



Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – PRIVATE SCREENING by Sarah Mohan. Ms Mohan is a writer and medical assistant living and working in Northern Virginia.

Page 8 – THREE PLANETS by Doug Hawley. Mr. Hawley is a former mathematician turned actuary (mathemortician) who writes, snowshoes, volunteers and hikes. He was a volunteer wheelchair jockey (pusher, roll model, unpaid escort) at a hospital, greeter at the Marine Mammal Center, “control” in a balance study at OHSU and docent at China Camp in California and now is ... This story is an amalgam of two stories that appeared in Literally Stories: “When Planets Miss” and its sequel “Living La Vida Extraterrestrial”.

Page 15 – MY WEIRD TOUR GUIDE by K. A. Williams. Last year K. A. Williams was published in *Corner Bar*, *The Blotter*, *Literary Yard*, *Calliope*, *Tigershark*, *Ariel Chart*, *Visual Verse*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *Nuthouse*, *Transfigured Lit*, *Altered Reality*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Yellow Mama*, and *Mystery Tribune*.

Page 18 – AN ODE TO THE EARWORM ELECTIC by Charis Emanem. Biography: Charis is a world wanderer who lived for years in Trinidad as a child, resided in Hong Kong as an adult, but always winds up home on the Columbia River shores. They maintain a wildlife refuge for words that have developed consciousness at ElectricSoupfortheSoul.com. Their writings have been published widely, including in *Defenestration*, *Jokes Review*, and *Aphelion Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Charis’ latest book, *R.I.P. City: 51 Ways to End Your World*, is due out through Montag Press in 2021.

Page 22 – 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.



“PRIVATE SCREENING”

by SARAH MOHAN

Ye Pyaar Ki Kahaani was a 2002 romantic comedy by director Dinesh Bajaj, starring Saba Khoosat as Seema, a free-spirited young woman working as an artist in Mumbai, and Randeep Sharma as Raman, her strait-laced love interest. The Committee for the Dissemination of Virtue and the Elimination of Vice (or just *the Committee*, in ordinary language) had banned the film for “depicting the wanton,” “nudity,” and also for a scene in which the comic relief character made a joke about having intimate relations with a mullet, which was a type of fish. The scene had been flagged for both the mention of bestiality, and also because dried mullet was one of the Republic’s main food exports, and the Committee objected to an animal of national importance being associated with a lewd act.

Najma had never seen it. From the plot description, it didn’t sound like it was worth going to jail for, although the investment banker in Al Aziziya who had requested the film thought differently. But she wasn’t paid to question his taste; she was paid to move the product. All 120 minutes of it had been temporarily encoded in the DNA of her red blood cells. The banker had a machine, a GenScribe, that would take a drop of blood from her finger and decode

the whole movie for him.

Najma delivered only six or seven pieces of banned media a week but earned enough to support herself and her thirteen-year-old son. She had taken this assignment two years ago, when Adnan had turned eleven, telling herself it was time to think seriously about his future. In any case she was tired of real field work. A few months more and she would finally be able to have her pipes fixed so that the water coming out of her showerhead wasn’t boiling, even in the middle of the brutally hot summer. While watching the numbers go up in the elevator of the Al Aziziya man’s building Najma thought about how good it would feel to finally have cool water, how she would feel awake and alert after a shower, alive in her skin in a new way. She was wearing a freshly laundered black abaya, as well as a clean black niqab to cover her face. She was also wearing black elbow-length cloth gloves, so as not to leave a trace of her DNA anywhere, not even on the elevator buttons. Only Najma’s eyes were visible, but before leaving home she had put in contact lenses that would scramble any attempt at a retinal scan. She was a biological ghost.

The man who was willing to die to watch *Ye Pyaar* lived in a glass-paneled building with fifty-four floors. The elevator doors

slid open noiselessly onto a hall swathed in plush blue carpet and subtly pinstriped blue wallpaper. It looked like a hotel. Frederique Alman lived at number 543. She pushed his buzzer and he answered, to her surprise and annoyance, in accented Arabic.

“Mr. Alman,” she said pleasantly, in English, “I am here from the Heavenly Cleaning Service. Thank you for choosing our company. We aim to provide a professional experience to all of our valued clients.”

His coded reply was halting, and Najma could tell that he was a first-time user and also that he was some sort of nerd. When he opened the door she was rewarded by his awkward posture and unflattering rectangular wire-frame glasses. Frederique seemed surprised to see her carrying actual cleaning supplies but didn’t remark on it when she set the plastic bucket down in the entryway.

“So where is it?” she said.

“In...I’ll go get it,” he said, and ducked into a side room to retrieve the GenScribe. Najma relaxed. While she could never be sure until something happened, Frederique didn’t seem like a predator. On one side of the blandly-decorated living room was a holo-projector, so small she barely recognized it, along with a shelf displaying mementos from his travels—keychains, glass jars of sand, and a caricature by a street artist. Najma couldn’t afford the level of government scrutiny that would come with applying for a passport, so she had never left the country. The multicolored jars of sand from distant beaches were especially

intriguing to her. Physical proof, she thought, of a world outside the Republic.

On the far end were floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a panoramic view of the Al Aziziya district, full of glass and chrome temples to the unshakeable power of the Republic. The excessive wealth should have been shocking, but instead it bored her, the sameness of every residential and commercial megacomplex melting into a sort of visual static. She could see a park across the street, just starting to fill with children and nannies as the heat of the day relaxed its stifling grip. In the midst of all the gray and blue the bright green of the grass was like a rocket flare.

He placed the device on his low glass coffee table. It looked like an old, bulky laptop. Bulky because it needed the processing power, Najma knew, but beyond that she had no idea how it worked. She knelt beside it and pulled back the sleeve of her abaya to expose a sliver of upper arm, which she grazed on the exposed lancet. The lancet slid into a closed compartment, where the GenScribe would read and decode her DNA and then destroy the sample through UV light. She would go straight from the apartment to a clandestine People’s Army clinic, where her red blood cells would be returned to their unaltered state.

“Well, that’s it,” she said brightly. “Usually it takes about ten minutes to finish rendering.”

“Oh!” he said. And then: “Do you drink tea?”

He brought two glasses out on a little

tray. Najma slipped hers behind the part of her niqab that covered her from the eyes down; it was better for both of them if Frederique never saw her face. It was black tea, Moroccan-style, with a sprig of fresh mint in each glass. She asked if he had spent any time there.

“No, unfortunately,” he said. “But my neighbor as a boy had a Moroccan grandmother, and sometimes she would come over to watch me when my parents weren’t home.”

“That is where you learned Arabic?”

He laughed. “No. From an app. That is why I speak so poorly. Where did you learn English? Your English, I must say, is better than my Arabic.”

“Thank you,” she said placidly, sipping her tea. It was always very amusing to English-speaking foreigners that, despite her accent, she spoke nearly fluent English while they could barely communicate in Arabic. She wondered what they would say if they knew she had spent several years at a training school run by the People’s Army and knew, besides English, how to crush a windpipe with maximum efficiency. Most clients, even those who were part of the movement, treated her like a stupid maid. Frederique was not one of those, but he was clearly no revolutionary.

He would be aware of the risks, though. Someone from Outreach would have vetted him and briefed him on the protocol. He knew he could disappear into a state prison where no amount of money or power could keep him from being tortured and eventually shot—for *Ye Pyaar Ki Kahaani*? She had to

ask.

“I have never seen *Ye Pyaar*,” she said. She had in fact never seen any movie that hadn’t received the Committee’s stamp of approval. The People’s Army kept their own samizdat library of films, books, and holomedia, but Najma didn’t see the point of fiction, except as another way to avoid reality.

“It’s one of my favorites,” Frederique said enthusiastically. “On the surface it is a typical romantic comedy, with all of the usual things—big dance numbers, family drama, miscommunications—but if you look deeper, there is much more. My favorite part is a scene one-third of the way into the film, where Seema and Raman have a conversation in an aerial tram.”

“A what?” she interjected.

“Like...a trolley, but the cables are in the air. Like a ski lift.”

Najma nodded. There was a mall near the People’s Army clinic closest to Al Aziziya that had an indoor ski slope, and she had gone in once for a hot chocolate.

“Seema is more of a free-thinker,” Frederique continued, “While Raman is very cautious. He is not sure it will work out between the two of them. It is a beautiful scene. They are in this tram car, alone, in the evening, and the light fills the little space in a wonderful way. They are suspended in the air above a dense forest. By this point they are both in love with each other, but they are afraid to express this feeling, in case the other person does not feel the same way. Even though they are alone in the tram car, it is like their unspoken feel-

ings are in there with them, and so to avoid speaking about the feelings they cannot name, they look around at the forest. Raman says that life is a constant struggle. Everything in the forest struggles to survive, and every life's survival depends on competing against or consuming another life. But Seema replies that despite all of the crushing pressure, it is a miracle that life is still possible. And the lesson she takes from the forest is that life will prevail, no matter what."

He looked at her, evidently expecting her to be impressed.

"She is saying they can be together," he said.

"Yes," Najma said. "I understand that. But which life does she mean? Does she think the deer prevail against the tigers? What sort of life is that?"

Before Frederique could answer, his phone rang. He grimaced at the name on his screen.

"The building owner is my cousin, I had better take this...."

Najma nodded.

"*Jacque, a va?*" There was a long silence. With a sick feeling in her stomach, she watched his expression change from mild annoyance to abject horror. He hung up and looked at her blankly, blinking like he'd just been hit in the face.

"It's the Committee. They're raiding the building. They had a tip-off—*not you!*" he said frantically, when she lunged towards him. "Not you—someone else—drugs—I don't know."

The Committee had a division of secret

police, known for their speed and brutality. They had only a few minutes to act.

Frederique was stashing the GenScribe in a storage closet.

"You must leave," he was saying. "I'll send the money—"

"No," she said sharply, grabbing his arm hard enough to hurt. She had to impress upon him the seriousness of the situation. "They will have sealed the exits already. There is nowhere for me to go. Hide my cup."

She thrust it at him and he disappeared into the kitchen. Her bucket of cleaning supplies was still out in the entryway. She had just moved it around the corner and out of view of the door when his buzzer rang and someone began to knock with authority.

"Mr. Alman? Mr. Alman!"

There was no pause at all in the knocking. Frederique was just coming back from the kitchen; he looked at her helplessly.

"Answer it," Najma whispered. "They can't see me from here. Just be polite. Try not to lie."

She crouched beside the bucket as he swept past her. Beside the Windex and under a dirty washcloth was a small handgun, which she held pointed towards the ground, one gloved finger on the safety. She heard the door open. A pleasant male voice of indeterminate geography said:

"Ah, Mr. Alman!"

"I was in the bathroom," said Frederique lamely.

"No matter. I am with the building management. We are looking into a little

incident with some damage to the spa facilities, nothing major...and some stolen skin-care products. Very expensive. May I see your identification?"

"Of course."

