

# Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 3 Number 3

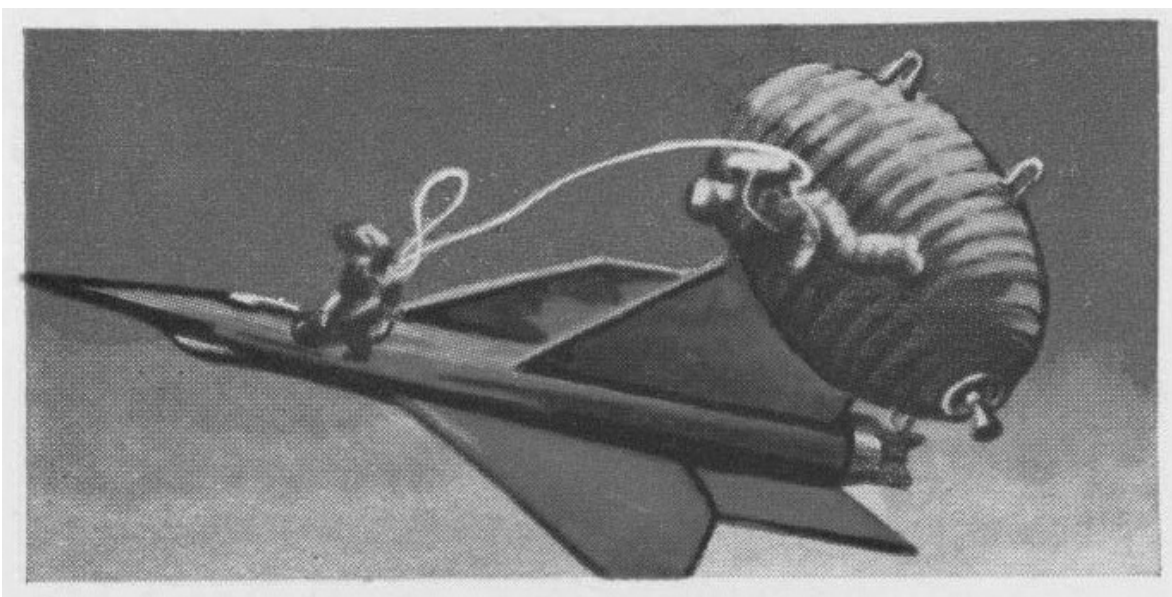
Page 1 – THAT SUCKING SOUND by John N. Crain. Mr. Crain writes sci-fi in a place called Cerrillos, New Mexico (about 30 miles south of Santa Fe).

Page 3 – CLOWN CAR by Tony Conaway. Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Mr. Conaway has written and ghostwritten everything from blogs to books. He has coauthored nonfiction books published by Prentice Hall, Macmillan and McGraw-Hill. His fiction has been published in eight anthologies and numerous publications, including Blue Lake Review, Danse Macabre, Linguistic Erosion, qarrtsiluni, Rind Literary Magazine, and Typehouse Literary Magazine. His odder work includes cowriting the script for a planetarium show and jokes performed by Jay Leno on "The Tonight Show."

Page 8 – THIS HORRIBLE HUNGER by Ben Spencer. Mr. Spencer's work has appeared in Literary Orphans and Scholars & Rogues. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. You can follow him on Twitter @RBenSpen or visit his website at [benspencer.org](http://benspencer.org).

Page 10 – OUTBACK JUSTICE by L. K. Pinaire. Mr. Pinaire writes, "My short stories have appeared in A.S.I.M., Beyond Science Fiction, Hero and Heroine Anthology and others. I have received numerous WOTF honorable mentions. I am a longtime member of The Online Writing Workshop for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror. I am a graduate of Indiana University, living in New Albany, Indiana, USA."

Page 22 – DEATH OF AN IMMORTAL by Craig Woychik. Mr. Woychik is a debut author living in a small town in Iowa. He has a sweet one year old daughter who means the world to him.



# “THAT SUCKING SOUND”

by JOHN N. CRAIN

There was that sucking sound again. It came from behind his left shoulder. Conrad spun around but he was too late – whatever had been there was gone. Sometimes he knew without doubt exactly what – or who – went missing, other times he couldn’t be so sure. It just depended on the situation. In this case, he had no clue. Conrad went on about his business as though nothing had happened, and at the moment his business was getting across the street without getting run over. A Volvo made an abrupt halt, chirping its tires, the front bumper twelve inches from Conrad’s knee. Conrad gave the driver a dirty look and wished for another sucking sound. But it was his fault, really. He should have waited for the light to change. How was he to know he’d be distracted halfway across the intersection? Oh well.

A day later, Conrad waited for the elevator on the fifth floor. It was lunchtime. The door opened revealing one occupant and Conrad was pleased. That babe who worked on the sixth floor leaned against the handrail and smiled at him. He’d been itching for the right situation to break the ice, but never been presented with such a juicy opportunity. He decided to make his move.

Time seemed to speed up as he took his place in the elevator, and Conrad’s mind raced, searching for a good opening line but drawing a blank as usual. He smiled back and tried not to stare. Finally, passing the fourth floor, he said, “You work on the sixth floor, don’t you?” An incredibly lame thing to say, but it was the best he could do, and he figured she’d give a perfunctory reply followed by an uncomfortable silence and leave him in the dust as soon as the elevator doors opened. But she smiled back, eyes twinkling, parted her ruby lips to say something, and Conrad heard that sucking sound and watched as she disappeared. Oh well.

Conrad tried to relax. Doctor Prine (though he was supposed to call her Sheila), always made him a little nervous. (He should probably find another therapist.) She sat in the chair opposite him and said, “So you’re still experiencing these... anomalies.” She paused and stared at him, as she often did, before asking, “When was the last one?”

Conrad paused and focused on her knee before replying, “About twenty minutes ago.” (He knew she didn’t believe they really happened. She was just playing along.)

“Can you tell me what disappeared this time?”

“I’m pretty sure it was a pair of shoes.”

“But you’re not positive?”

“Well, I heard that sucking sound as I was getting out of my car in the parking garage and a guy walking by the car stopped and looked down at his feet. He was bare-foot – except for his socks.”

Doctor Prine’s face remained inscrutable. “So you think that’s when he noticed his shoes were gone? In our last session you told me that when something went missing nobody ever noticed... even in the case of an entire person.”

“Yes. That’s true. Maybe the guy in the garage figured he’d simply forgotten to put on his shoes before leaving the house. I don’t know.”

She paused again and continued to stare at him with total impassivity. (Very annoying.) “Conrad, where do you suppose things go when they disappear?”

“How should I know? Probably some other dimension.” (Nothing ever came back, and he knew she wouldn’t believe anything he said anyway.)

Her eyes finally moved. Conrad saw them shift toward the clock on her desk, and she said, “I’m sorry Conrad. We’ve run out of time. Let’s talk about where things might go when they disappear in our next session, shall we?”

He left her office deeply aware nothing had been accomplished. Oh well.

Alone in his apartment, Conrad cranked the lever to raise the footrest of his recliner, pointed the remote control at the television, and heard that sucking sound one last time. The remote clattered to the floor. Oh well. ❖

# “CLOWN CAR”

by TONY CONAWAY

Always, always check your food order before you leave the drive-thru window.

I usually do that. But this time I didn't, which is why I had a box of Proto-Peruvian Cuisine that I couldn't eat.

