

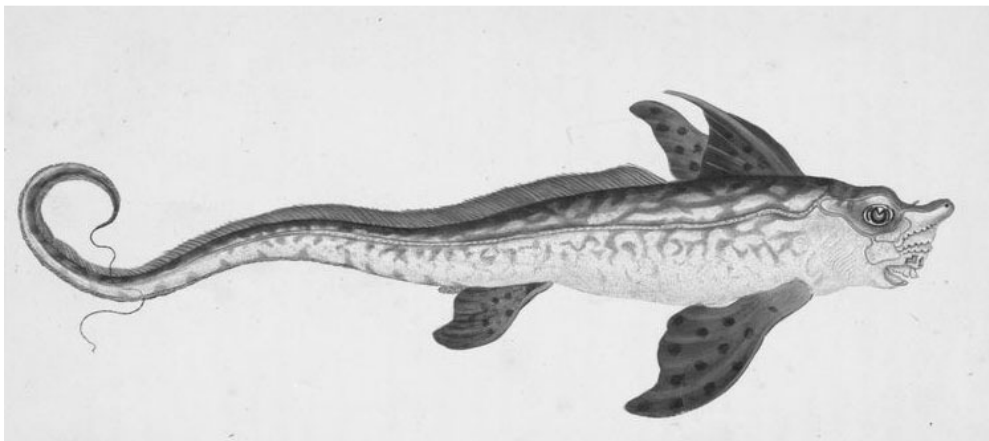
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 1 Number 5

Page 1 – TAKE THE NEXT LEFT by Mario Lowther. He writes, “My short fiction has appeared in *Necrotic Tissue*, *Imaginarium*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Mystic Signals*, and *Remarkable Doorways*, and has been a Glimmer Train New Writers Top 25 Finalist.”

Page 11 – TIME LAG by David Hann. He writes, “I am a university teacher from New Zealand. I am currently working in a university in a small city in China. I am married with a 2 year old child (who sometimes thinks he is 18). I used to write for the university magazine when I was a student, but I have had nothing else published since those long ago days.”

Page 16 – THE CLOCKWORK HOURI by Robert Hartzell. The piece is part of a larger fiction-cycle titled **Pictures of the Floating-Point World**. Other pieces from the cycle have appeared most recently, or will appear, in *the Uperder*, *Milkfist*, *Typehouse*, **the Startling Sci-Fi: New Tales of the Beyond** anthology (New Lit Salon Press), and **the Science Fiction Stories** anthology (Flame Tree Publishing). He can be found at <http://robhartzell.wordpress.com>



TAKE THE NEXT LEFT

by MARIO LOWTHER

The accident scene lay up the road, investigators scuttling all about, measuring skid marks and tracing the damage path, the photographer's camera strobing and growling. A tow truck backed into position, a city worker eying the overhead power lines. Firemen closed up the Jaws of Life. Paramedics in no hurry waited with a gurney and a body bag. The ground was wet, and red.

Down the road, ignoring the onlookers, Demmy stood beside his car, a blue older model Prelude in immaculate condition parked at an angle to the curb. The guilty exhilaration he'd first felt had died. Now he felt sad. And nervous. Very very nervous. This *had* to happen, he thought.

A chrome bumper straddled the center yellow line, bent double like a fortune cookie. He glared at it, then at Officer Grott, whose sideshow-sized nose was deep in his notebook. I've told you everything, Demmy repeated to himself. Shortly after eleven o'clock, I turned onto Woolrich Boulevard from King Street, and proceeded northbound down the inside lane at slightly over the speed limit. The second vehicle, a black Corvette, sped up from behind, doing probably twice my speed. It flashed its lights, ordering me to move. I engaged my right turn signal, and was about to change lanes,

when the Corvette swerved around me, the driver gesturing then accelerating. He must've grazed the curb because the car lost control, went airborne, and struck the tree head-on.

A horrified gasp from the onlookers made Demmy flinch. As the paramedics extracted the battered and bloody body from the wreckage, the mangled stump of a hand had slipped out and knuckled the pavement. Demmy shuddered, feeling the frost of accusing eyes.

"Are we done?" he demanded, then regretting it, thought: easy, be cool, can't let on.

Officer Grott gave the quivering witness a critical look. "Mr. Hoyt, how much time do you think elapsed between the second vehicle flashing its lights and you engaging your signal?"

An island of shattered windshield glass sparkled red and blue under the police car lights. Demmy held himself close and said, "Couple seconds," then reiterated, "Did he piss me off? Yes. Did I do anything to provoke him? No. Can I please go? I'm not handling this very well. Sorry."

Officer Grott snapped his notebook shut. His lip curled faintly in disgust. "Okay, have a good night, Mr. Hoyt. Go get some rest. We'll be in touch. And remem-

ber, you're a lucky man."

"Lucky," Demmy grunted. In his haste to leave he stumbled off the sidewalk. In his car, his hand on the keys in the ignition, he closed his eyes and sighed. When he next looked, the cop stood framed in the side-view mirror, his penetrating expression musing whether to hold Demmy up while he leaned against the trunk and had himself a good old fashioned re-think. With a short wave goodbye, Demmy roared the Prelude to life and exited quickly down Woolrich Boulevard.

Officer Grott's junior partner, Officer Ivory, approached. "Our hero gonna make it?"

"Thought he was gonna go messy on his shoes," Grott said, still bothered by something.

"You ran his plates?"

"Six-one-Tango-eight-five-Romeo, '93 blue Prelude, registered to Demeter Hoyt, 262 James Terrace. Age forty-two, no priors, no warrants. Not even a traffic violation. An angel."

"No, a virgin," Ivory smirked. "First-timer, carnage overload. C'mon, let's wrap it up."

They turned back to the accident scene. The Corvette, its radiator in the front seat, had just been winched off of a thick, unmoveable oak. The ambulance was departing, the onlookers wandering home.

Officer Grott opened his notebook to jot down the time. The page screamed out at him,

and his notes smacked him between the eyes. "James Terrace is on the other side of town," he blurted to Ivory. "So what the hell was he doing out here so late?"

In the rear-view mirror, Demmy saw the ambulance leave. His shakes began to subside. Just bad luck, the accident happening, but he felt proud of how he'd handled it. And sometimes bad luck turns into good. And sometimes they say you gotta make your own luck, that's what I'm doing, making my own luck. I'll be okay, only gotta keep my eyes on the road and not attract attention...

...but what about that cop, Demmy thought. Did he suspect something? Maybe he didn't. Or did he? Maybe he's put two and two together. And he's coming after me. Coming now...

Demmy couldn't chance getting caught, had to know, had to be sure. Bracing himself with a deep breath, he braved another look into the rear-view mirror.

Someone sitting in the back seat met his gaze.

He was young. The shattered windshield



had raked his skin away, leaving gore for flesh. Glass cubes stuck out everywhere like a bad case of light-reflective acne. A large, jagged chunk protruded from his right cheek. His nose had sliced off, a crater remaining. Brain matter gleamed from a crevasse in his forehead. Blood carpeted his long, stringy hair. His wide, wild eyes gaped at Demmy, the left eyeball popped out and dangling.

“Take the next left,” he said.

“*Jesus Christ!!!*” Demmy screamed.

The steering wheel spun in his hands, the car barreling through a red light onto Fontana Avenue, traffic lurching to a halt and honking. White-knuckled, Demmy spun it back, regaining control and starting down a rundown street of dimly-lit gas stations and storefronts behind bars.

“I didn’t know I could do that!” the carcass in the back seat raved. “Sweet!”

He grinned in the mirror. Three of his lower front teeth appeared to have been forcibly removed. A rivulet of chunky guck snaked out, dribbling down his chin and onto his tee-shirt, which was black and sported a green ankh.

“Hey, dude, I’m Zip,” he said, offering his hand without thinking, what was left of it. He giggled insanely, realizing.

“Demmy,” Demmy shuddered. “Uh... how you doing?”

Zip guffawed, spewing more effluence. “A comedian. Sweet. Actually, Demmy, thanks to you I’m pretty fucked up. But I’ve got unfinished business so you’re taking me where I gotta go.”

That gave Demmy a cold feeling. “What

do you mean?”

The car bolted forward. Demmy stomped on the brake, barely missing rear-ending a bus, the tires screeching. Smoothly the gas pedal returned to its natural position under Demmy’s boot.

