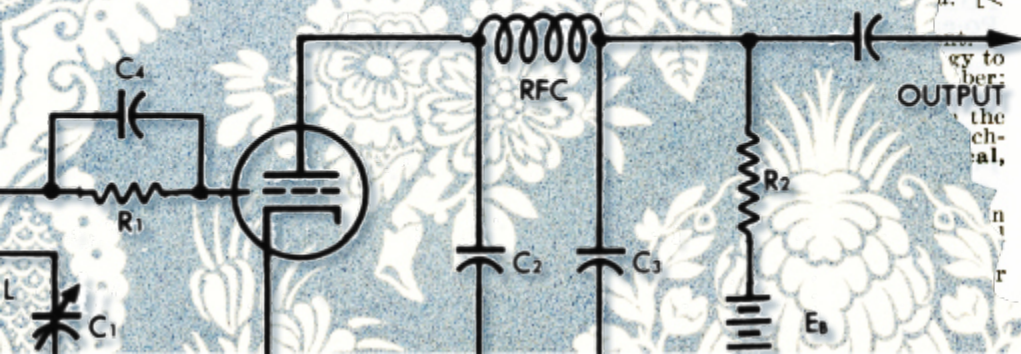


The Ineffable Adventure of Jake Calcutta and the Third Act

Episode 3 of the Adventures of Jake Calcutta



...lau...
a poet appointed for me as an official...
formerly expected to write poems in ceremonial events. 2. a poet recognized or accepted as the most eminent or representative of a country...
po-et-ry (pō'et-ri) n. 1. the art of writing literary works in metrical form; verse. 3. qualities. 4. poetic qualities however manifested in spirit or feeling. [Y. *poésie* < ML *poëticus* < Gk *poietikos* < *poietis*, fem. of *poieo* 'I make, I create' (see -y³)] —**po-et-ric** (pō'et-rik) adj. of or pertaining to poetry. The difference between poetry and prose is the difference between thought or impassioned feeling expressed in words: Elizabethan poetry. **VERSE** is any poetry that conforms to accepted metrical rules. —**po-gey** (pō'gē) n. Canadian. 1. any form of poetry. (defs. 1, 2)

"Aren't you tired of all those bloody kings?"

The tall thin man near the window laughed as he said it. The equally tall but most definitely not thin man who boomed a response was not laughing. Most definitely.

"Those kings, bloody or clean, are what the people want to see."

The man seated in the midst of the hubbub waved both hands, attempting to silence what seemed to be a close-knit but vocal group.

"In fairness, Richard, the people pay just as much for a laugh as a cry."

Richard Burbage, the greatest dramatic actor of the time, wasn't having it.

"They pay for your name, Will. Write a musical farce featuring farm animals, they'll pay their pennies because they need the theater, and because they hear your name."

William Shakespeare tutted. "I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue, sir. Slow down and listen, eh? Even the poor have expectations, Richard. And it seems in these perilous times that a good laugh is worth more than a good cry."

"Hear, hear" from the two thinner tall men.

"Lawrence, what say you?" Burbage turned to the only man at the table who hadn't spoken.

Lawrence Fletcher shook his head. "I'll speak the lines written and follow the stage direction as long as the pennies flow at

the door. Laughing or crying or angry or bored, matters not to me. Only the flow of cash into my pocketbook, good sirs."

Jake Calcutta, Temporal Journalist, kept his head down, ostensibly peering into his pint of most excellent ale, brewed by the proprietor of Deadman's Place himself. As usual, his mandate was simple: determine, once and for all, whether this Shakespeare fellow had, indeed, written the various plays and sonnets and whatnot attributed to him.

Simple, on the surface.

A few challenges had already presented themselves. Will was always surrounded by his entourage, the actors who, along with Shakespeare himself, brought the bard's (ostensibly) words to life on stage at the Globe and sometimes, it seemed, at the Rose or other stages around London.

And on those rare occasions when the man was alone, the aforementioned brewer slash publican was very protective of the man who was obviously his favorite patron, perhaps because of that man's local fame.

Jake took a gulp from his mug. Good stuff, that.

