



# The Illuminata

## Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

### From Abinidine to Zykorander: Names in Fiction

By Bret Funk

One of the questions I am often asked is: where do you come up with all those names? Since I am an unknown author of relative obscurity, I can only imagine that best-selling fantasy authors hear that question even more often. The answer is not particularly glamorous. I neither consult a magical device (unless you count the occasional Yea or Nae from a certain 8-ball in my possession) nor do I have access to a team of underlings whose sole purpose is to string together letters into passable names. I (and I imagine most fantasy authors) utilize a combination of tricks and resources, all topped off with a tiny bit of imagination.

First of all, it's important to realize that there is no correct or incorrect way to come up with names. It may sound odd to hear of an ogre named Ellorien, a decidedly Elf-ish sounding name, but no one gets to choose his name, and therefore no one should criticize a person about his name. (Admittedly, this is an idealized perspective, one that a lifetime with the last name "Funk" should have thoroughly disabused me of). Perhaps Ellorien's parents were particularly enamored of Elven culture.

Or perhaps he was raised by kindly Elves who did not know any good ogre names. In any case, an out-of-place name might be a story in itself, and any criticism of it might be a shortcoming of the reader, enslaved to conventions that an author may be trying to ignore.

A writer can choose the straight and narrow, naming his characters Johns, Jens, Jeremys, and Jessicas. Contemporary names and their derivatives are more often found in horror (which frequently take place in contemporary settings) and science fiction (where the names of today have survived into the future), but

I have read a fair number of fantasy works whose heroes were named Simon, Michael, Paul, or any of a hundred other names found in the pages of my phone book.

A writer can also choose to go in the other direction, creating a whole new world, with fully developed languages and cultures, each with a unique history and naming convention. Tolkien springs to mind, and though I'm sure he drew inspiration for at least some of his names from other sources, I credit him with writing books filled with place and character names I had never seen before and for which I have found no analogues (from an earlier work than his, at least). Of course, spontaneous creation of an entire naming system carries its own set of drawbacks, like an entire culture whose names start with "EO", making it very difficult for certain readers to keep track of which horseman did what.

In developing one's own names the simplest thing outside of using a standard name from one's own language is to take a name from someone else's. A little research into the naming rules in the Middle East, India, China, Scandinavia, or anywhere in between and you can develop names that sound exotic and original to your friends, but which on the streets of Singapore or some other far-off locale would be akin to shouting out "Bob!"

Names and naming styles from history can be used in a manner similar to names from other cultures, as can names from mythology and legend. The older or more obscure the legend, the more likely no one will realize it's not a name you made up yourself.

Of course, you can also steal the names you like from other books. Names can't be copyrighted. I thought Melanie Rawn's character "Rohan" was a particularly unique name, until I realized a few years later that Tolkien had named a whole group of Riders (and probably a place) the same thing. And of course, a little more research reveals that "Rohan" is a name of Indian descent meaning "to ascend", though whether Tolkien or Rawn knew of that at the time, or legitimately thought they had created a new name, one can only guess.

You don't have to limit yourself to taking names from characters either. You can take any word and

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# To What Degree, and Who?

by Terry Crotinger/montanasings

Two subtle examples of speculative fiction in media this Spring are a deodorant commercial and a well respected author's work represented by animation. A commercial; a movie. Media aimed at adults; the other for children. Degree deodorant; Dr. Theodor Geisel. Both could be labeled Altiverse (Alternative History) or speculative fiction.

Unilever, known for airing controversial commercials for Degree deodorant recently offered two more that combined whimsical gadgets and futuristic themes. The first—a man is late to work and his wrist timepiece tells him he has less than 60 seconds before he is to meet with his boss. An ungainly contraption shoots both underarms with deodorant, and he races to the crowded Metro street where he realizes a large and berserk Digi-pet (canine variety) begins to chase him (programming corruption?). Running into an alley to avoid this armor-clad pooch, he is able to jump a chain link fence where he allocates (“borrows”?) a personal one-manned vehicle—reminiscent of the 1970s astronaut Jet Packs with a touch of Star Gate detail—and flies this to the roof of his office building. He parks in this upright position and rushes to the meeting with his holographic, mechanical boss who smiles slowly, almost malevolently before breaking out in complete robotic sunshine. Cut away to our subject/employee smiling confidently knowing he beat the clock... Every aspect of this commercial is dark and brooding once Mr. Employee is on the street. Not simply that the street is in shadow, but that the people appear gray, tired. The conference room where he meets with his boss is bright and open, partitioned by large expanses of glass. But even that looks dull and aged with a patina reminiscent of old detective stories. In the end, remembering this is a commercial is quite forgotten since the plot leaves the viewer slightly frustrated. Mr. Employee gets to his meeting, but why does his boss look subtly evil, and what is this man's job?

The other commercial is more at-home and our subject is being brought pizza by a robot-servant (obviously, a much older model). The plot for this commercial isn't as heart pounding or dramatic—lackluster, but amusing. The brooding, grimy feel is the same. That this is aired on SPIKE's “men's” channel is likely to keep many viewers from seeing this. Here too, you forget this is a deodorant commercial. The Degree website gives no clue about the nature of these ads, though the edgy feel persists. A series of

these commercials would make interesting viewing, especially if they continue using futuristic themes and CGI (computer generated graphics) to beef up the gadgetry.

Change the channel from shadowy commercials to Dr. Geisel's bright, animated movie...

Was America aware, decades past, that Dr. Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss, master rhyming poet, artist and moral storyteller was a scientific and technological visionary? For the uninitiated in children's “classic” literature, Dr. Seuss introduced the concept of spatial perspective as the reader learns that an entire population and political structure resides on a world no bigger than a dust bunny's navel. (A speck of dust.) This world is being carried on a pink clover, no more remarkable than any other garden-variety clover. Further, this speck is being eyed, shouted at and protected by an elephant with the usual large, floppy ears and that because of said ears, can hear at least one of the inhabitants, the Mayor of *Who*-ville.

Spatial perspective notwithstanding, the book, Horton Hears A Who! (Random House, 1954) contains good vs. evil themes, “the challenge” and the moral of the day—fairly standard in children's literature. However, the culture of *Who*-ville bears scrutiny. Taking license from Dr. Seuss' cartoons and drawings, the feature-length movie illustrates that the *Who*-world gravity is heavier than the human world, though the sphere is lighter than ever imagined. How else would *Who*-Dads mow their grassy and generously curved roofs without physical injury? Because of this gravitational difference, the inhabitants must also be very strong, relatively speaking, though the slenderness of their form belies this. The gadgets and doodads and whimsy in rhyme range from a table that seats 1 son and daughters numbering 99... shaped in an “S” that moves all the seats, conveyor-belt style while parents give attention to each... (Whew, rhyming is hard work!...)... to a telescopic-like domed observatory containing enough physics experiments to make the creators of “Mouse Trap” downright depressed that they did not think of it first (another antiquated amusement c.1963, designed by Martin Glass and Harvey Kramer/Milton Bradley).

Dr. Seuss' aim was to moralize humans of young age and small size though with his imagination amok, he inadvertently touched on the scientific concept of space, size and spatial integrity. Opening the eyes of the young mind to concepts of size was not limited to

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# Suspended Animation and Space Travel

by Joe Vadalma

The biggest problem with space travel is that it takes so long to get anywhere. The Voyager 2 space probe traveled at 38,000 miles an hour, yet took two years to reach Jupiter and twenty-two years to reach Neptune. It would take it 74,000 years to reach the nearest star. Even if it were possible to travel at the speed of light, it would take 4.2 years to reach Proxima Centauri. Other stars in our galaxy range anywhere from ten to 100,000 light years away. Even Star Trek's Enterprise would take a long time getting to the other end of the galaxy.

One solution to this problem is to be placed in suspended animation during the voyage. This technique was used in *2001, A Space Odyssey* and the *Alien* series of movies. The question is whether it is possible to slow down a human being's metabolism without killing the person. Some mammals, such as bears and marmosets, hibernate during the winter. When a bear hibernates, its body temperature drops to 88 degrees Fahrenheit, and its heart rate drops to eight beats a minute. Some people claim that they can go into a trance state and slow their heart beats.

Researchers at North Carolina State University have identified two genes that mastermind hibernation. They've found that these genes can be made to work in similar ways in humans. The PDK-4 gene, for example, is switched on by starvation to conserve glucose. One theory is that melatonin, the hormone which responds to light, may be involved.

One lab has been able to place a number of mice in suspended animation for up to 24 hours by reducing the concentration of oxygen. They have used carbon monoxide and hydrogen sulfite gases to accomplish this. This allows them to reduce their temperatures as much as eleven degrees and their metabolic rate tenfold. The researchers from the University of Washington and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle put mice in a chamber filled with air laced with 80 parts per million (ppm) of hydrogen sulfide (H<sub>2</sub>S) - the malodorous gas that gives rotten eggs their stink. In the study, Doctor Roth and his colleagues found that the mice stopped moving and appeared to lose consciousness within minutes of breathing the air and H<sub>2</sub>S mixture. The animals' breathing rates dropped from the normal 120 breaths per minute to less than 10 breaths per minute. During exposure their metabolic rates dropped by an astonishing 90%, and their core body temperatures fell from 37C to as low as 11C. After six hours' exposure to the mixture, the

mice were given fresh air. Their metabolic rate and core body temperature returned to normal, and tests showed they had suffered no ill effects.

Researchers have studied cells take from hibernating squirrels at 6 degrees Celsius. They saw reversible structural changes in the cells that allowed them to continue working normally.

In another study using pigs, Mike Duggan, a veterinary surgeon, used a similar technique on the porkers, putting them in an almost deathlike sleep while he operated.

Something similar was done to my own daughter. She suffered a sudden cardiac arrest. This is a condition where an apparently healthy heart suddenly goes into an arrhythmia. Most people do not survive this. Luckily, artificial respiration was applied in time. When she arrived at the hospital, the medics lowered her body temperature to hypothermia conditions until they got her heart pumping in the correct rhythm. After she recovered, they installed a defibrillator in her heart. This saved her life when she had a similar occurrence recently.

Because of its use in medicine, it seems to be only a matter of time when suspended animation of humans will be not only possible, but a common occurrence for different medical conditions. Next stop, the stars.

If you think of yourselves as helpless and ineffectual, it is certain that you will create a despotic government to be your master. The wise despot, therefore, maintains among his subjects a popular sense that they are helpless and ineffectual.

— Frank Herbert

# Suspension of Disbelief: Finding Your Audience

by Rachel V. Olivier

Sometimes entertaining people is like hitting your head repeatedly into a brick wall, but that is what writers try to do, whether writing a book, short story, or film – entertain. Eventually you find the door to break through, but sometimes it feels like it's never going to happen. One of the tricks to finding that door is to find your audience. In speculative fiction there is a wide field to explore in terms of audience, but sometimes it's frustrated by some of the gatekeepers who have decided that speculative fiction should only be limited to certain parameters. They've forgotten that it is the audience who decides what those parameters are. It's the audience that the writer is making a contract with, not the producer, editor, or publisher. So, the trick is to break through to that audience, because they are the ones who are willing to suspend their real world lives to listen to, watch, or read your story.

I hate to admit this as a fellow Science Fiction/Fantasy geek, but I've only ever been to one science fiction convention. It was August 27, 2006 and the last day of LA Con IV, the 64<sup>th</sup> annual World Science Fiction Convention. I was broke (what's new?) and could barely afford the \$50 day pass, but I scraped it together and borrowed a car to drive down to Anaheim from Los Angeles. One of the panels I attended left me with this nugget of information: Readers and viewers of speculative fiction (science fiction, fantasy, cyber punk, scifantasy, etc) have a greater ability to suspend their disbelief and wait for the story to unfold than the average reader or television/movie viewer or reader. People in the know – i.e. the writers and viewers and readers of speculative fiction – get this. Unfortunately, producers and publishers and editors (those worried about how quickly they can make how much money on said story) don't always get this. If something doesn't take off right away, they get nervous and pull it. Next time they see something similar they reject it, even though there are plenty of people out there who really want to watch or read that story. So, the trick is to get around those publishers and editors and producers to the readers and viewers and prove to the publishers and producers and other various gatekeepers there are people out there who really like your work.

