



PLUTO HEART

HOW KERYON CAME TO BANETOWN

BY

Mark von Schlegell

The following text is the beginning to a new novel in the System Series, a collection that includes *Venusia* (2005), *High Wichita* (2007), *Mercury Station* (2009), and *Sundogz* (2015).

It was deep night over the harbor of Dorr, but across the HeraSea the broad sky was already the color of fiendish. Keryon Eightfoot did not fly down to the docks; she walked. She had emerged from sleep only recently. In this total immersion, paradoxically, sleep alone was real. After, the return to the weird was always newly uncanny, and energizing. But was this a return?

Outside of thought, her wings unfurled, itching to lift her up under the first clouds. Had the inner light started to seep out of herself? Or was it from the weird as a whole? It was hard to think the latter, seeing the broad coast of Cthonia curling toward half-glittering first dawn, feeling the breath of morning on the skin. The multi-cortex psychoscape was as perfectly tuned to her perceptual imagination as ever. The failure to believe was her own.

Failure was new for her. She reproached herself for having been so unprepared for the events at the temple of the goddess. Of course it had been Lava mixing up her mind. Lava had told her the first time they'd met that she was a part-time role player. Her doll lived another life separate from this one. Keryon assumed that if something happened in the real—if Lava's doll died, for instance—the psychoscape was supposed to be elastic enough to stretch her character years in any direction. But Lava was either leaving the weird altogether, or giving over her character to the goddess. Keryon wanted to help her in that decision.

And why would Lava leave? Lava had access to a real family line in Cthonia, which was more than most spacers had out in the frightening and dangerous real. She had been selected into special service to the goddess. She would soon have access to temples connected to the entire spectrum of the weirds. Not that any of them

could compare with this one. What scripted retro-world could compare to the legendary naturalism of HeraSea, set in play back when AIs had full creative autonomy? New characters were extremely difficult to get, and available old ones were weak and uninteresting. The only real entry spots left were far on the margins, necessitating years of in-weird commitment even to cross the HeraSea. Yet Keryon's memories were now her own, and despite their loneliness, they were enough to keep her committed to this remarkably collaborative place. A role like Lavasilver's, with its own lifetime of memories as well as those of her mothers, was of great value in itself.

But it seemed she had thrown it away. Memories of earlier last night came upon Keryon, bringing the real burn of shame to her cheeks. In the temple's secret garden, she had forgotten her friend and forsaken the oath of the messenger by which she safely rode the skies.



It had been two long years since Keryon had set out from the rough life of the Shard, the rocky home on the edge of the HeraSea. That life she'd grown to resent, in crystal-clear memory proved full of rough beauties. The green of seawater underlining the gray of stormy skies; the stones and breakers cleaving snowy breakers; icy Montez over the blue-ice icebergs on the horizon! Having crossed the HeraSea now herself, she understood why Jyverne would cling to the Shard. But back then Keryon had only ever wanted to leave. She'd stand all of a day looking over those lethal waters.

The Chyll, in which the Shard was the last livable promontory, was well named. On the edge of the frozen

lower portions of HeraSea, between the southern reaches of Inanna Regina and the unnamed southern hemisphere, the temperature was low enough year-round that permanent shelter was necessary. Winds blew so high that home had to be dug downward into the rock. 2nd Sun only appeared for two sacred summer months, during which, when 1st Sun set, the horizon took on the appearance of an enormous, pupiled eye. In those months, against that strange sky, Jyverne taught her adepts how light could be caught, preserved, to be made use of at a later date.

Keryon was lucky that she had gained that rocky shore. Many of her first companions in the wreck never even made it out of the harsh waves. Orphans of a catastrophe they no longer remembered, the surviving wastrels had pulled themselves up on the Shard's only "beach": a somewhat less-savage-than-usual arrangement of sharp-edged volcanic residue. It was assumed when she was taken in that a sea creature had bit off Keryon's two leftmost toes, but it might have been a coralloid rock.

