

Science Fiction

Kin

By Bruce McAllister



fictionwise

Excellence in eBooks

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

Fictionwise, Inc.

www.Fictionwise.com

Copyright ©2006 by Bruce McAllister

First published in Asimov's, February 2006

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

The alien and the boy, who was twelve, sat in the windowless room high above the city that afternoon. The boy talked and the alien listened.

The boy was ordinary—the genes of three continents in his features, his clothes cut in the style of all boys in the vast housing project called LAX. The alien was something else, awful to behold; and though the boy knew it was rude, he did not look up as he talked.

He wanted the alien to kill a man, he said. It was that simple.

As the boy spoke, the alien sat upright and still on the one piece of furniture that could hold him. Eyes averted, the boy sat on the stool, the one by the terminal where he did his schoolwork each day. It made him uneasy that the alien was on his bed, though he understood why. It made him uneasy that the creature's strange knee was so near his in the tiny room, and he was glad when the creature, as if aware, too, shifted its leg away.

He did not have to look up to see the Antalou's features. That one glance in the doorway had been enough, and it came back to him whether he wanted it to or not. It was not that he was scared, the boy told himself. It was just the idea—that such a thing could stand in a doorway built for humans, in a human housing project where generations had been born and died, and probably would forever. It did not seem possible.

He wondered how it seemed to the Antalou.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

Closing his eyes, the boy could see the black synthetic skin the alien wore as protection against alien atmospheres. Under that suit, ropes of muscles and tendons coiled and uncoiled, rippling even when the alien was still. In the doorway the long neck had not been extended, but he knew what it could do. When it telescoped forward—as it could instantly—the head tipped up in reflex and the jaws opened.

Nor had the long talons—which the boy knew sat in the claws and even along the elbows and toes—been unsheathed. But he imagined them sheathing and unsheathing as he explained what he wanted, his eyes on the floor.

When the alien finally spoke, the voice was inhuman—filtered through the translating mesh that covered half its face. The face came back: The tremendous skull, the immense eyes that could see so many kinds of light and make their way in nearly every kind of darkness. The heavy welts—the auxiliary gills—inside the breathing globe. The dripping ducts below them, ready to release their jets of acid.

"Who is it ... that you wish to have killed?" the voice asked, and the boy almost looked up. It was only a voice—mechanical, snake-like, halting—he reminded himself. By itself it could not kill him.

"A man named James Ortega-Mambay," the boy answered.

"Why?" The word hissed in the stale apartment air.

"He is going to kill my sister."

"You know this ... how?"

"I just do."

The alien said nothing, and the boy heard the long, whispering pull of its lungs.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

"Why," it said at last, "did you think ... I would agree to it?"

The boy was slow to answer.

"Because you're a killer."

The alien was again silent.

"So all Antalou," the voice grated, "are professional killers?"

"Oh, no," the boy said, looking up and trying not to look away. "I mean...."

"If not ... then how ... did you choose me?"

The boy had walked up to the creature at the great fountain by the Cliffs of Monica—a landmark any visitor to Earth would take in, if only because it appeared on the sanctioned itineraries—and had handed him a written message in crude Antalouan. "I know what you are and what you do," the message read. "I need your services. LAX cell 873-2345-2657 at 1100 tomorrow morning. I am Kim."

"Antalou are well known for their skills, sir," the boy said respectfully. "We've read about the Noh campaign, and what happened on Hoggun II when your people were betrayed, and what one company of your mercenaries were able to do against the Gar-Betties." The boy paused. "I had to give out ninety-eight notes, sir, before I found you. You were the only one who answered...."

The hideous head tilted while the long arms remained perfectly still, and the boy found he could not take his eyes from them.

"I see," the alien said.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

It was translator's idiom only. "Seeing" was not the same as "understanding." The young human had done what the military and civilian intelligence services of five worlds had been unable to do—identify him as a professional—and it made the alien reflect: Why had he answered the message? Why had he taken it seriously? A human child had delivered it, after all. Was it that he had sensed no danger and simply followed professional reflex, or something else? Somehow the boy had known he would. How?

"How much..." the alien said, curious, "are you able to pay?"

"I've got two hundred dollars, sir."

"How ... did you acquire them?"

"I sold things," the boy said quickly.

The rooms here were bare. Clearly the boy had nothing to sell. He had stolen the money, the alien was sure.

"I can get more. I can—"

The alien made a sound that did not translate. The boy jumped.