“Hey!” I shouted. “Driver. We have to go back. They got my order wrong.”

“I'm sorry,” said the mechanical voice of the Ooberoo Self-Driving Vehicle that I was in. “We are entering a peak driving time. The amount of time allotted to each passenger is strictly allocated. We do not have time to return to the PacRimJob Drive-Thru.”

“Goddammit! I can't eat this crap!” They'd given me the Batch-ado I'd ordered, but it was cut into cubes. I've been modified so heavily that I can't eat solid food any more. I'd ordered my Batch-ado extruded into a tube, and they gave me the wrong stuff. It was in the right box, decorated with a cartoon of an Inca warrior slurping from a toothpaste-sized tube, plus a word balloon that read, “Mmmm. That's good Batch!” Underneath was the slug-line “Now with endorphins!” I'd been in a bad mood *before* I went thought the drive-thru – I *needed* those endorphins!

I cursed at the Robo-cab. I shouted. I threatened. All I got out of the Ooberoo-brain was “I'm sorry, I cannot process your

request.”

By way of excuse, I should say this: I was alone in the vehicle, without anyone to tell me to calm down. It was just me and the Ooberoo-brain, and I was damned if I'd let it tell me what to do.

So I unleashed my hydraulic fist on it.

The vehicle's brain is located in a box near where the gear shift would have been on a normal car. I hammered that sucker so hard that I thought the recoil would push me right out the door I was braced against. Unfortunately, this Ooberoo was a repurposed armored personnel carrier from the First Syrian War. It wasn't indestructible, but it was pretty damn close. I did, however, make the robo-brain glitch. The electronic voice stammered, and the interior camera – the one that had been recording my hissy-fit – went out. But we didn't go back to the drive-thru.

I tossed my box of Batch-ado cubes, which burst open and scattered all over the vehicle interior. Then I slumped back and sipped on my Quinoa-Cola, which was the only part of my order that they got right. Sipping and thinking murderous thoughts.

Drinking my cola, I considered my predicament. As long as the robo-brain wasn't taking me directly to a police sta-

tion, I figured I had a good chance of not getting arrested for vandalism. I'd used an anonymous cashcard to pay for my Ooberoo ride, as well as for the PacRimJob food. Paranoid as usual, I always avoid using credit cards that could be traced. The cab hadn't picked up me at home - I'd been downtown, looking for someone willing to sell me more illegal body-mods. The address I'd given for my destination was equally anonymous. Sure, the camera had recorded my face, but when your body is over 70% metal and plastic, you can have your face changed easily enough.

I'd left the other 70% of my body in Mogadishu. The Somalis fired a lot of RPGs at patrolling troops in the Second Somali War. Uncle Sam replaced my missing parts, and I'd spend a lot of my disability payments buying nasty, dangerous parts. Just another Charlie Cyberpunk, looking at you though the crosshairs of mechanical eyes.

We'd passed by the closest police station, so I figured the robo-brain wasn't taking me to jail. So I'd torch the cab when I got out, to destroy any DNA I left behind. And because it would be fun.

Then, to my surprise, the robo-cab slowed to a stop. Had I damaged its brain more than I realized? No matter: when the cab stops, the doors are unlocked.

Only they weren't. I struggled with the door handle. Cursing, I used the strength of my prosthetic left arm. All I managed to do was rip the handle off the door. The door itself remained shut tight!

As I stared at the twisted door handle

in my claw, I realized someone else was cursing, too. *That* was why we'd stopped - to pick up another passenger. You entered a robo-cab from the rear. That's also where you paid, in advance, after keying in your destination. Then you came forward, found a seat, and eventually exited from the nearest door.

The new passenger was a middle-aged woman in neo-Puritan dress. Evidently, her religious beliefs didn't preclude blasphemy. I thought she was cursing at the door handle I'd removed, but it was the scattered Batch cubes that had offended her.

"Pigs!" she said, as she flicked a cube off of the left rear seat. "People are effin' pigs!"

"Yeah," I said. "I think some kids had a food fight in here." Only then did I realize that I still had my Quinoa-Cola in my right hand, the container clearly marked with the logo of PacRimJob.

She glared at me, then flicked the final cube into the other rear seat and sat down, muttering "Good thing I've only got a short way to go."

But when we reached her destination, the robo-cab wouldn't let her out, either. Instead, its back door admitted two teenaged girls. They squeezed into the other back seat.

"How do we get out of here?" Polly Puritan wailed. "I'm calling the police."

That was something I couldn't allow. Not only might they arrest me for damaging the robo-cab, but I had illegal modifications among my metal bits. One of those

was a short-range jammer. I turned it on.

“I can’t get a signal!” the Puritan said. Neither could the teenage girls.

“I tried that earlier,” I lied. “I think there’s a problem with the network.”

The robo-cab slowed again. “Quick!” I said. “Try your doors – see if you can get out.” This time I used my right arm with the pneumatics. No joy. One of the girls tried to get out the way she entered, which was designed to be impossible: the doors open inward. All she managed to do was get knocked down as the doors opened inward, when an Asian man entering.

“Look,” I said when their cries of dismay died down. “We now have five people in a vehicle built for four. We’ll get out eventually – this is an electric vehicle, so it will have to return to its garage to recharge – but we can’t fit anyone else in here. This ain’t no clown car. If someone else tries to enter, *scream* at them not to come in. OK?”

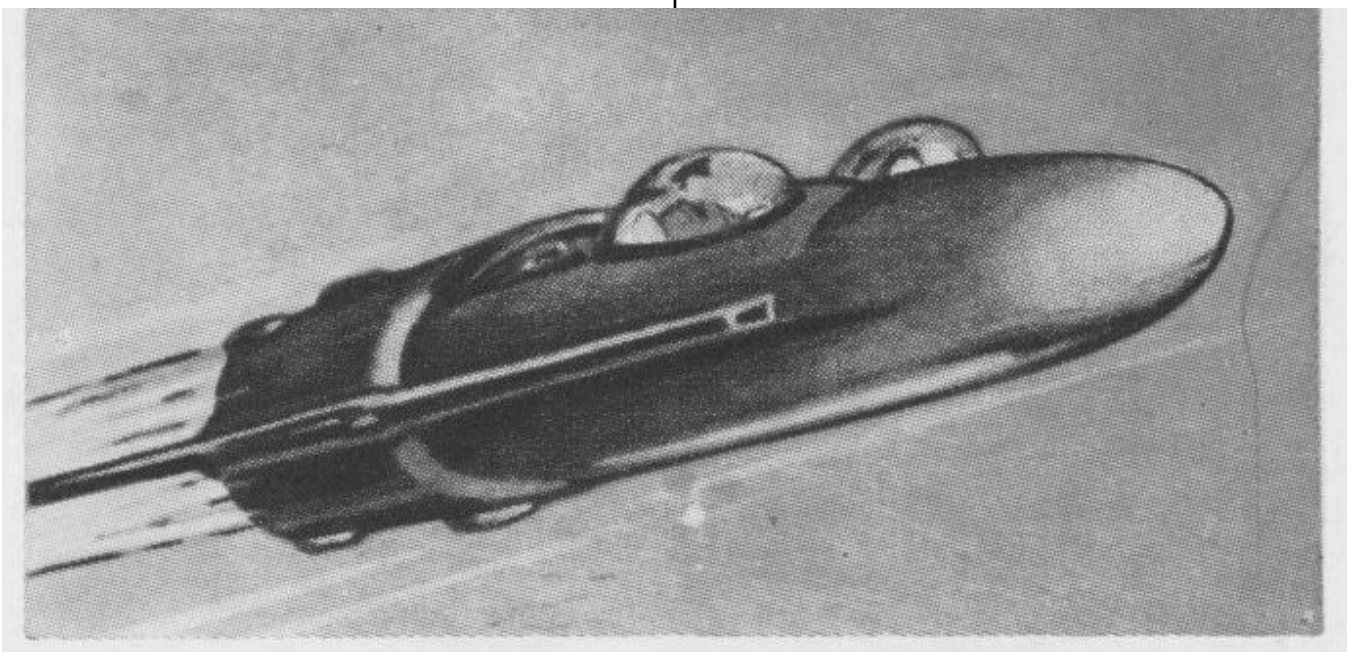
The girls and the Puritan nodded. The Asian man, sitting in the front passenger

seat across from me, just looked confused. Evidently, he didn’t speak English.