"I can hear you slurping, Calcutta."

Felicity Bruttenholm's voice sliced into his thoughts, and his left ear.

"I don't slurp. Also, I'm in a pub. This isn't one of those modern coffee shops where they're required by law to let you sit all day just to use the toilets without ever buying anything. These people expect you to eat or drink or both, or they toss you out."

Her sigh whistled in his cross-temporal device. The publican looked over sharply.

"People can hear you, harpy."

She grunted. Delicately, in a most feminine manner, but she grunted. "If they can't hear you—"

"You know that's not true. You're hearing the sound from my jawbone. But this thing is in my ear, not my brain, as you well know. Maybe just stop hollering and I can do my job without all and sundry copping to my plans."

This time her sigh was a bit more ladylike, or, at least, quiet enough not to leak out of his ear and into the surrounding space.

"Yes, thank you, Jake. I know how it works. I also know how you work, and if someone doesn't prod you, all we'll learn from this mission is that Jake Calcutta can drink a gallon of the local ale without needing to—"

"Something you need, my good man?" The proprietor was leaning close to Jake.

"No, no. Simply professing my love to this marvelous ale, and hoping I've not drunk you dry."

"Ha! Made right here, as you may know, so there's always another barrel. Here, let me refill that for you. It was the bitter, yes?"

Jake nodded. When the man had gone, he spoke again,

"I am well aware of my mission. I read the brief."

"Skimmed."

"Fine, I skimmed the brief, briefly, and it can't be that hard. Though I can see I'm not in your good books just now."

Her voice rose, just a little. "And if you were, I'd burn my library."

Jake chuckled, glad he'd gotten a flap from the normally unflappable Ms. Bruttenholm. "I don't even have to talk to the man, now I think about it. I'll just ask around, check with his actor buddies and confirm he's the writer, and quick like a bunny, back home to you and the triplets."

Felicity Bruttenholm, his mission liaison, the voice in his ear for so much of the time, said nothing. He heard the faint click as she closed her connection.

Easy. Cake. He'd start with the wonderful man bringing his fresh pint of excellent ale.

"So, the gents in the corner. Is that the fellow who writes the play at the center?"

The proprietor plunked down the mug. "Aye, that's him. And you seem like the kind of chap who'll be wasting his time, keeping him from his next comedy. The wife and I pay good brass for a laugh at the Globe, and I'll not have anyone delaying his next."

"So, you prefer his comedies, then?" Jake ignored the warning, nudging the conversation in a more useful direction.

"Indeed I do. Wife says I should take a bit of time to think between the laughs, but those angry kinds and bloody

foreigners poking each other with swords, no thanks. I'd rather laugh." And he did.

"Off they go, and good riddance to the tight-fisted lot." Though he smiled as the troop of actors, well, trooped by.

Once they'd passed, Jake spoke again. "Your permission to engage them, then?"

The man laughed again. "As you like it, man." Jake gulped the last of his pint and scooted out the door after Shakespeare's friends.

###

He slid up behind the group as if he'd left the pub at the same time. Kempe, he thought it was, acknowledge him with a nod, not speaking so as not to interrupt Burbage, who was expounding from the head of the pack about the virtue of historical plays to educate the unwashed masses.

"I quite like being unwashed." Jake thought that was probably Thomas Pope, the other main comic actor in the group.

Jake laughed, and all turned.

"Ho there, sir. Come to join our troop?"

He laughed again. "Not a bit of it, good sirs. My skills at dissemination lack any subtlety," said the man who could insert himself into any situation throughout human history and fit in without being noticed—and had.

"Ho, another smithy of words in our midst." Fletcher spoke the least of them, Jake felt, but he was, perhaps, the brightest.

"Is that what you'd call your William Shakespeare, then, a wordsmith?" Jake prodded to see if he could get their input on his quest.

"There's a good word for it. Yes, a wordsmith," said Kempe.

Jake nudged a bit farther. "And, he writes them all himself? Because I've been told—"

Burbage turned with a roar, so suddenly Kempe and Pope both bounced off him.

