

THE
INTERSTELLAR
UNDERTAKERS

Paul S. Wesson

Publishing
Info

THE INTERSTELLAR UNDERTAKERS

A treatise on inebriation and tensor calculus

Coffins and conviviality – two sides of the same coin?

An account of the violent soft underbelly of the Galaxy

Number theory and lust: a rapprochement

The annotated version of one man's search for justice in a
spiral arm full of BS

HOW TO improve your skills at pool and differential
geometry

Documentary excerpts about crazed attempts to control
entropy

Reminiscences of a thug with a Ph.D.

A stupid story about stupid people doing stupid things

The most epochal manuscript in the intellectual history of the
Universe

“You might not like it, but it could be interesting”

(Jale of Acheron)

SPONNED!

The ship *Rigor Mortis* slipped through greasy clouds and landed with a crunch on alien gravel. The pilot Jale, tired from a long trip in subspace, entered the appropriate octadecimal code and went aft to pick up the resulting shot of whiskey. Its smell reminded him of the hickory tree he and his brother had once chopped down and later regretted. But nostalgia and another shot of liquor gave way to practicality. There was work to do: people do not live by codes, but by what they mean. And the coffin in the hold meant a lot to the people of this planet.

Jale entered the hold of the *Rigor Mortis* with his boots making more echoes on the metal plates than his ears could register. The ship's illegal megamotors had been thrumming for too long, and it was only gradually that the noise in his inner ear died away, leaving him contemplating the coffin in silence. It was a masterpiece of necro-carpentry: slim and classic in its lines, and with a lid intricately carved into symbols that would make anybody's passage to the future a sweet slide. Jale ran his hand gently over the edge, not touching the alien sacred symbols on the lid. The coffin was smooth as a baby's bum, and he knew he had done a good job. Its blackness was deep and intense, but with suggestions of colours that his human eye found difficult to classify.

The hatch started to open, and immediately a bar of painful light invaded the gloom of the hold. The antiseptic air was swamped by a fetid, diaphanous gust. Leaving the coffin where it was, Jale walked to the hatch, jumped to the gravel, and looked about.

"Photon, what a hole."

Turner and Dali combined, he thought. The sky was a tightly

Paul S. Wesson

packed roil of various shades of grey and yellow that made the pilot feel as if he was standing under a layer of intestines. The ground was a hummocky expanse of sand and stones, interspersed with occasional patches of struggling vegetation that became green mirages on the horizon. The latter was broken to his right by a clutch of dilapidated buildings.

Jale was sweltering. He ducked back into the hold and grabbed a thermosuit. In a corner where the sunlight did not penetrate, he pulled on the garment, noting as he fought with the seal that life in space seemed to add unwanted weight to muscles. Outside again, he adjusted the controls and almost immediately felt coolness attach itself to his skin. After a while, the sweat stopped running down from his hair. A cold grab in his crotch prompted him to readjust the thermostat.

“No point in being a brass monkey.”

An entourage had appeared, moving slowly across the space between the town and the ship. The hot air and the perspective made the group appear to attach itself more closely to the ground as it approached. Eventually, Jale could make out a group of insectoids, apparently arranged in some kind of hierarchy with an elder in the front.

The pilot stood still as the group arrived and deployed itself, the elder at the centre.

“You are Jale?”

The voice had a curious clicking quality, but was easily understandable and there was no sign of a translating device. Its owner had chitinous wing cases, legs that were hard and thin and spavined, and a skull that looked desiccated. However, it had brown eyes that were so close to human that the alien aspect became irrelevant.

“Yes, I am Jale. You wish to bury one of your kind?”

The question seemed to cause the alien some confusion, and

Interstellar Undertakers

Jale realized he had asked a gender-ambiguous question. After a pause, the alien said:

“We are all of one kind. I wish that you should bury a special one. My brother.”

Jale, now confused, also became wary.

“How did you choose me?”

“We know your history. We need somebody with the right...”

The alien was clearly having trouble with words, but he replaced the unfinished sentence.

“We require somebody with the correct relationship to the gone. My brother was the most special. All things must be done correctly.”

The alien was staring at Jale. Brown eyes and blue eyes locked. Grief flowed along an invisible conduit, stronger from the one side because it was recent, but reciprocated by old pain.

“Everything will be done right,” said Jale.

*

The main street of the town was a track of silt. But the ramshackle houses that lined it showed signs of attention and care. There seemed to be three hotels. One had a religious motif over the entrance, and since Jale was followed by a self-levitating coffin covered in alien symbology, he thought it prudent to pass by. The second hotel was in good shape, but on looking inside he perceived a group of older humans reclining in soft chairs and chatting with the air of a long-established clique. Thinking that he could always trek back to the *Rigor Mortis* and sleep there, Jale came abreast of the third hotel and stopped in the middle of the street.

He could hear raised voices from inside, and presently a figure erupted from the front door. It landed in the road, raising a

Paul S. Wesson

pile of dust that hung patiently in the air .

Jale waited out the dust, and when its source got up, said “Is this place any good?”

A bleary gaze tried to focus on Jale, but then attached itself with terror to the coffin behind. A faint, stuttering sound came that might have passed for an attempt at speech. But then the figure was off and running, finally to disappear in an alley.

“No answer was the stern reply,” muttered Jale, as he entered the hotel.

Coolness enclosed him. Turning off the thermosuit, he let cold air waft over his body from a series of regularly turning fans set in a high ceiling. The latter was intricately embossed, concealing a few lights that reflected off a shiny wooden bar. Behind, a short man was furiously polishing glasses.

Jale slid onto a bar stool and waited. After a short while, the bartender plunked down the glass and walked over. Impressed by the black thermosuit and its wearer’s sobriety, the last traces of anger disappeared from his face.

“What’s up?” asked Jale.

“Oh, nothing much,” replied the bartender. He was a tubby person with wispy yellow hair, wearing a striped coloured shirt that would have interested a Neapolitan tent-maker. “Joe comes in here most mornings and stays til lunch. But sometimes he drinks a bit too much.”

Jale grunted, and after a pause said “I need a room.”

The bartender looked slightly surprised. “We’ve only got three rooms.”

“Are they occupied?” asked Jale.

“No.” There was a pause while the bartender sized up the pilot’s expensive attire.

“Two are crummy, and the other is the wedding suite.”

“Thanks for being honest,” said Jale. “What about the

Interstellar Undertakers

wedding suite?”

A look of pride suffused the waiter’s face. “Nice, chintzy furniture and a bidet. Even a little elevator that goes down to the kitchen in the basement.”

“Kitchen?” asked Jale.

The bartender’s happiness was replaced by regret. “It hasn’t worked properly for ages.”

There was a hiatus. Then:

“My name’s Jale.”

“Mine’s Charlie.”

They shook hands. Charlie picked up a glass and began polishing it fetishily. “Do you want a drink?”

“No, thank you,” said Jale as he slid off the bar stool. “But you can put my coffin down in the basement.”

There was no chink of dropped glass as he exited.

*

Underground, in a vault whose approach made a catacomb look like a nun’s picnic, Jale and Raknok sat facing each other. The table between them was a stone slab inlaid with cuneiforms. At right angles to theirs lay another table, which bore a corpse. The air was dank, and Jale took the opportunity to turn up the control on his thermosuit before he spoke again.

“You offer an order of magnitude more than what I would normally charge for the job. Please explain.”

The elder of the insectoid clan regarded the pilot gravely. “We have done our homework, Mr. Jale. We need a special person.”

“We are all special,” mumbled Jale, getting up and starting to walk around the chamber. He disliked complicated contracts; and when offered a payment so large that he could retire from the undertaking business, he became suspicious about the

Paul S. Wesson

implications of the deal.

Stopping by the corpse, he looked down on an alien who was anatomically far from human, but somehow shriveled and sad enough to be classified as benign.

“May I?”

“Of course,” replied Raknok.

Jale laid his hand gently on the forehead of the dead creature, noting that its eyes lacked lids that could be closed. The somewhat bovine stare was fixed on the roof of the vault, but Jale made the traditional gesture of the hand and the head, indicating respect for an intelligence that had passed. There was a great similarity between Raknok and his dead brother. But to Jale the latter’s cranium seemed slightly malformed. Gently, he put his hand under the skull, and turned it.

There was a neat hole.

Jale turned the head with care to its original position, walked back, and sat down. Again there was a meeting of eyes.

“You will have to find who did this.” Raknok’s voice was clickety but intense.

Jale shifted uncomfortably in his seat. What he had thought was to be a simple job was rapidly becoming baroque. “I am an undertaker...” he began.

“But you are an ex-smuggler,” interrupted Raknok. “Also, you have a Phud from the University of Trantor. The people who did this are tough and non-stupid. You are the best person to deal with it.”

Jale growled gently with exasperation. He resented that people knew about his past. (How had they found out?) And he resented the pressure that Raknok was applying. His face set into a sullen mask.

Raknok watched the human carefully, leaving a long period of quiet. Finally he said, “By the meaning of our code, we

Interstellar Undertakers

cannot bury my brother until the death-carrier has been identified.”

Jale’s first thought about this was pragmatic: it was so cold in the vault that a body could lie here for a long time without decomposing. Thinking, he turned up the heat on the thermosuit a notch.

“I did not come prepared for this,” said Jale after a pause. “I made the coffin you ordered, and I know the ceremony. But I did not bring...”

A clatter cut off his words. Raknok had tossed a blaster onto the cuneiform tablet and it came to rest half way towards Jale.

It was at this point that Jale realized the seriousness of the proposition. The blaster was not a Supergalactic-Mart dinky toy. It was a totally banned fusion gun without even a safety catch. (But then, if you were being shot at, who needed a safety catch?) Still thinking, he picked up the weapon. The butt fit smoothly into his hand, evoking a myriad of competing memories which he quickly suppressed.

Jale said “Grrr.”

Raknok said nothing.

The human, hefting the gun, looked down at the thermosuit. Tight to the limit of being lascivious, it did not offer much in the way of concealment. Hoping that Raknok really was a hermaphrodite, Jale peeled off the lower part of the suit and placed the gun gingerly in his crotch.

Raknok had a gleam in his eye. “Have you done the human ballet dance?”

Jale gave a bark of a laugh. “Not recently.”

The two walked towards the door of the vault. Outside were a couple of the insectoid’s clan, waiting.

“Please excuse our precautions,” said Raknok as his colleagues prepared to blindfold Jale again. “Also, it is very

Paul S. Wesson

important you confirm yourself and the contract when you get back to the hotel. But, we have a deal?"

Jale nodded.

*

The hotel was busy with an after-dinner crowd in a mellow mood. As he walked past the bar, Jale noticed that the incorrigible Joe was propped against it in the corner. Charlie, dashing around to serve a line of parched customers, gave a nod of recognition. Jale occupied the one free bar stool and waited.

"What can I get you?" asked Charlie when there was a lull.

"Nothing to drink right now," replied Jale. "But I need to know if there is a subether unit in the hotel."

"Sure," confirmed Charlie. "The bridal suite has everything."

"Hmm," acknowledged Jale. "By the way, what do you call this place?"

"The *Excelsior*," replied Charlie with a grin.

"Does it have a strange device?"

Charlie seemed nonplussed, then said "No. But it sure looks like you do. What is this, ballet night in the boonies?"

Jale slid off the stool and headed for the stairs.

"Are you hungry?" called out Charlie. "We have a special: eels and gin."

The undertaker paused. "Sounds good. Send it up."

*

The bridal suite was a surprise. Two rooms, one with an oversized nuptial bed and another with a smaller (anti-nuptial) bed. Bathroom with ornate faucets and the specified bidet. A very out-of-place and modern subether unit. And an impressive reclining chair with ochre upholstery and sweeping arms inlaid with natural wood, carefully designed to accept a plate or a big

Interstellar Undertakers

glass.

Jale removed the blaster from its (apparently ineffective) place of concealment, and laid it on the arm of the easy chair. Sinking in the latter, he spent some time thinking over aspects of business until there was a gentle knock at the door.

Yawning, Jale levered himself out of the chair, and then fell back in it.

Facing him was an android, with a deerstalker hat, a prominent nose, and a long cape. There was nothing visible between the hem of the cape and the carpet, so Jale knew it had to possess an advanced levitation system. The creature had soft, silvery highlights where its details had been worn down by over-zealous polishing.

There was, however, a note of normalcy: the android bore a plate of eels and half a bottle of gin.

“Your dinner, Sir.”

Jale said nothing.

The android advanced slowly, and with remarkable felicity put the plate down on the left-hand arm of the chair. Going around, it then attempted to put the bottle down on the right-hand arm, but stopped when it encountered the blaster.

“Really, Sir! The food is not that bad. I prepared it myself.”

“No offense intended,” said Jale.

“None taken, thankyou.”

In fact, thought Jale, the food smelled good, with a musty but meaty aroma that aroused his stomach. “Where do you get the eels?”

“They are a local delivery. Fished with primitive thongs in the southern swamp, kosher killed, and matured in casks of oak.”

“You mean, you get them at the supermarket.”

A look of distress crossed the android’s face and made Jale feel repentant.

Paul S. Wesson

“I’m sorry,” said Jale. “I believe that they *are* a local delicacy. They certainly seem to be exquisitely prepared.”

The android perked up. “Thankyou, Sir. Maybe you have heard our local jingle? It goes like this:

Jellied eels, jellied eels!

Wriggling about like wonky wheels.”

Jale, after consideration, said “No, I haven’t heard the jingle. But it seems to have elements in common with the Eroica symphony.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed the creature. “Possibly, the two greatest pieces of pregalactic music.”

“Aha.” Jale was still slightly puzzled. “But where did you cook them?”

“In the kitchen, Sir.”

“I thought it didn’t work properly.”

“It *doesn’t*,” replied the android with vigor. “If Mr. Charlie would spend more time fixing the kitchen and less time burnishing my cape, the *Excelsior* would be in a class by itself.”

“It already is,” said Jale laconically.

“Sir?”

“Nothing,” replied Jale. “You may remove the blaster to the bedside table and put the bottle down here. I’ll need a glass.”

The android picked up the weapon carefully by the barrel, put it in the designated place, and went to a farmerish sideboard where it obtained a hefty tumbler.

“Tonic water? There are ample supplies in the sideboard.” The android bent closer. “On the house, as they say.”

“Not now,” said Jale. “I’ve got everything I need.”

The android seemed concerned. “But what about the need for human companionship in the most neglected corner of the spiral arm?”

Jale considered. “You mean, a hooker?”

Interstellar Undertakers

“NO, Sir!” The android was mortified. “I mean intellectual contact. Perhaps, some high converse on dace and eels? Or a discussion about the change in the obliquity of the ecliptic?”

Jale suddenly felt tired and irritated. Getting out of the armchair and facing the android, he said “Not now. I’ve had a long trip through subspace, been offered more money than I know what to do with, and had to walk around with a gun in my genitals. That’s enough for now.”

The android moved towards the door, looking contrite. “I understand, Sir. But do not hesitate to call. I have stowed your coffin in the basement, and you can connect via your own elevator. I hope you enjoy your eels and gin.”

A streak of guilt hit the human. “Friend, my name is Jale. I presume I am talking to Dr. Watson?”

“Not exactly. I am a replica of the other guy.”

*

The hotel was quiet. Sunlight had disappeared from the chintz-draped window; and sounds of after-dinner talk from the bar no longer seeped through the floorboards. The plate of eels was a greasy memory, and the bottle of gin had somehow become empty. A revived Jale sat in front of the subether unit.

This is to confirm identity and contract for

Jalaquin

Algarve

Lebedev

Eddington

late of the planet Acheron.

Jale winced as he was reminded of his monikers. But he was glad that his place of origin was listed as Acheron, since it implied ignorance of several other and less salubrious places where he had been.

Paul S. Wesson

The questions are in no particular order but serve the two motives. Please enter numeric answers, which if acceptable will become your payment code.

Jale reached for the tumbler and found it empty. He briefly considered calling the android to replenish the supply, but decided against it.

The digit corresponding to the first letter in the standard alphabet for your mother's surname?

Jale entered "1". He hoped that the rest of the test would be more sophisticated, since anyone knowing his name could infer those of his parents, which implied a lack of security.

The same for your father?

"5". Jale yawned.

The escape velocity from Acheron in multiples of the sound speed at the planet's surface, rounded and divided by 10?

Jale blinked and started to think. So the Acheron connection meant something. He entered "4".

The number of independent components of the Faraday tensor in standard theory?

"Blimey!" muttered Jale. By standard theory, they presumably meant the four-dimensional one. So as the Faraday tensor was antisymmetric, the number of distinct components (as opposed to the total number) must be "6".

The number of siblings you have ever had?

"1".

The present status of your brother, first letter, but converted, alphabetic to numeric?

Jale suddenly felt grim, with new-found respect for his potential employers. He entered "4".

If a ship navigates a space with gravitational, scalar and electromagnetic fields described in terms of a standard unified 5D theory, how many independent components are there of the

Interstellar Undertakers

Ricci tensor? Divide your answer by 3.

Now he needed more gin. Walking over to a brass device with a cone on the end, he removed the stopper and whistled into it. Almost straight away, the mellifluous tones of the android wafted up the tube.

“How may I be of service?”

“Another half bottle,” replied Jale. “And a brain transplant.”

There was a pause. “We have the former, Sir. But the latter will need to be ordered.”

“Okay. Just bring the gin.”

“Right away, captain.”

Jale returned to the subether. In ND, there were N^2 components of the Ricci tensor, but that tensor (unlike the Faraday tensor) was symmetric. So in addition to the N components along the diagonal, there were two degenerate sets of $(N^2 - N)$. Then the number of distinct components must be $N + (N^2 - N)/2$ or $N^2 / 2 + N/2$ or $N(N+1)/2$. It followed that in a unified 5D theory there must be $5 \times 6/2 = 15$ independent components. He was just about to enter this, when he remembered the last part of the question.

“5.”

Jale was sweating. Where was the android with his drink? But the subether questionnaire did not pause.

The mode of death of your brother, number of letters in conventional word, divided by a dozen?

Anger began to grow in Jale. There was a restaurant in Acheron where he and his brother used to go. Its specialty was fresh bread, dipped into a bowl of transparent cactus oil, that floated above a pool of brown vinegar. The trick was to combine the warm yeast of the bread with the smoothness of the oil and the bitterness of the vinegar.

“Too much vinegar.”

Paul S. Wesson

The subether was silent, then prompted: Your numeric answer?

Jale started to think. Killed? Murdered? No good, as neither was divisible by twelve. Assassinated? Dozen-wise, he entered "1".

There was a knock at the door which Jale did not hear. The door opened, and the silver android levitated into the room. Expertly pouring from the bottle into the glass, it approached the human.

"That took time," said Jale, reflexively grabbing the tumbler.

"I'm sorry," replied the android. "There was a bit of trouble in the bar. Some undesirables."

"Jehova's New Witnesses?"

"No Sir. Some strange people. But Charlie got rid of them."

Jale, who had heard nothing from below, was still concentrating on the subether contact.

Last question. There is a group in the Galaxy, of which it is believed you have special knowledge. There was a unique break, as if inviting Jale to consider which group of malefactors the human would consider worthy of attention. The number of words in their title?

Jale sat. For a long time. Thinking. While anger grew.

The android, trying to be helpful, finally said politely. "Your response is awaited."

Jale moved, tossed back the tumbler of gin, and entered "3".

Almost immediately the subether unit responded. *Your identity is confirmed. Disregarding for security reasons the first two digits, your code for payment is confirmed as 4614513. Please keep your PIN secret.*

*

Jale flopped onto the bed, trying to will his anger to ebb. The

Interstellar Undertakers

android hovered nearby, looking worried. Finally the latter said “Sir, I have knowledge of your secret code. Do you wish me to erase it from my memory?”

“Huh?” The human was thinking about other things. Then, looking at the android’s cap and cape, asked “Where’s the meerschaum pipe?”

The android looked uncomfortable. “I had to barter it, in order to gain transportation away from a contretemps.”

Jale gave one of his mirthless, short laughs. “So you pawned your pipe to get out of a scrape? I’m sorry you ended up in this hell-hole.”

“Sir,” remonstrated the android. “The *Excelsior* is the finest...”

Suddenly, there was a bang. A humanoid leg, shod in armour, had appeared through the lower panel of the door.

Jale picked up the blaster that Raknok had given him from the bedside table and slipped it under the bedcover.

“House detective?”

“No. I fear that ...”

A fist covered in a gauntlet with metal spikes penetrated the upper panel of the door. There was another blow, and pieces of the door flew like tiny javelins and embedded themselves in the worn carpet.

The figure that entered was as large as Jale, but whether it was human or not was impossible to tell, as it wore a dark visor and was heavily protected. A blaster hung loosely at the thing’s side, but began to rise as its gaze swung to Jale.

“Greetings from the Black Hand Gang.” The voice was raspy but with a hint of amusement. The blaster was halfway up.

“Greetings,” replied Jale. “The door was unlocked, you know.”

Jale squeezed the trigger. The bedcover disintegrated in a

Paul S. Wesson

cloud of lint. The intruder disintegrated in a red mess, pieces of black armour skittering into the corners of the room.

Jale leapt from the bed, and was examining the remains when there was a rush of steps on the stairway. He raised the blaster again, but then lowered it.

“What the hell is happening here?” asked Charlie. He peered through the hole where the door had been, offense on his face. The multicoloured bar-shirt flapped about his bare legs as he entered the bridal suite and surveyed the damage.

“Somebody is going to ...”

He got no further. A hole appeared in his chest and the force of a blast from behind propelled him across the room.

Jale swung, squeezed, and half the wall that held the door became rubble. Among the stones, something black and armoured flailed an arm that held a blaster.

Calmly, Jale took two big steps and shot the thing dead.

Returning, he went over to Charlie. The barman’s body lay crumpled on the easy chair, red blood spreading across the faded yellow fabric. Jale picked up Charlie’s head in his hands. Two long strands of wispy hair fell from the bartender’s skull, making him look balder and even more pathetic.

“Charlie!” Jale realized he was not as calm as he supposed, as the word came out like a strangled yell.

The bartender’s eyes moved, but were still unfocussed. However, his mouth opened.

“Jale.” There was a breath, followed by a bad sound. “Get the bastards.”

A hardening face looked into a softening face.

“Vinegar,” said Jale as he jumped up.

Three black figures crowded into the room. Jale from a crouching stance shot the head off the first. Unfortunately, the blast tore down half the ceiling, revealing old rafters that

Interstellar Undertakers

proceeded to collapse into the space. There was a groan from above as the roof of the hotel started to settle on the bridal suite.

“Sir,” said a plaintive voice. “The elevator!”

The second figure was on him. Jale swung a fury-driven fist that cracked his attacker’s visor and crunched into something biological underneath.

“The elevat...”

The android spun off, hit on the side by a shot from the downed attacker.

Jale leaped sideways as a blast from the third assailant burned the carpet to a crisp and set the nuptial bed on fire. The future of the bridal suite appeared to be limited.

Jale ran for the door to the other room. He was almost there when a blast lifted him forward and slammed him into the wall. Groggy, he attempted to stand. His right hand in front of his eyes showed that the blaster was gone. His left hand, pushing back his hair, felt a hole and came away shiny red.

“Sorry,” said Jale. He did not know to whom he was apologizing. His brother? Raknok? Charlie?

Defeat is a hard thing. For a brave man it is really hard.

Jale tried to get up, but his legs would not work and the blood pouring from his head was covering his eyes. There were vague shapes, black and silver. The black one bore down on him.

Jale thought “There are no miracles.”

BROTHERS

The funeral procession approached the *Rigor Mortis* slowly. The sky was even more oleaginous than usual, trapping heat close to the planet's surface and making the occasional patches of vegetation cower.

The levitating coffin was not a mirage, but the scene had a surreal quality. In front walked the insectoid Raknok, with a black band around one of its wing cases. On either side, two of the other elders kept the coffin on its course. Behind, the Sherlock Holmes android applied a push when required, each movement causing its cape to scintillate. Further back there followed a rabble of insectoids and humans that attempted to maintain a deferential file. Along the route were black figures who lounged with guns.

An officer of the Black Hand Gang stood outside the airlock as the cortege arrived. "Get that body inside, and then get this piece of junk into space."

Raknok asked, "May we perform a short service?"

The figure flipped up its visor, spat, and walked off a few paces.

Raknok read the alien symbols on the lid of the coffin, translating as he went for the benefit of the humans who now clustered around.

"Friend, you are gone from us. We no longer see you, or hear you, or smell you, or touch you. But we *think* you."

Then, departing from the symbols: "Jale, you came as an alien to work for us. You leave as a brother."

The Holmes android sniffled. Opening the airlock, it pushed the coffin forward and floated in after. The airlock closed, and the crowd retreated.

Interstellar Undertakers

The *Rigor Mortis*, under its new pilot, bumped along the ground and then screamed into the sky.

*

Sherlock felt lonely. And the recent debacle left him with a sense of anticlimax. Also, the ship's instruments were profuse to the point of confusion. Sighing, the android lowered its shiny brows over eyes that came into focus with super-human fidelity.

The console was a mass of controls, dominated by two large screens. In one, the poor planet of his recent home faded steadily to a spot. In the other, two large gas giants grew in size, framing a sprinkle of brightening stars and a distant, whirlpool-shaped galaxy. The ship's computer, in the absence of signs from Jale, had obeyed Sherlock and seemed to be in capable control.

The android levitated out of the copilot's seat. The other seat, which was much more worn, was empty except for the intermittent reflection of lights from the console. The same lights glared off Sherlock's gleaming cloak as he levitated and headed aft.

He entered a surprisingly spacious cabin, furnished with sofas and tables designed more for comfort than utility. There was a glass tumbler on the sideboard, one-fifth full of some red liquid. A shiny wooden cabinet against the metal wall opened to reveal an army of bottles: several different kinds of gin, half-a-dozen varieties of whiskey, and an unopened example of Asterian ice-worm cocktail. Sherlock held the last to the light, and saw that there was indeed some kind of pickled vermiform in the bottom of the bottle.

He closed the cabinet door, picked up the dirty glass, and continued his explorations.

A bedroom, spartan but functional. The bunk was of ample size, and he replaced the quilt which lay discarded on the

Paul S. Wesson

deck. There was a bank of instruments over the sweat-stained pillow.

In the kitchen, he dumped the dregs from the tumbler down the sink. There was a gurgling sound from the recycling unit as he washed the glass.

The workshop was lined with lockers stuffed with bizarre pieces of equipment and strange tools. There seemed to be everything necessary to repair a spaceship and make coffins. That serious work had been done here was evident by the scored top of the bench. He opened the door of what looked to be a cooling unit, and leapt back: a hand sporting seven fingers dropped to the floor with a thud.

“Shit!” said Sherlock, using a little known niche of his vocabulary. Gingerly, he put the hand back and sealed the compartment.

The door to the hold slid slowly aside, revealing a large cavern from whose walls the sound of the ship’s motors echoed in a low growl. In the centre of the hold lay the coffin. The android gazed at this for a while, thinking about its occupant. Finally, and without approaching the casket, he turned and headed back to the front of the ship.

Here there was more activity. The forward screen scintillated with colour as the *Rigor Mortis* ploughed through the tail of a large comet. And one of the computer monitors seemed to be running a home movie.

“What’s this?” Sherlock inquired.

“Memory retrieval,” replied the computer. “It’s standard procedure. I’m cataloguing Jale’s outstanding memories.”

The android watched, with interest. On the screen, two boys were fighting in a schoolyard. They were obviously brothers. “Have I missed much?”

Interstellar Undertakers

“No. And it won’t take long. Jale’s memory was vivid but selective.”

Sherlock, who had a liking for stories with human meaning, sank into the copilot’s chair and relaxed.

* *

The school principal had a fat face and was furious. His eyes reminded young Jale of two inexpertly poached eggs. The boy’s own expression was sullen.

“You *will* walk your brother home!”

Jale avoided the albumin eyes and took a quick glance around the office. There was no window, and the only door was behind him. He stood with his hands clasped in front of him while the principal leaned forward threateningly over a littered desk. On a shelf in the corner stood several containers which Jale recognized as having something to do with the mysterious business of shaving. They explained why the principal had smooth jowls at the end of the school day and smelled of perfume.

“I don’t see why I have to.” Somehow, the fact that the principal smelled like flowers while Jale had not changed his socks for ten days gave him strength.

“You have to because he’s your brother and he’s younger than you.”

“But I want to play with my friends on the way home,” objected Jale.

The principal marched around the side of the desk and pushed his face close to that of the boy. “You also have to do it because, if you don’t, I’ll knock you stupid.”

Jale took a step back, his hand groping behind him for the door. Defeated, he opened it and stumbled out. The principal

Paul S. Wesson

followed him to the threshold and stared at the boy, before slamming the door with a bang.

Nearby, his brother stood waiting. Jale said "Come on."

*

School lunches were sometimes good and sometimes bad. A good one, as far as Jale was concerned, consisted of meat and potatoes. And then there was the notorious bad one: melted cheese on a piecrust with cabbage.

His brother was ahead of him, a long line of boisterous kids behind. A motherly woman dumped a square piece of cheese pie on his brother's plate, followed by a scoop of soggy cabbage. He saw his brother's shoulders wilt.

Jale examined his brother's food, and became fascinated. Between two pieces of cabbage there projected the body of a caterpillar, nicely parboiled.

The matron put a piece of cheese pie on Jale's plate.

Jale said. "No cabbage, thanks. I'm allergic."

There was a whispered comment to Zek, Jale's friend, who was next in line.

"No cabbage," said Zek.

A domino form of communication moved up the line of chattering children, gradually silencing it.

In the strangely quiet dining hall, it was easy to hear the litany of "No cabbage. No cabbage. No cabbage..."

Jale, his brother and Zek sat down at their designated table, with Mistress Whitey. The latter was a harridan who got her nickname from a bunch of white, frizzy hair. This topped a face that had never been known to smile.

"Eat your lunch," said Whitey to Jale's brother. The teacher and the boy were the only two with cabbage on their plates, a

Interstellar Undertakers

fact which seemed to have escaped the woman.

“Don’t want it,” replied his brother.

Jale had sympathy with this. Even discounting the infested cabbage, the lunch was a crock. The melted cheese was streaky with different shades of orange fat, and gave off an odour that made his socks seem positively aromatic.

“You will eat your lunch,” ordered Whitey.

His brother looked up in agony. “No,” he said in a quivering voice.

The teacher’s agate eyes bored into those of the boy, from which tears started to seep.

“I don’t want mine either,” said Jale with solidarity.

There was rebellion in the air. Shifting tactics, Whitey said “Zek?”

Jale’s friend shook his head.

The teacher’s dour mouth went down another notch and set into a line. She was about to utter an edict when there was a commotion from the other end of the hall. The matron, exasperated behind a pile of unwanted cabbage, was arguing with the last two children in line. Throwing down the scoop, she came out from behind the counter and headed for Whitey’s table. The teacher stopped eating, then got up and went to meet her.

Deftly, Jale plucked the caterpillar from his brother’s plate and inserted it into the cabbage on the teacher’s plate.

Adoration lit up his brother’s face.

The confabulation between Whitey and the matron ended, and the teacher returned to the table, watched by three pairs of unfriendly eyes. Changing tactics again, and focusing on the cause of the trouble, Whitey said to Jale’s brother “Well, we shall at least eat our cabbage.”

Paul S. Wesson

“All right,” said the brother with feigned reluctance, while Jale tried not to smile.

*

Jale floundered out of bed, passed his dad, and said “I’m late for school.”

His father commented “There isn’t any today.”

Puzzled, Jale followed his parent into the kitchen, where the latter waved towards the news-server.

School Principal Arrested on Sex Charges.

In yet another case of pernicious prurience, a local school principal was ‘collared’ yesterday after complaints from parents. His remotely-controlled collar is coded to respond in the case of further offenses, and he has been suspended with pay. However, the school is closed as an investigation proceeds involving other teachers, including a female. We note that this is an ongoing problem, and wonder editorially if a certain approach involving eugenics would not be a better response than the ...

Jale turned to his father, who was making toast. “Dad, what’s eugenics?”

“A questionable use of genetics and sex to influence racial development.”

Always non-judgmental, Jale’s father left his son with a better command of language but not much more insight.

A plate of toast (perfectly done) was placed in front of the boy. “Jale,” asked his father with care, “Did your principal ever...?”

“No,” responded Jale decisively. Then after a pause, “If he had ever tried, I would have kicked him in the balls.”

Jale added mischievously “If he has any.”

Father and son laughed.

Interstellar Undertakers

*

Jale sat on the toilet. He actually did not need to go, but wanted time for himself. Through the gaps in the outhouse door, he could see his brother hovering.

“Jale, I need help with the trolley.”

“I’m busy,” snapped Jale.

“But I can’t ...”

“Why don’t you go and look for the money?” asked Jale with a spark of a plan.

“What money?”

“The money I hid in the neighbour’s garden. Under the big red plantpot.”

Through the gaps between the planks, Jale saw his brother take off. The house next door, once occupied by a famous writer who had little financial sense, was rundown and had been vacant for ages. The garden was a jungle, strewn with discarded plantpots. At least a hundred of them.

Peace.

*

There was a bang. The car’s levimotor had blown, by bad luck half way over a busy bridge that spanned the local river. His father got out. Jale went with him, leaving his brother inside.

“Will it go?” Jale asked.

“Eventually,” replied his father, starting to haul tools out of the back compartment.

They had been working on the motor for a while, with Jale trying to figure out the different types of thermo-drills, when a big vehicle drew up.

“Trouble?” asked the officer.

“Apparently,” replied his father, looking up with a stained face.

Paul S. Wesson

Cold eyes surveyed the vehicle. "This is a V-64 Jaguar levicar. Can I see your ownership papers?"

