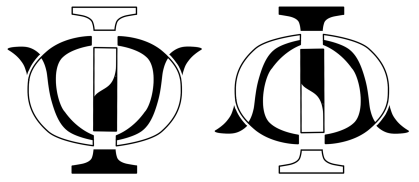
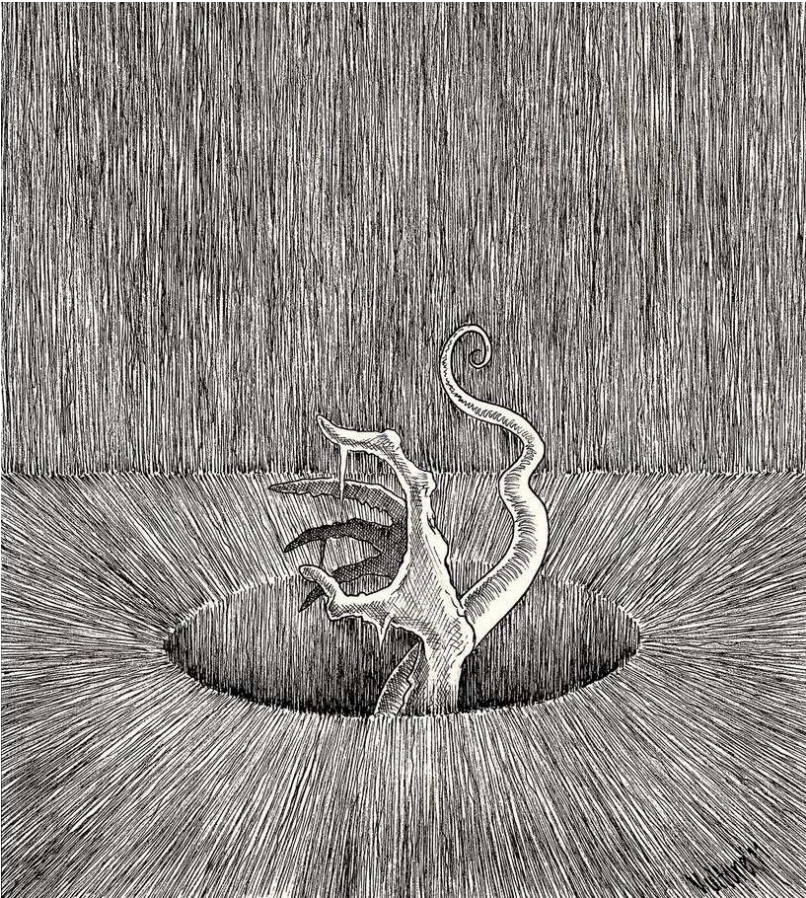


ICSF



# Fanzine 2014



# Resurrection

# A Note From The Editor

Welcome to the second attempt at bringing back the ICSF fanzine!

My name is Sanchit Sharma, and I am the editor for ICSF this year. I realised that I was supposed to be doing this about two weeks before LonCon, so this has been put together in a week – hence the lack of pretty magazine elements. Still, I hope you all enjoy it!

I'm also going to take this opportunity to thank everyone that wrote something for this fanzine, we'd have next to nothing were it not for you guys. Especially Daniel Thomas, who wrote Wolf the night I asked him to write something, staying up till 6 in the morning to do so!

I should also briefly mention that whilst we previously have had some sort of a theme for these fanzines, this is not the case for this edition. I've forgone the theme so that we can use things that were written whilst the fanzine was inactive, but there will be one in the next issue.

Two of these stories are the first part of longer works – if you're interested in more of these or seeing anything else our members come up with, check us out at the Imperial College South Kensington Campus or on the web (at [www.icsf.org.uk](http://www.icsf.org.uk)).

Finally, I should mention that in February, our annual convention, Picocon, will be running. Details are on the back cover, and can also be found on the website at [www.icsf.org.uk/picocon](http://www.icsf.org.uk/picocon) – the Picocon Sofa can be contacted by emailing [picocon@icsf.org.uk](mailto:picocon@icsf.org.uk)

Happy reading!

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# A Bright, Shiny Night

By David L. Clements

It seems to be working faster tonight. We only took the dose half an hour ago, and even now I can begin to feel the rush. My heart beats faster, my skin feels warmer, the lights shine brighter. Their electric glow is almost too bright. I look at Amy and can tell she feels it too. I look out of the window. The snow has stopped and it's now a bright, clear winter's night, the stars glinting and the moon gleaming low over the apartment blocks. The night looks so wonderful I want to be out in it, to feel the light on my skin, a cool clear light from above, not the tawdry imitation made by man. The cold holds no fears. My skin is warm and fresh. Nothing can chill it.

"Let's go out onto the roof," I say to Amy. She nods, smiling. She must sense the same urge, something in the trip drawing us up and out into the night. To see it, to breathe it in, to become it.

We hurriedly climb the stairs, and head out, through the fire escape, onto the roof. It feels wonderful. The dark, the glow of the moonlight, the stars, the dusting of snow reflecting it all back. I can nearly feel the starlight on my skin. I have to feel it on my skin. I start to remove my shirt, then my pants and underclothes. Amy is doing the same. We're both excited now. The drug seems to be taking us somewhere different tonight. Not just the euphoria and energy we had before, but outwards, into something bright and new, into space perhaps.

I look down, and realise there is snow beneath my naked feet, but it's not cold. It's fluffy, inviting, comfortable. I lie back into its woolly embrace, staring up at the stars, the stars that seem so nearly right in some way. They talk to me. Are talking to us both, but the sound won't come in. We need to let it in.

"What can we do to let it in?" asks Amy. "I want to hear the stars sing to me."

I remember something. I'd forgotten. I'd bought something for this, I realize. Something had told me this would happen. I reach down to my discarded pants, and there I find the two survival knives I bought just the other day.



I pick one up, and give it to Amy. She stares raptly at the blade, so sharp, so clean, so fresh, and then lovingly, tenderly, she makes a precisely shaped cut in my chest. I feel nothing except elation and pleasure as the stars start to reach in to me. I smile, hold Amy close, and we begin to open ourselves up to the shining bright freedom that the sky, the stars and the powder offer us.

I'm connecting to a world beyond our own, and sense something uncoil, stirring in its eternal slumber in the walls between the worlds, tentacular tendrils seeking a way through. And I have a strange realization that the old man on the Innsmouth boardwalk might sell something more than just drugs.

But there is no turning back. We're committed. The ritual has taken us. Slowly, red mixes with the white fresh snow on the roof. And as we let in the light of the stars, we become darker ourselves. Until nothing is left but the stars and the sky, and some small fragment brought through to make the world a little darker.

# Forest Fairies

By Joseph Henderson

It was quite some time ago the mystery of the world fell away. No one can say exactly when this happened, because there was no exact time. The world slowly opened, every cover against human eyes was peeled back and torchlight blazed under the Sun.

If that vision seems grim, then I apologise, but we are not alone yet. In a forest blackened with soot the angel Michael raced against a demon. Michael was fleet, but the demon was mounted in flight; Michael was cunning and hid, but the demon's instruments saw through all the forest and revealed the secret fire; so that in short for every virtue there seemed to be some response. This was clear for both of them to see, so that Michael was disheartened and frightened, and fell. As the demon swooped down to the treetops a white moth fluttered into Michael's vision; Michael saw that perhaps evil could not touch all things. No longer despairing Michael touched his sword to the demon's mount's stomach such that there was an explosion.

Michael looked around and took the form of a bear. The question had to be answered: how could such a creature as a white moth have survived to that day? The moth flew into a great, secret glade. Michael peeled back the branches and saw past: in that glade, which had been touched by pollen blown from Eden in a happier time, there was a safe repose. In the undisturbed glade birds sang only to hear the

beauty of the song, and even wolves ate only carrion – which did not rot here – because all was at peace. The lucky people of the glade had long ago stumbled in, or fled to there from the evil permitted only outside. These people were always kind and had learned to provide for every need. Like the animals they were without lust or greed, only seeking to add to the sweet music of the birds. When dusk fell they lay where they were and fell into a safe repose, for every day of their lives until their final repose, when they gave their finished bodies to those calm carnivores that took no live prey. Michael saw all of this, and was more than happy. Who knew that such sanctuary survived? Michael proudly resolved to destroy the community and scatter all within to the hellish Earth.

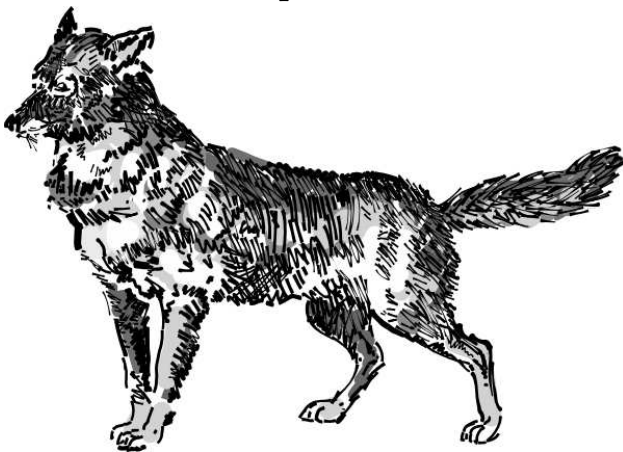
First Michael thought to simply draw and set all ablaze by the sword, but even as he thought this the peacefulness of the place was like an iron chain, holding back his hand. The mind of an angel is made sterner than anything else the Father created; The feeling of peace might calm every animal and human within but no reason or relaxation can stop an agent of God. Every elemental panicked then: so that the sky darkened and thundered; the wind swirled into a hurricane and blew Michael out; and mist rose up so that Michael could not see any path back in.

