

# SERPENTARIUS



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<http://Serpentari.us> N. E. Dix, Editor

## RealFur

By Cat Rambo

You may remember the ad campaigns, which they yanked hastily just as the trial began: a shot of a woman, damask skin and midnight hair, her back turned, against a red-draped background.

As the commercial begins, she has apparently just stepped naked from a fur coat, which lies pooled in silvery-grey folds around her feet. Looking over her shoulder with a Mona Lisa smile at the viewer, she dips her form and extends her hands to the fur, which surges upward to meet her touch. Like a cloak of furry snakes, it slides over her exquisite form, and she turns as it extends over her torso. Skin flashes, tantalizing, before the fur curves over it. So cool, so clean, so seductive.

"I believe," she informs us with a touch of hauteur. "In being pampered." She slides a palm along the fur, stroking it.

The fur lengthens as her hand passes over it, extending to calf-length. Her sculpted chin dips along the fur and the subtle soft grey darkens at the touch, like a monochromatic blush. Lifting her face, she gives the camera an orgasmic smile.

"Don't you deserve something real? RealFur. Because there's no luxury like life around you."

Scrolled across her belly:

<http://www.noluxurylikelife.com>.

The Yahoo Most-Mailed Photo of the Day featured her standing with the coat sliding slowly off her. Most of the media furor was manufactured, sponsored advertising hype: few people could afford the coats at 10k a pop.

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But Larry always had to have the latest thing for Libby. And because they had a two for one deal, he bought me, her sister, one as well.

At the time I lived in the back of the house, where I had my own little studio apartment, bathroom and kitchenette. Most of the time I was home with Libby; sometimes I went out running errands or working with one of the foundations that sometimes call me in. I'm a CPA, the sort you hire when everything else has failed, or if there are mysterious gaps in the database that need to be reconciled. I could afford my own place easily but this way I felt like part of the family. Larry hinted that he wouldn't mind me out, but he also liked the money I bring in -- the way I covered half the mortgage on his lakeside house. That was us, the New American Family.

The package arrived in a big brown truck, two large boxes labeled REALFUR™, which I signed for. They were addressed to Larry, so I left them in the hallway and went in to find Libby in the living room, staring out at the water.

I've always hated that room. It's the Land of Exotic Knickknacks, souvenirs from Thailand, Bali, Australia, Japan, Switzerland, all over the world. Larry's sole decorating criterion was that it not be American-made, and every time Libby suggested it might be updated, he'd whine ferociously until she

abandoned the thought.

"Larry got some packages," I said.

She pulled her attention back from the water and looked at me. "What sort?"

"Looks like two RealFurs."

"What? Those cost an arm and a leg."

I shrugged. "Latest thing," I said, my tone noncommittal.

She went into the hallway and looked at the boxes. Even the outside packaging was distinctive: glossy plastic coating with a metallic sheen, the logo like a sleek animal sprawled across the surface.

"I'm opening them," she said. "Well, one at least." The kitchen knife whispered through brightly colored packing tape. The Styrofoam pellets inside were the same color as the label.

"Nice packaging," I said, peering over her shoulder.

"Piss off," she said. "How much do you think he spent on this?"

"There's the bill of lading." I pointed.

She snatched it up and unfolded it. "Two for one deal," she said.

"What's the description?"

"Basic RealFur (lilac) and Basic RealFur (pink). Two complimentary feeding stations. Two manuals and certificates of ownership."

I pulled out the silvery sack. "Do you think this is RealFur (lilac) or RealFur (pink)?"

"There's only one way to find out."

The knife spoke again, and fur spilled out in lavish warmth. As the air struck it, it stirred, and Libby stepped back.

"Pink, evidently," I said.

She knelt and stretched a hand out to it. It rolled forward and rose to meet her touch like a cat arching its back into a caress.

"So soft," she said.

It crept forward to nuzzle her ankles.

"Will it become a coat now, I wonder?"

"I think it's waiting to be asked," I said, watching it.

She reached her hands down and it flowed

upward and along her shoulders. Her eyes closed, focusing on the sensation.

"It's warm," she said a little breathlessly. I paged through the manual. "It cleans itself through an electrostatic charge," I read. "You set the feeding station up in a corner of the closet you'll be keeping it in."

"Won't that smell?"

"It says it lives off protein molecules."

"That's pretty meaningless. What sort?"

"Doesn't say."

She stroked her bare forearm along the fur, eyes dreamy.

"It's like being hugged," she said. "So soft, so warm."

# # #

I found her that night asleep in front of CNN, the coat wrapped around her like a blanket. I shook her awake and left it there on the couch as I walked her off to bed. When I returned it came willing into my arms, soft and warm, stirring against my skin as though scenting it. As instructed, I laid it on the floor on the closet where its feeding station had been placed. They must have figured everyone who can afford one has a walk-in closet, I thought, amused.

Back in my own rooms, I opened the package to extract RealFur (lilac). Libby had claimed the pink without wanting to see this, but I thought I had gotten the better part of the deal. The subtle coloring enchanted me as it shaded to a deeper hue at the touch of my hands. I fell asleep with it layered around me like a cloak of feathers.

Every night that week I heard the rain, the delicious warmth of the RealFur around me in bed. Early every morning it release me to steal out and curl briefly around the rod of the feeding station, and then return to me, bright with heat and a little restive. I grew accustomed to that familiar warmth, the weight of the thick fur along my side.

Over the next few weeks, we took our coats

with us everywhere. No matter where we were in the house, they would be nearby or even at hand, coiled around our shoulders like companioning arms, or spread beneath us to shield us from the cold floor while we watched TV during the long hours while Larry was away at work. He laughed about it at first, but he took to hanging the coat up downstairs before coming to bed. He started turning the heat higher in the house as well; he and Libby followed each other from room to room, adjusting the thermostats.

