



speculative fiction **FOR THE REST OF US**

Expanded Horizons Issue 19 – June 2010
<http://www.expandedhorizons.net>

Table of Contents

Between Islands by Jaymee Goh..... 1

And the Psychopomp Followed the Lyre by Christine Lucas..... 13

Chicken Tikka Masala, Pseudoscience and Good Intentions - a review of Jeff Noon’s Nymphomation
by Bogi Takács..... 22

Issue Nineteen Contributor Biographies..... 26

 Jaymee Goh..... 26

 Christine Lucas..... 26

 Bogi Takács..... 26

Between Islands by Jaymee Goh

The name of the ship was clearly a joke, Johari reflected as he cleaned the cannons. The cold iron was a curious gray, from alloys that were produced from new refinement processes. Pure Arabian steel, the sayyida kept saying, even though the ore actually came from various places all over her trade route to build the ship.

Still, the ship was beautiful, and the sayyida had spared no expense on the interior design – wood-carvings on the masts and pillars, comfortable cubby holes for the sailors, and the architecture was paradoxically airtight and airy to mimic houses at home, even though the air was cold. Johari pulled his pashmina shawl around him even more tightly. The sayyida had given the entire crew such wraps, part of presents for their loyalty to her in traveling so far from home.

He finished the last flare canon and moseyed to the canteen. The ship’s cook – the sayyida refused to travel without the woman who had made food for the crew the entire voyage, and Johari knew they had a history beyond it – was busy in the cooking corner, splashing water and herbs into a wok on the small, controlled fire stove. Puan Ching had not been pleased at the restriction in fire size, and learning how to control the stove had been a trial to her. But for her art, she persevered, even though the crew suffered for it.

“Puan Ching?” Johari asked hesitantly.

“Yes?” she asked back, not bothering to look up from her loudly sizzling wok.

“When will lunch-”

The wok foamed with flame. Johari took a step back.

“What was that?”

“Er...” Johari re-considered the question.

“Johari, are you bothering the cook?” Nakhoda Harun asked from behind, making Johari jump.

“No, tuan!” he stammered.

“Come on, then. You don’t really want to bother Puan Ching right now, do you? She’s playing with fire right now, and it’s not nice to bother people when they do that.” Nakhoda Harun grinned down at Johari, his teeth pearly white against the dark brown of his skin. Johari could see that the nakhoda had newly trimmed his moustache at the behest of the sayyida.

“You always make her sound like she’s so dangerous,” Johari ventured, wanting to be at ease with the nakhoda. Harun had traveled for a long time with both the sayyida and Puan Ching, to the point where he called the sayyida the more affectionate, informal Cik. This was Johari’s first journey with the sayyida, ostensibly to earn his fortune, but more to escape home, and he desperately wanted to get into Nakhoda Harun’s good graces.

“She’s not as harmless as she looks. Come, let’s go to the open-air deck for a breather. If the ship bursts into a fiery conflagration, I want the chance to jump off.”

#

“To our esteemed friend and relation, Captain Francis Light, upon whom we have bequeathed the Island of Pinang, well-wishes of good health and prosperity from this hand of Sultan Abdullah Makarram Shah III, ruler of the Kingdom of Kedah. Peace be upon you in this year of 1202, 4 Thw al-Qi.

“I write-” and here its recipient winced at the sight of the royal ‘I’, a reminder of who he was dealing with, “-to remind you of the terms of secession of Pinang to the East India Company, wherein under Bab 4, Syarat 23, it is stated that whenever Kedah is under threat from its enemies, the East India Company will rise as a friend and swell the ranks of the army of Kedah.

“As of this writing, the borders of Kedah to the north are once again menaced by our neighbours across the Pattani River. Although Kedah bears the people of Singgora no ill-will, the inhabitants house an army of Siam that prepares to strike within the month.

“Thus, I ask the East India Company to fulfill Bab 4, Syarat 23, and send aid as needed. Laksamana Amanjid Taksin, who bears this letter, will confer with you on the extent of aid that the Kingdom of Kedah requires.”

A servant boy, white-skinned with light brown hair, brought in a tray of coffee and kuih, and set it down on the writing desk with a nervous glance at the sun-brown man at east in the chair opposite. Thomas had not quite acclimatized himself to living among the Malays yet, and for that, Francis was a bit sorry, thus kept the boy in his Suffolk House residence.

He picked up the porcelain cup and assessed the admiral. Then he smiled. “I’m so sorry, Admiral, but

this is a request that will take time to process,” he told his visitor. In an English aside, he whispered to Thomas, “Tell Mrs. Palmer to bring in Mr. Fauzan to cook tonight’s dinner.”

#

The large bird alighted on the steel ropes that held together the open-air deck of the ship, demanding attention from the figure that approached. It flew down to the railing proper, croaking in pleasure as it saw Nakhoda Harun waving a specially-made piece of jerky. Several of the crew clustered around, waiting expectantly.

Smooth hands stained with ink reached for the package tied to the bird’s halter. Thin lips pursed. Harun removed the bird’s halter, to signal that it could rest for the time being, and the bird preened, waiting for its thanks. He tossed it several pieces, a game of theirs, until it gave up and flew onto his shoulder instead to snap at the bag in his hands eagerly.

Nakhoda Harun patted the messenger bird in welcome. It was a carefully-bred genetic accomplishment of several generations of seabirds and falcons. Trained to cover vast seas in record time between specific outposts, it was one of the sayyida’s most expensive purchases, but the crew was deeply appreciative. Through it, they could keep in touch with family, as it flew to different outposts, where guardsmen wrapped up the letters into a single packet and tied it to the bird’s halter. After it had rested, it would fly to its next stop, until it felt it had enough and went looking for its moving outpost.

The anxious faces on deck dared not crowd closer. On by one, they received letters, a single missive each, as exhorted, to keep the load on the bird light. They gave thanks to the sayyida, then bowed to the bird.

Its specie was technically called in various languages the Ocean Falcon. But the crew called it Undan Berkat, the Pelican of Blessing.

#

Lu Gen Wei jian-zhang raised his long-scope up again, trying to discern the shape through the clouds. The ship’s engines were keeping good time. It was almost unbearably noisy more than three decks below, but outside, the furious turbines sounded like cicadas that refused to sleep.

This was not quite what he had hoped for when he had asked for a promotion. To be commander of a vessel was a great honour, and he was eager to serve, but he had not quite expected this much distance between himself and his employer. He envied his former superior’s new circumstances, and found himself missing games of checkers and chess.

The Dao Yi was not very large, but it was very fast, due to the new steam engines, and also surprisingly easy to steer. Aside from essential personnel, the bulk of the crew – if they could be called that – were mechanics and engineers, who spoke to each other in stilted, halting phrases, relying on their few multi-lingual shipmates to communicate certain ideas effectively. Often, it was easier to scribble on paper and point to the technical drawings of the ship. Then they would nod, foreigner or not, and get to work. It was a miracle of cross-cultural engineering cooperation.

He considered himself lucky to be in charge of a new crew that feared their employer too much to be querulous. When the crew were free, they would escape the noise to above deck. He would watch them cluster until they were comfortable. Some never strayed from their comfort zones, but most were willing to take a chance through their more integrated colleagues.

For a few moments, he let his thoughts drift, and wondered what Fei xiao-jie was doing. Raucous

laughter jerked him out of a tender recollection, and he smiled at the new game some of the crew had invented. They were not alone, and soon, they would be home.

#

To His Royal Majesty, Sultan Abdullah Makarram Shah III of the sultanate of Kedah

From Charles Grant, Director of the East India Company

Sir,

I must say I am astonished that such an illustrious ruler as yourself would make a request for military backing. I regret to inform you that this particular clause of your contract with Captain Francis Light is devoid of validity as the Company had had no information regarding the secession of the Prince of Wales Island to the control of the Company prior to the signing of the Contract. With regard to protection, the East India Company already maintains a coastal guard in the waters surrounding Kedah as a show of good faith, which Your Lordship accepted prior to signing the contract.

The East India Company is first and foremost a trading corporation; thusly, any and all artillery support on hand is required to protect the vessels and ensure the welfare of our outposts as a first priority. In local politics we maintain a neutral stance in order to avoid ill will from any party with whom we may already share trade, unless one party poses a threat to the ideals to which the East India Company espouses and to our trade partners.

Rest assured that we would provide you assistance insofar as our resources are not stretched beyond their limitations and it is to our misfortune that we cannot grant assistance beyond what we have already provisioned for the coasts of the Kingdom of Kedah. In the future we will make provisions to further the mutual interests of the colony of Prince of Wales Island and the Kingdom of Kedah through whatever means necessary.

#

Ching Seow Fen tsked at the young woman sitting at the writing desk, as she set a tray down on the only free corner. Several letters sprawled across the surface, and rustled gently when picked up for proper arrangement. Without looking up, Fei siew-je picked up a teacup and held it up to her servant expectantly.

