

*The mark sits before me, staring quizzically at my face. I stretch a chocolate talon towards him, pull the rock-candy nail of one finger across the back of his hand, and draw blood.*

*“So,” he asks, “you intend to kill me?”*

*“I do,” I reply. “It is a business deal, nothing more. Someone wants you dead. Just think of me, if you like, as an icing gun for hire.”*

*“Why?” he asks. “Why kill anyone at all?”*

*“It’s what I do,” I answer. “It’s how I’m made. But first, I have stories to tell you. Such sweet, sweet stories. My name...” – and I pause; the moment is too delicious – “...is the Kandyman.”*

## The War of Jenkins’ Ear (and Other Stories)

by Nic Ford

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*Earlier...*

He was sitting at a table in a darkened corner of the bar. An elf of a man, wearing a straw hat and pale jacket as misdirection, insignificant yet dangerous. Keeping his eyes lowered, keeping himself to himself, not bothering anyone – but aware of everyone there and everything going on around him. Even my arrival. Oh yes, I had no doubt he knew I was there. And I recognised him immediately. The hat concealed his eyes, most of his face in fact; but even so, I knew it was him. I had no need to consult my eidetic storage cluster to confirm the fact: that face was etched on my main memory in spun sugar.

Memories fade; but sugar lasts an eternity.

I strode over to him, dragged the stool opposite from under the table, and sat. He

didn't look up. No matter: I could wait. Needed to, in fact. I was nearing the end of this recipe's life, and the journey from the spaceport to this godforsaken hell-hole had drained my reserves. I needed an out. One more job and I could retire. And the mark, well, he would be it; after all, I had been searching long enough. Yes, I could wait.

He was nursing a goblet containing something which... steamed. It smelled immediately familiar, and it took a moment for me to work out what it reminded me of: melted flesh. My own flesh.

Delicious!

I peered into the goblet. It contained a foul, alien brew, a foaming brown liquid in which floated gelatinous lumps of half-dissolved fatty alkaloids. As last meals went, it was rather a good choice. Although not, of course, an informed one. He had no idea that he were about to die.

"I have been searching for you, Doctor," I said.

The mark looked up. "Have you now?" he replied. His voice was slow and measured. Deep, for such a small man. And it contained many more 'r's than it should for the words he used, cutting through the background noise like a honed and specially sharpened spatula. "Well, I'm sure you have your reasons."

"I have come to kill you," I told him. I should, I suppose, have held that back, but I have never had much time for such games. I am a machine. More, a professional. "May I buy you a drink first?"

"That's very kind," the mark replied. "The last bit, anyway; the first bit, not so much. But I have a drink already. Cocoa with whipped cream – you should try it."

"I am already aware of its work," I told him. "Your judgment of comestibles has improved."

"Improved?" he asked. "Yes, well, I suppose it must have done." He eyed me warily. "So, um, what have you been up to? I mean, since we last...?"

"Since you left me for dead on Terra Alpha?" I asked. "Killing. Mainly. And a little light gardening." I *did* like gardening. Who knew?!

"You weren't dead after all, then?" he asked. "On Terra... Alpha was it? That's nice."

"They thought I was dead on Terra Alpha," I said. "And on Tara too. But I am very hard

to kill. No matter what happens to me, you see... there's always a way to bring me back."

"Well, that's the thing with confectionery," the mark said. "The aftertaste *can* linger." So, he had spotted the essence of me, then. No mean feat, considering how much I had changed. He was astute, this one – more so than the majority of my targets. He stood and looked at me, appraisingly. "And a fine example of sugar-based intelligence you are, too," he said, as if to confirm what he knew. "A hydro-carbon based life form! A marzip-android, a bon-bonobo! Homo Brandy-Snapiens!" He paused. "Tell me... did you look *exactly* like this, the first time we met? I think I would have remembered."

He, of course, had a point. As I have mentioned, I had changed quite considerably since our first meeting. I was created as a killing machine, and that I remained; but the mechanics of my operation, my construction, were significantly different. Gone were the coconut ice and all-sort torso, the boiled-sugar limbs, the candy-floss cerebral circuitry. And in their place, the robotic simulacrum of a man formed from the finest, darkest chocolate; a cloak spun from gossamer threads of liquorice, as black and enveloping as night; needle-sharp shards of sugar crystal teeth hiding a nougat-lear fusion reactor inside. And my mind: an intricate web of saccharine threads, carrying memories, intuitions and emotions around my fudge processing units as fast as the speed of torte. I had been re-imagined. In fact, I had re-imagined myself. It's easy to do, when you're nothing but an aftertaste flavouring the mind of a passing and corruptible chef.

