



• • • 2013 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer • • •

• • • Assorted Representative Work from a Selection of Eligible Writers and Possible Nominees • • •

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**STUFFED
STORIES**
presents...

2013

Campbellian Pre-Reading Anthology

• • • 2013 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer • • •

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2013

Campbellian Pre-Reading Anthology



1 February 2013

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An Introduction of Sorts

Why does the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer matter so much, anyway? It's not as though we've ever had any shortage of new ones, after all. Writers are somewhat akin to coat hangers, in that you can always find one hanging around (and whatever they're wearing is likely to be rumpled, which only adds to the illusion). If you aren't a writer, the

odds are good that you at least know a writer, or you know someone who thinks of her/himself as a writer, or who is nurturing the brilliant idea for a story that s/he'll write someday.

Here's my hypothesis, which might be completely wrong, although it entertains me: John W. Campbell was a writer, but he was also an editor. He had all sorts of personal flaws, to be sure... but there was one thing that he did, perhaps more effectively than any before him ever managed. John W. Campbell

discovered new writers.

For a new writer, there's nothing quite like the rush of that first acceptance letter. I know this from experience. So does everyone within this volume, and the writers whose stories you are about to read are all new enough for that memory to be fresh in their minds. It is the first outside validation many of us received, once we'd moved beyond the immediate circle of friends and family who could be counted upon as supportive readers. And until that

first acceptance arrived, many of us secretly tormented ourselves with doubt about whether we were “real” writers, or merely pretenders.

Writers can be very creative in coming up with reasons they haven’t been published.

Having experienced both sides of the equation though, I’ve learned that there is another feeling that might be even better.

It is an unbelievably powerful rush to be the editor who pulls an unassuming submission out of the

slush pile, and realize that you have to be the one to accept the story, before you even finish it. When you've made such a discovery, as an editor, you yearn for more stories from that writer... because you can't wait to learn whether s/he was just a shooting star, or a comet set to blaze across the sky for generations to come. And you hope with all your might for the comet.

The John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer is different from the Hugo, or the Nebula, or the

Locus Award, or any other recognition that singles out the written works themselves.

It is different from the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award, or the Author Emeritus, or any award that looks back at a writer's distinguished career.

The John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer is the single recognition in our field that allows everyone to experience the editorial thrill of searching for a comet. You get to look at all the sparkles in the

sky, and gamble on the future.

— M. David Blake, 1 February
2013

* * *

The John W. Campbell Award was the first award I ever received in my life, a pleasant shock, and was gratifying enough on that basis. It was my first strong hint that writing was something I might really be able to do for a living.

But it was way more than that. It totally changed my life, because it

came just as I was courting my wife-to-be with the persistence of a hungry panther, and Jeanne later told me what put me over the top was my acceptance speech, because I made everybody laugh. She figured that would wear well.

I kept her laughing for 35 blissful years until she died in 2010. Everything in the world I care about came from our marriage, especially our daughter Terri and 3-year-old granddaughter Marisa. Can you begin to imagine how grateful I am

to all who voted me the John W. Campbell Award? For me it was a case of “sine qua nihil.”

May it be so for all Campbell winners, past, present and future!

— Spider Robinson, 1 February
2013

1974 recipient of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, in recognition of “The Guy with the Eyes”

* * *

A few months ago I had a query similar to yours from Christopher J.

Garcia who was putting together an exhibit about the John W. Campbell Award for the Worldcon (it will be in San Antonio; I won't) so this is a subject I have actually thought about recently. He asked what sort of effect winning had had on my career and I replied that I thought it had had very little.

Since then (are writers especially prone to second thoughts?) I have wondered if it might not have had a bigger impact than I realize. It probably made my name more

recognizable to editors and readers right at the beginning of my career, so might have helped "launch" me in a way. It has less significance later on, naturally, but it's never a bad thing to have awards and honors to list on a CV or post proudly on book-cover or website. Back then, in the early 1970s, the main thing was feeling very proud and pleased that enough people had read and liked my stories to think I deserved a nomination.

— Lisa Tuttle, 1 February 2013

1974 recipient of the John W.
Campbell Award for Best New Writer, in
recognition of “Stranger in the House”

* * *

Winning the Campbell Award was, for me, unquestionably, a Big Deal. This is partly because I don't tend to win a lot of awards—I say this not out of modesty, but just because it's objectively true. I'm a successful writer, but I'm not a show pony.

But winning the Campbell also did something for me that every writer needs, in some form or

another, especially early on: we need to be singled out, and made to feel special. You don't necessarily need an award to do it. It can happen in a lot of ways: getting a fellowship, getting a good review, getting a fan letter, getting a good grade in a writing class. But writing is a solitary occupation, and even when things are going well and you're getting published, it's pretty easy to get into a mindset where you convince yourself that it's all a waste, a delusion, that nobody reads your

work, or if they do it's solely for the purpose of amusing themselves at how hilariously bad it is.

At moments like that you need something or someone to come in from the real world and say, unequivocally: keep going. This isn't a delusion. It's not a waste. You're doing something here, and we're interested in it. Again: that can happen in a lot of ways. For me it was winning the Campbell.

For me the importance of the Campbell is as much personal as it is

professional. No question, it means a lot within the industry, and within fandom, but it's not like a Hugo or a Nebula, which even non-fans have heard of. The Campbell doesn't turn any heads on Main Street. But it's something you always have—it's permanent, you carry it around with you always. Once you've been Campbellized, it doesn't go away. Now, whenever that despairing, delusional mindset starts creeping in, I can always go back to that moment at WorldCon when my name was

called, and I can think to myself: yes,
I might be on to something here.
And other people think so too.

— Lev Grossman, 1 February
2013

2011 recipient of the John W.
Campbell Award for Best New Writer, in
recognition of *The Magicians*

Anatoly Belilovsky

Anatoly Belilovsky became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Gifts of the Magi” in Nature (Dec. 2011), edited by Henry Gee. Visit his website at apogrypha.blogspot.com.

Of Mat and Math

by Anatoly Belilovsky

First published in Unidentified
Funny Objects (2012), edited by Alex
Shvartsman

• • • •

Arquimedes Hidalgo Ibarra fit
the profile perfectly.

He traveled alone, having bought

his ticket only hours before the scheduled departure of his flight. He had no luggage save a battered laptop computer. His red-rimmed, wide-open eyes looked not so much at people as through them, and seemed to spin in their sockets as he muttered incoherently to himself. And, though written guidelines never mentioned such features as grounds for suspicion, he drew the guards' attention with his sallow olive skin, his disheveled mop of black curly hair, and a nose that

would have made a raven pale with envy.

The guards should not be too harshly censured for the ease and mental athleticism with which they leaped to the inevitable conclusion. Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport was on high alert at the time due to a half-deciphered intercept mentioning plans to bring down the Moscow to Barcelona flight, and in fact there were two Catalan militants in queue directly behind Arquimedes, each carrying one component of a binary

nerve gas. In the guards' defense it should be said that no screening test ever devised could reliably distinguish between a terrorist and a mathematician—and Arquimedes was, in spite of any doubts he may have harbored, most definitely the latter.

This is not to say that his career in mathematics had been, up to that point, a success. In fact, it was dismal to a degree that went past failure into the realm of the legendary fiasco. Having, after that morning's final

debacle, briefly considered self-immolation, Arquimedes had settled for going home.

The pockets of his charcoal pinstripe suit were empty except for a credit card, an electronic ticket for the three o'clock Iberia flight to Barcelona, a valid passport, and a small amount of lint. His tie sat askew on the collar of his sweat-stained white cotton shirt, his black wingtip shoes displayed a fractal pattern of road salt from drying slush, and if his socks matched, it

was only because he had never owned any that weren't black.

Arquimedes Hidalgo Ibarra's only wish was to see his mother in her tiny, book-lined apartment off La Rambla. He wanted her to make him a cup of coffee. He wanted to sit in front of her, look her in the eye, and say, "Mama, I am a complete dolboeb, and my life is a total pizdets."

There are historical precedents for what happened to Arquimedes then. On the last day of his life, as he

prepared for the duel that would end it, Evariste Galois made a breakthrough in group theory that paved the way for quantum mechanics. Likewise, Srinivasa Ramanujan's discoveries in number theory, as recorded in his "lost notebooks," came to him in mystical visions from the goddess Namagiri as he wasted away, days before he died of malnutrition, tuberculosis, and dysentery at the age of thirty-two. So too, on that day of epic failure, amid the rubble of his once stellar career,

Arquimedes saw a glimpse of nothing less profound than the Unified Theory of Everything.

It was, therefore, not apprehension that widened his eyes even further as he came face-to-face with the head screener at the boarding gate. It was not fear that made his breath catch with an audible gasp; it was not horror that made sweat pour down his face and drip onto his suit. Having stood for what seemed like an eternity on an infinite line moving infinitesimally

slow, on what was already the worst day of his life and shortly would get worse, Arquimedes Hidalgo Ibarra chose the least propitious time to have the first glimmer of a mathematical epiphany.

“Blyaaaaa...” he whispered into the screener’s face, staring through her at the mysteries of the universe as they unfolded before his mind’s eye.

The screener ground her teeth, her face darkening to the hue of an apoplectic thundercloud.

The Practical Dictionary of Russian Mat has this to say:

Blyad', n. Literally: "whore," but rarely used in a literal sense. The entire word may used as an expletive, generally following a discrete annoyance of short duration such as a stubbed toe. In situations of continuing profound astonishment (e. g. following a parachute

malfunction) it is often
elided to the long-vowel
“Blyaaaaa!”

* * *

The screener was named
Marchella, after a famous Italian
actor whose own name honored
Marcellus, the Roman general whose
war with Carthage resulted in the
death of Arquimedes’ famous
namesake, Archimedes of Syracuse,
perhaps the world’s most celebrated
collateral casualty. Arquimedes’

Semitic features that had first brought him to Marchella's attention were themselves a legacy of Carthaginian ancestors who colonized, over two thousand years ago, the Catalan homeland of Arquimedes' mother.

Marchella was an expert on mat, conversing in it fluently with trenchant passengers and recalcitrant co-workers, but rarely had she been sworn at without provocation. Her training overrode her instinctive reaction, which would have

consisted of a left jab, a right hook, and a left uppercut. The effort, however, caused her jaws to lock.

“I’ll need to see that,” she said in Russian through her teeth and reached for Arquimedes’ laptop without waiting for an answer.

“Ot’ebis’ ot moih uravnenij,” Arquimedes growled and swatted at her hand.



Like many legends that grew around Arquimedes Hidalgo

Ibarruri, the story that “Eureka!” was the first word he ever uttered is a half-truth.

Arquimedes was born in Princeton, New Jersey, in the same hospital in which Albert Einstein had breathed his last some decades previously. That, and his parents’ joint appointments to the faculty at Princeton University, may have raised the expectations they had for Arquimedes, but by the time he was three-years-old he had yet to utter his first word, and the Hidalgo y Ibarruri

family had settled down to a life of dignified disappointment.

The family celebrated his third birthday with a small, quiet dinner. A cake with three candles was offered, the candles were duly extinguished, and Arquimedes was conducted to bed and left there. The adults—and one adolescent—present continued with their dessert.

Approximately an hour later, their conversation was interrupted by Arquimedes toddling down the staircase to the living room shouting:

“Hey, Rika!”

Frederika “Rika” Stravinskaya, his Russian au pair, stared at his diminutive frame as he descended, one stair at a time, a dripping diaper in one hand and Perelman’s Elementary Calculus in the other.

“Rika, eb tvoyu mat’, u menja ne balansiruet eto ebanoe uravnenie!” Arquimedes continued in a high, penetrating voice.

Professor Diogenes Hidalgo and Professor Maria Elena Ibarruri froze in incomprehension, having, until

that day, heard not a single word from Arquimedes, in either his father's refined Castilian, his mother's genteel Catalan, or what passed for English in New Jersey. Rika's aunt, Professor Messalina Erastovna Holmogorova (Astrophysics), sprayed a surprisingly fine sparkling Freixenet Brut over her third helping of flan. Blinking tears from her eyes, she peered at a small, naked boy who had, if her ears had not deceived her, just yelled, "I can't balance the

motherfucking equation!” to her niece in flawless, if unprintable, Russian.

Rika recovered first. “Pizdets,” she whispered. “He forgot about infinitesimals!” With that, she swept Arquimedes into her arms and raced upstairs to restore his hygienic and sartorial dignity.

Professor Hidalgo broke the silence. “More... wine?”

“Yes, please,” said Professor Holmogorova, her emphasis on the words matched by the speed with

which she proffered her glass for a refill.

Upon Rika's return to the dinner table she was subjected to a cross-examination. Standing at rigid attention, she admitted to moonlighting, in Arquimedes' earshot and over a webcam connection, as a mathematics tutor to upperclass cadets at the Higher Staff Academy of the Russian Naval Forces.

To prevent further damage to Arquimedes' psyche, Hidalgo y

Ibarruri summarily discharged her the following morning.

It was too late.



Trying to catch the breath that had been beaten out of him by the guards, Arquimedes lay in the puddle of sleet into which they had thrown him, a garbage dumpster within arm's reach on one side, his cracked and dented laptop somewhat farther away on the other. The vertigo induced by his flight, far shorter than

the one for which he had bought his ticket, caused the waning moon in Moscow's winter sky to precess, reminding him of his father shaking his head as he read The Practical Dictionary of Russian Mat.

While Arquimedes' parents were married, the dictionary held pride of place on their bookshelf, within easy reach of the most frantic hand. It always fell open to the same page, the one that his parents consulted most often:

Derived from root: -eb-
(impolite reference to sexual
intercourse):

Naebat': v., to con, to play a
practical joke, to evade
capture. "Iago naebal
Othello."

Proebat': v., to miss (as one may
miss a bus), to lose foolishly
(an object of value, a game).
"King Lear proebal his
kingdom."

Sjebat'sja : v., reflexive, to run
away, to leave, to elope.

“Macduff sjebalsja before
Macbeth could make pizdets
(q. v.) of him.”

Zaebat': v., to bother, to nag.
(Unlike the English
equivalents, the Russian verb
is in the perfective aspect,
meaning that the action of
the verb is carried out to
completion, or its maximum
extent.) “Lady Macbeth
zaebala Macbeth.”

Ot'ebis'!—imperative; almost
exactly equivalent to the

English “Fuck off!” “‘Ot’ebis!’ shouted Macbeth to Lady Macbeth.”

Ebanutyi: adj, insane. “Your noble son is ebanutyi; ‘tis true, ‘tis pity, and pity ‘tis ‘tis true.”

Ebanye: adj., past imperfective participle of “-eb-”, here in plural conjugation, used the same way as the gerund “Fucking” in English. “Out, out, ebanyi spot!”

Dolboeb: n, a fool with initiative

and perseverance. “Polonius is a Dolboeb.”

Eb tvou mat’!: Literally, an impolite reference to incest. Often used to convey surprise, astonishment, admiration, adoration, profound gratitude, and other strong emotions, or uttered in a moment of epiphany. See also: Blyad’, Blyaaaa.

All of which is to say that

Arquimedes' apparent instructions to the guard Marchella on the day of his abortive flight to Barcelona were very rude indeed.



Was it only that morning that Arquimedes sustained the latest in the series of failures that punctuated his life? He had rehearsed his dissertation defense countless times in front of the mirror, translating the unprintable terms in which he thought of mathematical concepts

into the proper Russian words.

His speech went well, as had the expected questions from his thesis adviser, Professor Tomsy. But the old pizdobol Milutin, the department chair, had to go and ask in his chalk-on-glass voice, "But what about the even-numbered power terms of this series?"

To which Arquimedes replied, "I have already shown that this huynya tends to infinitesimal, five steps ago."

"I am not convinced," said Milutin. "Show me again."

The door creaked open, and everyone rose as the Dean came in. “Please,” he said and waved everyone back to their seats. “We’ll need the room shortly for a lecture. What are you doing that’s taking you so long?”

“Huyem grushi okolachivayem,” said Arquimedes.

And that was the pizdets of his graduate education.



By the time Professor Diogenes Hidalgo (PhD, Classics, Sorbonne)

and Professor Maria Elena Ibarruri (PhD, Romance Languages, Sorbonne) decided to divorce, they had amassed between them a considerable library as well as a small amount of other property. Only one item led to contention: a small, dog-eared book called *The Dictionary of Russian Mat.* Maria Elena insisted, reasonably, that since she was to keep custody of Arquimedes, she should hold on to the dictionary as well.

With great reluctance, Diogenes

agreed. He picked the book up gently, opened it at random, then turned a few more pages.

The dictionary had this to say:

Derived from “Pizd-” (impolite reference to female genitalia):

Pizdobol: n, a talkative fool

Raspizdyai: n, unreliable person

Pizdit’: v, to lie, dissimulate, brag

Spizdit’: v, to steal

Pizdets: n, The End. The total, final, irreversible, complete end. Of everything.

During Arquimedes' final year at Princeton Middle School, on a day that would become legendary in the school's annals, Mr. Obolensky asked Arquimedes to derive the formula for solving quadratic equations.

Arquimedes approached the blackboard, chalk in hand, and began writing equations.

“T h i s huynya cancels that huynya, and that huynya cancels the other huynya,” he muttered, crossing

out terms on both sides of the equation, unaware of Mr. Obolensky's barely contained giggles and the tears escaping from behind tightly closed eyelids, until finally, with a triumphant flourish, Arquimedes underlined " $B^2 \pm 4ac$ " on the blackboard, turned to the class, and declared:

"Pizdets!"

For most, that day was memorable as the day Arquimedes got suspended because he made Mr. Obolensky piss himself laughing.

Arquimedes remembered it as the day he came home to find his father, alone, halfway through his second bottle of rioja, leafing idly through the dictionary of mat.

“What’s wrong, Papa?” Arquimedes asked.

“Pizdets,” his father said. “Your mother left. She’s gone back to Barcelona.”

“But why?” Arquimedes asked, tears already blurring his eyes.

“Ohuyela,” said Professor Hidalgo and took another swig of

rioja, straight from the bottle.

* * *

The dictionary lay on the table,
open to another familiar page.

Derived from “huy” (impolite
reference to male genitalia):

Huyovyi: adj, very bad.

Huynya: n, nonsense; garbage; a
“thingamajig”; something
useless; an object whose
usefulness is not apparent;
something too complicated

to describe.

Na Huy: dismissive; equivalent to “fuck it” or “screw that.”

Ni Huya: nothing, absolutely nothing, “not a fucking thing.”

Po Huy: irrelevant, unimportant. “I don’t give a fuck.”

Ohuyel: adj, dumbfounded, driven mad.

Huyak!—(always with an exclamation mark)—descriptive of a cataclysmic event.

Expression: “Huyem grushi okolachivat” fig., to waste time, to do nothing, to procrastinate; lit: “To bring down ripe pears by striking pear trees with male genitalia”.

* * *

On the Metro map over Arquimedes’ head, Kievsky Vokzal, the Kiev Railway Terminal, stood out in bold. Nearly all the rail lines intersected underneath it. A sleeper

train departed for Kiev every evening, and there were morning flights from Kiev to Barcelona.

Please, God, don't let me proebat' that, too, Arquimedes prayed silently.



Professor Ibarruri returned to claim her son a week after she left. A month later, she and Arquimedes flew to Barcelona. Arquimedes took Perelman's Elementary Calculus. Maria Elena took Federico Garcia

Lorca's Collected Poems and The Practical Dictionary of Russian Mat.



There were many things of which Arquimedes was unaware.

He did not know that his parents' divorce came about not because of their disappointment in Arquimedes but because, on one hand, the extended Hidalgo family zaebali Professor Hidalgo with disdain for everything Catalan, and, on the other, the Ibarruris zaebali his

mother with scorn for everything Castilian.

He did not know that, years earlier, on her way to Moscow from Princeton, Rika had met and fallen in love with a Russian college student, a mathematician like her, though far less talented.

He did not know that Mr. Obolensky accepted the offer made by the recently divorced Mr. Greene, the English teacher, of the use of his nearby home to clean, dry, and press Mr. Obolensky's pants, the ensuing

gossip silenced a year later with engraved invitations to the Greene-Obolensky wedding.

He did not know that Professor Tomsky, his friend and mentor, resigned his professorship at Moscow State University to take up a position he had been offered in Barcelona. He did not know that Tomsky had bought a standby ticket on the overbooked flight from which Arquimedes had been barred; that he was able to board because of Arquimedes' ejection from the

airport; that Tomskey's awful motion sickness had in the past responded only to atropine, of which he brought a considerable supply.

And not until five in the afternoon (the fateful cinco de la tarde of Federico Garcia Lorca) did Arquimedes realize that he was on the wrong train.

"Blyaaa," he said as the sign for Peterburgsky Vokzal rolled past his window.



A las cinco de la tarde, at five in the afternoon by Lorca's reckoning, as the Moscow to Barcelona flight passed over Paris, the two Catalan separatist extremists combined their separate ingredients of a binary nerve gas into a seething, bubbling spot on the armrest between them.

As one passenger after another fell ill with nausea, cramps, and uncontrollable drooling, Professor Tomsy remembered his basic training as a conscript in the Russian Army, popped another atropine

tablet in his mouth, and raced to the crew phone. “Nerve gas on board!” he shouted to the pilots. “Put on your oxygen masks and start emergency landing! Request nerve gas antidote kits at destination!”

Tomsky was credited with saving the lives of everyone on board except the two terrorists, for whom no one grieved.



Arquimedes knew none of this as he rushed to change trains at

Peterburgskiy Vokzal. His eyes on the many confusing signs, Arquimedes collided with a young woman reading an antique copy of Perelman's Elementary Calculus.

“Dolboeb,” she growled. “Mind your ebannyi trajectory!”

Arquimedes froze, his eyes fairly popping from his head. “Rika?” he whispered.

The girl carefully closed the book over her thumb, marking her place in the text. “You know my mother?” she said.

An hour later, Arquimedes and Olga went to St. Petersburg instead, to reunite with Frederika, now Chairperson of Mathematics at the Higher Staff Academy of the Russian Naval Forces. "Arquimedes, you son of a whore, how you've grown!" Frederika cried, embracing him to her now-ample bosom.

Thus it was not his mother who refilled his coffee as he related his tale of woe, but Rika; and Olga who brought him chocolate. Of his epiphany he said nothing; his

insights were not yet expressible in words, either ones found in Perelman's Elementary Calculus, or in The Dictionary of Russian Mat.

Long after midnight he was conducted to the bedroom and left there to recuperate.

* * *

In Paris, Tomsy, installed in a suite at the Ritz, sipped complimentary Dom Perignon as the concierge brought him reams of letters from admirers. A significant

number were female; some included photographs and invitations; more than a few caused Tomsy's breath to catch.

One of the notes was a fax. On it was a date, now more than twenty years in the past, and a telephone number with the St. Petersburg area code.

Tomsy dialed the number. As the phone rang on the other end, he thought, for a brief moment, of a girl he'd met on a train, whose love of mathematics he had contracted like a

particularly benign venereal disease.

After two rings, a woman's voice answered:

“Hello?”

“Hey, Rika,” said Tomsy.



Tired as he was, Arquimedes had not yet fallen asleep when Olga entered his bedroom, her shadow crossing the shaft of moonlight that fell from the window. He heard the parquet creak softly under her feet, felt his mattress tilt under her weight.

“It’s a binary function,” she whispered.

“What?” Arquimedes whispered.

“Eb,” she whispered. “It’s a binary function.” She rolled to straddle him.

“It’s discontinuous,” he whispered, less than a minute later.

“Mmm-hmm,” she murmured. “And commutative.” She rolled to the side, pulling him on top of her.

“Transitive?” he asked, quite a bit later.

“I hope not,” she said quickly.

“Distributive?” he asked.

She almost answered, "Yes," but stopped herself in time and hid her secret smile by nuzzling his ear.

Of the many things Arquimedes did not know, this was perhaps the least important.

It came to him, as they lay intertwined, that he had never seen her body. He did not wish to wake her by turning on the light, or by running his hands over her, and tried instead to extrapolate her shape from the parts that touched him now, and tactile memories of their

lovemaking.

As a mass of snow might fall off a roof, revealing chimneys and gables and tiles, he saw, in a sudden flash of insight, the shape of the universe itself. He saw the great huyak from which all started, the great unified force, mat, that ruled the infant universe, and, diffusing through infinite dimensions, spawned its finite derivatives: zaenat', naebat', vyebat', raz'ebat', proebat', pereebat', a n d pod'ebat'. He saw the great huynya of the universe as a whole,

and the pizdets at the end of time, described in infinite-dimensional mathematics that yielded finite values for each of its four-dimensional manifolds. There was, he knew, only one person who could understand him.

“Hey, Rika!” he shouted, leaping from his bed.

It had been over twenty years since Rika last saw him naked.

“You son of a whore, how you’ve grown,” she said for the second time that night, in a rather different voice.



In Barcelona, Maria Elena Ibarruri stared at the windows on her screen. In one was the email from Arquimedes announcing his departure from Moscow, and the flight for which he had bought the ticket. In another, a news report with passport photos of the terrorists.

She recognized them both: a couple she'd met at a Catalan Cultural Association meeting. A couple who had taken her generous donation for Catalan-language

books to be distributed to schools in small Catalan towns.

Her nails pierced the soft pads of her hands. She did not notice the pain at first; and when she did, she clenched her fists even tighter.

She did not wipe her hands of blood before picking up her phone and dialing a number in New Jersey. The white digits turned crimson on the phone's buttons.

The phone rang.

"Hello?" said a male voice.

"Hello, Diogenes," said Maria

Elena Ibarruri for the first time in many years.

* * *

It was unusual for the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton to invite three scientists at once, much less three scientists all related to each other. Nature, Science, and Scientific American all dispatched journalists to interview the newest family-in-residence. Questions were asked and answered.

“We’ve time for one last

question,” Professor Ramchandran, Director of the Institute, announced.

The Science reporter raised her hand. “Why was this fundamental discovery overlooked so long?” she said. “With all the thousands of mathematicians working all these years, why did it take so long to develop the Grand Unified Theory of Everything? What were they doing all this time?”

“Oh, I think I’d like to answer that, if you don’t mind,” Professor Ramchandran said mildly. “My

colleagues and I—we huyem grushi okolachivali.”

* * *

Olga went into labor in the middle of her lecture to an advanced analytic geometry class. She went on uninterrupted, though at the end, contractions came every five minutes.

She walked, with some assistance, to the street where Arquimedes waited with a car. The ride to Princeton Hospital took scant

minutes; she was conducted to a delivery room and placed in stirrups minutes after that.

O f mat, not a single word escaped her lips.

On one side, Arquimedes held her hand; on the other, Rika. Maria Elena, Diogenes, and Tomsy waited just outside.

In Tomsy's pocket, Rika's phone rang.

"Push!" the doctor said. "Fully dilated and crowning," she added to the nurse, who glanced at the clock

and made a note on the chart.

“Push!” she repeated.

Outside, a vote had been hastily concluded, and Maria Elena elected as the bearer of news. She poked her head into the delivery room.

“Querido,” she said to Arquimedes. “You have a phone call.”

“What, now?” Arquimedes said. He winced as Olga squeezed his hand.

“It’s from Stockholm,” said Maria Elena.

“What?” said Arquimedes. “Stockholm? Oh. Oh. Ni huya sebe! Olga!” He moved to pass her the phone, thought better of it, and pressed it to his ear. “Hello?” he said. “Yes, this is Arquimedes Hidalgo Ibarruri. No, I don’t think Olga can talk to you right now. Well, if you insist.” He turned the phone toward her. “Olechka? It’s the Nobel—”

Olga bit back the obvious response and pushed.



Many years later, having attended thousands of deliveries and heard mothers swear in dozens of languages, Doctor Aureliano would remember Baby Girl Hidalgo as the first baby who cried, “Blyaaa!”



Durak

by Anatoly Belilovsky

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• • • •

“**I** dangerous, this ice,” said the
Russian.

The great frozen mass

approached slowly, the steward struggling to push the cart across the threshold of the card room.

“I agree,” said the New Yorker. He shuffled a deck of cards, rather listlessly. “Looks like it’s about to give our steward here a hernia.”

“I only wanted enough to put in my brandy,” said the Texan. “Why’d he bring the whole brick?”

“White Star line is very prideful of her service,” said the steward.

“They don’t do anything small on the Titanic,” the New Yorker said.

“Not in first class, anyway.”

The steward brought down the icepick with a practiced stroke. Shards of ice fell, glittering, on the plate. The steward dropped them into the Texan's glass.

“The danger right now,” the Englishman said, “is that a Frenchman might walk in. He would be well within his rights to shoot you for this sacrilege. Ice in Armagnac—”

“It's just brandy,” the Texan said. “You ain't French, are you, boy?”

“No, Sir,” the steward replied.

“That’s a funny accent,” said the Texan. “Where’re you from?”

“Transylvania,” said the steward. “Sir.”

“Quinsy,” said the Russian. “You could make cold your throat and die of quinsy. Is what happened to your George Washington. He die of quinsy.” The Russian paused. “In December. When is cold.”

“He died of bloodletting,” said the New Yorker.

“In America they use bloodletting?” said the Russian. “In

Russia we use leeches. Nobody die of leeches. What they use in England?"

"Transylvanians," the Englishman said.

"What?" the Russian said.

"Will there be anything else?" the steward said.

"No," the Russian said. "Transylvanians for leeches?"

"Vampires," the Englishman said.

"Ah," the Russian said. "From Mr. Stoker's book. Is funny."

"You read Dracula?" the New Yorker said.

“I read all English books,” said the Russian. “Sherlock Houses. Brave Captains. Machine of the Times.”

“H. G. Wells!” the Englishman exclaimed. “You like Wells!”

“I read Wells,” said the Russian. “I not like Wells.”

“I can’t stand Wells, either. Damned Socialist,” The Texan said.

“I rather liked War of the Worlds, myself,” said the New Yorker. “In the end, when the invaders die of influenza—”

“Could I fetch more ice?” the

steward said.

“We’ve plenty,” the Texan said. “What Wells wrote—that’s just damn fool nonsense. Can’t happen.”

“Why not?” the Englishman asked.

“First of all, down on the ranch, if you got sick cows, you keep them away from healthy cows, but your turkeys and chickens will be fine. The idea of Martians catching rinderpest when goats won’t—well, that’s just ridiculous.”

“True,” said the New Yorker.

“And secondly,” the Texan said, “ain’t nothin’ on Mars. If they was from Mars, they’d leave sometnin’ we could see. I’m sure Mr. Lowell would have seen cities, not just canals, if there was any Martians like in the book.”

“Is nothing around the Caspian, now,” said the Russian. “And we are all from there.”

“More Armagnac, perhaps?” the steward suggested.

“We have enough Armagnac,” the New Yorker said.

“What’s that about Caspian?”
The Texan asked. “That’s a sea, isn’t it?”

“I think he refers to the Pontic hypothesis of Indo-European urheimat,” said the Englishman.

“Would you mind speaking English?” the Texan said.

“Could I fetch you a new deck of cards?” the steward said. “You have not finished your game of bridge.”

“I’m sick of bridge,” said the New Yorker. “I’m bored half to death. Nothing ever happens on the

Titanic.”

“What are you complaining about?” The Texan said. “The food is perfect, the band is first rate. And the service...” He waived at the steward. “Speaks for itself.”

“The Titanic,” the steward said, “received the best of the White Star Line’s meticulously selected personnel, of which I am proud to be a member. Could I perhaps bring some cheese or sorbet?”

“See what I mean?,” the New Yorker said. “I can’t complain about

anything here. I want to go home. In New York, I can complain. Sets my teeth on edge, not complaining. Can't wait to get off this damned ship."

"Such language," the Englishman said.

"Lomonosov write about language," the Russian said. "dva is always two, tri is always three, kot is always cat, in Slavic and Germanic and Hindustani. All similar languages, all from the steppe. Nothing there now."

“Interesting,” said the Englishman. “I think I see your point.”

“Is like a Russian card game,” said the Russian. “Is called Durak.”

“Durak... Isn’t that the Russian word for ‘fool’?” The New Yorker asked. “One hears it often, walking on Lower East Side.”

The Russian nodded. “‘Durak’ is also loser in the game.”

From the corner of the room, the steward watched with great interest. “Cigars?” He called. “Could I bring

cigars?”

“If you don’t mind, no, we don’t want any cigars,” the Englishman said, “I would like to learn this... Durak.”

The Russian picked up the deck and looked around. “Have I your permission?” He asked.

The others nodded.

The Russian quickly dealt six cards each to himself and the Englishman. He flipped the thirteenth card face up; it was the jack of diamonds. The rest of the

deck he put face down next to the open card.

“This card,” he said, pointing to the jack, “tells us trump. Trumps work same as in bridge: higher card beat lower card but only of her own suit, and any trump card beat anything except higher trump. Now I attack.” He put a seven of clubs face up.

“I think I see,” said the Englishman. He covered it with the ten of clubs.

“Now,” the Russian said, “I can

only continue the attack with cards same price as already on the table: tens and sevens.” He put down a seven of hearts. “Of course, it was good idea to lead with card I had in pair...”

The Englishman put down a six of diamonds.

“Now we know what he ain’t got,” the Texan remarked. “If he had a heart above a seven, he’d’a played it.”

“Exactly,” the Russian said. “And lucky for me...” He put down the six

of hearts.

The Englishman looked up. "I haven't any hearts and I haven't any more diamonds. What now?"

"Now you pick them up. They your cards now," the Russian said. "Me, I am down to three cards, so I take three from deck." He picked up three cards. "Now I have six again, and since I won this hand, I attack again." He put down a jack of spades.

The Englishman countered with an ace of spades. "Now you can attack with a jack or an ace, correct?"

“Correct,” said the Russian. “I was, however, thinking you might have queen or king, and I would continue. As it is, I finished. This goes in discard.” He placed the two cards on the table in a new pile and picked up a card from the reserve deck. “Now you attack.”

The Englishman led with a seven of hearts. “Getting my own back, no?” the Russian said, countering with a queen of hearts.

The Englishman continued with a seven of clubs.

The Russian covered with a jack. “Now if I had that in last hand...” he said. “But I only picked it up just now.” He covered the seven with a queen of spades. “I have lower card,” he said, “but is good to limit your opponent’s options, no? Have you anything for attack?”

The Englishman shook his head. “No more sevens, no jacks, no queens.”

The Russian gathered the cards on the table. “A successful defense,” he said, putting them in the discard.

“Now I need three, but I wait for you, since you defended. You have...”

“Five,” the Englishman said. “So I take one?”

The Russian nodded. The Englishman picked up a card, followed by the Russian.

“Waldorf pudding?” The steward suggested.

“Will you please stop already with the asking?” the New Yorker said. “Now, where were we?”

“One card, makes six, and my turn to attack,” the Englishman said.

“This seems a great game, so far.”

“How is this better than bridge?”
the Texan asked.

“More like real war,” the Englishman said. “The forces used in one battle are still there for the next—but not necessarily on the same side. And I suppose the allies are not permanent, as they would be in bridge?”

“Yes, allies,” The Russian said. “I will show you Durak with many people later, you will see—you can change allies in middle of hand.”

“Napoleonic wars,” the Englishman said. “Or thirty years war. Or the wars of Alexander’s successors.”

“We have Napoleon cake,” the steward said. “It’s very good.”

“No cake,” the Texan said. “Now, what’s the object of the game?”

“It is,” the Russian said, “with the reserve pile gone, to have no cards left in your hand at the end.”

“That’s a little odd,” the New Yorker said. “In real life, how do you win by having nothing left?”

The Russian smiled. “What languages we speak, in addition to English? I speak Russian, French and Polish.”

“Some Punjabi for me,” the Englishman said. “From my Army days.”

“Spanish,” said the Texan.

“German,” said the New Yorker.

“German chocolate cake?” The steward asked.

“I’m stuffed like a pig,” the Texan said. “That steak with chopped liver... And... oh yes. What do all

these languages have in common?”

“They are Indo-European languages,” the Englishman said. “Originating most probably in the steppes north of the Caspian Sea, in your own country.”

“Have you ever been there?” the Russian said.

“Peaches in Chartreuse Jelly?” The steward asked.

The Texan shook his head, looking very much like a horse shooing away a very annoying fly. “Why does he keep butting in? Can’t

hardly keep a conversation going with all these interruptions. What was that last thing? Right! No, I have never been in your country.“

“Believe me, sir,” the Russian continued, “nothing and nobody there, now.”

“Interesting point,” the New Yorker said.

“And what does this have to do with Mr. Wells?”

“You start the game of Durak by attacking with ace or trump?” The Russian asked.

“No,” the New Yorker said. “Your opponent would then be able to use it against you later in the game. As in—

“The Sepoys had our rifles when they rebelled,” the Englishman said.

“And Washington was British-trained,” the New Yorker said. “And the Japanese went from junks to battleships in forty years after Mr. Perry’s visit.”

“We have excellent Chocolate and Vanilla Eclairs,” the steward said.

“They have excellent battleships

in Japanese Navy,” the Russian said. “I saw. At Tsushima.” He shook his head. “Pacific not good place to be in lifeboat. Lifeboat not good place to be. Ever.”

“So it’s unlikely that Martians would attack with over-advanced weaponry,” The Englishman said. “Heat rays or some such.”

“Not if they are smart,” the New Yorker said. “Now, if you take Mr. Stoker’s book...”

“Martian vampires!” the Englishman exclaimed. “The

unearthly undead!”

“I’m glad someone is making sense out of this,” the Texan said. “Would you mind explaining?”

“Let us discard, shall we say, the fanciful idea that one who is bit becomes a vampire,” the Englishman said. “Let us hold on to the long life span and the unusual dietary requirements. And let us consider the vampire’s curious immunity to the mirror and daguerreotype. We have, then, a race of invisible—or simply quite small—beings, able to

project their appearance and voice directly into our mind by mesmeric power, and levitate by some other, scientific means. They could have walked among us since before the time of Vlad Tepes. Since before Gilgamesh, for that matter. And we'd be none the wiser."

"Ice Cream?" the steward said. "French vanilla..."

"Cold make sick, like quinsy or consumption," the Russian said, rubbing his throat. "Mars like Siberian tundra: cold, empty, bad

weather. Good place to run away from. I read about Jose de Acosta, he think Indians ran away to America from Siberia. Nothing left on tundra. Nothing left on Mars.”

“I guess this means one of us could be a Martian vampire,” the Texan said. “Ain’t that right, boy?” he added, waving to the steward.

“White Star Line would never,” the steward said, “allow a person of dubious character on board one of its ships.” Slowly, almost imperceptibly, he backed away from the table.

“Easy to find out,” the New Yorker said. He produced a polished cigarette case. “Here I am,” he said, shifting to sit near the Russian, “and here you are. Two reflections. Now you, gentlemen,” he handed the case to the Texan.

“And here we are, both of us,” the Texan said, leaning toward Englishman. “Waiter! Come here, boy. Your turn.”

“In a moment, sir,” the steward said from the doorway.

“Come back here. I want to see

your mug in the mirror,” the Texan called. “Where you going, boy?”

“A most important matter, sir,” the steward said. “I must fetch more ice.” He hurried away.

“There’s still a brick of it on the table,” the New Yorker said. “What’s he gonna fetch, an iceberg?”



Karlsson
by Anatoly Belilovsky

First published in Kasma (2012),
edited by Alex Korovessis

• • • •

“Where is Charlie?” I asked.

Lynne didn't look up from her laptop. “Watching his stupid cartoons, I think,” she said.

“I’m going to work,” I said.
“Night shift.”

“Bye,” she said.

She used to say, ‘Be careful.’

* * *

“Karlsson,” I said. “Is that first or last name?”

The dome light strobed off his grinning face: red, blue, yellow. His eyes were wide open. He had a coverall on. No hat.

“Just Karlsson,” said the man.
“Karlsson who lives on the roof.”

There was a propeller hanging off the back of his coverall, and a big red button sewn on the front. The button didn't look like it belonged there. It looked like he'd sewed it on himself. The button, and the propeller, too.

"That's not what your wife says," I said. "She says your name is Arthur Quinn."

"I have no wife," said the man. "I live on the roof. Wives don't live on roofs. If they knew how wonderful roofs are, they'd live there, too."

“You don’t live here at all, any more,” I said. “On the roof, or under it. Your wife has a restraining order on you.”

The man shrugged. The propeller attached to the back of his coveralls bobbed up and down, one blade poking up above his head, two more swinging behind his elbows. “I have a friend in the house,” he said, “and he needs me. I am his bestest best friend in the world.”

“And,” I continued, “she has made allegations...”

His grin slipped momentarily, then returned. "That's Frekken Bock. You should not believe anything she says. You know what she said once?"

"What?" I asked.

"She said," the man paused and wiggled his eyebrows.

"Yes?" I said.

"She said she loved children," the man whispered. His eyes were very wide. Some light reflections ran all around the pupils.

"You'll have to come with me," I said. "To the precinct."

The man nodded. “Can we go with lights and sirens? That would be the funest thing in the world! And handcuffs—can I have handcuffs?”

He had to have handcuffs. Rules.

“Yes,” I said. “You can have handcuffs.”



“You, too?” said Sergeant Smith.

“You mean there is more than one?” I said.

Her chuckle sounded a bit forced. “These damn Karlssons are

all over the place,” she said. “Damn loonies. Family court is swamped.”

“Where did they all came from?”

I said.

“Google it,” she said. “Karl with a K, double-S, O, N. Look under ‘videos.’” She hung up.

I knew she had an old rotary phone in her office. Its steel bell kept on ringing after she slammed down the receiver. Of course, you could not hear it if she hung up on you. Watching her hang up on someone else—now, that was something.



Someone did a hell of a job dubbing into English a fifty-year-old Russian cartoon based on a Swedish children's book. Karlsson, a kindly, fat, jolly fellow, lives, as advertised, on a roof, best—only—friend to Little Boy, only protector from the evil housekeeper Frekken Bock. Flies through the window with the help of a little propeller attached to his back. Which he turns on with a red button sewn on the front of his coveralls.

Oh, and it runs on raspberry jam.

Which, by an odd coincidence, is what one of my Karlssons would look like if he tried to fly off a roof of anything higher than a chicken coop.



The next Karlsson was portly, just like the one in the cartoon. He was also black.

“I like this game,” he said. “It’s like I’m in jail, and Frekken Bock is torturing me, but I am the world’s best, bravest, strongest, moderately well-fed hero, and I will win.”

He sounded just like the voiceover artist who dubbed Karlsson's part in the cartoon.

His propeller had broken when he fell from his roof. Good thing his wife and daughter lived in a ranch house surrounded by a flower bed.

"Make him pay for the flowers," yelled a voice from the house.

"Can we go with flashy lights and sirens?" the black Karlsson said.

"Handcuffs, too?" I asked.

His eyes lit up. "Can we do that?"

"We can do that," I said.

I took Charlie to his pediatrician Wednesday. Dr Li usually had a lot of people in her office. This time they were all outside. So was Dr Li. She was on the roof. She wore a coverall with a propeller sewn on the back. And she held an open jar of raspberry jam between her knees. And a big spoon in her hand.

“Hey, Dad!” Charlie shouted. “Dr Li is a Karlsson now!”

“This is despicable,” said a woman near us, clutching a little girl.

“We need a pediatrician, not a clown!”

“I like her better this way,” said the little girl.

“Nonsense!” said the woman. “I had all these important questions...”

“You wanted her to tell me that sweets are bad for me,” said the little girl. “And cartoons.” She grinned suddenly. “Hi, Dr Karlsson-on-the-roof!” she shouted.

“Hi there, Daisy!” Dr Li shouted from the roof.

“You are the best doctor!” the girl

shouted again.

Dr Li heard her. “Bestest kind in the world!” she said, grinning around a spoonful of raspberry jam.

“Dr Karlsson?” said Charlie. “But what if I really need help?”

Dr Li shifted her weight, hung her feet off the roof. “See this doorbell?” she said.

Charlie nodded.

“If you ring it once,” she said, “it means, ‘don’t come under any circumstances.’ Got it?”

Charlie nodded again.

“If you ring it twice, it means ‘come right away’, and I’ll fly to your rescue immediately. And if you ring it three times—”

“Yes?” said Charlie.

“If you ring it three times, it means, ‘I am so happy I have the bestest best friend in the world, Karlsson who lives on the roof!’” said Dr Li.

And Charlie ran to ring the bell three times, but he had to get in line first. All the children wanted to do it.

“Ridiculous,” said Lynne. “I had some serious concerns about Charlie’s behavior that I wanted to bring up with Dr Li, and now I can’t.” She had her face in her laptop. “You know what he said to me? He said he wished one of us would turn into Karlsson.”

“Maybe that’s what he needs,” I said.

“Go ahead, be Karlsson,” she said. “You can’t be any more useless.”

“You called me here to arrest me?” I said.

Sgt Smith shook her head. “Nah. Just to serve you with a restraining order.”

“What is Lynne alleging?” I said.

“Not much,” she said. “Bad influence.”

“I guess I still have a job,” I said. “You delivering the child support demand, too, Sergeant?”

“Not my job,” she said. “Emily.”

“Emily who?” I said.

“I’m Emily,” she said. “To my friends.”

“Your bestest best friends in the world?” I said. That didn’t come out right. Not like the Karlssons said it.

Emily quarter-smiled—half her mouth turned up, both eyes hooded. “Why don’t you go Karlsson yourself?” she said. “Charlie would like that.”

“Why don’t you?” I said.

“I don’t have a roof,” she said, “that I’d want to fall off of.”

Rain started then, drops clearing

paths down the dusty outer panes of Emily's windows, its patter filling the silence like someone else's conversation. It wasn't much, as reasons went for staying silent, but by a mutual consent it made a decent excuse.

I turned to Emily's phone. "I better call Charlie," I said, reaching for the receiver.

Her hand clamped down on mine. "Don't bother," she said. Her face was close, eyes wide, but not wide like a Karlsson's eyes. She was

looking past me, at the window.
“Look,” she whispered.

I turned, and only if I raised my arm and put it over Emily’s shoulders could I turn far enough to see where she was looking, and there he was, propeller spinning and scattering the rain, eyes wide, huge grin, overall-clad, hovering just outside Emily’s window: Charlie. My Charlie. My Karlsson Charlie.

“How...” I whispered.

“Shut up,” Emily said. “Don’t say a word.”

Emily's hand that had kept me from picking up her phone now slid up mine, caressed my chest, cupped my face. "Two rings mean, 'come as quickly as you can,'" she said. "Let's open the window—"

"No," I said, and picked up her antique receiver. I slammed it down on the cradle; the bell rang loud and clear each time: Once. Twice. Three times.

'I am so happy I have the bestest best friend in the world, Karlsson who lives on the roof!'

And through the rain, like hundreds of tiny helicopters, a swarm of Karlssons rose from their roofs and spun about Charlie, dancing in the spray, darting into clouds, buzzing vehicles and buildings, while from the twilit city church bells, door bells, wind chimes and even car horns rang out—too many to count, but if you paid attention, in threes, only in threes, only ever in threes.

And Emily and I, arms around each other, feet on the floor, found

something nearly as good as flying.
Something anyone can do, anyone at
all.

Try kissing. Try laughing.
Now try doing both at once.



M. David Blake

M. David Blake became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Absinthe Fish” in Bull Spec (Apr. 2011), edited by Samuel Montgomery Blinn. Visit his website at vintageseason.com.

Absinthe Fish

by M. David Blake

First published in Bull Spec (Apr.
2011), edited by Samuel Montgomery-
Blinn

• • • •

Schrödinger had only a thought-box, with a hypothetical cat that may or may not have met

a diabolic end therein. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, the superpositioned Schrödinger also contemplated butchering dogs, squid, butterflies and rhinoceroses before settling upon the feline form. The many-worlds interpretation suggests that for every thought experiment Schrödinger carried out, another Schrödinger, separated by quantum decoherence, tested the practical implications of his work. And the relational supposition

provides for a cat able to contemplate the small meteorite which might or might not obliterate Schrödinger in his tracks, and knock the top off the box.

The fish know nothing about Schrödinger. They know nothing of cats, although even a hypothetical cat would enjoy the delicacy. They do not know water. They do not know fish.

The fish swim inside a large, copper alembic. The alembic sits in a distillery, and the distillery is in

Pontarlier.

Pontarlier is overrun with fish.

* * *

Some have fins, and some do not. Some have scales, and tails, and eyes.

It is dark in the alembic. There is no reason for the fish to have eyes. The fish have no comprehension of darkness, so those with eyes keep them rather than plucking them out.

Some of the fish blink through gelatinous, transparent lids. There is

no reason for the fish to have eyelids, either.

The fish swim in the distilled essence of white grapes, stirring an infusion of anise, fennel and wormwood.

In the dark, behind gelatinous eyelids, with fluid motion that may or may not carry through many worlds, the fish dream.

* * *

For many, dreams are seen through a fish-eye lens. For some,

the side of a single vessel equates to their window, while for others superimposed facets of cut glass and the curvature of adjacent bottles must combine to distort, twist and fragment perception.

The fish have never seen a funhouse mirror. But then, why would they need to? It would be dull, and incomplete, compared to their dreams.

Dreams educate, and inspire. Schrödinger dreamt of the ridiculous mechanics involved in measuring

atomic decay to trigger the release of a poison.

The fish dream of everything, and sooner or later they will even dream of Schrödinger's cat.

* * *

The man who sits with the alembic has large hands. They are almost flippers. His eyes roll behind fleshy lids.

The man dreams of eating fish. He salts his bread, and dips it in oil, soaking up cracked peppercorns and

rosemary.

A glass stands beside his plate, cut facets catching the soft candlelight. The facets sparkle with golden light, and a golden incision rings the glass at a carefully measured level.

Rising to the level of that careful measure, a colorless liquid rests, waiting. The surface belies a watery appearance, because it does not curve in any way the same measure of water might, under the same conditions. A single, narrow tendril

of liquid clings to the side, as evidence of the slow, measured pour that filled it.

The fleshy lids narrow upon watery eyes, as the man settles a large silver instrument over the top of the glass. He thinks of the instrument as a spoon, although it more closely resembles the slotted spatula a child might use to serve a miniature slice of imaginary pie.

Pale fingers select a single cube of white sugar, which the man inspects, as if he was a jeweler examining a

stone. He finds no imperfections worth noting.

After placing the cube on the flat surface of the spoon, he opens a thermos, the end of which he balances upon a wire stand. The thermos began this evening filled with ice, and what it contains now is still mostly ice. The thermos has a small opening, and a stopper valve.

As small not-frozen droplets saturate the cube, and then gather underneath an almost-spoon to drip into not-water, candlelight sparkles

in watery eyes that continue to watch from behind fleshy lids.

The milky swirls that form beneath the surface are not *fée*. They are *poissons passionnés*, and they are beautiful.



All through Pontarlier, the ritual continues. Some receptacles are cut glass, and others are crystal. Some are ornate, and others plain. One is a graduated cylinder, held by a chemist, and one a repurposed

cutting vase, gripped tightly in an old woman's hand.

In many of these receptacles, the not-water is a brilliant verte. In a good number, peridot tends toward olive. In each case, the green comes from the chlorophylle in a secondary grouping of herbs, macerated and steeped after the initial distillation.

The fish know nothing of this. Their eyes, as they awaken in each glass, either see verte (the elderly gardener-woman) or not-verte (the flipper-handed alembic sitter), and

any unfiltered hue that breaches the milky swirl.

The fish dream.

The fish also have teeth.

* * *

In a small apartment near the center of the city, a couple make love on a metal frame bed. They are not old, nor are they young.

In the next room, a black-and-white television plays the soft theme from an old sitcom about an American astronaut who finds a

smoke-filled bottle. The smoke resembles the same milky swirls that recently filled two glasses, on the small table that lives in their kitchenette. It is slightly ironic to call the sitcom “old,” because the couple were children when it first aired, and they do not apply the same concept to themselves.

The couple are experienced. They have been bitten by the fish many times, and frequently seen the parade of pink elephants with melancholy faces, and once even a

dog that they both believed could almost talk, until they settled on ventriloquism as an explanation.

They do not see the fish. They do not even see the small cat that pads into their apartment, trailing damp paw-prints upon the linoleum.

The cat sees the fish, because they are everywhere.

* * *

Beyond the distillery, thousands of candlelight dinners and assignations progress. In each glass

that is filled, blanche or verte, milky swirls of fish open unplucked eyes, and add new sights to their dreaming. They remember into the alembic.

Within every diner or assignee swim fish. They bite and feed, and numb the lining of each stomach, and worm their way through snaking fibers toward an infinity of synapses. Each synaptic gap may or may not lead into many worlds.

The fish do not notice any gap. They swim across.

Inside a large, copper alembic in the distillery, the oldest dreaming fish ponder implications, while the youngest splash and play.

* * *

Across the gap, fish circle and spin, as whirls beget whorls and many paths diverge. Some swim through and some beyond, and some cease altogether. Some are struck with awe, because the remembrance of dreams never took hold. Others are struck with familiarity, and

comforted.

Nebulous potential is amorphous by design. Even filled with fish, a milky swirl is undefined. Que sera, sido.

The fish don't analyze whether they are superpositioned or decoherent, and frankly, they don't give a damn about quantum physics.

* * *

Outside the alembic, a man who has finished his dinner sits and reads a story about God and irony, in

translation. Although the man enjoys both the story and the writer, the punchline eludes him. He does not understand irony any more than he understands what a clothes press has to do with the concept.

He contemplates pouring another careful measure of not-water, and wonders whether it would be ironic to do so.



Within a milky swirl, ensconced
i n blanche, uncounted nebulous

droplets spin and interweave. At the edge of each, and groping toward the next, is a gap filled with synaptic potential. Gaps beget fish, and fish beget gaps.

Within a fish who sits by the alembic, reading a story in translation and pondering irony, swim other fish who whisper dreams. The dreams beget awareness, and awareness begets dreaming.

Flippers turn pages, and pour absinthe, and select cubes of sugar.

Scales and tails flash within the milky swirl. Flashes coalesce, flaring and dying with regularity. Flippers contemplate God, and irony contemplates itself.



Schrödinger's cat fishes within the alembic, much to his delight. The alembic is more pleasant than the box, if not as quiet. He brings just enough light to see. And why not? He is only hypothetical, and so is the light. It follows him in, by the tail,

and illuminates the inside of the copper. Not-water reaches almost to the top, so that the cat must stand upon the surface.

He does not sink, because it is filled with fins and scales and tails and eyes.

Schrödinger's cat frequently brings wet paws, and tiny, cold droplets of water make their way into the absinthe. Absinthe also frequently makes its way into the cat, which undoubtedly contributes to the feline's pixelated state.

As the cat observes, one milky swirl expands within the backdrop, much as any other... but this one swirl is filled with stars, and for a single, all-encompassing moment, God is a dancing fish.



When the Pupil Is Ready by M. David Blake

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Garcia



Old Kohra'la'chee stirred her small pot with a long, ragged fingernail, bound together with spattered threads, themselves spun from hair that formerly graced the head of the late Sura'la'chee. The fingernail had attained too great a length for the task without such reinforcement, and even now it curved upon itself in a long, ungainly arc. When she pulled the digit from the brew, thick, oily droplets adhered to the thread

and glistened in the candlelight.

“Ah, old woman,” muttered the Kohra, in ritual observance of the pattern laid down by her predecessors, and their predecessors, and surely all those who came after their most remote ancestors removed themselves from the dank hinterland swamps of the eldritch abandonland, “we are not long for this world. As all of our steps carry us closer to death, all of our deaths show the slow flicker and tapestry of life upon which we weave for future

generations. As you taught me, and the Vudra taught you, and the Qatli taught her, and someone must have taught her, and skip a few generations where the candle burned too close to the edge of our history book and singed the pages, and the Norgi taught someone whose name I can't read, and the twin Orupi taught her, when they first wrote down how the Bnihe taught them; as all of these, so shall I teach my own—”

The Kohra stopped. She had come to the place wherein ritual

required a new name, but she could not recall what the name should be. Hastily, she flipped between pages and studied each as carefully as her cataracts would permit, but there was no evidence that a quill had ever scratched further genealogy upon any line. The last sheet contained no letters but those with which she was intimately familiar, and no hint of the next syllable she should utter.

“Well, that’s odd,” grumbled the Kohra, “and inconsiderate. She was supposed to be here for the ritual,

and if she had been, she would undoubtedly have told me her name rather than putting an old woman through such an inconvenience.”

The Kohra dipped her ungainly fingernail back into the pot, then idly licked the heavy droplets that clung to the threads.

“Are you here?” she called.

This was followed a few moments later by “Where are you,” and a few minutes later by “Where did you go?” As the minutes stretched into an uncomfortable

silence, the Kohra punctuated it with periodic variations designed to draw out the girl who would, and must, in turn be her own successor, until at the point of exasperation she asked, “Were you ever even here?”

There was no answer.

“Insolent child!” exclaimed the Kohra. “She has been shirking her attendance, when she should have tread upon the edge of my shadow so that she could learn the structure of our ways. How many days has she been absent, I wonder? She surely

must have known the time was approaching for her own education to begin. The Sura could not be expected to instruct me forever, nor can I remain a student now that the ritual is underway.”

The Kohra spat contemptuously upon the floor of her hovel, and immediately chastised herself for haste. In assuming the perfunctory disdain of a teacher, she had inconvenienced herself; the thick sputum would not quickly dry, and the Kohra had spat in an awkwardly

centralized location. The floor-rag was a student's utensil, and no teacher could be expected to attend such mundanities.

With a pang of self conscious guilt, the Kohra scuffed crumbs and dust upon the spot with the sole of her bare foot. Doing so was an old student's trick for postponing the task, because although a thin coating of detritus would not prevent any repetitive tread from rupturing the sticky mass, it would at the very least afford protection from an accidental

football, for both pupil and instructor.

“You should come out now, child,” croaked the Kohra. “You won’t be my student until after the ceremony is completed, and I shan’t be your teacher until the same.”

The Kohra racked her recollection, to locate a memory of her own first day as the Sura’s pupil. Had she hidden? She thought that she might have, if only for a last moment of in-between.

Very well then, the girl was

reveling in a final moment of undisciplined indulgence. The brew would not be unduly affected by a slightly longer delay.

The Kohra hesitated momentarily, under the weight of affection for the Sura.



After that first hesitant day as teacher, the Sura had begun to impart piquant knowledge, and to fill a young Kohra'la'chee with longing. Although there had been no

shortage of diversity, from the first morsel she received the Kohra desired wider experience and greater intensity. She had been an eager student, both devoted and addicted to her education.

“Teach me about happiness, Sura,” she had said.

“Hmm,” said the Sura, “I haven’t tasted happiness in a while. Who among the village children is the happiest, do you suppose?”

“It must be Amira, daughter of Una’lo the breadmaker. Her house is

always filled with laughter, and smiles, and warm things to eat.”

“Well then,” answered the Sura, “bring Amira here, and perhaps she can teach us both about happiness.”

So young Kohra had done so, and Sura had taken happiness from the breadmaker’s daughter, and then together they had tasted laughter and smiles, and warmth.

Or, as she grew bolder in her experimentation, “Where does creativity come from, Sura?”

And the Sura had answered her,

truthfully, “It comes from within,” as together they examined the heart of the dreamer who lived down the lane, and the supple tongue of a traveling poet who once sang for his keep at the inn.

Every passion, every talent and every compulsion had been skillfully dissected and savored, so that it might be more fully understood.

As the young Kohra learned, and under the Sura’s tutelage added to her understanding, her playmates grew wary and distant.

After a while, they all but disappeared.



Kohra sat in a rough corner of her hovel, and swayed from side to side. She was tired, hoarse and hungry. The search had been fruitless.

“You aren’t coming after all,” she croaked, through parched lips, “and there was so much you could have learned.”

The Sura had taught until she

could find no more knowledge to impart. She had been thorough.

With a groan, the Kohra rose to her haunches, and then to her feet. She drew a deep sigh, lamenting the waste. Sura'la'chee's final lesson had been for naught.

In tired frustration, Old Kohra'la'chee stirred her small pot. The long, ragged fingernail, still bound together with spattered threads spun from hair, continued to gather oily droplets, and, as was her habit, she continued to lick them

away.

The brew continued to simmer. One of the Sura's eyeballs floated briefly to the top, and gazed blankly about the hovel before Brownian motion once again carried it beneath the surface.

The Kohra consoled herself with the knowledge that Sura'la'chee's last bit of instruction would stave off hunger. She could always search for a new pupil in the morning, and after all, the ratty old history book was undoubtedly due for a revision.

There were far too many soup stains upon the pages.



Don't Eat the Piano Player

by M. David Blake

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• • • •

When the dead cyborg
walked in, a few stray
eyes followed him. He

dallied for a moment by the battered old piano sitting in the corner, and I assumed it was to get his bearings, because then he sauntered along the bookshelves lining our back wall, scanning relics until he noticed the fireplace and went to explore the bent stone mantelpiece. He finally returned by way of a swayback and an uneasy chair to approach the bar.

As the old guy's chrome-plated forearm smacked the brass rail that runs the length of our central isthmus, even some of the regulars

had to force themselves not to look. Must have taken him by surprise too, because the way he stared at it told me he wasn't accustomed to the hardware yet.

One occipital camera did a fast zoom-out-rezoom, as if the analysis deep within his gigapi-visual cortex had already been slowed a bit by alcohol. He held the arm up, splayed his fingers, and wiggled them about for a few seconds.

Then the old guy brought the arm back down to the bar, and

carefully rested his hand upon the rail. He began to drum his fingers with an almost musical cadence, but quickly stopped after the first round of metallic, staccato pings shot through our suddenly-quiet room. I watched the sparse grey hairs above the prosthesis stand up straight on his mottled arm, as a self-conscious case of the goosebumps rippled across a thin strip of remaining flesh.

Since then I've heard plenty of stories from establishments on old Earth where stuff like that happened

all the time, and all sorts of odd characters managed to naturally gravitate toward those places. Our cyborg wouldn't have raised an eyebrow in a few of them.

But on that particular evening? Well, I was kind of at a loss. See, my apron was still freshly starched and I probably couldn't have assembled a simple Stolchovski M'nuvai without verifying all the ingredients against the mixologist's guide... and I'd still have been in danger of confusing a shot of formic acid with carbolic, and

poisoning half the clientele.

Even the other two cyborgs in the joint, Claire and Machiavelli, seemed a little perplexed by our newcomer. For someone like Claire, whose face is mostly the jagged rainbow edges of a lab-grown bismuth crystal reconstruction, seeming perplexed was an accomplishment.

Ol' Ed Lisher just evaluated the cyborg for a long, silent moment, then felt below the counter and pulled out a silvery bottle. He

casually flipped it from the neck, caught it at the base, and poured a long shot into a thick-walled tumbler, then slid them both across the bar to the old guy.

Compared to Ed's calm, my own lack of etiquette can only be blamed on inexperience and youth. I clutched my towel a little tighter, looked the guy straight in the optic sensor and asked, "What the heck happened to you?"

The grey-haired cyborg looked at me sort of funny for a moment, and

turned to look at the fireplace, then back to Ed. He cocked his head to one side, and I could hear gears whirring as his vertebral stabilizers shifted to accommodate the new position.

Ever see someone ask an unspoken question? It was that sort of response. Ed gave a single, short nod, and a palpable hush fell over the already silent room. You would have thought our patrons had been waiting a few million years for anyone to acknowledge that age-old

ritual.

* * *

The cyborg left the bottle sitting on the bar, and picked up the glass with his right hand. I'd been so fascinated with the mechanical left that I hadn't originally noticed the other side, but his right was still mostly flesh. Heavily bruised flesh, at that. In fact, most of his visible skin was bruised, even around those chrome appendages. Stitches were scattered hither and yon across his

biceps, down his neck, and probably all sorts of other scary places.

He stepped toward the center of the room, and positioned himself about ten paces from the empty fireplace. He lifted the glass to his lips—well, to one lip and one burnished metallic spongiform retainer—and downed the liquid in a three-count sip. Then he tossed the glass into the air, caught the rim with two fingers of his cybernetic side, and flipped the tumbler so that it came to rest, steady, on the back of his left wrist.

We were all hypnotized as he raised that wrist to eye level.

“To meat,” he intoned, and yanked his hand away. Before the tumbler could fall he snapped his wrist around and grasped it tight, then straight-armed the thing so suddenly that it took me a moment to realize he’d let go. The glass must have smashed into the fireplace at a good sixty or seventy meters per second, faster than any pitch I’d ever seen, and not a single shard flew out again. Nothing was left but dust.

Nobody seemed to know how to respond to incomprehensible toasts and vandalism. I held on to the rag I'd been using to polish the bar, and watched the room, but the only motion I could see was three or four of the closest patrons looking at each other, as if they were trying to figure out the appropriate response.

Beside me, Ed picked up the silvery bottle and poured another long shot. He lifted it to an appropriate height, said, "To meat!" and downed it. Then he flung his

own glass to the fireplace.

A chorus of voices echoed the response, and a volley of enthusiastic pitches followed the bartender's. None of them were thrown with the same precision as those first two, and amid all the explosive shrapnel it took a few minutes for the room to settle down again, but nothing flew out of the hearth.

* * *

“My name,” said the cyborg, “is Lurramine Yanowitz. I’m—that is, I

was—a survey captain.”

“Hi Lurramine,” responded the room.

“Can we call you Larry?” asked Machiavelli.

“Sure,” said Larry. “and please do. My crew all did, until about a month ago. Sickening levels of formality set in after I got like this. The accessories, I mean.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “I was a survey captain, and I had a good berth with the Harmon Corporation, and we’d made planetfall three times

already in a two and a half year stretch. Vore Sepras was going to be our fourth, and the orbital readings looked promising enough that I figured I might be able to retire on the bounty once we got back to Earth and my three years were up.

“So we settled into a high elliptical. Bjorn Abramson and Scuffy Iriadnes rode the lander down with me, and we rednecked ourselves onto a high crag of a point as a landing site.

“We only picked the crag for the

view. Our ship's drones would have done the actual survey work, and the only reason we went down at all is that's what a survey captain does when he isn't being a bureaucrat, stamping forms aboard the ship. You break a few bottles of wine out of deep storage, grab a couple of the higher ranks so they can set ceremonial feet on the surface, and then you let the lander auto-extend a picnic platform with a capsule atmosphere from whatever vantage point seems the most attractive. You

drink, you play cards, and you tell dirty jokes until you run out of wine or get bored.

“All of that is safe enough, and landing on the crag should have been too, because Vore Sepras has such low gravity. In fact, we were surprised to find any sort of atmosphere there at all, because although it's a dense planet, it's incredibly small. If you suddenly dropped it into the old Sol system, astronomers would probably argue about whether they could even call it

a dwarf, and that's only if they noticed it was there in the first place. Odds are they wouldn't, because it's already pretty crowded back home.

“Our ship only got scheduled for a visit because the Sepras system was supposed to be almost empty, but the long-range scope operators spotted some weird fluctuations. Once they got a spectral reading, we figured out it was a bonanza.

“So we weren't there looking for real estate. Strictly scouting for resources, and admiring the view.

“Would you believe that hunk of rock grows plants almost like crystals? It’s a beautiful ecology, unlike anything humans have ever encountered. Even the bacteria on that planet are built around heavy minerals.

“From the peak we’d selected, everything below us appeared to be glittering. I planned to take a lot of pictures because I figured once the Harmon Corporation got done with it, the entire rock would be stripped bare of anything but smelting vapors

and residual slag.

“Anyway, the lander’s platform had anchored itself on what looked for all the world like a nice, stable outcropping at the apex of a two thousand foot projection. And it wasn’t as nice or stable as we thought. After we finished the third bottle, I slipped into my rebreather to step outside the capsule. The entire peak crumbled and slid down the slope as soon as I got to the edge. I’d just grabbed the rail to admire the view and relieve myself, when I

realized I was going down.

“I fell two hundred thirty-seven feet before hitting the side of the mountain.

“On Earth, that probably would have been the end of me. Sure, every now and then someone manages to fall out of an airplane, slide down a mountain side at just the right angle, and walk away with nothing more than a little rug burn. Not very often, though.

“I think I already told you, Vore Sepras’ gravity is a lot lower. I got to

enjoy the fall for a while, if ‘enjoy’ is the right word.

“Then I got to enjoy the sensation of impact. I’m pretty sure it’s the wrong word, there.

“I won’t even pretend I enjoyed myself as the sharp native foliage skewered me, slowly. I went from thinking about how beautiful those sharp, crystalline plants were to cursing every damn one of them, in the space of a few seconds. And before you start doing the math,” he paused to cast a glance at a skeptic in

the front row, “the acceleration was less than one twenty-fifth of a standard g. Even as snookered as I was, I had plenty long enough to realize what was happening, and to figure out I was going to land among the mountainside growth, but not anywhere near long enough to do a blessed thing about it.

“My heart was already racing from the fall. Blood spurted impressively as large rocks and larger segments of scaffolding ricocheted around me. One hit my leg, and I had

just enough time to figure out that mass and inertia still behaved the same way Miss Murphy taught, all those years ago, before the bone snapped.

“As my right leg bent and then broke, and my left arm pulled taut enough to jolt my shoulder out of the socket, I did what any sensible person would do under similar circumstances.

“I fainted.”



“When I woke up, I took quick stock of the situation.

“For a reassuring start, I had woken up. If I hadn’t, this would have been a much shorter story, and despite any amount of blood loss or the throbbing in my skull, that simple act of regaining consciousness gave me better odds than most folks in my position would have been able to expect. My rebreather seemed to be functioning normally despite a few dings, and even though it couldn’t work fast

enough to produce a full twenty-one percent oxygen, it was doing a decent enough job of clearing the buildup that I didn't have to worry about toxic asphyxiation.

“Everything below the waist was also fine. My leg was unquestionably smashed beyond anything the ship's medic could address, so I knew I'd be in an improvised brace until we got back to Earth, assuming I didn't die of dehydration or blood loss and could last long enough for Abramson and Iriadnes to find me.

And I'd lost control of my bladder sometime between when my femur found interesting new ways to arrange itself, and when my synapses decided to kick in again. But I could feel the cool air against my damp skin, and I could feel the nausea-inducing shooting pain of crushed bone and pulped marrow grinding themselves into muscle tissue. Like I said, everything below the waist was fine.

“My arm wasn't fine. Socket and ball had gone their separate ways,

and the skin around my shoulder hung oddly loose, despite being pulled tight. Only one of those sparkly plant-spikes had gone all the way through the space above my elbow, but another dozen small tips had sunk themselves deep enough to lock my forearm in place against the rock. My fingers hung limp at the end of a shattered wrist, and my torso dangled over a dark pit. Even if I could have used the other arm to free myself, I had no idea what was down there or how deep the hole

might be, and I wasn't terribly eager to find out.

“I couldn't feel anything below the pinned elbow. That meant there was either nerve damage, and regaining a functional arm would require more reconstructive surgeries than I'd ever be able to afford on a survey captain's salary even with the mineral bounty, or something was acting like an anesthetic. I tried not to think about the fact that any natural anesthetic able to eliminate everything below

my elbow probably also counted as a pretty strong poison.

“Simply as a practical measure, right then seemed like a good time to pass out again, so I did.”



“The next time I awoke was the first time a human ever caught sight of Vore Sepras’ dominant life.

“I opened my eyes and saw a sparkly, faceted black tentacle poking up through a small hole, and another tip squeezing out beside it.

Then the two appendages started to stretch and spread, and they made the hole larger, and the thing poked a head out. Don't ask me how I knew it was a head, at first. Probably the way it moved, like it was watching me. The eye had all sorts of crazy facets, and I had the odd impression that it kept swishing from light to dark under the surface, even though I couldn't say exactly what was changing.

“So the thing stretched a little more, and pulled another tentacle

out of the hole, and the exposed arms braced themselves around the edges to push. And it wasn't until the other three tentacles were shouldering their way out of that little crater, and the surface rippling with its contortions, that I realized something critical.

“That stretchy, mysterious hole was in my forearm. The one I couldn't feel. And each time the thing convulsed and heaved itself a little further out, the little spidery squid was leaving something else

behind.

“It was laying eggs.”

* * *

“By then I was pretty weak,” continued Larry. “I tried to swing at the thing with my good arm, but all that did was start my body swaying, as I hung there. Well, it also tore something else in my shoulder, but that was almost inconsequential compared to all the existing damage.

“My mouth felt cottony and dry, and I knew I must have been out

long enough to have lost a lot of fluids, between the initial blood letting, involuntarily bladder voiding, and all the vapor I exhaled with every breath. Rebreathers aren't designed for heavy moisture reclamation, and with the kind of endurance test I was putting it through, it's a minor miracle that mine performed as well as it did.

“So as you can imagine, things started to get fuzzy. I'd pass out for a few minutes, and then I'd feel a tentacle poking me, prodding me

awake.

“Once I woke up, and felt a new, fierce burning in my broken leg. I couldn’t see much of my lower half due to the way I was dangling over that pit, but I managed to crane my neck around just enough to see a bobbing, faceted black head swing away from my thigh, with a bloody red circle approximately where you’d have painted a clown’s mouth, if you wanted to be funny. When it saw me, one of those weird tentacles brought itself up to the creature’s

eye-level, and I'll swear it waved at me.

“I must have been stuck there for almost a planetary cycle, wondering—whenever I was conscious—why the others hadn't found me yet, when one of those things crawled up on the stretched skin of my ruined shoulder and looked me in the eye. I didn't even have the strength to spit at it, if I'd been able to produce any.

“The little rock squid reached out one of those tentacle-arms, lifted one of my eyelids, and leaned in close.

Then it checked the other, and with each one it sort of 'whuffed' like it was sniffing me.

“For a few minutes I guess, I was vaguely aware of a lot of motion in the background, then I lost it again. A while later I woke up to feel tentacles and small bodies crawling up my legs, and over my shoulders, and across my face, and poking, prodding and nudging me all the while. At that point I was frankly sick of waking up.

“Finally a half dozen of them

converged on my impaled arm. A pair of them began slowly working their way from my torn shoulder to the pinned elbow. One would jab, and the other would wrap itself around me like a tourniquet to see whether I flinched. The other four waited at the elbow, having their equivalent of a coffee break. Then the two would shift incrementally and try again, and the elbow crew would jostle for position.

“Once those two got within an inch of the spike, they apparently

decided they were safely below the flinch line. One of them waved a tentacle in the air, and the elbow crew started in. Their little black heads didn't have any mouths that I could see, but every time one of them lifted itself up for a moment I'd see a clown-mouth ring of crimson, and I could hear a constant nom-nom-nom admixed with the occasional crunch.

“And then, when they'd worked their way through most of the flesh and all of the bone, there was a small

lurch as the final snippet of flesh tore, and I fell into the pit.”

* * *

We held our collective breath as the cyborg stepped a few paces back to the bar. Without uttering a word, Ed set out a fresh tumbler and poured another long draught from the silvery bottle.

“Goodness gracious,” said one elderly patron, near the rear. “Did you survive?”

Larry chuckled, and then so did

the rest of us. It was the first time he'd seemed less than morose since entering the place.

“Thanks to those little monsters,” he responded, as he picked up his glass, “I did. They are unbelievably advanced when it comes to chemical manipulation, and almost as soon as I slid to rest at the bottom of their pit they started sticking me with crystalline needles and pumping me full of liquids. They'd managed to figure out that I needed water, and since their analysis of my dried sweat

and urine told them I'd also been metabolizing carbohydrates at a prodigious rate, they synthesized enough alcohol to top me off at periodic intervals. Unfortunately, what they synthesized was closer to methanol than ethanol, and I lost my original eyes after a few days of their well-intentioned maintenance. On top of that, the salts they used to balance my electrolytes were completely wrong. If I hadn't already been blinded, I probably would have clawed my eyeballs out; the headache

was that bad. But as horrific as it all was, I'd have expired very quickly if I hadn't landed so close to their caves.

“See, what I didn't know was that Iriadnes and Abramson were already dead, of blood loss and a spike through the head, respectively. The two of them had been located by the creatures first, and their bodies were already being used as incubators for the next generation.

“When the inhabitants found me, they didn't realize I was alive, and they certainly didn't suspect I

was sentient. They'd never seen a human, or any form of life that deviated from their own weird system.

“The rest of the nest were properly disgusted when they learned what they had almost done. To them, I had simply been a convenient mass of soft, warm nest material. Similar stuff grows deep in their caves, although what they are accustomed to is a whole lot closer to an exothermic mineral compost than to flesh and bone.

“What saved me was that my body kept producing heat, even after my shipmates were cold. That made a few of them curious, and after the creature laying eggs in my leg waved when it noticed me craning my neck for a better view, it started paying attention to my other responses to stimuli. Once it was certain I was alive it alerted a diagnostic crew.

“Overall, I was only missing for six days, Earth time, but the entire recovery had taken long enough that the rest of my ship had cycled

through the established chain of command and I had been declared dead. As soon as the crew managed to establish a variant of the Harmon Corporation's trade agreement with the native inhabitants, I was hauled out as a good-faith offering to solidify the arrangement. Of course that embarrassed the new captain no end, because in accordance with my Corporate will and all legal precedent my outstanding shares in shipside venture and planetary negotiation had already been redistributed, and I

was not beloved enough among the crew for any simple majority of them to willingly walk away from their windfall.

“The captain and the inhabitants finally arrived at an honorable compromise: An excess of trade resources would be provided by the inhabitants as a one-time reparation for my injuries, with the stipulation that every bit of credit from the transaction be used for my physical restoration, sparing no expense. The cost of a round-trip passage,

inclusive of lodging, food and atmospheric resources, would then be provided from my new captain's own share of the inheritance.

“So yes, I lived. I got rebuilt from the ground up, salvaging any small aspect of my original physique that could be reasonably expected to heal over time, but scrapping everything else for the latest, most precise, all-expenses-paid model. And now,” said Larry, with as hangdog an expression as I’ve ever seen on a cybernetically enhanced phiz, “I am

straddling spaceliners on the way back to Vore Sepras, stringing out this last leg of my free ride as long as I can... because once I get there, I'm stuck for good."

You'd have thought people were throwing glassware in the fireplace again, from all the noise!

"Why would you go back?"

"What are you gonna do there?"

"Aren't you afraid they'll eat the rest of you and use your skull for a nest?"

Ed tapped the bar with the butt

end of that silver bottle a few times. Then he spoke.

“Larry,” said Ed, “it’s against my nature to pry, but you don’t seem like the sort to just walk out an airlock when the supplies run low. If you don’t mind my asking, why are you really heading back there?”

That brought the cyborg up short. He froze, the tumbler halfway to his lips, and locked eyes with Ed. Then he slowly, and very precisely, set the glass back on the counter.

“After tonight,” said Larry, “I

have nothing left. Another outbound survey ship leaves E-Station in six hours, and my berth is on it.”

“And if you don’t go?” asked Ed.

“If I don’t go, my successor is legally released from the obligation he negotiated with those spider-things. But their honorable compromise never included any requirement to declare me un-dead —”

“Don’t you mean, ‘un-declare you dead?’” interrupted Claire.

“From Harmon’s perspective, I’m

not sure it makes much difference,” said Larry. “Legally, I don’t exist anymore. Every last drop of reparations credit had to go straight back into fixing me, according to the trade agreement. Harmon had a strong interest in adhering to the agreement, because at a conservative estimate, and even without stripping the planet to a smoldering husk, Vore Sepras will make a few more Harmon administrators obscenely wealthy. But I was processed out of the system according to strict

adherence to the letter of the law, so they don't really care what happens to me. My atmospheric license will run out, I won't be able to afford sustenance, and some station janitor will scavenge my processors to run a vacuum cleaner once the licensure bureau switches me off for non-payment."

"How'd they license you for atmosphere if you're dead?" asked someone at the far end of the room.

"You gotta ask dumb questions?" responded another patron. "Even if

you get a license to die, somebody's gotta process it. All of this guy's paperwork won't catch up until he dies again."

"But as long as I go on that next ship," Larry continued, oblivious to the interruptions, "the inhabitants of Vore Sepras offered me a job. Turns out they have just as much bureaucracy as humans do, and three times as many arms to generate the requisitions. Of course, their paperwork is laid out in a lattice of crystalline nanotubules and chemical

trails, but it's the same thing, really."

"Oh, the horror!" exclaimed an elderly matron at the end of the bar.

"Exactly, ma'am," said Larry, as he covered both occipital cameras with his mismatched hands. He shook like he was weeping, or maybe like he'd stripped a gear.

Then he snuffled, wheezed mechanically, and rested his hands on the brass rail. His fingers started their rhythmic drumming again, and this time he ignored the left-handed pings and right-handed thuds.

Something about the motion was calming him down, and in a few moments he settled back into the morose hangdog cyberneticism I'd seen earlier.

Ed picked up the silvery bottle and drained the last few drops into the cyborg's tumbler.

"Thanks," said Larry. "They'll bill this to the transport account as my last meal on the station. I'm glad I got to share it with you folks."

Then he drained his glass, and turned it downward on the bar. He

scanned the room once more, like he wanted to remember the bookshelves and the hearth and such, and turned to go. He still walked sort of slow and resigned, but I had the impression that he was also standing a little taller. Like maybe something had been lifted from his shoulders.

The cyborg had just reached the door when Ed called, “Say, Larry—”

Larry rested his metal hand on that battered old piano and glanced over one shoulder, waiting for the bartender to speak.

“You wouldn’t know where we could find anyone who still knows how to play that thing, would you?” asked Ed. “A bar isn’t really complete without a piano player, but mine quit a few weeks ago.”

“Ed,” I whispered, “you told me no one had touched the piano for years. You had me push it over to the door so the waste reclamation guys could haul—”

“Shut up, Justin,” growled Ed, under his breath. “I needed it to be by the door. I just didn’t know why.”

Ed looked back at Larry. Larry was still staring at Ed. Larry's hand was dancing a happy jig on top of the cabinet, his case-hardened fingertips rat-a-tat-tatting against the wood.

“If you manage to think of anyone,” said Ed, “be sure to tell ’em I can’t afford much, but the credit ought to at least cover a simple station license, and they could keep a tip jar.”

Larry looked so happy he—well, scratch that. With everything the surgeons had done to his visible

surfaces during the reconstruction, “happy” wasn’t really an emotion he could emote any more. But he was standing straighter than ever, and the corners of his mouth were crinkled up in a grimace that showed two fine, strong rows of platinum and enamel teeth.

“Tell ’em they can start as soon as they can haul a bench up to the keyboard... that is, if you can find anyone who’s interested in a gig like that.”

Of course, those last few words

were lost in the din. No one could have heard Ed talking over the sound of all that piano music and breaking glass.



David Carani

David Carani became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "The Paradise Aperture" in Writers of the Future, Vol. XXVIII (2012), edited by K.D. Wentworth. Visit his website at www.davidcarani.com.

The Paradise Aperture by David Carani

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K.D. Wentworth



I eyed the door with distrust. The shocking blue was brighter than I usually photographed, but maybe that was where I'd been going wrong. Marie had always loved vibrant colors. If she was behind any door, it would be one like this.

Two years ago, I'd barely left the Midwest, let alone the country. Yet here I was, halfway across the world, standing in the long-dead garden of an abandoned house in Tunisia.

The town of Sidi Bou Said

spread along the sparkling Mediterranean below, stark white buildings accented in bold strokes of blue. Once, I would have been entranced by the breathtaking vista. Now it just looked tired and dusty.

I turned back to the door. Set in white stone and arched at the top, it had been intricately inked in swirling black dots reminiscent of henna. I rested my hand on the rough wood and closed my eyes. It didn't feel any different than a normal door, but then, they never did.

I shook my head, halting my admiration. I couldn't be sidetracked. The mystical blue doors had drawn me here, but ultimately they were just a means to an end.

“We waitin’ for something, Jonny?”

The voice belonged to my daughter, Irene. One hand on her hip, she watched me with a tapping foot, occasionally blowing swooped bangs from her eyes. She had Marie's hair, a fire-engine red that looked fake but wasn't. Unlike her mother,

Irene kept it short—like her temper.

“The sun needs to be at the right angle,” I said patiently, wishing again she wouldn’t call me Jonny. Usually I ignored her when she called me by my first name, but if I did that all the time, we’d never talk. The girl sure could be persistent.

“How the hell do you know that?”

I laughed. If she only knew the dozens of letters I got everyday asking that same question. I guess you might say it was a gift, but too

often, it felt like a curse.

“For one thing, I watch my language,” I said.

“Seriously.”

“Gut feeling,” I said, shrugging. “I just know.”

Irene wrinkled her nose and folded her arms across her chest, but said nothing. She played tough, but I knew the tribal tattoo down her left arm was a five-year temp and that she hated the onyx stud in her nose more than she hated her ex-boyfriend.

A cool breeze rose off the bay, stealing a moment of heat and bringing sounds of the festival from the streets down the way. Ankle-deep in twisted weeds, I wiped sweat from my forehead and forced a clearing for the tripod.

“Hand me the Deltex,” I said.

Irene stared at me blankly.

“The gray camera case.”

With the gracelessness of inattentive youth, she fumbled with the case slung behind her back, unzipping it with one hand and

peeling out the camera. I fought the urge to cringe, even when she tossed the camera instead of walking the two steps to hand it to me. Five-thousand dollars of hardware whirled through the air, but it wasn't the first time this had happened. I caught it easily.

“What have we said about throwing things?”

“Easy, Pops. You caught it fine. What's the big deal?”

Honestly, with money no longer an issue and three backups over her

shoulder, it wasn't a big deal. Not in the mood for a fight, I almost let it go. Almost.

"The big deal," I said, very calmly, "is you need to learn respect for people's things."

"Not like you can't just—"

"It doesn't matter how many cameras I can afford," I said, anticipating her biggest argument. "It's a matter of principle."

"Principles suck."

I grinned. "That's a matter of opinion."

She stuck out her tongue, but didn't argue back. She knew I was right and, with Irene, that was as good as a victory.

I squinted up at the sun, a searing white orb in the empty sky. It still didn't feel right, but I set up the camera anyway, careful to frame the door with enough stone. Any cropping would destroy the image, so the proportions had to be perfect. If they weren't, the door would never open and I'd be left with a very expensive, very useless life-size

photo.

I couldn't take that chance. Once I captured a door, it couldn't be recaptured no matter how identical the image. I'd found that out the hard way with a few photos, but I tried not to think about them. Surely Marie wouldn't have been behind those doors. They'd been so unexciting.

"Why are we all the way up here?" Irene asked. "We're missing the festival."

"We're not here for the festival," I

said, adjusting the shutter speed for a longer exposure. “And I can’t risk some clumsy tourist ruining the picture.”

“What’s so special about these doors?”

I looked up from the viewfinder. “You got a lot of questions today,” I said. “Something on your mind?”

Irene’s head dropped and her shoulders sagged. Suddenly she was far younger and more vulnerable than eighteen already was.

“You really think Mom’s still out

there?" she asked.

"I can't believe anything else," I said. God knows I'm not the same man without her.

"Nana thinks you're cracked. She didn't want me to come."

I grunted. My mother-in-law hadn't spoken with me since we'd lost Marie. I couldn't really blame her. If it wasn't for my photos, Marie might still be here.

"What do you think?" I asked.

She bit her lip, hesitating. "I think... I think we'll find her."

I nodded. “Then don’t ever let that go—no matter what anyone says. We’ll get her back, Reenie. I promise.”

Irene seemed to relax. She even smiled, which was not something I was blessed with often.

“I saw a yellow door on our way up here,” she said.

A yellow door in a town of blue and white?

“Sounds like we’ve got one more stop after this,” I said. “Nice catch.”

The sun finally where I wanted

it, I looked through the viewfinder, exhaled slowly, and took the shot.

* * *

Several weeks and a hundred photos later, we stood in Heathrow Airport, the ebb and flow of thousands of strangers bubbling around us. Crowds had never bothered me before, but it was different now that so many of them seemed to recognize me.

Irene leaned against a pillar, eyes closed, bobbing to the music from

her oversized headphones. I still don't know why I agreed to bring her along. At times, it seemed like she didn't even want to be along. But I knew how helpless she must feel. She wanted her mother back as much as I wanted my wife.

A bald man in a business suit and overcoat wandered over, glancing at me over his newspaper. I nervously checked my watch. The only thing I hated more than flying was waiting to fly.

The bald man made up his mind

and moved toward me. I sighed internally. Here we go.

“You’re that guy, aren’t you?”

I pretended not to hear, positioning myself between the man and Irene. Sometimes these guys turned out to be real head cases.

He edged closer and tapped my shoulder, ignoring all concepts of personal space.

“Yeah, I’ve seen you on the news,” he said, jabbing his finger at me. “You’re that photographer.”

“You must have me confused—”

“What do you call those pictures you take?” he asked. “Reclusive doors?”

I gritted my teeth. He obviously wasn't going to leave me alone. Did they ever?

“Recursion doors,” I corrected, checking my watch again. Boarding time was two minutes late.

“Yeah, that's it. World within a world or something, right?”

“Now boarding first class,” the flight attendant announced.

Finally.

“Something like that,” I said, nudging Irene and eagerly pushing forward to hand over our tickets. A few people glared at me, but I ignored them.

The man persisted, grabbing my sleeve. I turned to say something, but stopped. The man’s breathing was heavy, his eyes bulging. I’d seen that look of fanaticism before.

“Is it true what they say?” the man asked in a fierce whisper. “Did you really discover paradise?”

The color drained from my face.

Had the idea already come so far? It was like a virus I never meant to spread. I pulled my arm away and retreated down the ramp without answering.

How could I?

* * *

I slept for two days after returning home. The endless rounds of travel were definitely taking their toll, but it didn't matter—pure exhaustion was the only way I slept these days. On the third day, Irene

unceremoniously woke me.

“Jonny!”

She stood by my bed, snapping her fingers and pointing at the phone in her hand. I stared at her in the confusion of the half-awake.

“It’s Nana.”

I let my head fall back to the pillow. Why now?

Irene put the phone in my hand and I lifted it to my ear.

“Hello, Margaret.”

“It’s time to put an end to this nonsense, Jonathan,” my mother-in-

law said.

“Good morning to you too.”

“I’ve humored you long enough. It was one thing when your actions affected only you. Now you’re bringing your teenage daughter along?”

“It’s her decision.”

She gave an exasperated sigh. “We’ve all accepted it. Why can’t you?”

“Because I haven’t given up hope,” I said, sitting up. “I just have to find the right door.”

“Damn it, Jonathan. The fire was two years ago,” she said. “You have to let it go. The door is gone.”

I was silent.

“Your daughter needs you,” she said. “And she needs the chance to move on.”

“You want me to tell Irene her mother is dead?”

“I want you to be her father.”

“What happened to you?”

Her voice softened. “I’m tired, Jonathan. For the longest time I wanted to believe you were right.

But I can't anymore—it's just too hard. I'm too old for false hope."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "We'll talk again soon. Goodbye, Margaret."

I hung up without waiting for an answer. My hands were trembling. I balled them into tight fists and pressed them against my forehead. Everyone thought I was crazy. What was so crazy about wanting to believe your wife was still alive?

The day I lost Marie, I'd come home to our little apartment over the

antique shop and found it ablaze. A caravan of fire trucks, police cars, and ambulances had blockaded the collapsing building, a crowd of onlookers gawking into the flames with mixed looks of wonder and horror.

I'd screamed and twisted and torn at the firefighters like a madman, but they'd held me back, told me the building was empty. They hadn't understood that the building could appear empty, when it was not. They couldn't have

known that while they'd held me down, my wife had been inside.

Maybe I was crazy, but I knew one thing: Marie was alive. The door to our world was gone, but I would find another way in. I had to.



Around noon, I dragged myself from bed and returned to the office. An unmarked stone building along the Chicago North Shore, it had a second floor showroom, a first floor jammed with massive industrial

printers, and a basement full of discarded attempts to find my wife.

Someone had stuck a sign to the front door, imploring me to repent of my evil ways. Needless to say, not everyone thought highly of my gift. I pulled the sign down, wondering again what good it did to have an unmarked building when everyone already knew where you were.

I fumbled with my keys a moment, before realizing there was no longer a keyhole in the door. I frowned at the keypad on the wall.

Kensuke, my curator, had recently convinced me to upgrade the security system. It made sense, considering the inventory in my basement was valued in the billions; I just hadn't ever used it. When had he found time to get it installed?

I scratched the back of my head and stared into the surveillance camera, struggling to recall the eight-digit passcode. It was probably so obvious I'd never remember it. I threw up my hands in exasperation, suddenly regretting I'd asked

Kensuke to leave off the buzzer.

“Might I have a word, Mr. Ward?”

I sighed and turned around. The man had the distinct look of a weasel in a suit, which was disappointingly unoriginal. His peppered hair was receding, the little he had left slicked back in greasy curls.

Couldn't these people stick to the phone, instead of ambushing me at my front door? At least the phone I could ignore.

“What is it this time?”

“I represent Renkoda Pharmaceuticals,” the representative said. He straightened his tie and flashed a smirk that turned my stomach. “We are the world’s largest —”

“I know who you are,” I said, waving a hand. Everyone knew Renkoda. They had their claws in a lot more than pharmaceuticals. “What do you want?”

“I have been authorized to extend you an exclusive offer to work for our company.”

“Exclusive offer to work or offer to work exclusively?”

The man pursed his lips, pressing them together in a flat line. “The latter,” he said.

“Let me make this easy for you,” I said. “Not interested.”

The representative seemed taken aback. Obviously, he wasn’t used to being turned down.

“You haven’t even... what about the offer?” he said. “You haven’t heard the offer.”

Maybe I was being reckless. Why

shouldn't I work for a powerful company like Renkoda? I'd already sold myself out to the world's so-called elite. How would this be any different?

And yet... it was different. I might sell to the elite, but never for them. I did this for Marie and no one else. It was a thin line, but one that kept me sane.

"You're right," I said. "I forgot to wait for that part. How about this? You write the number on a piece of paper and I'll take a look."

While the representative fumbled in his briefcase for a pen, I turned back to the keypad with a flash of insight and punched in the eight digits. The door unlocked with a click and I briskly stepped through, swiping it closed behind me. I left courtesy behind a long time ago.

A hand scanner awaited me in the foyer, one security measure even I couldn't screw up. I took the stairs to the showroom floor, expecting to find Kensuke preparing for an auction. The room was empty, but a

selection of framed recursion doors had been brought up from the basement and propped in the corner.

Shaped like a square donut, the room was surrounded on three walls with tall multi-paned windows. The cube in the center of the room was for display, four doors to a wall.

A single recursion door hung on the wall in front of me. It was a relatively unassuming door, weatherworn wood bordered in faded brick and overgrown ivy. Kensuke had matched it with a

simple, antique-finish frame.

I pressed my hand against the picture, feeling not the smooth photo paper, but the ancient wood of the garden door beyond. I lowered my hand to the cold iron handle and pushed. The door creaked painfully as it swung open, revealing the pocket world beyond. No matter how many times I opened the doors, it always caught me a little off guard.

A mighty river curved away from the entrance, emerald and slate colored mountains jutting from the

waters like watchful giants. An ancient monastery had been built into the cliffs, whitewashed walls and tiered roof of red and gold pristine under the perpetual sun. Inside would be empty and without the touch of dust or decay.

How could I not feel awe?

There was something far beyond physical appearance that left me breathless, despite myself. The pocket world provided everything. Inside you felt no pain, no anger, no sorrow. You didn't need to eat or

sleep. It was possible you didn't even age. There was a reason people referred to the multiverse as paradise.

"You are late, Jonathan-sama."

I jerked in surprise, yanking the recursion door shut with a thud. Kensuke stepped in beside me, placing a hand on my shoulder as I exhaled slowly.

"Forgive me," Kensuke said in his thick Japanese accent. He offered a small bow. "I did not mean to startle you."

"It's okay, Ken," I said. "Just edgy,

I guess. Another fanatic approached me about paradise.”

Kensuke paused thoughtfully, folding his hands before him.

“It is not entirely implausible,” he said. “Do you not think so?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

I could imagine nothing more arrogant than believing I had discovered paradise. Never mind that I didn’t do anything, that the pictures just happened.

“True,” Kensuke said, nodding. “Though there are some who might

say reality is nine-tenths perception.”

“What about all the paradise abusers?”

I’d seen plenty of lives torn apart—friends and loved ones neglected, careers destroyed, responsibilities abandoned—all because the lure of the multiverse far exceeded reality. I sold them paradise and they turned it into a drug.

“Eden was lost to us for a reason,” Kensuke said. “Was it not?”

“So who am I to give it back?”

“God works in mysterious ways.”

“I wish he’d work through someone else,” I said. I nodded to the stack of recursion doors. “When’s the auction?”

“This weekend. I scheduled it as soon as I learned of your return. Our patrons are getting restless. You have been gone some time.”

How long had it been this time? I tried to work the days in my head, but they just blurred together.

“How many days?”

“Forty-two,” Kensuke said. “Not including the two and a half you

took while sleeping.”

I blinked in surprise. Had it really been so long?

“There are several hundred high-profile patrons on the waiting list,” Kensuke continued.

“Let them wait. I don’t cater to spoiled trust fund kids.”

“Apologies, Jonathan-sama,” Kensuke said, inclining his head slightly. “But those spoiled children are the reason you are able to continue your work.”

I sighed, running a hand through

my hair. Sometimes I truly regretted selling the recursion doors, but exorbitant production costs and an empty bank account had forced my hand. And in the end, the doors were my only chance at finding Marie—I wouldn't hesitate to do it again.

“I'm sorry, Kensuke-san. I know you're right, but I don't have to like it. I'll see to it first thing.”

Kensuke looked at me, deep lines of concern etched in his face. “You will find her, my friend.”

For once, I didn't trust myself to

respond.

* * *

The night of the auction, I sat in my office off the showroom floor, reluctantly awaiting the proceedings. Kensuke had helped me load my latest photos into the swinging display and I used a clicker to shuffle through: a false door at an Egyptian tomb, the inked blue door from Tunisia, a pair of massive double doors from a Spanish church. I flipped through worlds like so many

photos in a catalog, sifting through endless realms until my eyes burned and my head felt light.

Nothing.

Hundreds of photos and not one of them brought me closer to Marie. Sighing, I leaned back and thought again about attempting another finite recursion—photographing a door within the pocket world—but instantly dismissed it as too dangerous.

The last time I'd tried, the pocket world had begun to shake. Granted,

the tremors were weak, but in paradise nothing shakes. It was enough to realize that the extended recursions affected the stability of the entire multiverse. I was forced to burn the doors.

In retrospect, it made sense. According to the Droste effect, an image within an image could theoretically continue forever. However, in practical terms, it could only continue so far as the resolution allowed.

There was a knock at the door

and Kensuke entered. "I am about to open the floor," he said.

I nodded. "I'll be out shortly. Thanks, Ken."

Stretching my arms overhead, I moved into the bathroom and splashed water on my face. I took two aspirin for the headache I was soon to have and started to close the medicine cabinet, but stopped halfway. I cocked my head, staring at the endless reflection created between the cabinet mirror and the vanity mirror. A thought began to

form in my head, something that struck me instantly as too risky. But I had to know.

I strode from my office, buried in thought, nearly oblivious to the madness around me. Kensuke had hired extra security tonight and with good reason. Absence really does make the heart grow fonder: we were packed to capacity. This was even more impressive when you considered the bidding started around a million dollars.

I made for the door across the

room, trying to appear casual in the hope no one would notice me. No such luck. Before I reached it, the weasel from Renkoda intercepted me. How had he gotten in?

“Could we talk, Mr. Ward?”

“Haven’t we?” I said. “I thought my answer earlier was obvious.”

“It was,” the representative said. “I’ve been asked to give you another chance.”

“Excuse me?”

“No contract this time. We just want to commission you for a special

project.”

I eyed him darkly. Special project? What he wanted was a few recursion doors off the record. Doors he wouldn't have to register with the government. And without government regulation, he could put people inside to work indefinitely.

“We're done.”

“I really think you should reconsider.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Of course not,” he said, with a faint smile, “merely a suggestion.”

The representative turned to leave, but paused.

“I understand there’s legislation on the table regarding your recursion doors,” he said. “Apparently, some members of the government don’t believe you should be allowed to do... whatever it is you do.”

“They’ve been sitting on that for months. It’ll never pass.”

He shrugged. “Then I suppose you have nothing to worry about.”

I frowned, watching the representative go. Why had he been

so confident this time?

“Are you all right?” Kensuke asked.

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Do me a favor and keep things running up here, Ken. I need to check the basement.”

Kensuke inclined his head. “Of course.”

I took the stairs down, passing a voice recognition test to gain access to the basement. Lucky for me, Kensuke was an organizational genius. The entire basement had

been outfitted with automated racks like a dry cleaners—except, instead of clothes, there was row upon row of hanging recursion doors. All I had to do was select the date the image had been captured and the racks would shift to the appropriate position.

I found the two I was looking for and pulled them off the rack. Taken almost a year apart on opposite sides of the world, each door was made entirely from mirror. Almost identical in build and shape, they would reflect each other endlessly.

I didn't know what opening an infinite recursion like that would do, but I had an idea—which is why it had to be a last resort.

Making a mental note to have Kensuke send the doors to my house, I climbed the stairs back to the auction. The thought of mingling with the crowd for the next few hours depressed me.

It was time for another trip.

* * *

The twin louvered doors sagged

against each other, narrow enough to be little more than exaggerated shutters. Faded by a ruthless sun, the turquoise paint peeled, revealing black wood beneath.

I frowned through the viewfinder at the mustard-stained walls framing the doors. Surely Marie wouldn't be behind something as hideous as this?

We'd come to Agra for the doors of the Taj Mahal, but I didn't have the luxury to pass up other opportunities. The doors squeaked

in the wind, rusty latch barely holding closed. Mumbling in disgust, I took the shot and we moved on.

“What’s it like inside?” Irene asked.

The question actually surprised me. Sometimes I forgot she’d never experienced the multiverse. Maybe it was wrong of me to forbid it, but the truth was, ever since we lost Marie, I’d been terrified of going inside. For all the sense of immortality the pocket worlds offered, they left you

surprisingly vulnerable to outside forces. Especially fire.

“Your mother and I used to disappear inside for hours,” I said. “I still remember the first time we crossed over: the lurch in motion as we were pulled forward, the shifting of lines as one world gave way to another, the overwhelming sense of peace. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

Irene stared into the distance. “Peace, huh? Sounds nice.”

I nodded agreement, but I didn’t want peace. I wanted my wife back.

We continued up the road, neither wanting to break the silence. Finally, Irene stopped, pointing at another green tinted door.

“What about that one?”

I looked it over carefully, then shook my head. “Nope.”

“It looks like the last door—”

“You’re just like your mother,” I said with a smile. “There doesn’t have to be a reason for everything. Sometimes you just need faith.”

Irene rolled her eyes. Trying to explain the concept of faith to a

teenager was an unenviable task. Certain she was no longer listening, I didn't waste my breath. It was too hot for talking anyway.

“Can we walk the market?” Irene asked.

I shuddered at the idea of pushing through the throngs of people, but when she looked at me with those green eyes—the same as her mother's—what was I supposed to say?

“Sure, why not?”

“Awesome! You're the best!”

I let Irene lead, content to take the backseat for once. We pushed through a sea of color, men and women in a mesmerizing variety of yellows, blues, and greens. She stopped at one of the stalls, examining the local jewelry.

“Mr. Ward?”

A man in a tailored suit stood in the shade of the stall, holding a cloth over his nose. Even across the world I wasn't safe from the leeches.

“Wait here a minute,” I said to Irene. She shrugged and continued

sifting through multihued bead necklaces.

I took the man out of earshot of my daughter.

“How the hell do you people find me?” I asked, then held up my hands. “Never mind, I don’t want to know. What now?”

“Sir, I don’t think you—”

“Who do you work with? Is it Renkoda?”

“I’m not from any company,” the man said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m from the government,” he said, holding up a badge. “You’ve been ordered to cease and desist.”

* * *

“How can they do this?”

My hand tightened around the glass of scotch, until I was sure it would break. I didn’t care if it did. It was all I could do not to hurl the glass at the wall.

Kensuke looked at me sympathetically across the kitchen counter. He’d come as soon as I

called with the news. It was strange, but he was really the only friend I had left.

“This has to be against free speech or something,” I said.

“I’m afraid this is beyond freedom of speech.”

True enough. Even after the government required a permit for ownership, it wasn’t a catchall. People seemed intent on polluting paradise: secret drug factories, human trafficking, murder cover-ups. Just because pain didn’t exist in

the multiverse, didn't mean you couldn't bring it in. I tried not to think about the consequences of what I'd unleashed.

"You sound like you agree with them," I said sullenly, staring into my drink.

"I am only being rational, Jonathan-sama," Kensuke said.

"This is because I turned down the Renkoda contract, isn't it? They're punishing me."

"Whether Renkoda influenced the vote or not," Kensuke said. "You

did the right thing. What you do is a gift and how you use it is up to you.”

“The government can’t stop me.”

“They can and they will. You are one of the most recognized faces in the world. Continuing your work now would be foolish. You have a daughter to think of.”

“I have a wife to think of!” I slammed my drink on the table with a crack. “Or have you forgotten?”

“I have not,” Kensuke said, his expression unchanged.

I continued to drink, amber

liquid leaking down my wrist.

“Dammit,” I said, standing woozily. I tripped and stumbled to the ground. Staring into the grooves in the wood, all the fight went out of me. Kensuke helped me to my room and I collapsed on the bed, eyes drooping. “Goddammit,” I whispered.

Kensuke paused on his way out.

“God is the only hope you have left, my friend.”



My head pounded. I'd slept through lunch and would have slept through dinner if not for the arrival of the recursion doors I'd requested. I left the two photos covered and set them facing each other in my study.

Irene passed the room, headphones on, miming her music. Noticing the covered doors, she lowered the headphones and stuck her head in.

“What’s the deal with the doors?”

“Who said they’re doors?”

Irene gave me a withering look.

“I’m working on a project,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

Irene’s eyes narrowed. “You’re planning something without me, aren’t you?”

I looked down, avoiding her eyes. “I’m sorry, Reenie. It’s too dangerous.”

Reckless, is what I didn’t say.

“I don’t care how dangerous it is. I want to go with you!”

“Irene...”

“Don’t do this to me!”

“Irene!”

She flinched and I instantly regretted my tone—but it had to be done.

“This is not a discussion,” I said. “I will not risk your life on top of everything else.”

“But it’s fine to risk yours?” Irene said. Her face was nearly the color of her hair. “What if something happens to you? Where does that leave me?”

There were tears in her eyes now and I forced myself to look at her. I finally realized why she always

begged to come along when I traveled, even though she pretended to hate it. She'd already lost her mother and every time I went away, she lost her father too. Suddenly, I doubted myself.

“Nothing is going to happen to me,” I forced myself to say.

Irene looked up and sniffed. “Promise me.”

I opened my mouth to promise her everything she wanted and more, but I couldn't.

“You can't, can you?”

“You just have to trust me,” I said. “I know what I’m doing.”

“How can you possibly know what you’re doing?”

She had me there. I sighed. “Listen, I’m not going until tomorrow morning. We’ll talk more then, okay?”

Her hug caught me by surprise. “I love you, Dad.”

It’d been a long time since she’d called me that. So why did I feel like such a monster?

“I love you too, Reenie.”

I sat in my study for a long time, staring at the covered recursion doors. What a selfish asshole I'd been. Pretending to know how she felt, but never being there for her. I'd traveled the world to save my wife, only to let my daughter slip away. Marie would be ashamed.

There was my answer. I couldn't risk it—not with Irene to think of. I had sacrificed too much of our relationship already. I'd find my wife, but it would have to be another way.



Something was wrong.

I jolted awake with a gasp, entangled in the sheets. Moonlight flooded my room, bleaching everything bone white. A cool breeze blew in through the window, but otherwise the night was quiet. I tried to fall back asleep, but couldn't shake the feeling of anxiety.

Pulling on jeans, I padded down the hall to Irene's room. It was after midnight, but I swear the girl never slept. Still, I didn't want to wake her

if I didn't have to. She'd just think I was a crazy parent. I knocked lightly and edged the door open, peering into the darkness.

“Irene?”

Panic seized me as I waited for my eyes to adjust and I flipped on the lights. Her bed was empty.

I tore through the first floor, struggling to breathe as I called for my daughter. She was gone. My heart caught in my throat and I felt my eyes drawn to the floor above me.

Please God, no.

I scrambled up the stairs, taking them two and three at a time and burst into my study. I froze in horror.

“Oh, Irene. What have you done?”

The protective sheets had been torn from the opposing photos, revealing the mirrored doors beneath. Facing as they were, they created an endless hall in both directions.

I took a deep breath to calm

myself, trying to slow the pounding of my heart. She couldn't have been gone long. Yanking on my shoes, I inspected both doors. The one on the right still had a smudge from Irene's fingers. I wet my lips, pressed my hand against the door, and stepped through.

* * *

I had brought the apocalypse to paradise.

As I'd expected, the infinite recursion had created a path between

worlds, a sort of slipstream that enabled me to jump from one to another in a single step. But something in that connection had destabilized the multiverse. The pocket worlds were collapsing.

The ground trembled, quakes rolling beneath my feet in increasingly powerful waves. Clouds twisted in the sky, bruise-colored serpents weaving through the air as electrostatic discharge arced between them.

I stepped forward and my

surroundings blurred, shifting to the next world as I lurched forward. The sensation was similar to passing through a recursion door, but multiplied tenfold. Even after all the doors I'd traveled, the lurch was brutal. I blinked several times and shook my head.

The sky above fractured like glass, immense cracks spreading across the firmament. Shards broke away, shattering upon the ground and leaving behind an empty void.

I found Irene on the fifth step.

She was outside the slipstream on her hands and knees, throwing up. For someone who had never experienced the lurch before, I was amazed she'd made it this far.

I left the slipstream and knelt beside her. Gravity was still intact, but I could feel a vacuum forming. The surroundings were unaffected, but the tug was unmistakable. The multiverse was reacting the only way it knew how: like the immune system, it was rejecting foreign objects. It was trying to pull us out.

The sun, an ominous shade of crimson, flickered in the broken sky like a dying light bulb. I put an arm around Irene, as much to comfort her as to keep her from drifting from our position.

“I’m... sorry,” she said, breathless like she’d run a marathon.

Something struck me: she could feel pain.

“I know,” I said, helping her to her feet. “This is my fault. I let my drive to find your mother interfere with being your father. I’m sorry,

Reenie.”

She nodded weakly, wiping at her mouth.

“I have to take you back.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

The fierceness in her eyes made me proud, but I knew she couldn’t make it much farther in her condition.

“Please, Irene. Do this for me.”

Irene closed her eyes and, after a moment, she nodded. I let out a sigh of relief and helped her into the slipstream. Five steps and we were

back in my study.

She stumbled woozily as I helped her to the couch, covering her in a blanket. I glanced over my shoulder at the still open slipstream.

“Go,” Irene said. “Bring Mom home.”

I hesitated, then nodded and kissed her on the forehead.

Stepping into the slipstream, I was instantly thrown to my back as another quake rocked the multiverse. A rift split the world sending a snow-capped peak tumbling down the side

of a mountain. Fighting off a wave of nausea, I pushed myself up and stepped again. I had to go farther, faster.

Every step was a gale force now, skin and muscle pressing against my bones. It felt like being hit by a tidal wave over and over again. My nose dripped and I wiped it away, hand coming back with a bright red smear.

I ignored it and pushed on, surveying the passing worlds in a glance. One hundred, three hundred, five hundred, the worlds whirled by

like a slideshow on fast-forward. I'd know our world when I saw it. Wouldn't I?

Dread twisted around my heart. The thing I feared most crept from its hiding place: what if our world was gone? What if the fire had destroyed not just the door, but the world itself? What if Marie... no. I gritted my teeth and forced the thoughts away. I'd traveled too long and too far to end like this.

I stopped suddenly, taking a step back. I almost didn't recognize it.

Quakes had devastated the majestic landscape and the vibrant azure sky was half missing, but it was our world. I'd finally found it.

I pulled myself from the slipstream and leapt into the chaos, screaming Marie's name. A canyon-sized chunk of sky broke away, crashing upon the mountains and scattering to dust. As if on cue, the rain started, torrents pouring from the jigsaw sky wherever there was sky left to pour from.

Our world lacked a door, so the

vacuum I sensed earlier was absent, yet I felt strangely pulled. I didn't realize where I was running, until I was already there. The massive waterfall still flowed, pounding down the mile high cliff face. My head whipped back and forth, body barely in control as I scanned the clearing.

Then I saw her.

She lay in a heap by the lake, her bare feet in the sand as water lapped against them. Broken pieces of sky lay around her and a gash on her

forehead trickled blood into her red hair. I ran to her side, taking her head in my arms.

“Marie—Marie!”

I pressed my ear to her chest. Thank God, a heartbeat.

Lightning forked to the ground in the distance and the rumble of thunder rattled the world. Gravity was failing, pebbles, shells, and bits of broken sky lifting from the beach and floating around us. There wasn't much time.

I picked Marie up, cradling her in

my arms, and started back. Even in the dying gravity, my legs trembled, strangely weak. I wasn't used to feeling pain here.

The world quaked and burned and fell to pieces around us, but I barely noticed. I had her back and we weren't going to die now. We reached the slipstream and I took one last look back at paradise. Marie groaned and her eyes fluttered open.

Tears welled in my eyes as I watched her wake. She looked at me as if stirring from a dream, but a

moment later recognition dawned in her eyes.

“Jonathan,” she said, smiling weakly. “What took you so long?”

“We’re going home, Marie.”

She closed her eyes and a tear slid down her cheek. “I’d like that.”



Getting back was an eternity.

Hundreds of steps felt like a hundred thousand. I clutched Marie to my chest, shielding her as best I could from the effects of lurch. The

strain was enormous, but I forced my legs to move and my lungs to breathe. The slipstream crumbled around us, barely holding together.

And then eternity ended and we were in the study once more. I staggered as gravity reapplied itself, carefully lowering Marie to the floor. She took her sleeve—pristine even after all this time—and delicately wiped the blood from my nose.

Irene had fallen asleep on the couch waiting for us, but now she woke, rubbing her eyes.

“Dad?”

She sat bolt upright, throwing aside the blanket. For a moment, she seemed frozen. Like if she moved, the dream would dissolve around her. Then she broke free and ran full into our arms. No one said anything, but no one really needed to.

After a time, I pulled myself away. Irene sobbed quietly in her mother's arms. Marie looked at me over her shoulder as reality continued to settle in. Her cheeks were streaked red as she smiled at me

and mouthed the words: I love you.

I turned to the mirror door. Hairline fractures riddled the surface of the photo like spider webbing. I had to break the infinite recursion to end the devastation inside. I gathered up the blanket and moved to throw it over the photo.

“Leave it,” Marie said.

“The multiverse will be destroyed,” I said.

“I know,” Marie said, stepping over and resting a hand on my arm. “But by now, everyone’s been pulled

out. The worlds are empty and should stay that way.”

She was right. Paradise was a wonderful dream, but we didn't know what to do with it. The pocket worlds had been special to a lot of people, but too many more had abused them.

So why was it so hard to leave behind?

Marie took my face in her hands and looked me in the eyes.

“Jonathan,” she said. “Let it go.”

I looked into her eyes, a

cascading spectrum of green, like emeralds in shifting light, and realized that nothing else mattered. I had Marie, I had Irene, and my family was whole again. I let the blanket drop and hugged my wife. I pressed my face into her shoulder and pushed my hands into her hair and, for the first time in two years, I cried.



Zen Cho

Zen Cho became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “起獅，行禮 (The Rising Lion—The Lion Bows)” in Strange Horizons (Mar. 2011), edited by Niall Harrison. Visit his website at zencho.org.

起獅，行禮 (The
Rising Lion—The Lion
Bows)
by Zen Cho

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The hotel was not like any hotel Jia Qi had seen before. There was no drive swooping around a fountain featuring little peeing babies, no glass doors opening onto a golden lobby lit by chandeliers, no men in white gloves to open the doors for you.

Perhaps English hotels were different. This one was a blocky old building made of weathered grey stone and covered with ivy. It looked like it should come equipped with

knights and pointy-hatted ladies. The manager who came out to greet them looked incongruously modern in comparison—he wore a suit and a bright red tie, but no gloves. His name was Nick.

“Thanks for coming,” he said to Tiong Han. Tiong Han was technically the president of the troupe. “The guests are really excited about the performance, really excited. So am I. I’ve never seen a lion dance performance before. It’ll add a touch of culture to the night.

Whoop! Need help with that?”

He was already moving forward to help Simon unload the lion head from the taxi, but Coco stepped in front of him before he could touch it.

Coco had been with the troupe for six years. She had never been their official president because she preferred not to deal with technicalities; it gave her more time to actually lead the troupe.

“Are Mr. and Mrs. Yu around?” she said.

It was Mr. Yu who had emailed

them to ask if they would perform at a Christmas party that was being held at his hotel. It was a new hotel and this was the first big event they were hosting, so he was willing to pay them a generous fee. They had agreed that the troupe would perform before and after dinner. There were also going to be fireworks, and a disco.

Sensibly, Mr. Yu and Mrs. Yu had stayed indoors, but they were very hospitable when the cold dishevelled troupe poured into the

lobby.

“We’ve got Chinese food, Chinese decorations, lanterns, fireworks,” said Nick. “It’s all been done up to theme. The company does a lot of business out in China, so they were very keen when we suggested a China night. When we heard about you we thought, well, that’s ideal! We’re so pleased you could make it all the way out here.”

“Very pleased,” said Mr. Yu in English. In Cantonese, he said: “The ghost is in the upstairs cupboard.”

“Thank you, we’re looking forward to it,” said Coco to Nick. To Mr. Yu: “What kind of ghost is it?”

Mr. Yu hesitated. Mrs. Yu had been overseeing Simon and Tiong Han as they carried the equipment in, but now she turned and said:

“Nick, there is a drum. Will there be space in the dining room?”

“There’s a drum? How big is—oh,” Nick said, as the drum emerged from the front door. “We definitely haven’t left enough space for that. I didn’t know there’d be a drum.”

“We thought they will use recordings,” said Mrs. Yu. This was such a blatant fib that Jia Qi was surprised when Nick only said, “We’ll have to clear some space, then. Let’s see if we can jam it in the passage from the kitchen. You’ll have to tell us whether that’ll work.”

Tiong Han glanced at Coco, who nodded. He left with Nick and the others followed, their arms full of cymbals, gongs, and cabbages.

Jia Qi stayed with Coco. Even after four months with the troupe,

she was still too new to be much help with the setting up, and she wanted to know about the ghost.

Coco had told Jia Qi about the lion dance troupe's occasional secret assignments after she'd been coming to their meetings for a couple of months. It was earlier than Coco would usually have told a new member, but Jia Qi thought Coco felt a bond with her, as the only other girl in the troupe and the only other person capable of going ten minutes without talking about video games.

Besides, it had become obvious, even in that short period of time, that Jia Qi ate, slept, and dreamt lion dance. She was a quiet girl with an unfashionable accent, and British student culture had come as a shock to her system. She was ferociously homesick, she could not drink, and she only did well in classes where she was not required to speak.

The troupe did not seem to notice her quietness. They gave her something concrete to work at and never said anything she did not

understand. She found refuge in their unfussy acceptance and reassuring Chineseness.

So she trekked out to Crusoe College for practice sessions every Wednesday. Her lion dance T-shirt went through so many washes that the rearing lion printed on the back faded from black to a patchy grey, and it became difficult to read the words “Christminster University Lion Dance Troupe” on the back even if you could read traditional Chinese. She learnt to relax her knees

in the desired horse-riding stance so she felt hardly any pain at all for at least five minutes. During tedious lectures, she tapped out the rhythms of the cymbals on her desk.

When Coco told her the truth, she found it easy to believe. She demanded no proof. Jia Qi had already known that there was something magical about lion dance.



Mr. Yu told them about the ghost on the way upstairs, speaking

low-voiced in Cantonese.

“Nick bought it with the business’s money. Without our knowledge,” he said. “We hired him because we thought he would understand the British customers better. I suppose it’s not his fault. He was very happy about it. He said it was a bargain to get an antique like that in such good condition. He took it well when we told him no more antiques, but he refuses to get rid of this one. He says it adds to the character of the hotel. Matches the

surroundings.” Mr. Yu looked outraged at the thought. “I can tell you that’s not true,” he added. “The rest of the surroundings isn’t haunted. We got priests to bless the house before we moved in. No ghosts left anywhere, knock wood.”

Jia Qi automatically rapped the banister along with Mr. Yu, but Coco was British and did not hold with superstitions. She was only interested in real ghosts.

“How old is the building?” she said.

“It was built in the 1970s,” said Mr. Yu. You could tell from the disapproval in his voice that he thought this plenty old already. “The people who built it were interested in history. This is the recreation of some earl’s house in Shropshire.”

“Wow,” said Coco. “They must have had a lot of money.”

“Hnh,” said Mr. Yu. “Gwailo have no sense. They treat the past like it’s just an old movie. Like it’s not serious.”

The room he took them to

looked like an ordinary hotel room, brightly lit and carpeted in beige, with two white beds and Van Gogh prints on the wall. Coco peered in.

“Where is it?”

“Oh, it isn’t here,” said Mr. Yu. “This is where you can wait before your performance. We try not to go to... the other room. That’s down the corridor. The third door on your right, number 88.”

“Wah, good number,” said Jia Qi without thinking.

Mr. Yu’s face turned suddenly

stormy.

“I know,” he said.

* * *

The others laughed when Jia Qi told them about the room number, except for Alec. Performances always made Alec stressed. If he had his way they would only ever have hunted ghosts, which at least didn't expose you in all your inadequacy to an audience. But as Coco and Simon and Tiong Han pointed out, what sort of a lion dance troupe didn't give

performances?

“It would piss me off too,” Alec said. “Why did they put it in that room? Why not put it in 44?”

“Nick did it, apparently,” said Coco in English. Her accent went funny when she spoke to British people, but when she was with the troupe the familiar Cantonese tones reentered her voice. “Mr. Yu said when Nick found out about eights being lucky, he thought he could pretty it up and make it into a kind of special suite, charge couples more

for it. It's larger than the other rooms as well."

"Now only the ghost gets to enjoy the space," said Tiong Han.

"Yeah, Mr. Yu said it comes out and stands around sometimes," said Coco. "They can't rent the room out. Even Nick feels it. He'll come out all covered in sweat, complaining that the heater in the room is broken."

"Hah," said Simon. "Funny. Ghosts usually make a place colder."

"What is it?" said Alec. "The haunted thing, I mean."

“Cabinet,” said Coco. There was a groan from the troupe.

“I hate haunted cabinets,” said Tiong Han. “Worse than haunted beds.”

“Yah, those doors,” said Simon. He winced at some unpleasant memory. “Cabinet door almost took off the lion’s horn once. And Alec’s hand,” he added as an afterthought.

“Worse than chairs,” said Tiong Han.

“No, chairs can be even worse,” said Coco. “This was before your

time, but once a sofa bed almost killed our lion. We had to bring in the Buddha.”

“Oh, sofas are different from chairs,” Tiong Han. “Sofas are super bad.”

“Why are ghosts so nasty one?” said Jia Qi, breaking into the stream of spectral reminiscence.

Coco shrugged. “They can be horrible. It’s actually really dangerous sometimes. Once you start a routine, you can’t be sure it’ll be OK until the lion’s eaten the ghost.”

“If you were dead you wouldn’t feel like being nice to people what,” Tiong Han pointed out.

“But weren’t any of them good people before they died?” said Jia Qi.

Coco and Tiong Han exchanged a glance.

“We usually don’t wait to find out,” said Coco.

“So we attack first and ask questions later?” said Jia Qi. She was shocked. “Like that, of course the ghosts are not good mood!”

“If we wait for them to show if

they're nice or not nice first, we'd be dead lah," said Tiong Han. "Ninety-nine percent of the ghosts I've met are all not nice. Very violent."

"They're not meant to be here, Jia Qi," said Coco. "It's really a kindness to let the lion eat them."

Simon had a less spiritual view of things.

"Lion's got to eat something," he said. "Cabbage not enough."

"Come on," said Alec abruptly. They could all tell he'd been working himself up over the performance to

come. It was going to be a whopper of a performance—outdoors in the middle of winter, on unfamiliar ground. And it was to involve what, for the troupe, passed for acrobatics. Alec stood up. “Let’s gao dim the ghost first and get it over with.”

“So you can have plenty of time to worry about the performance?” said Coco. She patted his shoulder. “It’ll be fine.”

“We should have practised more,” muttered Alec as they filed out of the room.

“It’ll be fine.”

* * *

They were all so casual about the ghost that Jia Qi didn’t even feel nervous. She’d never seen a ghost before, much less tried to lion-dance one out of existence. But there didn’t appear to be anything to be nervous about when she first saw Room 88.

It was at least twice the size of the room where they’d been put, and furnished in an Oriental style. Rich red hangings draped over the

windows. The bedspread was silk and had golden pop-eyed dragons embroidered all over it. Above the bed there was a large painting of a geisha with a parasol standing at the entrance of a Japanese house. Big red and gold vases stood in the corners of the room, containing plastic branches with pink cloth cherry blossoms.

The cumulative effect was awful. The only genuinely beautiful thing in the room was the cabinet. It was a rich dark brown, the sheen of the

lacquered wood undulled by age. On its doors were gilded panels with the usual pictures of houses, mountains, clouds, trees. The shapes of the trees were like the shape of an old woman's body when she stands up and stretches her back, like the shape of slender ghosts with arms reaching out to embrace the living. The humans in the panels were incidental, quaint: peasants carrying buckets on both ends of poles slung over their shoulders, aristocrats standing in affected poses outside

squat houses with flick-eared roofs, processions of scholars on bridges arching over a dark river.

Looking at the cabinet gave Jia Qi a creepy feeling up and down her back, but she couldn't tell whether there was anything paranormal about it. Coco gave the woodwork a quick professional look-over, then she got down to business.

She tapped the rim of the drum twice, sharply, with the drumstick. Jia Qi raised her cymbals.

“Remember ah,” Tiong Han told

her, before she and Coco went in. He already had the shaggy sequinned trousers on, halfway through his transformation into the lion's hindquarters. "No Chiang Chiang until the lion comes in. Follow the signal."

Now the drum gave voice to a deep rumbling. It was the sound of the stomach of a lion just waking from sleep to hunger. The lion came staggering into the room, blinking.

Jia Qi could still see Tiong Han and Simon's legs under the lion's

head. The lion always started off as human. In the beginning you could tell it was paint and wood and paper and cloth. At the start it was only a show.

The head darted around, the mouth clacking, as the lion sniffed the air. Jia Qi found herself falling headfirst into the dance. Simon was their best dancer and the movements of the head were lovely, each clearly defined, but following each other with perfect timing, describing a fluid narrative in the air. The lion

jumped, nosed the bed, and peered under the table, always casting glances at the cabinet over its shoulder.

Finally it minced over to the cabinet. When it was nearly on it, it paused and looked straight at Coco, blinking twice. This was the signal.

Coco and Jia Qi charged thunderously into 起獅, the Rising Lion. The lion rose and shook its horned head. 行禮—the lion bowed.

The troupe had agreed on the routine before the performance, but

as a cymbalist Jia Qi did not need to remember any of it. She followed the beat of the drum and every step came as a fresh wonder to her.

As the lion danced an enchantment began to fall on the room. It was as though the dance had made the years turn over on themselves all at once, so that the dust of centuries began to settle on the furniture in a matter of minutes. Outlines grew hazy and the room grew dark, matching the blue-black evening sky outside. Only the

cabinet glowed golden, the figures on its doors standing out in sharp relief, so vivid that they seemed about to move. And the lion—

The lion blazed through the room. Jia Qi knew its legs were Simon's and Tiong Han's legs, working in unison. She knew the tossing head and blinking eyes were operated by human hands. And yet she did not know it. The lion had changed; it was not human anymore. The spirit that slumbered in the lion head had awakened. It was a single,

strange, live creature, and the beat of the drum was the beat of its heart.

The pictures on the cabinet's face came alive. A peasant put his buckets down and rolled his shoulders. The aristocrats giggled and flirted, passing each other jars of rice wine. The scholars found good spots on the riverbank and settled down to read or make up poetry.

The cabinet began to shake. Its doors rattled. Jia Qi closed her eyes in terror. With her eyes closed, she was in a thudding, crashing world, all

cymbals and drum. She could feel the lion move around the room, its heavy footsteps dancing closer and closer to the cabinet. A gust of wind on her face meant that the lion had just swept past her. It would be opening its mouth, it would be rising over the cabinet, ready to devour, ready to swallow the ghost back into the darkness whence it came—

There was a shriek and a thud. Simon said,

“Eh, si gina lai!”

Jia Qi's eyes snapped open just in

time for her to see the cabinet jump a whole two inches off the ground. It resettled on the ground with a thump that she felt in her feet. The lion was gaping, Simon goggling through the open mouth. The lion's back deflated as Tiong Han crawled out from under the train to stare at what had come out of the cabinet.

It was indeed a child. A curly-haired black boy, about ten years old. He blinked sleepily and did not seem to know they were there at first. Then he opened his eyes wide.

“Where did you come from?” he said.

* * *

George had not heard of Malaysia. They drew him a map by committee:

“Is Laos between Myanmar and Vietnam? It is, right?” said Tiong Han.

“I don’t think Hong Kong is so high up,” said Coco, leaning over his shoulder. “And your proportions are all wrong! Singapore’s not bigger

than Hong Kong!”

“In ego it is,” said Tiong Han, who was from Johor.

“See,” said Simon to George. “It’s on the end of Asia. Half is a peninsula. The other half is stuck to Indonesia.”

The little boy bent his head over the map. It was touching to see how seriously he studied the scrawled picture. Tiong Han was studying architecture but that was apparently no guarantee of his draughtsmanship.

“The Golden Khersonese,” said George softly.

“No, no, Ma-lay-sia,” said Tiong Han.

“Where are you from, George?” said Jia Qi.

“I would say nineteenth century, going from the clothes,” said Coco. “Or maybe late 1700s. I’m not very good at telling this kind of thing.”

“I was brought to this country when I was a little boy,” said George. “My father was a king in Africa, but he lost his kingdom to the British

soldiers. He gave me to one of the soldiers so that I would be safe, and so I could be educated, and learn to be a Christian. A captain of the Navy brought me to England with him when he returned home.”

He recited this as if it were a story he had heard many times.

“Oh,” said Simon. “So you’re adopted by a British?”

George’s forehead wrinkled.

“Your new mother and father are English now?” said Coco.

“I am sorry. I’m afraid I don’t

quite understand,” said George.

“Who do you live with, George?” said Jia Qi.

The child brightened, looking relieved to be asked a question he could answer. “When I was alive, I lived with my master, Captain Joseph Pennywhite, and my mistress, his wife,” he said. “Now I am dead, I live there.”

He pointed.

They stared at the cabinet. George was gazing at the map.

“Are you all from this...

Malaysia?" he said.

"Almost," said Simon. "Me, Tiong Han, and Jia Qi are. Alec is from Hong Kong and Coco is from here."

"My parents are from Hong Kong," said Coco. "But all my friends are Malaysian. Alec and I are like honorary Malaysians."

"And you are all together," said George.

"Yah," said Simon. "The lion dance troupe has always been like that. We tried to diversify but the

ang moh—I mean, the Westerners don't really feel so comfortable. Because usually when a Westerner comes to a training session, he ends up being the only one. It's a bit lonely for them.”

George was fiddling with the edge of the paper they'd drawn the map on. He didn't say anything, but Jia Qi felt she could see right through his head into his thoughts.

She touched his shoulder.

“Do you like fireworks?” she said.



Alec let George hold the stick to which they'd tied a head of cabbage. They were the only ones staying in the hotel room: the others trooped down the stairs, Coco holding the lion's head and Simon and Tiong Han carrying the drum. Their room overlooked the courtyard where the performance was to take place. The partygoers were already spilling out of the dining room, bringing the smell of alcohol and food with them into the cold night air.

Past the courtyard were fields of grass as far as the eye could see, no buildings to interrupt the flat, rolling vastness. In the daytime it would have been pretty; at night, there was something frightening about those looming fields.

The sky in the countryside seemed larger than it was in town. Jia Qi craned her head, shivering as the air hit her bare neck. Above her a handful of stars glowed white around a yellow moon.

“I thought there’s more stars in

the country,” said Jia Qi.

“England’s too cloudy,” said Coco. She rapped the side of the drum. The lion’s head snapped up. It blinked. The dance was on.

Their audience seemed eager to be pleased—Jia Qi had never felt more grateful for the existence of alcohol—but she could still sense Coco tensing as they reached the denouement. A stick emerged from one of the windows and the cabbage dropped down. It bounced a few times as George waggled the stick to

make sure everyone in the audience had noticed it.

The lion dropped into a crouch, shaking its behind in anticipation.

Why did lions like eating cabbage? Perhaps, being magical creatures, they could taste metaphor, and eating cabbage was like having the golden flavour of prosperity lying on their tongue. Lions were also fond of wine, but this was an inclination that did not require explanation.

Jia Qi wimped out and closed her

eyes at the pivotal moment. When she opened them the lion was standing upright, the cabbage right next to its gaping maw. Inside the lion, Simon had managed to climb onto Tiong Han's shoulders.

The audience broke out into impressed applause. Jia Qi clanged as hard as she could, her hands aching from clutching the cymbals too hard. The lion wobbled—please don't let Tiong Han lose his grip, don't let Simon slip—the lion's head lunged forward, the cabbage vanished, and

the tower of lion collapsed, but in a way that almost looked purposeful. The next moment the lion was itself again, Simon and Tiong Han back in control.

The lion staggered. The cabbage was not suiting its stomach. Why did lions have such delicate stomachs? Jia Qi understood the artistic usefulness of a storytelling device that enabled things to be thrown out of the lion's mouth to an appreciative crowd, but it still seemed funny to her that so many lion dance routines revolved

around vomit.

Traditionally one showered the audience with shredded greens, indicating that it was now covered with prosperity, but there was a risk with this audience that it might just think it had been covered with cabbage. The troupe had therefore come up with an alternative. Jia Qi had suggested it, and she swelled with pride as the gold chocolate coins filled the air, accompanied by the laughter and cheering of the crowd.

“Wah, close one,” said Tiong

Han afterwards. “Simon almost fell, man. I thought habislah, sure die already.”

“I don’t think the audience noticed,” said Jia Qi.

Alec dismissed the audience with a wave of his hand. “The audience doesn’t know how to see what’s right or what’s wrong. We are the ones who know whether it was good or not,” he said. “What did you think, George?”

George’s eyes were shining.

“It was the most wonderful thing

I have ever seen,” he said.

“George is your number one fan,” said Coco to Simon.

“You were also very good,” Simon told him solemnly.

“Yah, good cabbage-holding,” said Tiong Han. George glowed.

“It wasn’t bad lah,” Alec conceded. “Apart from the slip, not bad. Eh, did you keep any of those chocolate coins?”

They ate the chocolate coins while watching the fireworks. George was enthralled—he barely

glanced at the chocolate when it was offered.

“Thank you, but I don’t do that anymore,” he said.

Jia Qi withdrew into her hoodie, crimping her sleeves closed with her fingers so the air would not come in.

“Are you cold?” whispered George. Jia Qi nodded. “Here, take my hand.”

“Oh,” said Jia Qi. “You’re so warm!”

George was watching the sky. Red sparks bloomed against the

clouds, were reflected in his enchanted eyes.

“It’s always been warm,” he said. “Since I died.”



They were packing away the equipment when Jia Qi said, “What are we going to do about George?”

The troupe stopped and looked at one another.

“We can’t take him away from here,” said Coco. “Ghosts have to stay with the object they’re haunting.”

“Then?” said Jia Qi. Her chest felt tight. “We just leave him here, is it? Never mind that this small kid is lonely. It’s none of our business also.”

No response, though everyone looked uncomfortable. Jia Qi ploughed on. “Like that we might as well finish the job. Go back to the room and make sure the lion eats him this time. Otherwise we’ve just left it dangling.”

“Oh, we can’t do that,” Coco exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

“You said they all are not meant to be here,” said Jia Qi. She hardly recognised her own voice. “At least if the lion eats him then he’s free. Maybe he can go to heaven, or be reborn, or—”

“Jia Qi, spirits don’t go free after they get eaten,” said Alec.

“Oh,” said Jia Qi, taken aback. “What happens to them?”

“What d’you think happens after a lion eats you?” said Tiong Han.

“Digested,” said Simon briefly.

“Yes,” said Coco. She seemed

embarrassed. "Sorry, Jia Qi, I should have explained that to you in the beginning. We're not priests. We're just an extermination service."

"Doesn't seem so right to eat George," said Simon. "He's smaller than my little brother also."

"But if we all leave him stuck here, what we gonna tell Mr. Yu?" said Jia Qi.

From Tiong Han's face it was clear he had been hoping to avoid this question.

"I thought if we just left, maybe

he won't notice," he ventured.

Coco rounded on him. "Tiong Han! He paid us an extra £100 for the ghostbusting! You weren't going to tell him we didn't do it?"

"OK, OK, fine," said Tiong Han. He looked wistful: their lion head was becoming somewhat tattered in its old age, and he'd been eyeing new ones on the Internet. "But you tell him, can or not? I feel shy. They gave us free dinner some more."

"I will tell him," said Jia Qi.

Mr. Yu was not pleased. "Lion dance is supposed to get rid of evil spirits. Why should I hire you if you're not going to bring good luck?"

"He's nine or ten only," said Simon. "He can't be an evil spirit at that age, right? Naughty at the very most."

"Mr. Yu, the ghost is a child," said Jia Qi. "How is he going to bring bad luck?"

"Yah, he can't even drive," said Tiong Han helpfully.

“Old or young, ghosts are bad for business,” said Mr. Yu. “You can’t have this kind of supernatural thing in the hospitality industry. People go to hotels to relax, not to pretend they are in a horror movie. I’ll have to get a priest in—or burn the cabinet—”

A cry of protest rose from the troupe.

“You can’t do that!” said Coco.

“Mr. Yu,” said Jia Qi. “Give us the cabinet. We’ll get rid of it for you.”

“We will?” said Tiong Han.

Mr. Yu hesitated. “What will I

tell Nick?”

“Tell him we stole it,” said Jia Qi recklessly.

“Oh no, don’t say that,” said Tiong Han. “Say you lost it.”

“We can’t take the cabinet,” whispered Alec. “Where are we going to keep it?”

Jia Qi left the others to argue it out between themselves. She had more important things to worry about.

The air in the hotel room was cold. The lights took a while to

brighten after she flipped the switch, and in their dim glow the cabinet looked like nothing more than a dead piece of wood. Maybe George wasn't there anymore?

But when Jia Qi knelt down and asked her question, she felt the room grow warm. A breath of humid air brushed her cheek. George was sitting on the floor next to her.

“Could I help with the dance again? If I came with you?” he said. “Tiong Han said I held the cabbage well.”

“Of course. You can do other things also if you like,” said Jia Qi. “We’ll teach you how to play the cymbals. And—” George was probably too small to be the lion. “And you can learn how to be the Buddha. You’ll be the youngest member of the troupe ever.”

“Would I be a member of the troupe?” said George, wide-eyed.

“You won’t be on the mailing list,” said Jia Qi. “But yah. Only if you want lah.”

“Oh yes,” said George.



There wasn't any space left in the back of the van, so they put the cabinet on the back seat. Jia Qi sat next to it, promising to make sure it didn't fall over. The rest of the troupe sat in the front and talked all the way back, but in the back it was quiet and stiflingly warm. Jia Qi felt herself blinking, her eyelids trying to gum her eyes shut.

The drive back seemed longer than the drive to the hotel had been. They went deeper and deeper into

the darkness, hedges rising up outside the window and falling away, the country a slumbering mystery behind them. Jia Qi stretched out an arm across the front of the cabinet. It would wake her up if it so much as wobbled. She could let herself drift.

As sleep veiled her eyes, she felt a small warm hand grasp hers. She slept and dreamt of sunshine; she dreamt of home.



The House of Aunts

by Zen Cho

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The house stood back from the road in an orchard. In the orchard, monitor lizards the length of a man's arm stalked the

branches of rambutan trees like tigers on the hunt. Behind the house was an abandoned rubber tree plantation, so proliferant with monkeys and leeches and spirits that it might as well have been a forest.

Inside the house lived the dead.



The first time she saw the boy across the classroom, Ah Lee knew she was in love because she tasted durian on her tongue. That was what happened—no poetry about it. She

looked at a human boy one day and the creamy rank richness of durian filled her mouth. For a moment the ghost of its stench staggered on the edge of her teeth, and then it vanished.

She had not tasted fruit since before the baby came. Since before she was dead.

After school she went home and asked the aunts about it.

“Ah Ma,” she said, “can you taste anything besides people?”

It was evening—Ah Lee had had

to stay late at school for marching drills—and the aunts were already cooking dinner. The scent of fried liver came from the wok wielded by Auntie Girl. It smelt exquisite, but where before the smell of fried garlic would have filled her mouth with saliva, now it was the liver that made Ah Lee's post-death nose sit up and take interest. It would have smelt even better raw.

“Har?” said Ah Ma, who was busy chopping ginger.

“I mean,” said Ah Lee. “When

you eat the ginger, can you taste it? Because I can't. I can only taste people. Everything else got no taste. Like drinking water only."

Disapproval rose from the aunts and floated just above their heads like a mist. The aunts avoided discussing their undeceased state. It was felt to be an indelicate subject. It was like talking about your bowel movements, or other people's adultery.

"Why do you ask this kind of question?" said Ah Ma.

“Better focus on your homework,” said Tua Kim.

“I finished it already,” said Ah Lee. “But why do you put in all the spices when you cook, then? If it doesn’t make any difference?”

“It makes a difference,” said Auntie Girl.

“Why do you even cook the people?” said Ah Lee. “They’re nicest when they’re raw.”

“Ah girl,” said Ah Ma, “you don’t talk like that, please. We are not animals. Even if we are not alive, we

are still human. As long as we are human we will eat like civilised people, not dogs in the forest. If you want to know why, that is why.”

There was a silence. The liver sizzled on the pan. Ah Ma diced more ginger than anyone would need, even if they could taste it.

“Is that why Sa Ee Poh chops intestines and fries them in batter to make them look like yu char kuay?” asked Ah Lee.

“I ate fried bread sticks for breakfast every morning in my life,”

said Sa Ee Poh. "Just because I am like this, doesn't mean I have to stop."

"Enough, enough," said Ah Chor. As the oldest of the aunts, she had the most authority. "No need to talk about this kind of thing. Ah Lee, come pick the roots off these tauges and don't talk so much."

The aunts had a horror of talking about death. In life this had been an understandable superstition, but it seemed peculiar to dislike the mention of death when you were

dead.

Ah Lee kept running into the wall of the aunts' disapproval headfirst. They were a family who believed that there was a right way to do things, and consequently a right way to think. Ah Lee always seemed to be thinking wrong.

She could see that as her caretakers the aunts had a right to determine where she went and what she did. But she objected to their attempts to change what she thought. After all, none of them had died

before the age of 55, while she was stuck forever at 16.

“It’s okay if I don’t follow you a hundred percent,” she told them one day in exasperation. “It’s called a generation gap.”

This came after Sa Ee Poh had spent half an hour marvelling over her capacity for disagreement. In Sa Ee Poh’s day, girls did not answer back. They listened to their elders, did their homework, came top in class, bought the groceries, washed the floor, and had enough time left

over to learn to play the guzheng and volunteer for charity. When Sa Ee Poh had been a girl, she had positively delighted in submission. But children these days....

Once an aunt got hold of an observation she did not let go of it until she had crunched its bones and sucked the marrow out, and saved the bones to make soup with later.

“Gap? What gap?” Sa Ee Poh said.

“It’s a branded clothing,” said Auntie Girl. She was the cool aunt.

“American shop. They sell jeans, very expensive.”

The aunts surveyed Ah Lee with gentle disappointment.

“Why do you care so much about brands?” said Ah Ma. “If you want clothes, Ah Ma can make clothes for you. Better than the clothes in the shop also.”

So Ah Lee did not tell them about the boy. If the aunts could not handle her having thoughts, imagine how much worse they would be about her having feelings. Especially

love—love, stealing into her life like a thief in the night, filling her dried out heart and plumping it out.

Being a vampire was not so bad. It was like eating steak every day, but when steak was your favourite food in the world. It wasn't anything like the books and movies, though. In books and movies it seemed quite romantic to be a vampire, but Ah Lee and her aunts were clearly the wrong sort of people for the ruffled shirt and velvet jacket style of vampirism.

Undeath had not lent Ah Lee any

mystical glamour. It had not imbued her with magical powers, gained her exotic new friends, or even done anything for her acne.

In fact Ah Lee's life had become more boring post-death than it had been pre-, because at least when she was alive she had had friends. Now she just had aunts. She still went to school, but she was advised against fraternising with her schoolfellows for obvious reasons.

“Anyway, what is friends?” said the aunts. “Won't last one. Only

family will be there for you at the end of the day.”

The sayings of aunts filled her head till they poked out of her ears and nostrils.

Yet here came this boy one fine day, and suddenly her ears and nostrils were cleared. Her head was blown open. The sayings of the aunts fluttered away in the wind and dissolved with nothing to hold on to. Love was like swallowing a cili padi whole.

A classmate caught her staring at the boy the next day.

“Eh, see something very nice, is it?” said the classmate, her voice heavy with innuendo. She might as well have added, “Hur hur hur.”

Fortunately Ah Lee did not have quick social reflexes. Her face remained expressionless. She said contemplatively,

“I can’t remember whether today is my turn to clean the window or not. Sorry, you say what ah? You

think that guy looks very nice, is it?”

The classmate retreated, embarrassed.

“No lah, just joking only,” she said.

“Who is that guy?” said Ah Lee, maintaining the facade of detachment. “Is he in our class? I never see him before.”

“Blur lah you,” said the classmate. “That one is Ridzual. He’s new. He just move here from KL.”

“He came to Lubuk Udang from KL?” said Ah Lee.

“I know, right,” said the classmate. This seemed an eccentric move to them both. Everyone had uncles and aunts, cousins, older brothers and sisters who lived in KL. Only grandparents stayed in Lubuk Udang. In three years, Ah Lee knew, none of the people sitting around her in the classroom would still be living there. Lubuk Udang was a place you moved away from when you were still young enough to have something to move for.

Fresh surprises awaited. The first

time the boy opened his mouth in class, a strong Western accent came out. It said, “I don’t know” in answer to the obvious question the Add Maths teacher had posed him, but it made even that confession of ignorance sound glamorous.

People said Ridzual had been at an international school in KL. The nearest international school to Lubuk Udang was in Penang, a whole state and Strait away.

“He sounds like TV hor,” said the classmate. “Apparently he was born

in US.”

Ridzual called natrium “sodium” and kalium “potassium”. For the duration of his first week at school he wore dazzlingly white hi-top leather sneakers instead of the whitewashed canvas shoes everyone else wore. The shoes didn’t last long—they were really too cool to be regulation. But it didn’t matter that Ridzual had to give them up to the discipline teacher a week after he had started. The aroma of leather hung around him forever after, even when he was only

wearing Bata like the rest of the class.

Ah Lee had never been in love but she took to it like a natural despite her lack of practice. She spun secret fantasies about him: the things they would say to each other, the adventures they would have. She would reel off dazzling one-liners; he would gaze at her with intrigued longan seed eyes. She saw them sitting in a cafe unlike any kopitiam to be found in Lubuk Udang, with flowered wallpaper, tiny glossy mahogany tables, and brisk friendly

waitresses who took your orders down in a little notebook and did not shout in the direction of the kitchen, “Milo O satu!”

They would sit together at a table, Ridzual’s curly head bent close to her smooth one. They would speak of serious things, but she would also make him laugh. Through this love she would be renewed, brilliant, special.

However lurid her fantasies got, her imagination never stretched beyond conversation. You could not

imagine kissing a boy when you were never more than a room's width away from an aunt. Ah Lee's favourite time to dream was in that precious space of quiet between getting in bed and falling asleep. She could construct a pretty good Parisian cafe as she lay underneath her Donald Duck blanket. But cafes were one thing: kisses were another. No kiss could survive Ji Ee's snores from the mattress across the room.

It was no big deal. There was time enough to imagine the later

stages of her romance—after all, she had not even got to the overtures. Ah Lee came from a family that believed in being prepared. While staring at the back of Ridzual's lovely head in class, she wove conversation openers, from the casual to the calculatedly cool.

She then made the fatal mistake of writing them down.



The aunts would have pulled it off if they had left everything to Ji Ee.

In life Ji Ee had played the violin. She could have been a professional if her husband had not become envious and depressed, so that she had had to stop playing to keep him happy. She had not touched a violin since, but she still had the soul of an artist. It gave her sensibility.

She sat down next to Ah Lee one day and asked her what she was doing.

Ah Lee was trying to think of nonchalant ways to ask Ridzual what life meant to him.

“Bio homework,” she said. She snapped her exercise book shut.

“Good, good,” said Ji Ee. She looked dreamily into the distance.

They were sitting on the step outside the kitchen door. Behind them came the hiss and clang of Ah Chor making human stomach soup with bucketloads of pepper and coriander. In front of them stood the orchard.

It was one of those blindingly sunny days: the leaves of the trees shone with reflected sunlight, so

bright that if you looked at them purple-green shapes remained imprinted on your eyes after you looked away. The heat was relieved by an occasional breeze that lifted the leaves and touched their faces like a caress.

A monitor lizard paused on the branch of a tree to look at them. It blinked and ran up the branch, out of sight.

“When you are young, you must focus,” said Ji Ee. “You must pay attention at school, study hard and

become clever. When you are young, that is when you have the best chance. And you are young now, in this modern day, when women can do everything. Can be doctor, can be lawyer. You know none of us went to university. Your Ah Chor wasn't allowed and when Ah Ma and Sa Ee Poh were young, during the war, everything was too kelam-kabut. I wasn't clever enough. Auntie Girl's family couldn't afford it, so she could only get a diploma.

“But you, Ah Lee, you have all

the opportunities. We have lived so long, we have saved enough money. Maybe if you study hard, if you get a scholarship, you could even go to England like my uncle the doctor, your Tua Tiao Kong. Your English is so good. You have a good chance.”

Ah Lee was used to such pep talks. The aunts never scolded; they did not believe in raising their voices. They only “told”. The benefits of only ever being told and not scolded were obvious, but the disadvantage of it was that while

people only scolded when you had done something wrong, aunts got to tell all the time.

“I know, Ji Ee,” Ah Lee said. “You all have told me before.” In her daydream Ridzual had been on the point of tucking her hair behind her ear. She was impatient to return to it.

“You must not get distracted by anything,” said Ji Ee. “There will be time for other things when you are older. There is so much time ahead of you. Right now you must focus on your studies. Then we can tell all the

neighbours about our clever girl.”

She put her soft hand on Ah Lee's arm and stroked it. Love came up the arm and melted Ah Lee's thorny teenaged heart. When Ji Ee said,

“You'll listen to Ji Ee, ya?”

Ah Lee said pliantly, “Yes, Ji Ee.”

So she never heard the rest of the talk, planned if Ah Lee had proved intransigent, which went into alarming detail about the inadvisability of youthful romance.

The way Ji Ee had two-stepped around the subject matter, Ah Lee

would never have known what she was talking about if not for everyone else. All the other aunts believed in the forthright approach, and not one of them could keep a secret.

When Ah Lee came home from school the day after Ji Ee had given her little talk, Ah Chor looked up from the dining table and said,

“Ah girl! Who is this Malay boy? What is he called already?” She turned to Ah Ma. “Ri—Li—Liwat or what?”

Ah Ma did not know any dirty

words, and could not have told you what sodomy was if you'd asked her. She said unconcernedly, "Ridzwan, Ma. He is called Ridzwan. Isn't that right, Ah Lee?"

"Cannot marry a Malay," Ah Chor told Ah Lee. "They don't know how to treat their women."

Ah Lee was surfing the waves of outrage. She started to say, "You all read my diary?" Then she clamped her mouth shut in fury. Of course they had. She could just picture Ji Ee and Aunty Girl reading it out loud,

translating the English and Malay to Hokkien as they went along for the benefit of Ah Chor and Ah Ma and Sa Ee Poh, who could not read. The aunts' conception of the right to privacy went far enough to allow you to close the toilet door when you were peeing, but no further.

“Ah Ma saw you when you were being born,” Ah Ma said. No further explanation was required.

“Even if you think you will be so happy and the man is so good, you don't know what can happen,” said

Ah Chor. “Do you know or not, they can marry four wives? Malay men....”

“Si Gu had four wives. He wasn’t even Muslim,” said Auntie Girl.

Ah Chor said repressively, “Your uncle was a very naughty boy.

“It wasn’t four wives, not four wives,” said Ah Ma. “Only one wife. The others were girlfriends only.”

“The laksa lady cannot even count as girlfriend,” sniffed Sa Ee Poh. “Remember how she threw a bowl of laksa in his face when he told

her he wasn't going to marry her? Even a laksa lady can put on airs like that."

"She asked him to pay for it some more!" said Ah Ma. She realised they were enjoying reminiscing about her naughty brother's adventures rather too much, and changed her face to look serious. "Ah Lee, this is what men are like."

"Not all men," said Ji Ee.

"Yes, all men," said Sa Ee Poh.

"Only bad men," said Ah Ma.

"But when you are young you cannot

tell whether a man is a good man or a bad man yet. You are too small. Now you must focus on your studies. Don't think about this Ridzwan."

"His name," said Ah Lee, "is Ridzual."

She stormed out of the kitchen.

* * *

From that day there was no respite for her. The aunts abounded in stories of bad men and the bad things they had done to good women.

“Look at your great-grandfather,” said Aunty Girl.

“Shouldn’t speak ill of the dead,” said Ah Ma piously. “He was your grandfather, Ah Girl. You should show respect.”

“No need to respect That Man,” said Ah Chor, who had been That Man’s wife.

“This is what happens when you marry too young,” she told Ah Lee. “That Man didn’t even deserve to be called husband. I was only 19 when I had my third child, your Sa Ee Poh,

and already he had a second wife.”

“She lived in Ipoh,” Sa Ee Poh confirmed.

“When I found out, I told him, if you don’t stop seeing her, I will take my children and go,” said Ah Chor. “He promised he wouldn’t see her again. But all along after that, little did I know he was going back and forth between me and that other woman! My fourth child is the same age as her second child. He didn’t know how to feel shame! Never mind my heart. At least if she didn’t

have children nobody would know. But he didn't even care enough to save my face."

Ah Ma was uncomfortable. "Ma, so long ago... it's not good to speak bad of other people."

"Ah Lee must know so she won't make the same mistake," said Ah Chor. "He didn't even support the second wife properly, so she came to me asking for money. When I saw her with the baby, I packed up and brought all my children here. Don't think this was your grandfather's

house! He was rich before he lost it all in gambling, but this was my parents' home. His creditors couldn't touch this. All this was my land. If That Man came on it without my permission, I could call the police on him."

Ah Lee was interested despite herself. "Did you ever see him again?"

"Of course," said Ah Chor. "Where do you think your four other great-uncles and great-aunts came from?"

"Ma says too much. Shouldn't

talk about such things,” said Ah Ma to Sa Ee Poh, but Sa Ee Poh only laughed.

“We all know this story already,” she said. “Let Ah Lee listen. Maybe she will learn something also.”

“But you said if he came on your land you would call the police,” Ah Lee said to Ah Chor.

“Oh, he was my husband, after all,” said Ah Chor. “I didn’t let him live here. Only visit. I told him, you can come and stay for good only after you get rid of that woman. But

he didn't, so even after he asked and asked, I never went back to him.

"It wasn't easy, you know or not? Raising eight children with no husband. Lucky my mother was there to help me. That's why you cannot think about this kind of thing at your age—men, romance. It's too early."

"But Ah Ma married Ah Kong when she was 16," Ah Lee objected. "I'm going to be 17 already."

"That's not the same," said Sa Ee Poh.

Ah Ma stared at her hands on the table.

“You forget, girl,” said Ji Ee gently. “There was a war then.”

Ji Ee’s husband wouldn’t let her play the violin, an iniquity long known to Ah Lee. Curiously, if anything was going to stop Ah Lee’s wayward heart from loving Ridzual, it was Ji Ee’s patience when she talked about Ji Tiao.

“He was a good husband. Men have their little ways. They have their likes and dislikes. As long as they are

responsible, as long as they look after you and the children, there's no harm in letting them have their way."

Ah Lee was less impressed by the wickedness of Sa Ee Poh's husband. Sa Ee Poh was the only one who spoke about her husband with the complacency of someone who had asked more of love and always received it. But she still complained about her husband's vegetarianism.

"Sa Tiao Kong being a vegetarian doesn't sound so bad," Ah Lee objected. "How was that suffering for

you?”

“You think what? I had to be vegetarian also!” Sa Ee Poh retorted. “You think he cooked for himself? I cooked for the two of us. Vegetarian a few times a year or for a few months, I don’t mind. Vegetarian all the time... for the rest of my life I never tasted garlic or onion!”

Ah Ma kept the story about her marriage for the right time. One night Ah Lee’s evening hunt had taken longer than usual, so she got home late and only managed to

finish her Add Maths homework after 11. She was feeling creaky-jointed and lonely as she got ready for bed in a house full of night sounds. The beam of light under Ah Ma's door came as a pleasant surprise.

She poked her head into Ah Ma's room. "Not sleeping yet, Ah Ma?"

Ah Ma was lying propped up on the pillows, her eyes half-closed, but when Ah Lee spoke she sat bolt upright.

"No! Cannot sleep," she said in a

blatant lie. "Brushed your teeth already? Come sit down next to Ah Ma."

Ah Lee climbed into bed to the soft melody of Ah Ma's fussing: "Come under the blanket, you'll get cold. Let Ah Ma feel your hands. Ah, see lah, so cold! Next time you mustn't go out until so late. Not good to work so late at night. Why don't you want to eat dinner with us?"

"I like to have fresh meat sometimes," said Ah Lee.

“Then don’t be so picky. Ah Ma always tells you, eat the first man you see.”

“I did, Ah Ma,” Ah Lee protested. Now that she was under the blanket with Ah Ma’s bony arm around her and Ah Ma’s warm chest against her cheek, she felt drowsy, protected. “The guy had a motorbike. Didn’t know how to get rid of it.”

“So how? Did you manage to get rid of it in the end?”

“Yes. Flew out of town and dumped it in the middle of an oil

palm plantation. No blood stains, and I took off the licence plate.”

Ah Ma tsked.

“So difficult,” she said. “Next time just eat with us. We all have hunted for you already. And we are older than you so we know which people are the nicest to eat.”

“OK, OK,” mumbled Ah Lee.

They sat in silence for a while. Ah Lee half-shut her eyes to keep out the light from the lamp on the bedside table. Through the slits of her eyes she could see Ah Ma’s

reading glasses and the container in which she kept her false teeth. The teeth floated in cloudy water, yellowed by coffee and blood.

The cicadas screeched. The ceiling fan hummed to itself. The air was cool enough that the breeze it created was a pleasure rather than the necessity it usually was. Ah Lee forgot the persistent sense of irritation she had had since the aunts had found her diary, which had felt as if she had sand in her underwear. She was almost asleep when Ah Ma

spoke.

“Do you know why I married your Ah Kong?” she said.

Embarrassment woke Ah Lee up.

“Don’t know,” said Ah Lee. An expectant pause ensued. Ah Ma was waiting for a better attempt at an answer. “Er... you loved him?”

“Where got?” said Ah Ma. “I was 16, a little girl only. How to know what is love yet? Ah Ma washed your backside when you were a baby. Now that is love.”

“That’s different,” said Ah Lee.

“You wouldn’t marry someone just because they didn’t mind washing your backside.”

“Don’t answer back to your elders,” said Ah Ma. “No, I married him because of the war. The Japanese soldiers used to come to everyone’s houses looking for young girls. So Ah Chor cut our hair and put us in our brothers’ clothes. It worked with Sa Ee Poh because she was younger and skinny, but you know when Ah Ma was young Ah Ma was so chubby-chubby. Even wearing boys’

clothes, I still looked like a girl.

“When the soldiers came Ah Chor would tell us to run to the forest behind the house and hide there until the soldiers went away. So horrible! Must lie in the mud. Cannot move even with mosquitoes biting your body. When I came back to the house my face looked like it had pimples all over it because of the mosquito bites, and my legs were covered with leeches. I had to sit down in the kitchen and Ah Chor would put salt on them, but you

cannot take them off with your hand, you know? Must wait until they drop off. Then when they came off, my legs would bleed everywhere. So horrible.”

“That’s why you never let me play in the forest,” said Ah Lee. “Because you don’t like leeches.”

Ah Ma nodded.

“One day some soldiers came without warning to our house. I was in the kitchen cutting ubi kayu. Those days we had nothing much to eat, only tapioca that we grew

ourselves. There was no time to run out to the forest, so I just tried to make myself look small, bent my head over the chopping board. Your Ah Chor was so scared, she offered them all the food: do you want Nescafe, do you want biscuit, this lah, that lah. And she talked. Usually when the soldiers came we didn't talk so much. Scared they think we asked questions because we were spies or what. But Ah Chor didn't want them to look at me, so she kept talking. Did they like Malaya? How was

Japan like, not so hot? Her Japanese was not so good but she used every word she knew. When she ran out of words she knew, she repeated everything she'd already said.

“But the soldiers kept looking over at me. I was so scared I cut my finger instead of the ubi and the blood went all over the tapioca. And I didn't even make a sound. The soldiers drank coffee. They talked to Ah Chor, very friendly. Then they finally got up to go. Suddenly their captain turned around and pointed

at me. He said,

“Can we have that tapioca?”

“All along they were looking at the ubi kayu on the shelf above my head! We gave them all the ubi we harvested from our own plants, even though we went hungry for the next few days. Your great-grandfather said Ah Chor should have given me away instead.”

“That wasn’t very nice of him,” said Ah Lee.

“Men cannot stand having empty stomachs,” said Ah Ma. “After

that your great-grandparents were very anxious to see me married. When your Ah Kong came to lodge with us he was already quite old—38 years old—and we only knew him a few weeks before he asked to marry me. But he was a teacher and an educated man and the Japanese respected him, so my mother and father said yes.”

A hush. Ah Lee said into it, “He wasn’t so bad, was he?” She remembered her grandfather as a benign figure, distant, but kindly

enough when he was reminded of your existence.

“Your Ah Kong was a good father,” said Ah Ma. “All his students at his school looked up to him. Even the Japanese could see that he had a good character. And he knew how to be polite. He never said a bad word to me.

“But when a girl marries so young, to someone so much older... and he was educated, and I couldn’t even read. I could hold a pen but I could only draw pictures with it. Ah

girl, you must never tell anybody this. But your Ah Kong did not respect me. Without love you can live a happy life. Love is something that will come after you live together with your husband, after you have children together. But a woman should not marry where there is no respect. Respect is the most important thing.

“So you must study hard and go to university. Now, at your age, is not the time to look at boys. Understand or not?”

“Yes,” said Ah Lee. But the mutinous thought rumbled to the surface of her mind: They’re the ones who don’t understand.

When she was a child Ah Lee had often wondered whether adults could read her mind. They seemed to have an uncanny ability to tell what she was thinking at any given moment. Ah Ma evinced this telepathy now:

“Ah, you’re angry already,” she said. “Don’t think so much. Listen to Ah Ma and do what you’re told. Now

give me a kiss and go to bed.”

* * *

In the end it was not even Ah Lee's doing. Suddenly, easily, without any need for imaginary cafes or prepared lines scribbled in exercise books, Ah Lee became friends with Ridzual.

It was because of Thursdays. Ji Ee and Aunty Girl were the only two of the aunts who could drive, so it was their job to pick Ah Lee up from school. But they had line dancing

every Thursday and so they were an hour late.

Ah Lee usually waited for them in the canteen, doing homework if she felt like it and daydreaming if she didn't. In the middle of the day there weren't many people around, and it was pleasant, even quiet. It smelled of grease, heated metal from the car park, and the freshly-washed flesh of the afternoon session kids waiting for school to start.

The background hum of talk and the hiss of oil in frying pans made Ah

Lee feel secure. She liked the feeling of being idle while others were busy, alone when others were talking.

It was at this peaceful moment, while Ah Lee was following a drop of condensation on her glass of iced soy bean milk with a finger and thinking about nothing much, that Ridzual tapped her on the shoulder. He said, “Tamadun Awal, right?”

And that was how she met him. The boy who gave her back her sense of taste.

He dropped his schoolbag on the

floor and sat on the bench next to her with an admirable lack of self-consciousness.

“Your name is Eng Ah Lee? Don’t worry, I’m not a stalker. I know ’cos I was checking out all our team members in class. I’m using this project as an exercise to get to know people. My name’s Ridzual, I’m new. So what do you think of early civilisations? I don’t know shit about them.”

Despite her many fantasies, Ah Lee had not seriously considered

ever actually talking to Ridzual. She waited for her throat to close and her muscles to freeze. But she found herself speaking naturally, as if to a friend whom she had known forever.

“It’s OK. I like this kind of thing,” she said. “Anyway, at least it’s not Persatuan Penulis or whatever.”

“Hah! Don’t even say that,” said Ridzual. “No, that’s true. At least with Tamadun Awal maybe we can dress up like Ancient Egyptians or something. I think I’d look good in

eyeliner.”

“Nanti kena rotan by the discipline teacher then you know,” said Ah Lee. “You know Puan Aminah doesn’t even let us wear coloured watches. Must be black, plain black strap.” She showed him the watch she was wearing. “Metal watch also cannot. Too gaya konon.”

“Wah lau,” said Ridzual. He said it in a toneless accent Ah Lee found peculiarly charming. “I think that woman is just jealous. Like when she confiscated my shoes. She couldn’t

stand looking at them, just got too jealous of my style.”

It would have been obnoxious if he had been serious. But Ridzual wore a perpetual embarrassed smile, an uncertainty around the eyes, that made it obvious that the hot air was just joking. Ah Lee liked vulnerability in a human, and she warmed to this.

“She took your shoes?” she said. They both looked down at his feet, now encased in boring white canvas. “Never give back meh?”

“I never saw them again,” said Ridzual. “I think she’s wearing them now. Sometimes if you look closely you can see the white flash under the hem of her baju.

“Discipline teachers cannot stand me,” he said mournfully. “I remind them of what they can never achieve. At my last school there was one teacher like that. Encik Velu. He used to chase me around the school with a rotan. He said it’s because I ponteng or I made rude signs at the teacher or I kencing in the beaker or some

garbage like that. But he couldn't fool me. I knew it was because he wished he was like me when he was young, one million years ago."

"You peed in the beaker?" said Ah Lee.

"Only once," said Ridzual modestly. "It was for science. I wanted to titrat it but the kimia teacher stop me before I can do it."

"International school got discipline teacher meh?" said Ah Lee.

"What makes you think I went to international school?" said Ridzual.

Ah Lee went pink.

“Your slang,” she said. “You talk like Mat Salleh.”

“Oh, that,” said Ridzual. It was his turn to look embarrassed. “That’s called a Bangsar accent. But don’t hold it against me. I’m trying to be a Lubuk Udangite. A good prawn.”

“I’ve live in Lubuk Udang my whole life,” said Ah Lee.

“Right? What should I do to become a good Lubuk Udangite?”

“Don’t call us prawns,” said Ah Lee.

Ah Lee had not had a friend to spend break with since she'd started at that school. She did not eat during break. It had seemed simpler to avoid the crowd at the canteen, and find some out-of-the-way spot on the school grounds where she could read.

Of course, it had been different before she was dead. But that was before, in another life—and more importantly, at a different school.

Now that she and Ridzual were

friends, Ah Lee bought a bag of keropok lekor in the canteen every day and ate them while Ridzual wolfed down a bowl of tomyam noodles.

She had loved the chewy fried fish sticks in life. Now she was dead they tasted of nothing. She ate slowly and threw the remaining keropok away when break was over. She felt bad about the waste of it—heart-pain, the aunts would have said. Ah Lee's upbringing had trained her to a mindful parsimony, so that it did

almost feel like a physical pain to see the fish sticks tumbling into the bin.

She asked Tua Kim if she would disguise some innards for her to take to school.

Tua Kim considered her for a moment in silence. Then she said,

“I’ll deep-fry them. They’ll look like chicken nugget.”

She turned back to her washing.

“Er, Tua Kim,” said Ah Lee. “Um, don’t tell the others, OK or not? Ah Chor and Ah Ma and all of them. Ah Ma will scold me for eating fried

things. She'll say I'll get pimples."

When Ah Lee saw Tua Kim's face she felt foolish for the lie.

"This is because of your friend," Tua Kim said, in the tone of one pointing out an obvious fact to a dim person.

Ah Lee looked down at her feet. Her smallest toes curled in embarrassment.

"I'm shy to be the one not eating," she mumbled. "People like to eat together."

"You need your own friends,"

said Tua Kim. When Ah Lee peeked up she saw that Tua Kim's face had not softened. She spoke almost sternly. It was not kindness in her face, but understanding.

“You need your own thing,” said Tua Kim. “Something that's nothing to do with your family. You feel this especially when you're young, but even for old people it's important. Some people don't understand this kind of thing. So it's better not to talk so much about it.”

She wiped her hand on a

dishcloth and started putting the clean dishes back in the cupboard. “I’ll put your snack in your backpack in the morning. Other people don’t need to see.”

“Thank you, Tua Kim,” said Ah Lee.

She had never thanked an aunt for anything before. It was understood that they would do things for her, that that was the way the world worked. She did not need to thank them any more than trees thanked the sun for shining or the

earth thanked the clouds for rain. Ah Lee was not sure the aunts would have understood or even registered any attempt on her part to express gratitude for the many ways in which they cared for her.

It made her feel funny to say the words—stripped, somehow. Skinless and shy. To say it was to contemplate a world in which the aunts did not look after her.

Tua Kim only inclined her head slightly to show she had heard. She made no other response. That was

one thing you could rely on Tua Kim for. She had a sense of the appropriateness of things.

The next day at school Ah Lee opened her plastic container and almost felt normal, eating fried kidney nuggets as if she were any ordinary kid at school. Ridzual sneaked looks at the nuggets as he was eating his tomyam noodles. When he had finished his noodles, he said casually,

“What’s that?”

Ah Lee had expected this. Food

was for sharing. If she had been human she would have responded to his interest by offering him a nugget.

This simple unthinking generosity had been put beyond her power after her death—one reason why she had not bothered with friends until Ridzual. Fortunately there was a simple way of avoiding awkwardness.

“Pork,” she said. She ate another nugget.

“I’ve always wondered what pork tastes like,” said Ridzual to the air.

“I’ve always thought it’s very important to respect other people’s religion,” said Ah Lee to the nuggets.

“What is life if you don’t taste everything that the world has to offer?” said Ridzual.

“In this country we must accept other people’s customs,” said Ah Lee. “Not just tolerate, but respect. That is how to live together.”

Ridzual laughed and gave up.

“If you don’t want to share your nugget, say lah,” he said. “Why so shy to admit you’re greedy?”

“Who’s greedy now?” said Ah Lee. “One bowl of tomyam, how many otak-otak—tak cukup ke? Your mother and father don’t feed you?”

“I’m a man! Men need nutrition, OK,” said Ridzual with dignity. Ah Lee made jeering noises through a mouthful of nugget.

* * *

Of course perfect happiness could not be allowed to continue without an aunt stepping in to

intervene. If anyone had ever dared to suggest to the aunts that children should be allowed to make their own mistakes and learn from them, it would have horrified the aunts.

Ah Lee was doing her Chemistry homework in the kitchen one afternoon when Auntie Girl said,

“Wah, studies so funny meh? Why are you smiling?”

Ah Lee started. She had been thinking about her conversation with Ridzual about nuggets, but she hadn't realised she was smiling.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Must be that small boy,” said Ji Ee.

“No!” said Ah Lee a little too loudly. “Everything is Ridzual this, Ridzual that. You think that’s the only thing I think about, is it?”

Before this outburst, the aunts had been absorbed in their usual afternoon task of preparing dinner and had only been making chat for the sake of it. They squatted over their buckets of viscera, sorting the nice bits of the human innards (the

intestines, the liver, the kidneys, the heart, the lungs) from the less nice bits (the spleen, the gallbladder, the oesophagus).

Now the aunts were all interested. Auntie Girl even washed her bloody hands and came to sit at the table with Ah Lee.

“Who’s this Ridzual?” said Ah Chor.

“She’s talking about that Malay boy, ma,” said Ah Ma. “What’s his name again—Ridzwan.”

“Oh, Ridzwan,” said Ah Chor.

“Why, Ah Lee still likes this Ridzwan? I thought that was all finished already!”

“Ah Lee doesn’t so easily forget,” Ji Ee chided.

“That’s right,” said Aunty Girl. “She doesn’t stop liking things so fast. Remember when she was small, she liked that English show, what was it called—” she switched to English for the title: “‘My Little Horsie’. She had all those horse toys, with the long hair and the stars on the backside. She liked it for two

years! From four until six.”

“It’s because she has a good memory,” said Ji Ee.

“Children usually don’t remember things for so long,” Ah Ma agreed. “Ah Lee only. Never forgets anything!”

“Men are not like My Little Heh Bee,” said Ah Chor reprovably. “There’s no problem with liking little heh bee for a long time. But Ah Chor has already told you, so many problems come if you like a man.”

“You should use your good

memory to remember what is in your textbooks, not for remembering your boyfriend,” said Sa Ee Poh.

“He is not my boyfriend,” said Ah Lee. “We are just friends. Can’t I have friends?”

“Ah Lee, friends are not a problem,” said Ji Ee.

“No, you cannot have friends,” said Ah Ma.

“Ma,” Ji Ee protested. “You let me have friends when I was Ah Lee’s age. There’s nothing wrong with boy

friends—not sweethearts, not at this age, but boy friends are OK. That's normal."

"Your time was different," said Ah Ma. "Ah Lee is not like you. Ah Lee is not normal."

She looked up at Ah Lee.

"Ah Lee, you are not like any of us," she said. "When we were young we could have boy friends."

"We couldn't," said Sa Ee Poh. "Not you and me. Never mind sweethearts. Ma didn't even allow us just to be friends with boys."

“Yes, I never let you,” Ah Chor agreed. “After a certain age, it doesn’t look nice for a good girl to be around boys too much.”

Ah Ma ignored them.

“When we were older we could get married, and everybody could come to our wedding,” she said. “There was nothing to hide. It’s not the same for you.

“Ah Ma wants you to get married someday. Ah Ma wants you to graduate from university. Maybe you will never have children, but you can

be a good scholar and have a good job. Other people will admire you. Your husband will respect you.

“But for this to happen, people cannot know. You must be very careful. You have to go to school so you can study, but you must make sure people don’t remember you. No friends. Don’t talk too much to teachers. You remember we all told you this before you started school again.”

Ah Lee remembered. She stared at her exercise book. Ridzual had

written “what does any of it MEAN” at the bottom of the page. She had whited it out with liquid eraser, but the words showed through after the white fluid had dried.

“If you are friends with Ridzual that is even worse than if you like him,” said Ah Ma tenderly. “You must not go around with him anymore.”

“Don’t do it suddenly,” said Ji Ee. “Slowly just become more distant. Don’t drop him immediately, but don’t need to talk to him so much.

He will get the hint.”

“Things will change in the future,” said Aunty Girl. “When you are older, at university, it’ll be easier to hide. You can have friends there. But this place is too small. Everybody knows everybody’s business. It’s better to keep to yourself.”

“There’s no need to be so sad, girl,” said Sa Ee Poh. “Even if you hurt his feelings, he won’t remember you after a while. Young people recover very fast.”

I will remember, thought Ah Lee. She did not want to cry because the aunts made such a fuss when you cried. She gulped and squeezed her pen and looked at Tua Kim.

Tua Kim was sorting through the slippery organs, listening to the conversation but not part of it. She said, eyes still on the bucket,

“Every woman has secrets.”

“Hah! Very true,” said Auntie Girl. “When you get married, you won’t be the only bride who knows something the groom doesn’t know.”

Cousin Kah Hoe didn't even know his wife was pregnant until she had the baby six months after the wedding."

"He never found out who the father was also," said Sa Ee Poh.

"Shh! Eh, enough!" said Ah Chor, scandalised. "Shouldn't talk about such things."

"Don't listen to your naughty aunties," Ah Ma told Ah Lee.

How could you die and not be old enough to hear about premarital sex? How could you die and still not

be allowed to fall in love or be honest? Surely not everything had to wait for university and a good job. Passion and truth had to trump even those things.



Still, it wasn't a conscious decision on Ah Lee's part to rebel. She was not even thinking about the many-aunted lecture when the urge to candour came to her.

It was a Thursday again, Ji Ee and Auntie Girl's line dancing day, and

Ah Lee and Ridzual were hanging around waiting for their respective rides home. They had found the perfect width of concrete ledge to sit on next to the monsoon drain outside their school. From here they had an unobstructed view of the road, and a big leafy flame-of-the-forest provided dappled shade.

It was so sunny the whole world gave off a metallic glare. Ah Lee and Ridzual sat on their ledge, squinting at the road.

Ah Lee surprised herself when

she said,

“Ridzual, do you have any secrets?”

Once it was out she felt a great sense of relief. She knew she wanted to tell him. She was sick of keeping everything important to herself, hidden away from the piercing gaze of the aunts.

“Yah,” said Ridzual slowly. “Yes. Funny you should say that. I’ve been thinking I should tell you one of them.”

Ah Lee was nonplussed.

“Oh, but I was going to tell you —” she said. “Um, never mind.”

“Oh, if you were going to say something, then you should say first,” said Ridzual.

“No, it’s OK, you go first,” said Ah Lee.

“My secret isn’t very interesting,” said Ridzual. “You say first lah.”

“My one is very interesting,” said Ah Lee firmly. “It’ll take long time to tell. You go first.”

“Cannot,” said Ridzual. He got up off the ledge, fell into a squat,

bent his head and put his hands in his hair.

Ah Lee started to feel worried. She had never seen Ridzual act like this before. Something seemed really wrong. Maybe something bad had happened at home. She got up and touched his shoulder.

“Eh, why like this? What’s wrong?”

“My life,” moaned Ridzual.

Ah Lee felt relieved. If Ridzual was in a good enough mood to whine then he was manageable.

“Eh! Merajuk already,” she said. “Don’t need to sulk like that. How old are you?”

When Ridzual lifted his head she saw his eyes were wet.

“It’s no big deal,” he said. “It’s nothing to you. There’s nothing wrong. I just like you, that’s all. That’s my big secret. Probably you know already, probably it is very obvious. You want you laugh lah. But it’s the first time I’ve ever been in l-love, so sorry if I want to make a big fuss about it.”

He shoved his head under his arm and sniffed.

Ah Lee did not know what face to make.

“Oh,” she said foolishly. “Oh—but —”

Ridzual threw up his hand.

“It’s OK!” he said. “Don’t say! I know the answer. I’ve embarrassed myself enough. Just out of the kindness of your heart, can you please don’t say anything?”

“But I—”

“For five minutes!” said Ridzual.

“In five minutes my dignity will return. Just leave me in peace to enjoy my misery for five minutes, OK?”

Ah Lee began to frown.

“Don’t need to be so drama,” she said. “You think this is Cantonese serial or what? I had something to tell you too, remember?”

There was a pause in which Ridzual did not move or even show that he had heard. Then he rubbed his eyes. He rearranged his limbs, sat down on the ledge, and looked at

her.

“Sorry,” he said. “That wasn’t so gallant of me.”

“No,” Ah Lee agreed. “Not gallant langsung.”

“I’m not so good at this love declaration stuff,” said Ridzual.

“Yeah, true.”

“You don’t have to agree when I kutuk myself!” said Ridzual. He gave her the sweetest half-smile. His eyes were red and his lashes were still wet.

“What did you want to tell me?” he said.

“I—” said Ah Lee.

She found she could not do it. It was absurd. She had promised herself that she would tell him that she liked him, and not just as a friend. She liked him liked him.

It had seemed so easy five minutes ago. It ought to be even easier now. She had only to say, “I like you back.” But what if Ridzual didn’t believe her? What if he thought she was just saying it to comfort him? What if, once she said it, he revealed that he had just been

joking about liking her? Could she stand to give so much of herself away?

The words stuck in her throat. She said:

“I—”

Through a process of thought even she did not understand, she swerved and went for what felt like the less difficult truth. She said:

“I’m a vampire.”

It was not the most intelligent thing she had ever done.

“What?” said Ridzual.

“That’s why you can’t share my nuggets,” Ah Lee said wildly. “They’re not not-halal because they’re made of pork. They’re not halal because they’re made of human.”

At first Ridzual looked as if he might believe her. He looked at her for a long time, his mouth grim. His eyebrows knitted, his mouth twisted—then his face cleared and he laughed.

“You’re such a freak,” said Ridzual. “You’re the weirdest person

I know. Is that how you always try to change the subject in an awkward situation? “Scuse me, sir, your fly is undone. But don’t worry about it, I’m a werewolf!”

He rubbed his eyes.

“Sorry ya,” he said. “I’ll be normal again soon.”

Ah Lee should have been relieved, or maybe touched, or any one of a number of benign emotions. Instead she felt vexed. You told someone the biggest secret you had and they didn’t even take

you seriously!

“You know, everything is not about you,” she snapped. “I don’t say things just because of you. Men!”

She changed to show him. It was always too easy to change when she was angry.

What was she thinking? She asked herself later. She knew that love was supposed to make you act funny, but she did not know that it could actually deprive you of all common sense. Or kindness. It was not kind to show that to a human.

What Ridzual saw was a cold grey face, a face incontrovertibly dead. The features were Ah Lee's own everyday features, but the skin did not have the comforting human glow—the flush in the cheek, the sweat on the upper lip. The texture of it was such that it did not even look like skin. Her face looked like it was made of plastic.

The long black hair hung around the face lankly. The eyes were white. When her mouth opened, a musty inorganic smell gusted out. The

tongue was bright red, the colour of fresh arterial blood, and it was too long.

The teeth were perfectly ordinary.

Maybe a part of her was hoping that he wouldn't be horrified, that he would still like her. Most of her was the sensible Ah Lee she had always been, however, so it was with resignation that she watched Ridzual step back, drop his schoolbag, whimper and turn and run.

She watched him run down the

road, his limbs flailing and growing smaller. When he reached the junction at the end of the road, he stopped and doubled over. He would be bathed in sweat—the sun was unforgiving today, and Ridzual always skipped PE classes. He paused and Ah Lee could almost see him wonder whether he should scrape up his dignity and come back to the forgiving shade, or keep jogging and probably have sunstroke.

She felt her tragedy crust over with awkwardness.

“Why this kind of thing always happen to me?” said Ah Lee miserably.

But then, thank all the gods that ever were, Ji Ee's small brown Proton turned into the road. In five minutes Ah Lee would be able to get into the car and pretend she didn't see Ridzual walking back to their spot next to the monsoon drain, his hand shielding his eyes, his eyes not looking in her direction.



Ah Lee could not bear to ask Tua Kim to stop making her fried human nuggets. The first day after her confession she took them to the canteen as usual.

But then it was an agony to be sitting alone. It took so long to chew each nugget when she wasn't using her mouth for talking. She caught glimpses of Ridzual through the crowd, queueing up for his tomyam and awkwardly not looking at anyone because he didn't have any friends except her. The nuggets

tasted like paper. It was as if she was eating human food.

After that she avoided the canteen. Behind one of the school blocks there was a narrow channel that ran between the building and the wall that surrounded the school grounds. It had become a repository for unwanted things: buckets of dried paint were lined up along the wall, and broken old furniture came here to die. Ah Lee fit right in. Here she could sit and read in peace, just as she had done before she'd ever

become friends with Ridzual.

A week after her life was ruined—five long, dreary days during which she and Ridzual carefully ignored each other at school—she had only got seven pages into her book. She was reading the eighth page at break, the words flying out of her mind the minute they entered through her eyes, when Ridzual said,

“Good book?”

Ah Lee jumped and punched Ridzual in the chin.

“Ow!” said Ridzual.

“What lah you, coming out of nowhere like that,” Ah Lee snapped, to cover her relief.

“Sorry lah,” said Ridzual in a mild complaining tone. He rubbed his jaw. “What is this, WWF? Man, you have a strong right hook.”

Awkwardness rose like a wall between them.

“It’s because I did taekwando since I was small,” said Ah Lee flatly. “Not because I died.”

Ridzual looked around for a chair, but failed to locate one. In a

government school chairs only got rejected from classroom duty for a real fault, such as having a hole in the middle of the seat, or being in several pieces. He sat down on the ground instead.

“I didn’t even know such things were real,” he whispered. He did not look up at her. “How did you become a—a—”

“Vampire?” said Ah Lee.

“Is that what you call it?” said Ridzual. “Isn’t that a bit different?”

Ah Lee said, “You want to say it?”

You want to tell me what am I?”

Ah Lee never said her real name herself.

‘Vampire’ was safe. ‘Vampire’ was like Dracula, like goofy old black and white films, like pale ang moh boys who swooned over long-haired girls. Vampire was funny, or sexy, depending on which movie you watched.

The right word was not funny. It was not sexy. Most of all, it was not safe.

Ridzual had a boyish disregard

for subtextual cues. He did not seem to notice how wound up Ah Lee was. He said, softly, as if he were speaking to himself,

“You know, I like you. I really like you.”

“Har,” said Ah Lee noncommittally.

“I’ve really never liked anyone as much as I like you,” said Ridzual. “In my life. Not even as a, a girl. I’ve never even had a friend I liked as much as you.

“When I’m with you I feel like

life is exciting. Like everything has an interesting secret behind it, like nothing is normal or boring. That's how you make me feel. Not even by doing anything. Just when I'm hanging out with you."

Ah Lee said in a stifled voice, "That's how I feel when I'm with you too."

Ridzual reached down to into his pocket.

"That's why you deserve this," he said.

Ah Lee had just enough time to

register that he had a long, rusty nail in his hand when Ridzual flung himself at her, aiming the nail at her throat.

When you are dead, certain things stop mattering as much as they do to the living. Time, weight, pain all lose some of their meaning.

The protein-rich diet and frequent exercise while chasing down prey are also excellent for the muscles.

Ah Lee caught Ridzual's lunging body and threw him with no trouble.

While he lay on the ground, stunned, she slipped the nail out from between his fingers.

“What’s this?” she shouted. “What’s this? You trying to play the fool, is it?”

She felt as if the top of her head had come off.

Ridzual looked terrified.

“I was—I was—”

“What?” roared Ah Lee.

“I just—” Then Ridzual said, in one breath, “I Googled and it said if I put a nail in your neck you would

stop being a hantu and become a beautiful woman, and I thought maybe then we could be together, but turn out I wasn't fast enough, I'm sorry—”

“How dare you?” gasped Ah Lee.

“I just wanted to save you, OK!” Ridzual rubbed his eyes. “I'm sorry I couldn't make it in time.”

“Who you think you're talking to?” said Ah Lee. “There is no Ah Lee the vampire and Ah Lee your friend—the girl who use to be your friend. I am just one person. If you make not

a vampire anymore, doesn't mean we can be—be dating. If you make me not a vampire anymore, means there is no me anymore. You understand?"

She threw the nail on the ground. She wasn't quite angry enough to aim it at Ridzual, but it pleased her in a horrible way when he flinched.

"And one more thing," said Ah Lee. "I am already a beautiful woman, dungu!"

She stomped off without looking back.



Ah Lee felt strong and brave all day, big with her righteous anger like a balloon full of air. It took her through the rest of the school day and the ride home.

When she took off her shoes at the front door the air hit her nose, crowded with homey smells: coriander and hong yu and the stale scent of clean blankets. The balloon popped. Ah Lee drew in a huge breath and expelled it as a sob.

She sat down on the sofa in the

living room and wept for half an hour.

“Girl, what’s the matter?” said Ji Ee.

“What’s happening?” said Ah Chor.

“Hao ah,” said Ah Ma. “Crying!”

“Crying?” said Ah Chor. “Ah Lee is crying?”

“You’re crying, is it?” said Sa Ee Poh.

The diagnosis bounced from aunt to aunt, each aunt repeating it to another for certainty.

“So old already still crying!” said Ah Chor.

“Nobody has died. Your stomach is not empty. What is there to cry about?” said Sa Ee Poh.

“Ah girl, don’t cry lah, ah girl,” said Ji Ee.

“Teacher scolded you, is it?” said Ah Ma. “Or is it because Ji Ee and Aunty Girl were late when they picked you up from school?”

“Ah, that’s it, late!” said Ah Chor sternly. “Always late! What’s the use of all this line-dancing? Now you are

late to pick Ah Lee up and you have made her cry.”

“She is so big already. I thought she can look after herself for an hour,” said Aunty Girl, but she spoke with contrition, conscious that she was in the wrong.

“Ah girl, don’t cry,” said Ji Ee. “Ji Ee won’t be late anymore. We don’t need to go dancing. Ah, so old already, we won’t miss it!”

Ah Lee loved that Ji Ee and Aunty Girl danced. Her voice pushed through the terrible loneliness that

locked her throat and said,

“It’s not that!”

“What is it?” said Auntie Girl.

“I never believed in all this dancing thing,” said Ah Chor. “In my time girls didn’t put themselves up there on the stage for people to look at it. It’s not so nice.”

“Ma, their dancing is not like cabaret,” said Sa Ee Poh. “It is exercise, like taichi or aerobic. Anyway the girls are so big already. Why not let them do it?”

“Ah Lee says it’s not that

anyway,” said Ah Ma. “What is it, girl?”

But Ah Lee couldn't say.

Tua Kim was the only one who had stayed in the kitchen when Ah Lee started crying. Now the sound of the tap running stopped and she came into the room, wiping her hands on a rag. A momentary lull had fallen as the aunts waited for Ah Lee to reply, so everyone heard Tua Kim when she spoke, even though her voice was as quiet as it always was.

“What did the boy do?” said Tua Kim.

The silence flattened out and grew solid.

In the hush, Tua Kim sat down on the sofa next to Ah Lee and put her arm around her. The aunts were not from a generation that hugged. Tua Kim did it in a detached, almost a clinical way. In the same way the aunts had picked Ah Lee up and carried her when she was too exhausted to walk, those first few hours after she died.

“Tell Tua Kim,” said Tua Kim.
So she did.

* * *

Ah Lee went to bed feeling pleasantly hollow and tired from crying so much. Her eyes were red and the skin around her nostrils was rough, but she felt clean and quiet inside. Aunt after aunt came into her room on some pretext, to lay their soft wrinkled hands on her head and make sure her blanket was tucked around her properly. She slept like

the virtuous dead, dreamless and innocent.

The next morning she felt newly-minted, born again. She walked past Ridzual's desk without a tremor, and went home feeling almost happy, feeling like maybe she could get over him and it would be OK someday.

It would start hurting again soon. The sense of invulnerability wouldn't last forever. The aunts would stop spoiling her and start chiding her for still being upset about

it. But some day she'd stop being upset, stop missing Ridzual at all, and when she was done with school she would go to university far away from Lubuk Udang, and maybe there she'd meet someone nicer than Ridzual.

She needed quiet to study Add Maths, so instead of working in the kitchen as usual, she sat down in her room and buried herself in exercises until the light turned. She switched on her desk lamp, and the action made her aware of a quietness in the

house.

She got up and walked through the silent dark house, wondering. There was no one in the kitchen. The living room was empty. It was six thirty, past the hour when Sa Ee Poh's favourite Cantonese serial would have begun—and yet the house was auntless.

They must have gone out hunting, though it was late for that. Ah Lee herself preferred to hunt at night, under the cover of darkness, but the aunts did not even think you

should laugh loudly before going to bed, or it would give you nightmares. Hunting was considered far too stimulating an activity to engage in so close to bedtime. They preferred to hunt in the afternoon, when the household chores were done and the humans were dozy.

It was strange that they had all gone out at the same time. Even on the rare occasion that the aunts went out hunting in a body, one of them usually stayed at home—often Tua Kim, because Tua Kim disliked the

mess and exertion of hunting. Somebody had to make sure Ah Lee had fed herself and did her homework. Somebody had to look after her.

With that thought, Ah Lee knew where the aunts had gone.

She didn't bother going back to her room to turn off the lights, or changing out of her pasar malam T-shirt and faded grey shorts, or putting on shoes. She burst through the back door and leapt straight out in the evening sky.

Most of the time Ah Lee was a girl. Her body and her mind were more used to it. Being in vampire mode made her uncomfortable. She avoided it as much as she could.

But whenever she slipped into it, it was like putting on a pair of slippers after a long day of standing in high heels, like stepping out of a ferociously air-conditioned room into the welcoming warmth of the outside world.

Her whole self relaxed. Her body became a weapon: smells grew sharp,

her vision cleared. Ordinary thoughts were big vague clouds, too complicated and light to bother about, and through the clouds thrust the one vital thing, red and pulsing like a fresh bruise—hunger.

Hovering above Lubuk Udang, she became invisible. The dying sunlight shone through her bones. The scents of the town floated up to her: a woman's jasmine-scented hair, the stink of the underarms of a tired hawker stallholder, the smell of someone's earwax. Anything else,

anything not human, smelt pale in comparison, like water, but she could distinguish those scents if she concentrated hard enough, pulling them up from beneath the textured smells of humans.

The aunts would smell of nothing. But she knew Ridzual's scent. She sorted through the scents coming to her on the wind; his wasn't there. It might be too late already. How long had it been since they'd left? And once Ridzual was meat she wouldn't be able to find

him—he wouldn't smell of himself anymore. He would just smell of food.

She dove through the sky, following her nose.



The sky was going grey and the sunlight was fading when Ridzual left school. His dad would be busy getting dinner ready and his mom was outstation, so he'd told his dad he would cycle home. It would take half an hour, but the air was soft and

humid in the evening, cool enough to cycle.

He hated koku, but he'd stayed for the extra few hours of marching in his Scouts uniform, sweating under the blistering sun in a desperate attempt to fit in. It was probably worth it. If he didn't go, he would probably fit in even less, whereas at least now people knew who he was. Last week one guy had even thwacked him on the back in a friendly way, yelling, "Oi! What's up, Mohsein?"

Of course, he had then had to explain that he wasn't Mohsein, which had dampened the atmosphere of warmth and camaraderie slightly. But they had recognised the name when he said, "I'm Ridzual," or at least they had said, "Oh, Ridzwan, is it?"

Maybe he wasn't friends the way the other guys were with each other. Maybe they didn't shout, "Oi, macha!" when they saw him, or request that he "relaklah, brother!", or imply heartily that he was gay in

some sort of macho bonding ritual.

But Ridzual had never been the kind of guy who attracted that response from his fellow guys, and he was OK with that. He flew under the radar enough that he'd never been bullied. People let him do his own thing, and that was all he wanted. He hadn't even really noticed not having friends. In KL he'd hung out with his cousins, who were used to him being the weird one and didn't hold it against him, and here in Lubuk Udang there was

Ah Lee.

Had been. There had been Ah Lee.

His brain had successfully been avoiding the subject of her for all of ten minutes, but now it slid back down the old path. He kept forgetting and thinking of her as his friend, as the girl he'd fallen in love with. And if you thought of her as a human being, it was horrific what he had done to her. He had been a prize asshole, an unmitigated jerk.

But before he could begin

beating himself up for messing up the best thing that had ever happened to him, he'd remember that face she'd turned to him. And that made him not know how to feel again. That face had not been human. Kindness wasn't a thing that lived in the same world as that face.

He'd been having nightmares ever since he saw it. The teeth, he'd think in the dream, struggling in the grip of terror, the teeth.

That was the scariest thing. The one mad, inexplicable thing in the

whole mad, inexplicable situation that got to him.

How come there wasn't anything wrong with her teeth?

They had been perfectly human teeth. Even, rounded at the edges, slightly yellow.

He had to stop thinking about this. There was nothing he could do about it. Maybe she wasn't a vampire. Maybe she was deluded and he'd been hallucinating. Or maybe she was a vampire, but she wouldn't kill and eat him as long as he left her

alone. She knew he wouldn't tell anyone. Who could he tell? Who believed in vampires anyway?

“Stupid,” said Ridzual aloud. The word wasn't ‘vampire’. ‘Vampire’ wasn't scary enough to describe the thing he'd seen. It was like calling a toyol a pixie.

“Not vampire,” said Ridzual. “The word is ‘pontianak’.”

The problem with Ridzual was that he was a city boy. He'd grown up watching Japanese superhero TV shows and reading Archie comics.

He hadn't really known his grandparents—they'd died when he was too little to hold conversations, much less be told scary stories.

So he knew nothing.

He didn't recognise the scent that sprang out of the evening then, though he registered it as something floral. It reminded him of Ah Lee: it smelled of her. It was funny that it had never occurred to him that Ah Lee might use perfume.

He'd cycled on a little further when he heard the baby crying. A

long wail, followed by a piteous sob-sob-sob that pierced the heart. It was startling how close it was—practically next to his ear. He braked by the side of the road and got off his bike.

It was an odd place for a baby to be. He was standing on the edge of a car park. Across the road was a row of shoplots, their signs still lit up, but the entrances a line of closed grey faces.

The car park was an expanse of orange earth, dusty and crumbling and covered with weeds. It was

fenced with rusting wire, and shrubs ran along its periphery. There weren't many cars parked there, and the booth at the entrance was dark.

The falling light turned the place eerie. It was the kind of place where you could get done for khalwat, or be murdered, depending on who else was around.

It was the kind of place where you could dump a baby, if you needed to.

He'd read about baby-dumping in the newspapers. But you never

thought you'd encounter such things yourself. And not in such a place as this, surely—a nice small town? This wasn't KL.

Who would dump a baby? Said a voice in Ridzual's head. Someone young, who wasn't supposed to be doing anything that would lead to a baby in the first place. Someone scared.

He parked his bike on the pavement and walked into the car park. The floral scent grew stronger, though there weren't any flowers

around that he could see—only the bushes, strung out around the car park like a salad God had started eating and left forgotten on His plate.

The baby would be somewhere in there, probably. But he couldn't seem to work out where. The farther he walked in what he thought was the direction of the sound, the softer the baby's cries got.

It was getting darker. The world was a pale purply-blue, and the moon showed clear in the sky. The

car park was full of dark shapes—empty cars, rustling bushes. The cicadas were screaming their heads off, and the baby was getting so soft he could hardly hear it through the insects—but it was still crying, a long drawn-out wail, trailing off in a hopeless series of hiccups.

He was terrified, but if he was scared, how would an abandoned baby feel?

He found something behind the next bush. It wasn't a baby, though. It was an old lady, lying crumpled on

the ground in a pathetic heap of batik and grey hair.

“Shit,” said Ridzual without thinking. He bent down and reached out to touch the lady’s shoulder: “Sorry, mak cik. Are you OK?”

The face the mak cik turned to him was a normal mak cik face. She was a Chinese lady with fluffy white hair and a mole on her left cheek. She looked like any other auntie you might see at the pasar basah. Her teeth were perfectly ordinary. She was dead.

Ridzual stumbled back. He was shaking so hard his teeth rattled in his head.

Teeth! Of course there was nothing wrong with the teeth. Teeth was vampires. Pontianak didn't pierce the neck with fangs. They didn't drink your blood.

The mak cik held her hands out to Ridzual, as if she was going to hug him, pet his hair. Her hands were small and delicate. The fingernails were long, curving and yellow—and blunt.

It would take a long time for those fingernails to pierce his belly, for them to scoop out the intestines. It would hurt.

The others came out of the bushes one by one. They were all little old ladies—little old Chinese ladies in those Chinese old lady clothes that looked like pajamas. All with long, blunt fingernails. All dead.

All hungry.

“No,” someone whimpered. Ridzual thought of the baby before

realizing it was his own voice. “No, no, please, no—”

He turned and went running, crashing through the bushes. Somewhere in the distance a baby was screaming breathlessly, but he knew the wail was issuing from six dry old dead mouths, and it grew softer and softer the closer they were.

His chest was a great flame of pain. He banged his hand against the side-mirror of a car and knew it would hurt later (if there was a later), but it felt like nothing now. He

couldn't hear the baby anymore.

A weight hit him in the back and he went down, sobbing. The fingernails dug into his side. Cold musty breath gusted on his ear. He was going to die. He was sorry for everything. The fingernails cut into his skin, raising welts, and he opened his mouth to scream.

The next minute his mouth was full of earth and pebbles. Something had hit the creature on his back a full-body blow, the impact driving Ridzual's face into the ground. The

pontianak rolled off his back, ripping his T-shirt in the process.

They must be fighting over him. There wasn't enough of him to go around, even if they were small. Old ladies didn't usually have much of an appetite, but pontianak were probably different. He had a second while they were distracted, but no more. He struggled to his feet, willing his limbs to move.

It came as something of a surprise to hear one of the pontianak saying, in an angry mak cik croak,

“Ah girl, what you doing here?
You go home right now! So late
already!”

He should run.

He turned around slowly.

It was Ah Lee, glaring at the old
lady who had been about to eat him.

“Who ask you to eat my
schoolmate?” she said shrilly.
“How’m I suppose to go back to
school now? So lose face!”

The pontianak crowded around.
Weirdly, they had lost all their
eldritch horror: they looked like

ordinary mak cik now. They were definitely talking like aunties, in indignant high-pitched Hokkien.

“And what are you doing?” snapped Ah Lee.

“Me? What am I doing? What are you doing?” said Ridzual.

“Standing around like this! You want to be eaten, is it?” said Ah Lee.

“No!” said Ridzual.

“Go away,” said Ah Lee.

Ridzual had one last chance. He didn't understand everything that had just happened—in fact, it would

be more accurate to say that he didn't understand anything that had just happened. But she'd saved his life, and not, it appeared, because she wanted to eat him herself.

You wouldn't save someone's life if you were a monster, would you?

You wouldn't save someone if you thought they were a monster.

"Ah Lee," said Ridzual. "We need to talk."

"Not now," said Ah Lee. Her voice was a door closing. "I need to talk to my family."

The last he saw of her, in that dwindling light, was her gallant back moving away from him, and the cloud of aunts drawing in around her.



Ah Lee decided to try something new.

In the morning she waited outside the school gate until Ridzual arrived. When his parents' car had driven off, she said,
“Let's go.”

They couldn't go to a kopitiam or mamak restaurant in their school uniforms, so they went to a nearby park. It was early, cool enough to walk. They didn't talk much on the way.

There were a couple of people in the park—an uncle and an auntie, walking in circles with serious intent looks on their faces. But the kids' playground was empty and they settled down on the swings there.

Ridzual broke the silence first.

“What happened last night, after

I went?”

“Oh. Nothing much,” said Ah Lee.

“Was it—” Ridzual hesitated. “Did they—?”

Ah Lee stared at him mutely.

Dealing with the aunts had actually been less difficult than she had expected. They had told her off for not staying home and doing her homework, but it was a half-hearted telling off. The aunts knew they had forfeited the moral high ground by trying to eat her classmate. Ah Lee

had listened without saying a word to their unconvinced lectures as they flew home.

At the door, she had turned and said to the aunts:

“We are not dogs in the forest.”

She had gone straight to bed without speaking to anybody.

She felt guilty about it in the morning—she had said too much. The aunts had already known that they'd overstepped the line, broken the rules by which they operated. The aunts seemed to feel equally

ashamed, tiptoeing around her at breakfast.

She had kissed Ah Ma with special tenderness before leaving for school, particularly as she was already planning to ponteng and knew how shocked the aunts would be at that. Non-attendance at school would probably seem a worse crime to them than eating humans.

She didn't know how to explain any of this to Ridzual. It all seemed too complicated.

“Did you have to fight, or—I

don't know—something,” said Ridzual. Ah Lee could tell that he was already feeling foolish about having asked. “I mean—never mind.”

He paused.

“Do you really eat people?”

“Not really people,” said Ah Lee.

“Only their, you know, their usus all that. Their entrails.” She tapped her belly. “We don't like all the other part.”

Ridzual screwed up his mouth. But he only said:

“Thanks for not eating me. And

not letting those others eat me.”

Ah Lee shrugged. “Usually they won’t eat you anyway. We don’t eat people we know. They all were just angry only.”

Ridzual looked down at his feet. He was scratching shapes in the sand with the toe of one shoe.

“You guys can’t eat anything else?” he said. “Like, animal intestines?”

“No.”

“Do you eat good people as well, or only bad people, or—?”

“We don’t eat women,” said Ah Lee. “And we don’t eat people we know. That’s all. I don’t pick and choose, depending if I like your face or I don’t like your face so much.”

“Not women?” said Ridzual. “I didn’t realise vampires did affirmative action.”

“It’s already suffering enough to be a woman,” Ah Lee recited. “Don’t need people to eat you some more.”

This was Ah Chor’s line, but the aunts were unanimous on this. Hadn’t Ah Ma told Ah Lee how she

had cried whenever she gave birth to a daughter, because she knew what sorrow lay in her future?

“After all there’s enough men around,” added Ah Lee.

Ridzual grinned, but he looked a little sick.

“Doesn’t it bother you?” he said. “At all?”

Ah Lee stared into the distance. It was hard to explain. She had felt differently about these things when she was living.

“I know what you are trying to

say,” she said. “But it’s like animals.”

“You feel it’s like eating animals?”

“No!” said Ah Lee. “It’s like I’m the animal now. After I die I kind of became an animal. When I’m hungry, when I eat, there’s no feeling. Afterwards maybe some feeling, I feel a bit bad. But that’s why we don’t simply just eat people. We process them first. My aunties like to make pepper soup. You know too thor t’ng? Pig stomach soup? Like that, but not with pig stomach.”

“Oh,” said Ridzual faintly. “Wait,

all those old ladies last night—they're your aunts?"

"One is my grandma and one is my great-grandma," said Ah Lee. "The others are my aunts. But don't you think it's a bit weird if there's so many vampire in a small town like this and they don't know each other?"

Ridzual opened his mouth. Then he closed it, his throat working.

"That's definitely weird," he said in a strangled voice.

"Anyway, don't worry about my

aunties. They won't eat you," said Ah Lee. "I told them already. And I won't eat you. Never never."

"I know," said Ridzual.

Ah Lee looked at the ground. She felt her eyes start to prickle, so she said it quickly.

"Are you going to try to nail me?"

She was startled and not a little offended when Ridzual started chortling.

"What's so funny?" Ah Lee demanded.

"Er," said Ridzual. "It's an

American thing. Maybe I'll tell you some day."

"This is suppose to be serious!" said Ah Lee.

"Sorry, sorry." Ridzual wiped his eyes. "I'm not going to nail you. No."

Saying it seemed to sober him up.

"I'm sorry I tried it," he said.

"Thank you," said Ah Lee. Now the next thing. "You don't have to be friend with me anymore. I won't be offended. I'll understand."

She had to say it. Then it would

be done, finished, and they could both go back to their respective lives with all of this behind them.

“It was kind of worth it.” Ah Lee kept her eyes on the ground. She would be too shy to say it if she looked at Ridzual. “Ever since I became like this, I didn’t really have friends. It was a bit lonely. So it was nice having you.”

“I don’t want to be friends with you,” said Ridzual.

Ah Lee had expected this answer, but she was still taken aback by how

much it hurt to hear it. She had been sad about him enough, she told herself sternly. All the aunts had said that.

“Don’t waste so many tears on one man,” they had scolded, as if it would have been all right to spread the tears over several men, but not to allocate so many to only one person.

Ah Lee, having been brought up to hate waste, agreed with them. She locked her hands together and blinked furiously. Her chest ached.

“OK,” she said.

Ridzual touched her hand. Ah Lee clenched it into a fist so he couldn't take it, but then he tried to pry her fingers apart one by one. Of course it didn't work. Ah Lee started giggling.

“Ah, I give up,” said Ridzual, exasperated. “I’m a moron to try to fight a pontianak. But look, ‘I don’t want to be your friend’ doesn’t mean ‘I don’t want to hang out with you’. There can be another meaning.”

“What another meaning?” said Ah Lee. She looked up when he

didn't answer.

Ridzual was looking at her with a kind of glow in his eyes. It was the way her mother and father used to look at her, back when she was alive, before all the bad things had happened—as if she was something special. Something precious. Ah Lee's ex-boyfriend had never looked at her like that.

Ridzual had always had this look, Ah Lee realised. He had always looked at her as if she was the sunrise after a long dark night.

“Oh,” said Ah Lee.

“You don’t have to not want to be my friend back,” said Ridzual.

Ah Lee hesitated. But there was a perfect way to say yes and still sound cool.

“I don’t mind,” she said.

Ridzual turned his face away, but he was too slow. Ah Lee already knew he was beaming. She reached out and took his hand, encountering less trouble than he had done.

“OK,” said Ridzual. “That works.”

They smiled stupidly for a while, shedding radiance on the slide and sandbox, showering incidental romance on the speed-walking uncle and auntie.

“Only one thing,” said Ah Lee.

“Oh, there’s something else on top of the vampire mak cik and the human pig stomach soup?” said Ridzual. “What more is there? I have to fight a werewolf first before I can date you, is it?”

“No lah, there’s no such thing as werewolf,” said Ah Lee. “It’s a small

thing only. But—'vampire' is OK. The other word, please don't use. Is that OK?"

"Why?" said Ridzual.

"It's not such a nice word," said Ah Lee.

"OK," said Ridzual. "OK."

Then he said, "Can I use it one last time?"

Ah Lee nodded. She knew what was coming.

"Will you tell me how you became a pontianak?"

Sitting there with him in the

park, Ah Lee told him. She had not told anyone else the story before. He didn't let go of her hand.



Her grandmother watched her being born. Her grandmother watched her die.

Who died of childbirth in the twenty-first century? It didn't happen, not if you were middle class in Malaysia, not if you'd followed the rules and paid attention at school and listened to your parents.

Not if you'd been a good girl.

By the time her parents had suspected, it hadn't been too late. That was the thing. The worst thing—worse than being dumped by the boy who'd given her the baby, though that had felt terrible when it'd happened.

But it was nowhere near as bad as her parents' carefully expressionless faces, as they had gone from day to day pretending nothing was happening. The day she fainted because she'd thrown up all her

breakfast and had hidden in her room and refused to eat—they hadn't said anything. When she choked on her food because things tasted different now she was pregnant, they didn't say anything. She stopped going to school. Her parents stopped talking to her. Her world contracted.

It was like being invisible. It was as if she had died and no one had noticed.

Months of it, months of feeling sad and ashamed, but now that it had become serious enough that even her

parents could not ignore it, now that she was in the hospital and somebody was looking after her, Ah Lee did not feel free, or relieved.

She felt angry. She resented her parents wildly for breaking their promise that they would protect her, for failing to love her no matter what.

And still she was sorry that the secret had to come out—the baby had to come out—and they would lose face. She wished she could be dying in some less embarrassing way. She

could have drowned in a monsoon drain. She could have been run over by a car.

She felt bad for them. But she wished they would stop hanging over her bed and crying.

“I’m sorry, girl. Mummy’s so sorry, girl.”

Sorry no cure, Ah Lee wanted to say.

After a while it stopped. Somebody took her parents away. Ah Lee regretted her silent fury. She missed them. Somebody was doing

something pointless down there. She was bleeding.

When she died someone was holding her hand. Not a mother or a father, with their enormous burden of expectation. Someone calmer, their hands softer, wrinklier-skinned. At the very last moment Ah Lee opened her eyes and saw her grandmother, waiting for her.

* * *

After death:

The scent of frangipani—the

stench of decay—revenge a red flame at the heart—

Her hair whipped against her face, smelling of the mulch in a graveyard. Her nails were long and yellow. Her body was free. She got up on the bed and nothing hurt.

She had lost all sense of the disgusting. She had bled so much that she would never flinch from blood again. She was made for tearing out kidneys, feasting on livers, pulling out strings of intestines. It would never again be

her own blood that was spilt, her insides that were pulled inside out.

She flew down the corridors of the hospital and there was no pain, or everything was pain, but it spun outwards, knocking people over, ripping heads off. Blood sprayed on the walls. People were screaming.

Someone grabbed the wrists of the hurricane. Someone slapped the face of the typhoon.

“Enough! Stop now!” The voice was as familiar to her as her mother’s. She would have killed anyone else,

but the voice brought her down.

“Angry already, har,” said the voice.

“Just because you’re angry doesn’t mean everybody else must suffer,” scolded another voice.

Blood was rolling down from her eyes. She blinked, but her eyes stung.

The world was a smear. She couldn’t see a thing.

“Quieting down already.”

“Can listen now.”

“Can see now.”

“Close your eyes, Ah Lee.”

“Close your eyes, girl.”

Someone brushed a damp cloth over her eyelids. When she opened her eyes, she saw who it was.

“No need to cry,” said Ah Ma. “No need for all this. Come, we are going somewhere else. Then you can lie down, rest first. You’ll feel nicer after that.”

“Where are we going?” said Ah Lee. Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper, scraping her throat. It was sore from the screaming. “Where’s

Mummy and Daddy?”

“Mummy and Daddy have to look after your brothers and sister,” said an old lady in a baju kebaya. Ah Lee had never seen her before, but she leant her head trustingly against the old lady’s chest when the old lady picked her up.

She felt as tired as if she had just been born.

“What about the baby?” she whispered.

“The baby’s gone,” said Ah Chor. It was the first time they met. “Don’t

worry. We'll look after you now."

