

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 6 Number 4

Page 1 – IS BLOOD THICKER THAN NANOBOTS, SIR LANCELOT? by Karin Osterberg. Karin Osterberg has BAs in both Biology and Chemistry. She analyzes chromosomes by day and creates worlds of fiction by night. Her work has been accepted by Adanna Literary Magazine, “The End of Dragons” Chipper Press Anthology, Blink Ink, 50 Word Stories, and has been nominated for the 2020 Best Microfiction Award.

Page 9 – GLOW WORMS by Tom Gartner. Mr. Gartner writes, “My background: I’ve had short fiction (of various genres) published in numerous journals, including *Aberations*, *The Madison Review*, *New Limestone Review*, and most recently *Deracine*. One story was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Other work is forthcoming in *Levee* and *Aethlon*. I work as a buyer for a large independent bookstore in San Francisco.”

Page 25 – JUMPEYE KARTLE OOZYU GEN by Matt Ingoldby. Mr. Ingoldby works as a copywriter in the UK. His stories have appeared in *The Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Next Review*, *the Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Existeré*, *Octavius*, *Crimson Streets*, *Rogue Blades* and several anthologies, working his way up to a novel. He is also a keen runner and currently lives in London.



“IS BLOOD THICKER THAN NANOBOTS, SIR LANCELOT?”

by KARIN OSTERBERG

“I was a monster,” Arta explained with a smirk. “Mom was a pioneer. Nature and technology were her paints.”

The man stopped wiping the counter and grunted, “You gonna order something or not?”

Arta shook her head and exhaled loudly through her nose.

“Now she’s gone, the old King’s gone, everything’s just... gone. But I guess that’s life. One minute you’re serving the Castle, the next, you’re the last sentient Droid left drinking yesterday’s coffee.”

The man at the counter forced a laugh but the sour look on his face told her how he really felt about having an Android in his restaurant.

“I wouldn’t push that Android Alert button, if I were you,” she added.

He gave her the once-over.

“I ain’t got time to worry ‘bout what anyone’s made of, so long as they pay.”

Arta rolled her eyes. “You’re a real open-minded guy, you know that?”

He pushed the button, alright.

Arta swirled her tepid coffee.

“I can tell you one thing, King Mordred is as rotten as they come... people think Androids are heartless.” She made a pfft sound with her lips. “That man isn’t fit to rule an anthill.”

The OPEN 24hr sign flickered through the dingy window.

Gawd this place is a dump.

A red dot moved across the wall behind the bar. The mirror flexed then seemed to bend inwards before exploding into dust across the counter. Two black helmeted Knights sauntered through the swinging doors.

“Looks like the King’s Cavalry have arrived,” Arta said, ducking behind the counter next to the greasy owner.

A piece of glass had sliced her face wide open. The flesh hung limp for only a moment before tiny nanobots in her blood activated and zipped her rosy brown skin back together.

“Wh-What are you?!” the man stammered.

“More than you could handle,” Arta answered with a wink and sent a handful of coins clinking onto the floor. “Keep the change.”

Like a dog with its tail between its legs, the man crawled through the flapping kitchen door. A moment later it was blasted into wood shavings.

“I told him not to push the button,” Arta said, gripping her sword. “They never listen.”

The dishwasher hummed against her

back.

Crunch - crunch. The Knights were within striking distance. She vaulted over the counter slamming her boot into a Knight's chest. The other Knight aimed his blaster at Arta's head. Before he could even pull the trigger, she sliced through his legs. He collapsed to the floor with a heavy clunk, sparks spraying from his boots.

"Drop your weapon," a robotic voice ordered behind her.

Arta turned and laughed, "Oh sure, I'll get right on that. First, a quick question: do I have to join your club to get that slick outfit or do you guys have a gift shop?"

The Knight's punch caught her off guard dislodging her jawbone towards her right ear.

Cheap shot.

She popped it back into place, wincing slightly.

"I guess I'll just take yours."

With a single slice, the black helmet rolled along the floor stopping the front door. Arta lifted the sleek black helmet and shook the shiny metal head from it like old coffee grounds. She ran her hands admiringly across the helmet's visor.

"Cool."

She kicked open the door, slipped on the helmet, and mounted the jet-black motorcycle she called Hengroen. Dust billowed behind her as the Tavern sign "The Round Table" flickered pink against the velvet sky.

#

"You're late."

"I had a little complication at the cafe,

Your Highness," Arta said, setting the black helmet on the table.

"Don't call me 'Your Highness'. It makes me feel...I don't know, anxious. 'Gwen' is just fine."

"Old habits... sorry," Arta replied.

"Was it Knights again?" Gwen asked.

"Yep. Just another open-minded citizen pressing the King's alert for Unauthorized Droids... but I also got this." Arta tossed a metal box onto the table. Gwen's tired eyes lit up like a birthday cake.

It's almost worth getting my face ripped open just to see her smile again.

"You got it?! You know what that means?" Gwen said, setting the console on her lap and rolling her wheelchair over to the computer.

"No more suicide missions?" Arta asked wishfully.

Gwen laughed. "With this I can hack into the Kingdom's surveillance mainframe and prove that my traitor brother murdered the King. The Kingdom will be liberated."

"And Droids like me?"

"You will be second to no one. You know that."

Arta sighed. She wanted to believe her, but every "No Androids Allowed" sign, and new anti-Android law made it difficult enough to survive, let alone hope.

"Maybe to you, but I won't hold my breath on the rest of the world," Arta replied, taking a bottle of thick metallic liquid off the shelf. She took a gulp filling her mouth with the taste of tamarind and engine oil.

"That stuff will kill you," Gwen

chastised.

"If the King's Knights don't first," Arta said, taking another swig. "Life's full of risks."

She walked past the table and down the scaffolding staircase to a cot below. Lying down gingerly, Arta stared at the metal beams and Gwen's wheelchair above her.

Gwen deserves to be Queen, but then what?

Arta's alloy heart hurt when she thought about it. She had no family, no friends. Gwen was all she had left.

Who am I kidding? Queens don't need Androids for friends.

Rolling onto her side, she gingerly probed her cheek with her fingertips.

Nanobots hurt like hell.

She closed her eyes against the pain and tried to count sheep, while Princess Gwen worked late into the night.

#

Arta's body ached. The nanobot repairs had taken their toll. She crawled out of bed with a groan and walked up the stairs to find Gwen in the exact place she'd left her the night before. Arta dumped three scoops of instant coffee powder into a mug and filled it with hot water from the tap. Gwen didn't look up from the module. Her olive cheeks were hard angles on her face and her brown eyes were shadowed with dark circles.

"Did you sleep last night?" Arta asked.

"A few hours. This module is more complicated than I thought. If I had security access, it'd be a lot easier. Is the module all you got last night?"

"Here I was thinking that was enough,"

Arta replied with a smile, remembering the security card in her pocket. "Now that you mention it..." She tossed the card to Gwen. "I nabbed this on my way out."

Gwen picked it up. "The card's got blaster damage."

"You try breaking into the Castle Offices without getting blaster damage. I lost some serious skin in there."

"Lucky for you it grows right back," Gwen replied.

"Your skin grows back, too."

"Only a thousand magnitude slower than yours," the Princess said, glancing down at her wheelchair. Gwen had taken a blaster shot intended for Arta when they escaped from the Castle three years ago. It was a sacrifice Arta would never forget.

Arta put her arm around Gwen's shoulders.

"You're the smartest techie I know. You'll have this hunk of metal cracked in no time."

She mussed up Gwen's short black hair and picked up her red leather jacket.

"I'm heading out for supplies. Need anything?"

Gwen shook her head and said, "Just be back soon." She looked concerned, but about what Arta couldn't be sure.

#

Down the road was a rundown convenience store called Morgana's Market. The owner, Cybil, had made it clear from the very start that she didn't give a damn that Arta was an Android.

The door chimed as Arta scooped up a blue plastic shopping basket.

“Arta!” the grey-haired woman greeted merrily. “It’s been a long time. I was beginning to think you got picked off by the King’s Knights.”

“Nah, I’m too quick for that,” Arta replied, throwing three cans of oil into her basket, followed by a loaf of bread, expired sliced ham, and a skinny carton of Swiss Miss.

Plopping her basket onto the warped counter she asked, “You got any gasoline out back?”

“How much do you need?”

“Five gallons. Just add it to my tab.”

Cybil gave her a disparaging look.

“You know I’m good for it,” Arta added.

“Okay, okay,” Cybil said, waving her hands. “But times are getting tight for everyone.”

“Ya, that Mordred is a real jerk,” Arta replied.

Cybil leaned in and gave her a conspiratorial look.

“You know, some of us think Princess Gwen is still alive,” she said.

“Is that right?” Arta said, stowing her items in her black messenger bag.

“I’m just an old fool, but I have this feeling in my gut. Anyway, it feels good to hope.”

Arta smiled. “Only a fool gives up hope. Things will get better, you’ll see.”

“I hope you’re right. You be careful around those Knights, okay?” Cybil warned.

“I always am.”

#

Arta kicked open the door with her

foot.

“I’m back!” she called out.

There was no answer.

“Gwen?”

The echo of slow clapping came from above her head.

“Well done,” Mordred said. “You really had me believing my sister was dead.”

Inhuman strength gripped Arta’s arms behind her back.

“What have you done with Gwen?”

“Oh, don’t worry about my little sister. I’ve got plans for her.”

There was a thud on the metal floor above her. She saw Gwen lying unconscious through the grate.

“Don’t you lay a finger on her. I’m warning you,” Arta said through gritted teeth, her eyes flashing violet.

Mordred just laughed and signaled for his Knights to carry Gwen outside to the waiting limo. He followed behind, stopping when he passed a pasty skinned weasel of a man.

“Make sure the Android doesn’t give me any trouble.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” the man said with a groveling bow. Mordred walked out and the man signaled for the Knights to chain Arta to a chair.

“What are you supposed to be... the King’s Henchman?” Arta asked.

“You could say that, but I rather think of myself as a philosopher.” He unrolled the tools of a deranged dentist and snapped on rubber gloves.

“Tell me, do Androids feel pain?” he asked, running his hand down her cheek.

She recoiled in disgust. “You really are quite lovely for an Android... such a pity.”

Arta’s eyes went wide as he brought a small hooked blade close.

Suddenly there was a scuffle outside.