That chef! I was his finest creation. He died well: drowned in his own special secret sauce.

"My outward appearance has changed," I told the mark. "But inside, I am the same. I am as you knew me."

The mark sat again, and stared at me, stroking his chin. "Are you? Are you, indeed? As I knew you?" His eyes were a depthless black, like my cloak. And while his face pondered, those eyes smiled. A knowing smile. A smile that hid millennia.

I touched him. Drew his blood. Red, like strawberry syrup.

"So," he asked at length, "you intend to kill me?"

I smiled, and told him my sweet, sweet stories.

### **Story the First: Love Among the Vervoids**

*Long after the events on Tara, when the chef had finally baked my current form to maturity in his ovens and I had taken leave of his spluttering, choking company, I went looking for my fortune.*

*Although my form had changed, my function remained: I was a killing machine, no more and no less. To kill with kindness, with pleasure, with sugary treats, yes – but to kill, that was the point. For a while I toyed with other ecstasies, other ways of thrilling the fatality into a being: but the intellectual rapture of computer entertainments, it transpired, resulted in merely a social death; and making love to a creature till its heart stopped just got everything sticky. No method of murder, no delivery of demise, was as satisfying as the sugar-hit. It was, if you'll forgive me, a rush.*

*And so my travels found me alone in a grey, listless bar (much like this one, Doctor) in the dour and dirty steel hive of an asteroid-mining settlement that nobody had heard of and fewer cared about. Contemplating my programming. My recipe. My existence.*

*My choices were, it has to be said, limited. I had two skills: to pleasure, and to kill; and the one was nothing without the other. My vocation, therefore, was Lord High Executioner to twisted emperors, those who valued the surreal as much as the sadistic – and they were not as common in the cosmos as you might expect.*

*“Oh, I don't know,” the mark said. “I find them round most corners and down the back of almost every sofa...”*

*“Hush,” I replied. “I have further flavours for you to taste.”*

*As I sat, I was approached by a toad. Greasy skin the pallor of a pre-sucked lime bombe, with the corpulence beneath distending it like so many brioche shoved into a sock. But wearing a suit, this toad, and a good suit at that. Evolution had obviously seen its mistake in the physical form, and tried to make up time by instilling a sense of style.*

*“You the Kandyman?” sneered the toad. “I've heard about you.”*

*Evolution had evidently left the building before getting around to personality. I said nothing. But I sighed, and smiled, and produced a poisoned gobstopper from about my*

*person. No point in prolonging the annoyance of this interloper, no point in playing the game, dancing the dance. No, I would just pleasure it to death as quickly as possible and be done.*

*The toad looked at the gobstopper, and then at me. "Nah," it said. "Don't think I'll bother. I've heard about your treats."*

*My fame was spreading. I felt a little spark of pride honey-glaze my core.*

*"I might have a job for you," the toad said, leaning in. "There's a planet. And some plants. And there's a man."*

*"I have little interest in plants," I told it. "Apart from sugar beet. Or cane."*

*"Cane, I think," the toad said. "Yeah, cane. This man what I mentioned... think you can cane him for me?"*

*My career as an assassin began, therefore, on the third moon of Prevalian 6. A rolling paradise of wheat fields and water meadows, Prevalian 6.3 had been colonised mere centuries before by Mogarian trading envoys. And now these envoys' descendants – of which the toad, as it turned out, was one such – were starting to exploit their home by farming. Farming Vervoids, to be exact.*

*A curious species, the Vervoid: a semi-sentient, occasionally mobile vegetable whose main role in creation, as best I could ascertain, was to make vegetarians question where they'd drawn the line in the sand. Certainly, their value was not aesthetic: they looked more the priapus than the pansy. And they were vicious aggressors when roused.*

*I rather liked them.*

*The toad, as it turned out, was the overseer of one of the larger Vervoid farms, and had grown comfortably rich on the endeavour. And his problem was this: his daughter – who was less toad and more human, but not all that noticeably – had fallen in love. The object of her desire was a humble Vervoid farmer second class: a man without prospects, without fortune, without any obvious path to the moneys required to keep Griselda – that was her name – in the manner to which she was accustomed.*