Wearily, his father re-entered the vehicle. The brother was asleep in the back seat. The glove compartment opened and spilled out several ownerships.

The policeman flicked through these, a frown appearing on his forehead.

"I'm a mechanic," explained Jale's father. "I buy cars, fix them and sell them."

The officer was not convinced. "Six at a time? And a Jag?"

Jale's father shrugged. "Yes."

"License?"

Jale was worried. His father handed over a license, stained from the motor and unreadable.

"You'll have to come with me," said the policeman.

There was a perfunctory argument, which left Jale and his brother at the roadside in a disabled Jag.

Yeah. So there was a SQUID to be reconnected and a jack to be removed. He managed the first, but the second left him sweating and angry.

Behind the wheel, he looked at the controls. There were many lights, but the pile seemed to be energizing the motor.

"Contract." He turned the switch.

"Contact, you mean" said his brother from the back seat.

"Be quiet," said Jale.

The motor cut in with a tremendous surge of power. The car jumped forward, depositing the jack in the river. But the splash was behind them, as the vehicle swept forward in a trajectory that would have embarrassed a spaceship.

Jale, interested in how things seemed to blur at high speed, eased off.

"Are we going to get home?" whined his brother.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Eventually.” Jale liked to mimic his father’s relaxed mode of speech. “But we’ll have a bit of fun on the way.”

*

Jale’s brother entered the kitchen by the back door, crying and with a cut on his cheek. Their mother descended on the younger boy with automatic solicitude. Putting the corner of a handkerchief in her mouth, she used it to dab at her son’s injury. The boy twisted away, something Jale understood because his mother’s saliva had an odd odour.

“Who did this?” she demanded angrily.

“The Forns,” sobbed the brother.

“The little rats!”

Jale felt uncomfortable. The Forns twins were well known in the neighbourhood for their toughness. They lived in a ramshackle house at the end of the street, and their parents were seldom present. This left the twins free to climb and act generally wild in the unpruned fruit trees that clogged the property. Though not his best friends, Jale had played with them often.

“Can you see what they’ve done to your brother?” his mother demanded. She was still attempting to clean the cut with her handkerchief, something Jale wished she would stop as it was causing more trouble than good.

“Don’t just sit there!” she shouted. “Go and do your duty!”

Jale got up and went outside. As he walked slowly along the street, he was not happy.

A ripe pear splattered on the sidewalk at his feet. Looking up, he saw two faces grinning from foliage.

“Do you want to play?”

“Sure,” replied Jale, hoisting himself up into the tree.

Paul S. Wesson

The Forn twins had spent so much time in the abandoned orchard that they resembled apes. They swung from branch to branch with an easy agility that Jale, though muscular, found hard to match. After a while, he was out of breath. He perched himself on a big limb and ate a crunchy green apple. One of the twins popped out from behind the trunk and squashed a rotten plum onto the top of his head. As the juice trickled through his hair, Jale smiled.

At least, that made his “duty” a bit easier. Catching the culprit by the ankle, Jale punched him squarely. The other twin, noticing, crashed through the branches and landed on the big limb. “You can’t do that to my brother.”

“And you can’t do things to *my* brother,” replied Jale.

The Forn boy advanced slowly, with excellent balance. He took a swing at Jale, who ducked at the last instant. The twin’s hand met the gnarled tree trunk and a look of pain crossed his face. Jale took a step forward and slapped him across the face, hard enough to make him collapse but not hard enough to do damage.

Leaving the Forns draped across the branch, Jale scrambled down to the ground. “Sorry,” he said. “Orders.”

*

Did they have enough money to get home? Jale had magnanimously emptied his pockets, and the boys surveyed the result: four piles of coins of approximately equal height, but only half as big as they should be.

Jale shifted position. Sitting cross-legged, the hot sidewalk was burning his legs. They were all tired. Zek sat resignedly with his chin in his hand. Their friend Quincey, irritated, pushed back sweaty hair. Jale’s brother slumped. A levibus went by, providing a welcome but momentary swirl of air.

Interstellar Undertakers

“We could sell the frogs,” suggested Quincey.

“Or the toads,” added Jale’s brother.

“But not the newts,” continued Zek.

Jale looked around. The various kinds of animals reposed in battered cans, though the latter contained water and weed, so the creatures were at least cool and wet. By comparison, the boys were prime candidates for sunstroke and were parched. They had spent most of the afternoon exploring an old quarry, where a few pools of water had survived to the end of summer. The pools were soupy with algae, but teeming with amphibians.

Jale shifted legs grey with rock dust, and said “No. It’s too far to the pet store. And in any case, they wouldn’t let us in.”

This was because Jale, with his brother in attendance, had demanded not long ago to buy a poisonous snake. When asked why, he had explained honestly that he was tired of having to protect his brother from bullies like the Forns; and that if his sibling had a poisonous snake hidden in his pocket, he could take it out at crucial times and sick it on the enemy. The store attendant had coldly pointed out that: (a) the store did not sell poisonous snakes; (b) they should not attempt to get one from somewhere else because it could bite his brother as well as the enemy; (c) it was the store’s responsibility to call the boys’ school if they did not give up the plan. As Jale had later explained to his friends, as far as the pet store was concerned he was “persona-non-grapefruit.”

The four piles of coins were not enough to get the boys more than half way home. They were buddies, and nobody suggested that there was enough to get *two* of them *all* the way home. Jale picked up one of the coins. While a simple disk, it was engraved with a complicated code. This particular one had a tiny “T” on its edge. This was because it had been minted on far-off Trantor, something which to collectors made it slightly more valuable

Paul S. Wesson

than its face value. But even if the levibus conductor recognized this, they only had four of them. They were the result of a morning's hard work. The boys would take a high-denomination coin and change it in a store to low-denomination ones. Outside, the latter were inspected to see if any had the fabled "T". If so, it was kept. If not, the boys would change low-denomination coins back into high ones at the next store. They had pursued this scheme between breakfast and lunch. In addition to the four Trantors, the boys had also earned criticism on the part of the storekeepers, since they never actually bought anything. The scheme had come to an ignominious end around midday. Jale and Zek had entered a store and changed a big coin for small ones. Outside, a quick inspection showed that none of them bore the "T". So they had walked down the street to the next venue, entered, and asked for the small coins to be changed for a big one. Unfortunately, it turned out that there were two different entrances to the same store.

"Let's just get on the levibus anyway," said Jale, "and not get off until we're home."

"What about the conductor?" asked Quincey doubtfully. Jale's brother also looked anxious.

"It's only a robot," scoffed Zek.

Jale and Zek got up. The other two boys reluctantly did likewise. There was some discussion about how to distribute the frogs, toads and newts. But eventually they lined up with their cans and inadequate fares.

The levibus slid to a halt and they boarded. It was a two-storey vehicle, and by silent consent they ascended to the upper deck. At the top of the stairway the robot conductor waited to collect their money. "Going all the way into the city?" it inquired suspiciously.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Not all the way,” replied Jale and walked on. Technically, this was correct, as the boys lived on the near side.

At the front of the levibus, they temporarily forgot about the misdemeanor they were engaged in, as the streets and people streamed past below. Occasionally the levibus would stop to pick up more passengers, and became progressively more crowded. The boys, polite as they were, squeezed together on one seat, concealing the cans behind them. It could have been the reduced light or the increased heat. Anyway, the frogs and toads began to sing to each other: “Zorr. Zizz. Zorr. Zizz ...”

Jale felt something slimey hop onto his back.

“Stop that noise!” shouted the conductor.

Looking down the aisle, he saw the robot bearing down on them. “Legs to standby,” he muttered to his friends.

“You bums are past your stop,” said the conductor. It had a somewhat crude face, and was tuned to rage. “Get off!”

The boys, intimidated, trooped down the aisle and descended the stairs. The levibus stopped, and they stepped onto the sidewalk. “And don’t come back!” called the conductor.

The levibus started to slowly draw away. Jale, feeling dispirited, noticed that Zek was wearing a big grin. Following his gaze, Jale saw that the upper deck of the levibus was in pandemonium. People were running up and down the aisle and climbing over seats. A feminine scream drifted through the hot air.

“I think we forgot something,” said Zek.

*

His father entered the sitting room with uncharacteristically swollen eyes. Recent times had not been easy for anyone in the family. His brother and mother had entered into some kind of relationship involving subservience and anger versus control and

Paul S. Wesson

anger. Like two stars going around each other in space, but with dynamics that were decaying, they seemed destined to annihilate each other. Jale had progressed into a defiant adolescence that had modified but not destroyed the bond with his father.

The latter said “Jale, your mother and I are splitting up.”

Jale, after a pause, said “That’s sad.”

He assumed that his brother and mother would stay together. But what would his father do? And what should he do?

Father and son looked at each other. There was still understanding there, and Jale waited for an offer.

His father turned and left.

* *

Sherlock blinked away an imaginary tear, and then came upright in his seat as the monitor went blank. “Malfunction?”

“You had better check,” replied the ship’s computer.

The android swept out of the control cabin, its silver deerstalker hat revolving in consternation. A dash through the lounge and other rooms brought it to the door of the hold, which rumbled aside. He entered and stopped.

The top of the coffin was in motion. It slid halfway back, and jammed. A hand covered with dried blood grabbed the edge and gave the lid a shove. It fell to the deck with a clang that temporarily drowned the sound of the ship’s motors.

A head appeared above the edge of the casket. It also was encrusted with old blood. But the eyes that stared out from beneath matted hair were alight with a new kind of determination.

Sherlock moved forward to help. “Welcome back, Jale.”

Stars slipped past the ship as it eased out of the spiral arm. Though already exceeding lightspeed, the monitors resurrected the colours of a million suns and studded space with diamonds. Behind, Raknok's star was a green point that rapidly faded. Ahead, a giant O star blared blue as it squandered its energy. Jale slumped in the pilot's seat, angry and aching. The Sherlock Holmes android occupied the copilot's seat, battered but functional. On the console in front of them rested the fusion blaster.

Jale picked up the weapon, noting that the charge was down. "You blasted the enemy?"

"Yes, Sir," replied the android. "It had to be done."

"Thanks," said the human succinctly. "But what happened to your directives?"

"The creature that was trying to kill you was not a proper life-form. It was a composite, and so disposable compared to yourself."

Jale grunted. So much for altruism.

There was a long pause, then the android said "Sir, the instruments report a spaceship following our course and closing."

Jale squinted at the console from under singed eyebrows. "The Black Hand Gang?"

"Probably," replied the copilot. "Our ruse was effective but solvable. And I regret to say that their ship is faster than ours."

Jale gave a short laugh, and bent forward to the controls. What had looked like a bulkhead slid aside, revealing two banks of instruments.

"Megamotors?!" exclaimed the android. "But they are illegal!"

Paul S. Wesson

“Everything’s illegal to somebody,” replied Jale. “And anyway, how would you know?”

The Sherlock Holmes android shifted uncomfortably, its silvery cape twinkling, but said nothing.

Somewhere in the ship, a deep throbbing sound started. “Is everything stowed?”

“Yes,” replied the android dubiously. “Your coffin is secured in the hold.”

The throbbing sound increased in frequency. “But, Sir! What course should I set? Where are we going?”

“Trantor,” replied Jale shortly.

“Trantor! It’s on the other side of the Galaxy!”

“That’s right,” said Jale with irritation. It’s a long trip. And if you and I are going to get along, stop calling me ‘Sir’ and don’t second-guess me. I’m Jale and you’re Sherlock. And if we don’t soon bung some ergs through those motors we’ll both be pieces of space junk.”

The sound of the megamotors was now a roar that promised enormous energy waiting to be released. Jale noted that the pursuing ship was heavily armed and close.

The android squirmed in its seat. “Sir!” it called over the noise. “I mean, Jale! I’m not sure I like this kind of jaunt. I...”

“You may not like it,” replied Jale, “but it could be interesting.” The *Rigor Mortis* leaped forward.

*

In the cabin, the companions were engaged in a listless game of Pangalactic Trivial Pursuit. Jale, lounging on the sofa with a glass of beer in hand, picked out another question. Sherlock, slightly less jaded, floated nearby.

“How far is it from Epsilon Eridani to Delta Scuti?”

“A long way?”

Interstellar Undertakers

The human looked at the android stonily. “I don’t think you’re taking this seriously. With your memory banks, you ought to know everything about the geography and history of the Milky Way.”

“Let’s try another category,” suggested Sherlock.

Jale located a new set of questions. “Early rock music?”

The android nodded, the earflaps on its deerstalker hat lolloping with renewed enthusiasm.

Jale said “Who was responsible for the following lyric?” He quoted:

*We gotta get outa this place
If it’s the last thing we ever do.*

*We gotta get outa this place
Girl, there’s a better life for me and you.*

The Sherlock Holmes android went into serious thought, its eyes hooded on either side of a prominent nose. Finally it said “Adolph Hitler to Eva Braun?”

Jale sighed. “No. It was Eric Burdon and the Animals. *Everybody* knows that!”

“Apparently not everybody,” countered the android. “I am not familiar with these early galactic sitcoms of which you speak.”

“Stop paraphrasing Slartibartfast,” admonished Jale. “And in any case it’s a rock song, not a sitcom.”

Sherlock looked confused. “The concepts seem to overlap. But I might do better with sitcoms.”

Jale wearily selected a new category. “Early sitcoms. Tell me who said:

To pee or not to pee? That is the question.”

The android knocked itself on the ear to test its aural circuits. Then its look of intense concentration evaporated into one of joy. “That’s easy. William Shakespeare.”

Paul S. Wesson

“Wrong!” exclaimed Jale maliciously. “It was Dave Lister, three million years out from Earth and under bladder duress.”

The android’s face registered disappointment. The human, feeling guilty, finished his beer and headed out of the cabin in the direction of the toilet.

“I’m going outside,” said Jale weightily. “I may be some little time.”

“Captain Oates,” responded Sherlock immediately. “During Scott’s disastrous expedition to the South Pole of the Galaxy.” The android smiled smugly, knowing that he had finally gotten one right.

*

A red-giant star lay ahead, like a distended heart in a dark chest cavity. The *Rigor Mortis* plunged into the outer atmosphere of the sun. With a tremendous size, it looked hot but was actually cool. Nevertheless, patches of black paint began to shed themselves from the hull.

“All engines off” ordered Jale.

“Off?” asked Sherlock incredulously.

Jale glowered at his companion. “Run silent, run deep.”

The ship sank into the outer reaches of the star. The instruments registered hydrogen and helium, with an ascending pressure as they sank lower.

The hull creaked in response to the increasing load.

“Jale,” asked the android, “are you sure this is a wise maneuver? There are only two recorded cases in history of ships surviving such a state.”

Jale, concentrating on his instruments, replied absently. “Recorded history is not all of history. Smugglers have been doing this for ages.”

Interstellar Undertakers

There was a POP from aft. “That’s a hole in the hull. Hydrogen and oxygen don’t mix well. Fix it.”

The android levitated rapidly towards the rear of the ship. A gentle sawing sound indicated buffets from convection currents in the red giant’s interior. The ship was floating uneasily in the inside of the star.

Jale relaxed in the pilot’s seat. The screens showed a fog consisting of different hues of tomato sauce. Apart from the creaking of the hull, all was silent.

Sherlock re-entered the control cabin and sat in the copilot’s chair. Jale did not ask if the android had fixed the leak. Using a practical application of the Anthropic Principle, he knew that they would not be in existence if the conditions had not been right.

“Are they still following?” asked Sherlock nervously.

“Hard to say,” muttered Jale. “With no radiation from the ship, I don’t see how they could follow us. That is, unless ...”

With a bad feeling, Jale looked at Sherlock.

The android, gradually filling in the implication, said “Unless they track my functions.”

The android looked at the human. A sense of depression filled the cabin. “Sir, I request that you turn me off.”

Jale said “But that’s like death. And you have a survival protocol. You’ll experience fear.”

There was a long silence. It was changed by the sound of something moving through the upper levels of the red giant. Another ship.

“Will you turn me back on afterwards?”

The android’s voice was child-like. Its eyes were fixed on the floor of the cabin.

“Of course,” said Jale.

Paul S. Wesson

Sherlock flipped open a hatch on his chest, revealing a simple switch. Jale leaned forward, and paused. The android looked up at him. Whoever had designed it certainly knew how to program pathos.

“Trust me,” said Jale.

“I do,” replied Sherlock.

*

There was an air of conviviality in the cabin. Having escaped the Black Hand Gang and nearing Trantor, Jale and Sherlock were eager to retest their trivia skills.

“Ancient politicians?” suggested Jale.

“Righty-ho,” agreed Sherlock.

“I need the name of the leader involved in the following famous exchange. Harangued by a female virago, her last statement to him was:

If you were my husband, I'd give you a cup of poisoned tea.

To this he replied:

Madam, if I were married to you, I'd drink it!

Please name the male respondent.”

The android stuck a shiny finger in a shiny mouth, apparently thinking. “Winston (*kick-their-ass*) Churchill.”

“Correct!” said the human. “More of the same?”

“Nah,” disdained the android. “Let’s go back to early sitcoms.”

“As you wish,” agreed Jale, though with a tinge of doubt. “Who wrote the following famous piece of dialogue:

A: *You burst in here, a complete stranger?*

B: Correction: an incomplete stranger.

A: *Explain!*

B: I have a wooden leg.

A: *Stop sawing my wooden leg!*

Interstellar Undertakers

And then there's a word I don't quite get, but seems to be *Timberrr...*"

Sherlock looked blank, but made a valiant effort. "Long-John Silver?"

"No," replied Jale. "He was the dude with the avian-encumbered shoulder. The answer is: Spike Milligna."

"The well-known typing error?"

"Exactly," confirmed Jale. "I'll give you half a point for that."

"Let's go back to early rock music," requested the android recklessly.

The human sighed, but readjusted the category. "Who said: *Ride, ride, ride the wild surf?*"

"You did, just now," replied Sherlock facetiously.

Jale rolled his eyes, prompting the other to guess lamely.

"A guy with a swimsuit?"

"No!"

"Err, well I ..."

"Let's quit for now," suggested Jale. "I'm going to take a nap in my coffin. Wake me when we get to Trantor."

He wandered aft, wondering about the pros and cons of friendship versus rationality.

*

The effective capital of the Galaxy was served by a massive shiny complex known as I.A. Spaceport. The whole planet was covered in metal, with spotless walkways and soaring buildings. The majority of the billions who lived and worked here had never seen the sky. But to Jale, arriving from space, claustrophobia edged up in his brain as the *Rigor Mortis* edged down to the ground. Finding an unexpired parking meter, he eased the ship into the slot. A slight forward movement bonked a Capricorn

Paul S. Wesson

Caddy ahead, and a slight backward movement bonked an Arcturus Accura behind.

“Shall I deploy awnings?” Sherlock inquired.

“Why not?” Jale replied.

Along the sides of the ship a series of pseudo-windows appeared, pointed at the top and surmounted by black awnings that hung limply in a weatherless atmosphere.

As the hatch opened, the pair found themselves confronted by a suave figure. It had nicely coiffured hair, a pink face, an expensive suit and mahogany shoes. It could have been a walking advertisement for toupees, Clearasil, Tip-Top and designer clogs.

“Trantor Traffic Central,” said the apparition. “Are you here for business or pleasure?”

Jale, who had long ago learned never to mention anything remotely connected with work to anybody remotely connected with customs, replied “Pleasure.”

The official entered this, adding casually “There is a spaceport improvement fee payable by everybody arriving from off-planet.”

Jale whispered to Sherlock “Look small. We might be able to get you in for half price.” The android shrank, its cape a bunch of tinsel on the ground.

The official looked up and surveyed the android with suspicion.

“My dummy” said Jale. “A paradigm of the ventriloquist’s art.”

“Gottle of geer! Gottle of geer!” squawked the android, its head jerking mechanically.

The parking official sniffed and entered two payments. The amounts were exorbitant, but Jale paid using the code 4614513. The official walked away stiffly, his mahogany shoes clacking on

Interstellar Undertakers

the metal.

“I hope you get woodworm,” muttered Jale.

*

The companions navigated their way through a crowd of richly-dressed people. Jale himself had changed into a pair of indigo calf-length boots, a black leotard, and a dark-olive cloak with red lining. The blaster was snug in his crotch. But he did not anticipate trouble. Trantor was the most civilized place in the Galaxy, where crime was disdained as socially unacceptable, an attribute which over eons had led to its virtual eradication. However, the inhabitants of the planet seemed also to have lost other things. The sedentary lifestyle had produced a population that was meagre of build, and the lack of natural sunlight had rendered their faces sallow. By comparison, Jale looked like a sunburned savage.

His entourage, the newly-polished Sherlock Holmes android, levitated along behind, trying to keep up. “Where are we going?”

“We need information,” replied Jale. He stepped around a group of three women, unaware that their stares followed him with appreciation as he forged his way through the throng.

“Could we not just use the subether?”

“No” said Jale. “We need ancient information. We need books.”

They stopped in front of a massive building, on whose portico was inscribed EBLING MIS LIBRARY. Inside, they followed signs to the rare-book collection, and came up against a checkpoint.

“The collection is only for use by qualified scholars.” This from a middle-aged woman who regarded the outlandish pair with distrust from behind a console-covered counter.

Jale leant forward and entered a code into the library’s

Paul S. Wesson

directory. The woman watched the display, and her demeanor suddenly changed.

“*Doctor* Jale!” She whimpered: “Please forgive me. I did not recognize you.”

“That may be because you haven’t seen me before,” pointed out Jale reasonably.

“No, that’s true.” She was only slightly flustered, and ran her eyes over his body in a non-academic way. “But I see you now, and your biocode shows you to be highly qualified.”

“Qualified for what?” Jale countered, keeping up the banter.

The woman paused, then obviously deciding to take a chance, said “Anything you want ...”

She was now leaning over the counter, revealing unconstrained breasts that reminded Jale of dumplings on Dagobar (where the gravity is 10g). “We just want books.”

Her demeanor went halfway back to what it had been originally, but she released the barrier. “You will still have to be screened.”

They moved forward, but something attracted the woman’s attention and she said. “Dr. Jale! You have something between your legs.”

“Most men do,” called Jale over his shoulder.

“But the screen shows metal...”

“He likes to play hardball,” proffered Sherlock, following Jale into the depths of the library.

*

On the fortieth level underground, they eventually found what they wanted. Jale released the hermetic seal and preserving gas wafted into his face. The book, though old, was in remarkable condition. On its cover was printed *A History of Secret Societies*. Jale turned over the first few leaves of the book

Interstellar Undertakers

carefully and scanned the contents. Homing in on Chapter 6, he began to read.

The Holmes android moved off to investigate what else the stacks had to offer. The corridor along which he moved was flanked by millions of ancient tomes, their perspective dwindling in the distance. Nobody had been here in a long time, and a faint cloud of dust followed his progress. Pausing, he took down a volume. *Johnny Carson Reruns in Pangalactic History*. Well, that might be worth looking at later, but he replaced it and went in search of something more pithy. Coming to a break in the stacks that opened up another immensely long corridor, he paused and looked back before turning. Jale was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He looked more like a boy intent on his float during a fishing trip than a man engaged in a deadly search.

*

The Black Hand Gang is one of the most poorly documented of the quasi-masonic societies that flourished after the colonization of the Milky Way. We have outlined above how the BHG probably had its origins in other secret groups, but it rapidly became a dominant organization. Ostensibly, it was a philanthropic foundation. Its early days were marked by major donations from wealthy individuals on Acheron, who mistakenly believed that they were contributing anonymously to the spread of civilization in that sector of the Galaxy. However, reports began to come in that the Gang was in reality a front for organized crime. These reports were never confirmed, but the assassination of several members of Acheron aristocracy lent credence to them. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the BHG adopted a tactic that was typical of other criminal organizations of that era: simply remove anybody that was a threat.

Paul S. Wesson

Jale recrossed his legs. The blaster was irritating his scrotum, so he removed it from his leotards and put it on the floor. The history made him as uncomfortable as his posture.

The BHG came to an abrupt and mysterious end. Some workers have argued that this was due to the defection of one of its more powerful members on Acheron, where it certainly collapsed. Others have argued that the Black Hand Gang was taken over by the Black Spots, a Stevensonian group that specialized in intimidation. In the latter case, one could speculate that the BHG was not destroyed but merely transformed. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is the case that after ages of ruthless domination the BHG apparently disappeared.

Jale put down the book and rubbed his eyes. The lighting was dim, but a slight change in its quality made him stiffen.

“Sherlock?”

With a sudden twist, Jale rolled away from the book, which exploded into fire. He squeezed the trigger of the blaster, and the black figure reeled away, its visor melting.

But it was not down. A ray congealed the floor at Jale’s feet as his attacker struggled to stay upright. Ancient books avalanched into the corridor.

“Jale!” yelled Sherlock, rushing down the avenue holding a thick volume.

“Stay away!” Jale pressed the trigger again. A thin bolt issued from the gun. It passed through his assailant’s heart, burned a hole in the android’s book, and bounced off among the stacks.

The android came to rest beside the human, both looking down at the smoking wreck of something that was a combination.

“It’s always nice to have a quiet day at the library,” observed Jale.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Yes,” argued Sherlock. “Education is a wonderful thing.”

“What are you reading?”

The android held up the disfigured book, before tossing it onto the corpse. “The Holey Bible.”

Jale groaned.

*

They approached the exit to the library with caution. However, the woman at the checkpoint seemed unaware of events, and had regained her amorous good mood.

“Did you get what you wanted?”

“More than what I expected,” replied Jale circumspectly. “Incidentally, what’s your name?”

“Dewey” said the female.

“Because of your eyes?” asked Jale gently.

“No.” She seemed embarrassed. “My second name is Decimal. But most of my friends call me DD.”

“Well, DD,” said Jale. “Could you tell me who else entered the stacks after us?”

She looked at her monitor. “Only Professor Crisp.”

“Is he a powerful guy with armour and a black visor?”

The woman laughed. “No. He’s a tall, thin old man with a brown coat. He comes here often from the University. He had a case full of stuff that he could hardly carry.”

Jale pondered this. “I think there might be a vacancy on the faculty. There’s certainly a mess on the minus-40 level that needs to be cleaned up.”

“Oh.” She seemed uncertain, perhaps envisioning a pile of discarded notes.

“But I can make amends. What’s the best restaurant on Trantor?”

Paul S. Wesson

The woman's frown disappeared and she became coquettish.
“*The King's Corner.*”

“And the worst?”

Confused, she replied “Well, there's the *Purple Escargot...*
But it has a really bad reputation, and I've never been there.”

“See you later,” said Jale, moving off.

“But which one?” called DD.

However, Jale and Sherlock were gone. The game was afoot.

*

The University of Trantor turned out a million graduates annually, a few of whom actually knew what they were doing. Jale and Sherlock worked their way through hallways thronged with students who had that indefinable way of looking erudite and vacuous at the same time. Eventually, they halted in front of Professor Crisp's office.

“We're ahead of whatever passes for a police force here,” remarked Jale. “But we'll have to work fast. You keep a watch while I jimmy the door.”

“Jimmy?” asked Sherlock, looking puzzled as the other removed a crowbar from under his cape. “Please, Sir. Allow me.”

The android approached the door and displayed a complicated device. There was a bit of fiddling, and a click. The door opened. “I am, after all, a detective android.”

They entered a windowless room, all of whose walls were covered with tapes and old-fashioned books. The four corners contained dunes of ancient paper, through which a narrow wadi led to a cluttered desk. Behind the door were a couple of shelves that appeared to contain personal toiletries and medicine. The place reminded Jale of the principal's office at his old school. Pointing to the space behind the door, he said “You start over

Interstellar Undertakers

there. I'll do the desk."

Putting the crowbar on a pile of assignments, Jale quickly riffled through the material on the desk top. There was nothing out of the ordinary. Proceeding to the drawers, he was mildly surprised to find them unlocked. However, after searching them carefully, he sat back in defeat: there was nothing to connect Crisp to the Black Hand Gang.

"Anything?" asked Jale.

"Not so far," replied Sherlock. "Though there is a rather large amount of some peculiar medicine here."

"Hmm..." Jale's eyes moved around the office carefully. They would have to get out soon, and he disliked to leave empty-handed.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door. It swung inwards, concealing the android and revealing a sickly-looking youth. "Professor Crisp?"

The boy advanced into the office. He had sloping shoulders, a long neck and the look of someone who had the habit of asking favours. Acne did not exist on Trantor, but if it had the visitor would have been a prime candidate for a major dose.

"Professor Crisp is not in today," said Jale affably. He leant forward on the desk with a paternal air and clasped his hands. "Maybe I can be of service?"

The youth was uncertain. His eyes moved about nervously, and came to rest on the crowbar.

"A fine specimen," expounded Jale. "Ming dynasty." Putting the piece of iron aside, he began flipping through a pile of assignments professionally. "And your name is ...?"

"It's not about the old test," said the boy without answering his question. "It's about the new one. It appeared on my console today, but I don't understand it."

Jale looked around, but could see neither console nor

Paul S. Wesson

subether unit. Crisp might be a neo-luddite, he thought. He was wondering what to say when the visitor handed him a thin foil containing a long list of questions.

The moving hand, having writ, moves on. Not all your piety or wit...

“Omar Khyam,” offered Jale.

“I know that!” said the youth petulantly. “It’s the last one I can’t understand.”

Jale’s eye moved to the bottom of the sheet. The short block of text had the same format as the rest, but lacked a question number. It read:

Gene brother, now your time has come.

The common will must be done.

If not, then suffer life’s travails

And eat your fill of bruised snails.

“Curious,” said Jale. “Henry the Fifth, Act 10?”

“There isn’t an Act 10,” responded the boy with exasperation.

“But there might have been had Shakespeare lived longer,” pointed out Jale plausibly.

“Bah!” The visitor turned and left. But Jale hardly noticed. He was thinking.

*

The King’s Corner was indeed a sumptuous restaurant. Following calls to Dewey Decimal and the Maître D, Jale had rushed over but was late. The transtube that connected most places on Trantor ran in a vacuum at high speed, but this did not avoid delays caused by millions of people getting on and off.

Also, the underground transportation system had given him a closed-in feeling that was uncomfortable if not new. As a boy, he had once wandered off from his brother and friends to explore

Interstellar Undertakers

the inner reaches of a cave. Worn over ages by water running through joints in the limestone, the cave was like a staircase: horizontal and vertical sections, alternating but becoming progressively narrower. Eventually, Jale had found himself in a small cavity in the middle of a mountain. Sitting there with only the flickering light from his levibike for company, he had felt the first finger of claustrophobia. The air was dead, never breathed by anyone. The silence was profound. Suddenly, he had launched himself head-first down the channel; and scrambled back through the cave until he emerged, battered but thankful, into sunlight.

Now, he ran a finger around the inside of his wet collar. “Good evening, Pierre.”

“Good evening, Monsieur Jale.” You are a trifle retarded, *n’est pas?*”

“You mean, late” corrected Jale.

“Si,” confirmed the Maître D. “These nuances they get me all the time in the vocabulary.”

“Is my friend here?”

“She is waiting for you at the bar,” replied the other. “And afterwards your table is ready.” He gave a conspiratorial smirk. “She is beautiful, *non?*”

“No,” replied Jale honestly. “But she’s a nice person, and I owe her something.”

Threading his way through tuxedo-ringed tables, Jale approached the bar and sat. “I’m sorry I’m late, DD.”

She turned and gave him a smile. “That’s all right.” Then after a pause, “I wasn’t sure you would turn up.”

“I wasn’t sure *you* would turn up.”

“I always turn up,” she said. The gown she was wearing

Paul S. Wesson

obviously had nothing underneath it; but while studded with gems, was less opulent than others in the restaurant. A small sequined bag lay on the bar beside a large drink.

“You seem more relaxed than at work,” commented Jale.

“A job’s a job,” she replied. “You don’t have to enjoy it.”

Jale picked his words carefully. “When I called you, I was expecting a bit of a problem. Because of the mess we made.”

“That’s funny!” responded the woman. “Just after you left, a couple of janitors turned up. They said they had a clean-up on minus-40. I checked later, but all I could see was a scrape on the floor.”

Jale shifted in his seat. “Were they wearing black?”

“Yes,” she replied. “But lots of the janitors wear black. And anyway, let’s not talk about work.”

“Agreed,” Jale replied. “What’s that drink you have?”

“A gargle-blaster. My dad introduced me to them.”

“Your dad must have been pretty liberal.”

“He was,” replied the woman, a soft look coming into her face.

Jale signaled the bartender while Dewey rummaged in her bag. She drew out a locket, enclosing a picture of a dark-complexioned man with a strong jaw.

Jale examined it. “He wasn’t born on Trantor.”

“No,” confirmed the woman. “But this was the only place we could get the medical help he needed.” An edge of bitterness entered her voice as she said “It didn’t work.”

“Stasis?”

“We couldn’t afford it.”

“DNA replication?”

“I’m saving for it,” she replied seriously. “This conversation is getting too weighty too fast.”

Interstellar Undertakers

“Sorry,” said Jale, watching the barman approach. “A gargle-blaster, please.”

“Certainly, Sir,” replied the waiter, putting a large glass on the bar and beginning to fill it with various ingredients.

Jale looked around the restaurant, taking the indicated break. *The King’s Corner* was packed with rich people, apparently enjoying themselves. The warm air was full of the sounds of chinking cutlery and light laughter. There was only one table free, which Jale assumed was intended for them.

He turned back to see the barman sloshing grenadine into his drink. “That’s enough!” The red liquid seeped slowly to the bottom of the glass.

“You don’t like it?” asked DD.

“Only in moderation,” replied Jale.

“I love it,” she responded. “Here, let’s trade.”

