

Alchymical Romance

by Lee Battersby

Nigredo

The problem was, he had never loved her. They both knew it, even in those moments after orgasm, when they leaned into each other and persuaded themselves that it meant more than shared sweat and another notch on a mental bedpost. Another boast for his mates, if only he had any.

Now she was gone, and it wasn't her absence that kept him from re-entering the world. The thought of it wearied him before he started. The long, dreary process of nightclubs, and blind dates, and turning up for dinners with colleagues to find an extra female present and the only empty chair directly opposite. The whole thing was such a drudge, and she'd have to be a sexual athlete of Olympic proportions to make up for the love he wouldn't feel for her. Too much trouble for the few weeks before her presence began to drain him of everything he held dear. Then she'd be gone, and the bar would be raised another notch for whomever came next, and where would it all lead him? A woman with superhuman flexibility and the perverse nature of an Indian God, perhaps. A woman made of fingertips and tongues, with no sense of shame.

And he still wouldn't love her.

He sat at his kitchen table, sipped coffee, and stared over his newspaper at the busy street beyond his window. There was no way around it. He couldn't face the real world. He had lived too long with reality. He raised a hand to his neck and ran fingertips along the network of tiny puncture marks criss-crossing the skin at the base of his jaw. He would have to visit Sir Million.

He plucked a set of keys from the hook by the phone and rubbed his thumb across the silver dog tag. There was a time when he could rejoice in the sensation the stamped letters made under his thumb, delight in the ripple of cold, rolled edges against his skin. Now: nothing. He felt nothing. He sighed, and pocketed the keys.

The streets north of Perth wither and die in the winter rain, leaving behind slick tarmac and an occasional oasis of sodium light. Residents close their curtains and hide before televisions, ignoring the rolls of thunder as best they can. Markus' black Audi slid along unnoticed, undisturbed, a metal shark cruising an empty ocean. Markus barely noticed the lack of humanity. Their absence meant only a lessening of white noise, a drop in the background level of static, a slight reinforcement of the link between his subconscious and the muted hum of the city. He glided along black tracks: a tiny spark within a vast, dormant machine; a single atom within a city-wide accelerator.

He hit the end of the freeway without seeing another car, turned away from the bridge, past late night construction works, and away from the centre of Joondalup, devoid of personality without its semi-permanent cast of shoppers; just an empty façade of shop fronts and parking lots, glistening clean in the aftermath of the evening's downpour. A right at the lights, and he pushed past the suburban sprawl, attention fixed upon the promise of overgrown country roads to come, and the moment of pure solitude before Sir Million's driveway.

After half an hour he left the coast, and soon found himself on the lonely road leading northwards from Wanneroo into the countryside. Trees formed a tunnel of outstretched fingers at the periphery of his headlights. Before he could get used to the ghostly burrow and decide to follow it into forever, Markus spied the entrance to Sir Million's driveway. He slid into the oncoming lane, took the turn without slowing, and jounced up the dirt lane as fast as the Audi's suspension would allow. He pulled up before the house with a squeal of brakes, a ghost of dust settling in his wake. Markus sat with the lights out and listened to the ticking of the car's cooling engine. There should have been *some* movement from outside, some noise in response to his arrival. An explosion of birds from the surrounding trees, a barking dog, even a light inside a window. Instead, nothing. Animals knew better than to come near the residence, Markus thought without amusement. With no better alternative, he opened the car door and stepped out.

The slamming door sounded supernaturally loud in the dead air. Markus surveyed the house. It had shrunk since his last visit. He'd expected that. Sir Million had stumbled across the ruins of the homestead some ninety years ago, if you believed the man- a gutted shell of broken masonry with only ghosts for occupants. Bit by bit, using whatever flotsam the universe deposited before him, he had rebuilt it to his own design, obsessively refining and shaping until every room, every angle, had reflected his own arcane needs. The man had shrunk as he'd aged, and the house had followed him. Now it was little more than a shanty. Bare wood boards patched together bricks of countless shades; glassless windows peered out at whatever angle they had been forced into the gaps; animal bones, wire, feathers, a rainbow assortment of bottles. Nothing had been spared. The house crouched upon bare soil like an abandoned engine. No wonder nature avoids this place, Markus thought for the hundredth

time. It's like a lunatic's dream catcher. Which, he reflected as he tested his weight on an unfamiliar porch step, it is.