Recent experience has jogged loose this bit of information to make me wonder, what is it in some

of us that allows the storyteller greater latitude in their stories? How come some of us have no problem seeing Mr. and Mrs. Beaver have tea and toast with the Pevensies in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, while others just roll their eyes? Why do some of us not care about whether or not all the creatures and humans in *10,000 BC* would be realistically seen together in the same time and place, while others will spend their valuable time researching and writing complete essays on how these beings would never be seen together in reality? It's our willingness to be entertained.

According to Wikipedia, our mostly (ahem) accurate go-to source on the web, Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief" to describe the willingness of an audience to accept a premises of a work of fiction as true even if it seems impossible, and even if this means overlooking the limitations of a medium in order to accept those premises. In exchange, in a sort of quid pro quo, the storyteller promises that the reader or viewer will *be entertained* by that work of fiction. In other words, your friends at the bar are willing to believe the yarn you're telling about your most recent fishing trip as long as it's *entertaining to them*.

It's that "to them" that is the key phrase. Different people are entertained by different types of stories and are willing to give a storyteller leeway for different reasons. For example, I'm perfectly willing to believe that a black Arabian horse born on the English countryside is able to tell a story from a human point of view (*Black Beauty*), or that a badger, a mole, and a rat can all sit down to tea and toast in a nice cozy hole whilst speaking the Queen's English (*Wind in the Willows*), or that robots can roam all over New York or Los Angeles or wherever, cracking sarcastic jokes and transforming into gas guzzling vehicles (*Transformers*). There are other people, however, who are not willing to suspend their disbelief for such stories, but they are willing to believe that a millionaire and a hooker can fall in love and get married (*Pretty Woman*), or that sensitive, caring alpha males really exist. We all have our own ideas of fantasy and the perfect tale.

The problem is in making sure that the right storytellers match up with the right audience, or no one is happy. Listen to your readers and pay attention when reading guidelines for editors and agents likes

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# The Writer's Block: Information Overload

by Charles Gramlich

In addition to telling a good story, writers also have to educate their readers on the Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How in their work. Some tales require a lot of education, others only a little.

If your story involves settings in malls, airplanes, and commercial buildings, you probably won't have to provide much description for them. Everyone has been to a mall. But if your tale takes place in 1812 London, or in a place just as weird such as an alien world, you'll have to give your readers a lot more information in order for them to follow your lead.

Similarly, if your story requires specialized knowledge in an area such as gourmet cooking, glass blowing, or wine tasting in order to understand the plot, you have to be prepared to learn the information yourself and provide every *needed* detail to your readers. The question is, where do you put that information into a manuscript?

A novel has width and breadth that provides you a lot of room to spread critical information out, although not all writers take advantage of it. For example, in *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown needed to educate his readers about various exotic locales and about the art world. He sometimes did this with what is called an "Information Dump," or "Info Dump." An example can be found on page 18 of the hardback edition where he describes the entrance to the Louvre. He writes:

"The new entrance to the Paris Louvre had become almost as famous as the museum itself. The controversial neomodern glass pyramid designed by Chinese-born American architect I. M. Pei still evoked scorn from traditionalists who felt it destroyed the dignity of the Renaissance courtyard. Goethe had described architecture as frozen music, and Pei's critics described this pyramid as fingernails on a chalkboard. Progressive admirers, though, hailed Pei's seventy-one-foot-tall transparent pyramid as a dazzling synergy of ancient structure and modern method—a symbolic link between the old and new..."

Many writers, including myself, dislike info dumps. They smack of laziness, and most of the time the information works better if it is integrated into the storyline and doesn't call attention to itself. However, many readers don't seem to mind info dumps at all. In fact, some readers seem to enjoy the chance to learn some tidbits that they didn't know before, even if it interrupts the flow of the story.

As a reader myself, if the information is interesting I hardly notice the info dumps, but when they are boring I start almost instantly to squirm. I didn't feel, for example, that the passage I quoted from Dan Brown was a good one. There's a lot of information but I frankly didn't find much of it interesting, and it really slowed the pace of the story. Plus, it didn't have anything at all to do with the plot, and never showed up again.

With short stories, however, writers don't have the leisure to spread the reader's education over 200,000 or more words. Consider a hard science fiction piece where you have to explain elements of physics and astronomy for the reader to understand the plot. You've got 5 or 6 thousand words to educate your reader, and without scrimping on characterization, plot, and action. A complex short story leaves the author very little choice but to cluster the needed information, and it has to *be* needed information.

Many short story writers solve the problem by either front-loading the information, including it at the beginning, or back-loading it, putting it in at the end. Each of these techniques has its strengths and weaknesses.

Front-loading has the advantage of getting the needed information out early so that the reader knows exactly what is going on as far as background is concerned and can get on with the tale without fear of distraction. The danger is that if the information isn't exciting on its own, the reader may kick your story to the curb without ever getting to the good stuff. Remember how important that opening sentence and opening paragraph is.

Back-loading frees you to start a story with character or situation, thus capturing the reader's attention, but there is the risk that if you try to combine the reader's "education" with the ending of the story you diffuse the climax. The climax is where you sell your *next* story, and you don't want it to be awkward.

There is also, I've found, a difference in which genres lend themselves best to the two kinds of "loading." SF and fantasy stories often require more front-loading because the reader needs to know about the science or the world that the tale takes place in before they can understand the tale itself. Horror or mystery stories, which generally take place in more realistic settings, are more often going to call for back-loaded explanations of events that have happened within the piece.

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# Reviews

## Steamboy

**Katsuhiro Otomo, Director**

Format: AC-3, Animated, subtitled, NTSC

July 26, 2005

DVD: 126 minutes, Rated PG-13

ASIN: B0009P42S2

Review by Terry Crotinger

*Steamboy*, by producer Katsuhire Otomo, is a whimsical view of steam power, staple of the Industrial Revolution. While unbelievable, this movie allows speculation of what-might-have-been over a century ago. Set in England, the colors are not vibrant and the washed-out effect helps keep the 1866 time frame in perspective.

*Steamboy* blends action and engineering with valor. There is no romance among the characters; it is a story driven by traditional good/evil themes. The main character does what is needed because it is the honorable thing to do and he has the brains to accomplish it.

Caught between his father, who designs weapons and his grandfather, who harnessed and understood the unlimited potential of steam, Ray Steam is sent a steam ball, just as his grandfather is murdered for this very object. Ray has a vague idea of the value of this gift when his house is destroyed by secret agents trying to steal it—uncaring who gets killed in the process. How he is able to out-smart the man trying to obtain the steam ball drives the story. When he learns this master villain is his father and the true value of the device, Ray understands that he has a terrible and deadly responsibility.

Anime leans toward stock, archetypical characters. *Steamboy*, no exception, includes the required “girl”, a spoiled princess who gradually comes to appreciate Ray’s talents with anything steam or engineering related and saves her life, or puts her in peril. There is also the “animal”, in this case, a poor yappy dog belonging to the princess. There is another “girl”, his landlord’s daughter, and though it feels like she is interested in him for more than a friend, this role is vague, like the washed-out feel to the entire production.

Some action scenes are unnecessarily long and gruesome while other areas beg for explanation and exploration. The viewer will be riveted in anticipation and tension, weaving in and out of conflict repeatedly. Background scenery, especially toward the end, is subdued and appears as penciled drawings—the

reason is unknown though it may be to keep the viewer focused on the human story rather than the rich detail of mechanical gizmos.

This is a guy’s movie; engineers will find it intriguing. The visual depth and detail of the machinery is breathtaking. Breathtaking—like deconstructing a marine engine and propeller from a mammoth cruise ship. Scope and magnitude are fantastic.

Worth the investment, *Steamboy*, racks up with Studio Ghibli productions in quality and collectibility. Mr. Otomo’s *Steamboy* appeals to the loyalty within us, the creativity of youth solving problems and the skills of master craftsmen to make it all happen.

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## Fire Study

**Maria V. Snyder**

Mira, Mar 2008, \$25.95

ISBN: 9780778325345

Review by Harriet Klausner

After being raised in the Territory of Ixia and having gained the trust of Commander Ambrose and the love of his second in command Valek, Yelena returns to her homeland Sitia to study magic. Belonging to both countries, Yelena wants to become the liaison so that neither place will war against the other. Her studies are interrupted when she goes to find Ferde the Soulstealer and Cahill, the pretender to the Ixian throne.

The two are believed to be hiding in the Avibian Plains where the Sanseed Clan (Yelena’s cousins) live. A splinter group of the clan has turned to the forbidden blood magic and Storyweavers dub them Vermin; whereas they call themselves the Daviiian Clan. Their mysterious leader’s goal is to rule Sitia. The Vermin take control of the Sitia government and prepare to conquer Ixia. Yelena and her Ixian lover Valek hope to prevent the carnage, but to succeed she must make a promise that will keep the pair of lovers separated forever.

*Firestudy* is a magical tale filled with intrigue, double crosses, and duplicity, and it stars a beleaguered heroine who swims in treacherous waters in order to stop a bloody war from occurring as both countries are dear to her. Valek loves Yelena beyond reason and will do almost anything to help her yet he is also a sexy alpha male who will not allow the woman who owns his heart walk all over him. Yelena loves him too and has started to get close with her family but first she must stop an evil person from destroying her birthplace before getting involved in personal matters.

# Reviews

## **Sword & Sorceress XXII**

**Marion Zimmer Bradley**

Review by Rachel V. Olivier

I've been a fan of the *Sword & Sorceress* Anthologies edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley almost as long as it's been around. Twenty years ago finding strong female characters in fantasy was difficult. MZB provided stories for people, like me, desperately seeking to read about strong, brave women. The difference between then and now is phenomenal and is seen not only in the speculative fiction arena, but in all genres of fiction, television, movies, and RPGs. Marion Zimmer Bradley left quite a legacy.

According to what I have read over the years, Marion Zimmer Bradley began the anthology as a means of finding new talent, as well as a way of providing new stories to people starving to read more women in fantasy. When MZB passed away a few years ago many fans and writers wondered if this legacy would carry on without her. Diana L. Paxson, who worked with MZB for years, put together *MZB's S&S XXI* posthumously and many thought that would be the last. Then last year Elizabeth Waters, another writer who worked with MZB over the years, worked to see if *S&S* could continue the tradition of sword and sorcery tales that MZB began. In November 2007, *Sword & Sorceress XXII* was released through Norilana Publishing. After reading it I realized how much had changed while remaining the same in this (hopefully) continued tradition.

In the "old days", *S&S* was published by DAW in mass market paperback. Small and inexpensive (\$5-\$7), it was easily obtainable in most bookstores and libraries and fit in one's handbag. The stories could be read in span of a 10-15 minute coffee break at work or on a brief bus or train commute. MZB understood who her audience was and what they needed to be refreshed before returning to the mundane world. The rules for submission were clear: engaging, well-written tales with a female protagonist in the role of swordswoman or sorcerer; no bad jokes masquerading as short-short stories; no vampires, werewolves, talking animals, or dragons; all tales to take place in mostly pre-industrialized societies; and all rules subject to be thrown out the door if the story was very well done.

Norilana and Elizabeth Waters had biggish boots to fill, and they did okay. Issue XXII is a trade paperback using quality paper and printing, and does have an appealing cover. However, the cover is not an original piece of artwork, but a reprint of an early 20<sup>th</sup> century painting of Joan of Arc (one of the first notable swordswomen) and is sold for about \$10 instead of the more friendly \$7. There were a few proof goofs, but not many. The margins are as small as you can get them to keep the printing costs down, however font size was increased a tad to make it not so hard to read. And of course there's the distribution; I wasn't able to find this book in any bookstore or library. I had to order it online. I wouldn't have known to order it unless I knew about it already. Unless Norilana or the current readers can get the word out, it's unlikely that there will be a new generation of *S&S* readers out there.

