

COLIN PALMER

More Short Stories to Read on a Bus, a Car, a Train, a Plane

(OR A COMFY CHAIR ANYWHERE)



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«Издательские решения»

Palmer C.

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Twenty-three stories to blow your mind, covering almost everything from romance to horror, and a combination of both! Friends, lovers, cats and dogs, ghosts and killers, aliens, they're all here waiting for you, so put your feet up, get comfortable, and let's go...

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MORE
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FOREWORD

One of the groups I write for is called Authors' Tale, a Facebook Group open to all and sundry who write or aspire to be writers. It is not a big group, not a small group, just about right, but what it does have is a core of people who care about each other, who offer encouragement and critique when asked and who support each other in their endeavour to become an artist of the pen (or pencil, or keyboard).

All the stories in this book have resulted from weekly writing prompts delivered through one of Authors' Tale's weekly events. Within a relatively short period of time, I found myself anticipating these prompts and doing my damndest to write for whatever the topic was that particular week. They are raw stories, as published via Authors' Tale, without the gloss and glamour that time and editing provides and are a reflection of the impromptu response to a sudden trigger, the trigger, of course, being the actual prompt.

The stories contained herein have received a little polish, they needed it! But without Authors' Tale, probably none of them would have surfaced, even in my over-imaginative mind. I have prefaced each story with the actual writing prompt so that you, the reader, can see where the story originates. You can also be the judge of where I've taken it. I make no apology for where my mind takes a story, for that is something beyond my control, creative or otherwise. I enjoy the surprise as much as anybody else, except I get the luxury of seeing it first. Yes, this is the process of how I write – an idea festers and takes hold, then kaboom, story!

Thank you Authors' Tale, you're an amazing group of people. Thank you too, for anybody reading this, for it means you must have bought this book. If you have any aspirations to put pen to paper, get onto Facebook, search for Authors' Tale, and tell them Colin sent you. That way they'll know who to blame! And you never know, the inspiration you receive from being a member might just lead you along the path to discovering your own latent talent. Good luck, and happy reading.

W152 – He thought there was no such thing as true love, until that moment their eyes met

FOUR

Four! Life wasn't meant to be this way. Four! It was supposed to be better than this, it should be better.

The first one he understood, and should have learnt from the experience, thought he had – he was young back then, heck, they were both young – childhood sweethearts through high school that everybody said were the perfect couple. Both parents were resigned to and accepting of the fact that the two were inseparable, bound together for life. It seemed the natural thing to do but he knew they'd only done what everybody had expected of them. He'd never mentioned marriage. She hadn't either, well not directly but there had been a few occasions where she'd hinted, like one of the many times they wandered along the main street, hand-in-hand, she pointing out a ring in the window of the local jewellers, you know, nothing obvious to the manboy he was then! He knew better now.

So why did he do it? Expectation, peer pressure, parental pressure – all of those, after all, it was what everybody else wanted. Oh, and of course there was the sex. It had been the first for both; messy and awkward to begin with then settling into a seeming never-ending series of quickies wherever and whenever the desire was mutually demanding, and the surroundings suitably discreet. It provided no real reason to get married. Ah, but it was the first – short and sweet and full of lessons he would go on to relearn over and over again.

Number two was a surprise. He was still young but on the rebound, and not over the embarrassment of the first short-lived union, so he should have known better but there were extenuating circumstances, or so he told himself. It was payday, and with a full wallet he'd gone out on the town with a group of friends. Like many young people, alcohol fuelled desire, and there she had been on the dance floor, gyrating and swiveling her hips in a suggestive motion he believed was only for him. He woke up beside her the next morning, in her bed, in her bedroom, in her parent's house. They swapped numbers, he gave his work number and not his home phone, and they passed like anonymous ships in the night.

Four months later, yes four, she rang him at work and asked if they could meet. Her voice seemed bright and there was no hint of reproach that they hadn't seen or spoken to each other since that one and only night. He vaguely remembered her, and was startled when she walked into the coffee shop a few hours later at the appointed time. She was beautiful, and that came as a surprise to him because he hadn't even been able to recall the colour of her hair. They exchanged a brief uncomfortable hug and he looked at her over the table with a question fixed firmly across his face. He didn't have to wait long – she was pregnant! More of life's lessons learnt the hard way.

He did the right thing, they married. When the baby comes, everything will get better they told themselves and each other. Her parent's disapproved, his parent's disapproved, friends – his and hers – disapproved, and he strongly felt it would turn out perfect because they were starting off almost exactly the opposite to his first marriage.

Twenty-four years old, married twice already and this time with a baby on the way. The learning curve was fast – it had to be because they knew virtually nothing about each other. It remained a marriage of strangers however, and when the baby did come, there followed a short period of elation that did bring them closer, even disapproving family and friends appeared to soften. In an instant his perspective of everything in the world had changed because now he had a daughter – but he was still

married to a stranger. Then the real father, the biological father came onto the scene, returned from overseas deployment. The baby, his baby, was one year old and no longer his.

Number three happened ten years later and resulted from a blind date of all things! He never thought it would happen again ... the bitterness of losing a family, the distrust, the lack of loyalty and honesty had honed a keen edge of self-protection which he believed would never be breached. He was older and wiser now and so was she, having a failed marriage herself. They took it slow, the show of becoming familiar with one another had no apparent time limit but as the clock ticked, so did she begin to share the desire for a family, something she didn't have a chance to begin in her first marriage. She explained her fear of menopause and he listened intently with complete awareness of the painful loss of his daughter fresh again in his mind.

After four years, uhuh, four, of dancing around it and in the complete belief they were doing the right thing for each other, they married. He was forty. Four years later, of course four, after trying desperately and unsuccessfully for a baby, they divorced, a mutual decision after numerous visits to doctors, specialists and even IVF clinics.

He thought he was scarred for life but then his best friend brought home an overseas bride. He observed how hard that little lady made the marriage work, always doting on her husband and even when the kids began to come, she still made sure her man was never feeling left out or forgotten. On the birth of their third child, her youngest sister came from the home country to visit. She appeared to be a more beautiful version of her older sibling with the same attention and focus to what was important – her family.

On his fiftieth birthday, they married in the backyard of his friends' home. This time it will work ... he was positive and he was happy – positive that she would have the same inane desire as her sister and happy that this, his fourth, would be the last. What a disaster! How was he to know that she'd grown up totally dependent on her older sister? She didn't know how to cook or care for him and she spent all her time helping her sister at her place, which was okay to begin with but then she began staying overnight, saying she had to help with the kids, then finally, after protracted arguments, admitting she had only married him to stay in the country with her sister.

Alone again. Alone but not lonely, he had his thoughts, his many and varied thoughts to occupy his time. Those very thought processes became self-assessment periods where he tried desperately hard to discover how he could have been so wrong four times.