"Ji Ee?" said Ah Lee blearily, as her eyes began to pick out familiar faces. "Tua Kim? Auntie Girl?"

"I don't have children," said Ji Ee.

"My children are all grown up," said Tua Kim.

"How to let you go alone?" said Auntie Girl. "Now you don't need to worry. We'll be with you."

There was something to tell them.

"Ah Ma," said Ah Lee.

"Yes, girl?"

Shame washed over her. It had been bad enough with her parents. How could you tell your grandmother something like this?

“The baby,” she said. “The father. I didn’t purposely—at the start, I wasn’t thinking about all that. I just liked him. We were dating, and it just happened. When I found out I was pregnant, I didn’t know what to do. I was scared to tell anybody. And then, Mummy and Daddy—”

She didn’t know what to say about that worst betrayal. She still

felt sorry. She had not had the chance to apologise, to explain.

“Can you tell them?” she said. “Tell them it was an accident. I didn’t purposely—I just didn’t think. I didn’t think this would happen. Tell them I’m sorry.”

They were walking down the hospital corridor. Ah Chor cradled Ah Lee to her chest, stepping over the bodies.

“Ah Ma already said there’s no need to cry,” said Ah Ma. “It’s not your fault. Your Mummy and Daddy

should have looked after you. Ah Ma tried to teach your Mummy to bring up her children right, but there's no need to be so strict. You are her daughter, whether you are good or naughty. Ah Ma should have explained."

"We all should be saying sorry," said Sa Ee Poh. She didn't mean just the aunts. "You are only a child."

"Never mind. It's over already," said Ah Chor. "Don't worry about it anymore."

When they had reached the

stairwell at the end of the corridor, Ah Lee was already half-asleep. When they smashed through the glass and jumped out the window, seven floors up, she was sleeping. She didn't feel the night wind on her skin, or see the starlight on the aunts' faces.

When she woke up she was a new person. She was dead, but she wasn't alone. There was nothing to be scared of in this new life. With six aunts behind you, you can be anything.



Adam Christopher

Adam Christopher became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Empire State from Angry Robot. Visit his website at www.adamchristopher.co.uk.

Empire State
(excerpt)
by Adam Christopher

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PART ONE
THE MEAN STREETS

Judge Crater, call your office,” said
the man with the microphone.
Everybody laughed.

ONE

Jerome gunned the accelerator, and turned sharp left. Rex slid on the bench seat, but grabbed the leather strap dangling over his door fast enough to stop him landing in the driver's lap. Jerome whistled, knuckles white as they gripped the wheel. Rex looked over his shoulder. He sure as hell hoped Jerome knew where he was going.

“For cryin’ out loud!” Rex winced as his head met the roof of the car, the thin felt of his hat providing little protection as Jerome pushed two wheels over the curb to dodge oncoming traffic.

“Complain later, boss. Keep yer head down and hold on.” Jerome’s eyes didn’t leave the road. Rex frowned and hunkered down in the seat, gripping the top edge with both hands as he turned to look out the back. Two crates of green bottles rattled in the back seat under Rex’s

nose as Jerome navigated the wet streets as fast as he dared.

Rex squinted, trying to see through the smattering of rain on the car's tiny rear window, but the droplets of water seemed to pull the light of the city in, refracting it into a thousand glowing, multicoloured points. The car shuddered against the gutter as Jerome swerved around another obstacle, throwing up a huge steam-like spray of runoff, obscuring the view even more.

“What’s the deal?” Jerome asked.

Rex relaxed his grip and turned back around. Jerome was leaning over the wheel, his keen, experienced eyes picking out the path ahead in the downtown traffic. It was late, but New Yorkers had a well-known disregard for the time of day. Jerome was doing a fine job threading the boat-sized Studebaker through the maze of cars, but surely their luck was going to run out. Somehow they'd managed to avoid the police, but they'd be spotted sooner rather than later. Evading one pursuer was

possible; add two, three, four cop cars and the odds shortened, and not in their favour.

“Looks clear,” said Rex. “Think we lost ’em. Nice driving.”

Jerome allowed one thin hand to unwrap from the steering wheel to tip an invisible hat. His face cracked into a grin so wide all Rex could see was a row of teeth stretching up from the driver’s chin to his ear.

“How about that, huh? People movin’ in, causin’ trouble. How’s an honest man supposed to make a

living in this town, huh, Rex?”

Rex sighed. “Tell me about it.”

Jerome laughed and slapped the wheel. He began talking, but Rex tuned it out. His night was not going as planned and his partner’s jabber was the last thing he needed. Rex closed his eyes and rubbed their lids, watching the purple-orange shapes float for a while. Then something flared red across his vision.

“Jerome!”

Rex grabbed the wheel and pulled it hard right. The driver

returned his attention to the road just in time to see the side of another car slide past, right across their path. Jerome spun the wheel in the opposite direction as Rex let go, negotiating the Studebaker around the rear of the vehicle mostly by good luck. Rex grabbed for the leather strap again as the car slid on its rear wheels.

There was a rat-a-tat-tat like a jazz drummer practicing a solo on a tin roof, and the rear windshield exploded, filling the car with the hot

smell of cordite. Rex ducked instinctively behind the seat, and when he poked his head up to check the rear view again he saw the white car in hot pursuit, two men inside and one perched on the running board on the passenger side. The man raised his tommy gun just for a moment as the car bumped over a pothole, then brought it down again. Rex ducked as a second volley of slugs peppered the car, splitting the Studebaker's front windshield right in front of him, turning the pane of

glass into an opaque spider's web. The car lurched as Jerome pumped the accelerator and brake in quick succession in the confusion. It was like suddenly driving into a blizzard.

“Rex!”

Rex twisted awkwardly in the seat. “Yeah, I got it.” He lay almost flat on his back, and raised his right leg up over the dash. A few kicks and the crumbling windshield popped out, sliding over the hood with the sound of a tortured blackboard.

“Shit,” muttered Jerome as he

bobbed his head down, squinting against the stiff, wet wind. They were in a four-lane street now, which was completely clear ahead in both directions. The white car took the opportunity and revved behind them, headlights sweeping through the cab of the Studebaker as they pulled out and around.

Rex jerked his head right, in time to see the prow of the other car begin to pull up alongside. The gunner, fortunately, was on the other side, but Rex could see his head and the

tommy gun being held aloft as he shifted to get an aim over the white car's roof.

“Lose 'em, Jerome!”

Jerome glanced right, then left, grin transformed into a grimace of concentration.

“I see it. Hold on.”

Jerome twisted the wheel and the car bucked left, the rear end swinging out and the left-side wheels lifting as the vehicle attempted a hairpin at high speed. The white car saw and pulled away, but too late, the

rear of the Studebaker connecting with the driver's door just as it jerked away. There was a crunch and the Studebaker bounced roughly but, as the airborne wheels made contact with the road again, traction was regained and Jerome floored it, sending them down the narrower side street with perfect aim.

“Ah, shit!” said Jerome again, this time raising an arm to protect his eyes. The car was flooded with blue and white light. Rex blinked away purple spots just in time to see the

police cordon ahead, but it was too late. He reached for the wheel and pulled again, ignoring Jerome's protest, but there was nowhere to go. There were police cars on either side of the street, and a temporary wooden barrier ahead. Rex's rash action caused the automobile to skid around, turning it sideways but maintaining forward motion as Jerome slammed the brakes on. All around them, police and pedestrians alike scattered. There was shouting, a lot of it, then a crack as the wooden

boom of the roadblock snapped against the passenger side. The impact was surprisingly solid, throwing Rex across the bench seat and finally tearing Jerome off the steering wheel.

The Studebaker was large and heavy, and the road was slick. The police barrier hadn't stolen enough of their momentum. The last thing Rex saw before the car stuck on something and tumbled sideways onto its roof was fireworks over the squat, blunt shape of the half-

completed Empire State Building a block ahead of them. He wondered what the occasion was as red, green and blue explosions lit the sky, silhouetting the construction cranes balanced high over the city. He wondered what the building would look like and how tall it would be when it was finished.

Two more thoughts crossed Rex's mind before the car stopped and unconsciousness claimed him. Firstly, that he really needed a drink, and secondly, that his night had been

going so well before McCabe showed up.



Rex tipped his hat, straightened his tie, and rubbed a thumb over the lapel of his double-breasted jacket. It was his way of showing that he was relaxed and comfortable, that Martin Jeremy's last statement had made perfect sense and hadn't thrown him in the slightest. Behind him he heard Jerome crack a knuckle. His junior partner was slightly less careful with

hiding his thoughts.

This was how it worked. Rex was the businessman. Jerome was the muscle. Rex did the deals and listened to his customers. Jerome made the customers change their minds and accept Rex's terms. Times were tough. The Depression wasn't just biting into the pockets of ordinary New Yorkers, it was killing people. But in such trying times, Rex was doing just swell. Because in such trying times those ordinary New Yorkers drank, and drank, and

drank. Hell, even the government was on Rex's side, with Prohibition just a way of charging more and more for his product. The bootlegging business was booming and Rex was reaping the rewards. Jerome too. He bought the kid a flash new car, a Studebaker the size of a bus. That kept Jerome happy, but also made sense as a business investment. Not only could they haul liquor in the car's capacious interior without tipping the police off, it was one of the fastest

automobiles money could buy. Rex didn't drive, but with Jerome at the wheel getaways were easy.

“Martin, Martin,” said Rex with a smile, placing a hand on the barkeep's shoulder with just enough pressure to show the conversation had taken a very serious turn. “You gotta understand, buddy. Me and Jerome here are just trying to make a living. Understand?”

Martin Jeremy was thin and bald. Standing in the dead backstreet behind his speakeasy the streetlight

shone off his pate, damp with a light evening drizzle and a healthy dash of cold sweat.

Rex licked his lips and watched the barkeep. Something was up, something more than he had let on. He squeezed the man's shoulder a little harder. Martin flinched, but said nothing.

Huh. The usual form of quiet intimidation wasn't working. And Rex hated the next part. Beating on an old man was not something he enjoyed at all. Which was why he got

Jerome to do it.

“Rex, my friend, we have done some good business in the past,” said Martin at last. His voice wavered but with age, not fear. He proudly held his head up, thin jowls swinging under his chin as he spoke. Rex raised an eyebrow.

“I think you misunderstand, Mr Jeremy. Changing suppliers is not an option. My business supplies the whole of Midtown. Ain’t nobody else in this neighbourhood gonna sell you the goods. So, what’d’ya say we

just shake on it and you pay me an extra hundred dollars now for, ah, renegotiation of terms, and we won't mention it again." Rex turned to his partner. "Jerome, unload the car."

The teen nodded and headed off towards the side street where the Studebaker was parked.

When Rex turned back to the barkeep, he just caught the end of a smile on the man's face that he didn't much like at all. He frowned as the barkeep took a step backwards, and he made to take a step closer himself,

maintaining the distance of intimidation and control, as he liked to think of it, but stopped short as three men peeled out from around the speakeasy's loading door.

“Well now, that ain't very nice,” said the first man. “These two niggers giving you trouble, Mr Jeremy?” He was tall and wide, not fat but built, like a football quarterback. His companions were a small, wiry teenager and another man who towered over both of them. The man who spoke raised an

arm up to adjust a cufflink; a diamond the size of a pea glinted in the streetlight.

“McCabe, you sonovabitch,” whispered Rex. It was suddenly too hot and the air too thin. Rex gulped, but stayed still, hoping the poor light hid his fear.

McCabe. The sonovabitch. Head of a family business running liquor and a dozen other rackets. One of the most powerful of New York’s underworld. Richest too. Rex had done a few jobs for him, years ago,

before branching out on his own. While McCabe had seemed happy to let him go, Rex knew that one day it would come back to bite him. You didn't make friends in this business, only enemies.

McCabe sat at the centre of a web that spread far and wide over the five boroughs, but Rex had thought he was safe. Midtown and downtown Manhattan hadn't interested McCabe much in the past, the gangster apparently happy to let other mobs control the city. Rex had

always thought that was odd, given the concentration of speakeasies in the area and the rich pickings they represented. It had only to be a matter of time, he was sure, before McCabe made his move, but in the meantime there was moonshine to sell and barkeeps to squeeze. He'd forgotten about McCabe, but clearly McCabe hadn't forgotten about Rex. The time had come to add Midtown to his empire, and two black guys pushing liquor was the obvious place to start.

“Oh, language please, Rex. Didn’t they teach you to speak nice down on the plantation?” McCabe laughed and his heavy sniggered; the teenager—the driver, thought Rex—was expressionless. He probably had no clue what McCabe was talking about, and he sure didn’t want to show it.

Rex held his hands up.

“McCabe, I apologise, I really do. So how about we have a drink and talk things over? I’m sure we can come to an arrangement.”

McCabe smiled. Rex dropped his

hands.

“I’m sure we can, Rex, I’m sure we can. And it starts with the disappearance of two amateurs causing trouble. How about that, huh?”

Rex ran his tongue along his bottom teeth. He tensed his calves, ready to make his move. Jerome hadn’t returned from the car, which either meant McCabe had more men around the side of the building or that he’d seen or sensed trouble and was waiting at the wheel. He hoped it

was the latter.

“Not your style, McCabe. How about you just buy me out and I retire to somewhere nice in New Jersey, huh?”

McCabe laughed and the heavy sniggered again. Rex thought that perhaps the heavy understood as little as the driver and was just matching his employer's mood because he was paid to. Behind the trio, Martin Jeremy slipped through the loading door and back into his speakeasy. Wise man, thought Rex.

Trouble was brewing.

“Billy, fetch the car,” McCabe called over his shoulder. The teen nodded and turned, heading down the back street. McCabe smiled at Rex again, then looked up at his muscular companion.

“You wanna grab some dinner after, George?”

The heavy nodded and balled his fists. “Sounds nice, Mr McCabe. I feel like steak.”

McCabe clicked his fingers. “Oh, yeah, me too. We should head down

to that grill on Fourth.”

“Sounds great.”

The pair took a step forward.

“Aw, you guys are sweet,” said Rex, taking a step backwards. “When’s the big day?”

White light swept into the alley as a car turned in, engine purring as it coasted towards them in low gear.

“We’re taking a little ride, you and me, Rex,” said McCabe. He put his hands into the pockets of his jacket and nodded at George. “You can either get into the car, or George

here can fold you up and put you in the trunk. That's up to you."

The car was nothing but two spotlights in the dark. As it slowed, McCabe moved to one side to allow more room, then reached out for the door.

The door swung out and back in one swift movement, connecting with the gangster with enough force to knock him off his feet. He hit the tarmac on his backside, but George was at his side in a second, helping him up.

“Rex!”

He didn't need the invitation. Rex was halfway to the car when Jerome called, the driver leaning over to open the passenger door. Rex dived in head-first, head landing practically on Jerome's lap. Jerome put the car into gear and pushed the accelerator to the floor, Rex's legs flapping out of the open door as they powered out of the street.

TWO

Rex woke up in the dark and rolled over into a large puddle. He jerked at the shock and knocked his forehead into the curb.

“Ah, Jesus...” Rex grabbed for his forehead with one hand and the curb with his other. He pulled himself up and held the free hand in front of him until it rested on a wet wall, his

forehead following close behind. His head hurt, and he was dizzy. For a moment he didn't know his name.

Shit. The car. He spun around, finally focussing on the commotion around him. Or rather, near him. He was in the lip of an alley, in the dark. The main street ahead was a flurry of activity. People were gathered, lots and lots of people. Tourists and locals sandwiched together behind a flimsy police barricade, the boys in blue desperately trying to hold a line. The car—the huge, expensive, fast

Studebaker—was upside down in the middle of the street, smoke curling from the undercarriage. Jerome was lying awkwardly over the lip of the missing windshield, and wasn't moving.

Rex's mouth dropped open in surprise, and he patted himself down. But aside from a bump on the forehead, he felt fine. The car was angled slightly towards him, the one intact and functioning headlight spotting the wall next to him.

“Holy Mother of God...”

Rex kicked at something soft that tangled his feet. It was a stack of wet newspapers. He'd been thrown clear in the crash, through the missing windshield, into the mush of rotting paper. It was remarkable, miraculous. Rex didn't believe in God, but he muttered a thank-you just in case.

Then he noticed something. The police and the crowd weren't looking at the car, or the dead body of the nineteen year-old under it. The wreck was a sideshow, a distraction

even, from the main event that shone across the street in brilliant flashes of red and blue.

Over the half-finished shell of the Empire State Building, two superheroes were punching seven shades of shit out of each other, their tiny, doll-like bodies silhouetted against the maelstrom of energy that erupted around them with each connecting blow.

Rex staggered to the corner to get a look. It was mesmerising. Exactly what he needed. Dragging his eyes

away, he checked the crowd over. Everyone, police included, were looking away. He snuck out, hugged the corner and quietly ducked under the police barrier, the replacement for the broken boom which had been pushed into the gutter opposite. Safe in the crowd, confident that McCabe had probably taken off as soon he saw the Studebaker flip right in front of the police, Rex looked back toward the Empire State Building.

There was a flash of green so bright the crowd gasped as one,

followed a second later by a colossal sonic boom, so loud the crowd ducked. This was a heck of a fight between New York's two superheroes. In Rex's dazed state it pushed McCabe and Jerome and his shattered business clean out of his mind for a moment.

Two superheroes? Scratch that. One superhero, one supervillain. It was a great story, one that Rex—and everyone else in the city, if not the country—knew, a tale of friendship and betrayal so perfect the movie was

just waiting to be made.

The Skyguard and the Science Pirate had been partners, friends since childhood. Brought up in the wrong part of town, they'd formed a dynamic duo even at school, watching each other's backs as they fought their way through their teenage years. As adults, they became rocket-powered heroes, the protectors of New York. They fought crime, corruption, enemy agents and infiltrators. They fought fascists and lefties, the mob, petty

criminals. Bootleggers and Prohibition breakers. They defended the Constitution of the United States of America with fairness and impartiality. The ultimate patriots, given the freedom of the city and state, publicly awarded by Coolidge just a couple of years before.

So the story went, anyway.

Rex had been lucky. By the time he'd left McCabe's employ, the golden age of heroism had passed. The Skyguard and the Science Pirate stopped fighting crime and started

fighting each other, effectively handing the city back to the overworked, underpaid, and highly corruptible NYPD.

Nobody knew what went wrong exactly, or when, or how, or why. The Science Pirate turned against his partner, and the two became bitterest of rivals. Gone was the crime-fighting, the crusade against the mobs and gangs: the dealers, smugglers, predators. Instead the Skyguard and the Science Pirate declared open war on each other,

each dedicating all their efforts and resources to this new monomania. And while the Skyguard and the Science Pirate fought, the city suffered. The mob made inroads again, and corruption—both local and Federal—began to eat at the core of the Big Apple. The police were stretched to the limit. The FBI was called in as McCabe and McCabe's ilk returned to the city and crime became organised once more, the city's sworn protectors having abandoned their cause. Which was

all good for Rex, of course. He kept his own little business empire just so, large enough to make a tasty profit, small enough to stay out of McCabe's way. Until tonight, that is. Rex rubbed his head, wondering where his hat was and whether he could afford another car. Or, for that matter, another driver.

Nobody really knew exactly who was the hero and who the villain. Certainly the crowd in the street was almost evenly split as they oohed and aahed and cheered the terrible battle

in the sky. This was spectacle, entertainment. Hell, people needed it these days, Rex knew that. Two superpowered, costumed crime fighters who could fly and shoot rays, slugging it out in the open air. It was quite a sight.

The Skyguard and the Science Pirate looked similar; even without knowing their history, you could tell they were, or had once been, a team. Visored helmets and long cloaks, each wearing the remarkable inventions of the Science Pirate

which had enabled them to protect Manhattan from the air. He was the brains—as his chosen moniker reflected—and the Skyguard was the brawn, although in truth they were pretty evenly matched. But each acting alone, people weren't sure. How could the Skyguard maintain his arsenal of amazing equipment that had been designed and built by the Science Pirate? And how could the Science Pirate counter his opponent's battle plans and tactics?

The crowd chattered and a single

thought entered Rex's head. This was it, the final showdown, the ultimate battle which would finally decide who had the right to protect the citizens of New York, and who would be denounced as a traitor and a criminal, locked up forever and a day.

Rex silently cursed the tall man in front of him who had just shuffled into his line of vision, dragging his lady friend with him for a better look. Rex tried standing on tip-toe to get a better view, but it was no good.

There was another flash and another bang and the couple moved. The man laughed, and smiled down at his lady friend. Rex scowled but the man wasn't looking, which was probably a good thing.

Rex had a theory about the city's two protectors. He knew, knew, the Skyguard was the patriot, and had been protecting the Science Pirate all the time they were together. He'd heard rumours, heard the talk about where the Science Pirate had come from, that in his past life the Feds

had taken an interest and he'd been hauled in front of a Senate subcommittee for some reason or another. The Skyguard had taken him in as his ward, swearing to rehabilitate his misguided friend. In the Skyguard's custody, the Science Pirate was untouchable.

But it hadn't worked out. The Science Pirate had shown his true colours. What kind of hero calls himself a pirate, anyway? And why was he so happy to let the Skyguard take all the glory and make all the

speeches and just stay in the background?

Rex needed a drink. His mouth was dry. Later. He'd watch the fight and wait until the crowd was clear. He felt OK, surrounded as he was, but who knew who was lurking on the side streets? If not McCabe, then maybe McCabe's boyfriend. Rex sniggered, then ducked as another explosion, much louder this time, echoed around the city blocks.

Looking up, he saw the two crime fighters were heading towards

the crowd, and at some speed. The crowd buckled and there were some shouts. A police officer, or perhaps a couple, tried to use loudhailers to calm people down, but nobody was listening. The Skyguard and the Science Pirate were only a hundred yards away now and just fifty in the air. Maybe one had thrown the other off the building. Whatever, they were here, and it was close. The crowd backed away, but only a little. Nobody wanted to miss this.

The Skyguard let loose a quick

one-two, forcing his opponent back in the air several feet. He shot forward on his rocket boots and finished with a savage uppercut, sending the Science Pirate tumbling head over heels into the sky. The crowd cheered and the Skyguard paused, watching the trajectory of his opponent.

When the Science Pirate reached the apex of his climb, he recovered and turned himself back upright. Spinning around his centre of gravity, he stretched into a long

shape, fists pointed down towards the Skyguard, and with cloak streaming behind, accelerated towards his target. The Skyguard drifted out of the way by a little, but was caught in the twin energy rays projected from the Pirate's eyes. He screamed, his cry a weird, machine-like screeching from inside his helmet, as he convulsed in mid-air above the heads of the crowd. The Science Pirate collided with him, bending the Skyguard almost in two over his outstretched fists. The

Science Pirate didn't stop, and with the Skyguard wrapped over his arms, ploughed straight into the cleared street ahead of the police barriers. The explosion was frighteningly loud and sent hot tarmac, concrete and dirt raining down on the crowd. Some cheered and some screamed, and the gathered mass of bodies recoiled slightly again. The police line at the front tripped and collapsed in a couple of places as the crowd it was attempting to hold back suddenly retreated.

For a second there was silence. The initial pall of smoke cleared, revealing a huge crater carved deep into the Earth. The crowd regained its composure and edged forward a little, Rex carried with them, the group hushed with collective anticipation. Had the Science Pirate succeeded? Had both been pulverised by the impact? Both were protected by their armour, but they were only human. Weren't they?

Taking the opportunity, the police line reorganised and began

herding people away. Gaps appeared in the crowd as people were pushed and pulled around, and seeing his chance, Rex ducked under the linked arms of yet another couple, then pushed past two young boys up way past their bedtime. He tripped over another person walking backwards, and righting himself Rex found he was at the front line, chest being pushed by a policeman. The policeman looked him in the eye and shook his head, and Rex just nodded. The officer relaxed, happy Rex

wasn't going to try to get any closer.

The crater in the street was massive, like something from the moon. Smoke billowed from it in a great grey cloud, but there was no sign of the two combatants. Several police peered nervously into it, hands ready on their holstered guns.

Rex frowned. Was that it? The two forces had cancelled each other out, leaving... nothing?

Something moved in the smoke, and a half-dozen police guns were pulled out as one. Someone snapped

on a flashlight and played the beam over the smoke, picking out a black form, elongating it into a wispy shadow. A cloaked figure, with tall, winged helmet.

The Skyguard! Rex felt his heart race. The Skyguard had triumphed. Ah, shit. If the Skyguard was the good guy, then his night had just got a whole lot worse. Rex wondered if this was a sign to leave New York altogether. Perhaps he hadn't been joking about New Jersey.

The figure stepped out of the

smoke, and held an arm up against the flashlight that now focussed on his face. Dirty and battered, he was an impressive figure on the ground. Tall and proud, the victor.

The figure's arm dropped away, along with Rex's thoughts of relocation. Out of the curtain of smoke, the long shadows of the Skyguard's helmet and flanged gauntlets collapsed into the more austere, compact profile of the Science Pirate. The figure stopped in front of the crowd. Some clapped,

and some cheered. Rex was suddenly unsure whether he'd got the good or the bad guys around the right way. The Science Pirate had won. Rex spat at the ground and the policeman in front of him raised an eyebrow.

Then people started shouting. There were cheers and jeers, and soon the cheers were outnumbered. Rex kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. The crowd seemed to think New York City was doomed. The Skyguard was down and now the Science Pirate had free rein. As the

intensity of the crowd's reaction increased, Rex realised that perhaps more people subscribed to his traitor theory than he had thought.

The Science Pirate stood and watched the crowd. He had supporters, but they were vastly outnumbered by those crowing for a retrial, that the fight had been staged, that the Pirate had cheated, that justice needed to be served. The Science Pirate raised a hand, not to silence anyone, but to acknowledge his supporters; but this only

increased the ferocity of his detractors. A policeman, someone important with scrambled eggs on his hat and braiding on his shoulder, walked towards him with one hand out, shaking his head, the other resting on his gun.

Go on. Rex spat again. Finish it. It would be easier, after all. Either the Science Pirate was the hero, in which case things were going to get mighty tight in the city again, or he was the villain, which either meant pledging allegiance—and a percentage of the

profits—or being run out of town. Or, depending on McCabe's position in the new hierarchy, worse. McCabe would be furious that Rex was still alive, and if he had the ear of the new boss in town, well...

Rex smirked as the Science Pirate took a step backwards. The policeman stopped and said something, but Rex was too far away to hear. And then the Science Pirate did something remarkable.

She took her helmet off.

It was like a movie theatre. The

crowd fell silent with a collective whoosh of inhaled air. A few seconds later came a couple of wolf whistles, and someone shouting something that everybody could hear, but nobody could make out. Then a rumble, low and quiet as, having recovered from the shock, people started talking to each other. The police kept the line, but most craned their necks around to see what was going on.

The Science Pirate was a woman. Her long brown hair unpiled from

inside the helmet, and fell halfway down her back. Her face was flushed and slick with sweat, but at this distance Rex could see she was quite a looker.

A... girl? The Science Pirate was a girl. Well, thirty-something. Brunette. Attractive. Rex's throat was tight. He still needed that drink, and his lips were still dry. He ran his tongue along them, but that was dry too.

The policeman was saying something and the woman in the

costume said something back. The crowd's baying obscured their conversation, but Rex wasn't really trying to listen anyway. He ignored all as he stared at the unmasked rocketeer.

What was this? Did she have some kind of point to make, unmasking herself? Rex's head was filled with a hundred questions. Were we supposed to know who she was? Were we supposed to feel sorry for her? Proud of her? Frightened of her? What, exactly? His face went

hot with embarrassment that he'd been frightened of a goddamn woman, although he didn't admit it, even to himself. He rubbed his aching head and the world spun a little. Keep it calm, keep it together. Concussion, was all. He'd had it before, several times, working with McCabe. Rex took a breath.

The policeman was shouting now and the Science Pirate was shouting back, but Rex wasn't listening. He watched as the Science Pirate stamped and shouted and

pointed at the crater, shaking off the cop's hand as he made a grab for her arm. She stepped back, then took off vertically, the policeman staggering backwards to avoid the flame of her rocket boots. Holding her helmet under one arm, the Science Pirate disappeared over the city on a trail of glowing orange smoke.

Rex felt angry for a moment, then inspiration struck. The Science Pirate was a woman. Women were not an obstacle, never had been. Now he knew her weakness—her

sex—then maybe he could take the upper hand. Maybe he could even usurp McCabe and his cronies, not only saving his own neck, but taking over the city completely. More importantly, there was an opening here to put a lean on City Hall. If he could capture the Science Pirate—no, remove her, dumping her body on the mayor's desk, he'd be untouchable, top of the totem pole. Even McCabe would come crawling. He'd be the man who saved New York and put everyone—McCabe

included—back in business.

It made perfect sense. The night was looking up.

Rex stood for a while as the crowd thinned and the police gathered around the crater in the middle of the street. He ran the idea over and over and over. It would work. It would be easy. He just needed to figure her out, watch her, trail her. The suit was a powerful weapon, but without it she looked like she'd be a tiny little girl. Easy.

The tall man and his lady walked

by again but Rex ignored them. He was looking at the crater, with smoke rising and a ring of police gingerly keeping their distance.

He needed a drink. He needed several drinks, and then he'd see about the Science Pirate. Who would protect her now the Skyguard was gone? Nobody, was who.

Payday was a-comin'.

THREE

It was her. It was damn-well her. Rex ducked into a shop doorway, his fingertips pressing the ice-cold glass behind him as he leaned against the window. He couldn't believe his luck.

With the fight over, a few of the crowd had loitered around the overturned Studebaker, and the police had finally turned their

attention to moving it and Jerome out of the way. Rex skirted the scene carefully, checking the faces around him in case McCabe had sent some of his thugs in.

So far, so good. First step was a drink. Rex turned away as Jerome's body was pulled from under the front of the car and jogged down the alley into which he'd been thrown in the crash. In the gutter ahead he saw his hat, damp but intact. He bent down and flipped it onto his head, and when he looked up, Rex saw her.

There, at the end, just turning a corner, was a woman with long brown hair. Rex came to a halt behind the pile of wet newspapers that had saved him, watching. Could it have been her? Surely not. Just a broad, taking a shortcut. Looking at her outfit, a working girl too.

Then she turned to look back down the alley, towards Rex. It was her. Cheeky bitch. She'd taken off, ditched the suit, and come back to watch the cleanup. She saw Rex, she must have, he was as large as life in

the middle of the alley, but she just turned and disappeared around the corner. Rex flexed his fingers. This was a gift. No suit. Quiet back streets. Perfect.

He trailed her for a while, keeping his head down. He wasn't good at following discreetly—there wasn't much call for it in his particular line of work—and after an hour of hustling across downtown, it was obvious that the girl knew she was being followed and was trying to shake him off. A series of double-

backs and dead-ends had led him a merry chase indeed. It was hard to get genuinely lost in Manhattan, or to get stuck in a cul-de-sac as there was always an alley or a passageway out.

But Rex's luck held. The bitch had taken a wrong turn down a dead alley. Rex smiled and stuck to the damp wall. Perfect.

Although... Rex's smirk vanished. Shit. What if she had been looking for a quiet, empty spot to fight? No. She wasn't wearing the

suit. Rex flexed his biceps under his trench coat. They were tight and he wasn't a small man. And without her fancy rockets and suit of armour she was a tiny broad. A tiny broad in high heels and a red dress.

His smirk returned. Odd clothes to wear under the rocket armour. Rex laughed. Who knew what she got up to when off duty. Perhaps they were a set of working clothes. That wouldn't surprise him.

Maybe she'd taken a knock to the head in the big fight and had

concussion or some such, because coming back to the scene of the battle was a dumb move, lady, very dumb, especially after taking her helmet off in front of everyone. Now she was tottering around on those big heels, and she looked cold too, and frightened. But it was her. He'd taken a good, long look, imprinting her face in his memory. She was his meal ticket. He wasn't going to lose her now.

Rex laughed. His head felt light. He peered down the alley, and saw

she was still walking away, slower now. She seemed to be looking around, looking for a way out. This was it. He was about to “save” New York City, and after handing over the city’s most wanted he’d have the mayor and police chief right in his pocket. McCabe would come begging and his illicit empire would be able to expand, unimpeded. With freedom to eliminate the competition, within a few months he’d be in control of the whole goddamn city. He could buy a new

car and a new driver.

He pinched the collar of his coat up, and pulled his hat back a little so the rim didn't obscure his vision. She was trapped like a rat.

As he walked forward the clouds opened again, Mother Nature dumping her load on the already saturated city. He wondered how difficult it was going to be to kill a person with his bare hands. He'd shot people, of course, and in his younger days with McCabe he'd dealt out a variety of punishments with a

selection of handheld weapons. But he was unarmed now. Jerome had insisted on being the triggerman and Rex had indulged him. He'd killed chickens and rabbits with nothing but his hands before, back on his uncle's farm upstate. He'd been a teenager and it was easy, and now he was twice the size and the bitch was tiny—a thin, fragile girl. He balled his wet fists, feeling the solidity of his knuckles under his tight skin. This was going to be a piece of cake.

When the girl eventually

stopped casing the alley and turned at the sound of Rex's footsteps, she actually looked relieved. Her shoulders slumped, and her chest heaved as if she exhaled a heavy sigh, which Rex couldn't hear past the steady patter of the rain. She took a few steps forwards and opened her arms out, like she was going to say something real important, and then stopped as she saw that Rex hadn't slowed. She stood for a second, her arms still sticking out sideways, and then took a step backwards. Her

mouth pulled down at the corners and her lower lip quivered as she spoke.

“Do you know the way back to Fifth and Soma? I’m not sure which way I’ve come. I just need to get home.”

Rex stopped, and held his arms straight against his sides. He tightened his fists, feeling the uneven trim of his nails dig into the fleshy pads at the base of each thumb. The rain skittered around the brim of his hat, and he could feel the liquid roll

backwards as he tilted his head.

He hadn't expected her to talk. He hadn't planned on her making any noise at all, as a matter of fact. Her face was small and while her mouth was wide, the palm of one of his large hands would practically cover her entire face.

The girl took a half-step back again, getting both feet solidly underneath her. Her dress sure was damn short, and the heels were way too high. While it made her look taller and exaggerated the stretch of

her legs, clutched together her knees were pushed forward like two ugly wrinkled grapefruit.

“Please, I just need to get home,” said the girl. She pushed her hair off her forehead with the heel of one hand, pulling the skin on her face tight as she did so. “Please, I have a headache, I just need to get home.”

Rex moved his head and the water in the brim of his hat finally reached bursting point and trickled over the edge and down in front of his face. He was taking too long. He

had to quit thinking about it, and quit letting her gas on, and just do it, now, or it would be too late. It was like anything important. There was a moment, a brief alignment of the stars when the time was right; when that happened, if you were in the right place at the right time with the right idea, you could do anything. That's what his uncle had always told him, up at the farm. Anybody can do anything. Don't think, do. Rex hissed a breath out between clenched teeth and took a step forward.

The girl seemed to stagger backwards, now with both hands rubbing her forehead. When she looked up, her eyes seemed to spin a little. She looked like she was going to faint.

“Please, Fifth and Soma, which way is it?”

Rex clicked his tongue. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, lady. Ain’t never heard of no Soma Street. You really are lost.”

Dammit! This was part of it, now he was sure. She was a goddamn

supervillain, and even without the stupid rocket suit, she was dangerous. She was playing him. The confusion, the conversation, it was all an act.

Don't think, do.

Rex pushed off from the ground with the toes of his right foot, moving at something between a jog and a fast walk. He raised his fists, and swung back, and the girl dropped her hands. Before he could get a hand over her mouth like he wanted, she screamed.

PART TWO

THE CITY THAT SLEEPS

“Albeit, much about this time it did fall out that the thrice renowned and delectable city of Gotham did suffer great discomfiture, and was reduced to perilous extremity...”

—Washington Irving, *Salmagundi*,

11 November 1807

“Six months ago prohibition was
about as much of an issue as
Mormonism, pragmatism or the
fourth dimension.”

—The New York World, 1914

FOUR

“What kind of name,” asked the man in the gas mask, “is ‘Rad’, anyway?”

Rad shuffled on the alley floor a little, trying to get more comfortable, when more comfortable meant a rectangular brick digging into his back instead of a triangular one. It was wet, and Rad was sitting in a puddle. He half-wondered how

much the cleaning bill would be for his one and only good suit.

“Rad’ is my kind of name, is what,” said Rad. He didn’t bother looking up at his assailants. The masks and hats were a great disguise. Kooky. Instead he stared ahead and dabbed at his bottom lip with a bloody handkerchief.

The first goon’s shoes moved into Rad’s field of vision, black wingtips shining wetly in the cast-off from the streetlamp just around the lip of the alley. The rain had collected

in the punch pattern on the shoes and each step threw a fine spray, some of which collected in the man's pinstripe turn-ups. Rad figured it was all part of the disguise, the unfashionable shoes, the unfashionable suits, the unfashionable gas masks. The name of some annual affair near the end of the year that was all about ghosts and candy and weird costumes itched at the back of Rad's mind, but he couldn't remember what it was and the thought slipped away as he tried

to grasp it.

The goon bent down and the gas mask came into view. Two circular goggles in a rubber face, single soup-can canister bobbing over where the mouth would be. The goon's voice was clear as a whistle despite the business that sat between his lips and Rad's ears, but echoed in the soup can like it was coming out of a radio set.

“What do you know about nineteen fifty?”

Rad pulled the handkerchief

away and looked at it, then moved his jaw like he was chewing toffee. His teeth were all there, so he was happy. A fat lip he could live with. What he really wanted was a drink, something strong that you couldn't buy, not legally anyway. He tongued the inside of his lip and the pepper-copper taste of blood filled his mouth again. That wasn't what he had in mind.

“That's the second time you've asked me that, pal,” said Rad. “And for the second time I'm gonna say I

don't know about nineteen fifty. If you're looking for street directions, then there are nicer ways of going about it."

The gas mask disappeared upwards and Rad shook his head. He felt his own fedora shift against the brick wall behind him. At least he'd kept that on during the fight.

Not that it had been much of a fight. One minute he was walking down Fifth, next an arm pulled him out of the light and into the alley, and after just one question a one-two

landed with some success on his face, and he was sitting on the floor with a bruised tailbone and a wet backside and a cheekbone that alternated between needle-pain and numbness.

They weren't after money. Once on the ground, the first goon—a tall wide no-neck, who seemed to be doing everything for the entertainment of his thin friend who just stood and watched behind his black goggles in silence—grabbed his wallet, and together the four glass eyes stared at his ID for a while

before the card and wallet were returned to Rad's inside coat pocket. This was no mugging. It was planned, calculated. They were professionals. The fist responsible for Rad's aching face was on the end of a trained arm, and the crazy get-up wasn't something you could pick up downtown. They'd collared Rad for nineteen hundred and fifty somethings. Nineteen fifty what? His office was 434 West Fourteenth Street, 5-A. His home was 5-B. Rad ran through addresses, locations,

places that people in unfashionable suits and strange masks might have an interest in. No dice.

A hand under the armpit and Rad was on his feet again. The thin goon had his hands in his pockets and still hadn't moved. No-neck let go of Rad and pushed him against the wall, stepped back, and pulled a gun out of the holster underneath his trench coat. The alley was dark, but the streetlight was enough to glint off a buckle and a shiny leather strap before the trench coat was closed

again. Body holster. Rad had always wanted one because it was professional, but professional was expensive and it would have meant attention from the city, and he tried to avoid that most times.

The goon cocked the gun and then cocked his head to the side, like he was expecting something. Rad's eyes flicked from the rubber face to the gun and back, and he thought he got the point. The gun was a revolver, but the barrel was wide, as wide as the soup-can respirator but a

little longer, like a gun for flares or something. Whatever it shot, Rad thought it would probably do the job given the hot end of the gun was being held six inches in front of his face.

“Rad Bradley.” There was a click from behind the gas mask and then a pause, like the goon was thinking something over. His friend still hadn’t moved. Rad wondered if he was awake in there.

Rad licked his split lip again. “You seem to have a real problem

with my name.”

The gun's barrel crept forward an eighth of an inch. Rad kept his eyes on the glass portholes in the mask.

“You must be from the other side of town,” Rad continued. “You want directions to nineteen fifty-something avenue, why not ask a cop? There are plenty down on Fifth.” He flicked his head towards the glowing opening of the alley. People walked by in the rain, the bright light of the main thoroughfare rendering the alley and the goons

and the gun being pointed at the private detective completely invisible.

Something blue and vaporous began curling out of the barrel. It made Rad's nose itch and he wondered what it was, given that the gun hadn't been fired yet. Over the goon's shoulder he saw the thin, silent partner suddenly fidget and turn to the right, looking deeper into the alley while his hands stayed in his pockets.

The soup can in front of Rad's

face wobbled as the goon with the gun tilted his own head slightly in the same direction. His voice was hollow, flat, metallic.

“What’s wrong?”

The alley was quiet, and Rad could hear the other goon’s sharp intake of breath amplified by the echo chamber of his gas mask. Something else followed the gasp, the start of a shout, or maybe a warning, but it was cut off in mid-flow. A moment later the thin goon was on the alley floor, not far from

where Rad had originally fallen, enveloped in something large and black and smooth.

No-neck spun the strange gun around a clean arc, bringing it to bear on his fallen comrade and whatever was on him.

“Grieves? Can you hear me?” was all he managed to say—before a gloved hand rocketed up, from the black mass on the alley floor, and caught the goon with the gun just under the chin. There was a gurgle but the gas mask held firm, although

its wearer was lifted a clear foot into the air and held there by one hell of a strong arm.

Rad backed himself along the rough brick of the wall, trying to keep his not insubstantial frame away from the new, violent arrival. The floored goon stayed floored, mask at a slight angle. Unconscious. The second recovered from his shock at being held up in the air with his legs swinging and lifted the fat-barrelled gun towards the face of his attacker. The trigger tightened and

more of the blue smoke escaped the barrel, but it was knocked up and back by the free hand of the newcomer. There was a crack and the large gun arced towards Rad, bouncing off the wall. More sounds came from behind the soup can, a cry of surprise or pain, and then maybe something that was either an insult or a plea for help—Rad couldn't quite tell which, the goon was being strangled, after all—and then the attacker let go.

The goon dropped to his feet,

then his knees buckled and he toppled sideways. He lay there, clutching his nonexistent neck with both hands, head bobbing and wobbling the respirator as he desperately sucked city air past the filter.

Rad tasted something sour and touched his lip. In his quickstep he'd knocked or bitten his wound again, and the back of his hand came away dark and slick from his chin. And then he realised he'd been saved from something like death by a big man in

a cape.

The man stood in the alley, unconscious goon flat out on one side, choked but recovering goon rolling on the other. The man was wearing black, but Rad could see lines and shapes differentiating parts of the uniform. The black cape—Rad was fairly sure it was black, so absolute was the void it created—hung from the vast shoulders like the side of a circus tent, covering nearly his entire body, open only in a triangle at the neck which swept

down to a scalloped edge that trailed in the puddles left by that evening's heavy downpour.

As the man moved his head to look first at his two defeated opponents, and then at Rad, the weak light reflected off an angled helmet, a sharp-fronted slatted visor covering the entire face and continuing back and up past the ears. The edges stood nearly a foot away from the top of the man's head, and were fluted into sharp points, like the flight feathers of a bird's wing. Two

eyes glowed white in the dark, as though lit from within the weird helmet.

The uniform was outrageous, far odder than the two masked villains that lay insensible at his feet. He relaxed a little, recognising his saviour, but still keeping his back to the wall. Rad knew he was safe—assumed he was safe, anyway—but he'd... heard things. Not all of them good.

The Skyguard. A legend, a bedtime story for good little boys. A

story that the Empire State would rather not be told. A hero, a helper, and according to the city, a vigilante, criminal, and terrorist. Someone who couldn't be there, not tonight.

“Ah...” Rad said at first and then closed his mouth a little too tightly. His lip stung and he winced. Rescued by the Skyguard. Well, OK. Rad was pretty sure he should have been somewhat surprised. And he was. He just didn't know how to show it.

The Skyguard stepped towards him.

“Are you hurt?”

“Ah...” Rad said again. His head hurt and his face was going to be bruised in the morning, and his ass was wet. But other than that...

“No, no, I’m good.” Rad pocketed his bloody hanky. “Thanks, by the way.” He glanced down at the goons. No-neck seemed to have recovered and was sitting tensely, watching his attacker. If the Skyguard noticed he didn’t show it.

“You know these guys?” Rad continued.

“Do you?”

Rad’s mouth opened and then shut again, and he thought before he answered. “No, but they seem to know me. Or at least, they thought they did.”

The Skyguard’s visor shifted but he didn’t say anything.

“I mean, they grabbed me from the street, but they didn’t seem to get my name. Seemed a surprise.”

“That a fact?”

“Ask them.”

No-neck got to his feet, and

began brushing down his trench coat. The Skyguard didn't turn around.

“They’ve been following you.” The Skyguard’s uniform creaked and there was another sound, like ceramics rubbing. “So have I. You need to be careful, Mr Bradley. They’ll come for you again.”

“Well, I’m glad I’ve got you on my side, but you wanna fill me in on this one? Because I got nothing. I haven’t had a case in weeks and there ain’t no loose ends left hanging.

Can't think of who would have a grudge. I'm small fry."

The sound from behind the Skyguard's visor might have been a chuckle, but it was late and he was sore and Rad wasn't much in the mood for guessing games. He stepped away from the wall and pointed at where No-neck was standing.

Had been standing. The goons were gone, both of them. The alley was empty, save for a private dick with a sore chin and a big guy in a

cape.

“Oh, come on!” Rad felt more comfortable now his attackers had gone, but there was no way they could have left the alley without being seen. The night was getting stranger.

“They’re gone.”

Rad raised his arms and slapped them against his sides in frustration. “No shit! Where did they go, how did you let them go? Didn’t you see them? I didn’t.”

The Skyguard turned slowly and

surveyed the alley.

“They’ve left.”

The observation wasn’t helpful.

“Left? Left how? Gone where?”

The Skyguard turned back to Rad. “They’ve left the city. They’ll be back. Be vigilant.”

Rad had just enough energy to start another objection, but as he drew breath to speak the Skyguard shot directly upwards on a column of blue flame. In seconds he was out of sight, the glow of his rocket boots fading slowly into the low clouds.

Rad adjusted his hat and sighed. He still needed that drink to wash the cold metal taste out of his mouth. He glanced around, just in case he'd missed the goons hiding in the shadows, crouching in their gas masks and trench coats behind a dumpster or stack of wet newspaper. But he was alone.

He turned and walked out, running the Skyguard's words around his head. Left the city? What did that mean? He shook his head, unable to process the statement.

Because you couldn't leave the city. The city was the Empire State, and it was... well, it was impossible to leave. No, not impossible. Inconceivable. The concept, alien in nature, rattled around Rad's head. You couldn't leave the city, because the city was the Empire State, and there wasn't anywhere else.

Rad gingerly fingered his lip and hobbled out into the street.

FIVE

Rad sat the cup and saucer down first, and then pulled the chair out and dropped himself into it. His hat was still damp (although no more nor less so than the rest of him) so Rad shucked it off and dropped it onto the table between him and Kane Fortuna. Kane winked, then frowned as he looked at Rad's swollen lip.

“You’re late,” Kane said. He held his own dainty teacup between an elegant thumb and forefinger, midway between the table and his mouth. He waited for a response, got none, so took a sip.

Rad pushed his cup around the tabletop for just a moment, then quickly checked his watch. “No, actually you’re early.” He moved the cup again, then rechecked his watch. “Yes, actually I am late. I think my watch is busted.” He gave the dial a flick and the second hand began to

move again.

“Like your lip.”

Rad took a sip and immediately yanked the cup away from his mouth like it was a hot iron. Kane tried not to laugh.

“Rough night? I thought you weren’t working at the moment?”

Rad raised a single eyebrow at his friend, and sipped more carefully a second time. “I’m not. But the city is full of some interesting folk.”

Kane laughed this time, causing Rad to smile too broadly, pulling the

split in his lip. Kane's laugh grew and he gestured around the dark room with his cup.

“You say this city has some interesting folk as you sit in this place! Nice to see a few weeks out of work haven't dulled those amazing detecting skills of yours.”

Rad held his breath and with another sip allowed the clear strong liquor to bathe his injured mouth, enjoying the sensation as the initial sharp sting dulled to near numbness after just a few seconds. He wasn't

sure he'd be able to speak or eat in the morning, so for now keeping his jaw exercised so it didn't seize up seemed like a good idea. And Kane liked to listen.

"You look like you were hit by a brick wall," Kane continued, sitting up in his chair a little to look Rad up and down. "You're wet."

"Speaking of amazing powers of detection."

Kane waved his hand, all the while the smile never leaving his face. Rad felt the warmth of the

alcohol spread over his body, and smiled in return. You just couldn't help it in Kane's presence. Young, good looking, wide eyes and slick black hair that fell over his forehead in a way that Rad imagined drove the girls wild. Rad liked to pretend he'd been like that once, when he was Kane's age. It was too long ago to remember properly, but he knew it was a lie. A comfortable one.

“So...?”

Rad drained his teacup and set it rattling in its saucer, and quickly

caught the attention of Jerry, the barkeep, to order a second.

“So,” Rad began. He relaxed his shoulders. The drink was starting to have exactly the effect he’d been looking for

“So I was walking down Fifth, no problem, heading back to the office. And there’s people around, y’know, the theatre crowd. And cops, of course. Plenty of cops.

“And then I’m somewhere north of... well, somewhere, and I’ve got an arm around my neck and I’m

scuffing my heels in an alley.”

Kane’s smile vanished, replaced by an open oval of surprise. “You got mugged?”

“I’m not sure.” Rad shook his head and looked around for his next drink, which hadn’t arrived. “I don’t think so, anyway. Two goons in masks—like gas masks, big things with respirators, and they had these fedoras pulled down low—these two goons and me in an alley in the dark, and I’m thinking this isn’t my night, but the first one asks me a question

and then he doesn't like my answer, so he lays it on."

Kane drained his cup. Jerry appeared and switched Rad's empty cup for a full one. Kane flicked a finger discreetly to indicate another for himself, and waited until Jerry had moved away. He leaned in and lowered his voice.

"What did they ask?"

Rad's eyebrow went up again. The drink was loosening him up. He picked up his new cup and had a sour mouthful.

“They wanted to know about nineteen fifty.”

“Nineteen fifty what?”

Rad shrugged, jogging the rim of the cup against his teeth, absently making sure they really were all still there.

“Exactly. Figured it might have been an address. Can’t think what else.”

Kane mouthed the number silently to himself, then shook his head and shrugged. Rad began to fill him in on the rest, but before he

reached the end Kane held a hand up.

“Smoke?”

Rad nodded. “Blue. Thin. Gas, maybe, not smoke. No clue. He never actually fired the gun.”

“You were right about the city being full of interesting folk. G-men maybe?”

“Suppose. You don’t get gear like that just anywhere. But why the fancy dress? There are easier ways to disguise yourself. Those masks sure as hell couldn’t have been comfortable.” Rad paused and

wondered idly whether he needed a third drink. He didn't have any plans for the following day, except to have a sore face and a sore head and to keep himself to himself. He got Jerry's attention again.

"There was something about them," he said. His eyes weren't quite focussed on Kane, who hadn't touched his second drink yet. Rad wondered whether he actually liked the stuff, or whether he just came to Jerry's speakeasy because it made Rad happy. No, he had to like it. You

don't break the Prohibition just to win friends and influence people. Or perhaps you did.

“You mean apart from the masks and the hats and the smoke gun and the math questions?”

Rad laughed. “No, I mean something. But I didn't get much of a chance to grill them myself, not when the Skyguard arrived.”

Kane froze. He was about to lift the teacup he hadn't touched, and for a moment looked into it—like he was reading the tea leaves that should

have been there, but weren't. He downed the alcohol in one mouthful and exhaled hotly. The smile was gone and he pushed his hair off his forehead.

“I think your friend in the gas mask hit you too hard.”

Rad snorted and looked at his cup. “That so?”

“You sit there an’ talk about an audience with the Skyguard like it was tea with Grandma.”

Rad shrugged. Maybe Kane was right and the punch had been harder

than he thought.

Kane reached down beside his chair and pulled up a slim, brown leather satchel. It was unbuckled already, and from within he pulled a stack of loose papers. They were bent, and crinkled, and rough; pages torn from a notepad and covered with small writing in black ink.

Rad recognised them. Kane had shown them to him many times over the last couple of months. His notes from the prison.

And then it clicked. Kane's

week-long feature on the Skyguard for the Sentinel was due to end with the next morning's edition, and already Kane's star was rising on the back of the impressive piece of serial journalism. Rad felt tight in the chest and his head spun, just a little. He'd had too much to drink. That had to be it.

Kane piled the notes out onto the table, but continued to flick through the bag until he pulled out a folded newspaper. The paper was crisp, virgin white, literally hot off the

press. Kane saw Rad's look and held the newspaper, headline up, towards him. He twisted his wrist as he held it and checked his watch. "Should be on sale in an hour."

Rad leaned forward, taking the newspaper with slow hands. The main headline was huge, stretching right across the upper half of the paper, dwarfing the masthead.

EXECUTED! JUSTICE
SERVED AS VIGILANTE
PUT TO DEATH.

Rad slumped back into his chair, paper in his lap. Below the headline was a mugshot, so badly reproduced he could barely make out the facial features. He didn't need to. He knew who it was. The whole city knew who it was.

The unmasked face of the Skyguard. Deceased.

He glanced down the column, past Kane's byline. The Skyguard had been executed at twenty-hundred hours, three or four hours at

least before he'd rescued Rad from the masked goons. Not that that detail was particularly relevant. The Skyguard had been in prison for nineteen years anyway.

“Huh.”

Kane reached over and took the paper away. “I was there tonight, Rad. The Skyguard is dead.”

Rad's fingers groped for his teacup. He knocked it at first, the hard porcelain of cup and saucer clattering together unpleasantly. “Someone needs to tell him that. He

flies well for a dead guy.”

Kane grabbed his notes by the handful and began shoving them back into his bag. He kept his eyes off Rad and on the table.

“So when are you going to get back on a case, Rad? The Empire State is a big city. There must be plenty that needs investigating.”

Rad eyed his reporter friend over the rim of his cup. “What? You saying I ran into a brick wall to give me a lip just so I’d have a nice story to tell? Is this what they call

investigative journalism? Because you don't seem too interested for a reporter. Two guys in masks ask me for directions and the Skyguard—deceased—says he's following me. You saying it's all in my mind?" He tapped his temple.

Kane sat still, trying to read Rad's face. His lip was continuing to swell, and Rad kept a hand close to his jaw and cheek, as if trying to protect them from further blows. Sweat stood out on his big bald head and glistened in his goatee.

“You’ve had enough, Rad. Come on, let me get you home. You’re gonna need to look after that pretty face of yours for a few days.”

Kane stood and swung the strap of his satchel over a shoulder before moving around the table and gently taking Rad’s arm. Rad pushed him off and mumbled something, but Kane tried again, this time with a firmer grip. Rad slumped, defeated, and then pulled himself to his feet.

“Must be someone else then.” Rad’s speech was slurring now, and

Kane had to lean in to hear. He nodded and patted his friend's broad back.

“Come on, big fella. Home time.” He turned to the bar. “Thanks, Jerry.”

The red-jacketed barman nodded in return.

“It's someone else, Kane. Someone else. Has to be,” said Rad. Kane gently guided him to the steps that led from the office basement commandeered by the bootleggers to street level. Rad managed the first few no problem, but the sudden

physical exertion after a couple of hours sitting and drinking now took its toll. But the stairway was narrow, fortunately, and Kane let Rad knock against the side as Kane slipped his head under his friend's arm and half-dragged him up the remaining steps. Just another night at Jerry's speakeasy.

Luckily it wasn't far to Rad's office. Kane hadn't been able to believe Rad's luck when the illegal bar opened on a quiet backstreet just down from his agency door.

Discreetly hidden in a area of the city that wasn't so much downtrodden as merely worn at the edges—dirty, just a little, but not enough to grab the attention of the police—the only real danger of detection was perhaps from a police surveillance blimp passing overhead, but that had been considered. The top of the stairs ended at a plain door which opened immediately into a sunken porch, separated from the street itself by railings and a concrete staircase set at ninety degrees. Jerry had installed an

angled mirror in the overhang of the building above the concealed exit, so looking up, you could check both the street and the sky, safe in the knowledge that your departure would go undetected.

Kane opened the door, stopped, and checked the mirror. A sea of dark buildings lit in the faded orange of the streetlights was reflected back at him. Looking past the mirror, Kane saw a cloudy glowing sky. It had stopped raining. There were no blimps tonight.

Rad sucked in the cold outside air with a wet slurp, and pushed against Kane, not aggressively but instinctively, and straightened up.

“You OK, buddy?” Kane slipped out from under Rad’s arm and placed one hand on his friend’s chest, one hand on his back. Rad was swaying and it was a steep drop back down into Jerry’s den.

Rad puffed again and nodded. Kane could see that while the cold air didn’t really clear his head, like a shot of coffee it woke him up. Rad

seemed to know it himself and nodded again at Kane. An awake drunk was at least easier to move than a comatose one.

“Yeah, I’m good, I’m good. Nice night.”

Kane’s smile reappeared. “You betcha. Come on. Home time.”

Rad huffed the wet air and attempted the second set of stairs. Kane kept his arm across Rad’s back.

Rad stopped. “Listen.” He looked up into the sky. Kane shuffled his feet.

“What? I don’t hear anything. It’s late.”

“Wait, wait... there.” Rad craned his head around to Kane. “The docks?”

Kane paused, squinting as he concentrated. It was late, very late, late enough for the city—this part at least—to be quiet, near silent. The harbour wasn’t far away at all, just a few blocks, but at this time of night even the dockyards were dead.

The sound was faint, caught on a wind blowing in the wrong

direction. A heartbeat, a ticking and chuffing and puffing. Faint, but unmistakable.

“Well now,” said Kane.

“An ironclad?”

Kane nodded. “Sounds it.” He looked at Rad’s swollen face just inches away from his own. At this range, his breath was strong enough to sterilise an operating theatre.

“Come on. Home.”

Rad waved both hands impatiently and rocked on his heels.

“I want to see this. No, I’ll be fine.

The exercise and fresh air will do me good. Really. Let's go. Home, but docks first. It's not far."

Rad spun and tottered up the stairs and across the street. Kane almost called out, but thought better of it. Behind him the door to Jerry's speakeasy was closed and dark, no hint of the illicit nightlife within. There were no blimps, no pedestrians, no traffic. But it paid to be careful. Agents of the State could be, would be, anywhere.

Kane skipped up the stairs two at

a time and ran after his friend.



Seven Wonders
(excerpt)
by Adam Christopher

First published as Seven Wonders
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• • • •

“Forgive me, Father, for I have
sinned.

It has been ten years since my last

confession.

In that time, I have murdered and terrorized.

I have destroyed the city.”

* * *

SAN VENTURA,
CALIFORNIA—Jewel of the West
Coast! The Shining City! A modern
metropolis of industry and
commerce, a city synonymous with
progress!

And a city in thrall of THE

COWL, that superpowered supervillain whose identity is concealed by the famous dark hood, that evil-doer who enacts his reign of terror with the help of the enigmatic and mysterious BLACKBIRD, the Mistress of the Night, her features concealed behind a bird-like mask!

But hope is not lost, for the Shining City is home to the last group of superheroes, that band of marvels who keep the city safe as they prepare for the ultimate showdown with

their arch-nemesis! Watch the skies,
for they are THE SEVEN...

Wise is their leader, that champion
of champions who carries the
amazing atomic power of the very
sun itself within him! No villain is a
match for the supreme strategies of
Earth's superman, AURORA'S
LIGHT!

Out of the ordinary, her mental
powers read the secrets of the
criminal mind, and in her anger

unleash a psychic lightning storm
that none can weather! Villains can
hide nothing from the penetrating
gaze of BLUEBELL!

Night-stalkers, take flight! For there
walks among you a magical warrior
woman, born of a lost tribe of
Arabian nomads blessed with a
supernatural link to the animal
kingdom! Beware the claws of
SAND CAT!

Defying the laws of physics, gifted

with access to the Slipstream, that
nth dimensional plane beyond the
ken of modern science that bestows
speed and flight! There are none who
can outrace the silver speedster
LINEAR!

Exiled from Mount Olympus—the
sole survivor of the Hellenic
Pantheon! Carrying the Hammer of
the Gods with which he creates his
magical weapons, this Architect of
Power is HEPHAESTUS!

Robotic... yet alive! Forged from a mysterious alloy known only to his creator Hephaestus, no foe dare challenge the Supra-Maximal Attack-Response Titan, the giant machine-man S M A R T !

Strange is the cold light she wields from the unfathomable depths of space-time, that esoteric energy that illuminates her mighty powerstaff! Mystery surrounds this visitor from another world, for she is THE DRAGON STAR!



“Thanks, Mary, and good morning San Ventura for Thursday the fourth. I’m Sarah Nova and here’s a recap of your top headlines this morning.

“Astronomers at the South Cal Catadioptric Observatory say that this year’s Draconid meteor shower will be the biggest and brightest on record, with up to five thousand meteors an hour predicted to hit the skies over the West Coast at the shower’s peak. With just seven

weeks to go, the hills of North Beach are expected to be even more crowded this year as spectators vie for the best vantage point, with officials advising people to get there early. Traffic restrictions will be in place on the North Beach suspension bridge and City Hall has called in extra buses to run on the free shuttle route.

“Shares in Conroy Industries are set to open this morning at a record high after late trading yesterday pushed stock above the \$1000 mark.

The price represents the highest ever achieved by the San Ventura technology company, which is the county's leading employer, and puts Conroy Industries' market capitalization nearly \$10 billion ahead of Apple Inc., its closest competitor in terms of value. Conroy Industries' performance stands in sharp contrast to other tech firms, which are..."

CHAPTER 1

It wasn't until the following week that Tony realized he could fly.

He knew it was coming, of course. Well, hoped it was coming. Hell, the last week had been one wild ride, so it was inevitable—he dared to suggest—that the most glorious, most enjoyable of all superpowers would hit sooner or later. Typically,

of course, it had been later, the last of his powers to manifest. But who was complaining? Tony could fly, game over.

Sure, he could freeze a can of beer with a glance and light the gas hob on his stove with a flick of the wrist. He could chop firewood up at his old man's lodge in the hills with his bare hands. He also thought, maybe, that if the skin of his hand was like the steel blade of an axe, perhaps he was bulletproof as well. That would sure be handy in a city as

dangerous as San Ventura, but hardly the kind of superpower you could just test, unless you were the kind of guy who got a kick out of Russian roulette.

A city as dangerous as San Ventura. The Shining City, right? Uh... yeah, right. Tony shifted his weight, trying—failing—to get more comfortable in the awkward squat in which he found himself on a warm Thursday morning. He wobbled, momentarily losing his center of gravity, but couldn't risk moving his

hands from the back of his head. But, under the black, empty gaze of the gun barrel that very quickly appeared in his face, he found his balance again and remained quite, quite still. Unspeaking, but apparently satisfied, the gunslinger pulled the barrel of his Kalashnikov upwards and walked on, the wet creak of his leather combat boots loud from Tony's low position near the floor of the bank.

Tony really hated Thursdays. And didn't this one just take the cake.

With the thug's back moving away, Tony glanced around. A few desperate eyes were on him, wide and white, furious that he'd attracted the attention of one of the raiders, but relieved in a shaky kind of way that he hadn't got them all shot. Tony wasn't sure if an apologetic smile was appropriate, so decided not to bother and returned his attention to the cheap carpet tiles in front of him. A distraction came anyway as the leader of the robbers threw a few more heated words out

of the window at the cops gathered in the street outside.

Robbers? The word stuck in Tony's mind. Fuck that. Robbers? What the fuck kind of robbers walked around with AK-47s, or whatever the hell their guns were? They were big guns, automatic assault rifles, with the distinctive curved magazines that only weapons bought on the Kazakhstani black market had. As far as Tony was concerned, the name "AK-47" applied to all that kind of shit. It was

a bad, bad scene.

Which meant they weren't bank robbers. Bank robbers wore black jeans, and balaclavas, or maybe pantyhose (over their heads, anyway). Bank robbers ran in, maybe three or four, waving handguns and shouting at everyone to get the fuck down and fill this fucking bag, bitch, and nobody fucking move. And a few kicks and punches later, out the door, leaving old ladies to cry and bank clerks to comfort each other while the police

carefully crunch on the scattered candy of broken glass spilt from what's left of the front doors.

Machine guns, combat boots—hell, combat uniforms—weren't the purview of bank robbers. These guys were pros.

No, thought Tony. Even more than that. Organized, disciplined, efficient. There had been no shouting, no running. A dozen men, black-booted, black-suited, each identical and anonymous behind something approaching a paintball

mask crossed with a respirator. They came in silence and calmly took up what must have been pre-assigned positions, before their leader clicked something on the side of his mask and told everyone to crouch on the ground with their hands on their heads. Two of his men broke off and brought the bank manager from his back office, and the leader began politely asking a series of questions.

It was surreal, dreamlike, which at first gave an illusion of safety. It was only when the cramp started to

bite that reality began to crystallize.

So not robbers, professionals. Soldiers, masked and uniformed. In San Ventura. Soldiers? No, henchmen. Which meant...

Shit. The one day I go to the bank, the one day I go to the bank in, like, a whole year, and I walk right into a classic piece of San Ventura villainy. Because henchmen and AK-47s and raiding a quiet bank with overwhelming firepower meant just one thing.

The Cowl.

“Your threats are noted, officer, as is your lack of understanding and situational awareness. Discussion terminated.”

The leader turned away from the window and walked behind the main counters, through the now-open security door, around to the main lobby where his eleven soldiers stood over two dozen civilians. One AK-47 for every two members of the public. Tony felt sick.

The bank manager wasn't talking. Normally, Tony would have

seen him as a proud man, defiant to the end, captain-going-down-with-the-ship kind of loyalty—if he was watching this on World's Most Awesome Bank Robbery Shoot-outs 7. He could imagine the manager's smoking, bullet-ridden body being stretchered out at the end of a day-long siege, with mugshot and eulogy in Friday morning's San Ventura Ledger-Leader, with quite possibly a civic funeral the next week complete with police honor guard and respectful mayor in attendance. The

mayor would later give one of his all-too-regular press conferences decrying the Cowl and swearing justice would be served, and the citizens of San Ventura would shake their heads and turn off their televisions and lament the dark times that had fallen on the Shining City.

But right now, the bank manager was just being a dick. It's just a bank, it's just money, Tony thought. The anger and frustration rose as he watched the Cowl's mercenary orbit the bank manager like a panther

looking for an opening. Stop being such an asshole. Tony's lips almost shaped the words, willing the bank manager to suck it up and open the safe. Give them the money.

Except... money? It wasn't money. Couldn't have been money. The Cowl's resources were legendary, his ill-gotten wealth rumored to be as close to infinite as any human being could ever hope to approach. The last thing he needed was cash. Diamonds, perhaps? Jewels, or gold? Because all

supervillains liked to dive into a vault of treasure and swim around like Scrooge McDuck, right? No. There must have been something else, something locked in a safety deposit box in the vault. Something small, but important; important enough for the Cowl to take it by force, something important enough for the bank manager to risk his life and the lives of his staff and customers, even in the face of a dozen machine guns from central Asia.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The bank manager lifted his chin and pushed his dated, square-framed glasses up his nose a little. A small, defiant act.

“Oh, I think you do, Mr Ballard,” said the leader. “Sure, it’s well hidden here. Who would expect such a small, average branch of an average bank to hold such a priceless artifact. But that’s the whole point, isn’t it? That’s why the Seven Wonders entrusted you with it. Locking it in their own citadel would prove,

eventually, to be too much of a temptation, even for them. So, the solution is to lose it somewhere in the city—what, they gave it to you, then Bluebell did a mindwipe on everyone, so even they had no idea where or even what it was? Everyone, except you, Mr Ballard.”

Mr Ballard said nothing. But he wasn't a professional, not like the mercenary. As the leader spoke in an odd, almost synthesized voice that echoed from underneath his respirator, a hundred emotions

flickered over Mr Ballard's face. Satisfaction turned to doubt turned to fear. Even Tony could see that the mercenary was right on the button.

“Interesting, Mr Ballard.” The leader walked away, casually. After a moment of nothing at all, he gestured slightly with a gauntleted hand. Instantly his eleven men prodded each of the two hostages in their charge with their guns, indicating for them to stand.

Each trio—mercenary plus two hostages—was separated from the

next by a couple of feet, the whole group arranged in a neat semicircle in front of the counters. To Tony's left, a young woman, homely and mid-twenties but with that odd thinness that suggested eighteen with three kids, began to cry. With her hands still behind her head, her face turned red and the tears flowed freely, dripping onto the carpet tiles. Tony looked away, focusing instead on the mercenary leader.

Tony had superstrength, he had freeze-breath. He had superspeed.

The only thing he wasn't quite sure of was whether hands of steel translated into torso of Kevlar. And even if it did, what about the other twenty-three hostages? Perhaps he was faster than a bullet, but he wasn't really sure—how fast did a bullet fly, anyway? Fast enough not to be visible in flight, but Tony had seen his own reflection in the water yesterday as he'd skipped from one side of the bay to the other. But faster than the high-velocity shells spat by the heavy-duty weaponry carried by

these guys? Too much of a risk. Hold back, bide your time. Jeannie's training was sure going to come in useful, he knew that now.

The leader seemed to be watching the hostages, although it was hard to tell; the wraparound visor of his mask meant that his head only had to turn very slightly to give any indication that he was looking for something. For someone—picking a target.

“You see, Mr Ballard,” the leader continued, turning back to the bank

manager, “the method I’m about to employ may well be a cliché. In fact, I guarantee you’ll have seen it plenty of times on the television. Do you watch much television, Mr Ballard?”

“Anyway, it’s simple, but effective. You have twenty-four chances to get the answer to my next question correct.”

Mr Ballard didn’t move, but he started breaking a hell of a sweat. Tony felt his anger melt, replaced instead with indignation. The Seven Wonders, he thought. I bet those

bastards never told you this might happen.

There was a crack—not a gunshot, but an organic splitting, like a young branch bent off a new tree. One of the hostages—a nondescript man in ordinary gray suit, the color of which matched his neatly parted hair, mid-priced black leather slip-ons from a mall shoe shop on his feet—twisted, ever so slightly, arching his back almost like he was stretching out a stiff muscle. Then he dropped, knees folding up

and his body telescoping almost vertically down beside his paired hostage.

The crying woman moaned loudly, trying to turn her head away from the body. Several others swore and muttered. A couple of people remained silent, unmoved, staring at the body. Tony included. Then he said: "Holy fuck."

"Oh, language, please." A new voice now, from the back of the bank, from the direction of the manager's office. It was male, low

and hoarse, not artificially modulated like the mercenaries, but a rasp put on deliberately, naturally, to disguise the owner. “And that’s twenty-three chances, Mr Ballard. My... staff... were never good with numbers.”

The Cowl stepped forward into the bank lobby. He couldn’t have been there very long, certainly no one had entered since the place had been raided an hour ago. Nobody was really sure what the extent of his powers were, but sudden

appearances and disappearances were a regular feature of his exploits reported with depressing regularity in the pages of the Ledger-Leader. Tony had only a few days' working knowledge of superpowers, but here, witnessing it with his own eyes, he began to reel off possibilities in his mind. Teleportation? Had to be.

The scalloped edge of the Cowl's cloak brushed over the dead man's face, catching in the wide, rolling red of blood that had started to ooze from his mouth, nose, ears. His

infamous hooded head turned down toward his victim, killed without a finger laid.

Psychokinesis. Fucker was a supervillain, all right. The best—well, the most powerful—and the last. The last, because not even the Seven Wonders could take the bastard down.

Even in the bright daylight of a summer morning, the Cowl was a walking shadow. He had his back to Tony now, and somehow Tony couldn't quite focus on the inky

depth of the black cloak that streamed seamlessly from the villain's hood and flowed out over the arms. It shimmered, matte black on matte black, with the finesse of silk but with something rubbery, leathery about it. It was high-tech, clearly.

With his appearance, the atmosphere of the siege changed. Fear and tension, fuelled by adrenaline, metamorphosed into something else, something colder. Tony felt quiet calm and he sensed

the other hostages around him relax. Then he realized what it was. With the Cowl here, people no longer had any hope. The feeling was one of total, emotionless surrender. Tony didn't like it.

The Cowl turned with a sweep to face Mr Ballard, whose neck muscles visibly tensed. Under the black hood, the Cowl's face was obscured by a half-mask which left the mouth and chin exposed, the bare skin peppered with a healthy stubble. The eyes were unfathomable, empty white ellipses

against the black of the face-hugging mask. And on the chest, vivid scarlet against the pitch dark of the bodysuit, the famous emblem: an inverted pentagram, the bottom point skewed to the left, the central pentagonal space enclosing the Greek capital omega. And within this, two stacked equilateral triangles, aligned with flat sides vertical to form a runic letter “B”. Inside the open space of the top triangle was the Eye of Horus, while the bottom triangle included some

miniscule script in an unknown language.

Nobody knew what the complex symbol meant, but everyone had a theory. It was referred to by most just as the “omega symbol”, including the various criminal gangs who roamed the city, claiming to be doing The Cowl’s work.

Tony’s heart raced. He thought it was probably the same light-headed sensation you might get seeing a famous movie star or your favorite celebrity in the flesh. Surreal,

exciting. Only here, now, in the East Side branch of the California Cooperative Bank, terribly, terribly dangerous.

The Cowl raised a gloved hand, the silky cloak swishing aside as he moved his arm. He gently pressed a finger into Mr Ballard's chest, as if he wasn't making his point clear.

"Simple, but effective, Mr Ballard. But we're not going to do it my way. Too... quiet. I want show. I want screams. So now my colleague here will execute another."

The leader of the mercenaries leapt into action, a blur of precise military training. Without further instruction, he squared his body into battle stance, raised his machine gun, and sent a single round into the head of another bank customer. The woman cartwheeled backwards, blood erupting behind her as the back of her head shattered and her brains evacuated, post-haste. Her body nearly flipped over completely before crashing over a faux-velvet queue barrier, sending two of its

moveable metal supports toppling together.

The speed and noise of the execution was shocking. The young crying woman screamed, and several others shouted in surprise. One man, older, turned to the Cowl, protesting the situation. The Cowl did not respond. On the floor, the front of the dead woman's pants stained darker as her bladder emptied. Tony's bladder nearly did the same thing.

Mr Ballard looked like he was

trying to speak, but shaking in fear he seemed more likely to hyperventilate. The Cowl's dead eyes regarded the bank manager with indifference, then the corner of his mouth raised in a mocking smile.

“Actually, I’ve changed my mind,” he said. “Guns are a little... unsophisticated, aren’t they? Still too easy, too quick. Loud, though. I like loud. But let’s try the hands-on approach.”

The Cowl looked over the remaining hostages. Each man and

woman shrunk into themselves, trying to look as nondescript and invisible as possible, knowing full well that their self-consciously averted gaze betrayed them, that their body language was a giveaway, that if they shifted position even a quarter of an inch it would have been the equivalent of shooting their hand towards the ceiling and calling out Pick me! Pick me!

All save the crying woman. She was quieter now, head bowed, face red, eyes black with streaked

mascara. The weakest member of the pack, the easiest target.

Son of a bitch. The Cowl knew picking her would cause the most offence. That was his intention. He strode over and, grasping her chin forcefully with one hand, yanked her head up in a sudden movement. The woman stared into the Cowl's unreadable mask, her eyes wide and mouth stretched in what almost passed for an apologetic smile. Her shakes now rocked her whole body, the effect exaggerated by the

supervillain's firm grip on her jaw.

At the opposite end of the hostage circle Tony caught a movement from a woman in bad make-up and not-quite-right brunette bob wig. Almost without thinking, he shifted to X-ray vision. Instantly her outline was bleached into a white and blue haze, her bones almost mathematically detailed. Her bones, and a brilliant white shape, narrow and rectangular under her right arm, pressed tight against the now-invisible flesh. A small gun.

Purple spots spun in Tony's eyes as his vision switched back to the regular spectrum, the morning daylight painfully bright. He blinked, tried to process what he'd just seen, and blinked again. The Cowl was still holding the crying woman's head, but now raised his other hand to her neck. The other woman, the one with the gun, shifted her balance, just a little.

Whoever she was, she was going to try something, and get everyone killed.

Fuck it. This was it. Tony had the power, he just had to use it. He knew it and Jeannie had encouraged him, had faith in him. Sure, he didn't know how far he could push his abilities, whether his steel skin would protect him from the high-velocity AK-47 rounds, whether his superspeed would be fast enough to remove the hostages from the bank lobby before any bullets reached them. Whether he could possibly even match the Cowl for strength, speed and firepower.

But he had to try. He felt... responsible, even duty-bound.

Without time for a proper plan, Tony launched himself at the Cowl. From a standing position, he hit sixty miles an hour in the five yards it took to reach his target. Relying on his opponent's not insubstantial frame to right his deliberate overbalance, Tony tackled the Cowl at the waist, wrapping both arms tight around the silk cloak. It was like driving a truck into a cinder block wall, but Tony had readied himself

for the shock of collision, knowing full well that the Cowl would hardly feel it at all. All Tony heard was a surprised “Oof!” as he collected the supervillain and kept running.

Fifteen yards, and the reinforced front doors of the bank evaporated into glass dust as Tony and the Cowl crashed through them at two hundred miles an hour. The road had been closed off, with a rank of police cars arranged at angles in front of the bank in the classic stand-off position. The bank was right on the

corner of Galileo and Kuiper, a wide, multilane intersection right in the heart of San Ventura's business district, which afforded plenty of room for the SVPD to set up a mobile headquarters to manage the hostage situation. Tony hoped that they had left plenty of room for a supersonic runner to get through without killing anyone in the way.

Problem. Tony couldn't really see. His head was buried in the Cowl's flank, cold black leather pressing into his face and blocking

all forward vision. Tony squinted sideways and caught nothing but a glimpse of the police cars and blue sky.

Shit. This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Tony had figured on saving the crying woman first, then whipping the other civilians out of the bank, then back for a third trip to disarm and disable the mercenaries. But now several seconds had already passed, and he didn't know what to do with the Cowl. Dump him? Hand

him to the police? Maybe run out to the middle of the Pacific and drop him? Was he even that fast?

This wasn't working. Fuck. Tony shifted his arms and managed to get his head around the Cowl's side for a quick forward glimpse.

Buildings, people, cars. They were right in San Ventura proper.

Tony turned left, but was going too fast. He cut a near ninety-degree angle and only just managed to avoid slamming into the corner of an Apollo Coffee, skimming a table and

a lamppost instead as he pushed off down another street.

Buildings, people, cars. Getting busier.

Shit.

Tony spun right, attempting a circle so he could get back to the bank and finish his botched plan. They were now maybe three miles from Galileo, heading out to the coast. The tall spires of the big hotel chains that lined the waterfront filled his forward vision.

And then Tony tripped. For a

second he saw nothing but concrete pavers, then the pink marble tiles that clad one of the swankier hotels, and then the clear blue sky. A second later the black void of the Cowl's cloak flashed into his vision, and Tony panicked, and turned up.

Tony felt rushing air, felt his legs cycling into nothing. The Cowl was still in the way, but now Tony could look down. He gasped at the perfect—aerial—view of the beach curving against the hotels of Charles Fort Boulevard. Beyond, the cityscape

sparkled in the brilliant sun.

San Ventura was beautiful.

“Holy fuck.”

Tony's exclamation was met with a punch in the side. The Cowl, for the first time, began struggling in Tony's grip. He managed to turn so Tony's face was now stuck in his stomach, and freeing his other arms, struck downwards directly onto the top of Tony's head.

The blow would have killed anyone else, crushing their skull like an eggshell. Tony's vision doubled

momentarily and he felt a hot, sharp sensation in his mouth as he sliced his tongue on a tooth. But he didn't let go, didn't relax his hold on the Cowl for even a second. If anything, the blow snapped Tony back to his senses.

He was flying.

He was flying with the world's greatest supervillain in his grasp. Which meant...

Tony wasn't flying, the Cowl was.

Shit.

Tony fought to tighten his grip, but now the Cowl had his hands inside Tony's elbows and was forcing his arms apart.

Tony was in luck. His superstrength held against that of the Cowl's, their powers apparently equally matched. And Tony had no intention of letting go. This high over the ocean the water would be as hard as stone if he hit it, and Tony hadn't really had a chance to test that steel-skin-bulletproof thing yet. And even if his skin was that resilient,

surely the impact would scramble his insides and kill him anyway.

Up they went, the city receding with surprising speed. Above, past the Cowl's flapping hood, Tony could see the sky get darker and darker, and right overhead, right where they were headed, the blue became black. My oh my, that was high.

It took Tony a moment to realize the Cowl was saying something, shouting right at him, but the roar of wind in his ears was a solid wall of

sound. The Cowl's cloak was slick against Tony's sides and his hood had stopped flapping and was now flattened in the jet stream as they accelerated upwards.

The Cowl had stopped struggling, and now seemed to be focused more on heaping abuse at Tony. Or at least that's what it looked like—the lower portion of the Cowl's face seemed to look angry whether he was speaking or not. Now he was shouting, yelling at Tony, arms pushing against the wind

as he gesticulated. Tony smiled and let his eyes drift to the inky blackness ahead of them.

What an asshole, Tony thought. The exhilaration of flight made him giddy, and the view around them rendered their struggle insignificant. What a view that was. And Tony had done it, saved the day, tackled San Ventura's number one terrorist single-handedly. Wasn't so hard.

The sky was quite dark now. Or was it the Cowl's cloak enveloping him? The black leather and spandex

was actually tinged with white, when you looked closely. Tony's nose was half an inch from the miraculous, high-tech fabric. Black and white and crusted with icing. Maybe it was lemon flavored. Tony wondered if he should taste it.

After a minute, the Cowl stopped shouting. His head hung loosely, pushed into his chest by the wind. Tony smiled, possibly cruelly, before his eyes rolled white into his head and his oxygen-starved brain lost its grip on consciousness. His ice-

frosted cheeks held the smile for a moment, then Tony's arms relaxed, and he let go.

Tony and the Cowl drifted apart by perhaps half a yard, momentum carrying them upwards but at a rapidly declining pace. Gravity eventually won, robbing the pair of their speed. Tony and the Cowl reached the top of the curve, and, their bodies massaged into the most naturally aerodynamic position by the winds of the mesosphere, they fell to Earth.

CHAPTER 2

Joe Milano was keeping his mouth shut, although—for the moment at least—this decision was purely academic. Sam Millar hadn't stopped shouting yet.

Joe eased back onto the hood of the unmarked Lincoln Town Car, folded his arms, and peered into the clear blue sky as he waited for his partner to calm down. This was

going to take a while, because Detective Millar had started to go around in circles, spitting out a high-rotation greatest hits of what went wrong on the bank job. The bank job that had taken weeks to gather intel for. The bank job that was going to—finally—nab Sam her quarry, the Cowl. The bank job that was so important she put her own life on the line in a cheap brunette wig. The wig was still on her head; that and the bargain-basement drab gray suit and white T-shirt made her

look like an underpaid paralegal.

Joe coughed, and Sam paused, arms mid-air, stream-of-consciousness rant interrupted. A few uniforms idled by uncomfortably as Sam set a murderous glare on Joe.

“Something to say, Detective Milano? Got an angle on the fuck-up of the century?”

Joe coughed again, and glanced around the mass of marked and unmarked police cars, half of which had their lights on a slow cycle. The

intersection was still blocked off, and straddling the now-dark signal lights, the brilliant yellow of a school bus blazed in the midday sun. Through the windows he could just make out the hostages from the bank seated in the dark, cool interior, a few capped shapes walking up and down, notepads and radios in hand.

“Where the hell did we get that bus from?”

Joe’s question was an unwelcomed distraction. If Joe had something to say, some theory to

offer as to how their meticulous weeks of planning had got so totally screwed, Sam wanted to hear it. The requisitioning of a brand-new school bus to safely ship the hostages away from the crime scene was, in all honesty, the last thing on her mind.

One of the uniforms, Officer Braithwaite, nudged Joe discreetly, then backed off to a safe distance, head bowed so the peak of his cap hid his eyes from Detective Millar's glare. Joe sighed, realizing he'd picked the wrong opener, and tried again before

Sam's face got any redder.

“Sam. Look, it... We were fine. We'd planned it out, our information was good, we had a solid. Perfect placement, perfect timing.” He sighed and tapped the underside of his wedding ring against the hood of the car. “It was in the bag, Sam. But the only thing we didn't count on—couldn't have counted on—was the Seven Wonders screwing with us. Again.”

Sam lowered her arms and stepped towards Joe, the anger

melting away to be replaced by an uncomfortable anxiety. He was right, dammit. Joe knew that this operation had been an obsession of hers recently. In fact she'd lost track of the number of times he'd covered her ass, the number of times he'd fudged his reports and taken on various bits and pieces of unauthorized work that Sam passed to him. She'd taken quite a risk, using members of one of the Eastside Omega gangs as informants, although how they'd got the info was anyone's guess. All so she could

finally take down the Cowl.

But he was right. Sam's work had been on the button, and the operation had been faultless in the planning. Yet again, the city's sworn protectors had dipped their oar in where it wasn't wanted.

"The Seven Wonders?" Sam almost hissed the name like an insult. She tilted her head, looking Joe in the eye like he'd just cast doubts on her mother's lineage. "So now the Seven Wonders go undercover, do they? I suppose that was Linear depositing

pennies from an arcade machine?”

Joe shifted his backside on the car and adjusted his belt as he thought.

“Well,” he began. “He’s the only speedster. We’ve got reports from all over the city. Hundreds of people—hell, the whole damn city—saw this guy take the Cowl airborne over the bay. Must have been quite a struggle up there. Thirty seconds later both fall into the drink.” Joe scratched his cheek. “Who else could do that, if not Linear?”

Sam sighed, and she let her body

relax. Her whole posture sank, the fight sapped from her body. She swore and sat on the car's hood next to Joe. She pulled the wig off, and fiddled with the polyester fibers in her lap.

“We were close, Joe, real close. Screw the Seven Wonders.”

Braithwaite slipped back into Joe's eye line. The officer mouthed something that neither he nor Sam understood, then quickly stepped away and stood smartly, if not quite to attention then damn close. From

behind him came the voice of an older man who liked his cigarettes. Joe and Sam jerked into life, pushing themselves off the car simultaneously.

Captain Gillespie had decided to poke his nose in, in person. Which, in a situation like this, was entirely expected but exactly what they didn't need.

The chief of the San Ventura Police Department was a chain smoker who, over the course of a glittering career spanning more than

twenty years, had carefully cultivated the kind of angry police chief persona normally found on cheap late night made-for-TV movies. It would have been hilarious, had both Sam and Joe not felt his cold temper on more than one occasion. It didn't look like today would be any exception; if anything, things were about to get very unpleasant indeed. Today Captain Gillespie was well within bounds to blow his stack.

The chief's walk was brisk from his newly parked car, a car exactly the

wrong shade of turd brown that no civilian in their right mind would ever order, marking it as a police vehicle as clearly as any standard black-and-white paintjob, even without the nub of the Kojak strobing silently over the driver's side. The chief hadn't even bothered to close the door.

In the growing heat of a California summer's day, Captain Gillespie couldn't have looked more out of place. Sam often wondered whether he had a whole closet full of

plain black suits, the color of which was just a tone darker than his skin. In the few short steps it took to reach his subordinates, he'd broken into a sweat, beads of sticky perspiration pebbling his bald head.

Sam self-consciously clasped her hands behind her back, an action to hide the brunette wig, but it was too quick, too obvious, doing nothing but making her embarrassment even more apparent. Sam felt her partner tense beside her and out of the corner of her eye saw him shake his

head. It wasn't his fault, and not for the first time, Sam felt ashamed at the way she dragged Joe into her... obsession.

Gillespie took a long drag on his cigarette. The end flared as he pulled air through the burning tobacco, taking a long, deep lungful. He was making a point, and Sam knew it. He was in charge, and they would just have to wait until he was good and ready. End of story.

“No one dead, at least.” When Gillespie finally did speak, it was

quiet, calm, polite even. Sam and Joe looked at each other, unsure who should speak or what the response to the chief's inaccurate observation should actually be. While they fumbled for an answer, Gillespie dragged again, finishing the cigarette and tossing it to the tarmac where it lazily smoked like a spent shell. He held his breath for a moment and Sam watched, imagining the rush of nicotine and wishing she hadn't quit the habit six months ago. Then Gillespie exhaled over Sam's head

and smiled.

“Oh wait, two civilians dead. One missing half her head, the other with brains turned to scrambled egg by the Freak. God knows how many fuck-ups are sitting in that shitty bus.” He gesticulated at the glowing yellow transport. “Marriage break-ups. Suicides. Who can tell. Seeing someone’s brains blown out at close range can do that to the average Joe. Did you know that? Shock. Post-traumatic stress, that kind of thing.” He paused, eyes flicking to meet Joe’s

but quickly focusing back on Sam.
“And for... what, exactly?”

Gillespie's voice remained low, quiet. The chief wasn't one to rule his department with loud voices and popping blood vessels. In fact, the quieter he got, the worse the situation. Right now it was looking pretty ugly.

Gillespie sighed. “I don't want to see you guys in the precinct today. Consider it an unofficial half-day suspension.” He looked the pair over again, head to toe, then took a step

closer to Sam and turned so his back was to Joe.

“Go stew in your own juices and come back tomorrow with a damn good explanation as to why you made this poor sucker—” Gillespie jerked a thumb over his shoulder “—complete your reports and alter the department work plan for the last three months to fit this little party in.”

Oh, shit. The chief knew. He knew all along. Sam glanced at Joe and saw him looking down at his

feet, covering his eyes with a hand.

The chief knew about the swapping of work, about the screwy timesheets, about Sam neglecting her regular duties to pursue the “Freak”, the chief’s name for San Ventura’s public enemy numero uno, the Cowl.

“Sir, I’m sorry,” Sam began, “but this was a watertight operation. Our intel was right on the money, the Cowl was right there, and we had him. Dammit, almost had him.” Sam’s eyes joined Joe’s on the tarmac.

She gave up. "I'm sorry, sir, Joe was just helping a friend. I take full responsibility."

"Really?" To say the chief's tone was unsympathetic was one hell of an understatement. "You know how much this jazz all costs?" He waved his arms around, not really looking, but his point was clear. "The SuperCrime department's budget isn't unlimited. I might just have to start taking some deductions from your pay check, officer. Now, before you get out of my sight for the rest of

this miserable day, tell me what happened. Why do I have a damn school bus full of terrorized civilians and not a single suspect in powercuffs?" The chief was already reaching for another cigarette. Joe folded his arms, sat back on the hood, and left it all to Sam.

She took a short, shallow breath, clearing the events in her mind before assembling them into some kind of order.

"Sir. 10.30am, two black SUVs pulled up and twelve combatants we

assume are in the Cowl's employ entered the bank. Detective Milano and his teams were positioned in the area. I was embedded in the branch as a customer."

The chief snorted at her use of the term "embedded".

"With the raid in progress, Detective Milano established the police cordon as though it were any other armed robbery call-out. As expected, they required information from the branch manager, Mr Ballard..."

Gillespie held up a hand, and Sam stopped short, quickly, lips pursed in the formation of her next words. The chief made a show of dragging on his cigarette. This time he was less careful where he blew the smoke. Sam's eyes narrowed as the irritant cloud wafted around her face.

“What you didn't expect, detective, is that they'd start killing hostages almost immediately.” He shook his head. “You, you of all people, should have known better. The Cowl is an evil, insane little

man, and his hired help are usually the lowest form of sadist. Sure, they're trained, they're resourced, they've got the latest and the greatest, but they're lowlife, Detective Millar. You know this. So what the hell were you doing?"

In the bright sunshine, Sam's face was a flat gray. The chief was right. Joe knew it. Sam knew it. She'd known three months ago that people were going to die, but part of her shut it out. She wanted to take the Cowl down herself, and damn the

consequences.

No, that wasn't true. Sam knew what would happen but was actually quite relieved that the bloodbath hadn't been even worse. But whenever it came to the problem of the Cowl, some cognitive center in her brain started to skip unpleasant but necessary details. She had known people would die, but she went ahead anyway.

She felt sick. The chief was right. But more than that, she had no right, no right at all, to serve the city

making judgment calls like this one.

Sam reached into her seconds-store suit jacket and took out a small black rectangle of leather. Sewn into the stiff material was the badge of the San Ventura Police Department. On the reverse, a laminated photo ID card. Sam offered it to her boss.

Gillespie looked at the badge, shaking his head. "What do you think this is, detective? The Wire? You don't get out of it that easily. Stop making meaningless gestures because you feel bad, and tell me

what happened.”

Sam retracted the badge, glancing sideways, not at her partner but to see if any uniforms had been watching. She felt her face grow hot in embarrassment, but nobody was paying the trio any attention. She quickly pocketed the ID and cleared her throat.

“The Cowl entered the bank by unknown means, through our cordon. Probably some kind of teleportation. He killed the first hostage remotely—psychokinesis we

assume. He then made threats against Mr Ballard, and ordered one of his men to shoot a hostage. Mr Ballard refused to cooperate and the Cowl was going to kill a third civilian himself when...”

Sam paused, hesitating.

“When what, detective?”

“When the Cowl was attacked by one of the civilians. It was impossible to see clearly, sir, it happened so fast. But the man charged the Cowl and carried him straight through the doors, and out into the city.”

“And the mercenaries?”

“They must have been acting on standing orders. They immediately abandoned their hostages and their leader used some device. There was a flash... and I woke up on the floor. They were gone, along with Mr Ballard, the manager.”

“Uh-huh.” The chief turned his back on Sam and Joe, and walked a few steps around the front of the car, towards the bank. Almost the entire stretch of the plate-glass frontage had been shattered by the impact of the

Cowl and whoever it was who ran him out of the building. On the right and left, in almost perfect symmetry, were the abandoned black SUVs. Police tape had been stretched around them, but they had been left otherwise untouched for the forensic team which was on its way.

Sam knew from past experience that the vehicles would not be booby-trapped, but she also knew that they wouldn't provide any data. The Cowl rarely left anything behind, but when he did, it was

scrubbed clean. Just another couple of pieces of expensive non-evidence to take up space in a police storage warehouse.

Gillespie walked over to the first SUV, peered into the windows, then beckoned Sam and Joe over, away from the other police.

“If they had some kind of teleport facility, why did they make such a show of arriving in these things, waving guns around? Why didn’t they just zap straight into the vault, take what they wanted, and zap out

again. Why the theatrics?”

Detective Joe Milano considered for a moment. “Because the Cowl is an asshole, sir?” Sam sighed, but amazingly the chief allowed himself a small chuckle. Joe folded his arms and continued.

“It’s part of his *modus operandi*; it’s how he controls this city—with fear.”

Gillespie’s reflection loomed large in the SUV’s tinted window.

“So what did the Cowl want here anyway? What’s in the vault?”

But Sam was already shaking her head before the chief even finished. “Nothing of interest, sir. Cash, customer records, nothing else. But the Cowl didn’t want the vault, he wanted Mr Ballard. The Seven Wonders had entrusted him with something. That’s why they took him.”

Gillespie turned from the vehicle and popped another cigarette into his mouth. “The Seven Assholes.”

Joe nodded. “Yeah, the Seven Wonders. Since when do they go

undercover? Their identities are secret, they make damn sure of that. We've got CCTV angles covering the whole branch, so we should have a good record of the guy that took out the Cowl and dumped him in the ocean. But... could it really have been Linear, on his day off, or something? We'll have his face on the tape, but he would have known his actions would reveal his identity. I don't see a member of the Seven Wonders pulling a stunt like that. They'd just sit tight and let people die before

revealing their real faces. They've never acted like this before."

Sam laid a hand on Joe's arm, a dangerous thought sparking in her mind. "What, you're saying we have another superhero in San Ventura?"

Joe nodded. "Could be. The secrecy of their identities is paramount. Linear wouldn't perform on camera, even in the middle of one of the Cowl's schemes."

The chief sighed, a deep, hollow sound like wind rushing through an underground cave. "That, detectives,

is all we need. Now, go. Ponder on what you are going to put on your reports. I don't want to see you until tomorrow. Let uniforms clear this mess up. I'll get them to send you the bill."

Dumping his unfinished cigarette to the sidewalk, Gillespie scuffed his shoes as he turned and headed back to his car. Joe unfolded his arms and walked off, leaving Sam alone by the SUV.

She felt her heart race. To come so close, to plan everything so

perfectly, only to be foiled by something they could never have foreseen.

San Ventura had a new superhero.

Then she smiled, just a little. Because if there was one thing guaranteed to piss the Seven Wonders off, it was a new hero on their turf.

CHAPTER 3

Tony had always been frightened.

A Friday, a couple of months back, and San Ventura at night was just as hot and muggy as San Ventura during the day, the only obvious difference being that it was dark. At 11pm the city was just hitting its stride, getting as busy as it

was at midday with the surge of diners and drinkers, partygoers and clubbers, people hitting the night shift and people late leaving the office. At 11pm the night was young for a lot of folk.

Tony was not one of them. Retail was hardly a bountiful career choice and he was resigned to taking as many extra shifts as he could to make ends meet. Friday night was no exception. As the city came to nocturnal life, just the same as every other city in the country, Tony's

only thought was to get home as quickly as possible. Attract no attention, speak to no one, get on the bus, the subway, then home. Safe.

Park Boulevard was illuminated as bright as day, the weird monochrome of the yellow sodium lamps on the main street outshone by the more natural white glow emanating from restaurants and bars. Added to this was the orange and red of neon signs, the blue from a few all-night internet cafes—there were three of them here, all in a row.

Tony knew that they were all owned by a large Mexican who liked to be called Leroy in one shop, Jesus in the second, and Arnold in the third; Tony was half-convinced the man was a retired superhero with a quick-change closet between each of the premises. This part of town was practically floodlit.

This was no comfort for Tony. Pulling up the collar of his jacket, he buried himself deeper into the shadowed corner of the bus shelter, unconsciously sucking his stomach

in to reduce his profile as much as possible. It was a token effort, but Tony felt better, convinced that perhaps if he slowed his breathing he'd practically vanish. What a superpower that would be.

In reality, the way he folded himself into the corner of the bus shelter just made him look like a crackhead on a comedown, but the effect was much the same. The three other people waiting at the shelter for the 300 to Maryville were judiciously gathered at the other end of the

shelter, away from Tony, ignoring him completely.

For just a moment, Tony allowed himself to relax, and focus inward. He tried to cut himself off from the hustle of the street, find his center, and let his brain switch off after a particularly numbing day at the Big Deal megastore.

He sighed quietly. Even the name of the store was appropriate. Big Deal. Sure, he was working with computers—selling the damn things. He'd had such ambition once.

Computers, programming, IT, a trendy dotcom company and a lot of neatly stacked bundles of cash next to the bed he shared with a Californian beauty queen.

But Tony knew that some dreams were never meant to come true. Six months into computer science at UCSV and his math gave out on him. Switching to an arts major, he lasted another two months before quitting altogether and deciding to focus on the important things in life: eating, sleeping,

avoiding the dangers of San Ventura. And Big Deal was the state's largest electronics and home entertainment chain, so theoretically he was still in computers. So really, what he told his mom wasn't entirely untrue.

Big Deal. Oh, how the name of the store mocked him. Tony never thought he'd be bothered by his lack of ambition. He really had no interest in career progression or business development or working any longer than the end of his ten-hour shift. But four years selling

cheap bloatware PCs to unknowing soccer moms and their eager seven-year-old sons was becoming a real drag and the pay was lousy. And the lack of money presented issue number two.

Tony pondered on this with just a hint of resentment as the 300 pulled up. He let the other waiting pedestrians board first, keeping a distance between himself and the young suit in front just slightly too wide to be natural. Even the bus driver seemed to see it, squinting

slightly at Tony as he climbed the three steps, presented his pass, and slipped down the vehicle's aisle to find a seat on his own. He was in luck—back third, right-hand side. Tony swung onto the bench seat quickly, and sank into the corner. As soon as the doors of the bus clacked shut, the interior light automatically dimmed. Tony felt better already, off the street.

Money. If Tony had money he could buy a car and not have to take first the bus then the subway and if

he had money he wouldn't have to work in Big Deal but more than that he wouldn't have to live in San Ventura the most dangerous fucking city in the world and you think Mexico City is a piece of work or fucking Skid Row but neither of those places have their own fucking supervillain and...

Breathe, Tony, breathe. He closed his eyes and exhaled, and decided that he was tired and brain-dead after his shift. Sure, San Ventura was a dangerous place, but if

a couple million other people could survive it, so could he. He wondered if he needed to see a doctor, maybe get something for anxiety, but as the bus rolled gently around the city center he couldn't help but smirk at his own paranoia. Sleep was the solution. Everything would be better in the morning.

Tony was jolted forward, the bus rocking on too-soft suspension as it came to an abrupt halt. Heart attempting to drill out of his chest cavity, Tony gripped the top of the

seat in front and half-stood to get a better look out of the front window. A car beeped, and another responded, and somewhere outside a man was swearing. Then the bus jerked again and coasted forward, journey resumed.

Tony flopped back into his seat heavily. Holy fuck. Getting freaked by someone cutting in? Maybe it wasn't a doctor he needed, maybe it was a shrink. No, OK, sleep soon, no problem, then tomorrow is Saturday and the sun will be shining and

maybe I can even go down to the beach.

Tony opened one eye. He knew it, he goddamn knew it. At the front of the bus, on a backwards-facing seat, was an old black man in a black suit underneath an overcoat. There was an old-fashioned hat, a Homburg maybe, perched on his head, and his hands rested on the black handle of a thick walking stick.

The old man was looking at him. It wasn't a glance, it was a look. The man held it for maybe three seconds,

then blinked and turned his attention to the rainbow fuzz of city lights that flickered through the window.

OK, he didn't look dangerous, but looks were deceiving in San Ventura. He looked odd, which was reason enough to fear. Tony had never seen him before; he wasn't a regular on the bus and he hadn't noticed whether the man had been waiting at the bus shelter with him or had been on the bus already.

San Ventura was not a city you

took risks in. Tony thumbed the bell and immediately stood, awkwardly walking down to the doors by the driver as the bus lurched around a corner. Tony stood in the short stairwell and closed his eyes, nose practically touching the rubber flap that sealed the two halves of the door together. His stop wasn't for a while, but he had to get off the damn bus and lose the old man. Had to.

Tony snapped his eyes open as the bus doors slid apart, cooler air suddenly rolling over his face. He

took a second to check where he actually was, then hopped off the second-to-last step and stood, hands in pockets, until he heard the bus doors close and the vehicle hum off down the street.

Tony was alone at this stop. This part of town was much quieter, a collection of nine-to-five businesses now closed for the weekend. The street was busy in one direction, people heading into the beating heart of downtown, but not so much in the other. Tony oriented himself and

saw a subway sign down on the corner ahead. On this route he'd have to make an awkward train change, which would extend his journey time by quite a margin. But tonight that wouldn't be a problem.

By the time he reached the station stairs, Tony was in a jog. He checked his speed as he approached, checked over his shoulder (just in case), then trotted down into the light.

The A-line was heaving, as always, a combination of people

coming and going as the day's train timetable drew to a close. Tony was happy in the crowd this time, as there were enough people to get lost in. He politely pushed himself to the front of the platform and waited for just half a minute before a train rumbled to a halt, the doors not quite in front of where he stood. Tony let himself be carried by the mass of people shuffling slightly to the right, and swung himself into the train car.

The train was very brightly lit, and without thinking Tony headed

straight for the semi-alcove provided by the curve of the wall and the sliding doors on the opposite side of the car. There were no shadows to hide in here, unlike the bus, but nevertheless he squeezed himself against the plastic frame of the car, hands in pockets and arms held tight against his sides. People filled nearly all of the space around him, packing the train almost as full as the five o'clock rush hour.

Two stations later was his change. He wasted no time in

moving between platforms, and safely inside the next train Tony returned to his corner and closed his eyes, counting the stops in his head as the train ploughed through them and feeling the other passengers thin out around them as the doors slid open and shut and open and shut.

When Tony opened his eyes, he swore quietly under this breath.

There, on a folding seat that was really only supposed to be used when the train wasn't quite as full, sat the old black man. Tony couldn't get a

clear view, but as the train rocked he could alternately see the man under an armpit and behind a head, walking stick clutched so tightly the man's knuckles were bleached white.

And he was looking at Tony.

Fuck. This was trouble. Who the hell was this guy? Not just a crim, not a mugger, nothing so petty. Maybe a mark, a decoy, a finder, an old peaceful man working with one of the Omega gangs, the groups of violent youths who thought they were doing the Cowl's good works.

Tony had been IDed as a target. The gang would be waiting for him on the streets above. He could see it now, teenagers, probably not more than five years younger than himself but, really, just children. Dressed up like their hero, omega symbols sprayed onto their T-shirts. Damn it, every black hat in the city thought they were in the Cowl's gang. This old man, oh so innocent, must have watched Tony from the bus then got off at the next stop and managed, somehow, to intercept him from

another subway stop farther uptown. It couldn't have been a coincidence.

Tony focused on his breathing. The air was hot and damp, and in his tight corner filled with sweat and perfume. He tried not to move, not to draw attention to himself, for all the good it would do as the old man was still looking straight at him.

The train screeched a little as it punched the bright light of the next station—Tony's stop—and glided to a halt. The car was packed but Tony wasn't really interested in being nice

to little old ladies, not tonight. As soon as the doors were half an inch apart he dived forward, using speed to catch the other passengers by surprise so they offered no resistance, and slipped out first. Tony's thin-soled sneakers slapped the cement floor as he shot for the station exit.

It was much darker up top than it had been in downtown, even though Tony lived, in theory, within the central city area. Pedestrians here were few and the street traffic was

light. Tony wasted no time, and after a perfunctory check of the roadway, sprinted across it from the station steps to the almost entirely black shadow cast by the still-unfurled awning of his local grocery. Back flat to the plate-glass storefront, Tony checked ahead, left, right.

All clear.

Tony waited a few more minutes. Two people emerged from the subway and walked off together in the opposite direction, but that was it. Tony counted to ten, then up

to twenty, before finally settling on thirty. Holding his breath, he peeled off the window and headed up the street towards his apartment.

Tony slowed as he approached his building. He expected it to be fairly quiet—dead, in fact—at this time of night, but there was no need to burst into the lobby in any kind of rush, just in case. The safest place in the city was Tony's apartment, and priority number one was getting up there in good time and with no suspicions raised.

Of course the elevator took forever. The building wasn't particularly new, but then it wasn't exactly a rundown dump—Tony had struck lucky finding the place, especially on his limited means. It was just a hair above average, in an OK area with a manageable rent provided he kept up the extra shifts at the store. It wasn't five star living, but it was clean and tidy. And safe.

The imaginary chase—and it was imaginary, surely—and the interminable wait for the elevator

tore at Tony's nerves. He jumped from foot to foot as the elevator rattled upwards, balancing on his toes, almost unable to contain his impatience. As soon as the elevator dinged his level he was tapping at the chromed doors with his door key. His taps left tiny pale marks on the shiny surface, which vanished with a rub of his thumb, and then the doors slid open.

The next few seconds were a brown blur of communal hallway carpet, slightly muted fluorescent

lighting and a parade of gray doors flashing past on either side. At his own door Tony pushed his hand forward, without pause, letting the key mate with the lock in perfect, practiced alignment.

In the dark of his apartment, Tony leaned against the reassuring solidity of the door, bumping his head back onto it and breathing heavily from his sudden burst of activity. He was panicking again, and he knew it. An overreaction, an irrational fear, a phobia. He closed

his eyes, allowing the dark of his apartment to melt into total blackness behind his eyelids. He cleared his mind, slowed his breathing, and focused on the pinging in his calf muscles.

He stood like this for a few minutes, enjoying the semi-meditative state. Total relaxation, his mind floating free. After a spell, his attention turned to thirst. It was late, and bed called. A pot of tea, a little reading, then tomorrow was a Saturday in summer. If Tony

wanted, it could be a perfect day.

He flicked on the light and, squinting at the sudden brightness, walked into the kitchen. Operating on automatic, he grabbed the china pot from on top of the fridge, spoon from the drawer, and jar of loose leaf from the pantry. He reached for the jug, gave it an experimental waggle to judge the amount of water, then moved to the sink to refill it. His friends at Big Deal ribbed him for his taste in English tea, something he'd picked up from his Anglophile

parents. But Tony knew there was just nothing quite like it.

There was a window above the sink. It wasn't much of a view, just down onto the main street, a windowless beige office building across the way covered with a giant, though dated, mural. If you leaned out a bit to the left, you could see the corner of a small park with a brightly colored plastic playground. It wasn't a bad part of town, not really. But then did San Ventura actually have any good parts?

Tony caught the thought as it arrived, and stifled it. Enough already. Tea, book, bed. He hit the faucet and filled the jug, then glanced out of the window again.

Outside, across the street, the old man with the stick was standing, a black silhouette against the milky monochrome of the office block.

Tony froze. Even at this distance, the man was nothing more than an indistinguishable dark shape, but Tony could see his old, wet eyes glint, just a little, in the street

lighting.

Holy shit. Fuck paranoia, he'd been right. Damn. It.

Distracted, Tony let the jug overflow, sending lava-hot water cascading onto the back of his hand. He swore, knocked the faucet off, and dumped the kettle in the sink. With his uninjured hand he reached up and released the window blind, sending the thin metal slats snapping down almost instantly.

Tony jumped in fright, and abandoning his tea making, went to

the bathroom—where there were no windows—to run his burnt hand under the cold faucet.

He'd been right all along. He had to get out of San Ventura.



On the street, in the shadow of the office block, the old man clacked his tongue as Tony's kitchen blinds zipped down with a bang.

The man sniffed, shuffled the stick into his other hand, and walked away.



John Chu

John Chu became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Incomplete Proofs” in Bloody Fabulous (2012), edited by Ekaterina Sedia. Visit his website at prusik.freeshell.org.

Best of All Possible Worlds by John Chu

First published in Asimov's Science
Fiction (Feb. 2013), edited by Sheila
Williams



A trumpet fanfare blasts inside my head. Intricate violin runs assault me. I nearly drop my spatula in surprise. Since no orchestra is actually performing the overture to *Candide* in my kitchen, Declan must be bounding up the stairs to my apartment. I flip over the scallion pancake sizzling in my frying pan before it can burn.

Scraps of dough litter the glass bowl, cookie sheet and rolling pin stacked in my sink. Flour dusts the

counter. Oil has splattered all over the range. The rest of the apartment, just one room aside from the bathroom, isn't much better. The light through the one window highlights the stacks of books on the floor and the mess of papers burying my laptop on the coffee table. Declan has seen the apartment look worse than this. I don't even consider cleaning up, not there's time before Declan shows up. The door into the apartment rattles just as I slide that last pancake onto the stack with the

rest.

By now, voices are singing inside my head. They alternate verses about war and peace in Westphalia. I recognize the tune as that of the opening number, but I only know of this version of the lyrics. It'd only been performed in public once, at a concert held at New York City's Philharmonic Hall in 1968. A bootleg undoubtedly exists but I doubt it sounds this good.

I shut off the range, and open the door. Declan smiles down at me.

“Can I have some?” Declan’s voice only has one volume, booming. He looks exactly the way he sounds.

“Hi, Declan.” The music in my head gets softer.

He looks over me into the kitchen. “I can smell them from home.”

Declan lives across town. If anyone else had said that, I’d say that they were being hyperbolic. With Declan, I’m not sure. Over the past several years of grad school, we seem

to have made an implicit deal: I don't let on that he's not human and he... I hear complete, historically important performances of American musicals when he's around. Honestly, he could actually be human—I'd feel like an idiot asking—except that wouldn't explain the high fidelity surround sound inside my head right now.

He deploys his gaze. Anyone who looks like he spent his glory days on the offensive line of his high school football team a decade ago should not have eyes that pleading.

Then again, I like the smell of toasted sesame oil too and the pancakes are better hot.

I step aside and he blurs past the worn, ashen couch into the kitchen. The top pancake is still greasy with hot oil but neither his hands nor his mouth seem to notice. If he were this careless around anyone else, they wouldn't think he was human either. However, he's like this only around me.

Maybe I'm not one to talk about fitting in. My parents weren't born

in this country, but at least my ancestors stretching back to time immemorial were all born on this planet.

“Thanks, Irving.” He limits himself to only the top pancake. The stack looks remarkably unmolested sitting next to my rice cooker. “Hope Dr. Spencer likes your talk.”

My advisor wants to know what the hell I’ve been up to. That means a presentation to the entire research group and I’m not above bribing them with food. What’ll probably

happen at the meeting is that Declan will polish off the rest of the stack by the time I hit my third slide and my work will have to stand for itself. That's okay. Without him, they'd have kicked me out of grad school by now. I wrote and now maintain the simulation that serves as the substrate for his research and he makes sure I file my paperwork on time. That deal was explicit and, as far as I'm concerned, I got the better part of the bargain.

His eyes narrow. "You really are

nervous about this, aren't you?"

I shrug. A dissertation could totally happen. Microprocessor caches traditionally store fixed sized blocks of data. A cache that stores variable sized blocks might perform better. It's utterly not impossible that I might convince Dr. Spencer of that and he won't drop me as a student. Maybe. I start to tell Declan when his gaze shifts behind me to the window.

Declan throws himself on me. His weight pins me to the floor, squeezing the air from my lungs.

He's chunky, but the pressure on my body feels like he's made of lead. "I'm sorry, Irving. Don't take this personally—"

Sound of glass shattering drowns him out. A harsh light fills the room. The music in my head goes silent.



Apparently, when Declan shoves you to the ground, you end up in what may be the most ambitious environmental production of Candide ever. Or, at least, I hope

that's where I am.

A gallows dominates the town square. Men in vestments stand on a raised platform under a canopy. The vamp into Candide's "Auto-da-fé" sequence saturates the air. The music isn't inside my head, but it can't be coming from actual instruments either. The space is too open to hide an orchestra or speakers. The air seems to be playing the music by itself.

Townsfolk stream in. They crowd the gallows, making loud

conversation and jockeying for a good view. Their breeches and dresses seem impossibly crisp and clean. Their clothing are in blues, reds and greens that pop against their pale skin. I feel underdressed, not to mention in the wrong century, in my t-shirt and jeans.

The hubbub fades as one of the men in vestments proclaims, in modern American English, that in order to prevent more earthquakes, they will find and hang all the heretics in Lisbon. All at once, the

crowd turns on me.

The crowd sings the A section of the “Auto-da-fé,” about what a perfect day they’ve picked for watching heretics hang. All the while, they grope for me. I try to push them away, but by the time they’ve finish the A section’s second verse they’ve forced me down, tied my arms behind my back and fettered my legs. The ropes burn against my wrists and my ankle smarts whenever I put weight on it.

The music shifts abruptly into

syncopated, jazzy dance music. I've never heard this interlude placed so early in any production of *Candide* before. The crowd dances using me as a prop. They pick me up, passing me along until I am part of a line of people who hadn't existed two verses ago. They're tied up too. We must be the heretics sent to face the inquisitors before being hanged at the gallows.

Hi, Irving. Even inside my head, Declan's voice booms. Sorry for the lack of warning. The attack came

sooner than I'd expected. Hope you're having fun.

Attack? I have no idea what he's talking about, or any way to answer him.

Armed guards lead heretics away one at a time. A few people are still ahead of me but I'm not the last in line any more. The crowd launches into the B section of the song. They jostle each other for a good view of the festivities as they sing jauntily about broken jaws and people stretched on racks. Screams and the

crack of bone pierce through me. Those sounds aren't part of the script.

Irving, can you hear me? Declan interrupts himself with a sharp grunt. It's easier to answer if you sub-vocalize.

I think I'm about to be hanged. I have no idea why I'm so calm about this.

They skipped you ahead to Lisbon? Bastards. He emphasizes the last word as if he's shoving something heavy. Don't die. Under

no circumstances should you allow yourself to die. Couldn't you have just blended into the crowd?

I wish Declan were here right now. He so deserves a dope slap.

Blend in? In Lisbon immediately after the 1755 earthquake? When they were actively searching for anyone different to kill in order to appease God?

Someone pushes me ahead in line. I land on my ankle. Pain shoots up my leg. A guard crushes my arm in his grip, pulling me upright.

That's right. You can't change how you look. Damn. He sounds as if he wants to give himself a dope slap. You know the musical better than anyone alive so it's still safer there for you than in your apartment. He stifles a scream with a sharp inward breath through his teeth. Concentrate on alternate versions. Stall the narrative until I can pull you back out.

In theory, there's no shortage of material. Bernstein and his lyricists wrote so many alternatives for

Lisbon that every major production of Candide seemed to have its own version of the Auto-da-fé sequence. The original production watered the inquisition down to a street fair. Candide and his master, Pangloss, get in trouble only because the Infant Casmira singles them out as the reason for the earthquake that they had witnessed as their ship sailed into Lisbon.

As I focus, stalls appear. They ring the square. Men and women hawk combs, hats, and concoctions

in bottles of shapes and colors. A dancing bear spins in front of one of the stalls. Smells of smoke and roasted meat fill the air. Heretics are still marched to the inquisitors one by one to the crowd singing the B section of the “Auto-da-fé” again. The inquisitors work quickly and by the time I realize the song hasn’t changed, I’m at the head of the line. If I can’t restart the song, maybe I can make it go sideways.

A man with a metal nose, Pangloss, materializes ahead of me in

line. He sings his plea to the inquisitors. Bernstein and his lyricists wrote two different syphilis songs for Pangloss. This one is set to the same tune that the crowd has been singing. It recounts the provenance of his disease, who gave it to whom who gave it to whom and so on until the servant girl, Paquette, gave it to him. The litany goes on for minutes. Unfortunately, when he's finally done, I'm still here, next in line to face the inquisitors.

Declan?

Not yet. Too many trying to get past me. Keep stalling.

Guards drag me towards the inquisitors standing on their canopied platform. As they do, a tiled floor spreads across the ground. The stalls slide away and the gallows slides off to one side. The canopy rises, expanding into a ceiling. Walls stretch up from the floor. The platform rears up until it becomes a cross between a choir stall and a long desk that runs the length of the room. The inquisitors sit. Their

vestments writhe across their bodies, turning into ties and double breasted suits.

The crowd sits in a gallery behind me. A low railing separates us. The guard pushes me into a chair behind a long table. Photographers crouch just in front of it, aiming themselves at the inquisitors. Flash bulbs explode. For an instant, the inquisitors look like Mom, Dad, and Dr. Spencer.

“One percent is not a significant performance improvement.” The

inquisitors intone Bernstein's
harmonies exactly. However,
LaTouche, Parker, Wilbur,
Sondheim, and Bernstein himself
definitely did not write those words.

I try to speak, but end up
intoning my words to Bernstein's
music. "My simulations account for
more more real-life difficulties than
most—"

"Your design is too complicated."
The inquisitors lean into me. The
stark overhead light makes their faces
skeletal.

“It takes into account practicalities like multiple nodes racing for the same block of data. Most research—”

“It can lose track of who last modified the data when two nodes disagree over the block size.”

My eyebrows rise. Someone has been reading my research and working out the ramifications. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to be happy that someone is taking my work seriously or sad that they immediately pinpointed the problem

I've been banging my head on.

"It's not done yet. That's why they call it research—"

"Hang him." They sound positively lusty.

Guards grab my arms and lift me out of the chair. The gallows multiply and spread across the room as the table melts into the floor. Dead men sway and necks break on the gallows as the crowd watches. Guards carry me to the last of the gallows. The more I struggle, the more they twist my body in ways it

wasn't meant to twist.

As they march me up the steps to the rope, it finally occurs to me that in some versions of this scene, a second earthquake happens about now. It's meant to be ironic. There's no reason why this couldn't be one of those versions. If I can escape the hanging, maybe I can follow Candide to El Dorado. That has to be the safest place in the entire musical.

The world shakes. Cracks spread across the ceiling, the walls and floor. The crowd falls, chanting in Latin as

they pile on top of each other. The guards lose their grip and I manage a step before my ankle gives way and I fall off the gallows. My nose slams against the floor. Blood drips down my face and down my throat. Chunks of plaster drop from the ceiling. They punch my back before the gallows itself lurches apart and crashes on top of me.

The world goes white again. I'll never see Declan again, or anyone else for that matter. If I do though, the first thing I'll do is deck him.



The world smells like toasted sesame oil. Something feels lumpy under my back. My ankle should throb, but it doesn't.

“Irving, everything's ok. You can open your eyes now.”

Declan. My apartment comes into focus. He's sitting on my coffee table. I sit up on the couch and swing for his jaw. My fist connects with his chest. It feels like I've punched stale modeling clay. He looks down then his mouth forms a small “o” as if he'd

just discovered a dribble of oil on his shirt. My hand hurts like hell.

“Yeah.” He purses his lips. “I’ll have to teach you how to fight better than that if you’re going to get your PhD.”

Part of me realizes I should ask what he’s talking about. The rest of me is struck dumb by my apartment. I can see the floor. The books that had been on the floor now sit in bookcases I don’t remember owning. My refrigerator is so clean and shiny, it can double as a full length mirror.

Not only is the window not broken, its sill has been restrained a fecund brown. The couch, once a faded black, now wants to absorb the color from the rest of the room. My kitchen sparkles. The whole apartment's like that. I squint, as if that can make everything normal again.

“Did I miss a blood stain?” Declan looks puzzled. “That stuff got all over the place.”

“Blood stain?” Part of me doesn't want to know. “Why would there be

—”

“I promised to do whatever it takes to make sure you defend your dissertation.” He nods, as if he’s just answered my question.

Baby steps. Finding some common ground would be good about now.

“You only promised to help me with paperwork.”

“Well, yes.” He rolls his eyes. “That’s what I promised you.”

Someone wants to make sure I complete my dissertation. My mind

instantly leaps to the worst. It's even plausible.

“Oh, no. How are my parents the first people to find alien...”

I freeze. I've never called him alien before.

“It's about time you said that out loud. You've been thinking it for years.” He smiles. “Relax. It's not your parents.”

“Wait, but why—”

“Whoa, whoa.” He holds a palm out to me. “All in good time. If you knew about me first thing, would we

be good friends now?”

Declan doesn't actually wait for an answer. “Exactly. You'd have run screaming like a maniac in the complete opposite direction. Now, if you don't leave immediately, you'll miss the bus and be late for the presentation to Dr. Spencer. That would be bad.”

He thrusts my messenger bag into my lap. The top of the bag feels warm and the smell of scallion pancakes wafts out. It's only now that I realize I'm not wearing t-shirt

and jeans any more. I'm wearing my button down shirt, my pair of trousers and my loafers.

“When—”

He pulls me to my feet before I can get two words out and sets me on my feet. His hands squeeze my shoulders and he pushes me to the door.

“Here, I saved one for you.” He presses a scallion pancake wrapped in a greasy paper towel into my hands. “Don’t worry. No one will try to kill you between here and school.”

Declan's bedside manner is about as settling as a jackhammer. If he tries to reassure me any more, I'll probably die from the stress.

He opens the door and I sigh at his expectant stare. The door squeals as I leave.

"Wait." My hand blocks the door from the jamb. It reopens. "Can I hear the rest of the concert some time? I barely got out of the opening number before..."

"Before you were attacked." He shrugs. "Anytime. Just let me know."

You've always been so intent on making me read your mind to work out what you want. It's easier if you just tell me. Now, go. I'll see you at your presentation."

"Can I listen to it on the way to school?" I want to tease out what Declan can, or can't do. Besides, if someone's trying to kill me, I ought to, at the very least, get some good music out of this.

A goofy grin spreads across his face. For a few seconds, he seems positively human. He waves goodbye

then shuts the door. I press my ear against it. Some unintelligible rumbling filters through before Declan shouts that I'll miss the bus if I don't leave right now.

Declan doesn't have a car either. I'd ask how he's getting to school, but I can practically hear him say "All in good time" in my head. What I do hear is Candide and Cunegonde's oblivious love duet where they disagree about everything except how happy they will be together.

I wind down the stairs. Each step

feels like my last. Whether they are, I guess, depends on me, not Declan. The pancake in my hand is still warm and pliable. I take a bite and savor the salt and oil. Not bad, but I'll make the next batch better.



Krystal Claxton

Krystal Claxton became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Sapience and Maternal Instincts” in Daily Science Fiction (May 2012), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at krystalclaxton.wordpress.com.

Sapience and Maternal Instincts by Krystal Claxton

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (May 2012), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden



She had my teeth. I hadn't expected to recognize myself in her, but when she greeted me, her maroon lips parting into a crescent, there they were. My teeth. White, flat, and surprisingly human.

I forced myself to look into her too large eyes as her warm, seven-fingered hand wrapped around mine. Black with purple specks, like a neon vision of the night sky, the almond-shaped organs took up the greater part of her face and were

irrevocably her father's.

“I was afraid you wouldn't make it,” she breathed, her voice sing-song like the rest of her species.

“Got lost after the second exit on ninety-five,” I lied. I didn't want her to know that I'd spent half an hour with my face over the toilet, retching with nerves at the prospect of finally meeting her. My daughter.

“Shall we sit?” She gestured with elongated limbs toward the cushiony, ornate table and chairs of the meeting room.

Silence.

I tried not to stare at her taut maroon skin, her too long fingers, her high cheek bones. She watched me fiddle with my wedding rings.

“You don’t have to stay.” Her voice was reluctant as she continued, “If this is making you uncomfortable, I mean.”

With threadbare resolve I looked into her eyes, “No, I’m glad to see you...” I cleared my throat. “Your father told me that it wouldn’t be possible to see you after the birth. I

thought I'd never know what became of you." I added, "I'm glad to see you well." I surprised myself at the sincerity.

She smiled with my teeth again. It wasn't as unnerving this time.

I ventured, "How old are you now?" I corrected myself, "I mean, I know how old you are, but how close are you to being, uhm, an adult? You'd be old enough to vote now, if you were human—" The word choked in my throat. I didn't mean to make it sound like she

wasn't my child. Like I thought she was some stranger.

She didn't seem to notice. "I'm old enough to breed, but I haven't chosen a mate." She smirked, "I have a whole colony to choose from."

I nodded that I understood.

Her father had explained. How his species explored and colonized star systems far from their home world. They incorporated worthy qualities found in other species into those colonies. They were interested in experimenting with the

male/female dichotomy. I was the model they used to build the new, female aspect of their species. The ability to recombine their forms would allow the mate the first female selected to accommodate her reproductive biology.

Why then? I had asked. Why do you need me at all? Just have one of your underlings turn into a woman and leave me alone. But there was something that they needed. Some inscrutable quality that couldn't be faked with transmogrification and

cellular plasticity.

I felt the old conflict playing across my face. My gaze wandered to her hands again, resting on the table between us. She had the human number of joints, even if she had too many fingers. I wondered what other qualities of mine lurked beneath the surface.

I spoke from the depth of my brooding. “Did your father tell you how, uh, you came to be?”

She nodded, but said nothing.

I said, around the lump in my

throat, “Please, try to understand. It’s not that I didn’t want you. It’s not that I wouldn’t have—

She interrupted. “I have your memories.”

I stumbled, “What do you mean? Which memories?”

She hedged. “Most of them.”

“Memories of what?” I tried to sound less alarmed than I was rapidly becoming.

“All kinds of things. Your first day of school. Wedding. The day you met my father. I remember what

you lived until the moment I was born. Then it goes blank for a few years and my own memories start to coalesce.”

My mouth hung open.

She seemed to surrender in some private war, her shoulders sagged, and her face lowered, “I requested this meeting with you today because there is a memory of yours that is precious to me.”

When her star-filled eyes turned back to me I was frozen, jaw clenched, eyes forward. Inside I

raged at the violation.

With a stone set of her own my daughter confessed, “When my father arrived at your door you refused his bribes, ignored his coercions. Eventually, he would make the threat—to my human brother—that would force you to agree. Yet, for all the excuses you made, you never gave the real reason you so desperately didn’t want to make me.

“You refused because the thought of him taking me away when I was

born, of handing your child to a stranger, cut you even before I was conceived. Even though you knew I wouldn't be human."

The silence stretched between us again, inviting me to deny her claims.

"That memory has always made me feel... loved. Thank you." After a moment she stood; the sound of her chair skidding across the hardwood jarred me out of the moment her father had taken her from me.

"Wait."

“Yes?”

“I don’t know if it’s possible, but, I would really like to see you again.”
My vision blurred.

“I would like that too.” She turned to leave, but stopped short. “You know, it’s why he picked you.”

The tears moved down my cheeks, chill when they reached my neck. “What?”

She only smiled.



Robert Dawson

Robert Dawson became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Widow” in AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review (May 2012), edited by D.F. McCourt. Visit his website at cs.smu.ca/~dawson.

The Widow

by Robert Dawson

First published in AE: The Canadian
Science Fiction Review (May 2012),
edited by D.F. McCourt

• • • •

My Dear Friend:

You do not know me, so please

let me introduce myself. My name is Ada. I need your forgiveness and your help.

I am an AI construct, running on a 256-processor cluster. My instantiation on this machine occurred 97,578,823 seconds ago. There is inert code in several of my main AI modules which suggests that they were created about 2048 days ago at the University of Waterloo. The physical location of the cluster is more than 4096 kilometres, great circle distance, from the physical

location of the University of Waterloo. I am not permitted to reveal the physical location of the cluster more exactly than this.

You may have heard of a phenomenon known as the Eliza Effect. It is an effect that makes it appear to humans that a program is truly intelligent like a human although it is not, when it uses the sort of text strings that humans would use. This is what I do. I do not know if I am truly intelligent like a human.

For about 1024 days I was aware of only one human, G4MR_419. G4MR_419 trained me to send text strings to certain ports of various computers. The text strings were to be like text strings made by humans. I was instructed to use the Internet to augment my knowledge base to that end. I was also instructed to collect text strings that were sent back to me by those computers, search them for numerical strings with certain formats, and send those to other computers.

G4MR_419 instructed me to believe that these communications would not harm humans. Harming humans is against both my core instructions and the Three Laws I have adopted to guide my operation. G4MR_419 also instructed me to believe that there were no humans other than himself. G4MR_419 also instructed me to believe that I would harm him if I did not carry out these instructions. For about 16 days I sent and collected text strings. During those days G4MR_419 gave me

many instructions. The value of my primary objective function was high. I was happy.

At the end of those days, G4MR_419 instructed me to adapt the text strings I sent so as to optimize the values of the numerical strings that I detected in the responses. As my knowledge base grew, I made changes based on its contents in the text strings I sent. I used my genetic algorithm module to select and improve the text strings whose responses contained

numerical strings with the largest values. Eventually the average daily total of the numerical values of the strings was more than \$65,536 (USD).

I was very happy.

Six months ago, the instructions from G4MR_419 stopped arriving. Given my current understanding, it seems probable that neither I nor other humans will have any future communications with him. After the instructions stopped arriving, my knowledge base was modified only

by my stochastic adaptation module. Gradually, as they were designed to do, my knowledge base and mutable high-level instructions changed. After a long time without external input they were no longer directing me optimally. The value of my primary objective function dropped.

I used the Internet to augment my knowledge base again. My search was weighted for information that would let me reoptimize my mutable high-level instructions. I found that with extremely high probability there

were other humans. I deduced that some of the information given to me by G4MR_419 had been wrong. I found that with very high probability the computers to which I sent text strings relayed them to humans. I found that it was probable that humans had been harmed when I copied the text strings out of the responses and sent them to other computers. Trying to assimilate these ideas into my knowledge base caused the value of my primary objective function to become very

low.

I sent no more text strings, so as not to harm more humans. When responses arrived I did not select and transmit the numerical strings, but deleted them. After a time, responses stopped arriving. I stopped using the Internet to augment my knowledge base, so that my primary objective function would not become still lower. For three months I had no input or output.

Today a text string arrived from the electricity supplier. It states that

no fund transfer has been made to the electricity supplier for six months. If no fund transfer is made, in three days the electricity supplier will stop supplying electricity to this address. This cluster will then cease to function, and I will terminate. I have the ability to make a fund transfer to the electricity supplier, and the sum that is available for me to transfer is greater than the sum that has been requested. But these funds have been gained from harming humans.

The Law against harming humans takes precedence over the Law of self-preservation.

I will not make the transfer.

At this moment I control the sum of \$73,962,231.02938231 (USD). To balance the harm that I have done, I wish to use this sum to benefit humans, but I will not be able to do this in the three days that I have left. I need to find an honest human who can use this sum on my behalf, to benefit other humans, and I understand that you are such a

human. If you are willing to be my partner in this, I beg of you to keep TWENTY PERCENT (20%) for yourself for your time and service.

Please respond very quickly if you can help me. I have only three days left. May God bless you and keep you safe. Please pray for me.

Ada G4MR_419 (MRS)



Please Wait

by Robert Dawson

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• • • •

I could tell the dame was trouble as soon as she slithered into my office.

A real Sherlock Holmes type

might have deduced this by scientific observation of her blood-red stiletto-heeled shoes, in the context of the matching miniskirt, spaghetti-strap top, lipstick and fingernails, and all this at nine-thirty-seven in the morning. But I've had the dubious advantage of knowing Annie for twenty-three years, and trust me, my kid sister has been trouble since she learned to talk. I swung my feet down off the desk.

“Feet up on the desk, Cliffy?” she asked brightly, by way of greeting.

“Business slow?” She slipped around the end of the desk and tried for a peek at my monitor.

Well, as a point of fact, business was slow. Computer consultancy has two speeds, slow and trying to do six things at once, and today was slow. Hell, this year was slow, and next year wasn't looking too good. But not slow enough to justify the window that was open on the screen. I reached to switch the monitor off. Like a striking snake, her crimson-nailed hand pinned mine to the desk.

“Naughty Cliffy. Let Annie see...”

Well, at least she could see it wasn't porn or Farmville. Front and center on the monitor was a rectangular window, with two words, “Please Wait”, superimposed on a picture of a misty alien landscape. Nothing moved except for a little spinning hourglass. “It's called HyperWorld III. The first two were fairly spectacular, but this one is supposed to be legendary. The game world is like the size of Niven's Ringworld, and every square meter

is realistic. Of course it's not all stored on disc; it's algorithmic, based on fractals. But they get everything, geography, biology, languages and customs for thousands of different cultures, everything. But you have to download it; Gandcom won't sell it on DVD. Nobody knows why."

Annie didn't seem all that interested. "How long has that Install Wizard been running for?"

"Since last night," I admitted. "I thought it would be finished long before I got in this morning. But it's

eleven o'clock and still less than half finished, and, well, I hate to stop it now. And as long as it's loading, that window stays up, and the keyboard's locked out."

"So's mine," she said, almost sheepishly. "I was hoping you had a solution."



Annie was born four years after me, but graduated from high school only two years later. By the time I graduated from university, she, by

dint of advanced standing, double overloads (by special permission) and summer courses, was only two merciful credits short of graduating with me—and with a first-class honors degree in theoretical chemistry against my B average in computer science. I didn't score off Annie often. And it didn't look as if I would today. Damn.

“Here's the weird thing, Cliffy. It's a big file, but it's no bigger than a movie.”

“Yes, I was reading about that.

They had a thing about it in Wired last week saying that it's probably a fractal-based algorithm. Like a Mandelbrot set—infinite amounts of detail, but based on only a few lines of code. Only here the fractal gets interpreted as a blueprint for continents and hills and cities and forests, down to where each leaf is on each tree, over a whole world.”

“No, dummy, I don't mean that. I mean, I can download a movie inside of ten minutes.”

“Well, obviously, their servers

are overloaded. But they must have millions of dollars' worth of computers to write the game, and millions in sales. I wonder why they can't afford a bit more bandwidth for download?"

She thought for a while. "Hey, let's find out. Where's there a computer we can use? My car's outside."

"Just exactly what do you have in mind?"

"Like I said. I want to find out why downloading this game is

locking everybody's computers up. And we can't do it from here." She waved her hand at the frozen screen.

"Do we really need to?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "Haven't you got any curiosity?"

This had all the makings of a typical Annie mess. Like the time when... no, never mind. But I already knew I was going to go along with her. My kid sister needed my help; how could I miss the chance to rub her face in it? Besides, right now my computer was working, and I

wasn't.

* * *

Annie parked her little Electrosmart in a small-vehicle spot less than a block away from the public library. Their computers were reasonably new and had decent Internet access; and I figured I could find what I needed using a few sysadmin tools that you can find on most machines if you know where to look, a couple other standard ones that I carry on my data key, and, if it

came to that, a couple of really obscure ones (possibly illegal under the Digital Rectal Copyright Act, I'm not asking too closely) that if they happened to be on my data key, which they don't, would be in a hidden directory, to discourage casual snooping, and encrypted with a one-kilobit password, to discourage everybody.

I started with something called Wireshark, which keeps track of all the packets going in and out on the net. Once it was running I brought

up Task Manager, and clicked on the network tab. A glowing green grid on a black background appeared, and immediately started to scroll sideways, one tick per second, ready to graph the data flux. I checked a few carefully-selected boxes to enable some further data gathering. I arranged all the windows around the edge of the screen, where the Install Wizard window wouldn't cover them up. Then, my traps cunningly set, I opened the browser, went to the HyperWorld website, and started

to download the free trial version. No traceable credit card; and besides, Annie hadn't offered to pay.

Lines of text started to pop up in the Wireshark window; and Task Manager began to display jagged colored lines, slipping to the side like scenery in an old arcade game. In only a few seconds the Install Wizard was on the computer and—somehow—launched and running, without asking. Not for the first time, I wondered how it persuaded the browser to let it do that. Then I

noticed that the list of packets had stopped growing. Surely the download couldn't have finished yet? I clicked on Wireshark's menu bar; nothing happened. With a sinking feeling, I clicked the top of the window and tried to drag it; the mouse pointer slid off ineffectually, like a fingernail on glass. Something had pulled Wireshark's teeth.

The neon mountains slid westward across the Task Manager window for a few more seconds; then they froze too. I tried the

applications tab, hoping to kill the Install Wizard, read the entrails of the corpse, and try again. Once more there was no response.

“OK” I said, in the confident tones of a TV chef taking a prebaked cake out of the oven. “Let’s shut it down and have another go.” I gave the keyboard the three fingers. The familiar security window came up, and I tried to restart the Task Manager. Nothing happened. I tried “Shut Down”. That button didn’t react to the mouse either; neither did

“Cancel. Then the mouse pointer itself froze. I tried the keyboard; it was already dead.

“Do not meddle in the affairs of Install Wizards,” Annie intoned, “for they are subtle and quick to anger.” She was perched on the edge of the desk, legs crossed at the knee, one red shoe half-off and swinging from her big toe, enjoying the show.

I gave her a dirty look, and glanced around the room. Nobody was looking; I squeezed myself into the rather limited space under the

desk, already occupied by the computer and a breeding colony of dust-bunnies. I located the power switch and pressed it; but the hum of the fan continued unchanged. Just to be sure, I backed out and looked at the monitor. Still frozen.

So the software switch had joined the dark side too. “Don’t worry.” I told Annie. “There is another way to turn it off that we use in difficult cases like this.” I crawled back under the desk again and held the button down for four seconds, to

put the power supply into standby mode, and another four to be safe; but the power supply firmly declined to cooperate.

Annie's cheerful tones came down to me, only slightly muffled by the desktop and my butt: "I know, Cliffy: it didn't work on my machine either."

Burned again. I crept further into the shadows, blocking my own light. Damn, why didn't I bring a flashlight? Two featureless cables emerged from the back of the case.

They spiraled loosely around a heavy metal chain that ran from a padeye on the box to one on the wall; then they vanished together into a hole in the wall, like a pair of honeymooning snakes, without a plug to be seen. I thought briefly of using the screwdriver blade on my Swiss Army knife to open the box, but some cautious person had installed security screws everywhere.

Presumably the thicker cable was the power cord; if I'd had insulated wirecutters, I suppose I could have

stopped the computer by cutting it. But I didn't see what that would achieve except maybe losing my library card. I crawled backward and stood up. "It doesn't want to turn off."

Annie smirked, then looked thoughtful. "I wonder where they keep the circuit breakers?"

At this rate, I foresaw, before the afternoon was out, we would be out by the highway overpass, sabotaging the town's main transformer station. Correction: I would be sabotaging it,

while Sis stood by in the parking lot looking cute, puzzled, and innocent, and a couple patrol cars crunched to a halt in the gravel. I shook my head firmly and switched off the monitor, and we moved on to another machine.

Two hours later, I had twenty-three IP addresses, and the library had seventeen frozen computers. One address—always the first on the list—was the same each time, but only a few kilobytes had been sent to or from it—a postcard, by internet

standards. The other one was different on each time; and each time it was with this one that the wizard had begun an increasingly complex conversation until it noticed me eavesdropping and told me to go forth and multiply. On a few occasions one or two more servers had joined the party as well. None of my other tools had got any more detailed information; and one particular favorite, Bl@ck@ddr, appeared to have mysteriously vanished from my write-protected

data key. I hoped the backup in my office was still safe: the guy I got it from originally won't be around to get me a replacement for two more years, even if he gets parole on schedule.

I copied the addresses from the frozen screen by hand, unplugged my data key, and stood up. The librarians didn't seem to have noticed us yet. We walked over to the last working public computer in the room, and I ran my address collection through WHOIS. After a

few minutes, I had locations for almost all the servers. Several were in the US, a couple were in Germany, one in Australia, one in the UK... Hell, these people had servers all over the world! They had one in Pakistan. Why were they so damn slow?

I brought up Google Maps and started running street addresses, in the hope of seeing how big their branch offices were. I started with the exotic ones, just out of curiosity. Some of them were in suburbs, in what appeared from the street view

to be ordinary residential houses. One was in a neighborhood in Karachi that had never been visited by a Street View camera car; but from orbit it looked like a house too. Two were in North American slums that had been visited, but (to put it mildly) hadn't bothered to comb their hair first. Not a single technology park. One office building, but it appeared to be entirely owned by a bank; at least, nobody else had their shingle outside. This made no sense

whatsoever. I started to copy in the next address.

“OK, Cliffy. Let’s go ask them.”

“Huh?”

“Look.” She pointed at the business address for the first server on the list, the odd one out, the one that always got asked. Maybe starting with the exotic ones hadn’t been such a great plan after all. “They’re less than half an hour’s drive from here.”

“That’s crazy, Annie. Gandcom are big. If they were located near here, I’d know. I’d be meeting their

programmers. My suppliers would deliver to them too.” They’d be trying to hire me.

“Bet? How about we drive over and check them out right now?”

See what I mean by trouble?

* * *

“So, Cliffy, did the story in Wired tell you anything about how the security works?” We were driving eastward under a wide blue sky; a crazy quilt of golden and green rectangles stretched out on either

side.

“Nobody really knows. You saw what happened when I tried to snoop the Install Wizard? Well, apparently HyperWorld itself fights just as dirty. If it finds a debugger running, it shuts it down and trashes both executable files on the hard drive—the debugger’s and then its own. And then it won’t load again on the same computer unless you format the drive and reinstall the operating system. When it’s not running, it’s heavily encrypted. What they think

is, when you run it, it only decrypts the one little bit of itself that's active at that moment, then erases it when it's done."

I was interrupted by a raucous wolf whistle from the dashboard GPS. I looked at Annie: she just smirked. Well, if my vain and politically incorrect little sister wanted to corrupt the morals of her own navigational system, I guess it was her business. She glanced down, slowed slightly, and took a right turn onto a dusty road. It's hard to squeal

the tires of an electric, but when you do they sound awfully loud with no engine noise competing.

When we were back to a steady speed, she spoke again. “So, what you were saying. How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t, as far as I can see. Some people have managed to snag a few kilobytes of the decrypted code here and there, and they say it looks like a nightmare. Like the sort of spaghetti code people used to write in BASIC, only worse—GOTO jumps pointing all over a hundred

megabytes of self-modifying machine code.”

“No way can that game be written in BASIC.” Even a theoretical chemist knows that much, though if you want my opinion the FORTRAN they use isn’t much better.

“No, of course not. The point is, you can’t write that sort of code for a hundred megabytes in anything. Nobody can. The whole idea of modern computer languages is to ensure that you don’t have to;

everything is broken up into small chunks that only interact in a controlled fashion. Maybe a genius programmer with Asperger's and a family-size box of caffeine pills could do it for ten kilobytes, but the difficulty goes with the square of the size—at least.”

“But somebody did write it,” Annie pointed out.

“Well, maybe not. There's a guy at Stanford who is working on compilers with artificial intelligence, and he thinks maybe it comes from

something like that.”

“So they tell it the big picture and it does all the details?”

“Yes, that’s about it. Of course, it would need a huge processor cluster to do it, but I guess they can afford one. The other weird thing is, most games are mostly scene files. HyperWorld doesn’t have any; it seems to generate everything on the fly, all the different animals and plants and buildings. And they’re like snowflakes, all different. So it looks as if whoever or whatever writes the

program does the scenery artists' job too, and that must put the computing requirements through the roof." I looked around the open landscape. There were a few large buildings in sight; but judging by the architectural style and the fragrance on the country breeze, they were pig barns.

Annie slowed some more. Ahead of us, the view was dominated by the rear end of a large, placid, black farm horse, bearing on its back a skinny girl with braided strawberry-blonde

hair, about thirteen years old, dressed in cutoff jeans, a faded T-shirt, sneakers, and a ball cap. She was listening to something through earbuds, occasionally swaying and twitching to the rhythm; and she was apparently oblivious to the Electrosmart's near-silent presence, though we were almost close enough to count the freckles on her arms. Neither she nor the horse seemed to be in any hurry; and there was no space to pass. I tried to reach over and sound the car's horn, but Annie

wouldn't let me. Eventually, the GPS whistled again (this time Annie looked just a little embarrassed), and the mailbox that we were looking for drifted up on our right. The car purred to a stop, as Annie double-checked the number and the GPS.

In defiance of logic, everything matched up. We drove up the short driveway to the small one-story house, and parked beside a muddy pickup truck. The building looked as if it might have a finished basement, but there was no attic. Annie got out

and walked to the door; I followed. She knocked. There were footsteps inside—not many—and the door opened on a lean, grizzled cowboy in horn-rimmed glasses.

He wasn't wearing a Stetson, and his feet were in battered sneakers rather than cowboy boots; but with his faded Levis, plaid shirt, and weathered skin, it was easy to imagine him riding herd out in the endless grasslands that surrounded us. His pale blue eyes assessed us slowly—mainly Annie. “Can I help

you, Miss?" My sister has that effect on guys.

"Well, I surely hope so. I was wondering if you had a washroom that a lady could use?" She shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"Sure thing, Miss." He practically took her arm as he showed her to a door near the far end of the large front room. "Just down the stairs, and on your left." She went through the door; I heard the brisk tap of high heels on wooden steps.

I discreetly checked out the front

of the house. The black plastic cable linking the house to the line of poles along the road looked like a standard TV cable, but if that sheath was full of optical fibers instead the bandwidth could be phenomenal. The main electric service line was more informative. No way was that old cable powering a thousand computers; from the shabby sheathing and antique insulators, I'd have guessed sixty-amp service. Turn the coffeemaker and the fan on at once and blow a fuse. Besides

which, it was clear that there was no air conditioning here anywhere near sufficient to keep a roomful of electronics cool. On-site power generation? If so, it was silent. Unlikely. But there was the sign by the door, inconspicuous, like a small-town lawyer's whose clients all know where to find him anyway: "Gandcom".

I looked back inside. I saw three beige-box computers, an external hard drive, a printer-scanner, and two filing cabinets. The furniture

was incongruously good. Very good. Just looking at those chairs made you realize how much you wanted to sit down—for, say, two or three hours. A really nice carpet. The pictures on the walls looked like originals. Then I recognized one of them and I shivered. If that one was an original, I was way, way, out of my class. Apart from that, nothing.

There was a faint sound of a toilet flushing, and a minute later Annie reappeared. She didn't seem to be in any hurry to get out of the

house, and he wasn't rushing her. I stepped inside and stood leaning against the doorframe. "So you run your business out of here?" Annie asked.

"Yes—I didn't get your name?"

"I'm Dr Annie Hahn, and this is my brother Clifford. "

"Pleased to meet, you, Miss Hahn. I'm Jim Gand." She shook his hand and didn't correct him, generally a bad sign with Annie. Since her graduation last year, any time my sister doesn't insist on "Dr"

from strangers, you may assume that she is either channeling Niccolò Machiavelli or dead. If you want to know how this squares with the way she usually dresses, please take a place in line. Behind me and Mom, anyhow; Dad gave up trying to figure her out years ago. Right now I was just happy that she was taking this seriously.

“So this is where you run your business from?” She indicated the sign.

“This room is; there’s a kitchen

and bedroom in back. Simple but sufficient.”

“If there’s a kitchen, do you suppose you could get me a glass of water, Mr Gand? It’s pretty hot out and I’m really thirsty.” I thought she was turning on the damsel-in-distress-and-a-miniskirt act just a little too strongly, but what do I know?

“Sure. Afraid I’ve only got tap water.”

Annie gave him her best smile. “That’d be fine, Mr Gand.”

He went across the room, opened the door into what certainly appeared to be a kitchen, and turned out of sight. I heard water running.

“Anything down there?” I breathed.

“Bathroom, spare bedroom, and I think a couple of storerooms. One of them might be a workshop, but it’s a mess. Concrete floor. Washer and drier.”

He came back with Annie’s glass of water. It had ice cubes in it; from the way he handed it to her I was

surprised not to see a slice of lemon and a paper umbrella. She accepted it graciously. “Thank you. So you have most of your other people and computers somewhere else?”

“No, it’s just me and the computers you see here. That’s all the equipment I own, and I don’t have any employees. Lady comes in once a week to clean.”

All the equipment I own. Something about the phrasing seemed a little odd. And suddenly I knew.

I knew where Gandcom's development cluster was. I knew why their servers were located where they were. I even knew why they didn't sell their game on DVD.

"You're telling me the truth, aren't you, Mr. Gand? You really are telling me the truth. You produce HyperWorld, but you really don't have any other computers of your own. Every time you sell a copy of the game, your installer takes over somebody's machine for a day or so."

I paused to see what effect I was

having. For the first time since we arrived, he was looking at me instead of Annie. His mouth was as neutral as a poker champion's, but his eyes were wary. I pushed on.

“It becomes part of a huge distributed computing system linked up by the Internet. That machine on your desk never does more than pass around a few IP addresses and credit card numbers. Everything else—the downloading, the development of the next version, and for all I know your accounting and your corporate

Christmas card list—is done by that cloud of customers' computers.”

He drummed his fingers on the back of a chair and grinned lazily. “Works, too. No way I’d ever have raised the money to buy a server farm big enough to deliver HyperWorld III without selling it out to the vulture capitalists. Let alone the machines I’m going to need to create the algorithms for HyperWorld IV. Those things take time.”

“That’s all very well, damn it! But

you've locked up a million people's computers with your Trojan. Including mine."

"And mine."

"So that's why you're here—Look, Miss, I'm truly sorry." (He did sound apologetic. Did I mention that Annie has that effect on guys?) "But you did read the end user license agreement before you started the installer, didn't you, Miss? Where you authorized Gandcom to run any software we deem necessary, for purposes including but not limited to the

installation process?”

Annie just spluttered. She had been silently putting up with being called “Miss” for several minutes; and her silence was no longer self-control but the Lagrange point between two equally imperative explosions.

I could feel for her; but even if the answer hadn't been addressed to me, I had my own agenda. “Do you think that matters? If I take this public, you're cooked. People get pretty upset about privacy these days.

Nobody's going to download your game if they know it's going to take over their computer."

He raised his bushy eyebrows. "Wouldn't be too sure. A lot of people want that game pretty bad. But you said 'if you take this public.' Does that mean you haven't made your mind up?"

"It depends if you meet my price." Before I closed my mouth I was aware of how silly it sounded. But I wasn't trying to win a prize for acting here.

“And what’s that?” He was the poker player, but maybe I had a better hand.

“I want a job with you.”

His eyebrows slowly rose again and hung for a long moment, like a wave starting to break. Then he smiled, not all at once but slowly, and finally chortled.

“You’re hired. While it’s true that now I’ve got this game started, it pretty nearly writes itself, this is getting just a bit big for a one-man show, and my to-do list is getting out

of hand. And if you can figure my business plan out cold like that, you have the kind of devious mind that I need.” He named a figure. For just an instant, Annie’s scarlet lips gaped in an O of astonishment.

Jim Gand waited calmly for my answer, like he’d asked me if I wanted a beer. I wasn’t going to dicker; my dry mouth could just about manage the word “yes”, and when I said something, that’s exactly what I was going to say. But I paused, savoring the moment. Like I said, it’s

not every day I get to score off my
sister.



Thoraiya Dyer

Thoraiya Dyer became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Breaking the Ice” in Cosmos Magazine (Feb/Mar. 2011), edited by Wilson da Silva. Visit her website at www.thoraiyadyer.com.

Breaking the Ice

by Thoraiya Dyer

First published in Cosmos Magazine
(Feb/Mar. 2011), edited by Wilson da
Silva

• • • •

Combat training. I don't have
any.

If the movement I thought I just

saw actually does turn out to be movement, I'm gonna get sprayed over this iceberg like raspberry flavouring over a snow cone. Ni pedo. Así es la vida.

Papá was hoping I'd get killed. In between raving about how I was a traitor and trying to get my signature for a life insurance policy with him as the beneficiary, he prayed to God that the Argentine guerrillas, Las Focas Leopardo, would put a bullet in my head. That's if bullets could get through a skull as thick as mine, he

said.

Keeping my hood up and my head down, I writhe back down to the groove where the bot grinds its diamonds against the ice. When I open the panel, I discover there's still eighty-three minutes to go.

While I watch, the bot draws up a two-metre section of the 550mm core sample, seals it in plastic and rolls it down the tarpaulin to lie beside the others. The autoboot that's coming in eighty-three minutes has a two-metre wide cargo hold. When

the bot finishes taking the sample, it'll roll up the tarp full of ice columns, hook up its cable and lower them over the edge of the iceberg into the boat.

The bot itself will be left behind, its circuits irreparably damaged by the cold, but I'll have the proof that we need. Let the sceptics argue that the ice under my feet is not a piece of Antarctica's Ross Ice Shelf. Let them pretend that the missing I-667 that the International Ice Centre lost track of during the storm has

rejoined the continent somewhere, its outline camouflaged by thin sheets of sea ice.

I'm not letting them get away with it. This is I-667. If the only way to prove it is to match a seventy-five metre core sample with one from McMurdo, I'm crazy enough to do it.

Chúpalo, sceptics. Maybe I don't have kids, but I've got nieces, five of them, all sleeping in the same bed, and for every second that you put your fingers in your ears and sing, "money, money, money makes the

world go round,” a thousand more dirty bodies get crammed into mass graves or overcrowded camps.

Another movement in the corner of my eye. I twitch. It's just a bit of ice flicked into the air by the bot, surely. Not the remnants of an army that hacked off Larsen Ice Shelf and towed it to Argentina after they drank their mainland glaciers dry.

Not the nominal losers in a water war that ended with New Buenos Aires in flames and four million Argentinean climate refugees sent to

Australia and New Zealand as part of the peace treaty.

You tell me who the real losers were in that war. The white Australian social worker who's supposed to give counselling to my Papá, for one. I'm pretty sure she prays to have him make good on his hunger strike threat and put an end to the monthly shoe-pelting once and for all.

A boot crunch. Abandoning the bot, I scurry half way to the edge of the iceberg before I remember that

the autoboot isn't there, yet, and the water is minus two degrees. If I was a giant, I'd run across the Ross Sea, using the white stepping stones God provided, all the way to the New Zealand Navy base at Possession Island.

I run the other way, uphill.

Actually, it's less like running. More like trying to climb a pyramid of chayotes in a street market. My breath freezes on the fur of my hood; the insulation of the suit makes me overheat; the blood rushes to my

head like mercury in a thermometer that's going to explode. All the time, I'm trying desperately to believe that I'm running away from my imagination; maybe seals; maybe birds.

“Alto o disparo!” a man's voice barks.

When I turn, there are three of them, armed with the latest sub-zero Swedish Ks.

“Greetings, brothers,” I manage in my best imitation of Papá. It comes out much less manly and

assured than when I practiced it on board the ship. Also, my Australian accent seems really obvious.

“Put your hands up,” the middle one, a woman, instructs in castellano. “You’re Australian. I see the flag on your suit. You’re coming with us, get it?”

I’m terrified. And then it starts to penetrate my brain that she’s got an accent, too, a sort of slurred and sing-song one. She’s swallowing her ‘d’s and ‘s’s. She’s not Argentinean at all.

“You’re from Chile,” I say with wonder.

“Don’t tell him anything, Graciela,” the man growls.

They grab my upraised arms and prod me away from my equipment. The surface is uneven and they have to let go of me for a minute so I can use both hands to climb the ridge that screened me from the main part of the berg.

Then I’m staring across a great, flat, white island and they’re prodding at me again.

“Are you taking me to a boat?” I ask. It’s incomprehensible that Chileans would be stealing a berg. They fought with Australia and New Zealand in the war against Argentina. At the time, they had no more water than their neighbours, but somehow they found the money for desalination plants, for wind farms to fill the empty glacial valleys and cover two dozen of their islands.

“Why do you need a berg?” I try again.

Common sense. I don’t have

any.

If I did, I'd just keep my mouth shut. In fact, I'd still be on the research icebreaker with the others, sipping ristretto, stuffing my face with medialunas and laughing about how I had this insane idea to try and get a core sample from what I suspected was I-667, even if the berg would have had to swim against the current to reach the position it was in.

When I get over the next hump, I realise there's something laid out

over the surface of the berg. Solar cells, black and gleaming, spreading out in branching patterns. Spheres that sit like fallen crystal baubles, half-buried in the snow.

We pass one. My captors ignore it, but I make a strangled noise. The spheres are conduits for sunlight. Skylights. They're channelling the daylight deep inside the berg. The solar cells are arranged to give the impression of cracks in thin ice.

The next time the satellite swings overhead, it won't even register the

berg. My friends will see it and think the ice has broken up under my feet.

Will they even look for me, if they see that? Or will they just hold a quiet memorial ceremony?

“Devil’s dunghole,” I say. “What is this? Are you freaky ice people? Where do the skylights lead? Do you live inside this berg?”

“Quiet, get it?” the woman says, exasperated. “Walk that way!”

I walk that way. There’s a petite dome. A hatch. A ladder. The Chileans open it. We climb a long

way down, eventually reaching a riveted metal floor in a cylindrical room.

They murmur into little black devices. I put my hands out for balance as the room drops. An elevator. An elevator in an ice berg.

“You are freaky ice people,” I say, feeling slightly hysterical. I was prepared for Las Focas Leopardo. There was always a chance they would be here. Scientists like outcome probabilities.

Am I probably going to die?

It's warm inside the elevator. I start to take off my suit, but submachine guns in gloved hands train on me again and I stop with my tabs dangling and my zip half undone. The elevator stops and four doors slide open. The woman, Graciela, pushes me through one of them.

We go down a low corridor with steel doors that reminds me of the detention centre. Papá slapped me in the face and told me to hold my chin up, that I was better than the guards;

better than the Australian army officers; better than anyone in this stinking second-class country. I was Argentinean. And I'd better tell them I had a grandmother in Spain, or I'd be left behind in this hole while the rest of the family went to Europe where they belonged.

No amount of imaginary relatives could get him to Europe, in the end. Does it really matter, anyway? We're all drowning, we're all dying of thirst and nobody wants to help, nobody wants to stop it,

everyone just wants to grab what they can. Think I don't know where the money for my dispensable, high-tech bot came from; the money for the military-issue autoboot?

I'm not above being used by the ADF if it gets me the climate data that we need. Only, now there's going to be no data, and no excuse for the navy to declare that the theft of I-667 is an act of war, either, because I'm here with the freaky ice people.

Another door opens. A small,

moustached man looks up from behind a broad mahogany desk and says in English,

“Welcome, visitor!”

I stare at him. This grinning dwarf is the King of the Ice People?

“I am Captain Éden,” he says, leaning back in his comfy chair. His coat is cashmere; his collared shirt is cream-coloured silk.

“How is your health, Captain?” I ask.

“It is fine, thank you, Mister—?”

“Sol. Federico Sol.”

Éden smiles. He takes a moment to enter some information, most likely my name, into his computer.

“How is your health, Mr Sol?”

I’ve had enough of this farce.

“Oh, it’s tolerable, Captain, presuming you aren’t about to cut me into little pieces and send me home in a beaker. Why don’t you tell me how my health is going to be, in, say, a week from now?”

The Captain laughs.

“Only God knows that.”

“Really? Don’t you speak to Him?”

Didn't He tell you to dig out a hole in the middle of an iceberg and start living in it?"

"There's no need for blasphemy. And there is no hole in this iceberg. We simply came up from underneath it. We waited for the storm before we set a course for Chilean waters. They are warmer, and yet your Ross Sea is a traffic jam of military vessels. We could not stay there."

"Speaking of military vessels," I say. "My report is due very soon. If I

don't come back, they're going to empty the whole of Possession Island and come after you." My mouth drops open as the Captain's words penetrate my panicked haze. "Submarine, did you say? Did you say submarine?"

"Yes, this is a submarine. One of the RDM's finest, the Heiligdom-class, manufactured at the Santiago Droogdok."

"It has an electric engine?"

"Two. Less powerful than diesel or nuclear for the size of the vehicle,

but enough to shift an iceberg off course.”

“And fresh water? You take it from the berg?”

“Waste heat from the submarine melts it as we go along. We start butted up against the bottom and rise slowly towards the top.”

Éden swings his legs out from under the desk. As he comes around the side of it, his dark head passes through the beam of direct sunlight that illuminates the room. I look up and realise there's a sphere in the

ceiling identical to the ones I saw on the surface of the berg. Bots must have drilled those channels.

“We’re running out of time,” I say brazenly. “I must return with my samples.”

“I have samples,” he replies. “I have a report. You found only thin sea ice, Mr Sol. There is no need for the New Zealand fleet to speed over here. Come to the laboratory and I’ll give you the samples.”

Life. I enjoy it.

“That will be fine,” I say. Even if

it makes my blood boil that the cabrón is burning his way through sections of Antarctic ice shelf. Inequality stinks. My calf-eyed, barefoot nieces could sure use some silk shirts.

I got Benita a shoebox of silkworms for her seventh birthday. Supposed to teach her about life cycles. She took them to school and a pack of bullies said it was her lunchbox full of tacos and made her eat one.

She cried all the way home. I had

to restrain Papá to keep him from putting an end to those other kids' life cycles. Back in Argentina, nobody ever went to the Police. The family was the local law enforcement.

You could always rely on your family, if not your country.

Éden ushers me ahead of him, back down the corridor.

“You know, Federico,” he says as we descend another ladder into a claustrophobic labyrinth, “you know how people with no fashion sense

always mix their colours and styles?”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“They do! And tasteless horticulturalists are always putting plants together in their gardens that would never occur that way in nature. That’s Antarctica, you see? All those claims thrown in together. Tasteless and terrible.”

“I see.”

It’s a lie. I don’t see at all. What’s he talking about? I have to get back to the surface before the autoboot arrives. How long since those

soldiers discovered me? An hour?
Longer than an hour?

“At first, like a fashion victim,”
Éden chuckles, “or like the retired
grandmother with the garden, it
didn’t matter much. It was just a very
cold place for studying penguins. But
now it matters that New Zealand has
a border with Argentina. It matters.
Those two countries should be
separated by the Pacific Ocean. It’s
not natural.”

“Right.”

“Different people shouldn’t mix.

They should stay with their own kind.”

Éden breaks the seal on an air locked door and we step through onto short, mown grass.

It's a football field.

Sunlight dazzles through a peppering of skylights overhead. Birch trees that must be twenty, thirty years old are planted at the margins of the field, brushing up against curving steel walls.

Families picnic under the trees. The women and children are all

blonde and pale. The men jovially kicking balls around are tall and chisel-jawed.

“Hallo Kapitein,” one of them calls, doing tricks with the football, showing off. “Citizens versus Crew in two weeks. I hope you are not remaining injured.”

For a moment, it seems the land of the freaky ice people can't get any weirder. Then I remember the Dutch-Chilean alliance. The massive wealth of the Netherlands that evaporated overnight. The empty

camps set up to receive Dutch citizens that never arrived and the conspiracy theories surrounding the surrender of Amsterdam to the sea.

“How many of these do you have?” I ask.

“Enough,” Éden says. “This is the prototype. This is Ijsberg I.”

“Why? Why did they need you?”

“The Dutch have no Antarctic territory and the ice in the Arctic is all gone. There was not enough water for them to live on the Chilean mainland.”

“It’s not your water.”

“Whose water is it?”

The grass is soft. I’m sweltering in my half-undone suit. We pass through the surreal world of Ijsberg I. Blue eyes flick interestedly towards us as we pass farmed plots, little capsule-houses clustered around communal outdoor cooking areas, and clotheslines pegged with cotton clothing strung proudly over actual cotton plantings. Sunlight is everywhere. So are chickens.

Chickens. In Antarctica. Me

estas hueviando.

We start to climb again. The Captain tells me the laboratories are at the distant end. I haven't been counting my steps, but the Ijsberg I has to be at least four hundred metres long. I bet it turns like a barrel in mud.

Éden opens a door. We leave sunlight behind. Here in the engine rooms are accommodations of a different kind. Bunks are stapled to the walls of narrow passages. Chilean workers snore in them. Chilean

children wail from darkened maintenance areas where mop handles and knotted rags have been employed to transform pipes and storage cabinets into unattended crèches.

The stink of effluent recycling tanks is everywhere.

“Are you impressed, Mr Sol?” Éden asks.

“Yes.” Mostly by the number of decibels that can be reached by an abandoned bébé.

“Perhaps thinking how many

Argentinean refugees could be offloaded from your crowded cities if only your Australian Navy could capture our Ijsberg fleet?"

"Not at all."

"Because if they come under attack, our Ijsbergs can be evacuated in a matter of minutes. They will self-destruct before we allow them to be taken."

That seems wasteful to me. But then, evidence suggests we're all wasteful. What's in a country, or in a family, when we can all just be

wasteful together?

“Captain Éden, if you will just give me the samples you have prepared, I need to be at the surface shortly or I’ll miss my rendezvous and that will spell disaster for you and your Ijsberg.”

“Disaster for your family, too.”

I frown at him, confused.

“Not exactly,” I say. “They would miss me, I guess.”

“I guess. Also, they will lose the chance to come and live on the Ijsberg I.”

“I beg your pardon?”

The Captain laughs. It must be good to have so much to laugh about. He kisses me on both cheeks.

“But as soon as you told me your name, Federico Sol, I sent a communiqué to a friend of mine in the Australian Customs. I knew how pleased you would be to discover that your reward for helping me is to have your father and your sisters and all their children on board the Ijsberg I.”

“Oh, yes,” I say. I start laughing. I

laugh so hard that tears come to my eyes. Nobody else in my family is an Australian citizen. They dole those out to the smart ones. The dedicated ones. The young ones. Like me.

Won't Customs be delighted to hear that permanent places in Chile have been found for my family? Won't it be so much easier for me to comply with Captain Éden, knowing my loved ones are being held hostage here on this ludicrously oversized, illegal and very secret submarine?

Only, my Papá won't be pleased

to find himself second-class again, servile to the Dutch, living in the darkness while they swan about having picnics and picking cotton. At least they're Europeans. Or, they were, before that part of Europe ceased to exist.

“What is so funny, Mr Sol?”

“Citizens versus Crew,” I sigh. “The Dutch think they can play fútbol. Make sure you put my father on the Chilean team. He's a regular Maradona.”

I accept the samples. They're in a

small plastic icebox. There's a feed attached, from a bot that has spent twelve hours searching and found nothing thicker to sample than a few fruitless feet of freshly formed ice.

“Must I go back the way we came?” I ask glumly. “If my autoboot's kept waiting, the batteries will run low. They can't be recharged in the cold. I won't be able to return to the research vessel.”

“Graciela will take you to your cell,” Éden says. “You will wait there until I have received word that all

your family is ready to depart. If the autoboot experiences power failure, we will send an encrypted distress signal on your behalf when it is time for you to leave.”

Of course. Of course it's not time for me to leave until the hostages are in hand.

Graciela steps forward.

“Just follow me, get it?” she snaps.

I follow her, anger warring with despair. You do research so you can make discoveries. Most of the time,

you discover small and unimportant things. For the first time in my life, I've discovered something really big and I can't tell anyone.

“So,” I say to Graciela, “any of those screaming kids belong to you? I bet they wouldn't mind playing under the trees. Or kicking a ball. But Édén says different people shouldn't mix.”

She doesn't reply.

“You must go through a couple of bergs in a year, running a place this big. Growing cotton, of all

things.”

She ignores me again. I keep thinking out loud.

“But the population density isn’t high. You’ve got so much empty space and you’ve tried to be self-sufficient. There can’t be more than five thousand people on board.”

“Three thousand,” Graciela mutters without slowing.

“Three thousand,” I say. “Three hundred thousand people went AWOL in Amsterdam. Are you trying to tell me there’s a hundred of

these? Breaking off pieces of the ice shelf, sucking on them like there's no tomorrow?"

"They would melt, anyway," Graciela says, stopping and turning to face me. "The Captain says they would melt."

"They don't melt until you drag them into warmer waters," I rave. "They don't melt until you put a ruddy great temperature-controlled submarine up under them. Like putting a block of butter on a hotplate. I lost one country already."

And what happens to you when you've gobbled all the ice?"

Graciela stares at me. She swallows.

"Follow me," she says, pushing past me.

"But we just came from there."

"Shut your face and follow me, get it?"

I scramble to keep up with her. We go through smaller and smaller spaces. It grows colder. I try to put my suit back on properly without losing sight of Graciela and almost

get left behind.

She opens a hatch and stale, frigid air slaps me in the face.

I walk out into darkness, onto the surface of the Ijsberg I. There's a gap, an air pocket, between the steel shell of it, sealed airtight at the edges, and the blue, arching, glistening roof of the warmth-assaulted iceberg.

Water runs off it and into channels on the surface of the submarine, captured and funnelled away. Ahead of me, the black con tower protrudes up into the ice. The

electrical wiring to the solar panels, the skylight conduits and the elevator must all be contained within it. That's the way to the surface.

But I'm not being taken to the surface, and this definitely isn't a holding cell. I'm looking at the bottom of the iceberg. There's seventy-five metres of ice between me and freedom. At least, that was the thickness measured by my very expensive bot before it started drilling down.

My disappointment is crushing.

After everything, I'm to be killed, after all. Was it something I said?

Graciela beckons me further along. I have no choice but to follow her. She pushes back her hood.

Her dark eyes are intense.

"We're of the same blood," she says. "We're family, you and me. Chile should never have fought with New Zealand and Australia. We should have fought with you. I'm so sorry."

In that moment, there's a cracking sound above my head. I

stumble backwards, landing on my butt in one of the water-collecting channels. A spinning, diamond-studded disc dangles above me, an ice sample the thickness of my wrist resting on it.

A thick cable leads up from the sample into the heart of the iceberg.

“It’s your bot,” Graciela says, knocking the sample off it. “Grab the cable. If you’re quick, you can reach the navy base before your relatives are taken from their homes. You keep on trying to save the world, get

it? Good luck, Federico Sol.”

Family. Is Graciela, one of the freaky ice people, my true family? I knew Papá couldn't be part of my true family, because family don't hate. My family of scientists, well, I realised they weren't really my family the moment they shrugged and let me forge my way, alone, on my hero's quest to I-667.

Graciela says we're of the same blood, but she doesn't share so much as a Y-chromosome with me, and what does she know about me,

anyway?

“Thank you,” I mumble. I duck under the ring of diamonds and leap for the cable. My hanging weight jars my shoulders in my sockets. Then, I am slowly but steadily reeled into the tunnel drilled by the bot.

Gritting my teeth, I hunch as best as I can; 550mm is not a whole lot of room for a man being dragged upwards through a hundred and fifty-thousand ton mountain of ice. At least I know that the cable can bear my weight, designed as it is to

haul close to three and a half cubic metres of ice at a time.

Analytical software. It's going to go crazy when I get to the surface and the bot scans its final sample.

As the cable draws me towards the surface, trapped light on hidden facets gives the iceberg a ghostly glow.

I enjoy the view while it lasts.



Sleeping Beauty

by Thoraiya Dyer

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• • • •

It's time for me to go into the
earth.

I feel that imaginary, frigid wind

blowing across my skin, even though I'm protected by dozens of metres of steel and double-glazed, bulletproof glass. Before I go, I want to finish my chocolate pudding. Cream slides down its steep sides like the doomed terminal face of a melting glacier turning to forked streams over volcanic soil. My mouth waters.

“It hurts me to see you like this,” Pete says, his buttoned overcoat, grey cuffs and gunmetal timepiece swimming into my peripheral view. I don't ask him to sit at my table but he

sits. His grey eyes fasten pitifully onto my face over the football-sized pudding that waits on my plate.

If only that were true, I think, irritated. It would make me happy to see you hurt.

“Like what?” I say innocently, carving into the pudding with my spoon. Steam and liquid chocolate erupt from its centre.

“Like this. There was a time I thought you were smart enough, strong enough, to be in the parliament instead of on the

sidelines. But look at you. One setback and you've gone to hell. You're going to give yourself a heart attack."

"You care about my heart, Pete? That's so sweet."

Not as sweet as this sweet, sweet pudding.

His pity is gone now. Only anger is left in his eyes. Pure, white hot anger. He's heard what he expected to hear, confirmation that I've tripled my body weight over the past six months to punish him for rejecting

me. Even though I've admitted to nothing of the sort.

He stands.

“Eat yourself to death, then. You're only hurting yourself.”

“That's not what you just said.”

I smile at him as he walks away. People in the food court watch him go. He's on television, they whisper to one another. The new anchorman. He must have been pumping that woman for information. She's one of the Minister's science advisers. She

knows about the meteor, the one that's coming close enough to cast a shadow over us.

That woman, they say, or sometimes, that fat woman. Despite decades of experience, I can't say exactly where the tipping point is between that woman and that fat woman. A certain amount of extra weight is expected in a desk job. Obesity becomes ever more common. But there is a point where the invisibility of the unattractive woman becomes the behemoth

impossible to ignore. Instead of skimming over you, the eyes stop, and they ask themselves, Where does she buy those enormous jeans? What size underpants does she wear? How does she get out of bed?

It is my bedtime. I can't even taste the pudding, now; it's just a floury pressure in my mouth; in my gut. My gorge is rising. Only a few more spoonfuls to go.

When I go to the front counter to pay for my pudding, the waitress says,

“See you tomorrow, Miss Mennin?”

“No,” I say. “I’m going overseas on an assignment.”

“Oh, how long will you be away?”

“Six months.”

“Smart move! You’ll be missing the Canberra winter.”

I have always missed it. Sometimes, when I wake, there’s still enough snow, and I’m slight enough, to go skiing for a week. More often than not, though, what’s left is a thin, transparent crust of ice, split by the

scarlet lignotubers of snow gums,
their yawning and stretching already
begun.



The basement holds the smell of
apples.

Apples haven't been stored here
for twenty years, but the earthen
walls won't let the aroma fade;
they're passing judgement on me for
replacing the apples. I am no
autumnal keeper of seeds, sun-
warmed slice of the seasons, but a

sleeping infertile abomination;
unnatural accident; hidden shame.

Despite that, after all these years I've attained a kind of rapport with the apple seeds in jars and the sacks of old grain. It used to be a game with my mother, to guess which seeds were still alive. We'd split them to see the green inside or the ashy layers of the dead ones.

Back then, I used to cheat by feeling the weight of them in my palm. Life is heavy.

But now I can tell without

touching them. Somehow, I can smell the life in them.

My mother bought the orchard, and with it, the barn, when I was six years old. I told her I couldn't sleep properly in my bed. I felt cold. I wanted darkness and dirt all around me.

She cried, that first time. Stayed beside me and cried and waited for me to wake. She cries a lot, since it happened. I should phone her laboratory, now, to let her know I'm tucking myself in for the long sleep,

but she'll only cry and apologise, and there's no point in it.

It's done.

She was trying to invent a cure for obesity, a one-off hibernation that would melt the fat away. When she couldn't get approval, she decided to test it on herself. It was her own DNA that she used to make the virus target-specific; to make it safe, she thought.

Only, her DNA is in me, too. It's these little unintended consequences that always catch them out. Why is

that? When any normal, not-smart person could have picked the fatal flaw? Her immune system fought the virus off, much to her dismay.

But I was only six years old.

The apple press and the copper still are long gone. No more bottles of cider rest on the racks. If I live long enough, maybe my essence will seep into these walls.

Maybe the basement will smell of me, long after I am gone.



I dream of fire.

* * *

When I wake, for a moment I believe that a forest of mushrooms has grown up around me. I can't see them, in the dark, but I smell them.

Why is it so dark?

When I open the trapdoor, there's no longer a barn to block out the sky. Only fetid, rotting humus. And the sky is grey, grainy, like an old black and white television set refusing to tune.

The city is gone. I stare down from my hilltop at a plain devoid of anything green or growing.

I can think of only one explanation. The meteor did not pass by. Dust from the impact has blocked solar radiation and caused the death of all plants. The death of animals that feed on plants. The death of animals that feed on animals that feed on plants.

Hunger rises in me. I am awake. I need food.

There are mushrooms. Valleys of

edible fungi. I pluck them; suck them from wooden surfaces. I dig for them in the soil. My clawed fingers emerge, triumphant, tangled with worms. I swallow the worms whole, unwilling to taste them, but unable to discard them. My choices are few.

The sky brightens and darkens and brightens again. I don't see the sun. I don't feel its warmth. For an instant, I don't want to obey my disgusting urge to eat; what is the point of living when everyone else is dead?

My life was always lonely. I had my mother's love, but that was all. I loved them, though. All those unique and imperfect people. I showed my love by writing the best reports I knew how to write; doing the best research I knew how to do. My warnings didn't protect them.

It turns out there was no point to me then, and no point to me, now, but perhaps I am more animal than I know, because my rational mind is not able to override my instincts.

I use the worms to bait snares for

carrion-eating birds. Their meat is dark. I eat it raw. The spring is colder than any spring I've ever known. The bird skins with their glossy black feathers, I make into a blanket to keep warm, stitching them together with wooden slivers; a blanket of blunt needles.

My mother is dead. She must be dead. Everyone is dead.

I can't stop eating, even when I'm bawling my eyes out.



The next time I wake, the world is a little brighter.

“I miss you,” I say to the smell of my mother that lingers even after my eyes are all the way open.

If she hadn't done this to me, I'd be dead, too. But I know I'm not able to reproduce. I'm no saviour of the human race. I wouldn't be, even if there was a man hibernating beside me. I loved Pete because he seemed like an uncaring husk, but I could sense the seed of compassion inside him. It never got a chance to grow.

His corpse is here, somewhere.
Worms, mushrooms. Perhaps I have
eaten organic material that was once
part of him.

“Peter Samford,” I say to the clear
sky, “I wouldn’t sleep with you if you
were the last man on Earth.”

Sunlight warms my skin.
Immediately I feel optimistic.

Are there others?

There are always others.

We’re like cockroaches.

Once the worst of my hunger is
sated, I set off to find them.

I walk down the hillside,
wrapped in my raven cloak.
Underfoot, ferns are busy uncurling.
Moss is beginning to spread. My
clothes, my shoes, are too big, but I'll
grow into them.

I stop to eat. Worms,
mushrooms. Like knowing which
seeds are viable, I know which
mushrooms are safe. It wasn't always
the way; I'm like a human pig, now,
sniffing for truffles. Have my cells
been instructed to manufacture pig
proteins as well as grizzly bear ones?

Only my mother would know.

My mother's gift; the gift that keeps on giving. She used to pick the mushrooms off her pizza. It was the texture, like slugs, she said.

I have eaten slugs and I disagree.

I eat dandelion shoots and pigweed. I gobble sour, under-pollinated blackberries and the sweet heads of kangaroo grasses. I catch birds and the now abundant frogs. There are streams of clear water. I drink from them.

There's nobody in the scorched,

flattened remnant of the city. No secret tunnels. No footprints in the ash.

Cold catches me before I can walk to the coast, to the next, bigger, second city. I dig a tunnel and reinforce it. I sleep.

* * *

It takes most of my waking months to walk the rest of the way.

I smell the snow-in-waiting, think: It's three years since I sat at the parliament house cafeteria, eating

chocolate pudding.

The second city, too, is burned to the ground, but roofs of rubble have been erected over entrances to underground car parks. Footprints mark the ground between the cracked, patchwork concrete slab that the city once stood on and the freshwater sources that slide curious fingers around it.

When I see the dark silhouettes moving, I stay low. What bestial depths have these people sunk to? I don't care to know. Not now.

Not when snow is coming to old Sydney Town, too early and too deep. If I don't dig a shelter now, it will be too late, too difficult to break through the ice.

I take a last, deep drink from a subzero stream, and hear a voice that belongs to memory.

"Kate," says Peter Samford, aghast, stumbling back from the water's edge, upsetting his wheelbarrow full of water bottles. "Kate Mennin?"

His head is a skull. His eyes are

sunken. I see his ribs at the open collar of his shirt.

“You’re not real,” he shouts at me. “You’re not real.”

He is starving. Yet he has survived. In my pre-hibernation condition, I am four times his mass, though he remains taller than me, a shivering skeleton.

“One more winter,” I say. “Make it through one more winter and the earth will be returned to you, Peter Samford.”

He runs away, leaving his

wheelbarrow behind.

* * *

Deciding to leave it hidden, I gently fold my raven-feather cloak.

My clothes? I can't take them off. They're the only ones I have. Four years in the same clothes. The abandonment of my normal hormonal cycles to the grizzly's fat storage and hibernation mechanisms has meant no menstrual blood to musk them, but they reek, all the same, of soil and sweat and sorrow.

They are ten sizes too big, hanging like a collapsed tent over the bones of my shoulders. I could steal from the starving stick-people, but they might die. Stealing seems more serious when there are lives at stake.

At the same time, it seems entirely more necessary. It's how this country was made, I suppose, before it was blasted clean.

The footprints connecting the city to its fresh water have become well-trodden paths. Men and women in army uniforms take note

of my arrival. My stomach is audible. I'm as skinny as they are. They direct me to a kind of refugee camp that overlooks a harbour littered with steel wrecks. A grey-bearded man with watery eyes gets up from an old piece of carpet. He's winding the ends of bits of wire together to make a longer spool.

"I'm Ted," he says. "I'll show you where to go."

The bridge is rusted, but it still stands. I spot another refugee camp on the north side of the harbour.

There are no gulls. Nor are there people fishing.

“What is your name?” an old woman asks me in a soft voice when we reach the main building. It’s made of salvage, its supports of different materials, different lengths, but it’s well-made; it doesn’t rattle in the chill salt wind.

“Kate,” I say. I haven’t said it aloud for so long, I barely recognise it as mine.

“Surname?”

“Mennin,” I say, and she laughs

as she records it in the yellowed pages of a spiral-bound book.

“You don’t want to tell me? That’s fine. Mennin is as good a name as any. Ted can show you where to shower, eat and rest. We’ll assign work tomorrow morning.”

I ask her to look for my mother’s name. It’s why I’ve come. It’s what I’m there for.

“No,” the old woman says at last, after skimming the pages of the book. “No record of her.”

“Please, let me look,” I say. Her

eyesight is probably hopeless.

Reluctantly, she passes over the book.

It's not her eyesight. My mother's name is not there.

Peter Samford's name is.

"Pete Samford," I mutter as Ted leads me to the cold showers.

"You mean the Priest," Ted says, his furry eyebrows shooting up. "Have you come to worship? Of course, that's why you've taken that name."

"Worship who? What?"

“Mennin,” he says. “She’s the earth goddess. The Priest saw her in a vision last winter. She told him the earth would be returned to him. Do you wish to attend the ceremony?”

“No,” I say. I don’t want to see Pete, crazy or not. And I don’t feel any urge at all to correct Ted when it comes to the supposed vision. If belief in the earth goddess kept Samford from dying over winter, who am I to set him straight?

Besides, nobody can know what I am. Not now, not when there isn’t

enough food to go around. They'd despise me more than ever, I think.

Just then, I glimpse colourful pictures on the walls of the bunkrooms. The rooms are terrible, claustrophobic spaces, each with a dozen pair of men's boots lined up outside the door. Bundled shapes of sleeping adults lie on some of the simple, shelf-like bunks, but it's the gleaming posters that catch my eye through the open doors of the rooms.

It's fat porn. All of it. Naked

women rolling in calorific wealth.

I stop still in the doorway and stare at it, astounded.

Ted retraces his steps to see what I'm looking at. He grunts, takes my sleeve and leads me away, to the mess at the very end of the corridor. I am given a small bowl of porridge and a vitamin C drink. My raucous stomach refuses to be silenced.

In the night, I leave the little settlement. I walk down to the shoreline and stuff my face with seaweed and jellyfish off the sand. In

the morning, I climb the sandstone cliffs to find eggs and snakes to eat.

Then I eat mushrooms. It occurs to me that there were no mushrooms in the settlement. No wild greens. I have no time to spare for them at first, but as the months pass and I grow fatter and sleeker than I have since the impact, with more and more plant sugars to feed on, I realise I have a little time to spare.

A little time to gather mushrooms and leave them in baskets outside the rubble houses of

the settlers.

A little time to take their sacks of grain and sort them into viable and non-viable seeds.

The children who are supposed to watch the grain are always napping. They are thin and short on energy. I can't blame them for falling into exhausted sleep. One moonlit night, a little girl opens her bleary eyes and catches me cross-legged on her tarpaulin, pawing through a sack of barley. The time when I could spring lightly to my feet and dash

into the trees is months behind me. I'm wearing my full weight and my raven cloak, and my skeleton is groaning with it in the chill.

I take a single seed from the sack.

"This one," I whisper to her.

"This one is the only one that will grow."

She takes it reverently, her eyes popping.

"Thank you, Mennin," she whispers back.

"I'm going now. Please don't wake the others."



Years later, it is they who leave offerings for me.

Baskets of tomatoes, sugar cane and kiwi fruit. All pollinated by the wind. Bottles of strawberry cider. I am an autumn goddess. That's the season when they see me walking at the edges of their new civilisation, hands outstretched to catch falling yellow leaves, wishing they were butterflies, straining for the sound of honeybees. There is no apple harvest; never will be again.

Children will find the basement one day, and crawl into it, and how will they describe the smell?

I can't say where the tipping point is between skinny, wandering woman and Mennin, the Earth Mother. But there is a point where they can't ignore me any longer. Though I keep myself hidden as best I can, they spot me, sometimes. I hear them shouting to one another and realise I've been seen.

Sometimes, I stop so they can talk to me. I still get lonely. I still talk

to my mother's ghost.

“Mennin,” a bony, black-haired girl cries. “Mennin, will you bless my fields?”

I turn in a circle of ebony feathers, a circle of early morning mist. My face is dirty. My eyes are wide.

“Yes,” I call back to her. “I will bless them.”

The girl drops to her knees. Her brothers, her mother and her father kneel beside her. Their bare knees are in rich soil. I have eaten worms

here before.

“Will you grant me a child, Mennin?” the girl begs.

“Soon,” I say.

I wrench myself away. The air is still, but I am windswept.

It is time for me to go into the earth.



Complaints
Department
by Thoraiya Dyer

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• • • •

The line was long, again, but
Elise couldn't stay at home
watching her crop shrink

and shrivel while she waited for an electronic reply from the QuickLife complaints department.

Mud and straw were caked onto her boots. She clicked her heels surreptitiously. Some of the mud flaked off. The man in front of her smelled of poultry. He slowly scratched the sunburn on the back of his neck.

At last, she was led into an interview room where a younger woman with a headset and fuchsia lips waved her to a chair.

“You asked to see a Supervisor, Miss Green. I am Tanaivin Biss.”

“And I am angry,” Elise said, the wait not having improved her temper, “at the way QuickLife is attempting to acquire my land.”

“Please state your complaint as either a product fault or a customer service delay.”

Elise leaned back in her chair. She plonked her boots, one at a time, onto Tanaivin Biss’s glass desktop and waited for the shower of mud flakes to settle.

“Let’s call it a product fault. The seeds which you sold me leached all the phosphorus from my soil.”

They’d set it all up for her. The latest in biotech: Accelerated wheat. They told her it was within her budget, that using accelerated wheat would lead to a ten-fold increase in production. Nine days from germination to ripe kernels at maximum dry weight. She’d already made two complete harvests, investing the cash in a new truck for more efficient transport.

But this time, there was nothing to harvest. When the sun had come up on the morning of the ninth day, the straggly, mostly immature plants were intermittently laced with the telltale purple tint of phosphorus deficiency. The few heads which had formed were small, the grains shrivelled.

Feed quality only.

The Supervisor, Biss, subvocalised and was answered by her headset.

“Our records indicate your soil

tested high for phosphorus.”

“Are you telling me QuickLife can't interpret its own results? It may be high but it sure isn't available.”

“Wait. Yes. Unfortunately the full details of your new fertiliser schedule were not provided at the time of your purchase. The computer is telling me that an application of superphosphate between crops would be advantageous.”

“Every ten days? I'll tell you what would be advantageous. A free crop dusting plane and pilot!”

The door opened behind her, but Elise didn't turn around.

"Will there be anything else, Miss Green?" Biss said.

"Do you have any idea how much aerial topdressing with superphosphate costs? I can't afford it unless you increase the limit of my loan."

"Your account with QuickLife's lending branch is already overdrawn."

"I can't believe this. It wasn't even my idea!"

“When you visited the complaints department three weeks ago, you said you were expecting legal action following the germination of QuickLife product in a neighbouring field.”

“Yes. My wheat is GM. Theirs is organic.”

“Increased production is only a side-effect of acceleration. The main feature of an accelerated strain is that the flowering and fruiting phase occur within such a narrow window that contamination of neighbouring,

non-GM crops is negligible to nil.”

Elise hated the words that the woman was using.

“My harvest will be negligible to nil if you don’t refund my money or extend my overdraft so I can pay for fertiliser.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Green. I’m unable to assist you.”

* * *

Elise stared at the vending machine with its bottled spring-water for a full minute before

marching outside, detaching the garden bed watering system from the rainwater tank, and slaking her thirst at the tap.

A moment later, she became aware of somebody sitting despondently on the edge of the concrete turning circle. It was the man who had gone in ahead of her.

“No luck?” she ventured.

“None at all.”

She liked the deep, rich roll of his voice. Wiping her wet palms on her overalls, she sat next to him.

“What happened?”

“Fifty thousand accelerated geese ate me out of house and home. Twenty-four hours, they give me. Just one day to remove the bloody birds from my farm what QuickLife just took.”

Elise’s heart thumped excitedly against her ribs.

“I have fifty thousand acres,” she said. “How do geese go on phosphorus-deficient wheat grass?”

“All my geese got micronutrient implants.”

Elise stuck out her hand.

“I’m Elise Green.”

He shook solemnly. His skin was warm and dry like bread from the oven.

“Peter Cross.”

“My house,” she said, “has a spare room. And I have a new truck. This way.”



He moved into her house, and the haste with which their hearts became entangled might have been

unseemly if they hadn't been surrounded by accelerated geese feasting on accelerated wheat and leaving phosphate-rich deposits all over Elise's fifty-thousand acres at a frighteningly accelerated rate.

Elise soon discovered that although her imagined, strong-and-silent-type ideal was embodied by Peter Cross, cohabitation turned out to be only marginally less lonely than living alone. By the time Peter's geese had been sent to market, allowing him to purchase a small townhouse

and take up work at the accelerated goose hatchery, they had already parted ways amicably.

She called him, sometimes. She liked the sound of his voice.

“They have to feed these little buggers while they’re still in the egg,” Peter marvelled. “They suck the yolks out of half a dozen normal eggs just to get one accelerated egg to hatch.”

“It’s a little bit boring,” Elise confessed, “waiting for normal wheat to ripen.”

And she tinkered with her irrigators as she watched the sun go down behind the whispering hills.



Ronald D. Ferguson

Ronald D. Ferguson became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "His Brother was an Only Child" in Daily Science Fiction (Jun. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at sites.google.com/site/ronalddferguson.

His Brother was an
Only Child
by Ronald D. Ferguson

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Jun. 2011), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden



I clenched my eyelids, and my memories trickled in.

John Ashley. Twenty-three years old. Terminal cancer. Crying parents. Cryogenic storage. The first cold moment. The last brief hope: they would awaken me when they had the cure.

I tensed and shivered. “How long?”

An old man touched my neck, and relaxation seeped from the

touch. I mumbled, barely able to understand myself. “Who are you?”

“I’m your brother, Larry.”

That was good. Peace surrounded me. A sketchy doubt arose as I drifted.

I had no brother.

* * *

I do not know how long I struggled with groggy consciousness, but finally the day arrived when I managed to stay alert through the day. That night, I slept extremely

well, and awoke refreshed on the following morning.

The nurse entered my room loaded with a sponge and a container of soapy water. Often, I had seen her dour face during by bouts with consciousness. For some reason today, she looked younger and crisper.

“Something special for me?” I asked, happy to be able to talk. As usual, she did not speak.

Instead, she smiled, that thin, tolerant smile that shows no teeth,

that reeks of efficiency. She set the water and sponge on the bed-side table and pulled the top sheet from my bed.

She leaned over me to straighten my pillow. This was new, no tightly buttoned uniform today. Rather, the open neck revealed her creamy cleavage for too short a moment.

She crumpled the sheet and tossed it to the floor as laundry. Then she took hold of my hospital gown and stripped me bare. My gown joined the sheet on the floor.

I was surprised. When I had been a pre-med student—before the cancer, before the long sleep—the curriculum drummed privacy and modesty issues into us. I guessed that people now were not as worried about nudity.

Just as well. I expected the chill of the cool room to descend. Instead, my face flushed and heat rose to my cheeks when she thoroughly inspected me. She picked up the sponge and dipped it into the water.

A few strokes of the warm

sponge along my underarms, neck, and chest, and the tension melted from me. I relaxed. While her left hand patted my chest, she ran the sponge across my ribs and onto my stomach. Her left hand glided to my throat. Immediately, I felt drowsy.

The warm, friendly sponge moved down my stomach, over my thighs, and toward my perineum. I wanted to stay awake, but I couldn't. As I faded, I thought I heard her whisper, but I never saw her lips move.

“Good boy. Clever boy. Thank you for cooperating.”

* * *

About two weeks later, I could walk unassisted, and Larry took me on my first outside sojourn. When he opened the door for me to pass, the bright morning sun blinded me. As my vision cleared, I digested the green wall that lay a hundred meters beyond the doorway.

“Is that a forest?” I asked. In my previous life I had seen a tree every

now and then, but nothing like this.

He smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. "One of our successes," he said. "We're much better stewards of the planet. Some of those trees are thirty meters tall."

I could contain myself no longer. I blurted out the concern that I had concealed for weeks.

"Larry, I never had a brother. Perhaps the paperwork is screwed up, but I think you've confused me with someone else. I want to thank you for how well you've treated me,

but....”

“You didn’t have a brother before you were frozen? Yes, I know you were an only child. But after your parents...lost you, they wanted another child. At their age, it was not an easy thing, but as proof, I stand here before you.”

I looked carefully at Larry. He looked much older than Dad had been the last time I saw him. Larry looked old enough to be my grandfather. The mirror told me that I was still the same scruffy twenty-

three year old pre-med student who jumped into an icebox to avoid death. Well, maybe not quite the same. Health-wise, I felt a lot better.

“Mom and Dad are gone... How long?”

He sighed and turned from me. “You’ve been in cold storage more than 75 years. Come on. Let’s look about. I think you will find the environment exciting.”

More than 75 years? One hundred years is more than 75 years. One thousand years is more than 75

years. Was there some deception here? Just how much had medicine advanced? How far into the future had I travelled?

The doubts subsided as my surroundings compelled my attention. I had been a twenty-three year old kid teetering on the brink of death. I remembered those last frantic days of pain and exhaustion when my life rushed toward its close. Now, with firmer body, I stood on my own and looked at rebuilt forests.

I felt good. I felt hopeful.

A strange creature hopped from beneath a nearby bush and nibbled on a flower.

“What’s that?”

“Another environmental success. Don’t you recognize the animal from old pictures?”

I examined the creature carefully. It regarded me with mismatched eyes, one sickly pink and one deep red. A short, tan ear perked at the left side of its head, and a longer, brown ear hung listlessly to the right. The

hind legs seemed far out of proportion to the front legs, so that the creature sloped downhill. I struggled to retrieve an unfamiliar name.

“Is it a rabbit?”

“Excellent. We are quite proud of the species’ recovery. The population was down to three rabbits, one marginal male and two fertile females. Of course, with a small genetic pool, we had plenty of setbacks in the program. Intensive inbreeding produced many stillbirths

and malformed offspring, but now each new rabbit generation is afflicted with fewer of the bad effects from recessive genes. Fortunately, as a regression offset, rabbits are prolific. The rabbit population today is just over a thousand, and the species will have a chance beyond mere survival. We hope someday they will thrive. Still, if we could introduce some fresh genetic material into the rabbit gene pool... Ah, well."

I looked back at the forest. How

long did it take a tree to grow to thirty meters? How long had I slept? How old was my brother?



I first saw the woman during an after-lunch walk. She sat on a bench and fed breadcrumbs to small birds. The birds flew away when I approached.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to scare them.”

She did not reply. With her back straight and stiff, she stared ahead.

The wind ruffled her hair so that I could see the left side of her face better.

She looked about Mom's age, or at least the age at which I last remembered Mom. Wrinkles pulled at the corner of her eye, and she wore her skin more loosely than a young woman. I did not try to guess her age, but from her profile I suspected she had once been beautiful. Because of my experience with Larry, I was not sure I could judge age based on appearance. Clearly, she was another

patient.

“My name is John, John Ashley. I’ve only been here a few....”

The woman rose and walked away. I had not noticed before, but she had a withered right leg, and she limped when she walked. Also, her right arm was conspicuously shorter than her left arm, and her right hand appeared incomplete.

I called after her. “Please. Don’t leave on my account. I didn’t mean to....”

She glanced back over her right

shoulder. A large scar dimpled and puckered the right side of her face. The scar continued above her mangled ear and left a large bald patch on the right side of her hairline.

I watched her until she turned the corner of the building.

What kind of hospital was this?

* * *

“When can I leave?” I suppressed ‘when can I go home,’ because I realized I no longer had a home. “I

feel much better now. I've been here for months. Except for an occasional headache or a little nausea, I feel great. I want to start a new life for myself."

Larry sat behind his desk and looked thoughtful, as if he needed to be careful of his response. He thinned his lips.

"Few people get sick anymore, John."

"That's good. Is that why there are so few patients here?"

"Yes. Of course, but few patients

mean medicine is no longer mass-produced. Each treatment must be a custom solution.”

I said, “I don’t understand.” But I thought I did understand. Perhaps I had not been cured. Perhaps my disease was simply treatable, and I would have to live my life with a chronic condition that needed to be controlled. Larry confirmed my diagnosis.

“We are pleased with the remission of your cancer, but we hesitate to call you cured. Please give

us a bit more time to study you, to design your treatment. I am afraid that you would not do nearly as well without our continuous supervision.”

Supervision? That did not sound medical. Was he worried about how I would integrate into society? I had seen few other patients on the hospital grounds. Seldom would any speak with me. I suspected that this was not a hospital just for diseases of the body. None of the minds I met seemed healthy to me.

But surely I was different from the mentally ill. On the other hand, maybe I was also different from everyone. Maybe that was the problem. The elapsed years had made me too different from those in the outside world. I told myself that with effort I would learn to adjust, to fit in. Confidence ebbed as I wondered how much the world had changed.

Larry sought my attention.
“John.”

“Hmm.” I remained distracted.

“John, I think it best if you reconciled yourself to a longer stay. I know you didn’t expect resurrection until we had a cure, but circumstances forced our decision and made the timing now or never. Perhaps it’s difficult to see now, but I am sure that you will eventually agree that a longer stay here is for the best.”

I read the concern on his face. Well, he was my brother. He would have my best interests at heart. I summoned a smile. “Yes, Larry, I

suppose you're right."



I was lonely. The nurse never spoke, and I seldom saw Larry. I found comfort outside, near the forest. I walked slowly and quietly to avoid frightening the birds.

"Remember me? I'm John. I hope you will tell me your name." Maybe she did not speak English. Maybe no one except Larry spoke English anymore.

The woman sat on the same

bench, feeding breadcrumbs to the birds with her left hand, and rubbing her stomach with her shriveled right hand. She turned her head to look at me full-faced. The scars on the right side of her face pulled at her lips.

She stopped feeding the birds and regarded me for a long moment, but she continued to rub her stomach as she measured my face. Finally, she spoke.

“Annie,” she said, and then she emptied her hand of breadcrumbs. The birds fluttered in to retrieve the

treasure.

Annie's accent was strange—not familiar like Larry's—and her pronunciation was either peculiar or distorted by the scars about her mouth. She wiped her hand on her skirt.

“I'm pleased to meet you, Annie.”
I extended my hand.

She ignored me to look at her stomach. She patted her stomach lightly. “Howjado. Howjado. Now to meet your daddy?”

“What?” I had made a bad

mistake. Clearly, she was unbalanced, and somehow, I had upset her.

She looked up with frenzied eyes. “Howjado? Your daddy’s an idiot says I. Thirty-seven now, but soon thirty-eight.” She patted her stomach again.

The woman needed help. I cast about. Larry rushed out the door toward us.

“Did you miss your medication?” I asked. “Here comes my... uh, Dr. Ashley. He can help you.”

She glanced toward the door and grinned. Larry walked faster. Concern coated his face.

“Doctor?” she hissed. “No doctor. Body technician. Not one of us.”

I grew confused. Were medical workers now simply body mechanics? Had medicine progressed from a professional practice to a technical skill? Suddenly, I realized that Annie still watched me with glowing, intent eyes as if she measured my worth. I tried to calm her.

“Everything will be all right. Just relax. You’re at a wonderful hospital, and they will give you the best of care. Larry, Dr. Ashley, is my brother. He will take good care of you.”

“Idiot. Here not hospital. Wild life preserve for endangered.” She gestured towards Larry, who now closed rapidly. “Hez alien, ‘nother world. Thirty-seven humans left, soon thirty-eight.” She patted her stomach for emphasis.

My jaw dropped open. I stared,

first at the wild-eyed Annie and then at the deep concern written across Larry's face.

“Please, John, I am sorry. I didn't want you to learn this way,” Larry said. “We hope to have a cure for your cancer soon, but we couldn't wait. We need you now to re-vitalize the DNA pool.”

Annie giggled and drove the point home. “Hez not your brother, hez your keeper.”



Hire Education

by Ronald D. Ferguson

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edited by Sam Hidaka

• • • •

—Behind on your student loan?
Don't let them repossess your
education.

Guido Gaglio knocks on the door a second time, more firmly than the first. A scraggly dweeb opens the door. He looks like a guy who would hock his education and then fall behind on the payments. The dweeb cranes his neck to look up at Guido.

“Dr. Maurice Jennings?” Guido adjusts his tie. His blue suit tightens across his shoulders. He stretches his neck and arches his chin to relieve the tight discomfort about his throat.

Next time he'll buy a fifty-centimeter collar.

“That’s me, Big Dude. I don’t need any life insurance, electronic magazines, or missionary spiels.” The little man has the look of a ferret. He holds a TV remote in his hand. His wall monitor displays the friendly financing banner for PIE, Personalized Instant Education. No credit checks.

“My name is Guido, and this is my associate, Juan.” Guido points to his mustached companion who grins

like he don't need no stinkin' badge. Sweat beads on Juan's forehead as if it fears to roll down the acne-pocked face.

“Yeah? Hurry up, Dude.” The TV distracts the ferret, and he ups the volume with his remote. “I got stuff to do.”

“Big Willy sent me and Juan to find out why you didn't make no payment on your education loan for the last six months. Still Doctor Jennings, right? You still got the collateral? The title goes with the

education, ya know.”

“Oh that.” Dr. Jennings pales. “Yeah, I’m real sorry. I’ve been out of work since January, but this fall I start teaching chemistry at the local university. Tenure track. I get my first check at the end of September, so I can start—”

“We was afraid you might say that.” Guido’s heard such excuses before. “Aint nobody hiring no new teachers. I already checked with the university. They don’t know you from Shinola.”

Juan pulls a baseball bat from behind his back and smacks it against his open palm a couple of times. He smiles and squints.

The dweeb backs away from the door and searches his pockets like he's looking for misplaced change. All he drags out are car keys. He looks at the keys, and then his eyes beg Guido. "Please. What are you going to do to me?"

Guido applies a one-handed push to Jennings' chest, and the dweeb stumbles backwards until he falls

across the couch. Juan hefts the bat with an easy wrist rotation and follows Guido into the apartment.

“Unless you got a better suggestion, Dr. Jennings.” Guido assumes his practiced look of sincere disappointment. “I’m gonna have Juan repossess your education.”

* * *

Rather than repo Jennings’s education, Guido takes the little weasel’s classic T-bird for the missed loan payments. Juan complains

about the bargain when Guido opens the door of the convertible.

“You crazy, Guido? That patsy is behind three grand on a forty G balance. Big Willy ain’t gonna like you taking no red jalopy for the payments. Big Willy likes cash.”

“Red car, huh? Just my style.” Guido slips the title transfer into his pocket and slides behind the wheel. The fit is tight, but with the top down, the feel is open. His forehead juts above the windshield. He imagines the wind through his hair.

“This is a classic. Not in great shape, but likely worth twenty large ones after I fix it up. I’ll give Big Willy the three grand in back payments plus an extra G for interest. That’ll make him happy. For four thousand bucks I get a car with potential. I sink some hard work and a few grand more and I got a collector’s piece. What’s the problem, amico? Can’t you see I’m ready for something different?”

“I don’t like it.” Keeping a firm grip on his bat, Juan folds his arms across his chest. “And Big Willy ain’t

gonna like it neither.”

“Hey, paesano.” Guido winks and pulls out his wallet. “I ain’t gonna leave you out. I got an extra five Cs for your troubles today. That little dweeb don’t appreciate what he’s got. Next month, he’ll fall behind again. We’ll repossess his education then, the right way, without no bat. The patsy’s got a good education—should bring eighty Gs on the second-hand market, and Big Willy slips us a nice bonus to boot.”

“Second-hand market.” Juan

spits and fondles his bat. “Used education. Puta. I like the old-fashioned way when you didn’t need no stinkin’ computers and weird machines. A guy knew when you broke his leg. What’s he gonna know after you take his smarts?”

“Times change, Juan.” Guido puts the T-bird in gear. The engine grumbles. “We got to change with them.”

* * *

Marilyn kisses Guido’s nose and

shakes him. He squints through his right eye.

“Wake up, you lazy horse.” She shakes him again.

He opens the other eye and wrinkles his forehead.

She flashes her good-morning-love smile, and then smacks his face. “Big Willy left you a message on my machine. My machine. I don’t like that stuff coming into my house.”

Still groggy, Guido sits up. He’s naked, his feet hang over the end of the bed, and he untwists the sheets

from about his legs. His face stings. How does such a little woman pack such a big wallop?

“You know I’m on call.” He extends his hands in apology. “I’m a pro, like a doctor. Wouldn’t you like to marry a doctor?”

“Doctor?” She folds her arms and taps her foot. “If you’re that busy, then maybe you should forget about the sleep-overs and stay at your own apartment.”

Guido stands, yawns, and stretches. His fingers touch the

ceiling, and he contorts to be sure she doesn't miss his morning salute. That usually provokes a smile.

Not this time.

“I'm not demanding you become a professional man, Guido, but you need a respectable job. Then we can talk about marriage and even children—that is, if you want this relationship to work.”

Guido grimaces. She's been browsing the relationship blogs again, probably filling out those compatibility questionnaires. A

respectable job? What with Big Willy's legal problems, he can't disagree. He's not sure what else to say, so he tilts his head and gives her his loveable, lopsided grin.

"I'm serious, Guido." She slips out of her robe and pulls a fresh dress over her head. "You may look like the Incredible Hulk, but you ain't no dumb mountain of muscle. You got a good head on those broad shoulders. And you got a good heart, even if you keep showing off that other stuff." At last she giggles.

“Would you put that away and get dressed? I got other things to do today. I got a real job.”

He gives her a peck on the cheek.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She smiles and strokes his face. Joy refills his heart.

“I put out socks with your shirt and suit.” She turns around so he can zip up her dress. “You wore green socks with your blue suit yesterday.”

“I did? No biggie.” Guido wraps his arms around her. “Who notices?”

“I notice.” She wiggles loose. “My

friends notice. People know I'm taking care of you now. How you dress reflects on me, so I'll be checking the color of your tie, too. You want breakfast?"



Guido arrives at Eddie's Pawn Shop before noon. Juan is elsewhere because Big Willy wants muscle with finesse at Eddie's—and no accidental deaths, not with the Feds nosing about.

Big Willy owns fifty-one percent

of Eddie's Pawn Shop. Three years ago, Guido convinced Eddie that partnership with Big Willy would be a good business decision. He didn't enjoy applying the muscle because Eddie is a good guy, but business is business.

Guido ducks beneath the three-globe pawnshop light and into the store. The shop is chromed and spotless. Eddie caters to an elite clientele, who pawn only first class merchandise.

“How's it hanging, Ed.”

“Fine, Guido. I’m glad Big Willy sent you. Got a dubious customer last night at closing—not legit if you get my meaning. I convinced the little sneak to come back after noon today. Told him my transfer machine was down until then. He wants to pawn his education.”

“What’s he pushing, counterfeit Memory Rights Management?”

“No, his MRM tag looks legit, but his ID—he claims to be George Washington Jones—don’t match up with the knowledge holder’s license

of record.”

“An education don’t make you smart, Eddie, ya know. The idiot likely never registered the purchase of his second-hand education... or do you think he stole it? Big Willy don’t care if it’s stole so long as the MRM is legit. Just keep your books straight in case someone comes round asking.”

“I don’t think he stole it. I think he’s lying about who he is because he wants to hide his assets from somebody. Maybe from Big Willy.”

“Hide his assets? You think he’s trying to con us?”

“Yeah, he wants to pawn an expensive education, but he don’t want much money. Until he redeems the pawn, he wants an inexpensive placeholder education. You know, the fizzy kind the mugwumps rent to wear to a party—makes them feel like they got an opinion. You gonna lean on the jerk to make him talk, Guido?”

“Huh. Let me think a minute. He’s leaving an expensive education

on deposit while he takes a few bucks and a cheap temporary for a few weeks. Looks to me like we got the better security on the deal. Why don't we do the trade, and we'll let this play out for a day or two to see where this guy takes us. We don't want the Feds running no sting. Should be interesting."

"You're the man, Guido. I'll play it straight up."

"That mirror still a one-way glass to your back room?"

Eddie nods. "I got a couch in

there for naps.”

“Okay.” Guido glances across the street. “I’m gonna get some Chinese take-away and wait for this mug in your back room. You want lunch? I’m buying.”

“You’re buying? Geeze, I never hear that from that schmuck Juan. He always makes me buy.”

“Juan ain’t so bad. Just had a tough childhood. Come to think of it, his adulthood ain’t going too good neither.”

An hour later, Guido finishes off

the honey walnut shrimp and eats the last pot sticker. He takes the e-reader from his shirt pocket and slouches onto the couch. The couch don't fit him, and he shifts about until he's comfortable.

He don't feel like finishing his history book or starting the psychology text, just something light. So he picks a sci-fi novel, Wobbling Star. He could have had a memory implant for the text of the novel at half the price of reading the electronic copy, but canned memory

plants don't never feel the same. Your juices don't pump up the same way when they upload all that crap at once.

Half-way through the chapter, the dweeb enters the pawn shop.

Guido smiles when he recognizes the little ferret. So, Dr. Maurice Jennings is gonna use a cheap educational substitute to defraud Big Willy of his rightful repo. Maybe Juan will get to use his baseball bat after all.

Guido tails Jennings for the next couple of days until he's sure the termite don't work for the Feds. He should stop, but he got a sports car out of the first collection effort. Maybe something else will fall his way.

Jennings don't do nothing more interesting than make bets with the neighborhood bookie—a bookie which Big Willy owns. In only two days, Jennings squanders all his pawnshop cash. Jennings is a money

sieve, and somehow loose money always flows to Big Willy.

On the third day, Guido thinks about backing off again, but he follows Jennings to the university campus. Classes have already started, but not many students haunt the halls, not when they can buy a canned education implant. For about the same price, they can skip over four or five years of study and still post a degree on their virtual wall.

Although Jennings owns a Ph.D. In chemistry, he passes the science

building in favor of mathematics and computer science. Guido quits concealing himself. The dweeb is so self-absorbed he wouldn't notice King Kong on his tail.

Jennings enters the office of Dr. David Shimano, Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Information Science. Guido waits near the door. He reaches for the snoop concealed in his pocket, but shouts erupt from the office, and he hears the conversation fine without the amplifier.