You wouldn’t think it was hard to warn someone from entering a malfunctioning robo-cab. You’d be wrong. When we stopped about ten minutes later, all three women started screaming at once. The result was incoherent (and not helped by the babbling of the Asian man, impotently beating on his stuck door).

A greasy-looking guy entered as the robo-cab started up again. “Ladiezzz!” he said, looking at all the women in the back. “Your cries have been answered. I am here! And just back from Double Down There. Who wants to see?” He started to untie his parachute pants.

Double Down There was a chain of outpatient clinics with one goal: it gave men a second penis. Yup, while I was getting mine shot off in Somalia, mojo-sexuals back home were adding a second schlong. Don’t ask me why, but an extra thing is a



thing nowadays.

I'd had enough. I reached over the seat with my right arm and used my hydraulic fist on his head. He dropped like he'd been pole-axed. "Stay down," I said, although I couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. The girls responded by flicking Batch cubes at our supine supercargo.

You might be wondering why I didn't just position myself at the back door myself, ready to push myself out the back door when it opened for a new passenger. Well, while robotic prosthetics have their advantages, balance isn't one of them. Did you ever look at clumsy robots on the internet, trying not to fall down? My robot legs are like that. I can walk, sure, but keep my balance in a moving vehicle? Not so much.

Soon we had three more passengers in the vehicle. That made me, plus eight normals (or maybe me, seven normals and a corpse, if I'd retired Romeo). This was getting out of hand. We couldn't seem to stop new people from coming into the robo-cab, but none of us could get out. The Asian man lay down in his seat and started kicking at the windows. Of course, the windows were made of the same nigh-indestructible material as the rest of the cab. I think he broke a toe kicking at it.

There had to be live human beings to clean out the robo-cab when it got back to the garage for recharging. They'd let us out. But that could be hours from now, and this situation was driving me crazy. I needed to do something to separate me

from these people, now!

In addition to my jammer, I have a full communications suite inside my metal bits. No one was trying their smarter-than-you phones at the moment, so I turned off my jammer and listened to the police bands. After a few minutes I found something that might help.

Since I'd cold-cocked the Dick with Two Dicks, everyone in the robo-cab was a little afraid of me. No one protested as I searched his body and pulled out his mobile phone. I also took everything else in his pockets, so the other passengers would think I was just robbing him. From here on they'd keep their valuables - including their phones - hidden. I didn't want them to try their phoning out again.

As inconspicuously as possible, I sent a text using Romeo's phone. (I have an internal phone in my comm suite, but I didn't want to ID myself by using my number.) As I sent it, I noticed that the neo-Puritan woman was using her foot to quietly pull down the unconscious man's parachute pants. I guess she wanted to see what two penises looked like. Whatever.

We drove past a number of emergency vehicles, both ambulances and cop cars. None stopped us, though. The girls shouted to the cops, but they couldn't be heard - or even seen through the tinted windows. I saw a few people running away, but, for the most part, the streets were deserted.

We stopped for another passenger. Despite the police reports, I'd had to guess at the location. Had I guessed wrong?

No. With a roar, a zombie entered the

robo-cab.

And all I'd had to do was text Ooberoo that someone needed a ride at this location.

Zombie's aren't really undead humans, of course. This was a techno-zombie. We build them and drop them on enemy populations to wreak havoc. The Russians and the North Koreans and the Caliphate build them and drop them on us. And we all deny that we did it.

You don't turn into a zombie when one of these cyborg-zombies bites you. You just die as you're being torn apart.

Being basically a cyborg myself, I had nothing to fear from this creature. I don't have enough meat on me to attract him. Maybe it's professional courtesy, who knows?

Bottom line: after a few minutes of screaming, the cab was quiet again, except for the sound of the techno-zombie munching away. And even that ended after a few blows from my pneumatic fist.

And now I had something that was actually stronger than the stuff this robo-car was made of. A techno-zombie's teeth are made of industrial diamond. I ripped the creature's skull off and used its lower jaw, pressing its teeth against the window until I scored it enough to crack it.

Finally! The Ooberoo was still stationary, since the zombie hadn't pre-paid for its fare. A bit clumsily, I eased my way out the window. I was free!

Before I walked away, I dropped a thermite bomb into the robo-cab. That would destroy any of my DNA left in the cab.

Why do I carry a thermite grenade? This isn't the first time I had to eliminate my DNA. So you can see why I didn't want to be examined by the cops.

Free, I contemplated my next move. I had started this day with several errands to run. Blood and viscera from the victims in the cab were dripping off my self-cleaning jumpsuit. Nano-fibers are wonderful.

I'd wasted most of the day in that damn robo-cab. I decided that I just wanted to go home.

I pulled up a map of the city in my head. Home was a good 30 blocks away. Call for another Ooberoo?

No. Robot legs may be clumsy, but they don't get tired. And it was a nice night for a walk. ❖



# “THIS HORRIBLE HUNGER”

by Ben Spencer

Thomas is thinking what a meal *His Rotundity* would make. Madison, minion, is prattling on, but for once Thomas doesn't pretend to listen. Instead he indulges his mind its dark wanderings: his vanquished friend-foe served up on a sterling platter at the inaugural feast, the swell of Adams' belly the tell-tell that clues in his ascendant compatriots, the horrified murmurings commenced—*My god, it's the former president!* And Thomas, ever refined, tucking his napkin into his collar in the French fashion, before diving for the jugular, a bloody *bon appetit*.

Oh, John. Thomas only wants to devour his dear friend because he loves him so. He remembers Paris in the sweet days after the revolution was won, when the two of them knew no greater joy than each other's company. Always liberty on their lips, and then the discussion of what it meant, their minds crackling as they attempted to untangle the republican experiment from its monarchical heritage without unraveling the whole. Americans! They would remake the world. Together they watched a man take flight in the gardens of Versailles, a balloon swollen by fire ascending into the heavens, and John, glorious patriot, whispered in his ear, *Look Thomas, it is our country, borne aloft before all the rest.*

It wasn't necessary to respond, for they were of one mind.

“...show yourself a man of the people, Thomas, a true republican. You might do away with the symbolic trappings, Adams' coach and silver harnesses, for one...”