“You,” the man pointed to a Knight. “Take care of whoever is out there.”

The Knight disappeared on the other side of the door, and then came the grating whine of a scrap grinder. Three blasts from the door disintegrated the man and left the remaining Knights sparking on the floor.

A familiar face walked in.

“Cybil? How?” Arta asked, as the woman cut through her bonds with a bolt cutter.

“Half an hour ago, Princess Gwen forwarded me the surveillance footage from the night her father was killed.”

“She did what?”

Cybil gave her a wry smile. “I was head of Princess Gwen’s Security. Only, until thirty minutes ago, I thought she was dead.”

“Mordred’s taken her. I have to get her back,” Arta said.

“Your motorcycle is gassed up and ready outside, My Lady,” Cybil answered.

Arta climbed onto her noble black steed and turned the throttle.

#

Just ahead the white limo sped down the abandoned highway, its gaudy gold bumper shimmering in the sunlight. Arta leaned her motorcycle next to the driver’s side window and smashed it with the hilt of her sword. The limo swerved.

“Don’t stop! That’s an order!” Mordred

yelled from the backseat. Arta saw Gwen slumped over the seat next to him.

I have to stop the limo without hurting Gwen. But how?

She scanned the horizon where a rusty water tower stood.

Bingo.

Arta’s dreads wiggled like snakes as she sped down the road at 120 mph. Cranking the handlebars hard to the right, she skidded to a stop at the base of the water tower. Her skin grated against the asphalt. Nanobots activated in her blood making her head swim. She took out her sword and banged it against one of the four supports. Water sloshed and the tower groaned. The white limo was coming in fast. Arta held her sword at the ready. With a guttural yell, she sliced through metal. The tower collapsed. A torrent of water cascaded onto the road and into the fields on either side of the highway.

The limo spun in the maelstrom of water, coming to a halt twenty feet from Arta. Sunlight glinted off her sword as she stood like an otherworldly angel in the unnatural lake.

Mordred kicked open his door, three Knights following after.

“Clever roadblock, but you can’t win this fight,” Mordred sneered.

“Who’s going to stop me? You and a couple little Knights?” Arta scoffed.

The trunk popped open and out crawled a seven-foot tall, indomitable Droid with blasters on his wrists.

“Do you like him?” Mordred asked, “He’s my prototype Knight II. I call him Sir

Lancelot.”

The elephantine Lancelot lumbered forwards. Waves lapped against Arta’s calves.

“Hey there big guy, I don’t usually dance on a first date.”

Blasts peppered the water around her like angry wasps. Arta leapt over the fallen tower, then ripped a large iron pipe from the collapsed structure.

“Well, if you insist.”

She rushed Lancelot, smashing the pipe against his leg with all her might. The dull thud reverberated through her titanium bones. Lancelot lifted her off the ground by her throat and planted a crushing punch to her jaw. She went flying through the water like a broken speedboat.

“Ow,” Arta said, cracking her neck.

Mordred watched with morbid delight. “Just admit it. You are no match for my Lancelot!”

A blast exploded the ground between Arta’s thighs. She rolled this way and that. More blasts came, taking flesh with each blow. The nanobots in her blood swarmed like angry bees. The pain was too much. Her vision blurred and she collapsed into the water.

Sir Lancelot trudged towards her like an executioner to the gallows.

Mordred’s face was painted with vile satisfaction.

“Do you really think my sister cares about you? You are nothing but the leftovers of a failed experiment.”

Lancelot’s heavy steps were only ten feet away.

“Arta!” A scream came from the back of the limo.

“Gwen?” Arta asked.

She lifted her head in time to see Mordred raise his gun to Gwen’s chest.

“Don’t you touch her!” Her voice sounded like the rumble of thunder. Arta climbed to her feet and raised her sword. “You ready for a real show, Mordred?” she asked, and sent her blade twirling into the air, slicing through the power lines along the road. Sparks rained down as the frenetic wires landed at Sir Lancelot’s feet.

The last thing Arta heard was Gwen scream, “Arta! Get out of the water!”

#

The radio on her bedside table broadcast the calm voice of the news correspondent.

“Prince Mordred found guilty of treason and murder in the first degree...”

Arta turned the dial to off. It was the first day she had been well enough to get out of bed. The nanobots were finally settling down into a dull ache.

It had been six months since the accident that sent fifty thousand volts skittering through her circuits. Arta ran her hand over her nearly shaved head. Then she heard something slide under the door. It was a letter with the official seal of the Crown.

“Your company is requested in the Throne Room,” was all it said.

Arta felt nervous and she didn’t know why.

#

“You wanted to see me, Your

Highness?" Arta asked, entering the expansive Throne Room.

Gwen rolled her wheelchair to meet her. She looked different, her olive cheeks fuller, her eyes clear and rested.

Arta kneeled low to the ground.

Gwen leaned over and put a hand to Arta's chin. "You don't need to bow to me. I owe you so much."

"You really don't, Your Highness."

"I told you to stop calling me 'Your Highness'," Gwen said. "The crown was always too heavy for me...and that's why I've called you here."

"Oh?" Arta asked.

"The Kingdom needs someone from the royal family to sit on the Throne."

Arta was confused.

"We have that now. You're here."

"No, not me... my sister."

"Sister?"

"Yes.... You."

"I don't understand..."

"The day I was born, your mother took a vial of my blood and with it she created you. Royal blood runs through your veins. You are the rightful heir to the Throne."

Arta was stunned silent.

I'm a princess?

The Royal Council filed into the Throne Room. The crown, worn by the Kings and Queens of old, was brought before Arta on a red velvet pillow.

"Will you rule our people?" Gwen asked.

Arta sprang forward wrapping her arms around her.

"Yes, Sister. I accept."

Gwen held out the crown and Arta kneeled before her.

"I, Princess Gwen, place this crown on your most noble brow and with it seal the promise of a Kingdom ruled with courage and compassion for Humans and Androids alike."

Arta stood and turned to face the Royal Council. Her eyes glittered more brightly than the jeweled crown upon her head.

"Long live the Queen!" They all cheered. ❖



“GLOW WORMS”

by TOM GARTNER

It started... well, how? You could say it started on a trail in New Zealand, you could say it started with a phone call, you could say it started fifteen years earlier in Washington state, but for me I suppose it started with my wife's death.

It's not something I like to talk about, but here's what you need to know. I lived in San Francisco. I'd made some money in real estate; hard not to, in the Bay Area in the 90s and early 2000s. Linda owned a bookstore. She worked too hard, she drank too much, she took too many meds, and in 2014 it caught up to her. Her heart failed one morning as she was brushing her teeth.

I owned the bookstore now, but as its managers made clear to me, it ran best if I limited my involvement to signing paychecks, negotiating with the landlord, and e-mailing book reviews to the buyer. I didn't need it to make money, and it wasn't; but if I had one firm intention in life it was to keep the store open, because as far as I was concerned it was still Linda's.

It wasn't like I didn't have other things to occupy my time: I ran, I cooked, I took photos, I traveled, I drank. If it sounds like I was a useless idiot who deserved to lose everything, that may be true. I can say that I donated serious money to charity; that I tipped like a crazy person; that I didn't own

yachts or cars or even a house—nothing that wouldn't fit into the apartment Linda and I had shared. Maybe none of that helps, but anyway, that's who I was when I met Tamara.

Or to be precise, when I met the woman who told me her name was Tamara.
*

Linda and I had turned New Zealand into a signifier for everything we were missing by living in an American city: endless beaches, jungles full of bright-colored birds, mountains wrapped in ice, flawlessly clear lakes, undammed rivers. But we'd never gone. Five years after she died, I decided it was better to go and be sad than not go and be sad.

The night before I left, my phone started ringing, not the usual tone but a sharp three-part trill. The number looked familiar but no name displayed. I answered:

“Patrick.” A woman's voice, soft, faint, but still urgent somehow.

“Yes. Who's this?”

“Don't you know?”

“I don't.”

“That's disappointing.” A pause, a noise in the background of something large moving through empty space—a car, a train. “Patrick, I'm here.”

It wasn't Linda's voice, because she was

dead; but also because something was missing from it. But it was very close.

She hung up and I stood there staring at the phone.

*

I met Tamara at Mt. Cook, on the trail to the Hooker Glacier. Near the trailhead is a steel suspension footbridge over the muddy torrent that comes off the ice. She was standing at the far end, under the cliffs of Mt. Cook's southern spur.

I paused mid-span. Fifty feet down to boulders and raging brown water. The bridge vibrated with the wind swooping down the gorge.

When I got to the far side I saw she was frowning down at the water.

"Intimidating," I said. "But you already made it across once."

She smiled, sort of—a quick twitch of the lips. "It's not that."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Premonition." Calmly, as if this happened to her a lot.

But as I headed up the trail I saw her crossing.

I had a reservation at a B&B in Wanaka that night. Late start after the morning hike, long drive across the brown Canterbury plains, befuddled search for the right driveway on the lakeside road, 1 a.m. arrival. I'd called ahead and the manager had told me she'd leave my room open and the key inside. When I got there, I found my room locked but the one next door open. Fine, I thought, she got the number wrong. I didn't wake her up to make sure.

Almost sleeping an hour later. A car

pulled up, headlights shone through the window, the doorknob rattled. I got up and opened the door.

"What the hell—" The woman from the bridge. She didn't recognize me at first. "Isn't this my room? She said she'd leave it open."

"My mistake," I said. "But... was this your premonition?"

That quick twitching smile, then a wider one as she did recognize me. "No, not exactly," she said. "But maybe it should have been."

*

I can't say it was smooth, even at the start, but she fascinated me. Partly that she was a hybrid, born in the U.S. and raised in New Zealand, with just a touch of Kiwi twang to her speech. More that I wasn't young anymore, and she was: matte pink cheeks, a screen of mahogany hair, ice-smooth thighs, a bounce to her breasts.

Like Linda, she read voraciously, but unlike Linda she was undisciplined, unfocused, unrestrained; a woman with an openness to the world, a hint of tragedy in her past, a future that seemed completely unpredictable. About some things—politics and business, for instance—she seemed willfully ignorant to the point of naivete. About others—music, the occult, abnormal psychology, animals, drugs, prisons—she was weirdly knowledgeable.

