time since she’d met him, Radul looked ashamed. Scared. He dropped to his knees in the sand, and looked out into the storm where the arrow had been. He looked back, his eyes wide. “I... I didn’t think it... I thought I could make the shot.”

“You were wrong. And now you’ve lost one of the arrows.”

The boy bit at his lower lip, his hands shaking slightly. “What do we do now? Do we go find the arrow? I’ll go look.” He got to his feet as the idea struck him. “I’ll find it, I promise.”

“It’s lost to the storm now. We’ll have to find it after I take down the drake. But we’ll find it, it’s not that big of a problem. One arrow is enough.”

Would it be? What if she missed?

The boy seemed to relax a bit, nodding continually.

“We wait for it to complete the next circle, and then it will come back, and I’ll be ready.”

“Okay,” he said, not meeting her eyes. “Okay.”

#

By the time Mahd heard the swoop of wings, she was already prepared – obsidian arrow knocked, bowstring halfway taut, her breathing steady, and her nerves calm.

She could do this. She'd done it more than two dozen times before. Every scale on a drake was known to her, and every mannerism it could exhibit was her whole life's focus. This was what she was made for. What she was born to do. She was a draker, and this was her moment.

She waited until the wings cast a shadow over her before she pulled the bowstring back to her cheek. The moment she heard the static, she lifted her arm, finding the back of the drake's head. There, between the iron-hard scales, would be a small gap, a weak point, where an arrow could slip in, cutting through the flesh and into the brain. That was the target.

As Mahd focused, it felt as if time was slowing down. She could see the blurring swirl of sand in front of her like a gentle stirring. The drake came into view, but its head was still a smudge. She knew exactly where on the head the gap was, but she couldn't see it. Couldn't see the familiar dark scales. Couldn't make the normal estimation of where her arrow should go. Couldn't guess the shape or the strength of the wind. All her indicators were gone.

And yet, she had done this so many times before. She could do it again. All she had to do was remember.

However, all she could remember was the children in the camp. The grandmothers sitting on the sand, drawing their scenes of forgetting with their fingers. The families gathered in tents, sharing a meal. All of that would be lost if she missed. She would have no time to find the arrows in the storm, and the drake would decimate the camp, gutting it and leaving it out in the desert like a traveller without water.

But if she didn't do this, her life would be over. Her honour would be stripped from her. A draker with no use. An old woman, just drinking the camp dry. The boy would rip her pride from her hands and feast on it.

As the distance approached the apex, Mahd's fingers itched to loose the string. She watched the blur of the drake in front of her, getting further and further away, until it was lost in the static sands. She slowly let the bowstring relax and lowered her arms. The boy looked up at her from where he was sitting. "Master? What happened? Why didn't you shoot?"

"I... I cannot... You have to do this. This is... this is your test. You become a draker by shooting drakes."

The boy shook his head. "Why? You're the draker, and there's only one arrow left."



"I..." The words stuck in her throat as the shame choked her. This boy. This insolent boy. He would take this moment of shame and drink it in. He would quench his unending ambition in her end. Why should she give him any of that? Why should she give him the pleasure?

And yet, the camp was still in danger. And she was unable to protect it. There was no choice.

She had to.

"I am the draker. But... but I'm also old, and my body is... it's not like it used to be."

"What do you mean?"

She swallowed. "I... I can't see well enough to shoot, boy. There. That's what you've been waiting to hear, isn't it? I'm too blind to shoot a target at fifty feet, never mind a moving drake."

The boy's confused frown changed into a wicked grin. "I knew it! I knew you were hiding weakness! All this time, I thought your skill had been slipping. But it's your eyes. I should have known. You're always squinting at your food, and you never comment on my targets until you've gone right up to them."

The boy laughed each new breath a deep wound in Mahd's chest. She looked at the ground as she handed him the obsidian arrow. He took it from her carefully, despite his posture displaying a fierce excitement.

"The drake will be back soon," she said. "You should get ready."

Radul tested his bowstring as they saw the drake pass, creating a new circle of the storm, its static whipping the sand into a frenzy. One step closer to the camp and its destruction. The boy smiled maniacally and knocked the obsidian arrow.

However, as Mahd watched her young pupil, his face faltered. He lowered the bow and turned to her. "I can't do this, master."

Mahd squinted through the storm, trying to ascertain if he was poking fun at her.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not ready. What if I miss? I don't have another arrow, because I've already messed up once. If I miss, the camp will be... I can't do this."

The boy seemed earnest, and Mahd couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He'd come here expecting to see his master make small mistakes that he could prod at to break her down. Instead, the dunes swept away entirely with Mahd telling him about her failing eyesight. And now he had the safety of the whole camp on his thin shoulders.

"Listen. You're no longer the child I found in the outskirts, picking through the trash. You've learned a lot. You've become an excellent archer. You're ready for this."

