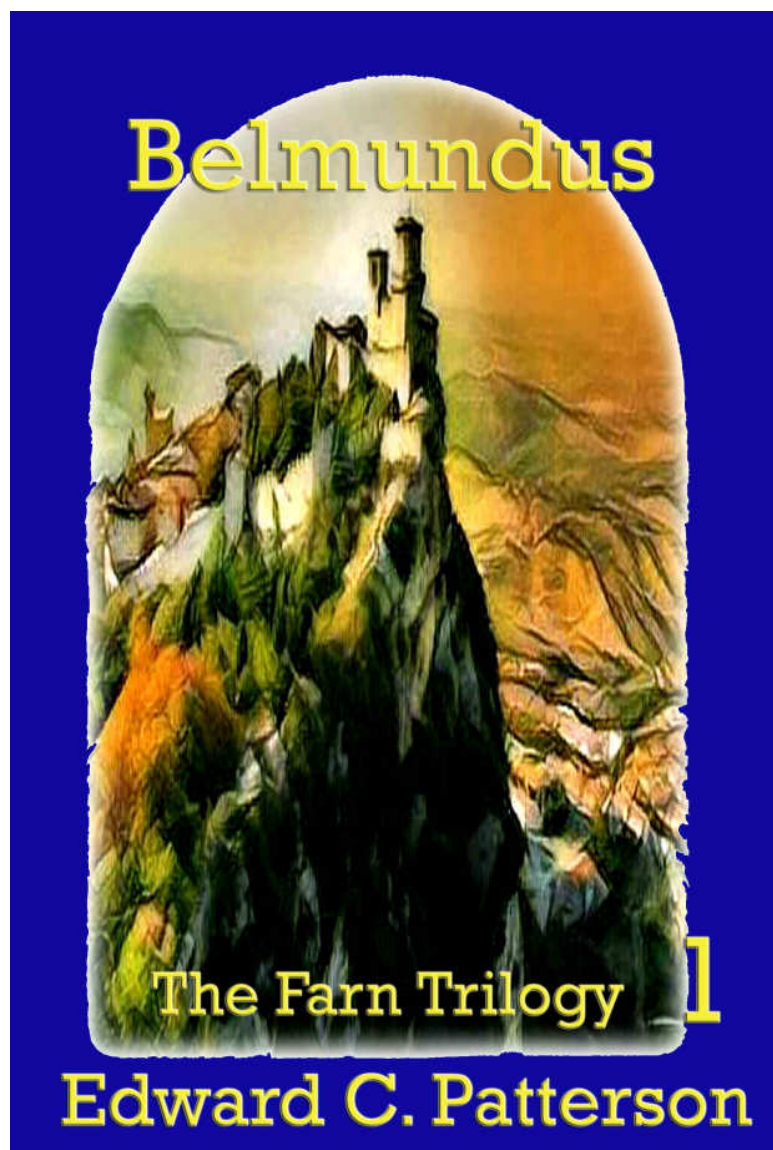




Sample Chapter

Belmundus
Book One of the Farn Trilogy
by
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Sample Chapter – Belmundus
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Table of Contents

Part I: The Audition

Chapter One: Astral Beauties
Chapter Two: Pursuit
Chapter Three: Happy Pings
Chapter Four: An Invitation
Chapter Five: Mortis House
Chapter Six: Plageris on the Bottleblue Sea
Chapter Seven: Kuriakis the Great
Chapter Eight: Yustichisqua
Chapter Nine: The Scullery Dorgan
Chapter Ten: The Cartisforium
Chapter Eleven: The Book of Farn
Chapter Twelve: Promise and Prophecy
Chapter Thirteen: The Shoe on the Other Foot
Chapter Fourteen: The Food of the Gods
Chapter Fifteen: The Scarlet Chamber

Part II: Exploring the Part

Chapter One: Following the Fold
Chapter Two: Learning Lines
Chapter Three: The Weeping Road
Chapter Four: Rehearsing Othellohito
Chapter Five: Mustering the Pod
Chapter Six: Hunting the Tippagore
Chapter Seven: Admiration, Fear and Wonder
Chapter Eight: The Play's the Thing
Chapter Nine: Danuwa and Taleenay
Chapter Ten: In the Wudayleegu
Chapter Eleven: Garan the Gucheeda
Chapter Twelve: A Game of Grusoker
Chapter Thirteen: Time to Shine — Time to Sparkle
Chapter Fourteen: Trouble at Ryyve Aniniya
Chapter Fifteen: The Judgment of Harris

