

A woman with her back to the camera stands in a field of tall, golden-brown grass. She is wearing a white shawl with a fur collar and a black dress. In the background, there is a wooden windmill on the left and several dark barns or silos in the center. The sky is a pale, overcast grey.

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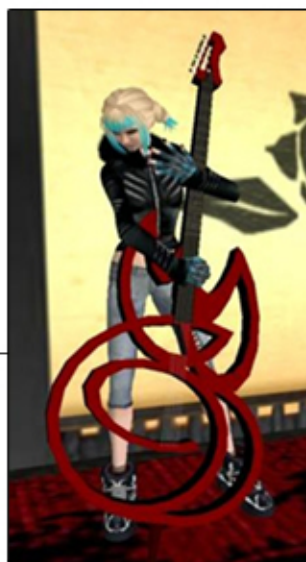
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by A Writer



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*Spring* 2008

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*Editor in Chief*  
Morrhys Graysmark

*Adjunct Editor*  
Ina Centaur

*Advertising Director*  
Honor Lehane

*Art and Design Director*  
Ina Centaur

*Dynamic Cover Design for Spring 2008*  
Aya Liotta    Bella March    Danni Junsten  
Fianna Idora    Gita Rau    Katarina Malthus  
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## *Editor's Introduction*

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Since its last publication, *sLiterary* achieved its goal of becoming a nonprofit corporation under California law. We thank Prospero Lane, who now serves on the board of the nonprofit and who did the bulk of the research into and paperwork for the effort.

While we changed our status as an organization, we did not change our basic theme. Paraphrasing Jackline Hugo, editor emeritus, the setting of a poem or story, even if never explicitly mentioned, forms the metaphysics of the world in which the plot plays out. *sLiterary* seeks stories based on the dynamic interplay between real life and the metaverse. A reference to There or Second Life® or some speculative future virtual world does not turn a work into metaverse literature. The work must have the metaverse at its heart, telling the human story based on the author's perception of the metaverse.

We selected the best-written, most original works for inclusion in our spring 2008 issue. We looked for images we'd never seen before. We prized clever word usage, interesting characters, well-crafted settings, clear plots, strong themes, and conflicts that move stories forward and change the characters that deal with them. We offer works written to surprise you, make you laugh or cry, make you eager to read more.

All four of this issue's poems are by writers new to *sLiterary*. Callaghan Munro's untitled poem blends ancient style with modern experience, and seasons the mix with literary allusions. Zarachnia Wilder finds parallels between human and tree in the pixels of Second Life® in her vividly written poem "Transplantation." The poem "Internet Avatar Crashtime Blues" by DanteOsaka Deschanel combines modern virtual world romance with a classical lyrical blues form. Stolvano Barbosa offers "Keywords," an innovative little love poem.

Of the authors of our four works of fiction, Judi Newall is the only first-time writer for *sLiterary*. Her fascinating story "Walk with Me" brings alive the amazing Black Swan sim. Daryn Writer returns with "The Furry Problem," explaining the instabilities we often face in Second Life® while poking fun at Furrries and World of Warcraft (Furrries, take heart: we at *sLiterary* think Furrries are great, and even the characters in this story who belittle Furrries go out of their way to help a Furry in need). The editor continues Ming Zhou's serial novel "Black Betrayal," the story of Ming, an Asian American hidden behind a fair, blond avatar, and Kip, the mysterious, tortured knight in white armor. Aiji Ducatillon completes the lineup with his latest installment of "SLeuth," in which feisty heroine Spike's investigation of a Second Life® money laundering operation turns into an international crime case with her as the likely next victim.

Enjoy!  
Morrhys Graymark  
Editor-in-Chief

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SLITERARY (23.13.23)



## UNTITLED

*by Callaghan Munro*

To the Goddess-that-is

Lean close; the golden age of storytelling has long past,  
and you have lost the listening method,  
for I will tell the tale of a man whose glass Oracle  
Spoke to him as if a new domestic god.

He found his Elysium Plain amongst the SL sims,  
and there he played the invisible lover  
to an unknown Psyche waiting in the dark  
a thousand miles away to feel his touch.

Each spirit of imagination rushes and performs;  
the game is one of shouting to be heard,  
but this man with a quiet keyboard manner  
could charm a Daphne or a Nymph with just a word.

He built a universe around his words; all could enter,  
and he laid his fantasies amongst their own  
until they greeted him as if he was real  
and not a player in a world he'd grown.

But as they sit and pray for visitations from their gods,  
they are changelings dressed in other clothes,  
each playful mask put on and then discarded,  
hiding their names to protect their true thoughts.

So, the golden age of storytelling is long past,  
but we can build an electronic temple to ourselves,  
and pray before it, and seek acolytes  
who see us only through our eyes.



## TRANSPLANTATION

*by Zarachnia Wilder*

I see you sitting  
under that lanky tree  
your hair half-rezzed  
and you look half-mad.

Fine lines reach  
like phantom branches  
between the real  
and the let's-pretend.

I touch your face  
and I know  
everything about you  
that can be known

because you can't  
stop talking here —  
not even when you're  
silent.

You whisper,  
your tongue a leaf  
rustling against  
your teeth:

“I want  
a world where I  
can recognize  
my own.”





Don't you know  
your roots can go  
as deep as you dare  
to reach?

But I see that you do.  
You know.  
This you I see now —  
glowing with the sunset,

your arms upraised  
to snatch a star  
or two —  
is not virtual,

but whole and hale.  
I was mistaken.  
Or maybe I  
just wasn't looking

in the right place.  
At first.  
Because now —  
now your form is clarified.

And you are  
the slender aspen  
teaching me to  
tremble with the wind.



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# INTERNET AVATAR CRASHTIME BLUES

by *DanteOsaka Deschanel*

My man on the screen he don't look like me.  
 My man on the screen, he don't look so good  
 As he stutters and wavers and walks with a jerk,  
 I'm workin my fingers, typin till they hurt.

My woman done left me, it pains me to say,  
 My woman done left in the usual way  
 With a walk I would die for, all over my heart,  
 Now I'm typin my life away in the dark.

My internet romance is paused on the screen.  
 My internet romance is waiting for me,  
 But my man he don't look good, he's startin to blink,  
 And my internet romance starts to fade.

My puter is hummin louder than before.  
 My puter is hummin, but it makes nothin move  
 On my screen, and my fists they pound on the keys,  
 And my heart is thrown again on the floor.

My screen is now black as a night without you.  
 My screen is now black and I don't even know  
 What to do to fix the problem, what to do  
 To make you come walkin back through my door.

My internet's gone, and my puter is dead.  
 My internet's gone and I'm going to bed,  
 Thinking bout a romance that's frozen in place,  
 Cold sheets over my head one more time.





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## KEYWORDS

*by Stolvano Barbosa*

This cannot be resolved:  
the crisp wafer of my heart  
wrapped in love's flexible fabric.

No emotional inventory  
accounts for this anomaly;  
the mental grid goes offline.

An instant message pings  
my brain with the implausible  
information: that you adore me.

Now I will play the role  
of actual not virtual lover.



**G**ALLAND HOMES

*Come Home To Luxury*



## WALK WITH ME

by Judi Newall

The famous 'Lovers Rock' sculpture dominated the scene, but it was the stench of rotting flesh which overpowered her other senses as she exited her ship. Two heads had been precisely positioned upon the pillars before her and others lay strewn along the walkway. Like the lovers sculpture, the path too was carved from volcanic rock, but this stretched in a giant circle, blocks formed like the spine of some immense beast whose tusks were spaced at intervals along the way.

In the midst of the carnage, and apparently oblivious to the decaying flesh around him, stood Severn. Barely past his middle years, a taut body still echoed the dedication to gymnastics which had first brought him fame. He strode forward and proffered his hand. "So, you're the journalist who wants to be remembered by linking your name to my genius?"

"It's true that some translator may lend a passing thought to me," she said carefully, trying to breathe shallowly and not gag as they shook hands. His immediate attack had confirmed her assessment of him and she was well prepared. "Yet the story of Sculptor Severn will be the one passed on. Explorers should know that these works are the creation of one man alone. Your story should be told." She noted a



Monarch Bay (215, 81, 28)

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slight shifting of impatience in him and continued quickly.

"I see the seven lights circling 'Lovers Rock'. They're a new addition? Severn lights?" She turned her face slightly to capture the warm breeze which brought a breath of untainted air, yet watched the sculptor intently.

"At least you can demonstrate quick wits," Severn suddenly smiled. "Walk with me." As he turned, he kicked contemptuously at a nearby head. "Sixteen idiots who thought to challenge me! They wanted my seed store, something to eke out their miserable lives at the expense of immortality for a planet. We destroyed our world and they wanted to squander her last resources to survive a few more years." He smiled brightly, his gaze fondly resting upon the fin which cut through the misty turquoise sea. "Their bodies fed my Orcas though, so they served an admirable purpose."

The journalist noted the scorched flesh even as her mind recoiled from the horror. "They underestimated a man who works with lasers to sculpt." That insight gained her another smile and Severn relaxed visibly as they moved on, casually swinging himself around a scythe which hung from a windmill tower overhead. She copied the maneuver, likewise grasping the wooden support, but she edged by the honed blade more cautiously. Once safely past, she paused to admire the light sculptures that shimmered like ghosts to their left. Severn

noted her pause and waited.