"Lies. Bah! Bacon? Scribbler. Marlow? Well enough in his own right."

Fletcher interrupted. "I mind the time some drunk suggested Edward de Vere had written them. Cost him a tooth, as I recall."

Burbage's laugh was a bellow. "And cost me five pounds in court. Had I realized he was some magistrate's cousin, I might have let the slight pass."

He paused to be sure he had the full attention of his audience.

"Though, in all, five pounds well spent, I'd say."

When the laughs died down, Jake spoke up.

"I'd like to keep all my teeth." He looked around the group, as had Burbage, before he continued.

"Though I could certainly use five pounds, if we can skip the courtroom business."

The laughs and back-slapping reminded Jake how much he missed the camaraderie of life. A temporal journalist didn't make friends, didn't have relationships. He came, he saw, he disappeared.

But he could already tell he was going to miss this little band of friends.

###

The next morning, Jake slipped into the pub, hoping to catch Will without his protector the publican. Sure enough, a youngish girl was behind the bar.

"A pint, sir?"

"Have you an ale as sweet as your smile, missy?"

In his ear, Felicity made a gagging sound. "If you touch her—"

Jaked tapped it to turn it off.

The girl giggled and pulled a half-pint of something dark and cream-topped.

"This might suit. Break your fast with a pint, father says."

He dropped a coin, generous overpayment, on the counter. "I will do just that, though if a big of bread and cheese were to be found . . ." He smiled his most winning smile.

She sent it right back. "Most assuredly, good sir. A wonderful cheddar, and me ma's best black bread. Will that do, sir?"

"Indeed. Might you bring it to me just there?" He pointed toward the corner where Will sat near a window. She nodded, and he headed toward the writer.

He'd stood for a few seconds, then sat quietly across the table, and still nothing. Finally, the writer finished scratching his pen across the page and looked up.

"Ho. Apologies, my good man. Had no idea I was entertaining. William. Shakespeare, that is." He put a hand out, and Jake shook it.

"James. Smith."

"Well, James Smith, yon lass is bringing a plate of bread and cheese, both of which I know to be excellent. And as luck would have it, she's brought a fair bit."

The girl giggled and set the plate down. "You forget to eat, sir, and I thought, as this gentleman would be breaking his fast with more than his half—"

Jake jumped in. "Please, there's plenty. Thank you kindly, young lady. This will do nicely for us both. Though perhaps another half of this bread in a mug?" He glanced at his companion, who nodded.

"And one for Mr. Shakespeare."

She left, and Jake continued. "Shakespeare. The writer? Is that you, in truth?"

Will flopped back against the wall behind him. "So-called, I'd say. Most days of late it seems I'm William Shakespeare the

Arbiter, trying to keep my actors from tearing our troop asunder."

Feigning ignorance, Jake prodded. "Trouble, then?"

Will sighed. "Burbage wants drama, tragedy, blood and death. Kempe and Pope want all the laughs, as comic actors would. And Lawrence simply wants me to keep writing as fast as I can so as to fill his purse, and cause I heartily espouse."

He took a long pull at the half-pint the young lady had brought. "After 'Much Ado', Burbage kept derailing my attempts at another pastoral comedy with his demands for Henry V and Julius."

He munched a bit of bread and some cheese. Jake could tell he was ruminating in his head, not just his stomach, so he sat quietly till the man spoke again.

"Of course those must be written. Great stories. And money to be made, of course."

"Of course."

"But I'll write what I please. No one, here and now or any other time or place, can tell me what to create or when to create it. Bah!" He pushed the pile of papers away and grabbed another chunk each of bread and cheese, stuffing them into his mouth.

Jake sipped his beer and thought. "One of your men mentioned a Scottish play."

Will washed his bit down. "Yes, that. I'm tired of it. Daggers here and swords there. Treachery and murder. I tell you, man, I am just about sated with all of it. Let me laugh a while. Let the people find some amusement."

He looked down at the heap of papers strewn across the table. "No. I won't do it. Burbage can hang for all I care. Life is hard enough, my own, everyone's. Comedy's the thing." He paused, and muttered again, "Comedy. That's the thing for me."

