

Excerpt from Fantasy Novel - Work in Progress (1st draft)

by Iain James Robb

From Faud POV 2 or 3

.....

Faud

.....

The stillness and the silence inside the chamber had grown imperceptibly hypnotic, and the first indication that anything was imminent was a click on the outside of the double door that stood in for a starter's pistol indicating something to happen, then the noise from the square beyond the chamber blew in like a wave against which the heads of the patient waiters tilted halfwise on their axes, as if the fulcrums of its swell. It rode in on a riot of incense, waves of burnt paper and gagging sweetness, a thousand cheap perfumes wrought from embalmed flowers and petrochemicals, the olfactory noise of bleeding trees and toxic smelling substitutes for roses, raped lilies ravaged for their pestilence. Whatever of good here lay within the staves was drowned to rankness in the disharmonic choir. It climbed the walls and ransacked transept, nave, and flooded human form and roof and bas-relief with a new wash that killed the old identities. All Volunteer appeared subjected here, brow beaten by a smell whose scents were culled beyond due senselessness.

Sense was pressed beyond coherence then; there was only the flood of scent, a ramaged rainbow, beyond which questions of discernment failed. The air grew softly noisy with the swing of

Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/iain-james-robb/excerpt-from-fantasy-novel-work-in-progress-1st-draft>»*

Copyright © 2013 Iain James Robb. All rights reserved.

censers that against their bases all held tinkling bells. As the olfactory colours of their contents blent, and dashed to fragments in the noxious wall they raised replacing hush and calm, the ringing grew the louder as the catafalque (its bearing too stately in some way to call a palanquin) they heralded replaced the censer bearers, in the attention of the watchers to this haughtiness. It was an ostentation fit to mark a minor king, but anyone could see beyond the harsh flamboyance and the fanfares of its gilded tastelessness. The figure in the litter was far from a king; he was an envoy only, ruler merely of a small protectorate. What was small of course in Volanteeran terms could be regarded large in terms of what lay past the walls. One had to travel past a twenty mile radius to find any towns worth talking of, which weren't simply made from some clustered villages of individual radius equivalent here to some public streets. One had to travel further to find cities which weren't equal to minor Volanteeran towns. But this man arrived from one of the larger ones, Ecruria, equal to Faud's city in wealth, and twice again in its political power near the Emperor's throne: regardless of the nominal claims of Volunteer to something approaching reserved autonomy, though a fifth of this larger sphere's circumference. The very fact that most of the major cities in the Western realm were the shape of circlets held a hint of where they suffered any pretense of their authorities. The fact that the figure the tented litter bore resembled nothing so much as a rather large circle somehow served to emphasise the rondure of the fact.

Here was Leoline Patrus Armifold, 57th Marquis of Keensbury, 'the gelatinous', allegedly the fattest man in the realm, and unfortunately for those attendant on the too steady pace of his bearers to deposit their ambassadorial load, among the most pompous men newly attached to the Imperial Council of Athrantis, reputedly among its worst orators also, a man so affectedly grandiloquent despite his lack of anything approaching elegance in his language, that a common rumour ran around immediately outside Ecruria, regarding the fact that to keep his listeners attentive on his first few embassies to potentially dissident regions