The old cook shook her head. She had watched the willful little girl grow, and followed her across the worlds and waters, but she doubted she would ever understand the extent of her charge's ambition that led to where they were now, in a ship's cabin, almost bombarded with letters from all over the known world. So she said nothing, and poured tea into the cup.

If Fei siew-je felt the heat of the freshly boiled water through the porcelain, she gave no indication. She laid the letters neatly side by side, picking one up to squint at the handwriting, all the while, holding the cup aloft, waiting for the tea to cool down.

"Fei siew-je, the tea will get cold-"

"Did you know, Seow Fen, that there is an British colony in the Straits? As if the Dutch in Melaka weren't bad enough." Fei siew-je brought the teacup to her lips.

Seow Fen considered this for a moment. Fei siew-je held a grudge against any gwailo, ever since her forced engagement to one, but she ordinarily avoided them, except for lucrative business deals. Still, the Straits were home to Fei siew-je, although she was fast running out of ports to comfortably stop at, due to the burgeoning number of gwailo.

“Knowing you,” Seow Fen sniffed, “you will find some way to deal with this, and make a profit from it at the same time.”

Yap Siew Fei smiled. “I *do* like making money.”

#

Tun Muasif, Bendahara of Kedah, was troubled when he met with the Temenggung and learnt the distressing news from the border. The Englishman had lied, and Kedah would receive no help from the East India Company. Bendahara Tun Muasif knew how the decision had plagued the sultan for weeks, whether or not to trust the white-skinned foreigner that had come to their shores asking to lease the island of Pinang.

It had not been easy, helping his sultan make the decision. Even Captain Light’s offer of a ship to patrol the coasts of Kedah had been disquieting. The East India Company’s reputation seemed ill-earned; how could they have monopolized trade to the West with little military might? Traders from all over had passed through the Straits of Melaka since sea-faring had been invented, and none of them could claim the same kind of monopoly – not that they wanted to; it was more trouble than it was worth.

Bendahara Tun Muasif sighed as he prepared to meet with his sultan. It would not be a good meeting.

#

The ropes that held balloon to basket creaked, and Johari patted them to ensure they held firm. He glanced at his co-pilot, who was blowing into the furnace that enabled them to stay aloft.

Samy was his age, and they were among the youngest of the crew. They were also the lightest, making them ideal for the mission – at least, that is what they understood. For the last two weeks, the sayyida had drilled them incessantly in how to speak, stand, stay silent, and dress, and in what to say, do, and wear. They had been given instructions they carried in their heads, and new clothes they kept in waterproof leather bags to wear when they arrived at their destination.

“Do you think people will believe us when we get back home?” Samy asked. His Malay was soft-spoken for a commoner, Johari thought, especially for one who had never been to school.

“You mean, when we land in the palace grounds with a giant balloon?” Johari pointed out. “I’m just hoping no one shoots us down first.”

Samy choked on a nervous laugh. “As-sayyida did send a message to the Seberang Prai outpost for the Sultan. He should be expecting us.”

“And if he doesn’t believe the letter at first, he will when we land. Where’s the long-scope?”

“Here.”

Johari took the long-scope from Samy and peered over the side of the basket. “We should be there in a day and a night. The dawn tomorrow, I think.” He squeezed the long-scope. “I’m nervous.”

Samy nodded in agreement, although Johari wasn’t looking. “I asked as-sayyida if she’ll give us shore leave once we’ve delivered the message.”

“What did she say?” Johari asked, folding the long-scope and handing it back.

“She said yes, of course.”

“Huh. So what will you do with your shore leave?”

“I’m going to visit my family.” Samy patted the furnace. “Tell them all about this adventure.”

“Are they in Kedah?”

“Yes. Yours?”

Johari sat down on the floor moodily. “Terengganu.”

“Have you heard from them at all?” Samy knew only a little of Johari’s former life, through what he had seen of Johari’s education. He knew Johari had been the son of an elite family, but never got the details.

“Not since I left home, and joined as-sayyida’s crew.” Johari tried to remember how long it had been.

“You should at least write. It is good to keep family.” Samy smiled reassuringly. “But if you have nowhere to go for shore leave, I’m sure my family will welcome two intrepid travelers home.”

Johari smiled back.

“But first, we must go to this one hawker I know who makes the best pasembur in Kedah.”

“Friend, I hate to contradict you but the best pasembur is in Melaka.” Johari grinned, already dreaming of the smells of foods sold on the docks.

“Oh ho! If we’re talking the best *ever*, then...”

#

Temenggung Rajanathan Mohan squinted at the morning sky, having just finished subuh prayers. The missive the Sultan had received had set the guards on edge. Expect visitors from the sky, indeed. Fortunately, this didn’t entail more guards, since they were expecting only two people.

He yawned and stepped out of the surau, preparing to head back to the main palace. The path was comfortably lined with smooth pebbles that massaged his feet as he walked.

Ten steps in and he heard a shout, knew what it was for, and his head almost snapped backwards to see a large basket, attached to a great orb of cow skin, just as the letter described. A youth leaned over the side of the basket, waving frantically.

“Asalamualaikum, tuan!” the boy shouted. “Where can we put down the balloon?”

“Front courtyard!” the Temenggung yelled back, forgetting his manners. He ran to the palace, through the hallways past bewildered servants, and out to the front garden. “Everyone move!” he bellowed at the gawking guards. He waved at the floating basket, feeling quite removed from his own body in surprise.

“Samy! You can lower us now,” Johari called, heaving a sandbag anchor over the side.

“Working on it,” Samy grunted as he pushed the lever that would close off the furnace from the balloon. He had been working all morning, lowering the balloon enough for Johari to see where they were going, and yet high enough so they wouldn’t be noticed, and now this was as low as they could go while staying aloft. When the balloon didn’t seem to want to go any lower, he fanned the opening, trying to push in cool air, not that it helped, considering how humid the weather was. “We might have to jump.”

“I am not jumping,” Johari retorted, and threw out another anchor. “Tuan! Would you mind pulling us down?”

After a lot of shouting, guards tugging at the ropes of the anchors, and telling people to calm down, Temenggung Rajanathan found himself looking down at the two messenger-pilots, who knelt respectfully before him. “Are you Johari and Samy?”

“Yes, tuan.”

Bendahara Tun Muasif came running. “Are these the two skyfarers? I wish I hadn’t missed the sight!” He stared down at them. “They don’t look like much. Are you sure it’s them?”

“Do you want to wait for another two boys in a basket with a balloon?”

“I suppose not. Come on, then.”

#

Bathed, groomed and freshly dressed, Johari felt better than he had in the days spent almost free-floating in the sky. He had declined the clothes the royal staff offered, as he had been told, even as it irked him to do so; he hadn’t been brought up to deny gifts. The staff were impressed by the finery that the sayyida had furnished him with. He walked through the hallways led by a retainer, and soon, Samy also joined him, smiling brightly and looking proud in his new clothes.

The Temenggung was waiting for them at the door of the throneroom. “Ready?”

They glanced at each other, and nodded.

“In you go then.”

The throneroom was not very large, but the windows made it an airy space, filling it with sunshine.

Sultan Abdullah Makarram Shah III sat on his throne, and he beckoned to the boys entering. They slowly walked until they were two meters away, then bowed formally. “Asalamualaikum, Tuanku,” Johari said.

“Good morning, Tuanku,” Samy rejoined.

The Sultan nodded, and they kneeled.

“Ampun Tuanku, we were asked to ensure our employer’s missive was received,” continued Samy.

“It has,” Bendahara Tun Muasif replied. “And true to the letter, you have arrived. What is it called?”

“A hot air balloon, Tuan Bendahara,” came the prompt, if slightly quavering, reply. “The hot air, heated by the furnace in the basket, lifts us up.”

“And will your employer be arriving in a similar device?”

“No, Tuan Bendahara, it is like a ship, but one that flies using engines, built by the scientists of Arabia, called a rohani, because it travels between earth and sky.” Samy relaxed a little. This was familiar ground to him; he understood how to explain these things.

The Sultan smiled graciously. “We had heard of such incredible advancements made in the Land of the Faithful.”

“Ampun Tuanku, our employer asks for safe harbour in Seberang Prai. In return, she will demonstrate the rohani’s capabilities for the Kingdom of Kedah, and offer aid in the efforts to hold off the Kingdom of Siam.”

The Sultan narrowed his eyes. Temenggung Rajanathan averted his, remembering full well the latest skirmish, while Bendahara Tun Muasif raised his eyebrows. “Tell me about your employer.”