Michael grew gaunt and short, with dull grey skin and bright, fierce eyes. He crept through cities in the night, pulling children on the edge of death into his sallow hands and casting them into the forest for the kind foresters to find. For ten years Michael took the weak, mad and angry of every city and every village. The sick suffered until the foresters learned to heal injuries that no forester had ever inflicted. The cruel raged against the place of peace



until the foresters learned to teach virtue, to heal the hate no forester had ever felt. As more people arrived the glade did not overflow, but expanded, to encompass the growing compassion.

Once the glade bustled with teaching and the practise of medicine Michael took the form of a jackal. He ran about the forest yelling, so that he would be heard even within the secret glade he could not find. For the first day from dawn through dusk to dawn Michael barked every word of cruelty. Every infernal depravity passed his lips, so the strong legged foresters ran after the jackal. However, the divine's messengers are too fast, and Michael could not be caught. On the second day Michael cried out at every hour so that every scream ever made might be heard. The foresters asked their adoptees how to catch an animal that flees too fast, and then dug pits and stretched out nets to trap Michael. These were sound traps, the foresters were so quick learning and sharp eyed that even an experienced hunter would not have known the danger until being caught. However, the divines know more than anyone on Earth, and their actions are informed by a greater wisdom, so Michael stood in no traps.



On the third day Michael imitated every plea against evil and every prayer for deliverance from the world's despair. The foresters surrounded Michael on the third day. At the end of the day Michael stumbled, and affected a convincing limp. The foresters fell upon the jackal as it fell. While they chased Michael through the forest none could have said what they intended, but having reached their tormentor they bunched their creative hands into fists, took their crafting knives tightly and ripped apart the fallen jackal. Never before had anyone or anything that came from that glade taken a life.

The foresters were happy to live in peace once again, and glad to think that they could go on as they always had. But that night every sleeper remembered the prayers Michael cried out in the day. Every forester had struck Michael and heard the cries of the world without. No one else was delivered into the forest, but the innocence of the place had been burnt away, the carefree life had been forgotten.

Eventually one healer left the glade to practise charity in the world, then more healers and makers and teachers and watchers, until the glade was but a brief stop and resting place for its people. They are now the best of all humans, working for peace on Earth. Perhaps the peace they worked for was unattainable but it was not an imaginary peace, every forester had seen that the glade's peace can expand to cover the whole world.

Michael, as an angel, is always too busy to rest on his laurels and linger on old victories. Nonetheless, in his brief moments of terror and doubt, Michael is warmed by the flame spread within the foresters and knows that he did good.



# Wolf

By Daniel Thomas

My pilot eased the helicopter down on to the ledge. The ride over was the most terrifying experience of my life; this flimsy bucket of a machine rattled the whole way. Unfortunately this man was the only one insane enough to make the journey. He'd flown many people here before me, including my father at one time; none had found what they sought, few ever returned, and those that did, did not come back whole – my father among them.

My mother and father had separated when I was small over a 'disagreement' regarding whose plans were best for my future. My mother won and the most I saw my father after that were in his final days; he'd become ill whilst exploring the remote forest I've come to now and left large parts of his mind here. He'd babble about the treacherousness of this place; the wild animals, the plethora of inedible plants, and the tricks the forest plays. In his questionably more lucid moments he told me of a treasure hidden in the forest and claimed that he alone had discovered its hiding place; I was young enough to believe it. He explained that he reluctantly had to leave it for lack of the simplest of tools required to take it with him, a sharp knife, and promised he would get better and take me back there with him one day to see it. He did neither.

When he passed he left to me a letter; my mother had taken everything else from him in the divorce. The letter

contained directions to this pilot who, if found, would fly me to the only 'safe' access point of the forest. It continued with a series of coded instructions that, if followed, would have me backtracking all over the forest to locate a particular cave in which the treasure could be found. I put the letter back in its envelope and filed it away.

When my mother passed I had earned a secure job with good pay and a comfortable life, everything she'd set out for me to have, save for a loving wife. Security, prosperity, and comfort are all nice things but my father's stories had installed in me a longing for adventure and having followed my mother's path most my life I was filled with a desire to try my father's path a while. Whilst sorting through documents in the lead up to my mother's funeral I rediscovered the envelope my father had left me and set about organising myself a trip to go see the forest that had inhabited him for the last part of his life.

With my feet back on land I say my first words to the pilot since we'd taken off; thanking him for the flight.

"Two days and I wait two hours. If you have not returned then I'll check for you same time next day and day after but no more." He says, unnecessarily helping me unload my supplies. "Remember, forest is very dangerous; do not eat its plants, beware its animals, protect the food you have brought with you." I nod again at his warnings; I've heard them many times. I pat my rifle and the knife in my belt to show I've understood.

The pilot looks me in the eye; he doubts my seriousness. "Forest will make your mind sick. Eat nothing that grows here. Many who return see ghosts or believe he has been

lost in forest for years when has been only days or thinks himself to be still in forest after he leaves..." I cut him short with the pay I'd promised upon safe landing, "Two days." I confirm.

I retreat a safe distance, to the edge of the forest, so he may start his engine. Just as the blades are beginning to spin, I hear a noise come from within the forest and, not fooled by the echoes of the helicopter's sounds, I spin and, perhaps intuitively, lift my rifle and shoot point blank a wolf that leaps at me. The wolf's body collides into my chest and knocks me over but I keep hold of my gun and can see the wolf is hit and staying down. The pilot cuts his engine but I'm quickly back on my feet and cheerfully smiling. I gesture to the motionless body of the wolf and, showing myself unharmed, wave the pilot off. He pretends to fiddle with his controls a while but seeing no stirring of the wolf or signs of a pack, he takes off.

My heart is pumping! I've yet to enter the forest and already it's trying to kill me! The adrenaline of having slain this wild creature has eased my stomach from the helicopter ride and, with the helicopter now retreating into the distance towards pink clouds, hunger takes its place. Inspecting the wolf, I'm surprised to find it is still half alive, watching me with cold dark eyes. Pitying the creature I take out my knife, "I guess I can save my tinned meats; you will be my first meal tonight." I tell it, before swiftly slicing its neck.

Whilst the fire warms, I skin the wolf as neatly as possible to save its pelt, which I wash with a little of my drinking water and set out to dry as the meat cooks. It is the tastiest meal I have ever had! I put it down to having

killed it myself. I entertain the notion of living off the land once I'm done with my business here. As the night creeps up I decide to keep my camp here on the edge of the forest and to not venture in properly until morning. I'm tempted to keep a fire lit, a safe distance from the undergrowth of course, to deter any other wildlife but ultimately decide against the risk and instead sleep with my gun and knife at hand.

In the morning I pack up my things and tie the dry wolf pelt about my neck. As I make my way into the forest I'm careful to note anything that could serve as a landmark should my other navigational abilities fail me. I spot countless odd trees that I believe would be memorable markers until I realise how many 'distinctive-looking' trees there are in this place. I start marking them with my knife, hoping it's not too little, too late. The forest grows dense very quickly and there's little light coming in through the canopy, enough to see by but making it difficult to judge the time of day. I also thought my father's directions would be less cryptic once I got here but they're near impossible to follow and I'm less than 100% sure I'm still going the right way.



I hear a nearby rustling and crouch down low. I remove my backpack and check my gun is ready to fire before standing again and scanning around me for the source of the noise. A bullet whizzes past my head. I'm being shot at! I scream out, "Hey! What do you think you're shooting at!?" I spot a figure out in the gloom, gun still raised, and duck as another bullet comes flying overhead. This man means to kill me! Creeping low to the ground I try to flank him. Getting into position I poke my head up just enough to see him searching for me. I take a warning shot. He howls at me... literally howls, like a wolf! Leaping to my feet I take a second shot to provide me with a moment of cover to run away and I sprint for my life.

I duck and weave to give him no line of shot but I can hear him close behind me, pursuing me deeper and deeper into the forest, way off my father's path. I run until I can hardly keep it up. I can sense him gaining on me. I spot a particularly thick tree and run around its trunk, drawing my knife and doubling back – my knife plunges into the tree trunk; there is no one there. Have I been running from an echo this whole time? I collapse out of breath against the trunk of this tree. I cry a little with relief and from a new fear of being lost in this place. I spot a cave not too far away. Probably not the cave I'm searching for but a good place to camp tonight.