They exchanged drinks in a renewed air of camaraderie. Toasting each other over the rims of their glasses, they each took a sip.

Jale’s drink was sweet and pungent. DD’s drink seemed to be stronger, for as she swallowed it an inquiring look appeared on her face.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jale.

The woman opened her mouth, but only a croak came out. Her hands started to move. One went to her stomach, the other to her sequined bag. She tried to get off the bar stool and head for the washroom, but collapsed. The contents of the bag scattered across the floor.

Jale dropped down and held up the woman’s head. In the restaurant, the sounds of cutlery and laughter had stopped. People stared. He shook the woman, but her eyes were already glassy. “Damm!”

Jale jumped up, looking for the barman. He had disappeared.

GASTROPODS

The metal pathway was stained with grease from the feet of workers. On either side were piled the skeletons of ships that had once travelled interstellar space but were now fodder for the wrecker's torch. Reprocessed, their elements would appear again in the shiny causeways of the better-class areas of Trantor. But presently the ships gradually decayed, in a neighborhood where the average citizen did not venture. In the distance, a gaudy sign proclaimed the location of the *Purple Escargot*.

Jale paused. On one side were the remains of a Betelgeuse Beetle, its hull ripped open where somebody had removed the modest motor, perhaps to power a rich child's sportster. On the other side lay the corroded engine from a Delta class torpedo boat, the cusps devoid of their neodymium coatings and full of some dark liquid. Deliberately, Jale dipped his hands into the fluid, and wiped them on his cape. He did this several times, adding a dash across his forehead. Finally, he picked at his finger nails until they were suitably broken, and dragged them across the ground until each harboured a layer of grime.

"Your turn, Sherlock."

The android smeared itself with the oily liquid from the discarded engine. A handful of rust, thrown in the air, stuck on its descent and made the android look appropriately tarnished.

The two surveyed each other critically in the dim light.

"Jale," said the android, "can I have the crowbar?"

"Of course," replied the human, handing it over. The man had already stowed the blaster in a place where he could easily get it, and where the bulge in his cape would be a deterrent to the kind of person who would notice such a thing.

"Excuse me," said Sherlock. Carefully, it used the chisel end

Interstellar Undertakers

of the crowbar to make three rips in the hem of Jale's cape.

"That looks better."

"You can keep the crowbar," said Jale.

"Thanks."

"Are we ready?"

"I believe so," replied the android nervously. "Have filth, will travel."

*

Jale's tactics were predicated on logic, not revenge. The desire for the latter had been mitigated by money. Earlier, he had dipped into the 4614513 account. Using the ID he had picked up from the floor of the restaurant, Dewey Decimal and her father Waldemar Decimal were now set up for DNA replication. Nevertheless, he was annoyed.

*

The door of the *Purple Escargot* opened automatically and a gust of sweaty air greeted them. They stepped forward; and a surveillance device, deciding they were not police, closed the door behind them.

"Check out the washrooms," growled Jale. "And try to find out if there's another exit."

The android moved off, while Jale walked forward.

There were two steps down into a surprisingly large room. The carpet, once embossed, had been worn smooth by countless feet, though some texture was supplied by the occasional burn hole. Jale walked forward slowly, kicked aside a discarded bottle, and looked around.

To his right, a bar ran almost the whole length of the room. At either end, brass rods screened off areas where waitresses came and went with orders. The two waiters who filled the

Paul S. Wesson

orders looked wooden. They moved up and down behind the counter like shuttles, never overlapping in the no-man's land at the centre of the bar. Stools were arranged in two groups, most of them occupied. The clients were all male, most of them staring either into their drinks or at their own reflections in the mirrors that lined the wall.

To his left, tables occupied most of the floor. They were square, standing on rickety legs which might or might not have accounted for the fact that their tops were blotchy with spilled booze. Here the clientele was a mixture of males and females. The former were in various states of jollity due to liquor, while most of the latter were trying to shorten their life spans with the aid of smoke.

Ahead, at the far end of the room, was a stage. Through the haze, it was possible to discern a well-proportioned girl who danced to a thudding melody. The stage was surrounded by chairs, most of which were occupied by men whose drinks were in danger of being kicked in their faces by the danseuse.

Jale liked the place.

However, he was here on business; and as he moved forward his eyes were wary. In the murk of the left-hand corner of the room, he saw Sherlock emerge from the female washroom and sidle along the wall. There was an ambidextrous door there, presumably leading to a kitchen.

Jale slid into one of the seats in front of the stage. The dancer, now minus her top, gave him a quick smile. She was relatively short, but with an athletic body and a mop of gleaming yellow hair. He looked on appreciatively, noting out of the corner of his eyes that two people were approaching.

The first to arrive was a waitress. Unlike the dancer, she had spiky black hair and a hard expression. But this was a situation that was common throughout low-class places in the Galaxy: the

Interstellar Undertakers

genetically endowed were on stage, and the less endowed slung beer. Jale gave the waitress a welcoming look, and her mouth quirked.

“Whaddya want to drink?”

“Rigellian Red,” answered Jale, who had screened what was on tap at the bar.

She walked away without reply, to be replaced by the second arrival. The chair by his side creaked, and Jale turned casually. He saw a massive person whose shirt seemed about to burst over a bulging chest that sported a gold ornament. The skin was smooth, but the hair on the chest and the head was artificially white. A pair of cold eyes would have melted any smile, so Jale just stared at him.

The bouncer stared back.

Jale moved slightly in his chair, revealing the bulge of what was concealed beneath his cape.

The bouncer’s gaze shifted to the stage. So did that of Jale. A short while later, a creak from the adjoining chair indicated the departure of his neighbour.

A big glass of red beer was placed before him. Jale relaxed, looking forward to the rest of the show.

*

Sherlock, in the kitchen, was puzzled. Tacked onto the rear of the *Purple Escargot*, the food place appeared to be typical of those that made short-order meals. There was an atomic fryer, a broiler, a pastry oven and several other pieces of equipment that the android recognized from the *Excelsior*. However, most of them seemed never to have been used to prepare meals. Contrariwise, they contained residues of some substance that his circuits could not analyse.

Intent on further investigation, Sherlock levitated around an

Paul S. Wesson

old-fashioned refrigerator, and found himself looking at a mechanoid wielding a meat cleaver.

“Health inspector!” said the android.

“Rah!” said the mechanical, and swung the cleaver.

*

Jale’s companions along the stage were paying only listless attention to the dancer, who was still partially clothed. One of the patrons, better dressed than the others, was fiddling with a portable subether unit. The dancer provokingly entered something on the unit as she gyrated by, causing the man to frown. The next person along had a shiny bald head, on which she planted a wet kiss. He at least appreciated the attention and gave a broad grin. The next two chairs were occupied by composites with strange physiologies. They breathed some artificial mixture, small puffs of exhaust coming from apertures in their necks. The dancer wrinkled up her nose in disgust, though spent enough time in front of them that the visitors could appreciate the anatomy of the human female.

She arrived in front of Jale, slid down onto the worn carpet, and put her foot behind her head. A pretty face was framed by a slim and well-formed leg. “Hello”

“Hello,” replied Jale neutrally.

He picked up his beer, and the girl glanced at his fingers.

“Are you a mechanic?”

“Only when necessary,” said Jale. “Mostly I deal with corpses.”

She did not know quite how to respond to this. “You’re not a cop are you?”

“No.” The slight tone of contempt in his voice seemed to reassure her, but the conversation stopped as the music stopped. The thudding dance beat was replaced by a slow and artistic

Interstellar Undertakers

piece of music. The girl rolled slowly around the stage, caressing her own breasts and thighs. Arriving back in front of Jale, she lay on her back with her head over the edge of the stage and started to massage her pubis. “Do you know how to fix a selenium drive?”

Jale laughed. “They don’t make them any more.”

“That’s not what I asked,” said the upside-down face. She had perfect teeth and her thick blonde hair brushed his lap.

Suddenly a look of fear came into her eyes and she rolled away, to continue her slow dance at the other side of the stage. The chair beside Jale again creaked.

“Enjoying the show?” asked the bouncer.

“I was,” replied Jale.

There was a silence. “The management doesn’t like it when patrons talk too much to the girls.”

“And who’s the management?” asked Jale.

“I am.”

Jale somewhat doubted this, but asked “And what do the girls think about it?”

“They don’t think,” replied the bouncer. “They just dance.”

Jale noticed that the waitress was watching them apprehensively from near the bar. His glass was two-thirds empty. He waved casually to indicate that he wanted a refill – then dumped the rest into his neighbour’s lap.

The bouncer yelled and started to rise from his chair, a look of fury distorting his features. Jale also started to get up, his hand moving under his cape. But two clicks from behind froze the fight. The composites stared at the humans, from unreadable eye-slits over the barrels of alien weapons. For an appreciable time, everybody stayed still.

Then Jale sat down, the composites slid their guns out of view, and the bouncer stalked off.

Paul S. Wesson

Jale watched him go, dripping, and made sure that the waitress had pulled his new mug of beer before the bouncer got to the bar. She wound her way through the tables towards the stage. The dancer was still performing, and most of the people in the restaurant were so inebriated that they had not noticed the exchange. But the waitress was clearly frightened. "Don't mess with him," she whispered as she put down his glass. "He's bad."

Jale grunted. Picking up his beer, he turned to the two composites and said "Cheers."

They regarded him silently, their breathing only indicated by puffs of vapour from their necks that alternated and gave the atmosphere a peculiar tang. Were they friends or enemies or neither?

Finally one of them leaned over, and said in voicebox mode "We want your brain."

"I'm kind of using it myself," replied Jale carefully. He kept an eye on the two aliens, but also noticed that the dancer had shed her last garment.

Something like conversation passed between the two composites. "You do not understand," said the nearest. "My companion is part mechanical and part biological. His brain is made of human tissue and is failing."

"So?" said Jale. "There are lots of body shops around."

"We have no pesatas," replied the alien.

"Money," corrected Jale. Then added "Stealing a brain usually involves the death of the donor."

"We are aware of that."

Jale started to get an uncomfortable feeling. The dancer was coming to the end of her act, doing a slow and spiritual imitation of orgasm. She had not come down his end of the stage recently, and on the edge of his vision Jale could see the bouncer standing in the shadows.

Interstellar Undertakers

“We were intending to acquire your aggressor’s brain,” continued the composite. “But quantity does not make up for quality.”

“Thanks,” Jale acknowledged. “Do I have an opinion on this?”

There was another quasi-conversion between the aliens. “We will give you a choice. Your aggressor has two companions behind the bar, which may potentially be a problem in attempting to possess his brain. But the situation would be balanced if you agreed to help us.”

Jale stared at the two composites. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” replied the other. “Deadly serious in all meanings.”

“And what if I don’t help you?”

“Then we will take your brain.”

Jale wondered briefly if the beer had not addled his synapses. There appeared to be a three-cornered contretemps involved here. The bouncer was certainly laying for him, with two helpers. The composites wanted his brain and had weapons to back up their desire – unless he agreed to a mental hijacking. The other corner of the situation was the dancer with the broken vehicle, who was smiling at him from between open legs over a beautiful wisp of pubic hair.

*

The cleaver went Thuk! into the floor and Sherlock took a step back. The mechanoid paused, trying to extract the knife from the floor. Its iron arms strained as it levered the weapon out and hate shone from its red eyes. It was much more powerful than the lightly-built android, and the latter knew it.

Standing by the old refrigerator, Sherlock saw the mechanoid raise the cleaver and lunge. At the last instant, he opened the

Paul S. Wesson

door of the fridge and there was a tremendous crash as metal met metal.

Chickens and turkeys, half thawed, spilled across the floor. Avoiding these, Sherlock stepped around the door and hit the mechanoid on the head with the crowbar. To make sure, he picked up the biggest turkey and squashed it down on the other's skull.

*

In the trendy part of Trantor, the parking attendant was unaware of the situation developing at the *Purple Escargot*. Indeed, his attention was fixed on the meter that timed how long the *Rigor Mortis* had been there. The ship, to his eyes, was distasteful: a long black shape, streamlined perhaps, but missing patches of paint on its underside; and the awnings that hung over the pointy pseudo-windows were in bad taste; as were the oversized fusion chambers that stuck out of the craft's stern.

The meter read 00:00:00. Dutifully, the parking attendant stepped forward in his mahogany shoes and started to prepare a citation.

There was a click from inside the ship, followed by a humming sound. The black awnings retracted and the windows faded to black smoothness. The *Rigor Mortis* shifted on its pad and started to rotate.

The parking meter collapsed in a molten mess and the attendant ran away with burnt clogs.

*

Jale pushed open the door of the washroom and was assaulted by the smell of male urine. It was a primitive place, and even sported a vending machine for actinolite condoms. These must apparently have been nutritious, because the machine

Interstellar Undertakers

was adorned with pictures of girls sticking things in their mouths.

He passed the unflushed urinals with their yellow pools, and entered one of the stalls. The lock was old, but he used it to seal the door. The toilet was a massive affair of white metal. It would have fetched a minor fortune from a scrap dealer, or alternatively have kept *Galactic Molly Maids* in business for ages. The lid had long ago gone missing, so he sat on the discoloured rim. Removing his boots, he placed them strategically on the floor in front of the toilet. Then he clambered over the partition into the adjoining stall.

Standing on the rim of the second toilet, with the stall door left open a chink, Jale took out his blaster.

He did not have long to wait. The outer door opened slowly and a bulky figure entered, bearing a gun. The bouncer glanced under the door and an evil grin appeared on his face. The gun spat plasma. Jale's boots went up in a puff of smoke and the door of the first stall disintegrated into boiling metal. Unfortunately, a blob of this rebounded from the floor and hit Jale on the ankle. Losing his balance, he fell off the toilet, crashed through the door, and fell sprawling under the wash basin. An antique sign above it said *Now Wash Your Hands*.

The bouncer was amazed at not seeing a body in the toilet stall and swung around in disbelief. But Jale's blaster was out of reach, and his aggressor automatically raised his weapon to finish the job.

It is at times like these that Fate, having dealt bad tricks to an individual for a while, changes and rewards him with a modest shot of luck. More scientifically, the Anthropic Principle implies that he who suffers too much ill-fortune will not be around to discuss it. Anyway, at this instant the door of the washroom banged open and the composites entered.

The leading one fired a blast, but it missed any human target.

Paul S. Wesson

Instead, the condom machine exploded and a large, circular hole appeared in the wall.

Not knowing whose side the composites were on, Jale grabbed his blaster and crawled through the hole.

He entered another washroom, full of terrified women. One such, emerging from a stall, ran screaming past him with her underpants around her ankles.

There was another blast from behind. It enlarged the hole between the male and female washrooms and opened up another one in the opposite wall. Its force sent debris surging into the air.

Jale, slightly delusional, staggered to his feet. His ankle throbbed with a peculiar insistence and the screams of the women were nerve-wracking. Flicking back his torn cloak, he raised his hands to the grimy ceiling and yelled "Repent! Repent! Only then shall ye receive this manna from heaven." Around him, singed condoms rained to the ground.

*

The Sherlock Holmes android was sitting quietly amid chickens and turkeys, finishing an analysis, when a circular hole appeared in the kitchen wall. Shortly after, Jale ducked through and ran limping down the length of the room.

"Any luck?" inquired Sherlock politely.

"No," barked Jale. "They're just heathens."

"You're hurt," observed the android.

"What's this?" demanded the human, ignoring the comment.

"A poultry convention?"

"Sir," insisted Sherlock, "you are seriously hurt. You have lost an appendage."

Jale looked down, and noted dully that he was minus a left foot. A trail of arterial blood led backwards from the refrigerator to the hole in the kitchen wall. Through the latter could be heard

Interstellar Undertakers

the concussion of a gunfight.

“I’ll hop,” asserted Jale. And proceeded to jump on one foot muttering in rhythm “Tomkinson, Tomkinson, Tomkinson...”

He got as far as the back door, where he fell and was caught by Sherlock.

*

The *Rigor Mortis* was a black shape moving through gloom. Preprogrammed, it navigated through the hulks of its cousins and settled behind the wreck of the Betelgeuse Beetle. Flickering light reflected off corroded metal, coming from a large sign in the shape of a snail that smiled.

*

Sherlock dragged Jale out of the back door of the *Purple Escargot* into a scene of chaos. People were running in all directions, looking for their vehicles or just trying to get away from the fight that was going on inside. A levicar whizzed past the pair driven by a disheveled lady, and crashed into the fence that separated the wrecker’s yard from the restaurant. Remarkably, the driver managed to keep the vehicle going. It flattened a segment of the fence and vanished amid the old spaceships. A burly mechanic, with a wrench in one hand and a bottle of purloined whiskey in the other, skidded to a halt in front of them.

“Is it a raid?” he demanded of Sherlock. Then, not waiting for a reply: “Your buddy’s hurt.”

Jale grabbed the bottle of whiskey and took a swig. “Why am I always the one to get clobbered?”

“Because you lack a sense of reck, Jale,” replied Sherlock. The mechanic had vanished into the gloom, taking his whiskey with him. “Who is Tomkinson?”

Paul S. Wesson

“Champion, school hopping race,” replied Jale briefly.

The door from which they had emerged burst open, and the two composites ran out. One of them held the head of the bouncer by its white hair. The other held the gold ornament that had adorned the victim’s chest.

Jale fumbled for his blaster and Sherlock took out his crowbar. But there was no need.

“Your help was significant,” said the second composite. “My colleague will live. Here.”

The half-machine, half-human tossed the gold chain and its pendant to Jale, who caught it clumsily.

The back door of the restaurant banged open yet again, and one of the barmen ran out bearing a sawn-off fusegun. The composite directed a blast. The fusegun blew up in a blinding coruscation and its owner fell writhing to the ground.

Blinking away the spots on his retina, Jale saw that a leviship had stopped in front of them.

“Do either of you gents know how to fix a selenium drive?”

Sherlock said “They don’t make them any more.”

“That’s not what I *asked!*” The female voice was angry, and scared. “Get in!”

They tumbled into the back seat as the second barman ran out and started shooting indiscriminately. People screamed. There was a surge of power, a hiccup, and more power. The girl’s leviship headed for the gap in the fence. Sherlock leaned back, and flipped the cover of the motor chamber. One of the two ancient selenium piles had a broken connection. He shorted the piles together with the crowbar, and the ship jumped forward.

“Careful!” yelled Jale as the ship scraped between the standing edges of the fence and just missed an atomic derelict. “Are you trying to kill all of us?”

“No,” replied the girl. “Only you.”

Interstellar Undertakers

Jale grunted. His left foot hurt no more, but with his right he could feel the slippery layer on the floor that indicated a continuing hemorrhage. Behind, bright lights filled the sky. But they were not all from the lot behind the restaurant. Sparks were flying out of the ship's motor compartment. He looked in, and saw that the crowbar was carrying too much power and was evaporating.

"Are you all right?" asked the girl with sudden concern.

"No," replied Jale honestly. The wrecks in the scrapyard loomed up, floated past and were sucked into the darkness. He felt dizzy. "Got anything?"

She flipped open the glove compartment. Jale, who had been expecting a first-aid kit, found a flask of gin thrust into his hand.

"*Deja vu*," said Jale, thinking of the *Excelsior*.

"Who's that?" she asked. "An old girlfriend?"

"No," replied Jale. "A state of mind. When it comes on, it's *Deja vu*."

"You just said that!" There was a renewed note of irritation in her voice.

Jale, giving up on that tack, took another drink of gin. The crowbar was now almost burnt through. He said "Turn left."

She started to turn right.

"Left, *left!*"

"I know! *I know!*" she yelled. Then, placatingly. "I never could get the hang of left and right. And anyway, who cares?"

"I do," replied Jale seriously. There was a fizz from the motor compartment. Then two clangs as the ends of the crowbar fell to the deck. The leviship stopped.

"Oh crud!" said the girl as the vehicle sank. "What do we now?"

"Get out," replied Jale.

The girl jumped lithely to the ground. Sherlock, his

Paul S. Wesson

levitation unit at maximum, helped Jale down. Around them, the silent hulks of once splendid ships made a jagged horizon. They had landed near an old Orion class battle cruiser. Its massive plating formed a multifaceted cliff that cut off most of the light from the *Purple Escargot*. As he ran his eyes over the enormous ravaged hull, Jale was reminded of a line from an old school poem: *The Old Superb was barnacled, and green as grass below. It's bones were only fit for stirring grog.* He drew the tattered remnants of his cloak around him, feeling somewhat vulnerable. The girl, only dimly visible by her golden hair, shivered. The Sherlock Holmes android gleamed softly.

Suddenly, another patch of light appeared in the shadows. A large mechanical guard-dog loped towards them. Its flanks were metal and its fangs were hypodermics, designed to neutralize any form of biological trespasser.

“Aha,” said Sherlock. “The Hound of the Bonkervilles.”

“Baskervilles,” Jale corrected.

The dog, sound-activated, was already in the air. At the end of an enormous leap it grabbed the android by the throat. The two went down in a cloud of rust, thrashing about in a deadly struggle. The hound howled and the android bleated. Jale reached for his blaster. The dog tried to inject its prey with venom from its teeth, but meeting resistance deployed razor-edged claws.

Jale shot it.

They gathered around the corpse. The girl, shaking but with aplomb, kicked the metal-shod body. “Is it dead?”

“Apparently,” replied Jale, who by loss of blood and gain of gin was feeling woozy.

“There could be more,” pointed out Sherlock, rearranging his cloak and hat. “Let’s go.”

They picked their way through the scrapped spaceships until

Interstellar Undertakers

a darker shape ahead caused them to pause. There was the sound of an airlock opening.

Jale, welcoming the warmth and smells of the *Rigor Mortis*, felt his way to the pilot's seat. Sherlock followed and sat in the copilot's place. The girl hesitated as she passed the coffin in the hold, but then followed the pilots to the cabin.

Jale said "Motors?"

Sherlock said "Megamotors to power! Ready to move out!"

The android was wearing a stupid smile that made the human wonder if androids had adrenaline and could experience euphoria.

Jale was feeling increasingly faint. "Do you remember how to fly this thing?"

"Sir!" The android looked offended. "I have a plethora of licenses, including a B2."

"That's for an atomic-powered lawn-mower," pointed out Jale. However, the *Rigor Mortis* was already moving under Sherlock's guidance.

As the ship lifted out of the shadows of the surrounding hulks, it was illuminated by the sign in front of the *Purple Escargot*. Jale said over his shoulder. "I forgot to say that I liked your dance."

"Thanks," replied the girl in a flat voice.

"What's your name?"

"Vestal."

Jale thought this over. "Is that all?"

"I have another name."

"Does it start with Vee?"

"Yes," she replied.

"And are you?" asked Jale.

"You'd be surprised," said the girl.

The *Rigor Mortis* moved forward. Ahead and below, there

Paul S. Wesson

was still fighting around the *Purple Escargot*. It looked as if the Trantor police force had arrived but were resented by the restaurant's working-class clientele. Jale indicated to Sherlock that he should avoid the conflict.

The ship turned sideways and upwards. There was a blast of energy from the motors. Part of it caught the illuminated sign outside the restaurant, melting it and causing a distinct change of expression. Unaware that they had made Galactic history, they left behind the *Sneering Snail* and headed into space.

SHOPPING LIST

Jale emerged from the shower, his metallic left foot clinking on the deck. Recovered from a box of odds in the ship's workshop, it had originally belonged to a mechanoid that worked on space stations. At every step, the in-built magnetic coil made the foot attach itself to the deck, so Jale walked Chesterishly into the cabin. Flopping down, he noticed that Vestal was curled up on the other divan. She wore a furry coat closed with wooden toggles, and as far as Jale could ascertain, nothing else.

"What happened to your clothes?" she asked sullenly.

Jale, also feeling somewhat grumpy in the aftermath, picked off the fate of his various belongings on his fingers. "Cloak with oil and rips, down the disposall. Leotard with irreparable hole in crotch due to blaster, ditto. Boots blown up."

Vestal said, practically "We need to do some shopping. This coat is the only thing I got away with."

"Come now," said Jale. "You got away with something else intact, didn't you?"

She regarded him coolly, then said "Yes. That bouncer hassled me every day, and I hated him." She made a half-smile. "Thanks."

"Nothing to thank for," replied Jale. "You did your part."

"So," said Vestal, "we need clothes. I need everything, including underwear."

"Crotchless panties are hard to get in this spiral arm of the Galaxy." Jale was in a slightly combative state.

"All right," conceded the girl. "What about a set of cedar-twig self-levitating lawn furniture?"

"*What* about it?" growled Jale. "We could have a bonfire with it." Then, in a frank tone. "I've been nearly killed twice in

recent history, and I'm beginning to think that my luck may run out."

"The Black Hand Gang were on Trantor, weren't they?"

"Of course," replied Jale. "Professor Crisp was one, and your bouncer friend was one." Jale picked up the ornament that the composites had given him. It was a pretty thing, sculptured in the shape of a hand with spread fingers. One side showed gold, the other was painted black. "This business is more serious than I thought."

Vestal suddenly leaned across to him, and put a delicate hand on a hairy knee. The coat opened part way, revealing pert breasts. Her eyes looked into his. "Jale?"

"Yes?"

"We still need to go shopping."

They laughed, bringing Sherlock into the cabin. The android appraised the scene and said "May I have a word with you, Jale, about a problem in the hold?"

"Naturally." Jale got up and followed Sherlock rearwards in the ship. They entered the hold, and the android carefully sealed the door.

"What's the problem in the hold?"

"None," replied the android. "I need to talk to you *in* the hold, about a problem."

"Oh," said the human, puzzled.

"It's about Vestal Virgin," said Sherlock. "Do you realize that she could be a plant?"

"I doubt it," replied Jale. "No chlorophyll."

"Sir! I am trying to be serious."

"Sorry." Jale collated his thoughts. "She was scared where she was; she escaped under fire; and she helped us get away. But you don't trust her?"

Interstellar Undertakers

“I don’t know if she is trustworthy or not,” answered Sherlock. “But we need to find out more about her.”

Jale reluctantly nodded.

“We need to do an ID check, including planet of origin, lineage and DNA classification. Let’s go and grill her!”

“Sherlock,” remonstrated Jale, “there are more subtle ways. Let me just chat with her.”

The android looked miffed, but acquiesced. Then it shifted approach. “Also, Jale, the girl covets your wedding machinery.”

Jale looked down at this naked body. It was warm in the *Rigor Mortis*, especially when it was running as now at high power through subspace. He was used to walking around with little or no clothing, and had no hangups about nudity. True, he was usually alone on the ship, but even with the present passenger, there was a powerful fact that the android seemed to have missed. “Vestal is a stripper.”

“Correct,” acknowledged the android. “But even so, I feel you should constrain your gonadal appeal.”

Sherlock rummaged in a bin, and pulled out an item that he handed to Jale. It had short arms, short legs and was made of some sort of cloth with red and white horizontal stripes.

Jale looked at it, thinking of swimming pools, and said “You want me to wear *this*?”

Sherlock replied “It is the last piece of clothing on the ship.”

Dubiously, Jale looked the garment over. In the collar was a faded label that said *Captain Webb*. Slowly pulling on the suit, Jale found that it fit snugly. However, he still somewhat resented Sherlock’s prudish protectiveness. “Haven’t you ever had a questionable female companion?”

The android paused as it unsealed the hold door. Acute eyes took on a programmed look of misty remembrance. “Actually, I

Paul S. Wesson

once was involved in a scandal in Bohemia. To me, Irene Adler will always be *the* woman.”

*

Jale looked at Vestal and Vestal looked at Jale. Sherlock levitated in the background, making out a list.

Jale said “One biological left foot.” Wearily, he detached the magnetic hand-me-down from the deck and stretched his leg out on the sofa.

Vestal said “A dozen black frilly panties.” She had no opinion as to whether they should be crotchless or crotchfull.

Jale said “Two dozen pairs of identical black socks.” That way, it did not matter if one or more got lost in the wash.

Vestal said “*Three* dozen pairs of gold-lamé...”

Sherlock interrupted. “Sir and Mam. This is not an auction.” He turned to the girl. “Vestal?” There was a pause. “You don’t mind if I refer to you as Vestal, do you?”

“No,” she replied innocently. “It’s my name.”

“Very well,” said the android. “It occurs to me that we have a limited budget for clothes, and that there may be more important items than those made of gold lamé. For example, what about a peephole bra?”

Jale looked at Sherlock with new respect. Vestal said “I don’t wear a bra. You know that, Sherls.”

*

Jale and Sherlock pored over the analyses from their stay on Trantor. Jale’s hummocky hair hung low over a frown.

Sherlock’s aquiline features showed bafflement.

“It almost seems to be *anti-DNA*” said the android. “Unfortunately, neither my programs nor that of the ship can decipher the codes.”

Interstellar Undertakers

“What do you recommend?” asked Jale. The Victorian swimsuit was itchy, and he got up from the ship’s laboratory bench and began to walk around.

“I suggest we couple to the Selipon computer and do a proper analysis.”

Jale looked doubtful. It was true that the computer at the hub of the Milky Way contained all known human knowledge, but in a galaxy of a million million planets new things were being discovered constantly. There was also another problem, reminiscent of an earlier one that had been solved by rerouting some of the android’s circuits. “If we couple to Selipon, then in principle the Black Hand Gang could trace us.”

“That is correct,” agreed Sherlock. “But without the data, we will not be able to locate the Gang’s origin.”

Jale pondered this, then said “You are largely right, and we may have to contact Selipon. But there’s another line we can follow.” He tossed the gold ornament from the beheaded bouncer onto the bench. “Do an analysis of this, and tell me where the metal came from.”

*

Vestal picked up the glass of whisky from the table and asked “Is there any mix?”

“Gin,” replied Jale.

She laughed slightly, her hand warming the tumbler. He noticed that the top joint of the right middle finger was a slightly different colour from the others. She proffered: “A dog bit it off when I was a kid.”

“What did you do with the dog?”

“Nothing,” she answered. “It was partly my fault. I’d been teasing him.”

Jale took a sip of his own drink. “It’s a good job of

Paul S. Wesson

reattachment.”

“No,” she said. “The dog swallowed my own finger. This was cloned.”

“Expensive,” commented Jale.

“No,” she said again. “It didn’t cost anything. My mother was having an affair with the surgeon at the local hospital.”

Her tone had become brittle. Jale said nothing, looking at his metallic left foot and wondering what the cloned replacement would cost.

“Have you got parents?” Vestal asked eventually.

“Dead,” replied Jale shortly.

“Brothers and sisters?”

“I had a brother,” replied Jale carefully. “He was assassinated.”

“Oh,” said the girl. A shadow of concern passed over her face. Then “I have one sister, two step-sisters and two step-brothers.”

“Interesting,” said Jale. “Who did your mother marry?”

“She didn’t marry anyone!” flared the girl. “After my father left, she took in a series of male turds. Most of them abused me and my real sister, and they left us with a family too big to feed properly.”

The girl’s face was set in a hard mask, but she was still in control. Jale asked gently “Where’s your father?”

“I don’t know.” The sadness in her voice was painful to hear, but she did not cry.

“Where’s your mother?”

“I don’t care,” she replied with a tone like quietly flowing acid.

Jale got up to replenish his drink. Turning, he asked “Another?”

Interstellar Undertakers

“Why not?” she replied. Then after a pause. “You grew up in cities, didn’t you?”

Jale nodded.

“I can see,” said Vestal. “You’ve got that *I-need-people-around-me* kind of attitude.”

Jale did not completely agree with this, but kept quiet. The girl was becoming garrulous, and he surreptitiously locked the liquor supply. “And where did you grow up?”

“In the country, mostly. After my father disappeared, my mother bought an old schoolhouse. It wasn’t really big enough, but she got a friend to raise the roof and add a second storey. That was free, of course.” Bitterness turned to softness. “We kept animals on what had been the old playing field. Goats and pigs mostly. We also had a flock of geese. One of them was called Molly and it only had one leg. It was kind of a pet.”

“Yes?” prompted Jale.

“We had to eat it,” she replied.

“And then?”

“I moved out,” she continued. “I was sick of my mother’s boyfriends, and sick of bringing up my brothers and sisters.”

“Where did you go?”

“To a big farm not far away. They gave me a job, training horses.”

“That sounds all right,” said Jale. He was still sober, but the girl looked drunk. “And then what?”

“Nothing.” A dead tone had entered her speech. “I didn’t want boyfriends much. And I didn’t want children.”

“Why?” asked Jale.

The girl looked at him blearily from tired eyes under limp hair, but her weary voice had a bitter edge. “Isn’t there already enough misery in the Galaxy?”

Paul S. Wesson

Jale stood up and limped aft to the laboratory, leaving Vestal to her memories.

*

Sherlock, with his deerstalker hat turned sideways, wiped imaginary sweat from his brow and looked up. "I think I've got it."

Jale looked at the paraphernalia strewn across the bench, among which lay the miniature hand.

"The black colour is not paint, but an alloy of nickel," explained the android. "The gold also contains traces of nickel. I believe this was manufactured on Nickelodeon."

"But the mines there are worked out," objected Jale. "They are only occupied these days by monks."

Sherlock shrugged. "I cannot be sure that the ornament was made there, but I can guarantee that the metal came from there. The proton spin structure is unique."

Jale felt the whiff of history. He crossed to the screen and punched up a series of star charts. The old mining world was in an obscure corner of the spiral arm, with several more advanced planets along the route.

"I can still contact the Selipon computer," offered Sherlock.

"No," said Jale, reaching a decision. "Set course for Nickelodeon via Spree."

"Spree?" queried the android.

"Yes. We need to go shopping."