HeraSea was distinguished by naturally evolving artificial life forms peculiar to Demetersphere and its laws. Sea life tended toward dinosaur-like enormity; creatures were so well armored against the environment, and against one another, that they craved easy sustenance. Their own meat proved quite delicious, but you had to be willing to fight through the razor-sharp, iron-hard carapace to get it. "Birds" were less dangerous. Like plants, they took much of their sustenance from first light. They had little need to fly; winds were such that gliding was the preferred activity. Fliers, like the harrier she waited for now, tended to be special role characters unaware of their own irreality—narrative packaging attached to ongoing

storylines into which a player might one day enter.

HeraSea modeled a new kind of human, one for whom the lonely realities of life in space left a craving for what the founders thought of as the natural human spirit. Perseverance in a collaborative biosphere demanded suffering. To clean out non-serious players, the environment was purposefully harsh; more than 50 percent of characters who arrived on the Shard did not survive childhood. Hardiness was cultured into those who remained.

It's true that the northern lands were warmer and, overall, more exposed to 1st and 2nd Suns. But for the summer months, 2Sun was more present. Jyverne taught the magic of 2Sun to those inclined to learn it. Keryon carried a locket about her neck even now that held a remnant inside. Jyverne herself had fixed it there, with her long bony fingers.

Runts like Keryon, she explained, without inherited prejudice, always proved better adepts. Those who wound up on the Shard in particular had potential. "Small chances," Jyverne used to call them, "for larger things." This priestess who had retired from her years as a justice in the old courts of HeraSea and come to the Shard voluntarily, to prepare a new generation of magic users, had favored Keryon especially with her teaching. Keryon never learned why. She learned only that there were happenings for which there would never be a single explanation, and that one must nevertheless accept them. She learned which lichens made which teas, and which made poison. She learned which leaves could heal the poison and how they might be persuaded to do so. She learned her own name, Keryon, which is another story.

Though she was good with her hands, it was always that broad but tightly curving sky that drew her imagina-

tion. Wind felt like a part of her own brisk nature. Naturally, she experimented with wing building and windcraft. With wings fashioned from fish skin and reinforced with bone, Keryon learned first with the fishers to fly. Months later she climbed so far, the balloon fishers were specks below. Up where 2Sun was constant, she beheld with the birds the new colors of Demetersphere, so strange and beautiful that Keryon was convinced this weird surpassed the beauty of any art yet made outside of the real Earth. There was a real numinous connection here to new laws and possibilities.

Keryon's own chitin wings only mirrored that possibility. Unfortunately she had had to de-wing six flying fish to make them. Leaping to catch 2Sun in the summer, these creatures came like bladed boomerangs upon the unaware. No one had thought of catching them before, and she kept her work secret. The creatures were sacred to the Shard, but she had thrown them back alive and believed the wings might well grow back over the long year anyway. They were so successful, Keryon's fantastic wings, that they had caused others to hate her.

Those hard days when she'd first seen the heart shape of the whole HeraSea, so high she could cover all its width between Cthonia and the Shard with her span, she had little imagined that one day she would circumnavigate the sphere itself as many as seven times during a single flight. As most of the globe was in obscure darkness, this was a lonely achievement.

Human players, especially when they gathered together, could be more dangerous than gods, or flying fish. Someone, somewhere (she had erased the memory), had falsified a conspiracy the proud ephebe had never deigned to refute. This was not a shock. The shock is how far she had

misunderstood her teacher's wisdom. Jyverne could not believe her word against theirs, though Keryon spoke the truth. Even when she'd raised reasonable doubt into the air, Jyverne had believed the lies. She cast Keryon away, cutting her off from the Shard forever, before the others. The expression on Keryon's face did not shame her; the tears she cried were inside.

Banished from the Shard! One might similarly be banished from a snake pit, or from a poisoned well. But it hurt more deeply than she would have known, to be cast out from that rough community.

In the long days, weeks, and years that followed the expulsion, Keryon had wondered at her teacher's sudden turn. Had there been secret intention? Some nights she felt as if Jyverne's eye was upon her. On waters laced with 2light, Jyverne could look upon any character or location whose light she shared on that flickering surface. It was those times when she was thinking of her, Keryon knew, when most likely she was. Tonight of all nights, when all the five moons had shone together and the stars told the truth to all observers, let Jyverne see then her surviving loneliness.

