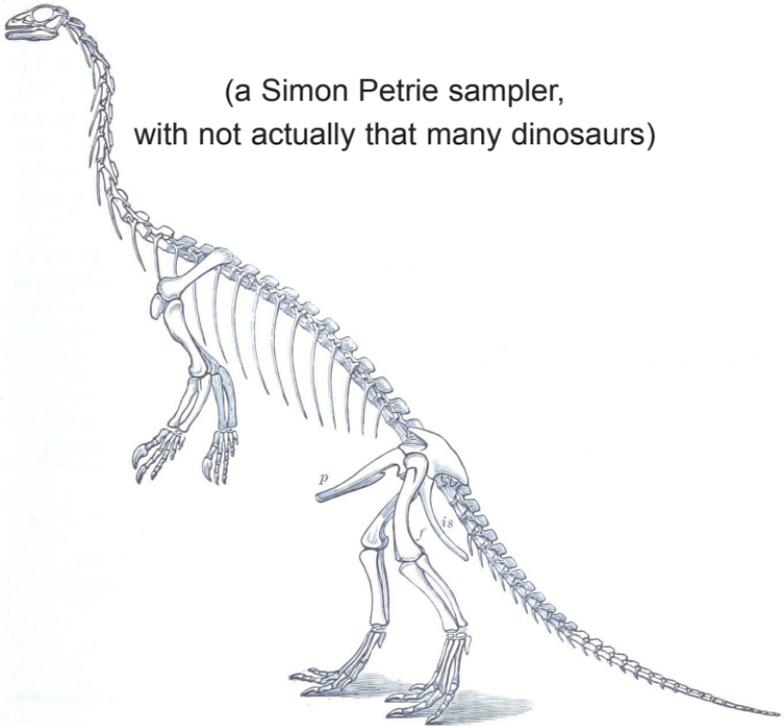


needs more dinosaurs

(a Simon Petrie sampler,
with not actually that many dinosaurs)



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The front page illustration for this collection is taken from p. 763 of James Dwight Dana's 1895 work, *Manual of Geology: treating of the principles of the science with special reference to American geological history (revised edition)*, a work now in the public domain.

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Foreword

If this is the first time you've encountered my fiction, then I hope you enjoy the stories contained in this sampler. (Of course, even if it's not the first time, I still hope you enjoy them; but the niceties of foreword writing would appear to require me to be particularly conciliatory towards any new readers.)

It's perhaps appropriate to provide a few words of context or introduction for each of the five pieces assembled here.

Downdraft is hard science fiction, though I've sought to disguise that. It's set on Rousseau, my fictional carbon-rich world, and devolves from a consideration of the difference in biological niches afforded by a hydrocarbon-rich atmosphere. (To mention in passing just one crucial point of distinction, thanks to atmospheric sooting and the photochemical production of hydrogen gas, plant life on such a world has both the means and the motive to float at considerable altitudes.) Rousseau is also the setting for another of my published stories, *Talking to Taniwha* (which you can find in my collection *Rare Unsigned Copy*, if you're interested), as well as a still-partly-written novella, *Solveig and the Zep*. I hope, eventually, to write at least one novel set on Rousseau, but the long tale is proving elusive.

To Arms sits somewhere at the intersection of *Star Trek* and *Monty Python*, and was inspired by eight words supplied to me by a storeman, while I was working at Christchurch's Municipal Electricity Department: "You can't have that, someone might need it." I've sometimes

been accused, in my stories, of taking things to absurd levels: I've really no idea, none at all, where readers might get such an impression.

Storm in a T-Suit is the first of several hard SF stories I've written that explore the human colonisation of Saturn's smog moon, Titan. I'm a firm believer in the requirement that hard SF, beyond all the requisite extrapolation and sense-of-wonder, should still say something significant about the human condition, and I hope *T-Suit* does. As with *Downdraft*, the characters in *T-Suit* haven't appeared yet in any of the subsequent works, but a work-in-progress, the novel *Wide Brown Land*, will feature at least one character from this story.

@*Bearhouse* is a piece of flash fiction which has previously appeared online, on my blog. I've yet to lose my enthusiasm for short-short pieces: some ideas simply wouldn't work if you stretched them too far.

Three-Horned Dilemma is the first of several (all unrelated) stories that explore my fascination with dinosaurs. In this case, a Triceratops, and a particularly inconvenient one. (Note that I excuse certain classes of stories—and stories featuring dinosaurs are one such category, because, well, dinosaurs are simply awesome—from the requirement alluded to, above, about human-condition significance.) I carried the idea for *Dilemma* in my mind for well over a decade before I found a way to write it. It's quite possible I could have found a better use for my mind in the interim, but there you go.

If you enjoy these stories, please feel free to check out my books *Rare Unsigned Copy*, *Flight 404*, and *The Gordon Mamon Casebook*. (You'll find links, and a brief summary, at the end of this sampler.)

And now, to the stories ...

Simon Petrie, January 2014

Downdraft

Above Poylinn, altitude 9.2 km

Fulven first mistook it for a ship of some kind, only the hull's underside discernible through a transient breach in the layer of brown haze.

Upper troposphere, altitude 14.1 km

The zep was dying, and she knew it.

She'd thought herself escaped from danger. She had been stalking a flight of juvenile bloons as they bumped and buffeted each other in the lazily churning current. The bloons were a kilometre or more ahead and perhaps a couple of hundred metres higher. Probably, to their rudimentary senses, she appeared indistinguishable from one of the haze-clouds and therefore hazardous only to the extent that clouds could harbor danger. Apart from the bloons and the messy skeins of the haze-cloud fringes, the only obvious movement arose from a lone dangler, its lengths of deadly braid hanging almost horizontally behind while its puffy, flimsy envelope was pushed along, bumped by the same stream of wind.

The zep had felt the current too, a ticklish whorl of orchestrated air; but as propulsion it was inadequate. She would need skill and lift to close with the bloons. Lift was still too difficult to come by, even now.

She had not spied the hunter until too close, too late.

The hunter, riding a mantawing, had used the old needlehawk gambit of radial approach, no

lateral movement beyond the subtle oscillation of its broad, haze-camouflaged wings. Even so, if she hadn't been concentrating on the forward view and the bloons, she'd have registered much sooner what her aft-eyes were seeing. As it was, it had been the mantawing, itself a predator of more thinly-skinned aerofauna like bloons and bubbleheads, which had unwittingly alerted her. The wing's missile had struck her squarely near an attitude gland, but the missile, blunt and slow—unripe—could not penetrate her taut, muscled hide. The shot was a warning, a gift.

Panicked, she'd begun the cumbersome process of evasion, of escape to the relative safety of yet higher altitudes. The wing itself was normally a high-altitude predator also, but the hunter straddled across its back must limit it substantially. Laden, it was probably near the peak of its range now; and the hunter lacked breathing apparatus ...

Could she exploit those weaknesses? Likely not: she was slower and much less manoeuvrable than the manta. But the beast's premature reflexive firing of its missile argued that it was either ill-trained or resistant to its rider's directions. The missile was never going to harm her unless, by ill luck, it struck an eye or one of her more recent wounds or scars; and she could not believe the rider would have wished her thus forewarned while a still substantial distance separated them.

Not that that gulf would save her or her passenger. Escape from this predicament would take longer than the time she judged remained to her. There was only one hope left.

Feed. Feed on this. Time is short, you must.

Escape, if she could. Her first action, though, was a belly roll as she squirted goutts of attitude-gas out of the ring of armoured glands encircling her midsection.

Only when her pale ventral surface was uppermost, and shielded from wing and rider by her bulk, did she flex her rear stave-muscles to generate the lift she'd need.

Her aft constricted, her prow rose as the centre of mass shifted within her. A thick stream of dark liquid ballast sprayed out noisily from the recessed sphincter of her rear valve. Most fell away towards the brown-black haze of the lower clouds; some, satisfyingly, splashed on the hunter and its steed. Lift, forward propulsion, and bombardment, in one.

Retaliation was swift and lethal.

Poylinn promontory stables

Though, like most adolescents, they had played at impregnation, taking mirth at the ways in which their dissimilar forms could interconnect, it struck Fulven that this business with Yarran was thoroughly ambiguous. They had been friendly a long time, but Fulven was not sure of which way, if any, he wished to gravitate on that issue nor whether he was yet ready. And even less concept of how Yarran viewed him ... he knew only that Yarran would sometimes gaze at him with a look of depth, but a look which in some measure suggested that Fulven lacked for substance, for seriousness, for dignity.

Regardless, though not fully understanding what it signified of his feelings on the subject, Fulven knew that he would do anything required to change his valuation in Yarran's eyes. Let him only manage *that*, and see what followed. Something within him quickened at the thought, a thrill almost illicit in its strength. Yet how to achieve it ... there lay the mystery.

Breaking from reverie, he resumed his search. The tackle room was a small, cramped, disorganised space surrounded on three sides by stable stalls and thus

heady with the smell of stale manure. There was just enough natural light, a sepia-stippled twilight courtesy of an unrepaired skylight breach in the room's roof, to allow Fulven to see without resorting to sound-sight. He hefted the flight saddle from its shelf, found a matching bridle, and carried the leathery bundle to the big mantawing's stall.