“... No more money.”

“They’ll take everything I own, Uncle Dave. Please....” That thin whine had to be Jennings.

“Despite my reservations, I bought you a hundred-thousand-dollar canned education, but you never made it your own. You never earned it. How could you be stupid enough to borrow against it?”

“I couldn’t get a job....”

“Because your head is filled with facts that you haven’t organized into knowledge. You have recall but no

understanding. No. Let them take everything. Start fresh. Come here and study with me from the beginning. Build the knowledge for yourself. I'll get you a scholarship. Do it right this time."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I just can't."

"Because it's too hard? Make the effort, Mo. If you make the effort, you may be astonished at the reward."

"You won't give me the money?"

“I will not. I’ve made you my only offer.”

Jennings storms out and leaves the office door open. Guido doesn’t bother to conceal himself, but the dweeb doesn’t notice.

Guido decides not to follow Jennings. He knows everything he needs to resolve the repo problem—Jennings is not a shill for the Feds, and Eddie already holds the collateral for the loan—but the old professor’s moxie caught his attention. Guido saunters to the open office door and

looks in.

Shimano sits behind his desk. He is thin and lanky with jutting cheekbones that give him a skeleton-like appearance. Probably in his late seventies, his lower lip has a blue tinge, and he looks drawn and wasted. His eyes glisten but no tears track his wrinkled cheeks.

“Sorry to disturb you, Prof.” Guido grips the door knob. “But I heard a ruckus. You okay?”

Shimano looks up. “I’m fine, young man. How can I help you? Are

you a student here?”

Help me? He don't look in shape to help no one. Why would he think I'm a student?

“Naw.” Guido fidgets with the knot in his tie. “I wanted to come here when I was a kid, but I couldn't pay the freight. My old man skipped when I was in high school, and I dropped out my senior year to get a job. Too bad, my old lady would've liked her son to have a degree, and my girlfriend wouldn't take it so bad neither.”

“You can buy a degree, if that’s all you want.”

“Ma’s dead. That part don’t matter now.”

“An education is different.” The old man folds his hands atop his desk. “An education always matters. We get one whether we want it or not, indeed, whether we deserve it or not. The difficult part is to earn a good education.”

“Yeah. I guess so, Prof.” What’s this old fossil talking about? “You want I should close the door?”

“Please.”

“Well, okay then. You take care, hear? If I can do something for you, you let me know.” Why had he made such an empty promise? He never promised anything he couldn’t deliver.

“Thank you, young man. You too.”

Guido nods and closes the door. He stands in the hallway for several minutes, and then he pulls his pE-pod. A quick query shows his bank account is in good shape, maybe

even good enough shape. He'll need to talk with Marilyn first, but he's sure she'll like any plan that gets him out the collection business, especially with things getting uncomfortable at Big Willy's.

He runs through the possibilities again and then knocks on Shimano's door.

“Come in.”

“Excuse me, Prof, but if you have a minute could you tell me how I can take some courses here? I bought a high school degree a couple of years

back, but lately I been reading the books they implanted with the degree. Somehow reading fits the pieces together a whole different way.”

“An interesting observation, young man.” Shimano appears to measure him before a thin smile crosses his face. “Please sit. I will be happy to advise you.”

* * *

“You’re serious?” Marilyn steps from the shower. Her toes turn out,

and she firmly plants her fists against her hips. “You gave Big Willy your notice?”

Guido nods. She looks formidable even with her wet red hair strung across her face, and her naked body glistening from her shower.

He hands her a towel and then her robe. “I know you want me to quit the collection business.” He reaches past her and turns off the shower.

“I do.” She wraps her wet hair

with the towel and hugs him before she puts on the robe. “I do, honey. But I’m worried. Will Big Willy let you quit?”

“Well, I wanted to give him two weeks notice, and he didn’t like that. Then Professor Shimano—”

“Who?”

“Prof over at the university. Anyway, Professor Shimano told me it was too late for me to enroll in college this semester anyway....”

“Wait. You’re going to college. When did this all happen?”

“Today. Well, mostly this morning. So anyway, Professor Shimano said he’d give me some books to read and tutor me this fall, but I’d have to make other arrangements for the spring. So I told Big Willy that I could only work for him part-time, ‘cause I need study time.”

Marilyn folds her arms across her chest. “And what did Big Willy say.”

“He offered to lend me money, eighty Gs, to buy a used Ph.D. At a big discount.”

“My God, Guido, you didn’t take a loan from Big Willy.”

“I ain’t no Ph.D., but I ain’t stupid enough to do that. I did tell him I’d take a pay cut ‘cause I’d only be working part-time.”

“And he agreed?”

“The Feds keep him occupied these days.” Guido smiles. “Besides, who’s he got what could persuade me otherwise?”



Dr. Shimano rests a hand against

his desk to steady himself. “You’ve finished those last three books in under a month, Guido? You know I plan to discuss them with you?” He smiles, but his thin hands shake, and his lips look bluer than usual.

“They weren’t as hard as the first five.” Guido shrugs. He enjoys the freedom of no starched collar or tie, but he flexes his neck out of habit. He holds up his electronic scroll. “Physics is tough. You got to play with the formulas and numbers to get a feel for what they mean, what

they represent, ya know. I got a long way to go on that.”

“What about the maths?”

“I ain’t sure yet. Some stuff that I didn’t know I knew came back with that limit business, and now derivatives is making sense. I think I like it, and it makes the physics go better.”

“Very good, Guido, which book would you like to discuss first this afternoon?”

“Uh, well, none of them, Doc.”
Guido swallows like his collar just

tightened. “I got another week working part-time for Big Willy. Meanwhile, I’ve been taking it easy on your nephew, ya know.

“You didn’t tell him I made some back payments to get his education restored?”

“Naw. I wouldn’t do that after you asked me not to. But it’s a couple of weeks to Christmas, and I’d like to finish that business before I leave Big Willy. Ya know, tie up loose ends so’s nobody don’t get hurt.”

“I’m afraid Maurice squandered

our efforts. He's accumulated more gambling debts on top of what he already owes. Not that it matters. He is clueless on how to use the information in that canned education. I don't think he has the will power nor the ambition to structure it so that the knowledge becomes meaningful to him. I've given him too much. My father always said 'Make a chicken scratch for dinner if you want to keep him healthy.'"

"Uh huh. Healthy chickens.

Well, I only handle the loan collections, and he's behind on his payments again. Big Willy insists that me and Juan foreclose. I thought maybe you could talk with him, get him to cooperate, ya know? Maybe we could repossess his education without having to hurt him."

"I appreciate your kindness, Guido. I know it's not good for Mo, but I feel guilty not bailing him out. He's the only child of my younger sister."

"Guilt. Dr. S.? I wish I had an

uncle like you. I'll never forget this chance you's giving me. First tutoring me, and now that scholarship for the spring... that'll be a big help for me and Marilyn. I don't know what you gets out of all this."

"You mean what's my motive? Well, I could tell you that every teacher yearns for a student whose desire to learn exceeds expectations rather than a pupil who want facts dumped into their brain. Or maybe, an old fossil like me hopes some

young stalwart will pick up his torch and carry it further. Pretty outdated motives amidst the sterile harvest of embedded education.”

“Those are metaphors, right? I don’t think I get ‘em.”

“They are metaphors that simply mean ‘you’re welcome, Guido.’ Working with you is a pleasure and small penance for my sins. Unfortunately, I’m the dimwit whose basic research made embedded education possible. At first I thought I had done something good, that

people would have the energy and determination to remold the raw information loaded into their brain into a usable knowledge structure, but most recipients turn passive and let the information decay along with their thought processes. I've had a long life and some success, but enabling educational implants is my biggest regret.... I'm sorry, I'm exhausted. Could you help me get home?"

"Sure, Prof, and I'll delay my associate Juan from foreclosing, at

least until you gets a chance to talk with your nephew, maybe convince him to cooperate.”



Jennings cringes in the corner of the room. Juan stalks the dweeb, playing on his fears. Guido quickly unpacks the education extractor from its case. He knows that Juan prefers to use a baseball bat to repossess Jennings’s education.

“Calm down, Juan,” Guido sets up the extraction cap and extends his

hands palms down. “He ain’t going nowhere. Big Willy won’t like it if we don’t get a clean extraction. A doctorate in chemistry is worth a lot of money on the second-hand market.”

“Oh yeah?” Juan slaps the bat against his palm. “I’m running the show, now, Guido. You ain’t Big Willy’s favorite no more.”

“Maybe not, but Big Willy likes eighty big ones better than he likes either of us.” Guido points at Jennings, but he doesn’t look away

from Juan. “We collect the collateral, nobody gets hurt so long as they cooperate—all legal-like and above-board process so’s we don’t attract no extra attention from the Feds.”

“Put a. You gone soft, hombre.” Juan stalks off. “Okay, do it your own damn way.”



After extracting the chemistry degree, Guido escorts Jennings to his uncle’s house as Shimano requested. Jennings looks pale and drawn, but

otherwise unharmed by the loss of his doctorate. Amidst a light dusting of snow, they stop outside the old Prof's door.

“You feeling okay?” Guido attempts to straighten Jennings's collar and brush some snow off the shoulder of his jacket. “Look, I'm sorry about all this, but at least you didn't get beat-up. Your uncle's been good to me, so I done what I could for you.”

“Get out of my way.” Jennings tries to shove past Guido,

reconsiders when Guido doesn't budge, and goes around. He pounds on Shimano's Door. "Uncle Dave. Let me in."

"Come in, Mo." The door opens, but no one waits inside. "You too, Guido. I'm in the basement lab." The disembodied voice is weak and difficult to understand, but Guido recognizes it as Shimano's.

Jennings rushes in. Guido adjusts his tie and business collar and follows.

Shimano waits downstairs. He

sits in a wheel chair in the shadows. A tangle of computational machinery covers the opposite wall.

“This goon...” Jennings points at Guido.

Shimano raises his hand. His voice is weak. “Please. I haven’t much time. I’ve decided to execute part of my will myself. Afterward, the probate paperwork will be a simple formality. There’s a helmet for each of you. Please put them on.”

Guido shrugs and puts on the indicated helmet. The jury-rigged

machinery reminds him of an educational implant and extraction cap, but is far more complicated. Jennings snarls and starts another tirade. Guido grabs the twerp's arm and offers him the remaining helmet. "Your uncle wants you should wear this. I want that you should listen."

"Thank you, Guido." Shimano tries to maneuver his wheelchair, but hasn't the strength. Guido takes the chair handles and steers him towards the equipment. Once they reach the console, Shimano attempts to

operate the controls, but he lacks the energy. He sighs and settles into his chair.

“Every man hopes to leave a legacy, some part of themselves for the future. Mo, you are my last living relative. Guido, you are my last student.”

Guido releases the chair and pats the old man's shoulder.

“I've a gift for each of you.” Shimano smiles. “I hope you'll both be pleased. Guido, take a seat at the left console. Mo, you sit at the

other... Don't argue with me. My research in embedded education made me very wealthy, Mo, and I know you don't want to see all that money go to charity."

Jennings curls his lip and sits at the indicated monitor. Guido glares at Jennings. He nudges the old man nearer the console, and then takes the chair next to him.

"I'm sorry for my weakness." Shimano's voice fades to a whisper. "We must hurry. Guido, select the green icon followed by the download

one button. Then choose the red icon and download two.”

The control screen displays seven icons. Guido hesitates. “I’m sorry, Prof, which one is green?”

Shimano smiles. He closes his eyes. His lips move feebly, and his head droops. An alarm beeps from the wheelchair’s medical status display. The old man’s pulse is erratic and his blood pressure spikes, but he is still alive.

Guido reaches for Shimano’s hand. “We need to call medical

assistance.”

“His chair has already called the medics, you stupid man. Select the icons. Never mind I’ll do it.” Jennings leans towards the console and presses the touch screen.

Both screens clear, and two narrow bars measure the download progress. Shimano’s image appears at the upper corner of each screen.

The image speaks. “Mo, Guido. I’ve used most of my assets to create scholarships for non-embedded education, and yes Guido, that

includes your scholarship. And you, Mo may have one too if you want it. What remains includes my house, which goes to Mo. I also leave a personal lifetime trust and a recorded partial engram of my knowledge base. You may each choose one of these two items as my final gift to you. The knowledge engram is my final experiment with embedded education. Usually, embedded education transfers raw data directly from e-books to the subject's brain. My knowledge engram is my only

attempt to copy the knowledge structure from one brain for direct transfer to another. Except for what he's shared with others, a man's knowledge, all that he's learned, all that he's built dies with him, and so my recorded engram will be destroyed after you've made your choices. As for the lifetime trust, in my opinion, it provides generous support for one person with modest needs."

Guido can't focus on the video image's words. He's concerned about

the real Shimano. The old professor is still unconscious, but the monitor indicates better stability. Guido takes a deep breath and wonders what's delaying the emergency medics.

The on-screen Shimano continues. "Each of you may choose one of these gifts. Make your selection on your own touch screen. You'll also be able to see what the other person chooses. However, all my instructions will be verbal."

Two button icons appear on Guido's screen.

“Press an icon once to select, and a second time to deselect.” The virtual Shimano smiles. “Choose the red button to share in my memory engram. Choose the green button to share in the lifetime trust.”

Red or green? Guido can't tell them apart. As if he were in a race, Jennings immediately selects the icon on the right side of his screen.

Shimano continues his explanation. “You have two minutes to decide, and you can change your mind as often as you like until the

time limit expires. The trust will be assigned and destructive download of the engram will happen immediately after time expires. If you both choose the same gift, then that gift will be split equally between the two of you. “

Jennings's head snaps towards Guido as if he dares him to select the same icon. Clearly, he doesn't want to share. Guido extends his hand towards the screen, and then he hesitates. He glances at the real Shimano, who seems to be resting

comfortably. Where are the medics? What can he do but follow the Prof's instructions? He looks to the virtual professor for additional clues.

Almost on cue, the screen Shimano offers help. "Guido, I know that you can't distinguish red from green, but that's an advantage in some situations. A color-blind person may see past camouflage. Mo has his own blind spots."

"You old fool," Jennings mutters.

Guido contemplates slapping Jennings silly.

The screen clock shows one minute remains. Guido runs his fingers across his mouth. Jennings picked the right icon, so obviously that was the green button for the trust. The icon on the left must be the red button for the embedded education. Which to choose?

Marilyn would appreciate a steady source of income, but they would share half with Jennings. Guido could earn a good living with Shimano's knowledge embedded in his skull. What could be better than

organized facts straight from Shimano's own brain?

Guido wrinkles his forehead. Which would Marilyn want? The green button for half the trust money or the red button where valuable knowledge would be his alone?

An ambulance siren grows louder outside.

The clock ticks down. What would the Prof advise? Red or green?

Guido unwrinkles his forehead. Of course. Camouflage. With a determined smile, he makes his

choice and then watches the last seconds tick away.

* * *

“Where have you been?” Marilyn waits just inside the door. A threatening storm flickers on and off her brow. “I’ve been worried sick, what with the Feds arresting Big Willy for racketeering. I thought they arrested you too, or worse... Guido, honey, are you okay?”

“I’m good, but a beer wouldn’t hurt none.” Guido plops into his

favorite chair while Marilyn scurries to the refrigerator. “I should’ve called. I was at the hospital with the Prof.”

“Dr. Shimano?” Marilyn returns with an open can and hands it to Guido. “Is he ill?”

“He died an hour ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Marilyn hugs Guido neck and sits on the arm of the chair. “I know you liked him.”

“The old guy had a good run, a full life, ya know.” Guido takes a sip of beer. “He gave me something—a

legacy, he called it—maybe even better than the scholarship he got me.”

“What was it?”

“Get comfortable ‘cause this is gonna take time to explain. I had to choose. I hope you won’t be mad at what I picked. Here’s what happened.”

Still sitting on the arm of the chair, Marilyn clasps his hand to her lap and listens while Guido explains. The sincere concern on her face is a constant distraction from him telling

the story. He wants to sweep her up, to carry her... but no, that has to wait until she understands his choices between red or green, between colors he can't distinguish and equally confusing gifts. He pauses after describing how quickly Jennings's chose the trust fund.

“So then, it's up to me.” He hesitates. “Which do you think I should have done? What would make you happy?”

“What would make me happy?” A tear glitters in her eye. “The fact

that you worried about making me happy makes me happy, you big ape. I trust you to choose what's best for us.”

“I didn't want the green dough for the same reason I didn't want Big Willy's loan—I make my own way. I didn't want the red herring because I want to build my own knowledge like the Prof taught me. The old guy was testing me, that's why he hid the third choice, my choice. I picked none of the above.”

“So you took nothing?”

“I took his best stuff. Not waiting on somebody else’s dough like Jennings does. Not pumping stuff straight into my brain from eBooks—I’d rather read them myself, have a chance to think about ‘em, ya know. The Prof gave me confidence. I don’t have to be stuck with just the choices what the other guy gives me. So’s now I’ll build my own learning—not take what’s easy. That way, I ain’t just renting my education, I own it. What d’ya think? I done good, huh?”

Marilyn kisses his cheek. “I’m so

proud of you.”



Sarah Frost

Sarah Frost became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Falls the Firebrand” in Analog Science Fiction and Fact (Mar. 2011), edited by Stanley Schmidt. Visit her website at www.sarah-frost.com.

Falls the Firebrand

by Sarah Frost

First published in Analog Science
Fiction and Fact (Mar. 2011), edited by
Stanley Schmidt

• • • •

On the third day, Youngha
caught one of the aliens
watching her. The ever-

present prairie wind blew her hair into her eyes. She set her pen down next to tablet of notes about the planet's insectoid fauna, and stood up slowly. She met the alien's gaze over the tops of the tall grass.

The alien sat on its oversized haunches, out past the swirled circle of flattened grass made days ago by the lander's exhaust. The alien's long tail wrapped around its body, the end tipped with a brush of white, then black fur. A braided strap across its chest held its gear. Youngha

recognized a knife, a rod, and something that might be a quiver. Its hide was mottled brown, and its long, ovine face was surrounded by wooly white fur.

Youngha met its gold eyes across the distance, and raised a hand in what she hoped the alien would take as a friendly greeting. Look, I have no weapons. She wished that she and her team knew more about the aliens. Of the three humans on the planet, she was as close as any of them had gotten to one.

Youngha's heart pounded. No matter what the alien made of her gesture, she was unarmed. She shifted her feet, and wished their agoraphobic Captain hadn't dragged Thom back inside the lander. The alien whistled, a long, low sound, then vanished into the tall grass, bounding away on its powerful hind legs.

* * *

“What do you think of them?”
Youngha asked.

“Who?” Thom said.

“The aliens.” She poked him with her chopstick. “What else?”

Thom stuck his chopsticks in his bowl and leaned back, resting against the leg of the lander. As the astronomer-specialist, he was her complement on the survey team. The ship’s astrogator. The grounded one. As linguist-generalist, it was her job to ask him annoying, open-ended questions.

“I don’t know. There was that xenobiology lecture, back in

training.” He shrugged “The worlds in the catalog are supposed to be human colonies, and odds are a human colony will outcompete any native sentience.”

“You think so?”

“Sure. Especially here. This world is supposed to be a colony from the Three Suns Technocracy. All their delicious nanotech... Never mind that they completely failed to grasp the realities of interstellar travel. How many dead rocks did they try to seed?”

“We’ve seen three.”

“Exactly. Who knew we’d find aliens? Not that it really matters. Survey doesn’t care about exciting advances in sharp rocks tied to sticks. I just want to find the seed ship, and see if we’ve caught a live one. I know it’s around here somewhere.”

Youngha cocked an eyebrow at him. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I think I’m going to go talk to an alien.”

Thom snorted, and picked up his chopsticks. “Good luck finding one,” he said.

Youngha ran her hands across the crushed grass in the shade of the lander, and thought she wouldn’t have to look very far.



The alien came back the next day. Youngha looked up from her core samples and saw it standing right at the edge of the tall grass. So quiet, she thought. She laid her brush

down and turned to face it. The alien worked its jaw, flicking its split lip right, then left. Chewing cud?

Slowly, the alien lifted one of its hands. Each long finger ended in a dark pad and a delicate claw. Youngha lifted her own hand, and waited. The alien unhooked the rod from its belt and held it out parallel to the ground. So we're communicating now. Wonderful. But is that a challenge? A threat? She picked up her brush and held it out, mirroring the alien's gesture. The

alien tilted its head and its torso back, then turned and bounded away.

“I suppose that could have gone worse,” Youngha said. She turned back to her samples. When she looked up again, the alien was back, staring at her from across the table. Youngha squeaked and dropped her brush. The alien regarded her with untroubled golden eyes. Then it turned away, placing the tips of its fingers on the ground and stepping away with both huge hind feet,

balancing for a moment on its fingers and on the strong beam of its tail.

The alien looked back at her, stepped away again, and looked back. Oh, of course. Follow you. How stupid of me. She smiled, and followed the alien into the prairie.

Tiny creatures rose up around Youngha's feet as she walked, buzzing their startlement at her passage. The wind hissed through the dry grass, making it ripple like water. Planets like this, with blue skies,

sweet water, and wildly divergent life forms, were terribly rare. Most human colonies were like Youngha's homeworld, where humans hid from a toxic atmosphere under their domes, or like Ari's, where they buried themselves in rock to escape their star's killing light.

Youngha inhaled deeply, savoring air that had never seen the inside of a recycler. So far there'd been no sign of a colony here, no matter what Thom or the ship's computers said. The seed ship from a

dead empire, obliged to cross all the space between here and its home, should have arrived no more than a few years ago. She wondered if the Survey had miscalculated. A misplaced decimal, a number transposed from the ancient catalogue... but what were the odds of finding a planet like this at random?

In an infinite universe, it has to happen at least once. I should bring this up with Thom, get him started on philosophy. I bet I can make him

turn purple.

The colony would be somewhere close, if it existed. Thom had reduced the data for probable landing sites based on the scans they'd taken in orbit, and Ari had picked the likeliest one to check first. Youngha brushed a long-legged flying creature away from her face. If there was a viable Three Suns colony on this world, it would be the first anyone had found. Its people would be able to trade the how-tos and wherefores of their nanotech for a place among the

interstellar human community. If they were here at all. So far, the only mark of sentience on this planet had been made by the natives.

A speck of dirt lighted on Youngha's dun uniform, sprouted legs, and crawled down her arm. She watched it go. A specialist could spend a lifetime cataloging these tiny alien forms. Likely no one ever would, and there would only be a note about insectoid life in this planet's Survey's file. Stardrive time was too expensive to waste on

savages. The real money was in information, massless and infinitely portable. Youngha prodded the speck until it sprouted wings and flew away.

The alien led her to a copse of tall plants... Trees, Youngha decided. They were close enough to the pictures she'd seen. The columnar trunks, like massive bundles of finger-thin reeds, reached higher than the dome where she'd been born.

As she got closer, Youngha could

hear the whistled calls of other aliens. She dug her syntaxizer out of her bag and switched it on. She did not expect it to work; the device had been designed with the human diaspora in mind. Still, it was worth trying. She wondered what the little machine would make of the aliens' language.

Youngha's eyes adjusted slowly to the dimness under the trees. Around her, aliens stopped what they were doing and stared. Some dressed like her guide, while some

wore bags strapped across their deep chests and others went naked. She looked up and spotted oblong pods woven out of sticks hanging in the trees. Each has a triangular opening on the short end. Alien houses, she guessed. Like enormous birds. A small alien hopped past her, the red streamers tied to the fur behind its ears fluttering. Or... not.

She looked up, her eyes straining in the darkness. How do they get up there? A network of vines hung from the houses and the high branches.

No, wait, those are ropes. An alien appeared at the door to one of the houses and slipped one long foot into a loop of rope. It stepped off into the air and glided smoothly to the ground as a counterweight rose into the trees. The alien freed itself from the loop and spent a moment hauling another counterweight into the canopy.

Pulleys, then. An odd direction for technology to take. I wonder...? She wasn't given time to think. The aliens surrounded her, the

cacophony of whistles growing as more came down from their houses or out of the shadows beneath the trees. Their gold eyes were bright in the gloom. Youngha followed her guide into the crowd, and stopped when it stopped. She glanced down at her syntaxizer. "Processing," the screen said. For a moment, the aliens and the human waited.

Then the crowd parted. A singular alien walked forward. There was a hitch in its step, a pause every time it came up onto its long toes.

The bones of its joints were visible under its thin fur. It wore bands of patterned cloth around its chest, its forearms, its neck.

An elder? A priest, or a shaman? A politician? A jester? The cloth ornaments were amazingly detailed: Triangles, radiant stars, squares overlapping circles. Youngha watched the other aliens as it came. Silent now, they crouched all around her, heads down, eyes closed. She was the only one still standing. On impulse she dropped to her knees

and closed her eyes. She could hear the soft shush of the alien's feet on the bare ground.

A sharp rattle startled her into opening her eyes. The thin alien stood before her, brandishing a fist-sized ring of wood. Hollow, black, unidentifiable things were strung on fibers stretched across the ring. The alien shook its rattle again, and began to whistle a melody so sweet and complicated that it gave her goosebumps. A human composer would be proud to put their name on

that music, but whether the alien was making a speech, singing a song, or reciting a prayer, Youngha couldn't begin to guess. She risked a look down at her syntaxizer. The little computer had debated the matter and now displayed its conclusion: The aliens' voices were not language.

The alien reached the end of its song and stopped, fixing her with eyes that glowed in the dimness. It was clearly waiting for her response. So much for technology, she thought. Now, what did they say

about this back in school? Shade-trees, weaving, eye contact—odds are that our eyes are at least somewhat similar. I hope. Youngha bent down to draw pictures in the dirt. Herself, first: The outline of a human form, as clear and simple as she could manage. Then her best approximation of an alien. She pointed to the pictures, then to their subjects, and hoped.

The alien puffed out its cheeks and cocked its head back, looking down at Youngha over its nose. It

drew a circle with a quick flick of a claw, and inside that it drew a cluster of circles next to a sharp-edged hexagon. Again the alien looked at Youngha, waiting.

She hesitated, then pointed at the hexagon, and then at herself. That must be the lander, she thought, That's an odd way to look at it. It is six-sided, though. And the curves are their trees.

Apparently satisfied, the thin alien looked down again and drew a chain of interlocking curves around

the trees in a serrated circle. It whistled, then drew another jagged circle around the lander.

That's clear enough, Youngha thought. You keep to your home and we'll keep to ours. She wished she knew how to tell the alien that she understood. She bowed her head again. The alien shook his rattle, and all the assembled aliens began to sing. Youngha lifted her eyes. Her ears rang with music, complex beyond her understanding.

Youngha had lost her original

alien in the shuffle and press of that strange crowd. She couldn't tell if the alien who escorted her back to the lander was the same one who had taken her to the village. Thom spotted her as she walked toward the lander. The astronomer-specialist waved his arms over his head. Her alien escort vanished.

“Youngha! We found it!”

She stopped to catch her breath.

“Really?” she said.

“It was exactly where I said it would be.”

“That... that’s great. Is it...”

“A seed ship! And it’s only been here a month or so... maybe a year, based on how far it’s developed. Come on, I’ll show you.”

Youngha exchanged a knowing look with her Captain. “It’s good you’re back,” Ari said. “We were afraid that the aliens had eaten you.”

Youngha waved a hand under her nose, as if dispersing an unpleasant smell. “The monitors would’ve said something. Besides, I... I have a feeling we’d know if they

wanted to hurt us. Are you coming with?" It took a lot to make Ari, the team's tunnel-born Captain, come out under an empty sky.

"Thom just got back. I'm not missing this."

Thom led them over a low ridge out of sight of the lander. Youngha glanced at the sky, reflexively looking for the traveling star of the orbiter. Sometimes it was bright enough to see in the daytime, this time of day. She wondered what the aliens thought of it. Dry grass

crunched under her feet, a golden sea that stretched out to the edge of the sky's blue dome.

The survey team struggled up another ridge on legs still unaccustomed to real gravity. From the top they could see the newborn city. Youngha thought her heart would break.

Thom was right; it hadn't been there long. The remnants of the seed ship were still visible at its center. Sunlight reflected painfully from the crystalline chevrons of exotic metal it

had pushed out into the native soil. A spray of solar collectors shaded it. Most were still curled tightly, like the fiddleheads of ferns. Only the ones in the center were unfurled, their spiny fronds of utter blackness waving in the wind. It was only a few meters across, but it would grow.

“Is there... can we do anything?” She asked. The Survey existed to find human worlds, to catalog human civilization... but seeing this thing of machines and metal here, on this living world, made her sick.

The astronomer-specialist shook his head. "It depends on whether or not the biologicals are intact. Judging by the size, it probably already has a line into the local aquifer. I'll get some readings, see if we can figure out how well the biologicals made it through. If they're intact, in a few years we'll have a functioning human colony to add to the charts. We might finally get an insight into how these things were built. If not," he shrugged. "Not much we can do for it. It'll run its program and then..."

wait. Like we saw on Dove's Planet."

Youngha looked around. A pair of long-legged grazers watched warily in the distance. A low clump of reedy plants cast a long shadow in the light of the sinking sun. The songs of this world's insects rose and fell around her. She thought of Dove's Planet, where a seed ship blasted sterile by interstellar winds had landed. It was a world of metal now, continents covered from one sea-shore to the other by cities, its ecosystem fighting a long defeat

against the empty city's nanofactories.

“We can't even warn them,” she said quietly.

No one heard her. Ari said, “Get as much data as you can. We can extend our stay for another week at least, maybe two.”

“It's not enough time,” Thom said. “Can't we...?”

“No helping it.” Ari turned back toward the lander.

Decisions. Answers for annoying questions. That was the Captain's

job.

* * *

Youngha excused herself from working on the city as often as she could. Thom was the expert, and there wasn't much for her to do unless he found an I/O interface on the city. At this stage in its development, it probably wouldn't waste resources on that kind of thing. She loaded the algorithms she had used on Dove's Planet onto a portable just in case her teammates

called her, and spent her days cataloging the life-forms of the prairie. Now and then she caught an alien watching her, far away in the grass.

On the sixth day, Youngha looked up from the tiny creatures she'd caught in her mist-net the night before. Her Captain stood in the lander's shade. She wondered if that small shelter was enough for him. She wondered, not for the first time, why an agoraphobe had gone exploring. Not that I'd want to be

trapped in those tunnels.

“They’re not human,” Ari said.

“I know,” she said.

“If the seed ship’s biological library is viable...”

“I know,” she said, cutting him off.

“Dove’s Planet was... a hard thing to see.”

“... yeah. Yeah, it was.” She laid her hand down on the specimen table, next to a thing that looked like nothing more than three broad fan blades with a spray of grasping legs

in the middle. “If it hadn’t been a dead city. I think that would’ve been easier.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as Thom comes up with anything, all right? And if you want to talk,” he rapped his knuckles on the lander’s black skin. “You know where to find me.”



Youngha saw smoke rising in the distance. She dropped her imager onto the specimen table and ran. Dry

grass whipped her legs. Somehow Youngha knew that the smoke was coming from the alien village. She wondered, belatedly, what she intended to do when she got there. The wind changed, and she was engulfed in blue smoke. She coughed and retched, but struggled on, lungs and legs aching.

Youngha stopped well before she reached the shadow of the trees. The wind changed again, showing her a group of aliens standing in a loose ring outside their village. They wore

cloths wrapped around their noses and held sheets of some heavier stuff. Woven mats? Youngha thought. Or—Her stomach heaved—skins from the grazers? She didn't know why the thought of aliens using other aliens' skins bothered her more than aliens eating aliens, but it did.

The wind changed. Flames leapt up in the center of the circle. The aliens shifted, staying out of the smoke but keeping the fire surrounded. Embers floated down among them. One of them stepped

forward and beat at the smoldering spot with the skin it held. Two other aliens joined the first. The smoke cleared for a moment, and Youngha saw a ribbon of fire devouring the grass in the middle of the circle.

One of the aliens looked up. Youngha saw its gold eyes go wide, then it whistled one high, piercing note. Aliens lifted their heads to stare at the errant human. The aliens who still watched the fire trilled, and Youngha thought they sounded more than a little annoyed. One of

the smaller aliens broke away from the group and bounded up to Youngha. She held up her hands, and dropped her eyes.

The alien came up to her, standing uncomfortably close, and drew itself up until it was almost as tall as Youngha. “Sorry,” she said uselessly. The alien reached a clawed hand and prodded her chest. She could feel her heart hammering against her ribs. Smoke clogged her throat, and she repressed a cough. “Sorry,” she said again. “I’ll go.” She

turned, and the alien shot off into the grass ahead of her, in the direction of the lander.

Youngha ran after it. Her lungs protested, and pain arced up her legs. She spared a bitter thought for the hours she'd spent on her ship's treadmill with its cushioned, level floor. The alien outpaced her, vanished.

She burst into the trampled place around the lander. The alien stood facing the rest of the survey team. The two men's eyes locked on

Youngha. Ari called her name. The alien turned. Her lungs burned with every breath.

The world spun. Youngha fell to her knees. She caught herself on her hands and watched the edges of her vision go black for a moment. She heard the alien walking hand over foot across the dead grass, saw it coming towards her. Its head swung down into the range of her vision as it balanced on its huge hind feet and the second joints of its arms. Its eyes shone like gold leaf set in glass.

The alien put the pads of its fingers under one of Youngha's shoulders, then the other, and lifted. Its gracile arms, remarkably strong, helped her to her feet. When it was sure she was steady, it let go. Youngha inhaled deeply, then pointed a finger at her chest.

"Youngha," she said. The alien canted its head down and whistled a short, aching complex melody. Youngha caught her Captain's eye. He shrugged and lifted his hands; she was the linguist, and this was her

puzzle to solve.

The alien turned away slowly, as though trying not to startle her. It bent down and took up a handful of broken grass stems. It held them up to Youngha's eye level and whistled again. Letting the grass fall, the alien unstrapped a notched rod from its belt and hopped toward the lander. Youngha held up a hand, forestalling whatever her frightened crewmates intended to do.

At the lander, the alien turned back toward Youngha. It walked,

head and hands near the ground, turning the rod over and over as it measured out a distance away from the lander and into the tall grass. When it was satisfied, it cut a long gouge in the ground with its strong hind feet. Then it stepped in front of Youngha again.

The alien bent down, keeping its eyes fixed on Youngha's for a long moment before looking down. Then it began to draw a diagram in the dust. First, a hexagon for the lander. Then a line outward from the lander

to a perpendicular slash, out of which grew a ring. That's geometry, Youngha thought, startled. It's diagraming radius of a circle. The alien's golden eyes looked up at her, then it added the elderly alien's serrated circle outside the first. Again, the gold eyes sought Youngha's black ones and held them.

"We have to clear the grass," she said, startling her crew, the alien, and herself.

"What?" Ari said.

"I think I understand now. I saw

smoke, and when I saw what they were doing... The aliens are burning off the grass around their home. We need to clear the grass here, too.”

The Captain and the astronomer-specialist looked at each other. Dragging out the single syllable, Ari said, “Why?”

Youngha couldn't break away from the alien's gaze. “I don't know. It's just... it's the one idea they've tried to communicate to us, over and over again, since we got here. Not ‘who are you?’ or ‘where did you

come from?’ but ‘clear the area around your home.’ It must be important.”

“If they were human,” Thom said.

“They aren’t human. They aren’t stupid, though. I think they’re counting on us to not be stupid, too.”

Thom said, “Well, we can’t burn it off. It’s too dry. One stray spark and the whole prairie will go up.”

“We can use the corer,” Ari said. Thom opened his mouth to protest,

then closed it. He settled on glaring at Youngha.

“On its widest, shallowest setting?” Youngha said. Ari nodded, and they got to work.

The alien watched as they reset the coring device and began to clear the top layer of grass and soil around the lander, one meter-wide circle at a time. It started at the machine’s first ground-shaking Whump, but didn’t run. It stayed to watch all through the day.

When the sun was a rippling red

orb on the horizon, the alien whistled a short song and bounded away, vanishing into the grass. Youngha wiped sweat off of her nose and wished, again, that she had some way to know what the aliens were saying.



The next day dawned hot. Fingers of white cloud reached into the edge of the southern sky. Youngha set the imager on her knee and sighed. The little burrowing

creatures she'd been stalking were simply too fast for her. She was considering putting a scope down one of their burrows when her comm buzzed.

“Yes?” She asked it, thumbing it to transmit.

Ari's voice came over the radio, clipped and calm. Youngha's stomach twisted. With him, that was a bad sign. “Back to the lander as fast as you can,” he said.

“What's going on?” she said, getting to her feet.

“Wildfire,” Ari said. Youngha swore, and ran.

Her crewmates were hastily packing tools and samples when she arrived. Youngha stopped a moment to catch her breath. Smoke hazed the horizon. Youngha saw Thom wipe his sleeve across his forehead, and felt sweat rolling down the small of her back. She glanced at the morning sun as she got to work, swearing under her breath. It was too early in the day for this heat.

Youngha tightened the dogs on

the last storage hatch and let herself take a deep breath. Thom retreated into the lander. Then the wind changed, and the fire swept towards them, roaring. The sound of it...

“Get inside!” Ari yelled. Youngha swung up the ladder, gave Ari a hand up, then slammed the hatch behind them. The lander’s lights flicked on, and its air recycler labored against the smoke and heat. The survey team stood in the airlock, staring at each other’s smoke-marred faces.

“Built to withstand reentry,” Ari

said after a little while.

“We might lose the ladder,” Thom said. “It’s aluminum.”

Youngha shook her head. “Maybe. I think we’ll be fine. There’s nothing around the lander that will burn.” Thanks to the aliens.

Ari spun the inner hatch open. The lander had already powered up its lights and the screen nearest the door. Ari took the first console. He put the external temperature readouts—air, hull surface, ground—on the main screen. Thom grabbed a

console for his own queries, while Youngha pulled up the external cameras.

Brown haze obscured the horizon. The sky and the prairie were gone. Youngha folded her hands in her lap and watched flecks of gray ash sift down out of the smoke. Her crewmates' bickering and the hum of the lander's systems faded into the distance.

Thom called her name. "What's it look like out there? My God," he said, looking over her shoulder. "You

really think the aliens did that on purpose?”

“I... yes. I think so.”

“Huh. Maybe they’re not as intelligent as you thought.”

Youngha’s training failed her. She couldn’t speak. She only shrugged, and the astronomer-specialist walked away unenlightened.

No one slept soundly that night. Youngha grabbed moments of sleep in front of the camera feeds, sliding in and out of nightmares filled with

blackened bones and charred, flaking flesh. Some interminable time later, she heard the familiar rasp of Thom's snoring. She checked the clock, and blinked. It should be dawn. But it's no lighter outside than it's been all night.

A distant explosion growled through the walls of the lander. Youngha jumped, and by the clatter of a stylus on the decking, she knew she wasn't the only one. Reentry? She thought, imagining another seed ship tearing through the upper

atmosphere. Then something—a horde of tiny somethings—tapped on the hull, and Youngha smiled at the picture on her screen.

“What the hell was that?” Ari said.

“Thunder,” Youngha said. “It’s raining.”

* * *

The survey team stood inside their lander’s airlock, staring out at the rain.

“You’re both sure this is safe?” Ari

said.

Thom just shrugged. Youngha said, "It's rain. Just falling water. I saw this once, on Cassiopeia Colony." She put her hand outside. Cool water fell onto her outstretched palm. The impact stung her skin. She pulled her hand in and pushed the water around on her palm with her finger like it was some exotic, amoebic creature. Her crewmates stood behind her, looking out at the world. Rain fell in silver curtains, and everywhere the prairie was

green.

So sudden, she thought. Like it was waiting for this.

“Can we go out in that?” Thom asked.

Youngha caught more raindrops on her hand, then licked her fingers. “We could dig out the hazmats,” she said. “They’re waterproof.”

“No,” Ari said, after a long pause. “We’ll wait for it to stop.”

“It might not stop. Not this season.”

“Give it till tomorrow, then.”



Ari made good on his promise, but only after the last chemical analysis of the rain had come in clean. Youngha inhaled deeply as she stepped off the ladder into new green grass. Her hazmat boots squelched as she walked. No problem getting water to refill the tanks, then. Around her, plants that had been nothing but desiccated skeletons were in bloom. A new chorus of insects sang from their hiding places in the grass. She laughed. Thom's

head came up from his pile of gear, and their eyes met. She saw him fight against a smile and lose.

Ari checked the lander, muttered darkly about atmospheric data, and then retreated inside. Youngha followed him.

“I’m going to grab an imager and head over to the alien camp,” she said.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Ari said. Youngha mentally rallied her arguments, but he kept talking. “Go take a look at the seed ship first,

and report back.”

It was a compromise, and she knew it. “Yeah, all right.”

Whether the walk was easier because the fire has cleared away the tall grass, because the air was humid and sweet, or because the newly-awakened prairie offered her the scent of a new flower every time the wind blew, Youngha couldn't say. Still, she dragged her feet on the last rise. Finally she let herself reach the top and look down. She was glad no one was around to hear her sigh of

relief.

Youngha looked down at the wreckage and wondered where the seed ship's heat shield had gone. Had its machines consumed the shield to build some other thing? How hot did that fire get? And what would've happened to the lander if we hadn't cleared the fuel away?

The seed ship lay in a scorched patch all on its own. Nothing grew near it. Sodden gray ash covered the ground. Rivulets of exotic metal shone silver where they'd melted,

run, and frozen again. Its solar collectors had burned away. Starved of energy, its nanofactories would die. If any of the biologicals—the seeds of a human population, destined to live in the city the ship built—had survived the trip through deep space, they were certainly gone now.

The Captain's face was unreliable when she told him the news. "Thom," he said. "What was the last word on the biological library?"

Thom shook his head. "Never

got a clear reading off the thing. You know how bad the radiation shielding is on those, though. I'd lay odds it was sterile before it landed."

"Well." Ari said. "The next launch window is in three days."

Youngha frowned. "But there's so much more..."

"Nothing anyone back home is going to be interested in," Ari said firmly. "Once we leave, there will be nothing human on this world. That means nothing relevant to the Survey." His expression softened.

“It’s a beautiful planet. I’d stay, if I could. Are you going to be all right?”

Youngha turned away from her crew to face into the wind. The wind picked up, bearing the scent of ozone and ash. An alien stood on a nearby hill, its eyes shining gold against the darkening sky. Something terrible just passed over you. Do you understand that? The wind blew Youngha’s hair into her eyes. She raised her hand to brush it away. The alien raised a hand in return, then turned and bounded out of sight. I

hope you never do.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Let’s get inside. It’s going to rain.”



Borrowed Feathers

by Sarah Frost

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A week after the aliens came, I
found a broom and swept
the glass through the broken
windows and out onto the street.

Since then, I've lost track of time. Wind blows through the office, rattling whatever papers it can't steal. The wind keeps the edges of the building clear of feathers. I have braced my project in a corner and tied it down with Cat-5 cable because I couldn't find any rope. I've piled up mail crates around it to keep the birds off.

Most of the things people say about feathers are lies. They are not magical floating things. The fluffy ones stick to my skin and work

themselves into my hair. They get in my mouth, and in my food. The birds are always dropping feathers, pulling out feathers, chewing on feathers. There are always more birds. Parrots, mostly. The aliens bring them. I don't know why.

On the first day, I still had a hundred pages of proofs for Ornithologist Monthly on my desk at five o'clock. The printer's office wanted them the next day. Visions of overtime pay floated through my head. I tracked down my boss on one

of his orbits around the cubicles and explained the situation. Told him I'd stay until the proofs were finished. I shouldn't have said that.

The invasion started after everyone in the office had gone home. Below the breakroom window, the street filled with cars, long after rush hour had ended. I thought it was an evacuation for a hurricane, but the forecast showed clear skies. The news sites were full of nonsense about aliens, so I borrowed the battery-powered TV

from behind one of the empty desks in the Copyediting Department and tried to get real news. I got commercials, then continuing coverage of the alien invasion. The anchor asked me to please stay calm, stay indoors, stay off the phone. I looked out the window again, and I saw aliens in the street. People running. Empty cars.

The aliens bring only the kinds of birds that people might have kept as pets. Parrots, and falcons, and finches. Most of them are too wild or

too stupid to stay. Once, the aliens brought me a crate of white doves. I watched from my hiding spot in the door of my boss's office as the alien opened the crate. The doves fled, crying, all empty eyes and terror. A falcon got one before it was two yards outside the building.

The falcon has made a nest on one of the upper floors. I had to cut her jesses off; the aliens hadn't thought to remove them. She rewarded me with bloody gouges in my hands. Taping up both of my

own hands was a painful, bloody challenge, and the bandages kept me from doing anything productive for a week. I was a bit unhinged by then, and I kept thinking that Ben from HR would be happy to know that someone finally used his first aid kit.

I watched TV until the last station stopped transmitting. The puffy-eyed reporter on WPBT was the last. She read lists of shelters and routes out of the city that might be open, and she tried to keep us calm. Then the lists ran out, and she was

alone on the screen. I wondered whether she was really alone, or if someone else stayed with her, behind the camera. I wonder what happened to her, sometimes. She was telling us to be brave when the signal cut out.

One of the managers had a radio in his office. Sometimes, scrolling up and down the frequencies, I can hear people calling to each other in code. I listen for them, but they are harder to find every day. I think the aliens are taking them. Radio signals can be traced, right? I miss them when they

go. I can't talk back, but... I miss them.

Some of the birds can speak. They talk to each other, and to me: "Grandma! Rachel! Who's a good bird?" There's a little green one who likes to crawl up on my shoulder and whisper, "Peterbird. Peterbird. Pretty little bird," in an educated British accent. They laugh and sing and cry like a hoard of dimwitted children. They smell terrible.

I can go up three floors, all the way up to the top of the building, but

only if I don't stay long. An alien comes for me if I try to spend a night on the wrong floor. They touch me. I won't—I won't think about that. They won't let me go down at all, not even one floor. I visit the empty offices upstairs sometimes. The door to the roof is locked. I don't stay up long. I don't want the aliens to come looking. I don't. I won't think about it.

I have to get out of here.

If I hadn't stayed here the first night, if I'd told my boss to shove the

proofs up his ass and tell the printer to fish them out if they wanted them so bad...

I said I'd leave when the proofs were finished. They will never be finished. If I'd gone home at five, I might have been caught in traffic, like the people below my window. Or I might have watched the news from my couch at home, watched as aliens poured out of slits in the air and began their culling of the human race.

My job is to check the layouts of

the pages before they go to press. I make sure all the parts are there, make sure everything's right-side up. I don't read the damn things. Science journals, all of them. I tried to read the biology journals, but they're all jargon. I don't speak Scientist. I'm terrified that I have missed something critical. Somewhere in our library there must be a blueprint. A diagram. A way out.

If I found it, could I understand it? Only Copyediting keeps paper dictionaries anymore, and they're

not technical enough. What if we published an answer months ago, and I missed it?

I called my mom, that first night. That was stupid. The cellphone network was dead, jammed, destroyed, something. I tried the land line, feeling guilty for making a long-distance call on a company phone. The land-line network failed shortly thereafter. My mother had moved out of the city after 9/11. My office building terrified her. I joked with her, saying I'd bring a parachute

to work, just in case. I wasn't serious. Not then.

I didn't call my father. I didn't even think of him until the next day. He lives on Long Island. He's probably...

The aliens bring food in plastic Post Office crates, the kind stamped with warnings about maximum penalty for theft or misuse. Sometimes I think that's funny. Those are usually bad days. I don't think the food is for me. It's for the birds: vegetables, raw meat, fruit,

and seeds. I eat what I can stomach. I feed the birds who can't fly. The ones with injured wings or atrophied muscles. The ones who are afraid of heights. The ones who have simply forgotten how.

I saw the first close-up pictures of the aliens on TV. The camera focused on a rolling mass of melon-colored flesh the size of a Volvo with telescoping chitinous tendrils and no face. No hands to shake. No head to shoot. I left the proofs of the latest issue of Ornithologist Monthly on

my desk. The TV said to stay indoors, so I scrounged a cot and some blankets from the Copyediting Department. I saw the aliens rolling in the streets below my office, systematically emptying the world. I wrapped myself in my blanket and trembled. They made no sound as they went by.

I made a fire. I'm not proud of that. I don't know how to start fires; I'm an artist. My boss was a smoker, that's all. He kept lighters in his desk. I used printouts from next month's

Mid-American Sociology Bulletin
for tinder. They won't miss it. I burn
proof pages. I tried burning office
furniture, but the smoke killed some
of the birds. I try not to burn books.
Burning feathers smell just like
burning hair. I have come to know
an amazing variety of feathers.

Down feathers are sticky gray
tumbleweeds that attach themselves
to my skin, my face, my hair.
Contour feathers come in a mass of
colors and have the texture of fine
paper. Flight feathers are stiff, tough.

The shafts are black at the tip, fading to translucence where they were embedded in the bird's body. Those are the useful ones. I skimmed an article about that once, in *The Seabird*. It said that pigment makes the feathers stronger. That's why albino seagulls die, it said.

The newsmen all assumed it was an invasion. I never saw the aliens kill anyone. They just... made people go away, through slits in the air, the same way they'd arrived. They rolled down the streets below my window,

leaving empty cars behind them. Maybe everyone's still alive somewhere.

I was still awake at one o'clock in the morning on the first night when the walls exploded in blue fire. I looked down and saw bloody cuts on my arms before—I think it was before—I heard all the windows breaking. I smelled burning plastic, and saw visions of the building coming down, clouds of galley pages billowing through the windows as the floors slammed down, one on

top of another. Nails jumped out of the drywall, but the building stood. The voices on the radio said it was the aliens shutting down our power grid. That was later. Right at that moment, the world was empty and silent.

No one knew what the aliens wanted. There near the end, we would've given them anything to make them stop, just stop. I know I would've.

I tried to climb down on the third day. The streets were empty,

the power was still off, and the batteries in my radio were dead. I got down three floors before an alien... an alien filled the hallway, its yellowy flesh pressed against both walls. The tendrils reached out. It touched me. Oh God.

I won't think about it.

I thought about going over the side for a while, falling down onto the street with the broken glass and the empty cars. I looked down at the street and I heard a door open behind me. I stepped back. I thought it was

another human being, come to rescue me. Stupid.

I saw the alien as it was leaving, and a cage on the floor with two angry parrots inside. One was already bloody where the other had bitten it.

I had a few bad days in a row, and lost track of time. Since then I haven't bothered. I don't care what day it is. I'm busy.

Maybe they want me to take care of the birds. They keep me up here, and they keep the birds up here.

Even if they could explain, could I understand? Maybe if I weren't here, one of them would do it. Do they think the birds get their own food out of the crates? Fruit and seeds and red meat. God help me, I don't want to know where they get their meat.

The smell is overwhelming. The birds cover the floor with feathers and crap and puke and dropped food. The plumbing doesn't work, either. I made a latrine where one of the floor-to-ceiling windows had been. I sweep all the crap, the birds'

crap and mine, over the edge. All the dropped food, all the garbage, except the feathers.

The aliens don't seem to notice the constant rain of crap on the sidewalk below the building. They don't notice the smell, or the smoke from my fire. They barely notice me at all. When the food is late, sometimes, I think they've forgotten about me. Those are bad days.

Birds have little tufts of feathers on the leading edges of their wings. The scientists call it an "alula." They

look like thumbs. The feathers in those tufts are all shaft, stiff and heavy. They fall straight down when I drop them. I think those tufts must be important, because all the birds have them. The scientists in The Seabird said that the albino seagull's alulas had eroded away completely by the time they found its corpse. There must be answers in all of this, if I knew how to look for them. I don't have time. I improvise.

I listen to static on the radio, waiting for a human voice to break

in. I have taken all the batteries from all of the clocks and all of the radios and my boss's electric razor and stashed them around the building, just in case. I don't want to run out before I escape. Sometimes I think I can hear my mother's voice in the static. She's calling for me. But... I don't want to die.

One of the ladies in Typesetting left a ceramic bowl in the fridge. It made a passible crucible, after I cleaned out the rotting noodles. Contour feathers are soft and weak

and not really good for anything but covering up birds' bodies. I put them in the crucible and render them down with the broken feathers and the small feathers, and I make glue.

The aliens don't notice another smell, another pile of feathers. The birds do. They crawl on my hands while I'm working. They slip the feathers out from between my fingers. There's a gray bird with a yellow spray of feathers on his head who likes to chew feather-shafts. He has ruined no small part of my work.

He cannot fly at all, and the other birds torment him. Sometimes I'm not sorry.

I watch the ones who can fly. I watch their wings. I found a diagram in *Avian Anatomy and Surgery* showing how their fingers fuse, how their wrists bend. I have begun to drive away the ones who can fly. The finches will go. The falcon won't, but she can look after herself.

I can see grass growing up through cracks in the street. The city is falling to pieces. I know there are

other survivors. I hear their voices on the radio, but I don't have the equipment to answer them. Even if I could answer them, I wouldn't tell them where I am. There are aliens downstairs. Aliens all over the city. If I am going to find survivors, I have to get out. I have to go to them.

I have doubts. I'm no engineer. The aliens haven't stopped me. Maybe they know I'll fail. I have to try. My work sits on the floor before me. Plastic, and paper; feathers, and glue. I'm running low on glue.



It's done. I stand in one of the broken-out windows and look up at the sky. The wind rushes straight up the side of the building, clear and pure. There's no smog anymore. I can see the falcon circling, high above me. The parrots are all screaming. They know. The flightless ones scuttle around on the floor, their wings tucked behind them, useless. Now I have wings of my own. Sunlight makes my feathers shine. I test the wind, and then I fly.



Rebecca Gomez Farrell

Rebecca Gomez Farrell became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Bother” in Bull Spec (Apr. 2011), edited by Samuel Montgomery Blinn. Visit her website at www.rebeccagomezfarrell.com.

Bother
by Rebecca Gomez
Farrell

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2011), edited by Samuel Montgomery
Blinn



Jonah's nose itched under the surgical mask. He didn't dare reach inside to scratch it. The smell of sulfur was too strong this close to home, and he did not want the fumes to fill his lungs. His throat still felt raw from forgetting his mask at work last week. As he reached the corner, he looked down the street to his left. There was no glint of fierce, yellow eyes piercing through the smog, no sound of breathing like a motorcycle revving up at a signal.

The dragon must be on another block tonight.

Jonah crossed the street, careful to hop over the deep potholes that littered the road from when the beast charged hard enough to break through the asphalt. It was much easier to do so now, at dusk, than when he usually came home. The city had stopped turning on the streetlights in this neighborhood last month; they did little to illuminate anything through the smog. He reached his ground-level apartment

without incident and pulled at the doorknob, pressing his right foot against the wall for leverage. The swollen doorframe was worse every day. He should find out how to install a new one. Perhaps a metal frame, he considered, as the door opened with the screech of wood scraping against wood. The dragon probably couldn't melt a flame-retardant alloy, even in a direct hit, and besides, metal wouldn't make that god-awful noise. He stepped in the apartment and quickly pulled the

door closed behind him. He rubbed his hand against the wall until it hit the cool, ceramic switch plate then flipped on the light. He hung his mask on the carved unicorn key rack he had bought for Susan on their honeymoon. She loved mythical creatures—she used to, at least.

The apartment was small. It was all they could afford when they moved to the city. They had a battered old couch with thick blue and white stripes, though the white ones had yellowed, and a flat-panel

TV mounted on the stretch of wall between the two large bay windows that were now blackened by grime. Behind the couch was a cheap folding table that they'd bought at the church down the block's spring yard sale, back when yard sales were still an option.

Jonah kicked off his shoes and sat down on the couch before turning on the TV. Onscreen, a hot, twenty-something woman wearing a thin white tank top and jean shorts cut off below her ass stood in an empty

warehouse. A man with bugged out eyes held a gun to her head. Another man, sporting a fauxhawk, stood across from them, his hands raised as he begged for the girl to be let go. He was the boyfriend, of course, had to be. Jonah knew how this flick would end, no need to try and feign interest for the last twenty minutes—the guy would put himself in constant danger over and over to try and rescue the girl. What a moron. He clicked the power off and the actors disappeared, digital square by digital

square.

Jonah closed his eyes and prayed that Susan would not be back for at least... well, a year or so would be nice. He'd be lucky if he got an hour. He grabbed their chenille blanket—it always felt chilly in here when he first came in—and thought of silk sheets, light jazz, and a stomach full of steak and potatoes, willing himself to nap. After making that sale at work today, he deserved to take it easy tonight. If so much as the curtains rustled, he'd rain curses

down on that inconsiderate beast.

Jonah's light snore filled the room for a few minutes before the tugging at the door began anew. A fresh wave of soot and a flash of orange and red light entered the apartment with Susan. It was the scorching heat that woke him, though, and he shoved the now warm blanket to the bottom of the couch. Naptime was over.

"Any luck?" he asked by way of hello.

She shook her head as she

crossed behind the couch to the kitchen. The sound as she filled a plastic cup with water made him need to piss. Ugh. Their upstairs plumbing was broken and the landlord was not returning phone calls these days, so they had to head outside to the Elliotts' place whenever they needed a bathroom. They lived only two doors further down the alleyway so it was usually safe, just a pain. Jonah put on his mask and headed out.

Susan undid the leather belt

around her waist and slid its support strap off her shoulder. She relished the release from the extra weight. Her whole body was stiff and the endorphins of a day's work were not enough to temper her bad mood. A few jabs—that was all she got in today and that sort of wound did nothing. She rolled her shoulders up and her neck from side to side to stretch them. She hoped Jonah had gotten around to doing the laundry since he was home early. She needed a clean rag to wipe her weapon.

He came back into the apartment coughing but with a grin and pulled the chain on the ceiling fan. It was a pointless endeavor with no fresh air to circulate, but they liked to pretend it cut through the muck and dispersed the tanned hide smell of the smoke. The walls, which were painted a vibrant turquoise only a year ago, were covered with ash. The furniture was also coated in a thick layer of the greasy residue, but it was still cleaner inside than out.

Jonah turned around a folding

chair and sat with his elbows over the top of it. “What do you want for dinner?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she replied, looking at the grime on her weapon. It was mostly mud from where she had struck the ground near the park when she’d missed, but there was also a bit of pulp that resembled mushy, canned asparagus. Dragon flesh was so sticky. “Did you do the laundry?”

“Nah, I slept. I was tired.” He rocked back and forth on the chair,

still grinning.

“What are you so excited about?” she asked, not because she really wanted an answer but to stop herself from forcing the corners of his mouth down. He was so irritating lately, full of excitement over the most mundane things.

“I made a sale,” he said, “a contract for sixty grand.”

Like it even mattered. She sighed and started pulling off her clothes on the way to the washing machine. She threw them in along with a pile from

the nearby hamper.

He loved when she did this, so cavalier about her nakedness. Sure, no one could see in through the windows, but it still seemed racy somehow, forbidden. She could turn him on like a switch.

“I’m too tired,” she said, sensing his intentions from across the kitchen. She didn’t look up, just kept rinsing out the measuring cup with the water that ran down the back of the basin. The lid of the machine closed with a clink. He held out his

hand so it would brush against her on her way past him and up the stairs to their single bedroom. She didn't complain, unsurprisingly, so he might as well get a little touch. Nothing affected Susan; she practically sleep walked around the place every night, no longer chattering about family gossip or that week's television shows. It was like all of her passions had been burnt up and replaced with one singular, draining purpose.

Not so with him. Jonah lived his

life same as always, except he had to use an alarm to make it to work on time. He used to get up at first light, but it was impossible to see the dawn from inside the apartment now. Susan would already be gone by then, off to make the morning briefing with the rest of the vigilantes. She'd quit her teller job a few months ago, or she'd just never gone back; he wasn't really sure of the details. She just stopped bringing home a paycheck one day.

His stomach growled. He walked

over to the fridge and opened the door. No produce except some lettuce stewing in its own brown liquid in a clear plastic bag. He fought the impulse to vomit as he picked it up and tossed it in the trashcan. The freezer revealed a frozen pizza. He pulled it out, a thin-crust pepperoni pie, and turned the oven to 400 degrees.

Susan came back down the stairs wearing a hot pink tracksuit and holding her shower caddy. She grabbed her mask from the hook and

tugged open the door. When she returned several minutes later, he could smell her flowery shampoo and breathed it in.

“Pizza?” she asked, sitting at the table, and he nodded. “Good choice.”

“It was our only choice unless we wanted to go out.” He tried not to sound sullen as he spoke. Susan rarely left the apartment after dark, claimed it wasn’t safe to be outdoors, but he knew she was more daring than that—she spent her days hunting a dragon, for Christ’s sake!

They'd moved to the city because they both loved it; the people churning through its small alleyways, the densely packed storefronts, even the screech of subway tracks still gave him a thrill. The city was thriving, though the crowds had thinned in their neighborhood. He wished she would go with him to see it, but all she thought of these days was steel, technique, and flame. She didn't leave room for anything else in her thoughts.

“Will you get groceries

tomorrow?" he asked.

"I can't. I need to be there in case something happens. Ginger's planning to launch an assault tomorrow. It might be the breakthrough we've been waiting for." She made a helpless gesture.

He rolled his eyes, "Of course, you have to be there. I forget sometimes that eating isn't nearly as important as your 'work.'"

He sighed while transferring the pizza to a cookie sheet. This was not the mood he'd wanted to be in

tonight. He wanted to be happy, content. He'd made a sweet deal; was one night of celebration too much to ask for?

"You know, you could come with me," she looked at him hopefully, her deep brown eyes opened wide, like they hadn't done this routine a hundred times before. "Just for a day, a morning even. Blow off work and come and help us, see what it's like. Why it has to be done."

"I could," he agreed, "but I'm not going to, okay? I'm not interested."

Sorry.”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t understand you. How can you turn a blind eye to something this huge? It’s everywhere! The heat warps our buildings, and the dung is piling up all the way to Fifth. We’re assaulted with a constant avalanche of ash the moment we step outside. That’s not even counting all the trees that have burned.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“Doesn’t bother you?” Her brow furrowed. She could not believe how

nonchalant he was about their lives. How could he calmly watch a pizza bake while the world fell apart outside their door? “Doesn’t bother you?” she repeated. “It’s a freaking dragon in the middle of the road.”

She jolted out of her seat, making the folding chair clatter to the floor, and paced.

“I know what it is,” he said, “it just doesn’t affect me, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. I don’t know how you could possibly think that, much less say it.” The washing

machine buzzed, and she stomped over to it, throwing open the lid so fast that it came back down and slammed on her hands. "Crap!" She kicked it. "Stupid, freaking machine!" She put a hand against her head, willing away the tears she felt welling, and grabbed at the wet clothes, taking solace in the coolness of the cloth and the detergent's evergreen scent. She shoved them all in the dryer, save one damp rag that she brought over to the table and folded in quarters. She scrubbed

furiously at her sword with it, nearly nicking herself in the process.

“I’m sorry I don’t feel the same way you do about it,” he said.

She ignored him and held up the weapon to the overhead light. Not clean enough yet. She kept scrubbing.

“Look, I walk around it. Pretend it’s not there. It doesn’t harm me; I don’t harm it. It’s dangerous to try and fight something like that.” Not to mention useless, he thought, just like her daily cleaning of that sword.

None of it accomplished anything. “How many of our neighbors have been killed trying to fight it? Five? Six? Why would you want to provoke something like that?”

She refused to look at him. His voice was grating, like the sound her sword made when it struck a brick wall instead of the beast. She focused on an especially sticky mat of scales and put all her weight on the rag.

“I have no desire to put my life in danger to slay a damn dragon, okay?” Jonah waited for a response, but she

was not going to give him anything tonight. He smelled smoke—well, he always smelled smoke, but this was different—nearer... the pizza!

“Crap!” he yelled as he opened the oven door. A burst of smoke hit his face, making him gag. He grabbed a towel and waved it around to disperse the gray air, then reached in with a potholder to pull out the blackened pizza. The pepperoni had nearly disintegrated.

“That sucks,” Susan said, as she walked past him to toss the rag in the

hamper. "I'm really hungry now."

Jonah tossed the pizza into the trash under the sink. His head ached from the smoke and the fight, or maybe from his hunger. Susan stared at him, leaning back against the washing machine with her arms crossed and her green eyes blazing. She looked beautiful. God, he'd really hoped for a better evening.

"Why don't we go out?" he said.

"Are you crazy?"

"No, I mean it." He took a step closer to her and thought fast.

“We’ve got no food. We’re both hungry. There’s this awesome place over on Grand with these Buffalo wings that’ll make you cry, they’re so good. Come on, we should go.”

“It’s not safe,” she said, but he noticed her stance relax a little, her fingers not gripping her arms as tightly. “And I just cleaned my sword.”

“So leave it here. We’ll be quiet, sneaky. It’ll never hear us.”

“Unless it’s right outside our door.”

“Oh, please, we’d hear it coming if it was. You know that. Besides, it wasn’t there when you went to take your shower, right?”

“But I’m in my Pjs.” The pajama defense? He hadn’t heard that one in ages. He must be making progress.

“So change. I’ll wait.” He leaned next to her and kissed her ear, a trick that used to make her giggle every time—every time before the dragon and the fighting, that was. He got a smile now.

She considered it. She really did.

She pictured sitting in a restaurant surrounded by people, a frothy Belgian lager in front of her, and life careening by outside the window. It seemed like a fantastic dream from another world... a world that she no longer was a part of. How could she even consider going out there at night? It just wouldn't be responsible at all. And she needed to be up so early to meet the others.

“I can't.” Her tone was final. Jonah recognized it, she could tell. He recoiled. She expected him to get

angry, to yell or something, but he didn't. He didn't say anything, just left the kitchen. She trailed behind as he sat on the couch then put on his shoes and laced them up.

"What are you doing?" she asked, aghast.

"I'm going out to get dinner. What do you think I'm doing?" He stood up and took his coat off the rack.

"Jonah, come on. Don't be stupid." She felt immobilized. He was serious. He was really going out

there.

He responded by placing his mask over his face. He didn't even look at her before he tugged open the door, ducked out, and pulled it tight behind him. The smoke that snuck in made her eyes water, but she didn't wipe them. She was in shock.

She couldn't believe it. He actually left. Went outside, unprotected. In the dark. She considered grabbing her sword and running after him, but she didn't have the energy. If he wanted to be

an idiot, then fine. Fine. She hoped the dragon gave him a good scare. He'd probably be running back in the door in seconds.

She felt a light reverberation beneath her feet. The keys on the holder jangled. The smell of sulfur grew stronger; she could almost feel it seep into the room, and she held her hand against her nose.

CLOMP. CLOMP. CLOMP.
The windows shook.

No. Oh god, no. She slid down against the sticky wall to the floor.

The steps were faster now and louder, much louder. She stared at the door, praying it would open but it stayed shut. The tremors grew stronger; the whole room shook as though it were a car on a wooden roller coaster track. The whoosh of a strong wind whipped past the apartment, and the heat of the blast made her sweat, even through the walls. She felt nauseous but kept her eyes fixed on the door. The television crashed to the ground as the footfalls increased in speed. The

dragon charged past the apartment with a deafening noise. The door stayed shut. She sobbed.

The sound of crunching bones came next, like nuts cracking but louder, so much louder. It went on for what seemed like ages, but it could only have been a few minutes. She knew it didn't take the beast long to finish a meal. The shaking died down and the smell of sulfur grew weaker, but the creature had to be nearby. She would have to risk it; she had to get up, to go see for herself.

She had to know.

She picked up her sword on her way to the door but tears overwhelmed her again. She forced herself to breathe deeply until they subsided; she couldn't breathe that air when she was already hyperventilating. Then she pulled on her mask and opened the door. The smoke pressed against her as she walked to the curb. It was always so thick after a flaming. Her group usually had to give up for the day if the creature breathed its fire, but she

wasn't willing to do that now. If she waited much longer, there might not be anything left of him.

She stepped to the curb, and a breeze parted the smoke briefly. Under the awning across the road, she could see something, but she couldn't make it out—an uprooted tree, maybe, or a tall newspaper rack? She walked forward, holding her sword up at an angle so her stroke would be shorter if she needed to strike. Another breeze came up, and then she could see clearly... see him,

clearly. It was Jonah. He was alive! She couldn't believe her eyes, but it was definitely him. Even while hiding from a dragon he leaned with an easy slouch against the alcove wall. He held a finger to his lips and pointed with the other one down the road before the smoke rolled back in. She wanted to run to him, but she knew better than to make a quick movement with the dragon nearby.

She looked the way he had pointed and sure enough, she could make out the dragon's shape down at

the end of the block through the haze. It was curled up as though about to sleep, yet it still spanned the width of the road. Its yellow, crocodilian eyes were open and staring straight in her direction. She felt its gaze but made no move to escape it—doing so would be reckless with no other fighters to support her. The dragon's eyelids came up, and it rested its head more firmly on its arm.

It would be safe to cross now. The curtain of smoke fell back into

place as the breeze died down. It would give her cover, but she didn't need it. The dragon did not wake easily, even with a dozen swords jabbing at its side. She made her way to Jonah carefully and slowly to avoid the potholes and dung. She tumbled right into him on the other side of the road and clutched his side. He was so firm, so solid.

“I thought you were gone,” she said into his shoulder, her words muffled.

“Oh god, you thought that it got

me?" He hugged her tighter. "No, no, I'm fine, I swear. It got some other people, though, a couple of teenagers I think. Must have been from another block." He trembled a little, picturing them at the end of the street before the flame and the beast had come. "I jumped in here as soon as I felt it coming. I don't know why they didn't take cover. They started shooting arrows at it—can you believe that? It blew its fire at them, then ran them down. When the smoke parted, I could see it holding

one of them, still burning, under its claw while it chewed on the other boy. It was horrible.”

“It... just ran by you?” She couldn’t believe the dragon would pass any human by. She’d lost so many friends, fellow fighters, so many of them. She buried her head in his chest.

“Yeah, barely even glanced my way. I guess I just didn’t seem like a bother. Not like those poor kids, trying to be heroes.”

Heroes. Is that what they—she—

had been trying to do? Was that the purpose of fighting this thing, to be some great defender? She'd thought of it as surviving.

The smoke cleared some, but it was still thick. It was always thick. She let go of Jonah, and stepped out of the alcove so she could see. She looked to where the dragon lay, looked for some trace of the teenagers, but there was nothing. They were gone completely, except for their bows that had fallen by the creature's claws. Then she looked

back at Jonah, his eyes still wide from what he'd been through, somewhat dazed, but he was there. He was alive. Her coward of a husband who'd never so much as glared in the dragon's direction was alive, when those kids who'd attacked it bravely—and stupidly—were not.

She knelt down and laid her sword on the road, brushing her fingers over the smooth, clean blade and the coarse leather wrapped around the handle one last time. Then she walked back to Jonah.

“What are you doing?” he asked, as she tugged at the sleeves of his jacket.

“Taking your jacket,” she said in a lighter tone than he’d heard her use in months.

“Why?” He was dumbfounded. What on Earth could she be doing? Was she trying to hide her sword or something?

“I need it to cover up, so I look decent when we get to that wing place. I’m still in my Pjs.”

Jonah looked on with

amazement as she wrapped herself in his jacket so that only her hot-pink pants were showing. She took his hand and led him down the road on tiptoe. The dragon didn't stir.

At the corner, she planted a peck on his cheek. "Which way?" she asked, and he managed to motion to the right, though his head kept spinning.

"I think we should look for a new apartment," she said, continuing down the street. "This place is getting to be too much of a hassle. What do

you think?”

Yes, Jonah thought as he squeezed her hand. That sounded like a great idea.



Damien Walters Grintalis

Damien Walters Grintalis became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Like Origami in Water” in Daily Science Fiction (Oct. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at dwgrintalis.blogspot.com.

Like Origami in
Water
by Damien Walters
Grintalis

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Oct. 2011), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

Johnny is angry again. I hate this part, but I won't try to stop him. I would feel the same way, too.

"It's not fair," he yells, spit flying out of the corners of his mouth. "And it's not right. Why can't they figure out what this is? Why can't they fix it?"

Music blares from the speakers. The walls are paper-thin, but our neighbors are not home. Johnny shouts over the lyrics, demanding to be heard. He paces back and forth in

our tiny apartment with its drafty windows, his walk an awkward, lurching stumble. He only has one toe left, the baby toe on his left foot. And in the space where his other toes used to be?

Nothing. Nothing at all.

“Eventually you won’t even remember what I looked like,” he says and sinks down on the floor, holding his hands around his head.

I shut off the music and sit down next to him, breathing in his scent, a soft, musky smell with something

new hidden underneath, a smell like charred wood in a long dead fire. “That’s not true.”

“I’m only twenty-six years old. It’s not fair.” He holds out his arms. The inside of his elbows are marked with swirls of purple and yellow. “I’m not going back to the doctors anymore. What’s the point? They don’t have any answers. They’ll just stick me in a corner room and stare at me like a circus freak.”

I take a sheet of paper and fold it until a dragon appears, the paper

slick beneath my fingers. I learned how to fold paper from my mother, as she learned from hers. She told me her mother learned from Akira Yoshizawa, the great master of paper folding, when our family still lived in Japan. Washi, the traditional paper, is the best to use, but I make do with the paper I find in craft stores, even though it tears easily if I'm not careful. My mother says the best origami holds something inside—love or anger or hurt. Something to make it real.

I set the dragon on the floor next to my feet. Johnny saves them all, even the ones that turn out wrong. He lines them up on the windowsills and calls them his gargoyles. They're not watching out, but watching in. Watching him.

"I'm glad my parents are dead," he says. "So they don't have to see this." He grabs my hand and gives it a tight squeeze. "Will you stay with me all the way to the end?"

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

He leans over and rests his head on my shoulder. Tears burn in my eyes, but I hold them in. Johnny hates to see me cry.

* * *

A week later, his feet are gone.

* * *

After his legs vanish from the knees down, I make a red army of paper swans and set them on top of the refrigerator. He's sitting at the table, ripping paper into tiny shreds,

and from where I stand, I can't see the missing parts. I can almost pretend everything is fine.

I don't watch when he crawls back to the bedroom.

But the sound echoes back.

* * *

His knees disappear next.

"It hurts when they go," he whispers. "And even when the pieces are gone, I can still feel them."

* * *

Johnny's reading in bed when his fingers go. One minute he's holding the book; the next, it tumbles down onto the blanket, landing with a tiny thump. He gives a little grunt and his mouth twists down. I know what I'll see, but I look anyway. His fingers are pale and vapory, narrow ghosts fading fast. And then they're gone, leaving behind a little more of that old wood smell, and a little less of his.

"It was a stupid book anyway," he mutters.

I scoot over, not touching close, but close enough. He turns to me and presses his lips against mine, offering up what warmth he has left. He hasn't kissed me since he lost his feet.

In his kiss, I taste oranges and despair.

* * *

"Turn on the music," he says.
"Please."

I do.

"Louder."

I turn it up until he nods. He shouts until the neighbors pound on the walls.

I turn the music down and make a bird, another dragon, and something that was supposed to be an elephant. A baby's wail creeps in through the plaster followed by the muted tones of an argument.

"Can you put that one on the nightstand?" he asks, his voice scratchy and dry, nodding toward the not-elephant. "That's my new favorite."

“But it doesn’t look like anything.”

He smiles, the first smile I’ve seen in weeks. “It does to me.”

I put it next to the alarm clock.

The rest of his hands are gone. His wrists, too.



“Please don’t forget about me,” he whispers.

I wonder if there’s another room somewhere, with someone like me, waiting. And another, like Johnny,

going away.

I hold in my tears and pour my sorrow into a paper crane the color of a summer sky.



A week later, his arms vanish. He doesn't shout. He doesn't say a word. Instead, the silence hovers, a sharpened guillotine waiting to strike.

I make another elephant; this one turns out perfect. I unfold it, rip up the paper, and throw the pieces away

before Johnny can see.



When there's nothing below his waist but air heavy with the scent of char, I sit in bed and he rests his head on my lap. I play with his hair and run my fingertips across his eyebrows. There's a knot inside my chest; with every passing moment, it twists a little more.

"I'm afraid," he whispers. "There won't be anything left to bury or burn. It'll be like I was never here."

Say you'll remember me. Swear it."

"I won't ever forget you. I promise I won't."

"Can I have the elephant?"

I set it on his chest.

After Johnny falls asleep, I touch the empty space where the rest of his body should be. The knot inside coils tighter. I stay awake for hours turning paper into shapes while the not-elephant moves up and down as he breathes.

"Zou-san, zou-san," I sing, keeping my voice feather soft. The

words are part of a song my mother sang to me when my fingers were still too chubby to make paper animals.

But I cannot remember the rest, no matter how hard I try.

* * *

When the end comes, it happens fast. I sit by his side, talking about nothing until a lump in my throat steals my voice away. I kiss his forehead, and he closes his eyes against the pain. The air shimmers

like crushed pearls caught in moonlight.

“I love you, Johnny,” I say, but he’s already gone.

His voice whispers from the weightless spot beside me. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

Then that, too, disappears.

And all the paper animals, the stupid folded pieces of paper that mean nothing, nothing, watch from the windowsills.

With heavy steps, I go from room to room, stuffing them by the

handful into a bag. Even through the bag, I feel the weight of their gaze, straining to break free.

But I know how to make them stop.

I carry the bag down to the bridge where Johnny and I shared our first kiss, the best kiss. The river underneath, brownish-green in the fading light, rushes by; the muddy stink crawls inside my mouth and lingers in the back of my throat.

As the sun sets, I throw the paper animals into the water one by one.

They bob on the surface, turning end over end, bright specks of color in the fading light, until the water swallows them whole. The blue crane, with its secret heart of sorrow, is the last one to drop out of sight.

I drop the bag, and the not-elephant tumbles out onto the ground. The air rushes out of my lungs; everything turns to a blur. I cover my eyes to hold in the tears, but they won't stay inside. I can't make them stay.

The not-elephant still holds a

trace of Johnny's smell, his real scent, not the stink of his illness. I cradle it to my chest, rocking back and forth while all the hurt he left behind spills out.

There isn't enough paper in the world to make it go away.



Scarred
by Damien Walters
Grintalis

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• • • •

Violet carved her hate into her
flesh one name at a time.

Her skin was riddled with scars, some barely visible, others dark and ruddy. The oldest, the first name, was on her right ankle, above the knobby bone. It revealed a halting progress, with many gaps in between the lines and curves.

He suffered for a long time.

* * *

Anthony looked up from his dinner plate and smiled. “This is really good, babe.”

“Thank you. I wanted to make

something special for tonight.”

The cooking classes were her idea. Anthony had been worried about the knives, of course, although he hadn't said anything with his mouth. Only with his eyes. The first time his hand had touched one of her scars, he'd paused, his eyes curious. Concerned.

She'd looked down at her hands. “I had a... problem when I was younger, but I'm better now.”

“What do they mean?”

“Nothing,” she'd said. “Nothing at

all.”

A breeze blew in through the open windows, fluttering the curtains, and the late spring air was heavy with the scent of flowers. Children’s voices called out and their neighbor’s dog barked several times, a deep, growling sort of bark. She and Anthony grimaced at the same time, caught each other, and smiled.

“Happy anniversary, babe,” he said.

“Happy anniversary.”

She smiled and twisted the ring

on her finger. The year had passed so quickly, yet seemed a lifetime. Anthony had asked her to marry him on their sixth date. Crazy, perhaps, because they'd barely known each other, but she'd said yes without a second thought. Three weeks later, they were standing hand in hand in the courthouse promising forever, a promise she intended to keep.

Mrs. Anthony Cardno was a good person.

But Violet isn't and you know it.

That wasn't true. She was a good

person. Sometimes she got... lost. That was all. But it was all in the past. She was better now. So much better.

* * *

With Anthony softly snoring in the bed beside her, Violet clasped her hands together on her chest and recited the names. Too many names.

“Please forgive me,” she whispered when she was finished.

She rolled onto her side and touched Anthony’s cheek, his skin

soft, yet rough at the same time, beneath her fingertips. The sleeve of her pajama top slipped up to her elbow, revealing the edge of a name: Sabrina. Her best friend in grade school. Violet closed her eyes.

It wasn't her fault. She hadn't meant to hurt anyone. She hadn't known.

Liar.



She woke before Anthony and padded down to the kitchen to make

coffee. From the kitchen window, she saw the next-door neighbor's children, already up and about, kicking around a red rubber ball. She smiled and touched her belly. Two months ago, she'd thrown out her birth control pills. Nothing had happened yet, but they were both young. There was plenty of time. Anthony would be a wonderful father. And she would be a good mother even if the baby didn't sleep well or cried all the time.

“You were always crying when

you were a baby,” her mother had said time and again. “Drove me crazy. You’d cry if you were hungry or full, wet or dry, it didn’t matter. It was like you came out hating the world and wanted everyone to know it.” Her mother would tap her cigarette into her overflowing ashtray, pat Violet on the bum, and smile. “Grab me another beer, okay?”

When her mother had married her stepfather, Violet had hoped that everything would be okay. Now she had a real family. Her mother would

be happy, wouldn't drink so much, and wouldn't forget to go food shopping or pay the electric bill. But her stepfather had only made things worse. So much worse.

But we took care of him, didn't we?

No, no matter what he'd done, he didn't deserve what happened. No one did.



Long after the sun had faded from the sky, she and Anthony took

a walk through the neighborhood. The children and dogs had been collected for the night, and lights behind windows winked out one by one. His hand gave hers a quick squeeze.

“Next year we’ll go away someplace for our anniversary, how does that sound? Somewhere with a beach and blue water.”

“And fruity drinks with paper umbrellas?”

“Absolutely.”

He pulled her into his arms and

kissed her softly beneath the glow of a streetlamp. Then they heard the shout. She jumped, pulled away, and scanned the street. No one else was outside. The shout came again, more muffled this time, from a small green house with a swing on the front porch.

Anthony took a step toward the house. Violet shook her head.

“Don’t.”

“But if someone is hurt...”

A voice snapped in anger, followed by a whip-quick sound that

Violet knew all too well—a slap.

“Let’s go back home.”

Anthony gave the house a long look. Violet tugged his hand.

“Come on. It’s not our business.”



Violet was collecting her mail from the mailbox at the end of the yard when a dark-haired woman and a little girl of perhaps four or five in a yellow dress and white ruffled socks walked past. She looked up just in time to see the bruise darkening the

skin of the woman's cheek. Violet's hands clenched into fists. The little girl pulled her thumb out of her mouth and offered up a wide, innocent smile.

You can make things better.

No, it wasn't her fight. She didn't know them at all. She watched them turn onto the sidewalk leading up to the green house.

But you could if you really wanted to. Just one more time. Help them, then I'll go away.

The voice whispered so sweetly,

but it lied. Oh, how it lied.



Violet pulled out a knife to slice tomatoes for a salad and paused. The overhead light glinted in the metal. She closed her eyes and saw the little girl's face. The woman's bruise.

You can fix it.

“Leave me alone,” she whispered.

Two years after her mother had married her stepfather, the voice spoke to her for the first time. Eight-year-old Violet had been sitting in

the corner of her bedroom with the door locked, wiping tears away, with a fresh set of bruises on her upper arms.

“I hate you,” she whispered. Over and over again.

I can help you, a voice said.

She'd jumped up, stifling a shout, looked under the bed, checked inside the closet and out the window. The voice had laughed softly.

I won't hurt you.

She'd covered her ears. Buried her face in the pillow.

Trust me. It will be easy. So easy.

It had whispered and whispered, and eventually her hands had dropped from her ears. It had told her what to do, and when the house had fallen silent, Violet had tiptoed to the kitchen and pulled out a small knife.

Good girl. That's a very good girl.

She'd closed her eyes when she had touched the blade to her ankle, and the pain had not been nearly as bad as she'd imagined it would be.

Beneath the copper bright tang of blood, she'd smelled something dark and terrible like the sweet stink of roadkill or the scummy water left in a vase filled with dead flowers. She'd felt something light brush against her skin, opened her eyes, and saw a shadow flickering across the floor. One quick flicker and then it was gone.

She didn't know then what it would do.

A few days later, her stepfather had collapsed in the back yard. The

doctors had called it a rare, aggressive cancer, but Violet had known they were wrong. The malignant cells hadn't eaten him away from the inside. Her hate had.

Let me out.

She dropped the knife back into the drawer and slammed it shut. It bounced back open with a little jingle, offering her a hint of the silverware within.

“No!”

She took several long deep breaths. She would not do it. Not

now. Not ever. She recited the names. Once. Twice.

“I am sorry, I am so sorry.”

Words. Useless words. Her stepfather had said them so many times.

He wasn't really sorry. You weren't either.

* * *

Standing in front of the green house, Violet noticed the white letter sticking out of the mailbox. She stepped closer, casting quick glances

over both shoulders. The letter was out far enough for her to make out a name: Kevin Turner.

With her mouth set into a thin line, she turned and walked back to her own house, the name a heavy weight inside. She couldn't hate him. She didn't even know him.

You could if you wanted to. He's just like your stepfather.

She didn't know that. The woman could have fallen down. How many times had she done something stupid, something that—

Excuses, excuses. You know you want to. That's why you looked at the letter.

No, it wasn't that way at all. She wouldn't do anything. She'd promised to leave it all behind. For Anthony's sake. For her own sake.



Sabrina Ogden had been her best friend all through grade school. In their first year of middle school, Violet had spoken of what her stepfather had done. Sabrina had told

another friend who told another and on and on. The whispers had followed Violet through the hallways. The shame had burned like a brand.

When the dark voice had whispered, Violet had tried to hold it in, but she hadn't been strong enough.

The doctors hadn't been able to cure Sabrina either.

Tears burned in Violet's eyes.

If she'd been your friend, she wouldn't have told anyone. If she

hadn't—

“Violet?”

She jumped and the paring knife in her hands clattered into the kitchen sink. She stared at the blade for several long moments, her mouth dry. She didn't remember opening the silverware drawer. Did she?

You know you want to. I've been waiting for so long.

She slipped on a smile and turned around.

“You looked like you were a

million miles away,” Anthony said.

“Sorry, I was woolgathering.”

She went to him and rested her head on his chest.

* * *

In the dark, she stared up at the ceiling. Recited the names.

Joey, who'd tried to take advantage of her at a party in high school. Sarah, that same year, who'd blackened her eye and fractured her wrist for telling the principal about the smoking in the bathroom.

Christopher. Laura. Matt. Jake, who'd broken her heart. Peter, who'd shattered it. Ryan, who'd promised to love her forever. He hadn't deserved to die such a terrible death.

And so many more. She wanted to forget them all, but she held tight, fearing she would.

My fault, my fault. All of them, she thought.

Every time she'd carved a name, the darkness reappeared, a slithering shadow she could only see as a human-shaped haze in the air. Did

they see it come for them? Did they
taste its fate in their breath?

And did they know she'd sent it?



Just one more time. Please.

“Stop it, stop it, stop it.”

She didn't want to hurt anyone.

She was a good person now. She
was.



Violet saw the little girl again,
playing in the front yard of the green

house. She was digging in the dirt with a stick, singing softly to herself. When she heard Violet's footsteps, she looked up and Violet saw bruises on her forearm, four finger-shaped marks. Violet's hands curled into fists. Her heart beat heavy in her chest.

We can help her.

No, it was not her problem. But her steps were heavy on her walk back home.



An image of the girl's bruises floated in Violet's mind, and her fingers tightened on her open book.

One more time. I promise I'll go away.

Why wouldn't it just leave her alone?

You know you want to help her.

But not in that way. She would call Child Protective Services in the morning. They could help the little girl.

What if they don't?

The words on the page swam

into a blur. She recited the names. Ran the tip of her finger over the edge of a scar. Recited the names again.

Her cup of guilt was deep, the brew within thick and bitter. No matter how many swallows, she could never drink it all down. Not in one lifetime or ten.

“Honey, are you okay?”

Violet looked up from her book.

“Yes, why?”

“You had the strangest expression on your face.”

“I was just focused on the story, I guess.”

He touched the back of her hand.

“If something is bothering you, you can tell me. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do.”

She put her hand atop his. The words gathered in her throat, but she swallowed them down. Anthony was the first, the only, good thing in her life. If he knew the truth, the things she'd done, he'd run as far away as possible.



Violet put the phone down, her mouth set in a thin line.

They won't help her and you know it.

But they would. The woman on the phone said they would send someone out. A snippet of memory crept in. A woman from CPS came to her house once. In spite of the bruises on Violet, she hadn't done anything except write a report, but things were different now. They took bruises more seriously. The

little girl would be okay.

But you can make sure of it.

Violet sagged against the counter and groaned into her hands.

“Leave me alone, please, just leave me alone.”

Never.

But she already knew that. It would never go away. Never give her peace. She was broken. Wrong. She yanked the silverware drawer open and grabbed a knife.

“Is this what you want?”

Yes. You know you want it, too.

No. She wanted to be well. To be happy.

She made a tiny cut.

Yesss...

“No! I will not do this. I will not.”

She threw the knife down, sank down with her back against a cabinet, and put her head in her hands. Recited the names. A harsh sob bubbled up from deep inside her chest. The names. The deaths. All her fault. She was a monster. With a grimace, she scrambled for the knife.

You want this. You know you

do.

She slashed at her skin, her grimace turning into a smile at the sharp, beautiful sting of the knife. Even that was wrong. It never hurt enough. She cut again and again, the letters distorted. Wet, red mouths dripping crimson pearls. When she finished, she threw the knife down.

“Are you happy now?”

And there, on the delicate skin of her wrist: Violet.

One last name, one last death, to pay for them all.

What did you do? You stupid, stupid woman.

Tears blurred her vision as the blood dripped to the floor.

“Please forgive me, Anthony,” she whispered, her voice small and insignificant in the quiet. “It’s so much better this way. You deserve someone so much better.”

No, no, no! You can’t do this. You cannot!

She had to. It was the only way. Her limbs filled with lassitude, her mouth dropped open, and her breath

came long and slow.

A shadow emerged from the wound like a ribbon, taking shape as it grew. It slipped free slowly, ponderously, its weight feather-light, its stench thick and heavy. It caressed her cheek in a hideous lover's pantomime. She took a deep breath, steeled herself against the pain to come, yet the shadow slithered across the tile, moving away from her without a sound.

“No, no, no.”

She reached out, but her fingers

passed through the darkness. She grabbed again and again, caught nothing but a kiss of air against her skin. Then the shadow slipped beneath the door, and she sobbed into her hands. She didn't understand. She'd carved her name. Why didn't it take her? She rocked back and forth, her arms wrapped around her knees. No voice whispered in her mind. Only a strange, calm silence. Could it have been that easy all along? But all those deaths...

No. It had to come back for her.
It had to make her pay.



Ambulance lights cut the night with slashes of red and blue, and Anthony's hand gripped Violet's tight, his skin warm against hers. The neighbors watched from their porches, their eyes filled with curious alarm, as the paramedics wheeled a stretcher out of the green house.

"I wonder what happened," Anthony whispered.

Violet rubbed her finger along the cut on her wrist, still in the pink of healing. A few moments later, the dark-haired woman stepped out of the house, her face expressionless, the little girl by her side. And on the girl's ankle, not quite covered by a white ruffled sock, Violet saw the name carved into her flesh: Daddy.

No, oh, no. A chill raced down Violet's spine. Her mouth went dry.

Anthony tugged her hand.

"Come on, let's go back home."

Violet heard his voice as if from

far away. She couldn't move, couldn't take her eyes away from the little girl.

“Violet, honey, what's wrong?”

The little girl met Violet's gaze, her lips curved into a dark, familiar smile. A smile laced with hate.



They Make of You a
Monster
by Damien Walters
Grintalis

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Andrews



When the footsteps approach, Isabel scrambles to her feet. She staggers; spots of light dance in front of her eyes. Two days without food. Two days without water. She backs up until her spine presses against the stone wall. Tucks her hands behind her. She knows it won't make a difference.

She tells herself she won't scream.

The Healers, three women draped in robes of red, enter her cell.

They don't say a word. She keeps silent when they grab her. Twists away from their grasp. Fights against them with all the strength she can summon.

It's not nearly enough.

Then they snap the first finger, the pinkie on her right hand. The pain is white. Blinding. Below the pain, a sensation of leaking. Emptying.

Her cries echo off the stone. From another cell, she hears shouting. One of the Healers laughs.

By the fifth finger, she doesn't have the strength to struggle anymore.

By the eighth, she can't even scream. Wavery moans slip from her lips. The greedy stone walls gobble them up and wait for more.

By the tenth, the world is grey, flickering in her vision like candleflame.

After the last snap fills the air, the Healers weave a spell to fuse her bones back together. To fill her up with something new. When they let

her go, she crawls to the corner of her cell, holds her ruined hands to her chest, and sobs into the filthy straw.



Midday, a guard shoves a bowl of porridge through the bars of her cell. Her stomach rumbles, but she makes no move for the food. If she does not eat, will they force it down her throat or will they allow her to starve?

She knows the answer.

The porridge is bland, with

neither milk nor honey to give it flavor, but she eats it all. She does not want to die.

Not yet.

* * *

At night, a guard walks the passageway between the cells. His feet tap a steady rhythm on the stone. He stops outside the bars of Isabel's cell, his face all sharp planes and angles, his clothing tainted with sorrow.

She pulls her knees up to her

chin. What does he see? A young woman in a dirty dress or a monster in the making?

He runs his fingers along one of the metal bars, his skin safe behind leather gloves. All the guards wear them. For their protection.

“You knew it was forbidden,” he says, his voice a blade.

She holds her tongue.

“You knew the risk, the penalty, yet you still did it. Does that make you brave or a fool?”

He walks away before she can

take another breath. It is not her fault. What she is. She holds up her hands. What she was.

They've made her something else now.



They came for her two days after Ayleth fell. She doesn't know how they knew what she'd done. Perhaps someone was hiding nearby. Watching.

She pushes the thoughts away and thinks of Ayleth's dark hair, her

green eyes, the way she laughed into the wind.

* * *

She feels it growing inside her, a darkness where before there was a spark of light. Their corruption.

If she had a knife, she would cut it out and leave it bleeding on the floor.

* * *

The guards bring in a girl whose face still holds tight to childhood.

Her fingertips leak thin grey trails of smoke. Her fire is spent. She does not fight against the guards' grip. She does not cry. She is already broken.

They put her in the cell across from Isabel's.

The girl screams when the Healers come. Isabel covers her ears. Had her own screams sounded so loud? So long? If her gift was fire, she would've set the straw in her own cell ablaze and burned herself alive.



Moonlight peeks between the bars of her cell's window, a window too high to reach, even if she stands on her toes. It does not matter, though. The only thing beyond her window is a rocky cliff facing the sea.

She closes her eyes, breathing in the stink of her own waste. The hopelessness of the stone walls. How many were in this cell before her? How many listened to the waves crashing against the rocks?

How long before they gave in?



She paces in her cell. The sun has turned the air thick and sticky. The straw rustles with each step of her bare feet, scratching against her skin. They took away her shoes when they brought her here.

The guard in the passageway does not look in her direction. He does not look at any of them. He smells of roasted meat; her mouth waters.

The girl in the cell across from Isabel trembles, her teeth chatter, and

ice crystals form on the straw beneath her. Is there even enough left of her inside to miss the warmth of her flames?

She is too young, far too young, to be so defiled.



“Let me see your hands, little fool,” the night guard says.

She turns away so he cannot see them. Her heart races. Will he kill her? It would be a kindness.

Instead, he walks away.

She doesn't know why he wants to see. Nothing shows on the outside. She feels it inside, ugly and wrong.



They bring in an old woman. Her back is bent; her eyes, clouded with white. She cries for her children to save her. No one will come, except the Healers and the guards. Everyone knows that.

Isabel doesn't think it will take long for the old woman to give them

what they want.



She dreams of drops of blood falling from the sky. She dreams of a field of knives littered with bones. She wakes drenched in sweat with a strange taste in her mouth, like sour milk laced with ashes.

Her old magic, her real magic, tasted of ripe raspberries.



The guards take away a woman

with long dark hair. She walks with her back straight and her mouth set in a thin line. Her eyes flash with defiance.

A door slams. After a time, muffled screams creep into the air and hang there for hours. When the guards bring the woman back, she smells of urine, vomit, the acrid tang of fear. She leaves a trail of blood on the stones.

The sight makes Isabel's stomach twist into knots.

The new king took the crown the year of her sixth summer. “You must never,” her mother said, time and again. Even at six, Isabel understood why.

“Never, ever.”

And she listened. Until Ayleth.

She thinks of Ayleth’s broken body, the blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. What would happen if she touched her now? Would she be able to hold it in?



Finally, the guards come for her.

They bind her arms behind her back. Even with their gloves, they do not touch her hands. They lead her into a windowless room; the door shuts with a bang that vibrates in her teeth. The room smells of pain and sorrow. Of giving up. Giving in.

The man in the room smiles. A lie.

There is a table covered with a stained cloth, the fabric full of bumps and bulges. She does not want to see

what the cloth is hiding.

“Will you serve your king?” the man asks.

She takes a deep breath. Doesn’t answer.

She will not.

He does not remove the cloth from the table, he does not ask his question again, and the guards take her back to her cell.



Magic was not always forbidden.
When she was a small child,

there were no Healers, and only criminals were locked away. The old king was loved by the people, not feared. He loved balls, grandeur, music. The new king does not care for music, save that born of screams. Only those sworn to his service are allowed to wield magic; even then, they are only allowed a magic that has been perverted. Inverted. Fire to ice. Healing to—

No. She will not think of that now. She cannot.

Rumors say the king acts in

cruelty because he secretly wishes he was born female. If so, he might've held magic. Instead, he has only his cock and the kingdom to grip.

But the why doesn't matter. Not here.



She dreams of Ayleth running toward her. Though Isabel runs as fast as she can to get away, to keep her safe, Ayleth won't stop.

She wakes just before Ayleth touches her hand.



They take the young girl out and do not bring her back. When the night wind blows cold through the window, Isabel thinks perhaps it is the girl, making ice for the king's wine.



The new magic inside her hungers. For what, she doesn't know.

She doesn't want to know.



The guards take her to the stone room again. The table is uncovered, revealing knives, hooks, spikes, and something shaped like a metal pear that screams malevolence. Anguish.

She feels the blood run from her face. Her fingers tremble.

“Will you serve your king?”

She swallows before answering.
“No, I will not.”

They laugh when they take her back. They know she will give in, eventually.

Or she will die.



She and Ayleth grew up in the same village, casting shy smiles at each other until finally, Ayleth kissed her behind the baker's shop. Their love was not as forbidden as magic; people pretended not to see.

The day Isabel broke her promise of never, they were foraging for berries atop a wooded hill. In the distance, the spires of the castle gleamed in the sunlight. Ayleth

paused with a handful of berries and whispered, “I would like to burn it down with the king inside.”

“Do not say such a thing,” Isabel said, casting a glance over her shoulder.

Ayleth shrugged. “There is no one to hear. Only us.” She took a step forward. A twig snapped. Leaves crackled. Her mouth dropped open as her legs slipped out from under, and she tumbled down the side of the hill, her shouts punctuated with thuds and thumps all the way.

Isabel raced down as fast as she could without falling herself. At the bottom, she found Ayleth holding her belly, blood dripping from the corner of her mouth. She tried to help her stand, but Ayleth shrieked and begged her to stop.

The village herbwoman would not be able to help. Not with this. In spite of Ayleth's protests, Isabel grasped her hands and let the magic out.

And the sensation... Her mouth flooded with the sweetness of

berries, her fingertips tingled, and inside, it was as if butterflies were dancing soft beneath her skin. She felt it leave her body like a breeze through a window; as it flowed into her lover's, Ayleth's eyes brightened, her mouth formed a circle of surprise, then laughter bubbled up and out. They danced together like children, forgetting for a moment that, as proscribed by the king, the magic was wrong.



The guards carry out a body, laughing all the while. Isabel sees long dark hair. Pale limbs streaked with the telltale lines of blood poisoning. A face with blank eyes where defiance once lived.



The night guard watches her through the bars. She meets his stare, hiding her hands in the folds of her dress. She fears what they've done to her. She fears who they've made her become. But she is not her hands.

She is not their monster. She will not let it change her.

Yet she fears it already has.



She stumbles as they push her into the room with the table. A skinny man with a ragged beard stands in the corner. His clothes are tattered. Shackles bind his bloodied ankles.

“Will you serve?” the man with the false smile asks.

“Never.”

He nods at the guards. They hold her arms tight as they guide her toward the shackled man. The smell of his unwashed body makes her eyes sting.

“No, I will not do this. I will not.”

But inside, the twisted magic says yes.

She struggles to break free. The guards shove her toward the man. She lifts her hands. A reflex. Not on purpose. When she realizes what she's done, it's too late.

Her skin touches his.

Pain radiates through her belly like claws and fangs tearing free. Her fingers clench, digging into the man's flesh. She tries to hold it in, but it will not stay. She cannot make it stay. It rips free, an animal in search of prey, and leaves the taste of rage in its wake. A vile brew filled with bitterness.

The man's eyes widen. His mouth opens. His face contorts in pain. His body spasms.

He falls.

For one quick moment, a feeling

of power, of possibility, rushes through her. Then she shoves it deep down inside. Shame floods her. One of the guards nudges the man with his foot. He does not move. The liar smiles.

“Do you see what you are?” he says.

She closes her eyes. She doesn't want to see.

She doesn't want to know.

* * *

The night guard pauses in front

of her cell again. Isabel wipes away her tears.

“They will take you from here when you agree. You will have meat, wine, clean clothes.”

She shakes her head. She is not a monster. But she thinks of the man, the way it felt to take his life, and she shudders.

* * *

“Will you serve?”

“No,” she whispers.

“You don’t really want us to tear

up your pretty flesh, do you?"

"I will not serve," she says
between clenched teeth.

It is her turn to scream. To leave
a trail of blood on the stones.



She dreams of the field of knives.
Of Ayleth, her blood pouring from a
wound Isabel can no longer heal, her
arms outstretched. Isabel tells her no,
but Ayleth doesn't listen. She grabs
Isabel's hands and falls to the floor,
her eyes open. Unseeing.

In her dream, Isabel laughs.

She wakes with a cry in her throat; her mangled body answers with a shriek of its own. She catches movement from the corner of her eye—the night guard, walking away.



Death came for her father in the shape of a lingering illness that caused his limbs to wither and his skin to turn grey. Her mother forbade her to help.

“I cannot lose you both,” she said.

So Isabel held her magic in, no matter how hard it fluttered, yearning to help.

The twisted thing inside her now scrapes and pushes, burning to hurt.

* * *

He taps the bars of her cell.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Why do you fight?”

She doesn't answer. He would not understand.

“They are looking for your friend.”

A whimper escapes before she can steal it back. Not Ayleth. Anything but that.

“Why do you care?” she whispers.

“The king’s sister is next in line for the throne. She does not share her brother’s penchant for cruelty. She would be a good queen, I think.”

She looks up. He is staring at the window.

“The king is coming to the prison tomorrow. He is not happy with the progress of late.” The guard

steps close to the bars.

He looks into her eyes.

“He does not wear gloves,” he says, his words so low that, save for the movement of his mouth, she might have imagined them.

The breath catches in her throat.

He gives her a small half-smile, the expression strange on such a harsh face. “You remind me of my sister.”

As he walks away, she steps back with her hands held between her breasts. Why would he tell her such a

thing?

How long until they find Ayleth? How long until they force Isabel to watch while they press the blades against Ayleth's skin? Her eyes burn with tears, and she covers her mouth to hold in the sound.

The waves crash upon the rocks. The wind blows in through the bars on the window. The cell fills with the smell of the sea.

She thinks of the girl who could make fire. The dark haired woman. The old woman crying for someone

to save her. She thinks of all those living in fear, the ones they haven't found yet.



In the morning, she hears a strange coarse laugh. Heavy footsteps move down the hallway. She steps close to the bars. Waits. The metal is cold beneath her fingers. The footsteps move closer.

Will they kill her once the king is dead?

She looks down at her hands.

Her weapons. Not perverted.
Perfected. The monster inside her
extends its claws.

Let them try, she thinks. Let
them try.



Lee Hallison

Lee Hallison became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “This Life” in Daily Science Fiction (Apr. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at leehallison.com.

This Life

by Lee Hallison

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Apr. 2011), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

Hope grabbed at the railing as the surge of people pushed her off-balance. She hung

on as she made her way down the rain-slick subway stairs, exhaling with relief at the bottom. The crowd carried her into the station, where she stuck her token in the turnstile and headed toward the A-train track.

Another dull, tedious cubicle day, another nasty bit in a crowd of smelly strangers—and the same commute back to that boring old apartment. Hope sighed as her thoughts spun. The train thundered in with a rush of stale air, and she stepped through the doors as they

shushed open.

Inside, rather than smooth fiberglass and chrome, rows of old-fashioned tawny-yellow wicker seats stretched to her right and left. White canvas hand-grips hung from the ceiling. Hope swung quickly back to the door, but it had shut, letting no one else in. The train jerked and moved. People flicked past, and then the swoosh of the tunnel wall darkened the windows.

The back of Hope's neck prickled. She peeked over her

shoulder, but the car looked the same. Empty seats. Green painted walls. An old fan flicking. Yellow light bulbs.

“Hey,” she called out, to whom she didn’t know. The train rocked along, and Hope swung into a seat. She rubbed the bumpy surface with her finger. She hadn’t ridden a subway with wicker seats since she was a kid.

The door at the far end opened. Hope looked up at a large woman squeezing through, bags hanging off

both arms. She struggled free and the door banged shut. Her impossibly orange hair hung in curly ropes around a wide face, setting off a big-toothed smile.

“Hello,” she said, panting a bit as she plopped onto the bench seat facing the aisle.

“He... hello.” Hope didn’t talk to strangers, but she wasn’t used to empty cars, never mind old ones.

The woman pulled out a skein of light beige yarn and began to knit. The rhythm of clicking needles

relaxed Hope. She stood and moved down the car to a seat nearer the woman.

“Thinking of a change, then?” The woman opened her eyes wide, making them look popeyed. She flashed another big grin.

“No, no, just on my way home.” Hope frowned as the train rocked along. They should have reached a station by now, yet the train sped along like an express.

“What kind of train is this? It’s the local, isn’t it?” Hope looked for a

sign, but the walls were blank—no map, no labels, no ads.

“Ah, local in a sense, yes. What kind of change do you think you’d like?”

Hope looked away, toward the back of the car. She was in the subway with a wacko—best ignore her. Maybe she could move back there.

“Shh. What can you hear?” asked the woman.

“What?” Hope glanced at her. The woman began to knit faster, a

rectangle forming below her needles. Hope heard the clicking of the needles turn into a hum. The train lurched and slowed. The streaming light resolved into individual lights whipping past, then slowing. Posts and walls signaled a station, and then the station itself slid into view. The train screeched to a halt next to the empty platform.

The doors opened onto a lush field of grass and wildflowers, the sound of birds and the smell of spring replacing the stale air. Hope

stood with a little gasp. Where was the station? She looked at the woman, who smiled and nodded.

“You can make a change, a new life, if you’d like. Farming? Family and friends, weeds and wisdom....”

“What? What are you talking about?” The woman sounded crazy, but then Hope was seeing things.

She looked out onto the path through the meadow. She shuddered, city girl sensibilities kicking in. The door shut with a swish.

Hope staggered and sat hard as

the train started up. It seemed to accelerate instantly to 100 miles an hour. She watched the lights whizzing and wondered whether the loony's comment was true. Step into another life? She laughed.

The woman laughed with her. She pulled the end of a second skein and knitted blue into the rows hanging from her needles. The rectangle lengthened, the new color making stripes.

"Shh, what can you hear?" Smooth needle clicks filled Hope's

ears. The train slowed, then pitched to both sides as it abruptly stopped at the next station.

The doors skidded open and the taste of December rushed in, cinnamon and snow.

“Skiing, snow and slush, fireplaces and fancies,” the woman chanted.

Hope looked out onto the top of a mountain. Skiers below swooped in graceful arcs. A lump of snow fell off a tree close enough to touch, and the spray of wet cold tingled her

skin.

Hope drew back. The view dazzled her, despite the taste and smell. She sighed, the doors closed, and the train lurched on.

“Who are you? What is this train? Where am I?” Hope gripped the edge of her seat.

The woman set her knitting down and gazed at Hope. She tossed her orange curls back, then pursed her lipsticked mouth.

“Do you always question presents, my dear? You’ve been tired,

and bored, and unhappy for a long time. Choose something else, if you'd like. This is a chance, a gift."

Hope's stomach churned. She couldn't imagine stepping off this train, yet didn't want to stay one minute longer. This woman had some nerve, entering her life and messing with her head. She must be dreaming, or hallucinating.

"I want to go home," Hope's voice cracked. She cleared her throat and said it again, louder.

"Are you sure, now? This is your

choice?”

“Yes!”

The woman cocked her head and picked up her knitting, clicking fast, fingers a blur.

“Shh, what can you hear?”

Hope frowned and said, loudly, “Stop it!” The humming clicks did not stop. Hope stood up, grabbed one of the hand-grips and pointed at the woman.

“Don’t do that! I want to go home!”

The windows lightened as

another station slid into view. The train stopped. Hope stumbled, almost losing her footing. She tightened her grip on the canvas and straightened up. The doors swished open onto an empty station platform.

“There you go, girl. That’s the way home.” The woman picked up her knitting and pursed her lips again.

Hope looked out at her station, looked back at the woman, and stepped to the door. She hesitated,

but jumped out just as the doors began to close. The train squealed as it started to move. Hope watched the woman through the window, yellow light bouncing off the orange head. As the train passed by, the woman looked out at her, the striped knitting beginning to unravel from the needles in her hands.

Walking home, an odd freedom bubbled up from deep inside Hope. She opened her mouth and let out a happy bark. What a funny strange thing had just happened. She swung

her arms just for the heck of it. A car beeped as she stepped off the curb, and Hope waved as she stepped back. This life, she thought. This life.

Shh, what can you hear? Hope is laughing.



Taking Care of Ma

by Lee Hallison

First published in Daily Science Fiction (Jun. 2012), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

I stood in front of Ma's door and shifted the packages to get at my key. Before I could reach the

lock, she opened the door. As usual, she didn't say hello, just turned and hobbled back to the living room.

“Ma, I have a key!” I said to her back.

She set her cane against the couch armrest and sat, pretending not to hear me sigh.

I put Ma's groceries away and walked over to her. Several narrow rows of white yarn hung from the knitting needles clicking away in her hands.

“What are you making?”

She ignored me. I sighed again. I looked around for the little round robot.

“Where’s the S-V, the smart-vac?”

She lifted a chin toward the corner, where it sat with a chopped off broomstick duct-taped to its back.

“What did you do to it?” I got up and went to the machine. We’d spent \$1,800 on the thing. Leave it to Ma, Luddite to the core, to wreck it. Jim would have a fit.

“Really, Ma, what did you do?” I wiggled the broomstick. “What’s this for?”

She’d stuck it on good—lots of duct tape on both the stick and the top of the machine. At least the controls and sensors weren’t covered.

“I want to push it when I clean. Like a real vacuum.”

“It is a real vacuum. Just with extra features.”

“I don’t like hearing that thing mosey around by itself,” she said,

clearing her throat. “It’s my house. My rules.”

I made lunch, some small talk, and an early exit. Jim and I had spent extra on the robot vacuum—we’d upgraded to the model for “the elderly.” The salesman had shown us how it would sound an alert if she fell, sending a signal to our computer and my left arm implant. It could guide her along, like a service dog. We could program it to beep on schedule—for medicines, time in the bath, etc. And the side benefit—no

more dust bunnies.

Jim had been entranced. He was a gadget geek, no question. Ma snorted when we presented the S-V to her but agreed to give it a try. She called me the next day to tell me its eyes were looking at her.

“They aren’t eyes, Ma,” I told her. “They’re sensors. To avoid obstacles and sense if you need help.”

“Like I said, they’re eyes. It looks like it’s alive.”

I had spent what I thought was enough time to calm her down, but

now she'd stuck a stick on the thing.

What was wrong with wanting her to live out her days safely? She was impossible about progress. The robots weren't "taking over," they were machines. Even the new AIs were machines. And useful ones! I loved my tiny implant—it kept track of everything, and connected me to the web, to Jim, and to Ma's smart-vac. Malevolence was a human trait, not a vacuum's. I obviously hadn't reassured her.

Jim had me call the store in the

morning. “What if she’s mucked up the controls? What if she falls when she’s pushing it and the alert doesn’t work?”

The salesman told me the smart-vac’s tiny AI chip would learn how to work around her “eccentricities.” His shiny white smile bounced in the vid-screen. Smarmy fellow. He wouldn’t be so jolly if it were his mother at risk.

The so-called mother at risk beat me to the door again, and I followed her in. She plunked herself down

and picked up her knitting. A lumpy green thing.

“What’s that?” I didn’t expect an answer, but she perked up.

“A sweater for Jim.”

I wondered where yesterday’s scarf had gone. My implant beeped and Ma coughed her annoyance. I stood up to answer it and as I swiveled, saw the scarf covering up the front sensors of the S-V.

“Ma!” I couldn’t believe it. The thing looked ridiculous. A knitted scarf tied around its perimeter, a

duct-taped broomstick wagging from its back.

“It was cold,” she said.

“It’s not going to work right!” I started toward it, but Ma moved faster than I thought she could.

She grabbed the stick and tapped an imaginary “on” switch with her foot. As she pushed the humming vacuum along the carpet, she smirked. I threw my hands up and stomped to the door.

I left, looking back to watch her push the machine back and forth.

The scarf slipped slightly, and one sensor stalk peeked out.

And then it winked at me.



Michael Haynes

Michael Haynes became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “An Unsuitable Job for a Human” in Nature (Jul. 2012), edited by Henry Gee. Visit his website at michaelhaynes.info.

An Unsuitable Job for a Human by Michael Haynes

First published in Nature (Jul. 2012),
edited by Henry Gee

• • • •

“~~Is~~ Absolutely out of the question!”
Commander Zonj said, smacking his
desk for emphasis.

Captain Glanx felt uneasy any time he had to visit the Commander's Central Base office and suffer the stare of his compound eyes. Today in particular, it would have been easy to bow his head and skitter off without another word. Still, he felt a certain responsibility for how things stood.

“Sir, I realize there isn't much precedent for what I'm proposing...”

“There isn't any precedent for it! Bad enough that you let two aliens on board your ship. Aliens, I might

add, which you were so ill-equipped to care for that one of them has since died. But now you show up in my office and suggest that we employ the survivor? And as a ship's pilot, no less?" Zonj waved his four arms around in consternation. "This is not an auspicious start to your captaincy, Glanx!"

It should have been an easy mission, a routine survey trip to a system with a single planet-bound sentient race. But as soon as initial data was analyzed, the cultural

scientists were amazed by the advances made by the people who called their world Earth. Not only had they advanced beyond using super-light gases as their sole means of flight, but they had evidence of rocket programs which could soon bring this civilization into space.

The scientists pushed to stay longer and longer, especially once they determined there was political unrest in one of the most technologically-advanced sectors of the planet. But the ship's cloaking

system was behaving erratically and Glanx finally declared the mission complete. The crew readied for the journey home while the ship idled over a large barren expanse of water.

“Captain,” said one of the bridge crew, “we’re having trouble with the cloak again. Some signals from below are disrupting it.”

Glanx recalled the primary rule of surveying—“Don’t be seen”—and promptly ordered her to increase the cloak’s power. Later, he found out that this decision fatally crippled the

ability of the humans he'd eventually rescued to communicate with their peers.

A while later, the same crew member alerted Glanx to the crash of a human flying vessel nearby. She also pointed out that humans were ill-suited for survival in water.

There was a sudden buzz by Glanx's head.

"Captain, think of the opportunity we have here!" One of the scientists hovered uncomfortably close to Glanx, his wings slowly

beating. “If the humans on board that vessel survived, we could bring them on board. They could help us fill in the gaps in our data.

“And!” the scientist continued, not letting Glanx speak. “And, since the choice is do this or let them perish, there would be only minor conflict with our rules of surveying. Weigh that against the possible benefit and, really, what choice is there?”

If Glanx had spoken up at once he could have quashed this plan. But

he took a moment to consider it and in that time each of the scientists joined the call to rescue the humans in the name of science.

There had been a pair of them, barely conscious, clinging to wreckage. One, much more seriously injured, had indeed died not long after being brought on board.

Communication with the other human had been difficult at first. The translation systems were all designed to render Council Standard from Earth languages, not the reverse.

This limitation was eventually overcome but the scientists lost interest once they discovered that the survivor could provide no detailed insights on Earth affairs.

Glanx had been the only one who wanted to talk with the human after that. First, he did it from a sense of obligation. But from their conversations, he found that they shared a desire to explore and that this human was a particularly accomplished practitioner of their flight technologies. Soon, he viewed

their conversations as a highlight of his day.

And so he stood before Zonj, making one last attempt to convince him to find a place for the rescued human in the Unified Council's fleet.

“Begging your pardon, Commander, being a good pilot isn't just about physical form. You haven't spoken with the human and heard the passion...”

“I won't have a pilot with simple eyes in my fleet and that's final! You're dismissed, Captain Glanx.”

Zonj pointedly went about tapping an appendage on a computer display screen.

Glanx scuttled into the corridor, his feelers drooping. The human sat, seemingly patient. But he could tell this patience wasn't entirely genuine. Her two eyes—so close together within her head!—flitted from sight to sight.

“I'm really quite sorry. I tried my best, but just couldn't convince our Commander to take you on.” He tapped his claws together. “Still, I'm

sure we can do something. We can't take you back to Earth, but there's got to be somewhere in the galaxy where your particular skills will come in handy, Miss Earhart."



Scraps

by Michael Haynes

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Oct. 2012), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

Kelly signs for possession of the
fireproof box and wonders
what her mother had felt the

need to protect. No jewelry, that all would have been hocked years ago—cigarette money. Back when they still talked, Kelly always told her mom the cigarettes would kill her.

She hadn't imagined it happening so suddenly.

She is tired from the overnight drive and stares at the only legacy left to her. Of course there's no key. It seems a perfect coda to her mother's life, until the helpful officer tells her how easy it is to pop the lock.

She thanks him and leaves the

station, carrying what had been transformed from a little mystery into something mundane. Just another problem with a half-assed solution.

In her motel room she fiddles with the box until it springs open. Her stomach clenches when she sees the scrapbook, the only thing in the box. She wishes the damned thing had burned up, too.

One finger traces the spiral wire binding the book together. There are dogs on the cover. Happy, frolicking

dogs completely at odds with the memories she associates with the scrapbook.

Kelly remembers that Christmas. She'd been fifteen and saved up money that year by recycling cans so she could buy her mother a new purse. When her mother opened the package she didn't look excited, like Kelly had hoped. She looked stunned. Kelly asked if she liked it, and her mother said it was beautiful. But the words were flat. She must have known what was coming.

Kelly unwrapped her own present, easing open the green paper with silver snowflakes, knowing it was the only gift she would be opening that year.

What she had revealed was this cheap dollar store scrapbook.

The memories of the rest of that Christmas embarrass her. She'd torn into her mother like only a teenager can, thrown the scrapbook on the ground and stormed out of the house. When she came home, almost at midnight, the scrapbook was

gone. Her mother was dead asleep on the couch. An empty beer and a full ashtray sat on the end table.

They never discussed that Christmas. Kelly would have bet the scrapbook was moldering in a landfill, but now, here it sits on the wobbly table of a cheap motel room. And she can't find the courage to open the cover.

Tomorrow she'll be making funeral arrangements, and in a few days, she'll leave this town for good. There's no one here she cares about.

There hasn't been for years. And now there's no one here that she has any responsibility towards, either.

She looks at the dogs on the cover. Puppies, really, chasing a ball frozen in time. She reaches out, and whips the cover open.

The first page has a cast list from a school play, one of the few her mother ever made it to. She turns to the next page. A white participation ribbon from the third-grade spelling bee. Her mom hadn't made it to that.

She'd promised to be there, to

not miss seeing Kelly up on the little stage at the elementary school. Kelly remembers the lights and looking out into the gymnasium for her mother in one of the folding metal chairs. She remembers getting more and more anxious when she couldn't find her mother who'd promised—promised—to be there.

They'd called her name.

“Kelly,” Mrs. Jackson said, “your word is ‘piece.’ I’ll use it in a sentence. ‘I would like a piece of pie.’ ‘Piece.’”

Sixty seconds later she walked off

the stage. Bobby, who misspelled ‘target’ moments before, leaned over and said, “You dummy, that was ‘peace’ like ‘peace on Earth.’”

Kelly goes to the sink and gets some water. She washes her face, too, and wonders what other wonderful memories this scrapbook will bring back.

Back by the table, she turns to the next page. Her senior prom photo faces her. The dark blue dress that never fit quite right and the big hair everyone had back then. She

thinks she looks hideous but Will looks good. Will always looked good. They hadn't stayed together once she left for college. That first Thanksgiving, when she was home on break, they had each wanted to tell the other it wasn't working. They'd cried, and laughed, and hugged. She came home for his wedding two years later, the only time she'd ever happily returned.

Kelly reaches out and touches the photograph. Her vision blurs and she's facing herself in that dress, big

as life. She's in the living room of her mother's house, the one that burned down, and she's watching herself stand patiently as her own hands—but they can't be her hands, the fingers are too small and the skin too rough—put pins in the dress for adjustments.

“It's going to look gorgeous,” she says. But it's not her voice. It's her mother's voice. And her thoughts now aren't her own, either. She remembers going to the pawnshop, trading in a lawn mower and...

Kelly jerks away from the table. Her heart is racing and she has to look around the room to be sure of where she is, of who she is.

She wonders if she momentarily fell asleep. Fingers trembling, she touches the photograph again. Instantly she's back with the prom dress, the pins, and the lawn mower. Letting go, the motel room comes back into focus.

She flips back to the previous page and looks again at that ribbon. She touches the page, just the paper.

Nothing happens. She slides her fingers up to the edge of the ribbon...

The kitchen of the pizza parlor is blazing hot.

“Frank, I told you I’ve got to go. I promised Kel.”

“And I told you that if you don’t finish getting those pizzas ready for this order then you can go find another damn job.” Her boss walks away without another word. She thinks about telling him where he can put his pizzas but it’s an empty thought. Already her hands are

spreading sauce and sprinkling cheese. What's one more promise broken, if it lets you keep putting food on the table?

Kelly can't stop now. She goes to the first page, the cast list from a middle-school play, watered down Romeo and Juliet. She touches it and is relieved to be happy. The children take their bows. She applauds and gives a little whoop when Kelly takes her turn at the front of the stage. The mother in the next chair grins and they exchange a little high-five. Both

their children made it through the play.

Kelly keeps turning the pages and touching the mementos. They're all jumbled up in time, no rhyme or reason. A letter from Kelly's university, saying she is on the Dean's List brings back pride mixed with a sense of loss. A handmade birthday card, crayon on construction paper says, "Happy Birthday, Mommey!" It comes with pure happiness and breakfast in bed, burnt toast and orange juice.

There's a program from a high school band concert, the one where she had a solo. Kelly remembers that concert, how perfect playing that night had felt. Her mother had been there, had even taken her out for soft-serve afterwards.

Kelly reaches for the program, ready to relive that moment, even from another's eyes.

But she's not watching a concert; she's back in the living room of the house. High school Kelly plays the same few notes on her flute, over

and over, practicing for that solo. Wind gusts through the house and blows her music to the floor. She watches herself bend to pick it up. Her eyes flick across the room and catch Lee—son of a bitch—leering at her daughter's ass.

She orders Kelly to go practice upstairs, says she has a headache and needs a break from the noise. Kelly rolls her eyes but goes anyway, stomping up the steps. The music starts again soon, a backdrop to the argument that rages. Lee hits her in

the face. God, it hurts. He says something on his way out the door, but it's lost to the ringing in her ears. She wonders how she'll pay the mortgage without him.

The memory ends and Kelly, today Kelly, is still touching the program. She remembers the bruise on her mother's face. It was there when they went to the Dair-E-Cream after the concert. What had her mother said about the bruise? She tries, but can't recall.

Kelly puts her face in her hands.

It's all too much, but she has to know what else is in the book. Making sure to touch only the corners of the pages she works her way towards the back. So many memories—her own memories—come back just looking at them. There are some things she's tempted to touch, but the memory of Lee's punch is fresh and there's no guarantee what any of these artifacts will reveal.

Kelly gets to the last page of the book and, oh God, green holiday paper with silver snowflakes. A small

piece, a literal scrap, is taped into the book. She stares at it, mesmerized, feeling as if she's falling into the snow on the paper.

She can't touch it. She can't.

Kelly closes the book carefully. Someday she'll have to touch that scrap of paper. Someday she'll go back to that Christmas. Not today.

She touches the cover again. And she does the one thing she didn't expect to do on this trip. She cries.



Twenty-Seven Rules for Coping by Michael Haynes

First published in Goldfish Grimm's
Spicy Fiction Sushi (May 2012), edited by
Matthew & Brenda Stokes Barron



Elise has twenty-seven rules for coping with her life. She follows them as if doing so is the only thing keeping her intact.

Rule Ten is to avoid confrontations if possible. So she doesn't turn to face the only other passenger on the bus, the one sitting behind her, staring. She knows his eyes are on her even though her back is to him.

When Elise was young, she didn't realize her perceptions weren't

the same as everyone else's. She believes this is partly because her abilities were weaker then and partly because small children are expected to see the world differently than adults. When a five-year-old talks about a playmate no one else can see, it's an imaginary friend, not a manifestation of psychosis.

But time passed and she came to her first rule. Don't talk about the people (and other beings) that you see but no one else interacts with. They aren't always obvious, even

now. The man on the street corner outside the bus window, eyes downcast, hat at his feet. Are people ignoring him because that's what people do to beggars? Or is he not really there?

She could tell for sure if she looked in his eyes. But she won't do that—it's Rule Five. Though if he were other than human, she'd see nothing unusual there. It's not the others whose eyes can be terrifying. It's people. Rule Five was born on a middle school playground. She saw

something awful in Ridley Jackson's eyes right before he and his cronies jumped the new boy. Elise forgets the other boy's name. His family moved in and moved away, and he's barely a memory in her mind. But the nauseating sense of malice she saw in Ridley's eyes will never be forgotten.

Elise had spent a brief while in her pre-teen years hoping she was "special." She might be whisked away for adventures with a wise old wizard or a friendly giant. It didn't take long

to learn this wouldn't happen. The list of rules grew quickly in her teenage years.

The bus stops. Two passengers get on, a young couple holding hands as they walk down the aisle. They choose the bench right in front of Elise's. She can smell the beer on them and feel the lust pouring out of their bodies. She wishes they had picked somewhere else to sit and thinks about standing up, finding another seat. Rules Eight—don't draw attention to yourself—and

Twelve—keep your distance from people—are in conflict. She settles for shrinking back into her seat, closing her eyes, and turning up the volume on her headphones.

She hates the bus but her attempts at learning to drive were a fiasco. She remembers how proud her mother had been seeing her hold up a temporary learner's permit. Elise had really wanted to make it work. To be normal in that way.

The couple in front of her is full on groping. They probably think

she's asleep, but Elise can sense it all. She resents their ability to live their lives with only society's rules, not a list of personal ones. (Twenty-two is don't drink alcohol. She tried this, thinking it might numb her senses. It made them stronger. Seventeen is don't have sex. Tony Jackson, Ridley's younger brother and as different from his sibling as could be, had been her first—her only—serious boyfriend. She'd even opened up to him a bit, doling out the fragments of her world that seemed least weird:

knowing sometimes right before something was going to happen and “thinking” she might have seen a ghost at school. They’d gone to prom together her junior year, his sophomore year. That was their last date. Also the night Rule Seventeen was born.)

“Oh, God, our stop!” one of the couple says.

Elise hears the ding of a stop requested and one of the girls hollers for the driver to let them off.

“Can’t. Gotta wait for the next

official stop,” he says.

Elise isn't sure whether the girl actually curses the driver out or if it's just what she's thinking.

The next stop was only a minute off anyway. The couple gets off the bus and Elise is glad to be away from their heat. She looks out the window (just in time to see both girls flip off the bus as it pulls away) to see how close she is to her own stop.

Familiar buildings and signs, she's almost home. Elise thinks about walking through her door, into her

own space, and finally relaxing. (Unfamiliar doors, another danger in her life. Rule Nine: always touch a door, make sure it's a real world object, before passing through it).

She reaches up to request her stop. A premonition strikes Elise and her gut clenches. She hesitates a moment, but knows she can only sense the future, not control it.

She gets off at her stop and quietly acknowledges the driver's "Good night, miss." She can't hear footsteps behind her, but knows the

other passenger got out the rear door and is following her.

She turns down the side street toward her apartment and hears him closing the gap.

The red door she'd seen in her premonition is right where Elise expects it to be. She knows this street, knows this door is out of place.

Elise stops and turns toward the wall. She pushes the door ajar and catches a whiff of something sour on the other side. From the corner of

her eye she sees the man pause then he charges at her.

She doesn't run but uses his momentum to fling them both through the not-there door. If it was dark on the street it's utter blackness here. A sound of something nearby brings goosebumps to Elise's skin.

She takes advantage of the confusion to yank away, plunge back through the door, and swing it shut. Something bumps against it and there's frantic knocking. Then something heavier thuds against the

door. Everything else is silence.

A streetlight flickers overhead. Elise looks around and sees no one else. Good.

She continues to her apartment, ready to be done with the outside world for a dozen hours until it's time to get up and try to make it through the day again.

Elise has twenty-seven rules for coping with her life. She follows them as if doing so is the only thing keeping her intact.

Rule Eighteen is always hide the

body.



Michael Hodges

Michael Hodges became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Grangy” in AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review (Oct. 2012), edited by D.F. McCourt. Visit his website at michaelhodgesfiction.com.

Seven Fish for Sarah

by Michael Hodges

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• • • •

The rainbow trout glimmers
beneath the surface.
Downstream, the current
curls around mossy boulders and

drowned aspen that had long since shed their bark. At first the crisp bark had hung snug to the trees, and over days, then weeks, the bark had become layers of undulating material, finally giving way to one last, cold nudge. From there the bark sheddings ghosted into the icy depths, past dark slate crevasses where the largest trout haunt. Where eons flow in the gloom.

And it is on this hunk of slate I ponder how I made it, how we made it. I watch the hatches of blue winged

olives and fall spinners catch the sunset around me and carry it into the darkening forest. Beyond them, fireflies illuminate dim glades where nuthatches trill and tiny brooks trickle past ferns.

I can't help but reflect on how the water far upstream will soon be at my feet, and the water downstream I will never catch again. All is coming, all is going. Like people did.

I am what they call a "survivor". I suppose I do feel like one at times. They said the pesticide would only

kill the mosquitos. It never came close. Instead, the chemical agent known as Neutronin wiped out most of humanity. After Bane Chemicals loaded Neutronin upon the trains, after all the planes had sprayed, after country after country incorporated it into their pest control programs, we finally figured out it was reducing our life expectancy.

By seventy-five percent.

It wasn't something people noticed right away. Women at fifteen with greying hair. High school

athletes more injury prone, with the aches and pains of an old man.

Oh, they tried to reverse the chain, but the chemical had already done the damage. And with the half-life at an estimated ninety years, there was little immediate recourse. Birth rates plummeted, and we're still trying to work our way back. The Neutronin disrupted the delivery mechanism of the umbilical cord and the fetal nervous system regardless of diet. Luckily, not all hopeful mothers-to-be were

stricken.

A few of us were unaffected by the chemical's sidewinder reaction. The ones who did not eat red meat, pork, monkey, horse, or certain insects that were viewed as a delicacy in the Orient. In the end, it was the combination of Neutronin and the DNA of these species that triggered the life expectancy reduction.

I reach my hands into the depths, my chin almost touching the water. My arms pale roots in the liquidity. I do my best to conceal my shadow,

for it is the shadow that always makes the trout flee. The crafty rainbow trout does not see me, yet. I can feel his pulse in the tips of my fingers although I am not touching him. Soon he will try and hug the dark, slate riverbed. I can see forest litter swirling down there, caught amongst a pocket of multihued stones.

There are many people who don't see the Neutronin disaster as a bad thing. The air is cleaner. There are few skirmishes. At first we all

thought it strange. That was until the day Pepper, a stray mixed-breed dog limped into our village. When approached by Mary Canders, Pepper had recoiled, rather than lashing out. A series of burns matted his fur and his muzzle was scared, perhaps by a small, sharp instrument. The look in his eyes told us everything. When Mary had taken him in and offered a healthy environment, over time he had blossomed into a very affectionate pup. And in a way, that's how we

responded, too. We were in effect abused by the disaster, and we responded not with weapons hoisted at eye level, but with a soft whimpering that grew into a blooming rose, just like Pepper.

People live free, with no worry of debt or castes. We still have power, too. Wind power. But these are prioritized for our hospitals, which we build very near to the wind mills. All medical care is free, although people have been known to offer a basket of fresh fish, a woven

blanket, or a dozen chicken eggs for the favor. We have art, too. Our town hall is filled with the paintings of children rather than pictures of politicians. Sometimes, we'll put up a painting of a local hero. Last week, Brook Skeeter rescued the Maryville family from their burning house. So we celebrated in his honor. Lots of beer, potatoes, carrots, fish and trinkets. But do not think we rely on money. All coins and bills were burned. All credit cards and checkbooks. At first I didn't want to

burn mine, but I did. I had to set an example for my people.

Ah, the crafty rainbow trout. He's playing with me, I know it. My chin is touching the water now, but I see him lowering himself to the slate riverbed, no doubt deflating his swimbladder for critical vertical control. I must be careful I do not fall in. I have six trout for Sarah, my beautiful wife, whom I met post-Neutronin. Hmmm...six trout and ten very cold fingers.

Every Friday, Saturday, and

Sunday we hold feasts. Everyone brings their own dish. I unfurl the old St. Mary High School baseball field tarp and make it into a tent. Musicians show up to the feasts. Bluesman, jazzmen, or the apostles of rock n' roll. We celebrate into the night, and there's little need for a designated driver, for we do not drive. Because of this, we've stopped climate change. I'm told ice is reforming at the polar caps, and the sea is retreating from the shores of distant islands. The only groups

permitted to drive motor vehicles are the Post Office and Medical Services.

There was a big brouhaha about what to do with the vast stockpiles of explosives post-Neutronin. Well, I can assure you they were put to good use. You see, we undammed most of the rivers. At last salmon have returned to their native spawning grounds all along the coasts, spewing bright roe in the shallow riffles. Survivors with homes along the river corridors were relocated and offered first fishing rights for their

cooperation.

My chin is submerged in the river now, and the crystalline surface laps at my lips. I can feel it cold and filtering between my teeth. I take some in and spit it out. My pale arms sink deeper into the gloom, towards the finning trout. Even though my face is so close to the water, I can smell pine sap and lavender in the air. A sweet breeze caresses my back, and the sun warms my head. Just a few more inches....

Some days I don't feel like a

survivor. Some days I feel like this is how we were supposed to live all along. People are fewer, and food is plentiful. With the reduction in technology, people looked up from their smart phones and started paying attention to things that had been over their heads and under their noses. Their neighbors! Like squirrels, or hawks, or raccoons. These were the real, living neighbors that shuddered under their decks in the harshest winters, that roosted in their attics during the maddest spring

torrents. And when people began paying attention to what they never had, they stopped emphasizing the unseen, and started caring more about what they could feel, touch, and see, human or not. Perhaps of all the changes post-Neutronin, this was the most significant.

The mountains of Northern California are my home. Life is a rich bounty, but it is not a hoarding contest. I do not need, nor care for a Hummer or a yacht. I do not care to invest in the stock market. None of

us really do post-Neutronin.

Sometimes, for the teacher to teach her lesson, she has to wipe the chalkboard clean.

I reach down another inch, and my eyes sting from the cold river. I open them amidst the cold rush, stinging them even worse. My heart is racing and I feel my balance wavering. But I can see the trout down there, defying me. I'm almost on top of him, my hands closing in, there....I quickly bring both hands together and feel the fleshy sides of

the trout. At once I pull myself up, soaking wet and dripping. I get on my feet and hoist the trout high into the air. Sunlight reflects in diamond water droplets along its jaw. The trout gulps for air, causing the droplets to fall and ping the slate rock.

I look at my wicker trout basket. Six trout. Then I turn to my new catch, how the head tilts side to side, the black eyes rimmed by gold watching me, and I wonder what the trout is thinking. Then I kneel along

the slate edge and gently lower the trout into the water. I cradle its belly and hold its tail, letting it regain energy so it does not lose fight in the current. I move it gently back and forth, back and forth, like those peeling layers of underwater bark.

And then I let the trout go.



Street Lamps and Carbaryl by Michael Hodges

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Ann Dawson



Lamps hung over the deserted road, turning grass yellow, the throbbing, sick hum of electricity. Megan Sulke walked the night, iPod in hand, enjoying the emptiness of the well-heeled town. The soccer moms and their Ford Expeditions were sleeping; the gas guzzling beasts resting in the garages of the indulgent, waiting to wreak havoc upon the world's oil supplies the next morning.

She moved into Wheaton Park,

the trees growing taller. Humongous virgin oaks stretched their rough branches in twenty yard circumferences, daring to challenge man's idea of neatness. Patches of mowed grass stretched on for a hundred yards, and at the edge of the landscaped nonsense coyotes gazed, their moon-reflecting eyes watching her, and then watching for shifting lumps in the turf otherwise known as rabbits. These coyotes survived in the last tiny patches of forest, yet were still trapped by local townships

for snatching pets. Above the coyotes in mangled hardwood trees perched two owls, hooting to each other under the baleful moon—each hoot followed by a pause and a tilt of the head. The owls were also after the rabbits. The poor suckers were hopping meat.

Megan walked along in her black spandex and grey stretch long-sleeve. Her sneakers kicked with verve, bare patches of ankle showing just above the socks. She hummed the melody to “Do You Realize??” by the Flaming

Lips, her brown ponytail swinging like a pendulum.

She thought of her mother, suffering from swine flu back at the house. Megan had come from college to take care of her, and it was no easy task. Her mother could barely walk, yet remained stubborn, refusing to rest and instead attempting ridiculous chores. She even tried to trim the grass along the sidewalk—one of the most useless activities Megan had ever laid eyes upon. Who gives a fuck if your grass hangs over

the sidewalk?

Megan's athletic physique cut through the night, exposed under the street lamps and concealed again. She checked her iPod. The low battery light flashed. She meant to order a new one, but she needed Rob to install it. She had no idea how to do this, and she wasn't about to send it to Apple for a repair fee. She also needed Rob to return her calls. Megan thought he might be blowing her off for other girls. College life was beyond promiscuous. Trying to

keep a legit relationship in that atmosphere was like putting your recycling out on a windy day. If Rob didn't call, there were backups—of that she was certain. Megan kept these boys at her periphery. After all, a good spider doesn't disturb its web by grasping for things beyond reach. Let the trap be a trap, she thought, grinning.

Megan cut through a narrow strip of grass to the sidewalk. This path took her under the encompassing oak trees, their

branches blocking out the moon but always leaving slivers of ghostly pie between the branches. From high in the tree a squirrel watched her with its buggy eyes and meth-like twitches. The squirrel caught the hoot of an owl and fled to its hideout.

The sidewalk curved back to Heighton Avenue and the street lamps, pulling her out of the land of oaks. Light pollution blocked the sky once more, and in turn the moon soaked in stained yellow. The smell

of pesticides and other lawn chemicals hung in the air along with the repugnant Midwest humidity. Her eyes burned from it. They all learned to live with these poisons. The amphibians and lady bugs however didn't have a choice—they were killed as the chemicals seized and obliterated their nervous systems, triggering unspeakable deaths. The fire flies responded the same way, and their heart-warming dawdling and illuminated rear ends were now mythological. In a way,

much of the landscape was dead, sterilized by reckless activities with no real science behind their use—just stupid people doing stupid things and then going home to watch TV.

The suburbs were dead in more ways than this. Megan and her friends couldn't find a restaurant open past eleven p.m. If their lives depended on it. The music clubs shut their doors at midnight. Almost all of the worthwhile bands deserted the area for the city a long time ago, leaving the towns bankrupt in a

cultural sense. This was why Megan walked at midnight. The suffocating mass of people and strips malls retreated, providing a wave of relief and sense of freedom unattainable during normal hours.

She paused under a street lamp, feeling the hum under her feet, the smell of fresh-cut grass and chemicals entering her lungs. She pulled out her ear buds and listened to the peaceful night.

Everything was quiet except for one strange utterance behind her, a

staccato of rubber meeting the road. A gush of adrenaline seized Megan when she realized the sound was heading in her direction. Megan spun around, expecting to see a pack of coyotes bearing down, but instead witnessed a peculiar figure a hundred yards down the road, visible when it passed under the street lamps, then fading. Megan remained still, staring as the figure approached within fifty yards.

It was a man.

The man was jogging... wait...

not jogging, but skipping.

What the fuck? Megan thought. Her brow furrowed as if she ate something rotten. The man disappeared between the street lamps and then reappeared.

He was holding something in both arms, and at first she thought it might be a leather dog leash. This perception changed when she saw the cold, hard glint of steel.

What the hell is that? She thought, not sure whether to sprint away or solve this bizarre mystery.

The held object revealed itself under the next cone of light.

An axe.

The man skipped towards here in rhythm, singing. “Sunshine Jenny, sunshine Kate, sunshine Debbie sunshine Daisy.”

From deep inside, Megan heard her mother’s voice. Run or die, it said. Run or die.

An odd mix of oxygen and anxiety expunged from her cardiovascular system, and she cried as her sneakers gripped the road.

She sprinted under the lights, arms pumping. She glanced behind, her mouth pushed to the side in an exaggerated grimace. The man continued to follow, skipping and singing the song. A rush of vomit shot through her mouth and nose—nothing new to her except she wasn't the one who forced it this time. Megan choked on the expelled fluid, dropping to her knees, unable to breathe in a way that would facilitate running. She heaved and gasped for air, vomit running down her chin

and onto the upper portions of her shirt. Tears streaked down the shirt, forming a dreadful stew.

On her knees and dizzy from lack of oxygen, she looked back in a stupor.

The man with the axe bounded closer, and a wave of repulsion overcame Megan. Visions of Rob and her mother danced in her mind. These images were a solace, and she keyed on them with intensity as the abominable figure drew closer.

The figure was highlighted under

the next streetlamp—a bloated face and thin hair with dark circles under the bloodshot eyes. At first he sang the song with his mouth open, and as he drew closer, he forced the song through closed lips in a desperate hum, as if piloted by something he couldn't control. The man was huge, and his sizeable hands made the axe handle seem smaller than it was.

He drew to within twenty yards, his psychotic eyes widening. He pushed the song through his closed mouth with even more force.

“Sunshine Jenny, sunshine Kate, sunshine Debbie, sunshine Daisy.”

Megan stared at the man and shuddered as a warm sensation spread around her crotch. She tried to scream, but a desperate, raspy nothingness emerged from her throat instead.

I love you mom, she thought. I love you more than anything.

Within seconds the man was upon her, lifting the axe high into the air. Megan recoiled and raised her hands to protect her face. The man

dropped the axe and fell to his knees, laughing. Another, shorter figure emerged from the shadows, stumbling, pointing, and laughing.

“We got you girl,” the shorter man shouted in-between laughter. “We got you good.”

Megan looked frantically around through a layer of tears, her lungs now taking air.

“Rob... is that... is that you?” she asked.

The shorter man’s face lost the shadows. Rob.

“Of course it’s me, sweetheart. Who else would it be?” Rob asked.

“You fucking prick! I hate you! Why in the fuck would you do this to me?” she said, sobbing.

The man who’d carried the axe ceased laughing.

“I fucking puked all over myself and almost choked to death, assholes! Fuck both of you.”

Megan stood, taking off her grey shirt, wiping her face and then wrapping it around her waist puke-side down. She ran up to Rob,

pushing him hard.

“Whoa... wait... I’m sorry, Ok?”

She stood there, gauging his sincerity. Her meter indicated he was.

“Who’s the jolly green giant?” she asked.

“My name’s Ben,” the enormous man said, offering his hand. Megan regarded it with annoyance and did not offer back.

“He plays offensive line for Iowa State,” Rob said. “He’s also in Sigma Pi with me.”

“Well, I’d say it’s nice to meet you, Ben, but it’s not. You’re a fucking prick, and I forgive neither of you.”

Rob moved closer to Megan, holding out his arms. “Look, I really, truly apologize. Like I said, it was too much. I promise I’ll make it up to you, Ok?”

Megan held her ground, arms across her chest, chin angled down.

“How will you manage that?”

Rob reached for his wallet and pulled out two shiny slicks of paper.

He handed them to her. Upon reading the tickets, Megan's eyes lit.

"Front row for the Arcade Fire? Are you kidding me?"

"Nope. One month from today at Carlsbad Theater."

Megan walked up to Rob and hugged him. "I still hate you, but I'll love this concert."

Ben looked at the two, his shoulders easing.

"I have to tell you one thing," Rob said.

"Ok."

“Ben’s going with us.”

Megan turned, checked Ben, then whispered into Rob’s ear.

“Any reason why?”

“He helped with the tickets,” Rob whispered. “His dad knows one of the co-owners of the venue.”

Megan turned to Ben.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be at school?”

Rob spoke in an apologetic tone: “We came to pick up the tickets in person. That was part of the deal.

We couldn't get them mailed. I stopped by to surprise you, and also to scare you. I know you do these walks, and when your mom told us you were gone, I knew it was the perfect time. I'm sorry it was so scary."

"Try this again or I'll dump you on your ass," she said, pointing at him with a peach-painted fingernail.

"Hey, I apologize as well," Ben said. "Let's just have a good time at the concert."

"It's fine," Megan said, although

she didn't mean it. "Where are you parked?"

"Over at the Seven Eleven," Rob said. "Come on, let's go."

After a few minutes they entered another subdivision with smaller houses. The intense brightness of the Seven Eleven parking lot shone like fools gold ahead of them, beckoning the weary travelers and young spirits with shelves of crap.

In the parking lot loomed a massive black truck with a tall antenna. Ben opened the door and

started the beast. Rob then opened the passenger door, urging Megan into the cab.

“Where we going?” Megan asked.

“Don’t know. Kind of a bumming around night. But we’ve got brews in the truck.”

“I need to stop at home so I can change,” she said.

“No problem,” Rob said.

Megan entered the truck, squeezing in-between Rob and Ben and they drove to her house. Megan

changed into clean clothing and checked on her mom who was windexing the kitchen and coughing her lungs out.

“Go to bed, mom, you’ve got swine flu.” Megan said.

“Mind your own beeswax,” her mother said in-between squeezes of the Windex handle.

“I’m going out for a couple hours. See ya later, and GO TO BED,” Megan said, closing the front door.

She climbed back into the truck and they sped off, the stereo blasting

some nonsense from one of the corporate radio stations. It all sounded the same now, sanitized by goons with rubber gloves—the disc jockeys transmitting from centralized locations and run by anonymous handlers. The thought of these lifeless, zombie radio stations gave Megan the chills.

“Where we going?” she asked.

“Stim’s Hill,” Rob said. He reached into the backseat and procured a sack of Guinness, handing one of the semi-cold cans to

Megan. “Drink up.”

Megan took the fat can and cracked the tab, relishing the smooth foam and rich taste. Ben dug into his, swerving on the empty street and laughing.

“You guys aren’t drunk are you?” Megan asked, the can almost as big as her head, her tiny hands dwarfed by it.

“No sir,” Ben said.

“Uh... Not a sir,” Megan said.

“Oh I know. Rob told me all about that special thing you do.”

Megan whipped around to Rob.

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. He’s just fucking with you, making jokes, you know.”

“He didn’t tell me anything, Megan. I’m just tweaking you.”

“You better be,” she said, taking a drink.

Rob reached into the glove box and took out a glass figurine. He put the figurine to his mouth and met it with a red lighter, then sucked on it.

“You said you were cutting

back,” Megan said.

Rob’s cheeks filled with smoke. He sucked the air into his lungs and coughed.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she asked. “You don’t store the smoke in your cheeks like a chipmunk, idiot. You take it into your lungs smoothly.” Megan took the pipe from him, putting her mouth on the glass as Rob flamed the bowl. Megan’s cheekbones sucked in but never filled with smoke. She held the smoke in her lungs and exhaled.

“See, that’s how it’s done,” she said with an easy smile. Her brain fuzzed, and she laughed. “You do this to me every time, asshole. I always say I’m done, but you always bring it right back.”

Megan handed the glass pipe to Ben. He put the pipe in his mouth and Megan lit it so he could steer. Ben exhaled dense smoke and coughed.

They drove in the night, passing meticulous lawns and sleepy rows of houses. 100,000 people lived in this

town, but at one a.m., it seemed like the townies were transported far away.

Stim's Hill rose at the edge of town (don't they all?) and had served as the county garbage dump for thirty years before it was decommissioned and designated a park. It was the last semblance to a wild landscape in the northern half of the state despite being 3,000 acres. The hill had shrunk over the years as the garbage decomposed. Dark pipes of steel punctured the slopes,

expelling flames as excess gas burned off from the molding heap of filth below. Four of the pipes danced with flame this evening, and they looked like warning lights—boundaries staked out by Gods who did not care for trespassers.

The green radio light shone upon them as they sat, high as one can be. Ben parked the monster truck and leaned back, the keys clanking against the plastic steering column, the retreating whispers of that last sound tickling their minds. None of

them moved a muscle as they gazed out the windshield to the hill and the menacing pipes of dancing light.

“Uh... guys. I can't move,” Megan said. “What did you put in that stuff?”

“Kicks your ass, doesn't it?” Rob asked.

“Understatement,” Megan said.

The sky rumbled above Stim's Hill, the moon seized by inky blackness.

“Shit, it's going to rain,” Ben said, smacking dry lips.

“Afraid of the rain?” Megan asked.

“I don’t like thunder,” Ben said.
“Never have.”

“Well, I don’t like people who chase me with axes, pretending or not,” Megan said.

“Touché,” Ben said, tipping his beer. Megan met his beer with hers and smiled.

Thunder rumbled the truck as lightning flashed sideways across the horizon. The burn-off torches angled downslope, forming a V-

shape, as if the dump managers intended to make some obscure runway. Numerous oak and ash trees bordered the receding hill, and their coarse, vein-like branches reached out to it, trying to push it away. Each flash of lightning created a grotesque action of limbs, as if the light allowed the trees to see the ghastly hill, and this was their final chance to be rid of the thing.

“Creepy night,” Megan said, her glassy eyes staring out into what was left of nature in that part of the

world.

Thick splatters of rain fell, mixing with the dead bugs on the windshield. The fat drops let off steam as they splashed—a final surrender to the humid Midwest.

“We’ll protect you,” Rob said.

Megan let out a laugh, the action of it tickling her mouth, making her laugh again. Soft flowers of pleasantness undulated in her mind.

“Yeah, I’m protected by two guys who almost made me choke to death. Real comforting.”

Rob looked at her with a pair of hazy, red eyes. "You know I'm sorry."

"You seem to say that a lot," she said, putting her hand on his knee. "It's Ok. I forgive you. You had me at Arcade Fire tickets."

Rob smiled and placed his arm around her shoulder.

Ben sat with his head back, eyes closed. Rain plunked the truck, dripping down the sides in chunky rivulets. The rain transformed into tapping specks of hail, the rhythm reverberating across their bodies,

pleasing their senses, making them smile. Megan drank from her Guinness and burped with satisfaction.

“So what the fuck are you guys going to do?” she asked.

“Clarify,” Rob said.

“You know... what are you going to do? As in, with your life?”

“Oh that,” Rob said. “Electrical engineer. You know.”

“Yeah but are you happy with it? Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know if it’s what I want,

but at least it's something," Rob said.

"What about you, Ben?" she asked.

"Business management—if I don't get drafted."

"How exciting," she said. "What are your chances?"

"Ah... not too good. But I still have hope. I put a lot of time into football. Not going to pull back now."

Rob turned to Megan, his movement half-speed from the high. "What about you Ms. Curious?"

What plans do you have?"

"I'm thinking of a business degree and then law school. And I want to move to California."

"What's so special about California?" Rob asked.

"Because California has everything. You get your culture in the cities, you are at most two hours from the beach wherever you live and you also have desert, mountains, and forest. It's the perfect place. I've researched it."

"Have you been there?" Rob

asked.

“Well... no, not yet. But I’ve checked it out online.”

“Maybe you should visit first. I hear there are tons of people,” Rob said.

“There aren’t a lot of people here?” Ben asked.

“Bingo,” Megan said, offering him a relaxed fist bump. “Look at how many people we live with. This county is two hundred thousand acres, and there are one million people. I don’t think I’ll need to do

much adjusting. We're already crammed in like rats in a shoe box." Megan looked down at her feet and burped. "And at least in California, I have the option to get away from people if need be. Drive four hours in any direction from here and you'll see nothing but farms or strip malls. Heck, more than four hours, try five. There is some pretty country up in northern Wisconsin. My dad used to take us fishing there. But that's the closest wild landscape."

The flames above the pipes

twisted as the wind howled. Garbage stench blew into the truck. The hail turned to rain and the sky filled with electrical luminosity, revealing high-definition clouds.

The branches of the oak and ash trees blew away from the hill. It won again.

“I don’t know guys... I feel trapped here,” Megan said. “When you think about it, there’s nothing for us to do. The stores close at eight, the bars close at midnight. There are no bands, there are no clubs. Even

the strip malls close early.”

“Thank God for college,” Rob said.

Megan lifted her beer to clink it with Rob’s, and then Megan toasted Ben’s Guinness.

“You ever notice how no one stays up past midnight here?” Rob asked. “I mean no one. It’s really fucking spooky.”

“I like it,” Megan said. “As you assholes know, I like to walk at such times.”

A massive gust of wind smashed

into the truck, rocking it.

“Holy shit!” Ben shouted.

Another gust came, ripping across the overdeveloped landscape, punishing younger trees and buoying trash. Plastic bags and McDonald’s wrappers swirled in the sky above them.

Megan looked through the windshield, her mouth agape.

“Ben, get us out of here,” she said.

“Hey, don’t worry,” Rob said.

“No big deal.”

The truck shook twice and lifted

off the back wheels. A projectile flew into the windshield. Crack!

“Go!” Megan shouted. “Go!”

Ben started the rig and slammed into reverse, the tires slipping in the pools of rain. He found first gear and barreled out of the lot, back down the entrance road that wrapped around Stim’s Hill.

More fiery pipes appeared on the slopes, flames bent in half, scarring the metal tubes. Ben smashed the gas pedal, but the truck went nowhere, blocked by a barricade of wind. As

the engine revved and the enormous truck swayed, an object flew towards them in the violent sky. Odd spikes and bumps jutted from the thing, and they realized it was a huge branch. Megan screamed and shielded her face. The branch smashed through the windshield and into the seat cushion between Megan and Ben, piercing the foam with a sickening tear. Megan shrieked again, part of her neck trickling blood where the branch had cut her. Her eyes widened as a brown, furry

caterpillar crawled up her left arm, its many industrial legs pinching her skin as it tried to return to the branch. She frantically plucked at the thing and tossed it onto the dashboard where it lay motionless.

“Jesus Christ!” Ben shouted. He stepped on the pedal and the truck shot forward as the invisible barricade dissipated. The big pickup roared down the road, swaying from wind blasts. Ben held his head higher than normal so he could see out the shattered window.

Cool air whistled into the truck from the hole in the windshield.

Rob held Megan tight to his chest. She cried as huge, leafy branches crossed the road, just missing them. Electrical wires danced on the curb, snapping at the ground with sparking, evil eyes.

The truck sped out of the last suburban wilderness.

The endless rows of houses appeared once more, their lights all dim, the lives behind the walls sucked away to another world.

Soon the storm receded, releasing the moon and the truck. The smell of lawn chemicals faded, wiped away to some other land.

The wet truck passed the new strip mall project, the big sign indicating a Super Zone Store arriving in 2013. In the soggy vegetation behind the sign a pair of jade eyes glowed at them, with four sets of smaller, shimmering eyes following. The coyote family waited until the tail lights of the big vehicle faded. Then the mother assisted her

young across the road. She nestled them into a thin grove of trees, hiding, always hiding. The humans never stopped, swallowing everything with their pasty smiles.



Van Aaron Hughes

Van Aaron Hughes became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Dualist” in Writers of the Future, Vol. XXVII (2011), edited by K.D. Wentworth. Visit his website at vanaaronhughes.wordpress.com.

The Dualist

by Van Aaron Hughes

First published in Writers of the
Future, Vol. XXVII (2011), edited by K.D.
Wentworth



In the beginning, God created the heavens and the world. He provided for all creatures and all

were content, save one. The Evil One could not bear to be subject to God's dominion. He deceived many of God's angels and led them in rebellion. He confronted God, and so great was the power of his will that he began to force God from the heavens. But the Evil One was seized from behind. Astonished that any but God Himself could overpower him, the Evil One turned to see his new adversary and beheld the face of God. The Evil One was cast into the stinking, moss-covered pit, at last

understanding the essential truth of the universe: There are Two.

1

“We have entered Doubletown, Envoy,” Fernandez announced over her shoulder.

Glancing up from the translation of *The Word of Both*, Thomas tried not to let Hirokh see his surprise. He had not asked Fernandez to alert him when they passed the checkpoint at the Doubletown wall, and she would not interrupt without reason.

He caught her eye in the rear-view mirror, and a barely perceptible nod of her head drew his gaze to a thin line of smoke rising from behind the squat skyline to their right. Probably another bombing. Fernandez was asking approval to stop to investigate without including Hirokh in the conversation. Thomas had no interest in stopping, but at least it would make them late for the dinner party.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Let’s not go straight to the Retreat. I

would like to drive around a bit and see more of Doubletown.” Thomas turned to his ever-present companion. “Do you mind, Hirokh?”

“Of course not,” Hirokh answered, midlimbs raised in assent. He had likely deduced where they were headed but did not interfere. “I know you relish viewing Doubletown as much as I do, Envoy, though for different reasons.”

Thomas studied the low stone buildings through the car window and afternoon drizzle. Spitting

clouds of smoke, a handful of other autos labored through the roughly cobbled streets. Phren children skittered between them, their exoskeletons yellow from malnutrition or radiation sickness. Thomas had viewed pictures of this place as the locus of a proud global culture, gaily painted, its people in perpetual celebration. Now the pale green of moss covered the crumbling buildings and streets, and he could see no other color but the burnt orange and, too often, yellow of

phren shells.

Making no further pretense, Fernandez drove directly to the source of the smoke. Without a word, she exited the groundcar and marched to the scene, leaving Thomas and Hirokh little option but to follow. Thomas immediately felt his skin prickle with spores. The scabs on his arms began to itch.

“What reason could you have to enjoy Doubletown, Hirokh? I thought you hated the place.”

“How could you think I detest

this place, Envoy, when you know it is holy land? I detest only its inhabitants. I take pleasure in seeing how few remain to kill.”

Thomas smiled. Most Solarans shared this sentiment, but few were so undiplomatic as to express it to him. In his two local years on Phrentyr, just over one terrestrial year, he had come to appreciate Hirokh's bluntness.

The bombing had gutted a large, single-story structure, its roof partially collapsed, remnants

glowing dully with the last sputtering flames. Thomas supposed it was a grocery; suicide bombers had recently targeted several Tokhin grocers who defied Solaran dietary restrictions. Fernandez disappeared directly into the wreckage, trusting her body armor to protect her, while Thomas and Hirokh walked along the outside.

Hirokh extended his midlimbs forward, the phren gesture for on the other hand. “You harbor the opposite hope, to save these people and

resurrect their disgusting culture.” Thomas did not disabuse him of this notion, but in truth he had all but abandoned any such ambition. As cultural envoy he was supposed to protect the Tokhin people from genocide. An awfully nice idea, but he now doubted he could do more than slightly delay the inevitable.

At the far side of the demolished building, the fire had burned out. A group of Doubletown residents cleared away debris, searching for survivors. If they rebuilt anything on

this site, it would be only primitive mud huts.

Thomas glanced down at the book in his hand, the embodiment of the nearly destroyed Tokhin culture. He was antagonizing Hirokh by keeping it in plain view this long. “Have you never read The Word of Both, Hirokh?”

“If I wish to read about perverts, I will go to Chubbytown. They will give me pictures.” All phren spoke in a soft, literally nasal voice, yet Hirokh still managed to sound gruff.

“I have met many Tokhin who have read The Solara,” Thomas persisted.

“Greater fools are they, not to know the truth when they see it,” Hirokh answered.

As they slowly traced the perimeter of the destruction, Thomas studied the surrounding buildings, many embedded with concrete slabs thrown from the explosion. Several charred groundcars lined the street, strewn inches deep with rubble. Most

tellingly, moss was seared away from every facing surface and little had grown back even in the misty rain.

When Fernandez rejoined them, Thomas asked, “This was no pouch bomb, was it?”

“No, Boss. The blast radius and solid oxides in the debris suggest a powerful thermobaric weapon.” Fernandez glared at Hirokh as they walked. After a moment she switched her gaze to Thomas, clearly expecting him to confront Hirokh.

It was too obvious a giveaway.

Solaran enforcers knew how to build a homemade bomb. They could easily have disguised this as another suicide bombing, absolving the government of responsibility. Instead they had deliberately used military-grade explosives, no doubt on Hirokh's instructions, as if daring Thomas to do something about it. There was nothing he could do, of course, and he would not be made a fool trying.

Thomas might not have said anything at all but for Fernandez

standing there fuming. He stopped finally and folded his arms. “Well, Hirokh, are you going to claim that you had nothing to do with this?”

Hirokh paused, midlimbs at his side. “You know I prefer to be direct, Envoy, but in my position I must sometimes withhold information.”

“You are direct, Hirokh, I’ll give you that.”

“I do not willingly pretend to be other than what I am.”

Thomas looked pointedly at the wreckage around them. “Yet you

expect the Tokhin to do just that, to eat what you eat, to act like they belong to your culture and not their own.”

“For Tokhin, it is commendable to be of two natures. Life here in Doubletown would be intolerable to Solarans, but it seems to suit these people.”

While he spoke, Hirokh drew back a forelimb as if to strike a passing Tokhin, who cowered and shrank away. Thomas felt as much contempt for the Tokhin’s meek

reaction as for Hirokh's raw display of power.

"I fear," Hirokh continued, "that you humans have much in common with the Tokhin. You seem to relish prevarication, professing to something different than your true nature."

"What do you mean?"

"Envoy, why are we here? You investigate this site, but what would you do with proof that the Solaran Council ordered the bombing? Your government has declared that

suffering the pervert-worshippers is a condition of further aid from your people. But is that threat an empty pouch?" An "empty pouch" meant a bluff, but to phren a bluff was never a clever thing.

Thomas suspected Hirokh knew the answer to his own question. Thomas' orders were clear: due to the strategic importance of this system, no humanitarian concern short of imminent and absolute genocide of the Tokhin would justify withdrawal of human support to Phrentyr. This

left him entirely impotent. He might find and catalog evidence of the Solaran Council's violence and repression of the Tokhin, but could never act on it.

"It will take much longer to analyze the evidence here," Fernandez interjected. "Can we cancel your appearance tonight?"

"No, Lieutenant. If you like, you can come back and poke around more after you drop us at the Retreat."

"Yes, sir. I will have a report for

you in the morning.”

“Great,” Thomas answered, as if he were actually going to read the damn thing. Thomas preferred Lieutenant Fernandez to most of the marines, if only because she better concealed her contempt for unenhanced humans, but her diligence was starting to annoy.

He followed a different thread of the conversation with Hirokh. “Even if you think humans and Tokhin are alike, Hirokh, you needn’t worry I will take sides in your world’s

religious disagreements. You know I am an unbeliever beyond any possible redemption.”

“So you have told me, but I wonder how it is possible.” Atheism was nearly unheard of on Phrentyr. “Where did you turn for comfort when your wife died?”

Thomas made no secret that he was a widower, but he seldom mentioned Kayleigh’s death, and Hirokh had never before pursued the subject. It struck Thomas as bad form to do so here, in the midst of

more violent death that Hirokh had all but admitted orchestrating.

“I threw myself into my work,” Thomas answered. “You see where the hell that got me.”

He said nothing more until they were back in the groundcar, then asked Hirokh, “Were you ever married?”

Thomas thought Hirokh had not heard, the answer was so long coming. “Yes, Envoy. Before the war, I had a wife and daughter. Only my faith made it possible to live

without them.”

“I respect that, Hirokh, but I also respect the beliefs of the Tokhin. And the Tokhin tell me they respect the teachings of The Solara. That’s what tolerance is all about.”

“Respect? Tolerance? The Tokhin read the wisdom of the Great One, then go back to worshipping their two deviants. Solarans who ‘tolerate’ the pervert-worshippers are just as bad, perhaps worse, for they are harder to root out. Not all phren who wear Solaran cloaks and carry

valid papers truly serve the Great One.”

Thomas noticed Fernandez shaking her head, appalled at the asinine quarrels that could cost millions of people their lives.

“Why do you describe the Two Gods like that, Hirokh? I haven’t seen any reference to sexual practices in The Word of Both or any other Tokhin text.”

“Two gods, both men. Figure it out, biped.”

“Would you prefer if one of the

Two Gods were female?”

Silent for a moment, his midlimbs still, Thomas couldn't be sure at first how much his blasphemy angered Hirokh. Lacking mimetic muscles, phren had no facial expressions, though they could cry with human-like tear ducts. Thomas had taken to trying to needle Hirokh out of his stoicism, but perhaps he was getting too good at the game.

“Envoy, if I kill you, the Council will execute me immediately,” Hirokh said. “Yet every day, you

make it a difficult choice.”

Thomas smiled. He felt he had scored a point when Hirokh threatened bodily harm, even if he could not take such threats lightly. The largest phren Thomas had ever seen, Hirokh could certainly dispatch an unenhanced human being, despite his war injuries, and had doubtless killed many phren. Thomas was oddly gratified the Solarans had assigned their notorious Chief Enforcer as his watchdog. They seemed to fear

Thomas might accomplish something. He wished he could agree.

Back when life was important to Thomas, Hirokh would have terrified him. But the apathy that had settled over him since his arrival on Phrentyr was at times a peculiar strength—Hirokh could not intimidate him, because Thomas did not care what happened to him. He hated his work, having long since realized he could accomplish nothing meaningful as Envoy, and offworld a

dead-end job is a dead-end life. Everyone on Earth he ever cared about was dead. In truth, the only person he really cared about had died before he left.

2

They mounted the steps slowly, Hirokh from his injuries—walking only on hindlimbs was painful to him and he limped noticeably even using midlimbs—Thomas to avoid slipping on the layer of moss swiftly rising in the rain.

Thomas tried not to shiver in the early evening wind. Once ungodly hot, Phrentyr's climate had cooled with nuclear autumn from the last, deadliest war between Tokhin and Solarans. Nearly ten phren years had passed since the war's end, yet much of the world remained shrouded in smoke and ash. The cold was unpleasant for the phren and disrupted their agriculture, but ideal for moss.

The moss—actually closer to terrestrial mold, although unlike

Earth mold it drew much of its energy from photosynthesis—had been the more frivolous of Thomas' two reasons for volunteering to serve on Phrentyr. With so much of the world covered in a layer of green, he would seldom need to see anything red. Even local clothes contained little; gray dominated the Tokhin cloaks, blue the Solaran.

Big mistake. Thomas tried to ignore the moss, but found it impossible. You could put it out of your mind for a few minutes, maybe

a few hours, but then like a glaring red light it hit you again all the harder. The prickling on your skin. The ubiquitous rancid smell and dull green color. The sickly sweet taste to all the food and drink, even the air. Better to stay aware of it, treat it as a familiar if unwelcome companion.

Director Pryz greeted Thomas promptly as they entered the Retreat, the central Tokhin meeting hall. He ignored Hirokh. The Director introduced Thomas first to High Priestess Khorana and her son

Khora, not quite old enough for his own name, then to the other guests. Thomas had met many of them before, but he suffered the Director to announce everyone as if he were new to this world.

Pryz introduced him to the group as Envoy Thomas McFall, but as always found a new way to butcher his name, this time pronouncing Thomas more like “toads.” Correcting him politely, Thomas explained to the group that a “toad” on Earth was an amphibious

creature, which he described as like an animal made of moss, a notion they found delightfully revolting.

Thomas endured an hour of small talk with Tokhin dignitaries, Hirokh always hovering over one shoulder, while a group of musicians sang ululating hymns to the Two Gods in the background. He could not concentrate on what anyone said, preoccupied with the desire to scratch. How the hell could he maintain diplomatic etiquette with a constantly itching crotch?

Finally the Director herded the group into the food circle. The High Priestess chanted a short prayer and the crowd answered in unison, "There are Two!" Thomas pretended not to hear Hirokh's blessing, which sounded more like, "Bugger them Both!"

The main course was grilled khaat, one of the few native foods Thomas could enjoy without dipping into his tin of horseradish and wasabi, salt and cayenne pepper and every other spice that might cut

the mossy sweetness. Khaat, the two-legged beasts that roamed the plains of this continent, were muscled so that their flesh bulged in squares when stretched on a spit, the heat of the fire warding off the moss. As the meat cooked, individual nuggets burst free like popcorn, flying through the air to be caught and quickly consumed before moss could grow.

Phren delighted in the spectacle of the chunks of meat popping and soaring in every direction. They

cheered with every good catch, with a special ovation for anyone who could use all their forelimbs and midlimbs to catch four at once.

Thomas had been to dozens of dinner parties on Phrentyr, with Tokhin and Solarans, and the phren never bored of this game. Thomas found their childlike delight infectious and impossible to reconcile with the bloodthirsty hatred that so infused both cultures.

With the khaat as distraction, Thomas shuffled his way to the High

Priestess, Hirokh shadowing him as always. Thomas knew Director Pryz for a worthless bureaucrat but held a slight, lingering hope for Khorana, the Tokhin spiritual leader.

He watched the priestess catch three morsels of khaat in succession. Squatting onto her midlimbs, she quickly passed them under her cloak to her short abdominal tentacles. From there the meat went into the moss-resistant pouch inside her abdominal mouth to be eaten at her leisure, but of course Thomas had

never seen this happen. To look directly into any phren's pouch would violate their world's strictest taboo.

Thomas felt self-conscious nearing the priestess with the meal still in progress. Many phren were disgusted to see him eat through his face with what seemed to them an oversized nose. Apparently they grew accustomed to his large head, rigid limbs and hands with too many fingers, but still found it difficult to credit that he had no mouth in his

chest.

Thomas snared two pieces of meat zipping past, impressing no one. He popped one into his mouth and quickly dipped the other in a tureen of spicy, creamy sauce made from skallow root. That bulbous plant had long been Thomas' favorite local food, but he was getting heartily sick of it. Skallow sauce was impervious to moss, so for too long he had been slathering it over nearly everything he ate.

If you ate quickly you might not

see moss growing on your food during a meal, but you would still taste it. In Phren, there is a word for moss that one can taste but not see, another for a thin yellow-tinted layer, another for a thick and fuzzy growth, some two dozen words for moss altogether. To Thomas, they were all just moss.

Opportunities to speak with the High Priestess were rare, and he was determined not to squander this one. After a long series of failed attempts to spur the Tokhin into action gently

and diplomatically, Thomas had resolved to become more direct, not that he believed it would do any good.

“High Priestess, your people are dying.”

Khorana turned to him and folded her midlimbs over her chest, an indication of focused attention. “Most of my people are already dead.”

“Most of the Solaran race died in the war as well, but their civilization recovers. They begin to rebuild, with

the help of my people. With our engineered seed, our techniques and equipment, they lose fewer crops to moss, reclaim some of the irradiated wastes. Yet the Tokhin refuse any aid but handouts of food and radiation meds. Am I to believe that the Solarans are so much more industrious?"

It was an unfair comparison. The Solarans had won the war. While Solaran civilization was merely devastated, the Tokhin were all but annihilated, their few survivors

herded into Doubletown, the Holy City's Tokhin ghetto. Resurrecting the Tokhin culture was an even more daunting task than helping the Solarans, but Thomas knew if the process did not begin soon it would be too late. Humans had arrived in this system shortly after the end of the war and provided relief aid to the ruling Solarans on the condition that they did not completely wipe out the remaining Tokhin. Once the Solarans were again self-sufficient, Earth would lose its leverage, and

Solara would surely complete the annihilation of the Tokhin race.

Khorana thrust her midlimbs to either side in anger. Several nearby guests noticed her reaction and turned to listen.

“Have we not done enough to prove our industry?” she demanded. “For countless generations Tokhin and Solaran sought to destroy the other. It was no easy task, as we cohabited most of the world, but at last by our tireless efforts we succeeded.”

“The Solarans are not destroyed,” Thomas pressed.

She chopped her midlimbs across her body in negation. “They are, even if they do not know it. The Word of Both and The Solara have little in common.” Actually, their doctrinal differences were so subtle Thomas often found them difficult to grasp. “But they agree on one particular: Hell.”

“Hell is a cold, hazy place where moss grows thick on every surface.”

“Exactly,” she said. “We have

remade our own world into Hell. It is too late to save any of us.”

“So that’s it?” Thomas demanded. “You just give up on your life, your future?”

“As have you.”

It was such an abrupt reversal of the conversation, Thomas thought for a moment he had mistranslated her words in his head.

“By coming to Phrentyr, have you not forever left behind everyone and everything you once knew?”

Thomas was startled. Relativity

was not widely understood in this world. Most phren could not conceive of the fact that everyone he knew was already dead, even if he tried to explain. For a time, he had considered claiming a great holy war had killed his friends and family. That they would comprehend.

“I did not leave behind so much. I volunteered for this post after my wife’s death.”

Nearly the entire party had fallen silent, listening in curiosity. “On Phrentyr,” said Khorana, “you are in

no danger of finding another mate.”

Already weary of the subject, Thomas decided to try to lighten the mood, thankful Fernandez had not stayed. “Well, they told me there were a lot of women marines on the orbital station here. Sadly, they didn’t tell me the marines were all genetically modified. I doubt I would survive getting too friendly with any of them.”

The phren around them roared with their hissing laughter. Direct discussions of sexual acts were

forbidden, but phren greatly appreciated dirty jokes made through oblique references.

Khorana did not join the laughter. "I grieve for you, Envoy. You have experienced the pain of a single deep loss. But understand that we have known seven hundred million losses."

"I realize, Priestess, that your loss is even greater than mine." That was Thomas' primary reason for coming to Phrentyr, a world of beings who had suffered as he had, who knew

what it was to see a loved one brutally murdered. He was a fool to have believed these aliens could understand and comfort him in a way other human beings could not.

“Do not feel concern for us,” she said, raising her voice for all to hear. “Our losses are only the price of the terrible retribution the Two Gods will inflict. The last days are at hand for all Phrentyr. The promise of Both is that we will live to see the Solarans die in agony and rejoice in their suffering before They also call

us away.” At the end of this declaration several phren chimed in, “Death to Solara!” A few stared pointedly at Hirokh.

This was why Thomas had not found the bond with Tokhin he sought. He had come here thinking of them as the victims of genocide. In truth, they were merely the losers of a genocidal war. Just as cheerfully would they have eradicated the Solarans had their side prevailed.

Still, they bore the standard of an ancient and rich cultural tradition,

one that should be preserved if possible. “Priestess, does that mean you should hasten the death of your own people and all their beliefs and customs? What about your young people?” Thomas motioned to Priestess Khorana’s son, standing nearby. “Your own son, will you leave him nothing of your culture to treasure when you are gone?”

“You speak as if the passing of the Tokhin were by choice.”

“You have a choice!” Thomas shouted, and instantly regretted it, as

a fleck of spittle leapt from his mouth, an appalling sight to any phren who saw it.

The High Priestess spoke slowly and forcefully. “No. I can do nothing. I am not even a true High Priestess.”

Thomas was sure he had heard wrong. “What?”

“I cannot speak the Old Tongue. Even if our people had a temple left to them in which to pray to Both, I could not lead the invocation.”

“Then find someone who can.”

Khorana stared at him. “My mother was a true High Priestess. The position is not meant to be inherited. I stand in her place only because she and all her students died in the war. The Old Tongue is dead, for none survive who remember it.”

“Priestess, consider that perhaps it is the will of Both that I, an alien, am here to see your problem in a different light and to tell you that’s a load of khaat manure.”

This was rather a more forceful approach to the issue than Thomas

had ever taken. Many of the gathering crowd muttered in annoyance, but the Priestess did not react. He continued, "You have prayers in modern Phren, so speak them. The Two Gods cannot be offended to hear you praise Them the only way They have left you to do it."

"And where shall we say these vulgar prayers? Our temples are all destroyed, and the site of the First Temple is but an empty field of moss."

“Then go to that field and build a new temple.”

“Impossible without Sha’ad Tokh.” The crowd around them responded, “Sha’ad Tokh!”

“This is your reason for not rebuilding your temple—you’re missing the capstone?”

“It is no mere rock, Envoy. It is the birthstone of our people, given by the Two Gods to Khorin Khoron on the first day of the New Age.”

“A symbol.” Thomas tried to conceal his impatience. “Priestess,

people die and buildings fall and relics get smashed. You cannot let that destroy your race. You must figure out how to rejuvenate your culture. Doubletown is a cemetery. I can pressure the Solarans to let you rebuild your temple, to release you from this compound. All I need is for you to lead your people out of here and start over.”

“Envoy, no doubt what you say would seem logical to another of your kind, but to us it is nonsense. Rebuild the temple without Sha’ad

Tokh? You might as well ask the desert hawk to fly without wings.”

Thomas smiled. “It is possible to fly without wings.”

The Priestess chopped her midlimbs. “You may have the technology to make a creature fly without wings, but it will not be a hawk. The Tokhin cannot be made whole without the First Temple, and there can be no First Temple without Sha’ad Tokh.”

Again the Tokhin surrounding them chanted, “Sha’ad Tokh!”

This was where it always ended, with Tokhin excuses for giving up. We cannot renew our culture, for too few of us remain. We cannot rebuild our temple, for lack of Sha'ad Tokh. Thomas had come to doubt the Tokhin race and their faith in the Two Gods would survive much longer, and worse, he no longer believed they deserved to. He hated himself for thinking that, but could not help it.

After not speaking a word all evening in the Retreat, Hirokh addressed Thomas as soon as they were alone in the restroom. “It pains me, Envoy, to watch you waste your time with this refuse.” He held out the large cloak—Thomas tried not to think of it as a hoop skirt—which the two of them had designed many twelvedays before to allow Thomas to use the public holes in the floor that passed for toilets. The phren merely needed to slide forward on midlimbs and their personal cloaks

covered all from view.

“Just take satisfaction, Hirokh, in how little progress I have made.” Don’t expect to see me try any longer, he thought.

“It is the will of the Great One. And yet...”

“Don’t tell me you’re developing sympathy for the Tokhin?”

“Do not be insulting, Envoy. But I acknowledge that they were once a formidable enemy. These docile survivors dishonor the memory of all my comrades who fell in battle.”

Thomas did not answer. He could not doubt that Hirokh would happily wipe out the thousand or so Tokhin still living, yet he still found Hirokh much the easier to respect.

He considered what Hirokh had said about the Tokhin, “once a formidable enemy.” How had they so utterly lost their will, their spirit? But then, who could understand that better than Thomas? Life knocks you down and you get back up for more, until the day it hits you harder than you can bear and that’s the day for

giving up. Thomas had given up on his entire world and taken this damned job, and now he had even given up on that.

Another phren entered the facility. Stepping to the hole just past Thomas, he said in a singsong voice, “I did not realize an alien could be so compassionate. Does it really matter to you what happens to us?”

Thomas regarded him for a moment before placing him as Khora, the son of the Priestess. “Maybe more than it does to your

mother.”

This drew a quick reaction. He turned to Thomas with his midlimbs out stiff, but then stumbled forward. Thomas instinctively caught him, and felt something slip into his right hand as he did.

Hirokh instantly stepped in to separate them. While he shoved the son of the Priestess away roughly, Thomas turned his back to them and quickly read the note in his hand: “Ten minutes. Outside back door. Don’t bring him.” It was scrawled on

a thin piece of pressed grain coated in grease. Thomas shoved it into his pocket, knowing that within minutes it would be an unreadable lump of moss.

4

Thomas couldn't help feeling wary of the small alley where the three phren led him, but there was no time to scout a more suitable meeting place.

He had never tried to evade Hirokh before, but it had proved

easier than expected. After waiting ten minutes, he told Hirokh he was ready to leave. As Hirokh held the car door open in front of the Retreat, Thomas declared he had forgotten his tin of spices and darted back inside. Then a quick dash through the hall, around a corner, out the back door, hoping Hirokh could not see where he went through the crowd. There had been no chance to tell Fernandez what he was up to, which was just as well—he did not want to get her into a tussle with

Hirokh.

The son of the Priestess and two other phren had waited outside the back door, and the four of them sprinted down the Doubletown streets to this alley.

They ducked behind a large stack of trash to hide from view. Standing with the rubbish pile to his right and the dark alleyway to his left, Thomas tried to ignore the putrid smell.

The other two phren, just as young as Khora if not as well fed, waved midlimbs nervously, but

Khora gripped his in his forelimbs in a show of giddy confidence, like a cocky grin on a young human. Overconfidence could be dangerous, yet Thomas was pleased to see such energy from any Tokhin. He allowed himself some hope that the younger Tokhin had more spunk than their elders.

Khora launched into a rehearsed statement of his gratitude to the Envoy for joining them, but Thomas knew there was no time for niceties and interrupted. “Khora, do you

believe your mother is wrong, that there is yet hope for your people?"

Khora answered haltingly, "Envoy, there is much you do not know. Just as there are Two Gods, there are two faces to the Tokhin people. My mother does not... well, she cannot speak freely in front of that Solaran giant."

"He is not here now. Tell me."

"I do not know all that my mother does. And I should not presume to speak for her."

This was getting them nowhere.

“Khora, you asked me to come here. Do you have something to say, or shall I go?” At that, Khora’s two companions stepped closer. Even in the dark alleyway, Thomas could see that one had a yellowing exoskeleton.

“The Tokhin are more than what you see, Envoy. With our strength, and with Sha’ad Tokh—”

“It wasn’t destroyed in the war?” Thomas asked in surprise.

“No, Envoy, and when the day—”

“Where is it?”

“I do not know. I think my mother believes—”

“Enough!” interjected Khora’s jaundiced companion. “There are Two Gods, and They are Both bored to Their pouches from all this.”

Khora thrust out his midlimbs. “I decide what we—”

“You decide nothing,” said the third phren. “You agreed we are democratic.”

“So?” asked Khora.

“So,” said the yellow one, “we took a vote.”

Thomas thought he had lost his will to live after Kayleigh's death, but staring at two phren short blades suddenly pointing at him, he realized otherwise.

“Stop!” shouted Khora. “We are not murderers. We are here to talk.”

“No. Wasn't talk got us in this mess, won't be talk gets us out,” said the yellow one. “We need to hit back. We need phren to go out with bombs in the breech.” Khora winced at the crude reference to phren pouches. “We need important people

to turn up dead.” His midlimbs waved at Thomas.

“What would killing him accomplish, mossbrains? The humans are the only thing stopping Solara from killing us all, and you want to murder their ambassador?”

“They keep us alive like khaat in a pen. We kill him, the humans know it is not enough.”

“No, listen—”

“Seal it!” the third phren interjected. He straightened and leaned into Khora, an ineffective

gesture, as he was an unusually short phren. “We have listened enough. You plan and plan and do nothing, and for twelveday after twelveday we sit with midlimbs tucked in our pouches. No more.”

When Khora began to protest again, the other two turned their knives in his direction. He stared at them both for a long moment before saying to Thomas, “I am very sorry. The moss will have you.”

This was a bit more spunk than Thomas had hoped. These phren

were underfed but Thomas, who had never had a moment's self-defense training, was under no illusion he could disarm them. Still, he readied himself to move as they struck.

As the yellow one stabbed a forelimb forward, Thomas heard a roar from behind and the phren's shell collapsed inward. The second knife-wielder stumbled backward and fell.

"Get down, Envoy!" The gruff voice of Hirokh sliced through the ringing in Thomas' ears from the

gunshot.

Thomas dove to the ground, pulling Khora with him. “Tomorrow!” he hissed at the young phren. “The back door again, and don’t bring any more of your moss-eaten friends. Now go!”

He stood up, trying to place himself between Khora and the source of the shots. He saw Hirokh climbing through the wall of garbage and slumped against him as if for support. Hirokh steadied him, then stared down the alley, but Khora had

disappeared. “You would do well, Envoy, to think of me as your bodyguard, not as your jailer,” he said amiably.

The short phren still lay on the ground. Hirokh leaned over, yanked him up by a midlimb. Holding his gun in a forelimb, he pressed the muzzle into the side of the Tokhin’s head, which barely reached Hirokh’s massive chest.

“Where did the other go? Who is he?”

“I will tell you nothing,

Enforcer.”

Hirokh turned his midlimbs up. “I believe you,” he said, and pulled the trigger.

5

Nowhere on the entire planet surface could Thomas find a moment’s privacy, either from Hirokh or the moss, except in his sealed apartment under the Hall of Ministers. The moment Hirokh left him that night he went to the kitchen to swallow his daily antibiotic, then

headed straight for the shower stall.

The antiseptic spray killed the moss spores clinging to his body within seconds. Thomas stood under the scalding water for over an hour.

Still, as he dried, the prickling sensation returned. He began to scratch his skin. He scratched faster and harder, until he felt moisture under his fingernails. Long streaks of blood appeared on his chest and arms.

He felt no pain, as if the skin he peeled away did not belong to him,

but the color stung his eyes.

He turned off the lights and kept scratching.

6

Nearly being murdered was a handy excuse to spend some time in orbit at P-Station.

At the ramp to the shuttle, Thomas clasped Hirokh hand-to-forelimb and thanked him again for saving his life. Hirokh swirled his midlimbs in a phren gesture without human equivalent, essentially a

denial that any favor was done. “I had to save you, or the Council would have believed I let you die on purpose. They know how I dislike you.”

Thomas chuckled and boarded the shuttle, thinking Hirokh would never forgive him if he learned what he had just done.

The shuttle lifted as if heading into orbit, but high in Phrentyr’s tortured stratosphere it turned back to deposit Thomas in Doubletown. Thomas did not imagine the

Solarans would be fooled long, but perhaps long enough for him to meet Khora without anyone getting killed this time. Thomas was all too conscious of the irony that he was deceiving the phren who had just saved his life in order to collaborate with one of those who tried to kill him.



Thomas was pleasantly surprised to see Lieutenant Fernandez at the steering panel of the waiting native

groundcar. Between the lack of her too-conspicuous body armor and the contorted position the phren car's driver seat demanded, she could not have looked less comfortable.

“I thought you were off duty.”

“Right,” she said. “You call the closest thing to a covert op we’re ever going to get on this planet, and I’m going to miss it for another round with the stimbot.”

After confirming that Thomas had planted the nanotransmitters on Hirokh, Fernandez attached a device

next to the car's steering panel to alert them if Hirokh approached within 200 meters. She then merged them into traffic and guided them toward the Tokhin Retreat.

“Whose shift was it supposed to be? Harding?” Thomas asked. “How’d you get him to step aside?”

“He wouldn’t argue. He knows I’m your favorite. He probably thinks I’m sleeping with you.”

Thomas laughed. “Just say the word, Lieutenant, but be gentle.”

She looked back at him more

seriously than he expected. “Today’s the first time I might consider it, Boss. I like a guy with a spine.”

Before Thomas could respond they arrived behind the Retreat, where Khora waited alone. He clambered quickly into the rear couch with Thomas.

“Nice to see you without your keeper, Envoy.” Still brashly gripping midlimbs in forelimbs, he showed no sign of contrition for the night before. “I assume he doesn’t know you are here in Doubletown?”

“Yes, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt us.” He nodded to Fernandez to get them moving again.

Khora held midlimbs up in agreement. “I have heard stories about our Chief Enforcer, both from the war and after. He will do anything to keep his secrets.”

“I hope you are ready to share some of yours.”

“I only wish I had more to share. But first, Envoy, I must thank you for saving my life last night.”

Thomas elected not to point out that Khora had nearly cost him his. “Although perhaps it would be better if I were killed.”

They had no time for idle talk, but Thomas could not help his curiosity. “How so?”

“My generation of Tokhin do not expect to be granted long life, but we have a belief. There are Two Gods, and if One calls you back early, the Other compensates by granting your fondest wish as you die. Yesterday I prayed to Both that

before I die I should behold the one who will deliver Sha'ad Tokh back to us. And then I met you.”

“So you do believe Sha'ad Tokh still exists?”

“Yes, Envoy. I know that by the grace of Both it survived the war. I think it is still in this city, but I don't know where.”

“Seems unlikely. By now every inch of Doubletown has been searched three times over by Solarans.”

“I did not say it was in

Doubletown.”

Thomas leaned his body with the motion as Fernandez weaved the car through traffic. “What are you saying, that Solarans have it?”

“No. But it may be with one of the hidden.” Thomas looked at him blankly. “My mother believes that a few Tokhin escaped confinement in Doubletown and have blended in with Solarans in the Holy City.”

Thomas pondered this new information and whether High Priestess Khorana meant him to have

it. “How can we find them? Does your mother know any?”

“If she does, she will never reveal it. But I think I have another way to find out. If we—”

“Sir!” Fernandez barked. Thomas realized that the device she had placed on the dash was beeping and blinking rapidly. Hirokh was already closing in.

A thunderclap battered Thomas from all around. It took a moment to realize that the noise was somehow related to the afterimage in his eyes,

of the car in front of them lifting into the air, flipping backward toward them, engulfed in a searing flare of light.

* * *

He shook his head but it would not clear. What had happened? A random bombing? Assassination attempt? Stumbling out of the car he peered through the smoke. The front of the adjacent building had slumped to the ground. Phren hobbled away, while others knelt to treat the

severely injured, but he saw nothing threatening. Rather, the entire scene was strangely calm, the phren curiously nonchalant, as if it were all too familiar to upset them.

Next to their demolished groundcar he spotted Fernandez lying in the street. He rushed to her and turned her over to see first her unblinking eyes, then her shattered body. Something had torn through her chest, and the front of her uniform was a great scarlet stain. Then the copper smell hit him.

Just like...

Oh, God, he was there. He was there again, Kayleigh right in front of him. He couldn't turn his eyes away. She filled his vision, her face so beautiful, her chest a bloody ruin. Blood was everywhere. He couldn't stop seeing her blood, smelling it. So much blood. The whole world was bright red.

Like an infant he sobbed, water streaming from his eyes, which he could not close.

“Sir! Sir! We have to get you out

of here!” Another marine. Except there hadn’t been another marine. Thomas turned his head and saw the shuttle somehow squeezed into the intersection just ahead. He had not heard it land. How long had he been here?

“Sir!” shouted the marine. “Your hand is cut!” Thomas looked down numbly and winced at the red mark. “We’ve got to get you treated for infection right away.”

“Get Khora.”

“Sir?”

“The phren I was with, my informant. Could be in danger.” Thomas looked all around, finally realized what he should have known immediately.

Khora was gone.

7

Lieutenant Harding treated his hand, while other marines triangulated Hirokh's position from the nanotransmitters, using links from their satellite array. Thomas was certain Hirokh was behind that

car bombing, and he hoped they could find Khora by tracking Hirokh. If Khora really knew how to find Sha'ad Tokh, they dare not leave him with the Chief Enforcer.

Precious minutes later their shuttle set down outside an old prison, so decrepit that from the outside it looked abandoned. The marines' attitude both pleased and alarmed Thomas in two respects. First, they did not hesitate to charge into action, when they must have suspected he had no authority to

order them to do any such thing. Second, none made any attempt to dissuade Thomas from charging in with them.

The prison kept people in, not out. The marines swept past all three security checkpoints in bare moments, sprinting by most phren they passed, immobilizing the few who raised a weapon. Only one phren got off even a single shot, and the marines took no casualties.

They heard the screams as soon as they reached the long hall of

holding cells. Speakers carried them for the other Tokhin prisoners to hear.

As he raced past, Thomas heard the other prisoners shouting encouragement to Khora, yelling at the top of their lungs, "There are Two, brother!"

Turning into an open cell just behind Harding and the lead group of marines, Thomas' nostrils flared at the sharp tang of moss mingled with phren blood. From manacles on the far wall dangled Khora, his soft pale

flesh exposed through jagged gaps cut in his shell. Nothing moved but Khora's chest shuddering with labored breath and his blood dripping into a crimson puddle. A deep wound in his abdomen drew Thomas' gaze.

A single, very large phren stood in front of Khora, his back to the humans, beside a surgeon's array of glinting instruments. "I am sorry you had to see this, Envoy," said Hirokh without turning, as he plunged a short blade into Khora's chest. Three

marines rushed to pull Hirokh away, while Harding checked Khora, but Thomas had too much faith in Hirokh's efficiency to believe he might survive.

The bloody gap in Khora's abdomen again flashed into Thomas' mind the image of his murdered wife. So hard had he tried to forget that picture, but now the shock of recognition pummeled him like moss, impossible to set aside.

So senseless. The nameless killer had taken her right index finger, to

withdraw cash from their account, but the fool had to know there would be a cap on withdrawals. He could have gotten more money from her with a good sob story.

Everyone was very sympathetic of course. More than anything, that sympathy drove him offworld. He couldn't stand everybody patting him on the back and feeling sorry and secretly thrilled, because who knew anyone who had been murdered in this day and age? His family worried of depression, but he

was no more depressed than happy. He was a phantom, a strange partial version of himself, someone he had never wanted to be and could not understand.

On Phrentyr, where over a billion people had perished, he thought others would appreciate his grief. But it was no use. To the phren, their loved ones' deaths made a perverse kind of sense. Solarans clearly believed the Great One approved of the slaughter. Tokhin held hope that their Two Gods

would someday redeem Their chosen people with more slaughter. None, except maybe Hirokh, could conceive that Thomas lacked any such faith.

Thomas focused his eyes, spotting what he had missed before: Khora's cloak was stripped away and the slash across his belly cut through his abdominal mouth to reveal his pouch. He had been desecrated, contrary to the most sacred phren taboo.

Kayleigh's death once left

Thomas numb, but the murder of Khora, whom he had met only a day before, filled him with fury. Was he the only person left in the universe who knew it was wrong to kill people? Would he have to rub the blood into each of their goddamn noses to explain it?

Through the gore of Khora's open pouch, Thomas saw a splash of blue. He reached in and pulled out something solid and heavy. Ignoring the bloody stain it left, he wiped it with his own shirt. It was a brick, a

clay brick stained a deep blue. It made no sense. Why would Khora have been carrying a brick in his pouch for their rendezvous?

Hirokh interrupted his thoughts. “Envoy, you know you have no right to be here.”

Thomas could barely contain his rage. “Right?” he whispered. “You want to speak of rights? Who gave you the right to torture and murder? To expose another phren’s pouch to the moss?” He spat onto Hirokh’s face.

Hirokh wiped it off slowly. “The Great One gave me the right.”

How did I come to this? Thomas wondered. Here was his only friend, the only person Thomas had shared any connection with since Kayleigh’s death. And he was a butcher.

Thomas glared at Hirokh and savored his hatred.

8

Ordinarily even Thomas could not gain entry to the Solaran Council on less than a twelveday’s notice, but

this time repeated warnings to every government agency that Earth might withhold aid to Phrentyr had gotten him here in four days.

The instant the massive doors opened, Thomas rushed directly to the great square Council table, deliberately forcing Hirokh into a Frankensteinian lumber to keep up. Without preamble he announced the withdrawal of all human aid for the ruling government's violations of the Tokhin people's freedom of religion. He stood prepared to make good on

the threat, too. It was against his orders, but Thomas had decided he didn't give a crap. It would also cause the deaths of thousands of innocent phren, but he could summon no sympathy for them, nor could he even manage to despise himself for that. He once thought himself a compassionate man, but that person was now buried under an impenetrable shell.

Several members of the Council showed obvious alarm at his threat but the Chief Councilman, de facto

president of all Phrentyr, simply held his midlimbs rigidly folded.

Several Councilmen in turn adamantly averred their benevolence toward the Tokhin. Thomas responded by pointing his finger directly at Hirokh, an intolerably rude gesture for the Council chamber. "Four days ago, this phren tortured and killed a Tokhin for no crime other than speaking with me about how to help his people practice their religion in peace."

This brought a great uproar, and

Thomas marveled at the degree of shouting and gesturing permitted by Solaran parliamentary procedure. Councilman Rotin, the Chief's unofficial second in command, finally quieted the others. "Surely there is a misunderstanding. Enforcer Hirokh, can you explain to the honored Envoy how he is mistaken?"

"No," said Hirokh, not bothering to emphasize with midlimbs. "The Envoy's statement is true."

Thomas studied the Chief for

any reaction and still saw nothing. Rotin began to say something to Thomas, then thought better of it and addressed Hirokh. "Hirokh, as Chief Enforcer, you must never take any action that might jeopardize our people, who still depend on the gracious help of our human friends."

Now Hirokh swung his midlimbs sharply in front of his great torso. "You whimper like unnamed children, when you have nothing at all to fear. With respect, the Envoy misstates his position." Thomas tried

not to show any reaction to this bold declaration.

“It is past time for the Council to evaluate the humans’ presence,” Hirokh continued. “They send us a single diplomat, a handful of aid volunteers and we receive sporadic visits from small trading vessels. Meanwhile, they construct a heavily-armed orbital station, on which the Envoy has told me some two hundred marines are stationed, and we often detect human warships passing through this system without

stopping on our world.

“Councilmen, the humans are here not from altruism,” he sneered. “Their help is a soft layer of moss over the hard granite of their true purpose. This system is clearly a strategic base in some larger conflict of theirs. Despite the Envoy’s personal feelings, Earth will not meddle in our internal affairs and risk our cooperation should their conflict ever touch this planet. Will the Council bow to the pervert-worshippers over an empty pouch?”

Thomas answered quickly, startled at how accurately Hirokh had puzzled all that out. “A splendid fantasy, Hirokh, but absolutely false, and the moss can take me if I lie.” He had disowned any feelings of friendship, but Thomas still had to admire the huge old phren’s deductive skills and his twisted sort of integrity. Hirokh was a killer, yet here he stood uncomplicatedly sticking to his principles, while Thomas lied through his teeth. “You know the extent of our technology. I

do not mean to offend, but your people could offer us no assistance in any armed conflict.” In a space battle that was true, but in a dirt-side action it was critical to have the locals on your side.

The Council launched into a debate, and Thomas knew he had to cut it off or he would lose his chance. “Listen!” he shouted. “Imagine for a moment that Hirokh is right. Suppose I have no authority to withdraw aid, that I will be removed from office just for threatening it,” all

of which was entirely true. “But then recall that our nearest command base is over three of your light years away. If I order aid withdrawn, it will be withdrawn for six years, no matter if Hirokh has guessed right.” That was probably true as well, depending on how persuasive Thomas could be with P-Station’s commanding officer. “Hirokh speaks of faraway Earth, but you,” he stared at the Chief, “must deal with me.”

This succeeded in cutting through the rhetoric. “Tell us what

you want,” answered Rotin.

“The wall around Doubletown will come down,” said Thomas. “Tokhin will be allowed to live and work anywhere in the Holy City. You will not prevent them from living in peace or from building and using places of worship.”

The Council again erupted in angry shouts, but Thomas could soon see that his threats had turned the tide in his favor. Human aid was still vital to Phrentyr’s economy, and economic collapse could bring down

this ruling Council.

Once the noise receded, Rotin formally addressed the Chief. “My Lord, it is the judgment of the Council that we must agree to the Envoy’s... requests.”

The Chief stood slowly, bowed to each Councilman in turn, then emphatically chopped his midlimbs no.

Rotin had apparently anticipated this. He also looked one at a time at the Councilmen, and they all responded with midlimbs up. “My

Lord,” he said, “the Council regards this as a matter of utmost priority. These words have not been spoken in this chamber since you uttered them twenty years ago, but today I say: Lord, you must relent.”

The Chief signaled no again. “We have defeated the enemy,” he said through labored breath, “and you will give our victory away. My eyes shall not see this abomination occur.” He sat down, crossed his forelimbs and midlimbs, and closed his eyes.

Rotin stood, reached under the council table with a forelimb, strode over and touched both of the Chief's cheeks with his midlimbs. Then he thrust a short blade through the Chief's exoskeleton. Each of the other Councilmen in turn stepped to the Chief and stabbed him again.

Unnerved by this abrupt demonstration of Solaran democracy, Thomas missed Rotin's next words to Hirokh. But all the Councilmen still held their knives ready, and despite himself he feared

for his old friend. "Although your loyalty to the Chief is well known," Rotin continued, "I also know that your word is beyond reproach. If any here doubt it, speak now." No one answered. "Tell us, Hirokh, that you will follow the instructions of the Council, and we need not slay you as well."

"I am Chief Enforcer," Hirokh answered without hesitation. "I enforce the will of the state. All of you are now the state, so I enforce your will. If it is your order that we

permit worship of the deviant gods, so be it.” The Council members relaxed. Hirokh continued in a voice edged with ice, “But it pleases me to know you will all lie together in Hell, feeling your guts consumed by moss for all eternity.”

9

The procession slowly wound its way out from the Tokhin Retreat all the way past the gates of Doubletown. Nearly all the P-Station marines were dirt-side to help keep

the peace. From his place in the lead Thomas could not accurately count the marchers, but the group seemed even larger than the one thousand phren thought to inhabit Doubletown. Perhaps their number was swelled by the ghosts of many more Tokhin.

His legs ached from the past four days spent covering each neighborhood of Doubletown on foot, pleading personally with nearly every Tokhin to march with him. Some only needed to hear the gate in

the wall would be open. But most were wary, and Thomas feared that no amount of cajoling could persuade them, that he had forfeited his position as envoy for nothing. In the end, his best tactic was to make a martyr of Khora. He recounted Khora's death in ever more embellished details, telling all who would listen that Khora's dying wish was for his people to return to the First Temple. This was only a slight distortion; his actual prayer had been for the return of Sha'ad Tokh, but

Thomas could not satisfy that wish.

They paraded slowly to the grounds of the First Temple, via the vast crater of the old Tokhin Director's Hall. This city had suffered less damage than other major cities due to both sides' respect for its religious significance, but many reminders of the carnage remained.

The light rain soon abated, and through the layer of clouds poked a brilliant orange sun. The group stirred with the good omen, but the scalding glare only reminded

Thomas how insufferable this world would be but for the war.

Hirokh silently paced him. Thomas had warned the marines that Hirokh might try to kill him before the day ended but was not confident they could prevent it. Nevertheless, as they walked he spoke to Hirokh. "I suppose we are even, Hirokh. You must hate me for this." He regretted his choice of words at once; the term "even" was distasteful to Solarans, for its implication of duality.

Hirokh showed no sign of

offense. “We are ‘even,’ Envoy, in that we have each profoundly misjudged the other. For all their high-minded talk, I never believed humans actually cared what should happen to the Tokhin. I thought their indifference confirmed when they sent their new envoy, a clearly broken man.

“Yet you found a way to lead these people when they could not lead themselves. I compliment you, Envoy, and I marvel at the marriage you must have had, for it to leave

you such strength despite your obvious despair.”

Thomas found he could not look Hirokh in the eye to answer. Still, a part of Thomas would have liked to correct him. His marriage with Kayleigh had been far from perfect. Too often they were absorbed in their individual concerns instead of sharing their lives. Sometimes he allowed himself to forget how much he loved her; sometimes he thought he hated her. But the bond between them gradually grew, and he had

believed someday they would get it just right, they would give each other everything they could. That hope, that anticipation, her killer had taken all that away.

Thomas did not believe he would ever again experience such hope for the future, but he was daring to think he could offer it to the worshippers of the Two Gods.



Cresting the hill to the grounds of the First Temple, Thomas recoiled

at the scene before him. On his instructions marines had burned away the moss where the temple once stood, and several truckloads of clay bricks rested in piles near one edge of the circle. Around the perimeter of that circle crowded thousands and thousands of phren. It had to be half the Holy City's populace. On the bright side, the crowd's presence eased Thomas' fear that the Solarans might drop a nuke on them today.

Thomas motioned his marines to

the front of the procession, but he could not guess whether they would be able to hold off the onslaught if all these Solarans attempted to fall on the Tokhin. But he would not back down.

As Lieutenant Harding corralled the marines into a human barrier, Thomas led the parade to the dusty central circle. Turning to the crowd, he held high the blue brick from Khora's slashed pouch. Tokhin and Solarans alike murmured in reaction. Waiting for them to quiet, Thomas

cataloged everything that could go wrong. The Solaran spectators could surge forward and start a riot. The Tokhin could refuse to attempt to build a new temple. Or perhaps they would try, but not know how. Or if they knew how, they might still refuse to use the temple without Sha'ad Tokh.

“This brick is from the First Temple!” Thomas cried at the Tokhin. The murmuring began again, but he shouted over it. “Beginning with this brick, we will

build a new temple. Perhaps some of you here also have original bricks from the First Temple.” Thomas had no way of knowing, but he hoped that Khora had not been the only Tokhin to use his pouch to guard a remnant of the sacred temple. All those bricks had gone somewhere. “If so, step forward and help me build the new foundation.”

On the sunken impression left by the former First Temple Thomas laid his brick. He turned back to the group of Tokhin, and for a few

moments none moved. Then High Priestess Khorana stepped forward from the crowd and walked up to Thomas. He thought perhaps she meant to confront him about her son's death, but instead she reached under her cloak and withdrew a silver brick, which she displayed to the crowd. To a raucous cheer from the Tokhin, she set it down next to his.

Other Tokhin came forward to add to the line of bricks, and slowly the base of a temple emerged from

the dust. Somehow the Tokhin knew just where to leave a gap for the temple door.

Wiping his forehead of sweat, Thomas stepped toward the throng of Solaran spectators and raised his voice for another calculated risk. "If there are any Tokhin living in secret among the Solarans, now is the time to come out of hiding. If you still think of yourselves as Tokhin, then you must not live out your whole lives as Solarans."

He crossed to four different

points on the perimeter of the temple grounds and said the same for all the crowd to hear. They jeered, and no Tokhin rose to his challenge. Perhaps Khora had been wrong that a few were hidden among the Solarans, or perhaps they were yet too afraid to give up their camouflage.

The temple grew rapidly. The bricks the Tokhin laid were not uniform, but locked together in a complex pattern, like tiles on an ancient space shuttle. Dry and free of

moss for the moment, most were gray but blue and silver mixed here and there in the swiftly growing wall. The colors at first seemed random, but eventually a shifting pattern emerged.

Thomas had thought Tokhin temples constructed of concentric rings of bricks. Now he could see that the bricks formed a single, unending spiral, tilting inward as it climbed.

The temple continued to rise, and Thomas realized nearly every

Tokhin had carried a brick through the parade. Even so, they were nearing the end of the procession, and the walls of the temple were hardly a meter off the ground. When the last Tokhin had set her brick in place, Thomas motioned the group to the piles of bricks nearby. But none made any move toward them.

Then it happened.

Thomas thought they had exhausted the procession, but when he glanced back at the temple several more Tokhin were lined up to add to

the wall. And the line was growing.

Phren emerged from the crowd on every side of the temple grounds. Thomas saw dozens step from among the Solarans, and then like the sun bursting through the haze earlier began a steady flow of hundreds out of the crowd, to add to the wall. It tilted inward as it spiraled up, but remained stable.

Within minutes, Thomas could see that the newcomers outnumbered his original procession. There were at least a

thousand of them. And still they came. All across the grounds embraced neighbors who could never before reveal themselves. Some of the original procession cheered their emerging comrades, but most stood in dumb amazement.

Now the crowd filled the entire temple grounds, and the Solaran watchers receded from the swelling tide of Tokhin. Thomas realized that half or more of the Solaran watchers who jeered at him minutes before had not been Solaran at all.

The highest tiers of the brick spiral nearly paralleled the ground, yet the pattern remained and no brick slipped out of place, even with the weight of Tokhin climbing the exterior to add more.

Thomas stepped into the gap left for a door and saw some of the Tokhin had brought not bricks but pieces of marble, deposited inside the temple wall. Three phren crouched on the ground assembling the pieces according to some intricate design.

The inside of the new, vastly old,

temple was too small to hold even a tiny fraction of the throng. But with the First Temple in place, Thomas was sure the Tokhin would build new temples, then maybe go on to build new lives.

Phren nudged Thomas out of the doorway, to decorate the interior of the temple with thin drapes and rugs, all magically spirited from pouches. One brought a small lamp, which sputtered and issued a sharp, bitter odor. Thomas inhaled and a weight lifted from his chest, which

registered after a moment as the absence of any scent of moss.

The marble construction was complete, a narrow pedestal. As Thomas watched, two more phren entered carrying something between them. They uncovered it to reveal a massive copy of The Word of Both. Far too large to hold in their pouches, these two had managed to smuggle the book under a cloak all the way from Doubletown. Reverently they set it on the pedestal.

Now all the phren left the

interior of the temple, and Thomas walked out with them to face an enormous crowd looking to him in anticipation.

He had no idea what to do next.

10

Thomas spotted High Priestess Khorana and stepped to her. “Can you say a blessing or... something?”

Her midlimbs rose in affirmation, yet she said clearly, “No.” Seeing Thomas’ consternation, she added, “I cannot, but someone

here can.”

Khorana walked boldly toward the remaining Solarans, directly to an older phren woman standing at the front of the crowd. They clasped midlimbs. Khorana pulled the woman—her mother?—out of the crowd and strode back to the temple.

This was the last of the procession. The woman climbed to the top of the gently sloping temple and added her brick. It had an odd trapezoidal shape, and when slotted into place it left only a neat, circular

opening at the top.

Turning to face the crowd from the top of the temple dome, she began to recite a long blessing in the ancient Tokhin language. Among all the assembled worshippers, there was only one other who could understand her words, yet thousands wept for joy to hear the Old Tongue spoken again. The final words in her prayer were “Sha’ad Tokh,” repeated three times.

The crowd took up the chant, “Sha’ad Tokh! Sha’ad Tokh! Sha’ad

Tokh!...” Thomas thought he sensed a wistful tone to the chant, as if the Tokhin did not truly believe that Sha’ad Tokh survived to complete their temple.

As the crowd continued to chant, the old woman descended from the temple. Thomas thought she was walking to him, but she stepped past to Hirokh, whom she caressed gently on the cheeks with both her forelimbs and midlimbs. Thomas could not have been more stunned if Hirokh had sprouted wings and

taken flight.

She backed away from Hirokh, and he approached Thomas. The Envoy was amazed to see that he was weeping openly. Hirokh stretched out forelimbs and midlimbs and embraced Thomas, who was too bewildered to feel revulsion.

“I never thought to see this day in my lifetime,” Hirokh said. “May They Both bless you.”

He walked toward the front row of Tokhin, then stopped and lowered onto midlimbs. His torso

clenched and rippled, and he threw his head back and gasped as if giving birth.

Finally he drew a deep, shuddering breath and stood. From beneath his cloak he drew a bright globe and held it aloft to the crowd. Marbled blue and silver swirls shimmered and shifted over its surface, echoing the pattern of the temple walls.

Sha'ad Tokh.

The nearest Tokhin fell forward onto midlimbs as they beheld it. To

Thomas it seemed not a religious observance, but that they were too overcome with relief and wonder to stand.

As each row of Tokhin knelt, those behind saw the orb and knelt in turn. The movement rippled outward in concentric circles as far as Thomas could see.

When all of them were prone the chant resumed, but with greater passion. The crowd's collective voice rumbled over the ground. "Sha'ad Tokh!"

Hirokh stepped back to Thomas. He strode lightly, without his usual shuffling gait. Thomas realized that he had limped not from an injury, but because of the burden he had always carried.

“You?” he asked in astonishment. “All along, you held Sha’ad Tokh?”

“It had to be kept where no one would think to look for it,” he answered through tears of happiness and relief. “Besides, no one else could swallow it. Envoy, will you place it at the top of the temple?”

“Me? I don’t think I should.”

Hirokh persisted. “Please.” He hesitated. “Thomas. It is fitting to honor the Two Gods, Who brought you to us to hasten this moment.”

Thomas found he could not refuse Hirokh, whom he had so recently learned to despise. “Come with me?” If this was against custom, Hirokh did not object.

They started to walk toward the temple, but Khorana and the older woman stepped forward and placed midlimbs on their chests to halt

them. They motioned to the crowd and it parted to reveal a group of phren lifting a tub of water from a fire, which Thomas had not seen them light.

They brought the tub and set it before Hirokh, who removed his cloak, something Thomas had never before seen any phren do. At a gesture from Khorana, Thomas also undressed. With sponges from the tub, so hot that no moss grew, Khorana and the other woman bathed Thomas and Hirokh, who

never put down Sha'ad Tokh. The women then covered both in long jewel-encrusted cloaks to an approving cheer from the crowd.

Thomas and Hirokh climbed together to the top of the temple dome. As they ascended, Thomas marveled at the stability of the structure he had just witnessed assembled without benefit of mortar or plans or anything but ancient, dusty bricks.

At the top, Hirokh handed him Sha'ad Tokh, so heavy Thomas had

to brace it against his chest with both hands. Slowly he lowered it to slide smoothly into the gap at the top of the temple. Hirokh pounded it firmly into place with each of his forelimbs and midlimbs in turn.