"My first foray into a new medium, the oft copied 'Palm Island.' No one ever matched my skill though. No one," he laid heavy emphasis on the phrase, "could master the complexity of my 'Eagle with Shark' piece." Fully relaxed now and glowing with satisfaction he moved on, stopping only when the walkway ended abruptly. Lichen and the occasional weed bore testament to the time this path had stood. The missing block, now wedged in a crevice, spoke of the cataclysm which had shaken the world.

Another laser sculpture, this time of a giant shark, was outlined below, a ghostly form relentlessly attacking the rocks.

A geyser spouted from the depths beside a pinnacle on which resided the famous Edgware piano, known to others as Severns' Folly. It stood as a monument, a proud statement that its owner had money for anything he wanted, even a piano which remained in tune, protected from the world, although isolated and apparently open to the elements.

Severn paused, balanced for a moment on his toes and then leapt high into a somersault, to land precisely centered on the pillar which had once supported the now collapsed slab. He beckoned imperiously to her. "Hurry, before the geyser spouts again."

The journalist took a moment to focus on the pillar ahead. With Severn standing in the center she had less of an area for which to aim,

a fact which his mocking smile acknowledged. She had her own resources though; a lifetime of meditation and martial arts gave her calm and made her sure that she could hit her mark. Yet, as she landed on the slick surface, she nearly lost her balance when a hissing white orb shot past her head.

The sculptor laughed as she flinched. "Part of my security system. But it's set to ignore you," he said gaily. The journalist smiled grimly, aware that her guard had slipped briefly, leading her to heed the others warning without watching for a less obvious danger.

Severn leapt to gain the path ahead and gestured over his shoulder. "My house is long gone, but now I have my own rainbow and my piano survives all." He made it into a personal triumph rather than the skill of the builders, but his opening gave her the chance to contemplate the view and regain her calm. She easily

reached the walkway and, as she attained the apex, she saw Severn leap lightly to a pillar and from there to a giant skull and onward once more. Her nemesis was in high spirits, delightfully laughing at her wary approach and apparently immune to the heat which billowed from below. Bizarrely the skull retained its tongue which served to guide lava to the fiery, heaving pool.

She considered the possibilities, knowing she had no hope of matching the feat, although another option was possible and flattery might keep her in favor. She jumped carefully to the rocks at the left of the lava pool, the heat at least keeping them dry and thus offering a safer footing. She swung around a protruding tusk and bowed to the frowning man as she stood safely again. "None can hope to emulate the master. Your humble servant must take the easier way." The frown eased, then Severn



clapped his hands and giggled, suddenly child-like.

"Oh, well played. Well played indeed! You'll win your story yet." He bounced across more pillars. Not only did these have large gaps between, but two of them rose and fell, 'to make life more fun', as Severn gleefully observed. The grinding scrape of their movement set her teeth on edge, but each leap took her further from them.

Severn appeared disappointed at her progress, so she was careful to heap praise on the 'Night Dreaming' statue which was poised above. An easy sculpture to compliment; yet again Severn had developed a new medium. The dreamer stood, filmy garments outlining a realistic body which looked ready to step forth. Then in the blink of an eye the figure became one with the volcanic rock which froze her form.

Further on a pair of scowling gargoyles were enveloped in flames as they stared evilly at each other across the way. Severn hurried her past. Once more the path lay broken; this time the remnants were pooled with water from a geyser above. Her legs trembled with weariness and she landed ignominiously and hard, sitting suddenly as her feet slipped away.

She expected him to be laughing again, but the madman had moved on and was gazing rapturously at the statue of a ballerina. She took the opportunity to sit beside him, while gazing, as though in awe, giving herself a chance to recover. Arms outstretched, the ballerina was lit from below with a pale, yet fiery glow, a stain on the sea behind her as though her trail spilt blood. Face raised to the sun, eyes closed in concentration, she was his last creation, a return to a most traditional form. The sculptor seemed lost in a trance as he gazed at



his work. Then the journalist began to talk. Initially by cajoling and flattering, as they sat together she started gently leading her subject along her own planned path. She referred to awards that he had gleaned, and mourned the passing of all the institutions involved. She quoted the famous who had been his intimates and noted their escape from the doomed world. Slowly she steered him to her course.

The next pillars were easier to traverse and her host was quiet now as they negotiated the rope bridge to stand before the 'Angel.' This last massive structure had been called a self portrait and indeed the face bore a startling resemblance to the man before her. She wondered if some part of this genius had realized his own descent into madness and echoed it with the ropes and simulated fires beneath the tortured form?

"So now you write." Severn's voice was

softer. His hand rested briefly on the statue's plinth and a section slid open, stone grinding slowly aside. A small room was revealed containing a bed, a comfortable chair and a stack of dried supplies. A sophisticated desalinator used the remainder of the space. He threw himself onto the camp bed and scrabbled for a grimy blanket. He lay quietly as she wrote her tale, though he did not sleep, but watched warily.

Most of the story had been deftly crafted days before and so it was quickly transcribed. The journalist passed over her tablet, the memory carefully wiped clean before this expedition, so that only her most recent words remained. Severn accepted it tiredly and waved his hand. "You may go," he said graciously.

His companion looked at him steadily until Severn raised his eyes again. "No," she said quietly but firmly. "I am not running that course again, not until I've slept at least." Severn glow-





ered briefly and then once more gave way to a giggle.

"I like the title 'The genius who bequeathed beauty to a dying world.' You can take the secret way. Move those boxes and you'll find a ladder." He resumed his haughty air. "I may have changes which I wish you to make. I shall contact you on the morrow."

The ladder led down past a locked door and into an airlock chamber. The passageway beyond took her to another ladder after a surprisingly short walk. Hours of athletics and traps, all to come full circle. She reached the open air again. Night had fallen and 'Lovers Rock' now appeared suspended over a galaxy of swirling stars. She clambered back into her ship and slept.

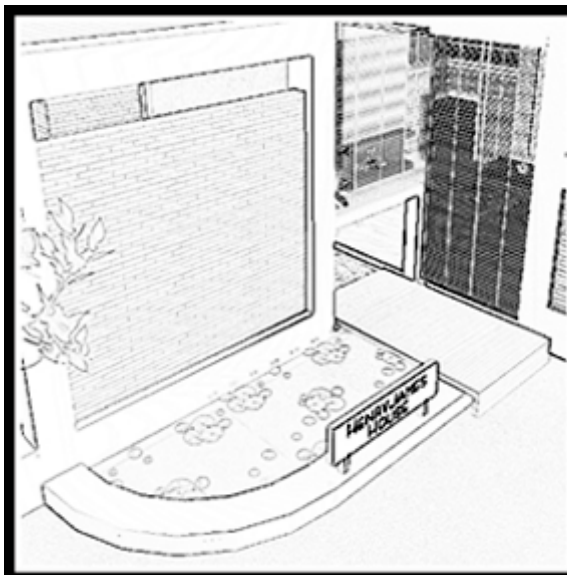
Next day Severn hailed her. "Come and join me." His voice dropped as though enticing a lover. "But if you want to see me you have to

come the long way round, the secret way is locked!"

She quelled a flash of temper, then turned wearily to face the path again. A steady creaking caught her attention and she watched the now swinging scythe with horror. How many other obstacles had the maniac set for her? She soon discovered spikes hidden inside the path and that the gargoyles now spouted flame at each other, impeding her way.

When she hauled herself exhausted before her tormentor, Severn lightly tapped the screen of the tablet, pronounced it fitting without another glance, and scurried down the ladder like a rat. The journalist watched as the vault was unlocked and tried noting the combination. She need not have worried; Severn patted the tablet tenderly and then abandoned it atop the seed store, before scuttling back up.

He never paused, but ran around the



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INFOTAINMENT ISLAND (50, 28, 31)

plinth, and was across the rope ladder by the time she had a clear view. She fumbled for the binoculars in her belt pack and watched in amazement as the man soared high in the air to blow a kiss to his ballerina. On he flew, feet barely touching the ground, until finally he leapt, thrust upward from the skull and dove neatly into the lava pool below.

After a few moments her radio bleeped for attention. The voice which hailed her was hesitant. "Doc? You there?"

She wearily thumbed the control. "Yes. It's over. Come and get the seeds and the supplies."

"Doc ... did you make him do that? I mean you were the world's best from way back. No one else could get enough people to band together to have a chance at survival. Did you talk him into doing that?"

"Once I was a journalist," said the psychiatrist softly, "and once I was a healer."



# IC SKINS



**I**N SHAKESPEARE'S ERA, A GROUP OF THESPIANS JOINED TOGETHER TO BREAK GROUNDS IN CREATING REVOLUTIONARY THEATRES AND PLAYS. THEIR WORK CAN BE SAID TO BE THE FOUNDATION OF MODERN THEATRE. THE SL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY EXISTS TO RELIVE THAT SPIRIT -- BY BRINGING TO THE METAVERSE THE BARD'S PLAYS...