Four.

His father passed away after a short illness and he became occupied for some months helping his mum to sort out the family home. He saw the sadness, and more importantly, the loneliness his mother displayed after the grief began to slide away. The grief disappeared first, the sadness took much longer but the loneliness never seemed to leave her. Amongst many questions he'd broached during this time, he asked one he wished he'd asked forty years earlier. How did she and his father manage to stay married together all those years? Sprinkled amongst her many responses was a recurring theme to which he scoffed, but never forgot.

Love.

Love. Such a fallacy, a fairy tale perpetuated by books and movies. Novelists were full of crap and movie makers were driven by the almighty dollar and none of what they produced had anything to do with reality. Love, ha!

Four.

Four times he'd tried it and apart from the emotional blackmail of the second, he thought he'd been in love. Even that second failure he'd been willing to try and when the baby arrived, he felt he had fallen in love – but with somebody that wasn't his to love.

Love, phooey!

Seventy years old, retired and living in his old family home now after his mum died a few years ago having never got over her loneliness. He spent his days doing odd chores around the home,

occasionally visiting or being visited by old friends, doing the necessary shopping but always, always occupied with his thoughts.

The walk to the shops wasn't far – there was a big mall only a block away but he usually chose to walk in the opposite direction, to the corner store his family had patronised ever since he could remember. It had changed hands many times over the years but successive owners had stayed true to the spirit of what a neighbourhood store should be, except malted milks were replaced by slurpees and redskin lollies by chup-a-chups, plus the large windows and entry door were sealed after hours behind roll down steel shutters these days.

On this particular day, his walk to the store was like many before it, the sun was shining, the birds were singing, the traffic on the relatively quiet suburban road hummed slowly by. The sounds were natural and normal and unheard as he walked, until a loud screech of tyres prompted attention. His eyesight wasn't as good as it used to be of course, and he had to squint against bright sunlight and the halation off the windscreen of a car now stalled in the street.

He heard rather than saw a woman loudly shrieking, and he hurried toward the sound as he made out her silhouette in front of the vehicle, evidently hers. As he approached, only a few meters from her now, he saw the body of large dog lying on the road in the shadow at the front of the vehicle. The woman continued to shriek and he was aware of other people coming out, looking over fences or through windows but he was the closest. He glanced quickly at the dog which hadn't appeared to move so he grabbed the woman to draw her away from the scene, and as he did, realised she had her back to him surveying the relatively minor damage to her car and not looking at the dog at all! She let him drag her off to one side before she turned to look at him.

Her eyes were twin, dancing, blue flames, full of venom and anger that he didn't understand, until he managed to interpret her muted threats at the stupid mutt that had spoiled her day and damaged her car. He released her and stepped back away from this thing full of her hate, shaking his head to clear the vision she'd imprinted on him, an image he was sure he'd seen somewhere before.

He turned his attention to the dog which was now feebly attempting to lift its head. He quickly knelt by her, cradling her head for support and to stop her from trying to stand. She was a large breed, Newfoundland or something similar, and knew it would be impossible to lift her on his own. Her big head lay still on his forearm and he thankfully saw no blood but never having owned a pet of any kind before, he had no idea what other damage she might have sustained. The weight of just her head was considerable on his old arm so he slid one leg underneath to provide more support. As he did this, her long tongue slid out and licked his hand, her way of showing appreciation. He gently patted her with his other hand and she moved a little to tilt her head, then opened her eyes and looked up at him. Her gratitude was evident but there was something else as well, something beyond pain, something he thought he'd never seen before but recognised nonetheless.

He closed his eyes as his mind wandered to the hate, loathing and disgust of the woman who stood nearby, now screeching loudly to others who had come to either help or from curiosity – heard her heinous and scathing comments about dogs roaming loosely and how it had received its just desserts, and he could feel her eyes again, those horrible eyes which twiggged a memory, the memory of seeing his own eyes many times over the years, peering back from a mirror as he questioned himself about the sad choices he'd made. The answer had always been there but he'd been too selfish to recognise it, too self-centered to understand but this graphic and tragic demonstration had finally shown him, after seventy years, seventy long years, how wrong his own perspectives had always been.

He opened his eyes and the dog still looked at him, patiently waiting as if it knew his internal suffering – he sobbed and did his best to change what seventy wasted years had mistaught him ... looking back with all the love he could generate from his old but inexperienced heart. She licked his hand one more time, a gentle slow tickle against his skin ... and then was still.

===== THE END =====

W153 – I saw it before it was broken

BEFORE

They moved along the neat aisles stopping briefly at each casket to punch a code into individual panels on the clear canopies. They made no discernible noise, every movement was silent. The great hall was silent too except now, as the caskets activated, a soft hiss of gas could be heard from where the silent drones had begun their task. The drones ignored or were oblivious to the sound, hovering onward to their next assigned casket.

The great hall was seven hundred meters long and four hundred meters across, from floor to the centre of the domed ceiling, a distant ninety-nine meters. The brochures stated the ceiling height was exactly one hundred meters but budget manufacturing had saved some time, money and a massive amount of material, massive because the great hall was only one of sixteen such halls in this, the greatest cruise ship ever designed and built.

The caskets themselves also hovered like the drones, their neat lines perfectly symmetrical vertically and horizontally, for they were stacked twenty deep up to the soaring ceiling – their magnetic fields secured them to an exact position. In total, there were five hundred thousand caskets in this great hall and in each of the others for a grand total of eight million ... and each and every casket was occupied, nearly two million being crew members of the ship but the majority, paying customers for the maiden voyage.

The designers, marketers and owners had been overwhelmed with the public interest shown in the project. There had been over three hundred million initial applications for a berth on the first voyage, the lucky customers selected by random lottery. The vision of the creator had been clearly justified.

Sadly, the creator himself had not made the journey because he had died some months before the project completion. His name however, was evident inside and outside the ship, on the drones, every piece of equipment, each casket and the uniforms presently hanging in a myriad of personnel lockers. His name was etched everywhere, on cutlery and utensils, on crystal glassware in public and staff bars, even embroidered into every chair, lounge, napkin and towel. The name was less numerous from the outside but what was there was visible for tens of kilometers because of their size, the largest situated on each flank of the huge ship. Each of these letters was fifty meters high and the name stretched almost two hundred meters along the sleek elegant hull.

TRUMP.

There was a time in human history that this name was synonymous with hate, greed, social and race discrimination, and some historians remained convinced the ancestors were responsible for the end of human habitation on planet earth due to pollution of the atmosphere. General consensus was that over population was more to blame, however successive Trump administrations had certainly contributed to the demise. In recent centuries, the Trump name was seen more as saviour, responsible for deep space exploration and the creation of alternative “living planets” that allowed the migration of humanity to more sanitary locations in the galaxy. At present there were only two such planets but a further four were in development, all thanks to the Trump dynasty.

