

*View 8*

**Tangled in the Nets of the Gods**  
**Paul Di Filippo**

With crackling flames leaping high all around him in the treetops, with the surging, shrieking, shoving madness of citizens desperate to escape the conflagration shattering his senses, with a burgeoning concern for the kindly beautiful woman — Safiya? — who had aided him swelling inexplicably in his chest (yet she was one of his hated enemies, a Sengpa!), the terrorist from Dardarbjji suddenly burst into wild laughter.

He realized that this assault was all a hoax. Perhaps a diversion for something more fatal, to be sure. But on its own, mere spectacle, probably intended to foment confusion and fear and possibly even rebellion. And, pitifully, the mock threat was localized to this district, not even citywide.

This showy celestial phenomenon was not the Kalpagni, the legendary doom of an era raining down upon this cursed city of conquerors. The plotters had no sway with the gods, no means of bending the deities to their will. (At least so the terrorist hoped.) The sky had not cracked open to reveal other-dimensional refulgence that would blind and strike frail mortals, and set their constructions afire. No, it was all a conjuror's trick. A brilliant conjuror's trick, but just a sham nonetheless.

The patterned, oscillating wavefronts in the sky, obeying distant human programming, betrayed the true origins of the unnerving show — but only to a trained eye. Ah, and now the "cracks" in the twilight sky were "closing." Its true fading nature was evident to the terrorist, if to no one else.

Back in Dardarbjji he had been a student, a student of the sciences: biology, physics, and their strange intersection, biofidelic mechanics, the discipline that produced the muscles and stomachs and sinews that powered much of society. In the student laboratory, he had played like the others with a substance commonly referred to as "neural dust." These atomies, when seeded in a proper substrate, would invigorate even inorganic matrices, and establish sympathetic etheric links among subjects. One could propagate impulses along chains of raw neural dust and produce startling displays of differently colored dendritic luminescence.

This was just what he had witnessed now.

The atmosphere had been seeded with neural dust in crazed, chaotic, wind-dispersed patterns, and "ignited" with the subsequent application of the proper enzymatic chemicals. The resulting brief flareup of luminescent quasi-motor impulses mapping standard cortical subroutines had resembled the fracturing of the heavens.

But how had the dust and enzymes been lofted high enough to achieve the spectacle?

As if in answer, winds stoked by the conflagration in the trees sent the smell of burning rubber to the nose of the terrorist.

Rubber? In the trees?

Then the terrorist focused on shreds of multicolored balloons littering the ground everywhere.

The neural dust and trigger enzymes had been sent aloft by this simple expedient! Who would ever think to suspect a child's plaything floating innocently in flocks on the breeze?

But how had the sealed contents of the balloons been released to mingle at the proper time?

By something that could reach them aloft, something that could fly and rend, something sentient —

Of course! The dhajarahs! Somehow, those alien imagos of the salps had been induced to shred the balloons!

But no one had ever succeeded in co-opting the dhajarahs before, or even communicating with them! This breakthrough excited the terrorist's scientific side. For a moment, he almost forgot his mission, his hatred, his current predicament. If only his life had been more open-ended, less constrained by politics and revenge and circumstance of sept, he would have enjoyed following such researches —

Perhaps, in fact, the employment of this tactic explained why *he* had been chosen from so many who had volunteered for this mission: for his scientific training.

But what of the diversionary, ancillary fires in the trees? If it had not rained down from above, then —

The terrorist's keen eyes picked out the charred corpse of an animal not far away from where he stood, crumpled at the base of one pipal bole.

A dead monkey.

Could someone have trained and instructed the ubiquitous salp monkeys of Riarnanth to set these trees alight?

Yes, it all made sense. A clever simulacrum of Kalpagni, just enough to utterly disconcert this district around the Battidarmala station.

But why? What was the ulterior plan? The plan he had been sent to implement, and which was now proceeding without him. And how could he help carry it forward?

If sowing calamity was indeed still his goal...

These questions echoed frustratingly in the terrorist's brain.

But this whole chain of deductions culminating in these conundrums had flashed through the terrorist's brain in less time than he could have uttered the logic. The early moments of chaos still unfurled around him. Where was that woman, Safiya — ?

There! Crouched behind a tipped-over, flavored shaved-ice cart that served as a boulder in the stream of noisy mad humanity, brandishing her pistol bravely, as if ready to shoot at imperious Jaggenuth himself, should he appear and claim responsibility for this limited disruption of Riarnanth's civil calm.

