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[“Evensong, Having Been Answered,” by Dean Wells](#)

[“Sweetwater Notion and the Hallelujah Kid,” by
K.C. Ball](#)

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EVENSONG, HAVING BEEN ANSWERED

by Dean Wells

The slashes in his wrists are still vivid and bone-deep. He bled out long ago, or so it seems; naked in his loft with an empty bottle of single malt and the Plough-Jags haunting the speaker-horn of his phonograph....

Willem descends the twisting stone alleys of Mullish Town slowly and with profound effort, carrying the weight of the World in a mandolin case of worn brown leather and a carpet bag slung over his shoulder. The Sun has only now begun to rise; rusty squawks of spring-driven shorebirds call down from the winter sky, crabs of clockwork and brass scuttle from his path.

...his life pulsing away in silent rhythm with notes culled reverently from his mandolin.

A cannery at the water's edge looms before him, the hinges of its great iron doors etched in frost. At the quay a ketch is outfitted for personal use, gear-and-flywheel riggings made ready for departure, "The Mighty Steam Kings" painted in bold industrial script across the stern. (A barbed reminder, that; the Gods of Time and Engines are nothing if not ironic in their

manipulation of possibilities.) Dockers and road-hands hustle about, most of them indentured from the poorer Aspects of Her Eternal Majesty's Aetheric Possessions.

Willem looks up the impossibly tall stoop to the cannery doors and feels every prayer and harmony he'd ever devised collapse under the weight of the mandolin. The scene is etched in his memory and repeats again and again, never resolved, like a phonographic needle trapped in a scratch. The "difference boy", as he was known by very few, whose musical gifts and equations transcended his mortal heritage and drew upon the apotheosis itself; the transformation of flesh and spirit to mechanized immortality. Harmony elevated from numbers: the binary form of Lord Babbage's numbered punch cards (the very precursor to Mechanical Thought) transformed into an opus of diatonic purity. Each note a fragment of the Pattern-That-Is, infinitely becoming...

...never resolved.

All of this has been conjured for his benefit, of course, to show him yet again what he has been denied. The Lords-Mechanical do not perceive Creation as do mortal Men; even those mortals who have passed beyond the veil. There is neither a future nor past, just the never-ending Now (here in this nexus through which all potential outcomes flow), and Willem is swept along like flotsam in a Great Ship's wake. He

stops, the cold of northern climes stabbing through the illusory hobnails of his shoes.

Dying's a bitch, mate. I don't recommend her company.

“Oy, Wills. You coming up or not?”

Willem peers through icy fog that's rolled in from the sea. Hugo sits at the top of the stoop, plucking arbitrary notes on the cittern balanced on his motorized thigh. A pipe of gnarled briarwood dangles from the side of his mouth.

Willem stares. “You aren't supposed to be here,” he says, taking in the incongruity of the moment. Indeed, Hugo has never been present at this juncture in the iteration, not in any of its endless repetitions. Yet another variation, this, on the theme of their passing.

Hugo shrugs, rich amber light from streetlamps still lit glinting off the industrial lenses affixed to where his eyes had once been. The paving beneath the stoop is littered with an empty tin and ash from Hugo's customary blend. He's been there a long while. “Damnedest thing, innit? Then again, mate, you aren't supposed to be here either.”

He bled out long ago, or so it seems...

Willem sets his bundles down, and the walkway threatens to crumble under the overpowering weight. “I have to do this, Hugo.”

“Let her go, Wills. Let all of it go.” Hugo waves a hand at the village that’s crowded round its small harbor, ancient stone houses stacked vertically up the slopes out of centuries-old necessity. In truth, Mull and the isles of Innes Gull are not islands in the optimal sense at all so much as rocks and the jagged peaks of mountains thrusting high above the waters of the West Scotian Sea. Poor in resources save for whale oil and cod, the Galls and every soul who inhabited them had all but been forgotten by the Machines of the Queen’s Instrumentality when they remade Creation in Her Most Perfect Image. “You belong somewhere else.”

...in the company of equally-gifted players, on a tour that was set to depart for Whitehall in scarcely a fortnight.

“I can’t leave her.”

“Bullshite. She left you.”

“Callie is dead, Hugo. The Jags are dead. Everyone aboard that godforsaken wreck is *dead*. I should have been there.”

“Cor, spare me the insufferable monotony of your perpetual self-flagellation. I’ll surely weep.” Hugo sets his instrument down and hops off the stoop, soot-blackened ice crunching beneath his motorized underpinnings (legs and eyes having been lost to a Luddite’s bomb in Whitehall, outside the Cathedral of Pistons). “Kit held you back, Willem. It was yourself who bound the lot of us together, not him.”

“The structure was more important than me,” Willem says. “Melodic order was more important than me. Perfection was more important. And Callie....” His voice diminishes, allowing Hugo to finish the thread.

“...and Callie was more important than everything.”

I know.... I've always known.

The Plough-Jags had been Kit's passion from the beginning, holding court upon the stage, as was his want, with a mechanized keyboard that belched sparks and shattered vacuum tubes more often than it produced a coherent tune. Hugo maintaining rhythm on the cittern, the diminutive automaton Lug on steam-fiddle, Calandre Leigh Goff on tambour and the bodhran. “Callie from Gallie” she would playfully say, and they'd smile every time.

But it was Willem alone on his grandfather's mandolin (handcrafted in the Before Time, or so had been claimed) who raised the modest quintet to a higher level of complexity with his intricate chordal structures and mathematical progressions. Yet there he remained, unnoticed, unseen, from one smoke-filled dance hall and tavern to the next, subtly informing his harmonies with the fundamental equations of the Lords-Mechanical (the unspoken language of the Gods of Time and Engines) while everyone's eyes were on everyone else but him.

...swept along like flotsam in a Great Ship's wake.

Until a break one eve at the Wind-Up Lass, when members of the Steam Kings approached Willem with an invitation worthy of his talents: join them—and at long last his rightful place in the company of equally gifted players—as they readied for their seasonal tour to Whitehall, then on through the Great Mirror to perform in the very Aspects themselves.

Chaotic memories vie for dominance now, flickering as if from a kinoscope: a revel on Gondalsay that Kit insisted the Plough-Jags attend, despite a worrisome squall forming over the Minch; Willem bowing out in secret to meet with his new fellows; sirens and steam-bells from the lighthouse on Storn; a boat torn to splinters in the perilous Na Torrain, the Rocks of Murmuring Thunder.

Everyone dead....

I should have been there....

“I should have been there,” Willem says again, the cobbles threatening to rush up and smite him in the face. “I owed every one of you the truth. Kit above all.”

“Bollocks.”

“No, he was a right bloody prig half the time, but he took us in when no one else would. I was always grateful for that.”

“So was she.”

Hugo’s meaning stings, and Willem’s eyes have already brimmed full with tears.

“Go to Hell.”

“She was pleasuring him when she died, Wills. You know that’s true.”

“Go to Hell!”

“Lug and I in the pilot-house arguing the merits of Instrumental Enlightenment, Callie below deck with Kit and no desire to be disturbed. The squall we’d ignored blows in from the east. The boat lists crosswise as the first of three rogues is upon us. Before its waters can drain away the second wave hits. We break deep—the weight of the tide is go great—and the third slams what’s left of us into the Rocks. It’s over in an instant.” Hugo turns and gazes over the post-Instrumental gloom round about them and the malevolent tides beyond, then sparks his pipe aflame again. “Dying’s a bitch, mate. I don’t recommend her company.”

And then Hugo (a ghost, a clockwork revenant, an arbiter from the Lords-Mechanical; who can honestly say in this place neither here nor there?) looks back at Willem with profound understanding.

“I’m not sharing anything you don’t already know.”

Willem nods in tiny fits and starts, his eyes tightly shut, and tries to breathe. The winter air tastes like coffin nails and rust.

