



*Redstone Science Fiction*

*April 2012*

*#23*

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*Rahul Kanakia ~ Jacob A. Boyd }*

Cover Art by Michael Ray

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## Editor's Note

by Michael Ray

We are excited to have two returning authors and a new friend in Redstone SF this month.

First, we welcome back Rahul Kanakia, whose first RSF story, [Death's Flag Is Never At Half-Mast](#), appeared in our August 2010 edition. (I love that story). He has written another excellent piece, [An Early Adoption](#), which involves, among many other thought-provoking ideas, the concept of constructing, coding really, our own reality and just how real we may want it to be.

Our in-house essayist, Henry Cribbs, returns to Redstone with his usual flair. This month he considers the Disney version of John Carter, [Barsoom Busted? The Foibles of Following Fiction with Film](#), which completes the circuit he began with his essay in RSF #1, [Barsoom or Bust!: The Lasting Influence of \*The Martian Tales\*](#) – and brings in *The Hunger Games* for good measure.

Our other story this month is a compelling piece, [Men and Their Toy](#) by Jacob A. Boyd. We receive submissions involving assassins or sexbot androids or gangsters and certainly involving revenge. But Jacob puts them all together in heart-wrenching fashion. Read this one, you'll be glad you did.

The code on the cover, by the way, spells out Redstone Science Fiction in binary. I was quite pleased with myself over that one.

Your friend,  
Michael Ray  
Editor  
Redstone SF

# An Early Adoption

by Rahul Kanakia

At noon, I noticed the elephant flapping its wings outside the window of my third-story apartment. When it caught my eye, the elephant trumpeted, “Do I have the honor of speaking to Chandrani Mehta?”

I slid open the window. “Keep it down,” I whispered. “Who coded you? I’m going to file a harassment report.” The elephant carried a luscious howdah: a tall, golden throne surrounded by awnings and cushions of red velvet that trailed down into the street. Down below, two pedestrians slowed down, glanced up, and then hurried away from this great, big trainwreck of unreality.

The elephant flapped its wings to remain in place, but the wingbeats were leisurely when they should’ve been hummingbird fast and the featherless wings—although massive—were much smaller than they ought to have been. This *thing* was not only unreal; it wasn’t even self-consistent!

It said, “My mistress has seconded me to you for the day. When the appointed time arrives, you have only to step onto my back and I will convey you to her palace.”

“Your mist—Maya sent you?” How just like a newcomer.

I pulled out my phone and used a disincorporation app to erase the elephant from existence. Normally, it would be considered shockingly rude to destroy a friend’s creation, but Maya clearly had no understanding of ordinary politeness.

With the elephant gone, I breathed easier. Maybe no one from the building had even noticed it? Still, I opened my phone to send a note of apology and explanation to my building, and saw Linda’s message: *Hey Maya and Sureel, I’m sorry I’m not going to be able to make it to tonight’s dinner. Last night my mother screwed up her home’s settings, and I’m going to have to spend all day helping her reconstruct it.*

A naked lie, of course. She’d sent the message a few seconds ago, probably right after seeing her own elephant. Perhaps I should cancel as well? I was so tempted to stay here and optimize my chilies. I usually resisted these sorts of anti-social urges. Four years ago, I’d been such a social butterfly; it felt unreal to blow off my social engagements in order to stay home and do something as selfish and useless as *coding*. But surely even the old Chandrani would’ve been bored at the notion of spending an evening trying to chat with Maya.

I called up Rhodea.

“Are you still going to Maya’s place tonight?” I said.

“Of course. Why? Aren’t you?” she said.

“Didn’t you see her little ‘present’?”

“Oh, don’t be so mean. I think mine is cute. I’m going to ride it over.” Of course Rhodea could afford to let a thing like that stick around her house; she lived all alone on a tiny island.

“I already destroyed mine.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“Don’t,” I said. “My neighbors are such unreality-prudes.”

“Oh, your *neighbors* are the prudes. You would *never* sneer at an unreal effect.”

“Maya’s place is probably some horrible Disney Castle. I tried to see it on the maps, but her neighborhood hasn’t been re-indexed yet.”

“Didn’t they put the new immigrants in Rapid City? That’s a nice place.”

“Sure, it *was*, but the newcomers have no doubt destroyed it through their utter disregard for visual or contextual unity.”

“Well, it’ll be fun enough to see what monstrosities they’ve erected. I’m still game if you are.”

“I suppose we have to. Could you please message her and tell her we’re still coming?”

“Them.”

“What?”

“You mean ‘them.’ You *did* know that she’s married to Sureel, right?”

“Still?”

“Why wouldn’t she be? They only tied the knot like six years ago.”

“I don’t see how she can be so fond of unreality and still be hanging onto a *marriage*.”

“Jealous much?”

“Of course not.” I felt a tendril of fear. Should I be jealous? No, why would I be? The modification had nothing to do with Sureel. Had Rhodea detected the hint of unreality in me? I massaged the back of my neck, and then I was glad that Rhodea couldn’t see the guilty gesture. This second-guessing was getting to be so tiresome; maybe it was time to remove my self-modification. If I hadn’t taken the easy way out, four years ago, then surely I would have gotten over my loneliness on my own by now...

