

Oscar's Temple

Short Fiction by Stephen L. Moss

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Deputy Mayor Walker Brooks tripped over an alien on his way to take out the garbage. He lost his grip on the bag and dropped it right on top of the visitor.

“Sorry,” Walker said. He wasn’t all that surprised to find an alien living next to his garbage cans; it seemed like every day there was a new species profiled in the papers or making the rounds of the talk-show circuit.

Walker bent over the dark brown gelatinous mound to pick up the bag, but stopped short. Wisps of milky discoloration swirled across the surface of the alien’s body as the bottom of the garbage bag dissolved like melting ice cream and disappeared.

Did this thing eat garbage? Walker hesitated, then lifted another bag from the garbage can and dropped it on the alien. The second bag disappeared too.

“That’s a pretty cool trick,” Walker said.

He checked his watch. Damn. He was going to be late for briefing the mayor this morning.

Walker raced down the Lakeside Highway at an inappropriate speed, the South Side bluffs reflected in his rear-view mirror. Lake Michigan stretched to the horizon on his right, and the brand-new city sports complex, looking like something from *The Jetsons*, loomed on the left. The mayor would have some hard questions about that, too, assuming he had seen the newspaper. Walker’s forehead started to ache.

He was twenty minutes late by the time he reached the mayor’s office. Jamie, Hizzoner’s secretary, didn’t look up from her computer screen to acknowledge him.

Walker paused to see what she was looking at. It was a video of an Aerid, a rarely seen butterfly-like being with enormous wings that spanned four football fields and caught the sun’s rays in a dazzling array of glittering sparkles. This one had recently appeared over Shanghai.

“Wish we had one here,” Jamie said, her voice dreamy.

“Me, too,” Walker said. “That would get people’s minds off city government.”

Hizzoner was pacing. His jacket was off and his gut pressed against the buttons of his shirt. He grabbed the *Kilbourn Record* from his desk and shoved it at Walker.

“Where have you been all morning? The press wants to know what we’re going to do about the stadium.” The mayor’s breath smelled of coffee and antacids. He poked a finger at Walker. “My question is, what are you going to do about it? You and Monroe held my balls to the meat slicer to get that thing built. And now he decides to move the team to Memphis?” Hizzoner tossed the paper to his desk.

“Maybe we could lease it to one of the alien leagues for Bloodball. It’s popular enough with the visitors,” Walker said. “That could make up for the lost revenue.”

“Oh yeah, just what we need. More damn aliens running around. This city is screwed up enough as it is.” The mayor wiped his brow with his sleeve and sat down heavily behind his desk. “Jesus, I didn’t need this stadium thing today. I’m supposed to meet with Snipes at eleven about the garbage strike.

You’re the one who used to be a garbage man. What the hell am I going to tell him?”

Walker rubbed his temples with his fingertips. “I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t been able to talk to Snipes since I left the job. He thinks I’m afraid to get my hands dirty now.” Not that the union president got his hands very dirty, either.

“Just figure out how to handle him, Walker. Say, did I tell you what the gardener found out by my garbage this morning? Some kind of alien fungus. Looked like a giant pile of bird crap.”

So the mayor had one, too? Walker perked up.

“Did you try feeding it?”

“Feeding it?” Hizzoner frowned. “I told the gardener to spray it with Roundup. It’s probably already done.” The mayor lumbered over to his chair and settled down. He reached for the paper. “Go!” he snapped, and Walker went.

Walker’s day was consumed by aldermen quibbling over some two-bit parking ordinance, phone calls from all the newspapers, the meeting with the garbage-workers’ union. It was nearly dark when he got home, frustrated, tired, and thinking about trash.

He went out to the alley, toting the contents of his bathroom wastebasket. As the gooey brown alien swallowed the trash, Walker worried about what the sanitation guys would think when

they saw it sitting there. They'd probably blab to the TV news about the strange things Walker Brooks, city hall big-shot, left beside his garbage cans.