I slept with mine each night. I kept my window open and listened to the rain, nestled in its warm embrace.

He offered to get her a kitten, but she said no.

"Are you offering to clean its litter box for me as well?" she asked, and he hemmed and hawed as she chuckled.

"Get me tickets to the Ballet instead." She wore the RealFur to it, and I wore mine. In the lobby, friends swarmed around us, caressing the coats. We had dressed to match them; Libby wore a shell pink dress and shaggy ivory boots, while I dressed in a more sedate eggplant colored pantsuit.

My friend Margery fingered the cuff, pinching the soft flesh between her fingers. The coat stirred and I pulled away.

"Doesn't it like being touched?" she asked.

I ran my hand along the front lapel and felt the warm swathe that stirred along it in my wake. "There are too many people here, it's making it nervous," I said. I made my way to a quieter part of the room and watched the two of them from a distance.

Larry kept one hand slid through the crook of Libby's elbow, her fingers intertwined with hers. He looked around, smiling and nodding to as many people as possible, while Libby focused all of her attention on each person as they spoke to her, leaving out the rest of the world. The fur framed her face. Mine settled in heavy warmth along my shoulders and pulsed slowly along my thighs, subtly nudging them apart.

Outside, the air was cold and crisp before we slid into the taxi back to Redmond. My coat cocooned me, smoothing itself out to catch any gaps.

"Well," said Larry, leaning forward to adjust the car's heating upward. "You two were certainly the belles of the ball with your furs."

"I love mine," Libby said dutifully. "Thank you again."

I kept quiet, pretending to be asleep. We were crossing the bridge across Lake Washington, and the Seattle lights glittered and guttered on the dark water.

# # #

Though I love her, I'd be the first to admit that my sister Libby is a flake. She reads her horoscope and watches for signs of it in her day; she believes in aromatherapy and Rainbow Paths. And I think it's one of the reasons Larry was attracted to her in the first place, that delicate nuance of belief he could mock in public and take comfort from in private. He insisted that she not work, but made sure to mention it around friends. He laughed at her for talking to her plants, but at the same time singing the praises of her vegetables to guests.

She named her RealFur Petunia. It gave Larry plenty of fodder.

"It's just a coat," he said. "You don't name your underwear, for Christ's sake."

She stroked the RealFur.

"It's Petunia," she said. "The Findhorns think you should name everything, even your appliances. We could name the refrigerator."

Larry marched through the kitchen, naming the appliances: "Freezy! Heaty! Washy! Blendy!" He turned, pointing at her where she stood with the fur wrapped around her. "Coatie!"

"Petunia," she said.

"It's ridiculous."

"It keeps me company."

He lapsed into silence, looking at her, and I was unsure whether to turn away and let them fight or not. They had argued about his hours all through the previous evening. She wanted time; he had none to give her.

"Would you give it up," he said very quietly, "if I stayed home more?"

She stoked the collar. "Find out."

# # #

But his hours didn't change – if anything, they grew longer. He was on the fast track, and pausing would have ended in his sliding off.

"Explain it to her, Pol," he begged me one night. "Tell her about the payoff."

"Are you planning on spending every day of your golden years in the Barbados?" I asked. "When do you know you have enough?"

He paced the kitchen. I was chopping vegetables to make potato soup. In the corner, my coat was draped over a chair. I noticed Larry avoided its proximity.

"I want to have enough to know I won't want for anything when I'm old," he said.

"Want as in hunger for, or want as in 'Hey, that would be nice to have in blue too?'"

He frowned at me. "I need this," he said. "I can't have kids."

"What does that have to do with the price of eggs?"  
"What?"

"It's an old saying. What does you not having kids have to do with anything?"

He gestured, vague and uncertain.

"Tell her," he said.

"And what do you want from her?"

"To give that thing up."

I turned and looked at my coat. "Thing?"

"I know you like yours, Pol. I'm not trying to interfere with you and it. But you don't like men or women, as far as I can tell, so you might as well have something. Maybe she could give it to you."

"Go away." My knife sliced across the onions, cutting them into perfect translucent arcs.

"Just talk to her."

"I said go away!"

The onion smell hung heavy on my hands, so I washed and dried them before picking up the coat. I

slung it around my shoulders and passed my cheek along it.

Libby sat in a rocking chair near the living room window, wrapped in pale pink fur. The sky was gray with rain, and whitecaps scudded on the lake.

I went to stand by her, and tendrils of our coats reached out to each other, tangled like intimate snakes. I wound my fingers through her long hair.

"He wants you to get rid of it."

"I know."

"He'll just keep on pushing."

"I know that too, Pol." She leaned her head against my hip. The room was dimly lit from the hallway light. Our coats undulated against each other.

# # #

Later, I realized that he must have planned it in advance – why else would he have had the can of gasoline there already waiting for him? He poured it over the coat and for the first time I heard it make a sound, an ultrasonic keen that brought Libby towel-wrapped from her bath.

My own coat pulled me along to the scene of the crime.

He interposed his body between her and the coat, and flicked his lighter aflicker. He threw it with a twist of his wrist and the RealFur screamed again as it erupted in flames, writhing on the tiled floor, leaving greasy black marks in an accusing calligraphy.

I couldn't tell if mine was pulling me forward or back; it convulsed on my shoulders.

"I had a hard day at the office," he said. He had an arm wrapped firmly around Libby, holding her in place as she keened, as she hunched forward in vain. The coat spasmed, thick black smoke snaking from it. The smell was terrible. "A man needs to blow off a little steam."