Struggling with the crucial task of cinching Pennant's girth-straps—the big manta had a reputation for bloating up during saddling, and a loose strap could prove disastrous at altitude—Fulven sensed that he was not alone. He turned, foolish, frustrated, reluctant to relinquish his partial progress with the saddle.

"Hail, Fulven." Yarran, breathing heavily from the climb, bending to see in below the corridor's low roofline: the stables were sized for scouts and their mounts, not for soldiers.

How long had she been there, watching him, Fulven wondered? He nodded a bluff greeting to Yarran while his fingers continued to busy themselves, blind, with the trickeries of the mantawing's riding tackle. Then, giving up, he fumbled a tar-fruit from his breeches pocket, palming it into the beast's warm maw, seeking its compliance. He stepped out of Pennant's stall into the comparative brightness of the adjacent lofting-yard. Yarran followed but stayed well back from the lip of the sheer drop which terminated the yard's run.

"Where are you going?" Yarran asked, a shy smile spreading across thin lips.

Fulven, standing at the rim, took a further moment to take a swig of some sticky liquid from the small chiselled-diamond flask drawn from the pocket of his flight tunic. Then he looked into the sky's depths, as if seeking to sight the sun, before returning his gaze to Yarran's face. "Up. Aloft. You should try flight for

yourself sometime, Yarran.”

“I plainly haven’t the build for that,” the other retorted, spreading her arms apart, as if to emphasise the disparity in their bodyforms. Though they shared the same age, soldier Yarran was fully twice scout Fulven’s height, perhaps five times his weight. “Besides, I’m too busy with lessons, as should you be, from what I hear.” That smile again, a gentle mocking grimace. “But if you must elevate yourself, my little scout, why don’t you bring me back some souvenir?”

“What souvenir would that be?”

“An air-weed of some kind, perhaps. Something exotic, of an altitude. It needn’t be anything too precious – just some object to show that you have, in fact, gleaned something from the heights and thought enough of me, and it, to bestow it me.”

“You shouldn’t need any such token,” Fulven replied, turning his head again as though seeking something in the murky smear of the sky’s vault of haze above them. “But did you just come here to catch me, to chat? Or for the exercise of the climb?”

“I came to ask” – there was reproof in her tone – “if you had remembered our lunch arrangement. You’ll need hurry, if you’re to be back down in time.”

Fulven swore, surprising himself at the vehemence of his own outburst. In his anticipation of the morning’s flight, he had forgotten their appointment. Self-conscious, embarrassed, both at his oath and at the lapse in his memory, he licked like a rebuked child at the sticky residue of a raindrop that had fallen, just now, on his wrist. “Yarran—I’m sorry. Really. But this is the only morning for months Pennant hasn’t been rostered out to someone else. Let’s lunch tomorrow, alright?”

Yarran’s answering look was unfathomable, like a column of clear sky.

“And I’ll bring you that souvenir you seek,” he added softly, though with no concept of what to offer Yarran as a memento.

Yarran had already forgotten the request.

Upper troposphere, altitude 14.2 km

A flash, then instant agony as the diamond-shrapnel dart punctured her hide and a half-dozen interior membranes. This, she knew within moments, was much worse than the stingers’ small punctures, more painful, even, than the agony she’d suffered from the spearbeak attack. The dart had cut through to her depths. *Too soon.* Lift-gas surged from her voluminous buoyancy organ into the tissues surrounding it, and she clamped her mouths rigidly shut to contain the mounting internal pressure. Without the ballast she was now more buoyant, was rising; but it was ponderous, futile. The mantawing had another hunting-missile still, and who knew how many darts the hunter’s rifle carried? She had seconds, at the most, and likely not even that. *She needed more height.*

It was not destined. Another dart and the mantawing’s remaining missile, both striking near the wound. The hide punctures seemed minor and, by themselves, of little consequence, but the pain she felt spoke of horrendous internal damage. The hissing squeal of escaping gas, still internalised but no longer unconsciously confined, increased in pitch. She felt stomach, lungs, and other compartments bloat with lift-gas as her buoyancy organ ruptured within her. Nausea tugged at her throat, the taste of lift-gas grew overpowering. She was still rising, but too slow, much too slow. The manta was rising now too, coming in for the kill, its leathery wings beating awkwardly under the hindrance of the rider’s harness.

The haze-clouds grew more vivid, they appeared

almost luminous, and she could no longer tell if she was rising or falling. She could not even determine whether she had succeeded in placing herself top-downmost, as was necessary.

Two will die today, at least, she thought. The hunter has seen to that. But I still may have some choice as to which two. Striving to control the roiling gases within her frame, mouths clenched tight shut, she spoke a word that could be heard only within, a murmur in the whistling chaos of her agony.

No answer came, but there was no time left.

Poylinn promontory stables

Watching Fulven's preparations for flight, Yarran felt a queasiness in her belly. Partly, she knew, it was simple height-dread; Yarran was deeply conscious of the threat of gravity, a fear her friend apparently lacked. But there was more besides: she'd seen something in Fulven's eyes, a desperation, a compulsion the root of which she did not understand. The little scout sometimes showed such a dark, purposeful seriousness, so unlike his normal levity ... Now Yarran waited, at what she perceived to be the safest point within the lofting-yard, while Fulven bustled and swore and stomped around within the stables. Looking for something?

Then followed the heavy, measured, rhythmic thump of the mantawing's footfalls, as Fulven led it out from the gloom into the yard. Wings folded back against its flanks, Pennant did not look in any way imposing: just a large ugly thing, a mistake. Stumpy legs, too close together beneath a long, low, wide body; an improbably aerodynamic face that seemed at odds with the lumpy substructure apparent beneath the furled wings. The creature was barely taller than a scout but massive, long,

and wide: it seemed a wonder it could ever get airborne. Fulven slipped the manta another tar-fruit while he fussed one last time with the fastenings of saddle and bridle.

Yarran was alarmed to note that Fulven carried, strapped beneath his bundled chute, what appeared to be Karnag's rifle.

She was sure Fulven did not have permission to take *that*. What could he be planning? Yarran sought the words to frame a question, wary of sounding too challenging—there was this odd, unbalanced air about Fulven this morning—but nothing more was spoken before Fulven nodded ceremoniously to her and climbed awkwardly athwart the saddle. Yarran watched while the manta stepped to the cliff's rim and arched its back. It urinated in a long steaming stream then shook its still-furled wings, tensing its body further in readiness. Yarran wondered that it didn't prematurely stumble forward; the thing must be more sure-footed than it looked.

She turned away, unwilling to see the animal's ungainly leap into the void.

She heard, nevertheless, the terrified, exultant yell that always announced Fulven's plunge off the stableside cliff-face.

Yarran caught one last look of Fulven, several seconds later, dwarfed against the broad, blunt triangle of the manta's outstretched wings as it lumbered through the air, slowly climbing from sight.

Above Poylinn, altitude 9.8 km

Fulven dared not approach closer. Rather, he pulled on the mantawing's bridle until the beast held a broad loping circle in the air so that, for most of the time, they were,

he hoped, obscured by the intervening pall of barely-translucent haze, as well as by the thin murk of low rain. Even if the zep spied them—and he knew nothing of how good a zep’s eyes might be, since they were creatures of the upper air, and might not be expected to see well into the grainy twilight that existed below the perpetual haze layers—he trusted the mantawing’s flight would appear as a hunting circle, directed towards some ground-dwelling or at least lower-altitude prey. But he kept eyes focussed upwards, for all that the zep was most of the time hidden by the same haze that kept the manta and himself obscured.

A zep. Folk in the town knew of them, naturally; but he didn’t know of anyone who could actually claim to have *seen* one. Zeps were creatures of rumour, of mystery, creatures from far above the haze.

Yet this one was at the haze’s very rim, perhaps only a couple of kilometres above him.

He should be returning Pennant to the stables: there was no sense in tiring the beast, and there were other duties to which he should be attending. Yet he was reluctant to break off from surveillance of the zep, particularly just to return to his studies. The Academy—more, the whole town—was, in truth, a miserable place in which to be spending time right now, farmers, soldiers, clerks alike complaining of the exceptionally poor season and the scarceness of resources. And there was Yarran. Fulven needed more time to think, and aloft—among the cold, the gusts, and the crackling roll-snap of the manta’s powerful wingbeats—was a good location for thought.

Was the creature hurt? Mortally so, perhaps? There had to be *some* cause for its appearance during this prolonged drought. (Though why the lift-gas farmers insisted on calling it a drought, he couldn’t fathom. They’d had rain regular enough, he was sure, commented

on it to old Werilang last week, yet failed to make sense of the old farmer's response, that it was the *wrong sort* of rain, too heavy and insufficiently sticky.)

The zep, he judged after repeated sightings, was not *hanging right* in the air. The view through the handheld spyglass was so jittery as to be vertigo-inducing, but he could still discern the creature's eyes were not level: in fact, its whole fuselage was canted at a large angle from what he presumed must be its normal, horizontal, displacement. Fulven wiped the glass clean on the inside of his tunic and stowed it again in its bloodhide sack. The zep was clearly sickened in some way; it hung at the air's upper edge like some fell cloud, a contained storm.