He decided to move the alien into his back yard. How heavy could it be? But when Walker tried to take hold of it, his hands sank into its gelatinous mass as if he were trying to pick up a puddle of chocolate pudding. Walker felt an acid sting on his skin and ran into the house to wash the brown goop from his hands.

Standing at the sink, he could see the top of the new stadium from his window. Typical of Monroe to leave town and dump an empty stadium into his lap. And on top of that, the strike; Hizzoner figured that since Walker was a former sanitation worker, he could deliver the union on a silver platter. But the union was thumbing its nose at them both.

Walker rinsed and dried his hands. His head was throbbing again, so he reached for the Tylenol. How much garbage could that thing outside eat? Well, it didn't matter. The whole town was turning xenophobe along with the mayor. The talk-radio pundits were calling for Jim Crow laws. They probably wouldn't warm to an alien who ate dirty socks and coffee grounds. He was sure the garbage men would heave it in the truck if they could.

Well, if he couldn't move it, maybe he could convince it to move on its own. The next morning, instead of dumping his garbage on top of the thing, he poured a trail from the alley to his backyard. He hoped no one was looking.

On Friday, the mayor worked half the day and then headed to Florida for a long weekend. Walker didn't ask if he was taking his family or his new "friend" that no one was supposed to know about.

He drove home to find that his plan had worked. The thing had flowed into the backyard. Walker rewarded it with all the trash he could find.

"Welcome to Earth," he said, but it didn't answer.

As he headed back inside, Walker glanced up at the second floor of his duplex, where his tenant Jerry lived. Jerry was an alien, too; maybe he would know more about the garbage-eating alien in the backyard. Walker climbed the steps and knocked.

Jerry opened the door on the second knock, releasing an explosion of thrash metal from a stereo in the next room. A bird-like alien from some planet whose name Walker couldn't pronounce, Jerry made his living as a scream sculptor in an art gallery downtown. The walls of his kitchen were festooned with discarded human objects: upside-down license plates, a purple feather boa, an old Farrah Fawcett poster.

“Hi Jerry,” Walker yelled over the music.

Jerry hopped back from the door, his owl eyes wide over his down-turned beak. Like the name of his home world, his real name was unpronounceable, so Walker called him Jerry Dactyl. Jerry didn’t seem to get the joke.

“Hi, Mr. Brooks,” Jerry yelled through the translator that hung around his scaly neck. Jerry motioned to a chair, the red vinyl one Walker had scrounged up when he realized Jerry didn’t have any chairs. There were chin-up bars suspended from most of the doorways in the apartment; Walker figured Jerry hung upside down on them when no one was around.

“I’ll turn the music down,” Jerry shouted. He skittered to the dining room, his claws scraping the hardwood floor. Something was simmering in a stockpot on the stove—pigeons, presumably. Walker had once seen Jerry crawling down from the roof with one in his beak.

When Jerry returned, Walker asked if he’d seen the thing in the backyard.

“Yes,” Jerry said.

“Have you ever seen one before?”

“Yes.” The translator made Jerry’s voice sound almost human.

“What can you tell me about them?”

Jerry paused, the ridges over his eyes parting horizontally. The flying lizard-owl was funny about information. He wouldn’t just give it to you; you had to trade, *quid pro quo*, and he wouldn’t settle for a stock tip or celebrity gossip, either. He wanted personal dirt, weird stuff, like your sexual fantasies or the time you stole money from your mom’s purse.

“Tell me what you dreamed about last night.”

“It’s pretty hazy.”

“Tell me what you can.”

“I was late for a press conference, but I couldn’t find my car keys. The mayor was on a donkey, singing songs from *The Sound of Music*. Then I was in front of all these reporters and realized I wasn’t wearing any pants. I still felt embarrassed when I woke up.”

Jerry’s clawed fingers waved in the air; that usually meant he liked what he was hearing.