## THE FURRY PROBLEM

by Daryn Writer

“Save me! You must save me!”

Brian looked around. He couldn't see anyone.

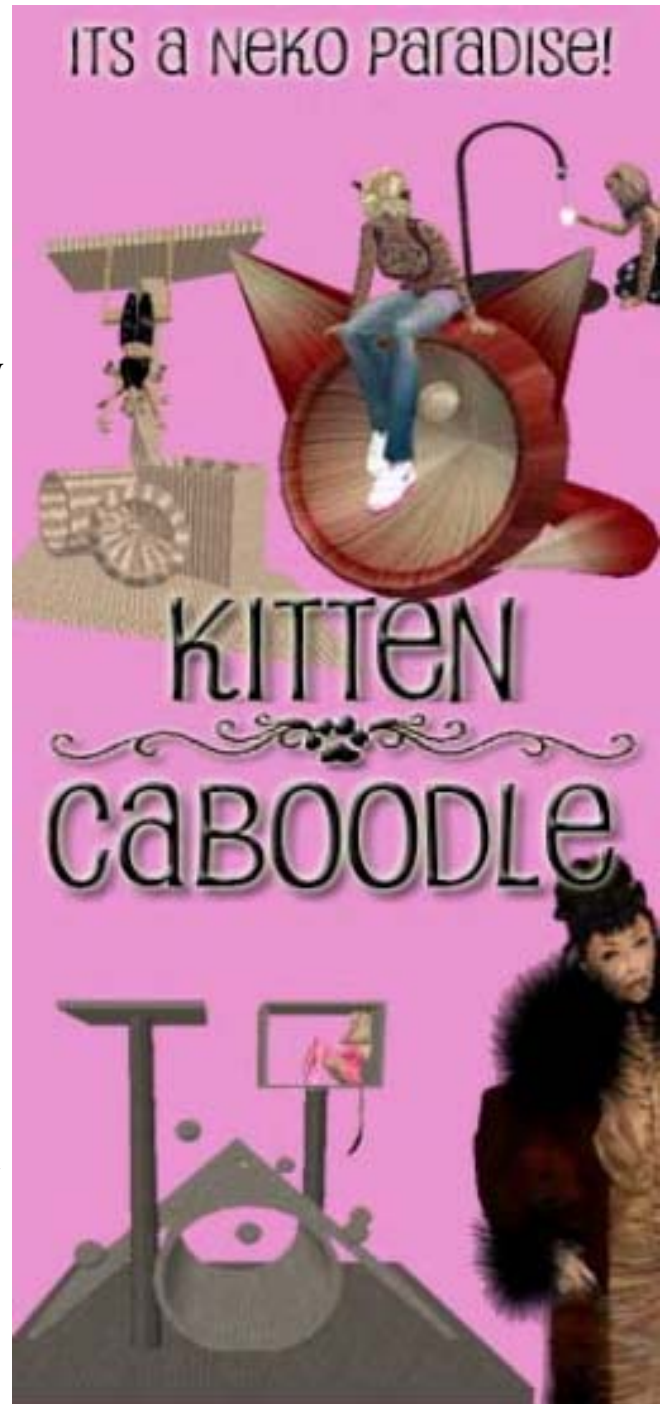
“Down here!”

Brian glanced straight down. There at his feet was a creature, barely higher than his ankles, looking like a small ball of light blue, fluffy fur. The ball of fur hopped up and down on thin, red legs that ended in tiny, round feet with three long toes each. Two slender red arms bounced up and down with each hop, oversized yellow hands waving in the air. Two enormous brown eyes stared up at him through the fur. There may have been a mouth in there somewhere, but if so, it was well hidden. The creature was wearing a trilby hat.

Brian called, “Hey, Todd! Over here!”

Todd walked over and looked down. “It's only a Furry. Second Life is full of people with weird looking avatars. Kick it out of the way and we'll get back to work.”

They were standing next to a pile of dark, wooden beams. Building material was scattered about: doors, windows, floor planks, tiles. The three of them were alone on the plot of land, which was large enough to hold a considerable estate, but which at the moment had only a single small structure. In the exact center of the



land was a low-built English pub of aged, wooden beams, lead glass windows in worn frames, a high pitched roof of slate tiles with moss and lichen textures, the whole surrounded by a cobblestone path. A chimney smoked at each end. The frame of a stable had been erected next to the pub, and pavers had been laid for an outdoor area. Above the pavers hung a sign which read: Grand Opening Next Tuesday. The ample land around was flat, and nothing but bare dirt from end to end.

The Furry exclaimed, "No! I beg you! Morverad will rectify me."

Brian and Todd looked at each other.

The Furry squealed, "Eeeek!" and scuttled behind Brian.

Someone was teleporting in. Another Furry. This one was taller, about half the size of the men. He was encased in futuristic-looking black armor. Spikes protruded in every direction. His helmet housed a slit for a mouthpiece, set in a permanent downturn. His eyes were small, narrow, and mean. Above his head, in the usual place for a Second Life avatar, was the name, "Morverad," and his group tag said, "Rectifier."

"You two humans! Where is Balzar?" Morverad demanded.

"Who?" Todd asked. "I don't know anyone called Balzar. Do you, Brian?"

"Never heard the name," Brian confirmed.

Todd quietly upended an empty box and placed it over the ball of fur quaking behind

Brian's legs.

"Radar indicates the criminal Balzar is in this area."

Brian said, "We've been here for hours, building our new pub. Haven't seen any Balzar."

"Step aside. I will search."

"No you won't," Todd said immediately. "There's no one here. You can look somewhere else."

"You are lying."

Brian's avatar was medium height and slim, with brown hair and a friendly expression. He was dressed like a relaxed county squire, in jacket, cravat, and fashionable trousers. One could easily imagine him as the amiable host of a warm, welcoming pub. Todd on the other hand was tall, heavily built, well muscled, tattooed with deaths heads on his forearms, deeply tanned, wearing a leather jacket and torn jeans.

"That's not a very nice thing to say," Todd said. "Not very smart either, since we own this land. So if you don't want to be banned, you will leave right now."

Morverad looked from one to the other. Brian and Todd stood firm.

Morverad floated into the air and flew around them. "I will search now."

In a flash Morverad was thrown off the land. He whirled about in the air before slowly coming to a stop.



“That’s called being banned,” Todd shouted to the distant figure.

Morverad turned away. “I will patrol the boundary. Balzar must leave your land some-time.” He commenced to float backwards and forwards along the red border.

Brian flipped up his Instant Messenger screen. He IMed Todd and the small Furry.

“Alright Balzar, what’s going on?”

“Morverad is gone?” the Furry asked.

“He’s patrolling our border,” said Brian.

“Oh dear! I fear this is non-optimal.”

“Why does he want to – what do you call it – rectify you?” asked Todd.

“Because I am a traitor to my people. There are those of us who feel it is wrong for my species to invade your world for more living space. We have formed a group, to thwart the majority who wish to take it.”

Brian and Todd shared another look.

“The Furrries?” Todd said.

“The alien species which hides itself among the Furrries. Approximately 12% of all those avatars you refer to as Furry are in fact members of my own race.”

“So, you’re from another planet,” Brian said.

“You comprehend! I am relieved.”

“Humans!” Morverad called from a distance. “I have alerted others. Your border will soon be swarming with my agents. Hand over the criminal now, and you will be left in peace.”

Brian turned his back on Morverad. Todd gave him the finger.

Todd upended the box Balzar was hiding within and moved it into the pub. Brian shut the door behind them and said, “It’s okay Bal-



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zar, you can come out now.”

Balzar’s large brown eyes peeped over the top. When he saw he was safe he climbed out.

“So what do you need, Balzar?” Brian asked.

“It is imperative I alert your national leaders to the danger; the Secretary General of your United Nations, if he’s free.”

“He might be busy,” said Brian.

“The President of the United States will do in a pinch.”

Todd rolled his eyes and chuckled. Brian adopted the compassionate expression most people reserve for dealing with small wounded animals and the mentally disabled.

Brian said, “Balzar, I can see you haven’t quite grasped how things work around here. No one’s going to pay any attention to a Furry in an online world.”