*What this man – let's call him Brad – did have (and here I'll have to leave you with Griselda's description, since I am hardly in a position to judge) was 'biceps to that make me go weak at the knees, a six-pack I want to use as a face flannel and a bum that'll go like a*

*steam-hammer.' He also, apparently, had taste: at the first indication of Griselda's feelings for him, Brad ran a mile.*

*The toad thus had two issues: first, that Brad couldn't be allowed to marry his daughter; and second, that he didn't want to. There was no choice, therefore, but to kill him.*

*Sweet!*

*I cornered Brad, eventually, in a disused barn in a far, forgotten paddock on the Vervoid estate. Surrounded by limitless fields of Vervoids, the barn was not the safest place to be on Prevalian 6.3 – but I was not unduly worried. The Vervoids were maintained in a virtually parched state, and this made them lethargic, largely unwilling to move. If there were open water around, the merest drop, they would undoubtedly hunt it down; but so long as I did not accidentally irrigate them, I would be safe.*

*I had my gardening expertise to thank for this knowledge. Brad, on the other hand, had swallowed the stories older farmers had told him. He was convinced that he was a dead man walking, from either the poisoned buds of a rogue Vervoid, or the overly energetic thighs of Griselda. He remained, of course, completely unaware of my own honeyed threat.*

*When I found him, he was cowering beneath sackcloth. Hiding from his huntress but giving away his location through a combination of the aroma of fear, and the screams of nightmare. I smiled as I pulled the hessian back from Brad's quaking, fearful – and, yes, rather well muscled and half-naked – body. There was a frisson in the air, an intensity of emotion I had not felt since Tara, like a blast of sherbet across an unsuspecting tongue: I was salivating at the foretaste of the kill.*

*The poor hunk scuttled backwards, away from me, shaking in fear and dread; but his exit was blocked by bales of hay, and his jolting attempt at egress had done nothing other than trap him further. I giggled, and took a large and obscene stick of rock from about my person with which to cave in his skull. Less delight for the target, this kill; but oh, so much more for me.*

*"No!" Brad cried, pushing his hands in front of him, an impotent act of self-preservation, if ever there were one. "Don't! Please don't! Don't take me back to her!"*

*I was given leave to pause. "I am not going to take you back to her," I informed him.*

*"I am here merely to kill you."*

*I shan't lie, Doctor: the palpable relief that crossed his face was something of a disappointment to me. Nevertheless, I had a job to do, and now was the time. I opened my maw wide – to reveal the syrupy furnace inside with which I would soon dispose of his bones – and holding high my candy cudgel, my sugar shillelagh, I at last moved in for the kill.*

*All of a sudden, from behind me, a commotion! Brad's face transformed, from initial fear, through confusion, to ultimately settle on abject and utter terror. There was a final crashing and splintering of wood, and I turned to see the barn doors smashed to smithereens.*

*There, between the jams of the ruined doors, and silhouetted by the evening sun against the endless swaying Vervoid fields behind, was a slaving, vengeful toad monster.*

*"Let... the totty... go!" snarled Griselda.*

*It was nothing less than a stand-off. Griselda, sonic blaster in hand, was ready to dispatch me. I had already shown myself prepared to end Brad's life. And Brad would have done for Griselda, if looks could kill.*

*"Leave him," Griselda snarled again. "He's mine. I have the paperwork."*

*"I cannot," I replied. "I have a contract with your father, and I intend to see it to completion." I rummaged in one of the voluminous pockets of my liquorice overcoat, and pulled out a walnut whip. "But here. A gift. As recompense."*

*Griselda, I could see, was torn. On the one hand, the chance to save her one true love, and end her days in happiness; on the other, a tasty comestible. Her miniscule brain with its clumsy, slow neurons was weighing up the pros and cons. Her brow furrowed, her jaw clenched – and a bead of sweat dripped.*

*"NOOOOOO!" In horror, my delicious treat forgotten and chocolate talons outstretched, I dived forward to catch the drop of salty, abominable water before it hit the ground. But to no avail! I landed at the wretched woman's feet in a cloud of dust – just as the tiny payload hit dirt.*

*Silence. I looked at the stain on the dusty floor, up at the apoplectic face of Griselda wiping walnut whip from her cheek, and across at the whimpering Brad. And then I looked out the door. The splintered, unprotecting door, and beyond it a hundred-thousand pink,*

*vicious, parched and thirsty Vervoid heads... turning. Away from their position pointing at the evening sun, and, as one, in the direction of the water droplet.*

*And me.*

“What did you do?” the mark asked, breathless.