“The life form you saw is called a —” Jerry’s translator cut out. In Jerry’s native tongue, the name of the alien goop-monster sounded like flies buzzing in a jar. “They are similar to the mold and fungi of this world, only they can grow in any weather. They subsist on rubbish. They can metabolize almost anything.”

“Are they sentient?”

“Have you ever had a homosexual experience?”

Walker sighed. Sometimes the translator worked almost too well. “Never mind.”

On Saturday morning, Walker put on his coat and headed out with the rest of last night’s take-out pizza and a couple of empty beer bottles. The alien gobbled them up eagerly.

A black spot appeared in the middle of the alien’s body. It was dime-sized at first; then it got wider. A mouth?

“Still hungry?” Walker asked. He went in the garage and found some scrap lumber. The thing sucked the boards in like fettuccini. The boards liquefied as Walker watched.

He noticed tendrils poking out from underneath the garbage-eater, pointing in every direction. Roots, maybe, or creepers.

He went back to the garage and found his dolly. He wrestled an old range out of its corner; he’d been meaning to put it out in the alley, but why not see if the alien would eat it?

Picking up garbage for a living hadn’t been so bad. Why had he ever gone into politics? It would be nice to jump on the back of a truck again and tell the newspapers to kiss his ass. But it was too late for that; his former work buddies would never let him live down a stint in city hall.

“Here you go, Oscar,” he said as he set the dolly upright. The range hit the ground with a clang. “It’s good for you. Lots of iron.”

Oscar—so dubbed in honor of the Sesame Street Muppet that resided in a garbage can—flowed up the side of the range and spread like a cracked egg until it covered the entire appliance.

By supertime, the range was gone and Oscar’s tendrils had spiraled out another two feet. Its mouth was open again.

Walker was out of garbage. He snuck out to the alley and raided his neighbor’s cans. He looked down and realized that Joe, his neighbor, had an Oscar, too. It was much smaller than the one in Walker’s yard. Had his been that small at first?

He picked up a couple of foul-smelling white plastic bags, dropped one of the bags on the new Oscar, and took the other back into his yard.

Sunday afternoon, Walker let Joe in on the Oscar phenomenon. Joe was a pretty open-minded guy, and soon he was scrounging up all the garbage he could find.

Then Walker went to talk to his other neighbors with hungry Oscars. Before long, most of the people on their street were out feeding their Oscars. Walker grinned when he realized his neighbors weren’t as xenophobic as the mayor.

Joe wanted to talk about Aerids. One had been sighted over Shanghai again. Walker had seen the satellite footage. The whole city was bathed in a dazzling play of light and shadow as the sun filtered through the Aerid's translucent wings.

"They say half the world has applied for a visa to go there and see that thing up close," Joe said, "but the Chinese government won't let anyone near it. They're putting out some story about a chemical spill."

All day Sunday, Walker's Oscar kept growing. Its tendrils were now at least four feet long. Colorful yellow, orange, violet, and fire-engine red bulbs sprouted from the tendrils. Oscar looked like a hot pepper plant on steroids.

Walker's cell phone chirped.

"Walker?" The Mayor's voice roared out of the phone. "Hi, Boss. I thought you were in Florida."

"I came back early. The sanitation workers union moved the strike deadline up to this Friday and their demands are going up, too. They want a ten percent raise and another week of vacation. Christ."

"Did they call you in Florida?"

"No," he said in a near-whisper, "they found me in Florida. Some goon knocked on my hotel door. They know about Suzy. They say they have pictures and they're threatening to take them to the media."

Walker didn't think the mayor's affair was much of a secret, but apparently the mayor didn't know that.

"You gotta do something, Walker. I'm gonna get nailed to the cross on this one."

Walker stifled a laugh. Somehow he didn't see Jesus jetting to Florida with Suzy the Floozy.

"Walker? Say something, dammit."

"Walker looked at his hungry Oscar.

"Let them strike," he said.

"What?"

"I said let them strike. We have a secret weapon."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Trust me, boss, you won't believe it till you see it. How soon can you be here?"

The mayor waited till dark. "This had better be good," he said as they walked to the back yard.