She struck at him, but he held her wrist with an indulgent strength. My coat moved me forward, towards him, and he half-turned, still holding onto

Libby by the wrist.

It slid from my shoulders and slithered up his legs with a terrible, sinuous speed. He was enveloped in pale lilac fur, a bag of it, stumbling around the kitchen trying to free himself.

After five minutes, the bag slumped to its knees; at the eight minute mark it fell over entirely. At ten, it slid from him and crept towards me. I gathered it in my arms. Petunia smoldered on the floor.

# # #

The police have not outright accused Libby or I of engineering the RealFur's act. By the time they got there, we had hidden it in the garden shed. They found it, of course, and took it into custody. They will not say what will happen to it, but the possibility of destroying it has been mentioned. They let me go visit it at one point and take it its feeding station; it lapped about me in velvety, inarticulate warmth as my tears fell on its blanched fur.

Libby would not come in with me, but waited outside in the car.

"How is it?" she asked, starting the car.

"Fine. Very pale."

She nodded.

We drove away into the silvery gray rain, its tendrils creeping along the windshield. I blew my nose and looked forward, unable to make out more than a glimmer of lights through my tears.

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# RealFur

No Luxury Like Life

## Looking For...

... a student or amateur designer looking for a project. We need a unique magazine template for future editions of Serpentarius Magazine. While this will be a paid gig, it will be an on-spec process. Submissions will be closed March 15<sup>th</sup> 2008, and the winning entry will have a design byline in every future issue, plus a \$100 payment for winning the contest.

... submissions for Volume 2 of Serpentarius Magazine. We have a couple of items picked up from the first round of submissions purchased for the second volume, but we'll need more. We offer professional pay rates. The submission window will be short this time, because of the sheer volume of high-quality entries that inundated us the first time around. We are looking for poetry, short fiction, flash fiction, articles and reviews. Watch the website, Duotrope and Ralan's for the next submission window.

... artists to provide color and/or black & white images for future issues. Compensation includes a byline and payment. We prefer one artist per issue, with a preference for new breakout artists. Check the website for more information.

## You May Find This Hard to Believe

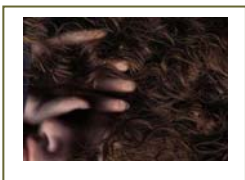
By John Grey

Once it was the people that moved  
 while the sidewalk stayed rigid.  
 You couldn't just say,  
 "The Gigaplex Building"  
 or three blocks north then right  
 at the Helium Station.  
 There had to be something in your head,  
 other than a program,  
 that resolved direction by instinct or memory,  
 with no master plan in that low grade ganglion,  
 just rubber soles under feet and a liking for self-propulsion.  
 Of course, folks had bodies then,  
 muscle and bone, and hands to greet strangers,  
 necks to turn heads as enemies passed.  
 It was the age of fossil fuels and fossil fools.  
 No one was energy then,  
 just complaints when they had none.



## Low Orbit

By F. J. Bergmann



The eyes of the ground take flight;  
 pinpoint sparks soar above the sea of air.  
 Flying fish of light leap over the prow of the world,  
 silent upon a peak of vacuum and cloud,  
 flowing motionless while substance streams beneath,  
 and distance recedes and blurs at the horizon.  
 Half-gods, radiant in the awareness of a closer star,  
 floating in the divine haze of information,  
 gleam against the well of less reachable illumination.  
 They record the intimacies of weather, warmth and warfare,  
 permit access to the temporal and eternal, omniscient  
 and utterly powerless  
 to intervene.

## Self-Made Man

By Erik Williams

No, no one is sitting here. Go ahead and pull up a seat.

Nice night, isn't it? I find myself coming out here all the time. Best place to look at stars on a clear night, this park. Quiet, too.

Go ahead and drink. I won't judge. I understand I'm one of the few that comes here at night to do something other than drink. Hard times, huh?

What was that you said?

Oh don't worry about it. A lot of people ask me about my scars. Lots of scars and lots of stitching that'll become scars. Yes indeed, my body has required a lot of work. But it's made me the man I am.

No, it's not from plastic surgery. You're going to have trouble believing this but I'm a self-made man.

Oh, I'm being serious. You see, what sits before you is the man I created. Piece by piece. Part by part.

Ha, ha. No, I'm not drunk. But I understand your questions. Hell, when I say it I'm not sure I believe it. But I'm the one who gave me the power to speak so I know it's true.

Go ahead, have your laugh. I don't mind. Finished? Good.

The truth is when I arrived on this planet I was just a small little thing. That's how all of us arrive. We infiltrate and assemble our bodies piece by piece.

Yeah, it sounds ridiculous but it's true.

*"A lot of people ask me about my scars. Lots of scars and lots of stitching that'll become scars."*



We don't have the technology yet to change into what we want. Metamorphosis would save us a hell of a lot of time. We're great assemblers, though. Once we get all the parts we fit right in. Then reproduce. Then conquer. Kind of like a virus.

No, I'm not high.

Why? Well, I'm not a decision maker. I just go where I'm ordered. But the powers-that-be definitely want this planet. Sent a lot of us in the first wave.

Yes, I'm being serious. I'm a self-made human, through-and-through.

Well, from other people of course. Where else would I get the parts? It's taken longer than I thought, though. Still have a piece or two missing.

Where are you off to? Must you go? Please stay.

Now you just sit calmly and I won't hurt you more than I have to. I just need your help.

Scream one more time and I'll take more than I need.

That's better. I don't know why you're resisting so much. Your whole civilization's going to be gone within a month anyway.

What is it I need? Well, let's just say I'm not completely a man, know what I mean?

Now what'd I tell you? You've forced me to take more than I wanted. But I guess a few spares won't hurt.

Well, it won't hurt me.