The alien was thinking of the 200,000 inters for the vengeance assassination on Hoggun's third moon, the one hundred kilobucks for the renegade contract on the asteroid called Wolfe, and the mineral shares, pharmaceuticals, and spacelock craft—worth twice that—which he had in the end received for the three corporate kills on Alama Poy. What could two hundred *dollars* buy? Could it even buy a city rail ticket?

"That is not enough," the alien said. "Of course," it added, one arm twitching, then still again, "you may have thought to

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

record ... our discussion ... and you may threaten to release the recording ... to Earth authorities ... if I do not do what you ask of me...."

The boy's pupils dilated then—like those of the human province official on Diedor, the one he had removed for the Gray Infra there.

"Oh, no—" the boy stammered. "I wouldn't do that—" The skin of his face had turned red, the alien saw. "I didn't even think of it."

"Perhaps ... you should have," the alien said. The arm twitched again, and the boy saw that it was smaller than the others, crooked but strong.

The boy nodded. Yes, he should have thought of that. "Why..." the alien asked then, "does a man named ... James Ortega-Mambay ... wish to kill your sister?"

When the boy was finished explaining, the alien stared at him again and the boy grew uncomfortable. Then the creature rose, joints falling into place with popping and sucking sounds, legs locking to lift the heavy torso and head, the long arms snaking out as if with a life of their own.

The boy was up and stepping back.

"Two hundred ... is not enough for a kill," the alien said, and was gone, taking the same subterranean path out of the building which the boy had worked out for him.

* * * *

When the man named Ortega-Mambay stepped from the bullet elevator to the roof of the federal building, it was sunset and the end of another long but productive day at

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

BuPopCon. In the sun's final rays the helipad glowed like a perfect little pond—not the chaos of the Pacific Ocean in the distance—and even the mugginess couldn't ruin the scene. It was, yes, the kind of weather one conventionally took one's jacket off in; but there was only one place to remove one's jacket with at least a modicum of dignity, and that was, of course, in the privacy of one's own FabHome-by-the-Sea. To thwart convention, he was wearing his new triple-weave "gauze" jacket in the pattern called "Summer Shimmer"—handsome, odorless, waterproof, and cool. He would not remove it until he wished to.

He was the last, as always, to leave the Bureau, and as always he felt the pride. There was nothing sweeter than being the last—than lifting off from the empty pad with the rotor blades singing over him and the setting sun below as he made his way in his earned solitude away from the city up the coast to another, smaller helipad and his FabHome near Oxnard. He had worked hard for such sweetness, he reminded himself.

His heli sat glowing in the sun's last light—part of the perfect scene—and he took his time walking to it. It was worth a paintbrush painting, or a digital one, or a multimedia poem. Perhaps he would make something to memorialize it this weekend, after the other members of his triad visited for their intimacy session.

As he reached the pilot's side and the little door there, a shadow separated itself from the greater shadow cast by the craft, and he nearly screamed.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

The figure was tall and at first he thought it was a costume, a joke played by a colleague, nothing worse.

But as the figure stepped into the fading light, he saw what it was and nearly screamed again. He had seen such creatures in newscasts, of course, and even at a distance at the shuttleport or at major tourist landmarks in the city, but never like this. *So close.*

When it spoke, the voice was low and mechanical—the work of an Ipoor mesh.

"You are," the alien said, "James Ortega-Mambay ... Seventh District Supervisor ... BuPopCon?"

Ortega-Mambay considered denying it, but did not. He knew the reputation of the Antalou as well as anyone did. He knew the uses to which his own race, not to mention the other four races mankind had met among the stars, had put them. The Antalou did not strike him as creatures one lied to without risk.

"Yes.... I am. I am Ortega-Mambay."

"My own name," the Antalou said, "does not matter, Ortega-Mambay. You know what I am.... What matters ... is that you have decreed ... the pregnancy of Linda Tuckey-Yatsen illegal.... You have ordered the unborn female sibling ... of the boy Kim Tuckey-Yatsen ... aborted. Is this true?"

The alien waited.

"It may be," the man said, fumbling. "I certainly do not have all of our cases memorized. We do not process them by family name—"

He stopped as he saw the absurdity of it. It was outrageous.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

"I really do not see what business this is of yours," he began. "This is a Terran city, and an overpopulated one—in an overpopulated nation on a overpopulated planet that cannot afford to pay to move its burden offworld. We are faced with a problem and one we are quite happy solving by ourselves. None of this can possibly be any of your affair, Visitor. Do you have standing with your delegation in this city?"

"I do not," the mesh answered, "and it is indeed ... my affair if ... the unborn female child of Family Tuckey-Yatsen dies."

"I do not know what you mean."