This brings us to the heart of the matter – the stories. Each issue in the past had a theme of sorts. In this issue Elizabeth Waters said that theme was the originality of the stories and the twist endings. Some of MZB's most hard and fast rules were broken in this issue (an early version of a gun, a dragon or two, a story told from a male's point of view, a society that COULD be industrialized if the camera lens were pulled back a bit from the magical storyline...), however some of those rules had been broken in the past, and the stories were all very original. It was clear the writers had been chosen because they had approached this aspect of storytelling with a fresh perspective. There were a couple of stories that I thought were a bit too long, and a few times when I had to go back over and re-read awkward sentences that I tripped over. I think in the past those may have been cleaned up a bit better. On the whole, however, this issue of *S&S* does hold up well to the ones that came before. The stories were from a range of both seasoned professionals and first sale amateurs. The stories engaged me (I started the book at 7 PM and finished it the next morning). There were authors that I hoped would be included that were not, as well as new ones I look forward to reading again, if possible. When I closed the book on the final short story I had the familiar feeling of thinking it was over too soon. I will have to go through and re-read these stories again, soon.

# Reviews

## Orphan's Journey

Robert Buettner

Orbit, Apr 2008, \$6.99

ISBN: 9780316001731

Review by Harriet Klausner

As an advisor to the Tibetan rebels, General Jason Wander had orders not to fire at the Chinese troops unless he came under fire from them. However, he could not let the rebels he trusted die in combat, so he disobeys a direct order. To keep him out of further trouble the Brass exile him to the New Moon resort station where scientists work on figuring out how to fly a space ship captured from a Slug with engine powered Cavorite at its core. The ship was captured during the most recent hostility. Jason is on the station to get his godson Jude to power it up with reflexes only he has and which are needed to interface with the engine starting up.

Jason persuades Jude they need it done so they can fly back to earth together, but something goes wrong; the Cavorite fueled ship takes off from the station and travels through a black hole before landing on the planet Bren. For a millennium they have mined Cavorite and given it to the Slugs so they will be left alive and alone to fight amongst themselves. However, when Jason and his crew touch down, the Slugs decide to eradicate all humans except those they need as drones and slaves. Jason has to unite the feuding clans, who have been at war with one another for years, if they hope to extricate the Slugs from Bren for that is the only way they will survive. Addin g to his dilemma is the Slugs are breeding so his chances of winning are nil unless he can come up with a dramatic Hail Mary. Whatever happen he is responsible because the clan leaders named him Commander.

The latest Jason Wander military science fiction thriller (see *Orphanage* and *Orphan's Destiny*) is a great space opera reminiscent of the early Heinlein sagas. The protagonist still struggles with accepting that in war there are casualties including collateral damage of the innocent. He detests that he sends men to their deaths, but understands the greater good. He is sensitive and willing to disobey orders if he feels they are wrong. However, what makes this tale so strong is the insight into Bren culture where Homo sapiens fight one another with nineteenth century equivalent technology while avoiding a confrontation with the Slugs.

## In The Wrong Hands

Edward Gibson

SPECTRA/Bantam Books, April 1992

ISBN-13: 978-0553295672

Review by Terry Crotinger

Combine a little *Star Trek* with the movie, *2001—A Space Odyssey*, throw in a rebellious astronaut, Joe Rebello, and a deformed evil scientist known simply as Wolf, you've got *In The Wrong Hands*. Joe discovers enough inconsistencies as he learns friend after friend is inexplicably killed that he is able to thwart his own bending of the rules just enough to save the human race from being *perfected* in the form of an army of enhanced clones. But while one of the clones, Otto, feels he is the best of the best, he knows there are legion of "Ottos" just like him being developed by Wolf. Somehow, Otto's programming isn't enough and like a human, he has designs on being an individual. This slight little glitch is enough to save Joe from his own death and humans from being slowly replaced by Ottos and Kurts and other lines of clones. (Wolf devised a way to allow a toxin in the air that would render every woman sterile)

Let's review some similarities: There is *Star Trek's* episode with Harry Mudd and a bevy of cloned beauties, *2001—A Space Odyssey* with a rotating space station and evil lurking within, and even a tad of *Lord Of The Rings* at the end.

Is this worth the read? Yes. Edward Gibson is well versed in space travel and it shows in his intense detail of procedure in all things astro-nautical, being that he is one, in the literal sense. Dr. Gibson's first space flight was in 1965 and he logged over 1996 hours on the first Skylab mission in 1974. He's got the right stuff to write this novel.

However, though I am the daughter of an engineer and love all things technical, his detail in pre-flight, flight, landing, ascent/descent, docking... finally got to me and I found myself skimming. Did they land okay? Yes, then skip this part. No? Go back and read. Even the explanations of Wolf's master plan were predictable and later, repeated again as if the reader just didn't, or couldn't, grasp the concept the first time. I admit to skimming through many pages. That's not to say I did not enjoy this, though the first several chapters seemed sluggish. The plot didn't remind me of a young Jim Kirk ("rebellious" Rebello) until I was hooked with the story line.

Dr. Gibson's first novel, *Reach* (1989), gave readers science (also noted for his exhaustive use of technical detail) and fiction—the best of science fiction. These two books are collector's items. *Reach* was published in hardback, though *In The Wrong Hands* was produced as a paperback. A signed copy of each would be a great find.

# Original Fiction

## *The Bats of Elvidner* by Danielle Parker

1

"They have taken my son," the sorceress said. "You must get him back."

Elian Tellen, wandering scion of the doomed lords of White Star, made no immediate reply. A log fell suddenly in the fireplace before them, sending up a shower of red sparks. He picked up the iron poker lying on the stone hearth and leaned forward to push back the errant log. He could not see her well, not there in the shadows she seemed to draw around her like the cloud of her long dark hair, but he could see enough, more of her than any yet alive was rumored to know of the woman called the Aconite Sorceress. Perhaps even she could not guess how acute his eyes were in the dark.

Her face was too hard and too angular for beauty, though it was not a face to forget. She wore a gown of baby-soft skin, cut as finely as a queen's silk gown; it was black with strips of deepest red in the skirt, and the white mounds of her breasts could be seen suspended above the low-cut neck like pale twin apples. Her hair was as gossamer as a web, and through the curtain that half-covered her bowed face he could, now and then, glimpse an eye, an eye of a steely, impossible blue, the deadly blue of her namesake. Her thin long hand lay loosely upon her left knee, and on all its fingers – even the smallest finger that was cut away at the first knuckle – glittered the emblems of her power: rings, heavy rings, rings of fantastic design and sinister aspect, which were not worn for their beauty. One of those rings upheld a tiny mirror, and now and then it winked at Elian Tellen like a sly spying eye.

"He is still alive," she insisted as he let the doubting silence continue. That voice, controlled as it was, seemed to ring and vibrate afterwards on the air with an indescribable, crystalline tension. "He is *alive*, Elian Tellen. I *know* this."

Elian Tellen replaced the poker and sat back. It was not a comfortable chair, made as it was of bones and horns from sources best left unimagined, but he did not shift in it. He was not a restless man. There was power in his stillness and in his listening and in the long strong arms that rested loosely now upon the bone armrests, and the woman who sat beside him felt it, and laughed softly, an aconite laugh.

"I *know* things about you, Elian Tellen," she baited him, speaking as softly as if she were whispering love to him now. "There is no man on Elvidner who knows these creatures more intimately than you. *Ah*, you are a hunter, and your prey is the nightmare and terror of ordinary men. Does it not *intrigue* you, this chance for death and horror that I offer you? What man has ever seen the deep dwellings of the mordant bats, has spied upon their sleep, has crept through their secret darkness, as *they* have in ours? Do you not thrill to the opportunity I offer you? Is it not what you *live* for?"

The visitor turned his face slightly toward her, though he did not raise his eyes from the fire. One of his hands, large and smooth and white, held his still rain-dampened leather hat. "My lady, they do not keep their prey alive long. If he was taken on Firstday, as you say—"

"He is *alive*." There was a furious flash from the single visible eye, like the discharge of the tormented clouds that roiled through Elvidner's dark skies; he saw her sign avert to his words in passionate denial. She rose suddenly, tossing back the cloud of loose hair: a tall woman, as slim and as threatening as a spear. "*See!*" she cried. She thrust out her hand demandingly. The tiny mirror on the middle ring flashed like a strobe, and in the glittering instant *something* could be glimpsed...the thin pale face of a youth, utterly intent and watchful. Then the image fractured like a pool plinked by a pebble. "He *lives!* There is time, man. There *must* be time!"

"He may be deep within Lichtlos by now," her guest said. "The nearest entrance is three days' journey into the mountains. Lichtlos is the greatest of all their strongholds. We can only guess how deeply its caverns run, but it is a city, my lady, greater than any humanity has yet raised upon this planet. Do you not know that this is *their* world still? How could I find your son there, even if he...for whatever reasons...yet lives?"

"*This* will guide you to my son Bram." With disdainful impatience she wrenched free the ring and thrust it upon him. "It will pull you ever toward him; it will show you his face. What do you wish more, man, for your reward, or for your journey? Weapons? Gold? Power? Youth? My *body*?" She paused, panting; her uneven breath rasped between them, like a racing animal's. Then a sudden malice stole into the eyes that regarded him, sly

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beneath hanging hair. "I will deny you nothing, man, but it is something *else* that draws you to these foes, is it not, my lord White Star? You will do as I ask for your own reasons."

The man rose to his feet, weighing the ring in his palm. Though she was tall, he was much the taller, and she gave a small, hating step back, and then another, beneath the looming mountain-weight of his presence. "Your price was indeed paid, long ago, by another," he answered quietly. He put the ring into a pocket of his jerkin and sealed the flap with a smoothing of his fingers and looked at her with the star-silvered eyes that were his namesake. "And if the boy dies before I reach him?"

She turned away from him sharply then, and the dark cloud of hair fell again to cover her bowed face. Her hands seized the curved bone back of her chair, and the knuckles gleamed white as its polished femurs beneath her rings. "Then nothing," she answered at last. "Mordant bats keep no hostages. I will mourn my son and my only remaining love. *Go!*"

Elian Tellen bowed slightly toward the slim straight back and put on the low broad-brimmed hat that he held in his hand, and when the sorceress turned, at the continued silence, he was no longer there. She consulted her rings, but though the omen-bird and the rats and the maddened wolf chained at the foot of her tower answered her as they were compelled, none of them had seen Elian Tellen leave. Only the old raven that sat hunched on a broken crag outside saw a fleeting shadow, that of a great wide-shouldered man astride a swaying steed whose long limbs moved with unnatural swiftness and precision, first one side, then the other, like the shimmering lope of a centipede. But Black Claw hunched his great beaked head lower and hid the gleam of his carnivorous eyes beneath his mantling wing. There are some creatures a wise being hopes not to see again, even one who is also a hunter of the night.

### 2

Last View is neither village nor town; it clings to the flank of the Dunkel Mountains like winter lichen does to rock, without green or hope of springtime. The man on the eight-legged steed found in the first pearl of dawn six or seven leprous and hopeless habitations of piled rocks and banked dirt, huddled as densely as nits. A brown half-frozen stream of sewage and wash water meandered between them, crusted with a rainbow film of grease. A large gaunt rat, feasting upon the ordure, turned to glare at him for an instant without fear in its red eyes and then humped swiftly into a crevice.

The rider, drawing rein, took the leather hat from his head and allowed the bitter breeze to ruffle his bared brow. Behind him stooped the trail he had labored up through the night, falling in multiple breathless cloud-hazed switches to the distant valley floor. But his eyes, which were twin strange glitters of silver under his lids, seemed alert in spite of his hours in the saddle. After his brief rest, he lifted his hat to his head again and drew a long spear from its sling near his knee. With its iron-wrapped butt he knocked on the door of the nearest hovel: once, twice, three times, the metal striking each time with a peculiar authority in the still air.

"Eric Cut-Lip!" he called in a bass boom. "I, Elian Tellen, command you! Come forth!"

There was no reply, but now the silence seemed to quiver with a voiceless agitation. The rider, waiting with iron patience, heard a rat-like scurrying within; at last the patchwork boards that formed the door cracked open a finger's width, and the curls of an untamed red beard and one pale rapidly blinking eye could be seen around the edge.

"I am sick!" its owner protested in a trembling voice. "Go away!"

"Presently," said his visitor. "You must answer my questions first. Two nights ago, perhaps three, the Silent Ones passed through this town, did they not?"

The eye fled. There was a rusty scraping sound as Eric Cut-Lip tried to force shut the patchwork door, but Elian Tellen had already inserted the end of the spear into its gap, and the door did not budge.

