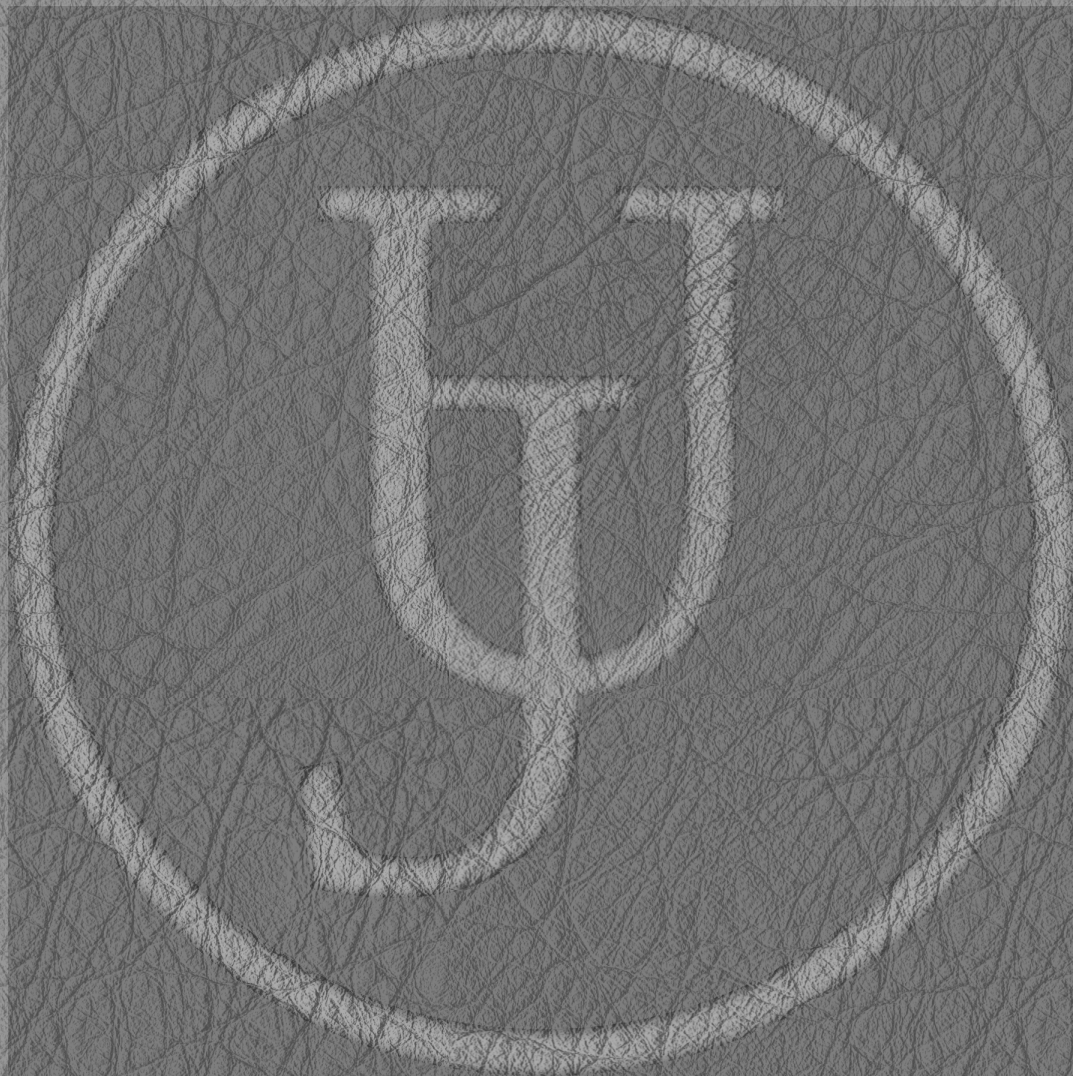


*Vulgar, Vague, and Slightly Suggestive*

# Unnamed Journal



5



# UNNAMED JOURNAL

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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Dear Shallow & Pedantic Publishing,**

**Do you have any internships available? I'd really like to break into the world of low-circulation literary magazines. I have 10 years of experience teaching English to ungrateful students, and a large back catalog of unpublished stories.**

**-B. Leaguered**

*Well, you'd be a prime candidate to work for Unnamed Journal, B. Your reasons for wanting to join this magazine are why we started it. Sadly, none of our internships pay.*

**Dear UJ,**

**Dude! Was your interview with that guy from Staten Island real? I'm totally freaked out! I live in NYC, but now I'm thinking it might be time to leave town.**

**-Scared in Long Island**

*Yep, our interview with the Staten Island Fairy was 100% real. This is a non-fiction magazine. We're seasoned journalist here, at Unnamed Journal. Literature and the news are precisely the same thing. Yep. In all seriousness, it might be a good time for you to move out of Long Island, and possibly off of this planet.*

**To the senior staff of Unnamed Journal:**

**Dear sirs and/or madams, we find your work inspiring and would like to invite you to speak at the National Conference on Excellence in Fiction. We're particularly interested in hearing you describe your creative process as well as your sources of inspiration.**

**-Planning Board, National Conference on Excellence in Fiction**

*We're flattered by your invitation. However, I don't think we've ever heard of your organization or it's conference before. Please contact us again, but this time leave us more detailed contact information, or we'll assume this is another attempt by one of our family members to stage an intervention.*

# FROM THE PUBLISHER

Everyone thinks I'm hiding from them in my office. They are fools. Fools! What I'm really doing is hunting. Do you know how much fresh snipe meat it takes to fill a slice of white bread? Or how many snipes roam freely in the AC ducts of your average mid-size office tower? Of course you don't. You're not listening to them. You can't HEAR them. Only I can. I can hear them scurrying away when the fluorescent lights come on. If I use my peripherals right, I can almost see them. I will feast upon their flesh. All of them.

Just kidding. The editorial staff thinks their musings about what I'm doing in my office both rib-tickling and secret. They are wrong on both counts. Oh, of course, the guy who doesn't want to listen to Fibble and Marchè-Malô play More Socially Aware Than Thou has to be nuts. There's only so much humblebragging a man can take without rum.

In any case, we've a banner issue this bi-month (fort-month? fort-week? This language sometimes...). First, my colleague in leadership, Mr. Underhill shows the noobs how it's done with "Everything was Upside-Down." Then someone either confirms or comically apes Lovecraft. You decide. Then, I show the noobs and everyone else how it's really done with "Your Duty to Retreat." And then there's a first chapter of an existential scifi horror story called "The Void". I believe you can guess where that's going.

Now, if you'll excuse me, these snipes aren't going to rub garlic on themselves...

**Thomas Fitz**  
*Publisher*

# EVERYTHING WAS UPSIDE-DOWN

*By Alfred Underhill*

“Hey, you just moved here, right?”

“Yep, just moved in yesterday,” Pat said. She wondered why boys always talked to her. Pat was tall and skinny for a ten year-old. She didn’t like wearing skirts or dresses, and she had short hair. Pat wasn’t pretty and she didn’t care. Maybe that was why boys talked to her.

“I’m Alex,” he said grunting. “This is the fag.”

Pat’s gaze shifted to a small, silent boy Alex had trapped in a headlock, struggling for freedom.

