



Kipling

Mistleline Poppish



R. Rikki Simons



Kipling Mistletoe Poppish

by R. Rikki Simons

Kipling stood lank and tall in the streaming rain, like a pumpkin-headed scarecrow adrift in a waterfall, slightly bent in his gray-green campsuit. The safari armor left him comfortable, dry and warm, and though the dome helmet's oblate sphere was open, the waters of Keyser's Moon bounced from its illuminated deflector fields. He could have closed the helmet and sent a short burst message to his surrounding crew, but he knew that theocratic rulers of this world might be listening. To communicate with his crew working the mineral pools five meters away, Kipling simply shouted his synthetic lungs out — and what he shouted, as always, sounded unintentionally camp.

“Right-o! At this rate our lady whale will surface in ten minutes! *Rather!*” Kipling hollered in his Flash-Wooster modded Ing'Lesh, the national patois of Windsor Society. As an Ascended humanoid, he could make himself heard clearly over the aqueous roar, cartoon vernacular and all.

Two Dervish puppet-cats sat atop the shoulders of the nearest crewman, a Human zoologist named Magister Dresden Loreen. Magister Loreen's marionette-like robots flagged her through the rain with blue and red lights fixed to their tiny hands. Kipling got Magister Loreen's attention by shouting, “I say, Dresden! Tell your pips to stay at least thirty meters from that tail! Field generators will give them all the jolly range they

need!” Kipling said this while slapping Magister Loreen on the back. She laughed with her boss, though he nearly knocked her breathless.

He heard a peer-to-peer channel open up between himself and Dresden. She subvocalized to him, her voice clear in his inner ear, “Tell me again, Captain. Just how many conversations can you have at once?”

Kipling smiled and inhaled. He said, “Well, let's see, shall we? That's eighteen conversations simultaneously, last I counted. That's fifteen conversations more than a Poeta, thirteen above the average Gylfinîr Priest, sixteen above a Moartale Human like yourself, and of course, seventeen more than a damned Éndrake.”

“That's a lot to follow,” she said while she watched her fellow crewmen.

Kipling shook his head. “Just a trifle really. A discussion via holo here, a debate in Tacit Reality there, gossip with an analog tongue, poetry in subvocal harmonies: so much chatter to sort and yet I'll still have to hold open a line for the Keysers. They communicate via hallucinations, you know. Still, it's a rummy of a fit! Ha!”

“So you never get a thought to yourself?”

“Well ... I'm a talented, if rather lonely android,” he said aloud before stopping himself, and this much was true. Even with his personality mods set to High Joviality, his loneliness stuck to him while all his friendships seemed so distant and away. He frowned momentarily, then said, “Better if we turn this channel off. Keysers could be listening. Back to work now. Get those cat pips out. There's a girl.”

Magister Loreen acknowledged her leader by sending her whirling cat-puppets off. Away they went, splashing over to a throng of campsuited crew who climbed in and out of two mushroom-shaped field generators.

Meanwhile, Kipling held another conversation deep within his own body. In a hyper holistic virtual reality called Tacit Reality, in a red craftsman house rendered within a computer core that made up the length of Kipling's spine, Kipling said to his virtual wife, Meara, "You see, my dear? My crew likes me."

Their two avatars sat together on the carpet before a wood burning fireplace, lounging in pajamas, their backs against an overstuffed sofa. In their separate Thymotemporal minds, they watched the rain-soaked scene outside Kipling's body.

Virtual Kipling said, "Smile, be pleasant, and the world will be your friend. You see? Eh?"

Kipling's virtual wife was literally his backbone.

Meara shrugged and thumbed through an Outhernet furniture catalogue. She said, "Dresden Loreen is not your friend. She's your employee. Besides, it doesn't matter how you speak to the Keyzers when they come for you. They see through everyone."

"Why, even me?" Virtual Kipling nudged her, trying to keep the mood playful, but there was something in his eyes just then. She saw it: something that said not all of his intimate attention was with her. Kipling's smile curled. "What?"