"It was the night before last," gabbled his reluctant respondent. "At midnight, when the first moon was high, we heard them...oh, a great, great caravan of Evil Ones, with many prey! We were afraid! Oh, do not make me speak of them! I am sick!" And within could be heard panting and cries as Eric Cut-Lip struggled once more to shut the door. But the door did not move.

The visitor pressed his lips slightly beneath the shadow of his leather hat. "And was there a dark-haired youth among them, twelve or thirteen years perhaps, tall for his age, and dressed better than the common kind?"

"Many, many prey," wept the red-bearded man in response. "Men and women and children; oh, the poor, poor babes! Go away and do not affright me, lord!"

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"I go," replied his interrogator as he withdrew his spear. His face now was stern and set. "You may tell those who inquire that fifteen souls from the little town on Wandering Creek, and one more besides, were taken. I go to save those I can, but there will be few alive even now."

"The poor, poor children!" wailed the voice from within. "Oh, I am sick!"

Elian Tellen slung his spear in its sling at his knee and slapped the reins upon the neck of his centipede-legged steed. With a blur of its segmented limbs the beast leapt Last View's wandering slime and thundered past the last hut; *boom* went its feet, in a swiftly rolling drumbeat. The trail above was sparse and steep, and only its own footprints now gouged the new-fallen snow. Ahead the orb of the sun shone low and weak in Elvidner's ash-lilac dawn, and its rays gilded the frozen peaks it rested upon with a false rose.

## 3

There had been sixteen in the cart, sixteen humans with limbs woven like knitted yarn, without room to breathe, to piss, or to wail. There was plenty of room in the swaying wooden conveyance now, but no one was celebrating. Now there were only four. Only four, and all of them shivering and trembling in the frigid high-altitude air.

Only Siglind Stick-Arm, the bony child of the village washerwoman, still whispered monotonous prayers from inside the cover of her tangled hair. "*Lords of White Star, save us from the Evil Ones; Maura, red mother of birthing, protect us now...*"

The red-haired pig farmer Hagar Huge-Fist, sitting sideways in the front of the cart, spat through the wooden lattice door. The spittle fell short of the smoothly working haunches of the double-yoked dray bats in front. "Ain't no lord of White Star listening to ye now, girl."

There was no real rancor in his voice, but Loeske Light-Eyes, the village elder, spoke up in mild protest. "Let the child pray, Hagar. It can't hurt."

"Can't help, neither."

They fell silent. The boy, his dark head cocked in an attitude of intense listening, beat his knuckles softly against the wooden side. The old man watched him with rheumy pale-eyed speculation.

"Talking again, are they?"

The boy nodded.

"I'll go next, then," the old man said. "There's not much blood in me, but maybe it'll be enough, for a while. I'm old. Doesn't matter much to me when I go, now."

Siglind Stick-Arm fell suddenly silent and pushed her face into the shelter of her upraised knees, covering her head with her spindly arms. But the boy closed his eyes and turned his head, like a blind man seeking sound. He shook his head sharply: *no*.

"*Witch-boy,*" breathed the farmer, and signed avert with furtive fingers.

"The boy can hear them talk, and we can't. That's our only hope right now, pig man." The old man hitched himself laboriously upright, pressing his wrinkled face against the rear lattice. The cart was open on each end, where the tightly woven branches formed doors now secured with coarse rope. The wooden sides curved over their heads in a crude low arch. "One of them in sight – one of the warriors. It's coming."

A breathless silence fell. Then the boy, hesitant at first, then more loudly, began to rap against the side of the cart in a variable, stop-and-start rhythm.

"Keep the boy alive as long as you can," the old man said. "Do that for me, Hagar. He can hear them. You can't understand how important that is. Ain't never been one of us that could hear them talk, before. Dogs can – we know that. But humans haven't been able to, before. You'll have to give them the girl next. There's no help for it."

A shadow fell over them from behind; a bitter-iron odor threaded their urine-fouled air. The boy stopped his rapping. The humans, immobile, looked upon the source of the shadow with terror-dry eyes.

The face was larger than a man's, sunk low between sharp, jutting shoulders. Its shoulders were the tips of its leathery wings. It leaned upon the elbows of those wide, scissored wings as it hopped-walked upon the ground. The pupil-less eyes were large and glassy black; its nose a hideously complex structure of folds and tubes and fluctuating holes. Its mouth was pinched small and sunken like a toothless elder's; the flexible sucking tube that formed its eating apparatus hidden, for now. It could not chew, nor could it bite. But it did not need to bite or to chew.

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"*Promise me, Hagar!*" the old man rasped. "Get the boy away, if you can. It'll have to be soon. We've been descending for at least an hour now."

"Aye," the farmer replied hoarsely. "I'll do what I can, Light-Eyes."

Suddenly the boy tapped, almost hesitantly, upon the wooden side of the cart. There was a pause; then he tapped again, and again, and at last, a flurry of desperately fast knocks in a complex rhythm.

Then the knocking fell silent.

And at last the shadow withdrew, and the cold bright sunlight slanted inside their wooden cave once more.

The old man wiped his gray-stubbed face with trembling fingers.

"It heard you," he whispered. "By the lords of White Star, boy, *it knows you can hear it.*"

The boy nodded. A flash of white split his face suddenly: a smile.

"It was testing you, sure enough. What's your name, son?"

"He don't seem able to talk none." The pig farmer snorted. "Ain't said one word the whole time. Ain't even *cried.*"

The boy frowned. His fingers found his mouth, and felt out its shape dourly.

The old man nodded encouragingly. "Go on, boy. What's your name?"

The boy's fingers fell away. He spelled out something on the palm of his hand. The old man leaned to look. The boy spelled letters over and over, more urgently each time, and at last seized the old man's hand to spell out the same shapes.

"B," Loeske muttered, squinting. "That's a B... R... Bram. That your name, boy? Bram?"

The boy nodded. He let the old man's hand drop. Then he twisted his head to listen to the silence, and began, once more, to knock softly against wood.

"We got a witch-boy that don't talk, and bloodsuckers that don't listen," the pig farmer said. "How's that going to help us?"

The old man scratched his stubbled chin in satisfaction.

"*One* of them listened. Maybe that's a start."

The cart tilted steeply. Its occupants slid forward in a helpless tangle. The swinging bucket of half-frozen water hung above broke free from its hook and crashed down, drenching them in icy liquid.

"Maura help us!" the farmer screamed. "What's happening?"

Loeske felt about in the sudden absence of light. The cart was tilted too steeply to pull himself upright. The little girl wailed. The old man put his arm around her thin, trembling shoulders for comfort -- his own, perhaps. He could hear the labored, panic-stuttering gasps of his companions in the close inky dark, but he could no longer glimpse even the whites of their eyes.

"This is it," he croaked. "We're going down. Lichtlos... we're going down into the heart of the world. Pray, farmer, if you know any god who might listen. It can't hurt."

## 4

Day never lingered on the high slopes, and when the sun sank beyond the endless peaks to the west, winter fell instant and bitter. The man on the eight-legged steed reined in and watched the diffuse disc slip beneath the distant jagged edge of the horizon.

His beast complained of the cold in strange squeaks and hisses, pawing irritably in the snow with its front pair of clawed feet. The man dismounted and patted its chitinous neck. Then he drew his spear, and leaned upon it, as he turned to pensively regard to the shape that rested no more than few yards away.

Fresh snow dusted the figure, deceptively arranged like a mere sleeper, its arms folded neatly across its chest. But the snow was only a thin drift: the body had been abandoned less than an hour ago. Yet how gray and chill its face was; how sunken its somber cheeks, as if more than life had been taken from it! Around the corpse's mouth and nose were characteristic small boils. The boils on the throat were blacker and larger, but still, the fatal bite was surprisingly small and neat. The acidic bite was the mark of the mother -- she who sustained her warriors. Only she took the blood, and gave it in turn to her clave. This was an unusually large clave of nine warriors, requiring much nourishment: this was the twelfth drained victim Elian Tellen had discovered in his pursuit.

He knelt to examine the tracks at his feet. The wheels of the first cart gouged deep into the stony soil. The second cart rode much lighter than it had begun. The mother was swollen, but had not paused to feed her

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warriors. Vengeance was on their heels, and they knew it. They were hurrying to the shelter of Lichtlos, where no sane man had ever followed – or ever would.

He feared they had already reached it.

Tellen stood up and gazed upwards into the dim heaven. Above him were the fliers that had escorted him for the last three days and nights, now only distant, tiny dots wheeling in a patient, watchful circle. They were almost too high for vision. But their eyes were even keener than his, and they used more than sight to hunt. With his human ears he could never hear them, but in the other shape he could take at will, he might have heard their constant high-pitched squeaks and chattering, and the strobe-like pulse they emitted for echolocation.

He hung his spear once again in its sheath upon the neck of his beast. Then with deliberation he unpinned the great furred cloak he wore and laid it upon the snow; he drew off his boots and his tunic and trousers. At last he stood naked except for a long leather thong about his neck. Its pendant ring, resting on his broad chest, flashed like a mirror as a last ray briefly caught it. He shook his waist-long night-dark hair out of its braiding until it fell loosely upon his great shoulders. His powerful body was almost as white as the snow, seamed here and there, mostly upon the arms, with old bite rings, and in a few places with a puckered healed slash or burn.

Then he knelt and tied up his clothing in the cloak, and tied that, in turn, upon the saddle of his beast, and looped its reins around the high horn of its leather saddle.

“Go,” he wished it. It could not reply, but they had long ago come to understanding of each other, all the same. He had named it Sleipnir in an instant of bitter humor; for he, almost alone upon this cloudy world, remembered the name of an eight-legged beast that served one who had also paid hard price for wisdom. “Go, until I call again. Good hunting!”

The beast lowered its head in obedience. It turned away from him, picking its way among the snow-covered rocks and boulders with surprising delicacy. It would hunt, for it was not an eater of grass. Grass had never flourished on Elvidner. The cattle men had brought with them had grown thin and then at last died, following the seedlings that also failed, in a soil that would never easily nourish Earthly shoots.

It was cold upon the high peak. For a time the man seemed to simply wait, except for the visible trembling of his naked body. Then after a longer time, as the first of twin moons began to rise in the night sky, his shivers became more pronounced, and yet more rhythmic. They became great rippling shudders that shook his whole body. The man’s posture changed. His head sank lower, and his arms extended stiffly, and his shoulders hunched. There was a hint of a color change in his starred-light eyes, as they sank beneath thickening brows, and a mute suffering. His body convulsed, and bones cracked like gunshots in the still chill air, and poked against taunt-stretched skin like fighting sticks. The man fell to all fours and groaned and whimpered with all the agony of a woman in birthing. As the light of the first moon fell upon him, he was hairy all over, and there was now the look of a beast in his animal-yellow eyes. And when the light of the second moon shone, a huge white wolf with a bar of black fur ridging its back and tail rested panting in the snow, and lifted its muzzle to howl, and lapped the glittering shards of its teeth with its long red tongue.

Then the wolf bounded to its feet, and with its nose now and then dipping to the snow, began to follow the tracks of the carts in its long, light-footed lope. Occasionally, it whined. After a time, it ran swiftly as a galloping horse, and no longer paused to sniff the fresh trail.

## 5

There was still no light, but the air had grown stale and warm, almost too warm, and heavily tainted with the iron-tinged, acid breath of their captors. After a long, steeply pitched descent, endless enough for all of them to regret the loss of their drinking water, the cart was once more moving upon a level surface, more slowly than it had before. There were many other sounds around them now – creaks and squeals of other unseen vehicles, some near, some not; a distant, dull, repetitive hammering; the whisper of wings beating in the dark, and the brief flutter of air disturbed by multitudinous passages.

The boy had ceased rapping. When Loeske had asked him why, he had taken the old man’s hand, and spelled out with laborious care the single word, *much*, in the elder’s skinny palm.

“They’re all around us now, I reckon,” the farmer said. “Don’t need no witch-boy to tell me that. I can smell ‘em. The mother’s still close – smell the blood? The other cart’s right in front of us. I can hear it creaking. What now, old one?”

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"They haven't bled us yet. That's good." The old man pressed his face against the branches, squinting futilely into a dark thick as suffocation. "Don't think we stopped long enough for her to feed the warriors. I wonder about that... But maybe she'll feed them next, now that they're safe inside Lichtlos. That may buy us time."