"I'm not. I miss targets all the time. I've never shot a drake before." He looked down at his hands and then held them out to Mahd to show her. "My hands won't stop shaking."

"I wouldn't normally tell you this, because you're an opportunistic scorpion who would take any moment of kindness and pull weakness from it, but I think you need the truth right now. You are the most spectacular archer I have ever seen. You're better than me already, and you're not even fully grown yet. I can't imagine what you'll be like one day. But I know that you can do this."

She watched him as his eyes locked on hers, his head frozen in place.

She continued. "The drake is coming by soon. If you feel something is off when you aim now, you don't loose the arrow. You just wait. It will go to the outer circles again, and then you will be ready by the time it's back."

"I don't know, master. I don't think I'm as good as you think I am."

"You have the raw talent. I will walk you through the steps again, and you can just follow those. Okay? Do you trust me?"

He looked at her, nodding. "I do trust you."

"Then let's make a draker out of you."

When the swoop of wings came again, Radul was ready. Mahd sat back, her pride in this young boy overshadowing – for the moment – even her shame. His stance was perfect, his eyes were focused, and his hands were as still as a mountain.

The drake passed overhead, and Mahd relished the sound and feeling of static for the last time. Radul let the drake pass about thirty feet, and then let out his breath silently, and loosed the arrow. It seemed to go a bit wide for a moment, but the wind pulled it in as Radul had no doubt known it would, and it disappeared from Mahd sight into the dark blur of the drake.

A screeching roar announced the success of the boy – no, the draker. The drake fell to the ground, its speed and momentum causing it to careen into the sand, digging a partial grave for itself. Radul took a deep breath and looked back at Mahd, his eyes showing the same happiness and pride that Mahd knew showed in hers.

“Acceptable,” she said with a smile, and he laughed. Around them, the storm started to die down as the drake’s static influence no longer powered it. It would soon be a calm sea of sand again, and everything would go back to normal. Well, almost everything.

Mahd got up and clasped Radul’s shoulder. “Let’s go find your wayward arrow.”

#

Mahd’s thoughts were dark as she and Radul walked into the camp. People gathered around them as they entered, but Mahd’s eyes were fixed on the chief’s tent, knowing that her life ended there. The shame would blow over her life in a gust, taking all her accomplishments and pride with it. There would be nothing left but ashes.

“If can’t make myself say it,” Mahd whispered to Radul, “you will have to tell them what happened out there.”

Radul gave her a blank look. Even after everything that had happened, and the raw side of him she’d seen, she still couldn’t read his face. He’d gotten too good at hiding his thoughts. She imagined that he was running the scenarios through his head. The numerous ways he could use her shame to build himself up.

In the end, he deserved it. Despite the cloud that hung over her, she was incredibly proud of the draker he’d become.

The chief met them standing, his hands outstretched in a gesture of happy returns.

“You have done it again, Mahd. Your talent knows no bounds.”

Mahd opened her mouth to correct him, but her tongue hesitated a moment too long as the ichor of her dishonour choked her.

He continued. “Boy, you are extremely lucky to have this woman as your master.

Were you paying attention? Did you learn anything?”

Radul paused, and his mouth pulled into a bit of a sneer. “I’d say so. I killed the drake.”

The chief’s broad smile held for a moment before it faltered. He glanced at Mahd.

“He speaks the truth, chief. He has become an excellent bowman.”

The chief’s nose flared, his eyes wide. “You... you risked the safety of the camp by putting this on the shoulders of a boy?”

Mahd looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She was going to have to tell him.

“It’s... I...”

Radul stepped forward, almost putting himself between the chief and her. “You’re not trying to suggest that she would have missed, are you?”

The chief, taken aback by Radul’s interference, mouthed silently as he tried to find words. Mahd felt her breath catch in her throat as she looked at the young man who had once been an insolent boy intent on breaking down her honour. She felt her throat tighten as she watched him speak.

“I succeeded on my first attempt, with my master coaching me through every moment. If I missed, she would have killed it with the other arrow.”

“It’s true,” Mahd said, finding her voice in her storm of emotion, and managing to keep it steady. “The only way to become a draker is by loosing arrows at drakes. How else did you want him to learn? I wasn’t sure that he was ready, but...” She glanced at Radul, hoping her eyes would communicate her gratitude. “He proved himself. More than I could ever have imagined he would.”

As the chief stared at her, sputtering protests, Mahd kept her eyes on Radul, who gave her a slight smile and a nearly imperceptible nod.

She turned to the chief. “Stop being so brackish, old man. Congratulate your new draker on his achievement, and prepare a feast to celebrate. I’ll join at dusk.” With that, she put the obsidian arrows in the wrinkled hands and walked away, towards her tent.

Her step was light, and the blackness of her shame had retreated to the edges of her mind where she would not go looking again. It was time to hang up the bow and let the new draker take on the responsibility.

Perhaps it was time to find out what the scenes of forgetting were all about.