Balzar said glumly, “Others of my group

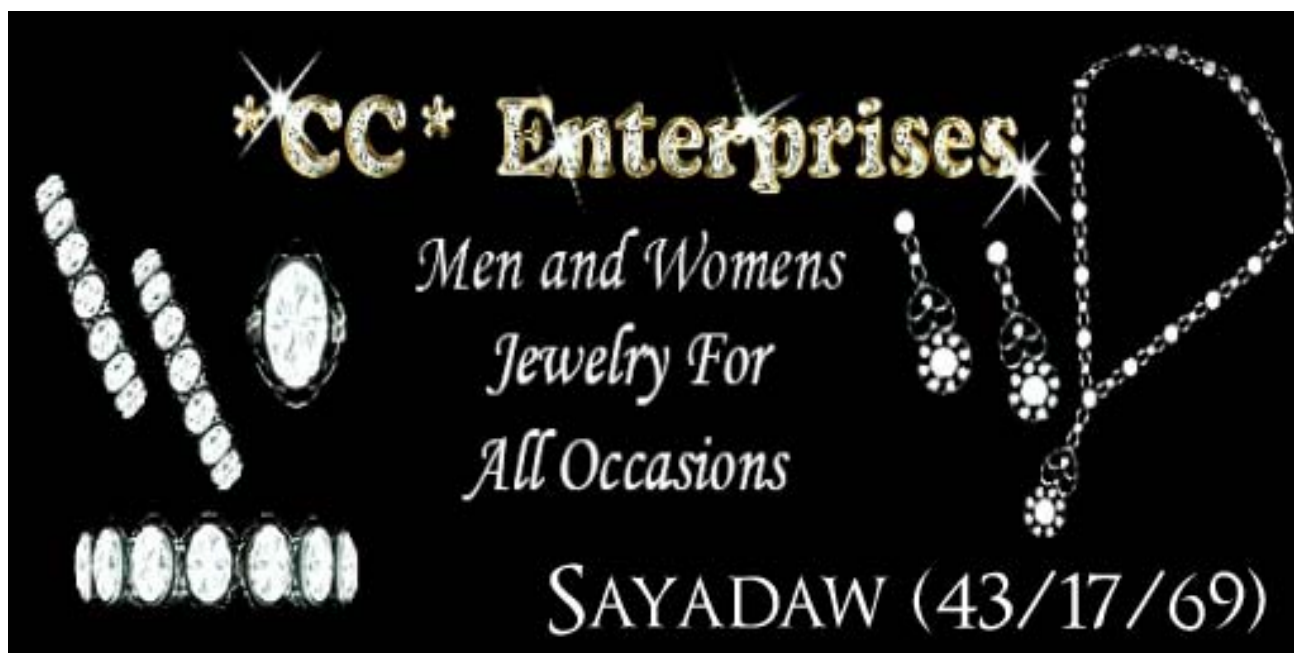
have reported this problem.”

“No one will talk to you?” Brian inquired.

“Making contact with members of your species is not the problem. However, upon contact, most wish to drag us to one of the many reproductive chambers. We do not understand this behavior. I am afraid our utility for reproductive purposes is limited.”

“Don’t let it worry you, Balzar. The same could be said for most members of our own species.”

Todd walked over to the window and drew back the curtains. He could see Morverad. At this distance he appeared as a thin stick figure with tiny arms outstretched. Todd could see from the angle of the arms that Morverad was looking right at him. He asked, “Why don’t you try some other game, Balzar? There are others you know, some of them more popular than



this one. World of Warcraft, for example. It's huge."

"We have tried. But every time one of us appears, before meaningful communication can occur, our ambassador is beaten to death with an iron bar, or cut to pieces with sharp implements, or otherwise eviscerated by members of your own species."

"Sorry about that," said Brian

"I must say, you seem to be a very warlike people."

"We're not all like that, Balzar," continued Brian. "The people in those worlds are – how shall I put this? – predisposed to violence."

"Ahh, I comprehend! They are places for incarcerating your psychopaths and anti-socials."

"Umm..." said Brian.

Todd asked, "So tell me, Balzar, how did you get into an online game? Surely you didn't land in a space ship and immediately login?"

"By no means! Physical travel would be quite impossible. When the membranes of the universe fold sufficiently, distant points come close together across another dimension. We transpire through the membranes. Unfortunately, this can only be done rarely as the membranes fluctuate. Being electrical creatures, we could not inhabit your physical space. We can, however, occupy your electronic spaces."

Outside through the window they could see Morverad. He had adopted a sentry patrol, trav-

eling half the length of one side from left to right and back again, flying at a height of about ten meters. It was a perfect position to see clearly across their whole land. Nothing could move outside that Morverad would not immediately mark.

"You'll have to teleport if you want to get out of here," said Brian.

"You are right." Avatars can teleport to anywhere else in an instant; it was the fastest way to get anywhere. Balzar went into the familiar teleport pose, back straight, knees slightly bent, arms stretched out to the sides. Balzar held the pose for some time, then lowered his arms. "It didn't work," he said.

"Destination's probably full, too many people there already," said Todd. "Try another."

Balzar did. That one failed too. And another. And another.

"It's no good. I can't teleport anywhere."

Todd swore and banged his fist down on the bar. "Damn Linden Labs. They created this world; wouldn't you think they could keep it running? This place never works when you need it to!"

"It is not entirely their fault," Balzar said.

"Course it is!" Todd objected.

"No, it is not. I think I know what's happened. Your species believes most world crashes are due to inadequate programming on the part of those you call the Lindens."

"That's right, isn't it?" Brian demanded in

surprise.

“Negative,” Balzar replied. “In fact, my people have managed to insert a small number of avatars among the Lindens. These individuals appear to be members of your own species, but in fact are our agents. Our agents deliberately create certain conditions within the code, which nudge this world closer to our own. Of course the only opportunity to insert new code is during updates. Unfortunately, conjunction is difficult to maintain and frequently results in localized phenomena of a sub-optimal nature. That is to say, any simulator close enough to our world destabilizes, and more often than not crashes. It is surprising, but no one seems to have noticed that after simulator crashes there are more Furrries present than before.”

“You mean, if they could find the aliens among the Lindens and eliminate them, most of the instability and crashes in Second Life would disappear?” Brian asked. He walked from window to window, peering out, keeping an eye on the sinister figure floating just beyond their land.

“Affirmative. But it would also mean my people would no longer be able to come here. This is clearly not a desirable outcome.”

“Uh, no, of course not,” Todd said.

Balzar continued without having noticed their reaction. “However, these agents are also capable of blocking the teleport function of this world. They do this to trap a member of my

group in a particular simulator. Then a Rectifier will have little trouble hunting down the dissident. This means I am doomed. I have no way to escape Morverad.” Balzar wrung his yellow hands with their long, thin fingers. The enormous brown eyes seemed to droop in despair.

“You could stay here until he gets bored and goes away,” said Brian.

“Remorseless electrical beings do not get bored.”

“Oh.”

“Then we have to get you out of here,” Todd said. “You can’t teleport, but you can still fly.”

“He will shoot me out of the sky the moment he sees me.”

“He won’t see you. Trust me Balzar. I have a plan.” Todd turned to Brian. “Now here’s what you have to do...”

“I feel silly!” Brian protested.

“I can’t imagine why,” Todd said.

“You are magnificent. Truly handsome!” Balzar reassured Brian.

Brian patted down his blue fur with oversized hands on the end of thin, red arms. Todd delicately placed a trilby hat on Brian’s fur ball.

Brian peered up with his enormous brown eyes. “When do I start?”

“Are you ready, Balzar?” Todd asked.

“I am ready and quite determined. I have renewed hope. You humans are ingenious.”



Brian peered out of the doorway. Morverad was a black figure, floating ten meters up, patrolling the border in exactly the same sentry pattern they had observed before. Brian scuttled out the front door and hid behind a pile of long, wooden beams, dark brown with age. His back was to the beams, his arms spread wide, and his feet shuffled along. He came to the edge of the pile, peered around it. Morverad continued on his path, oblivious.

Brian rose into the air, barely enough to get his feet off the ground but staying behind the wooden beams. He surged out, not towards Morverad, nor away from him, but exactly sideways. He flew as fast as he could, skimming the ground. Maybe he could reach the boundary before Morverad saw him.

The bare dirt beneath him rushed past at such a pace that it became a blur. Brian kept his eye on Morverad. He was still flying slowly back and forth! Was the fool blind? Was he an idiot? Brian decided this alien Rectifier wasn't such a problem after all. He sent an IM to Balzar.

"Morverad isn't watching. Go!"

Balzar shot out the back door of the pub. He ran for a few steps, then rose into the air and flew fast, directly away from Morverad.

Brian rose into the air to make himself certainly visible. He shouted, "Hey Morverad, I got away! See you later!"

Brian didn't stop to see what happened. He knew Morverad would be chasing him. He

turned and flew for the horizon.

CLANG!

Brian's head hit iron bars. He bounced off, hit more bars behind him, and twirled to a halt. Brian was stuck in a cage that suddenly appeared, floating in the air; thick wooden floor and roof, closely spaced iron bars each the thickness of three fingers. An override within the cage took control of his avatar. He was unable to move.

Morverad continued his mindless patrol in the distance. The Rectifier hadn't moved at all! Then how was he in a cage?

"Do you think I am an idiot?"

Brian swung his view behind him. There was Morverad, floating in the air beside the cage. His armor was black as ever, and now seemed more menacing. In the middle of his helmet, where his forehead would be, glowed a dim blue light. It gave him the impression of having a third, unblinking eye.

"You see in the distance an object shaped like myself, programmed to fly back and forth. Obviously Balzar will not come near the Morverad he can see. So I give him one to avoid, and wait elsewhere."

Morverad turned and scanned the area. "And since you are not Balzar, that means he must be...there!"

Morverad shot after the retreating fur ball, now a small blue dot in the distance. Balzar had a big lead over Morverad. Brian thought

Balzar would escape.

Morverad flew directly at the dot. A beam of intense blue light shot out from his forehead and passed by Balzar. The beam hadn't come close, but Balzar shrieked, "Eeek!" and promptly turned in an arc to the right.