“What I mean,” Zip smiled, “is that in the great scheme of things we’ve been ordained to share a fate. We’re not told why. So tough shit. Just drive, and don’t do anything to piss me off.”

Sighing hard, Demmy kept his eyes on the road and his thoughts to himself. On Fontana Avenue, dingy tenements began to pop up alongside vacant lots choked with weeds and garbage.

Zip whistled. “Hey, Demmy! Look what else I can do.”

Although not high on the list of things Demmy wanted to obey, he did. Instantly seared into his brain was an image of Zip in the rear-view mirror happily plucking a shard of windshield glass from his face, then with a grunt of effort wrestling the large jagged chunk out of his cheek.

He held up the blood-dripping thing. “I’ll just lay this on the floor mat, okay? You sure keep your vehicle clean, Demmy. I’m down with that. I like order. I like finishing things.”

Demmy disliked the sound of that. He launched a windshield-wiping towel into the back seat. “Aren’t you supposed to be in an ambulance?”

“I am,” Zip said. He giggled again. “Don’t worry. It didn’t hurt. Over before it started really. And hey, I’m impressed. You

were primo chilled, back there when you lied to that cop.”

Chagrined, Demmy gaped at the rear-view mirror. “What do you mean, I didn’t....”

The steering wheel began to rock. Demmy grabbed on, struggling to stay in his lane and not attract attention. He threw Zip a pleading look, saw the back seat ghoul casually shaping his blood-matted hair into a sloppy mohawk, the tips pointing like barbed spikes. Done, he beamed proudly, then as if remembering a neglected detail, he popped his dangling eye back in. When he blinked, he made alternate winks with a two-second delay. Demmy gave up pleading.

Zip broke into a crimson grin. “Dude, when he asked you about time elapsing, I failed to hear you mention the nudge you tried to give me.”

Demmy saw events unfold again: the Corvette tailgating his ass just a wheel-width away, high beams flashing impatiently, swerving just as Demmy finally acquiesced to lane-change. The Corvette’s single-finger protest, Demmy responding with a right-hand tug on his steering wheel. The other car lurching in surprise, slamming against the curb, launching into the air...

“You were so chilled,” said Zip, as Demmy fought to keep the Prelude from careening all over Fontana Avenue, “you looked at the cop, the street, the wreck, the onlookers, at everything *except your car*. What up? Most dudes would scope their transport to reassure themselves there’s no damage. Idiot cop’s probably pondering: ‘What’s so special about his car that

Demmy didn’t want me to notice?’ Not the interior - that’s immaculate. Glove compartment, maybe?” Alarmed, Demmy watched the compartment unlock and yawn open, crammed with accessories and papers. Not even a deck of cards or a condom. The door closed. “Maybe not. Wait a second, was it...?”

“NO!” Demmy shouted.

With a banshee scream, Zip dove through the crack between the back seats, vanishing up to his belt. Twisting around, Demmy latched onto his leg, trying to tug him out. It felt as though he was grabbing onto semi-frozen stew. He yanked harder, swooning with disgust.

Bang! The Prelude bucked over something solid. An overflowing trash can showered the air like fireworks. Demmy’s forehead thwacked against the steering wheel and he realized to his horror he had wrenched the wheel over, now the car was doing fifty down the sidewalk. As if in slow-motion he sped past two barely human shapes in the half-open doorway of a nameless shop engaged in a non-consensual act with two others assisting. A shawled figure shambled into view dead ahead, pushing an overloaded shopping cart. Demmy blasted the horn, a cane clubbing the car as it sped by and a leprous face cursing in an alien tongue.

Zip re-emerged as if siphoned out from between the back seats. “Hey, dude,” he grinned, “can you explain why there’s a box in your trunk with a baby in it?”

Like you’d understand, Demmy thought. He glared at Zip, snarling, “Fuck you.”

The Prelude lurched back onto Fontana Avenue, right into the path of a delivery truck. It swerved and screeched to a halt, horn blaring at Demmy's taillights.

"Alright!" Demmy yelled. "She's my girlfriend's kid! Look, I don't know what you think about me, but I've got nothing, okay? All I have is this car and a skinny broad on welfare who's passed out twenty-four seven. But she's blessed with this unreal kid, and I thought... well..."

"You'd wait till the slut was snoring, then steal her brat. Then what?"

"Start over!" Demmy said, steering wildly. "Gimme back the goddamned wheel!"

"Make your own luck," Zip said ruefully, looking thoughtful despite lacking a face. "So you put her in the trunk because you were scared and weren't thinking straight. No shit, that cop spooked you. Dude, you're right, this is an unreal kid. Two car accidents and not even a wah."

The Prelude's engine calmed, the car decelerating. Hoping against hope, Demmy eased off the pedal. "Her name's Ramona," he said. "Sleeps through anything. Has to. Shit, if you think she's getting knocked around here, you should see what her mother's addict friends do, treating her like a crushed beer can, even worse." With Betty stoned witless and raving that Ramona was a curse, a good devil to her bad. Demmy found it actually felt good to get this off his chest.

That, and the light up ahead had turned red. He slid a toe onto the brake.

"You're right about me making my own luck," he babbled on. "Y'see..."

"That's what I thought I was doing," Zip nodded. "Till I met you."

The wheel spun in Demmy's hands, the Prelude hang-gliding across two lanes of traffic on a four-wheel drift, before catching and swinging right, tires squealing, onto Jackson Road.

Demmy gave a hollow laugh. Anywhere but Jackson Road. "Was it something I said?"

"Dude, when the light of your life comes to and has nothing to inject pabulum into - well, let's say the cops have your name, address and license number and you're gonna be very fucking popular. Until that happens, you're gonna have to sit tight." Zip's lacerated expression was grim. "Like I told you before, I've got unfinished business. And we're tethered. Just lucky, I guess."

The car rattled on over cobblestones and rusted rail lines, and the further down Jackson Road, the sadder things were. Even the cops ventured down here only as a last resort. The street was a tunnel, the shop signs stripped away, the black buildings so close one could spit, or worse, from side to side. One might wonder what would befall the fool who dared park his vehicle here. The sort of place where doors didn't open during the day, yet dusty lights still came on at night.

Straight ahead swelled the harbor, a well of black secrets, rippling, thick like oil. Demmy didn't like water or the docks. Who knew what went on behind security gates and barbed wire. A different world, with dif-

ferent rules.

Jackson Road descended toward a dead end, a gate, a Keep Out sign, and a long, empty pier. Demmy resolved not to beg for mercy but to go down with dignity. He crossed his fingers and thought of Ramona, deep asleep and oblivious in the box in the trunk. Kid, if we get out of this, I promise you'll have it better than what you had. If not, then we'll go down together, and tomorrow morning Betty will stagger awake and fly into a panic. Better luck next time, hon.

The Prelude made a last-second hard right turn away from the pier. Demmy held on and blew a sigh of relief. It was short-lived. The car passed a low brick wall and entered the parking lot of a run-down, glass-fronted building with no storefront name. Large red posters covered the windows, bearing strange symbolic scripts above numbers accompanied by a ¢ or \$ sign. It was no language Demmy had ever seen. But he recognized the pattern of the posters immediately.

It was a supermarket.

A battered brick warehouse extended behind it, lined with disused shipping doors. At the rear stood a too-high metal fence topped with barbed wire, with a big gate that smoothly swung open. Demmy held his breath as the Prelude sped in and bounced onto an old, creosote-stained pier. Two forklifts like worker bees were off-loading containers from a trailer. In the harbor, tugboats were piloting in a sea-worn freighter, the bridge deck crowded with shadowy figures.

The gate closed. The car stopped. Demmy swallowed. Now that they weren't moving, he wished he could run. Waves rippled, and somewhere in the darkness a seagull cackled.

A container door half as wide as the back of the warehouse opened, a man emerging as if from a giant mouth. Far away he was tall and swarthy; up close he turned short and stocky, more powerful and threatening with each step. Demmy couldn't tell if he was Arabic, Indian, Asian or Alien; he was some, then none, then everything. His mean Happy Face smile beamed disquiet.

"You're late," said the Everything Man in a gurgling, underwater-soaked voice. Demmy stared back, the helpless bystander. Momentarily thrown, the thug then saw Zip waving from the rear. Although impressed by Zip's condition, he shrugged as if he'd seen worse. Stepping back, he eyed the Prelude from bumper to bumper, and declared ominously: "This is not the car."