The cave looks quite deep and dark and with my torch back with my backpack, no doubt now raided by my earlier assailant, I construct a fire at the cave's mouth and decide I could take a burning branch in later to explore it. Suddenly I become aware of a large, hairy figure standing in the mouth of the cave and as I leap for my gun, much further from me than I ought to have ever left it, the thing disappears inside yelling.



It was a human yell. Did it yell or did I yell? It didn't look like a bear but all I saw was hair... hair and maybe claws... I get the fire started with one hand, keeping the other firmly on my gun. It's much more difficult to do than when I had both hands but I will not take my sights off the cave mouth. I'm not watching the forest around me... Panic creeps over and I whip my head around to check for danger coming from other directions and then immediately back to the cave. Nothing appears and I've got the fire going now.

I wave a burning branch to and fro with one hand and with the other keep my gun trained steadily dead ahead of me as I edge my way slowly into the cave. The cave is even larger than I believed it to be, extending into the ground. I find my mind wandering; how does a cave like this form? Could this be my father's cave? I shake all distracting thoughts and focus everything on the task at hand. I need to be alert if this thing comes at me. Some way into the cave, the light from outside long behind me, it occurs to me the trouble I could have potentially walked myself into. I *know* there's one huge black thing in here, what if there's a lot of them? What if it's a pack of wolves or a family of bears or a group of hunters out seeking the treasure for themselves? What if some had gone off and returned now? I'm trapped. I almost pass right by the ball of hair cowering in the shadows – the creature waits as still as it can and so do I, pretending to have not yet noticed it. What do I do? Do I shoot it? It looks smaller than it did before. What if this is a cub and the mother's hiding further in? I should have abandoned this cave and camped elsewhere. "Don't shoot me!" the hairball cries. I jump a little at its sudden speaking but cover my shock as best I can.

“Who are you?” I demand.

“I’m the person who can tell you where to find what it is you seek.” The thing replies wryly. I let the light a little nearer and the hairball uncovers to show me its face. The features are old. I’m surprised he or she could have moved as fast as they did earlier; it’s difficult to determine the sex of the person. Their hair is incredibly long and wrapped about them. As he/she moves to show themselves I see its fingernails: unbelievably long and curled. Its toenails are similar but most appear bent or broken. The sight is repulsive.

“And what is it that I seek?” I test the cavething.

“You seek the stone of life.” he/she replies. It’s not the name my father gave it but it sounds as if they’re describing the same thing. “Say I am, what do you know of it?”

“I can take you to it,” he/she says, “If you’d only perform for me some simple tasks.” Riddles and tasks were not the kind of adventure I was expecting. What had I expected? I guess I was hoping the stone was some perfectly formed gem, buried in the cave wall, just waiting to be prised out... but I suppose it would not lie unclaimed if it were as easy as happening upon the right cave.

“What kind of tasks? I’ve no desire to waste my time here. You cannot keep it from me!” I warn the caveperson, brandishing my gun.

“You’ve already made a fire... let me share its warmth, trim my nails and hair, and make for me a broth to fill me and then I’ll tell you where you can find the stone.”

This has to be a trap of some sort. No sane person would just give up the location of this stone if they truly knew it and I said as much to the caveperson.

“I’ve no interest in the thing!” the caveperson barked, “It has already ruined my life. I would warn you off it too but I know nothing I say would deter you when you’ve come this far already. Am I not right?”

I silently consider the caveperson’s proposal and then gesture that they should follow, at the point of my gun barrel, back to the fire. Beside the fire they seemed a lot more human and as I sliced off masses of their hair and nails I rapidly became aware of their nakedness: *her* nakedness. I gave the old woman my coat. More so I did not have to bear witness to it any longer. Her bony legs poke out from under the coat and I can’t help but notice the left is covered in gnarled scars; an old wound that appears to be healing well. She treats it like it’s still tender but professes not to know how she came about it. “Now the stone?” I ask her coolly.

“First the broth... gather those leaves of that plant there... don’t worry, they’re safe for me... grind them up a bit and boil them in water.”

I prepare the ‘broth’ to her instructions; grinding the leaves between two rocks and scoop the paste into my cup. I swirl in some of my drinking water and heat it over the fire as best I can. It could hardly be called a broth; it’d be more accurate to describe it as a cold weak tea. I hand her the cup when it’s ready but she insists I should also drink with her. I let her drink first, making sure she has actually done so, before duly accepting back the cup and carefully sipping from the opposite side. It tastes horrible; I toss

the rest aside. "The stone." I demand impatiently.

She smiles and in her gravelly voice declares, "The stone is in my stomach. I swallowed it long ago. True to the nature of its legend, I've not had to eat or drink a single thing since and it has kept me alive now for countless centuries. The truth is though, I am *done* with immortality; it's a curse. You may have it!"

Her story is crazy nonsense! Not least because the stone's legend is not immortality but youth! If she really possessed it she'd be young, forever young, but also still very much mortal; that - if it were more than just a legend. No rational man could accept the legend (albeit they'd all secretly delight in the notion of the thing and privately entertain the dream). "If you have it and don't want it, then just give it to me foolish woman." I state.

"You fool; you must kill me to take it. Take it and swallow it. Cut it out!" I refuse her mad demands. "Then die!" she cackles, "Die! I have killed *you*! That broth is poisonous! That plant is poisonous! Only this stone can save you now!"

My chest does feel a little tight... my fingers numb... my skin is starting to redden and blister... she's telling the truth! My throat seizes and it's difficult to breath. I look to the old woman; why is she not reacting like I am? Is it *all* true? No, this must just be an allergic reaction I tell myself. It's no more comforting. It occurs to me that I could kill her easily enough and no one would know... Kill her, she wants to die, and possibly save myself; there is no harm believing in false hope when the alternative is no hope. Propelled by my desperation I stab the smug old witch repeatedly in the stomach. I ought to have sliced her throat or something faster first I realise, but here I am

now, cutting out her stomach, covered in her blood... and here is a stone! The stone! A red pebble in appearance though perhaps red only with her blood? It does not look or feel like a precious stone at all.

I wash it with my drinking water to clean it. "Swallow it!" the woman gasps and gurgles encouragingly in her own blood, staring at me wide-eyed, "Swallow it now!" I lift the stone to my mouth. It looks too large to swallow; I'll probably choke. Then I recall my father's version of the legend; you give the stone a drop of your blood and it will give you health and youth. *That* is the correct exchange. I ignore her pleading and follow my father's advice. I wipe her blood from my knife and cut a small nick in the palm of my hand and cradle the stone there and to my chest. I ignore the woman's cursing, lie down and shut my eyes, thinking of my parents.

When I woke it was to a dead fire and morning light. Last night seemed like a dream but the stench of the old woman's dead body brings everything back. I survived! I check my reflection on the blade of my knife and I truly am young again as my father's legend had promised. My clothes hang too loose on my younger frame and itch a lot. Seeing no reason to bother with them this very moment I shed them and wrap myself in the wolf pelt. I feel young and free again and somewhat invincible. Nevertheless, I keep my gun and knife close.

The stone had fallen from my hand and appears to have grown a few layers of human skin. I kick it away. I shudder at the horrible thought of the woman reforming from the stone and then again at the thought that it could be assembling some clone of me and I regret not destroying it. I decide to nap before attempting to find my way back

to the ledge on which I arrived. I have until sunset and then a further two days, if necessary, though I am now quite low on water and all my food was in my backpack. I curl up in a patch of sunlight, pulling the pelt tightly around me; it is incredibly cosy and warm. I have an exciting dream of being a wolf like the one whose skin I now wear; running through the forest, feasting on rabbits I catch myself, and sleeping without a care in patches of sunlight.

When I wake I don't feel properly awake; like a dream within a dream I still inhabit the body of a wolf but I am shaken alert by the laughter of a young girl wearing my old coat, retrieved from the dead woman. "You stupid man!" she yells at me, "You chose to become a wolf over immortality." She kicks me.

"I chose no such thing!" I yell back but what comes out of my mouth sounds more like a bark and a growl. I leap to my feet only to find I've now four of them and am quite a lot shorter than before. '*No! I am awake now!*' I protest to the world. Why won't I wake up? I whimper at my reflection in my knife blade, lying in the grass. I *am* a wolf now. How is this possible?!

The girl throws stones at me and I turn and snarl at her. She spreads her arms out wide, ready for me, smiles and closes her eyes. '*She wants me to attack her!*' I realise. She senses my hesitation. "Go on! Kill me! Kill me, mutt!" she goads. I turn and leave her. My wolf instincts are begging to kill her but I will leave her to her cursed existence out of spite. She screams and throws my knife at me but I dodge it easily and casually trot away.

I discover new sensations that have opened up to me as a

wolf; my hearing is superior now, and my sense of smell. I can *smell* the difference between safe and unsafe to eat vegetation. I happily gorge myself on tasty plants and mushrooms. I can also faintly detect my scent from the day before; I could use this to find my way back to the ledge! I hear a movement... Something two-legged... Perhaps that hunter has returned? I crouch down, wait for my moment, and pounce! It's the witch-woman! She has my gun! I bite her leg and wrestle the gun from her then bound off with it in the vague direction of where I believe the ledge to be. I drop the gun along the way; it is too awkward to carry whilst darting between trees.