Frederique walked back to retrieve his phone from where he'd left it on the sofa. He had a tight, nauseous expression, like he was suppressing a stomachache. Conscious or not, it had been a good choice to say he had been in the bathroom. He didn't even move his head in her direction as he passed by.

The man at the door examined his ID and seemed to find it satisfactory.

"And sir, I hope you will not mind if I scan your home for the product codes? I do not wish to invade your privacy, of course, but—"

Najma stopped listening. He was almost certainly going to do a thermal scan. If she stepped out from behind the corner she could get both of them with one shot, drag the Committee man's body inside, then lock the door, which would buy her time to destroy the GenScribe and drink the solution she kept in her cleaning bucket that would cleave every molecule of genetic material in her body and turn her into so much biological goo...would she have enough time to text her son goodbye? She had almost forgotten about her phone. For a brief moment Najma was overwhelmed with terror, but she breathed slowly through her nose and soon was only conscious of the reassuring weight of the gun in her hand and the steps ahead of her. The gun had been issued to Najma as a field agent

and had been designed specifically for her, not just in its unobtrusive size and shape but in the biometric trigger lock that would only open for her fingerprints, scanned through her thin gloves. She had been taught to think of it as an extension of her hand, a part of her body.

Okay, she thought, *shoot, lock the door, text, wipe phone, GenScribe, then drink the Denaturon*. Whichever government worker tasked with the coverup could use her cleaning supplies to get rid of the mess. With some annoyance Najma found that she was automatically mouthing the words of the *Ayat-al-Kursi*. She tried to swallow and found that her tongue wouldn't cooperate. Her mouth was bone-dry.

She had risen to a standing position and was just about to step forward, but stopped herself. Frederique was saying something.

"...so expensive these days...."

Najma heard him take something out of his pocket, and then the unmistakable sound of rustling paper.

Time slowed down. It was easy to kill, easy to feel nothing. Najma was a weapon for the People's Army. Her arm was an extension of her gun. Her muscles and bones, her blood and skin—her heart that still beat, for the moment—all strove as one for the cause. Even her genes had been rewritten to aid the silent revolution. The Committee flunky at the door was nothing but a tool, like her, a weapon that needed to be destroyed. Frederique was a tool for the Republic too, even if he didn't know it, a cog in a complex global appara-

tus of control, an overprivileged idiot who had ended his life over a meaningless movie, who didn't even care enough to learn the language of the country that he was exploiting for personal gain, who knew nothing about suffering, who had served her tea and had lived next to an old Moroccan woman as a child, somewhere lush and verdant in France, she imagined, in a little stone house, not like her own childhood in a hot, cramped high-rise apartment with two families to a single broken bathroom. But it hadn't been all bad, had it? There was fresh bread from the bakery down the street because the old man had a soft spot for children, secret soccer games in an alley with her friends, the first day in winter when it didn't hurt to touch the pavement at noon. All of it would be gone soon, erased, unwound, denatured, illegible.

If she could just lift her arm and fire.

"So true," said the man at the door.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Alman."

The door closed, and Frederique sighed with relief. Najma silently counted to ten before stepping out from around the corner.

"We'll make an agent out of you yet, Monsieur Alman..."

He let out a quickly stifled yelp of surprise at the sight of the gun still in her hand. Najma put a finger to her lips. She had forgotten she was still holding it, and, embarrassed, tucked it safely back into the bucket. She was glad he could not see her expression.

Frederique slid down the wall to sit.

One corner of his face was caught in the hazy glow of the setting sun from the window. The rest was pale and shining with sweat. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

"You were going to—"

"But I didn't," she said, cutting him off.

His laugh was tinged with hysteria.

"What does it matter? I'm going to jail anyway..."

"For bribing a member of the secret police? No. He was low-level enough to take money, and so I think he will be low-level enough to keep his mouth shut. A true believer would have detained you immediately."

He didn't look reassured. "But now that I've helped you—"

"Don't worry," said Najma. "We'll leave you alone. The cash you gave was for me?"

He nodded.

"Then we'll collect our payment another time," she said. "And that will be it."

The golden light from the sun illuminated the whole apartment, but even that couldn't disguise its sterility. The water was fortified with micronutrients, the air fine-tuned to a comfortable temperature and humidity level, the windows hermetically sealed against sand and wind. Here in Al Azizya it had been made easy for people to forget that they were living in a desert, as long as they never went outside. Frederique didn't have to worry about the revolutionaries. He was unrecruitable.

"Has this ever happened to you before?" he asked, after a moment.

"No," she said carefully. "Not exactly

like this.”

“But you were prepared,” he said, “for the possibility.”

“You think I could forget?” she said, taken aback.

“No, no! Of course not.” At least he had the decency to look embarrassed.

A notification buzzed on his phone, startling them both, and as he took his phone out of his pocket he fumbled and dropped it. Najma handed it back to him wordlessly.

Looking at the screen, Frederique smiled ruefully. “Cousin Jacque again. They are securing the building for the next two hours. No one in or out.”

He looked at her. “I have a gaming system...something came free with it, *Angry Freyr*, or something like that, but I am not

sure how to play...”

“*Wrath of Freyr*,” she corrected, and, at his surprise, decided she had nothing to lose by explaining.

“My son likes it,” she said, watching his face. His reaction was unexpected—no reproach, just a polite nod of acknowledgement, that she had her life, that her choices were hers alone. She felt moved to respond to this gesture but couldn’t think of anything to do or say that would make sense to him.

“Well,” he said faintly. “What else....”

There *was* something. Najma laughed to herself. “We could....”

“What,” he said, already smiling in anticipation.

“Do you have any movies?” ❖



“THREE PLANETS”

by DOUG HAWLEY

The astronomers first noticed the approaching star and its one planet on February 10, 2043. How this caught them by surprise was never explained to anyone’s satisfaction, because we were told that it would ruin our whole solar system within a year. I don’t know if the conspiracy theories about giving more lead time to important people to prepare, while leaving the unwashed masses at the mercy of a shattered earth, were true. I’m an agnostic on the various stories.

At the time I was working on the NASA mission to Mars which had been scheduled for 2025, but had been postponed many times because of subcontractor failures, overly optimistic schedules, bad management and politics. At least when the news of planetary destruction was delivered, we were getting close to ready for our original mission. Necessity intervened, and our new mission was to land on the invader planet, Rover as we called it. A highly placed group of physicists, chemists and astronomers had determined two things about Rover – it was a Goldilocks planet suitable for human life and it would not be destroyed as it and its sun wandered through the solar system. I was a propulsion guy and not fluent in any of the areas covered by the experts, but it seemed highly

unlikely that everything would come to pass as predicted. It all seemed like a bad science fiction movie in which some Einstein has exactly the right solution. Even given my skepticism, I couldn’t just hope for the best and ignore the conventional wisdom.

Our change of project was supposed to be a secret, but somebody tattled. Within days of being given our new marching orders, Jason Wilkie sent out recruitment letters to everyone on what had been the Mars mission, and every other rocket scientist in the world. The letters mentioned a private enterprise space ship project, but everyone at Mars Mission could read between the lines. Wilkie was going to have his own ticket to ride to Rover.

Jason is the son of Mike Wilkie, the founder of Gold software in Portland, Oregon. When Jason found that running the company after his father retired had bored him, he started his private rocket company outside of Bend, Oregon. He promised a profitable company eventually, but so far it had been a rich man’s plaything.

Maybe I’m biased, but I didn’t want to stick with the devil I knew. Sure, you can find a myriad of examples of private enterprise screw-ups, but I didn’t think that they were ever as bad as government cluster

humps. There were a couple of other things suggesting that I go with Mr. Wilkie. His company had a sterling track record, and everyone that I talked to said that his project was ahead of the Mars Mission. I jumped ship and headed for Bend.

When I got there I could see that his pitch had gotten some first rate personnel and the project was moving along on schedule. One of the real pleasures was working with the brilliant and beautiful Sapphire Hendrix. She was rumored to be a relative of Jimi, but she said no. She was my boss on obtaining the right fuel in the right amount. Other teams were recruiting the right five hundred to take the flight and the right supplies for the short journey. Other scientists had determined that Rover had lower gravity and more oxygen, so if we had anything to be happy about it was that we would seem more athletic on Rover.

After working long hours, Sapphire and I had few drinks and commiserated. I'm a born complainer and whined about my divorce and what I thought of as an unfair world. Finally after I wound down, she said a little about her abuse as a child and the difficulties of finding a guy anywhere near her level without him just wanting a quick hookup. We just looked at each other for awhile and without a word went to her room. After the hookup, I was hooked. It seemed so perfect that I looked for something wrong. Eventually I had the good sense to just accept that I was about the luckiest guy ever.

Our preparation proceeded apace, and we felt that we had a shot at getting to

Rover and surviving. News from the former Mission to Mars was not as good. We gave a good faith effort at helping them, but it didn't look good for them.

Sapphire and I knew that we were going, but there was one surprise. At the last minute Jason said he was giving up his seat so Fred Halley from the construction crew could go. Fred said "Listen Mr. Wilkie, everyone here knows that you are far more valuable than me. Shut up and get on aboard." I swear, there was not a dry eye to be seen.

I'm happy to say that when the day came, our trip to Rover was boringly smooth. The experience on Rover was both better and worse than expected. After we landed we saw buildings in the distance. As we got closer, there were signs saying "Foreigners Unwelcome Here - Aliens Will Be Deported."

Deporting us would have to wait until we passed another inhabitable planet. In the meantime the Azari (people in their language) had us clean their houses, landscape their yards and haul their refuse.

We were told by the Azari to call their planet Azari after themselves.

Even for me it was hard to complain, and that is one of my best talents. Seven billion had died on earth, and we never found out about the Mission to Mars. Maybe they landed on an uninhabitable planet. Even with menial chores and sub-standard housing and food, life with Sapphire is sweet. The best part is that I've heard that we'll be put on a planet where the primitive inhabitants will worship us as

gods.

I was chosen to write the history of the survivors of the destruction of earth. Our stay on Azari was what seemed like three earth years based on the amount that we aged, but we may have been aging faster on a planet that does not match our biological cycles. We can't be certain. Our atomic clock either broke or was sabotaged, so we could not judge the passage of time. It didn't help that Azari was illuminated somehow so it was never dark and the temperature was generated internally and remained consistent. Why was I chosen to write the history of our travels? I don't know what to believe. The given reason from the survivor's committee is that I had already written about the beginning of our journey covering the rocket construction to our stay on Azari. I suspect it was that no one else wanted the job, or I was being punished for some unknown sin. There were not enough of us to have many official titles besides myself as Historian, but the "good billionaire" that had our rocket built, Jason Wilkie was known as The Boss until his early death on Azari. There was a lot of silent sobbing when he died, because we all thought of him as our Moses. He got us to the Jordan River, but not to the other side.