“What’s his name?”

“Pat,” she said. “Hey, how old are you?”

“Nine and a half.”

“Gotcha,” Pat said with a nod. She didn’t know either of these kids, but she didn’t like Alex. At least she wouldn’t feel bad.

A heartbeat later she grunted and punched Alex in the nose with a left-cross. He collapsed into a pile of wailing boy. Leslie fell next to him, dragged down by Alex’s slack arm. Leslie scrambled to sit up. He gaped at his disabled tormentor.

Before long, Alex was running home to nurse his wounds and pride, shouting promises of revenge in his wake. Pat felt her heart slow down and her knuckles throb as she watched him go.

She looked down at Leslie. Why was he still sitting where Alex had dropped him? Why was he looking at her with disbelief? Boys were so stupid, Pat thought with a frown.

“Th-thank you,” he said.

Pat scowled at him, her fists on her hips. “You should act like a man! Why would you let that asshole push you around like that?” Her voice was raised, but she wasn’t shouting. Pat had been in enough fights to know that grown-ups might come if she shouted, and that could mean getting in trouble.

“Well, I’m only nine,” Leslie said, “and Alex is always like that.” His gaze was intently focused on the velcro straps of Pat’s sneakers. “He was just fooling

around. It's always like that with him; he didn't mean anything by it. Alex is my friend."

She shook her head. "Well, I'm ten, and you're dumb. Real friends don't do stuff like that." Pat was wondering if she had made a mistake by getting involved at all. She knew she didn't like Alex's smug grin or the helpless look in Leslie's eyes. She sighed and helped Leslie stand up, then started walking back toward her new home.

"Um, it was nice to meet you," Leslie called after her.

"See you around," Pat replied without turning or stopping.

\* \* \*

A few months later, Pat and Leslie were sipping juice and watching Transformers: The Movie at Pat's house. Only a few days after their initial encounter they discovered their shared mutual passion for Transformers, Masters of the Universe, and Super Mario Brothers. Optimus Prime was their hero. They watched him battle his way toward his nemesis, Megatron, to a soundtrack of 80's hair metal.

"I think this is the best part of the movie," Leslie chirped.

"Yeah. Optimus Prime is the coolest. Hot Rod's all right, but he's no Optimus," Pat replied, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"It's like, he becomes the Prime, and he's a good fighter, but he doesn't have the skills and smarts of Optimus.

"Oh! Here it comes," pat exclaimed, setting down her juice. Leslie joined her as they both did their best impersonation of their Autobot hero.

"One shall stand, one shall fall."

They watched the clashing metal titans on the screen with rapt attention. This was Pat's 22nd viewing of the film; it was Leslie's 17th. They both knew all of the lines.

"What do you think it takes to get into making cartoons?"

"I don't know," said Leslie. "You probably have to be really good at drawing though."

"I can draw, but I'm not that good."

"I've seen some of your drawings. You're a lot better than me, Pat."

"Hey! Quit it!"

## Everything Was Upside-Down

Pat continued making the noise at him. Then Pat's mother walked into the room.

"Patricia Jeanne Calvert, what are you doing?" Her mother's tone was icy.

"Nothing, mom," Pat said sheepishly. She took a sip of juice and tried to avoid eye contact.

"Well it sure didn't sound like nothing. From where I was sitting, it sounded a lot like you were being rude to your friend. You should apologize to him. Now. Leslie might decide not to come over here anymore. I might be too embarrassed of your behavior to let him come over anymore, if you don't apologize."

Pat's eyes got wide as she turned toward Leslie. She couldn't read the smile on his face; she couldn't tell if he was being smug or if he would keep coming back.

"Sorry," Pat blurted.

"What was that, Patty? What are you sorry for?" Her mother was relentless.

"I'm sorry Leslie that I said you were bad at drawing and for sticking my tongue out at you and for blowing raspberries." She started to tear up in embarrassment.

"Oh, it's okay, Pat." Leslie cooed. "I'm not hurt. I like watching Transformers with you."

"You're lucky to have such a mature friend in Leslie, Patty. You should try to learn a thing or two from him. Why don't you two finish your movie and then head outside for awhile?"

"Okay," they said in unison. Pat's mother returned the way she came, shaking her head.

\* \* \*

Pat stared out the window at the brick path that lead to her room. She had no idea seven years ago just how many times she'd have to beat down Alex, and whoever else, because of Leslie. It had been tough for both of them; he'd get hurt, and Pat would get in trouble for sticking up for him.

The two of them had been friends for so long. Friends and then best friends. When they'd reached high school a few years ago, their friendship transformed into a relationship. They lost their virginity to each other not long after. Just in time, too. Pat was pretty sure she would've killed someone if she hadn't finally gotten laid. She liked guys that looked like girls, and Les definitely fit that bill. They had a



## Everything Was Upside-Down

good thing going, and they'd keep it going.

Together they'd make it through school and run off to college together. She'd study art and he'd study English. Afterward they'd move into a loft somewhere and find work, start paying off those student loans, start putting together their own comics, raise a bunch of cats as surrogate children. That was about as far as they'd planned.

Lieutenant Asshole didn't take kindly to his son looking like, "some kind of cross-dressing hooker". Pat hated Leslie's dad. She scowled reflexively at the window.

God, if only I could catch him by surprise and put him down for good. Fucking marines, she thought.

One night, Leslie's dad got hammered on Wild Turkey and beer and beat Leslie so bad he had to be hospitalized. His mom just let it happen, and social services did fuck-all about it. Her and Les had come up with their system after that.

Pat and Leslie's system was simple: he would stay at her place when his dad was home, and Pat would stay at Leslie's during the week when her parents were pissing her off, which was more often than not. They'd been doing this for almost two years, and it didn't always work. Sometimes the parents would want one of them around, so they'd both be stuck at home. But most of the time Leslie's dad didn't seem to notice, and her parents didn't seem to care as long as she didn't get pregnant.

God, shoot me if that happens, she thought.

And then there Leslie was, walking down the outside path to her room. It was great having your own door to the outside, definitely made high school more bearable. He knocked twice and she opened the door.

"Hey babe," she said.

"I'm okay. How about you?"

"Eh, you know. Dad's home. Not much more to say than that."

"Well, you're more than welcome to stay here," She said with a grin.

"Thanks," Leslie said. "Oh, I saw these and thought you could use them, so here." He handed her a plastic bag that contained a slim box. It was a large set of colored pencils.

## Everything Was Upside-Down

"Aww jeez, Les! You didn't have to do that," she said, crushing him with a hug.

"Well, you've been saying you wanted to add color to your comic." he wheezed.

"Thanks babe, you're the best."

Pat looked him over. Even now Leslie wasn't very big, and he still hadn't learned to fight. But the boy had at least learned how to look scary. Pat had made sure of that, right after she almost went to juvy in the ninth grade for breaking Alex's jaw. With Pat's help, Leslie had dyed his hair black to match his clothes. She stole him a leather biker jacket for his birthday last year and painted a Crimson Ghost on the back of it. Les at least looked like a badass, and it definitely excited her a little bit more than she cared to admit, even to him.

But despite their best efforts to make him look intimidating, Leslie was still mistaken for a girl sometimes. People often did a double-take when they first saw him. Pat just figured he was that pretty. A few times, guys had threatened Les's life after asking for his phone number; they'd realized a little too late that he was a dude.