Where did the sun set two nights ago? I look for clues from the shadows cast by the low position of an obscured sun. Not too far in the distance I hear the sound of the helicopter's engine. *Perfect!* I run in the direction of it. I've three chances maximum, including today, to convince the pilot that I'm really a human whilst avoiding *him* shooting at me! Else I'm stuck here forever. I vault through the forest, over dead branches and tree roots, as fast as I can. As I'm running I realise that the sounds of the helicopter are of it preparing to take off rather than land; I'm later than I thought! The sunlight cuts between the trees; I'm almost there! Leaping out into the clearing, I collide with a man standing in my way. There is an ache in my body and a gunshot ringing in my ears. After the helicopter leaves the man comes over to check on me. He has a familiar face. "I guess I can save my tinned meats; you will be my first meal tonight." he says, bringing his knife to my throat.

# 40k Theories

By Rebecca Davenport

(Set in the Warhammer 40K universe.)

Cousin

I know you deem our decision to to execute your lover after our investigations of [date] unfair, unjustified and indeed a personal attack but I assure you that it was no such thing. In hopes of fostering some much-needed unity within our order, I present one of the more startling and most obvious examples of the heresy he spouted.

I also wish to assure you that since you were the one reporting him for heresy (albeit mild) and you do not seem to have spoken more than you ought, as yet no suspicion of blame attaches to you, and we have no evidence that you delayed your report any longer than was convenient.

Attached is the document earlier spoken of. It was to be a submission to an amateur journal of ancient history, although which journal was unspecified.

Go with the Emperor, cousin

Alaric.

*Upon the Origins of the Empire*

*Our Empire stretches far and wide, facing danger on all sides: from insidious Chaos, the bloodthirsty Orks, the Tyrannids, even the decadent Eldar and numerous other threats.*



*Less well known is the history of the Empire. The Emperor himself, may He bless us all, can only be found in historical documents when He is already a young man, passionate and charismatic. Not unusual, you might say, for we have almost no records left to us from that terrible time. But the Emperor's cult was well-established in his lifetime, and since Holy Terra has never been ravaged, one would think that such things would have been collected within the first few hundred years...if they ever existed at all.*

*It is well known that the Warp is a dangerous place, with the creatures who live in it actively inimical towards man or, at best, apathetic. There are the lesser demons, a constant peril to our Astropaths, and the greater Warp Gods, of whom we know very little. Demons may enter our universe without our consent, by tunnelling back into the minds of the gifted; or with it, if we summon them. Summoning rituals are barely known indeed since we deem it unwise to investigate, but I have (during my years upon years of wandering amongst the lost and the damned) learned this: it involves souls. The greater the demon, logically, the more souls are required.*

*Consider a hypothetical situation: a colony ship, in the Dark Age of Technology, goes missing in a freak accident. Who would know? It was far too unimportant for any documentation to have survived the aeons. It, for instance, explodes at the very instant of entering the Warp. A gateway between there and here is established, and a bridge of a billion souls (human and animal) is built. The Warp God thus summoned would be instantly impressed with all the hopes, dreams and aspirations of a planet's worth of humans. Back then, since we had not for very many centuries used the Warp, most of its denizens would have no idea that another universe even existed. Suddenly, in an instant, this creature knows with a perfection beyond the perfect what it means to have a human soul. What it does not quite understand is what it means to have a human body. Flung into the Terran system, it creates a body more by newly birthed instinct than thought. This body looks human, and is young and energetic. It knows humanity inside out, and has a desperate, burning desire to mend its ills.*

*Such a man could rise far and fast in politics, and would gain easy respect from the military. Even the scattered fragments of the knowledge from a group of experts such as ride aboard colony ships would make him an effortless genius in tactics, strategy, galactic history and current events, physics, biology, genetics... Creating the Primarks and Legions would be child's play, after a little study. Consider also the Emperor's great lifespan, and the fact that while He always self-identified as human we can suppose that He had different, and vastly superior, genetics (else how could the clearly*

*superior Primarks and Space Marines be His children? He must have known). Why was that knowledge always suppressed, controlled? And why has only the Emperor, out of all humanity, ascended and become our god? No mere human has ever achieved this, and if there were not evidence to the contrary scholars would claim it impossible for us to do so, some fundamental inadequacy in our souls. Could it be, then, that our Emperor did not ascend to the Warp, He merely returned to it?*

*I shall probably never publish this article, for most Inquisitors are less gracious with freedom of intellect than he who watches this world, and things I have written here could well be deemed black heresy. I write it in the hope that someday someone will see it, and think.*

*Pray fervently to your Emperor, humans. He is listening, and he can return to answer those prayers. All he needs from you is your souls.*

My dear Alaric

My thanks for your forwarding of this document. It has helped me to rationalise my former spouse's death, and indeed to welcome it. I had not understood that he had gathered so much foul knowledge. I pray fervently indeed that I have escaped any taint, and shall soon be visiting a Chaplain to ensure that this is so.

Go with the Emperor's peace, cousin

Ciaphas



# The Accalia (Part One)

By Sanchit Sharma

*Foreword: This is set in a world where there are two major humanoid races – humans and kemonomimis. The latter are human-animal hybrids, the most obvious difference being the presence of animal tails and ears. There are also significant social differences – the most relevant being that wolf kemonomimis are even more social and hierarchical than humans due to their wolf sides.*

*A few decades ago, all hybrids (in France, at least) were kicked out of human settlements. This led to a severe shortage of food, and so many have turned to piracy. Despite the best efforts of the humans, the kemonomimis remain a thorn in their sides to this day.*

The Accalia was a small but fast and powerful skyship – much like the wolf that she was named after. Her sails were strong, the structure well-built and maintained. To any sky-sailor, the Accalia was all around a beautiful sight. Normally home to a crew of twenty to thirty of the pack when out, it was primarily used for raiding human ships so that the rest could get enough food to survive. Any excess or useless cargo they stole they were always able to trade at Port Skye, near the old human city of La Chaux-de-Fonds.

The humans normally stayed in central France, far enough away that Port Skye was relatively safe. This led to it becoming one of the biggest ports in the region, so there was a buyer for anything they found. Like any large port, there were a lot of different kinds of human-hybrids in Port Skye. Cats, like everywhere else, were the most common, but Skye had at some point been home to nearly every type of hybrid that existed, including owls.

squirrels, rabbits, foxes... And, of course, wolves. Only a small amount of these wolves were those that crewed the Accalia, and the rest of the pack only rarely visited the port, so they mixed little with the others. However, this was a sense of community beyond the pack, one shared by all species alike, so even those that were normally solitary were glad that it was there.



ooooo

Scree was sat in the crows nest, his usual spot. He surveyed the port, simply watching to see what or who was there, utterly relaxed. Like most of the pack, Scree's fur

was primarily a light grey, with some brown and white mixed in here and there. He had a typical bushy tail and pointed ears, with short grey hair and a generally small build. His clothing, a mix of brown and black across a waistcoat, shirt, and trousers, therefore suit his fur and hair quite well. He stood up and grabbed a small metal device – a pulley with a handle on the end – as he heard his name being called.

“SCREE! CAPTAIN WANTS YOU!”

Scree put the pulley onto one of the many ropes attached to the crows nest. Holding onto the handle, he pushed off and used the pulley to ride the rope down to another platform – one that allowed him to ride another rope onto the deck. He hung up the pulley next to one of the masts, so that anyone else going up would have access to one. Except for in times of combat, these were always kept in a communal pool.

Walking over to the captain, Scree saluted.

“Dwam–Alph– Uhh, I mean, Captain!”

Dwam frowned slightly, dismissing another wolf that he had been talking to.

“Scree. What have I told you about pack hierarchy whilst on the ship?”

“No pack ranks. Only ship ranks. Sorry, sir, it's just difficult to get used to.” he said, hanging his head.

“Exactly. Here I am not your alpha, but your *captain*.” Dwam emphasised the last word, and paused before continuing,

“But you know that I'm not going to make you return to the rest of the pack just for that. You're too good of a lookout, and if more of our brothers and sisters were like you, we would be set.”

Scree's ears perked up a little at that, giving away his

pleasure at the compliment. It was all he could do not to wag his tail as well – it was rare for Dwam–alpha to give such high praise.

“Anyway, that's not why I called you here. I've got a job for you. You've heard of the trader Ayana?”

“Umm, I think I know the name. Don't we normally get guns from her?”

“That's the one. Well, she recently came into some cannons. We'd lose so many fewer family members if we were able to bombard an enemy before boarding them, so I want those cannons – as many as you can get. About a month ago, just before you joined us on the ship, we picked up some electronics from a human trading vessel. Not sure exactly what they are, but we won't need most of them. See what you can get.”

“Yes, capt– Oh, wait. Aye aye, captain!” He smiled at the fact that he'd remembered the proper term.

“There's a good pup.” Dwam ruffled his hair and started to walk off, calling over his shoulder, “Oh, and take Gunnolf with you. He needs to get off the ship for a bit.”