And now, for the very first time, the opportunity existed to return to where it had all begun, the evolution of man, Earth.

In sixteen different great halls, almost two million staff and crew were the first awakened, their intensive training automatically sending them to assigned stations. Hosts moved amongst the lower level of caskets as the lucky paying clients slowly roused. Families, couples, individuals were assisted from their caskets and escorted to preparatory cabins for ablutions and refreshment. As the lower

levels of caskets were vacated, they slid seamlessly into the walls of the great halls, and the next level of caskets lowered automatically to floor level. Every customer was bursting with excitement – they would be the first to see where it all began.

Finally, the lower levels cleared and only the highest caskets remained, on their final descent to floor level, thousands of canopies opened synchronously across all the great halls – except one casket. This one remained sealed and as programmed, the drones had not initiated the opening procedure. A young family had alighted from neighbouring caskets and the two children pointed and stared excitedly, first as their own caskets resealed and disappeared into the walls, then as the pulsing air of expectation invaded from the multitude of people surrounding them. Many glanced at the sole casket that remained, the curiosity a short interruption to the anticipation of this new adventure. The children allowed their curious nature to voice a question to their parents and escorting host. “I don’t know” was the unsatisfactory response but it was a short-lived disappointment as they moved out of the great hall and onto the next amazing discovery. The sealed casket was soon the only thing gracing the great hall.

The massive ship slid into position and halted briefly before beginning a geo-stationary orbit. None of the occupants inside felt the different movement, shielded and oblivious to what waited below, their only knowledge from documentaries and the sales brochures that accompanied their tickets to this historic tour. Every customer took their assigned seats in the great halls from whence they had awoken not an hour previously. The magnetic drives positioned each chair into an arena like position of tiers so that all would have an unobstructed view, the occupants firmly secured so that it was impossible to fall, nearly ninety meters for those in the highest tier.

The two children with their parents had returned to the great hall, curiosity aroused once more as they noted the unopened casket still present. Again the casket was forgotten as their chair whisked them from the floor but only to a height of two meters as they were, ostensibly, the front row. Surround sound modules built into the individual chairs gave instructions and announced forgoing proceedings, the excitement of the audience building with each passing second and word. The little boy and girl reached out and held hands – and then a loud collective gasp and more than a few screams resounded through the great halls as the walls and floor diminished then disappeared entirely. The audience was left suspended in seemingly mid-space, looking down at views of a planet nobody present thought they would ever see. Planet Earth.

Swirling clouds, a strange mix of surface colours, the occasional burst of light energy through the atmosphere itself was all explained in the running commentary. A warning was posted that the viewing window would now zoom, bringing the planet and the continent immediately below into clearer perspective, and that each client had the choice to zoom closer should they so desire. Maximum zoom was recommended so that any life forms, animals, plants, would become identifiable, and most people chose this option. However, as their views broke through the ever-present cloud, it soon became obvious that there was no life. The commentary announced they were over a once grand city named New York, though no mention was made of where the Old York had gone. The assumption was made the new was constructed over the top of the old.

The view was amazing, gasps of astonishment at every grid pattern evident in the red dust (the grid pattern believed to be a road system explained the ongoing commentary) or a crumbled dust laden hulk of what were once enormous vertical buildings. A constant strong, gusty wind kept the red dust flying and sometimes restricted the view until special filters cleared the viewing zone again. A particularly strong gust almost blanketed the screen for several seconds, the inherent lull afterward creating the greatest view of all. A giant arm reached up out of the red dust with an enormous torch in its grip, panicked screams now ricocheted the lengths and breaths of all the great halls until the commentary allayed their fears by describing the Statue of Liberty.

Whilst the millions were absorbed with the Statue and unseen by any except the two small children, a drone and several attendants approached the heretofore unopened, and forgotten by the

masses anyway, casket. The drone did its duty and retreated, the attendants waited, the canopy opened but instead of a person dismounting from the casket, the casket itself tilted toward the view. The casket went on to occupy the space where a seat would normally have been, right beside the children who were watching now with real interest. To them, this was much more interesting than all that red dust blowing around down on that dirty old planet below!

Not a little unlike the arm of the Statue had done but just as surprising, and to the two watching children, just as old, an arm extended from the casket pointing to the scene below. The kids heard a sotto voice, too low to discern the question but an attendant immediately replied, “yes Sir, New York.” The children clearly heard the sounds of crying, broken sobs rare in their world now. The attendants did their best fussing over the occupant, his ancient arm still hanging out of casket ... the braver of the two children, the girl, reached out and grasped the paper dry skin, the hand startled by the touch and instinctively withdrawing before slowly unfolding and returning to where the girl could again curl her little hand around some of the fingers. The face of a man leaned forward and over the top of the casket, his eyes roaming between the view below and that of the little girl holding his proffered hand. Tears streamed down both sides of his weathered old face, and if the little girl felt fear, she did not betray it.

“Why do you cry?”

The old man closed his eyes for brief seconds, brief because he had waited so long for this chance and was not going to waste it crying and dreaming. Though short in duration, he had enough time to think, go back, the thousand years or so since he’d been in cryogenic suspension waiting for this very opportunity, to see his home one more time. He saw, the animals at the zoo, giraffes and lions, hippos and zebras and those ever funny penguins, he saw them all now as they flashed before his eyes. He saw people climbing mountains, mountains covered in snow, deserts of white fine sand, the beaches, the oceans and streams teeming with fish, the green earth teeming with life. He opened his eyes and saw the redness of the planet below him, the hostility, the loss, and a few more tears escaped. The little voice urged his attention again.

“Why do you cry?”

He took a deep breath, aware it was one of his first for a very long time, aware it was close to his last, meaning the longest time. He looked directly at the little girl, looked into her eyes, saw the mirror image of another pair of eyes as her less than brave brother peered across her shoulder and he surveyed his young guests with as much dignity and respect as he could tiredly muster. Before she could voice her question again he answered while delicately squeezing her little hand.

“That was my home,” he nodded at the red dust swirling across the bare planet below them, then went on. “It didn’t used to look like that you know. Once it was very beautiful,” and a choking sob erupted from his chest forcing him back into his casket and releasing, slowly, reluctantly, the hand of the little girl.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at her brother who returned her shoulder shrug and they both switched their eyes to the view of horrible planet below. They forgot about the old man. They forgot about the casket. And when the tour was over and the walls of the great hall solidified, the casket was no longer there.

Later, as the huge ship prepared for the long return journey, caskets replacing seats, the great halls filling again, a small dot was ejected from a service port, accelerating away toward the hostile atmosphere of Earth. A casket, but a special casket carrying a special client, a customer who had paid to return home. His casket bore the Trump logo, everything from the ship did, but this casket also carried an inscription;

...I REMEMBER BEFORE ...