Part III: Takes and Retakes

Chapter One: The Gulliwailit Bridge
Chapter Two: Wisgi and Charpgris

Chapter Three: In Enemy Country
Chapter Four: The Place Where Death Crosses
Chapter Five: Whisperers and Ferrymen
Chapter Six: Reaptide
Chapter Seven: From the Jaws of Death
Chapter Eight: The Shades of Zacker
Chapter Nine: Defiance
Chapter Ten: The Katorias
Chapter Eleven: Curfew

Part IV: Cut, and Check the Gate

Chapter One: Oh, Home on the Range
Chapter Two: Shades of Yorick
Chapter Three: The Gananadana
Chapter Four: The Pursuers
Chapter Five: Dodaloo
Chapter Six: The Asi-asa
Chapter Seven: Enitachopco's Say
Chapter Eight: Two Cheeks Upon a Single Face
Chapter Nine: Kanuwudi
Chapter Ten: Journey to Comastee
Chapter Eleven: The Treasures of the Yigoya
Chapter Twelve: Chewohe
Chapter Thirteen: The Spark

Part V: Mounting a Three Reeler

Chapter One: Much To Do
Chapter Two: Like the Rolling Tide Across a Crimson Sea
Chapter Three: The Golden Eight
Chapter Four: Walls of Phitron
Chapter Five: The Mordanka
Chapter Six: The Kanaguda
Chapter Seven: The Gonada Gigaha
Chapter Eight: The Temple
Chapter Nine: The Outlands
Chapter Ten: The Prisoner
Chapter Eleven: The Portal
Afterword
Glossary

Chapter One

Astral Beauties

1

"I'm a star," he whispered to the young man in the mirror. "A star," and then chuckled as he thought about a giant gas ball, ignorantly fixing planets in orbit for no other reason but gravity.

Harris Cartwright, born nineteen years earlier and christened Humphrey Kopfstutter, smiled dimly in the mirror. Dimly, because the hotel room shone amber with its upscale ambience — flattering light designed to be so. Still, in any light, this *star* of stage and screen was a Narcissus; although his reflection sometimes tamed him.

Harris moistened his bottom lip with his upper, and then winked. He shrugged, and then preened, coming closer to his reflection, nearly kissing the glass. Pucker he did; then laughed. His grin exposed a brilliant smile, a gap between his two front teeth — a chasm his mother meant to have corrected when he had landed his first role as a wee urchin in a Dickens remake. However, the gap and his alluring eyes kept the roles coming until . . . well, until the adolescent leaped the gulf between child actor and teen idol; done with ease and without scandal, drugs or an arrest record. Now Harris leaped the second gulf — youthful high school parts to the dashing hero. Still, he could hide his secrets safely from public view — although the public pried.

He winked again, and then turned around on the stool, which faced the dressing table. The hotel was accommodating — equipped for a range of actors from A-list to C, now that the Tribeca Film Festival had rolled in this town. The SoHo Grand, the classiest bed roll in this lower Manhattan neighborhood, had no vacancies this weekend.

Harris stood and stretched. He had slept the day away and, now as evening hugged the New York skyline, he was up for nocturnal festivities — a sneak preview of his new film *The Magic Planet* to be followed by a Q&A panel and light refreshments. Who knew what would come beyond that? These junkets were regulated to a point, but burst like fireworks when the rockets spent. Harris might take an evening romp with his co-star. The prospects loomed, so Harris stretched, chucked his underwear, and then headed for the shower.

2

The hotel room was small by luxury standards, but the Grand had arisen like morning cream. The warm rooms shimmered with golden walls and amber lighting. All that wasn't silk, was satin. When not occupied by a nineteen-year old, the king size bed wore an olive satin spread, seagreen silk sheets, a princely counterpane and stately pillows. Now the bedding was tossed asunder as if cats had fought in the sack. Clothes were strewn on the floor in a trail from dresser to bed, from bed to shower. Books and scripts kiltered in piles on the dressing table, and the telephone directory sprawled beside a tray with last night's room service caking in partnership with this morning's breakfast. No lunch — evidently.