After I hung up, I saw a strange glint in the kitchen, where the shiny rows of chilies were laying out on every available surface, drying under the heatlamps. I circled the offending tray of chilies. One of the chilies was emitting an ostensibly reflected ray of light that couldn't be a result—not at that angle—of any of the light sources in my kitchen. When I nudged the chili to one side, the spot of light disappeared. When I nudged it back, the unreal ray returned.

I sighed. Some would say that if I insisted on hand-coding my chilies, I had to expect these sorts of bugs. I'd managed to get my latest specimen—Egyptian Blue—to 99.9% of reality using only 11,000 instructions. That was extremely good, as these things went. Of course, an AI-optimized chili would have been almost indistinguishable from reality, but even the most minor machine products are so bulky with millions of extraneous, junky instructions. Some creators believed that inefficiency didn't matter anymore, since we had the processing power to run *anything*, but I wasn't alone in thinking we should be *very* careful about the kind of instructions we put into our bodies.

With a tap, I exploded the chili's code and started chasing the dancing logic clusters to try to catch the erroneous instruction.

\* \* \*

Maya's home was worse than I'd expected. It was a network of treehouses nestled into the uppermost branches of thousand foot tall trees. I had to ascend using an elevator set into one of the trees. Rain fell perpetually, but I never got wet. At the foot of the trees, a lake shone unrealistically bright, considering that the moon was a dim crescent. The complex was lit by impossibly dynamic torches whose dappled flickers created pools of dancing shadow that were slices of utter blackness. Thankfully, a thick fog shrouded the equally grotesque homes of the neighbors: a sorry collection of castles, palaces, cathedrals, and pyramids.

Some would have called this scene beautiful. The parts of my brain—my simulated brain—that were devoted to processing novel vistas for hints of evolutionary dangers—predator animals and foul weather and bands of marauders and such—were kicked into overdrive by the strangeness of this place. As a result, the place grabbed my attention in a way that was considered, by some, to be a pleasure.

But I thought it was tawdry and manipulative and even a little bit dangerous. Still, Maya didn't know any better. It would be up to me and Rhodea to teach her. I'd sent Rhodea a message when my jet landed, and she—either less fastidious or more polite than I—had landed her elephant alongside me.

Sureel answered the door, looking just like himself. He was wearing the scan of his body that was usually taken just moments before the subject came inside.

“Wow,” he said. “I haven't seen you in a really long time.”

“Eight years,” Rhodea murmured.

“I’m glad you called us!” I said.

He was staring at me. “You look really beautiful,” he said. That grated on me. It was so *wrong*. I’d spent months designing this shell: I’d aged my body to accurately reflect what I would have looked like if I’d spent the last eight years outside.

“You look really accurate,” Rhodea said to him.

“What?” he said.

Maya arrived before I could explain. She was wearing a sari woven out of some purely virtual material: it flowed like silk but shined like silver. That wasn’t the worst, though. In life, she’d been slightly pudgy and somewhat dark-skinned. Now she was tall, slender, high-breasted and pale. She looked like a Hindi film star.

As she said hello, she flicked her eyes over my blouse, slacks, and graying hair, then pursed her lips.

Maya showed us into her home’s grand receiving room—which was much larger on the inside than on the outside—and ushered us past a legion of jodhpur-wearing servitors. I was disgusted by the trays that the software-men were holding out. Dinner was to consist of every kind of unreality: cakes that had the consistency of clouds; stews that drifted through the air like bubbles; flickering, televisual drinks that flowed like molasses.

“Eat, eat, it’s all for you,” Maya said. “I’ve been designing for weeks.”

I looked at the trays like they were a collection of bear traps that were ready to snap shut across my simulated neurons. I sampled one of the most normal-looking items—a mooncake that was hovering slightly above the tray—and tried to smile. The cake tasted like Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. I wanted to spit the synaesthetic mess onto a napkin, but I forced myself to swallow it.

Maya and Sureel conducted us to their sitting room, where we were cradled by a set of spongiform shapes that supported our bodies without constraining our freedom of movement.

As I lolled in the arms of the dreadful manikin, Maya and Sureel leaned forward. They looked at each other, then at us. Rhodea took up the mantle of conversation.

“Your home is so diverse and well-coordinated,” she said. “Everything must have taken so long to prepare. How long have you been inside?”

“Only six months,” Maya said. “I guess everything we’ve done must seem pretty ordinary to you. Some of our friends have *really* spectacular places: one lives on an entire simulated asteroid.”

“While we were waiting to enter, Maya studied up on design,” Sureel said. “She spent months modeling all this and then using AIs to optimize it.”

I wasn't sure I could trust myself to speak politely, but I was worried that my silence might seem unreal. "Why did you decide to move inside?" I said.

"Oh, it was time," Maya said. "I used to read your online dispatches from inside the 'net, back when you first came here. You made it seem so clean and fun and simple."

"My work was slowing down, outside," Sureel said. "No people means no need for financial advisors."

"Even for a doctor, business was slow," Maya said. "Mostly only the elderly were left, but even they were starting to come inside."

Rhodea straightened up. "Well, are you enjoying your retirement?" she said.

"Oh sure," Sureel said. His smile was just the way I remembered; he only showed his upper teeth. "Maya is always showing me new things. And she loves to cook. I could spend a lifetime exploring these strange new tastes."

"Be careful," I said. "Some of these unrealistic recipes tweak with the brain in strange ways. You don't want to get hooked on something."

