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You Get What You Pay For
By Patrick Thomas

They say some people are born stupid, while others end up that way, but there are those who actually seem to make a choice to become stupid by refusing to learn from their mistakes. Paulie Enuz fell in the later category.

Paulie was a small cog in the big machine known as organized crime. He was on his way up the criminal ladder, due not so much to savvy, but having an uncle high up in the hierarchy and an innate ability to not mind hurting other people. Still that particular ladder is difficult to climb, often taking years for each rung. Paulie had many faults and impatience was one of them, so when he heard that a particular section of prime Manhattan real estate was not laid claim to by any protection racket, he was led by the nose by another one of his faults. Greed.

The first thing he did was ask his uncle about it.
'Is it true?'
'Yes.'
'Why? Are they family businesses?'
'No.'

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR
Dear Readers,
I am thrilled by the opportunity to bring you to the second issue of Padwolf Presents. For those of you who aren't familiar with Padwolf Publishing we are a speculative fiction publisher specializing in science fiction and fantasy that has been around since 1997 when we published our first titles..
Padwolf Presents showcases original stories from four of our most vibrant and exciting worlds.
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“Friends of family of high ranked cops or politicians?”

“No.”

“Then why is no one earning from these people?”

Uncharacteristically, his uncle was evasive. “We do not talk about it. It has been this way since prohibition.”

“Is it forbidden?”

“No, but advised strongly against. If one were to attempt to work that area, it would have to be as an independent. No mention of other affiliations would be permitted, nor should help be expected.”

“So someone, such as myself, would be allowed to work there, alone. Without offending.”

And because Paulie’s uncle, despite their familial bond, was not terribly fond of his nephew he answered, “As long as no mention was made of family connections, yes.”

Paulie didn’t pause to think that there might be a reason and thus began his career in the extortion racket began.

It may have been the most unfortunate choice he made in his life.

The area he choose was frequented by multiple rainbow sightings and home to Bulfinche’s Pub, which in turn was the favorite watering hole of the divine, mystic, and legendary. This information might have helped Paulie had he cared enough to do any real reconnaissance.

Deciding the best way to approach his new enterprise was to case the neighborhood, he walked the streets. Unfortunately for him, he still had the same problem as a bad doctor-lack of patience.

He saw a homeless woman pushing a shopping cart full to the brim with what he would describe as junk. Her clothing looked like a drunk designer had gotten rid of fifty years worth of remnants by throwing them in a blender and pulling out the ensemble while blindfolded. From his vast knowledge of how the world worked, he assumed all homeless panhandled. That meant they were earning on what he now considered his turf. Even the homeless had to pay their fair share and this woman was older, therefore weak and helpless. Paulie figured her for a good warm up before he started on the area businesses.

It was obvious he didn’t know Rebecca or he would never have accosted the Mother of the Streets.

“Yo granny, c’mere,” said Paulie, standing near an alley.

Rebecca stared right at the wannabe tough guy and the steel in her gaze caught him off guard. He flinched before he could stop himself.

“Are you referring to me, cause I ain’t your granny. I’d know if anything as ugly as you was related to me,” said Rebecca.

“What are you doing here?” asked Paulie, as it dawned on him that maybe she might not be panhandling. His mind was working and he realized he could offer the businesses another service. Homeless had to be bad for business, so as part of his fee he’d offer to keep the riff raff away.

“None of your concern,” said Rebecca, turning and walking away.

This infuriated Paulie, with his puffed up sense of importance. “Nobody walks away from me. I’m talking to you.” He grabbed Rebecca’s arm and that’s where things started to go awry. Faster than he could follow, his wrist was bent back and something cold was pressed up against his throat. When he managed to look down, he saw a knife next to his jugular. A large knife and it looked very sharp.

“Tired of breathing are you? What do you think *you’re* doing here?” asked Rebecca.

Despite thinking of himself as a tough guy, Paulie felt his knees going weak. “I’m in charge of the protection racket around here.”

Rebecca blinked as if she hadn’t heard right, then she laughed. Once. “Just starting are you?”

“First day,” admitted Paulie.

Rebecca smiled and pulled her knife away. “You just saved your life.”

“You know you’d be in trouble for messing with me.”

“Hardly. It’ll be more entertainment than I’ve had in ages to watch you try to collect money in this neighborhood. I may even invest in some day old popcorn from the theater and sit and watch.”

“Listen you got lucky, but I want you off my streets. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t ever come back,” said Paulie.

The wannabe extortionist blinked and when his eyes opened, he found himself face down on the sidewalk, his chin bleeding.

“All these streets are mine, Paulie.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I know many things. It would do you well to remember that. I will be watching and laughing,” said Rebecca, pushing her cart across the street where she pulled out a director’s chair that had seen better days and planted herself in it.

Paulie was faced with a dilemma. The bag lady had gotten the best of him two times. Macho pride and a false ideal of honor demanded he avenge the dual insults. The part of his brain that handled survival pointed out that a third confrontation would likely end the same as the first two, but he might not get off as easily.

Choosing to ignore the Mother of the Streets, he told himself he’d deal with her another time. More quietly, he made a mental note to simply try to forget all about it.

Paulie had rushed in to confront Rebecca without much thought or planning. Someone else might start drawing conclusions between what little he had learned from his uncle, but Paulie was a few crayons shy of a full box so he plunged ahead.

Looking up, he saw the steeple for Our Lady of the Lake parish. He knew most New York City churches took in five figures in their weekly collections, but he was raised Roman Catholic. Taking from a church, while not exactly wrong in his mind, wasn’t quite right. Even though he was an independent, he knew that if his uncle heard about him hitting a church, he would send some of the boys to hit him repeatedly.

At the far corner, he saw a rainbow umbrella above a hot dog cart. He looked around at the other visible corners and saw no other food carts. The mayor’s office had cleared vendors off of many streets in recent years, limiting where they could hock their wares. He wasn’t sure if these streets were off limits, but he knew it was odd for there to be only one of these guys in an area.

Again he didn’t cross reference this information with any other info he had, so again he plowed ahead without forethought or plan.

Paulie got into the line at the cart, then decided he shouldn’t have to wait in line with the regular people so he gorillaed his way to the front.

The other customers complained in typical New York fashion, varying from “Hey!” to casting aspersions on his parentage and threatening to smash their footwear into his buttocks.

He in turn replied, “Shut up!”

Edgar Tonic, the gentleman handing out the frankfurters, was not the most soft spoken or easy going of men. He didn’t suffer fools or even wisecracking bartenders gladly.

“You may not have noticed, but there’s a line,” said Edgar. “Get to the back of it.”

“You better be careful. You don’t know who you’re talking to,” said Paulie in his most intimidating manner.

Edgar failed to be impressed. “Don’t care either. Back of the line or no hot dog for you.”

“I don’t want your stinking tube of rat meat,” said Paulie.

Edgar turned to his bun warmer and spoke. “Did you give away our secret recipe?”

A voice from the bun warmer answered him. “It was a secret?”

“You think people want to know what’s in hot dogs? Tommy, we’d lose customers,” said Edgar.

“Put some bells around their necks and you’ll be able to find them,” said the voice.

The other customers started to chuckle at the give and take between Tommy and Edgar. Paulie glared back, unsure if the laughter was directed at him.

“You a ventriloquist or something?” asked Paulie.

“He’s more of the dummy,” answered Tommy.

“Only a dummy would go into business with someone as annoying as you,” said Edgar. Motioning to the man behind Paulie, Edgar said, “What can I get you?”

As the order was being filled, Paulie became increasingly more upset at being ignored. “I have some important business to discuss with you.”

“Fine. Get to the back of the line. When you get to the front, you can talk. Next...”

Paulie first instinct was to hit, but experience had taught him to suppress that instinct when in front of a large number of witnesses. Reluctantly, he moved to the back of the line which was several people longer now.

A few minutes later, he was back at the front.

“Oh yes, the winner of the rude customer of the day award,” said Edgar. “What can I get you?”

“You can get me money,” said Paulie.

“Rude and not terribly bright. That’s not how this type of transaction works. You give me money, I give you a hot dog, a pretzel or maybe a soda. I even have knishes. It’s not terribly complicated. I’m sure if you keep focused, you’d get through it rather painlessly,” said Edgar.

“But you won’t if you keep jerking me around, old man,” said Paulie.

“Who you calling old?” asked Edgar.

“I’m pretty sure it was you, Edgar,” said Tommy’s disembodied voice. “You old man you.”

“You’re much older than me. You were born in what? 1895?”

“1896 actually, but I’m much better preserved than you,” said Tommy.

“Well, technically you’re dead,” said Edgar.

“And if you don’t stop talking to yourself, you’ll be dead,” said Paulie.

“I guess you’re trying for the rudest customer of the month award,” said Edgar.

“You shouldn’t try so hard to influence the judges when it’s so much easier to just bribe us,” said Tommy.

“I’m in charge of the neighborhood now. You want to do business here, you pay me,” said Paulie.

“You honestly think we’re going to pay you protection money? Slow and nuts,” said Edgar. “Very sad.”

“You pay me or you or your cart may have an accident,” said Paulie. “And stop making like there’s someone else in there. You’re just throwing your voice.”

“Edgar’s been working out for months now. Before his voice used to throw him around,” came the voice from the bun warmer.

“Tommy, it’s official. You’ve been spending too much time with Murphy,” said Edgar.

“Official? Darn. We had been trying so hard to keep it quiet,” said Tommy. “We didn’t want people to talk.”

“Yeah, the two of you wanted the entire talking market to yourselves,” said Edgar.

“Didn’t you hear me? I said either you pay me or...”

“Yeah, we heard you, but we ain’t worried. We have insurance,” said Edgar.

Paulie blinked. Had someone beaten him to the gold at the end of his imagined rainbow? “No, insurance is what I’m offering you. Ain’t nobody else’s insurance better than what I’m offering you.”

“Sure there is,” Edgar said.

“What kind of insurance is that?” demanded Paulie.

“Jinn insurance,” answered Edgar, looking up and down the block. “You’ll wish you never tried this, but your wishes don’t count. You’re clear Tommy.”

“What? You trying to make like your little friend is gonna come out that cart and get me?” mocked Paulie.

“Let me introduce you to my little friend,” said Edgar with a smile.

“You see, I’m not a voice. Scientists worked hard to develop the ultimate mechanical killing machine, designed with the utmost in urban camouflage capabilities. The supreme assassins, able to blend in to their surroundings and strike and disappear instantly. The only problem is the AI, that’s artificial intelligence to you, in the prototype decided it wanted to be free. So I ran away and the government has been chasing me ever since. I’ve tried to keep a low profile, get along peacefully, but doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten what I was programmed to do—kill,” said the genie in the bun warmer, as he used his powers to cause the cart to transform into a cross between a hot dog cart and a killer robot. The most unusual feature was that the hybrid had silver pinstripes and the umbrella now resembled a fedora, Tommy’s typical mode of dress.

The cartbot reared up on its back wheels while its front wheels transformed into arms that ended in high tech looking guns.

Paulie looked up into metallic eyes made from the bottoms of soda cans and froze. Edgar had to cover his mouth to keep from giggling.

“I will give you the chance that those who built me never did. You can have a head start. I’ll give you to ten before I start shooting.” Tommy started counting. By three Paulie was sprinting down the street. At ten, Tommy started shooting, but what came out weren’t bullets, it was hot dogs. One pegged Paulie in the back of the head, another in the back of the knee, causing him to stumble.

