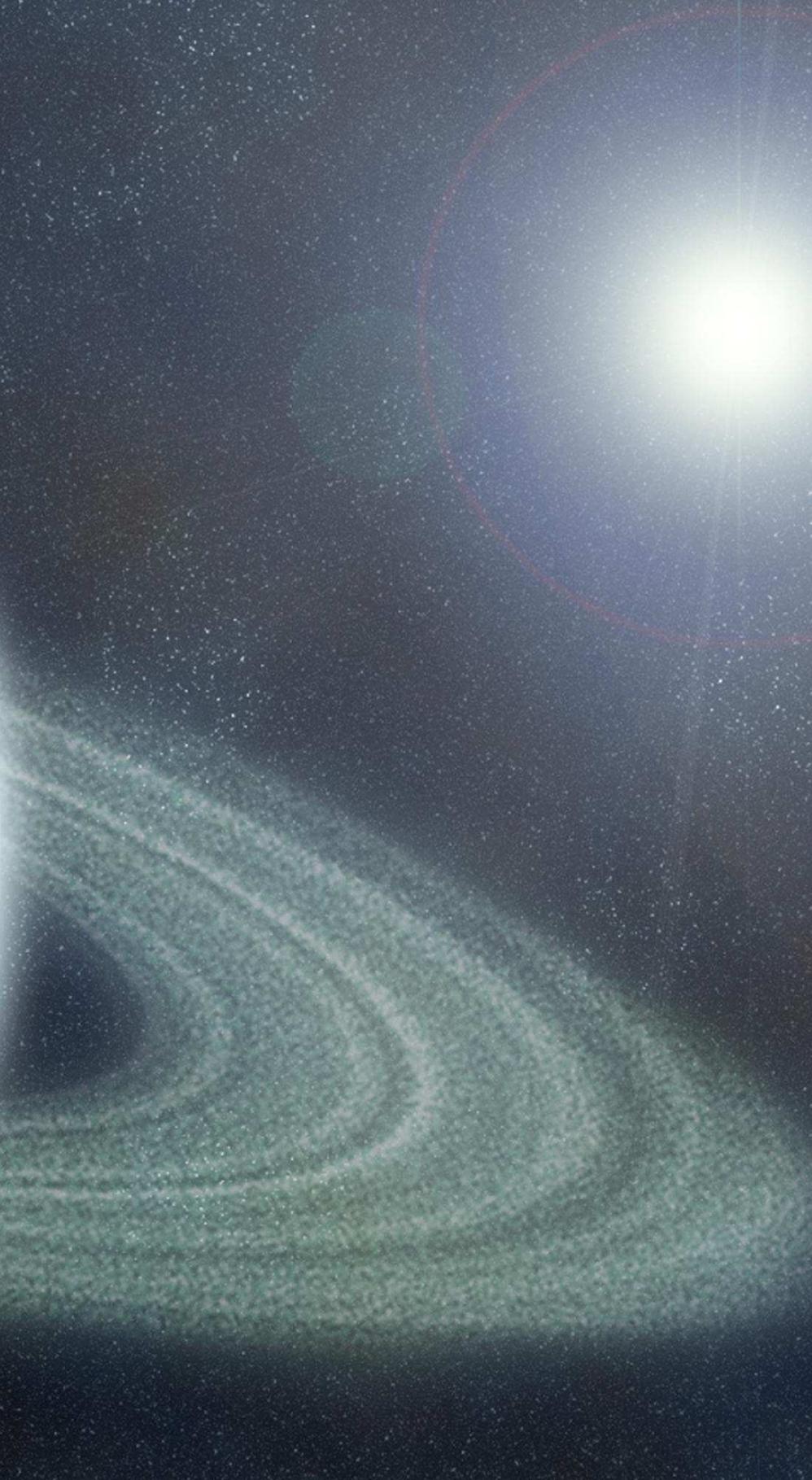


PROBE 169

SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SOUTH AFRICA



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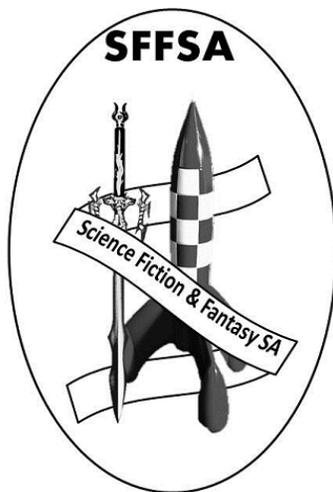
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Email: gailjamieson@gmail.com

Probe is typed by Gail Jamieson and other contributors.

Cover Art: Kyle Brunette



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PROBE 169

September 2016

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Editorial

Gail

In July we decided that instead of the social meeting that was planned, we would go along as a club to see the Gateway to Space exhibition that was being presented at the Sandton Exhibition Centre.

10 members of the club spent around 2 and a half hours wandering around the exhibition before we went off to have supper talk about what we had seen.

The exhibition documented the journey into space from an American and a Russian point of view. From Robert Goddard's first rocket experiments to the theories of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky.

I was intrigued to see a child's wagon with a rocket strapped onto it as an early attempt at rocketry. We were able to touch a real moon rock which had been rubbed smooth from numerous fingers doing the same.

We looked at a model of the Sputnik-1, an Apollo capsule model and also of the Orion capsule. We smiled at the Coca cola dispenser which took less than 2L of coke into space. The freeze dried food that the astronauts had eaten really did not look very appetising.

And the space toilets made me very glad I did not have to use one!

I really enjoyed the full sized model of the Moon buggy which looked very fragile. And the presentation of the different types of wheels they looked at before deciding to use the ones they did.

The most fascinating exhibition was a life-size Mir space station core module built at an angle to give some effect of vertigo. It really was most strange to go into the module and find that I immediately became dizzy as soon as I tried looking up. If I kept my attention directly in front of me I was able to look at the treadmill and the plants and the upright sleeping compartment, but as soon as I tried to take in the whole module I felt as if I was going to fall over. Guess I would not have made a good astronaut.

There were also small summaries of all the Apollo missions, which began almost 50 years ago. Also a model of the cockpit of the space shuttle and for the adventurous the Multi-

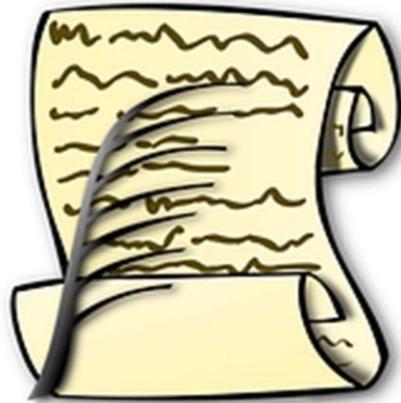


A very different SFFSA meeting which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Chairman's Note

Andrew Jamieson

Another month flies by and before you know it, another Chairman's Note is required! As always, I do have to think about what I want to write about. It could be something serious, but to be honest, the world is serious enough and in your hands you have the SFFSA Club's awesome Probe filled with possibilities, fantasy and science fiction... so why would we want to be serious when we could instead indulge our imaginations? I know that we are a literary club, and as I have mentioned before, I do read a lot of comics instead of books .



This time I would like to talk about another one of my favourite things: TV series. I am pretty sure many of you dear readers do take time out for a spot of indulgence watching your favourite TV show, be it from the classic Red Dwarf or Firefly, to the excellent, ongoing Game of Thrones or perhaps you have decided to try out the new series The Expanse. Whatever your passion, I am pretty sure there is a TV series out there for you. Have you noticed lately just how many TV series out there have got a Science Fiction or Fantasy theme to them? I certainly have, and I'm loving it! There are just so many of them that I am actually falling behind in try to watch them all ongoing, but then again having over 20 series to watch is a lot to ask in one week! I thought I would mention a few of my favourites, and some that may pique your interest, and probably some that you wouldn't want to watch even if they paid you.

The Expanse: To me one of the best hardcore Science Fiction series I have ever seen. Set 200 years in the future (and based on award nominee and winning books) about a potential war between Earth, Mars and Belters, and other, strange things.

Dark Matter: A crew wakes up on a spaceship with no memory, and have to work together to find out what happened, and how to survive in the universe.

Killjoys: Bounty hunters in space! Ok, I really enjoyed this, different and fun.

The Magicians (2015) : I loved this fantasy series, though it started slowly and took a bit to catch me. It is an odd one, about a school for teaching magic, a

fantasy world for children, and a monster. This is not for children with some very adult themes.

Ash vs Evil Dead: For the horror fans out there, if you enjoyed Evil Dead 2 and 3, you'll love this series which stars Bruce Campbell reprising his role. Gory and fun!

Lucifer: The devil decides he has had enough, leaves hell... and opens a bar in L.A. Good fun watching the devil and a cop solve crime with the devil's inherent abilities.

BrainDead : I got to admit I passed on this when I first started reading the precise, "A government employee discovers that the cause of the tensions between the two political parties...". Urgh, a political what? Until you read the last sentence, "...is a race of extraterrestrial insects eating the brains of the politicians" Say what?! Yes, part politics and part aliens, but all good fun.

There are still many more that may be interesting to you : Cleverman, From Dusk Till

Dawn : The Series, Powers (2015), The Last Ship, The Strain, Zoo, Salem, Sense8, Stranger Things, Hemlock Grove, etc. etc. There are simply too many to mention, have a look, you will be amazed what is out there, and what is still coming. Of course, if you have little interest in watching the TV, our wonderful club library is available anytime for you readers to indulge your passion for the written word instead. Enjoy yourself, no matter how you want to spend your time.

Nova 2015 Finalist

Brian Warner

Travelling

"Next passenger, please," the grey-uniformed attendant announced, and my fellow Travellers and I did the queue-shuffle once more. Twenty minutes I'd been waiting, and I was nearly at the front of the line. A family of six was now at the head of the line; behind them and in front of me, a solitary man like me. The family, on their way off-planet for the first time, were glowing with the restrained pleasure that marks firsttime Travellers. The father was attempting to appear blasé and relaxed; this was effectively undermined by the children's barely-restrained exuberance, and their mother's attempts to keep them in check.

Involuntarily, I smiled at the unrestrained enthusiasm. Known officially as

Pandimensional Translocation, Travelling (as everyone but the most earnest of technicians calls it) has been commercially available for a number of years - yet there is still a large percentage of the population who have yet to take advantage of near-instantaneous transport between Worlds. Of course there are others, such as myself, who have been Travelling regularly for years. In my case, it's an essential part of my job – I make a comfortable living as a galaxy-level marketing supervisor for TransGalactic Inc., and meet with members of my sales-force on one World or another every week.

My wife, though she seldom if ever Travels herself, is one of the keenest proponents of Travelling. A business trip for me would once have meant weeks away from home, journeying to and from Worlds on a shuttle, but is now accomplished in a single morning or afternoon. Yes, I am a seasoned and confident Traveller.

That's right; confident. Nothing to it. Step onto a platform here, step off on another world. Easy as falling off a log.

"Daddy, Daddy, we're next! We're next, Daddy! Daddy, can I Travel first, please? Please, Daddy!"

The man bent down and spoke to the four children, who were now all clamouring the same refrain: "Daddy, can I be first? Please, Daddy? Can I?" I didn't catch what he said, but it obviously wasn't to everyone's satisfaction. The girl who had first spoken was now complaining loudly, her voice rising in pitch:

"But Daddy, that's not fair! I asked first! Didn't I ask first? Mummy, tell Daddy that I asked first!"