The shower room opened directly into the boudoir, a glass panel separating it from the minibar. To Harris, the steaming water would be his wake-up call. He wasn't sure what time it was (and he didn't worry, because Tony watched those details). However, a schedule would kick in eventually. It always did on publicity junkets. Soon, a flock of studio bullies, who, as well-meaning as they pretended to be, would erase his freedom. They were the paycheck, after all, and who was he?

"I'm a star," he gurgled, spitting out a mouthful of amber water. He laughed again, the stream plastering his curly hair into black slick. He shook the cascades from his eyes and laughed again, and then ran a soapy cloth over his newfound biceps. His last flick demanded his body beef up from a teenage lanky noodle to a swashbuckling space pirate. He was unaccustomed to the added

musculature, although the chicks dug it.

At the thought of *chicks*, Harris smiled, leaning against the glass wall and letting the shower permeate every pore — every crevice. He felt giddy, his hormones having run the gamut of sexual urges and experiences lately. Still, he refused to declare a preference in public. He couldn't even admit his affinities in the shower stall, because he wasn't sure he had a preference — a weather vane at times; at other times, as sure as the partner who shared his bed. One thing was positive. He hadn't time to ponder the issue now or do more than scrub his groin in this shower-call.

"Maybe later," he mused, and then hastened to finish, turning the taps and waiting for the steam to clear.

Harris reached for a towel — a preliminary dry, beginning with face and hair, and then creating a silly turban, which didn't squat well on his noggin. He grabbed a second towel for his nether parts, marrying this more ample terry around his waist into something akin to Pharaoh's kilt.

"A star," he said again, and then slid open the glass door.

The room's chill met him and he noticed something queer. On the shower door, written in the condensation, were letters. He squinted, thinking he might have accidentally etched these sigils, but he hadn't. These *were* letters — clear and definite.

C U L8R C M J

"What the fuck?" he said, pawing the initials. "See you later — CMJ?"

He turned, looking for uninvited company.

"Tony?" he called. "Are you here?"

Harris inspected the room, walking over his debris, pushing linen with his feet and picking up his clothes as he went. Opening the closet door cautiously, he expected to encounter Anthony Bentley-Jones, his co-star and best friend. A joke, perhaps. However, the closet, devoid of actors, contained only tonight's wardrobe.

Harris threw off the turban, and then returned to the shower door, hunkering for another inspection before the initials faded. But they were still clear. He rubbed them. They remained. He pushed back, landing on his ass.

"They're inside. Whoever wrote this was in the fucking shower with me."

He crabbed back to the bed, took the room in again, and then laughed.

"You're nuts, Humphrey. Scared by a little soap scum?"

He shook his damp hair, and then sought the dryer.

3

Again the mirror loomed while Harris dried his hair. He inspected his cheeks for blemishes and his chin for the scar remnant — a nick from a sword accident on the last film. It healed nicely — nothing makeup couldn't hide, and was more pronounced two weeks ago, when he had walked the red carpet in L. A. Tony fussed over the scar so much, Harris thought Mom had tagged along. Mom wasn't the stage door kind, but she had rules — good rules, which worked well for a child actor transitioning through this Thespian world. Mom's rules guided Harris to regard acting as a job rather than a privilege. A good thing, because he loved his job. He hated these junkets and the crowd's rush. The red carpet was his least favorite thing, although he was gracious to his fans and never withheld his autograph.

He mused on his last prance on the red carpet. Unlike tonight, a public preview at a festival, two weeks ago the event was an invitation-only premiere. He was tuxedoed and spotlighted — the press in full attendance — interviewers great and small, each with frivolous questions like *did you find the*

battle scenes hard? Did you perform your own stunts? We hear talk about you and Romey (Romaine Rowan — the heroine). Any truth to it?

Drone. Drone. Drone.

Harris danced around these questions. He hugged Romaine and Tony and the director, McCann Phillips. He stood with them and posed and preened and bathed in a shower of flashbulbs and strobes behind the usual studio spoiler backdrop. It was a whirl until he saw . . . saw *her*.

She, a fan, cocked her head and grinned. *She*, dressed in black denim and a leather cap, was unlike other fans, who stretched arms forward, pens in one hand, books in the other — this girl in black denim stood patiently, smiling confidently, and then . . . winked.

“Do you see her?” Harris whispered to Tony.