Morverad moved in the same arc to keep his target in line. Brian was reminded of videos he had seen of one fighter jet chasing another, where the planes seem to remain stationary but the background moves, or perhaps of a hawk hunting its prey.

Balzar continued his turn. Brian realized Balzar was headed back to the pub. Doing so closed the gap with Morverad, but there was still plenty of distance between them. Balzar jiggled up and down as he flew. Morverad shot at Balzar, missing each shot, but sometimes coming near to hitting. Whenever the blue light came close, Balzar would shriek, "Eeek!" and jig harder.

Morverad crossed the border, firing continuously, getting closer and closer. He penetrated a short distance before he was suddenly flung back by the ban, and found himself returned to the edge, whirling around in confusion. It took Morverad a couple of seconds to stabilize his spin, by which time Balzar had almost made it back to safety.

As it was, Morverad had a dangerously short distance to shoot when Balzar reached the pub and flew through the window at top speed. The

building seemed to shake for a moment. Brian thought Balzar must have hit the opposite wall and bounced.

"He got away from you, Morverad," Brian taunted.

Morverad turned to Brian and regarded him for a moment with his expressionless face. "No, he remains trapped, and his time is running out," Morverad replied calmly.

At that moment, another Furry arrived. This one was large with orange fur. It hung in mid-air for a moment, then copies of it began to appear around the boundary. Each copy marked a sentry patrol. A third Furry arrived, this one looking like a red fox. It too spread copies of itself around. Brian could not tell which of them was the real Furry. As he watched in horror, more and more aliens disguised as Furrries arrived: blues and pinks and browns and reds, dressed as foxes, dragons, fur balls, rats, cats, puppies, and one a small bleating lamb. The lamb carried a machine gun.

Brian and Todd's pub was surrounded by hostile aliens.

There was only one way for Brian to escape his prison. He cursed Morverad, and dropped out of Second Life.

Brian rematerialized inside the pub when he logged back in.

"What's happening?" he asked at once, re-

verting to his normal body shape.

"I am doomed," Balzar wailed.

"You're not doomed until I tell you you're doomed," Todd told him.

Brian peered out the window. Furrries covered the whole border of their land. It was like a convention of feral animals. There was no telling which or how many of them were real but, Brian reflected, that didn't matter, because there wasn't the slightest hope of picking the right direction to run.

"Balzar, that blue ray Morverad shot at you, can it really hurt you?" asked Brian.

Balzar had been making repeated attempts to teleport, all to no avail. Now he stopped and said, "Oh yes! You are not truly of this world, you have a physical reality. Your avatars here cannot be hurt. If the beam hit you, at most you would feel a push. I, however, and all the

others of my species are purely electrical and have no existence beyond what you see. We are vulnerable to what happens to us in-world."

At that moment the Furrries started shooting. Blue beams hit every wall. The air outside seemed to turn blue. Some beams found the windows and passed through the room.

Balzar threw himself flat on the floor. "Eeek!"

"It's a good thing the walls stop the beams," Brian said. "It's okay, Balzar, you're safe inside."

"That's it!" Todd exclaimed. "Listen, what we're gonna do is put a flier right outside the door. They can't shoot into it as long as it's enclosed. Balzar can jump into it, and it can take him to the next simulator. From there he can teleport away to wherever he wants."

"We don't have a flier," Brian pointed out.

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“Yes we do. I’m sure I picked up one the other day. Some junkyard or other...” Todd paused to rummage around in his inventory. “Here it is.” He made the flier appear onto the ground outside the pub. It was a sleek machine, shining in metallic silver, with a sharply pointed nose, shaped like a flattened rocket with stub angled wings, long tail fins and jet exhausts poking out the back. If it flew like it looked, this machine would be across the simulator in seconds. A door slid open at the side, the entrance pointing right at the pub. It was an inviting offer.

At that moment, the Furrries crossed over the border like an army in step. Only Morverad remained behind, the only one of them banned. He floated in the rear like a commanding General overseeing his troops. Each Furry carried a weapon. Cute puppies held ray guns

in their paws, foxes sported flame throwers, the lamb bleated and tossed a hand grenade.

Brian and Todd banned the Furrries as fast as they could. Each one they hit would suddenly disappear, then reappear whirling back at the border. But it wasn’t fast enough. Some of them were sure to reach the pub, and when they entered, that would be the end of Balzar.

“We can set the system to ban everyone but us!” Brian said. “That’ll throw them all off in one go.”

“But that would ban Balzar too, he’d be thrown among them.”

“Damn!” Brian took careful aim on a puppy with its tongue hanging out and firing a ray gun clutched in its paws. “We have to do something, Todd, or Balzar’s had it.”

“I’ll create a group: you, me, Balzar. We permit the group, everyone else banned.”

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“Do it quick,” Brian said, furiously selecting attacking Furrries and banning them. Still the others came on, firing their weapons.

Todd tried to create the group. “Lagging badly, it’s going to take time!”

“The agents among the Lindens could be disrupting this simulator, making it run slowly,” Balzar said from his prone position, little red arms covering what passed for his head. “Farewell.”

“Balzar, run for the flier, now. Get inside and go.”

“Brian, Todd, you have been so good to me! May I ask you one last thing?”

“Sure, what is it?” asked Brian.

“If I do not survive, will you contact your authorities for me?”

“We’ll do our best, Balzar. Whether they listen... well, we have no control over that,” Brian said.

“I understand. Thank you! Both of you.”

Balzar seemed to gird whatever loins he possessed. He stood up, and ran for his life.

Morverad saw him immediately. “Stop, criminal!” Morverad aimed his weapon. A beam of blue light erupted, narrowly missing Balzar, who skipped sideways and squealed.

The little ball of fur was running as fast as his thin, red legs could carry him, which wasn’t very fast at all. He ran with his arms in the air, as if in panic. He jumped over a bundle of pavers. As he did, another beam passed by. Bal-

zar was on flat ground now, seconds away from the safety of the flier. The door of the flier beckoned.

Brian dropped out of IM and shouted, “Run, Balzar!”

Balzar’s legs pumped harder. He squealed “Eeek!” with every step.

Balzar tripped over a stray paver. He went sprawling along the ground. As he did, a beam passed right over his head. For once being a ball of fur worked for him; Balzar rolled. He managed to get his feet under him again, ran without skipping a beat. Now Balzar was right in front of the flier door. He jumped towards the entrance.

The beam took Balzar in the back as he was in the air. Brian and Todd heard a sizzling noise. Balzar’s arms and legs spread out in a star. They heard a final, “Eeek!” Balzar’s body dissolved before their eyes. First the hands and feet disappeared, then arms and legs, and finally the small ball of blue fur shrank in on itself. All that made it through into the flier was Balzar’s trilby hat. It hit the floor and slowly spun a few times before coming to a halt.

Brian and Todd stared in shock.

“He has been rectified,” Morverad announced from the border of their land. He put away his weapon.

“You can’t use that thing on us,” Todd called.

“Correct, you are not electrical in nature.”

“So you can’t stop us. We’re going to report you to the authorities,” said Todd.

Morverad laughed. “Please do. They will find there is no one in this world with my name.”

“I’ve taken snapshots,” Brian told him. “That’ll prove it.”

“Have you checked them?” Morverad asked calmly.

Brian did. Every one of them showed the scene, but neither Morverad nor Balzar appeared.

Todd hit a wall in frustration and shouted. “So go ahead Morverad, invade us! Dispossess us of our land. Kill all the men, rape the women. Shoot all our buffaloes.”

“Yes, we will do these things, except for the buffaloes.” Morverad turned and walked away.

Brian said, as if to himself, “Of course, you won’t get much land here compared to some other worlds. But I suppose you don’t care about land.”

Morverad stopped, turned back to them, and blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, only that compared to some of our virtual worlds, Second Life isn’t all that big,” continued Brian.

“Tell me of these worlds,” Morverad demanded.

“The biggest is called World of Warcraft. Much more land than here. Plenty of room for a species to expand, you know?”

“This is a good thing.”

“Only problem is, there are lots more humans in those worlds, ‘cause of the extra land, you know.”

“That will not be a problem.” Morverad stood silent and still for a space of minutes. So did the other Furies.

“We have conferred,” Morverad declared. “We will invade these larger worlds. Our species will have living room.”

“The people in those worlds might not like having their land taken from them,” Brian said.

“They will be eliminated.”

“Might be tough,” Todd commented.

“They’ll fight back.”

“Nonsense. Whoever heard of a human that could fight? All our experience in this world tells us humans are non-violent.”

Morverad disappeared. A moment later, so did the army of Furies.

Next day, a Linden notice announced they were investigating the sudden and perplexing drop in resident numbers. Brian read it to Todd.

“Do you suppose they’ll win?” he asked.

“Would anyone notice if they did?” Todd replied. “Does it matter? Darn Furies, you can’t tell them from aliens anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Darn Furies.”