Pat had the opposite problem. She had thick, broad shoulders, and was as tall as most of the guys on the varsity basketball team. A layer of fat covered her torso, which made her curvier than she liked, so she wore loose shirts and pants as well as her ever present army jacket. She looked like a man from behind. Pat's skin was always broken out, and she usually smelled like she could use a bath. The foot-tall, red mohawk didn't do much to enhance her femininity either.

The other kids called her "The Rooster" because of the mohawk, but never to her face. Pat's retribution was swift. She knew the kids at school feared her, and she liked it that way.

"Can I get a beer?" He said smiling.

"Yeah, I wish."

"Eh, it was worth a shot."

"We could go play 'hey mister'," Pat purred.

"True, true we could. Do you have anything else?"

"Just some of the Adderall I hoarded a while back."

"Nah, I don't feel like speeding. Hey mister it is, then."

## Everything Was Upside-Down

He moved toward the door, but Pat turned him around and pulled him close. She stared down at him with a dopey grin. Leslie smiled as Pat kissed him forcefully. Then she released him with a mischievous look on her face.

“Beers and fucking?” Pat said.

“What else is there, sweetie?”

Pat grinned and grabbed her jacket. Together they left through her door.

Playing 'hey mister' was tedious, but they were usually successful. They only ever had to run from the cops once. Usually some frat boy would end up getting them beer because he thought the two of them looked “freaky” or “badass”. God, she hated that. It was bad enough that people stared at them wherever they went.

Part of the reason people stared was because Leslie looked tiny compared to Pat and her mohawk. With the extra height and hair, Pat was two feet taller than Leslie.

She knew they were weird. Even the other weird kids thought they were weird. Sometimes the two of them were mistaken for dykes when Pat kissed him in public. It was the worst at school.

Once during lunch, some asshole yelled, “Damn, look at those girls making out—oh wait, never mind!” Pat never did find out who had said that. She would’ve loved to have curb-stomped that guy.

Pat knew she shouldn’t get so mad at people for being shitty to them. She didn’t really care what people said about her. No one could actually do anything to her. She knew that.

But it was different when they gave Leslie shit. He was the only person Pat could be herself around. She wasn’t very good at the whole “feminine” thing. She only wore a bra to keep her back from hurting and people from staring. A few times she’d forgotten to bathe for a week; another time she had just worn the same clothes over and over for weeks. Les didn’t seem to care, or at least not much. A few times he’d ask to fuck her in the shower, which she didn’t mind. And besides, Les would talk and smile and laugh when she was around; he wouldn’t do that for anyone else.

She loved Leslie, and he was so pretty! Pat remembered how her gaze went red with murder when some skinny goth-bitch had stared at Les longingly the last time they went to a show. Pat had put a stop to that. It wasn’t that different from how she got when someone ragged on Leslie, she told herself. Besides, that cunt had it coming.

# Everything Was Upside-Down

\* \* \*

'Hey Mister' succeeded yet again. A creepy bald guy obliged them, using their money to buy them a six-pack each. They tipped him and said thanks, which he smiled at with too few teeth. He offered them a ride that they politely declined, and then quickly started walking home. They took a back way to Pat's house incase Snaggletooth the Bald Pervert tried to follow them.

Once they were back at Pat's they both took off their jackets and shirts. Skinny-drinking, they called it. Every time one of them opened a beer, he or she had to remove an article of clothing. Pat usually ended up naked first, but sometimes Les would remove more of his clothes than required when he opened a beer. Most of the time they'd get too horny to actually finish their beer before they started fucking. Tonight was no exception.

"Mmm, let's fuck now, Les."

Pat removed her underwear and spread her legs. Les got on top of her, grabbing a handful of Pat's breast as she jammed her tongue into his mouth. She reached down and slipped Les inside of her. They moaned and sweated and said 'I love you' until Pat came. A few seconds later, so did Leslie. She loved feeling him come inside her; good thing she was on the pill.

They curled up on her mattress with its threadbare comforter thrown over them. They slept soundly beneath the haze of teenaged indulgence.

\* \* \*

The weekend passed and Leslie went home. Pat hated seeing him go, but she also enjoyed having her space back to herself. She would spend Sunday nights staring at the walls. Pat read a book once about some guy named Somebody-Dharma who became a Buddha, or something, after staring at a wall for a few years. At least staring at the walls was easy and quiet.

Pat's mom and dad more or less left her alone that week. She didn't have to deal with her mom's annoying questions about school, or find excuses to give her dad for having not found a job yet. It was a good thing too because her stomach was being a son of a bitch.

She must have eaten bad food or caught the flu or something, Pat told herself. But after a few more days, she just couldn't eat anything without getting sick. What was the deal? Her stomach had been weird all week. Early Saturday morning, it dawned on Pat exactly what could be wrong with her.

She didn't say a word to anyone. Pat walked to the Rite Aid near her house and



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bought a pregnancy test, drawing a horrified look from the gray-haired woman behind the counter. Pat shuffled toward home slowly.

The test in her pocket seemed to get heavier the closer she got to home. So she kept walking, past her house, and into the woods a half-mile away. Secluded, she sat on a rock for hours. When it got dark, Pat knew she couldn't wait any longer.

She went home and took the test. She swore and cried and swore some more at the result. Not a single pill was missing from her birth control packet; she checked a half a dozen times to be sure. Les and her usually only had sex a few times a week, but they had stopped using condoms three or four months ago. It just didn't seem like they needed them anymore. Pat got into the shower to cover the sound of her grief: the last thing she needed was for her parents to find out. Oh God, she didn't want a kid!

She got dressed but didn't bother to put her Mohawk back up; it just wasn't important right now. What was she going to tell Les? Pat stared at the walls most of the night before she could sleep.

\* \* \*

"Hey Les," Pat said to him in the hall, "is it cool if I come home with you tonight?"

"Sure sweetie," he said, looking her over with those big eyes of his. She still hadn't put her Mohawk up since she got out of the shower Saturday night. "Everything okay? You seem kind of, I don't know what."

"Oh, yeah babe, yeah. I just- you know- I got cramps. That whole girl-thing."

"Oh, okay. Hope you feel better," he said. "I'll wait for you outside once school's over and we'll head to my place."

"All right babe," she said, trying to sound casual and confident, "I'll see you later."

Pat noticed that time was both dragging and speeding along. She stared at the clock all day, wishing it would either stop or speed-up. When the dismissal bell finally rang, she froze for a moment. Pull yourself together, she thought, getting up and heading out. She went through the empty hall, down the stairs. Leslie was waiting for her outside. Pat exited and saw a crowd of kids forming.

What the fuck is this? She thought, as she glanced at the backs of the other kids, looking for Leslie. She didn't see him on the outside of the crowd, which had become a circle. This could only mean one thing. Pat set her jaw and pushed her way into the center.

Sure enough, there was Leslie in a shoving match with Alex. It was a pathetic sight. Alex was as tall as Pat and almost as big. Leslie was shoving Alex back just

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to stay on his feet. The crowd of kids was shouting jeers and taunts. They began to chant, "Kick his ass! Kick his ass!"