“Oh, it is.” Walker led the mayor to Oscar.

“That’s the same thing I had in my alley,” the mayor said. “Roundup works really well on them.”

“You killed it?”

“Nah. Had the gardener do it.”

“You won’t want to exterminate them when you see what they can do.”

Walker appropriated another bag of trash from the alley and fed it to Oscar. The mayor’s eyes widened, but he didn’t say anything.

Walker led the mayor up and down the alley and showed him all the other Oscars and the empty garbage cans that stood next to them. Then Walker looked expectantly at Hizzoner.

“No way,” the mayor said.

“Why not?” Walker asked. “This guy will make garbagemen obsolete.”

“Do you have any idea how many tons of garbage this city generates?”

“Yes. Do you?”

“No, but it’s a lot. These guys won’t keep up.”

“It is a lot. But if there are enough of them, they’ll keep up.”

“Are there enough?”

“Everywhere I look, I see more,” Walker said.

“This is too good to be true.”

“Maybe,” Walker said, “but what other choice do we have? It’s perfect.”

“Forget it, Brooks. You think the people of this town want gelatin balls from space to be their garbage men?”

“Yes!” Walker said. “Look, almost everyone in this alley is feeding their garbage to the Oscars.”

The Mayor just shook his head. “Give me a solution I can use and quick, or you’ll be driving a truck across a picket-line and picking up the garbage yourself.” He walked back to his car.

Walker felt his headache returning. Now what? His job wasn’t going to last past Friday at this rate.

On Monday, Walker drove up to Madison for a highway commission conference. The state senators ribbed him about the stadium.

“The thing looks like a flying saucer that crashed into an octopus,” one said. “No wonder Monroe moved the team.”

Walker forced himself to smile. Eventually the meeting was over and he started the ninety-mile drive back to Kilbourn.

He switched on the radio, only to find himself listening to a broadcast of the mayor's press conference.

"Let them strike!" the mayor roared defiantly. "I have found the solution, right here in my back yard."

Walker gripped the steering wheel. He knew what the mayor was about to say. Incredible.

The Mayor went on to describe Oscar, and his own chance discovery of what it could do. "My gardener was about to spray pesticide on it," he said. "I stopped him just in time."

Walker smiled. Once he realized he could take credit for the whole idea, Hizzoner had come around.

When he got home, Walker found Jerry spooning pigeon stew into a bowl. It didn't look half-bad, though it smelled *wrong* somehow. What kind of herbs had Jerry put in there?

"Is there anything I should know about these guys? Do they do anything bad?"

"Have you ever committed murder, Mr. Brooks?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you certain? Not even an animal? You never even killed an insect or a spider?"

"Well, sure." He shifted uncomfortably

"Then tell me about it."

Jerry's TV was on. More footage of the Aerid over Shanghai.

"Could you ask me something else?" Walker asked. "I'm not up for that question right now."

Jerry's spoon scraped against the bowl of stew, but he seemed cheerful enough.

"Okay. How often do you masturbate?"

"Come on, Jerry, give me a break."

Jerry waited, looking at Walker with unblinking eyes.

"Oh, all right," Walker said. "Quite a lot, okay? I get a kick out of earning taxpayers' dollars for jacking off in my office. Sometimes I have to make a little diaper out of my handkerchief to keep my pants from soaking through during meetings." He felt himself blushing, but Jerry was waving his hands excitedly, so Walker pressed on. "I even did it sitting in the mayor's chair one night after he'd gone home. There. You satisfied?"

"Oh, yes."

“Now,” Walker said, “what about the aliens?”

“They emit an unpleasant odor when their spores are released.”

“How unpleasant?” Walker wrinkled his nose. Worse than pigeon stew?

“Like the smell of those mammal houses at the zoo. I find it bearable.” Jerry spooned more stew into his beak.

“How long does it last?”

Jerry threw his head back and gulped. Walker could see a lump of stew make its way down his gullet.