“Yes, yes,” he answers Madison, but his mind is still wandering, back into those dark Parisian nights, hand-in-hand with Maria Cosway as she led him into the seclusion of a Parisian garden. *Drink from my wrist, she said, I'll take your pain away.* He knew who she was, knew what she was, but all the same he gave into the temptation, hoping it might offer some escape from the pit of sorrow into which Martha's passing had plunged him. When he opened his eyes he had been reborn, no longer an American innocent but now a being with the old world coursing through his very veins, and filled with a horrible hunger. She had laughed at his transformation, his paramour, to which he sprinted away and jumped a fence, injuring his wrist, but he didn't feel it at the time because he had spotted prey, a handsome French couple enjoying a nighttime stroll. He was soon feasting at the woman's neck, while the man tried fruitlessly to beat him off with a parasol, but only for a moment, for Maria joined him in his work, lightning-quick,

and together they made a meal of the pair. *You're one of us now*, she said when it was over. He knew that she was right, though he wished it wasn't true. What he wanted was to be was a man who embodied enlightenment ideals, but no, he was a slaver and a spendthrift and an absent father and a coward who had fled on horseback when the British overran Virginia, and now, worse, he was one of the damned, destined to befoul the country he wished to build.

"Thomas?"

Enough of this. He reclaims the room. "The President, will he stay for the inauguration?"

"I...I don't know. You know John, Thomas. Once his blood is boiled, it doesn't soon cool."

John's boiling blood. He imagines the taste of it on his lips. Boiling, yes, but also hearty and pure. "Washington set a precedent. Surely he'll linger."

"It is of no consequence, one way or the other."

"I want him there. I want..." His voice trails off, his long, pale fingers searching after the words.

Madison, sallow scarecrow, ventures a dictum. "He isn't the man you once knew, Thomas. He is an anglophile, a monarchist, a madman who would accuse anyone who dares contradict him of being a seditionist, and lock them away. And now, he is defeated. Put him away, Thomas. We have won the revolution. Now, we will rule."

*The revolution.* Madison means this election, of course, the cause of liberty become

so intertwined with the cause of Democratic-Republicanism that to harken back to the events of last century is to besmirch the current ideal. But Thomas cannot put the old days away so easily. It eats at him, the past. He had the ideas, of course, he was the one who knew what true liberty must entail, but the others, the others...by God they were the ones who fought for it, indomitable Washington and gallant Hamilton and even fearless John—he's heard the stories, John at sea urging the captain to chase down a British ship, John holding tight to the young lieutenant as the ship's surgeon amputated the young man's leg—John was heroic, no doubt, as were all of his friends-turned-foes. There are days when he can't reconcile the necessity of cleaving John and the others from the republic with his deep want to carry forward their ineffable spirit. A taste of their blood would do it, so long as he could leave their bloated, despotic corpses behind. Washington is in the grave, of course, and he doubts he has the stomach for Alexander (a tyrant in the making, that one, Caesar let loose in the wrong age), but John, John...

He stills, knowing that to ruminate on a matter for too long is to lose one's power to act decisively. He makes up his mind.

"Yes, we will rule. Of that there is no question," he responds. He locks eyes with Madison, siphoning his minion's will. James's gaze glazes into obeisance. "But all the same, you will ask John to stay for the inauguration, won't you?" ❖

# “OUTBACK JUSTICE”

by L. K. Pinaire

Randy Martin’s ring buzzed. He stacked the eviction notice on his court summons and stepped into the awaiting aero bus. “Renowned Carnival, please.” The taxi sped into the Texas morning sky. One of Olga’s exhibits was missing, and he needed the job, his last chance to save his private investigator license and avoid jail. Randy shuddered at the thought of being imprisoned on Thursday.

The bus landed in the wooded alien reserve, surrounded by the North American megalopolis of steel, concrete and holo-imagery. A tall woman stepped forward. She waived as he got out.

“Mr. Martin, I’m Olga Stem.” Perhaps in her twenties, she shimmered when she shook his hand. Holo-essence, the latest fad. A hidden holo-projector surrounded her with a golden aura. Shoulder-length auburn hair highlighted her powerful muscular frame, but she was warm and friendly with a lovely face.

“I’m Randy.”

“I’ll show you the exhibit and introduce you to Ieason, Stangone’s wife.”

They walked to a glowing, force-field park entrance and opened it with her access-chip. The gateway flickered and opened. Olga led him in over a stone path with rails.

At first, there was a sign: ‘Mud Dwellers.’ A few steps later, the exhibit came into view, a flat, cleared area with a home, sunken flush to the ground. Its flat, transparent roof revealed eight rooms and little privacy except living areas. A series of tunnels dotted the brown, mud surface, like a giant, wet ant farm.

Minutes later, a small creature covered with light fur except on her humanoid face stepped out through a ceiling doorway, holding a child. The Dweller woman, small as a six-year-old, reminded him of a giant mouse with a little girl’s face.

Olga pointed to him. “This is Randolph Martin, the detective I told you about.”

Randy held out his hand. “Olga hired me to find your husband.”

The little creature held up her gripper, a fist of fifteen-centimeter-long wiggling digits. When Randy tried to shake her *whatever*, she actually grasped his hand and felt like a mass of powerful worms.

“I-I’m Ieason.” Her English was excellent, but her chattering voice reminded him of a stuttering squirrel. “T-thank you for coming. I’ll help you any way I-I can, Mr. Martin.”

Olga moved to the little alien and kneeled, wrapping her arms around her

shoulders.

Randy smiled at Ieason, "Tell me about the last time you saw Stangone?"

Ieason sniffled. "Be-before I realized we had visitors, t-two tall men were carrying him away." She handed him Stangone's holo-image, held her chest and studied the ground. "Pr-obably the Vardiaan creep, Basee, who tried to hire us in Alice Springs."

When Randy probed her personal situation, she said they'd been stranded and agreed to join the exhibition for a lucrative sum, enough to start life over on an island somewhere. No one would volunteer for this work, but...the money. When he finished, she held out her gripper in concurrence with the human custom, and they shook again. He shivered when they finished.

"He's a kind person and doesn't deserve this." Ieason choked on her words. "M-Mr. Martin, s-she needs him." Ieason held up her child. "We need him."

Randy said goodbye and walked back up the path with Olga. He hated to see such tortured eyes, like the client who'd begged Randy to find his wife's killer. Turned out the man's son had shot her.

"Why would anyone kidnap your alien? What makes this one so unique? Australia has been full of them the last forty years since the Scimenon invasion and the Treaty of 2022. They'll be easy enough to find in the Outback."

"We contract with sentient beings, bring them to Earth, pay them a ton of money and place them in an authentic

habitat. These are the only Mud Dwellers within thirty parsecs, and we have three months of advanced sales. I have until Thursday morning to open this exhibit or refund everyone's credits. We can't do that and survive. I need you to do more than find Stangone. You need to bring him back by Wednesday."

Olga and Randy stopped at the gate while she let them out.

"If Basee is in Alice Springs, I can catch a tube there within the hour."

She led him to the aero bus station and stopped. "He keeps an office in there where he runs his show, Ship of Slaves Carnival. You can look him up. I've met him. He's a monster."

Randy rubbed his chin. "I can be in Australia late tonight and back by Wednesday. I've been there a couple of times."

Olga opened a holo from her ring and signaled an aero bus. "I will deposit the advance as you asked, but I'm coming with you. I have too much to lose, and I won't get in your way."

Randy crossed his arms. "I can't do that. I work alone."

"Then I'll have to find someone else. You choose."