## **James Dryja      WHAT TO DO! WHAT TO DO!**

“Stress! Stress! Stress! What am I going to do!” she thought in panic, “I should never ever have indulged!” “It can’t stay a secret for long!” Lara thought back to the night of lust, and how when he offered condom use she turned it down.

She found the clinic easily enough....”ABORTION ON DEMAND! ...read the sign.

When Lara left, she was feeling better, much better! The cost was manageable, and she had booked an appointment at a time suitable for both of them. Never again, she thought with determination, as she entered her place of employment: The remuneration was fine but insufficient for raising a child.

The Robo-nurse was having a good day. No disturbances and peace in the home. The door chime startled it: then pressed the video and a man in black appeared on the screen.

“Is this the home of Lara?” he enquired. “Yes, but she is not here, she is at her work.” “Nevertheless, please let me in”, he said. Quickly, it called Lara. Yes, she was told, let him in. He will explain.

The Robo-nurse did as instructed, and the man entered. “Where is the baby?” he demanded. It explained that he was asleep in his room. “Well I am to let him sleep forever”, he said, taking out a syringe. Quickly the Robo-nurse slipped into the baby’s room and locked the door. “Let me in!!” the man roared, “the baby is under 6 months old!!” Vaguely the robo-nurse remembered a new law passed legalizing post-birth abortion!

The man started kicking the door.....Robo-nurse looked around for a weapon....

Lara arrived home in an air-taxi which dropped her on the roof of her building.

Feeling very relaxed as she had made a decision to her satisfaction. As she got to her front door she was perturbed to find it ajar. “Robo, where are you?” No answer! She entered what she felt was now an empty baby room. Pure horror welled up inside her at the body of a man in black on the floor behind the door, a knife in his chest and a hypodermic syringe still in his hand. Baby cot empty, Robo gone!

She sank to the floor as the implications hit her:

THE ROBOT HAS MORE FEELINGS OF COMPASSION THAN A HUMAN BEING

## **Blast From the past from PROBE 148 June 2011**

### **William Shatner may be 80, but Captain Kirk is forever**

*Actor, horse breeder, author, TV pitchman and small screen legend, William Shatner, turned 80 on 22 March 2011. What with all those horsemen of the Apocalypse charging about in the Middle East, North Africa and Japan, you may not have noticed this star-date, but true Trekkies could never let such a thing go by without an appropriate celebration. By J BROOKS SPECTOR.*

And so, for the third year in a row, fans organised a William Shatner Sound-Alike Competition. Of course, contestants needed to master the eerie pauses, unusual pronunciations of words like 'saa-batage' (sabotage for the uninitiated) and other verbal tics that are Shatner's hallmark style. This year's winner, Jeff Nelson, and all the other finalists can be seen [here](#). Some of these impressions are uncanny, complete with costumes, soundtracks and parodies of parodies. Some of these folks, however, might want to consider getting out just a bit more in the daytime, beyond attending Trekkie conventions or going to one of those summer camps where you can study Klingon – if you have the time and money.

William Shatner has had an extraordinarily varied career. One of a relatively small group of Canadians who have made it big in the film and TV world (okay, okay, there are also Michael J Fox, Neve Campbell, Dan Aykroyd, Donald Sutherland, Glenn Ford, Jim Carrey, John Candy, Keanu Reeves, Lorne Greene, Martin Short, Raymond Burr, Raymond Massey and Leslie Nielsen from north of the Lower 48 States), Shatner was a trained, live-stage Shakespearean actor, but he made his first real cinematic breakthrough in a film version of "The Brothers Karamazov", together with Yul Brynner. Once he moved to the small screen, however, he made his big breaks, after work that included straight-man Ranger Bob on the Canadian version of the 1950s children's favourite, "The Howdy Doody Show". Really.

Picked after another actor, Jeffrey Hunter, didn't quite fit the texture of the new show – Shatner became a cultural icon with his portrayal of James Tiberius Kirk, captain of the starship Enterprise, in the science fiction television series "Star Trek" from 1966

to 1969, “Star Trek: The Animated Series” from 1973 to 1974 and in seven of the subsequent Star Trek feature films from 1979 to 1994.

Several other short-lived series followed but, late in life for a TV actor, he made it big all over again as the eccentric, near-to-Alzheimer’s attorney Denny Crane in two different television series, “The Practice” and “Boston Legal”. Back yet again, Shatner currently stars in the CBS sitcom “\$#! My Dad Says”, based on the Twitter feed created by Justin Halpern.