===== THE END =====

W155 – The mind replays what the heart can't delete

KNIFE

Luigi was the last in a long, long, line of master craftsmen. Their skills, precision, and traditions were handed down from father to son over many generations. They made blades, cutting implements, not just battle weapons like swords, daggers, long knives or scythes but anything for any purpose that required the keenest edge available. He'd heard many times in hushed tones that his family was responsible for the mythical sword wielded by Arthyr himself, and closer to home the dagger Brutus used to betray his Emperor, though Luigi scoffed at the idea of either!

In recent centuries of course, most of their products were sold to overseas buyers – Kings, Dictators, Pharaohs, Despots, any warlord willing to pay the exorbitant price for the best. Their wares were all custom designed and made, and in keeping with expectations and desires of the purchaser, as plain as a cheap market trinket or elaborately scrolled with the best metals and jewels money could buy. Each buyer knew their item was unique, one of a kind, and regardless of decoration, capable of cutting through almost anything without losing its edge.

The modern world however, was taking its toll on Luigi – his Grandfather and Father had passed decades earlier and he had no son to pass on the skills he had painstakingly learnt under their watchful paternal supervision and guidance. Then came the day that changed his life, not that Luigi would live to see the final result of his labours. He would instead become the first victim, a first of many.

The little bell over the shop door heralded a new customer, the custom tinkle something his great grandfather had worked very hard to achieve using left-over material from a large order of katana blades bound for a Japanese samurai clan. The bell design would be viewed by most as a windchime, however the blades were wafer thin and, in accordance with their heritage, sharpened to an edge of infinite keenness. The tiny weighted blades hung from individual fine chains – the shop door's upper edge sheathed in protective alloy to stop the blades from slicing through the timber frame and contributing to the fine tinkle produced by the bell. The tinkling was a rare occurrence nowadays, customers almost always ordering online or through an anonymous middleman. The very occasional tourist or windowshopper sometimes activated the tinkle but as the shop bore no sign or displayed any wares, these were usually wayward accidents. Oh how Luigi would wish this time had been one of those instead of the vision who now stood before him.

At first, she appeared to shimmer but as Luigi allowed his middle-aged eyes to focus and adjust to the bright noonday sun silhouetting her from the street behind, he saw the curvaceous figure of a woman. She was looking slowly around the small shop, devoid of products or advertising. Finally she noticed Luigi sitting behind the small desk and she stepped forward, her low heeled boots clicking against the wooden floorboards almost at the same pitch as the bell over the door. Her piercing dark eyes sparkled as she watched Luigi observing her from head to toe. She was pleased to see that he appeared absorbed in his examination because her preparations for this visit had been lengthy and detailed, not to mention painful at times. His eyes finally arrived at hers and he was startled quickly to his feet as his brain registered the beauty before him. He dropped his gaze quickly before speaking, his hands wringing together and advertising his embarrassment at being caught.

"I'm sorry, Miss? How may I help you? Are you lost?" He shuffled his feet adding to his look of abject misery.

"You are Luigi?" Her voice was deeper than expected but in a sultry, smoky way. A slight accent was evident but her question too short for Luigi to assess further.

"Yes, that's me – how may I help you?" Finally he lifted his face and his eyes widened as he took in her beauty from less than a metre away. He frowned slightly, "how do you know my name?"

She reached out a gloved hand, a dainty lace glove trimmed in gold edging which highlighted her slender long fingers. “*Chovani* you may call me, and for me you shall be *Armandino!*”

She spoke the two different names with a much heavier accent than the rest of her sentence and Luigi recognised an Eastern European clip but couldn't possibly determine the source of the accent. It was not unusual at all for the middlemen or customer to have a foreign accent, in fact, it was the norm but what wasn't normal was for that person to be a woman, an extremely beautiful woman at that. In her face Luigi could see an almost Central-Asian countenance tinged with some Slovak and something else almost middle-eastern in her dark eyes. She wore short, patent leather boots and the glint of sunlight on metal showed a small stainless cap backing the rear of the stumpy heels and probably the source of the tinkling sound as she walked. Her legs were sheathed in patterned soft-pink stockings until the fine lace hem of her below the knee dress interrupted his view. The dress was multi-coloured but the tones were subdued and the pattern itself random, set off with lace edging on the half-length sleeves, bodice and neckline to match the hem. A soft pink mantilla draped across the top of her head and slinked around her shoulders, with her dark eyes making her almost appear Spanish. She held a patent leather clutch in her left hand. He studied her amused gaze.

“So, *Armandino*, are you ready to do business? Do you approve of what you see?” She smiled showing her even white teeth and making him drop his gaze again. “Look at me *Armandino*, there is no need of shyness, I do not bite!”

Luigi complied and tried a smile himself but even with his head up, his eyes kept casting to the floor. “Why do you call me that, *Armandino* ... *Armen*?”

“*Armandino!* Do you not know your own name?” Her smile tightened a little as if addressing a little boy. She watched patiently as he composed himself, his bushy eyebrows raising as she added, “we are ready to do business, yes?”

“*Signora...*,” he began.

“*Chovani*, if you cannot remember your own name then perhaps you can remember mine?” She raised a single eyebrow.

Luigi swallowed, then continued, “*Showvarrni*,” he enunciated slowly and carefully and seeing her nod and smile, he relaxed somewhat. “You are aware of my expertise?”

She smiled widely now, “of course, do you think I would go anywhere else other than here, to the best?”

Luigi wasn't sure if she was actually flirting or being patronising but he was certain that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She looked like an exotic Sophia Loren and he was willing to let his mind believe she was flirting ... nothing wrong with a little fantasizing! He hurried around his little desk and made a show of dusting off a padded armchair and offered her a seat. She primly sat down, crossing her legs and arms and raised both eyebrows at him this time. “Yes, so, *Showvarrni*,” he waited again for her smiling acknowledgement, “how may I help you?”

She opened her clutch purse and drew out a slip of paper which she placed on the desk in front of him without a word. She watched as he looked at the elaborate patterns on the paper and could see the obvious question developing across his face, then as he opened his mouth to speak, she quickly interjected one single word. “*Trishul*.”

“What, *Signora*, sorry, *Chovarni*? I, I didn't catch that ...”

“You don't know what a *Trishul* is? I thought you were the best? Perhaps I was mistaken..” she made to stand up, reaching toward the paper on the desk as she rose.

“*Trishul* is a cross,” he looked her squarely in the eye as he spoke and she nodded and resumed her seat. “What I don't know is what this is,” his eyes glanced to the pattern on the note before him. “You were not mistaken, I am still the best but perhaps you could help me with this and what it means in relation to a *Trishul*?” He was looking directly at her eyes, his master craftsman brain was working hard now and effectively masking his previous shyness.