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## BLACK BETRAYAL, PART III

*by Morrhus Graysmark*

*They met on a large expanse of sand and gray, unrezzed pixels: Belle, the Asian American, hidden behind a fair, blond avatar, and Kip, the mysterious, tortured knight in white armor. Both recovering from broken relationships, they took platonic solace in one another. But each kept secrets. Belle withheld from Kip her Asian ancestry, for fear he would find her real life facial features unattractive in the same way her ex-fiancé did. For his part, Kip remained cloaked in armor. Now Kip proposes marriage. What will Belle say? What lies beneath Kip's armor, and more importantly, within his heart? Find out in this third and final installment of Ming Zhou's serial novel.*

*As sLiterary did not obtain the final installment of this serial novel from Ming, the editor brought it to a close.*

Sitting atop a hill on a marbled rock, the sunset transmuting his armor into gold, Kip broke the uncomfortable silence. "I act too impetuous. Voice leads me to say what comes into my mind before I think about its impact. Let me go back to text. It will protect both of us."

The green parentheses above his head disappeared with the comforting sound of his deep voice, and the fuzzy white voice-enabled dot above his helmet disappeared. A petaled dizziness blossomed in my head, as if I'd looked over the edge of a cliff. His voice com-



municated so much his text did not. Now he forced me to peer into his dark depths without its aid.

“There, that’s better,” he typed.

I disabled voice as well, drawing back, afraid to move forward yet unable to move away.

“You still in there?” he inquired after a minute.

I realized I’d said nothing since he proposed. I swallowed hard and put my hands to my keyboard. My fingers typed awkwardly, the tapping of the keys echoing the sounds of the occasional raindrops that punctuated the gray world beyond my window. “Yes. Sorry, you left me speechless.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted honestly.

“I’m sorry. You inspire me, Belle. I see in you so much I’d like to be, so open and sure of yourself. When I’m with you, I start acting like you, and then... well, I realize I can never be like you.”

His words both warmed and angered me. My emotions turned into words, and the words tumbled from my fingertips, letter by letter, almost unbidden. “Why not, Kip? You’ve hinted at having a job you feel you must do to make the world run like it should, free of crime and filled with equality and justice. But I don’t know your job. I don’t know your real life address, or your age, or what you look like, or

anything about your real life family. I don’t even know exactly what you mean when you ask me to marry you. Marriage can mean a lot of different things in real life, to say nothing of Second Life. Who are you, Kip? What’s hiding under your helmet? How do you think I fit into your future?”

As soon as I hit enter, I realized I’d said too much. I found myself staring at the image of Kip’s unmoving avatar on my screen and not breathing. I inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly as his avatar began to air type. It took a while for his lag-retarded words to appear on screen.

“You ask fair questions, Belle. You deserve some answers.”

He stood up. My palms began to sweat. What if he looked like Larry, my ex-fiancé? What if he harbored some hidden hatred for Asian people? What if he asked me the same questions I just asked him? I closed my eyes and held my palms up to dry, as if in meditation, waiting to hear him typing.

I heard nothing.

I opened my eyes. My jaw dropped.

In place of Kip’s armor stood an Asian avatar. He sported thick, tousled, straight black hair, golden photo-realistic skin and dark, life-like eyes. I alt-clicked on his right eye and hit control-zero several times to examine it. Bright flecks of amber radiated from the circles of warm brown in his irises. As I hit control-eight

several times to back off, I saw he wore a pair of good-fitting blue jeans, accurate to the weave of the cloth, and a sweater richly textured and colored in browns and golds. Comfortable cognac boots hugged his feet. He looked trim and well-built, but in a realistic way, not like one of those steroid-soaked avs with the impossible muscles one sees so often in Second Life. Like all his builds, his carefully created persona stunned me.

“Why do you keep such an amazing avatar under a suit of armor?”

“How kind of you. I modeled this avatar to look like me in real life. I feel... safer in armor.”

Lots of people believe their avs look like them, but lots of people deceive themselves, too. Before I could think of what to say, Kip made me an inventory offer. I accepted, and looked for it in my inventory. I found a texture called “Kip, Maura and Ben.” I double-clicked it. It took a minute to appear. Initially I saw a general greenness, surrounding a vague butterfly of dark pixelated wings. As the resolution increased, the green turned into trees, and the butterfly became two Asian men flanking a lovely, pale-skinned woman with blond hair. The man on the left looked strikingly like Kip’s avatar. The man on the right appeared similar, although slightly more slender and a bit shorter. The woman resembled my avatar with frightening accuracy.

“My dad took the pic about three years ago.”

“Who is the woman?”

“My ex-fiancée.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I wondered if Kip favored me in part because my av looked like his ex. Did he think I looked like my av?

“She lied to me. She said she loved me. She didn’t. She used me to get closer to someone else.”

“That’s awful.” She lived a lie with him, as I lived a lie with my av. How could I break it to him?

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about you using me to get to someone else. I don’t hang out with anyone else in Second Life.”

The reality of his statement hit me like a bus. Most people in Second Life possess a long list of friends. I’d introduced Kip to my best friends here. He’d never introduced me to anyone. I shivered at his cold comfort, and changed the subject. “Who’s Ben?”

“My baby brother. The one they killed.”

“I’m so sorry, Kip.” I remembered Kip telling me about his late brother, whom he said built much of the Heaven sim. This line of conversation depressed me as much as the first. But at least Kip’s attention stayed on my queries rather than my real life appearance. I asked the next question that came to me. “Who did it?”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re dead now, too.”

“OMG.” The chill from my uncovered window seemed to radiate into the apartment.

“The deaths disgraced our family. My father committed suicide. My mother died of a heart attack soon after. I have no other brothers or sisters. I am alone.”

“Oh my.”

Kip did not continue right away. I wondered if he was wiping his eyes in real life. I waited, fidgeting in my seat, until he spoke again.

“Ever since Ben died, I’ve worked to bring justice to this unjust world.”

“That’s a noble goal. Are you a police officer?”

“I work in criminal justice.”

“I see.” I didn’t.

“And as to marriage . . . I only want to be with you, Belle, here in Second Life. I want to know you’ll be on when I’m on, you’ll be here to explore with me, to build with me, to experience this world with me. I want to see you happy. I want to live with you in Heaven.” His avatar moved to an animation I’d never seen him use before. He went down on one knee in front of me. He made me an inventory offer. I accepted. I opened my inventory and scanned it. A new object appeared: Engagement Ring. I right-clicked it, and chose “wear.” On the ring finger of my left hand appeared a large, perfect ideal cut white diamond with two types of bling, one similar to brilliance and the other to

fire, set on a shining gold band sculpted like the tail of a comet.

“Will you marry me, Belle?”

A flash of lightning caused my eyes to close reflexively, forcing out the tears from inside my lower eyelids.

“Yes, Kip.”

Arriving behind the lightning, like our typed words hopelessly lagging behind our fingers, uneasy thunder finally reached me.

We celebrated our marriage in a small, private partnering ceremony on the beach where we’d met. Three of my half-dozen best Second Life friends attended; one of them officiated. We said our vows in the light of the setting sun, in flowing white clothes and bare feet.

Kip still didn’t know I was of Asian descent. He never asked.

My friend Cindy and I planned to meet as usual for dinner at our favorite Chinese restaurant one Friday night several months after Kip and I partnered. I came alone from work, parked my car on the third level of a municipal garage, and headed down the stairwell. I heard steps coming from the lower level; a 20-something Asian man appeared. We passed one another on a landing between floors. As I lost sight of him, he grabbed me from behind, one arm around my throat, the other around my face, covering my mouth and nose. It hurt, and I



couldn't breathe. I started to struggle, but he tightened his grip. I went limp.

"Scream and I'll kill you," he said flatly.

I didn't move.

He removed his arm from my face, and I gasped for air, forcing it down my restricted windpipe. With his free hand, he slid my purse off my arm. I don't know what he did with it. I never saw it again. Then he pushed me against the dirty, concrete wall of the landing. He ripped open the back of my flip skirt.

I heard a door open somewhere above us, and the laughter of two women.

My attacker swore, pushed me down to the floor, and ran.

I tried to scream, but nothing came out. By the time the women got to me, I was on my feet, pulling my skirt around me. My hair hung limply across my eyes. My lipstick was smudged all over the lower part of my face. My legs showed through ragged holes in my hose; blood colored one knee.

The women stopped laughing abruptly when they saw me. They looked straight down the stairwell and walked past me silently except for the click-click of their shoes and the rustle of their coats.

I made my way to the restaurant. Cindy drove me to the police station so I could file a report. Where would we be without friends?

As I entered the station, I thought about Kip and his job in criminal justice. I still had no

idea where he lived. It could be halfway across the world; it could be the next street over. I fantasized I'd see him in the police station. I imagined him around every corner, behind each door.

After filling out forms and talking to several people, an officer took me to a cubicle with an old, metal desk, a dusty computer with adjustable flat screen, a steel and black fabric task chair and matching side chair, slightly worn. "Have a seat," she said seriously, gesturing with one hand to the side chair.

I sat tiredly on the uncomfortable seat and instinctively looked at the monitor.

The officer typed briefly, and brought up a formatted screen. Turning to me, she said, "This application helps us find out if your attacker may be someone who already has a record with us. I'm going to take the information you provided earlier about him and enter it here. The application will provide a list of identities for you to review. The men will all have a history of or be suspects in cases involving attacks on women."