Keryon herself had stolen often down to those pools. It was her right. 2light belonged to she who saved it. This unspoken rede covered for the fact that if one could catch it, and keep it on the body, the shedding particles would grant invisibility for hours after.

It was on those dark and phosphoric waters that Keryon had first seen the face of a stranger flickering on the watertop—wide eyed, a finger to her lips. Eyes the shade of a night crow, a smile as young and vivid as any she had ever seen.

Lavasilver too was stealing a visit to a pool of her nurse

just then, an old connection of Jyverne. She looked upon Keryon from far away and also felt the balance between them. They became friends and secret confidants. Yes, the friendship had blossomed. She didn't even like to think about or remember what they had shared; despite the code, she didn't really believe that her innermost thoughts were not under surveillance. But they had become closer than family.

The expulsion had been sudden, and final, and there'd been no opportunity to let her know what happened. Lavasilver had never said what place exactly she hailed from. Keryon only knew it was Cthonia North, across the great width of HeraSea.

It was a flight no one in the Chyll was known to have survived. But Keryon had little regard for that knowledge. In the trail wind of a wub triad, she made it clear across to Froy. Ordinarily she wouldn't be able to keep up with the singing gliders, whose original players, strangely enough, were bird minds of the old Earth. The wub—the new mind that came when three or more gliding birds were in unison for long enough—had learned to catch 2Sun in such a fashion that it could sail forever with no need to land.

The journey took three days and four nights. The sound of their unified breath in the darkness was her only company. Keryon fell asleep among them, knowing she was sure to be protected from accidental collision.

As it was she'd almost bypassed Froy, and then came close to crashing in the highlands above. Coming down was the harder part of flying high. It was best to take a long, gradual decline, but Keryon had cast herself ingloriously down in Froy Harbor, trusting that the townspeople would have protected it from the more dangerous sea

life. It turned out they did so only seasonally. It was dumb luck that she wasn't torn to pieces as she swam over that deep bowl. Only as she approached the shore did she notice people laughing and pointing at her, speculating on her fortune.

She became a flier of Froy, the ancient port that commanded the liquid HeraSea and its upper islands, and the work gave her access to lists of characters all over the region. Never did the name "Lavasilver" come her way. Last they'd spoken Lava had said she was attempting to join a temple, and would consider giving her life to the goddess. This was equivalent to leaving the game. It would signal her doll was quitting, for good.

As the time of five moons approached, that evening when adepts were chosen, Keryon thought of Lava and dissuading her from this giving of her life away.

Keryon was in the state of Ramsdatter on the edge of the Horned Crater, when she decided for the first time to spend a precious portion of her 2light. She found a suitable cavern down the coast, and at the time of no moons threw a splash against black water, calling her name.

There in the clear window that broke through the surface she saw the back of Lava's head. Someone was pulling her away from the waters. She was adorned in flowers as if for a festival. A temple above a small, anonymous harbor. As Lava receded the landscape remained long enough for Keryon to recognize Mount Fantastic on the horizon. The temple ruins she glimpsed were so old they appeared to have raided long ago. Vines and undergrowth concealed enough of the ancient ruin that she had no doubt it was safely camouflaged from the air. Somewhere in the proliferation of the Xrater

islands—Keryon had naturally thought that region of town had been abandoned.

The next day at the depot she looked at the slots for deliveries to Xrater. There was only one; her heart lifted as she saw the secret letters upon it come to life.

*Lavasilver, Temple of Demeter, Dorr.
Urgent Express.*

Nobody liked flying into western winds. This dusty tube looked like it had been lying here for who knew how long. But as Jyverne had taught: in HeraSea, all messages arrive at the correct time.

There were still only two moons in the sky. So there must be a chance, indeed a certainty, that if the flight went OK, Keryon could make the delivery—that she could see Lava in person, talk to her before she committed to signing her life away.

