

# Genesis (By Robert Bee)

My final masterpiece is completed. Its vibrant reality beckons me from the canvas, filling me simultaneously with hope and dread. The special medium has dried the paints and provides the means of re-uniting me with my love, my Yvette. That I must use the cause of my despair as a vehicle for redemption is not lost as a supreme irony. The pigments enliven before my eyes. I prepare myself for the steps needed to complete the task I have set. There can be no turning back. Yvette awaits me.

As I recall how this impossible nightmare, this source of fleeting joy, began, I take the first step.

The expectant onlookers at Central Spaceport released a collective sigh as the shuttle burst through the low cloud cover. It glided gracefully to a perfect landing like a pelican on a glassy lake. My lanky brother-in-law wasn't hard to pick out from the crew of the Spaceship InterTrade III when they began emerging from the umbilical tunnel.

"Michael, over here!" Ketrina's excitement was barely under control.

Michael O'Rourke, Chief Engineer, swung in the direction of his wife's voice and broke into a run. He smothered Ketrina with kisses, then scooped up his son, Martin, with a whoop of delight.

Six months had passed since the departure of IT-III to the fourth planet around the star Beta Pollux, where advanced sentient life had been discovered. The two hundred light year distance to BP4 was a formidable barrier to trade. But now, IT-III had returned to distribute its cargo of exotic goods.

"You crazy bohemian," Michael shouted at me through the tangle of his family's arms. "Out of your slump yet?"

Trust Michael to hit you where it hurts. But then, how much sensitivity can you expect from an engineer who travels at near infinite speed through space with his head stuck up a Hawking Wormhole Drive nuclear accelerator.

"If you're asking have I been able to sell any of my works, the answer is no." I tried to keep the bitterness from my voice.

"However, I have an exhibition at the Greenhoff Gallery next month. My agent is hopeful for a big turnover."

Michael's innocent question had cut deeply. The truth was my creative juices had dried up. Thus the lie about my agent's hopes for the Greenhoff exhibition.

"You need a good woman, Damien," Michael said. "Ever since what's-her-name left you, you've gone off the boil."

In the automatic sky-cab, above the congested streets of the city, Michael recounted the historic voyage and the wonders of the alien planet. From his carry bag, Michael produced three wrapped packages and gave one to each of us.

Martin, with the enthusiasm typical of twelve year olds world-wide, demolished the exotic wrapping paper in two quick movements. "It's great Dad. What is it?"

"It's a portable Hologram projector" his father explained, laughing. "It gives you a three-D audio image." Michael pressed a button on the device and the cab was filled with a view of a stunning alizarin hued BP4 sunset. "In the box there's a collection of discs on a range of subjects."

Ketrina held a dazzling necklace, its gems coruscating in the cab's lights. "It's beautiful." She hugged Michael who smiled contentedly. He cast a questioning glance in my direction.

"Please, if by some miracle you like yours, spare me the hugs"

"It may be two years since 'what's-her-name' left me," I replied, "but I'm not that desperate."

I removed the exotic wrapping from my gift and exposed a simple wooden box. "Interesting" I said, and slowly prised open the lid.

Martin screamed, then Ketrina. An incredibly loathsome, snarling creature shared the cab with us. Its impossibly wide mouth opened revealing endless rows of razor sharp teeth and a gaping gullet leading to hell. The beast roared and stretched four cruelly taloned arms towards Ketrina, who was futilely attempting to cover Martin with her body.

Michael hurriedly reached over Ketrina and pointed an object at the monster. The abominable creature instantly disappeared. Michael cursed. "I forgot about that one." He hugged Ketrina to soothe her distress. "It's all right. It was only a picture on Martin's H-projector."

Ketrina uncovered her face. She quickly checked Martin and found he had already recovered from his initial fright. "It was horrible. What was it?"

"The locals call it a Zhuffac, a carnivorous predator with explosive strength. Thankfully they're extinct on BP4."

"Sweet creature," said Ketrina. With shaking hands, she retrieved my gift from the floor. "Please hurry up and open this. We're almost home".