"She is to live, Ortega-Mambay ... Her brother wishes a sibling.... He lives and schools ... in three small rooms while his parents work ... somewhere in the city.... To him ... the female child his mother carries ... is already born. He has great feeling for her ... in the way of your kind, Ortega-Mambay."

This could not be happening, Ortega-Mambay told himself. It was insane, and he could feel rising within him a rage he hadn't felt since his first job with the government. "How dare you!" he heard himself say. "You are standing on the home planet of another race and ordering me, a federal official, to obey not only a child's wishes, but your own—you, a Visitor and one without official standing among your own kind—"

"The child," the alien broke in, "will not die. If she dies, I will ... do what I have been ... retained to do."

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

The alien stepped then to the heli and the man's side, so close they were almost touching. The man did not back up. He would not be intimidated. *He would not.*

The alien raised two of its four arms, and the man heard a snicking sound, then a pop, then another, and something caught in his throat as he watched talons longer and straighter than anything he had ever dreamed of slip one by one through the creature's black syntheskin.

Then, using these talons, the creature removed the door from his heli.

One moment the alloy door was on its hinges; the next it was impaled on the talons, which were, Ortega-Mambay saw now, so much stronger than any nail, bone or other integument of Terran fauna. Giddily he wondered what the creature possibly ate to make them so strong.

"Get into your vehicle, Ortega-Mambay," the alien said. "Proceed home. Sleep and think ... about what you must do ... to keep the female sibling alive."

Ortega-Mambay could barely work his legs. He was trying to get into the heli, but couldn't, and for a terrible moment it occurred to him that the alien might try to help him in. But then he was in at last, hands flailing at the dashboard as he tried to do what he'd been asked to do: *Think.*

* * * *

The alien did not sit on the bed, but remained in the doorway. The boy did not have trouble looking at him this time.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

"You know more about us," the alien said suddenly, severely, "than you wished me to understand.... Is this not true?"

The boy did not answer. The creature's eyes—huge and catlike—held his.

"Answer me," the alien said.

When the boy finally spoke, he said only, "Did you do it?"

The alien ignored him.

"Did you kill him?" the boy said.

"*Answer me*," the alien repeated, perfectly still.

"Yes..." the boy said, looking away at last.

"*How?*" the alien asked.

The boy did not answer. There was, the alien could see, defeat in the way the boy sat on the stool.

"You will answer me ... or I will ... damage this room."

The boy did nothing for a moment, then got up and moved slowly to the terminal where he studied each day.

"I've done a lot of work on your star," the boy said. There was little energy in his voice now.

"It is more than that," the alien said.

"Yes. I've studied Antalouan history." The boy paused and the alien felt the energy rise a little. "For school, I mean." There was feeling again—a little—to the boy's voice.

The boy hit the keyboard once, then twice, and the screen flickered to life. The alien saw a map of the northern hemisphere of Antalou, the trade routes of the ancient Seventh Empire, the fragmented continent, and the deadly seas that had doomed it.

"More than this ... I think," the alien said.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

"Yes," the boy said. "I did a report last year—on my own, not for school—about the fossil record on Antalou. There were a lot of animals that wanted the same food you wanted—that your kind wanted. On Antalou, I mean."

Yes, the alien thought.

"I ran across other things, too," the boy went on, and the alien heard the energy die again, heard in the boy's voice the suppressive feeling his kind called "despair." The boy believed that the man named Ortega-Mambay would still kill his sister, and so the boy "despaired."

Again the boy hit the keyboard. A new diagram appeared. It was familiar, though the alien had not seen one like it—so clinical, detailed, and ornate—in half a lifetime.

It was the Antalouan family cluster, and though the alien could not read them, he knew what the labels described: The "kinship obligation bonds" and their respective "motivational weights," the "defense-need parameters" and "bond-loss consequences" for identity and group membership. There was an inset, too, which gave—in animated three-dimensional display—the survival model human exopsychologists believed could explain all Antalouan behavior.

The boy hit the keyboard and an iconographic list of the "totemic bequeaths" and "kinship inheritances" from ancient burial sites near Toloa and Mantok appeared.

"You thought you knew," the alien said, "what an Antalou feels."

The boy kept his eyes on the floor. "Yes."

The alien did not speak for a moment, but when he did, it was to say:

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

"You were not wrong ... Tuckey-Yatsen."

The boy looked up, not understanding.

"Your sister will live," the Antalou said.

The boy blinked, but did not believe it.

"What I say is true," the alien said.

The alien watched as the boy's body began to straighten, as energy, no longer suppressed in "despair," moved through it.

"It was done," the alien explained, "without the killing ... which neither you nor I ... could afford."