A relevant subject that I should have written more about earlier is that besides the crew being picked for their expertise, we were picked for sexual compatibility and social skills. It was understood that we should repopulate whichever planet we inhabited; otherwise humans would cease to exist. There were a couple of notable

exceptions, because of the limited amount of vetting, some special skills which had no good choices or things just going wrong. Ace maintenance guy, Joe Martin had been a lay preacher on earth. While on our second home, he became a zealot with a small band of followers. Most of us were quite secular, but a few bought his line and called him "father". Alice Weathers, our astronomer, was old, unattractive and had an acid personality. She largely kept to herself.

While still on Azari, it was made clear that we were unwanted and would be given the worst jobs available until we could be offloaded onto another planet. We were, however, treated to an Azari spokesman, Sezan, who knew English better than we did. I was appointed to interview him.

Me: How does the planet generate continuous light?

Sezan: There are chemicals in the soil that make a cool light.

Me: How do you not lose atmosphere as you travel through space?

Sezan: The same as your former home - gravity holds our air as we go, similar to yours.

Me: Your planet and ours, your people and ours seem quite similar. Coincidence?

Sezan: No, we colonized planets similar to ours millions of years ago. Our descendants on your planet seem to have forgotten their origins and slipped backwards. We have kept track of earth as we have our other colonies.

Me: Can you steer Azari, or does it travel at random?

Sezan: Some of each. We could avoid running into a star, but it would take a tremendous toll on our energy supplies. Except in dire cases, we go where gravity and momentum takes us. Sometimes we float in space for eons.

Me: How did you pick planet Renn as a place to offload us?

Sezan: We calculated that we will come close to Renn and it is a place that you can survive. Also, it could be an interesting cultural experience for you to live amongst a primitive people who might end up worshipping you.

Me: What can you tell me about the planet and the people?

Sezan: I could tell you a lot, but I won't. We will give you a guide to the local language. It is simple, much as the people there are.

During his final answer Sezan was laughing, which didn't bode well. They may not have realized it, because they think that humans are dumb, but we survivors did know when the Azari were laughing. Whenever a human or Azari did something stupid or clumsy, such as a slip or blowing something out a nose, other Azari would make a sound like throat clearing and point at the victim. The Azari had some holes in their vaunted sophistication.

We simultaneously appreciated the Azari for saving us, and hated them for their arrogance.

As promised, all of us were given language lessons for the Renn and a very short guide to words and grammar.

We got to the departure date with a

mixture of joy and trepidation. We weren't given a choice, so there was no point in wondering if leaving was a good idea. At least the Azari refueled our rocket with high quality fuel and wished us safe passage. The sweethearts also told us where to land to avoid killing many Renn.

Making the passage more interesting, I had kept one little secret from humans and Azari - I thought that Sapphire could be the first human to give birth off earth on our third planet.

As Azari got to its closest point to Renn, we marveled to see that it resembled earth from space. Maybe this wouldn't be too bad. Our luck doubled with a smooth trip to the desired landing spot.

After we landed and got on solid earth, the residents came out to meet us. After a short, stunned silence Jim Gilgert shouted out "They're superdogs." Jim never had a filter, and always said whatever popped into his mind, but he wasn't wrong. Clearly the locals were not in any way the descendants of the Azari. They appeared to be mutant dogs about a meter high at the shoulders, built on the centaur plan. Their "skin" appeared slick, no hair or scales. Other than that and the six appendages, they could be earth mammals. We'll never know if they were imported by the Azari, or are native to Renn because they had little sense of the past or the future. To them, it was always "now". In that sense, they are very much New Age creatures "in the moment".

One of them came up to me, somehow assuming I was our leader and asked in their language "Welcome. What do you

need to know?"

We had prepared questions because the Azari had given us little information.

There was no word for "name" in their language, so I called him Joe. We had a medallion that we hung around his neck with his name. He seemed really happy to get it.

"What do you eat and drink?"

He pointed at what appeared to be a field of multi-colored fruit the size of watermelons next to what appeared to be a pond about a hundred meters away "Over there".

"Do you have places for eating, sleeping, defecating and urinating?" At first Joe looked puzzled, but then just gestured wherever, then dropped a load on the ground. Said load quickly turned to dust and blew away in the light breeze. Like anyone else would have, I wondered if it would be the same for humans. We soon learned that it was.

"I can't think of anything else to ask now Joe, but may I ask you questions as they come up."

"Sure."

I went back to my people to tell them what I had learned and see what they thought. After I had briefed them, Elmer Banks, the electrician, asked a question that I hadn't thought of - "What about weather, the seasons and night and day?" As we learned, I might as well not have asked. The questions were meaningless to the Renn. Because the planet didn't rotate, we always faced their sun. Nothing ever changed - slight breeze, equitable temperature, always light. So far the wind has been

steady and in the same direction from the temperature differential on different parts of the planet.

It was my turn to ask what everyone else had learned. The inquisitive Elmer had done some wandering about and had some information for us. "Everyone has probably noticed that we are now Supermen and Women. Chubby middle aged me has jumped five meters into the air."

Sapphire had talked to some of the Renn. "I had a really hard time communicating, but it seems that the Renn that we have seen is all of them, at least as far as this group knows. They didn't understand when I asked for a number, but I estimate that there are five hundred live ones. I saw several of what appear to be corpses. They are pretty much ignored by the live ones. After a lot of interrogation, I learned that going in one direction is warmer and another is colder."

That made perfect sense as we later proved. We were near to the part of Renn that was the warmest because it was closest to their sun - they never named it, so we just called it sun.

Given that we were very comfortable, our next concern was food and drink. Jill Smith and Jack Renfro analyzed the food and water that Joe had pointed out. While they did their lab tests, we ate a little of what we had on our rocket.

Shortly, they gave an encouraging report. "The pond is pure water and the food is composed of fats, carbohydrates and protein, but not necessarily the same as on

earth.”

For what seems like a few days we explored, ate and slept when we felt like it. The Renn mostly kept a respectful distance except when we wanted something.

Two unrelated things became obvious about the Renn. They were very active and promiscuous. Sex seemed to happen at the drop of a hat – but they don’t have hats or any other form of clothing – and was loud and long-lasting. Despite their intelligence seeming to be between the dolphin and jack rabbit level, their art and craftsmanship astounded us. Their carving ability with stone tools was as fast as Woody Woodpecker and as well done as Leonardo de Vinci. We watched them carve the images of all of the crew into a stone wall in what seemed like a few earth hours. Further explorations revealed what looked like an Azari rocket and what may have been its crew carved in stone. An earlier Azari exploration must have prepared them for our arrival.

After an undetermined amount of time – in my case ten urinations – I suggested that we find the length of the Renn year. It had no practical value that I could think, but it gave us something to do. Astronomer Weathers was pleased to have a project, so she noted the few visible stars and instructed a few crew members to measure their fingernail length, and other statistics, then observed the sky until it appeared the same as her first observation. The Renn year was determined to be only about three earth months plus or minus a week, but since nothing changed the calculations

were of little significance. During the measurement, Weathers spent a lot of time with the Renn. She seemed to enjoy their company more than that of the crew.

We largely had crew unity, with the notable exception of Weathers with the Renn and “Father” Martin with his followers, who avoided the rest of us.

Sapphire and I had our hearts broken when after a Renn year, she miscarried. Over the years, despite our best efforts, there were never earth children born on Renn. We had no hopes of continuing our species. It was in no way compensation, we found that we were becoming healthier the longer we stayed on Renn. The medical staff didn’t have all the answers, but the oxygen content of the air, lower gravity and the plants we ate were all good for us. The real breakthrough was our telomeres. Aging is largely caused by their deterioration, but that doesn’t happen to us now. We may not be immortal, but if we are not injured, we will live lives like the Biblical Methuselah.

As nearly as I can reckon, I have not written for about three thousand Renn years or 750 earth years. Why not? Nothing happens, every day is the same. Only four events of interest have occurred during that time. Father Martin decided that the other side of the planet was heaven and took fifteen of his followers there never to be seen again. Jessie Smith ate a Renn and died in pain. The Renn showed no

interest in the killing of one of theirs, or his death. Weathers returned limping from an “intimate event” – her words – with one of the Renn with rashes all over her body. No one else showed any interest in interspecies dating after that, despite sex being one of the Renn’s great talents and their interest in mating with us.

The rest of us are all incredibly healthy, bored and a little insane. It has gotten so bad, that I write poetry. I hate poetry and my poetry is horrible. Sapphire has done her best creating games and things to keep us occupied, but even the most obsessive nerd becomes disinterested after a hundred or so years of a project or hobby. She and Jim Gilgertz formed a company which produced “Hello Dolly” for 5,768 performances. By the end of the run it had evolved to look more like “Streetcar Named Desire”. Sex has largely ceased because everything has been tried and experimentation fatigue set in. One couple worked through the Kama Sutra three times. Our problem in part is that we have no problems, hence no driving motivation. We can’t make things better or worse.

We live on in hopes that another race will appear to save us. We’ve been sending distress signals to any other species like ours since shortly after we got here. That hope and Sapphire is all that I have, but the time may come when we all follow Father Martin. ❖

“MY WEIRD TOUR GUIDE”

by K. A. WILLIAMS

It was hot for early September, at least ninety degrees in the shade. The sand must be burning the feet of the people walking along collecting seashells.

Two men from our senior tour group were swimming in the green Atlantic Ocean. They were older than me and I hoped they didn't need saving. The lifeguard had hurried up the beach when those two young women, in the tiniest bikinis I've ever seen, walked by.

I was content to just sit under the big beach umbrella and watch Ted and Murray bob up and down with the waves. Angela, our tour guide, came over to me. “How are you doing, Nora?” she asked.

“I'm fine, but hot even under this umbrella. I was hoping the heat would help my arthritis.”

“Has it?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Good. You can sit out here again tomorrow but now we need to head inside and wash the sand off of us before going to the dinner theater I've booked. They're doing a modernized Shakespeare play.”

“Which one?”

“I'm not sure. I better get Ted and Murray out of the ocean or we'll be late.”

Angela was very pretty but her eyes were yellow. I'd seen her this morning without

her sunglasses. Her hair, tied back in a ponytail, was platinum blonde.

But it wasn't only her hair and eye color that were unusual. While she'd been standing there in the glaring sun talking to me, I'd noticed that her skin was dry. There were no perspiration stains under her arms on the white tee shirt she wore over her swimsuit either. The woman did not sweat.

She stood at the water's edge, called to the men, and they headed toward her.

We weren't late but I would have rather missed it. The meal was excellent, though I couldn't say the same thing about the play. It had been dreadful listening to Southerners trying to say the lines to “Romeo and Juliet” in a British accent. It was almost a relief when the main characters died at the end, but at least I didn't laugh like Angela did.

I mentioned to my roommate Betsy that night about how weird I found Angela and she said, “You're not used to hanging around young people, Nora. They're all like that.”

The next day on the beach proved that Angela really was different.

Ted and Murray were enjoying their afternoon swim as usual and Angela was

checking her watch. I couldn't remember the plan for tonight's entertainment but I hoped it wasn't another night at the dinner theater. I'd hate to see them ruin my favorite Shakespeare play, "Macbeth".