There was a sharp intake of breath from Rhodea, but Sureel and Maya laughed.

"Of course there's no *real* danger, right?" Maya said. "I mean...I make mistakes- things like jumping off tall things or getting mauled by the kitty -but I get put back together automatically. Nothing really bad can happen here."

I thought about saying, "After you take some things, you don't *want* to get put back together," but Rhodea replied first.

"Of course not," she said. Rhodea looked at me strangely. I resisted the urge to touch the back of my neck. Was I acting unrealistically? What would the unaltered Chandrani have done? Wouldn't she have felt even *more* strongly about this? Perhaps that was the problem; perhaps Rhodea was afraid I was going to pursue this further.

The servitors were constantly circling us with trays of food. Maya only sampled things here and there, but Sureel gorged himself on tidbits. Rhodea picked a cocktail of incandescent gas and sometimes lifted it to her lips. I couldn't bring myself to touch anything. I had to get away from this disgusting food.

"I'd love to see more of your home," I said.

"Oh, let me show you around," Maya said.



Sureel and Rhodea hung back as Maya charged forward, pulling me across rickety rope-bridges. I tried to nod along as she babbled about the place. Once, the two of us had been able to sit down in a hallway and chat for hours. Now, I couldn't think of a word to say to her.

She was showing me a sauna room which was capable of becoming hotter than the interior of the sun when she said, "Is everything here really that bad?"

"What? No."

"I remember that face. You're looking at my whole life like it's an ugly dress."

"It's...different from what I'm used to."

"I know I'm just an amateur designer, but I'm anxious to learn. I've heard that you're considered something of a master..."

She was looking at me with wide-open eyes. Her hands were knotted together behind her back.

"It's just...well...everything here is so...unreal," I said.

She emitted a short laugh. "But we're computer programs that are being run by a giant server. Isn't *that* unreal?"

"Of course, and that's why it's so dangerous to try and manipulate the senses the way you're doing right now. I could sit down and scribble out a tiny bit of code—one hundred instructions—that would make your brain think that this bench, or that doorhandle, was the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen. I could write down another bit of code that would make you have more fun right now than you've ever had in your life."

"But this is just a house. It's nothing like that."

"It is, though; the scale and strangeness of this place is just a clumsier way of tricking the brain."

"Oh, and it's so much better to be a dowdy old woman who reprograms spices by hand?"

"There's a reason that my work is so well-respected," I said.

"Sureel didn't even look at you when we were sitting together. That was a real shock, wasn't it?"

I didn't mention his reaction at the door. I really hadn't thought about Sureel all evening. I never noticed that kind of attention anymore.

"Being inside is wonderful," I said. "It's so peaceful and free. But our social proprieties aren't arbitrary taboos; we have them for a reason. I saw how many invites you sent out for tonight's gathering. There's a reason that Arvid and Yonathan and Nicolette and Jeremias and Sonia didn't show up. They're gone."

She was giving me an odd look. “We visited Jeremias just last week. He has a really interesting place. It’s a hypercuboidal structure that...”

God, she was perplexed because I’d mentioned Jeremias like he was just another person. I struggled to muster up some anger.

“Most of the time Jeremias is so zapped that he can’t tell where he ends and his house begins,” I said.

“He said he missed you. Why don’t you ever go and-”

“You’ll find out soon enough, when Sureel falls into the same trap.” I didn’t need to feign that cattiness.

Moisture was gathering at the corner of her eye. If she was going to be unreal, she might at least disable those tears.

“You were always jealous of me,” Maya said.

I tried not to smile; Maya had always aspired to be the kind of person I’d envy, but she had never succeeded. There was a crash and then the floor of the sauna rattled.

A Bengal tiger padded in. I backed away, but the creaky rope-bridge was the only way out, and I was afraid to turn my back to run across it.

The tiger nuzzled Maya’s leg. She, still crying, reached down to caress its head. The tiger growled and broke free of her. It stalked towards me. It batted at me with a paw. I dodged back.

“No, Amitabh! No!” Maya said. She pulled on its tail.

The cat hit me with its next swipe, opening a huge gash on my arm. I barely felt it; my simulated adrenaline had kicked in. I backed out over the rope-bridge.

Maya pulled again and the cat turned. It pounced on her and ripped her open. Then it sat and yowled. Maya’s body disappeared, but I was still bleeding. The cat quit yowling and stalked off the way it’d come. I took a towel from the sauna and wrapped it around the wound. Quite a lot of blood was coming out of me. The room became fuzzy and I stumbled, hitting the wall.

After what felt like hours, Sureel and Rhodea ambled in.

“Oh no, Amitabh got wild again,” he said. “Amitabh is...was... our cat. Maya put him into that tiger’s body, but he’s not used to it yet.” He took out his phone and crouched down next to me. “Don’t worry. I’ve patched up Maya tons of times.”

I knocked it out of his hand. “No!” I said. “The cut’s not serious. Find me a doctor.”

“A doctor?” he said.

Rhodea smiled. “Come on, that must hurt. Why don’t you let us-”

“Don’t any of you understand that we have these rules for a reason? They’re not some stupid game! There’s a reason you don’t let your unreality leak over into other peoples’ lives, and there’s a reason you don’t just zap away every illness. What if I was feeling sad one day and decided to zap *that* away? What if I decided to zap away my boredom? What if you called me and found me staring at a wall and just laughing and laughing and laughing and...”