“I know.... I’ve always known.” He wipes his nose on his coat sleeve. Something is different this time, he senses with unwarranted certainty, or at the very least has the potential of becoming so. Not another variation on the same tired theme but something significant; something profound. He can almost feel the turning of Creation on its great herculean gears.

“So why am I here?” asks Hugo. “This is your grand bloody epiphany, not mine.”

“I never said goodbye,” Willem answers, accepting the truth at long last even as his tears continue to fall. “Not to you, not to her. I never told her anything.” He watches the morning Sun continue its climb up the great arc of its rails. “I don’t know, perhaps the life I needed to make peace with the most was my own.”

Something is different....

The iterations of his death resound about him like the echoes of a suspended chord. All seems as it was and should continue to be, here in the moving present Men perceive as Time: the all-consuming anguish, a scullery knife, bleeding out alone with the final notes from his mandolin. An evening prayer and offering, the last of both, sung from the “difference boy” to Gods whom he desperately needed to save him from drowning in the black depths of regret.

But Time is ruled by probabilities, and the Gods delight in games of chance.

Probabilities. He observes them all—the infinite from every point in Space, the eternal from every point in Time—the echo of the Self occupying every possible outcome at once.

And in every one, Willem kills himself *for* himself; for his guilt, for his anger, for his self-pity and remorse...

...spare me the monotony of your perpetual self-flagellation.

He sees it now for the first time. Something is different, deep within the structure of possibilities. An iteration Willem has never anticipated. The entirety of potential outcomes hones to a single note of perfect clarity, sung from the “difference boy” to Gods whom he desperately needed to hear him. Not for his own sake, no. Not for immortality. Not for himself at all, Willem realizes, but for *her*.

I can offer my song for her.

And with that, the mighty gear-trains that govern the never-ending Now shift, the chord resolves, and a new Now stands in its place.

A resolution earned, at long last.

“You’re set upon this, then?” asks Hugo, his voice sounding as if from a great distance.

Willem nods, absently tugging his coat sleeves over the smooth unbroken flesh of his wrists. He can feel it, something new, here in this moment between downbeats where Time is not encouraged to pass. But hadn't it always been thus? He can't remember now; the isle of Mull and the rock-littered seas beyond its harbor are already starting to fade, dockside clamor muffled by the cold magicks of iron and stone. He nods again, turning his collar to the damp, and looks down upon his worn shoes. "I'll miss you, Tin Man," he says, embarrassment stealing unexpectedly into the intimacy of the moment.

I never said goodbye....

But Hugo is no longer there.

"Oy, Wills. You coming up or not?"

Willem peers through icy fog that's rolled in from the sea. Callie stands at the top of the stoop, the blue-white light of electricks streaming through a mighty doorway finally open; the alchemic light of Heaven's Great Engines. She smiles, regret and hope offered to him in newly mechanized eyes.

...and Callie was more important than everything.

"Aye," he says, smiling as well, and he wipes the last of the tears from his face. "I'll be right there."

Willem picks up his mandolin case as if it weighs nothing at all.

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Dean Wells's short fiction has appeared in Ideomancer, Eldritch Tales, ShadowKeep Magazine, 10Flash Quarterly, and The Nocturnal Lyric, as well as multiple times in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, and he is a member of SFWA. Visit him online at www.darkapostle.net.

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SWEETWATER NOTION AND THE HALLELUJAH KID

by K.C. Ball

I came upon the Hallelujah Kid in Goodkind Square, two days before Teddy Roosevelt set foot on the Moon.

The Kid had claimed a wrought-iron bench that offered him an unobstructed view of folks just off the daily shuttle up from Earth. He sat still as a statue, all slicked up in one of those green-plaid suits he favored. The brim of his bowler lay just above his brow to shade his eyes against the sunlight streaming through the dome's dutch-glass panels three-hundred feet above our heads. A passerby who didn't know him as well as I did might figure him asleep.

I eased onto the bench and cleared my throat. "Hello, Kid."

"Howdy, Jack." He dipped his chin but didn't turn his head.

"Seen the manifest?"

Without a word, he pulled a sheet of paper from his jacket and offered it for my inspection. I didn't tell him I had a copy folded in my pocket.

I made as if to read the list. “Got someone particular in mind?”

He pushed up his bowler with his thumb. “Maybe. I’ll know for sure when I see ‘em.”

My interest in new arrivals to Tycho City was professional. I wrote for *The Columbian*, the local daily rag. They billed me as **Jack London, Everyman**, and ran my columns front-page every weekday, with a half-page spread in the Sunday rotogravure section. I hoped to prise a story from one of the new arrivals. Comedy, drama, or true romance. It didn’t matter, as long as it ran twenty inches.

As to the Kid, I figured he was setting up some scheme. I knew he didn’t give a hoot in hell about romance. We had been friends since I arrived on the Moon two years before, and I would have sworn in court a greenback dollar was the only thing that piqued his interest.

Turned out I was wrong.

* * *

Around our bench, Goodkind Square sounded like the Plain of Shinar the day God came down to Babel. Japanese. Russian. High and low German. Chinese. A multitude of tongues all flavored by a dozen Yankee dialects.

It had the look and smell and sound of a world exposition, and little wonder. Over the next week, Tycho City, the Moon’s

first permanent and largest settlement, would not only celebrate its golden jubilee but also witness the inauguration of Teddy Roosevelt as President of these United States.

Someone shouted, "There she is!"

Set against a dark-velvet backdrop of unwinking stars, the flagship of Wells Fargo's fleet hove into view. *E.G.S. John Butterfield*, a blunt-ended tube big as a railroad car, had the firm's horse-and-rider marker painted on its sides.

The ship bristled with the first of Professor Goodkind's inventions. His big money-maker. Those ten electro-gravitatic differential disks were big as manhole covers and set on rigid masts spaced evenly around the tapered hull. The ten disks glistened as if coated in quicksilver and their under-bellies pulsed, each warping independently to modify gravity, as the pilots maneuvered toward the docking bay.

Thirty minutes later, the first passengers appeared at the customs gate. A handsome dark-haired woman dressed in burgundy walked among them, her tailored skirts drawn tight about her limbs. The broad circle of her hat brim might as well have been a halo.

For an instant, I forgot to breathe.

Most folks bounced and wobbled, their first hours on the Moon, but this woman slid along as if she were on rails. It came to me: she had been on the Moon before.

“Will you look at that?” I said.

I leaned closer to the Kid, intending to introduce my elbow to his ribs. He wasn't there; had covered half the distance to the customs gate without my noticing. As I followed, I couldn't help but shake my head. The Kid might have been the tall and gangly sort, but he had an elegance of movement about him contrary to his looks.

“Hello, Sweetwater,” I heard him say, as I caught up.

“Hello, George.”

George? That was news to me, but then the Kid always held his cards close to his gaudy plaid vests. He caught her gloved hand in one of his big mitts and lifted it to press his lips against her knuckles. For a moment, I swear I saw a touch of mischief in her smile.

I stepped next to the Kid and cleared my throat. He glanced sideways at me and dipped his chin.

“Miss Sweetwater Notion,” he said, sounding very formal. “This here's Jack London, my good and trusted friend.”

I tipped my hat. “Pleased to meet you, ma'am.”

“Likewise, I'm sure, Mr. London.

“May I say that you are lovely?”

Her smile widened, her cheeks pinked, and her violet eyes grew wide. If she had been a lesser woman, I might have

doubted her reaction; but when she spoke, she sounded like an angel.

“It was kind of you and George to be here to welcome me,” she said. “However did you know I would be on this flight?”

The Kid drew himself up to his considerable full height and gazed down upon her. His voice broke for an instant as he spoke. “I... saw the name on the manifest, but wasn’t certain it was you. You said you were never coming back.”

She offered a finely tuned half-shrug. “Things change. We were presented with an unexpected opportunity.”

The Kid leaned back a bit. “*We?*”

“Who might this troublemaker be?” A tall man of early middle years stepped into place beside Sweetwater. He was near a match for the Kid in height and build. All done up in a finely tailored suit. Silken blond hair flowed loose to his shoulders, and he wore a waxed moustache and goatee.