He'd promised Yarran a souvenir. He had been intending to bag some small creature of the upper air, a floating plant or some small herbivore of a sort that never descended to surface. Far better it would be to show her this, if he somehow could: it would be something they could share, something Yarran could boast about to the other townfolk. *I saw a zep. Fulven took me aloft, to show me a zep.* Yet Yarran, like most people, did not have the build that permitted flight; and, he now saw, the zep was slowly moving away and climbing. It might well be lost, or out of reach far above the haze, by the time he returned to ground and found Yarran; and then she would never see the zep, might well not believe him.

And with that thought, he knew what he would do.

But the manta was reluctant to take him higher.

Hazefeeding self-fondler! Fulven swore, pulling on the reins. The manta's obdurance was, he was sure, due to the dark ceiling of solid-seeming cloud now gathering close above them. Mantawings did not like traversing the haze, though they were certainly capable of flight above it. He knew of other fliers who'd coaxed their mounts through the murk: it was a mark of honour for a

pilot to be able to claim his haze-wings, and Fulven was sure that Pennant itself had made the transition before. Not with him, though; and therein, perhaps, lay the problem. The manta did not *trust* him.

Fulven, too, was fearful of the haze; but he was not going to let the zep evade him. No matter what the manta might think on the issue, even if it meant dropping the awkward bundle of the chute, to minimise weight. It wasn't as if he'd ever *needed* the chute.

He jabbed in his heels and swore again as the manta still resisted his urgings upward.

Above Poylinn, altitude 14.2 km

She strained at the cluster of ventral stave-muscles, strained to the limits of endurance, and then beyond. At the last, pressure literally unbearable, the stressed chords overpowered the obstruction, and the pod ejected. The trailing cable stretched and snapped, releasing the pod to bob upwards until, ultimately, it would find its own neutral-buoyancy altitude.

The fissure along her hide started along the scar of an old toothwing's gash just forward of her midsection, in the weakened strip between two bunched strands of stave-muscles. Then it rivened wider, catching at the seam of the spearbeak-inflicted wound, still quite fresh and tender. Her skin tore and would not stop as a bubbling mess of attitude-gas and vital fluids streamed from the developing gash. She clenched bands of muscles, distributed against her dermis, in a manner which her every instinct resisted. The pain was unendurable, yet still insufficient. She strained harder, watching while the hunter readied another dart for its rifle; and somewhere within her, finally, a vital chord snapped. A propellant bladder, now painfully distended

and pushed up by escaping lift-gas, began to herniate from the growing gaping crack in her fuselage. She entertained two thoughts:

One (eyes upward): *Good.*

Two (eyes downward): *Fool.*

The squeal of escaping gas, still much too slow, grew in volume as it climbed slightly in pitch. Two more internal tethers, the last of significance, ripped themselves asunder.

Done. She gaped her mouths and bellowed, a death-roar that split her fuselage from bow to stern, massively enlarging the size of her hide's fissure so that a lifetime's hoard of precious lift-gas screamed out within a few seconds. Hunter and manta alike were taken surprised by the suddenness with which her ruined envelope fell onto them, draped the sky around them.

The hunter's instinctive reaction doomed it as it sought to claw its way free from the shrouding, enveloping hide of the dead dirigible. In panic at its loss of flight and agitated by its rider's thrashing, the mantawing twisted and spasmed until it shook off its encumbrance.

Wing and rider, now separated, plummeted downward from the wrecked zep.

A kilometre or so below, the wing levelled off and began a slow climb away across the top of a burnt-blood shelf of haze-cloud; the rider did not.

Poylinn west crater lake memorial island

So many mourners, such a small casket, Yarran thought to herself, rubbing her belly, still unsure. So very much, these days, appeared uncertain.

Words were spoken, a good many words, though Yarran seemed not to hear them against an internal wall of deafening static. It did not matter. None of the words

would explain, *could* explain, what Fulven had thought he was up to. But it was comforting to think that he had had so many friends; unless, thinking less charitably, it was simply the spectacular manner of his death which had drawn this crowd.

They held the service, as was traditional, on the coral-groved mound of the round lake's central island. Younger members of Fulven's family—Pirrif, a half-grown, merchant-bodied sister; and Arranat, a soldier-bodied cousin—opened a tar-fragranced sack from which they removed a score of still-bright glowblooms. With rehearsed solemnity, these were handed out to the mourners, and as each took one they held it aloft against the midday gloaming so that its eerie blue light might be seen by those, back in the township, who had not been able to make today's journey.

Gradually, in mute response, the town's own illuminations were extinguished. Then the party waited, bearers still shouldering their load, while Fulven's own parents set to with shovels, digging a rectangular hole into the small circular clear space at the grove's centre. The digging went comparatively swiftly: this far up the slope, the ground was fluffy, tar-sticky soil rather than the dirty-diamond sand of the island's shoreline; and the casket was small, even allowing for Fulven's small frame.

At the last, after the words, the almost unbearable contemplation, they'd queued to drop tokens onto the unyielding carbide lid of Fulven's coffin.

Some threw down their now feebly-glowing blooms; Pirrif, weeping, a small figurine; Yarran threw in some shards from the shattered dart-rifle. Karnag, Fulven's father, simply shuffled past the grave. But Fulven's mother Millak had been last in the queue: she had dropped an oddly-scented length of cord.

It was only several weeks later, when back in the township and speaking to Fulven's still-grieving family of her own pain, that Yarran had learnt from Millak the true nature of the cord.

It was a piece of zep umbilicus.

Downdraft was first published in 2009, in *Sybil's Garage* issue 6 (ed. Matthew Kressel, Senses Five Press). It has since appeared in my collection *Rare Unsigned Copy: tales of Rocketry, Ineptitude, and Giant Mutant Vegetables* (ed. Edwina Harvey, Peggy Bright Books, 2010), and was shortlisted in the Best Short Story category of the 2010 Sir Julius Vogel Awards.

To Arms

Jelika stands, all pulled-taut hair and crisp green medic's smock, at the storage servery, fingernails drumming relentlessly on the countertop. The nail tattoo is a signal, plain and strong as you could wish, but the storebot isn't getting it.

Oh, for Force's sake... what's keeping it now? Can't it just access the sys-inventory? Apparently not.

Instead, she can hear the bot rummaging—there's no better word for it, although 'dithering' comes close—where were we, yes, *rummaging* through the assorted bric-a-brac of ship's stores, more like a child playing hide-and-seek (and *that* rather incompetently) than a state-of-the-art Class 5A Archival / Object Retrieval droid tasked with the sole duty of outmanoeuvring a collection of thoroughly inanimate objects. She can hear it. Lifting containers. Searching shelves. Checking labels. Climbing *ladders*, for Force's sake. While she seethes, brimming with roboticidal intent.

Eventually, after two-and-a-half subjective epochs, the storebot returns to the counter. It pays no apparent heed to the brazenly murderous cast of Jelika's face. Its own pressed-metal visage is, of course, unreadable, but it's not carrying anything.

"Well?" asks Jelika, from whom, in this state, the monosyllable should be capable of piercing the bot's triple-steel titanium-skinned, osmium-lined torso, if not actively initiating a general emergency by way of explosive hull breach; but the storebot still doesn't *get it*. Doesn't get Jelika's uncontained impatience, her

unconcealed frustration, her willingness to commit SHC if it'll just get the task *done*.

"I'm sorry," the storebot starts, speaking as though it believes itself to have all week to stand and chat. And perhaps it does. "The item you requested," it resumes after an apoplectogenic and thoroughly redundant breath-simulation pause—during which Jelika widens the scope of her wish-list hit list to encompass not just the bot itself, but also its designers, its programmers, its builders, its tutors and its neural-net developers—"the Mark 7.3 Auto-sighting Tranquiliser Dart Dispensing Machine Rifle with Telescopic Tripod Support and Rapid-Fire Magazine of Wide-Spectrum Xenovermicide Soluble Dart-Flechettes, isn't currently available. There *is* one, but it's the last in store."

"Buggeration," she replies, for the moment at least keeping within the confines of reasonably polite discourse, though the effort's not without cost. "Then I'll need to come up with some—Wait on, did you just say that you've got one in store?"

"Yes, certainly, that is precisely the summarised content of my verbal utterance to you on the subject."

"Who's it being held for?"

"Held? It's not being held for anyone, Ms Karlyle. It's just being held against contingencies."

"Well, then, *this* is a flicking contingency! I'll take it! Please."

"Oh, now, I couldn't do that—"

"Why the flick not?"

"Because if I give it to you, we'd then be out of stock in that line. And we can't have *that*, now ..."

"Look, do I or do I not have the appropriate authorisation to requisition the flicking dart dispenser?"

"Certainly, you've got the authorisation, Ms Karlyle; but I can't let you take the last one, someone might *need* it."

"I need it! Desperately! Now, if not sooner! Look, if I don't get that trunk gun in the next few minutes, there's not going to *be* any other someones to want to borrow it!"