I was still talking, but Rhodea and Sureel were having a whispered consultation.

Rhodea teleported away.

Sureel sat next to me. He held the towel to my arm while I raved.

Eventually, he said, “I won’t get hooked on anything.”

Why was he wasting my time like this? The shock was wearing off and the pain was becoming intense.

“Don’t you get so bored here?” he said. “What is there to *do*? I used to have only a few free hours every week. I’d play squash sometimes. But in here, there’s no reason to play. These bodies don’t need exercise to stay fit. And if I did play, then missing a shot would only be an affectation, since I could so easily download the reflexes and skills of a pro. Only eating is still fun; it’s more fun than it ever used to be. But I am not sure it’s enough.”

Anger forced away the pain. “You can do anything inside that you could have done outside. If you need external constraint in order to feel entertained then you have a slave mentality. You should go back outside until you’re ready to be free.”

“I’ve thought about leaving,” he said. “But Maya likes it here.”

That’s when she reappeared, looking whole and healthy. She was carrying a black bag.

“Sorry,” Rhodea said. “It took a little bit of searching to find a realistic set of medical supplies.”

Maya leaned over me. She was smiling. There was some kind of needle in her hand. I looked away.

“I can’t believe I’m going to stitch you up.” She laughed. “I haven’t done this since my residency.”

I gasped when she pulled away the towel. Then she went to work. Sureel’s face was the only one I could bear to look at; he was the only one who wasn’t smiling.

After aeons of stitching, she said, “You have 49 stitches. And there will definitely be a scar.”

I blanched. My body was ruined. “What will the scar look like?” I said. “How long will it be? How deep? What color? Will it have puckered edges?”

“I don’t know...” Maya said. “I could whip up some possible designs, if you want.”

Rhodea burst out laughing.

\* \* \*

On the way home, Rhodea said, “Didn’t you go out with him?”

“Once,” I said. “He asked me to the Indian-American Society’s end-of-year formal. Afterwards, he asked if he could kiss me. I said no. A few weeks later, Maya said yes.”

“Well, now you’ve gotten a glimpse of what your life could’ve been like.”

“He’ll leave eventually.”

“Whoa, still bitter?”

“No,” I said. “Just realistic. That’s the way people are. In here, there’s no reason to stay together.”

“Well, we’re still together. I’m glad you didn’t cancel.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe Linda...”

“Were you surprised? From the moment Maya first invited us, I *knew* that Linda was going to cancel at the last minute.”

Rhodea accompanied me all the way home. As I was walking into my apartment, she said, “We’re having lunch tomorrow, right?”

I sent her back to her island with a jar of chilies.

The code for the Egyptian Blue was still floating around my apartment, along with a sternly-worded note, from my neighbors, cautioning me about the unreality spillover earlier today. I shunted both into storage.

Soon enough, I started getting curious/admiring messages from fellow designers who’d heard, from Rhodea, about my new venture into realistic injury and scarring. I marked their overtures for later reply.

Then I tapped at my own head, doubling myself.

I exploded the double. The room filled up with thousands of logic clusters. Each one represented millions of instructions. I pushed my way through the forest of interconnections and found what I was looking for. It was an extremely elegant cluster: 83 instructions that redirected signals from a tiny portion of my simulated brain. I unclipped the cluster and wrote a program that would automatically reattach it in ten minutes. Then I ghosted myself into the simulated double.

I'd expected the memories to slam into me, but I didn't feel any different. Then I looked at the bookshelf. It was still full of his books. Why hadn't I deleted them?

Why hadn't I moved? He'd moved into his fucking hypercube; why hadn't I been able to change, too? This place hadn't been enough for him. What was wrong with me? Why had I been able to lie up inside it for four whole years?

I gripped the windowsill and looked outside. Everything outside was different. Nothing out there reminded me of Jeremias. Dealing with this was the right thing to do. All day I'd sensed that the alteration was making me unreal.

When the ten minutes was over, I smiled. That had been silly. What did it matter what another person chose to do with his life? What was unrealistic about me? Weren't people *supposed* to feel self-sufficient? Why should I work through all that suffering, when the intended end-point was to forget about him and achieve the exact same feeling that I had right now. My self-alteration wasn't unreal; it was just a shortcut. It had allowed me to skip all that painful healing: because of that set of instructions, I'd never again have to be lonely.

Still...I browsed through the little cluster of instructions that had re-clipped itself to my double. It was so tiny and so efficient, but couldn't it be better? Maybe I should have shown a *little* more distress today?

I spread the instructions all around me. No, I didn't have to remove the modification entirely; I just had to make it a little bit more realistic.