## Streetwalker

By Guy Anthony De Marco

Darkness came forth, blossoming from empty spaces, spreading between buildings and cars. The city fought back, defending itself with the artificial glow of neon and the dead-pallor of yellowed mercury-vapor streetlights.

Walker watched the scene with dread and hope. Sore, his back stiff from sleeping on a concrete bench surrounded by pictures of teeth (Dr. Wharton's Dentistry -- Don't make a mountain out of a molar!), he pulled himself up and crumpled his still-warm newspaper blanket into a large ball. The arcing shot made the half-empty trash bin. His stomach rumbled in a successful attempt at gaining his attention.

Walker didn't really like cities. There were too many people, and the ones he didn't want to meet were the ones he usually ran into when the darkness came. He put on his best pissed-off axe murderer face and pushed east, trying to lessen the time between now and when the sun would rise.

The path his feet chose took him past the Chicken Shack and the hole in the wall Chinese food joint. He glanced over his shoulder, then ducked down the gang-tagged path between the crumbling buildings towards the dumpster, dodging xylophone-sided cats and other hungry vermin. Walker still had his pride, but his hunger made a convincing argument. No food meant no energy, and no energy meant he was a target.

Luck didn't fail him today. Two unopened containers of white rice, twelve crushed fortune cookies, twenty mixed packets of duck sauce and sweet and sour -- a virtual feast. Walker crammed them into his Army surplus overcoat and set off to find a place to enjoy the bounty. He wouldn't starve, but his body was screaming for bloody meat. The aroma of chicken and pork wafted through the oil-soaked reinforced metal screens on the back door of the Chinese restaurant, accompanied by the staccato jabbering of take-out orders coming in on a



speakerphone. He forced himself to walk past, into the covering darkness.

The east end of the city sported the low-income folks, most living day-to-day on minimum wage jobs or worse. Once in a while Walker would spot a high-end import cruising for hookers. The girls, their wares displayed in Japanese schoolgirl minis and black lace corsets, kept the occupants and visitors from paying attention. Walker's mix of olive-drab and black clothes allowed him to blend with the grime and trash; a permanent background fixture, as invisible as a rusting, piss-stained fire hydrant.

He was concentrating so hard on being inconspicuous that he didn't notice he was gaining ground on a pitch-haired person wearing all black. When she finally turned around in a fury to scream, "Leave me the FUCK ALONE!" he jumped backwards in alarm.

Her pale, ghostly face and running mascara gave the illusion of sunken eye sockets on a gnawed unearthed skull. They both stopped, nerves alert and ready for fight or flight, waiting for the other to attack.

She broke first. "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not, I didn't even know you were there until you yelled. You scared the shit outta me." He could feel her fear, the familiar electric ants crawling up the nerves in his arms and legs. He felt aroused from the rush.

They sized each other up for a minute. One of her hands stayed in the left pocket of her snorkel



jacket. Walker couldn't smell gun oil, so he assumed she had a knife. He stepped backwards, giving her more space. She kept herself in a defensive posture.

"I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

Walker attempted a weak smile. "Yeah, kid, no problem. Who was following you?"

She started to retreat, and stepped on part of a broken beer bottle. She almost fell, arms flailing wild until she recovered her balance. Walker had to will himself not to advance and steady her. The girl's hands were empty; no knife.

"Well, you can go now."

Angsty PMS teenagers. "My apologies. Good night." He crossed the street, while she slid under a streetlight for added protection. Walker smiled at her naïveté.

He felt her watching him for half a block before she doubled back. He began to chuckle at his reaction from a teenaged Goth Girl. Cities at night always gave him the willies, more so since he met so many predators in hi-top Nike knockoffs. *Funny*, his mental alter-ego said, *since it used to be your favorite time and place to be with your wife and kid.*

Walker replaced his axe-murderer expression with true roiling anger. His primal brain had crossed the mental line he avoided at all costs. It knew better than to think about his family when he was awake -- it had free reign during his fitful sleeping periods, but the night was his time to be in charge.

He prepared himself to torture the voices in his head. The Macarena should work, coupled with picturing people doing the stupid viral dance.

He heard a faint echo over the humming electric transformers and the *tink-tink-tink* of moths beating themselves against yellow streetlight bulbs. It was the Goth Girl's voice: "Leave me the FUCK ALONE!"

Echoes shouldn't be delayed so long, the voices said, desperate to prevent Hey, Macarena

from playing. He slowed his pace, and he heard her again. He ducked into an empty doorway, blending into the brick fresco, thick nails digging into the lead paint on the rotted doorframe. He peeked around the corner, back the way he came.

Goth Girl was standing under another streetlamp, but it had lost whatever repelling power she had hoped for. Two leather-clad toughs, zippers scintillating, angled around her. She repeated the warning, her voice sounding scared and small. Their eyes never left her, backs arched and ready to pounce. Predators. Eaters of the weak. Meat.

Walker hugged the darkness he had earlier cursed. He carefully emptied his pockets, stacking the dumpster banquet below the rust-stained mailboxes. The three youths circled each other; the two males confident, the girl's breath rapid and visible in the cooling night air.

Walker thought his boots sounded as though they had amplifiers hidden in their heels, but the trio was too involved in their own dance to hear his slow approach.

Before he was in striking distance, the men pounced. She fought hard, scratching someone's face with her French manicure. They dragged her, kicking and biting, into the alley between two run-down tenements. Walker stopped by the mouth of the narrow passage, his senses straining, his heart pounding. Careful and practiced, he removed his overcoat and shirt and placed them on the graffiti-covered sidewalk.

"You fucking bitch, you don't diss me like that in front of my friends," said the bigger male, followed by the unmistakable sound of an open palm hitting a cheek -- a sound he had heard much too often on his travels. "I say when you're not my girl, not you. When I'm done, nobody will want what's left."