“What ya talkin’ about, mate,” Tony replied. “All I see is a sea of screamin’ Mimis, and you know not one of ‘em’s me type.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Harris said. “I mean, focus your ass and look at that one over there — the one that’s casing me.”

“They’re all casing you. I mean, who wouldn’t, you damn cutie?”

“Stop it.”

But Tony wasn’t in the mood for sightseeing. The whirl distracted him. *They* were the attraction. The stars. The fans, white noise.

White noise.

Except that *one*, there. That *one* in black stillness. Then Harris, compelled to speak with her, broke ranks, despite the push to enter the theater.

“Where ya goin’, mate?”

“Nowhere,” Harris muttered, his eyes drifting to that wink in the crowd.

He went to the sidelines, suddenly accosted by hundreds of arms and pens and books and screaming women. They broke his reverie. He grasped one book, and then another, and yet another, signing and scribbling on demand. When he looked up, *she* was gone.

“Gone,” he said, now into the mirror, and then pouted.

But he had seen *her* again; last week near his mother’s house in Santa Monica. While heading to the Yatzy Club with his little sister, Harris wore his usual public disguise (thick glasses and a false nose). He encountered a gaggle of fans. Sarah, his sister, always a good shepherdess, tugged him across Santa Monica Boulevard to avoid detection. There were times for adulation, and times for anonymity. Harris liked the Yatzy Club because the DJ, although recognizing him, would never blow his cover.

Normality.

Crossing the boulevard, he spotted a lone wolf coming in the opposite direction.

“It’s *her*,” he muttered.

“*Her* who?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know,” he said, loosing himself from his sister’s arm.

The lady wore black denim — the same outfit she had at the première. She strolled with swagger, her head down, but she looked up when she passed him. She winked, her chalk-white skin amplifying her crimson lips. She had a green beauty mark on her right cheek. Harris gasped — his chest hitching. But even as he turned to follow her, she hastened to the curb.

“Wait,” he called.

She didn’t. She raised a departing hand — an alluring fist wrapped in a black fingerless glove — on her finger, a captivating jade ring. Then, as if the night had swallowed her, she disappeared. Harris reached the curb.

“Do you know her?” Sarah asked. “You look . . .”

"No," he replied. "She's . . . How *do* I look?"

"Smitten, Humph. Let me fix your nose."

They had neared the gaggle of club girls. One latex slip and Harris would be a rooster fending for his life in the henhouse. He let his sister repair his nose and straighten his thick glasses. Still, he meant to pursue the phantom lady, only . . . *where did she go?*

"She's a dream now," he said into the mirror, the hairdryer aimed at emptiness.

The lady in black denim — the evasive girl of the night, no longer remained in reality. She stalked Harris' dreams this last week. He spent the afternoon trying to escape her clutches. But she lingered — on the red carpet and at the curb, winking and waving, and then coming close to his ear, her crimson lips and chalky cheeks an arabesque to his quaking soul. These were good dreams, but fell short of *The Magic Planet*. Harris had spent so much time on bizarre sets, this shade had to be a remnant hallucination from a cut scene — a scripted snippet chastised by better reason, never to be seen in the projector's flicker.

"You're spoiling me," he muttered, shutting the dryer and nodding his head before his image.

A knock at the door interrupted this reverie.

"It's open," he shouted.

"What d'ya mean, it's open, mate?" came a voice from the hall. "'ow can it be open?"

Harris set the dryer down and let the towel fall. He let his co-star in.

"Well, don't cover your nuts for me," Tony said, bouncing in as if it were his room. "And what d'ya mean, it's open?"

"I was testing you," Harris replied. "And you didn't mind me butt naked last week."

"Well, we've no time for that sort of thing now. We're late, and King McCann'll have those balls if there's a repeat of . . ."

"Hush up," Harris said, without malice.

"Is your minibar stocked?" Tony announced, aiming directly for it. "Or should I ask? You sip only fizzy drinks and water, unless there's a bloody 'eifer up 'ere filling jugs with chocky milk."

"You know we have to pay for that shit."

"You're payin', thank ye. Me cooler's gone empty some'ow." He shrugged and grinned. "Get dressed and . . ." Tony raised his hand toward the bed. "What a toss we 'ave 'ere? Did you 'ave some birds in? I'm green with envy."

"No. Nothing like that," Harris said, pulling on his briefs and heading for the closet. "I slept, mostly."