This time I heard the man clearly, as he raised his voice to be heard: "That's enough, now! I told you how we're going to do it, and that's my last word! Now, no complaining, or we'll go right back home."

The children obediently subsided, apart from the girl's occasional mutter of "It's not fair, I asked first", which the rest of the family cheerfully ignored.

The attendant was back again. "Next passengers, please!" came the summons once more. The family gathered up their belongings, and started moving toward the large, silver screen at the front of the terminal. As the mother fussed around her young ones, lining them up, I

saw the father had solved the issue of who would Travel first by taking that place himself. Behind him his children followed apparently in order of age, oldest to youngest, with their mother bringing up the rear. This placed the girl who had clamoured to go first fourth in line, and seeing her lips moving, and a sullen expression on her face, I guessed that she had not yet given up her litany. Sure enough, just before the six of them moved off behind the attendant, I caught a whispered, "I asked first. It's not fair," which trailed away as they moved off. By the small smile that now returned to her lips, her outraged sense of justice had apparently faded as her excitement at her first time Travelling returned.

As they hurried toward the screen, the sedate attendant looking rather like a swan who had somehow acquired a trail of six ducklings, the man in front of me turned round and caught my eye. When I gave him a polite smile, he took that as an opening to ask in an amused tone, "Can you remember ever being that excited at the prospect of Travelling?"

"It's been a while," I answered him with a light chuckle, "But I'm sure I was just as worked up my first time." Consciously adopting a relaxed posture, hands in my pockets, I asked <in return MAKING CONVERSATION>: "What about you?"

"Hardly remember it really, though I'm sure I was pretty excited. Of course, that was many Travels ago."

"Of course," I agreed with a polite chuckle, as we shared a moment of understanding. Men of the Worlds, both of us, experienced and confident. In control.

I just hoped he couldn't hear the beating of my heart, which was threatening to explode from my chest.

He smiled again, and returned to the perusal of the data-screen he carried in one hand. A businessman like myself, obviously, routinely Travelling to appointments and meetings on one World or another.

Schooling my face into a relaxed smile, and focussing my eyes on some far-off point, I did my best to ignore the thoughts clamouring for my attention.

Stop that! I scolded myself. You're being ridiculous! You've Travelled hundreds - probably thousands of times, and you're still in one piece. This time won't be any different; just relax

- in less than half an hour you'll be there safe and sound, and laughing at what an idiot you are!

Great advice. I really wished I could take it. But uninvited thoughts still rushed at me,

Surreptitiously I eased a handkerchief out of my pocket, and under pretence of blowing my nose, wiped the tiny beads of sweat off my forehead I hoped no one had noticed them.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that the line of Travellers now reached nearly to the back of the concourse. Good thing that I, a seasoned Traveller, knew to get here early, and wouldn't have to wait an hour or more, like those at the back. Best to get it over with quickly. Yes, if 'twere done, 'twere best done-

No! Stop it! Think of something else. Revise your brief for the meeting, or... or something.

Good idea. Unfortunately, I'd already revised it so many times I could probably recite it backwards, standing on my head.

Shouldn't that attendant be back by now?

"Next passenger, please."

At last!

The man in front snapped his data-screen shut, picked up his briefcase, and with a look over his shoulder and a cheery, "See you on the other side!" strode off after the attendant.

Giving him a small wave and a relaxed nod, I lifted my own briefcase for my final move in the queue-shuffle.

I was now in the front of the line.

Gloomily, I passed the time by imagining how my wife would break the news to our children that Daddy wasn't coming home again. A soft voice, "Kids, there's something I need to tell you- " Then the shocking pronouncement - my wife struggling to keep from breaking down - the anguished cries of "Mommy, nooooooo!". And after that... the struggle to carry on with life: the pitying stares of the neighbours, the frantic calls from family, each

night my wife privately shedding tears into her pillow, the children learning to put on a brave front...

By the time my turn eventually came, I was so caught up in my morbid fantasy that I was feeling almost calm.

"Next passenger, please!"

My heart, which had ceased its pounding, hammered at my ribcage even more fiercely than before. Suddenly short of breath, I found myself making a choking noise which I immediately disguised as a cough. Hoisting my briefcase, I marched confidently off behind the attendant.

I am calm. I am at peace. I am an experienced, seasoned Traveller, and I have no fear.

Nope, None at all. No fear. I laugh at fear. Ha, ha, Fear!

I wished the perspiration trickling in my armpits didn't tickle so, and I wished I had thought to visit the bathroom. Oh yeah, I had. So why did I need to pee so badly?

As we approached the enormous silver screen, the technicians on each side began fiddling with dials and punching buttons, laying in co-ordinates. As I stood on the pressure-sensitive pad, they made further esoteric gestures over the touch-screen - adjusting settings for my body mass, I presumed.

"All set, sir?" came the gratingly cheerful voice of the attendant. Hah, she could afford to be cheerful! She wasn't about to be translated into potentiality, and travel through imaginary space as nothing more than a disembodied concept.

"Ready," I croaked. The attendant looked at me oddly.

I cleared my throat. "I'm ready," I repeated firmly. Just a tickle in the throat. Nothing to worry about, nothing to see here, folks. Move along now.

Apparently reassured, the attendant beamed. "If you'll just step up here, please, sir." Taking my cue, I stepped up on the platform she indicated, holding my briefcase in front of me. Only when I saw her looking at me strangely again, did I realise I was clutching it so hard my knuckles had turned white.

Oops.

Lifting the briefcase up, I explained, "Important documents. Most important. Can't possibly afford to have them go astray," and I gave her my friendliest grin.

"Ah." She looked relieved; she was probably dreading dealing with a neurotic, a crazy person who thought Travelling was somehow dangerous. "Right, one second, and here we-"

My world exploded.

A thousand shattered reflections of myself whirled around me, ghostly and insubstantial. Colours bloomed in a hundred thousand refracting kaleidoscopes, and I wasn't sure if it was happening behind my eyelids, or if it was real.

I wasn't sure if I was real.

Life was only a story I'd once heard, a whisper that came through the darkness and disappeared like the mist. Nothing was real, except the darkness. Nothing had substance, nothing existed, only the darkness.

I embraced it. I became the darkness.

There was no concept of time. There was no now, no remembrance of things past, nothing I could identify as 'I'. The darkness existed - that was all, and the darkness was all.

The darkness swallowed me.

It was like the rising of a sun, the dawning of consciousness. Slowly, I became aware of my own existence; and like a drowning man gasping for air, I inhaled my own reality. I remembered that I was a person; that I was a man; that I existed... and slowly, reluctantly, the darkness released me from its embrace. "I will always be here," it seemed to whisper to me, "I will always be waiting."

I had a name. I remembered it now. I had a name, and I had a family, and I had a job. I was going to a meeting...

The colours again. Bright, brighter than I could imagine; colours I had no name for; colours I had never seen before. They swirled around me, and with them came again the ghostly reflections of myself, broken and distorted. A hundred thousand eyes, looking at me; looking through me. Limbs connected at odd angles; ears, toes, hands, whirling in a maelstrom around me. I tried to shut my eyes against them - to no avail; I could still see

them. But now, thank God, it began to slow; the pieces of myself began to join together, until soon it was no worse than standing in a vast hall of mirrors. Now, the light began to get brighter. Brighter and still brighter it became, and I couldn't shut it out, couldn't keep from seeing it.

I had only just regained my identity, and now I was going insane.

The light not only surrounded me, it penetrated me. It suffused every fibre, every molecule of my being, and it not only filled me, it saw me.

It exposed me, and it saw me.

It exposed me, and it weighed me in the balance; every thought, every impulse, every fleeting notion that had ever made up my self, was brought into the light, was held up as if for inspection. Every action every attitude of mine, was brought squirming into the light... and I felt as if my heart would break.

Because I was judged, and I was found wanting. There was no place for me in that light; I was not worthy of it.

The darkness had whispered to me; so too did the light. It also told me, "I'll always be here. I'll always be waiting for you." And as it faded, I thought I heard it say, "Someday - someday... "

And that quiet whisper was filled with the yearning of every lover that had ever lived; a desperate longing, a love so vast, so steadfast, that it would wait forever, through all eternity and beyond.

"Nice to see you, sir. Thank you for Travelling with us. Have a good day." A cheerful chirrup, banal words that sounded in my ears like nails against glass. An expectant hand, waiting to help me down. Ignoring it, I stepped off the platform, and then, remembering my manners, turned to the attendant - a different woman, the same grey suit - and said, "Thank you."

"Do you need us to arrange further transport for you, sir?"

"No - thank you," I said, automatically. "There'll be a car waiting." My body on autopilot, I walked toward the exit. In the distance, just pushing through the doors, was the man who had Travelled before me, his hand up to his ear as he spoke into his dataphone. Off to one side stood the family who'd Travelled before him, presumably waiting for someone who was coming to meet them. Excited young voices floated over: exclaiming proudly about their first Travel, speculating about what they would do on their holiday. The father stood slightly to one side, an indulgent look on his face, while the mother, looking now vaguely harassed, clucked at her brood like a motherly hen, and performed small motherly services - wiping a face, adjusting clothing, checking they had all their baggage.

Am I the only one? I wondered. The only one who, every time he Travelled, lived through an eternity within the space of a heartbeat? Every time it was the same, or nearly the same. The disintegration of my self, the fantastic colours... and then the darkness. And after the darkness, the light. And always the whispers, "I will always be here. I will always be here."

Surreptitiously, I looked around me. The concourse streamed with pedestrians, people arriving and others departing. Was it my imagination, or were those heading for the exit walking a bit faster – almost as if in a hurry to escape? Lost in my reverie, I didn't realize that I had stopped moving. The woman who now brushed past me – was that look in her eyes one of fear... or merely anxiety at being late for an appointment?

Hearing a child's voice raised, I turned and found myself once again looking at the family of six. The girl who had clamoured to be first in line was now in tears. No whining child, however; she was sobbed as if her heart was breaking. Her mother bent down as if to comfort her, but the girl turned away from her as if to hide her pain. As she turned, I saw the look in her eyes, and it was a look I recognized, though I had never seen it before. She saw me looking her way, and she must have seen the look in my own eyes, because she stopped crying and simply stared at me. As her father reached out to her, gently drawing her back to the familiarity of their family, I averted my eyes, feeling somehow like an intruder, and resumed walking to the exit.

I know now that I am not the only one, and I also realise now why no-one ever speaks of their time between Worlds. It's an experience too intense, too real – and yes, too personal - ever to be shared with another. We are stripped of all the things by which we define

ourselves, reduced to our essence, the core of what makes us who we are. Not just myself, but each of us, whenever we Travel, are confronted both by the seductive oblivion of Darkness, and the exquisite, overwhelming love that emanates from the Light. We know – I know - that both want to claim us – to claim me - that both wait patiently for us somewhere outside of Time and Space, and whenever we travel between Worlds we are, in that place, welcomed and confronted by them.

I wonder how long they will have to wait for me, and I wonder which, eventually, I will belong to.

I wonder, and I know I will remember - although I'll do my best not to. Soon, I'll be in a meeting with my sales team. We'll talk of projected sales and quarterly goals; we'll smile politely and make small talk, and I will suppress any stray thought of Light or Darkness. Instead, I'll think of my wife and my children and imagine the evening I'll spend with them: eating, talking, doing the ordinary things that families do. I will not think of the journey home, or the time between Worlds that I must face again in exactly three hours and seventeen minutes.

Reaching the exit, I push it open and walk out to a World of grey skies, of people rushing to get to their destination. I see the car, driver patiently waiting next to it, holding up a sign bearing my name.