As I worked, messages poured in from my admirers. Everyone was intrigued by the prospect of realistic scarring. I ignored their invitations and offers of help. Today's dinner had almost caused me to totally upset my life. Maybe it would be more real for someone of my station to be a little more circumspect about her social engagements. I took a break to jot out a message to Rhodea: *Sorry. So swamped. I can't make tomorrow's lunch. Maybe next week?*

## **The End**

*Rahul Kanakia grew up in Washington, D.C.. He graduated from Stanford University with a B.A. in Economics in 2008 and subsequently returned to D.C. to work for the World Bank on environmental operations in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. He currently lives in Oakland, C.A., and works as an international development consultant. In the fall of 2012, he will be starting a Master of the Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. He has sold short stories to Clarkesworld, Apex, the Intergalactic Medicine Show, Redstone, Nature, and Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet. He also serves as a First Reader for Strange Horizons. You can follow him on his blog, [Blotter Paper](#), and/or his [twitter feed](#).*

# Men and Their Toy

by Jacob A. Boyd

On a large, stiff bed facing a wall of windows high above the night-bright city, Dolly sat alone with her new owner. Her red silk robe lay opened and down around her waist. As though etched onto a tombstone that marked the lives she had had with her previous owners, tattoos covered her naked back with wide, blocky letters, centered in one perfect row. Each tattoo stated the owner's name, the dates of her indenture, and the price paid. At the top: Barol Homonick; 2112 – 2116; \$50,000,000. Tersk, her new owner, ran a rough finger down the list from the nape of her neck toward his name between the dimples on her lower back. There, he played his finger around the dash and the blank space for their concluding date. Dolly acted as though it tickled.

“You’re Dolly?” Tersk asked.

“Would you pay so much for someone else?” Dolly asked. She watched for his reaction to her cheek in the window’s reflection. He remained fixated on her back, reading and rereading the list as though checking it against what he knew.

“Others have pretended they were Dolly,” Tersk said.

“I heard.”

“I had them killed...their partners, too. They didn’t enjoy their money.”

“I heard that, as well.”

Tersk pinched the back of Dolly’s arm. She winced.

“You say you’re a robot?” Tersk said.

“I am a *Toy*. I have feelings.”

Tersk stood from the bed, then stepped to the window and peered down at the skyline. He was naked, hairy, a square, brutish man with a bald thumb of a head, his old muscle hidden under new fat.

What Dolly knew of Tersk she had learned from her previous owners, competitors of Tersk’s whom he had ousted from their businesses and killed. As far as she knew, Tersk was as much known for his plain-speaking and lack of imagination as for his savagery.

“I knew those men named on your back,” Tersk said.

Dolly rose from the bed, crossed to Tersk, and pressed her body against his back. She rested her chin on his shoulder.

Lit by footlights far below, a statue of Ceres stretched its arms from atop the Board of Trade building across the street.

“That statue below us,” Dolly said, “at the time it was sculpted, the building upon which it stands was so tall it was unthinkable another would rise to match it and anyone would see the statue’s expression, so they left it faceless. Now, we are so high above it, the effect is the same as if we would be viewing it from the ground.”

A bank of rain clouds slowly shouldered through the crowd of buildings and filled the gaps with the manic, shifting glow rising from the streets, which looked like neon sheet lightning. Ceres disappeared in the cloud cover. Red lights lined antennas atop the heads of those buildings still visible. Almost imperceptibly, Dolly felt the sway of the skyscraper in which she stood. Gusts pushing the storm pushed it, too.

“Why do you hesitate?” Dolly asked. “Lie on the bed, let me attune with you. Afterward, we will be as one.”

“I didn’t tell you to stand,” Tersk said.

Dolly lingered — was this a challenge, a part of Tersk’s game, did he want her to push back and prove her worth? She was not attuned. She returned to the bed and sat facing him.

“The others, your owners,” Tersk said, and faced Dolly, “you were attuned with them?”

“They do not matter,” Dolly said. “I am yours.”

Tersk’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t say that. If for nothing else, they matter if you’re to survive.”

“In that case, yes, I suppose they do,” Dolly said.

“You haven’t forgotten them, have you?”

“I am incapable of forgetting.”

Tersk nodded. “Tell me about them.”

“Where should I start?” She turned her back to Tersk as though inviting him to touch her. It was not the first time she’d indulged an owner in detailing the sum of his conquest.

Tersk approached and touched the name at the nape of her neck. “Barol.”

“Barol was an old man when he commissioned me,” Dolly said, “though his smuggling business was not as widespread and grand as yours is now.”

“Don’t try to flatter me,” Tersk said, and slapped the back of her head. “Tell me the truth. Tell me what I don’t know.”

“As you wish,” Dolly said.

“Barol brought me everywhere with him as an equal, taught me fighting skills so I could protect him, protect myself. He never touched me unless invited. He was shy and soft-spoken, never wanting to make a show of himself. He bathed with scentless soap. He said he sold me to protect me from what was coming. He told me not to be insulted by the price I fetched from Ban Yi. It was for expediency’s sake, he said, nothing else.”

Tersk padded back to the window. “Barol had grown sentimental and slow. And I was young. I had to make a name for myself.”

Dolly faced Tersk’s back. “Does his story make you uncomfortable?”

“Move on,” Tersk said.

“Ban Yi paraded me around like a trophy. He paired me with live women and men to fabricate jealousies and rivalries he could manipulate. He and I often had drinking competitions with scotch older than him. He never asked me to dial down my tolerance so he could win. He liked impossible challenges. It was a fun time. There were always occasions to unpuzzle people and find ways to ingratiate myself, but it was also quite lonely.”

Tersk scoffed, his broad shoulders jumping.

“Do you think I cannot have fun or suffer from lonesomeness?” Dolly asked.

“Ban...Yi.” Tersk spat the syllables. “He was dumb and lucky. Sloppy.”

“And yet it took longer for you to kill him than it took with any of the rest.”