“Who’s going to pay for those?” asked Edgar, but he was chuckling.

“Take it out of my share,” said Tommy.

As they spoke, Paulie only picked up more speed as he sped into the distance.

I heard both stories later that night when Rebecca, Edgar, and Tommy came in to Bulfinche’s Pub and told us what happened.

Tommy’s cartbot act had most of us laughing so hard we had to hold our sides.

Even the boss laughed so hard, that he wipe a tear from his eye. “This happens every decade or so. I wish I could have seen it,” said Paddy.

“Looks like you’re about to get your wish,” said Tommy. Paddy gave him a puzzled glance. Tommy could grant certain wishes, but not in Bulfinche’s because magic, curses and the like didn’t work in the bar. The boss could grant a dispensation, but he hadn’t given one to Tommy so he was confused as to how the jinn could be granting his wish.

From his seat in the corner, Tommy jerked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing at the man coming in the door. “That’s the guy.”

Edgar and Rebecca moved toward the back of the bar to blend into the shadows. If Paulie spotted them, he might rabbit.

“Persistent, ye have to give him that,” said Paddy.

“But not anything else,” I said.

“Exactly, Murphy,” said the boss.

“Good evening, sir and welcome to Bulfinche’s Pub. What can I get for ye? For ye first visit, the first drink is on the house,” said Paddy with a smile.

“Actually, all my drinks are going to be free from now on,” said Paulie.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t allow customers to bring in outside drinks. It understandably cuts down on business,” said Paddy.

“I’m all about business, but you misunderstand. You’ll be supplying my drinks,” said Paulie.

“Why, pray tell would I be doing that?” asked Paddy.

“Because I’ll be running things in this neighborhood from now on,” said Paulie.

Dionysus from his bartending station chimed in. “President of a joggers’ club are you? Sorry, but

I’m not interested. I might loose my figure if I did that.” Dion patted his wine belly as he spoke.

“I ain’t talking about jogging, you fat idiot,” said Paulie.

“You think I’m fat?” The god of wine, women, and orgies turned to Paddy. “Do you think I’m fat?”

“To be honest, I’ve always considered ye more tubby than fat,” said Paddy.

Dion let out a sigh. “Tubby I can live with.”

“He also called ye an idiot,” said Paddy.

“But so have you and if you said it, I knew it could be true,” said Dion.

“What is it with people ignoring me today and talking like I’m not here?” shouted Paulie.

“Did anybody else hear that voice?” I said.

“The voices bothering you again, Murphy?” asked Tommy. Paulie started at the familiar voice, but relaxed when all he saw was Tommy in his spats, hat and pinstripes instead of a killer cartbot.

“I guess. They keep telling me to cut you off, I tell them no,” I said.

“That settles it then. The voices are crazy, but you are perfectly sane,” said Tommy motioning me to refill his glass.

“I wouldn’t go that far about Murphy,” said Paddy.

“True. I do work here,” I said.

“If ye call what you do work,” said Paddy.

“Enough!” screamed Paulie. “I’ve had a really bad day and you people are not helping. This is simple. I’m offering you protection. You either pay me ten percent of your gross...”

“Whose gross exactly?” I asked.

“I kind of think he’s gross,” said Tommy.

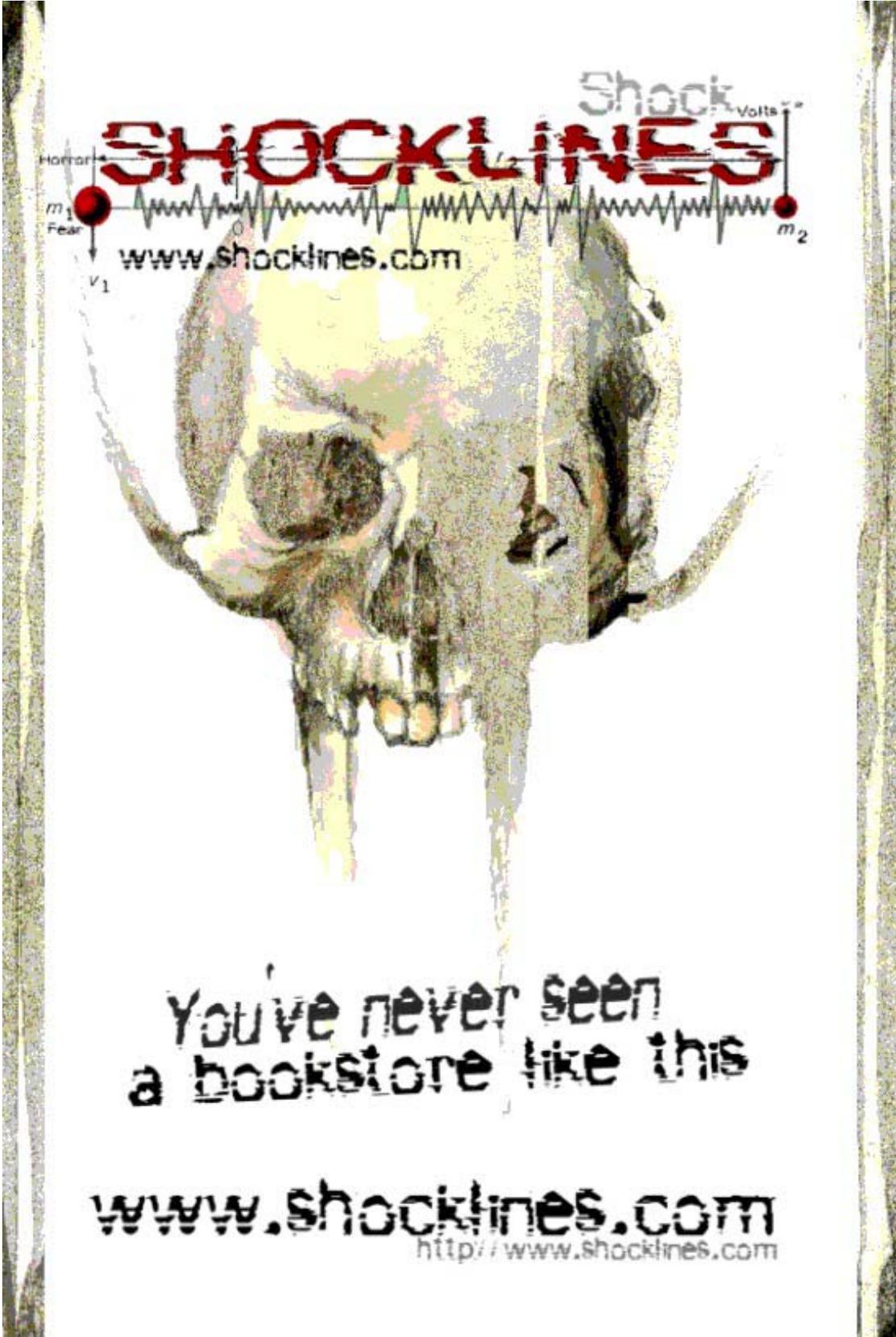
“You two shut up. Either I get my money or this place and all of you may meet with an unfortunate accident,” growled Paulie.

“You know, I met with an unfortunate accident once. I gave him ten dollars and a sandwich,” I said.

Paulie turned and pointed his index finger at me. “You are really getting on my nerves.”

“Now ye know what the rest of us have to put up with on a daily basis. Now if ye could offer us a way to make Murphy less annoying, that’s something I might be willing to pay for,” said Paddy.

“I’d chip in,” said Tommy.



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The advertisement features a central image of a human skull with a jagged ECG line superimposed over it. The skull is rendered in a dark, textured style. The ECG line is black and has two red circular markers labeled 'm<sub>1</sub>' and 'm<sub>2</sub>'. To the left of 'm<sub>1</sub>' is the word 'Horror' and 'Fear' with a downward arrow. To the right of 'm<sub>2</sub>' is the word 'Shock' and 'Volts' with an upward arrow. The word 'SHOCKLINES' is written in large, bold, red, distressed letters across the top of the skull. Below the skull, the text 'You've never seen a bookstore like this' is written in a black, typewriter-style font. At the bottom, the website 'www.shocklines.com' is repeated twice, with the second instance including the full URL 'http://www.shocklines.com'. The entire advertisement is framed by a thin black border.

“Me too,” said Dion.

“It’s great to be loved,” I said.

“How would you know?” asked Hermes who had been quietly sitting at a table and watching things unfold.

“Don’t you understand? I’m going to cause an accident?” yelled Paulie.

Fred, our bus-satyr, who still didn’t have a total grasp of the English language, joined in. “Our rest rooms are in the back. Or do you need an adult diaper?”

“How stupid are you people?” screamed Paulie.

“I was just going to ask you the same thing,” asked Hercules, stepping away from his post near the door.

Paulie spoke before he turned. “That’s it. I’m going to kick some as…” Once his rotation was complete he was confronted with the sheer physical presence of our bouncer, perhaps the most famous hero of legend. Face to face with an unhappy Herc, Paulie temporally lost the power of speech.

“Any kicking that is going to be done here is going to be gone by me,” said Herc, who moved right up into Paulie’s face. “So is there going to be any kicking?”

“Um… yes, I mean no.”

“Now about these accidents. I’m in charge of security here and I should be informed, wouldn’t you say?”

“Of course, but I was just playing,” said Paulie.

“Playing? Like a game?” asked Herc, holding back a smirk.

“Exactly. A game.”

“I love games. You know what one of my favorite games is?” asked Herc.

“Monopoly?” offered Paulie.

“Naw, that’s Paddy’s favorite,” I said. The boss makes Trump look like an amateur.

“Tis true. I love being the car piece,” said Paddy.

“My game is catch.” Hercules looked at the boss. Paddy nodded his dispensation, allowing Herc to use his strength. The boss then nodded at Judah Macabee, a seven foot tall golem. “Let me demonstrate.”

Herc picked Paulie up by the back of his belt and lifted him up off the floor, then hefted him

from one hand to the other. The would be extortionist whimpered as Herc tossed him to Judah.

The golem caught him with both hands and held him at arms length.

“Could you put me down?” asked Paulie meekly.

Mute by nature, Judah just smiled and shook his head.

“Would it help if I said please?”

Judah shook his head, which is when Manta stuck his head around Judah’s neck and gave him a Bronx cheer. Of course, the fact that Manta was a baby earth dragon added to the effect greatly. Paulie squirmed and tried to get away, but Judah’s grip was too strong. Instead Judah tossed him back to Herc.

The pair kept a volley going for several minutes. I started a sing-a-long of *He flies through the air with the greatest of ease*, which Paulie didn’t seem to appreciate for some reason.

After the third time Paulie threw up, they stopped and put him down on his feet. Dizzy, he fell to the floor a second later.

“Kinda wobbly, ain’t he?” I said.

Paddy walked up and towered over the guy, an act only made possible by Paulie’s supine position.

“So ye want me to pay ye to not do stuff to me?” said Paddy.

“I did, but I think I’m willing to not do stuff to you for free, if I could just leave,” pleaded Paulie.

“I won’t hear of it. As a matter of fact, I’m actually willing to give ye a chance to get some of my money,” said Paddy.

“That’s really not necessary.”

“But it is. Do ye play poker?” asked Paddy.

“A little.”

“Perfect. Of course, we play by house rules,” said Paddy, helping Paulie to his feet by the back of his collar and plopping him in an empty chair at a nearby table. The boss took the seat opposite him. “That means anything goes, as long as ye don’t get caught. Do ye understand?”