Zip's window rolled down without him touching it. "Ran into one tiny problem," he said.

The Everything Man's lip raised in a sneer, exposing hammerhead teeth, his expression retorting *And one enormous problem*. "Come," he gurgled, turning toward the container door.

Demmy shook his head and gripped the wheel. "Not me. I'm not going."

He glared his defiance, hoping to convince. Instead he saw himself reflected in agony in the bullet black eyes of the Everything Man. Demmy paled, and the thug laughed *haw haw haw*.

Then Demmy knew why, because he heard it too: a new waterfront sound. Beyond the usual lapping of waves. And the omnipresent hum and clank of machinery.

There was now the plaintive, muffled cries of a baby.

“Feeding time,” Zip announced, his ironical grin adding *tough luck*.

Demmy had seen a gun up close in a grocery hold-up and had been frightened enough to hope to never see one again.

The blaster that the Everything Man drew from behind his back was twice that size, and the barrel even had holes down the sides as though to let the bullets breathe.

“All come,” the gun itself seemed to say, “now.”

Hands up, Demmy came out first. Gun in his ear, he removed a cardboard apple box from the car trunk containing a pink-faced, blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl-child swathed in a Teletubby blanket. Ramona squirmed and giggled, thrilled to see him. The Everything Man eagerly reached out to touch her. He had no fingernails, only hard skin, smooth as plastic. Repulsed, Demmy held the box away. He and the thug exchanged glares. Turning, they found Zip waiting at their elbows, his door unopened. As the blaster swung into Zip’s face, Demmy noticed the thug’s hand

tremor briefly. The thug noticed it too. Zip guffawed. He filed in as gestured toward the container door, his squishy footfalls pulling off the pier, Demmy leading with Ramona gazing at him trustingly.

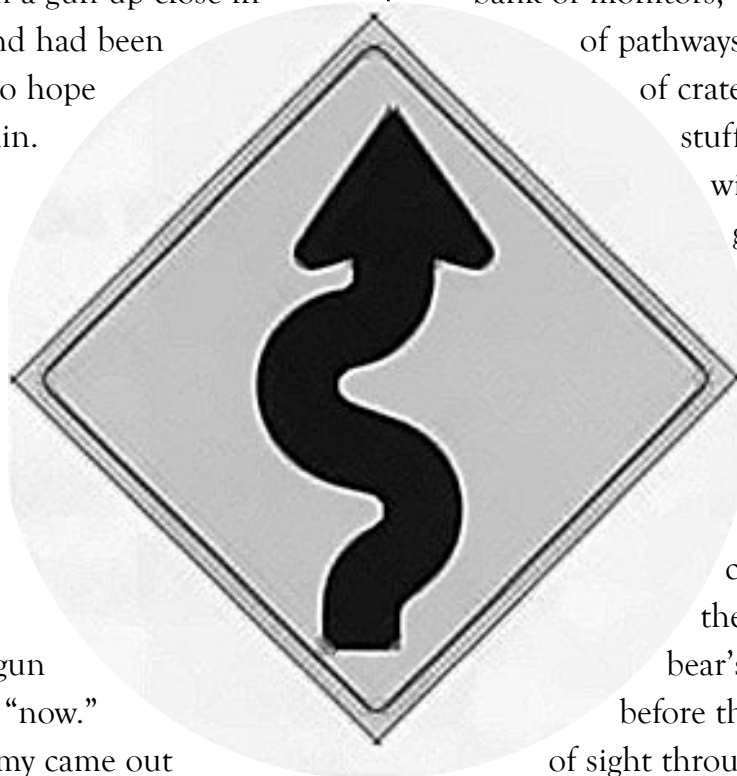
They entered the warehouse past a guard shack where a virtual clone of the Everything Man watched from beside a

bank of monitors, Uzi in hand. A maze

of pathways wove around pillars of crates labelled with food-stuffs and pallets piled with bags of rice and grain. The air reeked of musky spice. Boxes of medical supplies, needles and gauze appeared amongst the edibles. Demmy caught a glimpse of a crate labelled peppers, the lid pried open, a

bear’s foot standing atop it, before they were whisked out of sight through a dark doorway.

The door closed with a click behind them. They were in a room, candlelit and thickly curtained. At the far wall stood a shrine of a hulking marble idol with a ravenous expression leering between two sandstone columns topped by a mantel carved with figures in torment. A naked, voluptuous jade hermaphrodite lay in repose at the idol’s feet, its eyes closed as though asleep, a third eye in its forehead open and gazing, and a cushioned platform, fashioned with stirrups and adjustable from standing to flat, lay before the shrine like an altar.



Three men sat at a rosewood table in the center of the room. They were bent over bowls of red purée in which many-legged things were undulating, spearing and eating them with tools shaped like scalpels. Two of the men could have been uncles of the Everything Man. The third, in the middle, was tall and ruler-thin, and had stark white hair and a face tapering like a shield, characteristics that seemed to elevate him.

Stepping forward, the thug gurgled a few words. The boss chewed thoughtfully, then in retort barked one harsh word, and the thug lost no time placing himself behind Demmy and Zip, his weapon in his back belt, his hands clasped before him.

“You look poorly,” remarked the boss. An instant later, a second guttural voice as though emanating from inside the boss echoed, “*You look poorly.*”

“I’ve had a bad night,” Zip said, embarrassed. He turned. “But I bring you an offering.”

He made a pull gesture toward himself. The apple box tugged in Demmy’s arms, hard then harder. Panicked, he tried to hold on, but the box broke from his grasp and sailed to Zip.

“You bastard!” Demmy shouted, shaking his fist.

The fleshy men laughed. Zip grinned, motioned the box to the table, and stepped back. The boss peered inside and smiled, a pearl of drool hanging from his elongated, rapier teeth.

“*A yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl-child. I’ll take it,*” his inner voice whispered delightedly.

Then both his voices said, “But you come to us without the car. Quw Phan delivered it to you?”

“As arranged. And I thanked him for the opportunity to serve you.”

“Then deliver it to us,” said the boss, the inner voice adding, “*You made a blood vow.*”

Zip shrugged. “My vow is why I’m here. Quw Phan sends his regrets. Unfortunately, he drowned in his toilet after saying you plan to encase me in something airtight under concrete.”

Ramona recoiled as the boss poked her cheek with a long, many-jointed, nail-less finger.

“Kootchie koo,” he tittered, the fleshy men laughing again. The boss tossed Zip a look relishing the thought of what he would soon do with that finger. “*Where the car is, you will tell us now.*”

“It’s safe. So is the cargo. Long as nobody wonders why the airbags didn’t go off.” Zip opened his palms casually, retracted then raised them. “Now *you* vow. Swear we’re settled, and you take this baby as my token...” He pointed at Demmy, “...and his life as my payment.”

Demmy lunged. The Everything Man collared him, one thick arm, tight as a boa round a monkey. Struggling only made it worse. Feeling his life strength begin to ebb, Demmy gazed at Ramona with big eyes, the baby blinking back at him as if understanding and forgiving, then he glared at Zip and made a last, secret, silent vow of his own. His palms still raised, Zip shrugged sorry, Demmy’s luck had run out. The boss, satisfied he knew all, and that blood could

now be spilt in the pleasant, time-consuming way, nodded graciously. “*And your life as well,*” he said.

Exactly what Zip had wanted to hear. Gore oozed from his smile as he said: “Too late.”

The boss reacted, barking a quick order. Still holding Demmy, the Everything Man went for his weapon. His eyes widened. It wasn't in his back belt. He whirled, found the exotic piece hovering mid-air like a dragonfly. Angling his upraised palm, Zip aimed the barrel at a puzzled wrinkle in the thug's fat forehead and nodded. The gun fired. The bullet burst out, buzzing like a mosquito. It burrowed into the thug, splashed out the back of his skull, then streaked for the next victim in line. Screaming, the boss collapsed onto the altar, not blood but red purée racing down his cheek from a hole over his left eye. Something green and vaporous emerged from his mouth and fled, shrieking, for the shrine, into the three-eyed androgynous statue lying at the idol's feet.

Zip held out his hand and the blaster flew to him. The fleshy men dove to the floor, firing wildly. By an unseen force, the door blew open. Ramona, grandly entertained, cried with delight.

Demmy saw it all in a blur. “Run!” Zip bellowed, snapping Demmy out of it.