"Ms Karlyle. I am fulfilling a serious responsibility here, and your grandstanding and histrionics are both uncalled for and unhelpful."

"Unhelpful! Listen, you, you, you cybernetic misplacing machine, *I'll* give you unhelpful! Unhelpful is when some copper-jacketed cretin thinks it's god's gift to junk collectors, refuses to release probably the one item has been requested in the past *year*, and then stands about and rusts wondering why nobody's left on board to give it its monthly *service*! You want to answer to an imperial commission about how you decided to let the ship's crew all die a horrible death rather than switch off your own anal-retention circuitry, you *go for it*, buddy, just make sure you let them know I put you well informed of all the facts!"

"Facts, Ms Karlyle?"

"*I so* don't have time for this. But. All. Right. If I don't get Security Chief Thacker sedated, with a fast-acting xenovermicide, within the next few minutes, then it's all going to be too late. I *told* him, *told* him not to touch the Arcturan salad, *told* him if he did that he needed to gamma-nuke it first ... and he didn't, and I watched it happen, tried to warn him, there was a Sirian mindworm larva on one of the salad leaves ... horrible, it did that nasocranial intubation thing, and that was what, twenty-three minutes ago, and any minute now it's going to hit maturity, and do that explosive parthenogenesis trick, and then ... And now, of course nobody *believes* me, but I know what I saw, and I know you don't dick around with a Sirian mindworm or it's the last flicking mistake you'll ever make ... and ... so, *can I have that flicking trunk gun now?*"

“Ms Karlyle. I can appreciate that this is a circumstance of somewhat of an urgent nature, and therefore I am prepared to waive the usual store policy ...”

“You *will*? Then just *hand it over*—”

“As I was saying, I will waive the usual store policy, and issue a priority crew-wide call for competing claims of interest on the item you have specified. If, after a reasonable period of, say, two to three days there are no other—”

“Two to three *days*? You still don’t get it, do you? People are going to *die* here, just because ... look, forget the trunk gun, it’s obviously a no-brainer, just get me a, a, I don’t know, a piece of polythene tubing, any length, and just *one* trunk dart.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, it would leave us short-stocked on the darts.”

“Shortstocked? What d’you mean, shortstocked? The standard magazine has *hundreds* of darts—”

“Three hundred and sixty, to be precise.”

“There you go, then. Just give me one of those.”

“But, Ms Karlyle, our current inventory is only three hundred and sixty darts. *One* magazine. And I obviously *can’t* split a magazine.”

“You can if you use a meat cleaver,” Jelika mutters, through clenched teeth.

“I’m sorry?”

“Look, *scrap* that, just find me something like a rubber mallet or something, I can KO Thacker and then snap-cryolise him, be a bit *messier* but it’ll still buy us some time—you *do* have a rubber mallet in store, I’m guessing?”

“Certainly, Ms Karlyle, we have one of the items you mention.”

“One. Two, maybe?”

“No. Just the one, I’m afraid.”

“And—let me guess—I can’t have it, ‘cos someone-

might-need-it."

"Regrettably, that is a reasonably accurate reflection of Store policy, yes."

"Great. Flicking *great*. Is there anything in store you happen to have *two* of?"

"I'm afraid you'll need to refine that search parameter somewhat."

"Um, OK, percussive anaesthetic devices, sports equipment—bats, racquets, clubs, anything with a handle and a good bit of heft to the frame. Baseball bat would be ideal."

"We *have* a baseball bat," the storebot announces, proudly.

"One?"

"Yes."

"Anything like that you have *more* than one of? Anything I could actually, like, *borrow* before the heat-death of the Universe?"

"We have a large number of golf clubs—but, unfortunately, only one of each sort. However, we *do* have two cricket bats listed."

"A cricket bat? That could work."

"*Two* cricket bats. Wait a minute, let me check... Sorry. They're part of a set."

"Right. Figures. Listen, does the word 'cheeseshop' mean anything to you?"

"No, should it?"

"Probably not."

"Can I enquire," the storebot asks, "if you've considered other approaches to your problem?"

"What are you now? Clutter Central *and* ship's psychotherapist?"

The storebot ignores her. "It sounds like a Security problem. Right now the Mind-worm is confined to Chief Thacker—"

“If the birth frenzy hasn’t spattered his assorted bits across the refectory by now,” Jelika snaps.

“—and could be ameliorated by directing your concerns to the Security 2IC, for example, who would be fully authorised and able to incapacitate Mr Thacker without any resort to tranquiliser darts, simply through the use of his stunner.”

“Authorised, yes. Able, yes. Inclined, *no way*. You think anyone in Security is going to start taking potshots at their head of section, just on the say-so of a junior medical adjutant, who saw something fleetingly across the ship’s canteen? And aside from the Captain, they’re the only ones, shipboard, who’re entitled to *carry* stunners. Which is why—Wait on. Do you happen to have any stunners in storage?”

“Parts, yes. But the full item—that falls under the categorisation of weaponry. You’d want the armoury, next level.”

“Forget it.” Jelika pauses for a moment, weighing up the prospects of starting over with the armoury service bot—who’s rumored to make her present robotic company sound flexible to a fault, by comparison—against the likely time taken to assemble a stunner, from parts and her shaky knowledge of first principles, without a manual. Neither avenue appeals. It’d be quicker to *invent* the stunner from scratch. “Look! I need—I need—I just need *something* capable of exerting more than, say, five tysons of subduing force to an adult human male, when operated by someone of my stature. Give me a display of what you’ve got, in lendable duplicates, that you’d actually be willing to sign out to a junior medical adjutant, and that fits those parameters. And *hurry*, for Force’s sake!”

The storebot’s eyes go vacant—*not much change there*, Jelika thinks—while, apparently, it consults the store’s

central hive-mind. Then, on the adjacent wall display, an item list forms. It's a depressingly short list—doesn't require scrolling—and as Jelika stares at it she realises there's only one item among the displayed options which is going to serve her purpose in any way.

"This benchtop hydraulic press. Shown here. How big is it?"

The bot holds its 'hands' about sixty centimetres apart.

"Perfect," Jelika breathes, suddenly confident for the first time in far too many minutes. "Can you bring that out, please, so I can see how it operates?"

"Certainly, I can retrieve it for you. But I'm obliged to say I don't see how that addresses your problem. The anaesthetic properties of the benchtop press are not among its principal documented features."

"Oh, it's not the anaesthetic properties I'm after," she replies. "Just *bring the flicking thing* to me!"

"Right you are, Ms Karlyle. If you'll please just bear with me, I'll need to locate the item in question." The bot turns and ambles off into the store's labyrinth, and there follows a drearily slow symphony of metallic, synthetic, and evidently sometimes breakable items being moved, inspected, overturned, and, on occasion, dropped. Jelika is comforted only by the thought that these noises have not, as yet, been accompanied by the deafening klaxon of a shipwide General Alert, which would surely be sounded in the event of Thacker's apparently still-imminent spectacular demise in the mind-worm's birthing frenzy.

Eventually (still no broadcast siren) the storebot returns, struggling with the highly-cumbersome benchtop press, which shares the overall dimensions of an adolescent kodiak bear but lacks the latter's flimsiness of construction. The grunt the storebot gives is, surely, solely for effect, but it's with apparent difficulty that

the bot manoeuvres the press onto the countertop. “I must say, Ms Karlyle, I don’t see how you’re going to transport this—”

“I’ll *manage*,” she says shortly. She bends to inspect the item. “Uh. No, look, this one’s no good. The pressure surfaces are supposed to be micrometer-smooth, but this one’s got a serious imperfection on the upper plate. Look, about here—”

The robot bends down, angles its neck, sticks its head into the gap between the press plates and turns its gaze to the indicated region. “I don’t—”

She presses the switch.

Editor’s note: In deference to our burgeoning cyborg readership, a brief episode of considerable violence and brutality has at this point been excised from the narrative.

Swinging her makeshift weapon, Jelika strides, as swiftly as protocol permits, down the corridors leading to the refectory. The klaxon still hasn’t sounded, she might still be in time. Just. As long as she can catch the chief by surprise, as long as she swings with enough force to knock him unco on the first blow, as long as she can persuade his Security cronies to *just take a look* at her medscanned realtime images of the mindworm, nibbling away at his frontal parietal, before they decide to brig her, as long as they get the chief on ice before the worm spawns... it’s a long shot, still, but she might just win. She swings the robot arm again, seeking to get a better feel for its concussive properties, and smiles. It’s wonderful when things just fall into place, and she has an optimistic feeling about the future. Helping people. It’s her *job*. And she enjoys her job. She has the feeling she’s going to particularly enjoy the next few minutes.

To Arms

In leaving most of a hastily-dismantled storebot carcass on the floor of the store server, she's almost certainly broken a large number of Cybernetics Charter regulations. But she has a feeling the demised storebot would be, in one way at least, satisfied with the outcome.

Yes, she's taken an arm – and no, on this occasion she didn't have the proper authorisation. But she *did* leave a spare.