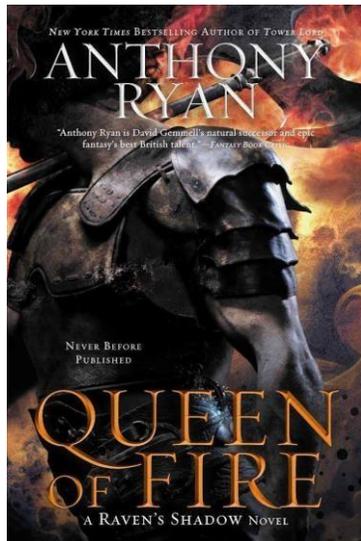
I walk over, greet him, and climb in. Settling into the seat, my briefcase on my knees, I wait to arrive at my destination.

Book Reviews

The Jamiesons

Queen of Fire

Anthony Ryan



It would be better to read Books 1 and 2 before reading this, but I haven't done that soQueen Lyrna, badly burned at the end of book 2, has been healed by the forces she used to mistrust. She fanatical and extremely brutal, in her quest to raise an army and save her Kingdom from the invading Volarians. There are various prominent characters; Vaelin Al Sorna, now Battle Lord, who has to confront the mysterious Ally; Frents, who did very bad things while not in control of himself, Reva who has incredible strength and battle

powers; and Alucius Al Hestian, who has to make some very uncomfortable choices but also adds a touch of necessary humour. And don't forget the Wolf people.

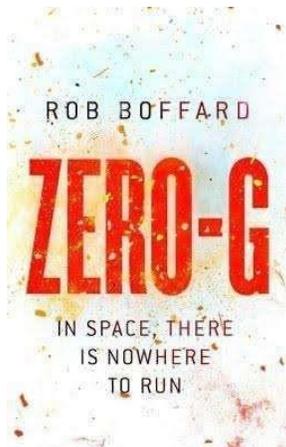
Ryan is an interesting and entertaining writer, who is good at character developments but takes time to really get the plot moving. At 637 pages it is simply too long.

3/5

Ian

Zero-G

Rob Boffard



The Earth is lifeless, destroyed by nuclear war. Three hundred miles above is Outer Earth, a space station six miles in diameter housing the last of humanity.

Like humans everywhere there are squabbles, fights, gangs and disputes over territory. The Shinso, one of the last remaining spacecraft, is bringing a massive asteroid which is critical for the survival of Outer Earth but a desperate group wants to capture the Shinso and its captured asteroid and to return to Earth. They believe

that some people on the Earth

below are still alive.

Riley Hale is a member of law enforcement, and is tasked with keeping the peace. She learns about the attempted hijack and has to do her utmost to make it fail, or Outer Earth will die. If that isn't enough she has explosives inserted into her legs and is being blackmailed into freeing a top member of the hijack group.

Riley Hale comes across as better than James Bond and even maybe superman, surviving brutal attacks, jumping high buildings, and defeating the bad guys.

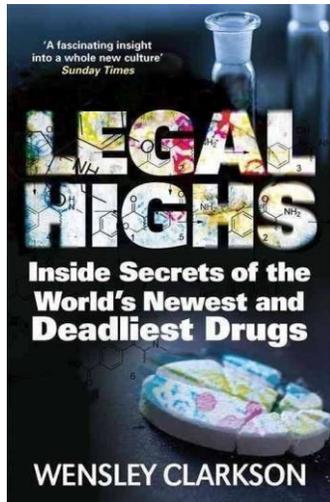
Boffard writes an entertaining story and the action is non-stop.

3/5

Ian

Legal Highs

Wensley Clarkson



THIS IS A FACTUAL WORK.

Cocaine, Heroin, Ecstasy. According to the author these addictive drugs have been replaced by synthetics, ones which can give the same highs, but are legal, just.

There are hundreds of them and they are manufactured all over the world. From China to the USA, India and even the U.K. and Germany.

The author splits the book into seven sections: Producers, Dealers, Transporters, Testers, U.K., Acid

Shops and the Future. In each sections he interviews various people all with a similar tale to tell. Avi in Producers; Thadius in Dealers; Lou in Transporters; Lucy in Testers; The Falla clan in the U.K.; and Phil the phone man in Head Shops.

And of course what happens is that the author sees the Future.

It is a sad, malicious, and often sickening story about people who do what they do because they believe that as the drugs are not illegal, they are doing no harm.. This in spite of the increasing number of deaths caused by these drugs.

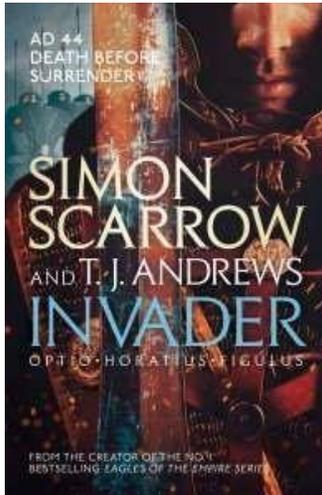
The author writes well and he would have us believe that “Legal Highs” are a major worldwide problem.....I have my doubts.

2/5

Ian

Simon Scarrow

Invader



Horatius Figulus is an Optio in the Roman army, a minor officer in the Second Legion, and he prefers it that way. Stationed in Britain in 44 A.D. he wants to stay alive and see out his years of service.

But the Gaul's have other ideas for him. Figulus is half Celt and is fluent in the local language, and this together with his bravery in action, brings him to the attention of his superiors. The Romans need someone to quell the rebellious Durotiges tribe, and Figulus is that man.

The Romans want to pacify the local population, but the Durotiges and their Druid priests are prepared to fight to the death rather than surrender.

This book was originally published as five novellas, and it is a little bit episodic, but the authors manage to string them together very well.

Warning. This is not S.F. or really Fantasy but it is a fairly entertain read.

3/5

Ian

Sarah Knight The Life Changing Magic of not giving a F**K



How to stop spending time you don't have doing things you don't want to do with people you don't like. The blurb at the back of the book says it all!



Are you stressed out, overbooked and underwhelmed by life? Fed up with pleasing everyone else before you please yourself?

Then it's time to stop giving a f**k.

This irreverent and practical book, which is not SF, but arrived with a selection of novels, explains how to

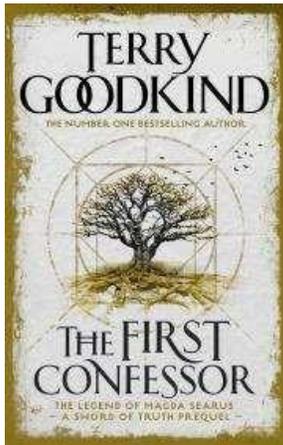
rid yourself of unwanted obligations, shame and guilt – and give your attention instead to people and things that make you happy. From family dramas to bikini body, the simple “Not Sorry Method” for mental de-cluttering will help you unleash the power of not giving a f**k and will free you to spend your time, energy and money on the things that really mater..

A humorous but thought provoking book. At the beginning it is a fun read but as you progress you begin to realise that a lot of it makes actual sense.

4/5

Ian

Terry Goodkind The First Confessor



Magda Serus, the ungifted wife of the powerful leader of her people lives in a time of war which is slowly destroying her world.

She is safe among those with great gifts because of her husband, First Wizard Baraccus but her life is thrown into disarray when he suddenly and totally unexpectedly throws himself from the ramparts of the Wizard's Keep.

He leaves her an instruction to find out what has happened telling her to seek the truth.

Now alone in a world where she is unable to protect herself, she must unravel a seemingly inexplicable puzzle.

She is threatened by Lothain, who wishes to be named as Baraccus's successor and wishes to claim Magda as his wife as well.

This prequel to the "Sword of Truth" series leads us to see that Magda is the key to the salvation of the world and to becoming the First Confessor.

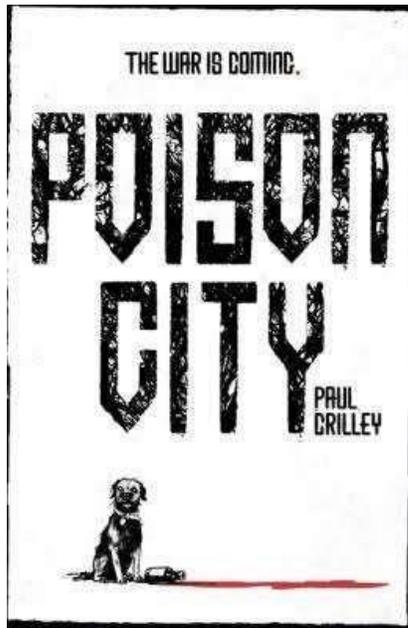
I have, in general, enjoyed the "Sword of Truth" series but have to say that I feel that this novel does not seem to be a really necessary part of the series. It also has the problem that there is just too much adjectival description. Mozart apparently said of a rival's composition "Too many notes" To paraphrase "too many words"

I am sure this novel will be enjoyed by Terry Brook's fans but it is not for me.

2/5

Gail

Paul Crilley Poison City



Gideon Tau (call me London) works for the Delphic Division of the South African Police Service as an investigator.

Durban, the poison city of the title, is full of devils, demons, imps and other assorted supernatural beings, and it is London's job to keep the peace between the various factions. With the aid of his spirit guide, who happens to be a mean alcoholic, his job is mainly routine, until he becomes involved in the murder of a low level vampire. CCTV footage captures the face of the killer, and London recognises him as the man who killed his daughter years before. But war is about to break out and, as his life spirals downhill,

he may be forced to choose between catching the killer and saving the world.

There is nothing particularly new in this novel, the Dresden files came out long before, but Crilley writes very well and entertainingly. The one objection I have is the number of life or death experiences he is forced into after his miraculous escapes.

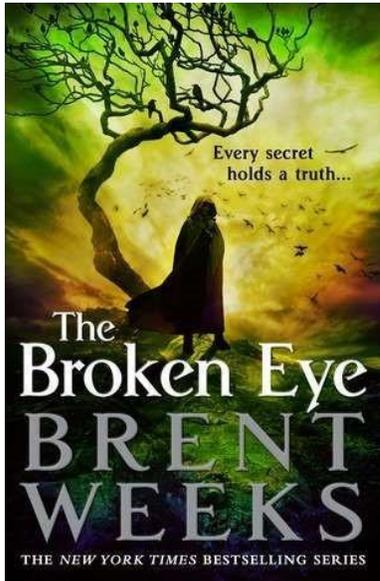
According to the blurb, Paul Crilley is a Scotsman adrift in South Africa who has been writing young adult novels, computer games, and worked with Fox Television.

He has recently completed an X-Files novella and a Hardy Boys novel. "Poison City" is his first adult novel and the beginning of a South African Crime series. 3/5

Ian

Brent Weeks

Lightbringer 3. The Broken Eye



As the old gods awaken, the Chromeria is in a race to find its lost Prism, the only man who may be able to stop catastrophe, Gavin Guile. But Gavin is enslaved on a galley, and when he finally escapes, he finds himself in less than friendly hands. Without the ability to draft which has defined him . . .

Meanwhile, the Colour Prince's army continues its inexorable advance, having swallowed two of the seven satrapies, they now invade the Blood Forest. Andross Guile, thinking his son Gavin lost, tasks his two grandsons with stopping the advance. Kip and his psychopathic halfbrother Zymun will compete for the ultimate prize: who will become the next Prism.

Without the protection of his father, Kip Guile will face a master of shadows as his grandfather moves to choose a new Prism and put himself in power. With Teia and Karris, Kip will have to use all his wits to survive a secret war between noble houses, religious factions, rebels and an ascendant order of hidden assassins called The Broken Eye.