Meara of course knew that Kipling's real body was standing in the rain on the Mineral Shores of Keyser's Moon, she knew that a holo version of him was holding a conversation with the Gylfinr Engine Priests up in orbit aboard his ship, and she knew another part of him was preparing for the coming charade with the Keyser Ambassador. None of that bothered her. That was business. No, what darkened Meara's mood was

Kipling's look of subtle shame, peeking ever so much above his conscious. He was guilty. Again. Their weeklong honeymoon had not been a happy one.

Virtual Meara threw down her catalogue and said, "Everyone can see through you!"

She shook her dark head and stood, stomping out of the room. A door slammed behind her. Virtual Kipling blinked.

He felt pity for Meara. He knew she didn't like safari life. It was the first thing she said to him when he selected her avatar from the Bridling Group. Still, pity wasn't enough to stop his infidelity. Was it Kipling's fault his own ship extorted him for sex? *Well, yes, but that was besides the point*, he told himself.

His other avatar, virtual Kipling number two, was up there now, in orbit in another Tacit Reality house somewhere within the Outhernet matrix of his ship's computer's private world. This time it was a virtual island where a little red bamboo house surrounded a little blue rattan bed. There, under computer generated Indian walnut trees, virtual Kipling number two cheated on his bride with virtual Ella, the safari ship *Oomingmak's* computer EtherCore Personality.

It *was* extortion, of course. Ella made it clear that she would not move the ship from orbit unless Kipling helped her reach climax seven times. He was working on six and feeling guilty for the hundredth time, but not so guilty as to be unable to concentrate on his more pressing duties. Still, the argument with Meara had an undesirable effect on virtual Kipling number two.

"What's wrong?" Ella gasped, frowning over her shoulder at him. "Don't stop now, you're almost there."

“Gracious girl, how many more ‘almost there’s’ will there be?” asked Kipling, slowing for a moment.

“Seven’s the magic number, Monsieur Prime Minister-Captain.” She gasped again, tightening Tacit Reality muscles.

“This ruddy well has to stop, Ella. This has to be the last time,” said virtual Kipling number two. He added lamely, “I mean to say that’s an order.”

“Of course, of course”

While virtual Kipling number two took red headed Ella for the seventh time, he also held another, more formal conversation in a different part of the ship, this one as a holo representation of himself in his green-gray Safari Minister’s uniform. This was holo-self Kipling number three, who stood suave and genteel, white hair spiked in that roguish manner that only a Brummagarti class android was capable — but only barely able at that. As he was prone to do in any incarnation, he lurched arms apart, rather Nosferatu-like and thus, once again, unintentionally camp. There was always that underlined bit of fakery lingering about his every move as he subconsciously inserted affected pop wherever he went. Crewmen who noticed this were inclined to point out that Kipling just couldn’t help himself, and they said he was rather like a dog trying to look innocent near a cat’s litter box.

Here at the back of the great ship, in a physical room under Chinese elms crowded with glowing messenger-fireflies, Kipling’s holo-self held a pipe and stood within Gylfinr Oskar’s Engine Priest Temple. The room was located back along the *Oomingmak’s* labyrinthine gallery above the aft Engineering Mall. Kipling would have

preferred if his Priests were tucked somewhere below the many decks of his ship's sixteen hundred meter superstructure, not up here where all that separated Oskar and his monks from attack were half-meter thick cathedral windows. *Although they are very pretty windows*, he mused. "Well, I suppose it's all right then. Cheerio!" Kipling said to the windows.

In a circle of fluted stepping stones the size of pie tins, five monks prostrate themselves in a circle around Oskar, who sat on a collection of hand-loomed pillows with the Company Poeta named Albrecht Saint-Thames. They were by sight, ghost-like — everyone but Albrecht, who was, no matter how one looked at him, an oversized turtle.

Holo-self Kipling number three paced before the monks in visible worry. Priest Oskar was most opaque when the light of the system's red giant star filtered through the incense that curled in quantum gestures above his featureless head. He reclined in dark robes that covered all but his sightless, coal-black face and golden glowing mouth and when he spoke aloud the amber smoke twisted from him in sub-vocal smoke signals intended for Albrecht.

Oskar closed his black button eyes and said in Ing'Lesh, "We need just a little more time, Prime Minister. Keyser's Moon orbits a rudimentary gas giant. Though we have made contact with the Jovian planet's Entity Core, we have discovered that it is not a mature Angel that controls this system's Gripper Gate, but it is a lesser intelligence called a Cygnus Entity - probably put there by the Keyzers. Our prayers are too complex for this planet. We recite Monsieur Saint-Thames' pretty poems but they have too many lines, too great a pentameter. This gas giant's intelligence wants the simplest of praise."