"How much time, ye think?"

The girl child pressed close to his side, burying her head into his ribs. The old man patted her shoulder absently. "Can't say, Hagar. A day's worth. Two. A week... We know so little of these creatures... four generations gone, and never any bridge made... Hagar? Don't you have a mastiff to guard your pigs?"

There was a creak as the farmer shifted his considerable bulk. "Oh aye. Old Trap. Good dog, he were. Fought like a hero to the very end... never see 'im again, I guess!"

"Do you have a dog whistle? One of those silent ones?"

"A whistle?" There was a rustle. "Oh aye," the farmer said after a moment. "Right here under me jerkin. Come jest a-runnin' with his tongue hanging out, every time he heard that whistle, Trap did." Fingers fumbled in the dark; the farmer's big hand pressed something into his. "Ye'll be wantin' this for the boy, then?"

"Yes." Loeske groped in the dark. "Boy – *Bram* – give me your hand. I'm going to blow this whistle. Just real softly, now. Squeeze my hand twice if you can hear it, for yes. Squeeze it once, if you can't, for no. Are you ready? Yes?" He fumbled the small object to his lips. The boy squeezed his fingers swiftly, twice.

The old man lowered the whistle, panting. He wiped his face with the tail end of his jerkin. It was getting uncomfortably warm, and none of them could afford to sweat. The loss of their drinking water might soon prove serious. But he supposed they would be given food and drink soon enough. Their captors only drank fresh blood. Corpses were no use to them.

"He *hears*." Loeske groped through the muffling darkness until he encountered flesh once more. "Take this whistle, boy. I don't know what good it'll do, yet... but *they* hear it, too. Put this around your neck. *Keep it.*"

"Ye're thinking, if the boy can *talk* with 'em -- ?"

"Not really. Guess it's just a vain hope..." The old man settled back. "You ever wish you had one of those oracular talking pigs, Hagar? Like Henny Piggy in the old stories?"

There was a startled silence. Then the farmer snorted loudly.

"Nay," he said. "I'm happy with me pigs just a-lyin' in the muck eatin' their fat heads off. Wouldn't want any talking pig!"

"Why not?"

There was a longer pause this time, and the answer, when it came, was flat.

"Because I *eat* 'em."

"Exactly." The old man nodded in the darkness. "*Tell me, Hagar... if the Silent Ones didn't eat us, what would they eat?*"

There was a growl, much like that of a mastiff, in the darkness. "Oh aye, what do I care what *those* 'uns put in their bellies, so's it's not us? Whatever they ate before we poor men came to their cursed world, I guess!"

"Gazelles? Archons? Swift-wings? When I was a boy, we used to organize great hunting expeditions. Those were wonderful times! I remember gazelles thick as ants upon the plains. Now it's rare to see one. When was the last time we went hunting? When was the last time *you* saw a swift-wing, Hagar?"

There was another unwilling silence. Then, gruffly, "Oh aye, mayhap two years ago... Don't know exactly when."

"When we came, we ate up the native game. There wasn't much choice. The cattle died, and for two generations, even the pigs were sickly." The old man sighed. "There *were* those with the knowledge to help us. To stop the babies that came, willy-nilly, whether there was food for them, or not; to adapt the grass that would not thrive; to save the cows. To save the *goats*, at least, perhaps. I *liked* the goats... But the wizards of Kolonie stayed inside their far-away fortress and lived with their old things, their deathless machines and their unchanging foods and their ways of ancient days. They're there, still... *Adapt*, they told us. Adapt, or *die*. Oh, there were a few who came out with us. The lords of White Star... a few others. So *few*, and most of them – this boy's mother, perhaps – caring no more than the cold wizards of Kolonie what becomes of ordinary mortal man, upon this new Earth called Elvidner."

There was another silence. The cart rolled on, creaking gently.

"Oh aye," the farmer said at last. "Mayhap ye're older than I guessed ye, old man."

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"I'm older than you still guess me to be, my friend." Loeske stared into the darkness. "I've seen this coming for a long time. Our Darwinian war. Eat, or be eaten... We brought it on ourselves as much as the Silent Ones did. One species will live. Unless we can begin to coexist, another will die. Perhaps *both* will. Then the wizards of Kolonie will depart their failure, and the lords of White Star also... though there is one among *them* we may trust to avenge us first, at least. He is apt for blood, *that* one."

There was an odd sound in the close confines of the cart. The farmer grunted question. A meaty hand swiped the air near his face; Loeske felt the swish of its passage. "Oh aye, and are ye chokin', old man?"

"It's the boy. He's trying to talk." The old man reached out into the darkness. A small hot hand grasped his, and tightened urgently. *Squeeze, pause; squeeze, pause.*

"We're stopping!"

"Yes." Another child's fingers slipped into his free hand, gripping with the same desperate plea. Loeske nodded. "We've come to wherever they are taking us. We can only hope we have time... *time.*" Something large shook the cart; bitter-iron invaded their fouled air once more. He squeezed the pitifully trembling hands he held. "Stay close, children!"

The cart rocked. The farmer grunted alarm. "They're opening the door!"

"Don't fight," the old man whispered, staring into darkness. "Don't fight them, Hagar. Maybe they won't use the sonics this time, if we don't fight them."

But they did. There came a shrilling almost too high to hear; it was hot pain in his head. Little Siglind wailed. The boy gabbled inarticulate agony. The pig farmer swore foully. The old man closed his eyes. There were floating spots before the pressed lids: red, and black, and yellow, images of cellular dissolution. They could kill with that sound. His brain would burst; the membranes of his ears explode and bleed...

Claws seized them, tumbling all willy-nilly out of the cart. Hands tore free from his own. The old man endured an instant's revolting contact with an alien body – flesh hot and soft-skinned as a kid glove, muscles underneath like taunt wires. The deafening shrilling went on and on.

Then his shoulder hit dirt, and the old man rolled and tumbled until he fetched up, winded and gasping, against more dusty-smelling earth. Someone thudded to the ground beside him; the girl child screamed and screamed until her voice was almost as high and shrill as that endless waspy whine. There followed a second, heavier *thud*, that shook the very earth he lay upon.

Then silence.

The old man sat up. There was hot liquid running out his buzzing ears when he reached up to press them: blood. "Hagar," he rasped. "*Hagar...* children! Are you there?"

There was a soft sigh in the darkness. Loeske scabbled for the wall. He groped outwards and found a hand: one of the children's. Its fingers clutched his in wordless urgency.

"Who's there? Who's in here with us? *Answer!*"

Someone cleared a throat. A rusty voice replied.

"Hagar? Is it truly ye?"

There was surprised grunt in answer. "Oh aye, and who be *ye*, then?"

"Markin," the hoarse voice whispered, slow and thick as unstirred porridge.

"Markin! And ye dead these six summers, so we thought! Have ye been here in this great dark, then, e'er since they taken ye?"

"Dead," croaked the slow rusty voice, and broke upon the word. "I've been dead these six years, Hagar. I've dug for them, like a blind mole, and hauled stone, and hollowed their endless tunnels. I've broken me fingers upon their rock. I ain't seen light, Hagar, all these years. *Six*, ye said?"

"The child!" the old man cried. "Where's the other child? Speak!"

There was a long silence. Then the farmer answered gruffly.

"They got her."

The beast no longer a man could not see in the lightless tunnel it crept through, but it had keener senses than mere eyes. It had delicate ears, and a quivering, finely tuned nose, sensitive to the slightest sensory trail in

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the warm stale air. Most of all, it had a brutal instinctual cunning, within which a man's quicksilver intelligence lurked, half-dreaming, half-aware, enclosed in the red lust of the wolf.

This tunnel had fallen into disrepair. Water dripped from its low ceiling. The wolf drank from a pool it encountered and continued forward on its belly, its ears pricked high. Ever deeper, ever lower, in the musty depths of the earth. At last, a fall of rock blocked its way. The wolf investigated, yipping as it pawed the rocks and sniffed the wet earth.

But there was no way through. It retreated, whining bafflement.

For a time it rested, its huge head cradled upon its paws and its yellow eyes closed. Suddenly, its ears pricked, and it rose to its feet. It listened with its head cocked quizzically to one side; it stalked closer to the source of the sound in small, mincing steps. Then it dug furiously in the soft earth with its front paws, spewing dirt between its widespread hind legs.

The earth pile grew; the wolf's shoulders sank; it panted as it continued to dig, until even its haunches were almost hidden with its cast-up dirt. Then its questing nose, pushed through earth, encountered air.

It wiggled through and shook itself free of dirt like a hound emerging from water, and loped down its new, wider tunnel.

There was a problem with this new route, though. It was not always empty. The wolf snared the first small flier with a great twisting leap in the air; it killed with a scissoring snap of its jaws, and ripped out the belly of the squeaking creature with its hind claws. Its acid odor displeased the wolf, so it left the mangled body behind.

It batted down the second bat with a swift paw, dancing on its hind legs, while the little flier squealed and chattered and swerved in futile aerial evasion. Its odor displeased the wolf still, but this time, the wolf was hungry. After it had bitten the smelly head into quietude, it ate out the belly of the creature with much noisy smacking.

Then it left the gutted remains and loped onward, licking its bloody chops.

## 7

Henrik Loeske had lived three lifetimes in mortal flesh. This fleshly envelope, too, was growing too feeble for use. Loeske was the only immigrant from Kolonie – and there had been few enough of those immigrants, in any form -- who had lived all his lives as unenhanced, mortal flesh.

He treasured – he *loved*, most intensely -- the natural arc of life. He had long ago sensed how the fleshy frailty of old age and looming mortality interacted subtly with the mind. On the looming edge of senility he always seemed to sense, tantalizingly over the horizon, the cosmic wisdom that had so far evaded him. Perhaps only true death would take him there. He had begun to seriously consider the question. Was his cowardly failure to face that final threshold no more than a larva refusing to turn into a butterfly? *Was* he, in the final weighing, no braver than the amoral wizards of Kolonie, despisers of both the frailties of old age and their lost humanity?

He wiped his streaming eyes with the edge of his jerkin. He cried so easily now. Old age did that, too. For a moment, the irony of the weeping ancient, comforted by a young boy's shaking hand and panting, inarticulate distress, made Loeske snort choked-back laughter. Laughter and tears could be so painfully close. He had learned *that*, too.

The cell was deathly silent, now that he had ceased his own foolish sobbing. The silence had the dank feel of lost hope.

The boy seized his hand and held it, painfully tight. The little fingers were trembling and cold. Loeske squeezed back. *I'm done now, boy. I'm back to playing the adult. I've got too much work to do before I die, this time.*

"Right," he announced with forced cheerfulness. "Anyone for checking out?"

No one answered immediately. Then the pig farmer grunted derisively.

"Oh aye," he said. "I'm with ye, old man. I'd rather die with me ears bleeding out me head, or e'en the mother sucking out me veins, than live six years like a mushroom in this dark!"

"That's the spirit." Loeske felt for the wall with his free hand. The boy was not letting loose of the other one. "Markin," he addressed himself to the former woodcutter, "How long does it take the mother to feed her clave when she returns from a big hunt?"

The rusty voice from the corner of the cell ruminated to itself for a time. "Two or three feedings, maybe," it replied at last in its slow, hoarse way. "I get hungry, sometimes."

"Oh aye, and what do they feed ye, then?"

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The woodcutter made no reply. Loeske cleared his throat. "Ah, best not to ask that now, Hagar." Best not to *ever* ask that question, was his opinion. "I need you to do something else. Turn out your pockets. Markin, Bram -- you do the same thing. I need to know everything -- and I mean *everything* -- we have to work with."

In the end, they had a surprising array of possibilities. The boy, like boys of his age, yielded a crow's collection of a wood fragment, a crushed nest of some kind, a handful of sweet drops and a ball of twine wrapped around a small stick, probably used for fishing. The pig farmer owned a collection of small iron rings jangling on a larger ("I put 'em in their noses"), a pocketful of elastic bands ("I tie elastics 'round their johnnies when they're young, see, and pretty soon, their balls drop right off. Cleaner than cutting"), and a long leather belt and its iron buckle supporting his considerable girth.