“I think so,” said Paulie.

“Excellent,” said Paddy as he deftly shuffled the deck. Cards flew at speeds Hermes would have envied as Paddy made them practically dance a jig. It was more like watching a puppet show than a shuffle.

“Would you like to cut the deck?” asked Paddy, placing the deck on the table between them. Paulie obliged and the massacre began.

Paddy won hand after hand, until he had cleaned Paulie out of every last cent he had on him. Paulie had what he considered an unbeatable hand—an Ace, King, Queen, Jack and Ten of clubs. So when Paddy raised, Paulie had no cash to match.

“I guess that means you’re out,” said Paddy.

“Wait,” said Paulie, throwing his keys on the table. “What about my car?” He told us the make and model. “I made the last payment six months ago. Book value is at least seven grand.”

Paddy made a face to express pondering. “I suppose, which means you raise. I match and raise again.”

“But you can’t. I don’t have anything left.”

“Ye should have called then.” The boss made a humming sound. “I suppose I could see me way clear to keeping ye in the game if ye put up every stitch of clothing as collateral.”

Paulie shrugged and smiled, confident in the outcome. There was several thousand dollars in the pot at this point. “Sure. Call.”

“Not so fast. The clothes need to be in the pot,” said Paddy.

“So you mean you want me to strip naked here?” asked Paulie.

“It’s not that I want to see ye in your all together. I’d just consider it a sign of good faith. After all, your clothes are worth only a fraction of the money I’m spotting ye.”

“Fine,” grumbled Paulie as he got into his birthday suit and piled everything into the pot. Embarrassed, but unshaken, he flipped his cards over. “Read them and weep. Royal flush.”

Paulie reached in to pull the winnings toward him, but Paddy said, “Not so fast.”

Paulie stared as the boss flipped his cards.

“Seven aces,” said Paddy.

“But that’s impossible! You’re cheating!”

“Hardly. I explained the house rules and ye said ye understood that anything went. Ye didn’t catch me, so I win.” The boss pulled the pot toward him.

“But that’s not fair,” whined Paulie.

“And taking money from those weaker than ye is?” asked Paddy.

“That’s different. That’s business,” said Paulie.

“I’m glad ye feel that way, because I too am a business man, so from now on, ye will be paying me fifty bucks a week for insurance from me,” said Paddy.

“That’s outrageous.”

“I’m glad ye think so. Just so ye know, the price will go up by exactly double anything you extort from others,” said Paddy.

“There’s no way you’d know if I did that,” said Paulie.

Paddy smiled. “I’d know. Now get out of me bar.”

“But I don’t have any clothes on.”

“So?”

“Give a guy a break. Give me one piece of my clothing back.”

Paddy shrugged. “Never let it be said I didn’t show mercy. Here,” said the boss, tossing him a sock.

“You got to be kidding me.” Paddy raised his eyebrows indicating he wasn’t. Paulie placed it strategically. “Could you at least spot me cab fare?”

“I think it may be more of a case of see spot run,” I said.

Rebecca and Edgar stepped from the shadows.

“I’d advise him to run very fast,” suggested the Mother of the Streets.

“I can see why he was envious of my hot dogs. There’s no way that sock will stay on his cocktail weenie,” said Edgar.

Paulie glared but took a step back.

“We could always ask Herc and Judah to give him a lift again,” I said.

He took another step back. “No thanks. Could somebody at least give me something for the subway.”

“Sure,” I said, picking up a subway token from a pile I keep at my station at the bar. I find them useful props for “token” of my affection or esteem comments. I tossed him one and he caught it with the hand not holding the sock.

“But the stations around here have switched over to the Metro Card and don’t take tokens anymore,” said Paulie.

“I know,” I said.

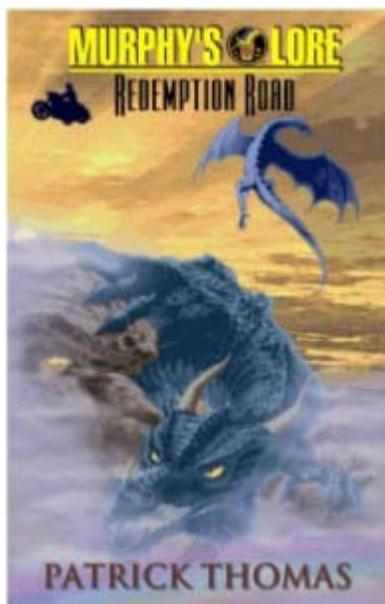
Cursing, Paulie left the bar. Paddy makes sure he pays his weekly premium, and it seems to have kept him clean. At last check, Paulie had left his former career and took a job in one of his uncle's legitimate businesses.

Of course, it may also have been because he lost all respect in his neighborhood the next day when Paddy and Herc went down to collect Paulie's car. They moved it to an open space on a corner and offered the people in the neighborhood a chance to hit it with a sledge hammer for five bucks. Paulie was thought of so highly, that there was a line down the block. Paddy gave Rebecca a free swing. Edgar bought one. Paulie's uncle paid for two. Even his mother spent her lotto money for the month.

In the end, everyone gets what they pay for and Paulie's going to end up paying for a long time.

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**Will the Norse god Loki give up his dark ways and his stolen freedom to save an entire race? Find out in *Murphy's Lore: Redemption Road*.**



## ***Bread Milk Eggs Gas***

**A Fix® Adventure**

**by Tony DiGerolamo**

Stacy Mahalamahatni was bad news from the moment I met her. One of those people born without the capacity to know when you were imposing or what the word "imposing" even meant. I had gone to the Quick n' Go she ran part time for her dad, hoping for nothing more than Tastee-Klair and \$5 worth of gas. Instead, I end up talking to Stacy for an hour, trying to remember why I am still standing there.

Oh, yeah. Stacy's a hot Indian chick. She had let me screw her a few of times, which just about sums up the emotional investment in that relationship. Mindy and I had a huge blow up a week before, then I run into Stacy and bam! I wasn't really looking for it, but never look a gift screw in the mouth. Mindy and I got back together a month later and I conveniently forgot Stacy's phone number, not that she cared. It all seemed like a good idea at the time, until today. Stacy once called me "Stud Muffin", these days it's just Fix.

"Fix, this is nothing for you," she said in disbelief. "A few phone calls. Maybe one car drive."

"Stacy, I do this for a living," I said as annoyed as possible. "If you're cousin is an illegal immigrant AND he's missing, we're talking two weeks minimum. Not to mention the fact that I don't speak Hindu and normally get paid a lot of money to do this crap."

"You would charge me?!" she countered, outraged. "How could you charge me, huh? Do you know what my family would do if they knew what we did?"

My mind reeled for a moment. The picture of Stacy telling her turbaned father the blow-by-blow details of our 3 afternoon rendezvous' at a Motel West, and the one time on her kitchen table, did not fill me with joy. Nor did the thought of her leaving uncomfortable messages at my parents' place and the office. Just what I need, another crazy broad in my life.

“All right, look,” I relented. “I’m not going out of my way and I’m not promising anything. I’ll poke around, but if real work comes up...”

I gestured as exasperated as possible, hoping she’d get the message.

“Good, good, you call me soon. Five dollars for gas.”

“Free gas, free pastry or no deal.”

“I would, but my father keeps an inventory. I give you employee discount.”

Ca-ching.

I drove to Mindy’s apartment, parked the car and mentally prepared myself. Mindy had this sixth sense when it came to me speaking to other women, especially ones that I had shagged within a year or two. I, of course, had to endure her endless prattle about her “ex’s”. It was perfectly fine for her to torture me with “David-the-investment-banker-who-banged-her-in-his-indoor-pool” or “Cory-the-professional-surfer-that-nailed-her-in-the-airplane-bathroom-enroute-to-Hawaii”.

However, if I even mentioned--- **mentioned**, say, how hot I thought Christina Aguilera was or how I’d like to find out if Britney’s were real--- If I just checked out a waitress or glanced in the direction of some sweet, bootilicious young thang on South Street--- Quite frankly, if I just stopped paying attention to Mindy and looked at anything female--- I was doomed to spend an evening hearing about what I jerk I was and working all night to get laid.

Taking a deep breath, I had put Stacy out of my Mindy--- I mean, mind and climbed the steps towards Mindy’s apartment. We were trying a “living together experiment”. Basically, we decided to spend two weeks together to see if it could become more permanent. At the end of it, we both vowed I would leave without any obligation, but I was already getting the sense that I would have to pay big time to extricate myself.

Not that I wouldn’t mind living with Mindy, but if I didn’t leave we wouldn’t have a control for the experiment, would we? My relationship with Mindy may raise and fall, but Science must endure!

“Hey, babe,” I smiled sniffing the air furtively. “Is that Kung Po Chicken I smell?”

“Yeah,” Mindy replied suspiciously as possible. “Why so late for dinner?”

Mindy was wearing this oversized sweatshirt I owned and, I was hoping, nothing underneath. She stirred her pork-fried rice and gave me this halfway smile.

“Traffic,” I said flatly.

“Traffic?”

“Mm-hm.”

She’s on to me.

“I got a surprise for you,” she grinned knowingly.

She tore away a dishtowel from her coffee table. Underneath was a freshly baked plate of chocolate chip cookies. Man, she really does want me to live here.

“Huh,” I gasped. “You made **me** cookies? Thank you so much.”

“I’d do anything for you, sweetie,” she cooed.

Uh, oh. I sense I’m being out-maneuvered here. Like she’s three moves into a chess game and I don’t even have my pieces out. Only one thing to do, go on the offensive.

I grabbed Mindy unexpectedly and kissed her as if it were the last time we’d ever see each other. She tensed up for a second in surprise then melted in my arms. My busy hands were everywhere and I soon realized my initial suspicions were correct...

Nuthin’ on underneath. Hee-hee.

A few hours later after some fabulous sex, delicious cookies and adequate Chinese food, I was sitting in front of Mindy’s PC in my underwear. She, of course, had an early day at the “Workplace of the Damned”, while I had a leisurely wake up call and could afford to surf the Net while she snoozed.

Stacy’s cousin name was unlikely to get any hits on the search engines, but this was the laziest and easiest way to find people. I didn’t want to go doing a lot work if it turned out the guy had his own website. Amazingly enough, Mahalamahatni got **two** hits! I added the first name “Sanji” and the hits go dumbed down to one.

It turns out Stacy’s cousin may have been lax on his citizenship papers, but he was hot to get laid. He’d registered himself on an Internet/Video Dating Service his picture and his email box came up immediately. This was too easy.

Opening Mindy’s desk drawer, I retrieved the insanely expensive digital camera I bought her for our anniversary. (It still had a dent in it from being

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thrown across the room. She wanted theater tickets.) Setting the flash on the lowest setting possible I crept into Mindy's room. I gingerly arranged the covers to hide her naughty bits and waited. Sure enough, she shifted her weight and made that sexy sleepy face I like. I snapped the picture and skulked back to the PC.

Uploading the image file, I clicked onto Sanji's email and attached the photo.

"Dear, Sanji," I wrote. "You are the most attractive man I have ever seen. Attached is my picture and as you can see, my bed is **very** lonely. Please email me back soon. Achingly yours, Mindy."

The next morning, some four hours later after I mumbled "goodbye" in my pillow to Mindy as she left for work, I sat in front of Mindy's computer again. I had installed an online Doom-type game that was too graphics intense for my own PC, hoping to get a few hours of quality time virtually sniping kids that had stayed home sick for school.