Samy opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out, and he glanced over at Johari in a panic. Johari felt his mouth go dry, but he nodded, and began to recite the carefully-crafted words that had been drilled into him in preparation for this question. “Ampun Tuanku, our employer is Yap Siew Fei, from the Dutch-infested Melaka, who travels in search of knowledge, from the scholars of the Middle Kingdom to the vidvams of Bharat. At her command are four written languages and nine spoken ones, three merchant vessels and men and women of all places and trades. She descends from the court retainers of Princess Hang Li Po, and claims the lands of the Straits of Melaka as her homeland.”

Samy almost whistled in admiration at how smoothly the words rolled out of Johari. He’d delivered them like a true poet, although they both knew who had really written those words.

“Peranakan,” the Bendahara muttered. He had never really liked the communities of Chinese descendants.

“Better than British,” the Temenggung pointed out. “That Francis Light has done nothing for us, despite the gift of Pinang. Even now, he welcomes more Englishmen to consolidate the colony.”

The Sultan’s face didn’t flinch. Samy and Johari exchanged glances. They knew what to say, but neither quite wanted to be the one to say it. Samy, however, looked so nervous, Johari plunged in. “Ampun Tuanku,” he began, hoping he wouldn’t get into trouble for speaking out of turn. “My employer heard of your recent trouble with Siam and the broken contract between Kedah and Captain Francis Light. She wishes you to know that she has dealt with the British before, and knows how easily they break faith, especially now as they seek to expand beyond their island. She begs you not to concede territory to them, and to watch them closely, for they are known to take advantage of the goodwill of others. She has witnessed what they have tried to do to the great kingdoms of Bharat, and offers her services in protecting the sovereignty and prosperity of the Straits Kingdoms.”

“You speak well for a servant,” Bendahara Tun Muasif said curtly.

“Tuan Bendahara, our employer taught us well,” Johari replied defensively, remembering why he ran from home.

“You have done good work,” the Sultan said before the Bendahara could say anything more. “You may go now.”

The two boys prostrated themselves. “Ampun Tuanku.” They stood up and backed away ten paces before turning for the door.

#

It was early evening when Lu jian-zhang received a surprise visitor. “Fei xiao-jie?” He wasn’t sure how she had arrived and wasn’t about to ask. “I thought you would want to stay hidden for as long as possible.”

“We’re not at the Straits yet. Almost, but not quite. You will dock at Seberang Prai.”

“That’s a tight fit. Why not Binlang? Wouldn’t that be more convenient?”

“I did not buy this ship so my captain could worry about navigating difficult courses,” Fei xiao-jie sniffed. “And there are British colonials there now.”

He grinned. Her supercilious manner always amused him, because he and a few others had traveled with her long enough to know she only pretended to be obnoxious. But he understood the decision, and made a mental note to tell his navigator of the next leg’s course. “Would you like some tea, xiao-jie?”

“I would, and then we must talk. I have plans, and I need this ship.”

He escorted her to his cabin and sent for hot water while she made herself comfortable on the chair usually reserved for him. “How long will we be at port?”

“I’m not sure. It depends on what happens at Binlang.”

“You’re being cryptic again,” he told her smilingly, selecting a mix of tea leaves.

“I can’t be clear if I don’t know what will happen,” she said, with annoyance.

“We’ll at least get two weeks, yes?” He handed her a teacup. There was a knock on the door, and he answered it, coming back to the table with a fresh pot of hot water.

Her eyes crinkled with amusement. “We *will* need that much time to ensure we’ve sampled all the homeland’s food.” She drew out a map from her sleeve pocket and laid it on the table. “Now then.”

#

“That’s not one of ours,” Captain Francis Light mused as he looked through his telescope at the vessel approaching. “And I don’t recognize the design. Is it approaching our harbour?”

“No, sir,” the lieutenant in charge of the makeshift fort replied. “It appears to be headed towards Seberang Prai.”

“I see.” That worried him. “Any idea what kind of vessel it is?”

“Not built for cargo, that’s for sure. It’s too fast.”

“It’s also chugging smoke. Good God, is that a steam engine? I heard some fellows in Arabia were developing steam technology of their own, but I never thought to see it out and about so fast. And on the sea, too.”

“Any threat?”

“You better have some troops on hand just in case.” Captain Francis Light lowered the telescope. “And prepare cannons, too. I really don’t like the looks of that ship.”

Throughout the day, people sporadically paused in their work to watch the ship that roared in the distance, ever closer, until it docked in Seberang Prai’s harbour, a silver enigma.

#

Johari and Samy ran to the wharf as soon as they saw the Dao Yi approaching. They ate little meaty snacks while waiting for it to dock and finally throw out its gangplank. They thrust their hands into the seawater to wash the sauce off their fingers, wiped their hands dry on their trousers, and hurried over.

The sayyida came breezing down, radiant as usual. Her kebaya was a fine gray silk from China, trimmed with black floral patterns, although she had the sleeves specially designed to be large and loose, like true Chinese robes. She held her hands out to them, and they ran forward to kiss the ink-stained fingers.

“You made it. Alive,” she said in a rush of earnestness, her fingers wrapped around theirs tightly. “I am so proud of you! Did you get to meet the sultan?”

They laughed and grinned, happy at her obvious pride in them. “He says he will speak to you, ya sayyida,” Johari said. “He didn’t say much, but he looked curious.”

“Very good. Have you seen your family, Samy?”

“Yes, ya sayyida, and the whole town is gossiping about retaking Pinang island. And now people are watching the skies to see if more baskets of boys come showering down!”

This made her laugh, so she took them out to lunch.

#

To Captain Francis Light, representative of the East India Company upon the island Pinang, which you have erroneously called Prince of Wales Island, after a man who has never set foot upon its soil and likely never will. I hope this letter finds you in the best of health, as you will require it in the days following this day of 14 Safar, in the year 1203.

As the new lease holder of the land you are currently living upon, I am empowered to ask you to remove any and all military personnel, which are superfluous for the protection of the coasts of the Kingdom of Kedah, to an alternative outpost along the Straits of Melaka. Whilst your settlement may remain if it is too inconvenient to remove, please bear in mind that it is now under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Kedah, and while I welcome the business opportunities that the East India Company has to offer, it is highly inappropriate for land that has hitherto belonged to the people of the Straits to remain under the bureaucracy of foreigners.

I understand that the removal of such forces will be a great undertaking, and am willing to permit one week's grace before I arrive to assume governance of the island of Pinang. Any attempt to resist the smooth transfer of administration will, in sum, result in a violent eviction.

#

Captain Francis Light wrote an urgent letter to Director Grant in India, loading it once more with arguments for full military support in all West Indies colonies, punctuating it with observations of the vessel sitting in the strait between Seberang Prai and the Prince of Wales Island, attaching a copy of the letter he had received from the so-called new governor of Pinang. He ordered his troops to stand ready for an attack.

As if in response, to make the English troops even more nervous, the Dao Yi ominously began to encircle Pinang Island. It docked in Seberang Prai every few hours for the crew to enjoy proper meals. Lu jian-zhang could be seen standing at the prow of the ship as it rounded the island, watching any activity of the English. The day before Fei xiao-jie was due to take over Binlang Yi, the Dao Yi docked and the crew took shore leave.

Laksamana Amanjid Taksin withdrew his ships, but stayed on one that remained at a certain distance from Pinang Island, to witness more closely the confrontation between Francis Light's and Cik Yap's forces. Cik Yap had also requested that a ship stand by to deliver medical assistance.

Sultan Abdullah Makarram Shah III, accompanied by Bendahara Tun Muasif and Temenggung Rajanathan Mohan, traveled to the formerly sleepy seaside town of Seberang Prai, and ensconced themselves in a house that had a clear view of the harbor and the island.

Yap Siew Fei dined on a delicious meal prepared by a local Baba that night, accompanied by Johari and Samy, who elected to stay rather than take shore leave, even if it meant sleeping on the floor in front of the sayyida's bedroom door.

Sometime the next morning, after she had had a bath, dressed in fresh clothes, eaten a delicious breakfast, and paid her respects at a local temple to Thean Hou in thanks for an excellent voyage and to beg favour for the day's doings, Yap Siew Fei boarded the Dao Yi again to inspect the island of Pinang

(after a brief put-down of her two messenger boys who wanted to come along). She sighed when cannons began to fire at her ship, but was not surprised.

“Fei xiao-jie!” Lu jian-zhang shouted over the commotion. “Take cover!”

She threw him a withering look, then drew a little mirror from her sleeve and caught the flash of the sun in it.

“There it is!” Samy shouted, pointing at the sky. “Rohani! It’s the rohani!” Johari and Samy waved at the shadow that loomed closer from above.

The rohani broke through the clouds. It was not very large, but Johari and Samy thought it looked larger than what they thought it felt like from within. Its sides were the same sleek lines as the Dao Yi, and sailors waved through the glass of the windows all along the hull. Along the bottom, vents roared and blew a wind downwards as the rohani lowered itself, causing housewives and servants to run out and hurriedly collect drying laundry.