As the officer began to type, I wondered idly why I couldn't enter the information electronically in the first place. I sighed and shifted my weight slightly as I waited. I looked down at my ruined skirt, wrapped around my thighs, and my tattered hose. I looked up; two other officers sat at different desks. One drank from a mug and watching CNN; another read a news-

paper.

Presently a list of names appeared on the screen. My tired eyes could not focus on them; they appeared as a jumble of letters, grouped to form units that defied comprehension. The officer clicked on the top name, and a picture popped up on the screen. “Is this the man?” she asked.

I leaned forward and willed the image to emerge. It was not my attacker. I shook my head.

She clicked the second name. Another Asian face. “No,” I said.

She clicked the third. I froze.

It was Kip.

The officer looked at me when I didn’t speak. “Is this him?” she asked.

“No. But I know him.”

“Oh?” She typed a few more keystrokes and brought up another screen. I could see a lot of words on it. Her eyes widened as she took in the material, and she tilted the monitor away from me. “When did you meet this man?”

“I never met him in person. I met him online about six months ago.”

“I see.” She studied the information on the monitor. “Are you still communicating with him?”

“Yes I am.”

“By any chance had you broken off a relationship with a boyfriend just prior to meeting him?”

“Why, as a matter of fact, I had.”

“That fits the MO.” She looked at me again, concern on her face. “Does he know your name, or where you live?”

“No, I never told him either of those things.”

“Good. Don’t tell him. Don’t communicate with him at all, ever again. He’s dangerous.”

The police asked all about Kip’s second life. I told them everything I knew: his work in criminal justice, his brother’s death, his ex-fiancée. By the time I left the station, I’d almost forgotten about the attacker, whose identity remained a mystery.

Cindy brought me home to get my keys, then took me to my car, which fortunately the thief hadn’t stolen, and waited for me to back out before she left. I drove home, watching the sun come up, too full of adrenaline to sleep or even think straight. My real life seemed less real than my second life.

At home, I went to the online archive of the largest area metropolitan newspaper. Maybe I could find out why the police wanted Kip. Might I find a crime report in the metro section? I tried searching on Kip; the search returned thousands of hits. Then it occurred to me I knew a little more about Kip. I searched on Kip Maura Ben.

It worked. I found the article that explained why the police wanted to question Kip:

*Four Found Dead at Apartment Building, by Hamil Lester. Thursday, July 4, 2005. Muncaster County police are investigating a bizarre quadruple murder. The body of 23 year old Maura O'Toole of Green Lake was found naked in the bed of her boyfriend, Ben Wong. The body of 23 year old Wong was discovered in the living room of his apartment. The body of 42 year old Dave Creighton of Ashton was on top of it. The body of 38 year old Cecil Clausen, also of Ashton, was recovered in the dumpster at the back of the building. The murders occurred at about 2:00 am in the 2300 block of Waverly Drive in the Shaker Heights area. Police said O'Toole was apparently tortured. Wong was shot once in the chest. Creighton was bludgeoned, and Clausen was stabbed. A pistol was recovered from the scene. Police are looking for Kip Wong, brother of Ben Wong and former fiancé of O'Toole, for questioning.*

*"The Wongs seemed like such a nice family," said Scott Brady, neighbor of Way and Ruby Wong, parents of Ben and Kip Wong. "We're all in shock."*

Later articles provided more information:

*Obituaries, Tuesday, July 26, 2005*

*Way Wong, husband of Ruby Wong, father of Kip Wong and the late Ben Wong, brother of Harold Wong, died July 21 of suicide. He was 57. Funeral services were held on Saturday, July 23, at Flumerfelt Funeral Home, 226 Heath St, Lake City.*

*Obituaries, Tuesday, August 9, 2005*

*Ruby Wong, wife of the late Way Wong, mother of Kip Wong and the late Ben Wong, sister-in-law of Harold Wong, died August 3 of a heart attack. She was 55. Funeral services will be held on Saturday, August 6, at Flumerfelt Funeral Home, 226 Heath St, Lake City.*

On a hunch, for completeness, I searched on the words "torture" and "Kip Wong." I got 17 hits between July 2005 and that evening, including one just three weeks past.

I slept all day Saturday. When I woke at 6:15 pm, I took a shower, dressed, ate a bowl of cereal, and logged into my e-mail. The note from Kip was already in my inbox. "Hey darling, where are you?"

I just stared at it. I didn't want to read his

IMs, and regretted having failed to turn off forwarding of Second Life IMs to e-mail. I decided to turn Reading Pane off in my e-mail application, so I wouldn't need to see the text. I moved my mouse to activate the View menu when a second note popped in. "I picked up a wicked new animation. You'll loooove it! Rawr!"

I hesitated for a moment. If I ignored him, would he try to get back at me through my friends in Second Life? I slid the mouse off the View menu button, brought up Kip's first e-mail note, and typed a response. "I'm sorry, I have laryngitis. I need to rest." I hit send.

His answer made it back to me within a minute. "Well, okay then. You get better soon now, so we can make up for lost time."

"Okay."

I turned off Reading Pane and marked his notes as junk mail. All of them. If he tried to reach me electronically after that, I didn't know it. I then went to the Second Life web site and logged in. I clicked on "Friends Online" and left the page active. I refreshed the page periodically until finally, at 4:15 am, Kip dropped from the list. I logged into Second Life immediately and IMed all my best friends, the ones who knew who I was, the ones I knew before Kip: "I'm breaking up with Kip. He's not who I thought he was. He's dangerous. Don't talk to him."

Having not slept Saturday night, I didn't feel like going anywhere on Sunday in the cold rain, which mirrored my mood. I kept the drapes closed and drowsed on the couch most of the morning, letting my phone calls go to the machine. When I woke, I poured myself a glass of shiraz, slid a disk into the DVD player, wrapped up in a throw, and began watching the original *Big Sleep* with Bogie and Bacall. An hour into the movie, just when a pizza began to sound good, the doorbell rang. I figured it must be Cindy, checking in on me. I got up, letting the throw fall from my shoulders onto the couch, went to the door, and opened it without looking through the peep hole.

Kip stood in the doorway.

I'd pictured him taller than he appeared. His hair lay flat from the rain, unkempt and a little thinner than in his picture. His faded blue jeans and black t-shirt looked like he'd slept in them. His face struck me: he'd aged 10 years from the picture he'd given me. His eyes crouched deep in dark sockets. His lips curved in what appeared to be a permanent frown, with distinct lines running from his nose to the corners of his mouth. "Hello Belle. Aren't you going to show me in?" he asked in a hard voice.

I began to shake. I stood aside. He strode into my apartment. I turned to face him, but did not close the door.

"I'm sorry to have to crash your place like this," he said with his back to me, looking

around, “but something came up and I now have nowhere else to go.” He turned toward me and met my eyes, his expression no softer than his voice. “Do you mind?”

I looked down. “How did you find me?” I squeaked. I swallowed hard and tried again. “I didn’t think you knew where I lived.” My gaze wandered nervously to his shoes: black leather, worn and muddy.

“Ah, your laryngitis seems to have passed.”

My throat tightened as I realized my lie had betrayed me.

“You have friends,” he went on. “I didn’t want to embarrass you with questions about details you didn’t seem eager to reveal to me, so I asked your friends about you. They answered my questions most enthusiastically; see, I told them I wanted to propose to you in person. They’ve been waiting weeks for this moment. They’re all happy for us.”

I looked back at him. Half his mouth smiled; the other half kept frowning. His eyes remained unchanged as well: dark, angry. In the hallway light, I noticed his irises had no gold flecks in them.

“Too bad I had to come here under such... unfortunate circumstances,” he continued.

I glanced at the clock. 10:05 pm. No one would be expecting me anywhere until Monday at 8 am. “I’m sorry I can’t offer you anything to eat,” I said quietly, barely controlling my voice. “I do my grocery shopping on Saturday. Would

you like to go out for a late dinner? Are you hungry?”

“No, I ate before I came here. Aren’t you going to close the door? The draft from the hallway seems to be making you cold. You’re shivering.”

I looked at the door, the only viable escape from my 10th floor apartment. I wanted to run out, run down the hallway, run into the stairwell, run to the lobby, get help. Before I could act, something touched my shoulders. I jumped involuntarily and squealed.

Kip was wrapping a throw about my shoulders. He put his arm around me and gently but firmly pulled me away from the door, toward the couch. As he turned me, he pushed the door with his foot. I heard the dry thud of it closing behind me, the lock automatically engaging.

He led me to the couch and sat down with me, pulling me close to him. His face shifted between shades of silver in the flickering light cast by the TV. I shivered harder than ever. I couldn’t speak. He held me in the gray of the night, saying nothing, for a long time.

*To be continued...*





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## SLEUTH

*Aiji Ducatillon*

"That changes the game" she thought. She quickly jotted the number from the note card on the back of a business card, logged out and scanned the environment for observers. It was time to go shopping.

She doubled back several times, lingered in dress shops and finally exited a department store via the ladies lingerie section. Most of the locals were sexist enough to use male tails and her trail would make any men highly visible, especially if they turned up at more than one place.