He snatched Ramona from the table and took off, trying to remember his way through the warehouse. Behind him, he heard an exchange of gunfire sounding like explosions in a beehive, then a shrill protest as if someone in a death throes was being further handled. Demmy came to a halt in a

dead end of red pails bearing radioactive stickers. Where to now? Take the next left, he thought. He tore through a nursery of ornate, bulbous plants in greenhouses warmed by humming mauve lights; dodged a hazmat-suited figure lifting some overalls, acid-scorched and frayed and smoking, into a disposal bag with a pair of tongs; then froze, stared up at what hung from a hook in the ceiling, thinking it the oddest-looking side of desiccated beef. Until he counted the digits.

Uzi fire clamoured. The twin thug at the guard shack was firing back into the warehouse. Demmy flew the other way. As he ran out the container door he heard a high-pitched, agonized scream at the guard shack, and a cheerful voice yelled, “Sweet! Now where's that gate switch?”

On the pier it was bedlam. Everyone on a forklift, in a semi-trailer or on the freighter was yelling gibberish and driving, running or sailing towards Demmy. Shots from the ship splintered wood at his feet. Reaching the Prelude, Demmy dropped the apple box in the passenger seat and apologized for the rough treatment to Ramona, who giggled, this apparently being great fun. He wheeled the car around, outrunning a forklift with its forks up, and beelined for the gate.

On cue, it began to open.

Demmy hit the gas. Speed and the thrill of a narrow escape exhilarated him. The Prelude exploded into the parking lot, just as a police cruiser, responding to a shots fired call, swooped in the other way off of Jackson Road. Its light were flashing, its

siren was howling, and to Demmy's dismay, it was just his luck that two familiar faces were looking back at him.

"That's him!" Officer Ivory cried.

Screw you, Demmy thought, rocketing by.

Officer Grott watched him go, pleased that his suspicions were confirmed. "Call it in," he said. "Someone else can pick him up. I want to see why he was in such a hurry."

In the rear-view mirror, Demmy saw the cruiser race toward the pier. He raced too, back to a low-rent suburb and a drab bungalow on King Street. In the carport he sat, collecting himself, and listening to the neighborhood at three in the morning, graveyard silent but for the sound of Betty's bellicose snoring through the open bedroom window.

Ramona grinned up at him. Demmy smiled. He made a little laugh. She made a happy little gurgle. He tickled her. She wriggled and swatted his hand.

Sighing, he said, "I love you, kid, but Betty's right: you're bad luck."

Inside the house, Demmy quickly warmed Ramona's bottle on the stove, fed her and put her to bed, and left his key on the kitchen table with a goodbye note for Betty. When he got back to the car, he felt refreshed and ready. Storm clouds were gathering overhead and he knew worse things would soon be hounding him down a new, terrifying road. But with a little luck, he'd be fine. And courage, determination and perseverance. And money. Lots of

money would help.

"I know where we can find something that's worth millions," said a voice from the back seat. "And I messed with my vow back there, so I'm sensing I'm bound to the goods and now we're ordained to share a new fate. What the fuck, maybe we'll catch a break this time."

"Or maybe not," Demmy said. He shook his head and put the car in gear. "Sweet."

All he had wanted at the beginning of the night, Demmy thought, was to make some luck with someone special and turn a new page. He glanced in the mirror.

"Put your damned eyeball back in," he said, then into the storm they drove. ❖

TIME LAG

by DAVID HANN

Come on. We're off to see the great battle. You don't want to be late. Everyone's coming. All the families in the city, in fact all the families in this hemisphere, will be out in the open air tonight to see the great event that saved our world.

It's one of the things that most people don't think about when they look at the sky. They don't think that what they're doing is looking back in time. Light, after all, travels at a constant speed (purists will disagree, but in a vacuum with no major gravitational fields it's close enough, and any other way of looking at it takes a degree in physics). Basically, it takes light one year to cross one light year so when you look at a star six light years away you are seeing that star as it was six years ago. Seeing as how stars don't normally change that much over the years it's not really important most of the time.

Now, with faster than light ships you can be somewhere before light gets there. If, for example, you fled a supernova, years from then you could go out on your back lawn and watch it happen in comfort when the light finally caught up with you. In a way you can see your own past. In theory, if you had a good enough telescope, you could see yourself on a world you left behind in an FTL ship. You could even wave goodbye to

yourself.

Sorry, I'm rambling. It's just that today is such a great day, and, you know, I'm excited.

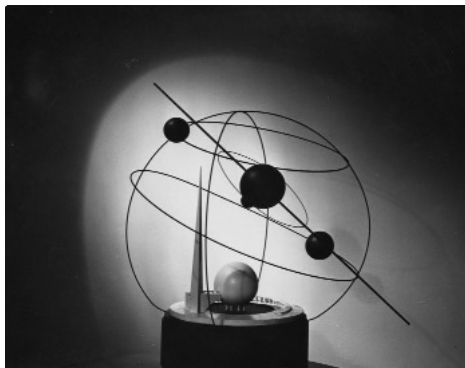
A few years ago things weren't so good. We'd been stuck in a major war with the Brefa, an alien species, for longer than most of us could remember. They were a nasty lot too, violent and downright evil. They didn't occupy worlds in the conventional sense; they looted them and enslaved the occupants. Our colony worlds were devastated in their attacks. It was no use even trying to calculate the death tolls. We just assumed that everyone caught in their attacks were as good as dead. The lucky ones were dead.

Oh sure, we fought back, but we were not winning. Not at all. It's not that the Brefa technology was really in any way in advance of our own. It was certainly different though. They grew their ships and weapons after all. In essence, where we used what you might call industrial technology they tended toward more biological approaches. The quantitative difference was huge, but the qualitative one, in terms of its value in action, was almost nonexistent. The big difference was that they were obsessed with conquest. They attacked in massive numbers and completely disregarded

ed casualties. You see, one of the main reasons they attacked us is that they have an insatiable appetite for new worlds. They breed so fast that they need to keep expanding at a rapid rate, and they need as many habitable worlds as they can. They were driven by their biology. Until very late in the war we couldn't match that fanaticism.

Oh, look, let's sit here. One advantage of being a well-known writer, you get the best spots. Look, the president's platform is only a little behind us. You'll have a great view of the battle tonight. The skies are really clear.

Where was I? Oh, right, the war. It was going badly. We'd lost three quarters of the fleet, half of that at the disastrous battle at Virgo Four. The 2nd and 3rd fleets had been ambushed by a vastly larger Brefa force and cut off from escape by the gravitational instabilities in the system. Most of our colony worlds had fallen and it was obvious that the next target would be here, home. Indeed, their long-range strike ships had already done some hit and run stuff. The worst was when they took out the central records building. Not only was it too close to home, but it was damned inconvenient having to go back to a cash economy because all retinal and DNA records had been lost. And then there were occasional reports of Brefa landing parties being put down at various places, but that seems to have been paranoia, nothing was ever found.



When we realised that the next blow would fall here, and would likely extinguish our race forever, that's when we got fanatical. Everyone who could walk was taught to use a weapon. Everything that could be used as a weapon was converted. We'd make them pay for every inch they took. Beyond that we started stripping the waste dumps for fissionable material. We hadn't used nukes in centuries, they are too messy, but now we figured we'd have nothing to lose. We built enough nukes to drop one pretty much every hundred kilometres across the whole planet. They were badly made, and would have been really dirty when they went off, but they would work. The plan was simple, every time the Brefa advanced more than one hundred kilometres we'd fire one of these things at

their new location. We'd slaughter them as they took up new positions. If we won, well and good. If we lost then all they'd be able to claim was a burnt-out radioactive rock. The world would be useless to them. Either way, they'd lose.

Of course the Brefa knew we'd put up a hell of a fight and they started developing their own weapons. A small number of amazingly brave and resourceful individuals managed to escape Brefa controlled space and reported all sorts of horrible things. The Brefa scientists had been taking slaves and exposing them to all sorts of nasty bio-

logical stuff. They tried mind control bugs, killer insect swarms, viruses. There were certainly stories of biological modification in all sorts of forms, both on the slaves and even modifications to their own bodies and appearances. It was horrifying stuff. It made me feel quite ill when I read it. What really worried us was that they would manage to produce some sort of super virus that could wipe us all out while they sat



in their ships and laughed at our nukes.



We had bio-warfare



suits and the like, but only for about five percent of the population. If the Brefa succeeded in developing a truly effective bio-weapon the rest would die.