Unfortunately, we live in an age of ultra-instant communication. Sanji had already emailed me back and attached a revealing photo of himself in a speedo and one of those backward, red, Limp Bizcut baseball caps. I rolled my eyes, then agreed to a dinner date at a local Italian restaurant. He suggested the Garden Italiano, a big chain of McItalian food places that I wouldn't eat at even on fake dates. Fortunately, I steered him clear. At least when he found out I wasn't Mindy, he'd know not to eat at a G.I.

I shot back to the office and scooped up the mail. I was still getting threatening letters from the Iraqi government about how I had illegally entered and then left their angry little sand dune, but since I had no intention of returning there during this lifetime, I tossed the letters into a pile with the others. Last case. Long story.

By the time I had made it to the Quick n' Go, it was almost time for my date. I wanted to milk Stacy for any discount gas and snackage I could before I told her. When I pulled up, I noticed someone has spray painted "Thuge Life" on the side of the mart where the air pump sat and there was a local patrol car parked sideways across a two handicap spaces and a regular space. Solve one

crime, commit two more: that's the motto of the local police!

Unfortunate, the cops were there to talk to Stacy and her dad about Sanji, not the graffiti bandit. They had found Sanji's decomposed remains in a shallow grave behind an abandoned 99 cent store the county was demolishing to build a "much-needed" car wash.

Stacy was as demure and quiet as I have ever seen her. Grateful even, for my agreement to make an effort to find Sanji. Thankfully, her father didn't even know who I was, which means her threats were all crap anyway. In the back storeroom, I caught a glimpse of two of Stacy's relatives stacking boxes and looking somber. The one with the turban carefully handed a Hindu idol to the other in the silk scarf. I guess it was part of their funeral rites and I was feeling like I was intruding. The cop did not seem interested in my tenuous connection to Sanji, so I made some hasty condolences, then got in my car and left.

I thought it wise not to mention my impending date for my own convenience, but now I was left with a problem. Who the Hell was waiting for me at a fine local Italian restaurant? The cops had said Sanji had been in the ground for at least a week. Now I was really wishing I had just downloaded some obscure porn star's picture to that email, rather than have used Mindy's picture. God dammit Stacy, why'd you have to be so hot?

And that wasn't even my biggest problem. My biggest problem was that whoever had taken over Sanji's email account was expecting hot, sleepy Mindy, not fat, hungry Mark Mammon. This was going to require a unique series of manipulative moves that only a Peter Brady would attempt.

"You're taking **me** out to dinner?" Mindy bubbled happily on the phone.

"Of course, my angel. Can you meet me at Alonso's Ristorante at 7pm?" I said as casually as possible.

"Tch, oh, I was kind of in the mood for Tai, can't we---"

"No. It must be Alonso's at 7pm. I already have a table."

I detected a bit of bewilderment and frustration on her end of the line, but Mindy hadn't been taken

out in a while. I figured she'd ignore minimal weirdness in exchange for a night out. Like clockwork, she caved.

I staked out a spot in front of Alonso's at 6:30pm. Mindy was notoriously late for our dinner dates, so I figured I had a minimum of 30 minutes to pick out the weird lech I had accidentally turned on to my girlfriend. If I couldn't, all I had to do was parade Mindy around and whoever gave her a weird look, was probably the guy. However, sitting in the car, a thought occurred to me.

How the Hell did Sanji take the picture? If he was dead, that meant that photo had to have been lying around his place and the weirdo that stole his email had sent it. This wasn't making any sense at all. I decided to take a vial of the Stuff. Unfortunately, at that moment, Mindy decided to be early for our date.

She had, uncharacteristically, come straight from work, not bothering to stop at home to change. Checking her watch, she realized how early she had arrived. Backing under a corner behind a post where she thought no one could see her, she busted out a cigarette and fired up.

That sneaky bitch. She was supposed to quit. If I hadn't been telling her a stream of lies recently, I would've marched right up and chewed her out over it. I waited in hopes the weirdo would show and I could intercept him before he started a conversation with Miss "I-swear-I-stopped-six-months-ago".

At 6:50, I looked down at the clock in my car. I then noticed my CD case had come open during the ride and my precious CD's were in danger of being scratched. It only took a minute to place them back in the protective case, but the distraction was long enough for Sanji to walk right up to Mindy. I took a second to be shocked, then scrambled out of the car, while they had this conversation:

"Hello," smiled Sanji, dripping with anticipation.

Mindy mistook Sanji for a work-related client. She had met dozens of boring people in the text book publishing trade and most remembered her, but not vice versa. Additionally, she did not want it to get out that she was sneaking smokes, so she

took another quick drag, stamped out the butt and started searching her purse for gum.

"Hi," smiled Mindy, warmly, not noticing me several parking spaces away. "Uh, your name again was..."

Sanji was wearing sports jacket, open shirt and a gold chain. That combo never goes out of style (mainly because it was never **in** style to begin with). Mindy rightly assumed he was meeting someone for a date. Sanji reeked of cologne. He might as well have had an "I'm looking to get laid" sign over his head.

"Sanji Mahalamahatni. I liked your picture very much!"

Again, Mindy's brain filled in the blanks in its own way. She assumed he was talking about the picture from her company's website.

"Oh, that," she laughed lightly. "I hate that picture, I was so tired that day."

I was now running full throttle at them across the parking lot. Mindy popped some gum.

"How did you like **my** picture?" Sanji asked knowingly. "You like Limp Bizcut? Their music shreds!"

"Picture?" said Mindy bewildered, finally flagging the conversation.

Gasping and out of breath, I skidded to a halt in front of the duo.

"Hey, there she is," I breathed, kissing Mindy on the cheek and spinning her around.

"Huh? What? Okay, but---" Mindy managed to utter, while I quickly guided her inside the restaurant and closed the door behind her.

"Meet you at the table," I said, spinning around and intercepting the anxious Hindu. "Sanji! My man, let's walk and talk. I sent that email."

"You?! Oh," he said, disappointed. "I have never participated in a three-way before. Do I buy dinner or do we split?"

"Sorry, there's no three-way with me and Mindy...at least not with another guy. Your cousin, Stacy asked me to find you. They think you're dead, the cops found a body with your clerk shirt and name tag."

"My tag, but--- Oh, no!" he said realizing. "Hassan! I let him work my shift at the Quick n' Go."

"I'm sorry, man, but look--- I didn't tell the cops because I know your status here is a little

shaky, but you can't go disappearing until we sort this out. Here's my card, meet me in my office in three hours. I gotta go feed the girlfriend."

"Okay," he said, looking at the card. "Thank you, Fix. I meet you there tonight."

Sanji walked away and I nearly collided with Mindy at the doorway to the restaurant.

"You don't have reservation," she said suspiciously. "And who was that guy?"

I played it perfectly. I casually started to tell her, then shifted gears.

"Oh, that was--- Do I smell smoke on your breath?"

"You do not!" she insisted in her most outraged voice.

"I do, you'd better not be smoking 'cause---"

"Can we just eat, please?" she insisted, shifting gears and going back inside.

I stole a glance up to God, thanked Him and followed her back into Alonso's.

Mindy and I had a pleasant dinner, all things considered. She was more interested in pressuring me to share her place, than some weirdo that hit on her at a restaurant. Moving in with Mindy all sounded good on paper, but I didn't know if I could handle the overhead with the office rent. Same ol', same ol'.

Afterwards, it was almost impossible to ditch Mindy. After a night on the town, she was ready for some action and quite frankly, so was I. However, I begged off for a few hours, making up a story about a client. Unfortunately, I could tell I was digging a hole for myself. A paying client meant I had money, which meant I could easily afford to split her rent. Oh well, one crisis at time.

When I got to "Fix Central", the plaza was dark and the arcade next to my office had already closed. One of the juvenile delinquents that hangs out there had written "Fix Sux" in finger oil on my door. I figured I still had about 15 minutes before Sanji, so I decided to wrap this case up quickly. I took the Stuff.

I gagged and choked, while smoked billowed from nowhere. My eyes and mouth lit up like a glowing, green jack o' lantern and I was bombarded with visions of the past, present and future. I am 8 years old and I trash my bike playing "smash-up derby" with the kids in the

neighborhood. It's sometime in the future and I am diving for cover behind a hotel bar in Pittsburgh. It's last night and I am licking soy sauce out of Mindy's bellybutton. I hear the crackling of a fire, the mew of a cat and the screech of distant tires. I smell wine, mud and cheap crank. I taste ice water, soap and blood.

Then, it all comes into focus. I see Hassan in a hole. He's got marks around his neck like he was strangled. Then I see Sanji using the bottom of a soda liter bottom to fill the hole. No wonder he didn't dig deep.

The vision fades and I look up just in time to see Sanji pull up. I got a gun, but there was only one problem: The Stuff had made me 4 times as heavy. I could barely move and I could hear the gears in my office seat starting to give way. Throwing myself to my feet, I flopped forward and landed on my desk. The desk legs dug into the carpet, then punched through the floor. Fortunately, I hadn't turned on the lights and Sanji cautiously walked inside. I went on the offensive.

"Okay, Sanji!" I yelled. "I know you killed Hassan, the only thing I want to know now is why!"

"Why?" he smiled in anticipation. "I am a *thooge*."

I struggled and managed to look up at him. I couldn't believe a Hindu got that word wrong.

"It's pronounced *thuggee*, you moron. Any idiot who watches the History Channel can figure that out."

I started to push myself off the desk, but I heard a creek and suddenly my arms plunged through the cheap, Office Surplus desktop. Sanji didn't know what was going on with me, but he realized I was stuck somehow. He was holding a .22, but he put it away, took out a black bandana with Ying-Yang symbols and prepared to garrote me.

"The first time, it was an accident," explained the demented mini-mart clerk. "I was so mad at this boy who had stolen in the store."

Oh, great. He's had lots of practice.

"After I strangled him, I buried him in the back lot of the store. It was 4:30am, no one saw me. He had over \$500 in his wallet! That little drug dealing, punk! I do all this work and have nothing, while he---"

He put the bandana around my neck. This isn't looking good.

"My life changed after that. Kali made it change. I read about the *thuggees* on the Internet. Now I worship, I rob and I am happy. I bought a new VCR."

"Uh, that's all very nice, Sanji, but, two things. One: You're crazy. Two: It's DVD players, now, where you been, man?"

My last flip comment seemed to anger him and he lifted me up with some difficulty. I started to choke immediately. Looking at the mirror across the room, we made eye contact. I could see the real Sanji. Hopelessly Americanized, the Hindu was desperately capitalistic society of the New World Order. In the process, he discovered that he'd been deculturalized and stripped of soul. He wasn't a Hindu living in America, he was just another loser working in a mini-mart. Another ignorant American that didn't know Kali from Kaluha, he would cling to any shred of Indian culture he could access. Despair is a powerful motivator and it can make you do crazy things when you're making minimum wage.

I managed to shift my weight and throw him off-balance for a second, but it was no use. I had finally been hoisted by my own petard---Screwed by the Stuff. Just before I blacked out, someone moved out of the shadows and grabbed Sanji by the neck with a silk hanky. He bore a striking resemblance to one of Stacy's relatives from the Quick n' Go and said something in Hindu in a grim tone.