It took two hours to tie up loose ends in Froy, pay off the landlady, and unpack the pair of wings she hoped would take her there and beyond. Coming down past Mount Fantastik would be dangerous. But this is why she flew to begin with. She had nothing else to live for. Why indeed had the gods placed this rare princess in such intimate relation to Keryon, if not so she could deliver this message now? Certainly magic had made Keryon Lava's special courier, but there was little way of knowing whose magic it was. It might well have been her own.

It would take a person most of a month to walk so far west, over the Octagonal Plains and through the dense Rigour Mountains until freshwater Xrater Sea showed Mount Fantastic peeking over the horizon. But aloft, if one could access and survive the notorious twisters in the lower

regions of the atmosphere over the plains, one could gain enough lift to reach the target in a single day.

Coming down would be the tricky part. Keryon had resorted to an extra set of underwings, like a dragonfly. As the moment she needed to begin descent she retracted the larger span and cut downward with the secondary set. The stiff board-like appendages had been well crafted. With these Keryon sliced through and rode the full force of the torrent until she ended up surfing the winds of Fantastic, very much like a Saturnite daredevil. The great unilluminated backside of Fantastic passed into foggy obscurity, and all was darkness until the lights of Froy winked in the distance.

She came down, slowing with unfolded first wings, carving a wake into the little fortified harbor at four moons rise. She noted the guide lights were burning though no fishing craft were about—just the few old work boats needed to keep the waters free of predators. Not trusting the functionality of these barges, she swam swiftly toward the old receiving dock with its stairway carved high out from the sea.

To her surprise, the tessellated stonework of the yard had given over to lichens, cracking here and there into new-spidering greenery. Darkness had settled from above. A brief 2Sun had set, but its magic remained. On the meadow that rose behind, long grasses shone with shimmering aura beneath the gathering moons. The scent of a magic garden was close. With a quiet certainty as to her own destiny, Keryon believed she had come exactly to the right place at the right time. An endorphin-rich satisfaction blinded her inner eye.

For there before her, on the old and nature-claimed monument to an industry no longer deemed necessary or

fruitful, was a gathering of young females her own age or close to it, so it appeared, playing at bowling on the lawn. Gravity was stronger than it should have been on Demetersphere; it was partly magic moving that ball.

They were all excited to see a courier emerge at such a moment, shedding waters as if a merwoman from the sea. They gathered around, inquiring who might be her charge on such a night as this.

“I seek Lavasilver, Temple of Froy.”

“You’re just in time. Tonight is her transition. The fifth moon is not yet rising.”

They took her to the hidden temple, pledging her to secrecy. As she’d arrived in the time of sport, it seemed these younger pupils felt she was their own to sport with. With the power given them by the goddess in this holy spot, they bathed her in a sensory overload of rosemary- and lavender-scented perfumes, and warmed her by censers brimming with light. They told stories of strangers treated to the mysteries in days of old. Persuaded by such legerdemain, she drank a psychedelic substance. Only because the light by the moons was enough to see that one of those who had sported with her was different, and took time to really pledge to deliver the tube for Keryon, did she open her scabbard and give it forth.

The mysteries were such that one could not remember them. One had to erase, though the temple would hold them in such a way (in case of trickery) that the memories would be preserved against your oath in the meantime. All she remembered was that after such a time of loneliness in this weird, this sudden sisterhood came like a blessing on the orphan Keryon. She reclined happily among these new friends in a bower high up beside an ancient water-hole, while they circled and sang among the shining grasses.

From this spot she could look back and see the moonlit shape of the bay opening to the mountain-stabbed horizon. Winds were visible, competing in roiling twirls of dancing, purple-black impulse and above them, so she thought, wubs or other unidentified flying objects. In the weird light of five moons the grasses became selanter, that color between lavender and olive that when you saw it for the first time you understood you had always known. Shadows combined to give the sensation that everything was conscious. Breezes blew against her face from directions she had not known existed.

And she saw the one who had pledged to deliver standing dumbly, the tube still in her hands. Keryon approached, questioningly.

The light she remembered in this one's eyes had gone. It seemed the player had departed altogether and left a husk. She spoke as if in a trance, holding out her charge. "The one you seek is no longer here. Her old nurse remains by the harbor, however, awaiting passage."

Keryon gathered the tube. It had not been opened.