*

The *Rigor Mortis* came to rest on the edge of a vast landing field. There were innumerable other ships of various designs, reflecting light from an enormous illuminated tower in the distance. This stood atop a gigantic structure that was utterly

Interstellar Undertakers

devoid of architectural value.

Jale stepped out of the airlock and promptly barked his shin on a levitating piece of machinery. It bore the inscription: IT IS UNLAWFUL TO REMOVE SHOPPING CARTS FROM THE PARKING LOT.

Jale cursed, and was about to kick the thing, when he had a better idea. “Vestal, get in.”

“In *that*?” she objected.

“Or else we can spend half our natural lives walking to the shops,” said Jale. He clambered into the cart, which sank lower. The light from the tower picked out the red and white stripes of his old-fashioned costume vividly.

Vestal climbed in with easy movements but with a reluctant frown under her mop of yellow hair. She drew the furry coat about her and did up the toggles.

They sat uncomfortably rigid in the cart, trying not to upset it. Sherlock applied pressure and they glided off.

“Look Mom!” exclaimed a child as they passed. “Galactic Joe and Galactic Barbie. Can I have one?”

“No,” replied the harassed mother. “Anyway, they’re being returned. They look pretty defective.”

Jale growled and started to say something unkind, but they were already out of ear range as Sherlock applied maximum power from under his cape. The cart careened around parked ships, scraping only a couple, and they covered the distance to the mall in a fraction of the time it would have otherwise taken.

“Brakes!” yelled Jale as they sped up to the entrance. But too late. They crashed into a collection of other carts outside the entrance and were precipitated to the ground.

Jale arose, dusted himself off, and found himself in front of a mechanoid with an ingratiating smile.

“Welcome to Spree.”

Paul S. Wesson

“You’re welcome to it as well!” muttered Jale and stomped inside.

He was followed by a surly Vestal and a guilty-looking Sherlock.

“I hate shopping,” said Jale, as they entered the din created by a million crazed consumers.

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” said the girl, starting to brighten as her eyes surveyed the myriad of shops in front of them. “Look!”

She pointed excitedly to a store full of lingerie. He followed her directive, and noticed a prominent display featuring a cross-over bra. For three breasts.

Jale set his teeth. “Let’s split up.” Shopping for him was like torture, and shopping with a woman doubly so. “We can meet back here when we’ve each got our stuff.”

There was a saloon nearby. It bore the inscription *Desperate Dan’s*, and sported a pair of massive horns over the entrance. Next to it was a cafe called *The Tea Shoppe*, wherein elderly women could be seen chattering in bird-like groups.

“All right,” agreed Vestal. She was now happy with enthusiasm. “Let’s meet for a drink later.” She disappeared into the crowd.

Jale looked at Sherlock. “Do you know what purgatory is, my friend?”

“A synonym for shopping?” guessed the android.

“Correct.” Suddenly Jale felt regret. The android was after all a construct, and while it looked male it was androgynous and might enjoy shopping. He checked the balance in the 4614513 account, and said “Go and buy yourself a meerschaum pipe, if you can find one. You deserve it.”

Sherlock scooted off like a kid on the way to a candy store. Jale limped forward, dragging his metallic left foot.

This was a prime source of concern for him, and in part

Interstellar Undertakers

responsible for his bad humour. The foot's built-in coil was on its lowest setting. However, while a magnetic field was a boon on the hull of a ship in space, it was a drag in a mall whose floor obviously contained some metal. His thigh muscles were aching by the time he located a cloning laboratory.

Jale entered and sank into an expensive and comfortable chair. On a floating table by the side was a collection of foil magazines, spread in a semicircle like the cards in a deck. He picked up the top one. It was headed *Men of the Millennium*. Not recognizing any of the dignitaries, he tossed it down. He started to read the next magazine, backwards from the end; but the contents appeared absurd, and he skipped to the beginning, where there was the heading *Reader's Indigestion*. Throwing that one down as well, he found that a pretty female had approached.

"Hello," she said professionally. Her eyes started with his artificial foot and then ran over the rest of his well-developed body to see if anything else was needed. She had a calm gaze, a remarkably smooth forehead, and dark hair cut very short.

"Do you have your Galactic Blue-Cross card?"

"No," replied Jale, who liked the girl. "I have cash."

She gave a quirk of a smile. "Are you allergic to anything?"

"Only shopping."

Her smile broadened. "You can come right in."

Some considerable time later, he emerged from the store with a box that contained a mirror image of his right foot that was growing rapidly in a nutrient bath. He would have liked to stay to get the new left foot attached, but the girl had assured him that the procedure was straightforward. She had also let him know in a diplomatic but definite manner that she was emotionally attached.

Paul S. Wesson

Dragging his heavy foot into a shop further down the causeway, a dotting mechanoid approached him. It said “Deary, deary. We have a little problemito here, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we do,” replied Jale gruffly.

“What does the sahib desire?” prattled the mechanoid. “Sandals from the oriental sector of the Galaxy? Puttees from the eastern rim of Andromeda? Or...”

“Boots,” stated Jale. “I want boots. Now.”

He left the store not long after with practical footwear and a dozen identical socks. Unfortunately, the left boot would not fit over the metal foot. He therefore proceeded with a shod right foot, a box with a growing left foot, and the boot for it under his arm. While this might have been a nightmare for a podiatrist, Jale was happy because he only had a couple more stops to make.

A new cape was easily procured, and he headed in search of a woodworking shop. He found one at the back of the mall, where the opening door released a glorious smell of freshly-cut wood.

A grizzled individual looked up as Jale entered the workshop. He said nothing, but carried on smoothing a piece of richly-grained lumber. Running his finger down the finished plank, he grunted with satisfaction, and came forward.

“How can I help you?” His manner was short but friendly.

“I need a coffin.”

The carpenter surveyed him carefully, noting Jale’s thick wrists and broken fingernails. “You look like you could make one yourself.”

“I sometimes do,” replied Jale. “But I’m in a hurry.”

“How much of a hurry?” The woodworker was a squat man, elderly but with muscular forearms that would have intimidated the best arm-wrestler. His eyes were keen under shaggy grey brows.

“I have to meet some friends for a drink at the other end of

Interstellar Undertakers

the mall,” replied Jale. “And then I want to get off-planet before the day’s out.”

The carpenter ran a calloused finger over a stubbly chin. “I don’t want to sound like a money-grubber, but how will you pay?”

Jale gave him the code, and the old man walked to the rear of the store to check it. Jale, left alone, surveyed the stacks of lumber that leaned against the walls, noting their dimensions. He approached a pile of wide, clear-grained boards with a thickness about that of his thumb. The wood was beautiful, with an aroma that made him breathe deeply.

The carpenter returned and said shortly “Your credit’s good.”

Jale asked “Where does this come from?”

“It’s local,” replied the craftsman. “We’re not all mall-freaks. I have a plantation on the other side of the planet. This is what we call swamp cedar.”

“It’s nice,” said Jale simply. The lumber had a smell like regular cedar, but was fine-textured and hard.

The carpenter regarded him narrowly. “It’s expensive. Getting it out of the swamp is difficult, and machining it is difficult. You can make a coffin of cheaper...”

“No,” interrupted Jale. “My coffins are special. I want this.”

The elder man waggled his eyebrows.

The younger man looked around the workshop. There was a traditional bench, criss-crossed with a thousand marks. And behind it a modern servocutter, waiting to be programmed.

The two men looked at each other.

Jale said “Can we do it together?”

The other replied “Sure. Grab a saw.”

*

Paul S. Wesson

Jale trudged back to the entrance of the mall. Behind him, the coffin held the box with his growing foot, 5.5 pairs of socks, and 1 boot. The rest of his purchases adorned his person. The coffin, though requiring some further minor work, was a thing of art: planks of clear lumber, untarnished by knots, fit snugly in aztecian dovetails. The levimotor, purchased on sale at G-Mart, could be replaced later for a more up-scale unit.

He arrived in front of *Desperate Dan's*. The horns above the swinging doors seemed to welcome him; but he was slightly deterred when a patron staggered out, coughing violently.

Tethering the coffin and its contents, he pushed back the swing-doors and entered. There was nothing too much amiss. People sat around in groups, drinking and talking. The only odd thing was a certain lack of visibility: he could not see the back of the room.

Walking through the smog, he got to the bar and took a seat. A mechanical bartender approached and asked in a twangy voice "What kin I git you, bud buddy-bud?"

"A beer and a ventilator," replied Jale.

"One beer, a comin' up," acknowledged the waiter. It was clearly not programmed for subrequests based on levity.

The drink placed in front of him had the typical rich hue of Rigellian Red. He wondered how long it would take Vestal to show up. And where was Sherlock?

He took a gulp from the glass. The beer tasted good, and rejuvenated his body and spirits. "I'll never go shopping again," he vowed to an indifferent neighbour.

The smoke was getting thicker. Now he could not see more than two spaces along the bar, and people were leaving, bent over with hacking fits.

"Nice place," observed Jale. "If you have X-ray vision."

His neighbour finished his drink, gave Jale a nod, and left.

Interstellar Undertakers

Jale drained his beer and signaled the bartender. It moved in his direction, but seemed to be having some control problems. Its movements were jerky, and when it came to take his order it said “Anoth...? An...?” and went silent.

Deprived of his second libation by a fume-clogged mechanoid, Jale thought briefly about going around the bar and getting his own. Instead, however, he slid off his stool and started to walk towards the epicentre of the smoke. He bumped into a discarded chair, but kept going because he could see an indistinct silvery shape at the end of the bar.

“Sherlock!”

“Yes, boss?” Smoke puthered in thick billows from an oversized meerschaum.

There was a period of evaluation. Finally, Jale asked “What are you doing?”

“Smoking,” replied the android innocently.

“But you don’t have lungs,” pointed out the human.

“Well, I don’t inhale,” admitted Sherlock. “I’m constrained to be Clintonesque.”

“Aargh,” said Jale. “Let’s go.”

The smoke was cut off with a click. In the street outside, Jale drew in great lungfuls of fresh air. A fire-alarm began ringing; but somebody must have already called, because three people with fire-extinguishers were dodging through the shoppers towards them.

He looked around, and saw the sign for *The Tea Shoppe*. Dragging the android along, he walked inside.

There were about twenty tables, most of them occupied by women of advanced age. But whatever their other infirmities, tongues were clearly exempt, for there was a high level of chatter. White heads were matched by white tablecloths and white teapots. The decor was rounded out by white cups with thin

Paul S. Wesson

handles, and small white plates containing buns topped with white cream.

The door closed behind them and an antique bell tinkled apprisingly.

Sherlock said “There is a woman approaching with a boat on her head.”

Jale looked around as the manager came to meet them. “That’s not a boat. It’s a hair-do.”

She looked them over discreetly, and her smile became rigid. It was matched by her alabaster-like coiffure. “Gentlemen, er...”

At the back of the cafe, someone was waving at them vigorously. A voice meandered through the babble. “Jale! Sherlock! Over here.”

Jale bowed to the manager, and said. “We are here to meet and escort the Princess back to the royal ship.”

The proprietor’s face shifted professionally from disdain to respect.

“If any of the hoi-poloi should ask for us, we would appreciate anonymity, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed the manager, patting her immobile hair. “Walk this way.”

Sherlock said “If I could walk that way I’d...,” but was shushed by Jale.

The party threaded its way between the tables, attracting glances that ranged between the hostile and the puzzled. As they neared Vestal’s table, Jale noticed it was adorned with several pieces of jewelry, and made a mental note to check the 4614513 account. However, the purchases made a good prop that was not missed by the manager, who hovered in the background with her hands clasped over her corseted tummy.

“Your highness,” said Jale and made a bow that sent his cape swishing back, only to reveal the Victorian swimsuit. “Your

Interstellar Undertakers

father, the king, has ...”

“I *told* you about my father,” interrupted Vestal, frowning.

“Wayward,” confided Jale to the manager. “Perhaps I may talk to her while we sojourn?”

The manager nodded, batted her eyelids, and withdrew backwards. Narrowly missing the next table, she whispered to its occupants “Royalty.” The four dowagers looked over, and three assumed inane smiles. The fourth fished up a bag from under the table and began to apply make-up in a cause that had been lost for geological ages.

Jale and Sherlock sat down. Vestal said in an irritated tone “What the photon’s going on? And where have you been? I’ve been waiting here forever.”

“When you said you wanted to meet for a drink, I thought you meant a real drink,” explained Jale. “Like the kind they have next door.”

“Oh,” said the girl, mollified. Abruptly, her manner switched to one of good humour. “Do you want to see what I bought?”

“Well, I think...”

But Vestal was already on her feet. “Look.”

She opened her coat to reveal a pair of frilly black panties with a diamond set into the material at a crucial spot. Above her bare midriff, a cut-off blouse of gold lamé revealed the undersides of her breasts.

Jale said “Sit down!” Looking around, he encountered four stony stares from the next table, and smiled weakly in return.

“We’ve got to get out of this place,” said Jale.

“Do you know who first said that?” Sherlock asked Vestal. “Eric Burdon and the Animals.”

Jale groaned, and ran exasperated fingers through thick hair. “I am surrounded by fools.”

“Napoleon,” promptly responded the android. “Just before he

Paul S. Wesson

chopped his arm off to avoid being finger-printed.”

Jale put his elbows on the table and regarded his two companions moodily. His artificial foot was hurting, and he was finding it difficult to control his temper.

“We can’t leave just yet,” said Vestal. “There’s a band coming on.”

“A band?” said Jale disbelievingly. “This is a tea-shop, not a dance hall.”

“I know,” she said placatingly. “It’s a traditional band with older music.” She pouted slightly. “It’s not often I get the chance to hear the classics.”

“Like Beat-Hoven?” asked Sherlock.

“No,” responded the girl. “Look at the menu.”

Sherlock picked it up and began reading. Meanwhile, the manager had reappeared and said to Jale, “Would you like some refreshments? I’d be happy to serve you *myself*.”

“Yes, thank you,” replied Jale. “A pot of Darjeeling tea with two shots of rum in it. The Princess and I will share.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” she said, looking slightly baffled.

Sherlock finished reading the menu. “This is interesting. You can get 674 different kinds of tea, 37 different kinds of bun, and 14 different kinds of cream.”

“Any real food?” asked Jale disconsolately.

“Apparently not,” replied the android. “But as Vestal pointed out, they do provide entertainment. By Fred Bummer and his E.P.N.S.”

“Fred Bummer?” repeated Jale, in a voice whose contempt threatened to discolour the white tablecloth. “And his E.P.N.S.?”

“Correct,” confirmed Sherlock. “My logic circuits infer that it is probably an abbreviation for *Euphonious Preludes and Nocturnes on Spree*.”

Jale looked down at the table, noting the glittering knives,

Interstellar Undertakers

forks and spoons. “Try *Electro-Plated Nickel Silver*.”

“Ah, yes,” replied the android, crestfallen. “I had forgotten that we are not far from Nickelodeon.”

The manager returned with a teapot covered in a lace cover. She looked suspicious, and was about to say something when clapping broke out. Turning in his seat, Jale saw that they were close to a small stage from which the curtains had just withdrawn. They revealed a group of geriatric women fronted by a tall, dissipated-looking man with Calloway hair slicked back with oil. The lapels on his grey suit could have been the prototypes for the wings of some kind of ancient supersonic plane.

Fred advanced a step, looking out over the tea room with the inviting expression of an aged playboy, and said: “Ladies.” There was a rustle of anticipation at some of the tables. Fred said again, this time drawing out the word and loading the inflexion at the end: “*Ladies*.” This was greeted with simpering smiles and a smattering of applause.

Jale leaned over to Vestal and said “Can I throw up in the teapot?”

“Sshh!”

Jale reclined in his chair, nursing his foot. An expression of boredom and disgust registered on his face.

“Our first number,” said Fred, “is for this filly in the front row.” He directed a dazzling smile from patently false teeth at a person who could have understudied for Tutankhamun’s grandmother. “It will feature Elsie and Mabel on E-flat teapots, Florence on bass samovar, and of course the rest of the gang on alto teacups. Take it away, *girls!*”

There was a rhythmic din as knives, forks and spoons began to tap on the various pieces of crockery. Above, Fred’s quavering voice began to sing.

Paul S. Wesson

“When I was young in the springtime (pause)

My feelings I could not fake (pause)

I gathered you up in my arms, and ...”

“...Threw you into the lake,” added Jale in a too-audible voice.

“Jale!” objected Vestal icily. She kicked him under the table, eliciting a clang from his metallic left foot.

Suddenly, the appendage stuck to the floor. Jale, realizing that the magnetic field had been knocked to maximum, half rose from his chair and tried to get free. He managed to drag the foot out from under the table, but it was hard work. He was bending down to grasp the thing with his hands when a scream pierced the air.

There was a flash of light from the stage and a spoon attached itself to his foot. This was followed by two forks and a knife.

Jale staggered towards the entrance to the restaurant. The music had stopped, and people were jumping up as their knives, forks and spoons took flight. Pushing a way through the whinnying crowd, Jale was impacted by a matron whose ample bosom seemed to deploy like an airbag, saving them both from injury. He arrived at the door; but the antique bell pulled loose, hit him on the head, and attached itself to his foot with a loud *Boing!*

Half-dazed, Jale lurched out of *The Tea Shoppe* and saw with thankfulness that his new coffin was still tethered outside *Desperate Dan’s*. His left leg was aching like blazes, and he was glad when Vestal put an arm under his on one side and Sherlock put an arm under his on the other side.

“We have been embarrassed by cutlery,” said Sherlock. “Forced into an ignominious retreat by ...”

Jale hoisted himself into the new coffin. Vestal, following,

Interstellar Undertakers

turned to the android and ordered: “Sherlock, shut up and shove.”

The *Rigor Mortis* brushed the jagged top of the ringwall and started to descend into the crater. The highest peaks were dusted with snow; but lower down, the near-vertical cliffs were bare rock with various shades of ochre. Gashes in the wall marked the sites of ancient landslides. These remains formed a ragged circular ring around the base of the crater. The flat central region was green, however, and traversed by tracks that indicated cultivation.

Jale was careful to keep the motors pointed away from the fragile-looking cliffs as he landed the ship. Leaving Sherlock to check the instruments, he strode aft and opened the airlock. He jumped down onto a plain covered with short vegetation and sparkling with dew. The air was cool but not cold, drenched with the smell of newly-cut grass. Vestal landed beside him, her bare feet sinking into the soft sward. "Oogh," she said with appreciation, feeling the wet grass between her toes. She ran off impetuously, kicking her heels and leaving a trail in the dew.

Jale looked around at the cliffs. They were dotted with the holes of ancient mines, some of them quite inaccessible. This was a place where industry had come and gone. Among the crags a bird wheeled, uttering an occasional toneless cry that echoed for a while but gradually died.

He began to walk, and soon caught up to the girl. She said nothing, sensing the natural quietness of the place. They headed towards the centre of the crater, where there stood a monument of some kind. Jale's new foot was working well, and he set a fast pace that left his cloak billowing behind. Vestal's feet were covered in grass clippings, but she seemed unaware of the dampness.

Interstellar Undertakers

They stopped in front of a monumental sculpture. Many times higher than a man, it was a column of smooth grey rock that must have come from somewhere else. It was intricately and expertly carved into human shapes. Walking round it, Jale saw that the lowest level consisted of interlocking but distorted figures. One was an old man: his ankle was twisted, his legs were bumpy with veins, and the skin of his loins was flaccid. His torso was covered by part of another figure, from behind which emerged a scrawny neck and a bald head with dead eyes. There was also an old woman: her abdomen was lined and paunchy, her breasts were deflated; and her toothless mouth was open as if she were yelling some message out over the grassy plain.

The next level of the sculpture featured more naked figures, but some dead and some alive. The latter appeared to be engaged in some kind of sinuous struggle. The limbs of the living curled around the limbs of the dead. Tilting his head back, Jale saw that the pile of bodies continued upwards in a scene of controlled carnage. Whoever had made this monument must have possessed an excellent sense of perspective, for the lower figures were crushed by the weight of the higher ones in a manner that was eerily accurate. Paradoxically, at all levels in the column the spaces between the adults were occupied by fighting children and crying babies.

“This is weird,” said Vestal.

“Yes,” agreed Jale. “But excellent.”

He approached the monument and laid his hand on the bald head of the old man. The rock was wet and hard as he ran his fingers over the sutures in the skull. He got the impression that the eyes were not only dead now but had been blind in life also.

At the base of the monument was a plinth. It was covered in soil that had been thrown up by a rainstorm. Jale scraped the mud away with his boot, revealing words cut deeply into the

Paul S. Wesson

stone: REALITY CHECKPOINT.

“Let’s go,” said Vestal. “This thing is scary.” She started off.

Jale followed, thinking that the monument was not so much scary as disturbing. Ahead, the girl’s blonde hair bounced up and down with each springy step. Her smooth shoulders were set and the muscles in her legs flexed with every stride. She was young, petite and attractive. By comparison, Jale felt like an intelligent ape. His mind was clicking with ideas, but his large body gambolled along with the gait of a seaman. He stopped and looked back at the monument.

Mortality is always closer than you think.

*

The cliff in front of them was indented with steps that had been scoured out of the soft rock. The tool used, however, must have been primitive, because the steps were ill-formed and shallow.

“I’ll go first,” said Vestal.

Jale shrugged, and was rewarded with an underneath view of neat buttocks. He followed, finding it difficult to fit his large feet into the dents in the cliff. After a while he stopped, sweating, and removed his boots. Leaving these in a niche, he proceeded more quickly as his toes gripped the porous rock. He caught up with the girl on a horizontal ledge.

From here there was a long view over the interior of the crater. The flat, green surface spread away into the distance, punctuated by the monument at the centre and a black dot at its farthest edge. The last was the *Rigor Mortis*, dwarfed by the mountains of the ringwall behind. A moderate wind cooled the sweat on his body, and he moved on, this time leading.

The next set of steps was even harder to negotiate. The improvised stairway wandered diagonally over the cliff face, first

Interstellar Undertakers

one way and then the other. The turnarounds were particularly tricky, but someone had helped matters by spiking short pieces of rope into the rock at these points. The rope, noted Jale, was made of some natural fibre that was carefully braided. Also, some of the cracks in the rock contained pieces of straw. They were on the right track.

The third and last set of steps presented a real test of nerves. The line of indentations in the rock stretched out of sight around a buttress that projected over nothingness.

Vestal said petulantly: “Why can’t monks live in apartments with elevators?” She was panting and had a bloody scrape on her forearm.

Jale took the question rhetorically. The ledge on which they were resting was about as wide as his backside, so he sat down with his legs dangling over the abyss.

The girl looked at him angrily. “Aren’t you frightened at all?”

“Claustrophobia I have,” replied Jale. “Vertigo I don’t have.”

A bird, probably the one they had seen earlier, floated around the buttress on still wings. It had a major beak and round, fierce eyes that regarded them with contempt.

Vestal swayed, and abruptly sat down. He took off his cloak, handed it to her, and said “Wait here.”

Jale stretched out his foot and found a step by feel. His fingers found cracks at about shoulder level, and it occurred to him that the architect of this stairway must be quite short. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he moved steadily across the face of the cliff. Until one of the handholds fragmented, sending a shower of rock into space.

“Damm,” muttered Jale. The person who had made the stairway must also be pretty light.

Paul S. Wesson

Jale stared at the rock in front of him, holding on with one shaking hand. It was a close-up lesson in petrology, with crystals of different minerals set in a spongy background that resembled diseased liver. Taking a chance, he grabbed with his free hand for a projection above his head. It held. Then he inverted his other hand so that the heel of his palm was pressing downwards. With a heave, he moved up and out of the stairway and began climbing freely.

The wind whistled between his legs as he swung from one piece of rock to another. The Forn twins on his home planet would have been impressed. However, his bare toes found purchases on the pumicey rock, and as climbs went he regarded it as only a 7 out of 10. It was not long before he emerged triumphant on top of the buttress.

He was standing on a relatively flat surface that felt as if it was perched in the sky. The stairway which he had forsaken wound up from below and petered out between weathered boulders. On the top of one of these, a pink flower was held in place by a pebble. Turning, he saw the opening of an old mine. It was a square of blackness in the flank of the cliff; but as he walked forward he began to make out the shape of a man, apparently floating just inside the entrance.

Jale stopped, unsure whether he should cross the cave's threshold.

"Welcome," intoned the monk. "Would you like a beer?"

*

The sky began to darken as the two men talked. On the opposite wall of the crater, some of the abandoned mines showed as flickering yellow squares of light. The ones lower down were brighter, while the more inaccessible ones showed only feeble illumination. The monk picked up a single twig and tossed it

Interstellar Undertakers

onto the tiny fire at his side.

As the flame grew, Jale saw that the monk's eyes were half closed. He had no eyebrows, and only white fuzz remained on his skull. His face resembled a nut that had dried out and shriveled with time. With only a chain around his neck and a cloth covering his loins, his body could have been that of a child – were it not for the countless wrinkles. Yet his back was straight, as he regarded his visitor calmly.

Jale took another swig of beer. It was not fully fermented, and had a yeasty flavour that he was beginning to appreciate. There was also a tang of resin from the wooden mug. A pitcher of the stuff stood on the sandy floor of the cave, and Jale wondered briefly if the monk's half-gaze was due to alcohol.

“How long ago did the mines run out?” asked Jale.

“When I was a boy,” was the obscure response. “Nickelodeon used to be a busy place, with towns, stores, and bars with mechanical music. Now, it is as you see it: dead and quiet.”

Jale shifted his position again. He had been sitting on a large boulder just inside the entrance to the cave, but its unevenness was a source of pain in his posterior. He sat down instead in the sand, and crossed his legs.

The monk was also cross-legged, but had not moved since the interview started, except to pick up twigs for the fire. These he plucked from a large pile of firewood that must have taken many trips up the cliff to accumulate. On the bottom were a few big logs, then a layer of branches, and then a pile of twigs. On top there was a layer of hay. The monk himself was the pinnacle of the structure.

“Don't you get lonely?” asked Jale.

“We are all lonely,” was the response.

“But why didn't you leave with the others?”

Paul S. Wesson

“One place is as good as another.”

Jale did not care for this fatalistic comment, but the monk was many times his own age, so he forbore to comment in deference to the other’s knowledge. However, it was this knowledge that Jale needed, and as dusk grew outside the mine he was thinking increasingly about the trip back down the cliff. He decided to be blunt. “Did the Black Hand Gang leave with the others?”

The monk’s eyes opened briefly and then relapsed. “They did not leave, but they do not exist here anymore.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.”

The sage’s tone was neutral, but somehow sent a shiver through the younger man. However, he was not to be deterred, and returned to something he had learned earlier. “If the Gang only used Nickelodeon as a source of metal, where did they originate? And where are they now?”

“They are everywhere,” said the monk, answering the second question. His voice seemed to be getting weaker.

“But where is their headquarters?” pressed Jale. “They must operate from somewhere.”

The monk’s head dipped slightly, perhaps in agreement or because of fatigue. “Even the mightiest river starts in a spring.”

Jale was getting irritated, but kept anger out of his voice as he enunciated slowly “Where is the spring?”

There was a long pause, during which the only sounds in the cave were the rasping of the monk’s breath and the low crackle of the fire. Then in a whisper “Where is your brother buried?”

Suddenly logic congealed in Jale’s mind. “Acheron.”

He jumped up, towering over the monk on his pile of wood. “Are they on Acheron!?”

There was no reply except a faint rattle from the monk’s

Interstellar Undertakers

throat. Jale peered through the gloom: the old eyes were closed, and the desiccated body no longer breathed. Jale bent over and put his ear to the wrinkled chest. There was no heart beat.

Jale stared into the monk's face. The chain about the old man's neck reflected the light from the fire and seemed to be the only thing that retained life. He walked around the corpse, and saw that the chain supported a small ornament. As he gently detached it, he already knew what it was: a black hand.

Clasping the icon, he took two steps towards the cave mouth, and stopped. He was after all an undertaker. He looked at the monk. The slight body was rigid, its hands resting on thin bony knees. The palms were turned outwards, as in supplication.

Jale picked up a burning twig from the fire and threw it into the pyre. The wood, dry after being hoarded for so long, burst into flames. Using the light to see his way, Jale turned and left.

*

The ship's motors thrummed with steady insistency, carrying them away from Nickelodeon and towards Acheron. Vestal lay stretched out on the sofa, bored. Jale sat in the opposite divan, trying to see up her legs and wondering why clothes made his desire greater. Sherlock was flipping through the questions and answers for *PanGalactic Trivial Pursuit: The Penultimate Version*.

"Here's an interesting category," said the android. "Symphonies."

"But you've already looked at the answers," objected the girl.

"Not so. I have only assimilated half the data, and have not looked this far. To prove my obeisance, I would be willing to let Jale be quiz-master."

Jale groaned and took another sip of whiskey.

"Come on, Jale!" said Vestal. "There's nothing else to do."

Paul S. Wesson

“Yes, there is,” replied Jale, ogling her legs.

The girl, tired of kipping on the couch and still insecure, said “Jale, from now on, I’ll sleep in the new coffin.”

“That’s all right,” he replied.

“And,” she insisted, “I want to play the question game.”

Reluctantly, Jale took the game from Sherlock and ran his eye over the questions and answers. “You won’t get any of these,” he pronounced.

But the psychological torpedo did not work. “Just try me,” challenged Vestal. There was a corresponding look of anticipation from Sherlock.

“Okay,” agreed Jale with resignation, and deliberately chose the most arcane question to start with. “Who wrote his most famous symphony while his home town was being bombed?”

Sherlock said “A guy with ear plugs.”

Vestal said “Shostakovich.”

“One for the femme,” acknowledged Jale, going to the next question. “Who, obsessed with death and knowing that most great composers only completed nine symphonies, kept one back in an attempt to trick fate?”

Sherlock looked serious. “Jim Morrison. It was a chorale, entitled *Break on Through to the Other Side*.”

Jale said “No. Over to you, Vestal.”

The girl said “Mahler.”

“Correct,” admitted Jale, feeling slightly intimidated by the rampant erudition of the erstwhile stripper. “All right. Here’s an easy one.” He turned to Sherlock. “Who wrote *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*?”

“A musical bat,” replied the android.

“Sorry,” said Jale. He could see from Vestal’s expression that she knew the answer, but in order not to inflate her ego any further he provided the answer himself. “It was Mozart. That is,

Interstellar Undertakers

Bill Mozart.”

The android let out an ululating sound that was supposed to be laughter.

Jale said “Sherlock, you might be accused of having a laugh like a horse and a kid’s sense of humour.”

The android flipped its eyebrows up and down and replied “Guilty, until proven innocent.”

Vestal chipped in “Wasn’t there a song called that, by the K...?”

“Last question,” interrupted Jale, who was rapidly becoming tired of this inanity. “Sherlock, please pay attention.”

The android nodded, its face a mixture of anticipation and concentration.

“Who wrote Beethoven’s ninth symphony?”

There was silence in the cabin. If there had been a pin on the ship, and it had been dislodged (say by a random meteor), you could have heard it drop. As it was, Jale and Vestal stared at Sherlock in hope.

“I think ...,” said the android.

“Yes?” said Vestal. Her mouth was open in expectation, and her smile was encouraging.

“I think ...,” repeated the android.

“*Come on*, Sherls” said Jale. “We’re rooting for you, buddy.”

“I think ...,” said the android for the third time. “I think I’ll have to pass.”

*

At the back of the *Rigor Mortis*, the throbbing of the motors was clearly audible. On the workbench lay the two black-hand ornaments. However, Sherlock was worried by a couple of quite different things.

Paul S. Wesson

“Sir, shall I put the lid on Miss Vestal’s coffin?”

“No,” replied Jale. “She’ll suffocate.”

“Exactly,” responded Sherlock. “And then we two can...”

“Sherlock!” growled the human. “Can you please discard this jealousy component you seem to have? It’s counterproductive.”

“But her loins are ...”

“Smooth, beautiful and sexy,” said Jale. “But obviously off-limits. It would help, my friend, if you could apply your brain to more serious things.”

The android looked disappointed, but said: “That brings up a second problem. I grant that you received significant information from the monk, but we still need more.” Abruptly, he stood erect, clicked his heels, and did a salute that consisted of whirling his hand in the air and slapping his forehead. “Sir, I renew my request to contact the Selipon computer.”

Jale looked at his companion, and began to pace about the workshop, thinking. Finally he said “There are pros and cons.”

Sherlock pointed out “The pros outweigh the cons.”

Jale knew that this was correct. After consideration, he said “Contact Selipon. But use all precautions.”

Sherlock did another salute that caused his skull to ring, and headed for the subether console.

*

Orbiting around the singularity at the centre of the Galaxy, Selipon was in a prime position to receive and give out data to all its inhabitants. Discovered in the early ages during the colonization of the Milky Way by humans, it was of alien construction. For ages, its foreign technology had baffled the best scientists, who could only regard in awe the machine and the race that had built it. The latter, from hieroglyphics that took eons to decipher, were called the Krell. They had apparently

Interstellar Undertakers

created a civilization based on pure mentality, and abandoned the Selipon computer as a piece of obsolete circuitry. However, to the less-developed human race, its potential was enormous. Unfortunately, it lapsed into history with its secrets unlocked, and finally became just a museum piece, visited by groups of school children. It was during one such visit that a girl called Fiona, who had a cold, sneezed and dropped her handkerchief. Stooping to pick it up, she noticed a device on the underside of the computer. It had only two symbols, which were like I and O. The rest of her class had moved on, making “Aah” sounds as the teacher pointed out terrific but mysterious aspects of the machine. Fiona bent down and pressed the I button.

Immediately, Selipon had come to life, broadcasting a wealth of information through the length and length of the Milky Way.

Sherlock, though, was having difficulty gaining access. He turned to Jale and said “They doubt your identity. Also, our ability to pay.”