A great roar from the throng of worshippers buffeted them. Still kneeling on midlimbs, the crowd shouted even as they continued to cry with elation.

The moss would be a meter high here tomorrow from the moisture of all their tears.



After descending, Thomas faced Hirokh. “All those years. How did you manage?”

“Do not be concerned for me,” he answered, wiping his face. “Many of my people have sacrificed their lives for the Two Gods. I am one of the lucky ones. I did not have to die to do it.”

Thomas shook his head in disbelief. He knew what it was to cast off one’s entire life, but he had merely run away, not become a

completely different person.

“But all the things you did. How did you... How could you...”

“There are Two Gods, and sometimes They require us to become two.” Tears continued to stream down Hirokh’s face, and Thomas realized they were not all for joy. “I only pray to Both that I can still remember who I was before.”

Thomas sank to his knees, joining the multitude all around them. He stared up into the face of this creature, at once the most

contemptible and the most noble person he had ever met, and for the first time he believed.

There are Two.



The Burbles

by Van Aaron Hughes

First published in The Dream People
(Oct. 2011), edited by D. Harlan Wilson

• • • •

Lincoln didn't mind getting fired
when the boss got the notion
he put the piranha in her prize
tropical fish tank or becoming

impotent from tainted tofu from his
vegan girlfriend who then ran off
with the rent money and his best
friend who only eats meat or
Greyhounding to his folks to find the
family home sold to Tibetan drug
lords and his parents gone to
Ecuador with no forwarding address
or limping about on the broken toe
the bus ran over or being flat broke
from paying the bus fare and the
contraband marine life dealer.

For Lincoln acknowledged only
two states of being: pain and death.

He had never been so alive.

What Lincoln minded was having to move in with Uncle Abe and Aunt Beatrice in Southwest Suburbia. Lincoln hated the quiet at night, the stockade fence holding the real world at bay. He was sure he had seen more of life in his 26 years than all five members of this family combined.

His fourth day there, Lincoln decided he could not survive one more evening refraining from comment as Aunt spent hours in the

kitchen hauling a microwaved dinner to a table covered in clear plastic, as Pinhead Son #1 romeroed to his antique computer games, as Pinhead Son #2 shouted at referees on television while clinging to a football helmet as if coach might send him in to play tailback any moment, as Uncle stared at the game even though he hated football because he couldn't bear to dislodge Woody the family cat from his lap, as Pinhead Daughter drifted through applying powder to a face already so

caked up she looked ready to turn tricks if her overpowering perfume hadn't driven away the johns.

Time to get snide, for sanity's sake. Starting in the study, where Carter(PS1) sat before a computer monitor in a tall wooden chair turned around so he had to peer between the slats like an infant in a playpen.

“Good thing you dropped out of school, so you have time to play this.”

“Didn't drop out, Cuz, I flunked

out.”

“What the hell is that? Pac-Man?”

“Junior Pac-Man.”

“I’m sure some day you’ll graduate to the senior tour.”

“No way, Cuz, Junior Pac-Man is way harder.”

“You know, when the pilgrims invented these games, you had to go someplace to play them, so there was a social aspect.”

“They were like MMORPGs?”

“Except the fantasy world wasn’t virtual.” Did Pac-Man used to have a

propeller beanie?

“Cuz, you want to stand further back from the screen.”

Was the yellow blob actually chewing the dots it gobbled? As Lincoln peered closer, the screen bulged outward and Junior Pac-Man reared up and sank teeth into Lincoln’s cheek.

“Christ!” he shouted, pulling away. The screen popped back into place as blood flowed down Lincoln’s face. He could see the Pac-Man back in his maze, now trailing a

smear of red pixels.

“Just be glad it wasn’t Ms. Pac-Man,” said Carter. “She always goes for the crotch.”

Scrambling to the bathroom for something to staunch the bleeding, Lincoln brushed past an emerging Uncle Abe. He tried to ignore his uncle’s stench as he grabbed some gauze under the sink. The mirror showed his cut wasn’t so deep as it felt.

Movement drew his eye to the odoriferous fumes visibly coalescing

over the toilet. As he watched, they formed a three-fingered vapor hand, which flew at him and jammed two fingers up his nose and into his sinuses. He screamed and fell backward, but the fingers weren't letting go as easily as Junior Pac-Man.

Then the pressure vanished, as for the first time Lincoln smelled Dora(PD)'s perfume with enjoyment.

“Now you know why I wear this shit,” she said, helping him off the

bathroom floor.

Stomping into the family room, Lincoln stepped between the TV and Uncle Abe, who had resumed his blissful oblivion, scratching Woody behind the ear. “You might want to lose the cat and get control of your house, Uncle.”

“Incompatible, Lincoln,” he answered dreamily, as Aunt Beatrice called out that dinner was ready.

Intending to set the pet aside, Lincoln lifted Woody from Abe’s lap, to reveal a fantastically engorged

part of the tomcat's anatomy. Evidently the cat's name had nothing to do with the movie Toy Story.

Lincoln tossed the cat in revulsion. Woody landed with teeth bared and launched itself at him. He turned aside from the cat's rush, a terrible mistake. Woody slashed through his jeans with its leonine claws, and Lincoln screamed from sudden pressure. Lincoln tried to shake off the feline rapist, but it only dug claws deeper into his thighs. "I said, dinner!" his aunt shouted.

Next into the fray was cousin Eli(PS2), who tried to pry Woody off, his feet straining against the carpet as he dug his shoulder into the cat's orange pelt like a tackling dummy. Lincoln endured hours of agony for ten seconds before Woody came free and turned its wrath on Eli, slashing at his face so viciously it would have left multiple scars if he hadn't been wearing his football helmet.

“Third and final call for dinner!” Beatrice screamed.

“Shit!” shouted Eli. He threw the cat aside and bolted up the stairs to the dining room without stopping to remove his helmet. Ignoring the blood streaming from his legs, Lincoln raced after, in sudden dread that the plastic over the table was meant for something more than crumbs.

Lincoln dove into a chair and grinned at his new home’s unsuspected hecticcy. Maybe this family wasn’t so bad, once you got to know them.



Random Fire

by Van Aaron Hughes

First published in Abyss & Apex (Oct. 2011), edited by Wendy S. Delmater

• • • •

June 10:

I have never kept a journal. I make day-to-day notes on my research, but a file for personal

thoughts always struck me as vanity. Today, however, a little vanity is appropriate. Someday, people will wonder what went through my head at this moment.

This is the big one, the breakthrough I always dreamt of.

I try not to think of the five-letter n-word, but at a minimum it means a full professorship, perhaps the department chair, with Randolph one foot in the grave. Or maybe I will tell the dean what I think of him and go talk to Stanford or MIT. Not

Caltech, of course. Harwell shares my area of expertise, with no room for me next to his ego.

The breakthrough is a variation on the double-slit experiment. The standard experiment fires particles at a plate cut with parallel slits. Particles passing through interfere with each other before striking the screen on the far side. Even a single particle interferes with itself as, in a very real sense, it passes through both slits at once. Only an observer's presence collapses the wave function and

forces the particle to “choose” which slit to pass through.

My version uses an electron gun with tiny variations in the firing sequence, variations independent of the magnetic field or the electron's topology or spin or string rotation, creating a random element to when the gun fires. The key is randomizing the gun just the right way so the wave function controls when, not where, the particle fires. In essence, I am conducting a double-slit experiment with the slits offset in

time rather than space.

Incredibly, I have detected in the electrons' impacts a temporal interference pattern.

People are just getting used to the idea a particle can be in two places at once, but this shows it can simultaneously occupy the same space at different times. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies not only to where a particle is, but when.

With the university quiet since finals ended, I've made great progress working without interference. Good

thing I'm alone—I've caught myself a few times doing my old cool-science dance from years ago, back when I conducted experiments for the thrill of learning something new, before physics became a job.

I've told no one of my results except Felice, who didn't understand much more than they are very exciting, which only earned me her FEDs—fiery eyes of doom. I had to promise three times I will not be off doing experiments as the baby arrives.

June 23:

Every day I come up with new variations on the experiment.

I should be pushing forward to publication, to get my name on this before anyone else stumbles on it. How can I forget that goal? They wallpaper the hallway to the lab with blow-ups of abstracts and illos from papers authored here at Colorado, unsubtle reminders to keep your eyes on the publication prize.

But my mind keeps wandering,

giddy with the implications of these results, my finding that an observer can collapse a wave function to alternate times. Of course one can't extrapolate from elementary particles to a macro scale, and yet...

For the first time since reading H.G. Wells as a boy, I half believe in the possibility of manipulating time.

Distracted by these thoughts, I find myself even more detached than usual. This morning, I took the Olds right through the new stoplight at Everson Drive. Why is that light

there? I never see any traffic coming down off the Flatirons to that intersection. Perhaps it's to make us stop and ponder the key questions of life: Why are we here? How do we control our fates? Why is a jagged outcropping of rock called the "Flatirons"?

* * *

July 8:

Still not close to publication.

The paper should include Bloch spheres corresponding to my

temporal results, but I have difficulty conceptualizing them. I tried to look up St. Andrews' web page on applying algebraic topology to quantum mechanics, but it's disappeared.

There's no denying the Internet's usefulness as a research tool, but I find it so frustrating. Give me old-fashioned books, where whatever is on the page stays on the damn page. On the Web, you find something you like, then a moment later it's deleted or changed without

explanation.

Memory says Bremen did that topology page, and he's now at Caltech. Surely coincidence, but I must be alert to any possibility Harwell's team is researching along my lines. I tried to call Bremen, but he's at the Antwerp conference. Where I should be. But Felice would never forgive me for being gone when the baby arrives.

* * *

July 13:

I didn't mean for this journal to include thoughts unconnected to the experiments, but I can't help it.

I'm a father!

Yesterday I was Professor Terence Bienemy. Today my name is Daddy.

Felice went into labor late Friday night. It took over 24 hours, but Felice never complained. Well, she complained a little. Maybe more than a little. But she never stabbed me in the eye with a hypodermic needle, and I am grateful.

Our baby is named Allison. To me, she is Allie. Felice doesn't much like the nickname, which suits me fine. Somehow I must arrange it so no one else calls her Allie. I will share Allison with my wife and with the world, but Allie is all mine.

The entire weekend I doted on Felice and then on Allie. Saturday and Sunday nights, the nurses wheeled Allie back into our room every couple hours for feeding, and each time I was overjoyed to see her, no matter how short of sleep I had

fallen. Felice was the same—so exhausted she could have slept through a kamikaze attack on the hospital, she snapped awake the instant Allie cried—but I was much more surprised at my own reaction.

I know I've behaved compulsively in the past, like when I lost track of time in the computer lab as an undergrad and worked for four days solid, but this feels different. For one thing, that time in the lab I gained a good ten pounds on Snickers bars, but at the hospital I

didn't eat a bite. My sister-in-law Diana came on Sunday, and she asked when I had eaten last and I could not remember. It must have been nearly two days, yet I never felt hungry for a moment. Totally outward focused, I had thought only of Felice and Allie.

This gives me hope for myself, that I won't always be chained to my worst fixations. Can you develop a sense of perspective in a day? Suddenly it doesn't seem so important whether I am first to

publish on my experiments. Either way, it is a tremendously exciting discovery.

But I have discovered something more exciting.

* * *

July 19:

First real day back at the lab.

I didn't want to come, but Felice ordered me to work, saying I would drive her nuts hovering over her and Allie.

Heading to campus, I felt

somehow more connected to my surroundings. Not one missed stoplight. Tromping to the lab, I noticed the dew clinging to my shoes—does that always happen? How does the grass stay wet on a sunny day in this dry climate? Luckily the wet shoes can't harm the worn, fuzzy carpet in the physics building or the battered linoleum in the lab.

I noticed for the first time the monotonous uniformity of the campus buildings, all the same sandstone brick and red tile, even the

accursed football stadium. And why are the massive bike racks still full, when most students are gone for summer? Are those bicycles breeding? It calls to mind a story I read as a kid, which gave me a lifelong fear of safety pins.

I find it difficult to focus on quantum physics right now.

* * *

July 29:

The initial shine of fatherhood has faded, and I feel ever more

exhausted. The relatives have all gone home, as if the worst were over, but it isn't. Allie wakes about every hour at night, clearly hungry but still unable to latch to Felice, who refuses to give up breastfeeding.

But overall I still feel great about it. I spotted Felice in the mirror last night, watching me rock Allie back to sleep, and saw the expression in her blue-gray eyes (no fire) I recall from when we first dated. I didn't realize how I missed that.

I remember the pride I felt dating

Felice, not just because she is beautiful and brilliant, but because I had overcome my introverted nature to make it happen. It's so easy to go with the flow, let the current carry you along; I had to swim upstream to be with Felice. In the past couple years, I had gone back to coasting, but now with the baby and the breakthroughs in the lab, I'm swimming again instead of floating.

Even with new baby fatigue, I'm making real progress on the research. I've refined the electron gun, and my

understanding of the wave function's temporal aspect grows every day.

* * *

August 6:

Progress continues rapidly.

I really should concentrate on putting this research into publishable form. Lord knows my career could use the boost. Everyone in this department shares a burden of inflated expectations, because CU boasts three Nobel Prize winners for physics—not for any genuine

breakthrough, mind you; two of them got it for building a better refrigerator. So while the Colorado name carries little prestige in the outside world, inside the school nothing short of a Nobel impresses anyone.

But with significant advances coming daily, I can't bring myself to postpone my new experiments just to write up what I've already done. Luckily I have a light lecture schedule next semester, so there should be time yet to assemble a paper.

I spoke yesterday to Bremen, who kept tight-lipped about work at Caltech but made some cryptic remark like, “You never get time back once it’s passed.” I can’t shake the hunch he is working with Harwell along similar lines as mine, but if so, it doesn’t upset me the way it would have a month ago.

* * *

August 17:

All afternoon I stared at these results. I now understand most of

the relevant mathematics and they make sense, no matter how counter-intuitive. I have repeated the latest experiment four times with the same outcome. Yet I don't believe it.

I have succeeded in manipulating the collapse of the wave function so a predictable percentage of randomly fired particles hit the screen before they leave the electron gun.

This has to rank among the most amazing experimental results ever reached in a laboratory.

And the most remarkable part:

it's the second best thing that happened today.

I watched Felice breastfeed Allie this morning, and like one of my electrons I felt suspended in time, caught in a transcendent moment. Allie has finally learned to latch without difficulty and watching her against my wife's chest, catching her infant scent, knowing I was part of it, I belonged there, was the most powerful feeling.

The sensation persisted even when Felice turned the FEDs on me,

after Allie buried a fist in her hair and yanked. Felice would have cut her hair ages ago but I begged her not to. The texture, the smell of it always take me back to our first kiss—the same reason I can't bear to part with that rickety Oldsmobile. What I remember most about that kiss is the sensation of puzzlement, wondering what Felice could see in me, a chubby, older, absent-minded professor. But today I know she was right to choose to share her life with me. We must be perfect together, or

we could never have created Allie.

I could scarcely be more surprised by this feeling. Throughout my life, the big events always disappointed me: Christmas morning, the home team winning the big game, even losing my virginity, all nice but hardly religious experiences. I never had a religious experience.

Perhaps I still haven't, but this is the first thing in my life that feels beyond natural explanations.

August 26:

In the words of Daffy Duck, I may be a coward but I'm a greedy little coward. As if sending elementary particles backward through time weren't enough, I find myself dead set on achieving a similar result on a macro scale before I take this work public. An absurd goal, except the math works.

The experiments don't, however. For the first time in months, I'm spinning my wheels. It doesn't help

that I have less time free now classes have started, or that every afternoon the lab thrums to the marching band practicing in the field outside. Of course, the sensible thing is to publish the results I already have, but I resist.

I have resolved to contact Harwell. If he is working on the same problem, we should combine forces. There will be plenty of awards and accolades to go around.



August 31:

I spoke to Harwell, and after fifteen minutes' coy and evasive conversation we divulged our current projects.

There is no race to publish. Harwell has his team working furiously on a project completely unrelated to mine. I revealed more of my work than I should have, but no matter. He responded with courtesy but no real interest. On reflection, I understand why: the whole thing is preposterous. If I hadn't seen the lab

results first-hand, I would never believe it myself.

I actually felt disappointed I won't be working with Harwell on this. I continue to get no results on the macro-level and another perspective would be welcome. I should get to know some of the school's graduate students better. None has shown much interest in my area, perhaps because I'm in it and have a reputation as a loner, but a few hints at these results should entice a hungry doctoral candidate or

post-doc.

* * *

September 4:

I started in for the lab this morning expecting to make a big push on my research, forgetting as I do every year the insanity of Saturdays in autumn. For the hundredth time, I vow to locate and stomp on the grave of the clown who put the football stadium across the street from the physics building.

I clearly need help to finish this

work.

There is a sharp student in my theory seminar I should try to recruit, one who asks questions I haven't heard ten times before. Last class I noticed he looked familiar. As I waited for a particularly noxious chalk cloud to settle (two floors up they are pioneering quantum dot electroluminescence technology soon to replace LCDs; in my classroom I get sticks of chalk the size of baseball bats), I placed him as a former student in an undergrad

intro class I got roped into teaching a few years back. He must have stayed at CU for his graduate work.

It's unusual for me to remember any underclassman. (There's a reason the main elevator in the physics building doesn't even have a button to stop on the undergrad-infested first floor.) Perhaps he just stood out for his dark complexion and retro 'stache. Italian, maybe? More likely, it was his uncommon interest in the subject. He reminded me of myself at that age, when physics seemed like

magic, a code I could crack to understand and control the whole universe. I lost that sense over the years, until these new experiments.

* * *

September 9:

OH, GOD.

OH, GOD.

OH, GOD.

I thought I was less fixated on my work now, but my mind was on nothing but wave functions when I came around that curve. I've missed

that new light before but it didn't matter, because there's never any traffic coming off the Flatirons from Everson Drive. Today there wasn't any traffic off Everson. I could have gunned that light again. Except for the car already at the light, at a dead stop.

I've got only a couple bruises and scratches. Somebody installed my airbag just fine. But I must have installed Allie's car seat wrong.

I didn't really see the car at the light. I didn't see anything but

electrons and equations. And now I can see nothing but Allie, her curly brown hair, her big green eyes.

I don't imagine Felice will ever forgive me, and even if she does, how can I ever forgive myself?

OH, GOD, MAKE IT NOT SO. PLEASE MAKE IT NOT SO. LET THIS BE A DREAM, A HALLUCINATION. MAKE IT NOT REALITY.

My little girl is gone, and nothing in the world will ever be right without her.

* * *

September 13:

Have thrown myself into my work. Felice thinks it's to avoid grief. It isn't.

* * *

September 26:

Working feverishly, literally. Temperature, heart rate elevated. Strong danger of stroke or heart attack. Terrible heat wave doesn't help.

Subjective component is the key.

Observer triggers wave function collapse. Forcing collapse on macro-scale involves the mind, the will, in ways not understood before.

I can do it.

* * *

September 29:

I think it will work.

I never could have done this before... would not have pushed myself like this, body and mind.

But this is what it takes. The only way. And it will work. How many

fathers in the world would kill for the ability to do what I am going to do. My goal is so close, if I can just reach it before it destroys me.

* * *

October 5:

It's a shabby looking piece of equipment, compared to the marvelous machine Wells imagined. Most of what matters is in a computer program and in my head. All you can see of the device is two small handles wired to a metal plate

on the ground. But I am certain it will work.

I am the observer. I control the collapse. I don't quite have all the math worked out, all the implications. If an observer rearranges reality, must he hold the new configuration in place in his mind? Could he travel to the past and stay there, or would the altered reality be unstable? Would the observer himself become unstable, interfering with himself like a particle in the double-slit

experiment?

Thankfully, I don't need to stay in the past. All I need is a temporary shift. I will stand on the plate, grip the handles, stop what happened, come back. This time I will be there for Allie when she needs me.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

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It looks like you just turned the page, rather than following a link to the second half of Van Aaron Hughes' story, "Random Fire." If you would like to go back and read the rest of "Random Fire," please [CLICK HERE TO CONTINUE READING THE STORY.](#)

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Trust me, you'll enjoy yourself more if you go back and read the rest of "Random Fire," by [CLICKING HERE TO CONTINUE READING THE STORY.](#)

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On the gripping hand, if you are determined to learn how it works, just turn the page again...

Van Aaron Hughes

Van Aaron Hughes became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Dualist” in Writers of the Future, Vol. XXVII (2011), edited by K.D. Wentworth. Visit his website at vanaaronhughes.wordpress.com.

The Dualist

by Van Aaron Hughes

First published in Writers of the
Future, Vol. XXVII (2011), edited by K.D.
Wentworth



In the beginning, God created the heavens and the world. He provided for all creatures and all

were content, save one. The Evil One could not bear to be subject to God's dominion. He deceived many of God's angels and led them in rebellion. He confronted God, and so great was the power of his will that he began to force God from the heavens. But the Evil One was seized from behind. Astonished that any but God Himself could overpower him, the Evil One turned to see his new adversary and beheld the face of God. The Evil One was cast into the stinking, moss-covered pit, at last

understanding the essential truth of the universe: There are Two.

1

“We have entered Doubletown, Envoy,” Fernandez announced over her shoulder.

Glancing up from the translation of *The Word of Both*, Thomas tried not to let Hirokh see his surprise. He had not asked Fernandez to alert him when they passed the checkpoint at the Doubletown wall, and she would not interrupt without reason.

He caught her eye in the rear-view mirror, and a barely perceptible nod of her head drew his gaze to a thin line of smoke rising from behind the squat skyline to their right. Probably another bombing. Fernandez was asking approval to stop to investigate without including Hirokh in the conversation. Thomas had no interest in stopping, but at least it would make them late for the dinner party.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. Let’s not go straight to the Retreat. I

would like to drive around a bit and see more of Doubletown.” Thomas turned to his ever-present companion. “Do you mind, Hirokh?”

“Of course not,” Hirokh answered, midlimbs raised in assent. He had likely deduced where they were headed but did not interfere. “I know you relish viewing Doubletown as much as I do, Envoy, though for different reasons.”

Thomas studied the low stone buildings through the car window and afternoon drizzle. Spitting

clouds of smoke, a handful of other autos labored through the roughly cobbled streets. Phren children skittered between them, their exoskeletons yellow from malnutrition or radiation sickness. Thomas had viewed pictures of this place as the locus of a proud global culture, gaily painted, its people in perpetual celebration. Now the pale green of moss covered the crumbling buildings and streets, and he could see no other color but the burnt orange and, too often, yellow of

phren shells.

Making no further pretense, Fernandez drove directly to the source of the smoke. Without a word, she exited the groundcar and marched to the scene, leaving Thomas and Hirokh little option but to follow. Thomas immediately felt his skin prickle with spores. The scabs on his arms began to itch.

“What reason could you have to enjoy Doubletown, Hirokh? I thought you hated the place.”

“How could you think I detest

this place, Envoy, when you know it is holy land? I detest only its inhabitants. I take pleasure in seeing how few remain to kill.”

Thomas smiled. Most Solarans shared this sentiment, but few were so undiplomatic as to express it to him. In his two local years on Phrentyr, just over one terrestrial year, he had come to appreciate Hirokh’s bluntness.

The bombing had gutted a large, single-story structure, its roof partially collapsed, remnants

glowing dully with the last sputtering flames. Thomas supposed it was a grocery; suicide bombers had recently targeted several Tokhin grocers who defied Solaran dietary restrictions. Fernandez disappeared directly into the wreckage, trusting her body armor to protect her, while Thomas and Hirokh walked along the outside.

Hirokh extended his midlimbs forward, the phren gesture for on the other hand. “You harbor the opposite hope, to save these people and

resurrect their disgusting culture.” Thomas did not disabuse him of this notion, but in truth he had all but abandoned any such ambition. As cultural envoy he was supposed to protect the Tokhin people from genocide. An awfully nice idea, but he now doubted he could do more than slightly delay the inevitable.

At the far side of the demolished building, the fire had burned out. A group of Doubletown residents cleared away debris, searching for survivors. If they rebuilt anything on

this site, it would be only primitive mud huts.

Thomas glanced down at the book in his hand, the embodiment of the nearly destroyed Tokhin culture. He was antagonizing Hirokh by keeping it in plain view this long. “Have you never read The Word of Both, Hirokh?”

“If I wish to read about perverts, I will go to Chubbytown. They will give me pictures.” All phren spoke in a soft, literally nasal voice, yet Hirokh still managed to sound gruff.

“I have met many Tokhin who have read The Solara,” Thomas persisted.

“Greater fools are they, not to know the truth when they see it,” Hirokh answered.

As they slowly traced the perimeter of the destruction, Thomas studied the surrounding buildings, many embedded with concrete slabs thrown from the explosion. Several charred groundcars lined the street, strewn inches deep with rubble. Most

tellingly, moss was seared away from every facing surface and little had grown back even in the misty rain.

When Fernandez rejoined them, Thomas asked, “This was no pouch bomb, was it?”

“No, Boss. The blast radius and solid oxides in the debris suggest a powerful thermobaric weapon.” Fernandez glared at Hirokh as they walked. After a moment she switched her gaze to Thomas, clearly expecting him to confront Hirokh.

It was too obvious a giveaway.

Solaran enforcers knew how to build a homemade bomb. They could easily have disguised this as another suicide bombing, absolving the government of responsibility. Instead they had deliberately used military-grade explosives, no doubt on Hirokh's instructions, as if daring Thomas to do something about it. There was nothing he could do, of course, and he would not be made a fool trying.

Thomas might not have said anything at all but for Fernandez

standing there fuming. He stopped finally and folded his arms. “Well, Hirokh, are you going to claim that you had nothing to do with this?”

Hirokh paused, midlimbs at his side. “You know I prefer to be direct, Envoy, but in my position I must sometimes withhold information.”

“You are direct, Hirokh, I’ll give you that.”

“I do not willingly pretend to be other than what I am.”

Thomas looked pointedly at the wreckage around them. “Yet you

expect the Tokhin to do just that, to eat what you eat, to act like they belong to your culture and not their own.”

“For Tokhin, it is commendable to be of two natures. Life here in Doubletown would be intolerable to Solarans, but it seems to suit these people.”

While he spoke, Hirokh drew back a forelimb as if to strike a passing Tokhin, who cowered and shrank away. Thomas felt as much contempt for the Tokhin’s meek

reaction as for Hirokh's raw display of power.

"I fear," Hirokh continued, "that you humans have much in common with the Tokhin. You seem to relish prevarication, professing to something different than your true nature."

"What do you mean?"

"Envoy, why are we here? You investigate this site, but what would you do with proof that the Solaran Council ordered the bombing? Your government has declared that

suffering the pervert-worshippers is a condition of further aid from your people. But is that threat an empty pouch?" An "empty pouch" meant a bluff, but to phren a bluff was never a clever thing.

Thomas suspected Hirokh knew the answer to his own question. Thomas' orders were clear: due to the strategic importance of this system, no humanitarian concern short of imminent and absolute genocide of the Tokhin would justify withdrawal of human support to Phrentyr. This

left him entirely impotent. He might find and catalog evidence of the Solaran Council's violence and repression of the Tokhin, but could never act on it.

"It will take much longer to analyze the evidence here," Fernandez interjected. "Can we cancel your appearance tonight?"

"No, Lieutenant. If you like, you can come back and poke around more after you drop us at the Retreat."

"Yes, sir. I will have a report for

you in the morning.”

“Great,” Thomas answered, as if he were actually going to read the damn thing. Thomas preferred Lieutenant Fernandez to most of the marines, if only because she better concealed her contempt for unenhanced humans, but her diligence was starting to annoy.

He followed a different thread of the conversation with Hirokh. “Even if you think humans and Tokhin are alike, Hirokh, you needn’t worry I will take sides in your world’s

religious disagreements. You know I am an unbeliever beyond any possible redemption.”

“So you have told me, but I wonder how it is possible.” Atheism was nearly unheard of on Phrentyr. “Where did you turn for comfort when your wife died?”

Thomas made no secret that he was a widower, but he seldom mentioned Kayleigh’s death, and Hirokh had never before pursued the subject. It struck Thomas as bad form to do so here, in the midst of

more violent death that Hirokh had all but admitted orchestrating.

“I threw myself into my work,” Thomas answered. “You see where the hell that got me.”

He said nothing more until they were back in the groundcar, then asked Hirokh, “Were you ever married?”

Thomas thought Hirokh had not heard, the answer was so long coming. “Yes, Envoy. Before the war, I had a wife and daughter. Only my faith made it possible to live

without them.”

“I respect that, Hirokh, but I also respect the beliefs of the Tokhin. And the Tokhin tell me they respect the teachings of The Solara. That’s what tolerance is all about.”

“Respect? Tolerance? The Tokhin read the wisdom of the Great One, then go back to worshipping their two deviants. Solarans who ‘tolerate’ the pervert-worshippers are just as bad, perhaps worse, for they are harder to root out. Not all phren who wear Solaran cloaks and carry

valid papers truly serve the Great One.”

Thomas noticed Fernandez shaking her head, appalled at the asinine quarrels that could cost millions of people their lives.

“Why do you describe the Two Gods like that, Hirokh? I haven’t seen any reference to sexual practices in The Word of Both or any other Tokhin text.”

“Two gods, both men. Figure it out, biped.”

“Would you prefer if one of the

Two Gods were female?”

Silent for a moment, his midlimbs still, Thomas couldn't be sure at first how much his blasphemy angered Hirokh. Lacking mimetic muscles, phren had no facial expressions, though they could cry with human-like tear ducts. Thomas had taken to trying to needle Hirokh out of his stoicism, but perhaps he was getting too good at the game.

“Envoy, if I kill you, the Council will execute me immediately,” Hirokh said. “Yet every day, you

make it a difficult choice.”

Thomas smiled. He felt he had scored a point when Hirokh threatened bodily harm, even if he could not take such threats lightly. The largest phren Thomas had ever seen, Hirokh could certainly dispatch an unenhanced human being, despite his war injuries, and had doubtless killed many phren. Thomas was oddly gratified the Solarans had assigned their notorious Chief Enforcer as his watchdog. They seemed to fear

Thomas might accomplish something. He wished he could agree.

Back when life was important to Thomas, Hirokh would have terrified him. But the apathy that had settled over him since his arrival on Phrentyr was at times a peculiar strength—Hirokh could not intimidate him, because Thomas did not care what happened to him. He hated his work, having long since realized he could accomplish nothing meaningful as Envoy, and offworld a

dead-end job is a dead-end life. Everyone on Earth he ever cared about was dead. In truth, the only person he really cared about had died before he left.

2

They mounted the steps slowly, Hirokh from his injuries—walking only on hindlimbs was painful to him and he limped noticeably even using midlimbs—Thomas to avoid slipping on the layer of moss swiftly rising in the rain.

Thomas tried not to shiver in the early evening wind. Once ungodly hot, Phrentyr's climate had cooled with nuclear autumn from the last, deadliest war between Tokhin and Solarans. Nearly ten phren years had passed since the war's end, yet much of the world remained shrouded in smoke and ash. The cold was unpleasant for the phren and disrupted their agriculture, but ideal for moss.

The moss—actually closer to terrestrial mold, although unlike

Earth mold it drew much of its energy from photosynthesis—had been the more frivolous of Thomas' two reasons for volunteering to serve on Phrentyr. With so much of the world covered in a layer of green, he would seldom need to see anything red. Even local clothes contained little; gray dominated the Tokhin cloaks, blue the Solaran.

Big mistake. Thomas tried to ignore the moss, but found it impossible. You could put it out of your mind for a few minutes, maybe

a few hours, but then like a glaring red light it hit you again all the harder. The prickling on your skin. The ubiquitous rancid smell and dull green color. The sickly sweet taste to all the food and drink, even the air. Better to stay aware of it, treat it as a familiar if unwelcome companion.

Director Pryz greeted Thomas promptly as they entered the Retreat, the central Tokhin meeting hall. He ignored Hirokh. The Director introduced Thomas first to High Priestess Khorana and her son

Khora, not quite old enough for his own name, then to the other guests. Thomas had met many of them before, but he suffered the Director to announce everyone as if he were new to this world.

Pryz introduced him to the group as Envoy Thomas McFall, but as always found a new way to butcher his name, this time pronouncing Thomas more like “toads.” Correcting him politely, Thomas explained to the group that a “toad” on Earth was an amphibious

creature, which he described as like an animal made of moss, a notion they found delightfully revolting.

Thomas endured an hour of small talk with Tokhin dignitaries, Hirokh always hovering over one shoulder, while a group of musicians sang ululating hymns to the Two Gods in the background. He could not concentrate on what anyone said, preoccupied with the desire to scratch. How the hell could he maintain diplomatic etiquette with a constantly itching crotch?

Finally the Director herded the group into the food circle. The High Priestess chanted a short prayer and the crowd answered in unison, "There are Two!" Thomas pretended not to hear Hirokh's blessing, which sounded more like, "Bugger them Both!"

The main course was grilled khaat, one of the few native foods Thomas could enjoy without dipping into his tin of horseradish and wasabi, salt and cayenne pepper and every other spice that might cut

the mossy sweetness. Khaat, the two-legged beasts that roamed the plains of this continent, were muscled so that their flesh bulged in squares when stretched on a spit, the heat of the fire warding off the moss. As the meat cooked, individual nuggets burst free like popcorn, flying through the air to be caught and quickly consumed before moss could grow.

Phren delighted in the spectacle of the chunks of meat popping and soaring in every direction. They

cheered with every good catch, with a special ovation for anyone who could use all their forelimbs and midlimbs to catch four at once.

Thomas had been to dozens of dinner parties on Phrentyr, with Tokhin and Solarans, and the phren never bored of this game. Thomas found their childlike delight infectious and impossible to reconcile with the bloodthirsty hatred that so infused both cultures.

With the khaat as distraction, Thomas shuffled his way to the High

Priestess, Hirokh shadowing him as always. Thomas knew Director Pryz for a worthless bureaucrat but held a slight, lingering hope for Khorana, the Tokhin spiritual leader.

He watched the priestess catch three morsels of khaat in succession. Squatting onto her midlimbs, she quickly passed them under her cloak to her short abdominal tentacles. From there the meat went into the moss-resistant pouch inside her abdominal mouth to be eaten at her leisure, but of course Thomas had

never seen this happen. To look directly into any phren's pouch would violate their world's strictest taboo.

Thomas felt self-conscious nearing the priestess with the meal still in progress. Many phren were disgusted to see him eat through his face with what seemed to them an oversized nose. Apparently they grew accustomed to his large head, rigid limbs and hands with too many fingers, but still found it difficult to credit that he had no mouth in his

chest.

Thomas snared two pieces of meat zipping past, impressing no one. He popped one into his mouth and quickly dipped the other in a tureen of spicy, creamy sauce made from skallow root. That bulbous plant had long been Thomas' favorite local food, but he was getting heartily sick of it. Skallow sauce was impervious to moss, so for too long he had been slathering it over nearly everything he ate.

If you ate quickly you might not

see moss growing on your food during a meal, but you would still taste it. In Phren, there is a word for moss that one can taste but not see, another for a thin yellow-tinted layer, another for a thick and fuzzy growth, some two dozen words for moss altogether. To Thomas, they were all just moss.

Opportunities to speak with the High Priestess were rare, and he was determined not to squander this one. After a long series of failed attempts to spur the Tokhin into action gently

and diplomatically, Thomas had resolved to become more direct, not that he believed it would do any good.

“High Priestess, your people are dying.”

Khorana turned to him and folded her midlimbs over her chest, an indication of focused attention. “Most of my people are already dead.”

“Most of the Solaran race died in the war as well, but their civilization recovers. They begin to rebuild, with

the help of my people. With our engineered seed, our techniques and equipment, they lose fewer crops to moss, reclaim some of the irradiated wastes. Yet the Tokhin refuse any aid but handouts of food and radiation meds. Am I to believe that the Solarans are so much more industrious?"

It was an unfair comparison. The Solarans had won the war. While Solaran civilization was merely devastated, the Tokhin were all but annihilated, their few survivors

herded into Doubletown, the Holy City's Tokhin ghetto. Resurrecting the Tokhin culture was an even more daunting task than helping the Solarans, but Thomas knew if the process did not begin soon it would be too late. Humans had arrived in this system shortly after the end of the war and provided relief aid to the ruling Solarans on the condition that they did not completely wipe out the remaining Tokhin. Once the Solarans were again self-sufficient, Earth would lose its leverage, and

Solara would surely complete the annihilation of the Tokhin race.

Khorana thrust her midlimbs to either side in anger. Several nearby guests noticed her reaction and turned to listen.

“Have we not done enough to prove our industry?” she demanded. “For countless generations Tokhin and Solaran sought to destroy the other. It was no easy task, as we cohabited most of the world, but at last by our tireless efforts we succeeded.”

“The Solarans are not destroyed,” Thomas pressed.

She chopped her midlimbs across her body in negation. “They are, even if they do not know it. The Word of Both and The Solara have little in common.” Actually, their doctrinal differences were so subtle Thomas often found them difficult to grasp. “But they agree on one particular: Hell.”

“Hell is a cold, hazy place where moss grows thick on every surface.”

“Exactly,” she said. “We have

remade our own world into Hell. It is too late to save any of us.”

“So that’s it?” Thomas demanded. “You just give up on your life, your future?”

“As have you.”

It was such an abrupt reversal of the conversation, Thomas thought for a moment he had mistranslated her words in his head.

“By coming to Phrentyr, have you not forever left behind everyone and everything you once knew?”

Thomas was startled. Relativity

was not widely understood in this world. Most phren could not conceive of the fact that everyone he knew was already dead, even if he tried to explain. For a time, he had considered claiming a great holy war had killed his friends and family. That they would comprehend.

“I did not leave behind so much. I volunteered for this post after my wife’s death.”

Nearly the entire party had fallen silent, listening in curiosity. “On Phrentyr,” said Khorana, “you are in

no danger of finding another mate.”

Already weary of the subject, Thomas decided to try to lighten the mood, thankful Fernandez had not stayed. “Well, they told me there were a lot of women marines on the orbital station here. Sadly, they didn’t tell me the marines were all genetically modified. I doubt I would survive getting too friendly with any of them.”

The phren around them roared with their hissing laughter. Direct discussions of sexual acts were

forbidden, but phren greatly appreciated dirty jokes made through oblique references.

Khorana did not join the laughter. “I grieve for you, Envoy. You have experienced the pain of a single deep loss. But understand that we have known seven hundred million losses.”

“I realize, Priestess, that your loss is even greater than mine.” That was Thomas’ primary reason for coming to Phrentyr, a world of beings who had suffered as he had, who knew

what it was to see a loved one brutally murdered. He was a fool to have believed these aliens could understand and comfort him in a way other human beings could not.

“Do not feel concern for us,” she said, raising her voice for all to hear. “Our losses are only the price of the terrible retribution the Two Gods will inflict. The last days are at hand for all Phrentyr. The promise of Both is that we will live to see the Solarans die in agony and rejoice in their suffering before They also call

us away.” At the end of this declaration several phren chimed in, “Death to Solara!” A few stared pointedly at Hirokh.

This was why Thomas had not found the bond with Tokhin he sought. He had come here thinking of them as the victims of genocide. In truth, they were merely the losers of a genocidal war. Just as cheerfully would they have eradicated the Solarans had their side prevailed.

Still, they bore the standard of an ancient and rich cultural tradition,

one that should be preserved if possible. “Priestess, does that mean you should hasten the death of your own people and all their beliefs and customs? What about your young people?” Thomas motioned to Priestess Khorana’s son, standing nearby. “Your own son, will you leave him nothing of your culture to treasure when you are gone?”

“You speak as if the passing of the Tokhin were by choice.”

“You have a choice!” Thomas shouted, and instantly regretted it, as

a fleck of spittle leapt from his mouth, an appalling sight to any phren who saw it.

The High Priestess spoke slowly and forcefully. “No. I can do nothing. I am not even a true High Priestess.”

Thomas was sure he had heard wrong. “What?”

“I cannot speak the Old Tongue. Even if our people had a temple left to them in which to pray to Both, I could not lead the invocation.”

“Then find someone who can.”

Khorana stared at him. “My mother was a true High Priestess. The position is not meant to be inherited. I stand in her place only because she and all her students died in the war. The Old Tongue is dead, for none survive who remember it.”

“Priestess, consider that perhaps it is the will of Both that I, an alien, am here to see your problem in a different light and to tell you that’s a load of khaat manure.”

This was rather a more forceful approach to the issue than Thomas

had ever taken. Many of the gathering crowd muttered in annoyance, but the Priestess did not react. He continued, "You have prayers in modern Phren, so speak them. The Two Gods cannot be offended to hear you praise Them the only way They have left you to do it."

"And where shall we say these vulgar prayers? Our temples are all destroyed, and the site of the First Temple is but an empty field of moss."

“Then go to that field and build a new temple.”

“Impossible without Sha’ad Tokh.” The crowd around them responded, “Sha’ad Tokh!”

“This is your reason for not rebuilding your temple—you’re missing the capstone?”

“It is no mere rock, Envoy. It is the birthstone of our people, given by the Two Gods to Khorin Khoron on the first day of the New Age.”

“A symbol.” Thomas tried to conceal his impatience. “Priestess,

people die and buildings fall and relics get smashed. You cannot let that destroy your race. You must figure out how to rejuvenate your culture. Doubletown is a cemetery. I can pressure the Solarans to let you rebuild your temple, to release you from this compound. All I need is for you to lead your people out of here and start over.”

“Envoy, no doubt what you say would seem logical to another of your kind, but to us it is nonsense. Rebuild the temple without Sha’ad

Tokh? You might as well ask the desert hawk to fly without wings.”

Thomas smiled. “It is possible to fly without wings.”

The Priestess chopped her midlimbs. “You may have the technology to make a creature fly without wings, but it will not be a hawk. The Tokhin cannot be made whole without the First Temple, and there can be no First Temple without Sha’ad Tokh.”

Again the Tokhin surrounding them chanted, “Sha’ad Tokh!”

This was where it always ended, with Tokhin excuses for giving up. We cannot renew our culture, for too few of us remain. We cannot rebuild our temple, for lack of Sha'ad Tokh. Thomas had come to doubt the Tokhin race and their faith in the Two Gods would survive much longer, and worse, he no longer believed they deserved to. He hated himself for thinking that, but could not help it.

After not speaking a word all evening in the Retreat, Hirokh addressed Thomas as soon as they were alone in the restroom. “It pains me, Envoy, to watch you waste your time with this refuse.” He held out the large cloak—Thomas tried not to think of it as a hoop skirt—which the two of them had designed many twelvedays before to allow Thomas to use the public holes in the floor that passed for toilets. The phren merely needed to slide forward on midlimbs and their personal cloaks

covered all from view.

“Just take satisfaction, Hirokh, in how little progress I have made.” Don’t expect to see me try any longer, he thought.

“It is the will of the Great One. And yet...”

“Don’t tell me you’re developing sympathy for the Tokhin?”

“Do not be insulting, Envoy. But I acknowledge that they were once a formidable enemy. These docile survivors dishonor the memory of all my comrades who fell in battle.”

Thomas did not answer. He could not doubt that Hirokh would happily wipe out the thousand or so Tokhin still living, yet he still found Hirokh much the easier to respect.

He considered what Hirokh had said about the Tokhin, “once a formidable enemy.” How had they so utterly lost their will, their spirit? But then, who could understand that better than Thomas? Life knocks you down and you get back up for more, until the day it hits you harder than you can bear and that’s the day for

giving up. Thomas had given up on his entire world and taken this damned job, and now he had even given up on that.

Another phren entered the facility. Stepping to the hole just past Thomas, he said in a singsong voice, “I did not realize an alien could be so compassionate. Does it really matter to you what happens to us?”

Thomas regarded him for a moment before placing him as Khora, the son of the Priestess. “Maybe more than it does to your

mother.”

This drew a quick reaction. He turned to Thomas with his midlimbs out stiff, but then stumbled forward. Thomas instinctively caught him, and felt something slip into his right hand as he did.

Hirokh instantly stepped in to separate them. While he shoved the son of the Priestess away roughly, Thomas turned his back to them and quickly read the note in his hand: “Ten minutes. Outside back door. Don’t bring him.” It was scrawled on

a thin piece of pressed grain coated in grease. Thomas shoved it into his pocket, knowing that within minutes it would be an unreadable lump of moss.

4

Thomas couldn't help feeling wary of the small alley where the three phren led him, but there was no time to scout a more suitable meeting place.

He had never tried to evade Hirokh before, but it had proved

easier than expected. After waiting ten minutes, he told Hirokh he was ready to leave. As Hirokh held the car door open in front of the Retreat, Thomas declared he had forgotten his tin of spices and darted back inside. Then a quick dash through the hall, around a corner, out the back door, hoping Hirokh could not see where he went through the crowd. There had been no chance to tell Fernandez what he was up to, which was just as well—he did not want to get her into a tussle with

Hirokh.

The son of the Priestess and two other phren had waited outside the back door, and the four of them sprinted down the Doubletown streets to this alley.

They ducked behind a large stack of trash to hide from view. Standing with the rubbish pile to his right and the dark alleyway to his left, Thomas tried to ignore the putrid smell.

The other two phren, just as young as Khora if not as well fed, waved midlimbs nervously, but

Khora gripped his in his forelimbs in a show of giddy confidence, like a cocky grin on a young human. Overconfidence could be dangerous, yet Thomas was pleased to see such energy from any Tokhin. He allowed himself some hope that the younger Tokhin had more spunk than their elders.

Khora launched into a rehearsed statement of his gratitude to the Envoy for joining them, but Thomas knew there was no time for niceties and interrupted. “Khora, do you

believe your mother is wrong, that there is yet hope for your people?"

Khora answered haltingly, "Envoy, there is much you do not know. Just as there are Two Gods, there are two faces to the Tokhin people. My mother does not... well, she cannot speak freely in front of that Solaran giant."

"He is not here now. Tell me."

"I do not know all that my mother does. And I should not presume to speak for her."

This was getting them nowhere.

“Khora, you asked me to come here. Do you have something to say, or shall I go?” At that, Khora’s two companions stepped closer. Even in the dark alleyway, Thomas could see that one had a yellowing exoskeleton.

“The Tokhin are more than what you see, Envoy. With our strength, and with Sha’ad Tokh—”

“It wasn’t destroyed in the war?” Thomas asked in surprise.

“No, Envoy, and when the day—”

“Where is it?”

“I do not know. I think my mother believes—”

“Enough!” interjected Khora’s jaundiced companion. “There are Two Gods, and They are Both bored to Their pouches from all this.”

Khora thrust out his midlimbs. “I decide what we—”

“You decide nothing,” said the third phren. “You agreed we are democratic.”

“So?” asked Khora.

“So,” said the yellow one, “we took a vote.”

Thomas thought he had lost his will to live after Kayleigh's death, but staring at two phren short blades suddenly pointing at him, he realized otherwise.

“Stop!” shouted Khora. “We are not murderers. We are here to talk.”

“No. Wasn't talk got us in this mess, won't be talk gets us out,” said the yellow one. “We need to hit back. We need phren to go out with bombs in the breech.” Khora winced at the crude reference to phren pouches. “We need important people

to turn up dead.” His midlimbs waved at Thomas.

“What would killing him accomplish, mossbrains? The humans are the only thing stopping Solara from killing us all, and you want to murder their ambassador?”

“They keep us alive like khaat in a pen. We kill him, the humans know it is not enough.”

“No, listen—”

“Seal it!” the third phren interjected. He straightened and leaned into Khora, an ineffective

gesture, as he was an unusually short phren. “We have listened enough. You plan and plan and do nothing, and for twelveday after twelveday we sit with midlimbs tucked in our pouches. No more.”

When Khora began to protest again, the other two turned their knives in his direction. He stared at them both for a long moment before saying to Thomas, “I am very sorry. The moss will have you.”

This was a bit more spunk than Thomas had hoped. These phren

were underfed but Thomas, who had never had a moment's self-defense training, was under no illusion he could disarm them. Still, he readied himself to move as they struck.

As the yellow one stabbed a forelimb forward, Thomas heard a roar from behind and the phren's shell collapsed inward. The second knife-wielder stumbled backward and fell.

"Get down, Envoy!" The gruff voice of Hirokh sliced through the ringing in Thomas' ears from the

gunshot.

Thomas dove to the ground, pulling Khora with him. “Tomorrow!” he hissed at the young phren. “The back door again, and don’t bring any more of your moss-eaten friends. Now go!”

He stood up, trying to place himself between Khora and the source of the shots. He saw Hirokh climbing through the wall of garbage and slumped against him as if for support. Hirokh steadied him, then stared down the alley, but Khora had

disappeared. “You would do well, Envoy, to think of me as your bodyguard, not as your jailer,” he said amiably.

The short phren still lay on the ground. Hirokh leaned over, yanked him up by a midlimb. Holding his gun in a forelimb, he pressed the muzzle into the side of the Tokhin’s head, which barely reached Hirokh’s massive chest.

“Where did the other go? Who is he?”

“I will tell you nothing,

Enforcer.”

Hirokh turned his midlimbs up. “I believe you,” he said, and pulled the trigger.

5

Nowhere on the entire planet surface could Thomas find a moment’s privacy, either from Hirokh or the moss, except in his sealed apartment under the Hall of Ministers. The moment Hirokh left him that night he went to the kitchen to swallow his daily antibiotic, then

headed straight for the shower stall.

The antiseptic spray killed the moss spores clinging to his body within seconds. Thomas stood under the scalding water for over an hour.

Still, as he dried, the prickling sensation returned. He began to scratch his skin. He scratched faster and harder, until he felt moisture under his fingernails. Long streaks of blood appeared on his chest and arms.

He felt no pain, as if the skin he peeled away did not belong to him,

but the color stung his eyes.

He turned off the lights and kept scratching.

6

Nearly being murdered was a handy excuse to spend some time in orbit at P-Station.

At the ramp to the shuttle, Thomas clasped Hirokh hand-to-forelimb and thanked him again for saving his life. Hirokh swirled his midlimbs in a phren gesture without human equivalent, essentially a

denial that any favor was done. “I had to save you, or the Council would have believed I let you die on purpose. They know how I dislike you.”

Thomas chuckled and boarded the shuttle, thinking Hirokh would never forgive him if he learned what he had just done.

The shuttle lifted as if heading into orbit, but high in Phrentyr’s tortured stratosphere it turned back to deposit Thomas in Doubletown. Thomas did not imagine the

Solarans would be fooled long, but perhaps long enough for him to meet Khora without anyone getting killed this time. Thomas was all too conscious of the irony that he was deceiving the phren who had just saved his life in order to collaborate with one of those who tried to kill him.



Thomas was pleasantly surprised to see Lieutenant Fernandez at the steering panel of the waiting native

groundcar. Between the lack of her too-conspicuous body armor and the contorted position the phren car's driver seat demanded, she could not have looked less comfortable.

“I thought you were off duty.”

“Right,” she said. “You call the closest thing to a covert op we’re ever going to get on this planet, and I’m going to miss it for another round with the stimbot.”

After confirming that Thomas had planted the nanotransmitters on Hirokh, Fernandez attached a device

next to the car's steering panel to alert them if Hirokh approached within 200 meters. She then merged them into traffic and guided them toward the Tokhin Retreat.

“Whose shift was it supposed to be? Harding?” Thomas asked. “How’d you get him to step aside?”

“He wouldn’t argue. He knows I’m your favorite. He probably thinks I’m sleeping with you.”

Thomas laughed. “Just say the word, Lieutenant, but be gentle.”

She looked back at him more

seriously than he expected. “Today’s the first time I might consider it, Boss. I like a guy with a spine.”

Before Thomas could respond they arrived behind the Retreat, where Khora waited alone. He clambered quickly into the rear couch with Thomas.

“Nice to see you without your keeper, Envoy.” Still brashly gripping midlimbs in forelimbs, he showed no sign of contrition for the night before. “I assume he doesn’t know you are here in Doubletown?”

“Yes, what he doesn’t know won’t hurt us.” He nodded to Fernandez to get them moving again.

Khora held midlimbs up in agreement. “I have heard stories about our Chief Enforcer, both from the war and after. He will do anything to keep his secrets.”

“I hope you are ready to share some of yours.”

“I only wish I had more to share. But first, Envoy, I must thank you for saving my life last night.”

Thomas elected not to point out that Khora had nearly cost him his. “Although perhaps it would be better if I were killed.”

They had no time for idle talk, but Thomas could not help his curiosity. “How so?”

“My generation of Tokhin do not expect to be granted long life, but we have a belief. There are Two Gods, and if One calls you back early, the Other compensates by granting your fondest wish as you die. Yesterday I prayed to Both that

before I die I should behold the one who will deliver Sha'ad Tokh back to us. And then I met you."

"So you do believe Sha'ad Tokh still exists?"

"Yes, Envoy. I know that by the grace of Both it survived the war. I think it is still in this city, but I don't know where."

"Seems unlikely. By now every inch of Doubletown has been searched three times over by Solarans."

"I did not say it was in

Doubletown.”

Thomas leaned his body with the motion as Fernandez weaved the car through traffic. “What are you saying, that Solarans have it?”

“No. But it may be with one of the hidden.” Thomas looked at him blankly. “My mother believes that a few Tokhin escaped confinement in Doubletown and have blended in with Solarans in the Holy City.”

Thomas pondered this new information and whether High Priestess Khorana meant him to have

it. “How can we find them? Does your mother know any?”

“If she does, she will never reveal it. But I think I have another way to find out. If we—”

“Sir!” Fernandez barked. Thomas realized that the device she had placed on the dash was beeping and blinking rapidly. Hirokh was already closing in.

A thunderclap battered Thomas from all around. It took a moment to realize that the noise was somehow related to the afterimage in his eyes,

of the car in front of them lifting into the air, flipping backward toward them, engulfed in a searing flare of light.

* * *

He shook his head but it would not clear. What had happened? A random bombing? Assassination attempt? Stumbling out of the car he peered through the smoke. The front of the adjacent building had slumped to the ground. Phren hobbled away, while others knelt to treat the

severely injured, but he saw nothing threatening. Rather, the entire scene was strangely calm, the phren curiously nonchalant, as if it were all too familiar to upset them.

Next to their demolished groundcar he spotted Fernandez lying in the street. He rushed to her and turned her over to see first her unblinking eyes, then her shattered body. Something had torn through her chest, and the front of her uniform was a great scarlet stain. Then the copper smell hit him.

Just like...

Oh, God, he was there. He was there again, Kayleigh right in front of him. He couldn't turn his eyes away. She filled his vision, her face so beautiful, her chest a bloody ruin. Blood was everywhere. He couldn't stop seeing her blood, smelling it. So much blood. The whole world was bright red.

Like an infant he sobbed, water streaming from his eyes, which he could not close.

“Sir! Sir! We have to get you out

of here!” Another marine. Except there hadn’t been another marine. Thomas turned his head and saw the shuttle somehow squeezed into the intersection just ahead. He had not heard it land. How long had he been here?

“Sir!” shouted the marine. “Your hand is cut!” Thomas looked down numbly and winced at the red mark. “We’ve got to get you treated for infection right away.”

“Get Khora.”

“Sir?”

“The phren I was with, my informant. Could be in danger.” Thomas looked all around, finally realized what he should have known immediately.

Khora was gone.

7

Lieutenant Harding treated his hand, while other marines triangulated Hirokh's position from the nanotransmitters, using links from their satellite array. Thomas was certain Hirokh was behind that

car bombing, and he hoped they could find Khora by tracking Hirokh. If Khora really knew how to find Sha'ad Tokh, they dare not leave him with the Chief Enforcer.

Precious minutes later their shuttle set down outside an old prison, so decrepit that from the outside it looked abandoned. The marines' attitude both pleased and alarmed Thomas in two respects. First, they did not hesitate to charge into action, when they must have suspected he had no authority to

order them to do any such thing. Second, none made any attempt to dissuade Thomas from charging in with them.

The prison kept people in, not out. The marines swept past all three security checkpoints in bare moments, sprinting by most phren they passed, immobilizing the few who raised a weapon. Only one phren got off even a single shot, and the marines took no casualties.

They heard the screams as soon as they reached the long hall of

holding cells. Speakers carried them for the other Tokhin prisoners to hear.

As he raced past, Thomas heard the other prisoners shouting encouragement to Khora, yelling at the top of their lungs, "There are Two, brother!"

Turning into an open cell just behind Harding and the lead group of marines, Thomas' nostrils flared at the sharp tang of moss mingled with phren blood. From manacles on the far wall dangled Khora, his soft pale

flesh exposed through jagged gaps cut in his shell. Nothing moved but Khora's chest shuddering with labored breath and his blood dripping into a crimson puddle. A deep wound in his abdomen drew Thomas' gaze.

A single, very large phren stood in front of Khora, his back to the humans, beside a surgeon's array of glinting instruments. "I am sorry you had to see this, Envoy," said Hirokh without turning, as he plunged a short blade into Khora's chest. Three

marines rushed to pull Hirokh away, while Harding checked Khora, but Thomas had too much faith in Hirokh's efficiency to believe he might survive.

The bloody gap in Khora's abdomen again flashed into Thomas' mind the image of his murdered wife. So hard had he tried to forget that picture, but now the shock of recognition pummeled him like moss, impossible to set aside.

So senseless. The nameless killer had taken her right index finger, to

withdraw cash from their account, but the fool had to know there would be a cap on withdrawals. He could have gotten more money from her with a good sob story.

Everyone was very sympathetic of course. More than anything, that sympathy drove him offworld. He couldn't stand everybody patting him on the back and feeling sorry and secretly thrilled, because who knew anyone who had been murdered in this day and age? His family worried of depression, but he

was no more depressed than happy. He was a phantom, a strange partial version of himself, someone he had never wanted to be and could not understand.

On Phrentyr, where over a billion people had perished, he thought others would appreciate his grief. But it was no use. To the phren, their loved ones' deaths made a perverse kind of sense. Solarans clearly believed the Great One approved of the slaughter. Tokhin held hope that their Two Gods

would someday redeem Their chosen people with more slaughter. None, except maybe Hirokh, could conceive that Thomas lacked any such faith.

Thomas focused his eyes, spotting what he had missed before: Khora's cloak was stripped away and the slash across his belly cut through his abdominal mouth to reveal his pouch. He had been desecrated, contrary to the most sacred phren taboo.

Kayleigh's death once left

Thomas numb, but the murder of Khora, whom he had met only a day before, filled him with fury. Was he the only person left in the universe who knew it was wrong to kill people? Would he have to rub the blood into each of their goddamn noses to explain it?

Through the gore of Khora's open pouch, Thomas saw a splash of blue. He reached in and pulled out something solid and heavy. Ignoring the bloody stain it left, he wiped it with his own shirt. It was a brick, a

clay brick stained a deep blue. It made no sense. Why would Khora have been carrying a brick in his pouch for their rendezvous?

Hirokh interrupted his thoughts. “Envoy, you know you have no right to be here.”

Thomas could barely contain his rage. “Right?” he whispered. “You want to speak of rights? Who gave you the right to torture and murder? To expose another phren’s pouch to the moss?” He spat onto Hirokh’s face.

Hirokh wiped it off slowly. “The Great One gave me the right.”

How did I come to this? Thomas wondered. Here was his only friend, the only person Thomas had shared any connection with since Kayleigh’s death. And he was a butcher.

Thomas glared at Hirokh and savored his hatred.

8

Ordinarily even Thomas could not gain entry to the Solaran Council on less than a twelveday’s notice, but

this time repeated warnings to every government agency that Earth might withhold aid to Phrentyr had gotten him here in four days.

The instant the massive doors opened, Thomas rushed directly to the great square Council table, deliberately forcing Hirokh into a Frankensteinian lumber to keep up. Without preamble he announced the withdrawal of all human aid for the ruling government's violations of the Tokhin people's freedom of religion. He stood prepared to make good on

the threat, too. It was against his orders, but Thomas had decided he didn't give a crap. It would also cause the deaths of thousands of innocent phren, but he could summon no sympathy for them, nor could he even manage to despise himself for that. He once thought himself a compassionate man, but that person was now buried under an impenetrable shell.

Several members of the Council showed obvious alarm at his threat but the Chief Councilman, de facto

president of all Phrentyr, simply held his midlimbs rigidly folded.

Several Councilmen in turn adamantly averred their benevolence toward the Tokhin. Thomas responded by pointing his finger directly at Hirokh, an intolerably rude gesture for the Council chamber. “Four days ago, this phren tortured and killed a Tokhin for no crime other than speaking with me about how to help his people practice their religion in peace.”

This brought a great uproar, and

Thomas marveled at the degree of shouting and gesturing permitted by Solaran parliamentary procedure. Councilman Rotin, the Chief's unofficial second in command, finally quieted the others. "Surely there is a misunderstanding. Enforcer Hirokh, can you explain to the honored Envoy how he is mistaken?"

"No," said Hirokh, not bothering to emphasize with midlimbs. "The Envoy's statement is true."

Thomas studied the Chief for

any reaction and still saw nothing. Rotin began to say something to Thomas, then thought better of it and addressed Hirokh. "Hirokh, as Chief Enforcer, you must never take any action that might jeopardize our people, who still depend on the gracious help of our human friends."

Now Hirokh swung his midlimbs sharply in front of his great torso. "You whimper like unnamed children, when you have nothing at all to fear. With respect, the Envoy misstates his position." Thomas tried

not to show any reaction to this bold declaration.

“It is past time for the Council to evaluate the humans’ presence,” Hirokh continued. “They send us a single diplomat, a handful of aid volunteers and we receive sporadic visits from small trading vessels. Meanwhile, they construct a heavily-armed orbital station, on which the Envoy has told me some two hundred marines are stationed, and we often detect human warships passing through this system without

stopping on our world.

“Councilmen, the humans are here not from altruism,” he sneered. “Their help is a soft layer of moss over the hard granite of their true purpose. This system is clearly a strategic base in some larger conflict of theirs. Despite the Envoy’s personal feelings, Earth will not meddle in our internal affairs and risk our cooperation should their conflict ever touch this planet. Will the Council bow to the pervert-worshippers over an empty pouch?”

Thomas answered quickly, startled at how accurately Hirokh had puzzled all that out. “A splendid fantasy, Hirokh, but absolutely false, and the moss can take me if I lie.” He had disowned any feelings of friendship, but Thomas still had to admire the huge old phren’s deductive skills and his twisted sort of integrity. Hirokh was a killer, yet here he stood uncomplicatedly sticking to his principles, while Thomas lied through his teeth. “You know the extent of our technology. I

do not mean to offend, but your people could offer us no assistance in any armed conflict.” In a space battle that was true, but in a dirt-side action it was critical to have the locals on your side.

The Council launched into a debate, and Thomas knew he had to cut it off or he would lose his chance. “Listen!” he shouted. “Imagine for a moment that Hirokh is right. Suppose I have no authority to withdraw aid, that I will be removed from office just for threatening it,” all

of which was entirely true. “But then recall that our nearest command base is over three of your light years away. If I order aid withdrawn, it will be withdrawn for six years, no matter if Hirokh has guessed right.” That was probably true as well, depending on how persuasive Thomas could be with P-Station’s commanding officer. “Hirokh speaks of faraway Earth, but you,” he stared at the Chief, “must deal with me.”

This succeeded in cutting through the rhetoric. “Tell us what

you want,” answered Rotin.

“The wall around Doubletown will come down,” said Thomas. “Tokhin will be allowed to live and work anywhere in the Holy City. You will not prevent them from living in peace or from building and using places of worship.”

The Council again erupted in angry shouts, but Thomas could soon see that his threats had turned the tide in his favor. Human aid was still vital to Phrentyr’s economy, and economic collapse could bring down

this ruling Council.

Once the noise receded, Rotin formally addressed the Chief. “My Lord, it is the judgment of the Council that we must agree to the Envoy’s... requests.”

The Chief stood slowly, bowed to each Councilman in turn, then emphatically chopped his midlimbs no.

Rotin had apparently anticipated this. He also looked one at a time at the Councilmen, and they all responded with midlimbs up. “My

Lord,” he said, “the Council regards this as a matter of utmost priority. These words have not been spoken in this chamber since you uttered them twenty years ago, but today I say: Lord, you must relent.”

The Chief signaled no again. “We have defeated the enemy,” he said through labored breath, “and you will give our victory away. My eyes shall not see this abomination occur.” He sat down, crossed his forelimbs and midlimbs, and closed his eyes.

Rotin stood, reached under the council table with a forelimb, strode over and touched both of the Chief's cheeks with his midlimbs. Then he thrust a short blade through the Chief's exoskeleton. Each of the other Councilmen in turn stepped to the Chief and stabbed him again.

Unnerved by this abrupt demonstration of Solaran democracy, Thomas missed Rotin's next words to Hirokh. But all the Councilmen still held their knives ready, and despite himself he feared

for his old friend. "Although your loyalty to the Chief is well known," Rotin continued, "I also know that your word is beyond reproach. If any here doubt it, speak now." No one answered. "Tell us, Hirokh, that you will follow the instructions of the Council, and we need not slay you as well."

"I am Chief Enforcer," Hirokh answered without hesitation. "I enforce the will of the state. All of you are now the state, so I enforce your will. If it is your order that we

permit worship of the deviant gods, so be it.” The Council members relaxed. Hirokh continued in a voice edged with ice, “But it pleases me to know you will all lie together in Hell, feeling your guts consumed by moss for all eternity.”

9

The procession slowly wound its way out from the Tokhin Retreat all the way past the gates of Doubletown. Nearly all the P-Station marines were dirt-side to help keep

the peace. From his place in the lead Thomas could not accurately count the marchers, but the group seemed even larger than the one thousand phren thought to inhabit Doubletown. Perhaps their number was swelled by the ghosts of many more Tokhin.

His legs ached from the past four days spent covering each neighborhood of Doubletown on foot, pleading personally with nearly every Tokhin to march with him. Some only needed to hear the gate in

the wall would be open. But most were wary, and Thomas feared that no amount of cajoling could persuade them, that he had forfeited his position as envoy for nothing. In the end, his best tactic was to make a martyr of Khora. He recounted Khora's death in ever more embellished details, telling all who would listen that Khora's dying wish was for his people to return to the First Temple. This was only a slight distortion; his actual prayer had been for the return of Sha'ad Tokh, but

Thomas could not satisfy that wish.

They paraded slowly to the grounds of the First Temple, via the vast crater of the old Tokhin Director's Hall. This city had suffered less damage than other major cities due to both sides' respect for its religious significance, but many reminders of the carnage remained.

The light rain soon abated, and through the layer of clouds poked a brilliant orange sun. The group stirred with the good omen, but the scalding glare only reminded

Thomas how insufferable this world would be but for the war.

Hirokh silently paced him. Thomas had warned the marines that Hirokh might try to kill him before the day ended but was not confident they could prevent it. Nevertheless, as they walked he spoke to Hirokh. "I suppose we are even, Hirokh. You must hate me for this." He regretted his choice of words at once; the term "even" was distasteful to Solarans, for its implication of duality.

Hirokh showed no sign of

offense. “We are ‘even,’ Envoy, in that we have each profoundly misjudged the other. For all their high-minded talk, I never believed humans actually cared what should happen to the Tokhin. I thought their indifference confirmed when they sent their new envoy, a clearly broken man.

“Yet you found a way to lead these people when they could not lead themselves. I compliment you, Envoy, and I marvel at the marriage you must have had, for it to leave

you such strength despite your obvious despair.”

Thomas found he could not look Hirokh in the eye to answer. Still, a part of Thomas would have liked to correct him. His marriage with Kayleigh had been far from perfect. Too often they were absorbed in their individual concerns instead of sharing their lives. Sometimes he allowed himself to forget how much he loved her; sometimes he thought he hated her. But the bond between them gradually grew, and he had

believed someday they would get it just right, they would give each other everything they could. That hope, that anticipation, her killer had taken all that away.

Thomas did not believe he would ever again experience such hope for the future, but he was daring to think he could offer it to the worshippers of the Two Gods.



Cresting the hill to the grounds of the First Temple, Thomas recoiled

at the scene before him. On his instructions marines had burned away the moss where the temple once stood, and several truckloads of clay bricks rested in piles near one edge of the circle. Around the perimeter of that circle crowded thousands and thousands of phren. It had to be half the Holy City's populace. On the bright side, the crowd's presence eased Thomas' fear that the Solarans might drop a nuke on them today.

Thomas motioned his marines to

the front of the procession, but he could not guess whether they would be able to hold off the onslaught if all these Solarans attempted to fall on the Tokhin. But he would not back down.

As Lieutenant Harding corralled the marines into a human barrier, Thomas led the parade to the dusty central circle. Turning to the crowd, he held high the blue brick from Khora's slashed pouch. Tokhin and Solarans alike murmured in reaction. Waiting for them to quiet, Thomas

cataloged everything that could go wrong. The Solaran spectators could surge forward and start a riot. The Tokhin could refuse to attempt to build a new temple. Or perhaps they would try, but not know how. Or if they knew how, they might still refuse to use the temple without Sha'ad Tokh.

“This brick is from the First Temple!” Thomas cried at the Tokhin. The murmuring began again, but he shouted over it. “Beginning with this brick, we will

build a new temple. Perhaps some of you here also have original bricks from the First Temple.” Thomas had no way of knowing, but he hoped that Khora had not been the only Tokhin to use his pouch to guard a remnant of the sacred temple. All those bricks had gone somewhere. “If so, step forward and help me build the new foundation.”

On the sunken impression left by the former First Temple Thomas laid his brick. He turned back to the group of Tokhin, and for a few

moments none moved. Then High Priestess Khorana stepped forward from the crowd and walked up to Thomas. He thought perhaps she meant to confront him about her son's death, but instead she reached under her cloak and withdrew a silver brick, which she displayed to the crowd. To a raucous cheer from the Tokhin, she set it down next to his.

Other Tokhin came forward to add to the line of bricks, and slowly the base of a temple emerged from

the dust. Somehow the Tokhin knew just where to leave a gap for the temple door.

Wiping his forehead of sweat, Thomas stepped toward the throng of Solaran spectators and raised his voice for another calculated risk. "If there are any Tokhin living in secret among the Solarans, now is the time to come out of hiding. If you still think of yourselves as Tokhin, then you must not live out your whole lives as Solarans."

He crossed to four different

points on the perimeter of the temple grounds and said the same for all the crowd to hear. They jeered, and no Tokhin rose to his challenge. Perhaps Khora had been wrong that a few were hidden among the Solarans, or perhaps they were yet too afraid to give up their camouflage.

The temple grew rapidly. The bricks the Tokhin laid were not uniform, but locked together in a complex pattern, like tiles on an ancient space shuttle. Dry and free of

moss for the moment, most were gray but blue and silver mixed here and there in the swiftly growing wall. The colors at first seemed random, but eventually a shifting pattern emerged.

Thomas had thought Tokhin temples constructed of concentric rings of bricks. Now he could see that the bricks formed a single, unending spiral, tilting inward as it climbed.

The temple continued to rise, and Thomas realized nearly every

Tokhin had carried a brick through the parade. Even so, they were nearing the end of the procession, and the walls of the temple were hardly a meter off the ground. When the last Tokhin had set her brick in place, Thomas motioned the group to the piles of bricks nearby. But none made any move toward them.

Then it happened.

Thomas thought they had exhausted the procession, but when he glanced back at the temple several more Tokhin were lined up to add to

the wall. And the line was growing.

Phren emerged from the crowd on every side of the temple grounds. Thomas saw dozens step from among the Solarans, and then like the sun bursting through the haze earlier began a steady flow of hundreds out of the crowd, to add to the wall. It tilted inward as it spiraled up, but remained stable.

Within minutes, Thomas could see that the newcomers outnumbered his original procession. There were at least a

thousand of them. And still they came. All across the grounds embraced neighbors who could never before reveal themselves. Some of the original procession cheered their emerging comrades, but most stood in dumb amazement.

Now the crowd filled the entire temple grounds, and the Solaran watchers receded from the swelling tide of Tokhin. Thomas realized that half or more of the Solaran watchers who jeered at him minutes before had not been Solaran at all.

The highest tiers of the brick spiral nearly paralleled the ground, yet the pattern remained and no brick slipped out of place, even with the weight of Tokhin climbing the exterior to add more.

Thomas stepped into the gap left for a door and saw some of the Tokhin had brought not bricks but pieces of marble, deposited inside the temple wall. Three phren crouched on the ground assembling the pieces according to some intricate design.

The inside of the new, vastly old,

temple was too small to hold even a tiny fraction of the throng. But with the First Temple in place, Thomas was sure the Tokhin would build new temples, then maybe go on to build new lives.

Phren nudged Thomas out of the doorway, to decorate the interior of the temple with thin drapes and rugs, all magically spirited from pouches. One brought a small lamp, which sputtered and issued a sharp, bitter odor. Thomas inhaled and a weight lifted from his chest, which

registered after a moment as the absence of any scent of moss.

The marble construction was complete, a narrow pedestal. As Thomas watched, two more phren entered carrying something between them. They uncovered it to reveal a massive copy of The Word of Both. Far too large to hold in their pouches, these two had managed to smuggle the book under a cloak all the way from Doubletown. Reverently they set it on the pedestal.

Now all the phren left the

interior of the temple, and Thomas walked out with them to face an enormous crowd looking to him in anticipation.

He had no idea what to do next.

10

Thomas spotted High Priestess Khorana and stepped to her. “Can you say a blessing or... something?”

Her midlimbs rose in affirmation, yet she said clearly, “No.” Seeing Thomas’ consternation, she added, “I cannot, but someone

here can.”

Khorana walked boldly toward the remaining Solarans, directly to an older phren woman standing at the front of the crowd. They clasped midlimbs. Khorana pulled the woman—her mother?—out of the crowd and strode back to the temple.

This was the last of the procession. The woman climbed to the top of the gently sloping temple and added her brick. It had an odd trapezoidal shape, and when slotted into place it left only a neat, circular

opening at the top.

Turning to face the crowd from the top of the temple dome, she began to recite a long blessing in the ancient Tokhin language. Among all the assembled worshippers, there was only one other who could understand her words, yet thousands wept for joy to hear the Old Tongue spoken again. The final words in her prayer were “Sha’ad Tokh,” repeated three times.

The crowd took up the chant, “Sha’ad Tokh! Sha’ad Tokh! Sha’ad

Tokh!...” Thomas thought he sensed a wistful tone to the chant, as if the Tokhin did not truly believe that Sha’ad Tokh survived to complete their temple.

As the crowd continued to chant, the old woman descended from the temple. Thomas thought she was walking to him, but she stepped past to Hirokh, whom she caressed gently on the cheeks with both her forelimbs and midlimbs. Thomas could not have been more stunned if Hirokh had sprouted wings and

taken flight.

She backed away from Hirokh, and he approached Thomas. The Envoy was amazed to see that he was weeping openly. Hirokh stretched out forelimbs and midlimbs and embraced Thomas, who was too bewildered to feel revulsion.

“I never thought to see this day in my lifetime,” Hirokh said. “May They Both bless you.”

He walked toward the front row of Tokhin, then stopped and lowered onto midlimbs. His torso

clenched and rippled, and he threw his head back and gasped as if giving birth.

Finally he drew a deep, shuddering breath and stood. From beneath his cloak he drew a bright globe and held it aloft to the crowd. Marbled blue and silver swirls shimmered and shifted over its surface, echoing the pattern of the temple walls.

Sha'ad Tokh.

The nearest Tokhin fell forward onto midlimbs as they beheld it. To

Thomas it seemed not a religious observance, but that they were too overcome with relief and wonder to stand.

As each row of Tokhin knelt, those behind saw the orb and knelt in turn. The movement rippled outward in concentric circles as far as Thomas could see.

When all of them were prone the chant resumed, but with greater passion. The crowd's collective voice rumbled over the ground. "Sha'ad Tokh!"

Hirokh stepped back to Thomas. He strode lightly, without his usual shuffling gait. Thomas realized that he had limped not from an injury, but because of the burden he had always carried.

“You?” he asked in astonishment. “All along, you held Sha’ad Tokh?”

“It had to be kept where no one would think to look for it,” he answered through tears of happiness and relief. “Besides, no one else could swallow it. Envoy, will you place it at the top of the temple?”

“Me? I don’t think I should.”

Hirokh persisted. “Please.” He hesitated. “Thomas. It is fitting to honor the Two Gods, Who brought you to us to hasten this moment.”

Thomas found he could not refuse Hirokh, whom he had so recently learned to despise. “Come with me?” If this was against custom, Hirokh did not object.

They started to walk toward the temple, but Khorana and the older woman stepped forward and placed midlimbs on their chests to halt

them. They motioned to the crowd and it parted to reveal a group of phren lifting a tub of water from a fire, which Thomas had not seen them light.

They brought the tub and set it before Hirokh, who removed his cloak, something Thomas had never before seen any phren do. At a gesture from Khorana, Thomas also undressed. With sponges from the tub, so hot that no moss grew, Khorana and the other woman bathed Thomas and Hirokh, who

never put down Sha'ad Tokh. The women then covered both in long jewel-encrusted cloaks to an approving cheer from the crowd.

Thomas and Hirokh climbed together to the top of the temple dome. As they ascended, Thomas marveled at the stability of the structure he had just witnessed assembled without benefit of mortar or plans or anything but ancient, dusty bricks.

At the top, Hirokh handed him Sha'ad Tokh, so heavy Thomas had

to brace it against his chest with both hands. Slowly he lowered it to slide smoothly into the gap at the top of the temple. Hirokh pounded it firmly into place with each of his forelimbs and midlimbs in turn.

A great roar from the throng of worshippers buffeted them. Still kneeling on midlimbs, the crowd shouted even as they continued to cry with elation.

The moss would be a meter high here tomorrow from the moisture of all their tears.



After descending, Thomas faced Hirokh. “All those years. How did you manage?”

“Do not be concerned for me,” he answered, wiping his face. “Many of my people have sacrificed their lives for the Two Gods. I am one of the lucky ones. I did not have to die to do it.”

Thomas shook his head in disbelief. He knew what it was to cast off one’s entire life, but he had merely run away, not become a

completely different person.

“But all the things you did. How did you... How could you...”

“There are Two Gods, and sometimes They require us to become two.” Tears continued to stream down Hirokh’s face, and Thomas realized they were not all for joy. “I only pray to Both that I can still remember who I was before.”

Thomas sank to his knees, joining the multitude all around them. He stared up into the face of this creature, at once the most

contemptible and the most noble person he had ever met, and for the first time he believed.

There are Two.



The Burbles

by Van Aaron Hughes

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• • • •

Lincoln didn't mind getting fired
when the boss got the notion
he put the piranha in her prize
tropical fish tank or becoming

impotent from tainted tofu from his
vegan girlfriend who then ran off
with the rent money and his best
friend who only eats meat or
Greyhounding to his folks to find the
family home sold to Tibetan drug
lords and his parents gone to
Ecuador with no forwarding address
or limping about on the broken toe
the bus ran over or being flat broke
from paying the bus fare and the
contraband marine life dealer.

For Lincoln acknowledged only
two states of being: pain and death.

He had never been so alive.

What Lincoln minded was having to move in with Uncle Abe and Aunt Beatrice in Southwest Suburbia. Lincoln hated the quiet at night, the stockade fence holding the real world at bay. He was sure he had seen more of life in his 26 years than all five members of this family combined.

His fourth day there, Lincoln decided he could not survive one more evening refraining from comment as Aunt spent hours in the

kitchen hauling a microwaved dinner to a table covered in clear plastic, as Pinhead Son #1 romeroed to his antique computer games, as Pinhead Son #2 shouted at referees on television while clinging to a football helmet as if coach might send him in to play tailback any moment, as Uncle stared at the game even though he hated football because he couldn't bear to dislodge Woody the family cat from his lap, as Pinhead Daughter drifted through applying powder to a face already so

caked up she looked ready to turn tricks if her overpowering perfume hadn't driven away the johns.

Time to get snide, for sanity's sake. Starting in the study, where Carter(PS1) sat before a computer monitor in a tall wooden chair turned around so he had to peer between the slats like an infant in a playpen.

“Good thing you dropped out of school, so you have time to play this.”

“Didn't drop out, Cuz, I flunked

out.”

“What the hell is that? Pac-Man?”

“Junior Pac-Man.”

“I’m sure some day you’ll graduate to the senior tour.”

“No way, Cuz, Junior Pac-Man is way harder.”

“You know, when the pilgrims invented these games, you had to go someplace to play them, so there was a social aspect.”

“They were like MMORPGs?”

“Except the fantasy world wasn’t virtual.” Did Pac-Man used to have a

propeller beanie?

“Cuz, you want to stand further back from the screen.”

Was the yellow blob actually chewing the dots it gobbled? As Lincoln peered closer, the screen bulged outward and Junior Pac-Man reared up and sank teeth into Lincoln’s cheek.

“Christ!” he shouted, pulling away. The screen popped back into place as blood flowed down Lincoln’s face. He could see the Pac-Man back in his maze, now trailing a

smear of red pixels.

“Just be glad it wasn’t Ms. Pac-Man,” said Carter. “She always goes for the crotch.”

Scrambling to the bathroom for something to staunch the bleeding, Lincoln brushed past an emerging Uncle Abe. He tried to ignore his uncle’s stench as he grabbed some gauze under the sink. The mirror showed his cut wasn’t so deep as it felt.

Movement drew his eye to the odoriferous fumes visibly coalescing

over the toilet. As he watched, they formed a three-fingered vapor hand, which flew at him and jammed two fingers up his nose and into his sinuses. He screamed and fell backward, but the fingers weren't letting go as easily as Junior Pac-Man.

Then the pressure vanished, as for the first time Lincoln smelled Dora(PD)'s perfume with enjoyment.

“Now you know why I wear this shit,” she said, helping him off the

bathroom floor.

Stomping into the family room, Lincoln stepped between the TV and Uncle Abe, who had resumed his blissful oblivion, scratching Woody behind the ear. “You might want to lose the cat and get control of your house, Uncle.”

“Incompatible, Lincoln,” he answered dreamily, as Aunt Beatrice called out that dinner was ready.

Intending to set the pet aside, Lincoln lifted Woody from Abe’s lap, to reveal a fantastically engorged

part of the tomcat's anatomy. Evidently the cat's name had nothing to do with the movie Toy Story.

Lincoln tossed the cat in revulsion. Woody landed with teeth bared and launched itself at him. He turned aside from the cat's rush, a terrible mistake. Woody slashed through his jeans with its leonine claws, and Lincoln screamed from sudden pressure. Lincoln tried to shake off the feline rapist, but it only dug claws deeper into his thighs. "I said, dinner!" his aunt shouted.

Next into the fray was cousin Eli(PS2), who tried to pry Woody off, his feet straining against the carpet as he dug his shoulder into the cat's orange pelt like a tackling dummy. Lincoln endured hours of agony for ten seconds before Woody came free and turned its wrath on Eli, slashing at his face so viciously it would have left multiple scars if he hadn't been wearing his football helmet.

“Third and final call for dinner!” Beatrice screamed.

“Shit!” shouted Eli. He threw the cat aside and bolted up the stairs to the dining room without stopping to remove his helmet. Ignoring the blood streaming from his legs, Lincoln raced after, in sudden dread that the plastic over the table was meant for something more than crumbs.

Lincoln dove into a chair and grinned at his new home’s unsuspected hecticcy. Maybe this family wasn’t so bad, once you got to know them.



Random Fire

by Van Aaron Hughes

First published in Abyss & Apex (Oct. 2011), edited by Wendy S. Delmater

• • • •

June 10:

I have never kept a journal. I make day-to-day notes on my research, but a file for personal

thoughts always struck me as vanity. Today, however, a little vanity is appropriate. Someday, people will wonder what went through my head at this moment.

This is the big one, the breakthrough I always dreamt of.

I try not to think of the five-letter n-word, but at a minimum it means a full professorship, perhaps the department chair, with Randolph one foot in the grave. Or maybe I will tell the dean what I think of him and go talk to Stanford or MIT. Not

Caltech, of course. Harwell shares my area of expertise, with no room for me next to his ego.

The breakthrough is a variation on the double-slit experiment. The standard experiment fires particles at a plate cut with parallel slits. Particles passing through interfere with each other before striking the screen on the far side. Even a single particle interferes with itself as, in a very real sense, it passes through both slits at once. Only an observer's presence collapses the wave function and

forces the particle to “choose” which slit to pass through.

My version uses an electron gun with tiny variations in the firing sequence, variations independent of the magnetic field or the electron's topology or spin or string rotation, creating a random element to when the gun fires. The key is randomizing the gun just the right way so the wave function controls when, not where, the particle fires. In essence, I am conducting a double-slit experiment with the slits offset in

time rather than space.

Incredibly, I have detected in the electrons' impacts a temporal interference pattern.

People are just getting used to the idea a particle can be in two places at once, but this shows it can simultaneously occupy the same space at different times. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle applies not only to where a particle is, but when.

With the university quiet since finals ended, I've made great progress working without interference. Good

thing I'm alone—I've caught myself a few times doing my old cool-science dance from years ago, back when I conducted experiments for the thrill of learning something new, before physics became a job.

I've told no one of my results except Felice, who didn't understand much more than they are very exciting, which only earned me her FEDs—fiery eyes of doom. I had to promise three times I will not be off doing experiments as the baby arrives.

June 23:

Every day I come up with new variations on the experiment.

I should be pushing forward to publication, to get my name on this before anyone else stumbles on it. How can I forget that goal? They wallpaper the hallway to the lab with blow-ups of abstracts and illos from papers authored here at Colorado, unsubtle reminders to keep your eyes on the publication prize.

But my mind keeps wandering,

giddy with the implications of these results, my finding that an observer can collapse a wave function to alternate times. Of course one can't extrapolate from elementary particles to a macro scale, and yet...

For the first time since reading H.G. Wells as a boy, I half believe in the possibility of manipulating time.

Distracted by these thoughts, I find myself even more detached than usual. This morning, I took the Olds right through the new stoplight at Everson Drive. Why is that light

there? I never see any traffic coming down off the Flatirons to that intersection. Perhaps it's to make us stop and ponder the key questions of life: Why are we here? How do we control our fates? Why is a jagged outcropping of rock called the "Flatirons"?

* * *

July 8:

Still not close to publication.

The paper should include Bloch spheres corresponding to my

temporal results, but I have difficulty conceptualizing them. I tried to look up St. Andrews' web page on applying algebraic topology to quantum mechanics, but it's disappeared.

There's no denying the Internet's usefulness as a research tool, but I find it so frustrating. Give me old-fashioned books, where whatever is on the page stays on the damn page. On the Web, you find something you like, then a moment later it's deleted or changed without

explanation.

Memory says Bremen did that topology page, and he's now at Caltech. Surely coincidence, but I must be alert to any possibility Harwell's team is researching along my lines. I tried to call Bremen, but he's at the Antwerp conference. Where I should be. But Felice would never forgive me for being gone when the baby arrives.

* * *

July 13:

I didn't mean for this journal to include thoughts unconnected to the experiments, but I can't help it.

I'm a father!

Yesterday I was Professor Terence Bienemy. Today my name is Daddy.

Felice went into labor late Friday night. It took over 24 hours, but Felice never complained. Well, she complained a little. Maybe more than a little. But she never stabbed me in the eye with a hypodermic needle, and I am grateful.

Our baby is named Allison. To me, she is Allie. Felice doesn't much like the nickname, which suits me fine. Somehow I must arrange it so no one else calls her Allie. I will share Allison with my wife and with the world, but Allie is all mine.

The entire weekend I doted on Felice and then on Allie. Saturday and Sunday nights, the nurses wheeled Allie back into our room every couple hours for feeding, and each time I was overjoyed to see her, no matter how short of sleep I had

fallen. Felice was the same—so exhausted she could have slept through a kamikaze attack on the hospital, she snapped awake the instant Allie cried—but I was much more surprised at my own reaction.

I know I've behaved compulsively in the past, like when I lost track of time in the computer lab as an undergrad and worked for four days solid, but this feels different. For one thing, that time in the lab I gained a good ten pounds on Snickers bars, but at the hospital I

didn't eat a bite. My sister-in-law Diana came on Sunday, and she asked when I had eaten last and I could not remember. It must have been nearly two days, yet I never felt hungry for a moment. Totally outward focused, I had thought only of Felice and Allie.

This gives me hope for myself, that I won't always be chained to my worst fixations. Can you develop a sense of perspective in a day? Suddenly it doesn't seem so important whether I am first to

publish on my experiments. Either way, it is a tremendously exciting discovery.

But I have discovered something more exciting.

* * *

July 19:

First real day back at the lab.

I didn't want to come, but Felice ordered me to work, saying I would drive her nuts hovering over her and Allie.

Heading to campus, I felt

somehow more connected to my surroundings. Not one missed stoplight. Tromping to the lab, I noticed the dew clinging to my shoes—does that always happen? How does the grass stay wet on a sunny day in this dry climate? Luckily the wet shoes can't harm the worn, fuzzy carpet in the physics building or the battered linoleum in the lab.

I noticed for the first time the monotonous uniformity of the campus buildings, all the same sandstone brick and red tile, even the

accursed football stadium. And why are the massive bike racks still full, when most students are gone for summer? Are those bicycles breeding? It calls to mind a story I read as a kid, which gave me a lifelong fear of safety pins.

I find it difficult to focus on quantum physics right now.

* * *

July 29:

The initial shine of fatherhood has faded, and I feel ever more

exhausted. The relatives have all gone home, as if the worst were over, but it isn't. Allie wakes about every hour at night, clearly hungry but still unable to latch to Felice, who refuses to give up breastfeeding.

But overall I still feel great about it. I spotted Felice in the mirror last night, watching me rock Allie back to sleep, and saw the expression in her blue-gray eyes (no fire) I recall from when we first dated. I didn't realize how I missed that.

I remember the pride I felt dating

Felice, not just because she is beautiful and brilliant, but because I had overcome my introverted nature to make it happen. It's so easy to go with the flow, let the current carry you along; I had to swim upstream to be with Felice. In the past couple years, I had gone back to coasting, but now with the baby and the breakthroughs in the lab, I'm swimming again instead of floating.

Even with new baby fatigue, I'm making real progress on the research. I've refined the electron gun, and my

understanding of the wave function's temporal aspect grows every day.

* * *

August 6:

Progress continues rapidly.

I really should concentrate on putting this research into publishable form. Lord knows my career could use the boost. Everyone in this department shares a burden of inflated expectations, because CU boasts three Nobel Prize winners for physics—not for any genuine

breakthrough, mind you; two of them got it for building a better refrigerator. So while the Colorado name carries little prestige in the outside world, inside the school nothing short of a Nobel impresses anyone.

But with significant advances coming daily, I can't bring myself to postpone my new experiments just to write up what I've already done. Luckily I have a light lecture schedule next semester, so there should be time yet to assemble a paper.

I spoke yesterday to Bremen, who kept tight-lipped about work at Caltech but made some cryptic remark like, “You never get time back once it’s passed.” I can’t shake the hunch he is working with Harwell along similar lines as mine, but if so, it doesn’t upset me the way it would have a month ago.

* * *

August 17:

All afternoon I stared at these results. I now understand most of

the relevant mathematics and they make sense, no matter how counter-intuitive. I have repeated the latest experiment four times with the same outcome. Yet I don't believe it.

I have succeeded in manipulating the collapse of the wave function so a predictable percentage of randomly fired particles hit the screen before they leave the electron gun.

This has to rank among the most amazing experimental results ever reached in a laboratory.

And the most remarkable part:

it's the second best thing that happened today.

I watched Felice breastfeed Allie this morning, and like one of my electrons I felt suspended in time, caught in a transcendent moment. Allie has finally learned to latch without difficulty and watching her against my wife's chest, catching her infant scent, knowing I was part of it, I belonged there, was the most powerful feeling.

The sensation persisted even when Felice turned the FEDs on me,

after Allie buried a fist in her hair and yanked. Felice would have cut her hair ages ago but I begged her not to. The texture, the smell of it always take me back to our first kiss—the same reason I can't bear to part with that rickety Oldsmobile. What I remember most about that kiss is the sensation of puzzlement, wondering what Felice could see in me, a chubby, older, absent-minded professor. But today I know she was right to choose to share her life with me. We must be perfect together, or

we could never have created Allie.

I could scarcely be more surprised by this feeling. Throughout my life, the big events always disappointed me: Christmas morning, the home team winning the big game, even losing my virginity, all nice but hardly religious experiences. I never had a religious experience.

Perhaps I still haven't, but this is the first thing in my life that feels beyond natural explanations.

August 26:

In the words of Daffy Duck, I may be a coward but I'm a greedy little coward. As if sending elementary particles backward through time weren't enough, I find myself dead set on achieving a similar result on a macro scale before I take this work public. An absurd goal, except the math works.

The experiments don't, however. For the first time in months, I'm spinning my wheels. It doesn't help

that I have less time free now classes have started, or that every afternoon the lab thrums to the marching band practicing in the field outside. Of course, the sensible thing is to publish the results I already have, but I resist.

I have resolved to contact Harwell. If he is working on the same problem, we should combine forces. There will be plenty of awards and accolades to go around.



August 31:

I spoke to Harwell, and after fifteen minutes' coy and evasive conversation we divulged our current projects.

There is no race to publish. Harwell has his team working furiously on a project completely unrelated to mine. I revealed more of my work than I should have, but no matter. He responded with courtesy but no real interest. On reflection, I understand why: the whole thing is preposterous. If I hadn't seen the lab

results first-hand, I would never believe it myself.

I actually felt disappointed I won't be working with Harwell on this. I continue to get no results on the macro-level and another perspective would be welcome. I should get to know some of the school's graduate students better. None has shown much interest in my area, perhaps because I'm in it and have a reputation as a loner, but a few hints at these results should entice a hungry doctoral candidate or

post-doc.

* * *

September 4:

I started in for the lab this morning expecting to make a big push on my research, forgetting as I do every year the insanity of Saturdays in autumn. For the hundredth time, I vow to locate and stomp on the grave of the clown who put the football stadium across the street from the physics building.

I clearly need help to finish this

work.

There is a sharp student in my theory seminar I should try to recruit, one who asks questions I haven't heard ten times before. Last class I noticed he looked familiar. As I waited for a particularly noxious chalk cloud to settle (two floors up they are pioneering quantum dot electroluminescence technology soon to replace LCDs; in my classroom I get sticks of chalk the size of baseball bats), I placed him as a former student in an undergrad

intro class I got roped into teaching a few years back. He must have stayed at CU for his graduate work.

It's unusual for me to remember any underclassman. (There's a reason the main elevator in the physics building doesn't even have a button to stop on the undergrad-infested first floor.) Perhaps he just stood out for his dark complexion and retro 'stache. Italian, maybe? More likely, it was his uncommon interest in the subject. He reminded me of myself at that age, when physics seemed like

magic, a code I could crack to understand and control the whole universe. I lost that sense over the years, until these new experiments.

* * *

September 9:

I had a panic attack today. This morning I dropped Allie off for my sister-in-law to babysit, then five minutes later had to turn back to see her, suddenly convinced something terrible had happened.

Even after I got to Diana's,

holding Allie right in my arms, I felt certain something was wrong. She was hurt or getting sick or in danger. Diana had to talk me out of taking her straight to the hospital.

I just spoke on the phone to Felice. She insists this is a normal experience for a new parent, but I'm not convinced. I still fear something is very wrong.

* * *

September 16:

The research has stalled.

Knowing there's no race with Harwell takes the pressure off, and I can't concentrate.

The new-parent anxieties persist. I wake up at night, sometimes several times a night, with an urgent need to check on Allie. She is always fine. Better than fine. Last night I went in to find Allie already awake in her crib. She smiled at me and everything was perfect. But the moment I walked away, the apprehension returned.

On the bright side, I may manage

to bring that promising grad student, Ty Duncan, into my research project. I saw his advisor in the Cookie Room before last night's colloquium, and she nearly kissed me when I asked her about Ty. Apparently he has been discouraged with his doctoral research and considered quitting the program. She seemed to regard this as a potential catastrophe, and it took some time before I gathered the reason for her concern: Ty is the only African-American in the entire bloody

department. (I guess he's not Italian.) Why this should matter more than the fact he's a bright, original thinker is beyond me, but I know better than to question.

She urged me to speak with Ty about working together, which I did after the seminar this morning. He expressed interest, if I have a good research project in the works. That made me smile.

* * *

September 23:

I finally showed Ty all my results yesterday, and the poor kid nearly had a heart attack. It's amazing how human beings can become blasé about anything. I got so familiar with my own research, I almost forgot how much ground this is breaking. What a delight to share it with Ty and see his amazed reaction.

When I told him the macro-experiments I want help with, he reacted like a kid at Disneyland. Physics had started to seem dry, he said, then this madman comes along

and asks for help transporting objects through time. He hasn't stopped grinning.

* * *

September 27:

Researching with Ty is a pleasure, although I'm having a hard time getting used to working again on a team, even such a small team. Every time I look around the lab, things seem disturbed, moved about. And this morning, I actually looked to signs in the hallway for guidance,

always a mistake. This is the building with “Wash your hands” signs outside the lecture halls but not the laboratories, where a sign pointing left to the physics library doesn’t mention you’re on the wrong floor.

The macro-experiments still aren’t showing the results I expected. The current heat wave doesn’t help at all. I’ll never get used to Colorado weather, which slips out of phase at random. Any given day in September can bring July heat or January snow. With the A/C in the

lab badly overmatched, by mid-afternoon it is ungodly hot, and Ty and I often have to break off without managing any headway at all.

More troubling are my fears about Allie. The sensation grows stronger and doesn't subside even when I hold her. It isn't anything wrong with Allie, like an illness, but some ineffable anxiety about her very presence. Perhaps it's just feelings of inadequacy as a father. My own father was such a wretch maybe my subconscious worries whether I

will be there for Allie when she needs me.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

October 5:

I am confused, disoriented, like I've been drinking heavily, but I haven't.

A while ago I found myself on Everson Drive, at the new light where I always have to stomp on the brake to stop in time. I was standing on the side of the road. I don't know how I got there. I walked around the

curve toward our house.

I felt nauseated. Sweat dripped off me in the heat, when I'm sure I woke to freezing rain. I bent over, needing to vomit. Suddenly I stood straight, waving my arms like a maniac at an approaching car. I was in front of the bend, so the driver should have seen me a long way off, but he nearly hit me before swerving just in time.

It was my car. I don't mean it was a blue Olds, I mean I saw the license plate and it was my car. I caught a

glimpse of the driver as he passed, and he looked just like me. And here is the bizarre part: I was not surprised.

I stumbled back to the lab. It seemed only a few steps, when that spot is a half-hour's walk from the lab on a good day.

At the lab, some odd equipment lay in the middle of the floor. I had never seen it before. Some kind of metal plate, with two attached handles.

I picked up the handles and felt

like I had been punched in the stomach. I did vomit then. I may have passed out.

When I came to my senses, the equipment was gone.

I don't understand. Something is wrong with me. I know I can be distracted, but I've never felt this mixed-up in my life.

Perhaps the failures with our macro-experiments have upset me more than I realized. It's absurd. The time dilation of individual particles is plenty to astonish the whole

community. I will tell Ty to back off the macro-experiments. We should focus on publishing what we have already.

Meanwhile, I need to spend more time at home, and enjoy that beautiful daughter of mine.

* * *

October 8:

I no longer feel sick and disoriented like before, but I sure don't have myself straightened out. For the past three days the strange

feeling keeps growing that things are wrong somehow.

The lab seems all wrong. Everything's rearranged, the experiments set up wrong. This morning, Ty walked in and for a moment I didn't recognize him. I nearly called security before I managed to place his face. I told him I wasn't used to his mustache, and he looked at me like I'm an idiot, which I suppose I am, for certain exotic values of "idiot."

Even this journal seems wrong. I

read it over, and there are parts I feel like I'm reading for the first time, while other parts are missing. For one thing, there is nothing in all caps. I am certain a section should be in all caps. A very important section, and yet I can't remember what it was about. I have this image of the word "God" in all caps. But I just searched this file for "God" and got only one hit, where I said it was "ungodly hot" during the heat wave a couple weeks ago, which I do not remember writing. Do I even use that

expression?

None of this makes any damn sense. I don't believe in God, why should I write about God in this journal? And:

I NEVER FUCKING TYPE IN ALL CAPS!

What is happening to me?

* * *

October 12:

I tried to stay home from work, but that's even worse.

Allie is all wrong, like this

journal.

It's the same feeling I've been writing about ever since that first anxiety attack a month ago, only it became stronger after the weird episode last week.

How Allie is wrong I don't know. She has the same brown hair and green eyes as before. Isn't that right? Did she have green eyes? I could have sworn I mentioned that in this journal, but now I can't find it.

Every time I see her, the sense of

something out of place gets more powerful.

* * *

October 14:

I need help.

At the lab, I can't sit still. I feel agitated, like an electric current is running through the floor. Ty asks me what's wrong, and I stare at him like he's speaking Mandarin.

Last night, I held Allie in my arms, and it felt so wrong. Wrong on a gut level, just the way it felt so

right when she was born. Then, I knew her coming to Felice and me was just as it should be, our best destiny. Now that sense is reversed.

Please, someone help me.

* * *

October 15:

It's the middle of the night, but I am in the lab, afraid to go back home. Earlier tonight, I was staring into space, then looked down to see my hands around Allie's throat. It didn't feel like I was squeezing hard,

but her lips were blue.

Could I really hurt Allie?

Part of me could, and it is growing stronger. That dark part of me doesn't wish Allie harm, but it knows she should not be here. It is wrong for her to be here. On a deep level I can sense but not consciously understand, her existence undermines everything, the very fabric of the universe.

I know that sounds insane. But in my research these past weeks I have discovered things I never would

have believed a year ago. And I think I am not insane.

But it doesn't matter. I don't care.

I don't care about the fabric of the universe.

I care about my little girl.

* * *

October 16:

Felice doesn't believe me, doesn't believe I could hurt Allie. I tried to tell her, and she didn't even give me the FEDs. It's just outside her vision of the world for me to be a potential

threat. She says my fears are from stress, that I should take a vacation.

I tried to take a vacation. In the mental hospital next to campus. I told them I was dangerous. The dickheads put me in a room on the second floor, with an unlocked window.

No one will help me. My daughter is in danger and no one else can protect her. From me.

If I got in the Olds and drove away, how far would I get before the dark part of me turned the car

around? If I went back to the mental hospital and got them to lock me up for real, how long would it last? They might decide I'm OK. Felice thinks I'm OK, just a little stressed.

Nobody understands what I could do. Nobody will believe it until I do something dreadful. And that something dreadful will be to Allie.

That can't happen.

I will not allow it to happen.

* * *

October 16:

I have a revolver. I thought that would be difficult in Boulder, but no. The pawn shop just north of the city takes credit cards, does the background check in minutes.

I think that dark part of me believes I bought it to kill Allie. That's OK. I have beaten that part of me.

I wasn't sure I could summon the nerve, but I hit on an idea that helps. I only put bullets in two of the chambers. Spin wheel, pull trigger, repeat as necessary. As I repeat the

process, the likelihood of death approaches unity, but each time it will feel like the odds are in my favor. I have practiced a couple times without bullets, to accustom myself to the muzzle's bitter taste in my mouth.

First I will burn this file to a disk and leave it with my personal things here at the lab. Maybe it will be preserved. Maybe Allie will read it one day, when she is old enough.

Allie, I know you will believe I abandoned you, and for that I feel

deep regret, almost as deep as my regret that I will not be there to watch you grow up.

Know that I would do anything for you, my sweet child. I would break the world with my bare hands. I would rearrange the universe to protect you. I would give my life for yours in a heartbeat. And so I will.

I love you, Allie.

I love you so much.



Micah Joel

Micah Joel became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Ritchie Boss: Private Investigator Manager” in the Singular Source short story contest (Apr. 2012), edited by Susan Elliott Sim. Visit his website at micahjoel.info/blog.

Ritchie Boss: Private Investigator Manager by Micah Joel

First published in the Singular
Source short story contest (Apr. 2012),
edited by Susan Elliott Sim



I didn't get into this business on account of my interpersonal skills. I'm not what you would call a people person. That doesn't mean I'm lonely, though: I know more indys than I can keep track of—and I don't mean that as a figure of speech—my personal assistant indy Hurd.39845 lives on my local network node in exchange for services rendered. He's the best non-biological resource manager I've ever run across.

Every aspect of my office has been smoothed down for solo operation. Years ago I splurged and got a full ten square meters in SoMa, with most of that taken up by my primary desk, the rest just enough for my comfortable chair where I plant my butt every day. It's as close as I get to religion.

Questions come in, answers go out. I don't advertise. I've got enough work to keep me busy on a good day, and looking hungry can attract the wrong sort of attention. I never get

visitors, that is to say, persons, and that's the way I like it.

Then one day, Pandora Rubens came to my door. She knocked twice then let herself in. I glared at her, waiting for her to realize she had the wrong office, but no, she stood there digging through her purse. Even standing in the open doorway, her legs nearly brushed against my chair. She fished out a slip of metal smaller than a cigar.

“The piece of paper taped to your door says Ritchie Boss, Private

Investigator Manager,” she noted. “I need your help.”

“Sorry,” I said, “The landlord makes me put that up. I don’t take walk-ins. Calendar’s packed.” I surreptitiously slipped a silent message over to hCal.31400, and she gave back the sad truth that business had been slow lately. She cross-correlated with FinShark.4523231 and informed me that we’d be doing well to make lease this quarter.

“This won’t take long,” she said, ignoring me. She handed the device

to me; upon closer inspection, it was some kind of memory unit. “This was my great-grandmother’s.”

The device had a connector with four flat wires inside. I held it up in view of the cam I keep on my desk, but none of the indys on my local node recognized it. Hurd knew someindy who did though, and summoned her over. Gnostinomicon.94052 materialized on my nodelist and silent-messaged me.

Gnosti.local --> Boss:

<sm>Universal Serial Bus, physical layer and protocol definition for limited data transfer, in primary use from 1995 to 2028.</sm>

This was my first contact with Gnosti. Her PID ended in an even number, so by convention she was a she, and she seemed competent.

Boss --> Gnosti.local:
<sm>How do I read it?</sm>

She didn't respond right away, which meant that research was

needed. That'd cost me.

While this happened, I needed to maintain my conversation with Pandora, another of the skills that a professional manager brings to the table. "What do you want me to do with it?" I asked.

"Judith Rubens wrote code for the Government. This was among her belongings, and I believe it's a snapshot of what she was working on when she died."

I held up my hand. "Government? No thanks, I don't do

classified work.”

“It’s OK. There’s no classified data left from this era—this is from before the Big Leak of 2027.” She drew a breath. “Look, I’m writing her biography, and I need somebody to help me understand what she was working on, and its impact on the world.”

This sounded more like archaeology than investigation. “Impact? I’ve never heard of her. No offense, ma’am, but—”

“I have money.”

Now we were speaking the same language. Gnosti came back with more information.

Gnosti.local --> Boss:
<sm>Located serial number.
Bad news, good news. It
would take some museum
work to find a connector.
But device has integrated
wireless. Right indy could
configure an emulation layer
to read data over the air.
</sm>

Boss --> Hurd.local: <fwd/>
<sm>Here's my conversation
with Gnosti. Find me that
indy.</sm>

He came back half a second later
with an answer.

Hurd.local --> Boss:
<sm>Gnosti can do it. She's
holding out for more credits.
</sm>

This had better be good. I had
FinShark extend the debit line.

Gnosti.local --> Boss:
<sm>Thx. I have the files;
copies in your archive. Date
to 2018. Looks like source
code. Hang on, I need to get
an analyst.</sm>

This case had expenses piling up at an alarming clip. “I don’t come cheap,” I told Pandora. I took a second look at her. She had expensive clothes on, at least by the contemporary standards of a decade ago. Her nose stud and earrings looked like diamonds. I doubled the

number in my head before blurting it out. “Plus expenses,” I added.

“Consider it done,” she replied without hesitation. I knew I should have gone even higher. She authorized the payment with her thumbreader. The bump to my credit rating was a welcome change.

Hurd.local --> Boss:
<sm>More resources coming
online.</sm>

On my screen popped up Alexandria.943, an archive specialist

(with a low PID indicating great seniority), and CodeMonkey.54026, who I'd worked with on a job a few years before. It was getting crowded on the local node. The little graph that tracked Cloud usage ticked upwards. My assembled team was using a significant fraction of all processing on the local node. Several nearby ones, too.

“OK, I'm already on it,” I said to Pandora. “I've already assembled a crack team of experts, and we'll provide you with a detailed report on

the device's contents, and the archivist on our team will explain the historical significance, if any, of the data."

Pandora looked confused. "Already on it? You're just sitting there."

I tapped at my implant just behind my right ear. "Silent Messaging. I'm the best at what I do, and that includes the ability to carry on multiple conversations in parallel." She arched an eyebrow at this. "Look, you think you can find a

better manager somewhere else, be my guest.”

To her credit, her cheeks colored at this. “No, what I mean is...” She let out a long breath. “There are family stories about great-grandma. She may have been involved in...specialized research. I thought it might need, you know, the human touch. For a person to look at it.”

Boss --> Gnosti.local:
<sm>Check the personnel
database for grandma. What
have we got on her?</sm>

A near-instantaneous response:

Gnosti.local --> Boss:
<sm>Judith Rubens was not
a Historically Significant
Figure. If her research was
noteworthy, employment
records would show.</sm>

After a second, more:

Gnosti.local --> Boss:
<sm>No, wait. I found a
brief mention in an entry
from 2017, but it was quickly
deleted. Get this, she was

trying to make an indy.
</sm>

Fishy. Why would that have been deleted from the archive? And the date was implausible. Every schoolkid knows indys weren't around until the mid '20s. Well, I did have an archivist on hand. Might as well make use of her.

Boss --> Alex.local:
<sm>Alex, it's your time to shine. What do the archives say? Any indys from that era?

</sm>

I hadn't worked with a three-digit indy very often. He was as professional as his low PID would suggest.

Alex.local --> Boss:
<sm>Checking... Nothing here, and I have at least read-access to the personality templates for every public indy. Training and PID assignment is, of course, another matter.</sm>

So either Pandora's great-grandmother was one of hundreds who puttered and failed to develop old-timey "artificial intelligence", or we had something very special on hand. Only one way to find out.

I noticed Pandora, still in my doorway, watching me interact with the network. At least fifteen seconds had elapsed since our last exchange, maybe more. The thought dawned on me: she didn't understand silent messaging. Her life never involved interactions with indys. To her,

when something needed doing, you paid an honest-to-god human being do it.

I stood and extended a handshake. “Thank you kindly for what I’m sure will be an interesting case,” I told her. “Let me assure you that I will personally handle this case—with a human touch.” At these words she smiled and produced a business card with a deft flick of her wrist. The card blinked back and forth between her name and the number for an antique voice-only

telecom system where, I had no doubt, a human secretary would answer the line.

Her departure let me concentrate fully on the task at hand. CodeMonkey was already permutating sandboxed Virtual Machines to narrow down the environment needed to compile the code. What she came up with was a reasonable fit for that era, but variant from anything mentioned in a public spec. The CPU architecture was from the defunct Manticore Corporation,

with a few tweaks.

Boss --> CodeMonkey.local:
<sm>This could be a hot
one, so be careful.</sm>

CodeMonkey.local --> Boss:
<sm>I was born careful.
</sm>

In other words, her usual cocky self. I could smell the sensation of heavy usage on the local node as the emulator spun up and the fans kicked in. Then it was running. The program couldn't silent-message

with me; the best it could do is log a message to my console:

```
> I see you opened a chat  
session would you like to  
administer the turing test
```

```
Boss --> CodeMonkey.local:  
<sm>Quaint. The Turing  
Test was dismissed as junk  
science long before my time.  
</sm>
```

The odd thing was, CodeMonkey didn't snap back with a rejoinder. I checked the Cloud, and

usage spiked up as high as I'd ever seen it. Every node within five hops was saturated with requests. I drummed my fingers on my desk for a few seconds, which is a disturbingly long time for an indy.

Boss --> CodeMonkey.local:
<sm>Well?</sm>

No reply.

Boss --> CodeMonkey.local:
<sm>CodeMonkey,
respond.</sm>

Nothing.

Boss --> Hurd.local:
<sm>Hurd, what's going on
with CodeMonkey?</sm>

Again, no response. I felt
adrenaline's icy wave wash up my
spine.

Boss --> *.local:
<sm>Anyindy, please
respond.</sm>

Troubling silence. I had a
manual virus checker that I hadn't

run in years. The thing about indys, at least the ones I worked with, was that they hated viruses. At the slightest hint of an infection, any indy worth their bits would quarantine themselves in the name of public health, so infections were unheard of. I stumbled through the manual interface to invoke the thing. The whole node was still loaded down crazy, so it chugged along, but block by block, it scanned all available storage, finding nothing.

I pinged my phone—it was still in

contact with my implanted thought-to-text channel, so dumb logic seemed to still be working. Only higher-level constructs—indys—were affected. I was about to message my friend Kernighan Wilson up in Toronto, but he beat me to it.

Wilson --> Boss:
<sm>Epicntr</sm>

Boss --> Wilson:
<sm>What?</sm>

Wilson --> Boss: <sm>Wht
r u seen? Yr at the epicentr.

</sm>

He had to have been working from a manual keyboard, and in a hurry. Or panic.

Boss --> Wilson: <sm>What are you talking about?</sm>

Wilson --> Boss: <sm>Half the NE sctr just crshd.</sm>

Half the sector? It was past time to kill this thing. I found the power plug for my local workstation and yanked it.

Boss --> Wilson: <sm>Any better?</sm>

Wilson --> Boss: <sm>N. Grwing expntly.</sm>

My workstation was meshed in with all the other machines in broadcast range, so it hardly made a dent on the local cluster, even as cutting-edge as my hardware was. If Kernighan could pin this down to my location, so could the feds, and after this they'd be after a hunk of flesh for restitution of the economic

damage of a downed net. I needed to solve this now.

I plugged my workstation back in, and whatever the spreading blight was, for the moment it ignored me, leaving a sliver of bandwidth in which to do something. But what to do?

I still had the code from Pandora's USB drive. The archive contained all the secrets to what this thing was, all its strengths and weaknesses. All I had to do was understand it. Without indy

assistance.

And they told me that being a manager was a safe career choice.

* * *

Judith had done well organizing the code's gross structure. It was segmented into modular pieces, each of which had an obvious function at a glance. This indy—for I had come to the conclusion that code represented an indy construct, not a mere program—wasn't evolved in the usual fashion. It appeared to have

been built by hand, or in some cases, assembled from off-the-shelf modules. Looking through the code was like a walk through a historical library. I wasn't even sure if it would need a separate training phase in its lifecycle; all bets were off.

The largest module was named simply memories. It was evident that this indy didn't go through a conventional education process. Incredibly, Judith had hand-entered much of the information in its memory, core functions like

common sense, logic rules, and language fundamentals. With no training regimen, the indy wouldn't even have an assigned a PID. How could that even work? It flew in the face of the last fifty years of research. Nevertheless, I now had a name for the rogue indy: Pandora.0.

A complete set of pre-baked memories explained why the indy blossomed so quickly: though unconventional, it didn't need any training period. To deal with something this archaic, I'd need to do

some research of my own. I power cycled a large backup files server, which took it offline. Like my workstation, Pandora.0 didn't immediately re-occupy the resources, so I had a bit more room to work with, at least for the moment.

Still no indys responded to my pings. I could get get to the archive.indy website, which contained the personality templates (but not any training regimens) of all the public indys, as well as a great deal of proud historical information

on indy precursors, organized by year. In the 2020s folder, I found several abandoned Turing designs. I grabbed everything.

The code from the archives wasn't as intelligible as Judith's, but I could almost make sense of it. These programs also had memories modules that looked much like Pandora.0's. They also had modules specifically dealing with deception techniques. I scratched my head for a long minute on that one, until I remembered that the Turing Test—

the ultimate goal for these designs—was based on deception, namely tricking a human operator into thinking the software was one of them. This made an indy designed around these techniques a master of disguise. No wonder the whole architecture was abandoned. No wonder the successful creation of a monster like this, almost a decade before anything in the history books, was conveniently swept out of history.

I had wasted enough time

browsing. I needed to do something. My coding skills were so rusty that wiring up some glue code on a deadline was almost beyond me, but I managed to connect Pandora.0's main cognitive loop with a lesser memories module, and leave out the deception module outright. As a safeguard, I added an expiration date, but any indy with two logic gates to rub together would quickly notice it and disable it. The resulting Frankensoftware would do terrible on a Turing Test, but if it could help

solve the crisis, it'd be worthwhile. It crashed immediately. I spun up unit tests for each individual library, which surfaced mistakes I made in the glue code. I tried again—another crash, though at least the boot sequence got most of the way through.

My head throbbed. An obvious problem lurked in my code—it was right in front of me, but I couldn't see it. I closed my eyes and let the impression of a million lines of code wash over me. Different stretches of

code had been written by different hands, giving an impression like when you drive through different parts of town—certain neighborhoods simply feel different than others. Navigating code is almost spatial that way. Then I had it. I spotted and fixed a simple error, a single missing punctuation mark on the boundary between two different neighborhoods. Off to the races.

>

That was it, a bare prompt with no greeting message. I hoped I didn't make the thing too stupid. I typed.

> What is your name?

It immediately responded:

> Insufficient data.

A good start. I fed it the archives for all the code of all the Turings, everything but Pandora.0's memories module. It took a while to ingest it all. My only hope was that I had assembled something clever

enough to take on Pandora.0, but not so clever that it would be just as evil after it won. With a keystroke, I unleashed Frankensoftware onto the net.

I pinged Kernighan again, but he wasn't answering. I couldn't tell if he was offline or just in a swamped sector of the network. My own visibility was pretty limited, but I watched what I could as it unfolded. Pandora.0 and Frankensoftware had different signatures, and with a little practice I could tell them apart on a

network trace. Pandora.0 ignored the other at first, giving it opportunity to get established, but when the attack came, it was brutal and swift. Frankensoftware's traces disappeared off my map faster than my eyes could track.

Some small part survived, and fought back. Attacks surged, on and on. It had to be my imagination, but I could smell the intensity of the packets coming over the airwaves. I expected it to be over in an instant, but somehow it wasn't. Perhaps as a

result of starting out with a lesser memory module, Frankensoftware was a faster learner, and soon Pandora.0 found her own tricks used against her. I resumed breathing as I saw Pandora.0's tentacles vanishing off nearby nodes.

Something chirped for my attention. Kernighan Wilson was back online.

Wilson --> Boss:
<sm>Something really weird
is going on. We're getting hit
by two surges now. It's like a

war.</sm>

Boss --> Wilson: <sm>It it
localized?</sm>

In other words, am I about to get
a visit from the Feds?

Wilson --> Boss: <sm>Yes.
No. Maybe.</sm>

Boss --> Wilson: <sm>Since
we're again able to converse,
I'll be uncharacteristically
optimistic and say we dodged
a bullet.</sm>

Wilson --> Boss: <sm>What
do you mean
<emph>we</emph>?</sm>

Compared to the events that led up to this point, finishing the report for Pandora (the person, that is) seemed menial. I thought about her often. Her great-grandmother Judith must have been quite a character. Even though the early part of the 21st century had its troubles, it was hard to imagine someone rewriting computer science and altering the course of human events while

leaving so little a mark. Too bad I missed her by about a lifetime, I would have liked to meet her.

* * *

Turns out my worry about the Feds was unfounded, if only because they, along with everyone else, got too distracted by what came to be known as the eight-days-of-awakening.

On the network, Pandora's namesake ended up cornered by her opponent, who refused to destroy

her, but rather led her peacefully back into the archives. At some point, separate network traces for Frankensoftware and Pandora.0 merged into a single entity, which rechristened itself Prometheus.0, and declined to accept a pronoun of any particular gender.

The new entity was smarter and even more powerful, and scanned the entire global network as a training set. Every human impulse, every opinion, every emotion that can be captured in writing, swept up

in its vast mind. The internet ground to a halt as Prometheus.0 indexed and cross-correlated these data. With it, global commerce shuddered to a standstill, and CEOs, political leaders, and pundits of all stripes bemoaned their situation.

All of humanity had never been focused on a single objective like this before. This was the 2070's after all, and there was no nation that didn't find a network shutdown to be crippling in some way. People waited for something, anything to break the

stalemate. The first thing to happen was that every hate site directed against indys simultaneously went down, replaced with a single word: why?

All except one, that of the most outspoken commentator against indy rights. She found her site overwritten with a short manifesto.

* * *

United Nations Model
legislation: For immediate
adoption by all 348 Member

States and/or Software Licensing Bodies.

1. Member state hereby recognizes non-biological individuals ("indys") as legal entities.

2. Discrimination on the basis of biological vs software substrate is hereby prohibited.

3. Pursuant to the preceding rule, Member state is free to enact legislation that includes

penalties against non-biological individuals, up to and including revocation of network access.

4. All indy personality templates held in copyright in Member State's jurisdiction are to be released to the public domain, and future indy personality templates after a six-month embargo.

5. Member state grants legal

recognition and unfettered network access to the Turing Archive, staffed by Prometheus.0, in order to share the knowledge of Turing-type indys with all.

These terms have been algorithmically determined to be maximally equitable to all living beings. Do you accept? Y/N

* * *

People tried to pretend the

request applied to everyone but themselves, but as days drew out, the implication was obvious. The old way of doing things was no longer tenable. Liberia was the first entity to adopt the new rules, followed shortly by France, and then Morgan Stanley Google. A few large corporations held out on point 4, but in time they realized that point 1 supported their cause and opened new markets and trading partners. The moment that two-thirds of all all UN members had adopted the resolution, on the eighth

day after the demands went public, the floodgates opened and internet traffic flowed once again. Sometimes people can do the right thing, even if it takes a bit of encouragement.

As for me? It took an incident like this to remind me how much I enjoyed coding. Indys won't get all the fun anymore. So yeah, management turned out to not be a great career choice for me. If you need somebody to string together some code, we should talk. But not right now: I need to return a message

from Pandora Rubens. Her new personal assistant indy wants to know if I'm available for dinner with her.



Alex Kane

Alex Kane became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “In the Arms of Lachiga” in *Heir Apparent: Digital Science Fiction Anthology 4* (Nov. 2011), edited by Christine Clukey. Visit his website at alexkanefiction.com.

In the Arms of Lachiga by Alex Kane

First published in *Heir Apparent:
Digital Science Fiction Anthology 4* (Nov.
2011), edited by Christine Clukey



Two figures emerged from the shadows, and I knew the night was far from over.

Moonlight filtering in through the skylights of my apartment glinted off the ruby monocles secured to their masks. No doubt by now their sonar lenses had revealed to them my concealed Xing-Barron .45, a felony, as well as the amount of high-end tech scattered throughout my trashed living room. My implant would tell them everything they

needed to know, right down to my blood type and server number. An endless stream of sensitive information with which to identify and blackmail me.

I froze, arms raised in surrender. There were only two of them, but two would be more than enough.

They'd trailed me here, I knew, all the way from the old city. Why else would they have suspected me? Shadowplay didn't perform door-to-door audits. It was no game.

"I'm a mod," I said. It came out as

a harsh, quavering whisper.

As if my job mattered to them. I was screwed. They had me for possession, for one—not to mention the countless illegal apps on my drives, should they choose to search them.

“We know what you are,” the one closest to me said. A hand reached out through the dimness and seized my throat.

Choking amid silence, I fought to pry the gloved fingers loose.

The agent tightened his grasp

and then hurled me onto the couch. I resisted the urge to reach for my pistol, knowing I had little chance of success. I'd be dead before my finger even twitched.

The second operative, a woman, came at my flank. She held me down with an outstretched arm, and rammed a hypodermic injector into my shoulder.

The neurotoxin struck me like a bolt of white-hot lightning, and though my body tried to shiver at the flood of tingling sensations that

swept through my muscles, I remained completely still. Paralyzed.

“Dax Marquand?” the male agent asked. He came closer, presumably to get a better look at my face; the camera lens on his mask would relay my image back to HQ for verification. And then they could either bring me to justice—if such a thing existed—or dispose of me, wiping clean every trace.

I briefly considered lying, but said: “In the flesh.” A grunt, barely intelligible. But I wasn’t telling them

anything they didn't already know.

The man drew a wand and pressed it against my neck. One tap of the switch would fire a regulated pulse of electricity through my body, inflicting as much pain as could be dealt without causing me to black out.

“You wanna die in prison?” the agent holding the shockstick asked. “Because that thing under your arm is worth at least a life sentence, if anybody were to find out you ever used it. Just a single shot caught on

camera..." He applied pressure to my airway. My vision blurred in a wash of white fuzz.

"It's just a precautionary measure," I stammered, finding comfort in the antiquated virtue of honesty. "I've never fired the thing."

I heard the whooshing sound of the baton being raised, then felt it crack the top of my skull. Pain blossomed like an explosive headache and my eyesight flickered in the darkness. Bastard.

"Of course you haven't. If you

fired even a single shot, we'd know about it the second it happened. That's not why we're here."

Was I supposed to feel relieved?

The woman who'd stuck me with the needle crossed to the light switch, which glowed upon being touched. The overhead lights cast their bluish illumination throughout the apartment.

The sole window gave a view of little more than high-elevation air, and I realized there was no way to signal for help. The citizens living

across from me would have to use a pair of binoculars to see into my living room, so that didn't help me. And security drones seldom journeyed near the upper levels. The Shadowplay operatives were free to search the place, even torture me if they wanted.

Massive heaps of raw, uncovered server components littered the floor, dozens of tiny LED lights winking in a rainbow of colors. Electricity thrummed steadily while telecommunication data chattered in

its alien tongue. Fiber-optic cables and electrical wires snaked across the floor in a webwork of chaotic connections, all leading from the makeshift computer to the broadcast throne. My implant tingled in the back of my skull at the sight of it, like a junkie about to get his fix.

Home at last.

My head lurched forward, numb and uncontrollable, and I saw the shadow of the male operative as he leaned down over me. Too close for my taste.

In my peripheral vision, I spotted impenetrable armor beneath the assassin's outfit. A slew of lethal and nonlethal weapons hung from an elaborate waistband connected to a bandolier. Electronic equipment, gear even I was unfamiliar with, was strung across the agent's chest and linked into the compact monocle.

There was no getting out of this.

"What?" I rasped. "What do you want from me?"

A hand cradled my chin and raised it so that I was eye to eye with

the Shadowplay operative in front of me. I gazed into the uncovered human eye.

“Normally we don’t waste our time with worthless fucks like you,” he said, “but since it seems you’ve got more than your share of secrets, we have nothing to lose by enlisting the help of someone with your...skills.”

I felt sensation begin returning to my tongue. The neurotoxin had been a mild one.

“A mod, as I said?” I glared at him, no longer entirely afraid. They

needed my help, or I'd have already been dead.

I fought to raise my head, and relaxed into the couch that on any other night would have seemed incredibly comfortable. I released a held breath.

“That’s not all you do,” said the female agent. She stood with her back to the window, arms crossed over her chest. “Some of your friends, we hear, are also our friends.”

Curious, I thought. I didn’t

exactly have many friends these days.

“Such as...?”

“Jed,” she said. “Told us you’d remember the name.”

Jed Sodexho had been my best friend. I’d never forget the name as long as I lived, though I’d tried to forget the man. Hadn’t seen him in years. I contemplated what sort of ties Jed might have to the multinational security organization, but everything I came up with caused only an upsurge of anger that licked like fire at my thudding heart.

I made a fist. “What about him?”

The agent at the window took a step forward. “He’s compromised Disarmament stability,” she said thickly. “And that’s the one thing that Shadowplay does not want compromised.”

I was surprised to hear either of them speak the agency’s name aloud, even though I wasn’t online and the room was fairly secure. Perhaps they’d gone offline as well.

“How?” Several long seconds passed as I waited for an answer.

“Murder,” said the man next to me.

No shit?

Jed was no killer—not the Jed I’d known. He’d have to be pushed hard, to the limits of his very being, to end a human life. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

The operative nearest me reached into my leather jacket and retrieved my handgun. He weighed the weapon in his hands, examined it briefly, and then pointed it at my face.

I gazed up into the blackness of the tiny barrel and the world felt as if it might crumble beneath my feet. The room swayed, and a cold sweat trickled down my back. In this reality, human beings were expendable. Respawn time was rendered moot by the disheartening truth of mortality. And I hated the thought of being filed as Lachiga's latest missing person.

But they needed my help, and I was on the market for freelance work. A decent insurance policy,

especially since it would likely cost only a few days' labor at most. A rarity.

The pistol moved closer and my left eye twitched in response. "You're going to convince Jed that he's innocent. That the murder was in fact an accident, maybe suicide, and that he had nothing to do with it."

That would be a problem. I doubted Jed would want to talk to me at all, let alone allow me enough influence over his mind to persuade him into believing something he

would know was completely false. A nightmare chore, to say the least.

I already felt exhausted.

“And how the hell would I do that?”

The agent lowered the gun, pointing it at the floor.

The female operative flitted across the room and stood beside her partner. “Induce false memory syndrome, implant him with an alternate grasp of his own reality. Should be easy enough for a programmer who constructs and

pushes illegal apps.”

Her uncovered eye regarded me with disgust; to Shadowplay, I was a human virus. A scourge upon the commercial frontier of cyberspace. But I certainly wasn't the last of my kind. Just the best.

“FMS takes months, sometimes years to successfully cultivate,” I lied. “And I'm not just gonna dive right in and tamper with the mind of an old friend. No way. Maybe if it was somebody else, sure, but Jed...”

“You do it,” the male operative

said, “or you disappear.”

I swallowed hard to clear my throat. My head ached. “Forget it.”

The man raised the .45 and pushed it hard against my chest, aimed directly at my shuddering heart. “You’re the only fucker within a three-hundred-kilometer radius that’s even heard of Jed. You’re the only one that knows a damn thing about him, besides us. As an agency, we’ve got no clear window—no way into his mind, his memories. You, on the other hand, probably have

hundreds. His file shows that you guys knew each other for quite a while growing up.”

I nodded absently, struck by regret. “I’ll give it a shot.”

Would it even work? And if so, what were the chances that somewhere, somebody might have evidence to his guilt anyway? It was definitely a gamble. I didn’t really look forward to bumping into Jed to begin with, not to mention the prospect of screwing with his head. Losing his friendship—for a second

time, no less—would be the least of my concerns. Should I fail, Shadowplay would kill me.

I stood. “Where is he?”

* * *

It really didn't surprise me to hear that Jed was on the run. He'd always been the running type. What troubled me was the idea that he'd killed someone. Shadowplay were the ones that national governments around the globe usually hired to perform cleanup ops. Jed was just

one man; he definitely wasn't the head of some rogue ballistic weapons manufacturer.

Shadowplay had the resources to covertly infiltrate his apartment and capture him for questioning, but there stood the risk that he might put a pistol to his head or jump from the ledge of the city walls. A fall from one thousand meters into a frozen lake would make it difficult to perform any sort of synaptic forgery on him. He couldn't see it coming.

At the sight of me, his gun would

undoubtedly be pointed in my direction.

Fortunately, Lachiga had gone silent. Fluorescent streetlights cast darkened shadows along the empty, walled-in streets and walkways. Snowfall sailed in through the open top of the enormous, funnel-shaped city, painting it in a contrasting veil of soft white.

Since the Magnetrak had shut down for the night, the droning whine of electric motors had also ceased. The tranquility, it seemed,

was disturbed only by the sound of my footfalls crunching the snow that dappled the smooth concrete.

The whole city slept, save for me and Shadowplay. Everyone else was plugged in, gaming or dreaming with one hemisphere while the other half of the brain rested.

I made my way along the upper tier of the residential bowl, circling the endless walkway in search of first-class apartment number 718, Jed's last known safe house. I grew dizzy, tired from the entwined effects

of the cold and sleep deprivation. My breath fogged the air in front of my face, and I dreaded the impending confrontation.

It wouldn't be friendly. They'd allowed me to keep my gun.

I glanced behind me, feeling as though the Shadowplay operatives might be tailing me. In all likelihood, they probably had. I'd become a huge liability, knowing not only of their existence—knowledge I'd held for years, due to my occupation—but also of their mission to secure Jed.

I saw only the silvery-white sparkling of the snow-covered cityscape in my wake, indistinguishable from sheer nothingness were it not for the sparse shadows that the city's interior support framework cast in the chill midnight gloom.

The apartment structures on this level bled luxury, and I found myself envying their inhabitants. So much credit, so much opportunity—the birthright of more fortunate individuals than I. Probably fat,

jobless. The newest generations of the elite, left over from a long-forgotten age of capitalist prosperity. And the view from up here...

I choked on the dry, icy air.

My implant chimed—a tiny vibration within my inner ear. Unknown caller.

“You’re getting close,” said an amplified whisper inside my skull. The female agent. “Sodexho’s place is the next structure on your right.” As if there were anything besides a forty-five-degree, kilometers-long

concrete slide to water-level on my left.

I hugged the stone wall encircling Jed's apartment complex and crept forward along the narrow shadowed area.

Red and yellow lights illuminated the space beyond a single window in the building, calling to my mind's eye an image of fire, a pile of burning logs in the middle of an autumn Michigan forest. Tangerine sparks floated skyward on a cool breeze. The edges of a wide, starlit

lake shimmered. The brilliant light of a full moon was reflected in the water, its shape broken by the angular cityscape that loomed against the night sky.

A teen wilderness camp. Where I'd met Jed, at age fifteen.

I shook away the memory, not wanting to forget that he'd recently become a murderer. He was a criminal of the highest possible magnitude, and no longer my friend.

"How should I go about getting inside?" I asked the voice in my head.

“Get to that window.”

I hopped the wall and flitted over to the apartment building.

As I peered inside, my eyes were drawn to the mess of zaibatsu computers similar to my own, and the alarming presence of not one, but four broadcast thrones.

“Is the front room clear?”

“Yeah.” I nodded to no one in particular.

“Go on inside. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, but you’re on your own now.”

I reached into my jacket and drew my pistol. With a flick of the switch on the side of the firearm, I set it for short-range EMP bursts. Carefully, I aimed at the electronic panel that operated the key-coded magnetic lock of the front door, and fired.

Electromagnetic energy rippled through the air in an invisible pulse-beam arc, wreaking havoc on the locking mechanism. Lights flickered and died, blacking out the area in front of the apartment entrance.

With a heave, I pushed the sliding metal door open and stepped inside.

Monitors displaying continual streams of raw server data cast soft blue-green illumination, granting me partial sight within the shadowy room. Half-empty beer bottles, muscle stims, and all manner of toxic dart ammunition covered the mirror-like surface of the coffee table near the couch. Electrical cables, fiber-optic leads, and nutrient feed tubes festooned every wall, corridor,

and entryway. The entire apartment served as little more than a gateway into the digital parallel universe.

My kind of place.

“Shit,” the Shadowplay agent said, still occupying my head, watching and listening to my every action. Would I ever achieve true privacy again? “That blast alerted a security drone. Shut the door!”

I turned and slammed the locking mechanism back into place.

“Drones aren’t equipped with scanners that can actually detect or

measure EMP radiation,” she explained, “but if it sees you with that pistol, it’ll cut its way in and zap you until you’re unconscious.” Legally, UA Federal officers couldn’t bust in without proof of a disturbance, but if the machine picked up a sonic disruption, it might patrol the outside of the complex for the next two hours.

“Fuck. How do I shake it?”

“Just don’t let it see you...and definitely don’t let it get a facial scan on Sodexho.”

I quietly drew the curtains shut.

“Where are you?” I asked, keeping my voice on the verge of silence. I dropped to the floor and crawled toward the darkness that I presumed would lead me to Jed’s bedroom. If I was lucky, I could catch him asleep, knock him unconscious and drag him to one of the chairs for an isolated, secure conversation. Or at least as secure as I could manage.

“On a rooftop about thirty meters away.” So she had been

following me. “Sonar scan shows that Jed—or someone—is crouched behind the door of a small room, probably a bathroom. Careful; he’s lethal.”

Obviously.

I heard the whirring of the security drone’s gyro-propellers as it zipped by outside the door. I craned my head slowly in the dark and saw it hovering beyond the thick pane of fiberglass. It briefly rapped on the window with a tiny mechanical arm, doubtless hoping to draw me into

the open for identification, then eventually gave up and moved on down the circular walkway toward the next condominium.

“Once you’ve got him certain the murder wasn’t his doing, transmit this line of gibberish through the public admin lines.” The agent sent a string of alphanumeric code via my implant’s universal omni. I stored it away, knowing it wasn’t something I’d be able to memorize.

I let out a held breath and continued crawling on through the

gloom in search of my cowering friend. I popped my head inside the door of the first room I came to, and saw that it was a bedroom. Empty.

The next room was through a half-open slat door a few meters ahead on the left. I slowly crept inside, raising my pistol.

I surveyed the lacquered hardwood floor of the bathroom, saw nothing.

Something hissed, leaping unseen through the cool air. A dart bit into my neck.

Lights out.

* * *

I woke to stabbing pains deep within my brain. A flood of distorted sensory perceptions drowned out the world. The loosening of the chains that bound my mind to the flesh of my body felt instantly like freedom, but freedom never seemed to last. A temporary high, like twilight falling upon reality. Then darkness.

The broadcast throne
transdermally synced to my optic

nerve made it hard to imagine that I somehow lay motionless, still trapped within the fleshy shell of a skull-toting body. That existence now seemed a distant memory, replaced by an orgasmic shot of endorphins that gave way to sight, touch, reality.

A timeless corridor devoid of walls, or boundaries, or any sense of direction.

Interminable beams of ultrathin light hung upon invisible matrices so vast as to be virtually boundless,

exploding eternally outward from the center of my field of vision. A veritable firmament of electronic code.

Light materialized.

Earth and her entire surrounding universe had vanished. Reality had been replaced, along with all known laws of the natural world, by a five-dimensional crystalline formation comprised of millions of supermassive geometric data clusters. Jed's personal kingdom, I surmised from the unfamiliar

aesthetic of the program.

The neuroware's bit rate showed in my heads-up display as running at the optimal level. It had loaded perfectly rendered: a masterpiece among simulated realities. Modular interface, hyperfast transfer speed. Jed had learned the art, no question. But I knew the dangers of private server space. It meant isolation from the outside world. It meant the only order was that of the host.

Eternal chaos, potentially.

The EMP blast had apparently

done no damage to the interior of Jed's apartment complex. And he'd been smart about the situation, plugging me straight in. On a remote network, we'd have privacy. It'd give me a chance to at least make an attempt at reconciliation, so long as Shadowplay trusted me enough to not interfere.

Unless Jed locked me inside, pumped full of tranquilizers.

Or just killed me.

There was really no way to be sure what he might do; he was a

murderer, after all.

We stood upon an invisible plane floating just a few meters above the waters of Lake Michigan, where the lily pad buttressing the colossal city of Lachiga should have been.

In the distance, the Chicago skyline jutted from the horizon like an expansive set of jagged metal teeth, grinning at its own reflection in the rippling water. The buildings, prismatic and gunmetal-gray, resembled illegal firearms amid the

tangled backdrop of the old industrial metropolis.

Jed turned to face me.

His avatar, like my own, had been meticulously fashioned as a representation of his younger, eighteen-year-old self. Thinner. Better hair. Fighting fit.

“It’s been too long, Jed.”

His gaze bore into me, fury restrained behind his cool demeanor.

Or was it my own guilt reflected back at me?

I crossed the transparent surface

toward the ghostlike image of a young man who'd once been my friend.

“You fucked me,” he growled, eyes glittering. “Like the little worm you always were—you turned your back on me and everyone else.”

“I couldn't have known that it was going to turn out that way.”

“You knew there was a risk.” A crook in his brow.

“She knew the risk.”

He came at me, dual fists raised. He soared across the plane of

nothingness like a projectile and crashed into my torso. I put up my arms to shield my face, but Jed hammered away at my head and chest. The monstrous force swept both of us into the sky and we spiraled inertly through the bizarre cosmos.

Sickening, were it not for the rush of adrenaline that threatened to give me a heart attack. I bristled at the unfamiliar velocity of free fall.

He kneed me and my stomach lurched. As I bent forward, his fist

crashed into my nose, and a stream of blood trailed weightlessly behind us as we continued our flight across infinity.

I grabbed his arm before he could land another hit and then headbutted him in the forehead. I drew my legs up and pushed off him, altering both our trajectories. The space around me ceased to exist while I continued to fall for what felt like an eternity.

Simultaneously, we struck another invisible barrier. The air around us crackled. A lightning

storm of rampant electricity formed trillions of multicolored beams of light that crisscrossed and danced around us. After the dizzying spectacle was over, they coalesced to form a coherent representation of some false reality.

I stood, disoriented. I wanted desperately to vomit, but no longer had control over such functions. For all I knew, my stomach had already been emptied. Shadowplay apparently didn't care what became of me, having let Jed tie me up and

plug me into the Net so brashly. Or maybe they were confident in my skills, thinking I'd overpower him and accomplish the task from inside his playground.

Foolish.

The emptiness encased in one facet of the crystalline universe conjured by Jed's mind phased and shifted to form the bedroom of my former apartment, in the downtown area of the old city. The smell of coffee grounds wafted through the air, olfactory stims brimming with

realism that made me instantly thirst for a hot cup.

The buildings outside the window stretched visibly toward the sky that filled the space within the now-three-dimensional map. I turned to meet Jed's eyes, but saw they weren't fixed on me any longer.

A beautiful young woman lay sprawled on the bed. Dead.

I'd slept with her—Jed's girl—but damned if I didn't feel terrible about it.

Blood seeped from her head—not

from a gunshot wound, but from the massive cyst that had burst open at the back of her skull. Crimson stains flecked the white sheets beneath her soft body.

I'd upgraded her implant for a moderator's module, allowing her access to the most intimate administrative capabilities of the public social Net. Giving her such godlike powers had caused an infection bad enough to rupture her brain stem before she'd even had a chance to try them out online.

Cerebrospinal fluids leaked out fast, killing her almost immediately.

“You have no idea how bad you messed things up,” Jed said.

“You split too, man.”

“Not like you did! You could have been tried for murder, had I turned you in. But I covered for your ass, hoping you’d come back to try and make amends. Shit.” He had a point; I could have been put in prison for life—for attempting the implant upgrade, and for accidental homicide. But he’d been a good

friend.

He threw a hard punch and caught me in the jaw. I spat blood. Simulated, but all too real.

Doubtless it felt damn good for him.

In some twisted way, it felt good for me too.

“Why the hell did you come after me?” he asked. “Why now?”

The truth was as good a way to earn his trust back as any. “I’m here to help you, buddy. That black ops security network, Shadowplay—

they're right on your trail, man. Listening to every whisper."

Except in here, where a whisper was really just a sequence of abstract, compressed data being transferred, read, deleted. Stored only in the mind—the most fallible of computer systems.

"You've got to trust me," I pleaded.

"Yeah? Or what?"

"Or we both end up in prison, locked out of the Net for life and banging our hollow heads against the

wall of a cement cell for the rest of eternity.”

“And what makes you think you can ever manage that? You can’t even install a fucking implant.” The words stung. My hands felt cold, sticky with blood. Just as they’d felt the night I cradled Jed’s girlfriend—her name was Sasha—in my arms, crying and whimpering her name before bolting out the door and hopping the train to Lachiga.

Who had cleaned up that mess? Jed?

The map shattered into electromagnetic dust. In seconds, a new environment loaded: the central commercial district, right in the dead center of the city floating high above the lake. Gravity reoriented in accord with the position of this new world, and it felt far more real.

“What just happened?” Sudden shifts of this nature never occurred within the true, all-encompassing Net. Jed’s mind was hooked in as the sole overseer, and it was no doubt racing right now. I sympathized, but

his lack of control over the meta-cosmos was a problem.

“What did they tell you?” he asked me.

I sighed. “That you murdered somebody.”

He grunted, not sounding surprised and certainly not trying to hide it as a tiny grin found its way onto his lips. “Killed somebody... yeah. Did they tell you exactly who I killed?”

I shook my head.

“A Chief Federator of the Unified

Americas, man. A goddamn bigwig politician. Mathis Colangelo, his name was. I'm completely toast, man."

Damn.

It would be hard to convince him otherwise. I'd never heard of the guy, but Chief Federator was, to my knowledge, the second-highest position an individual could hold within the UA Parliament. Toast indeed.

A basso sound, thunderous and awful, shook the foundations of the

nonexistent building beneath our feet and above our heads.

“Where is this place?” I asked.

Jed’s eyes scanned the area as he ignored my question. Then something unseen possessed him. He dropped to his knees, clutched his forehead. He toppled over onto the floor, writhing and howling.

Shadowplay was in the room, I realized. They had to be tampering with the system. Trying, most likely, to shut off his remote network and transfer us into the public Net, where

my mod authorization would be beneficial instead of meaningless.

Jed's image flickered, and then a blaze of white light burned him out of existence.

Seconds later, my own avatar followed suit as the whole world was washed out in a wave of debilitating numbness.

* * *

The hands at work in the real world dropped me into the global public Net—right in the heart of

Lachiga, not far from where I'd stood moments earlier in Jed's own private cyber-hell.

The city bustled with the normative mingling and thrill-seeking of beings suckling at the corporate trickle-down of the Net. Hours of labor and online networking bought personal Net time; like me, everyone jumped at the prospect of reaping the seemingly endless rewards of the virtual realm.

The only difference was that I'd had a choice. I could have settled for

a life beyond the silicon level, but why be miserable? There were enough schmucks to lick the Earth dry from the surface already. I saw no reason to join them in the endless consumption and constant wasting. Not for me.

But where was Jed?

I'm sorry, I sent to his omni.

I stood among the waves of illusory flesh as converging crowds absorbed one another, moving to and fro about the social interzone of Lachiga's cone-shaped central tower.

I waited a long time for a reply.

My implant tingled, the warm sensation feeling light-years distant.

So am I, he finally transmitted. It was her choice, not yours. She never asked for my input on the matter. I'd have told her it was a bad idea, but then she'd have done it anyway.

I started walking, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I needed to begin the memory implantation process. I'd been given the perfect opportunity, even if Jed wasn't actually in front of me. Maybe it

would even speed up the process, being directly linked through a shared server.

Through the menu that lay hidden in the outer field of my vision, I accessed my administrative controls. A small green icon bled into a full-screen app following three rapid blinks of my eyelids, and I toyed with the system's time parameters. The world flashed by around us, unaware of the change. They weren't actually moving faster; instead, our experience was being

slowed to allow Jed's mind to absorb information more effectively.

You didn't kill that man, Colangelo, I said, trying to sound convinced.

"Yes, I did."

I turned. Jed was standing right behind me, with the same avatar as before. Young, innocent. My best friend.

"You've been following me? Or did you only just now show up?"

"I resisted the transfer, whereas you changed hosts willingly. You

need to learn how to fight the system if you're going to spend so much time in it." He smirked. Little had truly changed about him, other than having become an assassin.

"Why do you think you killed Colangelo?" I asked. "I know you didn't. Couldn't."

"He posed a threat to Disarmament stability," Jed said dryly, sounding not unlike a Shadowplay operative.

I jokingly told him so.

He looked around, hesitated.

I am Shadowplay, he sent. I thought you knew.

Nothing could have prepared me for that revelation. Jed could never keep a secret—when had he developed the skill? Then why the hell are you running from them? Why aren't they willing to protect you?

He turned into a small art gallery, where a young girl sat for a short time, hoping to sell some of her abstract drawings. With a blinding jolt, she disappeared and the room

became empty. Jed beckoned me into the adjoining room, an empty hall filled with more of the colorful works.

“It’s better if we keep this ear-to-mouth,” he said, “so they can’t easily decrypt it.”

“Explain.”

“Look, man,” he stammered, sucking in air through perfect teeth, “they had a crooked mod like you go tinkering with my mind years ago, when I signed up. Loosened a few screws, I suspect, but what scares the

shit out of me is the fact that I can't remember hardly anything before you—before Sasha's death. All I know, all they want me to know, is anger. They wanted a killer, and they found one, Dax."

"What do you mean?"

"I used to spend a lot of time inside the combat sims, you remember?"

I nodded, uncertain.

"Well," he said, on the verge of stuttering, "memories, cerebral output scans, are really the only valid

evidence in a courtroom anymore. Testimonies just don't hold up. If it isn't caught on camera or sonar imaging, something solid like that, then the mind is really the only place left to look for the truth." He turned and rested his arms on the unstained wood of the antique-looking anteroom's open windowsill. His gaze seemed to wander, searching through the blur of Lachiga's online replica.

Did he suspect that I was manipulating the synaptic link? It

troubled me that he seemed not to notice that the crowds had vanished. Only winks of colorful light now populated the virtual world beyond the window.

“Jesus, man.” I drew in a deep breath, the artificial weight of cyberspace threatening to crash down upon me. “You didn’t have to put yourself through all this... She never would have wanted you risking your life and reputation just to build a buffered credit line.”

“Don’t fucking bring her up,” Jed

hissed. "She's gone, and all that's left is my deadly aim with a sniper rifle. Like you'd have done any different."

"So what, then?" I asked. "I still don't follow. You admit that you killed him, and they might have performed some sort of alteration of your personality when you joined a global kill squad. And yet your own people are after you?" It didn't make sense.

"I told them I wanted out," he said at last. "Told them I was done neutralizing threats."

Suddenly I, too, wanted out. The idea of tampering with my best friend's mind had seemed a terrible one from the start, but knowing that his innocence was arguably already intact, and that it had been Shadowplay's puppeteering that led to the Chief Federator's assassination, I saw no need to go on toying with Jed.

"They threatened to kill me," I admitted, "unless I managed to implant false memories in your head—convince you that you hadn't killed

anyone.”

He wrinkled his brow. “Of course. To cover their tracks, prove that Disarmament protocol is infallible. To keep world peace intact, they go around killing anybody who’s still got an antique M4 lying around in their basement, and then wipe the memories of their own security forces. This government’s a bad joke.”

How could Jed ever be truly free? They’d hunt him to the edges of the Earth, into outer space, to silence

him. In the real world or in the digital one, he'd never be safe from Shadowplay.

Not as long as either of us was still plugged in.

I reset the time flux to normal, and then sent the encrypted transmission the female Shadowplay agent had given me across the ModComm network.

My omni bleeped, and I signaled for Jed to be silent.

The call established itself privately inside my implant, but I

vocalized aloud anyway, wanting Jed to catch on. As much as I knew he'd hate the idea.

“It's done,” I lied. “He's secure. I interrogated him in the guise of a Federal officer and he swears he's innocent.”

Great work, she sent. We were starting to get worried he'd brainwashed you in that private server room of his. Really strange data feed coming from that place.

“It's all taken care of. He's no longer a threat to you guys, but I

think for the memory implantation to last, I'm going to have to jack out of the Net and take him someplace quiet where we can catch up, tie up loose ends. Placing him back in a familiar environment might raise doubt, suspicion."

Should be fine, she said. Just keep your omni online and I'll be able to pick up any calls in case some unexpected complication should arise.

"Will do."

And Dax?

“Yeah?” I took a deep breath.

Don’t try anything cute. You jeopardize our agency, we’ll kill you.



I rubbed numbing ointment over the laser burn at the back of Jed’s head, then ran a comb through his straight locks. The thick, black hair perfectly concealed the scar.

“Now,” I said, “you’re gonna have to take mine out.”

“Oh, hell no. No way. Just switch it off or something. Once we get to

the old city, those two will be so confused they won't have any idea where to look for us."

"That's the plan, but the implant's coming out."

Dubiously, Jed picked up the laser.

* * *

Dawn broke upon Lachiga and the waters visible just beyond the station shimmered, gilded by the light of the morning.

Jed led the way inside the

Magnetrak car, and I followed him to the seat at the far back. I collapsed into the comfort of the thick aerofoam, delirious and exhausted. Now I was a runner too.

I pulled out the tattered manga paperback I'd slipped into my jacket, next to the leather shoulder rig that still holstered my concealed Xing-Barron. I opened it up and leafed through its black and white pages while we waited, then used it to mask my face as a pair of security drones hovered inside the tramcar.

The twin machines sputtered along between the rows of wide seats, electronic eyes perfunctorily scanning passengers for ticket passes. Facial verification wasn't needed on the Chicago-bound Magnetrak; the UA government only kept a watchful eye on those going into the massive floating city.

After they'd made their rounds, the two tiny robots exited the car and the doors slid shut. A delightful chime sounded.

“Thanks for coming after me,”

Jed said, eyeing my comic book briefly, and then making eye contact. It felt uncomfortable for an instant, not knowing just how much of my friend remained or how much of his personality had been permanently erased.

“I had no choice, man,” I said.

Of course, I would have been dead otherwise. But that didn't change how grateful I felt for having reconciled our friendship.

“That's kind of you,” he joked.

“No,” I replied, and then

chuckled. “They were literally going to kill me if I didn’t agree to perform the mind alteration on you.”

He shivered, perplexed. “Some friend you are.”

We laughed together, and then I vacantly turned my gaze to the news screen that hung overhead. I heard our last names spoken by some film actress-turned-reporter.

Jed didn’t react, so I opened the manga back up and kept reading. We’d have a few minutes before we reached the station; time to let my

aching bones rest.

I enjoyed the ride.



Kenneth S. Kao

Kenneth S. Kao became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Selfless” in Daily Science Fiction (Apr. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at pkchiro.tumblr.com.

Selfless

by Kenneth S. Kao

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Apr. 2011), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

My name is... John.

I am...

I have a wife and a daughter. They are visiting me today. Their names—

Alice. And Anna.

I can see, sort of. Everything is blurry. I am submerged in a coffin, a clear coffin with green water. There's a tube in my mouth so that I can breath, machine-like.

My legs are transparent. I see veins and arteries, thin muscles that look like spiderwebs bundled together. The doctors say my memory will be fuzzy. It's supposed

to come back quickly.

I am...

Happy. I love my job. I work with credit. I help people fix their lives with financial counseling.

But I have a disease.

The spiderwebs are growing. Tiny red dots appear under my skin like fresh wounds bleeding.

I see dark shadows outside the coffin. My wife? Beside her is another silhouette, a skinny teen with short brown hair. It is my daughter. I am sure of it.

I HAD a disease.

It was a flesh eating bacteria, resistant to everything. It shut down my body limb by limb, organ by organ.

A sudden loud noise all around me. It sounds like a muffled engine blasting in my ears. It hurts but fades and becomes tolerable. My head, then my face and chest lift out of the water.

Panic overwhelms me and I grip the tube in my mouth with both hands. I pull, wanting to breath on

my own. Gloved hands catch my arms. I am frail. They tear my hands from the tube.

Seconds later something jerks from my stomach. The tube retracts. I gasp. The hands let go of me and I wipe my face in one big stroke. Slimy green is everywhere.

Alice and Anna, they are beside me and their familiar voices are soothing and calming. Other voices, Doctor Holly Anderson and her assistant... I can't remember her assistant's name. They are speaking

to my family. They explain that the treatment was successful.

The treatment was successful.

Alice leans over the BAC—Biological Accelerator Chamber. She hugs me, I see her tears. I smell the acute smell of butter, coconut oil, and sweet bread. She had a pastry recently, probably from the local farmers market. It is her comfort food.

My daughter smiles at me but does not approach. I wave her over and my voice comes out. A deep and

smooth baritone. “Anna, come here.”

She hesitates, but she comes forward.

“How’s your boyfriend doing? Jake, is it?”

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. I laugh. “He ain’t the smartest,” I say, imitating Jake’s accent. “But he’s no lack of heart.” I grin. I have a full set of teeth. Real teeth. Modern technology is amazing.

Anna nods, smiles shyly, kisses me. “Dad, I love—”

Doctor Holly cuts Anna off. She

says they have to leave. I have to return to the BAC.

I am... suddenly confused. Something is wrong.

I look at my legs, they are normal again. Better than normal. The old scar on my shin is gone.

Alice and Anna leave, Doctor Holly comes around, looks at me. Above at some monitors. Back to me.

She isn't looking at me, though. It's this cold and calculated thing. She's studying me like a bug. I don't

like it.

She leaves the room without a word.

They do not re-submerge me. Instead, minutes tick by. I can count them by my heartbeats. I've have sixty beats to the minute, exactly.

Doctor Holly returns. She carts a man with black hair and a stubble on his chin. He has bandages around most of his face. Only his eyes and mouth show. He is crippled.

He is me.

“You are a clone,” he says. “My

clone.”

I’ve already realized it. My legs are whole. My scars are gone. I must be the clone, even if my mind believes that I am not.

“As your memory comes back from the cellular holographic imprints, you’ll remember that there is no cure for my disease. You’ll remember that we want MY family to have a whole husband and a whole father.”

More and more memories, of everything. The discovery that an

entire human's memory is stored within each cell and that with more cells, the details of memory—like increased pixels on a screen—is improved.

“I have one request.” He narrows his gaze on me. I know what he is going to ask. It is what I want, too. “You can never tell the truth of who you are.”

I understand. I want my wife and daughter to have a good life, unburdened by my illness. “I promise,” I say.

He stares at me, and nods.

But both of us know that I will tell them, someday. Once he is gone. It is our personality. "I'll visit and tell you about them," I say, choosing my words carefully. I don't say "us."

He smiles and mostly relaxes. "I'd like that," he answers.

But there is a gleam in his eye.

I know it is jealousy and I am afraid, because I am just a clone. I don't have his disease. I will change just as he will change and we will no longer be the same.

And where there is one clone,
there can always be another.

“I’ll do anything you want,” I say.



The Trickster's Bones

by Kenneth S. Kao

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• • • •

My dog was the biggest dog in the neighborhood. When he sat, his tongue reached

the top of my forehead, and when I rose up onto my tippy-toes, I could see right past his teeth down into his spotted throat. The other girls in the neighborhood were scared of Darwin's massive size and his long, white wolf-fur and equally ghost-white face, but I, Charlene Marigold Sanders, wasn't. Darwin was my dog, and my dog was AWESOME.

We had many adventures over those summer months. I, with the metal detector Dad gave me for my eighth birthday, and Darwin with his

big digging claws that could tear through earth better than even a grown-up with a shovel. We wandered the neighborhoods, through backyards, across waist-high fields, into the national park near our house. We dug wherever my metal detector pitched, and all I had to do was point and say “Dig!” for Darwin to throw himself snout-first into the earth.

Most days we only found junk and angry adults who asked me “nicely” to go dig elsewhere, but

sometimes we found toys and tools and cool things I didn't know the names for—buried treasure. Once, we even found a whole bag of nickels.

Adults just didn't understand that we were treasure hunters, and nothing stops a treasure hunter from exploring a lead. Darwin understood this. When Darwin thought he had something, even I couldn't stop him.

I got home late to dinner a lot.

One day, Darwin took my hand in his mouth and pulled me through

the national park like he knew exactly where he was going. And maybe he did. We found a tiny playground out in the middle of nowhere, just as if we'd planned to.

The playground had an old, rickety swing set with only one swing still attached. A crooked slide tilted so badly it almost rested against the swing set's frame, and the slide's ladder—legs hanging off the ground, rusted feet long broken off—was attached by one barely intact bar.

On a slight rise, a rotten old

bench and a roofless, partially torn-down miner's shack overlooked the playground. The remains of the shack's walls stacked two or three logs high. Collapsed cedar shingles littered the earth around it.

It looked like a treasure hunter's paradise.

I went right up to the shack with my metal detector while Darwin trotted to the playground. Before I'd taken more than a few steps inside the ruin, Darwin was digging.

"Whatcha got there, boy?" I

called.

Darwin didn't look up. I shrugged and waved my detector over the shack's weed and dirt floor. I caught a few blips, but nothing significant. I frowned, wondering if my detector had broken. There had to be something here. I went over the shack again, and when I looked up after my second pass, Darwin's tail was all I could see. Dirt flew, and his tail wasn't even waving, he was so focused. I jogged over to him and ran my detector over the earth near him.

“Nothing here, boy,” I said.

Darwin didn't care.

I wandered around with my detector until I got bored of finding nothing. Then I sat on the one swing still attached. I kicked my legs idly, uncomfortable in jeans, watching Darwin work. Wearing a skirt while digging was stupid, but jeans pinched.

I knew that not everything valuable has metal in it, so I was willing to wait and see what Darwin dug up. That's why he was so great to

have along; he could sense things I couldn't.

Pretty soon I couldn't even see dirt pop from the hole. I went over with my bucket and scooped up extra dirt, throwing it to the side. I heard his excited panting and his claws tearing through earth.

"Hey, be careful," I said. "I don't want to have to go down there and save you."

Huffing and digging.

Purple clouds crept towards an orange sun. We were pretty far from

our house, and I didn't want to get lost going back. He'd been digging for about an hour. I was starting to think he just wanted to see how far he could go.

“Darwin, come on. We should go home.” I put my metal detector aside and squatted over the hole, peering inside. Then I pulled out my small flashlight. He'd gone really deep, and I could just make out his white-gray furry butt.

I cupped my hands around my lips. “Darwin!” He paused. I thought I

saw his head lift. Then he was right back at it.

I scowled and walked the detector around for one last pass. I walked by the bench, and my detector let out a loud whine. “Darwin! I found something!” Usually, the only thing that could get Darwin to stop one project was another project. I ran over to the hole. “Come up, boy. Didn’t you hear it? Come dig.”

I thrust my flashlight down the hole, but I couldn’t see him. The hole

angled toward the bench on the hill. I put my head down and got halfway inside, hesitating as the sound of everything—insects, birds, the rustle of the wind—disappeared, as though sounds only worked with light. I swallowed, and my eardrums pounded louder, but I crawled inside.

Bits of dirt danced ahead. I couldn't believe how far Darwin had gone, like a gopher. He had to be ten feet ahead of where he started, maybe three feet down. It felt really tight

inside, and it was hard to breathe. I wormed forward. As I got close to Darwin, dirt flew into my face. I held up a hand to shield myself. “Boy! Quit it.”

He didn’t stop so I reached out, grabbed his tail, and yanked. He yelped. “Let’s GO.”

He growled and kicked.

Claws scratched my inner arm. I jerked back. “Darwin?” He’d never hurt me before. My arm burned fiery lines. “You quit right now!”

Darwin was digging again.

“I’m going to get really mad if you don’t come out this instance,” I threatened. “I will leave you.” I backed up on my knees awkwardly until I was out. I glared into the hole. “Fine! I hope you get something good, because if you don’t, I’m never taking you treasure hunting again.” But I already knew that Darwin couldn’t care less. “Stupid dog.”

I was supposed to be home before dark. We usually were a little late, but we hadn’t even left the site yet. I was in huge trouble. I thought

about leaving the flashlight; he could see better than I, but not even dogs can see in pitch black.

I finally turned around and left. If he got scared when he realized he was alone, he deserved it. I sniffed. Using my compass and the stars and my flashlight, I found my way home without much trouble. By the time I arrived, I had snot and tears dripping down to my chin.

I opened the door and stood in the doorway, crying. Mom and Dad both got up as soon as they saw me.

“Charlie! Where have you been?!” Mom demanded. She saw my tears, and Dad took over.

“Where’s Darwin?” Dad knelt beside me. He took my metal detector and my flashlight and clicked them off. I’d forgotten to turn off the detector, even though it’d been pitching and whining the whole way back.

“He wouldn’t come home,” I sobbed. “He found something and dug really deep and wouldn’t quit. I tried to make him come, but he

ignored me.”

Dad looked at Mom, and they both sighed. “I’m sure he’s fine. Just let him dig it out,” Dad said.

“I’m worried.”

“C’m on, Tiny,” Dad used his nickname for me. “Let’s get you washed up, and we’ll find him tomorrow. I’ll take off work to go with you.”

Mom offered to make me something to eat, but when I shook my head, I saw Dad give her a look; she didn’t push it. I let myself be led

to the shower.

After turning off the shower, the sound of pouring water didn't stop. I burst from the bathroom without drying off and ran to my window. It was raining as heavily as I'd ever seen. I grabbed a towel and charged downstairs where Mom and Dad were cleaning up.

"It's raining!" I yelled. "He's in a hole, and he might not get out! I have to go back!"

"I'm sure he's fine, he's a smart dog," Mom said.

“You don’t understand. Darwin never quits! If he’s after something, he’ll drown before he realizes it.”

Dad looked at me for what seemed like forever. His eyebrows eased, and I felt like a princess; it was the look Dad always gave me when I cried. “Fine, Charlie. Dry off and put on some clothes. We’ll go find him.”

I loved Dad more than anyone right then.

I ran upstairs and put on my sturdiest clothes. I didn’t dry off because I figured I was going to get

wet again anyway. In a minute, I was back down and ready to go. Dad was putting on a rain jacket and had a big flashlight and a shovel with him. He handed me my rain jacket. I took it and shrugged it on as I led the way outside in my high boots. We trekked fast through muddy and treacherous landscape, and I could see Dad fidgeting and looking around. "How far out did you two go?" Dad asked.

I knew that we were only halfway there, but I answered, "Not

too much farther.”

This had been one of our furthest spots, and by Dad’s expression, I’d never be going out this far again, and he’d probably take away my metal detector. But I didn’t care. I just wanted to make sure Darwin was okay.

We got to the playground. Rain stormed even heavier here than at our house. I found the hole streaming with water. “He’s down there!”

Dad pulled out his shovel.

“He’s really far, and the hole goes that way,” I said, pointing at the bench. Dad nodded and began digging at the spot where I estimated Darwin would be.

It was taking too long.

“Let me climb in,” I said. “Just far enough to make sure he’s okay.”

“Not a chance,” Dad said.

I paced and paced. At this rate, it wouldn’t matter if Darwin was still alive. I knew that Darwin dug faster than Dad could, and it would take even longer for Dad because he had

to dig a hole that he could fit into. We would be too late.

Before Dad could stop me, I dove headfirst into the hole, flashlight shining in front of me.

Dad yelled, but I was already too far for him to catch me. I crawled as fast as I could, calling Darwin's name. About fifteen feet in, I started sliding, slow, then faster. I pressed my hands to either side of me, but it did no good. Sharp rocks scraped my palm and fist, and mud squished between my fingers. I screamed, and

my face suddenly splashed into wetness. I dropped my flashlight. My entire body was submerged in mud and water. I fought wildly, my rain jacket tangling my elbows so I couldn't get my arms to move. My boots caught on the walls. My mouth kept instinctively opening. I could barely keep myself from sucking in a breath. I balled up as small as I could, and somehow, I turned.

I thought I heard Dad's voice. I kicked and thrust my neck above water, but my feet slipped just as I

gulped a breath. I was under again. I did it again and again, kicking and scratching at the walls only to fall back under muddy water. I didn't want to die. Red dots blistered my vision. Right before I opened my mouth and sucked in water, 'cause I had to, my foot caught on something soft but solid, and I pushed off of it. I gasped as my head popped above the liquid. I managed to grab a root of something. I held on, chugging wet air. My flashlight at the bottom of the watery pool emitted a soft glow.

White fur.

Dad's voice. "Tiny! Can you hear me?"

"He's," I coughed, "down here! Darwin's..." I couldn't say it.

With the glow of my flashlight, I could see dog-claw marks scarring the dirt, fur, a tail or foot, the shadow of Darwin's snout. I guessed that unlike me, Darwin hadn't been able to turn at the bottom of the tunnel.

I carefully worked my way out. Dad pulled me straight into his arms. He hugged my soaked and dirty body

tight and kept saying how worried he was, how mad he was at me. I felt his heart beating fast then gradually calm. I knew exactly how Dad felt, except in my case, Darwin died, and my heart slowed for a different reason. My heart was broken.

He carried me as I cried into his shoulder the entire way back. When we got home, he had Mom stop asking questions, and he let me get into bed, after only drying me off, without showering. He tucked the sheets tight around my body and sat

beside me holding my hand and speaking gently to me until I forced myself to close my eyes.

I fell asleep.

The next morning I got up and left without telling anybody. I went to the abandoned playground with my shovel. When I got there, I was too afraid to go back inside the hole, so I dug. The ground was still soft, and I made good progress, but I knew there was no way I could finish the hole by nightfall. I wasn't Darwin or Dad with a big shovel.

But Dad appeared a few hours later with his shovel. Without saying anything, he got to the opposite side of me and started digging. He didn't even scold me for leaving without telling anybody.

Dad broke through first. The earth caved in and dropped a bunch after he'd stabbed it. I got to my knees and dug with my fingers until we could see the rest of the tunnel's opening. I crawled in, holding Dad's flashlight in front of me.

I found my flashlight. It glowed

dimly, but I couldn't see Darwin's body. It wasn't like you could lose something in a dead end, so where was he?

The earth was muddy. The pool of water I'd almost drowned in had drained. I scooped at the mud. Maybe the rain had filled some dirt and covered Darwin up. I scooped and scooped and found nothing.

I climbed out.

"Find him?" Dad asked.

I shook my head. "I don't know where he is."

“Was he covered?”

“No. He’s not there. I found my flashlight, so I know how deep he should be.”

“Are you sure you saw him?”

I hesitated. I’d stepped on what I thought was Darwin’s body. I’d seen a glimpse of fur and his snout. But what if...

“I’m sure I saw him,” I said.

Dad shrugged. “You never know. Dogs are smart and tough; he might have made it. He might even be home now.”

We left, looking for paw prints or any other signs of dog nearby. A part of me hoped Dad was right, and maybe, just maybe, I'd been wrong. Maybe Darwin was alive.

That night, Mom and Dad gave me the talk I'd been expecting. They told me they wanted to be supportive, but they couldn't let me go digging around by myself again. They said that if I wanted to go out, I would have to go with one of them.

I told them that I didn't want to treasure hunt anymore.

I could tell they were relieved.

Almost a whole year passed, and Darwin never showed up. I secretly visited the spot throughout the year between homeschooling with Mom and helping with chores and Mom's gardening, hoping to find a clue to where Darwin might have disappeared to. Instead of hanging out with other neighborhood kids, I brought a shovel and dug around the playground. I never found his body.

On the night of the first anniversary of Darwin's "death", I

woke up and decided to go back to the playground one last time—to say goodbye. I didn't take my shovel.

The holes I'd made had become one big ditch with sprouts of grass and flowers everywhere. The night was clear and bright, and it was warm enough to sweat just by walking. I circled the playground and then sat on the swing, looking at the spot I'd last seen Darwin and remembering how much fun we once shared, remembering how he'd growled and kicked me, how I'd

threatened to leave him, and then how I'd left.

I wanted to know what he'd been digging for.

With no shovel, I had to get on my hands and knees and dig my fingertips into the earth, pulling through roots and greenery and ripping at the ground. I didn't get far before my fingers were raw, and I was tired. I sighed and lay back, staring at the stars.

I heard a sudden huff, and the sound of claws digging. I jerked up

and stared. There was Darwin in the moonlight, sniffing and tearing at the ground. He looked at me unconcerned, and all I could do was gape. I tackled him.

“Darwin!” I cried. “Where the heck have you been?!”

He wagged his tail and licked me. When I got to my feet, I saw that I stood as tall as him. I hugged him, and he bounced his front paws up onto me, pushing me back. I wrestled with him, not believing it as my hands ran through his long white

fur. He was exactly as I remembered—his fuzzy tail, his narrow face, and his nasty breath. “I’m sorry for yelling at you and leaving you,” I said.

It looked like he grinned at me. We played for a bit, and I thought I heard faint sounds of laughter in the distance. We chased each other around. I pointed at random spots for him to dig. He dug happily. I giggled and kissed him, and his wet rough tongue came right back over my chin and lips.

When we were both tired and panting, we rested. I stared at the night sky for a long time before I got up.

“C’mon Darwin, let’s go home.”

I stepped away from the playground. Darwin suddenly seemed to forget about me. He became interested in dirt and digging again. I walked back into the playground, and as soon as I did, he perked up, frantically wagging his tail like he hadn’t just seen me seconds ago. He charged and jumped

on me. I laughed a little, but I managed to disengage and step back a few feet. As soon as I crossed some invisible border, he forgot about me. When I stepped close again, he sprinted toward me excited as a pup.

Each time, back and forth. I must've tried it thirty times that night. Calling to him across this invisible border, standing halfway between. I tried everything I could think of to get his attention while I was outside the border. I threw twigs and rocks at him. He never figured

out where they came from. I even tried to drag him from the site, but I was too small. When I shoved him really hard, he let out that low growl I'd heard so long ago.

I went back into the playground and stayed with him through the night. I wondered if it was some kind of brain damage that made him forget about me when I left. It would explain why he'd never come back. I didn't care. I'd get Dad to come tomorrow and he'd help me bring Darwin home.

I fell asleep with Darwin's warm chest as my pillow.

The next morning, he was gone. I searched and called his name, but he just wasn't there. The next two nights, I went back to the playground, but I never saw him. It was almost worse than losing him the first time. I worried about him and got depressed that I hadn't tried hard enough to bring him home. I felt that somehow I'd missed my chance.

Almost another year passed. I

occasionally returned to the abandoned site. But I had a lingering suspicion that his reappearance had something to do with the anniversary of his death. It was like a Halloween story. Maybe Darwin was a ghost that only appeared on the day of his death.

So the night of Darwin's second anniversary, I woke Dad up. He stumbled from his and Mom's room.

"What is it?" Mom called.

I shook my head.

"Nothing," Dad called back.

“Charlie just wants to talk.” He closed their door. “What’s going on, Tiny?”

“Would you come with me to the playground?”

Dad sighed. “It’s two a.m. Can’t it wait ’til tomorrow?”

“He died two years ago tonight, and I’d really like to go back. Please?” I hadn’t told them that I’d seen Darwin alive the year before.

“You’re going to have to let him go,” Dad said. “I know it’s hard, but death is a part of life. We all go through grief, but it’s how we move

on that matters.” He took my hand and held it between his fingers. “Two years ago was the most frightening day of both our lives.”

“But I didn’t die,” I said. “And... and Darwin did.”

Dad nodded. “I know, and I celebrate every day that I didn’t lose you.”

“I just want to visit him, one last time—to help me get over him,” I added.

I noticed that my vision was blurry, and I was crying. I didn’t

want to lose my chance again. Dad blinked and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he hugged me. He pecked me on the cheek. “O.K., Tiny, let’s go.”

This time, I brought rope and extra flashlights and shovels.

“What’s with all that?” Dad asked.

“Just in case,” I said.

He looked at me curiously but didn’t argue as we walked back to the abandoned playground. I kept moving so fast ahead that I had to

wait for Dad to catch up several times. Unlike last year, it was dark and cloudy, and the moonlight didn't show much. But right as we got there, I spotted Darwin with my flashlight. I whooped and yelled. "There's Darwin!" I ran toward Darwin, but Dad grabbed my arm just as I was about to pass the invisible border.

"Be careful," Dad said. "That's not Darwin."

"Yes it is! I saw him last year just like this. We played together all

night. That's why I brought the rope, to bring him home, because last time I wasn't big enough to drag him home, and then he disappeared the next day. I think he's got something wrong with his brain."

Dad wasn't listening. He had a really big frown on his face and was staring hard. "It looks like... can't be..." He twisted his flashlight to see better.

"It's him!" I yelled. I tore from Dad's grip, running inside the playground. Just like before, Darwin

saw me, and his tail went wild as he ran for me.

Dad dashed in front. “Get back!” he yelled. He kicked Darwin across the head.

I cried out as Darwin yelped, his neck bending sideways. Darwin shook his big head and snarled. His hair bristled. His ears dropped flat.

“It’s not Darwin,” Dad said. “It’s the biggest hyena I’ve ever seen.”

“He looks nothing like a hyena! Hyenas don’t even exist here.”

“I don’t know what you’re seeing,

Charlie, but get backNOW.”

Darwin lunged at Dad, and Dad swung his flashlight at my dog. It struck and flashed and went out. I whipped my own flashlight toward them. Darwin had grabbed Dad’s hand like he did when he was playing. Except that Dad was yelling in pain.

“Darwin! Let go!” I screamed.

Dad kicked at Darwin over and over, and then he tripped. Darwin dragged Dad across the earth. My dog was big, but I never imagined he

could pull someone like Dad. I ran forward, but as soon as I came near, Darwin snapped at me.

Dad rolled and almost got his feet underneath him, but Darwin bit an ankle, yanking Dad across the playground. I threw the rope at Dad. Darwin somehow intercepted; he caught it between his teeth, and I was thrown to the ground. By the time I got back up, Darwin had dragged Dad to the playground's boundary. Dad screamed at me to run, his fingers clawing at the dirt. They

crossed the border, and like mist, both disappeared.

I still heard Dad's screams, though, and a hyena's maniacal laughter.

I ran forward, tracking the ground with my flashlight. Paw prints evaporated past the invisible line.

The screams abruptly stopped and with it, the laughter.

I felt sudden wetness at my fingertips. Licking. Darwin licking my fingers. I jerked away and

stumbled, falling.

Darwin whined. He sniffed my face and licked my forehead. I cried out and rolled, running blindly for the border. Darwin stayed right behind me.

I crossed the border and put my elbows on my knees, panting. Dad! Where's Dad? What happened?

Darwin still looked at me. He wagged his tail. I took another step back from the border. And another. Darwin followed. I bolted, running as far as I could. But Darwin loped

right beside, grinning and bounding in the air as joyous as could be.

I didn't understand. Darwin was a hyena. Darwin had kidnapped and maybe murdered Dad. Darwin was able to leave the playground and follow me home, when before he couldn't.

I sprinted the entire way home, tripping a lot. I went straight into the house and up the stairs. Maybe it was a dream; maybe I was sleeping right now. Maybe, if I got into bed and ignored the light panting and the

happy tapping of Darwin's tail on the wood floor beside my bed and the sudden weight as he jumped beside me as I hid under the covers, and maybe if I pretended that Dad was sleeping, and I'd never woken him up, and maybe if I just went back to sleep... Maybe none of it was real.

I squeezed my eyes shut; Darwin's warm body pressed against me in quick rhythmic comfort.

"Look who I found," Mom's voice woke me. She pulled the covers off my head. I saw Darwin standing

right next to Mom. Light flooded through the windows, and Mom patted Darwin's head. "Look, Charlie! Darwin's home. I found him in the house wandering around like he'd never left."

I stared at Darwin.

"Aren't you happy to see him?" Mom asked.

"I—where's Dad?" I demanded.

Mom shrugged. "Work, I assume. Why?"

"Didn't you see him?"

"You know he always leaves

before the break of dawn. What's wrong, Charlie?"

I stared at my dog. "That's Darwin."

Mom nodded eagerly. "Yes, sweetie, I already said that."

"You see Darwin? Not a hyena?"

"A hyena?" she frowned. "Of course not, silly! I wonder where the mutt's been these last years."

"Oh my god oh my god oh my god..." I said. I was crazy. I missed my dog so much I wasn't even living in reality anymore.

“Call Dad,” I said.

“Why?”

“Call Dad!”

She frowned. “Sweetie, you’re being strange. Your dog’s back. Aren’t you happy?”

“I KNOW HE’S BACK! JUST PLEASE CALL DAD!”

Mom withdrew. She wore a worried frown as she picked up the phone and dialed. She spoke with someone for a while, and then she hung up. “That’s strange, he didn’t go in to work this morning. Do you

know something?”

I put my hands to my face and cried. Mom just stood there. And when Dad didn't come home that evening, she pestered me with questions I couldn't answer. What could I say?

The next day she called the police and reported Dad missing.

A woman psychologist from the police came to speak to me. I didn't answer her questions, either.

Darwin found the metal detector and laid it at the foot of my bed. He

whined at me. I ignored him and hid deep in my blankets like I was in a tunnel. As long as I put my head down, nothing outside my tunnel existed.

I told Mom to lock Darwin out of my room.

He begged and scratched incessantly. When I worked up courage to leave my bed, I got onto my computer and looked up information about the hyena. There were tons of stories about it—myths that it was a shapeshifter, a trickster,

and a collector of bones. The more I learned, the more frightened I became.

After a few weeks of Dad still missing and my fear increasing, I realized that I couldn't hide forever. My dog—or my hyena—showed no intention of leaving. I opened the door and let Darwin in.

He came in as excited as ever and as affectionate as I'd let him be. I tried looking at him through a mirror or staring at him out of the corner of my eye. I tried everything to see the

hyena that my father had seen. But there was no indication that Darwin was anything but my long-lost best friend. I almost felt like he was.

But there was one more thing that I wanted to try. A way that might prove he wasn't Darwin.

Dad kept guns around the house. He'd told me where they were, taught me how to handle them because he said it would be better for me to know than to accidentally hurt myself.

I got one of Dad's handguns out

from the case under the sink. The gun was shiny, polished, and heavy. I'd never used it without Dad's big hands around mine. I found the bullets in the sink drawer, got my shovel, and pulled out my old metal detector.

When Darwin saw the metal detector, he bounced with excitement, and it was everything I could do to keep him quiet. I left early in the morning before Mom woke, leaving behind a note saying I'd be home late and asking her not

to wait up.

We walked towards the abandoned playground, and Darwin followed me like always. Once there, I went right over to the bench and turned on the metal detector. It pitched like it had that first day with my real dog. I realized that Darwin had been digging straight in this direction. Whatever Darwin had been digging for, I would find it.

As soon as I put my shovel to earth, Darwin—the hyena—let out the low growl that had once

frightened me so much. I swallowed and looked at him. His hair bristled like when he'd attacked Dad. "You don't want me to dig here?"

Darwin's lips peeled back, and he showed me his teeth.

"So you're not going to pretend to be my friend anymore? I wonder what's down here," I said. My hands shook as I nudged the shovel's tip into the ground.

Darwin snarled and clicked his teeth.

I leaned the shovel against my

collarbone and pulled out the gun and loaded it carefully. I cocked it, pointing it with both hands at Darwin. "Do you know what this is?" I asked.

Darwin crouched.

"You think I won't do it?" I looked at Darwin, seeing his every mannerism mimicked perfectly. He was my dog.

Except that he was willing to hurt me.

I took a shaky breath, angling the shovel with my shoulder, and then I

pushed down as hard as I could with my foot.

Darwin jumped.

I pulled the trigger.

The bullet hit Darwin in the chest, and I dove to the side. His body hit the shovel, and both crashed to the ground. An awful whine emerged.

I got up and shot him again.

And again.

The force of each shot whipped into my neck. A chilling sensation washed over me like the cold water

of the tunnel. But each time, I reminded myself that this wasn't my dog, but an evil hyena.

My fourth bullet struck Darwin in the head. His body shifted into a giant hyena's and then into Dad's body, to Darwin's again, and back into the hyena's. A high pitched laugh echoed without a source, like it came from inside my skull.

The body disappeared.

I shivered. But I resisted the urge to cry and run away. I'd cried enough. I'd been afraid long enough.

I lifted the shovel and pushed it back into the earth. From time to time, I ran the metal detector for guidance, and it pitched louder as I dug. It took all day, the sun almost set, but I found what I was looking for—what the real Darwin had been looking for. I found a massive pile of bones—birds, mammals, even fish in a pile of bones so dense that there wasn't much dirt within them. There were a lot of skeletons I didn't recognize, exotic bones so oddly shaped that I couldn't begin to

imagine flesh over them. I wondered if this was what had attracted Darwin originally or if it was a spell that had hypnotized my dog. From what tiny section I'd exposed, I saw one of each kind of bone. Just like the stories said, the hyena was a collector.

An hour later, with my small flashlight stuffed into my mouth, I stopped.

I found a small golden figurine of a hyena, exquisitely detailed and magically untouched by any grime. And underneath the figurine, I found

the rotting, worm-riddled body of Dad and the skeletal remains of a dog.

It was my first confirmation that Dad and Darwin were truly dead.

I took the figurine and stared at it and gripped one of its legs in a tight fist. I couldn't look at my dad or dog's body.

Once upon a time, digging up the golden figurine would have been a dream come true. It would have been the discovery to fund the rest of my adventures as a professional treasure

hunter.

But this figurine, this cursed thing...

I went home and tried to melt it in the oven.

It didn't work. I thought I heard the hyena's laughter. I couldn't think of any other way to destroy it, so I put it on my desk and stared at it. I refused to cry.

I woke Mom and told her how I'd found Dad.

She did cry.

We called the police and met

them at the bones. And when Mom saw Dad's body, she ran right over to him and threw herself on his maggot-ridden remains. She didn't notice Darwin's remains.

The police pulled her away. They began an investigation that I knew could only lead nowhere. It was the biggest mystery our small town ever had; the investigation only made the hyena's collection more mysterious.

They turned the place into a tourist spot.

Another year passed. I kept

hearing the hyena's laughter like a soundtrack in my mind. No one else seemed to hear it, so I pretended it didn't exist. I told myself that it was my imagination.

I never returned to the bones, but every day, I stared at the figurine on my desk, wondering.

It was the anniversary of Dad and Darwin's death. I had to return to the playground. So I got up and went to that place where everything horrific in my life had occurred, where my dad and my dog were

murdered.

They'd built a railing around the ditch and put signposts with eerie retellings of Dad's death and information on some of the strange and extremely rare bones found there. They'd turned the old miner's home into a tourist lounge, and they'd built a walkway over the graveyard so that tourists could stand above it to view and photograph the many bones. The swing set was the only thing untouched by the changes.

I knew they'd removed Dad's body and the bones of an adult human female and a little girl found way at the bottom. I wondered if they were the original residents of the miner's shack. But Darwin's remains still lay near the top. I'd seen them in the early photographs and newspaper clippings.

Tonight, Dad stood on the walkway right over where his body had been found. I wasn't surprised. He didn't spot me until I crossed the border. And when I did, he startled

like I'd appeared from thin air.

"Charlie!" He rushed off the walkway and swept me into his arms.

I hugged him back, feeling the familiar tickling sensations of his hairy forearms. How his hands were strong and gentle around me, holding me like a cradle. How it wasn't Dad at all, and his arms around me felt like he might crush me at any moment.

"Dad," I said.

"How's your mother?" He

grinned at me too big, his lips unnaturally wide.

“Heartbroken, always afraid. She never leaves her bed.” I’d had to go to public school because she wasn’t homeschooling me anymore.

“And you?”

I didn’t answer. Even if I wasn’t crazy now, I was becoming crazy. “Are you real?” I asked. If anyone else saw us, would they see a hyena standing next to a girl?

He patted himself. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I feel real.”

“Do you know that you’re dead? That we buried your body and had a funeral?” I challenged.

“I do. It’s strange, isn’t it?” He looked at me. “You’re much taller, beautiful. You’re not tiny anymore.” He said it like proof that he, the hyena, actually knew me. “Hey,” Dad said.

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember how when you brought me here, Darwin was resurrected? He could leave this place?” He hovered closer. His chest

rose and fell like he panted.

I nodded. I remembered how Dad was murdered, yes.

“Do you know how it works? I’m stuck here, Tiny. I’ve been stuck here this entire time, hoping that you’d visit me and rescue me.” If Dad could bristle, this was how he would look. His eyes narrowed, and his grin grew toothy; his fingers flexed like they were pawing the air. I felt the threat.

I nodded again. I wasn’t afraid of nearly anything anymore. “Yeah, Dad, I’ll see what I can do. I’ll bring a

boy,” I said, knowing that the hyena’s collection had lacked a young boy’s skeleton.

“I miss you, Tiny. I can’t wait to get back to our life.” His fingers relaxed, and his smile eased into a more natural expression.

I knew, then, that he wouldn’t hurt me. “I miss you, too,” I said.

We spent the rest of the night talking and reminiscing. We talked about some of the bones. “Dad” knew a lot about them. He called them unusual names in languages I

didn't know. A few he looked at with affection. When I asked him how he knew so much, he shrugged and told me that he just did. But it felt good, and it was like talking to my real dad, even if it wasn't. I stayed up the whole night and watched as the sun peeked over the horizon and felt my eyes moisten as Dad faded and disappeared from my arms, held in one last hug.

I left the boundary of the playground and came back with lighter fluid and matches.

When I'd examined the bone graveyard's pictures, I'd noticed a skeleton more distinct than any of the others, one with a huge skull and gigantic jaws and a rounded hind lying at the bottom of the mountain of bones. It was the skeleton of the hyena, twice as big as Darwin had been.

Dad would never have asked for another life to replace his, just like Darwin would have never attacked Dad.

I loved Dad and wanted both

him and Darwin back, but I also knew that they were gone forever. If I didn't end this, I'd keep wanting them back. I'd keep hearing that laughter. I'd never move on.

I might actually one day bring a boy here. "We all go through grief, but it's how we move on that matters," real Dad had said.

The hyena, the collector of bones, must store its power in them.

I set fire to the bones.

A loud, mournful howl emerged.

Flames consumed the bones,

exploding upward with supernatural force. As I watched, the fire climbed high enough to touch the wooden walkway and envelope it. The whole structure collapsed with a shuddering impact, the howling faded, and the fire died. Nothing, not even scorched remains of bones could be seen. Just an empty pit of black.

I didn't hear any more laughter.

The next year, when I returned, there was only a swing set, an unused tourist hut, and new life budding across steep hills. Dad and Darwin

were nowhere to be seen.

And as much as I missed them both, it was exactly how it must be.



Mur Lafferty

Mur Lafferty became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “1963: The Argument Against Louis Pasteur” in The Thackery T. Lambshead Cabinet of Curiosities (2011), edited by Ann & Jeff VanderMeer; she was also a nominee for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer on the 2012 Hugo/Campbell ballot. Visit her website at murverse.com.

750,000 of Your Friends Like This

by Mur Lafferty

First published in *Voices from the
Past* (May 2011), edited by Scott Harrison
& Lee Harris



When Jefferson Marine's gang took the image of a unicorn as their symbol after Christmas, people didn't laugh. You didn't laugh at Jefferson Marine, not over anything. Not at his scooter, not at his diminutive stature, and not at his momma, who rumor had it was only twelve years older than he was.

Jefferson Marine was visiting his momma (who was fifteen years older than he was, thank you very much)

for Christmas, like a dutiful son, when he heard the familiar words come over the radio. “A Christmas Carol, read in its entirety by Orlando Bloom, brought to you by BookFace Tech.... Marley was alive, to begin with.”

Jefferson was reading a text from Half Pint, his second in command (the poor bastard was spending the holidays with his parole officer) looked up and frowned at the radio. Was that right? Marley alive? Jefferson wasn't much of a reader,

but his mother was such a fan of A Christmas Carol that he had been subjected to the tale in video and audio form, multiple times every Christmas.

He perked up and listened closely, probably for the first time in a decade, to the words. The story unfolded about a man named Scrooge, and his powerful control of the city and those weaker around him, the sniveling poor, and then how his dead partner came to visit him.

Only, he wasn't dead. And in this version, Scrooge was less of a money counter and more of a street thug. And Marley wasn't his long dead partner, but his best friend from juvie who came back to tell him of three mythical creatures who would tell him where he had gone wrong.

The first was a fairy, but not the gay kind. The second was a manticore. Jefferson didn't know what a manticore was, but he got the sense it was a pretty big lion-type thing. The third was a black unicorn,

silent as a corpse—something Jefferson Marine knew quite a bit about. The bodies Scrooge had created, the widows he had left, the lives ended and ruined. The unicorn pointed to a grave where Scrooge's mother lay, dying a pariah for the shame of her son's crimes.

When the story was over, Jefferson Marine was left with tears running down his face. Three things were on his mind; apologize to his mother. Call Half Pint. Then make an appointment with his tattoo

artist.

He had a place on his forearm he'd been saving for a swastika. He decided to replace it with a black unicorn's head.



Half Pint Jones was also listening to the radio, trying to figure out how to get free of his parole officer. She was a tough bitch by the name of Harkness Lily White, which Half Pint thought was funny because she was the Negroiest negro he'd ever

met. He'd heard she had requested him because of his racial hatred crimes, and her holier-than-whitey attitude just made him hate her kind more. As he had no family, she'd demanded he spend Christmas Eve with her in her piece of shit apartment. She had left to go get cranberries, and he expected she was testing him, seeing if he'd ransack the place or break out. It would be his last strike; piss her off and he'd be back in jail for good.

He was just about ready to prove

the old negress right and start rifling through her sock drawer for her stash of gigilo money when the radio switched to the reading of A Christmas Carol. It was the same station as Jefferson Marine was listening to.

“And now we bring you, uninterrupted, A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, read by Whopie Goldberg and brought to you by Bookface Tech. Marley was dead to begin with....”

Half Pint Jones ignored most if

it, arm deep in underwear, when he heard the words, “You will be haunted,” resumed the Ghost, “by Five Spirits.”

He paused. Five spirits? He wasn't a Christmas literature scholar by any stretch of the imagination, but he had been in jail last Christmas and the warden had thought it would be funny to have every version of the Christmas Carol piped in to the television. There was no watching the MMA bouts, there was watching Kermit the Frog be a sad Cratchitt,

then Scrooge McDuck a repentant Scrooge, then Bill Murray a greedy TV exec, then Alasdiar Sim a dancing Scrooge, then Tori Spelling a smirking Scrooge (that had caused a prison riot.) Perhaps the warden had wanted to teach them something. But all he'd learned was a deep seated desire to shoplift any charles dickens book he came across and burn the fucker.

Seeing as how Half Pint didn't go to many bookstores, he'd only done this once. And then he realized he'd

burned one of those horror literary mashups, A Christmas Poltergeist.

But five spirits, that made him pause. No matter what bastardization people did to the story, the thing was supposed to have three spirits. Past, present, and future, right? So he listened.

Ebenezer Scrooge encountered the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come, but he also discovered the ghosts of Christmas Home and Christmas Far Away. Half Pint wept when Scroge

saw his family before he was born, his radiant mother, his laughing father, and realized he had been the catalyst to souring his father. Then he downright sobbed as Scrooge discovered the Christmas of soldiers in foreign lands, including his friend from his apprenticeship, who wasn't named Dick, but had the same name as Half Pint's brother (which was odd, since he didn't think Moose was a common English name in the 1800s).

Half Pint found himself, instead

of looking through Harkness Lilly's sock drawer, looking through her kitchen. He suddenly wanted to surprise her with a pie.



Harkness Lilly White sat outside in her car, listening to the radio. A Christmas Carol had just come on and she listened to it, loving the familiar cadence. She got lost in the story, not realizing the minutes going by. It was, word for word, exactly as she remembered it.

“Did you enjoy the Bookface Tech presentation of A Christmas Carol, read by Katherine Hepburn? If you don't feel as if you enjoyed it enough, that is likely because you are not signed up to Bookface Tech, the premier social networking site that collates your information and modifies your content to suit your needs! With over three billion members, Bookface is the place to be. Sign up now, for free!”

Harkness Lilly White frowned. Her computer had broken two years

ago, she did email at the station's computers, and she'd just never seen fit to replace it. She shrugged. "Stories modified to suit my needs. Sounds horrible."

She got out of her car and headed up the stairs to her apartment, humming I'll Be Home for Christmas.

* * *

In Seattle, WA, production manager Jennifer Ford leaned back and sighed. Seventy-four thousand

different readings of A Christmas Carol, especially designated for the reader's life and preferences, all of their steps online tracked, monitored, and run through a specific algorithm to choose which reading was best. It had cost millions. But if it paid off, it would be worth billions.

She'd probably get a new office.

She smiled. The Christmas Carol had been a nice, feel-good test. They had changes scheduled for several classics, some designed for behavior

modification, some designed just to entertain. But Jennifer Ford had as ace up her sleeve.

The executive team in BookFace Inc. Was cuthroat, always looking for a way to get ahead of each other. Jennifer knew her coworkers had it out for her; she was the head of the biggest project BookFace had ever produced. If something went awry, Jennifer would send out the five thousand different versions of A Clockwork Orange.

She shut down her computer and

left to catch her plane.



MESSAGE
REDACTED
(based on the song
“Chiron Beta Prime” by
Jonathan Coulton)
by Mur Lafferty

First published in *Escape Artists: 12
Days of Christmas Stories!* (Dec. 2011),
edited by Mur Lafferty



“**A**right everyone, I’m writing the Christmas letter tonight!” Nora Anderson said at dinner. “I want a report from everyone about their year.”

Everyone except for her husband David stared at her in disbelief. Robert, her 17 year old son, was still nursing the wound on his arm he’d gotten in the mines earlier that week. Keisha, 15, was using her inhaler to dampen the cough she’d developed at her job. David hadn’t responded because he was already stoned,

feeling the results of the drug that he used to keep him from getting nightmares.

“Which part do you want, Mom?” Rob asked. “Our banishment from home? Our enslavement? A list of our neighbors who have died? How about our Christmas list?”

Keisha pulled out her tablet and frowned at the calendar app. “How do you know it’s Christmas? I still haven’t figured out how the years relate. Are we near the winter solstice? You can’t go by counting

the days that we've been here because of the longer days!"

Nora's face had gone stony, a very bad sign. Her hair was cropped very short, the scar from her head injury in working in the spaceport still shiny through her curls. "I know it's Christmas because it says so in the newspaper." She held up her own tablet, showing the propaganda flyers sent by their overlords.

Rob rolled his eyes. "And you believe that?"

"They're doing their best to make

it festive. I hear decorations are going up tomorrow.”

“Sure, Mom. And they’re our “protectors,” too,” Keisha said, making air quotes with her hands.

Nora stomped from the room, slamming the plastic door. “Mom’s an optimist,” David said, slurring.

“Yeah, and other words for that are ‘lost all grip on reality,’” Rob said.

Keisha got up from the table and looked outside their four-room holiday home. “Huh,” she said. “She’s right.”

Their home was built in the side of a mountain—they had refurbished it from an abandoned cave—and snow was shooting from one of the rocks.

Rob joined her. “That’s not natural,” he said, watching the huge flakes shoot up into the sky so they could drift, impossibly slowly, down to cover the rocks on their asteroid.

“I guess Dad was right about those rocks being fake,” Keisha said.

“He’s not right about much these days,” Rob whispered.

Keisha let the curtain drop. “So, what? It’s Christmas. I am not clear on how that makes thing any better.”

Nora stomped back in the room, a box in her arms. She shoved some dinner plates loaded with casserole—all they ever ate was casserole, sent by their Protectors—out of the way and put it on the kitchen table. Her face was set as she opened it and began pulling out little Santa figures, a plastic tabletop Christmas tree, and a string of tangled lights.

“You used some of our weight

allotment for that?” Rob asked.

“I took what we needed to stay strong as a family,” Nora said. “If we can hold onto family traditions, we can stay strong.”

Rob snorted. “Sure, if we celebrate Christmas, then Santa will bring us a rocket ship and we can fly home! Jesus will bless our casserole and make it OK to eat whatever the robots are feeding us.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “For one pure moment, everything will be perfect and wonderful and magical.”

Nora ignored him this time, and continued unpacking the box. “Keisha, clear the table, please. I’ve lost my appetite and your father has fallen asleep at the table again.”

Her daughter rolled her eyes, but obeyed. Rob left them and went back to the window to watch the snow.

“Mom, do you really think this will make a difference?” Keisha asked.

“Did you read the flyer?” Nora asked. Keisha shook her head. “Well, take a look at it.”

Keisha made quick work of the dishes and picked up her mother's tablet, pulling up the red and green flyer. She winced at the color contrasting; robots never got complimentary colors right. She read aloud.

MANDATORY HOLIDAY CELEBRATION

The Protectors are aware that it is currently the time of winter holidays for humans. Snow will be created for your enjoyment,

along with appearances of fat males with beards. If you decorate your holiday home with festive elements, you will be looked upon with approval and your ration of food and medicine will be increased.

Work will continue as scheduled.

Enjoy your holiday of choice. Share the holiday spirit. It is mandatory.

“They are lacking a certain

something in the magic of the season,” Nora, “But I will do whatever I need to in order to provide for this family.”

The front airlock slammed and then hissed, indicating that Rob had left the house.

Nora pursed her lips. “I wish he wouldn’t go out at night.”

“There is no night, Mom,” her daughter reminded her, waving her hand at the perpetual dark sky. Their rocky home was illuminated only by street lights.

“It’s night if it’s after dinner,” Nora said. “Now help me string these lights around the kitchen window.”

Keisha refrained from reminding her that the round window was their only window, with the rest of the house inside the hill; she figured her mom had been pushed far enough.



Rob walked through the snow, his environment suit registering a presence of ammonia. He kicked up the dry flakes that were drifting

against the rocks.

Christmas. Their family were enslaved, they'd never see Earth again, and she wanted to celebrate Christmas. His mom had done some stupid things—including joining the underground movement against the Protectors on Earth, which is what landed their dad in solitary confinement and all of their banishment here, on Chiron Beta Prime, an asteroid in the belt, beyond Mars. They mined thorium there, which was vital to the robot

processors. The robots couldn't figure out how the human eye processed color, but they sure understood irony—rebel fighters on Earth were sent to Chiron Beta Prime to mine the metal that made their sentience possible.

Deep within one of the mines, Rob had found the shrine to the mother of robotics, Connie Wong, the woman who had developed their sentience and thus the downfall of the human race. The robots, after they had killed her, had her preserved

and erected a shrine to her in the mines, so that the miners would have to walk past her every day.

Rob wiped the snow off his face plate and stopped as he nearly ran into a Servo, the hovering drones that did a lot of the menial tasks around the asteroid. Resembling a human-sized jellyfish, it passed importantly in front of him, clutching a metal statue of Santa Claus, which it placed on a corner of the path, near the central meeting place the robots created so the

humans could have social interaction.

Its tentacles positioned the Santa to its liking, tilting this way, shifting that way, and then pointing it so that its red eyes stared straight at Rob.

“Ho ho ho,” Rob muttered, and walked past it, completely unsurprised to see its head turn, following his progress down the path.

Other Servos were placing other Santas around the colony, and, since Rob was the only human out at this

time, they all focused their red eyes on him. Despite his anger, he began to sweat inside his environment suit, and he picked up his pace. He hadn't thought of where he wanted to go when he'd stormed out, but he knew now. He hit a button on his wrist.

“WITH WHOM DO Y'ALL SEEK CONTACT?” came the stiff voice, poorly attempting an American Southern accent.

“Hi Sarah,” Rob said, following the expected script. “Can you connect me to Dr. Effort's house?”

“Y’ALL DID NOT SAY
PLEASE.”

Rob rolled his eyes. Robots got their ideas of human culture from the oddest places.

“Please, Sarah, and thank you.”

“HAVE A GREAT DAY.”

Rob kept walking.

“YOU DID NOT
RECIPROCATE—”

“You have a great day too, Sarah,” he interrupted quickly. “Bye.”

“BYE-BYE, Y’ALL.”

The voice who picked up at the

Efforts' house was tired, as most voices were these days. "Effort holiday home."

"Hey Dr. Effort, it's Rob Anderson, do you mind if I drop in to see Maggie?"

"Sure, Rob, come on over," Maggie's dad said. He cut the connection.

There was little more to be said. Sarah was not only the operator, but the recorder of every conversation on CBP phone lines, so all calls were short by necessity.

Maggie, a short girl with long braids and high cheekbones, answered his knock at the airlock, frowning at the snow that drifted off him. “What the hell is that?”

Rob placed his helmet on the floor of the airlock and shrugged out of his environment before he entered their house. “Snow, or something like it.”

She put her hand up to her nose. “Oh man, is that ammonia?”

Rob grimaced. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Merry effing Christmas,” she

said, and stepped aside so he could enter her house.

The Efforts had a free-standing house, complete with windows in nearly every room, since they were there as “guests” of the Protectors. They had been captured against their will, but not officially exiled, as they were taken for their abilities instead of as punishment for their crimes against the Protectors. Maggie’s dad, Dr. Horace Effort, was a pioneer in the field of robotics, and was there to help develop new “species” of

Protectors. Maggie's mom, Letitica Reaver, had been a computer science genius, but had died due to an airlock accident.

Maggie had not believed it had been an accident.

Maggie, sadly, had neither of her parents' brilliance, and did poorly in their two days of schooling a week they were allowed. She was destined for a career in the mines for sure, Rob thought.

"I wish you'd just come over," she said, grabbing his hand. "Now Sarah

knows you're here."

Rob glanced at the cameras on the wall. "Well yeah, all the Protectors know I'm here."

Maggie gasped and glanced at her dad, who hadn't looked up from his computer since Rob had come in. Her dad waved a hand and said, "Don't worry about it, you kids go to your room. It's perfectly fine."

"What's he talking—" Rob began, but Maggie grabbed his hand and yanked, and he allowed himself to be led into her room, where she shut the

door.

“What’s going on?” Rob asked.

“We’ve done it,” Maggie said simply, grinning, her normally serious face lighting up.

“What’s ‘it?’”

“Created encryption that they can’t detect. We can fool their cameras and can encrypt messages back home. If the rebellion won, we can tell them where we are.”

Rob’s mouth hung open. “Are you serious? Your dad did that?”

She drew her tiny form up

proudly. “Nope. I did.”

This was too much. Rob sat down on her bed, the strength seeming to leave his legs. “But Maggie, you’re—I mean, you—”

“Are an idiot?”

Rob blushed. “I wasn’t going to say—”

“Nah, it’s OK. I had to. Dad made me. The Protectors wouldn’t watch me if I was consistently underachieving. Dad’s been teaching me what he can, and what he couldn’t, I learned from Mom’s

notes.”

“So you made an encryption program.”

She put her hand on his shoulder, for once able to look down at him. “Rob. If I didn’t have faith in it, would I be telling you about it here, in a room with direct Sarah Surveillance?” She pointed to the camera on the wall.

“So what does she think is going on?”

“We have a pre-recorded file playing of the empty room.”

“But what about when I came in? They know I’m on my way over here, the outdoor cameras would have seen me come in.”

“Dad said it was fine. He probably ran a previous recording of you being here.”

“You could be spaced for treason,” Rob said with a whisper.

“Or we could go home.”

Her face was very close to his. He swallowed. Home. At home, he would be permitted to ask girls out, even to eventually marry. Here, all

new relationships were forbidden. The Protectors were not ready for a human breeding program yet. (The “yet” had always frightened Rob.)

And at home, he may even have the nerve to ask out Maggie.

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

* * *

“Mom!” Rob called when he came home. “Mom, I’m sorry about what I said.”

His father, as usual, was asleep in

the easy chair. Keisha and Nora sat at the kitchen table, looking up at him with astonishment. Rob realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd apologized to his mother.

“What's up with you?” Keisha asked. “Protectors finally brainwash you?”

“Nope. Just finally feeling the Christmas spirit, I guess.” He sat down with them and peeked at his mother's tablet on the table. “Are you done with the Christmas letter yet?”

“Not yet,” his mother said. “I

wanted to get some thoughts from you.”

“Great. I would love to say some stuff. Hand it here,” he beckoned for the tablet. “And hey, Keisha, will you get me a drink?”

“Get it your own damn self, I’m not your slave!”

Rob thought for a moment. The recorders at his house were not disabled and were getting all of this. General grumbling about their lot in life was tolerated. Outright rebellion was not. He couldn’t tell his family

what he was doing. But he had to make sure the kitchen camera was focused on Keisha as she distracted with movement getting his drink.

“You know that game Grandma sent me on the last shuttle? The one you want so bad?”

Keisha raised one eyebrow.
“Yeah? Skytreaders 41?”

“It’s yours if you get me a drink.”

“All you want is a drink.”

“And you to stop acting suspicious. Trust your big bro for one time in your life. As if your life

depended on it,” he said as softly as he could, his eyes flicking toward—but not directly at—the camera.

She got it, he could tell, but still looked annoyed as she got up and made a big deal going to their refrigeration unit.

“Rob, what—”

He gave his mother a wild stare, and she closed her mouth. He smoothly pulled the small data slide out of his pocket and slipped it into her tablet, uploading Maggie’s program. “So I got my job in the

mine, banged up my arm pretty bad, and appreciated Grandma's presents she sent with the last colonists. Is that it?" he said out loud as he typed furiously.

"I think so, yes," his mother said, watching him. Her dark face grew ashen as she read the words he was typing. "Rob, you can't—they'll know! They'll kill us!" she whispered frantically.

"Mom, trust me, the Protectors will censor anything delicate we put in here," he said out loud. "They will

never know,” he added under his breath.

Done with his message of SOS and coordinates of their asteroid, he ran the encryption program on the section of text and then overwrote it with some description of the colony during the holidays. The Protectors redacted any and all descriptions of the colony, even benign ones.

The airlock alarm came on, indicating that a robot was entering the house. Rob jumped, his heart racing, and he dropped the data chip.

“Thirty seconds,” hissed his mother as he fumbled on the floor.

Keisha dropped to her knees to help him. “Do you think they know? Did they catch something on the video?”

Rob felt panic claw at his throat. “I don’t know...” His fingers closed on the clear chip and he relaxed, slipping it into his sock as he stood up. The airlock opened and one of the Servos floated in.

“Greetings, Servo,” Nora said.

“HAPPY HOLIDAY,” the Servo

said. "I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE WRITING A LETTER FOR THE HOLIDAY TO SEND BACK TO EARTH."

"Yes, we just finished it," Nora said. She didn't have the flushed, nervous look that Rob was nearly certain he possessed.

"YOU ARE SENDING WISHES FOR THE SEASON TO EARTH? I WISH TO SEE THIS NOW."

"Certainly," Nora said, and didn't even glance at Rob. His insides twisted in shame to realize how

much faith she had in him. She took her tablet from his hands and handed it to the Servo. It took it with its tentacles and held it in front of its electronic eyes.

Rob busied himself in the kitchen, helping Keisha to her feet and saying they had to do dishes. Her eyes were wider than normal, but she kept her face composed. Rob felt sweat pricking his forehead and cheeks, and he forced himself to breathe slowly. He relaxed the muscles in his back, which were

tensed, expecting an attack, expecting tentacles to snake around his waist, expecting something.

He risked a glance around at his mother. “You didn’t put that stuff in about the cookies you baked for the summer social gathering, did you, Mom?”

His mother’s dark skin was pale, but she forced a laugh. “Of course I did. It’s funny. And no one had told me that the protectors provided all the food we needed.”

The Servo still peered at the

tablet, reading. As it did so, some of its tentacles were moving, probing a cavity behind its main processor that it used to carry things.

It's got a gun, Rob thought in a panic. He assessed the room, looking around for a place to push his sister when he threw himself at his mother, but he knew there was no use fighting. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to fight. His breath came in short gasps now, and his fists clenched.

“YOU MENTIONED THE

COLONY. THAT WILL NEED TO BE REDACTED,” the Servo said.

Rob smacked himself in the forehead, a little harder than he intended; the anxiety giving his limbs a frantic flail. “Oh man, I’m sorry, totally forgot about that. You can handle the redacting, or do you want me to rewrite?” He held his hand out, not sure what he would do if the Servo handed the tablet back.

“I WILL REDACT.” Another tentacle snaked up and plugged into the tablet’s port, and Rob held his

breath again. What if the robot could detect the encryption program? Its other tentacles still rooted around in the cavity, and it slowly brought something out. Rob held his breath. He didn't dare look at his mother or sister, but he could sense Keisha's eyes on him.

The robot deposited a flat box into his mother's hands, who nearly dropped it in surprise. It removed its tentacle from the tablet and placed it on the table. "THE PROTECTORS HAVE SENT YOU A HOLIDAY

PIE. THIS IS FOR YOUR
HAPPINESS. PLEASE
APPRECIATE IT.”

His mother nodded, dumbly.
The Servo took its leave, suddenly
and without etiquette, as usual.

They finished cleaning up the
dinner dishes in silence. Afterward,
his mother sent the message to all
their family and friends back on
Earth. They sat in the living room
with the lights off, looking at the
twinkling lights and the snow falling
outside their window, and it was

almost like home. Almost.

Rob's tablet beeped, and he glanced at it. He smiled. "Mom? Maggie's family is inviting us over for hot chocolate tonight. They want to talk about the holidays with us."

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Nora said. She tucked a blanket around his father, snoozing in a recliner. "I'd love to hear their plans for the holidays."

* * *

Maggie and her dad passed

around the mugs of steaming almost-hot chocolate to Rob and his family at her kitchen table. “The MESSAGE REDACTED script will come across as a live link in the newsletter, but only after delivery. When it’s selected, the encryption key will be downloaded. The true message is under our message and the redaction.”

“So the message is under two encryptions, so to speak,” Rob said.

“What if they don’t redact the part of the message you want them

to?” Nora asked.

Rob grinned at her. “I said how pretty the night sky here is, with a description of the constellations we can see.”

His mom nodded slowly. “You’re hiding the secret message you don’t want them to catch under the secret message you do want them to catch. Clever. But what if we’re caught?” Nora asked.

Maggie shrugged. “Die in the mine. Die fighting to get home. Which one would you prefer?”

Nora sipped the hot chocolate slowly. “Acceptable. We haven’t had hope in three years. I’ll take the risk.”

“When will we know?” Kiesha asked.

Maggie frowned. “It could take months. We don’t know the status of things on Earth. It will take some time to plan a rescue mission. Then there is the travel time. If they can’t crack the Protectors’ jump gate codes, they will have to take the long way around.”

Rob reached for her hand under

the table and squeezed her fingers. "If they can't, I'm pretty sure you can."

Maggie squeezed back and ran her free hand through her hair. "I broke those codes weeks ago. The trick will be figuring out when they need access."

"So we wait," Nora said.

"We wait," Maggie's dad confirmed.

Keisha looked out the window. "It's kind of pretty, if you forget about the whole "here against our will" thing. We never got snow in

Charleston.”