She had failed in her purpose. Even from all the way up behind the temple, she could make out the tiny hump of the kindly old woman sitting on a stone bench, looking out over the morning harbor. The nurse was a familiar type—whether a lump of flesh or cloth, one could hardly say. Older characters were often more than casual players, Jyvernes of the more settled North, likely teaching magic on the side to promising youngsters and new players. But this nurse, almost certainly, by Keryon's reckoning, was a bot. Up already and fishing, she no doubt believed herself real, one of those kindly elders who could be found in any happy hall or home, a necessary part of the architecture. She was surely heading to a cave where she'd be tend-

ing to the fire and keeping water ready for tea for the early risers, caring for objects and furniture others took for granted. Helping wherever her humble services were needed in exchange for a blanket and the place by the fire.



As Keryon came down to the docks, a hard wind greeted her. She turned the corner and saw only the nurse's blue blowing blanket from behind. A lump in silhouette, risen against the dappled dawn waves. Her long stick curled out. Line fishing was only possible in well-guarded waters. Even so, it was a dangerous pastime.

But it seemed the nurse had local assistance: very likely another stranger to this part of the world waiting for the ferry, a tall, hawk-faced man, bearded, wrapped in dark blues that suggested wings, in a blanket at least as rich as the nurse's own. He kept watch casually beside her, gossiping, exchanging information.

This was a courier, she realized, of some station. The scabbard that became apparent on the stranger's back suggested a long-range flyer like herself. Most certainly a glider, whose kite-like spread could carry post between all the settlements of the north.

He saw Keryon and alerted the nurse. She turned nimbly for her size. A silvery flash seemed to reach out from her surprisingly living eyes as Keryon made greetings.

"Your coming is propitious, orphan of Chyll. Though we cannot say it is lucky. We hoped you would come with her whom you sought beside you. Lavasilver of Temple Froy."

"... She is not there. I was to deliver her a message. She was taboo under the five moons." But there was no use trying to lie.

“Where is your message?”

Keryon tapped her own scabbard. She was surprised at such a tone of command from what she had assumed was a computer routine. But the old woman’s eyes had lit with new fire.

“Where is she?” she demanded.

The nurse’s companion turned to look into Keryon’s eyes, as if to see the truth there. There was something beyond human in that gaze that Keryon also feared. Something that she recognized but could not name. “She doesn’t know.”

“Take me back!” The Nurse cried. “Now.”

The world flashed slint, and before Keryon’s eyes the visible world rewound itself backwards in time. She saw a vision of her own backwards from this scene into the past. The nurse remained, but soon her wiry companion transformed—beak sprouting out of that hard profile, eyes sliding on to the side of the feather-sprouting head, talons stretching out of imaginary sandals—into a winged *gryffyn*, a flyer of a sort she had heard tell of but never seen, such as served the gods. She watched this magical bird, larger and mightier than a man, flapping backwards, also disappearing into the sky.

When Cerberus, the fifth moon, reappeared in the sky and crossed, the scene relaxed into ordinary, forward-moving time. This was indeed now a moment Keryon no longer remembered, during which her senses were obscured. And now standing out of her own body, as she witnessed the moonlit eve, there came a sudden hard dip in the winds. She hadn’t remembered that.

Even before the sound arrived, waves of the rupture flowed through the nurse and Keryon. And then that shock-break crack, as if the dimensional membrane sup-

porting the weird snapped. The winds and the boomeranging force waves bounced them back to the dawning present: Keryon crouched low on the stone of the pier, instinctively curling her wings for protection, the nurse rising up, while statuary and loose architecture wavered and toppled throughout the town of Dorr.

The glider, still a gryffyn, had risen on his great wings high enough to surveil the scene up by the temple grounds.

“There is a great disturbance in the land over and behind the sacred pool. The cut is fresh, the seam smoking even now.”

“Go!” And the gryffyn was gone like the wind that bore him.