“What else could *Trishul* represent, besides a cross which you correctly identified. You surprised me a little *Armandino*. I like your surprises. Give me more!”

“Ah, it was originally a trident, and I wish I could pronounce the name, and yours, as eloquently as you do, but *Trishul* in more modern times is in the form of a cross, like a religious artifact. And this pattern ...?” He didn’t glance at the paper again, instead maintaining their steady mutual gaze. Beautiful woman or not, he was still the only professional craftsman present.

He had his finger on the slip of paper and she reached out and put her hand near his, tracing the elaborate pattern neatly with a finger without even looking. “It is indeed the cross that I seek and this is the adornment I want on the haft and the quillion.”

His bushy eyebrows rise together again, “that is a knife or a dagger then rather than a traditional cross,” he nods at her, “and the blade?”

“As you would normally create *Armandino*, the sharpest of sharpest edges available,” she smiled.

They spoke of length, weight, balance, material, the necessity of a camouflaging scabbard and Luigi became absorbed in this new project, this new very interesting project. It was a relatively easy task for him but the very interesting part was the customer. Finally, they arrived at money, as all business transactions are wont.

“This won’t be wildly expensive but you will have to leave a deposit to cover the cost of the raw materials. For that, I can give no discount,” he shrugged.

“How much, the deposit? And how much in total?”

“The materials are exotic but easily obtainable, around three thousand Euros. Three will be enough,” he watched her eyes as he mentioned the amount, she did nothing but nod so he went on. “My charge for moulding, machining, tempering and finishing will be considerably higher than that, but,” he added quickly, “it is a little quiet at the moment so I could spare a small discount, say, a total of twelve thousand Euros.”

She didn’t blink, instead reaching into her clutch again and withdrawing a small billfold. “Three now and another nine thousand on completion, yes?” This time it was he nodding. “And how long until completion?”

“About two weeks, but I’ll have to wait nearly a week for the special alloy. If it comes sooner I can finish sooner. Maybe I can call you ...?”

She smiled and stood up, proffering a bundle of cash toward him. “No need *Armandino*, I will be back in two weeks.” He took the cash and was opening a desk drawer to retrieve a receipt book when he heard her tinkling footsteps. Surprised, he looked up. She was almost at the door when she whirled back to face him. She waved, a dismissal. “No need for that either. Goodbye for now *Armandino*, I will see you again soon.” She blew him a kiss.

“Wait, wait, what was your name again?” He started after her.

“*Borsaki* my darling, *Borsaki*,” and with that, she turned on her heel, the tinkling of the bell over the door and her heels dissipating together.

Luigi walked back and slumped down at his desk, the cash still ensconced in one hand but his eyes remained firmly fixed on the closed door where he had last seen her. He shook his head a little, and not for a second recognised the different name she had given before leaving. It was sometime before he locked the door and went upstairs to his little home to phone the metal supplier.

The elegant lady walked confidently around the corner to a waiting limousine. The back door opened as she approached and she began to laugh before getting into the car, sinking into the plush leather and surveying the elderly, and some surprised, faces around her. The oldest, a slightly built man dressed in a simple dark suit that clashed heavily with the large gold hoops hanging from each ear, grinned back at her.

“It went well then, I see,” and when she laughed a little more he added, “so tell us what you did to this little man so we may laugh along with you!”

“First, first, I told him my name was *Chovani*,” she laughed more, “then, wait for this one, I told him I would call him *Armandino*!” Some had laughed at the first name but all of the men broke into laughter at the second.

“You jest child?” asked one of the other men, also dressed plainly but he too adorned with somewhat smaller hoop earrings.

“No, no jest, and I thought he was supposed to be worldly and clever but he couldn’t see past my beautiful face ... men!” She spat the last word savagely and silenced the laughter. She grinned but not the smile Luigi had seen, this time there appeared to be too many teeth, not beautifully full as he had seen but sharpened, pointed like the teeth of a shark. “Then I told him the truth, I told him who I really was, I told him my name was *Borsaki* and do you think that idiot noticed? NO, he was still far too enraptured in his appointed task, too sad that the beauty in front of him was leaving.”

“What if he is aware of the *Romani* folk?” another asked the elder.

The old man turned his eyes to the woman. “Yes, so you tell this man you are a witch, a good witch, then you use the name of a cursed one to address him, and you leave after telling him you are in fact an evil witch! What if he does know the *Romani* and works it out? He will not make the *Trishul* if he knows.” His voice gathered volume as he spoke and he pointed fixedly, accusingly, at the woman, with a single gnarled finger.

She laughed out loud, again, slapping her thigh in glee at their combined looks of shock. “Because I gave him the *Solax* to engrave onto the handle and he did not recognise the old speech. When he completes the engraving he will be putting a hex on himself, a curse that will see him dead within minutes, or hours, or days if he is extremely careful. But you tell me, how soon before a blade maker draws blood, mayhap when he shaves in the morning?” her laughing increased and the men in the car nodded their approval and laughed along with her. “It will end his blood line forevermore, justice finally after his family effected the deaths of hundreds of ours.”

The limo departed with its laughing occupants, leaving behind a reflective Luigi, upstairs in his apartment thinking of the woman who had come into his life so abruptly. *Maybe, just maybe there is a chance for me to have a family, a heir*, he was thinking. He picked up the telephone and called his special metals supplier again, this time he wanted a special express delivery. He was going to make sure this job was so exquisite she would drop dead at his feet in gratitude

===== THE END =====

W156 That's not 'extreme'. That's just stupid!

FINE DINING

Ever have one of those days, you know, the type of day that you wish you never got out of bed? Everybody has them, occasionally, some more than others, and for those who get out of the wrong side of bed on one of those days, it can be catastrophic, life defining, or life ending. Eve, Tom and Jerry shared one of those days together. The three close friends suffered at the hands of fate, a hand obviously dealt with the greatest amount of malicious intent with the aim of delivering the most brutal torment imaginable.

Eve slept in, her alarm inexplicably not working even though it had done so religiously for the past three months. She tripped over the cat (black of course) hurrying to the bathroom, chipped a tooth when she collided with the partially open door then in her half stupor, sat down on the toilet and began her business having forgotten to put up the lid. The warmth from her nether regions, not to mention the smell, performed the function that her alarm clock didn't and she truly came awake quickly, jumping up and swivelling quickly to witness her stupidity. She cursed to the heavens with all her petite frame could muster but quickly realised there was something worse happening ... she'd also forgotten to lower her panties. She didn't believe for a second that her day could get any worse, however, this was just a prelude of what was to come!