He looked up as if he'd just seen Jake for the first time.

"Here man, I have a marvelous idea. That Bernabe Rich claims to have written the story, but I know it was Bandello; I've read an excellent translation."

He smiled at Jake. "Though I suspect not everyone has."

He slurped his drink. "Yes, that's it. Mistaken identities. Mistaken sexes! Mistaken motives. And plenty of cakes and ale." He burped, loudly. "And maybe even a belch or two!"

He laughed, then stopped suddenly, serious.

"Off with you, before yon lass calls her father to run you out. I've work to do, and perhaps only a twelve-night to finish. Off, off." He made shooing motions with his hand, pushed the plate away, and grabbed his quill.

Jake stood, unsure what to do.

"You!" The shout from the bar surprised him.

"Leave that man alone. He's got laughs to make. Haven't you, sir?"

Will waved one hand without looking up. The publican made as if to come around the end of the bar, and Jake stood.

"I'm off, sir. I'll trouble him no further."

###

"Are you even trying to accomplish your mission, Calcutta?"

As soon as he'd turned his earpiece back on FB's hiss hit his ear.

"Doing my best, dear."

"Well, 'dear', was it written for two grown men, or for a father and son?"

Jake stopped dead in the street.

"Say again."

The sigh whistled through his head and out the other ear.

"You cannot possibly imagine the desperate level of tedium I endure as your handler, Jake Calcutta." She was clearly pausing to calm herself enough for moderately professional speech.

"Your mission, which you chose to accept, is to determine whether 'My Lord Chamberlain, His Galliard, an invention for two to play upon one lute', intended for one player sitting on the other's lap, was written for two grown men, or father and child."

Another ostensibly calming pause. "AS WAS WRITTEN IN THE BRIEF I SPENT WEEKS ASSEMBLING AS YOU WELL KNOW."

He tried to stop his mouth, he really did, but to no avail.

"What?"

There was a rapid clicking in his earpiece. It took a moment to realize that Felicity Bruttenholm, a professional in every respect, was pounding on her keyboard, accidentally opening and closing her connection repeatedly.

Silence.

Silence.

Click. "I will not repeat myself if you ever go on another mission without reading the brief I absolutely promise I will make sure you land in the black hole of—"

Calcutta cut her off. "No no no. Sorry, I wasn't talking to you. Someone asked me for directions and I had to, um, we, they, um, that's what I was saying 'what' to. Not you."

He cleared his throat. "Wasn't to you."

He heard breathing, hard breathing, in his earpiece.

"Well, then. Get about your business."

Click. Just the one this time.

###

What in amazing orange blazes was she talking about? Two men playing a single lute? Dowland. Chamberlain. He had a good head for names and knew the connection, but seriously, 'was it written for two adults or father and son?' seemed like the single most trivial bit of lost history in the history of history.

###

"Excuse me."

She clicked on. "Are you speaking to me, Mr. Calcutta, or some imaginary other person asking you how to tie their shoes, as if you could possibly provide a meaningful answer?"

"I am speaking to you, ma'am. I, um, well, a few minutes ago I was having breakfast, and bumped into William Shakespeare."

He waited.

"And?"

"I wondered whether he might fit into all this somehow. I don't remember it from the brief."

"This is astonishing, considering that you did not read the brief. Though if you did remember Wilbert Shakesomething, that too would be astonishing, because not only was he not in the brief, I have never heard of him."

Oh. Oh oh. No no no no. This is not good. Not good at all.

"Um, could you, please, I mean, it seemed like maybe he had some information. Could you check him out and—"

"What was the name?"

"Shakespeare. William Shakespeare."

Clickity click clack. "Let's see. He was . . . nobody. Washed up writer. Not surprising. The visual report shows that he signed

his own name six different ways. His. Own. Name. There's a professional writer, no doubt about it."

"So, not a famous playwright? I mean, he may have said—"

Clackity clack click. "Jonson. Marlow. Both of them, of course, trying to knock the great Edward de Vere from his perch as the most influential writer in the English language, to this very day. Mine, not yours."

"Edward. De Vere. Edward de Vere."