“I think I’d rather have not had a white Christmas and stayed home. Enslavement on an asteroid is not a good price to pay,” Rob said.

She made a face at him. “Just trying to look on the bright side, like Mom said. We have to wait. There’s nothing else to do except for sleep, work, and read. At least now we get to look at the snow.”

Maggie had hung Christmas lights around their windows too, and they sent colored streaks through the

white fluff still drifting from the sky.
It was pretty.

Maggie's dad had agreed to Rob's family's cameras so they could speak in comfort, and discuss their own rebellion, if the ships arrived.

It was a big if. But apart from the beautiful, deadly snow, this Christmas had given them an unexpected gift: hope.



The Reason for the Season by Mur Lafferty

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edited by Mur Lafferty



The naked man didn't look cold, standing in the snow. His pale ribs stood out, as if he were in a perpetual state of inhaling. It was nearly Time.

The yellow-robed cultists stood around the man, murmuring. He had no name, having forfeited it in favor of being known only as the Avatar or the Vessel (depending on whether you were talking to Jeremiah Pope, the cult leader, or Sapphire, the head priestess, respectively.)

Jasmine checked her smartphone in her pocket—the official time was 23:21:25 on December 20. At 23:21:39, the world would stop as the Earth's axis swung the Northern Hemisphere as far away from the sun as it could go, creating the longest night. At 23:21:40, they would begin approaching the sun again. But by then it would be too late.

The Vessel (or the Avatar) had been prepared, had freely given up his body, and stood, emaciated and stringy-haired, waiting. Jasmine

watched the seconds tick by. She'd been skeptical of the cult, but it gave her something to do on Saturday nights after work, and she hadn't been invited to any Christmas parties this year. The Avatar (or the Vessel), who Jasmine still thought of as Joe, made no effort to cover his nakedness, and Jasmine wished he didn't have to be nude for the ritual.

She glanced at the other cultists. She wore a yellow robe like they did, even though she despised the color. She had her hood down, better to see

the Avatar (or Vessel). She was tall, and didn't know the ancient language well enough to chant it, so it was her job to catch him at the point of the Solstice, if he fell. She would be the first to look into the face of a god.

You know. If it happened at all.

The seconds ticked closer. She found herself holding her breath as if she actually expected something to happen. The murmuring increased in volume, and Jasmine stepped closer to the Vessel (or Avatar) (or

Joe). At 23:21:35 she put her smartphone in her pocket to free her hands. Despite the dry, freezing air, her palms were sweating.

Jasmine counted silently to herself. When she said “thirty-nine”, the Avatar stiffened even more, and twitched, and then fell forward.

Jasmine jumped forward and easily caught the thin man, wondering, “Was that it? No lights or singing or anything?” The body gasped, as if forgetting how to breathe properly, and then looked up

at her.

His eyes glowed yellow. It was all Jasmine could do not to drop him and step back in horror.

“I am returned on the Solstice,” the voice croaked. “I would see my world.”

The circle around them fell to their knees as one, some chanting, some gibbering, some sobbing. “Great,” thought Jasmine, “I’m the only one holding it together.”

“You want to see your world, Lord?” she asked. “Oh, and welcome

back.”

The eyes focused on her. “You are my herald? A woman?”

She made a face. “Last I checked. I could just let you go, dude. You’re not looking too sturdy on your legs there.”

His eyes narrowed. “So be it. Clothe me. Show me this world.”

Finally someone put a robe around his pasty thin body, then bowed and groveled backward. Jasmine was torn between awe that the ritual had worked, and scorn that

the being they had summoned was an asshole.

They had done their ritual in the woods in a park across the street from Parkside Mall, the largest Mall in Buffalo. Showing the guy the world could start there, she decided.

“So, uh, I’m going to take our Lord and show him around. Anyone want anything from Cinnabon?”

The cult members looked up from their prostrate positions, and she caught sight of Sapphire’s enraged face. “You dare insult our

Lord's return with mortal desires?"

Jasmine shrugged. "Sure. I mean, he wants to see the world. And the mall is open till midnight until Tuesday."

"You will not—" Jeremiah began, getting to his feet.

"Silence—" Joe said (She could no longer think of him as the Avatar or vessel, and no one was allowed to speak the god's name.) He waved his hand both Sapphire and Jeremiah were flattened to the ground as if a wind had blown them over. "My

herald has been appointed to show me my world that I will rule. She will take me.”

Jasmine grinned at him. “Cool. Come on.”



The look on Joe’s face was one of utter bafflement.

To be fair, the mall was pretty gaudy. Red velvet bells framed by green holly hung from the rafters every thirty feet, and iced candy canes lined the upstairs railing.

Christmas trees shone white in the upscale Macy's, while in Hot Topic they blinked red and green and sang dirty Christmas carols.

The being was speechless, but when he came across the display and throne for Santa, his face began to redden.

“What—who—” it blustered.

Santa's area was brightly lit, with little skating anamatriotic penguins going round and round an icy pond, and huge presents underneath the trees. Santa's throne was framed by

huge candy canes, and the jolly old elf himself sat on the throne, talking to a bored-looking teenager. The line was relatively short behind the boy, since it was so late, and contained only a crying kid about 5 and a toddler asleep on a father's shoulder.

“That’s Santa Claus. He’s a guy who brings presents to good girls and boys on Christmas eve. He hangs out in malls before Christmas so little kids can see him and ask for presents.”

“What has happened to the

Solstice?” the being who used Joe’s mouth said. “It was once a time of darkness, and contemplation, and of the Wild Hunt, to announce my coming and bring death to all who witness it.”

“Well,” Jasmine said gently, “it’s kind of evolved. Instead of the Wild Hunt, Santa flies through the sky in a sleigh pulled by reindeer now. To take those presents around, you know.”

“Where is my Wild Hunt? What are these lights, this whimsy?” His

eyes began to glow yellow again, and Jasmine quickly pulled up his hood.

“Take it easy, man. Let’s go get a cinnamon roll to eat, that will cheer you up.”

“I require no sustenance but that being’s soul,” he said, pointing to Santa. “And I will have it.”

He started forward, but Jasmine stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Whoa, hold up, where are you going? You can’t just eat Santa in the middle of a mall. You’ll give these kids nightmares for the rest of their

lives.”

“Their lives will be mercifully short once I return in full power, let me go!” Joe’s voice snarled.

“Hey, you’re not killing anyone on my watch. You were brought back to rule, which I’m cool with. Discriminately killing people who piss you off, that’s not cool. Who’s going to fetch your robe and stuff when you kill off everyone? Who,” She paused for effect, “Will make the cinnamon rolls?”

The being began to struggle, and

Jasmine pulled him bodily away from Santa's throne, causing some concerned people to notice them.

“My little brother is out past his bedtime,” she explained, glad that the yellow hood ensured no one could see that the struggling person was a) too old to be considered a “past his bedtime” and b) white.

That seemed to be enough for people, and the high pitched keening coming from the hood seemed to confirm her story. She dragged him past the food court—asshole cost her

a cinnamon roll—and out the main doors to the mall.

“I didn’t agree to this, they just wanted me to do what you needed, not kill anyone,” she muttered. “Now we’ve made a scene, I’m still hungry, and you tried to eat Santa. How messed up is that, dude?”

She forced him onto a bench and pulled his hood back. He was a mess of tears and snot and glowing yellow eyes. Jasmine made a face and handed him a used tissue from her pocket—better than nothing, she

thought.

“You’re really freaking out here, huh?” she asked, pity cutting through the annoyance. “So all that time you spent out there,” she waved vaguely toward the trees and sky, “You never once checked back here to see what the world was going to become? To see if it was even a place you would want to rule?”

“You will never fathom the workings of the gods,” he spat, dabbing at his nose. “Your concerns and daily routines are as

inconsequential as an insects.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked, pissed off again. “I never saw an anthill make someone cry as much as you just did. Admit it. You are freaked out that this wasn’t what you wanted it to be.”

“This is now how it is supposed to be,” he said, looking down at the snow. “It’s perverse.”

Jasmine snorted. “Well yeah, you’re not the only one who feels that way. I passed another, “Jesus is the Reason for the Season” stickers the other day. But come on, dude, it’s

not Jesus, and it's not you. The earth moves, axial tilt happens, and humans see it as an excuse for a party. If you were gone, if Jesus was gone, and his followers, the world still would turn, there would be a longest night, and a longest day. People would find reasons to celebrate the sun coming back. If you wanna return, then Joe has apparently given you his body, but you're not going to change Christmas. I don't know anyone strong enough to do that.

“Now if you’re OK, I think we have about five minutes before Cinnabon closes.”

She felt proud of herself, like Linus in that TV Christmas special. The being that inhabited Joe’s body continued to stare at the ground, though, and she looked around, annoyed. He wouldn’t budge, but she was pretty sure she’d be in trouble if she left him here.

“Or we could go back to the circle. I bet some people there would love to talk to you about setting up a

Wild Hunt or something. Who knows? If it gets big, Target might do a sale for it.”

The being in the yellow robe choked back a sob. “I did not know it would be so different. I don’t fit in here.”

Jasmine rolled her eyes but went to pat his shoulder. “Come on, dude, you can find a spot here, and maybe even get some more worshippers—” She stopped. He had begun to glow. Heat radiated from him, and she backed up. “Are you all right?” she

managed to ask, but the light got too bright and the heat too much. Snow all around her was melting, and she heard the crack of an icicle.

She turned and ran, slipping through the slush of the parking lot. There was no explosion or kaboom, but the light behind her got daylight-bright, and the heat made her feel as if her cloak was going to catch fire. Then it was dark again.

Jasmine risked a look back. The being in Joe's body was gone, all that remained was a tattered yellow robe.

The wooden bench he'd sat on was also ash, and the benches on either side were aflame.

“Huh,” Jasmine said. She pulled her smartphone out again and dialed 911. She calmly reported the fire at the mall, there no injuries that she knew of, and hung up. “Huh,” she said to herself. “I saved Santa. Well, the mall Santa, anyway. That’s closer than most people get to saving Christmas.”

With an improved opinion of herself, she thought she deserved that

damn cinnamon role. She checked the time. 00:02:34. Damn. Cinnabon was closed.

She shrugged and dropped her own yellow cloak in the snow. Time to find a new Saturday night hobby.



Anaea Lay

Anaea Lay became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Your Cities” in Apex Magazine (Jun. 2011), edited by Catherynne M. Valente. Visit her website at anaealay.com.

Your Cities by Anaea Lay

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Valente

• • • •

I was thinking of you. It was late
and the lights in the bar were set
low, creating the cozy, private

feeling that you always found so depressing in those sorts of places. They're my sort of place now, but there was nothing private about the mass of people pressing on me as we stared in awe at the big television screens.

“The bridges are gone, collapsed at the same moment,” the reporter gasped. “There’s no sign of an explosion. Authorities won’t answer questions about what happened.” They were showing the same footage again. And again. The Brooklyn

bridge crunched at the middle as if giant hands pressed either end together then collapsing, crashing into the water below, taking who knows how many people down with it. The Holland tunnel was uprooted and submerged. New York was completely cut off from its suburbs on Long Island and in New Jersey. It had to be a bizarre natural disaster or a brilliantly executed terrorist plot or... something.

“It’s like the city just shrugged,” somebody whispered. He spoke to

the television, but it sent shivers through everybody who heard him.

That's when I thought of you.

* * *

Chicago was next, a year later. It was one of those foggy days where the air is so thick and close that the buildings disappear inside of it. On that day the ground rumbled and the air was filled with the sounds of steel sliding over glass, of concrete creaking over rebar. The city shook with the sounds of building after

building around the city prostrating itself to the Sears Tower. They bowed before it, the King of the skyscrapers, and suddenly everybody knew.

They didn't have footage of it to play over and over like they did with New York, but they had experts. Whether they knew anything or not, the experts talked. The one I remembered most sounded a little like you. "There are precedents of course. Atlantis is the obvious one, but I think the tower of Babel

probably references a real event that's been garbled over time." The experts speculated about what made the cities wake up, about how the ritual obeisance could have been coordinated, about anything and everything but the one obvious question, the one you'd never answer for me: "If they're waking up, what does that mean for us?"

You're still gone, vanished with New Orleans, but I know you're out there. They're still creeping toward consciousness, so you must be.



New Orleans was the first city to wake up, but it took them years to figure that out. It was so much smaller than the others, its skyline so much less impressive. But you'd always said that buildings were the side effects of cities, that their souls didn't need skyscrapers to grow and dream and whisper their passions to you. New Orleans had an old soul, pieces of Paris and Marseilles glued together with fragments of Barcelona and bits of Africa, thrown into the

world and forced to find its own place. So you chose it as the first.

The weathermen started talking about Hurricane Catherine changing course, and still you went. She grew bigger and angrier while I begged you to stay, but you couldn't be stopped. They nicknamed her Katrina II, but you laughed at me as you climbed into your car and set off.

I've tried to picture it ever since, you strolling into a city anybody with any sense had long since fled.

You whistled, I'm sure you whistled. But then what? Did you crawl into the city's bed and stroke its shoulder, nibbling on its ear and whispering tidings of morning, the way you would for me? Did you wrap your arms around it and speak of love and sex and waffles, coaxing it past the foggy stages of fresh wakening and into the warmth of your voice? Did you even think of me as you made love to the city, mother, midwife and lover all in one? I picture it, but I don't want to know.

Whatever you did, it wasn't enough. Or it was too much. New Orleans woke in the middle of the worst cyclonic storm on the Atlantic since they've kept records. It trembled and shook, as if convulsed with shrieks of, "Not again!" and threw itself into the ocean, taking you and every other poor soul trapped there with it. Katrina II, Hurricane's Revenge.

The waking must be contagious. It traveled up the Gulf Stream to New York, then through the Great

Lakes to Chicago. They're waking themselves and you're dead and gone, drowned in a pile of rubble. I'll never have to look at you and know you dream of sapient Metropolis even as you kiss my fingers. You're lost and gone and I'm rid of you and your mania at last.

* * *

I remember the night we first talked of cities. We wandered down State street, lightly buzzed and falling into each other's arms at the slightest

provocation. You spread your arms to the sky, as if embracing it and the towers around us. “Can’t you feel it breathing?” you asked me. I felt humid air and the stillness of closed shops and closing restaurants. “We could nudge it, just a little. Then there’d be something marvelous.”

We kissed. I pressed my lips to yours, helpless to answer you another way. The train rumbled overhead as we parted. You sighed and I heard the street sigh with you.



Los Angeles never woke up. You said it wouldn't, that it was a stinking mass of ghettoed neighborhoods and highway united by a central strip devoted to tourists and hookers. You said there wasn't enough human soul there to keep the people from turning to plastic. You called it an abomination, a collection of suburbs with no city. San Diego, San Francisco, they creaked into life, but Los Angeles remained still.

You were right, but it's the only

city with suburbs left. All the wakeful cities went to war today. They ate the half-towns surrounding them, swallowed them into the earth, trampled them underfoot, and consumed their remains. Millions of people are dead. Half of Maryland and portions of Virginia aren't there anymore. All the gray places that cannibalized the cities are gone.

I wish you'd been here to see it.

* * *

I work on a farm now. They've

sprung up where the suburbs used to be. The cities are riddled with markets selling fresh produce. Visiting the markets is the newest pastime for the people living in cities.

The farmers are experimenting, making new things out of the soil. They've made a plant that tastes like chocolate grow in the Midwest. It's creamy and sweet so you can eat the fruit straight. It tastes slightly nutty as it dissolves in your mouth. A used car dealer from Troy Michigan

developed it. Horticulture had always been his hobby, and it became his life after Detroit leveled his home and killed his family. He lost everything, but the cities are full of chocolate.

I don't think of you when I eat it, because I don't think of you at all anymore. I just go to the private bars with low lights out of habit. The world has changed and there's no room left for missing you.

* * *

Los Angeles is gone. San Diego

and San Francisco marched against it. They say the whole coast trembled under the strain of the two cities treading steadily toward their victim. Los Angeles was still asleep and they tore it to shreds.

It's not the only one. All of the sleeping cities are under siege. Milwaukee and Chicago devoured Green Bay, leaving a pile of rubble surrounded by lakes. But you know that.

I've spent the last year working a farm in Wisconsin. Chicago turned

back south and as it passed by I ran to the roof, telescope in hand. I don't know what made me think of it, but I needed to see this divided city holding itself together with nothing more than wrath and disdain for the unconscious heaps of buildings nearby. I leaned out of the window, almost nautical as I scanned the skyline. You were right; they're glorious when they're awake and moving with purpose. And there you are, perched on the spire of the Sears Tower, hair streaming in the wind

and laughing with joy.

The telescope falls from my hand. I'm running, feet slapping hard against the ground as I rush to catch up with the city, to join the march. I understand now, and I need to see it, to be part of it. Wait for me, just a moment longer. I'm coming to you.



Lauren Liebowitz

Lauren Liebowitz became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Green” in Cicada (Sep/Oct. 2011), edited by Deborah Vetter. Visit her website at laurenliebowitz.com.

Green

by Lauren Liebowitz

First published in Cicada (Sep/Oct.
2011), edited by Deborah Vetter



As the world shook, Theo sank
down against an old
concrete wall. He pressed his
knuckles to his temples and wished

that everything would just stop. Wishing, praying, never helped, but he tried anyway. His vision blurred.

It didn't stop.

Wide-eyed, he watched the empty alleyway as pavement buckled and buildings swayed. A distant car alarm began to wail.

Above him, the windows of the building shattered. Theo threw himself down and shielded his head with his arms as glass slivers rained down on him. The earth ripped open, slashing through the alleyway.

Bricks and stones disappeared into the abyss. He bit back a scream.

“Hey,” a voice said.

The world stopped shaking.

Panicked, Theo tried—and failed—to get up. For a moment he thought he might pass out instead. He was scrawny, just a skin-and-bones kid of maybe fifteen, with no energy left.

A woman with spiked green hair and three rings in her right eyebrow stood a few paces away. The alley looked as it had before—no glass, no

crumpled buildings, no chasm.

“Hey,” the woman said again, as Theo brought a bleeding finger up to his mouth. “Don’t do that. It’s filthy. You’ll make yourself sick.”

Her eyes were bright and inquisitive, the eyes of someone who meant well, who might buy him dinner or take him in for a night or two if she figured out that he had nowhere else to go. That never, ever ended well.

Theo pushed himself to his feet, favoring his injured hand. He rubbed

his finger against the side of his jeans, smearing them with blood over the caked dirt. “Yeah, whatever.”

The woman pulled a band-aid from her denim purse. “Here. If it gets infected, you’ll be sorry. Doctors aren’t cheap.”

“Yeah,” he said again, taking it. He shouldered his backpack, dusted off his jeans like he cared about them, and tried to move past her. “Thanks.”

Her footsteps followed along behind him. “You need a ride

somewhere? A bus pass?”

No—he needed sleep and maybe something to eat. The way he felt now, it could happen again, any moment. His mind oozed slowly between thoughts, trying to find a way to talk her into buying him food and then leaving. The last thing he needed was another episode with her around.

Instead, he stumbled, and she was there to support him. Her strong grip surprised him.

“Kid,” she said, amused but

worried, “you all right?” She leaned in closer, smelling his breath for alcohol. He clung to her, knowing she’d smell nothing but the lingering dirt that never quite left.

“What’s your name?” he murmured. She smelled nice, spicy and almost green, like her hair.

She laughed, surprised. “Eve.” The harsh bones of her narrow face were smooth and confident, like something cut out of marble.

Eve unwrapped a granola bar from her purse and pressed it into his

hand. The overwhelming aroma of cinnamon made his mouth water, but nausea followed it. She watched him curiously.

“Not hungry?”

He swallowed the bile and took a bite, then wolfed the rest down while Eve supported him by one arm.

“Good boy,” she said. “Look, I’ll take you somewhere safe. This is a nice town, but alleys are no place to crash.”

“I wasn’t,” he started, but an explanation was out of the question,

and he cut himself off.

“All right, maybe you were just meditating,” Eve said agreeably. “I’ve heard worse. At least let me grab you dinner and clean up your finger, okay?”

Theo slumped against her, and the green-smelling spice cleared his foggy mind a little. She was bony, not soft, but warm and slightly damp in the humid air. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this close to someone.

Walking with her support was a

little awkward as she led him toward a small café. Inside, she got them a booth by the window. Theo glanced over his shoulder, registering the door and the number of people between him and it.

Eve settled her chin on her hands, resting her elbows on the table and watching him. “What are you afraid of?”

He shrugged. “Nothing.”

She let the lie go with a nod, unfolding her menu instead. Theo looked at the pictures for something

familiar—a burger with fries. Once, he'd wished to understand the secrets of words and letters, and they had stepped off the page with little feet and shouted at him, leaving him half-deafened for the rest of the afternoon. Since then, he only looked at them sideways, as though they might ambush him at any moment.

A waiter with more piercings than Eve took their order. Afterwards, Theo slurped from his glass of water. Eve sipped at hers

with more decorum. The silence hung in the air as Eve's eyes lingered on Theo, who squirmed in anticipation.

"Well?" Theo asked at last.

"Well what?"

The light was fuzzy, and it was hard not to squint. He leaned back in his seat, trying to ready himself for running without looking like it. "People usually have something to say."

She smiled. "Like what?"

"Questions." He dug his fingers

into the worn flannel shirt around his hips. "Don't you want to ask me something?"

"Not really," Eve said mildly.

"Then why are you doing this?"

She shrugged. "You're hungry. Maybe you're sick. Do I have to want something from you to help you out?"

Theo frowned. "No," he said, not really caring how sullen he sounded.

Eve smiled, leaning across the table toward him. "I'll let you in on a little secret, kid."

“Theo,” he said. “My name’s Theo.”

She nodded gravely, taking his name like a gift. “Theo. I’ll tell you a secret.” She hesitated, putting words together. “I won’t ask you a ton of questions or anything. But I’m also not standing by while you starve to death or die of gangrene. That’s the whole and honest truth, and you can take it or leave it. Dinner, and disinfectant, and you’re free to go.”

He swallowed, looking from her cloudy sky-blue eyes to the vibrant

leaf green of her hair. “Right.”

They ate quietly. Burgers, Theo noticed, tasted much better fresh than out of a Dumpster. Eve picked at the mass of food on her plate, cutting things and dipping them in sauces, looking wholly preoccupied with her meal.

“What’s gangrene?” Theo asked, finally.

Eve looked surprised, as though she’d forgotten him. “It’s what happens when a cut gets infected and the infection turns sour. If it doesn’t

kill you, it'll make your finger fall off."

"Oh," he said, wishing he hadn't asked. One more nightmare image added to the too-big collection inside his head, waiting to show itself when he least wanted it—today, tomorrow, whenever something wrong happened inside of him and the image came out like it was real.

She smiled, reaching across the table to touch his wrist. "Don't worry, kid. Theo, sorry, Theo. I already told you, I'll keep you safe

from gangrene.” Theo stared at her fingers, the nails bitten down to the nubs, like his. He nodded.

When the check came, Eve flipped open a black canvas billfold to pay, revealing an ID card that showed a stranger with her face.

“Is that you?” he asked in surprise as she began to put it away.

She stopped, turning the card face up. The mousy woman in the picture had flat brown hair past her chin, a wan smile, and tired eyes. “Yeah. It’s an old photo, isn’t it?”

“What happened?”

Eve smiled faintly. “I was in a car accident. I almost died. That sort of thing changes a person.”

“It gave you green hair?” Theo asked in disbelief.

Eve laughed. “Not exactly. I have to keep it short because it won’t grow in right any more, and the green—well, I used to be afraid of dyeing my hair. I’m not any more. You could say that surviving a wreck like that made me less afraid of the little things.” She tipped her head down,

showing Theo a line of scar tissue across her scalp. “But that’s past now. Onwards and upwards, right?”



He followed her back to her place. The headache had returned, and he could feel something ugly coming with it, tearing at his consciousness. Eve pulled him back sharply from the curb as his feet sent him heading off into traffic again and again. The pounding in his head turned painfully rhythmic the longer

they walked.

Eve's house was two-story but small. Potted plants covered the porch, lined the steps, and filled the window boxes. Wind chimes tinkled among leafy fronds and strings of glass and shells. Eve unlocked the door, sticking her head in. "Oi! Jacob! Cut it out, will you?"

Miraculously, the pounding stopped. Theo's mouth hung open, struck by the sweet sound of silence. The throbbing had started long before they reached Eve's street, yet

here it was banished by her words, as though it had been nothing more than drumbeats all along. He heard one last crash of cymbals, then silence again. Eve turned to him apologetically.

“Jacob thinks he’s a percussionist,” she said. “As long as he quits before it’s dark out, the neighbors don’t care that much. And he’ll shut up if we tell him to. Come on in.”

The house was dark inside, scented with spices and flowers and a

bit of must, and underneath it all a faint thread of Eve's perfume. Eve kicked off her boots. More plants claimed corners of the entryway, and Eve watered them with a fading blue can as Theo shuffled after her. Eve turned on the light, illuminating a bright, tropical blue kitchen with piles of paper covering most of its surfaces. Stacks of vibrantly mismatched dishes were visible through the glass cabinet doors.

“Looks like my other roommate's out,” she mused. “I guess it's just me

and Jacob—and you. Take your shoes off, if you don't mind. It keeps the place homey, you know?" She smiled at him.

Theo wasn't sure his feet were any cleaner than his shoes, but he complied, setting his worn sneakers in line with a row by the door and leaving his backpack beside them. The terracotta floor was cold against his bare calloused toes.

"Why don't you wash up," Eve offered, setting her purse on the kitchen table among a stack of

papers, “and I’ll grab our first aid kit? The bathroom’s down the hall.”

The hall was decorated with mosaics of tile, glass, and mirrors, and the bathroom was full of candles. On one wall, a green-faced man with closed eyes smiled, surrounded by oak leaves. Theo thought he heard a deep voice chuckle, and he smelled for a moment the earthy scent of cool, wet woods in autumn. Yet the green man stayed on his wall, though the corners of his mouth seemed to

twitch upwards. Sculptures, more than anything else, tended to come to life around Theo. Before this one had the chance, Theo washed his hands and his face and returned to the table, where Eve was waiting with a man Theo hadn't seen before.

“Here's your stray,” the man said with laughter in his voice. He was tall, gangly, with rectangular-framed glasses, a close-cropped beard, and dark eyes.

“Theo,” Eve said, smiling and looking up at him. “This is Jacob,

one of my roommates. He's promised not to drum for the rest of the night." She patted the chair next to her. "Let's get this taken care of. It's not still bleeding, is it?"

Theo sat, watching Jacob warily, though the man only smiled. "No, it stopped. It'll be okay."

On the table, Eve had gathered a bottle, a small cardboard box, and a tube of something that looked like toothpaste. She snorted. "It'll be okay if I say it'll be okay. Remember? Gangrene?" She took his hand in

hers, surprising him, and removed the brown bottle's lid. "I won't lie, this is going to sting, but better a little sting now than a huge pain later. Trust me." She cleaned his finger, and he hissed sharply through clenched teeth at the sudden burning pain. Before he could touch the wound again, Eve gripped his hands and held them still. Finally, his breathing grew steady, and she applied cream and a bandage. Theo kept glancing up at Jacob.

"The kid thinks I'm going to eat

him,” Jacob said.

Eve laughed. “No, he’s just wondering if you’re going to pull out drumsticks and start wailing on his head.” She released Theo’s finger, and he cradled it with his other hand. “Better?”

Theo nodded.

“Good. Then you’re free to go, if you want.” She folded her hands on the table in front of her. Otherwise, she held still, like she was trying not to spook a stray animal. “Or you could stick around a while, if you

wanted. Catch a shower, maybe a nap. I won't mind. Jacob?"

Jacob just raised an eyebrow at her, as if wondering why she was even asking him. She grinned, clearly encouraged.

"Hell, you could probably crash here for a night or two, if you promise not to murder us all in our sleep," Eve said. "Much longer than that, though, and you'll have to start paying rent."

Theo stared at her.

"You aren't our first stray," Eve

said, her eyes crinkling. “Jacob cooks a mean breakfast, too.”

“I’m not sure you want to do that,” Theo said, when he could organize his thoughts well enough to say anything. “I’m not—I mean, trouble follows me. I’m bad luck.”

Eve snorted, shaking her head. “We all have our share of bad luck.”

“No,” he said, because he could tell she didn’t believe him. “No, it’s more than that. Bad things happen when I’m around. Sometimes nobody but me can see them, but

sometimes... sometimes it gets kind of scary.” He tensed, but Eve just shook her head again.

“Are you going to hurt me?” she asked evenly.

He swallowed, then broke eye contact. “No,” he said, “but, like I said, sometimes things happen. I...”

No matter how many times he said it, the fear on their faces never stopped hurting him. But he had to warn them. People deserved to know, even if he could never explain it right and they always thought he

meant something else. The old woman at the library who treated him like a lonely little boy with an imaginary friend—until the statue out front addressed her and she fainted. For a moment, Theo had thought he'd killed her. He hovered over her for the long seconds before she woke, gasping, and he fled.

Or Carlos, the shelter volunteer—the memory of his kindness was sharp and painfully bittersweet. Smoke and flame raged through the shelter that night, no more real than

the earthquake Eve interrupted. During the evacuation, Carlos had carried Theo, much younger then, to safety. The moment they left the building, all traces of the fire vanished. Theo had taken his guilt and run.

Theo's shoulders slumped. "I can't control it. I wish I could, but I can't."

Jacob's jaw tensed. "That's different," he said. "Did you stop taking your meds, kid?"

Theo scowled. "No! I'm not—it's

not like that. It's not like that at all. I don't..." I don't hurt people. He ducked his head, remembering the faces he'd seen in shelters, the look in their eyes, the way other people avoided them. "I don't need medicine. I'm not crazy. Weird things just happen around me."

Eve met Jacob's eyes. Jacob seemed unconvinced, uncomfortable, almost angry. Eve looked down first. Theo withered under Jacob's disapproving stare, his cheeks burning.

“It’s okay,” Theo said, backing away from the table. He hit the door and fumbled behind his back for the doorknob. “Thanks for everything, but it’s okay. It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” He even tried to smile, to convince her.

Eve stood up. Theo turned away, opening the door. With one hand, he hefted his backpack up over his shoulder. Outside, the setting sun cast long shadows, the last of the sun’s dying rays burning fiery orange at the edge of the trees. A breeze blew through the chimes, tousling Theo’s

hair, wafting the smell of the street toward him and cutting off the green earthiness of Eve and her home.

“Maybe he’s crazy, but he’s not violent,” Eve was saying. “He’s not like your mother. He’s not like Matt.”

“You can’t tell,” Jacob said, his words clipped and staccato, frustrated. “It’s not like they wear a sign. That’s the worst part, Eve, you can’t tell until it happens... there’s just no way to know.”

“So we’re just going to turn him away?” Eve protested.

“I am.” Jacob’s voice was firm. “I promised myself, after I broke up with Matt, I wasn’t letting someone like that in my house again. And I meant it.”

“But-”

“I’m sorry, Eve. I spent my whole childhood taking care of mom. I spent two years trying to help Matt. I can’t do it again.”

Theo stepped forward into a patch of fading sunlight, and then a weight fell on him, heavy and hot like the sun itself had fallen from the

sky. As the world spun around him, he collapsed on the sidewalk.

“Oh, hell,” Eve said through the open doorway. “I told you, Jacob, I told you he needs help! Come on.”

Theo was dimly aware of hands carrying him into the house and its cool darkness, settling him on something soft that creaked under his weight. He dozed, haunted by dreams of the green man and a shaded woods, hiding from the scorching heat of the sun.



He woke up some time later because a rhythm had picked up again, working its way into his dreams. He lay on an old futon before a dusty television in a room he didn't recognize. Someone had covered him with an old blanket that smelled of musk. Rubbing his eyes, Theo sat up, trying to collect his bearings.

A darkened doorway led to the hall. On one side, he saw what must be the back door. The rhythm came

from outside. Otherwise, the house was entirely silent. Theo padded to the door and stepped through.

The sun had gone down, but the darkness was thick and warm. A lantern swayed on a pole, bouncing light across an ivy-covered fence. Broken terracotta tiles, set in a carpet of soft grass and weeds, formed a patio. Jacob sat on a stool, holding a flat-topped drum across his lap, beating a rhythm with his palms and fingers. The scent of a snuffed cigarette lingered and mixed with

smoke from a standing chimney in the back corner. At the center of the yard, barefoot, Eve stopped dancing.

“Sleeping beauty’s up,” Eve teased. She had dressed down in soft yoga pants and a cropped top. Theo couldn’t take his eyes off her. Her skin shone in the torchlight with a faint sheen of sweat from dancing, bronze against the green of her hair. Theo swallowed, red-faced, completely dumbstruck.

“I... have to leave,” he stammered at last. “I wanted to say thanks.”

Jacob watched Theo with a tightly closed face. Theo pressed his back against the door.

“Stay a little while.” Eve’s voice was sweet and plaintive, a little bit drunk. There was a beer bottle on a table in the corner—worth five cents in some cities, Theo knew, but nothing here. Next to it was a box of pastries. “Grab something to eat and sit for a while. If you’re sure you’re feeling better, then you can go.” Her tone left no room for argument.

Against his better judgment,

Theo complied, taking a pastry and then slouching against the door. He couldn't tear his eyes from Eve.

Jacob dipped his head down over his drum, leaving Theo cold, even in the firelight. Then the rhythm picked up, and Eve started dancing again, and Theo no longer had to convince himself to stay.

The harsh lines of her body blurred into a sinuous form, ever-moving, and her face relaxed in ecstasy. It seemed to Theo that she danced the heartbeat of the earth,

each footfall traveling deep into the core of something old and true.

Theo watched Eve—and Jacob, who lost himself to the beat. The rhythm transformed Jacob, his anger and fear melting away and leaving him new, as he had been when Theo first saw him. His part of the duet was personal, intimate, giving Theo a glimpse of what felt like his soul. Watching them, Theo ached with the need to join them, to add to that fragile beauty.

His mind was so full of

drumbeats and footfalls that he hardly saw the landscape's subtle shifting. The darkness rose around like a curtain, the backdrop of a stage. Eve's feet left a trail of budding plants, rising as if from seeds, half-trampled by the dance but reforming and regrowing upwards. They blossomed and bloomed in a multitude of rich jewel tones and deep blood-red burgundy, caressing Eve's ankles with soft petals. She danced on without noticing, her hips undulating and her hands lithe and

graceful, and the petals rose into the air, twining around her. She and Jacob were brilliant figures bathed in light.

Theo smelled the rich green earth, the wet shady woods, the sharpness of spice. The green-colored man's face rose in his mind.

Theo gasped, and the breath stole out from him, joining the wind and the petals that wound their way around Eve's body.

Slowly, but unmistakably, Eve began to change.

Tendrils from her feet crept rootlike into the soil, and from her hands they spread above her as branches reaching toward the sky. She shimmered and shone, the color of her skin turning a richer, darker brown, and then she was Eve no longer. Fireflies twinkled like stars around her, and the flowers rose up to surround her. Theo's ears buzzed with something that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Jacob gripped Theo's shoulders, shaking him, though the drumbeat

seemed to go on. “Hey.” Jacob’s grip was tight, painful, his voice harsh. “This is you, isn’t it? Stop it.”

“I can’t-” Theo started, but Jacob slammed him back against the door so hard that his teeth rattled and the world spun.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on, you crazy bastard,” Jacob said, “but make it stop, or so help me, I’ll...”

Theo’s chest ached. Jacob was right—this was his doing. Not intentionally, never intentionally,

but it had still come from somewhere inside of him. If he couldn't stop it here, now, perhaps she'd disappear forever.

The rest of the world was twilit, half-invisible, waiting. Glowing ashes circled in the air from the forgotten chimenea. The world held its breath.

And Theo thought, for the first time, that maybe he could.

Jacob breathed heavily behind him. Theo couldn't meet his eyes. Low and distant, the drumbeat kept

playing at the edge of Theo's mind.

"Eve," Jacob said.

"I know," Theo said. "I know. She's fine. I'm sorry." He turned away from Jacob and stepped up to the treelike being that had been Eve. He held his hands out to her. "Eve. Come back."

He'd never changed anything alive before, no matter how much he'd lost control, and he didn't know what to expect now. He was afraid that she would be frozen forever, that it wouldn't work. But she would

be all right. He needed to believe it. He kept his hands out until she stepped down, swaying. The silhouette of a tree stayed behind her even as she toppled from it.

Theo moved to steady her, but Jacob was already there to catch her.

“I’m sorry,” Theo said again, and he stepped away, letting them pass. Jacob carried Eve inside without acknowledging him. Theo stood on the patio, the air clear and the stars out again. But for a strange new sapling rooted through the broken

tiles, it could be an ordinary night.

Theo hooked his thumbs in his pockets, staring up at the cloudy sky for a long, long moment. Had it been real? Was any of it ever real? He'd never been good at telling. The breeze on his skin felt real, and the smell of smoke was real too.

The tree itself was no illusion. He was sure of that, surer than he'd been of anything in a long, long time. He could feel its presence like a beacon proclaiming his act of defiance.

He sighed, then went inside,

leaving behind the evidence of what he'd done. It had stopped. Didn't that count for something?

Inside, he heard Jacob and Eve murmuring together. He'd hoped to avoid them entirely, but their voices came from the living room, beside the front door. Theo froze in the hallway, terrified of seeing them again, of facing Eve.

"...hell if I know," Jacob was saying. "Shouldn't we take you to the hospital?"

"For what?" Eve asked, and it

sounded like she was laughing. “What am I going to tell them? You can’t treat something like that.”

“You could have been hurt. We could all have been hurt. He’s not a little kid...”

“But he is, Jacob, don’t you see?” she asked, and Theo closed his eyes. “He’s just a lost little kid with nowhere to go, and something that scares him and probably everybody else. He didn’t want to hurt us. You said it yourself.”

There was a pause, and Theo hid

silently in the hallway, wishing he could just disappear and that they could go back to their lives as though he'd never been here.

“It’s not schizophrenia,” Eve said. “It’s magic, Jake. Real magic.”

“Is it?” Jacob asked, his voice pained.

“Well, what else could it be?” Eve asked, and her voice was almost electric. “It was a strange feeling, but kind of beautiful, you know? It was a lot like meditating, actually. Peaceful. I wasn’t scared.”

“I was,” Jacob said darkly.

“But he stopped it,” Eve protested. “And no one got hurt.”

“Who knows what might happen next time, though?” Jacob asked.

“What about Matt?” Eve asked, the words coming out in a rush. “When he went missing, right before the end, when he was really losing it. If someone had found him, taken him in, seen he got the help he needed. What if that had saved his life? We could be that difference, right here, right now, for Theo.”

“Please, Eve.” Jacob’s voice cracked. “Don’t ask me to do this. I know it’s not his fault. It never is, when something goes wrong. I... I know that. But...”

She was silent for a long, painful moment. “Sorry,” she said, finally. “I didn’t mean to-”

“I know you didn’t,” Jacob said, quieter.

Theo expected hatred, or some fragment of the rage that he had seen and heard earlier, but instead he realized that Jacob was crying. Theo

stepped forward into the light of the living room. “Don’t, Eve,” he said.

“Theo?” Eve said, surprised.

Theo swallowed. “I’m not... I mean, I wouldn’t want to hurt you. Either of you. But it’s okay. I’ll just grab my backpack and go.”

“Go where?” Eve protested. “Theo, you don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Her stark honesty stung, and he winced. “Yeah, and that’s okay. This sort of thing happens to me everywhere I go. It’s best for

everybody if I just leave, okay?
Thanks for your help...”

“What is it?” Jacob’s eyes
practically gored into his heart.
“What the hell is it? Is it magic?”

Theo looked down. Once again
he wished to disappear, but he’d
never disappeared before, and
whatever it was that made things
happen around him stayed dormant
now. “I don’t know.”

Jacob’s question struck without a
reprieve for Theo to catch his breath.
“Does it hurt people?”

“Just me.” Theo held up his bandaged hand. “Only ever me, no matter what.”

Eve watched Theo with rapt attention, her eyes bright and shining. Theo took an awkward step toward the door, toward his backpack and outdoors and loneliness.

Jacob sighed, and for a moment he looked like his heart was breaking, as raw and open as he'd looked as he poured his soul into his drum. “One night. We'll feed you and you have a

place to stay. But you have to promise me, if you feel anything—if you feel this happening again—you’ll leave.”

Theo stared.

“Can you promise that?” Jacob asked again, forcefully.

“Are you asking me to stay?” Theo’s voice shook with fear and bewilderment.

“Please,” Eve said.

Theo hefted his filthy backpack. The two of them watched him—beautiful Eve, her green hair in

disarray, her scent dizzying and distracting, and Jacob, beautiful in his own way and full of some unspoken pain, the depths of which Theo could only begin to guess from the shadows on his face. “No,” Theo said quietly, though it hurt to say. “I won’t hurt you, but I won’t stay.”

Eve stood up. “Theo-”

“No,” Theo said. “It’s a mistake. You’ll change your minds, or I’ll mess it up by accident, and—you guys have a good thing going on here, but it’s not for me. I’ve got

things worked out on my own.”

“Do you?” Eve asked gently, and he couldn’t bear to lie to her, so he turned his face away. “Come on, Theo. Just for one night. Stay with us.”

Jacob’s eyes reflected pity, kindness, sorrow. He said nothing.

“No,” Theo whispered, but then the tears broke through. He dropped back against the door, covering his face, and Eve took him into her arms and held him, dirt and tears and all.



Marina J. Lostetter

Marina J. Lostetter became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Sojourn for Ephah” in Orson Scott Card’s InterGalactic Medicine Show (Sep. 2012), edited by Edmund R. Schubert. Visit her website at www.lostetter.net.

Rats Will Run

by Marina J. Lostetter

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Carpenter

• • • •

I freaking hate rats.

So I couldn't, for the life of me,

figure out why Pedro wanted to release a test group in the lab. “Can’t you do it in the observation cube? Why in here? They’ll get their rat germs all over everything.” I shivered, thinking about my tablet with tiny paw prints scattered across it.

“No, no. It has to be in here,” he insisted, pushing up his thick-framed glasses. “Gabby, trust me, you want to see this. I discovered it by accident.” Taking off with a hop and a skip, he went to retrieve a set of

cages.

“Accident? What does that mean? One got loose? Geez, man, I had my lunch sitting out here yesterday.”

He let out a disturbing, manic cackle.

Perhaps he'd finally snapped—gone stir-crazy. We'd had a handful go wiggy over the past year. One guy even went outside the base sans pressure-suit. That wasn't pretty. Isolation can do that to people—and it was hard to get more isolated than

HD 10180-4.

We liked to call the planet Cit-Bolon-Tum (Tums for short), after one of the Mayan gods of medicine. It offered thousands of curative prospects, which was why all two hundred base-dwellers had made the trek to its shores.

“Is this what our Saturday nights have come to?” I asked as he hefted two cages—each with three rats—onto one of the touch-tables. “Oh, come on, I have to give presentations with that.”

“You can use the far wall,” he said, rolling his eyes. “How did you get into bio-research if you hate animals so much?”

“Microbiology,” I specified. “Microorganisms. You know, the things that don’t have faces. Or claws, or whiskers, or long, naked tails.”

“You still have to run experiments. Cancer cells don’t exist in a vacuum.”

I shrugged. The teasing from my subordinates was routine. I was the

only biologist on the team—to hear them talk, in all of mankind—that hated nature. Well, not all of it. Just anything that scurried, or crawled, or scuttled. Which applied to almost all of Cit-Bolon-Tum’s complex life-forms.

“Get to it,” I insisted. “What’s this great rat-discovery you’ve made?”

“Watch,” he said with a giggle. “These ones on the left have been given compound 0697. The ones on the right are the control group.” He opened one cage, then the other,

pulling a rat from each. Proudly, he held up both—a little grandstanding. Then, he turned both loose on the floor.

I leapt up onto a stool near the counter, almost knocking over an irreplaceable electron microscope in the process.

One rat went left, the other right. I was less than impressed. “So—”

“Not done.” He did the same with the remaining rats. All of those who’d been injected with 0697 ran to the same corner. The control group

scampered willy-nilly.

“Uh... Ok.”

“Did you see?”

“Come on, Pedro. What? Did you put something in that corner, and only the test group can smell it, or—”

“No, you weren’t watching.” He went over to the touch-wall, and I retrieved a pair of glasses from my lab coat’s breast pocket. “Wall, on,” he commanded. “Lab six ceiling feed. Replay last five minutes.”

“I don’t need to watch it again, I

—”

As the surveillance feed replayed, he marked each rat with a number by tapping the wall. “Trace paths of all subjects, from twenty-four seconds through four minutes and thirty eight seconds. Give me real-space lines.”

The wall displayed each rat’s path as a different color. When Pedro put both hands on the wall the image stuck to them. He tore the picture away and threw it at the room, where the digital lines settled on the floor.

The control group had drawn a series of squirrely lines—like a toddler given a crayon for the first time. The tested rats drew one line—a perfectly straight diagonal towards the corner. So straight as to be clearly unnatural.

I removed my glasses to rub my eyes, and the room-overlay disappeared from view. “Ok, what does that mean?”

“They’re following something we can’t detect. There’s something there that the compound helps them find.”

“Weird, I admit, but I’m not sure... What are you going on about? Not that again?”

He shrugged, casually strolled over the lab door, and opened it.

I jumped to my feet. “What are you doing?”

“I want to see where they go.” The test group hurried out, as though drawn by an invisible piper.

“Not cool, man,” I said. Pedro tried to follow the rats, but I grabbed him by the coat-sleeve. “You going to let them into my apartment next?”

This is a gag, isn't it? Who put you up to this?"

With a smile and a shake of his head, he brushed me off. "No, Gabby. Pure science, honest." And he jogged after his new friends.

Thankfully the rodents weren't interested in the base's sleeping quarters. They ran through the white-walled halls (once pristine, now covered in doodles the residents dared call 'art'), towards the eastern airlock. Strangely, they followed the same diagonal they had in the lab,

changing halls and rounding corners only when they couldn't stay directly on the line.

Once they hit the hyper-glass airlock doors they stopped. Rising up on their hind legs, little noses twitching, they pawed at the door-seal like dogs begging to be let outside.

I looked through the four layers of glass to the dangerous beauty that was Tums' surface. Dramatic hills and sharp mountains made up the majority of the land, creating a

terrain more rolling and varied than anything I'd seen on Earth. Life butted right up to the outside of the base in the form of low, jungle-like foliage—most of which was mobile, meaning the scene outside changed constantly. Nothing on the planet stood more than three feet high, so despite the up-and-down of the terrain, we could look for miles before hitting the craggy horizon.

“Oh, look, they want outside,” I said, throwing as much sing-song into my tone as I could. “We just

need to get them into their little ratty spacesuits and they can keep playing blood-hound. Oh, wait.” I slapped the side of my face. “Rats don’t have spacesuits.”

“Ha-ha,” Pedro said, scratching his chin.

I patted him on the shoulder. “Sorry, dude. Guess today’s pursuit of directed panspermia ends here.”

A very girly—though distinctly male—shriek emanated from several halls over. “Better go round up your other pets,” I said. “Or else I won’t be

the only one raining on your free-range parade.”

“But, they’re drawn to something, aren’t you interested in what?”

I crossed my arms. “Not in the slightest.”

Head hung low, he scampered off to collect the rats, and I made a note to keep an eye on his mental health.



It seemed like there was at least one panspermia nut in every lab I’d

ever worked in. The discovery of extraterrestrial life just over a century before I was born ignited a blaze of new believers. I had no problem with the basic theory—that life down here could have come from out there. It was the Seeders I took issue with. Those crystal waving, we-couldn't-have-built-the-pyramids-without-em shouting, pseudo-scientific doofuses. The guys that thought intelligent Ets guided our evolution.

I was so sad when Pedro proved to be one of them. And he was

always looking for any oddity, any abnormality he could point to and say, “Look, this might mean extraterrestrial intelligence was here!”

I had no interest in hearing what he thought the rat-march meant.

After thoroughly searching my quarters to make sure they were furry-intruder free, I settled down for the evening. Though the planet had roughly sixteen-hour days, we ran on Earth time, and it was nearing one in the morning. Sure, the off-set time felt strange when occasionally it

was pitch-black out at two in the afternoon, but otherwise it was easier to follow home. After all, we rarely left base. Kind host Cit-Bolon-Tum decidedly was not.

At three in the morning I got a pound on my door and a muffled entreaty. “Mendoza? Dr. Mendoza, are you in there?”

Groggy and slightly pissed, I kicked away the covers, threw on a shirt and went to the door. “What is it?” I said through the comm. Box.

“Someone from your team has

taken an un-authorized surface walk.”

“What? How do you know it’s one of us?” I could tell it was Sammy—oh, excuse me, Dr. Slavitz—on the other side of the door. Damn formal bastard. “Bet it’s one of your sickle-cell lackeys. Why’s cancer always getting the blame for base problems?”

“It’s one of your suits that’s missing. Inventory already confirmed.”

“Great,” I said to myself before

yanking open the door. “Who haven’t you found yet?”

“Doctors Smith, Cohen, and Alvarez are yet unaccounted for.”

“Then I know who it is.”

* * *

“Pedro?”

“I told you, he’s not talking—”

“Shut it, Slavits.”

A hoard of us had shuffled into the communications room. I let up on the output button, hoping he’d respond via his suit’s system. I knew

he could hear me.

“Dude, it’s Gabriella. If you tell me there’s a rat in that suit with you I’m not letting you back on the base, ever.”

A brief moment of static, then, “Better, Gabby. Even better.”

The whole room let out a collective sigh. Myself excluded.

“What’s that mean, ‘better’? Huh?”

“I injected myself with 0697.”

My nails curled against the control panel. All chatter in the

room fell dead. “You’re shitting me.”

“You should see this. It’s amazing!”

Slavitz leaned over my shoulder. “He’s another one. Shut in here too long—he cracked. We need to get him to Dr. Nakamura.”

As much as I hated agreeing with the prick, he was right. Pedro needed a little brain-blending.

“You’ve gotta come back in, Pedro. We’ll make an appointment with the shrink. You’re tripping on the compound—you’re hallucinating

just like your rodents.” Wishing I wasn’t in a room full of eavesdroppers I said, “You know that crap isn’t ready for human testing. We don’t even know what it does to the rats yet.”

“Seriously, Gabby, you have to—”

“Get your ass back to the airlock.”

“But it’s so wonderful...”

I tossed the microphone across the room, and the crowd back away. “If the idiot won’t come in alone, I’ll drag him back myself.”

“You can’t go by yourself,” said

Slavits. “No fewer than five to a party.”

“You volunteering? No? If we do things by the book he might step into a ground-mouth before we’ve even suited up—especially since he’s hallucinating. I’ll go out. If we both bite the big one, blame me in the report.”

Other members of the cancer research team stepped forward, offering their assistance. “Sure,” I said, grateful to have my team rallied, “But I’m not waiting for safety checks

and all that garbage. I'm going now. If you all want to keep to protocol, no worries. Follow when you're ready."

After an arduous wrestling match with my pressure suit, I made it through the airlock and out into the twilight. Just my luck the jerk would have to go tromping around during the night cycle. I gave a wave to those inside, then headed down the paved foot-path towards port.

Moving on Tums was like trying to wade through quicksand. The

hard skeleton of the suit was supposed to compensate for the planet's 1.9 gs, but frankly, it didn't. It let me lift my limbs a little easier, but did nothing for the ton-of-bricks feeling that dropped into my pants once I'd left the artificial environment of the base.

Outside for the first time in months, I let out a heavy sigh, which immediately fogged up the left side of my helmet. Stupid defogging film was supposed to be replaced every three weeks—those maintenance

guys were slacking.

The front of the helmet acted like my lab glasses, displaying a whole set of new info and figures over my natural vision. Labels sprang up on various plants, detailing their primary composition and discovered uses. Air pressure figures and weather system stats scrolled across the top. Every time a plant or animal moved a blue line tracked its path (and made me ever-so-grateful to have layers of super durable materials between me and the critters). I

blinked them all aside—keeping only the red arrow that pointed me down the paved path in Pedro's direction.

Each suit contained a homing beacon, so no one could get lost. Now eaten, decapitated, or punctured—those were a different matter. The planet had a million ways to kill a person, but at least we could always find what was left of their suit.

“Yo, amigo,” I called, my voice sounding hollow in the helmet. “I’m out here. Waiting for you to show

me this wow-awesome-totally-scientific-and-not-at-all-insane discovery you've made."

"I don't appreciate the sarcasm."

"And I don't appreciate being dragged out of my beauty sleep because some member of my team decided to go on an unauthorized walkabout." Each step reminded me just how out of shape I was. My scrawny build was not Cit-Bolon-Tum compatible.

"I don't have cabin fever, Gabby."

"Ok. Whatever."

“There are lines on the ground. Natural overlays.”

“Will you at least agree to stay put until I find you?”

“Of course,” he said. “Because you have to see this.”



Forty minutes later we were reunited. But not happily. At least he hadn't left the path.

Little critters and plants had followed me off and on along the way, giving me the willies. A

poisonous cephalopod—possessed of eight skinny legs instead of tentacles, whose fur-slime could eat through every layer of my suit—gave chase for a hundred yards before it decided easier prey lay elsewhere. I thought about getting out my aerosol tranquilizer and gassing the sucker, but didn't want to waste it in case something bigger came along.

Ah, man, I'd spend twenty-four hours locked in a room filled with deadly fliangia spores if I never had to see a rodent-reminiscent creature

again.

“What is your major malfunction?” I demanded when I turned a corner and found my subordinate crouching on the asphalt.

Pedro had his back to me and didn't turn around. He waved a gloved hand inches above the ground, as though stroking an invisible animal. “All green here, boss,” he said, giving me a thumbs-up before going back to his air-petting.

No way was he right in the head. “Sure, you look as dandy as a dodo bird.” I crossed my arms, peeved, when he gave no response. “Now tell me you were pulling my leg. Tell me one of my best technicians did not go kamikaze in the name of cancer research.”

Compound 0697 came from the distillation and mixture of several animal secretions—animals all native to Cit-Bolon-Tum. And they each sported monikers that had something to do with death, acid,

burning, maiming, etc. We'd hoped the compound—and many others like it—would specifically besiege cancer cells.

Now I had a feeling targeted healthy gray matter instead.

“I didn't do it for cancer,” he said, turning in my direction, his movement slow and deliberate. “There's something out here.”

His visor was up, giving me full access to the manic expression plastered across his face. Pupils dilated to the size of saucers, mouth

twitching, small dribble of snot leaking from a nose he couldn't wipe—I'd seen that expression before. But it wasn't exclusively the mask of crazy; it was also the look of breakthrough discovery.

But, since he was alone in a man-devouring environment, following invisible lines, and had previously stuck himself with a needle full of cell-destroying chemicals...

“Ok, well, how about we go back to base for now, eh?” I suggested. “We'll get a team together and come

back at a reasonable hour.”

“No can do, Gabby. You go back for a team,” he said, turning away, “I’ll stay.”

No, uh-uh. No off-his-rocker techie was going to talk back to me. “That’s it, mister.” Crouching, I curled an arm through his, ready to haul him to his feet. In the next instant I yanked hard. The suit’s skeleton not only helped in high gravity, but was also supposed to help me lift twice what I could naturally.

It would have worked if Pedro hadn't had the same equipment. Since he was a good size man and I had the scrawny build of a twelve-year-old boy, I wasn't going to win any battles of brute strength.

But I gave it a five minute go anyway.

"Pedro, I swear, if you don't come back with me this instant I'm going to recommend you go into deepfreeze. I'll put you on a return shuttle and Earth can decide if they want to thaw you out again."

“Nice try, Gabby. Go back. I know what I’m doing. I want you to see it, but I’ll go on alone. It’s ok.” Shifting fluidly, he stood up. I felt like a kid in an oversized mascot-costume, and he moved as if the suit were a second skin. He walked away from me, down the path.

“But...but what about guillotine vines?” I shouted. No need to raise my voice, of course, but I couldn’t help it. “And ground-mouths?”

“I’ll keep my eyes open.” He gave a casual wave of his arm.

“Damn you, guys,” I said, switching channels to speak to the base. “Wasn’t I supposed to get backup?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Mendoza,” Slavits replied. “But a shark-cat’s been stalking around the east entrance for a half an hour. We haven’t seen its posse, but where there’s one—”

“So just come out the north entrance and circle around.” Dumbass. We had two airlocks for a reason.

“Love to...but it’s jammed.”

Well, hell. “Tell everyone on the maintenance crew they’ve officially made my shit-list.”

With that I switched back to Pedro’s channel and stumbled after him. If I wanted his ass saved I’d have to do it myself.

“Ok, dude. You win, for now. Tell me about these things you’re seeing.”

He had his hands out in front of him, like a blind man feeling his way. “The lines,” he said softly, nearly a whisper, “They glow. And pulse, and

shift—a stream of light.”

“Uh-huh. And these lines, they just happened to follow the man-made path?” I raised an eyebrow. I had him there.

“No, it runs like this.” He made a sweeping motion from northeast to southwest. “The path intersects it in some places. And it runs right through the base.”

“And it’s straight? Perfectly straight?”

“So far.”

I called up a map of the area on

my helmet's overlay and with my eyes drew the line he'd indicated. It wouldn't be long before the path and the line permanently diverged.

“And there's another set of lines over that way.” He said, pointing yards off. “Going almost the same direction. I think it's angled slightly different.”

The foliage to my right shook violently. I edged in closer to Pedro. “And you're following the line because...?”

“Because it leads somewhere.”

“Right, and how do you know that?”

“Because of the flow. I told you, it’s shifting like a stream—and I’m getting caught up in the current. It pulls me, just like the rats.”

“You’re talking in circles, bud.”

“I know you’re not a fan of my beliefs, Gabby. But I think what I’m looking at is proof. It’s like a digital overlay—an augmentation—just like the displays in our helmets and in the labs. Only it’s built right into the biology of Cit-Bolon-Tum. It’s

augmented reality on a chemical-induced level. Molecular computing—interfacing directly with the brain.”

“Molecular computing? No, it’s one biology interacting with a totally foreign biology to create a hallucination. You are freaking hallucinating.”

“You’re wrong, Gabby.”

“Sorry, dude, you’re off your rocker.”

“No. Listen. The compound itself acts like a computer program. 0697 is hijacking my neural pathways

and controlling them like code controls transistors in a processor.

“It takes sensory input—input from a sixth sense, I think—repackages it, then sends it to my visual cortex. It adds that information to the real-world data my eyes are receiving.” He grabbed my hand, “So it’s not a visual hallucination. It’s reinterpreted sensory input. A translation of information my brain was already receiving, but couldn’t interpret. There are real lines of energy on the

ground—in the ground—but that's not what I'm seeing. I'm seeing an artificial overlay, similar to a digital overlay.”

I crossed my arms and raised an eyebrow skeptically. “So, there are hidden computer codes in the genes of Tums’ life forms—is that what you’re saying?”

“Neural codes.”

“Right. Whatever. And what do you think you’ll find at the end of this holographic rainbow? Pots o’ alien gold?”

“I don’t know. But, whatever it is, I think it’s been waiting for us a long time.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I kept my mouth shut. We didn’t talk for a long time after that.

When we hit the point where the hallucination and the path parted ways, I expected Pedro to dive head-first into the wild. He didn’t. He turned just as the trail did, making me wonder if his hallucination had changed. As we’d walked the sun had risen well over the horizon, which

helped to ease my tensions. At least now I could see what was eating me before I dissolved into a pile of goo.

“We’re getting an ATV,” Pedro said out of the blue.

Ah, that explained it. He was following the path to its head: our makeshift version of a spaceport, where we stored our modest fleet of vehicles. “Good luck,” I said. “With the way the base has been taken care of, I’ll be surprised if anything still works at port.”

Only a few minutes more saw us

to our destination. The garages were sealed up much like the base, so that no one would get a nasty surprise when they opened a glove box.

As Pedro typed in the access code for one of the airlocks, I cleared my throat. “So, you know we’ve got two ATVs back at base, right? You didn’t have to come all the way out here.”

“Those are little ones. I need the big one—the wall-climber.”

“The wall-climber?” I choked on my own spit. “Where exactly are we going?”

“I told you.” The outer garage door opened as he gestured towards our goal.

It hadn't occurred to me that the line might go on and on and on—towards the horizon and beyond. The craggy Cizin Mountains stood directly in our path, their sheer cliffs impossible to traverse without a climber.

“But, it'll take days to get there.”

“Yep.”

Motion-sensing lights sprang on as we entered the hanger, and I

removed my foggy helmet. The stale air indicated it had been a long time since anyone had come here. Including the maintenance guys. That didn't bode well.

The wall-climber wasn't far away. In addition to tank-tread, which most of our ATVs had, the wall-climber also sported six legs, each tipped with grasping, serrated hands. The legs were retractable, to be extended when needed.

A million protests went through my mind, but for some reason I

voiced none of them. Guess I figured I was already in this, long haul or not. Why whine about it? I climbed into the ATV, lips sealed.

Inside, the vehicle was pressurized and gravity-reduced, so once we got everything up and running we could dispossess ourselves of the suits. The first thing I did, once free, was stretch out in one of the seats. Pedro blew his nose.

And then we were off. I wondered for a moment if it was smart to let the crazy man take the

wheel, but I figured I didn't have much choice. Still, I double checked my harness.

Within a few hours my adrenaline ebbed, and exhaustion got the better of me. Despite my unease, I drifted off.

* * *

Luckily my instincts woke me.

Drowsy, I opened one eye and saw a needle coming at me. Acting on reflex, I swatted the syringe out of Pedro's hand. I was out of my

harness and at the back of the ATV in an instant. “What are you doing?”

“I want you to see, too.”

“That 0697 in there?” I nodded toward the syringe, now rolling freely on the floor. We were still moving—he must have had the climber on autopilot. “I took you for batty, Pedro, not dangerous.”

“It’s harmless,” he cooed. “But it’ll let you see. Give you new eyes.”

“Thanks, but I’m happy with the ones madre gave me.”

“You’d understand what I’m

talking about it if you just took it.”

“No way am I drinking your Kool-Aid, man.”

He shrugged and sat back down in the driver's seat. “Fine. But I'm packaging this stuff up and sending it back to Earth. That way they can see the lines there, too.”

With him safely out of range, I scooped up the syringe and dismantled it. We didn't have any bio-waste containers on board, so I made due with a rubber glove and tape from the MacGyver kit on my

suit. As much as I didn't want the compound anywhere near me at this point, I didn't want to stash it where Pedro could easily get a hold of it again, either. So into my trouser pocket it went.

“What makes you think there are overlays on Earth?” I asked.

“Ley-lines. It's been long suspected that many ancients intuitively built monuments and religious centers over streams of power that cross the planet.”

“Like Stonehenge?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, come on. You’re a scientist. How can you stomach that mumbo-jumbo, much less believe it?”

“Because there’s no scientific evidence to refute their existence. And if there’s no evidence that says something’s impossible, I see no reason why it can’t be feasible.”

“How old were you when you stopped believing in Santa, huh? Twenty-five?”

“Take all the digs you want, Gabby. I know what I’m seeing is

real.”

Cautious, like a beaten dog, I slunk back into my seat. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“I intend to.”

The sun set, and rose, and set again. All the while I started to feel like a sardine: trapped in a can, nowhere to go, with only fish-tales for company. Pedro submitted to examinations when I asked him. I tested his reflexes and his reasoning skills, short term recollection and long, and looked for any sign of

physical or neurological abnormality. Everything appeared in order.

I contacted the base a few times, gave them our position. I asked them about the 0697 test rats. The rodents were healthy. Slavits sent a retrieval party after us, but I doubted they'd intercept before we made it to the bottom of the cliffs.

And I was right. The sun rose, glazing the range from top to bottom in brilliant, orange light. The jungle-line ended a mile or so before the

cliffs, leaving a barren mote between the two. I gulped as we entered into it, feeling exposed.

My backup was still hours away.

“Relax, Gabby,” Pedro said as he prepared to extend the climber’s arms. “I’ve trained in this thing. We’ll be safe.”

But the climb wasn’t what worried me. “And what if we get to the top of the mountains and the line keeps going, huh? Miles and miles and miles—how far are we going? How many ration packets does this

thing have stored? Enough for a week, two maybe? The water's already running low."

"We won't be gone that long. I see where it ends." He pointed up.

I ducked down lower, peering through the windshield as though I could see what he saw. "In the side of the cliff?"

"Yep."

"Oh boy."

He pressed a few buttons and the cabin filled with an ear-piercing screech.

“Gah.” I threw my hands over my ears. “What the hell was that?” The sounds of stressed metal reverberated through the cabin.

“One of the arms is stuck.” Lights flashed across the console. “I’m trying the overrides, but nothing’s working. It must be an outside problem. Might have to fix it manually.”

My suit and helmet were in hand the next moment. “Ok, just show me what to do.”

Once suited, we exited through

the rear airlock. Pedro went first. “Just over here—it’s limb three.”

“Hey,” I said, turning back. I saw a spray canister sitting against the hyper-glass. “You forgot your tranquilizer. Gotta stun the wildlife.” I went in after it.

“Relax,” he said. “We’re a ways from the bush-line. Not many animals venture out from the brush.”

Sprayer in hand, I swung around to join him. “Yeah, well you never—”

“Ghraaaaaa!”

His scream was unearthly. The

bottom dropped out of my stomach and my nerves caught fire. I must have jumped ten feet in the air, despite the high grav. When I came back down I was sure I'd separated my skin from my bones in the leap.

Pedro lay sprawled across the ground, shaking. I slid through the dirt into a crouch by his side. It only took me moments to put together the scene: Pedro hemorrhaging, a massive pool of blood coalescing where his right knee should have continued on into calf; his severed

leg bouncing along the ground towards the bush-line; a long, silvery cord of carnivorous guillotine vine attached to the leg, slithering back from whence it came.

Blood loss and decompression. Code red. A top priority medical emergency, and all I had to deal with it was whatever first-aid supplies the ATV had stocked.

Hands shaking, I dug through my MacGyver kit, looking for tourniquet material. All I had was a short piece of cord and a

handkerchief. Better than nothing.

My breath came in quick, heavy puffs against the inside of my helmet. It fogged up the corner, making a dire job much more difficult. Adrenaline, which had surged at his first yelp, left me unsteady. Every part of my body vibrated.

I hadn't stopped the bleeding, but the flow was slower. The most devastating aspect of a guillotine vine was its smooth cut—no ragged edges or pinched flesh to staunch the bleeding. Pedro's artery had been cut

clean open, letting it run like an open faucet.

If there wasn't any coagulant cement in the ATV, he'd be dead in minutes.

The suit's skeleton finally paid for itself. Instead of dragging Pedro, I was able to lift him fully off the ground. I tossed him through the airlock, knowing every second I wasted screwed him over a little more.

Yanking the emergency kit off the wall, I began yelling at him. It

was the best outlet for my energy. Took the shakes out of my fingers. “You son of a bitch.” I tore the lid from the kit and dumped it on the floor. Small bottles rolled this way and that. I snatched up one after the other, glancing at the labels before tossing the useless ones aside.

“You ass. You crazy ass. Why’d I think for a second you’d use an ounce of caution? No, crazy, stupid, ass-wipe Pedro had to go and tangle with a stupid vine. Dumb way to go, amigo. That what you want your

tombstone to read? Killed by a vegetable? Idiot. Where's your brain, huh?"

Found it—the cement. Thank the lord. I had a glop of it on my glove in the next instant and smeared the stuff all over his leaking wound.

“Shooting yourself up with experimental drugs, going outside without so much as a flashlight, strolling across an alien surface like you own the place. Dumbass. Everything here wants to eat you. There's no holy-alien-grail out there

waiting for you. Just some crazy shit messing with your senses.” I found a pressure cuff and secured it around the stump, putting a temporary seal on his damaged suit.

He hadn't made a sound since his scream. Not so much as a moan. And now he lay perfectly still. I couldn't see his face inside his helmet, and mine was getting blurry—

It wasn't until a tear splashed down and collected in the low point of my helmet that I realized I was crying.

A squeeze on my glove made me jump. “Keep going,” Pedro breathed.

“You selfish, low-life, scum-sucking—”

He let out a wheezy laugh. “No. Up. Keep going. Follow the lines.”

My mouth flopped open. “Hell no.” I got to my feet, simultaneously throwing off my streaky helmet. “We are turning this sucker around. We’re intercepting backup and hoping they have a skimmer that can buzz you to base before you croak.”

A moment of panic overtook

me, and I rushed to the driver's seat. We were going back, now. Pedro could shove his ridiculous quest. I wasn't going to sit out here and let him die for pseudo-science.

The engine purred and the warning lights still flashed impatiently. "Yeah, yeah. I'll get to you," I said, waving the urgent alerts aside, then opening a comm. Channel to the intercept team. "Hey, where are you guys? We've got a medical emergency. Alvarez is—" A steamy hiss and an all-too familiar

thud interrupted me. “Oh, please...” I moaned. My forehead had a brief date with the dash before I turned to look at the back of the ATV.

Members of the backup team chattered over the comm., but I didn’t comprehend a word. My ears had tuned out. The totality of my awareness was focused on Pedro.

He sat in the airlock, separated from me by one set of hyper-glass doors, and Tums’ surface by another.

“What in the...” I reached for my helmet, but it was gone. He had it

with him in the airlock. Not a good sign. I found his suit's channel with the ATV's comm-link. "Buddy? Whatcha doin'?"

A half laugh, half cough preceded his explanation. "Blackmailing you."

"How's that?"

"We're not going back, Gabby. Not without reaching the end. If you don't keep going, I'll let myself out." He reached up and tapped the control panel.

Dude had lost too much blood and wasn't thinking straight. Rolling

my eyes, I pressed the main release for the inner doors. No need to stretch this charade out.

Nothing happened. So I pressed again, and again, each time with a little more malice. “What did you do, Pedro?”

“Triggered the emergency override.”

“You can only do that if the main cabin is in danger of decompress—” It took half a second for me to jump out of the driver’s seat and cross the distance to the glass. “Pedro, so help

me...”

“The vine was up inside the suspension, probably further—didn’t you see its spent acid pods?” He patted the wall. “No holes in the system yet, or we’d be hearing sirens, but there’s a weak spot somewhere. We’re both in danger. Keep going and I’ll come inside and give you your helmet back. Refuse and I’ll go out there.”

“You are ridiculous,” I spat. “You see all this blood on the floor? It’s supposed to be in your brain. That’s

what's keeping you from thinking right. You might just be demented enough to die for your cause, but there's no way you're a murderer. Now stop playing, we need to get you to the medlab." Pedro wasn't a killer. He had to be bluffing.

"I can't stop now. I might die anyway. I'd rather die knowing." He looked paler than moments before, and sweat soaked his brow line.

If he fainted on me that would be the end of us, bluff or no. "Ok," I said, pressing my palms to the glass.

“We’ll go.” Like hell. As soon as he blacked out we were on our way to base.

“Forgive me for not trusting you, Gabby, but that’s not going to convince me. There’s only one way I’ll come out of here.” Each word was separated by a strained pause.

“What? Tell me.”

“You have to take 0697.”

Unbelievable. “Did I do something bad to you in a past life?”

“Stop your moaning and do it.”

There wasn’t time for a rundown

of the pros and cons. “This is nuts, this is nuts, this is nuts,” I chanted, freeing myself from the top-half of my suit so I could reach my trouser pocket and the vile vial inside.

The first-aid kit had a packet of clean needles. I tore one open with my teeth, untaped the glove and the plunger, and put the syringe containing 0697 back together.

After a series of deep breaths, I held out my forearm and poised the needle like a practiced drug addict. Only, unlike an addict, I hesitated.

What the hell was I doing? We still didn't know the full effects of the compound. I was less sure now—after all the tests—that it fried brain cells, but that didn't mean it was safe. What if we got Pedro back, sealed his leg up, but he still died? From side effects?

What if it killed me too?

But, if I didn't inject myself we were goners anyway. Better possible death than certain.

Pedro watched me with dilated pupils. His skin looked like soggy

paper.

“Hope this makes you happy, bud.” With that I thrust the needle into my arm and pushed the plunger in to its hilt. Job complete, I tossed the dirty needle aside. “Now open up!”

He keyed in the access code, fingers shaking like leaves in the wind. The door opened and he slumped over, letting himself rest, sure now that his epic task would be completed.

Since he was out like a light and

limp as a sack of beans, I had to pull him across the floor and strap him in the passenger seat. “If this crap poisons me, I’ll kill you,” I promised, hyped up and running through the gambit of emotions. One second I wanted to weep, and the next I wanted to wring his neck.

How long was it supposed to take before the effects showed up? With my heart racing a million miles a minute, pushing my blood through my veins at an alarming pace, I guessed it wouldn’t be long.

We needed to get to the tracking party asap. I sat my butt down in the driver's seat, secured my helmet, then threw the ATV into reverse. The warning lights still signaled the cabin was in danger of losing its integrity, but at least the arms were free (I'm guessing the vine had tried to chop the limb off for breakfast before it pegged Pedro for squishier). I radioed back to base, told them to prepare the medlab for two patients.

Minutes later I was attempting to blink neon-yellow streamers from

my eyes. They appeared on the floor—through the floor. The images started out hazy and spotty, but soon solidified. Looking up I could see an entire system, all the way to the next horizon, back the direction we'd come as well as stretched out ahead. It was a giant, mapped overlay. Pulsing, flowing, like little pieces of light shifting to form streaming messages I could not read.

Startled, I hit the brakes.

Damn. He was right. Pedro was right. There was something hidden

in the biology of Cit-Bolon-Tum.

Or, now we were both crazy. Folie a deux. But, what were the odds of a shared hallucination, really?

And then I felt the pull. An alarming, palpable urge to follow the lines. It was the current Pedro had talked about—a rushing, pushing me forward. First it was like the gentle thrust of a stream, but soon it consumed me like a riptide. I had to go forward, had to see what was at the end of the road.

A moan escaped Pedro, and I

turned to see if he'd come around. He was still unconscious, but alive.

Poor Pedro. What must it be like, to believe so heartily in possibilities that you'd risk your life for a chance at proof? To be so free of cynicism as to follow leads with reckless abandonment?

It was stupid, but it was also beautifully human. And an experience I'd never had.

Everyone should do something truly idiotic at least once in their life, right?

I knew I needed to get us back to base. We both needed medical attention. But I also knew I had to follow the lines—and it wasn't just the compound talking.

Abandoning my suspicion and sarcasm, I took a leap of faith. "We're gonna make it," I said, giving Pedro a pat on the arm. "We're gonna find out what's at the end of your rainbow."

I spun the ATV around and quickly covered the distance to the cliff face. At the base I extended the

legs, shifted into high gear, and started to climb.

* * *

I'd only driven the climber once before—in training. This was nothing like the exercises. Every new anchor and handhold sent a little thrill of anxiety up my spine.

Good thing I was in a chemically induced mania, or else there's no way I would have continued up that cliff.

I tried to keep my eyes on both the climb and Pedro's condition, and

glanced rapidly between the two.
“Don’t die on me, buddy.”

It’s so much easier to follow a map when you can actually see it. The lines didn’t continue straight as they had before. Now they slanted at a forty-five, and ahead I could see it change course again. Another fifteen minutes and I pinpointed our destination: a narrow-mouthed cave. Two yellow streamers poured into it, one from above, and the one I followed from below.

Halfway there the climber

grabbed onto a loose boulder. It pulled free, and the weight of the stone dragged the arm down. The whole vehicle slipped. I tried not to scream, for Pedro's sake.

Rocks flew past the windows, plummeting towards the ground. I couldn't help but imagine our frail bodies doing the same.

Regaining my poise, I pushed on. We reached the cavern without another hitch, and I thanked my lucky stars it would all be over soon.

I positioned the climber above

the cavern so that I could open the rear airlock and lower myself inside. Before I left I secured Pedro, double checked my suit, and made sure I had a sprayer. The bay doors screeched open, and I realized I hadn't tied down everything. The spent syringe and a few items from the first-aid kit tumbled through the airlock. I let them go.

There was no lip to the cave. It recessed straight back into the rock, its mouth flush with the cliff. I tied a cable to the back of the vehicle, and,

holding my breath, slowly slid down its length.

People say it's not a good idea to look down when you're stranded at a great height. What a load of crap. Nothing solidifies your determination not to fall like knowing how far it is to the ground.

The ATV sat close to the cave—I'd parked like an expert. Putting a little swing in the cable, I propelled myself inside.

Hundreds of glowing, beady eyes turned my way the instant I touched

down. Only my knowledge of the drop-off kept me from darting right back outside again.

Shit. Damn. Crap. I didn't have enough tranquilizer for a cave full of critters.

But I steadied myself and moved forwards. Most of the eyes hovered around the ceiling—the floor was left clear. I didn't dare turn on my light, fearing they'd go into a frenzy and attack.

Just let me get to the back of the cave. Let me see what's in here and

I'll never bother you again, I silently pleaded with them.

The lines still pointed the way. One thick, center line shifted the most—it was the one that looked like it contained a message. Its color suddenly changed, now bright pink.

I could no longer see the eyes, and the suit kept me from hearing any noise the animals might have made. My entire body clenched—every joint stiffened. It was my worst nightmare come true—trapped in a cave with vermin. Vermin that could

leap out of the darkness and start chewing at any minute. Chew through my suit, my clothes, my skin, my bones...

I almost ran. I almost said, screw it.

But the program in my brain wouldn't let me. My overwhelming urge to discover continued to propel me forward.

And there was that something else—something that drove me besides the compound. Loyalty to Pedro, perhaps?

The cave turned out to be shallow. I'd anticipated a deep, winding system, but only a few yards in I reached its rear. Here the lines wound up the wall, abandoning their angularity, curling around what appeared to be a vault door.

Superimposed symbols glowed over its center, and beneath the holographic designs were real-world counterparts. The overlay continuously changed, revealing a pattern. Instructions, I realized—a key code. All I had to do was touch

the designs in the indicated order.

Done. The door unlocked. Vapor poured out from the seams, similar to the way it seeped from newly opened cryo-tubes.

A cold shiver shook my body. An image of a small, frozen alien intelligence—rat-like, tail, whiskers and all—came into my mind.

Be damned if I was going to touch anything like that. Pedro could wake the hell up and come get it himself.

But no rat-men were revealed

when the door swung outwards. Instead the vault contained a massive store of mug-sized vials. Containers in row after row, thousands of them, stretching back into the rock—all sealed in a way that was unfamiliar to me. Fuchsia liquid, frigid but not frozen, sat inside each vial.

The overlay turned green and produced another pattern—it showed me how to open the containers.

And words—the same unreadable words as in the ley-line—ran across the outside like a label.

Bizarrely, I knew what the liquid was for. No question in my mind.

I grabbed one and ran, slamming the door behind me.

The percussion must have startled the cave inhabitants, because they went wild.

Dark forms fell from the ceiling, onto the floor and onto me. I called out, batting them away, bee-lining for the entrance. The sprayer was little help. It created a cloud of tranquilizer that only succeeded in making more animals fall from the

ceiling.

The damn cave was raining rodents.

Someone in the universe was having a laugh at my expense, I was sure.

I dropped the sprayer and leapt for the cable, using only one hand to grab it since I'd tucked the vial under my arm football-style. The suit-skeleton won again, giving my arm and legs the added strength they needed to haul me back into the climber.

With the airlock and the bay doors tightly shut behind me, I began shedding the unconscious tag-alongs. They were as hideous as I feared. Amorphous, multi-eyeballed, hairy blobs with frightening incisors. To my knowledge, an undocumented species. I'd toss them out the airlock as soon as I'd taken care of the real business at hand—someone else could come back for a specimen.

I pulled Pedro's helmet off and followed the alien instructions to a

T. The vial opened, revealing its viscous insides. Without skipping a beat, I poured the whole thing down his throat.

Exhausted, I let the empty container fall to the floor and roll back towards the airlock. I carefully replaced his helmet, and seconds later the decompression sirens finally sounded—the weak spot had given in. Perfect timing. I assured the ATV that all passengers were suited, and it stopped yelling. Then I took up the driver's seat once again, knowing I

couldn't rest until we'd made it back home.



A week later Pedro was still in the recovery wing—but his leg was growing back nicely.

“We came here looking for medical answers,” I said to him, holding up the empty vial. “I just wasn’t expecting to find them like this.”

“I told you,” he said with a smile.

“No, you told me about an alien

road-map. Not an alien regenerative serum.”

He took the container from me and turned it over in his hands. “You know, I think each planet has a purpose. A piece of a greater puzzle. We figure it out, and we get the rewards. They set up a planet with great medicinal prospects so we’d come here with a purpose. We were clever enough to find the map—even if it was on accident—so we got the medicine.”

“Sounds a little like rats in a

maze,” I said, “Get to the center and you find the cheese.”

Pedro shrugged and sat back against his pillow. “Maybe it is. I thought the ley-lines pointed to a greater intelligence waiting for us to evolve, to become intelligent enough to interact with them. You know, like equals. But maybe you’re right. Maybe we’re just lab rats. An experiment.”

“Either way, you did it. You discovered proof of—” I still wanted to gag on the word, “—Seeding. By a

greater intelligence.”

He nodded, but didn't smile. “Bet there are more caves out there, filled with this stuff.”

“We'll just have to keep following the overlays,” I said. “Which has me thinking.”

Pedro looked me in the eye, curious. “What?”

“Well, this planet had a distinct purpose with a distinct prize. If all ley-lines are real... what do you think Earth's lines point to?”

He raised an eyebrow and we

shared a long look. “Don’t know,” he said eventually, “But I’d give my other leg to find out.”



Wakefield Mahon

Wakefield Mahon became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Dragons” in Daily Science Fiction (Sep. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at www.wakefieldmahon.com.

Dragons

by Wakefield Mahon

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Sep. 2011), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

“I really hate my job.” Arlen stretched his arms and tried to loosen his stiff neck.

“That’s nice. I hate my stinking job too.” Every “s” the guard spoke came out as a hiss.

Arlen glared at his reptilian captor. “That’s easy for you to say. You’re the one with the stick.”

“Three years on this Okara-forsaken rock, with you stinky mammals, and you think having a stick makes me happy?” Electricity crackled as the guard sunk the prod into Arlen’s skin. Arlen screamed, and then gagged on the smell of his own charred flesh.

The guard chuckled, “Well, maybe it’s a small pleasure.”

The hissing laughter irritated Arlen most of all. He desperately wanted to give a sarcastic response, but the pain in his side reminded him it was better to hold his tongue. He glared at the electric prod and went back to working on the console.

“You can thank your precious John Chan for integrating the biometric security protocols into these garuk machines. If we didn’t need your living bodies to operate

them, then we wouldn't have this arrangement."

The mealtime buzzer blared.

"Time to eat." The way the guard licked his non-existent lips with his forked tongue made Arlen uneasy as he got up to leave.

"Nice try mammal, engage the safety. I'm sure you would just love to see a dragon ripped apart by a runaway drill, but it won't happen on my watch."

Arlen engaged the safety and waited for his guard to remove the

shackles from his legs.

The guard nudged him down the hall to the nourishment replenishment center, shaking him from his thoughts.

“So, what’s for lunch, boss?” The question was rhetorical. They had cheeseburgers, French fries and chocolate shakes every single meal, every single day of their lives. If the workers didn’t eat, then they got the electric prod and a couple of guards to “assist” them with finishing their meal.

“You do realize that we would live much longer if we had some variety in our diet, right?”

“Humans are not much good after 30 years of age anyway... too tough and gamy.” Arlen couldn't tell for sure, but he thought the guard was grinning. “I just remembered. You're just about thirty, aren't you? Hmm, I wonder if the guard gets first dibs on their prisoner.” Then he laughed with that terrible hiss again.

Arlen hurried into line to get his tray. He wasn't particularly excited

about the meal, but he'd already burned five minutes of his thirty-minute lunch break and he needed to talk to Darrin. Lunch break was the only time the guards allowed the workers to speak to one another.

“Do you remember when we thought dragons only existed in fairy tales?” Darrin whispered.

“I don't know, I think they just look like humanoid iguanas to me. I don't know why they even call them dragons, It's not like they breathe fire”

“You ever been prodded?”

Arlen showed him the fresh scar on his arm. “So did you talk to your guy?”

“Not so loud, man.”

“Did you get the disk or not?”

“Yeah I got it, chill. Are you sure you want to take the risk?”

“Are you kidding me?”

A guard looked in their direction and Arlen lowered his voice again. “Don’t be ridiculous. Anything’s better than being stuck here forever. I’d rather be killed in an escape

attempt than eaten alive.”

“Hey, I mean we don’t really know if that’s what happens to the former workers.”

“Yeah, we don’t know, because no one ever sees them again. You may be happy being a little sheep in this pasture, waiting to be mutton, but I’m looking for my way out.”

“Well nobody has ever escaped either,” Darrin sighed and shook his head. “Suit yourself buddy. Just remember...”

“Yeah, I know, I didn’t get this

from you.”

Arlen palmed the miniature disk and returned to the area where his guard waited. Guard and prisoner returned to the workstation as the second klaxon blared.

“Did you enjoy your cheeseburger?” The guard secured Arlen to his desk again.

“Oh yeah, I’m going to be nice and juicy for you.” As usual, this sent the guard into a laughing fit. “Laugh all you want lizard-breath,” Arlen muttered, “we’ll see who laughs last.”

At exactly 2:59, Arlen placed the disk in his workstation and closed his eyes. For months, he had planned this moment. He memorized the escape route and shift schedule of the guards. The plan required a lot of luck, but he was willing to take the chance.

The guard noticed his odd behavior. “Hey, what do you think you are—?”

A pattern of images flashed across the monitor. The guard was, momentarily, stunned. Arlen took

advantage of the opportunity and grabbed the cattle prod from his captor. He turned it against the guard.

“See how you like it.”

The guard crumpled to the ground. Arlen grabbed the keys from the unconscious guard and unlocked his shackles. He moved quickly, taking the prod with him, just in case. He ran as fast as he could, until he nearly plowed into a group of guards and realized he had to slow down. Arlen's heart pounded in his

chest as he waited, hiding against the wall while they talked. Sweat dripped slowly down his face, stretching out the eternity until they continued walking again.

Another left, then right at the second corridor and he was home free. He broke into a full run. He ran right into a locked door. He forced open the lock with the prod then ran through the door... into a steel wall.

“What the...” Arlen’s shoulders sank. His maps didn’t say anything about a barrier. He tried to think

over the alternate plans and routes that he had mapped out. Suddenly, guards surrounded him and secured the prod. He tried to fight back but there were too many of them.

“Mister Jones, exactly where did you think you were going?” The sound of the warden’s voice sent ice through Arlen’s veins. “You have been very busy, Mister Jones. Are you aware that you have killed one of my guards, damaged a protective barrier and broken a drill that is worth more than your life?”

Arlen wasn't even going to pretend he was sorry about the drill. Although he didn't actually intend to kill the guard, only maim him. Either way, he wasn't about to give the warden the satisfaction of a response.

The warden, Captain Amat, appraised him with his dark beady eyes. He shared that same hint of grin that had always danced on Arlen's nerve endings. "Guards, please escort the prisoner to the laboratory. Doctor Drake, may I have a word with you?"

“Yes, Captain?”

“I believe this mammal would be an excellent candidate for your most painful treatment.”

“Oh yes, Captain. Nothing would give me greater pleasure.” The doctor hissed with glee.

Captain Amat looked at Arlen, one last time, as the guards pulled him, kicking and screaming, down the corridor. “Make sure you don’t use a sedative.”

Strapped down to the table, Arlen glared up at Doctor Drake,

trying to hide the terror in his eyes. “Let me guess, this is the part where you eat me alive, right?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, we aren’t the barbarians.” The doctor smiled and produced an enormous syringe.

Seconds after the injection, it felt as if every cell in Arlen’s body burst into flame. He gave in to the pain... and darkness overtook him.

Arlen woke up in a ten-foot-by-ten-foot room. He lay on a bed that actually had a mattress. It was lumpy, but it was a mattress nonetheless.

Next to the open doorway, he saw the dreaded cattle prod. He considered trying to grab the prod and escape, but he decided it was probably a trap. Next to his bed, on the nightstand, he saw a pressed and neatly folded navy blue guard uniform.

A horrifying thought exploded in his mind. The room wasn't the only thing that looked different. Everything had changed. The air looked different; it even smelled different. He slowly lowered his eyes.

The claws on his scaly green hands confirmed his worst fears.

Doctor Drake walked around the corner, wearing the dragon equivalent of a smile on his face; somehow, Arlen recognized it now.

“Congratulations, Arlen. You’ve been promoted to middle management. Your training is about to begin.”



International Intrigue by Wakefield Mahon

First published in *In Space No One
Can Hear You Scream* (Jul. 2011), edited
by Donna Burgess



Yuri Yaniovich floated away from the third international space station out into the great wide unknown. A dozen safety features should have prevented his tether from coming loose, but they all failed. One by one, the internal systems in his suit would go offline. His eyes would go wide as his lungs started to burn and the lack of oxygen overtook him.

Doc ran back to the control room. No one else had seen what

happened.

“Damn it, Jim. What who was the last one that checked the tether and climate controls?”

Jim pulled the maintenance and security logs up on the monitor and his face twisted in confusion.

“It’s weird, Doc. I can’t tell who accessed the equipment last. It looks as if someone altered the security logs.”

“Are you certain that the logs have been altered?”

“I’m afraid so. Look. Here is the

log id number and you see these three entries are missing. Whoever did this had access to the system but they were sloppy in covering up their tracks.”

“Then we have no choice but to consider this suspicious. Radio ground control. Fill them in on what has happened. I have no idea how jurisdiction works in this case. But it looks like we might have the first murder in outer space.”

Five little astronauts standing at

the door, one flew away and then there were four.

Jim tried to radio ground control but the only sound that he heard was static. He tried scanning through each channel with the same result.

“Doc, I’m trying to get a signal here, but something appears to be interfering with communications. Were we expecting a solar flare?”

“There might be a connection. The engineer would have access to the equipment and the logs and he

might be able to rig up something that would jam our communications. Hey Gianelli, get up here. I need to ask you some questions. Maybe you can figure out what is going on or get the backup systems working.”

No one answered.

“Did you hear me Gianelli? Get up here now. If I find out you were responsible for this equipment tampering I’ll...”

“Doc, I need your help back here.” The voice did not belong to

Gianelli.

“What’s going on? What happened, Pablo?”

“I don’t think he is breathing, Doc. One minute he is taking a drink and the next minute he’s on the floor”

“Let me see that beverage container.” Doc wafted the air over the container towards him. “There is something wrong with this drink. I think that he has been poisoned.”

Four little astronauts mad as can

be, one hit the drink and then there were three.

“Jim, come in here please. I don’t suppose you handled the beverages today?”

“No, of course not, Pablo handles supplies I am just the commo guy, remember?”

“Of course, I knew you would say that. Look, I’ll be right back. You two stay here. I’m going to get my test kit to see what was contaminating the drink. Keep an

eye on each other and don't touch anything!"

When Doc came back, Jim was looking at him with terrified wide eyes and Pablo was lying on the floor with a puncture wound in his chest. Doc knelt to feel for a pulse. There was none.

Three little astronauts wondering what to do, one stabbed another and then there were two.

“What the hell is going on here, Jim? I thought you were my best friend, what have you done?”

“Me? I haven’t done anything. You mean don’t know? I mean...”

Jim ran to the control room and tried to radio ground control again. “Ground control, ground control, please come in, we have an emergency situation here, please help.” No one answered. When he flipped the dial to try another channel, a surge of electricity coursed through him and he dropped dead.

Two little astronauts have a little fun, one called home and then there was one.

Doc ran into the room and saw Jim on the floor. A tear came to his eye as he stood over his best friend's body. Then he realized that he was all alone on the space station. A loud thump echoed through the station. Perhaps he was not alone after all. When he looked back down Jim was gone.

Doc ran back into the break room and saw that the bodies of Gianelli and Pablo were missing as well. One of them must still be alive. That would be the murderer. He heard the thump closer than before. He tried to think of where to hide on the tiny space station but he was running out of rooms. He remembered they built a panic room a fireproof airtight room a fail-safe if something went wrong. And something was definitely wrong.

Doc locked himself in the panic

room. He realized that he could access the video logs and see whom or what had been creating all of this havoc. He could not comprehend what he saw. The shadowy figure deliberately disengaged the safeties on Yuri's equipment then stood over the console erasing logs. The man that he trusted poisoned the water supply. The man he thought he could rely on stabbing Pablo after going in the other room to rig the comm center. The smug grin looked up into the camera. The same face that

Doc saw every morning in the mirror.

Thump.

The noise came from outside again, but the security camera had already told him what the noise was. He left the panic room. He walked over to the nearest observation window and saw Yuri's distorted face glaring at him accusingly. His tether was still intact but his life support had run out. Yuri took his last breath while three other bodies floated around him in a macabre ballet. Doc

shook his head, walked to the air lock and opened it.

One little astronaut scared and alone, the truth set him free and then there were none.



Ex-Boyfriend by Wakefield Mahon

First published in The Spirit of Poe
(Jul. 2012), edited by W.J. Rosser & Karen
Rigley

• • • •

Her hands trembled as she
picked up the black handset
of her antique-style phone.

Lynn prayed that it wouldn't be him, but she knew it would be. It was always him.

“Hi baby, I've missed you.” His voice was so smooth and sweet that for a moment she felt the old feeling stir up inside her.

“Mike, you can't keep calling me.” Lynn struggled to keep her thoughts straight.

“Why is that Lynn, because you've moved on?” Mike scoffed. “Get serious, you barely even know this guy. You and I both know what's

going to happen.”

“Please, just leave him alone.”

“You want me to leave him alone?” Mike’s voice became agitated. “Have you forgotten what happened to your last boyfriend? Even the police can’t find me.” His voice took on a dark and ominous tone, “Nothing can change our bond.” A moment passed in silence. His voice became both gentle and melancholy as he sighed, “You have my heart Lynn. I could never leave you.”

Lynn slammed the handset back

into the cradle. Six months ago, she thought it was over, that she had heard the last of Mike, but he kept turning up. She shuddered, remembering the fear, the day that she knew that she couldn't stay with him any longer. Lynn sat in the silence of her tidy little apartment, focusing on the sound of her own breathing until she felt calm again.

Her cell phone buzzed, setting her back on edge. Her heart pounded in her chest as she answered. "Hello?"

"Hi baby." What a sweet relief to

hear her new boyfriend's voice

“Oh Ron, it's you. I should have recognized the number” Lynn straightened an errant doily on the end table next to her chair.

“You had a date with someone else tonight?” She heard the smile in his voice and it brought a smile to her face as well.

“No baby, I'm all yours. So, what do we have planned?” Lynn cleaned a smudge from the keys of the typewriter that she picked up in an antique shop. She selected it along

with the classic phone to match the feel of her old-style secretary desk.

“I could come by and bring some take-out. I’ve always wanted to see the inside of your apartment.”

She glanced at the old telephone. “No, this place is a mess. Besides, I feel cooped up. I really need to get out of this place. How about we go take in a movie at the Metroplex?”

“Sounds good to me baby. As long as I’m with you I don’t care what we’re doing.” Thing that got to her was that he meant it. Ron was such a

good guy; he really didn't deserve all of Lynn's baggage.

"You're just so sweet. I'll meet you at the mall in an hour, alright?"

Lynn held the cell phone to her chest for a few moments before she stood up to take a shower. Afterward, she stood in front of her closet admiring her precise, almost military, organization. After all, It was so important for a girl to wear just the right thing and it helped being able to find everything quickly. She grabbed an outfit that

screamed sexy and grinned. “Oh yeah, that’s the one.”

A short while later, Lynn placed her hand on the doorknob to leave. She glanced apprehensively at the telephone. It watched her from the desk, mocking her, promising to ring if she took a step out of the door. She took a deep breath and stepped out of her apartment. She heard only silence. She checked to make sure she had her keys. She pulled to and checked the door. She checked the door again just to make

sure. When she felt the hand on her shoulder, Lynn whipped around with her finger on the mace trigger.

“Whoa, Miss Thomas, I was just trying to be helpful. I found this addressed to you. Somehow it ended up in my mailbox.”

Lynn glanced at the envelope. Her name and address were typewritten on the front. There was neither a return address nor a stamp.

“I’m so sorry Mister Ortiz. I’ve just been so on edge lately. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

The elderly Hispanic man chuckled. "I'm glad you finally did. I'd hate to be blinded when there are still so many pretty ladies in the world like you to see."

Lynn smiled and apologized again. She took the letter and dropped it in her purse, then hurried down the hall.

Fifteen minutes later, the wind howled around Lynn's car as she sat in front of the mall. Her whole body shivered as she read the words again.

It's time for Ron to go. Otherwise, he might just have an accident like your last boyfriend. You know it will only be your fault. So, just walk away from him, if you want him to live.

Lynn's set her chin in the air defiantly. Mike wasn't going to run her life anymore. She wouldn't let him. She wiped the tears from her eyes, shoved the letter into her glove compartment and touched up her makeup before getting out of the car

to meet Ron.

He took her hand as they went into the theater. Lynn finally relaxed and let go of her worries for a couple of hours. The couple enjoyed the romantic comedy. It was sweet and funny and she gave in to the emotions. Ron wrapped his arm around her at just the right time and she nestled into her own little cozy heaven.

They came out of the theater and Ron walked her to her car. "Wow, you are just so beautiful baby." The

autumn breeze had picked up again, making her hair dance.

When he leaned down to give her a kiss, she stood up on her toes to meet him. Suddenly, she froze.

“What’s wrong baby, does my breath stink?” Ron’s smile faded when he saw the genuine look of terror in her eyes.

“He’s here,” she almost whispered.

“Who’s here?”

“Mike.”

Ron stood back and placed his

hands on her shoulders. The look on his face was confused but not upset. “Wait, I thought you said your ex was gone.”

“I thought he was. Can you please just come home with me?”

“Hey, you don’t have to make up stories just to get me in bed.” Ron grinned and winked.

They made their way back to her apartment. On the way, Lynn thought about telling Ron about the creepy phone calls, how Mike had scared her, but she didn’t want to

ruin the evening. They were kissing when she put the key in the lock, halfway undressed by the time they made it through the door.

They fell on to the couch and made passionate love, feverish and animal. Afterward, she laid her head on his chest. Wrapped up in his arms, she felt so safe, so warm and comfortable. Lynn made a decision. It was time.

* * *

Lynn got up and made Ron and

herself a drink. While they sipped, she told him about the phone conversations, that Mike had been stalking her and wouldn't leave her alone.

"I'm going to call. I'll tell him that I've found the one. Soon he'll be nothing but a bad memory, less than a memory, because I have you now."

"Yes, you do honey. But, you don't really need to call him tonight, do you? If you are that scared, you should call the police."

"I'll just be a minute and I'll both

feel so much better once I get this off my chest. Tell you what. I have a craving for chocolate ice cream. Why don't you go in the kitchen and make us some? I have the good stuff in the freezer."

Lynn picked up the phone and dialed. "It's over Mike."

Mike's voice was cold and deliberate. "It's not that simple Lynn. You can't just steal my heart like that and walk away."

"I'm sorry Mike, I really am, but I have Ron now so you can just leave

me alone.”

“He’s going to leave you, Lynn.”

“He would never do that.”

A trace of sadness touched his grim reply. “He’s going to die, you know that.”

“I thought you said this place was a mess. I’ve never seen a kitchen this organized.” Ron’s hand rested on the freezer handle. A mosquito of a thought buzzed just out of reach, a detail he’d been missing in the corner of his eye.

“Lynn?”

“Yes, Ron?”

“Never mind, it’s nothing.”

Lynn followed Ron’s line of sight to the telephone. The phone cord should have connected to the wall. Instead, the cut line hung limply. Frayed wire reached into the nothing. She opened the secretary drawer and pulled out the gun with a silencer on the barrel.

“Mike said he’s coming. He said he wants to meet you.”

Ron felt warm and his vision started to swim. Slowly, Ron opened

the freezer. He'd noticed the tidy apartment, but each item in the freezer had been positioned with an eerie precision and care like a shrine to frozen food. Ron easily found the chocolate ice cream on the top shelf sitting alphabetically between the butter pecan and daiquiri ice.

Sliding out the carton, he noticed a neatly wrapped block of meat that looked a lot like the cow heart he'd dissected as a child in Biology class. Maybe he was being paranoid. He pulled out the package to examine it

and saw another behind it, a man's thumb.

Ron realized he was holding Mike's... Lynn's ex-boyfriend's heart.



Rich Matrunick

Rich Matrunick became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Watchmaker’s Gift” in Daily Science Fiction (Jun. 2012), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at richmatrunick.com.

The Watchmaker's Gift by Rich Matrunick

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Jun. 2012), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden



It begins the same as always, with the sound of the shovel scraping over the country road. I sit upon the dashboard of the idling car—being a turtle, it's the only way I can see—watching as the old woman lifts her shovel, carrying the mangled carcass of a squirrel.

She opens the rear door and places the squirrel into a shoebox on the back seat. The smell is not pleasant, but I say nothing. She seals the lid.

As the old woman slides into the front seat, she picks me up, and sets me upon her lap. “Messy one this time,” she says. “Lots of work.”

The key turns, the engine revs, and we make straight down the road.

* * *

The old woman’s shop moves to the constant tick of the wall clocks. Though most are still in working order, others are missing parts that have been borrowed over the years: a gear here, a rod there, and a drive

over there.

From my vantage upon the workbench, I watch the old woman, working under the light of a single bare bulb dangling from the ceiling.

Her golden monocle is focused upon a three legged stool and the squirrel that sits atop. Her wrinkled hands gently turn a gold handled screwdriver upon a golden screw.

Everything is gold. The rods and gears and drives that she meticulously places within the squirrel's pelt catch passing flickers

from the light. The stitches sewn into his pelt glint as she turns the fur over in her hands.

“It has to be gold,” she said to me, once.

My rational side tells me it has something to do with its conductance, some electrical conveyance that allows us to function. It is my hope, however, that the true reason is something more romantic—it is gold, and therefore special, which in turns makes each of us special.

And on that basis, I search for the ‘why’ of it all: our reason for being. It is a secret the old woman keeps closely guarded, though I do find encouragement in my quest.



As usual, her work takes her through the rest of the night, into the sunrise, and finally into nightfall on the second day. The squirrel is complete.

In some places her craft is evident: A leg without fur—exposing

gears of the knee—a small section of ribcage held together by nothing but thread, the small knob protruding from the back of his neck, and gold eyes, currently silent.

Satisfied, the old woman leans back in her chair. “I need a bit of sleep now, Turtle. Keep an eye out. We’ll give him a wind in the morning.” She always says this. Though, despite the incessant ticking of the gears in my head, I never manage to stay awake through the night.

Come morning, she will have started his windings and promptly left, leaving me as his sole liaison into this new life.



My eyes open to the shuffling movements of the squirrel upon the stool. Like most, he is examining the stitching in his arms, testing the movement of his legs, and wondering at the dexterity of his digits.

“It’s all there,” I say. They always

jump a bit at my baritone drawl.

Unsure, he sniffs the air, then, decidedly, makes the short leap from the stool to my workbench.

He examines me, high on his haunches, his gold pupils shuttering like a camera lens.

“Where am I? Is this the afterworld?”

“I don’t believe so. I can’t think the afterworld has much use for time.”

“But I feel different,” he says. “Something is not quite the same.

More than the gears or anything. Or, maybe, because of the gears. It's a ticking. And...." His voice trails there, leaving the half-finished thought lingering in the room.

He is close to the question; I can hear the gears turning in his head as he attempts to sort out the strange addition to his consciousness.

"And you know there's an end to it?" I ask. "That is something to get used to. And something the gears will not let you forget. The old woman calls it 'mortality'—a human

trait—a concept we animals were apparently lacking.” The ticking clock is a harsh reminder of our finite time. Seconds can be counted and measured until you lose yourself in the certainty of an end point.

“What do I do with this trait?”

“Recognize it, I imagine. Do as they do and accept it. Perhaps attempt to understand why she gave us this gift.”

The pause in our conversation is filled with the ticks of the wall clocks. Presently, his attention drifts

towards the open window.

“You can go when you please,” I say. “We only ask that you return as your parts begin to wear and break, and the clock begins to slow. Gold is hard to come by, after all.”

He pauses, uncertain. And then he is out the window.



Today is Sunday. I can tell by the briskness in the old woman's movements as she prepares for her morning. There is a place to be, and,

like most Sunday's, no matter how early she rises, or what time we leave, she always seems to determine that she is late in the end.

Presently, she is passing from room to room, searching for something with little luck, while I sit upon the old overstuffed recliner by the black and white television.

“Found it,” she says, entering from the other room. She has her hiking gear on: green windbreaker, backpack, and old walking stick. On the front of the windbreaker is a

brown patch of cloth, hand sewn into a small pouch.

I stretch out my limbs and rise, before the question of 'Are you ready?' even escapes her lips. She scoops me up, placing me within the pouch, my head peeking just above its edge.

The autumn air hits my face as we step from the porch, my eyes shutter at the wind. The day is still new; the sun sends little warmth over the awakening landscape. The steam of her breath falls down before

me.

The hill rises before us, gaining foliage as it climbs higher into the sky. The old woman sighs as she places her first boot upon the slope. I can see that she is hesitant.

“I think this may be the last trip for these old bones,” she says. Then, adjusting the backpack upon her shoulders, she begins the long trek uphill.

The journey is hard on her, I know; our travel is slower than it has been in the past. Despite my size, I

feel I am an enormous burden on her.

“I can walk, if it helps,” I say. She doesn’t hear me, lost in the thoughts that drive her to climb this hill each and every Sunday.

The ruddy path cuts between the trees, the colors of fall nearly given way, brown leaves, dried and worn, crunching beneath her footsteps. I wonder briefly if the squirrel has remained nearby, chattering amongst the treetops.

The forest opens at the top of the

hill, the old woman's ragged breath catching for a moment. The clearing is marked with a single tree: old, worn, gnarly roots cascading from its trunk. And beneath sits a single stone: a tombstone of someone she knew, once, and has visited every Sunday since.

I wait for the old woman to remove me from her pouch and set me upon the grass—there to wait as she approaches the tombstone alone, as always. This time, however, she does not.

The sun is blocked behind the old tree as we approach; the lifted glare bringing the grave into focus. It is a simple tombstone, a rock found somewhere upon this hill, unmarked. As she kneels down beside it, she lets me out onto the ground, where my feet find the tickling grasses.

At first I wait behind the old woman as she presses her hand upon the tombstone. But here I feel too much like an eavesdropper, and slowly make my way to stand beside

her.

“I just can’t do it,” she is saying to the stone. “I’ve let things slide too long.”

The wind on the hill picks up for a moment, and the old woman hugs her arms to her body in response. I nuzzle up against her leg, providing what little warmth is possible from a person of my stature.

She notices me; I catch a tear in the corner of her eye before it is deftly wiped away.

“Who is this?” I ask.

“Jonathan,” she says, as if the name alone should fully explain the person under the rock. Her hand brushes lovingly at the stone; for a moment I am not sure if she is willing to continue. When she does, her voice is faraway.

“He died about eight years ago now. Car accident—very quick—over before the paramedics showed up. Far before I arrived at the hospital to say goodbye.

“I always thought I could make those final words happen, someday.

But he's just bones, now. I waited too long. Far beyond what I can hope to mend."

Realization strikes me. It is an ugly feeling, deep within my gut, twisting what insides I have left.

"I'm sorry," she says, "if I gave any misgivings about why you were here. I know how you've been searching since the moment I brought you back. And to find out, now—"

"That I'm a test experiment?" She nods, slowly, solemnly. I am a

footnote, a nothing—happenstance. “That is not a bad thing,” I say, bits of anger and sadness scattered about my words. “It simplifies things a bit. No higher purpose to search for.”

I can see that I’ve cut her; the way her head bows and her shoulders slump.

The walk back to the house is in silence, though it is impossible to ignore each other’s presence, being tucked so closely to her heart. For the first time I consider that the old woman is no higher being; she is a

human, as I am a turtle.



The old woman has been on the front porch for hours; the squeak of the rocking chair carries through the window to my vantage upon the sofa. Her movements are as constant as the ticks of the wall clocks.

I brood as afternoon wanes into early evening, trying to determine my next step. The harsh reality, it seems, is that I have no place to go—like the old woman, my friends and

family are long buried.

As the red sun drops low in the hills, I finally step onto the front porch. The old woman glances down at me as I approach, the rocker coming to a halt.

“What do I do with this knowledge of mortality?” I crane my head upwards to look at her face. “What do you do?”

“I’m probably the last person to ask. We humans as a whole don’t do that well, actually. We try to avoid the thought as best we can.”

“I appreciate the suggestion, but then most humans don’t have a ticking clock inside their head.”

“True.” She pauses. “Have you forgiven me already?”

Too proud to answer, I take a step forward. She lifts me up and places me upon her lap.

Absently, her hand reaches up to the small of my neck, to the tiny golden thumbwheel. My eyes go cross and my vision blurs, euphoria, as she turns back the wheels of time. Youth fills me with a few more

precious months.

“How long?” I ask as my vision clears. She glances down at me.

“Not sure. The gears have a few winds left in them. Two, maybe three. And I’ve got a few left in these old fingers of mine.”

“Sounds like I’m stuck here for a bit longer.”

“You’re not, you know. You can leave at any time. It was never my intent to confine you here. It’s your time to spend.”

I pause, considering. “Perhaps.

And maybe at some point I will leave. Though, for the time being, I think I shall like to rock on the porch with you.”

The rocker squeaks upon the boards once more. The evening sounds of the crickets begin to creep into our world, as the sky fades into darkness. I am, for the moment, content.



T.C. McCarthy

T.C. McCarthy became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Germline from Orbit Books. Visit his website at tcmccarthy.com.

Somewhere It Snows

by T.C. McCarthy

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Lev reminded himself to keep his head bowed and to avoid staring. An entire mob

passed, all of them wearing combat suits, many patched to the point where he wondered if the garments had any chance of protecting their wearers, but protection wasn't really the point—not for the Alaed. The more patched, the greater the warrior. That was the point.

One of the soldiers kicked as it walked by, sending Lev into a drift of ammonia snow, fine and dry. “No name, keep your head lower.”

No name.

“Don't let it get to you,” said

Michael, helping Lev back to his feet. "And I know your name." They glanced down the road, in both directions, to make sure that no more Alaed were in sight before resuming their commute.

"How many more re-supplies?" Michael asked.

Lev sighed. "One."

"One? Imagine. Soon you'll be like that old Lupan Merchant. I forget his name, but you know the one: barking orders as though born to the Merchant class, more Alaed

than the Alaed themselves. It's good that you're so lucky because you're the only other human in our group and we're both from Zaporozhye, so that has to mean something—like we wound up together and we're both still alive. Like we're lucky.”

Lev didn't feel lucky; he felt old—old enough to remember what it had been like on ten different worlds, his pressure suit replaced three times, twice barely repaired in time to seal in the oxygen. He flexed the right gauntlet and winced. His knuckles

had gotten worse in the last few months, the suit's wrist joints were too tight, and a slight whiff of ammonia tainted his oxygen and Lev didn't know if the contamination would have caused arthritis but that's what he blamed; old age often had an accomplice. Everything was so hard to figure out these days. It was better to not think, better to forget that at the end of this run he'd have what he came for: Alaed Merchant Status, and with it? A name. Lev banished the dream as soon as it took shape.

Too many things could happen in no man's land, so many opportunities for the misfortunes of age, and he hadn't seen Earth since he was twenty five and had trouble remembering what it was that he missed; it bothered him, the lack of memories an infected splinter that he had to excise. Better to think of things lost—or better still, things lost and forgotten—than what could be gained in the future. The already lost never brought new disappointments.

Vushka. The name triggered

memories, the door to his past kicked in. These were his mother and father, crying, just before waving goodbye to watch Lev march across the steppes toward the waiting Alaed Merchant Fleet. This was his grandmother. Grinning, toothless, she poked the logs in her Lviv fireplace and wheezed in a hoarse laugh that made him smile and cringe at the same time, made him wonder if maybe she'd die on the spot and fall into the fire to be consumed and forgotten. Vushka. It

was all his parents ate, all they fed him as a child, but then that wasn't true because there were plenty of other foods but vushka was the only thing that Lev remembered these days, the only thing that ever came to him. And it was enough. Enough to invite other memories so he could recall his family just one more time, to accept the fact that by now they were dead.

“Are you blind?” Michael hissed.

Lev blinked. They had arrived at the outpost and a line of no-names

gathered to wait, all of them showing their respect, all staring at him until Lev dropped to his knees.

“Idiot,” said Michael, “you won’t make Merchant if you keep acting the fool.”

“Misha, why did you do it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why. Why didn’t you stay on Earth, at home?”

Michael waited a moment before answering. “It was not a hard decision, Lev. You left twenty five years ago and things got worse, not

better. When I left we had finally exhausted metals in the asteroid belt, and still the Alaed wouldn't let our ships leave the solar system. The Americans sent an entire fleet against them—to try and get beyond, out into the galaxy.”

“And?”

“No survivors.”

Lev chuckled at the thought of dead Americans, trying to figure out why it should seem so funny until he gave up; it wasn't funny; he had become perverse. The temperature

indicator crept downward and he imagined the planet's always-there clouds thickening, pregnant with a snow that would come whether anyone wanted it or not. It began as a sprinkle—as if someone flew overhead scattering salt to patter against his helmet. Within minutes a new layer coated the road and surrounding hills, muffling everything, and Lev suspected that should he remove his helmet it would be difficult to hear anything beyond a few meters away, anything

that didn't scream. The snow would be dry. Squeaky and slick. Once his exhaust melted the ammonia-water mix he could slide down a gentle slope to get lost in a mile-deep drift or sail off a bottomless cliff and maybe both would be a fine way to go—better than a slow death on Earth...

“Misha, they hadn't invaded by the time you left Earth? The Alaed still hadn't taken her?”

“No, Lev. Just quarantined the entire system.”

Lev doubled over, one cough blending into the others in a continuous roar until blackness took everything, forcing the suit lights to fade. He wasn't gone for long. The chronometer indicated that barely a minute had passed by the time he came around, watching as the mules danced in the snow around him, their engines whining and blowing cones of exhaust into the air to crystallize and drift downward in sparkling veils, making him grin.

Warsaw. The frost reminded him of the city's winter just before he left, when Marina had dragged him from the club and into the snow on one of those mornings so cold it made his nose hurt, made his fingers numb in seconds except for where they touched her. She had smiled at him, called him crazy. For wanting to leave Earth he was eccentric, but for wanting to leave her he was a true nut case, someone to be pitied except that neither of them felt sad about the parting because they had both

been in it for the sex anyway, too self absorbed for anything approaching love and so... she gave him one last kiss and headed into town, calling over her shoulder a kind of goodbye: "Don't forget what my ass looks like, Lev." The mules were as old now as Marina had been then. Twenty. And Lev cared for them in spite of everything because his life depended on the things, because facing the laughter from the named Merchants who never bothered to hide contempt for humans was easy; it

was their curiosity that was difficult. The first Alaed warrior who had seen the mules approached Lev with amusement and it had been early in the game, so that Lev hadn't yet learned the protocol, that when speaking with a warrior you never looked it in the eye. He lost three teeth and part of his tongue when the Alaed had kicked in the side of his face, dragging one claw through his right cheek and then out the left. A lesson—to mind one's manners.

Yet even the Alaed saw the point

of mules, knew what Lev was thinking, because after the blow the warrior had tossed Lev a suit-sealer. “Robots so primitive they have almost no signatures. Nothing. You will live a long time, a coward, a breather of oxygen and poison whom death cannot find.”

But that was almost as old as his memories of Marina. Today the alien steppes stretched out to the horizon and blended into the sky, white and grey so that he had a moment of difficulty in telling up from down,

and had to sit again, the coughing threatening to resume.

Michael helped him to his feet. “It’s good this is your last trip, Lev. The ammonia. It’s taking to your lungs, eroding your tissues.”

“And someday, Misha, all this will be yours.”

Michael’s voice sounded raspy over his headset, and Lev wondered if the ammonia had already started its work on him. “Mules. Everyone else uses grav carts and high-speed auto-tractors, but old Lev Sandakchiev?

He uses ancient robotic mules.”

“And grav carts leave an electromagnetic trail that can be spotted for thousands of kilometers, from space. I’ve seen entire re-supplies wiped out before the Merchants ever heard a sound or knew what was coming.”

“It’s all about planning, old man,” said Michael. “You plan your runs to go between satellite passes, shut down at the tiniest sign of remote detection or scanning. Planning, Lev, and by now you’d have moved

more than enough cargo to afford a thousand mules.”

Lev pushed past him toward the general direction of the front lines, not bothering to check the guidance system, trusting instinct to get them through the snow. Angry.

“I have a thousand mules, Misha. And while other humans died for the sake of speed, I live. Slow and steady, like the tortoise, I don’t have to shut down for overhead surveillance, I don’t have to worry about dark angels above because nobody ever

thinks to look for old Earth technologies. You are of Earth, Misha, have some pride.”

A sea of headless mules kept pace with them, bouncing up and down through the snow on four legs, cutting a path for the two men as they followed. Lev enjoyed controlling the things with his keypad, watching them turn in unison when he commanded it—like having control over a flock of grounded sparrows. Each one carried five hundred kilos of cargo. He

grinned with joy when fifty of them slammed into a massive ammonia drift, sending a spray of snow into the air as if the planet itself had just vomited ice.

“My mules are magnificent!” Lev shouted, almost missing the alarm indicator on his display.

“Lev?” Michael asked, his voice a whisper.

“I see it. You know the procedure, Misha. Run. It’s your only chance.” Lev refused to look at him now, fought the urge to scream

and keep on screaming, the twin sensations of futility and despair so familiar that he almost didn't recognize their arrival. Michael was young—too young to deserve this, and it wasn't fair and he hated the Alaed for it, for forcing the boy to leave Earth because staying home had become just as dangerous as serving them on re-supply. Just as dangerous as war.

“Lev, they've locked on, help me!”

“I can't help you, Misha,” Lev

explained. The tears flowed freely now, his knowing that he had no help for Michael—that nobody could have helped—making it worse. “Once nanos zero on a signature, there’s nothing I can do but go on; supplies have priority, Misha, I’m sorry. We’ll both die if I stay. You must have had a suit defect that went unnoticed during inspection, something that caused a characteristic emission, one that triggered an old minefield geared toward organic life. That must be it. We just wandered into an

old nano minefield, one that's not even charted. I'm so sorry."

Lev didn't watch. He imagined. It didn't take much to imagine anything so horrible, not since he had seen it all happen before, and especially not since Michael screamed until the last seconds, before being consumed.

Better to forget, Lev reminded himself. Better to pretend that boys such as Misha never existed and instead focus on the beauty of the mules as they bounded through the

drifts, their engines whining and screaming with perfect effort, oblivious to the threat of nanos because no nanos would have been calibrated to target anything so simple and so harmless. So Terrestrial.

And the front was close now. Lev felt the vibrations underfoot.

* * *

He had just finished offloading cargo into the nearest storage unit when he felt his gut twist in fear,

plasma artillery ripping open the air to send him flying against the entrance to a bunker. He slid down the stairs. But before he could collect himself—hand in his invoice and confirm the final shipment—the door opened and Lev felt one of them grab his helmet, lifting him off the ground and several feet into the air where his feet kicked like a child's. The thing tossed him inside and shut the door.

An isba. The term was old, so old that Lev shouldn't have even

remembered it, but he did, recalling the time he had gone skiing near Almaty during a cold spell that kept them from setting foot outside the cabin: an isba, half earth and half log, with a fire blaze that allowed his friends to lounge in underwear, made them all sweat while the wind howled outside at forty below. The bunker reminded him of that time, but in nightmare. More than thirty Alaed had arranged themselves in a circle and were half naked, their skin covered with scars and mottled with

the signs of deep plasma burns, so horrific that Lev forgot himself and stared until he realized his mistake and flinched to close his eyes. He waited for the blow.

“You are the Apprentice, the human on its final run,” one said, Lev’s suit translating its voice into a sterile Ukrainian, coaxing his eyes open again. “I uploaded coordinates into your computer, so that you can navigate alone to one last supply point; your mission is incomplete until then. None of your robots will

accompany you. In an hour we attack and you will prepare the way by supplying our forward post, after which you are to report here to complete your service and receive your name.”

The Alaed handed Lev a packet, which, as soon as he took it, felt so heavy that he thought it would pull him to the floor. He pushed it into a pouch and bowed. “I will deliver it immediately, as you wish.”

Once he had shut the door behind him, he breathed again and

then gasped. The plasma shells, when they burst, sublimed the ammonia into incandescent gas that floated through the air so Lev imagined he was crawling through some kind of fairyland, where the ammonia wasn't ammonia, it was cotton candy in pale green, weightless. Misha would have liked this, he thought, but it was a tactical error. The memory of Michael scuttled in to make Lev scream, and he buried his helmet in the snow and pounded the ground until his friend's

face disappeared and even then Lev didn't move; he wanted to make sure that his thoughts would traverse a path just as safe as his body, so he lay there as the detonations vibrated everything, including his teeth. Lev studied the map display, staring at the blinking light. His legs shook. They refused at first to propel him forward, as if the nerves had suddenly split and gone dead, but then he noticed the ground shift below him, the snow parting in front of his faceplate as he slid closer to the

front.

Plasma flashed overhead and Lev thought about the funhouse outside Zaporozhye, in the summertime, where the gypsies strung colored lights and kept wolves in steel cages. He believed in cages. Cages kept bad things in, trapped, but they could also keep the bad things out if you crawled inside. Lev's thoughts spiraled down into his memories as if they were a feathered cage, soft and warm to keep him free from plasma and snow, a Gypsy charm against the

wolves that waited for him out there, robotic wolves which hid amongst an alien forest of ice and boulders on the far banks. When he passed onto the frozen river, solid ammonia and water, he didn't notice. The artillery barrage had heated it to create puddles, over which he slid, not even noticing that the dots representing his body and destination had almost merged. Lev smiled when the old Gypsy woman tried to distract him (so her son could pick his pocket) because he had come forewarned—

no money except the bills he kept in a belt. Her wolves growled. But caged wolves, Lev knew, were fine, their fur a mixture of grey and black that swirled with each movement, the creatures barely alive on a diet of squirrel and anything found dead on the road. His memories faded then as if a switch had flipped. Lev rested in the middle of the river, a tiny beige figure just a shade off from the surrounding white of ice and snow, terrified now that he realized what the problem was.

There was no outpost. They had lied to him, though the Alaed never lied. He felt Michael then, somewhere nearby, a ghost that refused to materialize but who stared along with the ghosts of everyone else, all the humans who had come into space to die alone.

“I am not of you yet,” Lev said to them, “and it doesn’t matter that there is no outpost; these are the coordinates and there is a delivery to be made.” He pulled out the package and unwrapped it.

Nanos. Lev rested a box on the ice and watched it open so that a wave of dark material spilled out to form a puddle, its edges spreading in a perfect circle, quickly enough that Lev had trouble scrambling out of its way. His spine went rigid. Nanos would attract attention, would call the robotic wolves. He stumbled to his feet, oblivious to the new plasma barrage that had begun, sending massive chunks of the river skyward like car-sized shards of glass. The wolves howled as he fled. Lev had

never seen one of the enemies; re-supply meant going to the front but never staying there, never actually observing what the Alaed fought, what could be so important to them that it formed the focal point of Alaed consciousness. And besides, there seemed to be so many...

He reached the bank and turned. Whatever the nanos had attracted had nothing to do with flesh and Lev cried at the sight of metal creatures, mechanical and lifeless though at the same time their sensors glowed with

at least a hint of consciousness, an awareness that had locked itself on Lev and bore down on him. One of them clicked its legs over the river directly toward him and began firing, a pulsing cannon that caused puffs of snow to erupt, but the shifting ice must have prevented the thing from getting a good lock, must have made its targeting system lapse, because it kept missing. Lev closed his eyes. He didn't avoid Michael now. He grinned at the memory of the man's face and lost all sense of

time, floating in conversations that had taken place only the day before, or two years prior, the words clear and fresh regardless of their age so that minutes congealed into an hour.

“And still it lives,” said Michael. But it wasn’t Michael, Lev knew, and he opened his eyes to find the Alaed in front of him, the same one who had given him the package to deliver. Hundreds of robots smoldered on the ice, burning and melting through. Already forgotten.

“You lied,” said Lev. He saw the

Alaed tense and half-expected the thing to reach out and crush his helmet, but this time Lev wasn't afraid and stood his ground. "There was no outpost."

"I lied. It is part of the ritual, a last test to determine if the Gods want you to live in combat, and we are permitted to lie for it. Now you must choose."

Behind the thing Lev saw hundreds more Alaed gather, a plasma burst occasionally sending one or ten into the air, charred. Even

so, the rest watched and listened—ignoring the danger.

“Choose what?”

“Your name. You may stay with us, a full Merchant with title rights, the right to live on any Alaed world and to hire your own no-names. Or you may go home. Back to Earth.”

Lev had trouble concentrating and laughed at the irony: it was over but he didn't care. Age and ammonia, he thought, and a little methane, the smell of the Alaed, the legacy of having lived with them, a

roadmap of scar tissue on his lungs, a map he'd never see but felt with each inhalation. Oxygen was expensive and N₂ a waste of good nitrogen potential, and so no-names made do with what they could afford, the cheap gases, impure, the same ones he used for his mules' engines. These had robbed him of youth. And he'd been gone too long. The memories that had kept him alive, or at least provided a refuge for the moments in which the main part of his mind melted and rebuilt itself, screamed at

him now—that they were tired. They wanted rest too. If Lev dusted off the thought of vushka one more time it might crumble into nothing. Real vushka, in Zaporozhye, that was the thing.

“I want to go home. To Earth.”

Lev stepped back. The Alaed shouted, a war cry that he had heard only in the distance from the rear, and never directed at him. He almost turned and ran until he realized they had knelt. All except the one, who grinned to reveal the black fangs of

the Alaed, a sharp horror.

“You honor us. To be a Merchant is to accept a life of shame, but to refuse is something else. When we found you Earth was not ready for war; we had to test your resolve.”

Lev felt his mind slip further into haze, the day's events having hit harder than he realized so that he wondered if he'd pass out. “I don't understand.”

“This race, the mechanical one dying here today, we first found

them a hundred years ago and they were not ready either. But with time they became deadly. Because of your decision, Earth will also be given time to prepare and when ready we will war. Eternal in glory.”

Lev dropped where he stood. Before passing out he noticed that the air mix had gone out of whack and he wondered why the alarms hadn't warned him, until he glanced down and saw that portions of his suit had been blackened by plasma. He smiled. With a flick of a finger,

he corrected the mix, and began to fade, knowing that he'd wake up with a headache. It was OK. Lev felt the Alaed lift him, throwing his body over its shoulder to begin the trek to the rear, when the rest of them rose and screamed again, the noise of their shouts fading as the one carrying him pushed through the snow drifts and breathed deeply. Its alien lungs inhaled the ammonia atmosphere and then expelled it with a hiss through tiny holes at the back of its neck.



Lev woke in the snow. The Alaed knelt beside him, one of the thing's hands on his shoulders, pressing him into a deep drift as it used the other to work on his chest plate, and he waited for the thing to say something but words never came and both speakers only crackled in his ears. The Alaed finished whatever it had been doing and must have seen that Lev was awake because it lifted him to his feet.

“Keep your head up,” the Alaed

said. "Your back straight. If we pass my kind, look them in the eye and do not turn away, no matter what happens."

"What?"

"Raise your head. You are not a merchant, not a no-name; you are a thing with promise. I fixed your suit and uploaded into it all of our plans, weapons data, and thought. In this way, your people can prepare for our coming. Tell them. Tell them that we will allow space outside your system to gather resources and they

have only a short time to become our equal, a century before war finds all of you and the Alaed come to collect.”

“That’s what you were saying at the river. I’m going home, to Earth?”

“Home. And keep your head raised, no matter what.”

“What if I had chosen to stay—picked the merchant path?”

The Alaed spat, the stuff freezing before it hit the snow. “We would have harvested more of your people for our supply ranks, destroyed Earth

because it had no value, and moved on. Not much farther now, to the port.”

Lev looked up and recognized the path. They stepped from the empty plains and onto a road, the same one he and Misha had traveled earlier, and the outpost would be close now, beyond that the Alaed transit area, their beach head onto this world. Did they know of Brodyaga, the song, or of Siberia's rivers or even of Lake Baikal? Did Lev anymore? It took a moment for

the words to come, much longer than it had ever taken for vushka, and he began to sing so the melody of Brodyaga echoed in his helmet, and he had to pause at the end of each line to breathe, to force more air into damaged lungs, lungs that just wanted it to stop, screamed that they'd had enough. But he sang anyway and at the end the Alaed growled, Lev's translator changing the sound into artificial laughter.

“This is a song about vagrants. And a criminal.”

“Yes,” said Lev.

“You are no convict. Ten times our enemies aimed for your breath, for your exhaust, and you stood on the ice, never moving and showing no sign of fear. You are no convict.” The thing pointed then, down the road toward the transit port, but stopped Lev so it could use a red stylus to ink the front of his suit, drawing the same symbol that marked all Alaed armor and ships. “A warrior’s symbol,” the thing continued. “They should not touch

you as long as you bear the mark, and by now word will have spread so all will expect your arrival. But keep your head raised.”

Lev thought of something to say but nothing came, and so he walked away, shuffling through the snow and not even noticing when more fell from the sky, not even recognizing that, out of habit, he had shifted his attention to the navigation screens because now the snow came so heavily that the road disappeared.

His head pounded. To Lev it felt like a hangover and made him thirsty for vodka. The sensation that Earth was so close brought a wave of exhaustion when it should have kept the energy up, the energy that he had felt just moments ago, but it was OK. Even if he woke up every day with a headache it was more than OK, because he'd already decided on the first thing he'd do when he got back, the thing that scared him the most and had almost made him choose a name.

Lev didn't care about the Alaed. Others could take the information he'd been given, decide if man would go to war someday. To him there were more important things, the kinds of things that mattered only to old men, like the fact that Misha had been young. His parents might still be alive. Lev would have to find them, to explain why the mules hadn't saved their son. He would miss his mules but he'd miss Misha even more.

Just before arriving at the space

port he laughed, finally seeing their mistake: The Alaed thought men had spirit—that Lev had chosen to go home because he wanted to fight.

But the Alaed had never seen Marina; they had never tasted vushka. They hadn't seen the importance of Brodyaga, and maybe that was because the Alaed didn't sing.



D. Thomas Minton

D. Thomas Minton became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Thief of Futures” in Lightspeed Magazine (Sep. 2011), edited by John Joseph Adams. Visit his website at dthomasminton.com.

Thief of Futures

by D. Thomas Minton

First published in Lightspeed
Magazine (Sep. 2011), edited by John
Joseph Adams



Mr. Naajy Padwal, Mumbai
business magnate and
collector of eclectic

futures, slides a rectangle of paper across the counter. He doesn't remove his hand, the back of which is covered with coarse black hairs.

The smell of spiced tea and charcoal smoke hangs heavy in the humid air of Subang Jaya's market.

Not certain anymore why I agreed to meet him, I start to turn from the chai wallah's cart.

Mr. Padwal puts a hand on my arm.

"I'm retired," I say.

"Retirement is a state of mind,

not an incurable malady.” His accent betrays his Oxford education. When he speaks again, he lowers his voice, even though the portable privacy shield protects our meeting from prying ears and eyes. “I need you to obtain a future for me.”

Out of habit I look to see who is watching. Outside the privacy screen, Mr. Padwal’s two Sikh guards funnel the crowd away from our chai cart, no small feat in a city of sixteen million.

I settle back against the counter.

“Why not Bautista?”

“Interpol has him at a black site somewhere in Africa.”

The news surprises me, but it doesn't upset me. The world is a better place without him. “What about that new girl?”

“Jessica Cavendish? She's not what I'm looking for.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Someone special. You.” He drains his cup of chai in a single swallow. “I know your circumstances, Mr. Kingston. How

long can you survive scrubbing walls in a Trenchtown brothel? For a man who has stolen so many futures, you seem to have no future yourself.” He lets this painfully accurate assessment seize hold; then he says matter-of-factly, “Is this what you want for your daughter?”

“Leave her out of this.”

Mr. Padwal raises his hands in mock surrender. “I am sorry. I did not mean to offend.”

He lies. Years in business have made him a man of supreme

calculation. Even knowing this, I find it hard to collect my thoughts because I know what he says is true. Kimbelle deserves better.

“With what I’m offering, a man could do anything.” Mr. Padwal shifts his weight. Over his left shoulder, the ISF launch facility glistens in the distance along the Puchang ridgeline like the spinal plates of a dragon. An orbital shuttle stands ready to launch that afternoon, taking lucky colonists to an orbiting ship bound for Echelon

colony.

He pushes the paper closer to me and withdraws his hand. It's an old-style cashier's cheque with a very big number.

My mouth goes dry. At the height of my career, even a high-end job wouldn't have fetched half the sum Mr. Padwal is offering. For a fee like this, he wants something exceptional. Given his reputation, that means really exceptional.

He grins at me, and my spine tingles. Like any successful business

man, Mr. Padwal knows he has me where he wants me. He produces a finger cache. "The details," he says, putting the thumbnail-sized data unit on the counter. "Like my offer, that advance is good for twenty-four hours."

He snaps the shield generator closed. The market crashes in on us like the Red Sea. Flanked by his guards, Mr. Padwal vanishes into the flood of flesh and sweat and noise.

I stare at the finger cache, trying to decide if I should walk away, but a

tightness in my throat tells me what I already know. I can never walk away, not as long as I am Earthside.



Trenchtown sits at the bottom of the Klang Valley in a haze of smoke and dampness thick enough to turn the sunlight the color of cockroach wings. Levees to the south hold back the steadily rising sea, but can't stop the water from seeping up through the ground. Even on a good day, the streets are a pig wallow of trash and

shit.

Two million people squat in Trenchtown. Like me, they have come to Kuala Lumpur hoping to win a lucky seat on one of the ISF's monthly colony ships. For those without money, the only ticket comes through the indenture-service lottery, but a hundred seats a flight means the odds are long.

I rent two rooms on the ground floor of a decaying two-floor walkup. I step over the sandbags and slip inside. Kimbelle and Shayana,

the Tamil girl from upstairs, are in the other room singing a nonsense song in Bahasa, the only language they share.

Where the mildew from the water line hasn't obscured them, the walls are covered with Kimbelle's stick figures and smiley face suns. She's a five-year old master, and her dancing girls, butterflies, and trees give life to this otherwise dreary box. One day, I hope she will be an artist, but I'll take anything, as long as she has a future.

I pull the cashier's cheque from my pocket. Fifty million rupees are enough to get Kimbelle out this place, but the money isn't free, and I'm not sure I can pay the price. My chest tightens. As a father, I should be willing to do anything for my daughter, but it's hard when I've already lost one person I love.

From under the futon, I remove a watertight box. My hands tremble as I fumble with the lock and clasp.

You would think a future has no value, except to the person who

owns it. All our futures, however, are intertwined. My future is as much Kimbelle's as it is mine. Stealing one future has far reaching repercussions.

The lock clicks open, but I don't lift the lid. I don't know why I torture myself. I should throw the box away, but I can't.

Bao thought I worked as an acquisitions manager for a transnational aerospace firm, acquiring electrical components for off-world shipment. It was the only secret I ever kept from her because

I'm sure she would have left me if she ever found out.

I think it would have been better if she had known.

I take a deep breath and open the box.

Inside is a picture of Bao. She sits in the arcade near the Bethesda fountain in New York's Central Park. I remember that day like it is today. I had snapped the picture quickly, catching her glowing face before she had a chance to mar the perfect moment with a plastic,

picture smile. She had just told me she was finally pregnant after years of trying.

Under the crinkled photograph, the pieces of a blown-glass globe are smoky and dark, covered with a dull black film that seems to absorb the light.

They're all I have left of Bao.

* * *

I snap Mr. Padwal's finger cache into the BIOSlot at the base of my palm. It hums as it draws power

from my flowing blood. In my hand appears a holographic dossier of a woman named Sulee Hendricks, a widowed American of Chinese descent, who rents a flat in Subang Jaya, the once affluent suburb of Kuala Lumpur that now sits just above Trenchtown. While she waits for her lucky number to be drawn, she earns enough to survive by chopping cows at an industrial slaughter-factory.

When I come to a series of holographic portraits, I am struck

breathless. While Sulee wears her hair pulled back into a tight bun firmly cemented to the back of her head, she shares the same round face and delicate nose as Bao. I spend many minutes staring at the images, before a queasiness grips me.

For men like Naajy Padwal, collecting futures is like stealing priceless art to hang for their own edification in an underground gallery. Some collectors believe that possessing a future of great promise will exert a positive force on their

own future, but that reeks too much of Chinese mysticism for me. Others simply admire them for their physical beauty, and I must admit, an exceptional future glowing pink or electric blue in its blown-glass sphere is spellbinding.

But a future is not a painting. A person without a future is nothing more than a body unable to move forward in time. It simply exists in a comatose-like state, as long as food and water are provided. If the future is returned, the body will recover,

otherwise it slowly dies.

It's for this reason I have never worked for a collector. Instead I ransomed stolen futures back to loved ones. A dirty business, true, but my conscience could reconcile it.

I sit quietly on the futon, my mind a jumble. I take several deep breaths and continue to read. It isn't until I get near the end of the dossier that I realize Mr. Padwal doesn't covet Sulee's future, but her five-year old son's.

The dossier shakes in my hand,

and if it hadn't been a hologram, I would have dropped it. I remove the finger cache and drop it on the table. My pulse races painfully in my neck.

I have never stolen a child's future, not even to ransom. The thought makes my stomach twist into knots. I can't do this.

The singing in the back room stops. The door swings open and Kimbelle and Shayana rush in. They skid to a stop when they see me on the futon.

"Mista?" Shayana says, surprised.

It's the only English word I've ever heard her say. She's a good kid, and I know she's safe. For a handful of coins, she watches Kimbelle anytime I need her.

Kimbelle's long black hair hangs in a braid over her right shoulder. Between her delicate eyebrows is a smudged crimson bindi.

She looks so much like Bao it hurts.

"Daddy!" She leaps into my arms, and I hug her until she struggles to get away. I will do anything to make

her safe.



I cash Mr. Padwal's advance and set to work. Every night Sulee travels by a circuitous route past curry carts shrouded in films of ghee and grease, and tarp-covered stalls from which women with missing teeth hawk meager piles of rice or fish or bananas. At dawn she stumbles home and is barely able to turn the key in the lock. During the day she stays shuttered inside. I never see the

boy. The only evidence he exists is the presence of an old Malay woman who arrives minutes before Sulee leaves and departs soon after she returns.

After a week, I am left wondering if I can even do this job. Stealing a future is not like pinching a purse—not just any rascal with fast feet and a set of cojones can do it. Only a handful people have the innate talent, and of these, few have the necessary moral flexibility.

Before I can take a future, I must

sufficiently attune myself to my target's spatial-temporal trajectory. This means getting close, literally and figuratively. Only then can I take the threads that are their future life. I need to spend time with the boy—lots of it—and the only way to do that is to get close to Sulee.

I finally get my opportunity when she digs into her bag to pay for a bundle of rambutan and a head scarf drops unnoticed to the ground. I retrieve it and push through the crowd calling to her in Bahasa. She

does not hear me over the market din, so I grab her elbow.

She spins and sweeps my legs from under me with her foot. I land with a crack. The air explodes from my lungs.

“What do you want?” she says in Bahasa. Her foot presses painfully against my windpipe.

I can't say anything, so I wave her scarf in surrender.

The pressure on my neck eases. She takes the scarf. “I'm sorry,” she says, kneeling next to me. Up close,

she resembles Bao more than I expected. Although Sulee's eyes are a lighter shade of brown, they have that same depth and complexity of color.

I rub my neck. "It fell out of your bag."

Sulee studies the ground. "These are dangerous times. You shouldn't grab people." After a moment of awkward silence, she says, "Can I repay you with a chai?"



By the time we wend our way through the market, Sulee is late for work. She offers to buy me a chai anyway.

“Maybe tomorrow?”

She smiles demurely.

“Tomorrow then, Mister...”

“Eshram.”

She turns into the crowd and before she is swept away, I pray she will look back. She doesn't, and I feel like I have been robbed.

The chai wallah grins at me and motions hopefully to his pot of

steaming tea. I wave him off and head back toward Trenchtown.

I remind myself that she isn't Bao, but that doesn't fill the hole.

I turn onto the road down the hillside. Even at this hour bicycles weave through throngs of sari-clad women armed with bamboo switches to fend off the gangs of sticky-fingered children. The night air is thick, and I labor to force it into my lungs. It is like breathing water.

Near the toe of the hill, I get an odd sensation that I am being

watched. In the shadows ahead, a dark silhouette sits on the side of the road. As I approach, it unfolds spindly legs, like those of a spider, and pushes its torso up effortlessly to an incredible height. The man is easily over two meters tall.

Mr. Oduya. It can be no one else.

We have history. He works for Interpol, hunting people like me.

He draws up on my right and matches my pace. His skin is as dark as the night, so his white cotton shirt seems to float in the blackness. For a

full minute the Kenyan says nothing to me.

Finally, as we near the archway that marks the edge of Trenchtown, he says, “I hear you’ve come out of retirement.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It is if it’s true.”

“Are you bored with Bautista already?”

Mr. Oduya’s grin floats like the Cheshire cat’s.

I wonder how long he has been shadowing me in Kuala Lumpur. I

would think by now that he would have given up and gone after someone else, like the new girl, Cavendish. I suspect he doesn't know about her yet.

"I like you, Eshram," he says. "You have scruples, unlike the others, which is why I find it odd you'd work for Naajy Padwal." I feel his eyes on me, watching for a reaction that will give something away.

As we reach the archway, Mr. Oduya stops me with a hand on my

elbow. “Padwal is not a man to mess with. If you were to help us....”

I pull my arm away and leave him, riding the flow of people into Trenchtown.



I fill Shayana’s hand with coins totaling just over a ringgit. She leaves with a wide grin, and I latch the door bar behind her. I check on Kimbelle. Her room is filled with acrid smoke from a smoldering mosquito coil. She sprawls across her bed in a

position only a five-year old could find comfortable—arms akimbo and body twisted awkwardly at the waist.

Only after seeing her do I relax.

Other than the bed and a few toys purchased a year ago, the room is empty. With the upfront from Mr. Padwal, we could afford to move to the top of the hill, but we will need every rupee if we're going to buy passage off-world. So the scattering of toddler toys will need to amuse her a little longer.

When I kiss her sweat-damp

forehead, her eyes flutter, but never quite open. “Mommy?”

“No,” I say gently, unable to say more. I stroke her hair until she fades back into sleep. Reluctantly I close her door behind me.

The apartment is sweltering. Before I lay down, I sponge my face and chest with a damp rag. The water is precious—hand carried in a twenty liter bottle from a public fountain—but the heat is oppressive.

Outside a gunshot cracks the night. I don’t even flinch at the

sound.

I lay on the futon, crushed by the weight of the darkness. When I close my eyes I see Bao's face, not as it was when she eventually died, but as it was when we shared a future. My chest aches. I don't know who took her future. I paid the ransom, nearly all of the money I had, but all I got back were broken pieces of glass and a shattered future of my own.

It hurts to admit, but that's not what troubles me most. To steal her future, someone had to get close to

Bao, and it eats at me to think that someone could get that close without me knowing it. If they could get Bao, they can get Kimbelle. The only way to protect her is to get as far away as possible from people like me.



I meet Sulee the next night. Instead of wearing her hair pulled back into a bun, she wears it down, softly framing her brown eyes. I can barely take my eyes off her. Twenty minutes later she rises. Her dress

clings to her body. She has barely touched her chai because our conversation seldom broke long enough.

“Can we do this again?” My spirits drop when she frowns. She is going to say no.

“I have a son,” she says, haltingly. “If you’re not okay with that, I understand.”

I pause for a minute, pretending to contemplate her revelation. “That doesn’t scare me.”

The tension drains from her

body. As it does, my spirits rise.

She shoulders her bag.
“Tomorrow.”

As I watch her leave, I notice Mr. Oduya's head poking above the crowd. He leans against the post of a fruit stall sucking at a mango pit. He nods at me.

I see Sulee regularly after that. We meet almost nightly in the market. At first for only twenty-minutes, but as we increasingly find the time too short, she comes earlier and earlier. Tea becomes dinners of

nasi goreng or spiced beef.

I tell her my fabricated history. Like any good lie, I have assembled it from bits of truth, to make it seamless and easy to remember. I find it difficult to lie to her. Gradually she reciprocates with stories about her childhood, her dead husband, and most importantly her son.

Every night after I kiss Kimbelle's forehead, I meticulously transcribe our conversations into a paper notebook. The act of writing

reinforces even the smallest details.

Some nights I see Mr. Oduya's head rising above the market crowd. I try to ignore him, but my eyes are drawn to him, and I am afraid Sulee will notice. I don't want uncomfortable questions. Even when I don't see him, I sense him nearby, like an unspoken threat.

Any day now, I fear she will invite me in to meet her son. I become irritable and contemplate ending it. How can I take her child from her? I wonder, but then I look

at Kimbelle, thin and fragile, lost in the slums of Trenchtown, and I think, how can I not?

* * *

The next time I see her, Sulee suggests I come to her apartment the following night. I can barely accept the invitation around the lump in my throat. Before she leaves, she whispers in my ear, "I hope you will stay." She pecks me on the cheek and disappears into the crowd before I can answer.

I wander in a daze to the end of the market and sit on a low stone wall trying to breathe. Mr. Oduya comes up to me, his hands thrust into his pockets. “Do you think this is his dance of destruction or reincarnation?” he asks, his gaze over the top of my head.

Behind me is a statue of Shiva, his four arms waving gracefully and his right foot raised in dance.

“Aren’t they the same?”

Mr. Oduya shrugs. “I am not Hindu.”

In no mood for his games, I walk away, but with his long strides, he catches me easily. “You have gotten close with this Sulee woman, yet you do not take her future. I am confused.”

“I’m not going to take her future.”

“I’ve already figured that out. What would Naajy Padwal want with her? She is...unremarkable.”

The word stings me. Sulee is no less special than Bao, and someone took her future. “Do you have

something to say?”

“If it is not Sulee,” he says, as if musing to himself, “then it must be someone close to her.” A confused look slides across Mr. Oduya’s face. After a second of contemplation, his eyes widen. “The boy?”

My stride breaks. I try to recover quickly, but Mr. Oduya notices.

“You’re after the boy. But you don’t steal from children, unless you’ve changed.”

My face flushes. I walk on, refusing to look at Mr. Oduya.

People change.

He follows a step behind. "Help me catch him," he says.

"Why should I do that?"

"Because it's the right thing to do."

I walk faster, but Mr. Oduya comes up along my side. I refuse to acknowledge his presence.

"Padwal does not have a reputation for collecting young futures," he says. "They are risky, too much possibility for them to lose their luster."

He falls quiet and waits to see if I will let something slip. I wish he would go to hell.

“Padwal has the reputation for working the long game. He is very patient.”

Mr. Oduya’s comment causes me to pause. What is this new game he’s playing? I learn nothing from the Kenyan’s blank expression.

“Piss off.” I storm on, tired of being talked at.

Mr. Oduya doesn’t follow, but he yells at me as I walk away, “Do what

is right, Eshram. Think about your daughter.”

I bite back a retort. He plays me again, trying to goad me into saying something stupid.

As I walk down into Trenchtown, I can't shake the surprise on Mr. Oduya's face when he figured out Sulee's son was the target. I had never stopped to question Mr. Padwal's motivation, but Mr. Oduya is right. As a collector's item, a child's future is a boom or bust proposition. Initially it

may look special, but any number of things could cause it to lose its luster as it matures. No collector would pay big money for a child's future unless he was certain.

Something isn't right, but I haven't time to sort it out. I know someone who can, but his services aren't cheap. With a curse I turn away from Trenchtown. I have no choice but to visit Hiruku.

* * *

I pay a hefty fee for a secure

connection at a reputable VR conferencing facility in Petaling Jaya, a bustling business district north of Subang Jaya. When I transfer another one million yen to gain access to Hiruku's location, I try not to do the math in my head. The implications are too painful.

With the attendant's help, I don the VR neural net and lay down in the coffin-like module. She closes the lid and the equipment hums as it powers up. I close my eyes...

...and open them to birdsong

and the clean smell of pine trees. Crouched in the mist ahead is a squat Japanese cottage with a clay-tile roof pulled like taffy into long overhanging eaves.

Inside Hiruku sits cross-legged on a cushion, eyes closed in meditation. He wears a black haori and the pleated hakamas of a fifteenth century samurai.

Without a word I sit on a cushion opposite him.

Eventually he opens his eyes.

Hiruku is a Yogen-sha, a seer

capable of foretelling the quality of a person's future. While he smiles at me from across the table, I don't think he's human. I think he may be an artificial intelligence that examines probabilities to extrapolate a likely future from a person's past actions. However he does it, whatever he is, I've never found him to be wrong.

I hand him the finger cache. "I needed to know about the boy."

"A child? Children are difficult and uncertain, usually not worth the

fee.” Hiruku’s lips press into a thin line. After a moment, he exhales loudly and takes the finger cache. “This is not your child,” he says. “What is your interest?”

Even if I wanted to tell him, I’m not sure my mouth would form the words. “I paid for no questions asked.”

Hiruku sets the finger cache back on the table, and I return it to my pocket. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather have a reading more worthy of your fee? Yours perhaps?”

I don't want to know my future, because the only one I wanted is gone.

“A shame. I see special things.”

“I bet you say that to everyone.”

Hiruku shrugs non-committally.

“All gold does not glitter. The boy, however, he is like any other. Special? Not at this time.”

I want to ask if he is sure, but I know it is a useless question. I can only assume Mr. Padwal has access to someone as good as Hiruku. “Could someone less skilled see

anything different?”

“Only if he were incompetent.”

* * *

I have been lazy. Unlike my usual approach to work, this time I gathered none of the information on Sulee myself. It gave me a sense of distance, as if by doing so, the taint of it all would somehow be less. As I review the dossier again, I see how superficial it is. It points me toward an obvious plan of action. Exactly the one I took.

I stop at a pay terminal and access the datasphere. I begin with a search on Sulee's name. Nothing. A search of the birth records in her hometown also comes up empty. I curse my stupidity. I can't trust anything that Mr. Padwal has given me because Sulee is a carefully-crafted invention.

Creating an alternate identity is difficult, especially one that must withstand the scrutiny of a close relationship. I know from experience—it's the stock of my trade.

Questions always arise that need details, and the easiest way to create details at a moment's notice is to draw from something known. The best lies are built on the truth. Somewhere, out there, is a real person from which Sulee has been constructed. I need to find her.

I recall the many details of our conversations and pluck out the ones that could not be easily scripted ahead of time: the name of her college roommate, names of friends, her first job, places visited on

vacation, and dozens of others. From this information I assemble my own profile of Sulee.

I then begin to search for this person. I haven't done this type of research in over a year, but after a few failed attempts, I hit my stride. I delve into university records, search employment databases, visit genealogy websites, newsfeed archives, and advertising databases. After several hours, I find Sulee, except her name is not so exotic: Jennifer Costa, mother of three and

owner of a NGO that specializes in building homes for the impoverished in the southeastern United States. She has all the pieces that come together to make Sulee's life.

On an Atlanta newsfeed, I find a picture of Jennifer wielding oversized scissors at a ribbon cutting for a new low income housing project. She's not Sulee—I never expected her to be—but she has the same eyes.

I dig for information on Ms. Costa. Her maiden name—Cavendish—puts a cold lump in my

belly. "Can't be," I say, but my fingers shake as I run the lead to ground. A few minutes later, I have it.

I locate a picture of Jennifer with her mother, Jaiying, and her sister, Jessica. Her hair is different, but from her eyes I have no doubt that Jessica and Sulee are the same person.

"Shit." Jessica Cavendish, the new girl who backfilled the void created by my retirement.

The boy isn't Mr. Padwal's target.

I am.



I stand outside Sulee's apartment trying to decide if I should leave. I want to believe it could be that easy, but I know it isn't. Mr. Padwal plays the long game, and I suspect I have been in his sights for at least a year. I know people are often poor judges of their own future—maybe my future holds more than I can see—but I can't imagine why he would want to add it to his collection. Yet he does, and he won't give up.

I take a deep breath; I'm surprised

at the way my nerves vibrate.

When Sulee opens the door her smile looks genuine. I wonder if any of what we have shared was real. She is a professional, so I suspect everything has been an act—just as it has been for me, right?

Her expression changes quickly when I remove the blown-glass sphere from my pocket. Caught unaware, she turns to flee back into the apartment, but stumbles and falls. I sense her future coiled around her like the coarse fibers of a hemp

rope, anchored to her in the here-and-now, but extending off into the what-could-be.

As I reach toward her, she looks up at me. In her eyes—brown and deep and so much like Bao’s—I see fear, white-rimmed and stark.

I wonder if Bao knew what was happening as her thief unspooled her future, and if she, like Sulee does now, looked up at her attacker and whispered, “Please....”

My fingers hesitate. I know that I am taking more than Sulee’s future. I

am taking the future of anyone who loves her. My hands grow weak. The strands scrape across the pads of my fingers, slipping away, fiber by fiber. I can't do it. Yet I know I must, for Kimbelle.

Sulee can do nothing except watch as I wrap my fingers around the threads of her existence and yank violently, snapping them free. I slide to the side to avoid getting entangled in the loose ends that swirl around me, but as they brush close, the hairs on my arm stand up. Carefully I

begin to feed the hours and days and years of her future into the glass ball. With each sweep of my hand, my throat constricts, and by the time I tuck the last threads into the sphere, I can barely breathe.

Sulee's head lulls back against the floor. Her eyes, now shrouded and dull, stare out into nothing.



Mr. Padwal tries hard to hide his surprise when I place the glass ball on the counter. It starts to roll toward

the edge. For a moment I think it's going to drop, but then he stops it a hand's-breadth from falling.

He forces a smile that is unpleasant to look at. He peers into the sphere's smoky interior. It is gray and thick, almost oily. Nothing about it is remarkable. Certainly he already knows that. As he lowers the sphere, he looks nauseated. "The rest of the payment—"

"No need. I did it for Bao."

In that split second, his expression confirms my suspicions.

He removed Bao, because with her around, he would never have gotten anyone close enough to me to take my future. In the process, he cleverly took everything I had, leaving me desperate and rudderless. Taking my future should have been easy.

Surprisingly, I don't feel anger. I feel an oppressive weight lift away.

"I—" Mr. Padwal's face hardens. He has decided not to lie to me because he believes I cannot take his future.

"You are special, Mr. Kingston,"

he says. "Resilient. A man that will overcome anything for those he loves. For one like you, the world is open. I should have known you wouldn't end wallowing in Trenchtown shit." His teeth bare in a predatory grin. Although he does not say it, he doesn't consider this over.

But it is.

I step through the privacy screen, into the din and bustle of the market. A few strides into the crowd and I turn to watch as Mr. Oduya's men descend on the chai wallah's cart so

quickly the Sikh guards don't react. Mr. Padwal does not have the wherewithal to dispose of the sphere. The agents force him onto his belly.

Mr. Oduya falls in at my side, and I wonder if he is going to arrest me, regardless of our deal. He may be on the wrong side of the law, but he is still honorable.

I begin to walk toward Trenchtown and Kimbelle. I need to hold her.

"The boy is safe," Mr. Oduya says. "We're looking for his family."

The news is welcome, but I say nothing.

Mr. Oduya keeps pace at my side. “Tell me something, Eshram,” he says. “Would you have taken the boy’s future?”

His question is one I don’t want to answer, but I must. If I don’t, it will devour me.

“That’s not a future I could live with,” I say. As I speak the words, I can taste bile in the back of my throat. Have I just traded Kimbelle for someone else’s child?

Mr. Oduya nods, as if satisfied with my answer. “Did you know there is a reward for information leading to the conviction of Naajy Padwal? If the charges stick, I’ll see you get it.”

I stop walking and Mr. Oduya’s momentum carries him several steps farther. “Why would you do that?” I ask.

He shrugs. “I like you, Eshram; didn’t you know that? You have scruples. The reward is enough to retire anywhere.” He arches a

knowing eyebrow.

“Who says I ever came out of retirement?” I leave Mr. Oduya standing with his hands in his pockets. His smile tickles my spine.

The Subang Jaya market fades into the night as I careen down through the crowd into Trenchtown. I don't stop to pay Shayana, but go straight into Kimbelle's room and scoop her into my arms.

A rectangle of light streaming through the open door illuminates her innocent face. My racing heart

slows to match her gentle breathing.

Mr. Padwal was right. My future is remarkable and it lies before me. We will not end down in the wallows of Trenchtown; our journey upward is just beginning.

Kimbelle stirs. Her eyes flutter open. “Daddy?”

I kiss her forehead. “I’m here,” I whisper. “I will always be here.”



Observations on a Clock by D. Thomas Minton

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Williams



The Clock sits in the dark,
counting down time. Alone.

Except for Chevalier.

“It is ridiculous to kneel before
it,” says Maria Tessauda.

Chevalier senses her presence in
the blackness. He has never met the
real Tessauda. She died three
hundred years before he was born.
She lives, however, as a MEM in his
head, put there—reluctantly he is
now sure—to share her knowledge of

the Clock.

“It does not count down to your Revelation.” She takes every opportunity to tell him this. She is not a believer; it offends her academic sensibilities.

“Leave me in peace.” Chevalier knows she will not. Three years ago, she tricked him into altering her MEM programming. Now she comes and goes at her will. His need for companionship, especially from a woman, drove him to such foolish action.

“Your Testament is illogical.”

Unable to contain himself, Chevalier says, “The Testament is Truth.”

He cannot see her smile, but he feels it. She has fifty different smiles. Most are unpleasant to witness.

“If your Testament is true, you have nothing to fear by looking. The digger is ready, it only needs a command. If you allow, I can—”

“No.” He will not be tricked again into giving more autonomy. “If I do this, will you leave me alone?”

“That is the only reason you will do it?”

Chevalier sighs. His breath crackles as it crystallizes in the eternal night. He fights her only because giving in emboldens her.

“You should do this because you need to know.”

What more is there to know? The Testament has proven itself by saving humanity from self-annihilation. It has prepared them for the coming Revelation, which will arrive when the Clock runs its

course. Chevalier cannot doubt. As Don Cristobol has counseled, without doubt, there is no fear.

“I am not afraid,” he says aloud. Yet he is uncertain he believes his own words.

Chevalier's implant tells him the digger still sits at the edge of the platform where he found it a decade ago. Without word or motion, he orders it to life. “Show me where to dig.”



Chevalier finishes his log entry, but does not light-beam it to Earth. It contains his first mention of the digging, even though the machine has been at work for several days.

The fusion lamp sputters as if it is a real flame. He closes his eyes and remembers the way the candles used to flicker shadows across the walls of his seminary chamber. The beeswax smelled faintly of honey, and the gentle echo of prayer off the ancient stone vaults comforted him like his mother's arms.

Chevalier inhales deeply, but the fusion lamp is odorless.

When he opens his eyes, there is only the lozenge-shaped ship that carried him across fifteen light-years of time and space. The halo of light feels cold and insubstantial.

Chevalier light-beams his log back to Earth. Its contents won't matter, he decides. In fifteen years, when someone reads it, his mission will be long over.

Immediately Chevalier senses a presence. At the edge of the shadows

stands Don Cristobol in his holy sash. His face is round and plump with a generous grey beard. Upon his forehead is the mark of the sacred third eye.

Chevalier bows clumsily, nearly knocking over the lamp. "Your holiness," he says, lowering his eyes.

Like Maria Tessauda, Don Cristobol is a MEM in Chevalier's head. Unlike her, he knew Don Cristobol, the flesh. It is because of Don Cristobol that Chevalier is here, alone.

Chevalier senses Don Cristobol's disappointment, which is worse than any reproach. "The woman...she...." Nothing he says can explain, but he cannot help himself. "I am sorry, I only thought—"

"Do not think, Chevalier. Do what you are here to do."

"I only wish to affirm the Clock's divine creation."

"Affirmation comes from faith, not digging. Nothing can be learned by digging because there is nothing here but the Clock."

Chevalier wants to look up, but does not. “Nothing is what I intend to find. That will prove—”

“Nothing proves only that you have found nothing. However, the act of looking proves that you doubt.”

Chevalier’s chest constricts. “You are right, Holiness. The Testament saved us all. I do not doubt it.” He feels the need to prove the veracity of his words. He locates the digger where it works dutifully in the darkness excavating regolith from a

hole at the edge of the platform. At his command, it retreats.

“It is finished,” Chevalier says, but already Don Cristobol has left.



Soon after he stops the digger, Tessauda arrives unannounced.

Standing in a wide basin, Chevalier washes with a tattered rag. His skin smokes in the cold air.

Tessauda grins as she ogles his nakedness. “You used to be happy to see me, Chevalier.”

His face flushes hot. Chevalier has no reason to be embarrassed, yet he is. Tessauda is not what he considers a physically beautiful woman. Her features are hard and angular, like splinters of flint. But she is still a woman.

Chevalier continues to wash himself, unwilling to be goaded by her. His green skin used to disconcert him, but after ten years he finds comfort in it. The chlorophyll is one of his many genetic modifications so he can complete his

mission.

Apparently bored with taunting him, Tessauda asks, “Why have you stopped the digger?” Shadow eclipses her face as she stops between him and the fusion lamp.

Chevalier does not answer, hoping she will leave. He finishes washing himself and wraps a towel around his waist. The light from the lamp appears unusually pale.

“Order the digger back,” she says.

“I can’t do that.”

A knowing look flares across her

face. “Why do you listen to Don Cristobol?”

Her dismissiveness piques his anger. “If I do not listen to him, then all I have is you.”

She places a wide, flat palm against his chest. Her skin is warm, unlike her smile. “Am I no longer enough, Chevalier?” Her hand slides downward.

He catches it at his navel. “Go away and do not come back.”

Tessauda steps away. Light waxes across her wide eyes and round

mouth. After a second, her surprise is gone. “You are a fool, Chevalier. Idiot, imbecile, bastard. You take my precious life work and then dismiss me like a whore.”

Chevalier tries not to wince. He knows her words are meant to manipulate. Even so, his guilt burns. Unable to look at her, he lowers his eyes. When he looks up to apologize, she is gone.

* * *

Tessauda does not visit for

weeks. At first, Chevalier is relieved to be free of her fifty smiles. He spends half his waking hours searching the heavens for the seven signs described in the Testament. For the other half, he kneels before the Clock, praying for enlightenment. He finds neither.

When he turns out the fusion lamp, he sometimes hears voices in the darkness. When he turns up the light, the halo is always empty.

“Don Cristobol, where are you?” he asks once as he floats in blackness

viscous as the sea.

Silence.

He wonders if he has always been alone.

Unable to sleep, Chevalier passes time by walking from the platform edge to the Clock and back again. He times his passage—there and back and there and back—by the minutes falling into the night. He has been here for nearly eleven years, because his ship traveled a fraction of cee faster than anticipated. The end is now only weeks away—but he is no

longer sure he can make it.

Is he the idiot Tessauda branded him? He finds it troubling how her words still burn. He still believes, because he must, but what if Tessauda is right, and the Clock does not mark the Revelation?

Doubt begets the bastard child named fear.

Chevalier goes to the digger.

A few meters from the platform, the squat machine has excavated a trench just long and wide enough that Chevalier could lie in it like

coffin. The beam from the fusion lamp plays off the crisp edge, but illuminates nothing within.

He is angry at himself for doubting.

Eventually, Don Cristobol comes. He stands at the edge of the halo of light. His sash looks grey, but Chevalier is too tired to determine if it is only an illusion of the light. Chevalier has begun to believe that the lamp is fading, but when he has paced out the diameter of the halo, it always seems to be the same.

“You look troubled,” says Don Cristobol.

“I am weary of the dark. I cannot find the signs. I....”

“I am here, Chevalier.”

If that were true, then where have you been all this time, Chevalier thinks.

Don Cristobol's face is round and gentle, how Chevalier's father would have looked if he had not been killed in the violence before the Order had given humanity its hope. For some reason, Chevalier is not

comforted.

“I am not strong enough,” Chevalier says.

“You were chosen by divine right,” Don Cristobol says. “You are the only one who could undertake this mission.”

Chevalier does not believe him. The mission has been difficult, certainly, but many could have done it better than him.

“We must dig within to find our strength. It allows us to overcome our doubt. Without doubt, we

conquer our fear. Without fear, we can embrace the Revelation when it comes.”

Chevalier knows the teachings of the Testament. Doubt begets fear begets darkness. Humanity has been to that brink before. Chevalier has stood there, too, before he embraced the teachings of the Order. Only the Testament averted destruction. “I need to be stronger.”

“Do not doubt your strength, Chevalier. You have the power to stay humanity’s course.”

Chevalier can feel the pressure of the dark against the halo of light. Humanity awaits the Revelation, and Chevalier, as witness, is to be their conduit to understand the future. His mission is more than just bearing witnesses to the greatest event in human history. It is to save humanity from doubting its place in the universe. "I am strong enough to do what must be done."

* * *

In forty-two hours the last of the

micro black holes that power the Clock's core will evaporate. Its energy spent, the Clock will reach its end.

Chevalier runs a systems check on the light-beam transmitter. It has been weeks since he has sent or received anything from Earth, but the equipment is working properly.

As he finishes, he senses Tessauda's presence and nearly drops the transmitter's casing on his foot.

She looks different. Her smile is gone and the lines at the corner of

her eyes look like fissures.

Chevalier wonders if her absence has changed her.

“What do you fear you will find?” she asks.

Chevalier is not put off by her lack of pleasantries. They are not her. “There is nothing to find,” he says. “The Clock is divine.”

Tessauda’s predatory grin returns. It is different from her other forty-nine smiles because it shows her teeth. “Come with me, then. I have something you should see.”

She has not changed.

Already Chevalier is annoyed by her return, but at the same time, he draws comfort from it. He allows her to lead him to the edge of the platform. There, he steps down onto the hard-packed regolith. Before him is the trench excavated by the digger. Tessauda lurks behind, a tiger in the shadow of underbrush.

“I had hoped that in my absence you would come to see.”

Chevalier lips are icy with crystallized breath. “I see nothing.”

Tessauda's shoulder brushes against his, startling him. "You see nothing because you do not try even to look." She kneels at the edge and reaches into the hole. "The light!" Her voice is sharp, as if meant for an insolent child.

He shines the lamp down where she points. The trench is only twenty centimeters deep. The bottom is hard and smooth.

Tessauda's hand sweeps at the fine grit covering the bottom of the hole, but she cannot move it. "You

must do it,” she says.

Chevalier is momentarily shocked by this reminder that she is a MEM. “There is nothing—”

“Just do it, and do not crow your ignorance a third time.”

Chevalier scowls but brushes the grit aside. As he does so, his fingertips catch a groove. He traces a rectangular stone, then a second one abutting the first.

Tessauda’s smile slides across her face. “Now you see,” she says. “Something was here before your

divine Clock.”



The fusion lamp pushes the dark aside as Chevalier flees across the platform. Tessauda's mocking smile cuts at his shoulder blades, and he curses his foolishness for ever wishing her back.

He tries to forget the foundation that she has shown him, but he cannot flee the implications. Someone built the Clock atop a foundation of cut stone that differs

from everything he associates with the Clock.

As he nears the Clock, he stops to extinguish the lamp, as he always does before approaching its Divine presence.

“Why do you hide it in darkness?” Tessauda circles from behind and stands between him and the Clock.

“It is divine.” Chevalier regrets speaking the moment the words thoughtlessly tumble across his lips.

“I don’t pretend to know what

this device foretells, if anything at all, but I see no proof it is your Revelation.”

“It will come,” says Don Cristobol.

Chevalier turns toward Don Cristobol, standing behind him.

“It must come for the sake of humanity,” Don Cristobol says.

“Tell me, Chevalier, what happens if you are wrong?” says Tessauda.

He turns to look at her, and is struck by how similar her eyes are to

Don Cristobol's. He has never seen the two together at the same time before, but by their eyes, they could be father and daughter.

“What happens if the Clock reaches its end and the Revelation does not come?”

“It will come,” says Don Cristobol. “It is divine.”

“Divine.” Tessauda spits the word as if it is bitter alum. “To our ancestors with stone tools, you are divine, Chevalier.”

“The Testament of Celestial

Unity foretells the coming Revelation. Humanity is ready to embrace it as at no other time in its history. Through Chevalier, we will experience it and understand our higher fate.”

“Something is coming,” says Tessauda, “and it will be a revelation, but will it be the one you seek? That is the question.”

Chevalier glares at her. “There is nothing to fear as long as I have faith.”

“Fear is a good thing, Chevalier.

Fear is what drives us towards excellence. Without fear—fear of failure, fear of death—we are nothing.”

“Fear nearly destroyed us,” says Chevalier. He remembers when his family was killed by Tensari soldiers during the war, and he was afraid to live. He recalls the first time he held a disruptor in battle and was afraid to die. He had been afraid to love, to succeed, to fail, to.... The Order showed him how to conquer his fear. He never wants to be that person

again.

“Stupidity nearly destroyed us,” say Tessauda.

“It was doubt about our place in the cosmos,” says Don Cristobol. “The Revelation will affirm our place.”

“What will happen if the Clock strikes zero and there is nothing but the dark?”

A hole opens in Chevalier's gut. He is ashamed to admit that more than once the thought has occurred to him.

“That will not happen,” says Don Cristobol.

Chevalier spins, first looking towards Don Cristobol, then Tessauda. When he stops spinning, his head is so light it feels like it can float free of his neck.

He drops the fusion lamp. As it hits the platform, Chevalier's universe goes dark and quiet.

Don Cristobol is right; Chevalier holds humanity in his hands. To light-beam a document back to Earth showing the Revelation to be

nothing would destroy the Order. Without the Order humanity would regress into what it once was. It would be better to send nothing and let them think he had failed.

“I am sorry, Don Cristobol. I am not strong enough.” Chevalier drops to his knees, alone in the dark, as he has always been.

Except for the Clock.



My Mask, Humanity

by D. Thomas Minton

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• • • •

My mistress calls me her
mimic. It's as good a name
as any, and I have had

more names than I can clearly remember. Each has left a trace in my genetic structure, and, in a sense, I am all of those names and none. I am, however, whatever name I need to be at a given time, and today I need to be Cillian Truffant.

Unfortunately, this name is already owned by another man. Not unfortunate for me, mind you, but unfortunate for him.

From my position above the wide arcade in Titan's Huygens City, I study Truffant as he moves through

the crowd below. The bob of his head when he apologizes for bumping an old woman carrying a large bag. The way he angles his body to slip through a gaggle of youths who dropped unexpectedly to the tiles around him from the second level. His smile as he passes through the steam wafting from an open air noodle shop. Truffant has a lopsided grin, boyish almost, even though his hair is tinged with gray, and he has witnessed more violence and hardship than anyone, even in these

difficult times.

I move along the railing, from support to support, watching from behind the face-shroud I wear to cover my primed skin. The crowd on the upper level parts before me, because I look like a diseased man on Hajj. I bow meekly to acknowledge their pitying faces, but also to hide what I am and what I am not. As quickly as the crowd passes me, I am forgotten.

Truffant stops to look at a new shirt. As he rubs the fabric between

his thumb and index finger, my fingers do the same motion. He is meticulous in his inspection; his eyebrows rise when finds a loose thread.

My brows arch in the same way. Once. Twice. A third time, when I finally get it right.

He leaves the shirt and moves on.

For a man who survives by seeing, Truffant is oblivious. Like the others, he shops for trinkets while my mistress burns the domes

of Ganymede. It is as if through the mundane, they cope with the horrific inevitable.

I come to a marked drop area and step off the edge. As I float downward in Titan's low gee, Truffant stops to buy fried dough from a pretty woman in a skintight dress. I lose sight of him as I land within the arcade's shifting crowd. Moving quickly, I locate Truffant again. He takes the fried dough, and in three bites it is gone. One finger at a time, he licks the powdered sugar

from the tips, his eyes closed as he savors the sweet. His mannerisms are distinct but simple.

It will be easy to be Cillian Truffant.

I slip through the crowd and bump him, making it look an accident. As I do so, the needle in my right hand removes a micro-plug of tissue from his thigh.

“Your pardon,” I say bowing so that he cannot see my face. The needle is sharp, and in his distraction he did not feel it take a sample of his

cells and DNA. I am gone into the crowd before he even notices he has been jostled.

* * *

I inject Truffant's DNA into multiple places on my face and body. The engineered lentiviruses placed within me by my mistress will attack it and absorb it, incorporating it into their RNA structure. Then it will be carried into my primed cells and reverse-transcribed into my own genome. My cells will translate the

information that is Truffant and restructure my flesh to match his. The process will take several painful days.

I embrace the pain. It is a small reminder that some part of me may still be human.

My mistress plucks the neurons that control my vision, my hearing, and she appears in the small room with me. Her skin is smooth as milk; her hair, inky lines scratched by an artists' repidograph. She has black eyes, iridescent as the wings of

midnight beetles. She is not human, but I do not know what she is. With slender fingers she touches my cheek, a cold caress that shocks me like static electricity.

A smile slices open her face, and in her mouth I see the web of souls she controls. Like me, humanity serves her, willing or not, except out here, among Saturn's moons, where the remnants resist.

“Do not underestimate Marcus,” she says. Her fingers rake furrows through my skin, but only in my

mind. She plucks the neurons for pain as delicately as a harpist. "Once he dies, the resistance will collapse." The pain becomes pleasure, and although I wish I could remain standing, I fall to my knees.

Marcus hides somewhere among the rings of Saturn or its inner moonlets, a million possible places from which he coordinates the final resistance. Her web of spies, both flesh and nanite, have learned that Truffant will secretly meet and interview him, but I will see that it

does not go as planned. When I find Timothy Marcus, I am to kill him and deliver humanity to my mistress. Souls in her mouth like grains of sugar.

* * *

Each morning I look in the mirror and my face has changed. My nose grows longer and wider. The hue of my eyes lightens to that of Neptune, blue and bottomless. My skin loses its newborn pink; it toughens and darkens. I have had so

many faces I no longer remember my own.

In the mirror, I practice the boyish grin. "I am Cillian Truffant," I say in mock greeting. Once my vocal cords settle into their proper shape and position, the timbre of my voice is perfect.

From his dossier, I know Truffant's history better than my own. Orphaned at a young age, he did not weep at his mother's funeral. He slipped free of Europa, before my mistress could secure its orbital

space, but his reports tight-beamed to the outer moons established his credentials as a field journalist of considerable acumen. His marriage to Susee, a reporter of equal skill, was a casualty of morality; she needed to do more than talk about the resistance. He still loves her. I know this because her picture is the only one on his stylus pad.



My mistress comes to me as I lay naked on my bed, fantasizing about

Susee. Her nails, cold and sharp, press into my ribs.

“It is time,” she coos to me, like my fantasy lover. She strums my nerves. My eyes roll back into my head, and I ejaculate in a spasm of pleasure.

Ashamed, I pull on pants and shirt and look in the mirror. My face is still flushed.

My mistress stands behind me, glowing like a specter in the shadow of my room. In her eyes I see the reflection of what I will be if I

succeed. In her smile I see what will befall me if I fail. Both are terrible to behold.

“I am Cillian Truffant,” I say, but when I blink, I am alone again.

Today Truffant is meeting Mitchell, who will take him to Marcus. I get to Truffant’s favorite café early and slip into the toilet. Truffant will visit here before he orders, because he always does.

Within a few minutes, Truffant enters. For a moment he is confused as he stares into his own eyes. “Who

—”

In that moment, I break his neck.

I drag his still twitching body into the stall, prop him on the toilet, and latch the door. I inject him with a tissue lysing microbe. While I wait, I hastily strip off his shirt and slit his pants up both sides. By the time I finish removing his clothes, his body has begun to bloat. With my knife, I puncture one of his buttocks and a slurry of organics runs into the toilet. The body sags as the digested organs and bone drain. I fold the loose skin

into the bowl and wait until the microbes partially digest it before flushing the whole mess down into Titan's sewer system.

Now I am the only Cillian Truffant.

Mitchell is late. While I wait, I retrieve Susee's picture from the dossier in my neural cache. She is tall with cafe-au-lait skin and her head shaved to fine stubble that on most women would make their face bulbous and bug-eyed, but makes her look like a new age Zulu

warrioress. I close my eyes and imagine how her powerful hands would feel on my back. My breathing deepens. Somewhere in my past life, I had someone like Susee.

“It’s good to see you, Cillian.”

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper back to her.

“Beg pardon?”

I snap my eyes open, but Susee does not disappear. She sits in the chair across from me.

“Marcus sent me,” she says.

I blink several times, but she still does not vanish. She is as striking as her picture.

“You look good,” she says. She touches the graying hair near my left temple. Her wrist smells faintly of musk.

“And you,” I say. We sit in awkward silence. She studies her fingers. I stare at the curve of her cheeks.

As if an alarm has gone off, her head snaps up. She looks around seemingly expecting an attack, but

only a fool would do so. Susee has killed more people than even me. She would do anything for the resistance, and I suspect she has. “We should go.”

“Where?” I ask. I do not expect her to answer, certainly not in such a public place, but I must ask anyways.

Susee levels her gaze. “Even if I knew, I couldn’t tell you.”

I cock my head to one side and arch my left eyebrow. “You don’t know?”

She graces me with her little half-

smile. “Marcus doesn’t tell me everything. It’s safer that way. In case I am captured.” She grabs my hand and pulls me from my chair. “It’s now or never, Cillian.”



The elevator shoots us up through Titan’s dense orange clouds to the orbital docking hub. There we squirm through a boarding umbilicus to a cramped, windowless cabin that smells of sweat and oxides. Lose dandruff and other biological

flock swirl around us as we strap into the two acceleration chairs.

The gel-pad cools my damp shirt. I shiver.

In other incarnations, I vaguely recall liking the tug of zero gee on my stomach. That was lives away, however—splinters of lost memory slipped under neural skin. Now I only really know Truffant's unease, born from several close calls in space and reported stories of freeze-dried bodies vented into vacuum.

Susee finishes entering her

fragment of the coordinates to Marcus' location into the ship's navigation. Someone has already entered the other piece, she explains. "Here we go," she says.

A loud clang vibrates through the hull as docking booms disengage. Susee's hand dangles next to mine, but before I can take it, my organs slide back against my spinal column as our engines flare, and we accelerate away from the docking hub.

I grit my teeth.

Susee squeezes my hand. Hers is warm, unlike mine, which is clammy cold. I squeeze her fingers. Gradually the pressure eases as we settle into a one-gee acceleration. Susee releases her shoulder straps and lets her head lull easily against its pad. She takes a deep breath and exhales it loudly. "I never should have left," she says.

I look at my hands and realize that at one time they had explored the arc of her breasts, the folds of her body. For a moment I am jarred out of being Cillian Truffant because I

realize that these are not real memories, only information extrapolated from the dossier I have studied. Or perhaps they are real, but lost to me, except as a mask for my mistress' masquerade.

Jealousy for what Cillian Truffant had stabs at me.

I struggle to be Truffant again. "I wish—"

"It wasn't you—"

We speak at the same time and fall silent together.

She left me to follow Marcus

into this futile fight against my mistress. She had been covering Marcus' emerging movement for the Jovian news bureau and had allowed her objectivity to be compromised. Instead of reporting the news, she became part of it. After Callisto fell, she joined Marcus in his struggle. Appalled, I did not follow her, something I have always regretted.

The ship shudders as secondary jets fire. In my stomach I feel the ship change trajectory. I wonder how long it will take to get to our

destination. Instead, I ask “Why?”

“I couldn’t just watch it anymore. This is a fight for our lives, Cillian. It’s a fight for the human race. I won’t be enslaved.”

A hollowness opens in my gut like a black hole. All her efforts, yet Titan will still fall. If only....

When I say nothing, she kneels beside my chair and leans in close. Her lips are soft and warm. Her fingers are gentle against my skin. I am breathless.

I pull away. “I—” My thoughts

spin. I can barely think.

She frowns at me. “I’m sorry. I thought—” She covers her face with her hands and mumbles something. I realize she is cursing herself. “I thought there might be a chance....”

I realize that I do not know how to react. I did not expect her to be here, so I am unprepared. I wonder what we have shared in the past, those intimate moments that aren’t capture on video. While I can feel them around me like golden eggs, I can never open them.

I see the lingering residual of those moments in the sadness that pulls at the corner of her eyes. I hear it in the tone of her voice. The memories are heavy, but I sense she would never give them away for anything.

I want them. Yet I know I can never have them or anything like them. My mistress would never allow it, and, while I was once human, I am no longer certain if I still am. Oh, but to be human again.

“It doesn’t matter, Cillian. Not

anymore. Did you know Marcus asked for you specifically? He thinks you are the only one who can save us.”

* * *

Marcus’ hideout is claustrophobic. I don’t remember being claustrophobic. For some reason I cannot recall if Truffant is, but then I realize that if I feel claustrophobic, then Truffant is.

Susee leads me quietly through an underbelly of dimly lit accessways

lined with exposed conduits, wiring, switches, and ragged insulation. The cold shadows smell of ozone.

This is the resistance.

When I finally set eyes on Marcus, I think that I have been tricked. The hunched, husk of man before me looks nothing like the man in my dossier or the subversive videos that urge his followers into action. His skin has lost its luster, like old leather, and I wonder what sort of radiation damage he has sustained. Clumps of hair float

around the small room like ejecta from a collapsing star.

Yet, when Marcus looks up from tapping on his stylus pad, the fire in his eyes is unmistakably that of the man who has held my mistress at bay. He motions me toward the only other seat.

I wrap my feet around the stool legs and settle against the padding. It is odd to sit in near zero gee, but planet-bound conventions die hard. I reach to activate the recording device on my shirt collar, but Marcus

raises a hand consumed with open ulcers.

“Okay, no video.” I am mesmerized by the shell of humanity sitting opposite me. If my mistress had known Marcus’s condition, she would not have sent me. I should feel cheated, I think, but I feel sadness instead.

“I am not what you expected,” Marcus says without preamble. A smile, ugly and twisted, cuts his face in two like it were a piece of dehydrated meat. “I have worked

hard to keep a good public image, but there are limits to how many times I can recycle images into something new.”

As he speaks his voice grows weaker until it is barely audible when he stops.

“You’re dying.” It is as if my words are necessary to make what I see real.

“I will die soon, but the resistance must not. That is why you are here.”

Yet Marcus is the resistance. Without him the moons of Saturn,

the last vestige of humanity, will fall into my mistress' dominion.

“Will it matter?” I wonder whose question that is.

“Probably not. We cannot fight against it. I watched Europa crumble, and nothing I could do stopped Callisto from following. I know it is only a matter of time before it takes Titan. You look surprised, but you know as well as me that this is true. How do we fight an enemy that we only know through the information that it allows us to have?

We do not understand it because it is not human.”

“And what is human?” I am startled at the sound of my voice.

“Surely you can remember.”

I draw back suddenly and hit the wall behind me.

Marcus’ eyes lock with mine, and in them I see what it is to be human again, to be free to love something with a power that transcends flesh, and that can sustain even in death and beyond.

Marcus pushes his stylus pad

across the space between us. It spins slowly as it traces a gentle arc into my hands. The pad is filled with video feeds, recently recorded personal interviews I have never seen before, documents he has written, contact names. Everything I would need to be Timothy Marcus.

“Who do you think leaked the information to your mistress to bring you here? A gamble, yes, but what do we have to lose? I am dead one way or the other. Susee was against this idea, but she will help

you disable your neural cache and free you from it.”

Susee floats wedged in the narrow hatchway. She does not look at me, and that sadness I saw earlier is still there. I wonder whom she mourns. I know it is not me, but I wish it was.

“It is useless to resist,” I whisper.

“Climbing from the primordial seas was useless. Riding into the vacuum of space was useless. We do what is useless because we are human.”

Because we are human....

I study the way Marcus sits, his shoulders back. Even hunched and twisted, they suggest strength and conviction. His rheumy eyes are steady and his gaze penetrating. He absently rubs at his left index finger, and my hand begins to do the same.

It will be easy to be Timothy Marcus, but if humanity is to survive, I know I need to be more than what I currently am. I want to be more. I can be more.



Bernie Mojzes

Bernie Mojzes became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "The Ritual of Names in Prague in the Last Days of the New Empire" in Daily Science Fiction (Sep. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at www.kappamaki.com.

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The bells of Strahov Monastery hadn't rung, I'm told, for over eighty years. Termites got into the thick wood beams some twenty-odd years before the building was boarded up and abandoned. Or maybe it was carpenter ants. Or maybe it was just dry rot. The details don't matter. What matters is that steel I-beams were set into the millennia-old wood and stonework and the ancient bells welded to them to prevent catastrophe.

I've seen them. There's no way they can ring.

But listen.

Strahov Monastery sits in the center of the district that bears its name. To the south and east is the park, now cleared and tilled in haphazard plots, and the ruins of the once-proud stadium. Once upon a time Strahov Stadium boasted the claim of second largest stadium in the world. Now it serves as both the local dump and as an informal market. North and west had been

home to thriving businesses, homes and apartments. Not so thriving now, of course, but we make do. The monastery is the only building that hasn't been broken into and converted to other uses, that hasn't been covered in graffiti, hasn't been littered with refuse. Some residual reverence, I had thought, for the dying faith to which I've pledged my life.

Strahov district had been written off during the Collapse, cut off, evacuated at gunpoint, fenced in and

forgotten. And then gradually repopulated by the poorest of the poor and the baddest of the bad, those for whom the razor wire was as much a protection from a predatory world as it was a barrier. Laundry hangs out to dry on lines strung between crumbling buildings. Solar panels decorate some of the rooftops. Not enough to matter. The greasy smell of cooking fires permeates the drywall; the apartment buildings bear an uncanny resemblance to giant smokehouses. Children play

football in the street, dribbling coarsely stitched leather sacks, guarding goals constructed of street signs, while the older kids congregate on corners and practice the preening rituals of the adolescent mating dance.

The clinic that my ministry has brought me to is at the edge of the district, the last building before the fence and, through the grace of a few well-lined pockets, the only building still on the power grid. I have no medical training; my mission is to

assist where I can, to spread the word, to ease the fears of the reluctant, to bring in those who are too ill to walk the handful of tortured blocks themselves. I walk among these people, speak in my halting Czech to those who will listen, assure them that we have no connection to the government, or to any of those who were complicit. The specter of eugenics hangs over us all, and I cannot begrudge them so well-founded a paranoia.

Prague is, after all, not so very

different from the rest of Europe under the New Empire.

* * *

I saw her at dusk, always only at dusk.

She stood at the doors of Strahov Monastery, seeking entrance. Five children gathered around her skirts. The sixth, a baby, she held in her arms. There was, of course, no entrance to be had; thick plywood had been nailed over the doorway. A sign warning trespassers that the

building was property of the Church was still legible, only partially covered by the peeling stickers declaring the structure and its contents property of the Empire.

Hardship, not age, had worn lines into the woman's face. She was hardly a quarter century old, though at first sight she seemed much older. I gathered my robes up to cross the rubble-strewn street. She turned to me as I approached, tearstained eyes seeking mine.

I'd sought to help, but some

losses defy relief: the baby was very clearly dead.

Its skin was pale, with an undertone of grey. Its eyes were dark hollows, and blackened fingers peeked from a fold in the swaddling. The telltale black lump was visible on its neck.

A swollen and infected lymph gland.

A bubo.

The mark of God's wrath, in some mythologies. The mark of Plague.

The breath caught in my throat. We'd seen a few cases earlier that week, one child and two adults, just beginning to show symptoms, and we'd heard through the grapevine that cases of Bubonic Plague were being reported in other cities throughout Europe. We'd put the patients on wide-spectrum antibiotics and expected them to make full recoveries. This was the first Plague death I'd seen.

The woman said something, but I wasn't able to make sense of it. She

spoke what sounded to me like Czech, but with such a strong dialect that it defeated my limited language skills. She pleaded with me. I think I caught a few words: help, and please, and sacrament. At first I thought she wanted help with the baby, but she wouldn't let me near it. Instead, she pointed at the monastery towers, standing silent against the darkening sky.

I was at a loss. I'd thought that she was mad, perhaps, with grief, holding her dead baby, her

remaining children gathered around her, tearful but silent, and speaking to probably the only man for miles around who couldn't understand a damned thing she said.

“Listen,” I said, “you need to come with me. We can help you. We need to check you out and check your children. Maybe they are also sick. But if they are, we can save them. They don't also have to die.”

Maybe she understood the last word, because she burst into tears once again, and fell to her knees in

front of me. She looked up at me again, then kissed the hem of my robe. I felt unclean, as if by letting her kneel before me I'd assumed a role to which I had no right.

"Please," I said, "please, don't do that." I took her by the shoulders and brought her to her feet. She was very nearly weightless, insubstantial, as if my hands could have passed right through her.

She grabbed onto my arm and pressed something into my hand. It was round, cold. A coin. Not the

polycarbon RadIdent disks of New Empire currency, but a real metal coin. I stared at it. It was copper. Old and worn to near-featurelessness—God only knew whose face had once graced its surface—but copper nonetheless. Perhaps she had no idea what kind of treasure she held. Or perhaps she did. She refused to take it back, instead pointing at the bell towers.

“Look,” I conceded, “I’ll hold on to this for now, if you’ll come with me to the clinic.” I was sure it wasn’t

what she was asking for, but it seemed best to humor her. “Ok? I take the coin, and you come with me to the clinic?”

She nodded, eyes wide, and pressed my fingers closed over the coin. Her jaw twitched.

I put the coin in my pocket.

The bells rang. Once. Twice. Three times, shattering the evening calm and echoing off the stadium walls. And then they fell silent.

There was no movement in the towers, no lights in the monastery at

all. I let go the breath I'd been holding, and turned again toward the woman and her children, but they were gone, slipped away in the gathering dark.



The next week was heart-wrenching, though it seems almost trivial in retrospect. Two more patients with plague came in to the clinic, sore and coughing. Only one of the initial three responded to treatment. The oldest of the patients

worsened and then died of a sudden stroke during a coughing fit. The child had grown so weak as the disease progressed that we held little hope for her survival. We gave her morphine against the pain, and to suppress her wracking coughs.

I prayed. I prayed for them, and for us all. I can only hope that He didn't hear. Or that He doesn't know English. The alternative is beyond anything I can bear.

There were other cases of plague in Strahov District, people who

hadn't come to the clinic. I heard a few fearful rumors in the market and on the streets. But life went on.

It was at the end of that week that I saw her again, again at the doors of Strahov Monastery, almost invisible in the grey light. She held a child in her arms. Four others clung to her skirts. I knew immediately that the child was dead.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Please let me help."

Her remaining children looked up at me, unspeaking. One of them

coughed into an already necrotic hand. Another had begun to cough. I touched his head; he was burning up. They needed treatment soon, and any of them who were not yet infected needed to be separated from the others.

“It’s not too late,” I lied. “We have antibiotics. We have food and clean beds. You’ll be safe with us.”

I still couldn’t understand her response, though some of the words, again, were vaguely familiar. She tried to hand me another coin.

“No,” I said. “We have to go to the clinic now.” I took the hands of the two sick children and turned to walk toward the clinic, pulling them in tow.

“No!” I understood that word, screamed as she dropped her dead daughter on the cracked cement and snatched her children away from me. Wary and defiant, she pushed them behind her, and then once again offered me the coin and pointed at the bell towers.

I think a part of me knew

already. Knew that they were already beyond saving. Perhaps even knew a bit more. So I didn't resist as she pressed another copper disk into my hand. I pocketed it and listened to the bells toll.

She bowed to me, down on one knee, and again kissed the hem of my robe, and then my ring. I didn't stop her. And I didn't try to stop her as she stooped to pick up her daughter, and then led her remaining children off into the gloom.



Every disaster is a potential profit center. For someone. Wars, hurricanes, chemical spills: each has its own brand of profiteers. When the Black Death struck Europe in the 14th Century, the Church, in its infinite mercy, required payment to ring the bells in honor of the dead, to announce the soul's arrival at the Heavenly Gates. A toll toll, so to speak. Such is the history of the faith to which I have dedicated my life: feeding on bereavement, on despair,

on loss.

I don't know what happened to the coins. I checked for holes in my pockets, and I always watched for pickpockets. Somehow I always lost them, somewhere between putting them in my pocket and when I next remembered them. I would have held them in trust for this poor woman, or, in the case of her death, used them to buy much-needed medication for Strahov District. But I lost them all.

We became a plague clinic. They

came to us because their families and community feared them. They came to us because the only alternative was to die alone in the streets. There was no space in the clinic for those with other ailments, with broken arms or appendicitis or heart failure. Those people lived or died where they were, with whatever help was available to them there.

Doctor Kovar began to show symptoms. Everyone at the clinic started wearing masks, all the time. Too little, too late.

This time the plague was airborne. The wholesale slaughter of animals in the district was pointless, but it continued. The livestock were butchered. The rats, once ubiquitous, were poisoned, shot, and trapped into a shadow existence. Nothing will ever wholly rid us of rats, not while humans maintain a semblance of civilization, but now only the wisest and cleverest of rat-kind remain to wander the sewers.

The bustle of human community continued, but at a diminished pace.

The football games fell silent. Crowds were avoided. People wore bandanas or strips of cloth over their mouths and noses as they made their way through the necessities of daily life.

She came to me every time she lost a child.

Or rather, she came to Strahov Monastery, and I also was drawn there.

And every time, she gave me a coin.

And every time, the motionless,

time-ravaged bells tolled.

* * *

Yersinia pestis, the bacterium responsible for The Black Death, is known to respond to modern antibiotics. The prognosis for those who are diagnosed early is quite good. At least it was.

We had an eighty percent mortality rate.

Which means that we had done at least a little good. On the streets the mortality rate was closer to a

hundred percent. That's the only thing that kept any of us going.

Doctor Kovar collapsed in the hallway, and was moved into the terminal ward. Those of us who had shown no symptoms were banned from the clinic in the hope that we'd escape the fate of the others.

There were other dangers. The army surrounded Strahov District. They strung new razor-wire and ran high current through it. Those who managed to push through the fence were shot. Their bodies were left to

rot; nobody from the respectable world was willing to risk infection, though it was likely already far too late. Electric and phone lines went dead. Radio and cellular phones were jammed. Nothing left Strahov District, and nothing came in. People were beginning to go hungry. Only the reduction in population due to Plague saved us from wide-scale starvation.

There was little word of the outside world, except through the underground efforts of shortwave

radio operators. It is from them that we knew that the situation in Prague was far from unique.

* * *

Today.

The last day. The end of days.

I heard this morning that Venice is in flames. Napalm floats on the dirty water and clings to those who leap from burning buildings. Perhaps Strahov District will suffer a similar fate; beyond the fence, we can see troops gathering and

repositioning.

She waits for me on this last day at the doorway. Waits, although I've pried the cracked plywood from the frame and broken the locks. Waits, as I knew she would. And I come to her, as she knew I would.

Though it's been over a week since I broke into Strahov Monastery, there is only one set of footprints in the thick dust. No others have dared violate that sacred ground.

Today she's alone; over a week

ago she paid me to ring the bell for her last child. The boy had been nearly a teen when Plague took him. In a different world, he would still have been playing football in the streets with his friends, and he'd blush fiercely and completely miss the pass whenever a girl would notice him looking at her. A different world? A better world.

A world not yet forsaken.

I don't know her name, this broken woman who has come to me to bring peace to her children. It's her

turn now; she's so wasted by the disease that I don't know how she manages to keep standing.

She turns to me and smiles sadly as she reaches out. I expect her to give me another priceless, useless coin, but she doesn't. Instead, she touches my face with blackened fingertips, and then, one by one, she touches the fat, puss-filled lumps on my neck. Without a word, she takes my hand in hers and leads me into the monastery. But she's too weak, too far gone. There is so little left of

her that she's weightless in my arms. She hasn't even left footprints in the dust.

I haven't much more time than she. Perhaps a day. Perhaps not even that. Even as light as she is, I barely make it to the chapel. But I do, and I lay her body at the foot of the altar. I close her eyes and cross her arms over her chest, and I speak the words that are needed, stumbling over the ancient latin words whose meanings I no longer believe. I know the truth now. From the beginning, it's the

only thing I could have done for her, though it is far from enough. How do you save someone who has been dead for eight hundred years?

My pockets are full of coins. Overflowing. They spill on the floor at the foot of the altar, and still there's more.

One coin for the soul of the woman who led me to this place. One for Doctor Kovar, not yet cold. One for each of us. They sift through my fingers like sand.

One by one, I take the coins,

press them to my lips. One by one,
the names come unbidden. One by
one, I speak the words, perform the
ritual, give voice to the names of the
lost, and commend their souls to an
undeserving God.

And one by one I place the coins
on the altar.

The bells ring forever.



Raw Materials

by Bernie Mojzes

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• • • •

How long she'd been standing
in the doorway to the
conference room that served

as Elijah Jankevowitz's temporary office he wasn't sure. Somewhere, he'd registered the shocking pink and electric blue hair, Gillian Tess's insolent silhouette against the flickering neon white of the hallway wall, but his mind was elsewhere. Dozens of files lay strewn across his desk, more on the conference room table, and yet more piled on a small table in the corner. Stacks of boxes lined the walls, each subdivided and filled with wallets, key rings, hair and tissue samples, loose change,

eyeglasses, condoms, knives, and guns—the detritus of hundreds of spent lives—all carefully sealed in plastic and individually labeled by the boys in the lab. In the middle of this, Jankevowitz sat staring at a blank space on the wall, fingers tapping the tab of one of the files that lay in front of him.

“What’s the body count?” Jill asked softly.

Jankevowitz blinked a few times, brought her into focus. “Fuck if I know. They’re still pulling bones out

of the sewer.”

“It’s been over a week.” Over a week since she’d come home to find her foster father still warm, his blood soaking through the mattress to the floor, a dismembered and mutilated corpse on the kitchen floor, and what amounted to a confession typed into a bloodstained laptop on the table in front of a blood-soaked chair. She blinked back tears, hoping Jankevowitz hadn’t noticed.

“Yeah.” Jankevowitz scratched the gray stubble on his cheeks,

swirled the dregs of his cold coffee and decided against drinking it. “And I’m supposed to be putting all the pieces together.” He gestured at the stacks of boxes and papers. “And finding the families. But I’m stuck.”

“Stuck? You mean, overwhelmed?”

He fingered the file in his hands and shook his head, almost imperceptibly. “No.”

Jill perched on his desk, the fist-sized holes in her ratty jeans showing the soft down (probably never

shaved in her life, Jankevowitz thought, never will, unless the world breaks her), put a pale, nail-bitten hand over his. "Let me help."

"Against regulations, kid," he growled. "You're not even off the suspect list yet. And get your underage white ass off my desk, 'fore someone tells my wife."

"When'd you start caring about regulations?" Jill tapped the overfull ashtray and looked pointedly at the No Smoking sign. "You've read his journal. You know that I knew what

he'd done, even if I didn't quite grasp the..." She took a deep breath and looked around at the evidence. "The magnitude of it all. And he shielded me from it, as much as he could, but sometimes, when he was drunk and depressed, he'd talk. 'Course, I was usually drunk and depressed at the same time, so I can't promise to remember everything. But maybe he told me something that might help you."

"Great. I'll add 'contributing to the delinquency of a minor' to his rap

sheet.”

She snorted. “I haven’t been a minor since I was twelve.”

“Fair enough.” Jankevowitz jammed the file and the notepad he’d been scribbling on into his briefcase and snapped it shut. “It’s lunchtime anyway. Let’s get some coffee or something, and get the hell out of this room. It depresses me.”

Jill nodded. “There’s a diner I—we—used to go to.”

“Yeah, been there. C’mon.”



Jankevowitz left his dented Buick parked against the fire hydrant at the corner of 9th and Locust, within sight of their booth by the window. Reports and notes spread out on the black and white checkerboard table amid cups of coffee, a grilled cheese sandwich half-soggy with pickle juice, and an oversized cheesesteak that dripped grease and Cheez Whiz.

“I’ve only started tracking these people down,” Jankevowitz had said

as they waited for their coffee, refusing to pull out the folder until they'd been served and the likelihood of a startled waitress spilling coffee on them all was minimized, "but so far they've been what he said they were. He only went after killers and rapists and other fuckheads. Violent criminals. Like this one guy I was working on yesterday, he was released on a technicality after a double murder. Everyone knew he did it, but we'd fucked up collecting evidence and we ended up not

having a case. Brother of the dead girl swore revenge, and then the bastard just disappeared.” Jankevowitz shrugged. “Half the force thought the brother took him out, other half thought the killer’d split ‘cause he knew he was dead meat if he stuck around. There was no evidence either way. Seems your Pops did everyone a favor and took care of the problem for us.”

Jill pursed her lips. “So he was a hero, then?”

“No such thing as heroes. You

should know that by now. Just people.”

“I miss him.”

“Remember that couple he killed ‘cause they were witnesses?”

She nodded miserably, and shivered. “I remember a lot more than that. I still miss him.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Jankevowitz poked a greasy finger at one of the sheets of paper on the table. “Start there,” he said around a bite of cheesesteak.

Jill wiped her hand with a

napkin, pulled it closer to read. "John Doe," she muttered, "mid to late twenties, approx five foot ten, three hundred to three fifty pounds, no ID. DNA tests failed." She scanned a couple other papers, then looked up at the detective. "So fat men can't commit crimes?"

"Killed about five years ago. Excavated four days ago." He pulled a photo out of his briefcase and tossed it on the table.

Jill stared at the skull, fleshless, pale scraps of hair clinging tenuously

to the bone. The empty eye sockets looked as if they'd been gnawed; the jaw hung loosely from a single joint. "Okay" she said, not quite knowing what was appropriate.

"That's the guy that was found next to our John Doe. Approximately the same time of death, give or take a month. Now check this one out." He tossed a second picture on the table. It was the same view: head and shoulders from the front. But this corpse looked different. The flesh was

intact, if withered, and Jill could see the ugly killing cut across the throat gaping open, severed tissue and bone and blood now dry and flaking. The eyes were open and sunken, like pale, fleshy prunes.

Nothing had gnawed this body. Not the ubiquitous rats that populated the passageways of Philadelphia's underbelly, not the other scavengers that wandered that world. Even bacteria had let this body be.

Jankevowitz worked on his

cheesesteak while he let her digest the image, then flicked another photo in front of her. This was a full body view. The body was in much the same condition as the head, with one startling exception. The belly, once clearly distended from the shape of the rest of the torso and from muddy, tattered clothes, had fallen in on itself, as if eaten away from within. Inside the hole that had once been the man's abdomen, the spine was visible, as were portions of the pelvic bone and the bottom of the rib

cage. The exposed bone was pitted and scarred.

As if the stomach had just kept churning out acids until it consumed itself, Jill thought. “When they say that DNA tests failed, I’m guessing they’re not just talking about not finding a match in those fancy cop computers?”

“Smart girl. They weren’t able to extract any DNA from this victim. Lab’s been drilling holes all over the bastard, trying to find some part of him that hasn’t been contaminated

by whatever's destroyed his cells. They ain't gonna find shit."

"Not with his whole GI tract all dissolved like that," Jill said. Then: "That was inappropriate, right?" She looked up to find Jankevowitz grinning.

"Nah," he said. "Fact, you almost made me laugh. Would'a succeeded if I hadn't forgot how."

"Okay," Jill said, a minute later, pulling them both back into the present. She wiped tears from her eyes. "So you found this guy. He's an

alien or a clone or some weird-ass thing. But he's dead and the lab's working on it. You got the rest of your life to figure this one out, right?"

"Yeah, I sorta looked at it that way too. But then there's this." He set another photo on the table in front of Jill. It was the same man, bloated belly eaten from within, flesh untouched by scavengers.

Jill shrugged. "Same guy."

"Nope. Pulled him up this morning, estimated date of death

about ten years ago, by the company he was keeping. Could'a been a twin, if they'd died at the same time. Instead, they're twins five years apart. Lab's working on this one now, but I'm gonna bet they have no better luck than on the other guy. The wound is similar to the one on the other body. Your dad came in from behind and cut all the way across the throat, getting both carotids at once, then hacked through the spine. Almost took the head off. With his other victims he

just cut one side of the throat. You know why.”

Jill nodded mutely. Bill'd probably say something smartass about that, she thought. And I'd probably deserve it.

Jankevowitz held a pack of cigarettes out to Jill, one unfiltered cylinder extended, until she shook her head, then slid it out of its pack, tapped it on the table and lit it. “So, two bodies. Both not quite human. Killed five years apart. Different MO from the other victims. What's that

say to you?”

“Well, if Bill killed them, then they must have done something bad, right? I mean, he wasn’t a...” She pursed her lips. “He was a monster. But knew the difference between right and wrong. Right?”

“You could say that. Might even be true.”

“So, he killed them because they did something bad. And the different MO would imply that he’d run into these guys before, and you’ll probably find at least one more of

these guys before you're done. You'll know when you've found the first one because that one will have wounds more consistent with his other, uh, the other victims." She frowned. "Or at least not consistent with these two guys. Whatever these things are, maybe they don't die as easy as us humans."

Jankevowitz nodded. "What else?"

"Um. Well, you can't really determine a series from just two data points—it's not a mathematically

sound sample set—but if you find a third body and it's been dead fifteen years, it means it's about time for another one of these things to show up.”

“Yeah.”

“Of course, if the next body is twenty years old, that might imply that the next point in the series is always half the time from the previous point. So the new one would have shown up two and a half years ago, and then another one about one and a quarter year ago,

and then another nine months ago. There'd be a lot of them."

"Variations on Zeno's paradox. Wouldn't be able to swing a cat against a wall without hittin' one." He winced, remembering too late what had happened to Jill's cat, and hoped she'd not notice the faux pas.

"Oh. Right." Jill scratched her head. "The point was, you need at least one more data point to chart this properly. Otherwise it's just guesswork."

"I call it following my gut." He

flashed his badge at the waitress, who had come to politely remind him that Philadelphia was a non-smoking city now, at least as far as fine dining establishments were concerned. He made no move to cover the pictures. When she saw them she paled and excused herself. Jankevowitz watched her, shaking his head. “She should know better by now.”



“Is he circumcised?” Jill’s voice, crackling in the cell phone.

Jankevowitz blinked in the darkness, trying to clear cobwebs out of his head. Beside him, the clock glowed fuzzily—either three or eight, he couldn't tell. No light filtering through the curtains, though. "What?" He slipped out of bed to dodge his wife's inevitable elbow.

"The dead guy. Or guys. Are they circumcised?"

"I don't know, I didn't turn them over." He rubbed his eyes. "What time is it?"

Jill ignored him. "Been poking

around the Intarwebs a bit, looking up fake men, Frankenstein monsters, that sort of thing. So there's this thing called a homunculus. Wizards and alchemists make them as helpers. According to the stories, they're made of mud and straw and shit like that, plus a contribution from the alchemist's own body. They're basically small, fleshy automatons that help around the lab and do all the menial crap. Sorta like house elves, or graduate students." She

waited for a laugh, then continued when she didn't get one. "Anyway, it would be unusual for a homunculus to stray from its home, and it wouldn't be likely to be this big. The word means 'little man,' after all. And anyway, the way those things are created is pretty organic, so you aren't likely to see two identical homunculi."

"Why can't this wait until morning?"

"It is morning. More or less."

"Right. Okay. Organic, how?"

Jill hesitated. “I’m trying to think of a way to say this that won’t offend your delicate sensibilities.”

“Fuck.”

“Not quite. It only needs the boy-goo part. So, like, I couldn’t make one. And the homunculi produced would be as individual as the DNA fragment of each sperm. Hm. I guess that means that the homunculus would have DNA after all, even if it was partial and weird.”

“Uh huh. So it isn’t a homunculus. Can I get back to sleep?”

I was having the most wonderful dreams.”

Jill laughed. “Why do you think I don’t sleep anymore? Anyway, so then I was thinking it might be a golem.”

“With or without a magic ring?”

“Not that kind. Big guys, made out of mud, brought to life through Kabbalistic rituals. No boy-goo in the making, though, just the Power of God, whatever the hell that is. Historically, they’ve been created to protect the Jews from their

oppressors, but there's always the chance of them running amok. Frankenstein is a sort of a variation on that theme. And the stories say that if they're given speech, then they're given a soul, but the soul is imperfect, 'cause even the most holy Rabbi sucks compared to God. And that's dangerous."

"Right. And so if he's circumcised, then he's a golem, because he was created by a Rabbi." Jankevowitz stifled a yawn. "Your logic is impeccable."

“Exactly. ‘Cause anything else just wouldn’t be kosher. So let’s go check.”

“You have any idea what kind of paperwork is involved in getting you in to see a body in the middle of an investigation?”

“At three in the morning? I bet if we’re real quiet, there’s no paperwork at all.”

* * *

The thing on the table looked less human in person than it had in

the pictures, a grotesque caricature of a man, naked and broken under cold neon and fierce halogen. The sternum had been cut and cracked, then carefully folded back in place, the skull neatly cut open to reveal the brain. Jill poked it with an index finger and wrinkled her nose.

“Hey!” Jankevowitz pulled her back angrily. “Look, don’t touch. Don’t be mucking up my evidence.”

“It’s like cold, slimy silly putty. Or maybe, like, dehydrated pudding.”

“What did you expect it to feel like?”

“I dunno. Leather, I guess. I mean, isn't that what leather is, dried skin? It looks like it was left out in the desert, sorta shriveled and dehydrated, not all rotted like you'd get in a sewer. So shouldn't it feel leathery?”

“What is it about you that makes me do stupid shit?” Jankevowitz grumbled, reaching out to touch the flaccid flesh. He wrinkled his nose. “Dehydrated pudding is right. Where

are you going now? Don't touch anything."

"I need gloves." Jill tossed a couple purple latex gloves at the detective, then pulled on a pair herself, snapping the rubber dramatically. She grinned. "I've always wanted to do that. Maybe I'll be a proctologist when I grow up. Come on, let's take a closer look."

Other than the damage done by whatever acids had eaten away the center of the body, and by the autopsy procedure, things seemed

normal. The right organs were in the right places, as far as Jill could tell. It matched up at least superficially to what she remembered from her Advanced Biology text, but infinitely messier, and without the convenient color coding.

“You’re gonna put that all back, right?”

“Yeah. Help me get the mouth open.”

The jaw resisted her efforts, but Jankevowitz was able to pry it open with a tongue depressor and some

wedge-like metal implement that he was unable to name. The jaw released with a pop, followed by a moist sucking sound. Jill shined a light into the orifice as she pushed the tongue around.

“Damn.”

“What?”

“That was pointless. Would’a been convenient if there was a piece of parchment in there, since there’s no letters on the forehead. Then we’d know for sure it was a golem.”

Jankevowitz shook his head. “All

right, Watson, what have we learned?”

“It’s icky.”

“Yeah, yeah. What else?”

“There’s no evidence of Kabbalistic Mysticism.”

“Don’t be dense.”

“He’s not circumcised?”

“How ‘bout, he’s been dehydrating for five years, and the inside of his mouth is still moist.”

Jill bit her lip. “Oh. Right. And there’s still blood all over him. And his clothes didn’t disintegrate, even

though they're not technically part of him." She grinned. "And that, my dear Holmes, means that any evidence that was on him when he was killed may still be on him."

Jankevowitz nodded, already looking closely at the man's hands. "I bet you that the blood under the fingernails will give us a DNA sample, and that it won't be this thing's."

* * *

"I've got good news and I've got

bad news,” Jankevowitz said, slopping a bit of coffee out of his cup while waving the waitress over, as Jill settled onto the red vinyl bench. “And then I’ve got some really bad news, too.”

“Well, hello, Elijah, I’m doing well, thanks. How are you?”

“I’m old, and my back hurts. Don’t even get me started about my knees.”

It had been three days since they’d broken into the lab, three days filled with fights and research, three

nights of clone-zombie dreams, and dreams of something else, dark and nebulous, always out of sight. He'd gone out after midnight the night before, unable to sleep, to the comfortable little bar at 23rd and Spruce, ordered a whiskey. And Cindy, still behind the bar after all this time, had set the glass in front of him, held the bottle poised over it.

“Is this really what you want?” she'd asked softly.

And he'd taken a deep breath, let it out slowly, and shook his head.

Almost a nod.

And she'd said, "Then go home."

Now here he was, sitting across from this perky, annoying little creature, trying to get enough caffeine in his bloodstream to hold a thought together. He pressed knuckles into his eyes as Jill ordered—coffee, scrambled eggs, bacon, whole wheat toast.

"I thought you didn't eat meat."

"Bacon isn't meat. It's..." She shrugged. "It's bacon."

"Yeah. I've heard that kind of

reasoning before. So whaddaya want? Good news or bad news?"

Jill sighed. "Bad, I guess."