More thuds as his hand turned into a fist. Walker heard the air forced from her lungs; heard one rib breaking from the onslaught. Her crying

and muffled Fuck You's were overridden by the snick of a blade and the tearing of clothes.

"We'll teach you, you fucking whore. You're getting what you deserve." The shorter one had a high-pitched voice, obviously not the alpha. More punches, the rasping of zippers. Her bra floated out of the alleyway, settling next to a one-armed abandoned Barbie balanced precariously on a storm drain.

Enough!

Walker didn't know he said it aloud. He entered the alley, taking in the situation in one sweep of his gold-flecked eyes. Goth Girl, pert breasts rising and falling, nipples the same color as the bruises flowering from her ribcage, lay spread-eagled and helpless, drifting in and out of consciousness. She was a sacrifice on the altar of lust. The two men stood over her, their pants open, frozen like bucks in headlights.

The Alpha recovered quickest. He pointed his stainless steel butterfly knife at the intruder. "This ain't your fight, hobo. Get out or we'll do worse to you."

"Or we'll do worse to you," parroted the other, whose tenor voice cracked. "Jesus, this fucking guy is huge."

Walker stood still, arms bowed slightly. His breathing intensified, his arms and chest swelled with adrenaline-fueled anticipation. The glow of the streetlight backlit his hairy outline; his thick musk wafted to every corner, overpowering the stench emitting from the rotting contents of the garbage cans lining the alleyway.

The two thugs faltered, confused by the rapid switch from predator to prey. Walker smiled, his elongated incisors slick with Pavlovian saliva.

Alpha advanced, his knife hand steady. He was used to midnight duels, and he won most of them.

*"This ain't your fight, hobo. Get out or we'll do worse to you."*

The bum was on his turf, another positive. The knifepoint feinted, went left instead of right in a well-practiced move. Walker watched Alpha's eyes, and reacted just enough for the blade to slice only air. His smile widened, a Cheshire cat playing with his food before he got down to deadly business.

Alpha retreated, surprised his blade was dry and the bum was still standing. Doubt began to vine throughout his thoughts; a kudzu blocking out the light of reason.

The shorter punk watched, hands shaking and legs petrified in fear, waiting to see which dangerous animal would be victorious, a spectator to the gladiatorial struggle. "Stick him, man."

The wind shifted; night air penetrated the protective labyrinth of the cityscape. Walker felt the change, probed the scents for new dangers. He braced himself for another attack.

The Alpha came in low, waiting for his opponent to flinch. Walker stood his ground, the Vibram soles of his worn and scuffed combat boots dug into the layer of grime on the concrete. He watched the knife blade arc upwards, a move meant to disembowel.

Again, Walker's gaze never left Alpha's eyes. He side-stepped; his right arm hooked under his attacker's elbow and directed the knife into empty space. He pushed hard with his left hand, forcing his opponent to lose his balance and drop the butterfly knife.

The thug was tiring. Walker could almost hear Alpha's heart pounding a tattoo underneath the motorcycle jacket. He felt the rasping breath from exertion, tinged with cheap hamburgers and cheaper booze, and muscles fueled by fear. Walker knelt down, retrieved the knife, and snapped the blade at the handle. His eyes bored into Alpha's, and watched as the realization spread that this was a fight he could not win.

Walker felt a stabbing pain in his lower back.

He whirled around as the two reports from the mini .22-caliber derringer chased each other in echoes around the enclosed alleyway. A gunpowder cloud spread from the shorter thug's hand. Walker coiled and leapt, covering the fifteen meters in one bound to land on the punk's chest. Rage pounded through his veins as Walker bit down on his victim's throat, his nails penetrating the leather jacket through the back like an arrow through rice paper, his fingers seeking and puncturing the heart. The kill was clean and quick, the meat wouldn't be spoiled.

Walker heard the Alpha scream, a guttural cry of despair and fear of an impending death. In another lifetime, when Walker hunted rabbits with a rifle, he heard a similar scream; the death cry always sounded like a baby to him.

He picked up the ragged body and threw it at the Alpha. Blood splattered over the worn bricks, the ones spared from a tagger's paint greedily sucked in the plasma. The aim accurate, the bigger thug collapsed from the fury of the pitch and the dead weight of his friend.

Walker loped over to the struggling man; the Alpha veneer stripped away, pants wet from emptying his bladder, unable to escape. Walker lifted the body up and smashed it down again, not sure whose bones broke in the process. Up and down, five, ten times. The taller thug's head looked misshapen when he was done, one side dented in, cerebrospinal fluid leaking from one ear.

Hunger overcame his senses, and Walker bent over the bodies, tore the clothes off and began to gorge on their still-warm corpses.

In fifteen minutes, it was difficult to recognize the remains as human. The adrenaline rush faded, but the thrill still lingered. His senses began to readjust, and he heard a strangled gasp from the Goth Girl.

He crept towards her, the familiar hunt mentality taking over again. He took in her exposed breasts heaving, blue eyes wide with

terror, heart calling rhythmically. Walker licked his lips, his lust rising. He smelled her musk, calling to him with invisible pheromones. She was his, he was the new Alpha, her body his to dominate.

"Help me," she barely whispered.

Walker stopped. The predator left as fast as it had arrived. He looked down at the terrified woman, the voices in his brain reminding him what he was about to do. Shame-faced, he stepped back, his body shaking.

He continued backtracking down to the alley entrance and picked up his shirt and coat. He approached again, and tossed the shirt to her. "Put this on and get out. Get away from here, and don't come back. I can't control myself sometimes." One tear ran down his face, mingling with other people's blood. "I may kill you without knowing it if I see you again."