Angela called to them like yesterday. Ted was slower getting out of the ocean and a big wave knocked him down. Angela walked into the surf without hesitation and pulled him up.

When she came out of the water, I noticed her feet. The left one was turned

almost backward, and she walked on it without limping. Then she flexed her foot and it moved back into place.

Betsy sat two umbrellas away with her head down reading a mystery novel, and obviously hadn't noticed anything unusual. I opened my science fiction paperback quickly and pretended to be totally engrossed in the plot about a UFO investigator.

"I guess you saw that, didn't you, Nora?"

"Saw what?" I didn't look up from my



book.

“You might be more convincing if you weren’t holding your book upside down.”

I put the book down and regarded her evenly. “What do you think I saw, Angela?”

“You know what I’m talking about. I twisted my ankle.”

“I put one of those stretchy wraps around mine when that happens to me.”

“I know you’ve been watching me.”

“Okay, you’re right. I have been watching you. You’re weird. No offense. You don’t sweat. Your eyes and hair are an odd color. You laughed at the end of “Romeo and Juliet” and it’s a tragedy.”

“Their version certainly was.” She cackled.

I couldn’t argue with her about that. “And you have a strange laugh,” I continued. “I observed all that before you walked on what appeared to be a badly broken ankle without seeming to be in any pain. And then you moved it back into place. I know you’re really unusual. Are you an alien?”

Angela turned around to see if anyone could overhear our conversation and seemed to be thinking about how to answer. “I’m not supposed to reveal my identity but since you’ve already guessed I might as well tell you the truth. Yes, but we’re humanoids, just a little different in our anatomy.”

“Are you here to conquer the planet?”

“Of course not. We’re mostly only observing you Earthlings. Although some of us, like me, are interacting with the planet’s citizens, we’re not ready to make official

contact yet. Your species is too volatile. I hope you haven’t said anything to the others.” She sounded worried.

“Who would believe me? I told Betsy I thought you were weird and she said I wasn’t used to young people. It can be our secret.”

“Thank you for that.”

No one wanted to go back to the dinner theater so Angela took us uptown to the Beach Pavilion. It was late in the season with thankfully no kids, they had gone back to school, at the moment. So the pavilion wasn’t that crowded.

We split up. Tim and Murray went to the shooting gallery, others got cotton candy, a few went to the arcade, and the rest of us went on the more sedate rides.

Angela joined me on the Ferris wheel. We enjoyed the ride awhile before she pressed something into my hand.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I’m not supposed to interfere in any way but I’m a bit of a rule breaker and I like helping people. I know you have arthritis. It’s a cure.”

“Just the one pill?”

“That’s it.”

“Thank you. Why don’t you change your mind? Go ahead and conquer our planet. We might be better off.”

She only cackled in response.

“AN ODE TO THE EARWORM ELECTRIC”

by CHARIS EMANEM

JAVACODA.Begin

Camus Raine typed in the keystrokes. The other code monkeys worked in pictures, but he persisted in words and symbols. The images were all in his head already, the little projected characters linked together to form the whole that he already saw.

His fingers rapidly stroked the virtual keys, like little mallets on a xylophone, pounding out a tune. Camus hummed softly as he worked. It was an old song that possessed him, a forgotten melody. It gripped his brain.

Slowly, the code took shape. The body perfectly tabbed in, indented to set out the conditions.

```
If Maruka.randa {  
    GrabandDestroy  
}
```

“What ya’ doin’ there, Cammie?”

Camus’ eyes didn’t leave his task. He took his index finger and swiped a line down the center of the projected light. Over top of his keystrokes appeared two distinct rectangles. On one side symbol, on the other image.

“I didn’t assign that to you. You thought of that—that’s all your own work? ... Pretty impressive. ... Duncan, Reditha ... you should come take a look at the algo the

temp is putting together.”

A small crowd began to gather around Camus’ desk. There was a lot of whispering, pointing, chins being stroked, furrowed brows. What was Camus up to?

“It’s a game!” a late comer to the group called out.

“No way!” another interjected. “Look at the variable names there, and the comments, there—and there. Don’t you see it?”

So now a challenge had been issued. If you could see it you really knew your stuff. Those who couldn’t, well, they just weren’t made of the sort of metal that Azzfapple Dot Com expected of its people.

More than a few pretended to get it. A chosen few did.

The crowd grew larger over the next few hours, watching as the application took shape. Each time it seemed he had wound up at a dead end Camus somehow found a new branch to grasp, a new way to propel forward through the rainforest of logic. It was high drama and suspense, for those who understood.

A sense of witnessing something that only came along once in a great while was in the air. This was not how things got done; not usually. Most programs came in lots of bit pieces, little puzzles doled out, rubik’s cubes that were solved and then tri-

angulated together. No one individual saw the whole—not at this level anyway.

Here, though, was vision. It shimmered in front of them.

“He’s watching! Look!”

Someone pointed upward, up the glass layers of the pyramid, gesturing towards the tiny crow’s nest near the top of the office building. High up above them, the figure could just be made out.

Poppa: their god. God watched.

Camus, oblivious, worked. His fingertips gave off gold, flowing in the stream of light.

Inside of his head, thoughts, ideas.
Electric expressions.

He was one with the micro PC. Camus

communicated to it, and through it to them all.

Poppa watched, his hawk eyes aided by the surveillance drones that now circulated about. As the flock of sky spies grew, so did the crowd.

All work in the headquarters came to a stop. An irresistible desire to be in on what was happening pulled one and all into the scene. Down the elevators and stairwell they streamed. Throngs of employees, all shapes and sizes, gathered around the work space of a temp engaged in an activity most of them could barely understand.

Why? The HR specialists, the advertising execs, the cleaning crews, the server stirrers, the sky floaters, none of them knew



the answer for certain. So, why not? All they knew was that Poppa watched, so they did too.

Something was taking shape. A birth, in the cubicle of a coder all the way down at the lowest level of the building, on the cement floor over top of the parking garage, in a corner of the universe of no prior renown. It was as unlikely a place for anything of consequence to happen as a manger in a barn. Yet here too something miraculous was stirring.

“Who is he?” someone hissed.

“They say he’s Cammie—Camus Raine.”

“Yes, but who is he?”

“A code developer, a temp.”

“I heard he’s on the Latasha AI team.”

“OK. But why are we all staring? What is he doing?”

“Look—there. You would see it if you would concentrate!”

The words were spoken too loud. The sharpness cut through the air.

Camus, roused out of his trance, stopped humming. He turned towards the voices, and saw the crowd. He silenced them all, his face a boil of anger.

“Quiet! Or I lock the image to the pat of my irises.”

Camus turned back towards the light, his face sliding forward until the projection absorbed his visage. It took in his whole being once more. He was the shadow and the bright, the electric.

A few more strokes. It was done.

JAVACODA.End

He slumped onto his hover chair, his

weight driving it back towards the cold floor until it righted itself. He levitated in the afterglow of the moment.

There was complete silence. Then, from far up above, a jarring sound, repeated slapping, that echoed as the wavelength traveled down the levels of glass.

Poppa was clapping. Other code engineers joined him. Then they all did. The employees all broke out into a wild cheer. Not one was to be outdone in expression of admiration for what they had just witnessed. This moment consecrated by Poppa.

Camus heard the adulation but didn’t care. Perspiration covered his skin. He was spent. There was nothing left in him to give.

They had come together over several hours, but now the crowd broke mostly as one. A few onlookers lingered, waiting to see if Camus had a second act. The rest just walked back to the routine of their office jobs. Some were in rapture, many others were puzzled.

“So what is it? What did he make?”

“Couldn’t you see it?”

“I saw the projection. I saw the images.”

“So you saw it.”

“Yes. But what is it?”

Miriam just shook her head in disbelief, muttering as she walked away, “Da Vinci painted in front of you, or did you not notice? Casting pearls before the swine....”

Three months later, seven months

beyond the anticipated arrival date, version 3.8.5 of the Azzfapple Search Worm was released. It was an immediate success.

Reviewers described its dazzling speed, its omniscience in responding to queries, its smooth integration with the Azzfab streams, and the unlimited Sky access. They also approved of the color changes to the title bar, as well as the new logo.

Traders drove company stock up, up, up! Poppa—Paige Brynn, as the world knew him—became worth an additional seventy-three times of an astoundingly high number that rhymes with the word “billions” even as it dwarfs it.

Camus Raine, now locked into a contract as a permanent employee, was given a t-shirt to mark the occasion. So was every other member of the Latasha AI team. Each one was emblazoned with the phrase, “So the WORM turns!”

Not one reviewer commented on the way in which the floating header advertisements shifted as each key stroke was registered in the search oval. Nobody wrote an article about how simultaneous to the tap of a character a graphic commercial appeared in exactly the corner of the projection that was most likely to capture the user’s attention.

The symphony of user query and machine thought and persuasive image all blended together. Advertisements seamlessly stole into the soul of the beholder.

The new Search Worm didn’t give you what you asked, it didn’t give you what you needed. It gave you what you were afraid to ask. It supplied your unspoken desires.

Poppa knew, the moment he saw the algorithm. The better coders knew it too.

Camus Raine had worked it all out, one inspired afternoon. He had increased the sticky by a factor of 8.2!

He had built the better trap and Azzfapple caught more rodents in its grasp. Once they were in, the users shed electric currency like fleas, like a contagion. Azzfapple grew larger and fatter, swollen.

The consumers got caught there in the maze, in the inner workings of the company servers, inside of the machine. They were lured down one rabbit hole after the next. One image after the other pulled them onward, without ever reaching an end. It was a rush!

People couldn’t resist its charms, not even to defecate or to sleep or eat. Drained of life force, they just gave up the ghost. Azzfapple worms feasted on the corpses. The corporation took everything they had. Used up; the bones of the dead users wound up bleached by the projected radiance of electric light.

“Addictive!” a few reviewers noted, but then added, “It has to be experienced!”

The pied pipers played the tunes, the masses followed. They were all just swallowed up, without a thought as to why.

“Everybody loves it!”

Camus hummed a tune as he worked. An ancient siren song possessed him, body and soul.

Oh, how we all danced! How gracefully we swayed along to the violins as the deck chairs started to slide away. ❖

“JUMPEYE KARTLE OOZYU GEN”

by MATT INGOLDBY

Ed. Note: Welcome to episode two of a two-part serialized story about time and space and how they work, sometimes together. If you haven't already, check out episode one in our March 21, 2021 (Ostarablot) issue. Enjoy!

Episode II

Nine days later This One staggers into the hollow of his home, past the cave-mouth to the snow-mound of the last beast felled in Sprung. It is all the sustenance they have to survive Winter. He scrapes away the snow and begins to tear the frozen meat with his teeth.

By now his family have awoken. This One's two brothers, his son and daughter and their mother watch him devour their only rations. Though he is almost dead, they are afraid to approach him. The mother mewls; she fears her empty-handed mate will consume her children next. The uncles nuzzle her but dare not approach the famished hunter.