“Did you give them the 4614513 code?”

“Yes,” replied the android. “But they are suspicious that the funds may have been laundered.”

“Tell them we don’t have any washing powder.”

“Jale!” expostulated Sherlock. “Will you please come and establish your identity?”

The man walked over slowly to the console. Lifting the two miniature black-hand icons, he took the place of the android. There was something about the ornaments that was nagging at the back of his mind, and as he sat down he was only partially concentrating on the problem with Selipon.

The computer was waiting. *You claim to be Jalaquin Algarve Lebedev Eddington, formerly of the planet Acheron?*

“I do,” responded Jale.

Our records have information that cannot be mimicked. Do

Paul S. Wesson

you agree to an identity test?

“Yes” replied Jale.

We begin. How many living brothers do you have?

Jale, *deja-vued*, entered “0”.

What is the mass ratio between Acheron and its moon Aster?

Jale responded immediately with “91”.

What is the present energy density of the cosmological vacuum?

Jale hesitated. “Geometrical units? Colloquial symbols?”

If you so wish.

“Lambda over 8π ,” he entered.

There was a perceptible pause from the computer, which made Jale wonder if his answer was wrong. But having reviewed his courses on grand-unified field theory, he concluded that he was right.

How many times have you visited Acheron since you first departed?

This was difficult to answer, because some of the visits had been clandestine. In the old times, smuggling had been fairly profitable; but with the removal of tariffs between spiral arms, the trade had dried up. Undertaking had been an obvious second choice. Jale thought back. Would Selipon know about the illegal visits as well as the legal ones? Given that the computer’s mode of operation was still not fully understood but enormously effective, he decided to assume it had total knowledge. He entered “7”.

Again there was a pause from the computer. Jale shifted nervously in his chair. Sherlock was levitating behind him and following the interchange with care.

Last question. Spacetime is a 4-dimensional human construct, which you commonly refer to as curved. If your race

Interstellar Undertakers

wished to do things in a simpler fashion, and use a flat manifold, how many dimensions would you need?

Jale began to think furiously about the metric tensor. The Schwarzschild solution could be minimally embedded flatwise in 6D. But the computer had asked a generic question which only people who shared his rather peculiar education could expect to answer. He entered "10".

The identity test is over. There was a gap. You are denied access.

"What!?" exclaimed Jale. He jumped out of his chair, but then sank back. "Did I get the last question wrong?"

No. You got the first question wrong.

Jale was in disbelief. "But I only had one brother, and he was killed."

You are operating with old data.

"I request additional information."

Request denied.

Jale was suddenly angry. "I request a logic review."

That is your right. There was another pause, much longer than the others. Logic review is complete. There are three monads: (1) You are almost certainly Jale. (2) But because there is a small doubt, we cannot allow you access. (3) If you are indeed Jale, you are informed that your brother has been recloned on Acheron.

The console went blank, and Jale slumped back in his chair, stunned.

*

Vestal wandered into the cabin, flopped onto the sofa, and said "Coffee?"

Jale, who had been up for a long time analysing the implications of what he had learned from Selipon, said "Gin?"

Paul S. Wesson

“No,” replied the girl. “You drink too much.”

“So do you,” replied Jale.

“I get it from my father,” she replied defensively. “He used to consume 24 a day.”

“That’s a bit,” acknowledged Jale, but added. “24 what?”

“Beer,” replied Vestal. “He was always half drunk.”

“So was Winston Churchill,” added Jale.

The girl assumed her moody expression. “He once came round to my place, with two packs.”

“Why?”

“I’d asked him to help fix the barn. It needed some work on the outside.”

“And?”

“Well,” continued Vestal with a yawn, “We fixed things up. It took us five days. But then, he drank one of the packs. I wanted to talk to him. You know, about my family? But he was too far gone. He passed out in the spare bedroom.”

“So?” said Jale.

“I went to sleep,” she continued. “But halfway through the night he woke me up. He seemed to be sleep-walking. Anyway, he didn’t know where he was.” There was a pause. “He urinated on my bed.”

Jale’s mind flicked through several opinions. It seemed obvious that if the father had consumed 24 beer, he would at some stage need to relieve himself. And, he had spent a long time helping his daughter. Also, the rest of the family had been conspicuous by their absence. He said “What happened?”

“I threw him out,” answered Vestal. Her tone was defiant but sad.

“And that was the last time you saw him?”

“Yes.” A tear appeared on her cheek.

Jale, depressed, got up and sought his bed.

Interstellar Undertakers

*

An alarm began ringing. Sherlock rushed into the hold and shook the black coffin in which Jale lay snoozing.

“Jale, wake up!”

“I *am* awake,” lied Jale. He had just been precipitated out of a dream where Vestal was crawling under the sheets towards his nether regions; and he did not want to give up the illusion. But practically, he asked “What’s up?”

“Two ships,” replied the android. “They have a lock on us.”

“Impossible,” mumbled Jale. “We’re in subspace.”

Sherlock flung up his arms and his silvery cape wafted in consternation. “They are here. And they are black. And they are homing in on us.”

Jale sat up in the coffin and asked “Motors?”

“Optimal,” replied the android.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” said Jale, relapsing into the soft lining of the coffin. “The *Rigor Mortis* can out-run anything.”

Suddenly, the sound of the ship’s engines became strained and started to dip.

“Tractor beam,” diagnosed Sherlock.

Jale jumped out of the coffin. His bare feet thudded on the deck. Together the human and the android raced for the control cabin. They slammed into their respective seats simultaneously. Jale said “Atomic batteries to power?”

Sherlock said “Check.”

“Subether conduit open at full throttle?”

“Check.”

“Brains turned on?”

“Er...,” said Sherlock.

“Who cares, anyway?” responded Jale. “Boost engines to maximum.”

Paul S. Wesson

A slow, screaming sound built up in the *Rigor Mortis*. The hull started to vibrate as the megamotors began to consume ergs.

“Haha!” laughed Jale. “I have outrun the slime-creatures of Silvidor. I have outpaced the Pachyderms of Pele. And,” he gave a slow wink, “I have outguessed the customs officers at Gatwick.”

“Really?” said Sherlock with serious doubt. “They’re pretty tough.”

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

“I wish I had as much veracity as you, Sir. But I am fearful. They have twice as much power as us.”

Jale gave one of his short, humourless laughs. “We will fight them on the beaches. We will fight them in the streets. We will fight them in the pool-halls. We will never give up.”

There was a sudden descending note from the motors. They stuttered, and fell silent.

“They have cut off our power,” observed Sherlock.

“Okay,” said Jale. “So let’s give up.”

*

Matching velocities in supspace is a tricky business. A miscalculation of one part in a million usually results in somebody ending up in the Magellanic Clouds. Hence Jale’s nonchalance. He believed that there was nothing the Black Hand Gang could do, even given their two cruisers. Jale was an intelligent man, broad-minded and with a sense of compassion. Sadly, he now proceeded to screw-up totally.

“Leave ‘em alone,” he said.

“But, Sir...”

“Leave ‘em,” Jale repeated. “There’s nothing they can do. Celestial mechanics rules, O.K.?”

Sherlock squirmed in the copilot’s seat. If he had possessed

Interstellar Undertakers

an orifice, he would have used it. “Jale, it really is brown-trousers time.”

“Oh, yeah?” responded Jale. He had poured himself a shot of whiskey, and annihilation was now somewhat down the list of his concerns.

“The Gang’s ships are leaving,” said Sherlock.

“Of course they are,” replied Jale. “Delta-vee is impossible.”

“But, Sir.” The android was trying to make a case.

“What?” Jale slid into a more serious channel of thought.

“Sir,” repeated Sherlock.

“Yes?” demanded Jale.

“There are two asteroids, moving towards us.” The android was shaking with fright. “I estimate that we have enough time to make a rice pudding. And if we don’t do anything, we will soon have the same consistency.”

*

Jale, Vestal and Sherlock sat around, looking glum.

The girl summed up the situation. “We have no power, and we are about to be dinged by two hunks of rock?”

Jale nodded disconsolately. “But it’s a clever trick,” he admitted grudgingly. “They can’t match up to us, so they send two other things to crush us.”

Vestal started to pace in agitation. “I didn’t come aboard this tub to splatter into protoplasm.”

Jale shrugged. He wondered if it was the right time, in view of their imminent death, to have sex with her. Discarding the idea, he said “You know, there’s an old Acheron proverb.” The girl and the android looked at him expectantly. “But I can’t remember it .”

Vestal snorted. Sherlock said “Sir, I think I know it. *When in doubt, conserve momentum.*”

Paul S. Wesson

Jale and Sherlock looked at each other, and got up.

*

A glaring white A star bathed Jale in radiation as he cranked open the outer door of the airlock. He flipped down the visor on his spacesuit and it blackened automatically. Inside the darkened helmet, he read the display that was fed from the suit's sensors: positrons, and other small stuff; but with a strong flux of neutrons. He would not be able to stay here long. It was not only the dangerous neutron flux from the star. He was sweating heavily inside the suit after manually opening the door, and felt fatigue creeping into his limbs.

Jale floated out of the airlock, followed by Sherlock. The black hull of the *Rigor Mortis* was flecked by meteors, revealing the shiny metal underneath. It would soon be time for a paint-job. Dragging himself over the pitted hull, Jale went into the shadow side and found himself in almost complete darkness. Then the visor cleared, revealing myriads of distant stars. Also, two nearby and threatening objects.

"There they are," he said to Sherlock. The asteroids were large, dark and moving perceptibly towards them in a pincer manoeuvre.

"I'll get data on them" said Sherlock. There was a pause. "Carbonaceous chondrite material."

"Masses and velocities?" asked Jale. A stream of numbers appeared on his visor. The objects were big, with speeds well above orbital. "This will be tricky."

"Agreed." The android's voice was shaky.

"Sherlock," said Jale. "Do you really want to do this?"

"I don't *want* to do it, Sir. But there is no alternative. You know that."

Jale did indeed know, and sighed. He looked at the android

Interstellar Undertakers

through his visor, noting that it had a relatively small mass and would have to blast off with a correspondingly large velocity.

The android tried to see the human's eyes, but his visor was too dark. However, a mitt was extended towards him. They shook hands.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Will I dream?”

“You're being melodramatic,” replied Jale, though gently.

“I'll try to give you a good push,” said the android more practically.

“Thanks, friend,” acknowledged Jale, and took a couple of steps back.

Sherlock hunched down, his silver cloak spreading out over the black hull of the ship. There was a blast of power from his emergency motors, and he seemed to disappear. A tiny, dwindling spot of light marked his course.

Jale felt the *Rigor Mortis* move slightly under his feet, responding to the immutable laws of a Universe that would not exist if momentum were not conserved. He watched the android until he could see it no more, and headed back to the airlock with heavy steps.

*

Vestal watched the data on the secondary screen in the engine room. Jale's feet projected from under a cowling, from which emerged banging sounds.

“They're getting closer,” said the girl nervously.

“Of course they are!” Jale's voice was muffled and tense. “Send me the atomic screwdriver.”

She searched amid the tools strewn over the deck, picked up a likely-looking device, and slid it across the floor.

Paul S. Wesson

"I said a screwdriver! Not a wrench. It has a proton pack in the handle and a flat end."

Vestal, flustered, hunted around and found another tool. She slid it between Jale's legs. He groaned. "Thanks."

Back at the console, she said. "They're *really* getting close." The asteroids were closing in like omens in a bad dream.

"What's the angle?"

"Present offset is only point-zero-three," she replied. "But it's increasing."

Jale grunted.

"Do you think you can fix the engines?" asked Vestal.

"How many times are you going to ask?" Jale's voice contained exasperation. "The last time I had to disconnect the governor was when I got caught on Tralfamadore with a cargo of illegal bog rolls. That was ages ago. The casing is corroded."

The girl put her fingers in her dry mouth. The hulking dark shapes on the screen rushed towards the ship, nutcrackers aimed at a peanut.

There was a sudden sound of tearing metal, a clang and Jale said "Got it!"

The following sounds were more calculated and ended in a click. The deck began to vibrate as the motors came back on.

Jale crawled out from underneath the cowling, his face red and grimy. He took a quick glance at the screen and said "Photon!"

Jale grabbed Vestal, who protested "What the hell are you...?"

"Be quiet," he ordered. Dragging her to the hold, he dumped her into the new coffin. Then he jumped into his own and clenched his teeth.

The first asteroid missed the *Rigor Mortis* by about twenty ship lengths. The second asteroid ploughed into the first, filling

Interstellar Undertakers

space with a silent explosion of debris. Less than a heart-beat later, a barrage of rocks slammed into the ship. There was a bang as something broke, and the craft was hurled ahead on a wave of ejecta. The lights went out.

*

Vestal, bruised but breathing, fell out of her coffin and crawled over to the one beside. Jale was bleeding from the nose, but as she slapped his face his eyes opened.

“Jale?”

“Yes,” he replied slurrily.

“Jale?”

“Yes?”

“Can I kiss you?”

There was a pause, as the man processed this inopportune request.

“Yes.”

She put her mouth tenderly on his. Her full lips fit closely, full of thankfulness and passion. But abruptly Jale sat up in his coffin and said “Sherlock!”

“What?” Vestal said.

Jale climbed out and stood up unsteadily. “I’ve got to find Sherlock.”

Vestal went back on her haunches, anger bubbling inside her. “*You..!*” She slapped the deck hard enough to hurt her hand.

*

The man and woman sat in front of the main console at a stand-off. The screen showed a speck of silvery light that was almost drowned by the intense radiation from the A star. The speck was Sherlock, headed to oblivion.

“You can’t help him,” said Vestal. Her yellow hair flounced

Paul S. Wesson

and her breasts rose and fell with short, furious breaths.

“I can try,” replied Jale. He had donned his spacesuit, but felt tired and sick.

“You’ve already received a maximum dose of neutrons,” objected the girl. “If you go out there again you’ll kill yourself!” Jale kept quiet, as she added “It’s only an android.”

“Only?” queried Jale, who saw no sharp divisions between humans, aliens, androids and mechanoids, or for that matter anything else that existed in the world. Plus, while it had never been made explicit, he knew that he owed the android something. He quoted: “A promise made is a debt unpaid, and the trail has its own stern code. I’m going out, so help me now, while I try to get that load.”

“You made up the second line,” objected Vestal. She looked surly, but realized she could not dissuade him. “All right, I’ll fly the ship. You go and grab him.”

Jale walked aft on wobbly legs. Radiation sickness is an insidious and deadly thing. The monitor on his suit was already flashing yellow. He sealed off the aft part of the hold, and peered through the window in the inner door of the air lock. The outer door was still open. This was good, as he would not have had the strength to re-crank it. He bled most of the air from the hold into the reserve tank, and cracked the inner door.

A waft of escaping air carried him forward. He grabbed the edge of the outer door and blinked. The actinic light from the A star, now very close, threatened to overpower his visor. But it was the invisible neutrons that were the real danger. He glanced at his display and noted that the lethal stuff was sleeting through his body. The suit monitor began to flash orange.

Leaning out, Jale saw that the ship was closing in on Sherlock. The android, damaged by the flood of radiation from the star, appeared lifeless.

Interstellar Undertakers

“You okay?” Vestal's voice crackled in his ear above an increasing background hiss.

“Yeah.”

But he was not. Specks flashed before his eyes as he tried to focus on the android. It was close now, as the *Rigor Mortis* edged in. He stretched out his hand.

The suit alarm went off, deafening him. Reflexively, he cut it out. Sherlock, with his eyes closed, was now alongside. Jale made a grab and caught the android's cloak. He pulled, and they both fell back into the airlock.

Jale, confused, pushed Sherlock to the side and tried to stand. He collapsed and lay on the deck while the disk of the sun filled the opening with white. The last thing he noted was that the suit monitor was a square of continuous red.

Vestal sat down by the side of the coffin, exhausted. Jale lay in its depths, lifeless except for the irregular rise and fall of his chest. A heavy man, it had taken all the girl's strength to get him out of the airlock and into the relative safety of the ship's laboratory. By comparison, Sherlock weighed no more than she; but the android also lay inert, in the other coffin. Feeling very lonely, she stared at Jale's face with a mixture of anger and affection. His heavy hair was wild and matted, and his expression even in unconsciousness was grim.

"You idiot," said Vestal. "You wonderful idiot."

Jale's labored breathing suffered a hiatus. The radiation damage must be severe to have produced respiratory problems after so short a time. Vestal jumped up and began the standard resuscitation technique. After a pause, Jale's chest started to rise and fall again.

Dashing to the console, she queried "Tritium?"

Even before the response, she had pulled a tube out of the dispensary and entered the code that dealt with radiation sickness. Heavy water began to fill the coffin.

Jale's costume, damaged by the intense flux it had received, came off under her clawing hands like the weathered shingles from an old farmhouse during a winter storm. His prominent maleness momentarily disconcerted her, but then she grabbed a roll of spare foil and pushed it under his head. The special water rose, submerging his body but stopping short of his mouth and nostrils. Naked in a new womb, he half floated as the liquid began to scintillate.

"Suck in those particles," said the girl, as if she could order the subatomic world to her cause. "Suck the crud out of him."

Interstellar Undertakers

Jale's breathing stopped again. His hairy chest lay submerged and unmoving. Vestal jumped to the autodoc, entered TRACHEOTOMY, and signalled emergency response. There was a deluge of instructions, followed by a scalpel, which she picked up with shaking fingers.

But on turning back to the coffin, she saw that the man was breathing anew. Vestal threw the knife to the deck with a clang, and yelled "You will live! You *will* live!"

Jale did not respond. He was surrounded by numerous flashes of neutron-induced fission as the tritium began purging his body of radioactive poison. Looking down at the black coffin, Vestal was reminded of a god in a new constellation.

*

The *Rigor Mortis* plunged on through subspace. Vestal, tired, tried once again to get the ship's autodoc to give her information.

"Sherlock Holmes master-detective. Damaged by radiation. Assistance."

"What model?" responded the ship's medical computer. At least this time the unit seemed to understand what she was asking.

The girl went over to the new coffin. Its intricately grained wood panels and lacey interior gently cradled the inert android. She rolled the detective's head to one side and bent back the collar of the hound's-tooth cape. There were words in some indecipherable script (cleaning instructions?) and then a word she recognized: *Hecuba*.

The console was inactive for a while, before responding. "There are no records of androids being produced on Hecuba."

Vestal was thinking that maybe only the cloak had been made on Hecuba. But this seemed unlikely, given its integration

Paul S. Wesson

with the rest of the android; and the computer supplied the alternative explanation before she had figured it out. "The Sherlock Holmes android must be illegal. Shall I report it?"

"No," responded the girl immediately. "There's no need – it's apparently dead."

Vestal started to walk up and down. In the one coffin, Sherlock lay completely unresponsive. In the other, Jale struggled for breath but was still alive. Clearly, she needed more information if she was to get them back. But who could she turn to for help without betraying them? There was only one answer.

Reluctantly, she made contact with Selipon. The alien computer responded almost instantaneously, and she entered "Vestal Virgin. I need help from my father. Where is he?"

*

Selipon, whirling around the central singularity and feeding off its energy, asked *You claim to be Vestal Virgin?*

"Yes," responded the girl.

Both names must be fictitious within your lifespan as birth appellations.

"I know," she replied. "But my familial name is not far off." Gritting her teeth, she admitted. "It's Virginia Vest."

The alien computer almost seemed to doubt her with its pause, but eventually responded. *Our records have information that cannot be mimicked. Do you agree to an identity test?*

"Yes," replied Vestal.

We begin. How many living siblings do you have?

"One full sister, two half-sisters and two half-brothers." She added "As far as I know, they are all still alive."

When did you last see your father?

"A long time ago," she replied qualitatively but wistfully. "I need access to find him. He's somewhere in this spiral arm."

Interstellar Undertakers

The computer ignored this and moved on. *The name of a pet goose?*

Vestal, shaken at the incisiveness of this, responded "Molly." Selipon, however, was impersonal. The next question shook Vestal even more.

Are you what your stage name says?

She paused, feeling ancient hurt. "No. My stepfather did it. But apart from that, yes."

The place of your last engagement under your stage name.

"A dump, called the *Purple Escargot*."

There was a pause from the computer. *It has been renamed the Sneering Snail.*

"Oh," responded Vestal with interest. "I didn't know that. Are there any more questions? Like, to do with tensor algebra?"

Only one. Do you know what a tensor is?

"No," replied the girl truthfully.

Your identity is established. You are granted access.

Vestal, slightly surprised at the brevity of the examination but still smarting from its intrusions, stated "Thanks. Now, tell me where I can find my father."

A million million pieces of information were sifted in a millionth millionth of a time unit. Unaware of the Krell's fabulous technology, the human waited for the computer's response as if it were a card bearing her weight that was to be dispensed from a slot machine.

Aster.

"Where the hell is that?" demanded the girl.

You know. Aster is the only moon of Acheron. A pause. Your father, you are informed, is no longer practising genetics. You should hurry.

Alarmed, Vestal demanded "Why should I hurry?"

There was a quiet moment. Then: *Things come together in*

Paul S. Wesson

this time-line. Hurry.

There was a barely visible flash, and Selipon disconnected itself, leaving Vestal anxious.

*

Jale's breathing was more regular, but he was still in a coma. Vestal had siphoned off the tritium, which took with it most of the radiation poison, and had gingerly connected a food tube into the big artery in his right thigh. Looking down at him, she felt a strange mixture of desire and resentment. Abruptly, she took a cloth from the laboratory bench and put it over his loins.

Depressed, Vestal wandered back to the cabin and fell onto the big sofa. "A drink!" she demanded.

"Variety?" queried the ship's computer.

"I don't care," she barked. Then repenting. "Gin."

"Mix?"

"No!" If Jale could drink it neat, so could she. Getting up, she walked over to the dispenser, shedding her clothes as she went. Her mind was full of thoughts she did not like: Jale's hirsute body with its protuberant sexual organs; her father's bushy eyebrows with the pain of rejection underneath. She needed a distraction.

"PanGalactic Trivial Pursuit," she ordered.

"Regular, Penultimate, or Ultimate?"

"The last," she said, not really caring. Playing with the ship's computer was only marginally better than doing nothing.

"Your starter," said the computer politely. "The categories are: *Physics of Food, Human History and Classical Rock Music.*"

"Take each by turn," she replied. The first sip of gin sent fire down her throat. But while she knew that it had been the scourge of ancient Victorian bars, it had an endearing and peculiar taste. She vowed to have only one glass.

Interstellar Undertakers

“First question,” said the computer. “What do you get if you combine antipesto with pesto?”

“A big mess,” replied Vestal. “They'll just annihilate each other.”

“Wrong,” replied the computer commiseratingly. Then, sensing her defiance and dejection. “Shall I move to the next category?”

“Yay.”

“All right.” An edge of worry had entered the computer's voice. “The human race is commonly regarded as having originated in one place...”

“A cesspool,” interrupted the girl. “It must have been. We lie, cheat, torture and kill each other. We don't deserve to have the Galaxy.” She took another, convulsive, drink of gin. “The only man I ever met who's half-decent is lying in a coffin...”

Abruptly, she began to cry. Not just meagrely, but copiously. The tears streamed from her eyes, ran down her cheeks, and dropped into her glass. “And I threw out my own father.”

There was a very long pause from the ship's computer. After ages of being controlled by a straightforward male, this complicated outburst of feminine remorse was a puzzle. Finally, it ventured “Next category?”

Vestal rubbed her eyes, at first slowly but then with a vigorous contempt for her own self-pity. “Go for it.”

“If I may say,” pointed out the computer diffidently, “you have not so far scored any points. It may be advisable to take the group option.”

“What's that?” she asked.

“A series of questions, all very difficult, but with the same answer.”

“Okay,” sniffled Vestal, prepared to concentrate.

The computer said “Consider the following early rock lyric:

Paul S. Wesson

Woke up this morning, what did I see?

A big black cloud hanging over me."

"How appropriate," said Vestal. "Next?"

"*Wall Street's down*," and then with a remarkable imitation of a sarcastic human voice with a descending intonation, "*so what?*"

"I don't understand," objected the girl. "What is Wall Street?"

"Your confusion is justified," replied the computer. "My file indicates that it was a primeval thoroughfare, where people gesticulated, trying to create money."

"You can't create money," admonished Vestal. "Money is only a symbol for wealth. And wealth cannot be created, but is intrinsic to things."

"Correct," agreed the computer. Then self-importantly. "Hence the phrase: *so what?*"

Vestal was starting to feel drunk and annoyed. She stretched out her legs on the sofa so that the joints cracked, wiggled her toes, and said "Give me one more, but make it cogent."

The computer became serious. "There was a famous classical rock song, reviled by some but loved by others. It purported to be a musical argument between husband and wife, but was actually sung by two males."

"Give me a clue," said the girl.

"The title of the song was *Hatred: A Duet*."

"Yes. So?"

"It contained the most redundant line ever to be written in the history of rock music." The computer cleared its voice channel and sang "*Why don't you just drop dead and don't recover?!*"

"You need tremolo on the last word," suggested Vestal. She lost patience. "Anyway, what's the question?"

"Well." The computer stuttered. "Well." It sounded like it needed a brush-up course at Toastmasters. "Well, what group

Interstellar Undertakers

created this profound music?”

Vestal put her finger in her mouth, thinking back through her dancing career. Then: “The Kinks.”

The computer coughed in amazement.

The girl said “Ray and Dave Davies. Great guys.”

Vestal closed her eyes, and with her glass empty, fell asleep on the sofa. The computer, defeated, silently directed the *Rigor Mortis* towards Acheron and Aster.

*

Snow blew up in a cloud, whitening the discoloured boards of the old barn. A poacher, noticing the blow, disregarded it as a meteorite impact and skulked away into the nearby woods. An airlock opened, disclosing a shivering figure, and promptly closed again. It opened a second time. The figure, clad in a thick coat, jumped out.

Vestal landed in snow up to her thighs, and looked about. In front was a pile of rotten planks which, over long untended years, had detached themselves from the back of the barn. The wall was now a patchwork of holes through which shone the faltering light of evening. As she watched, something like a bat issued from one of the holes and disappeared into the dusk. Overhead, a few early stars twinkled in a freezing atmosphere. She turned in response to a crunching sound. But it was only the ship, settling through the snow drift onto the frozen ground beneath. Beyond it, there was a dark mass of trees bent over with ice.

The girl lunged forward, taking big steps but sinking at every one. Finally, she broke out of the drift into a relatively clear area at the corner of the barn. Here was a massive rough-hewn stone. Walking around the corner, she followed the wall to a dark entrance. The door was open, hanging crazily from only the lower hinge. She peeked inside: rusty pieces of machinery of

Paul S. Wesson

forgotten purpose; guano-encrusted rails of what had once been a chicken coop; and a pile of straw which had long since settled into a near-solid mass and was riddled with animal burrows.

She pulled her coat around her and looked at the sky, wondering if it would snow. But the night was remarkably clear; and as she looked, a meteor dashed across the sky and dipped below the horizon.

It was cold and quiet.

Walking towards the dimly-seen farmhouse, her feet creaked in the snow. Suddenly a light, activated by sound or movement, blazed down from atop a gnarled pole. There was the sound of a dog barking from inside, followed immediately by a second. However, the farmhouse remained dark.

It was an old structure. The floodlight revealed gaps between yellow bricks where the mortar had fallen out, and shone off a semicircle of white stones that crowned a pointed window beside a battered door. A vague light appeared in the window, and she moved forward.

The stoop was a block of concrete, with a ragged crack that split it diagonally where the house's foundations had sunk. It supported a flowerpot, tilted over so that half the soil had poured out. But the frozen plant was dead anyway. There was also a pile of cinders which, however, were still warm.

The light in the window grew brighter. Vestal waited, noticing that an attempt had been made to repair the roof over the porch with some type of modern material. There was a scuffling sound from behind the door. She recognized it as the scrabbling claws of excited dogs on hardwood.

The door opened half way, revealing a tall man with grey hair. He had one hand on the doorknob, and the other twisted around the collars of two massive dogs. One of the beasts growled menacingly, but then fell silent.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Dad?” said Vestal.

The man said nothing.

“Dad?” she repeated.

Still silence, but there was a change in the slope of the man’s shoulders as he peered out.

“Dad!” She started to sob uncontrollably. This carried on for a while, the old man looking on dispassionately and the dogs staring with puzzled frowns. She said, finally, “Dad, I’m sorry.”

The door opened fully and she went inside.

*

Disdaining the gleaming equipment of the laboratory of the *Rigor Mortis*, the old man took out an ancient instrument of his own, a pair of pincers and an empty beer can. Bending over the Sherlock Holmes android, he applied the instrument to its forehead and inspected the display. Then applying the pincers to the back of its neck, he gave a twist. The android's eyes flickered open and then closed again. Another twist, and this time the silvery eyes stayed open, though fixed blankly on the ceiling.

“Will he live?” asked Vestal.

“Yes,” replied her father. “But he’ll need time to recover.” He added, looking at the aquiline features and finely moulded body. “Neat thing.”

Vestal moved nervously over to the next coffin, where the wet and naked body of Jale lay. His deep chest inflated and deflated sterterously.

“Your boyfriend?”

“Not really,” said Vestal with confusion. “But I really do...”

The old man, however, was already examining the inert body. The instrument seemed to be giving a paradoxical reading.

“There's something funny here,” he said, grey brows low over grey eyes. “Where did he come from?”

Paul S. Wesson

“He always gives his reference as Acheron,” replied the girl. “But I don't know if he was born there.”

A shadow crossed the old man's face. “Hmm. I'll have to take a sample.”

The daughter looked on with squeam as the father disconnected the feeding tube and proceeded to drain blood from Jale's thigh artery into the beer can. His calm movements and lack of concern had the manner of a professional. When the can was full, he stowed it in the pocket of his parka and reconnected the food tube.

“Will he be all right?” asked the girl nervously.

“I have no idea,” replied the old man. “Most normal people would be dead several times over after that dose of radiation.” He squinted at Jale's body as they prepared to return to the farmhouse. “But your friend is *not* normal.”

*

The wood-burning stove hissed quietly in the corner of the kitchen. Ruddy flames licked behind sooty glass, and the air above shimmered with heat. A pot-pourri, consisting of a ceramic vase filled with herbs and water, bubbled gently. Its sweet aromas covered up other less desirable smells. On the table, which was a rickety affair missing a leaf, were the turgid remains of a meal. The table was of wood, scarred; and was also home to a collection of vials filled with chemicals and an ancient but powerful neutrino microscope. At the sink on the other side of the kitchen, a faucet leaked tediously onto a pile of unwashed pots and plates. The counter to the side was covered with old potato peelings, and also sported half a sausage covered in mould.

Vestal, who was warm and felt somewhat at home, nevertheless looked around her askance. In one corner of the

Interstellar Undertakers

room were piled three crates of beer, the top one open and half-consumed. The empty cans were lined up on top of the fridge. She crossed to this and opened the door. Inside was a miscellany of food items, most in a state of advanced decay, plus more chemicals. She noticed that the roof of the room was stained with smoke and sagged in the middle. From a hook in the corner of the kitchen, onions were hanging from a rope that had been braided from their stalks. Most of the onions had sprouted, with thick green shoots that made an unlikely hanging garden.

She returned to the table and sat down. Her father was titrating Jale's blood sample. His forehead was furrowed, and his fingers trembled. A large drop of the red stuff dropped to the floor, where the pink tongues of the two dogs immediately licked it up. They looked at Vestal with only half-trusting eyes.

“Dad?”

There was no answer. The old man had almost completed the transfer of blood from the beer can to a specimen holder, and seemed oblivious of anything else.

“Dad.”

There was still no response, as the old man carefully moved the specimen over to the microscope.

“Dad!”

“Yes?” calmly.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm trying to find out what your friend is made of,” was the reply.

Vestal, puzzled, said “Isn't it obvious what he's made of? Muscles and skin and cells and such.”

“I mean, at a genetic level.” said her father. He turned to the microscope. “Will you put another log on the fire? Thanks.”

Vestal grudgingly went over to the pile of logs beside the stove. Some were thick, some were thin; but all were cut to the

Paul S. Wesson

right dimension. She picked out a thick, dry piece and put it in front of the fire. Grabbing an old towel that hung nearby, she took hold of the iron handle and twisted it in a half circle. It squeaked, but the door opened, revealing a bed of red embers. Expertly, she heaved the new log into the fire and closed the glass door. Opening the flue on the rusty chimney, she saw flames rush from under the wood. The stove began a low roar.

“So,” said her father. “You haven't forgotten.”

“I don't forget,” she replied in a bleak tone. “Anything.”

*

It was the darkest time of the night, and the poacher moved silently through the wood. No twig cracked under his moccasined feet as he slipped through the branches, his eyes dark-adapted to the starlight. A dead fox and a rabbit swung from his belt as he stooped under a low limb and came within sight of the farmhouse. There was still a light on there, which was curious. Pausing, he decided on a detour. The old man did not like people hunting on his property. Indeed, he had a special rapport with the animals that inhabited the unworked farm, and often fed foxes by hand from his front door. But everybody needed to live. The old man had reputedly been a geneticist, but was now retired. The poacher had a simpler, if more brutal, way of making a living. This was after all Aster, not Acheron. The moon still tolerated a rustic attitude to survival that would have been regarded as obscene on the parent planet.

The poacher moved leftward and entered a field of half-grown evergreens. Planted with a view to a commercial crop by the farm's previous owner, they had been left unthinned, and those that survived were now choked with wiry grass. At this season, and at this time of the night, the trees were brittle with frozen sap. A wrong foot might cause an explosive report from a

Interstellar Undertakers

shattered branch. The poacher moved forward with extreme caution, and then stopped. Turning with an animal-like instinct, he saw a cloud of snow falling quietly to the ground behind the old barn.