The two boys paused as Pat stomped over to them. Leslie looked scared and worried; Alex sneered at her.

"Oy! What's this?" She said.

"I got a better idea, Alex," she said, "how about you fuck off."

"Make me, bitch."

"If I make you, you'll look like a fag in front of your friends, again," she said, directing a piercing gaze at the crowd.

Alex sneered. "I'll never look as faggy as your boy over there," he nodded his head once in Leslie's direction. Pat felt her temperature rise; she could hear her own blood beating like a drum. She had enough shit to deal with: she did not need this too. Pat bellowed and charged at Alex, ready to kill him with one blow.

But Alex saw her coming, and socked her in the mouth as she went to tackle him. Pat did manage to knock him off his feet, landing on top of him. She pounded at the sides of his head, but Alex still had his arms free and was able to deflect most of the blows' fury. He blocked her punches and returned a few to her torso. Alex laughed when she winced from a shot to one of her breasts.

Alex rolled them both over so that he had Pat's arms pinned. He punched Pat in the face, breaking her nose. She was blinded by the flood of involuntarily tears. Pat was getting scared. Where was Leslie? What was he doing? Had he just run away?

"Yeah," Alex said, "how do you like that, bitch?"

Pat spat in his general direction. Alex slapped her hard in response. Pat kept struggling to get out from underneath of where he held her, but couldn't get free.

She thought she heard Leslie say, "one shall stand, one shall fall."

"What was that, faggot? You know-" Alex's sentence was cut off by what sounded like a loud pop. There were frightened screams and the sound of many running feet.

Through the haze of tears, Pat could see Alex's silhouette sitting above her, then he slumped over on top of her, limp. Something warm and sticky was leaking from Alex, getting in her hair. Pat scrambled to get out from underneath of him. As soon as she was free, she clawed at her eyes and nose frantically. When the world came

## Everything Was Upside-Down

into focus, Pat saw Leslie standing just a few feet away holding a still smoking hand gun by his side. Les was rubbing the wrist of the arm that held the gun. Pat was at a loss: everything was upside-down.

"Are you okay?" Leslie asked.

She nodded, still too dumbfounded to speak.

"I'm sorry, Pat," he said. "I'm sorry I let Alex do that to you. I'm sorry I was too much of a pussy to stand up to him before."

"Les...", she said, "What have you done?"

"I, uh, I'm pretty sure I killed Alex, honey." Leslie's voice shook as he finished the sentence.

"I'm pregnant." She didn't know why she blurted it out. Maybe she thought the horrible force of her pregnancy could turn everything right-side up again. Leslie went pale and dropped the gun.

"Oh God!" He said.

Pat looked at her beautiful boy and began to cry, voluntarily this time. Leslie knelt beside her. He cradled Pat's head as she sobbed into his shoulder. Les's head rested on hers as he wept. The shock was too much for either of them to really do anything about, other than cry and say, "I'm sorry," to each other over and over again.

The two sat there until the police arrived. Pat watched as they handcuffed Leslie and put him in the back of a cruiser. He looked at her with kind, drying eyes through the window until the cops took him away. Nothing made sense anymore. **UJ**

# QUESTIONS FOR CTHULHU

*[Editor's Note: We have no intention of revealing how the following document came into our possession. In the first place, we were drunk, and in the second place, the material itself is oddly . . . sticky. We only mention it to note for the record that we would never be so callous, or quixotic, as to send one of our writers to interview a Thing That Should Not Be. Believe it or not, we have scruples. But on the off chance that this is an authentic account of an Interview with Cthulhu, Great Old One of Horror, we pass it on to you. Editorial responsibility or something.]*

**UJ: How long have you lived in your current residence, amid the Cyclopean lost city beneath the waters of the Pacific?**

C: ... ..  
I dwelt in the first city before it was built.

**UJ: Do you have a preferred home? Perhaps somewhere off the coast of Innsmouth or Arkham?**

C: I move through what you call "space-time" in ways that you have no concept for. It would be as if you yourself tried to explain the Pleistocene era to a single carpenter ant. I exist everywhere I wish to. I arrive wherever my gaze falls. Nothing exists beyond my vision, therefore nothing exists beyond my reach. My home is everywhere. I am home now.

**UJ: What do you eat? How does a being of your immensity maintain his figure and stay healthy, given your largely sedentary lifestyle?**

C: I consume all. All creation yields before me. The flesh does as I will it. I have held your planet like a pebble within my grasp; I have drifted amongst subatomic particles. Size and proportion carry no meaning or primacy for me. Your science does not bind me. This flesh is mere puppetry. When it fades, I craft a new form for myself, though I have no need of it...I am forever.

**UJ: How are your current relations with Hastur the Unspeakable?**

C: He's a twat. Next question.

**UJ: Do you consider yourself a God? Have you any messages for your human fans and cultists?**

C: Your limited, feeble intellects cannot grasp my existence, let alone its implications. I am beyond your frail concepts of divinity. Those who would pay me tribute will go mad when they gaze upon me, despite their reverence. This



pleases me. However, the welfare of such devotees isn't my concern. Perhaps I will consume them out of decadence.

**UJ: Are you dating anyone right now?**

C: My perfections alone suffice. I need no other. At times, my mirror image will entertain me with its ministrations. When I grow slaked or bored, I consume my double. This is but one joy wrought by my perfection.

**UJ: Given that you have not stirred from your watery place in many a long year, do you consider that you have limits to your power?**

C: To you, my power might seem like the heavenly spheres: inscrutable, eternal, distant. Yet my power lies just below the surface of your world, waiting to drown you in madness and ruin. My designs lay beyond your rudimentary comprehension. Nothing limits my power.

**UJ: Do you read? What do you think of *Moby Dick*? Is its status as "Great American Novel" overstated?**

C: Herman Melville saw only a fading harbinger, yet could never become the sailor he wished to be afterward. This was his price for witnessing the signs of my perfection.

I find *Moby Dick* quaint. Of course, I am amused by the knowledge that the book's symbolism has been misunderstood by all who have read it, except for me.

**UJ: Do you feel that your identity has been appropriated by human depictions of sea monsters?**

C: I am what waits beyond the darkness. My existence lies etched within the psyche of all life, birthing fear. If man's monsters take my form, they are but clumsy shadows given shape by my radiance. I won't dignify sad effigies with jealousy.

**UJ: What do you aspire to? At the end of the Day, what does Cthulhu want?**

C: A convergence that remakes the universe, warping all that will exist into my image. A reckoning profane and glorious. A universe ruled absolutely: my exclusive plaything. One that I will cast aside ruined when I tire of it, as I have every time before.

**UJ: Could you tell us about some other legendary sea-persons? Have you ever met Triton? Aquaman?**

C: I will hide myself from the first children- what you call "merfolk"- until their despair has been properly seasoned. Then I will devour them all at once.

# Questions for Cthulhu

The other you speak of went mad before the end, but his end took an excruciating amount of time to arrive. I made sure of that.

**UJ: What would happen if you said “Release the Kraken!”?**

C: ... ..