He gripped Sweetwater’s elbow as if he owned her; she winced and jerked away. He paid no heed to that as he examined the Kid, for all the world as if he suspected my friend might be a Texas cockroach.

“Who is this man?” he asked.

“George Clayton Moore,” Sweetwater said. “An acquaintance from the time I lived here. George, this is Alexander Tanner. Alex is my husband.”

The Kid didn't even hesitate. I had to give him marks for that. He said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Tanner."

Tanner ignored the offered handshake. "Mr. Moore, I advise you not to cause a scene. We do not require your services."

The Kid's hand almost became a fist. Almost. He withdrew it before that happened. "I don't recall saying I was available," he said. "At least not to *you*."

I had seen Tanner's grin before on wolves. "Nonetheless, you have had my answer."

I rested my hand on the big-bore, double-barreled derringer I kept tucked in a leather-lined vest pocket. "I'm right beside you, Kid," I murmured, at his side.

Tanner glanced at me. "Here, Elijah," he called.

"Trouble, Alex?" The voice of the man who moved up behind Tanner reminded me of the rumble of a New York City subway train. The fellow stood all of seven feet and looked strong enough to break a horse in half. I had been in a fight or two, knew how to work the gun, my fists and feet. Even so, I changed my mind about a scuffle.

When I fight, I like think I have a chance to win.

"No trouble," Tanner said, his eyes still on the Kid. "Just setting a rascal in his place."

The Kid shrugged and stepped aside. “If that’s the way you want to run the string.”

“There’s no need—” Sweetwater began.

Tanner pushed on her elbow; interrupting. “We’ll be moving on now.”

She pushed back, then saw me watching and hid her frown. She dipped her chin in acknowledgement and swept by like an Oriental princess right off the stage of a British operetta. The two men followed. I felt the heat of the big man’s passing; caught his thick scent. Bay Rum, laced with something else. Gun oil, maybe.

Tanner handed the woman up into a floater carriage, then he followed. As the big man climbed in, the floater tilted—with a nasty hiss—then settled level, its dinner-plate-sized Goodkind disks pressed almost to the regolith. The crowd parted to give the operator room. He headed east, toward the main dome.

“Who was that?” I asked.

No response. The Kid stood rigid, watching the floater disappear. He spun his hat in his hands as if it were a valve on a pressure line. One way and the other, round and round.

“Kid?”

“She’s an old friend,” he rasped.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Later. Right now I need a drink.”

“All right,” I allowed. “I wouldn’t mind a drink myself.”

* * *

Faraday’s Saloon stood near the dome-six pressure gate, so regulars wouldn’t have too far to go. Most of them were miners, who liked to throw back a pint or two after work, to wash the taste of talc out of their throats.

We sat at the bar, not talking, just sipping whiskey. Up on a little stage near the door, a gaggle of the joint’s good-time girls sang ragtime as Tommy Faraday pounded out the tunes on an old Cable-Nelson upright.

Shift-one miners crowded around most of the tables. They had brought their work along with them. A thin film of greenish-white powder lay upon their clothing and made their faces shine. The sweet scent of talcum almost hid the stink of wet sawdust, fried onions, and stale beer.

The Kid toyed with his drink, pushing the half-empty glass of Bushmill’s along the polished bar top. In the Moon’s gravity, it slid from his left hand as if it were on ice. Then he scooped it up and finished the whiskey in one swallow.

“Had about enough?” I asked.

The Kid fished a Morgan dollar from his vest. It spun and wobbled when it hit the bar.

“Two more, Ike,” he called to the barkeep.

He turned to me and grinned. His teeth glowed in the cold light of the Tesla excited-gas tubes Tommy favored.

“That’s enough to keep me going,” he said. “How about you, Jack?”

“I’m not finished with the last one yet.”

“Well, hell. You’re not keeping up.”

“Tell me about the woman.”

He looked at me owl-eyed, pretending, I expect, that he was drunker than he really was. “What woman?”

“No more baloney, Kid. Tell me about Sweetwater.”

“You don’t want to hear about her.”

“Yes, I do. If I was a cat, I’d be close to dead.”

The Kid laughed. “I like you, Jack. I swear, first time we met I liked you, even if you ain’t much more than a child.”

“I’m twenty-nine years old.”

Ike delivered the Kid’s whiskeys. The Kid knocked back the first one straight off. “Don’t matter,” he said. “I can talk to you because we’re friends. We’re friends, ain’t we?”

“We are.”

“All right. You ever been in love?”

“I have,” I said.

“Ever been married?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Four years.” I didn’t say I had liked Bessie well enough, but never really loved her. I suspect she hadn’t loved me, either.

I took another sip of whiskey. “She lives in California now, with our two daughters.”

“At least you had a chance. I never did.”

“Tell me.”

He drained half the second glass before he said another word. “I met Sweetwater right after her family’d come to Tycho City. I was twenty-four; she was nineteen. We fell in love.”

He took a sip of whiskey. “Imagine; me in love. She was smart. Funny. A mind of her own. Stood up to me, stood up to her banker daddy, too. She wanted an education, Jack. Always had some book around. She read Mark Twain. Thoreau. A German gent named Engels.”

“*The Condition of the Working Class?*”

That’s the one.” He chuckled. “I remember she said once Goodkind should be arrested for how he treated the working class.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Her daddy never liked me. Not a lick. He pulled a scam on me. *On me*. Made me look like nothing but a two-bit flim-flam man. Somehow he convinced her all I wanted was his money.”

“Did you try to tell her the truth?”

“She wouldn’t hear a word from me. Took a shuttle back to Earth and didn’t even say goodbye. That was twenty years ago, and I ain’t heard a word from her since.”

“I’m sorry.”

He finished off the second glass. “Me, too. Figured I was shut with her, but it ain’t so.”

When he faced me, he fought to hold back tears. “Damn it, Jack, I still love her. What am I to do?”

I had to say I didn’t know. I hadn’t had much better luck myself.

* * *

Next morning came too early.

When I got to *The Columbian* newsroom, a broadsheet lay spread across my desk. The gaudy piece of work didn’t do a thing but aggravate the headache I had brought with me.

It touted *The Amazing Tanners*, a trapeze act, for God’s sake, and showed a color-tinted photograph of Tanner, Elijah, and Sweetwater. The three of them were wearing red-white-and-blue spangled tights. The getup looked best on Sweetwater. I had to wonder where they found enough material to cover Elijah and what kept it from tearing any time he moved.

“London!” Borden shouted. “Get your sorry ass in here.”

Miller Borden, our city editor, maintained a first-name relationship with the entire staff but persisted in addressing me by my family name. Who knows why some men get resentful? I swear I hardly said an unkind word about the man or his inability to write a decent sentence.

Be that as it may, I returned his surliness with as much indifference as I could muster. The resulting tension seemed to suit the both of us. I studied the broadsheet for a time; his shouts grew louder and more furious. Finally, I ambled to his office.

“You find that poster?” he demanded, without preamble.

“I did. It’s on the gaudy side.”

“I don’t pay you for art criticism, London. I want twenty inches on the trapeze act for Sunday.”

“The hell you say.”

His jowls began to flush. “The hell I do say.”

“I figured to do a full column on the president, with a couple sidebars. Something with more substance than a circus act.”

“I’m the goddam editor. I’ll tell you what to write.”

“And I’m to write about two grown men in spangled tights,” I said.

“You are. They’re set up at the Palace.”

“Damn it, Borden, why are you giving it to me?”

The evil bastard grinned. “I figured you were our expert at working in high places. You rode the police hopper, didn’t you?”

“That don’t mean—”

He waved away my protest. “Besides, you’ve been requested. That pretty wife of Tanner’s asked for you. Go on; get out of here. You’re wasting time. I got you the run of the theater today and tomorrow. Take a photographer along.”

“I know how to work a camera.”