It may be difficult to remember, but in the late 1960s, much of the content of “Star Trek” was very controversial, very challenging material. With anti-war themes in the middle of the Vietnam War, inter-racial intimacy including the first inter-racial kiss on US television (not to mention the occasional trans-species sexual encounter), explorations of the boundary between life and machines, as well as range of alternatives for traditional religion - Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry and his cast pushed the edge of the envelope almost every week for years. Shatner’s role in all this was as the brave, emotional, ready-for-a-fight or a romantic interlude starship’s captain, often in contrast to his subordinate officers. These included his first officer, the half-Vulcan Spock, engineer Scotty and medical officer Dr. McCoy. Lesser characters included language specialist Uhura, Russian Chekhov and Japanese Sulu.

Like other fans of the show, I was delighted to have a real moment of connection with one of the characters, er, actors, associated with “Star Trek”. Years after the show left television I had the job of filling the governing council of a US government board that dealt with US-Japanese relations. With this task, there was no way I was going to ask anyone other than Mr. Sulu, er, George Takei, to take up this appointment. To my delight, he told me he was deeply honoured to be asked by his government to work on international relations – even if it was just for meetings six times a year. And I have an autographed photograph to prove it.

William Shatner’s work on screen, of course, has transcended “Star Trek”. With a reputation as an actor who showed up on time with his lines learnt, he had an active, if less than spectacular career until he set off on his mission “to boldly go where no

man has gone before". He played a critically acclaimed role in a staged-for-television production of "The Andersonville Trial", a retelling of the first crimes against humanity trial, just after the American Civil War, as well as one of "The Twilight Zone's" most famous episodes, "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet". This was the story of an airline passenger who sees a gremlin tearing out the innards of a passenger jet engine in flight.

Over the years, William Shatner has also made something of a career parodying himself on television in guest appearances on shows like "Third Rock from the Sun", "Fresh Prince of Bel Air", as well as surreal moments like his performance of Elton John's "Rocket Man" and several late-night television readings of the writings of rightwing politician Sarah Palin to the accompaniment of a jazz trio.

Most recently, William Shatner recorded a wake-up call for the crew of the Space Shuttle Discovery on 7 March 2011, its final day docked to the International Space Station as it was about to be retired from service. Backed by the familiar "Star Trek" theme music, Shatner's voice rolled out into the galaxy: "Space, the final frontier. These have been the voyages of the Space Shuttle Discovery. Her 30-year mission: To seek out new science. To build new outposts. To bring nations together on the final frontier. To boldly go, and do, what no spacecraft has done before." Perfect, split infinitive and all. Long live James Tiberius Kirk. **DAILY MAVERICK**

## Top 10 Nova 2019

### Daphne Olivier

### Danny Boy

Anna and I work the dump, day in, day out. We start crack-o'-dawn and head for home when the sun goes down. That way we get first pickings of whatever the trucks bring in during the night and don't miss out on what they dump during the day. There's no knowing what we may find. On a good day it might be a pot, a pan, a bundle of clothes or a box of stale pizza. A ham past its sell-by-date or a pair of old shoes. Now and then, a rickety chair or a rusty bike. On a bad day, nothing but paper



and plastic. We take home as much as we can carry. What doesn't get used, gets sold. It doesn't fetch much but Anna and I don't live fancy, and we get by.

You come across some pretty weird things on the dump, but nothing I ever saw can match what Anna found early one morning, way back in '98. We were following a line of trucks, when, all of a sudden, she let out a yell. "Ben! Hey, Ben, come here. Come over here and take a look at what I found."

Anna isn't given to shouting and she's not the type to make a fuss about nothing, so I dropped what I was holding and hurried to her side. And there she stood; a thin, dirt-smudged woman, holding a baby in her arms.

"He was in that bag," she said, pointing to a carryall at her feet. "I thought he was dead. Then he opened his eyes." Her face lit up, eyes shiny-bright,. "Oh Ben, isn't he the cutest thing you ever saw?"

I gazed down at a child with a too-large head and thin, sticklike arms and legs. Pale skin. Small mouth. Big, navy-blue eyes. I'm no expert when it comes to babies but it struck me I'd seen better-looking kids in my time. In fact, come to think of it, I couldn't recall ever seeing one as ugly as the one she held in her arms."

"Dunno about cute," I said, scratching my head. "But I can tell right off he's trouble."

"What do you mean?" she asked, a sharp, cold edge to her voice.

"Well, I was thinking of taking a trip to the scrap-yard, later today. And the recycle depot. Now, I'll have to drop the kid off at St Mary's instead. A day wasted. If that's not trouble, I'd like to know what is."

Anna clutched the child closer to her chest. "St Mary's? Oh no! This baby's not going to no orphanage."

I frowned. "So what you aiming to do with him?"

"He's mine," she said, facing me square on. "I found him. I'm gonna keep him."

My jaw dropped. "You're not serious?"

"I am. Oh, yes, I most definitely am."

"You crazy?" I burst out. "What kind of life do you think a kid growing up in a shack next to a garbage dump would have?"

Anna's jaw came up the way it does when she's set for an argument. "What we got may not be grand, but it's better than a life in an orphanage." She paused then added, her voice so soft I barely heard, "Please, Ben, please. I want this one. I want him real bad."