The front door swung open as he raised his fist to knock. Markus stepped into the darkened hallway.

“Hello?”

No answer. Light framed a door at the far end of the hall. He was almost upon it when it, too, swung open. A lumpen silhouette stood in the light.

“Markus de Brant! I knew it would be you!”

The silhouette reached out misshapen arms, grabbed Markus by the wrists and dragged him into the light.

Albedo

Idly, Markus noted the whirr and click of clockwork.

Sir Million turned from him, making his way across a room overgrown with a profusion of esoteric constructions: pipes that began in one box and ended in another, if at all; dials that spun and whirred; cabinets in a myriad of shapes, covered with inscriptions, crackling with sparks at odd moments; cups; plates; cutlery, bent and deformed; statuettes; mummies both human and otherwise; painting, plans, and blueprints; and over everything a flow of detritus and flotsam the nature of which Markus could not begin to guess. The whole effect was one of arcane disorder, as if some key to understanding lurked just out of Markus' grasp, and only with it could he begin to divine a purpose from his surroundings.

Sir Million stopped by an overstuffed sofa, crammed between a dozen empty canvasses and something that could have been either an iron maiden or cappuccino machine, depending on the angle from which it was viewed. He cleared a space by the simple expedient of dumping everything on the floor, and patted a cushion, arm jerking spasmodically.

“Come. Sit.”

Markus studied the old man. He had grown younger since their last meeting. Metal plates covered large areas of his body, his skin smoothed out and neatly tucked behind them. Assemblages of rods and pistons surrounded his knee and hip joints, and everything was

connected to a small engine that crouched on his back and contributed to his lumpy, toad-like shape. Steam hissed whenever he moved. He stared at Markus expectantly. Markus coughed.

“You’ve changed.”

“Necessary. Big explosion. Lost bits. You’d have known if you visited.” His head twitched to the side. “Still, worth it. Look.”

A window ran the length of the far wall, opening out onto a back yard more bedlam than garden. A bench table crouched underneath, back almost broken by the weight of tubing that covered it. At regular intervals, liquid dripped from openings into petri dishes filled with piles of coloured powder.

“Uranium,” Sir Million said. “Strontium, mescaline, heroin, saffron.” He laughed, a sound like the clearing of pipes. “The Alchymical wedding, in all its most lovely forms. Gold is for amateurs.” He turned his mechanical gaze upon Markus. “Now. You.”

Markus shrugged. “It’s not—“

“Not working?”

“No.”

Sir Million raised himself from the seat, stalked over to Markus, began to prod him here and there about the torso.

“You don’t feel? Not a thing? Nothing penetrates?”

“Physical things.” Markus shrugged again. “Pain, cold, you know. Nothing emotional.”

“No laughter? Fear?” He snapped his fingers before Markus’ eyes, peered into his ear, up his nose. “Love?”

“No.” Markus gazed steadily out the window, at the bombsite of weeds and rubble beyond. “No love.”

“And this is important?”

A rat peered at Markus from the window of a rusted car, then withdrew into the dark. “I don’t know.”

“But you want to.”

“Still.”

Sir Million turned away, walked to the window, and stared at the sky.

“One hundred and sixty five years, seven months, three days, twenty one hours, several minutes, assorted seconds. A long time. Still you all come. Problems, problems, problems. No matter the country, or the time. You all come.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No.”

Markus bit his lip. “No. I guess not.”

“If you were, the problem would not exist.”

“No.”

Sir Million returned his gaze to the room. He clapped his hands, a sound like cymbals. “Still. If you did not come, the solution would not be found. I have never failed. Never. Not with Queens, nor Fuehrers, nor Godmakers. In what do you work now?”