Tersk’s shoulders tensed. “I was learning.”

“As you can see from my back, Ban Yi sold me for more than he had paid,” Dolly said. “He may have been sloppy, but he did some things very right.”

Tersk returned to Dolly’s back and touched the dates paired with Ban Yi’s name. “Ten years. It didn’t seem like so long at the time.”

“Mikhail, the man who bought me from Ban Yi, had no family. ‘They would’ve been a liability.’”

Tersk jumped at the dead man’s cigar roughened Eastern accent coming from Dolly’s soft lips.

“You can do that for each one?” Tersk asked. “For me?”

“I cannot do it for you,” Dolly said. “We are not attuned. Would you like me to speak with their voices from now on? I can tell you their bad jokes. They all had them.”



“No,” Tersk said. “That’d be too much.”

Tersk stared at Dolly, and then sat beside her. His gaze drifted into a daze then back into the room. When he spoke his voice lacked force. “Continue.”

“Mikhail wanted to retire, but there was a war on, and those who would have arms flow freely dogged him. He constantly chewed antacids, which made his breath smell like mint. He and I worked in disguises and subterfuge — I will not presume to detail their intricacies since you found him. He sold me the day before you drowned him. He knew you were close.”

“I almost got you that day, too?”

“Yes. But those who have owned me always regarded me as a commodity to be turned to for large sums of quick cash in a pinch. When your dogs came barking, Mikhail was no different from the rest. He sold me. The nature of frightened men is static. It has saved me and kept me out of your reach until now. There were eleven hours between when Vasil collected me from Mikhail’s yacht and when it went down. Vasil would never say, but I suspect he sold Mikhail’s whereabouts to you.”

“He did.”

“Vasil was cagey and always telling me where to go with certain secrets — contacts, names, locations — if he did not return to our bed. He was a nervous lover, and though he enjoyed pleasuring me greatly, he, himself, was impotent. He wore rubber bands on his wrists, which he snapped for the surety of pain. He was hooked on a cocktail of drugs, you see, which Storch happily supplied.

“Storch...”

“Enough,” Tersk said.

“Do I pass your test? Am I who I am?”

“You’re Dolly. But the test isn’t over.”

“Yes, we are not attuned.”

Tersk shifted away from Dolly. “My men are terrified of me.”

“Rightly so.”

Tersk thinned his lips. “But you aren’t?”

“Why would you pursue me from owner to owner if you did not want me?”

“I wasn’t only pursuing you. I wanted everything. And when I started, I couldn’t stop.”

“And now you have everything.”

Tersk opened a nightstand drawer and removed a handgun. “Is it because you’re a robot you don’t fear me?”

“Only you could find and get to those who owned me before. Now, I am in the safest place I could be. All that was theirs is now yours. Who would want to attack you, let alone so much as insult you? What is there to be afraid of?”

“If I shot you?”

“You would have wasted a great sum of money purchasing me.”

“You would die?”

“Why are men always so fascinated with that?”

“Answer me.”

“My memories would become inert and inaccessible. Everything I have learned from all your competitors, from my entire life, would vanish, and you would not know how they managed to evade you for as long as they did. You would lose a companion who would have known exactly what you wanted, though you would not have known it yourself. Yes, I would *die*, as you put it.”

Tersk aimed his gun at her, his hand shaking as though fighting an ingrained response to her challenging tone.

“Would you like me to share their secrets with you before you kill me?”

“I would like you to defend yourself.”

“Is that truly what you want?” Dolly asked. “I cannot tell. We are not attuned.”

Tersk thumbed back the handgun’s hammer.

With one graceful motion, Dolly sprang, disarmed Tersk, and tossed him onto the bed, where she pinned him facedown between her vising thighs. Tersk panted in her grip, his ribcage constricting.

“When we are attuned,” Dolly said, “I will not have to guess what you want from what you tell me. I will know.” She eased the handgun’s hammer back to rest and unchambered its round.

“Six men guard this room,” Tersk panted, struggling beneath her.

“I saw them when I was brought in.”

“Security cameras...”

“Such things do not pass my notice,” Dolly said. “Have you so quickly forgotten who I told you I was, who I am?”

“No,” Tersk said, and ended his struggling.

“If I let you go, will you behave?” Dolly asked.

Tersk panted. Dolly disassembled the handgun, then relaxed her thighs and rose to straddle his back. Tersk rolled over and faced her.

“Fuck me,” he said.

“You would attune with me?”

His penis hardened.

Dolly made herself ready for him, warmed her skin, tightened her pores, and dilated her pupils. She exuded a sweet scent which he would link with her forever. She lowered herself onto him.

“Not like that,” Tersk said. “Like them.” He ran a rough finger down the list on her back.

“As I would if you were them?” Dolly asked.

“No,” Tersk said. “As them.”

“As you wish.”

Dolly became demure, as though uncertain where to put her hands, then forceful and unconcerned. She rode him slowly, savoring the feeling, then gave of herself, wanting only for his pleasure.

Tersk lay beneath her, his hard eyes watering, his jaw clenched.

Then Dolly attuned. She saw what he wanted.

She tightened her legs around him and pinned him to the bed. Tersk’s face bunched with shocked confusion, which faded. She circled her arms around his neck and hugged hard, her grip bands of steel. His breath came in stiff gasps against her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She pressed her lips to his ear and spoke with the voices of her owners whom he had killed, repeating the same phrase over and over as she crushed the life from him. “You are forgiven.” When she spoke with his voice he violently shook with a shudder of pleasure, and went limp.