The front of the ship’s hull was lined with glass, within which Nakhoda Harun stood firmly right at the front, peering down with a long-scope and occasionally shouting orders to the men and women behind him. He gave a friendly little salute to the crowd cheering beneath him.

On a gesture from him, the rohani surged forward towards the island. Out the sides, cannons groaned out of their stationary positions and pointed downwards.

Yap Siew Fei stabbed a finger in the general direction of wherever it was she guessed shooting was coming from, even as Lu jian-zhang, now at the navigator’s wheel, steered the ship out of range. She held onto the side of the ship as it swerved away, and made a mental note to stand on deck one day when the Dao Yi was going very fast, for entertainment.

The cannonade that resounded from the rohani as it fired on the makeshift forts on Pinang Island shook everyone who watched. Two shots, first. The Dao Yi continued to circle the island, and Yap Siew Fei pointed out further targets. Two more thunderclaps, a third, then three in succession, before it fell silent and the Dao Yi finished the circumference of the island.

Johari and Samy started the cheers, and they howled and capered at seeing the rohani triumphantly fly over the island with no forthcoming retaliation.

“Congratulations, Fei xiao-jie,” Lu jian-zhang said to his employer, who stood silently at the prow. “You have won the island.”

She said nothing for a long while, her hair whipping in the wind from the rohani. “Let’s collect the ground troops, then, and finish this.”

#

When she stepped foot on the island, she felt distance from her body, still shaken at how quickly everything had happened, and walked so briskly, Johari and Samy almost ran to keep up.

Behind her trailed an escort of soldiers carrying appropriate firearms, and docking after her ship were surgeons and doctors, running to search and rescue. The boys’ eyes darted everywhere, taking in the blasted structures and forlorn flags flapping in the wind. The forts were destroyed, pieces of wood and stone and fires scattered everywhere, and despite the hum of the Dao Yi, the island was too quiet. Samy muttered a quick prayer. Johari tried very hard not to stare at red stains on the gray and black landscape.

The rohani hovered above, and Nakhoda Harun's face was grave as he assessed the damage done to the locals' houses. There were broken sampans and torn fishing nets everywhere, and even from his height, he could see the wary faces of the fishermen as they emerged from the forest inland and picked through the wrecks of their homes.

Suffolk House still stood, the pepper plantation surrounding it fairly intact. The attap roof looked quite ruffled, and the windows were blasted in. She pushed open the unlocked door and cautiously entered what she supposed was the parlour.

Johari reached out for her sleeve. "Ya sayyida." When she turned to him, he said, "Let me go in first. Samy and I will search the house for you."

She nodded, and the two boys made soft scuttling noises as they ran in, light on their feet, from room to room, looking for its inhabitants. But her eyes wandered over the sitting room, taking in the dust-covered furniture, wood splinters and broken porcelain on the floor.

There was a shoe in the corner, sticking out from behind a cabinet. With a foot still in it. Curious, she walked over and peeped behind the casement.

The boy was asleep, curled into as tight a ball as he could manage, arms covering his face. She reached over and dusted off his hair, revealing the sandy-brown under the gray dust. He woke up with a cry, his large blue eyes staring at her wildly.

"I will not harm you," she said to him softly in his language. "Are you hurt?"

The boy Thomas spoke little, and had few answers for her. When she was done questioning him, she left Johari and Samy to feed him properly, although neither of them spoke much English. "That's good," she said unsympathetically when they protested. "You can learn from each other." They fell silent, seeing the grim lines on her face.

She spent the rest of the day inspecting the whole island, collecting damage reports, hearing the grievances of the locals, and questioning the British soldiers. There were few casualties, cold comfort for the day's events.

Captain Francis Light was nowhere to be found.

#

Samy and Johari finished their rice, and folded the banana leaves towards themselves in satisfaction. Thomas glanced over and took his cue to do the same. Johari felt a bit sorry for the boy, remembering the time when he himself was friendless. Samy was indifferent; Thomas was an orphan, but he was still white. They awkwardly exchanged phrases, stumbling on conversation and cross-cultural snags.

Thomas looked to the distance, where a harbor was being built on Pinang. Then his gaze wandered up to the rohani that had landed on top of a hill, no longer quite as imposing. "What is she called?" he asked.

"Rohani," Samy answered slowly, making sure Thomas got the pronunciation.

"Just that? Ro-ha-ni?"

"Al-Rohani Antara," Johari said shortly.

"Antares?"

Johari shook his head. "Antara," he repeated. "Because..." he said in English, then hesitated. He patted

the ground they sat on. “Earth.” Then he pointed up. “Sky.” He flattened his hand and wiggled it a little. “Antara.”

“Between?”

“Yes.” Johari almost sighed in relief.

He looked at his new crewmate, then to his good friend, and back up at the rohani, which was resting in preparation for another voyage.

He was starting to understand why as-sayyida had chosen that name.

And the Psychopomp Followed the Lyre by Christine Lucas

For countless years, no one had come to Hermes seeking a lost soul.

Then Charon came, shrouded in the echoes of the bone flutes of Tartarus. The Ferryman had never left Hades before. Intrigued after many decades of hazy loitering amongst the mortals, Hermes put on his gambler’s face.

“I never expected to see *you* above ground. Hello, Charon.”

“Good *morning*, Son of Zeus.” Charon spat the word “morning” as though it burned his tongue. Clad in an immaculate grey suit, he removed hat and sunglasses. His eyes, cold and mirthless, scanned the dusty shelves, packed with dustier books and newspapers, the stained walls and the occasional cockroach scurrying along the worn wooden floor. “Interesting... abode.” Contempt coated each word. “And what’s that *noise*?”

“That’s music, Charon. Modern Greek music.” Outside his cramped one-room apartment in downtown Athens, the olive trees and the laurel bushes withered, their leaves sickly and grey. This new Greece, dusty and hurried, poked and pricked and bled his immortal soul. Greece had changed, the spirit of the people lost somewhere along the way. But in their music, woven through chords and tunes and lyrics, specks of the old glory remained and soothed this lost god’s soul.

“Bah! Mortals and their endless whining, never content, always moaning about love and money and fame,” said Charon. “It’s cut short when they come on board.”

Hermes lowered his radio’s volume. The Ferryman didn’t have an ear — or heart — to appreciate mortal music. Even Orpheus’ lyre had left him cold. But Hermes had seen Charon’s ghoulish face mellow to another tune: the ethereal whisper of Hades’ breeze amidst the riggings and railings of his boat, the murmurs of the dead wind that blows between the worlds. How long had it been since he too had flown on winged sandals upon this very wind, guiding the souls of the dead to the Ferryman?

Too long. Not any more. That life was over. Lost.

“What do you want, Charon?”

“To remind you of your duties, *Hermes Psychopomp*, Conductor of Souls.” Wrinkled hands cupped the silver top of his cane, fingers too pale, too thin — a corpse’s hands.

“Haven’t you heard? The old world is dead.”

Athena had withered to a mere murmur through the leaves of the olive trees, whispering words of wisdom to deaf ears. Apollo lingered amidst the laurel bushes at Delphi, a whiff of sacred incense and a drip of silent water, muttering incomprehensible prophecies to oblivious mortals. Poseidon still remained, a sleeping giant in the deep, feasting on the prayers to that saint of the new religion, that new guardian of the seas, occasionally stirring his trident, his dreams awakening the storm and the earthquake.

Charon's lips stretched to a smile too wide, too white to be human. "But you're *not* dead, Son of Zeus. They still worship you, those mortals you have chosen to live amongst. The cutpurses, the thieving merchants, the taxi-drivers with the rigged meters, even the priests of the crucifix with the fat bank accounts; *they* have not forgotten you, God of Thieves."

"So?" Was their unbeknownst devotion what had spared him his kin's fate? True, his places of worship were many: any place where cards were shuffled, dice rolled or fast fingers took what was not theirs. He had many names and many faces once: Guide of the Dead, Messenger of the Gods, Protector of Travelers. All that had survived was the Thief. Awesome. He cleared his throat, the bitterness still lingering in his tongue when he spoke. "Aren't you still in business with them as well, Charon?"

"Worms! None of them carries decent ferryman's fees any more. And I cannot deny them passage. We can't have a legion of cheap souls loitering around Acheron's west bank forever. Your uncle Hades has enough headaches with all the protests from some of them. Gibberish about heaven and hell and the like." He sighed. "The waters of Lethe have been quite useful lately."

"So, why are you here, then?"

Charon looked away, a frown on his aged — and yet ageless — face. "One is missing."

"You've got a soul unaccounted for?"

The frown deepened. "Not *any* soul."

"Who's missing?"