The terrorist's heart surrendered itself in this moment. Unpredictably, illogically, irrefutably. He experienced a fleeting instant of nibbana that undid all his knotted, poisoned heartstrings. For a timeless moment, the world seemed colored in shades of cornflower blue. The texture of reality resembled a pointillistic painting composed of petals.

A burst blood-vessel in his brain?

Or the chance touch of a passing beneficent goddess, a deva, an apsara?

Whichever explanation obtained, the moment passed, dropping one lone unnoticed sourceless fresh and fragrant flower petal at the man's feet.

And the ex-terrorist knew he had to act.

He dashed zigzag across the space separating him from Safiya and crouched beside her.

"Gullinder!" he shouted.

"What?!"

"You asked my name! It's Gullinder. My friends call me Gulliji! Let's get out of here!"

He raised Safiya to her feet and, himself still shoeless, they sprinted toward the shelter of the terminal building.

As they rounded a fluted column, there was a crack, and stone flinders spilled off the column.

Gulliji turned, and saw the assassins who had slaughtered Kerao back at the garial factory.

They could only be after him, Gulliji realized. Lethal messengers from his contacts here. But why lethal? Simply because he had been a little late to meet up with his co-conspirators?

Or were there more levels to this affair than he had been made privy to, back in Dardarbji?

Safiya spotted the killers too, and a fierce expression slid down over her fine features. She raised her hand-cannon and it boomed shockingly loud right next to Gulliji's ear.

"For Kerao!"

Her bullet took one of the mercenaries in the chest and rocked him bloodily backward. But the others never even paused in their pursuit and sniping.

Fumbling to reconfigure the barrel of her pistol for another shot even as she ducked bullets, Safiya cursed like a sailor from Jesurum.

Gulliji knew they were both doomed.

A fusillade of heavy fire from big-bore guns drummed the air.

The assassins went down like skittles in a tavern, gunsmoke contending with the smoke from the trees, whose flaming crowns, Gulliji noted with a queer irrelevance common to

overloaded brains, were already being extinguished by a squad of firefighters from the train terminal.

Gulliji spotted their rescuers.

A corps of police officers, led by —

A beggar? The same one Gulliji had rudely disdained earlier in this interminable, senseless day?

Now the beggar raced to where Gulliji and Safiya stood.

But instead of seeking to reassure them of their safety, the beggar-turned-cop trained his impressive weapon with its burred stock and delicately engraved silver barrel upon them and said in a stern and cultured but brusque voice, "Maiden lady, drop your pistol, please. And you, man from Dardarbjji, raise your hands. I am Investigator Nashira of the Riarnanth Bravest."

Both Safiya and Gulliji did as instructed.

Still training his weapon on them one-handedly, Investigator Nashira pulled a thick gelatinous coil off his belt.

"Extend your arms, please."

Each end of the living rope cinched itself snakelike around one wrist of Safiya and Gulliji, merging with its own substance to make a cuff.

"The nematocysts in the jelly bracelet will remain untriggered unless I spray the proper catalyst. I know from personal experience that their stings will leave you senseless for several hours. This condition would not be conducive to my investigations, as we have much to discuss. Now, let us proceed to the precinct house."

Gulliji attempted to speak up on Safiya's behalf. "This woman, she's innocent, a bystander. She knows nothing —"

Investigator Nashira held up a stern hand. "You will speak when I command." He turned to the other policemen hovering over the bodies. "Bring those corpses back with us. They might allow us to identify who hired them."

Linked together by the rubbery tether, Safiya and Gulliji were marched off.

Entering the precinct house under the heavily armed prodding of the Bravest, Gulliji noted that full evening had descended, soft and fragrant and inviting as a blanket in a Dardarbjji winter. The darkness, prinked with colored lanterns, brought with it an increased sense of Festival gaiety, an upsurge in feverish play-activity. For here, just a few blocks away from the confused scene at Battidarmala station, the basically imperturbable life of sprawling, complacent, rich and narcissistic Riarnanth, spoiled only-daughter of all the glorious cities of the land, continued on apace, as if no threat loomed.

Gulliji tried to imagine what it would be like to live in this odd, exotic city. He knew he could never return to Dardarbjji now, after his failure. But what kind of life could he manufacture for himself here, among his ex-enemies?

If further life the laws and courts even allowed him!

No, best not to contemplate the worst....

Did the famed University of Bohbot have any openings for a bright student of biofidelic mechanics? Would there be a small garret apartment where he could doff his sandals? Would there be a woman who would share his days?