“Good for you,” he said. “Take a camera monkey, anyway. I want twenty inches and three photographs by Friday midnight, and make damned sure one includes the girl.”

I made it halfway to my desk before he shouted at my back.

“Hey, London!”

“Yeah?” I didn’t look around.

“That bum you call a friend—”

“What? You mean the Kid?”

“Yeah. He landed his sorry ass behind bars again.”

I cursed myself for abandoning the Kid at Faraday’s. He had been in no shape to be alone. Borden had closed his office door. I ducked into the darkroom. No one was there, so I snatched up a camera bag, and headed for the jail.

* * *

Tycho City is laid out beneath a main dome and five lesser ones. The main dome only tapers to the regolith at one end. The other end butts flat against the high east rim of Tycho Crater.

Professor John Roswell Goodkind had carved out his company headquarters and personal residence there, one thousand feet above the crater floor, and installed a lot of windows. A fine spot, I suppose, to look out across a kingdom.

The five lesser domes fan out like the outstretched fingers of a hand, each joined to the main dome by a tunnel that can be closed off by two pressure gates. The jail is in dome five, set in among warehouses, repair garages and equipment shops.

“I’m here to see the Kid,” I told the booking sergeant.

“He ain’t here,” the sergeant said.

There was a new Edison acoustical handset on his desk. “Mind if I use that?” I asked.

“Help yourself.”

The Pole picked up on the second ring. “Central Division. Lieutenant Rybarczyk speaking.”

I held the receiver inches from my ear. The Pole shouted, the way most folks did when they first used Edison’s new device, but his normal tone was as loud as anybody else’s shout.

“Hey, Pole,” I said. “It’s Jack.”

“Course it is,” he said. “Who else would call me on one of these god-forsaken gadgets but a newshound.”

“I’m glad to hear your voice, too.”

“What’cha you want, London? I’m a busy man.”

The Pole called me by my last name, too, but not because he didn’t care for me. He liked to play the rough-and-tumble game. He was a good man, though, so I let him get away with it.

“I’m looking for the Kid,” I said. “Somebody told me he’s in jail, but he’s not here.”

“Planning to spring him?”

“I thought about it.”

The Pole laughed; my hand set rattled. “Should’a called me first, saved yourself a trip out there to five.”

“Oh?”

“He was here at Central for a spell, something about a dust-up at Faraday’s. Tommy never showed to file charges, though, so we held him ‘til he sobered up and let him go.”

“When?”

“Couple hours. Didn’t want to leave. Said he needed time to think.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, Pole. I know where to look.”

* * *

I'd told the Pole I knew where the Kid was, and I found him there, sitting on the wrought-iron bench in Goodkind Square.

"I've been trying to find you, Kid." I settled next to him.

He didn't look at me. "I've been right here."

"I see."

"I been thinking, Jack," he said.

"About Sweetwater?"

"What else?" He took off his hat and brushed at the brim as he spoke. "You ever hear why folks call me the Hallelujah Kid?"

"Not that I recall."

"She's the one who hung it on me. One night, not long after we met, she and I went out to eat. I was dead-set in love with her by then. Couldn't say no to her. So when she asked to see where working people ate, I took her to Tommy Faraday's.

"So we're halfway through our steaks. I'm telling her how my mama and papa died of the Yellow Fever, when the Pole shows up. Just settles at the table, unannounced and uninvited."

"He's done that to me a time or two."

"So you know how he is. He takes over the conversation; tells Sweetwater if he hadn't kept a thumb on me I would'a been more than a petty grifter, I would'a been a crook and a

three-time loser. Then he says, ‘Did George tell you his daddy was a preacher? George was a preacher, too. A preacher *boy*.’

“She looked at me and giggled. I remember thinking, *God, don’t let this ever end*. The Pole said, ‘George was all of six, but he knew his Bible verses and he could talk a mile a minute, so his daddy let him preach. Now and then, he’d come up for air and yell, ‘Can I hear a Hallelujah?’ Folks loved him then; would’a done anything he asked. It’s still that way.’”

The Kid sighed. “Sweetwater looked at me and clapped her hands. She said, ‘Why you’re a hero of the people, George. Like Robin Hood. We’ll call you the Hallelujah Kid.’”

“That was twenty years ago,” I said. “She’s married now.”

“Don’t make one damned bit of difference.”

I had to ask. “Any chance you could forget her? Move on with your life?”

He didn’t even try to hide the tears, this time. “No.”

“Then you best talk to her, see if you can work it out.”

His shoulders slumped. “I tried after I got out of jail this morning. Tanner’s goon stopped me at the door.”

“Elijah?”

“That’s the one. He said he didn’t want to hurt me, ‘less he had to, but I wasn’t welcome. He’ll never let me close to her, let alone give me a chance to say a word.”

I stood up. “Come on.”

He sat up straight but didn't stand. "Where to?"

"The Palace. I got two days of unrestricted access."

He shook his head. "I don't."

I held up the Auto Graflex I had pinched from the darkroom. An extra press medallion hung from the camera's carry strap. "Now you have a press pass. Borden wants three glossies."

"I don't know how to operate a camera," he said.

"A little tyke can do it. We'll walk slow. On the way, I'll teach you everything you need."

* * *

The Palace Theater was hard to miss. It stood three stories high and took up a city block just off Center Park. Its walls, bricks formed from molten sulfur and regolithic powder, had been dyed dark red. A lighted marquee ran the length of the street face. **The Flying Tanners** had top billing.

At the lobby door, a skinny somber-looking gent in a horse soldier's campaign cap and open-collared shirt blocked our way. He wore an old service pistol in a holster cinched tight on his hip. He had carved holes in the holster belt so it would fit.

"Here now," he said. "Who might you two be?"

I flashed my press badge. "Jack London, *The Columbian*."

Mr. Campaign Cap made a show of perusing my pass. He poked a thumb at The Kid. “It don’t say nothing about him.”

The Kid twisted the strap to show his badge.

“My camera operator,” I said.

“You need a special operator?”

“Clarence,” I commanded.

“This is a tricky brute,” the Kid said. ‘Let me show you—’

Mr. Campaign Cap waved the Kid away, then squinted up at him. “You been here before?”

“Naw,” the Kid said.

“I swear I seen you this morning, when I come to work.”

“Not me.” The Kid shook his head. “I was home in bed.”

The fella took another hard look, grunted, and waved us on inside. A second stalwart, an old man this time, sat on a high-backed wooden chair tipped to the wall, reading the morning’s *Columbiana*. He barely glanced at our passes, just waved us through.

“Boss says you got run of the place,” he said. “Just don’t disturb rehearsal.”

The Kid went off in search of his lost love. I slipped into the high-ceilinged auditorium. A net had been stretched the full width and depth of the stage and extended out over the orchestra pit. Mechanics were stringing lines, testing tautness, and trapeze bars dangled a goodly distance off the floor.

Back-stage, a barbershop quartet worked their way through *Hello! Ma Baby*. Tanner stood at the edge of the stage, with an older gent I took for the work-crew foreman. The two men were arguing. I slid into a seat beneath the balcony; leaned against the seat in front of me to better hear their heated words.

“...too damned long, I tell you... my rig, not yours... but the lines... my calculations... but... don’t care what you...”

Someone settled into the seat next to me.

“Boss told me to watch for you.”

I could feel the words in my back teeth. Elijah filled the seat and a wall of heat poured off him, so that I wondered if I’d burn my fingers if I touched his chest.

Instead, I rested my hand on the lump in my vest that was the derringer. It brought me some small comfort.

“*My* boss told me I had run of the place,” I said. “Maybe I misheard him.”

“You being smart with me?” Elijah asked.

“Wouldn’t even think of it,” I said.

Then it came to me why Elijah made me nervous. When the sun was overhead, Tycho City could get real warm. No one wore a stitch more clothing than called for by decorum.