"They will let her live?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"I do not lie ... about the work I do."

The boy was staring at the alien.

"I will give you the money," he said.

"No," the alien said. "That will not ... be necessary."

The boy stared for another moment, and then, strangely, began to move.

The alien watched, curious. The boy was making himself step toward him, though why he would do this the alien did not know. It was a human custom perhaps, a "sentimentality," and the boy, though afraid, thought he must offer it.

When the boy reached the alien, he put out an unsteady hand, touched the Antalou's shoulder lightly—once, twice—and then, remarkably, drew his hand down the alien's damaged arm.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

The alien was astonished. It was an Antalouan gesture, this touch.

This is no ordinary boy, the alien thought. It was not simply the boy's intelligence—however one might measure it—or his understanding of the Antalou. It was something else—something the alien recognized.

Something any killer needs....

The Antalouan gesture the boy had used meant "obligation to blood," though it lacked the slow unsheathing of the *demoor*. The boy had chosen well.

"Thank you," the boy was saying, and the alien knew he had rehearsed both the touch and the words. It had filled the boy with great fear, the thought of it, but he had rehearsed until fear no longer ruled him.

As the boy stepped back, shaking now and unable to stop it, he said, "Do you have a family-cluster still?"

"I do not," the alien answered, not surprised by the question. The boy no longer surprised him. "It was a decision ... made without regrets. Many Antalou have made it. My work ... prevents it. You understand...."

The boy nodded, a gesture which meant that he did.

And then the boy said it:

"What is it like to kill?"

It was, the alien knew, the question the boy had most wanted to ask. There was excitement in the voice, but still no fear.

When the alien answered, it was to say simply:

"It is both ... more and less ... than what one ... imagines it will be."

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

The boy named Kim Tuckey-Yatsen stood in the doorway of the small room where he slept and schooled, and listened as the man spoke to his mother and father. The man never looked at his mother's swollen belly. He said simply, "You have been granted an exception, Family Tuckey-Yatsen. You have permission to proceed with the delivery of the unborn female. You will be receiving confirmation of a Four-Member Family Waiver within three workweeks. All questions should be referred to BuPopCon, Seventh District, at the netnumber on this card."

When the man was gone, his mother cried in happiness and his father held her. When the boy stepped up to them, they embraced him, too. There were three of them now, hugging, and soon there would be four. That was what mattered. His parents were good people. They had taken a chance for him, and he loved them. That mattered too, he knew.

That night he dreamed of her again. Her name would be Kiara. In the dream she looked a little like Siddo's sister two floors down, but also like his mother. Daughters should look like their mothers, shouldn't they? In his dream the four of them were hugging and there were more rooms, and the rooms were bigger.

* * * *

When the boy was seventeen and his sister five, sharing a single room as well as siblings can, the trunk arrived from Romah, one of the war-scarred worlds of the Pleiades. Pressurized and dented, the small alloy container bore the

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

customs stamps of four spacelocks, had been opened at least seven times in its passage, and smelled. It had been disinfected, yes, the USPUS carrier who delivered it explained. It had been kept in quarantine for a year and had nearly not gotten through, given the circumstances.

At first, the boy did not know what the carrier meant.

The trunk held many things, the woman explained. The small polished skull of a carnivore not from Earth. A piece of space metal fused like the blossom of a flower. Two rings of polished stone that tingled to the touch. An ancient device that the boy would later discover was a third-generation airless communicator used by the Gar-Betties. A coil made of animal hair and pitch, which he would learn was a rare musical instrument from Hoggun VI. And many smaller things, among them the postcard of the Pacific Fountain the boy had given the alien.

Only later did the family receive official word of the 300,000 inters deposited in the boy's name in the neutral banking station of HiVerks; of the cache of specialized weapons few would understand that had been placed in perpetual care on Titan, also in his name; and of the offworld travel voucher purchased for the boy to use when he was old enough to use it.

Though it read like no will ever written on Earth, it was indeed a will, one that the Antalou called a "bequeathing cantation." That it had been recorded in a spacelock lobby shortly before the alien's violent death on a world called Glory did not diminish its legal authority.

Kin
by Bruce McAllister

Although the boy tried to explain it to them, his parents did not understand; and before long it did not matter. The money bought them five rooms in the northeast sector of the city, a better job for his mother, better care for his father's autoimmunities, more technical education for the boy, and all the food and clothes they needed; and for the time being (though only that) these things mattered more to him than Saturn's great moon and the marvelous weapons waiting patiently for him there.

—for Harry Harrison, master

—THE END—

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this eBook by going back to your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.