“Work? Um. I was in advertising, last time. I’m in web design now. Contract work.”

“A web designer. Not worth becoming my first failure. Not after Queens and...” Sir Million waved his hand. “And so on and so on. This time, this time, I will find what you need.”

“I don’t even know *what* I want any more.”

“I don’t care about want. Now sit.”

He indicated a chair in the darkest recess of the room, a complicated web of wires perched upon it like a crown. Markus sat, wiggled his backside around until he was comfortable.

Sir Million threaded a long tube onto a hypodermic, swabbed a spot on Markus’ temple, and carefully inserted the needle into the skin. Markus sucked air between his teeth. Previous experience kept him from flinching. Sir Million drew off several millilitres of milky fluid, and frowned.

“So little left. This will be the last time, old fellow. The last time for us both. You are bereft of essence.”

“So soon?”

“So soon? Pish. Nobody bothers me as you do. You are quite drained, my boy. Drawn dry. This is the last time.”

He withdrew the needle and placed it to one side. Moving about the machine, he encased Markus in the cage of wire. Countless tiny spikes pressed against his skin at head, face, throat and wrist, points nestling inside the healed over puncture wounds that littered his body.

“One more time to capture your dreams,” Sir Million said. “One more time to bring them to life. Don’t blink.” He clanked across the room to rest his hand atop a large, tape-wrapped lever set into the wall. “This is going to hurt.”

Markus stared at the world outside the window. With a sigh of expelled steam, Sir Million lowered the lever, and the world turned black.

Rubedo

The problem was, he could never have loved her, no matter how much he needed it. No matter how many bodies filled his bed, or whatever drugs, blades or fluids he used to batter his nerve endings, the core of him remained indifferent. Nothing reached inside. The void remained empty, pressing against his organs, deadening everything it touched. Nothing had changed, not in all the months since his visit to Sir Million. Not since then, and not in all the years before. It was not that the failures proved so disastrous. It was knowing the inevitability of failure, and still being compelled to try.

The taxi arrived, the lover departed, and a small interval of peace descended. Again, and again, and again.

Today, however, a change: the taxi was gone, and a courier van filled the driveway. A uniformed figure approached, knocked on the front door. Markus signed the proffered form, received the brown-wrapped package. A flat box, perhaps four inches thick, long and wide enough that he chose to lean it against the arm of his sofa rather than attempt to lift it onto the coffee table. He curled his fingers over the top flap and pulled, revealing the contents in one long tear of cardboard.

A mirror, simply framed, reflective surface gleaming a dull brass in the light from the single lamp. A small sheet of something like thick paper was taped to its surface. Markus fingered it. A spark of something tickled him inside. The sheet was not paper, but vellum-- smooth and supple beneath his fingers, slick as he pulled it from its mooring. He recognised Sir Million’s rounded, feminine hand in the letters stained into its surface. He read.

Dear Fellow,

A surprise. Not what you expected. There was so little of you left. So few drops of essence. Not enough to transmute blood or dreams. Enough to spread over a surface. Enough, I hope, to show you. What? Who knows? A mirror made of you, dear Markus. Let it not fail.

M o 'C

Markus ran a finger over the mirror's surface, frowning. It was soft and warm, sticky, not at all the cold, smooth metal he had expected. In the mirror, his doppelganger frowned and removed its finger from the glass. Markus bent, and peered closely. The image was dark, its outline vague and wavering. He stood and recovered the lamp from the far corner of the room, set it upon the coffee table, and knelt before the mirror again. The light worked- he saw himself, the details of the room stark behind him. Still, the image bore soft edges, almost out of focus, as if a million tiny imperfections caught the light and diffused it. A fault of the odd surface, Markus decided. A flaw in his essence.