Another meteorite? Hardly. Unslinging his laser rifle, he snuggled into the snow and prepared to watch.

*

Vestal, finding the kitchen too hot and stuffy, got up and closed the damper on the wood-stove. The roar became muted and the flames hunkered down.

“Can I have a look around?”

“Sure,” replied her father, still intent on his analysis. “Sorry about the mess.”

The girl, who might have said something negative at this point, kept quiet. She resented that her father had hardly looked at her; and while she liked dogs, was worried by the two massive animals that lay under the kitchen table, watching her every move with quick brown eyes.

She walked through a short passage on an uneven hardwood floor. The walls were wainscoted, with vertical planks up to about waist level which must originally have fit snugly together but over long time had dried out and lost touch with their neighbours. The walls above the wainscoting were covered in old-fashioned panels of embossed paper, most of whose corners had come unstuck from the plaster beneath. Out of place, a modern subether unit sat on a bracket that had been crudely screwed into the wall. Beside it hung a foil, old and tattered, that bore barely discernible names, many of which were crossed off. She guessed that this must date to some earlier time: the subether was glossy and new, and two empty beer cans showed that it had been used recently.

Paul S. Wesson

She passed by a bathroom and looked in, surprised to find it occupied mainly by plants. Three ferns in pots stood in shallow water in an ancient bathtub. Well, it made sense: the air here was moist with old steam. She turned, and found one of the dogs regarding her. Gingerly, she edged past it. The dog entered the bathroom with familiarity, and began lapping water from the old toilet bowl. It looked at her with drops dripping from its jowls.

The living room was mainly occupied by two couches. One was in red plush, with an end piece that was lowered. A dirty pillow and a rough blanket showed that it was used as a bed. The other was upholstered in some green fabric, through which stuffing sprouted from holes. The two end seats were lower than the one in the middle; and as she noted this, the dog that had followed her walked over and curled up in one end of the couch. Shortly after, the other dog entered and took its place at the opposite end. There was only one more significant piece of furniture in the living room, a low table that occupied the space between the couches. It stood on a round, beige rug. Here at least some cleaning had been done: the nap on the rug was newly brushed, and the tablecloth was faded from many washings. Wondering why the table top was not littered with beer cans, she picked up the edge of the cloth. Underneath was not a conventional levitable, but a battered chest. She pulled off the tablecloth, and studied the lock. The main feature of this was an indentation designed to receive a human finger. Instinctively, she put her right thumb into it. There was a click, and compartments began to extend from the side of the chest, one by one. They contained old coins, buttons, bullets, minerals, fishing hooks and other oddments, carefully sorted. The last compartment to emerge was stuffed with pictures, and as the pressure was released a number of them cascaded to the floor.

One of the dogs growled. Guiltily, Vestal started to push the

Interstellar Undertakers

pictures back into the compartment. However, the one that had been on top caused her to stop. It showed a little girl, proudly holding a white rabbit dappled with brown patches. The rabbit's ears were also brown, and touched the girl's upturned nose. Perhaps because she was being tickled, there was a broad smile on her face. However, the eyes were also smiling, and full of self-confidence under a mop of yellow hair.

Amazed, Vestal could not remember ever having been that happy.

*

The poacher blew gently into his right mitten. The cold of the night was seeping into his body. Already, the dead fox and rabbit were stiff boards of meat. Pushing these to the side, he pulled off his thick mitt. Underneath was a thinner glove, with the fingers cut down to half. Carefully but quickly, he picked up his rifle and adjusted the night-viewer. It showed two figures approaching the house from the direction of the old barn. As he watched, one crept up to the front porch. There was a blaster in its hand. The other figure made its way stealthily along the side of the farmhouse, paused, and seemed to vanish into the ground.

Puzzled, the poacher blew on his numb fingers and released the safety catch on the laser rifle.

*

Vestal, disturbed but not yet willing to return to the kitchen, looked around the living room. It was a hermit's hole, but had other doors opening off it. One of these had a frame of polished wood, into which were set panes of sculptured glass. She pushed, but it did not open. Reflexively, she stretched up her hand and ran her fingers along the lintel. The key she found there was grimy, but opened the lock with a grating sound. An

Paul S. Wesson

automatic light came on. It was laden with dust, but gave enough illumination to show that she was in a study: books, foils, instruments – all covered in cobwebs. A big chair was tilted back as if the owner had just arisen; but the desk was covered with the droppings of some farmhouse rodent. She turned, and her foot hit something. Picking it up, she brushed off the cover and read: *Reverse DNA Analysis*.

Closing and locking the door, she replaced the key and looked around. There were two more openings. One revealed a flight of steps going upwards. However, the air had the heavy, musty odour of long disuse. Anticipating only bedrooms full of decay, she turned away, feeling depressed. How could her father live like this?

The other opening from the living room also revealed steps, but going downwards. The air here was cool and fresh, as if a window might be open in the cellar. However, no light had come on. She was hesitating, when there was a sudden growl from behind. Turning, she saw one of the dogs leap from the couch towards her. The other followed close behind, its lips drawn back over white fangs. Scared, she turned back to the basement and started to move. But then she froze: there was a black figure ascending the steps.

The dogs hit the intruder with a tremendous impact that sent junk crashing down the basement steps. One of them went for the upraised arm and the other for the neck. But the creature was strong. Not being able to dislodge the dog's teeth from its arm, it swung the animal against the door frame. Both wood and bone shattered.

By now the intruder was in the sitting room. The one dog fell to the floor, mortally wounded. The other hung on, burying its fangs deeper and deeper into the enemy's neck with a terrifying grinding sound.

Interstellar Undertakers

Vestal ran for the kitchen but tripped over the rug and went sprawling. Without thinking, she grabbed the rug and pulled. The chest went flying across the room and smashed into the wall, scattering its contents. She threw the rug over the combatants and looked around for a weapon. The only thing useful in the stuff from the broken chest was an ooloo, a scimitar-shaped blade with an amber handle used for skinning the sealoids that frequented Aster's polar regions. She grabbed this, but could not use it: the dog and the intruder were in a ferocious battle that went backwards and forwards across the floor; but they were rolled in the rug and she could not differentiate between them.

Suddenly there was a blade of green light and the rug dropped away in two pieces. It revealed the dog on top of the attacker, its jaw muscles working spasmodically through flesh and sinew. But under that there was metal, and the antimatter sword rose above the dog's backbone.

With a lunge, Vestal landed on the combatants and swiped at the visored face with the ooloo. Razor sharp, there was hardly any resistance. A gush of blood sprayed her face. The dog jumped back, licking its fangs, and then sank them into the intruder's leg.

The black figure rose to one knee, dripping, and fell back to the floor. With remarkable persistence, it began crawling towards the kitchen, dragging the dog along. But then went suddenly still.

Vestal ran for the kitchen.

"Dad!" she yelled, and stopped short.

Her father was struggling with another intruder at the farmhouse doorway. Blood spread in a widening stain across his chest as he desperately tried to bend the black hand and its blaster away from his head. The gun went off, disintegrating the microscope and sending beer cans in every direction.

Paul S. Wesson

Vestal ran at the black figure, hit it, and had the satisfaction of seeing it stagger back onto the stoop. Her father fell down, bleeding freely. Vestal was ready to run at the thing again, when a blue shaft came out of the night. The laser drilled a hole in the intruder's head, and as its brains began to bubble out it slowly fell over.

*

Vestal and the surviving dog stared at the dying man.

The girl sat on her haunches, his head in her lap. The flames of the woodstove flickered behind her, but the hand she held was growing colder. After a glance under her father's coarse shirt, she had vomited over the unwashed pots in the sink: the damage was irreparable. Now she sat with a white, gaunt face, watching another face that resembled hers but was getting softer and greyer.

The dog was stretched out with its head on its paws. Its deep eyes were fixed on those of the old man, and occasionally it would shuffle its feet and let out a sound that was half growl and half whimper.

"Dad?" said Vestal softly.

A pucker creased the old man's cheek, maybe from pain or maybe from recognition. But his eyes remained closed.

"Dad?" she repeated. "Do you forgive me?"

There was a pause. Then, "For what?"

The girl ran her fingers over the old man's jaw, feeling the stubble she had hated to kiss as a child but now revered. Gently, she pushed aside the grey hair from his lined brow.

The dog moved forward slightly, and let out a low growl. "It's all right," said the man with a weak voice. "Kazak?"

The dog squirmed forward and licked its master's face. "It's all right," he repeated.

Interstellar Undertakers

The dog looked at the girl. The girl looked at the dog. “Kazak, I guess you’ll have to come with me.”

The man coughed slightly, and a trickle of blood emerged from the corner of his mouth. He licked this away slowly, and then said “Beer can.”

Vestal, misunderstanding, objected “Dad, you can’t...”

“Beer can,” he said again. “DNA for your friend.”

With growing understanding, she looked around the squalid room. The neutrino microscope existed no more, its place marked only by a burn in the table top. But against the wall a solitary beer can still stood. Relinquishing her father’s head, she got up. The can was surprisingly heavy; and when she popped the cap a peculiar, minty smell emerged.

Sitting down again, she clasped her father’s hand in both of hers. It no longer had the softness of the academic, but was hardened by many seasons of chopping firewood.

“What shall I do with it?” she asked, looking at the can.

A flicker of irritation crossed the old man’s face. “Make him drink it, of course.” There was a gap. “But ...”

“Yes?”

“He’s not what he appears to be.”

The girl waited patiently, wishing to know more but not wanting to push the conversation.

Finally, the old man said “He’s got the same genetic code as the Gang.”

The girl, confused and disbelieving, said “But, *Dad* ...”

However, the hand she held had gone limp.

8
DNA

Jale opened his eyes and saw what appeared to be a black wolf. A red tongue lolled over white teeth, and it gave off a canine smell. On a table nearby stood a beer can, but the taste in his mouth was more medicinal than hoppy, and he could make no sense of this. There were flashing lights, but distant and indistinct. Closer, a vague silvery shape hovered. Another hallucination? He closed his eyes.

A flutey voice said "Sir?"

Jale opened his eyes again, and with difficulty focused on a shiny face supporting a deerstalker hat.

"Sir!" said the figure with obvious pleasure. Then "Please don't say *Where am I?*"

"Where am I?" asked Jale stubbornly. His voice sounded weak and unfamiliar in his own ears.

"You are aboard the interstellar hearse *Rigor Mortis* on the moon of Acheron. Unfortunately, we are buried in snow, and neither myself nor Miss Vestal have the expertise to get the ship out."

"Try putting sand under the wheels," said Jale unhelpfully.

"Jale!" remonstrated the android. "This is serious. If we do not get out of here soon we will almost certainly be revisited by the Black Hand Gang."

Things began to click together in Jale's mind. The mental integration went into speed mode as the girl walked up. She looked at the man with guarded affection.

"Where have I been?" Jale asked Vestal.

"As the song says," she replied. "*Out of your brain on the five-fifteen.*"

Disregarding this comment, Jale said "Where did the wolf

Interstellar Undertakers

come from?”

“It's not a wolf,” replied Vestal. At the sound of her voice, the dog's big black head turned towards her. Its ears perked up, and it looked at her with trusting eyes from under questioning brown eyebrows. There had been a transfer of loyalties. “This is Kazak. Hound of Space.”

Jale was beginning to think that there was not much difference between hallucination and (if this was it) real life. “I'm hungry.”

“What would you like?” asked Vestal.

“Beef Wellington,” he replied. “And beer.”

She moved off to a dispenser while Jale struggled out of the coffin and lurched to the table. The girl returned with a plate. It contained a massive slab of well-done pseudo-beef topped with a dollop of pseudo-crabmeat. Sherlock came over and put a thick-sided glass of Rigellian Red by the plate.

Jale took a hefty bite. The flavour rushed through his taste buds and made the nerves in his jaw tingle. He began to chew. No, this was not an hallucination: food did not taste this good in dreams.

*

Jale, apprised of what had happened while he had been unconscious, opened the ship's airlock. He was confronted with a solid wall of snow. To his hand it felt crystalline and hard. The hold's lights twinkled off tightly-packed ice granules. This would be difficult.

“Sherlock,” he ordered. “Break out the lasers.”

“Jale,” responded the android. “There are just two problems with that. (a) *We have* no lasers. (b) *We have no lasers.*”

The man looked over his shoulder commiseratingly. “My friend, if you can't come up with any new jokes, at least find me a

shovel.”

“Aye aye, *Sir!*” The android whirled its hand and smacked its forehead in a salute.

Jale kicked the snow wall, and a minor avalanche spilled across the hold's floor. A spade was shoved into his hand. It felt like a toy. With returning strength, he heaved out massive chunks from the wall, casting the snow across the deck, where it started to melt and be absorbed by the ship's habitat system.

A good time later, he wiped sweat from his brow and sat down in the tunnel. It brought back memories of childhood, and he felt the return of claustrophobia. Sherlock, having difficulty with his levitation unit, bumped along the tunnel and came to rest by his side. The mist of the man's heavy breathing condensed on the shiny cape of the android.

The two sat in the light from a portable lamp, surrounded by diamonds.

“It's quiet,” observed Jale, his voice muffled by the close walls. “How much farther?”

Sherlock activated his scanners. “Not far at all,” he replied. “Allow me.”

The android took the shovel, and pushed it vigorously ahead. There was a metallic clang. Clearing away the last of the snow, there was revealed the hull of the ship of the Black Hand Gang.

“Jale,” said the android, “when we write our memoirs, I suggest that we call this chapter *Escape from Stalag 147*.”

“Sherlock,” said the man, “if you don't get your ass in hyperdrive, our memoirs will consist of just three letters.”

“And what would they be?”

“R.I.P.,” replied Jale, and pushed open the airlock of the enemy craft.

Vestal frowned at the display from the neutrino microscope in the laboratory of the *Rigor Mortis*. Her Dad had been correct:

Interstellar Undertakers

Jale had the same type of peculiar DNA as other members of the Black Hand Gang. In a way, this made sense, as his brother had apparently been involved with the Gang. But in another way it made no sense, as Jale (she was certain) was implacably opposed to the Gang.

If the Gang was desperate for some kind of DNA fix, why was not Jale?

She got up and wandered around the laboratory. In front of the freezers, she paused. One contained what was left of the two Gang members after a long and destructive analysis. They were now basically a pot of genetic sludge. The other freezer contained a smaller pot. After spending the best part of a day chipping away with a pickaxe to make a grave in the frozen soil, she had buried her father with pride. Jale's undertaking texts had been comforting. But while most of her father's body now lay deep under the snowy surface of the farm, a small but viable sample was in the pot in the freezer of the ship. Perhaps, after this escapade was over, there might be money available from somewhere to try a recloning ...

Vestal went over to the food dispenser. Seeing Jale consume so much had made her hungry. She said "Braised trout with asparagus, and a glass of lucozade."

The machine began to function, but she changed her mind and stopped it. "Correction. Beef Wellington and beer."

If it was good enough for the Iron Duke, it was good enough for her.

*

Jale and Sherlock stepped quietly into the interior of the enemy ship. It was cold, and the human wished he had brought a thermosuit. The android, unaffected, levitated forward and promptly crashed into an icicle that hung from the roof. It

Paul S. Wesson

crashed to the floor, splintered, and scattered to the corners of the hold. Icy echoes reverberated from the metal walls.

“Be quiet!” hissed Jale.

“It doesn't matter, Sir,” replied Sherlock. “The other crew members are frozen.”

The man moved to stand by the android. In the wall of the hold were two niches, each containing a Black Hander. But their visors showed no hint of breath, and the display above implied suspended animation.

Sherlock asked “Shall we terminate them?”

Jale thought for a bit, and answered. “No. We'll send them on their way.”

The walls of the hold were covered with solid rivulets of water. This ship was strangely decrepit, and resembled most an old mausoleum. Jale shivered, partly from the cold and partly from an inner bad feeling.

“Sir,” advised Sherlock, sensing the other's mood. “Don't crap as you creep in the crypt.”

Jale barked one of his short laughs, propelling himself out of his sombre mood. “No fear. Let's find the control room.”

They moved towards the front of the ship, passing through a mess room that more resembled a medical dispensary. When they found the control room, however, it was reasonably orthodox. It did not take Jale long to figure out the instruments.

“Where are we sending them?” asked Sherlock.

“In the opposite direction to where we're going,” replied Jale. His thick eyebrows were low over intense eyes as he figured out a course. The BHG, when it got to Aster, would not find the *Rigor Mortis*. The logical conclusion would be that Jale and his companions had hijacked the enemy's ship. So ... He entered coordinates for Trantor, and set the time delay.

“Let's go,” said Jale, urging Sherlock away from the controls.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Step on it.”

“Step on *what*, Captain?”

“Aargh,” replied Jale, pushing the android towards the exit.

“Remind me to check your humour module for corruption.”

They raced through the Gang's ship. Already the deck was vibrating as the engines built up power. Jale slipped on the ice, got up, and dived through the airlock. Slamming it shut behind him, he butted Sherlock into speed down the ice tunnel.

Behind them, an explosion of snow signalled the rise of the enemy ship.

*

Free of snow on one side, the *Rigor Mortis* edged out of the drift. A careful blast from its motors nudged it out over the frozen fields, and it began to pick up speed. Frozen lakes and white forests slipped by below.

“Where are we going?” asked Vestal. Replete with pseudo-meat, she lay on the big sofa in the cabin, intermittently reading one of her father's books.

“To Acheron, eventually,” replied Jale from the adjacent control room. “But we're hot. We need to lie up. And the *Rigor* needs some work.”

Below was a river with ice-bound sides and a rushing stream only in the middle. It wound away between frosty hills, becoming gradually wider.

“Sherlock,” said Jale theatrically. “I'm going down the river.”

“Ah!” replied the android. “The old *Aurora* trick. Watch out for poisoned darts.”

Jale laughed, feeling strong again. Vestal, vowing to review her knowledge of Victorian crime, said nothing. The dog Kazak watched her intently, dripping slobber onto her bare thigh.

Paul S. Wesson

The river curved around a headland. On the top, there were a few houses with yellow lights; and then they were descending towards a sizeable town. Slowing, Jale used the ship's computer. He dropped the craft to the surface of the river and began a detailed reconnaissance. Edging between piles of ice jumbled by the river, he eventually paused at a boatyard whose prosperity was in the past. A short burst of power sent the ship into an empty warehouse that was beyond repair.

"Anchors aweigh or away?" asked Sherlock, who was sitting in the copilot's chair.

"Neither," replied Jale. The *Rigor Mortis* settled with a squeal onto a pair of rusty rails whose lower parts disappeared into the frozen river.

"Engines off," said Jale.

"Check" confirmed Sherlock, completely unnecessarily.

Jale donned his thermosuit and Vestal put on her furry coat. Kazak seemed content in his thick fur, as did Sherlock inside his metallic cape. The airlock opened, and they stepped out into the gloom of a building that creaked in a chilly wind. Picking their way through old equipment, they emerged into late afternoon light. Beyond the wreck of a stern-paddler was a reasonably well-kept house.

The door opened partly, and a stocky man of about Jale's age appeared. The crew of the *Rigor* took a few more steps forward, and halted. The light was fading from the sky, and the wind was picking up, blowing back Jale's too-long hair.

"We will sell the frogs or toads," announced Jale.

"But not the newts," was the counter phrase. Zek threw open the door.

*

Jale regarded his boyhood friend. Long separations can be

Interstellar Undertakers

problematic, but all Jale saw was an older, stronger version of the boy he had played with in the ponds. Certainly Zek was as taciturn as before, and they had drunk half their beer before there was a response to Jale's question.

“Yes, the Gang are after you,” said Zek. There was a pause. “They won't find you here.”

Vestal, slightly irritated at the slow pace of the conversation, said “We know that they are basically drug dealers. They need anti-DNA, and they kill to ensure the supply.”

Sherlock nodded, then gave a pretend yawn and patted his mouth politely. “Permission to check the perimeter?”

Jale gave assent, even though the operation was pointless, adding “Maybe you can take Kazak with you?”

The dog jumped up eagerly. “Walkies?” asked Sherlock.

They went into the dusk, leaving Jale, Zek and Vestal seated around the table. A modern antimatter light shone from a ceiling that was dark blue and casually studded with silver stars. Despite the dereliction around, the house was technologically advanced. A subether unit more sophisticated than any Jale had seen hummed to itself in the corner.

“But why do they do it?” demanded Vestal, trying to push the conversation forward.

“For the same reason that all druggies do it,” replied Jale. “They need it.”

“But...”

“They need it more than most,” added Jale. “They are a subspecies. Even your father had figured, that without anti-DNA their race will die.”

Vestal, insulted, said “I know that!” Then more calmly, and using new knowledge, said “We aren't talking about a few addicts in a vile opium den in Upper Swandam Lane. We're talking about a group of murderers spread throughout the Milky

Paul S. Wesson

Way.”

Zek took a swig of beer, then said “She's right.”

“And they're based on Acheron?” said Jale.

Zek nodded.

“Why don't you do something about them?” demanded Vestal.

Zek shifted in his seat. If he was irritated with Vestal's angry demeanour, it did not show in his face. As boys, Zek had been the practical foil to Jale's flights of imagination, and now he said “They don't normally bother us.”

Vestal, frustrated, jumped up. “I need a shower and then I'm going to bed. While I'm asleep, maybe you two heroes can figure out how to save the Galaxy.”

She flounced out. Zek fetched two more beers, sat down and said “Screw-crew?”

“No,” replied Jale. “She's just a nice girl with a lot of problems. We haven't done anything together.”

“Pity,” observed Zek. “She's pretty.”

“Yeah.” Jale was thinking about something else. “What happened to Quincey?”

“Dead,” replied Zek shortly. “Killed while mining asteroids.”

“Oh.” There was a silence. “Talking about asteroids, my ship got beaten up in an encounter with two big ones near Nickelodeon. Can we fix it?”

“Sure,” agreed Zek. “Tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” said Jale. Then “What about my brother?”

“Recloned.” There was a long pause. “He's now one of the main cogs in the government on Acheron.”

“Yes? What department?”

“Imports and exports.”

Jale was momentarily puzzled. “What do they need to import

Interstellar Undertakers

or export on Acheron? They've got everything.”

Zek said nothing as his friend's mental processes caught up. Jale, arriving at the answer, asked “DNA?”

Zek nodded. It was quiet for a while as both men drank beer. The light shone through the Rigellian Red with a ruddy hue, but outside the sky had gone dark. The door opened and Sherlock came in, closely followed by Kazak. The latter held a large rat that dangled by the tail. Carefully, the dog laid it at the feet of their host.

“Thankyou,” acknowledged Zek.

Kazak padded off to find Vestal. Sherlock announced “All quiet on the western front,” and went over to inspect the subether unit in the corner of the room.

“What happened to the boat business?” asked Jale, looking at the rat and thinking about the run-down warehouse that concealed the *Rigor Mortis*.

Zek shrugged. “There are lots of rich people on Acheron, but they have more sophisticated toys these days than boats. There are none left to fix.”

“So?” prompted Jale.

“I now do computer engineering,” replied Zek. “I have a permanent link to Selipon.” He inclined his head towards the subether, on which Sherlock was playing tachyon tennis.

Jale yawned. “I'm going to take a shower.”

He got up and followed the smell of steam. Stripping off his suit, he turned on the tap: it was real water, ample and hot. A noticeable aroma of weed implied that it was pumped up from the river.

He dried himself in the air blast, and went back to where Zek was watching Sherlock. The android was adept at batting balls that moved faster than the speed of light, and had already racked up an impressive score.

Paul S. Wesson

Jale finished his beer and put down the glass. He was feeling weary and slightly overwhelmed by the problem that the Gang posed. For a while he sat in moody contemplation.

Zek finally said “Jale, do you remember the frogs, toads and newts?”

“Of course,” replied Jale. “There were thousands of them.”

Zek said “They're all gone.”

“How?” asked Jale.

“The water supply got contaminated.”

The two friends looked at each other. A slow surmise built in Jale's mind. Eventually, he asked “Are you any good at contaminating things?”

Zek stretched his arms, tired. “I can try.” He got up and headed for his bed.

Jale stared into his empty glass, his worn brain trying to formulate a plan. But it was too late in the day. He got up and wandered down the corridor. Surprisingly, the room Zek had indicated contained only one bed, and there was already a form in it.

He retreated into the corridor. However, the only other door opened to the outside, with a sky of steely stars and a cold swath of air from the frozen river. Closing the door hurriedly, he went back to the bedroom.

Trying not to overload the levitation unit, he sneaked into the bed. It tilted slightly, and the figure on the other side moved.

“Jale?”

“Yes.”

“Jale?” The girl turned towards him. “Jale, I think I know how to get the Gang.”

“So do I,” replied the man. “Poison their DNA.”

It was still in the bed for several moments. Perhaps Vestal was disappointed that Jale had reached the same conclusion about

Interstellar Undertakers

the Gang. But her next words were fuzzy with sleep and passion.

“Jale? Do you have any clothes on?”

“No,” confirmed Jale. “Do you?”

“No.”

Actually, he had already ascertained this from her nipples, which stood up aggressively in the cool air.

“Jale? You smell nice.”

“Algae number 4 by Chanel,” he replied. And fell asleep.

*

Inside the thruster tube of the *Rigor Mortis*, Jale swung the sledgehammer as hard as he could. It hit the bent housing with a deafening bang. Outside the tube, Zek with another sledgehammer received the impact. It jolted into his arm and numbed it. The metal of the thruster moved back somewhat towards its original position.

“Two more,” grunted Zek.

A couple of terrific blows from Jale sent a cacophony of diminishing echoes down the river valley. He emerged from inside the tube, shaking his head to clear the buzzing sound in his ears.

“Not bad,” said Zek surveying the ship's motors. They had been working on them all morning, and they were finally restored to their original state.

The two men sat down on a baulk of timber. In times past, piles had stretched out into the river, supporting docks at which boats moored. Now, the tree trunks stuck up at all angles like tossed matchsticks, the docks were decayed, and the only things that floated against them were chunks of ice.

Zek said “It's summer on Acheron.”

Jale nodded, knowing that Acheron and its moon Aster were always seasonally out of phase. “Do you feel like a vacation?”

Paul S. Wesson

“Maybe.”

Kazak walked up and deposited another rat at Zek's feet. The old boathouse was infested with them, but the Hound of Space did not seem to understand that there was little market for dead rodents. A dozen of them lay on the ground under the looming hull of the *Rigor*.

Zek walked over to the ship and surveyed it. Carefully, he pried a piece of rock free from the hull. “Carbonaceous chondrite.”

“Uh,” agreed Jale. It was, after all, the commonest form of asteroid around most stars.

“Easy to get off,” said Zek. “How about, we clean up the hull and then go into town for some entertainment?”

Jale, thinking of bars like the *Purple Escargot* where he could look at something nubile and imbibe something alcoholic, said “Sure. What's on?”

Zek replied “Madame Mayhem.” And then, sensing that his friend was misinterpreting, added “Opera.”

“Oh,” said Jale in a voice flatter than a pancake.

“She's got the biggest bosom in this spiral arm,” encouraged Zek.

“Yeah?” asked Jale sceptically. “I suppose she'll carry on forever, and sing some profound version of *The Rings of the Galaxy*?”

Zek, anticipating a hard sell, said “Actually, Jale, you remind me of the Rings.”

“*What rings?*” asked Jale, falling into the trap.

“The rings with the power.”

“What power?”

“The power of voodoo.”

“Who do? Do what?”

“Remind me of the rings,” said Zek.

Interstellar Undertakers

“*What rings?*” asked Jale.

“The rings with the ...”

Jale, smiling, stood up and went to work on the ship's hull.

However, dusk found Zek, Vestal and Jale headed for the opera. Zek still wore his work clothes, and they bounced along a rutted track in a levitruck that needed some suspension work. Jale had donned his black cloak with the red lining, out of deference for the nature of the soiree. But as they were overtaken by a couple of Zek's hillbilly friends in an atomic tractor, his misgivings about the opera deepened. What kind of company would want to perform on a rustic world like Aster? He wished he had stayed home with Sherlock and Kazak to clear up the rats.

Relations between Jale and Vestal had not been easy that day: she had declined to get him a cup of coffee at breakfast, and had only offered him rat pie for lunch. Jale recalled that some ancient wit had said “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” But since he could not remember the source of the quote, and especially since he did not like to eat rats, he had maintained a stony silence most of the day. Now, though, he noticed that she was wearing a dress that seemed to consist mainly of holes held together by a minimum of fabric, revealing acres of pink flesh beneath.

“Do you like my dress?” asked Vestal. She had noted his attention, but her voice was still flinty.

Jale said nothing.

Vestal pouted, smoothing the dress over her well-formed thighs. “Are you ashamed to be seen out with me?”

“Not really,” he replied generously. “Anyway, it will be dark soon.”

Vestal looked at him with eyes that were embrasures loaded with laser light. Zek, as usual, said nothing. Jale resigned himself to operatic martyrdom.

Paul S. Wesson

They arrived at the hall and entered. The clientele was varied, from tradespeople who were overdressed, to trappers in dirt-slicked leather jackets. Most were trying to find their seats in a dim light that was producing more injured toes than operatic atmosphere. Jale walked down the aisle in his black boots and flowing cape, unaware that several female patrons followed him with interested glances. One of the few mechanoid ushers, programmed to recognize expensive costumes, came over to them.

“May I be of service?” it asked.

“Yes,” growled Jale. “Get lost.”

Zek, forever pragmatic, said “Jale. Calm down, and sit down.”

Jale said “How *can* I sit down? Is Aster inhabited by dwarves?” It was true that his knees were up to his chin and his posterior hardly touched the seat. The people in front, an old man and a middle-aged woman with a lorgnette, turned around and gave him a disparaging look as he tried to force himself into the seat.

Vestal smiled frostily at the couple, then sat down. She was a silent figure quivering with disapproval.

The curtain went up, and music started to emanate from the orchestra pit. Simultaneously, the lights went down, and a spotlight transfixed a woman on the stage whose dimensions were exorbitant.

Jale leaned forward to the couple in front. “Got any popcorn?”

The old man's waxed moustache flicked with anger. Zek stuck an elbow in his friend's side. The woman on the stage started to sing with a low, intense voice that portended tragedy.

“The gods have called on us (she sang)

At a pretty pass (sigh).

Interstellar Undertakers

The Galaxy is ruins, and...

“Shove it up your ass,” added Jale.

A smack on the side of the head, delivered behind Zek by Vestal, caused him to be temporarily quiet. On the stage, Madame Mayhem was clearly unaware of her ability to provoke *ad libs* from the best raconteur in the spiral arm. She thundered on, describing a record of interstellar devastation designed to set the scene for what Jale feared would be ages of musical torment. But it was not only the potential longevity of the piece that intimidated him. This *grand dame* of the opera was clearly past her best: despite her wobbling bosom (which Jale had to concede to Zek was prodigious), the voice which emerged seemed to climb up the scale like a fireman going up a ladder with greasy boots. That is, there were numerous slips. And when she got to the highest register, she was not singing but screaming.

“Armageddon's on its way ...”

“And arma geddon outa here,” said Jale.

He ducked into the aisle and stumbled towards the exit. The mechanoid usher, automatically attentive, asked “What do you think of the music, Sir?”

“I think it's the end of hearing as we know it,” replied Jale.

Outside, there was cool air and sanity. Along the street, a sign flashed. It advertized a pool hall and Rigellian Red. Jale, bored and depressed, walked in that direction.

There were 39 steps, which led down to a vault that had been designed to withstand nuclear attack but now housed six pool tables. Most of them were occupied, but the bar in the corner showed empty stools. Jale walked over, sat down, and said in a dull voice “Red.”

The bartender was a badly made lesbian android. It had a face that Jale might have thought was mounted upside down, except for the L ornament that pierced one nostril. It was hard-

Paul S. Wesson

eyed and unfriendly, and the glass of beer it plonked down before him immediately lost about a quarter of its contents. Jale said nothing. A veteran of bars over the whole Milky Way, it was beyond him why any owner would employ negative staff. But other, more real people were filtering into the place, and he began to relax. The customers were of various types, but all shared the property of looking shell-shocked. A young man, nicely-dressed but with blue foppish hair, sat down beside him.

“Opera?” asked Jale with sympathy.

“Opera,” confirmed the other, who looked as if he had just escaped from a concentration camp.

The bartender brought two beers, rewetting the counter and departing without a word.

“You from here?”

“No,” replied the young man. “Up from Acheron. I thought it would be nice to bring my girlfriend for a spell in the country, and take in some culture. You know.”

Jale, who knew very well, said “Yes. The motels are cheap on Aster and nobody asks questions.”

His companion fiddled nervously with his glass, and Jale asked “Where's the girlfriend?”

“Still in the opera,” was the guilty admission.

“Mine too,” said Jale. This overstated his relationship to Vestal, but he felt the need to show solidarity with his companion.

“Gertrude is very educated and high-strung,” confided the young man. “She likes the theatre and the opera. Do you think I should go back?”

“No,” advised Jale promptly. “Have another beer.”

“But I have to be at work tomorrow.”

Jale, taking a swallow from his own glass and signalling for a

Interstellar Undertakers

refill, asked “What do you do?”

“I work in a bank,” said the other. Then added “It's actually quite exciting. You know, securities and life insurance.”

“I'm afraid I don't have either.”

The young man did a double recoil. Firstly from Jale, who as a person without financial status seemed to have suddenly become alien. Secondly from the bartender, who slung two more beers on the bar and sent foam flying. He scrambled off the stool and wailed “Gertrude! I'm coming!”

Jale watched his lately confidant run out of the bar, and then picked up his glass. Draining this in one long gulp, he pulled over the other glass and looked into it with a sigh.