So there we were... No, don't open the wine yet! We have a good ten minutes before the battle begins. See the president's only just got here. He looks so happy too. Well he should, this is his night after all.



We were basically sitting around waiting to die. No one really expected to live through the battle. If the Brefa didn't develop a virus to kill us all then their weapons would, or ours. Maybe we'd die in a Brefa bombing attack, maybe a little slower from the radiation of one of our own bombs. It didn't really matter, we expected to die. The only thing to look forward to was killing a few of them.



Then one day the miracle happened. Okay, the day didn't start very well. The newly completed battlecruiser "Vigilant" went out of control and plunged into the atmosphere. A ship of that size is too big to

burn up completely; so large parts of it hit the ground, impacting on fleet HQ as it happened. As the president and defence cabinet had been visiting at the time the accident effectively took out the whole of our government and military command apparatus. It seemed that fate was against us too.



Okay, then the miracle happened. A fleet of capital ships was seen on TV blasting away from the dark side of the moon. They told us that this fleet had been constructed in secret to avoid any Brefa attention and that it would now be going out to engage the main Brefa fleet before it could reach us, and before it could react. The fleet was led by Commander Zhania, who we had all thought had

been killed at Virgo Four. It turns out that fleet had exaggerated the number of crews killed at Virgo Four so they could be redeployed back here to man the new fleet. I have no idea how they escaped the gravitational trap at Virgo Four. Anyway, the whole thing had been kept so secret that even their own families didn't know.

We waited with baited breath. We couldn't see what was going on of course. That's the whole thing about FTL; you travel faster than you can see. All we knew was that the fleet had jumped to engage the main enemy fleet some 10 light years out. We waited, and hoped, and prayed. I have to admit, we didn't have too much confidence. We'd seen the Brefa

smash our fleets in the past. Most of us thought it might gain us a couple of months at most.

Then the high-speed picket boat was spotted jumping back in-system. Immediately the jump distortion had cleared she sent us a broadcast of the battle. Oh, it was gorgeous. For once luck had been with us. The Brefa had massed almost all their ships and were just getting their fleet ready for the final jump when our fleet jumped right into the middle of their formation. We were outnumbered almost ten to one, but we had surprise and utter desperation on our side. Our fleet tore through them, reducing the odds to eight to one before they even had time to react. Then they started fighting back and all hell broke loose. We lost almost all of our new ships, but by the time the battle was over the entire Brefa fleet was gone. Our only survivors were the flagship "Vengeance" and the light cruiser "Retaliation". They'd done their jobs though.

The Brefa contacted us a day later. Unbelievably they wanted an armistice. Apparently even they couldn't take that sort of pounding. They agreed to expand their empire away from us. The massive sacrifice had been worth it.

"Vengeance" and "Retaliation" limped home in a couple of days with their surviving skeleton crews. Remarkably Commander Zhania had survived the battle. It was so sad to wreck his homecoming with the news that his family had been killed in a freak flying accident the day before. The war had been hard on so many though; vir-

tually none of the crewmembers had any family to come home to.

There's only a couple of minutes left till we can see the great battle so I'd better make this quick. We've been waiting ten years too see this. I don't want to miss it, or distract you from it either.

Obviously, as the government had been killed in the "Vigilant" disaster we had to hold fresh elections. Equally obviously Zhania won by a landslide. With so many of the government killed he put a lot of his comrades from the "Vengeance" and "Retaliation" in senior positions. It made sense really, they were used to working together to solve difficult problems. Oh, sure, some people complained about the harsh new rules, but he had to get the planet back up and running again. I'm not too happy about the work camps and the re-education centres for dissidents myself, but I suppose he's a military man and feels that the reconstruction needs discipline. Certainly the government has a good degree of control over the whole planet now.

Of course it was a severe shock to discover that several senior military men who hadn't been in the fleet that saved us had been collaborating with the Brefa. Maybe the trials were a little short, but they deserved the death penalty. Anyone who dealt with those horrible monsters had to die.

Anyway the government is now securely in control of our lives and we know exactly what we have to do. We've finally finished the dismantling of the nukes, and the fissionable material has been disposed

of. I know some people wanted to stockpile it in case of renewed hostilities, but I think firing it into the sun made sense. We really didn't want all that radioactive material lying around. Maybe now the economy is back in business we can get back to manned space flight again. Zhania said we needed to concentrate on domestic recovery before we sent ships out again, a wise decision I think.

That's funny. I thought the light show would have started by now. They told us they had the exact time of the battle and the exact distance. Still, I suppose it's possible that the distance could be a little out. You know people don't pay a lot of attention to details when they jump into the middle of an enemy fleet. Strange though, you wouldn't think that they'd be more than a few seconds out. It's now at least five minutes since it should have started. Look, the crowd's getting restless.

Maybe the battle wasn't really large enough to show up over these distances. No, that's not right, the detonation of a fleet buster releases about the same energy as a small star. Some sort of gravitational effect that delayed it? A gas cloud or nebula between us and the location of the fight? No, the astronomers would have told us. Very strange.

Other people are getting nervous too. Look at them all muttering, and looking back at the president. What are they thinking?

This is very strange. If we can't see the battle by now then it would mean it was never fought. But... if it was never fought

then the Brefa would have invaded and we'd have reduced this planet to a burnt out radioactive cinder. They would have lost anyway. I'm beginning to wonder-

Look! There's a light show after all. Maybe just a bit late. See the lights over there, toward the west. Bright and getting brighter. Wait... Wait. That's not a battle in space. Those are the drive flares of landing ships. Brefa ships. They have to be, we don't have any anymore.

I hear laughter. Why is our president laughing? ❖

THE CLOCKWORK HOURI

BY ROB HARTZELL

[Ed. note: Though this story is sometimes included in collections of old Arabic tales, the provenance of this story is controversial. The story itself post-dates the time of its setting by quite a bit – enough that it appears to expect its reader not to recall that the democratic uprisings in the Arab world came long before the introduction of mass-market sex robots. None of the Arabic speakers in the Cloud can remember being aware of the story until seeing it in English – and no physical manuscript (in Arabic or English) is known to exist. Even if we could pinpoint when the story first appeared in the Cloud, we would still likely be at a loss to tell whether it originated there, whether as urban legend, a short story, or something else.]

History is the result of careful pruning, even when everything is data, and storage is seemingly limitless. The Cloud can no more manage a fully-detailed memory, like Borges' titular "Funes the Memorious", than Funes himself could. The tale was of no consequence worth remembering – until it was, and by then, the details had already been lost....]

In the twilight of the reign of the Saudi kings, a long time ago, there was a sheik, rich and powerful, who could afford any and all the desires of his heart – and the two things his heart desired most were women and novelty. Before he'd reached the

age of thirty, he already possessed, in his harem, more women than years, and when he made his periodic trips to the capitol city, he usually returned with a new addition to the harem. The harem chambers took up an entire wing of his grand palace, and housed women from all corners of the globe: Turkish and Kurdish women who belly-danced for him and taught the other women to do the same; American women who would do things for him in his bed-chambers, with enthusiasm, that few of the others would do without goading; women from Indonesia and Japan and India who taught the palace chefs the dishes of their homelands; Egyptian and African and Palestinian women, and Iranian and Portugese and Spanish, and still others besides.

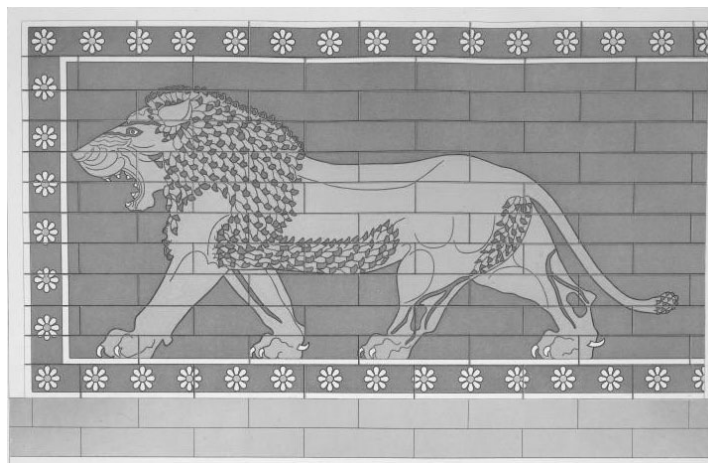
It would be a lie to say that all was harmonious in the harem all the time – even with the best of intentions, such a varied mix of cultures and languages and traditions cannot co-exist so closely without the occasional misunderstanding or the possibility of conflict. It is true, however, that the sheik's mother helped to settle such squabbles quickly, sometimes even before they had a chance to reach the sheik's ear. She was a learned and shrewd woman, and whenever the dangers of clashing factions

arose in the harem, she knew just what to whisper in whose ear to divide and dissolve them.