To Arms was first published in my collection *Rare Unsigned Copy: tales of Rocketry, Ineptitude, and Giant Mutant Vegetables* (ed. Edwina Harvey, Peggy Bright Books, 2010).

needs more dinosaurs—a Simon Petrie sampler

Storm in a T-Suit

Who in their right mind went out, voluntarily, into a Titanian shitstorm?

Cursing, Mats slewed the big quad-ski to a treacherous halt in a curve of brownsugar snow. He fired off a couple of anchorage harpoons for good measure. The downslope ahead would be difficult, would require negotiation on its own terms.

Get a grip, he told himself, as the memories threatened to subvert his resolve. *This is Titan, not the Valles Marineris. More than enough happening in the here and now.*

The old melanoma scar on Mats's forehead was beginning to ache: fatigue, tension, frustration, a fair dollop of anger. Behind all else, foreboding. Not helped by the eyestrain of trying to navigate through *this*. Pausing at the top was as much a sanity break as it was an opportunity to gain a better vantage. But pause meant delay. And every moment of delay was another moment to fear for the safety of Mercedes, and the other two.

The valley ahead was sepulchral, a study in dun and orange, smothered by a hazy brown sky. Within the landscape, further features were vague, not helped by the adhesion of this groundblown crud to the quad-ski's windscreens, and to the visor of his own T-suit.

No sign of the rover, or its crew. But they'd come this way. He tried hailing them again, tried calling Leto too. Nothing. Out of range, or just too much junk in the atmosphere. Bad news either way.

He climbed out of the quad-ski's passenger cage, gripping a side support against the wind. Denser air-

mass, weaker gravity: Titan didn't do hurricanes, nor anything remotely resembling, but a shitstorm gusting at up to twenty kilometres an hour could churn up plenty of material. Could prove deadly in its own right.

Mats knew deadly. Mats had been haunted for eighteen years by deadly.

The wind was a constant, low, note-bending growl. Its noise was overlaid by the *flack ... flack ... flack* of the larger flakes of crud as they landed on the visibility-blue shell of his T-suit. A glob like bird-shit impacted wetly on his visor, and he instinctively wiped it aside with a sweep of his glove, leaving a worse mess.

He muttered *refresh*. The T-suit's visor obediently shucked off an ultrathin layer of film, affording him a momentarily improved view. Not that it helped overly, his eyesight wasn't what it had once been. He wondered how many visor-film layers were left, before he was reduced to the baseplate. Not that many. Not enough. His visor was yucking up again, already. Mats *hated* shit-storms.

He peered forward, looking to spy out the best approach down to the valley's floor, and spied something out of place. A smear of orange-green, near the slope's base. A clue. Another navigational challenge. It was difficult to be sure, but it looked like a trail marker.

Refresh. He looked again, and his breath snagged. It wasn't a trail marker.

Barely a hundred metres; but it took half an hour to manoeuvre the quad-ski down the slope to the T-suited figure. That was the easy part.

The figure lay sprawled face-down, concealing both its identity and the array of med telltales incorporated into the suit's chest. There was no way of telling whether life yet remained within. And Mats' heart slumped

further when he saw how firmly the once-blue T-suit had become embedded in the re-frozen surface.

The rescue equipment he'd brought with him, from Leto, had been chosen for rover retrieval. The quad-ski was equipped for towing, and for reasonably heavy lifting. It would certainly be up to the task of pulling an occupied T-suit from the ground's cold grasp. But the T-suit itself wouldn't withstand the stresses involved. And there was nothing on board the quad-ski that was designed for excavation.

At least the suit was small. Joachim was tall. Mercedes was much shorter, but then so was Frank.

Mats didn't know what to hope for. Didn't wish to find his daughter dead; but the prolonged doubt was corrosive, took him all the way back to Mars. And the suit's occupant *was* small ...

Torn by haste and caution, Mats stared at the figure before him, searching for a shortcut that he knew didn't exist. Turned to look at the quad-ski five metres away, hoping for reassurance from its workaday solidity. But the vehicle suddenly seemed a small, fragile thing, lost like him within planetary-scale vastness. Beneath the skin of his own T-suit, his ribcage tightened.

He shook himself. The time wasn't his to waste. The figure in front of him might well be Mercedes. He had a rescue to attempt.

He returned to the quad-ski, for one of the anchorage harpoons.

It took Mats a good forty minutes with the harpoon, forty minutes of stabbing at the waxy crud entombing the figure, before he was ready to try levering it out. He'd paid particular attention to the region around the head of the T-suit. Not only had the incarceration been most extensive

there, but he needed to ensure that there wasn't too much resistance, too much residual adhesion between the ground and the visor. If the visor remained cold-welded to the surface while the rest of the T-suit came free ...

The first attempt didn't work. Mats could sense that the opposing vectors, his application of leverage against the ground's reluctance, were still too great for the T-suit to handle. So he set to once more, kneeling on the trammelled quasi-ice around the T-suit, his own suit's harsh headlamps drowning out the wan buttery light of the early-afternoon sun. He jammed the harpoon repeatedly into the broken ground, the action becoming mechanical, ritual, devoid of significance as it built its own rhythm.

He grew desperately tired, fearful that he'd slip with the harpoon, would pierce the T-suit through mischance or through mesmerised incaution. Every several minutes he stood, dizzy each time, each time having to fight to prise his lower legs out from the tar-like slush that, like an addict, sucked steadily at the warmth leaking from his own suit's knee joints.

His visor had gone beyond 'refresh' by the end, and he was working almost blind, trying to see through near-opacity. His suit's servoes, intended to compensate for the difficulty of stiff-suited manual exertion against Titan's ambient overpressure, had become sapped by cold to the extent that they were more encumbrance than assistance. And he'd reached the point where he was losing confidence in his ability to distinguish chopped-up titanian gravel-slush from precious T-suited human meat. He pushed the harpoon as far under the figure as he dared, and heaved downwards.

The T-suit came free, encrusted with an encumbrance of coffee-stained syrupy muck. He turned the suit over. He still couldn't make out the idents, or discern the

med telltales' status, but the suit's weight was sufficient identity of its occupant.

He stooped in preparation to pick her up, but the motion took on a life of its own. He sank to his knees, as something that had lain in him almost two decades struggled to emerge. The static in his ears grew deafening, threatened to overpower. He forced himself to breathe deep, slow, regular—to take the necessary steps.

At least, this time, there was a body.

He carried his daughter's body back to the quad-ski's passenger cage, strapped her as best he could into one of the front seats, and wiped her T-suit down. Then he plugged a cable from the vehicle's auxiliary heating unit into the jack at her suit's hip, and set about the task of emergency suit rehab.

The suit's med lights were off. Which was clearly very bad, spoke volumes about the length of time Mercedes had lain sprawled out there, seeping out precious body heat. But Mats was experienced enough to know that the status panels were designed to power down a little before the ultimate failure of the suit's life support, meaning that there was still some cruel hope. *Might* still be some hope. He'd know soon enough: there was a med-status recharge piggybacked onto the thermal conduit running from quad-ski to suit.

He pulled a liquid-rations syringe out of the quad-ski's first-aid locker, slipped its secure-seal needle through the septum on the upper compartment of her T-suit's backpack. Strained to squeeze the crude nutrient mix through, his fingers' clumsiness amplified by the gloves. Slapped a thick gob of emergency sealant over the septum, once he'd withdrawn the needle. Queried her med telltales. Still no response. *Not good.*

The bodily-waste tank in the backpack's lower compartment appeared to be frozen through, which meant that extraction—basically the reverse of the nutrient-loading process—faced a delay. Another bad sign.

Finally, the first med light came on. Yellow.

For quite some time Mats did not trust himself to speak. It was Mercedes' voice, thin, uncertain, that emerged first.

"What was the expiry date on those rations?" she asked.

He didn't laugh, made no immediate response whatever. Then, "Don't know what Frank thought he was playing at, three in a rover. It's totally against regs."

"That's how it had to be, Dad. I was there for the geochem, Joachim for navigation. Frank because ... well, Frank ..."

Beside him, she was quiet and so still that he thought she'd drifted into unconsciousness again, until he felt her gloved fingers gently squeezing his. "You came from this way, right?" he asked, waving, indicating the view through the quad-ski's barely-translucent windscreen.

"Uh... yeah. The rover's trapped in a crevasse about three clicks due west of the thirty-five kay mark on the cargo track. There's a methane-ethane blister nearby, where Frank had been wanting to... but the radio wasn't..."

"Thirty-five kay?" he asked, a degree of surprise added to the question's inflection.

"It had to be me," she answered. "I had the most left in my tank."

She had to have known the suit wasn't up to that level of endurance. He was amazed she'd got as far back as she had. "Joachim? Frank?" he asked.

“Frank’s *dead*, Dad,” she replied. “Joachim — but that was three days ago ...”

He waited her out, busied himself with putting the quad-ski through a wide, deliberate arc across the knurled landscape. The reorientation did not escape her notice, and it was with distinctly more animation, panic even, that she called out, “What are you doing? We can’t just leave him! I mean—”

“We’re *not* leaving him,” he reassured. “But if the rover’s that distance away, and so close to the cargo track, then it makes sense to follow that rather than to attempt the whole way cross-country.”