The priest gestured to the turtle. “If you can break orbit soon, Monsieur Saint-Thames tells me his own mind will relax. The farther he is from Keyser’s Hallucinatory Outhernet the better for him.”

Holo Kipling chewed his pipe and looked down on the Poeta named Albrecht Saint-Thames and said, “Can’t say I disapprove. I’m trying to get the ship to ... cooperate. Just how much distance is needed before that gasser will give us a grip?”

Albrecht sat upright on his pillows, with each movement the spaces between his hexagonal plates glowed from the transmission lines under his skin. Not an alien, but an autonomous android, the Poeta whispered to his Gylfinîr masters in the sub-vocal smoke signals of Incense-Speak. Albrecht wrote stanzas upon his belly with a lighted chamomile-pen in a tidy scrawl of swirling smoke that flashed and twisted away into the nostrils of the semi-transparent monks in prayer.

Oskar plucked a messenger-firefly from the air nearest him, downloaded the coordinates stored there, and placed a gentle hand on the back of Albrecht’s shell. His fingers blurred as he transferred the data to the little Poeta. “Not far,” Oskar replied. “Just three hundred thousand kilometers away and Albrecht will be able to write a small haiku. Even the silliest of gas giants likes a haiku. You’ll have your gripping point then, a full sixty light year flex to Shire Fenny system.”

“Well, well, well,” Kipling puffed. “The Queen’s Refuge is in range then. We’ll bend our way to the Park’s brown dwarf from Shire Fenny is what. The Explorer’s Club can take our quarry off us after that. *And indeed*, pay us in the sweet!”

“May I ask,” added Oskar, “have we caught our whale yet?”

“Just about,” holographic Kipling and real Kipling said at the same time.

Down on the surface of Keyser's Moon, Magister Dresden Loreen asked Kipling if the ground crew would have time for a break. "Certainly! But I dare say probably in orbit," real Kipling replied to Magister Loreen.

Magister Loreen grumbled at this and looked back out into the rain. She stayed inside the enclosure but leaned out to shout, "Quarry's in the net! Tea's in orbit!"

The grounded crewmen cheered.

Real Kipling stood with Magister Loreen inside the protected control room of one of the eight meter tall, mushroom shaped field generators. The transparent frame around him revealed the scene: rain continued to pour down the sides of the generators; in the haze of the distant horizon the ziggurat shapes of Keyser arcologies blinked amidst their blue bulk while Keyser's gas giant loomed over a full quarter of the sky. This little moon of a world was speeding on into the giant's shadow. The soft blues and powder grays, the sickly mists and torrential rain, the movement into darkness: all these served to punctuate Kipling's loneliness, for being planet-side made him feel so damn tiny.

Dresden Loreen said, "I think we have about two hours before we're in planetary eclipse."

Kipling unfolded a bench from the wall nearest him and sat behind her, saying, "Right ... Dresden old girl, have you thought about my offer?"

Magister Loreen paused before replying, though Kipling didn't get the sense she was caught off guard. She said, "Well, yes. Of course. How could I not?"

Kipling clapped his hands together, excited. "So you're in? You're going Spineward?" he asked.

Her helmet couldn't swivel, but Kipling could tell she was shaking her head no. "I mean, how could I not think about it. That's not a yes."

"Right, but"

"And I was talking to Dun Dagen"

"But Dagen's just an Éndrake!"

Magister Loreen leaned against the window. She was a hundred and twenty but she didn't look any older than the day she got her Masters at nineteen. She still had her childhood freckles. Kipling admired this about her. Anyone who kept up such an original blemish as freckles must be very genuine at heart, and those were the best people to wander the Universe with. This he always believed, despite his own obvious fakery in matters of style. Magister Loreen said, "He's a good listener."

Kipling laughed as he compulsively brushed mud from his boots. "Get off! Éndrake's don't listen to anyone. They just ... *react* to their obsessions."

"He thinks I might be better off just going straight to android. Isn't that what you did?"