When I came to, it was the next morning. I gingerly pulled my face from the impression I had left in my desktop. Sanji and his "friend" were gone. I scrambled to my car and drove to the Quick N' Go. As I pulled up and got out of the car, Stacy had just finished saying goodbye to the man with the silk hanky. Me and Silk Hanky made eye contact and, although the Stuff didn't tell me, somehow I knew Sanji was buried in a nameless grave that wouldn't be found until the next millennium. I looked at Stacy.

"What the Hell?" I demanded. "Who's your uncle?"

"He's not my uncle, he just worked for my father," Stacy said innocently. "He quit today. I don't think he was who he said he was."

I looked up just in time to see a limousine pull up. Silk Hanky gave me one last look as if to say, "You will never know, Fix." My internal sound track played a few strains of a sitar. He got into the stretch and it pulled away. The word "thuge" on the side of the mini-mart had been corrected to read "thuggee".

"So," said Stacy in a voice that broadcast she was hot and bothered. "I have, uh, nothing to do now."

"That's nice," I smiled satisfactorily. "Why don't you pump my gas? I'm in a hurry."

Stacy's grin left her face faster than a boy band leaving the charts. She marched back into the mini-mart, fuming that I dissed her. It looked like I wouldn't be entering her Shangri-La anytime soon. For me, the exchange was all the reward I needed in payment anyway. I looked down at my crotch and muttered.

"This was all your fault."

---

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## **World Tree™: Sleeth Feast** by Bard Bloom

*To our daughter Dustweed,  
greetings.*

*We shall be at our townhouse on the  
14th of Thory. Please to join us for  
dinner. Also, please to bring a  
guest, perhaps one who is blue, and  
who is entangled with an Orren girl  
who changes her name frequently.*

My parents, polite to me for once, had sent me an invitation to dinner, spiced with an extra request. Court etiquette forbade them from asking for anyone by name or species, but allowed them to give an oblique hint. Their hint was rather more acute than it should have been: they wanted my roommate Sythyry, a Zi Ri dragonlet with very famous and very powerful grandparents.

"I rather hope you're busy on the night of the 14th, Sythyry, or too busy to dine with my parents," I said.

"Two days hence? I am, regrettably, quite free, though I could certainly concoct an urgent social engagement if you need. What tiny offense have your parents perpetrated upon you now, on top of the big one, Dustweed?"

"Oh, they just want you at dinner. I imagine they'll have some of Vheshrame city nobility over, and want to show off whatever social jewels they can find. To compensate for their anti-jewel and heir," I said.

"Oh, you're not *that* bad," said Sythyry, with more loyalty than accuracy. I am a both-female, one of those rare Herethroy born with characteristics of two of our three sexes, and as such wholly unacceptable in decent Herethroy society. I had had the ill grace to be born first, however, and my parents were stuck with me as their heir. Sythyry, who is of a very different species than Herethroy

(and a species of hermaphrodites at that), has never quite understood this in detail.

"Will you come, then? It will be tedious, and vegetarian!" My species, unlike all others, cannot digest meat.

"I don't have to, if you'd prefer to insult the Great Baron Bethony and your other parents. Is there anyone else answering their description of me that you could bring? How did they describe me, anyways?" asked Sythyry.

I showed Sythyry the letter. Sythyry snorted sparks. "It's not asking about me in any case. Strenata, the Orren girl who changes her name frequently that I was hoping to be entangled with, does not approve of inter-species entanglements."

"They obviously want you, though."

"They obviously do not want me enough to attend *that* closely to my romances! For which I should be grateful. My romances are not extensive enough to stand much attention. Unlike yours."

"I daresay Tethezai would be glad to add you to her collection," I said. My girlfriend is a libertine who prefers the exotic and shocking, which is why she found me appealing at first. My parents generally pretend she does not exist.

"A generous offer, which I decline with the utmost of gratitude. Actually, your parents *did* ask for somebody in particular. Strenata has a good friend, Rhedwy, whose fur is a sort of blue-black."

"That's the Sleeth we sometimes see her with, isn't it?"

Sythyry smirked. "The very one. And if your parents find you unacceptable, how will they find a near-monster prowling in to dinner on four legs and demanding meat in a Herethroy household, and live meat at that?"

"They *did* ask for her, didn't they?"

"How unhappy are you with them this week, Dustweed?"

"Last week they asked me, once again, to renounce my relationship to them, and to abdicate the barony in advance, before finishing my degrees. And go do something fitting to my station in life, as they put it. By which it sounds like they mean, go become an impoverished and miserable day laborer on the docks or something and get murdered early, like a decent both-female would, and stop wasting their money on my education," I said. I presume I sounded a bit bitter.

"Yet you unaccountably refuse this generous offer, and display unfilial unhappiness with them? How uncivilized! A Sleeth would be a fit companion for such as you!" Sythyry grinned apologetically. "Indeed, I would not spend time with Rhedwy socially, except that wicked Fate has condemned me to share a table with her in a class, and I cannot escape her."

"Well, since my parents *did* ask for Rhedwy, I can scarcely refuse them."

*To my parents, greetings.*

*We shall indeed be at the townhouse on the 14th of Thory, myself and the guest who, of the entire city, most closely meets your desires.*

---

My parents' townhouse is a fairly plain thing. A Great Baron can scarcely **not** have a pied-a-terre in Vheshrame, and my parents are comfortable even by the standards of Great Barons, but much of their money goes elsewhere. For one instance, they have only one full-time servant there, and that one a spinster who lost a mid-hand (Herethroy have four hands and two legs) and needed a job.

For this dinner, they hired a cook and a butler: a pair of tall otterly Orren gentlemen from the city who worked eagerly, a bounce to their step and a clever glitter to their eye. The butler answered the

door, when Rhedwy and I arrived somewhat early, and stared at the Sleeth in some consternation. I gestured for silence. My mother had evidently not paid them enough to buy their complete loyalty: he giggled, and waved us in, and announced us in melodramatic, lugubrious tones as "The Heir of your villages, and zir ominous companion."

Unfortunately, my parents had not invited a hallfull of important grandees, so I could not humiliate them in front of anyone but the butler and each other. "I have come, as you requested. This is Rhedwy, a student of Enchantment of distinctive skill at Vheshrame Academy."

Herethroy and Sleeth do not, stereotypically, get along. We are, stereotypically, farmers, and

Sleeth are, stereotypically, hunters. We are numerous and peaceful and civilized. Sleeth are vicious and cruel and, thankfully, scarce. Indeed, stereotypically, nobody gets along with Sleeth, not even other Sleeth.

Bethany scowled, as is polite and almost obligatory when a Sleeth invades a Herethroy noble's home. My other parents dropped to four legs, as if to flee; perhaps my mother thought I had brought a Sleeth to kill them and get the title in a classic, if illegal, way. Not that a Sleeth often murder people, but they are more physically and spiritually capable of such things than anybody else.

A round of introductions seemed like the best way to emphasize the situation. "Rhedwy, I am immeasurably delighted to introduce the Great Baron Bethany Grentian, her husband Greenthorn, and her mari Tormentille. Greenthorn and Tormentille's other wife Mellilot shall be along shortly."

Rhedwy regarded the triad with a gaze like molten emeralds. "I am the delighted to meet you now. Perhaps even the delighted enough to remember your names!" She *could* speak properly if she wanted to, but chose to use peculiar grammar and only the present tense as an odd point of pride.

"I daresay I shall remember *your* name, and a great deal else about this evening for many years to come," said my mother Bethany, glaring at me.

The Sleeth grinned, showing a mouthful of ivory scimitars. "You are rarely having blue friends of the Orren who changes her name so often, then? Especially not blue friends who learn Enchantment from Professor Alzagond every morning, who date Orren when their own species is scarce, and who happily levitate when suitable furniture is not provided." Rhedwy and I had been chatting about other points of similarity between herself and Sythyry, and these were the best.

"Well, we didn't plan for a Sleeth," snapped Greenthorn. "Of course there's no chair for you." They had managed to acquire a quite fancy perch for a pet bird, which Sythyry might have found comfortable.

"You are not so rude as that!" said Rhedwy. "You provide the big flat floor. It is covered with a tilissy rug, so it is not even shabby." She sprawled on her flank in the middle of the room, and stretched, spreading pawfuls of practiced-looking claws.

If there is something more disconcerting than a sudden near-monster in the parlor, it is a sudden near-monster lying at leisure on the floor. Not only might one fear for one's life, one must look awkwardly down when attempting to carry on polite conversation. Tormentille sat down in a low chair, obviously trying to adapt zir plans for the evening for her guest, preferably without antagonizing her. "And how do you find studies at Vheshrame, Rhedwy?"

"Oh, studying is pleasing to the mind, but not so pleasing to the body. Before I study here I am mostly the hunter and the spy in the dangerous lands. I miss that! Very rarely do I kill anyone or screw anyone here," said Rhedwy.

Tormentille is a very proper co-lover, and tries to act graciously sheltered, and thus generally ignorant of both murder and fornication. (I try to act like a co-lover myself, following zir lead, but

pretending to be graciously sheltered is too false even for me. I simply try to act a bit modest.) "That sounds a bit alarming -- have you ...?"

"Oh, I do not yet screw Dustweed. That is Tethezai's job," said Rhedwy.

"No, I meant..." Tormentille tried to interject.

Rhedwy refused to let zir. "Fortunately, Tethezai is very the good at it. I often hear Dustweed yowling happiness from three blocks away." Only the first half is true, but my attempts to appear modest were not going to work well.

"I do not wish," said Bethony, "to discuss how my daughter defiles herself with a *mammal*." She has always refused to give me the relationship name or pronoun I prefer, or anything else she wasn't forced to give.

Rhedwy smiled, a perfect picture of feline mock-innocence. "You do not want Dustweed with other Herethroy of course, but you also deny zir mammals. But most people we know are either Herethroy or mammals. Only one is not. You wish zir to seduce the Sythyry zie is supposed to bring instead of me tonight?" She chuckled, a low menacing chuff. "You are the *very* desperate for social advantage. Most noble families do not make the prostitute out of the *heir*."

Bethony and Greenthorn and I scowled at her. Tormentille just grinned, and waved zir antennae. "I was actually asking about the murdering side of things. I have enough spouses so that I have, perhaps foolishly, never had the occasion to hire a prostitute."

"Ah, you have instead too many spouses? You need to hire an assassin?" asked Rhedwy, with downright kitten-innocent expression.

Tormentille laughed. "I have no specific murder in mind."

Bethony grunted, "Though I can think of one or two people who might be a bit more polite after a bit of terrorization."

"This is why you invite me here? My rates are extravagant, and my methods are extremely slow," said Rhedwy. She turned to look at me. "Also I charge by the gender. Castigating Dustweed for bringing me here will not be cheap!"

"Oh, we're delighted that you could come!" chirped Tormentille. Zir manners were definitely back in full force. "Only, we were expecting someone a bit smaller, which leaves us in a bit of an awkward situation."

"I must stand on my hind feet on a bird-perch throughout dinner? I can endure this! I once hang underneath a large tree-branch while I eat seven chameleons, when I am living in a very dangerous place," said Rhedwy.

"You must tell us that story in detail!" said Tormentille. "No, we simply have acquired roasted songbirds where we might have done better with roasted bustards."

"Madam, we have taken the liberty of sending to the market for further provisions," said the Orren butler. "And for now, the first course is ready for your delectation in the Grand Hall of Gustatory Delights."