Daring to glance covertly at the woman tethered to him, Gulliji sought to size up her mood and nature. She looked irked, not fearful. Bold and proud, not cowed and shameful. Eager for whatever life could toss at her. Beautiful, despite grime and sweat and ripped shawl.

What spirit! The women of Dardarbjji might have as much inner mettle and firmness of character, but it was expressed in dour, stolid, rigorous fashion, not in this individualistic, fleering, almost haughty manner.

Gulliji suspected that an alliance with such a woman would involve much give and take.

"I'm sorry." The words escaped Gulliji's lips almost involuntarily.

Safiya looked with cool interest at her partner in captivity. "What is that?"

"I'm sorry I involved you in this. Don't worry, though, I'll clear you of every charge."

Safiya snorted. "Me worry! It's you that had better fret, man from Dardarbjji!"

Gulliji started to ask her to use his given name, when he was prodded by the barrel of Investigator Nashira's gun.

"Quiet there! You'll have plenty of time to talk soon enough!"

The members of the Bravest carrying the corpses halted before a large impressive desk. Behind the desk sat a portly fellow who looked to Gulliji as if he would have trouble chasing down a fritter. Investigator Nashira addressed him now.

"Chalch! Open up the morgue and summon Doctor Kannukaden for immediate autopsy work! I want the somatic upgrades implanted in these killers dug out and analyzed right now! Also, issue the call for all off-duty personnel to report back, and send out a general alert to every other precinct house. But first, give me the key to the examination room."

Chalch complied with alacrity. "At once, Investigator!" But as he passed the key over, he could not resist inquiring, "You haven't seen my magazine by any chance, have you?"

Nashira trained a look on Chalch such that even those not its direct object quailed. No further words were necessary to terminate that irrelevant line of inquiry.

The door to the examination room consisted of rust-pitted strapped steel, and radiated a forbidding chill. Gulliji instantly envisioned the racked instruments of torture behind it, the excruciation couches and brown-stained floor.

But when Nashira opened the door and thrust them forward, Gulliji encountered only an innocuous stone-walled chamber bare of anything but two wall sconces and a wooden table with four chairs.

But the illumination from the hall lamps was enough to reveal one puzzling anomaly.

In the middle of the table sat a magazine befouled with monkey dung: *The Ten Thousand Heroes of Riarnanth*.

Nashira burst into hearty laughter and then yelled out, "Chalch!"

Chalch arrived, surveyed the situation, then shook his fist at a small barred window high up in one wall. "Curse those creatures!" Gingerly, he picked up his magazine and departed.

Nashira ordered, "Sit." Gulliji and Safiya shifted chairs close enough to accommodate the jelly cord between them. Nashira lighted the sconces, then closed and locked the door. He took a seat as well.

His unexpected laughter seemed to have drained some of the tautness and urgency from the Investigator, but also suffused him with a certain weariness. He rubbed a big hand across his stubbled face, and began to mutter to himself, meaningless phrases.

"Enif doesn't think so, but still.... Goza wants to rest.... Azog says kill them... But what does Nashira want...? Only Dseveh, only Dseveh...."

Gulliji and Safiya watched with incredulity. But the massed power of their stares brought the Investigator's focus back. Yet still his words seemed almost beside the point.

"Listen to me, you two. I love my city. Its gutters have channeled my blood, my veins map its canals. Born here, never traveling, I shall die here, and with no regrets. Riarnanth is the hope of the world. Here, all septs mingle freely, all peoples have access to as much opportunity as they desire and can stomach. Some sink and drown in this sea of freedom, yes, but many more rise up and flourish. If we have sought to distribute our way of life across the land, sometimes under the gun, sometimes under the oobol, it is only because we believe our precepts to be infinitely flexible and adaptable, not a stain that will obliterate, or chains that will bind, but rather a mutable template that will accommodate and enhance any other system."

Nashira paused and swept Gulliji and Safiya with an imploring look.

"Now I sense that our way of life, perhaps the very existence of Riarnanth is imperilled. That incident at the station, the presence of this man from Dardarbbji, all betoken a larger scheme. If this city goes down to dirt and ruin, then something splendid will have perished forever from the earth. So I ask both of you now to please help me preserve this unique place from any doom you may know about, or have a hand in."