“Less than a day,” he said through the translator. “But then there is another period, during their totem ritual, when the smell lasts longer.”

How much longer? And what’s a totem ritual?”

“Have you ever committed murder?”

Walker’s headache was coming back. “Some other time.”

Within a few weeks, Walker’s backyard was transformed. Oscar’s tendrils curled and snaked through the yard and up the fence and garage, each one covered with bulbs. All over the city, tendrils covered every yard and parkway. People had stopped mowing their lawns, and the grass grew long.

There was never any sign that the Oscars excreted, but the native flora seemed enriched by their presence. Daisies and lilies bloomed everywhere. Kilbourn looked like a hippie’s wet dream dressed up with Christmas lights.

The people of Kilbourn had embraced an alien solution to the garbage strike more easily than Walker had hoped. When you came right down to it, it was fun to watch the garbage dissolve like paper in the rain. And the foliage on the Oscars was beautiful. Weeds seemed to like having Oscar around too; they were spreading like rumors in Walker’s backyard. He spent many evenings digging up dandelions with a trowel, until his trowel went missing. A few days later he noticed that Oscar had flowed on top of it and hidden it from view. Walker was glad Oscar hadn’t eaten it.

The trowel was covered with the milky slime that swirled around Oscar’s body. Walker picked the trowel up gingerly and found that the white slime didn’t sting his skin like Oscar had. Apparently Oscar could avoid digesting things if it wanted to; after all, it hadn’t eaten the sidewalk it was sitting on.

On the Fourth of July, the bulbs finally opened. Huge flowers, as big as hyacinths, covered the town.

There was a single black mass at the center of each.

“Those are the spores, I assume?” Walker asked Jerry

“Yes.”

“How long before they open?”

“Depends on the weather.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have you ever committed murder?”

Walker shook his head.

The flowers bloomed for two weeks. Since the Chinese government still wasn't letting anyone into Shanghai to see the Aerid, people flocked to Kilbourn like ants to sugar. So much for xenophobia — as soon as footage of the flowers hit the national news, every hotel, motel, and B&B within a fifty-mile radius was booked. You could barely get a room, even in Chicago. Monroe actually expressed public misgivings about moving the team out of Kilbourn.

The police had their hands full trying to keep curious tourists from touching the blooms or the creatures that sported them. But once word started to spread about emergency rooms filling up with folks complaining about chemical burns on their hands, people stopped trying to pick the flowers.

The Mayor had stared down Snipes and disbanded the entire sanitation department; he was selling the trucks, and most of the garbage men were being retrained for other municipal jobs. And he reveled in the out-of-town money pouring in. Walker watched the spores and waited. He had told the mayor what Jerry said about the smell, and the mayor had been furious.

“Why didn't you tell me this sooner?”

“Because I didn't know.”

“You let me go ahead with this plan without knowing all the ramifications first?”

“You implemented the plan without telling me. I was out of town.”

“But it was all your idea,” the mayor said.

“That's not what you're telling the public.”

“This is the best thing that ever happened to Kilbourn,” the mayor said. “I don't want to chase these people away. We'll deal with the smell when it comes. You'd just better hope it's not bad.”

Walker shook his head, but knew there was no point in arguing.

On the morning of July 18, as a steaming summer day settled on Kilbourn, the seeds exploded.

It seemed to happen to every flower at once. A cloud of spores catapulted from each black seed. The spores floated on tiny glider wings and caught the breeze; in seconds, the sky was dark with them.

Saying they smelled bad would be like calling Hitler a petty criminal. It smelled like feces, rotten eggs, and dead fish, all whirled in a blender and then painted across the sky. It was the kind of stink that made your head reel and your gut lodge in your throat. Walker took one sniff and vomited his breakfast. He staggered back inside and found a respirator in the basement where he had been doing some spray painting. It helped some, but not enough. He rubbed VapoRub on his upper lip, the way he used to when he hauled garbage after a hot weekend. But the menthol fumes did little to cover the stench.