Elijah was layered in wool and linen, every inch of him, except his face. Looking at him made me sweat. That explained

the heat. As to the gun-oil smell, I was certain that under all those clothes he wore a Goodkind augment frame.

I'd seen augment frames in use by Tycho City's special-crimes bluecoats. If Elijah's frame was standard, he could run at ten miles an hour all day, lift two or three times his own weight, and squeeze a piece of aged oak into splinters.

The big man leaned close; loomed over me like a stone wall ready to collapse. I forgot to breathe again.

"Here's Elijah's Rule," he said. "Remember it. Don't make no trouble for me, I won't make no trouble for you."

"I'll remember."

"Good."

He pushed himself out of the seat. The armrest between us snapped beneath his hand with a dry-stick crack. He lumbered up the aisle and out the double doors.

The auditorium grew quiet. Only the foreman remained on stage. I made my way to the front and climbed up to him.

"Howdy," I said.

"Who are you?"

I showed my press pass. "Jack London. *The Columbian*."

"Sure, I know you. I like your column. You speak up for the little guy."

“Thank you.” I tipped my head toward the net. “That’s a solid rig you fellows put up, but aren’t the lines a mite too long?”

The foreman peered at me. “You know much about trapeze?”

I shook my head. “Not as much as you.”

He nodded at my words. “Been doing this sort of thing for thirty years. *He* says he done the calculations, but so have I. They haven’t even—”

“Peale!”

Tanner’s voice thundered from above. The foreman shut up and turned toward the balcony across the back of the auditorium. I spotted Tanner, standing in a crossing aisle, an open door behind him.

“Yes, sir?” the foreman shouted.

Tanner beckoned him. “Come up here, will you? I want to talk to you.”

“But—”

“I’d like to speak with you *now*.”

The foreman hurried off stage left, down a few steps, to the outside aisle. At his touch, a hidden door opened in the side wall beneath the balcony. A service stairwell, I supposed.

As if a magic trick, an audience door to the balcony opened and Elijah appeared. I swore I could hear the hiss of his

augment frame. He and Tanner exchanged whispers, then the foreman appeared. All three stepped through the open door and it closed behind them.

I was alone in the auditorium. I looked out across the vacant seats; felt the sighs and echoes that fill such empty spaces. I stood for a time, alone. Listening for ghosts, I guess. The scent of Elijah's Bay Rum and gun oil still hung with me.

After a bit, I wandered off stage-left and found a staircase cut down into the regolith. I descended into a labyrinth of dressing cubicles and storage rooms, where I wandered near on to thirty minutes, poking happily into places I had never been. On the far side, I came upon another staircase. I climbed back to the stage, and there was Tanner waiting at the top.

The fellow with the horse soldier's campaign cap stood at his elbow, grinning as if he knew something I didn't.

"He's the one," Mr. Campaign Cap said. "And he brought that tall skinny feller in with him."

Tanner held up his hand, a folded greenback pinched between his thumb and finger. "You can go now."

Mr. Campaign Cap took the money with one hand and laid the other on the pistol hanging at his hip. "Maybe I should stay."

"I'll deal with him," Tanner said.

“You’re the boss.” The fellow touched the brim of his cap and wandered off.

Tanner stepped close. His voice was low, pitched just for me. “Your editor swore you wouldn’t give me any trouble.”

“Have I?”

“Elijah was correct. You, sir, have a smart mouth. You are no longer welcome.”

“I’ll have trouble finishing that write-up you wanted.”

Tanner offered up that wolf’s grin again. “That’s not my problem. I’ll survive without it, but I doubt that you will. You ought to have thought it out before you brought that tramp in.”

There was a commotion across the stage and Elijah appeared through the side curtains. He had the Kid and Sweetwater in tow, each clamped in one of his meaty hands. Sweetwater appeared set to pitch a fit; her lips were pressed down tight and her brow was creased. The Kid looked ready to rip Elijah’s head off, or die trying.

“Look what I caught, Alex,” Elijah growled.

“Tell him to let us go,” Sweetwater snapped.

“Do what she says,” Tanner said.

The big man let go, and both of them wobbled on their feet. The Kid recovered first. He wheeled around, his fist drawn back. Elijah grinned, ready for the blow, but Sweetwater

stepped between them. “No, George!” she said. “He’s just looking for a chance to bust you into kindling.”

The Kid took a step back and tugged his coat and vest into place. “Got no right to treat us this way, Tanner. No right at all.”

“I’ll treat you any way I like,” Tanner replied. “She’s my wife and you’re a trespasser. You, too, Mr. London.”

I saw only one safe way out of this. “We’ll leave,” I said.

Tanner smiled again. “Good.”

“Sweetwater, I meant what I told you. Every word of it.”

The Kid sounded near to breaking.

“I know you do, George,” she said. “Every word.”

“Get him out of here,” Tanner snarled.

Sweetwater stepped close and laid her hand on the Kid’s arm. “You best leave, George.”

I pulled at the Kid. At first he resisted, still ready to jump into a fight. Then he nodded and came along to the stage door, walking backwards, his eyes on Sweetwater.

“I’ll come back for you. I swear I will,” he said.

“Oh, George.” Sweetwater stretched out her arm toward him. I glanced at Tanner, wondering if he’d sneer.

Instead, he roared, “Elijah, throw them out!”

The big man crowded us through the stage door and slammed it behind us.

In the alley, the Kid pulled away from me and squared his shoulders. “I thought you was my friend.”

“I am. Now let’s get out of here.” I started for the street.

“No. Let’s go back in there and go toe-to-toe with those two bastards. They’re all but holding her a prisoner and I ain’t about to pocket such a treatment.”

“Listen to yourself, Kid. Do you really think either one of us can take on Elijah in a straight-on fight?”

He snatched off his hat and spun it in his hands, then drew a breath and nodded. “All right. I expect that’s so. Let’s go tell the Pole what’s going on.”

“What *is* going on?”

The Kid stopped at the mouth of the alley. “Hell, Jack, you was there. You saw the two of them, the nasty way Tanner treats her.”

“I did, but she’s his wife and he made his wishes clear to both of us. The Pole, busy as he is right now, will laugh and kick us out.”

“Suit yourself. I can’t just do nothing.”

He pushed the camera at me, swung around, and walked away toward Central station.

I should have run after him, should have stopped him, but I needed time to catch my breath. I already had my share of problems. First off, I needed to figure out a way to tell my boss

there'd be no write-up or photographs. A way that didn't end with me getting fired.

* * *

I decided if I got to Borden before he heard what happened from someone else, he might be reasonable. No luck with that.

“London!” he bellowed, the instant I stepped through the newsroom door. “Come convince me I ought not toss you out on your ass right now.”

I hesitated at the door to his office. He sat back in his big leather chair, his fingers tapping on his acoustical receiver, his brows screwed in tight.

“It's not bad as it sounds,” I said.

“The hell, you say,” he snapped. “I just got off the line with Tanner. He made it sound like a proper bollix, blamed it all on you. He threatened to pull his advertising—even worse, to sue.”

“He won't do that,” I said.

“You know that for a fact?”

“Where else would he advertise?”

Borden slammed his hand onto the desk. “Damn it, it's no joke. I've had enough of your tomfoolery. You're a good writer, London, but you don't think, you just go off half-cocked. I can't have it. I'm the editor. I run things here.”

“I was wrong to do what I did.”

Borden glared at me over the top of his reading glasses, surprised, I suppose, to hear me admit I was guilty.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Borden,” I added. “I won’t do it again.”

I watched the wheels turn. I swear, he bought that pack of lies. “All right. You got enough to do a column about Tanner’s show?”

“I could write it in my sleep.”

I could, too, even if I had to make up most of it. I’d slap something together by Friday night that would satisfy him.

“All right,” Borden growled. “You got ‘til midnight Friday. If you don’t have it to me by then, look for another job.”

* * *

“It’s a simple calculation.” My friend Max Weber scribbled on a sheet of paper as he spoke. “Only three numbers that can change.”