"Oh, you were listening. Well done. Any more of your work I can do for you?"

He turned off his earpiece, and returned to the pub.

Maybe he could fix this. Whether or not that happened, he wanted another pint. Now.

###

Great. The man has been a piece of furniture here in the pub since Jake arrived, and today, there's a conspicuous empty space at the corner table.

"Progress, Calcutta?"

Jake shook his head. He wondered if it made a sound in his earpiece. One can hope, he hoped.

"Still looking for a connection to speak to Dowling. He's been difficult to approach directly so I thought an introduction would help."

There was a pause. He waited, surprised. "That's good thinking, Jake. Um, well, keep me posted. Us. Keep us posted." Click.

Yeah. Sure. Report: third pint of excellent bitter as I wait for the greatest writer in the history of the English language, now basically wiped from history, to waltz himself back into the blessed pub for crying out loud.

And finally, late in the day, long after Jake had switched from beer to coffee, there he was, the man himself.

Jake switched to professional mode instantly. As Will passed behind him, a finger raised to the publican, Jake heaved a long, dramatic sigh.

Will stopped and put a hand on Jake's shoulder.

"That was heart-wrenching, my friend. You should be on the stage, though I suspect that was, not brilliant acting, but pain of heart."

Jake shook his head and turned, feeling guilty for deceiving a good man yet proud his acting had been so effective.

"Indeed. The news is both tragic and comic, bad, but ultimately resolved. Still, painful in all."

Will tapped Jake with the back of his hand. "To my quiet corner, man, and share this story. I love nothing better than a tale filled with real emotion."

Jake followed Will and sat across from him.

"So many thoughts all at once. Let me see. The news came from home by means of a traveler. My father's neighbor died some time back; a good man, flawed, but good."

Will smiled, shaking his head. "As are we all, eh?"

"Indeed. But it was thought by all and sundry that that man's brother had done him in. The cut across his throat was ugly, done by a madman, it seemed. But this madman was quiet and calm, cheerful to all down the pub or in the market."

By now Shakespeare was leaning forward, intrigued. "Go on, go on."

"My father, always the wisest man I've known, suggested a ruse whereby he might expose himself: have two young men stage an altercation in the marketplace, acting out what must have been the scene in my father's neighbor's house that night."

Will sat back sharply. "Bravo. Bravissimo. It worked. Tell me it worked."

Jake laughed. "So it did. When the man was passing by they fell to harsh words, and finally, one pushed the other to the ground and drew a wooden knife across his neck, splashing pig's blood as he did. Our foul murderer shouted 'He never saw me, I cut him from behind!'"

"Arrogant fool," Will shouted. "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

"Yes, the man's arrogance caught him out; a fool who thought himself wise indeed. It appears, my friend, that all

the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

Now Will was laughing. "Are you certain you are not a playwright back in this home village of yours, good sir? Your words are worth writing down."

Jake threw his arms wide. "They are yours, if you want them. I have plenty more."

Will was quiet, hand on chin, elbow on table.

"This acting out a scene to expose a vile crime, it interests me." He wasn't looking at Jake anymore, but toward something far away over Jake's left shoulder.

Sitting up straight and dropping his hand, he shook his head just a bit. "But what is that to us? We have joy to bring, and little time left, eh?"

So close.

Fortunately for the English language, art, and history itself, Jake Calcutta was not the unread lout a certain Mission Liaison whose surname rhymed with 'doom' may have thought him to be.

"True, true. As for my time, well, doesn't time travel at different speeds for different people. For me, it strolls, casual, for I have nothing anywhere to attend to. You, of course, have much to do and so it gallops past."

Will's eyebrows scrunched. "Again, well-said." He slapped both hands flat on the table.

"And sometimes, it stops cold. What rush am I in? Are my players all to die tomorrow? Will the Globe burn to ash this very night? No, time is what we make of it, and I'll not be rushed into action."

Drive it home, Jake.

Knowing how a man of Will's intelligence and drive would respond, Jake said "But who is it the crowds come for? The pennies roll in for Pope and Kempe, do they not? A laugh to clear the head and heart?"