outside his city, he had been forced to employ and even use armed guards. These were not permitted of course inside Anthrantis' imperial chambers, where he was allegedly treated with the same indulgent regard that one affords the necessity of a garden centipede, in the matter of eating more photogenic smaller animals more injurious to small crops. *A slug, though, more than a centipede*, Faud mused, *a very large one, as sweaty but less slimy: this one makes a habit apparently of saying everything he means.* The litter was covered over six feet down the centre and eight feet tall with a battleground of pastel and clashing fluorescent designs made up sometimes of what should have been complementary colours: but even the reds were too dark or pink to go with the greens, at once too dark and beacon-bright. In every shade and deepness of applied texture, yellows and purples, browns, blues and garish admixtures leapt out, paraded like a collision of festivities among ten armies of drunk and seemingly colour-blind revellers: an exhibition on as great a scale in its own way, despite the shorter space it dislocated, of the crass triumph of the scents. The bearers of the smoking perfumes that had preceded the ten figures, who lurched beneath the leaden spell of this floating island, were dressed in combinations of the complexions that marked its floral mountain out. The palanquin's poles were twelve feet long at a conservative guess, and actually more demure in their chromal scheme and design, or at least they would have been if the spectator was merely admiring their long bands of neatly separated rose and white goldleaf, linking strips of artificial ivory and hardwood encased in leaf of marble. Once drawn past the elegance of their horizontal design, the eye was greeted, at one end, by what appeared at first to be straightened serpent's tails but which then resolved themselves into triangular spearheads or the shapes of militaristic anchors. At the front ends, there was an upward deviation from the overall horizontal, in the forms of elongated male genitalia, made out of a lucent substance that was probably rose-opal, with three sets of mothlike wings extending from the middle section of each phallus: and they were ridden each one by the figures of nymphs, who

laughed with forever parted smiles to make quiet songs to priapic passions, and whose garments were flung back to reveal their breasts and felted vulvas as they danced in merry stasis, against an ever-sculpted wind.

Faud knew what the audience could expect here. If there was a method in this pomp, the very least of it was the use of garish dullness to subjugate the viewer. What was startling at first grew to monotony with each too slow footfall of the attendants gone ahead. The procession had taken roughly seven minutes from the point of opening of the double door, to that of the lead censer-bearers diverging in two lines to stand at left and right abreast each by the podium. In that duration the extended pulse of a suspended heartbeat followed the rules of its own monotony, and failed to stir to positive response that might have galvanised the viewer to something other than a sense of weakness as a fog of dread crept in. Once the mobile pavilion at the end had reached its terminal place before the north end of the chamber, an armed guard in livery of chequered rose and lime plate (all ostentation finished in the procession at least, and wearing the harmonious pastel tones that adorned the fields of the Armifold banners, though their sigil was appropriately enough a rampant chanticleer) followed the rear without apparent order in their movements and took their time to station themselves at each side in a flattened square. There were sixteen guards to either side, spaced out more sparsely at their width than at their height, and holstering ornate rifles lined with aluminium tracery. In their right hands, they hefted the shafts of ceremonial spears of banded yellow and black with pastel violet ribbands at the spearpoints, which of course stayed fully pendant in the lack of outside breeze. They trailed for half of the shafts' lengths towards the ten foot strip of redwood that extended before the podium, rendering their use of weapons, though perfectly viable, a subjective adjunct to ornament, despite the fact that any discerning viewer could see the stocks of their long rifles were primed for action, in the face of adversity towards the speaker on an even incipient attempt.

Once the litter was fixed where it would be left, however, something unexpected happened, farcical even by the standards of the exhibition prior, and diverging attention for a reasonably lengthy period of a few minutes before the guards took their place, to either confuse the expectations of the audience and thus unnerve them, or to let the full import of the gesture sink in; as the attendants so uncomfortably hunched below its mountain manoeuvred themselves beyond its weight's radius, it was clear there was no need to put it directly to the ground for easy access of its rider. Had it been suspended higher, say a few feet above the bearers, the seated might have noticed ten lozenge shaped plates extending down to either side of the red veined ebony extravagance that made the base of the litter. Concentric pale blue circles, lilacly ambient, within the pale yellow galvanised surrounds, marked these to be suspensor plates, tuned in to half their magnetic volume, just enough to make sure the carriers could impress the audience with the ponderous quality of the passenger who had brought them under by his weight - and functional enough to produce the impression of the pointless expense of energy involved in there even being bearers. Had the plates been turned up full-way, it would have made no discernible difference in terms of energy conservation, if that indeed had been the reason to their being thus pre-set. Attached to suspensor discs were internal motion controls: which the ambassador could have made use of via a small console whilst adrift among his cushions, if he'd felt it more fitting to resort to mechanics for the mere sake of hastiness. Obviously, such flamboyant contempt for the poor patience of his audience, whether stationed highborn or low, in line with the time it took for him to finally extend himself beyond its doorflap, was time enough for all to fully register the farcic compass of his haughtiness, and to prepare them more for the humiliation both implied and now to come. The conclusion of all came naturally enough (at the high point of the pantomime none dared to nervously laugh at, though there would have been temptation if anyone dared) at the flick of a switch on the very control pad the figure inside now deigned to make use of: as the palanquin swung around in a gliding