What did she look like? OK, yes, a bit like Linda. Short, curvy, unremarkably pretty. The thing you noticed was her eyes, bright blue irises, eyelids tinted jade, eyelashes enormous and fake. If you ever saw

her without the makeup, though, there were shadows, a hollowed out and almost frightened look.

*

New Zealand is gorgeous. Tamara is a complete lunatic.

By the time we got to Te Anau, I almost regretted sending the postcard. We'd been together a week now, and there had been a few tiffs, nothing serious. But that morning we'd had a murderous fight at the B&B in Glenorchy, both of us hung over and disinclined to compromise. It started with a disagreement about where to go and ended with her accusing me of trying to get it on with one of the maids in a vacant room. I'd finally walked out, bought the postcard at a Take Note bookstore, wrote it and sent it before I could stop myself. Toni and Ron were old friends in SF, book people like Linda. They'd take it with a laugh and a headshake. All they knew about Tamara was a photo I'd sent with an email after that first night in Wanaka.

But in the car, with coffee, sugar, and who knew what else in her system, Tamara slid from furious to sulky to sultry to vivacious. She didn't quite apologize for the accusation about the maid, but almost. "I know, I know, I know. You're not that kind of guy. You were married for—how long?"

"Ten years."

"Unfathomable. And you never cheated?"

"Well, never with my wife in the next room." Actually, never, period.

"Afraid I've got no stamina for relationships," she said. "None at all."

"Good to know."

"It started with doctors," she said.

"You know how it is with doctors." She'd been seriously ill when she was a teenager—some kind of kidney disorder. "You get a new one, and you think they're nice. Then they get less nice, as if they're the customer and you owe *them* something. And you start thinking, what if there's bad news? Is this the person you want to hear it from? 'Sorry, inoperable! Nothing we can do! Nice knowing you!'"

She could laugh about it; she'd had a transplant, everything was fine now, and she was only thirty-seven. I was pushing fifty, had high blood pressure and a bad liver.

"So, defense mechanism. I started changing doctors every few months. I just didn't want to get to know them that well. Or them to know me, whichever."

"Understandable," I said.

"Then it started leaking over into my friendships. I'd imagine having to tell my friends I was dying. Which just put a damper on things. I had to cut people off, you know, before I could get cut off from them. Relationships, too. I still can't stand anyone for more than six months. Is that weird?"

"Fairly. But then I'm sure to die before you, so it should be fine."

"Thanks! I appreciate that." A laugh. Apparently we were friends again. "But I wouldn't want it to end that way." Serious now. "I can't imagine how hard that must have been for you... losing your wife."

Let's not go there, I thought. I'd told

her about Linda; you can't hold something like that back, or it turns into a bombshell later. But I didn't see a need to talk about it any further.

"I don't know if I could handle that," she went on. "Mortality's such a hard thing to face. But you seem like you've made your peace with it."

Had I? Mortality, maybe. Separation, no. I hadn't made my peace with Linda not being around.

We got to Te Anau late, but Tamara was insistent that we skip dinner so we could catch the last boat for the Glow Worm Caves. When I suggested that a steak and a beer seemed more important than an overhyped tourist trap, she gave me her death stare.

"No," she said. "Have you not been listening to me? This is what we're here for."

Biggish boat, fast so lots of wind, a hundred passengers or so. The lake is long and narrow, with low hills on the east and the big ridges of Fiordland on the west. A long arm stretched off toward the last brilliant blue of twilight, stark against a black horizon.

A bit farther up, the boat pulled in to a dock on the wooded west shore and we filed off into a lodge where they gave us watery hot chocolate and sat us down for a slide show. The caves, we were told, had been thought for a long time to be a Maori legend, but a persistent white man had finally located them. They're formed by water seeping down through limestone from lakes up in the hills. The glow worms are

little blue-green blobs who live on the moist stone walls and ceilings. They use bioluminescence to lure flying insects, which are then caught in sticky threads that dangle down a few inches.

"Gross," Tamara whispered to me, and then after a second, "But kind of clever."

Duly briefed, we were sorted into groups of twelve. Tamara and I and our ten companions followed a guide outside, then along a stream and through a narrow opening in the hillside. We were in a long sloping rock-walled chamber, lit by hanging electric lanterns. A good-sized creek, the water so clear it was almost invisible, flowed down toward us through elaborately carved stone—pools, waterfalls, cascades; fins and pillars and smooth slabs of light orangey rock. We followed it up, the passageway narrowing and steepening.

Our guide put all twelve of us into a metal box of a boat floating behind a weir; beyond that was still, dark water. I noticed a rope fixed to the ceiling of the cave. The guide introduced himself as Nicholas and welcomed us to the Glow Worm Caves. "It's a better experience with a bit less light," he said, and hit a switch somewhere.

Total darkness. Total. Gasps, a bit of laughter. Tamara grabbed my hand.

I felt the boat rock as Nicholas clambered past us to the front. We started to move—presumably he was using the rope on the ceiling to pull us along through the darkness. Every now and then we'd bump the rock walls—on one occasion, so sharply that water splashed me, and Tamara let go of my hand for a moment.

On into the dark, dripping cave, the roar of the water over the weir eventually receding, and we started seeing the glow worms above us, little blue-green dots seemingly hovering in space. Ones and twos at first, then clusters, then big dense constellations of them. It was very like being in a spaceship cruising past galaxies of blue-green stars—eerie, beautiful, mystical. Some were bright, some dim as if farther away, but none lit anything other than themselves. When you looked ahead or behind, they seemed to blur into luminous clouds moving slowly through space. No one spoke aloud, but I heard whispers, murmurs, hushed gasps of amazement.

Finally the glow worms thinned out again, the sound of falling water returned, and we were back at the weir. The light came on. People started talking, a gabble of exclamations, superlatives, laughter. I let go of Tamara's hand as I started to climb out of the boat, glanced at her to share impressions, blinked. It wasn't Tamara.

"Sorry," she said brightly, patting my hand. "I panicked there for a second." She was Tamara's age, maybe, wearing a green dress like Tamara, but with longer, darker hair, a narrower face, and without the gaudy eyes.

I looked past her, trying to find Tamara in the crowd of people clambering out of the boat—somehow our seats had gotten switched?—and the woman was gone, down the passageway toward the lodge. The other passengers filed after her. When Nicholas saw me lingering behind, he tilted his head quizzically.

"Something wrong, mate?" He was young, curly hair and short beard, muscular arms.

"Where's Tamara?" was the best I could manage.

"Your girlfriend? Headed down to the lodge."

"That wasn't her."

"Well..." Frowning. "That's who you came aboard with."

"I don't know who that is. That's not Tamara."

"Sorry, mate, I can't remember every pretty face. Head count's right. No one fell out, I promise you that. So she's got to be in the group."

"What the hell," I said, wondering if I'd gotten it wrong, knowing I hadn't.

"If you're so sure that gal wasn't yours, maybe she just missed the boat. Waiting down at the lodge, probably."

"Makes no sense," I muttered, but he just stood there with his arms crossed. I turned and hurried down the passageway.

There was almost no one in the lodge: a few tourists flipping through brochures, a teenager in overalls sweeping, a manager behind a counter communing with a computer terminal. No Tamara. The manager hadn't seen her.

Nicholas came in behind me.

"Gentleman's lost track of his lady friend," he said to the manager. "Don't suppose there's anyone in the WC?"

"Just locked it up."

"Look, I don't know what's going on," I said. "She was with me when we got in the boat and you turned out the lights." But I

was struggling to bring back the precise image, the last time I'd looked at her and registered, Here's Tamara. Here we are. "Never mind, I'll just try and call her." I reached for my phone.

They looked at each other. I thought I saw the trace of a smirk on Nicholas's face.

"Not much chance of that working," the manager said. "There's fuck-all in the way of cell service here. All around the lake, really."

I shook my head.

"Just curious," the manager said. "Did I see Jocelyn in the group?"

Nicholas half-nodded, half made a face.

The manager spread his hands in a voila gesture, as if everything suddenly made sense.

"Who's Jocelyn?"

Neither of them seemed to want to answer my question, but finally the manager said: "She used to work here. We've had some problems. If you've gotten yourself mixed up with her, no surprise it's gotten strange."

"Fine, but I don't care about Jocelyn. She's not the person I came here with."

They traded another look. "Well, whoever she is, your girl's likely on the boat for Te Anau. Nowhere else for her to be."

"Then let's look there," I said.

Which we did, the three of us sweeping the big boat deck by deck. We looked on the bridge, in the engine room, the bathrooms, the storerooms. The captain made a PA announcement. A few people remembered seeing a young woman in a green dress at various points in the trip. But

finally: no Tamara, and no Jocelyn.

*

My rental car was a silver Corolla hatchback. There were three of them parked in various places along the waterfront in Te Anau, near where we'd gotten on the boat for the caves, but none of them was mine. Before we left Wanaka, Tamara had turned in her own rental and I'd gotten her a set of keys for the Corolla. It had been my idea—much more convenient, I figured.

*

We'd booked a room at a hotel north of town, on a bluff overlooking the lake. They sent a taxi for me, and the night clerk checked me in without remarking on the fact that I was alone. I didn't get much sleep, and I didn't get any less confused. At 3 a.m., sweating and twitching, my sinuses aching, I remembered a shred of Tamara's rambling during the drive to Te Anau.

"Do you know about the disappearances?" she'd asked suddenly, after a long silence.

"Disappearances?"

"Around the lake. There were quite a few in the early days. People thought the lake was haunted."

"Always interested in a good haunting."

"I knew I could count on you." She smiled, sat up straight, faced me as I drove. "1892. Quintin McKinnon, one of the real pioneer settlers. They found his boat sunk in Lake Te Anau, in water six feet deep. No sign of him. 1920—Miss Jessie Reid. Disappeared from the Milford Track. 1888—Professor Mainwaring Brown. Went out for a stroll near Lake Manapouri, no

trace ever found.”

“Nothing more recent?”

“Oh, lots. There’s a local historian who keeps a database. Here’s the weird thing, though. Probably half of these cases involve two people going missing, and only one body being found.”

I didn’t really have a theory to cover that one. “Better disappeared than dead, I guess.”

“Exactly,” she said, and pointed a finger at me as though she’d just won an argument.