The nurse, in the meantime, was still growing, inflating, revealing herself structured into dimensions young Keryon Eightfoot could not understand. Her fine blue swath had become a tunic from which limbs now extended that might have belonged to a woman a quarter of her age. Indeed, in a new blast of sudden aura, the nurse became young, beautiful, old, fearsome, larger, smaller, hook nosed, round eyed, and all at the same time. A shining nimbus blew out from the single front chakra of all such personae, and curled around her like a ribbon of light.

Keryon kept her gaze fixed on the tessellated stones. The young flyer was clever enough—that is to say, sufficiently trained in the superstitions—to lower eyes lest she be permanently blinded by the single flash of unimaginable beauty.

“What is in your scabbard?” came words she could only answer.

“I know not. The seal is un-broken.”

“Break it.”

Fumbling fingers did the bidding, passing over the missive unread.



Great was the wrath of the goddess on Dorr. She cursed the intrigues of the town, and the temple and the merchants, none of whom had bothered to observe the hour of the five moons. Her words fell down upon them like rain.

“Rudderless and unconcealable creatures, it is your moral weakness that has made this breach possible. Did you not listen to the teachers we put into the weird? Did you not read the texts we preserved for all of your sakes, and read to you in the cribs? Did you not swear to keep vigilant care of her temple grounds? We cared for you. We chose your town to protect with our long magic. We took care of your forgotten things, every day watched out and protected you from cruelties and the horror of invasion. But no one was here to see the lightning of the four moons or read the signs in the fish. You were all up to your own businesses but never ours; and now you cannot even understand the language in which these words are spoken.”

All the minds of Dorr had emerged in perplexity. Not the empty town Keryon had imagined, it appeared now a place teeming with points of view, including fishers, watchpersons, merchants, lichens, artisans, poets, dogs, musicians, trees, cats, counselors, cats, prostitutes, guardspeople, and birds. This apparition would be a once-in-a-lifetime event for every player. They would all come here to see this. Even the few stealthy newfish who had made it through the defenses (via an unknown underground con-

nector) to cruise within the harbor raised their barbed paraphernalia to witness that diamond-shining radiance.

“Is this how you welcome the old one when she walks your streets? Who washes your robes in the river, your feet in the bowl? Who swaddles your precious offspring? She who is not invited once to any council of matter, but whose advice is always true, she who serves always as the first vessel for your vicious gossips, suffering the hate-filled lies issued to mask your libelous policies? What sort of names do you call her, throwing shame down upon those humble, huddled shoulders? This is how you repay your goddess? Dare you look upon us now?”

Keryon shielded herself from the glory with her wings. She would be glad she did, for there were many others who could never from that day see again without 2Sun in the sky.

“Henceforth Dorr shall be called Banetown”—and Keryon marveled how in her own memory it had always been called that. “We hereby remove our interest in this place.”

And with a sharp intake of breath, the goddess departed leaving only the old, greasy robe with which the old nurse had kept herself warm on the stones, and beside that the discarded scroll addressed to Lavasilver, Temple of Banetown.

Keryon picked up the missive. The message, in two-dimensional script, was at first unreadable.

DEAR PASSENGER

THE HABITAT TO WHICH YOU ARE CURRENTLY
ATTACHED BELONGS TO A SPACECRAFT.
YOU ARE HEREBY NOTIFIED SHIP DEPARTS

SATURN SYSTEM IN 12 HOURS 13 MINUTES,
SYSTEM STANDARD TIME.

AS PER THE RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES CLAIMED
BY SO-CALLED “EXTRAORDINARY MACHINES”
AND/OR ARTIFICIAL PERSONS IN SECTION 17 OF
THE FREE SPACE CHARTER SIGNED BY THE
FIRST ISOLATO CONGRESS IN PARSON’S CRATER
IN 21 JULY 2134, SHIP HEREBY AFFIRMS DELIV-
ERY OF THIS COMMUNICATION.

MARK VON SCHLEGEL is the author of eleven published books and numerous stories, websites, essays, and experimental short-form writings. His novel *Venusia* (Semiotext(e), 2005) was honored for the Otherwise Award in Science Fiction. He has taught literature and art at CalArts, the San Francisco Art Institute, and Städelschule in Frankfurt, and has served as a founding member of the hybrid theater-art-writing collective Pure Fiction since 2012.