The child gave a weak, wailing cry. And, from nowhere, a memory came back – memory of a cry I'd heard close on a year ago. The day Anna's newborn died. The day she stopped smiling.

I hesitated a while longer, chewing at my lip, then picked up my bag and slung it over my shoulder. "Come, woman" I called. "What are we waiting for? Let's take the kid home."

\* \* \*

Like other kids on the dump, Danny spent his first years playing among the garbage. Now and then, when he found an object he fancied — a bead, button or shard of brightly-coloured glass — he kept it curled in his fist till we got home. As time went by, he added bits of metal, broken pottery, coils of wire and other oddments to his collection. It kept him amused for hours, sifting, sorting, searching for just the right piece to add to the structures he created. Anna smiled as she watched him play. "Look at that," she said. "Our Danny's real smart. He don't need Lego or rich kid's toys. He can build whatever he likes with junk, right here in our backyard.

\* \* \*

"Danny's a slow starter," is what Anna said when three years went by without Danny uttering a single word. "He'll talk when he's ready, you wait and see."

I wasn't so sure. I couldn't put a finger on it but there was something about Danny that set him apart from other kids. His appearance for one thing. He was too tall for a three-year-old, too thin, too bony. His skin too pale, his eyes too dark. His hair, fine as corn-silk, covered his head in tight curls. And there was the way he sat staring into space, eyes blank, for long spells at a time.

Anna brushed my worry aside. "Danny's fine. He needs a bit more time to develop, that's all. Leave him be and you'll see I'm right."

It turned out Anna was wrong. Danny never did learn to talk but, as time went by, it became less and less important. "Telepathy," Anna said by way of explanation. "Our boy don't need words. He can hear thoughts."

"Don't be daft, woman," I said. "There's no such thing as telepathy. Anyone tells you different, is talking crap."

Anna tossed her head. "You can say what you like but I know Danny, and I'm telling you he *can* hear thoughts. How else does he know when it's time to come in from the dump? Why else does he run before I get close enough to give him a whack? Why

else does he bring in a pile of wood, just when I'm thinking we could do with a bit more? Go on. You tell me that." I gave up arguing, partly because Anna always gets in the last word, but also because there were some things about Danny that are difficult to explain. The way he taught himself to read, for instance, with nothing more than odd books, magazines and newspapers carried in from the dump. And the way he seemed to know when a truck was due and whether or not it held good pickings. Time and again, he came home carrying something of value. First a radio, then a laptop, then a kettle and a box full of nails. Soon after that, a leather jacket, a ceramic vase and a good pair of shoes. Then, a week later, a TV. Anna beamed with pride when he sat himself down, fiddled with its innards and, in next to no time, got it working.

"Look at that!" she said. "Our Danny's a whiz kid. He can fix anything, good as new." Danny was twelve, going on thirteen, when Anna spied him sitting on the edge of the dump, surrounded by a group of boys. She could tell right away something was wrong from the way they were laughing and jeering. Then she saw something else — Danny's eye, all black and blue, and his nose spurting blood.

"They ran away when they saw me coming," she told me later. "But I recognised the ringleader. It was that Barnard boy. Jim. Pete Barnard's son."

I knew Pete Barnard. He was a big, beefy fellow with red hair and a temper to match. Not the kind of guy you'd choose to pick a fight but, at that moment, I was so angry, I didn't stop to think. All I knew was that Pete's son had hurt my boy — hurt him bad — and that if Pete didn't wallop the kid to teach him a lesson, I would. By God, yes! Good and proper.

I ran all the way to Pete's shack, then stopped to stare at the crowd milling about the yard. From inside, I could hear the sound of wailing. As I watched, an ambulance roared up. Screeched to a halt. Paramedics got out, carrying a stretcher.

"What happened?" I asked a bystander.

"Kid fell in front of a dumpster truck. Pete's boy. It was all over in a few seconds. The kid didn't stand a chance."

It was a coincidence. Of course it was. How could the fact that Jim Barnard fell in front of a truck have anything to do with Danny? Accidents happen. They happen all the time. It was an accident that could have happened at any time, to any of the youngsters who run wild on the dump. The fact that it happened to Jim Barnard, ten

minutes after he beat up Danny, was a coincidence. Nothing more. Definitely. No doubt whatsoever. That's what I told myself as I walked back home but, for some reason the uneasy feeling that sent a shiver up my spine, didn't quite go away. Always a loner, Danny withdrew even more after that incident. He spent long hours on the dump searching for items to add to his collection. Some days he came home carrying scraps of metal as big as soup plates. On others, a matchbox filled with fragments no bigger than a pinhead. Now and then, he came home bearing gifts, a shawl for Anna, a scarf for me. Most nights, he stayed up late, messing about in the backyard, building weird structures, only to take them apart, bit by bit, a day or two later. Then rebuild, over and over, again.