Tom was always early to work, always. His nickname at work was 'Early-Tom' in fact, something his colleagues always managed to say with some form of added sexual innuendo, more often when there was an attractive new young lady in the office. This day Tom was not early, he wasn't even on time – Tom was late. More than one person looked around the expanses of the office wondering why the lights weren't on, why the coffee machine, printers and photocopiers were not operating. Some of them milled around the coffee machine studying how to make it work! Where was Tom, where was 'Early Tom'? He was on the freeway, which was the actual reason Tom became 'Early Tom', because he liked to avoid the morning rush hour. Unfortunately, this day Tom had created a nightmare for commuters because he had smashed the brand new car he had picked up just the previous afternoon. Tom had bought a Ferrari, red of course, and yesterday drove it home with loving care, pride, and due attention. Tom's mistake was believing he could leave home five minutes later now because a Ferrari was infinitely faster than the Prius he had traded. What Tom hadn't reckoned on was the minor percentile increase in traffic just five more minutes added, and in his frustration at his potential late arrival, had attempted one too many gung-ho passing maneuvers. His brand new Ferrari currently occupied lanes three and four and a fair bit of overpass support pylon. Tom was fine; shaken, furious, frustrated but fine. The only condolence was the fact that if he had been in his Prius, he'd probably be seriously injured or worse. Worse was though, of course, yet to come.

Jerry was Tom's best friend, had been since they started school together. But where Tom was always neat and punctual, not to mention well dressed, Jerry was slovenly and tardy. Casual, was how Jerry saw himself. Casual Jerry had met Eve about five years ago, a casual meeting at a bar, a casual meeting that turned into a casual relationship until Eve decided they should part ways and just be friends. Their casual relationship cum casual friendship actually turned into a full-on trio of close friends who, over the years, developed an understanding and acceptance of each other and their individual idiosyncrasies. Jerry only ever stressed over whether Tom and Eve would ever get together as a couple, though he had never dare share this thought with the pair of them lest he accidentally introduce something they had never thought about before. That would be an irony he could never accept. Jerry had a, well, a fairly casual morning so far, nothing stressful had happened that he'd noticed anyway and it had been a fairly typical day. That was until he got the first text message from

his best pal Tom, and almost simultaneously, an email arriving pinged its existence on his computer, from Eve he saw. Both messages had the same heading – HELP!

Jerry acted immediately – comforting, supportive text messages, emails and follow up phone calls to his two best mates, his casual attitude actually helping to relieve their respective moods. But it didn't last long as Tom soon discovered that the insurance on his Ferrari hadn't been validated and approved and Eve received her nightmare client in person when he was only supposed to call to arrange an appointment. Naturally, the pair of them were at their lowest ebb by the end of the day and even Jerry was becoming concerned at what to do. Suddenly, he had a revelation. Tonight, the same night every week, the trio usually joined up for dinner. They'd been doing this for nearly three years, sans holidays and illnesses. Jerry understood he had to make tonight special, spectacular even to try and cheer his friends up after their respective disastrous day.

Jerry ate anything. Jerry ate everything. Tom and Eve were different though, their diets restricted to their chosen favourites irrespective of the cuisine. Jerry thought they were boring, unadventurous, dull, so he thought it was time to go to the extremes because nothing else would do it. There was one thing the three of them universally disliked, only one cuisine among hundreds they had always agreed was taboo, and that was spicy food, specifically, spicy Thai food. Sure they ate spicy Mexican food, spicy Chinese and Indian food, damn it, The Colonels Spicy Buffalo Wings were the best too but somewhere, somehow, the three of them had agreed never to eat Thai food. Jerry couldn't recall when and why they had decided this but what he did know was after such an epic day, they needed to go to the extremes.

He emailed them both an address and a directive to meet him there at seven sharp this evening because they were all going out on a limb tonight. He didn't tell them the name of the restaurant because tonight, they were going to live dangerously. It was now or never and he couldn't see either of them refusing such was the downer they were suffering. Jerry was late getting to the restaurant and Tom was already there, naturally, walking the footpath out the front taking in the glowing neon announcing *THAI FOOD*. They shook grips and bumped shoulders as old mates do but Tom kept glancing at the sign. He made it clear he was not impressed with the idea but Jerry convinced him it was worth a try. Eve arrived just as Tom acquiesced and Jerry had to repeat the process but was at least supported by Tom now. After the day they had, what could be worse was the general feeling. Jerry was congratulating himself on a good decision.

All of them drank too many Phuket Lagers and Singha beers before attacking the seemingly unpronounceable menu. Their courage was up, albeit alcohol fuelled. A further round of beers followed after they ordered a kind of soup named Tom Yum (Eve chose this, because of Tom of course and Jerry's eyes narrowed a little when she giggled her reasoning), Jerry chose the only dish he thought he could pronounce, Larp, but the waitress laughed and told him it was spoken as Lar**B**, and Tom boringly decided on a Thai beef salad, because salads are not spicy are they! Neither Tom or Eve had eaten that day and both decided, with a gutful of beer behind them, that a little spicy Thai food wasn't going to hurt anybody. They laughed at Jerry's explanation of extreme dining and none of them could deduce who had decided Thai food was sacrosanct.

The first course arrived, the Tom Yum, the aroma permeated even their close to totally inebriated minds. They ate, gasped at the tartness, hissed at the sweetness and drank liberally to deny the harsh chili bite. Eve got the nose runs and used half the napkins stemming the flow, their loud laughter now was anesthetic bolstered by beer. Thai food wasn't hot at all they laughed, but Tom was also sweating copiously from the forehead to go with Eve's never ceasing nose runs. The Larp arrived before they finished their soups, Lar**B** Larb, Larb they chorused loudly to other non-amused customers. Larp is served in a lettuce leaf and smells like heaven, even after the addictive aroma of the Tom Yum, it was something else again. They all plunged in, eating with their hands and even Jerry had to admit, it was firey-hot, but no-way was he going to admit it to the other pair. Firey-hot

yes, delicious, a big yes! Tom's sweat was making it hard to see as it ran down over his eyes, Eve felt like she was swimming in her nose runs. But oh, this food was so delectable.

Tom advised them to enjoy because next up was just a salad, which would naturally cool their palettes. The Thai Beef Salad arrived. *This* dish topped the first two, the aroma so tantalising they forgot their burning mouths, their beer filled heaving stomachs, their sweat and runny noses and they enthusiastically dove in, the sweet, salty, spicy beef melting on their tongues and even though none were hungry anymore, driving them on to eat more, more, more! They ate the salad, slammed it down followed by more beer and Eve was the first to go. She tipped the last of her beer down her throat, looked at Tom and Jerry and her eyes seemed to pop out of her head like a cartoon character, then her head fell face first straight into the plate in front of her. Jerry laughed out loud, he too suffering the sweats and a burning mouth but nothing more. He looked at Tom expecting to see him guffawing at the unfortunate Eve but instead, Tom's head was wobbling like a dashboard mascot. The sweat running off him had soaked his shirt and created a sheen over his face that looked like varnish. His head too plummeted face first into the table but without the bellylaughing eye pops! Jerry did laugh though, what a night it had been and they would all be able to laugh together tomorrow and evermore about their calamitous day.