"An old friend of yours, Orpheus."

"Again?"

"Yes, *again*." Charon leaned forward. "And watch your tone, young one."

"Why should I care? If Orpheus wants a stroll among the living, I say let him have it."

Charon raised his cane, the silver skull ornament pointing right at Hermes. "First and foremost, you were *Psychopomp*, Guide of the Dead. It is your *duty* to lead them to me." He scoffed and reached into his tailored jacket's pocket. "You will be compensated for your time, of course." He produced a pouch and emptied it on the desk. An assortment of curious items scattered about: gold teeth, coins of various dates and value, rings and christening crosses.

Hermes cocked an eyebrow. "Teeth?"

"These days, you've got to work with what you can. The ferryman must be paid. Now, go and do your duty."

"Why?"

"Why?" Charon's face changed, the illusion fleetingly failing. The sharp angles of a skull pierced through the alabaster face. "You refuse? By the waters of Styx, you *cannot* refuse me!" Thunder

lingered in his voice, and the stale air in Hermes' small, stuffed room rippled at the anticipation of a storm over Acheron. Charon shook a skeletal finger at him. "You promised, godling!"

The icy tingle of apprehension; foolish, hasty words of his younger self. "That happened centuries ago."

"Time matters little in Hades and a vow on the waters of Styx in binding. I turned a blind eye when you stole your uncle's helmet of invisibility to aid Perseus. It is time to return the favor. *As you promised.*"

Empty words. Empty threats, over words spoken hastily in times long lost. The world had changed indeed. The ancient consequences — years of silence, exile, the Furies sent after oath-breakers — had little bearing any more, in this new reality that mocked gods and revered nothing. He was already an exile, and the Furies posed as evil witches in scary children's stories. In the course of countless empty centuries, Hermes had lost more than his kin. He had lost himself.

Another lost soul. Like Orpheus. Should he go after the fugitive, what else would he find?

Purpose. Meaning. His own, elusive *Ithaca*, in a world that made little sense.

"Fine," Hermes finally said. "I will track him down."

"Good. But be forewarned." Charon put on his shades. "Others are after him."

"Others?"

"Before the Trinity, even before the Twelve, older, darker spirits roamed this land. They never left, untouched by oblivion, nurtured by strife, hunting down the oath-breakers, the deserters and the restless dead that should not venture among the living. The death-fates are on the prowl."

"Ah." The *Keres*, daughters of the night, ruthless and avenging. Hermes hadn't heard their name in a long time. He liked it that way.

"Farewell, Son of Zeus. I will be waiting at Acheron's shores." Charon put on his hat and left, the sigh of a thousand deaths following his heel. Somewhere outside, a dog howled.

###

Hermes left his building from the side entrance that led to a back alley, deserted under the scorching August sun. A lone pigeon pecked through a torn garbage bag, content that the stray cats wouldn't hunt in this heat. Then something stirred in the shadows and it flew away, a blur of panicked fluttering over the rooftops.

There *they* were; Hermes caught their scent, festering flesh and gutted corpses. His jaw tightened. The *Keres* lurked in the dark places behind the trash cans, in the escalators to the subway, in the abandoned buildings where the junkies and the homeless sought refuge from the heat. Grim-eyed, blood-thirsty, they gnashed their teeth, lashed their black tongues, seeking the one who had lulled Cerberus and gotten away.

Standing still, the hot air so thick it almost crushed a god's chest, Hermes reached into his shirt and took out his wand — the *kerykeion*. He held it up under the merciless light, the entwined snakes writhing in their double helix.

"Begone!" The air rippled, carrying his command through every shade and shadow. "I am *Argeiphontes*, slayer of the hundred-eye giant. I am *Psychopompos*, conductor of souls. Stand not in my path!"

Oh dark waters of Styx, how good did that feel! The surge of energy rushed through his bloodstream, prickled his skin and awakened long-suppressed memories. Power. Bliss. *Godhood*.

Purpose.

A dog howled, its cry stretching until it lessened to a whine, until it dissolved under the sun. Hermes no longer sensed the *Keres*. A lone pedestrian crossed the street down the alley, keeping his eyes shaded, oblivious to everything but his mobile phone.

And Hermes was alone again, his brethren moonbeams and whispers in the twilight, dreams and memories of past glory carved in marble, now blackened by smog. Whom could he trust? Who could aid him in his quest?

No one. Apollo's holy *talking water* dripped silent and the sacred laurel choked in exhaust fumes. But he had learned a few tricks in the recent years. Time to visit the scene of the crime in Hades.

He tucked the wand back into his shirt and headed north, to Acheron. A secret path to Hades lay hidden in the vicinity of Lake Acherousia. Many centuries ago, Orpheus had taken this route to descend to the Underworld, the same path Odysseus had walked to consult with the dead.

Had it been so long since the time of heroes?

Distance meant nothing to a god with winged sandals. Hermes reached the northwest region of Greece in a blink. More a marsh than a lake now, Acherousia stretched around him murky and still. The incessant buzzing of mosquitoes filled the air, and no birds nested in the nearby sickly trees. In walking distance, among the reeds, stood a forsaken hut, its roof ruined, its walls rotting away, its door hanging from rusty hinges. No human presence in the area, save for the blurry shapes of a town up north and a factory at the east.

Hermes had barely set foot inside the hut when a cat darted out. It stopped a few paces away and measured him from winged sandals to head and back. It licked its whiskers, its yellow eyes following each flutter of the wings. Then a fly buzzed, a frog croaked nearby and the cat ran off after juicier prey.

Inside the hut, with walls bent to unnatural angles, the dimensions swirled and mingled into a ghostly threshold, letting through the draft of betwixt and between: the backdoor of the Underworld. On the way down, nothing hinted at recent human passage. There were animal tracks aplenty, mainly muddy feline pawprints. Cats had always managed to sneak into Hades through every creak and crevice. Often did Charon find them napping on the prow, climbing up his mast or shredding his sails. It served the bitter old ghoulish right. For the first time in countless mirthless years, Hermes snickered.

Once he crossed Acheron, Hermes found *her* by the pool of Mnemosyne, under the white poplar tree — Eurydice, Orpheus' beloved. Mythographers and scholars had reduced her status to a mere nymph; Hermes knew better. She looked at him, her eyes darker than the waters of Lethe, and the veil parted for a split second. Under the alabaster skin lurked her three divine faces blending into one: Maiden, Mother, and Crone. Hecate, the Lady of the three-way Crossroads, whose steles once bore her three faces and protected travelers in the wild. Amidst her dark, silken braids, the silver scales of little serpents glimmered.

“Well met, Lady.”

The face of the Maiden, rosy-cheeked and smooth, stared back at him. “Hermes. It has been a while.”

“It has.”

“You came for *him*.”

“Yes.”

She sighed, the features of the Mother now playing upon her face. “He grew restless. The souls roaming the Asphodel Meadows had many stories to tell, and those in Tartarus even more, none of them pleasant.”

“The mortals’ stories have never been pleasant. What changed?”

“Their music did. They sang new songs, melodies of distant lands, to the beat of exotic drums and the chords of unfamiliar strings. He learned the lament of the bag pipes, the sorrow of the balalaika, the mourning of the sheng. And he had to know more; to hear, to play, to sing himself.”

“So he left.”

“Not until his lyre broke, and he could no longer mend it. Not here, in this place of death and oblivion. The lyre that you, Hermes, made for him. Made by a God’s hand, it needs the melody and the breath of the living to be restored.”

“Ah.”

“The tales of all those new, unfamiliar instruments only fueled his yearning.” A delicate silver serpent fell on her lap. It slithered back into the folds of her dress. “Hades was furious when he found him gone and Cerberus deeply asleep at the gates.”

“Of course.” Hades had not learned his lesson. Little had changed down here. “Why didn’t you stop him? You knew, didn’t you?”

“How could I stop him?” The blushing cheeks of the Maiden shone in the gloom. “You have heard him sing. I was smitten, lost to his crystalline voice.” Her expression hardened, the Crone coming forth. “When I regained my wits, he was long gone.” The fanged grin of a skull flashed in rage before fading away. “He tricked *me*.”

“Do you know where he’d go?”

She shook her head, the pretty — fake — face of the oak nymph restored. “Amidst the mortals, I assume, where his worthless hide belongs: the helpless, the hopeless, the miserable.”

That narrows it down. “Before I take my leave, Lady, one last thing. The *Keres* are after him.”

“Ah.”

“Call them back, before they shred his soul.”

“Haven’t you heard? I have no power left. A younger God rules the world now, Son of Zeus. Seek help elsewhere.”

Hermes turned to leave, but not before he caught glimpse of a forked tongue lashing between rosy lips. *A woman scorned...* He crossed the Asphodel Meadows, the waters of Acheron and headed upwards, his mind racing. *Seek help elsewhere...* but where? He was alone, with the death-fates after him.