Max was an engineer at Goodkind’s laboratories. I bought him beers, from time to time, and he provided technical information, from time to time. He never asked any questions.

We sat in his office, as he ticked off three variables on his fingers. “The length of swing arm—in your case the bar’s support lines; the load mass – that’s the weight of the person hanging on the bar; and force of gravity.”

“And there’s less gravity here on the Moon.”

“One-sixth Earth. So if you want someone on the trapeze to swing a certain distance in the same time, every time, the bar’s support lines need to be shorter than on Earth, and their swing points closer together.”

“What would happen if the lengths were off?”

Max grinned. “A trapeze act is all about someone being in a certain spot to catch someone. It’s all about timing. If the length’s not right, that wouldn’t happen. Whoever was expecting to be caught would fall. Of course, they’d have a net; but wouldn’t it would be embarrassing, falling on their asses in front of Roosevelt.”

Walking back to the office, I played that notion over and over in my head. Tanner was a proud man, who wouldn’t want to look the fool. And he had done the calculations, too often to make such a simple error.

So what was going on?

* * *

I woke up to the noise of someone pounding at my door.

“You in there, Jack?” a man shouted. “If’n I gotta go get a key, I ain’t gonna be happy.”

I rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up, then stood and headed for the door. “Hold your water. I’m coming.”

“I swear I’m gonna bust this door in.”

I grabbed the knob and yanked the door open. “There,” I snapped. “It wasn’t even locked.”

A bluecoat stood outside, a hopper cop. I knew the man. I had written a column on hoppers six months before and had ridden pinion behind Hogan; even tried my hand at the controls.

“What is it, Hogan?” I sounded as if something nasty had crawled into my mouth and died. It tasted that way, too.

“The Pole wants you. Right away.”

“Are you arresting me?”

“Naw, but you gotta come. He’s rippin’ at his hair. He says Roosevelt’s supposed to be here inside the hour.”

I followed him outside to where his hopper sat at the curb. The thing looked like a praying mantis wearing an augment suit. It carried two narrow saddles and rode on six big Goodkind disks. Not much weight and lots of power.

“Jump on.” Hogan tugged on his helmet and goggles. “Don’t forget the straps.”

I worked at the safety straps and did it right. When he was satisfied, Hogan swung onto the front saddle and set his hands to the controls. By the time I got my hands wrapped around the panic grips, we were two hundred feet above the regolith and climbing, headed north toward central station.

* * *

The Pole spotted me the instant I walked in. The room was filled with officers, elbow-to-elbow, but somehow they got out of his way.

“Where is he?” he demanded. “Where the hell is that lanky bum?”

“You mean the Kid?”

“Damn straight. Nobody’s seen him since yesterday.”

“Last I saw him was mid-afternoon. He said he was coming to see you.”

The Pole’s big, homely face was inches from mine. I could smell the sausage he had had for lunch. Heat poured off him, and he wasn’t wearing an augment frame.

“He never made it,” the Pole said. “Ain’t bad enough we got two hoppers missing and the president close to landing. I got to find the Kid, too.”

“What’s he done?”

“It ain’t what he’s done, it’s what he might do. I got three witnesses ready to swear they heard the Kid say he was going to kill Roosevelt. The Secret Service is hot to get their hands on him.”

A door in the far wall banged open and a fellow in a black suit, who looked to be made of granite, tromped into the room. “Rybarczyk?” he shouted, even louder than the Pole.

The Pole pushed me toward the door. “Go find the Kid.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“That gent’s Secret Service. He wants the Kid, but he wants you, too.”

“And?”

“You won’t do me a bit of good, handcuffed to a table here. Go find the Kid and bring him in.”

“All right,” I said, and hustled out the door.

* * *

Outside, I found the streets almost deserted. As I stood gawking, wondering if the rapture had come and gone and no one had said a word to me, a couple hurried by. They were dressed as if on their way to a party or a funeral.

It came to me: everyone was off to see the president.

The Pole had it right. The bluecoats did have their hands full, and most every copper in Tycho City was already stationed inside dome four.

I set off west, figuring to worm my way into the dome and work the edges of the crowd, looking for the Kid. I had to hoof it, though; the omnibuses weren’t running. Coming out of Center Park, I crossed a stand of grass that faced the Palace Theater and I heard the crowd begin to cheer.

I marveled at the volume. For that much noise, I knew safety protocol had been ignored and both pressure doors were open. How else could the coppers manage that big a crowd?

The noise swelled. High above the domes, A Wells Fargo shuttle appeared. An image of a rippling red, white, and blue American flag adorned the shuttle's brushed aluminum shell. I'm not what you'd call a naturally patriotic man, but seeing that flag, there on the Moon, made me feel real proud.

Then I caught movement from the corner of my eye. A hopper climbing away from the alley next to the theater. The driver wore a flier's helmet and bluejacket uniform, but the rider in the pinion saddle wore a bowler and a green plaid suit, and he was tall and lean. "Hey, Kid," I almost shouted.

Then I had a second thought.

Anyone who didn't know the Kid real well would swear it was him, just from the suit. Even so, you hang around another man, you come to recognize him no matter what he wears. It can be any one of a hundred little things. The way he sits. The way he turns his head. The way he touches at his hair.

Something about the fellow on the hopper made me wonder if it truly was my friend. Then, when they cleared the roof of the theater, sunlight caught a roll of golden hair tucked beneath the back brim of the bowler.

Tanner!

He might be wearing the Kid's plaid suit, but he hadn't done a good enough job of hiding that mane of his beneath the Kid's hat. Still, I couldn't bring to mind who the other fellow

was. It couldn't be Elijah, dressed in copper's blue. He was a much bigger man.

I stepped off the curb and hurried across the empty street. It would be a waste of time to go to Goodkind Square. The only place I figured I'd find answers to the mystery was inside the Palace Theater.

* * *

A second hopper sat outside the stage door. A discarded tarp lay nearby. The door had been secured but didn't have a sturdy lock. I fiddled at it with the hardened-steel picks I always carried, heard the tumblers click into place, and pushed the door aside.

No one was there, at least not back-stage. From the sound of it, I wondered if there was anyone inside. Even so, I moved with as much stealth as I could manage, creeping across the stage, expecting a spotlight to snap onto me at any moment.

Only a few work lights were burning, and all I heard was the shuffle of my shoe soles on regolith. The net and Tanner's rigging still hung in place. The cavernous space beyond the proscenium lay draped in shadow. It felt real empty.

Then I heard a voice. I closed my eyes and held my breath so long I almost put down roots. At last, the voice came again, from the balcony. It rumbled like a kettle drum.

Elijah.

I hurried from the stage, slinking from shadow to shadow on the far wall until my fingers brushed across an inset hinge. Careful inspection found two more hinges and the latch. The crew stairs. I pulled the latch an inch; heard the lock click free. In the empty theater, the sound seemed thunderous, but no one came.

I was alone in the building, except for Elijah and whoever he had spoken to. I needed answers, even if it meant I had to risk him beating the tar out of me to get them. So I slipped through the door and tiptoed up the narrow stairs. Dim light from Tesla tubes inset into every riser lit my way.

Up and double back; up and double back.

I found myself on a small landing. I worked another latch, eased onto the balcony, and tiptoed along the back wall. Elijah's voice grew louder, behind the door I had seen Tanner use the day before. Then I heard another voice.

“—king, queen, jack and ten of clubs are forty. That makes eighty-three, and I knock with two.”

The Kid. So he was still alive.

“You?” the Kid asked.

“Fifty-three,” Elijah snapped.

They were playing gin rummy, a card game the Kid had tried to teach me once. After the first few games, I had refused

to play with him. It seemed too much like one of his flim-flam schemes.

“Another thirty dollars. You owe me two hundred now.”

“Like you’re ever gonna see it.”

“That saddens me, Elijah,” the Kid said. “I figured you for many things, but not a welsher.”

“You sure you told me the rules straight?”

“Just the way my friend, Elwood, explained them to me.”