Once This One is sated, he rests in the snow. Later, he enters the cave, dragging his spear. The mother guards her young who squeak, the danger unclear to them. His brothers stand and growl. They do not recognise This One's expression, which is focused on more than what they see.

This One makes a sound: “Umpay!”

At the same time he throws the spear into the snow outside the cave. Then he retrieves the spear and inexplicably hands it to the elder brother.

“Umpay!” he calls again.

The brother is uncertain. He can kill This One now, but he is still afraid. He handles the spear as though it is red hot.

This One snatches back the spear.

“Umpay!” he says again, hurling the spear into the snow. He unsticks it and puts it back in his brother's hand.

“Umpay.”

“Um'ay.” his brother echoes, and copies the throw, landing the spear in the same drift. This One hoots and bounds to him, embraces him. Now This One gives the spear to his mate.

“Umpay.”

For the safety of her young, she humours his game. She tosses the spear at the snow.

“Umpay.” she growls.

This One chitters with glee. His eyes have changed, glinting with alien resolve. She is nervous but detects no threat in them.

One by one This One urges the family to throw the spear to the same cue. His enthusiasm scares them; they learn fast. Against their will, against the cold, against the prospect of starvation, they are beginning to grasp the potential of this game.

They are beginning to recognise hope too.

Two helicopters reared through the clouds over Staten Island. One was an escort, bearing twelve alert marines who tended their firearms almost in unison. The other contained the expiring body of Cyrus Orphall, CEO and eighth richest man in America, plus a corps of his private nurses. In this craft the sound of the rotors was muffled by creamy leather baffles and whalesong sourced from the healthiest whales known to modern research.

No one decried the need for two helicopters more than Miten Singh, PA and translator to the Great Disruptor Orphall. Miten quaked and fretted among the marines in the escort, trying to catch a glimpse of the other craft through the bulletproof windows.

For nine years he and Cyrus had maintained a secret romance. Secret, not out of fear of public disapproval, but in keeping with Mr Orphall's dislike of labels and boxes. "The future is fluid." Cyrus liked to say. "We are what we are, Miten. We're together. Definitions are the crutch of a loser." And Miten had always agreed, aided by a severe case of Lover's Awe. Now the sinking lights of the East Coast were an overt reminder of what might be slipping away from him one chopper over.

On top of which, he was deathly afraid of heights.

"Do you have signal?" he squeaked to the marine next to him. "Excuse me, pilot! Have you heard any updates?" He was ignored, or unheard, and sank into a pit of nerves that would swallow him for the

entire flight.

Seven hours later a nest of lights pricked the dark of the Barents Sea. The choppers descended towards them. This must be Murmansk, where Miten could staunch his anxiety with activity.

They landed on the deck of the *Takanabo*, a vast and lavish catamaran that was primed to embark. It had been lent to Cyrus Orphall by the scion of an oil sheikh with whom Orphall had struck a deal regarding a chain of luxury brothels. On hearing the tycoon of Orphall LLC was dying and his empire likely to be auctioned off to sympathetic bidders, the black gold scion was more than willing to please the Orphall estate by pledging the *Takanabo* to an unpropitious hail-mary at death's door.

As soon as the choppers touched down, Orphall's cushioned gurney was rushed to the medical bay below deck. The *Takanabo* surged into open sea before they were again airborne. The cargo of marines busied themselves acquiring defense points on the catamaran's upper deck, shouting in lingo that unnerved Miten.

The PA Miten followed Orphall's gurney to the lower decks, skidding into a white room equipped with the latest healthcare robotics. Nurses surrounded the comatose tycoon, forcing Miten to hang back. His lover's face was as pale as ice, and deathly relaxed, as far as he could make out between their scrubs.

"Heart rate 30 bpm. He's barely breathing." said one nurse.

"How far to Lank's Perimetre?" Miten demanded. In other circumstances even

saying its name would have stoked his boyish fascination with mysteries - but not with Cyrus' life balanced on the answer. The nurses seemed to hear his question without registering him.

Lank's Perimetre! The internet was rife with speculation and conspiracy about the offshore 'Area 52', named after the leader of the expedition that uncovered it, and over which even satellites were forbidden to fly by on pain of diplomatic reprisals from the Russian government. The Perimetre was cordoned by a continuous and expensive naval presence, through which slipped rumours of immortality fields, alien artifacts and proof of a divine visitation. But money opens doors which good sense would keep shut, and Russia's coffers, newly depleted by increased military and scientific spending, could not refuse a billion-dollar stake in Orphall's empire.

Plus, here was a willing guinea pig. The rumours of Lank's Perimetre's healing field were not fantasy, but there was no way of knowing the risks.

"Top speed? We'll reach it in eighteen hours." someone said.

Miten calculated that he could delay sleep for another eighteen hours only with caffeine. He hightailed it to the nearest kitchen, downed a mouthful of bitter marine coffee and returned to find half the nurses retired to their bunks.

"How's he doing?" he asked the remaining shift.

"Still deteriorating." came the flat response. "A man in his forties shouldn't be BASE jumping, whoever he is."

Miten agreed. He personally could not descend stairs two at a time, let alone hurl himself from Perrine Bridge. Even the glass lift to Cyrus' penthouse made him dizzy. But Cyrus had been impossible to dissuade. As PA, Miten knew he should have tried harder. The fall might have killed Cyrus outright; and still could.

"What are his chances?" Miten asked, yanking someone's sleeve.

A different hand gripped his shoulder. "If I were you," an anonymous face told him, "I would pray."

Miten considered it. The rest of the executive board would be praying to their attorneys, mounting appeals against the legislative board to secure stock. Only Miten would be praying sincerely for Cyrus' recovery.

He slumped by the gurney, too weary to make demands, too anxious and caffeinated to rest. He imagined he saw Cyrus' finger twitch but no, it was an eyelash in his vision.

The *Takanabo*, attended by a collar of foam, ploughed north-east at a maximum sixty knots per hour. The ballroom, games hall, restaurants and other amenities were ignored by Miten in favour of his sick bay vigil, targeted by poised robotic limbs. Eighteen hours trod by without change, except a cooling by the Arctic wind that the state-of-the-art insulation could not fully annul. Miten's buttocks soldered to the tiles.

He woke - he had slept - to a buzz of agitated nurses. "Hold him, hold him," one was repeating. "Adrenaline!" another yelled.

“Where are we?” Miten asked blearily. He stood up and reiterated, “How far out are we?”

“Two minutes to the Perimetre.” a nurse told him, diving by.

If Miten could have left Cyrus to venture out on deck, he might have started to guess the reason for the military escort. The rough sea had changed, bubbling and blurting, though not enough to slow the *Takanabo*. Stony-faced marines trained their weapons at each passing geyser; no call yet to fire.

Then the worst befell the loyal PA. The nurses stopped their ministrations and stepped away, exchanging jargon. Cyrus was as still as before, only this time there was no rush to attend him. A nurse checked his Lyfebit and recorded the time on a nearby interface.

The silence (the eccentric sea was inaudible there) was suddenly solemn. The cushioned gurney fit the definition of a slab.

Miten’s chest imploded with grief. An obituary he hoped never to write came to him then: Cyrus Orphall, billionaire, philanthropist and job creator, passed away Monday at 5:35am... Even the ship’s engines quieted as if to allow the paying of respects.

On deck, the shivering marines faced down an icy, harmonising wind that suddenly became balmy. The frost in their eyelashes dripped in a sudden wave of heat. The firearm of each marine was specially adapted to waylay the main threat within Lank’s Perimetre, for which the change in

atmosphere was their red alert. They did not have long to wait.

Arising from the sea were twenty, thirty, forty lopers: creatures in the loosest sense of the word. Saltwater forms imbued with life, chunks of sea cohered and given sentience.

Their exact shape was unknown, surrounded as they were by the same liquid material as themselves. But as they floundered towards the catamaran, the marines gained the impression of large-limbed insects scuttling through waves like moths to light. They were attracted to life, and the *Takanabo* held the requisite nectar. What they would do to a person if they reached them was also, happily, unknown. Only targeted bursts of radiation could evaporate them quick enough to prevent anyone having to find out.

The Marines had trained to repel up to a hundred - certainly no more than that had been detected by illegal US drones. Meanwhile the aura of Lank’s Perimeter sharpened their senses, making the bizarre massacre a piece of cake. Beam after microwave beam formed a hissing locus in the sea around the gleaming vessel.

Down in the medical bay, the dead billionaire reared up on the cushioned gurney. The siege of sea-formed lopers was not heard below deck, and even if it had been, the spectacle of Cyrus’ resurrection took all focus.

The tech baron choked on new breath, coughing like a forty-a-day smoker. He moaned something, his eyes wide and bloodshot, then he slumped again, his chest rising and falling regularly.

A more extraordinary thing occurred then. From his forehead grew a fleshy lump that became a perfectly-formed baby. The tumorous newborn wobbled bonelessly from the tycoon's hairline, caterwauling a precise string of nonsense syllables. Then it shrank as abruptly as it had grown and burst like a zit. Miten felt a spray of pus wet his cheek.

Cyrus Orphall awoke again, this time in agony. A round, open wound puckered his forehead.

"Tell them-!" he screamed hoarsely.

Then words failed him. He stared at the terrified nurses. "Where did it go?" he slurred.

"I'm right here." said Miten, gripping Cyrus' hand.

"Good." said Orphall. "Did you hear it?"

Miten swallowed and soothed, "Of course, sir."

"The message. It's everywhere. It's everything." Cyrus cried. He grabbed Miten's arm with surprising strength and pleaded: "Tell me you can hear it."

"I hear your voice, sir. That's enough for me."

Cyrus moaned. "We have to tell them. It's a message. A message for... for..."

"What message, sir?" asked Miten, half his focus on the disappearing wound on Cyrus' brow. "What does it say?"

A distraction came as the *Takanabo's* engines loudened to full power. The captain of the marines had just requested the ship's captain get us the hell out of here. The swarm of lopers had proliferated at an

unforeseen rate. Within minutes of entering the Perimeter, the sea was more loper than waves, a churn of living water scrambling over itself to climb the smooth wings of the catamaran.

It was a scene from a nightmare: Each microwave blast only created space for more lopers to surge forward, flailing limbs that flicked spray in all directions. They had insinuated through the starboard engine, cutting it with a belch of sparks. In the Marines' haste to prevent the port engine meeting the same fate, they bombarded the sea around it with enough blasts to melt some vital wiring, and it too had died. Only the central motor pushed the craft in a sluggish U-turn out of Lank's Perimetre. And still the lopers intensified, foaming limbs breaching the deck on all sides.

In the medical bay, the revived Cyrus collapsed before he could say more. His eyes rolled, his limbs had gone still, his hand cooled in Miten's.

"We're leaving the Perimetre." Miten realised aloud. That was why Cyrus was slipping away again. To the nurses: "Why isn't he permanently healed?"

One shrugged. Another suggested, "He was deceased as he entered, maybe a permanent fix was impossible..."