"Strewth, but Burbage, the great and only Richard Burbage, is the one sells tickets and fills my pint and plate."

Nearly there.

"But this comedy, this trifle by Bandello you've mentioned?"

"It will wait. My time is mine. Your ponderings on a devilish murder and the play wherewith all is revealed: the play's the thing, if I be not a foolish fool but a wise one."

Shaking his head and looking around, Will looked like a sleeper waking. He glared at Jake as if they hadn't just been speaking like friends.

Waving at the publican he shouted "Ho there. A pint, a loaf and cheese, and some quiet, if you will sir."

The man, who had apparently been ignoring the interloper who sat, invited, at Will's table pulled a pint and rushed over.

"You. What did I tell ya? This man has much of import to my future happiness and I'll not have you slowing his pen. Off with you."

Jake rose slowly. "As you like it." He glanced at Will, who was gathering writing materials from the end of the table under the window, ignoring them both.

Jake made a small bow to Will and a nod to the proprietor and left.

###

He stepped into a filthy alley behind the pub, tapped his earpiece and said "Return", and disappeared.

###

"So?"

He was greeted by the technical team leaders, three men of such intellect that Jake always felt like a child looking up at the grownups when he was with them. Didn't stop him needling them occasionally, coming home with information they were desperate to hear, but knew wasn't within their purview (but which, somehow, they always knew before long.)

Cranshaw Featherstonehaugh, Temporal Master, a Teddy Roosevelt lookalike, Brewster Worcester, Psychohistorian, who was shortish, roundish, thinning on top, and Zechariah Cholmondeley, general factotum, tall, thin but not cadaverous, spoke in unison.

"So?"

Jake smiled. "Gentlemen. It is good to be back. "

They all looked sheepish simultaneously.

"Sorry. Apologies. Indeed. Welcome back, Jake."

He greeted each by name. Of course, he pronounced them in the olde fashion, Fanshaw, Wooster, and Chumley, just as 'Broom' was the something of how someone her last eyes. Stop. Wait. Name. Last name. Broom.

"Feeling quite well are you?"

Jake focused his eyes on whichever of the three he assumed had spoken. "Excellent. Thanks very much. Good job all around, yeah?"

They nodded like automobile-rear-window toys. "Yes, yes. Marvelous. So?"

He cleared his throat. "Why, thank you. It is good to be—"

"Did he write them or not?" Chomondeley leaned in; the only one taller than Jake, he could sometimes pretend to begin to appear menacing. Barely.

"Ah, gentlemen, am I now to be debriefed by you three rather than—"

The tall man leaned away, shaking his head. "Apologies again, Jake. We're just so very fascinated by these little questions that seem so trifling to some. We were thrilled, no, not too strong a word, thrilled, when the pee tee bee approved this little foray into history."

PtB? Ah, 'Powers that Be.' Jake chuckled.

"I understand, really I do. I only wish I could give you some kind of hint before going down the hall—"

And at this point he slowly nodded, once.

"—but we would none of us wish to circumvent—"

The rest of his sentence was drowned by the instantaneous and simultaneous outburst from the three.

"Certainly. Never. Absolutely. We would never couldn't possibly never entered our heads."

They looked at one another, at Jake, and one another again, grinning like they'd nabbed a brass ring whilst riding a circling plastic pony.

Jake turned and left, up the hallway for his mission debrief.

###

For some reason his debriefing sessions had occasionally caused him some minor puzzlement.

If 'minor puzzlement' meant absolute bewilderment bordering on mental collapse.

The mission was complete. Successfully. Smashingly so. Though he alone knew it, the greatest shaper of the English language, and possibly a shaper of modern civilization thereby, had kept his rightful place, meaning the stream of time had been also kept within its banks.

And, certainly, during missions, his communication with his liaison was, if perhaps curt, even abrupt, simple, direct, clear, even easy.

So why was it that when he thought of speaking to Felicity Bruttenholm his fringe clasped through edge hope.

And with that clear and helpful thought, he reached her door.

Pause. Prepare. Step through while knocking gently on the open door with the knuckles on his right hand.