Randy hated this. He had to have the money... His mind flashed to the idiot bot-judge in his last major case. It still couldn't see that if Randy revealed his informant, the man would be killed by dawn. Because Randy wouldn't identify the snitch, the judge levied a ten-thousand credit fine due Wednesday to keep his P.I. license, to save

the business he'd built from scratch and to avoid jail.

"Well?"

This was his last chance to pay that damn fine. "Okay, but I make all the calls, and if things get crazy, you'll stay out of the way."

Olga nodded. "Agreed. We'll have to be careful. Basee is dangerous, a wild-man. I've heard he's killed more than once."

"We'll be fine." The advance would barely cover his expenses, and rescues always held an element of danger, but Randy had done this before.

"Listen, I know the area pretty well. I studied Xenanthropology before leaving school to work for the business, and I can help."

A hover-bus arrived, and Randy followed Olga aboard. She got off at her place. "I'll meet you at the Transit Terminal."

Randy returned to his apartment, packed his overnight bag and headed to the terminal.

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From their small, stainless steel tube-compartment with a tiny rest room and kitchenette, little more than a wafer in a long chain of hypersonic segments, Randy sat next to Olga and studied handheld projection images. He went over police reports, personal data, traits, habits, and information regarding Basee and Vardiaans in general.

"They could pass for albino humans from what I saw." Olga crossed her arms. "I know who he is, because he's our competi-

tion."

Basee, a person of interest in the murder and disappearance of many extraterrestrials, had recently purchased a building in the desert outside Alice Springs. The police suspected him of abducting aliens to fill his menagerie.

The job would have been a lot simpler if there wasn't that damn deadline of the carnival closing Wednesday. To make matters worse, Randy, who'd been born in Taiwan to Chinese parents, had struggled ten long years to make his P.I. agency one of Texas' best. His father, a major corporate CEO in Hong Kong, had demanded that he work in the family business. Later, his father had disinherited him. Regardless of the outcome, his father couldn't spell failure, let alone show sympathy for it. They hadn't spoken in ages.

Twelve hours after departure, their sub-surface tube arrived. A soft female voice broke Randy's concentration. "Welcome to Alice Springs. Enjoy your visit."

Randy stretched after the long ride.

Their restraint netting released, and they climbed out to the surface. A warm, late-morning, December breeze felt good. Randy led Olga through a vast, open mezzanine packed with extraterrestrials like a standing-room-only-concert.

Small, hairless humanoids with large foreheads and bulging eyes walked through the vast, pedestrian streets. Not a vehicle to be seen. Spotty merchants with glassine flesh, gangly limbs, and huge joints served the crowd from kiosks. A human with a machine gun guarded the doorway to a

four-story concrete building a few meters away. Randy's ring told him he wouldn't find the right type of shop here, so he spoke to the guard. "I'm looking for a utility-weapons dealer."

The man grunted, said, "GO!" and motioned with his gun for Randy to move away.

Flashes of holo-aura color glistened around people in the crowd. One woman wore a long white gown surrounded by a swirling red torrent of light, like flowing blood. Others wore only their glows in the deafening din of voices, squeaks, chirps and roars.

What a perfect place to audition aliens. The invasion had changed everything. The Scimenon navy had arrived with 653 military ships. Earth had had five, so there'd been little resistance. Fortunately, the terms and conditions of the truce were amicable and surprisingly reasonable.

Humanity would establish immigration and travel laws for the flow of extraterrestrials to and from Earth. Aliens would be considered the same as humans in all criminal laws. The Scimenon did restrict the flow of technology to Earth and taxed all alien income. Humanity finally decided to keep them in the Outback except when they carried a visa issued by a human nation.

Randy glanced up from the data stream.

A brilliant green holographic image filled the sky with foreign symbols, shimmering like the *aurora australis*. Thousands of aliens and humans partied, filling the streets. Finally, the words changed to

English and read: "Ship of Slaves Carnival auditions, tonight at Mid-City Hall."

A man walked by guiding two naked women, tethered by leashes, like dogs. Randy gritted his teeth at how the law was ignored and not enforced in the Outback. Not only did slavery of non-indigenous species thrive, but—now, since the Scimenon navy left Earth, most anything was overlooked. Olga glared with a scowl.

"This is why I hated this place when I was in school." She shook her head.

After a short turbo-ride, they arrived at Mid-City.

Here, the crowds flocked to beverage islands like ants around spilled sugar. Randy needed to find the auditions, so he worked his way to the nearest bar.

After a long wait, a space opened, and he placed both forearms across the counter and looked down into the bartender's palm-sized faceted eyes.

The meter-tall Scimenon looked up over its mandibles and spoke like a creaking door. "G-get you head f-from your ass and order. You're s-scaring away my real c-customers."

"A Heineken please."

The short, segmented insectoid gave Randy a brew with surprising grace.

"Thanks. Where can I find the nearest utility-weapons shop?"

"Over there." He pointed to the base of a three-story structure a hundred meters away. A large holo that he couldn't read flashed above the emporium.

Time was slipping away. He and Olga still had to spring the Dweller and make

the twelve-hour transit tube ride home. He had to get cleaned up and attend his license hearing.

Randy led her to the building and down a dark stairway into a cellar corridor, and into an establishment labeled “Andrew’s Place.”

“*Bonsoir.*” The tall Onhiade looked down with drooping eyes and a bald head except for a single lock of auburn frizz that dropped to mid-tunic.

Randy held up his palms. “We’re North Americans from Texas.”

“I don’t get many human customers,” the alien switched to English.

Randy had read about this species, known for their intelligence and ability to use passed intestinal gases for self-defense. In some cases, their flatulence could be fatal. A bit leery, Randy braced himself and used his ring to find the needed information and create a partial list supplies.

Andrew examined the data file, smiled and rubbed his chin. “This will be expensive, especially the information.”

“After I see your information, I’ll give you the rest of my equipment list. I have a generous friend.”

Olga’s fist poked Randy hard in the ribs.

A clump of molting flesh fell from Andrew’s forehead and landed on the floor. “I will have these supplies ready in a few minutes.”

Suppressing his gag reflex, Randy held out his ring, which flashed as Andrew uploaded Olga’s credits and then again while downloading Randy’s info. He and

Olga stepped outside where he read Andrew’s detailed report on Jae’s Basee’s building, his staff, their schedules, the floor layout and more.

A five-story building with offices on the upper three. The top floor housed Jae’s headquarters and the holding cells would be on the third. A diagram of the building showed the ventilation, cooling and comms. There were two elevators, a regular and a service stairwell and light security, but there weren’t any chip readers inside the third floor complex listed as holding cells, so if he made it in there, someone had to let him out. Damn, Basee had an illegal prison in his building, and Randy couldn’t spring Stangone alone.

Randy and Olga returned inside. He added a few more items to Andrew’s supplies list: a transit scooter, two laser pistols, two defensive vests, one rifle with sabot rounds and two maintenance worker uniforms. A few minutes later Andrew returned with most of their goods.

Olga entered a small dressing room donning her new attire. When she finished, Randy went in and changed. They lugged their gear upstairs and outside.

Randy placed his hand on her shoulder. “Consider this expenditure an investment. I’m doing everything I can to keep down the cost, but I still have a problem.”

“What problem?”

“My original plan won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll need help when I go inside.”

She returned a puzzled look. “What about me?”

“No, no, no. This will be dangerous.”

She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Look, we are in this together. I got involved when I came here. I have lost an exhibit and my friend’s husband. Are we going to miss my deadline because you won’t let me help?”