This novel is book 3 in the Lightbringer series. I have not read books 1 and 2 so I sure I have missed some of the basis of the series.

But it is apparent that the magic that is used is based upon the colours of the spectrum of light. For example “red” is volatile and can be used for fire but the users are inclined to be angry; Blue is hardand can be used for building and even weapons and users tend to be rational.

It seems to me that the author is building the concept of his world and I found it interesting. He writes well and we are drawn to a semi-conclusion which makes us inclined to look out for novel 4.

I will look out for the first two books: “The Black Prism” andf “The Blinding Knife”

Gail

Nova 2015 Finalist

Deon Schnieder

The Passenger

It's the tiniest of wafts, but the wave form of the Omega rhythm is instantly recognisable. Just a dandelion touch drifting across my awareness with the stealth and deadly intent of the trained assassin. My reflexes, keyed to the recognition rhythm, reacts instantly, damping the field to keep only the faintest whisper filtering through the Psi collar. The knowledge that he's here is a shock to the system. Trails a sour taste in its wake. Seriously hope I haven't alerted him.

"You fucking bastard!" Been subconsciously using that phrase a lot lately. Makes me feel better. I think it's because it gives me a tangible target to focus on, instead of that vague spirit thing I've been hunting. Never been much good at something I can't rationalise. Give it a name, and it becomes a physical reality. Becomes something I can visualise. Lets me maintain hate at fever pitch. Don't have a problem with that reasoning. It's what I can understand.

I pause in the doorway. Breathe deeply to slow pulse down. Must have faith that the Psi collar will do what it's been designed to do. Randomly recodes my brainwave pattern. Keeps me invisible. Find him before he locks on to me. Don't want to test belief in my superiority quite yet. Stakes are far too high.

Starting to relax. Elation at having won this small victory, helps to flush the last traces of shock from my system. I'm starting to feel good. This time he won't get away.

"We've got him Prof." I've started referring to it as 'him'. It's become personal. Very.

Damn! Shouldn't have invoked the Professor. Dredges up memory of last time I saw him. Undoes all the good relaxing bit. Visions of my closest friend with vital organs shivered to jelly, runs cruelly through my mind. Turns elation into bitter bile of destruction. Limbic system lets me down. Blind and deaf to reason, emotions cloud my mind. Rational thought deserts me. The worst possible reaction. Maybe even override the safety of the Psi collar. Its several heartbeats of lost time before control returns. Find myself halfway across the room to the nearest group in a surging swinging berserker stride. This won't do at all.

"Fool!"

Polite faces turn my way. Five star General looks quizzical. Others just smile uncertainly. They don't know. Better that way. I smile back. Give thumbs up. All fine. Don't worry.

"Which one of you?"

The question, aching in its intensity, murderous in its intent, hangs unspoken in the void between thought and expression.

Deep breath. Keep control. Don't let it slip again.

Then it comes, faintly, persistently, mockingly. He knows I'm here. A momentary lapse in concentration, and I've given myself away. The tangled dissonance of the Omega rhythm flirts at the edge of perception. He's bouncing the wave. Echoes from every direction. Can't get directional lock. Nice touch that.

"Okay you son of a bitch. Just you and me." My challenge goes unanswered. He won't reveal himself. Maybe he's not that sure of his infallibility. That's a good sign. Gives me hope.

I move around the room. Mingle. Everybody smiling at me. Telling me how special I am. And, why not, I beat the odds. I came back. I found another world. I'm such a hero.

In my mind the voice of the Professor. "It won't be the guns and bombs that'll write finis to mankind my boy. I suspect it could very well be an intelligent brain parasite feeding without regard to consequences. No antidote, unless ... " Didn't have to finish the sentence. We both knew what he meant. What had to be done?.

I look at the groups in the room. How many. Twenty, thirty groups. Maybe a hundred, hundred and fifty people. He could be in any one of them. Make a halfmoon turn, and still the tell-tale signal throbs its alien presence. Relax and smile.

Keep control. He's biding his time. What for?

Gently now, finger on the gain control. Let the collar do the work. Feed on the intangible web of Psi power. Amplify the signal through the nano filaments to the tiny directional receptors under my hairline. It's no good. He's gone into hiding. Only familiar human Alpha waves mesh and phase their neural oscillations in steady reassuring cadence.

Okay then, nurture the energy till the time is right.

Aha! Something is happening. The Omega rhythm is back. I sense a change. There's a focus to it. No longer just drifting in from everywhere. Now it waxes and wanes tantalisingly across the human clutter. He's deliberately toying with my brain. Scratching. Manipulating. A haunting of irrational fear shapes pad mockingly through the cerebral cortex. Deeper down stirs deep emotional response in the Limbic system. Hate rules. Deeper still. He taunts the R-complex. Deliberately provoking me. He wants a fight to the death.

Be careful now, protect the brain stem. He's gone really deep. This is dangerous. I can feel interference in my basic functions. Respiration and heartbeat has become erratic. He's good. Got news for him, Prof told me I'm better. I am immune. I have to keep believing that.

Can't take a chance. Not yet. Quickly reduce the gain. Feel the damping effect. Heartbeat and respiration return to normal. Carry on moving through the crowd. Sounds of normality everywhere. Everybody looks human. Well of course they do. Why wouldn't they? The illusion is perfect, but somewhere in the crowd an alien in a human shell observing me. Biding its time.

Ah yes, time. It's almost time. Soon we'll move to the auditorium for the political ego trip. We've reached the stars. Well, I did. I survived. I was the only one. Brought back news of a habitable planet. Somebody's going to pin a medal on me for doing that. If only they knew. I wonder what they'll give me for bringing back the end of the world as we know it.

Metastasis. That's how Prof described it. Greek noun for displacement. One thing makes way for another. And that's just how it happened.

Such a beautiful world. Beautiful and bountiful. Just like Earth, before man stuffed it up. A gentle world inhabited by gentle harmless creatures.

And then, the one we didn't know about. The alien parasite.

It wasn't his world. That's just where he ended up. An energy life form, feeding indiscriminately on any available life force. Clever in the way of a psychopathic killer, and just as deadly. We didn't know.

Twenty five of us, all experts in their field. Me, I'm the pilot. My brain's very clever with spatial coordinates. Much, much better than a computer. Much faster. And, the big plus ... can interface with ship's Artificial Intelligence. Tell it what to do. Allows ship to shift through Nullspace. Actually that's misnomer. Doesn't shift through Nullspace, because space doesn't exist there. Well, it does in the sense that any two points are connected by intervening space. My speciality's to compute space curvature between two points. Then AI twists it out the way. Creates Nullspace so two points coincide. We make a good team that way. Far as known on Earth, only I can do that. Prof said I was very special. A Savant. One of a kind. Ship engines used only for orbital manoeuvring.

Our target: Barnard's star. About six light years away. I computed space curvature. AI twisted space out the way. We shifted. That's how it's done.

Astronomers were right. Three gas giants. Four terrestrial planets. One right in Goldilocks zone. Orbited for whole week doing atmospheric tests, mapping geographic features. Was almost perfect earth twin. Maybe few percent more ocean area. Lucy called it New Eden. Apparently named after perfect world in ancient mythology. Never heard of it.

Lucy was first to go. The oldest of us. Team leader. She was our virologist. Ironic really, considering what killed us. Maybe he knew. Cut off the head etc. To him we were a novelty. An intelligent life force shackled in an organic body.

He had never come across anything like us before. So, in the beginning he was clumsy.

My crew, my friends. One by one he took over their minds, their bodies. He practised. Sucked out their life force. Didn't need the sustenance, plenty local wildlife for that. One after another they died. Normal one moment, dead the next.. Each one lasting just that little bit longer. Pathologist in our team didn't have a clue. Found nothing. Not a single pathogen. In the meantime he was learning, getting stronger. Still they died. All twenty three of them. Horribly. In the end it was just Charlie and me. Didn't know then what was going on. We soon found out.

So, there we were, just the two of us. We had to get out of there. We lifted for Earth.

Picked up the automatic message in orbit. Just bad luck that the small transmission satellite was in planet shadow when we first made landfall. Everybody would have still been alive. Simple message in binary code. Easy to understand, difficult to comprehend. Stay away, it said, stay away. Under no circumstances land. Explained why. A mutant aberration that killed for pleasure. Killed plenty of them before constrained. Exiled forever to an uninhabited world where it could do no harm. Right!

Message was far, far, too late for us.

We thought we'd left it behind. Then I saw it in Charlie's eyes. He knew. I couldn't stop him, he was too quick. The airlock spat him into the vacuum. A quick messy death.

Stayed in orbit six weeks to make sure. Nothing. No sign of the alien parasite. Charlie didn't die in vain. Gave AI curvature coordinates. Space twisted out of the way. Headed home. All by myself.

Time passed. Preparations being made to celebrate first successful space trip. Posthumous honours for my team members. Medal for me. I'm such a big hero.

Three weeks and no sign of the alien. Prof did all the tests on me. Everything came up negative. The question remained. Was I immune, or did I survive because he needed a lift out of there? We couldn't tell. To make absolutely sure, Prof designed and fitted me with the Psi collar. Completely unobtrusive. The first of its kind, both detector and weapon. He was incredibly clever that way.

There are moments in life never forgotten. One such moment when Prof activated the collar, and it sang with the mocking wave song of the alien. The ice cold moment of truth. Wearing the collar I was immune, Prof wasn't. Before my eyes his insides liquefied. Dead in seconds, his boneless body folding like a concertina.

I said what I had to say. "You fucking bastard." More hate in my voice than any one person should possess. He didn't have to do that. I saw the terror in the old man's eyes as he

knew. And then, that final moment between being and death. Somebody else's eyes looking out at me. Distant mocking laughter in my head ... fading ... fading ... gone.

Where?

So many ways a world can end. Who could have predicted a whimper? Well, Prof did, didn't he?

It's time. My name being called. Applause. Walk towards the stage. Everybody clapping. I'm such a big hero. The rhythm of death pervasive. Intense. Still can't get directional lock. Up the stairs. Everybody smiling, cheering. I'm such a big hero. The President. Big presidential smile, one hand reaching out to shake mine. I'm such a big hero. Other hand with gold medal. I'm such a big hero. His eyes touch mine and I know. A smile that's not a smile. Full of alien mockery.

Shit, I'm far, far too late.

The Omega rhythm pulsing all around me now. Filling my mind with chaos. People (?) closing in. Surrounding me. Why?

Metastasise. The verb. Medically, the unrestrained proliferation of malignant cells in proper hosts. We're proper hosts. Didn't see that one coming.

Strength in numbers. Just parasitised human husks now. No more human beings. Omega rhythm throbs from single drumbeat to full orchestra. Room full of malignant cells. Crescendo in my head. Overpowering. I can't fight the numbers.

I can't fight ... I can't ... I'm ... I'm ... I'm ... I

Movie Review

Star Trek Beyond

The USS Enterprise arrives at Starbase Yorktown, a massive space station, for resupply. Captain James. T.Kirk has applied for a promotion to Vice Admiral and commanding officer of Yorktown and recommends Spock as the new captain of the Enterprise. Spock and Nyota Uhuru amicably end their relationship; Spock also receives word from New Vulcan that Ambassador Spock has died.