“Uh huh. I get my hands on Elwood, he ain’t seeing any of my money, either.”

I couldn’t stand there, listening all day. I had to take the chance the two of them were alone. I drew the derringer, and a deep breath, then turned the door-knob. Luck was with me. It was unlocked. The door swung in and I followed.

“Hands up, Elijah,” I barked.

They were seated at a small table. The Kid faced me, his back to the far wall, wearing nothing but a union suit. He had been tied to his chair, but his hands were free.

Three bodies lay stacked like cordwood against a side wall. Right off, I recognized the rigging foreman. The other two wore long-johns, too. They had to be the missing hopper cops.

Elijah never turned around. “London, you promised me. You said you wouldn’t give me trouble.”

“Things change,” I said.

He lunged across the table, grabbing for the Kid's throat, but my friend wasn't having that. He fell backwards; rolled with the chair still tied to him. Elijah slapped a hand on the table to catch his balance and it collapsed beneath his weight.

Right off, he came to his feet facing me and charged. Hands out, teeth bared, and roaring.

I roared right back, firing both barrels. With the first shot, Elijah's left ear exploded in a spray of red. The second bullet tore away a big flap of his cheek.

Just like a runaway engine on the rails, he never slowed.

I slipped out of his grasp and scrambled through the door down the balcony's center aisle. On the way, I juggled my two extra cartridges from my vest. I had practiced the move over the years, so I managed to slid in the second shell as I reached the bottom rail.

I turned, fighting to control my breath and my quivering hands, and aimed the pistol. "Stop right there!"

He did. He stopped halfway down the steps and studied me. "You ain't got it in you, London," he said. "You meant to kill me, you should'a done it when my back was turned."

He started toward me.

Before I could pull the trigger, the Kid hurtled down the aisle, broken pieces of the chair still tied around him, those

long legs of his extended, and planted both his boots into Elijah's back. The big man toppled toward me.

I ducked; he dropped over me, landing with his belly on the rail. Before he could grab ahold, I jammed my shoulder into his thighs and heaved.

His legs lofted and he tumbled from the balcony.

A man can walk away from a fall on the Moon that would have killed him back on Earth, but the balcony was high and Elijah carried too much extra weight. I swear the building quivered as he slammed into the wood-and-metal seats and regolith below.

"Mary, mother of Jesus," the Kid muttered.

He sprawled on the steps above me, picking at the tangled rope around him.

"You all right?" I asked.

"About to ask the same of you," he said.

We both snickered, the sort of sound a man will utter when he's grateful to have survived some awful thing. Then I heard a noise from below.

"Is he still alive?" the Kid asked.

We crept to the railing and peered over the edge.

Elijah lay twisted on the seats below, bent and broken, to be sure, but very much alive. He fumbled about him, trying to get back to his feet. A sound came from him, a deep-pitched

wheeze, as if a steam fitting was about to blow. It set my teeth on edge.

I made my way downstairs and through the seats. The Kid followed.

Elijah looked up at us. His augment whined. Gears clashed, chewing at each other. His left arm quivered, but nothing moved. When he spoke, his words weren't much above a whisper.

"Help me out here, will you, London?"

"Not a thing I can do," I said. "You're stoved up awful bad."

He tried to move again, without success. "Yeah... Can't feel nothin' below my shoulders."

He coughed; blood bubbled from the corner of his mouth. "Go on," he said. "Shoot me."

I shook my head. "I never killed a man in cold blood."

"Damn you, London. Don't leave me laying here like this."

My hand shook so much I didn't think I could do it, but I set the double barrels of my derringer into the hollow of his brow, just where it met his nose.

Then Elijah closed his eyes and whispered, "Go on. You'd do it for a dog."

"You're right," I whispered back, and pulled both triggers.

* * *

In the alley, the Kid, still in his union suit, pointed to the abandoned hopper.

“They take the other one?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I saw them fly away.”

“We got to stop them,” he said.

“Who?”

“Tanner and—” He hesitated. “—and Sweetwater. I heard them talking. She knows how to fly a hopper.”

“What kind of hold does Tanner have on her?” I asked.

The Kid shook his head. “It ain’t like that.”

“What?”

“She come and talked to me, up there in that room, after Elijah snatched me. Jack, she *laughed* at me. It’s all been an extended con, these past few days. She’s a part of it.”

“A part of what?”

“She said what you said she would. That twenty years was a long time. That I was a fool if I thought we could have what we had all those years ago. She said the three of them come here to teach us all a lesson; to put Goodkind in his place.”

“Damn it, Kid. What have they got planned?”

He stepped closer. “They’re gonna plant some bombs. They want to kill the President. Goodkind, too, if they get lucky, and scare folks away from Tycho City.”

“They’ve got bombs?”

The Kid just kept on talking. “I expect they figured to kill me when they finished and make it look like I done it. And ain’t I been the perfect patsy?”

It finally came together. Tanner hadn’t been worried about the rigging because he knew there would be no show.

“How many bombs?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Enough to blow a big hole in the dome.”

“Sweet Jesus,” I said. “Everyone in town’s out in the open, waiting to see Roosevelt.”

The Kid stalked to the abandoned hopper. “You know how to fly this thing, don’t you?”

“I only ever been up the once. I’ll kill us both.”

The Kid climbed onto the pinion saddle and slapped the seat in front of him. “I sure as hell don’t know how to, and it’s the only way we got to stop them.”

“We’ll get the coppers.”

“There ain’t enough time, Jack. Come on.”

“Kid, don’t make me do this.”

“You don’t, there ain’t no stopping them.”

He was right, even if I didn’t care for it one bit. Three steps to the hopper. I climbed aboard, hit the power switches for the Goodkind disks, and slid my toes beneath the safety bars.

“You conniving bastard,” I said. “You best hang on.”

* * *

We climbed in silence the first few seconds, then the Kid stretched his arm across my shoulder, pointing. “There they are.”

They were up near the center ridge of the dome, close to the crater rim. There was no missing the green plaid of the Kid’s suit. Just what Tanner was counting on, I expect. I goosed the throttle and we gained speed. Too much. The hopper wobbled and almost over-turned; the Kid jerked his arm back and snatched at the panic bars. “Damn you, Jack. Hold it steady.”

“Don’t you think I’m trying!”

I arrowed upward and made a sloppy stop behind and below the other hopper, not fifty yards from the windows of Goodkind’s residence. Sweetwater was bent over the controls, doing a damned fine job. Tanner was standing on the pinion seat, his hands above his head, fiddling with a lumpy package the size of a loaf of bread. I knew enough about explosives to know a bomb that size could open up a nasty hole.

Folks stood behind the glass panes of Goodkind’s residence, watching us. I spotted Goodkind, holding an acoustical up to his ear. He would call for help, no doubt of that, but it would come too late.

I eased my hopper away and leaned back to the Kid. “That goes off, it’ll punch a hole in the dome big enough to fly a shuttle through. What’s your plan?”

“Get in close,” the Kid said. “We got to keep them in the air until the coppers get here. I don’t expect they’ll risk their own hides, so they won’t set off the explosive while they’re still in the open.”

“And if that don’t work?”

“If we got to, we’ll knock their hopper down.”

“*That’s* your plan?”

“You got something better?”

I didn’t. So I crabbed in close again, near enough we could have reached out and touched the other hopper’s Goodkind disks. Right off, I saw Tanner had the safety straps hooked to his belt, but he had done them up wrong.

“You got your straps on?” I asked the Kid.

“What?”

“The safety straps,” I said. “Do it now!”

Sweetwater must have heard me. She looked toward us. “You two again!”

In that instant, she lost focus.

Her hopper slide sideways and bumped into mine. Tanner flailed his arms, trying to keep his balance. As he twisted, one of his straps pulled free from its bindings and he tumbled from

the pinion seat. The second strap held, so he wound up dangling above that awful drop.