Beside him, she was silent again. Eventually he discovered that she’d drifted back into sleep, or something like it.

The cargo track, worn almost smooth and packed down by the regular passage of the big cargo haulers, allowed Mats to open up the quad-ski’s reserves of power, to put on more speed. It also afforded him more opportunity to monitor what was happening inside the vehicle, rather than outside. Mercedes’ med telltales, relayed to the quad-ski’s main console, kept shading intermittently from green into yellow, and her breathing was worryingly shallow and inconsistent. She drifted in and out of coherence; at times he’d hear a rapid sharp intake of breath, but could not tell whether this was grief—he knew she’d been close to Frank—or some more innately physiological damage.

“Madness, heading out into a shitstorm like this,” he commented eventually. “What *did* Frank think he was playing at?”

“There was never any indication it was going to develop like this,” she argued. “It started out as just a

gentle brown-down, and we all figured it would stay that way."

"He should have *known*," said Mats.

"Dad," she said, her voice heavy. "Don't judge this by ... by the standards of the past. Mother wouldn't have wanted that. Not ever."

He took his time replying. "This is *not* about your mother."

"Isn't it, though?"

"No, Merc, it's just about basic safe practice. And obviously, there's been at least one fatality. Look, I know accidents happen, but there's no reason to be going out and courting danger. *That's* the difference here. Your mother, that was an accident. This, this ... adventure of Frank's, this was an accident waiting to happen."

"You've no idea why this was so important to Frank."

"No, and you've not told me."

"He didn't want people misinterpreting his actions."

"Even if it meant ignoring safety restrictions? Come on, Merc."

The quad-ski slipped and threatened to backslide down the trail's gentle slope. "Some of these patches are like teflon," he complained, twitching the drive-stick while he fought to find better purchase.

"It was waxy out by the digsite, too," she said.

"Digsite? So this is all about what, more of Frank's amateur archaeology? Jeez, Merc, we're paid to refine organics for shipping to the inner system, not to indulge in some futile attempt to uncover the nonexistent biology of a world that's always been dead."

"See? This is just the attitude Frank was afraid, was talking about. Closed-minded, jumping to conclusions."

"Okay, then, I'll open it. You tell me what Frank was up to."

"He wasn't ready to go pub—"

He's never going to be ready now, he thought. Aloud: "But it might have some bearing on the rescue. Assuming Joachim's still alive. If I know in advance what the situation is over there."

Her stance shifted, stiffened somehow, and she fell silent. Slipping into reverie again, he figured. "You're thinking what?" he asked, quietly.

"Jeez, Dad, nothing. Well, actually, taking a piss."

Smother going now; the trail was level here, and enviably stable; but he was lost for the next hundred metres in thoughts from the past. Mars, and now Titan. *Once you leave the cradle, the universe will do its best to kill you*, he thought to himself, conscious of how similar—in temperament as well as in appearance—Mercedes was to his memories of her mother.

He spied a relay post up ahead. He killed the fuel cells, brought the quad-ski to a halt. "Just going to notify Leto," he explained, climbing out of the cage. "Let them know the rescue hasn't been a total failure. Touch wood." He made his way awkwardly to the bright-blue plastic post that stood like a small totem on the cargo trail's shoulder, brushed off the crusting, and pressed his communicator against the post's induction pad. Reception was scratchy, but at least there was a link, courtesy of the comm cable. He got through to Rani. She sounded tired, overstressed.

"Mats," he announced, as though it could be anyone else.

"Oh, thank good ... Steen and I were getting worried. Any news?" she asked.

"Some. Not all good. But Merc's alive. Don't know yet about Joachim."

"Frank?"

“I haven’t reached the rover yet, but from what I’ve heard ...”

“Oh.” Pause. “Let me know the minute you find Joachim. I’ve had Henna on the link, distraught. As you’d ... as you would be.”

“Henna. My God, yes,” he said, realising he’d allowed his own thoughts of personal tragedy to eclipse the larger situation, the uncertainty and grief that Joachim’s young wife must now be experiencing. “How far away from Base is she?”

“Two-three days, still, depending on the storm. She’s in the leading hauler. Stopping at every relay post on the route, seems like.”

“Can’t blame her.”

“No. Look, Mats, thanks for calling in. Give Merc my love. And bring them back safe.”

“Do my best,” he promised, hoping to sound confident.

Straining to see the trail straight ahead of them. The quad-ski’s windscreen was positively dark through accumulated gunk. Too bad its own refresh function was on the fritz. They were accordingly going slower than he would have preferred. Twenty-five, was that twenty-five they’d just passed? Ten more to go.

“Your mother would have liked Titan,” he commented eventually.

“You think?” Mercedes asked.

“Well, aside from the cold, the dreariness, and the overpressure, and all the toxic gunk.”

“Gee, well, when you put it like that ...” and he thought, for the first time, to hear a lift in her voice. “Okay,” she added. “You want to know what Frank was up to?”

“I want to maximise the chance of getting Joachim back alive ... there should never have been three people

in that rover, and you know it. Not that I'm not grateful that Joachim was along as a chaperone."

"Big girl now, remember?" Pause. "Plus, if you must know, *I* was the chaperone."

"Frank and Joachim? Since when?"

"Couple of years now, I think. It was hardly a secret."

"I didn't know it."

"Pretty much everyone else on Base did. You've been pretty closed-off, you know, Dad."

"Closed off? Since when?"

"Since ... since ... look, I don't know. Too long."

"I—wait a minute. Does Henna know this?"

"Yes, Dad, Henna knows. It's *complicated*."

"It sounds it."

"Well, like I said, closed off."

"You were going to tell me what Frank ..."

"He's found a platinum-iridium layer."

"What?"

"That part's actually in the public domain," she said. "It's in the Eyre Lacus condensate core, though there's been quite a bit of argument as to whether it's signal or noise. The data's pretty much borderline."

"But Eyre's a good fifteen hundred klicks away ..."

"Two thousand," she corrected. "But Frank found a marker, much closer to the top slush, just out in the Mandelbrot lakes region. At that massively eroded site."

"Doesn't sound like it's worth getting killed over," Mats said. "I mean, I assume Frank wasn't checking this out for any reasons of self-sufficiency, or anything actually useful?"

"He had a suspicion," she replied, and he could hear the iron in her voice, pulling just below the surface. "He talked to the people he thought would listen openly to what he had to say on the subject, and he didn't bother trying to convert people who wouldn't. I was a tough sell—too

much my father's daughter not to be—but what he said stacked up. And what he'd found sounded plausible."

"So what had he found?"

"He had dates," she said. "Well, one date. Sixty-five point five million years."

Impact. The *frisson* escaped him, involuntary. "Sixty-five point five? A platinum-iridium layer, same age as the dinosaur killer? Here on *Titan*?"

"That's the one."

He thought for a moment. "No way. That's got to be way off. For one thing, with the rate of precip, you'd have to go a good hundred clicks down to retrieve samples that old. And none of the cores are anywhere near that length."

"Most places that's true," she countered. "But most of the original upper strata around Eyre have sheared away, that's one of the reasons it was sampled. It's a patchy record, but it does stretch much farther back than the other cores. And the radiochem holds up."

"Okay. Even assuming that's the case, so what? Some large-enough body gets disrupted, too close to Jupiter or whatever, breaks into fragments, part of it hits Earth, kills the dinosaurs, another part slams into Titan. It's all just part of the regular business of solar-system billiards."

"Yes. But. There's more to it, Dad. He'd run models. Lots of them. Any object large enough to do the damage Earth sustained, with a heavy-metal core, would have had to cut so close past Jupiter that the odds against it simultaneously resulting in inner-system and outer-system fragments would be astronomical."

"No pun intended. But Merc, it only needs to have happened once."

"But he didn't think it had even happened once. Not through chance. Because in over a thousand model runs, he never saw any evidence that it could."

"So what did he say happened? He have a theory?"

"Yes, Dad, he had a theory. He thought Earth was just collateral damage. He thought it was *aimed*, and he reckoned the main target was Titan."

"Did you believe all this?"

"Well, no. And I still don't, I think. Occam's razor. But that's hardly the point."

"Thirty-five," he announced, braking the quad-ski. "You get some rest?"

"Some, I guess. But I still feel like crap."

"But you know, if you have some, it'll only make you sick."

She gave a brief hint of laughter, dead at the birth. "Don't *joke*, Mats."