"Not really." The mud wasn't coming off and he was making it look worse. "I drifted in the Stellar Outhernet for a time. You don't need a body for a jolly party. You can rent an android body or holo project out to any arcade on the Rout. One just walks through doors instead of opening them when shopping for manly things. Though I wager you'll most probably be out looking for lady things."

"You still do that." Magister Loreen monitored her crew outside while Kipling continued to frown at his boots.

“Granted,” Kipling replied nodding, arms folded. “I shop with my wife. She’s always looking for bargains out in the real world. And you can do it too, just your Thymotemporal personality would be located in my spine instead of that old brain of yours.”

Magister Loreen watched the action outside as a dozen Dervish cat-puppets hovered in a ring formation, horizontal to the immense, pulsating mass that bubbled up from the great concave pool of steaming bacteria. The whirling cat-puppets pirouetted on one foot each, six meters above the rising sheenwhale, while the generators beamed power into their little robot bodies. The anti-Casimir field generated by the robot cats was invisible to Human eyes, but Kipling hadn’t been Human for a century.

Magister Loreen said, “I still have at least ten years before I run out of cell options. I don’t need to abandon my original body so soon.”

“Certainly. But you’ll save ten years of panic not thinking about the transfer. It’s like when people used to have their molars pulled. Destroys the integrity of the mind worrying about pain and misery on the horizon, is what.”

“But what would your wife think about having a ... boarder?”

Something in Kipling’s expression changed. Magister Loreen wasn’t looking at him then, but she could hear it in his voice. Kipling’s honest face withered into clumsiness as he said, “Well, that is ... um ... she gets terribly lonely, I think. Ah ... why Meara would love to have you.”

“So you haven’t even asked her?”

“Well ... not as such”

“Kipling”

“Dresden, dear! I assure you I’m not some dashed confidence thief. I think of you as a little sister. I’m not caught up in the sex element and all that. I only want to see your transition from Human to Ascended to be as free from personal severity as possible.”

“Kipling ... Prime Minister. I would believe you, but”

“But? What’s that? But, oh?”

Magister Loreen stepped from the shelter of the generator and back out into the rain, “How many women have lived in your spine?”

“Um”

Magister Loreen had to shout through the downpour, “How many?”

“Thirty seven?” Kipling shouted in reply, “But I’ve only been wedded once!”

“And that’s why they call you *The Minister of Catch and Release* behind your back!”

Kipling flushed red and said, “What? No, no of course not. That’s just ... that’s just a hang over from my early years. When I started this safari outfit I was slapdash at placing my animals under permanent lodgings. That’s all, I swear!”

Magister Loreen waved off her boss and walked down the ramp to her fellow crew.

“Thank you for your concern, Prime Minister. I have to get back to work now.”

Kipling sat in frustration — alone but for the pieces of him scattered everywhere at once.

Magister Loreen shouted back one last time, “You need a dog more than you need a girl!”

“As if,” Kipling said to himself.

“There is an unusual request!” It was Gylfinîr Engine Priest Oskar speaking. He stuck his right hand in the air and when he snapped his fingers gold sparks burst on contact and fluttered holo Kipling’s way.

Holo Kipling allowed one of the sparks to settle onto his finger. Information connected and found his core Thymotemporal self gaunt and wondering. Kipling blinked for a solid twelve seconds while he tried to make sense of the request hidden in layers of what sounded like bubbling whistles and chirps. Finally, holo Kipling said to the priest, “I’m just cabbaged! Is this right? This message is extraordinary! Is this ... is the gas giant asking to speak with me *personally*?”

“Yes,” said the priest.

“Well, I ... I’m just cabbaged! Well! What the what, eh?”

Oskar nodded slowly and released a firefly from his left hand. It returned to the ceiling to hover with the others, blinking in communal Morse code harmony. Oskar said, “I have a TR Quiet Place ready for you in the ship’s local Outhernet. It will appear to you as an arctic realm, as per the gas giant’s request. Are you ready, Prime Minister-Captain?”

“Indeed,” said holo Kipling, puffing at his pipe.

Real Kipling opened a new access-way among his regular eighteen channels of communication and virtual Kipling number seven stepped into a Tacit Reality chamber somewhere in the *Oomingmak*’s local Outhernet. The TR realm was a simulated ice field in a frozen sea. Virtual Kipling number seven wore a gray parka and stood almost grotesque in his campiness this time, like an anorexic Abominable Snowman circling in an old West gun fight.