Walker turned and left her, too petrified to cover herself with his dirty shirt.

# # #

Walker hated cities. He always met the wrong types. His stomach churned and gurgled, his hunger sated and his karma reduced to a new low.

His boots pointed east again; he would need a new shirt and a way to clean the blood off of his jeans. If he could retain some humanity when he changed, perhaps he could remember to do the small things, like keep the money in his prey's wallets.

He knew he was going to have a chat with his unruly brain as he walked on. The voices knew better than to bring up the subject of his past victims.

*Yes, the voices answered, but this time we kept you from killing another little girl.*

He punished it with a rousing chorus of *It's a Small World After All.*

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## Home, Home on the Brain

By Chet Gottfried

Terry Rickenbacher was late. Jumping out of his car, he took a shortcut under a massive hemlock and never felt the alien fall on top of his head.

Terry had broken three cardinal rules: He (1) ignored the sign stating "do not walk under the hemlock between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m.," (2) let himself be captured by an alien, and (3) made a date with a co-worker, Martha Bishop. Nevertheless, he entered Jack's Bar and Grill with a light heart and didn't hear the alien say, "I claim this Earth beast in the name of Wertheim Consolidated." Nor did Terry feel the prick in his scalp when the alien stuck a tiny flagpole on his head or realize that his life would be measured in miles instead of years.

Terry saw the object of his advancement sitting on a tall stool and leaning against the bar.

"Hi, Martha. Sorry I'm late."

"No problem," she slurred. "Glad you could make it."

Martha Bishop was a short, cute, energetic blonde with sharp white teeth and a delicious bite. Or so went the office rumor at Owl International, where they both worked. Owl had a stranglehold on producing instructor manuals for textbook publishers. Terry churned out two manuals a day, and Martha was a production manager.

Sitting next to her, Terry wondered whether he should kiss Martha hello. He said, "There's a woman outside standing upside down with her head in a bucket."

"That's Lisa," Martha said, as if that

explained the whole situation: Anyone knowing Lisa would expect to find her outside a bar with her head in a bucket.

"Right." Terry wondered whether he should put his arm around her--that is, when he kissed her hello. He thought a small peck on her cheek should be okay. Or was that too cautious? He didn't want to appear cautious.

Martha designed the templates for Owl's writers. Two years ago, half of them couldn't figure out her templates. She had sworn to make it 100 percent by the next version. Her employment would be ensured for a hundred years, a noted achievement at a company which shed workers faster than Microsoft issued updates.

The key to Martha's template was her private notes, which she sold on the sly. Her prices were high and not always in dollars. Hushed voices spoke of latex clothing and of whips and feathers. Terry didn't know whether he was fully prepared for the Martha experience, but he was willing to try.

For his big date, Terry had bought a new shirt, new shoes, and new underwear and went to a salon to have his hair trimmed and his nails shaped.

Going for the kiss, he was zeroing in on her neck when she turned to face him.

"What will you have?" she asked.

Terry stumbled but saved himself from falling by grabbing her waist and ended up with his head on her lap.

"That comes later," Martha said. "What will you have to drink?"

Blushing, Terry got back on his stool and stuttered an apology.

"Forget it," she said. "Forget everything. This is a celebration, and I'm buying. After six years I finally got the nerve to give my notice."

"You're quitting Owl?" The blood drained from his face.

"That's right."

He watched his future prospects dissolve into

*"Martha Bishop was a short, cute, energetic blonde with sharp white teeth and a delicious bite."*

gray spirals. "I could use a drink."

"Hey Jack!" Martha yelled.

The bartender came over, and she ordered two margaritas. "With extra salt on the rim."

"Extra salt?" Terry asked.

"Yeah. They like it."

"Who's they?" Terry reached for a pretzel in a bowl, but Martha stopped him. "You don't want to eat the pretzels. Believe me, don't touch the pretzels. They do things to you. Stick with the peanuts."

Terry ate some peanuts. "They're horrible. Can the pretzels be any worse?" Then he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror opposite the bar. "I have a flag sticking up out of my hair."

"Yeah," Martha said. "You've been claimed."

"Yes, Earth thing. You are now the property of one of the greatest interstellar corporations: Wertheim Consolidated. Have some more peanuts."

Terry removed the flag and tossed it on the bar. "Strong drink. I'm hearing voices."

Someone grabbed Terry's shoulders and swung him around. Terry stared at a businessman whose face was a serious shade of green.

"Give me a bag," the stranger begged. "I'm going to be sick."

"Hey," Terry said weakly.

Martha handed the guy a plastic bag.

"Thanks." The stranger disappeared into the men's room.

Terry said, "Why is it that in every bar . . . well, at least he had the decency not to throw up on us."

"Vomiting is perfectly natural. It is also quite profitable. It's what you Earth things are best at. We look forward to your having many long and fruitful regurgitations."

Terry's eyes bulged as he stared at Martha. "How can you say that?"

"It's our version of what you could call ambergris. It's the basis of a most delightful perfume that drives most races absolutely ecstatic. You would not believe how popular

it is. Or how much people are willing to pay for it."

"Your lips aren't moving," Terry told Martha.

"It's your alien who's doing the talking. You know, the one who planted the flag."

"I threw away the flag."

"But you still have an alien on top of your head," she said.

"No longer on top," the alien announced cheerfully. "I've burrowed deep inside your brain. I had to attach lots of wires. There are also rooms to excavate. Eat some more peanuts."

Instead of the peanuts, Terry grabbed and downed his drink. "What does it want?"

"Relax, Terry," Martha said. "It's not as if he wants to turn you into a spaceship or anything. Talk to the fellow. I'm sure you'll be interested in his proposal."