“There was only one thing we *could* do,” I answered.

*We ran!*

*All thought of my contract dashed from my mind, I lifted my liquorice tailcoats and sprinted for the barn’s rear entrance. The noise of the angry rustling of leaves was in my ears as I pounded on the wooden beams again and again and again – until at last they succumbed to my gum-arabic musculature and splintered, as had their neighbours minutes earlier across the way.*

*I was safe – just! – by mere moments. As I made my querulous exit from the paddock, I heard the massed shrieks of angered foliage uncomfortably close, and without wasting time looking back to confirm, I felt, I am sure, the razor-toothed edge of a Vervoid frond scrape my sugared shoulder.*

*I ran harder!*

*And I was not alone! To my amazement – for I was convinced I had successfully left them to that vegetarian’s nightmare – I suddenly saw that my erstwhile victim and his huntress were catching up with me.*

*Saw? Felt, more like. The ground was shaking to an evil rhythm which I had put down to the marauding vegetation at that very moment demolishing the sturdy walls of the barn. But I was wrong: it was, in fact, the pounding of Griselda’s trunk-like feet as, possessed of a strength and speed she should not have had, she raced to freedom with the still-whimpering Brad in her arms. Until this point I had considered her a waste of calories, a sad lump of a girl with no sense and no hope; but in fact, today, she was a woman of grit and determination, of strength and calibre. She was Brad’s saviour.*

*She was also sweating like a hog, and every droplet that left her fevered brow and spattered across the dust of the track was another inducement to the thirst-maddened*



*shrubbery behind to catch and kill us. I tried to run harder, to out-run Griselda and her cargo in the short term and the Vervoids in the slightly longer; but it was no use. Already, my speed was causing the fruit-leather of my shoes to melt a little, and the increased stickiness did nothing other than slow me all the more. And anyway, Griselda had by now easily overtaken me and was pounding her way to an even greater distance between us. But even she, I was certain, would not be able to escape the Vervoids for long. I had all but accepted our fate.*

*Unless...? What?! There, ahead in the distance and slowly but surely approaching us! Could it be...?*

*A hot-air balloon! A bulb striped like creation's biggest barley sugar, a wicker basket hanging beneath – and its burners roaring as the pilot expertly negotiated the air currents and inexorably brought it towards us.*

*Griselda and Brad, of course, met it first. The pilot cast a rope ladder over the side, and, demonstrating a nimbleness with which I was loathe to credit her, Griselda threw Brad over her shoulder in a Fireman's Lift, jumped for and caught the lowest of the rungs, and, hand over hand, pulled the pair of them skyward.*

*And then the balloon started to ascend once more.*

*I ran, and ran, and ran! Why was it leaving? Was there not one more tasty morsel to save from the plundering plant life? Was there not ME?!*

*With the sound of recalcitrant florae snapping at my heels, I at last reached the retreating airship, and with a desperate leap and the stretching of fruit-chew forelimbs, I just – just! – managed to grasp at a trailing rope.*

*And with that I, too, flew. One moment I was in danger of becoming plant food, the next I was sailing away into the skies. I looked down, briefly, at the snapping, shrieking, razor-leafed furies below; but our height was such that I didn't have the stomach to hold that view much longer, and I looked up instead. To the basket from which I hung.*

*Two things I saw while hanging there helpless, two things which amazed me.*

*The first was Brad in Griselda's arms, with a look on his face that said nothing so much as gratitude, worship and, above all, lust. And Griselda, in turn, all beaming and coyness, was shining: adoration clearly suited her. They kissed, and sank to the floor of the basket, and that was the last – I am extremely relieved to say – I ever glimpsed of either of*

*them.*

*Which leaves me with the second thing I saw, Doctor: the face of the pilot, leaning out of the basket – possibly to avoid seeing what was happening inside – and grinning down at me. Not reaching to pull me in, not throwing out the rope ladder to aid my ascent. No, just a face, a devilish face, grinning.*

*A face I had seen before. A face that would remain with me forever, etched on my main memory in spun sugar...*

“My face?” the mark enquired.

“Of course your face,” I spat, sour as a lemon surprise. “I assume you have not forgotten the events of Prevalian 6?”

“I’m sure you do. Assume, that is.”

“And you have nothing to say?”

The mark paused. Looked at me, as if deliberating something. And all the while, his eyes were laughing their ancient laugh. At me.

He sipped at his cocoa. Examined me some more. And finally he spoke.