“Hello?” Kipling heard himself say.

He jumped back when a long white horn popped up from the water, followed by a white-gray melon of a head and two black eyes. The gas giant’s Cygnus avatar was a narwhal.

Down on the real surface of Keyser’s Moon, the robot Dervish cats’ whirling motion spun them up six meters above the ground and pulled the seventeen ton pregnant sheenwhale out of its hiding place deep under the mineral lakes. With a moan like terrestrial whale song, the helpless yellow mammal, more manatee-like in appearance than cetacean, slowly rotated above the water, its three eyes revealing a mild persona. Magister Loreen shouted back up the entryway to Kipling, “She’s ready! We can load the skiff!”

“Jolly well, too!” Kipling replied, shaking off the earlier sting of rejection.

Five of the campsited safari crew darted up the shoreline of rotting branch-mulch and opened the aft hanger door of the skiff’s deep-set capture tank. The main body of the skiff itself, though nearly invisible in camouflage mode, revealed its immense forward-swept wing outline under the torrential rains.

Magister Loreen stepped back into the shelter with Kipling, saying, “Creature load will take five minutes, blackout box activation will take another two, then it’s just the generators and us to pack up and we can break camp. If you’re going to hoax the Keyzers, now would be time, Prime Minister.”

Kipling nodded and prepared his internal oratory. Enough of the personal. Now to business.

Far up in orbit, inside the Oomingmak's cavernous, cathedral-like wheelhouse bridge, Kipling's fourth conversational self stood in the form of a translucent gryphon. It was a hallucination, a radio-telepathy that curled around a perfectly round stone spinning in a two meter wide fountain. A large, armored Éndrake humanoid, flanked on either side by two formal-attired bridge crew, stood next to Kipling's gryphon but said nothing. They watched as the Keyser's fountain and stone rolled next to Kipling's.

Outside the great ship, opaque picoscale bits of matter designed to encourage anthropic persistence from nothingness spun up in luminescent cloud-work from the Oomingmak's hull and spread along the full length of the ship's saurian frame. This created a firewall of idle, faux sapient chatter. Kipling's Thymotemporal mind was now shielded from Keyser infiltration as little bits of cognizance winked in and out of existence around the ship. Hoary gossip and barroom chat-up lines flooded the airwaves and thus all was ready for theocratic politics.

The distantly Human-descended Éndrake security officer was known as Dun Dagen. He was three meters of thick black armor topped off with a sealed, round helmet that bulged from a recessed plate that made up the whole of his neck and torso. Unreal, holographic images of a dragon's head moved liked a free form serpent within the helmet's globe — like an eel in a black fishbowl — concealing whatever true face rested within the armor. The holographic dragon's face smiled big enough to swallow a normal-sized Human head and shouted with too much enthusiasm, "Permission to board granted! Welcome, Ambassador Wilore! Raaargh!"

Tambourines chimed in the minds of those standing nearest, conch shell horns sang in auditory illusions in the phantom distance, and a hallucination of silverback gorilla rose to full height from the spinning Mirage Stone next to Kipling's. This was the Keyser Ambassador speaking now to Kipling via the planet's Outhernet. The hallucinatory conversation began thus:

“Hello, I am Ambassador Esmund Wilore of the Votive Deposit of Keyser Khan.” There were no words. Meaning was conveyed by transforming images and sounds. Thus “hello” was a coffin melting into a crystal plate while Ambassador Wilore's name and title was a series of waves drowning birds in a rain cloud.

The next succession of images from Ambassador Wilore — ceramic idols exploding into baby skeletons — meant thus: “Transponders state you are Kipling Mistleline Poppish, Captain of the registered Safari Ship, *Oomingmak*, and husband to Meara Bridling. Your vessel claims a manifest of over ten thousand sentient employees and thus your ship holds Subsidized Nation status as *Corporativismo Oomingmak* with you as Franchise Prime Minister and Exulted Safari Minister under Her Majesty the Queen of Windsor Temporality, Olde Sol Uncommonwealth. That much is known. This much is not: why are you violating our Sovereign Space? Why did your vessel swing out from Keyser's Giant so close to our orbit? Why did you take seven days to answer our hails? You must answer me or we will wage war until you are dead.”