**UJ: Hq345&\*@)(%->,\$!JDKSF?kklr!!?**

C: Ah, I see you too now know the joy of revering me...UJ

# YOUR DUTY TO RETREAT

*By Thomas Fitz*

The storm catches you shaving. You had not expected it. Up until this moment, with the razor at your throat, the day has been dull. Little Jack has finally fallen asleep. Thea is out, having set the afternoon aside to visit her ailing mother. The clothes still sit in the laundry, unaided. The dusting is finished, the vacuum cleaner put away.

In coincidence with the third peal of thunder, the knock comes at the door.

You stop and look at your razor. You bought it at a shop that specialized in retro-shaving kits, the kind of place patronized not by old men but young men who idealized the tastes of their grandfathers. Nostalgia aside, you understood the multiple functions of such an implement. As you hear a second knock, you exhale, and gently squeezing the blade into the lacquered handle, slip the razor into your back pocket.

This is predictable, them showing up like this. It fits their method to a T. All their heists happen in bad weather. It confuses and frightens people. Resistance weakens; eyewitness reports jumble. To rob a bank in sunshine shocks. To rob a bank in a thunderstorm terrifies.

You look at your half-shaven face. How much value would there be in wiping it off? The remaining lather would indicate they'd caught you unawares. This would embolden them, make them take greater risks. If they were bloodthirsty enough, it might work to your advantage.

So the shave foam will have to stay on. That means you'd have to stay bare-chested. Which is okay; it will help your story. And you have nothing to be ashamed of. You've done your daily exercises. You may not have a six-pack, but it's not a keg.

You walk to your bedside table and pulled the .380 Ruger from its holster. You slip the extra clip out and put in the other pocket. You let the holster drop to the floor. Should you kick it under the bed, or let it fall someplace else? No. Good enough is good enough. Just release the safety on the Ruger and pull a round into the barrel.

Another knock comes – more insistent, annoyed – as you moved down the hall from the master bedroom. Listened at the door to Jack's room, which is closed. Jack might not always want to nap, but he's a good sleeper when you get him down. No sign of stirring yet. Briefly and gently touch the door to the room, then go softly down the stairs.

A crash of broken glass came from the front door. Inhale sharply; feel the pressure inside your head expand and release. You want to rush down, meet the bastards

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at the door with .380-grain slugs of air-bending lead, avenge the desecration of your home. But you won't. You know their plan; the door was a distraction. The real attack always comes in the back.

And there it is: two men in long grey raincoats kicking in the slider to the deck. Normally they'd be wearing ski masks, but not for you. They know you. Watch as they brake through, sending glass everywhere. Thea would feel so violated. Take a moment to thank God for your arthritic mother-in-law. Because of her, your wife won't be home for hours. Which doesn't mean you have an explanation handy for what's about to happen. There is no explanation. You'll have to just come clean about what you've been doing, for what's going on years now. No other story, in the end, will satisfy Thea half so well as the truth, however painful. Thea can handle painful truth. She's a survivor. She's supportive.

Did she blink an eye when you lost your job in this economy? No, because that wasn't your fault. Layoffs are layoffs. And besides, they'd sent you away with a generous dismissal package: an extra month's salary, paid up front, with benefits. Thea knew you'd find something else. She knew you were a worker.

What she didn't know was that you weren't laid off. You were terminated, with extreme prejudice. An internal audit finally caught you, laundering the money of bank-robbers. The only reason you're not in jail right now is because the firm didn't want a scandal. The golden parachute was an attempt to keep you quiet. It worked.

So you do what you have to do.

Pick the right moment to appear at the bottom of the stairs. Too early, and one of them might get the drop on you. Too late, and it will give the game away. You cannot seem to be lying in wait. Carver would smell it on you, and that would mean disaster.

Nicky comes in to the kitchen first, skinny and jittery, clearly jonesing hard. Carver doesn't let Nicky chase the dragon until a job's over, and a job isn't over until everybody has his share. When Carver has the ten million you've stolen from them, the ten million only you can turn over to him, then Nicky gets his fix. Nicky is the weakest link. He will snap. You've told Carver this, but he does not care. Nicky is family. As you look at Nicky, you are glad of this. You feel good for the first time since the storm began: warm and gleeful inside. Nicky will screw everything up.

Stand up. Yell "What the fuck?" and point your Ruger at the little junky.

Nicky grimaces, aims his big stupid Colt revolver at you. Carver sees you and raises his Glock as well, just as coverage. Stomping steps through the living room



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bring Galston and Hanes, also armed. Four men who terrify entire crowds for a living are now pointing guns at you in your dining room while you stand, the only thing between them and your sleeping infant son, with one foot on the stairs. But it's still a Mexican standoff, because they can't kill you first and get what they want.

They do know that, right?

"Specially not her," says Hanes. "She fine."

"Shut up," says Carver, and Hanes' face becomes impassive and forbidding again.

"We only need one thing," Carver says. "Our money, Temple. Give us our money and we all walk away."

"Maybe we take a finger or two," says Galston, attempting to bore holes into you with his blue blue eyes "just for our trouble." Carver does not correct him.

"Oh, I see," says Hanes "Galston can talk about choppin' fingers off, but I say a woman look good and I gotta shut up. I see." This too, Carver passes on.

Take your time. Let them think you're afraid. You are afraid, so that works. But they're also afraid. They're afraid that you might be stupid enough to start shooting, so they'll kill you. They're afraid that you won't be able to give them the money easily, so they'll have to kidnap you, and possibly the baby, too. They're afraid because all these things create extra hassles between them and the thing they want. These are not patient men.

But then, neither are you. Patient men don't find themselves in this situation. They don't lie to their wife about losing their job, and take up with criminals. They also don't steal from those criminals. They get new jobs.

You should have gotten a new job. But there weren't any, were there? Even with their silence, you could hardly get a reference out of your new employer. And without a reference, your sudden layoff, on a day when no one else lost his or her job, needs explaining. Bills need paying. Mortgage needs mortgaging. These things don't change. Money doesn't change.

"The money," says Carver, "That's what we want, Temple. Where is it?"

"It's not here."

"Bullshit, Temple. The money got withdrawn. Not transferred, withdrawn. As in cash. We checked."

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"Twice," says Galston.

"So the money is someplace you have physical access to it. So even if it's not here here, it's within-your-fucking-grasp here. Bearer bonds and such. So hand them over, and you don't have to die with half a face of shaving cream on."

How nice. He noticed.

Nicky's still pointing his revolver at you, and he looks sick as a dog. Junk-sick, like he's only dimly aware of anything outside from the searing pain that's coating every nerve in his body, pain that he will let out at any moment. The big stupid Colt looks bigger than he is, but he's not going to drop it. He's going to put a few rounds into your stairwell first. He just doesn't know it yet.

"The safe," you say, your voice small and defeated, your Ruger still pointing right at Nicky's eyes, "It's in the safe."

Carver doesn't move a muscle. "What safe?"

"Downstairs, in the office. It's all down there."

"And...?"

"And what?"

"And the fucking combination, Temple."

"You can't pick that lock?"

"Jesus Monkey-Shit Christ, Temple. Do we look like we came here to pick locks? Do you know what's involved in bypassing a security system? We don't pick locks. We get the people to open the locks for us. So either you open the safe for us, or you tell Hanes the combination."

"Why me?" said Hanes.

"Because you bitch and moan every time I tell you to do something, that's why."