He spent the day in a kind of fitful sleep on the couch. No way was he going to work. He didn't even want to take the respirator off to call in sick. His phone never rang; everyone else was probably hiding out at home, too.

It was over in about seven hours. The cloud of spores drifted off in all directions and slowly the stench began to dissipate.

Kilbourn's appeal as a tourist attraction disappeared with it. The streets, train station, and airport were mobbed with disappointed sightseers trying to get home. Then they, too, were gone.

Monroe announced that he would keep the team in Memphis. The mayor placed Walker on administrative leave, citing some "allegations regarding his personal conduct," and promised an investigation. The Oscars kept right on eating garbage.

The real trouble started several mornings later. The smell was not only back, but worse. Walker stumbled to the back bedroom and looked out the window. No spores. Oscar was hunched by the toolshed, convulsing like a cat coughing up a hairball. Its body rippled rhythmically. Then its mouth opened and a torrent of black goo came out. It heaved again and more goo came out.

Walker ran for his respirator, stomach lurching. When he returned to the window, a pile of glistening black vomit steamed next to Oscar. Oscar circled the pile with its tentacles, pushing and shaping. The pile grew taller.

Walker stumbled away from the window and to the front of the house. Outside he could hear a cacophony of engines and car horns. When he looked out the window, he saw that everyone was trying to leave Kilbourn. Traffic jammed the streets.

The phone rang. Walker put the receiver to his ear and yelled through the respirator.

“Hello?”

“Brooks! You piece of shit!! You did this to us.” The Mayor broke into a fit of coughing, or maybe he was sobbing. “You’re fired.”

“Boss-”

“They came after me. I called the National Guard but who knows when they’ll get here?”

“Boss,” Walker yelled, “I’m going to try to figure out what’s going on-”

“-a bunch of goddamn survivalists with guns. I told them it was your idea. Told ‘em I have a tape of our conversation. I told them where you live!”

Outside, over the din of jammed traffic, Walker heard gunfire. He cursed and hung up.

There was only one thing left to do: he ran upstairs. When Jerry answered his door, his feathers were drooping but he was breathing without a mask.

“How can you stand the stench?” Walker gasped.

“No worse than the musk eel’s annual rut on my own world,” Jerry said.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me it would be this bad?” Jerry’s beak drooped. He tilted his head and looked down, reminding Walker of a puppy that had piddled on the carpet.

“I did not know how strongly it would affect humans,” he said. “Your sense of smell must be more acute than mine.”

“Could I borrow your translator?”

“Have you ever committed-”

“Have I ever committed murder? Jeez, can’t that wait?”

“Not if you wish to use my translator.”

“Now? How can you ask at a time like this?”

“Among my kind, to give without receiving is worse than being robbed. We must trade, or we are committing a terrible crime.”

“Let me borrow the translator or I’ll raise your rent.”

“Send me a bill,” Jerry said. He began to close the door.

“Okay, okay. I’ll tell you.” He took a deep breath, forgetting the foul air. Jerry waited patiently while he coughed and gasped.

“Back when I was a garbage man, I came across a German Shepherd in the alley. He was lying down and didn’t look too good. Then I realized this huge bug was attached to his neck. It looked like a grub, but it was dark and had about ten legs. There was a red tube sticking into the

dog's fur from where the bug's mouth should have been. It was sucking out the dog's blood." His stomach somersaulted but he forced himself to continue.

"I grabbed the bug and ripped it off the dog. Blood sprayed out of the thing's mouth and seeped out of the dog's neck.

"I heard a girl's voice calling from the back yard. 'Josie? Where are you, Josie?'"

Jerry's hands started to flutter.

"The girl came out to the alley and saw what had happened. She was only about eight years old. She fell on top of Josie and started crying. I grabbed the bug and tossed it in the back of the truck. Then I switched on the compactor and watched. Its body got flattened and its head got cut off and I was glad."

He paused. Jerry looked at him expectantly.

"It was only later after seeing some documentary about it, that I realized the bug was an Aerid larva. It may have been the only one ever seen in North America. And I squashed it."