As time went by, Danny's construction took on a more complex shape — layer upon layer of glass, metal and other unidentifiable objects. And, instead of dismantling, he added to the structure, fastening a bit of wire here, tightening a screw there. Danny's construction — or contraption — as Anna called it, was the first thing I saw when I opened the door each morning, the last when I closed up at night.

Then, one morning when I opened the door, it wasn't there. Where it had stood, there was nothing but a circle of burnt grass and churned-up sand. I must have let out a yell because, a moment later, Anna came running. "What...?" she began, then her jaw fell open. "Danny's contraption... it's gone! Where did it go?"

"Looks like it took off," I said, pointing skywards. "Up, like a rocket."

"No ways!" she said. "Junk don't go flying off into nowhere."

"Well, it sure as hell didn't walk away, that's for sure."

"Maybe someone stole it," she suggested.

"Talk sense, woman. Who'd want to steal a load of junk?"

She stood gazing out a while longer then turned back into the shack. "Danny?" she called. "Danny... Danny...?"

But Danny wasn't in his bed. And one glance was enough to see that his bed had not been slept in. Anna stared, hand pressed to her mouth then, with a wail, turned and ran. Out the door she went, past the outhouse, past the broken-down Chev, down the path that led to the dump. "Danny, Danny," she called. "Danny, *Danny*..."

I followed but no matter how loud we hollered, or how far and wide we searched, there was no sign of Danny. Not so much as a glimpse.

"Maybe we missed him," Maggie suggested, a note of desperation in her voice.

"Maybe he's back home waiting for us." She set off again, chest heaving, hair flying, not stopping till she reached the shack.

The shack was empty. Anna turned to me, mouth trembling, eyes wild and filled with tears. "He's gone," she wailed. "My boy's gone. My boy... my boy... We should never have allowed him to build that contraption. Never, *ever*! Oh, oh... Danny, Danny... My boy, my boy..."

I should have put my arms around her. Should have held her close. Should have murmured comforting words. That's what I should have done. That's what I *would* have done had I not, at that very moment, caught sight of the ticket lying on the kitchen table. A Lotto ticket! And beside it, a crumpled, mud-stained copy of the Sunday Times.

I snatched it up and, with shaking hands, flicked it open. And there, at the top of the page, in big, bold print, was the winning number. I checked, double-checked and checked again, till there was no longer the slightest doubt. The numbers matched. Exactly.

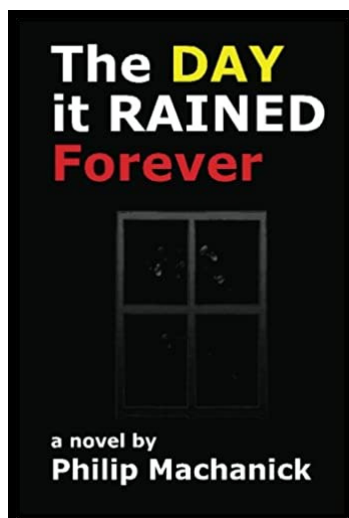
I sank down on a chair and held the ticket high over my head. "We're rich!" I yelled. "Dirty, filthy, stinking rich! Millionaires, that's what we are 'cos this here ticket is the Lotto winner. Rich, rich... dirty, filthy, stinking rich..."

I was a millionaire, richer than I'd ever dreamt of, for exactly three seconds.

Then, without warning, Anna snatched the ticket from out of my hand and, right in front of my eyes, tore it into a hundred pieces.

# Book Reviews Gail Jamieson

**Philip Machanick**



## **The Day it Rained Forever**

From our very own Philip Machanick, joint runner up in the 2018 Nova short story competition, comes this entertaining and different time,(you can't really call it travel)but maybe time manipulation story. Jimmy Anderson, a very bright but totally socially inept around girls, young man, starts to hear a voice in his head. The voice says it is himself from the distant future and it can

help him , but not with his girl friend issues.

It takes him a lot of introspection ( how is his future self communicating and for that matter how did he manage to live for so long), before he begins to think it may be able to help him to do something about the very unusual rain that just goes on and on. It is set in Johannesburg and we get a background feeling of a person who has grown up in the repressive apartheid era but with no real stress on this.

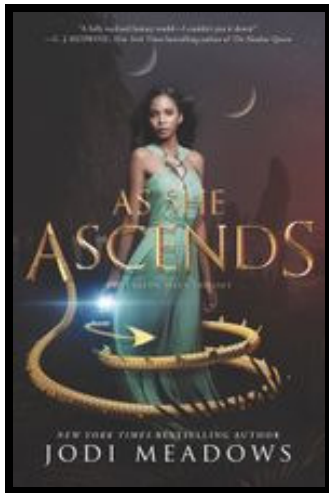
Jimmy, with an odd selection of friends as well as his future self, sets about trying to prevent the things that have created the unpleasant future the voice comes from, as well as working towards a way to extend human life. At almost the end of the book there is a press conference at which Jimmy announces that he has developed a gift of longevity which he is giving to the world, but the last chapter in the book takes us back to the very beginning and one has to wonder if all that has gone before is futile if time is looping around and around.