*

Morning. A view across a cove, a houseboat anchored in the middle. Nothing on my phone—no service, anyhow. Cereal, toast, coffee by myself in the hotel’s tiny breakfast room. We’d been planning to go to Milford Sound, had reservations for a cruise. I could write her off, assume that it was normal for something that had started so inexplicably to end inexplicably. But if I was still looking for her—and all right, I was—Milford Sound was one of the few places I had any reason to think she’d go.

It rained all the way there, and when I came out of the tunnel into the gorge above the Sound, dozens of waterfalls were pouring off the forested cliffs, filling the valley with mist. I’d always imagined there was a town of Milford, but apparently not; just a parking lot by the water and a dock where the tour boats came and left. Likewise while I’d probably been half hoping to find Tamara waiting for me at the ticket window, she wasn’t.

The boat was more than half empty; easy enough to check all three decks and be sure she wasn’t already aboard. The rain paused. Fresh snow on Mitre Peak blazed white as the sun came out for a moment. Out at the mouth of the Sound, jade-colored hills of water tossed the boat up and down. Through the chop and the foam the Tasman Sea horizon lay under a mass of clouds.

Ours wasn’t the only tour boat on the Sound—as we nosed out further onto the margin of the open ocean, one was coming in on our right, a hundred yards away. A family was on the foredeck, the children waving in our direction. Behind them, a woman in a green raincoat pulled a hood over her dark hair. I got one brief look at her before she slipped back into the cabin. Jocelyn.

*

There were two hotels not far from the dock. One was full up; the other only had dorm rooms left—five double bunks, shared bathroom. But it was raining again, twisting windblown showers edged with sleet, and dark was coming on. The long drive back to Te Anau didn’t appeal. I settled for an upper bunk, and fortunately only two others were taken.

I might have slept right through until first light had not something warm and smooth slithered in next to me— a shoulder, long hair, a breast, a smooth thigh. For a moment I was back seven years, backpacking with Linda in the Yosemite high country, hearing a soft insistent whisper from her as I didn’t move fast enough to let her

in out of the cold.

"It's me," Tamara said when we were thoroughly entangled. "Hope this is OK."

I didn't say anything. There were too many questions to ask any particular one.

"You said her name."

"Whose name?" But I knew who she meant—Linda—and I knew I probably had. . "Sorry if this is rude... do I remind you of Linda?"

"Some ways yes."

"Most ways no?" Her voice went up. I touched her lips to remind her there were other people in the room. Luckily they were at the far end and snoring. "Ah well."

"What was the point?" I wanted to ask about the mechanics of it, when she'd gotten out of the boat and Jocelyn had gotten in, whether Nicholas had been involved—surely yes—but first things first. I didn't know how many answers I'd get out of her.

"You remember we talked about disappearances?"

I nodded.

"I was curious. If you'd look for me if I disappeared."

"Well, I did."

"Yes. Not very effectively, but you did."

"Still, that was kind of messed up. Don't you think?"

She kissed me again, and then bit my lip. Not hard, but hard enough.

"We've got two choices," she said. "We can talk, or we can fuck. Take your pick."

*

I woke up at seven to find her already gone. My roommates, two burly Scotsmen saddling up for the Milford Track, smirked

at me, so I gathered we hadn't been as quiet as I'd thought. I checked at the hotel desk to see if she was registered as a guest, but they wouldn't tell me anything.

In the restaurant, sitting alone with tea and a few apple slices in front of her, was Jocelyn. I sat down without asking permission. She nodded faintly, then seemed almost to smile as I ordered a meat pie, muesli, a fruit bowl, and a flat white.

"Sorry about the other day, I suppose," she said.

"That makes one of you." I stared at her, because I needed to be sure beyond any doubt that she was in fact a different person than Tamara. It was obvious enough—an elegant face, but leaner, almost gaunt.

"Is she still here in the hotel?"

"Long gone, I'm afraid." The voice, too, was distinctly different, almost monotone, much more of a Kiwi accent. "You could have joined us on the Sound yesterday if you'd gotten here a bit earlier."

"And what was the point supposed to be? What's the point of any of it?"

"Ask Tamara."

"If I ever see her again."

"Oh, I think you will." She made no move to leave; still there was a wariness about her. "She'll leave you a clue where she's gone. Or she'll just turn up. After all these years I know the form."

"I thought she didn't have old friends."

"Just a few of us. She can be very loyal, you know."

"Can be."

"Point taken." She looked down at her hands. "But she and I go way back. She

was with us when my husband died.”

It may have been pointless for me to offer condolences to somebody I didn't know for something that had happened a long time ago, but I did. I was starting to have a good feeling about Jocelyn. It seemed as though the two of us were the sane ones, calmly discussing Tamara's mad wanderings. Then again, I wasn't so sure we were sane either. “It certainly seems like you're loyal to her.”

I needn't have bothered trying to be subtle. She went right on as though I hadn't spoken: “It was on a rafting trip. In your Northwest. Washington state. There was an accident and he drowned. All of us nearly did. You can see how that might create a bond.”

“Sure,” I said. “Enough to help her disappear. And reappear. And disappear again.”

“It's not that hard once you've got the knack.”

“But why?”

“Because she likes it?” Laughing at me a little now.

“And then... Leaving you behind to talk to me about it?”

“No, that wasn't her idea. That was me. I was curious to get a sense of you.”

“And?”

“My impression is that you're actually serious about her.” She pushed back her chair and stood up. “It's really kind of worrisome.”

*

I could have stayed at Milford Sound, on the not unlikely proposition that Jocelyn

was lying and Tamara was still there. But I felt I was only going to find her if she wanted me to, and if she did, she'd make it happen. Since we met in Wanaka we'd been following the route I'd planned before I came to New Zealand, so she knew what came next—Dunedin, Akaroa, and back to Christchurch for my flight home. It startled me to realize that my return flight was in only three days. Regardless, she knew where to find me, and for that matter, she knew where San Francisco was. Really the question was just whether she wanted to find me again. In theory I wasn't sure I wanted to be found, but in practice I did.

*

When I got back in the car, I noticed something I'd somehow not seen before: a book on the floor of the back seat, half hidden under my rain jacket: a worn hardcover edition of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. I couldn't remember Tamara having it, but whose else could it have been?

I leafed through. A cocktail napkin marked—or didn't mark, maybe it was just there—the scene where Marlowe interviews a bookstore owner who he says would make a good cop. “South Seas Hotel: Stewart Island NZ” was printed in a 50s-style font on the napkin.

I flipped to the front. The price—\$3.50—was penciled in, then a few seemingly random characters—M0614LT. Used bookstores, old school ones anyhow, use codes like that to track their inventory. Don't ask me how the system works. All I know is that Linda's store used something of the kind. And LT were her initials. And

June 2014 was when she died.

“Tamara, no,” I muttered.

We’d actually had this discussion: had she ever been to Linda’s store? When she lived in the States she’d been to San Francisco any number of times. And of course she’d been to some of the City’s bookstores: City Lights in North Beach, Green Apple out by Golden Gate Park, some hole-in-the-wall on Market... Was Linda’s shop on a hill? (Yes.) Near the Marina? (No.) Was there a cat? (Two cats.) I couldn’t tell whether she really had this vague memory, she was fooling herself that she did, or she was flat-out manufacturing it. But if it was the latter, she could have just gone on the internet and gotten all the details she needed, right down to the names of the cats (Bovary and Karenina).

Jocelyn: She’ll leave you a clue...

There was something odd about the cocktail napkin/bookmark: it had a rumpled feel, and a ghost of dark striations, a discoloration underneath the neat curlicues of the printed name. When I unfolded it I saw that someone had written *Saturday 6 o’clock. Southernmost bar!* On one of the inside sheets.

Stewart Island is a good-sized chunk of temperate rainforest off the tip of New Zealand’s South Island, so the last bit made sense, kind of. Not on my itinerary—no lakes, no mountains—at least not until now, but I knew there was a ferry across the Foveaux Strait. Tamara and her boat rides...

It was Friday afternoon, no chance of getting to the ferry before it shut down for

the day. My phone had no signal but the woman at the front desk let me use their land line. Easy enough to book a passage for the morning. Not so easy to find out if Tamara had done the same. They had no listing for a Tamara Smith. There was one for a T. Smith, which seemed promising, but then the agent told me that on an average day they carried five Smiths to Stewart Island.

*

Oban, the only town on the island, with a decaying pier, wide streets almost empty, and rainforest peeping over the surrounding hills as if to reclaim the site, had the hushed air of an abandoned imperial outpost. The South Seas Hotel was a wide, single-story building with a veranda facing the beach.

I forced my way through a crowded hallway, bouncing off a woman in an All Blacks jersey, and emerged in the 21st century’s answer to a Somerset Maugham scene. Low ceiling, dim lights, a pool table, framed black and white pictures of the town in more prosperous times— throngs of boats in the harbor, older editions of the hotel, an enormous shark hoisted above the pier. The denizens of the barroom itself, packed in around varnished tables or just wandering around in the interstices, were an informal bunch. Shredded jeans, tank tops, dirty T-shirts, leather jackets; dreads, long tangled manes, goatees; shoulders, backs, arms, thighs, cleavages patterned in ink; pierced ears, noses, eyebrows, chins, lips. But no Tamara.

I wedged myself into the bar and

ordered a Speight's. It was only 5:30. When I ordered the second beer I held my phone out to the bartender.

"Hmm, seen her before..." He squinted at the picture. "What's her name?"

"Tamara."

"Doesn't sound right. Wasn't that the friend?"

"Friend?"

"Feel like she comes in with another girl. Not lately, though."

"Jocelyn?"

"Could be." He shrugged. "Dunno."

Didn't mean anything, I told myself. I looked at the napkin under my beer. Same as the one I'd found, minus the message. It was five to six now. I didn't know what I was expecting. That struck me as odd, suddenly. That I had no idea what I wanted to say to her, or what I wanted her to say to me. We were here—well, I was here—and the next step was totally up in the air.

And then it was six o'clock, and then five after, and then a quarter after. And of course, I realized, the cocktail napkin in the copy of *The Big Sleep* didn't have to be the clue Jocelyn had predicted, there didn't have to be a clue at all. Surely at some level I'd known that all along. The seconds kept piling up and she still didn't appear,

At seven o'clock I finished my fifth beer and walked none too steadily up the street to my hostel. I'd checked in before I went to the hotel, but even that early a bunk in a dorm room was all they'd had. My roommates were three loud Austrian guys and two Irish couples. The Austrians wondered aloud to each other in German—something

about "Juden." One of the Irish girls, on hearing I was from San Francisco, asked me if I had any shrooms to sell.