Terry sighed. "What do you want?"

"A productive relationship, Earth thing," the alien said.

"I have a name. I'm Terry Rickenbacher."

"I'm Bob."

"Bob? That doesn't sound like an alien name. Is it short for anything?"

"Yeah. Robert. But you can call me Bob. Everyone else does."

"Okay, Bob. Listen to this: Get out of my head!"

"Too late, Earth thing. I mean, Terry. I've already claimed you in the name of our wonderful corporation."

"I'm not something to be claimed. I'm a sentient being."

"A native sentient being? On Earth? I am surprised. I must write a memo. First, however, you wouldn't mind answering a few questions. It is a perfectly straightforward matter to prove whether one is sentient."

"Go ahead. Fire away." Terry made his living by writing and answering questions. His topics included everything from quantum mechanics to child rearing.

"Very well. If you left your home at 8 a.m. and reached Triton by 2 p.m., how fast was your ship traveling?"

"Well ..."

Bob muttered to himself, "Subject doesn't understand simple mathematics."

"Wait a minute," Terry said.

"Perhaps you'd prefer if I limited the questions to facts about your planet?"

"That would be a lot better," Terry said.

"Fine. How many protons are in a kilogram of iron?"

Martha said, "Don't look at me, Terry. You're supposed to be the expert."

"Six trillion," Terry guessed.

Bob muttered, "Doesn't have grasp of basic physics."

Terry complained, "That's not what would be considered typical Earth knowledge."

"Would a history question be fair?"

"Of course."

"Who discovered America?"

"Christopher Columbus--wait a mo, I meant Leif Eiriksson--but Bjarni Herjolfsson sighted the shores first. Actually, Paleo-Indians: the Clovis peoples."

"No, no, no. Emmanuel Wertheim discovered America."

"Who's Emmanuel Wertheim?"

"He led the first expedition to Earth and then went on to found our company, the glorious Wertheim Consolidated. Every schoolchild on Pesumacia knows that." Bob then muttered, "Unaware of basic history. Sentiency highly doubtful."

"Okay," Terry said, "I don't know that stuff. But you can't use me as if I were a slave."

Bob sounded shocked. "Of course not. You'll be paid a good rate. Twenty-five zcotes for each 'event,' which is above minimum wage, given your intelligence."

"Twenty-five zcotes?"

"That's right," Bob said. "Your money is deposited directly into an account at Haycon, a very trustworthy bank."

"How do I withdraw the money?"

"You go to the bank." Bob laughed.

"That was a joke. No one ever goes to Haycon. It's somewhat dangerous in that region. You will be paid just like everyone

else is paid: You receive your check by mail."

"Does it take long?"

"A typical transit was 215 years, but we've cut the paperwork, and it now only takes 15 months before receiving your first check. That is, 15 months after you file Form X2300, Animate Conveyor."

"Where do I get--oh, never mind."

"Never fear," Bob said. "Your money will accumulate until you complete the paperwork. Of course, taxes will be deducted automatically."

Terry asked the bartender, "Do you accept zcotes?"

"Sometimes," Jack replied. "Personally, I prefer being paid in dotmards."

"How could this have happened?" Terry exclaimed while holding his head.

Jack shrugged. "Dotmards were always a more stable currency."

Terry pointed to Martha. "You set me up."

"It's your own fault," Martha said. "You didn't have to take the shortcut under the hemlock tree. There's even a sign saying not to take the shortcut. You should pay attention to signs. Hemlock cones open in daylight, and you never know what kind of alien is going to fall out of one. For the most part, people wind up with aliens from the Wertheim Corporation, like Bob. I got stuck with a Nungesser sales rep." She shuddered. "You never want a Nungesser living in your head. Talk about alien . . ."

"You walked under the hemlock?"

Martha nodded.

Jack added, "Everyone does. Sometimes I wonder why I ever bothered making the warning sign. The sign seems to attract them. It's a fiendish alien trick, to put out a warning sign that attracts more victims."

"All I need," Martha said, "is one more recruit, and I'm through. My term of contract ends, and I'll be free of the Nungesser."

"I can do that," Terry said. "I can bring lots of people. Do you hear that, Bob?"

"Fine and dandy," Bob said, "but you can't leave Wertheim that easily. We're different

in Wertheim. We care for our Earth beasts."

The bartender reached from under the counter and gave Terry a bunch of plastic bags and strainers.

"I don't need these," Terry declared. Then his vision swam around and he felt his bile rising. "Maybe I do." He grabbed the bags.

"Don't forget the strainers," Bob said. "Freight can be pretty expensive, so we only want to send the good stuff."

Terry said, "There has to be a way out of this."

"Of course there is," Jack said.

"Don't tell him," Bob begged.

"He'll never accept. He doesn't look the type."

"But he might."

The bartender nodded his head. "Yeah, he might at that."

"I might what?" Terry asked.

"You can stand in the sun upside down with your head in a bucket. After a couple of hours, Bob will fall off."

"Why would he fall off?" Terry asked.

"We pour two bottles of vodka in the bucket. These aliens talk big, but they can't hold their liquor. But it has to be potato vodka. Nothing else will do."

Terry groaned. "How much does it cost?"

"The vodka is cheap enough," Jack said.

"I can let you have it for 50 dollars."

"That's okay."

Jack put a bucket on the counter. "The bucket costs another 600 dollars."

"This is a scam. That looks like an ordinary bucket that I'd get from Wal-Mart for 4.95 . . . plus tax."

"You see," Jack said triumphantly.

"Nobody knows about buckets anymore. I bet you don't even know what 'galvanized' means. You'd stick your head in a plastic bucket and waste your time." The bartender shook his head from side to side. "All they know is plastic."