The book is well written and very readable. I found the present tense presentation interesting.

I think that South African science fiction is really coming of age and can take its place in any setting

## Jodi Meadows

### As She Ascends Book Two in the Fallen Isles Trilogy



I have not read the first book in this trilogy but this one apparently continues directly on with Mira the Dragonhearted on the run with her friends following a fiery escape from the prison where she'd been condemned for speaking out against dragon trafficking.

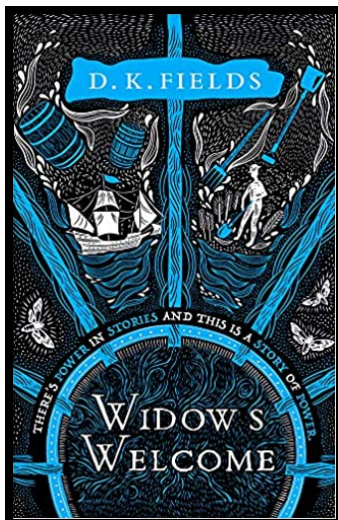
And the dragons she seeks have gone. She suspects that the Treaty she had been defending, has actually sold out the dragons to the enemies

of the Fallen Isles. She desperately needs answers. She does not know if she can even trust her parents. She has also discovered the power she can wield and is afraid that this may cause hurt to the people she loves if she loses control of it. But she needs to save the dragons and find out where they have gone.

The political story behind the Fallen Isles is filled in and we see Mira's character development as the novel unfolds. The story ends on a strong note but we will have to wait for the third book to find out if Mira succeeds.

## D.K Fields

### Widows Welcome Book One of the Tales of Fenest



Fenest is the capitol of the Union of the Realms and it is election year. Detective Cora Gordeheim has seen the underside of the city, muggings, brawls, murders and the like. But the city is full of the electioneering parties and this election is conducted in a way very different from most. Here the next party to govern the Union will be the one whose story wins the most votes from the electorate. (the Audience who hear the stories)

Here words truly have power.....

Detective Gordeheim finds a dead body, not that unusual, but the man has his mouth sewn shut and he turns out to be the Wayward's election storyteller. Now a completely different light is shed on this murder and the detective has to find the killer.

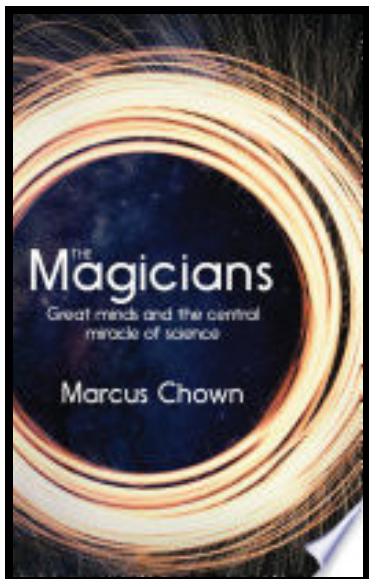
A large part of the book is taken up by the stories from two of the parties. The entire universe revolves around the telling of stories. We hear two of the six stories which will be told. The Casker story and the Lowlander story. The Audience discusses them but will have to wait for the other stories to be told to make a decision on which party will rule next.

And Detective Cora has her own issues. Her family do not like the profession she has chosen and her sister Ruth has gone missing.

She solves the murder but there is still much to come in this story and this is one trilogy for which I will look forward to books two and three with anticipation.

The novel is written by David Towsey and Katherine Stansfield and I found the whole premise very intriguing. This one is really worth reading.

## **Marcus Chown**



## **The Magicians**

This is a non-fiction book about the amazing prophecies that Mathematics has been able to make about the physical world we live in. Subtitled: Great minds and the central miracle of science,

This is the story of the magicians who, with pen and paper, not only predicted the existence of unknown worlds, black holes and subatomic particles but antimatter, invisible waves that course through the air, ripples in the fabric of space-time and many more things besides.

From the discovery of Neptune to Einstein's troublesome prediction of gravitational waves to the huge multinational project of proving Higgs' boson, Marcus Chown



takes us on a vivid, witty and illuminating tour of science's most significant breakthroughs, and highlights the central, mysterious magic of science: its astonishing predictive power.

I really enjoyed the stories about the people who sometimes surprisingly earned Nobel prizes, and about those who possibly should have.

There are 10 chapters, each about different aspects of physics and how mathematics was able to show that there is a mathematical mirror universe which lies behind the physical one we have come to know.

I am not well versed in Mathematics and so had to read this book at a slower rate than I would normally do but I have to say that I enjoyed every page. Chown uses humour and clarity in such a way that I was able to follow the sometimes convoluted path that takes us to the understanding we have of our universe today.