There was something else wrong with the image, something he could not quite put his finger on. Markus traced his outline. There he was, in the centre of the glass, in his shirt and trousers, and with a look on his face that countless women had referred to as the final straw. The lamp was there, casting its light. The coffee table, the curtains... there. Behind him, to the right. A figure. A dim smudge where he should be able to see to the wall. As Markus watched it came closer, became clearer. A woman. There was a woman. Markus spun away from the mirror with a gasp, then stopped short. The room was empty. The coffee table, the lamp, the curtains. Nothing else. He turned again to the glass. She was there, almost touching his shoulder. Markus reached out behind him, felt nothing.

“What the hell?”

There was more, now, Markus saw. A fault with the woman, something wrong, or missing. She was beautiful, breathtakingly so: short without appearing small; curvaceous; her breasts the perfect size to balance the swell of her hips; elfin features atop a long neck; suntanned skin the colour of lightly burnished bronze; short bobbed hair curled around delicate ears. Her almond eyes met his. She smiled, and in that smile lay all the joys that had avoided him for as long as he could remember. Markus gasped. A bolt of heat struck the centre of his chest, tearing his breath away. The woman stepped in front of the mirror-Markus and raised her hand. She was perfect, as perfect as any desire he could ever have. And exposed to his gaze as she was, with nothing between them but the surface of the mirror, the light from two lamps playing across her, front and back, Markus saw the wrongness he had been unable to place. Her skin was not just the colour of bronze. It *was* bronze.

The woman in the mirror was made of bronze.

They stayed that way for several minutes, staring at each other across a gulf of space and understanding. Then, with a smile so sweet it made the void inside Markus ache, she raised one perfectly forged hand, and beckoned him: closer, closer. Markus fell to both knees, inches from the mirror. Without knowing why, he raised his hand and pressed it against the sticky surface, like a prison inmate in an interview booth, desperate for the touch of a visiting lover. The surface resisted him briefly, then his hand sank into it, deeper than the millimetres-thick plane. He let go a shout of surprise. On the other side of the image, his hand appeared. Only it was not his hand but a simulacrum, in every detail a perfect imitation of his own, forged from glinting bronze.

Markus wiggled his fingers, and the bronze hand in the mirror did the same. He clenched his fist, and watched the metal fingers curl over until they pressed against their palm. He pulled back, and his arm came out of the glass. The hand slid backwards until the heel was on one side and the fingers were on the other. Markus stared at it, then leaned forward again.

“How? I don’t...” But of course, he did know. It was Sir Million, and his essence, and the need that had been drawn out of him—transformed, transfigured, given shape. He looked into the perfect eyes of the bronze woman. She reached out, and her hand nestled inside his.

And suddenly, just like that, the barrier that surrounded his void was ruptured, and into the breach poured... he didn’t know, didn’t have the words, but it was hot as blood, and it stung, and the emptiness inside him drank and drank and he was crying and laughing and so... so...

“Oh, oh, God. Oh, God.” He brought his free hand to his face, and wept into it. “Oh, God.”

And slowly, slowly, the first, boiling rush of emotion thickened, settled, until the void was full and only gentle waves lapped at the edges. Markus raised his head, drew the back of his hand across his face, tears and snot mingling in a long streak. He sniffed, brought his breathing under control.

“Oh, God,” he said to the woman behind the mirror. “Is this what it feels like? Oh, God. Do I love you?”

She smiled, and pulled on his hand, drawing him closer to the surface of the glass. Markus resisted, looked around-- at the room, the furnishings, the fixtures. Nothing here, he realised, nothing that isn’t beyond the mirror. Nothing that isn’t replicated. He turned his gaze back to the glass, and the one thing he could not find anywhere else.

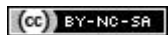
“But what if...?”

He paused. What if what? He looked at himself in the mirror. What happens to him, he thought, if I’m there too? Does he disappear? Do I? And if I disappear, will anyone notice? Will they care?

And he realised: it doesn’t matter. None of it does. Whatever happened, he would not be alone. Whatever happened, she would be beside him, and if not her, then someone, and he would love her.

He would love her. And for that small fact, that one small fact, he would risk the answer to any question.

Smiling, crying, happy, Markus bent forward and leaned beyond the mirror.



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