I cautiously opened the lid and peered inside. There were tubes of what appeared to be artist paints, and one large tube which I suspected was a medium. I examined the label on one of the smaller tubes. The language was indecipherable. Turning it, I found a second label in pseudo-English. "Metamorphic Reality Primary - Warm Blue" it said. Examining the other tubes, I discovered the basic artists' colour range. Was I missing something? Why bring paints two hundred light years to an artist?

Then I picked up the large tube and read the label aloud. "Metamorphic Reality - Fixative Medium".

"The Beta Pollux artist assured me they give a totally realistic effect," Michael said. "I thought it might help you out of your slump."

My slump. Ever since 'what's-her-name', Simone, had walked out, tired of my single-mindedness, unwilling to share me with my art, I had lost my creativity. Simone couldn't grasp that my intense love for her was what caused me to apply myself without reservation to each new creation. Since Simone, I had not been able to find another as beautiful, vibrant and full of life and stimulation. The shallowness of the mod-soc set was a cloying facade and I was like a floundering fish, struggling for a return to the depths of meaning and inspiration.

Later, in my studio, I re-examined the tubes of alien paint. Curious, I set up a new canvas and arranged a composition of a half empty wine bottle, a book, a glass and some drapes. At first I was lethargic but as the paint mixed with the medium and flowed from

my brush to the canvas, I began to gain a renewed enthusiasm. The image captured on the canvas displayed a previously unknown vibrancy. It was not from any reflective light, any quirk of the texture. It emanated from the painted image itself. Metamorphic Reality. Could it mean that it gave an extra dimension of realism to the painting? I looked from the model to the canvas. It was true. I couldn't tell them apart.

Quickly I set up some apples, an orange, a banana in a straw bowl. As I applied myself to the new painting, my hands shook with excitement, so I finished the bottle of wine. To complete the picture and balance the composition, I painted an imaginary pear.

The painting looked good enough to eat. I contemplated all the possible subjects for this fantastic medium. Landscapes, nudes, portraits. They would assail the senses, exuding reality.

Exhausted from my work and with an overwhelming sense of anticipation, I went to bed to prepare for the first day of my new life.

The following morning Martin arrived for his weekly lesson. He was developing a good eye for tone and colour as well as his own style. He particularly enjoyed painting animals and regularly visited the Zoological Sanctuary to sketch a new subject. Neo-caff was beginning to clear my cobwebs when Martin called from the studio.

"Uncle Damien, these paintings are par-ex". I entered the studio, cup in hand, to see Martin examining my paintings while eating the last of a pear. He grabbed an apple from the basket. "How did you make these so real?" He demolished the apple as I told him about the paints from BP4. "Can I use some?" he asked.

"When I turn you into a decent painter. Let's get started."

After Martin had left I returned to my studio. The painting of the fruit was pulsing with reality as a memory tugged at my mind. Where was the pear in the picture? Then I remembered seeing Martin eating a pear, but where had the pear come from?

Unanswered questions made my head spin. I spied the still half full bottle of wine on the table. I took a deep draught, debated with myself, then drank the remainder.

After a quick brunch, I admired my latest works before heading to the Greenhoff Gallery. I stared incredulously at the painting with the book, wineglass and bottle. The wine bottle was empty.

The remainder of that day was a blur. The bizarre sequence of events in the studio that morning nagged for explanation. My meeting at the gallery was an unqualified disaster. The nervous sponsor insisted that I should produce a major work of special interest or lose the exhibition.

That night my sleep was full of fantastic dreams. Imaginary pears were devoured by aliens who bled exotic wine into empty bottles. Simone drank the wine, then wiped the pear and wine from the paintings. Evading my grasp, she painted a quick self portrait and leaped into the canvas, striking a classic pose with a Mona Lisa smile.

I awoke with a start, the dream persisting. An idea began to grow and became a conviction. I would paint a portrait. Not just any portrait, but the most beautiful woman in the world. This woman, glowing with reality, would gaze down at the gallery viewers, capture their hearts with her secret, knowing smile, make them ache to touch her and long to have her. She would captivate the art-soc.

I began to research my model. As Eve was created from Adam's rib, my Yvette would embody mod-soc's loveliest.