Safiya responded first. "I am a native of Riarnanth, Investigator, a loyal citizen. I will tell you my name, my parents' names, the name of my employer, and you will see that I am innocent. But this one —"

"I appreciate your cooperation. But I cannot discount that even someone born in Riarnanth might play a part in undermining the city, for personal motives of one sort or another."

Gulliji intervened. "Investigator, this woman — Safiya is her name — she knows nothing. She merely chanced upon me when I was wounded, and offered first aid. Then we were attacked by those killers and forced to run away together."

"Perhaps this is the truth. But now I need to know what brings you, man of Dardarbjji, to Riarnanth during the Festival of Chuzdt."

For one moment old instincts compelled silence. But then Gullijji's new soul counseled speech.

Investigator Nashira listened intently to Gullijji's whole story, from the revelation of his identity and past, to his recruitment, to his arrival here. At its end, Nashira said, "You never made contact with the unknown parties at Number 50 Djudrum Lane?"

"No. The salp hounds saw to that."

"And you know nothing of the exact nature of the plot?"

"Nothing."

"What do you speculate it is? What would your part have been? Why you?"

"I don't — When the skies over Battidarmala lit up with neural dust, I wondered if perhaps my experience with biofidelic mechanics might have been valuable. And then this unprecedented business of being able to control salp monkeys, and talk to dhajarahs —"

"The salps and those animals they control are just annoyances, though."

Safiya chimed in. "But what if the salps could be induced to control some much grander organism?"

Nashira looked quite interested at this line of reasoning. "Such as what?"

"I don't know. Something from their native environment, beneath the sea. Something that's not normally of practical use to the salps. My grandfather was a fisherman, and could tell frightening tales of what lurked in the deep waters beyond the shelf of Bangma Bay."

Gullijji added, "If attuned properly, the neural dust might be used to establish a control linkage between human and salps. I could see how to do it..."

"That's why they wanted you then! But they must have decided they knew enough, after experimenting, to proceed on their own."

"So the display at Battidarmala was not so much a distraction as a test run for their powers of control. Lighting the trees afire was intended to make us believe in a supernatural explanation."

"Yes!"

At that moment a knock at the door interrupted.

"Investigator Nashira," said the mustachioed cop who stood outside the room, "Doctor Kannukaden reports that the implants in the killers bear serial numbers that tie them to the personal squadron of mercenaries maintained by Septon Majin Panaranja."

The messenger left, and Nashira conjectured aloud feverishly, as if sensing time running out.

"Septon Panaranja sends killers after you. Why? Because *he* is your contact here, not some cabal of Dardarbjji sleeper agents. And he believes he has no use for you, now that he has plucked the reins of the neural dust himself. Moreover, he thinks that you might be able to thwart him somehow. Can you?"

Gullijji ignored the last question for the nonce, his mind still reeling from the revelation that he had been a mere pawn for outsiders and their complicated politics, that his natal sept had not been concerned with their own honor, but with some lousy, stinking alliance.

Dardarbjji! How had she fallen in his eyes!

"Who is this Septon Panaranja? What schemes could he possibly be involved in?"

"He is the incarnate representative of Chuzdt. As such, he is in direct competition with another Septon, one Anjai Mace, who represents Yeshe. Mace won the right to sponsor the Factors' Dance tonight, and Panaranja has been stewing ever since. Yes! That's where he intends to strike. The Factors' Dance! But my Dseveh — !"

Nashira shot to his feet and shook Gullijji by the shoulders. "Can you stop whatever Panaranja intends! Tell me!"

"Why, yes, I could disrupt any etheric connection established via the neural dust, simply by spraying the sender — Panaranja — with a certain mix of anti-sense inhibitors. Bohbot University should have plenty in stock —"

"We'll get it! But now, as for you two — !"

Nashira whipped a pump atomizer from his belt and sprayed the punitive jelly bracelet binding Gulliji and Safiya. Gulliji braced for the incapacitating stings of the nematocysts, fit punishment for his part in this mess.

But instead, the bracelet dropped off to the floor.  
“As for you two, you’re coming with me!”

The police rickshaw was powered by a small onboard stomach that transmitted its energies to the muscles in the wheels (and heated the passenger bench as well!). In place of an old-fashioned human between the foreshafts, a third leading wheel allowed steering via linkage to the cab. The car’s emergency progress was announced and its way made clear by the venting of flatulence through a very loud whistle. The vehicle proceeded at least twice as fast as a man could run, even holding three riders, as this one did: Nashira, Gulliji and Safiya.