The waitress approached, she looked concerned. She had been concerned from the beginning when they began heavily drinking and now it was even worse. She looked at the laughing man, his face red and sweaty but he just looked drunk. She went to the woman first and gently touched her neck, feeling, hoping, praying for a pulse. There was none. The man beside her looked white and sickly but she thought she could see some slight movement but a similar check also discovered no pulse. She looked at the laughing man again, her eyes full of grief and anger.

“Why you tell me on telephone you all love very hot food, why you do this, why, you stupid, stupid man?” She ran off toward the phone and Jerry just kept laughing.

===== THE END =====

W157 You or your best friend will survive – but not both

BACHELOR PARTY

“Fool.”

“Asshole.”

“Dickwad.”

“Moron.”

“Fu.. God’s sake, stop it!”

“Sure, pussy!”

Brandon and Lee. Friends since, well since God was a boy! They were virtually inseparable after first meeting at kindergarten a million years ago it seemed to their long suffering parents and respective siblings. Never had the boys, now men, ever done an individual thing without the other, except for the obligatory responsibilities as members of different families but even then, on many occasions one or the other had managed to accompany his mate and their family to a boring visit at Aunt Edith’s (she of the unknown and spectacularly bad culinary ability) or a picnic in the field adjacent to the retirement home where Great Uncle Fred was pining away the last of his days. Friends for life. They even established their own business together, now a successful construction company, B&L Enterprises. The success in business, long term comradeship and life in general they both put down to the rock solid foundation of their love and support for each other as friends.

Lee had a steady girlfriend, Brandon was into experiencing life and every opportunity that came knocking, especially when it came to girls. It came as a surprise when Lee announced he had proposed to Leigh, his girlfriend, surprise to family and friends but more like shock for Brandon. He accepted that Lee and Leigh were made for each other and she even accepted that Lee spent almost more time with Brandon than he did at home with her. Brandon firmly believed that marriage or not, he and Lee would continue to live their lives as they always had. Friends, inseparable, together, forever.

Everybody knew Lee was the intelligent one of the duo, Brandon the knock-about, the handyman, the jack-of-all-trades and the one most likely to do something impulsive. Another surprise for all was when Lee further announced that he and Brandon would be going away for a camping weekend to a remote mountain lake, just the two of them, and he saw it as being his Bachelor Party. Everybody looked at Brandon believing this was his idea, had to be, but it was plain to even the ardent believer from the look of complete and utter shock on his face that Brandon had known nothing about the idea until this very moment. Surprise was replaced with awe, then exhilaration as he jumped up and grabbed his friend in a savage bear hug. All the guests smiled, happy for the two of them, even Leigh.

Brandon’s family had been concerned about him after the wedding announcement but as Brandon himself had demonstrated and voiced on numerous occasions, he was just happy for his friend, and as long as Lee was happy then so was Brandon. At times though, his brother and sister had seen the long face when Brandon had been sitting by himself believing he was not being observed. The pair worried about this and brought it to the attention of firstly Brandon who dismissed them as being “silly-billys”, then to their parents who advised them to leave well enough alone.

The big weekend finally arrived, faster than Brandon thought but they had been very busy with the wedding arrangement for the following weekend so the camping bachelor party weekend had crept up on him. After Lee had missed the turn-off, an ensuing and very normal and natural war of words had followed which, as usual, Brandon won.

“Sure pussy!” He repeated.

Lee ignored him. “You got cell coverage?” He reached and tapped at his dash mounted phone.

“Nope. Do we need it?”

“Nah, just told Leigh I would call when we arrived safely is all.”

“No worries, should get some kind of service as we climb, as long as this lake of yours isn’t tucked into some little valley or something.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“How’d you know about this place anyhow?” Brandon was frowning and thinking whatever Lee knew, he knew too. Until now anyway.

Lee threw him a glance. “Remember Rogers, that idjut contract to build a bunch of cabins in the woods?” He saw Brandon nod and went on. “This is it.”

“Hey? But we didn’t take that contract.”

“No, I palmed it off sideways to Jeffrey’s, they did it, finished it up about a month ago and Jeff himself came around one night and gave me a key to the place. As a thank you for the job you know. Told me the official handover was at the end of the month and we should duck up here for a look before then ... outstanding he described it.”

“Cool, can’t wait then. How far now?”

“Should only be a few more minutes, the road turns into a bit of a forest track but Jeff says it’s good all the way to the camp.”

“Cool,” Brandon repeated and reclined a little more in his seat, relaxed and more than looking forward to this little adventure.

Deep down inside he knew it might be their last time together for something like this. Sure, he’d always see Lee at work and they’d still catch up away from work at times but Brandon wasn’t completely stupid; he knew Lee and Leigh would be together more often than not when away from the obligations of work. He thought about how to make this weekend memorable, more memorable than just being the last. Memorable enough so that Lee would want more. He couldn’t think of anything.

The roadway depleted but a well maintained sandy track lead them through an ancient forest of huge trees. Firebreaks and the still obvious tire tracks on the sandy surface were the only signs of human life. Finally, they crested a small rise and the two of them gawped at the picturesque setting before them. Six wooden cabins were dotted amongst the tree line overlooking a still lake, the surface so smooth that the sky, clouds and the infringing mountains were reflected like a mirror. Lee had let his foot drop off the accelerator at the sight, such was the magnificence, and the SUV slowed to an idle crawl as they crept ever closer.

Brandon was the first to break the silence, “wow,” being the best he could conjure.

Lee finally applied pressure to the go pedal again and drove a little off to the right toward the furthest cabin. “Wow is right.”

The car stopped at the cosy verandah that fronted the cabin and both men sat in the surrounding stillness that followed after Lee turned off the engine. Brandon as usual, was the first to break the silence.

“Man, this is epic, we’re are going to so rip this place apart!”

“Sure bud, sure, but here ... ” Brandon glanced at his mate and saw him handing something to him. He reached out and took the key that Lee was offering as Lee went on, “go open up, make sure the fridge is on, gotta keep them beers cold!” he chuckled.

Brandon slipped of his seatbelt and bounded out of the car. He placed one foot on the first little step of the verandah and turned back to gaze at his friend through the open window. “Mate, we’re going to make this weekend something to remember!”

Lee nodded and beamed his best smile whilst shooining him on at the same time with one arm. “Get on with it idjut.”

“Sure, pussy,” Brandon exclaimed as he turned and bounded up and onto the verandah.