I figured I'd come back when I needed to sleep. I decided to check my email and take a shower. Showers were free, internet access was not—which seemed sad, that people were more willing to pay for the Web than for cleanliness. Nonetheless I checked the email first.

I suppose it's safe to say I was hoping Tamara might have responded to the emails I'd sent her from Te Anau after we went to the Glow Worm Caves or from Milford after I'd talked to Jocelyn. But she hadn't, just like she hadn't responded to any of my attempts to text or call her.

I'd also emailed to Toni and Ron, my friends in San Francisco, to let them know my itinerary was changing and why. Not the full why, but apparently enough to let them know that things had gotten seriously weird. Toni, who has an academic background and thus knows a lot of the dustier corners of the web, replied with a one-sentence email—

"Would this be the same person?" and an attachment:

Seattle Post-Intelligencer, August 15, 2000

New Zealand Man Killed, Oregon Woman Missing in Rafting Accident

DRYDEN, Wash. - A man who died Wednesday afternoon in a rafting accident on the Wenatchee River has been identified as a visitor from New Zealand. One of his

companions, an Oregon woman, remains missing.

Michael Stillman, 32, of Queenstown, New Zealand, died after a 12-foot raft flipped, ejecting him and three others into the cold waters of the river, said Chief Don Howell of the Chelan County Sheriff's Office.

Two of the four were able to climb back onto the raft, but Stillman and the woman, Tamara Smith, 22, of Hood River, Oregon, could not.

Rescue personnel from The Wenatchee Ranger District recovered Stillman from the river and performed CPR for approximately 30 minutes but failed to revive him.

Rescuers were unable to locate Smith, and the search was postponed due to darkness. Both Stillman and Smith were wearing wet suits and life vests.

Rangers returned with the two rescued rafters to the Wenatchee River campsite Wednesday evening. They were identified as Nicholas Collins, 24, and Jocelyn Stillman, 22, both from Queenstown, New Zealand.

An autopsy is planned to officially confirm Michael Stillman's cause and manner of death. The search for Tamara Smith is set to resume Thursday morning.

I had to read it five times before I could really process it. My face was hot as though

I'd lain out in the sun for a few hours. I could feel the blood banging away at the insides of my body.

Did they ever find her? I typed onto the screen and just stared at it. Toni, seldom far from her I-phone, answered almost at once:

Not as far as I can tell. Still working on it.

Not fair, really. It was one of those bombshells you should defuse early in a relationship. Honey, I'm divorced. Honey, I'm a Jehovah's Witness. Honey, I drowned fifteen years ago.

You OK? Sorry to drop this on you.

No, I needed to know. Appreciate it. And I'm fine. Almost true. I would be fine. I'd had bigger shocks. Though maybe only the one.

You didn't cancel your return flight, did you?

I hadn't. I thought about that on my way to the shower. Even catching the earliest ferry Monday, I couldn't make it to Christchurch in time for my late afternoon flight. So I'd have to leave tomorrow. It felt too soon. And yet.

*

The shower was dismal—an outside door that wouldn't latch properly, a tiny concrete-floored vestibule with a plastic bench, an even tinier shower stall with a weak flow of warmish water. I'd just managed to dampen most of my body when I heard knocking on the outside door.

"Occupied," I shouted.

More knocking. Banging, really.

“Go away!”

“It’s me!” A faint voice, more banging.

I stepped out of the shower stall, reached for my towel. The outer door flew open, and Tamara came into the vestibule, closed the door behind her. She was in her green dress again, or another one like it. Green eyeshadow, green lipstick.

“Any room in here for a little glow worm?” She pressed up against me, darkening her dress with the runoff from my body.

“Tamara—“

She kissed me. Sticky.

“Who the fuck are you?”

The question didn’t seem to faze her.

“Literally or figuratively?”

“Both.”

“Literally, Tamara. Figuratively... hhm.” She took my hand and put it on her hip.

I shook my head, pulled my hand back.

“You know the deal. We can talk, or we—“

“So we’ll talk,” I said.

“You have a room?”

“Not really.”

“That’s OK.” She handed me my towel and sat down on the plastic bench. “I’ve got a tent.”

*

The hostel, like most of them do, had a little square of lawn for camping. As we headed there I looked up and saw towering masses of cloud sailing in from the west, from the Tasman Sea. The other campers, not a lot of them, were tightening guy ropes, adjusting flies and groundsheets.

I hadn’t ever seen a tent in Tamara’s

belongings, but she had one now, a seemingly new green one that slept two. Her sleeping bag was spread out in the center, her backpack off in a corner, stuffed full, with odd bits of outdoor gear piled next to it.

“Going somewhere?” I asked.

“I hope so,” she said.

We sat down cross-legged on the sleeping bag, facing each other. I showed her the printout of Toni’s email

“Ah.” She nodded, glanced at it, set it down on the sleeping bag. Green fingernails.

“Well?”

“Well, what? This is from the day after it happened. They found me that afternoon. Nicholas did, rather. The rangers were a bunch of screw-ups.”

“You spent twenty-four hours in the river?”

“Not in the river. On an island.

Anyway, I had a wetsuit and a life vest. And it was August. I washed up three miles down from where we flipped. They were looking for me much closer.”

“OK. So Nicholas found you. My friend who dug this up couldn’t find a record of that.”

“No, I don’t think there was one.”

Long pause. “We didn’t exactly... we just came back to New Zealand.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that’s pretty clear, isn’t it?”

Nicholas took me to a motel, and we spent a day or two resting up. Then we got on a plane and went home. You’ve got to remember, this was before 9/11. Airlines weren’t

so fussy about ID back then.”

Not for the first time, I wondered if Tamara realized how crazy she sounded. “You mean you didn’t tell anyone?”

“Well, Jocelyn.” She frowned. For the first time, she seemed conflicted, as if she owed me an explanation, or she needed to justify herself. “But not right away. She stayed behind, because, you know, her husband. I felt so bad, I just couldn’t talk to her.”

“I can see that.”

“Well, no. It was my fault the raft flipped, at least I think it was. I fell out first, and that unbalanced everything. And Michael, he was kind of a pig, but he did try to save me.”

“And since then...”

“You’d be surprised how easy it is to live in the margins. How many Tamara Smiths are there, and who’s going to keep track of them all?”

Not me. One Tamara Smith was plainly a stretch of my abilities. I had lots more questions, but she only had answers on one more subject: the camping gear.

“I thought we could do a bit of a tramp. Do you know where the Freshwater River is?”

I shook my head.

“In the national park. Well, the whole island’s a national park, isn’t it? You take a water taxi up the Paterson Inlet, that’s right over the hill south of town, easy walk. There’s a hut where the river comes in. From there we can get down into the southern part of the island, or do the northwest circuit. Rainforest. Beaches. Mud.

Tussock. Kiwis—the birds, I mean.”

“Promise you won’t disappear on me?”

She laughed. No way in hell was I going into the jungle with her, but I didn’t say so. We went down to the hotel for dinner, and the bartender gave me a thumbs-up when he saw us. “Tamara, is it? Cheers!”

When we went back to her tent, the wind was picking up and a few drops of rain were falling. We hunted for the Southern Cross in between the mountains of cloud, but I couldn’t see it even when Tamara pointed it out. Once we were in bed, her sleeping bag spread out under us, mine on top, she rolled onto her side, facing away from me. “You had your chance,” she said.

*

I woke up in the dark. The tent was stretching against its framework under furious blasts of wind, like a balloon about to pop. Swarms of raindrops hammered the nylon. The sleeping bag under my shoulder was sodden. Tamara was moaning.

I sat up. How was there water in the tent? I reached out and felt it, all along the edge next to our heads. A seam gone bad?

Tamara screamed. Again and again, as if something had taken over her breathing. I put a hand across, groping for her shoulder, and she flung it aside, then struck out again and caught me on the cheekbone.

I shouted her name, reached out and tried to catch her arm. Her whole body was thrashing— something slammed into my knee. She jerked up into a sitting position, the screams more like words now, but noth-

ing intelligible. I had one of her hands in one of mine, and after a moment's struggle she let me hold it.

"It's OK, it's OK. Tamara, you're OK." With my free hand I tried to find my flashlight, somewhere in the puddle at the top of the tent. No luck.

"Oh God. Oh God." She was fully awake now, sobbing. I pulled her in and she clamped her arms around me. "Patrick. Holy shit. Oh my god."

"Nightmare," I said. "It's OK. You were having a nightmare."

The wind lashed another burst of rain against the tent. The walls lifted, settled. Her cheek bumped mine as she turned her head, coming out of her dream into the world.

"I dreamed I was her, Patrick."

I finally found the flashlight, clicked it on. I didn't point it at her, just at the tent wall. In the spill of light all I saw of her was the tangle of her hair down her back.

"I was dying," she said. She pulled back a little and we stared at each other from a few inches away. Her face was white, bloodless; the color seemed drained even from her eyes. "I was Linda, and I was dying."

"You weren't. You're not." I wanted to close my eyes, but I knew I should stay as I was, looking at her, trying to calm her. "It was a nightmare."

Her bare shoulders rose as she took a deep breath. "I was dying, I was on the floor looking up at you. I looked at you and you couldn't help me."

Oh God, I thought. How did we get

here? Because that was just how it had been, Linda looking at me as the paramedics intubated her and put her on a stretcher and all I could do was hold her hand until we got to the door.

"It's OK," I said now. I turned the flashlight off, and we just huddled there in the dark with the water seeping into the tent. Her breathing slowed, the tightness in her limbs dissolved. "You're Tamara. You're not Linda," I kept saying. And I wondered how true that was, or how true I wanted it to be.

*

By morning the rain had stopped, the clouds had sailed on into the Pacific, and dark green parrots were winging back and forth in the trees above the campground. Our sleeping bags were spread across the top of the tent to dry, and Tamara was packing up the rest of our things in preparation for our trip to the Freshwater River. I walked down to the hostel computer room to send Toni and Ron my updated itinerary. They might be concerned, I supposed, alarmed even. But when you thought about it, Tamara and I made a perfect couple: a woman who wanted to be a ghost and a man who was entirely willing to be haunted. ❖



“JUMPEYE KARTLE OOZYU GEN”

by MATT INGOLDBY

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode one of a two-part serialized story about time and space and how they work, sometimes together. Enjoy!