He thought for a moment for any alternative.

“I like you.” She paused. “But I won’t pay you if you won’t give me a chance. Tell me what to do.”

Damn! Randy shuddered at the thought of prison. Somehow, he would have to keep her safe. Against all better judgment, he nodded agreement. “Okay, fine, but we do this my way, or we walk away, Dweller or none.”

“I promise.” She smiled again. “Thanks for trusting me. It means a lot.”

Back outside, one of Andrew’s clerks, a younger version of him, brought their jet scooter. Randy and Olga loaded the gear and climbed on. He throttled the drives and steered them high into the morning sky. Olga sat behind him, her hands around his waist.

A desolate dirt road below ran to the skyline over a red sea of worn, brown mountains. Shortly, Jae’s tower came into view against the horizon, five stories tall, centered on a concrete pad.

Randy parked, stowed his helmet, and turned to Olga. “We’ll walk in and present ourselves as HVAC workers, cut the top floor AC, then seal the elevators and stairwells before arriving upstairs to fix the air. We shut down the comms, lock the stair-

ways and convince Jae to give up his pass-  
chip. Then we free Stangone and get away. This worked for me once before in a different situation.”

The notion of failure grew like an ugly weed, and Randy thought of Olga. He took a deep breath and gathered himself.

“Let’s go. In a few minutes, Andrew will send an e-mail to Jae to expect two HVAC technicians.” Randy said.

They both donned pink contact lenses to match the Vardiaans’ eye color. Randy picked up their gear and Olga followed him into the building. Facing the vendor security desk, he held out his fake ID and Olga flashed hers. “We’re here to check the ductwork.”

The pink-eyed receptionist opened a holo on her computer, examined her records for over a minute. “Thanks for coming.”

Olga strode in at Randy’s side as though she’d been there before.

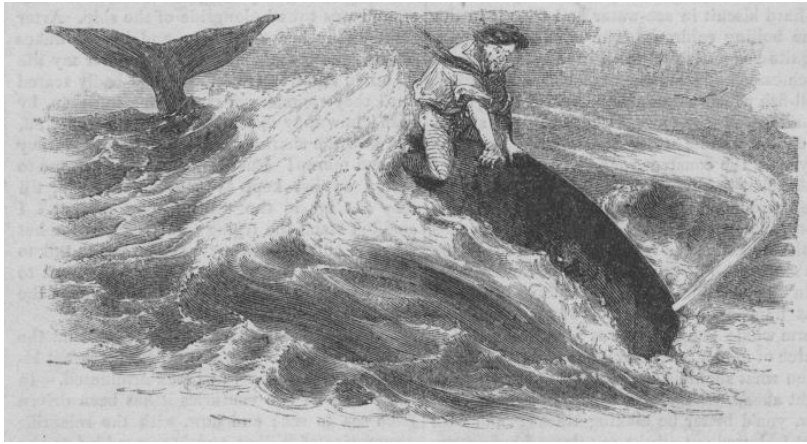
The clerk gave them two security passes. “Return these when you’re done.”

Randy remembered to breathe before nodding, and they walked off. Once past security, Randy reviewed Andrew’s report again, the diagrams and images. Jae’s offices were on the building’s top three levels.

He led Olga up the stairs to the third floor, where he removed an access panel and inflated a large balloon, blocking the vertical ductwork and halting all upper-floor ventilation. “That should heat things up on the top floors,” he whispered.

Randy climbed further inside the tight





but passable horizontal ductwork. “Come in and pull the panel closed.”

Olga grunted and followed. He proceeded about twenty meters to the interior side of another panel and pushed. The thick, heavy door opened.

“This should be the prison. If Stangone is here, we should know soon.” Randy stepped out and helped Olga to the floor, about a meter below. Because the solid-steel panel couldn’t be opened from the prison side, he wedged it open with his wallet. They found themselves in a long, circular hallway, surrounding hundreds of locked cells on both sides. Each cell entrance had a transparent-aluminum window for viewing the prisoners.

“You check out those...” Randy pointed to the opposite side of the corridor. “I’ll take these.”

The first cell held nearly forty prisoners, aliens of many species packed unbearably close, but no Dwellers. Some slept, others sat on their bunks and a few glared back from their cells, perhaps curious or resentful of his freedom. When they returned through the hallways, Olga would

help him with the door.

Randy and Olga moved down the hall, examining the prisoners in each cell. Basee had a prison full of aliens, but he hadn’t seen a Dweller yet.

He came to a cell that was empty, except for two large vats, one of brown slime and a second filled with water. A larger, male version of Ileanor poked his head up and stared.

“I found him.” Randy motioned for Olga to come see. Meanwhile, Stangone pulled himself from the mud, rinsed in the water and climbed out, dripping.

She looked inside, and grimaced. “This is awful.”

“Olga!” The little guy shouted from the other side, as he dried off and dressed. “Yes, i’tis awful.”

Randy scanned the reader number on Stangone’s cell door using his handheld so he could be sure he got the correct chip from Basee. He shouted back. “We’ll be back to open up your cell.”

Olga waved her fingers at the Dweller and climbed into the ductwork. “What now?”

Randy followed, closing the access door. “Jae’s office will be unbearable soon, but in the meantime, we have some things to do.”

While the temperature rose and the humidity turned the upper levels into a sauna, Randy led Olga through the ductwork into the third-floor hall.

“Why,” he whispered, “are you so inter-

ested in aliens? You've gone way beyond protecting your business interests."

"My father worked with the Australian extraterrestrials before opening the carnival. When Mom died, he hired an Onhiade nanny named Mardi. I loved her. The way the police ignore these creature's legal rights is abominable. When we get back, I fully intend to go public about Stangone's abduction. People need to be aware. There is no reason to tolerate such lawlessness."

"I see."

"You know, this is scarier than I'd expected."

"If we don't have any surprises, we should be fine."

Randy and Olga entered the service stairs. The comm-center down the hall was empty. Good! Randy installed a jamming device to stop personal comms.

He led Olga to the building's rapid-lift. It shot upward and deposited them at the top floor. He opened a holo from his ring and reviewed it, then pulled the lift's circuitry and crushed it under his boot.

He disabled the service elevator. With comms jammed and the lifts dead, they walked both stairwells, changing the passcodes as they went. The building was his.

Pulling Olga's hand, Randy led her into the top level VIP area with the service pass. They strode through the stifling, wet executive offices where the air dripped, past perspiring office folk. Randy's heart threatened to leap from his chest, but he moved on, Olga at his side.

A receptionist in a pink glow and nothing else sat at a desk guarding a large office.

Randy smiled. "We're here about the air." At thirty-three degrees C, the Vardiaans were miserable or half-dead.

"Go in. This heat is unbearable." She pointed to an aisle behind her desk.

At least none of the guards, goons or office workers had noticed the brown eyes behind their contact lenses. Randy drew his pistol, held it behind his leg, and entered. Olga came in behind him. His heart was pounding again, and perspiration crept down his cheeks. To make things worse, he feared that Olga might get killed before he could react. With every step, he envisioned their deaths.

A man sat behind a large curved desk in the far corner. He looked human enough as he stood. Randy recognized Jae from holo images.

"Who are you?" The thug with pale skin, receding hair, and a thick white mustache wore a crumpled shirt, jeans, leather vest, and bandanna. When he glared back, one of his pink eyes twitched.