Dolly rose from him, checked for his pulse, and closed his eyes. She reassembled the handgun, dressed, and stepped to the wall of windows. Below, the faceless statue of Ceres peeked through the dull sheet of clouds.

Dolly strode to the intercom and pressed the button connecting her to the six men in the nearby room.

“Another fraud,” Dolly said with Tersk’s voice. “Come and get her out of here.”

She listened at the door for their approach. When it came, it sounded like freedom.

## **The End**

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# Barsoom Busted? The Foibles of Following Fiction with Film

by Henry Cribbs

[Spoiler Non-Alert! I imagine based on the reported box-office returns that most everybody has already seen both *John Carter* and *Hunger Games*, but for those of you who haven't yet, rest assured that I won't be giving away anything here which will lessen your experience of either film. I *will* be making some drive-by mentions of differences between the novels and books, however, so if you've read the novels it may subtly give some of the game away. But then if you've read the books I'm guessing you're probably not the sort of person who's worried about spoilers, anyway.]

Readers of *Redstone* since its inception will know how long and how much I have been looking forward to Disney's *John Carter* film (see [RSF#1](#)). But when in early March I picked up a copy of Disney's *John Carter* novel at the local bookstore, I immediately put it back down again, and decided I wasn't looking forward to the film after all. My negative reaction was based purely on what I saw printed on the front cover.

Go ahead, feel free to tell me you can't judge a book by its cover. I agree. But you *can* judge a movie by its novelization's cover.

The subtitle, after all, is *The Movie Novelization*. Clearly this meant it's not the novel on which the movie was theoretically based (which I had hoped would have been written by Edgar Rice Burroughs), but the other way around. As if that weren't enough, there is no author listed on the cover, just the (no pun intended) possessive "Disney's" above the title. Not *Walt* Disney, of course, since he's dead. Just Disney (though a perusal of the fine print on the title page reveals Disney's last name: "Enterprises"). A little digging later discovered that the author of this novelization is, in fact, graphic novel writer Stuart Moore. I couldn't tell that from the cover and title page (or else I might have not put the book down so fast).

But the clincher was the banner across the top of the front cover, which read "Also includes: *A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs." Now why in the world would they need to include a copy of *A Princess of Mars* along with the novelization if this was based on *A Princess of Mars*? (Better question – why novelize it at all, since it's already a novel?) I assumed it must be because the novelized movie (and the movie itself) is so far removed from the seminal John Carter novel (celebrating its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year) that Burroughs would roll over in his grave (and his estate would roll over Disney) if they didn't clearly indicate that the two stories are definitely *not* the same. (That and maybe the fact that *A Princess of Mars* is in the public domain so Disney didn't have to pay anyone royalties to bundle it with their version.)

[Shameless-less Plug: I'm actually glad Disney included Burroughs's original story, since it's a favorite of mine and now maybe more people will read it who might not have otherwise, but those of you who don't want to have to buy the Disney version to get it can find it (and many other public domain works, including most of Burroughs's other John Carter books) at [Project Gutenberg](#).]

If you haven't figured it out by now (or if you haven't read [my first RSF column](#)), I'll go ahead and admit to a bias: I'm a purist. I like my movie versions of novels to stick fairly closely to the original book. Going into the theater on opening weekend, I was expecting to be disappointed. Coming out of the theater, I was disappointed. But that may have been due to the fact that I left with a headache after seeing it in double-vision because the 3D projectors in my local theater weren't calibrated correctly. (When I complained, the theater manager told me I should pay double since I technically got to see two different films at once. He gave me double my money back after I threatened to make him see double. True story.) While I *was* disappointed that *John Carter* didn't follow Burroughs very closely, at the same time I *wasn't* disappointed because the film *did* follow Burroughs closely. (Hmmm. Maybe I *did* see two different films, after all.) Before I untangle that paradoxical statement, let me first discuss another recent movie, one which followed its inspirational novel *extremely* closely, *The Hunger Games*.

Suzanne Collins's (2008) *The Hunger Games* is a thrilling science-fiction novel for adults and young-adults alike (but not for the very young – it gets graphically violent). The first in a trilogy (I'm reading the equally gripping second book in the series right now), it's similar in concept (but not in finished product) to Japanese cult sci-fi author Koushun Takami's (1999) novel *Battle Royale*, in which the government in a dystopian society randomly selects youths to battle each other to the death. Takami's novel is an extended homage to the chapter of the same name from Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, itself an ironic allusion to H.G. Wells's 1897 sci-fi classic *Invisible Man* (see review in [RSF#5](#)).