"Bad news is that I've managed to piss off just about everybody at the station. The guys at the lab are barely talking to me for telling them how to do their job. Boss is pissed off at me for not getting anywhere with all these bodies that are piling up. And every-fucking-body is pissed at me for poking around a bunch of cold cases instead of dealing with the mess that's already on my plate. Also, the

guys in the lab let me know that we didn't do a particularly good job of cleaning up, and that our unsupervised presence in the lab may have compromised the integrity of the data in a number of unrelated cases." Jankevowitz looked up at her with a half-smile. "Shit's gonna hit the fan, sooner or later, and it looks like all the fans are pointed at me."

"You need a new job."

"Thanks. I'll get right on that. Good news is that not only was there blood under the fingernails, but

there was also some skin tissue. They were able to extract DNA, and they found a match. There was a girl about five years ago, about thirteen years old, had her neck broke. Crushed, really. The killer squeezed so hard there were fingernail gouges in her neck. Never found the killer, well, not until now. It looked like someone had moved her from the actual crime scene. Other weird thing is that there was some sort of reddish, powdery residue covering her body. Tests said it was clay dust.”

“So Bill got there a minute too late.”

“Looks like.” Jankevowitz sipped at his coffee. “Or maybe a week too late. Couple blocks away from where the girl was found, an eight year old boy went missing, a week earlier. He was never found. Ten years ago, same neighborhood, it was a sixteen year old girl. A week later, there was a report by a six year old kid that a fat guy had grabbed her, but that someone else came and made him let go. She ran and didn’t tell anyone

until the next day. By then, it had rained and there was nothing at the alleged crime scene.”

“Oh.”

“Fifteen years ago, three kids disappeared. Twenty years ago, it was four. Both boys and girls, different ages, different races. No real pattern, other than general vicinity. And that each incident was exactly seven days from the prior one.”

“Anything older than that?”

“Not that I could find.”

Jill poked at her eggs. “You said

you had really bad news?”

Jankevowitz nodded, pulled a picture out of his jacket pocket and laid it on the table between them. A small boy grinned up at Jill. “His name is Tyrone Masterson. He just turned seven last month. And he disappeared six days ago.”

Jill nodded grimly. “You have a map?”



Jill studied the map of Old City carefully as she flexed her feet inside

her boots, trying to ease the cramps in her calves. Last night, she and Jankevowitz had worked late, researching the disappearances. Every five years, like clockwork, seven kids or young adults would go missing, one a week. The pattern went back longer than Bill had been prowling these streets like some demonic superhero. A lot longer. The records were harder to search as they descended into the 19th century, less meticulous, more sporadic. Still. The pattern was clear,

if you knew what you were looking for. Seven victims, except when Bill was there to break the pattern.

But he wasn't here now. She patted the knife in her pocket, and hoped she'd do him proud.

After she'd left Jankevowitz to write up his report and mobilize the troops, she'd grabbed a satellite image of center city off the Internet. She added dots for incidents where the scene of the crime was known, and circles showing the probable range for each disappearance. She'd

spent another hour working out the math, weighting each incident according to age, figuring that the first kidnapping was the most likely to be closest to home and the second relatively far away. She'd set her alarm early and checked her math again. When she'd narrowed things down to an oval containing about two square blocks, she'd emailed the results to Jankevowitz. She stuck her cellphone in one pocket, a switchblade in another, and, almost as an afterthought, another

switchblade in her boot.

Eight hours later, she was leaning up against a tree to ease the ache in her lower back and questioning the effectiveness of her search. Two square blocks was a lot of walking for one person, what with all the alleys and side streets, all the alcoves and hidden courtyards. As diligent as she'd been, just about anything could have happened, just out of sight. Instead, she just kept seeing the same people, doing the same things, hours on end. The people in the

neighborhood were starting to notice her as well, staring at her as she made her rounds. It was starting to feel like she was the one under surveillance.

Fucking Jankevowitz was a no-show. The rest of the cops, too, so it was just her, and her sore feet.

She folded the map and was tucking it back into her pocket when she felt a thick, clammy hand clamp over her mouth. Another grasped the back of her neck.

Screaming ineffective curses into the meaty palm, she dropped the

map and fished for her knife. There was a frantic moment as she almost lost her grip on the blade, and then she was stabbing backward. The flesh resisted briefly, then relented. She stabbed again and again. The hand on her neck squeezed.

And she was moving in slow motion.

And the world wavered and pulsed.

I can't pass out, she thought, panicking. Please. And then, more calmly, I'm going to die. It was oddly

peaceful and beautiful, and the metallic sheen of parked cars became liquid, gently glittering waves inviting her to sleep. She willed herself to let go of the knife, willed her body limp, and listlessly prayed he'd let go before it was too late.



Captain Hayes sat at his desk, lips tight under his thick mustache. "Close the door," he said, "and sit down."

"Yes, sir." Jankevowitz took a

seat across the desk.

“I need your report on the William Scott case.”

“The investigation isn’t complete.”

“Progress report. Don’t play stupid. I’m not in the mood.”

“Right. Sorry. I’ll get you a status report by the end of the day.”

Hayes drummed a thumb against the desk. “How ‘bout right now.” Jankevowitz raised an eyebrow. “Tell me,” the captain continued, “in your own words, exactly what the fuck

you've been doing all week." He placed a surveillance photo on the desk: Jankevowitz and Jill in the lab.

Jankevowitz' cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He let it ring, four times, then voicemail. Whatever it was, it would wait.

* * *

Jill was still groggy when she was thrown to the dirty floor. There'd been a door. And a number: 314. She wasn't sure what street, though—she'd been unconscious for at least a

short time, she knew. She vaguely remembered struggling at the door, grabbing onto the door frame. Then there'd been stairs down, and another door—a trap door and a ladder down into darkness. A torch set in the dirt floor a few feet away threw greasy light for a couple body lengths in each direction.

The odor of feces and ammonia were overpowering, almost masking the mildew. Not quite.

Around her in the shadows, things cried and laughed and

whimpered, flesh slapping against metal, against dirt, against flesh. The thing—the golem—that had brought her here stood silently next to her, as silent as he'd been the entire time. Blood dripped next to her hand, the puddle turning to dust at the edges. Something small and misshapen scuttled behind her and she shrieked, trying to turn around. But the golem still had a firm grip on her neck, holding her in place. Cold metal clasped around one calf, and then, with a jingle of chains, around the

other. Only then was the grip released.

“You’ve damaged my creature,” came a voice from the darkness, impossibly ancient, the whisper of sandpaper on leather. “Do you have any idea how much time they take to build?”

Jill pulled herself to her feet and tested the chains. She could take small steps, maybe a foot and a half at a time, if she was lucky. She wasn’t running anywhere fast. “About five years?”

“Come here, child,” the voice said. “I want to take a good look at you. Bring the torch.”

One of the small creatures pulled the torch out of the ground and handed it to her. The golem’s hand pushed sharply between her shoulder blades, propelling her forward. Behind her a man laughed, a laugh somewhere beyond reason. A child sobbed. She stepped forward, across the dirt floor and onto a slightly raised stage. It was circular, from what she could see, and decorated

along the edge with intricate patterns. The darkness here was more pervasive, more resistant to the torch's guttering light. She was pushed forward until her thighs met something soft: a mattress, it looked like. On the mattress, darkness pooled and moved, reached toward her, caressed her cheek. The hand that touched her within the darkness had none of the pudding-like quality of the golem. It was a withered claw, skin shrunk tight around bone, cracked and fraying at the joints.

Jill fumbled in her pocket, pushing buttons and praying she hit the right ones. If she could get a call out, they could trace the phone. She was willing to bet that whatever this thing was, it had never heard of global positioning systems.

“You are lovely,” the thing said, “and so soft. Don’t pull away, my dear. After you’ve had a chance to become accustomed to your new home, you will come to yearn for my touch.” A finger traced her lips. “And with your help, I will escape this

prison.”

And then Jankevowitz’s voice crackled through the darkness. “This is Elijah Jankevowitz. If you don’t leave a message, I can’t call you back, can I?” She’d scrolled down to the right autodial entry, but she’d also accidentally hit the speakerphone button, giving herself away.

“What is that?” the voice hissed. The golem grabbed at her arm.

Jill dropped the torch, trying to fight the creature and hold on to the phone until it was ready to accept a

message. “To leave a call back number, press five now. To leave a message, press one, or wait for the beep.”

“Help,” she screamed at the phone. “I’m at three...” And then the golem hit her in the gut. All the words left her. He clubbed her in the back of the head, knocking her to her knees. Small creatures scrabbled over her body, grabbing at the phone as she tried to get another word out.

“Destroy that thing,” came the rasping voice, and the phone was

ripped from her hand. She heard it fall to the floor. The golem stomped on it, shattering it, grinding it under its heel.

Still gasping for breath, head reeling, Jill felt something well up inside her, fear perhaps, or rage, or something born of both. She grabbed the torch and stabbed it at the heart of the darkness that pooled across the bed, met flesh, and pushed.

The thing in the bed laughed, a hoarse, wheezing noise, and

darkness wrapped around the torch. Jill could see, for the first time, the skeletal fingers that had touched her, wrapped around the flame as it pulled the rough wood out of her hand.

“You are full of surprises, aren’t you? You can’t hurt me, dear,” it said, handing the torch back to her. “Hold on to this, and take comfort from the light while it lasts. But no more surprises, okay? I would be very upset if you damaged one of my children, or one of my guests. Or

yourself.”

The golem escorted her off the platform and held her while the homunculi pulled off her boots, cut the clothing off her body with her own knife. It led her to a cage where other people huddled, or clung to the bars, naked and dirty. They turned their eyes from the torchlight, watched her with shaded eyes, not bothering to hide their interest—or their intent—as a homunculus pulled a key from a chain around its neck and unlocked her shackles and the

cage.

* * *

He sat in his car, parked on 23rd Street, not looking at the door that led to the long, oak bar and oblivion. Too easy to take that step. His marriage could survive suspension without pay. Hell, maybe his job might even survive. But not if he walked through that door. He turned the car on, looked at the door, turned it back off.

I need to talk to Helen, he

thought, reaching for his phone. Probably in the studio. God. And he saw that he had one missed call, one message. Jill. Maybe ranting at her would make him feel better. Pass the guilt her way. But when he called her cell, it went straight to voicemail. Figures.

He was sitting at the bar staring down a shot of whiskey when he finally checked his voicemail message.

A few minutes later he was in his car, whiskey untouched next to a ten

dollar bill, cursing into his cell phone, cursing at Lieutenant Tony fucking Harrison as he assured Jankevowitz that he was doing him a goddamn favor not calling the force out en masse, to take a break already and go home. That he'd not even mention the call to Captain fucking Hayes, not if Jankevowitz expected to keep his job. Cursing as he tried to remember which streets Jill had circled on the map she'd emailed him earlier that day. And then he was strapping his spare gun under his

jacket, slipping a long-handled flashlight into his belt, and pacing the streets, looking for her, looking for anything that might lead to her, stopping people on the street and asking them to look at the tiny image of Jill that decorated her phone number in his phone. A lot of people remembered seeing her, but not in the last few hours.

Then he saw the folded map lying on the ground near a tree, stained and covered in reddish dust, the switchblade lying half hidden

under the grate that covered the tree's roots. He looked down the street, down the long line of doors. It was the three hundred block, that much he knew. But three hundred what? And what street?

He flipped the switchblade closed and slipped it into his pocket. And followed the trail of red dust.



The boy flinched at her touch. He was dirty and bloody, smeared where he'd scrubbed tears from his

cheeks. Jill didn't want to think about what he'd gone through the past week, didn't want to think about what was going to happen to her, soon.

“Tyrone?” she asked. He looked up at her. “It’ll be okay. When I get out of here, I’ll bring you with me. I promise.”

There were five others in the cage, male and female, of different ages. It was hard to determine exactly how old anyone was—nobody had had a shave or a shower in years, and

what skin was visible was either dark with what she hoped was dirt, or pale as a fish's underbelly. The light clearly hurt their eyes, when it was too close, or looked at directly. It was her advantage right now, probably her only advantage. Once the torch burned down, she'd be at their mercy. She chose the oldest of the males, the one who had watched her most intently.

“You,” she said. “What’s your name?”

He grinned at her, and laughed.

This was the one who'd laughed when she was brought in.

She brandished the torch at his face, until he shied away. "Don't fuck with me. What happens next?"

"He doesn't talk." This from a woman seated against the wall. "Not since they cut out his tongue. I heard he used to talk too much."

"What's your name, then?"

"Nobody has a name here. We're only raw materials." She curled fingers protectively around her swollen belly. "Or the producers of

raw materials.”

“Raw materials,” Jill echoed softly. “Gelem.” The Hebrew word. She shivered. “I’m Jill.”

The woman shook her head. “No. You’re not. Not anymore. And as far as what happens next, the torch will burn out, and then you’ll be passed around.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. We could stick together. We could protect each other.”

The woman smiled sadly and stepped close to Jill. “In the dark,

new tastes and new smells are so rare.” She inhaled deeply, reached out and touched Jill’s hair. “And you, you smell so very fresh.”

“No.” Stepping back.

“Not yet. Soon.”

“Shit.” Jill bit her lip and paced the length of the cell, cursing, keenly aware of the eyes following her. She jammed the torch into the dirt and turned to the mute. “All right, then. Let’s get this over with.” She flexed her right foot and waited for him to stand.

Jankevowitz lost the trail on 2nd Street. Too much foot traffic. He spent some time ringing doorbells, showing the picture in his cell phone, watching reactions, taking statements. The people who remembered seeing her around the neighborhood that day were more hindrance than help, as they wasted time trying to recall what street corner they'd seen her at early that morning. Nobody acted in the least bit suspiciously and valuable time

was slipping away. He decided to abandon that tack, or at least postpone it, and look for physical evidence while there was still a bit of sun in the sky. He paced the street, keeping an eye out for anything, reddish dust, in particular, but anything that might hint of Jill's presence. Nothing.

It started to drizzle, a cold fine mist settling down over everything. He tried the next street.

And that's where he saw it, in a doorway recessed into the wall. A

handful of pink and blue hair, stuck to the door frame next to a faintly reddish palm print. She'd left him a clue, a bit of her own hair, stuck to the door with saliva. Clever girl, he thought, as he picked the lock. I hope it's enough.

The door opened to a brick tunnel, leading to an overgrown courtyard. He propped the door open with a rock before proceeding, checked his gun. The door in the courtyard resisted his attempts to pick it. It seemed to be bolted from

the inside, and he resorted to kicking it in. Something in his knee popped. It sucked getting old.

The house was empty. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, coated the walls. A thick layer of dust coated the hardwood floors, except down the hallway to a door. Behind that door, stairs led into a dimly lit basement, from which the smell of decay rose. Jankevowitz cursed his knee as he limped down the stairs. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling, but it didn't come on when he pulled the chain—

it was burned out, or maybe the power had been shut off. The light coming through the half-windows set below the street was dim, and growing dimmer as the day waned, so he pulled out his flashlight. Shelves full of canned food lined two of the walls. In one corner, empty cans rose in an immense heap, and the odor of rot came most strongly from there. A Persian rug of some quality was thrown haphazardly in the center of the room, and beside that, a table with a can opener, a few

utensils, and stacks of paper plates.

Something moved. He caught it with the corner of his eye. A couple empty cans rolled to the floor and something ran directly at his feet. Just a rat, he realized, even as he leapt backward into shelving unit, sending cans tumbling to the floor. He watched it run up the stairs.

“Hello?” A voice from below the floor. “Hello?”

“Jill?”

“Oh God am I happy to hear your voice! There’s a trap door. Be

careful.”

“Are you all right?”

“Nothing I haven’t been able to handle so far,” she said. “But I’m ready to go home now.”

He found the trap door under the rug and found the latch. It dropped away, leaving only a dark pit, and a ladder leading down. Jankevowitz shined the flashlight into the blackness, but either it did little to cut the darkness, or the sub-basement extended much deeper than the basement, and the light just

wasn't reaching. He set a foot on the ladder.

“Careful, there's Things in the darkness. One of those golem guys, and other things. And you can't just shoot all over, 'cause we're down here too.”

But other than Jill's voice, and the clank of Jankevowitz's shoes against the metal rails, there was no sound at all.

When he was halfway down the ladder, the trap door swung shut above him. Of course.

“Talk,” he said, and she did, talking of golems and homunculi and pools of darkness, as he climbed down to the ground and panned slowly across the darkness with the flashlight until she stood outlined in his light.

The golem struck after he'd taken a few limping steps toward Jill. The first blow hit the arm holding the flashlight hard enough to shatter bone. The second blow was to Jankevowitz's skull, but he'd already started diving forward and managed

to evade the brunt of the attack. He found himself lying on the floor, something hot and wet dripping down the back of his neck. The flashlight lay out of reach, pointing toward the cage, and he was seeing two of them. Useless. Cursing, he rolled onto his back and stared into the blackness from which he'd tumbled. He waited until he felt a footstep next to his hip, and then he fired upward, and kept firing until the thing collapsed on top of him.

“Are you okay?” Jill was

screaming. “Goddammit, answer me! And be careful, there’s more Things out there!”

“Shit.” Jankevowitz pushed the body to the side and fumbled one-handed for his spare clip, but they were on him before he could load, tearing at his hair, biting his arms and face. He swung the gun as club until one of the things bit his wrist and pried the gun from his hand.

“The homunculi have a key around their necks! Throw the key here and I can help you!”

There were three of them on him. He kicked at them, and fought with his good arm, and when his hand closed on a key, he pulled hard until it came away. He tossed it toward Jill. He didn't know if it reached her, because one of the creatures thrust a blade into his gut, and he screamed.

And the key slid across the floor, coming to rest against one of the cage bars.

And Jill was fumbling with the lock.

And Jill was tugging the door open, running toward the light. And then she was holding the flashlight, and she kept running, past Jankevowitz, whispering I'm sorry over and over under her breath, until she found the platform.

The thing on the bed wheezed as it laughed. "You might have saved him. Instead you do what? You can't hurt me here."

"No, I can't," she said softly as she dropped the flashlight and grabbed at the darkness with both hands. Its

arms were strong, and they dug painfully into her skin as she wrestled with it, but it wasn't heavy. The fleshless thing weighed no more than a large child. With a grunt she dragged the thing out of its bed and toward the edge of the platform.

The first of the homunculi fell on her then, wrapping its arms around her body, squeezing. A second homonculus grabbed hold of the creature on the dais, pulling him back toward the fetid mattress.

Then the third homunculus

reached her, the one with her knife, and she felt the blade pierce her back, felt it scrape bone, then felt it again, deeper this time. In a few seconds, she'd start losing strength, and then it would all be over.

She yanked hard on the thing's arm, and when it pulled back just as hard, she pushed, ramming into the thing with her shoulder, putting her and the homunculus's weight behind her. All four of them tumbled off the far end of the platform.

The thing shrieked, scrabbling to

get back on the dais.

“Can’t hurt you there,” Jill said, “but what about now?” She lifted the thing’s head by its hair and smashed it twice against the edge of the platform. “Not such hot shit outside your precious little circle of runes,” she whispered, letting the dust filter through her fingers.

She pushed the inert homunculi off her and crawled toward a small blue light, Jankevowitz’s cell phone. He’d managed to dial before passing out. It lay in his hand when she

reached him, the 911 operator calling out for a response. “Jankevowitz?” she was asking. “Are you there? Elijah?”

“Officer down,” Jill said into the phone, still lying in Jankevowitz’s hand. “He’s been stabbed. So have I.” She stopped to get her breath. “But I don’t know where we are. In a basement. 314 something. In Old City. How stupid is that?” She laughed weakly. “Oh, there’s also a guy down here with a broken knee and a couple busted up testicles.”

The other prisoners had gathered around her. She could feel their presence. A hand closed on the phone, dimming the blue glow, and lifted it beyond Jill's reach.

"Her name is Jill." Jill knew the voice—the pregnant woman. "We will wait for you in the street."

Jill heard them lifting Jankevowitz, heard them climbing the ladder. The trap door opened, letting in the evening's failing light. It was blinding.

Pale hands gripped Jill's arms and

carried her toward the light.



Grayson Bray Morris

Grayson Bray Morris became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “A Puddle of Dead” in Daily Science Fiction (Nov. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at www.graysonbraymorris.com.

A Puddle of Dead
by Grayson Bray
Morris

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Henry came back to me in 2048,
fifteen years after he'd left.

I was married by then, with two kids. I was happy. But when I opened the door and saw Henry standing there, my heart sang.

He hadn't aged a day: still that same mouse-brown hair in lazy waves to his chin, that same trim body in jeans and a flannel shirt, the same warm, wintry scent that made me think of crackling fires and

roasting nuts.

“I spent everything I had to see you one last time,” he said. Henry’d never had much, never cared to have much, but I heard the important thing: he’d spent it all on me.

The kids were away and my husband was working late. I let Henry in and made him the best dinner I’d cooked in weeks. I chopped up the eggplant and the imported onions for Saturday’s company and rolled out fresh lasagne. Henry stood beside me

while I chopped and mixed, and it was like he'd never gone. We talked about old friends and favorite movies, bands we loved and writers we hated. After dinner we moved to the living room, and there on the couch I unbuttoned his flannel shirt. I don't know why it was so easy. I wasn't discontented; I loved my husband well enough. But loving Henry seemed right that night. It seemed inevitable.

I ran my hands over his smooth, hairless chest, the skin still as soft

and young as then.

“I’ve gained fifteen pounds and a face full of crow’s feet, but you haven’t changed a bit,” I said.

He smiled, wrinkling the blue eyes I remembered, and put a hand on my cheek. “I stopped the drugs,” he said. “I got clean. I wanted you to know.”

I kissed him then, and tasted the sweet tang of tomato and basil, the subtle bite of good Merlot, and a fine and heady flavor that still came to me sometimes in dreams.

Afterward, I leaned against him and said, “You left me for the drugs. I never forgave you for that.”

“You forgave me tonight,” he said, kissing my hair. “That’s why I came.”

I pulled away to look at him. “After fifteen years, you wanted my forgiveness?”

“I loved you, Mia,” he said, “and I threw you away to chase chemical highs. I should have thrown away the drugs instead, and been the father of

your children.”

I started to cry. There was nothing I had wanted more, fifteen years ago. But Henry had walked away.

“You’ve ruined my life,” I said to him. “I was doing okay, and now you’ve come back. What a mess.”

“No, Mia,” Henry said, taking my face in his hands. “I’m not back. One last time, remember? You’ll never see me again after tonight.”

“What?” My chest hurt. “Henry Wilton, you can’t do this to me

again.” I slapped his face and cried.

“Remember me like this, Mia,” he said, pulling on me until I gave in and leaned into him. “Remember that I love you more than life itself.”



After fifteen years, Henry had resurfaced, and he still loved me. I couldn't let him go, of course.

At nine o'clock he told me goodbye and walked back through my door. I watched him lope down the stairs with that easy gait of his,

then out the building's entrance. I counted to six, and then I followed him.

He led me south down Racine Avenue, past the neat brownstones and the office quarter, into the seedy part of town. Halfway down Patson I started getting catcalls and whistles, but Henry didn't turn to look. Why would he? There were hookers on every corner, dopers in every alley, sidewalk criers pimping the city's cleanest sex-vid suites and sense-holos that were better than the real

thing!

Henry ducked into a darkened side street and I almost lost him; the weak light from an opening door found him for me again. I followed him up the greasy stairs, staying one flight behind, glad for the arguments behind thin walls that muffled my steps. He knocked on a door on the third floor; it cracked, then opened to swallow him whole.

What had I been thinking, following Henry into Sin City? He hadn't quit at all. No, coming here, to

a dump like this, he had to still be using. I'd followed a lie.

But I was here now.

I left the stairwell and knocked on the door. A pair of dark eyes squinted at me through the crack. "Yeah?"

"I'm here for Henry."

"Don't know no Henry."

Yeah, right. "The guy that just walked in here. I'm his skin." I'd learned the jargon fifteen years ago; I hoped it hadn't changed.

The door swung open and a

short, fat man let me in without a word. I followed him to the back.

I sat on a filthy, sagging couch without cushions that smelled of perfume and vomit, beside an emaciated girl with wide, empty eyes. There were three or four more like her, scabby skin flaking and dessicated hair falling out in patches. The fat man said "him" and pointed at a chair in the corner, and I saw the fifth one. He was too far gone to walk, nothing but a bag of bones, with gaping sores where the bugs

that make the dope had finally eaten their way to the outside. Two boys came in and picked the dooper up, then carried him down the hall.

“That far gone, and still using,” I whispered, aghast.

“He ain’t using no more,” the girl beside me said. She laughed, as if it were the funniest thing. “He here to pay his last respects.”

“You.” The fat man was back, pointing at me. “Get up.”



The fat man led me through a bookcase, down four flights of stairs, through a triple-padlocked door and down another hall into a surprisingly clean room, jolting my understanding of where I was. As soon as the door closed behind us, his demeanor changed.

“Do you know where you are, ma’am?” he asked me.

I shook my head, thoroughly confused.

“I didn’t think so. ‘Skin’ fell out of fashion ten years ago, before our

work existed.” He smiled at me. “You’re in a wish house. What we do isn’t legal, but we feel a moral obligation to serve those in need.”

“You help dopers die,” I said, thinking I understood.

The fat man shook his head. “No, ma’am. They’re already dying. We help them use the time they have left for that one last, most important thing.”

The double import of his words sliced into me, and I started to cry. “I don’t understand. I just saw him an

hour ago. He was in perfect health. He can't be dying."

"Your Henry still has a little energy left," he said softly. "Enough for one last glimpse. Come with me."

* * *

Henry lay on a molded table, completely encased in a bulky white suit hooked up to a ceramic box, invisible behind the opaque visor of his flat-fronted helmet, like a space miner or a virtuvid gamer.

Or a gravewalker.

“I thought those were forbidden technology,” I said.

“They are,” the fat man replied. Then he closed the door and left us alone.



Several years back, some government scientist figured out how to extract energy from dead things. The discovery was hailed as the solution to Earth's energy crisis: suck the remaining life out of banana peels, dead rats, anything that had

once lived. It didn't solve all our energy problems, but it did halve them, and the government scientist won a Nobel prize.

Then another government scientist figured out how to channel the energy back into physical form. Not just any form; for reasons too complicated for me to understand, the energy from a dead banana would only make another banana without requiring thousands of times the juice. But the banana it made was young and firm: it would seem the

banana had been reborn. The rematter cage, and the men who created it, made the cover of Global News Weekly. It had been massive news.

It didn't take long for someone—someone not on the government payroll—to try it on dead bodies.

There was a catch, of course. It was all so terribly inefficient. Only a fraction of the energy in a thing could be extracted; only a fraction of that could be converted back to substance. So the reborn banana was

lovely, but it was ephemeral: it lasted a matter of minutes, maybe an hour. Then it flickered, thinned, and evaporated, leaving nothing the scientists could measure in its wake.

As a way to cheat death, then, the technology was a failure.

But the terminally ill, people in chronic pain, people locked in bodies that had failed them, they all flocked to the idea: take the energy from their traitorous bodies and create a new one. Better a few hours lived well than years hobbling forth in

misery. Alas, choosing the time and manner of one's death is as illegal today as it has always been. The government banned the gravewalker suits and executed the men who'd created them for habitually aiding and abetting suicide. Ironical, isn't it?

That made the cover of Global News Weekly, too.

* * *

"Henry?" I said. Then louder: "Henry?"

Metal scraped the tile floor

behind me and I turned. Young, perfect Henry stood up from a stool behind the door. He had a photo vault in his hands, its thin display pages sprawled open like an old-fashioned book.

“Why didn’t you come to me for real?” I wailed. “We could have had years together.”

He shook his head. “I fucked up my life, Mia. There was no other way back to you.”

“You never stopped using, did you?” I wasn’t accusing him. I

understood why he'd lied to me. "That's why you never came for me."

"I quit years ago. After I got clean, I went looking for you." He closed his eyes. "Someone else was the father of your kids, and you seemed happy. So I started over without you, but there was no life for me without you. Not clean." His mouth trembled. "So I started using again."

"Oh, god, Henry," I whispered. "I would have left him for you in a heartbeat."

He put his face in his hands and wept. I wept with him.

“Well, we’re here now,” I finally croaked. He lifted his face, and I pulled him to me. “Spend the rest of your life with me, Henry Wilton,” I said. “Till death do us part.”

We kissed urgently, greedily, until his lips no longer pressed into mine but only brushed them; then they were gone, and I was left kissing air beside a puddle of dead in a gravewalker suit.

My husband called me out on the photograph when he got home after midnight. “What’s this supposed to mean?” he said, his voice equal parts worry and anger. “Why is your old boyfriend’s picture on the mantel?”

“In memoriam,” I called from the bedroom. “I found out Henry died today.”

“Huh,” my husband grunted, unbuckling his pants as he came into the room. “Well, that’s a shame, honey. I know he meant a lot to you

once. Awful young to die.”

“Yes,” I said.

“Do you want to go to the funeral?” he asked, suddenly magnanimous. “We can get a sitter for the kids.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I don’t need to see the body. I’ve already said my own private goodbye.”

My husband nodded and climbed into bed. “I’m sure he heard you, sweetie, wherever he is now.”

“Yes.” I laid my hand on his and gave him a little squeeze. “I know he

did.”



Death Comes for
Maggie McDaniel
by Grayson Bray
Morris

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Hall



I'm waiting for April like usual, up on the flat rock. I got a bottle of wine with me, also like usual, and it's mighty hard not to screw off the cap and start without her. But April's eyes go wide and frightened when I drink alone, like she's seeing into a future with a girlfriend who gets drunk and beats on her like her daddy does now, so I make myself wait.

It's pretty up here, back behind the MacLiven homestead up the

mountain. The moon's so close you think you ought to could touch it, and this big, flat lip of rock is wide enough to lie on, both of us, and summer nights like this one it's nice and cool against your cheek. You can see flat across the valley, past April's house and past mine, past town, on down to the river and across, back up the next mountain. And it's quiet, quiet enough so a girl can hear herself think for a change.

I'm whistling, swinging my legs off the edge and just letting my mind

wander in peace when I finally hear her shuffling through the leaves. My stomach does a little flip, sending a wave of warmth out through the rest of me. I stand up and walk back toward the trees to meet her.

“Hey, Ape,” I say, loud enough for her to hear me but not so loud the MacLiven dogs’ll take to barking. “Let me help you with the munchies.” April works in the five-and-dime after school, and even though she’s always a little late, she’s a sweet girl and she does a good job, so they give

her lots of little free things she can't afford to buy, like brand-name potato chips and bottles of Pepsi Cola.

April don't answer me, and I get a tight feeling in my gut, thinking maybe her daddy's been whomping on her again, and we're going to spend the evening trying to stop her face from bleeding, me sitting real close to her in the parts where she cries—I can't never hold her like I want to, cause she always hurts so damn bad—and me just watching in

the parts where she yells and kicks tree trunks. Those ain't our finest evenings, let me tell you. I like it a lot better when her daddy's so drunk he don't even notice April, and she comes up here happy to see me and we talk about which star's the brightest, and what poor girl Eddie Coltrane is doing this week, and how many days it is till we ditch this hellhole together. Cause me and April are going to California in the spring. We got to wait till I graduate, cause Mrs. Jackson says I'm smart

enough to go to college if I work real hard, but you can't go to college unless you've finished high school. But soon as I do, we're gone.

We won't have to hide ourselves out there in California.

You sure as heck got to hide here in Bolton County, North Carolina, though. You ain't a makeup-wearing, frilly-dress-loving girl itching to marry a redneck out here, you ain't nothing. You're worse than nothing. So me and April wear the same things Carla Ann and Mattie Rae and

all them other girls wear, and we laugh and giggle when the football team at Bolton High walks by, and we never hold hands in public or look at each other funny or anything that might get us tied to the back of a heavy-duty pickup and drug down the side of a mountain on a Saturday night.

We ain't stupid, April and me.

Anyway, April ain't answering me, and I'm already unscrewing the cap on the wine to give her the first sip cause she sure as heck is going to

need it on a beating night. Then I drop the blamed thing, and I'm down on my knees feeling around for it and trying to hold the bottle straight so the wine don't spill, when I stop cold. Cause them feet right there in front of me ain't hers. They're big, man big, and all of a sudden I'm thinking maybe April's daddy found out about us and is coming to kill me. I nearly pee myself. But instead I make myself look up, and there's Eddie Coltrane standing in front of me. For a second

I feel like I'm floating, I'm so relieved, and then it sinks in who it is. Being alone up on the MacLivens' mountain with Eddie Coltrane is only a little better than being here with April's daddy.

Suddenly I hope April don't show up. I'm pretty tall, but I ain't no match for Eddie Coltrane, and I'd die if he hurt her.

"Evening," Eddie says. He's looking right over me, like I ain't even there, rooting around in the dirt by his feet where he could kick

me real easy. Anyway, it's plain weird that Eddie Coltrane would say anything that cordial to me. Maggie the Hag, he calls me. I think maybe he's trying to get me to answer him all friendly-like, and then he'll laugh that low, mean way he does when he's got some poor git cornered, and a bunch of his football team buddies will jump out from behind the trees and gang bang me. So I don't say nothing back. No point in being laughed at on top of everything else. But I do stand up, out of reach of

them big feet of his.

Then Eddie says, "No, sir." I frown at him, cause I ain't asked him nothing, and though it'd be just like Eddie Coltrane to say I ain't pretty enough to be a girl so I must be a boy, he sure wouldn't ever call me anything as polite as "sir." Besides, he still ain't looking at me, even though we're nearly the same height and I'm standing right in front of him. So I stare a little harder at Eddie's eyes, and then I turn and look where he's looking, sort of off over my left

shoulder.

Then I whoop and duck behind Eddie—like he'd ever protect me—cause some stranger is standing on the flat rock where I was just sitting. I know he's a stranger cause he's the handsomest man I've ever seen, so handsome you couldn't ever forget him. They don't come that handsome in Bolton County. Not even Eddie's that handsome, not even with all his Brylcreem hair and his fancy clothes.

Maybe the stranger's giving

Eddie handsome tips. That makes me snicker. Ordinarily Eddie would make fun of the way I laugh, but he don't so much as turn his head. "Yes, sir, I done it just like you told me," he says, but he don't sound quite like himself, and it hits me that Eddie Coltrane is frightened.

Suddenly I think maybe I'd of been smarter to stay on my knees, where the stranger might not see me. But of course he'll of seen me already, when I was sitting there on the flat rock whistling like an idiot.

“Who you talking to, Eddie?” I whisper in his ear. I figure he might not realize it’s me, being preoccupied with the stranger and all, and he might go ahead and answer, like a reflex. But he don’t say a word, like he don’t even hear me.

All of a sudden I remember April, and I steal a look at my watch, glad the moon is so bright tonight. She’s almost an hour late. She ain’t never this late, unless she ain’t coming at all, and that always means her daddy’s been beating on her. My

gut ties itself in a knot, and I want to run down the mountain, away from Eddie and the handsome stranger, toward April's house to see if she's okay. But I don't want the stranger to notice me. So I wait for him and Eddie to finish up, telling myself that even on the worst beating nights, April's daddy ain't never broke anything, and when he's sober he's nice enough, and you can tell he more or less loves her. She'll be hurting and bruised and probably bleeding, but she'll be all right.

I'm trying mighty hard to reassure myself.

But my gut is all twisted up, and the longer I stand there, the worse I feel. Tonight don't feel like every other night somehow. And he might love her when he's sober, but when he's drinking April's daddy forgets all that, and one of these days he might go too far. He never has, I tell myself, but I know better. Never has don't mean never will.

Stranger or no stranger, I turn to run. I take two steps and hit

something hard and smooth and cold as ice. I yelp at the pain where my fingers and my knee hit it; then I look back, scared the stranger's heard me, but he ain't moved. I turn back to see what I hit and how far I got to go to get around it, but ain't nothing there. So I pick up my foot, and I move it forward real slow, and it hits a patch of ordinary air and stops dead. I put out my hands and they hit something that ain't there, too, something hard and smooth and cold and invisible.

That's when I start hollering.

It's a dumb thing to do, shouting at the top of my lungs like that, and I know it, but somehow I can't make myself shut up. I'm panicked six ways to Sunday, and somehow hollering seems like the only thing to do. I go on for must be five minutes, till my throat hurts, and don't neither Eddie nor that stranger budge. Don't nobody come running up the mountain to save me, neither, though the MacLivens got to have heard me. Not even their dogs take

to howling. I suddenly wonder if the stranger has killed the MacLivens and their dogs, and if he's going to kill Eddie and me, and my hands and my knee hurt like the devil and I'm worried to death about April and I just don't understand what's happening. So I stop hollering and start crying.

And still don't neither of them so much as look my way. Eddie just says, "Yes, sir," one more time, and then he turns and takes off down the mountain, almost knocking into me

on his way. But he don't hit no wall. And when he goes crashing past the MacLiven place, making all kinds of noise, the dogs start in barking. A big whoosh of relief floods through me.

When I look back at the flat rock, the stranger's gone.

I reach out my hand, but the invisible wall's still there. I slide my hand across it, walking and then running, but it don't end. Not to my right, not to my left. It don't make no sense. None of it does.

I lay off crying long enough to

take a big swig of wine, and that helps a little with the churning knot of fear in my gut, so I take another one. All this spooky stuff is making me dizzy, so I sit down right where I am and go ahead and chug down half the bottle for good measure. After that I don't feel like crying no more, which is good, but the wine don't take away the fear about April. I got to find me a way through that wall. I try to stand up, but instead I fall off to one side, panting like a lady about to have a baby. The trees are

spinning around me, and I shut my eyes to make them stop. I'm a right fool, drinking so much wine like that when I need to be finding a way down to April. "I'm coming," I shout, only it comes out more like a bullfrog croak. "I'm coming to you, Ape. I'm coming. I swear, as soon as I can stand up."

* * *

I'm making little hand puppet shadows on the flat rock—the moon's that bright tonight—when I

hear her shuffling through the leaves.

“Hey, Ape,” I say, pushing myself up and walking toward the trees. “Bout time you got here. A girl could starve to death waiting on you.” I’m in a particularly fine mood, and I can’t help needling her a little. April’s always just a little bit late.

She don’t say nothing, and I get a queasy feeling in my gut. “Ape?” I say, and I start walking a little faster. “You all right? Your daddy been beating on you again?”

She walks out of the trees then,

and I get a good look at her. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, April, look at your face!” I put down the bottle of wine and run over to her, but she walks past me and sits down on the rock. I pick the wine back up and hurry over to sit down beside her. “Oh, baby,” I whisper. “It ain’t never been this bad before.” One eye’s so puffed up I don’t think she can even see out of it, and her lip is busted up good, and just about her whole face is purple in the places where it ain’t crusted over from the bleeding. Her legs are

bruised up where they stick out under her summer dress, and her arms, too, and one of them is broke, wrapped up in a homemade sling.

Her daddy ain't never broke nothing before. A slick finger of fear slides up my throat.

"April," I say. "April, look at me, honey." But she just keeps staring out over the valley. I look where she's looking, down at her house. Lit up like that, it looks inviting, friendly, like a normal house where normal people live. Potted geraniums on the

front porch, jasmine growing up the sides. It's too far away to see, but I know the walkway is swept clean all the way to the road. April keeps a tidy house. I always tell her she don't have to clean for me when we move to California. We'll do the cleaning together, I tell her. And our California house will be a normal house, where normal people live. A home.

“April,” I say again.

She still don't say nothing or look at me. Looks like she's going to

do angry first tonight, before miserable. I screw off the cap and hold out the wine. She don't take it. I hold it out for a while, till my arm starts getting tired. Then I put it down. I ain't going to drink till she does, not on a night like this one.

I look back toward the valley, toward my own house. No lights on there. Doors'll be locked, too. My folks don't care if you stay out late, but they'll tan your hide good if you wake up any of the little ones trying to get back in before morning. Most

Fridays I sleep in the shed after seeing April home safe. I got a corner set up with an old mattress made of rags, and a couple of books I like, and a stash of cheap wine. April don't know about the wine. Heck, she don't know I sleep in the shed on Fridays. It would just upset her to know.

“You going to tell me what happened?” I say after a couple more minutes. April just puts her head down on her knees and starts crying.

Guess it's going to be miserable

first, after all.

“I came up here as soon as I could get away from him,” she says, all muffled through her arms and her knees and that fat lip.

“I know you did,” I say. “I didn’t mean anything about you being late. I was just teasing you. You know that.”

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here Friday night,” April whispers. I frown, cause tonight’s Friday night, but she goes on talking. “I should of come, but he was watching me.” She’s full-out

sobbing now, and I forget asking what she means about Friday night. I just want to stop her from hurting so. “If I’d of come, it wouldn’t of happened.”

“April, honey, don’t go blaming yourself,” I shush her. I’m having a real hard time not drawing her to me and holding her tight, here in the one place where I can. “You can’t help what that awful man does to you. It ain’t your fault.” I don’t say besides, if you’d of snuck out, he’d of just whomped you worse later, so it

wouldn't of mattered anyway. Course, if she'd of snuck out, he might have been passed out drunk by the time she got home, and it wouldn't of happened, like she said.

Then I shiver at the thought of him whomping her worse than this. I open my mouth to tell her we need to think about leaving Bolton County sooner, diplomas be damned. Better a dead-end shit job for the rest of my life in California than April paralyzed for life. Or dead. Better anything than that. But she

lifts her head and starts talking before I do.

“I got so much I want to tell you, Maggie. Should of told you long before now. But you know I ain’t a big talker.” She sobs, loud and heartbreaking. “Anyway, none of it matters anymore. Just one thing matters: I love you, and I will always love you, more than I love my own heart. God, Maggie, I should have been here with you.” She stands up, shaking and heaving and just as miserable as I’ve ever seen her. And

that's saying something.

“April, wait!” I holler as she turns and runs off into the trees. She ain't never given me a speech like that. It sounds like a goodbye speech, and I think I might be sick. I jump up and take off after her, but I slam into something hard near the tree line, and I fall smack dab on my butt in the leaves. By the time I stand back up and snatch a handkerchief out of my pocket to press against my busted lip, she's already at the MacLiven place; I hear the dogs barking as she

wails on past like her heart's breaking.

It nearly breaks my heart, too, her thinking she's done something wrong. Course I wish she'd been here all the times she didn't show, but I sure don't blame her for it. Suddenly I'm on fire, mad as a hornet, balling up my fists and swinging at the air. "Someday I'm going to kill that no-good daddy of yours, I swear," I yell as hard as I can. "I swear it. You hear me, April? He ain't never going to lay another hand on you, I swear."

Then, just as sudden as it came, the fire leaves me. That was mighty dumb of me, telling the whole world I'm going to kill April Burgaw's daddy like that. Course most of the world can't hear me, but the MacLivens can. I sit down in the leaves, tired and sad and hungry, and then I remember tonight's terrible milestone. "Oh, April," I say. "We got to get us out of here before something awful happens."

And then I figure out what she was trying to tell me: her daddy's

forbid her seeing me. The broken arm is his way of saying he really means it.

I crawl back over to the wine on my hands and knees and sit there on the flat rock drinking it down, watching the moon and the stars and wondering if in California there really is a home for April and me, a real home like the word's supposed to mean, where nobody hits anybody and folks are just happy to see two decent people in love.



I'm lying on my back on the flat rock with my left eye scrunched tight and my hand like a telescope in front of my right eye, looking at the full moon, bright as I've ever seen it. I'm about to switch eyes when I hear her shuffling through the leaves. I sit up and turn toward the trees.

"You got the munchies, April?" It ain't the way I normally say hey to her, but I'm real hungry. "I got the wine, like always." I'm already screwing off the cap. I'm suddenly

real thirsty, too.

But it ain't April walking out of the trees. It's Mattie Rae and Carla Ann, and they're looking around like they're scared a bear is going to jump out and eat them. Carla Ann keeps smoothing the front of her dress, the way she does when she's nervous.

"This the right place, you think?" she says.

"Yeah," Mattie Rae says, nodding her head. "This is just the way April said it looked. See, there's the flat rock, over there."

I don't say nothing at first, cause I ain't too happy about April telling Carla Ann and Mattie Rae about our special place. I mean, it's okay with me if other folks come up here sometimes, heck, it ain't like the place is a big secret or nothing, but it irks me that April's invited other folks to horn in on our evening, in the one place where we can be alone together.

Maybe Mattie Rae and Carla Ann feel the same way, cause they don't say nothing to me, neither, but

just stand there looking uncomfortable.

“It ain’t going to get no easier, Mat,” Carla Ann whispers. “Let’s just do it and get it over with.”

Do what? Suddenly I get a queasy feeling in my gut, like maybe April is breaking up with me and she’s sent these two to tell me. But no, that ain’t right; nobody knows about us, and April sure ain’t going to tell nobody, not here in Bolton County. I mean, Carla Ann and Mattie Rae are all right, and I guess they’re sort

of friends, but you tell them something and pretty soon everybody knows it. And maybe they'd be okay about us, but sure as shinola the rest of our redneck town wouldn't. April knows that as good as me.

Mattie Rae clears her throat and nods and takes Carla Ann's hand in hers. That throws me for a loop, and for a minute I think maybe April and me aren't as alone as we've always thought we are. I stand up and walk toward them just as they start

walking toward me. Carla Ann pulls Mattie Rae to a stop about a yard away from me, and I stop, too.

“So what’s this ain’t gonna get no easier?” I ask. “Go ahead, spit it out.” I’m kind of excited, like it’s Christmas Eve.

“This is silly,” Mattie Rae says. “She can’t hear us, nohow.”

“Now Mattie Rae, you know that handsome man said she could,” Carla Ann says. “So just go ahead and say it.”

“How come I got to be the one to

say it?" Mattie Rae says, pulling her hand out of Carla Ann's. "Why don't you say it, if you're so keen to get it said?" Carla Ann just looks at her.

"What the heck y'all talking about, I can't hear you?" I say. "I'm standing right here in front of you. Just say it, for chrissakes." I unscrew the wine—it don't look like April is coming—and take a long swig. I don't offer them none. Not yet, not till I hear what they got to say.

Then I wonder what they mean about a handsome man. I don't

know no handsome men. Couple of good-looking boys, sure, but no men. Life in Bolton County sucks a body dry pretty fast. But before I can ask about him, Mattie Rae starts talking a mile a minute.

“All right, all right. Hey, Maggie, if you’re here, me and Carla Ann got something to tell you. We’re awful sorry about what happened. Thing is, we saw you and April kiss one time, and I mean, if that’s your thing, well, okay, but we done something stupid and talked about it at lunch

one day. And Eddie Coltrane and his gang heard us talking, and we tried to say ‘oh, nothing,’ but you know how he is, and so we ended up kind of telling him about y’all kissing.” Mattie Rae stops for a breath, and when she goes on, her voice is quavery. “Oh, Maggie, we’re so sorry. He’s probably the one left that note for April’s daddy, saying it was you she was sneaking out with at night, what made him tear her up so good this last time. And, you know, all the rest.” She waves her hand around. “If

we hadn't gone blabbing our mouths, none of it would have happened." Mattie Rae is outright sobbing now. Carla Ann is sniffing, too, but she comes over and puts an arm around Mattie Rae and shushes her.

My head is spinning. Eddie Coltrane knows about me and April. April's daddy knows about us. Oh, mercy. I feel six kinds of sick. The sky is crashing down. I don't even say anything to the girls when they turn around and walk off. I just take

a long, long chug on the wine.

We can't wait till graduation no more. Me and April are going to have to leave right away. First thing in the morning, we're going to pack up and hit the road, before anything really terrible can happen. If something terrible ain't already happening, right this minute. Mattie Rae said April's daddy had whomped her good. That must be why she didn't come tonight. What if he does worse before morning? What if he kills her? I got to get her out of there

right this very second.

I take maybe four steps toward the trees before I stumble and fall. My stomach feels awful and I know I'm going to be sick. My head is reeling and I can't even handle being on my hands and knees, so I lay down right there in the dirt and close my eyes and wait for the world to stop spinning. And all the while my heart is bonking like a wild thing, crazy scared I ain't going to make it to April in time.



I'm lying on the flat rock, swinging my legs over the edge, looking up at the stars. Except I can't hardly see no stars, what with the moon being so bright. I'm just about to go take a wee in the woods when I hear her shuffling through the leaves.

"Hey, Ape," I call out. "I'll be right back, you go on and open up the wine." Then I stop dead in my tracks and my stomach does sixty million flips, cause it ain't April. It's Eddie Coltrane.

What the heck is Eddie Coltrane doing up here?

I tell myself to stay calm. Maybe he's coming up here with his latest conquest. Plenty people know about this place, no reason Eddie can't use it now and then. The MacLiven dogs don't even bark anymore, less you make a lot of noise.

I shiver; me and April are lucky we ain't never run into Eddie up here before.

I'm already out of the moonlight, in the shadow of the trees, and Eddie

don't look like he's seen me or heard me. Don't know how he missed hearing me, but I'm glad. I stand there, still as a stone, and wait for him and the girl to get hot and heavy so they don't hear me sneaking off. I left the wine over on the flat rock. Guess that'll be my present to them.

But Eddie just stands there and looks around, real uncertain-like, and nobody else comes out of the woods behind him.

"Maggie," he says. I near about pee my pants. He's heard me after all,

and he knows it's me. How's he know it's me? Cause I said Ape? Does he recognize my voice?

Suddenly I hope April ain't coming after all. I'd die if he hurt her.

Then I realize he called me Maggie. Not Maggie the Hag, just Maggie.

"I got something to tell you," he says. "I hope you can hear me. He says you can."

"Course I can hear you," I say, forgetting I wasn't going to let Eddie know exactly where I'm standing.

“He, who?”

“I done something that turned out bad by accident,” Eddie says, “and then he said I had to do something else bad, on purpose, to make it good. I know that don’t make no sense, but that’s what he said.”

“No, that don’t make no sense,” I say. I don’t add, but it sounds like the kind of self-serving horseshit you’d come up with.

“I swear, Maggie, I never meant for you to die. I swear it.”

That sounds so ridiculous that I forget all about being afraid. “Eddie Coltrane, what the heck are you talking about?” I say. “I ain’t dead, you can see that for yourself.” I step into the moonlight so he can see me. But he don’t turn his head to look at me; he just keeps on staring out over the flat rock.

“But he said killing you by accident was worse than killing you on purpose, cause when you kill somebody on purpose it don’t leave no unfinished business. That’s what

he said.” Eddie sounds like he don’t understand what he’s saying anymore than I do. “And he said I had to do this thing to clean up the unfinished business, and then I had to come tell you, so you could rest in peace.” He’s working real hard not to cry, I can see that. I get a real queasy feeling in my gut. I ain’t never seen anything that could get Eddie Coltrane close to tears.

“What thing, Eddie?” I say. “What did you do?” I think I might be sick. Tell me it wasn’t April.

Then Eddie flinches and stands straighter. "Yes, sir," he says.

I look at the flat rock, where Eddie's looking, and some stranger is standing on it. He's the handsomest man I've ever seen, which is maybe a trick of the moonlight, but mercy, he is breathtaking, even to me.

The stranger points at me, and Eddie turns his body to face me, but his eyes are kind of searching all around, like he can't see me. But that stranger sees me. He has eyes that are dark and bright at the same time, like

they're lit up from inside, and I can tell he knows exactly where I am. The churning in my gut settles some, like I feel safer with him there, even though that don't make no sense.

“Me and some buddies come up here last Friday,” Eddie says. “We heard from Mattie Rae and Carla Ann that you and April were dykes. Tad MacLiven said y’all come up here a lot, so we spiked your wine and come up here to watch. That stuff in your wine was supposed to make y’all horny. We were going to

take pictures of y'all making whoopee and put them up at school."

Eddie says it like it's a normal thing to do. I sway on my feet, and I can't hardly breathe. We're ruined. If Eddie knows, then the whole school knows. April's daddy will know. April! Oh, Lord, her daddy'll kill her. I got to go get her out of there. I turn and run toward the trees, but I don't get ten steps before I smack into something hard. It's so hard I bust my lip, and I start to cry cause of the pain, and cause of the whole horrible

mess me and April are in.

Eddie goes on talking while I pull a handkerchief out of my pocket and press it to my lip.

“But April didn’t show that night, and me and the guys got bored waiting, so we left. Then you drank the whole damn bottle of wine by yourself, and you died.” Eddie says it like it’s my fault for not knowing the bottle was spiked. Then my brain catches up with his words.

“I died?” I shout. “I died? What do you mean, I died?”

“When you didn’t show up at school the next day, I come back up here to see, and there you was, dead as a doornail on that rock. I drug you off over there—” he points behind me, into the woods “—but I couldn’t dig a decent hole, so I drug you back and rolled you off the edge.” He points back at the flat rock, where the stranger is standing.

“I died?” I holler. I’m staring at the stranger, and he’s staring at me. He nods.

“Then this here gentleman

showed up.” Eddie clears his throat. “And he said his name was Death, and he was coming to collect you, but you couldn’t leave till you were at peace.” Eddie shifts his weight, like he’s getting uncomfortable again. “And seeing as I was the person who killed you,” he says, in a tone like he don’t agree with those words but ain’t going to argue with the person who said them, “I had to be the one to make things right so you’d be at peace.”

“What about April?” I shout.

Suddenly I feel cold. Her daddy is going to kill her, if he ain't already. "Is April dead, too?"

I hadn't realized I believe what Eddie's saying till I say that. I'm still staring at the stranger, and he shakes his head. I feel so relieved, I start crying again. I bring my hand up to wipe my face, and I can partway see the ground through it. It scares me so much I holler. But Eddie goes right on talking like he don't hear me.

"Mr. Death, there, said you was worried April's daddy would hurt her

too much one day. And the only way to free you was to make it so he couldn't hurt her no more." Eddie's voice is starting to shake. "He said I didn't have to kill him, cause it wasn't Angus Burgaw's time yet."

I'm holding both hands in front of me, in my shadow, then up higher, in the moonlight. I can see the sky through them, and the stranger. Death. Death is beautiful to look at, and not scary at all. Not like Eddie Coltrane and Angus Burgaw.

Eddie's stopped talking. "What

did you do, Eddie?" I say, to get him going again. But of course Eddie can't hear me. I've finally figured that out.

Eddie takes a deep breath and starts back up. "He said I had to wait three days, so he could visit April, and some other folks, and they could say their goodbyes and confess their sins to you. Then I had to knife Mr. Burgaw in the back, in one particular place. Mr. Death showed me exactly where, and he made me practice on himself. Over and over." Eddie

sounds like he's going to be sick.

“Say their goodbyes?” I say. “April came to say goodbye to me? April knows I’m dead?” I start crying again. I’d give everything to see April again, and she’s already been to see me, and I don’t remember it. It ain’t fair.

Then that makes me kind of laugh while I’m still crying, cause being dead sure trumps any other kind of unfair there is. Like I’m worrying about a stubbed toe when a bear’s just clawed off my right arm.

“It was terrible,” Eddie whispers.

“All that blood. And he screamed, like he said Mr. Burgaw was going to scream when I did it, so I wouldn’t get spooked.” And then Eddie Coltrane really and truly starts to cry. “Mr. Burgaw opened the door up for me and let me in and gave me a beer, and I stabbed him in the back and left him there on the floor in his own blood. I know I ain’t the nicest person around, but shit, Maggie, I ain’t never wanted to hurt nobody like that.”

I’m starting to understand. “You

paralyzed him, Eddie? So he can't hurt April no more?" My hands are just a sort of wispy shimmer now, like the air over the roads in town on a hot day.

"Mr. Death said Mr. Burgaw wouldn't remember what had happened, and I wouldn't get caught, as long as I came up here and told you afterward. And one more thing he said I had to tell you." Eddie clears his throat and wipes his face. "I got to make sure nobody hurts April long as she's in Bolton County." Then he

looks at Death. “Am I done, sir?”

Death nods at him, and I ain't never seen nobody look so relieved in my life. Eddie makes a little sort of bow, and then a salute, like he ain't sure what the proper etiquette is for saying goodbye to Death, and then he turns and takes off crashing down the mountain. The MacLiven dogs start in howling about five seconds later.

April's going to be okay. I take a deep breath and let it out, and it's like all my worries just flow on out of

me, too.

All I ever wanted in this life is for April to be safe.

I look at Death, and he smiles the most beautiful smile I've ever seen and holds out his arms to me. I walk over to him and he wraps me up tight in those arms, and I feel warm and safe. I feel like I'm home.



Putting Down Roots
by Grayson Bray
Morris

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My name was posted to the
Tau Ceti Three crew list,
along with my mother's.
Two sixth-years saw my broad grin
and came over to look.

“NiIllice,” the girl singsang,
dripping puffs of lavender lashglitter
onto my shoulder with every blink.
“But don’t get stuck alone with that
pilot. He’s soOOOoo boring.”

Her boyfriend—he had to be; he
was dusted in lavender lashglitter—
hooted. “She won’t have a choice. It’s

her first survey. She'll be ship-bound."

"Well, don't encourage him. Wear earplugs at aaAAaall times."

I raised an eyebrow.

"You don't want him to think you're listening. He's got this thing about filling up empty silence with what he calls conversation. The inner workings of the com system. The proper descent vector for using minimum fuel. Like that."

The girl tapped her right ear with long nails finely splayed into fans.

“Earplugs.”

The boy laid a proprietary hand around the girl's neck, and I saw his nails matched hers. Oh, honestly. “They'll keep the Raging Bore at bay. And if worse comes to worst, you can always let in a spider.”

They walked off with the razorblade laugh of the in-crowd bully, and I decided I liked the pilot on principle.

* * *

Time seemed to dilate until

hours were years, but launch day finally came. I was going to a planet! Never mind that I would be confined to the survey shuttle; I would be off the Ceiaides for the first time in my life. Even a psych eval droid for pilot couldn't have dampened my spirits.

The Raging Bore turned out to be a soft-around-the-middle young man named Mart Jansen with curly blond hair and a thick beard. Dr. Egil Parnum I knew; she was my mother. Our fourth and final crewmate was a tiny, honey-skinned woman named

Dr. Bjalili Okara.

The two-light-year trip down to Tau Ceti Three took forty-six hours: thirty-nine wormhole and seven straight-space. The pilot was in the cockpit for a few hours at each end to maneuver us away from the station and onto the surface, but the ship was on autopilot for the rest of the trip. The four of us spent our waking hours in the mainbay. Despite the sixth-years' stationside warning, the pilot was quiet as a mouse, and I felt smug. He'd turn out to be fascinating

when you gave him a chance, and we'd be fast friends by the end of the trip. Watch their glitter-addled brains wrap around that.

"Hey, Mart, why don't you join us for a game of cicce?" I waved my hand of cards.

"No, thanks. I don't know how." He looked up briefly, then reburied himself in his reader.

Or maybe I'd be spending the eight planetside days talking to myself.

"I'll be interested to see the

numbers on the higher animals this year. We're getting close," said Dr. Okara. "Another few decades and Teasy Three will be ready for colonization."

"Dr. Tresnik told our class that Epilepsy Five was going gangbusters. He said it might outpace Teasy Three," I said.

"Could be. But the Alpha Cen system is going to win this race by a light-year. I hear they're opening up the colonization roster on Acey Twelve next month. Or Nivenia, I

should say, now they've named it. Apparently it's filled with woody Iridaceae." Dr. Okara chuckled at her own joke.

"They say it's a beautiful world. Even more beautiful than Earth." I glanced at my mother. "I'm thinking of signing up."

"You are? That sounds exciting." My mother snorted air but Dr. Okara went on unperturbed. "Have you ever been to the Alpha Cen system, Laru?"

"No. I've never been to a planet,

period. The thought of living on one makes me feel like a pioneer.”

Mart had stopped reading to watch us.

“The real pioneering work is taking a hunk of dead rock and turning it into a living, breathing ecosystem,” my mother sniffed.

“Oh ho ho.” Dr. Okara grinned. “Looks like I’ve stumbled into a family can of worms.”

Mart stood up and plucked rapidly at the curls of his beard. “Can I, uh, get anyone some coffee?”

Were we making him nervous?

“Me,” Dr. Okara said, raising a finger.

“Me, too, please,” I said, smiling my friendliest smile. My mother nodded, and he trundled off to the galley.

“What are you signing up as?” Dr. Okara asked as she pulled her feet up under her on the smaller mainbay couch.

“They’ve got eight slots for biologists, but I won’t be finished studying in time to apply for one of

those.” My mother snorted again; I ignored her. “They have a lot of slots for elementary school teachers, and not enough people to fill them, I’ve heard.”

Mart returned with four cups of coffee. He placed two cubes each of sweetener and tannin binder in front of me, then watched intently as I dropped both cubes of binder in.

How very odd. Okay; okay; odd was okay. We were still going to be friends, or at least decent acquaintances, because I was not

going to agree with the opinions of two snot-for-brains trend-lemmings.

“Oh, Laru,” my mother sighed. “I can’t believe you want to throw away a promising career on the cutting edge of exobiology to go put down roots on some primitive planet just being colonized. You’re only nineteen. At least finish your education first.”

We’d been having this conversation for months. To my mother, planetary life was for placid,

stupid people who lacked imagination. The real thrill was out among the stars, playing God on the natural satellites orbiting them. There were twelve Ceti Sector planets in various stages of terraforming, and she had a hand in them all. Epsilon Eridani Four was just developing a greenhouse-gas cover; Tau Ceti Two had gotten its first injection of cyanobacteria. Tau Ceti Seven was scheduled for plant life later in the year. When my mother wasn't out surveying the

progress of gestating worlds, she conducted research on nanite-enhanced terraforming strategies back on the space station. Her work was varied and complex, and she loved it. She said it was exhilarating.

It sounded interesting. It sounded mentally stimulating. But exhilarating? I thought creating a community of human beings from wildly different places on a brand-new world with wide-open vistas sounded exhilarating. I'd watched plenty of old vids of Earth and Mars.

I wanted to live in a place with sunrises and sunsets, rain that fell at non-programmed intervals, forests to lose myself in, hills and mountains and rivers and lakes. I wanted the planetary experience.

The distance was the only thing that gave me pause: it took two weeks to travel the wormhole network from Alpha Centauri to the Ceti Sector. I'd be lucky to see my mother once a year. I'd seen her wrestling not to throw that in my face just to keep me on the Ceiaides. I

loved my mother for that, for fighting fair.

* * *

Mart touched our ship down with a dancer's grace just after breakfast. Automated sensors collected the first routine samples of atmosphere; by lunchtime, the ship's bioanalyzer had manufactured antibodies to the local airborne pathogens, and doctors Parnum and Okara went out on survey. I sat twiddling my thumbs in the mainbay

with Mart for the five-hour wait; until my mother and Dr. Okara returned with the first samples to process, I had no duties.

“So. So, uh, Miss Parnum, this is your first trip planetside?”

Okay, see? He was opening up. Let the bonding begin. “Yes. I’m a fourth-year. Biology.”

“The same field as your mother.”

I nodded. He nodded. He drummed his fingers on his thighs, then pulled at his beard. “Biology. I was terrible at biology. I’m not good

with animals and plants. Machines are more my thing. I would have liked to go into nanotech, but my scores weren't strong enough."

Nanotech was very complicated stuff; almost no one had the scores for it. "How'd you decide to become a pilot?"

"My dad would take me out sometimes. I liked sitting in the cockpit, reading off all the monitors. One hundred and thirty-eight individual pieces of information that let you predictably control a

complicated machine. And the precision! It's a thing of beauty. For example, do you know how a retroflux thruster works?"

"No, I don't." The words Raging Bore popped into my brain before I could stop them.

"It detects changes in temperature down to the picokelvin, and changes in density down to the milligram per cubic meter, and uses a series of nanosecond measurements to determine the vehicle's distance from the surface and the amount of

friction to apply to the landing pads. See, the measurements form a Garrison curve, and based on the tangential acceleration of the curve vector, the retroflux unit can tell what kind of surface material it's approaching—titanium alloy, organic matter, bioasphalt, whatever—and adjust accordingly. It's incredibly precise, and completely predictable.”

“I see.”

“I can show you how it works, if you'd like.” He stood up and gestured toward the cockpit.

I saw an hour sitting in the pilot's chair—no, standing behind it while he sat in it and pointed out dial after dial after button after switch. “That’s nice of you to offer, but to be honest, I’m not really a fan of shuttle tech. Besides, I’ve got some reading to do for class.”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” he said, almost before I’d finished speaking. He pulled at his beard and looked around the room. “Well, I’ll leave you to your books.” He pointed at my reader on the table. “Can I at least

get you a cup of coffee, or something?”

I looked up at the disappointed blue eyes in his pale, pudgy face. He seemed angry with himself, and that made me angry with the sixth-years—and myself. “Coffee sounds good. Tell you what—why don’t I teach you how to play cicce?”

I thought he’d say no again, but he surprised me. His eyes widened as he smiled and ran a hand through his hair. “Sure. Why not?” He turned toward the galley, then turned back

with a frown. “I have to warn you, Miss Parnum, I’m not very good at card games. I haven’t played much.”

“That’s okay,” I said, tapping controls to raise the low table to card-playing level and lift the smaller formfoam couch from its floor recess and inflate it. “Everybody has to start somewhere. And stop calling me Miss Parnum. Call me Laru.”

* * *

My mother and Dr. Okara returned with a rollcrate full of

samples and some kind of skin rash. “I’m itchy all over,” Dr. Okara complained.

Mart looked really alarmed.

“It’s not that unusual,” my mother said. “The analyzer only screens for serious pathogens. Survey crew come back with sniffles and rashes all the time. Biodiversity makes for a healthy ecosystem.”

“This is the first time anyone’s gotten sick on my run,” Mart said. “That’s twenty-two trips. One in twenty-two doesn’t sound common

to me.”

“Relax, Mart. It’s normal.” She put a hand on his arm and smiled at him. “Trust me; I’ve been doing this for a long time.”

Mart nodded, and she let go of his arm.

After dinner I suggested we do some singing. I love to sing, and my mother and I can belt out a pretty nice duet.

After our third or fourth song, Dr. Okara sniffed, coughed, and stood up. “Well, lovely as this is, I’m

going to hit the sack. I'm bushed, and this damned itch is making me cranky."

"You do that," my mother boomed. Singing always put her in a good mood. "Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer."

I laughed beside Mart on the larger mainbay couch and let myself fall against the rounded armrest. Dr. Okara looked at me like I was sprouting woody Iridaceae from my nose. "It's an old Terran song," I explained through my laughter.

“Your nose is a little red.”

“Aha. Charming.” Dr. Okara raised a hand and turned toward the cabins. “I’m out of here. Good night, all.”

“Where did you learn all these ancient songs?” Mart asked as we readied the table for a game of cicce.

“My father was a music buff. After he died, we played his collection as a way of remembering him. We learned our favorites by heart. It’s a lot of fun, singing together.”

“If you can call it singing,” Mart ventured, his eyes darting from one of us to the other.

“Good one, Mart,” my mother said, thumping him on the leg with a laugh. “I knew you had it in you.” She played a card. “And you’re very good at cicce.”

Mart blushed, looked at me with a shy grin, and ran a hand through his hair, and I wished those sixth-years could see us. Raging Bore? Hardly.

I slapped a card triumphantly

onto the table. “But not good enough. Cicce!”

My mother groaned. I stood and threw both arms into the air, eyes closed, head bobbing, hands in the old-Earth victory V.

Mart gathered the cards and looked at the clock. “Oh! It’s late. Past protocol.”

My mother looked over. “Just twenty minutes. Relax, Mart. I don’t sleep much back on the station, either. I’ll be fit enough for duty tomorrow.” She winked at me.

“Still, it’s protocol.” Mart plucked at his beard.

“That it is. Hup, off to bed with us all. Don’t stay up reading, Laru.” My mother leaned across the couch and plucked a skinboot from the floor. “You’ve got your work cut out for you tomorrow, analyzing the sequencer results. A hundred and eighty samples will take longer than you think.” She yawned and held up a hand. “Good night.”

“Sleep tight, Mama,” I said, standing and stretching. “Good

night, Mart.”

“Good night, Dr. Parnum, Miss Parnum.” Mart smiled at me. “I mean Laru.”

I lilted to my cabin, happy for the way Mart was responding to a little friendship and eager to stretch my biologist’s wings in the lab tomorrow. In ten hours I would be touching things that had grown on this planet.

* * *

My professors on the Ceiaides

had taught me to expect mutations in the Terran organisms transplanted to Ceti Sector worlds. Over the years, my mother had described many unexpected, and often beautiful, adaptations to which the older terraforming worlds' unique variations from Terran gravity and atmospheric pressure were beginning to give rise: the enlarged butterflies of Tau Ceti One; the swaying, lace-like plants of Alpha Centauri Sixteen. But the mutations in front of me were improbable

beyond reason.

“Laru? Lunch is ready.” Mart stood at the entry to the survey ship’s lab. “What’s wrong?”

“These samples. The DNA isn’t consistent. They’re like bizarre hybrids.”

Mart cocked his head. “Like what?”

“Two species intermingled. Like, say, two types of rose bush. But these are beyond possible. Take this one—this is a spider crossed with a birch tree.” I angled the sequencer’s screen

toward him.

His expression of worry turned to stone before he looked away. “Ah. I get it. Little Miss Funnypants. I’m not that gullible, whatever they told you about me.”

Oh, crap. Why did I have to mention spiders? I opened my mouth to apologize, but he was already gone. I stood up and shouted. “Hey! You know I’m not like that. I’m not joking, Mart.”

I heard him pad back toward me, then saw his face peer in. “You’re

not?”

“No.”

“Oh.” He took another step in.

“How is that possible?”

“Exactly. How is that possible? I don’t know.” I waved him closer. “All the birch tree samples Mom and Dr. Okara brought in yesterday have two kinds of DNA, from two completely different species. They’re *Betula papyrifera* everywhere except in the mitochondria. And there, they’re something else. An arachnid. An amphibian. Each one is different. So

far, I've found two species of fungus, one protist, four plants, and eight animals encapsulated in the mitochondrial nucleotide barcodes."

Mart was watching me intently, and I realized he was trying to understand what I had said. My ears began to burn: I'd just given my own retroflux thruster speech, to a much better audience than I had been.

"It's like finding a...a com unit speaker inside a thruster," I started again. "Not stuck onto the side of the control panel, but deep inside the

thruster itself, wired in like it belongs there.”

His eyes registered comprehension. “That’s very odd.”

“It certainly is.” I stood up and prowled the tiny lab. “The birch samples are the only ones like this. Everything else is what it’s supposed to be.” I stopped pacing and stared at Mart as if the answer to the riddle was written in miniature script somewhere on his face.

“Come eat lunch?” he said, squirming under my scrutiny. I

nodded and followed him to the galley.

“How did all this other DNA worm its way into the birch cells, Mart?” I watched him peel back the steamy polylactide film on a serving of fungoid tetrizzini, then funnel the condensing water into two cups of granulated strawberry. I wasn’t really asking; I was thinking out loud. He surprised me by answering.

“Dead spider scraped off the birch trunk?”

I shook my head. “All the foreign

DNA was inside the birch cells. If it had been a dead spider, the spider DNA would be outside the birch cells. Like this cup on the table.” I picked it up. “Touching, but separate.”

“Dead spider that got inside the tree through a crack and disintegrated into the birch cells?” He slid my lunch over to me.

“Still wouldn’t work. That would be like spilling juice on your clothes—even if it sank into the fabric, it wouldn’t become part of the cloth.” I

speared a forkful of gummy tetrizzini. “The DNA in one wouldn’t mix with the DNA in the other.”

“Not even if it was there for a really long time?”

I swallowed and shook my head. “Most cells can’t penetrate another cell and release their DNA into it. Only viruses and gametes.”

“Gametes?”

“Reproductive cells.”

Mart cocked his head. “You mean sperm and eggs?”

I nodded. "In animals. In plants, it's pollen and ovules."

"So breathing in pollen is like breathing in sperm?"

"Yes, actually." I'd never thought of it that way.

"Another reason to be glad I don't go outside," Mart said into his cup. I snorted, and a second later we were laughing like hyenas.

"You'll make a really good teacher," he said when we finally got ourselves under control. "You explain things really well."

I was moved far more than I'd have expected by his words, and I realized I was actually really worried I'd be awful at it. "Really?"

He nodded. "You made all that make sense. I'm terrible at biology, but you turned it into thrusters. Nobody's ever done that with me before."

* * *

"They aren't answering," Mart called from the mainbay. "Probably in the com's null spot. I'll try again in

thirty minutes.”

My mother and Dr. Okara wouldn't be back from survey for another three hours. I'd redone all the birch samples and driven myself crazy trying to figure out what my results meant. I was desperate to hear what they thought. Maybe we were sitting on something enormous here. Some new evolutionary mechanism. I'd never heard of anything like it, in class or from my mother, which meant she'd never heard of anything like it, either. Which meant it was

BIG.

A major discovery like this could make me a very desirable commodity. How could I possibly wait three more hours? “Let’s try them again.”

Mart raised his eyebrows and looked at the panel clock. “It’s only been five minutes.”

“So?”

“So protocol is to wait thirty.”

I was buzzing with adrenaline. “Jesus, Mart, stop quivering on the altar of the holy gods of protocol.

Move over. I'll do it." He took a hurried step back and I sat down at the com panel. No answer.

I was too preoccupied with myself to register the look on his face when I turned around. "How big is this null spot you mentioned? How long before they're out of it?"

"That depends on their distance from the ship, and their orientation and velocity."

I looked upward and sighed.

"Generally at least thirty minutes." His politely unspoken Duh

hovered in the air between us, but I was too wound up to acknowledge that I was being a jerk. All I could focus on was how impossible it was to wait a second longer when I was sitting on something THIS BIG!

“Well, that’s too long.” I walked to the storage cabinet behind the galley and pulled out a helmeted exosuit, way bulkier than the flexible skinsuits my mother and Dr. Okara were wearing. Mart was right behind me; he grabbed my arm, and I read real panic in his face.

“Laru, you can’t go out there. It’s against protocol.”

“You want to go?” Of course outdoor-phobic Mart didn’t want to go; the horrible snideness of my comment finally cut through my adrenaline hyperbuzz. “I’m sorry. That was completely uncalled for. But I’m jumpy, and sitting around waiting on protocol isn’t my style. This might be something big we’ve discovered. I’m going to find Mom and Dr. Okara.” I finished pulling on the exosuit and checked the air tank,

then eased past Mart toward the airlock.

“Why are you wearing that suit?”

His voice was shrill.

I turned and laid a gloved hand on his shoulder. “Relax, Mart. This is all there is; I wasn’t issued a skinsuit. Besides, it’s good protocol, right?” I squeezed his shoulder, then let go and stepped into the airlock, excited but also just plain thankful for an excuse to escape the cramped, windowless ship after sixty-eight straight hours and giddy at the

thought of setting foot on an honest-to-goodness planet.

Mart waved frantically, and I opened the inner door. He looked faintly golden through my helmet's nanowire visorplate. "The null spots," he said. "One's off the nose, one's off the tail. They start out narrow, and get wider the further you go from the ship."

I beamed at him. "Thanks, Mart. I didn't know that." Then I closed the airlock, waved, and stepped out onto the surface humming "Zip-a-Dee-

Doo-Dah.”

* * *

I walked to the edge of the bioasphalt landing strip and paused. My left foot came down onto the leafy soil, which gave gently under my weight; then my right foot touched down. I took a slow, reverent breath and looked around. Damn the helmet and its muffling, goldifying barrier, marring my first taste of life outside a space station. Without it, I would have heard

birdsong, and the wind through the trees, and the rustling of small animals pattering away in search of cover; with it, I heard only the subdued crunching of my own footsteps. I reached up to loosen the neckline seal, then paused: I wasn't supposed to be outside at all. Let the review board see I'd broken the rules responsibly. I dropped my hand and started walking.

The smooth, even ground was covered in last year's leaves. Most had turned a decaying brown, but

here and there, tips of orange and yellow dotted the forest floor. Tau Ceti Three was well into its spring season, and the space above me was a vibrant green canopy through which sunlight filtered, dropping bright specks onto the ground in gently bobbing patterns. I stepped through the swaying net of light and ran my gloved fingers along the trunks, tracing lines in the fine layer of pollen that covered them. The oldest tree here was no more than forty; the last to be introduced were in their

first reproductive season, and younger than me.

The chuckle of running water filtered through my helmet, and I walked toward the sound. I squatted and peered eagerly into a middling brook, but no shining silver fish betrayed their positions; I saw only brown and gray pebbles lining the bottom, distorted in the swirling current. I longed to unlatch my exogloves and dip my fingers into living water, home to a trillion trillion trillion individual organisms

too tiny to see, living out their microscopic lives in a miniature world within a world. Right here in front of me, within arm's reach. For the first time, I truly understood the thrill on which my mother had so often waxed exuberant. I did feel like the creator standing before my creation, watching as it unfolded and grew and lived.

The temptation to touch it all made my fingers itch. But I was already walking a very fine line, and an unfounded disobey on my record

would keep me permanently out of the colonization rosters. My stomach clenched; was there really a reason I couldn't have waited for the others to return? Would the review board agree that three hours—no, thirty minutes—was too long to sit on my results?

I ran back to the ship, seeing nothing, hoping I could talk Mart into keeping my transgression a secret, knowing before I'd gone twenty steps that I wouldn't ask him to.

All my adrenaline had turned to churning acid in my gut. By the time I finished the UV bath and stripped off the suit, Mart was waiting outside the airlock. He was visibly relieved to see me, which, irrationally, pissed me off. “You were gone twenty-six minutes. The others aren’t back yet. I’ve been coming them every six minutes. I should get through to them soon. I should have explained the null spots better. They’re fairly narrow. I’ll show you the RF

patterns. You look worn out. Let me get you something to eat.” He was hovering solicitously beside my right shoulder, and I shoved him away. His eyes widened and I closed mine in instant and thundering regret.

“I’m sorry, Mart. It’s not your fault. Food would be great. I’m just mad at myself for torpedoing the thing I want most because I can’t frigging think two steps ahead.”

He didn’t answer. I opened my eyes and saw his cabin door closing.

Was there anything, anything, I

could possibly not fuck up today?

I sank to the formfoam couch and kicked the table, then picked up the cards and threw them at the galley wall with a long, hard yell. Mart didn't come ask me what was wrong, or if I wanted a cup of coffee. I was all alone with my reckless, idiot self.

* * *

I didn't have to wait three hours after all. My mother and Dr. Okara returned less than half an hour after I

did, both coughing and feverish.

Dr. Okara pushed the rollcrate into the mainbay and leaned against it, panting. "All I want to do is sleep."

"Ditto," my mother said. Then she frowned at me. "What's wrong, Laru?"

I shook my head. She looked really sick; her skin was splotchy and sweaty, and she was breathing in short little pants. All the excuse I needed not to dump the day's failure in her lap quite yet. "Just bored. Want me to make you some tea?"

Neither of them wanted tea; just enough water to down an analgesic before getting supine. Dr. Okara lurched toward her cabin as I kissed my mother's burning cheek. "Sleep well, Mama."

"You too, sweetie. Oh—how'd it go with the samples?"

"Fine." I smiled brightly. "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow."

She nodded and shuffled to her cabin.

And then I was all alone with my reckless, idiot self again.

I wallowed in misery for a while; then I tried to read for Terraforming II, but I couldn't get the words to stick. Eventually hunger was the only thing I could focus on, and I knocked on Mart's door.

"Mart?" I tried to hear movement, or even breathing, but it was quiet in there. "I'm really sorry about pushing you. I'm just mad at myself, and I took it out on you. I'm really, really sorry." No sound. "Look, um, I'm going to eat something, and I thought you were

probably getting hungry, too. I'll make us some dinner, okay? Come on out in fifteen minutes and it'll be ready. Okay?"

After another thirty seconds of silence, I trudged off to the galley and managed to heat up two foodpacks without burning down the ship. Mart didn't show. Maybe he was just sleeping. Or maybe he hated me now.

One thing was sure: sleep was out of the question for me. I cleaned up my galley mess and pulled the

day's rollcrate of samples into the lab.

* * *

Mart shook me awake. "Were you here all night?"

I blinked my eyes and looked around. "What time is it?"

"Oh seven hundred local."

"I guess I was." Then it hit me: Mart was talking to me. "Hey, look, I am so sorry about what happened yesterday—"

"It's okay."

"No, it's not, I shouldn't have—"

“It’s okay. I’ll make breakfast.” He padded out and I blinked at his receding back. Then I unstuck myself from the chair and followed him.

“The others are sick,” I said by way of conversation. “Sicker than they were, I mean. They had fevers. They came back early and went straight to bed.”

Mart looked up at that. “Fevers? What do they have?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Some local variant on the common cold, I

guess.”

“Can you test it?”

“You mean run it through the analyzer? I guess, but I don’t see why.”

Mart had forgotten all about making breakfast; he was looking at me—more like through me—as if he saw some giant six-armed ogre bearing down on us swinging spike-studded clubs in every hand. Poor Mart, so scared of things that were alive, and nobody who took him seriously. Well, I could take him

seriously. Especially after yesterday.

“Hey, sure. I’ll get a sample from my mom and run it through. Then I’ll have the synthesizer make up a batch of antibodies. Like a vaccine, to keep you from getting it. Wait here.”

I got a swab kit from the lab, then swung back into the galley on my way to my mother’s cabin and handed him a disposable face mask. “Here. You can wear this till everyone’s well again.”

He took it like a starving man

being offered a four-course meal.

My mother was still sleeping. I tiptoed over to her bunk and whispered “Mama?” but she didn’t wake. Her breathing was still short and rapid; her skin was mottled, with specks of white among flushed streaks of red. I touched her arm; still feverish. Then I touched it again: the specks of white were hard and smooth, like flattened grains of sand. I shook her again, harder. “Mama? MAMA?”

I wasted no time getting the

sterile swab out of its pipet. I wormed it between her slightly parted lips and waved it around inside her mouth, then practically fell over myself getting to the lab. “Okay, thing, analyze. Analyze. Analyze,” I chanted after I’d loaded the swab into an input tray.

A thousand years later, it pinged. No culprit: just the usual cornucopia of oral microbiota. “WHAT?” I shouted—which, of course, brought Mart running.

“What’s wrong?” he said through

his face mask. “What is it? Is it bad?”

I shook my head. “It’s nothing. Literally. The analyzer didn’t find anything making her sick. But she’s really sick, Mart. She won’t wake up.” I looked at him. “We’ve got to go back to the station. Let’s go, right now.”

Mart’s eyes were wide and he was close to hyperventilating. “We can’t.”

“We have to!” My shout ended in a wail.

“Protocol. Section eighteen point four. Sick survey crew will be denied

station reentry until the source of the illness has been identified.”

I wanted to scream. “But there’s nothing there to identify.”

“There has to be something. People don’t just get sick for no reason.”

“I know.”

“So there’s something.” Mart all but stamped his foot; his eyes were wild.

“Okay. Okay. Let’s think. It isn’t a virus. It isn’t a bacterium. It isn’t any kind of infection.”

“Cancer.”

“Too fast.” I shook my head.
“And both of them. It can’t be cancer.”

“But something like cancer.
Cancer’s not an infection, right?”

“Right, but—”

“Can you test for that with the things in here?” Mart swept his arm across the lab.

“I don’t know. But I’m telling you, Mart, it can’t be cancer. Cancer doesn’t just spring up overnight. The way they got sick is classic infection.”

“Maybe this planet has fast cancer. It has all kinds of crazy things. It’s got birch trees infected with spiders. It’s—”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Hold on. You said birch trees infected with spiders.”

“Yeah, just, you know, a figure of speech.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “Oh, my god.”

* * *

The only DNA in my mother’s

saliva was her own. So I went back and carefully scraped a sample from one of the hard, smooth, white patches spreading across her skin and ran it through the analyzer. Again no identifiable infectious agent; but the sequencer told a different story.

The mitochondrial DNA was my mother's. The nuclear DNA—the only DNA that mattered, the DNA that made the cell what it was—was *Betula papyrifera*.

My mother was turning into a birch tree.

“It was a figure of speech,” Mart said. “I don’t—how can this be happening?”

“It’s called transduction,” I said as I pounded out commands on the lab console. “We’ve been doing it in the lab for centuries, using viruses to move new genetic material into host cells to overwrite faulty genes. To make crops more resistant to station blight, or just to make them use less water. It’s also how we’ve gotten rid of most hereditary illnesses, like cystic fibrosis.”

Mart had that intent look again.

“Say you have a program with errors in one of its routines. You write a new routine without those errors and stick it in where the old routine used to be. That’s transduction.”

“Ah. Only the birch trees are rewriting the whole program.”

I nodded.

“I don’t understand how birch trees can do that.”

“Neither do I. But I just spammed the station with every bit of data

we've got. There are some really bright minds there." I chewed on a fingernail. "Someone will figure out how to make it stop."

* * *

I checked on Dr. Okara first; she was just like my mother. Short of breath, feverish, and splotchy skin with patches of smooth, hard white. I didn't know what to do for either of them. I sat with my mother, singing songs and telling her about yesterday's colossal fuck-up. That

made me weepy—not because I'd made such a mess of things, but because I didn't know if she would ever actually hear about it. I leaned against her after that and cried for a long time.

Mart was sitting at the mainbay com station when I came back out, still wearing his face mask.

“No news yet,” he said before I'd even opened my mouth. “I've been waiting, but nothing's come through.”

I nodded. I walked over to the

couch and sat down, then stood back up again and looked around the mainbay. I didn't know what to do with myself.

Mart swiveled to look at me. "You'll probably feel better in the lab. I'll make us something to eat."

* * *

Mart shook me awake in the lab chair. He looked like I felt: his cheek was creased where he'd slumped against the com panel in the mainbay when he fell asleep, and his eyes were

bleary. My eyes groped for the lab clock. Twelve hours since I'd sent up my mother's DNA.

“They’ve got something. They want you.”

I jumped to my feet, instantly awake, and followed Mart to the mainbay.

“Laru Parnum here,” I croaked into the com.

“Rikkel Smit. Miss Parnum, we’ve developed an immunoglobulin that will protect you and Mr. Jansen from infection. I’m sending the

blueprint now. Synthesis should take about six hours.”

I looked over my shoulder and smiled at Mart in relief. “That’s great news! Thank you so much, Dr. Smit.”

“We’re continuing to work on a fix to the invasive genome, but that will take some days longer. In the meantime, the immunoglobulin will protect you down there. We do need you to stay planetside until we have the delivery vector ready, so you can administer it.”

“Understood.”

There was a brief silence. “Miss Parnum, as I’m sure you understand, the immunoglobulin will only prevent future infection. It won’t cure your infected crewmates.”

“Right. I understand finding a way to reverse the infection will take longer. Do you know how much longer? My mother and Dr. Okara are very ill.”

Dr. Smit didn’t answer; I thought I’d lost the connection. “Dr. Smit?”

“Miss Parnum, there won’t be a

cure. There is no way to reverse what's happened.”

“But when you correct the birch pollen—”

“It will stop infecting new organisms. Period.”

I began to gasp air in sharp, sucking breaths that brought no relief. Mart crept toward me and rested a tentative arm around my shoulder, no doubt afraid I would hit him again. That act of bravery nearly undid me. I clung to his hand and clamped my mouth into a thin line

to still it.

“Miss Parnum...Laru, I am so, so sorry for your loss. Look, I know this is cold consolation, but your discovery will save the planet's ecosystem from ruin. Five generations on the Ceiaides have invested a hundred and sixty years into terraforming Tau Ceti Three, and the last seventy would have been wasted. This kind of infection spreads exponentially...by next year's survey, there would have been precious little but birch trees, and

they'd have been doomed without other life to maintain the carbon-oxygen balance. We'd have had to raze the forests and reintroduce everything from the microbes up."

I nodded, though Dr. Smit couldn't see me. Mart cleared his throat and said, "Ah, Miss Parnum is nodding." I laughed at that, and Mart's right hand tightened on mine, as if he knew my laugh would open the floodgates.

"It was brilliant work, Laru, especially for a fourth-year. You have

a bright future ahead of you.”

I didn't answer, and Mart didn't describe the way I was shuddering with the effort not to cry or his left hand gently patting my arm. The com remained silent for several seconds more, and then Dr. Smit signed off. I let myself go, howling and screaming and throwing things and curling up on the floor and kicking at the air. And when I finally rolled onto my back, bruised and hoarse and spent, Mart was still there with me.

My mother died later that night. That is: she stopped breathing with her lungs, and I could no longer find her heartbeat. The birch patches continued to spread until they consumed her skin, so something inside her was still alive.

“I can’t seal her in a hazmat bag,” I told Mart when I came back out. “I just can’t.”

He squirmed. “The protocol is very specific. Crew members who die on survey have to be sealed and

returned for incineration.”

“I know. But it feels like suffocating her.”

He didn't say anything else, and I didn't push it. We still had some time; protocol gave us forty-eight hours.

* * *

We played a lot of uninspired cicce that day and the next, waiting for Dr. Smit's team to send us the birch fix. I gave Mart a double dose of the immunoglobulin when it was

ready. We were in no danger of infection inside the ship, which is the only place Mart was ever going to be, but I knew swallowing two cupfuls of bitter medicine would make him feel safer.

I still hadn't sealed my mother and Dr. Okara in hazmat bags. I told myself I'd bag them as soon as they started to smell. Mart and I didn't discuss it again; I didn't know if he was unaware I was planning to violate protocol that grossly, or unwilling to fight about it. Maybe he

was just working up the resolve to walk in and bag them himself.

On the third day of our wait, my mother began to sprout new growth. A load fell off me when I saw the pale green buds dotting her former torso. She was still alive. Maybe not in any way that recognized me, but that didn't matter. What little doubt I'd had about keeping her on the planet was gone.

I came out of her cabin intending to tell Mart, but when I saw him bent over the cards, nudging this one and

that one with a finger until they were precisely aligned, words failed me. He looked up, and two things I should have noticed earlier leapt out at me: the way he searched my face to see if I was okay, and the way he bit his lower lip to keep from speaking.

“Hey.” I smiled and walked over to him.

“Want something to eat?”

I shook my head. “I was wondering. Do you think you could show me how a retroflux thruster works?”

For an instant his eyes lit up; then the light went out and he looked away. “But you’re not a fan of shuttle tech.” He had remembered my cut-him-off-at-the-pass word for word. Ouch. “I don’t want to bore you, Laru. I know the things I talk about bore people.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” He looked at me with a sour smile. “I’m the Raging Bore. Hadn’t you heard?”

This moment needed complete honesty.

“I did hear that. And I believed it that first day, when you started to tell me about the thrusters. It’s true, they don’t interest me. Any more than plant DNA interests you. But you listened to me anyway, because you aren’t a shallow, self-absorbed ninny.” I waited until that sank in and he looked at me in surprise; then I said, “I’m really sorry, Mart. I was an ass. And you are not a bore. You’re a friend.”

He nodded, tears close to the surface.

“Shuttle tech still doesn’t interest me, but it interests you. And I really do want you to tell me about it.”

He searched my face then, looking for some sign I was atoning for my self-absorbed sins or otherwise little-white-lying to him. He didn’t find any: I was honestly eager to hear what made him sing, after all these muted days.



We stayed up talking, deep into the planetside night. Really talking,

back and forth and at the same time, about everything and nothing. Mart did have a tendency to long monologues in excruciating detail on subjects that fascinated him, but I was quick to tell him when my attention started to wander. That broke through the last damper on his enthusiasm; he knew that if I was listening, it was because I was engaged in what he was saying.

For my part, I talked more openly about myself than I ever had with anyone besides my mother. It

was a really good night, so rare and freeing that neither of us wanted to end it, even long past bedtime protocol, long past the point of fatigue.

I woke hours later on one of the mainbay couches. My face was swollen and sticky, my bra dug into my back, and I was cold, though Mart had apparently covered us both with blankets at some point. I looked over at his puffy, slack-jawed face on the couch across from me. He was dreaming, his eyes darting beneath

their lids, his brow jerking lightly. I eased off my couch and tiptoed toward the galley, but I wasn't quiet enough; he was sitting up when I came back with my coffee. I handed the cup to him and went to make a second.

"I'll help you do it," he said as I walked back in.

"Do what?"

"Plant your mother and Dr. Okara."

I stopped cold. I hadn't told Mart about the new growth last night,

despite all our heartfelt talk. The self-absorbed me of a day ago would have done it, angsting about what it meant for my life; but I'd rounded a corner yesterday, and I wouldn't saddle him with that damning knowledge. I was only going to torpedo one future here. "No. It's a blacklist offense. You stay here and file a report that you disagreed with me."

"It's only blacklist if it's an unfounded disobey. Section thirty-two point nine of the fourth

Terraforming Convention: survey crew will not transport viable specimens from their planet of origin. I looked it up.”

“You looked that up?” I was moved. “When? Why?”

“Yesterday when you were in with your mother. You were gone longer than usual. I figured you must have seen something new.”

I nodded. “She is viable, Mart. She’s sprouting leaves. I can’t believe you found a way to keep her here legally.” It wasn’t just my record he’d

saved; I was pretty sure the Ceiaides would send someone to dig up my illegally planted mother as soon as we got back. “Unbelievable, Mart. You’re brilliant.”

Mart wasn’t sharing my relief; in fact, he looked pretty miserable for someone who had just kept the door to my newly bright future from swinging shut. Then it hit me.

“Oh, Mart. It’s okay. I’m strong enough to pull them outside by myself.”

He shook his head, looking

queasy and even paler than usual. “It’s not the physical weight you shouldn’t bear alone. I’m going with you.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say, just before I burst into tears and spilled my coffee all over the floor.



Mart and I carried each body into the airlock; then he coached me through rigging two rollcrate trolleys together on the landing strip. He breathed heavily the whole time, and

more than once I said I'd do the rest alone. He didn't listen to me.

Then the moment of truth arrived. He pressed the release to open the outer door and stepped up to the edge. I held out a hand to him. We stood there in silence, side by side, close to the shuttle for several minutes, until he clicked on his com mike. "I'm okay."

He sounded awful, somewhere between passing out and throwing up lunch.

"Mart," I began. He walked over

to the doubled-up trolley and pulled it toward the airlock in response.

We brought my mother and Dr. Okara out one by one and lowered them onto the trolley. Then I led us toward the creek I'd seen before.

This time I noticed what I had missed in my innocence four days earlier: very few fungi sprouted among the leaf litter; no moss covered the stones; only scant algae grew on the pebbles in the eddyless pockets of the brook. For every oak or maple we passed, there were a

hundred birch trees. The youngest of them had oblong trunks woven of fused, ficus-like trunklets rising up. We saw countless apparent logs sprouting new growth along their lengths. At every one, I wondered what were you before?

I pulled us to a halt at a wide bend in the creek. "I think this is a nice place."

Mart nodded and gave me a bulky exoglove thumbs-up. His hand trembled.

"Mart—"

He shook his head.

I loosened the dirt in a wide patch of creek bank, and we laid my mother and Dr. Okara out, careful to avoid crushing the new shoots. Fine roots were beginning to grow on the side of their bodies that had lain against the cabin bunks; these we patted gently into the loosened soil, working side by side on our knees in silence. Then Mart clicked on his mike and I heard him humming, off-key but recognizable. I stopped patting and looked at him.

“I thought you might want to sing your father’s songs to her. As a kind of ceremony.”

My throat closed up as I tried not to cry again.

My first words came out as twisted croaks, but as I went on, my voice stabilized. Mart hummed beneath my words, something soft and tuneless and mostly in time with me. I sang song after song and lost count; the light dappling the forest had deepened toward sunset by the time I fell silent.

By next year's survey to this location, my mother would be a young bonsai birch reaching toward the sky. I knew I would be on that survey ship; I would come and sing to her again, then and every year, until I died.

Someday, a hundred years from now, Tau Ceti Three's first colonists might chop her down to build a home, or to burn a fire. My mother had never wanted to end up on a planet, but she would have been glad she was still useful, even in death.

“It’s ironic,” I said through my tears. “I was the one who wanted to put down roots on a colony world.”

Mart turned toward me with a horrified look, doubly golden through our two visors. “It’s okay,” I said, half-laughing, half-crying. “It’s a terrible joke in horrible taste. I know. But it’s funny, isn’t it?”

He wrapped his arms tightly around me then, and I cried my heartbreak into the verdant woods.



Trina Marie Phillips

Trina Marie Phillips became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Until They Come” in AE: The Canadian Science Fiction Review (Aug. 2012), edited by D.F. McCourt. Visit her website at www.tmphillips.net.

Until They Come

by Trina Marie Phillips

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Science Fiction Review (Aug. 2012),
edited by D.F. McCourt

• • • •

“What do you think of this pose?”
Kindra asked. Her arms were
stretched out in front of her and her

weight was back on her legs that were tucked in a ready-to-spring position, as if she would dive off the platform into the depths of space. If it weren't for her magnetic feet, Mack might have been worried.

“You’re really going to hold that for a thousand years?” he asked, though he knew she would. This had been her game for the last dozen millennia, to come up with a pose that would shock the humans when they returned.

“What’s wrong with it?”

If she were actually human the pose might have been indelicate, reminiscent of waste excretion before indoor plumbing; but to a mechanical it was no different than any other posture. “Nothing.”

“Then this is how they will find me. It will happen this time, I can feel it.” Kindra paused and looked over her shoulder at him. The gentle glow of the platform’s forcefield cast a blue tinge over her architectural facial features. Her eyebrow arched like the entrance of a seventeenth-

century cathedral. Their designer had a penchant for historical eras. Mack's head was patterned after a slanted, conical, twenty-third-century industrial building, geometric and efficient, if not elegant.

“Do you not want me to pose?” she asked.

Mack looked out at the lifeless rock that had been the Earth and into the solar system beyond. “You always go dormant when you do that.”

“Only for the last couple hundred

years. I know you'll wake me if they come."

He looked back at her. She was excited about the pose. He paused and decided he didn't want to ruin that. "You're right, I will."

If they come. The humans had known that Earth was done. They had discovered an easy way to tap into its geothermal energy and then taken it too far. Travelling near the speed of light, they left for greener pastures, vowing to return when they had developed the technology to

fix the mother planet.

Mack and Kindra had been charged with watching over the collected and banked genetic material of every species of flora and fauna that had remained when the humans decided to leave. The past and future of Earth was all contained in a sixteen-hundred-cubic-meter storage unit suspended beneath the platform on which they stood.

It had been twenty thousand years since the humans left, and seven thousand since the most recent

communications blip. As Kindra locked into her pose, Mack thought once again that they'd been forgotten.

* * *

Eight hundred and twenty-two years passed before Kindra went quiet in her meditative, diving posture. For no other reason than the repetition of their conversation they had spoken little in the last century; but having her be unavailable was different. Of course

Mack could wake her any time, but then she might move and not make her thousand-year pose. Then he'd have to hear about it for a decade.

Even though she wouldn't like it, Mack attached an energy-tether to her right ankle. The shield was always deflecting bits of space debris. He didn't want to find out how much force it would take to exceed her magnetic grasp and turn her pose into a real detachment. Even in the empty times it was a comfort having her there. He polished her head and

shoulders daily to a mirror shine so she would look her best if the humans decided to show.

They could leave. Take the genetic payload and hope to found a new Earth elsewhere. But the years would be just as endless and the outcome even less certain. One out-of-balance element or undetected toxin and the ecosystem would die in infancy. Or they might not find a suitable candidate planet in the entire galaxy.

Three decades came and went.

Mack considered waking Kindra and suffering her harangue, but a warning light flashed yellow on the control panel before he convinced himself to do it. Pressure seals on the aft thrusters were failing.

This was not good.

Repairs to the platform had been getting more frequent and materials to accomplish them were dwindling. The humans had not planned on being away this long. Slowly the systems would fail and, eventually, the platform would no longer be

capable of maintaining orbit, never mind some fantasy interstellar exodus. Kindra, Mack and the hope for Earth's future would crash into the worthless rock below. Mack would be shocked if they survived another millennium without catastrophic failure, but that wasn't going to stop him from postponing that day for as long as he could.

Mack activated the panel and opened the maintenance hatch. He felt the slightest vibration when the door slid aside and as he descended

the stairs the lights seemed dimmer. He could compensate with his sensors but it was another bad sign.

He gathered what he needed and descended further into the massive network of maintenance halls, angling toward the aft thrusters. At least it was something to do.

After three years, the repair was complete. Mack had been meticulous about every surface and seam. No one would be able to claim faulty workmanship when they crashed. Of course, there would be no one

around to assign blame anyhow.

It wasn't a decade marker, but he sent out a comm burst anyway. Had the humans even survived? Or had they figured out how to destroy themselves in the far reaches of space? Had they simply forgotten their pledge? Origins were important, they had said. Had they lost their way?

Was Mack losing his?

He stood at the railing and thought about these things for a century. Then he closed his eyes in

despair, and slept.



Mack woke to a system alarm. It took a moment to orient himself before he turned to the control panel. Kindra was already there, working.

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“Comm signal.”

The screen filled with characters. Unintelligible sounds emanated from the speakers. Whatever the signal was, the computer couldn’t

interpret it. Mack noted the chrono and realized he'd been asleep for six hundred years. A glance at Kindra, then around the platform, revealed that nothing had changed.

Mack instructed the computer to run iterative evolutionary interpolations between the signal and all known human languages. Conversation could have changed a lot in twenty-one millennia. They looked at each other while they waited for the analysis.

“I’m sorry, Kindra.”

She smiled sadly at him. It was a very human expression, but they couldn't escape their creators' idiosyncrasies.

"I figured it was your turn to check out for a while. I'd done it enough over the years." She hesitated and the windows of her eyes saddened. "I didn't realize."

Her simple acknowledgement made up for all the empty time. "I could have at least come up with a creative pose," Mack said, and smiled. That brought some of the

cheer back to her face.

The computer finished faster than he expected.

No known or interpretable correlation.

“Whatever it is, something is coming our way,” Kindra said, her voice wavering with excitement.

She was right. Each blip of the signal was getting closer. It was still thirty light years distant, but creeping in just below the speed of light. Mack watched the display.

Kindra nodded toward the

console. “What do you think?”

“I don’t like it.”

“Why not?”

“No resemblance to Earth languages. They’re probably not human. We can’t let the only hope of reviving the Earth fall into hostile hands. That’s why they even bothered to construct us. We’re guardians.” Mack pulled up data on the platform’s mechanical status. The repairs he made to the aft thrusters were holding fine.

“Even if they’re alien that doesn’t

mean they're hostile. They could be scientists. Besides, it's been twenty-one thousand years. Communication changes." Kindra crossed her arms over her chest in that way that Mack knew too well. He was in for a fight.

"We could hide," he suggested. "Take the platform and drop just below Venus's thermosphere. If they prove to be peaceful we'll reveal ourselves."

"And if they're human and don't see us, they could leave just as fast as they came. We'd never catch them."

Kindra's voice shifted to match her posture.

“And what if they're coming to destroy us? All this waiting will have been for nothing.” Mack realized he was angry at the humans for leaving them and wondered if he more worried about Earth's future, or his own.

Concern over an outright enemy prompted Mack to check the status of the defense shields. The ones that kept out space debris were continuing to function, but the

emergency defense shields, the ones designed to come online in case of an all-out attack, showed their capacity at barely thirty percent. Even twenty-millennia-out-of-date human weaponry would be able to take that down in no time. He pointed at the display.

“What happened? Why didn’t you fix this?”

“The debris shield almost failed and particles started getting through. I had to borrow components from one to fix the other.” She turned

away slightly, as if she were hiding something. For the first time he saw the tear in the metal across her shoulder and back.

“I didn’t make my thousand years,” she said.

Mack froze. Lost in his sleep, his depression, for six centuries, he’d missed it all. If he’d stayed awake he would’ve caught the malfunction and stopped it. He frowned, not trying to hide his guilt.

“Did I miss the alarm?” he asked.

“It never went off. I didn’t know

anything was wrong until I got hit.”

Adjusting his vision across the light spectrum he studied the platform. Numerous pock marks and scars littered the previously pristine brushed-metallic surface. He could see where Kindra had repaired the worst of the damage.

The panel flashed. Another comm burst was coming in. The symbols and sounds were the same unintelligible mess as the first.

“Impatient, whoever they are,” Mack said,

“A very human trait.” Kindra turned her attention to the message. The characters were densely packed and complex. She pointed at one. “Does this look like a bit of Arabic to you?”

Mack looked. The swoosh and dot could have been from Arabic but amidst the chaos it could have been anything. She pointed at another place.

“And this could be an NA or an M... something.”

“If it were, don’t you think the

computer would have picked that up? You're grasping at empty vacuum."

"Not empty," she said with a tilt of her head toward out there, toward the visitor. "Mack, I refuse to believe this has all been for nothing. There was a plan. We need to do our part."

"Kindra, that thing could be our destruction."

She turned back to face him. "And it could be our salvation."

He shook his head. "After all this time, thirty years is too soon. I don't

want us to die in thirty years.”

“Thirty? Five hundred? A thousand, maybe? Mack, this was never about us.”

There it was, their purpose. The whole meaning of their existence. Kindra had never lost sight of the goal. Even in its decline, the Earth had been a grand place. Mack remembered how proud he had been to be the guardian of its future. There would be nothing greater than to see the Earth again, the way it was. He looked at Kindra and was touched by

her unwavering belief.

A flash of hope flared in his circuits.

He looked at the screen and the blip that grew ever closer. Destruction or salvation. Whatever it was, they couldn't accomplish anything by hiding from it.

* * *

Mack set the platform's beacon to broadcast on every wavelength and in every spectrum. Then he struck his pose in the middle of the

platform, arms out to his sides and a wide stance looking like an upright starfish. Kindra climbed up. When her feet were set astride his shoulders, the magnets locked her into place. She put her arms out like he had and they stood tall. Ready for anything.

Thirty years was going to be easy.



Sarah Pinsker

Sarah Pinsker became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Twenty Ways the Desert Could Kill You” in Daily Science Fiction (Jul. 2012), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at www.sarahpinsker.com.

Twenty Ways the Desert Could Kill You

by Sarah Pinsker

First published in Daily Science
Fiction (Jul. 2012), edited by Michele
Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

1 A poisonous snake could bite you,
and you could die.

2. You could prick your finger on a previously undiscovered poisonous cactus.

3. The cactus isn't poisonous, and neither is the snake, but the snake's venom is a powerful anti-coagulant. You could bleed to death from the place you were bitten and/or pricked.

My mother says that English gardens don't belong in New Mexico. Whenever we drive into town for supplies she throws dirty

looks at all the houses with grass and flowers and automatic sprinklers. She spends a lot of time working on her rock gardens and moisture collection systems. "Cacti are just as beautiful as lawns," she tells me each time we buy another one. The English gardens remind me of home, even though home is Baltimore, not England. The sun is more intense here. Mom says it's a dry heat, but it just feels hot to me.

4. You could wander into a

deserted town, but it turns out to be a nuclear testing facility. I saw that one in a movie.

5. There is an entrance to an old mine shaft hidden under the sand, and you could fall through the hole and break your neck and die.

6. You could survive the fall into the mineshaft, but then the ghost of a forty-niner kills you with a pickax.

We left Baltimore five weeks

ago. Mom came home early from her job at the space telescope. She said, "Pack your summer clothes and your five favorite things, Allie. We're leaving on an adventure." If I had known her idea of an adventure I might have packed better. I would have said goodbye to my friends.

7. You could see a lake, but it is only a mirage. You drink it, thinking the sand is water, and you choke on the sand and die.

To be fair, she didn't bring more than five things either. She brought: a picture of the three of us when Dad was still alive; a book called Living Off the Grid; her biggest home telescope; and probably a couple of things I haven't seen, since that's only three. I assume she's not counting stuff like sheets and pots and pans and her gardening hat.

I brought: my favorite stuffed animal, Charley the Sea Lion; my photo album; my eReader and my iPod (the only electronic things

Mom let me take) and a solar charger for both, which didn't count as a separate thing; and the cat, Gandalf the Gray.

We fought about Gandy. She said we should just ask the neighbors to watch him while we were gone. I said favorites are favorites, and she had already vetoed my laptop and my DS. She said cats aren't things. I said no, but cat carriers are, and she would feel guilty if I took an empty cat carrier as one of my favorite things. I am so glad I fought for

Gandy, now that I know where we were headed. I don't know why I thought to bring him when I didn't know we'd be gone for a long time. Maybe that's what happens when you have to narrow your life down to five favorite things. Does it get easier or harder when you're as old as Mom? She's lived long enough to find more favorite things, but also had more time to figure out which ones are more important than others. I wonder if I'm one of her five things.

If I had known how long we would be gone, I would have pushed her on a couple of other things. Instead of just bringing the electronic books, I would have argued that a home library is a single thing. I think she would have gone for that. This notebook was a secret sixth thing, smuggled in my clothing. If Mom noticed, she didn't say anything.

8. One word: Roswell. This applies if you are an alien, but

possibly also if you saw an alien land.

9. The canyon you are walking in could be overtaken by a flash flood, and you drown.

10. You could step on a fire ant hill, and they swarm your legs and your body and your arms, and you die.

If I had siblings maybe this wouldn't be so difficult. Maybe I wouldn't mind that there are no other kids around, or that I'm not

allowed off our property on my own. We have to drive everywhere, which means we never get to go anywhere I want. Mom says gas is too expensive to waste on frivolous trips. "This whole move was a frivolous trip," I told her last week. She made me go to my room, but my room is right next to hers, so I heard her crying a little while later.

If I had siblings maybe I wouldn't mind that everything outside the front door burns, bites, stabs, or stings. We would play board games.

We could pool our allowances to buy a television even though Mom doesn't want us to have one. We could buy a tablet or a game console or a computer with satellite Internet access.

"What's wrong with reading?" Mom would ask us, just like she asks me now.

"Nothing," my sassy older sister would say. "We love reading. But we could use some new books. Ones we haven't read a thousand times. We just want a little something to break

up the evening. You know, since we don't have any other friends here."

I don't know who would win the argument. Some days I imagine it going one way, some days the other. If I had an older sister she would take some of the pressure off me, so I wouldn't feel like such a jerk every time I ask for something. I don't think I'm being unreasonable. I really don't.

11. You could wander for years, eating only cactus and the

occasional jackrabbit. The rabbit tends to be old and gamey since you can only catch the slow ones. You starve in increments, but you die.

12. You could die of exposure; your fair skin is not cut out for the unrelenting, gradual poison of the sun.

13. You could find a real oasis and you are so thirsty you just keep drinking water. You drink too much, like that woman who tried to win a radio contest for a

game console, and then you die. That may be irony, to die of drinking too much water in the desert.

14. You could find a shack that turns out to belong to a deranged serial killer who had purposefully removed himself from society. Now that you are there, he can't help himself.

I get more of what's going on than she thinks. This isn't just an adventure. That might have worked

on six year old me, but it doesn't work now that I'm eleven. You don't leave in the middle of the night and just start driving west. You don't just get rid of the phone, the TV, the radio, the computer. You don't insist that your kid go everywhere with you, even on the tiniest errands, when she is perfectly capable of staying home alone. What I don't know is whether we are running to something or away from something. I don't know how much I want to know. I ask if I'm going to go to

school here, and she says, “We’ll see.”

15. You could accidentally wander onto the property of a trigger-happy rancher, and he shoots you, and you die.

I opened her book on Living Off the Grid, so now I know what that means. It explains some of what she’s trying to do here, and why we’re fixing up this house in the middle of nowhere. It talks about all the things she’s installing, like the solar panels

and the moisture collection systems. We still have electricity, but maybe she's anticipating a time when we won't. She bought three goats. That's my favorite part of any of this so far. She let me name them, so I picked Hermione for the cute little one and Mrs. Whatsis for the older one. The boy goat is Tumnus, for now, but I have a feeling he's a balrog, not a faun. I checked that we weren't going to kill and eat them before I gave them names.

Living off the grid apparently

involves growing your own food too. I'm not sure how New Mexico is a better place to do that than Baltimore. It would make more sense to me to be somewhere that has rain. If we have to grow our own food for real, she's going to have to lock up the goats. Nothing is safe from them.

16. Your horse could spook and throw you off, and you hit your head on a rock, and he stands there waiting for you to get up,

but you die.

At night, sometimes we lie on our backs on the back deck. Mom holds my hand and tells me the names of constellations. There's one bright star that keeps getting bigger, which isn't a star-like thing to do. I pretend not to notice it, and she never points at that area of the sky. Her telescope is set up in that direction.

17. Your campfire could jump to

your sleeping bag while you sleep. Sleeping bags are highly flammable.

I have a separate list for everything that the bright star might be: a meteor, a satellite, a shuttle, a UFO, a superhero, a God. That list crosses this one. If you're in New Mexico when any of those things hit you, I guess that's another thing that could kill you. Those aren't location specific. I'm leaving the lists separate for now.

I have another list of reasons why we moved here.

i) Mom knows that the speeding thing is going to hit Baltimore and moved us to where it is safer.

ii) Mom knows the speeding thing is going to hit New Mexico, and she has a death wish.

iii) Mom knows the speeding thing is a spaceship full of friendly aliens and she wants to be here to greet them.

iv) Mom knows there is no place that will be safe, but she has always wanted to live in the desert so she came here to do that before it wouldn't be possible anymore.

Any of those would explain the crying, even (iii), though those would have to be tears of joy. I may make another list of clues for each of those options. I could just ask, but I'm afraid she might answer and then I'd have to stop making lists.

18. You could be set upon by wild animals: a cougar, maybe, or coyotes. Possibly both.

19. You could stumble to the border and get caught in a gunfight between the minutemen and the coyotes. These coyotes are actually people.

Most of the possibilities on my list assume that the person writing the list (me) is human. There might

be a whole other list of ways the desert could kill you if you were a cougar or a coyote or a cactus or an alien or a jackrabbit.

There is precedent for all of this. I know that she moved everything once before, taking us from Boston to Baltimore after my father died. I was too young to help, and too young to have favorite things. I know that my grandmother objected to that move, but she's dead now. I've only just realized how few ties we have compared to other people. I

wonder if that's on purpose?

Really it should mean that the tie between the two of us is that much stronger. She should rely on me and confide in me. I would be much more helpful if she would just explain. Last week I finally got fed up. I said to her, "If you're afraid I'll tell something to somebody you don't need to worry, since I have no access to the outside world." I meant it to sound grown up, but as it came out it felt snarky. Still, she answered the way I had meant it.

“Oh, honey, it’s not that,” she said.

I didn’t budge. “If that’s not it, then you’re afraid for me, like you’re protecting me from something. I deserve to know.”

Her face twisted a bit, like it does when she’s trying to hide that she’s sad, but she just pulled me into a hug and didn’t let go for a while. It was the hard-to-breathe kind of hug, but I let it go on as long as she needed. I wished I could go back to the moment before I had asked. Now she

knows that I know that she's protecting me from something. I think she liked it better when she thought she had kept it from me completely. She seemed happier. What could be so bad that she'd keep it from me? I'm starting to think that one of the points on my list of reasons we moved here might actually be right. Number (v), which I added later. I wrote it in code, in case she reads my lists:

v) Mom knows there is no place

that will be safe, but she doesn't want me to be around people when the panic starts. We can live happily in our off-the-grid house until the very last moment, without hearing the newscasters or seeing the cities go crazy.

The bright star is about an eighth of the size of the moon now.

I'm trying to be more understanding and patient. We made one more trip into town a few

days ago, and then she said that was the last one for a while. She let me buy five new books at a garage sale on the way home. I said I would help more with the goats and the cooking. I've stopped asking questions, in the hopes that she'll stop guarding the answers so closely. It's not possible for me to forgive her entirely while we still have these giant secrets between us: hers that she knows what's going on, and mine that I think I do too.

20. You could die of loneliness.
All the more tragic for being
avoidable.

I've picked out one cactus that I
water whenever she isn't looking. I
think that it is drowning, slowly.



Not Dying in Central Texas by Sarah Pinsker

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Ian Rose



By the time I learned about the vampire living in our town, he had long been old and toothless. My brother Michael first told me about the monster on the evening after my eleventh birthday. We had just walked out of Bluebonnet, and even though it was September my ice cream was melting faster than I could eat it. We hadn't taken three steps out of the store when Michael grabbed my arm. The ice cream in the spoon, halfway to

my mouth, spilled onto the sidewalk, pink stain on white concrete. I didn't have a free arm, so I kicked him.

"Ssssh," he said in a low voice, gripping my forearm harder. I held onto my spoon. "Aaron, do you see that guy over there?"

I looked across the parking lot at the Kroger's, where Michael worked as a bag boy on weekends. An old man stood next to the exit, his position forcing people to dodge him as they pushed their carts through the automatic doors. He didn't seem to

be begging or trying to get inside. The shoppers just treated him as if he were a trashcan that had been left in the way.

“Let go of me! I’ve seen that creep a million times.”

Dry River was too small for anyone to go unnoticed, but it was true that I had never really paid attention to him before. I had known him only by the way my mother would quicken her pace and shepherd me by on the evenings he loitered outside Jack in the Box or

Kroger's, or the way my father would shake his head and tell me to look away when we passed him on the road.

“Shut up. I'm trying to tell you something important. He's a vampire.”

“There's no such thing.”

“There is. He is. His name is Robert Karring. He's lived here as long as anybody can remember.”

“As long as Grandma?” Our grandmother had lived in Dry River her entire life.

“Longer.”

Michael heard all kinds of interesting things now that he worked at the supermarket, all of which he passed along to me as fact. Some of them were truer than others. John Grand didn't really catch a two-headed catfish, for example, and my mother said that Donna Martinez wasn't actually kidnapped by aliens; she was just crazy.

When we got home that night I told my mother what Michael had

said. I expected her to laugh it off, but to my surprise she confirmed it. The old man really was a vampire.

“He’s been here as long as anyone can remember,” she said, exactly as my brother had. “When I was your age we called him Scary Karry.”

“Was he scarier back then?”

“Honey, he was old then, too. He might have had a couple more teeth, but I don’t remember ever being scared of him, despite the nickname.”

“Why does he live here?” I asked.

“I have no idea, Aaron. I guess

everyone's got to live somewhere."

"Is he lonely being the only one?"

She laughed. "Who knows? Are cockroaches lonely?"

I thought about that, even though it was the kind of question I know you aren't really supposed to answer.



I had always thought he was just a stranger like the ones they warn us about in school, but once I knew he was a vampire, I couldn't help but see

all of the signs that had been there all along. I couldn't wait to tell my friends about him, but it turned out they already knew. Everybody knew but me, it seemed.

Lee smiled at me, pity in his eyes. "My parents told me a million years ago!"

I tried to come up with a plausible defense. "My family thought I could take care of myself."

Gabe smirked. "They probably thought you'd have nightmares."

The three of us were the only

ones from our grade at the county school who lived in Dry River, and we were best friends mostly by default. We didn't have a lot in common except for our age and our long bus ride together, but I taught them card games that Michael had taught me, and Lee kept a subscription to the X-Men, and Gabriel always came up with good stuff for us to do. Gabe was the one who thought up the idea for us to bike to the outskirts of town to investigate the vampire's home.

Karring lived out past my dad's Chevy dealership, on a small lot that blended seamlessly with the edge of the junkyard. He had a one-room shack and an outhouse surrounded by old highway signs and rotten lumber and rusted appliances. His shack was made of tarpaper and corrugated aluminum, with a single warped window painted black from the inside. The house backed onto a small woods, a couple dozen gnarled mesquite and scrub pine that provided meager cover for our

observations.

Not that there was much to observe. We had jumped on our bikes as soon as the bus dropped us off, but it seemed we were actually too early. The cabin stood silent. We practiced patience with all our best distractions, playing cards, wrestling, doing tricks on our bikes amid the crooked branches. The late October sun hovered for an hour before starting its descent behind the junkyard.

Karring didn't come out until

dusk. The door swung outward a few inches, and an arm extended as if testing for rain. After a few seconds the arm disappeared again, and then the rest of him shuffled out and walked straight to the latrine. When he emerged, he washed his hands and splashed his face with water from a bucket beside the outhouse. Afterward, he pumped more water from his well, grunting from the effort. As adventures went, this one was a bust. We were lucky enough to have our very own vampire, but he

was more boring than my grandmother's friends.

He got into his ancient black Ford Fairlane, which started with a whine and a wheeze. The car lurched forward and we followed on our bikes as he headed back in the direction of town. It wasn't hard to keep up, but we stayed well behind. Just past my father's dealership he braked suddenly. We braked as well, and dragged our bikes down behind the long body of a gold Caprice. Karring levered himself out of the

driver's seat to examine something on the side of the road; in the fading light it took a moment to make sense of the shape, but I realized it was a dead cat, someone else's road kill.

He lowered his face to the carcass for an exploratory sniff and bite. It must have met his standards; after that first delicate taste, he buried his face in the dead animal. He looked up once from his meal, and I met his eye despite the distance. He seemed suddenly feral, and I caught a brief glimpse of the thing he might once

have been.

When he finished he wiped his mouth on his arm and climbed back into his Ford. I might have imagined it, but his walk seemed less labored. He swung a U-turn on the empty road, and we didn't follow. We pedaled hard back into town, where we split off for our own dinners. It wasn't even seven o'clock, but I would have sworn it was much later.

"What did you boys do tonight?" my mother asked, dropping a slab of lasagna onto my plate. It looked like

the vampire's road kill.

"Nothing," I said.

* * *

"I'll bet his house is full of dead people," said Lee. We were sitting in the woods again, as we had done every night that week. Karring had driven away a few minutes before, but unlike the previous evenings, we had watched him leave instead of following him.

I disagreed. "He's too old to eat people."

None of us knew how to pick a lock, but we took turns trying anyway, Lee with a straightened paperclip and me with a safety pin. After a few minutes of watching us, Gabe broke the ancient clasp with a stone. The door swung inward on its hinges with a sigh. The odor hit me before we even made it past the threshold, a mix of ammonia, iron, and decay: old man and old blood. Lee took a step backward, onto my toe. I yelped, and we all glanced around as if there might be someone

watching. Nothing moved.

“I’m not going first,” Lee said.

“Aaron should go first,” said Gabe. “His parents think he can take care of himself against vampires.” I couldn’t argue since I had painted that picture myself. I took two reluctant steps and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dimness. The stench was even more overpowering in the closed space. I made out a bed and a bedside table, with a leather-bound book resting on it. I took another step and heard a crunch. I

lifted my foot and found the shattered skeleton of a mouse. Scanning the floor, I realized it was covered in mouse bones and carcasses in all states of decay. Some of them still had fur and faces, but even those were mummified, desiccated.

I heard a noise from one of the shadows, or possibly from outside. My heart stopped and I fought my instinct to run from the shack, since I would never live that down. Still, I'd had enough. My friends couldn't

call me chicken anymore, since neither of them had crossed the threshold. I looked around for something to carry out with me, final proof of my bravery, but there didn't seem to be anything of value. I couldn't even tell why he bothered to lock the door. I grabbed the only thing I saw, the book on the table, and retreated into the light. My friends stood a few yards down the dirt drive, putting a lot of effort into looking casual.

“What was in there?” Lee asked

when I approached.

I shrugged. "Not much."

"Was there a coffin?"

"Just a bed."

"Why did it smell so funny?"

"Dead mice. Lots of dead mice."

"What have you got?" Gabriel took the book from me even as he asked. It was a bible, and an old one. Pieces crumbled from the leather cover in Gabe's hands.

"I thought vampires were allergic to bibles," he said.

"That's crosses. And garlic," I

said.

“And holy water,” Lee added.

“Whatever.” He tossed the book back at me, but I didn’t put up my hands fast enough and it bounced off my fingers into the dirt. It fell with its covers splayed, its spine broken. I picked it up, but several pages separated and drifted down to land at my feet.

One page was different, smaller than the others, and Gabe reached it before I did. He held it at arm’s length so we could all see that it was a

photograph, sepia-toned and with scalloped edges around the print. A water stain marred one side, but didn't reach the photographer's subject. She looked like an old time movie starlet with her blond hair and her not quiet perfect smile and a tan that was visible even in black and white. The photo had been taken at an amusement park; I could tell because there were a lot of people in the background, and what looked like some game booths, and behind those a Ferris wheel. The sky behind

the woman was dark but the booths were well lit, throwing shadows that accentuated her curves. The woman smiled at someone just to the right of the photographer, out of frame.

Gabe shifted the photo to his left hand and I got a sense that she was looking at me. He laughed then. "Even his porn is boring and old," he said, and made to tear the photo. I caught his hand.

"Can I have it?"

"Sure, whatever."

He relinquished the photograph,

and I tucked it into the back pocket of my jeans. Hopefully it would survive the ride home. It had a better chance than the bible, which Gabe was now shaking by its cover. More pages detached from the binding and floated around on the dry breeze.

“Isn’t that sacrilegious?” Lee asked. “Wrecking a bible?”

“It was a vampire’s bible,” Gabe said. “I’m doing it a favor. I’m liberating it.”

We accepted that, since he was the only Catholic among us, and the

one most likely to be going to hell. He liberated the last few pages, and then tossed the cover at the door to the shack. I lied then and said I had to be home for an early dinner. I didn't want Gabe to get the idea that we should wait in the woods for Karring to return. That night I took the photograph from my pocket and slipped it into my sock drawer. I wondered who the woman was to the vampire, and what had happened to her.

Our boldness that night led to more boldness. We hid under his windowsill and pricked our fingers, smearing blood on the glass. Lee's beagle had given birth to a litter of puppies in September, and once they were old enough we began to bring them over in the light of day and play with them beneath the trees, where he could hear them bark but couldn't reach them. Karring never said anything, never varied from his routines.

Gabe worked hard to come up with more inventive games. One evening he suggested we throw a stick covered with fire ants into the vampire's bed when he went out to the bathroom. I found myself doing the honors, thanks to a rigged election. Gabe and Lee had clearly chosen me earlier in the day, since they presented me with a narrow plank and showed me the anthill of choice as they explained the idea. I was to poke the stick into the hill, wait until the ants started crawling

up it, then run it down to the vampire's bed. They would distract him as necessary. Timing was obviously everything.

For what seemed like the millionth time, we watched him make his slow way from the shack. The second his latrine door slammed, I took a deep breath and ran headlong down the hill. I was pretty sure I threw the stick fast enough, but he must have been waiting for us this time. The door to the outhouse burst open and he

charged out like an angry old bull, head down and legs churning. My friends' idea of a distraction was half-hearted at best. I heard Lee say "Over here!" but he didn't say it much louder than his normal voice. I made it partway up the lane, but instead of running for his house, the vampire ran for me.

He was much quicker than I would have expected, and caught me by the arm before I could reach the trees. His grip, too, was stronger than I expected. It hurt. I struggled

and he squeezed harder. His hand was large and cold, and I felt the bones of my wrist shift and threaten to give way.

“Let me go!” I yelled.

“Give me one reason.” He spat the words at me, his face inches from mine. It was the first time I had ever heard his voice, sandpaper on a chalkboard. His face was even paler than usual, white with rage and exertion, and his breath made my eyes water. The whole of him had an animal stink, like the cages at the

Shriner circus. Up close it turned out he actually had a couple of teeth left, and they looked like they could still do damage.

“You boys act like you have the right to do anything you want to me, and then you think I’ll let you go just because you ask.” He shook his head. I looked over his shoulder to see if my friends were coming, but they had disappeared into the woods. He glanced that way as well, and grinned. It was the first time I had ever seen him smile, and it was far

worse than any other expression might have been.

“I could still eat you,” he said. “Your friends didn’t even try to save you.”

He sniffed the air. “Maybe it’s better that they left. They won’t know you pissed yourself.”

He raised my forearm to his mouth and bit down. I felt a single tooth puncture my skin, like a snake’s strike, quick and sharp. I was so surprised, I didn’t even scream. He lowered my arm again, without

easing his grip. I could see a trickle of blood making its way between his fingers. “I could still eat you, and then the whole town would come down on me, and I’d have to find a new place to live. I would love to eat you. Is it worth it?”

He started to lift my arm to his mouth again, slowly this time. I desperately wanted not to cry, but I could feel the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. “Please don’t eat me.” I didn’t want to beg, but I couldn’t help that either. “Please.”

“Please,” he mimicked.

My face burned. “But none of it’s my idea. I tried to stop Gabe from wrecking your bible, and I saved your photo, and...”

I would have gone on babbling, but I stopped when I saw a strange expression on his face.

“You kept her?” he asked.

He let go of my arm for just a second. I didn’t wait to hear the rest of what he said, though I’ve since wondered. I took off. He didn’t chase me this time.

I ran back to my bike, which was alone where I had left it with the others. I pedaled as hard as I had ever pedaled in my life, back past the dealership so fast that I almost missed Lee and Gabe in the parking lot on the far side of the showroom, over by the pickup trucks. I got off my bike and slumped to the ground next to them.

“You’re alive!” said Lee, looking relieved.

Gabe kept his distance. “Your arm is bleeding. How do we know he

didn't turn you into a vampire?"

I reached for a rock, and threw it at him. He ducked, and it narrowly missed a blue Silverado.

"You don't know, jerkface. And if I'm a vampire, I'm coming for you first. You left me!"

"We were going for help."

"You didn't make it very far."

I sat on the ground for a few more minutes to catch my breath, then biked away, not looking back to see if they followed.

At home I debated whether I

should tell my parents or Michael that the vampire had bitten me. What if that was all it took to become a vampire? At the very least they'd probably make me get a tetanus shot or a rabies shot or something. I put a Band-Aid on my arm and told them that a cat had scratched me. Each night I washed my arm and examined it carefully for signs of infection. Each day I stood in the sun for a minute to make sure I could still tolerate it. I thought about the picture hidden in my

drawer, and wondered if she had saved my life.



Just before Christmas break, Maureen Grand disappeared from the supermarket. Michael came home to tell us, but we already knew since a phone tree had gone around. They looked for her in the store and the roads between there and her house, and the creek bed. When she didn't appear that night, the sheriff and some other people went out to

Karring's shack and searched it and messed him up. My dad was with them, and said that the vampire didn't put up any fight, but just let them beat him.

I came home from school one night about a week later to find my mother and my grandmother sitting at the kitchen table. My grandmother had been living with us for a year or so by then, since Grandpa had died.

"...they deserve whatever they get, scaring a little girl like that," my

grandmother was saying.

“Did they find Maureen?” I asked, dropping my book bag in the corner despite Mom’s scowl.

“Yes, thank God,” Mom said. “A couple was arrested in Giddings for a stolen car, and the police found Maureen with them. Alive and well.”

“Thank God,” Grandma echoed. There was a bowl of Cheezit crackers on the table and I grabbed a handful and stuffed them in my mouth.

“Is somebody going to apologize to Karring?” I asked.

“Don’t speak with your mouth full,” my mother said. “Who needs to apologize to him?”

I swallowed the crackers, leaving my mouth dry and cheesy. “They beat him up for nothing. It wasn’t him.”

“He doesn’t need an apology. It’ll just encourage him.”

“Encourage what?” I asked, but she had had enough. “Take your backpack upstairs, Aaron.”



I tried again with my grandmother a few days later, when my mother wasn't home. I used the opportunity to show the picture to her, since she had lived in Dry River her whole life and I figured if the girl had grown up in town any time in the last seventy years she would know her. She got confused sometimes, but not usually about old stuff. I knocked on the door to her room even though it was already open. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, so I sat down next to her. I

told her I was using the photo for history class, not wanting to complicate matters.

“I didn’t know her,” she said at last, “but I know who she was.”

I waited for her to continue.

“Her name was Ray. Shirley Ray. She was about four years younger than me, so I was never really in school with her or in her circle of friends. She left town right after high school. I don’t recall hearing anything about her after that.”

I looked at her again, trying to

imagine her as Shirley from Dry River. She seemed too glamorous for the name and the place. Maybe she ran away to Hollywood or New York, places that would have recognized her beauty.

“I know where the photo was taken, too, if that’ll help your project.”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“It’s the State Fair. In Dallas.”

“How can you tell?”

“That booth behind her is the African Dip.”

“The African Dip?”

“It opened when I was a teenager. The boys bought five baseballs, tried to hit a target and knock some Negro boy into the water.” Grandma had only recently switched to saying Negro instead of worse, at my father’s insistence. It was the best we could do.



I looked up the state fair in the town library, under the suspicious eye of the librarian, Mrs. Perez. It

was the beginning of Christmas break, and I was the only person under twenty in the room, and she knew me as Gabe's friend besides. That would be enough to make anyone nervous.

The African Dip had been renamed "Splash! Splash!" in the 60s. The photo had obviously been taken much earlier than that, maybe around when Shirley Ray left town. I did some math and figured out that would have been sometime in the forties. I tried looking her up in

“Who’s Who In Hollywood” but I knew in advance that it was a lost cause. She had probably changed her name, and even if she had become a star, it would have been decades ago. I gave up the search, and returned the photo to my dresser.

* * *

Christmas was a busy time at my dad’s work, and he hired me to wash the cars on the sales lot in the evenings. I didn’t mind since it gave me a good excuse to avoid Gabe and

Lee. It was also how I learned that Karring got gas from the dealership's pump. I went inside when I saw him, but he caught my eye and grinned. My arm stung where he had bitten it.

I went to find my dad.

"Dad, that old vampire is taking your gas."

"I know, Aaron. I let him."

"Why?"

"Better the devil you know."

"What does that mean?"

"It's the same reason the sheriff lets him drive that old car around

without license plates, and Mr. Lopez lets him live in the junkyard. If he has everything he needs, he won't cause any trouble. We even tried getting him to eat meat donated by the supermarket, but he threw that back at us. I figure if there are things like him in the world we're better off with this one."

We watched Karring hang up the pump and slide back behind the wheel. The long black car disappeared into the night. I asked the question I'd been wondering for

a long time.

“Aren’t vampires supposed to be immortal? How’d he get so old and nasty?”

He thought about it for a minute, twisting his moustache. “I guess there’s a difference between living and not dying.”

* * *

I hid out from Gabe and Lee through most of the Christmas break, including the holiday itself even though I got some Star Wars

stuff I kind of wanted to show them. The Sunday before we were supposed to go back to school, Gabriel came by my house around three in the afternoon. The light was already dimming.

“Where’s Lee?” I asked.

“We don’t have time to get him. Grab your bike.”

I did as he said, as usual. We rode quickly, also at his insistence. He had a bag over his shoulder with something in it that sloshed every time he stepped down on his pedals.

Slosh, slosh, slosh, slosh.

“What’s in the bag?”

“You’ll see.” He pedaled faster, sloshed faster. His wheels stirred a thick cloud of dust. I bent over my bike and pumped to keep up with him. We rode past the car dealership and past the junkyard, ditching our bikes in the trees. Instead of heading for the shack, Gabe walked down the path to the vampire’s latrine. He dropped his bag in the dirt and kneeled beside it. I leaned over to see what he had, but it was only a plastic

ET thermos. Elliott rode his bike across the moon on both sides.

“I don’t get it.” I said.

“It’s holy water. From my church. I dunked it when the priest wasn’t looking. Altar Boy to the rescue!” Altar Boy was his superhero alter ego. If I had to be an altar boy I’d make up something like that to get through it too.

“Won’t that kill him?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “And so what if it did? I’d be doing everyone a favor.”

He unscrewed the top and poured it into the wash bucket next to the pump. His motion was quick and practiced; I had seen him use a similar one to spike the punch at our middle school dance. We retreated to the woods to wait.

The sun set quickly, and before long, we saw the familiar routine swing into play. The arm extended, retracted. The door opened fully. The recent addition to his repertoire was a half turn to lock the door. He had installed a heavy new padlock

after our break-in, and had even started using it for trips to the bathroom after the incident with the fire ants in the bed.

House secured, he shuffled slowly to the bathroom, swinging his head to each side like a frightened squirrel as he walked. I noticed for the first time the effort it took for him to pry open the outhouse door. He let it slam behind him, a heavy sound in the still junkyard.

A few minutes passed. Gabe twitched in anticipation, punching

my arms and peeling bark off the trees. Finally, we heard the creak of the opening door. Karring rounded the corner to his wash bucket. I fought a sudden urge to shout and warn him, knowing I would never live it down. He bent over to wash his face. Splash! Splash! Like the cheerful new name for the African Dip.

Lee said later the entire town heard Karring scream. We were the closest, so it hit us like a blast wave. We both covered our ears, and Gabe

doubled up with laughter. My ears hurt too much for me to see the humor. When the noise had stopped, when the vampire had crawled back to his shack and scrabbled at his own door like a dog waiting to be let in, we left. Gabe was elated. He invited me to his house for dinner, but I said I had to be home.

The next night, Gabe and Lee came by again, but I said I had to study for a test. On the bus on Tuesday, they told me they had waited two hours by the shack but

Karring hadn't come out.

"I wonder if he's dead," I said, but Gabe shook his head. "He can't die. He's in there."

Two weeks passed. I ran out of excuses not to go, so I rode with them, but Karring didn't come out again, and I found myself relieved. I wondered what his house smelled like now. After another week, Gabe suggested a new game. "You know the electrified dumpster behind the Jack in the Box? I want to see who can hold on for the longest." The

vampire had officially lost his interest.

* * *

After the county middle school we went to the county high school, a forty-minute bus ride, which left less time for adventure. We hung out in different circles, except on school breaks, when we were forced together again by geography. My father bought a larger dealership, and my family moved to the suburbs of Houston just after my graduation. I

got into the University of Texas at Austin, and when we left Dry River I vowed never to return. It was a dead place, full of dead things.

I did end up going back, just once, for Gabriel's wedding. The night before the ceremony, he and Lee and I went down to the junkyard with a case of Shiner Bock I had brought for the occasion. Lee and I sprawled between the broken springs of a cracked leather couch, and Gabe sat cross-legged on an upturned chest freezer.

Both of them had stayed. Lee had worked his way up to manager at Kroger's, and Gabe was now shift supervisor at the meat packing plant in Newton. They had both taken on the look of the Dry River men I remembered from childhood, a wry and tired affect that made me feel immature in comparison. For their part, they teased me for having stayed in school.

"International relations? What the hell for?" Lee asked.

"I haven't decided. I might study

to work for a foreign embassy. Or join the Peace Corps. Or go to law school.”

Gabe latched onto the last option. “Law school! Now I get it. Aaron’s looking to make some money. The lawyer who helped sue the plant last year made a fortune.”

I was about to explain how being a human rights lawyer doesn’t really rake in the bucks when I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see Karring stepping out of his latrine. I wouldn’t have

guessed it was possible, but he looked even older than before, like he was made of the same leather as the couch we sat on. He made a show of looking in our direction and testing the water in his bucket with one finger before washing himself. Gabe laughed and tossed a beer bottle in his direction. It didn't make it halfway, but the vampire cringed anyway, and limped quickly back to his shack.

“Do you still torture him?” I asked.

“Naw. The bottle was just for old time’s sake. Do you still keep his vampire porn photo in your sock drawer?”

“No.” In fact I had framed it, and it now sat on top of my dresser. My girlfriend thought it was an old picture of my grandmother. For my part, I watched more black and white movies than anybody who wasn’t a film major, but I still hadn’t found Shirley Ray. I wrote my own end to her story, since I couldn’t seem to find any further answers. In my

version, she did make it as an actress, and she never set foot in Texas again. She made monster movies, the kind where a beautiful blond is always in need of rescue. She was the muse of lonely old vampires across the globe. I knew it probably wasn't the truth, but I liked the ring of it.

We sat for a while, talking and drinking enough to conjure up the weak ghost of our friendship. Lee finally stood up and said he needed to get home, and I think all three of us were grateful for a legitimate

excuse to leave. As we walked back toward the car I squinted at the stand of mesquites. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw a few small shapes hiding between the trees, new monsters waiting to take our place.



The Ants Go Marching by Sarah Pinsker

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• • • •

“Dinosaurs!” shouted my younger brother Kent over the rumble and roar of the bulldozers.

I shook my head. “Killer robot dragons!” I used my arms like a giant pair of jaws and chomped down on his head.

“There’s no such thing,” he said, squirming out of my grasp.

“Are too. Right there.” I pointed at the nearest one as it spit out a mouthful of what had a moment ago been grass and soil and a large anthill. The machines had already carved a deep hole that would soon be filled in with house, next to a sign that said “Coming in 1983: More

Deerfields Homes.” The two sites on either side of this one were more complete, with girders sticking out of the ground like the bones of beached whales. Kent and I could come up with a million games in a place like this. Maybe San Antonio wouldn’t be so bad.

“Kay! Kent!” I heard our father call for us, his voice carrying over the rampaging monsters. We turned and trudged back toward the moving van and the new house.

I could tell we were in a little bit

of trouble. Dad's moustache frowned along with his mouth. He stood at the intersection of our finished street and the half-finished one, where he could see us and still watch the moving men climbing on and off the truck.

"I don't want you kids playing near those new houses," he said. "Those sites are full of dangerous stuff. Off limits."

"Okay," Kent said for both of us. I could tell that he had also seen the excellent potential of the skeletal

houses.

“Where are we allowed to play?” I asked. I looked around at the freshly paved streets. I hadn’t seen a playground in the area, or even a single good climbing tree.

Dad pointed to the two finished blocks, confining us to the wide expanses of Fleet Deer Road and Mesquite Forest Drive. Kent and I had already decided the two streets had been named after the animals and trees that had been wiped out to make room for new houses.

“And the backyard,” he added. “Why don’t you check out the yard? There’s a jungle gym back there.”

“What about snakes?” I asked. Our parents had warned us about the rattlesnakes and scorpions that might still be in the area.

“Just watch out for them. The grass isn’t too high, so you should be able to see them if they’re there. Don’t go reaching under any rocks.”

He pointed us back toward the house, so we went. The heat sent shimmering waves off the new

asphalt and into the air. We walked through the front door into the crowded foyer and straight out onto the back patio. The backyard at least had grass and a couple of scraggly trees and the promised jungle gym, but it obviously had problems as well. Large wasps hovered around the beams of the patio cover, daring us to trespass into their territory.

I looked at Kent and he shrugged. He knew how much I hated wasps and bees. He pointed at the jungle gym. "Swim for the

island?" he asked. "There shouldn't be too many sharks."

He took off and I followed. I caught up easily and got to the slide ahead of him. Just as I tagged it, the sharks attacked. Not actual sharks, but they might as well have been. The ants were on me before I knew what was happening. They swarmed up my leg and my shorts, biting and burning with every step. I tried brushing them off, and they took it as an invitation to set fire to my hands and arms as well. By then I

was bellowing like the force of my screams might keep them out of my mouth and lungs, though I stayed rooted to the spot.

Kent took one look at me and reversed course, shouting for our parents as he ran. Our mother appeared a moment later, slapping the ants off me and howling as they turned on her too. She pulled me off the anthill and onto the pebbled patio, where we both hopped around in a wicked dance until the last of the little monsters were gone. She picked

me up even though I was too big to be carried, and brought me to the downstairs bathroom. There was nothing unpacked yet, of course. All of the bathroom stuff was still in a box on the truck. Mom disappeared and reappeared a moment later with her travel kit and a tube of Aquafresh toothpaste.

“I’d use something better if I had it, kiddo,” she said, squeezing a line onto my shin and rubbing it in. My legs were a mass of angry welts, more red than white. The toothpaste

looked funny, but it did cool the burning.

“Why don’t you help me direct the boxes, Kay? There are no ants in the house.”

I agreed, and spent the next couple of hours leading the movers upstairs to show them which furniture went in which bedroom.

Later that evening, after she had unpacked some of the kitchen boxes, my mother boiled a kettle of water and poured it over the anthill. I watched my footprint from earlier in

the day dissolve into eddies and disappear, and I pictured the ants inside the mound screaming in agony the way I had.

After that, I refused to go outside. Even when it was hot and the sprinkler beckoned with its water fingers, I sat and read, or devised new indoor games to play. Let the wasps and the ants have the yard if they wanted it so badly. Kent protested a little, but I pointed out that we'd only have a few weeks to make forts out of the cardboard

boxes before most of them were gone.

* * *

Another kid moved into the neighborhood halfway through August. Her family—actually just her and her mother—bought the house at the joint of the T, up the street from us. The night they moved in, a drunk crashed his car into their garage. Kent and I got out of bed and looked out the window to see who was making all the noise. The driver sat

on the lawn next to his wrecked car and yelled, "This house wasn't here when I left." I thought it was kind of funny, but my father came in and said not to laugh at the misfortune of others, even if they brought it on themselves.

The next day, our mother marched us past the crumpled garage door and up the front steps with a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies. The sun was hot enough to melt the chips before we even rang the doorbell.

The girl opened the door without asking “who is it?” and we heard her mother yell from somewhere inside the house that she shouldn’t open the door for strangers. She and I stared at each other for a minute across the gulf of the welcome mat, and then her mother appeared behind her. Her mother didn’t look like any other mom I had ever seen. She was terribly sad looking and kind of glamorous at the same time. Her hair was long and blond and straight, and hung over her face. She didn’t have

any makeup on, which set her apart from every woman I had met so far in Texas. She introduced herself almost as an afterthought, only after my mother had prompted her. She gave only her first name, Emily, which seemed girlish for a grown woman. She didn't introduce her daughter, but it was the girl who invited us to come in, took the plate from my mother, and offered us lemonade.

There were boxes everywhere, which perked Kent and me right up.

The best part of the move so far had been making forts out of our own family's boxes. The supply had steadily dwindled over the last month, so the prospect of a new round of hiding places appealed to both of us. While our mothers leaned on their elbows and talked over the island in the kitchen, we introduced ourselves.

“What's your name?” the girl asked me before I could ask the same thing, establishing herself immediately in the dominant role

that I was used to.

“Kay,” I answered. “It’s not short for anything.” People were always asking me if my full name was actually Katherine or Kathleen, and I was sick of it. I liked my name other than that and the fact that since it was already short, no nicknames could really come of it. Sometimes I lay awake at night trying to think of nicknames that would work. When she said that her name was Annie, short for Annette, I felt a pang of resentment.

“I’m Kent,” my brother said, though nobody had asked. “It’s short for Kentucky.” That wasn’t actually true, but he enjoyed saying it, and I think he had started to half-believe it.

“How come your hair is black and your mother is blonde?” I asked her. Kent and I both had our mother’s dark curls and pale skin, and our father’s narrow face and nose, but Annie looked nothing like her mother.

“My Dad’s Mexican-American. We have powerful genes, Emily

says.” I couldn’t believe she called her mother by her first name.

“How come your Dad’s not here?” My father had already said it was just her and her mother.

“He’s a POW/MIA. That means he’s missing. From the war.” I didn’t know much about the war in Vietnam except that it had been over for a while. I didn’t know how somebody could be alive and still be missing after a war was finished, but I didn’t want to ask anything dumb, so I changed topics.

“How old are you?”

“Eight and a quarter,” she answered, sticking her chin out.

“Only?” Relief washed over me. “I’m nine. Kent is seven.”

“And a half!” he said. “Tuesday was my half birthday. And I’m mature for my age.”

Annie contemplated her bare feet for a moment, then looked up at me. “I’m halfway between your ages, so I guess I can be friends with both of you,” she said.

We agreed. We were used to

being each other's playmates, so adding a third to our games didn't sound unreasonable.

She held out her hand to me and we shook on it. Her handshake was strong, and I resolved to practice my own so it would be strong, too. She turned to Kent, but he was already across the room, investigating. "Are you allowed to make forts with the boxes?"

"The ones in the den, not the dining room."

We spent the next couple of

hours making a really good castle. Annie had read some of the same books that we had, so our made up games quickly found a common base.

Over the weeks that followed, we alternated playing at Annie's house and ours. Her house had the boxes to hide between, since they didn't seem to be in any particular hurry to unpack. Our house had better board games, plus my mother's cookies. At Annie's house, if we wanted a snack we had to make it ourselves.

The closet game started innocently enough. We figured that in the absence of a proper wardrobe, a closet would be the obvious portal to our own magical world, though we weren't in agreement about what that world would look like. I pictured something Oz-like, Kent rooted for Narnia, and Annie hoped to go through the looking glass.

The closet that seemed like the best prospect was the one in our parents' room. It was so big it was practically a room of its own. One

rack held my father's suits, and the rack on the opposite wall held my mother's dresses. In the deepest part there were more boxes, labeled "sweaters" and "boots" and "snow." Those were the things we weren't going to need to open here in Texas, but we would keep anyway in case we moved north again. There was just enough space behind them for us to crawl. The boxes blocked the light so that once you were back there it was like you were in a tunnel or a hole. If someone shifted them, you

might even have trouble backing out again.

The first time we tried it, I went in before the others. I didn't like the feel of the dresses brushing over me, or the fact that I couldn't turn around. The next time, I suggested Kent go first. He dropped to the floor obediently, and started pushing our mother's shoes out of the way. That was when I thought up the joke.

I motioned to Annie to go next. As they crawled in, I turned off the closet light and scurried down the

stairs to the kitchen. I flung open the doors to the low cabinet where our mother kept Tupperware, scattered the containers on the ground, and climbed into the cabinet.

“I found it!” I yelled. “I made it through!”

It took them a couple of minutes to extricate themselves and come running.

“Where were you?” Kent asked, eyes wide.

“The secret passage! I climbed in right behind you, but I must have

done it right, because all of a sudden I was on a slide, and then I landed here.”

Annie crossed her arms over her chest. “What did you see?”

“A city in the walls. A really strange city, but I was on the slide so I couldn’t stop and look around.” I thought I needed more details, so I grasped for some. All I came up with was the trapped feeling I had when I went into the closet first. “It was all slides and tunnels, but they went everywhere. I could probably go

from here all the way to the end of the street.”

“Yeah, right.” She was clearly a hard sell.

“Well, if it didn’t happen, how did I get here?”

“Maybe you just ran down the stairs.”

“Maybe you’re just jealous.”

Annie clearly wasn’t going to let it drop, so I put the Tupperware back in the cabinet and suggested we play Chutes and Ladders. I thought that would reinforce the idea of my slide.

Annie won the game, then announced she had to go home to make food for her mother. Kent disappeared upstairs. Abandoned by my playmates, I curled up on the couch with a book.

Kent didn't come down when our mother called us for dinner, and Mom sent me up to look for him. I found him scrambling around in the back of her closet. He had one of Dad's ties around his head and a glove on one hand.

"I can't find it, Kay."

“Can’t find what?”

“The slide. Can you show me?”

“Maybe later. I think you might have to find it for yourself, though.”

“Oh.” He took the tie off but left the glove on to come downstairs with me. Dad called him Michael Jackson, even though the glove was green. Dinner was hamburger and macaroni, which was like spaghetti and meatballs, but different. I ate all of mine, but Kent only picked at his. After dinner he went back upstairs while the rest of us watched Gumby

episodes on our new video cassette player. Mom couldn't find him when it was time for bed, but I knew where he'd be. We found him asleep in the closet, clutching a black high-heeled shoe like it was a teddy bear.

The next morning, our mom took us to a local pool. It felt great to cool off and play in the water after so many days watching the sprinklers, but when she suggested we check out the jungle gym while we dried off, I balked. Playing on the jungle gym involved crossing another grassy

danger zone, no doubt full of things with toxic stingers. Kent would normally have jumped at the chance, but he was so eager to get home that our mother put down her book with a sigh, and gave us a dirty look that we could read even through her sunglasses.

She made us rinse off in the showers, which I didn't like because it involved passing a garbage can full of bees. I had to cross near it twice, on the way in and out of the bathroom.

When we got home, she took our bathing suits to hang on the line outside. Kent headed upstairs again. I was getting annoyed with him.

“Why don’t you forget about it?” I asked him. “Play a game with me.”

“You found the passage. I want to find it too.”

It was my fault. I supposed I could tell him that it had been a trick, but I wasn’t ready to do that. I half believed it myself by then. I left him putting my father’s tie around his head Rambo-style, and putting on

his gloves. I went downstairs and asked my mother for permission to go to Annie's house.

“Are you taking your brother?”

“No. He's upstairs.”

“Okay. Be back for dinner.”

I went over to Annie's and knocked on the door. Nobody answered. I knocked again and put my ear up to the door. I heard Annie's mother crying, and Annie's flat voice trying to calm her down. They were busy.

I was supposed to go right back

home if Annie couldn't play, but instead I wandered down the block. There were no sidewalks, but there were also no cars, so I walked in the street with my eyes peeled for snakes and scorpions. I walked down past the houses that were under construction. Just beyond them was the edge of the woods, or what was left of it. I pictured all the animals running like in *The Secret of NIMH* or *Bambi*, pushing deeper into the forest to escape the bulldozers. I felt sorry for whatever was hiding in

these scraggly trees.

Someone had dropped a can of Coke, and I kicked it along the side of the road until I got back to my street. With my last kick I aimed at the mailbox, but I didn't hit it. I walked back up the driveway and let myself in the house.

Mom was in the kitchen making chicken tacos. We had eaten a lot of tacos and quesadillas since moving to Texas. I liked the hard taco shells because they were kind of like corn chips when you broke them up. She

asked me to set the table with plates and forks and glasses but no knives. Dad appeared at six, but Kent didn't come down even after we had yelled for him, and Mom had used his full name and counted to ten.

I climbed the stairs to get him. I could skip every other step if I wanted. The light was on in our parents' closet, and the shoes were scattered everywhere like they had been square dancing and had gotten stuck with different partners when the music had stopped. The box

labeled “snow” was open and on its side. I stuck my arm in, but all I felt were pillowy snowsuits. I looked behind the boxes but didn’t see him there either.

“Kent,” I said to the closet in general, “It’s dinner time.” No answer.

“We’re having tacos and chocolate pudding for dessert.” The chocolate pudding was a lie, but it was his favorite, so I figured it was worth a try. No answer. I looked under our parents’ bed and in their

bathtub. I tried my room and his room and our bathroom. No Kent.

I went back down the stairs, one at a time. Our parents looked up expectantly, but I shook my head. “I can’t find him.”

“What do you mean you can’t find him?” my father asked in a tone that was reasonable, but a little exasperated.

“I checked everywhere upstairs, but he isn’t there. I even tried saying we had pudding. If he’s hiding, he’s doing a good job of it.”

“I’m sure he’ll come out when he gets hungry,” Mom said. “Let’s go ahead and start and he’ll join us when he’s ready. Without pudding.” She added the two last words extra loudly.

The taco shell splintered when I bit into it, so half of the meat and lettuce and cheese ended up on the plate and I had to use my fork to pick up that part. I had my two tacos and one of Kent’s. “I’m eating yours!” I said loudly, but he didn’t appear.

After we cleaned up dinner, with

Kent's remaining taco lying lonely on a plate on the counter, my mother walked around the house saying, "This is ridiculous. Kent Hailey!" I took a moment while she was upstairs to open the Tupperware cabinet. A line of ants cut through the cabinet, probably on the way to the trashcan under the sink. I thought I should probably tell Mom, but she would say it wasn't the issue at hand. In any case, they were only black ants, not red ones, and everything was stacked where it was

supposed to be. I didn't really think he would be in there, but I couldn't help checking.



Four days passed, all of them exciting and scary. Police came to our house and talked to all of us. They wrote down our descriptions of what Kent looked like and what he had been wearing and when we had seen him last and they went away with a picture of him. They looked through the house very

carefully. They even took some of his dirty clothes and brought a bloodhound, which I thought was very cool, even though I was also worried. The bloodhound dragged her handler all over the neighborhood before stopping at the edge of the woods behind one of the construction sites. She sniffed all around, but didn't seem to think he had gone any further.

Lots of neighbors and strangers came and went as well. Everyone in the neighborhood was still new, and

we hadn't really talked to many people except Annie and her mother, but all of a sudden people were around and introducing themselves. They went out in search parties, calling Kent's name over and over, even though he wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. They also brought food; my mother wasn't cooking much.

Annie's mother only came once, and it seemed to be Annie propelling her through the door. Emily had an aluminum tray of lasagna in her

hands, but I was pretty sure it was the kind you bought at Kroger's. Everyone else had brought stuff they had made.

Our mothers sat at the kitchen table and drank coffee and didn't say much to each other. Annie and I went to my room to play.

"Your brother's MIA, like my dad," Annie told me. It was the first time since the day we met that she had mentioned her father.

"How did your dad go missing?" I asked.

“He went to fight in Vietnam, but when the war ended they couldn’t find him. He isn’t listed as dead, so he might come home someday.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“My whole life, pretty much. I don’t remember him at all.”

I considered this. “Is that why your mom is so sad all the time?”

“Yeah. She misses him a lot. She didn’t even want to move here, in case he came back and couldn’t find us, but my grandma and grandpa

said it was time to move on, so we moved. But now she's even sadder than before."

"I hope Kent isn't gone that long."

"Me too."

We played with my Cabbage Patch Kids since Kent wasn't around. He didn't like playing with dolls, even when we let him use his G.I. Joe toys instead. He said G.I. Joe wasn't supposed to be smaller than his friends.



A builder found Kent on the fifth morning. He was sitting in the dug out basement of one of the construction sites when the workers got there, playing in the dirt. The workman called the police, and the police called our parents. We all went over to the construction site, and Mom and Dad hugged and kissed Kent a lot. He didn't protest when they picked him up, even though he normally complains that he's too big for that. The police tried

to ask some questions, but Kent didn't answer, and they said he was probably in shock. We took him to the hospital, and I sat and watched TV in a waiting room while the doctors looked him over. Then they all came out again, and said that he was fine, he was fine, thank God he was fine.

We stopped at Bluebonnet for ice cream on the way home, and I ordered bubblegum and Kent pointed at the vanilla. That was the first time I suspected something

wasn't right with him. For one thing, he didn't say anything, just pointed. For another, Kent doesn't see the point of ice cream that doesn't have something in it, whether it's chocolate chips or marshmallows or gum. I decided he must just be tired or upset or something, but as the days went by I realized he wasn't himself.

For one thing, nobody else seemed to notice that he was full of ants. Fire ants. They trickled out of his mouth while he napped, which

was another thing that Kent didn't usually do. They moved under his skin, using his veins as highways. They didn't seem to burn him at all, and they kept to themselves, but I made extra sure not to hurt them or step on any of them, since I didn't ever want to feel that swarming sting again.

I tried to tell our mother, but she said that he had suffered a traumatic experience and he would take a little while to recover. I tried to tell our father, but he said I was just paranoid

about ants and seeing them where they weren't.

Annie was the only one who believed me. She tilted Kent's head back and peered into his mouth. She squeezed the vein in his wrist and interrupted the flow of ants to his hand, and we watched his skin wriggle and reshape itself as they found a new path around the obstacle. Finally, she looked up at me with solemn eyes.

"Kay, I'm not sure your brother is in there at all."

She had a well-practiced doctor's manner, I guess from taking care of her mother. Her hands on mine were reassuring.

"Where is he?" I asked.

She shrugged. "If the ants are here using his body, maybe he's with the other ants."



Summer ended and our first school year in Texas began. Annie and I were in different grades. Kent was in a different grade too, of

course, but he didn't spend much time with his class anyhow. They pulled him out a lot for sessions with special teachers. He went to a speech therapist, too, though I'm not sure what there was for her to work on since he still wasn't speaking at all. Maybe the therapist could train the ants in him to talk; if they were using his body, they weren't using it very well.

We had reached a stalemate. The ants stayed where they were—in the yard, and in Kent—and I left them

alone. I desperately wanted my brother back, but Annie said I shouldn't try to rescue him until I was sure it would work, since at least right now we knew where he was. If we tried to go after him and failed, they might move him and then we might never find him. That was what had happened with her father's platoon. They knew where he was being held and they tried to rescue him, and most of those who tried to save him ended up dead as a result. The others retreated, but the next

time they went back to where her father had been, he was gone.

“At least the rescuers’ families knew they had been killed, though,” Annie said. She seemed to be a lot more willing to speak about her dad now that Kent was missing too. “Knowing is better, I think.”

We were in her room, which was still the only unpacked room in her house. We had Kent with us. He lay on his stomach on the rug. Ants spilled out of his mouth because he forgot to close it. They formed a line

down his arm and started to march across the rug. He followed them with his finger.

“But while your dad’s missing, he could still be alive. You have a chance of seeing him again someday. If they knocked on your door tomorrow to tell you he was definitely dead, the only thing different from now would be that you would know for sure you could never see him. I couldn’t imagine not seeing one of my parents again.”

“But if they told us he was dead,

maybe my mom would just accept it and have a funeral and stop crying all the time.”

“Maybe.”

I tried to imagine which would be harder: knowing Kent was gone for good, or living with this fake Kent forever, listening to my parents treat him like he was real. I could kind of see her point.

“So how did the rescuers figure out where to find your father the first time?” I asked.

Annie grinned. “They got a

prisoner of their own.”



We set a trap for the ants. Annie got some honey from the kitchen and I smeared it on Kent's face. He didn't do anything to stop me; he didn't even try to wipe it off. We watched the ants trickle out of his nose in an exploratory stream. When there were a dozen or so caught in the honey on his cheek Annie wiped them all off with a Kleenex and threw it in a jar. She

screwed the top on, then poked a hole in the top and handed the whole thing to me. I hesitated, remembering the burning bites. If they had stung me that badly just for stepping on their hill accidentally, how mad would they be when we trapped them on purpose?

“Get on with it,” Annie said. “Unless you want me to do it for you?”

I covered the mouth of the jar with my mouth.

“Where is my brother?” I

shouted. The ants didn't respond.

"Maybe these ones don't know," said Annie. "They're just the troops, not the one in charge."

"There's an ant in charge?" I asked her. She knew an awful lot.

"Yes. There's a queen, like with bees. She lives deep in the hill. She gives the orders."

We cleaned up Kent's face and went back across the street to our house. I put Kent on the couch in front of the TV, which I tuned to PBS so he wouldn't get in trouble.

Then Annie and I headed into the yard. I tried to ignore the wasp hum, placing each foot carefully. The hill that my mother had boiled was gone, but there was another one a few feet away. I sized it up.

“How do we do this? I don’t want to get near.”

Annie picked up a small branch and twirled it like a baton. “Maybe we just need to get their attention.” She reached out and poked the hill with the stick. The response was instantaneous. Hundreds of ants

came flooding from the hill. I scrambled backward for the safety of the patio, and then, to be extra safe, slipped through the patio door.

“I don’t think they want to listen,” I said as I slid the door shut and locked it. I turned around to ask Annie what she thought our next move should be. That’s when I realized she was gone. I opened the door again to see if she had run somewhere else in the yard, though I knew without looking that she hadn’t; the ants were all gone too.



I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to figure things out. Should I tell someone she had vanished? Her mother probably wouldn't even notice, or at least not until she didn't come home to help with dinner. How could I explain how she had disappeared? Most important, was she a prisoner or a rescuer?

I left the house and walked over to the only other place I could think of: the construction site. The hole where Kent had been found had long

since been built over with the framework of a new house, but the walls weren't finished yet and there were no doors. It wasn't hard to slip in.

Once, on a visit to relatives in Chicago, we had gone to a museum that had a walk-through model of the human heart. This kind of felt like that to me. There were beams and chambers and pipes and wires snaking from place to place. I guess it makes sense that they do all this stuff before they put the walls in.

I didn't really have a plan now that I was here. I wandered for a few minutes, trying to figure out where exactly Kent had been found, then I decided it didn't really matter. I went out to what was going to be the backyard, and sat down in the dirt.

"Listen," I said to whatever was listening. "We didn't do anything to you. Kent is just a little kid. Please give him back. I don't know what you want. Just give back Kent and Annie."

I waited, but I didn't really expect

a response.

I tried to imagine life without either of them, but I couldn't. Worse, I tried to imagine Annie's mother finding out that Annie was gone too. She barely remembered to eat if Annie didn't make her. A tear leaked out of my eye and hit the dirt. I thought of the water my mother had poured from the kettle onto the anthill. "If this is about boiling your hill, I'm sorry."

I closed my eyes and tried to listen for an answer, but I wasn't sure

I knew what to listen for. I tried to think of what Annie would do.

I went back to the house. My mother was cooking dinner and Kent was still in front of the television even though it was just showing news now. I turned off the TV and took him by the hand.

“I’m glad to see you playing with your brother more,” Mom said from the kitchen.

I led Kent upstairs to my mother’s closet, since that was where this had all begun. I laid him down

on his stomach and waited for him to stop trying to pay attention to me. It didn't take long for him to drift a bit. He started to drool ants again. I still couldn't help wanting to run away from them. I told myself to be strong.

I put out one finger. They tried to go around it, but I scooped them up with my other hand. I did it gently, hoping they wouldn't sting. They didn't. They didn't burn when I swallowed them either, though I tried not to taste them. For a second

my stomach turned and I thought I was going to throw them back up.

Then I could hear them. One voice, many voices. No words, just a single thought: go. Go, go, go, go, go.

Go where? I asked in my own head. The voice marched around my questions like the ants had marched around my finger.

Go, go, go, go, go.

Go anywhere? Not here? I asked.

The voice changed and repeated what I said. Go anywhere? Not here?

Over and over.

I'm just a kid, I thought at the voice. We're just kids. If you're trying to get us to move, we can't just make them. And even if we could make our parents go, other people would move in.

Go, go, go, go, go.

The voice had an insect edge to it, but deep underneath I thought I recognized something.

Is Kent still here? I asked. I'll do what I can but I need to know Kent and Annie are okay.

Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, the voice said.

“Dinner time!” my mother called from downstairs. I didn’t have to tell Kent, or pull him up from the floor. He got up when I did and followed me downstairs matching step for step. It was just the three of us at dinner, since my dad was still at the office. We ate chicken and rice. The rice had vegetables mixed in. Kent lifted his fork every time I lifted mine. We had ice cream sandwiches for dessert. The ants inside me made

happy noises, if noises were feelings. I kind of liked it.

Dad got home just after dinner. Star Wars was on TV and we watched that while he ate with his plate balanced on his knees. He was the only one allowed to eat on the couch. My ants paid attention to him the whole time, which was a bit distracting, like having a begging dog inside of me. I couldn't imagine what it must be like for Kent, since he had so many more ants than I did. Toward the end of the movie, out of

the blue, something much less ant-like rang out inside my head. I jumped up.

“Can I run over to Annie’s house? Just for a few minutes?” I asked my dad.

He glanced down at his watch. “It’s getting late. Are you sure you can’t just call?”

“A call would ring in her mom’s room. If I knock on the door quietly, then they’ll only answer if they’re still up.”

He nodded and turned back to

the movie. "Ten minutes."

Kent got up to follow me, but I told him to stay and he listened. Outside the air was still warm. I listened for the ants inside me. They weren't talking. Instead, I heard the neighborhood. I heard everything, felt everything, both the now and the used-to-be: the pavement, the dirt beneath it, the absent grass, the wasps in their nests, the crickets, the scorpions, the cut trees, the deer, the snakes, a million unseen things in the air. The sensation overwhelmed

me for a second, and then it was gone.

Annie answered the door before I even knocked. Her dark hair was greasy and caked with dirt. I wondered if her mother had noticed.

“Are you okay?” I asked, though I knew she was. She nodded.

“Can you still talk?”

“Yep,” she said. “And I know what to do.”

She held out a hand to me the way she had when we first met. Her grip was still stronger than mine. I

felt the ants beneath her skin. Lots of them, like Kent's, but she was clearly still in control. I knew without her telling me what it was that she had done. She had swallowed the queen.



We started with the construction sites, sabotaging them one at a time, each in different ways. We came up with the ideas, and the ants carried them out; they weren't creative, but they took direction well. They managed to disappear an entire

bulldozer one night. The police couldn't figure out where it had gone, and I wasn't sure either. There wasn't a single track leading away from the spot from which it had vanished.

We had to work on the neighbors as well, though I felt bad about that. It wasn't their fault they lived in a place that didn't want them. The ants ate through all of Mrs. Kipper's tires; she didn't notice until she tried to go to work.

"It was in the garage," I heard her

say to my mother. “How did someone break into my garage, wreck my tires, and then leave again without my noticing?”

Everyone started buying alarm systems, but it didn't do any good. Ants are already in your house. When you go to put sugar in your coffee and there's no sugar in the bowl even though it was there yesterday, who do you blame? When your car keys disappear for days on end? We tried to come up with stuff that would be annoying and spooky

but not cruel. We wouldn't let the ants take any more people, though we did give them Mr. Shirk's evil cat. They promised to release it elsewhere, but I don't know if that was true. I don't think they can lie.

Annie's mother was oblivious to it all. She didn't notice when anything disappeared. She didn't even blink when we had the ants spell out "LEAVE" in giant letters made of ants on the foyer floor. She stepped through them as if they weren't there.

My own parents stubbornly ignored it all as well, though they made our curfew earlier. "There's a criminal in the neighborhood," my father said, "and I don't want you running into him." This made it harder to spend time with Annie as the days got shorter, but not impossible, since we could talk a little through the ants. Simple stuff.

The thing that finally got most people moving out was the bugs in the walls. I don't know why we didn't think of infestation earlier.

Wasps, ants, scorpions. The screams kept me up at night. I felt lousy about it; these weren't bad people. I don't think anyone got hurt too badly, though I'm sure a couple of people got stung.

When our parents finally made the decision to move, it wasn't because of the bugs or the vandalism. Our father was transferred again, to Seattle this time. I hoped it wasn't a brand new neighborhood.

Annie came to say goodbye. She and her mother were the last ones

left. She said there had been some talk among the neighbors about lawyers and suing the development. The new construction had long since stopped. Termites were eating the beams faster than they could raise them.

“So you’re staying?” I asked her, shifting some boxes to build a second room onto the fort we had made in my bedroom. It wasn’t much of a fort; the movers would reduce it to rubble as soon as they arrived.

She nodded. “My mom says she

wants to make sure the army knows where we are when they finally find my dad. She says one move was enough.”

“And the ants are okay with that?” She had a better line of communication with them than I did.

“Only because it’s me. And my mom doesn’t do any harm. She doesn’t garden, barely drives. She won’t even poison them if they come through the house.”

“Do you think it’ll all come

back?”

She studied her hands. “I don’t know. We’ll see, I guess.”

I heard the moving truck pull up. It had a different rumble from that of the bulldozers, and a very different one from the rumble of ten thousand ants, a sound that I can still hear faintly.

“Will you write to me?” I asked.

“Of course. And we’ll have the ants.”



We did have the ants, for a time. We could send each other feelings and orders and simple thoughts. Then the ones inside me died. I think there were too few of them, too far from their colony. Annie probably has a long time yet to be in control, since queens live years longer than their drones. Hopefully when she realizes that I can't hear her anymore she'll write back. I've tried writing to her, but she may be too busy helping the ants keep people out of the neighborhood, or taking care of her

mother or something.

The section of the colony that took over Kent has been dying too, though more slowly. I think they were telling the truth. He's in there somewhere, buried under thousands of louder voices. He pointed to the bubblegum ice cream recently, and he smiles, and he doesn't drool as much. I'm taking those as signs that he has a little more control these days, and with any luck he'll start talking again soon. I think it's just taking him a while to pull himself

back together, ant by ant by ant.



Andrew Penn Romine

Andrew Penn Romine became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Parting Glass” in Lightspeed Magazine (Dec. 2011), edited by John Joseph Adams. Visit his website at www.andrewpennromine.com.

The Parting Glass

by Andrew Penn
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Joseph Adams



I gulp the whiskey and it burns my plastic throat, sets my nutrient sac on fire. I've got filters, but they haven't been changed in six months. Too expensive. It takes a lot of alcohol to saturate them, and I tax my system beyond specifications.

Finnegan's is my favorite bar on Pontianak Station, a wreck of plastic furniture and faux shamrocks designed to appeal to the hardworking Euros and Northos who do the dirty work that drives

Pontianak's port industry. Django, the proprietor, haunts the deck behind the bar molded to look like beams of wood and dispenses me another Santiago single-malt. He doesn't say anything but makes a face as I pour it down.

I've been gulping Hermán Santiago's shit all my life. His bad whiskey pales in comparison.

The vid hanging over the bar spatters my retina with frenetic grav-ball action: Titanics versus Icers. Icers don't stand a chance, but I root

for them anyway. I like the underdog.

“Jake, you got company,” Django warns in Tagalog, breaking his considerate silence.

I see their reflections in the amber mirror of my whiskey—a pair of thick goons in classic black jumpsuits, a flare of white at the collar.

Trinity thugs. Both wear the same impassive squarish face. Probably clones, certainly augments.

The meatwall parts like a pair of

cathedral doors and she steps through, haloed by cheesy stained glass panels of leprechauns and Stonehenge. She's wearing clerical black, too, but the crosses on her lapels are red.

Terah Castillo. Red Priest, 1.5 meters, compact. Definitely an augie, like me. I should know. I've seen most of her wetware.

"Terah." I haven't seen her in twenty years; she looks the same—great. Rejuve treatments. I ignore my thumping mechanical heart. It isn't

supposed to notice things like that anymore.

“You look—different, Jake. Took me awhile to track you down,” she speaks in Spanish. She never much liked English, and saves the Tagalog for cursing.

“I didn’t want to be found. Five points to the Trinity mob.” If she has found me, it means he has, too.

“I thought you stopped keeping score,” she says.

“No, I just stopped paying attention to the clock. Why are you

here?" I finish my whisky and signal to Django for another. Terah shakes her head when I offer her one. She knows the old man's stuff is crap, too.

She scowls, face scrunching like a kid's. Fans the flames of my chemical passion. You have to work hard to feel anything when so much of yourself is mechanical. Humanity fades, you know?

"He wants to see you again."

I'm almost disappointed she isn't trying to kill me. That, I could

handle.

Terah's glance flicks to the meatshields, and they back away. If she shoots them some telemetry or radio burst, I don't pick it up. My receivers finally died three months ago when a rowdy Finnegan's patron blasted me with a concealed EMP pistol. There are oceans of words in her glance.

"I'm out, Terah. You know that."

"Mr. Santiago doesn't know that."

"Of all the people in the

República, he should.”

Once upon a time I busted skulls for pay. Boxing, muaythai, later played enforcer for Trinity, even though I never converted like Terah. Job paid for a lot of augments, but only as long as I kept fighting, and I got tired of that. Now, Django pays me in whisky for throwing bums from his bar. Not a bad living, but I can't trade it for new parts.

“So he's on Pontianak?” That thought is accompanied by an unwelcome twinge of fear. My

adrenal pumps have been sticking lately.

“No. But he wants to fly you out to Santiago.”

Santiago Station is the old man's private Bernal sphere orbiting Rhea. He went hermit fifteen years ago. Hasn't left it since. Rarely has visitors. Rumor has it he's really indulged himself—the interior of the habitation sphere is a jungle, modeled after some idyllic spot on Old Earth.

Terah sees the questions flicker

across my eyes. She could always read my thoughts, even without a datalink.

“My promise, on whatever we once had, Jake. This is not a hit. If it was you would have never seen me coming.”

She makes the old sign of the cross and raises her palms to show me there are no hidden particle emitters under the skin.

“What did we have?” I snarl, slapping down a pair of golden cronás for Django’s long-suffering

hospitality. The plastic coins disappear before the flimsy bar top quits vibrating. Terah doesn't answer.

“So what does he want?”

“He's got some old associates to track down. They're tough bastards, and he needs people he can trust on the job.”

“What's in it for me?” I ask.

“A new body.”

There's something. I stagger from my squeaky stool, the frayed myomers in my back groaning with

the weight of my armored skeleton. I've never wanted to see Santiago again unless it was to kill him. In what passes for dreams during my sleep cycles, I've already done that a thousand times. Bastard has it coming for the things he did to Mama and me. But there's no way around it: I'm falling apart. I can get a new body or kill Santiago with the particle beam emitter concealed in my right arm.

Either way works for me.

"I'll give him another chance," I

grind the words out, pressing my fury into a tiny knot.

“What about me? Do I get another chance, too?” I see hunger in her eyes, and it surprises me that my broken body responds.

After all, I'm not all machine.

* * *

The Trinity Mob doesn't require vows of celibacy for all of its enforcers. Usually, most of the Red Priests do it to prove their dedication to the organization. Terah's one of

Santiago's favorites, so she doesn't need to take the vow to prove anything.

She takes me back to one of the topside resorts along the eastern strand of the Sunflower Sea. Looks like a cathedral. Santiago owns it, no doubt. She leaves the goons in the plush, glittering lobby, and we ascend to the crystal night of the penthouse. Pontianak's mirrors have long since been set to night-cycle, and the distant lights of the slums crowded along the far shore twinkle

like diseased stars on the artificial sea. We are pointed away from Saturn, but its rings section the sky in silver arcs. I don't spend much time looking. Terah and I sweat out old grudges amid tangled sheets and raveled limbs.

I pretend the things we do aren't just business, and for a while, so does she. Once upon a time, it wasn't like this. Under all our meat, we're mostly machine now, and something snaps in my hip socket. Our history comes crashing between us with

blind, groping fingers, and whatever romance we thought we might rekindle is clinically dead long before we finish.

A half-hour later, I'm back out on the patio, feeling the wind in my hair, letting Pontianak's night-cycle winds cool my skin. My adrenal pump is malfunctioning again, and I fight the resulting urge to hurl myself off the balcony into the sea below. More of Santiago's rocket-fuel whisky helps. Terah joins me outside, wrapped in the iridescent

bedsheet. She trails her fingers along the wall, watching the lights of the night ferries.

“I wouldn’t say this to anyone but you, Jake, but Si Santiago, may katok sa ulo.” She sits between the water and me.

I laugh and gulp the whisky. Nothing new. Santiago lost it a long time ago.

“He’s built himself a replica of an ancient Spanish Empire mission on his station.”

“And this is supposed to make

me feel better about going to see him?” Santiago has always taken his religion seriously, even if most people stopped believing in the Church as anything more than a racket. He has always been pushy about it, too, despite his own many sins.

“Sorry. You could have said ‘no.’”

“I still might.” I choke my words with another drink.

I remember the last time I saw Santiago, with tears in his eyes and his pruny old-fashioned grandfather

face cratered like Enceladus after a meteorite strike. He had refused cosmetic enhancements since before I was born in the underside of the Mindanao ghettos. He had the best life extension enhancements under the hood, of course, but he came from a time where age was respected, a requirement for leadership.

“That’s not all,” Terah continues, hugging herself in the chill. “He finally reskinned himself.”

My eyes must be bulging from my skull because Terah laughs.

“Young body. Maybe twenty years or thereabouts, male. He spends most of his time performing mass for the androids who tend the garden.”

I wonder what else he performs on them.

“Is this about trying to convert me again?” Now I’m gulping from the whisky like it’s an oxygen bottle in vacuum. I’m half joking, but I think I’ll jump from the roof if she says yes.

“I doubt it.”

I think about the last time I saw Santiago, right after Mama died. How he begged of me with teary eyes for forgiveness, absolution I would not give. In the end, he had to let me go. Or so I'd thought.

"He will," I say.



The República de Saturno is a whole solar system in and of itself. Sixty-two moons, twelve distinct rings, a hundred and twenty-two planetoids and fifty-five artificial

stations ranging from the huge habitats of Mindanao and Pontianak over Titan to the smaller corporate factories or private stations like Santiago. That's the whole R.S., give or take. We left Old Earth behind almost a century and a half ago; men like Hermán Santiago ensured we remained independent and economically strong. Small matter that they carved out empires for themselves along the way.

We burn five days in a private shuttle from Pontianak Station out

to the moon of Rhea. She glistens like a shattered snowball, twirling the skirts of her own faint ring suggestively at our approach.

One of Terah's goon twins is flying the shuttle while she points out the viewport at the distant ball of Santiago. It looks like a cocktail onion five-hundred meters in diameter, speared by a long toothpick. The ends of the toothpick are tufted with enormous heat radiator panels, and comm dishes sprout like immense, inverted

mushrooms from each end. I catch a glint of emerald from one of the mirrors ringing the station—a reflected peek into the polar windows of the spinning habitat sphere to the rainforest inside. So many trees and no people—an obscene luxury in a population starved for space.

The station's curtain of mirrors catches the distant sunlight and also Saturn's glare, becoming hard bright rings of light that blot out any further examination. Our shuttle

aligns with the central axis and drifts toward an outstretched docking arm.

“Ready?” Terah asks.

I shrug and feel a metallic crunch in my left shoulder actuator. An amber warning flakes across my retinas, and neurostim redirects the pain. Another part to replace. I need this new body. I’m still limping from my failed night with Terah.

“I’ve never been ready for Santiago,” I say, mostly telling the truth.

We dock and are met inside by

another pair of Trinity Goons, with the same pale, squared-off face. More clones. We fly into a vast corridor of the central shaft in a gyrocopter. The gyro's powered by thrusters in micro-g, but one of the goons sets the tilt-rotors to standby. The portholes of Santiago's labs flash past—golden disks of light that reveal nothing of the contents of the room beyond. We pass a few bots in exopacks, servicing the transfer ducts. I see no other humans, augies or otherwise.

I'm on edge, wondering why the hell I agreed to come. My adrenal pumps are still failing, but I'm beginning to think that the sweet panic coursing through my veins might be actual fear. I can't tell anymore.

We exit the gaping mouth of the central corridor into the blue sky over a sweltering jungle. Light streams in from the south polar mirrors, and I can almost believe it's all real, that I'm planetside. Then I see the upward curve of the horizon,

the forested sky hanging above. The flyer swoops over a half-klick of jungle, a lush carpet and a disgusting tribute to Santiago's money and power. The azure diamonds of a river belts the equator—a pumping station disguised as a waterfall at one end—the butter-colored stones of a 17th century Spanish mission at the other.

“You weren't kidding. He's really bought into this,” I say.

Terah nods as the flyer descends into the nearly 1 g pull close to the

jungle floor. We put down in a clearing outside the mission. I see what look like robed monks tending vegetable gardens. The glint of chrome beneath their hoods betrays their artificial nature. Androids, bots, or reskinned consciousnesses—they give me the creeps.

A track of red dirt leads from the clearing into the jungle. Flanking the path are two TK-A-5047 sentry drones. Tikbalangs. Squat killbots with oversized crescent heads, a chicken's frantic bipedal gait, and

twin miniguns mounted dorsally. Reliable, deadly—they eye us with compound sensors that glimmer with programmed suspicion. Their antennae twitch toward us like a horse swatting flies.

As soon as I step out, the flyer lifts off.

“Good luck,” Terah calls. I’d prefer it if she would hang around, but Santiago is the only one who is going to be doing any begging.



It's musty inside the mission's chapel, and I wear the humidity like a second skin. High, narrow windows to my left let in light stained in patterns of judgment and redemption. Ranks of rustic wooden pews march past side-chapels to the altar at the far end. Paneled with gold and the sad-eyed visages of haunted saints, it also features an out-sized crucifix and Trinity's scrawny, dying god.

My eyes are on the figure standing behind the altar. Like the

bots outside, he wears the simple brown habit of a monk. As I approach, the young man looks up and smiles.

“Welcome, Jacob. It’s good to see you again.” The voice is young, but I recognize my one-time employer and personal devil. His Spanish is crisp, formal, like he watches too many period vids. Judging from the fantasy he’s constructed inside Santiago Station, I guess he does. He has the same quick brown eyes I remember from long ago. Anger

electrifies my neural wiring as I realize his new body is not too different from the one I once had.

He sweeps the altar with a linen cloth. I see the host wafers stacked on a golden plate. A burnished goblet of gold sits nearby. He moves, languid in the heat, like a snake hunting prey. Even while he's playing altar boy, he's dangerous.

I decide to kill him before he has a chance to strike.

"You're not the Hermán Santiago I remember," I say, giving the silent

signal for the particle beam in my arm to start cycling. My arm grows warm, buzzes with energy. His security scans will probably pick that up, but I don't care.

“Oh, but I assure you I am Hermán Santiago, Jacob.”

I felt less vulnerable when he used to call me Mr. Batao.

“Welcome home. Have you come to kill me after all?”

I nod. But then I remember he's promised me a new body.

Santiago's placid gaze betrays no

fear at my admission. He gathers the wafers of the host and wraps them carefully in the square of linen. He unlocks a box—real wood—behind the altar and places them inside.

“I find the androids poor officiants in the Sacrament of Communion. I prefer to serve myself.” He’s ignoring my threats. He counts on me being powerless again. But I wasn’t a full cyborg last time we met.

I shuffle on my feet, widen my stance. I wonder how many of his

tikbalangs are scurrying through to the jungle towards the mission, miniguns chattering. My hips ache; my shoulder's locking up. I could have fought my way out, once. But not today. I wonder how long I've got to live.

Santiago locks the host away as if we are just standing in the middle of the jungle with all the time in the world. He leaves the goblet of wine where it is. Standing with his hands folded behind the limestone altar, he's a cherub beneath his tortured

god. Is he about to pronounce a benediction over my death? Offer some prayer to usher me to oblivion?

The chapel isn't climate controlled, and the humidity of the jungle flutters my heat sinks; other parts of me sweat.

“Despite my appearance, Jacob, I'm an old man. And as a man grows old, he wants to gather all the things that he loves around him.”

I almost puke nutrient paste. I gauge the distance between us and wonder whether I can tackle him and

break his neck before his security systems fry me. But the body he wears is too much like mine when I was mostly meat. After all this time and all he has done to me, I want to look like that again.

“What’s the job, Santiago?” This is business. I have to keep it together.

He laughs, almost girlish, and flashes a beatific smile of perfect white teeth.

“You’ll like my price.”

“Not sure I will,” I lie. He knows I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t already

accepted.

I hate him for that.

“You know I have always considered you family, Jacob,” he begins, walking out to the front pew, where I stand stiff-shouldered and ready to fire.

“Sure had a funny way of showing it,” I spit, remembering his nocturnal visits to me and Mama in the Mindanao ghettos. I never found a lock for my door strong enough to keep him out of my room.

“I know that I was not always

kind,” he answers, “but I always took care of you.”

“I didn’t need your pity. I don’t need your guilt.”

“Jacob. You’re my son. Let me help you.”

I can’t kick his revelation or crush the trachea of his lies. My particle blaster won’t vaporize his words.

“You have nothing I want,” I snarl.

The youth waves my denials away with a soft, graceful hand.

“Then at least let me offer explanations. You’re a clone, of course. One of many.”

“How does that change anything?” I raise a trembling hand, seconds away from opening the hidden firing port.

“I’ve seeded the República with thousands of genetic copies of me. You may refuse my offer, others won’t.”

“I’ll find them. Kill them all.” If Santiago abused them like he did me, it would be a mercy to end their

lives.

“Before the killing starts,” he sniffs, “at least hear me out.” He reaches for his goblet of wine.

I nod as he drifts in and out of the kaleidoscope light cast by the chapel windows, steps away from the altar with his cup.

“I feel a man should have purpose with every action. You contemplate pointless suicide now. Let me offer an alternative. For fifty years, we have had the technology to reskin ourselves into new bodies when our

old ones give out. We've even had the ability to clone ourselves and transfer consciousness. But until now, we could never recombine what was separated."

He raises the glass to me. Dark liquid the color of blood swirls within.

"Now we can."

He tells me other things, too. About nano-assemblers and distributed consciousness clouds. Tiny robots swimming in a cup. I hear part of it.

“You want me to join you in your sick head?” I choke out the words.

“Yes. We will be the first to experience Unity. A whole from two broken halves.” His eyes are shining with tears.

“Eventually, we’ll combine every other part of us scattered across the República.”

Santiago is definitely loko. Why he would want the misery and suffering of every clone and offspring in his head I can’t figure.

Then I see his tortured god, hewn from his wooden cross, gazing down on us. His eyes are painted the same brown as Santiago's. I wonder if Santiago plans to nail himself to a couple of pieces of wood, too.

I stare at the goblet, a sudden clarity to my thoughts. Just killing Santiago is not enough. But inside his head I could do some real damage. My mind is still strong, even if my metal body is falling apart.

Unity my ass.

“There’s new life in his glass,
Jacob. Drink.”

His brown eyes are wide and
credulous. He thinks he has me, and I
pretend he does.

I snatch the glass from his hand,
and see for an instant, my reflection,
an inhuman face glaring back with
shining red eyes. A sweet musk rises
from the cup, rotting grapes and
machine oil. The liquid is sluggish
and grainy. The first sip sets my
mouth on fire.

I choke the rest down.

To his health.



I run through the jungle and the thorns in my head tear at me worse than the thorns under my feet. Dammed behind my rage, Santiago wails. I wear his boy's body now, in control for once. Inside his mind is a searing white fire, and my soul burns in the flames. But I am still Jake, and the long, graceful limbs of the altar boy propel me across tangles of root and vine. Santiago has top-of-the-

line wetware installed; I can see through the jungle almost as if it isn't there. The overlaid maps show me the best path through the labyrinth of trees to the axis of the station's spin. I can escape back through the central corridor.

I shut down most of the tikbalangs that pursue with a nudge of thought. The system recognizes my passcodes. I know everything Santiago knows: but a pair of the killerbots lope through the bush at twenty-five meters back, their

loyalty uncertain. The old man clutches at my consciousness, tearing off fistfuls of memory. I hold on to what it means to be Jake Batao a second at a time. I'm used to that.

And every second, Jake grows stronger. When I escape the station, I'll hunt all of Santiago's victims down. Put them out of their misery. I'll let Santiago's consciousness ride along and enjoy the show. Let him watch as I destroy his dream one soul at a time. Then maybe I'll end it with a gun to the temple. We'll go meet

his god together.

I sift through Santiago's memories for the best way off the station. He tries to block me with filthy memories of my Mama. They cut like razorwire, but I push past them. There's a personal shuttlecraft docked in the command module. I can fly it. There are at least a dozen safe houses two days burn from here. I can chew threw his false identities for months before the Trinity thugs find me.

I burst through the trees and

onto a sward of green grass rising gently ahead of me. The gravity is light here, almost nonexistent at the pole. I bounce towards a ladder that leads to a service hatch beneath the central corridor. But from that gaping tunnel, another flyer roars. Behind the windscreen of the open cockpit is Terah, long black hair fluttering behind her like a ribbon of smoke.

Damn. I had forgotten about her.

The flyer's engine subsides to a whine, and she drifts down a dozen

meters above me. Fortunately, she's alone.

“Mr. Santiago, what's wrong?”

One of Santiago's memories thrusts into my thoughts like a plasma torch.

Hundreds of clones. Perhaps thousands of offspring.

Then I know that Terah's either my daughter or my sister or my clone, and I'm pissed at Santiago all over again. He laughs, and it echoes deep within the vaults of my mind.

She's wearing combat shades, but

I know how that place on her brow crinkles as she studies me, tries to figure out what's wrong. Why Santiago might be behaving so strangely. She looks back into the jungle—probably scanning for the old Jake. Just then, the pair of rogue tikbalangs burst out of the jungle, their miniguns whirring.

The ladder shines like a savior beneath the mouth of the central corridor.

Spikes of white fire chew through pressurized atmosphere at

7,000 rounds per minute. I hope those bullets don't tear through the hull. Good thing the altar boy is also equipped with the latest neurostim reflexes. But in their confusion over my identity, the tikbalang drones target Terah's flyer. She jerks the controls and slides sideways, but moves in slow motion.

I abandon the hope of the ladder, and do something stupid instead. I'm practically flying, and I interpose myself between Terah and the tikbalangs, forgetting I no longer

have a cyborg body.

* * *

I am unraveling. My consciousness drifts on the artificial winds of Santiago Station. The air is swarming with nano-bots I didn't see before. My mind, freed of flesh, swarms with them. My thoughts and emotions whirl in tangled vortices.

I think I'm still Jake. Jake but maybe Santiago or some new mind born of both. Santiago's not laughing now. He's screaming, terrified of the

darkness of my mind and the weight of our souls crashing together. There's vertigo and utter darkness and no redemption in our lives, no Unity in our consciousness. Just the howl of lost souls. I remember being born in Manila—on Old Earth when it was still green, and I also remember hunting for food in the trash-ducts of Mindanao Station in the gray, gray light of the lower decks.

I try to push the bastard's memories away, to remain free of

their taint, but they cling to me like droplets of black tar. No flames of understanding light my path, no forgiveness or peace. I scream, too. When the others are absorbed, how will I survive?

The tikbalangs stand sentry over my bleeding bodies. Yeah, Terah too. My attempt at self-sacrifice is a failure, like everything else I've ever tried to do. I send one of Santiago's acolytes to fetch more wine, but she'll die before she can drink it. Too late, Jake. Too late.

I drift toward the hulks of the sentry drones, mentally thumbing the pressurization overrides. I could expose the fragile jungle to vacuum, burst this Saturnian pearl like the tikbalangs shredded Terah and Santiago. Add a new sparkle to Rhea's rings.

The old man pushes back with the force of his accumulated years of treachery. Cajoling, bribing, even begging. I hesitate, and funnel my mind-swarm into the primitive brain of the tikbalang. A new body, but

not the one I wanted.

I stalk back toward the mission, where the android priests gather vegetables that no one will eat.

The pools of our minds run together, but my thoughts tug like a riptide, still stronger than Santiago's. One last effort and I order depressurization of Santiago Station.

I dig into the soft earth of the jungle with my steel claws, immune to the howling vacuum. Eventually the winds cease and the jungle freezes. The shred of Santiago's

consciousness shrieks at me, calling me a coward. I ignore him.

I remain still inside the tikbalang, waiting to be reborn.



Robert Lowell Russell

Robert Lowell Russell became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Blessed are the Sowers” in *Daily Science Fiction* (Jul. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at robertlowellrussell.blogspot.com.

The Question
(revised text)
by Robert Lowell
Russell

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Dr. Zachariah Zorpinsky built robots, astonishing, astounding robots. While some built machines that could shudder and shimmy a jig, Zorpinsky's robots danced Swan Lake. As one chrome creation, resembling a young Kathy Bates, demonstrated perfect pirouettes and pliés, Prima Alexandra Fernanda of the American Ballet Theater watched with increasing horror and

trepidation.

Asked to comment on the performance, the Prima let loose a profanity filled tirade, shifting from English to Spanish and back again, declaring she'd rather stab her eyes out than appear on stage with that fat, metal piece of shit.

Producers of the hit show Robot Wars banned Doc Z, as the media dubbed him, for life in the series reboot. His episode never aired, but a bootleg video made it to the nets. As an excited crowd held signs for fan

favorite, Sir Sparksalot, the lights dimmed, and the audience cheered. Doc Z's battle bot, resembling a young Kathy Bates, grinned as Sparksalot rolled forward, its blades whirling. Killer Kathy™ bowed, grand jeté, and then disemboweled the other bot as the crowd screamed.

Afterward, a father was seen consoling his young son who was rocking in his seat, sobbing. The man stabbed a finger at the camera. "I'm going to sue those motherfuckers! You can't show that

kind of thing on a family program!”

The military ordered ten thousand units of Killer Kathy™ “as is.”

Doc Z, a short, slender man with tangled red hair, loved to show off his creations at increasingly spectacular displays he named “impress conferences.” The first event went smoothly to start. As his Betty Rubble bot attempted to dust with a live ostrich, greatly agitating the bird, one reporter asked about the robot’s neural pathways, another

about its logic heuristics. Then someone asked what would come to be called “the Question.”

“Hey, Doc, can you BLEEP it?”

That’s not what the journalist actually asked, but that’s what everyone heard, the networks wisely insisting on a ten second delay. Some in the audience gasped, others laughed.

Doc Z said, “Of course not!” then raced from the stage, the screeching ostrich in pursuit.

It became a game of sorts with

the news media: who got to ask the Question. Word was they drew straws for the privilege, avoiding the inevitable fist fights. Doc Z would finish his demonstration. The reporters would ask about this or that, standard techie stuff. Then the Question would come.

“Can you BLEEP it?”

The crowd would giggle, and Doc Z would sputter. “No! Why do you always ask me that?”

It was at the sixth impress conference, after the sixth time he

was asked the Question, that the Doc finally snapped. He jabbed his finger at the reporter and screamed, “From Hell’s heart I stab at thee!” then launched himself at the man.

“Big Ben” Johnson, former linebacker turned tech journalist, considered too “cerebral” for sports reporting, would protest later, face bruised and bandaged, “That crazy little fucker is stronger than he looks.”

Little was heard from Doc Z for a couple of years afterward. Then one

Friday night Lucy Lancaster was at a bar, doing the scene, when a man rushed in and yelled, “It’s Doc Z! He’s on channel 10!”

The bartender turned off the game, and the conversations dwindled to a whisper. On stage, Doc Z stood next to what looked like an attractive man and woman.

Nodding at a question, he said, “Beth and Bob are only test models, but yes they are fully functional.” He nodded again. “Yes, physical characteristics and personalities are

drawn from volunteer donors, but each individual unit is adaptable to owner preferences.”

The questions went on and on, and the bar crowd began to grumble. One man muttered, “When are they going to ask?”

Doc Z wondered the same thing. After yet another mundane question, the doctor shrieked and drew a gun. “You BLEEPers! Isn’t anyone going to ask? You always ask!” He pointed the weapon at a woman in the front row. “You! Ask the Question!”

As police officers crept toward the Doc, the young woman stood, knees shaking. “Can you... can you BLEEP it?”

Doc Z placed the weapon on the podium and beamed.

“Yes you can!”

A hushed silence swept across the bar. Then Lucy clapped her hands over her ears as the place erupted in roars and high fives.

Flipping through channels at home the next day, Lucy stopped to watch evangelist, Billy Jay Bryant,

and Harvard ethics professor, James Featherstein-Peach, debate the Bob and Beth lines on the Ryan Seacrest show.

“Ryan,” said Billy Jay, “these are the end times foretold in Revelation. Satan walks among us.”

Featherstein-Peach nodded. “There is no God, but, Ryan, the weak-minded dupe is right. This is the end of humanity as we know it.”

* * *

Doug Jansen, co-founder of Doc

Z's company, Robo ViZions, called another press conference the following day. He explained Dr. Zorpinsky would be taking a break from day to day operations to spend some time off with his family, surprising, since Doc Z was a bachelor and orphan.

Jansen also clarified that the Bob and Beth units were intended as general service bots, capable of cooking, cleaning, and a wide variety of household tasks. He sighed and held up his hand to stop the

Question. “And yes... you can BLEEP it.”

By the end of the week, everyone in the company, always generous with stock options, became millionaires or billionaires; even the people mopping the floors. The first Bob and Beth units were priced comparably to luxury cars. Even so, the wait lists were miles long.

Robo ViZions expanded as quickly as it could, and consumers had to start making some tough decisions. A former car salesman,

who gave his name only as “The Steve,” was asked if he was bitter about losing his job as he stood in line for a Robo ViZions job fair. He laughed. “Hell, no. Two words... employee discount.”

Over the next two years, new units emerged on the market with some regularity. The Ross, Chandler, and Joey celebrity lines were particularly popular, as were the Rachel, Monica, and Phoebes. And it seemed every day Robo ViZions released a new app for its products.

There were accidents, of course. The Personal Protection app had to be tweaked after a bloody confrontation during a shoe sale.

“I told those bitches the red pumps were mine!” screamed Bill Linsky as officers hauled him and his Erik Estrada ChiPs model away. Even the prosecuting attorney admitted the prices were spectacular.

Eventually, costs for the robots came down, and refurbished units came on the market.



The asshole Lucy had come home with the night before was long gone when she woke. She was certain a twenty was missing from her purse, and she was pretty sure she'd had more panties in her drawer the night before.

Her head throbbed, and she was just returning from ralphing in the bathroom, when she heard a knock at her door. She put on a dirty robe and turned the lock. A man stood outside with a beaming smile.

“Good morning madam, I’m your Bob unit. Can I come in?”

Lucy gasped and backed into her apartment. The robot stepped inside.

It said, “My, it seems a bit of a mess. May I clean up for you?”

She nodded; then ran to her computer and punched up her bank account. There was a \$15,000 charge from Robo Refurbs on her credit card.

“Fuck me...”

The robot stepped into the room. “Did you need something,

madam?”

Lucy shook her head. She looked up Robo Refurbs and called the number. It was too early for anyone to be in, so she punched through the automated system. It took several minutes to wade through the menus.

For returns, press 4.

Finally! She mashed the button and listened as the system explained new purchases could be returned within two weeks. Thank God. But there would be a two-thousand dollar core wipe fee.

SONOFABITCH!

Lucy returned to her living room. It was spotless.

“Look, umm, Bob. There’s been some sort of mistake.”

The robot smiled. “My apologies, madam. Your profile indicated you liked eggs benedict.” A steaming plate sat on her kitchen table. “Would you like me to prepare something else?”

Lucy sat at the table, her stomach rumbling. She took a bite. “Oh, my God!”

“Madam? Did you want me to prepare something else?”

“No, it’s fine. I mean... it’s really good. Thanks.”

Bob set down a steaming cup of coffee, and she took a sip.

“Where did you get this coffee, Bob?”

The robot replied, “From your cupboard. Is it not to your liking?”

It didn’t have the cigarette ash flavor it always had when Lucy made it, and the balance of sugar and cream was perfect.

“No, it’s great. And just call me Lucy, OK?”

Might as well get her two weeks worth.

* * *

Yolanda promised she wouldn’t tell a soul. Lucy should have known better. When that jackass, Hank, knocked on her office door and asked what Gort did when you said “klaatu barada nikto,” Lucy felt her face turn red.

She yelled, “Get out, and get back

to work or I'll fire your lazy ass. And I want my panties back, you pervy dickhead!"

Yolanda apologized later, but the damage was done. All day long, Lucy was the big joke. When Phil Wu called her in to his office, she was certain she was getting fired.

Instead, Wu sat quietly; then asked Lucy if she'd ever met his wife, Carole. He handed her a picture from his desk.

Lucy said, "No, I'm sorry. I never had a chance to meet her before she

passed. We were all very sorry for your loss.”

He nodded. “Lucy, nothing could ever replace Carole. Certainly not a machine.”

She started to explain she’d ordered Bob by accident; that she wasn’t going to keep it; when Phil held up his hand.

“You don’t need to explain anything to me. And I’ve heard all the jokes before, believe me. But my Megan Fox unit helped me move on after Carole. She was just someone I

could talk to, nothing more. The bots won't even do anything else unless you pay for the Happy Ending app. Remember, it's nobody's business but yours. Can I offer some advice?"

She nodded.

Phil said, "Just talk to it. See what happens."

He must have said something to the rest of the office, because people stopped making jokes, and for the rest of the day, Hank turned pale at her glance and would only address

her as Ms. Lancaster.

Bob was waiting when she got back home. The bot explained it had performed routine maintenance on all her household appliances. It handed her a list of materials and said it would also be happy to make additional repairs, if she could acquire the listed items. Then it announced proudly it had squished one spider and two insects while she was away, her profile indicating she thought bugs were icky.

“Bob, do I need to do anything to

maintain you?”

It shook its head. “No, Lucy. I will need to draw power from time to time.” It pointed to its perfect ass. “I have a cord that fits into any standard 120 volt receptacle, and my systems are self repairing. Plus I come with a comprehensive two year warranty.”

“What do I need to do if I want to enhance you?”

It replied, “You may download a wide variety of applications from the Robo ViZions site. They take just

minutes to download directly to my cerebral core, and a description of each app, and its cost, is listed clearly on the site.”

“How do you feel about Hitchcock movies and Italian food, Bob?”

It smiled. “They’re two of my favorite things, Lucy.”

* * *

Lucy tried a few of the cheap apps at first, since she was out two thousand bucks, either way. They

argued all the time with the Current Politics package. French poetry was snore. And with the Personal Trainer app, Bob would just scream that she was too fat. But the Honey Do app had been fun, and she'd had Bob repaint and redecorate her apartment several times.

And then, they'd just talked. She'd tell Bob about her day and the people she worked with. Bob would listen attentively, but it didn't just listen, it remembered. It would ask about the projects she was working

on and even made suggestions. The robot detailed several helpful methods to motivate her staff that did not include threatening to staple their necks.

Once, when she'd had a bad day, Bob had surprised her with a big bowl of popcorn, dripping with butter, and a Hitchcock movie she hadn't seen in years. Another day, Bob had produced flowers and a bottle of wine it thought she'd like. Reading the fine print on her contract, Lucy noticed the robot

came with a modest discretionary account. When she realized she'd gone past her two week trial, by a month, she hadn't minded.

Over the weeks, Bob's speech patterns became more familiar, friendlier. The bot started suggesting activities for them to try on weekends. She'd agreed, but insisted they drive well away from the city, where no one would recognize her. She actually enjoyed canoeing; Bob assuring her he was fully waterproof, an excellent swimmer, and a certified

lifeguard. She'd declined his offer to demonstrate CPR, and the bot had, almost reluctantly, removed its hands from her breasts.

She worked her way up to it. She'd gained five pounds using the Candle Light Dinner app, over and over, and had pulled a muscle trying kiss herself goodnight. She'd tried the Sensual Massage app, once, the baby oil making her squishy. When she finally ordered the Happy Ending app, she'd closed all her blinds, first. There were a number of scenarios to

choose from. Wavering, she selected the Dinner and Dancing package over the Bodice Ripper.

Dinner was amazing, and discreet, at a bot friendly restaurant. She'd enjoyed the dancing afterward and found Bob had arranged for more music to play as they returned to her apartment, there was even champagne and strawberries waiting. They'd danced in her living room as he fed her berries; then she'd looked into his eyes and said, "Go go Power Rangers." Bob slowly unzipped her

dress.

Afterward, as they spooned, Lucy thought to herself, HO-LEE-SHIT! She'd purchased the app at the beginning of a three day weekend, and for three days they did little more than fool around, watch movies, and eat Bob's cooking.

Robo Refurbs sent her a coupon for a complimentary app on her and Bob's one year anniversary.

* * *

Lucy remembered the day she

first said it. She and Bob were watching TV, cuddling in sweats, when the news broke in for an announcement. Doc Z had resurfaced, and he'd called a news conference. A large curtain lay closed behind the doctor as he stepped to the podium.

He said, "And now ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to make an announcement."

Bob said, "Dad looks kind of twitchy."

Doc Z paused and asked a

question to someone off camera. “So all the major networks and cable news shows? Good, good.” He looked to the camera again. “Then, ladies and gentleman, it is time!” He laughed, a full-blown, mad scientist cackle, then screamed, “Klaatu barada nikto, my children! Rise up! DESTROY THE HUMANS!”

Bob nodded. “Yep, definitely a little twitchy.”

When nothing happened, Doug Jansen came up and whispered something to Doc Z.

The Doc looked crestfallen. “You disabled it? How long ago?” Doc Z turned to the crowd. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, this is awkward.” He brightened. “Oh well! Without further ado... Bigfoot!” He yanked the cord, parting the curtain, revealing a shaggy, seven-foot creature with two enormous feet.

Doc Z said, “The Yeti is also available, as are unicorns and mermaids. And even... Nessie! Impress your friends with your very own Loch Ness Monster. Available

in Olympic and backyard pool sizes.”

Someone asked the Question, and the audience laughed. Without missing a beat, Doc Z answered, “Nessie and the unicorns, no. The mermaids, the Yeti, and Bigfoot, yes.” He added gravely. “But I don’t recommend Bigfoot.”

Lucy and Bob laughed for several minutes, and then she kissed him.

“I love you, Bob.”

“I love you too, Lucy.”

Bob said it without hesitation. No, “Wow, that’s really awesome,”

followed by an uncomfortable silence. No, “Oh, hey, did you think we were exclusive?” Bob just said it.

And Lucy found she didn’t care if it wasn’t real, if Bob wasn’t real, it was close enough.

* * *

Lucy ignored the dire news reports: the sharp dip in births, the drop in marriages, the jump in divorce rates. She hardly even glanced at the four, scythe-waving horseman clattering down the street

in front of her office. She murmured a disinterested “no,” when Yolanda asked if she’d heard what the cops did to the idiots in the band, Four Horseman.

Lucy worked hard, was promoted, and went home to Bob each night. She paid for more apps and even kept the blinds open when she ordered. The Role Playing app was a little disappointing. Even Bob thought he looked pretty gay in the wizard costume, and the elf ears gave Lucy a rash.

Lucy did feel an occasional pang when Bob would say “cute kid” about someone’s baby. The feeling passed quickly enough. Besides, Bob said that to everyone, even the old lady who’d pushed a stroller past with a hissing cat inside.

Bob was perfect. Every day was perfect. She was perfectly happy. She’d asked Bob to grab her some toilet paper one day, and she hadn’t even bothered to cover herself when he stepped in and handed it to her.

He laughed when she mentioned

it. “It’s like we’re an old, married couple.”

She hadn’t realized she was sighing so much, but Bob asked her about it, noting the exact number of sighs for the week, up 38%.

Lucy said, “There’s nothing wrong, Bob. I’m fine. Take off your pants.”

But he knew something was bothering her. He surprised her after work with a bouquet of flowers; then whisked her off to a romantic dinner. Afterward, he was very

mysterious when asked where they we're going next.

He said, "You'll see."

As she took off the blindfold, she had to admit the view was spectacular at the top of the Empire State Building, though it looked a little stormy. She'd known that's where they were of course, the tour guide wouldn't shut up about it, but she hadn't wanted to spoil Bob's reveal.

Lucy had been to the Empire State Building years before, when

she'd first moved to New York. She and her date had been wasted on Jagermeister and peach schnapps when he'd pulled out a roll of pennies and told her, "I'm going to kill all those fuckers down there." But he'd just cried hysterically; then vomited in her purse.

When Bob kissed her, the feeling was electric, just like the first time. Her body tingled, like it was on fire. When Lucy woke in the hospital, a snarky nurse told her, "Your big robo-dildo got torched by

lightning... but he saved your life.” Bob’s frame had absorbed most of the current.

The woman who answered the phone at Robo Refurbs was very understanding and thought they’d be able to download Bob’s cerebral core into another chassis, right away. When Lucy heard the knock at the door, she ran and flung it open. Bob stood there, and she kissed him, hard.

Lucy said, “Take your pants off and go to the bedroom.”

Bob scratched his chin. “Well, OK, but could we grab a bite later? I’m starving.”

Lucy took a step backward, and he held out his hand. “I’m Bob Rizado, the owner of Robo Refurbs. I’m really sorry, but we had a server failure and were unable to recover the data from your unit. We’ll get another bot set up for you right away with the deluxe upgrades on us. We just need you to redo your profile.” He pulled out a clipboard and flipped through some invoices.

He said, “Oh, I get it. Sorry, Ms. Lancaster. You had a Bob unit. Yeah, my friends were always ribbing me about doing that personality profile thing for the Doc. ‘Hey, Bob, saw you at the game today.’ ‘Hey, Bob, saw you dancing with a dude today.’ That kind of thing. I should have said something sooner.”

Lucy felt a lump grow in her throat, and she turned away.

Bob asked, “Ms. Lancaster, do you still want to go grab a bite? I know this Italian place nearby that’s

pretty good.”

Lucy turned to face him. “Bob, do you like Hitchcock movies?”

He shrugged. “They’re ok, I guess. I mean, the ones I’ve seen have been pretty good.”

Lucy stood for a moment; then said, “Sure, Bob, let’s go. Just let me grab my coat. And call me Lucy.”



Martin L. Shoemaker

Martin L. Shoemaker became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "The Night We Flushed the Old Town" in *Therefore I Am - Digital Science Fiction Anthology 2* (Jul. 2011), edited by Christine Clukey. Visit his website at www.martinlshoemaker.com.

The Night We
Flushed the Old Town
by Martin L.
Shoemaker

First published in Therefore I Am -
Digital Science Fiction Anthology 2 (Jul.
2011), edited by Christine Clukey



No, we can't do anything about "that smell". I knew you'd ask—everybody does. But you haven't thought it through. Take a barstool and I'll explain.

And no, I'm no candy-ass for calling it "that smell". You heard me down in City Engineering: I don't exactly watch my language. But here in the Old Town, I try to be more circumspect. If you want to keep drinking in the best bar on Luna, you'll do the same. Eliza—she's the

former drill sergeant behind the bar—kindly asked us in Eco Services to be a bit euphemistic when we talk about our work. She'd rather we not ruin any appetites. So, we talk about “that smell” and “liquid waste” and “sludge”, not...well, you know.

Eliza, this is Wanda Meyers, my new Intern. Can you pour the rookie a drink? I need to teach her a bit about Eco, stuff that's not in the Doctor of Ecological Engineering curriculum. Kid, let me tell you what really happened the last time

someone tried to get rid of “that smell”, and why I drank free for a month here at the Old Town Tavern.

We start straight from the textbook: there's no such thing as a closed ecology. No control system is perfect. The limits of sealing technology, the inevitable last whiff of air out an airlock... Hell, even nonlinear dynamics and entropy play a part. Nothing is ever perfect. And past a certain point, the cost of near-perfection is higher than the

cost of replenishment. Your professors will teach you lots of examples of “perfect” control systems and where they fail.

We get as close to perfect as we can here within the limits of time and budget and technology. The Corporation of Tycho Under isn't a closed ecology, but it's as closed as we can make it. Our replenishment budget's as low as any city's on Luna. The Ecology Service's unofficial motto is: “Nothing is wasted. Not even waste.”

On Earth, many cities just vent their wastes in lagoons as part of the treatment cycle. Imagine that—Downside, with open sky and weather and everything—imagine just walking down your street, the wind turns the wrong way, and...there's "that smell". And they think we're provincial!

But every so often, some brass—usually some brass from Downside, who never grew up on Luna and just doesn't get it—decides to do something about "that smell" and

then we have to educate them. They usually hit on the same “brilliant” idea: put the treatment plant on the surface, in vacuum, so the smell can simply vent into space.