There were three buckets, all waxed leather, for water, waste, and food, in the cell. Loeske sniffed the contents of the food bucket and decided to leave that one alone. There was something fungal in there, by the smell, but what was mixed with the fungus was probably exactly what he was afraid it might be. But they could eat the boy's sweets. Maura knew there was no reason to save them back. *Eat, drink*, indeed, for tomorrow they could surely expect to die. And there was unexpected comfort, then, listening to the farmer's loud smacking as he agitated his sweet in his mouth. It was a human contact, of a kind, in the utter separation of the dark.

But Markin was a different matter. Foul as they three smelled, the woodcutter reeked rotten enough to gag a buzzard. There was a terrible, chilling listlessness to that rusty, broken voice, speaking out of the nightmare of its unending burial. Loeske had no way to be sure the former woodcutter was even sane human, after six years of lightlessness, slave labor, and cannibal food. Then again, how could he blame him?

"Aye," the farmer announced, swallowing his sweet noisily, "Got me back to the door, I think. I'll feel about, now, and see what can be done." There was a wheeze in the dark, as the big man compressed himself to investigate. "Stone. No gettin' through *that*. No latch I can feel. Dirt here... *aye*, hard dirt about a third of the way down. Might be dug out, aye, if we have time. Feel, old man!"

Loeske hitched himself one-armed along the dirt floor toward the voice, towing the boy in his wake. Sausage-huge fingers fumbled his shoulder; slid down; grasped his free hand. "*Feel*. Dirt. Can scratch it out with me nails. *Think* ye, old one?"

The old man ran his hand along surfaces. The door was stone. There was no inner handle of any kind -- no surprise, *that*. But about a third of the way from the bottom the solid edge of rock crumbled into something friable. Not that it was likely they could ever manipulate the unseen bolt or latch through any hole they made.

But it was all they had to work with now, and anything was better than waiting, in the listlessness of all hopes lost, for the bitter taste of the mother's final kiss.

"Get out that iron buckle, Hager," he said through stiff lips. "*Markin*. Get over here! You can use the stick. Dig. *Dig*, boys!"

He squeezed the boy's thin hand. "Bram," he said. "Squeeze my hand for no if you hear them near. She'll be feeding them, now. Feeding her fliers and her warriors and her drones... We have a chance, at least a chance to die like men fighting for freedom, and not prey... Dig! *Markin*, you slug, *dig*! And don't stop!"

## 8

They had no way of telling the passage of time in the endless night, but enough digging had been done that the farmer now rested slumped against the door, snorting like a foundering horse. But the woodcutter dug on like an automaton. The old man, pressed against greasy bare skin and smoothly working muscle as he gouged the iron buckle and his bare hand into the earth, could not resist a shudder.

"It's me nails. I've gouged off two of 'em. I'll be back at it... just let me wrap up, first. I thought I felt air, there, almost... I think we're getting close, old man."

"We're *there*, pig man." There was a silken rustle as earth collapsed. Loeske's fist punched through to air. But the feelings of panic and suffocation were growing stronger in him all the same. The wall had proved a foot and half thick, and not all of it had been earth. *How much time had passed?* Not for the first time, he yearned for his ancient mind-to-mind connection with Ship. He never missed time, there. "Keep working! We need to make it large enough for the boy. He's got to lift the latch for us."

The farmer grunted. "Out of the way, then, old man."

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Loeske heard him attack the wall with renewed vigor, muttering curses as he gouged his torn fingers into earth once more. With the noisy snorting, panting, cursing, and scrabbling of stone and earth, it was fortunate they had not already attracted attention. But who knew whether the Silent Ones even heard the same sounds humans did? They knew so little about the creatures. Who would have dreamed, even in nightmare, that the Silent Ones kept human slaves alive, in the eternal underworld of Lichtlos?

"Aye," the farmer panted at last. "Think I can kick it through. Give room... give room..." Breath rasped harshly in the fetid, hot air. The big man grunted and gasped. "Oh aye. There's that, now... Let the boy try."

The boy squeezed his hand. Loeske patted the tightly clenching fingers and opened his mouth to speak. But the reassuring platitudes froze unspoken on his tongue. The boy squeezed his hand again. *Squeeze, pause; squeeze, pause.*

The old man felt his heart slug hard against the wall of his chest, like a trapped falcon trying to burst outside the cage of flesh.

"Get away from the door. There's one out there."

He heard the farmer hitch away. The woodcutter made a deep animal sound -- not a word. Breath sawed raggedly in the dark. There was a fouler edge to their mingled sweat now, sharp and acrid: *fear*. The silence, broken only by their breathing, went on and on.

"Right," the farmer said suddenly. "Maybe it's gone on. Let the lad try. The longer we wait, the surer the mother'll be drinking our blood."

"There's something out there," Loeske whispered, staring futilely into stygian dark. "I can *feel* it."

There was another long, long silence.

"Maybe it's gone on. I ain't heard nor smelled nothing."

"It *hasn't*," Loeske whispered, staring wide-eyed in the dark. "It's there."

"Oh aye, do we just sit and wait all trembling and mindful, then, 'til they knock on the door, and ask us please to come *out*? I say it's worth the chance."

The old man gnawed his lip and bit the rims of his dirtied nails in agonized indecision.

Then he sighed. *The pig farmer was right.*

"Bram," he patted the boy's knee with his free hand, "I'm going to have to ask you to do a brave thing. Do you think you can do it?"

The thin fingers crushed his. No signal, now: the child was hanging on for dear life. But Loeske felt the boy nod jerkily.

"You'll have to be quick, Bram. Quick as you can, so we can help you. It may have a latch, or a bolt, or something else. We're going to pass this twine through with you. If you can't find it, because you can't reach it, or something, you give the twine a pull. Once for trouble and twice quick for yes, good, hear me?"

The boy squeezed his hand. The old man coughed. There was wetness leaking out of his eyes again.

"Go on. You're a brave boy, Bram. Your mother would be proud of you. *Go, now. Help him, Hagar! Give him the end of the twine.*"

The boy crawled past him. Loeske, straining his ears, heard various scuffling and straining sounds, and the scrabbling of more dirt and stones. The boy made an effortful grunt.

"More room here, aye," the farmer said, and scraped vigorously in the dirt. "Now get yer arms straight out before ye, lad, like a piglet comin' out the sow's rear... that's *it*, now... ye're a brave lad. Push! *Push!* Aye, ye're going through. Good lad!"

Feet scrabbled in the earth. The boy made another groan of dire exertion, like a newborn struggling out of the birth canal.

"I can't feel the lad's feet, now," the farmer said after a moment, his breath harsh. "Aye, he's through. He's through! There! He pulled the twine, twice."

"There's still something out there," the old man breathed, his fingers to his wet cheeks. "Can't you *feel* it?"

There was a tiny vibration through the door, and the scrape, as they listened intently, of the boy's fingernails across stone.

Then another sound: an inarticulate, high-pitched mewl from a throat that could not form speech or screams. There was an inexpressible horror in the wordless, frantic gabbling that came, muffled, through the stone.

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The old man lurched to his feet. "Bram!" he screamed. "Boy! Boy!" The farmer crowded beside him, straining with all might at the recalcitrant door -- as the sounds continued, pounding, with two futile, furious fists.

Something outside whined. It was not the boy's sound. The hairs on the back of Loeske's nape stiffened. The farmer froze.

"Listen!"

There was no more mewling outside. The boy was crying, instead, then finally sniffing and panting as if trying to catch his breath, and whatever outside with him still whining, now and then.

"'Tis old Trap," the farmer said, and gulped back great choking sobs of his own. "Aye, it's me old mastiff, followed me into hell. He were ever a brave dog, Trap. I thought he were dead. *Brave* Trap! That's me dog, or I'm no pig farmer!"

"That's no dog," Loeske whispered.

There was a silence outside now; the silence inside was sick with tension. Then came a renewed scrabbling upon the stone, and the boy's grunts of almost silent effort, once more.

"The door! The lad's gettin' it. Give room!"

Loeske felt outward in the dark as he stepped back. His fingers closed on flesh. He squeezed a muscular forearm as hard as he could.

"Listen to me carefully, Hagar. That's not your old Trap. I think I know what that is, now. *Who* that is. We have a chance, now, Hager -- Markin -- but we've got to be careful. There's a beast outside."

"A beast? Aye, so? Dogs are beasts, so?"

"It's a *wolf*, not a dog. It *kills*. *People*, perhaps. Don't forget."

There was a puff of fresher air. Something struck his legs, rocking the old man back on his heels. The boy wrapped his thin arms around his waist as tightly as a python's squeeze. Loeske patted the boy's head and sniffed back more foolish tears. He felt the woodcutter's hand settle tentatively, shyly, upon his shoulder.

"Boy," the old man croaked. "You done real good."

## 9

Outside was deep silence, and a smell like butchering on a hot day, and darkness, thick enough to chew.

"She's still feeding the clave," the farmer whispered. "Aye, smell that blood! What now, old man?"

Loeske shuddered as his busy fingers threaded the farmer's long belt.

"Hang on to the belt. Don't lose touch! Markin, can you guide us?"

"What about the dog? The wolf, ye said?"

"It may not be here entirely to rescue us, Hagar." Loeske felt the wall with the hand that was not anchored to their shared length of leather. "Though I think we can expect to be fully avenged, should we die. But we can't look for help from anyone but ourselves. Markin? Did you hear me? Is there any way out of here? *Any* way, at all, to avoid bats?"

The woodcutter's hoarse, slow voice rumbled in the darkness behind him. "They 'uns led me out with a rope 'round me neck and put me in the cart. I don' know. The diggin's... that's all I know."

"Are the diggings hotter than here, Markin? Cooler?"

There was another agonizing pause as rusty cognitive wheels ground. Then, "Hot, aye, ver' hot," came the rasping reply.

"Pity. The diggings are going deeper, then, not toward the surface." The old man crept forward, tugging his little train. "But you've given me an idea. We need a cart, boys, and a couple dray bats. They're used to humans moving about as prisoners, in those carts. And dray bats can *see* down here. We *can't*."

"Ye're crazed, old man!" The farmer gave a honking snort. "And mayhap dray bats can whistle up a couple warriors, and we'll all be bleeding to death out our ears!"

"Drays are no more than dumb animals, Hagar. I never saw them treated as anything else, the whole three days. Warriors are intelligent. Fliers, obviously so. The mother... I'd guess so. Don't know about the drones." Loeske stopped. "What *is* it, Bram?"

"*Bats!*" It was a malignant hiss.

"I don't think so, Hagar." The child tugged eagerly. "The boy's trying to lead us. Wherever it is, it's away from the wall... get down. We'll have to crawl."

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Loeske lowered himself to his knees. His joints hurt; his whole body ached, especially his damaged ears. They were all lucky they could still hear. It was definitely time to make his final journey to Kolonie, if he escaped this subterranean hell with body and soul still joined together... Crawling one-armed was painful, what with the grip he dared not lose on their sole leathery connection. Behind him, he heard the harsh gasps of his two companions. He could smell the unwashed reek of all of them, especially Markin. The old man paused to scratch something already biting vigorously among the wiry hairs of his crotch. Six years of darkness, devoured every minute by a ravenous host of human lice... how *could* the poor woodcutter still be sane?

The cavern was obviously larger than he guessed. They crawled on, and on. The boy, though, seemed confident enough of their direction. Then suddenly, Loeske's head met something with a jolt that numbed his cranium. He felt the shape of the obstacle. It was a large unevenly spoked wheel.

"It's one of the carts! Not ours. The mother's, I think. It's bigger."

"Yes. Let me think." Loeske sat back on his heels, rubbing his head. "And it must still have the yoked drays in front. That's how the boy found it." The old man clambered to his feet, clinging to the top of the big leather-wrapped wheel. Out of the darkness, the farmer's big hand came to assist him, and the child's spindly arm wrapped his waist. "They haven't been unhitched. She must have been in a real hurry to feed those warriors... but they'll be coming after the drays too, any moment. We need to get to their heads, Hagar. There's no telling how they'll react to a human handler."

"Aye, I'll go round and get the off-side. Markin, ye help me. Get t'other side."

The old man felt moving disturbances in air. The tail of belt went slack in his grip. He patted the boy's head with his free hand. "Done *good*, boy," he whispered.