Scree was so delighted at the praise that he nearly didn't catch the last command. When he registered it, his mood turned quickly. Gunnolf was a big, beefy guy that was normally one of the first into combat. He had a habit of turning aggressive at the drop of a hat, and wasn't easy to get along with. Scree tried to avoid him whenever possible.

But he had to follow the alpha's orders...

ooooo

After a little searching, Scree and Gunnolf came across a bar, with a sign in the window claiming that it was an “Olde

English Pub! For canines and their guests only!". Gunnolf's ears perked up at the sight, and Scree pretended not to notice.

"Scree! It's a pub!"

"Yes... So?"

"It's the..." Gunnolf stared at the sign, squinting slightly,

"Miches- Misschew-"

"The Mischievous Fox, yes. So what?"

"Haven't you ever heard of this place? It's like, *the* gathering place for canines! They're bound to know where Ayana is in there!"

Scree sighed. He knew that this was just an excuse for Gunnolf to drink, but if there really were lots of canines in there, maybe he would be able to find Ayana after all? Just as he was about to agree, Gunnolf spoke again.

"Hey, wait a minute. We're on ship terms now, and on the ship I outrank you. No bossing me about while we're out here. Come on, I say we go in."

He half-dragged Scree to the entrance, where a bear put one hand in front of them. This guy was even bigger than Gunnolf - and Scree hadn't even realised that was possible.

"ID?" he spoke in a bored drawl.

Gunnolf replied quickly, clearly knowing what to say.

"Gunnolf and Scree, with the Accalia. 18 and 15, wolf, ACL23 and ACL...?" he turned to Scree.

"ACL59."

The bear turned to a screen next to him and typed something. He jabbed at Gunnolf.

"You're fine. The kid isn't - too young."

"Oh, what a shame..." Scree pretended to be upset, secretly pleased that he wouldn't have to look after a drunk



packmate. "I guess we'll just have to look somewhere else, right Gunnolf?"

"Nah, it's cool. I'll go in, you wait out here. Won't be long!"

"What?!"

"Ship ranks. Stay." He pointed to a lamp post, and Scree just knew that Gunnolf was alluding to the dogs that humans sometimes kept. He would have tied him up if they'd happened to bring a rope.

"I'm not a fucking dog, Gunnolf!"

Scree was furious as he walked away, but he knew he had to do what Gunnolf said. Stupid ship ranks. Still, at least he wouldn't have to take the blame when everything fell apart. As Gunnolf went inside, he sat down on a bench, waiting and still fuming.

ooooo

After about an hour and a half, he had calmed down and was starting to get worried. A few times now he had approached the bouncer and asked to go in for a minute, just to see where Gunnolf was. Each time he had been refused. In the meantime no other canines had passed, so he couldn't even send a stranger in. Thus, Scree was over the moon when he saw a fox walking in his general direction.

"Umm, excuse me, miss?"

The fox had flowing red hair and looked to be only a little older than Gunnolf. She wore a costume that was reminiscent of the treasure hunter films of the old days, and was one of the most beautiful canines that Scree had ever come across.

"Yes?"

"Sorry, but could you do me a favour?" He stumbled on his words slightly, unused to talking to non-wolves

(especially female ones that were so pretty!), but kept going regardless. “One of my pack members went into that pub. He was only supposed to be a few minutes, but it's been an hour now and he still hasn't come out... I think something might have happened?”

“And you want me to go and check he's not just drunk himself stupid?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Why don't you just leave him?”

Scree looked at her, somewhat confused. “He's my packmate. I can't leave him.”

“I'll never understand why you wolves worry so much about your packs.” She sighed softly, scratching her head. “Still, it's no effort for me. What does he look like?”

Scree gave the woman a description, and she went inside. She returned a few minutes later, gently dragging along a clearly drunk Gunnolf.

“This your friend?”

“Friend isn't the right word, but yes. Thank you so much.”

“HEYWHY'SITSOBRIGHTANDWHERE'DTHEBOOZEGO?” Gunnolf was slurring by this point, and noticing the fox he nipped at her ear.

“WELL, AIN'T YOU A PRETTY ONE?”

Scree pulled him away and slapped him around the face.

“What the hell, Gunnolf?! You were supposed to be trying to find Ayana, and you just leave me out here whilst you drink yourself stupid?! Not that you weren't pretty fucking dumb to begin with. I got you out of there as part of the pack, so we're now running in pack hierarchy. That means you do what I tell you to, got it? Now sober up and get back to work.”

Immediately, Gunnolf went into full omega mode, submitting to the authority of his superior.

The fox merely looked on, curiously. Despite being social animals as well, foxes didn't have the rigid structure that wolves did – and they tended to be just fine on their own. So the interaction between pack members was a bit of a curiosity to her. But what was that name he just mentioned?

“Did you say you were looking for Ayana?”

Scree looked over, pausing from his berating Gunnolf.

“Huh? Yeah, we have a trade to negotiate.”

“Hmm.” She looked him over. “I'm one of her public negotiators. I'm sure we can sort something out – come with me.”

He paused, but followed, guiding Gunnolf in the process. He wagged his tail without noticing.

As she walked, she called over her shoulder, “And I'm sure we can get him some coffee or something, see if we can't get him in a fit state before a more formal meeting.”

Things were looking up...

# The Champion of Glacia (Chapter One – Castor)

By Joshua Carr

Upon the icy plains of the remote planet Glacia, there was a settlement that was battered by blizzards three quarters of the year; the other quarter was the equivalent of a harsh winter. However, even in such adversity, humans had managed to evolve and develop some sort of civilisation. They lived alongside winter versions of wildlife observed on Earth. Technologically inferior to other local planets, Glacia was regarded as a primitive world. It was a world that was always behind, but its people didn't mind. The settlement lived in the shadow of a mountain range that pierced the sky. It was metres away from the entrance to a cave whose enormous mouth was a marvel of nature. Huts were dotted across the landscape and light filtered through their thick windows. The cumulative effect made the huts look like beacons glowing in a thick fog. This settlement was considered to be the capital of this planet, Polaris.

In one of the largest huts the door swung open violently, awakening a young man asleep in his favourite rocking chair in front of a blazing fire. Eighteen years of age, the young man had dark hair that contrasted with the embers. Standing up to see the cause of his awakening, the sabre tooth necklace around his neck dangled as the young man could not hide his displeasure at being rudely awoken. The noise of the blizzard slamming against the windows was equal to hundreds of people knocking on your door when

you wanted to be alone. However, this was mere background noise to him as the young man looked down to find himself being stared at by a shaggy white rat. The rat did not look scared as if it had been caught, but rather was examining the young man.

Recognizing the rat, the young man shook his head and commented,

"Damned pest."

"Oi! Who you calling a pest?" squeaked the rat.

"I wasn't talking to you."

A boy of around six years of age burst through the open doorway. His cheeks were bright red with anger from the comment just made. With blond hair and multiple cuts and bruises over his arms and legs, this boy was the curious type and the young man was suspicious as to why he was here.

"That's not funny, Castor," screamed the boy.

"That's what you get for waking me up, Timmy."

Castor walked over to a basket full of chopped wood and threw some onto the fire. Cut from the finest pine trees, Castor looked at the flames given off the burning wood. It drew Castor in like a mesmerizing dance with its beauty. The flames were not just yellow, but streaks of green erupted in random directions. Castor felt like he was watching a performance. The bark on the wood curled up with Castor seeing the bark bubbling like a hot spring in small pockets. Like a dramatic piece of music, Castor was captivated, hanging onto every rise and fall. The wave of heat given off was only further drawing Castor in, allowing his mind to wander. It was only when one of the logs collapsed at the bottom of the fireplace did Castor snap

back to reality. It had only been a few seconds, but Castor found himself surprised that he allowed himself to detach from reality so easily. It was unlike him to do that, but perhaps it was because he wanted to be somewhere else. After all, he had a clear idea why Timmy was here.

"What are you doing here, Timmy?"

"We wanted to ask you something."

"And what's that?"

"Where's your animal spirit?"

Sighing heavily, Castor wanted to be distracted once again. Pressing his tongue on the roof of his mouth to avoid snapping, Castor was employing years of practice of how to answer these kinds of questions. Timmy was just a boy whose naive curiosity meant no harm, but he was too young to understand the consequences of such curiosity.

"I don't have one."

Lowering his head, Castor felt ashamed. This answer did not satisfy Timmy and with the annoyingly inquisitive nature that only a child has, he continued to press:

"What? But everyone has one? Why are you hiding it?"

"I don't have one. I wasn't born with one."

Timmy detected the sharpness in Castor's voice. It was hardly subtle. Becoming increasingly agitated, Castor stood there hoping Timmy would just leave. Timmy was disappointed by Castor's answers lowering his head and whimpering,

"Oh? ... Okay then ... Come on, Ratty. Let's go home."



Ratty scurried across the floorboards heading towards Timmy. Timmy then bent his knees and positioned his right arm like a ramp. Castor watched as Ratty started to climb Timmy's arm. Ratty started to disappear. It was like Ratty was fading in and out of existence. By the time Ratty reached Timmy's shoulder, it had completely vanished. There was no sign of it ever having been on Timmy's arm whatsoever apart from very shallow footprints on Timmy's jumper.