Kipling replied with bubbles bursting over a field of poppies, which meant: “Right-o, hello to you too, there's a bird, what!”

Glass anchors congealed from Ambassador Wilore: “We do not acknowledge sarcasm.”

“Rather! Down to chops then: I’m taking your last sheenwhale,” said Kipling’s flying sheenwhale image.

“There are no sheenwhales here.” Stones crushed the flying whale and turned its pulp to cream.

“What oh! Then you won’t mind my taking the last one, right?” Bees exploded from a red sea.

“We do not give you permission to land.” Two magpies nested on an iceberg.

“Oh, Yes? Then you won’t mind if I tootle off your sponge of a moon, either.” The magpies turned to snow.

While the two minds split images within the *Oomingmak*’s wheelhouse, the Éndrake security officer stepped away to man an enclosed weapons station. Dun Dagen trained the *Oomingmak*’s howler guns on the trio of wraithships that chased Kipling’s swept-wing safari skiff from the Surface of Keyser’s Moon. When he fired, thought-shells of anti-premonition burst around the pursuers, confusing their pilots and daunting their ability to predict their own target. Yet the pursuit went on, however clumsy.

Kipling’s skiff now carried his real body, his twenty safari crewmen, Magister Loreen, his virtual wife in his spine, and his sheenwhale quarry all into orbit, and now they were decelerating in the direction of the *Oomingmak*. Keyser’s Moon quietly moved into the shadow of the colossal gas giant it orbited. Darkness shepherd them on. Now there was only the portal lights of the *Oomingmak*, the fusion burn of the skiff’s ring of engines, and the angelic light of the scattering Keyser wraithships.

Dun Dagen continued his protective barrage around the approaching vessel. The real Kipling sat within the skiff, the back of his campsuit locked into his acceleration couch. He was aware of the conflict outside his shuttle. He watched patiently as his Moartale Human pilot juggled four Outhernet conversations and still guided his vessel with skill. Kipling watched all this, participating in mild conversations with his crew while still maintaining the hallucinatory conflict on the *Oomingmak's* bridge, while still arguing with his wife in his spine, while still giving into the ship's computer's sexual demands ... while still trying to make sense with a gas giant id disguised as a narwhal.

Magister Loreen, locked into the acceleration couch next to Kipling's, leaned over and tapped her helmet against his. "See? she said. "This is exciting! Being chased off a hostile planet with ships in pursuit: how can I possibly have these kinds of tactile encounters if I have no real body? I'll have to go right for android when I reach Accenting Age. Spineward's just not for me, Prime Minister."

Real Kipling shook his head and said, "Rubbish! There are plenty of opportunities for the tactile when you're holo or virtual."

"If all you want to do is shop and play."

"It's a very serious business, I assure you.

Virtual Kipling number seven's self threw a red metal ring around the narwhale's horn. They had stared at one another for several minutes, the narwhal waiting for ... for what? Kipling wasn't certain. It wasn't giving any more sign of anything resembling language, so Kipling paced back and forth blundering through haiku's until the idea of the ringtoss game came to him.

“Here we go! That’s a bird! Right!” Kipling tossed a blue ring and the narwhale barked with pleasure, backing up in the water and easily catching the virtual toy. His horn was now sporting several colored rings and considering Kipling had an endless supply, there was no telling when this game would end.

But maybe that was the point, mused Kipling.

Kipling made to toss a green ring but then stopped himself. He stood upright and paced for a moment. Finally, hands on his hips, the ring tapping against his thigh, virtual Kipling number seven asked, “I say, are you lonely?”

The narwhale-disguised gas giant dipped its bulbous head and the many colored rings slid down, floating free upon the gray-lapis water. It looked very sad.

“Aw ... ” said Kipling.

In his Tacit Reality house in his spinal column, virtual Kipling number one leaned his head against the bedroom door. His wife refused to open. “Meara, let’s sort this out,” Kipling mildly pleaded.

Meara shouted through the oak door, “Go away!”

“Out of the question, you’re in my spine.”

“I don’t love you anymore!”