As soon as he set foot on the world of the living, the cool breeze welcomed him; not the stale marsh air, but a fragrant breeze carrying the scent of the sea and the memories of a song. Even if that first lyre had been broken, its strings snapped, the tortoise shell cracked, its essence remained, weaved into the folds of the musician’s heart.

Hermes raised his fingers, tracing the iridescent threads of the lyre’s strings. They swayed and trembled, fragile memories of dreams. There quivered the longing, there trembled the frustration, there

struggled the aftermath of lost love and wasted chances. They caressed his ears, harmonies lamenting the loss of hope and purpose, chords echoing through desolate places — through his own solitude and exile.

He hadn't constructed Orpheus' lyre for such sorrow. How could the strings from Apollo's sacred cows not break? How could the tortoise shell not shatter? This wasn't the music Hermes had heard his old friend play. Where had the ethereal tone gone that had entranced gods and beasts alike?

He had to find him.

The stench of death engulfed him, disintegrating the lingering notes. The *Keres* had tracked him down. Before the last of the harmonies vanished, the Psychopomp rose on winged sandals and followed the lyre.

###

The memories of the lyre's songs led Hermes to many places in every corner of the Earth. In opera houses they swirled, azure and indigo ribbons, around the violin and the cello. In rock concerts they throbbed bright red and blue at every sound of the drum, they flashed gold and silver alongside the electric guitars during their frantic solos. Hermes mingled with the crowds, the modern-day Sirens and Lotus-Eaters, seeking the lost soul. Orpheus was always one step ahead, and the shadow of the *Keres* right after him.

But although the fugitive was long gone, his memory remained. Tired faces changed when they remembered his music. For a fleeting, precious moment, all burdens lifted off wrinkles and scars, guilt and concern vanished from bloodshot eyes, shoulders squared, and hope dared to dawn. They spoke in many languages and many ways, words sophisticated and simple, educated and slang, of the same thing they had all forgotten until they heard the lyre: Life as it was *before*.

A toothless black man with opaque eyes said it best, fingering his harmonica as if it was made of gold.

“Like seeing a rainbow, son. And God knows I was born blind.”

And still no sign of the musician himself.

Hermes followed the fragile trail back to his homeland, where the lament of the lyre mingled with the longing of its descendant, the bouzouki, through the songs of the prisoners and the hashish-eaters. All paths around the Earth carried the memory of the fugitive, and all had kept his secret, even from the God of Travelers. Weary now of the never-ending journey, Ithaca always just beyond his grasp, Hermes sank on a worn bench on a hill above Piraeus. The sea breeze didn't soothe him, now only carrying the stench of the docks and the oil refineries.

Alone.

A grey cat darted past him, chasing after the thread of the lyre.

He sat up, his eyes narrowed. The God of Thieves could always use a snitch, and cats often crossed between the worlds. They saw the threads. Did they know something he didn't? Would they tell him? His gaze followed the stray cat running uphill, to the chapel dedicated to *Aghios Neilos* — Saint Nile. Greek immigrants from Alexandria had built it after WWII, dedicated to a lesser Christian saint, as the ruling Church claimed. Hermes knew better. So he followed the cat that followed the lyre.

Two steps uphill and the air around him changed — thicker, stale, ancient. His vision blurred. The sky darkened and a huge white hound blocked his path, the path upon the fine line between the worlds.

One of the *Keres*. Messenger or assassin?

Sharp fangs glowed in the dark, and hungry eyes fixed on his. The white limbs stretched, the bitch rose on her hind legs and her body mimicked a human form — twisted, grotesque, with knotted bones and a forked tongue. Her torso stretched too long, her six breasts empty sacks of chalk-white skin. A clawed hand beckoned at him.

“The rogue soul belongs to us.”

“Is that so?” He donned his gambler’s face, his voice flat, his eyes steady and unblinking. His fingers traced his wand inside his shirt — fingers slightly trembling. In times past, those filthy creatures wouldn’t dare to cross his path. Not any more. This was *their* time, the time of Plague and Pestilence.

She snarled. “The dead shall not walk among the living! You know the Law, godling!”

“That Law has too many holes. Too many have returned, and not all of them... *heroes*.” He spat the last word. His idea of heroes, much like everything else, had changed since the time of Heracles and Achilles. Now, most of the so-called heroes had bloody hands and fat bank accounts, faithful followers of the God of Thieves. He stifled a sigh. Perhaps it would be better if he too vanished. But not now. Not to *that* creature.

White fingers, twice the length of normal human fingers, clasped together on her chest. “Once we’re done with the rebellious mortal, perhaps we will come after you...”

“I do not abide by lesser spirits.” He took out the *kerykeion* and pointed it at her, his hand thankfully steady. The serpents lashed out at her, hissing their anger. “Stand aside!”

“Lesser spirits?”

Her shriek made the snakes on his wand recoil. He stood his ground, inwardly cursing his careless tongue.

“Lesser spirits! My sisters and I walked this land long before the Twelve, long before the Titans!” Her out-stretched hand closed in a fist. “Where you go, we will follow. We will break his lyre, feast on his treacherous tongue, and drag his worthless hide to Tartarus for an eternity of torment. And then we’ll come for you!”

She vanished into a swirl of ashes and broken bones. It stung his eyes and he blinked, tearful and half-blind. When his vision cleared, he no longer sensed the foul presence. His shoulders relaxed, and he found the strength to start uphill. One more step. One more road. Perhaps...

His fingertips tingled, his heart fluttered. No longer alone.

An old woman limped down the path, leaning on a walking stick, stopping to feed the stray cats at every corner. A crazy cat woman, her grey hair unkempt, her clothes stained, her lips moving to the incessant mumbling of the insane. But when Hermes looked at her sideways — the fairy way — her form changed. She stood tall and lithe, the sistrum in one hand, the aegis in the other. The finest linen covered her smooth body, and her head was no longer wrinkled, but *feline*.

He cleared his throat. “Good afternoon, Mistress of the Sistrum.” Lady Bast, a kindred soul in her love for music and her thieving, soft-pawed tricksters.

“That’s a greeting I haven’t heard in a long time.” Her voice trailed off to the distant echo of countless brass sistra.

“You haven’t vanished, like the others.”

She looked up, her eyes huge, the pupils slits. “Wherever *they* are,” she nodded at her cats, “*I* am. What do you want?”

“I need help.”

“You do?”

“One of the dead has gone missing. A friend, and I need to find him.”

“And?”

“Perhaps your cats have seen something?”

“What if they have?”

“They could help me find him?”

“Why? You ask for our help, and come empty-handed?” She spat on the ground. “Leave us alone. We have nothing to tell you.”

So he *was* alone. No kin, no allies. Hermes opened his mouth to protest, but closed it back. Perhaps he’d try again later. Perhaps with the right offering... His shoulders slumped, and he tried one last time, his voice lower — pleading, not demanding.

“You used to enjoy the music of the mortals once, Lady. They sang praises to you with flutes and rattles, cymbals and sistra. Will you let the lyre break for good, its song reduced to a whiff of smoke, the hand that plays it ashes and dust in some forsaken corner of Tartarus?”

As if awakened by his plea, the warm South Wind brushed his hair back, carrying the sounds of a distant land under the endless light of a merciless sun. The sistra and the cymbals joined the flutes in a glorious song celebrating Music, Love and Life during the festivals at Bubastis. Bound together by the shimmering threads of Orpheus’ lyre, they revived the songs of another time and another place where the Cat Goddess reigned supreme.

“Seek the strays,” she said without looking up, her voice the murmur of the Nile — liquid, languid felinity.

“Seek the *what*?”

“The strays, Son of Zeus — the human strays.”

###

The blistering heat of that August evening had driven the more unfortunate of Athens’ denizens in the small parks and squares, near the public fountains. One such place was near the center, a few blocks from the City Hall, where many illegal immigrants gathered. Poor, hungry, desperate, they loitered under the sickly trees, on the broken benches, sipped cheap beer and talked in low voices, their eyes darting around, ready to flee at the first sight of a uniform. Amidst the poverty and hunger, anger boiled, ready to explode with the slightest offence. Blades lay hidden in pockets, fists clenched, curses lingered just behind their teeth.

In the shadows at the edge of the square, white forms lurked, hungry eyes scanning the crowd, forked tongues tasting the anguish in the air. The death-fates had followed him. And the human strays sensed the presence of the *Keres* – the presence of death — and the tension rose. Wild eyes, deep frowns all around him, and Hermes reconsidered. Orpheus couldn’t be here. Could he?