This One knows the tundra but he does not know where he is within it. His toes are black with cold. He lopes on because to stop is to die. The tracks he follows plod to the horizon, heavy and constant like the prey itself.

Cresting a shelf of layered ice, This One reconnoitres the plain. By moonlight the tundra is its own map, criss-crossed by trails, every outcrop a stark icon. A dark dead forest terminates the wastes like the shadow at the edge of the world.

The mammoth's tracks lead towards it, now clumsy and irregular. The beast is succumbing to the blood loss caused by This One's spear.

He sees the distant treeline is not deserted. Sickly light flares from an encampment, brighter than the moon, warmer than tomorrow's sun.

This One limps towards it. Then he drops to the hoarfrost, risking cold-death to observe.

By the light he sees the shaggy boulder of the mammoth. Three new spears jut from its carcass, shedding long fingers over the rime.

Three spears, and three figures circling the light: a family like his own. They have flatter

brows and deeper eyes than his, but hands and feet the same. Their son is like his son, practicing spear-throwing at the corpse. He weaves and dodges as if it might retaliate.

This One feels the last of his strength ebb into the ice. After days of pursuit, he has lost his prize. He will lose more: Without its flesh his family will not survive the long .

Despair vies with cold to kill This One. He has no chance against three Others. After five days it has come to this: he must crawl home, with nothing to show for his desperate persistence. If he lasts the journey, his dying body may at least sustain his mate and young. His own toes must sustain him until then.

This One grunts, a sound which means nothing. He gathers the energy to drag himself away.

Abruptly a low hum unifies the wind. It becomes a localised choir, singing in key. It intensifies right above where This One is lying.

A shadow forms in midair, growing starker against the pale moon and lurid ice.

It shows a man. Two men. No - one man with a double count of limbs, emanating heat. Its four arms flail madly, its four legs kick air. From jittering lips it blurts a complex babble:

“Jumpeye Kartle Oozyu Gen.”

This One recoils, spooked. The eight-limbed figure flounders as if drowning. Then it utters more calmly:

“Bleef mimas mujjas ub jettas, sis fennom syoar.”

On impulse, This One mimics the first sound: “Umpay.” Hunger affords it a taste: it tastes of storms.

The figure vanishes - the moon is once more alone. Then it reappears, leaving This One unsure if it vanished at all. The doubt makes him clutch his head, but not enough to block out the next sound.

“Cuz yadam ist!”

“Yada. Yumpay.” This One copies, tasting magic in the rapid movements of his tongue.

“Dirtry. Oolzy maggen...” The ghost replies.

Without bombast it fades again, this time for good. Nothing is left on the ice, not even footprints.

This One fights the urge to gag. On his tongue lies a revelation. He clamps his lips to stop the wind taking it, and swallows. Its flavour is like flesh. He packs his mouth with snow to keep it in.

It is possible to be both certain and bewildered. This One is suddenly graced by hope: he can save his family. How will follow, like lightning after thunder. He just needs to listen and repeat.

He can taste it!

A welcome burst of adrenaline. He begins to crawl home, on the hands and knees of a giant.

The same wind howled and dispensed to the room a figure in a soaked bowtie and jeans, hefting a sodden crate of beer. “Okay.” The figure yelled over cheers. “Let’s not start celebrating yet.”

Lighting a damp cigar, the man

resumed the shape of Dr. Erton Lank, leader of the DH607-1 expedition. He dropped his coat on the console of Iris Popov, who purred in surprise, and mentioned to her, “There’s another crate in the galley...”

“I’ll fetch it,” Iris chirped.

Area Specialist Iris Popov tossed her headset onto her console and dashed out before making Lank complete his request. He held open the door with amused thanks, wrung out his bowtie then refastened both.

Outside the doghouse, the bare catwalk moaned with gusts from an approaching storm. Each blast was eager to unwind the steps from the rig like so much fruit peel. Iris had left her coat inside.

Her feet knew every divot in the stairwell. She descended nimbly, feeling the stress on every joint and knowing it would hold her. She stroked the metal as though soothing a spooked horse, murmuring encouragement.

The door to the lower deck was stiff but she knew the trick to it. Inside, she burrowed briskly through musty hammocks to the larder. She found the second crate and lifted it with a grunt, unconsciously in tune with the rumbling drill pipe at sea-level. She knew the cramped space better than her own reflection and did not turn on the light.

Something made her bristle. Among the old piles of tins and bare shelves she sensed some new thing, a whispering heat... which passed, like the shadow of a cloud. *Just that ghost of Jacobsen’s,* she thought.

That her rig could hide another soul was absurd, and no one believed Jacobsen. She left, humming loudly, glad there was absolutely no need to turn around.

Climbing back through the gale, heaving open the doghouse door, Iris found her colleagues engrossed by Dr. Vanka's monitor. On it, a blocky animation showed the progress of the undersea bore through Earth's mantle. Dr. Vanka sat back to let others see, taking off her glasses to squeeze the bridge of her nose. She felt a headache coming on and winced as Iris set the crate down.

"This is history, folks," puffed Erton Lank on his cigar, thanking Iris with a quick nod. "We did this. Deepest bore ever, deeper than the oldest dinosaur! Jacobsen, who called me a dinosaur last week, will admit I have surpassed my peers."

Sven Jacobsen raised his beer and grinned.

"We're not there yet," barked Dr. Vanka, shoving her glasses against her steel-wool eyebrows. Optimism made Ana Vanka wary - it implied they weren't prepared. She read aloud: "Twelve thousand two hundred ninety-six metres deep. Ninety-seven... ninety-eight..."

"All this math!" Jacobsen clutched his ears.

King of the glib remark, Sven gave a dramatic moan. Third engineer Sven Jacobsen was the kind of man to have kissed the bore before its descent, telling the others, "Now she'll do it. If it's wrong for a man to love a drill, I don't want to be right." Dr Lank had ordered him to wipe it.

Now, all eyes were glued to Vanka's screen. They saw the readout but waited for Vanka to announce it.

"Twelve *three hundred*. World record. And still no precious ores found," Vanka added dourly.

With a whoop unbecoming his age, Dr. Lank shook his beer and sprayed the doghouse interior. Vanka shielded her console from the spume.

"Twelve three two...", she went on, drowned out by celebration. Alcohol would only worsen her headache, so she didn't partake, earning a pained glance from Dr Lank.

"Oh, go on," Sven Jacobsen joshed, wheeling himself to an intimate distance. "This is mostly your feat, Ana. Plus, if you don't drink it the ghost will, and he's bad enough sober. Just like me." he added with an unnecessary weight of flirt.

Rolling her eyes made her headache worse, but Vanka managed it. Jacobsen grinned and retreated, smoothly claiming a new beer as he rolled past the crate.

Vanka and Iris Popov shared a look: *Again with the ghost.*

The ghost was Jacobsen's favourite subject: A figure with four arms and four legs who could pass through walls and who whispered evil truths to those who heard it. No one believed Jacobsen, to his private chagrin. To avoid doubting his own sanity he played it as a joke - only too often for the crew to believe it was just that. A flask of vodka by his bunk seemed to explain it.

Outside, the growing storm had turned the horizon to mush and the waves to a

nervous frenzy. They pounded the four concrete pillars that raised the rig from the Barents Sea, echoing through the structure like the footfalls of giants.

Six months of marine onslaught had proven that the DH607-1 rig was far sturdier than her top-heaviness implied. Those structural groans were as good as lullabies to them now.

Jacobsen joined Dr. Lank and Iris in a loud chorus of the Russian national anthem, Lank waving his cigar like a conductor's baton, Iris singing harmony. Jacobsen lifted himself from his wheelchair to belt out the main refrain.

Her colleagues distracted, Vanka sneaked a gaze at that outlying European, Roche, the last member of the crew, who had so far kept his silence. He slouched behind the singing trio of Iris, Dr. Lank and Jacobsen, the latter now performing a rotating wheelie while he sang mock-soprano.

You could plough a field with that jaw, Vanka mused, watching Roche. It was the limit of her acquiescence to high morale. Roche observed the revelry mildly, one eyebrow raised. Vanka suspected that if he ever did learn Russian, instead of relying on their gestures, he would be no less taciturn.

"Obkro ena sem z pti jimi mo gani," he murmured to no one - a phrase he often spoke at times of levity.

Only Iris Popov, drenched from her beer-run, took notice of a new sound.

"Anyone hear that?" she asked, quietly so as to avoid interrupting Dr. Lank. Despite living on the rig much longer than

the others, preparing amenities, she still regarded herself as a junior add-on.

Her colleagues stopped singing. A dim harmonic hum could now be heard by all. It had a noticeable metallic burr, like a choir of fridge-freezers. It seemed far and near at the same time.

"Jacobsen's ghost is serenading us," Dr. Lank joked nervously, while the others strained their ears.

Jacobsen grinned. He traced the sound to the discarded headphones on Iris's console. They were connected to the bore for troubleshooting by ear.

He put them on and his grin from Lank's validation became a slack 'O'.

Huskily he asked, "Has someone tapped this frequency?"

Vanka's headache was suddenly like rebar through her temple. She tore off her glasses and blinked at a scene newly-painted. The rust at the corners of the farthest console stood out in vivid clarity. She could now make out every pixel on her screen, every hairline crack. She blinked again in amazement.

Now a loud cry came from Jacobsen, who was tearing at Iris' headset. It seemed to be fixed to his ears. As he struggled, his ears grew fur like the fur of the headphones - it spread across his jaw like a natural beard. The plastic band between them took on the texture of flesh. Panicking, he did not notice what the others had: He was standing, his chair thrown behind him. He recoiled in steps until the headset cord was taut, then he tore it free.

It blasted through the console speakers.

An almighty musical chord, enslaving the barrage of elemental sounds - storm, sea and subterranean static - to its apodictic key, engulfed the doghouse then. Headset freed, the harmonic roar was poured punishingly into Jacobsen's skull whether connected or not.

"It's him!" he screamed - the scream of a grown man, tuned to the inescapable chord. "The ghost!"

A deluge struck the rig then. The dense clouds ditched their pretense and fell bodily onto the crazed sea. The waves convulsed like a pit of giant snakes.