Wedge between the two Riarnanthians, Gulliji felt simultaneously protected, imprisoned and pleurably stimulated. Nashira’s muscled hardness contrasted with Safiya’s pleasing softness. He hardly knew whether he was being strong-armed or seduced. Additionally, the speedy jouncing of the rickshaw over rough patches of road caused his wounded leg to throb painfully.

Since the revelation that Septon Panaranja seemed the most likely candidate for traitor to the peace of the city, Safiya had been pensive and silent. Now she turned to Gulliji, and actually laid a hand timidly on his wrist. She had to speak loudly, above the noise of the whistle.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I was so quick to judge you. I have nothing against your people. It’s only that I love this city and my life so much, I couldn’t bear to think of it being overturned.”

“I understand.”

“And — and you did come to help me during that riot at the station.”

“Yes, because you were so kind to a stranger. It touched my heart —“

Suddenly the rickshaw’s whistle ceased to blare, and the vehicle slewed to a stop.

Nashira jumped down.

“This is all very touching. But now comes the time for action. We are here, at the Factors’ Dance.”

Gulliji stepped down, assisting Safiya, and looked about.

This was the fabled Rannadive Fairgrounds, an immense plaza in the middle of the city, now festooned with lanterns, garlands, golden paper cutouts of deities and demons and devas, and surging with chatter and music. Four canals — the Petulant, the Jaunty, the Belligerent and the Otiose; two flowing north-south, two flowing east-west — formed the boundaries of the vast square. Fairylike bridges spanned the waters at intervals. At the near entrance to each bridge, private guards checked invitations before granting admittance. And although the night was very young, the fairgrounds were already chockfull of rich, elegant, beautiful partygoers, along with the hired entertainment.

Nashira began to march toward the nearest bridge. “The chemicals you requested are en route from the university. We had to drag every pandit in the biofidelic mechanics department from their supper before we got what we needed. How long will it take you to mix the inhibitors?”

“Not long, if you remembered to bring the titration devices.”

“Good, good! Let us get inside, and see if we can find Septon Mace, to warn him of Panaranja’s imminent counter-show.”

“Do you expect Panaranja himself to appear? The etheric lines of communication theoretically stretch for miles. He could stand off safely out of our grasp.”

“Yes, he could. But I predict he will attend. If only to gloat, and to direct operations and witness the turmoil.”

Nashira’s Investigator badge got them easily past the guards, who were left with directions to forward the chemicals when they arrived.

Inside the fairgrounds, Gulliji experienced a heady sense of luxury and gaiety at odds with their mission. The rich apparel, the endless array of fancy food, the music, the flirting, the inconsequential banter — How would these elite members of Riarnanth mercantile society react if he were suddenly to scream out the truth of their danger — ?

A viewing tower lashed together from bamboo, some ten feet tall, with its lofty platform holding a table of exclusive guests, presented itself as their obvious goal. Toward it Nashira pushed through the oblivious crowds, trailing Gulliji and Safiya in his burly wake.

Safiya at one point bumped into a man who turned to remonstrate with her. But the offended one just stood there with jaw gaping when he glimpsed Safiya's face.

Gulliji recognized the owner of the garial factory, and he almost chuckled — but the gravity of their mission asserted itself.

At the base of the tower, more private guards, these resembling the mean-faced killers who had hunted Gulliji. But Nashira's credentials got the three of them up the tower staircase, albeit with an armed escort.

Seated in the middle of the banquet up high was a wrinkled old man who could be none other than Septon Mace. For his flesh, where visible, writhed with the implanted spiders that were one of Yeshe's totems.

Nashira approached the lordling boldly.

"Septon, I bring warning of a possible assault on your party tonight. Your rival, Septon Panaranja, has plans —"

Mace waved a be ringed hand negligently. "Nonsense, officer. We are rivals, yes, but friendly ones who both respect each other and obey tradition and custom. I beat Panaranja fairly in the matter of the Thousand Delicacies, and he can only honor —"

At that moment a disturbance manifested among the crowds in the corner of the fairgrounds closest to Bangma Bay. From the elevated perch, Gulliji could see the wake of something big travelling in the waters of the wide canal. And when the ripples reached the juncture of the square, their cause surfaced.

The creature was five times larger than a locomotive. Its carapace was encrusted with barnacles. It walked on six many-jointed legs that each terminated in a sharp spike as big as a pipal bole. Its tail was a plated disc big as a dancefloor. Antennae sprouted from its massive head, questing about. Serrated mandibles dripped water and a thicker slime.