In the center of the square, a young man sat on the yellowish grass under an acacia tree, a guitar in his

arms. Orpheus, sitting cross-legged on ground littered with cigarette butts, empty beer cans and used tissues. Orpheus, whose music had made Persephone and Hades weep. His song had lulled Cerberus, the Clashing Rocks had stood still at the command of his lyre, and rivers had changed course. He could — he *had* played for kings and gods. In this new world, he could entertain the rich and powerful, be a modern-day demi-god. What was he doing there?

The strings of the guitar answered him. No, not a guitar, but the *lyre*. The strings had been mended with the thundering solo of the electric guitar, the shell patched with the mournful tune of the blind man's harmonica. Endless songs of countless souls, of myriad paths traveled around the world embraced together in one perfect melody.

Orpheus played on. His fingers flew on the strings, shaming the nightingales, silencing the crowd. All eyes turned on him. Tensed shoulders relaxed, fists unclenched. Some sat down. Some held hands. At the shadows at edge of the square, even the *Keres* sat down, the stray cats curling upon their laps.

A young girl from Nigeria started to dance, her long hair in countless beaded braids. At the edge of Hermes' hearing, the strings of the lyre met the drums of the Yoruba. The lingering tunes of a Pakistani sitar joined in, while the silver of the singer's voice carried a different tune to each poor soul: folk songs, love songs, laments and lullabies. Others joined the Nigerian girl, their burdens lighter, their enmities forgotten, even for as long as the song lasted.

And Hermes allowed the song into his own heart. Here were the modern-day heroes, who struggled against impossible odds, against monsters sneakier than Charybdis and deadlier than Scylla: War and Famine and Intolerance, along an ever-ending road to an Ithaca that wasn't there. Here were the souls to guide and the travelers to protect. Here, at home, waiting for *him*.

For time and times and half a time, Hermes had traveled the Earth, seeking the fugitive and his lyre, and had found them here. At home, where Athena smiled through toothless grins, Apollo shone in almond-shaped eyes, Artemis danced through the braids of Nigerian girls.

Ithaca, at last. His home. His soul. His purpose.

The song ended, leaving the audience numb. Smiles dared to linger on the drawn faces, happiness dared to flicker in the wild eyes. Hermes approached the musician. Orpheus didn't look up, his fingers still caressing the lyre, as if already missing the song.

The words stuck on Hermes' tongue, fearing that even his voice would taint the lingering notes. When he finally spoke, he only managed a whisper. "So here you are."

Tired, moist eyes looked up at him. "Let me stay a while."

"Charon is sick with worry."

"I'd bet."

"You know I can't let you stay." Hermes offered him his hand. "Come."

Long, delicate fingers touched the strings again. "Just one more song. Please?"

Hermes glanced around, at the faces of those who had nothing. After a moment that stretched on, he turned to the one whose music had given them something. The words of the blind man flew to his ears upon the strings of the lyre: "*Like seeing a rainbow, son. And God knows I was born blind.*"

"Very well then," said Hermes, and sat down by his lost soul. Charon could wait in the never-changing Hades, while the lyre changed the mortal world. "One more song, for old times' sake."

Chicken Tikka Masala, Pseudoscience and Good Intentions - a review of Jeff Noon's *Nymphomation* by Bogi Takács

Jeff Noon: *Nymphomation*. Doubleday, 1997. 362 pages.

A novel with an ensemble cast where almost all members belong to at least one underrepresented group, written by one of the well-respected voices in British literary speculative fiction. What could possibly go wrong? Alas, there is plenty – from Indians whose entire universe centers around food to a monstrous antagonist described as a giant “mass of black flesh”, *Nymphomation* hops from one stereotype to another, and ultimately falls flat.

Jeff Noon is undoubtedly well-meaning, as the protagonists are depicted in a positive light, while there are antagonists like an openly racist Neo-Nazi gang leader. Noon probably wished to promote diversity, but ultimately we find out more about his preconceptions than about the actual minority groups themselves.

We will survey the characters and we will discuss whether Noon's is a desirable way of featuring underrepresented groups in science fiction. (Note that the article inevitably includes spoilers about the characters. Major plot spoilers were avoided.)

Setting and background

Manchester, 1999 – the near future at the time of writing the novel, the immediate past now. A company uses the city as a testbed for its latest game of chance, the AnnoDominoes. The game is a runaway success. Soon, most people are seen clutching their dominoes, blinking in a random pattern until the draw on every Friday when the dot pattern becomes fixed. One lucky player wins untold riches, while a hundred others gain a modest sum. Some of the locals try to find out the secrets of the game – their fates soon become intertwined, and they also realize the game is not as benign as it looks at first glance.

Nymphomation shows the usual Jeff Noon pattern: start in present-day Manchester, then have a series of increasingly improbable events happen until the dramatic showdown. Sprinkle in some *Alice in the Wonderland* references, unheard-of drugs and suitably psychedelic prose, and you have the recipe. It sometimes works and sometimes does not. His first novel, *Vurt*, won the Arthur C. Clarke award, while his short story collection *Pixel Juice* is often considered a masterpiece in literary speculative fiction, and for good reason. But *Pollen*, the sequel failed to repeat *Vurt*'s success. *Falling Out of Cars* also offered a great premise but ultimately did not deliver.

When the novel opens, it seems that we are off to a charming start. An entire city is aflame with gambling fever, and blurbflies, flying biotechnological creatures spout advertisements to get you to buy the mysterious dominoes. The usual tropes of cyberpunk appear: megacorps sponsoring policemen, young genius hackers, and apparitions in the computer, but with a sense of style that keeps the story from being dragged down into B-movie morass.

The cast of characters is diverse, and features many underrepresented groups. We have a homosexual couple where one man is gay and the other bisexual, a teenager who's the son of Indian immigrants, two homeless people, and several female characters. Unfortunately, the presentation of the protagonists

ultimately turns out to be vacuous at best, and stereotyped at worst.

Jazir, the son of Indian immigrants

Jazir is described as “Indian” and works after school in his parents’ Indian fast food restaurant... and the portrayal doesn’t get any more detailed. His father is opposed to intermarriage while his mother and sister aren’t. They make Indian food. They eat Indian food. They live and breathe and smell of (!) Indian food. That’s the entire extent of their Indian-ness. The reviewer can’t help thinking of *Bend It Like Beckham*, a movie about Indian immigrants in the UK, which while aimed at the general public in the broadest sense, still managed to make it clear that the family of the main character were not just nebulous “Indians”, but Punjabi Sikhs in particular. Here there is nothing of the sort; Jazir is Indian and that’s it, the differences among various Indian ethnic and religious groups are ignored.

While Jazir’s narrative is sometimes written in first person, his viewpoint is not that of an Indian immigrant to the UK, but rather that of Jeff Noon who apparently likes to eat in Indian restaurants. There are no actual cultural references beyond food. Jazir even names his pets and his computer software after food: “*Jaz’s disk caused a wave of animated curry sauce to form on the screen, and a rogue window to open up, called ‘Chef’s Special Recipe’. A box within the recipe demanded ingredients, so Jaz dragged the ‘Password please?’ icon across the screen, dropped it into the chef’s karahi pan. A whir and a click, and then a ‘Currently Cooking’ message came along, to apologize.*” He is a positive character, and one of the protagonists, but surely the life of a second-generation immigrant in the UK does not revolve entirely around food that’s also regularly described as “spicy” and “hot”? (Note the exoticization, which would probably not occur from an insider perspective.)

Sweet Benny Fenton and Joe Crocus, the gay couple

Benny is gay, while Joe is bisexual. They get a slightly better deal than Jazir – they have a relationship with all the depth, characteristics and even complexities of a heterosexual relationship. One of them cheats on the other with another man and gets found out, but this is also portrayed in a similar manner to heterosexual infidelity and not as a pointer toward the supposed promiscuity of gay men.

Another main character could be assumed to be a straight white male, but it turns out he maintains a relationship with Joe; this is an interesting twist that has the potential to reveal the reader’s default assumptions. If we could stop right here, we would be satisfied, but unfortunately there is more.

Sweet Benny Fenton is “sweet”, submissive and mild-mannered – on one occasion he is briefly described as the receiver of the sexual act, but he does not behave in a particularly feminine manner. He is also Black, while his partner Joe is white – yet another occasion of a Black person cast in a submissive role. As before, Benny is a positive character, likeable, a guy who would be a great friend. Yet there is a jarring scene where he buys a counterfeit blurbfly: “*‘This fly is gonna travel wide! He’s gonna send my message of gay love all over Manchester.’ Benny’s lips were smeared with wild ketchup. [...] Now the fly was hovering and buzzing, and starting to flutter its message to the world. ‘Sweet Benny Fenton, he’s the gayest gypsy of your genes. Let Sweet Benny unravel your destiny for a single puny. Gay to win! Gay to win!’*” The gay character who we’re supposed to appreciate attempts to “convert” people to his sexual orientation, and then does it in a clichéd, flamboyant manner. Even if this scene is supposed to be “tongue in cheek”, it does not redeem that. (Also, introducing an ethnic group and the accompanying stereotype for the sake of alliteration is not a particular win – not in my books at least.)