“You mentioned... other stories?”

### **Story the Second: The Keen of the Nimon**

*In the western marshlands of the northern continental mass of Spekulon 9, surrounding the basin into which the fabled Wandering City of Barsoom periodically deigns to descend, there prosper a number of villages.*

*One such is Vermouth, a tawdry little town whose economy depends entirely on the fecklessness of visitors awaiting the arrival of Barsoom. These visitors come, wait, and stay. And rather more often than is conventionally opportune, they die – Barsoom was neither predictable nor frequent in its arrival, and Vermouth not as safe as it at first appeared.*

*Because while the people of Vermouth used to make, let us say, a tidy profit from their visitors while alive, it was nothing compared to the profit made when they died. From audacious and surprisingly unchallenged insurance fraud to the delivery of a highly*

*questionable fois gras, Vermouth made sure its visitors paid every galacti-sou they owed, and more.*

*Until the arrival of... the Nimon!*

"Did you say 'Norman'?" the mark interrupted.

"No!" I replied shortly, my irritation staining the narrative like a strawberry fondant dropped on freshly laundered undergarments. "I said 'Nimon'."

"Oh," said the mark. "'Nimon'."

"Yes," I said.

"In that case, please continue."

I continued.

*Until the arrival of...*

"Only, I thought you said 'Norman'."

"No. I did not."

*Until the arrival of the Nimon.*

*The reputation enjoyed by these creatures was well known to the Spekulari. The Nimon were galactic parasites, horned bull-men who established a bridgehead on their victim worlds by dropping a single individual through a black wormhole onto the surface, to subdue the populace before the rest invaded in force.*

*And now one had come to Spekulon 9, arriving in the dead of teatime on a mountainside not three kilometres from Vermouth, and immediately setting up residence in a cave there. Initially its contact with the Spekulari was limited to the odd shepherd-boy turned to a desiccated husk here, a cow or two looking slightly perturbed there, and an eerie, mournful bellow that haunted the night... not, in fact, all that much, considering its reputation.*

*But nonetheless, as soon as the arrival of the Nimon was noted and disseminated – through screams of anguish and horror passed from citizen to citizen and onward – the*

visitors to Vermouth quickly dissolved to nothing. Gone were the easy targets for the poker schools, the moral vacuums frequenting the lap-dance clubs, the victims of insurance scam and associated sympathetic cosmic financial institutions. All that the inhabitants of Vermouth were left with was a number of empty hotel bedrooms plus three hundredweight of dubious paté – and no-one was touching that.

Something had to be done. Enter: moi!

Like a cookie-dough Samurai looking for a poor fishing village to protect, I descended on Vermouth and offered the good people there a deal. I would rid them of their Nimon scourge – for a price.

They lapped me up.

The entrance to the cave was dismal at best, perched halfway up the side of a nondescript mountain covered, as best I could tell, in nothing but a coarse grass and disappointment. 'Cave' was almost too charismatic a word for the scar that broke the ground here: it wasn't so much a cavern as a hiccough in the landscape. And it smelled a bit.

I entered, and let my toffee eyes adjust to the dour darkness of the place. I shouldn't have bothered: there was less to see once I was accustomed than there had been before. But what there was... was a noise.

From the back of the cave came a moaning sound: a hideous, low bellow, as if from something in the gravest of pain. This must have been the mournful keening of the beast's repute. Quite why it was thundering so, I had no idea: but neither did I care. The culmination of my job was at hand, and I almost giggled at the prospect. I groped through my capacious pockets to look for the weapon of choice, and found the perfect armament: a slingshot made of fruit chews, and for its missile... of course. A bullseye.

Slowly I opened my maw wide, ready to consume the monster, and started forward. Step by step I moved towards the back of the cave... and then stopped. Stunned. Before me, against the very far wall, was not the single Nimon I had expected.

No. There were two.