Such situations were rare, however; the sheik's mother had raised him (the youngest of eight sons) to treat women with some measure of kindness, and he was the most gentle and indulgent of his siblings toward women. His brothers often teased him, as a result, that his harem was full of women to nurse from, not to fuck – but as far as anyone could see, his household was more harmonious than their own, and they had only the four wives allowed them by the Prophet!

The sheik was as charismatic with his business partners as with his women, which kept both his wealth and his harem growing. He was, it is true, charming to a fault with his women – but, it must also be admitted, he could be just as stern and intimidating when he felt

that he was being treated with less respect or gratitude than he believed himself entitled to. At the same time, he was a man of his changing times, and not some sort of medieval monster: the women who joined his harem always did so of their own free will, and (with the exception of his Saudi wives, who were bound to him as much by the law of the Kingdom and the political alliances they cemented as by affection) they



were free to leave whenever they wished, with a not-inconsiderable parting-gift to see them off. Only once (before this story takes place) had a woman taken up the sheik on this offer – a London girl who simply could not acclimate to life in the harem – and she was returned home with no questions asked.

For the most part, the women of the harem were content with their lives therein, however confined they were by the dictates of Saudi law. The sheik made possible for them regular trips to the nearest marketplace to relieve the monotony of their surroundings, which were more luxurious than most of the women were accustomed to in

the first place: there was no shortage of comforts available to them, from the most exquisite gourmand delicacies to chemical pleasures, to intellectual stimulation (the Egyptian and Iranian women made sure that

access to books and the internet were as certain as access to alcohol and hashish and opium)...in short, there were no entertainments which were not available to them, and so, they lived more-or-less contentedly, as idle or active as each of them wished to be.

But then it fell one day, shortly after the end of Ramadan, that the sheik went to the capitol city, just as he usually did – except

this time, his trip went beyond the seven days it usually lasted. In the days that followed, the women wondered after him, speculating among themselves as to what he could possibly be doing:

“Perhaps he is bringing back a new woman,” said Aiysha, gloomily. She had been one of the sheik’s first “acquisitions,” and though she’d long been supplanted as his favorite – it had been more than a decade since she’d shared his bed – she still nurtured some small, secret hope that one day, he might return to her, and return some measure of the affection which she still had for him.

“Perhaps he is buying a new home – maybe even one closer to the capitol,” said Mikiko, her small voice barely audible over the din of the other women’s voices in the harem’s main chamber. Though she was currently the sheik’s favorite, her natural Japanese modesty made it difficult for the other women to truly hate her: whenever they complimented her on her beauty (and she was, it must be said, an *incandescent* beauty), she was quick to demur. “Your skin is so much softer than mine,” she would say, “and my breasts are so small compared to yours....”

“Perhaps there’s some sort of business crisis he must attend to,” said Sonia, a voluptuous Ukrainian who joined the harem shortly after the collapse of her family’s imports business; the experience had scarred her so badly that even now, despite the sheik’s fortune and his continued success, she desperately feared being plunged into poverty again.

And so it went, the speculation growing wilder and wilder over time until the sheik’s mother came down into the main chamber to address the women: “The sheik will return home at the end of the week. He has promised to bring with him a surprise which, he says, will explain his absence.” The women begged her to tell them what she knew – of course she had to know more! – but the older woman shrugged. “*Inshallah*, we will find out when he returns. I am as much in the dark as the rest of you.”

On the day the sheik returned from the capitol, the harem was abuzz with anticipation; having had most of a week to wonder what he would bring back with him, the women were naturally brimming with curiosity – except Sonia (who, having been reassured that there were no imminent financial disasters, felt no threat to herself) and Mikiko (who, being certain that the sheik was not bringing back a woman to displace her in his graces, also felt no threat to herself).

Their curiosity grew all the stronger when the sheik’s entourage began to arrive – and dispersed the women to their private chambers. “By order of the sheik,” the eunuchs said, refusing to answer any of the women’s questions, no matter how earnestly they begged. They spent about a half-hour in their private rooms, exchanging a flurry of text-messages with each other as their anticipation soared, stopping only when they received a group-text from the sheik himself: *Come to the main chamber, that I may*

properly greet my ladies.

The women's chambers were in corridors that connected, like spokes on a wheel, the outer hallway to the circular main chamber. As the women emerged from their hallways, they saw the sheik standing at the harem's entrance hallway, which led directly to an inner courtyard. He waited until all 72 women (not counting the wives and his mother, who flanked him on either side) had gathered, before he made his circle of the room, greeting each of his women with a kiss on both cheeks and an endearment: "Aiyesha, *habibi*. Justine, *ma chère*," and so on, all the way around.

When he had finished, he addressed the entire group. "My ladies, I am pleased to return and find you well, and as lovely as always." He paused for a moment, the hint of a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. "I can see from your faces that you are eager to see what I have brought back from the capitol?" He could not restrain himself from grinning when the women nearly shouted "YES!" in response: "Then I shall not keep you waiting. Eunuchs! Bring in Houri!"

The eunuchs disappeared down the entrance corridor; the women waited so silently that the sound of the outermost doors could be heard opening – and then, a single set of footsteps coming back down the hall. A young woman appeared at the mouth of the hallway, taking her place next to the sheik. At first, the women thought she was merely another acquisition – *why would she be any surprise to us?* – but as they looked closer, their confusion began to

grow.

She was completely naked, yet made no effort to cover herself. And her skin was impossibly porcelain and flawless, an effect only enhanced by the blackness of her waist-length hair – some of the women could be seen peering back and forth between Mikiko and the newcomer, as if trying to determine whose hair was darker. She had the petite frame of an Asian woman, yet her facial features were much more classically Middle-Eastern, down to the eyes, which were so dark they might well have been black. *But that skin, that skin....any paler and it would be translucent, inhumanly white....* Mikiko was the first to figure it out: "She's a *rokisu*, my sheik? A sex robot?"

To the consternation of the women, the sheik clapped his hands, delighted. "She is. It took the manufacturer more time than expected to get her specifications just right...but here she is. And not just a *rokisu*, but a prototype of a third-generation model. Tell the women 'hello,' Houri."

The robot looked blankly around the room and waved limply. "Hello." And the women wondered: *Can that...thing...actually feel uncomfortable? Or is that just a trick of its programming?*

Before they could get to the next thought – *how many of us will this thing replace?* – the sheik's mother burst out in rapid-fire, furious Arabic that only some of the women could understand: "This...*thing*...is an affront to religion! To Nature! To women! And you call it 'Houri,' my son? She is no reward for martyrdom – she is a fast track to hell!"

The sheik's eyes flashed with rage. "She is also an investment worth as much as the jewelry in your chambers, Mother. And I expect all of you" — here he turned his attention to the other women, who struggled to contain their own anger — "to treat Houri as such. For I assure you: the consequences will be grave for those who do not."

He glared around the room; when he was satisfied that there would be no more outbursts, he continued: "Mikiko, you will show Houri to the empty chambers and allow her to choose one for herself." With a sort of backhanded wave, he dismissed the women and strode out of the harem.

The women began to disperse as Mikiko approached the robot. "This way, Hourisan," she said, hoping her tone was sufficiently pleasant and neutral. She could feel the glare of the rest of the harem settle upon her as the robot took her hand and allowed itself to be led down one of the empty halls — and though she was guiding the robot, she was beginning to feel like *she* was the helpless one.

Houri, for her part, presented herself to the women in the most deferential light possible. She did everything the women asked her to do, no matter how insignificant or undignified, and with an unflappably neutral demeanor. Once they realized that she had no spirit to break and no pride to wound, the women turned instead to ignoring the robot — except for the Americans, who would, at least once a week, escort Houri to their shared quarters (where she would remain, emerging only late at night,

after most of the women had already gone to bed.)