The Grand Hall was the ordinary dining room, though my parents had gone to the expense of hiring a gardener-mage to cover the table with an extravagance of fresh mosses and tiny light-blue flowers that doubtless would have matched Sythyry's scales exquisitely. They had replaced the bird-perch by a piano bench, onto which Rhedwy leapt with the grace of water pouring. My parents strode to their seats elegantly. I avoided knocking my chair over, thank you very much.

Ordinarily, the first course has three dishes. The Orren had chosen to break this custom and serve only one, a small conical ivory bowl of molten cheese with spiced onions swimming in it.

"Where are my figs and my challenge-fruit?" asked my mother in a voice like bamboo tearing.

The butler put on a very serious tone like an ill-fitting formal jacket. "If it please your ladyship, they have been delayed until after the cheese -- which is in any case in immanent danger of congealing in your bowl -- has been suitably devoured. In the hope that the errand-boy returns with the main course before it is called for."

Rhedwy licked droplets of cheese from her whiskers and grinned across the table. "I am the very offended. I do not eat any of you if the main course is not available on time." When Greenthorn smiled at her, she bared her fangs at him and laughed viciously. "I am not so fat a Sleeth as that! I rend off one Herethroy arm, or two, and that is plenty of food for me."

Greenthorn was quite thoroughly nonplussed. Tormentille seemed to have gotten used to her guest. "Fortunately we took the precaution of coating our bodies with codelieth, the foulest of perfumes. A single bite would leave your tongue and nose offended for weeks!" This was ridiculous; codelieth stinks intensely of spicy carrion. Anyone could smell it a block off, and only the dogpeople wear it for perfume.

Rhedwy nodded. "A wise precaution to take when a small and barely carnivorous Zi Ri is expected, to be sure. And codelieth can be washed off in vodka, do not forget that!"

"Ah, but by the time you found our secret supply of vodka -- no doubt in a tower-fortress protected by legendary mythical demons -- the main course would have arrived. Even allowing for slight traffic delays," said Tormentille. Zie was actually *bantering* with the Sleeth.

And, worse, Rhedwy was bantering back. "Very wise, again! Your hired butler has available legendary mythical demons for the hiring by the evening, then?"

The butler nodded enthusiastically. "Of course we do, and at quite reasonable rates. Three and a half souls for an evening, plus eleven per cent in the Duke's taxes."

Rhedwy and Tormentille laughed. Bethony glared at her mari. "Tormentille, this is a serious occasion. Stop joking with the hired help."

"It is not so somber an occasion! We have a child and a guest present, and, if I am not mistaken, a serving of artfully-dissected figs approaching. No worse fate is at hand!" said Tormentille. Zie looked at the plates. The cook had carved most of the figs into artful flowers. "Though Rhedwy's looks a bit on the disemboweled side."

"I am generally more tidy when I hunt," said Rhedwy, and prodded her ravaged fruit with a forepaw. One fig rolled aside, revealing a nest of slivers of smoked eel. "Ah, the cook is the clever cook. He provides me with something to eat in this course. I wait until the next course to devour him."

Tormentille looked over. "Doubtless from his own dinner, at that. We do not ordinarily have eel in the house."

"A generous man is Oostmarine the cook! When his own survival is in question, at least. Or his reputation," said the butler.

I nibbled on figs. They were the first figs of the season, or, rather, slightly before the first figs of the season, and a bit harder and sourer than figs ought to be. My revenge was in no better shape.

The challenge-fruit arrived: thick-husked melons full of a serpent's orgy of bitter tubes, with a few blobs of pink flesh scattered here and there inside of it. The pink flesh is sweeter and more intoxicating than honeyed wine. Eating a challenge-fruit without tasting the bitterness is not the easiest exercise for a four-handed Herethroy armed with two ivory scalpels, a skewer, and a spoon.

Rhedwy peered at hers dubiously. "I am not the very brave Sleeth. I flee from the nycathath, I slink away from the scyanturge. This melon is not so easy to eat without any hands!"

My mother glared at her. "Well, if you don't want it, don't eat it."

"This is the excellent plan," said Rhedwy, and swatted her melon with a big and many-clawed forepaw. Oostmarine had served it on a grilled

trout filet, presumably also from his own dinner. The melon bounced across the table, scattering ivory chalices of light wine and glass flutes of herbs crushed with salt. Before it rolled to a stop in front of my plate, Rhedwy had finished the trout.

"One's enough for me, really, Rhedwy," I said, a bit weakly.

"You've got two, like it or not, and you'd best go on from there." snapped Greenthorn, which stung a good deal.

"You are confusing the melon with the sex," said Rhedwy. "You are not the expert at biology! With this sort of mistake, how is it that you have a child at all?"

"Oh, we always have to guide poor Greenthorn this way and that," said Tormentille. "He mightn't be the brightest male on the Tree, but at least he's biddable." Everyone but Greenthorn laughed.

"I know the difference," said Greenthorn, his antennae curled flat in anger.



Rhedwy curled her tail arrogantly. "Dustweed is the stuck with two sexes. But a melon is the easier to set aside!" She stretched across the table and swatted the melon again. It crashed through a window, splintering wooden shutters and bouncing off an arken tree in the footprint of a yard outside.

My parents yelped and winced. If a guest burns down one's townhouse, one may try to get the guest to pay for it, but minor damage is beneath recompense. Rhedwy smiled blandly. "Even the most expert farmer must be wary -- even the most sedate of vegetables may suddenly turn on one and be fierce and fearsome! For this reason I only eat meat. It is much safer."

Before anybody could reply, Sythyry flew in through the shards of the window. "Sorry to be late, O parents of Dustweed. I scratched at the door, but nobody answered, and I'm not big enough to open it myself."

My parents leapt up and started trying to ingratiate themselves and beg Sythyry to get some favor from them from one or another famous and powerful grandparent. The butler quickly followed, brandishing melted cheese and artful figs. Rhedwy grinned a many-fanged grin at me. "Be offended! Sythyry and I conspire together. Sythyry and I largely spoil your revenge. Sythyry and I show you off as the agreeable and helpful heir. Perhaps they sometimes try to be the agreeable parents to you as well."

I looked at the wreckage of the table and window. "Not wholly an agreeable heir. I suppose I should thank you for that much damage."

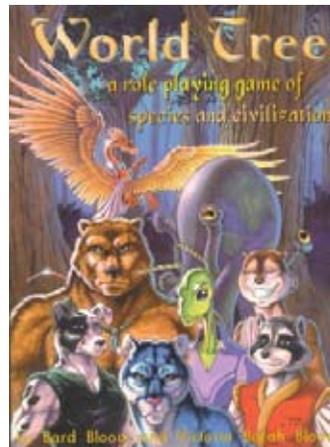
Rhedwy licked her whiskers and grinned. "More damage comes soon! The food from the market also comes soon. I certainly stay to eat it."

"I suppose I should thank you for coming at all, Rhedwy."

She stretched on the table in front of me, swatting ivory and leather utensils around with her tailtip. "I am the happy enough Sleeth! Not so often am I

invited to a Great Baron's house for dinner." She delicately flicked a candle off a candelabra. "I do not wholly know why not!"

**Intrigued? Give the World Tree RPG a try.**



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## **Starscape™: *Fire in the Soul***

By Brad Aiken

"That's the last of them, Colonel."

The words had seared a painful scar indelibly into the memory of Gandar. The young Neanderthal was just twelve years old when he first saw the video, a popular classic imported from Earth entitled "A Brave New World," but commonly referred to on Earth as "The Neanderthal Solution."

The son of a great warrior, Gandar was already accepted for admission in the Teconean Military Academy the following spring. His father had given the video to his son as a gift, a coming of age sort of present meant to stir the emotions of an ancient Imperial warrior. Little did General Kolimar know how effective his gift would be.

Now, on his forty-sixth birthday, Gandar watched the video again as he would do each year on this same date; he did not wish to let the memory fade. The movie told of the discovery of the original Neanderthal colony nestled in the Himalayan Mountains by human explorers in the twenty-first century. It depicted the Neanderthals

as rude beasts who could never live peacefully with their human counterparts.

But Teconean textbooks told a much different story. Gandar's ancestors had been treated more like animals than people back on Earth. They were never given equal opportunity. Humans were afraid of the Neanderthals' superior strength, and equally afraid for many of their jobs, as the Neanderthals' aptitude for technical skills was far greater than that of their human counterparts.

Soon after the development of hyperspatial travel, the planet Teconea was discovered – the first off-world that had the potential to support human life. The Neanderthals were chosen as the first colonists. The humans had said that they chose the Neanderthals because of their tremendous strength and adaptability, but Gandar knew better; all modern-day Neanderthals knew better. It was human fear that drove the Neanderthals away from their home world, a fear of the superior Neanderthal race.

“That’s the last of them, Colonel,” the young human lieutenant said into the radio on his wrist as he watched the last of Earth’s remaining Neanderthals board the Alpha One transport ship. He gave the door a slap as it closed, and walked briskly away from the landing bay. The notorious ship was one of many that had made the six-month excursion to Teconea before all of Earth’s Neanderthals had finally been resettled there.

General Gandar watched the vid screen intently as the engines roared to life and the Alpha One lifted off toward Teconea. A young Neanderthal boy looked longingly back toward Earth as the ship accelerated out of orbit. Gandar felt his pain.

“Take solace, my boy,” he said. “The Earth will soon be ours. We will rid our home world of the human vermin and reclaim it as our own once again. This I swear on my father’s grave.

A firm knock on the door stirred him from his reverie.

“Come,” he barked his annoyance.

The door to Gandar’s quarters slid open with a hiss.

“My pardon for this disturbance, General, but the Flaming Arrow is cleared for departure in

one hour and the ship’s crew is already on board. May I escort you to the spaceport, sir?”

“I think I can find my way, Lieutenant,” he barked with disdain.

“Of course, sir.”

“Dismissed,” Gandar said with a wave of the hand.

The door hissed closed.

“Vid screen off,” he said as he grabbed his pack and walked to the door.

“Lights off. Security lock-down on my exit.”

He strutted out briskly without looking back; no one would enter his quarters and live to see the light of day again. The door sealed behind him.

Within minutes, the general arrived at the spaceport. As usual, the dingy gray halls were devoid of civilian activity. Most men of age were in the military; it was not mandatory, but no self-respecting Teconean would choose to do otherwise. The rare exceptions were the merchant traders, mostly older or disabled warriors, who carried out the necessary task of exchanging merchandise with off-worlders, even humans when necessary. The valuable viridium ore, plentiful on Teconea, was a rare commodity in the Federation of Human Planets. Federation traders were drawn to the Empire by the rich rewards of the viridium trade business, at least those who had the audacity to risk landing on a world full of the Neanderthals who resented them so deeply.

Gandar seethed at the sight of the Stargazer in one of the few civilian landing bays in the port. The gleaming vitanium hull was a stark contrast to the jet-black ships employed by the Empire.

“What is *that* doing here?” he barked at the guard on duty.

The young man snapped to attention at the sight of the general. Gandar was known to everyone on Teconea, his face as familiar as the tales of his volatile temper.

“Merchant traders, sir. Piloted by two humans bringing supplies from Herculaneum.”

“Who are these vermin?”

The young guard checked his manifest. Captains Stryker and McGee, sir, from the planet Kennedy Prime.”

“Captains? Federation Space Corps captains?”

The guard tapped a few spots on his manifest tablet.

“Ex-Space Corps, sir. Strictly civilian trade now.”