This was one of nature's magical phenomena. Ratty had returned back into Timmy's soul where it would stay till it wanted to come back out into the real world. It was an understated process that humans had taken for granted, but it made Castor's heart sink. It was something he never experienced and it was an everyday reminder of how he was different. Timmy then ran out of the house, closing the door behind him and not realising the effect he had on Castor. Solemn, Castor rolled his eyes and sat back down in the rocking chair.

On the table next to him, there was a thermodynamics textbook which he had been reading before he took a break. Open face down, the spine of the textbook was bent and had numerous coloured coded tabs notifying him of key chapters. He could have used the internet, but there was a charm about using a book that Castor enjoyed. He had fallen asleep due to tiredness from trying to revise all the principles needed for his exams. To Castor, this learning was a necessary pain barrier he had to overcome in order to build his future.

His eyes caught sight of a photograph on the mantelpiece. It was of his father; once a pioneering scientist and one of the first Glacian academics to get to the forefront of his

field. His father was now enjoying early retirement and Castor wanted to emulate a similar career path to him.

However, he was too annoyed to get back to work. Timmy wasn't the first person to ask about his lack of animal spirit. He'd had to put up with it for as long as he could remember and it was like listening to a broken record to him. There was no reason he knew of why he didn't have a spirit partner. No matter how much he researched, there was no explanation. It was a universal truth; every human was born with an animal spirit. It shaped who he was. He always had a lingering sense of inferiority because of it. It made his childhood difficult being so different and there was fear at the back of his mind that this lack of animal spirit would hold him back.

Before Castor went too far, he reeled his thoughts back in and began to focus on something else. Turning them towards the cave whose shadow Polaris was in, he sat there pondering,

"I still can't believe no one's fully explored that cave yet. Who knows what's down there? There's a probably a fortune ready for the taking."

He then remembered the legend about the cave that he was taught at school from an early age,

"Those who seek the riches of the Glacial Labyrinth must be chosen by the Gods. Those aren't worthy will wander the caverns for all eternity and be driven mad by the riches they seek. May the one chosen find the true treasure of the Labyrinth and become the Champion of Glacia."

This was a very old legend. The oldest in fact. Castor thought it was nothing more than a cute fairytale to scare little kids away from going into the cave on their own.



However, it did illustrate how powerful superstition is. No one had ever explored the caves and come out alive. It perplexed Castor, but he guessed it was because the tunnels were easy to get lost in or it was impossible to get back out once you go past a certain point.

"I wonder what's down there ..." he pondered.

This train of thought was interrupted by his parents arriving back home. His mother and father were in their mid sixties with shiny white hair characteristic of older Glacians. Wearing very thick coats, his parents had returned from shopping. His father's animal spirit then flew in above their heads. It was an eagle whose body had perfectly adapted to the tough conditions it had to deal with – the perfect compromise between thickness of feathers and the optimal aerodynamic physique.



Landing on its perch, the eagle shook its body causing all the snow on its feathers to fall to the ground. His mother's animal spirit then walked in. A graceful deer, it was covered in a thick coat of the softest brown fur and it had wider hooves with small spikes at the bottom to help it

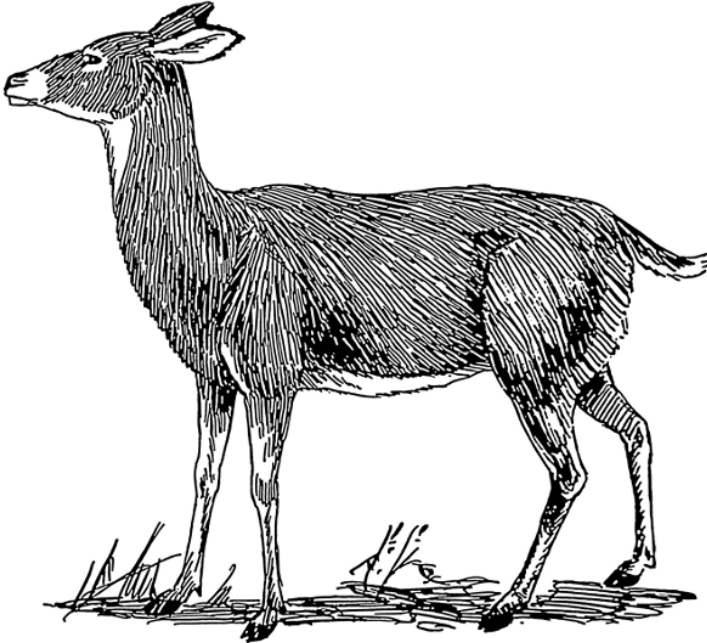
navigate through the snow and ice. Taking off their coats,  
his mother asked,

"Wasn't that Timmy here earlier?"

"Yeah."

"What he was doing here?"

"You know why ..."



His mother and father looked at each other knowing that  
this was going to be a difficult evening.

"Oh not again," commented his mother.

"There's nothing we can do. People are going to be curious,"  
his father replied.

Castor sat there weighing his options whether to ask again  
or not. His desire for the truth was becoming  
unquenchable. He needed to know.

"Why don't I have an animal spirit?" he asked.

His parents were dreading this question and knew how this was going to end.

"You're not old enough yet," his father replied.

"But I'm eighteen!"

"It really doesn't matter," said his mother trying to prevent another argument, but it was no use.

"I need a reason, Dad."

"Enough, Castor!"

"It's natural for everyone to have an animal spirit. Every kid at nursery knows that. Why am I different? What am I? Unnatural?"

"ENOUGH!!"

Both of them were getting more and more irate by the second. Seething with frustration at the other's stubbornness, neither them wanted to give each other eye contact. Castor turned his head to the thing closest in his line of vision, the window. What he saw dissipated his anger and frustration and replaced it with shock and fear.

"Dad?"

Both his parents noted the sudden change in tone and facial expression.

"What is it, Castor?" asked his father.

"Look!" responded Castor as he pointed at the window.

Both his parents followed the trajectory and their faces turned pale when they saw was going on.

The relentless blizzard had stopped.

# Explorers

By Charles Shoesmith

The once tiny grey planet now almost entirely filled the small porthole. George Russell could see the slight irregularities in the color of the surface and, if he studied it closely enough, the suggestions of mountains. Proxima Centauri b, the globe that had been the geologist's goal for close to a decade now seemed to be within hand's reach.

He managed to tear his gaze away from the opening to look around his surroundings. The cabin, which had been so cramped with the Commander and Sanjay occupying the other seats during the practice sessions, was now oppressively spacious.

His attention was drawn by the flashing on the control screen in front of him. As he had expected – the time for orbital insertion had come.

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The memorial service was scheduled to take place in the Odyssey's crew lounge. While the name was certainly appropriate given the similar durations of ship's mission and Odysseus' adventures away from Ithaca, those better versed in the classics had pointed out with some trepidation the ill-fated nature of those adventures.

The room was large enough for those gathered there to be able to see the gentle upward curve of the floor. Through

the strengthened plastic panoramic window the view extended all the way to the collision shield that blocked out the starfield in front of the ship. About half way along the central shaft to the shield were the two masses, attached to opposite sides of the shaft by metal beams, whose rotation, in the opposite direction to the habitation ring, ensured the ship had no net angular momentum - a great help with maneuvering.

As Russell had expected he had only been joined by Doctor Kingsley Freedman and Peter Haigh, the astrophysicist. The Commander had long ago started to act distant and had hardly been seen by the rest of the crew since the accident. Sanjay had obvious reasons to be absent. The atmosphere in the room was frigid. Now that he thought back to it Russell realized that the situation had far deeper roots than the accident. Six people can't stay cooped together for almost ten years without some tension building up, but Ewelina had kept them all together.

The Doctor was the first to speak, "This is going as well as expected. I'm going, there's no point in sitting here just doing nothing."

"I know that Sanjay blames you two," said Haigh after the Doctor had left, "but you know, it was bound to happen. Just six people, a twenty year round trip, the first interstellar mission ever mounted by mankind. It would have been a miracle if we had managed no casualties."

"Thanks, it's been hard the past few days. Everybody seems just seems to have become so withdrawn after Ewelina's death."

"There's nothing surprising about that. This has hardly

been a relaxing journey, especially the last few years, locked up, isolated, all news from home more than three years old!"

"Locked up?"

"Well, that's exactly what I feel like – none of our training could have really prepared us for this. You know, I never considered myself the least bit sociable, it was all too much effort really. But now ... well, I'd never thought how much I'd miss the little things – the idle conversation with the guys in the office, just being near people."

"Have you talked to the Commander or Freedman about this?"

"What could Freedman do, sedate me for the rest of the trip? And Holly, well, I'm starting to think that our dear leader's more messed up than me – when was the last time you saw her? I can only guess what's going on in her head – the same conditions as for all of us, plus the pressure of command, that's enough to drive anyone mad. This mission was bound to be a fiasco, let me tell you, just the six of us with not even a psychiatrist on board?"

"Well, we were all evaluated by the experts back home before the launch."