Randy stopped five meters back while Olga moved to the left. "I'm Randy Martin, a P.I. from the Texas Borough of North America, and you have a Mud Dweller downstairs in a holding cell who needs to go home."

Jae raised his hands apart. "Well look, Chink, ownership of property isn't always permanent, Mr. Martin. Hers yesterday—mine today. Who is your client?"

Randy had never heard such an inflammatory slur. He pursed his lips, and tightened his grip on the gun. "Never mind her. We're taking Stangone back. I need your

holding cell pass-key.”

“Mr. Martin, Ship of Slaves is a legal operation.” He paused. “Stangone is mine now.” Jae’s eye twitched again.

“Look, we both know that’s not true. No one has the authority to keep aliens in a prison for their own personal purposes, but I don’t want to involve the law here. We just want Stangone back.”

Jae picked up an object off his desk.

Randy raised his pistol. “Stop or I will shoot.”

“What are you doing?” The Vardiaan glared, his voice a growl.

“I told you. He’s going back to his family.”

“You think I’ll allow that?”

“We’ll leave with him, and you can go on about your business. You haven’t broken any laws in Australia that the police are sure of, but I have a right to bring Stangone back, and murdering humans is enforced here. Give me the pass. Your comm is down, and I’m jamming your personal phones. I’ve disabled the turbos and locked the doors to the stairs from the other side.” Randy had lied about the top floor service exit, but that would change soon.

Jae glared. “If you break into someone’s office and kill them, I would call that murder.”

“You’re right, but you know as well as anyone that crimes against aliens are rarely punished.” Randy glanced at Olga and then back to Jae. “If I must kill you, we’re prepared to take whatever comes.” Randy’s perspiration soaked shirt was cold on his

chest, and his stomach had twisted into a knot.

Jae hesitated, frowned, and flipped a pass-chip onto a conference table that ran concentric to the front of his desk. He crept forward, closer and closer.

Randy examined the chip’s ID number. It matched Stangone’s lock. “If this works, I’ll call your security and send someone up to let you out. Otherwise, I’ll come back and see you in an hour when the temperature in here gets worse than outside.”

“The chip will work, but you won’t get far. This is my building.”

A bluff. What could Jae do locked in here with no comms? Randy grabbed the little, green disk.

“Behind you—” Olga shrieked.

A hard object struck the back of Randy’s head. A godawful burst of pain ran through his brain, accompanied by a flash of bright light in his mind. A tall, thin woman moved between Randy and the table.

“I came in to see you, Jae, and walked into this.” The woman’s voice was hateful and harsh.

Stars swam in front of Randy’s eyes, but he raised the pistol again.

Jae, who was working his way around the desk, came right at Randy.

Randy had stretched this wild scheme too far, and they might both be killed. If he had involved the police, they might have gotten Stangone but never in time.

The woman swung the small club again.

Randy fired into her leg.

The woman fell hard against the floor, staring back and holding her bleeding calf. Jae lunged.

Olga stepped forward, raising her knee into the goon's gut. He dropped like dead weight.

She made him proud. Randy gathered himself, gripped Olga's hand and tugged. "Let's go!"

They sprinted through the office, pushing workers aside, the chip clutched between Randy's fingers.

Two punks near the lift moved toward them, weapons drawn. Jae emerged from his office on the run and shouted orders.

Randy opened the service door. He slipped through with Olga and pulled hard, locking it. He reset the access code to a random number and collapsed against the opposite wall, panting. Olga plopped down at his side.

A loud thumping and the subsequent vibrations shook the door. Randy stood and looked through the clear, ceramic-steel window.

Jae's angry face glared back at Randy, and the pounding stopped. The door grew warm then hot. Olga stood, and they both stepped away. The door turned light pink and then cooled. The security entrance might have been stronger than the walls.

"We'd better go," Randy said, and they strode hand-in-hand down two flights. Seemed like his heart had been pounding forever, and the pain in his chest grew worse. Down at the third-floor prisoner entrance, Randy opened it with Jae's chip.

"Stay here and keep the door open

until I get back."

Each step down the circular hall brought new aliens into view. Angry, anxious creatures of all forms shouted and shook their fists, their claws and then their grippers at Randy. Stangone?

He touched Basee's chip near the door's reader, and it opened. "Sorry it took so long."

"W-who are you?" The little guy jumped up and hugged him.

"I'm Randy. Olga hired me to get you back. We have to go." Next was the matter of the other prisoners. If he released them, they'd fill the building, resulting in Randy's discovery. He regretted not helping them but went ahead to another chamber. The circular hall filled with grunts and squeals, sentient beings crying for their freedom, but he turned away.

Randy and the Dweller returned to Olga and the doorway. "Let's move!"

They stormed through the service hallway and rushed down a flight of stairs. They entered another corridor, and a stitch tore at Randy's side. Olga and the Dweller stayed right with him. He pictured guards and hoodlums coming from every door and corner. At ground level, he stopped, amazed that they had gotten so far.

He whispered instructions into Stangone's ear. Randy needed to distract the woman at the service desk, while Stangone crawled under her window, the one that looked out across the hall.

Olga and Randy strode to the large window. From there, the outside doors were twenty meters away. Randy returned

the service-chips, the same ones he gutted a few minutes before. “We’ll be back tomorrow with the equipment to finish the job.”

On the floor beneath the service window, Stangone crawled toward the door, inching his way along the wall. Every second brought more perspiration to Randy’s forehead. If anyone walked up or passed through or just came there, everyone would be caught. He had stalled as long as he could.

Stangone was past the window. He stood and hurried toward the exit. When the Dweller walked out the doors, Randy and Olga followed. Each step brought the urge to run, but they couldn’t.

Randy looked around for the swarm of goons that had to be coming. None yet, but his concern grew with each stride. They walked, opened the door, and he and Olga stepped out under the Outback sun, joining Stangone in the parking lot.

Olga gave the little Dweller a big hug then wrapped her arms around Randy’s neck. She hugged him, made him feel good, but they were far from safe.

Seconds later, they rode off into the evening sky with Olga and the Dweller on the seats behind him. He guided them toward the hypersonic transit. They still had time to catch a tube to Mid-Texas and be there by morning. Randy parked near the entrance, and they walked down an underground street toward the main terminal.

“I never thought I’d see my family or the Carnival again,” Stangone said. “I’m very grateful.”

Olga placed her arm around Randy and squeezed. He returned the rented equipment, and they walked inside the Grand Tube Station.

Randy didn’t get ten steps toward the ticket counter before a man followed by four others—all in suits—stopped them, flashing police holo-images and said, “I’m sorry, but we’re going to take your group to the station. We need answers to some questions. Someone from Basee’s desert tower filed a complaint about an armed assault, and this will take time.”

The end of Randy’s career loomed.

That evening, which was morning in Texas, the Alice Springs Chief Constable paid Randy a visit. The short, uniformed man with dark flesh and Aboriginal features stood inside Randy’s locked cell. “I’m Constable Awarai, and I’ve come to resolve this situation and offer you a deal.”

Randy’s breath came easier. He stood and rubbed his chin. “I’m listening.”

“When we checked on you at the Mid-Texas complex, your court date tomorrow morning triggered an alert. We can let you go back right now if you promise not to return to Alice Springs. There is a tube leaving in fifteen minutes that can take you back in time. We can hold the tram and take you there. Otherwise, you will have to wait till we’re done with everyone here.”

This didn’t sound right. “What about Olga and Stangone?”