And slip on the freshly highly polished floor, sliding into the room, grabbing the door handle with left hand causing him to spin, which caused his right arm to whip around, pointing at the wall opposite the doorway he had just launched through, legs spread slightly, looking for all the world like the lead in a musical production belting out the final note of the Big Number.

So, of course, he froze. Except his right hand. It seemed to be fiddling, fidgeting, flailing.

The angelic vision of blonde and blue and porcelain at the other end of the room smiled, leapt to her feet, and threw her arms wide.

"Me, too, Jake; me too. How wonderful!"

She turned both hands palms up, arms still outspread. "What are we celebrating? Doesn't matter. I'm sure it's wonderful."

She sat.

Jake didn't.

She smiled. The ocean washed over his legs, up his body, and into his brain, where it cleared away all the cobwebs. And the thoughts. It cleared those away as well.

"Please, have a seat. We can, if you like, dance some more later." She gestured toward the malevolent leather chair in front of her desk.

Jake's arms had, of their own volition, lowered to his sides. His legs, without being asked and without asking, moved toward the chair.

Jake did not want to sit. The chair was, in a word, defective. Nothing he did, no effort he made, allowed him to simply sit upright, feet on the floor, back against the, um, back, head erect. It sloped. He was sure it sloped. Every time he sat, he found himself slowly slipping toward the edge, somehow unable to scoot back into the chair.

The starlike twinkle of her smile and the glorious blue of her eyes seemed patient beyond words, ready to wait for as long as it—

Thump. Jake fell into the chair, sliding over the arm as he often did, landing with a clearly audible noise.

"Good. Make yourself comfortable. This shouldn't take long but no point standing on ceremony. Or a slippery floor."

There was a sound, something like those little tingly jingly things percussionists sometimes drag their hand across oh she was giggling. Giggling.

Jake closed his eyes. He wondered if the words pounding the sides of his head were a prayer. He'd think about that later.

"Will." He cleared his throat and tried for more than one syllable. "Will."

Nope.

"Will. I? Will I? I might. You could always ask."

The ocean again, washing away sound and sight and the last two brain cells clinging desperately to a thought. Their last hurrah before being washed away was a two-syllable sound. Astounding.

"Shakespeare."

Felicity made an exaggerated frown. "Oh poo. Well, we'll talk about the mission then, shall we?"

Shuffle shuffle clickity click clack. "So, according to your report, very tidy by the way, confidence is 98.3% goodness that's confidence 98.3% that William Shakespeare did indeed write the artistic works attributed to him."

She turned to Jake again. "What was that like, meeting such a man? Were you at all intimidated?"

Something came unstuck in Jake's head, heart, mouth, at least one of those, maybe all three.

"Glorious. Being in the presence of something beyond our mortal experience, beyond reason; something divine, almost unreachably beautiful, but fully human."

His mouth ran out of noises to make. No, not quite.

"Glorious."

Across the desk, Felicity Bruttenholm's eyes shone, and if his normally acute vision were to be believed, a single tear slid down the perfect curve of snow healing soft gentle wild huh. Huh.

His mouth, noting that his brain had shut down, mercifully did the same.

"Jake Calcutta, that is not only the longest speech I've ever heard you make during a debriefing, but the most beautiful. I envy you, Jake, I really do. This time. Not usually, but this time."

She magically had a tissue and was dabbing at her glistening blue eyes. She cleared her throat.

"Well, I don't suppose you have any further oral notes to add to your report? No? Well then."

He stood. Well, he slid off the chair, his knees gave way, and his backside hit his heels; then his knees, realizing they were falling down on the job, stood him upright and locked.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Calcutta. Perhaps sometime we could discuss any details you feel would be appropriate to share after the local Shakespearean theater's next presentation?"

He stared. His mouth opened a little, but sensing that all that was likely to emerge was a stream of spittle, he lurched sideways, shuffled across the now perfectly walkable floor why had it been so slick before anyway he lurched toward the door, miscalculated the distance, punched his face straight into it, then sidestepping like a crab he slunk into the hallway, turned left, and ran.