"Squeaky wheel," whispers Galston, his eyes still locked on you with a killer's hunger.

"Fuck you, Galston, you come with me," says Hanes.

"Don't take orders from you," says Galston.

"Go with him, Galston. Now the combination, Temple. Your pretty wife's gonna

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be coming home soon."

Sigh. Lower your eyes, but not the Ruger. Say the numbers in a dull staccato: six. twenty four. four.

"Hanes," says Carver.

"Office. By the bathroom. On your right."

"Go," says Carver, and Hanes and Galston walk down your stairs.

Carver drops his Glock. "Put it down, Temple. It's all over now."

"Him first."

Nicky's big stupid Colt is still pointed at you, and it's still steady as a rock, no matter how much drool is collecting at the sides of the junky mouth attached to it. He looks like he wants to eat you, but only if he was sure you had dope inside you.

"Nicky," says Carver. "Ease up." Nicky doesn't seem to process this, but he does blink.

"Nicky!" says Carver. Nicky looks at Carver, and swallowing, puts his pistol down.

"He looks like shit, Carver."

"You look like shit. He's fine."

"Hey, Temple! Where the fuck is this safe?" Comes a voice from downstairs. It's Hanes.

"In the closet." you say.

"What?"

"In the closet!" you and Carver shout.

"You said it was in the office!"

"The office has a closet."

"What?"

"What? I'm coming up."

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"Stay down there, Hanes."

"Can't find shit in this dump."

"Shut up." Carver looks at you.

"It's right there," you say. "Inside the office there's a set of doors. That's the closet. The safe is inside, on the bottom, to the left." Carver nods, and heads to the top of the stairway leading to the basement.

"Where's Galston?"

"He's down there, man."

Carver proceeds to repeat the instruction with a light note of frustrated contempt, while you lock eyeballs with Nicky. He sees you, and doesn't like you looking at him like that. You grin at him, and he likes that even less. Then you mouth a word at him, so Carver can't hear: *junky*.

"Ffff...." says Nicky, twitching.

*Junky*, you repeat.

"....fffff..."

*Fuck you, junky.*

".....ffFFfff...."

*Fuck you, junky.* Stretch your arm out and tap a vein with your Ruger.

You are waiting for the junky to get out the expletive he's trying to start. This does not happen. Instead, the big stupid Colt flies up and you come as close to soiling yourself as you ever have in your adult life. Thunder peals and the house shakes as the Colt goes off five feet away from your face. For the first time in your life, you are conscious of the sound and feeling of a bullet flying past your ear, of the smell of smokeless powder. He shot wild, and his hand bucked. He seems as confused as you are.

Your ears hurt and Nicky's going to shoot again. Put the Ruger up first. That is his head. Pull the trigger. Pull it again. Watch as something smacks into Nicky's head, but not too long. You have to dash like a panicked deer up the stairs while Carver's Glock sends three more loud, house-shaking rounds after you.



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Think to yourself, amid the stink of smokeless and the sound of your terrified son bawling in his crib, *that went perfectly.*

\* \* \*

*"Have I ever told you how much I love you?"*

*"No."*

*"Do you not want to hear it?"*

*"Not really."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because it doesn't make any sense."*

*"Me loving you doesn't make any sense?"*

*"No. But quantifying it does. You can't quantify love. It's love. If it has limits on it, then it can't be love."*

*"So all love has to be infinite?"*

*"Yeah. Yeah, I think it does. Isn't that what they say? 'God is Love'?"*

*"Let's not drag God into this, Thea."*

*"You really get uncomfortable talking about this, don't you?"*

*"God makes everyone uncomfortable."*

*"Of course. God's too big for us. We don't understand. We don't get it. And we fear what we don't understand. If you believe in God, really believe, and not just pretend you believe, you have to deal with the idea that nothing else is really that important. And since all that is what makes up our lives, it scares us. It means that we may not matter that much."*

*"All I wanted to say was..."*

*"...was that you loved me. I know. And you wanted to be sweet and romantic about it. I know, and I love you for that. But sometimes I want you to think before you tell me something. So that I know it's coming from you, and not just you repeating something you heard elsewhere. That would really make me happy."*

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*"I don't think saying how much you love someone limits it. It's a metaphor. It's a symbol. It's me giving you as much as I can imagine."*

*"Hmmm."*

*"Hmmm?"*

*"What if I don't like what you can imagine?"*

*"Then you must not like my love. Which means you don't love me."*

*"..."*

*"Why are you smiling?"*

\* \* \*

In your head, this would be over a lot quicker. In your head, Carver, enraged at Nicky's death (Nicky is dead. You saw him fall, didn't you? Did you?), will charge up the stairs like a mad bull, begging you to blow him to hell. Everyone else retreats like an ancient army after the death of its king.

But as you crouch behind the wall at the top of the stairs, you find the lack of Carver quite unnerving. Not only can't you see him coming up the stairs, ready to be shot, he's not even poking around the corner of the landing to exchange ricochets with you like on TV. You're not even certain that he's at the bottom of the stairs anymore.

Jack is still crying, loud wails of shock and fright. You want to go to him, soothe him, but you dare not. Until this is over, there is no point. He's never heard such loud sounds before. You never expected them to be as loud as that, yourself.

Another loud sound reports from the ground floor, and a tiny dust devil pops from the floor of your bedroom. It happens again, and another explosion, this time closer. Carver starts to talk again.

You have no answer. Your mind races. Nothing comes. Nothing good, anyway: if you rush downstairs to stop him, he'll have the drop on you. If you stay up here, he'll just keep shooting, and he will hit something you care about.

Jack is screaming.

Then you hear rather a different sound, different from thunder or gunfire. Something that sounds very like a bag of coins falling on a hardwood floor. Something else, that sounds like Hanes saying "We got a problem, boss," comes next. You cannot hear the ensuing conversation between Hanes and Carver well

## Your Duty to Retreat

enough to follow it, but you don't really need to. You know what the problem is: there's only about \$10,000 worth of South African gold krugerrands in the safe.

"What's this, Temple?" shouts Carver. You know he's at the bottom of the stairs now. He sounds mad as a bull.

"Gold coins, Carver." you reply. Jack's crying has taken on a more rhythmic quality; there are pauses in it.

Another shot from Carver's Glock buries itself into the wall of the staircase. "Where's the rest of it, Temple?"

"If you keep shooting, you won't find out."

"I am gonna rip your head off and feed it to my dogs, Temple! Tell me where my money is!" says Carver. He does not, however, punctuate this with another bullet.

Take a deep breath. This is still doable. Plan B will work.

It has to.

"Okay, okay" you say. "I've got it. It's up here."

"Bring it down."

"No."

"I'm sorry, Temple. All this shooting must be messing with my ears. I thought I just heard you say 'No'."

"Bring the money down here, Temple. Now!"

"No. No, I don't think I'm going to do that."

"Why ... not?"

"Because there's three of you and one of me. As soon as I hand the money over, I'm dead."

"You got a way so that doesn't happen?" That means Nicky is dead, or incapacitated. Accept the small relief.

"Come up here."

"No fucking way, Temple. You've used up all your trust points."

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"And you've used up way more time than you planned. Eventually some of my neighbors are going to figure out the difference between gunshots and thunder. Hell, the cops could be on their way already. You come up here, and I'll give you the money. Just you."