One was lying on a rough-hewn rock bed, motionless. And the other was standing beside it, obviously in great distress: it was waving its head from side to side, and moaning

*the extraordinary moan I had heard moments earlier. It took me a few moments to work out what was happening.*

*The Nimon had not come to drain Spekulon 9's inhabitants of their energy, and crush the planet beneath its hooves. It had come to find a final resting place for its compatriot. To entomb one of its number which had met a honeyed death of its own, and which deserved, in the creature's debased mind, a certain respect.*

*I was attending a funeral.*

*Of course, if things went as I planned... I would be attending two.*

*Things did not go as I planned.*

*One moment I was crouching and creeping up on the monster, slingshot primed to fire and hit it squarely between the eyes. The next...*

*There was a clatter from behind me, the rattle of stones skimming across a rock floor... then a pebble hit me on the back of the head, bounced off, and landed right at the mourning Nimon's feet.*

*I stood and turned instantly, angry as a sherbet grenade. Who had the audacity to interrupt my kill, to fling a stone at me? Who?! But my persecutor had fled: all I could see was a shadow disappearing out of the cave's mouth.*

*It took but moments to realise that the Nimon, too, would have heard. Would have looked up. Would have seen me, in all my candy glory, slingshot in hand, looking out the entrance. Yes, standing at that point may not have been the wisest move I had ever made.*

*The sound of a Nimon keening is curious; but the sound of one enraged is a far more tractable noise. At the first furious snort, the first belligerent bellow, I knew what was happening... and once again, I ran! Ran! Out the cave mouth, down the hillside, as fast as I could go, followed by that infuriated bull-headed beast! I ran... and ran... and ran...*

*I do not know what happened to the Nimon, nor what happened to Spekulon 9. The beast may have drained it dry for all I know or care: having escaped its clutches I left as soon as I could, and damned the people of Vermouth to whatever fate befell them. They deserved it anyway.*

*But please do not think I was running from the Nimon, Doctor.*

*Of course, that was part of it: had my sarsaparilla reserves been lower, my buttermint engines less finely tuned, I have no doubt my speed would have been less and my demise swift and brutal, and I was therefore eager, my energies being at their prime, to use them to beat a tasty retreat. But I repeat, it was not the Nimon from which I ran.*

*No. It was the imp. Sat on a rock beside the cave's entrance, watching my egress and retreat from the monster.*

*And laughing.*

"Me again?" the mark asked.

"You again," I confirmed, breaking a poisoned Love Heart into his cocoa. It was a token gesture: he pushed the glass away immediately.

He eyed me thoughtfully once again. "You know," he said at length, "there's probably a reason we keep meeting. Have you thought about that?"

"Of course there is a reason," I replied. Was he stupid? "You hate me. You have since Terra Alpha. You choose to scupper my schemes."

"Ah yes," the Doctor replied, delighted. "I hate you! That must be it!" He paused. "Well, this is all very lovely, but isn't there the small matter of killing me we should be getting on with?"

"All in good time," I said. "There is still one sweet, sweet story to tell."

### **Story the Third: The War of Jenkins' Ear**

*On the day referred to by the inhabitants of Planet Earth as 7 Muluk 5 K'ayab, and more colloquially by the primitive locals in the area I found myself as 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1742, there was a war.*

*I had come to that godforsaken planet – after travelling the timelines a while, using a temporal carrot cake laced with a particularly fine artron-butter-icing of my own devising – in order to replenish my withering reserves. It takes a lot of sucrose to run a body as fine as this, and I was running low on fuel. Thus I chose to go to the one planet in the galaxy where my*

*nature was considered an everyday treat, rather than the artery-clogging, tooth-shattering death bringer it is known to be in every other civilisation.*

*I had started in the kitchens of Europe, a backwater continent far from the planet's intellectual hub in that period which, nonetheless, had an abundant supply of the local apes for me to toy with, and a cultural fixation on candy that defied all logic.*

*But I soon realised that, if I were to leave that hell-world in anything like a peppermint-perfect time frame, I needed to travel to the source of the continent's sugar: the plantations of their colonies. Many such colonies grew sugar, but the one to which I chose to travel, in the bottom corner of one of the larger northern continents, had an extra advantage: it was also home to a thriving drug and demise industry. Yes, they cultivated tobacco, a plant of the *Nicotiana* genus which was so addictively toxic and raveningly destructive its name was not even allowed to be spoken outside of Earth. And here they grew it openly, the barbarians! Truly, if my honeyed treats and torments were a way to pleasure a being to death, then tobacco was the way to get the being to do it to itself, and pay for the privilege.*

*I felt like I was coming home.*

*Thus I found myself on the poop of a Spanish Man O' War, under the captaincy of one Rodrigo de Souza, a Portuguese mercenary in the pay of Manuel de Montiano. We were heading with plans of invasion across the Atlantic Ocean towards the colony of Georgia, which was owned by the British – that month's mortal enemy of choice. The apes' propensity for warfare was unparalleled: in fact, it was tantamount to an art-form. This particular war, apparently, was based on a heady mixture of privateering, slavery and bad hair styles – one in particular being so bad that the recipient had had his ear cut off. Typical of the humans, it was the ear that was deemed to be the greatest offense, rather than the institutionalised torture, degradation and abuse with which the piracy and people-trafficking practices were so redolent. Their ability to ignore the abhorrent – even by my undoubtedly malevolent standards – in favour of the inane was breathtaking.*