Only Mikiko could be seen to interact with her as though she were a real woman, and even she had to admit that she found Houri's presence unnerving: she would find herself chatting with the robot for a half-hour or more before the robot would say something odd, that gave away her artificial nature. The Arab women, for their part, were particularly hostile, refusing to acknowledge the robot at all; only Aiyesha among them took a more fatalistic view: *we can only hope she does not bring down calamity upon us, inshallah.....*

It came as no surprise to Mikiko when she was, at last, supplanted by Houri as the sheik's favorite. It had been some time in coming; at first the sheik would summon Houri and Mikiko to put on a show for him before he would possess one of them. A couple of times, Mikiko remembered, the sheik had been able to take his pleasure with both of them in one evening — but that was when Houri was new. Once that novelty had started to fade, he would complete the evening with one or the other, eventually preferring to take his pleasure with Houri. In the early days, he would have both of them remain in his bed with him until the morning — but it wasn't so long before Houri edged out Mikiko for this privilege, as well.

And so, Mikiko found herself in the same position as most of the other women that had come before her: she was permitted nearly any comfort she might desire, any

luxury she might ask — but, unless she turned to one of the other women of the harem (as the Americans were said to have done), the one thing she was to be denied was love. Though she thought she'd understood this when she first joined the harem, it was only now that she truly understood what this meant. And though it had made the other women hard toward Aiyesha, Mikiko found that she could only pity the other woman her forlorn hope.

A year passed, and life returned to something like normal in the harem. Two of the Arab girls, an Egyptian and a Palestinian, decided they could no longer brook the insult of being cast aside for a robotic abomination and left the harem to return home — but beyond that, Hourī's presence had little effect on the overall balance: she was neither part of a faction, nor was she deemed worthy to faction against. And so the women carried on, enjoying the luxuries offered them by the sheik, as idle or as active as they saw fit to be. Only the sheik's next journey to the capitol provoked some measure of tension, but when he returned early — and without any new women — even that dissipated into relief: *Inshallah, we'll never have to go through that again....*

And then one day, word of some sort of delivery reached the harem; at first, only as rumors circulating from phone to phone among them, but when the eunuchs were called away and a meeting of the harem set to convene at noon, it became clear that something serious was about to take place. Speculations of all sorts were thrown out:

the Palestinian wants to come back; the household is about to move to a bigger compound; the sheik has been banished to one of the neighboring countries; the wives are about to assert their authority and dissolve the harem. “Another girl,” Aiyesha grumbled to anyone who would listen. *Another robot*, thought Mikiko — then chastized herself: *When did you become so bitter? Are you going to become another Aiyesha?*

When noon came, the harem chamber was hushed, so quiet that the women could hear the opening of the entrance doors far down the hall. Like the others, Mikiko stood stock-still in her place; only Hourī could be any more motionless. When the sheik finally entered the room, he was greeted with a quiet nervous intake of breath before the customary “Good afternoon, my sheik!”

“Good afternoon, my ladies,” he replied — though, as the women would later recall, without gusto — “You are well, I trust? Excellent.” He began to pace to and fro before the opening of the entrance hallway. “You will, no doubt, wonder why I have assembled you here. Let me begin by introducing the newest member of this household — Habibi? Come in, my dear.”

And to the shock of the women, in walked...another Hourī. This one had slight differences — her motions were more fluid than Hourī's, and though she had the exact same face as Hourī (that much was plain once she took up position next to the first robot), it appeared to be a bit more expressive than Hourī's, more lifelike, as she smiled and greeted the women in Arabic:

“Peace be upon you.”

The sheik opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the Arab women broke ranks and charged forward, shouting in their native tongue at him. Few of the other women spoke Arabic well enough to completely understand the rapid-fire accusations — or the sheik’s icy responses — but the gist was clear: *even these Western whores are not enough? You must insult us further with these machines?* And with the sheik’s answers proved unsatisfactory, they turned and strode toward their private chambers; as it became clear that they were preparing to leave the harem, some of the other women began to join them, and when the sheik’s rage was not stoked — when he in fact began to smile, a tight and slight rictus of a grin — even more of them left the room.

When it was all done, only three of the women remained in the room with the sheik and the Houris: Sonia, Aiyasha and Mikiko. The sheik began to chuckle as he gathered the women around him, but it was Sonia that broke the tension: “You are not angry?”

“Why should I be angry?” the sheik replied. “I have rid myself of a burden I have supported for too long. If their pride is worth more to them than the comfort I have provided them, then let them go. If anything, they have made my task easier by leaving.”

“Your task?”

The sheik squirmed briefly, almost imperceptibly so, before he continued. “I would prefer to have genuine women around me, but” — here he gestured toward

the Houris — “these are not displeasing at all. And I shall not lie to you: there are other circumstances which force my hand — hence a task which saddens me: I must decide which women, if any, I may continue to keep in my household. I will give each of you a chance to make your case for why you should remain. Succeed, and you may stay for as long as you wish. Fail, and you will be returned to your home country with a generous token of my appreciation. You will have two days to consider your answer, then each of you will have a day to spend with me to persuade me, Sonia will go first, Aiyasha, second, and Mikiko, last.” With that, he turned and left, the Houris trailing behind, leaving the women in stunned silence.

The next days were wearying and tense; with all the good-byes and packing and general commotion, it was difficult for Sonia and Aiyasha and Mikiko to think. The sorrow of parting with people they’d spent years living with....and the anger, it must be said, that even *they* must somehow prove themselves? Only the thoughts of what they’d left behind made it seem worth the effort; Aiyasha had fled unrest in Syria; Sonia, her family’s Russian poverty. Mikiko’s reasons were less immediate, though no less heartfelt: “Being Japanese can be suffocating,” she’d tell them. “*The nail which sticks up is hammered down* — and I do not wish to be treated as a nail.”

To pass the time, they would take turns talking about what they would do if they were sent home. Aiyasha had plans to get

her family out of Damascus — preferably to a peaceful spot in the country where they could farm, far away from the disturbances of the capital city. Sonia talked about starting a new business with her family, but Mikiko, when pressed, had to admit she had no idea what she might do. And the conversation would stop there; the next question, the obvious one — *what will you do to prove yourself to the sheik?* — was one they didn't want to answer. Not out loud, and certainly not in front of each other.

Sonia's day came: Mikiko and Aiyesha saw her off at breakfast, then spent the day in idle, furtive conversation, full of frequent pauses and awkward silences. By the time the evening meal was served, both women silently wished the sheik's mother would join them, if only to give them something else to talk about, something that would take their minds off of what was certain to be happening in the sheik's chambers. Beneath the *abiyah* she had to wear to cross the compound, the Russian girl wore scarlet lingerie (and not much of it), making it plain what her strategy was.

Aiyesha was scornful and nasty as Mikiko had ever seen her: "If he'd wanted *sluts*," she cackled, "he'd have kept the *Americans!*" Mikiko said nothing; it didn't take much to tip the Syrian into a full-throated rage, and she didn't need the drama, especially now that there was nobody else around to help absorb it.

An hour or two after dinner, Sonia returned to the harem, alternately sobbing and (probably) swearing in her native lan-

guage. "He spent the whole day sporting with me, only to tell me that my body still wasn't enough reason to keep me." Mikiko tried to comfort her — while Aiyesha tried not to be obvious about her gloating — but Sonia would have none of it. "He had me do...things." She shuddered. "And then he took his pleasure with the *roxujbot!*" She began muttering to herself in Russian, but for Aiyesha and Mikiko both, the gist was clear enough once she began gesticulating, slashing through the air with her hands: *he preferred the robots to me, the cockless son-of-a-bitch...*

The next day was Aiyesha's, and (once they'd said their final farewells to Sonia) Mikiko was almost grateful for the solitude. All night, while Sonia packed, Aiyesha was absolutely preening: *she thought her body would be enough reason to keep her, the stupid cow!* Mikiko had gone to bed early just to get away from her. Now, as the Syrian pled her case to the sheik — and Mikiko was certain she was pleading, absolutely without pride or dignity, and quite possibly on her knees or even stretched out at his feet — Mikiko roamed the empty harem chambers, coming to rest only when she came across the massive cushion-set that had once been the most comfortable and prominent seat in the main chamber. The cushions were stacked off in a corner; probably moved there by the eunuchs as they packed up the rest of the chamber. *It's not as though the robots will need furniture.*

Mikiko stopped to ponder this: *am I giving up already? Should I?* She walked up and

down the hallways of the harem's bedchambers; stopping before this room and that one, she found herself remembering the women who had once inhabited them, and the sense of emptiness, abandonment – the sense of a presence now missing – was haunting. The robots' rooms left her with no such feeling: *they have no presence, not even sonzai-kan – there's no they there.* Would being alone with the robots be worse than having another person (even *Aiyesha*) for company? She wasn't sure she had an answer to that.