His weight and movement pulled at the hopper. Sweetwater fought the controls, trying to compensate for the imbalance; she couldn't manage it. Her hopper rolled away from us, wallowing like some floundering dinghy caught in heavy waves.

"Help me, woman!" Tanner shouted. "Pull me up."

"I can't fly this thing *and* pull you up, you fool!" she shouted back. "Show some gumption. Pull yourself up."

"I can't. Damn it, help me."

The hopper continued to roll. Sweetwater stretched out one arm, all the while battling the controls. "Give me the detonator."

"Not until you pull me up."

"Very well then." Cool as can be, Sweetwater drew a slender flensing blade from inside her jacket and slashed at the strap.

"What are you doing?" Tanner screeched.

The Kid shouted, "Sweetwater!"

She slashed again; the strap parted with a high-pitched crack and Tanner dropped away, screaming as he fell.

Without his hanging weight, the hopper rolled back into place. Sweetwater dropped the knife after him, drew a breath, and steadied the controls.

“You murdered him,” I said.

She turned then, and I saw that gleam of playfulness in her eyes again. “He was an evil man,” she said.

“Even so.”

She grinned, as much a wolf as Tanner. “I only did what I had to do.”

The Kid held out his hand. “Come on, Sweetwater. Let’s go back down.”

She shook her head. “No. They’ll have questions I can’t answer.”

“I’ll help you,” the Kid said. “Me and Jack will tell the coppers it was either you or Tanner.”

She glanced up at the bomb. “His name wasn’t Tanner, nor was he my husband. And none of us knew a thing about trapeze.”

“Say what?” the Kid stammered.

“It was just one more part of the con, Kid,” I said. “A way to get them to the Moon.”

“Very perceptive,” Sweetwater said. “Do you also know how long I have wanted to blow up this wretched place?”

And it came to me why she was admitting everything. “You’re trying to work up the nerve to finish this alone. I don’t think you have the sand.”

“It was *my* idea from the start, Mr. London. I can finish it.”

“You set it all up?” the Kid asked.

She laughed. “George, you aren’t the only one with brains enough to run a scam. Did you really think I came back so you could save me, after all these years?”

“I had hopes,” he said.

She pointed to Goodkind’s window. “Surely you understand, Mr. London. That man created his own fiefdom here; you are all his vassals. I’ve come to set you free.”

“By blowing up the city. Killing thousands?”

She shook her head. “By showing everyone the folly of this place. It’s unnatural.”

The sirens wailed, and not too far away.

Sweetwater grinned again. “Shame on you, Mr. London. Trying to keep me talking, until the cavalry arrives.”

She pulled a pistol from the uniform belt, drew a bead on the bomb, and fired off a shot. The bullet ricocheted from a girder.

“If you don’t stop right now, you’ll kill us all,” I said.

“I’m ready to die for my beliefs. Are you?”

Sweetwater fired another shot; this one struck home. The bomb began to smoke, but it didn't detonate.

"Land now," I told her. "Don't make me knock you down."

She laughed again. "I don't think so. You can barely keep your hopper in the air."

She pulled away, maneuvering to get nearer to the bomb. She lined up a third shot.

"Get closer," the Kid said in my ear, his voice so calm you'd have thought we were sitting on the bench in Goodkind Square.

"I can't knock her down," I said. "I'm not good enough."

"Get closer!"

"I told you I'm not good enough!"

"Goddamn you, Jack, do what I say!"

I twisted the controls. We jittered sideways.

We were a good twelve feet from her when the Kid kicked off the pinion saddle.

He soared from one hopper to the other, in as elegant a dive as I have ever seen. His long arms wrapped around Sweetwater just as she fired again. The shot went wide and she cursed him for the fool she thought he was, even as his momentum carried the two of them away.

He never made a sound; just hugged her to him as they fell together from the heights.

* * *

The coppers dismantled all four bombs. City fathers wanted to erect a monument in Center Park. I argued for something simpler; told them the Kid would have been embarrassed by a twenty-foot-tall statue. The Pole agreed, even though we both knew that wasn't so.

So a sculptor worked from a mug shot the Pole provided, as well as a penciled sketch I made. It took six weeks to finish.

Life-sized, and cast in brushed aluminum. All but his jaw and chin hidden by the bowler, as if he might be napping. One long leg cocked at the knee, with his spat-covered shoe perched on the other knee; sharp elbows out and ready.

Every minute of those six weeks, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if the Kid hadn't done what he did. So many people would have died; Tycho City might have been destroyed. What scared me most was although we stopped it once, it still could happen. There are always angry people, made crazy by what they think is right.

I took to sleeping in the deepest hole I could find. One morning, someone pounded on my door again. When I opened it, I found the Pole. Miller Borden stood behind him.

“What do you two want?” I asked.

“You can't stay in here forever,” the Pole said.

“And you can’t run away,” Borden added. “The citizens of Tycho City need both their heroes. Besides, where would I find a columnist who can draw an audience as well as you?”

I promised them I’d stick around for the unveiling, and I kept my promise. I smiled through the speeches, let them take my photograph with Goodkind and the mayor. And then that afternoon I climbed aboard a shuttle back to Earth.

These days I live on a ranch in northern California. The income from my books pays my bills, and most days I am content. But on new-moon nights I’m drawn outdoors to train a telescope on the twinkling lights of Tycho City.

And as I watch, I can’t help but imagine the first-time visitors climbing from the shuttle to bounce and wobble through the raucous crowds, under the ever-present scrutiny of a life-sized statue sitting on a wrought-iron bench in what now is known as Hallelujah Square.

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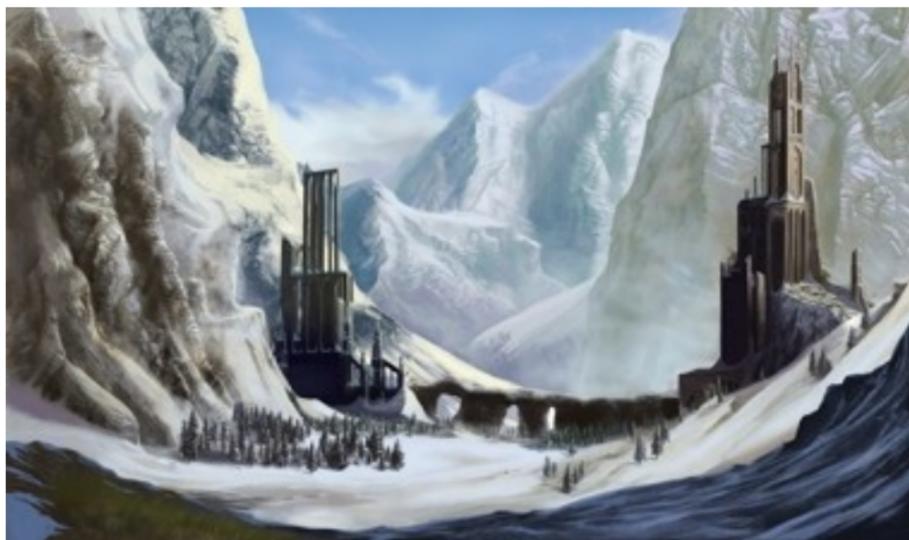
supervisor, corrections officer, and improvisational comic who lives in Seattle. She has sold almost fifty short stories, to various print and online magazines including Analog, Lightspeed, Flash Fiction Online, and Murky Depths. Her novel Lifting Up Veronica was published in January 2012 by Every Day Publishers as an online serial, and her first short-story collection, Snapshots from a Black Hole & Other Oddities, was published in January 2012 by Hydra House Books.

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COVER ART

“Ruins,” by Stefan Meisl



German native Stefan Meisl studied art at the University of Passau, where he went on to become a teacher. Beginning in 2006, Stefan became a freelance painter and a graphic artist. Stefan is a member of the German Professional Artists Association and has had numerous exhibitions in both Germany and abroad. In 2008, Stefan had received the Award for Young Artists of the Free State of Bavaria. View more of his artwork at his gallery on deviantArt.com.

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