*The weather was fair as we crossed the ocean, and the sun beating down on my chocolate skin was hot enough, even, to soften me slightly. But not enough to dampen my*

*hunger. We were but days from the colony: sugar and tobacco enough for my next hundred years of saccharine assassination, and a spree of killing the like of which I had not been involved in for decades. I could hardly wait!*

*The trouble started when we were less than eight hours from the island of Cuba, our first port of call. We were making good progress, when on the horizon suddenly we saw a ship flying a British jack. This spelled trouble – and so, we immediately sailed towards it. As I said, the apes' desire for conflict was insane and immeasurable.*

*She turned out to be an East Indiaman privateering under letters of marque from the British government, and as such she was a legitimate target for us. Unfortunately, we were also a legitimate target for her, and so the war came a day or two earlier than expected.*

*It was a great battle! The roar of the cannon, the creak and splinter of brace! Smoke and blood in our eyes and noses, and the cries of the injured and dying in our ears!*

*Of course, I enjoyed all this from a prime position below deck, hiding behind some barrels. While I revelled in the destruction and death, it was not for me to play a part. I was, after all, a paying passenger – and what new flavours could I bring to the demise of a seadog with my meagre complement of sherbet dabs and wagon wheels? No, it was my place to merely watch, as Spaniard and Britisher charged onto each other's ships, skewered each other's bodies and shot each other's shipmates with rude percussion devices.*

*The battle was bloody and delightful, and the stench of death as sweet to me as a brace of rose and violent creams. And it was only as I giggled my way into the second hour of the mêlée... that I realised I was virtually alone.*

*Yes, the conflict had been so fraught and furious that not a man-jack of either nationality remained standing. As I ventured forth from my hiding place and walked across the cracked and broken decks, I came to see that all around me were dead... or at least dying, which of course was as good as dead after I dripped a little sulphuric cordial into each grateful and unsuspecting mouth.*

*It was hard not to laugh all the more at the stupid humans' ability to kill themselves off with no benefit to anyone at all. But I managed to stifle my hilarity, mainly at the realisation that not only were my shipmates and enemies shuffling off their various mortal coils – so were the ships themselves!*



*I could hardly believe it. How had this happened? With tortured creaks and smoke and shattering wood, both ships were sinking beneath the waves.*

*Through an ingenious regimen of slapping everyone still (evenly slightly) alive around the chops with a specially hardened slice of Battenberg, I was able to glean an answer. In a final act of ignorance and egotism, and with their penultimate breaths, both captains had managed to give the command to scupper their respective ships in order that the other should not prosper. And in doing so, they condemned each and every one of us to a watery grave. Those of us dead, those of us dying, and those of us likely to dissolve in brine like so much salt-water taffy. In other words, me.*

*And all this... for a blessed ear.*

“So, what happened next?” asked the mark.

“You know what happened next,” I replied coldly. “You saved me.”

“I?” asked the mark, incredulously. “I saved you?”

“You know you did!” I answered. My patience was wearing thin. This body was nearing the limits of its physical endurance, and I wanted the job to be over. “You appeared there before me, hovering in your blue box a few metres above the surface of the ocean. You opened its doors, grinned out at me, and bade a girl dressed like a boiled sweet to descend on a rope, smear the remains of my temporal carrot cake across my person, and ascend again before I could even move!”

“Really?!” asked the mark. “And why on Earth did I do that?”

“Because you love the surreal!” I shouted, standing and slamming my chocolate talons on the table. “Because you are the ultimate twisted emperor! Because rather than let this wretched life end, you’d rather it continued as an hilarious slapstick joke!”

“Of course,” said the mark. “That’s definitely why I did it. Tell me what I did next.”

I drew a deep breath. He knew the answer, of course, but I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing me rail at his little games. I was a machine. More, a professional.

“Your Tardis,” I said, “took off. And because of the smearing of artron-butter-icing across my toffee-torso, I was drawn with you.

“Through the vortex you pulled me, for what felt like an eternity. I could not breathe!