Benny also dies a painful death; the only Black main character dying? This phenomenon is surprisingly common in American movies, and persists to the present day, but surely it was considered bad form for

a literary writer even in 1997?

Little Miss Celia, the homeless girl, and Big Eddie Irwell, her caretaker

Homeless life and extreme poverty are romanticized, mostly for the “liberty” they apparently offer. The homeless characters struggle, and fight with each other, but ultimately it’s a happy existence that one of them who gets out immediately begins to miss: “*They slept, each of the Fractals fitfully, except for Little Celia, who dreamed herself happy along dangerous streets, with a smile on her lips and a laugh, a winning bone and Big Eddie Irwell at her side.*” Never mind actual reality, this novel seems to say, it is good to be homeless! It’s romantic to be living in dangerous streets! I’m inclined to say of the author, “let him try”.

Female characters overall, Celia and her homelessness aside, look more accurately represented at first glance. However, it turns out they are important not because of their personal values, but their mysterious abilities – which are then mercilessly exploited by the supposed “good guys”, though there is some dissent:

“‘Who wants out?’ cried Joe, triumphantly. ‘That’s what he’s saying.’
Celia put up her hand first.
‘Not including you,’ said Hackle.
‘Why not?’
‘This is adults only.’
‘You can’t keep me here, against my will.’
‘She’s got a point, Max,’ said Joe.
‘No, she hasn’t. So, are you going, Joe?’”

Apparently kidnapping and imprisoning a young girl is completely justified when she has mysterious abilities... and then when she finally has a say in the matter, she “*of course*” remains with the main cast, apparently because they were nice to her. Just how “nice” is shown in the segment which is written from Celia’s point of view: “*They won’t let me out. Can’t sleep, can’t dream, can’t make tears. Cuts on my arm where the strangers take their readings, and this morning they stole some of my hair.*” The contradiction is never addressed.

The exact same is true of Jazir’s girlfriend Daisy Love, but to say more would require describing huge swathes of the plot, which can be quite confusing anyway.

The Disability Squick, or Georgie Horn having sex

A key point in the plot is about a disabled person having sex – moreover, producing offspring. He is described as mentally retarded, and not able to hold down a job or live independently. Paternalistic riffs abound: “*Good old Blank-Blank, doing nothing, happy to be living off the others’ earnings. Yeah, they looked after him, fed him, clothed him, pampered him. Jimmy couldn’t see the reasons for this; maybe a guilt thing, related to their salaries? Whatever, Georgie Horn was their pet.*” The reader is supposed to be shocked by him having sex, and this – and the identity of his offspring – is a dramatic revelation. His entire interest in sexuality has the explicit bearings of perversion: “*As far as I knew, he’d never known a woman, not in the basic sense. It [watching artificial life-forms procreate] was like pornography to him (...)*”

He is consistently presented as subhuman and animal-like. The fact that the main characters were his classmates, so he did not attend a special school, is also glossed over; and even if he had attended a special school, that would still not entitle anyone to think of him as a “pet”.

We are white, so white

In Nymphomation, you can be evil in several ways. You can be a Neo-Nazi: *“The fly was singing the team’s praises: ‘English schools for English tools! No foreign muck. Vote for Purity!’ Jazir recognized the blurb owner, the dreaded Nigel Zuze, self-proclaimed leader of the League of Zero. Fascist bastards...”* Strangely, Zuze’s team consists of medical students. What motivates medical students to racist violence – actual physical violence – is not discussed; this reviewer for once was puzzled.

You can also be the average white guy: *“The boy you ignored. The boy in the middle, not strong or weak or brilliant or stupid.”* He goes on to become an evil mastermind in a gigantic scheme of overcompensation.

These are ways of dealing with white male privilege: either becoming a violent White Power enthusiast, or simmering away in a little pond of mediocrity while thinking malicious thoughts of the others, the Others who enjoy life despite the constant setbacks. Are there good guys in Nymphomation who are white? Yes, but they are either homeless or have male sexual interests. This reviewer gets the feeling Jeff Noon is not necessarily comfortable with his own whiteness!

Last but not least, to be evil, you can also be a giant black slug. I kid you not: *“The creature was large, almost as large as the pit that held it. It was a mass of black flesh, dripping with juice that shone in tiny rivers down wrinkles of fat.”* Of course it is then revealed that the monster is black because it imitates dominoes, white spots on black... how ironic that my edition has white dominoes with black spots on its cover!

Science without scientists

While it has little to do with minorities, the depiction of scientists and science also breaks reader immersion, and as it is a major theme, it is worth discussing it briefly. The plot is supposedly centered around mathematics, and many of the cast are mathematicians. Despite this, there is no actual mathematics involved. The process of nymphomation seems like a variant on Conway’s Game of Life (explicitly mentioned), but for every mention that frames mathematics in at least a reasonable context, there are at least two that completely miss the point. „Fractal” especially seems to be used as a placeholder technobabble word: *“The fifteen remaining tiles had to be dragged into the shape of a Big Whoomph. Shouldn’t be too difficult, but the blurbs beat her to it [...] Then they started to eat. The puzzle burger actually vanished under their repeated attack. Dopejack must’ve concocted this, a fractal burger to hide his secret thoughts.”* The problem with using actual mathematical terms as technobabble is that they mean something outside the fictional context, and when they mean something different – with the difference never explained – this only serves to aggravate the reader.

Mathematicians are portrayed as swept up in the 1960s counterculture trends. There is certainly plenty of real-life precedent for this: Timothy Leary, John C. Lilly, Ram Dass and similar counterculture icons were all scientists originally. Alas, this connection is not explored, and math seems to be nothing beyond a convenient fictional vehicle for emotions: *“Of course, there was no reality application, not in 1968, and this fact seemed to inform Hackle’s equations with an element of loss. The professor was crying into his numbers.”*

Point-and-click hacking

The descriptions of computer hacking similarly do not have much of a resemblance to actual computer hacking, instead they come across as rehashes of Hollywood movie “hacking” scenes. Lots of twinkly icons twirling around, cute little animations interacting. Supposedly in 1999, with floppy drives! While one could argue for the unusual visual way of hacking being a legitimate – if not particularly good –

artistic choice, sometimes the reader gets the impression Noon fundamentally misunderstands how computer security works. In a hacking scene, “*the best mathematician for miles around*” who “*programmed the university’s defence system*” turns out to have his own first name as the password. Oops! (Also, mathematicians are not necessarily computer security experts and vice versa, but this particular character is more of the Mad Scientist archetype than an actual scientist, so this is understandable.) Genius characters are hard to write convincingly, and this time, Noon does not succeed either.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions

There is so much potential and wasted opportunity in *Nymphomation* it feels excruciating: an interesting setting, intriguing characters and backstory, drama, mystery and good old-fashioned adventure. Noon writes with flair as usual, and the book is a pleasure to read. But ultimately it falls flat: a novel about science with pseudoscience, featuring minorities but revealing more about the author himself, with hackers who are clueless about computers.

Readers interested in a novel with similar themes but – mercifully – no pretensions of a scientific background, and no misguided efforts at an ethnic flavor, are better advised to read *Needle in the Groove*, which also features a minority character in a main role. Jeff Noon has been relatively silent lately; this reviewer hopes that when he returns with a new full-length work, he will have moved beyond garish descriptions of stereotypes.

Issue Nineteen Contributor Biographies

Jaymee Goh

Jaymee Goh is a Malaysian-Chinese aspiring academic and sf/f writer, living in Canada. She blogs about exploring steampunk as a tool for postcolonial narratives on [Silver Goggles](#), and other mainstream-but-marginal issues on [Intersectionality Dreaming](#).

Christine Lucas

Christine Lucas likes to explore overlooked parts of fantasy worlds, especially the lives of the animals that dwell in them. Rumor has it that she’s in fact ghost-writing for her kitty Spitha. Her work has appeared in *Ballista*, [Renard’s Menagerie](#), [Afterburn SF](#), and [Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine](#), while other short stories will appear in future issues of [All Hallows](#), [Arkham Tales](#), [Aoife’s Kiss](#) and [Murky Depths](#). She is currently working on her first novel.

Bogi Takács

[Bogi Takács](#) is a member of the *Expanded Horizons* staff. She is a Hungarian Jewish author currently studying clinical neuroscience in Austria. Her speculative fiction and nonfiction have been published in various Hungarian print and online magazines, most recently in the 200th anniversary volume of *Galaktika Fantastic Books*, a short story collection featuring Hungarian and international authors. She has recently started to write SF in English as well – you can find information about her forthcoming stories on [her website](#).