"At that stage, it is hard to believe what they will become," Jerry said. "Thank you for sharing this with me." He slipped the translator off and handed it over. His eyes glistened. Could a lizard-owl cry?

Walker ran down the stairs and out the backdoor. The stench hit him like a punch in the face and the sound of the horns was deafening. Walker forced himself to walk over to Oscar and its tower of crud. Oscar's tendrils snaked all around the tower, pushing it higher and higher. Walker could see the impressions Oscar's tendrils had left in its surface. They were swirled, intricate, almost beautiful.

Walker set the translator gently on top of Oscar and stepped back. Oscar's mouth opened around the translator and started to absorb it.

"No!" Walker yelped, and snatched it back. He remembered the trowel Oscar had sat on. Maybe if he covered the translator with that white slime that had apparently kept it from dissolving....

Walker crouched down and looked at Oscar's underside. The milky stuff was thick and concentrated where it sat on the ground. Walker brushed against it and a thick patch clung to his hand.

"Come on Oscar," he said as he smeared the white stuff all over the translator's headset. He heard more gunfire over the constant blare of the horns. "We gotta work this out."

Walker put the translator on Oscar again. This time it didn't dissolve, and Oscar reshaped itself until it almost had a head. The translator's earbuds nestled into its dark brown surface.

"Can you understand me?" Walker asked.

"I understand." The words came out slowly, dreamily, as if from a creature in a trance. Walker's knees felt weak from relief, or perhaps from the smell.

Walker pointed to the pile of black stuff. "What is that?"

"It is my totem."

"Your totem?"

"My symbol. My great work of beauty." The Oscar's slow dreamy voice took on tones of reverence.

"Oscar, it's very offensive—I mean dangerous—to my people." Walker adjusted his respirator, but this close to the source, it wasn't doing him much good.

"We have no choice. We must give thanks."

He didn't think he wanted to know what the Oscars were thanking; they were enough trouble without their deities. "How long does your totem last?"

"Twenty-one Earth days."

Walker felt dizzy "Oscar, my people can't breathe the air now. They are all leaving. Your people will starve."

Oscar shifted uneasily. "This is troubling."

"I'll say."

"But we have no choice. If we do not build our totems, the air spirits will not appear."

Walker sat down next to Oscar. His dizziness was growing worse, and everything seemed to shimmer around him. Maybe if he rested a minute...

He could see the stadium down the bluff. In his dancing vision it looked even stranger than usual. Why not lease it to some alien league? He looked at Oscar.

"Oscar," he said, slowly, struggling to think through the stench. His head pounded. "If we gave you a place, a safe place of your own, a place big enough for all of your people, could you build your totems there?"

"Yes. We have... temples like that on other worlds."

"I've got just the place."

Two weeks later Acting Mayor Walker Brooks, with his new press secretary and neighbor, Joe, drove over to Oscar's temple. No one had seen the mayor since the chaos ended—well, no one except Suzy. She'd told Walker that the mayor was unharmed.

The sun was bright over Kilbourn and the air wasn't bad, even though it was the height of the totem ritual. The stadium's air conditioners did an admirable job of keeping the odors contained.

They had heard what had happened, but wanted to see it for themselves. As they drove beyond the crowded buildings of downtown and into the valley Walker saw the dancing shadows. The ground shimmered with an intricate play of light and darkness.

"Right there," Joe said, and pointed above the stadium. In the sky were not one but two Aerids, their translucent wings unfolded and sparkling in the sun. They hovered close to each other, their tiny bodies almost touching.

Walker's heart pounded.

"It's like they're attracted to the stadium," Joe said.

"Their totem ritual. Their great work of beauty," Walker said softly "The air spirits."

The men's eyes followed the soaring Aerids.

"The Chinese said they had a toxic spill," Joe said. "Guess you could call it that." He chuckled. "Eat your heart out, Monroe."

Walker smiled. For once, his headache was gone.



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