“Olga is a North American citizen, and she can go home in a few days. Stangone, being an alien, is another matter. Ship of Slaves Carnival has claimed him, and we

need to resolve the issue.”

*Damn!* Randy’s temper threatened to get the best of him, but there was too much at stake. If he left, Olga would never get the Dweller back in time to save the carnival. If he stayed, his testimony should swing a decision, but *he’d* be late, which might mean doing time. Randy’s choices were horrible and tried to pull him apart.

All his life, he’d been the stubborn one. He’d do it himself, no help needed, anything to be successful on his own. The specter of his father’s successes had driven him to do more, care less and never look back. Perhaps that’s why his business was failing. It didn’t really matter. He had promised Olga and Ieason, and he hadn’t come this far to give up now.

While Awarai cracked his knuckles and fidgeted, Randy answered,

“Thanks for the offer, but I can’t go. I’ll stay here with the others.” He shook the constable’s hand.

Two days later after Randy’s testimony in Alice Springs, the authorities returned his belongings and released the Dweller. Randy picked up their tickets at Grand Station, and the trio boarded a tube segment for Texas.

He opened a holo on his ring and checked his messages. Randy’s lawyer’s voice spoke, “Well, Mr. Martin, we missed you at the hearing. Seems the judge was even more disappointed than me. It’s a wonder you’re not going to jail.”

Randy leaned back and relaxed for the first time in weeks as he listened to the details of his trial, and the message closed

with, “You might start looking for some other sort of work. Call me if you need something more.”

Olga, who was reviewing her messages, looked up.

“My lawyer said something about a deposit made in my bank account. Did you pay my fees in advance?”

Stangone opened his eyes, looked around as though he’d missed something and fell back asleep.

She looked at the Dweller and shook her head. “No, but I think my brother might have. Seems that if we failed, our other creditors would have gotten it all, so he wanted to be sure you got your money. Why?”

“Well, I can’t possibly thank you enough. When my trial concluded, the judge pulled my license and was going to toss me in prison, but instead, he froze my assets and took them for payment of my fine.” Randy put his arms around Olga.

Olga kissed Randy and said, “It won’t pay much, but I *can* offer you a job. You’re excellent with the aliens, and we can work together.”

Since he’d lost his license, any offer was a good one, and he’d get to work with her. Randy and Olga, side-by-side, leaned into one another. In minutes, she was asleep as well. He smiled. This could have ended much worse. Much worse indeed. ❖

# “DEATH OF AN IMMORTAL”

by CRAIG WOYCHIK

The ruins loomed ahead of Sig as he wearily walked towards the inner hall. This, his childhood home, might hold the answer to what he was searching for. He'd survived so much, come so close to death so many times, had so many horrific wounds, and yet he lived. He was tired of fighting, tired of living. He wanted peace.

He made his way to his old wing, passing through corridors and arches. He finally reached his room, now completely in shambles. He sat on a fallen pillar, and looked around. This room had been his home for the first five hundred years of his life. He had trained, been educated, and even commanded his first battle, all while living here.

Tears began to well up in his eyes. He wished for it to be like it was. Young, happy, innocent. No fighting, no killing, no death, no love. A light wind whistled through the empty shell of a room, and delicate fingers of light emitted from the doorway. He reached for his swords.

“You won't need those, my son.” It was a woman's voice that spoke. “Calm your spirit.”

“Mother?” Sig asked, tilting his head and squinting his eyes.

A ghostly apparition appeared next to him on the pillar. It was his mother, Tarja.

A queen in the angelic realm, she could come and go between dimensions as she pleased. Her face was as youthful as he remembered it, pure and clean from any imperfection. Her glowing white hair hung to her waist, bejeweled in all manner of gems and precious metals. Her satin robes were bright and white as the North Star. She was the epitome of grace.

“Yes, Sigfried. It is I,” she said softly as she rested a hand on his shoulder. “What troubles you so?”

Sigfried stared ahead, gathering his thoughts. He hadn't seen her in over four thousand years. She hadn't changed at all. He desperately wanted to tell her what was wrong, but he couldn't find the words. He trembled with frustration and sadness. How could he tell his own mother he no longer wanted to live? That would destroy her.

“I... I'm not sure how to say it, mother.” he said, looking at the ground.

“Son, look at me. Look into my eyes.” Tarja gently reached out, and turned his head, gently grabbed his chin.

Sig raised his eyes to hers. Deep, piercing, blue as the morning sky, they looked deep within him, and she knew. She knew of his thoughts, his fears, his loves, his secrets. She saw every face, every battle,

every moment. Looking deeper still, she saw his wishes, wants and desires. And all she saw was the wish to no longer fight, to finally be at peace. With everything in her, Tarja wished she hadn't done what she did. She felt her heart breaking.

"It's not something to be taken lightly, Sig. Once you go down that path, there's no going back."

"I know what I want, mother. I've fought, bled, loved and lost for ages. I've done my due diligence, I've served my time," Sig said, standing up. He was impatient.

"Is this what you truly want, Sigfried? Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this is your final choice?" Tarja fought back her tears.

"Yes mother. I wish for sleep without end. I wish for peace," he said, kneeling. "What must I do?"

"The answer has always been there, my son. It's always been within your grasp. When an angelic being wants to die, they simply...die. No rituals, no pain, no blood. One merely slips away into the light, and is at peace." As she said this, a single solitary tear rolled down her cheek.

Sig fought back a cry of rage. All these years, and not a word. All the times he'd cried out for help, felt the anguish of losing one he loved, and nothing. He could've done this so long ago! He regained his composure. His mother had just revealed the one thing she hoped she'd never have to do...telling him how to die.

"Thank you, Mother. I'm sorry you had to do this."

"I love you more than the stars above,

Sigfried. As much as it hurts me, I'm your mother, and can't stop you from being happy." She kissed him on the forehead, and as suddenly as she appeared, she was gone.

Sig looked around, feeling as though he were in a dream. A warrior til the end, he seated himself on the ground, back resting against a wall, facing the rising sun. He drew his old companions, the mirrored kukris, one in each hand. He closed his eyes.

White light, peaceful singing, and golden skies were before him. In the distance, he could see a figure beckon him. He walked forward, feeling lighter than air itself. His spirit felt young, he saw the world through new eyes, and truly felt happy. As he got closer, he could see the figure. It was a face he hadn't seen in almost a thousand years... Lana.

"Is it really you? Is this a dream or are you a part of this realm?" he asked, tears streaming down his face.

"Sigfried, I've told you before, it's always been me. Throughout the ages, I've always been by your side. Lana was and is my true form, everyone before or after was my soul in another body. But now that you're here, I don't have to do that anymore. You and I can love one another for eternity," she said, beginning to smile.

Sig felt the moment slipping away, the real world was coming back. The sun was rising, it was time. With one final breath, he again closed his eyes, and was gone.

Epilogue:

Cervantes frantically searched the ruins



for Sig. He had tracked his location here, and now only had to find him. Up and down the halls, he sprinted and shouted his name. He reached Sig's wing, and could sense it. Slowly, almost in a daze, he walked down the hall towards the bedroom, dreading what was on the other side of the door. Gingerly, he pushed it open, hinges creak-

ing.

He stood still, didn't believe what he saw. His dearest friend, his brother, was propped up against the wall, head hanging, chin on his chest. His hands still grasped the kukris, and a gentle smile was on his face. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**