The Enterprise is dispatched on a rescue mission after the only survivor, Kalara, claims her ship is stranded on Altamid, a planet within the nebula. The rescue turns into an ambush when the Enterprise is quickly torn apart. Krall and his crew board the ship, and unsuccessfully search for a relic called an Abronath that Kirk had obtained for a failed diplomatic mission. Krall captures and removes many crew members from the ship. Kirk then orders for the crew to abandon ship as the Enterprise's saucer section hurtles towards the planet.

On the planet's surface, Sulu, Uhura, and other survivors are captured by Krall. Kirk and navigator Pavel Chekov accompanied by Kalara, locate the wrecked saucer section. Kalara is discovered to be Krall's ally when she tries to retrieve the Abronath. To escape Krall's soldiers, Kirk activates the still-functional thrusters, causing the saucer to lurch forward, crushing Kalara. Meanwhile, a wounded Spock and Dr Leonard McCoy search for other survivors. Spock confides to McCoy that he intends to leave Starfleet. Meanwhile, Scott is rescued by Jaylah, a scavenger who previously escaped Krall's encampment. She takes Scott to the grounded USS Franklin, reported missing over a century earlier. Scott is reunited with Kirk, Chekov, McCoy, and Spock. Using the ship as a base, they plot to escape the planet in the repaired ship. Meanwhile, Krall coerces Ensign Syl to hand over the Abronath that she had kept hidden for Kirk. The Abronath is the missing half of an ancient bioweapon which can disintegrate any humanoid. Krall intends to attack Yorktown and kill its inhabitants, go on to attack the Federation. Kirk and the others free the crew as Krall launches into space with the bioweapon, leading his drone fleet to Yorktown.

The Starfleet crew pursues Krall in the Franklin. Scott transports Spock and McCoy into one of Krall's drone ships. They learn that VHF transmissions can disrupt Krall's communications and destroy his fleet. Krall and his three surviving officers crash in Yorktown. As Krall flees into the city, Uhura and Kirk discover from the Franklin's logs that 'Krall' is actually Balthazar Edison, the former captain of the Franklin who became disillusioned with the newly founded Federation, rejecting its principles. When he and his crew were stranded on Altamid, he believed the Federation had deliberately abandoned them. The three survivors prolonged their lives with the technology of the planet's extinct natives and repurposed that species' dormant drone workers into the swarm. Krall now plans to destroy the Federation to resume galactic conflict. Kirk pursues Krall into Yorktown's ventilation system, where Krall activates the bioweapon. Before it can be unleashed, Kirk ejects the weapon and Krall into space. Spock and McCoy save Kirk moments before he is also sucked into open space.

The foregoing is part of a summary kindly supplied by Wikipedia, which clarified a lot for me. This movie was only released in South Africa in the 3D format. It is, in a large part, an action movie but I still feel that the 3D was not really necessary and by-product of the 3D glasses was to make the already dark movie, even darker. This is my biggest complaint. There were times when I found it difficult to follow the action as I struggled to see what was happening. Having said that I was also disappointed that the Enterprise was lost so early in the movie, even though I knew that it was going to happen from the trailers. Having said that I found this a much better offering than the last offering “Star Trek - Into Darkness”. The feeling was much closer to the original Roddenberry “Star Trek” series. I enjoyed the repartee between the characters and the feeling that they were working together as a team again. But, as one of our viewers said there were occasional jarring incidents. The use of the “ancient” motorbike on a planet that seemed to have no surfaces that it would be able to travel on takes a little much “suspension” of belief.

A little concerning was the fact that the movie had only been released 3 days before by the 17h15 show was less than half full

I enjoyed the portrayal of the Enterprise crew and feel that if some parts of the movie had not been so dark I would give this a wholehearted “thumbs up”. As it is I would really recommend that you find out exactly what is going to happen before you go and watch it so that you can follow the story.

Gail Jamieson

Nova 2015 Finalist

Hope Lester

The Cleansing

“Tia.” A familiar but urgent voice penetrated her innocent sleep.

“Tia!” it pleaded again, hauling her insistently from distant dreams.

What is going on? Her sleep-heavy eyelids pulled apart to reveal her dimly lit surroundings.

Two eyes—the bright orange of fallen maple leaves—peered down at her in irritation.

“Mamma? What’s wrong?” the now-troubled eight-year-olds tiny voice mumbled.

“Come, Tia. We’re leaving.” Her mother gave little warning before heaving the muddled child up off her straw-stuffed mattress.

Tia shivered as her bare feet landed on the icy stone floor, Mamma already bustling ant-like about the room.

“Get your boots.” She said, without sparing the briefest glance. Seltia stood beside her bed right where her mother had left her tottering, rubbing her eyes.

The woman turned and seeing her daughter’s idle attempt, hissed “Oh, do hurry up, Seltia! We must be off!” Finally startled to reality by the earnestness in her mother’s voice, she dropped to her hands and knees to retrieve her worn-out, scuffed boots from under her bed.

“Mamma, they’re not here.” She appealed meekly.

“We’ll just have to leave without them then. You can wrap your feet in a blanket once we are in the wagon. Take this.” She wound a black woollen scarf firmly around the girl’s head and neck, concealing her white-blonde hair. Kneeling in front of her, she bored her gaze deep into Seltia’s thoughts.

“Listen to me, Tia. We must go. Your father is coming with the wagon, and we will go with him. Remember, whatever happens, do not make a sound. If we lose you somehow, hide. Do you hear me, child?” clutching her shoulders, she shook her roughly.

Seltia nodded until it felt as if her head would fly off.

“And remember, I love you.” Her mother’s voice cracked and she swept the girl up into a tight, fierce hug. The sound of an irritated mule snapped both mother and child to attention. The woman grabbed Seltia’s hand and dragged her to the door. She jerked it open as if trying to wrench it from its hinges and stepped outside. Seltia squeaked in surprise and drew close to her mother as a blast of winter wind raked at her skin with icy claws. Her bare feet froze immediately in the shallow river that was now their driveway, drowned by the furious waves of rain that drenched everything in their path.

Seltia was lifted –more like ‘thrown’- into her father’s arms and followed closely by her mother.

“Hya!” shouted her father to the fat old mule, throwing them into a frantic gallop at the slap of the reins. Even over the angry screeching of the rain and wind, she heard the howling and yelling. A string of dim flames popped up over the horizon behind their wagon, carrying the men and their maddened dogs forward. Seltia watched helplessly as the sleeping town was brought to life with shrieks and cries of terror, only to be murdered.

“What’s happening, Papa?” she cried.

“Quiet, child.” Her mother hissed in a voice that made it final.

“Darin,” she breathed “they’ve seen us.”

Seltia’s father dared a cautious glance behind them at the terrible scene, and set his mouth into a thin, pale line in determination. Knowing the man’s mind, his wife clapped her hands over her mouth in horror.

“No, Darin; please no.”

“Protect our child.” He said, quietly. After kissing his wife lightly on the forehead, he shoved the reins into her numb hands and catapulted himself from the wagon. “Papa!” screamed Seltia, clutching the splintered side of the wagon in desperation as she peered through the obscuring water for the smallest glimpse of the man.

The wave of sadistic, blood driven wolves hurtled over the hill, baying and snarling through slobbering, putrid muzzles.

“Stay away from my family!” howled the man in an equally terrifying voice, just as the dogs’ owners fanned out behind them, whooping their excitement at exposing yet another victim.

As if in a tsunami, Darin was swallowed up in a mass of matted, black fur and worminfested maws. At that moment, heralding his death, the water-logged midnight sky, groaned in protest at the weight of grief that Seltia felt in her own heart. Unable to bear it any longer the blackness of that night split apart showering light over earth and sky.

Howling in pain, the wolves tumbled over one another and convulsed, smoking, then lay still. The light retreated to where her father lay unmoving, withdrawing into him, shrinking back into darkness.

Her world was immediately flushed into a flurry of rain and tears as the mule whinnied and reared in panic and pressed onward determinedly. The hounds were now dead, but the fearful horde was still advancing at an alarming rate. Her eyes and mind seemed to be left behind with her dead father, the pounding, blood-stained boots, and blood-spattered blue and white uniforms. Seltia made no attempt to look away, what else was there to look at? Her mother's fingers dug into her shoulder and her mind vaguely registered that she was explaining something.

“Do you understand? Child, listen to me!” The pain and urgency in her mother's voice caught her attention.

“I love you.” After shoving a thick blanket into the girl's arms, she brought the mule to an abrupt halt.

“Run, girl.” As if heeding her own advice, she bolted off toward the swiftly converging mob. Spreading her arms out in an arc, a shower of lightning rained down on them. All of a sudden, Seltia realised that her mother had, in fact, been talking to her. Also, if she had been talking to her, she should be running right now.

Which way, which way? She spun around frantically, searching for a hiding place, and finding none. Her mother's scream snapped her head around, just in time to see the woman collapse under the weight of the crushing mob. The first decipherable words filtered through her grief-flooded mind, “Kill the witch!” they hollered, accusing fingers jutting out in her direction.

Her eyes slammed up against the wall of tree trunks and her short legs started to pump frantically in the direction of the forest. Reaching the treeline in record time, she crashed through the underbrush, thorns tearing at her flesh and sharp stones slicing into her tender feet. The blanket caught on a low-hanging branch, and was torn from her grasp. She stopped to untangle it, but the loud yelling of the soldiers as they followed her clear path set her legs churning at a furious pace.

“Look!” the one growled, “the little bird left her blanket.”

The men's cruel laughter followed as they advanced cautiously. Seltia-in a final act of desperation- dived under a large, thorny bush. There she lay in painful silence as the

crushing boots stamped closer and closer to her hiding place. The feeling in her arms and legs had fled long ago, along with her courage. Whether it was a result of the cold or the poison oozing from the wickedly curved thorns, she did not know. Just as the fearful sounds seemed to have died off, and she was contemplating leaving the thorn bush, a heavy boot crashed down next to her face. It narrowly missed crushing the bones in her small hand. Her breath seemed to clog her throat up, and her heart thumped louder than a stampede of drunken dinosaurs.

“Where is my little bird?” the soldier’s voice barely pierced through her poison-fogged mind, but the fear it brought to her registered loud and clear.

“Come out,” he called, oblivious to how close she actually was.

“Come to old Foge. I won’t hurt you. Come with me, its cold out here.”

She risked the tiniest turn of her head to peer up through the leaves at the man’s face. He searched all around him, but his eyes never passed her hiding spot. Seltia watched as his face suddenly contorted in rage and he screamed into the night “I will find you, little witch! I will rid the world of your filth. You will pay; you and all your kind!”

A soft whimper escaped her constricting throat. She hoped it was too quiet for him to hear. But of course, nothing she hoped would happen that night, all the worst possible things just had to wriggle their way into her life somehow. His dark eyes jumped instantly to her pale hand next to his foot, then to her scared face. A wicked smile crept across his face as knelt down next to her.

“Hello, Birdie.” He snarled “You have been a particularly hard bird to catch. Come now.” His hand reached out to her, slowly, cautiously, but entirely too confident.

She looked up at his scruffy black hair and cruel, cold dark eyes, and a feeling entirely unknown to her swelled alarmingly in her heart. Her eyes focused on his outstretched hand, and the blood that was obviously not his own. Scratch marks raked down his arms, the final desperate act of a dying victim, no doubt. The blood pulled her gaze again, the blood of her people, the blood of her own parents. Dark rage born from anguish rushed through her veins, wringing boiling tears down her cheeks.

“You killed them.” She breathed, her voice quivering in barely-contained anger. Confusion slid over Foge’s face, and he hesitated, pulling back slightly. Her fear fleeing at the advance of her outrage, Seltia rose to her feet.

