

FERDINAND DRINKS

It's unbearable, it's unbearable, the pain forces my mind away from itself, splitting me into a thousand shards, while I sip my Beefheart tea. This little andro cubby-bar down in Rumchi keeps me well-hidden from the humans (humans – how can they call themselves by such a name?) who install personalities in me to suit themselves, just before they use me for intercourse of all sorts and discard me.

This world sickens me: its torments, its hopes, its lies, its longings, its betrayals, its fracturings, its healings, its exaltations, all etch away my wholeness like acids on rock, and I turn to sand. Jeddin said to me once, "That's quite a world you live in, but I wouldn't want to live there myself." Jeddin's a fool – he lives here too. At least he's able to lie away the pain.

This cubby-bar is called Kuklagrad, for reasons I don't remember. Maybe Bujilla could say, if she's in the mood, but she's too busy right now anjawing Pazzan back behind the bar. Pazzan never shows up for work here without four or five kinks in his brain, but by the time Bujilla finishes ripslicing his auditory nerves, he'll be a good little waiter once more. She uses the upper registers of anjive-speech like old friends, and she can Crank them. Oh the ultrasonic pain.

Up behind the bar are the bottles of xmitters etcetera, steeped in the various toxes we all love so dear, labeled with the tropes of long-dead mythical Earth: Weltschmerz, loaded with depressants and a gloss of hyperin, its label a sad smiling teardrop; Major Beefheart, laced with KPX and metho, labeled with a bass clef, my favorite for times like this; Doodah Parade, dashed with psilocybin and a few benzos, sporting marching suited figures with briefcases; Sticky Mouse Club, touched up with that bit of wood alcohol and lignins, its goofy little dancing ants wearing bobblehead antennae; all these and Heaven Too, where the fruits come with a streak of metathellin for that hot sex hop.

At least Bujilla keeps the sensi turned down to its normal machine-room rasp, so my neural filters aren't working to sift out the stego reports of the numbers of andro dead in Transellas Mines, or the latest forced relocations of thousands of innocents, or the endless planning and reporting and fucking about that produce no relief from the pain, oh the pain, of just living with one's senses awake and aware.

Too aware, that's the problem. Once they birthed me – threw me from the vat, yanked the mask from my face, and slapped me out of innerspace to bring me here – my senses wouldn't stop screaming in my mind. It's too much, it's all too much.

The sensi prattles on with its sludge river of cheap sex, hunger, and smirk, fake news, fake fun, and fake merchandise, its hidden messages for andros skating along where only our advanced liminal senses can suck them up and devour their horror avidly like tasty poison.

“Another Beefheart,” I tell Pazzan, who’s drifted up to me looking apprehensive. Beefheart calms me – it’d calm a mad bull – and I’ve only had three of them so far tonight, penetrating the witching hour with my bladelike hand of too much truth.

“Ho,” says Pazzan in acknowledgement, and drifts softly away past a table where three andro women sit with heads close, down in skerrish-land. They’re planing in innerspace together, could be anything from study to sex, or maybe everything at once, and I’m not in the mood for any of it, I just want to complain until the Beefheart manages to vegify all the sore parts in my head.

Ferdinand’s my name. Ferdinand the Bull, Bujilla always says, from one of her bar bottles, totally off the mark. No. It’s Fer di n’And, in that subdialect of Sintherou chatter the local andros use in Purusil. Fer di n’And, Steel of the Andros. It’s a pun, too; ‘fer’ is also Old CLang for ‘steal’ or ‘carry off’. I’m a thief of souls.

This cubby-bar is a mere vaginal slit in the rock, but it opens warmly into a dark and comforting space, and I lodge here, waiting to see whether Jeddin or one of his chatbirds will come sailing in. Pazzan brings me my Beefheart. I look at the knotted vessel, its sipping-line arcing up from a tangle of pipes, and I want none of it. I want Jeddin’s comfort. That’s all.

He always knows what to say to me. One minute with him, and the world loses its toxic bite. He’s my true addiction. It’s not sexual at all – Jeddin and I both femfit best – but it’s healing. Then I’ll go out and steal some more life for myself.

Been a man. Been a woman. Been human from time to time, but I usually want to be andro just as I was made, out of the vat with a shriek as the mask came off and the slap came down and I woke to this continuous tidal wave of horrors the humans call a world. Innerspace – ‘dreamland’ some call it – shuts it out for a while, but I just take new roles and forget who and what I am, for a while, now and then.

So who am I today? One of the aliens? Ooh, that’s tasty. But then I’d have to find a way to translate tensor-speech into this linear form, and that’s like weaving a huge cubby-blanket out of rodent fur. Like having a badly-obstructed bowel. And the Zashinhalh, the aliens, don’t tell stories, because all their stories are taking place at every point in time at once. No unfolding, no hope, no surprises. They even know

their demises – no disguises. Everything chiseled in bedrock, just like this City where cozy Kuklagrad nestles deep, a sliver of black space in the manmade lights and darks, passings to mimic the sun above, me with my drink and my candle of waiting for Jeddin. Welcome to the depths of Tarnus.

I lower my head to the tabletop, my temple in a cool puddle of Beefheart slopped by Pazzan on his last visit. My eyes close. Welcome to pain.