The bartender arrived, looking doubly sour. “Your friend didn't pay for his drinks.” The android's eyes were two chips of anthracite over a sneering mouth.

Jale said cheerfully “Then it would be a great honour if you would allow me to pay.”

Unfortunately, his words came out slightly slurred. The android, over-programmed, exaggerated Jale's condition. “You're drunk!”

“And you're ugly,” replied Jale without pause. “At least, *I'll* wake up sober tomorrow.”

*

It was lonely in the big bed. Jale, who had taken a levicab back, had not drunk enough to send him to sleep. Thus he was still half awake when the door opened and another body slipped between the sheets.

“Vestal? Do you have any clothes on?”

“No,” confirmed Vestal. “Do you?”

“No.”

Actually, she had already ascertained this from his testicles,

Paul S. Wesson

which were shrunk by the cool air.

“Vestal? You smell nice.”

“Jale,” she replied. “Get lost.”

*

A cold wind blew down the river as Zek and Jale stood beside the ways, watching the *Rigor Mortis* edge out of the old warehouse under the control of Sherlock. In the open airlock, Kazak whined eagerly, restrained by Vestal.

“Beautiful,” said Jale, looking over the smooth, black sides of the ship. “Thanks. Is there anything you need?”

Zek shook his head. “Not right now. You can buy me a drink on Acheron.”

The *Rigor*, still sliding slowly down the rusty rails, scraped against one side of the boathouse, setting the whole structure swaying.

“Careful, Sherlock!” yelled Jale. Then to Zek “This thing won't stand up much longer.”

“I know,” replied Zek. “But it doesn't matter. It's still insured.”

Jale, wondering who would be crazy enough to cover such a derelict building on a policy, said “Wouldn't it be sad if it fell down and burnt, leaving no evidence?”

Zek looked at Jale, but as usual said nothing. The two men shook hands.

In the control cabin, Jale slid into the pilot's seat and said “I'll take over.”

“I'm quite capable,” objected Sherlock.

“I know, friend,” replied Jale. “But I'll take over.”

The ship, coming to the edge of the river, started to rotate amid clouds of steam. The engines swung through the frosty air, just missing the old building. Jale applied a burst of power.

Interstellar Undertakers

The warehouse collapsed in a grinding mass of broken planks and began burning furiously. “Oops,” said Jale.

MEMOIRS

The planet Acheron was a multi-coloured spot that grew gradually in size as the *Rigor Mortis* approached it. However, there were regulations in place regarding the wake allowed by ships moving in subspace, so the Rigor moved slowly and hopefully innocently through ordinary space. Its megamotors were throttled back so much that there was hardly a rattle from the liquor cabinet.

Sherlock, floating in front of the console, was composing his memoirs. He had started with the title: *An Arch-Detective Explores the Soft Underbelly of the Galaxy*. But thinking that this was too long and anatomically confusing, had changed it to *Sherlock: What You See But Do Not Observe*.

Nagged by the feeling that this was still too verbose, the android decided to leave the title to last and get on in the meantime with the solid substance of his life.

Date of manufacture: unknown

Age: speculative

Place of manufacture: obscure, but maybe Hecuba

Name of manufacturer: unknown

Gender: irrelevant

Skills: ..?

“What are you doing?” inquired Jale, passing by on his way to check out the coffins in the hold.

“Giving a lurid account of the panoply of my life,” replied Sherlock.

Jale, noting the contents of the saga so far, asked “Don't you think it would help to employ a more free-flowing style? Try dictating. Also, just possibly, some information?”

The android considered this. Jale had left, but the criticism

Interstellar Undertakers

had been what is euphemistically called constructive. So Sherlock, pissed off, started over. In voice mode, he created a new file:

[I entered Victoria station in time to see Lord Landsberry's special train draw up in a cloud of radioactive steam. As the metal leviathan came to a halt, an ageing but lithe member of the aristocracy jumped to the pitted platform. He was followed by a ravishing woman clad in embroidered hessian of the finest quality.

I advanced, my cloak swishing behind me. Through my gas-mask I said in warm but muffled tones "Welcome, Lord Landsberry." I made a slight bow. My mask fell off, but disregarding this I added "And welcome to *you*, Lady Landsberry."

She favoured me with a smile, twisting her parasol to disperse the radioactive fumes. But clearly his lordship was bent on business, and entered into conversation without further ado.

"Mr. Holmes?" His voice had the bellicosity of the upper class, and his face the floridity typical of its excesses.

"Mr. *Sherlock* Holmes?" His ample stomach was crossed by a thick watch chain in gold, and the leather portmanteau under his arm clearly contained secret naval documents.

"Mr. Sherlock *Space* Holmes?"

"Dear," said Lady Landsberry. "Please shut up. There is no doubt this is the detective with whom we came to consult."

I bowed again, surreptitiously picking up my gas-mask from the platform but sliding it onto my head backwards so as not to impede the rush of conversation.

"We have heard good reports of you," said Lord Landsberry saliently. "Particularly, we are impressed with how you handled the affair of the Archbishop and the electric crocodile."

I gave a deprecating smile. "It's true that he only lost three

toes...”]

There was an interruption. Vestal, who had been standing quietly and unnoticed nearby, suddenly gave out a scream of laughter. She spluttered between bouts of mirth, but finally said “Sherlock. You're making it up!”

The android, embarrassed, said “Poetic licence.”

“But it's not true,” pointed out the girl.

Sherlock considered this, then shamefully admitted “You're right.” He sadly erased the first part of his memoirs. “The trouble is, I haven't done anything with my life. You have disported yourself naked before men in low bars. Jale has blasted evil criminals in various locations.” There was a pause. “But what have *I* done?”

Vestal put a friendly arm around Sherlock's shoulders. “You've done lots,” she said supportively. “You got Jale out of the *Excelsior*. And when we had to leave *The Tea Shoppe*, you pushed us all the way back to the ship.”

The android still looked as if it lacked self-confidence. The girl added “And how did you lose your first meerschaum pipe? That must be an exciting story.”

“Not really,” replied Sherlock. “It fell down the sewer while I was negotiating with a female robot of loose morals.”

Vestal, fascinated, asked “Did you get anywhere?”

“No,” replied Sherlock. “I got nervous about catching something through exchange of WD-40.”

Vestal, baffled and deflated said “Oh.” But then, brightening “Why not write something about the original Sherlock Holmes? You could weave in your own experiences. At least that way, it will be half true.”

The android perked up. “That's a reasonable compromise. Thankyou.”

The girl went over to the sofa, where she curled up with

Interstellar Undertakers

Kazak, the Hound of Space.
Reality is often blurred.

*

Acheron loomed large, an attractive globe showing blue oceans, brown continents and purple mountains. The screen blinked and an efficient-looking pretty girl appeared. “Space traffic control. Please confirm your course and state your destination.”

Jale entered his orbital parameters and said “Acheron City, Old Section.”

There was a wait, then the girl said “We are sorry. There is congestion on your planned route. Also, we will require your ident.”

Jale, ignoring the second part of her statement, said “Congestion? How can that be?”

“We have unusually heavy traffic,” she replied. Then added helpfully “The PanGalactic snooker championships are about to begin. You chose an unfortunate time to visit.”

“Not really,” responded Jale smoothly. “That’s what I’m here for. Ident: *Sem Mesaya*.”

There was a longer wait, then the girl said “Welcome to Acheron, Sem Mesaya. We hope you will retain your PanGalactic title.”

Jale had a sinking feeling. Having picked the name of an ambitious snooker player he had once beaten on a planet at the end of the spiral arm, he realized that he was now somewhat out of touch with the world of pool.

*

Sherlock’s memoirs, only weakly constrained by verisimilitude, flowed freely. He was still in dictation mode as

Paul S. Wesson

he created yet another file:

[Having disposed of the odious Woodley, it was clear to me that there was more to this matter than met the cornea. Accordingly, I took a large bunch of Cavendish tobacco from the hobnailed boot that hung by the fireplace, and stuffed it into my second-best pipe, the cherrywood. Slowly the room at 221B turned dark...

The landlady Mrs. Hudson entered, and fell to the floor, showing signs of asphyxiation. I revived her with a glass of Montrachet and an oatmeal biscuit. "Oh, Mr. Holmes!" she wailed when she was able. "There's a gentleman downstairs wearing a tartan kilt and a sporran."

My eyes narrowed. So the Space Corps had changed it's uniform once again. "Show him up," I ordered.

The visitor was a stranger to me, apart from the fact that I had never seen him before. He advanced into the light, hitting it with his head. In the wavering illumination, I swept a cursory glance over his form, noting his general air of dissipation, the scratched knees and the hickey on his throat.

"Shore leave?" I hazarded.

"Mr. Holmes! You amaze me."

I laughed nonchalantly. "Sometimes I even amaze myself."

Casting repartee aside, I fixed him with a rapier stare that had the coldness of heather-covered moors.

"Sir," I asked. "Do you like Burns?"

"Yes," he answered with enthusiasm.

"Then hold this poker."

He took it somewhat puzzeldly and stirred the fire into flame. I felt obliged to say "Don't bend the poker, my dear Sir. Doctor Grimesby Roylott, of Stoke Moran, will be here shortly to bend it into a pretzel."

My visitor, who was feigning bafflement, sank into the easy

Interstellar Undertakers

chair.

“That’s right,” I encouraged him. “Sit down and relax your sporrán. Now,” I continued in a business-like tone. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Well,” answered the laird, “when I came in here I thought I was sane. But now...”]

There was another interruption. Vestal, watching from the sofa, said “Sherlock, your style is now good, but you’re too erudite.”

Sherlock asked “What does erudite mean?”

*

Jale eased the *Rigor Mortis* into its assigned landing cradle. It had been a difficult descent among dense traffic, and he wondered with slight irritation what Sherlock and Vestal had been doing. To add to his concerns, the screen showed a customs officer approaching.

Quitting the pilot’s seat, he yelled “Vestal!” and walked towards the hold.

The airlock opened, and a stiff-faced android entered wearing a khaki uniform. The air that wafted into the ship was warm with summer. The officer said in a flat voice that belied the words, “Greetings from Acheron.”

Vestal arrived and stood beside Jale. The customs person was looking suspiciously at the coffins. “Why two?”

“Marital problems,” replied Jale promptly.

“Just a tiff,” said Vestal, backing up the story in a squeaky voice. “Isn’t that right, hubby-bubby?”

Jale, with complete sincerity, looked disgusted.

“Anything else?” asked the customs officer.

“Why, *of course*,” said Vestal, going even more falsetto. “You know, in the outer part of the Galaxy, we girls don’t have

Paul S. Wesson

access to the same *monthly* drugs as you *lucky* people on Acheron. So, first I start to feel really *bitchy*, and then ...”

“All right,” said the customs officer hurriedly “You’re cleared.”

The android departed.

Jale, turning to the girl, said “Thanks.”

Vestal said “No problem. Hubby.”

*

Acheron City’s old section was interesting. Here the visitor could find fakirs with (toothless) snakes, street vendors selling (aphrodisiac) sausages, and (stolen) pion watches. And in one of the better areas was located the *Victoriana Snooker Club*. Jale, who had heard of this club but had never been inside its hallowed precincts, chose to pass it by – he had more important things to do.

He turned into an alley and ducked into a doorway. People went by: well-dressed women on their way to the bazaar, respectable men going to their offices after the lunch break, and a couple of tramps who enjoyed a reasonable existence on a well-run world.

Jale, wondering if he was being followed, continued down the alley. He turned another corner, retraced his course when he heard no footsteps behind, and jumped down into a basement area. There was a worn wooden door, on which he knocked.

After a pause, he heard breathing on the other side, and said “We will sell the frogs and ...”

“What about the newts?”

“No sale,” he confirmed.

The ostensibly wooden door opened, revealing on the inside a layer of metal as thick as a man’s wrist. Zek said “Come in.”

The interior of the place was bright despite the absence of

Interstellar Undertakers

windows. A small army of mechanoids worked at pharmaceutical benches. Periodically, one of them would walk to the centre of the room and add a red phial to a heap that was already impressive in size.

Jale, bending under a laser Gatling gun that was mounted strategically over the entrance, said “Things seem to be in control. How long before they get it?”

Zek said shortly “By subspace, a few days. But we need to do the swap, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Jale. “How?”

Zek went over to a vacant bench and spread out a series of charts on its top. The charts automatically conjoined, showing spaceship routings that stretched throughout the Milky Way. “Most of the routes are serviced by robotic shuttles. There are various distribution centres for cargo.” He pointed to a series of locations. “The crucial thing is to swap the stuff at source. That is, *here*.”

Jale repeated “How?”

Zek leaned on the bench, silent for a while, looking at his friend. Then elliptically: “What about your brother?”

*

Vestal was still preaching to Sherlock. “The average guy doesn’t want a complicated plot with words made of three syllables. Also, your sentences should not be as long as the duration of the Trojan wars. You need short, snappy phrases. Don’t forget, Joe Everybody will only buy your memoirs with what’s left of his beer money.”

“Who says so?” demanded Sherlock truculently.

“An editor I once went out with.”

“Well,” said Sherlock. “I think he was underestimating the latent intelligence of the normal person. Also, he was probably a

Paul S. Wesson

moron with a tie.”

Vestal looked thoughtful, rubbing Kazak’s fur. “You know, Sherlock. You’re right. Do it your way.”

The android, empowered, resumed voice-file mode:

[As soon as I heard that Lord Landsberry had been fatally shot with a high-powered air rifle through the open window of an upstairs apartment in Lauriston Gardens, I deduced that he must be dead.

Taking an ugly handsome cab to the scene, I stepped down into a road made uneven and smelly by the recent passage of a lot of horse traffic. Inspector Lestrade of the Yard, dapper and polite as ever, said “What the hell are you doing here?”

I removed the cherrywood pipe from my thin lips, and pointed it at him. “Lestrade, you need help. This case is a real corker.”

“What’s a corker?” he asked with a frown.

“I don’t know that,” I replied.

Emboldened by not being precipitated into the Gorge of Eternal Doom, I continued. “But I do know that this case contains certain features of interest.” I proceeded to count them off using my pipe to punctuate the conversation. “One. Lord Landsberry has been fatally shot. Two. A fatal shot has been fired at Lord Landsberry. Three, Lord Landsberry is a stiff. You follow me so far?”

“Yes,” replied Lestrade slowly. “I suppose so.”

“The conclusion is clear,” I said.

“What is it?”

“You need an undertaker” I replied, giving him my card.

“Clear off!” exclaimed Lestrade, turning back to the scene of the crime. “And clear the horse-crap off yer boots.”

Disappointed at his reluctance to accept help from an amateur whose name would one day ring through the annals of crime, I

Interstellar Undertakers

nevertheless looked down at my feet and found that they were indeed encrusted with horse excrement.

Wiping most of this off on the crenellated curb, I headed back to Baker Street, my mind in a whirl.

An ostler, who was rubbing down a steaming black horse, said “Ay, mate! Your head’s spinning round!”

Thanking him, I fingered the radar switch under my cape and turned it to the off position. Immediately, my vision became less blurred. But without the draft from my rotating skull, the smell from the horse droppings that still adhered to my boots was overpowering.

I turned back to the ostler. “My good man.”

“Yerss?” he asked suspiciously.

“You are clearly familiar with the species Equine.”

“Nah,” he replied. “I ain’t bin to that cinema in ages.”

“Tell me, then,” I persisted. “If one has removed most of the horse manure from one’s boots, how does one get rid of the rest?”

The worthy stopped rubbing the flank of the black horse and gave me a knowing look. “There’s only one sure way.”

“What’s that?”

“Shoot yer feet orf...”

He began to laugh. I moved on, despairing at the puerile wit of the lower classes.

In Baker Street, I was stopped by a street urchin. He had long spines sticking out from his head. “What’s up, Wiggins?”

“Master Holmes,” he whispered, his eyes darting around in fear before returning to their sockets. “There’s somebody in the empty house across from 221B.”

I tossed him a coin. “Thanks. Buy yourself a popsicle.”

“But they ain’t yet bin invented, guvnor,” he objected.

“All right,” I conceded “Buy yourself a digital watch. And if

Paul S. Wesson

I'm not back by midnight, go to sleep."

I approached the empty house with circumspection, and when that did not work, with circumspection. In my own upstairs rooms, a yellow light shone through the blind. A wax bust in my own likeness was silhouetted against the light. It was a tempting target for that evil but well-known big-game hunter, Sebastian Moran.

Carefully I circled behind the empty house, using the labyrinthine mews that backed Baker Street. The rear door had a metal box attached to it, big enough to hold a key; but the place seemed not to have been visited in a long time. Gingerly, I turned the knob. To my surprise, the door opened.

I crept forward, my footsteps muffled by dust. In the front room there was flicker of light from a candle. Over the guttering flame hung a weather-beaten visage with a fierce grey moustache.

I entered the room and demanded "Who are you?"

He looked bemused. "The real-estate agent.]"

There was yet another interruption. Vestal, trying to suppress her laughter, choked and coughed. Then "Sherlock. Give it up."

The android looked depressed. But he sensed the futility of the exercise, and sadly wiped the record. Thus was lost to posterity the most inane work of literature ever attempted in the history of the Galaxy.

*

Jale and Zek sat under the afternoon sun in the garden that fronted the Acheron Trade Mission. The air was warm and full of the smell of flowers, but the two men were in sombre mood. "There's no other way. The vault where they keep their DNA has a genetically coded lock. Only your brother or other higher-

Interstellar Undertakers

ups in the Gang can get in. Or... *you*.”

“I know,” agreed Jale, thinking about several different things. “But I don’t look exactly like my brother.”

“Why not?”

“The main difference,” said Jale, “has to do with hair. When we were kids we were playing around, and my brother lost his balance and fell into the fire. His hair was burnt off. And afterwards, he kept a bald skull.”

“That’s easy to fix,” pointed out Zek.

“Yes.” Jale was actually thinking about a much more potent problem. “My brother may be in with the Gang. Or he may be against the Gang. It doesn’t really make much difference: when we give them the contaminated DNA, they are *all* going to die.”

Jale looked Zek in the eyes. “If I want to eliminate the Gang, I may have to kill my own brother.”

Zek said “Not necessarily. *You* don’t need their DNA medicine. How do you know he doesn’t?”

“I *don’t* know,” admitted Jale. “But based on what Selipon told you, there’s a probability of a half that he is the same genetically as the rest of them.”

Zek looked down at his feet. He had always admired Jale for his decisiveness, and therefore deferred to him. But now Jale seemed confused.

Jale, looking at his friend, said “My brother may or may not be a Black Hander. He may or may not be killed by our DNA. If he was *your* brother, what would you do?”

Zek started to say that the recent brother was only a clone and that the original was long dead. But he kept quiet: this was a dilemma his colleague would have to resolve for himself.

A breeze wafted Jale’s hair. Suddenly, he stood up.

“Where are you going?” asked Zek.

Paul S. Wesson

“To get my head shaved,” answered Jale.

*

Vestal rubbed her hand over Jale’s smooth pate and said “Ooh! I like it.”

“I don’t,” muttered Jale, feeling self-conscious. His head, shorn of its locks, was large and bony. And cold, even in the warm interior of the *Rigor Mortis*.

The girl looked provocative, and turning to the android said “What do you think, Shiris? Should I rub oil onto it?”

The detective shrugged, not wishing to be involved. Fortunately, the screen *binged* at this point to announce an incoming call. It showed the face of an elderly man with cool grey eyes and character stamped into the set of his jaw. “Colonel Ash for Sem Mesaya.”

“Who’s S...?” began Sherlock, but was silenced by Jale.

“At your service, Colonel.”

The old soldier looked Jale over with a quick glance. If he was surprised by the younger man’s totally bald cranium, he did not show it. “Glad to have you with us,” he said gruffly. “The preliminary matches are today. But of course, you needn’t turn up til tomorrow. Hope we can show you some challenge here at the Club.”

“Club?” asked Jale.

“The *Victoriana*,” filled in Colonel Ash. “You must know it. Best snooker club in the spiral arm.”

“Of course,” replied Jale smoothly, recalling the building he had passed previously. “I know where it is.”

“Good. See you after tiffin?”

Interstellar Undertakers

“Right,” confirmed Jale, wondering as the screen went blank what tiffin might be.

*

Jale and Vestal entered *Spyle's Snooker Emporium*. It was a large room whose walls were covered with hundreds of pool cues. There were numerous tables, ranging in technology from the old slate version to the modern levideck. Behind the counter, with his feet on it, was a thin man wearing an embroidered vest and picking his teeth.

He introduced himself perfunctorily. “Spyle. Need help?” However, he did not remove his feet from the counter.

“No,” replied Jale, whose history of experience beggared the need for present assistance. He walked along the rows of cues, occasionally picking one up to examine it. Finally, he took down a beautiful stick, crafted in three different types of wood and burnished to a high lustre. He looked at the weight designation, and hefted it. Then he walked over to the nearest table and rolled the cue, to make sure it was straight.

“No need to do that,” observed Spyle. “That’s the best one in the place.”

“Uh,” grunted Jale, examining the heel: it needed to be thick for what he had in mind. Then he picked up the cube of blue chalk from the edge of the table and carefully stroked the leather tip of the virgin cue. Behind him on the wall was mounted a cone of white chalk. With his thumb and forefinger apart, he rubbed his hand on this so that the cue would have smooth passage.

Spyle, sensing expertise and a good sale, said “Balls.”

“The same to you!” said Vestal, who up to this stage had been quiet, intimidated by the trappings of a game she did not understand.

Paul S. Wesson

Spyle ignored her and crossed over to Jale. He took down a lacquered box from a shelf, and opened it to display a set of spheres encased in plush: a pack of reds, the colours, and a white. “Real snooker balls.”

“I know,” replied Jale, who was intimately familiar with the difference between snooker, billiards and pool.

Spyle corralled the reds into a triangle with his arms, disdainful of the frame that hung on the end of the table. Then he placed the colours on their respective spots. The white went into the D-shape at the bottom of the table.

“I don’t have time for a whole game,” said Jale. “How about *ice*, two banks, bottom pocket?”

Spyle knew that *ice* was pool parlance for the blue ball, but doubted that it could be routed past the pack of reds and into the pocket at the corner of the table. He shrugged.

Jale bent down, sighting the cue. There was the characteristic click as the white ball hit the blue, which thumped off two sides of the table and crawled towards the bottom pocket, losing momentum. However, it crawled closer – and plopped in.

Vestal clapped.

Spyle scratched his pimply chin.

Jale smiled. “I’ll take the cue and the balls. I need to practice. I’ve got a big match tomorrow.”

The only thing that was bothering him was the question of what would happen when the real Sem Mesaya showed up.

*

Night descended on Acheron. Some people, weary after a day at work, went in. Other people, eager for entertainment, went out. Vestal was already asleep, her legs drawn up on the couch and Kazak’s head in her lap. Jale approached, intending to leave her in slumber, but wanting to give her a kiss. As he bent

Interstellar Undertakers

over the unconscious form, the dog growled.

“Be quiet,” ordered Jale. “I’m the alpha male around here, not you.”

The Hound of Space licked his hand, and Jale somewhat inexpertly kissed Vestal’s cheek. She stirred, rolled over, and started to snore.

“So much for romance,” he muttered, and walked aft.

Sherlock was levitating in the hold, his circuits turned off and his eyes closed.

Jale gave him a shake. “Come on. The game’s afoot.”

“But, Sir,” objected the android, becoming immediately alert. “We will be recognized. We should don disguises.”

The human had to admit that this was prudent. However, he said “I’m already bald. Isn’t that enough?”

“Hardly,” was the reply. “The information from Selipon is that your brother has a beard.”

“Where the hell am I going to get a beard at midnight?”

“We’ll have to improvise,” said Sherlock. “Also, I am readily recognizable, and we should ameliorate that.”

Grumbling, Jale started to rummage through the storage lockers in the hold. But they contained mainly mechanical things, and it was Sherlock who solved the problem. He entered from the ship’s kitchen, bearing a large dead bird and a piece of equally dead toast.

“Where did you get those?” demanded Jale.

“From the freezer,” answered Sherlock. “They are apparently left over from your ill-fated trip to ...”

“Yes, I remember,” said Jale, wishing he could not.

The bird was something he had been hired to bury, but after the cheque bounced he had repossessed it with a view to dinner. However, it was unplucked, so he had never put it into the culinary circuit. Now, its orange and mauve feathers were a bad

Paul S. Wesson

memory.

The piece of toast was a holy wafer, offered to him during an intensely religious ceremony following a human internment. But after being told that it represented the body of the saviour, he had put the holy breadstuff in his pocket and left the church in search of a hamburger.

Sherlock said “My data banks show that humans are easily distracted. So to deflect attention from my unique physiology, I will carry this extraordinary bird under my arm.”

Jale groaned.

Sherlock said “Do not worry, Sir. I have inserted a levimotor in it, and it will not be a hindrance. In fact, it will respond to the name *Dodo*.”

The corpse of the bird did indeed respond. It dragged Sherlock two steps forward before he managed to restrain it.

“Dodo! Heel!” The bird went still.

Jale, bamboozled, started to run his hands through his hair and rediscovered that he had none. “And what about me?”

“Easy,” replied Sherlock, producing a tube of glue. “We attach this toast to your chin, in lieu of a beard.”

Jale would have laughed, but as other actors on the stage of life have discovered, there is a thin line between humour and despair. Thus he sat lifeless as Sherlock squeezed glue from the tube, applied it to the holy toast, and struck it on his philistine chin.

*

The night was black, except for the moon Aster that was rising over the buildings of Acheron City. Crouched by the side of the Trade Mission were Jale, Sherlock and Zek. The last said “Okay. Let’s see how good your DNA is.”

Jale crept forward. Somewhere around the corner, a girl’s

Interstellar Undertakers

voice was raised in merriment and a man's voice made a crude suggestion. But then the air fell silent. Moving quickly, Jale attached a decoder to the lock. Courtesy of Zek and his software, it took only a brief time to break the numeric part of the security system. A panel slid up, revealing a blue screen. It bore the words *DNA Ident*.

Jale licked his palm, pressed it against the screen, and waited.

"What's taking so long?" complained Zek, showing uncharacteristic impatience.

"Sshh," said Jale. The panel flashed. There was a heavy click, and the door swung open. "Let's go!"

Zek, helped by Sherlock, dragged the container with phoney genetic medicine into the building. Jale was already moving forward along a many-doored corridor. This would not be straightforward: where was the shipping room?

Suddenly, a door clanged and a mechanoid emerged. Luckily, it started to walk in the opposite direction, not looking back.

Jale, knowing that the DNA shipment was due out that night and figuring that the only activity would be related to this, ran up to the doorway.

He pushed. It was locked.

Cursing, Jale fell back. But the display on the door abruptly cleared, inviting a palm. Again, he licked his hand and applied it to the screen.

His hopes were, however, short-lived. The screen said *Non-mechanical ident. Further confirmation required*.

Jale waited. Nervousness was not something he often felt, but tinges of it began to fray his concentration.

Ident begins, flashed the door screen. *Name of your brother?*

Feeling reversed, he entered JALE.

Acronym for?

Paul S. Wesson

Jalaquin Algarve Lebedev Eddington.

There was a pause from the screen, but maybe it was only processing the extensive name.

Brother's occupation?

This would be tough, depending on how up-to-date were the computer's records. Mathematician? Smuggler? He entered *Undertaker.*

The computer swallowed this. Then asked *Status of your mother?*

Dead

Status of your father?

Dead

Now there was a long gap. But then it flashed. *Welcome comrade. We shall make the Galaxy dark together.*

Feeling slightly appalled, Jale pushed open the door, and his two companions crowded through.

Inside was a room piled with goods, and conspicuous among them because it was ready to go was a stasis chamber containing numerous red phials. Expertly, Zek opened the chamber and switched the contents.

Up to this stage, the operation had, with some hitches, gone reasonably well. Now, it proceeded to go reasonably unwell.

Sherlock, clutching his multi-coloured bird, had been stationed at the door of the shipping room while Zek and Jale swapped consignments. With the door partly open, he had kept an eagle eye on the corridor; but while looking one way had not noticed the appearance of a bulky mechanoid from the other way. Surprised, but with the hope of authority, he yelled "Halt! Who goes there? Friend or foe?"

Jale, reacting more practically, leaped to the door and pushed it completely open. There was a *clang* as the metal door hit a metal figure. Zek ducked into the corridor, dragging the

Interstellar Undertakers

container with the original consignment of DNA, and made for the exit. Jale and Sherlock found themselves facing a mechanoid security guard of intimidating size.

“I guess it’s foe,” said Sherlock forlornly. With a swipe of its arm, the mechanoid swept Sherlock aside.

Jale yelled at the guard: “You are undergoing a minor malfunction! Request ident override.”

A security camera swivelled towards them. Jale turned slightly, allowing the lights in the corridor to shine off his bald head. He tugged significantly at his artificial beard, knowing that a thousand pixels was not enough to distinguish between 100% hair and 100% wheat. Unfortunately, the mechanoid did not seem to be connected to the security computer. It took a roundhouse swing at Jale, burying its metal fist in the wall. Jale, glad to be alive, ran for the exit.

“Get out!” yelled Jale to his friends.

Zek opened the outside door. The metal monster ran down the corridor, tripped over the sill, and fell sprawling into the alleyway.

Zek kicked it, but retreated, gasping and holding his foot.

Jale reached for his blaster; but concealed in the usual place, he only managed to get it half out before the mechanoid got to its feet.

Sherlock took aim and shouted “Dodo! Away!” The dead bird sped off like a missile, hitting the guard in the chest and triggering an eruption of orange and mauve feathers.

Jale, now with his blaster free, got off a shot that melted the mechanoid’s body and sent it crashing to the ground.

The three friends stood looking at the wreckage. For some androidal reason, Sherlock seemed to be elated at the kill, hopping around and saying to the inanimate corpse “Die, pig dog! Die!”

Paul S. Wesson

Jale and Zek, shaken but composed, looked at each other.

“We’re lucky,” said Jale. “We got out. But we can’t leave this thing here.”

Zek nodded. He pointed silently to a nearby drain. Over its grate was stencilled DO NOT DUMP – FLOWS TO BAY.

Jale shrugged. There was no choice. Setting his blaster to incinerator mode, he turned to the mechanoid. The energy from the gun melted it quickly to a pool of metal that ran into the drain in shiny globules. He followed it with a melt-down of the stolen DNA. Now, there was nothing left in the street to show the operation but a stain in the gutter.

Returning fortune soothed even this problem: rain began to fall.

It was gentle to start with, but gradually picked up in strength. The drops were warm, however, so none of the three minded. Indeed, Sherlock insisted on levitating along the road with his head tilted back and his mouth open. He had managed to recover one gaudy feather from the carnage, and it was stuck jauntily behind his ear. More reserved, Zek plodded along with his hair plastered to his head, before turning off with a cheery wave. Jale, though he did not mind the rain, was trying to get used to the feel of it on his bald head. The strange feeling of drops cascading onto his skull was augmented by the unfamiliar sensation of water running down his temples to his jaw.

“Don’t you ever get rusty?” asked Jale.

“No,” replied Sherlock. “I’m indelible.”

Ignoring the malapropism, Jale said “I’m hungry. We’ve done a good night’s work. Let’s go in here.”

He pushed open the door of an oriental restaurant. The place was packed with people in burnouses and redolent with the smell of figs. The manager advanced. Middle-aged, it took his eyes some time to focus; but he was a believer in the old ways, and

Interstellar Undertakers

had long been prepared to see the second coming.

He appraised the strangers: a floating, silvery demigod with an orange feather behind its ear; and a tall figure, clad in a black cloak with the shaven head of an ascetic and a unique chin growth.

“Praise be!” said the manager. “By the beard of the prophet!”

He reached up to Jale in supplication, but his hand came away with only a fistful of wet bread.

Emerging from the restaurant a short time later, Sherlock was minus his feather and Jale had an incipient bruise on his jaw. “Damned fundamentalists,” muttered Jale savagely.

10
POOL

The *Victoriana Snooker Club* was prestigious. Colonel Ash, its president, was also prestigious. He possessed one of those neutral faces which could either smile or snarl. His straight back was a lesson to some of the other members of the Club, who spent more time drooping over the bar than playing pool. The Colonel, by comparison, was a light drinker and a heavy player. His consumption of alcohol was strictly limited to two brews a day, which he charged to a tab but paid off regularly. His prowess at pool was due to several campaigns spent in remote mountain fastnesses where, through quirks of military fate, snooker tables had usually been available. Now, having beaten his last opponent, he sat at the corner of the bar. Without comment, the barman gave him his first beer of the day.

“Thanks, Tapp”

“You’re welcome, Colonel,” replied Tapp. A burly individual, he wore a black and white shirt whose cuffs were held above the various liquids that the bar dispensed by elastic silver bands over blatant biceps. “The roof’s leaking again.”

Colonel Ash grunted in acknowledgment of this information. He had been the Club’s longest-serving president, as well as its best-ever player, and he felt paternalistic about the place.

His grey eyes located the spot at the other end of the room where the night’s rain had seeped through. Blessed with amazing eyesight, he located the slightly brown stream of water that ran from the corner of the ceiling, and made a mental note to get it stopped at such time as the Club’s finances could afford it.

The *Victoriana* was housed in what had once been an armoury. It was a high-ceilinged, somewhat echoey chamber with an encompassing balcony. The original purpose of this was

Interstellar Undertakers

lost in the mists of time, but during tournaments it was packed by spectators. (Like all clubs, there was a large fraction of the membership that only turned out on special occasions.) From the balcony, people could get an excellent view of the play that went on below. The main floor of the hall was taken up by a dozen snooker tables, arranged in two rows of six. The two tables nearest the bar were impeccable: freshly-brushed green baize, leather-enclosed pockets, and mahogany legs discreetly covered in the old tradition with gingham skirts. Those tables were a player's dream. Accordingly, they were much sought after, but usually only the Club's best players were afforded access to them.