The cart rocked, lurched, jolted a further step forward; stopped as suddenly. The pig farmer swore luridly under his breath. "Here, ye stinking beasties!" Then he began to croon incongruous softness. "Aye, I have ye now. Ye be as good's me old sow Bessie, and I'll not pinch yer noses again. Stay, down now, *stay*, ye wicked blood-sucklin' beastie..."

The boy began to pat Loeske's arm in soft quick beats. The old man felt forward, drew himself laboriously alongside the cart, the boy pawing his arm more frantically the while.

"Hagar," he gasped. "I think they're making a racket. Like horses, neighing..."

"Aye," came the flat reply. "I guessed so. Get in the cart. I'll hold the heads."

"Wait." The old man groped. "Torches. They burned pitch torches all during the nights. Maybe there's one or two left... get up, boy! Feel around for torch and flint! *Quick!*"

The child mewled. But the clammy fingers tore free. The cart rocked as the youngster climbed; Loeske heard fingernails scabble and panic-stuttering breath. The wooden boards creaked as the boy searched hastily about. The cart reeked of something more terrible than the acrid urine and feces that had tainted their own conveyance; there was an iron-tinged, bitter tang of stale blood, and something strong and sickeningly musky beneath, the smell of the mother herself.

A low snarl erupted somewhere close in the darkness. The animal growling went on and on without stopping. The old man trembled.

"It's the wolf. The wolf! It hears them! There's a warrior coming. Boy! *Boy!* Give me a torch!"

There was a muffled sob in answer. The cart shook from side to side. Loeske, sweeping his hands outwards futilely, encountered solidity at last. The boy, sobbing and hiccupping, thrust resin-aromatic stick and rough flint into his grasp. With shaking hands, the old man fumbled with the striker. At the head of the cart, he heard Hagar struggling with the pitching drays.

"Plug your ears with your fingers, lads. It might be some help..." He struck the flint futilely. *Again.* "This damnable striker! There it is. *Light!*"

The pitch ignited like a bomb, barely missing his chin. Fire flared, blinding. The woodcutter groaned in inarticulate agony at the birth of light.

And other sound came then -- a killing shrilling. The old man screamed, and lifted the flaming torch high.

A figure filled the entrance of the cavern. It was taller than a man. Its skin was oil-black and soft looking as sueded velvet. It stood pitched forward upon the chitinous elbows of its scissored wings like a man leaning upon a stick.

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It hopped forward, then, with terrorizing speed. In the midst of its convoluted, many-folded, baroquely ornamented nose, there quivered a stiffly extended tube, like a truncated elephant's trunk, that poured unseen punishment.

Something white and huge flashed past. The beast leapt. Loeske dropped the torch and put his hands up to his bursting ears. The light guttered. In the return of total night, there were new sounds: inhuman snarls and snapping and cracking and crunching; short shrill bursts, sharp now as slashes of knives, that threatened dissolution to ear and eye and inner parts; unseen bodies tumbling and colliding and contesting with titanic, inhuman force.

Then slowly, quiet, except for that continuing low, animal snarl, and the sudden sickly reek, strong and almost sweetish, of violent death.

The snarl sank into a vibrating silence.

The old man put his hand to his frantically thrashing heart. There was an iron pain in his chest and tingling down his arm. Liquid, hot and wet, ran out his throbbing ears down his neck. His eyes wept blood. "Hurts," he gasped. "My old ticker's about had it. Hagar! Markin! Are you all right?"

"Aye," he heard through the buzz in his ears. "I'll hold their heads. Help him, Markin. Get the old man and the boy into the cart."

The boy still hiccupped speechless distress. Loeske put his arm around his shaking shoulders. "We're alive, boy." He was dimly amazed at the strength of his own voice. "We're *alive*." The woodcutter's huge, rock-hard arms surrounded him; the old man, pressed against that unclean, muscular chest, felt himself lifted with the ease of a babe. The boy settled beside him a moment later. "The torch," Loeske choked. "Give me the torch and flint, Markin!"

He fumbled with the flint once more, ignoring the continuing pain in his breast. "Dark won't help us now. Let's live and die in the light, lads!" The flint struck. Loeske squinted in the sudden dazzle.

The gaunt figure of the woodcutter turned away from him, fingers with eagle-like claws protecting eyes no longer comfortable with light. A long, matted tail of gray hair hung down his bared back; rags of trousers, no more than tissue-thin, ripped threads, hung about his hips. Loeske blinked past. The farmer, doughy face surprisingly composed, held the heads of two bridling drays tightly with both meaty fists.

Beyond lay the corpse of the warrior bat. The peak-eared head, half-rolled on its side to face him, had been crushed nearly in half in giant jaws. The sonic-generating snout, sheared from its root, lay flaccid as an eunuch's phallus. Little else was recognizable -- torn scraps of wing, skin ripped into handkerchief-sized patches, splintered and snapped bones (surprisingly delicate and bird-like) and glistening organs in a lake of black ichors. There was no sign of the wolf.

Loeske lifted the torch. He refused to acknowledge the hot squeeze of his spasming heart. His personal crisis could wait its turn, damn it.

"Get these drays moving, lads," he croaked, breathing in stentorian, labored snorts. "It's a long ways to home."

10

"Which way, old man?"

The old man bit his dirtied nails in indecision. The light of their second torch, and the next-to-last they had, was now guttering low. The listless drays, constantly prodded and pinched into reluctant motion by Hagar, hung their heads low. But their (he guessed) hour-long journey had been surprisingly easy since leaving their original chamber. Beyond, their chamber had yielded to a long, smoothly floored tunnel; there had so far been sign of neither bat nor wolf. Loeske's mistreated heart had even (slowly, oh so slowly) eased its painful pinching.

But now the tunnel forked. He had not the least idea which branch they should take. He shrugged. The center fork looked the most used; the left fork showed the ruts of many cart trips in a softer soil; the right was the smallest of the three. Hager, at the head of the drays on the left, scratched his chin in evident perplexity as he stared into the nearly identical black maws.

The old man sighed.

"Markin? Which way to the diggings?"

The woodcutter, face averted from the still-painful light, hunched his great shoulders. "Left," he muttered. "Think they's un took me left."

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"Not there, then. That'll only take us down." Loeske lowered himself from the cart, wincing and almost stiff as a corpse. The boy offered anxious assistance, patting his arm with every shaky step he took.

The old man approached the center tunnel and squatted on his haunches, sniffing. "The air's clearest straight ahead. Bram? Bats ahead?"

The boy nodded vigorously. A hank of his black hair fell over his hollowed, sunken eyes; he swatted it aside impatiently. There was sharpness in his features that had not been there before, a hint of the emerging adult.

"Guess we'll be meeting them sooner or later. We got no choice." The old man stood up, holding their precious torch above their heads. "We'll go straight on. But we all get in the cart now, and douse the light, and hide as best as we can. We'll have to let the drays pick their own way. Maybe no one will notice there's no warrior with us. We can only hope."

"These beasties won't move without prodding. They's done for, almost."

"Then pick a stick out from the latticework, and poke them in the rear as discreetly as you can, whenever you have to." Loeske hobbled back to the cart. The drays, as he passed them, did indeed look done for; the eye of the rightmost was dull and filmed, and its wrinkled feeding tube hung limply out of its mouth like a dried-out sausage. "Take this torch, boy. You'll have to help me up, lads. My old ticker's not what it used to be."

He rested on the edge, limp as an overcooked noodle, before he had the strength to crawl deeper inside. Outside, Hager could be heard yet crooning threats and exhortations to the exhausted drays. Loeske crawled to the back of the cart. The boy pressed tremblingly close. There was, as the torch was blown out, then thrust inside, and his remaining companions joined him in the close confines of the small conveyance, a hideous sense of *déjà vu*. Hadn't they all lived this horror before?

A stick cracked sharply. At the front of the cart, there was a rustle as Hager worked the latticework barrier into position. "Now ye blood-sucklin' beasties, here's one right up yer asses," the farmer muttered. "Move, ye drags!"

The cart rolled ploddingly forward. Inside their new close confines, Loeske could hear their mutual heavy breathing and thudding heartbeats with startling clarity. At the front, Hager muttered as now and then he applied judicious encouragement to the drays. Time seemed to stretch. The cart rolled on, and on. Loeske no longer had the least sense of their direction. Had they indeed gone straight ahead? Had they turned? Where were the drays taking them? How long had they rolled on in this thick blanket of darkness? *Miles*, or mere yards?

The boy started suddenly. *Squeeze, pause; squeeze, pause.* The old man swallowed in a dry throat.

"Bats," he whispered. "Close by, now. Careful, Hagar. No more noise."

The farmer hitched back. "They're moving on their own, anyway," he whispered back. "Don't know why. Haven't had to prod them for a while, now."

*Haven't had to prod them.* The old man licked his suddenly stiff lips. *I've been a fool.* "Hagar," he breathed. "What happens when a tired and hungry horse senses its stall and oats are near?"

"A horse? I ain't never seen one. Never seen oats, neither." There was a long, somehow terrible pause. "I guess, it starts to trot. Like me pigs, when I *sookie-sookie* 'em to their dinners."

"Exactly." The old man stared into the darkness with wide-open eyes. "Dinner. We're in trouble, now. Do you smell it? That musky, bloody odor? It's getting stronger. Isn't it?"

There was a tenser pause. Then, "*The mother,*" the farmer whispered. "I smell the mother. Maura help us! We've ridden right to her."

## 11

The old man felt about him for the extinguished torch. *This was it.* He felt, in spite of that knowledge, a wash of a peculiar peace. He, at least, among the four of them, would renew his existence in a new, younger flesh, courtesy of Ship and the occult knowledge of its long-ago builders. He would not remember this tragic ending. But he felt a sudden, intense, most terrible grief for his companions. This would be, for them, the final passage to the great unknown.

He almost longed to go with them. Death did not improve upon renewed acquaintance.

*I'll give it my best shot.* "Get the second torch, Hagar," he ordered. "Markin, you take this one. I've got the flint. On my command, we light the torches – and the front of the cart – and drop out the back. We'll push the cart ahead of us and use the torches. Aim for the mother, if you see her. That's the best we can do."

# Original Fiction

There were rustles in the dark, a grunt of satisfaction. "Aye. I've got t'other torch. We're ready, old man." The cart creaked onwards. The drays were definitely picking up their pace.

"Don't lose the flint."

"I won't."

"Better check the back lattice. See if it's loose enough to push out."

"I did."

There was a pause. In the darkness, now, Loeske could hear something new: the rustle and pulse of wings, at first faintly, and then, as the cart rolled on, a great rushing, like a river. Streams of fliers swept over their heads, busy in the service of their demanding mother.

"You're both brave, good men, Hagar... Markin. I've glad I knew you. I wish I could remember you all forever. But I won't make it back to Kolonie this time. I'll lose all these memories."

"Aye," the farmer replied after long silence.

"Boy. *Bram.*" The old man squeezed the boy's hand. "I never met your mother. I was crew, and she was – she *is* – one of the great, ageless wizards of Kolonie. That's *colony*, really. I wish I had time to explain. Anyway, back to your mother... I wish I'd known her. She bore a brave son. And it's amazing, really, that you exist at all. So many of us – wizards and crew -- have damaged genes. Interstellar radiation does that. We were in the void for a long, long time. Genes – radiation – *space* -- I don't have time to explain it all to you, boy. I wish I did."

The old man fell silent momentarily. The air had become almost too close and choking to breathe. The source of that musky odor had laired here -- for how long, no human could yet answer; still, a very long time, perhaps. The dense reek spoke of lengthy habitation. Even the deep stones of the earth must be permeated with effluent of the mother.

"The wolf," he continued musingly. "It'll help us. But it may not care, not in the way we do, whether we mayfly mortals live or die. Remember, too, it's a beast now, though it will be a thinking man again -- when it's ready." Loeske stared into the darkness. At first he whispered, but gradually, his voice grew louder. "Still, I think he hears me. So this is the last request – the prayer, if you will -- of Henrich Ira Loeske, second officer of the ship of the void, *Phoenix. Tellen!* Lord White Star; wizard; *vengeance*, incarnate; *hear me!* Drink blood to your fill, bitter prince; *eat*, bereft one, with your sharp teeth!" He drew breath and shouted with all his might. "*Avenge these children!*"

The cart rocked. It halted. No one spoke. Loeske, still breathing hard, fingered his flint with trembling fingers. There was a strange susurration and sighing around them now, as if unseen, huge wings beat air. The sickly musk was too strong to endure. Blood and iron lay beneath. The old man coughed, trying to breathe.