"Do you take credit cards?" Terry asked.

"Cash and carry only. I don't want to spend my life battling credit card companies once you're free of Bob."

"I'll get a cash advance and come right back," Terry said. "Wait a minute. I can't move. My legs are numb. What's happening to me?"

Bob said, "Earth thing is too valuable to be permitted to wander about. I have immobilized you for your own well-being. Of course, if regurgitation is necessary, I will release the safety latch so you can go to the men's room."

Terry said bitterly, "So I wouldn't even be able to walk outside and stand upside down in a bucket."

"Don't give it a thought," Jack replied. "I'd carry you for another 200 dollars and place you in the bucket."

"Will you take me to a credit card terminal?"

"Naw," Jack said. "That's way too far."

"I'll help," Martha said. "Give me your credit cards, write down your passwords, and I'll bring back the money."

"Can I trust you?"

"No," she laughed.

Terry heard a buzzing inside his head.

"What are you doing, Bob?"

"Ninety percent of your brain is useless material. I am removing the excess to make accommodations for my family."

Grabbing his wallet, Terry put a half-dozen credit cards on the counter and wrote down his passwords. "Please hurry."

"Relax." Martha stood up. "I won't be long. In the meantime, have some more peanuts." She walked out quickly.

"I don't like peanuts," Terry complained, but he chewed some all the same. "They still taste terrible. Do you think she'll come back?"

"Not to worry," said Bob. "Those peanuts will make you wealthy, because they have the key ingredient which reacts with your blood. The antibodies in type A blood are perfect for

producing Earth thing ambergris."

"But I don't have type A."

"You don't?" The alien sounded shocked. "Maybe you have type O?"

"I'm type B. I don't have type A antibodies."

"Major disappointment," Bob said. "You can throw up from now to nova, but you'll never produce any ambergris. What a waste. And I created such a lovely dining room."

"You'll leave my body?" Terry asked hopefully. "You made a mistake."

"The Wertheim Corporation never makes any mistakes. Listen, Earth thing Terry, we have an alternative. Jack, bring out the beans."

The bartender put a large plate of refried beans on the counter.

Terry's arm moved of its own accord, and he took a handful of the beans and began swallowing them. He no longer felt sick, but he did feel decidedly peculiar. "My skin is drying out."

"Earth things have a remarkable digestive system. With these beans, you will develop an efficient propulsion system. After your skin hardens, you will be suitable for deep space."

It was difficult for Terry to talk. His entire body was becoming rigid. "You . . . turn . . . me . . . spaceship?"

"That's right," Bob said cheerfully. "We're turning you into a spaceship. You won't be a very good spaceship, but we can carry Wertheim board members to the inner planets."

Martha never came back to Jack's Bar and Grill.

Three days later, a bottle of champagne smashed against his head, and the SS Terry Rickenbacher, with accommodation for twelve adult Pesumacians, or six adults and eighteen children, began touring the solar system.

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## Serpentarius Magazine

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## Editor Blues

By N. E. Dix

It's quite amazing to find your email system overflowing with submissions. Each submission encapsulates the best of an author's work, steeped in the hopes for another (or a first) sale. For the paid markets, there are only a couple of venues, so the competition is tough.

One of the goals of Serpentarius Magazine is to provide a paid short-fiction/poetry market that is accessible to unpublished authors who are ready to break into the pro markets. This issue includes two stories from professional authors: one Science Fiction Writers of America member, and one Horror Writers Association member. We want to make sure we leave at least one slot open for those who we feel are ready to break into pro status. Eventually, we'd like to see Serpentarius Magazine as an accepted qualifying market for the SFWA and HWA. This is not the main focus of the magazine, but a good side benefit-to-be.

We'd like to include at least one professional author in each issue. Let's face it; a recognizable name will bring eyeballs to the pages. With any luck, new readers will discover new authors, and begin or continue the name-recognition cycle for our contributors.

Thank you for reading the first issue of Serpentarius. We'd appreciate your feedback, both good and bad, sent to [editor@serpentari.us](mailto:editor@serpentari.us).

Nancy E. Dix,  
Senior Editor

## Contributor Bylines

*"Make it interesting. If the characters do not change, there is no story."*

F.J. Bergmann lives in Wisconsin and at [fibtz.com](http://fibtz.com). She writes poetry and science fiction, often simultaneously. She claims to have an MFA from the School of the Americas. One of her pseudopodia can reach all the way from the bed to the refrigerator. Her hairstyle is deceptive.

Cat Rambo's collaboration with Jeff VanderMeer, *THE SURGEON'S TALE AND OTHER STORIES*, is now available on her website (<http://www.kittywumpus.net>) or from [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). She is the co-editor of *FANTASY MAGAZINE*. Her hair is rarely its natural color.

Guy Anthony De Marco writes from a ranch in Colorado, surrounded by fuzzy beasts and the ghosts of history.

Over the years, Chet Gottfried placed stories in Issac Asimov's, *Aboriginal SF*, *Baen's Universe*, *Read by Dawn*, *Deep Magic*, a novel by *Space & Time*, and the *Grantville Gazette*. He is an active member of the SFWA.

Erik Williams says, "I've published short stories at [From the Asylum](#), [Black Ink Horror](#) (upcoming), [The MagusZine](#) (upcoming), [Dark Recesses Press](#) (upcoming) and [GUD](#) (upcoming). Not a large list of accomplishments but my wife seems to be impressed."

John Grey's latest book is "What Else Is There" from *Main Street Rag*. He has been published recently in *Agni*, *Weird Tales*, *Worcester Review*, *South Carolina Review* and *The Pedestal*.

Kerushi Mangetsu is currently working on two web comics. Her style is heavily influenced by Asian cultures.

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