Luckily, being a hydro-carbon based lifeform, I didn't have to. But it hurt, Doctor. It really – really! – hurt.”

“Ah,” the mark said. “Pain. Something you know so much about – and yet of which have so little real experience.”

I ignored him. “You landed me and stranded me,” I continued, “on a small island in the equatorial belt of an unregarded planetoid many light-years from the nearest space-lane. And I vowed – lying there, almost mortally weakened, on the beach – that I would have my revenge.” I could feel my anger rising again, and there was nothing I could do to stop the next outburst. “It was an outrage!” I shouted. “A cruel and unusual punishment! There was only one coconut tree on that island! *How many candies could I make from only one tree?!*”

The mark looked at me, and sighed. “All right then,” he said. “What was this revenge you vowed to take?”

“To kill you!” I seethed. “To find someone who wanted you dead...” – for I could not be a hired killer without someone to hire me, of course – “...and take their money and kill you! You would be amazed,” I continued, “how easy that part of the scheme was. How many people – species, even – out there want you dead.”

“So who was it, specifically,” the mark asked, “who paid you?”

I leaned in close. “All of them!” I hissed.

He paused. Smirked. “Then, why am I still alive?”

I had been waiting for this. “Because I have a question. Before I kill you, I have a question.”

“Go on...”

“Why?”

He looked at me. “Why?!”

“Why? Why do you hate me so much? Why do you follow me and bring to a standstill everything I do? Why?”

“Well, because of what you said, I suppose. Because I love the surreal.”

“But that's not the all of it. There is something more.” I rummaged, one last time, through my capacious pockets, and withdrew a candy cane filed to a lethally sharp point.

“Tell me,” I said, pushing the cane into the mark's jugular, “why you allowed me to catch the

balloon's rope on Prevalian 6.3? *Why did you save me, Time Lord?!*"

"Ah," the mark choked, his face full of fear but his eyes, his mocking eyes, still laughing. "That's the thing, you see. I've never been to Prevalian 6.3."

I caught myself. "You've never been...?"

"No. Nor Spekulon 9, nor Terra Alpha. I've been to Tara, and to Earth a lot. But you weren't there. Not once."

This... this did not compute. I lowered the sharpened cane from his neck and sat back. I had to work this out. He had saved me. He had scuppered my schemes. He had humiliated me, again and again.

"Why are you saying these things, Doctor? Why are you lying to me?"

"Oh, I'm not lying," he replied. "I haven't been to those places."

And he leaned in close to me, placed his lips next to my caramel ear. And he whispered to me. One word.

"Yet."

*I sit here, before this elfin man in his straw hat, with his mocking, laughing eyes, and I think. Contradictions whirl through the saccharine threads of my cognition matrix, my fudge processing units, fast as the speed of torte.*

*I have come here to kill him...*

*...because of the humiliations he has showered on me...*

*...that he is yet to shower on me...*

*...that cannot occur if I kill him here...*

*...just as cannot his many savings of me...*

*...so that I am alive to kill him here.*

*It is a sweet, sweet paradox, so simple a child could think it up. But I am not a child. I am a machine. More, a professional.*

*I know that it is a paradox. And yet, I cannot stop my circuits from trying to resolve it.*

*I drift away as my cognition matrix impotently circles the intractable problem.*

*Absently, part of me notices that, as the computation continues, so my internal temperature is rising dangerously high.*

*I hardly care.*

*A girl comes and sits beside the mark. Hair like candy floss, and dressed like a boiled sweet.*

*"Hullo Doctor," she says. "Who's your friend?"*

*"Oh, he's not staying, Mel," the mark replies.*

*"Really?" she asks. "He doesn't look all that healthy."*

*She is correct. Already the computation has caused my internals to overheat, and my rock-candy infrastructure is starting to collapse. In short: I'm melting! I'm melting!*

*"No," the mark says. "I don't believe that he is. Nor that he ever has been. Come on, we should leave."*

*"Leave?" the girl asks. "Can't we... can't we do something to help him? To save him?"*

*I am barely listening to them and their ridiculous compassion now. I am too busy dissolving, evaporating into a viscous, sickly steam that rises torpidly from the remains of my body. Nothing is left of me, by the end, bar a greasy, sweet stain on the seat. I am no longer a being, no longer alive. I am merely... an aftertaste. Waiting for a passing and corruptible chef.*

*"Save him?" asks the Doctor. "What a very fine idea, Mel. And I know just the place to do it. Tell me... have you heard of Prevalian 6?"*

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