He reached the door and fumbled to put the key in the lock, “damn new locks,” he mumbled, but just as he successfully pushed the key home, the door opened. He stepped back to avoid the

swinging door, and then froze at the intense shock of seeing Leigh standing in the open doorway. He didn't even move as Leigh stepped forward quickly and thrust the large kitchen knife into his chest, once, twice, three times and then more and more and more as he staggered backwards, looking at Leigh, looking down at his chest, at the knife and the realization of what was happening. He turned his head to look at Lee still sitting in the car. It was but a split second, and he saw the smile still firmly ensconced on Lee's face as he tumbled backwards off the stairs, taking the knife now fully buried to the hilt in his chest with him. Leigh looked over the body toward her future husband sitting and smiling at her in the car."

Knew you could do it Babe," he winked at her.

===== THE END =====

W158 – I wondered when I'd truly live

FELICITY

The world had clipped her wings.

Nothing but squalid living quarters for almost two years; dirty, grimy, overpopulated and the underlying stench of waste only bearable because the reek of unwashed bodies was closer, infinitely closer and impossible to avoid. Standing in ankle-deep foul water was an almost a permanent requirement as the ability to move was restricted by the bodies pressing from all sides. Movement was at the whim of the group.

She automatically swallowed an errant grasshopper, her stomach clenching and heaving in distaste. Shrimps were her favorite but so rare that she couldn't even remember their delectable flavor – it had been a long time, a very long time. She shouldered at the pressing body on her right side, the disgust at the flagrant violation of her personal space enough to help her empty tummy settle a little more.

'*Come on sunrise,*' was her thought and perhaps this time she could conjure an escape. Success was her only motivation, to live was her incentive. She closed her eyes and dreamed standing up, the only possible way to sleep in this decrepit, insipid environment.

A wave rolled through the group as they woke with dawn's first light. Many a feather was rustled as one after another opened their eyes to another dreary day of existence. The sun broke through and the horizon was littered with a thousand sparkling jewels of yellow light which brought the group into a concerted movement forward away from the squalor that was home. They moved in a jostling formation to the shallow waters of a fenced-in lake and she saw her chance as a break in the crowd appeared to her left.

Up, up, up she rose, the calls from friends and family below, startled but seemingly unsurprised. She saw the fence line approaching, she was almost there when suddenly, she came to an abrupt halt and crashed down onto the still waters.

Two people standing behind the fence shook their heads and laughed. "That Felicity," one guffawed, "when's she gonna learn?"

"At least we know that netting works now," added the other.

They walked away still laughing, past the sign that read:

FLAMINGO ENCLOSURE

===== THE END =====

Freewrite – write whatever you want, however you want. Extra points for the use of chocolate in your story

Alan

That's his name – Alan. It's not his real name of course ... that's too difficult to pronounce for mere human beings with their antiquated and strange vocal functions. He adopted the name because it was simple and almost everybody he met could say it without wasting time on proper pronunciation ... until he went to Japan, anyway. He accepted *their* strange speech because he genuinely liked them and felt no wrath, no anger, not the tiniest desire to decimate a single one, even though Alan knew it had to happen. And happen it would, as soon as he got around to it. First he had to meet more of these strange creatures, this most unusual species. He wanted to learn as much as possible because once they were eradicated, it would of course be too late.

In the beginning, the very uniqueness of the human species was a galaxial curiosity. Their evolution, diversity, and necessity for water to sustain existence and further transmogrification rendered them insignificant. Ongoing wars and violent disputes were analyzed as self-decimating – the race would kill itself off and was therefore of no interest or concern to collective neighbors. The wars never stopped, the weapons became more destructive, but still the population increased. The crux of the whole destabilizing situation occurred when the species began exploring outside their planet. It generated a fear that their destructive habits would spread, and spread quickly, just like their population. People on Earth became the focus of every other life form, and that focus was not good for the human race.

Life everywhere, on far-away planets, had always evolved and would continue to do so. The nature of most life-forms was peaceful and non-damaging, and so their growth was only observed, encouraged even, if there was enough evidence to prove they could be beneficial for all. There was no formal command structure among any of them; the most evolved were automatically in charge but they governed in a way that accepted all minorities. All life was equal regardless of size, strength, number. Until humans came to be, anyway.

Those in charge attempted to influence the progress of life on Earth, inspiring and encouraging world leaders of the time: Roosevelt, Churchill, Hitler, Lenin, Ghandi, Ben-Gurion, Mao Zedong, numerous Popes, and later revolutionaries such as Luther-King and Mandela, before tempting powerful celebrities like Geldof, Jackson, Rowling ... all to no avail. Humanity did not want to listen.

Alan's mission – for that's what it was, a mission – became necessary when the annoying disturbances of sound and light waves generated from the earth first accelerated in their frequency and then began to directly affect others in the solar system and neighboring galaxies, causing a level of fear and anxiety of never before experienced heights. It had to cease, must stop so that peace could always reign.

His mission – investigate the antagonistic human race, eradicate them, restore peace.

“Step 1”

A telephone rang, a cellphone, a Vertu Signature Touch. His final appointment he knew, and keyed to answer, listening without even saying hello. A voice immediately began its assault and he instantly recognized the English language, American English at that. There was a confusing melee of orders to do this, do that, but don't do this if you happen to do that, and so it went. The voice finally ended the lengthy diatribe and waited for a response, and after some tense seconds with nothing in return, queried the listener.

“Do you understand, Mr. Trelwick?”

“Yes, and it’s Alan.”

“Don’t be late, Mr. Trelwick, the president doesn’t like to be kept waiting, he is never late.”
And the call abruptly ended.

He placed the phone back down onto the adjacent side-table and rocked back in the luxury leather of the armchair, just one rock, and when his feet returned and touched the floor he stopped the motion of the chair so he could reach out and lift a simple tumbler of whisky. He sipped gently in quiet celebration of his final appointment, ice chinking loudly against glass in the silence of the room but he savored the smooth mellow liquid as it erupted onto his taste buds and took no notice of the sound.

He glanced down to make sure no temperamental condensation had dripped from the glass onto his keenly pressed trousers or patent leather shoes. He stood up, taking the whisky with him across the plush carpet of the room, stopping in front of the mini bar and inspecting himself and the whisky in the mirror hanging above the bar. He would never get used to seeing himself in this form but oh, the privileges it bestowed, such as this beautiful whisky!

“Cheers,” he offered to his reflection, and took another sip.

He was average height – a tad under one hundred eighty centimeters, or almost five foot eleven to those rebellious Americans – mid-forties and fit with a strong shock of black hair immaculately groomed to present him as the professional that he was. He adjusted the knot of his tie slightly, nodded, but then sighed as he placed the whisky back down on the bar. His eyes went back to the mirror and the classic handsome face and piercing green eyes that returned his gaze. He shuddered at the thought that he had to bear this monstrous form for the duration of his mission, sans the microseconds required to infect others.

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