“You killed them!” she screamed. As if awoken by her cry of pain, pale blue scales folded over her arms, and her nails grew into curved talons. Foge jumped back aghast and seemed to prefer his back to his feet for standing, as wings sprouted from the girl’s back and her face became that of a dragon. Still skewering him with her brilliant blue eyes, she opened her mouth in a roar, and white flame spurted from it, disintegrating all in its path. Foge’s scream was the last sound she heard before blacking out.

“I don’t think she will make it.”

“The poor little thing, it’s a real pity.”

“I didn’t really expect any more from her, how you found her. She looks like a starving, drenched rat.

“Oh, Dani, do be quiet. The little darling needs her rest. You’ll wake her.”

“I’m entirely aware of that, woman. Don’t you realise what this creature could be?”

“Don’t say that, Dani. She is a sick child, and nothing more.”

“What if she is a survivor of The Cleansing?”

“Dani... Please, she needs our help. Please let me help her. Just until she gets healthy again, then she will leave.”

“Ok, fine. But only until then.”

“Oh, thank you, Dani.”

“Elsan, you realize that I am just trying to protect our family, don’t you? Our children? This girl could be dangerous.”

“Yes, yes; but she is just so small. She reminds me so much of the one we lost.”

“I understand, Elsan. Maybe she will be of some comfort to us.”

The smell of roasted potatoes and meat drifted across her face, awakening deep rumblings in her stomach. Soft humming accompanied the smell, at the far end of wherever she was. Cautiously, making sure not to alter the rate of her breathing, she peeked through the tiniest gap between her eyelids. A low, thatched roof sagged miserably overhead, supported only by four wooden walls.

A woman sat hunched over a great dented metal pot with a dangerous-looking wooden spoon clutched tightly in one hand. She wasn't a very tall woman, but she did have a few extra kilograms that probably shouldn't have been there. Her black hair-more than a little speckled with grey -was twisted into a merciless bun at the top of her head, giving her an air of authority. She was clearly a woman who would tolerate no silliness, but her blue eyes sparkled with merriment, and her round cheeks glowed with warmth.

“Ma, look!” came a young girl's voice from right next to her. Startled, she shot up, ready to bolt for the door, wherever that was.

“She's awake!”

“Tania!” scolded the woman, making her way over to Seltia. “Don't give the poor child such a shock.”

“Sheesh, ma; she looks frightened half to death!” a boy's voice came from behind her.

“No wonder! Come stand by me, right now!” Her hands planted firmly on her hips, she scowled down on the two children until they made their way meekly to her side.

Once her gaze shifted to Seltia, it immediately softened.

“Hello,” she smiled warmly “I am Elsan. These are my children: Tania,” she motioned to the small girl beside her who had soft, brown eyes, and a mop of crazy red hair, “and Dane.” She pointed to the boy on her other side, who had unruly brown hair and stormy grey eyes. Both children smiled and waved to her, with a polite ‘hello.’

“And what is your name, child?”

Seltia smiled at them, but said nothing. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and Elsan rushed to her side.

“So, feeling well enough to get up, are we? Alright, I’ll help you.” She helped Seltia to her feet and crossed her arms, still waiting for an answer.

“Do you have a name?” she asked again. The girl looked up at her, and opened her mouth to answer. The door swung open, slamming against the wall. A vicious hurricane of wind and rain blasted in behind a tall, wiry old man in a drenched rain coat.

“Oh, you’re back.” Elsan grinned. “Our little chick has woken up.” The man stomped the mud off his boots, then peered across the room at the small, pale girl.

“I can see that.” He grunted.

“This is my husband, Dani.” Elsan introduced the man to Seltia. With his scraggly grey hair matching his impatient charcoal eyes, he looked like a bear who had been woken up in the middle of winter. Pointing to each person in the room, the woman said “Elsan, Dani, Dane, and Tania. Will you tell me your name?”

Seltia glanced nervously between Dani –who scowled at her like an ill-tempered old iguana—and Elsan, who smiled encouragingly.

“She asked you a question, girl.” He said gruffly. Seltia darted behind Elsan and clung to her leg. The woman stroked her pale hair and cooed. “Don’t worry, dearie, you’re safe here. Come, tell me your name and we will get some supper.” Seltia took one look at Dani and buried her face in Elsan’s apron.

“It appears we have a mute.” He grumbled, and set himself down at the table. Elsan gave a small, sad smile, then said “So it would seem.”

When someone is called a particular name for a long time, they begin to believe that it is true of them. Such was the case with Seltia in the seven years that she lived with the

Willows. The early rains had brought an early harvest, and Dani Willow could not afford to hire any workers; so, Seltia ended up working in the wheat fields with him and his son, Dane. Unfortunately for her, the name 'Rat' had stuck. Dani seemed to not realise she actually had a real name. Obviously, he harboured no fondness for the girl, but he could not get rid of her, as he needed her help with the crops. Seltia kept up the pretence of mute girl, speaking only to her friends. Of course, by 'friends', I mean Tania and Dane. She spent most of her time in the fields with Dani and Dane while Tania and Elsan worked in the house like the actual women she would rather have been. In this situation, Elsan was not around to defend Seltia against the cruel words from Dani.

"Rat!" he would shout, "Get out of the way!" "Do your work!" "Stop being a useless burden!"

After seven years of being called a rat, she started to feel very much like one; scurrying into the shadows to keep out of the way of the irritable man. Dane would try to defend her, but that would often result in him getting a clout on the back of his head, or being yelled at. Seltia had asked him to stop to prevent him getting into trouble, but that hadn't even made a dent in his resolve.

A raindrop dripped from the miserable-looking sky and ran maliciously down her back, bringing her back to the present.

"Rat!" shouted Dani, annoyed as usual. "Get yourself inside; we're done for the day."

As she made her way into the small shack they called a house, fourteen-year-old Tania threw her needle-work to the floor and bounded up to Seltia.

"Tia!" she squealed in her naturally excited voice "I have the most exciting news! I have just got to tell you right away."

Seltia smiled kindly at the girl and turned to Elsan, who rose a whole lot more gracefully than her daughter had and came over to give her a motherly hug.

"Tania dear, she has been out working all day, and is probably very hungry by now. Let her have her supper, and then you can tell her."

"Yes, ma."

Sitting down to a supper of potato soup that was more water than tuber, Elsan looked to Tania in confusion.

“You called her Tia. Where did that come from?”

“Well, uh...” she sputtered and looked to Dane for help. “You see, um...”

“She wrote it down!” Dane filled in for her.

“Yeah, on paper.” She agreed.

“Hmm.” Elsan mumbled suspiciously, but let the matter drop.

After being excused, Tania practically dragged Seltia out to the barn. Seeing as she was –as Dani called her– the hired help, she would have to sleep in the barn, like any other worker.

“Tia, you are going to freak.” She squeaked hanging on her arm.

“What is it?” she asked, keeping her voice quiet.

“We are going to-“

“BOO!” A pile of hay exploded, throwing out a grinning Dane. The girls screamed and scurried up the ladder faster than a pair of foxes with their tails ablaze.

Dane wheezed and clutched his stomach, doubling over. Peeking over the edge of the loft, Tania scowled. “Dane, that is not funny!”

“Dane, what are you doing sneaking around here?” Seltia laughed, pushing another heap of grass onto his head.

“Hey, Tia; I don’t sneak, I’m just naturally stealthy.”

“Yeah, right.” Tania snorted

“You couldn’t be stealthy if your life depended on it!” Seltia added.

“Oh, come on girls.” He grinned, smacking stray bits of straw out of his hair “It was just a bit of fun. Tania, did you tell her yet?”

“Dane, I was just about to tell her when you leapt at us and almost gave us a heart attack.”

“Aw, sorry ‘bout that. Now will you tell her?” he followed them up the ladder and plonked himself down in a pile of hay.

Still frowning at her older brother, she stated as firmly as she could manage that this was a girls’ meeting only.

“Oh, come on!” Seltia laughed. “Just tell me.”

“Tia,” said Tania “we are going to school.”

After a long moment of shocked silence, Seltia looked to Dane in utter confusion.

“What?”

“You know, where you get educated, or whatever.”

“Ma thinks we need to get us some learning, and Pa has enough money to hire some help to replace us.”

“Oh. When are you going?” Seltia felt more than a little mortified at the prospect of losing her only two friends.

“Tomorrow!” squeaked Tania.

“Hey, Tia; hold up. It’s not just us going. You’re coming with!”

“I’m what?” She shrieked incredulously.

“Shhh!” hissed Tania and Dane, knowing that their parents might hear the girl who supposedly couldn’t talk yelling coherent sentences. She winced and whispered a sorry before resuming her onslaught of questions.

“What... what... where is it?”

“Kren.” Dane winced.

“But that’s like, four day’s ride from here!”

“I know,” Tania groaned. “and we are going to have to wait in a really long queue, because we’ve got to take some sort of blood test.”

“A what?”

“You know,” Dane laughed “to check if you’re dragon or not.”

“Oh no,” Tania dramatically clapped her hands over her mouth “you can’t come with, Dane.”

“Oh, yes; I forgot. I’m a dragon.”

The siblings burst out laughing and collapsed into the hay, not noticing Seltia’s pallid face. Looking up at her Dane asked “What’s the matter, Tia? Wasn’t that funny?”

They already knew she was particularly sensitive on the topic of The Cleansing, but she wasn’t normally so serious.

“I can’t go.” She breathed.

“Why ever not?” they burst out in unison.

“Can I trust you?” she ventured quietly, turning her sapphire eyes on them.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Of course.”

“No, I mean really trust you. People have died because of what I am about to tell you. Good people were murdered.”

“Tia,” Tania breathed “of course you can trust us. What is it?”

“I am one of them.”

They stared blankly, clearly not grasping the true weight of her confession. She let out an exasperated sigh.

“Fine, I’ll show you. Whatever you do, don’t run and please don’t scream or we’ll be in huge trouble. Do you promise?”

They nodded vigorously. So, taking a breath large enough to fill the lungs of a dragon, she squeezed her eyes shut. Since she had incinerated the soldier in the woods on the night of

her parents' death, nobody had seen her in her true form. For her kind could not live without being able to soar through the clouds. She would change into her dragon form on dark nights, and fly high over the sleeping village of Tonue. She would have to be careful though, because king Sarlin III –the one who had authorised The Cleansing—still had many soldiers on the lookout for any dragons who might have escaped. And of course, that meant her.

Concentrating until it felt as if her eyes would burst, she urged the soft skin of her arms to turn over and show the scales within. Tania gasped and stood gaping at the moonlight-blue scales.

Seltia held her breath in nervous anticipation of the screams that would surely fill the night air.

Tania slowly stepped forward and stroked the smooth, cold scales. Her expression was indecipherable as she peered up at Seltia. “You’re a dragon?” she whispered, still looking more than slightly confused.

“Well what does it look like?” Dane burst out. He pulled his sister back from the girl and held her behind him protectively. Seltia winced at the hostility in his eyes and reached her hands out to him.

“I won’t hurt her; either of you. I’m still the same person.” Dane’s eyes softened in realisation and he released Tania.

“It’s beautiful!” she said, still gazing at the scales.

“Thank you.” Smiled Seltia. “So you see, I can’t go for the blood test, because I know what they’ll find. They will kill me, you, and your whole family for helping me.” “Gee, Tia. I’m sorry.” Tania said and quietened.

“Any chance we could, um, you know; go for a ride?” Dane enquired awkwardly.

Seltia grinned. “Of course.”

The rest of her scales burst forth eagerly, and her wings spread out in an arc around her.