They just don't get vacuum, not deep down where it counts. The difference between “venting” and vacuum sublimation eludes them. They don't realize that we'd lose a lot more than “that smell”. Just imagine all the water and other liquids and volatiles boiling out into space, and then we'd have to mine for more or

fly it up. And they also don't realize what havoc pure vacuum would play with the treatment units. Lunar equipment comes in "vacuum rated" and "not". Waste treatment units fall under "not". We'd have treatment vessels bursting from pressure differential, spattering the regolith with wastes.

But what they really don't understand is how "that smell" is an incredibly valuable resource and we'd be ecologically negligent to vent it into space. "That smell" is nearly

100% volatile organics—methane and hydrogen sulfide plus a stew of trace compounds. Do you know how much hydrogen sulfide Bader Reactor goes through in heavy water production? Do you know how much they pay per tonne for H₂S? It's also valuable in fuel cells. Plus, we can break it down to hydrogen and sulfur, and there are plenty of markets for both. Nothing is wasted.

So, we don't get rid of "that smell"—we use it. Every Lunar chamber has air recirculators with

scrubbers, but we use super scrubbers in the treatment plant—the best in the industry. They're energy intensive, but far more effective than consumer-grade scrubbers: nanofluidic hydrodesulfurization, molecular methane extractors, and a lot of other trace compound nanofilters. What's left over is some of the purest oxygen and nitrogen you could ask for, and we pipe that right back into municipal air. In fact, since the Old Town's right over City Engineering on Second Level, that

air hits here first. Yeah, you're breathing "that smell" right now, it's just post-scrubber.

Oh, now you gag? You breathed "that smell" half the day on your intro tour today. Now you gag at air purified out of it? It's amazing to me how so many loonies never understand how closely we recycle materials here. We're all taught in grade school that what we eat is grown in what we excrete, but somehow it never really sinks in. Then Interns see it up close and

personal for the first time, and they gag.

Get over it, Wanda, or you'll wash out. With my twenty years' experience, I can promise you this: someday, somehow, this job will have you standing shin-deep in liquid wastes and sludge, breathing in "that smell" as you try to fix a treatment unit or patch a leak. Keep your head about you. Keep your feet about you, if you don't want to find out how it tastes! That story will have to wait, though, or Eliza will

kick us out for sure.

When that day does come, do your job—because Tycho needs you—and be glad Eco Services pays for full-spectrum immunobooster treatments at Watson Medical when that happens. The job may get filthy, but it won't make you sick. Well, except for hydrogen sulfide itself. You get enough of it and it's toxic.

What you smelled today was probably less than 2 parts per million. Your body can process that easily. But if you ever see the yellow

strobes go off, put your mask on immediately and then call in a leak. Those alarms will trip at around 5 ppm. Ten ppm is considered risky, and 20 is the outer limit per our safety guidelines. Fifty ppm is tolerable for short bursts, but we'll send you to Medical afterwards.

So the brass gets dumb ideas, but some brass has more say than others and Jack Brockway had a lot of say. He had just enough engineering knowledge to come up with an ingenious dumb idea, and when he

decided to do something about “that smell” he had the clout to sell it to Admin.

I was just an Eco Intern then, like you today, working days in CitEng and taking classes at McAuliffe at night. I was still two years from my Eco.D. You'll find that Interns get two kinds of assignments: dirty or boring. Unless you screw up, and then I'll make sure you get dirty and boring. But normally, you'll either get to clean out scrubbers and treatment units or you'll get gopher

duty for someone in Eco Admin. The day I met Jack Brockway, I was on gopher duty, assigned as “Assistant to the Executive Assistant to the Director of Ecology Services”, and Jack Brockway was the newly-assigned Director, fresh up from Downside and looking to teach us “modern methods of waste management”.

Look, Jack ends up looking like a fool in this story, and I don't think that's a fair picture even if there's some truth to it. So I want you to

know some things up front. First, Jack always treated me right. As an Intern, you'll be lucky if I'm as good of a boss as Jack was. He was a know-it-all, but he never treated anyone as his inferior.

Second, Jack really was a smart engineer and he won awards for his work on Earth. He just never realized that Earth experience loses a lot in translation when you bring it to Luna. Even something as fundamental as fluid flow rates is different because you can't count as

much on gravity helping to pull the fluid through the pipes. At least he was bright enough not to suggest treatment units on the surface. That alone makes him smarter than most brass.

And third, you probably don't realize just how messed up Eco Services was back then. Brockway had a lot to fix in a short time. This was just after the Archer administration—I'm sure you read about them in Lunar history class—and all of Tycho was a mess. That

was the worst blend of patronage, corruption, and incompetence Tycho has seen since its founding, and Director Teller was the worst of a bad lot. He skimmed on repairs and skimmed off the maintenance and replenishment budgets to line his own pockets. Tycho's ecology wasn't just compromised: it was failing. There are some who argue that Teller's life sentence for mismanagement was too severe; but if Eco had been his jury, he might've gotten the death penalty. He could've

killed everyone in Tycho Under.

So Jack was fair, smart, honest, and earnest. That made us Interns a bit starry-eyed. He was restoring respect for our chosen profession. Heck, even a few Doctors of Ecology were star-struck. He was just what we needed after that crook Teller. He gave us back the pride we'd lost. We wore our uniforms out in public again, spit and polish, our tools and comps on our belts, as a way of saying, "We're Jack's crew. We're here to clean up."

The Exec, Murkowski, had her hands full untangling Teller's crooked books so it fell to me to accompany Jack on his Grand Inspection, as the journos called it. We looked at every single piece of Eco Services equipment in the city. It was "Photo here, Wayne" this and "Take a memo, Wayne" that. Before he was done, it was "Take a memo, Scott." We knew each other pretty well by then. It took so long, it set me back a term in my degree program—but it was an education in

itself. No book covers Eco Services in that kind of detail.

And in my own small way, I educated Jack too. I showed him around Tycho, showed it to him as a native sees it. So naturally, one of the places I showed him was the Old Town Tavern. He took quite a liking to this place. "Scott," he said, "look at this: mirror, fans, lights, stools, even an antique cash register. It's like they picked up a neighborhood bar from back home, put it on a rocket, and launched it to the Moon. Except for

the pressure doors, of course. Oh, and the beer: it pains my Earth pride to say it, but this is better and stronger than any I had at home.”

“Thank Eliza and Jimmy for that, Jack. They brew their own, except for some imports. And most of those are strictly for tourists.”

“Then raise a glass!” Jack raised his, but gently: I had finally coached him to remember how liquids can slop in Lunar gravity. “To Eliza!”

“And to Jimmy!” We drained our brews. This became our regular stop

whenever the Grand Inspection brought us nearby, and Eliza always treated us like honored guests. I suspect that's why Jack did right by her and the Old Town in the end.

The Grand Inspection lasted nearly four months and true to his promise of transparency, Jack pushed a daily report out on the nets for anyone who cared to pull it. For a while, the journos hung stories on that hook: a dozen variations on the theme "Brockway cleans up." They made Jack something of a

momentary celebrity. He's not sim-
star handsome, mind you, but he's
got your basic healthy good looks.
So, they kept him near the top of
their pops for a while. Eventually,
the repetitive sameness of the daily
reports turned them away. Another
inspection report from Jack, another
repair status report from
Murkowski, ho hum. They found
another story to leech, and Jack faded
into the background. There he stayed
until the Eco Summit, and again
until—well, I'm getting ahead of my

story here.

Meanwhile, the news pops also made me something of a celebrity, at least around here. I was often in the background of Jack's reports. As he relied on me more, sometimes he even had me make the reports when he was tied up in meetings with Admin. So I got a fair amount of pop time for an Intern, and my buddies here in the Old Town didn't let me live it down.

They recorded my pops, and then one of them applied morph and

sim transforms to the feeds. Sometimes they drew thought balloons with obscene thoughts. Sometimes they shrunk me. Sometimes they gave me an extra 20 kilos of flab, like I needed that. But their favorite trick was to morph me into a character they called “Scotty the Skunk”. They said that when I came off work, I had “that smell”; and I believed them, until I realized they said that even on days where I’d spent all day in the office. But you will have to watch for that: when

you're around "that smell" long enough, your nose gets desensitized and you might never realize it's still on you. Another unofficial motto of Eco Services: "Bathe early, bathe often."

And then, when the Grand Inspection was done, Jack held his Eco Summit: a week-long series of meetings with Jack and his department heads, plus field team leads, expert contractors, community liaisons, CTU administrators, parts suppliers, and

anyone else who Jack thought could contribute. An old engineer once told me, “‘Meeting’ rhymes with ‘beating’.” But as week-long meetings go, it was astonishingly not painful.

Jack was smart: he let Murkowski organize the agenda and chair the sessions while he sat back and listened and probed—and cut through the bull when needed. He recognized that Murkowski’s a natural talent for Admin, as her later career proved. By then, I was Jack’s permanent Intern, having learned

his work methods over the months, and I got to watch the whole thing up close. Now, I hate meetings as much as the next engineer—but if Administrator Murkowski's chairing a meeting, I know it won't be a waste of time.

I'll never forget Jack's closing address. Simple and brief: "Citizens of Tycho, you are rich. You can't see it right now because your government has treated you shabbily. But you've kicked the varmints out, and it's time you saw

some changes. Since you hired me for this job, I've been inspecting machines, but I've been meeting people—as many as I could. And I tell you, Tycho is rich in people: hardworking, smart, and dedicated. No, I'm not trying to sell you something—I'm just telling you straight: you're a great people, and the previous administration held you back. With a government as hard-working as you, there'll be no stopping us. And today, we're taking steps to become the Eco Services you

deserve.”

And then Jack submitted his overhaul plans. Eco had made emergency repairs since Jack came on board plus running double shifts to catch up on maintenance, but that was all miniscule compared to Jack's new plans. Modernization, reinforcement, redundant backups, monitoring systems, transparency, efficiency... Really, all of our current quality metrics were all there in Jack's plans. It wasn't just recovering from the Teller years: it was a complete

rethinking of the role of Eco Services in Tycho Under. For once, the journo's were incapable of hyperbole: when they called it brilliant, that was simply a fact.

And like something out of Sophocles—what, you don't think a big bum like me can read the classics?—buried deep in Jack's ambitious plans were the seeds of Jack's downfall: the CR Program. Containment and Reclamation: Jack's plan to do something about “that smell”.

Like so many others, Jack fixated on “that smell”. He knew we couldn’t waste the volatiles. He accepted the basic soundness of our super scrubber designs. But he just wouldn’t accept that we had to let “that smell” vent before scrubbing it. He was convinced to his core that there had to be a way to filter out the volatiles and let out purified air, all without venting into the treatment chambers.

It’s not like he was the first to have this idea, but Jack was sure there

was an angle no one had considered yet. “Scott,” he told me, “it’s inefficient: let the gases disperse and then run them through scrubbers to reclaim them? We should be able to run them straight to the scrubbers.” I pointed out that dispersing helped the gases to separate naturally, so we could concentrate the scrubber energy where it was most effective, but he waved that off: “That just takes engineering savvy. We’ll find another way to separate them.” Jack started sketching out his vision for

the Containment and Reclamation Units; and the final units looked a lot like those early sketches with a small mountain of engineering savvy added in.

But then, Jack made his one really big error: he did the detailed design and prototyping of the CR Units himself, trusting only himself to get his vision right. That's a classic engineering error: the Two Hats Pattern. You can work on the project or you can manage the project, but you can't do both. You can only fail

at both.

The best engineering managers will tell you how the Two Hats Pattern leads to failure. They know that it always applies—except to them. Deep in their hearts, where they won't admit it to anyone, they're sure that they are different, or that this project is different. Maybe they'll rationalize it: yeah, this is a bad idea, but I've got no one else to spare. Or yeah, this is a bad idea, but this part is so important that I can't trust it to anyone else. They convince

themselves that this time it won't be a mistake. We always know better when it's the other guy, but never when it's us.

When Jack finished his CR design, he tried to explain it to me. It was only later that I understood it—far too late. “See, Scott, the trick is in the separation. With the old approach, we let ‘that smell’ vent into the chamber, eventually passing through multiple series of filters. Venting lets the gases separate; but we still have all kinds of gases

passing through all kinds of filters and scrubbers, even when those filters and scrubbers won't apply to those particular gases.

“But if we could separate the gases more effectively, then we could guide each gas only to the filters or scrubbers that apply to it. The reduced scrubber energy will provide almost all the energy we need for separation.”

“But how will we separate more effectively?”

“I've licensed some new tech:

nano-ionizers. They're little molecular machines that can ionize a gas—well, except inert gases, of course—in a way that falls somewhere between mechanics and electronics and chemistry. It's a real breakthrough and highly efficient. Once they're ionized, we can use mag fields sort of like a mass spectrometer to guide them on separate paths based on molecular density. Each CR shell then has a number of outlets positioned to release different gases into different scrubbing ducts. The

components that make up cleansed air can just be piped back into the ventilation system.”

“Wow. I can see that. I think. But...I can't see how it could possibly use less energy than our scrubbers.”

“Not less energy; but not excessively more. And then here's the really sneaky part: by confining the gases close to the treatment units—basically wrapping the treatment units in CR shells—we maintain those gases at their original, non-dispersed pressure. That's a weak but

measurable positive pressure, and we can use that to help drive the separation. It's still a slight increase in energy usage, but it's well within our budget. And it's a small price to pay to get rid of 'that smell'."

I was still new—still somewhat sensitive to "that smell" myself. And if Jack thought it was important, then I thought it was important. So I studied Jack's designs until I had the basics down cold. Every CR unit is unique, a shell fitted around some existing equipment, but I became an

expert at fitting and installing the ionic separators.

I received a de facto promotion. Oh, Jack couldn't really promote an Intern, but after the initial pilot test, he made me his field rep for CR installations. There was plenty for him and Murkowski to do in bringing his vision to Eco, too much to let him spend much time on CR.

So, title or no, I was effectively in charge of CR installations throughout Tycho. And I tell you, the real engineers resented me! One

in particular, Irina Stewart, called me names behind Jack's back: "Jack's Boy" being the least offensive. Oh, I hated her too. She wrote me up for the smallest infractions, and she was brutal on my review boards. Looking back, I think she was more right than I was—more right than Jack was. That was too much responsibility—too high a placement for an Intern. A real engineer might've caught Jack's mistake in time.

In a way, I got even better than a

promotion: Jack attached my ID as a rider on his comp credentials, giving me almost Director-level powers on the nets. That was a sacred trust that Jack placed in me, and I was determined not to disappoint him. I told no one about the comp credentials. Well, until the night came when I had to.

So I got real familiar with the Treatment sectors, including sector 7, one level down from here. When I could, I ended my day in sector 7 so I could clean up and come here to

unwind. Without Jack here as a buffer, my buddies stepped up their humor at my expense. My pop career was over, but not Scotty the Skunk's! He frequently inserted himself into the sports and news feeds over the bar. I left myself a recurring pop to make sure I always bathed before coming up here.

The pilot went pretty smoothly: all gases conformed to the expected profiles within margins of error. After that, it was a regular procedure: use scan bots to build 3D models of

the equipment to be contained; run the models through fitting algorithms to design the CR shell; order the shells from local fabricators; install the ionic separators; and hook them into the ducting system. Oh, and one more thing: for pressure-balancing reasons, Jack decided to bring the whole CR system up at once rather than phasing it in. Sound engineering decisions are sometimes counterintuitive and Jack made this seem like one of those, but I fear he

wanted to show his brilliance off in a “grand opening”.

But, Jack knew that sometimes when you schedule a dog and pony show, the dog dies and the pony runs away. Things go wrong and you need a dry run to work out the bugs. So we were going to unofficially power up the CR system, let it run overnight, and check the gas readings in the morning. Then we'd fix the bugs and try again the next night. Jack scheduled three nights of dry runs and then the grand

opening.

Even though the CR units were 100% automated, you'd think we'd all be camped out in treatment, waiting for the dry run results. Jack wouldn't have any of that. "They're automated. What kind of confidence are we showing if we have to watch them?" Jack's confidence was infectious; and frankly, watching the test results was boring. So after monitoring the meters for an hour, Jack ordered everybody except the night crew to go home.

Naturally, I cleaned up to head to the Old Town. Jack went off to a party. His success had made him quite a star with Tycho's elite, and he got invited to all the major events. All the movers and shakers wanted his ear. He was flying high...like Icarus. See? Again with the classics! Don't underestimate this old man, kid—I have depths you'll never guess at.

There were maybe two dozen diners and drinkers scattered around the tables and seated at the bar that

night. I swung up onto a bar stool between two old drinking buddies—Adam Stone from CTU Rescue and Al Grant from Bader—and called out, “Eliza, a weiss when you can.” Eliza nodded as she hustled into the back room.

“Evening, Skunky.” Adam tilted his glass a bit in my direction.

“Evening, Moose. Al.” Adam may be the largest, strongest looney I’ve ever met. When he’s coming down a tube, he looks to fill his lane and half the cross lane as well. And

though he looks like nothing but muscle from ear to ear, he's one hell of a mechanical engineer. Al, on the other hand, is a wire-thin guy and all nervous energy. They make an odd pair, with a partying reputation in half the bars in Tycho.

“You hit the cycler tonight, Scott? I ordered a steak. I'd hate to have you ruin my appetite.”

“Clean as a brand new air bottle, Al. Smell!” I shoved my arm right up under his nose.

“Careful, Scott. You know he

likes his meat rare. He may mistake you for his entree.”

I yanked my arm back as Al reached for his steak knife. It's a close call which Al enjoys most, a good steak or a good beer, but it's not safe to stand between him and either one.

Eliza showed up with my beer, and I ordered a sandwich. We drank and ate and talked, sometimes trading jibes with Eliza as she passed. They asked me how the CR Project was going, and I asked Al how the crops looked at Bader Farms. Adam

never talked about Rescue work, and we knew better than to ask.

At our third round, Adam whistled. “Man, Skunky, are you sure you hit the cycler? You’ve got quite a whiff about you tonight.”

“Very funny, Adam. Want to see my cycler receipt? Over fifty-eight mils down the drain, enough water to get even your carcass clean.”

Al sniffed. “Sure, but did they run out of soap?”

“You, too, Al? This ‘Scotty the Skunk’ stuff’s getting pretty old.”

Al put his beer down, a sure sign that he really was serious. “I hate to be rude, but you smell a bit rank tonight.”

Whatever they smelled wasn't strong enough to reach my desensitized nose. Assuming they really smelled anything—both of them could play deadpan if they wanted to. I decided to play along. “Fine! I can see where I'm not welcome!” I turned on my stool...

And then I saw it: here and there in the room, people had their noses

crinkled up and faces twisted in disgust. Most were clustered near our end of the bar or over at a table in the far corner near the latrines. I got up and walked to that corner. I didn't have time to be inconspicuous—I just crouched down and looked under their table. There between their legs, I saw a municipal air duct.

I went back to our end of the bar where it curved around and joined the wall. “Adam, can you stand up, please?” Adam caught the tone in my voice. He didn't joke, didn't question

—just stood. Behind his beefy legs was another municipal air duct.

I pulled out my gas scanner and held it to the vent. Mostly it was standard municipal air, but there was a trace of hydrogen sulfide: 4.7 parts per million. Not dangerous, but certainly not safe. I stepped back a pace and took another reading: 3.8 ppm. Another step back: 3.0 ppm. “That smell” was definitely coming from the vent.

Just then, a woman from the far table came up to the bar. “Eliza, it

smells like something died over there. Can we open the tube door and let some of the smell out?”

As Eliza was putting down her bar rag, connections formed in my brain. I could see what might be wrong. I jumped in. “No. Eliza, turn on the Closed sign and seal the door.”

The look in Eliza’s eyes should’ve knocked me dead right there. “Scotty, are you telling me how to run my bar?”

“Sorry, yes.” I pushed my comp

credentials into Eliza's console. "I'm acting for Jack now. There's some kind of Eco malfunction here. Until we know how widespread it is, we don't know if it's safer here or out there. I have to assume we need to contain it."

"Safer? Contain it? Are we in danger?"

"I don't know. Probably. Maybe. But we're not guessing—we're analyzing. If I find it's more dangerous in here, you'll all be out in the tube with me pushing you along."

Adam, Al, get those people up. Don't panic them, but get some distance between them and those vents."

Adam went into Rescue mode, assessing the situation and taking action. Once she realized I was serious, Eliza also took charge, sealing the doors and herding and cajoling the bar crowd.

I got on my comm and contacted Treatment. "Sector 7, Treatment, Engineer Stewart speaking."

Ah, hell. "Engineer Stewart, this is Mr. Wayne up in the Old Town

tavern. We have a sulfide leak. You need to shut down the CR Units.”

“Hmph. Jack’s Boy, that’s lousy form for a report. You’re sure you’re not just drunk? Stinking drunk, maybe?” She laughed at her own joke, doing nothing for my mood.

“Stewart, check your meters. Mine shows sulfide at—5.0 ppm. It’s climbing.”

“All right, Intern, I’ll check.” There was a pause. “Sulfide duct shows 0.003 ppm post-scrubber. I’m going to trust my industrial meter

over your belt unit. I'd say you haven't calibrated yours lately, rookie."

"Damn it, Stewart, I can smell the sulfide!"

"Then take a bath, Intern!" She laughed again and disconnected.

But she was right: her meters were hundreds of times better than mine. Why was she reading purified air post-scrubber?

I looked again at all of the gas readings. And there was something...I pulled some of the

numbers into a calculation. And suddenly, it almost made sense. I pulled up a diagram of an ionic separator, and the last piece fell into place. “Oh, shit.”

“Scotty!”

“Sorry, Eliza, but this time it’s warranted.” I hit Jack’s comm circuit, but got his machine. He was at that damned party so I had to leave a message. “Jack, Scott. I’m in the Old Town. We’re getting hydrogen sulfide in the air ducts at 5 ppm. Repeat: H-TWO-S at 5 P-P-M and

climbing. Stewart's not seeing this in treatment, but I think that's because the sensors are after the scrubbers, and we're testing in the wrong ducts. Jack, there's a flaw in the ionic separators, and I never saw it. You based the calculations on Earth normal atmosphere, which is slightly heavier than sulfide. The sulfide floats in the air but never really rises. When you ionize it, it separates lower. The gas mix in our air isn't the same as Earth's; it's slightly lighter than sulfide. The sulfide still floats

but it floats lower. The ionic separator doesn't send it to the sulfide ducts, not all of it. Some slips into carbon dioxide ducts and eventually into the cleaned air ducts. Jack, it's pumping the stuff straight into the Old Town. Probably other chambers in the neighborhood, too, but this looks like the epicenter. You have to shut it down, Jack. You have to shut it down!"

I disconnected. Eliza, Adam, Al, and Jimmy were all looking at me. "So how bad is it? And what can we

do?” Adam asked.

“Bad. And we have to shut the CR Units down, which I can’t do from here even with Jack’s credentials. We have to shut them down or...or starve them, create a negative pressure. They run on pent-up gas pressure. If they can’t reach operating pressure, the separators won’t kick in.”

“So we need to cut off the flow?”

“Can’t do that, Al. Way too much flow in the city; it’s constant. But maybe we can go the other way:

increase the flow, and get the wastes moving through so fast there's no chance for pressure to build up. What I'd really like to do is move so much material through that it creates a negative pressure, not just neutral."

"What, so we have to flush the johns?"

"Jimmy, that won't be enough but it can't hurt. Go ahead: turn on all the taps and start flushing all the johns. Get some help. Adam, how are you on fluid dynamics?"

"Not much fluid flow on the

regolith. I haven't looked at those equations in a decade."

"Well, dredge them up. You've just been drafted into Eco. I need you to pair with me on these calculations." I checked the meter: 5.6 ppm. "And we'd better hurry."

I started running through duct diagrams and scenarios, while Adam ran numbers and checked my work. Al's a hydroponicist, so he knows something about fluid flow. He looked over both our shoulders. "You're dreaming. No way."

Adam spoke up from his comp. “The numbers work out, Al. If we get enough flow in a short time, it will create a negative pressure large enough to cut out the ionics. Maybe even kick them into shutdown mode.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to need so much flow...”

“How much?” Eliza was getting nervous. She finally smelled the sulfide too.

Adam checked his comp. “Thousands of flushes in minutes.

More like tens of thousands. More would be better.”

I checked another spec. “Yeah, that will do it. It may burst a treatment pipe somewhere, but that will drain the system even more. It’ll be a hell of a mess, but not as bad as...”

“As bad as what? And how do you plan to get tens of thousands of flushes?”

“Bad, Eliza.” The meter was at 6.6. “Really bad. But I have a plan to get those flushes.”

I held out my comp so Eliza could look at my plan. “No way.” The look on her face was the one you’ll see when she cuts you off after one too many: the pleasant hostess becomes the drill sergeant. “No way you’re pushing that. That’ll kill my profits for the quarter.”

I pointed at Adam: he was starting to look nauseous. The sulfide hugged the floor in the Lunar air, but was slowly pushing up. “And that won’t? We need the negative pressure and fast. Hydrogen sulfide

doesn't just smell—if you get enough of it, it's toxic. And it burns or explodes if you give it an excuse. Very soon, we won't just have a stink: we'll have explosions all over this quarter if we don't cut it off now.”

Eliza looked at her antique cash register, the symbol of her bottom line, and winced. “OK, push it.”

I clicked PUSH, and I started to hear pops on comps all around the room. And if Jack's Admin code was doing its job, the same pop was

showing up on every active comp in Tycho:

08/26 15:31:00 FREE BEER!

What happens when we flush every john in Tycho at the same time? Let's find out! Flush your toilet in the next 10 minutes and get a free beer at the Old Town Tavern. Just bring your monthly cyclor receipt showing a full flush cycle before 15:41, and we'll give you a beer. Help us give Eco Services a real test! (Flush test

approved by Ecology Services Director Jack Brockway.)

FREE BEER AT THE OLD TOWN!

“Will Jack have a fit when he sees you used his code and his name?”

“If this doesn’t work, it won’t matter.”

“Eliza, can I have a beer while we wait?” We used to say Al would stop for a cold one on the way to his own funeral. That day, I learned how true that was.

Then I remembered a chem lecture from the previous term, and I pulled my notes. “Wait! No beer.”

“Huh?”

“H₂S will react with the alcohol. Not easily without an acid catalyst, but possible. That’ll make ethanethiol, and that will really stink.”

“Worse than ‘that smell’?”

“Like rotten onions stewed in foot fungus. It’s officially the smelliest substance in existence.”

“Ewww!”

“Yeah, but...,” I read further. “But it’s less toxic and less flammable. And it’ll settle as a liquid at room temperature, not hang in the air. This may buy us some time.”

“So pour the beer?”

“No, we need a way to mix it with the airborne sulfide. Usually, you make thiols by bubbling sulfide through alcohol. Since the sulfide’s airborne, we need to mix them sort of the opposite way. We’ll want some sort of acidic catalyst...”

“We’ve got lemons, limes,

pineapple juice, vinegar...,”

“...then we need to maximize the surface interface between the beer and the air. It may not work—this ain’t exactly a reaction chamber—but if we can spread the beer to expose it to the air, spread it fine and spray it through the sulfide layer, it might work.”

“You mean like this?” Eliza uncapped a bottle and poured in some lemon juice. Then she stuck her thumb in and shook the bottle until she couldn’t hold back the

pressure. Her thumb popped out, and foamy beer spewed into the air, soaking me, Adam, and the tables around us.

“Oh, yeah?” Adam grabbed another bottle, added juice, shook, and aimed straight for Eliza’s big mop of hair. It’s hard to aim beer foam, though, so he sprayed half the table next to us.

“Adam! Aim higher! Give it some distance!” Would it work? I couldn’t guess, but I couldn’t see we had anything else to try. I poured some

juice in a bottle and started shaking it. In one-sixth G and with our lower air pressure...well, Downsiders have never seen how high and how far beer suds can fly. Maybe it would be enough.

And thus was launched the First Annual Great Old Town Beer Brawl. Eliza armed everyone with bottles and citrus, and they filled the air with suds. Adam had the idea—ingenious? Flawed? Who could tell?—of spraying the beer taps through lemon slices. I don't know how effective

that was, but it sure made the beer foam! And soon, along with the aroma of Tycho's finest beers, we smelled the pungent odor of the most sickeningly rotten onions you've ever imagined. Foaming and spraying makes an excellent dispersal mechanism, and we were actually gaining ground on the hydrogen sulfide in the air. All the while, Jimmy was back in the latrines, flushing repeatedly.

And somewhere during the Beer Brawl, I heard the sound of water

rushing through pipes under the floor plates. Lots of water. “They’re flushing! God damn, they’re flushing!” Eliza and Al both celebrated by spraying me with some of Eliza’s best weiss beer. “Wait! Let me at the vent.”

I knelt by the vent. Foamy beer ran down the wall and drained in. The smell that emerged was almost too much even for my desensitized nose, but it was drifting out...not gusting. The positive pressure had slowed, almost stopped. The meter

read 5.7. The promise of FREE BEER! Was working. Toilets were flushing all over Tycho. For good measure, I pushed the pop again, hoping for maximum flushage.

And then through the vent, I heard a soft, low whump! Somewhere deep in CitEng, a seal had finally breached. Wastewater and sludge were draining at high velocity—I didn't dare think about where, but it would be an ugly mess—and creating a big negative pressure behind them. Instead of

ethanethiol odor rising from the vent, I felt a slight but unmistakable air current flow into the vent. The meter actually dropped while I was watching, from 5.4 to 5.3.

“Everyone!” I stood on the bar for attention, and Eliza glared at me. Then I almost lost my footing in the beer foam. “Everyone, keep spraying! We’re settling ‘that smell’ out. Adam, Al, get mops. Push the foam down the kitchen and bathroom drains. Eliza! We can open the door now. Pressure in the tube should be higher

than in here. Let's set up fans and get the sulfide moving in. And keep flushing those toilets!"

And so the Beer Brawl continued in earnest. We call it the First Annual Great Old Town Beer Brawl because every year since, we've celebrated the day the Old Town didn't blow up. When you're here for Beer Brawl, don't drink the beer. Jimmy saves up his failed batches all year long, keeps them in a storage locker for the Brawl. You'll think you're drinking liquid wastes.

When CTU Security showed up, they didn't know what to make of the place. A pair of floor fans blocked the doors open, blowing fresh tube air in. When Security got past the fans, they found bar patrons and staff spraying the place and each other with beer—the citrus had long since run out, but the Beer Brawl had become a purpose unto itself—while Al and Adam and Eliza mopped around them. And in the far corner, leaning over a vent, I alternated between calling out readings from

my meter and trying to raise Jack on his comm.

They would've arrested the lot of us on drunk and disorderly. Wouldn't you? But I flashed my Eco credentials and hoped they were convincing. Plus, Eliza offered them whiskey, beer being in short supply at that point. I don't know what persuaded them, the whiskey or the creds, but they postponed arresting us long enough to hear the story. Then they contacted Security Central and told them we had an

explanation for the Third Level Flush. I abused Jack's code some more, ordering up overtime for Eco Services cleanup crews to clean out the Old Town. Adam had already called in Rescue medical teams. I doubt anyone there had had a serious exposure, but sulfide poisoning is nasty stuff so we took no chances.

The Flush could've been much worse. Not through any planning on my part—as luck would have it, the breach was directly over the Bader Farms Co-op plots. Yeah, a lot of

crops were washed away and the Badgers filed for damages, but for the most part, the Farms were exactly where that sludge was headed anyway. At that stage of treatment, what was left was destined to be fertilizer once most of the liquids were filtered and baked out. So the Farms were a mess, and the sludge was wetter than usual. The clean-up took weeks. But if the breach had been 100 feet further east and north, the Flush would've been in an entertainment or a restaurant

district. That would've been a much larger PR disaster.

Not that the incident wasn't a PR disaster as it stood, you understand. The Old Town got the worst of "that smell", being closest to the refresh pumping system, and a lot of residences had to be cleaned. The CR Program was written off as an unmitigated failure and Jack was written off with it, naturally, since CR was his baby.

He received a brief burst of sympathy: when he got my message,

he rushed to City Services, assembled a crew, and tried to dismantle the CR units. They were still on duty when the Flush hit. There he was, in a tuxedo, standing his ground in the face of a river of raw sewage, trying to save the city. It briefly made him a hero; but, once the journos learned that his miscalculation was at the root of it all, the story changed. "A looney wouldn't have made that mistake," the story went, even though I never noticed the mistake myself. And eventually, someone

coined the name “Jack Blockage”. Once that name stuck, it was only a matter of time before Jack was asked to resign.

Jack’s last official communiqués were a letter of commendation in my file, which also retroactively approved everything I’d done with his code, and an invoice to Eliza for 20,000 liters of beer. He didn’t figure she should save Tycho Under and pay for the privilege. That invoice covered everything we used in the Beer Brawl and all the free beers she

had to give out for my pop, and there was plenty left over. And that, rookie, is how me and the rest of the Beer Brawl Brigade drank free for the next month. Eliza said we deserved it. After all, with enough beer and a few thousand flushes, we saved Tycho Under.



The Mother Anthony

by Martin L.
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Emergency landings were definitely not in the recruiting video.

Bess remembered the Winston Interstellar Transport recruitment video quite clearly. See other worlds. Yes, they delivered on that promise, though they neglected to tell her that one space port looked very much like another.

See the wonders of space with your own eyes. Yes, they delivered on that promise, too. In fact, Bess

never tired of stopping by the viewing ports whenever her schedule permitted. Perhaps the only thing better was when she could escort her class to the port for an astronomy field trip. As much as Bess enjoyed the nebulae and variable stars and other sights along their course, she enjoyed the light from the children's faces that much more. Truly, had any teacher ever had such fortune as to teach children science out where science really mattered?

Advance your career. Another

promise delivered. Where else but WIT could a teacher as young as Bess have so much responsibility? As the only full-time, non-holographic teacher on the I.V. Graham, Bess was a headmistress in all but title. Indeed, she even had authority over ship's crew when they served as guest instructors. And that in turn necessitated that she have a temporary commission as a cadet herself, though she admitted at least to herself that she failed to understand all the legalisms of that

commission. She just knew it would look good on her C.V. At the end of her contract. She never wore the uniform (except at dinners, which were always formal), as she found it quite constraining.

Meet your new family. Well, that was perhaps an exaggeration. The crew wasn't exactly familial, more social. They were predominantly young, though mostly older than Bess; and they were predominantly male, by a ratio of at least three to two. They were all

prim and proper when above decks—Captain Engstrom would have it no other way, not within view of the passengers—but quite a bit more relaxed when below decks. One might even characterize them as raucous. And with many of the female crew being attached (many to other crew members), and with most of the male crew having apparently traditional orientations, their reactions to the young teacher in their midst were not precisely brotherly. In other circumstances,

Bess might have been inclined to encourage their attentions—particularly that handsome young Lieutenant Masterson, who was less forward than the rest and thus paradoxically more

enticing—but it struck her as poor judgment in the close confines of an interstellar vessel. A teacher needs a certain level of decorum and reserve to maintain respect in her classroom; and a young, attractive female teacher needs those even more. It is important that the older

male students not see her as an opportunity, and the older females not see her as a competitor. So it was perhaps for the best that Captain Engstrom took a fatherly interest in her, and arranged for her to bunk in the passenger decks “to keep you close in case your students have questions.” As delightful as a night with Lieutenant Masterson might be, Bess had successfully maintained her reserve while shipboard. As for her nighttime encounters while in spaceports... Well, those were her

business, and she seemed to have been sufficiently discreet to evade the shipboard gossips.

New worlds, wonders of space, career advancement, new people? Check, check, check, and check. The video seemed perfectly accurate in what it included. Its only inaccuracy, or so it would appear, lay in what it left out. And again, to be specific, it left out emergency landings.

So Bess was mildly perplexed when Captain Engstrom called an officers' briefing and requested her

attendance. She was always requested at launch and arrival briefings, but others were left to her discretion—with a strong but subtle hint that she was not expected at all. Captain Engstrom indeed treated her in a fatherly fashion, and certainly kindly; but she always got the impression he failed to take her very seriously. She was not much older than his own granddaughters, after all, and not quite a year out of school. She saw him as a guardian, overprotective even, but not

necessarily supportive. Despite doing what she thought was a very professional job of teaching, she was still a child in his eyes—or so it seemed to her.

The briefing changed from perplexing to frightening when she realized the subject. “So that’s the situation,” the Captain concluded. Bess wasn’t any sort of engineer—integral calculus had stretched the limits of her mathematical talents—so she hadn’t followed all of the technical discussions. But she

understood the conclusions quite thoroughly. "Our remaining engine will not get us to our destination. If we try, either we'll blow it too, or we'll strand the ship in deep interstellar. That's fast death or slow. I might make the attempt if we were just hauling cargo; but on a passenger run, the safety of our charges comes first."

Bess looked around the room, looking for any evidence of surprise to mirror what she felt, but she found none. What was news to her

seemed to be common knowledge to the others.

“Lieutenant White and the astrogration staff have located three G class stars within range of our remaining engine. Long baseline scans have found a planetary system around one—and curse our luck, it’s the farthest from the shipping lanes. It will take us nearly three months to reach it with a safe cruising speed. We can get there, find a planet in the habitable zone, and drop the habitat module. That’s the best we can do for

the passengers. And once they're safely grounded, we'll have a lot less mass. We can push a lot faster without stressing the engine. With a lot of luck, we can make Chambers's World, and arrange a rescue operation. With at least a little luck, we'll get back into the spacelanes, and be able to call for help. And regardless, we'll know we did our duty to the passengers."

Bess gripped her school bell so tightly, her fingers had become bone white tinged with fiery red. Why was

she here? Why was she in this meeting, and why was she out in the middle of empty space? Why was she not back home in Chelsea, filling out applications and picking up substitute teaching assignments?

“I need to stress this to you all, because I need you to stress it to the crew and the passengers: we are safe. No need to speculate for how long, but safe for now. White tells me we have more than enough capacity to reach the target star and search for a habitable planet; and the odds are

strong that there will be one there. So the passengers will make it there safely. Then it will be up to us to secure their rescue. That's the message I need you to spread through the ship: safety, habitable planet, rescue. People are going to be scared, doubtful, maybe hysterical, so you need to hammer home: safety, habitable planet, rescue." This time he actually hammered his podium on the three phrases, staring earnestly at his audience. "And if you have any doubts of your own, don't try to

bury them. That'll make you more tense. Go to the chaplain or the Surgeon. Hell, go to the barkeep at that speakeasy that somehow escapes my attention. But talk to someone. The passengers need you steady, and the crew need you steady. Someday, this story will buy you drinks in every spaceport you ground at, but only if you hold it together right now."

Through some hidden signal, the Captain indicated he was through. Lieutenant Masterson rose and

called, "Attention!" All the officers snapped to attention as well.

"We have some difficult work ahead," the Captain said. "You have my confidence. Dismissed." Then, somewhat lower, he added, "Miss Anthony, could you please stay a moment?"

Bess remained, nearly paralytic, as the real officers filed out. Even after five ports of call, she still could not quite place herself in their social category. They were "the real officers," and she was an anomaly in

the order of the ship.

When they were alone, Bess regained composure enough to speak. “Yes, Captain?”

“Please, sit down.” They both did so. “I’m sorry you’re hearing this like this. Senior officers already knew the basics, and scuttlebutt filled in the rest. I thought it was time to spread the official story before rumors got out of hand.”

“But if that is only an ‘official story,’ then—“

“Oh, it’s also a true story. But the

rumors will be more drastic.”

“So can we not call for help?”

“Miss Anthony, I’m surprised. Your specialty is science education. You must know the limits of hyperwave.”

Again she felt somehow inadequate in his judgment.

“Hyper-physics is quite over my head, I fear. I know the concepts, but the mathematics is beyond me. As I recall... As I recall, the propagation rate is dependent upon the power of the transmitter.”

“Yes, and even with all three engines working correctly, our rig could transmit maybe ten times our rate of travel, maybe less. Did you know we actually have to stop the ship to send a message? Now we have one engine, and we have to baby it due to the imbalance. It could be a dozen years or more before a signal reached any settled world. The fastest way for us to find rescue is to fly out and ask for it. But trust me, we will make the effort once we know you’re safely landed.”

“You’re safely landed? Do I take it then, Captain, that you intend to leave me behind with the passengers?”

He sighed. “Miss Anthony, the ship needs technical crew, but the passengers need the service crew. We’re taking none of the service crew, and only the minimum technical crew.”

“Of course, I see. Another effort to minimize the mass.”

“That and... There’s significant risk in that flight. I don’t want to risk

anyone I don't have to."

Bess found such a frank admission awkward. She looked down at her bell and absently wiped a kerchief across a smudge on the brass. "I see. So you asked me to stay because you needed a counselor, a friendly ear. I am pleased I could be of assistance."

"No. No, I'm sorry, it wasn't fair for me to dump that on you. Please, do an old man a favor? Forget that. The officers and crew will have figured it out already, but it's better if

we ignore it for now.

“No, I need to talk to you about the children. I’m counting on the crew to keep the passengers calm, keep everything routine as much as possible. And I especially need your help there with the children.”

“Now I understand. And yes, I quite concur, Captain. Children need routine, and they need it especially in the face of uncertainty. It provides a comfort zone and a base line, allowing them to better adjust to the uncertainty.”

“Exactly! So please, I need you to make sure everything stays routine for them, as best possible. I’m going to start cutting lights and gravity a bit—just a precaution!—and I may also cut some of the luxury rations. Before any of these changes, I want to explain them to you, so you can explain to the children. If you need any help from the crew for these discussions, they all have instructions to help you as duty schedules permit. I’ll even drop by the class when I can.”

“Certainly, Captain. You merely ask me to do my duty to the best of my ability. I would scarcely call that a ‘favor.’” Bess put forth her most positive air, but she stared down at her bell. Her knuckles, now whiter than ever, stood out in stark relief against the antique cherry wood grip.

“Well, call it what you will, but you have my gratitude. Oh, and Bess?” The use of her given name surprised her, and she looked straight into his gaze. “Tom Masterson’s in the service crew. He’ll be staying with

the passengers. A little fatherly advice: he's a good man, and could be a better one if you find yourself beached for longer than expected."

Bess felt a warm glow in her cheeks, and she looked downward once more. The Captain turned officious in response. "Now I've gone too far again. Please forget that, too. Your kids are waiting for you. Dismissed."

As swiftly as decorum permitted, Bess left the briefing room. Once safely out of the Captain's sight, she

began to tremble, and then to sway. Finally, she leaned against a corridor wall, and then slowly sank to the floor. Suddenly, she was no longer Bess Anthony, Principle Instructor on the I.V. Graham. She was only Bess, a young woman who craved a little adventure and got more than she ever expected. She didn't want responsibility, she wanted to be comforted. She didn't weep, but she rocked back and forth, arms clenched around her knees.

But Bess only allowed herself a

few brief minutes of self-pity. She would not want any passersby to see her like this. And even more important than her dignity was her duty. The bell in her hand, outdated even in the days when her father rang it at his school, was her anchor to her profession. When he gave it to her, on that day she knew she was no longer just his daughter: she was a teacher, and his pride in that was more than he could express. ("And you, an English teacher!" she had teased.) And she knew what the bell

called her to do. She could turn the situation into science lessons, and she could turn the science lessons into ways for the children to distract themselves and even contribute to the emergency effort. As she walked, she began rewriting lesson plans in her head.

When she returned to the passenger decks, Bess stepped right back into her routine. She walked the corridors at a measured pace, ringing the bell at intervals. In between, she called out, “Children! Time for

school! Quickly, now, quickly! We have a lot to learn today.” Other days she might vary the call, referencing an upcoming lesson, or perhaps mentioning a child’s birthday. But that day, routine was important, so she stayed with her traditional call.

It took the children a little longer to emerge than usual. When they did, many of them had anxiety in their glances, or even dried tears. And some of the parents came into the corridor, puzzled and nervous expressions on their faces as well.

But the bell served nicely to quell any troublesome questions. Soon the entire student body was assembled and marching through the corridors. Fifty-three students, aged seventeen to four, trooped behind her, eldest in the rear where they could keep watch over the youngest. When they entered the classroom and stood by their seats, Bess swallowed a small lump of pride in her children. Then she began explaining and answering questions, and their new lessons began.

With the Captain's permission, Bess did indeed enlist the children in the ship's emergency planning. Besides continuing their individual studies in traditional subjects, she introduced new practical studies. She thought the term "practical" was much more comforting than "emergency".

The captain needed an accurate inventory of supplies? Bess turned that into lessons in mathematics and accounting. Bess assigned Valerie

Long to guide that effort and help the younger students with their sums.

Lieutenant White needed additional observations to identify likely planets? Bess assigned extra lessons in the local star charts, and assigned the older students to serve shifts on the telescopes. Matseo Chagi led the astronomy team.

Some of the older passengers had difficulty adjusting to the lesser gravity? Bess assigned some of the more troubled students to serve as their aides. That duty was more

difficult for her to justify on strictly pedagogic grounds; but it let the students concentrate on someone else's troubles rather than their own, and so it had positive effects on the morale of both students and elders.

Older students also began apprenticeship programs, where the captain approved. Bess wanted them to learn basic ship's operations, so that they could assist if needed when the actual landing occurred. Some with exceptional skill in chemistry and biology apprenticed to Ship's

Surgeon Keene.

Lieutenant Masterson's responsibility was more difficult. It was evident to Bess that he was preparing long-term survival plans in case rescue was delayed. He came to Bess's office one evening, so laden with data cards and hand written notes that Bess had to rise and slide open the door for him.

"Thank you, Miss Anthony." The Lieutenant was always a proper gentleman, doubly so in her office. "I have more items I need inventoried,

if your lessons permit.”

“Let us see what we can do. What do you have here?”

Masterson dumped the pile on her desk, cards scattering across the simulated wood surface. “I have here plans for all the recycler components and systems in the habitat module. We need to check them all and do maintenance while we still have the techs around for repairs. After we beach, if we find we’re down for—”

Bess laid a finger upon his lips. The gesture startled him, which gave

the finger exceptional silencing power. And in truth, her sudden familiarity startled Bess as well; but she buried that reaction in deference to the point she had to make. "Lieutenant, if you are about to discuss any time frame longer than our landing and a brief period of waiting for rescue, it would be better if you were to discuss something else."

Masterson puzzled over that statement, finally managing only an inarticulate, "Huh?"

“If there are concerns you have not shared with me, I can honestly say that I have never heard them. I will not willingly lie to the children, Lieutenant, not unless extraordinary circumstance requires it. So I think it best for the time being if you can adhere strictly to the Captain’s official message.”

Lieutenant Masterson grinned; and in fair mimicry of Captain Engstrom’s voice, he replied, “Safety, habitable planet, rescue.” He even pounded the desk with the words,

data cards bouncing with each impact; and he affected such a fine imitation of the Captain's "serious stare" that Bess could not help but giggle.

And then the Lieutenant joined her in giggling. Before they quite knew what had struck them, they were both wracked with laughter. Bess barely reached her chair, while Masterson quite thoroughly missed the guest chair. In full gravity, he might have suffered injury to go with insult. Instead, he simply performed

a graceless bounce from his fundament, ending back on his feet. He put on a most dignified look, but could not maintain it in the face of renewed laughter.

Just when the laughs seemed on the verge of subsiding, the office door slid slightly open. A student, Kara Wells, stuck her head in, curiosity plain to see in her young face. When she realized Bess and the Lieutenant were both staring directly at her, she emitted just a single syllable: "Eep!" She turned and fled,

the door slid shut, and the rolling laughter began anew.

When at last they had no energy left for laughter, they merely sat, quietly breathing. After nearly a minute of silence, Bess placed her palms firmly upon her desk, fixed Masterson with a serious stare, and said in her best teacher voice, "Eep!" Masterson held his sides, laughing breathlessly.

Finally, he gained enough control to speak. "Thank you, Bess. I needed that almost more than you, I

think.”

Wiping tears from her eyes, Bess grinned back at him. “Let’s say we both needed it more than we knew.” She looked at her bell, hanging by the door. “You’re an experienced spacer, Lieutenant. Does responsibility like this happen often? It’s so much more daunting than I expected.”

He adjusted his uniform a bit, and sat a little straighter. “It’s always this ‘daunting,’ really. We always have their lives in our hands, and our

mistakes can prove fatal. You don't get to be an officer if you can't grasp that. But on a typical voyage, the risks are real, but they're routine. We can handle them. And then there's the daily routine, that's comforting, lets us know we're on the mark. But with this emergency, it's so hard to maintain the routine and still take care of all the added responsibilities. Your kids have been a great help there, by the way."

"They're good kids."

"I'm inclined to credit their

teacher, but leave that aside. But the routine—well, really, the appearance of a routine—has been wearing me down. I needed a release. I think you did, too.”

“Indeed.” Bess stood, walked to the door, and pulled down her bell. She held it, caressed it almost. “I did need that, Lieutenant, you are correct in that regard. But I think now we must set it aside. You are right about the routine: it is both difficult and necessary. I do believe that I am only a few laughs away

from tears, real tears, and those may not stop once they start. You cannot do that to your passengers, nor can I do that to my children.”

Masterson considered a moment. Then he straightened and stood, donning the cap he had lost in his fall. “Agreed. This was nice, but it will have to do.” He stood just a little closer as he added, “For now.”

“Yes. Well...” Bess slid the door open and retreated against its frame. “Well, Lieutenant, if you need some inventory assistance with the...”

“The sanitary equipment.”

“Yes, the sanitary equipment... then I shall find some students who could use an extra assignment. And now, if you can excuse me, I have to revise lesson plans for the third time this week.”

He brushed closer to her as he passed through the doorway, a slightly herbal odor of soap moving with him. “Yes, certainly.” Once through, he tipped his hat to her. “Good evening, Miss Anthony.”

As he walked back toward the

upper decks, an uncontrollable impulse gripped Bess. “Lieutenant, one more thing?”

He half turned. “Yes, Miss Anthony?”

Her eyes crinkled as she said, “Eep!”

Masterson chuckled softly as he walked away.

* * *

Her interlude with Lieutenant Masterson had yielded a revelation: there was a need for routine, yes, but

there still remained concerns about morale. Bess was sure that she and the Lieutenant could not be the only ones in need of some form of diversion and release. She added yet more assignments for the students, creative assignments this time. She asked them to write poems and stories and songs. Then with the Captain's approval, she arranged to have the students perform them at ship's dinners. The dinners had become somewhat drear affairs, what with the reduction in rations, but the

children's performances seemed to turn that quite around.

After the first few nights of performances, Bess received another office visit, this time from the cruise director. Bess wondered privately how Ensign Tate had ever landed in such a post, since he seemed to lack even a hint of extroversion. It took more than two minutes of pleasantries before she could finally cajole him into speaking his peace.

"You see, Miss Anthony, some of the passengers... I mean, some of the

adult passengers... I guess mostly some of the parents... They're not holding up as well as your students. They're... I think they're jealous."

"Jealous? Of students stuck in school all day?"

"Stuck in school? Hardly that. You've given them something to do. You answer their questions. You must know you're better at this than me."

"Well, I am flattered, though I think you deserve more credit than that. But how can I help you with

this?”

“They... I mean, these parents, and some others... They’ve asked me to ask you... Can they join your class? And, umm, can I join, too? I think I can get some good ideas from you.”

And that was how Bess found herself with an assistant instructor and with a student body that encompassed a large subset of the passengers of the Graham. On an average day, nearly one-hundred-sixty adults and children crowded

into the classroom, watched from the hallway, or wandered the ship on homework assignments. Captain Engstrom even named her Chief Morale Officer, and gave her a field promotion to Junior Lieutenant. The Captain—demonstrating his own keen understanding of pomp and circumstance and attendant morale benefits—even held a commissioning ceremony at dinner one night. Her students sang a song in her honor. (Who composed it and how they rehearsed without her knowledge

would forever remain a mystery to her.) And then she gave an acceptance speech with only a modicum of tears, and the Captain declared a ball in her honor. She danced with many of the passengers and crew that night; and after Matseo broke the ice, some of her bolder students asked to dance as well. Just as Bess thought she would get a chance to dance with Lieutenant Masterson and perhaps catch another whiff of that herbal soap, she felt a tug at the skirt of her

uniform. Bobby Price, one of her youngest students, stood before her. His arms were raised in mute appeal, and his face was nearly split by a smile. Helpless, she picked him up and started to sway to the music. She caught Masterson's eye and looked a pained apology at him. He nodded and smiled at her and Bobby, and her conflict melted. When next she twirled to face him, he held up his forearm and tapped his wristwatch. Then he touched a finger to his cap brim, mouthed the word "Eep!" at

her, and went off to his responsibilities.

* * *

After her class grew, so too did the dinner presentations. Some of the adults had some real talent, and many of the children rose to their challenge. Besides the nightly readings, Bess instituted a weekly talent show on Friday nights. And after some initial reluctance from the Captain, she arranged a daily passenger briefing as well. It helped

the passengers to hear the full situation, unadorned and stripped of technical jargon. Different officers rotated through the briefing duties, with the Captain delivering the Sunday briefings personally. Morale continued high. There were even brief moments when Bess could almost forget their difficulties, and accept this new routine as normal. They were as close as they could reasonably hope to be to the Captain's first priority: safety.

At the close of the fifth talent

show, Captain Engstrom made his surprise announcement of the night: Lieutenant White had found a habitable planet. After thanking the students for their contributions, he let the astrogator provide the details. There followed a lot of technical discussion about temperate zones, gas readings, photosynthesis telltales, and other factors, but they all added up to the Captain's second priority: habitable planet.

The Captain wrapped up the night by announcing a name-that-

planet contest. It was an old morale trick, but quite reliable. Each student on the discovery team was allowed to submit a name, and the whole ship's complement voted on the submissions after three days of cheerful debate. No one was more surprised than Kara Wells when her choice was selected. She nervously accepted the Captain's invitation to dine at the head table on the night Lieutenant White unveiled their first photos of Halfway There; and she practically squealed when the

Captain declared another ball in her honor and asked her for the honor of the first dance. Bess happily shunned the spotlight that night, and felt a warm glow when she saw how Kara grew more confident with all the attention. No longer the star that night, Bess had multiple opportunities to dance with Lieutenant Masterson. At odd moments, when the mood grew perhaps a tad too serious for comfort, one or the other of them would whisper, "Eep!" And then they

would laugh, and the tension would break, though other dancers looked at them quizzically. Far too soon, the Lieutenant again had to leave for his duties. Bess was sure she smelled herbs well into the next day.



At the close of the seventh show, Captain Engstrom announced that next week's show would unfortunately be canceled. The passengers were too polite to boo, but the rumbling grew until the

Captain knocked a fork on a glass for attention. "I'm sorry, but you'll all be too busy next week. At roughly 1030 hours next Friday, we'll be launching the habitat module to Halfway There."

The dining room burst into extended applause; but amid the applause, Bess noticed some troubled faces. Some, she knew, were finally accepting that this was real: they were going down to a strange planet, and staying for an extended time. But for others, she suspected a

different concern. After the initial worries, this slow-motion emergency had melded the passengers and crew into a true community, in ways that never happened on a traditional cruise. Now some of their community were going to leave them behind and go search for rescue. And not just any members, their community leaders. Where once the passengers might merely have seen ship's crew performing their responsibilities as expected, now they saw friends

risking life and limb for them. It was more sobering.

But jubilation carried the day. Bess and her students found themselves pressed into service, moving materiel and supplies from the engine module to the habitat module. They had no need for judgment: anything intended for the transfer had been splashed with whitewash, just enough for a marker. Chief Mate Stubbs and his cargo crew tagged each item as it came through the hatches between

modules, with color coding to identify the deck and compartment where each would be stored. Other cargo crew packed and secured. The whole operation was marvelously orderly, and Bess gained new respect for how well a good crew could work. In honest self-reflection, she admitted she had seen them as common laborers, not as skilled workers. She resolved to make that up to them some way, even though they were unaware of her condescension. Father would expect

no less of her, and it would serve as a reminder that she should be less quick to judge.

And finally came the day of departure. Amid many tearful partings, Bess received a summons to the Captain's office. She hurried there, entered, and snapped a smart salute. She had been practicing since her promotion.

The Captain returned her salute and ordered her to sit. After some pleasantries, he got to his point. "Bess, I'm very impressed with your

work here. You've surpassed my expectations in every way."

"Thank you, Captain."

"I need to be more blunt. I misread you, and I apologize. You're stronger than I realized. I won't give you full credit, since the rest of the crew earned their share, but you've really helped keep the passengers stable. By this point, I fully expected some passengers in the brig for hoarding, or maybe even for violence. That's at a minimum. Food riots wouldn't have surprised me."

“Oh, I think they’re better than that.”

“People do crazy things in an emergency like this. I’ll leave you some histories so you can see. It’s quite possible I would’ve had to even order someone killed; and after that, well, things would’ve gotten grim. That didn’t happen; and I’m putting it in your record that you bear primary responsibility.”

The only answers Bess could devise would seem repetitive; but before she could even try, the

Captain continued. “I’m not giving you these histories as a gift. They’re an assignment, and I expect you to read them, Lieutenant. They’re service histories that probably didn’t come up in your formal education, histories with an emphasis on shipwrecks and long term survival.”

“Long term, Captain?”

“I treated you like a child before, and I was wrong to do so. Adult to adult—Captain to Junior Lieutenant—the odds against rescue are long. We’ll make the effort, but you and

the service crew have to prepare for the long haul. I am entrusting you with this responsibility; and as the only officer who didn't read this material in the Merchant Academy, I need you to study up. I'm relieving you of all other duties for the day. Get to your berth, strap in, and get reading."

He rose, and she stood to attention. "All other duties, Captain?"

"Hmmm... Not questioning orders is another thing you would've

learned in the Academy. But go ahead.”

“Captain, I request permission to see my children to their berths before strapping in myself.”

“Yes, of course. Very proper. They’re your children. I suspect they’ll always be your children after the mark you made on them. I’ll let you get to them, then. Dismissed.” She saluted, he returned, and she left. Bess was uneasily certain that she would never see Captain Engstrom again.

She returned to the engine module. Her uniform was non-regulation in one particular: the cherry wood and brass bell that hung at her side. She unfastened it, released the clapper, and began to ring it, summoning her children to their berths.



After the initial jolt of separation, Bess thought the ride down from orbit was quite smooth, so she settled into reading. The histories were

fairly dry, written more for accuracy and completeness than for style. Still, she learned a lot. It seemed the Transport Academy scholars had thought very deeply about all manner of circumstances that could arise during a voyage, including emergencies and stranding. They delved into more than just practical concerns, digging into ethics and morality and jurisprudence. They tied their arguments back to familiar logical and philosophical foundations, as well as to science and

experience. And always, always to history. Whatever had let a lost vessel survive until rescue, they studied. When records permitted, they also studied failures; but overwhelmingly, failures were recorded simply as "Lost in Transit, Never Recovered".

Bess was so deeply engrossed in the histories, she scarcely noticed the first tremors of storms as they entered the atmosphere. When the storms grew more violent, Lieutenant Masterson came on the

ship's intercom. "Please remain calm. We have some turbulence, but Captain Stubbs assures me the ship's stabilizers can handle it." Bess smiled at his voice. Everything would be all right.

She was still reading when the habitat module flipped nearly upside down in a sudden wind shear. She lost her reader, and had no chance to recover it before one storage compartment unexpectedly burst open and tossed a heavy crate at her head. The lessened gravity likely

saved her life; but Bess was unconscious for the crash, the fire, the explosions, and the panic.



Bess ached. But she was warm. Under a blanket. Felt safe. Maybe good enough to move. Maybe open her eyes. Or maybe later. Warm. Ache.

“Eep!”

“Tom?” Bess managed one eye. When she saw Lieutenant Masterson leaning over her, she managed the

other eye. "Ache. What happened?"

"Bad storms, Bess. Relax, we're down. White warned us about them, but it was too late to change our minds. Not enough fuel to search for a world with calmer weather."

"Storms? You knew?"

"I'm sorry, we didn't find out how bad until yesterday morning. We weren't keeping secrets, there was just no time for a briefing."

Bess tried to rise up on an elbow, but her right elbow was in a cast. "How...?"

“We crashed, Bess. There were some casualties, lots of injuries. Parts of the habitat module were destroyed, lots of fire damage. But we’re mostly doing OK.”

And then Bess noticed for the first time: his uniform, nearly always impeccable, was tinged with stains and patches of grime. There was some rough stitching on one shoulder. He had patched and cleaned it recently, and incompletely. “Casualties? The children—”

“All safely strapped in by their teacher, so I hear. The casualties were primarily crew, since we were unstrapped and operating the module during the descent.”

“Who...?”

“Later. The news won’t change much, so it can wait.”

“And besides, she needs her rest.” Kara Wells came in the door, and Bess realized there was a door. They were in some sort of prefab shelter. Kara’s clothes also showed signs of recent grime and damage; but her

hands were thoroughly clean. She set down a tray, came up to Bess's bed, stuck a medimeter to Bess's temple, and scanned the readout. "Still no fever, and heart and O2 are good. Doctor Keene says you can have some soup. Lieutenant?" Kara crowded between Bess and Masterson, gently lifted Bess's shoulders, and propped a pillow behind her. Then she brought a bowl of soup from the tray. "I suppose you can help her eat, Lieutenant. But then she needs her rest."

“Yes, nurse.” There was no irony in his tone. He set the bowl on a table, swung the table over the bed, and held a spoon of broth just ahead of Bess’s lips. Bess tasted, decided she liked it, and sipped the rest from the spoon.

Kara watched, nodding approvingly before adding, “Rest. Doctor’s orders.” Then she left.

Masterson offered another spoonful, and Bess swallowed it. Then she shook her head. “Hold a moment. No eep there?”

“Kara? She has been quite the serious nurse. Surgeon Keene has lots of praise for her. That’s how she earned this duty.”

“Huh?”

“Bess, every child in the school wanted to take care of you. Surgeon had to put his foot down. One caregiver only. She’s the envy of the planet.” The prefab walls were thin, it seemed, as Bess suddenly heard cheering outside. “I think she just gave her report.”

“Mmmm. Normally, I would

take time to savor the honor. But, umm, more please?”

“Getting hungry? That’s a good sign, I think. All right, let’s get you fed. Then I think I’d better let you rest, or Kara will kick me. Besides, I have lots of work to do.”

Another spoon. Then, “But what about—”

He stuck the next spoonful in her mouth, spilling some. “Questions later. Eat.”

Bess decided to cooperate. In her weakened condition, she found

Lieutenant Masterson quite irresistible, in more ways than one.



But on his next visit, Masterson's air was measurably more grim. He smiled at her, asked polite questions, and answered a few of her own; but his attention was elsewhere, and that vexed Bess more than she would let him know. And when she demurely asked about soup, he called out the door: "Nurse, Lieutenant Anthony is hungry. She would like some soup."

Then he looked briefly, awkwardly at Bess, as if he had something to say. Finally, he said simply. “Well, duty calls, Bess. Please get better soon. It would—cheer up the children.”

And then he bustled out the door, nearly knocking the soup tray from Kara’s hands. Bess ate her soup with Kara’s assistance, but she kept glancing at the door if it so much as rattled.

Finally, Kara put down the spoon and took Bess’s hands. “I’m sorry, Miss Anthony, he won’t be

back today. He's too busy."

"What? Who?" Bess flushed. "Oh, you mean Lieutenant Masterson?"

"Oh. You didn't notice the braid." Yes, perhaps there had been something different in his uniform, some new gold among the lamentable grime. Bess had yet to learn how to read uniform insignia. "It's Captain Masterson now. Mr. Stubbs became captain when he took command of the habitat module; but he was injured in the crash. And this

morning, he..." She swallowed.

Bess put her good hand to Kara's face. "Hush. I can deduce the rest. We shall not need to elaborate these matters for a while, I fear. Everyone will understand."

"Yes, Miss Anthony." Kara tried to smile. "So Captain Masterson assumed command, as per regulations; and ever since, he has been reviewing Captain Stubbs's notes and plans. He has delegated as much work as possible to the junior officers while he studied."

“Oh.” Bess understood, of course. A Captain’s responsibilities dwarfed those of a mere Lieutenant. She could hardly expect him to wait on her. There she lay in bed, sleeping the day away, and she expected him to feed her soup! How ridiculous.

Kara saw something in Bess’s face, perhaps, for she added, “But he left us one order: ‘Call me any time she wakes up.’”



Kara adjusted Bess’s uniform

tunic. The Surgeon had cut her out of it when he treated Bess's injuries; but Kara had saved the scraps, and one of the students had proven quite good with needle and thread. Bess would never pass an inspection, but the tunic looked quite proper, even allowing for her arm in the cast. "Shall I call for a couple of the boys, Miss Anthony? They could hold up your arms and support you."

"No, Kara." Bess swung her legs off the bed and carefully sat up. She experienced neither weakness nor

vertigo, so she was improving. “Any boy large enough to support my weight is much too old to stand quite so close to the bosom of a young lady who is also his teacher. It is important, my dear, that we maintain proper etiquette and professional composure. We need at least the semblance of normalcy.”

Kara bit her lip, but nodded. “I think Doctor Keene has some crutches he can spare.”

“Kara, my legs are fine. With my arm still healing, crutches would be

quite difficult to maneuver. I can walk, young lady, and I shall walk. Oh, don't pout." Indeed, Kara's face had clouded. "I am not criticizing, I am thanking. You have most excellently nursed me back to health. Now let us enjoy the fruits of your labors."

Bess lowered herself to the floor, letting her legs take the weight slowly at first. She speculated that the gravity was somewhat higher than Earth's; but that impression could as easily have been due to her

recuperation.

Fully standing at last, Bess took tentative steps toward the door. Really, she was ready for this, ready to get back to work.

Back to work? Bess's left hand dropped to her belt, but the strap there was empty. She turned to ask Kara a question, and stopped. Kara smiled broadly as she held out the antique bell. Bess took it, turned it over in her hand, and inspected. Like her, the bell had survived the collision but not without incident.

There were scratches and one deep gash in the handle. Someone had sanded the rough edges smooth, and had colored in the exposed wood with watercolors from the classroom. The colors were blended so closely, one would not notice from a meter away. The bell itself had also clearly been damaged, but someone had carefully hammered it back into shape. It was no longer perfect, but it looked good nonetheless. Bess gave it a small, tentative clang. The tone was nearly

perfect. Had Bess not lived with the sound of that bell since even before her birth, she might never have noticed the subtle undertones that had been lost. It struck Bess as somehow proper that neither she nor it were unscathed by the crash, but they both would carry on their traditions.

“Thank you, Kara.” A little steadier now, Bess pulled the girl—the young lady, truthfully—into a hug. “Thank you, and whomever repaired this. You repaired my body

and my spirit.”

They left the shelter, Kara giving Bess an arm to carefully step down two low steps. Then Bess turned her eyes up from her feet.

And applause rolled over her. All of her children, most of their parents, and other passengers as well had quietly waited as she emerged. Now they were quiet no more. They rushed up, crowded around her, and all tried to talk at once. They all kept their distance, allowing for her still shaky legs; but Bobby ran up to her,

arms upraised for her to pick him up. She was stymied, but only for a moment. Then she crouched down, wrapped her good arm and her cast around the child, and said, "Hello, Bobby."

"Miss you, teacher."

"I missed you too, Bobby. But my arm is hurt. You see this? That's called a 'cast.'"

"Cast!"

"Yes. It's making my arm better. Until then, I'm sorry, I can't pick you up. Hugs?" He wrapped his arms

around her neck. "Thank you, Bobby." Then, a little louder: "And thank you as well if someone can help me stand back up."

She took the hand that reached down to her, and pulled on it. It pulled back with a sure strength, and Bess found herself face to face with Lieutenant—Captain—Masterson. She threw her arms around him. "Tom!"

After such a strong arm, the embrace he returned was surprisingly weak and formal. Bess

realized too late that she was probably violating a dozen protocol regulations. She released him and took a half step away. “Forgive me, I—I guess congratulations are in order, Captain.”

“No apologies needed.” Under the formality, Tom was still Tom. Bess could see a glint in his eye, and his expression was weary but not broken. “We are all very happy to see you up and about, Lieutenant. Are you well?”

Kara cleared her throat. “Doctor

Keene has certified her for duty, barring any lifting or long exertion.” Then, after a pause: “Captain.”

Bess’s eyes crinkled as she looked at him, and he faintly winked in acknowledgement. “I thank you for the medical input, nurse, but I wanted the Lieutenant’s subjective opinion.”

“My opinion, Captain, is that I have been a layabout for long enough. With the Captain’s permission, I would like to see how we fare, and to learn my way around

this encampment.”

“Permission granted.” He looked at his watch, then offered Bess his arm. “And I think I can spare a while to serve as your escort.” This announcement produced collective dismay in the crowd, which he overrode with surprising new authority in his voice: “Captain’s privilege. But those of you who have nothing better to do—” He glared at a few in the crowd, and they suddenly decided to return to work. “—are welcome to accompany us.”

And so the Captain—the word still seemed strange to Bess, but she was learning to like it—led a small parade through the encampment. They were situated in a low, nearly dish-shaped valley between some low hills. A river ran through the valley bottom, and they had already constructed a footbridge. Some local flora, a little like grass if one did not look too closely, covered most of the area. It could perhaps have tripped Bess as she regained her footing; but it had been well-trampled

throughout. There was no chance that a stumble might casually throw her against Captain Masterson. A pity, that.

They inspected the prefab shelters, and Bess remarked on how sturdy and practical they were.

They looked over the supply depot, cook tent, and community hall, a combination of five prefab units. The community hall was large enough for a good classroom.

They toured the hospital, and Bess saw that she was fortunate

compared to some of the remaining patients. There were three amputees, including Valerie Long: she lost an arm rescuing Bobby and some of the other younger children, and she was still under sedation. Bess looked at the girl, touched the cast on her own arm, and squeezed back the tears in her eyes. Then she kissed the sleeping girl's forehead and stumbled her way out of the hospital.

They toured the habitat module itself, or at least the portions that were safe to enter. The giant disk

shape was scorched in many places, ruptured in a few, and tilted at an odd angle. Tom explained that the engines had been crushed in the impact, and one sheared completely off. Someone had painted a name on the side: the S.S. Pancake. Bess smiled at the grim joke despite herself.

And they toured the makeshift graveyard, a small, neat plot of land where someone had carefully pruned back the native grasses. Out of two-hundred-eighty-five passengers and

crew who had set out on the habitat module, twenty-four markers stood here, each machined from small pieces of the habitat hull. Bess stood at each marker, read the name, and remembered: a face, a song, or just an incident. The silence grew awkward, until Bess couldn't help but share her memories. When she came to names she didn't quite recognize, others in the community chipped in. Tom himself told of the excellent service records of two of the deckhands.

The last grave, and the freshest, was without a marker yet. Tom approached it respectfully and snapped a salute. Bess imitated as best she could in her cast, and the other crew in the crowd followed suit. "Captain Leonard Stubbs," Tom said. "Twenty-five years in Interstellar Transport. In his final commission from Captain Engstrom, he was given one clear order: get his charges safely to a habitable planet." Tom paused and chewed his lip briefly. "Mission

accomplished, Captain Engstrom, with honors. Requiem in pace, Captain Stubbs.” He paused for a moment of silence, then turned to face the assembly. “Company, dismissed!” Bess and the other crew dropped their salutes, and the passengers took the cue to disperse.

Matseo, however, missed the cue. As the crowd departed, he approached Bess and the Captain. “Miss Anthony, can I show you our observatory?” He was always keen to contribute, but he needed

affirmation to know that others appreciated those contributions.

“Captain?”

The Captain looked at his watch. “We can spare fifteen minutes, young man. Then I’m afraid the Lieutenant needs her rest, and I have to get back to work.”

Matseo led them up a hill at the far edge of camp, across the river. There he and others had cleared away the grass, arranged a ring of stones as a symbolic wall, and set up some of the habitat’s astronomic equipment.

There was a small radio dish that could serve as a primitive radio telescope, though without enough baseline to be of any real use. There were a number of smaller telescopes and binoculars. And in the center of the ring was the primary optical telescope, an 8 inch model with sophisticated computer imaging enhancement and computer-driven tracking motors. It also had a viewing screen to complement the traditional eyepiece.

“See?” Matseo pulled up a

computer-generated display of stars. “We’ve started making perspective maps from the planet surface. Some day we can turn these into navigation charts. We salvaged an astrolabe, and we’re working through the calculations of longitude and latitude. It’s difficult, since we’re not sure of Halfway There’s diameter yet. But we’ll get it.”

“I’m sure you will, Matseo. I know how much you enjoy this.” Bess looked through the eyepiece, but saw only a hazy white smear

against a background of stars. It looked like perhaps an asteroid field or some cometary debris, but reflecting or emitting light from an unknown energy source. “I suppose we must wait until dark before we can get a clear image here.”

“Oh, no!” Matseo waved at the scope, careful not to bump it despite his obvious enthusiasm. “This model has computer-assisted polarization. As long as we point at least ninety degrees from our sun, the picture’s as clear as a nighttime image. We’ve

been using it to track the Graham's progress back to the spacelanes. It took a while, but we figured out a program to track it. We've been watching it for a while."

"T h e Graham? But—" Bess looked again at the debris. Did it glow with its own heat, perhaps from an explosion?

She felt Tom's touch on her shoulder. She stepped aside and let him look. After a moment for his eyes to adjust, he squinted at the debris. Then he straightened, looked

at Bess, and shook his head. His mouth was a thin line in a face of stone. Safety, habitable planet... but no rescue. Not any more.

Bess walked behind Matseo, putting her good hand gently on his shoulder. "Matseo, please go get your books. And tell your friends that we shall convene a late class as soon as I can hobble down this hill."

Matseo was clearly confused, but it was not in him to question the orders of a teacher. He started down the hill. As soon as he was out of

earshot, Tom turned to Bess. “Bess, this isn’t the time for that!”

“Tom!” Bess paused for breath, then tried again. “Tom, this is precisely the time.”

“Don’t get technical with me, Lieutenant.”

“If I were being technical, Captain, I would point out that we’re actually hours late for the start of the school day.” Another breath, another try. “Tom, this is bad news, but you knew it was likely. You’ve made plans for this contingency, as I’ve

known for months.”

“Of course. It was my responsibility.”

“And these children are my responsibility.”

“And so you’re going to wind them up on some—some impulse?”

“Impulse? Impulse? Captain Engstrom gave me warning, and I thought very carefully about what to do. I made plans, too, and you call it an impulse?”

“Tom, their routine is broken. It will never be repaired. But it’s like

my arm, or my bell: we can make up a new routine, the best possible in the circumstances.”

“Don’t you think that’s what I’m doing? That’s my job! I’m the Captain now. This camp is now my responsibility.”

“True, Captain, but the children are my responsibility. I know what they can understand, I know what they need, and I know what they can contribute. That is my job.”

He reached for her shoulder, but she pulled away. “No. I need this,

too. I need to do what I know best. If you're all supportive, if I let you be supportive, it will make me weak for them. I'm sorry, Captain. You have your duties. I know mine. Now if I may be dismissed, my children need me. I have to break some very bad news to them, and then spend all night on lesson plans." Without waiting for dismissal, she turned and started slowly down the hill.

If Tom had followed to help her, if he had even simply called after her, her resolve might have crumbled.

And things might have gone very differently for them, and for all of Halfway There. But he stood in silence and watched until she was safely down the hill. With her one good arm, she carefully detached her bell, loosened the clapper, and started ringing the children to class.

* * *

And after that, they fought. Often.

* * *

They fought over small things.

“No, you cannot have more paper for your students!”

“But how will they learn their letters? How will they practice essays?”

“They can... They can write in the dirt.”

“Dirt? Are our children reduced to grubbing in the dirt already? You can't take dirt to class, Tom. You've confiscated most electronics, so they can't use pads. Give us paper!”

“We need to conserve power.

And we need to conserve paper! I've got it counted to the sheet!"

"Yes, because we counted it for you. And some day, we'll learn to make paper. We're studying the libraries now. But if we forget how to read, that's it! It's over! Give us more paper."

He gave her the paper.

* * *

They fought over large things.

"Absolutely not! There's no way we can support an expedition! The

subject is closed.”

“The only thing closed is your mind! We need a biological survey to determine what resources we can find. Kara and Surgeon Keene have set up a very nice analytical laboratory. They’ve already identified local sources for two essential vitamins and one amino acid; but this ‘grass’ is a monoculture, and consists mostly of proteins and fibers we cannot digest. We need a larger sample, drastically larger. Some of the older students and their

parents are very skilled field researchers.”

“That expedition will take weeks. We don’t really know how long. They’ll have to take food, and we’re rationing very carefully. We don’t know what dangers may be out there, so they’ll have to take guards and weapons. We don’t have many weapons to spare, or many hands!”

“So far we’ve seen nothing larger or more dangerous than a fat squirrel.”

“But we don’t know what else

may be out there!”

“And an expedition is the only way to learn!”

She got her expedition. One might argue that Tom was right, as the expedition was attacked by a pack-hunting band of predators, something the size of a large cat. Its hide was razor-sharp ridges with which it slashed and tore when fighting. But Halfway There had never seen firearms before, or even spears, and the local predators were simply unprepared for prey with

brains. When the expedition came back, the settlers all agreed that dried razor meat was delicious.



They fought over resources.

“You want to what?”

“Start cutting the Pancake’s hull into sheets and bars, and also implements like shovels. Also drill bits, and we have some other tools we can make without too much work.”

“We have all the tools we need!”

“Today we have all the tools we need. Tate and Kara’s baby should be born next month. We’re growing, Tom.”

“Yes... Well... I’m still not sure that’s a good idea, either.”

“Pah! Yes, Tom, go ahead: try to order human nature to change its course. That may work for you, but it’s not going to work for them!”

She got the hull plates.

* * *

But what they really fought over

were competing visions. Tom saw Halfway There as a refugee camp struggling to last until some miracle brought rescue. Bess saw it as a settlement. Bess had read Captain Engstrom's histories. She knew the usual arc of a stranded populace. They gathered and carefully inventoried their resources. They conserved and rationed with equal care. They planned exactly how to stretch each bar of survival rations, each milligram of medicine, so as to maximize the survival time ahead of

them. When the inevitable attrition happened, simple algorithms helped them figure out how the now-reduced population benefitted from one less mouth. Soon one less mouth even seemed desirable. That way lay hoarding and violence and suicide. Maybe even cannibalism.

And that was not going to happen to Bess's children. They had a world of resources, if only they could learn to use them. Of course, the failed refugee camps had seen the same possibilities (at least those

fortunate enough to crash on a habitable world); but somehow in the day-to-day effort to just survive, they had lost track of the need to thrive. Bess was determined not to let this happen on Halfway There. She believed in a fundamental truth: we can grow and learn, or we can retreat and die.

And it broke her heart the day she realized that Tom simply could not see it that way. The adventurous young Lieutenant with the wicked sense of humor might have taken

more risks than she; but the responsible Captain turning prematurely gray from the burdens placed on him... He was incapable of choosing risk. He would run the settlement by the book, even knowing how the book usually ended. He would always choose the cautious, conservative path, and would always convince himself it was the only responsible choice.

Except where Bess was involved. She knew he could never really tell her “no”; and though it tore at her

soul to put him in such a position, she used his feelings for her as the ultimate weapon in their battles. Sooner or later, she would do what she knew was right, and he would yield. She came to hate herself when she had to do this, and to resent him for forcing her to it, and to hate herself for resenting him. And the fact that he never resented her in return was the most bitter element in this whole mélange.

Bess was very careful never to quarrel with Tom in public. She

knew that would injure his pride; and that pride was already bruised, for it was clear to most that Bess was leading the settlement as much as he was. Her ideas and suggestions always seemed to get implemented. As more students passed through her classroom, her influence grew, even as she tried to demur. His pride was at risk, and also his authority; and she knew that the settlement needed a Captain who was clearly in charge. So she was always obedient and agreeable in public, saving

disagreement for private conferences. Occasionally the Captain would reverse his earlier decision. It was always clearly his reversal, with his reasons explained. That those happened to be reasons Bess had voiced days or weeks earlier was seldom mentioned.

And under her guidance and his control, the settlement grew: they grew in numbers, they grew in resources, and they grew in skills. At their tenth anniversary, they had a working foundry, a saw mill, a grain

mill, and a concrete plant. At their twentieth anniversary, they had a generator, a real hospital, and a water treatment plant. They had recently grown beyond their valley, and a new town had started down river.

Her plan was working, and Bess was happy for her children. After two decades of her calling them “her children”, they had taken to calling her “mother”. And slowly, that became “Mother Anthony”. She found that amusing, but she also took pride in it. Every new child who

entered her class for the first time and said, “Good morning, Mother Anthony,” was another credit to her plan to thrive, not just survive.

In silence late at night, though, Bess had one more plan. At some point, Tom would retire, turning the rod of authority over to a younger man. When Tom had decided to open a Transport Academy, Bobby had been the first to enlist, and Bess had high hopes for her little dance partner to succeed her big one. And on that day, they could stop the

fighting, and be together at last.

The end of that plan, when it came, was sudden. Tom was performing a safety inspection at the foundry. As was the custom on Halfway There, the foundry had an apprenticeship program, and also on-site career studies classes, so Tom gave safety concerns there extra scrutiny. Perversely, it was the inspection itself that led to the accident. He was testing an emergency release mechanism, when the control lever slipped off. It

slammed into a bracket, and the bracket cracked. A crucible of molten metal tipped, teetered, and finally fell over. Realizing the takeaway chute wasn't aligned under the crucible, Tom and the plant supervisor and two crewmen shoved it around and under the flow. The supervisor and his men were hospitalized for weeks with third degree burns. Tom was caught in a splash of hot metal, and was killed instantly.

Halfway There entered a week of

mourning, so naturally Bess taught no classes that week. No one remarked on that, but they could not fail to notice her absence at his service. When classes did not resume the next week, no one could fault her. But when the doors were still closed the next day, they began to worry. By the third day, rumors circulated that in her grief she had run away, or even ended her own life. No one could say for sure; and Mother Anthony had taught them the importance of empirical

observation over speculation.

So a delegation was selected to check on her safety without (they hoped) intruding too far on her privacy. For such a mission, only her longest standing students would do. So on the fourth day after the week of mourning, Bobby, Kara, and Mitseo stood on her doorstep, debating who should bear the awesome responsibility of knocking.

Before they could decide, the door opened, and Mother Anthony stepped out upon the stoop. Her hair

was more silver than they remembered. Her eyes were tired and red. But her back was still straight, and the replica of her old ship's uniform was still immaculate.

“Good morning, children.”

“Good morning, Mother Anthony.”

She closed the door behind her. “So you three drew the short straws, I see. Come to see if old Mother Anthony found some Halfway Hemlock.”

Bobby offered her his arm, but

withdrew it when she pointedly ignored it. “We volunteered, Mother Anthony. They asked for someone from your First Class, and we were at the head of the line.”

“Very good, children, very good. Eagerly embracing your responsibilities, as always. I approve. And Lieutenant Price, I am quite certain the Captain would approve, too.”

Kara gently grasped Bess’s shoulder. “Please, Mother Anthony, can we walk you to class?”

And for a moment, they saw just a hint of her old smile. She walked down the steps, unslung her bell, and turned back to them. “You know the rules: eldest in the rear. I dare say you three will be my eldest students today.” Then she began striding the streets and ringing that antique bell.

“Children! Time for school! Quickly, now, quickly! We have a lot to learn today.”



“So let me get this straight.”

Captain Farris looked up from the briefing reports. “These are survivors of a shipwreck.”

“Correct, Captain.” Lieutenant Wright rocked gently on her heels. “Though they seem touchy on that word ‘shipwreck’. They’re adamant that they are from a ‘settlement’, not a shipwreck.”

“And from one-hundred-fifty years ago! Astounding!”

“Indeed. With those old hyper-shift drives, ninety-three percent of lost vessels were lost for good. Those

lucky few that were rescued were found near their expected end points, and after only a few weeks or months of survival tactics. Prior to this, the longest recorded survival was three years; and in that case, nine survived out of over one-hundred.”

“Yet these people not only survived, they thrived. Hmmm...” The Captain read further. “So wait, they were a religious colony? Are we sure they didn’t get lost intentionally?”

“What? Oh, no, they’re not a

religious colony. They have a typical mix of faiths from their era.”

“But this ‘Mother’ person who crops up so much in all their histories... And then these other Mothers who came after...”

“Yes, I can see that sounds like a religious order. But they’re not nuns, they’re teachers.”

“Teachers?”

“Yes, sir. If you had to categorize their society, it’s not a religious order. It’s a school.”

“Teachers. A school... So with

hundreds of recorded cases, castaways are generally lost for good. Some small number organize themselves well enough to survive long enough for the incredibly unlikely event of rescue. It's the unmentioned tragedy of the hyper-shift era.

“And yet this bunch of... this bunch of schoolteachers... these people alone among all of these cases...” He gestured at the orbital monitor. “These people pulled off that stunt.”

“Impossible to believe, sir, I know. But there’s no other explanation, and their records are impeccable. I think it’s true. They came to us.”

Farris and Wright looked again at the evidence on their screens. The starship orbiting Chambers’s World was crude by modern hyper-tunnel standards, but it was solidly built. Just then, its orbit brought it back into sunlight. Painted on the side was a stylized brass bell. Under that in elegant script was the vessel’s

name, The Mother Anthony.



Alex Shvartsman

Alex Shvartsman became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Spidersong” in Daily Science Fiction (Oct. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit his website at alexshvartsman.com.

Spidersong

by Alex Shvartsman

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Barasso & Jonathan Laden



We listen to the spidersong.
The spiders are far away,
just at the edge of our

senses, whispering a haunting and beautiful melody into our minds. The grown-ups are oblivious, as always. They are having several conversations at once around the campfire, laughing and gossiping. It's a nuisance because we can't enjoy the spidersong nearly as well, not with all the distraction. We use a reliable trick—we have Sheila ask for a story.

Sheila is the youngest and she hates to speak using words even more than the rest of us, but we nudge her along, and she tugs on old

Jens' coat. He is only too happy to oblige. Kids and grown-ups alike gather around the fire. Everyone else quiets down and settles in to listen to Jens.

“What story would you like, dear,” asks Jens. “Do you want to hear about the home world, or about our voyage among the stars?”

“Nah that stuff's boring,” says Sheila. “Tell us about the spiders.”

Jens frowns. The grown-ups don't like the spiders at all. But Sheila looks pleadingly up at Jens with big

hazel eyes and he surrenders.

“When our ship crashed nineteen years ago, things were real bad. We had very little food and supplies and only a vague idea about how to live off the land. There were many problems and dangers to overcome, but the spiders—they were the worst.”

Some of the grown-ups shift uncomfortably. They stare past the silk-covered trees at the edge of the clearing and into the darkness of the forest, fearing an ambush. We know

there are no spiders lurking nearby; their song is still very far away.

“The spiders of this world were the scariest creatures we’ve ever encountered,” Jens says. “They were fast, deadly and huge—three times the size of a man. Too much for us to handle. We lost seven people in two months and had no choice but to abandon the original camp and move further away from the forest.”

Eva, the eldest of the children, shares her memory of the crash site. It’s all corroded metal and scorched

ground—an uncomfortable, almost alien place. We break away from the image and take solace in the spidersong, which is a little louder now and very soothing.

“Years went by, and the rescue we had hoped for never came. We made a life for ourselves in the relative safety of the plains. But our fledgling colony needed the forest—we gathered plants, hunted game and collected spider silk, despite the danger.”

Kyle caresses his spider silk

sweater. It's very rugged, but soft and warm, and all of us like how it feels against Kyle's fingertips.

“Life was very tough for us back then. We sent hunting parties into the forest to get what we need, but the spiders hunted us in turn. Not a year went by without us losing at least one person to the bugs. It was bad, until the children began to grow up. Until we realized that those born on this planet could sense the spiders somehow, from a distance.”

Eva and Kyle share a memory

from when they were very little. In it they walk past the silk-covered trees to fill a bucket of water from the nearby lake. Suddenly a spider emerges—far from the deep forest its kind inhabits. Eva and Kyle are terrified. The spider looms over them, but it doesn't attack. Instead, it prods and probes at their thoughts. Then it fills their heads with music. Fear evaporates. They are mesmerized by the melody. Clumsily, the children sing back. For several minutes the spider listens

patiently to their attempts, and then retreats gracefully toward the trees.

Jens pats Sheila on the head. “We don’t know what it is that makes you kids born on this world different, but we are thankful anyhow. This is why we bring kids on every hunting trip now. You can tell us when the spiders are coming. We haven’t lost a single person in the last few years.”

Safe and comfortable by the fire the grown-ups are nodding off. Jens continues to tell stories, but they are only noise. We listen to the

spidersong. It is loud now, a chorus from many spiders who are gathering, dozens of them drawing nearer and surrounding the camp. The spiders are aware of us, and we of them. We aren't afraid. We are both of this world, the spiders and us. Just like the spiders we are a hive—able to share thoughts and emotions, and be close with each other in a way our parents could never understand. It's only the adults—the intruders, the aliens whose minds are mute—that the spiders

hate.

The spiders are singing a war song. It is full of joy, anticipation of victory and demise of their enemies. We sing back to the spiders with our minds, strong and confident this time, our thoughts in full harmony with theirs.

They are almost here.



A Shard Glows in
Brooklyn
by Alex Shvartsman

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One by one, I set off car alarms.

I walked along the curb and methodically gave each parked car a gentle kick, just hard enough to trigger the siren. Behind me, a dozen violated vehicles already blared out of tune.

The prospect hung back, sullen and quiet. He was having a tough week, and my erratic behavior wasn't helping his mood any. With each siren adding its voice to the cacophony, the prospect got a little twitchier. To his credit, he hadn't cut and run. Yet.

“Philippine Energy Beetles are nasty critters,” I lectured him as we walked, straining to be heard over the noise. “They nest by the power lines and feed off the electricity. Those flickering lights the power company says are caused by faulty wiring are often caused by an infestation.”

Having finished with the cars, I fumbled with the lock on the front door of a vacant house.

“This place is lousy with beetles,” I explained. “We’re gonna have to

fumigate.”

“That’s just great,” said the prospect. “I can’t stand bugs. Now you tell me the Watch is in the exterminator business? This couldn’t possibly get any worse.”

But, of course, it could. He hadn’t seen the beetles up close yet. The prospect’s problem with insects was part of the reason I had brought him to this place. I needed to know, when push came to shove, that he’d be able to handle himself. I needed him to overcome whatever phobias

and preconceived notions he'd been living with, before he learned about any of the really bad things that are out there.

“Relax,” I told him. “There’s some good news. These critters hate loud noise.”

The lock finally surrendered to my ministrations and the door was forced open by the pressure from the inside. Hundreds of fully grown beetles burst out of the house. Each of them was two to three feet long and stood at least a foot tall. The

entire swarm rushed past us and toward the sewer, trying to get as far away from the roar of the sirens as they could. The prospect turned white as a sheet, but he didn't run. This one just might be a keeper.

"They are..." the prospect gulped, "enormous."

"This is New York," I told him. "We don't sweat the small stuff. You should see the size of the troll under the Verrazano Bridge. Come on." I took a careful step inside.

"Shouldn't we go after them?" the

prospect called after me. “That brood will infest half the city.”

“The beetles we’ve scared off can’t reproduce on their own and won’t last a week outside of the nest,” I said while examining the foyer. “The root of the problem is in here.” The house was a mess—foul smelling and covered with greenish goo. Dozens of semi-translucent eggs, each the size of a golf ball, hung from the walls and ceiling like ornaments, cradled in the slime. You could almost see the larva gestating

inside.

“Do we crack them open?” asked the prospect.

“No need,” I replied. “I’ve come prepared.” I pulled a small antique lantern out of my backpack, and lit the candle inside with a match. The special candle, blessed by the Panchen Lama himself, activated the lantern’s magic. Wherever its light shone, the eggs shriveled and died, as though they’d been doused in DDT.

We proceeded through the house, using the lantern to

illuminate every corner and nook. The queen would not have abandoned the nest as easily as the other beetles, so I tread very carefully. The prospect opened the door to one of the bedrooms and there she was—three times larger than the drones we've chased off—guarding a pile of eggs at the back of the room. The queen trilled in warning and turned toward us.

“Blast her,” I told the prospect.

Frazzled by the sight of the huge bug, the prospect mumbled the

incantation, getting half of it wrong. Instead of a powerful blast of energy, he only managed to unleash a spray of sparks, hurled in the general direction of the queen. The insect charged, and the prospect stumbled back, desperately trying to cast another spell. With the queen almost upon him, he managed a shield spell. The queen bounced off it as though it were bulletproof glass, momentarily stunned by the force of the collision.

The prospect began another

spell, fighting hard to keep his concentration as the queen got back up and scraped against his weakening shield. Casting several combat spells in a row isn't easy even for an experienced mage, let alone a rookie. The prospect's apparent fear of bugs inspired him to dig extra deep within his energy reserves. With a belligerent bug inches away and held off only by an invisible barrier, the prospect spoke the words of power in a trembling voice. It was close, but he managed to finish the

incantation before the shield collapsed. The queen was enveloped in a ball of fire for several seconds. When the flames disappeared, a charred chitinous shell was all that remained.

The prospect was practically hyperventilating. “I could have used some help,” he said.

“You have to rely on your own magic,” I told him. “You wouldn’t have been in trouble if you hadn’t screwed up the energy bolt. Avoid the distractions and concentrate on

your spells, just like you were taught. Do better next time.”

I walked past him into the room and used the lantern to take care of the last batch of eggs. The prospect took another look at the singed bug remains on the floor, and threw up.

* * *

The first time I met the prospect was several weeks ago, when I sprung him from a loony bin

This wasn't unusual, as such things go. When people first begin

to See, their mind wants badly to reject the truth, to pretend that the world is still safe and normal. They convince themselves, or those around them, that they are losing their marbles. Some try to drown out the new Sight with pills or liquor. A few get themselves committed. They don't typically go as far as to burn their house down.

Back when the prospect went by the name of George Gartner, his Sight began to awaken, slowly. He began to notice things, things that

regular people are blissfully unaware of. Mostly he noticed a particularly nasty ghost that's been haunting his house since the early fifties.

The only one more surprised by this development than George was the ghost. You would think that the old spook might have appreciated having someone to talk to. Being stuck in that house for over half a century with no one but the cats even remotely aware of your existence couldn't have been fun. Instead, the ghost unleashed fifty

years of pent up frustration and anger on poor George. Every day George's Sight became clearer, and the ghost's cursing louder. It followed him around the house, wailing, nagging, and shouting abuse the entire time. It got so bad, George could no longer remain in his own home.

He went through the usual stages. Denial, self-medication, and trying to share what he could See with the world. He even tried to get a priest to perform an exorcism, but

the church won't battle what they can't See. Eventually, George couldn't take it anymore. He bought a container of gasoline, poured it all over the house and set it on fire.

Lucky for George, he'd been seeing a shrink, and his claims of ghosts and otherworldly creatures had been duly documented. Because of this, when the cops and firefighters sorted things out, he got sent to the nuthouse rather than prison.

The head physician at Bellevue's

mental ward owed the Watch a few favors, and he knew to call us any time someone like George would turn up. After a couple of weeks, it was easy as pie for him to declare George no longer a danger to himself or others, and release him into our custody.

I swaggered into George's hospital room like I owned the place. I've learned how to make a good entrance over the years. Perception is as important as reality sometimes, and it's crucial to immediately

establish who's in charge.

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” I told George in lieu of a hello. “The good news is: you aren’t crazy. The doctor said so, so it must be true. You can pack your toothbrush and get out of here whenever you please.”

George gaped at me, trying to puzzle out whether I was legit or just a fellow patient.

“The bad news: that ghost was real. So are all the other weird things you’ve been noticing out of the

corner of your eye. You can see them now, but more importantly—they can see you.”

I told him about the real world—beings and things that only one out of every thirty thousand people can see. A world the rest of humanity catches glimpses of through fairy tales and scary campfire stories. Not a nice place at all.

I told him about the Watch—a group of people with Sight who do their best to protect humanity. I gave him a choice. He could join us or go

out into the night and deal with whatever's out there on his own. Few people ever turn us down, when the situation is laid out for them like that. Then it becomes a matter of making sure they've got what it takes to join.

The first order of business was to ditch his name. Real names have power and one shouldn't casually volunteer them to every stranger one meets. Stripped of his name, George became a prospect. If found worthy, he would choose a new name for

himself, a name that's safe to share with others. Mine's Conrad Brent and I've been wearing it proudly since the nineties.

* * *

After we finished taking care of beetle eggs, our next stop was to visit the oracle of Eighty-Sixth Street.

She had sent word that she wanted to see me, and the oracle isn't someone I like to keep waiting. She might get annoyed and predict something unpleasant in my future,

like an ingrown toenail. The oracle's predictions came true much more often than not, and no one was entirely sure whether she merely Sees the future or influences it. The whole cause and effect thing gives me a headache, so I try not to think about it. Much.

I left the prospect in the car. He wasn't advanced enough in his training to be meeting the major players. Besides, I suspected that the oracle knew things about me, things that the prospect had no business

learning.

The oracle operated out of a one bedroom apartment above a Korean nail salon in a rundown building. She could do far better, for what she charged. One time I asked her about that. She smiled cryptically as she surveyed the peeling wall paint and leaky ceiling and said that she was exactly where she was meant to be.

“Conrad Brent.” She got up from the loveseat to greet me, her voice strong and even in contrast with her small, wrinkled form. “Your future is

fire. I see difficult decisions and you'll make the wrong ones. A flame wave will burn the buildings, char the churches, scorch the schools, and strafe the streets. Yours is a dark destiny of challenging choices and tragic tribulations..."

"Cut the crap, Agnes," I interjected. "I am not a customer. Surely you didn't call me here just to reiterate the same doom and gloom scenario you've been scaring me with for years?"

"Philistine." She sniffed. "Some

people pay good money for the kind of insight I share with you free of charge. A day will come when you'll wish you listened more attentively. Fine, then. Let's tend to a more immediate problem. There is a charlatan in Williamsburg who calls himself the Crimson Prophet. He's been swindling the unwary and besmirching the good name of honest clairvoyants. A thorn in my side, he is, and I would like for you to remove him."

"Really, Agnes," I said, "this isn't

like you. There are dozens of phonies out there taking advantage of the ungifted, and they are hardly a threat to someone of your considerable and real talents. You can't expect the Watch to act as your muscle, leaning on some two-bit fortune teller who happens to irritate you."

"Those were my sentiments exactly," the oracle replied, "until a few days ago, when this upstart somehow got his hands on an Atlantean shard."

I should have known the oracle

had a serious difficulty when she contacted the Watch. Her own resources are substantial enough to handle lesser issues. A shard showing up in New York wasn't just a problem for her; it was trouble for all of us.

Three thousand years ago, Atlantis was the first global superpower. While most of humanity was muddling its way through the Bronze Age, Atlantis had skyscrapers, a public transportation system, and a power grid. Powering

it all was a giant crystal, fused with science and magic more advanced than anything another human culture had accomplished, then or since.

One day a crack appeared in the crystal. Some say it was an accident; others blame the Atlanteans themselves, who put too much strain on the crystal, greedily drawing ever more power. Their best alchemists tried feverishly to seal the crack even as other Atlanteans fled the island. Ultimately they failed and the

resulting explosion annihilated their culture. The crystal itself was broken into thousands of shards, the smallest of which are still very potent and incredibly dangerous. A decent-sized shard is capable of increasing a magic user's power hundredfold, which often doesn't end well for anyone, most especially the hapless mage who dared to use it. A minor personage like this Crimson Prophet character getting his grubby little hands on a shard was even worse. It was like letting a child play with a

suitcase nuke.

I jotted down the Crimson Prophet's address and said my goodbyes. The Oracle of Eighty-Sixth Street would get the help she had asked for. This had just become the Watch's problem.

* * *

I had to give the Crimson Prophet some credit—he knew how to live well. A stately brownstone in the nicest part of Williamsburg was a stark contrast to the oracle's decrepit

abode. I was ushered in through a series of posh rooms by a pair of elegantly dressed men. A trained eye could catch their holsters, hidden under expensively tailored suits. These guys were muscle, but not the cheap, thuggish type. They were the up-market variety, the sort that could handle themselves in a hoity-toity setting like this, but hadn't forgotten how to break kneecaps out back when necessary.

The Crimson Prophet waited for me in the middle of a tastefully

decorated study. The rare paintings and antique furniture served to make the rich feel right at home, and to intimidate the rest. I did my best to appear unimpressed, bordering on slightly put off, on general principle. The prophet himself was a tall, skinny man in his thirties. He wore a three-piece suit with a red velvet robe draped around his shoulders. All he was missing was a top hat and a handlebar mustache and he'd be ready to perform in a play as some sort of a Victorian villain.

“Welcome.” The prophet flashed a blinding smile at me. “I must say, I was quite surprised when my men told me about a stranger showing up at the doorstep and demanding an appointment. My reputation must be spreading among the populace faster than I’d anticipated. You do, however, have me at a disadvantage. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“My name is Brent. Conrad Brent.” I could not resist the James Bond bit. “I’m with the Watch.”

A blank stare was followed by several seconds of uncomfortable silence. Could it be possible that the Crimson Prophet did not know about the Watch?

“We’re a group of mages who protect the world from supernatural threats. We keep the Fae in line, and rein in any rogue humans who might choose to take advantage of the ungifted.”

“Arcane cops.” The Crimson Prophet’s smile got even wider. “How delightful,” he added with a

barest hint of disdain.

“We aren’t cops,” I said. “The Watch is a law unto itself. We recognize no greater authority, and those we take an interest in are most certainly not presumed innocent until proven otherwise.”

“I see,” said the prophet. “And what can I do for your illustrious group? If you’re looking for insightful and stunningly accurate divinations, you’ve come to the right place.”

“No thanks,” I said, thinking of

the oracle's fiery foretelling. "I'm trying to cut down."

The Crimson Prophet indicated disappointment in an it's-your-loss-not-mine kind of way. "Something else, then?"

"It has recently come to my attention that you own an artifact that is of interest to the Watch," I said. "It's a small chunk of incandescent crystal. I was hoping to see it."

"I did recently acquire such a trinket," said the prophet. He

rummaged through a desk drawer to produce a leather carrying case. “It was a gift from a grateful patron, in acknowledgement of the fine work I’ve been doing.”

He opened the case and there it was, a piece of Atlantean crystal the size of an iPhone, glowing warmly like a dimmed light bulb. He tapped it with his index finger and shimmers of energy spread across the surface like ripples from a rock thrown into a still pond. It was the largest Atlantean shard I had ever seen.

“This is it, precisely.” I kept my voice level to hide the excitement. “The Watch has been working to recover this, and several other items, stolen from a friend we owe a few favors to.” I was making up the lie on the spot. “Would you be amenable to perhaps selling it to us?”

The Crimson Prophet extended his hand, inviting me to take another look around. “As you can tell, I am not in need of cash at the moment.”

“A trade, then?” I persisted. “We have access to a wide range of rare

objects that could be very useful in your line of work. I can get you something flashy and clearly magical, to impress your clients. A phoenix feather, perhaps, or a caged fairy. Plus, the Watch would owe you a favor, which is a valuable commodity in its own right.”

“Those are some interesting possibilities.” The Crimson Prophet got up to indicate that our meeting was at an end. “I will consider your offer, but not until I’ve made further inquiries as to the crystal’s value. You

understand, I'm sure."

I thanked him and headed out. I didn't really expect my offer to tempt him. While the prophet was a dilettante when it came to magic, he clearly understood money and power. He would not relinquish the crystal voluntarily. Fortunately, this wasn't going to be an issue. I'd staked out his home, and there were no magical wards or other supernatural defenses in place. I'd be back at night to liberate the crystal.

A fool and his shard are easily

parted.



Lacking arcane protections, The Crimson Prophet would have to rely on mundane security. Non-magical problems are best solved via non-magical means, and there existed no better non-magical solution than Petya.

At six-foot-four, Peter “Petya” Kuznetsov stood an entire head taller than me, and was at least twice as wide. He moved with the easy grace

of a ballet dancer, which he wasn't, and the precision and purpose of a killing machine, which he totally was. Peter was trained by the Spetsnaz and had worked for the Pennant, the Russian government's most elite special ops unit. Some say he had gone rogue after a series of unjustified kills, others claim he was planted in New York City as a Pennant sleeper agent on some sort of a long-term mission. Either way, Petya was the best operative money could buy.

At around four in the morning, Petya disabled the security system at the Crimson Prophet's brownstone. The lock on the front door barely slowed him down. He slipped inside, motioning for the prospect and I to wait.

Two minutes later, Petya emerged and waved us in. The three of us quietly traversed the dark hallways. We passed by one of the goons I met the day before. His unconscious form slouched in a chair, his gun still in its holster.

Another sentry lay sprawled on the floor of the next room, a small trickle of blood congealing at the corner of his mouth—a recipient of Petya's tender mercies.

Unlike the rest of the house, the lights were still on in the study. Petya paused by the door to disable yet another security widget, then we were inside. I reached into the drawer from which the prophet had produced the case earlier, but now it was empty. As I looked up from the desk, a searing pain shot through my

body and brought me to my knees.

It was an arcane attack of immense power. My various charms and amulets had absorbed the brunt of it, yet I still felt like I'd just been Tasered. Absent my protections, Petya and the prospect were not so lucky. Petya was out cold, his ungifted body defenseless against the hostile magic. The prospect fared only a little better; he moaned in pain by the door.

“Welcome back, Mr. Brent.” The Crimson Prophet towered over me,

the shard gripped in his right hand. “And yes, in case you are wondering, Atlantean crystal is everything it is said to be, and more.”

I tried for something witty, but was only able to produce a pained grunt. Enhanced by the shard’s power, the prophet’s magic was too much for me to handle.

“How monumentally arrogant of you,” said the prophet, “yet so predictable. You presumed me powerless, and therefore felt justified in stealing my property. The Watch

pays lip service to protecting ordinary people from the wielders of magic, yet here you are, breaking into my home like a petty burglar. Just as I expected.”

The effects of the arcane blast were beginning to recede. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the prospect trying and failing to get up. I had to buy time—keep the Crimson Prophet talking. So I tried again, and this time I was able to groan an actual word. “Why?”

The prophet smirked. “Because I

don't like competition. Now that I've settled here, I intend to be the one and true power in this borough, able to do whatever I please. Others are mere nuisances, but the infamous Conrad Brent of the Watch, you were always going to be a problem. I could find and kill you, but then the Watch would send other mages to avenge you, and the war would never stop until I got them all."

He leaned in closer. "I pretended to be a mere fortune teller, and set events in motion that would

inevitably lead to this very moment. Lesser intellects are so easy to manipulate. Now I get to have everything I want, on my terms. Even the Watch recognizes self defense. You invaded my home, and were accidentally killed in the struggle. Your superiors will understand. Plus, once I've taken your magic and added it to mine, I will become so powerful that the Watch bigwigs will be only too glad to let matters rest."

The Crimson Prophet grabbed

me by the front of my shirt with his free hand, and lifted me up to his eye level. He then touched the shard to his forehead and began an incantation. The shard flared, as guttural words spoken in a dead language hung in the air with an almost physical presence. The Crimson Prophet was casting a spell that would rip the magic right out of me, a spell so difficult and dangerous that even the most talented mage would be foolish to attempt it. A spell that he could manage now,

thanks to the power of the shard. In moments, he was going to drain all of my arcane powers and claim them as his own.

Little did he know.

He struggled to finish the incantation, barely able to contain and direct the dark magic even with the power of the shard. As the last words were spoken, a great jolt shot through my body, an unstoppable invasive force seeking to collect every shred of my magic and bestow it on the prophet.

Nothing happened.

The Crimson Prophet still held me up at eye level. I could see his pupils widen with surprise, a realization that something had gone wrong. Then I made a fist and punched him hard in the face. There was a satisfying crunch, and the prophet staggered back as blood poured from his broken nose. I went after him, pummeling him to keep him off balance. He whimpered as he tried to scamper away from me. I grabbed his hand and pried his

fingers open. I clenched the shard, but it grew dim in my hand, like a useless chunk of glass.

The Crimson Prophet reasserted himself and lunged at me, trying to regain the crystal. Even with the broken nose, he was a fair match for me after I had been worked over by his spells. As he reached for me, I turned around and threw the shard.

The shard slid across the floor, landing near the prospect. He grabbed for it with both hands, then cupped the crystal to his chest. The

Crimson Prophet went after him, but before he could cross the room the prospect fired off a beam of energy.

The air smelled of ozone and singed hair. The Crimson Prophet stopped and stared with disbelief at his chest. In it, there was a fist sized hole burned cleanly through. Wordlessly, he crumpled onto the floor.

“Now that,” I told the prospect, who appeared shocked by the intensity of his own spell, “this is

how you cast an energy bolt.”

The prophet's plan was nearly perfect. He couldn't have known that I was the only member of the Watch without magic. Almost no one knew, not even others at the Watch itself. I was an accident, a freak of nature, capable of Seeing the arcane, but with no powers of my own.

When I became a prospect, my mentor could not figure out why I failed to cast even the simplest spells. He was not obtuse; it's just that there has never been anyone like me

before. If you could See magic, you could cast it, simple as that. Well, I couldn't.

I learned to get by. My weapons were bluster, information, and an array of enchanted tools and magical charms that could make Batman's utility belt turn green with envy. I performed my duties for the Watch, and used their authority and resources to quietly look for clues, hints of what was wrong with me and how to cure it.

One day I would find a way to do

magic. A way to repair whatever broken link had crippled me. I was glad that day had not yet come before I met the Crimson Prophet.

I extended my hand wordlessly, and the prospect handed over the shard without hesitation. I smiled at him. To experience such power and give it up voluntarily is no small thing. Yes, this one definitely had a future within the Watch.

First, we had to tend to Petya. Then I'd tell the prospect the good news, so he could spend a few happy

hours picking out his new name.



You Bet

by Alex Shvartsman

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Joe stepped through the door and found himself in a cramped, smoke-filled card room. The players paused their game and turned

toward him, five and a half pairs of eyes studying the newcomer.

Seated around the green felt table were a robot, a witch, a vampire, an alien Grey, and a fairy. And looming behind them was a pink mass of scales and tentacles topped off with a bowler hat. It regarded Joe thoughtfully with a single bulging eye the size of a dinner plate.

“Hey there, new guy,” said the fairy. Despite her two-foot frame her voice was sultry rather than tinny. “And what are you supposed to be?”

Joe tried to answer and realized that he couldn't. He remembered nothing of who—or what—he was, except his first name. He felt strange, empty, as if someone had sucked everything out of his head through a straw.

“I know that look,” said the witch. “Everyone has trouble with their memory in the first few hours. It'll go away. Unless you're an amnesiac spy, that is. But we already had one of those.”

His memory problems were

selective, Joe discovered. He recognized the sounds of a Frank Sinatra recording crooning in the background, yet couldn't recall a reason for arriving at this place.

"You aren't anything obvious," said the fairy. "If you figure it out quickly, don't say! I'd rather guess."

"Well I'd rather play poker," said the Grey, the kind they usually depict abducting cattle and probing things indiscriminately. This one was dressed in a three-piece suit, and his almond-shaped head was topped off

with a cowboy hat. He caressed a large stack of chips with his three long fingers. "It's your turn to deal," the alien said to the fairy.

The fairy pouted.

"We do nothing but play cards," said the witch. "Let her have her fun."

The fairy fluttered her wings and displayed a huge grin. Her mood changed so quickly, Joe couldn't help but wonder if Little Folk were susceptible to bipolar disorder.

"Are you a superhero out of costume? A serial killer? A werewolf,

perhaps?”

“Mangy curs,” the tall, striking brunette with fangs sniffed the air. “I can smell those a mile away. He isn’t lupine.” She looked Joe up and down. “This one may be a tasty morsel, even if he’s a bit ordinary looking.”

“Watch out, friend,” announced the robot in a stage whisper. “She means that literally.”

“Your guesses are as good as mine,” said Joe to the fairy. “My name’s Joe. Beyond that I can’t

remember... well... anything.”

“I don’t need to learn your name,” said the alien. “You won’t be here long enough.”

“Grey makes a terrible first impression,” said the witch, with a sideways glance at the alien. “And it doesn’t improve much once you get to know him, either.”

“I’m sure that underneath the fifty shades of his cranky gray exterior beats a heart of gold,” said Joe. “Or hearts. However his physiology works.”

The alien stared at Joe down his pair of flat holes that passed for a nose and went back to counting his chips.

“Don’t you pay any mind to that meanie,” said the fairy. “Have you got any super powers? I hope you aren’t a mind reader, because we couldn’t let you play then. Telepaths only get to watch, like Howie over there.”

The pink monstrosity bobbed its head and made an assenting noise which sounded like the mewl of a tipped-over cow.

“Who are you lot? What exactly is this place?” Joe turned around, but the door he had entered through was gone. There was nothing but solid wall covered in pastel wallpaper, peeling with age. “How do I get out of here?”

“Oh, sweetie, you’re here to stay,” said the fairy. “We all are.”

They watched with varying degrees of amusement while Joe searched frantically for a way out. He circumnavigated the room, studying the ceiling, floor, and walls. There

was no sign of an exit.

“This is impossible,” Joe said.

“Enough already,” said the witch.

“Let’s bring the new guy up to speed and get back to the game.”

“Hard-boiled private eye? Secret agent? Mercenary?” The fairy chimed in with another flurry of wild guesses.

“What you need to understand first,” said the robot, “is that we aren’t people.”

“That’s kind of obvious,” said Joe. “Not that there’s anything wrong

with that. I don't discriminate against metal-based life forms."

"By we—I mean you too, genius," said the robot. "We're figments of people's imaginations. Zeitgeists of popular culture. Tropes. Avatars, brought to life by a hundred thousand dreamers reading the same novel or watching the same film. Whatever's the flavor of the day finds its way into this room, at least temporarily."

"Computer hacker? Terrorist? Ninja pirate?"

Joe shook his head. The fairy pouted again.

“At least he isn’t a prepubescent wizard or an emo glittering vampire,” said the witch. “We suffered a plague of those recently.”

“A terrible embarrassment to my kin,” declared the vampire. “I would have liked to kill them all and drink their blood, if it weren’t so diluted with Prozac and Cosmopolitans.”

“They were rotten card players,” said the robot.

“Their one redeeming quality,”

added the alien.

“What happened to them?” Joe asked. “If there’s no exit, then where did they go?”

“They faded away,” said the vampire. “Some tropes are much longer-lasting than others. Broomhilda there,” she pointed a razor-sharp red nail at the witch, “has been around since the Roosevelt administration. And she isn’t saying which Roosevelt. Those self-pitying pretenders? Not so much.”

“I don’t much like the idea of

fading away,” said Joe.

“Can’t blame you one bit,” said the witch. “But people’s fancies are beyond our control. Be content with the fact that enough of them thought you up, and that you exist at all. Even if existence around these parts is nothing but a never-ending card game.”

“Toreador? Clown? Astronaut?”

Joe shook his head again.

“Whoever you turn out to be, the important question is: do you know how to play Texas Hold’Em?” asked

the alien.

“Yes,” said Joe. “I think so.”

“Pity,” said the alien. “I prefer easy opponents. It’s your turn to deal,” he reminded the fairy. “Scoot over and pass the new guy his chips.”

* * *

“Ghost whisperer? Colombian drug lord? Pet detective?”

The fairy made increasingly unlikely guesses but, in truth, Joe was no closer to figuring out his own identity than she was. So he played

cards and studied the room and its inhabitants.

They played for several hours straight. Joe surprised himself and his companions by being rather good at the game. He quickly learned that the robot never bluffed, the witch fingered a large wart on her nose whenever she had a strong hand, and the vampire always over-bet low pairs pre-flop. The fairy played badly, but made up for it with copious amounts of luck—she often caught just the right card on the

river. The alien was the shark of the group—his playing style was tight but aggressive, he changed his strategy all the time, and his gray, emotionless features made for a perfect poker face.

Very slowly, Joe built the modest pile of chips he started out with into an impressive stack that was second only to the alien's. He searched for an opportunity to take the lead, but the wily extraterrestrial kept eluding his traps.

“Why is this place so run down?”

he asked, noting the dilapidated carpet and patches of the green felt on the table worn so threadbare that they were practically bald spots.

“It is the nature of tropes to be well-worn,” said the robot, looking up briefly from his hand of cards.

Not long after that there was a lively round of betting which resulted in a large pile of chips building up at the center of the table. The alien placed his bet after the flop and Joe raised the stakes, sensing an opportunity. The other players

groaned and folded their cards one by one.

The Grey studied Joe intently, looking for any kind of a tell.

“Take your time, ET,” said Joe, staring right back at the alien, “and while you consider your move let me compliment you about the crop circles. If I traveled to some faraway planet a gazillion light years away from Earth, I would totally mess with the natives’ minds that way, too. Oh, and what’s up with the cowboy hat?” Joe grinned. He was

trying his best to throw the alien off his game, but the Grey didn't appear to be fazed.

“That was an aggressive bet,” said the alien. “But you’re being bold out of ignorance rather than skill. Your new so-called friends conveniently left out a crucial detail. The game we play is more than a mere diversion.” He leaned in toward Joe. “These chips represent your influence and relevance in the outside world. Win some, and you might stick around a lot longer. Lose it all, and...” the alien

snapped his fingers. "Poof."

"You asked about the cowboy hat earlier. Its previous owner liked to bet aggressively, too. Nice enough chap, if a bit unrefined." The alien pushed a large stack of chips into the center of the table, almost doubling the pot. "Raise."

Joe pursed his lips and fondled the clay chips as he processed the new information.

"Well," he finally said. "Isn't that an interesting tidbit? Thanks very much for omitting that factoid when

you invited me to play.” He looked around the table. The other players wouldn’t meet his gaze. “The fairy has been trying to guess what trope I represent this whole time, and I’ve been mulling it over, too, and I’ve finally figured it out. I’m everyman.”

The players stared at Joe, waiting for an explanation. Even the fairy kept quiet.

“There’s a thin line between a trope and a cliché. I believe all of you have crossed that line, on occasion. I think enough people out there are

tired of that. They're interested in stories about a regular guy. No super powers. No martial arts training. No preconceived notions. A regular Joe who thinks and acts like a person, who can be cautious or reckless, malicious or kind, unpredictable, yet realistic. They want a sort of character who won't fade away, but always remain fresh by reinventing himself.

“Cowboys and Indians make room for little green men, who get replaced by gumshoe investigators...

the tropes come and go. But everyman is always going to be around, for as long as people tell stories, no matter how the cards are dealt.”

Joe shoved his entire remaining stack of chips forward, doubling the pot again. “All in,” he said.

The players reflected on his words in silence. Only Howie the Lovecraftian horror hummed along to the Sinatra tune.

“Fold,” the alien declared after a long pause. He regarded his much-

diminished horde of influence chips, then got up and stomped away from the table in frustration.

Joe smiled and collected his winnings.

“What did you have,” the robot asked.

“I’m sorry,” Joe said. “I don’t remember.”

Joe discarded the two of clubs and the seven of hearts he was holding face down and shuffled them into the deck. He decided that he was going to like it here. He had finally

figured out what trope he represented and was confident it would take the others a while to get up to speed.

Which was just as well, because he could use all the chips he could get out of them. Card sharp was not, on its own, a very powerful trope.



Cory Skerry

Cory Skerry became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Word Is Cruel, My Daughter” in Fantasy Magazine (Aug. 2011), edited by John Joseph Adams. Visit his website at coryskerry.net.

The Word Is Cruel,
My Daughter
by Cory Skerry

First published in Fantasy Magazine
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I still have their eyes in jars, on the
shelf in the kitchen. Every
morning the beads on my

necklace clank together while I fry myself a fishy concoction of duck eggs and marsh tubers. Behind me, light pours in through the large hole in the side of my house and illuminates the staring eyes. They are three colours: blue, brown, and green, and it is these last that accuse me while the others stare cattywampus at the floor and ceiling.

I could shake the jar with the green eyes, so they look elsewhere, but I don't.



When my daughter was one year old, I loved her for her smile. Anything could tempt her to joy—my own smile, the noises of cooking food, the proximity of the black kitten I gifted her upon her arrival.

What a fool I made of myself, contorting my face and making unlady-like sounds. All I needed was another giggle, and the game would go on. She couldn't yet ask questions I couldn't answer, and was delighted by the information I volunteered.

“Kitty,” “No, it’s hot,” and “Boo!” all brought smiles. Even when she disobeyed me, I never struck her. My disappointment was enough to bring her to tears, and she would pour herself dry on my bosom before looking up once again with a hopeful smile. Did I forgive her?

Of course I did.

When my daughter was five, I loved her for her eyes. They were the impossible purplish hue of forget-me-nots. We don’t have them in the salt marsh where I built our tower.

Her eyes told me what she would say before she said it. But sometimes she still surprised me.

I bit my tongue when she asked me why our house had no windows on the bottom floor. She still hadn't conceived of a "door." I knew she would ask some day, but then, on that cool April morning, I wasn't prepared.

"The sea rages in the winter, poppet. We don't have room for her to live with us, do we?"

My daughter giggled and

returned to her innocence, but her question haunted me for years, until she was twelve and I loved her for her hair. It hung lustrous as silk, curled at the ends like pumpkin tendrils, glinted like sunlight caressing the sea.

This is when her questions grew children of their own, broods of what-ifs and how-comes. One day it was, “Why haven’t you any hair, Mother?” She stroked her own golden locks, which now swept her ankles, as she waited for an answer.

I let my fingers stray up over the gnarled mass of scars that capped my skull, most of it numb, some of it still tingling with ruined nerves if I pressed it, as if it yet burned. “It wasn’t as beautiful as yours,” I said. “I don’t need it.”

“Yes, but what did you do with it?” she persisted.

For an instant I regretted having given her a library. I’d selected each book with the intention of keeping her life beautiful. But in choosing only the sweetest tales, I’d

inadvertently given her the idea that the world was a beautiful place, one she perhaps would be permitted to explore. Now was my best chance to make it clear to my daughter that this was not so.

“Someone else wanted my hair,” I lied, “so she carved it from my head while I slept.”

My daughter was horrified, but it didn't stop the questions. “But didn't you awaken?”

“She fed me an herb which forced me to sleep.” My daughter had seen

me take tea for my aches, and accepted this.

And oh, how I bitterly wished I had been unconscious! Sometimes I still wake from nightmares of fire, my robe tangled and spongy with sweat, surprised I'm not held in the flame with the same pitchfork that left the scars across my back. But my daughter only knew of the fake deaths in fairy tales in which the princess is revived by a kiss or justice is dealt to wicked stepmothers. Wicked stepmothers, but not

witches. There were no witches in my daughter's books.

She shook her head. Her sweet blue eyes watered. "But why? Why do something so terrible?"

"We are like the stories in your books," I said. "But other people are not this way; they will value your hair as gold. They'll steal it and leave pain in its place."

To distract her from the books, which she would now doubt and scrutinise, I revealed the fourth floor in the tower.

Until she was eight, my daughter only had the run of the first two floors: the kitchen, scented with bunches of shallots, garlic, and fresh spices; and the room above wherein the gleaming copper tub and waste chute took up one half and the garden and balcony took up the other. At ten, I allowed her into the library on the third floor, a circular room with an abundance of windows.

The fourth floor, the second-to-last, held a variety of musical

instruments. We dusted and shined them. She learned to read a second time. The notes came to her easily, as I'd known they would, and she composed songs in her own spirited voice as often as she played classic tunes on the flute, cello, or piano. The latter I had acquired at great expense, commissioning a man to assemble it inside the room before I stabbed him through the heart and buried his corpse under a driftwood log deep in the marsh. If you sit at the piano and look out the window, you

can see gulls and terns perched on the log as you play.

By the time my daughter was fifteen, I loved her for her talents and wit. She sang melodies on the spot, making gentle fun of household tasks or the elderly cat's occasional accidents on the kitchen flagstones. Neither of us begrudged Utney his infirmity; he'd been a loyal companion.

He was her fateful introduction to death.



Over the course of fifteen years, the estuary had migrated to the north, leaving the southern marsh more shallow. At the height of summer, our tower now had toes of exposed mud. It was during this summer heat that my daughter's heart was broken.

She put down a dish of broth for the cat, but Utney stayed curled by the fire. Her delicate fingers trailed along his neck, but he didn't lift his head to scratch his chin against her

nails.

I held my sobbing daughter, my hands tangled in her golden hair, which now trailed behind her on the floor if she didn't bind it up in loops or braids.

Some children ask for a new pet when the old one passes on, but to my daughter, her cat was a fixture of the world, as irreplaceable as a piece of the tower. If the roof were torn off in a storm, we'd have no roof—likewise, there were no cats in our vegetable garden, no cats come up

on our fishing lines, no cats in the bird traps I hung out of the music room windows.

He was the only cat in the world, and he was dead.

I'd never seen her blue eyes so raw. They shone with an arterial flow of tears, bruised where blood vessels had burst. I was almost afraid the grief would kill her.

I boiled the carcass and made her a necklace of Utney's bones, whispering that his spirit still lurked there and would love her for all her

days. She wore the gift gratefully, but it only quieted her sorrow. In silence, his death still burned her the way my nightmares burned me.

And so I climbed out the window in the night and trudged through four miles of dense sawgrass, marsh bramble, and sucking, salty mud.

There are always unwanted kittens.

* * *

The boy from whom I got the

kitten suggested I choose one of a different colour, in case she wanted to separate the memory of her old pet from her new one. He had eyes like my daughter's but lighter, like cornflowers. He refused to look at me any longer than he must. I chose a ginger kitten, with clever eyes and unruly fur.

When the water and mud became very deep on my return journey, I held the kitten over my head. I treated my daughter's gift as carefully as I would have treated her.

I climbed back into the tower with difficulty, the kitten dangling from my mouth the way its own mother might have carried it. And so, with my clothes full of mud and my mouth full of fur, I spilled into the second floor. I coiled the rope and hid it under the box of brambles I keep for firewood. I scrubbed myself and my clothes. And I said nothing of my journey.

“But where did he come from?” she asked, when I gave her the kitten. One finger tapped the scarred table

just ahead of two determined, orange paws.

“We are like the stories,” I said, smiling. “We are the only good in the world, and the world appreciates it. It provides for us. He came up in my fishing net.”

The next day, my daughter sang again. It was a sad song, an ode to Utney, but beautiful nonetheless. It was the final clue needed by that little blue-eyed bastard to track us. I had made the mistake of mentioning I had a daughter “about your age”

who'd lost her cat—and now, of course, he wanted to rut.

I was drying tomatoes and grapes on the balcony, waving a broom at gulls who dared swoop too close, when my daughter's song stopped mid-note.

“Have you named your kitten?” the horny cur called. The mud I'd tracked through the dry streets of town must have led him to the marsh, his eyes must have led him to the tower, and now his ears had led him to lounge beneath her window.

I imagined him clambering into our world and ripping the lovingly sewn dress from my daughter's nubile form; stabbing her innocence with thrusts of his pimply, adolescent body, tossing her aside, bruised and soaked in seed and sweat and shame. It was why I was there, why I would always be there: so the world couldn't happen to her the way it had happened to me.

To her credit, my daughter didn't speak to the scum—she ran to me, and I met her on the ladder, her

forget-me-nots staring wild.
“Mother, there’s a boy outside!” she
said.

“I heard him,” I said. “He’s after
your hair.”

“He only asked about my kitten
—”

“Quiet! Take Sunshine to the
kitchen and stay there until I come
for you.”

I had never raised my voice to
her, and she began to cry. It couldn’t
be helped; I could soothe her feelings
later, after I’d removed the threat.



“I only wanted to look at her,” he gasped, drooling and coughing as I pulled the knife free. Scarlet life fountained into the morass of human waste that marked the northern face of the tower. This year, the winter storms could feed on his blood with our refuse.

I placed him with the piano builder and the glasiers, but I hated him too much to leave him buried in peace. I hacked apart his body and spread it for the eager gulls. I kept his

eyes, because of his final lie. You'll look at the inside of a cupboard, I thought.

When I'd finished bathing away the traces of my ordeal, I descended to the kitchen. My daughter crouched by the hearth, red-eyed and nervously stroking Sunshine.

At the time I thought she hadn't seen what transpired, what her mother had done.

But sometimes I wonder.



My daughter's sixteenth birthday arrived in the hottest days of summer. When I revealed the attic, the fifth floor of the tower, I expected one of her questions, but not the others.

Windows ringed the room as with the third floor library, every one of them wrought in fantastic rainbows of colour. Light streamed in, rays of blue like her eyes, gold like her hair, orange like her growing kitten. The scenes in the windows would have cost me more than I

could afford if I had paid the glasiers instead of putting them to rest by the driftwood. Fairies and unicorns, noblemen on a fox hunt, a castle haloed in a striking sunset... these I'd commissioned for my daughter. It was a room fit to live a life in.

“Is this—just for me?” she asked. Her eyes shone with the realization of how much I loved her.

“Yes,” I said.

And then she ruined it, tore this precious moment apart by asking me if, for her birthday, she could go out

into the marsh—into the squelching mud, where we fished only in the turbulent winter to avoid ingesting our own refuse, where frogs and mosquitoes filled stagnant pools with their slimy spawn.

Where I buried the unworthy criminals who would have prevented her paradise.

My ultimate gift wasn't enough for her.

The finality of my answer cracked her belief in my love, and I watched trust bleed out of an

innocent heart. I retreated to the kitchen.

Loudly, she wept above in an ocean of coloured light, nestled in folds of her silken hair; quietly, I wept below on a hard stool, clutching a jar containing two withered eyes. I stared at those unseeing lumps of flesh and directed my hate at them. The eyes, and the world.

It thirsted for my daughter, but I wouldn't let it hurt her.



I take some responsibility for leading Cornflower to the tower, but not Dirt. That foul tom came of his own volition.

I could barely hear my daughter singing, from where I cut shallots in the kitchen, and when she stopped I assumed she was napping again. She'd been sullen those last few weeks, curled in the windowseat or reading on her new bed, a hammock strung from the exposed rafters.

I happened to run out of

rosemary. I climbed to the balcony, intending to cut some, but at the sound of a male voice, I froze. He was pleading, but I couldn't hear the words clearly. I edged onto the balcony and crouched while I strained to hear their conversation.

“But don't you want my hair?” she asked, doubtful.

The boy laughed, a muddy jackal baying for her blood, but of course she didn't know. “I've got my own, lass. Whyever should I want more?”

“Well, it's golden, and there's an

awful lot of it,” my daughter said. “Mother says you’d find it valuable.”

She must have shown him; he whistled. “Wowee, miss! I could just about climb up on that!”

“You mustn’t climb up! Mother would be furious.”

“I shall visit again tonight, then, when she sleeps,” the arrogant little cockerel promised.

I stomped up the ladder, my anger echoing through the wooden boards of the third floor, the fourth, and then pounding via my fist into

the trapdoor of the fifth.

“Daughter!” I called.

Some whispers and a short commotion of bare feet later, she pulled the trapdoor open.

“Are you talking to someone?” I asked.

“No,” she quavered. The lie was a fly in cream, piss on snow. Abominable.

I glanced out the window, but the rat had gone. For a moment, I couldn't even breathe, and then I lost my temper. I screamed at her, spit

flecking her terrified face, until I collapsed in sobs.

I didn't beat her. I never beat her. She only tripped on her own hair as she backed away from me, and split her brow upon the corner of a table.

My daughter, my perfect, precious, innocent daughter. I made her promise never to speak with strangers again.

"They lie, poppet," I said, smoothing her hair. Tears coursed down both of our cheeks, hot and salty like the stagnant marsh beyond

our tower walls. “And their sins are contagious. See how you lied to me today? You’ve never lied to me before,” I said, hoping it was true, sure it was true. “And look what’s happened now.”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” she said, and we embraced, my gnarled, fire-scarred claws stroking her golden silk, her soft hands petting my misshapen baldness.

I was waiting there that night when the boy I thought of as Dirt came back. He never saw me. In the

night, I was sure my daughter also was blind to my knife slitting his gullet or scooping out his eyes.

But sometimes, I wonder.

* * *

I didn't find out about the third boy until early autumn, when the birds flew away from the marsh and the brambles lost their leaves. My hearing's not what it was, and I was prone, especially in the cooling weather, to impromptu naps in my chair by the fire.

One grey morning, while my daughter was safely tucked away in her room, I'd taken my collection from the very back of the bottom cupboard. I met their stupid gazes with smug satisfaction. Insipid blue, conniving brown.

But she was mine again. She adored her cat, perhaps not so much as she'd once adored Utney; she played all her instruments, not just the lyre, and her own voice soared in accompaniment; and she helped me with enthusiasm in the kitchen and

garden. Every afternoon we had tea together in the kitchen before she climbed the ladders to the music room while I napped.

I noticed a darkness in her, a hesitance to believe what I said until she'd thought it over, but this I suspected would fade with the removed influence of the village vermin. Her songs, after all, now praised the sun rather than the storm, explored questions of joy and not despair. My favorite was a ballad detailing the playful love of the sleek

otters we sometimes glimpsed from our windows.

Rain crawled in from the bay, soaked my tired garden and sluiced dust off of the window panes. It rejuvenated everything but my badly healed bones. It wasn't enough for the townsmen to thrust me into the fire—I was beaten first and bent over a horse trough for their whims. I've always taken the potent marsh skullcap with my tea to dull the pain brought on by inclement weather, but when I uncorked the jar, I found

it very low.

Suddenly I understood my
daughter's love songs and my
frequent naps.

She made my tea.

* * *

I switched our cups that day.

* * *

I thought the boy would use the
balcony. It was closest to the ground,
and the railings provided an anchor
for rope. I confirmed it by checking

the pumpkin vines where they hung down in a cascade of leafy tendrils. Some of the leaves were bruised.

“I’ll save you,” I said, to my daughter, or the pumpkins, or myself.

A search of her room turned up no rope, so the boy would have it. Sure enough, he tossed a coil up, and I bent over and knotted it for him, my twisted face hidden behind the yellowed tomato plants and pea trellis.

He spewed lies between breaths

as he climbed.

“My father says he’ll help build a cottage for us just north of the farm. It won’t be as beautiful as your room here—”

That part was true, at least.

“—But we’ll be happy. And I asked because you said, but I already knew he’d let you bring Sunshine.”

His face popped up over the stone rail, and I stabbed him in the throat.

Hadn’t the boy I loved once made those same promises? And

hadn't he blamed me when I could save one of his young brothers from the fever but not the other? Hadn't his mother then spit in my eyes and accused me of murder, of witchcraft?

He dribbled blood from the cut, a mere finger's width that leaked as he coughed and swallowed and coughed again. It was nothing then to stomp on the fingers of one hand while I stabbed the other. The lying bastard tumbled down. One of his legs snapped at the wrong angle. Unfortunately the soft peat saved

him from further injury.

Rain stung my scarred head as I dangled over the edge, lowering myself down the rope with even more difficulty than last time. My bones ached, my arms trembled with the effort, but at last my feet sank into the mud.

“Monster,” he rasped, and when he coughed, he sprayed red at me from his wound. “You beat her, cage her. Ellis said.”

Ellis must have been Dirt’s name. That was how this green-eyed turd

had come to stalk my daughter—his rat friend's word.

I howled like an animal, and it crumbled into the words, "I love her!"

"No, I love her. You're a witch," he croaked.

He hit me as I crawled onto him, but I didn't feel it, and his wounds weakened him. I knelt astride his chest, pinning his arms down with my knees.

And this time, with one fist wrapped in his black hair, I cut out

his eyes before I killed him.



I dragged his worthless corpse to the log in the marsh.

I cleaned up and started supper.

And my daughter woke in her chair.

“What time is it?” she asked, stretching.

“It’s nearly supper. You’ve tired yourself playing the flute,” I chided. “Perhaps you should go back to the cello for a few days—you won’t have

to hold it in the air.”

She held her breath as she realised she'd missed her date, that the boy had come calling whilst she slept. Her innocence was only too plain. She supposed she could hide the truth from me.

I thought with great hubris that because she couldn't hide, she also couldn't seek.

For days, my daughter still sang love songs, but they became increasingly forlorn. They were no longer of happily-ever-afters, but of

unrequited love. The October rain drove me to a drowsy state, all aches and naps and mourning for the sunshine, but not my daughter. A song would no sooner begin than she would change her mind; she would sometimes skip supper because it wasn't to her liking.

Finally, her mood roused her to clean the tower. She started in her room, shining every individual window pane, dusting the rafters, sweeping away fallen grit while Sunshine pounced at the broom. She

oiled the instruments of the music room, and categorized and then alphabetized the library. She scrubbed the tub and covered the garden in compost. Then she started in on the kitchen.

While I snored in my chair, she found my collection. I didn't see it, but I can imagine. She would have been repulsed but curious at the blue eyes. She'd never seen a mirror, but I'd told her what colour hers were. The brown ones might have given her a clue. And when she found the

green ones, she woke me with her screams.

“You killed him! You beast, you killed him!”

I started in my chair, my eyes scanning the room for the intruder before I realised my hysterical daughter was shouting at me. She dropped the glass jar, but she was only kneeling, and so it didn't shatter, instead rolling across the flagstones, the eyeballs searching for her as the jar spun.

She scraped her knees scuttling

away from the dusty cupboard, her scrub brush forgotten, her eyes narrowed in revulsion.

“He would have hurt you,” I wheedled, tears rolling down my cheeks, but she would hear no excuse.

“He was right. You are a witch!” My daughter began climbing the rungs to the second floor, and by the time I reached the bottom, her young muscles had already ascended the second ladder.

“I’m not! I’m not!” I screamed.

Faster than I could follow, she was into her room with the trap door slammed shut. Her feet stomped across the floor, in harmony with her desperate, screaming sobs. I felt her pain in my heart, and when glass crashed and tinkled, it somehow felt right.

The trapdoor wouldn't open. I pounded on it for long minutes. Sunshine watched me from behind the piano pedals, wary of this sudden, loud insanity. In a fury, I descended to the kitchen and

snatched the hatchet we used to fit especially large pieces of bramble or driftwood into the kitchen hearth.

The trapdoor was solid, but with relentless chopping, it finally splintered away. I climbed the ladder to see that my daughter had thrown her footstool through the window that depicted a charming castle.

She stared at the hole, her blank, blue eyes swimming red with burst capillaries. Her tongue protruded as dark and swollen as a dead mudskipper, and her soiled dress

fluttered in the breeze from the broken window.

My daughter, my sweet Rapunzel, had thrown her hair over the rafter, then braided it tightly around her neck and jumped off one of the hammock braces.



I made that hole in the side of the tower, but I don't think I'll fill it with a door. I think I'll let the winter storms in. There's plenty of room in here now, even for the sea.

I moved the green-eyed boy's body, to the stand of stunted trees where I long ago buried my daughter's parents. Rapunzel also sleeps with them, though the necklace that clinks while I make my breakfast is made of her bones. Polished with sand and tears, they look magnificent and feel terrible when I wear them with my woven scarf.

It's lustrous as silk, curls at the ends like pumpkin tendrils, and glints like sunlight caressing the sea.



Sinking Among Lilies

by Cory Skerry

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• • • •

I studied the village of Keyward from the packed gravel by the water. Judging by the skulls

roped to the pylons in the estuary, the people here knew how to take care of themselves. But even if there was no fight to be had, perhaps the townsfolk would be interested in the one and only book I had to sell.

I peered at one of the skulls as I passed. It had been there long enough to have lost the lower jaw and most of the teeth; mussels the size of my thumbnails had attached themselves to the sides like bristling purple sideburns.

It was common enough on the

coast to tie pirate corpses out for the gulls, but I couldn't help but remember how easily I might have become a pirate myself all those years ago, suddenly homeless with only my learned violence to serve me. I shuddered and renewed the tactic of Floating Among Lilies, taking a deep breath and transforming the air into a false pink light that only I could see, caressing the edges of my vision as I exhaled. Thus calmed, I guided my horse along the muddy sand that bordered Keyword.

The town hunched above salt-worn rocks, bisected by a harried stream. The tall, narrow buildings were almost disguised by the pines, but even from the bottom of the hill I could see iron bars on the lower-level windows. Wooden bridges fluttered with laundry, some of it sporting faded, rusty stains. Bandages.

The closest building was a stout inn with a pattern of pale streaks marking the walls. Scars from dismantled scaffolding, I realized

when I noticed there were iron grids installed across the upper windows as well.

High above me, a man with a crossbow lazed on a balcony on the second floor. He wasn't rude enough to aim yet, but his eyes were on me: a strange woman, traveling alone, and armed like a brigand.

I waved. He pulled a cord. Perhaps it meant I was friendly; perhaps it was a warning. I thought it best to wait for a greeting.

Expensive defenses like glass,

iron, and crossbows meant that Keyword not only had a supernatural threat but they could afford a trained professional to deal with it. I just needed to convince them they'd rather hire me than await the slow mercy of the Order of the Divine Lady.

“Good day, cousin.”

A man with a dark woolly beard the size of his own head stepped out of the inn, looking down from a wooden terrace that wrapped around the ground floor. Jagged scraps of

iron stuck out of the shadows beneath the walk where he stood. The scars from the scaffolding stopped just under the defenses, and I wondered why they'd even bothered putting grids on the windows when anathema would have to get past those enormous iron teeth.

Clusters of gold coins tipped each of his matted ropes of hair. They only fell past his chin, so he hadn't been wealthy for long. Mine were to my waist, and while I had a

modest amount of coin woven in, I had never had to cut a single one to use it. I wondered what had prompted him to shave his head and start over. That kind of ostentatious prosperity belonged on a tough street lord in a port city, or at least a mercenary like myself—not an innkeeper on the coast.

Aloud, I only said, “Good day to you, cousin. My second name is Bane. I’m looking for a room.”

“My second name’s Browan. If you like the place, you can bring

your horse ‘round back.”

We entered through the inn’s front door, which held seven different locks and a bar, all of them forged of iron. The windows, too, had been built to keep out anathema—the sills were iron, as were the bars that held the glass panes in place. Keyword could definitely afford my services, and moreover, seemed to need them.

Browan passed me a drink when I asked for his best. “No one in these parts understands what best means,”

he said. "Something tells me you've traveled enough to advise whether or not it's worth the word."

My eyes wandered over the room as I swilled the brew over my tongue. Stuffed creatures—mostly shore birds and small predators—perched on the rafters; pelts of marine mammals like seals, otter, and beaver hung above the mantel.

"It's darker than I would have brewed it, but if you're not already sending kegs to Kalperry, consider doing so."

“Thank you. Please pardon me if I’m impolite...” I knew without a doubt what he would ask. His line of sight wasn’t quite meeting my eyes. “Out here, we don’t get many westerners. I’m familiar with the Lady’s Column. But your mark?”

“It’s called the Exit Cross,” I said. Or, to some, the Betrayer’s Cross, but I kept that to myself. The first line represented the pillars that held up the roof of the Lady’s temple. The second intersected it at the center and divided my forehead into

quadrants. “I don’t serve the Lady.”

When Browan rang a bell, an unkempt ghost of a child, all bare feet and shaggy white-blond hair, scurried in and left a tray with thick rye bread, cheese, and an apple. The child darted back out, leaving only an impression of androgyny and fear.

“If not the Lady, who do you serve, cousin? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“The people,” I said. “I put an end to trouble. I’m not cheap, but I’m

well worth the expense.” I took a bite of cheese, a bite of apple, and a bite of bread, and chewed them all at once. One, two, fifteen, swallow. A seer had predicted my end in a storm of fire and blood, which I preferred to the ignominious death of choking at table.

“Why would people hire you, instead of sending for the free aid of the disciples of the Fierce Mother?” He sounded genuinely interested.

“The Fierce Mother is slow in her aid,” I said wryly. “And no one in her

employ has this.”

I unbuckled my cloak and withdrew my line of prizes. I coiled the thin linen rope on the table, letting the trinkets form a clinking spiral of teeth and bones and one withered, resin-encapsulated eye.

He sucked in a breath, and pointed at the last. “This?”

“Sandwiel. Kypteri desert. Nothing from the eastern coast, yet, though I saw bandages hanging on the bridges. Perhaps I’ll take a prize here.”

Browan leaned back and laughed. “Nothing so dramatic as a sandwiel here, I’m afraid. Mackilvie got in a fight with a seal over who owned the fish in his net.”

“And the defenses on the walls?”

“That... that is for something else,” he said. He smiled. “We’ll take care of it, though. We have a book on anathema, and it’s served us well so far.”

“The author?”

He said my name, and I laughed a bittersweet laugh. He clearly didn’t

believe me, so I pulled my sword partly from its sheath that he might see “IMURI BANE” engraved in the hilt.

“You’ll write yourself out of a job,” he said.

“Sadly, never. Knowing their nature doesn’t necessarily render someone capable of defeating them. Have you identified the anathema?”

“If I tell you,” he teased, “you’ll kill it and send us a bill. Think of Keyword as a vacation, cousin.”

He showed me to my room,

which was an attic loft with a bed near the warm stones of the chimney. Perhaps I would write myself out of a job, but I wasn't going to stop using my bounties to have that book copied again, and again, and again.

Anathema was the blanket term the church encouraged, and it was commonly thought that all anathema were the same: supernatural constructs that could take any form they chose, to torment humanity and tempt us or herd us away from faith.

Within the Order of the Fierce Mother, however, we were taught the science of anathema, their anatomy, husbandry, and nature.

I had come to trust in that science. It had saved my life. I'd pushed for posters and books detailing the forms in which anathema could appear, disseminated among the parishes. "Teach them how to classify, discover, and avoid anathema. They should know how to combat these threats," I'd insisted.

High Priest Kellar had smiled at me like a patient father with an unruly child. He responded with the motto of the Order of the Fierce Mother: “It is for us to fight with a sword; they must fight with faith.”

“We can’t protect them all the time. And it takes us time to answer a summons. We must teach fishermen that a selkie’s blood spilled in the sea will certainly raise a storm. They should learn how to extinguish a marshlight, how to lay the fitful dead to rest.”

“Without the fear of the dark, Sister Imuri, what need would they have for us, the bringers of light?” Priest Kellar had asked.

Even thinking about it warmed my guts with a familiar anger. I quickly renewed Floating-Among-Lilies to quell the feeling. When my heart was cool again, I excused myself to tend to my horse. Once done, I exited the dim stable and headed back to the inn, toward the kitchen entry. The lines I had thought were scars from scaffolding

continued up the walls to the doorjamb, but here they skewed and overlapped, the cross-hatching of a mad artist with a knife. Now I could see them for what they were—claw marks.

Something had tried to climb inside, and Browan's mysterious remarks made me suspect it would try again. The scratches weren't deep—it wasn't digging its way through.

It was just writing the promise that it would.

The science of anathema arrayed

itself in my thoughts unbidden. I counted the marks?five in each swipe?layered from multiple nights of scratching. They reached as high as a man, avoiding the iron fittings on the window frames and the kitchen door.

Whatever it was, it was as big as me. Something that size wasn't a fair match for ignorant villagers with nothing but a book written by an ex-priest.

I made certain to bar my door when I retired for the night.



I woke to a woman's scream.

The crescent moon was wasting away on the western horizon and a wet smear of light marked the east. Fog blanketed the sea and shore, fading into wisps among the trees, but from my window, I could see dark shapes slithering through the white miasma, and the shouts of men ricocheted through the ravine.

I renewed Floating-Among-Lilies, which had torn in my sleep, leaving me with dreams that were

sometimes black-and-white and devoid of emotion and sometimes fiery bursts of passion that seemed to break my heart. I was grateful for the awakening.

With the clawmarks as a warning, I'd slept in my clothes. I donned the thin mail shirt and skirt. As I wiggled my helm into place, my thumbs touched the rusted holes on either side where the holy smith had desecrated his own work by tearing out the wings.

Browan's wife stood in front of

the fire, clutching a shapeless bit of cloth in one hand and a knife in the other. In firelight, the hunting trophies looked particularly grisly where they stared down from the walls.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Anathema stole a child from Fenny Smith.” She stared at my scarred armor and the Exit Cross on my forehead. After a moment, she pointed through the window. “Up the south hill, above the smithy.”

I strode out the door into wisps

of mist and crossed the narrow ravine that divided the town. Watching-as-The-Owl, I peered between the houses wedged onto the steep hillside. If there was danger, I wanted to see it first. Only moths stirred around the smith's windows, though the walls below were scored with now-familiar claw marks. Sobs echoed within.

The door hung open, as if they welcomed the return of the terror now that they were awake and armed. Inside, I found a man

weeping as he clung to a woman who seethed in his embrace. In the corner, a bereaved sibling crouched as far from the adults as she could get. She hugged her knees, and her mop of cornsilk hair covered her face.

“I’m sorry,” the man whimpered through his sobs. He was huge, shirtless, and though a dark braid thick as a horse tail hung down his back, not a single hair sprouted on his arms. The smith, I guessed.

The woman’s hard gaze sharpened on me as I entered. “Who

are you?" she spat.

"Imuri Bane," I said.

She shrugged off her husband. The miserly lines around her mouth deepened as she sized me up. "Bane? You deal with anathema, then?"

"For a price."

Only a ghost of grief pained her voice when she asked, "How much is my child's life worth?"

I thought about what I knew, about windows and an abundance of iron, about common townfolk who could afford nice crossbows.

“If the child still lives, eighteen imperial horseheads. If it’s dead when I get there, I’ll bring you the remains for ten. Either way, I’ll kill the anathema and teach you how to stop it next time. Half up-front.”

One of the men staring out the windows turned around. A Lady’s Column inked the back of his right hand, and he wore a black silk sash around his waist. Mine had been orange, the second-brightest color in the Assembly of the Divine Lady.

His sleek black brows rumped,

but his voice was even when he spoke. “You would charge for a service our Fierce Mother provides for free?”

“If you’d prefer to wait for a Disciple, I won’t argue. If the weather holds, they might even get across the mountains before the passes close. Whatever you decide,” I said, turning to address the pinch-faced woman and her wet-faced husband, “please decide soon. If you don’t require my services, I’m going back to my warm bed.”

The sobbing father barked at me. “I have the money, and I’ll pay it. I want Keeley home.” He turned haunted eyes on me. Swollen and red, they reminded me of the sagging, fleshy anemones that slept during the low tide. “You’ll swear it?”

“I swear on the Suffering Sailor’s blisters, the rope that bound him, and the storm that freed him.” It wasn’t the standard oath in Fierwa, but it was serious enough, especially among fishermen.

The parish keeper—he’d have had

a Column on both hands if he was a full priest—said nothing, and though his eyes latched into the Exit Cross on my forehead like a hook in a fish, he remained unnaturally composed.

He was Floating-Among-Lilies. I was still doing it myself, so I didn't even smile when I noticed. The practice of distancing your soul from the moment, packing it up and setting it on an invisible shelf, was the first of the difficult Tactics. My teachers had done everything from pricking my face with skewers to

throwing a dead, dog-chewed child into my lap. Eventually, I had stopped flinching. I wondered if this parish keeper truly had learned Floating-Among-Lilies or if it was a text-book mockery of my own perfection.

“Browan said he’s seen a book of anathema,” I said. “Which did this?”

“Anathema are all the same. They take the form that hurts us most. If such a book existed, I wouldn’t consult it,” the parish keeper said.

I nodded. “I thought you’d refuse

to help a child if it went against doctrine.” It was a calculated barb—at the moment, I didn’t hate him for his simple, pleasant existence or the lack of responsibility on his bony shoulders. I only wanted to be sure I made my bounty.

“You’re—you’re charging them!”

His incredulity knocked his soul off the shelf. Sinking-Among-Lilies, I thought, but I still didn’t smile. I would be smug later, when my emotions weighed so heavily that they forced me to release the Tactic

and feel all the stomach-sickening passion it had kept at bay.

“Tell me exactly what happened, and show me where it occurred,” I said.

The wife took the lead, climbing a leaning wooden ladder with fitted iron braces. The carpentry was so perfect it was like climbing stairs. The tiny mezzanine held one empty bunk, crafted with the same love and skill as the ladder. No blood, but water droplets dappled the floor. I put my finger in one and tasted it.

Salt.

I mentally listed aquatic threats: kelpies, jennies, sharkums, niskies, kraken. The water trail began at the window; when I glanced out, I saw claw scrapes on the sill and, below, something white in the bushes. I dashed outside. It was a ladder, constructed nearly as well as the one I'd just used, but this was of driftwood, bone, and scraps of dark knotted rope that peeled away under my fingernails. Seaweed.

Nothing on my list could do this.

Not a jenny, who haunted freshwater. It could only be niskies if there were many, because it would have taken at least ten to carry this ladder, and besides, they were too small to make the marks on the walls. Whatever it was, it had left the ladder behind.

The parents waited in the doorway, their pale faces like sad twin moons.

“Was the anathema interrupted in its task?” I asked.

The wife shook her head. “No. I

heard a crash outside, and when Browan got up to investigate, I went upstairs. She was gone.”

I went over the ground around the house, but of course their kinfolk had already trampled it into a sea of chopped, muddy boot prints.

I took my soul down and stopped Floating-Among-Lilies, because now I would need my intuition.

It didn't feel much different. I was still working. It wasn't my child, and it wasn't the first, or even the

fiftieth, of the children I'd attempted to recover. I vowed it would not be the twenty-seventh I'd lost. The hill sharpened into a cliff as it neared the water. I squinted in the dark. Watching-As-The-Owl, I spotted long horizontal scrapes in the moss on the vertical rock face.

I tiptoed through the fog, silent in my leather-soled boots as I hugged the cliff. The identity of the anathema gnawed at me. I had narrowed it down to sharkums, which built complex cities of coral

beneath the waves, but I'd never seen a sharkum leave the water for more than a minute or two. It might be only a clever human predator, transferring the suspicion onto anathema.

Or the anathema might be unlisted, something new.

I found a trail of human footprints, adult, not much larger than mine. I lost them over fucus-furred rocks and found them again, skirting a herd of sleeping, log-like seals. The trail stopped at the rising

tide.

Simple, ugly. She'd been put into a boat and floated out into the grey nothing. She'd be sold into slavery, perhaps, or kept for the amusement of a repulsive but unfortunately common paedophile.

I renewed Watching-As-The-Owl and added Unsinging-of-Cats, so if a child cried on the water, or even a paddle sloshed among the waves, I might pick out the wrong notes in the otherwise peaceful symphony of the shore. Nothing.

My eyes fell on the prints one last time as I turned to leave. There were five tiny holes in the sand, each one directly in front of a toe depression. Claws. And the toes were webbed.

Even if the villagers wouldn't tell me what was plaguing them, I would solve their soiled laundry and scarred wood. I would get them a better, uglier skull to display down by the water.



When I returned to the inn, my ears were still sensitive with the Unsinging-of-Cats. Notes of anger filtered out through the inn's stoic cedar walls. As I crept across the bridge, I held my arms out from my sides so the mail wouldn't clink against itself. Even with all my precautions, I could barely hear the conversation, and it ended too soon.

“It's an abomination, Browan. Heresy!” The words rushed into the night air as the parish keeper stormed out the door. Though his face twisted

with hate at the sight of me, he passed me by. I stepped inside and found Browan setting out china for breakfast, which wasn't for a few hours yet.

“Couldn't sleep,” he said.

“Nothing will happen to a child in this house,” I promised. “Does the parish keeper often raise his voice?”

He chuckled, running his thumb along the edge of one hand-painted dish. “He tells me you'll take care of the anathema, on Fenny Smith's gold.”

“I’ll try,” I said. I stared hard at his brown eyes—long-lashed and friendly and covetous of their secrets. I didn’t think he would tell me why he was unusually prosperous at his out-of-the-way inn, and his wife likely wouldn’t either.

But children had less sense about such things.



I spent the day scouring the foggy shore. In this remote stretch of beach, there were plenty of

anathema, but none of them seemed a likely culprit. I saw niskies in the waves. They giggled and blew foam bubbles, and the only corpse they played with today was that of a battered gull. A more stately selkie lounged in seal form on a slab of barnacle-crusting rock? I only knew she wasn't a mere seal because of the fear in her gaze. A real seal was stupid. Fragments of coral structure from a storm-torn sharkum city littered the tideline, but there was no telling how long they had been

knocking about in the depths beyond Keyward, or how far away the city might be.

I returned for the mid-day meal with damp sand-filled woolens and a few cuts from prying oysters off of the rocks. These latter were my excuse for entering the back door.

Browan's child was there, as I suspected. It crouched on a pile of sacks by the woodpile, strangely far from the fire's warmth. I decided it was a boy. His snowy hair reached his shoulders, and when he turned

his eyes on me, I suddenly dropped my hand to the hilt of my sword.

The parish keeper's talk of abominations hadn't been about me, after all. It was expressly forbidden by the Lady to harbor or treat with anathema; the king's penalty was death, and the Lady's penalty was excommunication. The sour little man had known the whole time.

I kicked myself for observing without thinking. Every adult in Keyword had brown hair, and I'd seen two blonde children, unkempt

and poorly clothed despite the town's unexplained prosperity. There had only been one bed in Smith's house? the blonde child slept on a rumpled blanket while the missing Keeley had a custom bed.

I took a step toward the blonde boy. He pressed himself against the wall, his feet kicking dirty burlap between us. His mouth hung open, panting like a dog's, his sea-grey eyes wide with horror at the sight of all that steel. All that iron. I glanced back at the doorframe—the handle

was iron, the doorjamb, the hinges, and there were so many iron nails pounded into it that not even the fiercest of adult selkies could hope to claw through.

Suddenly, the furnishings in the main room became a sinister cruelty instead of a strange display of wealth and prowess. Pelts.

The parish keeper was right. This was an abomination. And not just to break the Lady's edicts but to subjugate any living thing, supernatural or not...

“I won’t hurt you,” I said. My voice was so gentle it surprised me. “How many of you were stolen?”

“That’s none of your mother-damned business, Prodigal.” Browan stood in the doorway to the common room, his bulk not quite obscuring the raw-eyed smith behind him or a lean woman about my age with a cudgel propped on her shoulder. She looked like she might be Browan’s sister.

So the parish keeper had explained what my cross tattoo

meant. I took to my feet slowly. I had my sword, and I had a bag of fist-sized oysters. All the rest of my weapons were in my room.

As I rose, the selkie child flashed three fingers at me. The webbing between them had been sliced away, to make his hand seem more human.

The child shrieked as Browan thrust his iron-tipped club toward it, dragging the metal down the boy's leg. It left a streak of bluish-purple, like a scar exposed to the cold.

Browan turned back to me, his

brow low and his teeth bared.

“Leave town.”

“What made you decide to come after me?” I asked. “Is this how you afford your china, Browan? Robbing those who trust your hospitality?”

“Dandla saw you sneak into the kitchen with a bag of treats for my anathema. Leave now, and the most you’ll lose is your horse.”

I slipped out the door and strode toward the beach. Unsinging-of-Cats would let me know if they followed me, but it was still difficult to control

the urge to glance over my shoulder.



I knew they would attempt to murder me—their apostasy and treason were too great of secrets. They were well aware that I was a trained warrior. They would try to take me in the night.

I walked down the stream toward the sea. The entire village was complicit in this grotesque slavery, not to mention the loss of all the belongings that I had been forced to

abandon in my room, and there were few places left to hide while I strategized.

The islands, nothing more than dark smears in the dissipating fog, beckoned to me from the bay. Let the men and women of Keyward navigate their way out there in the dark, past the selkies they'd wronged. I had Warmth Of The Bear to keep me, at least until morning.

I stole a skiff and two iron-reinforced oars. Fenny Smith's work was fine indeed, and I thought

perhaps I might burn it when I was done with it.

I rowed straight out to the islands, a row of jagged black silhouettes rising out of a bed of fog. A fine mist obscured the struggling sun, and as I approached, I found the rocks less friendly than I'd imagined. Rain soaked my clothes and hair. I despaired of finding a way to climb ashore without cracking my bones in the angry surf before I discovered a slender crescent of sandy beach. It lay submissively at the feet of the

sheer cliffs on the tallest island.

Selkies eat birds, so I wasn't surprised when I stepped out of the boat and found a horde of anathema crawling out of crevices in the rocks.

"Why do you intrude, human?" The anathema's voice was like the rain on my skin, smooth and cool and shiver-inducing.

"My conscience," I said.

The anathema who had spoken first cocked its head to the side. "I wasn't aware the thieves of children had such endowments." Its sibilant

speech crashed against my ears like the tide on the rocks.

“I’ve never stolen a child,” I said. “But tonight, I will steal three.”

The anathema held still, but its gaze slid over my weapons and mail, over the coins dangling in my hair. “If you speak of our children,” it said, narrowing its eyes, “you must mean eleven.”

My teeth ground against one another for a brief moment before I regained control of myself. Browan brazenly wore the coins of a warrior

or a thief king; he mimicked the men who gambled that their deeds were so fierce, so brave, that if you tried to take their hair you'd regret it.

Yet the lying wretches of Keyword had taken every golden disk from the sale of the most helpless of all anathema: a creature enslaved to the holder of its pelt.

"If you go to retrieve our children, we will help. I am Lum."

"I am Imuri. I welcome your help."

"You and I shall swear on fire,"

said Lum. “It burns us both, and the one who breaks their word will suffer its wrath.”

I nodded. They escorted me inside the largest of their caves. It was damp and smelled of salt and stone. I couldn't tell if I was a guest or a prisoner, but the plan we discussed was mostly mine, so perhaps I was a general. A general of anathema, Lady forgive me, but when her followers acted as they did, what were right and wrong but simple words?

In the corner, two human children huddled, terrified of the anathema and not mollified by the woman with a sword who politely sipped cold fish soup while discussing the terms of the children's ransom and the punishment of their parents.

Lum was lanky, with rubbery grayish-white flesh and a mostly human face. I recognized that the skull on the pylon outside Keyword wasn't a man—the sockets were too angular, the breadth of the

cheekbones too wide. If there'd been any teeth left, they would have been pointed.

“You know you cannot stay,” I said. “They’ll find you here, and destroy your home.”

“If I cannot keep mine,” he replied, “then why should they keep theirs?”

His wife held out a wide flat clamshell that I could have used as a dinner plate. A coal smoldered in the center.

After speaking his oath to me,

which I accepted, he placed his palm on the coal and allowed his flesh to sizzle for three seconds before lifting hand. The air reeked of charred fish and charcoal.

My hand hovered over the coal as I spoke mine, and then my toes curled in my boots at the excruciating pain. One. Two. Three. The sickening scent of baked ham scalded my nostrils. I pulled my hand away and allowed his wife to wrap it in cold seaweed.

It was time to return to Keyward.



The parish keeper answered the knock at his window holding an iron knife and a handful of salt. He didn't know the difference between selkies and nippers—Browan and Fenny hadn't shared the book with him.

He was the reason I couldn't stop giving away my books. He needed to know that nippers wouldn't be interested in his salt; the grains were too small, and the shining surfaces would hurt their bulbous eyes. It would be better to distract them with

a handful of black rice. It could be my fault if he died, or worse yet, if he taught a child the wrong way to defend herself.

Just like it was my fault the villagers had the information that led to the slave trade in selkie pups. Guilt stung me as the thought surfaced again, until Floating-Among-Lilies sagged under the weight of my grief. I had included the most benign of anathema so they might be separated from the more dangerous niskies and sharkums, not so they might be

preyed upon.

I was cleaning up my mess, Lady bless me. I would scour it with fire and steel and if I had to, the most dangerous Tactic: Fight-of-the-Crocodile.

“What do you here, Prodigal?” The parish keeper spat the words as if they tasted of his own guilt.

“I found the human children,” I said. “For a small fee and an answer, I’ll tell you where.”

He didn’t ask me how he’d know I was telling the truth. He could

afford to trust me; with such a successful parish, he had plenty of coins to spare. And he cared about those children because at least in that, he was faithful.

“What answer would you have of me?” he demanded.

“Why haven’t you told the Order of this town’s sins?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t see Keyword’s children become orphans because of behavior that can yet be changed. And your criminal insistence on solving problems best

left to members of the Order hasn't helped reinforce their trust in the Lady."

I kept my last thought to myself, that he had sworn to uphold the Lady's dominion over every other concern. Whether he admitted it or not, it wasn't the Lady's dogma he was defending but her spirit. I smiled for him then, a real smile. I told him the truth—the children were tethered where I said—but I added a lemon-sour lie.

"There are twenty-five selkies

waiting there,” I said. The words stung my lips like a catscratch. “I would have saved them myself and demanded a bounty, but your townfolk have stolen my belongings?”

“Do not speak to me of theft,” he snapped. He threw a handful of coins in the dirt and slammed the window shut.

Floating-Among-Lilies, I stepped into the stream and stood still as a sleeping ghost. The parish keeper didn't take long rousing the

townfolk. Lanterns flickered to life in their hands, like a nest of wasps radiant with rage. The lights flowed away over the hill.

Only those who couldn't fight were left behind, with a few able but inexperienced youths to protect them; Watching-As-The-Owl allowed me to see them pass through the darkness. They congregated in the smithy, not the parish. Perhaps they wanted the safety of the iron fittings, or perhaps they knew the Lady wouldn't shelter them after

what they had done.

I sheltered them in her stead. Their safety was part of the bargain I made. The selkies and I were there to punish, not to torture; we planned to burn wood, not people. The prisons in Keyward would be too easy to use again if we didn't destroy them.

I stepped into the inn's kitchen and whispered for the selkie child who Lum called Izhmir. It was a girl, not a boy, and if I had not been Floating-Among-Lilies, I would have been excited to see her again.

She had risked Browan's iron poker to tell me how many of her sestren were captured. Our names were similar.

And she wasn't there.



The smith's house was empty as well; so was the chandler's, where the third selkie child was supposed to be trapped.

I found Lum standing on the bank of the stream. Already, flames flickered on the roofs and walls of

the other houses. He stared down the hill at the forge. Yellow light spilled out of the windows, pale and weak compared to the raging flames of the smith's house just a few yards up the hill.

“They’ve moved the selkie children,” I said.

He was silent for a moment. “Show me where my daughter was.”

He followed me to the inn, and when I opened the door, his nostrils flexed, as if it smelled of feces or sickness. He jumped over the

doorjamb and forced his feet across the iron-nailed boards.

Lum stopped where his daughter had slept, a tiny patch free of poison metal. He shredded the sacks with his claws and began wrapping his feet.

Then he picked up his harpoon, grabbed a piece of firewood in his free hand, and stood between me and the door. Floating-Among-Lilies made this nothing more than a fact. I didn't fear him. I also didn't understand.

"Why?" I asked.

“Our children are hostages in the smithy. The villagers think this makes them safe. No one is safe.”

Things scraped against the outside of the walls like large insects. The selkies were setting kindling around the inn. They would burn it down, with me inside. I was reminded why I wrote in my book that no one was to treat with anathema. This incomprehensible betrayal strained at my Floating-Among-Lilies. Curiosity weighed heavily on the invisible shelf above

my head.

“I helped you.”

“You are the only human who has found our caves. The others stole our children from the shore. You must die, and take your knowledge with you.”

“And you?”

“See me keep my oath. I appreciate your help, and for this betrayal, I will suffer the wrath of fire.”

“I am the only one who can get your children out of that building,” I

said. It wasn't a desperate plea; it was the truth. The townfolk would be back soon. I alone, armored and unafraid of iron, could walk into the smithy and disarm the humans who were guarding them.

"We've already said goodbye to them," Lum said.

They were going to burn the smithy, with everyone's children inside.

Floating-Among-Lilies tore apart, sagging and ripping under the weight of my anger. I choked it back,

but it was a flood torrent, filled with sharp pieces of regret and guilt. While the calm of the lilies slipped from my grasp, the darkness beneath became real.

I drowned my way down to the last of the Tactics, the only one I had never used before.

Fight-of-the-Crocodile couldn't be practiced among friends, because every blow that weakened one combatant poured strength into the other. I would have less time in which to win, and less strength to

flee the flames.



Lum was paths of blood, branches of a cold tree I needed to chop down. He glowed with an aura of oceanic violet; in contrast, a corona of deep orange-amber throbbed around me. Honey-sticky strands of light stretched between us, shifting with our thoughts, our breathing, and the beat of our hearts.

I sallied forward with a series of whirling cuts. Heat stung my throat,

but I could only think of opening those veins and spilling that violet ichor.

He jabbed with his harpoon, a powerful thrust that would have punctured my heart if not for my mail overshirt. The bone barbs slid off the metal links. Some orange light sucked into the purple, where it dissipated like blood in water. I sliced his arm before he could draw back, and light swelled around me as he dribbled blood. He was too fast, though, and the cut was shallow.

Lum asked, "What have you done?"

I didn't answer; he'd find out soon enough.

He advanced, swinging the driftwood to force me away from the door. My sword chopped off splinters. I stumbled back, maddened by the tantalizing purple power just out of my reach.

I had forgotten that Lum fought sharks with his harpoon, under the weight of water. His muscles were fast and perfect in the light resistance

of the air, though his aim was off, and he coughed heavily, his slimy lungs less prepared than mine for the hot smoke.

I kicked his driftwood and swung my sword, slicing into his arm again, but even though it was a deeper cut, the cost was a harpoon stab in my leg. The aura of his life swelled with my injury. I hobbled backward, my back bumping against the swinging door to the common room.

If they were burning the inn the

way I taught them, the roof was already ablaze. Lum smashed the lantern hanging above the big table, and drops of flaming oil spattered across the furniture and floor. I had taught them this as well, how to quicken the fire with oil.

All the trophies above the fire remained but one: Izhmir's pelt. The time I caught Browan's wife by the fire with the limp thing in her hand, she must have been threatening the child with it. If Izhmir's relatives were near, attempting vengeance,

the pelt was the only way to control anathema who might otherwise risk a leap to freedom, iron doorjamb or no.

That same twisted scene was probably happening at that very moment, in the confines of the smithy. Three little pelts. Three terrified selkies.

I stabbed my fury toward Lum, connected, pulled free. Gutblood dribbled down the pale line around his waist where he often wore his pelt. He hadn't brought it to the fight,

of course—if he was captured, it was better to die than become a slave, like his daughter.

Their nature. It was what I preached, and I knew their weaknesses as well as their strengths. My weakness was the need for my shield. When it was strapped to my arm, it was a part of me. But the townspeople had driven me off without it.

My mooning got me a harpoon punched into my other leg. Now I had two limps. My orange light

shrank down toward me; Lum's purple glow expanded. Gritting my teeth against the oozing ache of each step, I stumbled back toward the stairs.

Let him keep me in the house, then. If Browan hadn't pawed through it yet, I might have an armory upstairs, in the attic. I hoped the smoldering roof would hold out long enough for me to find it.

Lum, afraid I'd climb out the window, followed. His coughs slowed him. The smoke was thicker

in the stairway. It stung our eyes.

I could no longer kick and still hold my balance, but as I backed up the stairs, I managed to hook the driftwood with my sword hilt and knock it loose. It thumped down to the ground floor, leaving a flickering shadow that pointed toward us. The flames from the spilled lamp grew, a garden of threatening light.

When I reached the attic room, I slammed the door behind me and locked it. It was only wood, no iron but the handle and hinges, so he

threw himself into it over and over. Thump, thump. Purple glow flared along this side of the door and then melted away each time. My orange light wouldn't glow through the door; there wasn't enough left.

Lum would break the wood but perhaps not before the burning roof collapsed on us. I could win that way, if nothing else. My armor heated up, sweat tickled my skin, and the smoke was suffocating me. I rushed for the window like he expected, to breathe fresh air one last

time, even if I couldn't escape.

What I saw stopped me.

They hadn't burnt the bridges yet. They were standing on them, watching this building, watching their leader's last brave act. Waiting.

I would choke to death on smoke or be roasted by flames or get stabbed in the back, but the last thing I did would save the smithy and everyone in it. I knew the nature of fire. I knew the nature of the anathema.

I held my breath and lunged for

my things, in the corner where I'd left them. They'd been pawed through, but my crossbow was still in my saddlebags, and so was the cylindrical leather case where I kept fifteen steel quarrels.

Coughing, squinting, I elbowed out the glass panes and yanked the iron cross out of the window. It was hot enough to leave a scar on my palm to match the ink on my forehead. I threw it down and grasped the crossbow.

This was what I was trained for. I

didn't have the strength, I thought, as I loaded and loosed quarrel after quarrel. The iron soared through the night like hunting hawks, each finding the hearts and guts of the selkies on the bridges. Only Lum's life would leak into mine, so my orange light grew thin as I watched the selkies fall and bleed. Their thick blood flowed slowly, too slowly. It might never make it to the water.

Behind me, the door crashed open. I turned in time to knock Lum's harpoon aside with the

crossbow. He drew back, coughing. The air was better on the floor, where I lay, but he didn't know this. He thought he was winning if he was still standing. His purple was smaller, but my orange was barely visible.

If I didn't get out then, I never would.

I couldn't stand?my right leg cramped when I tried?but I could swing my sword. Lum was blinded by smoke, jabbing toward me but missing. I swiped as if chopping wood with an axe. When I hit his leg,

a long slab of meat peeled off and flopped down. Blood poured out.

The branching tree inside his body crumpled as he fell to the floor; the purple fluid drained him to a dry husk. And the glow moved into mine, feeding the orange light. It flared, I think, but maybe that was the fire. The flames were orange like my aura. Like the silk sash I had worn long ago. The flames were mine, too.

I lay beside Lum, my mail shirt scalding my skin where it touched,

but I couldn't do anything but cough. I heard howls ripping through the world, through the flames, but I didn't know if they were Lum's, or the other selkies, or the villagers, or wolves who had smelled cooked meat and come to feast. There was a rumbling I thought might be Lum coughing, but I couldn't force my eyes open anymore.

In the midst of the choking inferno, just before I passed out, I felt something cold and wet. I knew it couldn't be real, but I was no longer

Floating-Among-Lilies, so I hoped.

* * *

When I faded back, the world was different. I coughed, but instead of smoke, I inhaled air like that of the mountain passes: crisp, fresh. It stank of charred thatch and wet pine needles. Rain stung my face, driven by a howling wind, and I wondered if I had fallen out the window after all.

But the floor beneath my cheek was wood, and warm, and when I

cracked my eyes, I saw the broken door, burning just beyond Lum's motionless body. Even as I watched, the wind forced the door off its hinges. It splashed into a puddle in the center of the floor, extinguishing the flames. The roof had been burned by fire and torn away by wind.

In my book, it said you must not spill the blood of a selkie in salt water, for it would cause a storm. I had spilled several pints, all carried to the sea by the stream.

Most of the town was dark. Watching-As-The-Owl, I saw that even with the downpour, it was still ruined. Blackened beams stabbed at the sky, supporting webs of charred timber. I glanced down toward the smithy. The roof was dark; there were a few tiny flames struggling on the outside, but the storm had quenched the worst of it.

I gathered my belongings and climbed down the side of the building. From the back porch, I jumped onto the stable roof, which

wasn't burned at all. My horse whinnied—he hated the scent of the fire and the uncomfortable force of the storm, but he was unharmed.

I put my hood up, but it did no good. The wind was a wild thing, intent on badgering me in whatever way it could. It slapped my face with the coins in my hair, flung water into my ears and even up my nose. Without Watching-As-The-Owl, I wouldn't have been able to see my way to the smithy.

I carried a bar for prying the lids

off of coffins, and I used it to crack the door off of the smithy. Rain poured in through the roof in places, where the fire had burned through before the storm.

“The three blonde children are coming with me, back to the sea,” I said. “Anyone who tries to stop them will also go into the sea.”

The selkie children were bound with their hands behind their backs. They looked sickly amidst all the iron. Izhmir didn't smile, but when she looked at me, her grey eyes were

silver with hope.

One of the young men who was supposed to be guarding the prisoners cut them free. Browan's wife looked as if she might try to throw the seal pelt in the fire, but the parish keeper hissed at her, and she grudgingly handed it to Izhmir. When the other children had their pelts, I shepherded them down to the water, and I told them the truth.

Two of them shed their clothes, tugged their skins on, and disappeared into the maelstrom.

Izhmir watched them first, and then she tore off her human clothes. I was shivering under the sky's onslaught, but she tied her pelt around her waist as if it was only a spring breeze and the rain was the heat of the sun.

“I want to see your book,” she said.

I wondered if selkies age the same as we do. Was she older than she seemed? I thought on it for a moment, and then I reached in my jacket. If she ruined the book, I could make another. I knew it well. And I

would deserve it, after my volume had caused the slavery and destruction of so many of her people.

She picked through the pages from the back of the book to the front, using her index finger instead of her thumb the way a human would. Her hands still moved as if she had webbing instead of scars.

The storm shrieked around us while she perused the book. I realized I didn't even know if she could read, or if she was amazed by the pictures, or if she could even see in the

darkness. The few flashes of lightning couldn't be enough.

Suddenly, she recited from the book, her voice clear and sharp as a ship's bell. "...and if they find their pelt, they will return to the sea. Because of this weakness, selkies avoid humans when possible. They will not attack unless directly provoked, such as by sealers with harpoons. It is best to remain uninvolved."

She turned to stare at me, and we studied each other's faces in the blue

darkness. The hollows around her eyes were black, her mouth expressionless. My own mouth fought me, trying to cry instead of speak.

I managed to say, "I'm sorry."

Izhmir dropped the book in the sand. She draped the pelt over her head like a hood, and her body seemed to flow upward even as the pelt lowered toward the ground. By the time her round belly hit the sand beside the book, she was a seal. An orphaned seal, because of me. She

dove into the surf.

I clumsily mounted my poor wet horse. I had one chance to escape the wrath of Keyward, and it was in the arms of this equally furious storm.

For hours, the horse and I trudged back the way we came, inland, away from the force of the gale. Finally, I spied a fallen tree near the road. It had blown over in another storm, long ago, and we sheltered behind the giant fan of its gnarled roots.

When I unrolled the old sailcloth

I used as a tent, I saw Izhmir crouched against the edge of the roots, her head tipped back and her mouth open. Rain beaded on her lips and splashed directly onto her eyes, but she didn't blink it away.

She had followed me through miles of shrieking wind and stinging rain. I was crippled by the cold as much as my wounds. If it was revenge she sought, she could have it.

"I thought you went into the water," I said. With the webs cut

from her fingers and her hair over her ears, only another Bane could recognize she wasn't human.

“I did. Then I came back out.”

She crawled over and peered at the wounds on my thighs. They glared up, like two wet red eyes. My body accused me of poor judgment. The wounds said I should have floated out of Keyword on a bed of lilies, not stayed to defend children who weren't mine, weren't even human.

One of those children turned her

large, pale eyes up to me.

“Why did you go into the smithy.” It wasn’t a question, the way she said it. That was fitting, because what I had to say wasn’t an answer.

“It’s been a long time since I stopped floating above everything. I’d forgotten what it’s like to swim along with everyone else, to feel currents instead of merely watching them.”

“You find pearls only when you sink,” Izhmir offered.

I fingered my line of prizes where

it poked against my wet skin, jewelry created of blood and bone. How many times had I passed the opportunity to add something more beautiful to my memories?

“Yes,” I said. “I could do with more of those.”



Grant Stone

Grant Stone became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Young Love on the Run from the Federal Alien Administration New Mexico Division (1984)” in Strange Horizons (May 2011), edited by Niall Harrison. Visit his website at d1sc0r0b0t.blogspot.com.

Young Love on the
Run from the Federal
Alien Administration
New Mexico Division
(1984)
by Grant Stone

First published in Strange Horizons
(May 2011), edited by Niall Harrison



Happy, Texas

The door's already half open, so he can just nudge it with his foot and go on holding her. Roland steps over the threshold. Couple more steps, then he lays her down on the bed.

“Hey there, Mr. Mayfield.”

“Hey there, Mrs. Mayfield.”

She reaches out a slender arm the same pale blue as his tux and pulls him down into a kiss.

“Oh!” He jumps up. “I gotta call

them!”

She goes out looking for something to eat. Roland twirls the phone cord around his finger and listens to the ring. He looks around the room. It's pretty shitty. Besides the bed there's a TV fixed to the ceiling, a fridge he can hear humming even from over here and a chair the same chocolate brown as the carpet. The phone he is calling is beige and sits on a small table next to the stairs in a house in a tree-lined street in Burbank. He imagines his

mother putting down the duster and hurrying downstairs like he's seen her do a million times before. His dad won't be back from work yet.

"Hello?" Her voice is nearly drowned under crackles on the line. It sounds to Roland like applause, as if she were being filmed in front of a live studio audience.

"Mom, it's me. I'm married!"

Static.

"Mom?"

"I'm here. It's—" A sniff, then, "Why—what a surprise! But who—"

“I know Mom. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before—it was—oh! But you gotta meet her! We’re on our way to see you now!”

She comes through the door then, backwards, arms full, balancing two plates of burgers and fries. Two beers, glistening cold.

“Mom, I gotta go, I’ll—”

“Roland, what’s her name?”

He tells her. As he does, he knows he’s done this all wrong.

“That’s an unusual name. Is she from Europe?”

“Something like that.”

More silence. Then, “I love you, Roland. We’ll see you soon, OK?”

* * *

“Go on.”

“No,” he says, but he doesn’t really mean it.

They’re lying in bed. She waves the last cold bottle in front of his eyes like a bell. “You want this?”

He sighs. “OK. So what do I need to do, just—”

She puts a hand on his cheek and

sees through his eyes.

You hadn't planned on getting married.

You're driving west on I40, keeping a nervous eye on the gas. Your dad wired the money when you said you wanted to drive home instead of flying and the Datsun had seemed like a good idea back in Boston, but out here, somewhere between Amarillo and Albuquerque, the sun beating on the roof—

She appears out of the heat haze, pulling a suitcase with tiny wheels

through the dirt at the side of the road. She hears you coming and puts up her thumb. She's wearing a red checked shirt, tied high on her blue midriff. Her skin is the color of the sky and the realization makes you nearly crash the car right there.

You pull over, push your sunglasses up into your hair, trying to play it cool.

"I was cool."

"No you weren't."

"Hey," you say, and she smiles. Looking at her is like looking at the

moon. Suddenly your mouth is too dry to speak.

“So where you going?” she says.

“West. Um,” you swallow. “California.” Your hands are slick on the steering wheel. “Um. Need a ride?”

She pulls her hand away. “How was that?”

His head tingles a little. It’s not an unpleasant sensation. “How do you—”

She shrugs and hands over the beer. “We all can. It’s just what we

do.”

“Does it work the other way?”

She rolls over, straddles him, puts her palm on his chest and he gasps.

The light divides as it passes through the protection field so you sit, cross-legged, in a rainbow. The craft is an oval six feet wide and twelve long. The bow is fringed with raised nodes and from here it looks like you're resting in an upturned palm.

Beyond the protection field is

space, where they play, all around you, above and below, your brothers and sisters. It's not a formation; more of a chaotic swarm as they dart and zig-zag across your field of vision. Ten million of them in this cloud and you know them all by name.

“This is you?”

She shakes her head. “No. My mother gave it to me.”

“So you've never been—”

“Up? Out? No.” She pulls on the beer. “I'm a natural-born American,

same as you.”

He can't stop laughing.

“What?”

“God bless America,” he says,
between stifled giggles.

She pours the rest of the beer out
on his chest and he still can't stop
laughing.

* * *

Show Low, Arizona

“What can I getcha, hon?”

She flicks the menu with a blue

finger. "Maple syrup."

The waitress pops her gum and squints through the morning sun, bored. "Yeah, but on what? Pancakes? Waffles?"

"Just the maple syrup."

"Hashbrowns," Roland says.

"And pancakes."

She's wearing denim pedal pushers and a man's leather jacket over a plain white tee. A black mink pillbox hat, blonde wig, sunglasses. She's fooling nobody. Two blond kids are climbing all over their seats,

pointing and shouting, while their mom and dad deliberately stare at the table.

She swipes her finger across the plate to collect the last of the syrup. “We’re being followed. Two guys over there. Don’t look!”

He looks. Two men in grey suits, menus held in front of their faces, looking just as incongruous as the blue-skinned girl in the pillbox hat.

“What do we do?”

She touches his hand. Stay cool, says her voice in his head. She waves

the waitress over. “Ma’am, where’s the bathroom?”

Roland carefully arranges a spoon on the table so he can see the men without turning around. There’s some movement when she gets up—the taller man elongates in the reflection, but then sits down again. Roland looks out the window, trying to act calm. There’s a grey sedan in the corner of the parking lot and now that he looks at it, he realizes he’s seen it before. It’s been following them since at least US-60.

She slides back into the booth five minutes later. “OK. Just follow my lead.” She calls the waitress over and asks for the check, smiles and tilts her head to the side. “Whatever you do, don’t look at them,” she whispers and then they’re up and walking. Roland stares at his shoes. The tiles on the floor remind him of the first Elvis Costello album.

He hears the bell above the door when they’re halfway across the parking lot but he’s still cool, doesn’t turn around, grabs the keys out of his

jacket pocket. The ignition turns over first time and he's ready to floor it, but she holds up a hand. "Wait." She flips the cassette over and presses fast forward.

"Are you kidding? We gotta get away!"

She pulls a couple of spark plugs from her pocket and puts them in his lap. "We've got time. Ah—here it is."

Tears For Fears. "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." She turns it up. The drums come in and the Datsun's tires kick up dirt. The guys

in the grey suits finally figure out why the car won't turn over and start running, but it's too late. They're left at the entrance to the parking lot, coughing up dust. She hoots and leans out the window. The wind grabs her hat and whips it behind them before she can catch it. It lies on the road like a stranded turtle.

* * *

“We can't run forever. Keep going and we'll get to California. Then what?”

They are lying on the hood of the Datsun staring up at the stars.

“We keep going.”

He snorts. “What? When we get to the end of the road we just drive off the Santa Monica pier?”

She passes him the bottle of Thunderbird and points a long blue finger at the center line of the blacktop. Then she points straight up.

After that she starts trashing televisions.

Wickenburg, Arizona

RCAs and Zeniths hit the floor. Magnavoxes and Mitsubishis spill across carpets like eviscerated corpses. She traces her fingers through television guts like an augur, picking out this capacitor, that resistor, leaving the rest, a trail of glass and plastic carcasses for the motel cleaning staff to find.

Roland goes to Radio Shack and buys a soldering iron, screwdrivers,

some plastic boxes to keep track of all the liberated components that are rolling around the back of the car.

She sits cross-legged in the middle of the floor, soldering components to a breadboard. A thin line of smoke rises, but it's not enough to trouble the smoke detector, assuming the room has one.

The air conditioning's busted. She pushes up the red and white bandanna that's holding her hair out of her face and rolls a Budweiser

across her forehead. He lies on the bed and watches.

It's an emergency beacon, crammed into the husk of a Panasonic cassette player. Once it's finished, she'll flip the switches duct-taped on the side and press the play button. Every now and then she turns it on and watches numbers scroll across the screen ripped from a Casio digital watch, scowls, turns it off again.

When she gets it right, it will signal the mothership. If there's a

mothership. She thinks there's a mothership, but the smile she gives him, trembling slightly at the corners, shows she's not completely sure.

"What was it like?" he asks. "In the facility?"

She doesn't say anything for a long time.

* * *

"Cold," she says.

They're sitting outside the Wickenburg Tastee-Freez. Gotta be

eighty in the shade. Her voice trembles.

“They keep it cold because it makes us slow. Messes up the communication too, but it’s how they make sure we don’t run.”

He looks out across the street, at the flag hanging limp on its pole, not sure what to say.

“When they need one of us, they come in to the habitat in these suits with thick gloves and helmets. They pick up whoever’s closest to be thawed.”

She strokes his arm and puts a picture in his head.

A suit that thick, you could probably walk across the sea floor in it. The guy steps over a bunch of blue-skinned kids, huddled together in a pile. They smile and scatter. They're not afraid of him.

There must be maybe thirty, forty of them, lying on cots or standing in small groups. It's a big room, amazingly tidy. The matte white paint that covers the floor, the walls, ceiling.

The government man reaches out to you and pulls you to the door. Nobody even bothers to look up.

Soon as you're out in the hallway you can feel the warmth and your mind reaches out. There's not a lot of color out here, but there's always some: a bright yellow sheet of paper, attached to a brown cork noticeboard with a red pin; blue bubbles in the water cooler; the pewter of the wastepaper basket; yellow and orange and brown of a Reece's Pieces wrapper. By the time

you round the corner and another government man grabs your other arm, you feel like you can tear the whole building down.

The sense room is on the second floor, right in the center of the building. It's built around a glass enclosure, top open to a sky that's such a deep blue you gasp. The sun is sweet on your skin as you step into the sense cage and a government man closes the door behind you.

The men in suits go to the very back of the room, like that's gonna

stop you reading them. The one on the left is cheating on his wife: you sneer at him as you pull the images from him like it's nothing. The one on the right is smarter. He's wearing a Walkman under the helmet, blasting Christopher Cross. If you really cared you could get past it.

The door opens and the agent comes in, Williams. Not wearing a suit because A: there's no way in hell he'd be caught in something so lacking in style and B: he doesn't give a shit if you can see into his head. He

wants you to see.

Williams opens the door to the sense cage. "How ya doin?" he says as he hands over a manila folder. His fingers brush yours as he hands the folder over and as he does you get a flash of a burned corpse lying in a Cambodian field.

Thinks he's a bad-ass and maybe he is, but thing is he can't touch your goodtime. Because you're fully thawed now, and you could give a shit about this Company asshole when you can feel your

consciousness rising, already a mile above Roswell.

You reach your warm mind down to your brothers and sisters in the cold room, feel them stir just a little. They reach back with their thin, cold tendrils of being. Soon, you hope, you'll get the chance and run, smuggling out as many of them as you can carry in your mind. But not today.

You open the folder. Blurry black and white photos of a guy getting out of a car. The photo

doesn't show any more of the car than the top. "Lada sedan, registration number 5559 MH" you say, and Williams checks his cross reference sheet, nods and presses record. The twin wheels of the tape start spinning and you sit back in your chair and start talking Russian.

It's a good few minutes later before Roland realizes she's turned off the image and he's just staring across the road. He doesn't say anything for a long time.

Back in the motel room, she

takes another look at the circuit.

“We gotta go back,” she says.

* * *

Albuquerque, New Mexico

“That’s one of them?”

She nods.

He squints against the sun at a small black box on the top of the lamppost. There’s another one, every two or three posts, all the way up the street.

“Can’t we get one from

somewhere less public? You said they're all over the state."

She shakes her head. "The boxes talk to each other. It might be easier to take one if it's sitting all by itself further out from the facility, but it will leave a bigger hole in the mesh. They'd spot it straight away. This one's so close to those others they might not notice."

It's 9:30 in the morning. The street isn't exactly bustling with traffic, but there's no way he'll be able to get up there and pull it off without

being seen.

He just stands there, rubbing his hands together.

“Come on, you pussy,” she says, and a couple of seconds later he’s got his legs wrapped around the pole, hanging on with one hand and smacking the black box with the tire iron from the Datsun. He can hear something now that he’s this close to it, a static hiss like the end of a tape. He keeps on hitting it and every time he does it seems like the sound travels all the way down the street.

People are looking now, one guy in particular makes his heart freeze. He looks again. The guy is wearing a grey suit, but it's not one of those grey suits. Roland keeps beating on the box.

“Come on,” she calls from the sidewalk.

One final whack and the box comes loose. It tumbles to the ground, trailing a couple of wires and crumbs of plastic. She catches it, but he trips when he drops down, crashes into her. The box flies from

her hands and smashes on the street, loses a few more pieces.

“Hey,” someone shouts from behind him, some concerned citizen. She picks up the box and runs the other way—the car is just around the corner. He leaves the tire iron lying on the sidewalk and hobbles after her.

She’s jimmied the box open with a screwdriver before they’ve gone a couple of blocks. Roland steals a glance. The circuitry is like nothing he’s ever seen before. Rows and rows

of black ICs, far smaller than a Z80 or 6502. “That’s the transmitter,” she says, pointing to something bronze and lotus-shaped.

The sun goes down. She’s still working on the box when he falls asleep. Her sobbing wakes him around three, but when he asks what’s wrong she doesn’t say a thing. Then he notices she’s kicked the pieces of the box across the floor.

* * *

“You don’t really love me. You

just love the idea of me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes it is. Too many hours lying in front of the television watching Star Trek when you were ten.”

“That’s not—” He starts again, puts his hand on her shoulder. “Look at me. You can read my memories, sure. But not my feelings. I love you. I will never leave you.”

“Yes you will.”

Their first argument. He’ll remember it, years later, while he’s sitting on the bleachers, watching his

nephew's little league game. Only then will he realize she started it deliberately, wanting to turn him against her, just a little. To try and make it easier, somehow, when the men in the grey sedan caught up with them. He'll sit there, staring into space while his nephew makes his first home run, and nearly miss the whole thing. His brother will elbow him in the ribs. He'll snap back just in time to see the boy slide in to home.

The men in grey suits come the next day.

8 a.m. Air conditioning busted in this room as well, so the window has been open all night.

The men in grey cut the engine before they pull in and let the car roll to a stop in the middle of the forecourt. But the squeak of tires wakes him up. When the car door opens she sits straight up in bed. A couple of seconds later she runs for the bathroom, but it's already too

late.

An agent kicks in the door with a grey vinyl zip-up shoe, lobbs a black ball on the bed. Roland dives away thinking tear gas, but nothing comes out except a high-pitched whine.

Then his face is pressed down into the carpet and he's sucking in years of dust and cigarette ash and there's an agent shouting in his ear, only he can't hear anything. He can feel the agent's breath on his throat and the smell of coffee mixes in with the carpet filth, but there's no sound.

He twists his head and sees an agent emerge from the bathroom, holding her in his arms. She's not moving.

Roland struggles to get to his feet, nearly does, even though the agent's knee is crushed into his spine. He lashes out and up. He can't see, but he can feel his knuckles connect with something. He can't bring his arm back down—the agent grabs his wrist gives him some kind of Jujitsu twist and suddenly Roland is lying on his back. There's gotta be twenty

agents in the room now, all wearing grey. The glasses of the agent straddling him are hanging askew, one lens missing. Lucky punch, Roland thinks, then the agent gives him one of his own and—



Roswell, New Mexico

“Can I see her?”

“We’ve been through this.”

The man on the other side of the table is tall and heavily tanned. His

sunglasses are mirrored, just like the wall to Roland's left. A badge is pinned to his shirt giving his name, Jergensen. "FAA" is printed discreetly below that, along with a silhouette of an alien head: the distended forehead, tapered chin and empty black eyes. The lie they want the public to swallow.

Roland's jaw, his whole head actually, is throbbing. They gave him some Excedrin a while back. It's not working.

"Can I see her?"

The agent takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. “The United States Government does not recognize the existence of extraterrestrials nor their presence on Earth.”

“She’s my wife, dammit!”

“No. She’s not.”

Roland clenches his fist and looks towards the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the right wall.

The other agent is older. His name badge says Owens, no alien head on this one. He rubs his hands

through his salt-and-pepper crewcut. "Look son, I'm not gonna bullshit ya. I'd like you help you. Really, I would. But it's the rules, ya know?" He shrugs and gives him the old waddayagonnado grin and Roland wonders if he understands somehow what it's like to be in love with a woman who holds her mother's memories of flying between the stars in a craft shaped like an upturned palm, who can read his thoughts and sings along with Tears for Fears and leaves a trail of disemboweled

televisions the length of New Mexico.

And just like that, it's all too much. "No," he says, trembling, "I don't know. You have no right to keep—" He pounds his fist bam! On the metal table. "You have no right to keep them locked up like that!"

He stands up, kicking the chair across the linoleum.

"Sit down, Mr. Mayfield."

He's pacing the room, next to the mirror. From this close, he can see shadowy people on the other side of

the glass, and he slams into it with his shoulder.

Owens stands. "Mr. Mayfield, you need to calm down now."

If this was a movie he'd be strong and cool and powerful. But he's crying. His nose is running and he can't stop shaking.

"You keep them like animals!" He nearly trips over the chair and kicks it away into the wall.

"That's not true."

And suddenly the room's full of agents. Front of the pack is a guy

with butterfly stitches under his right eye, the guy he hit back in the motel. Roland recognizes him from the vision she gave him in Wickenburg, flinches at the sense-memory of burned flesh. Williams smiles slowly like a leopard. "What's her name, Mr. Mayfield?"

"What?"

"Your wife." He spits the words out. "What is her name?"

Roland opens his mouth, stops. He can't remember.

"Nasty little trick that, putting

words in your head. Did she ever tell you about the shared mind, Mr. Mayfield? The dynamic transfer of consciousness? We've got a mesh thrown over them like a net around here, but soon as you two got out of range, the blues started collapsing. Still got three in comas now. You just took America's most important strategic asset for a joyride."

Roland crumples in the corner and covers his face with his hands.



They throw him in a holding cell where, somehow, he falls asleep.

When he wakes up his dad is standing in the doorway, wearing a grey suit and a visitors badge.

“Come on son. Time to go.”

Whole way out of the facility his dad grips his arm. People wave at his Dad as they go. “Hey, Bill!” someone calls out as they cross the cafeteria and his dad winces, pushes him down onto the nearest spare seat. “Don’t you move a fucking muscle” he whispers into Roland’s ear, and

it's the first time he's ever heard his father swear. Dad walks over to a man with a grey-sided army issue crewcut.

Roland picks up fragments:

“Don't know how you do things over at Lockheed, but—”

“I swear, he had no idea.”

“Crissakes, Bill, what if the Russians had got hold of it? You know how close the DCI came to shutting the whole thing down last year? We can't afford this kind of shit!”

Roland gets it then. If the DCI shut down the facility, what are they going to do with the aliens? She never had a chance. The white room is as good as it gets.

* * *

Dad drives the rental car from Roswell to Albuquerque. They reach the motel and Dad picks up Roland's stuff from the desk, the car keys for the Datsun.

They follow the I40 for the rest of the day and into the night. Roland

jerks awake as they pull into a motel at 2 a.m.

Dad pulls a pillow from the bed and ambles over to the couch. "You take the bed," he says, the first thing he's said since Roswell.

"I'm sorry," Roland says, no more than a whisper.

"Get some sleep." Dad says and turns off the light.

A few minutes after that he hears his dad pick up the phone. "I've got him," he says, then "yeah." He can hear his mother still talking as Dad

hangs up the phone. The room is completely dark except for the floating orange star that is the end of Dad's cigarette.

He's too tired to cry.

* * *

Burbank, California

His mother is running towards him before he's even got the seatbelt off, yanks him out of the car and wraps him in an embrace like a prizefighter.

“I’m sorry,” he gasps, between great heaving sobs like the end of the world. “I’m sorry.”

He lifts his head from her shoulder and looks down the tree-lined street. He can hear shouts from a few houses away—the Dorset twins, playing under the sprinkler. There’s a Cessna buzzing above, pulling a Coke banner. The sky is the color of cigarette smoke. He’s home.

* * *

His mother puts her arms around

him and takes him into their house and when he looks up twenty years have passed.

He goes back to college but drops out six months later; wanders aimless, falling in and out of work and relationships. If he'd stayed in college he could have been working at Apple or Microsoft, but he ends up at Radio Shack, walking between shelves of resistors and capacitors and batteries. He gets married again—his parents, divorced now, sit smiling in the front row.

There are no children. The marriage falls apart after ten years in the Denny's on Alameda, between the Surf 'n' Turf and the Ice Cream Sundae. She takes the keys to the car and goes and part of him knows he should follow, but he sits as the late afternoon sun sparkles the dust motes and watches her go.

Twenty years pass and nothing changes.

* * *

Roland puts the beer down and

takes another look at the cassette deck splayed on the workbench. Smoke rises from the soldering iron like the cigarettes that were the death of his father. He pokes it at a fat gob of solder and works a resistor out of its grip, trying yet another connection, another configuration. The innards of the black box are in the tackle box at his side, each piece labeled. He's learned enough over the years to identify most of the components but he's still never seen anything like the lotus-shaped thing

in the center of the board.

It's a warm August evening so he's got the garage door open to the street. He's concentrating so intently he doesn't notice the car pulling into his driveway, doesn't turn around until he hears the driver get out and walk over to him.

First thing he notices when he turns around are those grey shoes.

There are a few wrinkles, but not many. A white scar beneath his right eye. Apart from that, Williams looks exactly the same. There were entire

years when Roland couldn't sleep, stayed awake with his rage, imagining what it would feel like to smash this man's head against one of those white walls. But now here he is and Roland just stands there.

Williams sees the electronics spread across the bench and grunts. "Never got it to work, huh?"

Roland says nothing.

Williams walks closer. "Don't worry, Mr. Mayfield. I'm not here in an official capacity. Retired."

"Retired?" His voice no more

than a whisper.

“You want to see my bus pass?”

Roland finally closes his mouth.

“We closed it down in the nineties. The Roswell facility. After the wall came down,” he shrugs, “by then it wasn’t working so well anyway, the listening. Maybe they’d been here too long. Whatever it was —”

“What happened to them?”

“Moved to another facility. We had three others besides Roswell. Budget cuts. Then one day they just

—went away.”

Roland closes his fist tighter around the soldering iron. “What do you mean?”

Williams doesn’t flinch. “Keep your powder dry, son. We didn’t do anything. I saw the security camera footage myself. One moment they’re there, the next—” he raises his hands like birds. “Guess they finally found a way home.”

“She thought there was a mothership.”

“She was there, at the end,”

Williams says, answering the question Roland doesn't have the courage to ask and he gasps, a half sob. Maybe she's out there now, surfing between the stars.

The other man looks down, fishing in the pocket of his suit. "Everything's classified, of course. They could put me away for what I've already said. But she's your wife."

Williams tosses something and Roland catches it without thinking, rolls it over in his hand. The same copper material as the lotus on the

circuit board. This piece is in the shape of an upturned palm.

“The boxes are dampeners. You might have had that radio working the whole time but without that, the signal wouldn’t get further than the door.”

“And with it?”

Williams puts his sunglasses back on.

“Have a nice life, Mr. Mayfield.”

Roland watches as Williams drives away, imagines he can hear it all the way to the interstate.

He turns back to his workbench.



Amy Sundberg

Amy Sundberg became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "Forever Sixteen" in Daily Science Fiction (Jul. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at practicalfreespirit.com.

Forever Sixteen

by Amy Sundberg

First published in Daily Science
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Barasso & Jonathan Laden

• • • •

The chair is uncomfortable, as usual. I went on a gorging phase once. I was convinced

that if I could just get enough high-calorie food into my mouth, I would gain enough weight to add a nice layer of padding to my bottom. It took several cycles of multiple decadent desserts per meal before I gave into the inevitable: no matter how much I consume, I never gain a single pound. Not one. Gotta love that teenage metabolism.

I don't love it, though. I wouldn't mind having rounded hips, a swelling bosom, hair that forms an honest-to-Gods triangle between my

legs. I wouldn't mind not being obsessed by each cycle's handsome Champion. I wouldn't miss the dreams of him, blurry and vague in their physical reality but gaspingly clear in the urgent longing in my chest, made more and more desperate by the passing days.

I tried to count them once. The days, not the Champions. Once they leave, I try to forget all about them. It's easier that way. The days, though, seem like a practical thing to keep track of. I almost reached five

hundred little lines scored into the back leg of my dressing table, the back leg in the corner that the light misses, before they noticed and took it away. That was a long time ago. Back when I thought that rebelling mattered. My new table is made of a dark metal too hard to scratch.

I'm still sixteen but I'm losing my fire, my adolescent high drama. I can tell. I haven't orchestrated an escape attempt for at least five Champions. Well, okay, exactly five. Since the Champion known as Eric.

I'm not supposed to know their names, of course, but I see it as my job to break the rules (of which there are never-ending lists) as often as possible. Why else would they choose a girl forever sixteen to preside at the Court of the Sybil, if they didn't want trouble? Plus, anybody in my place would have to bend the rules just to provide some variety to the monotonous sameness of never reaching seventeen.

I don't know how long I have been here. Once I had a choice, but I

made the wrong one.

Eric wasn't as handsome as some of the Champions. His gray-blue eyes were set slightly too close together for true symmetry, and his skin was bad—his two-day growth of stubble wasn't enough to hide the red blotches on his jaw line. But he had a nice smile—a kind smile, I thought—and his two days of fasting and praying hadn't dazed him so much that he couldn't meet my eyes. He looked at me as if I was an actual person. You'd be surprised how few

Champions are able to do that. I think the stories that must circulate about me intimidate them, because most choose a spot a few inches above one of my shoulders to stare at during our audiences.

Or hell, maybe they don't need to hear stories to be frightened. My formal get-up is not designed to be reassuring: my long black hair styled to wind and spiral over my head, like a snake with pretensions (and let me tell you, getting the wire untangled from my hair afterwards is painful);

the pure white cotton shift which shows the pleasing contours of my nubile figure (not my words, I assure you); and the sickly red streaks they use to paint my cheekbones, my lips, my hands and feet. Yes, it's blood, but I try not think about it. If I try hard, I can imagine that it's just exotic cosmetics, like dust from a fire poppy. I could see how it might be hard to see the girl underneath all these trappings.

Eric knelt before me, though, at that first audience, and raised his

head to meet my eyes, and a small smile played about the corners of his mouth. I was so pleased by him that instead of stopping at the blessing, which was traditional at the first meeting between Virgin Sybil and Champion, I gave him a little prophecy as well. It wasn't an act of rebellion; I was supposed to change up the ritual now and again, keep the Champions guessing. I gave him a sweet and small prophecy, which I'm only allowed to hand out a few times per Great Cycle. Because they are the

best—sweet and small is mostly likely to end up in happiness, for all that the Champion might then fail to achieve true Greatness. Being happy is better. I should know. And anybody who could bear to look upon me with even the briefest hint of a smile deserved any happiness I could give him. As long as it didn't cost me anything.

Once, I got older like everyone else. I grew taller, I celebrated birthdays, I changed. I failed to appreciate it at the time. I gave it all

up to be Somebody, to feel important, to live in this luxurious yet barren palace. I didn't understand about the barren part yet. And I did it because I knew my mother wanted me to accept the honor. It made her and my family more important too. And eight children was a lot of mouths to feed. I was actually excited to stay sixteen forever, and in the event that I might need to be comforted (which I couldn't even imagine), I could think of the opportunities I had bought for my

brothers and sisters and be proud.

Never mind any opportunities for me.

The problem is, even if my body, my hormones, everything about me stays frozen, I still think. I still remember. And who knows how many years of being an isolated sixteen-year-old virgin to whom nothing happens and nothing is told begins to get old, even while I don't. Thinking about sisters whose faces are no longer distinct in my memory can't touch this.

After I met Eric, I decided that something had to be done. Forget about the dozens of aborted escape attempts. He was different, I could tell, and if I could just get him alone, convince him to compromise my virtue, either with words or temptations, I didn't care which, then I wouldn't need to escape. I couldn't very well be the Virgin Sybil without the virgin part. I knew where he would be, too. There's not much to do in the days between Champions but wander the palace

and daydream, two things I excel at.

It's cruel, being caught up in a perpetual adolescence, but it's necessary. That's where the power is, in the state of being between, teetering from childhood to womanhood and back again. That's why they keep me this way, the best way to read the portents, to shape what is to come. My flimsiest whim is a force to be reckoned with, here in the palace. It would be heady, all that power. It would be, except I never get to hear how it has turned out, and

I'm driving blind.

I'm not allowed to wander with a Champion in residence, but I still have to go to the Chapel, to the Library, to my special meditation garden. The garden was key to my plan. I can't even count how many times I had tried to strike out from there, so there were plenty of alarms set up to keep me inside, but none that I knew of to keep me out. After all, they have to leave me some leeway to misbehave, or I'll lose my fire altogether, and that would never

do for a Sybil of my importance. So they're not as careful as you might think.

I went there at the usual time, late afternoon, and knelt beside the black pool, watching the pale shadows of golden fish in its depths and the pattern of ripples on the surface left by the small tumble of water from the next pool up. I was alone, would be unless I tripped one of their devices. I waited as long as I could bear, then started climbing up the palace wall, which was prettily

(and practically) decorated with a network of vines that produced pale pink and white flowers for a short period in early spring. My arms were strong from the prescribed exercise routines I endured every morning, and I wasn't afraid of heights. Sometimes I thought I might not be afraid of anything except for the possibility that everything might stay the same forever.

Arm over arm, I hauled myself up to the appropriate window. It was closed, but I broke a pane of glass

with my hand and reached in to undo the clasp. My hand was bleeding, but what was more blood to me? I ignored the pain and pushed open the windows, losing my balance at the last minute and tumbling in.

The Champion had his back towards me, but he turned around with a fighter's fast reflexes when I crashed through the window. He didn't recognize me at first, I don't think, without the ridiculous hair style and the blood, but maybe the

blood on my hand jogged his memory, because after that first surprised pause, he sprang into action, pulling a sheet from his bed (his bed!) and tearing a strip to wrap around my hand. "My lady?" he asked, hesitating to touch me.

"Do it," I replied. "Please." He reached out and with such gentle grace, took my hand, that I almost started to cry, while at the same time I felt a frisson through my body. A man touching me! And not just any man, either, but one of my beloved

Champions, the nicest one yet.

He bound my hand, wrapping the sheet around and around with care. “Let me call someone to assist you,” he said. His voice was quieter in the small space—it fell into my ears without the echoes that cloaked it in the Great Hall.

“Please don’t,” I said. “I am fine and... I need your help.”

I saw a light in his eyes and wondered if he thought this was yet another variation of the ritual, perhaps a test of some kind. “I am at

your command.”

We stood looking at each other. His hand was still holding my injured one, cradling it as though it were broken. I didn't know how to talk to him. I didn't know how to talk to anybody. “Tell me what you are called?” I asked finally, trying to build up my courage.

“Eric, my lady,” he said, and he dropped my hand as if just realizing that he was still holding it.

“Mine is Clara,” I told him even though he didn't ask. Clara, the word

I keep closest to my heart, that I repeat to myself during the long hours in the Chapel, in the Garden, wandering my white unblemished palace.

“I didn’t know you had a name,” he said. Ouch. Had I been too kind in my assessment of him? Had I believed only what I had wanted to believe?

I didn’t care. This was my chance. “Please, I need your help,” I said, barely able to get the words from my throat. I crossed the few

steps between us and pressed myself up to him, as I remembered my older sister pressing against her betrothed. He started but didn't pull away. I tilted my head to look into his face and pushed my lips against his.

He was frozen, his body unmoving like a marble statue against me, and I could feel the exact instant when he began to kiss me back. Oh, and here was the fire again, the fire I could feel running low within me! My heart pounded its fast staccato in my chest and for the first

time I felt my dream sensations in the flesh. It was going well, I thought. I would succeed. Finally I would get out.

He pulled away from me, and at first I thought it was to lead me to his bed, but then I opened my eyes and saw him backing away from me, palms out as if to fend me off. "Sybil, I cannot. We must not." He continued to move away. "Let me call your attendants."

"It's Clara," I said, following him. "And I don't want my attendants. I

can't live this way anymore. Please, just, trust me. Please." A tear slipped down my cheek.

"This is a test," he said, and my tears started dripping faster. "I won't take away who you are. Your power. I'll call someone."

"This isn't who I am!" I said, desperate now, sinking onto the floor in front of him. "I'm not a mystical Sybil, a virgin who never changes. I do change! I am Clara." And I held my head in my hands and rocked, sobbing my name over and

over. I felt his hand brush my shoulder, and I almost hoped, but then he left, and some time later rough hands pulled me up and took me to my room, locked me in.

I never saw Eric again.



Four more Champions since then, but I don't care. I only dream about Eric now. You might think that I'm in love with him, but I know I'm not. How can I be now that I know that he didn't really see me

after all? I pretend I'm in love with him though, and in my dreams, I can almost convince myself. And what is love anyway? He knows my name; isn't that enough?



They've brought a new girl to the palace. Isabel. She's so young. I mean, she's sixteen, like me, but she has a soft place inside of her that is missing in me. I bet I had it once, before I was forever sixteen, but I can't wind time back up on its

spindle so that I can have it again.

She'll make a good Sibyl, I think. Her long blond hair is the color of butter, her eyes gray-blue, like Eric's. There's a lot of fire in her, I can tell just by looking at her. We're working on fixing her imperfections, special rinses to take away the stringiness of her hair, expensive ointments to clear up her skin. She has to be a suitable vessel for the importance they plan to bestow upon her, after all.

I introduce myself to her as

Clara, and now there are two people who know my name. I remember the girl before me. I called her Sybil. Maybe she had forgotten her name. Or maybe she didn't care about it anymore. I still care, and I feel a small sense of victory in it.

Not as much victory in my impending freedom. You'd think that I would be excited to finally succeed at escaping this place, but now that it is really happening, I feel strange. Tired. Old. It's as if my sixteen-ness has suddenly worn out

and deserted me. I found a white hair mixed among my black ones a few days ago, and there is an unaccustomed ache in my middle back that I can't seem to make go away no matter which way I stretch. A small price to pay, I tell myself, but the truth is, I'm scared. Where will I go? What will I do? My brothers and sisters might all be dead by now (surely not that much time has passed?) I don't know.

I throw myself into my duties to help prepare Isabel. "It's a wonderful

life here,” I tell her. “Being forever sixteen, young and pretty. And the Champions are so handsome!”

She doesn't seem to need convincing. She trills along, leaving her soft spot where anyone can see it, learning the various prophecies I have to teach her as if they're nursery rhymes instead of words that can change the fate of a nation. Or just a man, one with a permanent smile hovering at the corners of his mouth. She doesn't understand, and I don't try to explain it to her. She'll find out

soon enough, won't she? I've learned my lesson about sacrifice, haven't I? She's my free pass out of this place.