"Looks like you wrestled the queen 'ere."

"No, you weren't anywhere around," Harris replied, chuckling. "Get your drink. I'll be ready in a shake."

Anthony Bentley-Jones, the draw of the East end and many a rear end, bowed first to the bed, and then the minibar. He was a *good egg*, as they said across the pond. He was four years older than Harris, but in the *biz* longer, having made his first cereal commercial at age two, his Mummy hell-bent on keeping herself in gin and marijuana. The Bentley-Jones franchise (which began as the Koslowsky enterprise) was not as smooth and carefree as the Cartwright-Kopfstutter dynasty. Little Antonin's Mummy drove him from stage door to audition to rock video to TV commercial to rascal roles until, by age ten (just over a decade earlier) he was a bundle of talented nerves and molested by a string of equally talented directors. He still landed plum roles, but his decadence factor overshadowed many jaded actors three times his age. However, he had his good looks and came out of the closet three years ago, with much aplomb. The rumors that he had slept with every one of his co-stars (male and female) were true, or so he told the press.

They don't call me Bentley-Jones for nothin', dearies.

Tony pulled the minibar door ajar and perused the choice of little bottles.

"I see the munchies 'ave gone missin'." He glanced at the floor. "Your aim is bleedin' off. I 'ope you made it to the loo better'an you did the dustbin." He rattled through the shot bottles, putting a few in his jacket pocket. "And what'll grace your glorious body tonight?"

"Something simple."

Harris alluded snidely to Tony's *over-the-top* outfit — very Dorsetshire — a flowery shirt beneath a blue blazer, a pink hankie mushrooming from where the yacht insignia should have been — a fedora (duck feathered – green) and, of course, an Ascot.

"Simple? Jeans and shitekickers?" Tony drawled like a Dallas native just short of Yorkshire. He turned, and then glanced over his tinted glasses at the young American. "Now that's bloody fetchin'. Turn 'bout and let your Auntie Antonia assess."

Harris had donned a green silk shirt and a white jacket with matching pants. He was stunning. He knew it, but dummied down this wardrobe choice. He was more comfortable in, as Tony had stated, *jeans and shitekickers*. He refused to do a runway twirl for *Auntie Antonia*, although he had seen the runway on many a fashion week.

"Listen," he said sternly. "I told you the judge is still out on me and the coming-out ball."

"I 'ate when a man can't make up 'is own mind," Tony said, pouting. He held a gin sample in one hand and a Post-it in the other. "You just want the best of both worlds — and I guarantee that you'll never get anything better'an me."

"Stop it." Harris squinted. "What's that?"

Tony lifted the bottle.

"Gin."

"No . . . that?"

"Oh. This was stuck inside ya minibar. Maybe a note from the mice that you ate their munchies. Stole their splif too, I bet." He looked at the Post-it, and then frowned. "Not the mice. It's from a secret admirer. It says," he adjusted his glasses. "It says — I C U *and* C U l8r, CMJ."

Harris shuddered. He rushed to Tony's side, swiping the note, and then stared hard.

"You did 'ave a bird up 'ere in this cage today," Tony said, fretfully. "You needn't 'ave lied. I mean, we're not a couple or anything like that."

"Nothing like that, and I didn't have . . . *a bird in this cage* today."

Tony shook his head knowingly.

"Ah, you said the door was open. So that's 'ow it's done. You know in some cat 'ouses an open door is a signal for . . ."

"Stop it. I had no one here. At least, no one that . . . Anyone could have stuck this in the fridge."

Tony pocketed the gin and shut the minibar door with his foot.

"Keep your little secrets. Let's just get a move on, mate. The limos'll be lining the curb and we mustn't keep a Rolls-Royce waitin'."

Harris Cartwright, star of stage and screen, sighed. He glanced about his home away from home and wondered about the journey. This was the only life he knew, and now he must move along a professional course.

"You're right," he said. "We're stars — giant balls of gas. Let's go fill the galaxy with our stink."

"Why, what's crawled up your arse, mate?"

Harris grinned. He was the master of the moment in his green shirt and white duds. He had a Q&A to give and flashbulbs to embrace. It was illusion, but he knew no other life.

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Pacific Crimson — Forget Me Not
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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

Contact author at edwpat@att.net — Feedback is always appreciated
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