“Let me see that.” Gandar grabbed the tablet out of the guard’s hands and scanned the database on the two traders.

Danny Stryker and TC McGee, both graduates of the Space Corps Academy, had served only a few years before resigning their commission. They had a long record of flying trade routes to several of the planets in the Empire, mostly with goods from the Federations outworlds. They rarely had contact with Earth and often flew routes that the Federation had marked as ‘undesirable’, in clear disrespect for the authority of Space Corps Command.

Gandar handed the tablet back to the guard with a grunt. These two humans were not worth his time. They posed no threat. *Perhaps*, Gandar made note to himself, *these two Federation rogues may even be of use some day*. The Empire often made use of human spies to obtain intelligence about the workings of the Federation, but the most useful were those who were still in the good graces of the Space Corps.

Time would prove Gandar very wrong in his judgment of Danny Stryker and T.C. McGee.

Gandar glanced askew, and spotted the Flaming Arrow off in the distance. He turned abruptly away from the Stargazer and headed toward his ship with the determined stride of a proud warrior. With an athleticism belying his years, he covered the distance quickly and ascended the stairs two at a time.

The Flaming Arrow’s navigator was the first to spot Gandar’s arrival and snapped to attention with a salute. “General on board!” he shouted.

Gandar mirrored the young officer’s salute hurriedly as he brushed past, in a manner that made it clear to the soldier that his general held him in no particular regard. Sometimes with Gandar, this was best. The navigator hurried back to his station and prepared for departure.

“Set course for Tantra Terra,” Gandar ordered.

The chamber of The Flaming Arrow was tensely quiet for a few long seconds.

Colonel Hirtek broke the silence with trepidation. “Have we changed our mission, sir?”

Gandar glared at his second in command. They were headed toward Tri-Luna in the Orion system, nearly the opposite direction from the planet Tanta Terra, to inspect the clandestine fleet being amassed for the strike on Earth. Gandar was only willing to ignore the presence of The Stargazer to a point; he would not take a chance of compromising the location of the fleet. He also saw no need to explain himself to these underlings.

“No, Colonel. Our mission stands.”

Hirtek was tempted to remind the general that Tantra Terra would take them well off course and delay their scheduled arrival at Tri-Luna, but he thought the better of it. Gandar was not to be questioned by an inferior officer. He had answered the colonel with relative reserve the first time. He was certainly not to be questioned twice.

“Lieutenant,” Hirtek said to the navigator, “lay in a course for Tantra Terra. Inform me as soon as we are prepared to engage.”

“Aye, sir.”

Within minutes, the Flaming Arrow was aloft and darting out towards space.

“Damn!” TC shrieked, cupping his hands over his ears. “Can’t they muffle those engines any better?”

He and Danny Stryker looked up as the Flaming Arrow streaked over their heads and out of the spaceport.

“Just as well they don’t,” Danny shouted over the noise, “since our scanners can’t penetrate their darned cloaking systems. At least this way, we can *hear* them coming.”

“Yeah. If we’re standing under one of them. A lot of good that does.”

Danny slapped him on the back.

“Come on, man.” TC shook his head. “Let’s the heck out of here. This place gives me the creeps.”

“Not until we check the containers. Zulinar shorted us by a hundred kilos last time. He’s always given us good stuff, but the bastard tries to short us every time.”

“You don’t have to remind me.”



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TC remembered the last shipment of viridium ore. The weight of the containers had checked out perfectly – thanks to a false panel in the bottom of one of them that concealed a hundred kilos of useless rocks. They barely broke even on that trip.

“Say,” Danny said, looking around the spaceport as they walked back to the *Stargazer*. “Doesn’t this strike you as kind of odd?”

TC looked around at the relatively empty port.

“Doesn’t what strike me as odd?”

“Well, that was a Teconeian starfighter that just zipped over our heads, right?”

“Yeah. What of it? This is a Teconeian port.”

“Exactly. You ever see a Teconeian spaceport that wasn’t packed with starfighters?”

The Teconeians were a largely military society. They always had three times as many ships as they needed ready for combat at any given time.

TC looked around again. “Humph. Does seem kind of strange, now that you mention it. You think something’s up?”

Danny thought a moment. “Nah. Probably just war games.” The Teconeians were always staging war games. “If there were any kind of hostilities, they wouldn’t be so nonchalant about two humans strutting around their capital city spaceport.”

“I guess your right,” TC shrugged. “Just the same...”

“Yeah,” Danny finished TC’s sentence, “let’s get the heck out of here.”

The *Stargazer* lifted off the landing pad of Bay 73. Her engines were quiet compared with the Teconeian starfighter that had piloted out moments earlier. Stryker guided the ship out of the planet’s atmosphere, then engaged the warp engines. It would be almost thirty hours before they reached Federation space, and another ninety before they were back home on Kennedy Prime with their payload. Five long, boring days in space. TC was glad that the ship was equipped with an extensive video library.

“Sir, the *Stargazer* is approaching Federation space,” Hirtek informed his commander.

Nearly two hours after take-off, the *Flaming Arrow* had reversed course and made way for the Orion system at top speed. Gandar had waited just long enough to be sure that his vessel was not being scanned by the *Stargazer*. The Federation traders seemed harmless enough, but Gandar had an uneasy feeling about them, and had ordered his first officer to keep close tabs on their ship.

“What is their heading?”

Hirtek tapped the display panel in front of him, and the *Stargazer*’s path was superimposed on an astronomical chart.

“They are heading directly for the Orion System!”

“Let me see that,” Gandar barked, shoving his first officer out of the way. “Humph. If you studied your prey, you would know that their home base is Kennedy Prime. Their course to that world takes them past the Orion System. That is their destination.”

Gandar began to walk away. “Still...” He turned back toward Colonel Hirtek. “It can not hurt to monitor them closely. After all, they are human.

“Lay in a pursuit course. Activate the cloaking system and engage engines when ready.

The long hours of uninterrupted travel through space could be quite boring. Merchant traders did their best to make accommodations on their ships for the void in time, though most were not as well equipped as the *Stargazer*. It had been nearly thirty hours since they left Teconeia, and as usual the trip had been uneventful. TC McGee leaned his massive frame back into the custom leather chair that he had installed at the *Stargazer*’s navigation station. A small holographic monitor sat next to the computer interface, programmed with dozens of his favorite movies. A classic western, remastered in holovision, began to play.

“Ahh,” he moaned, rocking back into the chair, hands behind his head. “Almost halfway home, and nothing to do but a little R & R.”

Danny looked over at his friend and smiled. “Just don’t tell me how it ends,” he chuckled. They’d each seen it a handful of times.

“Mum’s the word, Ace,” TC said. “Mum’s the...

The Stargazer stuttered from its usually smooth course, and TC lurched sideways, nearly falling out of his chair.

“Whoa,” he said to Stryker, “what’re you doing up there?”

“Not me, man. We just dropped out of warp.”

“Pirates?” TC asked. Space pirates weren’t usually bold enough to attack a battle-ready ship like the Stargazer, but they were growing more daring each year.

“Nah. I think we just took on too much viridium ore this run. The weight distribution in the cargo hold put too much strain on the warp field generator.”

“I told you we should have gotten that thing tuned up before this run, but *no*, you...”

“All right, all right. Just see if you can patch her up. I promise I’ll spring for the upgrades when we get back home.”

“Just patch her up,” TC muttered to himself, mocking Danny’s tone, as he pulled himself up out of his soft leather chair.

“What was that?” Danny called back as he replotted the ship’s course to keep her on target at impulse speed.

“Nothing,” TC said. “I’ll go check the warp generator.”

“Of all the luck,” Stryker muttered to himself. They had broken down just fifteen hundred kilometers from the notorious ion fields of the Orion System. The ion storms were handy for hiding from scanners in a pinch, but weren’t good for much else. If the ship drifted too close, the ion fields could play havoc with their equipment. Worse yet, there could be pirates lurking within, laying in wait for a situation just like this; vultures awaiting their wounded prey.

“What’s it look like, buddy?” He laid in a course to keep them as far as possible from Orion, but the going would be slow.

“Just fried one of the circuit panels,” TC called back through the comm system. “It’s not

too bad, but we don’t have a replacement. It’ll take me a couple of hours to patch her up.”

“Great,” Danny muttered. “Well, pick up the pace if you can. We stalled out near Orion.”

“Damn,” TC whispered.

“What’s that, partner?” Danny asked.

“I said thanks, Ace. I could use a little more pressure. You know, to make the job go easier and all.”

“Glad I could help,” Danny said with a smile.

They were both silent after that. They each had a task that would be best done without distraction.

“The humans have dropped out of warp fifteen hundred kilometers from the Orion storms, and just five thousand kilometers from Tri-Luna,” Hirtek announced.

“Damned humans!” Gandar shouted. “No matter how foolish, no matter how inept they appear they can never be trusted. I *knew* these two buffoons were spies.”

Gandar was not about to admit to his men that he had been fooled by the humans. He had nearly dismissed them, even thought that they may be able to be brought over to his side with the right bribe – perhaps this was still a possibility. He was glad that he was blessed with the notion to at least monitor the Stargazer.

“That reptile Zulinar must have informed them of the starbase on Tri-Luna.”

“But, General, Zulinar is a decorated war hero.”

“*Was*,” Gandar corrected. “Now merely a hobbled civilian.”

“But surely a former Imperial warrior would not betray the Empire.”

“Greed is a powerful potion, Hirtek, especially to a businessman like Zulinar. One does not become the chief of a viridium mining company by idle fortune.”

Colonel Hirtek paused. He had not thought of Zulinar, or any Teconean, for that matter, in this way. They were all trained as warriors, all fiercely loyal to the Empire...were they not?

“How long until intercept?”

“Three hours, sir.”

“They could be concealed in the ion storms by that time.”

“They appear to be heading *away* from Orion, sir.”

“Do not be fooled by these vermin, Colonel Hirtek. Treachery is their forte.”

Hirtek nodded.

“Scan the sector,” Gandar ordered. “Do we have any ships close enough to intercept the Stargazer if she makes a run for the ion storms?”

Hirtek checked his panel. “Only the freighter Nepal, sir.”

“What is their armament?”

Hirtek checked his files. “Just phase one cannons, sir. Primarily defensive.”

Gandar heaved a sigh of disappointment. “Perhaps, with the element of surprise, they may be able to detain the humans until we arrive. Open a secure channel to the Nepal.”

“Aye, sir.”

“This is Captain Vrace, of the Nepal.” A haggard older Neanderthal with a graying mane of hair hanging loosely around his wrinkled face appeared on the view screen. Hirtek was surprised that the captain did not appear frightened at the prospect of a communiqué from General Gandar; most men would be.

“I am Gandar, commanding the Flaming Arrow.”

“I know who you are, General.” Captain Vrace was battle-worn from his years in the Imperial Spacefleet; he was not easily intimidated. “What could you possibly want from a broken old freighter like the Nepal?”

“There is a Federation vessel in your sector.”

“The Stargazer,” Vrace nodded. “A hobbled ship limping toward Federation space. What of it?”

“You are to engage the Stargazer and disable her until I arrive.”

Vrace bellowed with laughter. “In this old tub? You must be kidding. We’re no match for a ship like the Stargazer. Even hobbled, she’d blow us out of space before we even charged our rusty old cannons.”

“Are you not an Imperial warrior!” Gandar snapped angrily.

Vrace's nonchalant demeanor faded from his face. Gandar's wrath was legendary.