Dane and Tania gaped in awe until she bumped her head on the roof, ruining the moment.

“This is amazi-“ Dane snapped the end of his sentence off as his mother’s voice rang out along with the groaning of the barn door’s hinges.

“Dane, Tania, time for bed.”

She stepped into the barn and froze as her mouth formed a silent ‘o’. Dane and Tania rushed to her and clapped their hands over her mouth.

“Ma, ma; don’t scream. It’s Tia!” Taking a few minutes to stop hyperventilating and take in her surroundings, Elsan held her hand over her forehead.

Seltia shrank back to her normal size as quickly as possible and ran to the panicking woman.

“Miss Elsan, please! It’s me, I won’t hurt you. It’s alright!” she hissed, desperately hoping Dani wouldn’t hear the commotion and come running.

“Please, ma;” Tania begged, pulling her mother to a three-legged stool, “do be quiet.”

Elsan sucked in a deep breath, then blew it out again slowly. Turning her eyes on Seltia, she said as calmly as she was able. “You can speak?”

“What?” said Seltia in confusion? Of all the questions to ask after seeing me turn into a dragon...

Elsan’s face cracked into a big smile and she held her arms out to the girl. Seltia ran to her, and, through the hug she said “Seltia. That is my name.”

Elsan pulled back in confusion.

“I’ve wanted to tell you that for seven years.”

Elsan’s eyes welled up and she ran a hand over the girl’s cheek.

“Seltia. My darling girl.” Then suddenly she jumped up and pulled her children to the door. “Do not speak of this to anyone, especially Dani. You hear? He has suspected this from the beginning.”

“What?” said a confused Tania “That Tia can talk? Why would that matter?”

“Oh, Tania, you are right; that would not matter. But no, it is something much worse than that. Your father has always known that she is a survivor of The Cleansing.” ***

A dress. Why on earth did it have to be a dress? Tania had said she looked nice, and Dane had barely stifled a snort. Elsan said that it was important that they give their best impression so as to get a good start at the school. She had said that whilst rearranging the green ribbon in Tania’s hair with shaking hands. I understand you are obviously eager to know, and won't continue reading this tale, until I explain why it is, her hands were shaking. So let me not disappoint you.

After their rather awkward meeting in the barn, the three children had gone straight to bed. Elsan had convinced Dani that it was too cold in the barn, and a bed was made in Tania’s room for Seltia.

Long past midnight, a persistent banging began on the door like a deranged woodpecker, and didn’t stop until Dani stomped up to the door with a bread knife.

“Hey you,” he hollered, still half asleep. “stop that! We’ll have none of that nonsense here. Be gone .”

“Open in the name of the king!” came the deranged woodpecker’s voice.

Dani howled in surprise and fumbled the keys before unlocking the door and pulling it open to reveal five men dressed in blue and white, the colours of king Sarlin III.

Barging their way inside, they smiled cheerfully at Dani, who stood off to the side in his night gown.

“Mr Willow.” Said the soldier who appeared to be in charge as he folded his arms across his chest. Black unkempt hair framed his merciless eyes and humped nose.

His skin was mottled and lumpy from what had obviously been a terrible burn.

“Uh, yes sir. That is me.” Dani said nervously, removing his night cap to wring it in his sweaty hands.

The soldier smiled and held out his hand. “Good evening. Commander Foge, at your service.” He pulled his hand away before Dani had the chance to take it. “May we search your premises?”

“Oh, um, sir. Have we done something illegal?”

“No, of course not. We are just doing a routine check. We are searching for a fugitive, a survivor of The Cleansing.”

Elsan, who had been peeking around the corner of the hearth rushed to her husband’s side.

“A fugitive?” she burst out, expertly painting a fake mask of horror over her face. “Is it dangerous?”

“Oh, how horrid!” she shuddered. “To think, that one of those creatures could be lurking about the grounds right now. Oh, please, do find it!”

“We will, ma’am. May we search your house?”

“Oh, yes; please do! I haven’t seen one in the house.” She spoke a little louder “I know for a fact that my three children are outside camping somewhere, and are not in the house. Right now.”

Foge stared at her as if she had gone quite mad, but gave a small bow and ordered his men to search the house. The three children took Elsan’s hint and slipped out through the window, then went to hide in the barn. After a more-than-thorough inspection, Foge left the house to search outside.

Tania and Seltia hid in an old barrel, and Dane burrowed into a heap of grass. As Foge and his men tramped into the barn, they lay as still as possible. The soldiers kicked piles of grass into the air and overturned buckets. Foge kicked a couple of hay bales around the barn, then moved off to Dane’s pile.

“Ow!” yelled Dane as Foge’s boot rammed into his ribs. He climbed up out of the grass and glared up at the man. “What was that for?” he demanded, rubbing his side.

“Men,” Foge called “I believe we have found something.”

The other four formed a ring around Dane, with their swords pointed haphazardly in his direction.

“Ya, ya, well done.” He said in irritation “You found me. Now scam before I bash in your beak nose.”

Foge’s laughter grated horribly on Dane’s nerves and he looked down on the boy.

“What is your name, boy?”

“Dane Willow.”

“Hmm. Well, a strong boy such as yourself, you could end up in the king’s army pretty soon. How old are you? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

“Seventeen.” He said and stood a little taller.

“Very well. The normal age for new recruits is sixteen, but maybe for you we could make an exception.”

“I’m afraid he can’t.” came Dani’s voice from the door. “He is already going to school tomorrow.”

“Oh well, that is just too bad, isn’t it?” Foge drilled his gaze into Dane’s mind before turning to Dani and his wife.

“You take care now. We have heard reports from people in the village. Sightings of a dragon flying over the town at night. In the dark, where it belongs and should stay. Many things are kept in the dark; secrets... monsters..., most of which should never come to the light. Good evening.”

And that is why Elsan was so afraid. That is also why they could not accompany the children to Kren. They had been taken in for questioning. Seltia was well aware of the fact that it was all her fault.

She now sat in between Dane – who pulled on the horses’ reins- and Tania – who snatched at the grass as the wagon rattled listlessly by. After three tedious days on the road, the lookout towers of Kren were now in sight.

“You should go... by yourself.” She said at length. “When they take the blood test, they will most probably kill me and anyone helping me. I have already caused you so much trouble.”

“But, Tia,” said Dane “we can’t leave you all alone! You’re our friend.”

“Please, Dane, do it for Tania.”

“Do not drag me into this like some helpless baby!” Tania yelled adamantly.

“Sorry, Tania. Dane, please stop the wagon. I’ll follow at a distance, then we can meet up at the inn.”

“What will you do when they find out?”

“I don’t know. But I can’t drag you into my punishment.”

“It’s not punishment, Tia; you’ve done nothing wrong!”

“Thank you, Dane, but I’m afraid not everyone is as understanding as you.”

And so, they dropped her off just shy of the first lookout tower, and she continued on foot. Despite their attempts at putting some distance between themselves, the queue was moving so slowly, that the Willow siblings were only a few places ahead of her. Seltia cringed as the soldier at the gate pressed the tip of his dagger onto the tender skin of Tania's wrist, and then extracted a sudden squeal from her lips as a bead of blood seeped out. He carefully tipped the red globule onto a fragment of parchment in his other hand, staining it red.

“Clear.” He said and waved them on. Six more people went through, and then it was her turn.

This was a stupid idea. Said a little voice in her head. You need to get out! Screamed another. I know, I know! Grumbled a third. But at least Dane and Tania are safe.

Well, if you think about it logically, they aren’t actually safe.

Yes they are, we made such an effort to keep away from them.

But you didn’t keep away from them.

Then all the voices started arguing and she shook her head in frustration to clear them away.

“Next.” Said the soldier impatiently. Judging by his tone of voice, it was probably the third time he had spoken. She hurried forward, and clenched her fists to hide the shaking.

“My name is soldier Thye, and I will be doing your blood test. Please hold out your arm.”

You’re going to die. The voices chanted as she held out her shaking hand. Perhaps he wouldn’t notice? Of course he’ll notice, Stupid. It’s his job to notice.

He looked to her, confusion swirling in his green eyes. He took in her unnaturally blue eyes and pale hair. “I must say, miss, your looks are very unusual.”

“Um, thank you?”

He laughed and took her arm, lifting the dagger. He paused.

“You’re nervous.” He said.

Yup, definitely his job. I’m doomed.

“Is this your first time?”

“Huh,” She laughed, trying to sound natural “is it that obvious?”

“Well,” he lowered his voice so that only she would hear. “I’m afraid you stand out in more ways than one.” He raised an eyebrow knowingly.

He knows! He knows! You’re dead!

She bit her lip as he rested the tip of his dagger on the inside of her wrist. Blood dribbled onto the parchment and he looked back up at her.

“Clear.” He said. She looked down at the small square of parchment in his hand, and the perfectly red circle on it. It hadn’t turned silver like it was supposed to. Then her eyes shot to the small hole in the hand he had used to steady her arm.

He knows I’m a dragon! But he used his own blood to help me get through? Thank goodness.

“Thank you!” she breathed, rushing forward to let the next person through.

“You be careful!” he called out to her. “And look after those friends of yours.” He gestured to Dane and Tania.

“Uh huh.” She nodded, not bothering to hide her shock.

It’s his job to notice these things. She kept telling herself. He’s just really good at it.

You’re not sticking out that badly!

She took a deep breath to steady her rickety thoughts, then pulled her hood over her head and slipped up next to her friends.

“Tia!” Dane burst out, only to be assaulted with an avalanche of shushes.

“Sorry.” He winced. “How did you get through?”

“He didn’t test me!” she hissed, showing her arms as proof.

“He stuck the knife into his hand. He knows I’m a-“

“Shhh!” they clapped their hands over her mouth to stifle the would-be exclamation.

“dragon.” She finished quietly. Unfortunately, it wasn’t quiet enough, as a nearby guard swished his helmeted head in their direction.

“Oh, that’s just great now, isn’t it?” Dane muttered, pushing the two girls toward an inn at a pace just slowly enough not to look suspicious.

We’re dead, we’re dead, we’re dead. The annoying little voice came back to swirl her thoughts into a confusing mess. Peeking behind her and over Dane’s shoulder, Seltia spied the same guard creeping after them as inconspicuously as possible.

“Dane, he’s following.” She whispered just as they ducked under the inn’s lowhanging sign.

It read—in swirling script that was meant to look elegant, but was ruined by the chipped, flaky paint—The Dragon’s Tooth.

“Is this where ma told us to go?” Tania asked uncertainly as Dane pushed the door open. It was hanging off its hinges and grated angrily on the scuffed wooden boards within. The pungent smell of alcohol and the din of boisterous laughter from within burst out upon them.

“Des.” Said Dane, trying to speak without breathing through his nose. “De Dragod’s dooth.”

They crept inside and ventured up to the counter to ask for a room.

“One night.” Dane said, and handed over a small purse of coins.

“Very well, young sir.” The bartender- a roundish man with a bushy grey moustache and shiny bald head- snatched the money up and slid the room’s key across the counter.

Just as they turned around, the guard locked his hand onto Tania’s arm and hissed to Dane,

“Don’t make a sound, or I’ll cut her throat. Take me to the room you are renting.”

Dane paled but nodded and scurried up the creaking stairs with Seltia in tow.

“Let her go!” Dane yelled once they had the door closed behind them. The guard released Tania and she flew to Dane.

“Sorry about that, but I couldn’t think up any other way of getting to talk to you.” He pulled his helmet off and his eyes shot immediately to Seltia.

“Are you the dragon?” he asked.