I can wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys a good mystery story and is astounded by the physical science that forms the backbone of our earth.

## SpaceX to Mars

"You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great - and that's what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It's about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past. And I can't think of anything more exciting than going out there and being among the stars."

-Elon Musk

. Elon Musk has revealed new details of SpaceX's Starship space craft, which the company is building to ferry people to the moon and Mars. The SpaceX boss shared an image on Twitter on Thursday, showing an aerial view of two massive tanks designed to hold fuel for the rocket. He also replied to a post by a space .photographer, confirming that a major update on Starships progress can be expected in September.

Earlier this month, Mr Musk described the development of Starship as the "top priority" for SpaceX.

A prototype of the Starship craft was unveiled last year and has since gone through several iterations as it undergoes flight and launch tests.

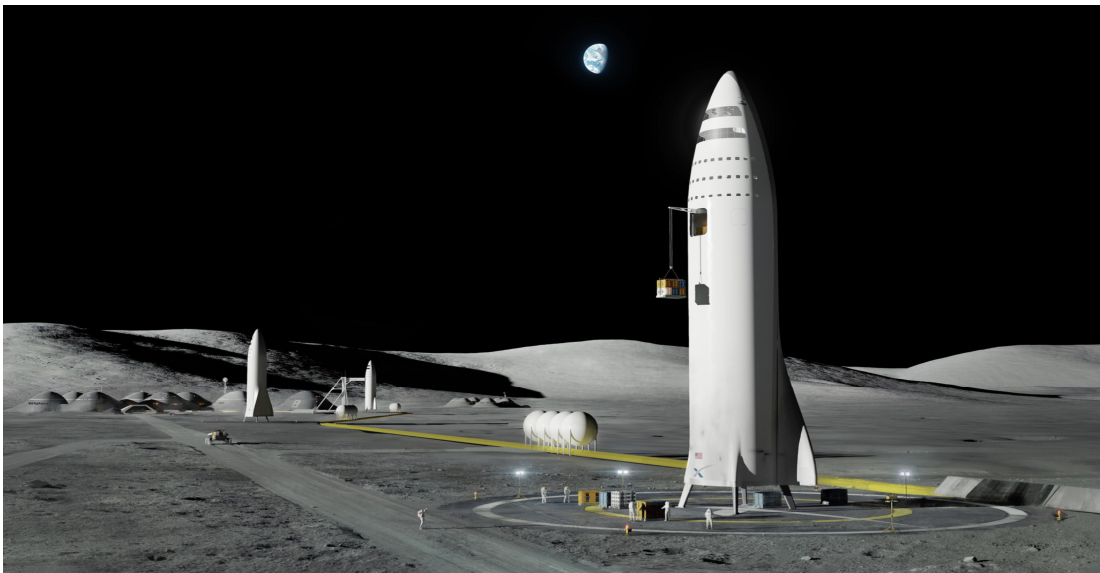
Earlier this year, a dramatic explosion occurred during a cryogenic pressure test at SpaceX's development facility in Boca Chica, Texas.

The stainless steel Starship craft will eventually be capable of carrying up to 100 people on missions around the Solar System. There is no set launch date for the first mission, though Mr Musk has previously expressed his hope of launching the first humans to Mars before 2025.

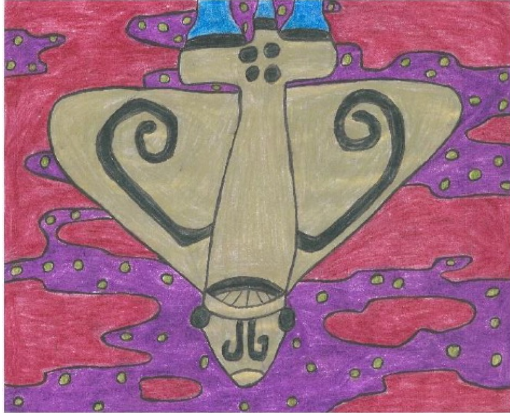
He has also frequently expressed his intention to one day travel to Mars himself, claiming that making humanity a multi-planetary species is essential to its long-term survival. The first Starship cargo missions could launch as early as 2022, which would carry materials needed to begin establishing a human colony on Mars.

Last week, Mr Musk revealed that SpaceX is building "spaceports" to receive and launch rockets travelling between Earth, the moon and Mars. A SpaceX job posting stated that an "offshore operations engineer" would be needed to develop rocket launch systems for future missions. "SpaceX was founded under the belief that a future where humanity is out exploring the stars is fundamentally more exciting than one where we are not," the post stated.

"Today SpaceX is actively developing the technologies to make this possible, with the ultimate goal of enabling human life on Mars."



## ORIGINS-5. AN ALTERNATIVE



TO BE CONTINUED...