The din sustained the chord, as did the thunder that came after. Now the immense harmony united the manic wind, the savage rain and each wave's echoing blow. Even in the asbestos-lined doghouse it was impossible to speak without conforming to the same oblique chord.

Jacobsen screamed again. "Shut it down! Close the drill pipe!"

Dr. Lank snapped into leadership mode. "Wait! That is my responsibility. Do nothing until we figure out what's happening. The bore comes first."

With those words he began to gag. A tarry black ooze fell from his mouth onto his chest in a single clump. Iris rushed to him, Vanka too, but Lank sashayed free of them. He threw down his cigar and trod on it, suddenly equipped with a fresh pair of lungs.

"Do it," Lank hiccupped. The black goop fell off his chest and slithered unnoticed under the consoles. "Pause the drill."

At once, Iris scurried outside again, into the savage and suddenly choral storm. As the door slammed, another absurd miracle occurred: Jacobsen's empty wheelchair hurtled towards the just-closed door and crashed onto its side, still twitching. Such was the pandemonium that no one glanced at it twice.

The onslaught of the absurd found a plateau, and Iris' exit brought a period of nervous appraisal.

"What's happening here? Is there a name for it?" cried Lank, running white knuckles through his thinning hair. Concealed in his second question was the knowledge that new phenomena usually took the name of the nearest person in charge. *The Lank event*. That would be fine, as long as this wasn't the centre of a catastrophe. Blame was the flipside of repute.

"Maybe the drill hit something," Dr. Vanka guessed. She tried to ignore the perfect harmony of her voice to the maelstrom. "Now it's spilling up the pipe and affecting what's around us."

Jacobsen nodded slowly in agreement.

In the face of this theory, Dr. Lank seized a second beer and emptied it vertically into his mouth.

Dr. Vanka entered a mute daze, raptly observing vivid motes of dust. Jacobsen continued to stagger unaided; his tearing at his headset, which had turned the colour and consistency of his own skin, subsided with his hopes of removing it.

"Barkeep, another," he addressed Lank, who kicked the beer-crate over to him.

Jacobsen loosened the cap in his elbow and glugged messily - then emitted a huge burp. Despite his intentions, the fear in the room did not decrease.

A deep voice spoke suddenly in perfect Russian: "I am surrounded by bird-brains."

Eyes bulged in the direction of the silent European, Fourth Engineer Roche, who looked as surprised as they did to be understood. It was certainly not Russian he had spoken, but in that language they had heard him, expressed in the phonyms *Obkrožen sem z pti jimi možgani*.

The European shrugged, invincibly aloof. "Well, now you know."

Then the storm redoubled its offense.

Iris believed she had soaked up the entire storm in her hair, driven sideways by the wind. She clung to the rail, nearly dragged overboard by it - that is, if the catwalk didn't rip from its moorings first. On hands and knees, she reached the level of the storeroom, paused for endurance, and continued down to the drawworks, where the drill pipe was waiting to be sealed against the sudden chaos. The ridged iron steps tore her palms and knees. But while her jeans ripped, her skin did not.

It was a storm beyond any she had seen: clouds pummelled seaward, obliterating distance and plummeting like rocks. It was as if each gust was at war with the next; and still the heavens roared in that impossible key from deep below. Inch by suffering inch she arrived at the portal to the drawworks, level with the highest waves, and wrenched the wheel-lock open. As she heaved the

door shut she glimpsed through it: waves agglomerating as though magnetized, rising into obscure, limbed shapes that distorted before an outline emerged; tendrils as high as the rig, wide accumulations with volcanic summits, and most incredible of all, a parade of vertical ridges like a toast rack wrought in water....

The door slammed.

The eldritch chord was louder in the drawworks. Iris tugged on the light. The room was bare and dripping, dominated by the red dome of the blowout preventer. Behind the chugging harmony she sensed an overture, a pattern. She hastened to the shaft's opening: fifteen centimetres in diameter, an iron drainpipe with a lid she could swing closed.

On the lid was scrawled, "DH607-1 SD *Screw me hard*". Jacobsen had been here.

The screws were in a box on the wall. She fitted them into the hinged lid. And then that same hot presence she had felt in the stores muscled into her senses.

The thought randomly appeared in her head: *A message*. An epic-scaled missive.

The undoubtable presence of the ghost lit up this avenue of theory. She began to move the cover plate, not glancing in the direction of the emanating heat. The scientific urge to count its limbs was stifled by a stronger urge which seemed to broadcast from outside her to ignore it.

She heard muffled gibberish, bypassing hearing to be daubed in fire on her id. The heavy cover plate bucked in her grip. Her beloved rig was struggling against her. The heat grew, the choir rose in pitch, heralding

a bizarre sensation.

The stiffness she fought became her own grip, fighting against herself. Her sympathy for the mechanical strains on the rig was suddenly physical. And she no longer had any hands.

She tried to move back, and *creaked*.

Dr. Vanka ventured outside to test her new sight on the mad waves and wind-muscled rain. She half-expected to be shorn from the rig by a savage gust but, clinging to the rail, she could make out engrossing patterns in the deluge that justified the danger. Gulls were alighting in fear, cawing in the same ever-present key.

A hefty one settled in her eyeline. It cocked its head at her with strange intelligence.

Dr. Vanka staring, and the gull staring back, formed a conduit between two unbridgeable worlds. The feeling was as close as Vanka ever got to that hoary definition of the divine: the magnificence of the unknown. She watched it gambol off the railings with a loud bray.

She looked for what had spooked it. The bewildering sea was at a uniform frenzy. The catwalk was empty, the cranes immobile, the derrick swaying with the storm but not greatly.

Then she felt heat on the back of her neck. Turning, her heart stopped. A face emerged through the metal doghouse door. Its lips moved as if shouting, its pale eyes flared with urgency. Now a hand extruded the steel door. Then a second. Then a third....

“What disgusting creatures,” Roche said, appearing suddenly at her elbow and pointing at the gull. “Worse than rats, since rats cannot escape traps by flying.”

The vision fled. Vanka responded with a nervous laugh, still getting used to understanding him. Roche gave her a sharp look and she stopped.

“Everything is forgiven of creatures that fly,” he went on, suddenly squeezing her elbow. “The cause of our forbearance is weakness. Human insecurity. But humans have no need to fly. What animal can boast a more profound *sexual* experience than you or I? There are other ways to soar, Dr. Vanka.”

She found her back against the railing, Roche’s hips against hers. The afterimage of her vision fled in his proximity, while the storm strengthened.

“Are you so weak, Ana, that you envy them too? No, say nothing. We can do more than speak.”

His rough lips joined hers with an equally rough kiss. She frowned as it continued, longer than she would have liked. His pronouncement on birds left a weird taste, not unlike his chewing-tobacco breath. Sated, he pulled away.

“I am fond of you, Ana. I dislike fools and weak-minded girls but you are, in my view, a proper woman. If we are still alive by nightfall, I have room in my bunk for two.”

“Roche...,” Ana heard herself mumble.

He released her and sauntered back indoors. Dr. Vanka relaxed her muscles, letting herself shiver. She swallowed the taste out of her mouth and frowned into

the wind. A gull veered towards her and landed on the catwalk, the same gull as before. She made sure to give it a friendly not before returning to the doghouse.

Professor Lank was fiddling with his bowtie and muttering while the others paced.

“She must have sealed it by now,” he said, with a ghost of his former bluster.

“I doubt it,” drawled Roche.

The Professor rounded on him, glad to reassert his voice as leader. “Why would she disobey the head of this project?”

Now Jacobsen intervened. “Because of how you treat her, Lank. Like furniture. Maybe the peril shook off your hold on her. Or maybe she’s dead.”

Lank bristled and tugged his bowtie. “You will show Iris more respect, Sven. If I had half as much faith in you as I do in her, I’d have sent you instead.”

In these circumstances there was no need for Jacobsen to hold his tongue. “Of course - anyone but you,” he snapped.

His harsh tone filtered through to Vanka, who had been studying the thread pattern in her sleeve. She stepped deftly between her colleagues and announced, “I’ll try the radio. We don’t know how far this has spread. We should send out a warning as well as an SOS.”

“Good idea, Ana,” Lank said, breaking off an eye-war with Jacobsen, who added, “Keep the receiver off your ear, Ana. Take my hat.” He stroked his flesh-headset woefully.

“I expect a lack of faith from Jacobsen,”

Lank resumed as Vanka headed to the radio terminal, “but not from you, Mr. Roche. Glad though I am to understand you, please remember Iris is the heart and soul of this rig. If that makes her furniture in Jacobsen’s eyes, then there is a man who does not value furniture. But what is your assessment?”

“His assessment? He called us bird-brains!” Jacobsen protested.

“Well, you make a good case for it, Sven. Now, sir,” - Lank addressed Roche - “please state your misgivings.”

“It doesn’t matter what I say,” Roche replied.

“Of course it does. We’re all here together.”

“It matters that you still understand me. That’s why I doubt Iris has sealed the pipe.”

A pause ensued, as when you locate your missing glasses on your forehead. They had heard him loud and clear.

It was pricked by a moan from Vanka. Before the radio receiver was halfway to her ear, the plastic handset had dripped through her hand like mozzarella. Vanka shook off the living ooze, their only hope of rescue, onto the floor with a splat. It coalesced and seeped under the terminal, the whole receiver with it.

This was too much for the head of the project. Lank threw up his hands.

“Great - no SOS!”

At these words a great metal crash shook the doghouse. In the same key as all other sounds, it made no difference to the tension indoors.

Roche was still staring at the melting radio. "We must evacuate," he said, his baritone starting to betray fear.

Dr. Lank, his hands already raised, could not throw them up again, and so swiped them down to express his estimation of their chances in the emergency vessel.

"The EV's under the rig, it's probably still intact," said Dr. Vanka, wiping her hand on her dungarees.

"It's too small. It won't survive those waves," Roche snapped.

"So what's your plan?" Jacobsen interposed.

Roche backed off moodily and spat, muttering what sounded like "Bird-brains."

Manfully, Jacobsen strode to the door on legs apparently unaware of twenty years' atrophy. He turned the lock and pushed. It didn't budge.

He set his shoulder to it and heaved. Still nothing. At last he peeped through its clear panel.