“Dragon? Seriously? If I were a dragon, how would I have got through the blood test? You are clearly mistaken, sir.”

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. “No, no, no. I am not mistaken; I saw Thye use his own blood. So don’t lie to me, because I clearly know more than you do.”

She bit her lip and glared up at him in defiance.

“Fine,” she said “what if I am?”

The man grinned “Then you need to come with me.”

Dane and Tania paled. “No Tia-“ Tania started, but was cut off by Seltia.

She hadn’t noticed his eyes until now. A brilliant green they were, and his hair was almost white, but he was definitely not old enough to be sprouting grey.

“Who are you?” she asked in suspicion. “Do I know you?”

“No.” he answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “But I am a friend.”

He held out his arm and Dane jumped between him and the girls protectively.

Once again, he rolled his eyes “Relax, Prince Charming ; I’m not stupid enough to try harm them.”

He shoved Dane out of the way and held his arm out for Seltia to see.

Scales, bright red and shimmering, had begun to fold over the skin on his arm.

Seltia’s eyes widened and the guard grinned. “Now do you trust me?”

“Soldier, what was your job today at the gates of Kren?”

“To test the citizens’ blood, and let them through.” Thye answered.

“Unless?”

“Unless they had dragon’s blood, sir.”

“And did you do that today?”

“Yes, to my knowledge, sir.”

“Aah, but you are lying.”

“Sir?” “The! Girl! You let her escape, and now the city will burn because you failed in that simple task!”

Thye kept quiet, knowing anything he said would only make the situation worse.

“Do you realize what you have done?”

“With all due respect, sir, she did not seem like the type who would burn the city.”

The man laughed, although he clearly wasn't amused. “Oh, you naïve boy, don't you realise? It is in their nature, to destroy. But no, even in spite of that she will not burn the city. It will still be her fault though. I swear I will burn this city to the ground if I have to. I will cleanse the world of the dragons.”

He looked at Thye out of the corner of his eye. “Starting with you.”

Thye's breath stuck in his throat but he recovered quickly.

“Sir? I do not understand what you mean. I am not a dragon. Feel free to test me if you do not believe me.”

“Oh, but you are. Or, half of one, anyway.”

Only then did Thye notice the glinting dagger clutched tightly in the commander's whiteknuckled fist. His hands flew up in defence as commander Foge grinned maniacally and thrust the dagger toward the soldier's throat. Thye's surprised face was the last thing Foge saw before his world was once again engulfed in rolling flame. This was a burn from which he would not recover.

“Hey, it's you!” Thye burst out once the fire had burnt itself out, which didn't take long.

“Oh, yes; soldier Thye, right?” Seltia smiled. “Thanks for helping me through the gates.”

Grabbing his arm, she launched herself out of the window and pulled him after her. Before he knew what was going on, he was sitting astride a pale blue dragon, flapping over the rooftops of Kren.

“You've got to see this.” She yelled over the screeching wind.

They dived through the smoky air and down into the town square, where a small pocket of citizens stood huddled together like docile sheep. Around them was a ring of dragons standing proudly over their imminent victory. The stomping of soldiers' boots on the flagstones drew their attention to a small division of about fifteen men charging forward. The largest of the dragons spun around and glared at them, smoke belching from his nose at

an alarming rate. The soldiers' courage wilted into a clattering halt. Colliding with and trampling upon one another, they fumbled in clumsy retreat.

The dragons seemed to be snorting or roaring with their teeth bared—which cast a frightening scene—but before long, Thye realised that they were laughing.

“Have they won?” he asked eagerly.

“Just about.” Seltia answered. “It seems they’ve been planning this uprising for years, and I just happened to come on the day they had set aside for it.” She laughed and shoved Thye of her back so that she could switch back to her human form. “They thought I was one of their soldiers! How stupid is that?” she laughed. They were interrupted by the triumphant cry that rose from the dragons at that moment.

“Victory!” they roared, all swirling into the sky in a joyful dance of wind and fire.

Seltia and Thye screamed along with them, proud to be dragons.

Once they had settled down, the largest, most magnificent dragon she had ever seen came thundering up to the citizens, transforming mid-stride to his smaller, less frightening form.

“People of Kren,” he boomed “your king , Sarlin III... is dead.”

If you have ever been in a situation such as this, where citizens are told that their king is dead, you probably know what their general reaction is. There will most likely be wailing, crying, and groaning. You wouldn't be happy if someone killed your king, would you?

Well, if you expect me to say that is what happened, you are wrong.

Sarlin III was cruel and cold, and his subjects followed more out of fear than love.

As the news came to the people, they cheered and laughed, glad to be rid of the old tyrant.

“And the army?” asked one of them. “Is the army gone too?”

“Yes,” answered the dragon-man. “and now Kren will be ruled by the dragons. You may live peaceably with us, or you may die. Choose wisely.”

At once, the people were all making plans on who would live where and all sorts of uninteresting details that you probably don't want to hear.

"Tia!" screamed the familiar voice of an ecstatic Tania. She was followed closely by Dane, Elsan, and Dani.

"Hey, how did you get here?" she exclaimed, running to give Elsan a hug.

"We came as soon as we heard of the trouble." The woman answered. "We're going to live here now."

Her eyebrows lifted of their own accord as she glanced in Dani's direction.

"Here, with the dragons?" They nodded eagerly.

"And Dani doesn't mind?"

"Oh, don't mind him, Seltia. Of course he doesn't want to live with dragons. However, he does still want to live." The corner of her mouth lifted into a knowing smile and she drew the girl close to her.

"Ah, and who is this?"

"Oh, sorry. Mrs Willow, this is soldier Thye. He helped me through the gates."

"Well, young man, you are very brave, I must say."

"Thank you." He grinned and pointed to The Dragon's Tooth inn. "How would you all like something to eat?"

"That sounds great!" Dani exclaimed.

Seltia granted her surroundings a cursory glance, and her mouth slipped up into a smile. Dragons in brilliant hues of red, green, blue, and many more colours spiralled above women as they danced joyfully over the gleaming cobblestones.

Finally. Sighed the little voice in her head. Peace.

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From: Jeremy Coppin

[jec@cellpoint.co.za]

A magazine held a competition inviting its readers to submit new theories on ANY subject. Below is the winner.

Subject: Perpetual Motion

When a cat is dropped , it always lands on its feet, and when toast is dropped, it always lands buttered side down. Therefore, if a slice of buttered toasts is strapped to the back of a cat's back buttered side up, and the animal is then dropped , the two opposing forces with cause it to hover, spinning inches above the ground. If enough toast-laden felines were used, they could form the basis of a high speed monorail system.

.....and then this mail got the following reply from one of the recipients.

I've been thinking about this cat/toast business for a while. In the buttered toast case, it's the butter that causes it to land buttered side down – it doesn't have to be toast, the theory works equally well with Jacob's crackers. So to save money you just miss out the toast and butter the cats. Also there should be an imbalance between the effects of cat and butter, here are other substances that have a stronger affinity for carpet. Probability of carpet impact is determined by the following formula: $p = s * t(t)/t_c$, where p is the probability of carpet impact; s is the "stain" value of the toast covering substance – an indicator of the effectiveness of the toast topping in permanently staining the carpet.

Chicken tikka Maala, for example, has a very high s value, while the s value of water is zero. t_c and $t(t)$ indicated the tone of the carpet and topping – the value of p being strongly related to the relationship between the colour of the carpet and the topping, as even chicken tikka masala won't cause a permanent stain if the carpet is the same colour. So it is obvious that the probability of a carpet impact is maximised if you use chicken tikka masala and a white carpet – in fact this combination gives a p value of one, which is the same probability of a cat landing on its feet.

Therefore a cat with chicken tikka masala on its back will be certain to hover in mid air, while there could be problems with buttered toasts as the toast may fall off the cat, causing a terrible monorail crash. Therefore it is in the interests of public safety that the buttered toast on cats idea is scrapped, to be replaced by a monorail powered by cats smeared with chicken masala floating above a rail made from white shag pile carpet.



Outshine a Single Star from “The Daily Galaxy

Like a massive, dormant volcano, the Milky Way's central black hole appears to be a sleeping monster. Black holes are regions of spacetime where gravity is so strong that “what goes into them does not come out,” says Avery Broderick, a faculty member at the Perimeter Institute. As the name implies, black holes are intrinsically dark, with no light or matter able to escape once they have passed the threshold of no return known as the event horizon. But as black holes feast on the surrounding gas and stars, their accretion disks can shine and produce extraordinary energy. They can even outshine their host galaxies.

Compared to some black holes, Sagittarius A* is much more anemic and fails to outshine a single bright star despite its comparatively enormous mass. But the data from the Event Horizon Telescope has opened a window on the inner workings of how material spirals towards black holes, finally disappearing across their event horizons, and growing into what Broderick calls “monsters lurking in the night.”

In December of 2015, the international Event Horizon Telescope research team measured for the first time the magnetic fields that contribute to black hole growth. The ETH, a linked array of millimeter-wavelength telescopes that spans the globe and is set to take the highest-resolution images in the history of astronomy. When trained on the black hole at the center of our galaxy, Sagittarius A*, it can see the structural details in the accretion flow that surrounds the black hole horizon.

For the first time, astronomers have detected evidence of black-hole-scale magnetic fields near the black hole at the center of our galaxy. Were these magnetic fields not there, “a lot of theoretical astrophysics would have to go back to the drawing board,” says Broderick, jointly appointed at the University of Waterloo. The discovery, published in the journal *Science*, moves the understanding of how black holes grow from the realm of theoretical speculation to the territory of empirical fact, Broderick says. Broderick was part of a collaboration that discovered high levels of polarization in the radio emission from Sagittarius A*, the bright radio source believed to be the astronomical manifestation of the 4.5-million-solar-mass black hole.

The current observations are from only three of the sites in the global EHT array, comparable to having just a handful of pixels of the larger picture that will eventually be

produced. Nevertheless, these few pixels are already writing the preface to the coming revolution in our understanding of black holes. Researchers are able to begin the process of putting our best current ideas of what is happening near the black hole to the test.

It will also shed light on the reverse process, whereby some black holes are capable of launching outflows of energy and material at nearly the speed of light, extending the black hole's impact to intergalactic scales. Decades of theoretical work, including enormous computer simulations, painted a picture of how strong magnetic fields near the black hole horizon contribute to the processes that enable a black hole to grow. But now, with the data from the EHT, scientists can begin to see how these processes work in practice.

The radio emission in Sagittarius A* is generated by high-energy electrons zipping around magnetic field lines. This produces highly polarized emission on microscopic scales, tied to the local orientation of the magnetic field, so the polarization traces the structure of the magnetic fields. Detecting high polarization on the size of the black hole horizon at Sagittarius A* does two things. First, it verifies that magnetic fields are there and that they must be ordered. Second, it provides a measurement of the typical size of these magnetic structures.

There is much more to come. Taking images of the accretion disk around Sagittarius A*, which has an event horizon that is smaller than the orbit of Mercury, is a feat akin to trying to image a grapefruit on the moon. But the EHT array should be able to accomplish that. "There are now enough telescopes in the array, in principle, to make images in the next couple of years," Broderick adds.

Those images will enable astrophysicists to transform our understanding of how black holes grow, how they interact with their surroundings, and even the nature of gravity. By studying the details of the cosmic "traffic jam" caused by gas as it rushes headlong towards the black hole, researchers will be able to check if Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity, one of the pillars of modern physics, holds up in the extreme gravity conditions around black holes.

From “The Daily Galaxy”