Miten stopped listening. "Tell the bridge to reverse!" he shouted. Then, senses heightened by panic and the Perimeter, Miten grabbed the gurney and rammed it through the swing doors into the corridor outside, which ran fully bow to stern. A nurse shouted but did not move to stop him.

Gaining strength and momentum he propelled the gurney aft with all his might. Unlucky crew were scattered like skittles as he barreled down the corridor, keeping Cyrus within the bounds of the Perimeter. Cyrus re-awoke, restored by the Perimeter's magic, to observe a bar of light streaming above him, doors flying past so quickly they seemed to be one.

He heard panting, saw Miten Singh above, who gasped: "We're on a ship, sir. In Lank's Perimetre. Per your instructions, if you were incapacitated."

They barged through another swing door, taking one side off its hinges. Fifty metres of corridor lay between them and the poop deck: the end of the road.

Before Cyrus could question his pellmell transit, he was deafened by a great boom from all around, followed by a metallic shriek and the crashing of enamel.

The floor lurched. A long, wide fissure tore the doors ahead off their hinges and let blinding daylight through the ceiling too, the decks above similarly gashed and bearing snapped rebar. The entire stern seemed to have ripped itself apart - and was shifting still.

Miten was now sprinting to keep the gurney within the healing field. Its momentum brooked no crack or fibreglass shard in its path. A widening crack split the corridor down its length, and the wheels of the gurney raced on either side.

They reached the poop deck like a two-man missile. Lino underfoot became wooden struts, sprouting green shoots through the varnish. The gurney juddered

over them, shaking Cyrus out of shock. Bright cold sky was above them now. And there was nowhere left to run.

In less than a second the pair comprehended an array of mortal threats: The deck was besieged by ravenous, watery limbs, whose blind will to board was frustrated only by lack of traction. The entire port and starboard wings of the catamaran were curling and uncurling like enormous limbs, creaking and snapping and spraying chunks of fibreglass in a lethal hail. And the rapidly approaching edge of the deck was just beginning to stir, threatening to launch the gurney with a mighty flick or open up under it.

It is a testament to the properties of the Perimeter that neither Miten nor his resurrected ward lost their minds to the onslaught of circumstances. Cyrus even studied the lopers for an instant, linking their forms with those in grainy drone recordings.

The taffrail had begun to rise as the *Takanabo's* stern, still within the Perimeter, practiced sentient movement. Cyrus was thrown off his gurney. Miten helped him up and the two men hared up the splintering slope of the stern. The living sea thrashed and flailed a full sixty metres below them.

"Jump!" Miten screamed. It was Cyrus who now hesitated over the drop.

The PA begged, "Jump! I can't lose you again."

Cyrus had frozen. Gripping his lover by the waist, Miten flung them both over the *Takanabo's* stern, arms windmilling as they

plunged towards the thrashing waves.

Behind them, the stern rose like a whale's tail then froze as it left the Perimetre. Unable to stay supported, it crashed down with a tormented bellow of steel. The rest of the Takanabo toppled sedately on its side, and the billion-dollar vessel began to sink.

Miten and Cyrus clung together as they struck the living sea, borne under by a horde of lopers. All sense of up and down perished with the shock of cold; then of light and dark; then they could not tell if they were alive or dead, for surely nothing could survive the freezing havoc that engulfed them. All that stayed true was the grip of the other. Then even that distinction was no more, and Miten could feel the grip around his arm as his own grip, and Cyrus' fingers squeezing as he himself squeezed, and Cyrus's terror joining his own...

Four legs thashed in unison, four arms scabbled for a surface that seemed less a memory than a dream. With powerful strokes the eight-limbed figure fought for any sense at all.

Then even the need to breathe lost its clarity. All that was left, besides touch, besides life, was the unbearable urgency of the Message.

The Message was like wind, and they were the leaf that revealed it. It snatched away substance but left them shape, no longer drowning but stretched throughout the Message like a pattern printed on elastic. They were a profusion of one, a spectrum of repetitions, staggered between

distant coordinates in time.

Their new role needed no definition. As long as they were animated by the Message, scattered over history like strong spice, they would be together. Sensing this, neither soul missed the easy comfort of wealth.

Meanwhile the lopers had completed their role. With a loud hiss they relaxed from life, becoming a shag pile rug of inert algae, so spongy you could walk across it. Bits of organic matter brought to daylight by the lopers' churn blossomed a dazzling green.

The lopers' role had taken five years to bear fruit. The ghost began a voyage of seven million.

The way was long, but the battle was short. Three spears lie against a brittle tree, their sticky heads gleaming in the hot light, not a hundred paces from the ghost's first appearance. They will not be cleaned till morning: a symbol of the family's victory.

The victors sit in the camp of their prey, the tethered sunset heating their limbs.

The hardest part turned out not to be the battle but the journey. The white plains had done their best to hide Ara's footsteps, but his son had been able to discern subtle divots in the new snow. They'd marched for five days.

During the bitter trek, Ara had punished any weariness his family showed by braying "Umpay!" This imposed a battle-rehearsal. Sometimes Ara directed new strategies by linking sounds to new actions and formations. His family dutifully play-acted their roles.

So, when the Others came into view at the

edge of the forest (before even the trunk of the mammoth was eaten), Ara's family were prepared.

Training guided them like instinct. Silently they had surrounded the camp. Then, at Ara's command, three spears flew in harmony out of the white. Two found their targets, and the remaining Other was quickly overwhelmed. Never was a war so clean.

Now the faces of Ara's family are red with the mammoth's haunches. The children bare their teeth and play-fight near the bright tamed heat.

During the march, each of them had claimed a sound that was theirs: Ara (for This One), Rar (his mate), Aw and Awa (the young) and their uncles O and O'a. They took to their chosen sounds with glee, uttering little else for days. They had taken to the gift with the same enthusiasm Ara had felt after his encounter with the eight-limbed spirit.

Ara looks around in satisfaction. There is nothing he cannot give a name to: every early star, the fullness in his belly, even the hot chaos eating the wood. There are no limits to what he can organise with this ability.

His glee is short-lived, soon replaced by fear. It is a familiar feeling, but this time its cause is obscure.

He remembers the figure with four arms and four legs who gave him his power. The power that meant he is no longer This One of the Tribe; he is Ara.

Having triumphed by this power, he can no longer not be Ara. He cannot survive with less.

This makes him afraid: What is freely given can be freely taken back.

A new thought follows this one. It has been

present long before it had a sound, but only at the birth of language does the thought come, and just as suddenly:

Why? Why has it been given to me?

But, abruptly, the river of his thoughts freezes over. It will not thaw downstream. One day, people with pick axes will come to break it into chunks, but one thought will never be split:

Why us? Why us?

Peace.

He looks up at the night sky, so big it bores him. He can make nothing of it.

One day it will fill up with sea, and if he looks up from this spot an aeon from now it will be crushing darkness still, only wetter. At the end of the world, the name of that space will be Barents Sea. He will be dead by then, never understanding the gift of the ghost.

From the gaping unknown his gaze drops to the chaotic blaze feasting on its wood. He can make something of that at least. One day he might even understand how it works. That is enough to hope for.

Around him, his children play on and on. The game is new and loud and exceeds mere imitation of adults. He cannot make out its purpose, but he suspects it is important. He doesn't know why.

Millions of years will pass before the Message is revealed.

Inside the airborne crate was the chill dark of a coffin. Only the sound of rotors, which after so many hours had become almost unnoticeable, put paid to Bolin's impression that he was already buried in one.

Bolin Withkeats lay completely still,

keeping his body loose to meet each squall and buffet with the minimum discomfort. He tried not to picture the windy chasm only an inch of wood below him. Against that fact, the evidence that he was not already a corpse in a box felt rather less compelling.

The ceiling of the crate was too low for him to sit up. Lying on his back in the darkness, he fished from his pocket a device that could record sound. He tapped the red circle and laid it on his chest.

“Whoever hears this will know these are my last words. You will know, I hope, what my death has achieved. But you may not know why, and you may curse me for what I’m about to do. And so I owe it to you, whoever you are, to help you understand.”

The helicopter banked and swung its cargo in a wide arc. Bolin weathered the nausea with deep breaths, praying all the objects inside the crate were sufficiently well-harnessed not to fall on his face. Despite trying not to, he pictured the cord snapping, the crate tumbling away from the helicopter carrier. When the swaying eased so that he could open his eyes, he continued, loudly under the rotors:

“All my early memories are of The Message, the long hills and the stars above them, the sound of the stream, the smell of the redwoods after rain. I dream of our commune constantly.

“A main rule of The Message was never to speak of the past, so I don’t know in what condition my father and I arrived, or from what we had escaped. I know the

commune didn’t like my father at first. His strange manners and complexion made them uneasy, and his eagerness to fit in and help out unnerved them even more. They were healthy white Nebraskans; he was a sickly, dark Cambodian who smelled always of tamarisk. But without my father they would never have built the dam-filter that kept the stream free of waste. Perhaps my father was a plumber.” Bolin added thoughtfully.

A patch of calm air caused a sudden lull inside the swaying crate. Around Bolin was crammed an eclectic array of labelled items, most in containers, some of which he could hear stirring.

Before the crate closed he had glimpsed fruit, fossils, petri dishes of pastes, a bag of molluscs, various material samples, trays of seeds, a case of holy artifacts, vials of cells, of ferrofluid, oil and cow’s milk, a Geiger counter, a boxed ant colony and many more diverse items. He was by no means the only life in the crate. What sounded ominously like a large and nervous spider scuttled inside a carton by his ear. He spoke more softly, bringing the recorder to his lips.

“The leader of our commune was Jeremiah Keats - and still is, for all I know. The Message was his, but it meant something different to whoever you asked. That was the point in the beginning. Jeremiah preached the essential purity of Man as a conduit of the nameless god, who bade us to be good and free and pure and true. Doing so we would find Surin. We worshipped at sunrise and sunset, at all other times we helped each other, kept

goats, taught children to read and pray and weave and make traps, and prepared for the next season using the wood of the forest and whatever else was granted to us by the nameless god. Occasionally we saw planes and hikers, but those ill-omens were thankfully rare.”

Bolin stretched his neck, hearing his wingsuit crinkle under him, careful not to tear it. He switched apps to a GPS: They were above the Barents Sea now; the screen was nearly all blue, but he had time. This was necessary. This was his message.

“Not much news reached us from the busy outside world, so when it did it had a special significance. It was a printed newspaper that brought news of Lank’s Perimetre, borne by upland wind as if blown to us by the nameless god itself. Jeremiah convinced us of that. The surviving front page was all about a clandestine voyage by a dying wealth-disciple named Cyrus Orphall - you’ve probably heard about it. A holy site had appeared in a far-off sea which Orphall hoped would cure him. Instead, he never returned, but (the page reported) he had raved to several nurses who had survived about hearing The Message, The Message that was everything. The rest of the story continued on a missing page, but Jeremiah did not need it. He recognised it as a sign! This was roughly eighteen months ago.”