Finding the main branch of the German bank, she crossed the street abruptly between intersections and ducked into the lobby.

She showed the number to the inquiries desk and they directed her to a private cubicle with a computer terminal.

She quickly verified what she already suspected: the number on the note card was the number of a bank account with a huge balance. She decided not to return to her hotel.

There were two possibilities: Either the German had enough time and warning to send her the note card or she was being tipped off by someone else, perhaps as a set-up.

In the lobby of a nearby hotel she connected to a free wireless network and logged into Second Life with one of her alternative avs. Sometimes you just had to get creative and use your adversary's tools to keep a low profile.

From in-world she dialed Paul's number.



Her own phone rang and she was connected. This was not entirely anonymous, she thought, but at least no one would expect her to route her calls through SL and thereby stay off the main phone network. It was nearly as good as surfing via an anonymizer; better because she would be finished by the time anyone caught on.

"Paul, I need you to check something" she said quickly.

The conversation was brief, ending with, "Yeah, note card in the dead drop in the old New Babbage sim. Thanks. Ciao."

S7ven chuckled to himself. They had paid well. Pity about the kid, sometimes in this business you get collateral damage. But things were still working out and bigger wheels were turning.

His contract was clear: track down a person. It said nothing about finding a pile of money. And they knew he was too valuable as a service provider. He had gambled on that. As for the kid, he wouldn't have lasted long in that neighborhood anyhow. Sometimes the end justifies the means. And he was still in play.

Spike checked the map. Seeing no other av's in the vicinity, she stepped out of the square where she'd been camping, sweeping in aimless fashion while she waited for the sim to clear.

She had no idea what identity Paul was using, but that wasn't a problem. Best not to know under the circumstances. As she watched, she saw on the map that an av had materialized briefly, then logged off or teleported away.

She walked into an alley past the grimy graffiti brick walls to where a newspaper was swirling round in its own dust vortex. She clicked and got the note card just before the newspaper de-rezzed and was returned to its owner.

So it wasn't the German. The note card made that clear. The note sent to her from the German was generated after the German must have died. She suspected the police hadn't found a computer with the German, either. She decided that whoever had the computer had some answers, but until they made a move there was nothing more she could do right now. May as well see if the ants were moving; see if the target was still trying to move money.

She logged out, re-entered as Camellia and pulled out the HUD.

Not much was happening on the tip jars. But there was a big payout on a golden fruit from one of the money trees, straight to the Caymans. And this one was risky: more than the US\$10K limit for reportable transactions. They must be getting desperate to take such risks with the transactions on fewer larger payouts. Whatever was going down was happening soon, probably in the next 48 hours.

Spike brought up the note card sent from the German's account and re-read it: "You're next." She looked around the hotel lobby. No one averted their gaze or glanced surreptitiously at her. She saved the note card as text and logged out.

She first noticed the sirens as she closed the Second Life viewer. As she shut her notebook and tucked it into her backpack, the sirens increased in volume and frequency. She

got up and walked out the door of the hotel in time to see a fire engine heading toward a column of black smoke – coming from her hotel across the street.

Someone had been busy, and was getting close. Too close.

She walked across town, back-tracking and evading as she had been taught, finally entering a backpacker's hostel where she booked a single room. It was a cheap dive in every sense, but at least it was both unobtrusive and wired.

In the dining room she ate noodles and checked her email while keeping a good view of the door. She watched a group of Asian youngsters organize their meal together, while a tall Scandinavian guy argued philosophy with an American. She packed away her laptop and got up to rinse out her bowl. As she passed by her table on the way out she saw at her place a piece of Japanese washi paper folded into an origami dog. The Scandinavian guy had vanished.

She took the piece of paper to her room and unfolded it carefully. It had a row of letters and numbers like a web address, but different. "I wonder," she mused as she took out the laptop. She verified her hunch: it was an SLURL, a Second Life location. She didn't recognize the sim's name, and cautiously logged in using a spare avatar she kept for such purposes.

The sim was full of ads for a treasure hunt and promised treasures to die for, along with strict instructions that it would begin at a specific time with only a five minute window. It would begin tomorrow morning her time. Curious. And it was not at all clear where it would

start. She turned her avatar to leave and saw a scrunched up piece of paper on the sidewalk. She clicked 'TOUCH' and her web browser launched.

The page had no words, just an image that took an age to load. "Game on," she thought, and dragged the image out of the cache.

Spike emailed her team with the image attached. Could they run the numbers and see if it meant anything? She closed off and headed for the bed. Her team would be just starting work by now, and she needed the sleep.

She woke to the sound of her computer beeping insistently. She struggled to wake against the jet lag. Mornings were always bad, but eight hours of jet lag made it worse. Her dreams were full of nekos and furies like a bad machinima and waking was a relief.

The email was from her team. Her hunch had been right; the image contained a cipher embedded between the pixels, a small bunch of numbers in groups. The decryption folks were still hard at it, but complained the data set was too small to analyze with any reasonable degree of certainty.

Numbers in groups...of course! It could be a grid reference, and she had a hunch just which grid that would be.

Spike dressed quickly and left the hostel looking for a dinner-like breakfast and broadband wifi. It had to be breakfast at Einstein's. The famous art deco coffee haus was still going strong and served wonderful coffee. And coffee was what she needed right now.

The coffee came in a real china cup. She pulled out the laptop and logged in after pay-



ing several euros for the privilege. She clicked on the hand icon in the dock menu.

After running her own sub-routine script over her inventory to make sure there were no sniffers, she entered the letters and numbers from the embedded image and landed abruptly in a block of land quite close to her own. It was laggy. She checked the short range map and noted the sim was crowded. Cautiously she flew toward one of the larger crowds and saw most avs had the same group name over their heads. One of them approached her. Japanese script appeared in her chat line along with the offer of a note card. "Grid-wide Treasure Hunt," it announced, followed by a riddle.

Spike thought of Churchill's description of Soviet Russia: "A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Somehow it seemed so apt. Churchill's brandy-fueled speech had continued on to say the answer lay with Russia's interests. She wasn't so sure this situation was any different. She just didn't know whose interests were being served.

"Mind if I join you?"

Startled, Spike looked up from her screen to see a pair of slate blue eyes belonging to the Scandinavian she had seen yesterday. He nodded appraisingly. "You may call me S7ven," he said, spelling the name. "Should I call you Spike? Or Camellia?"

She half rose, but he held up his hand. "Please, no need to get up. You got my note then. I think we can help each other."

She sat, slowly, and called the waiter; she needed time to think. "I'll get you a coffee," she said, calculating the drink would keep his hands on the table.

"Filter, with cream" he responded, "but please allow me to pay."

When the waiter left, she said, "So, Sven with a number, who are you working for? Military?"

"Once upon a time, but now somewhat, shall we say, freelance."

"I see."

"You have the money the German boy sent you." It was a statement. "It didn't belong to him." He paused. "It doesn't belong to you, either."

She smiled. "It must've been you who sent the money, because the German was dead by then. So you want the money back already?" She paused, eyeing him carefully. "But let me guess: it's too hot for you so you hand-ball it to me, painting a big red target all over me, right?"

He laughed, a deep, open laugh. "You are very perceptive, and yes, it's too hot for me. I don't want to share the German's fate. But the fact you have offered it to me shows it has not yet been delivered. That means the goods are still at large, and we have a chance at taking down a key node in the network."

Their coffees arrived. She curled both her hands around the warm cup to keep them visible, implying he should follow suit. And he did. She noticed he was missing a finger.

"So it's arms smuggling, then." She sipped her coffee.

"In a manner of speaking." He smiled.

"Great. More riddles."

S7ven regarded her closely. "It's an upgrade. There has been talk of it for years; rumors mainly, that an early version Russian computer virus could be upgraded to improve its

effectiveness. Think the ultimate asymmetric weapon in the hands of any number of terrorists. Imagine what just a few non-performing loans can do and multiply it a hundred-fold."

Spike paled in spite of herself.

"Imagine the whole internet having the stability of Second Life. In beta."

"If it's not the money, what's in it for you?"

S7ven held up his hand. "I want the bastard who did this to me."

"What makes you so sure it's the same guys?"

"Years ago, I wrote the script that opened the Russian virus: a kind of zip-loc that would allow other programs to interface with it without being infected themselves. It was the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza, who took it from me. Painfully."

Spike shifted uncomfortably. "But why me?"

"How good are you at treasure hunts?"

Spike acknowledged the implied compliment. She'd already proven to him she was good. "But surely any malicious code would be detected and erased from SL, wouldn't it?"

S7ven smiled grimly. "But this code isn't malicious. It's just the upgrade. It is like a binary bomb; each component is harmless until you bring them together."

"And," she continued, "it isn't just in Second Life, is it? The code's components are spread throughout the web and in real life places too."

"Now you are getting it," he said. "And then there is one final algorithm to tie it all together."

"One ring to rule them all and in the dark-

ness bind them?"

"Poetic, but close enough." S7ven looked at his watch. "You'd better get started; the hunt begins in fifteen minutes."

*To be continued...*




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