"What do they know? We've never done anything like this before and they didn't have the time and money to do the proper tests beforehand. You know as well as everybody on board that this mission was the Agency's last shot at reigniting public interest in the space program – humanity's first great heroic voyage beyond the solar system. Not that it seems to be working, there's nothing

romantic about an uneventful ten year journey. Well, uneventful till now, at least. Though I doubt this is the kind of publicity they'd want."

Russell paused before answering, "Well, there's nothing we can do about that now. Just a few more weeks and we'll be there, hopefully that'll take our minds off things."

"Perhaps for you, down on the planet, but for me, stuck up here with Freedman? What are you being so stoic about anyway! You've had it far harder than me, and not just with the whole Ewelina thing. Didn't you leave somebody back on Earth?"

"That's neither here nor there. Look, it's certainly been hard but we all knew what we were letting ourselves in for when we signed up."

"But that's my point," interrupted Haigh, "none of us did, not really."

"Just think of how important this mission could be - isn't that enough to keep you going. Don't tell me that you've become one of those spaceflight skeptics."

"Oh, I don't doubt the scientific merits of this expedition, just my need to be here. I could have just as well waited for you to send the data back to Earth. When I think of all the work I could have done in these ten years if I had stayed ... God, there's no use talking to you anyway, is there? You're almost as bad as the Commander! Might as well be a damned robot for all the emotion you show!"

At these words he stormed out of the room. Russell

thought about going after him but knew that it wouldn't do any good. His colleague's outburst had shocked him. He realized that Haigh had been right, he had been cultivating a somewhat stony demeanor which hardly endeared him to his shipmates, but beneath all of that he was finding it all just as difficult as the rest of them. He had hoped that astrophysicist would reassure him but instead he had gotten this.

Not so long ago Peter Haigh had seemed to be the best adjusted of the Odyssey's crew. He had never really fitted in back on Earth and his excitement at exploring the cosmos was almost palpable. Russell had no doubt that his enthusiasm was genuine at first but over the years it had clearly become a mask, just like his. A mask that couldn't withstand the shock of Ewelina's death. If this voyage can break a man like Peter Haigh, Russell thought, than what hope have the rest of us got?

ooooo

It had been far easier than Russell expected to plot the orbital entry path. After all this was hardly what the Lander had been designed for and spacecraft navigation was certainly not his area of expertise. But the computing power of the craft far exceeded that of those in which humanity had first made its tentative steps into the expanse of space, well over a century ago. It involved little more than telling the machine where he wanted it to go and overriding the safety warnings.

He felt the short burn of the thrusters and glanced at the fuel readout on his right. He had used far too much in just setting the Lander's course after he had decoupled it from



the Odyssey and the gauge now read little over fifty percent. This was going to be a one way trip.

ooooo

Russell stood outside Sanjay Rao's door for several minutes. It was very common for people to become romantically involved on even far shorter missions but he and Ewelina had been the Odyssey's only couple.

Obviously her death had hit him the hardest. As had happened so often over the past few days Russell's mind flashed back to the incident. The troubles had started over a week ago when the ship's sensors detected an exceptionally dense concentration of what Peter postulated were leftover fragments of a collision between two asteroids. The region of space was too large to go around so they had no choice but to risk going straight through. The shield would protect them from head on impacts but not those from other angles.

It was a minor impact from one of these angles when they were about half way through that had necessitated that disastrous space-walk. They all had basic training in ship functions and repairs and Ewelina, the Chief Engineer, had happened to ask Russell to assist her that day.

The damage wasn't serious and they had had no problems repairing it in under an hour. They were going back to the airlock when it happened. Ewelina, moving in front of him, suddenly jerked and went limp. Russell starred as if in a trance as he saw air and several large globules of blood escape from her suit near the chest. It took him several seconds to realize what was going on. Even in this region

of space the probability was less than one in a million but it had happened – a tiny remnant of the long gone asteroids had gone straight through her body. The two were tethered together so he had no problem in getting her back in the ship and to sickbay, but it was too late.



Russell knew that Peter was right and that there was nothing that he and Freedman could have done to save her but he knew that Sanjay, who was still deep in grief and from whom he had managed to keep his distance till now, would not see it that way. Still, Russell knew that they couldn't keep avoiding each other on the planet or the ten year journey back so he rung the buzzer by the door.

It took a while for it to open and reveal the disheveled looking atmospheric scientist.

“I considered not letting you in when I saw on the viewscreen who it was but I decided that I wanted to hear what you’ve got to say for yourself.”

Russell was silent for a long while. It had taken a lot of effort to build up the courage to go and see Sanjay but he only realized now that he didn’t know what he wanted to say.

Finally he managed to find the words, “Look, I know what you’re going through. We’re all taking it hard. But there’s no use trying to stay isolated. We’re going to be together for a long time.”

“How can you know what I’m going through? How can any of you know? I loved her! When I think of how easily it could have been you, if its course was just a few meters off. It should have been you! She was better than any of you!” There was another pause during which Sanjay seemed to calm down. “Whatever you might think, I don’t blame any of you. It’s just that when I look at your face, when I even think about you, I can’t help reliving that day.” Another pause. “I sometimes wonder, what is this all for? Can it really be worth it now, after what we’ve lost?” “Spaceflight has always been dangerous; there’s been plenty of loss of life before. It’s never easy but when you think of all that we can still ...”

Here Rao, voice rising once more, interrupted him, “How dare you refer to her like a statistic! How can any scientific find be worth a life like hers! I’ve been speaking

to Peter and he's right, you've got no feeling, you're barely human!"

He suddenly swung his fist at Russell but he dodged it easily. This seemed to have drained Rao of all his energy. He collapsed on a chair and the geologist caught sight of tears in his eyes. "Go, just go!" Russell thought about what he could do but his mind came up blank, so he left.

ooooo

Russell felt the acceleration die away and confirmed on the display that it had been the last burn in the sequence. He turned again to the porthole, now filled entirely with the planet's landscape. He gazed across the tall mountains and lifeless, darkened valleys to the horizon where he thought that he could just see the landing site under the faint gleam of the thin atmosphere.

The original mission protocol had called for the Odyssey to orbit the planet for several days, collecting photographs and other data before putting down its crew. With the Lander's limited instruments, however, Russell had decided to forgo that part of the plan. With the planet's surface moving swiftly below him, he prepared for landing.

ooooo

Ewelina, moving in front of him, suddenly jerked and went limp. Russell starred as if in a trance as he saw air and several large globules of blood escape from her suit near the chest. Slowly a high pitched whine began to penetrate the silence of space. It sounded to him like a demonic

scream or howl that filled his head until he could bear it no longer.

He sat up in his bed in a cold sweat. It took him a few moments to realize that he could still hear the sound. The crew life sign alarm. He checked the screen by his door. Sanjay.

By the time he had finished dressing and made it to sickbay the alarm had stopped. He walked into the long room to see Haigh waiting in Freedman's office, a small alcove at one end screened off by sliding glass panels. He walked up to join him and glanced towards the other end. The farthest bed was surrounded by medical equipment beneath which he could just see Sanjay's prone form. The Doctor stood nearby examining a display on one of the machines.

"Attempted suicide," Haigh spoke up.

"What?"

"He just walked out of an airlock. The Commander was on duty and she managed to suit up and bring him back in as soon she could but he was still out there a long time."

"I just can't believe that ..." Russell started but stopped when he saw Freedman walking up to them.

"How is he?" asked Haigh.

"Honestly, it's a miracle that he's still alive now. I've done everything I could but he was exposed to a vacuum for almost three minutes. I'll doubt that he'll make it through the day."

"I went to see him yesterday," said Russell, "He was in a bad state, I might even say he was depressed, but this?"

"You knew he was depressed and didn't tell anybody?" shouted Haigh, suddenly furious.

"Who should I have told? I had no idea that this would happen. What could I have done? What would you have done in my place?" asked Russell, getting angry himself.

"Well to start with, if I was somebody he couldn't help but associate with Ewelina's death, I would never have gone to see him. Not in his state. Goddamn you George, I wouldn't be surprised if that visit pushed him over the edge."

Russell was dumbstruck. Haigh walked towards the door but paused and turned to face Russell before leaving, "Do the crew, what's left of it anyway, a favor and stay down on the planet."

"He won't say mad forever," said Freedman after Haigh had left.

"I'm not so sure. You know, he's right, I'd be mad myself if I was him."

"Don't be too hard on yourself; none of us saw it coming."

They stood in silence for a while before the doctor spoke up again, "The second casualty in a week, is this all really worth it?"

Russell was surprised, "You know, Sanjay said the same thing to me yesterday."

"You know that he hadn't been himself since her death. Deep down he believed in the mission as much as any of you. No, I've been thinking about this for a while now. What's so special about that rock anyway? The probe confirmed what we all knew--it's a barren hunk of dirt, pretty much identical to Mars. Doesn't even have a proper name yet. All this will give humanity is a collective feeling of self satisfaction at reaching another arbitrary goal."

"Don't tell me that you've lost faith in the mission. You know very well that the probe only scratched the surface, we have no idea what we'll find down there. And even if we find nothing new or interesting, isn't that, what did you call it, 'collective feeling of self satisfaction' worth it?"