Turbulence struck the crate like an avalanche; it bounced and juddered and threatened to snap loose from the chopper. Bolin sought to enter the calm state of Surin, but his head hit the base of a shelf.

He woke up long after the shuddering had stopped. Panicking, he checked his straps, his brace of powerful explosives and his GPS: Twenty-three miles from the target zone. Quickly he continued.

“Jeremiah meditated for seven days. When he returned from Surin, the dimension without language, his zeal overwhelmed everything in the commune. The nameless god had come and was punishing the impure in this life, not just the next.

“Awful things happened then. Goats began dying in their sleep. A pregnant woman was ordered to be beaten since her sickly cough had infected the herd. An old man, losing his mind, began to rant about his role in an old war, and we drove him into the forest. We tried to restore our purity. And when my father cut his hand chopping wood, and the wound became putrid and his whole hand went black, it was no less than holy retribution.

“Jeremiah and our friends and neighbours, bearing flaming sticks, came to our hut at night. As my father slept, they set his bed alight. I watched his flaming body careen through the dry grass, leaving a path darker than the night. He was screaming. I’d never heard him scream. Then, somewhere by the treeline, his screams stopped.

“Then those torches were turned on me. Seeing neighbours’ faces infected with hate, I ran scared. I ran down the slope, away from the trees, down a sheer cascade of scree and across the dry and jagged Nebraskan scrubland, never slowing, the

furious eyes of Jeremiah ever glowing at my back.”

The GPS showed ten miles to the destination. He had little time. He fumbled the drywall saw from his belt and drove it through the plank under him, wrenching the blade back and forth as practised. He spoke louder as the gash began whistling.

“After three days I was found by a park ranger who took me to a hos-pi-tal.” (Bolin pronounced the difficult word with care.) “Because I was so frightened they thought I was deranged. In a grey room which is called a social monitoring ward I was given a device like the one I’m holding now, and shown how to use it to find out things that could distract me.

“In that grey room I met the internet. I searched for The Message, Lank’s Perimetre, the truth about Cyrus Orphall. Every time I did there were new theories about it, and I devoured them all: Every case for aliens, every re-interpreted passage of religious scripture, every pompous dismissal and speculation about a military testi of hallucinogens...

“Most edifying of all was a transcript of an interview with the two surviving members of the Lank expedition, Dr Ana Vanka and Sven Jacobsen, who had since married. They speculated that whatever caused the events in Lank’s Perimetre had been waiting to be discovered, like a shard of flint waiting to become a Neolithic axe - only consciously.

“‘The steam locomotive was invented independently on opposite sides of the globe.’ Vanka had said. ‘The lightbulb too

was developed by scientists independently. It is like ideas themselves choose when to make themselves known...’

“‘Jacobsen had excitedly taken up her thrust: ‘Ideas await a certain level of development then become universally available. Lank’s Perimetre may be the plainest and most recent example of that trend we had put down as coincidence. When we gained the technology and the motive to drill that deep, whatever power was hidden down there revealed itself to us.’

“Vanka then added ‘I have faith our scientists will soon decipher it, and make something of it that adds value to our lives.’

“They did not believe it’s purpose was destructive. When they were pushed on what it was and what its use might be, Vanka and Jacobsen could not give straight answers.

“I admire their optimism. But some ideas have only harmful applications. With a time machine, who would not roll back the invention of hydrogen bombs? But when a new force wants to reveal itself, it doesn’t matter who discovers it. Someone always will.

“Yes, the nameless god has finally chosen to reveal itself... not to benefit Man, but to facilitate the murder of men like my father. Your wide-eyed hopes make you enablers: the message, when you finally understand it, will spell doom for millions more. And only someone like me can see it.

“When I was pronounced sane, or when they realised I couldn’t pay to be made well, they fast-tracked my release. I

refused to leave until I learned the internet could be accessed outside the ward too, on devices that are widely available. What I did then you can probably find out on your own devices.”

The saw was now halfway through the central plank. The wingsuit rippled loudly in the wind coming in, flapping against the bomb vest on his chest. Bolin wiped his brow and continued thrusting through the wood beneath him.

“I soon learned about a scientific mission to measure the effect of the nameless god on various materials, materials that now lie around me. It was a covert mission with little funding, taking off from a minor airfield, intending to trawl those materials through the Perimetre’s dome while keeping the pilot and craft just above it.

“There was an opening for an operations agent at the airfield. I took it. Like my father I was eager to fit in and help out. I slept under the control tower, so everything I earned could go into preparation for this day: the day I destroy the nameless god.”

Finally a section of the plank could be thrust open, and a howl of raw fury breached the crate and turned Bolin’s sweat to ice. Between his legs he glimpsed the cacophonous drop to a dazzling sea. He felt light-headed with adrenaline; the crate was again a coffin; his eyes seemed to reflect a burning hillside. Though the noise was immense, he did not shout his final words.

“The nameless god demanded hate for my father. So I have become hate to kill the

nameless god, using Its own weapon to protect others from Its evil. Through hate I am your saviour.”

With that, he ended the recording and tucked the device under a shelf. Then he slid forward and plummeted through the gap.

Vials and fossils were sucked in pursuit; he tumbled in a ball; green, grey, blue, green, grey, blue. Then he uncurled, limbs outstretched; the fabric of the wingsuit caught the brawling air and he levelled, face down, withdrawing from fear into a mindset he had prepared for the unholy plunge...

From this height the sea became its own map. Immediately below him lay a near-perfect circle of green. The Perimetre was marked by a tumultuous froth of algae that churned and fizzed as though in a vast food mixer. Around it, beyond the circle of frothing algae, two Russian warships (a permanent cordon) circled like patient sharks.

Bolin dipped his arms and swooped out of control, raised them, tumbled lengthwise and was thrilled to perceive he was now hurtling down over the very centre. The wind was his father’s screams in his ears, louder than any living thing.

...Yes! Through the blinding rush he made out the nozzle of the drill pipe, around which an iris of bare sea prevailed. It was open. Squinting through the wind, he glimpsed the darkness inside the nameless god’s lair. He fingered the detonator in his outstretched right hand as he dropped.

Down he raced towards the severed drill pipe. He would send the bomb down the chute, bringing death to the nameless god...

Then his body was nearly snapped in half by a fast grip around his midriff. He flopped double, his knee meeting his eye, and painfully observed a large yellow bill lacerating his abdomen.

The bill was attached to a huge gull the size of man. It had swooped out of nowhere to thwart his descent, wings larger than a condor's, its bite sharp as a crocodile's. And yet, amid the terrifying chaos of the moment, Bolin looked into beady eyes that were human, aloof and intelligent.

The enormous white bird pounced under him, catching him on its back, and began to soar in descending spirals. Bolin clung to the feathers, his wingsuit close to hurling him off and out of the Perimetre altogether.

And then he saw the bird's target. A grey stain on the green was in motion, a machine bigger than the warships yet dragging itself in the clumsiest fashion through the knotted algae. Now he could see what he knew from pictures was an oil rig; and it was maneuvering to catch them.

With an ear-splitting squawk the monstrous gull alighted on the rig and deposited Bolin on the concrete deck. He lay gasping, his reserves of adrenaline spent, replaced by terror. Now he rose to behold a fissured concrete deck, overgrown with slimy vines and nets of algae. The thundering unseen legs of the rig slowed, and a steel crane swung to redirect

momentum. With a crash of green waves the monster settled.

"Squawk!"

The huge gull with human eyes was nodding Bolin towards a makeshift ladder that terminated at the door of a prefab cabin with no windows. It shook out its feathers like an actor preening. Bolin thought madly: Was that a squawk, or did it pronounce the word...?

"Squawk!"

Now convinced he had slipped into Dura, where the wicked were punished with unmerciful confusion, Bolin stumbled up the ladder and unlatched the steel portal.

Out came a powerful musk of BO. He entered a dank room of dilapidated consoles and cracked concrete walls, the floor coated with white-ish goo. Moisture collected on the ceiling and hung in fruit-like beads until, swelling to ripeness, they fell to the sticky floor with a plop

At the centre of the room an old man was sitting, cross-kneed and sporting a bedraggled bow tie. He wore a polka-dot jumper on which red dots merged with blue, and blue with green, in patterns repeated across the damp fabric like a multi-coloured bacterial infection. The effect was hypnotic.

"Quickly, then." snapped the old man. "Close it before... oh, too late."

The massive bird-creature had shouldered in behind Bolin, spreading its feathers and eyeing the room petulantly. With a wing it pulled the door shut, then defecated in triumph. It was the same white goo that covered the floor, and now both of

Bolin's feet.

"You'll be wanting to meet the ghost, I expect." The old man sighed, wrinkling his nose. "He'll be along any minute."

I am in Dura. I must not succumb to these visions.

Bolin found his voice: "Stay back, you agents of the nameless god."

Bemused silence followed this assessment. "I've been called worse." the old man ventured. "But I prefer 'Dr Lank'."

"How many arms does the nameless god have?" boomed a woman's voice from nowhere. Now it was Bolin's turn to look baffled. "How many?" he repeated. "Um..."

"Never mind, just a thought." the sourceless voice said. "Sorry, Dr Lank."

This was too much for Bolin. His mission was still clear in his mind, but he had lost control of it. Dura was close to consuming him.

He unzipped the front of his wingsuit to show the powerful explosives covering his entire upper body, and the detonator back in his hand.

"See this? I'm in charge here. Take me back to the drill pipe or I'll blow you to pieces. You can't fool me."

The old man laughed bitterly: a brittle, hacking sound. "What good will that do? You can't die here, you know. Just ask Roche."

The man-sized bird raised a wing in mock salute. "Squawk." it said ruefully.

Dr Lank's grey eyes had not left the explosive vest. "Heaven forbid we should be put out of our misery." he said dully. "No food or water for 600 days. God I miss TV.

The solitude here is its own nightmare, on top of all the madness in the air. No, whichever way you slice it, young man, we are doomed, doomed to remain in this hell forever. By all means send us to kingdom come. You might as well try."

"*You are being gloomy again, Erton.*" The disembodied voice chided. "*You know it hurts me when you say that. I think you are trying to hurt me, when you know I have done my best to keep you safe.*" Erton mouthed along with the next words: "*You'll die out there.*"

Erton Lank squinted at the sky through the door's unclean window. "The ghost'll be arriving now. Don't expect them to make sense, they say the same nonsense every time they appear. Can't make their phrases into a conversation, and I've tried." he groused.

"I reckon they've been waiting for someone." voiced the mysterious other.

Bolin found a mental path through the bombardment. "Then this ghost works for the nameless god!"

Lank said, "Possibly. If anyone's working for a god, it's them. Probably best not to meet them with explosives on, though. Leave them here before you meet the ghost."

Bolin only looked at him coldly.

"I mean it. Leave them out here. I'm not likely to detonate them myself, despite my gloominess before."

Curiosity made Bolin concede and strip off his explosive burden. To give an envoy of the nameless god a piece of his mind was worth the small delay. Halfway through

telling the old man what would happen if he tampered with it, namely that it was on a hair-trigger, Bolin was interrupted by a voice from behind a door bearing the sign for a unisex toilet.