Mats. That pulled him up. One of Pia's expressions, and as near as could be told, her intonation. He rechecked his daughter's med telltales—green, still just a hint of yellow—and blinked away the visions of martian terrain, a kaleidoscope of eidetic, unwelcomely persistent images. The familiar crinkled salmon-and-sand landscape of the eastern extremity of the Valles Marineris, both before and after the impact. He'd visited Pia out at the encampment, listened patiently while she bubbled over with geologists' anecdotes, tried to discern what it was that captivated her about the surrounding formations. He'd been back a week later to assist with the fruitless rescue attempt, and in case there was anything of Pia to identify. There hadn't been. *Comet core nav cluster malf, impact imminent, VM/Argyre*: the datasquirt had been all the warning anyone on Mars had received, scant seconds before it hit. Out in the field, there likely hadn't been any warning at all. It was still one of the worst catastrophes of the jinxed Martian terraforming effort, but amidst all

the public relief that the Hellas Basin communities had been spared, there'd been insultingly little mention of the several dozen lives lost—geologists, tourists, prospectors and miners—in and around Valles Marineris. Mats and his young daughter had left Mars a month later, outbound, as soon as it became obvious that there was no hope of finding any trace of Pia. The campsite had been less than a kilometre from the impact epicentre. But the fanciful notion that Pia might somehow have escaped, might still be lying somewhere in the vast chaos of the Martian southern highlands, tore into him for years afterwards. He'd let her down. He'd left.

"Dad. *Dad!* Brake!" She was reaching for the control stick.

He squinted out the viewscreen, swore, switched the treads to counter-rotation. The quad-ski shuddered, shook, stopped, inched back from the ravine's crumbling edge. "Sorry," he mumbled. "Must've put myself on autopilot." Checked to ensure they were placed safely out of danger. "Think we need to do the rest of this on foot."

"I think you're right," she said.

Just two kilometres; but it took well over an hour before they'd reached the crevasse, the ruined rover. Then there was the necessity to find secure anchorage points for the harpoons they'd brought; to tether the electrically-warmed rope—at Titan temperatures, rope didn't bend, it broke; to secure the rescue harness. Mercedes had pleaded to be the one to climb down, but he'd insisted. Her med telltales were still shading yellow intermittently.

The rover was about eight metres down, turned turtle and angled nose-downslope. Softened and sticky with tholins, snowdrift from the windblown haze.

“She’s fallen too far, and the terrain’s pretty treacherous, from appearances,” he judged. “I’d say it’s not going to be salvageable.” Which implied, also, that Frank’s body, pinned beneath the rover, was beyond retrieval.

Mats’s rope skills were rusty, to say the least. That wasn’t going to make opening the airlock any easier. He ran over various strategies for gaining entry, as he went hand-over-hand down the rope. But the airlock was open.

Joachim was sprawled awkwardly across the rover’s ceiling. His face was caught in a bared-teeth sneer, angled down towards the corner to which his helmet had rolled. His skin, though pale, was coloured naturally; it hadn’t had time yet to stain, to take on Titan’s unwholesome tints. A thin trail of some liquid—vomit? bile?—led down from his nostril and the corner of his mouth. Mats felt something gag in his throat—*this is neither the time nor the place for a solid cough*, he told himself—and picked up and reattached Joachim’s helmet. Then set about fastening Joachim’s body into the rescue harness. He tried not to think too closely about what he was doing.

The rover’s cabin had been fairly well sheltered from the force of the shitstorm, but even so. The lack of discoloration on Joachim’s skin sent a clear message as to how recently he’d made his decision.

No need for Mercedes to see that.

“Life support failure,” he told her through the radio. Listened to her breathing break up. Wanted to hold her, to say something that would help. Instead, he toggled the rescue harness’s auto-winch, pushed the body out through the airlock, watched as the rope took up the strain. In a grim mimicry of life, the harness jerked its slow way upward along the rope.

“There should be a cluster of storage beads in the data-locker,” Mercedes told him, her voice thick and brittle. “Frank wouldn’t want them left behind.”

“OK, got them,” he said, having stowed them in his suit’s utility pouch. “Merc, I think we’re done here.”

She didn’t answer all the time they were carrying Joachim back to the quad-ski. Around them, as the long Titanian afternoon wore on, the sky grew yet darker, more virulent.

They were back in the quad-ski, on the cargo trail in fact, before either of them spoke again.

“Frank say anything about *why* he thought his impact was aimed? Or by what?”

“He wasn’t sure. I mean, sixty-five million is a pretty long gulf to try to bridge, and I think he was wary of sounding foolish.”

“Even when preaching to the converted?”

“I didn’t exactly swallow his ideas hook-line-sinker, just a little more prepared to listen to them. But I think he thought it was all about blinkered viewpoints, competition, stuff like that. Von Neumann machines, maybe. Programmed by life which had arisen elsewhere, under conditions like Titan’s. I think his idea was, maybe earthlife, water-based biology, is a bit of a galactic fluke. If the rest of the Galaxy’s lifeforms are more like what you’d expect could come out of Titan, like what Frank thought *must’ve* arisen on Titan, like what Frank thought *must’ve* arisen on Titan—something purely hydrocarbon-based, or hydrocarbons and nitrogen compounds—then they could see other similar biospheres as a threat, taking the long view, whereas Earth would be Mostly Harmless, so to speak. Even with all its carnosours and the like. Not worth a really serious effort to sterilise.”

"That's a fairly long bow to draw," Mats replied. "On not a lot of evidence, from the sound of it."

"Frank *knew* that, Dad. He knew his ideas were outliers, was I think fully prepared for them to be shot down, but thought them important enough to put out there in the first place. Except I think the only person he really communicated them to, the only person he truly trusted with all of it, was Joachim."

"Huh. That's ..."

"Yeah. Dad."

"What?"

"I wanted to say. What really hurts, really sticks in my craw, is that it's all so random."

Valles Marineris. "You're right," he said, thought about enlarging on that, decided against it. Gave, instead, space for her—for both of them, really—to be alone with those thoughts. "Henna is going to be distraught," he said finally. Beside him, she nodded. They sat in silence awhile more.

"We will get back there," she announced. It wasn't a question. "Someday. Soon, when the weather's cleared. Properly equipped, not just with what the base can spare at the time. So we can check properly on Frank's hypothesis. Hopefully retrieve the rover, too."

"If you need to do it ... exorcising those demons, or whatever you want to call it ..."

"I know. Big girl now. It's not a question of *need*, Dad. It doesn't even matter if Frank was right or wrong, and I know you don't believe he was right. I don't really believe it myself. It's just the right thing to do. For my friend."

"The whole base is going to be in shock," Mats said. "Two out of twelve, gone like that." He strove to build a mental picture of the two men they'd lost. Realised he'd done the pair of them a disservice, by failing to truly

notice them on a day-to-day-basis. What was it Merc had said? Closed-off? Maybe so.

He pondered on the brutality of death in an environment more alien than anything his ancestors could ever have imagined. Reflected on decisions that might have been made. Catalogued his regrets, his losses.

Gave thanks that, eighteen years ago, he'd had the temerity to suggest that a Martian geological expedition's camp was no place for a four-year-old daughter to be staying.

There. That was something to keep hold of.

It wasn't all bad, the past.

Storm in a T-Suit was first published in 2010, in *Aurealis* issue 44 (ed. Stuart Mayne, Chimaera Publications).

@Bearhouse

"Someone's been eating my porridge."

"Someone's been eating *my* porridge."

"Someone's been eating MY porridge," said the smallest bear, stirring with his spoon, "and they—oh *gross*, is that an eyeball?"

They went through to the lounge.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair," huffed the father.

"Someone's been sitting in *my* chair," said the mother.

"Someone's been sitting in MY chair—and um, yuck, what's with the smelly green stuff?"

They followed a visceral trail upstairs to the bedroom.

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed."

"Someone's been sleeping in *my* bed."

"Someone's been sleeping in MY bed, and—"

The little dead girl awoke, saw the bears looming, and screamed. She leapt from the sheets, raced downstairs, and ran from the dwelling as fast as her decaying legs would carry her.

And Moldilocks never went near the house of the three bears, ever again.

@Bearhouse was first published in 2010, on my blog (simonpetrie.wordpress.com)

needs more dinosaurs—a **Simon Petrie sampler**

Three-Horned Dilemma

David assembled the breakfast of least resistance—cereal and milk—and carried the bowl to the table where the newspaper lay folded open at the *sudoku du jour*. He was just taking his seat when the commotion began. He looked up and stared out the back window.

Could his eyes be deceiving him? Was that an *elephant* loose in his backyard?

His eyes *were* deceiving him. It was a triceratops.

He watched in stunned fascination as the beast, like an animated Abrams tank, demolished a sundial, a birdbath and a small lemon tree before rounding on the pergola.

Transfixed, he forgot the details of his morning routine.

David had defended his backyard against mynahs, bamboo, Argentine ants and canine diarrhoea, but *this* left him feeling completely outgunned. There was Taking It to the Next Level, and there was Game Over. *This* was Game Over.

He gazed around the kitchen, hoping to find some implement equal to the task of dealing with the huge beast, knowing no such implement existed. The best thing he could think of was the forklift, but that was down at the shop. He wasn't at the shop.

David checked his watch. He was running late. He should head in to work ... but he couldn't just leave this—this one-beast rugby scrum running loose on his property. He had to get rid of it somehow.

Maybe if he just left it alone, it would leave by the way it came in; except he couldn't see any way that it

could have come in. His fences were, for the moment, intact, and he certainly didn't think it had flown here. Not to worry. Once it decided it wanted to leave, the fence wasn't going to put up much resistance. The wreckage of the pergola attested to *that*.

He called his boss, Joe, at Mulliken Tyre.