“Be that as it may, dear girl you know I can’t leave.” Virtual Kipling slid to the floor and said, “This avatar is always jolly well on.”

The door remained shut. Meara replied, “You’re rutting the ship’s computer even now!”

“Meara, now really, I’m not a complaining chap but you know she’s extorting me. If I don’t keep up with her blasted carnality her she won’t move the ship.”

“Then replace her!”

“Can’t be done.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I just ... can’t. You have to accept that.”

A chill swept up from around the doorframe.

Back in the real wheelhouse of the *Oomingmak*, hallucinations continued to crash and blaze about the deck.

Ambassador Wilore demanded, “Then you are ... leaving without your quarry?” This was represented as Wilore’s illusion: a dove chasing an undead fox.

“What ho? Quarry?” Kipling’s reply: the fox became butterflies.

“The one you seek.” Butterfly hatchets.

“What, what? Said it yourself, sheenwhales don’t exist, so you won’t mind my pinching the last.” A black rainbow settled over the scene.

“We do not allow the movement of the chaste upon our world. Sheenwhales live without sin under the water. They are unwashed by the rains. Only sinners are allowed on Keyser.” Ambassador Wilore’s reply stretched the rainbow on and on.

“Great socks! There’s a recipe for merriment if ever!” Kipling’s reply was like a wave pushing the black rainbow.

“Only those bathed in Keyser’s rain may tread here. If any ... *un-washable thing* persists we must kill it to the last.” Waves crashing.

“Forgive me for saying, dear boy, but you’re not getting the picture. I’ve come and gone and your whale doesn’t ‘tread’ there any longer. Not that it ever did anyway what with the thing’s lack of any momentum-making appendages. Rather lacking in the foot category, right, what?” Salt spray became flying jellyfish.

“We did not give you permission to land!” Jellyfish turned to stone.

“Too late for that, chappy. Yours truly was entirely scrubbed by your magic sky-seltzer. Stood right out and positively slosed up in the stuff.” Kipling’s illusion: his black rainbow fossilized to chalk.

Far below on the planet’s surface, in a squalid city besieged by telepathic wraiths and unending rain, Ambassador Wilore sat drenched on his balcony. A shriveled old man at only sixty standard years, a man made old by the weight of convoluted sinfulness and sodden punishment, Wilore sighed with great irritation as he waded in his dark fountain. He splashed himself once across the face and whispered to the transmitter stone that spun in the water around him. His message, strained of all patience, filled up with with images of swords cutting through stars, stars detonating into angels, angels shaking into banshee cries. Which was translated as: “Our rains are for the sinful! Public record shows you pure! You are locked in righteous marriage! You fight only in self defense! You are often employed by the Five Holy Charity Fiefdoms! You have good credit and a positive demeanor!”

“I like you too, old bean!”

“Enough! Our baptism is wasted on you and so we must fight you!”

Kipling answered with his gryphon image, but now the gryphon turned to bones and alabaster eyes. Kipling’s message meant: “My wife has filed divorce. Just now. Bad

luck and all. Seems I'm a cheating bastard. My Éndrake security officer is forwarding the petition to you."

The silence of a deepening migraine.

Finally: "May the rains you have received ... wash the sin from your illusions."

"That's a good bird. Jolly well thanks for that."

"Oh, God. Just shut up and go." A white rabbit trot away into a snowbank and shot itself with a handgun.

The Keyser wraiths broke off their attack. Flittering back into lower orbit, they dipped away despairing and exhausted from Dun Dagen's barrage. The *Oomingmak's* defenses cooled down. The ship's shielded sapience winked out of existence. The skiff docked.

Kipling's bridge crew moved the hallucination stones apart and the rocks stopped spinning in their fountains.

Real Kipling unlocked his back from the acceleration couch while the skiff powered down inside the *Oomingmak's* lower hanger. His safari crew cheered and Magister Dresden Loreen shook her Prime Minister's hand with both of hers. But inside real Kipling's spine, the door to his virtual bedroom was open, and Meara was nowhere to be found. Only her voice remained. She said, "I've sent the annulment request to the ship's adjudicant down in the Arcade."

"Can't say I disapprove," Virtual Kipling replied, head down.

"That's it? That's all you have to say?"

"Right, well the thing is we were only married a week. What more is there?"