measure that registered no more than a few sombre seconds, so that the door-end now faced the gathered sharers of the show. From this stretched Leoline Armifold, 'the gelatinous', scion of a realm a fifth the size of that he presided over now by their stretched patience, and by the placement of an authority whose actual circumstances Faud guessed most here were too scared to know.

It could never have been said by anyone that Armifold could have been a handsome man, even if better care had once been taken of his figure, which itself had been distended to a monstrous extent perhaps as much to affront the viewer, with its impression of heedless luxuriance, than from lack of concern with maintaining health in his physique. Even without the massive bulk he would have been luxuriant in his ugliness, with the bulbous forehead set above the piggish, bloodshot, almost black eyes which on this face bespoke not sensual mystery but harshness, with the long but bulbous, piggishly nostrilled nose, the fleshy liver-coloured lips that stretched back in a slimy grin like curtains of rubber over tombstone teeth the colour of jaundice, crookedly leaning towards the mouth-flaps when their size was more succinct. His hair, what he'd retained since the long passed years of his premature moulting, was at once frizzled and lank, a particularly acid colour of orange, peeled back to each side of his skull in concave curves along a patch of total baldness, extending halfway at the back to the nape of his neck. It hung flat and dry, until it flared at the sides and base of the head in a vermiform shower of greasy ringlets, and where it lay parted like a whale's tail across his hunched but too broad shoulders in a mass of writhing slag. Perhaps the most noticeable thing about the farce that was his face was the display of the most outrageous sideburns it was possible the audience had ever chanced to stifle laughter at. They jutted out about half a foot from his jowls, and not only were pointed at their drooping extremities, but upwards curved into side-streams of rampant bristles that would have made a maker of upwards curving brushes despair if their creation were his intention, in not being so incompetently able to temper horsehairs into so tilting at the clouds. What everyone was actually unaware of, which was

natural, was that this anti-fashionable blunder (regarding fashion as they did from the provincial perspective of those just half-acquainted with the follies of Athrantis' political lapdogs) was partly the result of the fact that Monsieur Leoline, having grown tired at some point from having to finecomb unwanted foodstains from his whiskers, had decided it were better from the point he'd started to grow his ornaments, to refrain from letting them wilt downwards in the misguided attempt to prove less ridiculous if they were paraded to the sides. Thus clean at least, they might bespeak a certain bearing, if of what, he didn't care. It was the one concession to a sartorial crown he'd ever chanced to lean towards, and he was proud enough of that, in spite of the fact he privately understood a superior ilk than here might find in this a cause for mockery, to present his bearing against all offenders who might challenge it by either smirk or laugh.

In any case, perhaps that was intentional, as the manner of his carriage when he finally made it backwards on the floating circular chair he hovered on to the podium certainly was. It was a suspensor chair whose relative elegant economy, a streamlined creation in the alternating light green and grey checks of his house arms, lined with aluminium and upholstered in tasteful crimson velvet, was out of bounds of the plush extravagavance of all this leading up to his appearance, but by then of course all other lapse of taste would have been superfluity; he had surely made his point. There was a further one to make, however, in the manner of gluttonously devouring a half-capon in the midst of his own attendants, who stood two to each side while the cowed admininstrators of this council stood reverently by either side of these at a respectful distance near the corners of the podium, attempting neither to register the lapse in patience and disgust which even they shared, surely, with the audience, but which they resigned themselves to showing merely by sideways bowings of their heads. It took him fully seven minutes, it seemed, to grow tired of this replica sceptre, as his lips smacked and mowed and his breath escaped from both nose and mouth in the manner of a broken

locomotive. Grease ran in seminal rivulets down the unctuous triple buttress that passed on this formless countenance for a chin, and moistened his lips of varnished blubber as he snorked each morsel in.

.....