"Uh-uh. You'll shoot me as soon as I show my face."

"Why? So Hanes or Galston can wait me out? I don't gain anything that way?"

"Hanes," says Carver, "Where the hell is Galston?"

"Downstairs," says Hanes. "He still think there's money down there."

"Tell him to get his ass up here."

Breathe quickly out your nose. They may be deciding to rush you after all. How many bullets do you have? Seven? Eight? Will that be enough? What if they start ...

"Got a deal for you, Temple."

"Okay."

"I'm coming up, and so is Hanes. When you show me you're not going to shoot me, I'll take the money from you. Then I'll leave. The end."

"I don't know..."

"I told him," says Hanes.

"Pfff. We're coming up, Temple."

Watch them come up the stairs. Don't shoot. That's not the plan. Stand up, put your Ruger up in the air, and then put it on the ground. They don't put theirs away. That's all right. That even works better. Let them come to the top of the stairs. Look Carver in the eye. Let his angry-lion visage give you a look that says "Well?" without having to say it. Point at the nursery with your head.

"Clever boy," says Carver. "Last place I would have looked, just to avoid the crying. After you."

He isn't going to shoot you when you turn your back. He isn't going to shoot you when you turn your back. He isn't going to shoot you when you turn your back. Turn your back. Open the door to your son's room.

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Jack is standing in his crib, tears streaming down his face. You pick up without a word, and he buries his face in your shoulder. Allow yourself to enjoy it, to need it. Ignore the shaving cream that's getting in Jack's hair. Then turn to face your invaders so Jack doesn't have to.

They haven't entered the room. Carver is standing at the doorway, his large eyes offering nothing but impassivity mixed with contempt. He mouths the word "Where."

With a tremulous right hand, point to the diaper pail.

Carver kicks it over, and amidst three days worth of Jack's used Huggies is a black plastic bag, which appears to have a stack of thick paper in it. Carver sees it, and sighs. "Pick it up."

Think of the razor in your back pocket. Think of picking the bag up with one hand and palming the razor in the other. Think of the ease with which the razor will fly open as you offer Carver the bag, and then opening his wrist. Think that it's the easiest thing in the world. Don't think of how much you don't want to have to do it.

Put Jack back in his crib. He doesn't like it. His little face contorts into the frightful grimace babies make before they let out a scream. Another peal of thunder cracks outside.

"Forget it," says Carver. "Pick him up. You really know how to make a man work, Temple." He puts his Glock in the pocket of his coat and reaches down for the bag.

Carver doesn't see Hanes raise his Smith & Wesson, but you do. You want to turn away, but you don't want Jack to see. As you turn to reach into the crib, you cover his face with your hand. The shot is deafening, and Jack starts to howl again. Pick him up and turn around again. Carver is lying on the floor of your son's room. Blood from his head is pooling into his ducky rug.

"Christ," you say, and then try to shush Jack as best you are able.

Hanes grabs the black plastic bag and rips it open. 200 sheets of computer paper fall out. On the top sheet is written a series of numbers granting access to a Swiss bank account.

He snorts. "Where's the other half?"

"In a different account."



## Your Duty to Retreat

Hanes turns his Smith & Wesson on you. "And what if I say I want that, too?"

"That wasn't the deal."

"Fuck the deal. I just killed Carver. How long you think I had a deal with him?"

Ignore the razor in your back pocket. Can't risk it. It wouldn't scare Hanes, anyway.

"So what if I say I want it all?" Hanes repeats.

"What if I say there's only a bank minimum in that account?"

"What?"

"I'm not that stupid, Hanes. Anyone who'll betray one boss will damn sure betray another. The money's not in that account until I transfer it there. That doesn't happen until you leave."

You are lying your ass off.

"So you my boss now?"

"That's right. I hired you to get rid of Carver's crew. Your fee was half of ten million. You've done your job, and you'll have your money within 24 hours. But first you have to exit the premises."

Hanes stares at you, hard. Stare back.

"If don't get my money..."

"...you'll come back. I get it. Neither of us want that."

"Maybe I want an extra million. I did more work."

"Maybe you want to get out of here before the cops show up."

His scowl says it all. He doesn't like it, but he's buying it.

"24 hours. Now get out of my house."

He adds "it better be there" as he retreats down the stairs.

The thunder rumbles off in the distance as Hanes moves out the broken slider. Sirens approach within two minutes.

## Your Duty to Retreat

\* \* \*

The police are careful and considerate. They check you and Jack for any injuries, of which there are miraculously none. They comment on how lucky you are. They apologize for checking the permit on the Ruger, which is perfectly in order.

Galston lies on the floor of your office with a large knife sticking in the back of his neck. His blue blue eyes, staring at the open safe, betray no more feeling than they did earlier. The krugerrands are gone.

You are telling your story to the police when Thea arrives, horrified. She scoops Jack up over the protests of the officers, who want to check him into the hospital just to get him checked out. She insists on riding with him in the ambulance. She looks at you with confused, angry eyes. She doesn't understand how this has happened. She hears what you are telling the police and says nothing. If the officers notice her demeanor, they seem to attribute it to shock. You know better. She sees the lie in your eyes.

You accompany the police to the station, and tell your story: how you were shaving when armed men broke into your house, threatened you and your son, and made you give up the combination to your safe, out of which they stole gold coins, while you retreated upstairs to arm yourself. A dispute broke out among them, and they came up after you, demanding more. You shot one of them and retreated to your son's room. One of them killed the other one for the krugerrands and then ran.

The police nod sagaciously. Your story checks out. The circumstantial evidence: the bodies downstairs and up, the missing coins, the holster on the floor in your room, all add up. Ballistics will confirm that you only shot the man at the bottom of the stairs. Even if you weren't in your house and covered under the Castle Doctrine, says one of the officers, you'd fulfilled your duty to retreat. It looks like justifiable homicide.

The house is empty when you return. Thea has left a note on the refrigerator. She and Jack are at her mother's. She doesn't want you to call. You tape over the broken slider, lock up the house and stay at a hotel.

Two days later you are on an American Airlines flight to Geneva. Five million dollars is waiting for you there. You aim to empty it and send Thea some with a letter explaining everything. She has to understand that you had to do it. She has to understand that you were providing for your family, and then protecting them from the dangers. She has to understand that this was how much you loved her and Jack.

## **Your Duty to Retreat**

She can sell the house and bring Jack to Switzerland. You can live there, comfortably. You can find work: in Switzerland of all places, a man with your finance skills can get a job. It will all work out. Thea will forgive you.

She has to.UJ

# VOID

## Chapter 1

*By Andrew Patrick*

Arturus Lang watched the attack ships on fire off Orion with perfect complacency. The Space Union and the buzzdroids had gathered around a protostar that had once been part of the Orion nebula, and their slugfest meant dollars to Lang. Each combusting mechacruiser was worth enough to finance the trip on its own, and there were plenty to go around. The Admiralty had screwed the pooch on this one, to be sure. Never having been a military man, Arturus did not have the eyes that could tell victory from defeat. But he knew enough to know that it was better to have more of the enemy's ships blow up than yours. However, he was not a military man, so he had the luxury of not caring. Victory or defeat, there was scrap, and the Union paid a pretty penny for scrap.