"Hi, Joe, gonna be a bit late getting in today. Bit of a crisis with the ... uh, plumbing."

"Look, okay, things're a bit slack anyhow, just make sure you're in by twelve. You manage that OK?"

"Yeah, think so. Thanks, mate."

"Hey, you having renovations done? That racket, can hardly hear—"

"Nah, just neighbours, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Students. Bastards. Crap taste in music."

The smell of smoke from the stovetop caught his attention. The kettle was boiling dry, and he hadn't even *heard* it. That thing in the backyard was *loud*, like an elephant that had swallowed a Pratt & Whitney. Or like a tape-loop of the call of a sulfur-crested cockatoo, amplified to the point of feedback.

How much punishment was the cinder-block garage wall able to withstand?

He phoned the wildlife rangers. While waiting to get through to a thinking lifeform, he ran through the options. *Don't call it a triceratops, they'll think you're mental ...*

"Hello? Listen, I gotta problem with a—a frill-neck lizard in my backyard."

"Frill-necked? You sure? Don't normally get those this far south."

"Yeh, I know. But this one is."

"Look, no worries. I'm just on another callout right now, but I can have the ute there in say fifteen minutes ..."

"Uh—look, I don't think a ute is gonna be big enough. You got anything bigger?"

"Well, there's the minivan, but ... hang on, how big is this lizard?"

"Pretty big—maybe like a black rhino? Strapped on to a hippopotamus?"

"You been drinking, mate?"

"No, but look, honest, there's this thing in my backyard and—"

"Big as a hippo?"

"No, bit bigger, but ..."

"Look, call the bloody circus, mate. We only do *real* wildlife." The phone went dead.

The beast seemed to have decided that it could not escape. Oddly, it hadn't tried to test the strength of the metal panelling of the back fence. There were, however, plenty of objects in the back yard that hadn't fared so well: the barbecue, the outdoor tap, the garden bench ... As he watched, the triceratops overpowered the rotary clothesline.

He'd never really liked that shirt anyway.

He tried another phone call, to his insurance company. Anonymously. This proved remarkably unhelpful.

Act of God? How could a bloody triceratops in his backyard be a bloody act of God? He obviously needed to look at changing policies ... There was another crash from outside. One of the verandah supports.

Of course, if he was a *real* bloke he'd go out there himself. Find some way to dispatch the beast with a rake or a golfclub, or at least outwit it into crashing through into someone else's garden. The students nextdoor, for instance. But those horns looked wicked. It'd be like taking on a demonically possessed bulldozer.

It occurred to him, watching the dun-coloured monstrosity in action, that it would probably have viewed the forklift as a challenger. Or a potential mate. And he knew which would come off worse, either way.

So what could he do? He reheated some leftover pizza for morning tea, while he pondered the question. The internet, maybe there was something he could look up there to help.

But the internet, it appeared, knew less about triceratops and how to deal with them than he did. Probably no-one else alive knew that triceratops would eat treated pine decking, or that grass gave them diarrhoea, or that a triceratops would charge at its reflection (the ornamental outdoor mirror had been an early casualty). And certainly no-one else would have even attempted to describe that *smell* ...

He was about to give up, when he noticed one of those ads to which the search engines give prominence. "Any question answered," it read. "Literally, we mean. Absolutely any question. Try us. No charge, no obligation." There was an email address. David clicked, and wrote in the new window "How do I get rid of a real live full-sized triceratops in my back garden?" Then he sent. At this point, anything was worth a try.

There was a knock at the door. The back door.

David, more bewildered than ever, opened the door just long enough for a man in delivery-service garb—navy overalls, peaked cap—to step across the threshold. The overalls bore the legend 'MysteriousWays'R'Us'.

"You gotta problem, Dave?" the stranger asked. He was overdue an appointment with a razor.

David didn't remember offering his name. "Who—"

"Sorry, forgot the niceties. Bit busy these days, new system and all that. Gabe. From Heavensent."

"Uh—"

"Anyway, what seems to be the problem?"

"Problem? I gotta a twelve-ton walking *wrecking ball* turning my backyard into a battleground, and you ask me what's the *problem*?"

“Wrecking ball?” Gabe turned around and looked out. “Oh, that. Don’t see many of those around nowadays.”

“That suited me *fine*,” David responded. “Until today.”

“What, you don’t want it? I can recall it, if you’d like.”

“Whaddaya mean, recall? Never mind, just do it. Please. That’d be great. If you can.”

“No problem. All part of the service. I just gotta make a coupla calls, sort out how this happened.” Gabe pulled a small gadget, not quite like a mobile phone, out of his breast pocket. He spoke into it. “Hi, Rafe? Gabe here. Gotta bit of a problem at 17 Elmway Crescent. Canberra. Yeah, Australia. Earth. Look, can you tell me what was flagged for delivery there? ‘Cos this doesn’t seem right. Yeah, I can wait.” He turned to David and explained, “Won’t be a minute, Rafe’s just checking with Mike in Central. I’m pretty sure this is all just a mistake. Soon have you sorted.”

David hoped so. The beast was making serious progress on the garage wall.

Gabe chuckled into his device. “Yeah, that’s what I said too. Thanks Rafe. Owe ya.” He turned to David again. “Yeah, just a little slip-up. Sorry about all this. Been having all sorts of problems like this since they installed the new system. Well, not like this exactly, but you get my drift. Quite funny really. They were supposed to put through a CTX8654341908 for you, but instead it got processed as a TCX8654341908, just a simple transposition error. Thing is, though, the TCX8654341908—that’s our friend out there, with the horns and the bad attitude—is supposed to be a deprecated code, which is why it got missed by the system check-filters. Hence we didn’t pick it up straight away, like we should’ve done. Not to worry, they’ll correct it any minute now. So I’ll just—”

“Wait. You’re saying that triceratops out there is a TCX-something-or-other? How? What? I only got it by mistake?”

“Yeah, that’s right. They’re actually extinct, you know ...”

“Not extinct *enough*. But, what’s this CTX-thingy? That’s what I’m supposed to have got instead?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s just the product code. Like, you know, a GDT98653747 would be identical twins, JHL1548258319 is a second-division win in the lottery, and so on. Heaps of the things, a bit difficult to keep them all in your head some days. New system’s supposed to streamline things, make it all flow smoother. ‘Cept we keep getting these little glitches. Keeps the job interesting, I suppose.”

“Yes, but what’s the CTX-whatever? The one I’m getting?”

“8654341908? That’s the funny thing. Massive coronary. Ah, here we go now.”

The triceratops, and its associated noises, vanished in a flashless instant. The smell lingered.

“Be seeing ya,” Gabe offered, and reconsidered. “Well, maybe not.” He disappeared.

The CTX8654341908 came through, an irresistible oppressive surge in his chest. David’s final thought was that the insurance company had perhaps, for once, been correct in its assessment.

Three-Horned Dilemma was first published in 2007, in *Yog’s Notebook* issue 2 (eds. Audrey Eschright & Lucas Grzybowski). It appears also in my collection *Rare Unsigned Copy: tales of Rocketry, Ineptitude, and Giant Mutant Vegetables* (ed. Edwina Harvey, Peggy Bright Books, 2010).

About the Author

Simon Petrie was born and raised on the South Island of New Zealand, and now resides in Canberra, Australia. Since 2006, he has written over 80 published short stories. His fiction has appeared in markets such as *Redstone SF*, *Murky Depths*, *Sybil's Garage*, and *the Annals of Improbable Research*, and much of it has been collected in three e-books released by Peggy Bright Books (and edited by Edwina Harvey): *Rare Unsigned Copy: tales of Rocketry, Ineptitude, and Giant Mutant Vegetables* (2010), *Flight 404* (2012), and *The Gordon Mamon Casebook* (2012).

Simon is a member of the Andromeda Spaceways publishing collective, the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild, and SpecFicNZ. He is currently on his fourth stint as an Aurealis Award judge. His sporadically-updated blog can be found at simonpetrie.wordpress.com.

Simon has twice won NZ's Sir Julius Vogel Award: in 2010 for Best New Talent, and in 2013 for Best Novella (*Flight 404*). His story 'Dark Rendezvous' featured in 'Year's Best' lists for 2010, and in 2011 he scored a coveted Dishonourable Mention in the Bulwer-Lytton Awards.

The three elements central to his writing style are scientific detail, humour, and the Oxford comma.

Also available, by Simon Petrie

Rare Unsigned Copy *tales of Rocketry, Ineptitude, and* *Giant Mutant Vegetables*

A collection of short speculative fiction dealing with overpossessive robots, anachronistic ham sandwiches, repetitive alien invasion strain injuries, and almost everything in between, in a heady mix of the serious and the absurd.

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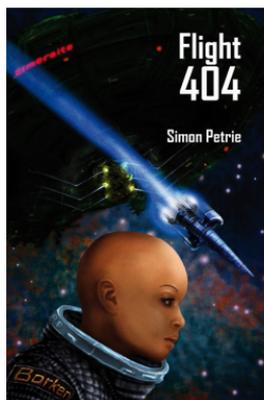
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