Meara paused, then said with relish, “The dijudicant will send the doctor by tomorrow to guide me from your spine and fill you with *nothingness*.”

“So you’re off? Back to the Catalogue?”

“Of course! Maybe the next man who orders me will have the decency to act like one.”

Kipling smiled. “Oh, yes? Well, you’ve been a great ... value to me. Three cheers!”

“Why did you bother to buy my card from the Bridling Group?”

“Why did you accept?”

“You had a big ship. You had money and fame.”

“Right-o! And that’s why I chose *you*, dear girl.” Kipling’s virtual avatar moved away from the door and out onto the simulated English beach that their craftsman house stood upon.

“I don’t understand,” said Meara.

“Well, that’s it: you’re just so shallow and unkind. A real Witch Hilda! You’re just so unpleasant, right? I just thought it would make our eventual divorce easier if we hated each other.”

“What?” screamed Meara’s disembodied voice.

Virtual Kipling was in the water now. He wore a green and white striped bather and his arm draped over a white-gray melon-headed mammal. “I’ll tell you *what*. I’ve called the doctor just now. I need to have you out of my spine by tonight, all right? My narwhal friend needs room.”

Somewhere a door slammed.

On a virtual rattan bed in the *Oomingmak's* computer core, Ella, the ship's EtherCore avatar relaxed.

"Oooo ... that was it, Monsieur Prime Minister," Ella said, stretching naked over hemp bedding.

"Be that as it may," said virtual Kipling number two, his head still upon her breast, "Now will you be so good as to move the ship, Ella?"

"Already doing it."

"Just widen Keyser orbit three hundred thousand kilometers. No more. Tootle on."

"You're such a pretender, you know."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You pretend to not want me but then why did you mod my sex drive?"

"For commerce, of course. I have to go."

"Oh, Poo."

In the Gylfinîr temple on the back of the ship, holo Kipling finished pacing around his circle of monks. He smiled devilish but subtle.

"Good," said Priest Oskar. "This is a good distance. Albrecht is feeling inspired. Do you have a theme for him, Prime Minister?"

Holographic Kipling exhaled a sub-vocal stream of smoke from his pipe that said, "Something for my new pet."

"Ah ..." whispered little Albrecht. He wrote a poem in incense upon his belly.

Oskar inhaled the smoke signals and recited the poem to himself. His voice dropped then and he sent his mind out over the emptiness of space to the great gas giant that

shadowed Keyser's Moon. Everyone within the chamber heard the prayer within their minds. Kipling heard it doubly so in his virtual sea with his narwhal friend. Oskar implored, "Oh petty Cygnus Entity there within Keyser's Giant, you that followed Humanity through the cosmos, you that give sapience to gas giants and play cruel tricks on the law of conservation: send us to Fenny Shire and hear our haiku!"

Synchronicity

In divorce from perfection

We all sigh at once

The whole of the *Oomingmak* rotated slightly to port. The Éndrake, Dun Dagen called over the ship's simple, general intercom. He said, far too excited as always, "Gripper Gate created! Gripping space via Transfer Event! Yaargh!"

On the hurricane swept surface of the red-hued gas giant a black line appeared and grew across the equator, curling up like a pumpkin knife slicing open a grin. The mouth yawned and through the black edges of the maw stars could be seen within. The *Oomingmak's* engine pods sent out invisible carrier waves over the divide, through the gas giant's maw and to the other side some sixty light years away, exiting through a brown dwarf where the Queen's Park Services Legion waited to take possession of Kipling's endangered sheenwhale. The invisible arm bent at the elbow and took the *Oomingmak* with it to the other side. The mouth closed — and unknown to anyone but Kipling and Oskar, it closed for the last time. A gas giant was just another big planet,

and no longer capable of creating interstellar portals, with its Cygnus Entity personality absconded from its core.

They used to call him the Minister of Catch and Release behind his back, but now they just said he seemed genuinely happy. Kipling never had anyone worth keeping before.

A month after entering Windsor Space, Kipling Mistleline Poppish chatted up the buyers at the Queen's Auction House, setting an immense reserve for his quarry, while somewhere in his spine, he played ring toss with a narwhal.

“Good Dog, what! That’s a lad!”

The End

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