"Vulture One, comm," said Lang, "stand ready to launch on my mark."

"Comm, Vulture One," said a silky voice that made Lang's loins ache, "standing ready, aye. Looks like a right goatfuck out there."

Lang wondered if she spoke that way all the time, or only when she was around him. He also wondered why it drove him crazy. He was no stranger to the loneliness of interstellar voyages: the hypersleep madness, the virility blooms, that odd, thanatostical longing to step out of the airlock that came along every hundredweek or so. He remembered the first time a colleague had done that, on his first voyage, aboard the Flying Gas Can. A perfectly sane woman, Freda Gorlung was. Had a satirical wit. Yet one shift, without saying a word to anyone, she'd walked into the airlock as naked as the day she was born and opened it. Everything shut down and they'd spent hours getting her frozen, twisted corpse back. Jhonn Herz, captain of the Gas Can, said it was just one of those things. "Sometimes the void just calls to you."

But the machines helped. They could repeat soothing mantras, offer progressive hypnotherapy, even administer small doses of prescribed uppers, downers, etc, all at the touch of a button. And there were other techniques: a journaling program that had evolved into a trans-Union literary society, blue-ribbon fairs for moonshine and psychedelics, even a quietly-ignored gambling subculture.

Plus, the effects of minimum-g and raw radiation had the knack of reducing to virtually zero the chances of human impregnation. And because of the hell warp travel still played with time, most spacers weren't married. So as long as you were up on your venereal shots, you could have all the sex, in all the ways, you could possibly want. Getting laid aboard ship or in port was as casual as handshaking.

## *Void, Chapter 1*

People did it as a way of finding out if they wanted to work with someone.

All of which meant there should have been nothing exciting in Alera's voice as she readied Vulture One to collect mechacruiser scrap when the battle was over. Arturus Lang had experienced as many different ways of copulating as he could have wanted to. He even tried it with a dude once, just to see if there was anything special about that (there wasn't). He didn't even remember the last time he'd gotten it up without a healthy dose of BB (biobethylene, or "boner bracer" as the spacers called it). It was all so...obligatory.

But somehow, when she spoke, he felt something.

At last some tide in the battle occurred. The buzzdroid fleets started to pull away from the larger Union control ships. The buzzdroids had a proper name, and they represented an alien race that the Union had been trying to get an agreeable trade agreement with for some time. But Arturus had never seen anything of them but their insect-shaped droid vessels, which everyone called "buzzdroids" even though they made no sound. Arturus watched them get destroyed with brutal efficiency as they retreated, but that meant nothing, because no one would pay for their salvage. Not that some hadn't tried to collect from the aliens. But none had ever returned.

"Vulture One, comm," said Lang "Action appears concluded. Launch and proceed."

"Comm, Vulture One, aye." With a sharp, heavy reverberation, the magnetic bolts holding the Pricey Vulture to her launch decoupled, and Alera shot off towards a broken prow of a cracked attack ship. There were no human remains to be accounted for on the attack ships, only the control-cruisers were manned. These, however had sufficient crew to make up for the rest. Each attack ship had a crew of at least two guiding it's actions safe on the control-ship mainframe. When a control-ship went down, the casualties were immense, plus all the attack ships immediately went out of commission. A scrap captain lucky enough to be involved in such an action could make enough to retire on for an intact attack ship in such circumstances. But they were very rare.

Lang watched Vulture One pull the broken prow of cruiser towards it with a tractor beam. You had to be watching the tractor beam at an oblique angle to see it, otherwise it seemed as though the tugged object moved of its own accord. But at the right angle, you could see the deep sparkling blue that flashed between tugger and tuggee. Lang wasn't at the right angle, and that made him briefly frown.

Then the control ship contacted him.



## *Void, Chapter 1*

This was exceedingly rare. The sailors and officers of the Union Admiralty regarded the scrappers as the lowest form of pondfeeding scum, and whatever their official license usually refused to acknowledge their existence at major battles. The most you'd expect would be a curt request to keep a vector clear.

"Say again, Executor," said Lang.

"..." said the static.

"Executor, we've lost transmission. Can you transmit again?"

"..."

This last persisted, without interruption, for a few more minutes before Lang shut off the hailing frequency.

"What the hell was that?" said Kronz, his No. 2.

"I don't know."

"I drank with a few of those control ship guys on Proxima 2 once. They're a bit weird," said Kronz.

"Yeah," said Lang. He tried to recall any instance of social contact with anyone in Admiralty grey, but nothing came to him. Despite their general sense of officious disdain, he'd never really had an unpleasant experience with them either. You did your business, collected your money, and that was that.

So Arturus Lang found it deeply odd when the control ship fired up its warp engines and plummeted into the protostar.

"Holy..." said Kronz.

"Make ready to move, Kronz," said Lang. "The flares are going to be on us in a very short time. We need to pull in the launch. Vulture One, comm, did you see that?"

Vulture One, still attached to its prize, said nothing.

"Vulture One, comm, do you copy?"

Vulture One started to move in the direction of the Pricey Vulture, dragging its broken attack ship behind it. Still no transmission came from it.

"It's moving," said Kronz.

## *Void, Chapter 1*

"Yeah," said Lang. In the far distance, the red swirl of solar flare began to swell. They didn't have much time. To be caught in that swell was to risk serious electrical damage.

"We could move towards her," said Kronz.

"And run the risk of moving towards it. No. She'd have to recompute all of her trajectory data in order to dock with us right. There isn't time. She's got to get to us, with or without the prize."

Kronz nodded at the sense of that, but then said "Have you given her permission to drop it?"

"Does she?"

"Are we ready to jump, Kronz?"

"Yeah," said Kronz, and got back to his work.

Vulture One was moving fast now, but not so fast as the hellish red glare from the now-atomized control ship's plunge into the protostar. It wasn't a question of vectors, or of approaches. Pure speed would make the difference.

"Come on, damn you, accelerate," said Lang, "hit the fucking throttle." This was stupid, because if she came in too fast, she'd blow right past the Pricey Vulture, and Lang would have to choose between abandoning her or risking everyone else to get her. But he said it anyway. His own stupid desire, the feeling that she gave him, pressed it out of his mouth.

"It's gonna be tight," said Kronz. Which was also stupid, but Lang gave it a pass. That was the sort of obvious thing you said. Verbal static reflecting the instinctive need to do something other than sit there and hope for the best. It took discipline to truly know when things were out of your hands.

Vulture One came in rough, but she came in. She connected with the mothership with enough force to send a shudder and a metallic squeal reverberating fore and aft, but she didn't miss the docking, and she didn't break anything. The hull of the attack ship was still in her beam.

The red flare was nearly upon them. "Lock the prize down!" said Lang, louder than he should have, and in any way irrelevant, because Kronz was already on it. "Done," he said.

"Do it," said Lang, and space bent away from them.

## *Void, Chapter 1*

A series of relieved expletives came from Kronz' mouth, but Lang wouldn't celebrate until he knew Alera was all right. "Zool. You all right?"

"Aye, Captain," said a voice that sounded exactly like Alera Zool's. But somehow Lang had the strange notion that it was not Alera Zool at all. Because when he heard it, he felt nothing at all. **To Be Continued**