She was still pondering the question at the evening meal when *Aiyesha* stormed into the harem building, alternately furious and despondent. "I gave him obedience. In everything. There was nothing I would not do." The Syrian paused, muttering to herself in Arabic, then continued. "And it wasn't enough for him." She alternated between sobs and invective – "a thousand cocks in his mother's arse" was one *Mikiko* thought she recognized, though by this point, it was difficult to tell. *Aiyesha* had buried her face in *Mikiko's* shoulder by this time, clutching at her until the eunuchs came to offer her a bit of opium to smoke, so that she might at least get a decent night's sleep.

Mikiko's own sleep was troubled that

night, as much by the question of *whether* she wanted to stay as by the question of *whether* she *could*. She thought of the sheik as he'd appeared to her when she first met him: cool and neither aloof nor solicitous. He carried himself like a man who knows he has money and power – *real* money and power – and can therefore allow himself an air of vulnerability. At the time, it made her feel as though she could penetrate to his core, if she stayed around and worked at it – that she could, that he wanted her to, know him as completely and intimately as humanly possible....

She chuckled: *how silly. How naïve – how gullible of me! Like a manga-addled schoolgirl, falling for the ruse that touches both her heart and her pride. As if there were anything there. As if he'd know what to do with the woman who actually figured him out in the first place.*

As if he'd know what to do with a woman his equal.

And thus, *Mikiko* conceived a plan.

The eunuchs ushered *Mikiko* before the sheik in his personal suite's entry foyer; once they'd left, he

gestured for her to remove the *abiyah* she'd worn to cross from the harem chambers to the sheik's. Underneath the shroud, she was wearing a simple black minidress, the sort of thing she might have worn at their introduc-



tory meeting, back when she was auditioning to join the harem in the first place; confidently sexy, without the brazenness of something like Sonia's merry-widow outfit.

And there was something different about Mikiko today – that smile? Not solicitous or pleading; more feline, like a predator cat, an image further impressed upon the sheik by the motion of her hips as she walked across the room and, without waiting for an invitation, seated herself across from him. “Good morning, my sheik,” she said, that curl of her lips suggesting...what, exactly? Amusement? No: that would be far too bold for the Japanese girl.

He remained standing. “Good morning. Would you like to join me for breakfast?”

“I'd love to.” She stood and took his arm; this was decidedly not the Mikiko the sheik was accustomed to, and where, ordinarily, he might have taken offense at such boldness, such familiarity taken with him! but this was so novel and unexpected, he found himself curious as to where she might go with this – how far? and what other surprises might she have in store? He gestured toward the dining room, but he followed her lead there....

Throughout the day, the sheik studied Mikiko, looking carefully at the signs of some sort of change that had come over her. He waited for her to make her pitch for why he should keep her – by this time, Sonia and Aiyasha had been well into their own – but if Mikiko was planning on pleading her case, she was taking her time about it. She hadn't broached the subject at all; not while

they relaxed in the jacuzzi (where she gave him a scalp massage that reduced him to a quivering jelly), nor while they played chess (her suggestion; she stalemated him twice – deliberately? he wasn't sure, but again: that curl of the lips suggesting amusement).

Instead, they talked about her homeland – his education abroad – the politics of the old harem – the uprisings in other lands – and he was taken aback to realize just how *observant* she was, how well she understood his culture, as well as the people immediately around her. How *nothing* seemed to get past her. Had he noticed this before, when he was bedding her? Probably not; to his surprise and perhaps even shame, he realized how little impression the women of the harem had left on him – even (until now) including Mikiko. He wondered how many of the others, like her, had had something to them that he'd missed noticing – she was, however unexpectedly, good company, every bit as lively and witty as his fourth wife. Under different circumstances, he might even have introduced them....

...but no. As the Filipino servants escorted them to the dinner table, he watched Mikiko take her seat and realized how silly the whole notion was to begin with. He studied her as she nibbled at her Kobé beef carpaccio, marveling at the grace with which she lifted the slices of meat to her mouth with her chopsticks in one hand, while using the other to hide her mouth while she chewed. A custom he would, if it were at all possible, impress upon his first wife. No: The only way for him to keep Mikiko was to keep her as one of the “pleasure wives” of

the harem, with the other Houris; *that's just how it must be, here and now*. The other wives might enjoy her company, but even if he tried to make her a permanent pleasure wife with their permission, they'd certainly bristle at her background, her lack of status and breeding, here *or* in her home country.

Mikiko met his gaze. "Is something wrong, my sheik?"

"Nothing at all, my dear. I was merely reflecting upon the good fortune that brought you into my household." She flushed and hid her face behind her hand again — *such a charming gesture!* — but when she said nothing, he continued. "Of course, I shall have to go back to the capitol to find some more human girls to keep you company — I can't imagine that Houri and Habibi make terribly interesting conversation..."

Something like discomfort — at least that's how it appeared to the sheik — swept over Mikiko: the way her back almost-imperceptibly stiffened, the way the corners of her mouth appeared to tense up. Perhaps confusion? He decided to put her mind at ease: "You have nothing to worry about, *habibi* — I would be grateful and proud to have you as part of my household, for as long as you care to stay."

"For which I am most grateful, my sheik. But I will not be staying."

The sheik was used to rejection in the capitol; the women who came from overseas to join his harem were just as likely as not to misunderstand what their lives would be like in this country, and to opt to return home. He could scarcely fault them for that. But *this*? The pleasure wife he wanted to

keep, turning *him* down? This was unexpected and novel — and infuriating. The sheik struggled to keep his voice steady, his tone, neutral: "You won't be staying?"

Mikiko's voice was heartbreakingly gentle as she spoke. "I have enjoyed my time here with you, my sheik, and I am more grateful than I have the power to show. Today, especially, has been an experience I will treasure. But it cannot last. If I remained in the harem, I would be one of many, even if I were the only human woman there. I left Japan for that reason — you've heard the proverb, I'm sure: *The nail which sticks out is hammered down.*"

"And what will you do when you return? What can possibly be there for you now that wasn't there before?"

"There may be nothing."

"Then what will you do?"

"I will *make* something."

None of this made any sense to the sheik, no matter how he tried to puzzle it out. "But...*The nail which sticks out is hammered down*, I thought you said?"

Mikiko embraced the sheik and gave him a small kiss upon the lips. "I will not be returning home as a *nail*." The sheik looked on, powerlessly, as she donned her *abiyah* and summoned the eunuchs to escort her back to the empty harem....

The sheik grieved the loss of Mikiko for some number of days — but, having now been abandoned by his harem, was even more resolved to rebuild his paradise on earth, *inshallah*, even if *all* his *houris* were to be robots! And so he began: with some

vague promises of investment money, he convinced Hourî and Habibi's manufacturers to make his harem their product's test bed, for any and all future models or upgrades.

He never quite made good on those promises, but earned their trust in other ways; mainly, by hosting parties for the robot team members in the capitol, full of all the pleasures he once used to lavish on his harem (*in this respect, he noted, there is little difference between men and women*) whenever they had a new *hourî* to deliver. At one of these parties, full of wine and mirth, he issued the engineers a challenge: if they could build a robot personality that could convince him it loved him the way a human would – enough to suspend his disbelief and, in his turn, fall in love with the robot himself – he would buy, at retail value, a complete set of 72 of them. Until then, they would deliver him their prototypes to test for free.

The engineers, believing the sheik to be as gullible as his request was naïve, accepted gladly. They did not know what the sheik was truly requesting – in short, a robot which could convincingly remind him of that last day with Mikiko. And so, over time, he filled his harem once again, this time with mechanical *hourî*. Each prototype was more beautiful, more graceful than the last, and all of them, obedient to the very bed – yet the sheik was unsatisfied: *this one's closer – but it's not there, yet.*

Some say that eventually he bankrupted his benefactors with his challenge – only to move on to another company willing to take him up on it. It's even been said, by these same storytellers, that the sheik's eldest son, somehow, gained access to the harem long enough to fall in love with one of the clock-work *hourîs*, refusing the company of human women altogether until he could have her (or one like her) – but that is another tale altogether.... ❖

END TRANSMISSION