Now, both tables were in use as the knock-out round of the PanGalactic snooker championship proceeded. There was a row of armchairs between the two top tables and the bar. They were presently occupied by members of the Club's upper echelon, intent on watching the best players from the Milky Way.

Colonel Ash took a modest swig of beer. It had the rich red lustre of Rigellian, but the taste was a mite off. "Check your lines, Tapp"

"Certainly, Colonel." The barman opened a trapdoor behind the bar. Rough-hewn steps led down to a gloomy cellar. Tapp descended out of sight.

Colonel Ash surveyed the Club, doing a mental calculation about its finances. There was a hefty crowd present. All the tables, with the exception of the two worst ones at the end of the room, were in use. They would do good business from this tournament: the take would be enough to resurface the older tables; and with Sem Mesaya scheduled, the proceeds might even stretch to a new roof.

Tapp ascended into sight. "Sorry Colonel," he said. "I had the pressure adjusted wrong on the Rigellian keg. I fixed it."

Paul S. Wesson

“All right,” said Ash. A man of intimidating fairness, he respected those who admitted fault. He knew that Tapp was the best bartender ever to work at the Club, and the two had a business relationship that was as smooth and precise as the workings of a Mauser laser rifle.

“Tapp?”

“Yes, Colonel?”

“Have you ever seen Sem Mesaya?”

“Only on the screen. He mostly hangs about in the big places, like Trantor.”

Colonel Ash took another gulp of beer, and frowned.

Tapp took the glass, dumped its contents, and filled it half way with properly aspirated Rigellian Red.

Ash asked “Is Mesaya bald?”

Tapp thought for a bit, trying to find a diplomatic line. “Well, he’s kind of like you, Colonel. You know. Age takes its toll, as long as you don’t use medicine. But then, who needs hair anyway?”

Colonel Ash showed no reaction to this bureaucratic commentary. He took a gulp of the new beer, which tasted better, and said “I thought he had hair. A big bunch.”

“Oh, no,” said Tapp. “You’re thinking of that guy who used to play with Mesaya. What was his name...?” There was a moment of concentration. “Jalaquin or something. He was good.”

“Yes?”

“Sure,” replied Tapp, stacking glasses. “Jalaquin could beat Mesaya three out of five times.”

“What happened to him?”

“Don’t know,” replied Tapp, starting to cut up lemons. “I heard he got involved in tensor calculus. Stupid.”

Interstellar Undertakers

Colonel Ash's eyes narrowed with thought.

*

Jale wiped his hand over his shaven scalp and applied the cutter to the pool cue. It was a sacrilege, but necessary. The stick fell into two pieces, of which he took up the thicker one. A centring mark from a bradawl was followed by a thumb-sized drill bit.

Curls of clear-grained wood excavated themselves from the interior of the cue and left it hollow. He collected the left-over wood and put it into a container on the laboratory bench: this would be a delicate job, and to make the illegal cue undetectable would require glue exactly the same colour as the wood it replaced.

The control device fit snugly into the hollow butt of the cue. He rotated it, and checked the alignment of the sensors with respect to the pattern of the exterior wood grain. There was a click and the unit began functioning.

He put both pieces of the cue into a traveling vise whose jaws were covered in cloth so as not to scratch the stick's shiny finish. The glue was ready. The pieces of the cue came together perfectly, the grain lining up exactly.

Jale, leaving the glue to set, headed for the ship's cabin. Sherlock sat by the table, his cloak in a pile on the floor. He was flanked by two groups of snooker balls and had one in front of him. This was cut into pieces and hollowed out. As Jale watched, the android inserted a responder inside the ball and rejoined the halves. He rolled it across the carpet. The latter was coarse, but the closest thing aboard to the surface of a pool table.

The ball ran smooth and straight. Kazak bounded up and retrieved it from under the sofa. Dutifully, the dog brought it

Paul S. Wesson

back and gave it to Sherlock, who wiped it off and added it to the group of doctored balls.

Vestal asked skeptically “Do you really think this will work? It seems kind of boyish.”

For some strange reason, she was knitting. Jale ignored her question and countered “What’s that you’re making?”

“A scarf,” she replied. “To keep you warm in prison.”

Jale laughed shortly, then backtracking: “It will work. But I’ll only use the controls if I get into trouble.”

Vestal snorted. She had a drink on the table in front of her, and Jale went over to the cabinet to get one for himself.

“There,” she said proudly, handing him the finished scarf as he returned.

It was a chromatic piece of clothing, made from threads of many different colours; and its edges were remarkable for a lack of parallelism.

“I may have dropped a few stitches,” she offered defensively.

“It’s beautiful,” lied Jale.

What might have been an argument was shorted by the sound of the subether unit in the laboratory. Jale got up.

Zek was on the screen. “We have trouble” he said succinctly.

Jale, slightly irritated, asked “What *kind* of trouble?”

“Two kinds,” replied his friend, and then sensing Jale’s mood added: “It’s started.”

“You mean ...?”

“Yes. Don’t you ever check your subether? Twenty people died today on Trantor of some unknown genetic disease.”

“Oh,” said Jale, starting to realize the implications of their DNA experiment.

“And twelve are dead on Spree,” continued Zek. “Including Fred Bummer and most of his E.P.N.S.”

Interstellar Undertakers

“That’s hardly a loss to the world of music,” commented Jale, his obstinacy returning. “What about locally?”

“That’s where we have the first kind of trouble.”

Jale, starting to wish he had left Zek to his newts, said patiently “Yes?”

“Your brother is dead.”

Jale ran his fingers over the smooth wood of the pool cue. He had known, after the raid on the Gang’s building, that his brother was one of them. Nevertheless, he felt briefly that something had been removed from inside of him, like the cue. However, his mood abruptly changed: this dead/alive/dead business was annoying. Also, he knew that his brother’s redeath was not what Zek was aiming for.

“But most of the rest of them on Acheron have apparently gotten away,” added Zek. “They’re after you.”

“Ah,” said Jale. He removed the cue from the vise and hefted it. For some silly hormonal reason, he felt empowered and ready for a fight. “What’s the second kind of trouble?”

Zek said “Sem Mesaya, the real PanGalactic snooker champion, landed on Acheron this morning.”

“Photon!” said Jale. This was bad luck. “Where is he?”

“At the spaceport, held up in customs.”

“All right,” said Jale, “I’ll take care of it”

The screen went blank, and Jale headed back to the cabin carrying the cue. Sherlock had finished adjusting the balls. Vestal lounged on the sofa, the dog’s head in her lap.

“Vestal,” said Jale nicely. “Have I ever told you that you’re very pretty?”

The girl’s face registered happiness and then suspicion. “No,” she replied factually. “You never have.”

“Well, I’m telling you now,” continued Jale suavely. “Your beauty is the eighth wonder of the Milky Way. Also...” He

Paul S. Wesson

paused, wondering if he was exaggerating, and decided to be more practical. "...Also, you have a nice ass."

The look of suspicion on the girl's face was now confirmed. "Jale," she said. "What do you want?"

"A small favour," he replied. "I want you to go down to spaceport customs and seduce Sem Mesaya."

Vestal's expression congealed into stone like lava from a volcano.

"You don't have to do anything biological," added Jale hastily. "Just keep him occupied for a bit, while I'm at the *Victoriana*."

"Why should I?" demanded Vestal, frigidly.

"Because otherwise I'll look like an idiot," replied Jale, honestly.

A gleam came into Vestal's eye, and a tiny calculating smile appeared on her face. "I'll do it – as long as you wear my scarf to the Club."

Jale could discern little logic in this. And like many men before him, faced with something that contained zero sense, he rolled his eyes to the N-dimensional Universe in a gesture of despair. Vestal, watching his reaction, lost her smile and became steadfast.

"All right," conceded Jale. He waved his hands in exasperation, which she took as surrender. "All right."

Vestal fetched the dress with the holes, while Jale picked up the cue. His fingers slid into the appropriate places and pressed lightly. The balls in front of Sherlock suddenly jumped into the air, smashed the two glasses on the table, and rushed into the corner of the cabin.

Interstellar Undertakers

“I need to practice,” grunted Jale, looking at the cowering balls.

*

The oak doors of the *Victoriana Snooker Club* swung open in welcome. A leviBentley drew up, and a large figure got out, followed at a respectful distance by a slighter one.

“Glad to have you at the *Victoriana*,” said Colonel Ash.

He saw a muscular individual clad in leotards, calf-length black boots and a cape whose lining matched the green baize of a pool table. Around his neck was a scarf of doubtful design. The figure was bald, with steady deep-set eyes. Puzzlingly, the strong chin appeared to be covered with small patches of glue and bread.

“Glad to be here,” replied Jale.

He saw a well-preserved though elderly man, dressed in a bow-tie, vest and baggy brown pants with an old-fashioned cross-hatched motif. The calm eyes were the colour of an overcast sky, and the shaven chin was pugnacious.

“Tapp,” said Colonel Ash to the barman. “Please take our guest’s cloak.”

Jale removed it with a flourish, extracting a flat disk from its folds as he handed it off. A knock, and the disk turned into a top-hat, which he crammed onto his bare pate.

There was a scatter of applause from the nearby members, several of whom were dressed traditionally in handle-bar mustaches and frock-coats. The colonel said “I see that you are aware of the quirks of the Club.”

Jale replied “Naturally. How could one not be?”

Ignoring this gratuitous comment, the older man called “Tapp! Bring the guest book.”

Paul S. Wesson

The burly barman finished pulling glasses of beer, grabbed a thick tome from the counter, and started to move through the growing crowd.

“Allow me to introduce my companion,” said Jale, looking around. “If I can see him.”

“You see but you do not observe,” quipped Sherlock, emerging from the throng. The android had already cased the place, noting where to dispense the cue and balls that were concealed under his cloak.

“Pleased to meet you,” acknowledged Colonel Ash, who was obviously intrigued by the Holmes android. “Allow me to introduce Tapp.”

The barman had arrived with the guest book, which was open and supported on simian hands. Tapp nodded a greeting to Jale, but then a small frown of half-recovered memory creased his forehead.

Jale slowly picked up the pen which lay in the fold of the book. It was a bird’s feather already moistened at the tip with some black stuff. What did Sem Mesaya’s signature look like? Ash was clearly nobody’s fool, and Tapp was suspicious. Feeling impending bad luck, Jale licked the end of the pen while thinking what to do.

“It’s usual to sign the book in home-planet script,” commented the Colonel, noting the younger man’s hesitation.

Relieved, Jale dashed off an illegible signature. To make the forgery more believable, he asked “Candle?”

Somebody bore a flaring light from the bar. Jale noted the soft, red wax of the candle; and regarded the hard glitter of the signet ring that adorned the longest finger of his left hand. The ring had been a gift from a boyhood friend, and flashed richly, even though it was actually a “ramp”, composed of brass coated with gold. The friend had been an immigrant from the Large

Interstellar Undertakers

Magellanic Cloud, so the symbols on the ring would be indecipherable here on Acheron.

A blob of wax descended on the page of the club book, and after a cooling pause, Jale stamped it with the hieroglyphics of the ring.

Again, there was applause from the crowd, which had extended to significant size and threatened to impede play at the two top snooker tables.

“Let’s move,” said Colonel Ash brusquely. “You’re on soon.”

*

Vestal stood in the arrivals area holding a pool cue and with a snake around her neck. The former had been purchased at *Spyle’s Snooker Emporium*, where however she had been served by an android in the absence of the owner.

It would, she hoped, be an appropriate signal to Sem Mesaya. The snake was an afterthought, and as it slithered down between her breasts she wondered if she had not gone too far: there is a fine line between seduction and brazenness, and after a career as a stripper she knew that she was straddling that line.

The doors opened. People, with the look of chagrin typical of needless delay, began to emerge.

A squat man with brylcreamed hair came out. He had a creased business suit, stained with something that might have been wine but might have been something else. He looked about him and noticed Vestal. As he approached, his small eyes ran over her well-formed body.

Uncertain, Vestal gave a small smile.

The man said “How much?”

The woman said “How much for what?”

Paul S. Wesson

The businessman gave her a knowing wink. "I've got three billion parsecs on my frequent-flyer card, so I can get into the presidential-club lounge. They have beds. So how much for...?"

There was a brief argument, which ended with a broken pool stick and a terrified snake.

Furious, Vestal shook her yellow hair and concentrated on the exit from the customs area.

Several people had emerged during the altercation. One of them was a heavy-set individual with the rolling gait characteristic of the rim worlds. He looked like an older version of Jale: morose but approachable.

"Sem Mesaya?" asked the girl.

"Yes," confirmed the man. "You're here to meet me?"

Vestal gave her best little-girl smile. But the effect was diminished by the broken pool cue. Also, the snake chose this moment to regain confidence and emerge from her cleavage.

"This will be an interesting visit," observed Sem Mesaya.

"You can bet your chalk on it," agreed Vestal.

*

Jale lounged against the bar, chatting amiably with the vice-presidents of the *Victoriana* about the recent move in Ursa Major to allow jump-shots.

"Terrible," said one.

"Destroys the whole game," replied another.

"I agree," said Jale being politic (though he had in his youth been an expert at extricating himself from a snooker by jumping over the opponent's ball). "Please excuse me for a moment, gentlemen."

Sherlock was hovering nearby. His meerschaum pipe was in his mouth, but unlit.

"Well?" asked Jale.

Interstellar Undertakers

“The cue is in the rack on the wall, in the slot nearest the bar.”

“And the balls?”

“I’ve only been able to do the reds,” replied the android. “I’ll do the rest when they finish this game.”

“Okay,” acknowledged Jale.

The barman walked over and set down a glass of beer in front of Jale. “Compliments of Colonel Ash.” The mug was of thick, carved crystal with mist on the outside, the handle turned towards the customer. The Rigellian red had exactly the right colour and the right head.

“Thanks,” said Jale. “I see you know your trade.”

Tapp’s heavy features showed a flash of appreciation. Turning to Sherlock, he asked professionally “And for you, Sir?”

“Black shag,” replied the android.

Tapp was temporarily nonplussed. But leaning conspiratorially on the counter, he said after consideration “I understand, Sir. But while prostitution is legal, racism is not. Now, my sister...”

Jale intervened. “He means tobacco.”

“Oh,” said the barman. “Of course. Yerss.”

He returned with a package of minced dark leaf, which Sherlock pounced on with manifest glee. He began packing it steadily into the bulb of the meerschaum, prompting Jale to advise “Not so much. You remember *Desperate Dan’s*?”

However, several people were lighting cigars as the nearby game finished and the crowd began to move towards the bar.

Tapp had time to say to Jale “Message for you,” and nodded to the subether unit at the end of the counter. Then he went to deal with the beer-thirsty hoards. Sherlock, taking advantage of the moment, moved towards the table clutching the rest of the doctored balls under his cloak.

Paul S. Wesson

Jale activated the subether, and Zek's face appeared on the screen, looking strangely concerned. But his opening statement was typically short: "Over three thousand."

"Dead?" asked Jale.

Zek nodded.

"The DNA will take time to get to the rim worlds," mused Jale. "That is, assuming there are any of the Gang out there. What's happening in the inner sectors?"

"Trantor's in uproar. The chairman of the PanGalactic council was one of them. So were several members of the government. The people are calling for the return of Hari Selden."

"He's been dead for eons" pointed out Jale.

"Yes," agreed Zek. "But he's not a genetic freak."

Jale had to concede that this was correct "*Better a clone you know than a mutant you don't.*"

Zek said with sudden seriousness. "Jale?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful. I'm sure now that we missed most of the Gang on Acheron, because they'd gotten their fix before we switched the stuff."

Jale looked around. There were no obvious signs of danger. Indeed, the opposite: everybody seemed to be having a good time, and an old-fashioned piano clanged out a music-hall tune in the background. Following the sound, Jale saw that the ivories were being tinkled by none other than the store-owner Spyle, who still sported a toothpick.

"What about you?" asked Jale, who realized that his old companion was also in serious danger.

"I've had Selipon agree to put me into random stasis."

"But how will you get out?"

"There's a password," replied Zek.

Interstellar Undertakers

“The amphibians for which we do not foresee a market?”

“Right,” confirmed Zek. “Bye.”

The screen went blank. “Bye, friend.”

Jale turned to see Colonel Ash approaching. While there were still a couple of consolation games to be played on the Number 2 and 3 tables, most of the people were congregating around Number 1.

“We’re up,” said Colonel Ash. “I have the pleasure of playing you.”

“Right,” said Jale, trying to push the threat of the Black Hand Gang out of his mind. “Let’s go.”

He negotiated his way through the crowd towards the table. Somewhere out of sight, Spyle played a tremolando on the piano.

At the edge of the crowd, Sherlock gave him a reassuring if too obvious wink.

Jale was nearly at the rack of cues when disaster threatened: one of the players destined for the Number 3 table took down the illegal stick.

“Excuse me,” said Jale politely, “You’ve taken the only left-handed cue.”

“Oh, sorry,” replied the other player. He handed the cue with the secret control to Jale and selected another. He was half-way back to Number 3 table when it occurred to him that there was no such thing as a left-handed pool cue.

“Your call,” proffered Colonel Ash.

“Heads” said Jale.

The referee, who had tossed an ancient gold coin into the air over the table, examined it where it lay on the green baize. “Heads it is. Your break.”

Jale, aware of the stares from the now quiet crowd, chalked the tip of his cue and added a smear between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. The dust was satiny smooth.

Paul S. Wesson

The white ball had already been put in place by the referee. With hardly a pause, Jale bent over the table and sent the ball whizzing down the table towards the pack of reds. One split off, leaving the rest of them intact, and went into the top pocket.

The crowd grew even quieter. A classy start. “One *ruby*,” intoned the referee.

Jale shot again, neatly sending the blue ball into the side pocket.

“One *ice*.” The referee had a bass voice that was not loud but whose resonance made the score clearly audible, even to those in the balcony.

Jale split off another red, pocketed it, and set himself up nicely for the pink. So far he had not used the secret controls inside the cue to control the balls. But the pink only made it by a hair’s breadth into the pocket.

He took a moment’s respite, rechalking his cue. The crowd was packed tight, and the atmosphere inside the Club was warm and close. Jale noted that the barman Tapp was missing from his station. “Permission to smash up the reds?”

“Permission granted,” said Colonel Ash, who stood leaning on his stick as if it were a rifle.

Jale sent the white ball into the reds, scattering them and getting one down. He sighted in on the brown, and pocketed this and the yellow in quick succession.

More chalk. Tapp appeared, his hair messed up and a grim look on his face. The barman moved up diplomatically behind the Colonel and whispered something in his ear. Ash said a few words, and Tapp started back to the entrance, his shoulders hunched.

Jale addressed the table. His next shot hit a red; but his angle was slightly off and it did not go into a pocket. There was a sigh from the crowd. “Your table, Colonel.”

Interstellar Undertakers

Ash nodded, looking Jale in the eyes. Both men knew that something was up.

The Colonel pocketed a red with ease and went for the green. It plopped down with geometric precision.

Jale watched as Ash proceeded to rack up an impressive break. But his attention was only half on the game. There were the sounds of a scuffle from the entrance to the *Victoriana*. A black-clad figure in a visor popped around the edge of the door, but was as promptly grabbed around the neck by a large hand and yanked back. The noise of a struggle became more insistent: those spectators standing near the entrance began to mutter and look around, though those nearer the table still had their concentration on the game. However, another Black-Hander dodged into the room and began pushing his way through the crowd towards Number 1 table.

Colonel Ash saw this, but proceeded with the game. As the figure arrived at the table, Ash jerked back his cue with ferocity. It hit the impostor in the stomach and sent him to the floor. Tapp reappeared, grabbed the intruder by the ankle, and dragged him unceremoniously away.

“Not a member of the Club,” announced Ash to the referee and bystanders.

“Nice move,” commended Jale. “Also, nice snooker.”

The Colonel had missed his pocket, but as an expert player had as default managed to sneak the white behind the colours so Jale could not get a straight shot at a red.

He pondered for a while, surreptitiously fingering the controls embedded in the butt of his cue. “Three banks, top pocket.”

A ripple of disbelieving comment ran through the crowd. Jale glanced around with a challenge in his eye. Most of the

Paul S. Wesson

crowd went quiet, but at the far end of the hall a commotion had started.

“Back door?” asked Jale of Colonel Ash. The latter nodded, his grey eyes steady but glinting. Most of the onlookers appeared to think that this was an acronym for the almost impossible shot that Jale had proposed, and their focus was still on the table.

Spyle played a tense riff, heightening the crowd’s anticipation.

Ash flashed a look at Tapp, who turned for the back of the hall, accompanied by Sherlock.

Jale bent over the table. The white ball whizzed. There was a thunk! thunk! thunk! with decreasing intensity as the white ball bounced around the cushions. Then a click: the white hit a red, which dribbled up to the top pocket, seemed to pause, but then dropped in.

The crowd was silent. Indeed, so stunned were they that the sounds of a fight at the rear of the Club seemed not to penetrate. Then a few claps developed into a roar of applause.

Jale, feeling slightly guilty, bowed to the balcony. It was still his shot. But any qualms he may have had about using the illegal cue were removed when a Black-Hander entered from the front of the Club fingering a blaster.

Jale bent over the table.

The attacker forced his way through the protesting crowd to its front row.

Jale shot the white ball with terrific power, playing a computer symphony on the secret controls in the cue. The white hit the black, bounced up off the table, and smacked the intruder squarely on the forehead. Then the white bounced back onto the table, re-contacted the black, and sent it into a pocket.

“Your game,” acknowledged Colonel Ash, stepping over the unconscious figure on the floor and offering his hand to Jale.

Interstellar Undertakers

The referee started to object that Jale's ball had left the table (which strictly speaking is not allowed). But his comments were cut off by the sound of rushing feet: at least thirty members of the Black Hand Gang poured into the Club.

Colonel Ash yelled "Gentlemen! Repel the invaders!"

True to his own order, Ash raised his cue. Intense laser light flickered from the end, decapitating a Black-Hander with a blast of fusion power.

Pandemonium.

There is nothing more sacrosanct to the true pool player than his Club. Like an atomic blast wave, fury spread through the crowd in the *Victoriana*. The members grabbed cues, beer glasses and whatever else came to hand. The battle was joined.

Jale used his cue to send the remaining balls screaming into the attackers. Shrapnel would not have been more effective.

Colonel Ash's laser cue flashed repeatedly, turning the snooker club temporarily into something that more resembled a disco. An expert at bank shots, his rays bounced off the roof and walls, smiting the intruders from behind.

Sherlock puffed a cloud of smoke into one Black-Hander's face, then grabbed the undirected blaster and shot its owner.

Tapp, being less inventive, picked up the nearest enemy and threw him into the wall with a tremendous thud. Artificial blood sprayed.

"Tapp," said Ash. "That wall was just painted."

"Sorry, Colonel" said the barman. He reached past the old soldier, and planted a massive fist in a black visor. Positronic circuits spilled onto the floor.

"Better," commented Ash.

Tapp went off, roaring with rage, his natural muscles breaking artificial limbs.

Paul S. Wesson

However, the battle was not one-sided. The Black Hand Gang was better armed than the more numerous members of the Club. Colonel Ash winced as he saw one of the *Victoriana's* oldest members blasted to bits in his armchair. And the people on the balcony were in trouble because they had not been able to grab weapons and were being decimated by members of the Gang.

Clearly, the balcony that ran around the hall was the proverbial high ground.

“To me! To me!” yelled Ash.

Tapp, Jale and Sherlock fought their way to the Colonel's side. Together, they rushed the stairway that led to the balcony.

Part way up, Ash suddenly sat down. A patch of red burst through his baggy pants. “Oh!” he said with genuine surprise. “I've been shot.”

“Take care of him, Sherlock.”

Jale and Tapp carried on. They made a fine team: Jale blasted the Black-Handers he met, and Tapp dumped the bodies over the rail. In a short while, they were on the balcony.

Here there were a lot of terrified people, who seized the chance to run down the cleared stairway. Jale looked down.

For some unspecified reason that would be recorded in the annals of the Galaxy and insanity, Spyle was still playing the piano. But the strains of the *Ride of the Valkyries* were largely drowned by the din of the battle.

Jale rested his blaster on the railing, and began to systematically kill the members of the Black Hand Gang below.

Tapp, lacking any weapon except his sinews, reached out from the balcony. From the embossed roof of the Club hung a massive chandelier, which was rarely used as it consumed too much power. Tapp missed it on his first two passes, but snagged it on his third.

Interstellar Undertakers

“Tapp!” shouted Jale. “You’re too heavy. Don’t ...”

“Geronimo!” yelled Tapp, and swung.

The wire supporting the chandelier survived for a moment. Then there was a TWANG! sound. Tapp and the chandelier landed on top of a Black-Hander, demolishing him but also dumping a pile of glass on Number 1 table.

Jale groaned: Colonel Ash would not be pleased.

The fight was winding down. Only a few of the Gang remained after Jale’s sniping. Disarmed, they were suffering the usual fate of a defeated and hated race. Ignoring the noise of blows from the pool cues, Jale descended the steps and staggered over to the bar.

Tapp, with blood on his face, squinted from under a grotesquely swollen eye. “May I offer you a drink, Sir?”

“Thanks,” replied Jale. His pulse was pounding in his ears and his legs were wobbly. He flopped down in one of the bar stools.

In the next one, Colonel Ash sat, calmly viewing the mop-up operation. His leg supported a tourniquet, which Sherlock periodically released and tightened. Smoke from the meerschaum gave the scene a Waterloo quality.

Tapp asked Ash “Sure I can’t give you another beer, Colonel?”

“No thanks,” replied the old soldier. “I’ve already had my two. Just because we wamped ‘em is no reason for indulgence.”

Jale, who would gladly have downed a whole bottle of whiskey, made do with a large gulp of Rigellian Red beer.

There was a creak from the oaken doors of the *Victoriana*, and the people at its bar turned to see a girl enter, followed by a man bearing a pool cue. They picked their way through the bodies.

Paul S. Wesson

Colonel Ash said gruffly “Club’s closed. We’ve had a bit of a dust-up.”

The man said “I’m Sem Mesaya. PanGalactic Snooker champion.”

“Ah,” replied Ash. “You’re late. But Jale filled in for you well.”

The three men exchanged glances. Particularly between the slightly shamed Jale and the very astute Ash, there did not seem to be anything to say.

“Have a drink anyway,” offered the colonel.

“I’m sorry,” replied the chagrined Mesaya. “I have commitments elsewhere.”

Vestal watched her quasi-paramour depart. There was a movement among the bodies strewn about the bar. One of the Black Hand Gang suddenly sat up, its weaponless hand flicking aggressively. The girl took the large tome from the bar, and smashed it down on the intruder’s head.

“Dear lady,” objected Colonel Ash. “That’s the Club’s guest book.”

“I can’t stand those black creeps,” was Vestal’s response.

Jale intervened. “Colonel, I would like to offer you and the Club my special cue, and of course the balls that go along with it.”

“All right,” said Ash. He accepted the cue, and then offered “You can have my cue in exchange.”

Jale took the president’s cue, and asked “What is it?”

“Army issue,” replied the colonel. “Royal Enfield, 303 laser.”

Jale was humbled. “Thankyou.” Then picking up his cape and taking a last look around, said “Sherlock, please take good care of this.” The android took Ash’s cue as if it was a gift from the gods. Jale added “We have to get back to the *Rigor Mortis*.”

Interstellar Undertakers

Colonel Ash looked disappointed that Jale and Sherlock could not stay. “And you, young lady?”

“Sorry,” replied Vestal, smiling sweetly. Then delving into her bosom she put something on the bar. “But you can take care of my snake.”

11
EPIPROLOG

The black coffin levitated above the gravel like the mirages on the horizon. In its depths, the shriveled alien looked through lidless eyes at greasy clouds. It was the end of a long ceremony, and Jale laid his hand gently on the forehead of the corpse, making the old gesture of the hand and head, which any intelligent creature deserved. The top of the coffin with its alien symbols slid into place.

“Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes,” intoned Jale. “Chitin to chitin.”

Raknok lead the elders past his brother’s grave. He picked up some sand and threw it into the excavation, along with a piece of his own carapace. After the elders came a long file of insectoids, all of whom did the same. By the time the light had ebbed from the strange sky, the unmarked grave was only another mound of stones in a desolate landscape.

“You have done well,” clicked Raknok. “You found my brother’s murderer and you did the avenger.”

Jale shrugged, feeling dispirited. The members of the clan were walking back to the dilapidated town that poked above the distant dunes. At least Raknok’s brother, for all his alienness, had been honourable.

“And all the procedures were done right,” added the insectoid. “Will you stay with us for a night, brother of my brother?”

“Thanks, but no,” replied Jale. “My friends are waiting on my home planet.”

In fact, Jale – having concluded his contract – was in a reflective mood. The breath of death, when it becomes insistent,

Interstellar Undertakers

signals the intelligent warrior to take a break. Jale's thoughts were on Acheron and its moon Aster.

*

Vestal moved into her father's farm with Kazak, the Hound of Space. She tried to make a living by raising rabbits, but soft-hearted as she was, could not bring herself to ship them to the local abattoir. In financial stress, she decided to rent out the spare bedroom.

Jale moved in, conscientiously paying her on a regular basis for the "spare" bedroom but mostly sharing the big bed. However, the undertaking business in that part of the spiral arm was not good, as people irritatingly declined to die with any frequency. Also, the lady of the house would not tolerate the few corpses that were available taking up space in the freezer.

Sherlock, with his ill-gotten gains, bought a bar in the local town. He called it the *Excelsior II*. He spent most of his time trying to show interest in the affairs of the farmers. But he never did find fascination in whether firewood should be ordered as a face-chord or a bush-chord. Also, winter wheat (sown in the fall to survive in the frozen ground and then germinate in the spring) was not something that got his circuits humming.

Things came to a climax when Vestal accused Jale of not washing up the dishes properly. She brandished a Wedgwood plate with a speck of curry. "Do you call this *clean*?"

Jale, worried about the lack of internments, looked at her askance. However, she was clearly upset about the fragment of last night's dinner that still adorned the rim of the plate. So he magnanimously took out his blaster. With an expert shot, he removed the leftover food. Unfortunately, he also removed half the antique plate. "Damn!" he said. "The sights must be off."

Paul S. Wesson

There followed an intense slanging match, at the end of which Jale picked up his cloak and donned his black leather boots.

Peculiarly, Vestal ended up yelling "If you leave now, I'll never talk to you again!"

Calmly, Jale opened the door and closed it behind him.

The *Rigor Mortis* was in the old barn. Sagacious, Jale had been careful to keep the megamotors tuned. He flicked the controls, and a deep hum spread through the hull. "Contract."

"Contact," corrected the ship's computer. "Any words for posterity?"

Jale pondered. Then: "I came. I saw. And then I got bored."

A short time later the *Rigor* landed in the cracked parking lot of the *Excelsior II*. By some uncanny communication, Sherlock was already standing by the grease-recycling bin outside the back door.

"Welcome," said Jale.

"Glad to be aboard, Sir," replied Sherlock.

Jale looked at Sherlock. Sherlock looked at Jale.

"Maximum power?" asked the human.

"Maximum power," concurred the android.

The *Rigor Mortis* blasted off. The parking lot melted, but rapidly cooled again. With no cracks left, the future owners of the *Excelsior II* had saved a bundle.

*

There are many parking lots in the Milky Way. The *Rigor Mortis* was not destined to land at most of them. But somewhere out there, Jale and Sherlock are still searching for a meter with time left on it ...

Interstellar Undertakers

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID ...

A valuable contribution to the history of the English-speaking peoples (*Winston S. Churchill, deceased*)

A load of nostalgic crap (*A. J. P. Taylor*)

Err... Well, I liked the pool scenes (*Wilfrid Spyle*)

A valid answer to feminism (*Chatelaine magazine*)

I'll buy it and put it in my library (*Dewey Decimal*)

A worthy follow-up to Dorian Grey (*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, reached by Ouija Board*)

I think the author should be punched in the chops (*Dave Davies, Arista Records*)

Derivative of Blake, but with certain aspects of Sartre. Of course, the issue of solipsism versus existentialism has never been completely addressed, so it would be difficult to... (*Philosophy Today: rest deleted due to boredom*)

The parts about tensor calculus appear to be correct (*A. A. Coley, famous mathematician*)

I'll sue (*Vestal Virgin*)

Who cares? (*Jale of Acheron*)

Back Cover

“Oh?!

The Milky Way is not the same after Jale goes through it. Ex-smuggler and now body-burier, this likeable thug with a Ph.D. meets his match with the Black Hand Gang. Blasted after transgressing their genetic code, he is rescued by a diffident android modelled on Sherlock Holmes. In trouble at the *Purple Escargot*, they are joined by a pouty if pretty exotic dancer whose stage name is Vestal Virgin. This trio’s exploits are as unpredictable as their temperaments – only kept to the task of fighting the Gang by Jale, who like his hero Sir Winston Churchill spends his time thinking, fighting and drinking.

This reviewer will not disappoint the reader with a *précis* of the peregrinations of the plot (sorry about the alliteration). It is like the scarf Vestal gives Jale before his ultimate game of pool: tightly knit but with a few dropped stitches. For example, what *is* the connection between tensor calculus and sex?

It is rare to come across a book which oscillates so effortlessly between the academic and the puerile. It’s a good read – especially if you have a drink handy ...”

Isaac Asinine (*Times of Trantor*)