The voice cried, "Jump! I can't lose you again."

Lank gave Bolin an encouraging smile. "Don't worry. They always do that. You can go in."

Bolin swallowed and strode towards the doghouse's en suite cubicle. Inside the small, white space a figure had appeared. It wore a Frankenstein blend of torn clothing, but the eyes struck Bolin first. They were dazzlingly urgent, almost enough to distract Bolin from counting their limbs. Almost.

It was an agent of the nameless god, no doubt about it. No natural-born man could count Bolin's age on his fingers.

The would-be bomber sat on the toilet lid. "You caused my father's death." Bolin said.

"Believe me, I'm as much a subject of this phenomenon as you are, Bolin," the ghost rejoined, their voice both passionate and weary. "But we serve it consciously, even if we have no control over what it does. I am sorry it affected your father."

"How do you know my name? Who are you?" Bolin snarled.

"That's a tough question. Once I was two people." the ghost said equably. "One was quite powerful, the other an acolyte or translator. Now we exist only to ensure the delivery of the Message."

The crazy situation still wasn't enough to stop Bolin's hackles raising at the tainted

last word. "So you do serve the nameless god." he cried.

"Perhaps." The ghost shrugged. With four shoulders, the dismissal of the question couldn't have been grander.

"And this whole thing, this zone, all this is the Message."

The ghost gestured widely. "This world, yes, and all the life on it. And it is finally ready to be heard."

Bolin snarled, suddenly back in control. "You want me to beg but I won't. I don't care what the nameless god's Message is. Your missive to humanity can hang. Nothing is worth the murder of my father. It should be destroyed, and I intend to do the job myself."

"I can't stop you." replied the ghost. "But what on earth made you think the Message was for humanity?"

The dialogue was interrupted by the intangible feeling of being observed. From the cubicle walls came Iris' voice, solemnly fascinated.

"So you know what the Message is, and who it's for?"

"This universe has no secrets from us." the ghost replied gloomily. "Not anymore. Oh, don't envy us. Most of it isn't worth knowing. A few surprises. The search for a fundamental bedrock of forces and fields has certainly led your scientists down the garden path. But there's nothing I can do about that. it's a terrible curse to exist both inside and throughout the universe, unable to change a thing, not even the words of this conversation. But that's the human in us talking. Suffice to say you are serving an

almighty purpose in which both of you have already succeeded.”

Bolin shook his head, retraining focus on his mission. “Can it be destroyed?” he demanded.

“By all means.” the ghost replied.

The back wall seemed to bulge and creak. Iris’ voice broke in furiously.

“So that’s it. Both of you want to destroy something you don’t understand!”

“I understand it.” the ghost said tiredly. “It needs to end. All of it. A bomb should do the trick.”

Bolin had followed this, barely. “Then why did you send that massive bird to stop me sticking a bomb down its throat?”

The ghost smiled sadly. Two sad smiles on the same face.

“Because you would have missed.”

A pause followed. Then Bolin’s hand instinctively touched his chest, where his bomb vest was no longer.

Dr Lank thought himself a man of adventure. It was in this spirit that he had applied to lead the DH607-1 drilling expedition - that, and the small possibility of fame. However, he did not like the cold and overvalued, perhaps, his creature comforts. But he was a man of adventure insofar as he had never married and much preferred to give, rather than receive, motivation.

Yet nearly three years inside Iris had intensified his need for action beyond any such qualms. Desperation, that was probably it. Why else was he about to...?

Don’t think about it. Not the freezing

green froth, nor the lopers within it, nor the five kilos of explosives in a waterproof bag he held in his teeth. He scaled the ladder to green-sea-level rapidly. He wouldn’t get a second chance.

He undressed awkwardly in the freezing wind, hung his clothes on the rungs. To his surprise, when he dropped off the ladder he did not plunge through the algae. It was dense and spongy and supported him like a sodden mattress.

Emboldened, he took off across the knee-deep slime, stumbling often but making fast progress. The air was so fresh he gulped it like lemonade. He could see the drill pipe five hundred metres away, poking through the rolling swamp like a nail through carpet.

All that waylaid him, besides the murky, tangled surface, was the fear of any minute hearing Iris’ mighty voice, then the great hook of her poised crane swiping him off the surface like a lizard’s tongue. For the adventurer was, at heart, terrified of risk. He was driven only by the pent-up horror of his situation, to which the bomb he clutched might put an end.

The pipe was now a hundred, now fifty, now twenty metres from his clumsy feet. The cold slime wobbled and churned, but never broke.

Suddenly he felt the downdraught of massive wings. Roche materialised, perching on the ooze between him and the pipe-mouth, eyeing him with his snowball head aslant. His landing sent a tremor through the slime.

“Squawk.”

Dr Lank begged, "Please, Roche. What other choice is there?" He shook the waterproof bag. "We're both trapped: This could free us. I'm scared too but... you understand?"

Roche said, "Squawk." His webbed feet shifted anxiously, causing sluggish ripples.

"I led this expedition." Lank said, stepping nearer his transformed colleague. "I'm responsible. I have to try to end it."

Before the bird could respond, a metallic howl filled the audible arena. Lank's blood turned instantly to ice. Wings of lopers preceded the mighty rig in motion towards him, tearing through the green carpet and thumping their ears with its harmonious roar. Lank struggled anew across the breaking surface, now traipsing, now swimming, battered by cold and the pain-barriers of age.



“Squawk.”

Roche had leapt off the shredding green. He hovered briefly, watching Lank struggle desperately towards the pipe. Something passed across his eyes that was denied expression by his stiff, snowy face.

As a final gesture of aloofness, the gull rose and sailed across the sun. He disappeared in its light. *If this spells the end, so be it*, Lank inferred. Roche’s human brain and bird brain were at last in accord: they wanted no part in what happened next.

Lank lunged and grasped the pipe, Iris still some distance behind, her yellow-painted hook swinging out ahead like a bullwhip. Her sky-shaking cry, re-tuned by the harmonic field, might have been sorrow in another key: the kind of raw woe that gets mistranslated as anger. But guilt did not stop Lank’s clumsy hands from stuffing the bag into the pipe’s maw and raising the detonator, like a protective relic, into the white sky.

The mighty rig plunged to a halt, sending forth waves that left Lank gasping and clinging to the pipe. The huge yellow hook swung within a metre of his chest.

“I’m sorry, Iris!” he cried.

The rig made no sound, letting the hook slow to a dangle. The algae around her started to recohere. Silent seconds passed.

Iris strained till every filament creaked, but no tears could be released. She was denied even that.

The crane drooped tiredly, the derrick slowly folded like a tape measure stretched

too far. She would advance no further.

The echoes of the explosives’ descent had time to fade.

“I’m sorry,” Lank repeated. Then, realising the truth of his words as they left him, he said: “I love you, Iris. I miss you so much. If there is a way to reverse what has been done to us I must try. Please forgive me.”

Like Roche, the rig could make no expression. The waves were now calm. The silence stripped the Perimetre’s harmony of its power.

By slow degrees, Iris turned her back on Lank. The rig began to wade in tired strides towards the horizon, towards the open, unaffected blue.

Dr Lank hung his head and pressed the detonator.

The enormous, echoing boom took a full minute to travel up the pipe and reach the ears of the retreating rig and her habitants.

Dr Lank was vapourised by the first shockwave, too fast to express either pain or relief - although, in his atomised heart, he felt both. The long expedition was over.

Bolin and the ghost had the luxury of hearing the end before it came. Inside Iris was an atmosphere of stoic acceptance. The certainty came not so much from the boom as from the dreamy smile on the ghost’s face.

Joy succeeds a job well done. Multiplied by aeons, the result is ecstasy.

“I think I’m ready to let you go now.” the ghost said to themselves.

They did not know which of them had voiced the thought, but their sincerity was equal. In a blissful beat the entrepreneur and the translator were freed from billions of years of abstract repetition. The true gift of free will is ignorance - at long last they deserved to know nothing of the almighty purpose of their existence. Bolin watched them shimmer into grateful ash.

“Don’t worry,” whispered the air where they had been. “You will see him again.”

Bolin’s dismay at losing his chance for revenge against the nameless god was still ripe. Thus he barely noticed his own body vanish in a spray of atoms. Unexpectedly, at the moment of his death, he was distracted by a smell: Tamarisk, and a tinge of ash...

Father.

It was all he’d ever wanted.

The last to perish was the rig herself. Iris felt physical pain, but that was nothing new. Her deck was cracked by months of movement, her concrete limbs were brutalised from wading through miles-deep sea. In the minute after Erton Lank died, she realised she felt very little besides those material strains.

He had been fragile, self-serving, and so she had protected him. It felt good to let that burden go. No, it wasn’t Lank she had served - nor, like Lank, herself. She had served the rig, and the expedition, and had kept Lank aboard so the latter could continue. The rest of them had abandoned it. Not Iris. But now her duty was over.

It is hard for an oil rig to smile, but she managed it.

The blast arrived then, painless and

removing pain. It felt like a reward.

*

Observers in space might have had the best view of what followed. With powerful telescopes they would have seen the two Russian warships erupting into scrap metal, the widespread fizz as the Barents Sea was abruptly purged of life, and the cloud-eating waves that resulted from the displacement.

They would have seen the shockwave engulf the planet from the Perimetre outward, turning life to dust and leaving mountains unharmed, evaporating cities, vanishing forests, stripping all green land to bare earth, ice or in some cases magma: returning the globe to lifeless order. From a strictly aesthetic point of view, this apocalypse was satisfying to watch. Order from chaos, a neat sweep. The trade-tools disappearing now the work is done.

There is a spectrum of light; there is also a spectrum of sound. Towards one end of the latter spectrum is a kind of sound that needs very little matter to carry it, but a lot of energy. The large-scale elimination of life makes a lot of energy available very suddenly. Thus, even a very distant eavesdropper would be able to make out a gathering susurrus around the point that was once Lank’s Perimetre.

At a critical point, the whisper spurted into space. It traveled in a focused beam, faster than the most energised shred of matter. It was, and is, the fastest language in the universe.

Neatly it avoids other such beams, arriving uncontaminated at a preordained point close to the mirrored wall at the edge

of the cosmos. Its receiver parses its subtleties with absolute interest. The message is terse and vague, but supreme etiquette demands an answer.

This Almighty corrals the unspent energy and places it within a world of the desired tone. It populates the world and catalyses it with a simple chronolinguistic loop, as one might fashion a magnet with a loop of electrical current. In the blink of a divine eye, the response is written. The lights on that world go out as one: the response is sent.

Across the universe, civilisations rise and vanish, projecting sense from Almighty to Almighty like a network of prodigious neurons. Compared to most, the language of this response lacks nuance, its civilisation of origin barely beyond the stage of mating calls and screams. It has only enough refinement to be understood by the original sender.

I'm sorry, can you repeat that? ❖

END TRANSMISSION