After days of creative frenzy, I stood before the finished painting, exhausted. Yvette was stunning and desirable beyond my wildest dreaming, yet with a naive innocence I had not intended. The paints, applied liberally, were only beginning to dry and their metamorphic magic was yet to be fully realised. How Yvette would look at final medium fixation I could only speculate. Already she was too beautiful for me to bear. In succeeding, I had destroyed myself and my depression of the post-Simone days returned. I was alone, again.

I languished in bed the next morning, unwilling to face the unattainable beauty in my studio. I cursed my genius. Why did Yvette have to be so beautiful?

My self flagellation was interrupted by a knock on the door.

It opened slowly and, into my room, preceded by a tray with steaming neo-caff and hot buttered toast, came a vision of loveliness. Yvette, for it was her, smiled the heart melting smile I had given her and set down the tray. She then sat on my bed, her parted robe revealing exquisitely sculptured legs and a modest golden tan, just as I had painted her. Yvette looked warmly into my eyes. "Damien" she said. Her voice was a soft contralto, with a faint unidentifiable foreign lilt. "I hope breakfast is as you like it."

I stared numbly at Yvette. "Impossible," I finally stammered, "I only painted you from my imagination. You're not real." The inanity of that statement was revealed as Yvette moved from the foot of the bed, gently placed her arms about my neck and slowly, brought her lips to mine. Her kiss was warm, soft, with an exotic taste. And real.

"Yvette" I managed to say, awe mixing with love and desire. We began to enjoy my breakfast.

As the bond between Yvette and I grew stronger and richer in the next weeks, so did my creativity and style. However, I was under no illusions from where my inspiration stemmed. Yvette. She was my life, my joy. I found that I did not need the BP4 paints to achieve the strength of imagery that had elevated me in the mod-soc scene, so I stowed them in my materials cupboard. The original painting of Yvette, "Genesis", was framed and placed in my den, where only I could marvel at the beginning of my salvation.

On the opening day of my new exhibition, "The Yvette Collection" at the Greenhoff Gallery, Martin arrived for his weekly lesson.

Yvette suggested he use my studio and show us his latest painting on our return. Martin's eyes widened at the prospect of his own private studio.

My triumph that evening was complete. Every painting sold and I received many new commissions. During the exhibition, I looked to see Yvette surrounded by admiring males, vying for her attention. But her gaze swept the crowd seeking mine, and she gave me that smile, melting in its path every unprotected heart. We returned home, at peace with our future life together.

Martin had gone home, leaving a note on the painting cover. "Finished painting. Drying. Don't peek. It's a surprise."

I awoke to a nightmare. Hideous feral snarls and ululations were punctuated by terrified screams and sounds of destruction. I heard my name called, receding into distance, repeated pleadingly. My arm reached out to gather Yvette to me but she was gone. My stomach twisted as I rushed to the studio with un-nameable fears. Through an ugly gaping wound in the wall, I saw a path of devastation. It led through the marble courtyard balustrade, the sculptured hedges and the super-alloy security fence. Littering this trail were the remnants of a robe and two slippers. Of Yvette there was no sign.

My heart raced and I grasped an easel for support. The easel collapsed under my weight and crashed to the floor, exposing Martin's

painting to my shocked stare. A scream formed in my throat as I recognised the metamorphic medium fixed shape of a Zhuffac, razor teeth glittering in the morning light. The monstrous sound in the sky-cab and my nightmare returned with a deafening shock. I vented the half formed scream in horror and disbelief.

Where might the beast take her? Controlling my panic, I hurried to the comm-set in the den. I punched the emergency code, collapsed weakly into the chair and turned to the painting of Yvette.

'Genesis' was empty.

As I take the second step up the ladder, I can hear Ketrina and Michael at the front door. They're too late. At the lofted ceiling beam, my last creation is taking shape, weaving itself into a secure knot about the knaggy timber. It reaches down to me, shimmering slightly but rushing to fibrous reality, only one step above my eyes. The noose slips easily over my head as I take that step and with one hand I tighten the knot around my neck. My free hand activates Martin's H-projector, filling the studio with an alien mountain sunset, Yvette's favourite.

As Ketrina bursts through the mountain, I smile to her, and take my last step.

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