“Well, General, I...”

“You have the element of surprise. With two blasts you can disable their weapons and fuse their warp generator. Are you telling me that you are not capable of such a basic engagement?”

“It’s just that the weapons on the Nepal are...”

“Perfectly adequate in the hands of an *adequate* Imperial Space Fleet captain,” Gandar finished his sentence.

Vrace fell silent.

“We will arrive in less than three hours. You have your orders.”

Gandar motioned to Hirtek with a slashing motion of his right hand across his throat, and the signal ceased abruptly, the face of the stunned Captain Vrace vanishing from the screen.

“That should do it,” TC announced as he entered the bridge of the Stargazer.

“Good,” Danny said. “These ion fields give me the heebie-jeebies. Get ready to engage warp.”

“Afraid not,” TC said.

Danny snapped his head around toward TC.

“She’s all patched up, Danny, but I had to shut the cells down. It’ll take a good half-hour to regenerate.”

“Good for who?”

“Well,” TC said, plopping back down in his leather chair. “I, for one, am going to relax and enjoy the ride. It only takes one to pilot the Stargazer, and she’s your baby.”

Danny couldn’t object. There was really nothing else for TC to do now but wait for the cells to recharge.

“Yeah, well don’t get too comfortable. We’re going to warp the second those cells are ready.”

TC winced ever so slightly. He always dreaded the feeling that a warp jump created. Warp travel was smooth as silk, but he could swear the initial jump turned his stomach inside out every time.

Captain Vrace crept up on the Stargazer. Even the decrepit old Nepal had been equipped

with a cloaking device since she began her runs to the Orion System. He wasn't sure exactly what was going on there, and he didn't want to. He had no great urge to attack a Federation vessel either, not even a hobbled merchant ship, but he was about to do just that.

"Target their weapons and warp generator, Ensign."

"Both canons at once, sir?"

The Nepal only had two canons, but still, firing both at the same time could well overload the patchwork system. Vrace was equally aware of this as his gunner, but there was little choice. His orders were quite clear, and this was the only possibility of success for this ill-conceived mission.

He nodded at the ensign. "Fire when ready."

The young gunner looked scared.

*You should be scared, young man,* Vrace thought quietly, watching the young Neanderthal's face. *You should be very scared.*

The weapons fired, but as Vrace feared, their power levels were less than half of what they were programmed to be. The Stargazer shuttered meekly in front of them, and to make matters worse, the power overload deactivated the cloaking device. They were sitting ducks.

"Should we take evasive action, sir?" the ensign asked nervously.

"No. Lay in a pursuit course and engage."

"But, sir. We have no weapons."

"I am well aware of that, Ensign. However, with any luck, the Stargazer is not."

Vrace sincerely hoped that the Stargazer could still outrun the Nepal. Any evasive maneuver on his part would only reveal his weakness, and Stargazer would certainly attack. But if they were spooked enough by the attack to run...

"The Stargazer just engaged warp engines, sir," the ensign said with relief.

Vrace did not relish the thought of facing General Gandar after his failed mission, but he had faced unhappy generals before. It was far more desirable to be dressed down by one's commanding officer than to be dressed up for one's own funeral. Many Teconean warriors did not feel this way, but Vrace had years of experience to dim the fire that ran in a young warrior's blood. There was more to

life than glory, but this was a thought that he would take with him silently through the rest of his years. To do otherwise would be the end of his career; this was the way of the Teconean warrior.

Gandar watched on his monitor as the Stargazer engaged her warp engines.

"They have changed their heading, General."

"I am not blind, Colonel."

"Of course not, sir."

They could both plainly see that the Stargazer was now headed for Earth at top warp speed. There would be no hope of intercepting it before it entered Federation space.

"Send a message to Tri-Luna. I want the fleet ready to launch upon our arrival. Time is now of the essence."

Colonel Hirtek sent the encoded message to the commander of the attack fleet that was already poised to launch the invasion of Earth from their clandestine position on the beautiful planet of Tri-Luna.

"And so it has begun," Gandar muttered.

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## DEAR CTHULHU

by  
Patriek Thomas

Dear Cthulhu,

Last week I tried out for US Pop Idol. Instead of forgetting about the rest of the stupid contest and simply just anointing me the next superstar, Theodore trashed me on national television. He went so far to said I sounded like a screeching owl and that my vocal cords should have been severed at birth.

I've included video of my performance so you can see that my greatness rivals your own.

Would you please devour Theodore's soul for me? And get me a recording contract? Or at least devour the souls of any recording executives that turn me down?

*-Sensational Songbird in San Diego*

Dear Songbird,

I'm not one to turn down an offered soul, but the ones you mention are not yours to offer.

The judge compared you to a screeching owl? After watching the video, I find that comparison insulting. To the owl that is. I haven't heard anything that awful in centuries. It is even worse than the banshee karaoke I endured a few months ago.

Prolonged exposure to your voice is enough to drive mortals to madness. Because of that, Cthulhu has secured you a record deal. With Cthulhu's management, we should have you in the top ten with major air play within six months. The contract is fairly standard. I get 60% of the gross, you get 40% of the net and after your third album, I get to devour your soul.

I will send you a copy. Please sign in triplicate and in blood.

Also Cthulhu is pitching his own reality TV show, American False Idol. Myself, Baal, and Barry Mantilow are lined up to be judges.

Technically, Mantilow is only tentative, as his agent is currently not returning my calls. Write your favorite network and demand that they carry it.

Dear Cthulhu,

Recently my husband and I were at a wedding that was canceled in mid-ceremony by an angry groom. Apparently he had just found out his bride to be had slept with the minister and his three hamsters the night before. The bride to be had recorded a pre-wedding message for him and forgot to hit stop when the minister and his rodents showed up to go over last minute wedding details. He watched the video that morning and arrived late, with his fists flying.

Unfortunately for us, we had dropped our present into the gift basket when we walked into the reception hall. Since the police took most of the wedding party and to jail after the mini-riot and the aftermath of splattered hamster guts on the walls, the catering hall asked us all to leave. We tried to get our gift back, but the mother of the bride had absconded with the basket.

It's been over a week and the gifts haven't been returned. Since they didn't go through with it and we were kicked out without even being fed, we want our gift back. We're unsure of the proper etiquette in this situation. Do we give them more time or call to ask for it back?

*-Gift Grabber in Goshen*

Dear Grabber,

You do not mention what the gift was. If it was a check, cancel it. If you bought it with a credit card, report the gift stolen. These days many credit cards have a replacement policy. If you were foolish enough to give cash, you are probably out of luck, unless you are willing to break into one of their homes to steal it back. If you do, Cthulhu is looking for a good toaster. Every human couple seems to get at least one as a wedding gift, so grab it and send it to me.

On the plus side, they each may try to marry again. If you are invited and the original gift was not returned, you are not obligated to give another.

In fact, if you attend both weddings, you will actually come out ahead by not having to buy two gifts.

Have a Dark Day.

*Dear Cthulhu welcomes letters and questions at [DearCthulhu@dearcthulhu.com](mailto:DearCthulhu@dearcthulhu.com). All letters become the property of Dear Cthulhu and may be used in future columns.*

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### **LETTER FROM THE EDITOR** (cont)

Patrick Thomas gives us *You Get What You Pay For*, a new offering from Murphy's Lore. Fans will be excited to see this never before published story of what happens when a not-so-bright gangster tries to extract protection money from the patrons of Bulfinche's Pub. For the numerous fans of Padwolf's best selling series Murphy's Lore the good news is that **Redemption Road**, Patrick's latest offering is now available. The better news is for his first time readers... there are a total of five Murphy's Lore books in print, with another one expected in 2006 and some spin offs later this year. For fans Murphy's Lore I'd also like to suggest that you check out Patrick's other offerings with Padwolf Publishing. You won't be disappointed. Visit his website at [www.murphys-lore.com](http://www.murphys-lore.com).

Tony DiGerolamo's detective character "The Fix" aka Mark Mammon is in trouble once again. He is living with his girlfriend, somewhat uneasily, when an "ex" asks him for help. Her cousin Sanji is missing. Through the use of the internet dating The Fix finds the missing man. But between having to deal with Thuggees and a need to take "The Stuff" The Fix tries desperately to keep his girlfriend Mindy happy. Tony is a prolific author of novels, comic books and games. Padwolf Publishing is proud to present two of his works. In *The Fix in Overtime*, Mark Mammon is possibly the world's worst detective. "The Stuff" the world's most powerful substance has been stolen. And only he can find it again. In *The Undercover Dragon* a

*Wildsidhe Chronicle* Tony gives us Jamil, a seventeen-year-old FBI agent. Jamil has been sent to the Wildsidhe to help find, and hopefully retrieve missing children stolen by the fey like Wildsidhers. He discovers that not only can't he bring the teenagers home, but his only hope of returning from the Wildsidhe is to complete a quest for the Grimstone. Tony's other works can be viewed at [www.thefixsite.com](http://www.thefixsite.com).

Bard Bloom and Vicky Borah Bloom, created the critically acclaimed World Tree Role playing game. The World Tree, whose upper branches are fifty miles wide and thousands of miles long, houses eight prime species as well as dangerous monsters. If you've ever had an interest in anthropomorphic role-playing, this games for you. In *Sleeth fest* a high born, but disreputable Herethroy, is invited home for dinner with her ambitious vegetarian parents. Instead of bringing home her roommate a Zi Ri dragonlet with powerful grandparents she invites a carnivorous Sleeth to join a never to be forgotten dinner party. Further adventures of Sythyry can be seen at [www.sythyry.livejournal.com](http://www.sythyry.livejournal.com).

In *Fire in the Soul*, Brad Aiken introduces readers to a world where Neanderthals inhabit the planet Teconea. In the early twenty-first century a small Neanderthal colony was discovered on Earth and shipped off to the recently discovered Teconea. Now, some five hundred years later, the extremely uneven peace between humans and Neanderthals is threatened by the anger of a Neanderthal general and dysfunctional human equipment. In the novel **The Starscape Project**, famed Captain Danny Stryker, who has been framed by his enemies thrust into a situation where an artificial life form is waging battle against the Teconea Empire. Danny must make a decision, aid his deadly enemies get rid of the alien invasion or hope that once the Neanderthal empire is destroyed, Earth isn't next. Other Brad Aiken stories can be found at [www.bradaiken.com](http://www.bradaiken.com).

To round it off we are running the syndicated column *Dear Cthulhu*, not that the ancient one gave us much choice in the matter. For more visit [www.dearcthulhu.com](http://www.dearcthulhu.com).

Finally, an editor's page cannot be considered complete without thanking the numerous people who are involved in the publishing process. We

## Padwolf Presents #2

obviously couldn't do anything without the authors, and to them all I can say is a big THANK YOU! Others, who are more "behind the scenes" editors, artists and typesetters put in what sometimes feels like endless hours getting the book ready for publication. My heartfelt thanks to you all. A special thanks to Ed McFadden and Cosmic SF for distributing Padwolf Presents.

And finally you the readers, who keep coming back and enjoying Padwolf's worlds, the biggest thanks of all! Come back and visit often.

To show our appreciation, please visit us at [www.padwolf.com/p2special.htm](http://www.padwolf.com/p2special.htm) for free shipping and other goodies on the books featured in this issue.

Issue three of Padwolf Presents will be out soon.

Diane Raetz  
Editor In Chief  
Padwolf Publishing Inc.

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