A portion of the crane had been severed by the storm and now lay against the side of the rig, causing the earlier crash and, more importantly, blocking the door from opening. Just as bad, the catwalk had been uncoupled by the fall and flailed like a dog's tail. As Jacobsen watched, it snapped against the fallen crane and went spinning into the sea.

He presumed it was the sea. In a churning blitz of spray and debris there was little to distinguish sea from sky.

Dr. Lank slumped on a console and rubbed his brow, ignoring Jacobsen's empty wheelchair bouncing off his shins. Roche

paced sullenly while Vanka shut her eyes, feeling cogs fly off her brain. Jacobsen hammered at the door with an effort even he knew was futile.

Suddenly, a familiar voice filled the doghouse.

"Dr. Lank! Are you okay, Dr. Lank?"

Erton Lank looked around at Jacobsen, Vanka and Roche, and the bank of consoles fizzing and melting. He had forgotten about Iris.

He called out. "Iris, we're trapped! You have to help us."

"Where are you, Iris?" cried Jacobsen. But the woozy, metallic voice favoured Erton.

"I think I can, Dr. Lank."

A loud grating sound joined the general hum. Looking again through the door's small window, Jacobsen choked on his own breath. The torn framework of the crane was beginning to shift. It was wrenched away from the doghouse by a mighty force, then sagged and folded on the deck. The door opened on a sixty-metre drop with no catwalk.

Dr. Vanka strode to the howling portal and cried, "Iris, where are you?"

"Dr. Lank, can you hear me? I moved the crane. I did. The rig... I think I'm it."

And a wail of metal answered any doubts. The rig was flexing its heavy, huge components with loud crunches of rust. In perfect detail Vanka watched the starboard crane swivel, the deck bend, the upper derrick curl like a neck. The doghouse walls buckled and relaxed. The rig was impossibly but undeniably alive.

Vanka filed the insane news for later digestion. She hollered at the wind. "Iris, is the EV safe?"

"Hello Ana. Yes, I can feel it."

"How can we get to it?"

After a pause, the second, surviving crane ceased turning at random and lowered over a spot Vanka couldn't see, around the side of the rig. There was a slow groan of gears. Then the crane swiveled back, this time bearing the dripping hull of a large motorboat: the EV. It swung in a wide arc, rising on its chain, and stopped a few feet from the doghouse door. This was outside the crane's normal contortions, and metal creaked to keep the craft suspended so close to the rig, and so high up.

"Can you jump? This hurts."

Roche put an arm around Vanka to pull her away from the door. He sized up the gulf, the height of the drop - not enough to kill him; he would simply drown in the melee.

Before he could make the lateral leap, he was flustered by a hovering gull. He grabbed its webbed foot with reptile speed. He swung it against the outer wall with a loud crack. Its limp body dropped with the rain.

"Ha!" yelled Roche.

Bile blocked Vanka's throat. Appalled, she simply stared. Even Jacobsen had no words. Roche wiped his hand on his coat and growled. "Bird"

He stopped because a yellow beak had entered his eyesocket. The rest of the bird flapped at his face, apparently stuck. It was the same gull Vanka had seen, now

screeching newborn hate inside Roche's cranium. Behind the blood and wings, Vanka saw the moment when Roche's other eye stopped moving. In slow motion Roche tumbled into the storm.

For an age he plummeted through howling air. Then his head struck a ligament of steel; his body pinwheeled for a spell then disappeared in a volley of white spray.

What followed wasn't silence, except to Vanka. Grimly she approached where Roche had stood, making out every crazed droplet between her and the EV's swinging hull. She tried not to imagine Roche's terror in his last moments.

"Hurry." Iris moaned, sensing the plastic ties holding the boat begin to melt.

Vanka flung herself at the EV with the grace of a ragdoll, striking the wet deck with painful relief. The EV jerked like a puppet, swinging closer to the doorway then swinging back.

Jacobsen swallowed, all glibness gone. He had no practice jumping. His first attempt, across a deathly, storm-battered gulf, brooked no second chance. Sizing the gap clinically, his trembling calves received a surprise blow, almost taking him off balance.

His own abandoned wheelchair reversed for a second assault. Jacobsen snarled. It rushed again towards the open door; he gripped the doorframe and lifted his legs; the chair sailed under him and plunged into the abyss. Jacobsen roared after it, unable to hear himself but charged with adrenaline. With no more hesitation

he cantered off the edge - landing next to Vanka in the EV, who caught him in a heap.

Erton Lank now shuffled to the edge. Through a horror of rain he saw the EV withdraw into the storm.

“Iris, it’s too far!” he shouted. But the crane pulled away again, a little more decisively. Vanka and Jacobsen sprawled under the might of the elements, losing sight of Lank although he was not two metres from the swaying raft on which they huddled.

It seemed a long time before the rig spoke. “*Dr. Lank, if you leave, you won’t come back.*”

Lank snapped into the wind, ““Iris, do as you’re told!” His voice was a desperate whine. But only the wind swung the boat closer; the crane inched further out. Across the roaring gulf between the craft and the

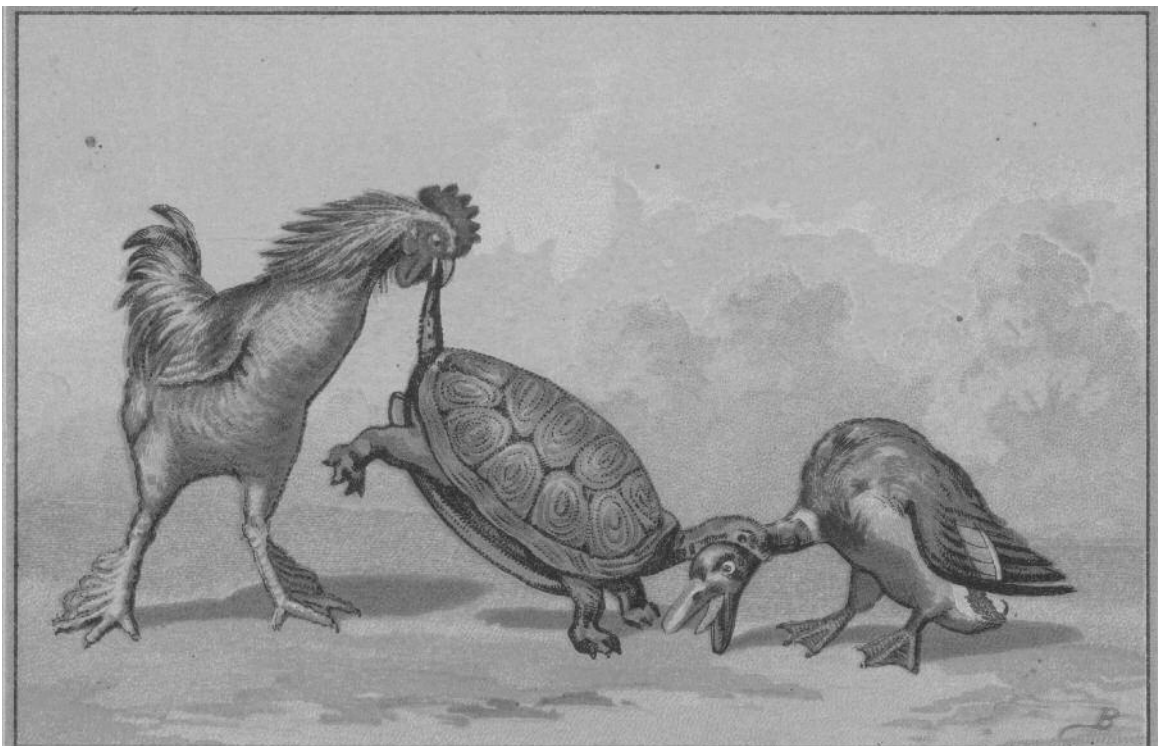
doghouse, Vanka saw Erton’s face tighten with an inkling of pure dread.

“You’ll die out there,” Iris cried. “Sorry, Erton. I have to keep you safe.”

So saying, the heavy doghouse door swung shut on Dr. Lank. Only Vanka could see his wild eyes through the porthole, imagine the noise of his fists against solid steel.

Instantly the crane holding the EV swung wide and the craft dropped in near-freefall. For seconds they travelled at the speed of rain, each drop suspended to Vanka’s eyes. Then the hull hit the sea, bounced and recoiled, and a hammer of icy water slugged the vessel broadside.

Putting out of mind the sight of Dr. Lank’s eyes, Vanka reached the helm and gunned the engine. The metal craft accelerated through a warzone of froth, pitching near-vertical so the rain stung them



head-on. More than once a sudden swell threatened to capsize them, only to be undermined by a second billow breaking against it. It was all Vanka could do to cling to the wheel, much less control it, and Jacobsen could only lie flat to stay aboard.

The lawless waves seemed alive, battling and merging like a timelapse of empires. After a mile or two they grew more ordered, and the engine's drone slipped out of key with the cathedral hum they had grown used to. With every metre the wind grew less ferocious, the waves changed from crushing walls to rolling hills.

Looking sternward, they could now see the storm's outline: a sinuous plume still expanding messily into the higher atmosphere. Each flare of lightning showed the black rig inside it like the wick of a lit candle. Jacobsen stared back, transfixed.

There came another tearing flash, and the rig seemed to have shifted. Another followed; now Jacobsen was sure. Like a newborn giraffe the rig had stepped out of the storm's eye, its four concrete pillars employed as rangy legs. Even as the EV bounded through softer waves and their home of six months receded like a bad

dream, a twin flash of lightning revealed something new. Atop the crown block of the striding DH607-1 rig, the silhouette of a man stood among the highest struts and spurs, a lookout in the crow's nest. In the space of a second Jacobsen counted four arms and four legs - then a barrage of harmonic thunder billowed out from the dark heart of the sea.

Jacobsen looked at Vanka. She, too, had witnessed the illuminated figure. In answer to his gaze, Vanka nodded and mouthed: "I saw it. The ghost with eight limbs."

Jacobsen lay back in the waterlogged hull. He smiled. "Told you," he whispered, and closed his eyes. Strength drained from him, and against all odds he fell asleep.

The EV motored away from the epicentre. It found shore eight hours later, by which time its two occupants, Vanka and Jacobsen, were found clutching each other for warmth. They were enormously grateful to be rescued, but dreading the task of explaining what had occurred. ❖

END TRANSMISSION