"Almost," he whispered. The peculiar calm was still upon him, but underneath, his stomach was tight, and his heart once again pinching. "*Almost. Are you ready, Hagar?*"

"Aye."

Something outside rattled and pushed against the front latticework. Loeske wished his traitorous heart had not chosen this moment to pain him so. Then, as he exhaled the breath he just realized he had been holding, it came: shrill sound.

He struck the flint. Of a miracle, it worked instantly. The first torch lit. The second, held to its flaming cap, roared into life. The branches of the front lattice exploded as if drenched in gasoline, obscuring the shadowy head.

"Now! *Out!*"

The woodcutter's great arm swept up boy and old man against his chest like helpless puppies, as he tumbled out. Loeske heard Hagar roar like an enraged bear through the cacophony of shrilling. The sound was worse than he had ever heard it, had ever *imagined* it – an orchestra of agony. It hurt not only his ears, but also parts deep inside.

Pressed against the woodcutter's shoulder, the old man struggled to see. The pig farmer stood with his back to the burning cart, whirling his crackling torch like a demon. There was blood in his eyes, and twin rivulets running from his nostrils. But though he staggered like a falling tree, still he swung his stick in a furious circle. And Markin, too, thrust with his flaming torch and yelled, all the while he protected his precious cargo against his broad chest.

# Original Fiction

There was a pop in the old man's right ear, then the left, and a sudden silence. *There go my ears. Deaf for good, now.* But he could still see. What he saw, looking over the woodcutter's shoulder, struck terror into him.

The chamber was not as large as he had expected it to be. But everywhere, everywhere he looked, were warrior bats, with great big-eared heads hunched between their sharp shoulders, and sonic tubes extended out of their faces like rifles. Their leathery wings beat a hot storm against his face. He looked up, and saw them hanging above like fruit ready to drop, and every tube stiff with death. He looked down, and saw, through his blurring vision, the man-shaped drones, looking, all of them, like nothing so much as stump-winged, bald-headed gargoyles. And he saw the mother.

At first, he mistook her for a giant, velvety carpet covering the whole floor of the chamber. She had been swollen like a tick ready to burst, but she had fed her children, and now the bag was soft and squeezey. If she had legs, or arms, or wings, he could not tell. But as he watched, the front edge reared, and he saw that underneath were belly plates and muscles she could constrict and expand, moving like a huge snake. And underneath, also, surprisingly small, was a perfectly round, red-edged circle, full of triangular teeth, and the lurking shadow of her sucking tube.

At that instant, the wolf leapt right over them. When it landed, in the center of the mother, a great red splash filled the entire room.

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"Light-Eyes! Old man!"

Elian Tellen, kneeling to scrub his torn and bloodied torso and arms in the snow, spoke without looking up.

"He's deaf, Hagar."

"Wha-?"

The wizard climbed to his feet. If he did so with a certain stiffness and weariness, it was understandable. There was blood on the coldly sun-lit snow where he had washed, much of it his own, and an uncountable number of still-oozing bite rings and slashes covering arms and legs. He spoke more loudly the second time.

"Deaf, Hagar."

The farmer pulled his earlobe in vexation.

"Aye, I heard ye this time. No need to shout. Will he live?"

Tellen, still entirely naked, knelt beside him. The old man rested, like a tired child, in the cradle of the farmer's meaty arms.

For a moment, the wizard gazed upon the unconscious face with his star-bright eyes, and then touched the brow of the gray head gently. He smiled.

"For a long time, Hagar. But I need to take him to Kolonie. He would want to remember you."

"Good." The farmer, rocking the old man on his knees, held out an arm, after a moment, and drew the boy in the embrace, too.

"Ye heard, boy. He'll *live*. No need to snivel so. Ye'll be a man, soon enough. Have ye a father? Nay? Well, I'll be yer father, then, for now. Every little lad needs a father. Ye're cold? Aye, so am I. But we'll be going home, we three, soon e'nou. Poor broken Markin! I wish he were, too."

The wizard stood. He stretched his weary limbs as he gazed about him. Through the giant rocks and boulders that littered this high-altitude vista, he glimpsed a head, and soon the rocking shoulders of an eight-legged steed, running to answer his call.

There was one more deed to do before he left this frozen wasteland. He walked back to the hole they had exited, and picked up the small flier he had struck down. It was still alive, though its left wing was broken. He gathered it up, while it beat its good wing against him, and wrinkled its hideous tiny face at him in its terror. He walked back.

"Eeuh! The ugly thing!"

"For you, boy." He held out his hands, with the little creature cupped between them. Its heart panted visibly against its velvety breast like a tiny hammer. "A gift. Heal it. *Listen* to it. Do you understand?"

The boy nodded. Slowly, so slowly, he reached out to the bat.

### To What Degree (con't)

literature. Walt Disney produced a series of educational films (reel-to-reel, 16mm, c.1950's) that ranged from physics, geography, mathematics and even riveting—like in welding and joining two sheets of metal together. Why *riveting* is anyone's guess, but Mr. Disney's vision was comparable to Dr. Seuss in their goal—to educate and inspire young minds.

Back to the elephant carrying a world in the delicate muscles of his trunk. This concept is not new! This theme is basic to various Asian myths and religions—that the world is carried on the back of an elephant (who is standing on the back of a turtle). It is also the premise of Terry Pratchett's Discworld series, though there are *four* elephants that carry the world (Disc) through the universe, standing on the back of a turtle.

Hopefully, this delightful tale of Horton who rescues a tiny civilization on a speck of dust, will inspire that next Hawking-like boy or girl to explore their world and discover the great and small of humanity's treasures—to some degree or the other. Because, "A person's a person, no matter how small."

For a laugh, check out "Stunt City" which aired during the Super Bowl. Go to <http://video.google.com> and Google for "Stunt City".

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### Suspension of Disbelief (con't)

and dislikes. If you like literary prose to be rich and poetic, don't have someone who likes Hemingway or Steinbeck read your work. If you like whimsy and talking animals, then don't send your work to someone who obtusely sticks to "realism" even in the speculative fiction arena. Your goal is to entertain your reader or viewer to the same degree that they are willing to suspend their disbelief. You won't entertain someone who is not willing to suspend their disbelief past a certain level. You don't want to get a headache from the brick wall. You want to find that doorway to those people who you know will like your work. Sometimes that means finding a place that is willing to showcase your work for free so you can get that work out to as many people as possible. Sometimes that means doing hours of research reading through magazines or online ezines or databases to find those markets whose whimsy matches yours. Sometimes that means going out on a limb and self-publishing your own work. But don't worry; they're out there. You just have to believe.

That's really what SF is all about, you know: the big reality that pervades the real world we live in: the reality of change. Science fiction is the very literature of change. In fact, it is the only such literature we have.

— Frederik Pohl

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### The Writer's Block (con't)

One thing you should do with front-loaded material, of course, is to make sure you don't put it in the *first* few paragraphs. Those paragraphs have one job, to suck the reader into your tale. After you have the reader hooked then you can give them a little play in the line and do some educating. But get the teaching over as quickly as possible. You can't, as Dan Brown did in his book, throw in tidbits that have nothing to do with the story itself. There's just not enough space.

In parallel, back-loaded material should be inserted *before* the climax, which will occur in the last few paragraphs of your piece. Let those last lines be memorable only for the final, emotional, completion of your story. They may be teaching a moral, but they shouldn't be teaching facts. (The only exception to this might be for twist ending stories that turn on some factual revelation.)

Another tip to keep in mind is that it's much less intrusive if a reader's education takes place within dialogue between characters, especially if the dialogue also helps develop character or move the plot. This is true of front-loaded *or* back-loaded material, but remember that the dialogue also has to sound realistic, meaning that it can't be of the, "well, as you know, John," variety. This is not easy to do, which is probably why the simple "info dump" is so popular.

Finally, remember that even if you only have 5 or 6 thousand words, there is still *some* room to spread the reader's education out a little. Share the load and the burden will be lighter.

## Names in Fiction (con't)

make it a name. I have always felt that the people who come up with drug names have a finger on the pulse of good fantasy naming, and I've considered writing a series of short stories about characters such as Princess Propecia, Count Ambien, and the evil Lord Valtrex (who lives atop the volcano Mount Viagra). And of course, each of the characters would exhibit the side effects of the drugs they are named after.

If plagiarizing names is not to your liking, there are ways to make names up that are purely yours, though with as much fiction as has been written, it's unlikely your work will be the only place that particular name appears. The easiest method is to take a standard name and change it up a bit. From that tactic we get Martyn, Ellyn, Mikael, and Josephani, to name just a few examples.

Still too commonplace? Then start with a common name, make a change, then look at it and make a few more. Switch some syllables around, add or subtract a few letters, and voila, you have a completely new name.

Hiding meaning within names is another "fancy" trick. Pick a character trait or a hidden meaning, and then use a translator to find out what that word or phrase is in another language. Then either use that word as the name, or apply the naming rules you learned to tweak it. It can be your little secret that your hero's duplicitous best friend Verader really means traitor (a fact easily recognizable to any reader who can decipher bastardized Dutch or German).

Another tactic is to decide on the type of name you want, and then just start tossing out ideas. Should it be a long name or a short one? Do you want it to start with a consonant or a vowel sound? In many cases, the sound of a name can give you a hint into the soul of the character, even if the name has no intrinsic meaning. Harsh guttural names lean more toward aggressive characters, and long flowing names to wise ones (though one would hope there is more to your characters' dimensionality than the sound of their name suggests.)

Many are the times that I have created a name by deciding that "I haven't used a V word in a while," or some similarly arbitrary condition. I also keep a list of the names I create and refer from it periodically so that 1) I can make sure I don't have too many similar-sounding names, 2) I don't repeat names unless I intend to do so, and 3) I have a reference to refer to when I just can't come up with anything that works.

Once a race or culture is established in a work, coming up with names is easier, since there are generally naming rules that accompany a culture. We can tell that certain names are Greek, others Russian,

and still others Chinese because of the sounds and constructions of those names. Other names cannot be pinpointed so exactly on a map, but may still be related to a region in a person's conception of the world.

The same holds true in fiction, even if the author is not aware of any particular set of naming rules for his cultures. Some names just don't sound right, and other names fit perfectly. If there is no pattern to names, it suggests a melding of cultures, the presence of a single defining culture in the story, or a homogeneity that had better be present in other aspects of the work, or else astute readers will pick up on the discontinuity.

Does the character's culture prefer short names (Drak), or long ones (Drakalithaen)? Do they list the family name first, or the individual's name? Do they use family names (Mutch Miller Jr.) or descriptives (Mutch the Miller's Son)? Are they tribal, clannish, or have any other sort of group affiliation? If a list of naming rules have been created, coming up with a name is simple. And the more it is done, the more characters who exist within a given culture, the easier the naming becomes. Certain names are discarded immediately for not sounding correct; others might jump out at you without much conscious thought.

But perhaps the best way to create new names is just to play with words. Any word can be modified to become a name. Any word can *be* a name.

Battery. (Not so good). Baterian. (Better, but needs more oomph). Ba'alterian. (Now he's starting to sound evil, but that just might be the Ba'al talking). Ba'altyrin. (I've seen worse names in fiction).

DVD. (A bit short). Deeveedee. Divedier. (Sounds French to me. Could be a family name.) Round Divedier... Rolund Dividier. Rolunde Dividier.

Try it yourself. Look around and select an object at random. Write its name down, then start playing with it. Does it look like a masculine or feminine name? Try to visualize the character. What are the primary characteristics? Does the character like the name he has, or does he resent it? Do you want the name to convey a meaning? Is it based upon a language created for your own work? Does it fit with the other names in that character's culture, or is there a reason for it to be discordant?

Creating character names isn't as hard as many novice writers think. No matter how poor your results, they will probably be better than Bow Hunter, Summer Skies, and Urhines Kendall Icy Eight Special K, all of which are actual, legal names taken from several "Worst Baby Names Ever" sites.