Last month's blockbuster cinematization of *The Hunger Games* certainly does Collins's novel justice by my own book-biased criteria. I know there will be some people complaining that their favorite scene got left out (e.g., no baker visit after the Reaping), or changed (how Katniss got her mockingjay pin), but those minor changes didn't really affect the storyline or characterization all that much, so I'm not bothered by them (except that, despite the snazzy special effects, the 'mutts' were not nearly as scary as in the book, since they went on four legs and their disturbing origin was ignored). But the silliest complaints I've heard ("silly" isn't really the word I'd use, but I'm trying to keep it clean here) are the ones whining about characters being miscast. I'm sure by now everyone has heard something about the flak regarding some (apparently not just a few) misguided people tweeting their indignation that Thresh and Rue are played by African-Americans (see [Haque](#)). Read the book, people! They're both described as having dark brown skin (cf. p.98 and p.126)! Similar (unfounded) complaints have been made about Cinna. [Note that Cinna himself is further evidence of Shakespeare's influence on sci-fi (cf. [RSF#13](#)). Have you noticed how many of the characters from the Capitol have names right out of *Julius Caesar*? Cinna, Caesar, Portia, Flavius, Octavia.]

And then there are the people complaining that Katniss is too fat. (see [Fleming](#)). Really? 'Fat' is not the word I'd use for 21-year-old actress Jennifer Lawrence. (Maybe 'phat,' except then I might come across as just as focused on physical appearance as those who call her 'big-boned'. And such a term would also reveal my age.) Okay, so maybe Katniss doesn't look as gaunt as a girl from District 12 should look, but remember, her family gets plenty of protein from the animals she hunts, owns a milk-goat, and trades squirrels with a baker for fresh bread, so I can suspend my disbelief for the duration of the film. Lawrence thankfully isn't the method actress

Robert DeNiro or Dustin Hoffman is, or she might have starved herself to fill the role. We need fewer heroin-chic anorexic role-models in Hollywood, anyway.

But as far as following the book's plot goes, the film is spot on. No major deviations. Not so with *John Carter*.

I know back in RSF#1 I dissed Asylum's 2009 low-budget version of *Princess of Mars* (they miscast Dejah Thoris as blonde, and the green men had artichoke heads and only *two* arms), but as far as sticking to Burrough's plot goes, Asylum actually did a much better job than Disney. *John Carter* did actually include a number of key scenes from the novel, only in the wrong order, with different results, and often with different characters. Disney left out the whole atmosphere plant crisis, used the question of Sola's parentage in a completely different way (and less suspenseful) way, introduced the therns a book too early and in a very different (but perhaps more menacing) role, and added an unnecessary voyage down the sacred River Iss (though perhaps this was just to set things up for the next movie, *John Carter: Gods of Mars*).

*John Carter* even lifted a cheap gimmick directly from Asylum (who in turn lifted it from Douglas Adams). Rather than having to deal with Carter learning the Martian language over an extended period of telepathic study as he did in the book, in *John Carter* he was able to miraculously gain Martian speech merely by drinking a concoction called the "Voice of Mars". In Asylum's version it was a centipede-like worm (probably closely related to the babel fish) that he had to eat.

But my big worry (which I voiced two years ago) was that the scientific and social discussions which tend to be my favorite part of sci-fi novels would be left out of an action-packed, special-effects-laden film. Perhaps I shouldn't even hope. Movies are, after all, a different medium, and one should expect something to get lost in translation.

What science is in *John Carter* is mere gimmicks and gadgetry. The very un-Burroughsian teleporters, the disintegration ray (drawn from *A Fighting Man of Mars*, about six books down the line, though a nod is at least made to the Ninth Ray from the first book), the thern communicators, and even the flyers are just taken for granted, with no explanation. Might as well be magic. That's fine for a space opera fantasy like *Star Wars*, but I want science in my science fiction, and it's completely missing from *John Carter*. So is the social commentary. At least they got the two moons right.

*Hunger Games*, however, managed to deal with the science aspects quickly but surprisingly cleanly. For instance, instead of the lengthy explanation from Katniss (as we get in the book), the game-show announcers briefly tell just enough of the tracker-jacker origins for the audience to understand what they can do. And instead of relying on Katniss's first-person conjectures of what the Gamemakers are plotting, we get to jump out of Katniss's perspective in the film to see the Gamemakers actually manipulating events in the arena.

The social issues in *Hunger Games* were muted verbally, with only a few characters actually daring to question out loud the society's structure. Without being inside Katniss's silent but rebellious thoughts, one would think there would be little social commentary that would make it

into the film. However, the visual medium actually helps to underscore the gross injustices of Panem society, and perhaps even makes it more accessible to viewers. For instance, the flashback with coal miners walking down a tunnel only to have it explode is not a scene from a future dystopia, but fairly recent news headlines. How can one *not* identify with District 12?

The special effects in *John Carter* may have partially made up for these deficiencies, but not entirely. However, even though Disney completely fubared the original plot and excised out all the science and sociopolitical philosophy, I *do* think they managed to capture the spirit, if not the letter, of the John Carter stories. The indefatigable, fearless, and funny stranger in a strange land came shining through all the surplus action and effects. In that sense John Carter did follow the original. I could easily imagine Burroughs's John Carter doing the things Disney's did, and doing them with gusto.

I still haven't read Moore's novelization of the Disney film. (I will if someone tells me it will give me greater insight into the film.) But then I haven't (yet) read many of the other Barsoom pastiches which Burroughs fans have written, either, and it seems that Disney's *John Carter* falls more in the category of respectful pastiche homage than adaptation.

The purist in me was disappointed. The moviegoer in me was at least entertained. The John Carter fan in me was pleasantly surprised. I was especially impressed by the elegant new twist on Burroughs's original frame story. *That* might even (dare I say it) be *better* (and more fitting the spirit of Captain John Carter) than the original.

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