"Well it's certainly not worth half a trillion dollars. Get real. We all know what's happening back home. I volunteered in the refugee camps after the last African Wars. I'm sure you saw pictures on the news, well, they didn't tell a tenth of the true story. When I think of what that money could have done there. International aid, medical research, hell, even infrastructure investments, all sacrificed for this glorified camping trip. All the lives sacrificed, and to these we now have to add two more."

Russell had no answer to that, all he could do was ask, "If you believe that than why did you come on the mission?"

"Oh, I believed in it all ten years ago, but people can change in a decade. You of all people should know that."

They stood together in silence for a while before a noise from one of the machines surrounding Rao called the doctor away. Russell continued to look at the two of them

for a few minutes until he finally returned to his cabin.

ooooo

A touch of a button instructed the spacecraft to begin its landing procedure. Russell felt himself being pushed into his seatbelt as it accelerated downwards. Though incredibly thin, the atmosphere had already started to buffet the fast moving Lander. The displays in front of Russell showed him it using up the last of its fuel attempting to steady its trajectory and check its speed. He could just manage to move his head so that through the porthole he could see the faint red glow coming off the heat shield beneath.

He could hear nothing over the almost unbearable noise but a sharp upwards jolt told him that the giant parachutes had at last been deployed. The displays finally showed the speed to be decreasing but through the porthole, now bereft of the red glow, the ground still seemed to be approaching alarmingly fast. There was something almost hypnotic about it, and Russell was unable to tear his gaze away. He lost track of time and yet still the ground kept coming. He could see finer and finer details until, suddenly, there was an unearthly bang, he felt an incredible jolt, and everything went black.

ooooo

Russell drifted down the main corridor in the central shaft and through the Lander airlock which, with the hanger bay door closed, was fully open. Beyond the rotating ring there was no gravity on the Odyssey. He had wanted some time to be alone so had volunteered for the duty of checking the small vessel's systems. This was meant to be Ewelina's job, he thought bitterly as he moved



into the control cabin.

He switched on the power on the main console and instructed the computer to perform a diagnostic. He was moving towards a locker near the door to get the equipment necessary for the manual check when he heard a deafening noise and wall came forward to meet him. The pain was terrible but Russell managed to quickly collect his senses. He checked his body and was satisfied that he was uninjured. The cabin also seemed to be free of damage but he could feel that something had set the ship spinning and that air was escaping through the still open airlock at an alarming rate. From the other side of the airlock he could hear a cacophony of different alarms.

He strapped himself in one of chairs and instructed the computer to close the main hatch. That should buy me some time, he thought. He tried to contact somebody on the bridge using the internal comms system but all he got was an error message. The same when he tried to tap into ship's internal and external sensors to try to find out what had happened.

It was then that he noticed a flashing message on the panel controlling the radio. Incoming signal.

Intrigued, he opened the channel. The picture on the was fuzzy and distorted, the radio was not meant to be used inside the hanger, but he could just make out the bridge and the form of the Commander.

“Thank God you're alive George. It's hell up here.”

“What happened?”

“Multiple asteroid fragment impact, we've got hull

breaches everywhere, the aft engines and most of the habitation ring have been taken out. I'll try to send you some images over the radio, the direct line to the hanger seems to have been cut."

The pictures that appeared on the second screen sent shivers down Russell's spine. They were clearly from one of the pairs of fore and aft cameras on the habitation ring – Russell assumed it was the one closest to the bridge. He could see breaches all along the section of the spine between the ring and shield but it was on the other side that the real damage was. There was hardly anything left. Looking near the bottom of the two images he saw with horror that only one of the ring support beams, and less quarter of the ring itself, had survived.

"What about the others?" he asked.

"There's no way they could have made it. They were both in the ring sections that we lost. I just managed to close the doors to the bridge before too much air was gone but there are too many leaks to fix up. Main power's gone and the batteries are being drained fast. I won't last long either. Listen George, what state's the Lander in?"

"What?"

"I said, what state is the Lander in?"

He glanced at the forgotten diagnostic panel. The program had finished and all the readouts were green. "It's fine," he said.

"Good, now listen to me. There's nothing we can do for the Odyssey, but we can salvage the mission. Launch the Lander and reprogram the computer to set course for Proxima b.

You should have just enough fuel to reach it and land safely.”

“What are talking about?”

“Have you gone deaf, launch the Lander!”

“I can’t leave you.”

“There’s nothing you can do. Just go! The impact threw us off course. Every minute you delay decreases your chances.”

“It’s impossible, I won’t make it.”

“Stop your damn whining! You’ve got enough food, water and air to keep three people alive for over a month.”

Russell paused, the Commander knew what she was talking about. He began to believe that he could make it. Then he thought back on the events of the past days.

“You know Commander, I’m starting to wonder why we should bother.”

“Have you gone crazy, I’m giving you an order!”

“Let’s cut the crap Holly, even if I do make it what will I be able to do on my own?” He laughed, “I doubt that the three of us could have done anything useful.”

“Have you been talking to Kingsley, he was a dammed fool!”

“He made some good points. Think of how much the mission has cost so far, in every possible meaning of the word.”

“Look, Kingsley saw some terrible things after the Wars, it’s no surprise that he was fixated on the aftermath but are you honestly stupid enough to think that it would have been any better if there had been no space program. Think of all the benefits of the Moon and Mars bases have brought. The new discoveries, the technologies we never dreamed of, the worldwide increase in quality of life.”

“You’re reaching a bit with that last point, aren’t you

Holly? That trend has been there for hundreds of years.” He laughed again. “Anyway, we aren’t about some jaunts to the Moon or Mars, but this mission. I’m starting to think that man just wasn’t meant to go this far. Just think how fragile our little group had gotten. All it took to break Sanjay, and hell, even Peter, was one tragic accident. You know what I’m talking about, why else would you have kept yourself locked in your quarters or on the bridge for so long.”

The Commander didn’t answer for a long time. Russell saw through the static that the anger was leaving her face but for the first time also noticed her heavy breathing, the effects of the escaping air starting to show themselves.

“God George, you don’t know how difficult it was. I had to be the Commander for ten years, no breaks, no lapses. I had to be strong and confident for you. I had to seem all-knowing when I was as in over my head as you were. Eventually it just became easier to keep myself apart from all of you.

When Ewelina died, well, it felt like I’d failed my duty to keep the crew together. And when you started to drift apart, to break down, and I had no idea what to do. You know, I came damn close to believing Kingsley’s nonsense but I never forgot why I had come here. Damn you George, remember. Didn’t you stay awake at night looking at the stars, wanting to be out here? Didn’t all of us? Hasn’t every child on Earth? Since the dawn of history what has defined humanity has been its desire to grow, expand, explore.”

“But the cost?” Russell asked, now less confident of himself.

“This is the first mission, we were unprepared. It’ll be better next time. Think of the cost if we didn’t go, if we settled, rested on our laurels, stagnated. We’d lose the very thing that makes us human.” She remained silent for some time, letting the words sink in, but eventually said, now with some clear difficulty, “Think what it will feel like to be the first human to stand on an extrasolar planet.”

“I’ll never make it back.”

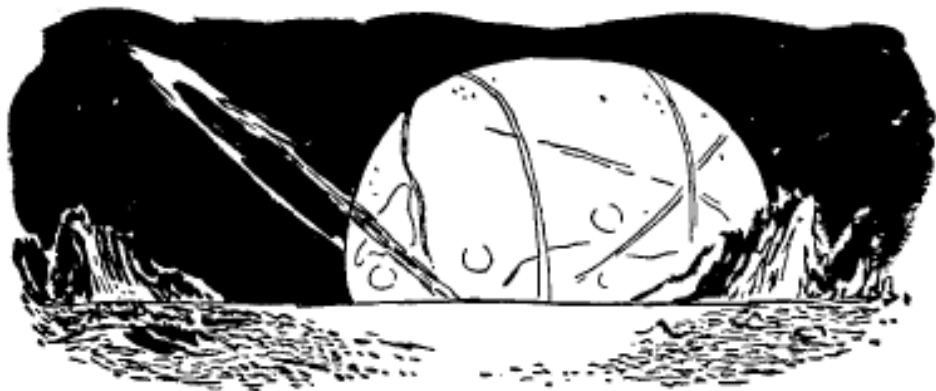
“Does that matter?”

There was a final silence before he said, “Thank you Commander”, and instructed the computer to prepare for a launch that corrected for the Odyssey’s spin. With another button he opened the hanger doors. Fortunately this circuit was separate from the main connection to the ship. As the Lander came clear the radio signal momentarily strengthened and Russell could hear a faint whisper before the bridge’s battery died, “Good luck and Godspeed.”

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He opened his eyes slowly. His gaze was drawn again to the porthole through which he could see a faint blue sky. He ran another diagnostic and was satisfied that there was no damage to the emitter that would send word of his findings back to Earth. He checked that his suit was secure before

stepping out through the airlock onto the grey dust. The first man on Proxima Centauri b. He would have to hurry, the long journey hadn't left him with much supplies.







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