Atop its neck sat a whole colony of salps, under etheric domination.

Now the screaming began in earnest, as the creature clambered out of the canal, spiking humans with its legs not maliciously, but just gratuitously, until its limbs began to resemble shishlaks!

Nashira raced for the staircase. "We must get those chemicals and find Panaranja! Down, now!"

Gulliji raced last down the stairs, after Safiya and Nashira.

Once on the ground, they became part of the madness of the crowd. Here were youngsters being abandoned by parents and trampled. Trays of food on the ground made footing slippery. A crew of mummies huddled beneath the stage whose banner declared: HRANGIT'S ACCOMPLISHED THESPIANS AND MOUNTEBANKS. A group of tunic-clad ephebes carried aloft a flailing old man clutching a vina to whatever safety prevailed.

Amazingly, Nashira abandoned his mission for one fleeting moment, to clutch one of these beautiful young men to his bosom! They exchanged brief whispers, kissed, then parted.

Gulliji found Safiya clinging to his arm. Nashira, all business again, said, "To the bridge! The chemicals must be there! They must!"

Fighting their way, the threesome experienced a seemingly impossible increase in the madness when a second identical creature reared up from a different canal! This one did not immediately begin to career about, but instead lowered itself like a kneeling mount. A man climbed onboard.

"Panaranja!"

Nashira's identification was correct. Panaranja, the mad incarnation of Chuzdt, bestrode his mount like some warrior out of the ancient epics. He cantered the sea monster over to the viewing tower, where Septon Mace cowered. Panaranja stood on a level with his rival. It seemed as if words were exchanged, although any vocalizations were certainly impossible for Gulliji to hear from his prospect down below. Mace shook his fist at his hated rival. And then Panaranja directed the giant crustacean to eat Mace.

A horrified lull in the screaming allowed the crunching of Mace's body to be heard in fine detail.

Nashira's mustachioed and sweaty comrade trotted up then, bearing a weighty leather valise.

"Sir, the chemicals you required."

"Gulliji, it is all up to you now."

With shaking hands, Gulliji began to formulate the anti-sense inhibitor solution. He found that Safiya's hand on his shoulder steadied his nerves.

Mixed, the solution went in to an atomizer. Gulliji pumped up a head of pressure in the device, and clipped it to his dhoti.

Panaranja and his langoustine steed were parked at the tower still, picking off morsels in the form of one bellowing human after another. The first creature rampaged indiscriminately elsewhere.

"What now? How to reach him?"

Nashira's face flashed through a spectrum of countenances, almost as if an assortment of discrete individuals were cycling through possession of his features. Then his eyes flamed with inspiration.

"The mountebanks! Come!"

They hastened back to the little stage. There they found the leader of the troupe haranguing his employees.

"Are you mice or men, kittens or women! Did we not face the jeers and rotten vegetables of the unwashed tribes of Khusma! This is nothing, a mere stone in the road! Buck up! I, Hrangit, promise you that we shall play to acclaim in theaters of gold!"

Nashira interrupted Hrangit. "Your acrobats! They perform the Teeter-totter Landing, do they not?"

"Of course! To perfection!"

"Set it up! Now!"

A barrel and a board formed a cantilever, precisely aimed. Four men mounted high, each upon the shoulders of the one below. Nashira positioned Gulliji atop the low end of the cantilever opposite the tower of men.

"Fly! Fly like Jaggenuth, and nail that bastard insulter of Chuzdt! I am too heavy, or I would go!"

Safiya darted in to deliver a quick kiss to Gulliji, the top man jumped —

And then Gulliji was airborne.

He closed his eyes briefly out of instinct, but then opened them to see the back of the sea monster rising up to greet him.

He landed on the broad surface, and the barnacles prevented him from slipping right off, even as they cut his hands and knees and insteps and shins. He scrambled to his feet, and whipped the atomizer off its hook.

Panaranja turned then from watching the gory feast. Implanted bugs squirmed beneath his face —

— which received the full blast of chemicals before he could even speak!

Freed from human control, the salps — and hence the sea monster — obeyed their own instincts to flee back to the water.

Gulliji held on for all his mortal existence was worth.

A titanic splash, and he knew he could let go.

He bobbed to the surface of the scummy canal. Not far away, Panaranja floated, disoriented still by the complete collapse of his plans.

Gulliji stroked toward the marble rim of the canal. A smile broke across his face, the first since his arrival in this mad city.

It was only the first day of Festival. He still had eight more days to enjoy himself.