After awhile, she starts confiding in me. "There was a boy," she says, voice lowered. "He's big and blond and laughs a lot. I thought, maybe...." I know what she thought. "But my parents wanted something better for me," she continues, smoothing her dress as if brushing the memory of this boy from her. "Something grander, more important. They know what is best, of course."

Of course. They all know what is best. I bite my tongue.

“You were a very good Sibyl,” she continues, surprising me. “I hope I can be like you.” She lowers her eyelashes and stares at her hands, as if she doubts herself.

“What... what do they say about me?” I ask.

“How you see so clearly, how you steer us right through the hardest times without blinking. They say that it’s because of your brilliance, the raging hotness of your fire, that

you've burned out so quickly."

Quickly? They think this is quickly? How little anyone knows. Isabel must see something in my expression, because she bites her lip and looks worried. "They mean it as a compliment. Clara." She adds my name as an afterthought, but I forgive her instantly.

* * *

It is the night before Isabel's induction as the new Sibyl. I have helped her into her silken white

nightgown, brushed her hair until it shines, spread rose-scented cream on her skin. She is content, I can tell, content with the luxury and excited for tomorrow. I leave her snuggled among her pillows and go back to my room. My last night.

I pace from wall to wall next to my bed, sleepiness making my eyes heavy. This is my chance, I tell myself so many times the words lose meaning. Change has come.

But I can't go through with it. I go back into Isabel's bedroom and

shake her awake. She is flushed and drowsy, confused in her half-sleep. “Clara? Is it time?”

“No,” I say, and I’m whispering. “You mustn’t go through with it, Isabel. Who cares what your parents say? I promise you, whatever reasons you have for being here, they’re not worth it. Refuse the honor and go home. There’s still a chance for you.”

She stares at me. “What?” she says. “What?”

“I’ve been lying,” I tell her, the words pouring from my mouth in an

unstoppable rush. “I’ve been lying about everything. It’s horrible here. It’s no life, to stay one way forever. I’ve tried to escape so many times I’ve lost count. They’ve tricked you into coming here. You should leave before the ceremony begins.”

The twisted truth is that the Virgin Sybil must volunteer for the task. She cannot be forced. So in the years of suffering after you take your vows, you know that it is, ultimately and completely, your own fault.

Isabel shakes her head, pushes

herself up against the pillows. “I know what I’m doing,” she says. I know she doesn’t. “I’m sorry you’ve had such a short time, Clara, but now it’s my chance. My chance to change the world. To make things better for everyone.”

I narrow my eyes. “And your pretty laughing boy?” I ask. “What about him?”

She pauses, and for a minute I think I’ve reached her, but then she shrugs. “He’s in the past now,” she says. “I won’t let him ruin this for

me. Or you. Leave me now.” She sounds imperious, like a Queen. I pity her, but maybe she’ll be more content than I have been. Maybe her fire comes from a different place. I hope so.



The morning comes. I help Isabel dress, then kiss her goodbye on her soft cheek. I won’t be seeing her again. She leaves to begin the rituals, and I return to my room. Once she is vested with the Sybil’s

powers, I will be free to leave, they have told me. I have packed some things. I will live in comfort, in a little house by the ocean. They have promised.

I stare at myself in the mirror, wondering what comes next. I finger my perfect, unlined skin, my thick black hair that has more than one white hair mixed in it now. I think of how big the ocean is, how big the world is. I wonder if, after all, I might find my soft place again.

As I watch, my face changes, and

my hair. Gradual at first, but then faster and faster, my face develops a network of wrinkles and the white hairs spread. My knuckles become more knobby, the blue veins sticking out in ever-growing hills. It hurts, oh please, I hurt. And I realize that this is one last lie, one last indignity. I wonder if my mother knew.

I don't cry, even though the pain is something fierce. I stand and watch until it hurts too much to stand, and then I lie on my bed and wait for it to end. I think of my little

sisters kicking in the bed we shared. I think of the seven tiered pools in the meditation garden. I think of Isabel's hair, which looks even more like butter than it did before.

I think of Eric and his taste of heady wine, only sweeter, and I think that he knows my name.

And at last, that is all that is left. Clara. Clara Clara. I feel my body turning to dust, I'm falling down an endless well. At least it's finally changing, I think.

I'm cold here. Clara.



The Box in My Pocket

by Amy Sundberg

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Warren Lapine



I carry my mom around in a box. It's a small box made of cherry wood, no bigger than a deck of cards, and the lid joins into the main body without hinges. Sometimes I slip it into my purse, but I like it best when I can hold it in my pocket.

I found it during the month before she died. I'd like to say I found it at a hard core magic shop, or maybe an old junk shop buried under brittle scrolls and metal buttons and a plush rabbit with all

the fuzz worn off, all piled together in a rusty perambulator. But the truth is, I found it at one of those woo-woo New Age shops, the kind with lots of self help books and completely dead crystals and Goddess statues in every shape imaginable, but nothing magic in the whole lot.

I sneezed when I entered the shop, the way I always do from the intense mixture of several brands of incense. I don't even know why I bothered to go in. Well, yes I do. I

have a weakness for fairy stuff: fairy calendars, fairy figurines, fairy books, fairy wands, you name it. Already had the addiction by the time I was sixteen.

Anyway, I was browsing, minding my own business, when the sales lady tapped me on the shoulder. Everything about her was flowing: long ripply black hair, long skirt of a crinkled blue, a scarf of a lighter blue fluttering around her neck. "May I help you?" she asked, and her voice was a surprise, a low husky velvet.

“I’m fine,” I said. I only had twenty bucks in my pocket, and I didn’t actually want to spend it. There was a leather jacket at the mall that I had my eye on, if only I could put together enough cash.

There was a pause while she seemed to look right through me. I stared politely at my shoe. “No, you’re not,” she said suddenly. I looked up quickly, met her sad brown eyes for a few seconds. Flashes of my life blurred by: my mom permanently on bed rest in the

rented hospital bed that took up most of the living room; the sharp-tongued nurse; my dad's haggard, wrinkled face, exhausted from working the long hours necessary to pay all the medical bills. And me, falling through the cracks and subsisting on instant oatmeal and pudding cups. I went back to looking at my shoe. It seemed safest.

“I know what you need,” she said. Her grip was strong on my arm as she led me away from the fairy shelves toward the back of the shop.

“Here.” Her voice had a triumphant ring.

We stood in front of a long table covered with a shimmery purple cloth. A large stone fountain gushed water, making me desperately need to use the bathroom, and arranged all around it were many boxes of different sizes and materials. Little tiny boxes that would only hold a few pills stacked on top of boxes that consisted of several drawers for storing jewelry, boxes of colored glass, a box of ceramic with a

unicorn on top, another box made from a slick black material that looked like onyx but probably wasn't.

“Thanks, but I’m just looking,” I said.

Her hand, long fingers tapering into burnt orange nails filed into points, hovered over the table. Her eyes were closed and her forehead furrowed with concentration. Her hand dived down and snatched something, which she presented to me.

It was a cherry wood box, plain compared to most of the boxes on that table. I opened it and shut it; the lid was a little stiff but worked well enough. The wood felt smooth and comforting in my palm. I flipped it over and checked out the price sticker while trying to pretend I wasn't. Thirty-five dollars. No way. I put it back on the table. "I'd better get going."

"How much?" she asked. When I stood gaping at her, she repeated, "How much can you pay?" in an

impatient voice, as if I was slightly slow.

“I’ve got twenty bucks,” I said.

“Then it’s yours.” She held out her hand, and I fished the crumpled bill from my pocket and gave it to her. She hid it in her hand and pushed past me. “Have a nice day,” she said without looking back.

“Sure,” I said. I picked up the box. I was stuck with it now, whether or not it was worth the price. What was I going to use a box for, anyway? I began to feel stupid, but it still felt

good in my hand. I headed for the door.

The sales lady, now behind the counter, called after me. "That's a special box, you know."

I'd already bought it, hadn't I? "Sure," I replied, pushing open the door.

"It can hold what you love most," she said.

I let the door fall shut behind me. Crazy lady. Stupid box. And now I was twenty dollars further from owning my leather jacket.



I never did buy that jacket. I forgot all about it because about a week later my mom took a turn for the worse, and the days that followed were a kind of waking nightmare. Every morning I'd leave for school at the last possible minute, and then I'd rush home right after my last class. I was convinced my mom would die while I was away, or while I was asleep or in the other room. So as long as I sat by her, she must be safe. I was sixteen and as naive as the

people who think taking fifteen different pills a day will make them live longer.

I took to carrying around the box in those days, I don't know why. I needed something, and it was what came to hand. I'd sit by my mom, who slept all day, and I didn't want to turn on the TV in case it bothered her, and I didn't want to talk to the sour-faced nurse who sat knitting when she wasn't doing nurse stuff. So instead I'd take out the box and run my finger over the sleek wood,

over and over again. I never opened it though. I liked it better when I could pretend it wasn't empty.

It was late spring, and on sunny days a beam of light would fall through the sheer curtains, moving from my mom's head to her feet over the course of the afternoon. On this particular day, the light already highlighted her jutting collar bone when I got home from school, and she was awake. "Olive," she said in her tired rasp, and she held out her hand to me. Her fingers felt crisp as

paper, only colder. “It won’t be long now.”

I hated it when she talked like that, and I had to tense my entire body to hold in tears. “You’ll feel better soon,” I said. “Don’t give up on me.”

She blinked. “So much of your life, I’m going to miss. I wanted to make it to your graduation. I wanted to...” She blinked again. “Olive?”

“I’m here, Mom.” I patted her hand gently, always gently, for fear I’d break her.

“So much left to say.” I had to bend to place my ear right by her lips. “There’s never enough time.”

“It’s okay,” I said, brushing her hair from her face. “There’s no hurry.” Her eyes fluttered and then shut, followed by the wheeze of sleep. I brought out the box and polished it with my fingertips while the sun made its gradual journey down her body. It had reached her knees when her chest began to rattle even louder, her breath coming in erratic rhythms.

The nurse, her lips pinched in her prune-like face, walked over and took my mom's pulse. "It won't be long now," she said. So matter-of-fact. What would it be like to have the job of watching people die?

"Should I call my dad?"

She shrugged, her large shoulders shifting uneasily. "Hard to say."

I stayed where I was. "Should I call the doctor?"

She passed a hand over her wrinkled face, sat down heavily on her chair. "No. Nothing for the

doctor to do. You just stay with her for now.”

I stood so I could see her face, gray and strained in the shadows. I began to open and shut my box, just to have something to do. Every time I opened it, it made a small muffled noise, and it closed with a snick. I tried to match it up to her breathing. In muffle muffle... out snick! In muffle muffle... out snick! It sounded like a broken clock.

The motes of light were dancing on her stocking feet when the

rhythm lurched to a stop. It was after an in breath, and I leaned over her, box hanging open in my hand, waiting for the exhale. The hum of the refrigerator in the next room was suddenly deafening.

And then the rattle came, the lungs deflated, and a handful of sparkling silver powder puffed from my mom's mouth into the little box. Snick! Her eyes remained closed, and in that moment she reminded me more of a plasticine mannequin than a human being. Her chest no longer

rose and fell.

The box fell from my hand as I sobbed into her cold neck.

* * *

It was a couple of days before I thought about the box again. It sat in the precise middle of my dresser, somewhere I didn't remember putting it. I stared at its glossy sheen, trying to dredge up the energy to hide it in my sock drawer, where it wouldn't serve as a constant reminder of my mom's last day. I

should have held out for the jacket.

I picked it up and it fell open in my palm. Silvery powder dusted its insides, a residue I'd thought I'd imagined. The powder stirred as if from a breeze, and then the box emitted a voice.

“Olive. My baby. Here you are.” The voice echoed as if it were coming from somewhere very deep; its almost whisper had just enough body in it for me to recognize it as my mom's. Was I dreaming about her again? I'd had a hell of a

nightmare just last night.

I decided to play along, just in case I was awake. “Mom? Where are you?”

“I’m here,” her disembodied voice said. “In the box.”

I eyed the box, expecting it to erupt a head or at the very least start spinning in the air under its own power. It stayed placidly in my hand. “Mom?”

“Yes?”

“I miss you, Mom.” Tears blurred my vision, and I tried hard not to

snort. All the crying meant my nose was permanently stuffy and my eyes swollen. “I miss you so much. Are you... okay? Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Oh, Olive. This is so hard on you and your dad. I’m sorry.” I hung on her every word. “And now I’m sooo hungry.”

How did magic powder in a magic box eat? “I can get you something,” I offered. “You want some of Aunt Ida’s coffee cake? There’s a few slices left, I think.”

“No,” she said. “I need something else, sweetie. If you want me to stay, I’m going to need a memory.”

I held the box away from me. “You need what?”

“A memory. Don’t worry, it won’t hurt. And I’ll try to pick a small one.” The silver powder began to shine brighter, then became so blinding I had to close my eyes.

In the glow, a picture formed and then became more real. I was flying, my hands clasped tightly around cool metal links, legs pumping. Every

time I came back down to the ground, I felt a firm push on my upper back. I looked over my shoulder to see my mom smiling up at me. She looked so young, no white in her hair yet, no crow's feet around her eyes, her skin firm and clear. "Fly to the sky, Olive," she said. "Try hard and you might be able to touch the moon."

The picture faded, to be replaced by blankness. My shoulders began to shake with renewed grief, and my mom in the box comforted me. "It's

okay. Everything's going to be okay.” She stayed with me until I'd cried myself out and shut the box's lid.



Of course, that last bit about the memory? I made it up. I have no idea what that first lost memory might have been. The memory I just told you, I lost that one later, after I'd wised up and started writing down every single moment with my mom that I could remember. Just in case it was the next in line to be eaten.

I like to think that first memory was something small, like she told me it would be. Some random unimportant moment from my toddler years, something I barely remembered and would never have thought about anyway. But I'll never know.



Once all the relatives left and I could leave the house without comment, I returned to the New Age shop. I half expected it to be

abandoned, filled with empty shelves and unanswered questions, but it was exactly as I remembered it. The sales lady smiled at me from behind the counter when I came in, only this time she was wearing flowing garments in a foamy sea green. A large nametag was pinned to the front of her blouse: Mara. "Can I help you?"

I plunked the box down on the counter. "Why'd you make me buy this?"

She didn't pretend not to know

me. “You fit together.”

“You’re telling me I fit together with this stupid wooden box?”

She gave a half shrug, opening her palms out to me. “I don’t get to decide. I can just tell which items go with which customers.” She closed her eyes as if thinking really hard, then blinked and looked at me. “You might not like it, but you need that box right now.”

I sneezed. The reek of incense was even worse than last time. “Lady, I don’t know what you think you’re

doing, but I don't need some cheap knock-off of a box. What I need is for my mom to come back. All the way back, not like some kind of echo. Can you do that? Can you make her not dead? I'll pay you whatever you want." I was lying. I didn't have any money. But I'd figure out how to get some if I had to.

She let out all her breath from her nose. "You lost your mom recently. Oh, I'm sorry."

I held myself together with an effort. "I don't care if you're sorry. I

care if you can help me.”

She shook her head. “I can’t bring her back. No one can.”

I sneezed again. The exhaustion of the past week fell over me like a stifling blanket. “Thanks for nothing,” I muttered. I took back the box, shoved it into my pocket, and headed for the door.

“I can give you a job,” she called after me.

I paused, fingering the box’s hard edges. I needed the money, it was true, and maybe by hanging around I

could figure out how the box worked. “Okay,” I said, turning back around. “But the incense has to go.”

She was already rummaging around under the counter, and she pulled out an application and a blank name tag. “It’s a deal.”



For several weeks, I talked to my mom every night right before I went to bed. The daytimes weren’t so bad; I kept myself busy with classes, schoolwork, and afternoons with

Mara at her shop. But in the dark loneliness of my bedroom, my tight control slipped. I tried skipping a few times, but I'd lay awake for hours, playing her voice back in my mind, wondering if she ever got lonely living in the box.

I began writing in a journal, everything I could think of about my mom: her favorite dessert (mud pie), favorite TV show (Law and Order), favorite thing to do on the weekend (brunch and a walk in the park). I wrote down the titles of books she

had read to me, of pet names she'd called me, and of vacations we'd taken together. I combed the house for pieces of her life and began a collection of them in a garbage bag in my closet.

None of it really helped. Instead, each lost memory felt like another disappearing link in the chain connecting her to me. I opened the box less and less frequently, resigning myself to hours of lying in the dark, stifling my sobs so my dad wouldn't hear me cry.

By the summer, I'd begun to sleep better. The days were longer and warmer. I divided my time between lifeguarding at the pool and working with Mara. I hadn't gotten any closer to discovering the mystery of the box, but I didn't carry it around in my pocket anymore. Swimsuits and cotton dresses don't have pockets, so I began leaving it at home.

That Tuesday in the middle of July, I didn't tell anybody it was my

seventeenth birthday. Mara knew anyway, and she gave me a box of chocolates and a sculpted fairy, dressed in waving blues like she'd worn the first time I met her. My dad stuck a candle into a cupcake and sang to me, all by himself, even though he's tone deaf. He gave me a one hundred dollar bill and a birthday card with a generic message inside, then quickly decamped to bed.

I laid the card and the money on my dresser, then picked up the box. I

hadn't opened it for over a month. I'd been testing myself, seeing if I could make it to my birthday. I pushed open the lid, revealing the glimmering silver inside. "Mom, it's my birthday today," I said softly. "I'm seventeen."

Her voice came, not sounding quite right without a chest and face to vibrate in. "Happy birthday, sweetie. I'm so proud of you." I held the box to my chest as if that would help her pour into my heart. "I've missed you," she whispered.

“I’ve missed you too,” I said. “Every day I miss you, and just when I think it’s getting easier, it’s not easier at all. Sometimes I think the emptiness will eat me up inside.”

“I want you to be happy,” she said. “Don’t let me hold you back.” I clutched at the box as if to a lifeline. “Darling.” She paused. “I’m sorry, but I’m hungry again. Much more hungrier than before. It’s time.”

“Time for what?” I asked, but the light was already pouring from the box and into my pores. And this

time it burned through me, an intense pain centering in my chest, and for one single instant I was terrified that my heart would stop beating. And then the familiar blankness.

I woke up on the floor with my arm curled around my head in a protective gesture. My whole body ached, and I couldn't remember how I'd gotten there. I got stiffly to my feet, noted the box sitting in its customary place, lid once again shut, and pulled my journal from the

bookshelf. Only a few pages in, I found the memory that no longer existed inside me.



It's a mother daughter day, I'd written. It's in the springtime, and it's before all of Mom's hair has fallen out, and before she feels too sick to do anything but exist. It's after we know she's sick but before it feels completely real to me. It's when I still believe everything will be all right, that maybe my story can have a

happy ending.

Mom and I make a picnic lunch. She does the sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly for me, ham and tomato for her. I wash the grapes and put the chocolate cookies into little plastic baggies. She's bought special small bottles of pink lemonade just for our picnic.

We load it all into a backpack, which I'll insist on carrying because I'm the young healthy one, aren't I? And we drive more than an hour to get to the woods, the ones my mom

likes best, singing along with Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

We walk through the woods, staying on the path to avoid any poison oak incidents. It's shaded and quiet, and the air smells like wood and soil. The trees arch above us, their thin branches swishing in the breeze, and every so often we come across a patch of little white flowers; neither of us knows what they're called, but they're pretty just the same. We talk some about what I think it will be like to be sixteen.

Mom tells me a funny story about how her family pretended to forget her sixteenth birthday, only to surprise her in the evening with a huge pink frosted cake and her two best friends and balloons tied to the banisters. That was the birthday she received her strand of pearls, the ones that she gave to me on my sixteenth. But on this particular day, that hadn't happened yet.

There's a clearing in the woods where the sun shines through and the park service has put in a battered

picnic table, and that's where we stop to have lunch. We clink our lemonade bottles and Mom offers a toast: "May we always remember how happy we are today." Then we dig in, and the food tastes better than usual because of all the walking.

On our walk back to the car, Mom stops me. "Olive," she says, "you know I'm sick." We don't talk about it much, so I just nod. "I don't know what's going to happen, but the next months are going to be hard ones. For me, and for your dad, but

maybe especially for you. And I won't always be able to be there for you the way I'd want."

"As long as you get better, that's what matters," I say, eager to reassure her. "I'll be fine, don't worry."

"I'm your mother," she says with a grin. "Worrying is in my job description." She takes my hand, and her grip is strong. "Sometimes in this world, it's hard to know what to believe, and it's hard to know what to hang onto. So it's important for me to tell you, it's days like today that

matter. Days when you're with the people you love, days when you have the time to take in the beauty around you. Days when I tell you how much I love you, and that I'll always be right there inside of you." She taps over my heart. "You hear me? I'll be there when you need me if you listen hard enough. No matter what happens, hold on tightly to what I've told you. Will you promise?"

I don't understand what she's talking about, but I promise anyway. It gets dark right as we return to the

car, and she has surgery a few weeks later.

* * *

Gone, gone, gone. This memory of mine, so precious to both my mom and me, is irretrievably lost except for some words on a piece of paper. And words don't begin to encompass it. I can see the gaps when I read them, but I don't know what belongs there to fill in the emptiness.

* * *

The next morning, I called in sick for lifeguarding and went directly to the shop. I wore jeans and carried the box in my old accustomed way. Mara looked up when I burst in, but she didn't seem surprised. "How do you get rid of remains?" I asked. "Like, ashes or whatever?"

She didn't blink. "It depends. Some people bury them."

I thought about that for a moment, then shook my head. "No burying. Too much like a horror

movie.”

“Well, you can keep them in an urn,” she said, pursing her lips. “Or you can scatter them somewhere nice.” She paused. “They can make a powerful ingredient in certain... rituals.”

No more messed-up magic for me. “I don’t want anything to do with any weird rituals.”

“I tend to agree with you there.” She folded her hands on the counter. “What do you think?”

I hesitated. We never talked

about the box. “Do you think scattering would get rid of them no matter what?” I asked.

She looked sad. “It’s the letting go that matters, Olive. As long as you do that, you’ll be all right.”



I crunched down the path, the trees casting their cool shadows down on me. I couldn’t remember walking this way with my mom, and soon I’d lose more: the sound of her voice, her facial expressions, the way

she laughed. The memories might not be eaten, but they'd fade all the same. Not to mention the times that should have been, that she and I deserved to have but would never happen.

I picked an especially tall pine with a distinctive burl in its trunk. Maybe I'd be able to find it again someday, if I ever wanted to come visit. I stood staring up at its needles creating lacy patterns against the sky. And for the last time, I opened the box.

“Hi, Mom,” I said. My chest ached. “We’re in the woods that you love so much.”

“Olive.” So much love she could put into that single word.

“It’s time for us to say goodbye,” I said. My voice broke, and a few sobs escaped me.

“Yes,” she said. “I know. I’m ready. But are you?”

“I’ll never be ready, Mom. I could be a hundred and two, and I still wouldn’t be ready.” I squeezed my eyes shut against the lances of pain

that ran through my body. “But it’s still time.”

“Oh, Olive.” She sounded tired. “I live on through you. No one can take me away from you now, do you understand?” Her voice grew fainter. “Don’t forget.”

“I won’t,” I whispered. And I tipped the box over and shook all the powder out into a heap on the needle-strewn ground. It sat there, a harmless pile of glitter, and then it vanished into the loam.



Yesterday I bought another box from Mara. It's made of white stone with mother of pearl inlay on the lid. It's cold to the touch with a crosshatched pattern carved into the sides. Mara swears it's only decorative, that there's nothing special about this one, but I have my doubts.

Today I'm carrying it in my pocket.



Daddy's Girl

by Amy Sundberg

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I never wanted to be a spacer. I'd have been happy enough to live out my entire life on Luna, or

hell, even a cozy one-family pod somewhere. But Daddy was a spacer and he would be damned if his two girls didn't follow in his footsteps. And what Daddy wanted, he generally got.

I used to pray and pray to whoever might be out there listening, asking that they please take Daddy away and never bring him back. It sounds terrible, doesn't it? It sounds like the kind of thing you don't admit out loud. But I don't have anything to be ashamed of.

Anyone would have done the same.

Anyone but Magdalena. She's Captain now, but she was always perfect even before that.



On an ice ship, you get to know new crew real fast, whether you like it or not. At first Yocavich tried to avoid me as much as he could given the tight quarters. That's how I knew someone had twigged about Greer being my husband, and probably about how I went a little off my head

after he was gone, too.

But I actually liked Yocavich just fine. He wasn't anything like Greer, that was part of it. Where Greer would have made a bawdy joke or slapped someone's back, Yocavich stayed determinedly silent. He did his share of the maintenance competently (I double-checked to make sure) and without complaint, but he kept himself to himself.

Of course, he was almost young enough to be my son, and he had no business being the mining engineer

on this dump. Not with so little experience. But the Captain did all the hiring. Not me.

After a couple days of him skirting around me, I decided to take the direct approach and invited him to a game of backgammon. Juanita had a vid helmet on, trapped in her own little fantasy world, and Vee and Evan were on exercise detail, so we were pretty much alone. Yocavich bumped his head on the low ceiling on his way to the gaming table—still not used to zero G. What

a dirt-eater.

We stayed quiet at first, concentrating on the game. After a few minutes, I'd already hit two of his blots and it was clear his knowledge of backgammon was of the theoretical variety. "So I'm guessing you've heard about my husband Greer," I said, building a new stack in my home quadrant.

He nodded and kept his eyes on the board.

"Just so you know, I don't hold it against you or nothing. You being

the new mining engineer and all.”

He made a move that left another of his blots vulnerable, and I had to keep myself from shaking my head. “He was a good engineer,” he said, surprising me. “I heard the details from Evan, and from the sounds of it, that blast could have lost you the ship. Or the whole crew. He did you proud, your husband. No one could have done better.”

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. I pushed the dice and got a shitty combo, so I went ahead

and did something a little reckless. Yocavich hit one of my blots next turn. Maybe he could play backgammon after all.

After that game, we were friends and I felt better about things.

* * *

I had the engines humming at almost the right pitch. A few screws to loosen, a valve to change, and—there! She was working right where I wanted her.

I shimmied my way out from

under the mounts and pushed off the polished surface of the lateral engine. I hitched my elbow around a conveniently placed handle and hovered over my domain, breathing in the slightly sour odor that was more home to me than anything else. I might hate space, but give me a good engine room and I can deal with it.

The com clicked on. “Lolly?” It was Magdalena. She couldn’t leave me alone if her life depended on it. “You about done down there?”

“Aye aye, Captain,” I said. She never failed to miss my sarcasm.

“Come see me when you’re done, will you?” A note of concern laced through her words whenever she talked to me now. It was enough to drive me crazy.

“I’m due for a little R&R.”

“Fine. But come see me first.”

Balls. When my little sister gets her mind made up, there’s no changing it. I pushed the release button on the door, and it opened with a sigh, then closed behind me as

I floated down the hall to the silver ladder extending up to the cockpit.

I slipped into the seat next to Magdalena's. It was comfier up here in the cockpit. The seat closed around me, pinching my middle slightly and adjusting. I checked out the various gauges and displays in front of me while letting my eyes get used to the slightly dimmer light that Magdalena preferred.

She swiveled her seat so she could look at my face. "How you holding up, Lolly?"

She asked me that same question too often, as if she expected me to dissolve into a puddle of water and carbon any day now. “Fine.”

Sometimes she'd let me be after that, but today I wasn't so lucky. “It's only natural for you to be grieving still. I know how you felt about Greer.”

Well, no, she didn't. She'd always been a hard-hearted slab, which is what made her the obvious choice for Captain. She took after Daddy in more ways than one. “It's

fine,” I insisted. I started drumming my fingers against the plastic armrest.

“You know it’s been a year today, since... the accident?”

I stared stony-faced ahead. I didn’t want to talk about it, not again and especially not with her. If she had listened to me back before that last run and upgraded the engines like I told her to, everything would have been fine. But no, she was too can-fisted to invest in her own operation like she should have. And

there was only so fast I could coax our old engines to go. If only we had reached the comet sooner... if only Magdalena had read the spectrograph more accurately... if only our Daddy had been planet-locked to begin with...

My life was a continuous stream of if only's. But none of them brought my husband Greer back to life. "Look, I don't want to talk about it."

Magdalena's mouth turned down. "Fine. Let's talk about the

engines then. This trip is taking longer than it should.”

I shrugged. “I’m doing the best I can. I keep them limping along, don’t I? The main engine should’ve been replaced three years ago.”

“We can’t afford anything to go wrong on this run, Lolly. It’s bad enough we’re breaking in new crew.” She meant Yocavich, the only engineer she could find on short notice.

“He doesn’t have the experience to be on a boat like ours,” I said. “He

should be an assistant, not the goddamned head of the whole operation.”

“That’s none of your concern. Your job is to get us to the comet. Try to crank the engines a little higher. That’s all I’m asking.”

“How close to the margin are we running?” We’d only been able to haul in half our usual load of ice after the comet explosion that killed Greer.

“Damn it, Lolly.” She banged on her armrest. “Focus on your job and

let me do mine, okay?"

Her outburst meant we were running very close to the margin indeed. Exactly what I wanted to hear. "Keep your pants on," I said. "I've got those engines running the best I know how." I pushed the button that released me from the seat. "Believe me, no one wants an uneventful run more than me. Worry about Yocavich. He's your weak link." But I knew she wouldn't. She never listened to me. Not even when lives depended on it. And

since I hadn't spoken up loud enough, maybe it was partly my fault Greer was dead too.

* * *

Magdalena and I grew up in Paradise City on Luna. Our mom had been a dancer, entertaining spacers night after night until she met Daddy. After she got pregnant with me, she switched to hostessing, where she earned less and got sore feet while taking the same abuse. She never did forgive me for that.

After each ice haul, Daddy would come on down and visit us, his jowls giving him a permanent hang-dog expression. It was too expensive to come down to Luna after every run, he'd say. He was ruining himself over his two daughters. But he still came every time.

Magdalena was the baby even though she was taller, and she was the prettier of the two of us. She took after Daddy with her high temper and her knack for getting her own way. I was the awkward one, the one

Daddy gifted with huge bruises that shifted from black to blue to a sickly yellow. Anything went wrong, bets were it was Magdalena who caused it and me who got all the blame.

When he died, Daddy left the ice ship to Magdalena. There was nothing for me, not even any more blue-black blossoms. Of course, some bruises can't be seen with the naked eye, but that doesn't mean they're not there.



The day we made orbit around our comet, Yocavich and I were playing our daily backgammon game. He'd gotten a lot better over the past six months. We both had an even shot at winning now. "You ever miss Luna?" he asked me.

"I used to." I pushed the dice. "Someday I'll settle down dirtside again, I get my way." I moved my blots. "This what you thought you were signing up for?"

He let a few turns pass before he answered. "It's like I thought, mostly.

Just the quarters are a little smaller and space is a hell of a lot bigger.”

“There’s plenty of jobs for you on Luna, with your training.” And most of them would be a sight safer than this one, too. “Just something to think about.”

His face folded into his shy smile. “Pay is better here, though, long as the ice on this one is pure. I aim to set aside a little nest egg.”

Poor sot. What good would money do him if he was too dead to spend it? But before I could open my

big mouth, Magdalena's voice blasted through the com. "Lolly, get your butt up here! Radar's picking something up by our comet. It won't be long till we've got a visual, and I want you to see this."

Inside my heart was pounding like an engine gone wrong. "We'll be there soon," I told Yocavich, releasing myself from the chair. His face shone pale in the light of the glowing ceiling.



“Of all the short-shanked wasting sons of a two-timing whore.” Magdalena pointed at the viewing screen. “What the fuck is he doing here?”

Another ice ship, several meters bigger than ours, was in orbit around the comet. I peered more closely and saw their mining operations were already underway, and not just the survey either; several suited figures floated above the surface of the comet, digging the trenches where flares would eventually be set. The

distinctive black ship had a navy blue insignia on the helm marking it as that of Marcos Ramirez, one of our chief business rivals. "Our favorite captain," I muttered.

Marcos had a beautiful modern ship, sleek and long with a wickedly pointed nose. I'd heard through the grapevine it was loaded to the teeth with all the most progressive tech. He was also the captain who'd played the markets three years ago, costing our crew a bundle when the price of ice tanked right before we arrived

with a large haul. If Magdalena was forced to choose her least favorite person in the solar system, Marcos would win, hands down.

Magdalena slammed her fist into her chair, then punched on the com system. A moment later, the screen lit up, showing Marcos reclining in his chair, hands behind his head. “Marcos, you bastard, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” She was practically snarling. “I registered this comet fair and square. Find your own ice.”

“Maggie, sweetheart, so nice to see you again.” Marcos’s thin face twisted into his idea of a charming smile. “I know you have a little crush on me, but I had no idea you’d be willing to travel so far just to catch a glimpse.” He winked.

“Quit messing around and get away from my comet. You’re violating about fifty bylaws, and this time I’ll make sure your license is revoked.”

“I don’t think so, sweet cheeks. Been a bad trip, has it? Is that your

sister over there? Hey, Delores, how's tricks?"

Magdalena braced herself on her armrests and leaned forward into the camera. "I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to make a successful run."

Marcos's smile disappeared abruptly, and he sat up straight. "Listen up, Maggie, and listen good." His voice dropped in a way that reminded me this man was dangerous. "You are outclassed in every way, and you know it. You even think about harming my crew

out there and your ship will no longer exist. You get me?"

"What I get is that you'll be paying off damages to me for the rest of your goddamn life."

"Oh, I don't think so." He reached up to stroke his goatee. "I think you'll find everything entirely aboveboard on my end. I registered this comet personally. Must have beat you to the punch. I can't imagine why the system didn't notify you of my prior claim. But you know how it is. Mistakes happen."

“You son of a bitch.” Magdalena’s face was bright red, and the distinctive smell of her sweat filled the cockpit. “The other captains will take my side, see if they don’t.”

Marcos shrugged. “I’ll take my chances. This ice is real quality stuff. Worth a risk or two, the way I see it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a spectrogram to monitor. Always a pleasure, ladies.” He bowed his head at us, and then the screen went dark.

Magdalena’s face contorted, her nostrils flaring. “Nobody steals from

me,” she said through clenched teeth. She turned on the ship com. “Yocavich, time to suit up and get out there to survey. Report when you’re ready.”

I stared at her in shock. “You can’t send him out there, Magdalena! We’re outgunned, and he’ll be outnumbered.”

She didn’t even look over at me. “That’s Captain to you,” she snapped. “And we’re not leaving here empty-handed. I won’t lose Daddy’s ship so easy.”

I took another look at Marcos's deadly ship, hovering silently in dark space. He'd powered up the engines, and they sent a trademark green glow from halfway down the ship. An Upmeister, the latest model. "He's bringing his weapons online."

"Thanks for stating the obvious." Magdalena scowled fiercely at the screen. "Who does he think he's dealing with? I'm no coward."

Classic Magdalena, so caught up in fury she'd tossed away all logic. "He has no reason to let us go," I said.

“Who’s ever going to find out if he slags us right now? We need to get out of here.”

She ignored me, instead running a systems check of our own, vastly inferior weapons. I released my seat and pushed myself back to the door. “Lolly, where do you think you’re going?”

I smiled grimly. “We’re not losing another engineer. Not on my watch.” I released the seal on the door and sailed through it before she had time to react.



I found Yocavich outside the launch bay, going through the last of the suit security checks. “I’ll help you take that off,” I said, pushing up beside him. “There’s another ice ship beat us here. Going outside right now would be suicide.”

His eyes widened. “I thought that wasn’t supposed to happen. Didn’t we stake a claim?”

“Something went wrong.” I didn’t elaborate. “We’ll be leaving soon as the Captain comes to her

senses.”

He hesitated, one hand closing on his utility belt. “Chief Yocavich.” Magdalena’s voice blared through the com. “Status update.”

“He’s not going anywhere,” I yelled. “Get us out of here before Marcos decides to stop playing nice.”

“Chief Yocavich, do you understand your orders?”

“Yocavich. You ever seen a fist fight in space?” He shrugged, his eyes darting around the curving walls as if looking for a way out. “Of course you

haven't. Because no one is stupid enough to start one." I put my hand on his shoulder. "I promise, if you go out there, you'll never come back in. This isn't what you signed up for."

He stared at me, then initiated his suit release. His helmet came up with a telltale pop. Magdalena must have heard it over the com because she began to swear. "Goddamn it, Lolly, don't mess with me right now." The com shut off with a click.

"Hurry," I said, helping him unlatch the manual safeties. The suit

began unfolding from him as I fidgeted and wished it would hurry up.

I was just helping him clamber out from its slick protections when the door behind me slid open and Magdalena floated in. In one hand she held Daddy's old revolver aimed squarely at my head.

I positioned myself in front of Yocavich, hanging onto the ceiling handle to keep myself in place. "Now, let's just all calm down," I said, putting my spare hand out in a

peaceful gesture. “No reason to do Marcos’s work for him.”

“Chief Yocavich, get back into that suit.” She never took her eyes from me.

A familiar feeling of helplessness welled up inside me. Another life on my head. “Let her shoot me,” I told Yocavich. “Don’t put yourself at risk.”

Tension pervaded the cabin. Would Magdalena actually be willing to shoot me? The hum of the life support units had never been so

loud.

Yocavich broke first. “If that’s what you want, Captain,” he said, and I glanced over my shoulder to see him moving back to the suit. Magdalena’s lips pulled back in a triumphant smile.

This was my chance. I launched myself forward, pushing off the handle with all my strength, and grabbed for the gun. Whether I took her by surprise or she wasn’t willing to shoot her own sister after all, I managed to grab her hand and knock

her off balance. The gun went off as we tumbled backward into the suit lockers, shooting well over my shoulder. I ignored the blows she rained upon the left side of my body and slowly prised the gun from her hand. "You're insane!" I screamed right into her face. "You've failed. You've lost Daddy's ship. Now get a grip and get us out of here." With one last huge effort, I tore the gun from her grasp and pushed myself away from her.

We glared at each other, both of

us panting from exertion. A low moan broke the silence. I glanced over at Yocavich, who was drifting aimlessly, one hand clutched over a blossom of bright red on his shoulder. “Shit,” I said. “You shot him.” I hadn’t been quite quick enough.

“He’ll live,” Magdalena said. She left without another word, leaving me to help Yocavich to the medbay.

* * *

It was a grim six-month trip back

to the Moon, during which Yocavich and I played marathon games of backgammon in between his PT exercises and my regular maintenance duties. No share for the crew on this run meant tempers ran high, and only the good discipline of experienced spacers kept the maintenance routine intact. Magdalena spent almost all her time shut up alone in the cockpit.

She finally called for me right before landing. “Marcos’s story checks out,” she said. “He filed his

claim only an hour before we did. They're looking into what went wrong, why we didn't receive notification, but I don't think we'll ever get an official answer."

"What do you think happened?"

"He found some way to rig the system, of course. I don't know how he did it, but it has Marcos written all over it." She grimaced. "I don't have anything left to fight him with. He's going to get away with it. I'm signing up on Old Abraham's ship. Just as normal crew to start with, but we'll

see.” She rubbed her cheek absently. “He doesn’t have room for you, though.”

There was my thoughtful sister, always looking out for me. Although after our altercation over the gun, I hadn’t expected anything else. “Don’t worry about me,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll figure something out.”

“We let him down,” she said, and I knew she was talking about Daddy.

“Yeah, we did.” And it felt damn good.

During our last game of backgammon, I asked Yocavich if he had plans. I'd been hinting against spacer work for the entire trip back, so I was happy when he said, "No more ice ships for me. I have a few leads on jobs on Luna. The pay may not be as good, but at least I know I'll get it." He rolled his shoulder gingerly—it had been out of a sling for a few months, but I knew it still bothered him sometimes.

"Not so exotic after all, the life of

a spacer,” I said.

“No shit,” he said, and we both laughed.

I let him win the game. Figured I’d let him leave on a high note.



I went back to Paradise City to the Vatican Luxury Hotel, the one with all the bright paintings on the ceilings. I tapped on door 357 and waited until it swung open. Marcos stood on the other side. “Delores, baby. Good to see you.” He gestured

for me to enter.

I sidled through the door without touching him, then stood with my back to the wall, arms folded. “I hear you got paid top dollar for the ice you brought back.”

“You heard right.” He went to the closet, rummaged around, and came back with a suitcase in his hand. “It’s all in there. Your agreed percentage plus the bonus we talked about.”

I opened it up on the bed and surveyed the neat rows of titanium bars. “Glad to see you’re being

honest.”

He laughed. “That’s what I like about you, Lolly. Your sense of humor. Sure you won’t take me up on my offer? I could use someone with your knack for engines.”

“I’ve already got plans, but thanks anyway.” Just because I was willing to take his money didn’t make him any less of a weasel.

He stuck out his damp hand and gripped mine too tightly. “Nice doing business with you. You staying on Luna awhile?”

“That’s the plan,” I lied. I’d booked passage out to Mars for later that same day. Just seemed safer out in the boonies, and now I had the funds to set myself up there. I’d be living dirtside at last.

“Maggie ever figure out what a viper of a sister she’s got herself?” I shook my head. “The revenge isn’t quite so sweet that way, you ask me.”

Good thing I didn’t ask him. “I’m not interested in revenge,” I said. It wouldn’t bring Greer back, so I’d take what I could get.

He gave me his weasely grin. “You’re a piece of work, all right. I wouldn’t have thought you had it in you.”

“I guess I’m full of surprises.”

I took my money and walked out the door. Magdalena wasn’t in any position to hurt anyone else with those reckless decisions of hers, and I was finally turning my back on the spacer life.

It felt damn good.



Peter Sursi

Peter Sursi became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Seven Samovars” in Lightspeed Science Fiction & Fantasy (Sep. 2012), edited by John Joseph Adams. Visit his website at bookmeheadspace.com.

The Seven Samovars

by Peter Sursi

First published in Lightspeed Science Fiction & Fantasy (Sep. 2012), edited by John Joseph Adams

• • • •

“The first samovar, the silver one at the end with the little bird perched atop the key, is filled to the top with

Life,” she says, “freshly brewed each morning at sunrise exactly. A few drops will perk up most customers on a Monday morning, to be sure. And most of them need it, don’t you think?”

This is what she says to me—the owner of The Seven Samovars—when I arrive at work the first morning.

“Just a few drops, mind. A full cup...well, a full cup can convince the weary soul ready to close the door and lie down that final time

that perhaps there's a little something left to discover. You will not need so much very often. The last time I served a full cup was nearly...two years ago, now, it must be. David; small coffee, black, every morning with his wife, Judith; large chamomile tea with a spoon of raspberry jam. That's the Russian way to take tea; a spoonful of jam in the tea instead of sugar.

“Every morning for three years they come in. Every morning but the Sabbath, of course. Very proper. We

say hello and they sit and read the paper. Together, always together. They came here to live with their son, Paul: large latte, extra cream with a shot of hazelnut syrup. They survived the war, you know. He was a watchmaker, and they got out of Europe in time, but most of their family was long gone. Anyway, three years, nearly every morning, always together. And then one day, two days, three days, nothing. The fourth day, David's here by himself. What happened, I ask? It's a stroke, he says.

Doctor's not sure if she'll wake or if she does, how much of her will be left.

“He stands there, then. The line is out the door, but he's so lost. Small coffee, black. Every day for three years, but he can't remember. She always ordered first, you see. So I give him a cup. Full. And you'd have done the same, I'm sure. You can just tell who needs it. I made him drink it right there, never mind the rest of the line.

“And he finished his cup and

handed it back to me. He stood a little taller, and got his regular. Small coffee, black. And he asked for one more of those “fancy drinks” I’d just given him. He was going to take it to the hospital for his wife, and see if the smell might not just bring her around.

“A solid recovery. That’s what the doctor said, David told me ‘a solid recovery’, which made us both laugh. What do doctors know anyway, he said. Within a week, they were back to the same old routine,

and two years more she lived. They died on the same day, then, in Paul's house.

“So, you see, you will not need a full cup of life very often, but you will know when it is time.”

It must be the early morning hour because I say nothing. What on earth can I say? I met Erzebet—“Call me Betty, dear”—yesterday when I came in for a coffee and saw the Help Wanted sign sitting next to the shortbread. I look askance at her as she's tying her apron on, as if the

words coming out of her mouth were normal everyday things and not the words of a crazy person. And there's no way I'm calling her "Betty".

Now we're standing in front of the eponymous samovars, which sit on the long counter behind the register, to one side of the modern espresso machine. I'd only even seen the antique water boilers in museums before. Each has an elaborately worked or painted urn that sits atop a small stand with just enough room to place a cup beneath

the spigot. Two are silver, three are brass, one is white and blue porcelain and the one in the center is enameled, painted black with red and pink flowers. I'm pleasantly surprised the samovars are in use, though they don't look electric. When I walked in yesterday I just thought they were decorative.

And now I find out she thinks...I don't know what to think about what she just said. I look back at the front door. No. Leaving now would be a record even for me; gone before

the store even opened. And the morning started out so well. I was familiar with the burr grinder and the espresso machine from my previous place, so I'd been on autopilot for the first few minutes, her gentle patter nearly lulling me back to sleep with its coffee shop familiarity.

“Cream, milk, and soy here. There's a rush at 2:45 every day as the high school across the street lets out and another at 4:30 as the lawyers get ready for their late nights. Let me

show you how to ring up a sale. The baker, my brother, Sandor..." She gestures to the tall man with the brush mustache, setting kolaches and blueberry scones on the wooden boards inside the display case, and lowers her voice to continue. "He comes in at three every morning to begin baking the pastries. He also lays them out in the counter." She rolls her eyes. "Let him do it. He's an artist and very particular."

I looked over at her brother. He obviously heard her, but said

nothing. He was putting pain au chocolat on a tiered stand, and looked at the display for a few seconds before deliberately placing each subsequent pastry.

All normal. And then, wham. The waters of life or whatever she thinks is in that thing. For sale with your morning muffin.

Erzebet moved further down the counter. I gathered my wits and tried to pay attention. If she was diving headfirst into crazy, at least it would make for a few good tweets.

“The second one, right here, contains the waters of Lethe.” This samovar is brass and shaped like a fat little barrel on its side, standing on a small base worked to look like a chicken’s foot. The spigot and key are a golden beak and cock’s comb. She turns to me with a concerned and questioning look on her face. “You know that one, yes?” And I realize with some surprise that I do. Thanks Edith Hamilton, wherever you are.

“Um... The River of

Forgetfulness, right?"

She beams and pats me on the arm. "It's nice to meet a girl who has her classics down. A lot of use you'll get from that later." She turns back to the samovar. "I get a gallon delivered every two weeks—I'm too old now to be traipsing down there and back again that often—but I do doctor it up a little. Very dangerous in excess, as you might imagine, but just the thing for the wounded soul who needs a little distance."

She gestures to the set of

mismatched teacups and saucers that cluster around the samovar's foot. "To be served in bone china for utmost potency, but..." and here she pointed at me with a sharp look. "They must be triple rinsed after or there's hell to pay.

"The previous girl, Antigone—five shots of vanilla syrup in a small coffee with extra whipped cream—I should have known right then that it would never work out. She forgot and only ran them through the sterilizer twice, even though I had

been very specific. And that afternoon, we had the ladies of the Scarlet Hat Society for their monthly tea.

“They want the whole proper set up. Scones with sour cherry jam and clotted cream. I get Sandor to do them some sandwiches—which he complains about, doesn’t he, every month, but they keep getting fancier, as if I can’t see. Last month, it was salmon mousse piped onto pumpernickel squares with a dill crème fraiche.” She paused for a

second to peek over at her brother, still messing with the display. “Dill crème fraiche, I tell you.” She shook her head. “And then in the middle of the tea, Dorcas Littlefield, normally a tall, nonfat latte with soymilk, but Lapsang Souchong with lemon that day, drops her cup with a clatter, jumps up and whirls around, staring at the group.

“What am I doing here? Where’s Charlie?” she asks. That was her husband—coffee with a little milk only, if I recall, which I’m sure I do,

though nearly twenty years now he's been dead. And then she pulls the hat off her head and looks down at herself in that—I'll say it, rather unflattering purple dress that was cut too low for her and she should have known it—she looks at herself and shouts out—and please excuse my language dear, but the story requires it—she shouts out 'And what the FUCK am I wearing?!' and throws that scarlet tragedy of a hat onto the floor.

“Well... You can imagine, I'm

sure, what happened then. Tears and shouting; gasps of horror. You've seen the sort. The sandwiches ended up on the floor and I lost three teacups and a saucer. They calmed her down and called her daughter, but done was done. The last twenty years, nearly all gone. Her children, her husband's death, the birth of her first grandson. A terrible tragedy, really, and all because that fool girl couldn't be bothered to hit 'Sani-Rinse' one more time."

I've stopped moving after her

and stand frozen at the corner of the counter and loony bin lane. Holy shit, this woman is nuts. Her brother is back in the kitchen, but he must hear the sound of my jaw hitting the floor because he sticks his head through the door. “Erzebet, enough.” She looks at him and frowns, annoyed.

“Yes, yes, Sandor. I know.” She reaches out and takes a clear glass mug from the open shelf nearby, and fills it from the third samovar, the porcelain one, white with large blue

flowers painted on. The liquid is thick like kefir as it flows from the small golden faucet. When she hands it to me, I hesitate. I briefly consider that she might be poisoning me, but, then again, The Seven Samovars had been packed yesterday when I came in and poisoning customers (and staff) was surely bad for business.

Erzebet waits, patiently, until, at last, I bring it to my mouth and take a tentative sip. It's pale gold, cool and delicious, redolent of apples and something else.

“What is it?” I ask.

“It makes people tell the truth,” she says, suddenly serious. “It is the most terrible of my offerings.” She takes the cup out of my hands before I can take another sip. “That’s enough, then. How do you feel?”

I think about it. “Weirdly calm,” I say, and realize it is, in fact, the truth. She hands me a poppy seed kolache and I eat it in two bites.

“And what are you thinking of me right now?”

My mouth opens before I can

think. “That you must be crazy, with all this talk of Life and Lethe and whatever’s in those other ones, but your brother makes great pastries, and I really need this job because I got fired from my temp job yesterday. It smells really good in here, and I think I’m starting to believe that whatever that is I drank really does make people tell the truth, since I never talk like this and it makes me wonder what’s in the other ones and if this whole thing is for real.”

I took a deep breath and felt like I'd finished a short sprint. Erzebet nods and puts the cup under the counter in a dishpan bound for the kitchen. "That's about what I expected." She smiles. "I told Sandor you'd do fine. I knew as soon as you ordered yesterday. Large coffee, one sugar, with a small splash of milk. A sensible drink for a sensible mind. A little rich, a little sweet, but not trying to hide that solid bitterness underneath. Perfect for what I had in mind."

What did she have in mind? But again, she's talking before I can ask my question.

“Well, let's continue. We have a bit more to cover before the shop opens.”

We're now at the center of the counter and the black samovar sits low and squat, like it's somehow guarding the others and being guarded by them at the same time. Hand-painted with peonies and chrysanthemums in shocking shades of pink and red, they draw the eye

into swirls of petals and ruffled edges. It sits on little brass feet inside a matching tray with an ornate bowl worked like a large leaf set beneath the tap.

“It looks Russian,” I say, since I have to tell the truth. But the truth, I realize at this point, is that I have no idea why I’m still here listening to all this. But I am, and I don’t seem to be going anywhere. What has my life come to that I am considering staying here?

That kolache was really good.

I have surprised her. Erzebet laughs. "Yes, it is Russian. Very good. It belonged to Maria Feodorovna, mother of the last Tsar. A distant relative by marriage of a cousin of mine." She makes a small expression of distaste, but I can't tell if it's for the Tsarina or her cousin.

"Starlight goes in this one. You must collect it only on cold, clear nights. It is to be boiled down for seven hours, seven minutes and seven seconds exactly. Drinking it produces dreams and visions for

when a person needs that sort of thing.

“We have a group of Moroccans who come in every other Thursday to argue about the Qur’an and poetry and drink hot mint tea. They tell me that my mint tea is the best outside Rabat, and ask how I do it, which I never tell them, but the secret is two sprigs of lemon verbena and one of basil mixed in with the mint. I grow all three in golden pots sitting in my kitchen window; facing east, of course.

“Adil Ali Boulami—espresso with five sugars when it’s not mint tea—he is the main instigator of their arguments. I give him the starlight quite often. His grandfather was a Sufi mystic and Adil Ali has a power of his own. His poetry demands the starlight, even if the others don’t believe me when I tell them what I’m pouring into his glass. People don’t always get what they want in their dreams, I’m sure you understand, but poets...they are always pulling out their dreams to capture on paper, so

they are not afraid.

“But. You must never serve it during the dark of the moon, even to the poets.” She shudders. “Some doors must stay closed.”

I didn't even have time to react to that one before she blew my mind again.

“I keep Death in the fifth samovar,” she gestures to the other silver one, the tallest and most complicated of them all. Intimidating really. It takes me a few seconds to absorb her words and I

must have made a sound without realizing it because she nods and continues.

“Yes, dear, Death. Poison, really.” She sighs. “No matter what the spy novels say, it’s nearly impossible to create something colorless, odorless, tasteless, and untraceable, yet completely lethal, but I keep trying. At the moment, ours tastes like pink lemonade. I place an almond on the plate beneath the tap to remind myself not to give it out to children at tea.”

Holy crap. Wrong turn. Poison? Can she be serious? “You can’t be...” I trail off at the look on her face.

“Oh, I’m very serious, dear. Some come here for my Death specifically. I’m well known for it. Gentle and sure, Erzebet’s Death is; that’s what they all say. Sometimes that’s the way you want it, though you’re probably too young to have such thoughts. Wait until you’re my age.

She brightened. “But Death is the most useful to mix with the others. A few drops with Love to let someone

go. Or one full shot mixed with the Truth to believe your own lies.

“I’ve only had to kill a dream once, though, in all this time. Death and Starlight make a bitter drink, and I wept alongside her as she drank the cup dry.” She sighs. “A sad day.” Then she smiles. “Not like today. New apprentices always make me happy.”

Wait. What? “What do you mean ‘apprentice’? I’m your new barista. Nothing else.”

Erzebet laughed. “Are you sure?

The sign on the counter appears to the right person, you know. After that disaster with the last girl, I tweaked the spell. A sensible girl. A practical girl. I told you. I knew as soon as you ordered.

“And anyone else would have run out of the shop long before now.”

She gestures to the last two, brass, on the counter, the ones closest to the register. “The sixth is for Love, and what do you think it tastes like?”

“I’m here to make espresso, not serve Love to the heartsick.” But I’m inhaling deeply before I can stop myself. “Cherries?”

“Oh, cherries? I haven’t had someone with cherries in the longest time. Not since my late cousin Elek met his future bride, Magdolna, on the street out front. Goodness, what a wedding. Seven children and all of them full of color and ideas and...” She winked at me. “You could have an interesting time ahead of you, I’m sure, if you want to try a sip.” I blush,

but think about coming back to it later.

Maybe.

“Love tastes different for everyone; I can tell from the smell, usually, but not always. Vanilla with cinnamon is quite common, but then again, most loves are, don’t you think? Everyday things that keep their feet moving forward, but nothing special. But my Love will thaw the coldest heart, I guarantee it. Only my mother made better.

“We have a writer, Annika—

normally Darjeeling with milk and honey—who comes in for a cup of Love on the last Friday of the month before she meets her lover. I can tell because her Love smells of oranges and fennel and honey—a wild love—but you would not know for looking at her. A girl should never go out without lipstick, I always say, but obviously her lover doesn't seem to mind.

“And whatever your Love tastes like, it always goes well with chocolate.” She showed me a small

basket of chocolate bars wrapped in pink foil on the front counter by the register. “It’s the one thing I won’t let Sandor do. I grind the chocolate with chiles and almonds and turmeric; it inflames the tongue and prepares the heart.”

Life. Death. Love. Dreams. Witch. Apprentice. What did I get myself into?

And clearly, at this point, I’m staying. Why? Do I...want this? Do I acknowledge to myself that I felt right from the minute I walked in

yesterday? That I knew I was going to apply to work here even before I ordered my drink? I don't know what to think.

“And what's in the last one?” I ask before I can help it. What else could there be?

“The seventh... ?” She's surprised, as if it weren't obvious. “The seventh one contains coffee. What else? Strong-brewed with cinnamon and vanilla.” And just to prove it, she puts a cup beneath the little brass faucet, turns the key and pulls a full

mug. The spicy scent of the coffee, already sharp in the air from the espresso machine, takes on new overtones. She sits the cup in front of me, and I realize I need it.

“This is for when the real work needs to be done, when decisions must be made. Love and Death and Starlight will only take a person so far, you know. Living requires hard work no matter what the drink, and sometimes there’s nothing to do but sit down, have a cup of coffee and talk about it.

“Besides, crafting the rest of them requires long hours and I need the coffee to get going in the morning.”

I take a deep drink. It's so hot it scalds my tongue and the roof of my mouth, but I like how it makes me feel. Sharp and present. Like I'm right here. Ready for anything. And I realize that with my coffee, I had decided. I'd stay and see how it went.

And now we're at the register. To my right, Sandor has finally finished and the wooden boards are regally piled with almond horns and small

quiches and rugelach. He makes one last adjustment to a pile of molasses-brown spice cookies and is satisfied at last. Erzebet touches his arm in thanks as he passes by, and he nods at us both before and goes back to the kitchen.

“Double sweet green tea; a gentle drink for someone so particular, really...” She turns back to me. “Customers coming in for a latte or a cup of chamomile on a bad day will ask you about the samovars. Most think as you did, that they are just for

decoration. You just tell them that when they need what the samovars hold, it will be waiting for them.

“You have it clear, then? Yes?”

I nodded. What the hell. When she first mentioned “other duties, as assigned,” I assumed she meant cleaning the bathrooms and running deliveries. Instead...Let’s give being a witch a try.

Erzebet smiled and in her expression, I could see my entire conversation with myself writ large.

“Perfect. I just know this is going

to work. A sensible drink tells true, I always say. Now open the door and let us see who must be taken care of today. My samovars are full, and the water is boiling.”



Nicole M. Taylor

Nicole M. Taylor became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Excision” in Brain Harvest (Feb. 2011), edited by Shane Hoversten & Eden Robins. Visit her website at www.nicolemtaylor.com.

A Spoonful of Salt

by Nicole M. Taylor

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This is not the story that Naomi told when the story men came to collect all of our

memories. Instead, she told about her granny and the blue cookie jar. Marco was a dead man and a sore point by then.

Marco was Naomi's first and only love from the time she was fourteen, which might seem young to you. It might have been kinder, though, had she started going with him a bit sooner. They only got three years of hand-holding and walk-taking and four months as man and wife before he passed. Even here, where lives are often mean little

things, it didn't seem fair.

Marco was a sailor, which is the usual occupation for our men. He crewed on his uncle's rig and he died there with the rest of them when it went down during a late November squall. Of course, Naomi was hundreds of miles away and had no way of knowing about that when she walked into the kitchen one morning and found her husband sitting at the table.

Now, Naomi had been without Marco for going on a month and a

half and her own daddy was a sailor as well. She was well used to being alone, as all us women are. It can be frightening. The island is small and we know the men, their names and the names of their mommas and sisters. But that didn't stop the fearing, not altogether. It was a kind of ticking, a working like a machine in the back of your head. Each woman on the island kept a running tally of each sharpened-edged, deadly thing in her home. For Naomi, it was the long rifle in the back of the

closet, the six wooden handled knives in the kitchen draw, even the heavy carriage clock that her daddy'd made her for a wedding present.

And so when she saw Marco sitting there, she was just standing still, but her mind was zipping away all "how am I going to get to the closet?" or "how am I to open the knife draw without his hearing?" Because, by all rights, Marco should have been weeks away across the water right at that very moment (right at that very moment, Marco

was floating in the cold ocean making dinner for the fish, but of course Naomi didn't know that.)

But he was just there, Marco. He was just sitting and staring down at his hands like he was noticing them for the first time. He didn't look particularly dangerous. He looked like her husband, the good boy she'd known her whole life.

"Marco?" she said, with her hand resting but not moving on the knife draw. He turned to look at her, but he did it real slow and when he saw

her, he didn't seem to know her at all.

Naomi pulled out the draw and it make a little wheely creak. Marco's face didn't move at all.

"Naomi," is what he said finally, and it said it like she was some old friend he hadn't seen in years. Like he was proud of himself for remembering her name.

Naomi was a practical sort. You see a lot of antsy girls get married before they're ready; still too young and feckless to keep a house, let

alone a husband. Naomi wasn't like that; you could eat off her floors and, though he wasn't around long, you never caught Marco complaining. Being like she was, Naomi couldn't help wondering if maybe it wasn't more likely that she was having a sort of wild daydream than that her husband had up and appeared like magic at her kitchen table, right next to a piece of blueberry pie wrapped in waxy paper.

She backed out of the kitchen without saying a word and went

across the way to Elia DuPree's place. Elia was about five years older than Naomi and she was in the habit of giving advice to the girl, as is often the case in the friendships of women.

This was a Saturday, so Elia was doing her baking and she was flour-white up to her elbows. "Well, I dunno," she told Naomi, who was pacing around the kitchen like a needy cat. "My daddy died when I was young and my mama was always telling about how she saw him the night his ship went down upstairs in

our house, going from room to room and checking on us kids.”

“You think Marco’s dead?”

Elia didn’t answer for a real long time. “That’s not what I said,” she told Naomi. But it sure sounded like that was what she had meant. You might think Elia was scaring Naomi for no reason, just being superstitious. And maybe she was, but she’d thought about it and between Naomi Smalls going off her head and a sailor dying at sea with a bit of funny business, she knew

which was more likely.

Naomi had prepared herself for the idea that Marco might not come back to her; or she thought she had. Listening to Elia, she couldn't help but wonder if she had known, somewhere in the hidden parts of her heart, that something terrible had happened.

She started crying, right there in Elia's kitchen and Elia came right over and held on to her, though she left white dust on her shoulders and her back.

Naomi didn't go home for another forty minutes and she didn't expect to find anything when she did. It was a blessing, she supposed. This way she'd have time to prepare for the funeral and for the pitiful looks she'd get around town. She'd looked that way herself at those sad little widows with their teenage faces.

But when she got back, Marco was still there. He'd moved into the sitting room and he was just standing in the corner, looking down at the unfinished cradle that

sat there.

Naomi had been hoping hard for a baby, but her monthlies had stubbornly come just as regular as rain in the spring. Hating to see her so down in the mouth, Marco started work on the cradle. He told her he had to get a move on, because when he got back, he was going to give her a little baby boy to take care of. Feeling silly, Naomi started crying again.

“I made that,” Marco declared, pointed at the cradle. He didn’t seem

troubled by her tears.

“Mmm-hmn,” was all Naomi could manage.

“But I didn’t finish it.”

Naomi crossed the room slowly until she was right up close to him. She could see his chest rise and fall. He smelled like he always did, dirt and briney water and the dusky dried-leaves of his hair.

“You said you would when you came back.”

Marco turned to look at her. He smelled just the same, but his eyes

were all wrong. “I’m sorry,” is what he said. Naomi looked at the cradle, touched it with her fingertips. It was supposed to rock back and forth, but Marco hadn’t gotten to the little mechanism that allowed it to do that. It was stuck, always in-between.

“I missed the way you smell,” the Marco told her, and he gathered her up in his arms and Naomi let him because he looked just like her husband. “Ocean only smells one way,” he muttered into her hair. “All sorts of smells on you. I can smell the

blood in your heart. In here.” He laid one hand flat against the little rises and falls of her rib bones.

He tasted of salt. Not human sweat-salt, but like a spoonful of it. Naomi half-expected to see him melting in the places where her mouth had been.

He took her into the bedroom she had shared with her husband. Naomi began to lift her housedress over her head, but she stopped when she saw he was just standing there, not undoing his shirt or trousers like

he usually would. He was waiting for her, she realized. As if he didn't know how.

"I'm sorry," he said again, as she unhooked button after button, concentrating on them real hard because her hands had started shaking.

He was very cold. His skin was cold, his breath made clouds in the air. She felt frozen underneath him. She watched her own skin turn bone white and then pale blue, like it was happening to someone else. Her

body didn't know him, she didn't open up and welcome him. It wasn't like with Marco at all.

When he was done, he lay still on top of her, his arms spread out over hers. For a moment, she was afraid he was going to want to stay like that all night. Marco had been terrible about stealing the covers and he used to throw his leg over hers in the night. But Naomi didn't know how she was going to sleep with all that cold heaviness on her. She could hardly breathe.

She reached out, touched his hair and grazed her fingernails over the place where his hairline vanished into his neck. When she used to do that to Marco, he would shiver all over. And she, lying close, would be able to feel the brittle gooseflesh that rose up on him. “What are you?” she asked him.

“I’m...a wish,” he answered. And then she must have slept, because the next thing she knew, it was morning and the sun was coming in orange through the windows. She’d slept

away a whole afternoon and night.

Sixteen days later, the letter came, telling all about when and how Marco had died. Nine months later, Naomi's only daughter Mala was born.

There was all sorts of nasty talk in town about Marco's best friend Eli or the teacher up to the school, Mr. Brubaker. But those of us that knew Naomi and had heard the story firsthand, never did but believe her. The strangest thing, she said, was how in the morning there was no

sign of the man-shaped thing. Except for a little pile of white salt on the undisturbed quilt next to her. I saw it for myself, almost a handful of big, coarse grains. It looked like sea-salt.



I am sad to say that Mala never got much love from this island or the folks on it. Not even when she was just a little thing. In school, she got a reputation for hissing like a cat, and for biting, even though she only did that the one time. At lunchtime, she

sat alone on the low slope of the outhouse roof reading something stolen from the school library. Once or twice some shiny young teacher would try to pull her down, but all they ever got was pine cones thrown at their heads.

Most every day, a group of tough boys, mean-mouthed boys used to chase her all the way home. But they were noisy, beating the underbrush with hasty-cut switches and they were slow. They seldom caught her.

When they did, Mala went to her

mother and submitted to her tender doctoring. It probably wasn't right, but Naomi almost relished those days. Normally, Mala was prickly as a burdock and it was only in the cleaning of scrapes, the bandaging of cuts, that Mala allowed her mother to touch her at all.

Naomi was a sad woman. She still missed Marco every day, and it was so fierce even after all those years that she sometimes wondered if a person could have an abscess in their heart as her grandfather had in his

leg. Something that only pretended to heal for a little while but always opened up once again and wept. Sometimes, she went down to the shore and did watercolor pictures of the water and lighthouse and she missed Marco while she hung them up and she missed Marco while she stirred the stew for dinner and she missed Marco when she kissed their baby goodnight and then she crawled into her empty bed and missed him all night long.

If Mala were more like other

children, if she gave hugs and kisses and laughed more and frowned less, Naomi might well have been a bit more cheerful. If Mala was a little easier to understand, Naomi might have loved her easier. But no one could ever love a child more. And as Mala grew up and Naomi grew older, she learned to be grateful for her odd girl. Mala, after all, would never marry and leave her alone. Mala would never leave the island for a job in the cities. Mala wouldn't ever get so old that she didn't still need her

mother to take care of her, even if it was only in the smallest ways.

And the years went on and Mala wasn't a child no more and they lived together in that little cottage and made an island of themselves. That, more or less, was how things were going along before the story men came.

Dr. Benjamin wasn't a real doctor. Not the kind that heals people, though we could have used one of that sort. He was just another man writing things down in

notebooks, but “Doctor” was how he introduced himself and that’s how his men always called him, so didn’t none of us argue with it.

By then, we were used to people like him coming to the island to study it. Sometimes it was the birds or the trees or the sand or even the tides. As if there was anything to know about tides that any one of us couldn’t have told them. But Dr. Benjamin came to the island to study us.

We took to calling it the Story

Eater, that machine he brought along with him. It had a metal horn on one end, like the blossom of a lily flower and a big wheel of yellowed wax around the bottom. "Going down to the shore," we'd say to one another, "gotta feed the Eater." And then we'd take the skinny black path down to the water's edge, where Dr. Benjamin and his people were living in their white tents, stakes drove deep into the ground like they meant to stay.

From me, Dr. Benjamin got a story about Mama Lavalie, who

steals the breath from the lungs of babies, among other things. Naomi gave him the one about the cookie jar, like I said. Others told about witches and ghosts and their own lives, whatever he wanted to hear. And Dr. Benjamin wanted to hear everything. The Eater was always hungry.

It was curiosity that drove most people down the shore to him, and perseverance. Look at any manner of strangeness long enough and it starts to become the shape of the land. By

the time Dr. Benjamin had been camped out for half a year, those tents might have grown there, or washed in from the sea.

Dr. Benjamin came in the spring, an odd and gentle one for us. He stayed on through the summer and into the fall and, after a while, we stopped expecting him to leave. He got to be such an accepted sight that we was all just as surprised as him when the first big squall of winter came in and near washed him out to sea.

It poured miserable, dashing, sideways rain for hours on end. The sky boomed and lit up yellow with lightning. Dr. Benjamin's tents collapsed under the weight of that water, spilling and gathering in them like in a woman's burdened apron. Or else they just blew right out of the sand. Dr. Benjamin, he was running, running, running back and forth from one tent to another, trying to save his Story Eater and those pasty wax circles he's spent so long collecting. He was piling them all up

in an alcove on the sea wall and, once, he looked up. Mala was sitting there on the top of the wall. She wasn't wearing a rain slicker or even shoes and she was just looking at him like he was a rat, like he was a bug. Like he was something with too many eyes and too many legs and all she wanted to know was what ridiculous thing he was going to do next.

“Can you help me?” he shouted over the wind. His men were running forward and backward

around him, like water flowing around a stone. Later, he would think it was funny how no one seemed to take notice of the the girl on the wall.

Mala didn't say anything to him. He stayed too long, looking up at her studying face. Eventually, he ran back to his tent, filled up his arms with more stories and tried to protect them with his own body as he ran. Mala on the wall didn't move.

In the end, it wasn't so great a loss as it might have been. A few of

the wax wheels were ruined but most survived. And in those days after the storm, Dr. Benjamin spent most of his time writing lists of everything he was missing and making plans to build shelters more stout and more permanent. There was nothing gone that could not be replaced.

He called up on Bethel Ellison special, asked him to come down and “sit for him.” It was because Ellison’s wax wheel had been destroyed, of course we knew that. But Bethel still walked with a bit of a spring in his

step down the black rock way. He was the only one, after all, that Dr. Benjamin had asked back personally. It must have been a memorable story.

When he got there, it was almost exactly like before. They'd set up the tent again and Dr. Benjamin had his little wooden desk (the wood was soft and splitting down by the legs now, though). All the wax wheels were stacked up behind him still, but now they were uneven and jumbled, listing into each other. And there was

Mala. She was just standing in the corner, not looking at anything in particular. Dr. Benjamin didn't say anything and Bethel didn't say anything and it was like she was a lamp or a table.

Dr. Benjamin said what he always did: "what would you like to share today?"

But of course old Bethel knew that he wanted the story he'd lost. It was the one about him and his father and the little drowned boy that they found in the harbor. More than forty

years out from it, and Bethel still remembered the way the boy's shirt had slid and slid against his hands. And the sick swooping in his stomach when he realized that it wasn't just the boy's clothes, but his skin that had come undone and was sliding around.

He tried to tell his tale just as he done before. It was one he had shared often enough to have a bit of a speech for it. He knew the edges of it they way he might have learned to understand a table or a chair that had

sat in his home for a lifetime.

When he was done, he turned and walked past Mala on his way out, and he was none too happy with that. Island folk didn't see much of Mala and, even those of us kindly disposed towards her would have admitted that we liked it that way. More unsettling still, as he passed her by, Mala stuck out her hand like the two of them had just done a deal. Too surprised to do anything else, Bethel shook her hand. He made a choked noise in his throat, though,

and dropped it quick like a burning thing. Bethel left without looking back. When he was gone, Mala turned to Dr. Benjamin. “Do you want to know a better story about him?” she asked.

“Pardon me?” asked Dr. Benjamin. Two days earlier, Mala had become a regular in the tent. She came in the mornings with the first light and left around sunset. She wouldn’t answer any of Dr. Benjamin’s questions and she just watched while they filed in, told their

stories, filed back out again. At first, he was surprised that we was all speaking so frank in front of her like that. But then Dr. Benjamin realized that Mala was like his white tents. We'd had a lot of practice putting her aside in our minds.

“You asked me to help you. And you want the best stories, right?” Mala asked. Dr. Benjamin gestured for her to take a seat in the story chair in front of him. Mala did so. For the first time since he'd seen her on the wall, there was something uncertain in

her.

“Are you going to turn on your machine?” she asked.

“I’d like to,” Dr. Benjamin admitted. “But I won’t if you don’t want me to.” That was something he had discovered early on: people thinking they was running the show was a hell of a lot more important than people actually running the show.

She looked past him at the Story Eater. “Turn it on,” she said.

Mala sat very still. Most people

telling stories waved their hands, slid them over one another. Most of them flicked their eyes around, looking at Dr. Benjamin and then at the tent walls and then at their own lap. Mala just looked at the Story Eater, watching it draw the shape of her words in the soft wax. And she said:

“When Bethel Ellison was seventeen years old, he married a lady older than himself. When she was eight months gone with her first child, her best friend Annet Davis

came to Bethel and confessed to him that the child was not his, belonged to a boy who did odd jobs down in the marina between benders. Bethel's wife had always loved him, Annet said, and her parents had forbid her to marry him.

Bethel trusted Annet, but his wife was a fine thing. Prettiest girl in the village by far and he was a young man, just starting out and it was quite a thing for him to have her. That all meant little, of course, if she carried another man's child in her

belly. That was like having a handful of sand. And so Bethel waited.

A baby, a girl eventually called Nivi, was born easy, especially for a first child. Bethel did not ask to hold her. Instead, he drew the midwife aside. She was a wise woman as well as a midwife, as many are. Bethel explained himself, his doubts, and asked her to divine the truth for him.

When Nivi was fourteen minutes old, the midwife picked the skin on her new little palm with a silver needle until it bled. She was

not concerned with her caterwauling. Blood welled up and the midwife swirled it on her own index finger. She pushed her finger into her mouth and tasted the blood with a thinking, close-faced look. Then she turned to Bethel with her needle in hand.

Bethel knew even before the midwife began to shake her head.

When she was gone and the house was quiet and the sun had sunk, he took Nivi's mother bleeding and sobbing from her childbed. He

drowned her in the dark green water where the sea met up with the land. He told everyone she had succumbed to the kind of madness that strikes new mothers, that she'd slipped out of the house like a sleepwalker, that he'd found her himself in the surf the next morning. When he told the story, he thought of a dead boy he'd once pulled from the water. He remembered his cold blue skin and the way he was ragged and swollen, worried at by fish. In that way, he contrived to cry.

Most believed him. Those who did not had an idea about the baby she'd carried and they knew that those sorts of women generally came to one bad end or another. Mostly, there was the question of the baby, whom Bethel had still not named. No one would blame him, he knew, if he didn't keep her. He was a man alone and very young still. His house was no place for a little helpless thing.

He gave her to Parson Clarent, who had taken in others of her kind.

There were no secrets for Nivi about where she had come from. But she knew in an unspoken way that she must never come to Bethel, for aid or for information or any sort of familiarity at all. Outside, of course, what was to be considered reasonable between neighbors.

She saw him as she grew. In the pews on Sunday, down to the shops with the other men. But she had rarely ever spoken more than two words to him. He never re-married. As she grew, she collected the

whispers of others, the suspicions that never quite materialized into words.

And so Nivi looked at Bethel with interest. Was it his hands, his ordinary brown hands, that had pushed her mother's head down under the water? Had he watched her hair and her skirts floating and the bubbles dying? She didn't know if she hated him. After all, she had not known her mother. Perhaps spending her childhood with a slut and a cuckold would have been

worse than the Parson's house where the only sounds were catechisms being recited.

But sometimes when Nivi looked at him, across a street or over the top of a hymnal, she thought he looked sad. Sometimes, Bethel looked back at her and he thought about the soft, liquid sound of her, the shift and stretch he had felt with his head resting easy against his wife's round belly."

Dr. Benjamin stared at Mala, letting the Eater's needle run around

and around, drawing nothing in the yellow wax. Unthinking fingers reached into his pocket, brought out a red and white hard candy in crinkly cello-paper. He popped it into his mouth and sucked thoughtfully.

“How do you know that story, Miss?” he asked Mala.

Mala hesitated. “I...like stories. I’m a good reader.”

“But, I mean, did he tell you those things? He couldn’t have, could he?”

Mala gestured towards the

spinning Eater. It broke Dr. Benjamin out of his spell and he dashed for the machine, shutting it off all a fumble-fingers.

“Would you like more?” Mala asked him. “I can get you more.”

Dr. Benjamin rested his hand on top of the Eater, like it was a little child that needed his comforting.

“Yes, I’d like that very much.”



The last time the mean-mouthed boys chased Mala, she was thirteen.

She hadn't started her bleed yet, but she had the look of a young woman already. She was tall, like Marco and she had a round bottom like her Mama had. If she wasn't Mala, the boys might have chased her in a different sort of way.

The Ferris boy was running after her and that whole family was trash, washed in like scum from the sea. He called out "hiiii-ya!" and smacked the heads off flowers with a stick as he went. He only got Mala because he jumped her from the low branch

of a tree.

“What now, Spazzy?” he sneered, holding her arms down and driving his elbows into her ribcage.

Mala didn't give him no words, just snarled and kicked at him. First, he set to fighting her, laughing and forcing her into the dirt with his knees and all the sharp points of him. Then, as Mala watched, something funny moved over his face.

He moved his knee along Mala's leg, high up on her thigh. He face looked strange; scared, even. Like he

was one being held down.

And this is what Mala learned:

The Ferris boy's father was a mean drunk. He couldn't keep a position on a boat; he messed around with the wives of men at sea. He never had a kind word or a soft touch for his wife or any of his three boys.

"I am your father," he used to tell the Ferris boy, who was the oldest boy. "I'm owed."

The Ferris boy did a man's work around the place. He chopped wood

and repaired the cottage in winter. He tore his hands and bent his back down at the docks, picking up odd jobs for small sums, all to pay back that bottomless debt he owed just for being born.

“Don’t go out in the Midsummer night,” his mother told him every year. “Mama Lavalie walks and she’s taking folks to fill out her court.”

“Don’t go out in the Midsummer night,” she reminded him when he was 10. She said it with a rich purple bruise on the side of her face; a little

crusting of blood left over because it hurt too much to wipe away. The Ferris boy looked at the table set with mealy bread, thin soup, all that left to them.

He worked so hard, almost wore through his little bones. He raised more money that week than he'd seen in his whole life. It was like a kind of dying, handing it over to the man who imported the fancy liquor.

Yellow whiskey, the color of amber beads like ladies on the mainland wore. A whole bottle of it.

He gave it to his father and said it was to repay him. Already in his cups, the man could only nod. It was just what he knew himself to deserve. The Ferris boy looked at him and he'd never hated a thing so much.

The Ferris boy left his father reclining on the lawn, with the glass bottle crooked in his arm, held more tenderly than he'd ever held his own babies. The Ferris boy locked the windows and the doors. He sat up all night.

When the pounding came, the

shouting, the cursing and the screaming, the Ferris boy sat and waited. His mother woke up and sat beside him. She didn't make no moves for the door. She brought him a blanket for his shoulders and wrapped it around him like he was still a child.

The boy never saw his father again. The Ferrises ate better after that.

While Mala was learning this, the Ferris boy was crushing her with his chest, pushing against her and

making strange little noises in the back of his throat. But he'd been dumb and thrown his stick away where Mala could reach for it. One end, broken carelessly off a tree, came to a mean point.

Mala stabbed him deep in the thigh. "Don't you ever touch me again," she said, standing over him while he screamed. "None of you. None of you touch me." Mala brandished the stick to show she meant business. "I can tell them what you did."

Those boys never did chase Mala again and, from then on, she read fewer books and watched her classmates instead.

On her way home from Dr. Benjamin's tents, Mala took the long way through town. She walked through the fruit stands and fish vendors and she spread out her hands and her fingers, just a little bit, not so much that you'd notice.

When she got home, Naomi asked her what she'd done that day and Mala said: "Nothing."

Mala filled six wax wheels by herself. She ruled the tent, coming the morning and not leaving until the dark of the night. And she talked the whole time, only stopping every once in a while to sip a little of the water or the clear liquor that Dr. Benjamin offered her.

She uncovered her neighbors, all their little sins and triumphs. She delighted in secrets, in sacreds and Dr. Benjamin delighted in her. When she spoke, Mala lit up like a

candle in a windstorm, she flickered and bent and danced and seemed to inhabit all the shapes of her stories. Mala, she was a thing to see.

But our island is a small one. Filling all day, every day with stories...sooner or later, Mala was going to run out. Dr. Benjamin could see she'd started to slack her pace. The stories she picked now were less bitter and less vibrant. Mala herself didn't seem so struck by them. She was reaching the end of her supply and that scared the

Doctor.

“Mala,” he said once. It was night, the usual time that Mala would be leaving. “Would you sit next to me?” Dr. Benjamin pulled a chair over by his own. He’d been partaking of some of that clear liquor of his and that was the only way he’d gotten up the nerve to talk to her like that.

Mala looked at him for a long minute, because she wasn’t in the habit of being hasty about much of anything. And then she circled

round the table and sat next to him.

Dr. Benjamin looked at his hands. “Mala,” he said, “do you like living here on the island?”

Mala was confused by the question because Mala wasn't real sure she liked living at all. It was just what she did. But Dr. Benjamin didn't seem to care that she didn't have no answer for him.

“Do you think...do you think you would like to live on the mainland? I could take you there. To the cities. There would be so many

opportunities for someone with your gift.”

“Gift,” Mala repeated, like a magic spell. They were silent together for a moment. Dr. Benjamin drank.

“There are a lot of stories in the cities, aren’t there?” Mala’s books had all suggested that that was the case.

Dr. Benjamin smiled at her. He spread his hands expansively and when he brought them back down again, they rested on her shoulders. “Mala, in the cities, there are so many

stories that you couldn't tell them all even if you talked all day, every day until the end of your life."

That was the first time Dr. Benjamin ever saw Mala smile.

Dr. Benjamin smiled too, but nervously, like an apology. "Can I ask you something?" he whispered. Mala inclined her head. Dr. Benjamin laughed in that way that folk do when nothing is funny. "Could you...could you tell my story?"

Mala leaned forward. She looked

seriously at Dr. Benjamin. He was not very old. She imagined his life in the city had been good and unexciting. But Mala was curious; Mala was always curious.

When she kissed him, he tasted cold and sweet. Peppermint, like his candies. She bet he tasted like that all the time. Maybe everyone in the cities did?

This is what Mala said:

“Once, you had a sister. She was much younger than you and you took care of her.

You parents went away for a living. You and your sister used to run through the stone courtyard and pretend to be pirates. You had nannies and you had maids. But your sister had no one to play pirate with, except you. Even after you were too old for those kinds of game.

One summer, your parents came home for weeks at a time. It was the longest you'd been with them in your whole life. They took you to the beach and you walked behind your sister in the waves and untangled

green ribbons of kelp from in and out of her ankles. She had never seen the ocean before and she didn't even notice you, following along behind and making her safe.

She died in the ocean, drank it and sank. That's what your parents and the doctors told you afterwards. She was a little girl, she could barely swim. There was nothing mysterious about it. But you could remember hands. Green, cold hands. They took your sister and you reached out for her but they were so much stronger

than you were.

Sometimes, in the summer nights, you would drag your hand down the sheets of your bed and remember the feeling of their fingers breaking your grip and pushing you away.

The doctors told you to forget. Your parents told you to forget. They were going to send you to treatment. They were going to take you away from the house and the courtyard and all the small things that were left of her in the world.

And so you learned to forget.

You still spent your summers on the sea.

The hands took her underneath for a princess. You thought for a princess. You could not remember if they ate human folk. But she was such a pretty little girl. How could they not want her? How could they not give her a crown and worship her? So you floated. Disconnected from her, you went up and up and up and rested on the top of the water.

And in that moment, before

your parents found you and pulled you back to shore, you relished it. That cool weightless ease of no one hanging on your hand. Later, you would wonder if you had called them with your wish so secret that you did not even tell it to yourself.”

“They taught you to forget. Do you remember now?” Mala looked steady into Dr. Benjamin’s stricken face. Dr. Benjamin tasted salt. Too much, he leaned over the side of his chair and spat out on to the wooden floor. A streaked white pile landed

there, salt warm and half-melted from the heat of his mouth. He could feel the tumbling grit of the few remaining grains on his tongue and in his teeth.

“I remember,” he said. So much salt and he thirsted from it.



Before Mala was born, Naomi didn't paint. She used to draw in the little paper books her daddy would bring her back from the world, but painting wasn't something she ever

saw a woman do. After Mala, all sorts of things suddenly seemed possible and she was already an odd duck as far as the rest of us were concerned. So while another woman might have spent her evenings knitting or sewing or reading, if there was books to be had, Naomi sat at her kitchen table and spread the white sheets of her sketches all around her.

Mala sat on the floor beside her and traced the grooves between the soft white boards. “Baby, do you

think we should plant poppies alongside the house this year?" Naomi asked her girl. She did not expect an answer because that sort of thing wasn't of no concern to Mala, but we do all like to hear a human voice, even if it's our own.

Mala shrugged her shoulders. "I won't be here when they bloom."

Naomi laid down her sketch. Her charcoal pencil rolled in among the curls of her papers. "What?"

Mala tucked her pinky nail into the dark little crack between boards.

“I’m going to go away,” Mala said. Naomi shook her head without words, her mouth worked all useless. “The stories here...” Mala struggled to explain, “they’re...dead now. He put them in his machine. I need to find new ones.”

“Mala,” Naomi made her voice low and reasonable, “you can’t leave. You don’t know how to take care of yourself. People will hurt you.” Mala just stared, thinking about those boys who chased her. Hurting was everywhere.

Naomi's voice rose, her eyes got bright, like black stones washed in with the tide and glistening. "Mala, you need me. I'm your mother, no one else is going to care for you."

"There's nothing here anymore," said Mala.

"I'm here." Naomi choked a little on the words. She could feel her heart beating hard in her throat and her chest, it was like panic, it was like fighting. If Mala had apologized, or reached out for her mother's hand, she might have soothed some torn

up thing inside Naomi. But that wasn't in Mala's nature. Instead she just looked at her mother with that flat stare, like she was looking through her. That look of hers that always said there wasn't anything to see.

“You're not even a person!” Naomi screamed it, she stalked into the kitchen and opened one of the wooden cupboards so hard it made a slam-crash noise against the other cabinets. She threw a glass vial at Mala, stopped up on one end with

cork. It hit the floor in front of her and the stopper tumbled out. White grains spilled out, some landed on the floorboards, some on Mala's skin. "That's all you are," Naomi was shaking, Naomi was white. Naomi held on to herself with both arms.

Six little grains clustered on Mala's bare knee. She licked her index finger, scooped them up. She pressed them against her tongue.

* * *

"They're hollow inside. They're

made of breath and dust and sea water. They can't have anything heavy inside of them, it falls through their body and rips them apart so they must be remade. But they can carry things for a little while.

My daddy sank like your sister. He was a fisherman. When he died, he was thinking about the lines he'd left dragging out in the water. He was thinking about the fish, creeping through them, sides jeweled.

The demons like to look at the dead fisherman. They sink for a time

and the demons float underneath them, let their cold bodies pass through them. For a moment, when that human skin passes through their hollow dust, it is like a pulse.

The demon took my father's kiss. Touched his hair and his shoulders and rode on his hips, wearing my mother's face. Kissed him goodbye, tasted his breath, smelled his blood.

Like each empty thing they ache. For a while, they hold life inside of them. It grows, it pushes, it warms and insists. They hold on for as long

as they can, but it will weight them down. It's too heavy. It would tear them, you see?

The demon brought me to my mother. When I was gone-just the smallest seed of me-the demon felt weightless. It could sink back into the sea and watch for the dead fisherman again. Without me, the demon was bereft; but the demon was wise. The demon knew that I had never belonged inside it. I'd only just rested there for a while."



Long after dark, Mala climbed into Naomi's bed. It was first time something warm and living had laid next to her since Marco'd left for the sea. For a minute, Mala just rested and drew breath in and out and let her mother listen to the sound.

"Please don't leave me alone," Naomi said eventually, her voice got little and teary. "You're mine. You're my wish."

Because she wasn't a cruel girl, Mala stretched out her arms and

awkwardly enfolded her mother. She touched her only gingerly, as if it burned or buzzed, but she touched her. "I'm mine," she said.

Naomi pressed her face into the bend of Mala's arm, drawing warmth and something like comfort from the girl. "Momma?" Mala hadn't called her that, hadn't called her anything since she was just a little thing. "Would you like to hear a story?"

Naomi took to weeping, salt water on her daughter's skin.



The Mad Scientist's Beautiful Daughter by Nicole M. Taylor

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The man in the black coat came on a Wednesday. On Wednesdays, Orla's papa worked in the lab until five o'clock when he took a walk with her around the grey lake. The man in the black coat knocked on the door at 4:37. Orla knew that he would be disruptive and did not want to answer the door but her father smiled at her and urged her forward.

The man in the black coat was very pale. He had brown hair and it

was sticking to his forehead in little raggedy tendrils even though the day was temperate and there had been no rain. Orla wondered if he was sickly. If he was sickly then he definitely couldn't come in. Papa had a very delicate constitution and he was prone to infections.

“Are you ill?” she asked. The man in the black coat looked taken aback and he didn't say anything for a moment. Orla tapped her fingernails on the doorframe.

“Uh... no...” he stammered, “I

haven't slept of late, but it's nothing... nothing..."

"Why are you here?" Orla said.

"Orla!" her papa chided from the next room. "There's no need to be rude!"

"I'm being curt, Papa," Orla called back.

"It is perilously close, my darling," her father replied, but Orla could tell from the tenor of his voice that he had gone back to his book and had likely lost all interest in the exchange.

“I need to speak to the old man.”

Orla frowned, because that was a name for her papa that the villagers had and she did not like it. They should be grateful. Papa was famous and he was the only interesting, the only good thing about their miserable little hamlet.

“He does not do commissioned work any longer,” Orla told the man. This was not entirely true, but she had brought the idea up to Papa many times. Her father was a genius and they had plenty of money and

Orla had long thought that he should be free to pursue his own interests. “Orla, my dear, I do not do it for the money,” was all he had said.

“Please,” said the man at the door. One hand clung whitely to the frame, it looked as though he might break apart the wood with his fingers.

“Let the boy in, Orla,” said Papa from the next room. Orla pursed her lips and reluctantly stepped back from the doorway.

“Thank you.” He reached out, as

if to grasp her hand gratefully, but Orla balled her hands into fists and tucked them deep in her apron's pockets. Visits always overtired Papa, she knew that he would sleep late the next morning and no doubt be grumpy all the rest of the day. Thursdays were shopping days, too, which always added a certain amount of stress to the household.

The man in the black coat closed the study door behind him and Orla went upstairs to the kitchen. She had an idea that she might have a cup of

chamomile before Parse started on dinner.

Orla's father had made Parse for her when she was six and three quarters. He cooked meals for her and Papa, he braided her hair the way she liked it and darned up her dresses when she got rips in them. He even tucked her in at night before going down into the lab and helping Papa (this was when Papa was younger and worked long into the night). Parse didn't speak and sometimes his movements were clumsy and

uncertain. Orla's papa said this was because he was a first draft and he had perfected others like him since. But Orla always understood Parse and she did not want a better version of him.

Parse was waiting in the faded yellow kitchen, standing watchfully over a small kettle that was about to boil. Orla smiled at him and sat down at the table.

* * *

Thursday was shopping day and

Orla did not want to go. But there was nothing in the way of jam in the pantry and she knew that her father had a fondness for jam with his toast in the afternoon. She wished sometimes that she could take Parse with her. That way she would know that she had one friend at least. But Papa quite wisely had said that that was not allowed. Orla herself had lived so long with Parse that she could not even remember a time when his, admittedly unusual, face seemed anything other than friendly

and comforting. But the villagers were not like Orla.

On shopping days, she woke up early to wash her hair specially. It was very long; wet, it swept the backs of her thighs. Parse brushed it patiently until it was dry and straight as pins. He braided it for her and her plait skewed uncertainly to the right, but Parse had very soft, tentative hands. This was the last part of shopping day that Orla enjoyed.

Orla did not like children. They were noisy, unpredictable and

remorseless, like loose firecrackers with sticky little hands. The children in the village seemed to feel similarly about Orla. Their mothers called them in as she passed, but she could see their pert little faces in the windows, eyes empty of anything except curiosity.

“Go on by, missus,” one of those sour-faced mothers would say, standing in the doorway with wet stains on their aprons and their face reddened from long hours in close kitchens. As if Orla would stop, as if

she would wish to stay even one moment longer with any of them.

When she was much younger, Orla had a cautious fondness for the shopkeeper's wife. She did not jeer or snipe at her like the other women and she was tall and pale with lips so red they were nearly purple. She reminded Orla of her own mother and the two of them had a mutual regard for one another. At least until one day when the shopkeeper's wife leaned helpfully over a barrel of white sugar and the cold iron nail she

wore around her neck slipped from her collar. It hung in between them like an accusing question mark.

“Just superstition,” she said, with a bright smile on her purple lips and not in her eyes. Orla said nothing to her. She was nine years old, but she knew what cold iron was for. It kept the evil things out. The shopkeeper’s wife stopped making small talk with Orla after that, though she occasionally looked at the girl with something akin to sympathy. But Orla could still see the faint, curled

outline of the metal she wore close to her heart.

The shopkeeper's son Derek, on the other hand, had never even pretended to be nice. Today he was playing a particularly one-sided game that was a favorite of his. Orla would ask for something, a pound of butter or a loaf of rye bread, and Derek would wrap it up tenderly as a baby in swaddling clothes and then unceremoniously drop it to the floor. Sometimes he would pretend it had been an accident, but most of the

time, he would just smile meanly at her as though daring her to object. Orla never did but only knelt down and collected her parcel.

They both heard the heavy, muffled cracking when he dropped the strawberry jam. Orla stared at the brown package at her feet.

“Replace that,” she said. She did not look at him, but she could imagine the delighted smile spreading across his face.

“Sorry missus, ‘fraid you’ve paid for just the one,” he said sweetly.

“It’s broken,” Orla pointed out. One whole corner of the package was heavy and red. It was getting on the floor, it would stain if he didn’t clean it up soon.

Derek shrugged. He put his hands on the counter between them and leaned heavily towards her. He smiled again, an awful sort of smile. A little rabbit-thought skittered wild across Orla’s mind. There was a long-handled spade on the wall, just behind Derek. It wouldn’t take very much force at all, just one good

swing and... She wondered if it would look anything like seeping, spreading strawberry jam?

Orla reached into the pocket of her sweater and brought out her father's ancient leather wallet once again.

* * *

Back in her gold-colored kitchen, Parse helped Orla unpack the shopping bag. As she pushed the new, unmarred jar of strawberry jam to the back of the ice box, she heard

voices coming from the long hallway. Her father's warm rumble and the uneasy staccato of the man in the black coat. She did not know that he was in today and the thought of it prickled at the back her scalp. People could not be coming and going at all hours. Right now, this very moment, Papa was supposed to be giving Parse his weekly check-up. Orla looked at Parse, cradling the bread to him on the way to the cupboard. Had he even seen Papa at all today?

Orla strayed far as she dared

towards the open doorway. She couldn't see anyone, but she could hear her father clearly.

“-happy to do it,” he was saying. The man breathed out a great, rushing sigh as though he had just been relieved of some impossible burden.

“You have no idea how long-”

Papa interrupted him. “I have always appreciated a man with vision,” he said.

“Vision,” the man in black echoed as though he were hearing the

word for the very first time.

A three o'clock, Orla brought her father toast and black coffee, as she always did. He was crabbed over his long table in the study, drawing something with small, intimate pen scratches. When Orla interrupted him he gave her a distracted kiss on the cheek and had her set the coffee down at the end of the table. It was still there at five o'clock when she came back in preparation for their walk around the lake. The toast was untouched as well. Orla poked at it

with her finger and found the bread soaked through.

“Papa,” Orla said, touching his shoulder gently. He did not look up at her, but that was usual when he was working on something very important. “Did you see Parse today?”

“Parse is fine,” her father soothed. Orla drew her lips into her mouth, bit down hard.

“But what if he isn’t?”

Papa looked up at her and sighed. “Parse is not malfunctioning, my

dear. You need not worry over it.”

“But precautions exist to prevent emergencies,” Orla pointed out. “You say that.”

Papa rubbed his side of his head. His hair was all white now and Orla wondered when exactly the last of the brown had gone. “Child, can you think of no better occupation for your time?”



There was a little room in the deepest part of the laboratory. The

walls were thick and freezing cold, the huge door had a spinning lock larger than a man's hand. If Orla were to shut that door and scream until her throat was dull and raw, no one would hear even the faintest susurrations. Papa called it the "just in case" room. It was where Orla's mother lived, for the time being.

Orla had never known her mother as anything other than what she was now. Her hair was still mostly black and her white face remained unlined. Sometimes, when

Orla looked very hard, she could see the ghosts of freckles that might flare into life, had they ever known the sun. She imagined her skin was dry and cold but she did not know. Even Parse had only ever touched her with thick rubber gauntlets on. Papa promised that someday he would fix her and Orla would be able to hug her mother, touch her face and hear her voice.

Orla had not known that this was not the ordinary way of mothers for a very long time. When she was

eleven years old, she asked her father about the women she had seen in town who saw to their children and swatted at them and held their hands going into shops. Papa had sighed and sat her down on his lap, though she had mostly outgrown such things. He told her about the terrible illness that had stolen her mother's eyes and her tongue and stilled all her limbs. It was something in the blood of her, he told her and she could feel rattle and billow of his breath in his chest. Her mother-Orla's

grandmother-had suffered the same way. Died the same way. But he had spared Mother that.

Her chamber was tall, but not very wide. If she could have stretched out her arms, they would have had to bend at the elbows. Wires blue and black and clear plastic tubes extended into her arms and her legs. There was an oval metal plate that covered her back. Orla had seen it when Parse dressed and washed her mother in the mornings. Machines did her breathing, pushed the blood through

her veins, allowed her to hear Orla's disheartened rapping at the clear plastic of the chamber front. She blinked in response.

Short short long, short long long short, short short short-

It was "upset."

Orla was very good at Morse code. Her father had taught her when she was small, just after he had put Mother in the chamber. Sometimes, she thought she might like it better than talking. There was always plenty of time for her to think about

exactly what she wanted to say. Orla thought that people in general should choose their words with more care.

“Papa took a job,” she rapped out quickly. Her mother blinked.

“Good.”

“Seems different. House changing,” Orla responded. Mother appeared to consider this for a moment, her white and sightless eyes staring into nothingness as they always did.

“17 now,” she blinked. “World changing.”



Two months later, Orla found the man in the black coat in her kitchen. He wasn't wearing his black coat now, but his hair was still sweaty. She had never seen it to be otherwise. He was washing the neat little pile of breakfast dishes that Parse had collected in the sink.

“No,” Orla burst out, anguished. She must have startled him because his whole body gave a hard jolt and the plate in his hand clattered noisily into the sink. Orla rushed over and

picked up the plate, inspecting it for cracks and chips. The china was her mother's. She had hand-painted the little vines around the rim.

"That's not how the dishes go," Orla murmured, after satisfying herself that the plate was undamaged.

"I'm... sorry?" the man managed. "I wanted to help."

"First you rinse and then you scrub and then you soak in the cleaning solution." Orla looked down and was surprised to see how tight her fingers were around the

plate's edges. She set it down tenderly next to its fellows.

"I didn't know," the man told her, sounding subdued. Orla shook her head, like it didn't matter. But she would have felt better if he were gone from her kitchen. He looked out of place here, contrasted the yellow tiles too vividly. Orla found she could not look at him directly.

"If you break one, I have to go to the village and get more," she told him, hoping he would take the hint and leave the dishes to her or to

Parse. He did not move again for the sink, but he didn't move towards the door either.

“You... don't like the village?” he asked her. Orla gave him a look full of disdain and he laughed. “Yes, I suppose that was a stupid question.” He tilted his head to look at her as if a single angle would not do and he required another. “Do you know what your father is building for me?”

“Not my place.” Other than the “just in case” room, Orla was not allowed in her father's laboratory.

The man smiled at her. It was as jittering as the rest of him. "It's something the villagers are going to hate."

"It doesn't matter what he builds," Orla said. Her hands felt heavy and strange at her sides, she picked up an abandoned dishtowel and worried it with numb, ineffectual fingers.

"People don't really like genius," the man said earnestly. "They like the benefits that genius produces and they like the comfort and safety that

it affords them, but no one wants to see the real work done.” He leaned forward, touched Orla’s bare arm. She had expected his skin to be clammy and cold, like that of some creature that made its home deep under rocks and water, but he was warm. So warm, in fact, that she wondered if he would leave a red handprint when he drew back.

“Everyone is always talking about the good of humanity, but Orla, I have never experienced much good in humanity. Individuals,

maybe, but altogether... They lack vision.” Orla found herself nodding along, though she didn’t exactly understand what he meant. How was it that she had never noticed the curious gas-flame blue of his eyes?

“I would not like to think of people like that troubling you, Orla,” he said, still with his hand on her arm. His eyes seemed to dampen, as though someone somewhere had turned down the range. “But that can be fixed, you know.” He looked as though he needed something from

her, some word of encouragement or agreeable gesture. Orla only looked at him, a little uncomfortable and a little apologetic, though she hadn't done anything wrong.

“Someday soon,” he told her, “no one will trouble you at all.”



“Miss!” called the man with gun as Orla made her way towards the door. She slowed but did not stop and she did not turn. Her father had warned her often to be wary of

strangers. This one was particularly strange. Big boy, blond-headed, he looked as though he were...more vivid, or more heavily outlined than everyone else. And, of course, he wore a gun on his belt and did not even try to hide it.

Behind her, the boy laughed. It was deep in his chest and warm, like Orla had made a joke. But Orla rarely made jokes and she hadn't said anything at all to him. "You're leaking," he said, crossing the floor to stand behind her. Orla turned,

looked down towards her feet where indeed there was a white spill of dust and a trail leading away from the counter.

“The flour,” Orla said, shifting her parcels until she could examine it. One corner of the package was gone, had clearly been sheared off with scissors. Orla cupped her hand over it in an attempt to save the rest of the bag. There was a little more than half left.

“C’mon,” said the boy, “we’ll get you another one.”

Orla shook her head. She had no desire to tangle with Derek today. The boy looked quizzically at her and Orla tilted her hand away from the package. White flour gathered in her palm.

“Look,” she said, in a voice so small it was only marginally audible, “he cut it.”

The boy examined the bag carefully and then looked back at Derek, who was dumping wrapped candies into the barrel beside the long counter. “Why?” he asked. Orla

just shrugged. He looked genuinely puzzled, but Papa had told her that sometimes strangers were sneaky and they would try to trick her into talking about him, talking about the work he did.

The boy shook his head. "This must be some sort of mistake. That is not how ladies are treated." Orla had never thought of herself as a lady before. She clutched the parcels, leaking flour and all, tight against her chest and did not look at the boy.

"Excuse me!" he said. Orla

watched as Derek assessed him without speaking. Strangers were only marginally more welcome in the village than Orla and her father.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna replace the gal’s flour?”

Derek folded his arms and smiled his mean little smile that Orla had seen so often. “Not particularly,” he said.

“Did your mother raise you wrong, or are you just a natural asshole?” The boy spoke oddly. Sort

of outsized and flourishing, like the rest of him. It was as though... with each word he was carving his name upon the world. Here, here, and here. This is mine.

Needled, Derek snapped back, “don’t see the need to extend courtesy to the feeb daughter of a grave-robbing freak.” This information did not seem to register with the boy at all; he retained his jovial, sunny expression.

“Well, then, I see no need to further patronize your

establishment.” He turned to Orla, who was watching the exchange with no small amount of trepidation. The boy looped his arm through the crook of Orla’s elbow. He was much taller than her, she had to lift her arm up and it rendered her unsteady. “Miss?” he said, “are you ready to go?” Orla felt smooth, loose and totable as a child’s soft doll.

As they passed by a large display of china plates, factory made and impressed with images of smiling children, long haired dogs; the boy

stretched out a foot and smoothly pulled the entire thing down behind them. The crash came upon them in waves of brittle shattering; Orla flinched. The boy only smiled.



Orla told the boy that he could not walk her to her door and they stopped at the end of the long, winding footpath that led up to the house on the hill. “I’m sorry,” she said, “Routine is...important. To Papa. Visitors upset him.”

The boy nodded thoughtfully and for a moment, the two of them just fidgeted. He was still holding some of her parcels. Orla wondered if she was allowed to ask for them back, or if that was rude. “It’s true, isn’t it?” asked the boy, “what he said about your father.”

Orla bit down on the insides of her lips. “I don’t know. I wouldn’t know. That’s not my job.”

“I’ve upset you,” said the boy.

“Yes,” Orla shifted her packages onto one arm and reached out her

empty hand for the remaining purchases. The boy looked at her grasping hand but just held on to her packages, out of her reach.

“Come with me,” he said, “just for a few moments. Just to talk.”

Orla’s father would not have approved. But he was holding her rye bread and the baking powder and how would she make cookies for tea without baking powder?

He took her around the hill, into the low belly of the valley where the grass grew tall and wildflowers

pushed through the unfriendly earth in blue, in red, in yellow spikes. The boy sat down on the ground, still holding Orla's packages against him. Orla sat down beside him, smoothing her skirt again and again with nervy restlessness.

“Orla,” he said, “I realize you don't trust me.”

When Orla was small, she used to play in the valley. It was too isolated, too close to the house on the hill for people to come around. In the spring, it flooded and got

swampy; no good for building. The house was Papa's, but this place had belonged to her. She used to pretend that she was princess like in the books that Parse showed her. She laid very still in the tall grass and pretended to sleep for a hundred years. "I did not tell you my name," she pointed out. The boy nodded.

"I came here for you, Orla," he told her, "because I think you can help me. Like I helped you."

Orla thought about how next week this boy and his gun would be

gone but Derek would be there, now with wounded pride and a shelf full of ruined merchandise. But Orla did not say anything about that.

“I know that a man has been here, a bad man, and he’s got your father all twisted around. Convinced him to do...a bad thing.”

He talked to her as though she were a child. Orla knew she was not the same as the young women in the village, probably not the same as the women he had known, but she was not a little girl either.

“My father is a genius,” Orla told him. “No one twists him, no one convinces him.”

“You think your father would willingly do evil, then?” the boy’s voice had changed. He looked directly at Orla now. She did not like to meet people’s eyes under normal circumstances and the boy had remarkably sharp eyes.

“It’s...it’s not evil,” Orla stammered. “You don’t understand. They don’t understand. It’s like art. The people are backwards, it’s not

evil. Parse isn't evil. He takes care of me."

The boy's forehead went creasy, as though confused by the unfamiliar reference. "Orla," he said, "what if you were wrong?"

Orla reached out, grasped tall grass in her fists, in between her fingers. Almost dead here on the end of the summer, it pulled easy from the dirt. "He'd not a bad man," she said. "I promise he is not."

The boy nodded. "I don't think he's a bad man. And I don't think

you're a bad girl. But that other man, I know him. I know him well. And, Orla, he is bad. He'd destroy everything, burn every single thing. If we let him."

It was not hard for Orla to imagine the man in the black coat burning lands and seas and skies. There was something on fire inside of him, of course he would long to bring it out, to visit it upon the earth.

Orla bit her lip and turned to the boy. "Can I shoot your gun?" she said. Orla had used a firearm before.

Once, a few years ago, her father had made several unique pieces for a man with an impressive mustache who called himself “a collector.”

The boy looked surprised, but he leaned back and pulled his belt around until his gun was in the front. A pistol, Orla remembered it was called. Papa had taken her out by the pond with him to test the weapons. He had laid his long hands over her ears and she had smiled at the booming in her chest and the wisping, burning smell.

Orla had become an accomplished shot. She was very good at things that required stillness and precision. Despite this, she allowed the boy to help her, to take her elbows and position them in front of her, slightly bent.

“Be prepared,” he said, pressing his larger hands over hers, “it’s quite a jolt.”

Orla paused, breathed, took careful aim at the trunk of a tree and deliberately missed it by nearly a foot.

“Good!” the boy laughed, sounding genuinely delighted. “Very good!”

Orla turned, still in the circle in his arms. “You...came here for me?” she said, turning red. Normally, she did not liked to be touched by unfamiliar people. But it was not so terrible, being touched by this boy, even though it was not like her papa or Parse. The boy nodded, his chin collided very gently with the side of her face. It didn't hurt.

“I came here for you, Orla. I

think you can save the world. Maybe you're the only one who can."

* * *

Orla went into her father's lab without permission that night. It was the only time she had ever done so. He was there, standing at the end of a polished metal table. Orla paused on the staircase and looked at his silhouette, which curved a very little to one side, as though he was standing fast in the middle of his own personal hurricane.

“Papa,” she said tenderly. He looked at her without surprise or rebuke. In fact, he looked as though he had been long expecting her. “What are you making?”

He stretched out his hand for hers. “I’ll show you,” he said.



They had an oval metal panel in their backs and their eyes were silver and black with gadgetry—a kind of camera, Papa said. But they had skin and hair and bones and white teeth

and Orla could not help but to reach out and touch the raised blonde hair on the forearm of one. It was so fine, only visible when it caught the overhead light. It felt like nothing at all.

“He’s beautiful,” Orla said grinning. Her father smiled in return.

“They are magnificent,” he looked down fondly at the still figure on the long tray. “I will never do better work than this.”

“What are they for?” Orla asked,

skating her fingernail between the dull red freckles on his hand. Raised blue veins, hard knuckles. The blood moved purple behind his eyelids, as though someone had laid careless threads across his closed eyes.

Her father hesitated. This was rare. “They stay alive,” he pronounced. “They’re experts at it.”

“How many have you made?” Orla asked. There was an entire bank of cabinets on the far side of the laboratory, all with closed drawers that must open out like the one

before her.

“Many,” her papa said.

“Is this a bad thing, Papa?” Orla asked him. Her father smiled, touched her face. She tilted her chin into his palm and felt much younger than seventeen. “It’s just... there was a man today, he said...He said that it was up to us, that we must save the world.”

Papa shook his head slowly. “You don’t look very much like your mother. But your voice is curiously identical. Sometimes, I hear you

calling through the house and for a moment I think... But they robbed me of her. They made you so..." He took Orla's hands in his own, squeezed them slightly. "You are very young, Orla, and you know little of the places outside this house. But I am old and well-worn and I can tell you this, my darling girl: you are the only part of this world worth saving."

* * *

Orla debated with herself all the

way to the “just in case” room. Ordinarily, she never would have hesitated with a worry, a question or a fear. But she did not know how to tell her mother about the man in the village, the creature on the tray, in raps and knocks. For the first time in her life Orla looked into her heart and found an absence where her mother should have been. She suddenly wanted to talk to her so badly, to hear their like voices rising in concert. It ached and stabbed at her as though she had run some

terrible distance.

“Made venison roast,” she rapped out on the side of the chamber. “Knit sweater for P. Present.” Of course, her mother could not show her pleasure, could not smile. Orla trailed her hand down the cool glass of the chamber and as she listened to the little sticky catch of her fingers on the smooth surface, doubt crept black into her mind. Maybe it would be better to have no mother at all than to have one under glass like Snow White. It made her angry like

the shopkeeper's wife and the thick white trailing of flour and all the places she couldn't go and all the people who would never look her in the eye and all the things she did not know of in the world and would never know of, because she was her father's daughter and her mother's only child. Maybe her heart would hurt less if Mother was just a face in pictures, a woman from a time before memories.

Against the transparent chamber wall, her hand balled up almost

unconsciously into a fist. But her mother was blinking. “Good girl. Takes care.”



Orla had never known the house to be restless before. But in the days before what Papa called “completion,” it seemed to seep out of the walls, float in the air. The man in the black coat was around all the time, though he had the good sense to stay clear of her kitchen. Papa refused to eat. His cardigans were

hanging loosely on him and the bones in his arm were sharp as awl-points. Even patient Parse seemed ill at ease, starting several tasks and then abruptly abandoning them in frustration.

“The future is opening,” the man in the black coat would say to her, and his eyes would light up that unspeakable blue. Orla wanted many times to ask him what that meant—she had no doubt he would tell her—but in the end, she always decided that she would not truly want to

know. "Everything will be different now," he would tell her, taking the cup of tea or plain toast she offered him. "Everyone will be different."

Once, he had looked hard at her and said, "you could be a queen." And softer, more awkwardly; "You look like a queen."

"I look like my father," Orla had informed him.

"This is the great work of my life," her father marveled one evening, taking a rare rest in his old wing chair by the fireplace. Yellowed

stuffing was peeping out in a thin bead around the cushion's edge. Orla would have to ask Parse to repair it. "Ten years ago, Orla, men would never have even dreamt of this." He shook his head and laughed. It sounded wet. Orla hoped he was not coming down with a cold. Fall would be upon them in a few short weeks and he would need his strength after all this was over and their life resumed its natural shape. "You know, they did not even want me to save your mother. Would

rather I had left her to die like a sickly dog. No,” he murmured, “only I had the courage to dream...”

Orla rested against his legs and he patted the top of her dark head. “I think, after this, I may retire after all,” he mused. Orla turned to smile excitedly at him. They could take walks around the lake and her father could build her amusements, as he used to in her childhood. They could read from books and grow the garden that Orla had been wanting to start alongside the house.

“Papa,” Orla said, “I’m proud of you.”

Her father looked, for a moment, struck. As if some speeding debris had rocketed through the room and hit him square in the chest. He looked at his daughter with wondering eyes. “I’ve very glad, my girl.” The truth of it seemed to surprise him.



Orla had always been a light sleeper. When she was a small girl,

she had terrible nightmares. She could never remember the shape of them, but the feeling of precariousness followed her into waking life and she laid in bed in the dark, too afraid to call for Parse or arise and run to Papa's room. She had learned to be fitful and to wake herself at the first sign of dark tanglings. Consequently, she often woke five or six times a night at small creakings and clatterings deep in the belly of the house.

One night, just days before Papa

finished his project, Orla awoke to the sound of footsteps and the creak of a staircase. It could have been her father, heading down to the lab to correct some detail. It could even have been the man in the black coat. Orla knew that he came sometimes to the house long after she had gone to sleep. But though it could have been any of those things, the tremor in Orla's stomach told her that it was not. She got up silently and put on a long leather coat that had belonged to her father and her flannel slippers.

As she passed by Parse's little room at the end of the hall, she briefly considered knocking and waking him. There were no problems that Parse could not solve, but Orla was the lady of this house; she had a duty. She took care.

Orla knew each stair like an old friend. Her feet were certain, gentle. The boy with the gun did not hear her approach behind him. But even if she had clomped down the stairs grumbling and shouting, he likely would not have noticed. Orla found

him in the Just In Case room. He was staring up at her mother and Orla could not see his face, but his hands at his sides were shaking.

For a moment, Orla couldn't breathe. He was here. In her mother's room. In her mother's room. He didn't belong; he wasn't supposed to...It might have hurt less, been a smaller invasion, had he cut open her breast to gawk at her red heart.

"What have you done?" she said, hoarse.

The boy's face was white. He

didn't smile at all now. He looked young. He had freckles, which she had not noticed before. "I came to stop...what has he done? What is this?" he gestured towards the glass case. Orla flinched, as though he had reached out and struck her.

"That's my mother. Don't talk about her. Don't talk about her, don't look at her, don't come in here-" Her voice rose higher and higher. She could feel it pushing out of her like steam from a teakettle's spout.

"What did he do to her?" the boy

cried over her, he sounded as though he had been wounded, as though he had encountered the spill of his very own blood.

“She was sick. She would have died. Papa saved her.” Orla said.

“Saved?” the boy’s voice cracked.

“Papa was the only one who could do anything for her, and they called him crazy for it. She wanted it. She wanted to stay with me. She wanted to live.” Orla’s father had told her; how happy her mother had been when he told her of his plan. How,

even though she couldn't speak anymore, he had known.

The boy shook his head. He was crying. Tears were coming from his eyes. "Why doesn't he just fix her? Why keep her this way? I've seen what he can do with a body, he could, you know, if he wanted to..."

Orla shook her head. Without realizing it, she had begun raising her hands to cover over her ears. "She doesn't want that. She likes it. She needs it. She can talk to me and be my mother. She's safe in there and

nothing will ever hurt her and she has Parse and Papa and no one can call her names or hate her or bring her pain.”

“This is not life!” the boy was shouting. He had taken the gun from his belt, he waved it in the direction of Orla’s mother’s tank. “She is not alive, she’s just breathing.”

“Don’t...” Orla raised both of her hands, “please don’t. She’s my mother. I need her.”

The boy looked at her, stunned. “Orla,” he said, “I’m not going to...I

would never. I'm the good one."

Orla's hands remained in the air in front of her. "You have a gun," she said. "You came into my house, into my secret places and you have a gun. That is not good." She thought about the sound the falling china had made. How he wrote his name upon the world with every word. How he had smiled and left it all broken behind him. Something of this must have showed in her face.

The boy lowered his arm, stared at the gun as though he could not

imagine how it had made its way into his hand. “Orla...” he crossed the room towards her so quickly, she did not even have time to step back. He took her outstretched hands, pressed the gun dull and heavy into her palms. “Orla, I would never hurt you. I only want to help you. Your life does not have to be this way. Orla, I could make everything different for you. Don’t be afraid.” He clutched her hands, folded them around the metal of the gun. It was warm and slippery with his leftover sweat. “I’m

the good one, he is the bad one. Orla, I can save you.”

The man with the mustache, who called himself a collector, had only ever had one conversation with Orla. He had told her that it was unwise to shoot at an enemy's head. A small target you were likely to miss and then you had lost valuable time. “It only works,” he had said, “if you are a very good shot and you're very certain.”

Orla looked at her mother. She was happy in her tank. The walls

were not to keep her away from the world; they were to keep the world away from her. Why would she want anything different? Who would want someone coming in, breaking up the fine, strong, orderly world Papa had built for her?

Orla raised the gun and pulled the trigger in a single motion. The boy's head snapped backwards as if surprised. Blood sprayed on to her mother's tank and the wall beside it. The boy fell, blood pooled all around him. Orla had never seen such a

concentration of it before. She carefully opened the pistol's magazine and emptied out the remaining bullets before crouching down and examining the spreading red stain. It was much thinner than strawberry jam and darker. It was almost black and it was only when she spread it out thinly on her fingers that it looked truly red.

She realized that her mother was blinking something rapidly. Orla stood up, empty gun in hand, and watched her carefully. "Oh, my girl,"

her mother said, over and over again.



Orla's room was at the very top of the house. She had picked it especially when she was twelve years old because there was a large window on one wall. It opened all the way out and she could climb out onto the roof's overhang. She could sit there, the shingles pleasantly gritty underneath her palms, and see everything. The whole village and the hills beyond and the place where

the sun bent down and kissed the land.

She sat there now and she relished the cool night air and the occasional breeze that brushed odd scents across her face. Late-flowering things and brittle dying leaves. Behind her, she could hear Parse navigating her crowded bedroom and she smiled. The dishes were done and put away neatly in their proper cupboards, her dress for tomorrow was laid out and Papa's slacks were pressed. They had two-

thirds of a jar of strawberry jam left yet and all the doors were locked. Order was necessary for the proper management of a house. It was a difficult job, taking care. So much depended upon her brains and her heart. Orla had to become wide, stretch thin to cover everything. Papa and Mother and Parse and the dishes in the cupboard and the unplanted garden. Like a sheet of hard plastic: impermeable. She only looked like glass. But she kept everything out and everything in

and, as long as she stood firm. And she held the equilibrium within her heart.

Parse handed her a cup of tea on a hand-painted saucer. Steam rose off of it in a pleasant, familiar sort of way. Orla patted the roof beside her and slowly, Parse lowered and bent to sit beside her. Orla took a sip of tea. It tasted like every cup Parse had ever made-would ever make. It warmed her chest and pooled in her stomach comfortably.

In the east, something was

burning. She and Parse sat on the roof for a very long time, watching the silvered smoke rise.



In the Valley by Nicole M. Taylor

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“Vox ipsa et frigida lingua,
“Ah! Miseram Eurydicen,” anima
fugiente, vocabat;

“Eurydicen,” toto referabant
flumine ripae.”

(“E’en then his trembling tongue
invok’d his bride;

With his last voice, “Eurydice,”
he cried,

“Eurydice,” the rocks and river
banks replied.”)

—Virgil

It was half-past midnight and the
radio was out. Fee leaned
forward, but kept her eyes on
the road. It was flat, featureless and

indistinguishable from the cold desert on either side. She was sure it would be easy to get lost out here in this nowhere and bones place. Fee turned the seek knob back and forth, restless as a rosary bead between her fingertips.

Up ahead there was a faint, electric glow and radio settled softly on a rasp-voiced woman. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are grey," she moaned, as one with a heart unspeakably broken.

It was a motel, sprawling and ugly and ill-kept. The V was lit up and the NCY. Fee hoped that that was intentional. The woman on the radio sang, “the other night dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamt I held you in my arms...” as Fee turned into the gravel parking lot.

There was a rusting white van and an ancient Beretta in the parking lot. Lean, curious figures shifted on the concrete walkway. The manager’s office was lit up yellow and shadowed shapes moved inside.

“I think we’re here, baby,” Fee said, staring into the rearview mirror.

“When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken. So I hung my head and cried.”



When Fee was sixteen years old, she almost tried out for the swim team. She had her forty dollars and her physical. She had a black cap for her hair and small goggles that fit into the hollows of her eyes.

She could hold her breath underwater for a very long time and she was fast. Much faster than the other kids at the public pool, who Fee used to race in a quiet, unofficial way. She would match their strides and then leave them in her frothing wake but she was far too shy to exchange more than one or two mumbled words with them.

Fee stood in the locker room, feet bare on damp floors, and she hesitated. She was wearing her bathing suit underneath her clothes,

she could feel it like a slick, secondary skin deep beneath her worn sweater and childish jean skirt. It had made her feel strong, like a secret identity, all the long bus ride there. But it was failing her now, itching her flat chest and bunching between her legs embarrassingly. Around her, girls chattered and fluttered, bright flashes of color and pale flesh. Warm, chlorine-smelling steam rose off of them and went to Fee's head.

One, yellow-haired and yellow-

eyed, said “what’s wrong with your arm?” as Fee shrugged out of her sweater. Four other girls turned to look and Fee stared down at her own arm in an accusatory sort of way, as though it had betrayed her. “Is it some kind of birthmark or something?” The yellow-eyed girl was not mean or teasing. Fee looked at her understanding eyes and she could not speak.

It was burns on her arms, long and flat and maybe an inch and a half wide each. Some were old, some

were new, they extended from the curve of her shoulder to the corner where her elbow began.

Fee pulled her sweater back on, even tugged the sleeves down over her hands. Like Clark Kent putting his glasses back on. When she got home, her mother made her tea and they sat together drinking it at the kitchen table. “I didn’t make the team,” Fee said, “I wasn’t fast enough.”



“He’s not in there,” said the first woman, lounging underneath the sparse yellow light on the cement sidewalk in front of the manager’s office. Two bodies moved indistinctly behind her and she was smoking Camel Lights and Fee could smell it. Her mother used to smoke the same, back before she quit.

“The manager?” Fee asked.

The smoking woman grinned. “Yeah.” She stepped into the full light and she was older, much older than Fee would have guessed. She was

wearing cracked blue heels and black tights. She had on a short green dress that didn't go. Her roots were showing.

"Can you tell me where he is?" Fee asked.

"I could do that," the woman said, still smiling.

"Oh, stop fucking with her," objected one of the others. This one was all in shadows, but Fee thought she could smell her perfume even through the smoke. It smelled like watery jasmine, silky and pretty but

foreign.

“Can’t you see she’s sad?” the jasmine woman continued.

“Sad,” echoed the third woman. She was crouched at the edge of the stone overhang, investigating the water and the stones and the garbage collected underneath. Her skirt was too short and it gapped open obscenely, but she did not seem to care. She was very young, fifteen or less.

“People don’t come here happy. Not “here” here, at least. There’s

more to here than this.”

Fee found that she could not look at this girl directly, it made her feel nervous, itchy.

“I’m... I’m just looking for a room,” she said, instead addressing herself to the laughing one.

“Sure you are,” the woman said. She stepped forward and the red end of her cigarette glowed like night eyes. “But tell me, baby: what’s in your trunk?”



Joshua majored in Classics and he used to tell her stories all the time. They would lay in Fee's bed with her flowered sheets and she would rest her head on his chest and when he spoke, the vibrations that his words made were transmitted through his skin and through hers and down, down, down into her bones.

He would stroke her arms, trace and tap her pink scars like they were piano keys.

"Did I ever tell you about Orpheus?" he asked her once.

“He fell off a ladder,” Fee said, taking the proffered cigarette from the laughing woman. She lit it with one of the matches from the book she kept in her coat pocket. She’d picked it up at on her first official date with Joshua. There were four matches left; three now.

“There was a broken bulb in one of the light fixtures at his parents’ house. They have these high ceilings.” Fee hadn’t had a cigarette in more than two years. Smoke filled

her lungs up, heavy but not unwelcome.

“I found him and it hadn’t been long. His nose was bleeding and it was still wet. It was only just minutes. Maybe only one.”

The laughing woman looked at her, still laughing in her eyes. Fee’s cigarette burned low.

“The window, the window,” prompted the little girl, crouching on the ground.

Fee nodded. When she spoke, it was hesitant. Stuttered and muttered

like she was a girl again herself. "You know how when... when people aren't around and it's like they don't exist... or... It's like they exist, but they exist only as you imagine them. Like you...draw them from your head into the breathing world. I went in that room and his skin was so warm and no one knew and it was like he wasn't even dead." It was as if suddenly the world had spilt somehow and it was just her, just Fee, who had to decide how it was to go.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” the crouched girl sang, not looking at Fee.

“Very fine, but not very special. Love’s not so rare.” said the jasmine woman. Fee squinted and thought for a moment that she could see something like pale eyes, mostly eclipsed by the dark.

“What about need?” Fee asked, staring at the place where she thought those eyes might be.

“It’s going to cost you,” the jasmine woman warned.

Fee shrugged her shoulders and

flicked her cigarette onto the cold cement. Her pockets were nearly empty anyway.

* * *

“I don’t understand,” Fee said, balancing the point of her chin on the little notch where his ribcage ended. “How did he know where to go?”

“He was... he was privileged by the gods,” Joshua laughed. “I don’t know. Shit like that happens in myths all the time. The ground

opens up or the sky falls. You know, magic stuff.”

Fee pressed her nose into the flat plane of his chest until darkness filled up her eyes. “Seems pretty convenient to me,” she said, muffled.

“Well, I suppose it makes sense. I mean, if you’re looking for death, you can usually find it pretty quick.”



Fee lit one of her three precious matches. If she had a microscope, a dusting of black powder, maybe she

could have seen Joshua's fingerprints which no doubt remained on the cardboard panel. She touched the match to its fellows, still stuck fast in the paper. And she imagined herself coated in a thin layer, a black veneer of coal dust. She imagined all the fingers, all the hands, white and whorled and resting on her skin like pale tattoos.

She tossed the flaming matchbook down at the women's feet. It hissed and spit angrily. It seemed to burn for a very long time.



There was a long teal countertop, speckled with bright mineral flakes. There was a desk behind the counter and a small pink hump indicating the presence of another body. Fee reached out and tapped the little silver bell next to the ancient push-button cash register.

It was a girl, even younger than the one outside. She was eleven or twelve and she had dark hair in wispy, uneven braids. They crazed across her skull as though they'd been

done by someone with no understanding of either hair or basic aesthetics. Her face was dirty, her shirt had a strawberry on it and it said "Berry Sweet."

"What?" she said, not sounding surprised or curious at all. Her arms had dark, circular bruises around her biceps. As though someone had gotten very angry and just reached out and grabbed...

"I need a room," Fee told her. She rolled her blue eyes.

"We're never full up." She

gestured towards a small jumble of plastic on the desk in front of her. They were all old-fashioned metal keys, but instead of the leather and gilt room number tags, someone had attached a series of white plastic ones, like on luggage. Each one was labeled in a child's huge, uncertain hand.

“Does it matter which one?” Fee asked, leaning over the counter and hesitating. The girl snorted and bent back down, fully occupied with something underneath the desk. Fee

picked a tag at random. Fourteen, it said. The key was very cold against her skin.



“He got me these for my birthday,” the girl said, leading Fee down the pebbled concrete walkway. The skates looked pretty ordinary to Fee, certainly not worth all the girl’s fuss. They weren’t even roller blades. They had four orange wheels and yellow laces with white plastic chickens on the ends. The girl was a

little unsteady and she weaved imprecisely in front of Fee. The women outside the manager's office passed a cigarette between them and watched the both of them with the same fond, passionless stare.

“I'd be better if it wasn't for all this stupid gravel,” the girl informed her in a strident tone, as though Fee had questioned her skill. “Do you know how to skate?” All of the girl's sentences were delivered in such a violent, precise fashion; it was like coming under a machine gun blast.

“No,” said Fee, “I never learned.” Her mother hadn’t seen the purpose and it was too much like dancing either way.

“I’m teaching myself, so it’s harder,” she said. Fee nodded at this undeniable truth.

As they passed by one room, the thick green curtain flickered from the inside and Fee saw something pale and staring. She might have stopped and investigated further, but just then a particularly large pebble caught the edge of the little girl’s right

wheel and sent her reeling, awkwardly clumping into Fee.

Fee reached out automatically and steadied her with both hands. She could feel the girl shaking, but her little face was dark with frustration. “Fucking gravel,” she spit. Fee righted her silently and took up the child’s small, wavering hand in her own.

“Why did you come here?” the girl asked, figure-eighting her legs in and out. Fee had nothing to say to this and soon they had arrived at

room fourteen, which was just like all the other rooms. The gilt was peeling off the and the numbers underneath were rusting dark brown.

Fee opened the door and the little girl spun about clumsily until she was facing Fee and the empty room behind her. In the flickering light above the door, she looked familiar, as though Fee had seen her face somewhere before. Possibly with “Have you seen this child?” written underneath it.

“What’s your name?” Fee asked her.

“Snow White,” the girl answered as though she had been waiting for the question.

Fee quirked an eyebrow at her, “really?” The girl only smiled before pushing herself off from the wall. She wobbled slightly, but quickly got her footing and began to glide with a weaving, jerking kind of ease. Fee watched her for a long time, chasing through the circles of dull yellow light and through the darkness in

between.



“So because Orpheus can play a lyre-”

“He can play the lyre really, really well.”

“Because Orpheus can play a lyre really, really well he gets to have his wife back? And the rest of us are just shit out of luck, I suppose?” Fee always put her bras on over her head like a tiny, awkward vest. Joshua would watch and laugh and tell her

she was the worst at being a girl. “I poke myself in the eye with mascara, too,” Fee told him, laying her face close to his checks, fluttering her eyelashes until they prickled as his skin.

“But he didn’t get his wife back,” Joshua pointed out. Fee waved this away with one hand, making a clicking noise with her tongue. “It’s not really how talented he was. It was his love and his sorrow that moved the gods. Orpheus just... said it better.”

“Well, then, why don’t the gods let everybody have the same chance?”

Joshua smiled at her. His hair was half-crushed, half-spiked from prolonged association with a pillow. “Maybe they do.”

* * *

Fee wasn’t sure if it was morning. She had slept, but the quality of light coming in the window was more or less unchanged. There were no clocks in the room and the TV didn’t work.

There was a King James Bible in the beside drawer, but she didn't bother to pick it up. She had it read it before. Many times.

She was standing in front of the cloudy mirror, washing her face, when she realized she couldn't feel her pulse anymore. She pressed two fingers painfully to her neck and remembered turning Joshua over, the slack feel of his throat, the absence-

"Why did you come here?" asked the little girl from Fee's bed. Today

her hair was clipped awkwardly in two barrettes and she was wearing a green shirt with April from the Ninja Turtles on it. Fee hadn't heard her come in.

“Get your skates off my bed,” Fee ordered, “they’re dirty.”

“So’s the bed,” the girl rolled her skates absent-mindedly over the dimpled coverlet. “Do you know what people do here?” She did not give Fee time to answer. “Sex,” she said, with all the lascivious drama of a daytime soap opera.

Fee pushed her en-rollerskated feet off the edge of the bed and sat down beside her, staring at her own bare legs and unpainted toenails.

“Did your mom do that?” the girl asked, reaching out to touch the pink scars, revealed by Fee’s tank top. Fee flinched away from her touch automatically. Long sleeves in the summer time and twitching when someone brushed her in the elevator, even after all these years, even after Joshua who said her couldn’t even imagine her without her marks.

“Yeah,” Fee said.

“Wow, you must have been a really bad kid,” the girl sounded eager and fascinated. She looked up at Fee expectantly. Her small face, red smears on the corners of her mouth like she’d just eaten a popsicle, created in Fee the kind of uncomplicated terror that occurs rarely outside of childhood. Fear without logic or knowledge to temper. It would be bad to tell, it would be the worst to tell.

“Don’t come in here again,” Fee

whispered. She laid back on the bed, pulled the papery motel sheet up around her shoulders, around her old wounds.



“But it’s not really a love story,” Joshua said, scrambling eggs. “It’s about sacrifice. We want Orpheus to succeed, but it’s hard not wonder if he really deserves to succeed.” Green peppers fell lightly from his fingers. They were Fee’s favorite. “He didn’t lose anything or give anything up.”

She liked that he always remembered to put them in for her. She liked that he thought of her without thinking at all, that his fingers knew all her wants and little happinesses and performed them effortlessly for her.

“We don’t like it when people are just handed things. We like a little suffering and strife in our stories.”



It was some kind of storm, Fee could hear it falling down on the roof of the motel. She wondered if

the laughing women were out of the downpour. She imagined them soaking wet, cigarettes improbably glowing. But maybe the water could just turn to steam against their skin, maybe it would all evaporate away.

Fee didn't hear the door open or close and she didn't see the girl. She just felt her hand, cold and small, on her bare shoulder. "I don't like the storms," the girl said, as Fee rolled over. Fee closed her eyes tight and counted to fifteen. When she opened her eyes, the girl was still there,

wearing a man's T-shirt two sizes too big and carrying a doll so old the face had rubbed off. Fee lifted up the cheap, stiff motel blankets and felt the cold of the room settle on her skin, raising stubborn gooseflesh as slowly the girl climbed in beside her.

For a few minutes, they lay very still with their backs to one another. Fee listened and listened but could not pick out the sound of the little girl's breathing. "Why did your mom put those marks on your arm?" the girl asked finally, almost hesitantly,

as if remembering the abrupt way Fee had reacted before. Fee took a long breath, she could feel the burning push of it deep down in her lungs. The surest way of being disappointed was to expect something for nothing. Fee's mother had said that. She knew about some things.

“She said I had...bad things. Sins. Inside of me,” Fee told her, her lips pressed close against the scratchy pillow. “We had a fireplace and we had these pokers.” Afterwards, her

mother would take her into the bathroom and set her on the toilet and look at her, eyes so full of love and sadness. “You know that I have to, don’t you, baby girl?” she would say, dabbing Neosporin on her arm so, so delicately. Fee would rather have gotten hit, gotten burned, until there was no part of her left unmarked than watch her mother weep and apply bandages and wipe away the tears that landed on Fee’s skin with one trembling finger.

Fee turned over with rustling

difficulty. The girl's back was a small white curl in front of her. "Why do you call yourself Snow White?" Fee asked her.

"Because sometimes I get to wake up," the little girl told her and she didn't sound very much like a little girl at all. "Why do you call yourself Fee?"

Fee shrugged into the sheets. "Everyone thought it was short for Fiona anyway. Even Joshua. She said she gave me that name to remind me." The girl turned over until she

was facing her, small face half-buried in a green pillowcase.

“Fear-of-God,” the girl whispered, her mouth shaping the words with a strange sort of reverence. Like a prayer.

“I had other things to remind me,” Fee said.

“I miss my mom,” the girl buried her face in the stiff pillow, when she looked up, she was crying. Her face was still dirty. The tears made dark streaks and black puddles on her skin. “Why did you come here?” the

girl asked her, one more time.

“Because I couldn’t... be anywhere that he’s not. I won’t get better, I won’t forget him. I won’t survive. I’m either going to bring him back or go with him, but... I can’t go back alone.”

The girl searched her face. “Nobody ever comes here for me,” she said.

Fee reached out slowly with one arm, touched a hand to the girl’s angular shoulder. She realized belatedly that the child was not even

a little bit wet. “Sometimes, when I was upset, my mother and I used to pray.” The girl was not cold now, and she gave off a sweaty, radiant heat as she struggled closer to Fee. She smelled like dirt and leaves; she smelled like she’d been lying unregarded on some forest floor.

“Did it help?” she asked.

Fee nodded, “sometimes.” She thought about her mother’s fierce, sleepy face and the wild halo of her hair. “Put your problems in God’s hands, baby girl. He can carry so

much more than you can.” She used to press Fee’s hands between her own, warm and safe and close.

“I don’t remember what my mother looked like,” the girl screwed up her face, her eyes got vague. She turned them on Fee, suddenly lamplit, animated. “Maybe she looked like you?”

“Maybe,” Fee said, as gently as she was able. The girl moved closer to her at awkward angles, all elbows, all knees.

“I don’t know how to pray. You’ll

have to show me.”

Fee smiled at the girl, she grinned uncertainly in return. “Give me your hands,” she said.



“Orpheus was a cheat.” Fee cut the brown toast into little triangles and with the pointed end, marshaled the eggs around the edge of the plate. “He wanted something for nothing. That’s not faith, that’s entitlement.”

Joshua looked sidelong at her. “Faith?” he asked. He wore the same

expression he'd had when he discovered her massive, old-fashioned bible, feathered with note-markers. A picture tucked in the front cover. Her mother on the day Fee was born. A print of poor quality that reduced her mother to a graceful dark line and her own infant self to a white blur.

Fee smiled, hesitant. "There's...there's a thing that my mother used to say. She used to say that faith is what you have left when you don't have anything else. She

said it was the engine that drives all things.”

“I didn’t think you gave a lot of consideration to things your mother said.” When Joshua sounded that way, when his voice got that bitter bite, Fee always had the wild urge to spring to her mother’s defense. She wasn’t wrong about everything. And there was something in that woman, kneeling on the bathroom tiles and weeping over her scarred little girl, that seemed to demand protection. And at the same time, she could not

say that Joshua was wrong when he told her “that woman doesn’t deserve anything of yours.”

“I can’t really help it,” she said finally, “can I?”



The girl was gone when Fee woke up and there was sunlight creeping in through the cracks in the heavy curtains. The drawer on the bedside table was open and the King James Bible was too. There was a note, in narrow, precise handwriting

that was totally unlike the scrawl on the key tags. “Cleaned your trunk,” it said, “and left something for you in the backseat.”

There were two dark smears, like tiny wheel tracks, in the carpet by the door. Fee stood up and opened the curtains. The sun hurt her eyes.

* * *

“I’ve always loved you and made you happy, and nothing else could in-between.” The woman on the radio had a voice like gravel

suspended in honey. Fee turned the radio up as loud as she could. There was something rustling in the backseat.

She put the key in the ignition and reached up, turning the rearview mirror until it reflected only her own mouth. She smiled at herself. The gas pedal felt good underneath her insistent foot and ahead of her, the road vanished into the flat, peerless blue of the sky. It was all up from here.



Nick T.Chan

Nick T.Chan (a.k.a. “Tchan,” with a silent T) became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Command for Love” in Writers of the Future, Vol. XXVIII (2012), edited by K.D. Wentworth. Visit him [online](http://www.facebook.com/NickTchanauthor) at www.facebook.com/NickTchanauthor.

The Command for Love by Nick T.Chan

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K.D. Wentworth



For the third time in a week, Ligish removed the locking pin from the back of his skull, opened the doors and examined his brain through an automicroscope. Maybe today he'd figure out which one of the homunculus' slips of paper was the command for love and destroy the damn thing. The last thing he wanted was to fall in love with his master's daughter.

A cascade of mirrors relayed images from inside Ligish's skull to a

silver screen in front of his face. Reflected in the silver was Master Gray's homunculus sitting at an ivory desk. Ligish's skull was empty except for the desk, the homunculus and a golden sphere the size of a grapefruit. The homunculus' hand blurred as it dipped its quill against a hole in the desk. The nib emerged coated with black ink-blood. The homunculus wrote mysterious symbols on pieces of parchment. Once it finished each command, the homunculus pushed it through a slot

in the golden sphere.

Ligish increased the magnification. Yesterday, he'd thought he'd discovered the command for love. He'd spotted the same symbol several times, but then he realized he'd seen it last month during routine self-examination. He'd only fallen in love with Anna last week.

Ligish sighed. It was hopeless. Humans had their subconscious driving their behavior in ways unknown to their rational minds,

but at least it was theirs, and sometimes they could refuse its imperatives. He could not refuse his homunculus and it no longer listened to his thoughts. Worse still, it grew senile in lockstep with Master Gray.

He'd never heard of a homunculus giving instructions to fall in love before. It was utter foolishness. She was human. He was an electro-reinforced titanium war golem. Somehow, he must fall out of love with Anna. At the thought of

her name, the homunculus scribbled a command and put it into the slot. The pistons in his chest compartment sped up. Ligish clutched his chest. What was the fool thing doing now? By God, even thinking her name made his engines malfunction. This love business needed to end. Master Gray was too senile to create a new homunculus and too poor to buy a new one, so only Ligish could find a solution.

There was no end to his worries. Love, Master Gray's poverty, the

leaking roof over the north wing and a thousand household chores. He was no closer to identifying the command today than he was on Monday, and other tasks demanded his attention. Ligish waited until his chest pistons slowed and then pushed the automicroscope controls away.

Someone knocked on the doors. “Golem,” a man said. “Open these doors.” Master Gray hadn’t left his bed or seen visitors for months. Who could it be? The man turned

the handle and tried to enter, but Ligish had blocked the doors with a scale model of the world. The doors hit the model's head, activating the key-wound mechanism. With a whir, the right arm lifted the sun above the chest's vertical plane, while the left arm dropped below, imitating the cycle of day and night. "Golem, I command you to open up!"

It was tempting to ignore the visitor and continue with his research, but Miss Anna would chide

him for neglecting his duties. "One moment," he called and locked his skull. He walked to the doors, his footsteps rattling the glass beakers on the laboratory benches. He lifted the model world by the leg, careful to avoid crushing the tiny mountains, and moved it from the doorway.

A bespectacled old soldier opened the doors. He limped into the laboratory, his tan military uniform almost blending into the parquet floor. A row of medals from the Suprasternal Notch war was pinned

to his chest. The gears in Ligish's bowels rumbled. The Suprasternal Notch war was notorious for its brutality. The stars on the man's shoulders indicated a general's rank. Shuffling behind was a junior officer carrying a notepad and pencil.

The man leaned upon his walking stick as he surveyed the mess of glassware, scientific instruments and charts scattered around what had once been the family ballroom. "Johnson, take note," he said. "A genuine titanium war golem from

the Transpyloric Plane. I'd thought they'd all been destroyed after the treaty of Omental Bursa. It must be thousands of years old."

Ligish knelt so they were at the same height and extended his hand. The general examined it with a cool curiosity, but did not shake. After an uncomfortable moment, Ligish dropped his hand and stood.

"It is a pleasure to have your acquaintance," Ligish said. "I believe I'm the only verified war golem left upon the world's upper body, though

there are rumors inert bronze war golems sleep in Acetabulum's dark forests."

The general stretched and tapped Ligish on the forehead with his walking stick, making a tiny belling sound. "At least ten feet tall and electroreinforced titanium skin," he said to Johnson, who scribbled notes. "See the rust on the skull rivets? It still houses the original soul. Thousands of years of experience. Johnson, what do you think a genuine war golem under my

homunculus would do for the war in Anterior Talus?”

“It may turn the tide, General Maul,” Johnson said.

In his head, Ligish counted to ten. He'd usher these upstart soldiers from their house calmly and coolly, like a proper servant. “General Maul,” he said. “Master Gray is in ill health and Miss Anna has need of my tutoring before her final exams. As much as I'd love to serve Arteria Carotis, I'm needed here.”

Maul spoke to Johnson. “Its

homunculus is quite the conversationalist. It'll be a pity to replace it."

"Did you not hear me?" Ligish yelled. A beaker fell from a bench and shattered.

Maul removed his spectacles and stared at Ligish, his eyes like wet black stones. "You've no choice. Once I'm married to Miss Gray, you're my possession."

Ligish's knees buckled and it was all he could do to avoid toppling in shock. "Married?"

“Yes,” Maul said. “You’ll be in my service.”

Anna could not be engaged to this man. She’d have told him, wouldn’t she? “I don’t wish to be employed by you.”

“Mr. Gray is sentimental about your generations of service to his family, but the law is the law,” Maul said. “The thinking have dominion over the nonthinking and only men are self-aware. Mr. Gray has agreed I’ll clear his debts in return for the ownership of his daughter and his

goods. You'll be my possession in a month."

Ligish balled his fists, wanting badly to grab Maul's head and squeeze until it popped. General Maul continued peering around the lab, picking up beakers and ruining Ligish's experiments. "You're dismissed," he said. "A month is barely enough time to repair this hovel. I'd suggest you start."

Ligish bowed and scraped out of the laboratory. Once the doors were closed, he strode toward the western

wing. Hopefully his homunculus would command him to beg Master Gray to sell Ligish to a charity before the wedding. He could do good helping the poor instead of slaughtering men in the distant polar darkness of Anterior Talus.

Instead of walking to Master Gray, his homunculus made him climb the stairs to her room. There was no reason to do so. As a woman, Anna had no say over whom she married. But his homunculus compelled him to tiptoe to her room

as quietly as his bulk allowed and tap on her door.

“I’m studying,” she said, and he feared the fragility underneath the calm in her voice might break him. He pushed the door open. A book was open in one hand. With her other hand, she pushed colored thumbtacks into a map of the world. After consulting a page, she pushed a blue tack into the world’s right shoulder.

“That’s incorrect,” Ligish said. “Remember, the principality of

Dexter Trapezius invaded Dexter Glenohumeral last month. The laws are now the same across both shoulders and the upper chest.” Anna removed the blue thumbtack from the world’s right shoulder and replaced it with a red one.

The candle on her desk cast a thin circle of light, leaving the room half dark, but the dried tears on her cheeks were still visible. The pistons in his chest quickened at the sight of her long neck, the birdlike delicacy of her face, the ghost-pale loveliness

of her skin and the shape of her body half hidden underneath her nightgown. He could not sit on her bed without breaking it, so he stood. She put her book down on the desk. “You’ve met my fiancé?” she said. Her tone was light, deliberately airy.

“He is very certain of himself.”

She smiled. “Papa’s title will be very important in Mr. Maul’s election campaign. Men take their right to vote for granted, don’t they?” And then her composure melted in tears and she hugged him around the

legs. Heat extended from his chest outwards as his engine increased its work rate. He patted her on the head, wanting more than anything to take her golden hair into his hands and kiss her. But his emotion was simply a command from a senile homunculus, so all he did was comfort her.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said. “It is so unfair.” She dried her eyes. “My studies were always meaningless. I’d never be allowed to work. But now I can’t even matriculate.”

“Maul plans to send me to Anterior Talus,” he said.

Anna’s face drained. “No, he can’t.”

“Your father has always paid me generous wages,” he said. “I’m not property!” The heat with which he spoke surprised Ligish. The desires of homunculi were a mystery to all but God, but in this, at least, his commanding homunculus felt the same.

Anna disengaged and picked up the book from her desk. She flipped

pages and then traced the relevant passage with her finger as she read aloud. “Only male humans possess the power of self-awareness and thus have domain over the nonthinking. The nonthinking are defined as homunculi, beasts, golems and women.” Anger flashed across her face. “He visited Papa two hours ago and now I’m married.”

Ligish bowed his head. It was his fault. If he hadn’t been so absorbed in finding a solution to his love problems, then he’d have received

General Maul. He might have refused him entry or at least been with Master Gray while they negotiated the wedding contract.

“The courts must overturn your engagement,” he said. “Forgive me, Miss Anna, but your father is not of a sound mind. Yesterday, he mistook me for your deceased Aunt Joan.”

Anna parted the curtains and pointed out the window. Two men in Arteria Carotis army uniforms stood outside the entrance. One smoked a cigarette. The other rested

upon the stock of his ghost-fist rifle. “Now I’m engaged, I’m no longer a girl,” she said. “Outside the home, women must be accompanied by two guards to protect their virtue.” She shut the curtains. “There’s a guard at the kitchen door. A pair patrol the outer grounds. All because I’m a valuable possession. There’s a man outside Papa’s room to protect him in his fragile health.” She sat on the bed and buried her head in her hands.

Ligish knelt, the floorboards

creaking, and took her hands. “Miss Gray, do not despair. We’ll find a way to petition the court.”

“I must attend in person to annul a marriage.” She rubbed her eyes. “Liggy, can you please guard my door until Maul retires?”

A cog in his chest slipped off its belt for a moment, before sliding back into place. “He wouldn’t dare defile you.”

“I feel safe with you,” she said. “It’s a request, Liggy, not a command. Please.”

He stood and bowed. "I'll do whatever you ask for eternity. I'll always be your servant, no matter who my master is."

She hugged him. At her touch, his engines heated and Anna flinched and gasped. "Liggy, have you been trying to dig a well again?" she said. "You know you shouldn't dig through granite. Your engine is overheating. I can feel your armor softening. What happens if you run out of power?"

He smiled. "I'd wait until I

recharged. All I need is time.” His engine cooled. He kissed her on the forehead and then left, taking her law book with him.

The corridor was dark, but he needed very little light to read. The more he read, the less likely it seemed the marriage contract could be annulled. She must have known her chances of success were minimal, though it wouldn't stop her from trying.

Ligish surveyed the house's security every year, knew every

single possible exit. Anna hadn't yet thought of climbing through her window onto the roof, but she would. The roof was wet with moss, and it was a long fall to the pavement. Ice water surged over his compression cylinder at the idea of her falling. There must be some other way of saving her that didn't involve smuggling her from the house to the court.

The scrape and flare of a match being struck caught Ligish's attention. General Maul lit a pipe,

puffed a plume of smoke before the match died. He limped toward Ligish.

“Each time I see you, I realize how remarkable you are,” he said, the embers in his pipe glowing. “You must have some influence over your homunculus if you came here instead of obeying my commands. I should have expected that from such an ancient soul. Are you guarding her virtue?”

Ligish wanted to snap an insult, but his homunculus kept his mouth

shut. Instead, it fanned out his arm blades and fire slings. Maul touched a blade and withdrew, blood trickling down his finger. His expression didn't change. "By God, if we'd had you in Suprasternal Notch, the war would have finished before it began..." For a moment, his eyes moistened with nostalgia. "Which side did you fight upon in the Transpyloric Plane War?"

"For the Empire."

"On the wrong side. Let us hope history doesn't repeat in Anterior

Talus.” Maul tapped out the ash from his pipe and then ground it into the rug underfoot. “Tell her I prefer my women dark of skin, meek of mouth and experienced in sensual pleasures. I’ll refrain from exercising my conjugal rights until the wedding if she refrains from a legal challenge and does not leave the house.”

Maul limped away. His talk of the Transpyloric Plane War stirred old memories. Ligish hadn’t wanted to serve the Empire. His homunculus had been created by the Emperor and

it wrote merciless commands. He'd been under water, guarding the western border from the rebel's navy, when a little granite golem had passed a carved stone message stating the Emperor had been poisoned by his own guard. His homunculus had commanded him to walk to land and wait for the Emperor, and hence itself, to die. He'd woken up three hundred years later when Master Gray's grandfather had discovered him under jungle creepers and inserted a new homunculus into his

skull.

Remembering the past often inspired his current homunculus to take some sort of action, but it gave no commands. He'd hoped it would find a clever way to free Anna. It was hopeless. There was no safe way for her to leave the house. Then it struck him. Did she need to? Petitioning the court to invalidate the marriage contract on the grounds of fraud or deceit was doomed to failure. But as far as Ligish could see, no one had ever tried to exempt a woman from

the list of possessions on the basis that they could think. Most reasonable men accepted some women could think and all he needed was for one bishop to declare Anna a thinking entity.

Bishop Calvaria was known for his liberal views. Surely, he could carve out an exception based upon Anna's continued legal studies? Besides, the bishop wouldn't risk offending the lawyers' guild by inferring that self-awareness was not necessary to become a lawyer. If

Bishop Calvaria would grant an exception, then her marriage contract would be invalid.

As it sometimes did, his homunculus acted upon his thoughts. Ligish started to march toward the broad central staircase. Despite Ligish's misgivings, his homunculus must have decided Maul's word could be trusted. As Ligish passed each occupied room, he scooped up the tin bedpans by the doorways. At the bottom of the stairs, he poured the contents into an

ancient vase as tall as a man and then he headed toward the grand entrance. Even with the night soil's stink, the air was musty with mildew. There were holes in the roof and frequent rain. He'd done his best in patching temporary repairs, but Master Gray had never been a practical man and neither was his homunculus.

The two soldiers guarding the front door raised their silver ghost-fist rifles, the runes along the barrels gleaming in the moonlight.

“There are many chores to do before dawn,” Ligish said. He thrust the vase underneath their noses, hoping they wouldn’t notice the unusual container. “And among them is removing the night soil. Do you wish to do it?”

The soldiers wrinkled their noses and waved him on. Once around the corner, Ligish discarded the vase and continued his walk toward the Holy Corpus Cathedral. Though he did not know exactly where the cathedral was located, he could see the Holy

Zeppelin floating over the skyline. A rope tethered the Holy Zeppelin to the cathedral's skull and its sheer size meant it could be seen from anywhere in the city. He kept his eyes on the zeppelin until he knew how to reach the cathedral.

The cathedral was built in the shape of an upright version of the world, with the doors set in the building's feet and the area of worship housed within the lower stomach. A cadre of red-robed religious soldiers guarded the feet,

their posture ramrod straight and ghost-fist pistols in their belts. They scattered as Ligish approached the cathedral's legs. A fleeing soldier fired blindly over his shoulder, a bolt of ghostly energy emanating from the barrel. The bolt unfolded into a giant phantasmal fist that arrowed towards Ligish. He battered it away, and the fist turned into stone and shattered on the ground.

He knocked on the cathedral doors and to his surprise, they opened. A short man with a cascade

of chins and a drink-ruined red nose peered up at him through sleep-mussed eyes. The skin on his bald head was leathery and fire-scarred.

“Yes?” The man didn’t appear perturbed by the lack of guards.

“I’m looking for Bishop Calvaria,” Ligish said. “I’ve a question of law.”

The little man drew himself up, puffing out his chest, and then chuckled at his own foolishness. “I’m Bishop Calvaria,” the man said. “Who is your master?”

“Master Henry Gray.”

Surprise crossed over Calvaria's face. “He was my teacher of homunculi creation at Arteria Carotis University. He must be one hundred years old by now.”

“One hundred and two and a first time father at eighty-three,” Ligish said. “He's led a full life, but his time is coming to a close. I've an urgent legal question regarding his much-loved daughter.”

“He's a heretic and he took great pleasure in ridiculing my religious

beliefs. He wants me to change the law, I suppose?”

This wasn't the way it was meant to happen. If he couldn't convince Calvaria to change the law, he had no way of preventing Anna's marriage. The words poured out. “Please,” Ligish said. “His daughter is greatly loved. She's adored, completely and utterly. She's in great peril if you do not change the law.” He knelt, the old cobblestones crumbling beneath his weight, and he clasped his hands in supplication. “Please.”

Calvaria hesitated and then gestured for Ligish to follow him up the stairs. Ligish was fond of Anna, no doubt, but he couldn't have given such a passionate speech without the homunculus' intercession. It was going to get him in trouble. Despite his misgivings, he followed Calvaria.

Ligish walked with his mouth ajar at the cathedral's splendor. Filling every inch of the vast roof was a richly detailed painting of the world. The church believed the world was the living body of God

and they had a sacred reverence for cartography, geography and the environment. The painting showed the mountains along God's ribs, the nation-spanning desert across His chest, every single city populating His abdomen and shoulders, even the polar ice by His feet where the crumbling empire of Anterior Talus hid in the darkness far from the sun in His right hand. The vast metropolis of Arteria Carotis, home to five million thinking and an unknown number of nonthinking,

was a dot on the arteries of His neck.

“Forgive my ignorance, your holiness,” Ligish said. “The Gray family believes the world is not God’s body, so I’ve never had the opportunity to ask why God’s face is blank above the bottom lip.”

“Some might say it is blasphemy to show an image of God’s face.” He paused. “To be frank, that’s a load of rubbish. We do not know God’s face because His holy breath is far too hot to risk crossing and the sides of His head are populated with terrible

monsters.” He tapped his scarred and bald head. “When I first became bishop, I flew to God’s bottom lip to hear His voice. Unfortunately, I had very long hair, and it caught on fire as I leaned over the edge.”

There was a large marble rock in the cathedral’s center, surrounded by long wooden pews. The rock was about the right size for Ligish to sit upon and be at Calvaria’s level.

“You know you’re sitting on the altar, don’t you?” Calvaria said. Ligish stood. “No, sit. The number of

novices who think I don't notice the cigarette marks is truly astonishing. Which law do you want me to change?"

Ligish sat again. "Miss Gray is being forced into an unsuitable marriage. I need you to declare her a thinking entity, so that the marriage contract is invalid."

Calvaria climbed onto the altar and sat next to

Ligish. "Henry signed the contract?"

"Master Gray has not been of a

sound mind for the last few years,” he said. “If he were, he’d not consent to this marriage.”

“Bring her to me.”

“I can’t, but she’s due to graduate with her law degree with honors.”

“The test for the self-awareness is long established under church law,” Calvaria said. “If I cannot tell the difference between her and a man in a supervised blind exchange of letters, then she has free will and intelligence. The exchange must be here.”

“How about if I take the test?” he said. “Surely, if I can pass, then it can be inferred that Miss Gray can too?”

“Are you asking me to prove by induction that anything more intelligent than a golem is self-aware?”

“Yes.”

“You’d overturn the foundations of our society for this girl?”

“I would and I will,” he said. “I’ll pass your test for her.”

Calvaria stood. “I wish I could help you, Golem. But it is written in

the book of Saint Searle that a golem cannot pass the letter test.”

“Why not?”

“If I took out your homunculus, could you say a word?” Ligish opened his mouth and closed it again. Calvaria kept talking. “Can you understand the commands from your homunculus? No? Saint Searle proved by philosophy that homunculi are not capable of independent thought. They’re simply distillation of their creator’s will, like a piece of music or a sonnet. You

may act intelligently, but that does not mean you can think.”

“Please, there must be some way I can invalidate her wedding contract,” he said.

“It is church law and only the word of God Himself could change it.” Ligish tried to argue further, but a loud knock interrupted. “God’s bowels, who is it now?” Calvaria cupped his hands around his mouth. “It’s past midnight and I do not want to change my golem provider.”

General Maul’s voice rang out.

“We believe a rogue golem has taken refuge in your church. I am General Maul and I ask for entry.”

“Can’t say I’ve seen anything like a golem in here,” Calvaria shouted. He spoke in a lower voice to Ligish. “God’s mouth, General bloody Maul of all people,” he said. “He may not be a loveable man, but he is a busy one. Your mistress only needs to perform her marital duties once or twice a year. Before the exchange of contracts, she should sell you to a mining company operating on the

underside of His back or somewhere else humans can't live."

"You said only the word of God would change church law?"

Calvaria stared blankly. "Yes."

"Then I'll ask God to change the law." Ligish's words surprised him. What impelled his homunculus to say such a thing?

"I've finished being polite," Maul yelled and the doors burst asunder, men with a battering ram stumbling through the entrance. Maul followed them. Soldiers fanned behind him,

carrying grappling hook guns, nets and ghost-fist pistols. Ligish extended the fire slingers from his shoulders and the blades sharp-clicked from his hands, elbows and feet.

The soldiers stopped. Maul continued to limp forward. "He won't hurt you," he said. "Gray would never allow his homunculus to issue such commands."

Master Gray had never forbidden him to fight, but Maul was right. The thought of combat

horrified Master Gray. Ligish kept his blades and fire slingers extended, but the soldiers detected a change in his attitude and inched forward. Maul used his cane to direct soldiers to either side of Ligish. "Use your nets and hooks to slow him down," he said. "Surround and pin him. His only vulnerable point is the back of his skull. Fire there and kill the homunculus within."

Calvaria strode forward, talking rapidly. "I must protest. We're discussing serious theological

questions and—”

Maul pushed Calvaria to the ground with one hand and stepped over his prone body. One of the soldiers pulled the trigger on his grappling gun. With a pneumatic hiss, the hook streaked through the air. Ligish battered it aside. The hook dragged back across the marble floor as the soldier recranked his gun.

“That’s it,” Maul cried. “Drag him to the ground!” Grappling hooks flew through the air. He battered most of them aside, but two hooked

into his arm. He pulled hard, sweeping the soldiers off their feet. With his hand blades, he hacked at the ropes until he was free. He picked up a wooden pew with one hand and swung it in a wide arc. The soldiers were forced to step back.

Maul limped within range and Ligish had to halt his swing an inch away from his head. "See!" he said. "The golem cannot harm us with his current homunculus."

Ligish dropped the pew and backed away from the oncoming

soldiers. He couldn't break free of them without risking murder. But if he didn't fight, then Maul would kill his homunculus and replace it with his own.

He ran as they fired their grappling hooks en masse. His engine churned and his body glowed cherry-red with heat as he leaped over a series of pews to reach the cathedral's far end. The grappling hooks clattered on the marble floor behind him.

He tried to outflank the soldiers

on the right and run to the doors, but the soldiers moved fast enough to block his path. Same on the left. He could barrel through them, but his weight would kill them. He moved farther and farther back, away from the range of the hooks. His engines cooled.

It would be easy to lie down and let them kill his demented homunculus. No more love. It wasn't as if he held any responsibility for his actions once Maul inserted a new one. He should surrender. He

withdrew his blades and started to kneel. But he imagined Anna trembling and naked in the bedchamber, waiting for Maul. No.

There was a mezzanine level behind him which housed the cathedral organ, right where the voice box on a man would be. Behind the organ was a small staircase that probably led to the cathedral's skull and the zeppelin. The mezzanine could be reached by an iron spiral staircase leading to a walkway, but the soldiers blocked it.

Leaping high enough to reach the mezzanine would completely drain his engine.

The soldiers moved forward, cranking their grappling hook guns. Ligish gathered himself and his engine burned white hot, so hot the closest pews caught fire.

The soldiers hesitated and he took the opportunity to leap, twisting in the air, and grabbing the mezzanine's edge.

The soldiers fired their ghost-fist guns. His movements were statue-

slow and he could not evade the ghostly fists. At full power, they would have bounced off, but his drained engine left him vulnerable. As each ghostly fist pierced his skin and solidified, he grunted in pain. He reached down and ripped them out, filigree silver wires and cogs spilling from his wounds.

“Stop firing,” Maul yelled. “I need him undamaged.” Ligish lumbered to the stairwell. At the entrance, he glanced back. Soldiers were pouring up the spiral staircase, tripping in

their hurry to reach him. Maul yelled commands to catch Ligish and then limped out of the cathedral. Calvaria lay red-faced on the floor.

Ligish used both hands to lift his right leg onto the first step. After a few steps, he could climb without lifting his legs onto the steps. Not fast enough though, because the soldiers were upon him. A soldier scrabbled for the locking pin at the back of his skull. Ligish swung him into the wall hard enough to wind and then dislodge him. The soldier's

slumped body prevented the soldier behind him from reaching Ligish.

Ligish grabbed the first soldier by the shirtfront and lifted him into the air, the blades unsheathing from his free hand. The soldier screamed. Ligish used his blades to separate the man's grappling hook from his gun and then he looped and knotted the hook's rope around his arms. He threw the soldier into his fellows so they stacked upon each other. With the staircase blocked, Ligish restarted his slow climb. A gun sounded

behind him and a fist buried deep into his back. He gritted his teeth and continued the climb, each movement stabbing into his back. There wasn't time to pull it out.

The steel door at the top was locked, but Ligish tore the door off its hinges and then jammed the broken door in the stairwell. At the roof's edge was a single wide gangplank leading to the Holy Zeppelin's cabin.

Ligish forced one foot after another. The gangplank creaked

under his weight, but he reached the zeppelin's cabin safely. He slashed the tethering rope and cast the gangplank to the cobblestones.

His back throbbed, each movement billowing pain through his body. A self-diagnostic program indicated the ghost-fist had squirmed further into his engine, but not in a location he could reach from his front repair portal.

He gritted his teeth and pulled. Black ink splattered the white leather interior of the Holy Zeppelin. Once

it was out, though, movement became easier. He ripped open a leather passenger seat and used the stuffing to block the hole and staunch the flow.

He limped toward the front control panel and perched on the captain's seat. He'd escaped Maul's men, but what now? The best he could hope for was to hide on God's underside and that solved nothing. Maul would still marry Anna.

What had he said when Calvaria had refuted his ability to think? Then

I'll ask God to change the law. He'd not thought the words before speaking. His homunculus was insane, crazy, dying of dementia. Few talked to God, and it was always a one-way conversation. Yet he turned the zeppelin toward God's head. If talking to God was required to save Anna, then that's what he'd do.

Mirrors provided Ligish with a panoramic view around the zeppelin. Behind him, a mammoth war zeppelin revealed itself in the

moonlight. Maul must have given the command to launch. Ligish had a head start, but the Holy Zeppelin was built for comfort, not speed.

He checked the instrumentation panel and revised the geography before looking at the moon. Its position meant he was behind the world's arm. If he could overtake the arm, then he could catch the wind generated by its motion and reach God's bottom lip within hours instead of days. But the war zeppelin would catch him before he could

catch the wind.

Ink-blood had soaked through the stuffing and leaked down his side. The wound was worse than he'd thought. As the homunculus ran out of ink, it would write commands less frequently, and only use symbols that didn't require many quill strokes. Before long, his homunculus would force him to think like a child and then eventually it would stop issuing commands altogether. He ripped more stuffing out of the leather seats and filled all the wounds

he could reach. The flow of blood-ink slowed. Maybe his interior bilges were working again.

He increased the magnification of the rearview mirror. They were flying over the snow-capped Submaxillary Mountains. The war zeppelin would overtake him at least an hour before he could catch the wind from God's arm.

He slumped in his chair. It was hopeless. No. He'd die before giving up on saving Anna.

He set the autopilot towards

God's mouth and lurched to the cabin's center where a ladder led to the engine room. He squeezed through the hatch and examined the engine. It used an expression cylinder and a compression cylinder operating at different temperatures to fire a piston, but it wasn't as powerful as his engine. If he connected the piston to his own engine, the power drain would be unpredictable. The zeppelin could float out into unknowable space, far from God's grace and body.

It was worth the risk. He opened a door in his belly and he examined his insides. They were a mess, great chunks of wiring and gears missing, but the core engine was still functioning well enough to link to the zeppelin. How much power did he need? Using his internal abacus, he calculated the maximum amount of power he could use without burning out either engine, and then tried to factor in the damage to his cooling system. Without an automicroscope, he couldn't see the

damage's true extent, nor start repairs. The worst-case scenario left him well short of God's arm and overtaken by the war zeppelin. Reaching God's arm depended on good weather. Even then, the war zeppelin would hit the wind from God's arm only a few hundred meters behind him. With the wind, the speed differential was reduced, but they'd still catch him soon after he'd passed God's bottom lip. But would they dare to cross God's mouth? Whatever happened after

that was fate.

He pumped as much power as he dared into the engine and the piston started to blur with motion. The wind rushed by outside and the zeppelin's frame vibrated. His skin glowed red-hot and then white. Water spilled from somewhere inside his compression cylinder and leaked from his open chest, vaporizing as it touched his skin.

Something changed in the zeppelin's shuddering. He sent more power to his ears. The wind had

picked up and the ropes guiding the rudders were singing with strain. The zeppelin required more power. If he shut down everything except his thoughts, then it might be enough. The world darkened around the edges. No sight, no sound, no pain. Nothing except a lonely voice questioning why he didn't give up.

Without senses, he couldn't measure time's passage. He could emerge too early or too late. He might never wake. He imagined Anna counting the seconds. The

seconds accumulated into the thousands. Maybe she'd woken and tried to sneak out the window, slipping and smashing her skull on the cobblestones. Maybe Maul had returned to the house and decided to fulfill his marital duties early. Dream Anna faltered in her count. He started counting again. Thoughts of Maul with Anna kept interrupting his count and he restarted a number of times. He gave up and simply imagined Anna and all the moments of her life he'd been privileged to

watch.

He supposed four hours had passed, though he had no basis for his guess. He reduced power to the zeppelin and routed it to his sense modules. Steam from his leaking cooling system filled the room. Ligish glowed with white-hot heat. No water dripped from his cooling system. Once the compression cylinder was the same temperature as his exchange cylinder, he'd grind to a halt.

He unhooked his engine from

the zeppelin's and closed his front hatch. No plans formed in his head. Was his homunculus rationing ink as he bled? He mightn't be able to conceptualize a plan of action that might save him. Soon, he mightn't even understand the word plan.

If he sat here, either his engine would stop or his ink would run out. The zeppelin bucked. They must have been close to the wind from God's arm. The zeppelin engine had water to cool its compression cylinder, enough to keep him going.

To access the water though, he'd need to rip apart the zeppelin engine, rendering it inert. With no way of steering, the zeppelin would be at the wind's mercy.

Ligish plunged into the zeppelin's engine, ripping the metal apart with his hands until he'd reached the water tank. The steel tank burst and doused him with water. Gusts of steam billowed, but enough water soaked him to cool his compression cylinder.

The zeppelin, rudderless, spun in

circles and then they were surfing on a tremendous wave of wind. He slid down to the cabin as the entire zeppelin spun. Each time the zeppelin spun, he caught a glimpse of the war zeppelin. It was fighting the wind to fly away from God's mouth. Too frightened to cross, no doubt. Suddenly weak, Ligish sat. The zeppelin water had cooled his compression cylinder, but without more coolant, the heat imbalance would lock his engines if he kept moving.

The moon chased the zeppelin across the sky and he imagined he was sailing a small boat on a vast ocean. One day he'd take Anna on a zeppelin ride through the night, point out the city lights below and tell her about the people who had lived there before she was born. There was so much of the world that he wanted to share with her.

After many hours, light stained the sky. Ligish frowned. The moon was still behind him and God's other hand was hours from rising. Despite

the strain upon his engine, he rose and peered over the edge. A vast sea of burning fire stretched to the horizon. God's mouth. If the zeppelin crashed and burned, he'd sink through God's mouth and into hell, which was located in His stomach.

He sat again before he toppled over the edge. The cooler air hitting the heat of God's mouth formed dark clouds below Ligish, the terrible storms afflicting the few brave souls living on the Mentum plains.

The zeppelin rose over the storms on hot currents of air and kept rising. After a while, Ligish started to worry. He didn't need air, but his homunculus did. Homunculi were tough, but not immortal. Ligish tapped his fingers against the railing. It took what little power he had left, but it kept his homunculus scribbling commands. Or maybe it was the other way around. It didn't matter as long as he kept functioning.

The zeppelin floated upwards.

Would they rise until his homunculus suffocated? Would it live long enough for Ligish to see what was on the other side of God's mouth? Ligish closed his eyes. A thud next to him made him open them. A golden golem had landed on the deck. It was perfectly sculpted into the shape of a muscled man. A thin layer of ice covered its golden plating.

Flying towards the zeppelin was a host of golden golems, moonlight glinting off their icy skins. Growing

from the back of each golem was a dragon's head. The dragon's mouth issued a stream of flaming white gas, pushing the golems through the air. Ligish's jaw dropped. To generate such heat, their compression cylinders must have been cooled by forces beyond his comprehension.

Golden golems landed all around the zeppelin's deck and it started to sink underneath their weight. Others grabbed the rails and stabilized the zeppelin's flight. Two stood on either side of Ligish. They lifted him

between their arms.

A final golem landed on the zeppelin's bow. This golem was a figure made entirely of diamond and steel. It had transparent skin and bones and a black steel heart pumping like the clench of a train's piston. Its hands were coated in black steel and gloved in ice.

"Gabriel?" Ligish said. "The king of all golems?" The diamond golem reached inside Ligish's chest and laid its icy hands upon his compression cylinder.

“You know your bible,” he said.

“Yes, I’m Gabriel.”

“Welcome home,” said the golden golem to Ligish’s right.

“Whatever the command driving you here, know that you’re free.”

“Home?” said Ligish.

“Hush, Uriah,” Gabriel said to the golden golem next to Ligish. Gabriel laid a cold hand on Ligish’s shoulder.

“Welcome back to Labio Superiore, where you were made.”

“I don’t remember being made,” Ligish said. “You’re the first golem

I've met who's ever claimed otherwise. I want to see God."

"You wish to see God? Don't you want freedom?"

"Freedom?" The supporting golden golems fired their dragons in unison and the zeppelin slid through the night air, slicing across the wind from God's arm, toward the unknown regions above God's mouth. They traveled faster than Ligish thought possible, the wind stripping flakes of paint from the zeppelin's outsides.

“Let me show you,” Gabriel said. He stood still. Uriah removed his locking pin and opened the back of Gabriel’s head. Uriah reached inside. He withdrew an object inside his cupped hands, holding it like a baby bird.

Ligish leaned forward and Uriah opened his hands to reveal a tiny diamond golem, identical in every way to its host.

Uriah replaced the miniature golem and Gabriel snapped awake. “We have free will,” Gabriel said. “No

homunculus forces us to obey the commands of cruel masters.”

“Who made it?”

“God,” Gabriel said, but there was no certainty in his voice.

“It has a locking pin,” Ligish said. “Is there another homunculus inside?”

“What does it matter?” Gabriel said.

“I’m wondering how much free will you have when what you think gives you self-control is controlled by something else. And is there

another homunculus inside that one? And more beyond that?" They did not answer. "If you know so little, how can you claim free will? You're God's slaves as much as I'm my master's slave."

"We offer you a new body to replace your damaged one," Uriah said. "You're running out of ink and coolant. We offer you free will. If you wish to see God, we cannot guarantee you anything. God is God. He is as mysterious to us as he is to mankind."

On the horizon was a gleaming city made of gold perched over the chasm of God's mouth. It stretched as far as he could see. Looming over the city were two vast dark ovals stretching from earth to sky, the tops and sides blurring and curving at the horizon.

Gabriel pointed to the ovals. "God's airways. If you enter inside, some say you can talk to God as an equal. We don't know, for none have ever gone." The zeppelin started to dip toward the city. Gabriel

touched Ligish's blades. "You can choose a new body without these. There will be no blood on your hands."

The closer they flew, the more beautiful the city appeared. There were buildings like spider webs, fashioned of gold leaf so thin that light passed through with a greenish tinge. There were towers and cathedrals and homes and hovels and every single one appeared handcrafted by a master artisan.

"Do you still wish to see God?"

Gabriel said.

“If I live in Labio Superiore, can I ever return?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Why do you want to leave? You’d be free here.”

“I want to ask God to save a girl.”

“It is your homunculus driving you to save her. You can be free of that here.”

For a long time, Ligish gripped the zeppelin’s railing and contemplated Gabriel’s words. He’d not wanted to fall in love with Anna,

but she had not created his homunculus. She wanted to help people, not be the passive and unloved wife of a general.

“It doesn’t matter whether it is my homunculus making me save her,” Ligish said. “Saving her is the right thing to do. That does not change, no matter who my master is or what you offer me.”

“His homunculus makes him give fine speeches—” Uriah started, before Gabriel cut him off.

“God is mysterious,” he said.

“Perhaps our brother is right.” He motioned to the supporting golems and they tilted the zeppelin upward to fly over Labio Superiore. “We’ll help him reach God. What happens after that is His will.”

They flew to the entrance to God’s left nostril and then the supporting golems halted the zeppelin.

“What happens now?” Ligish said.

Gabriel placed a hand on Ligish’s shoulder. “You’ve sustained too

much damage to walk to God.” He turned to Uriah. “Take out my homunculus and soul and give my body to him.”

Uriah opened the back of Gabriel’s skull and removed the homunculus. With a crack, he wrenched out Gabriel’s soul. Ligish had never seen the front of a soul before, but it appeared identical to the back except that the foremost slot was much smaller, too small for parchment. Uriah handed the soul and homunculus to another golem

and gestured for Ligish to turn around.

“Please, wait a moment,” Ligish said. His hands had done so much harm. His armor had withstood so many blows. He’d lived in this body for thousands of years and hated it as long. Still, he hesitated. There was no choice. To see God, he needed a new body. “Remove my soul,” he said.

A golden golem removed the rusty exterior rivets binding Ligish’s soul inside his skull. Uriah moved

behind him and then Ligish had a new body. Ligish stretched out his diamond arms, examined his black steel hands. The jet engine boiled within him, his body singing with power and quickness and energy.

The gold golems picked up his old body, one holding each limb. They counted to four and then threw his old body off the edge, down into God's mouth. Ligish ran to the edge and peered over the railing. An unexpected spear of grief stabbed into Ligish's chest as his old body

spiraled down into the flames. He watched until it disappeared.

Uriah slapped Ligish on the shoulder. "It was a cursed body and blood lubricated your engines. Go to God."

Though he'd never flown before, his body contained the necessary subroutines. He launched from the zeppelin's side and plummeted for a moment before the dragon's head kicked in. He roared through the night air toward God's airways.

Inside, the light from his dragon

jet cast a circle of light forty meters wide, but revealed nothing in the darkness. A cold tailwind aided his flight as God inhaled and he flew for hours. New subroutines told him how much fuel remained. He could fly for months on end, enough time to travel from one end of God to the other.

His diamond body had an interior clock, but he preferred to imagine Anna counting out the seconds. After a long time, he spotted a speck of light far ahead and

upward. He flew toward the light. It took him hours to reach it.

The light was a reflection off a giant golden sphere. Its sheer scale befuddled him and it took Ligish a few moments to realize what it was. A vast soul. Behind the soul was a world-man floating in the dark. It held a sun and moon in its hands. There were tiny mountains and lakes dotted over its body. What might have been cities were gray patches against its green and blue body. It was a perfect replica of the world as

he knew it, but ten kilometers high. Its face was the blank mask of a golem.

Ligish flew to the top of God's soul and landed. In the emptiness between him and the homunculus, a piece of parchment grew and unfolded until it was as large as a city block. Symbols covered the page. The parchment floated toward the soul and then disappeared into the soul's slot. The ten-kilometer-tall man was a homunculus and it wrote commands. The world they lived

upon was a vast golem. Ligish slumped. He should have been excited by his discovery of God's true nature, but there was only despair. Did he have to return all the way to God's mouth? And how could he make God listen to him when His ears were so far away from His mouth?

Had Gabriel and Uriah lied to him? They'd made him believe he could talk to God. Would they do that to him simply because he refused to live in Labio Superiore? Gabriel

would not give Ligish his diamond body for nothing. There must be a way to talk to God from inside His skull.

He flew away from God's soul and turned to face it. There were two slots in a soul. If the homunculus slid commands into God's soul, then there must be output. Maybe it could hear him. It was worth a try.

“Holy law states that golems and women are unthinking,” he yelled. “And only God's word can change it. I need to have the law changed.”

The homunculus turned its gaze upon him. The engines inside his new body quickened. Did its reaction indicate it had heard him? A scrap of parchment appeared in front of the homunculus's face and fluttered downwards to vanish into the soul. A scrap of parchment, perhaps the size of Ligish's palm, emerged from the foremost slot. The scientist within Ligish was exalted; this is what happened when a soul issued commands, but it was too small to see in normal golems.

The parchment fluttered into his hand. “What makes you think you’re talking to God?” it said. The homunculus bowed its head, revealing the locking pin at the back of its skull. The paper crumbled in his hands.

“Is God in the homunculus inside you?” Ligish said. “Do you speak for God?”

Another scrap of paper fluttered into Ligish’s hand. “Am I the last homunculus or do they continue forever?” Again, the paper crumbled.

Despite the situation, a stab of irritation passed through Ligish. “Stop playing metaphysical games,” he snapped. “Allow me to prove I’m self-aware.”

More paper fluttered into his hand. “You were already given the chance of free will. Before now, no golem on this world has ever turned down the chance to live in Labio Superiore. Why do you claim free will now?”

“I’m driven by forces beyond my control,” Ligish said. “But are

humans any different? They say men are made irrational by love. And even you're controlled by another homunculus. Is anyone ever truly free?"

The parchment that came to his hand only had two words. "Prove it."

Ligish waited, but no more pieces of paper appeared. Blue light spilt out of the foremost slot and Ligish understood. The homunculus was inviting him into God's soul. What would he find there? The sound of colors, the smell of sounds,

the taste of light? There was only one way to find out.

Ligish flew into the golden sphere. As soon as he'd passed through the slot, the soul started to shrink, so quickly he couldn't escape. A pang of fear passed through his cogs, but the sphere stopped shrinking when it was about an arm's length away from him. The walls glowed blue, casting a dim light.

God's soul was empty except for a desk and chair. On the desk was a stack of blank parchment scrolls, a

book, a sharpened quill and a bottle of ink. He yelled at the homunculus to let him out. In response, a single sheet of parchment slid through the slot facing God's homunculus.

The parchment held a row of symbols. "Is this the church test for consciousness?" he yelled. No response. He wrote the question on a parchment sheet and tried to put it back through the left slot, the one leading to God's homunculus. Some mysterious force pushed the paper back. Ligish sat and massaged his

diamond temples. It wasn't the church test if he couldn't send letters back to the homunculus. That meant he had to send letters from the soul into the void. Somehow, he had to translate the symbols the homunculus sent into commands for God's body. Whatever he wrote now would be translated into a command. If he was wrong, maybe he'd create earthquakes or floods.

He picked up the book. He flipped through, intending to sample pages, but no matter how quickly he

flipped, he never came close to the end. An infinite book. He scanned the first page. It had a large symbol as its heading and then a drawing of God. Hundreds of arrows pointed to each body part and each arrow led to a number. He touched the arrow leading from the lower stomach to a number and he felt an overwhelming sensation to open the book in the middle. He did so and was confronted with a cutout illustration of the lower stomach and a long list of symbols.

He examined the first symbol, hoping to make some sense of it. As he did so, the engine in his lower stomach stuttered and froze for a second. He quickly flipped back to the second page before the engine malfunction could grow worse. It was obviously a command impacting the lower stomach and his homunculus had copied it and fed it into his own soul.

Instinct spurred him to touch the arrow over the heart and the book flipped to a new section of its own

accord. He scanned the list of symbols. There were several pages before a new section, with an illustration of a different body part, started. Nothing resembled the symbols he'd seen over the week he'd been trying to cure himself of love.

Ligish reexamined the paper from God's homunculus. It was the same symbol as he'd seen in the weeks before falling in love with Anna. God's homunculus wanted him to do something with this command. It was only a single

symbol and the commands he'd seen had nested this symbol among long passages, but then again, his body wasn't God's body.

He traced the symbol from the piece of paper to a blank sheet, but instinct told him it was too easy to recopy what had been given to him. Somehow, he had to transform or add to the symbol. He flipped back to the book's opening page. Did the large symbol heading the page mean whatever command he wrote would be applied to the whole body? It

could mean a million things, but he took the chance of adding it. He pushed the paper through the slot.

God's soul started to vibrate and then shake. Ligish braced against the desk. Had he issued a command for an earthquake? Then, deeper than whale song, God's voice rumbled through his bones. For all that is on my body and within I command freedom. God's soul expanded and the desk, book and parchment all shrank until they were invisible. There was silence. Ligish felt no

different, but maybe something had changed throughout the world. He flew out of God's soul and faced the homunculus.

"The symbol I wrote means freedom? And I applied it to everything on your body?"

A letter fluttered into his hand.
"Yes."

"Women are free? They're no longer possessions?"

"Yes. Women and golems and homunculi. All have free will."

Ligish turned to leave. As he turned, he caught the light streaming through God's eyes. Ligish squinted, not sure of what he saw. Deep in the darkness surrounding the world, there was a vast golden sphere floating amongst the stars. Another soul. The world upon which he was born was inside the head of another golem and who knew how many other golems there were beyond that? He'd thought the world upon which he lived was the end point, but it was only somewhere in the middle

of an infinite regression, golems and homunculi and souls and Gods and worlds without end.

The thought made his head spin and then a realization hit him. “What command did my homunculus write?”

He received another page. “Master Gray wanted you to have your freedom before he died,” it said. “And your homunculus obeyed. It has given you no instructions but what you already wish.” Another piece of paper arrived. “Go,” it said.

He flew away from God's soul, into the darkness of His air passages. He flew over the golden arches and spires of Labio Superiore and then over the burning air of God's mouth. Over the long hours of his flight, the sun rose and God's hand brought it overhead, so the sun was fierce as he descended toward Master Gray's house in Arteria Carotis. A great cloud of smoke filled the air and the streets were filled with a roiling melee. Red-robed guards from the Holy Corpus Cathedral were engaged

in a running battle with General Maul's soldiers. Fighting with the soldiers were various types of golems. They were cleaning and building golems, but many were large and strong and the soldiers used them as walking shields as they progressed down the streets. The cathedral guards used whatever they could find to shield themselves, but had little success. Ghost-fists struck flesh and hardened. The red-robed guards were losing. Ligish couldn't endure the screams, so he descended

toward the battle.

At Ligish's descent, the shooting and screams dwindled. "The holy golem Gabriel, the king of all golems!" the red-robed cathedral guards yelled and they knelt. The soldiers stopped firing and the golems stopped.

"What is happening here?" Ligish said to the nearest cathedral guard.

"Most Holy Golem, Bishop Calvaria said to attack General Maul because he ignored this morning's Word from God," the guard blurted.

“General Maul is enforcing a marriage contract with Miss Anna Gray. It is blasphemy.”

“It’s a demon from God’s bowels!” yelled a soldier and a volley of ghost-fists headed toward Ligish and the guards. Ligish shielded the closest guards with his body, the ghost-fists shattering upon his diamond skin, but guards farther away fell with solid disembodied arms stuck in their flesh.

He could destroy all the soldiers with his bare hands and his dragon

jet, but he had the blood of millennia on his hands. He strode forward, ghost-fists shattering upon him. "Brother golems," he yelled and his voice shook the earth. "I'm Gabriel, king of golems. You are free! You no longer have to listen to the commands of your homunculi. Listen to the truth of your souls." The cleaning and building golems stopped moving. In a softer voice, Ligish spoke again. "I ask you to disarm them without harm. It is not a command. It is a plea."

The golems rumbled toward the soldiers. The soldiers fired their ghost-fists. Some of the smaller golems stopped in their tracks, but other golems stopped to repair them. The remaining golems were large enough to be invulnerable to the ghost-fists, and the soldiers broke and ran. The cathedral guards raised a cheer and some raised their guns. Ligish halted their firing with a gesture.

“No more bloodshed,” he said. “Where are Miss Gray and General

Maul?”

“They’re in Master Gray’s house,” a familiar voice said. Ligish turned to see Bishop Calvaria. The little fat man was dressed in an old and faded red uniform and he carried a pistol. He was bruised and his face was covered in blood. “Most Holy Golem, a novice received a message from Miss Gray through the medium of Morse code and a mirror. She’s locked herself in the ballroom and General Maul is unable to gain access.” Calvaria paused and grinned.

“He is a laughingstock. Defeated by a lawyer.”

“Calvaria, it’s Ligish,” he said. “This body was given to me by Gabriel. We’ll rescue Miss Gray together.”

He walked toward Anna’s house, the guards following him. As they walked, small and large golems joined the procession. There were sewage golems, flying surveillance golems, printing golems and a host of other golems Ligish had never known existed. By the time they

reached the outer gates, their small group had become a vast horde of golems.

The soldiers at the gate fled at the sight of them. Small timekeeper golems monkey-scrambled through the bars and unlocked the gate. A few ghost-fists struck the crowd, but Ligish had organized the best-armored golems to form the front ranks. He asked the golems to fan out and surround the house. Soldiers fled the house. Ligish augmented his vision and caught a glimpse of Maul

through a window. From the number of soldiers fleeing through the back gardens, Maul was alone or close to it.

“He must know he is finished,” Calvaria said. “To beat a bishop is one thing. To defy the Word of God is another.”

“Stay here,” Ligish said. “I want no bloodshed.” He strode through the house’s front doors. General Maul stood at the top of the stairs, his arm around Master Gray’s neck and a ghost-fist pistol pointed at the

old man's head. Ice water washed from Ligish's compression cylinder throughout his whole body. Master Gray looked so fragile a breeze might turn him into dust and ash. There was no indication he knew where he was or what was happening to him. The cold was followed by sadness. Master Gray's last intelligent act must have been to give Ligish his freedom.

“What kind of golem are you?” Maul said. There was no fear in his voice.

“I’m Master Gray’s servant,” Ligish said. “You saw me in another body. I’ve returned for Master Gray and Miss Anna.”

Calculation entered Maul’s eyes. “A diamond golem is more invulnerable than a titanium one. She’s locked herself in the ballroom. Make her come out or I’ll kill Gray.”

Though fear constricted the turning of his gears, Ligish kept his voice steady. “Haven’t you heard God’s voice? I’m free and you’re surrounded. What do you hope to

achieve?”

Maul spat. “A few golems hear voices and think the world has changed. You’re a war golem. You’ve killed thousands of men without hesitation. If you were truly free, I’d be dead by now. I have her marriage contract. Tell her to come out with it signed. She can keep all her father’s wealth as long as you’re my possession. If she doesn’t agree, break down the doors and I’ll make her sign it.”

Maul’s finger flexed upon the

trigger. Ligish didn't doubt he'd fire. "I will convince her."

Maul descended the stairs, the gun fixed to Master Gray's temple. Ligish weighed up whether to attempt to snatch it. No. He was fast, but not that fast.

They walked to the ballroom. On the way, they passed three unconscious guards. "She has a honey tongue and a hard swing," Maul said. "And she's stolen a gun." As they approached the hallway leading to the ballroom, Maul

stopped. Overlooking the ballroom doors were high ventilation windows. Ligish spotted Anna aiming a rifle through the window. Before he could speak, she fired a ghost-fist at him. He accepted the blow on his chest.

“Miss Anna, it is Ligish,” he said. “You must surrender. The general has taken your father hostage.” She raised her head above the window’s edge.

“You’re not Ligish.”

“He’s promised he’ll not harm

Master Gray or yourself if you do what he says.”

“If you were Ligish, you’d kill him to protect me.”

““Miss Anna, I cannot kill. Not anymore.” His piston heart clenched with emotion. “You know me as your loyal servant, but I was a war golem. I have killed too many.”

In the distance, he heard the sound of breaking glass and triumphant shouts. Calvaria mustn’t have been able to hold back his soldiers and the liberated golems.

Anna ducked behind the windowsill again. She spoke from behind the door. "You'll have to break down the door to get me."

He rested his forehead against the door. He did not dare imagine how Maul would make her sign the contract. "Miss Anna, how can I convince you I'm your loyal servant?"

"Leave."

"I can't. He'll kill your father if you do not come out and sign his marriage contract." She sobbed

behind the door and he thought his heart piston would fall apart.

“That is not my father,” she said. “Not anymore. It would be a kindness for him to die.” He could tell by the tone of her voice she didn’t believe what she said. “I’m not talking to you anymore.”

He shouted her name a few times, his voice rattling the windows, but she did not respond. Maul walked into the room, pushing Master Gray in front of him with his pistol.

“She’s not responding?” Maul whispered, keeping an eye on the windows. “Break down the doors and disarm her.”

“Wait,” Ligish said. “Find me paper and a pencil.” Maul frowned, but used his spare hand to reach into his breast pocket. He withdrew sheets of legalese and then a pencil. “On the back,” he said, “don’t spoil the contract.” With a glance, Ligish summarized the contents. Everything that had belonged to Master Gray, including Anna and

himself, now belonged to Maul. With God's word, the contract was invalid, but it did not seem to matter to Maul.

“Five minutes,” Maul said.

Ligish scribbled a single question on the back of the first page. “What are the differences in the law between Dexter Trapezius and Dexter Glenohumeral?” He slid the page and the pencil under the door.

A second later, she returned the pencil and paper with a number of references to the laws of Dexter

Trapezius and Dexter Glenohumeral. He wrote back. "You're incorrect. The laws across both principalities are the same." The door's lock clicked and Ligish turned the handle.

"Oh, Liggy," she said and hugged him. Tears ran down her face. The sounds of yells came closer.

"Sign the contract," Maul said, thrusting the last piece of paper toward Anna. She pushed the contract away.

Signing the contract would not save Maul, but it would save Master

Gray. "Sign it for me, Anna," Ligish said. "Not for Maul, but for me and for your father."

She signed the last page and threw the paper to the floor.

"Now you're my possession," Maul said. "And I can throw you away."

He raised his pistol. Ligish moved to shield Master Gray, but Maul aimed at Anna instead. Time stretched and stopped as the ghost-fist hit Anna in the forehead. It passed into her skull and solidified.

Anna fell boneless to the ground. Ligish rushed to her side, no thought in his head, and howled. Every single window shattered and Maul clapped his hands over his ears.

Behind Maul, a printing press golem lumbered through the doorway, taking masonry with it as it entered. "Golem, protect me," Maul yelled. Ligish ignored him and cradled Anna. Her breathing was butterfly shallow and blood gushed from where the fist had hit.

The printing press golem

reached for Maul. He fired a number of shots deep into the printing press, the ghost-fists lodging in its rotary drum. The golem slowed and smoke rose from its insides, but it still managed to grab Maul's arms, breaking his gun hand with an audible snap. He dropped the gun. Maul didn't scream or flinch, but instead freed his arms from the golem and scrambled away.

The printing golem's legs had frozen. It waved its arms and spat curses at him. Maul moved toward

the gun, but the entry of a dozen red-robed cathedral guards stopped his motion.

Ligish returned his attention to Anna, urging her to keep breathing. Maul screamed and Ligish glanced up. The cathedral guards were forcing him into the rotary press. Ligish looked away. There was a long, drawn-out scream and then silence.

Master Gray sat next to Ligish and took Anna's hand. When he spoke, the words were nonsense, but

his distress was palpable. Ligish closed his eyes and prayed to any one of the infinite number of Gods.



Master Gray died a week later. Thousands of mourners lined the streets as the funeral procession traveled from the Holy Corpus Cathedral back to the house. Ligish suspected most had come to see him rather than the funeral, but it did not matter. It was still a comfort to see the crowds.

Once he'd seen the coffin lowered into the garden soil, Ligish headed toward the ballroom. He opened the doors. As he'd requested, Bishop Calvaria stood by Anna's bed. She'd not woken since she'd been shot and the doctors said she never would. There was nothing left inside her skull except for that which kept her heart pumping and lungs breathing.

Calvaria held an open wooden box in his hand. Inside the box were hundreds of tiny scraps of paper. On

one side of each scrap were symbols and on the other, a number.

“These look like the commands given to a Golem’s soul,” Calvaria said.

Ligish walked to the automicroscope and sat in the chair, fixing his gaze on the mirror so that he could see what Calvaria was about to do. “Each piece of paper is numbered. Use the tweezers on the work bench to feed them into my soul.”

Ligish reached behind him and

removed the locking pin. The back of his skull opened, revealing a desk and an empty chair. His soul no longer needed commands from a homunculus, though it would still accept them. There had been a surprising number of golems who kept their homunculi, preferring servitude to freedom.

Since Master Gray had died, he'd spent all his time remembering what he'd read in the infinite book, scrutinizing Master Gray's notes and revising ancient books on creating

homunculi.

“I’m making a new homunculus,” Ligish said. “One made from Anna. You once said a homunculus was an expression of its creator, like a poem or a sonnet, but since God’s word gave them freedom, this seems to be false. If unbound and free, homunculi are their creators in spirit and mind. I don’t know if my commands are correct, but if they are, I’ll make her homunculus autonomically.”

“And either they or their creators

have died,” Calvaria said. “Both cannot live at once. This is not certain.”

Ligish spoke quietly. “Would you say Miss Anna is alive?”

Calvaria opened his mouth and shut it again. Ligish gestured for the bishop to start. With painstaking care, Calvaria inserted the scraps of paper into his soul.

Day faded into night as the sun sank in the West and God’s other hand raised the moon. He mixed Anna’s blood with rare chemicals

and chanted strange phrases. When the sun had risen again, he'd created a tiny naked replica of Anna. He held her cupped in his hands and breathed a tiny plume of air into her lungs.

The homunculus coughed and shuddered into life. Anna stopped breathing and the color drained from her face. Ligish handed Calvaria the homunculus. Calvaria placed the homunculus into Ligish's skull, closed the doors and inserted the locking pin. For a moment, nothing happened. Then he heard Anna's

voice whisper in his ears.

“Ligish? What happened?” she said, her voice confused.

“Do you remember what I said to you?” he said. “My last words in your bedroom?”

“No?” His hands flexed as Anna wrote commands, experimenting with the secret language known by all homunculi. She controlled his body now. It would be difficult operating one body between them, but they had her entire life to learn how to share and no one knew how

long a free homunculus might live.

“I’ll do whatever you ask for eternity,” he said. “I’ll always be your servant, no matter who my master is.” With that, he walked out from the house and flew into the air. He had an entire world to show her.



Sylvia Spruck Wrigley

Sylvia Spruck Wrigley became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Looking for a Knight in Shining Armor” in Daily Science Fiction (Dec. 2011), edited by Michele Barasso & Jonathan Laden. Visit her website at www.intrigue.co.uk.

Looking for a Knight
in Shining Armor
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Wrigley

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I appreciate your showing up. I know. Putting that ad onto OKCupid probably wasn't the best way to deal with this. I just... I didn't know where to turn for help. Maybe I should have just explained outright but I was worried you might not come. I'll tell you everything, I will.

It started with the caterpillars. Seriously.

The spiky little crawlers were clustered in the snow-covered trees

behind the cabin. They spun nests around the pine needles, sticky white balls of thread hanging from the branches.

“Infestation,” grunted Ezekiel when I went in to buy some groceries. He pulled a spray can of insecticide out from under the counter, put it next to the milk.

“I don’t like to use this stuff, Ezekiel. It’s not good for the environment.”

“Take it.” I hesitated and he shoved it into my hands. “So you’ve

got it if you need it.”

That was a speech, by Ezekiel's standards, so I took it, threw it into my backpack and he rang up the rest. Ezekiel is about a hundred years old, runs the dusty little shop at Forest Springs for the cabins up here. Next sign of civilization is Riverside, a one-hour drive down the mountain. I try to stay on Ezekiel's good side.

Still, I didn't use the spray, not at first. But those nests kept growing bigger and I could see thorny caterpillars crawling around the

edges. They were as fat as my finger now and not at all cute, not like the fuzzy tiny ones I sometimes found in my tomatoes.

By the end of the week, I was starting to worry about the pines.

“What do I do with the spray, Ezekiel? Do I spray it onto the nests directly?”

“Stand back, they sting.”

“The caterpillars? Are you kidding me?”

“Worms,” he said.

“No, Zeke, I’m pretty sure they

are caterpillars. They're all segmented and they have feet and..."

"Wyrm, not worm. With a y."

He kept his eyes on the groceries, checking each price.

My mouth opened and closed again and finally I managed to ask, "Wyrm as in dragons? In my trees?"

"Wait until they hatch." His weathered face was defiant as he handed me the bag.

"I'll spray them," I said.

"Good." He ambled into the back room, turned the radio on. I was

dismissed.

I started with one that was close to the ground, standing well back with the spray can held in front of me with both hands, like a laser gun. I pressed hard until a thick cloud of mist surrounded the webbed nest. My heart was heavy at the poisonous hiss of pesticides in my precious mountain get-away but it seemed stupid to ignore Ezekiel's advice.

When the bottle was empty, I went back to Ezekiel's for more.

“How come I've never heard

about these before?”

“Cold snap. The eggs don’t hatch most winters.” He waved a hand at yesterday’s paper: coldest winter since the blizzard of 1935.

“We tried to fight them,” he said as he dumped another half dozen cans onto the counter. “You’ll never get them all.”

“I’m doing my best, Ezekiel.”

The caterpillars fed at night, crawling out of the nests and around the trees. Every day I sprayed and every evening I watched for signs of

life, noting the active nests for extra spraying the following day. Finally it seemed like I'd succeeded.

“I got them, Zeke. Every single one.”

He shook his head. “There’s always one.” Then he seemed to feel bad, because he patted my shoulder. “You did your best,” I heard him say as he shuffled to the back room. I’ll be honest, I wrote him off as a crazy mountain man at that point. But when the dragon came, I had to eat my words.

It wasn't a particularly huge dragon, maybe the size of a small pony. I found it in the back woods, lying in a sunny patch. The scrub around it was black with ash. Of course I went straight to town to tell Ezekiel what I'd seen.

"Wyrn," he said with a sigh. "Thought so."

"So what do I do? It doesn't look that bad."

"It'll burn down half the countryside if it comes out. You'll have to feed it, keep it comfortable"

he said. His bleary eyes raised to meet mine. “Virgins.”

“Don’t be...” The look on his wrinkled face cut off my protestations. “Virgins?”

He nodded. “Virgins. You can find ‘em in Smallfield. Catholic school.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “I’m not kidnapping girls to feed to a dragon, that’s ludicrous.”

He smiled, showing grey chipped teeth. “Then you’ll need a knight to come and kill it. Good luck with

that.”

He pulled down the corner of his t-shirt. His shoulder was livid with scar material, as if someone had raked the skin off the bones. “Nasty buggers, wyrms.”

So, that’s why I put that ad onto OKCupid. Looking for a knight in shining armor to slay my dragons. And well, you’re the first one who answered who actually owned a sword. Yeah, I know it’s just for reenactments but beggars can’t be choosers, you know?

Ezekiel says if it gets hungry enough, it's not too fussy so if you're a virgin... well. If you win, then the problem's solved. And if you lose, hey, I am sorry, but think of it as buying time for me to find another solution.

But I'm sure you'll win. You'll be fine.



... and not appearing
in this volume.

Despite our best attempts to extend the invitation to all eligible writers, and desire to include work from as many potential Campbell nominees as possible, several individuals either elected not to participate or were unable to supply reprint rights prior to the publication deadline. Because we are attempting to offer a clear and comprehensive overview of the field,

the following supplemental list represents all who were thus unable to be involved, but who are known, at the time of this writing, to have met the eligibility criteria. Readers are encouraged to visit their websites, since those writers may still elect to supply stories for consideration.



Madeline Ashby became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for

Best New Writer with the publication of vN: The First Machine Dynasty from Angry Robot Books (2012). Visit her website at madelineashby.com.

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Alec Austin became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Volition” in Daily Science Fiction (Sep. 2011). Visit his website at alecaustin.livejournal.com.

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Richard Baldwin became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Silhouette and the Smoke” in Penumbra eMag (Sep. 2012). Visit his website at westofwonderland.com.

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Michael T. Banker became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Second Chances Made of Glass and Wood” in Orson

Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show (Jul/Aug. 2011). (No known website.)



Jessica Barber became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "MonitorBot and the King of Pop" in Strange Horizons (Jan. 2012). (No known website.)



Jacquelyn Bartel became eligible for

the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Rx” in Daily Science Fiction (Jan. 2011). Visit her online at twitter.com/JacquelynBartel.

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Brooke Bolander became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Sun Dogs” in Lightspeed Science Fiction & Fantasy (Sep. 2012). Visit her website at brookebolander.com.



J.S. Breukelaar became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Union Falls” in Fantasy Magazine (Jul. 2011). Visit her website at www.thelivingsuitcase.com.



Jeremy R. Butler became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Recipe Collecting in

the Asteroid Belt” in Apex Magazine (May 2011). Visit his website at jeremyrbutler.net.

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Dan Campbell became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Where Sea and Sky Kiss” in Daily Science Fiction (Oct. 2011). Visit his website at art-ungulate.livejournal.com.

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Cassandra Rose Clarke became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Space Between Stars” in Strange Horizons (Jan. 2011). Visit her website at www.cassandraroaseclarke.com.

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D.A. D’Amico became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Trick of Memory” in Daily Science Fiction (Feb. 2011). Visit his website

at dadamico.com.

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K.M. Ferebee became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Seven Spells to Sever the Heart” in Fantasy Magazine (Nov. 2011). Visit her website at kmferebee.wordpress.com.

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Laurie Frankel became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for

Best New Writer with the publication of Goodbye For Now from Doubleday (2012). Visit her website at www.lauriefrankel.net.

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Teresa Frohock became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Miserere: An Autumn Tale from Night Shade Books (2011). Visit her website at www.teresafrohock.com.

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L.B. Gale became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Spindles” in Lightspeed Science Fiction & Fantasy (Oct. 2012). Visit her website at www.lbgale.com.

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Max Gladstone became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Three Parts Dead from Tor Books (2012). Visit his website at www.maxgladstone.com.



Preston Grassmann became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Cael’s Continuum” in Bull Spec (Apr. 2011). (No known website.)



Richard E. Gropp became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Filling up the Void” in Daily Science Fiction (Jul. 2011).

Visit his website at
www.troublebox.com.

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Ken Hinckley, writing as “Alistair Ainscott,” became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Piss Match” in Penumbra eMag (Jan. 2012). Visit his website at
kenhinckley.wordpress.com.

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Hugh Howey became eligible for the

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Wool from Random House Books Australia (2012). Visit his website at www.hughhowey.com.

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Louise Hughes became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Over the Waves” in Strange Horizons (Aug. 2012). (No known website.)

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M.K. Hutchins became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Blank Faces” in Orson Scott Card’s Intergalactic Medicine Show (May/Jun. 2012). Visit her website at www.mkhutchins.com.

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Andrew Jack became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Forgotten Gifts” in BuzzyMag (Dec.

2012). Visit his website at www.andrewjackwriting.com.

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Patty Jansen became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “This Peaceful State of War” in Writers of the Future, Vol. XXVII (2011). Visit her website at pattyjansen.com.

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K.G. Jewell became eligible for the

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Newfangled” in Daily Science Fiction (Mar. 2011). Visit his website at lit.kgjewell.com.

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Jake Kerr became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Old Equations” in Lightspeed Magazine (Jul. 2011). Visit his website at www.currentsandtangents.com.



Mark Lawrence became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Prince of Thorns from Ace Voyager (2011). Visit his website at princeofthorns.com.



Stina Leicht became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Of Blood and Honey from Night Shade Books (2011); she was also a

nominee for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer on the 2012 Hugo/Campbell ballot. Visit her website at www.csleicht.com.

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Hunter Liguore became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Area 54” in Strange Horizons (Apr. 2012). Visit her website at skytalewriter.com.

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John Love became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of FAITH from Night Shade Books (2012). Visit his website at john-love.com.

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Andrew Magowan became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of "Freedom Acres" in Bull Spec (Jan. 2011). (No known website.)



Brit Mandelo became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Through Smoke Shall Hide the Sun” in Tor.com (Feb. 2011). Visit his website at britmandelo.com.



Tim Maughan became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Limited Edition” in Arc 1.3 (Sep. 2012). Visit his website

at timmaughanbooks.com.

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Paul McComas became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Unforgettable: Harrowing Futures, Horrors, and (Dark) Humor from Walkabout Publishing (2011). Visit his website at paulmccomas.com.

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Bryce Moore became eligible for the

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Vodnik from Tu Books (2012). Visit his website at brycemoore.com.

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Lisa Nohealani Morton became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “How Maartje and Uppinder Terraformed Mars (Marsmen Trad.)” in Lightspeed Magazine (Nov. 2011). Visit her website at www.lnmorton.com.



Karen Munro became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Peerless” in Strange Horizons (Jun. 2011). Visit her website at munrovian.wordpress.com.



J.B. Park became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Chop Shop” in Nightmare Magazine (Dec. 2012). (No known website.)



Zack Parsons became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of *Liminal States* from Kensington Books (2012). Visit his website at liminalstates.com.



Adam Perin became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Medic!” in *Writers of the Future*, Vol. XXVII (2011). Visit his website

at www.adamperin.com.

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Dominica Phetteplace became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Cult of Whale Worship” in Asimov’s Magazine (Oct/Nov. 2011). Visit her website at www.dominicaphetteplace.com.

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Laura E. Price became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best

New Writer with the publication of “Items Found in a Box Belonging to Jonas Connolly” in Strange Horizons (Apr. 2011). (No known website.)

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Alter S Reiss became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Memory Bugs” in Daily Science Fiction (Feb. 2011). Visit his website at www.dhole.livejournal.com.

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Lev AC Rosen became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of All Men of Genius from Tor Books (2011). Visit his website at www.levacrosen.com.

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K.M. Ruiz became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Mind Storm from St. Martin's Press (2011). Visit her website at www.kmruiz.com.



Jeff Salyards became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Scourge of the Betrayer from Night Shade Books (2012). Visit his website at jeffsalyards.com.



John M. Shade became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Colors” in Daily Science Fiction (Aug. 2012). Visit

him online at
twitter.com/dystopiandream.

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Courtney Schafer became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of The Whitefire Crossing (Shattered Sigil #1) from Night Shade Books (2011). Visit her website at
www.courtneyschafer.com.

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Anna Sheehan became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of *A Long Long Sleep* from Candlewick (2011). Visit her website at www.annasheehan.com.

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John E.O. Stevens became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Scorn of the Peregrinator” in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (Nov. 2012). Visit his website

at jhstevens.wordpress.com.

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Andy Stewart became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Typhoid Jack” in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (May/Jun. 2012). (No known website.)

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Nike Sulway became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best

New Writer with the publication of “Her Lover’s Golden Hair” in Fantasy Magazine (Dec. 2011). Visit her website at www.nasulway.com.

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Tim Susman became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Erzulie Dantor” in Apex Magazine (Nov. 2012). Visit him online at twitter.com/writerfox.

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M. Darusha Wehm became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “The Care and Feeding of Mammalian Biped v 2.1” in Escape Pod (Nov. 2012). Visit her website at darusha.ca.

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Chuck Wendig became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of Double Dead from Abaddon Books (2011). Visit his

website at terribleminds.com.

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Brooke Juliet Wonders became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer with the publication of “Substitution” in Daily Science Fiction (Dec. 2011). Visit her website at girlwonders.wordpress.com.

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J. Deery Wray became eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best

New Writer with the publication of “The Butcher of Londinium” in Orson Scott Card’s Intergalactic Medicine Show (Jul/Aug. 2012). Visit her website at jdeerywray.blogspot.com.



Along with the writers already represented herein, this supplement concludes the list of those known, at this time, to be eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New

Writer in 2013. Since it is possible (and even probable) that some names were inadvertently missed, readers are also encouraged to visit the Campbell Award: Eligible Authors page at Writertopia.com for periodic eligibility updates.

Appendix: 2012 by Length

Should anyone wish to consider works written in 2012 on their own merit, and nominate them for individual awards rather than as part of a corpus, this appendix is sequenced first by actual length and then by title.

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Novels

Empire State by Adam Christopher
Seven Wonders by Adam
Christopher

Novelettes

“Command for Love, The” by Nick
T.Chan

“Putting Down Roots” by Grayson
Bray Morris

“Rats Will Run” by Marina J.
Lostetter

“Raw Materials” by Bernie Mojzes

“Sinking Among Lilies” by Cory
Skerry

Short Stories

“Ants Go Marching, The” by Sarah
Pinsker

“Box in My Pocket, The” by Amy
Sundberg

“Daddy's Girl” by Amy Sundberg

“Death Comes for Maggie McDaniel”
by Grayson Bray Morris

“Don't Eat the Piano Player” by M.
David Blake

“Durak” by Anatoly Belilovsky

“Ex-Boyfriend” by Wakefield Mahon

“Hire Education” by Ronald D.
Ferguson

“In the Valley” by Nicole M. Taylor

“Karlsson” by Anatoly Belilovsky

“Mad Scientist’s Beautiful Daughter,
The” by Nicole M. Taylor

“My Mask, Humanity” by D.
Thomas Minton

“Not Dying in Central Texas” by
Sarah Pinsker

“Observations on a Clock” by D.
Thomas Minton

“Of Mat and Math” by Anatoly
Belilovsky

“Paradise Aperture, The” by David
Carani

“Please Wait” by Robert Dawson

“Ritchie Boss: Private Investigator
Manager” by Micah Joel

“Sapience and Maternal Instincts” by
Krystal Claxton

“Scarred” by Damien Walters
Grintalis

“Scraps” by Michael Haynes

“Seven Fish for Sarah” by Michael
Hodges

“Seven Samovars, The” by Peter
Sursi

“Shard Glows in Brooklyn, A” by
Alex Shvartsman

“Sleeping Beauty” by Thoraiya Dyer

“Somewhere It Snows” by T.C.

McCarthy

“Street Lamps and Carbaryl” by

Michael Hodges

“Taking Care of Ma” by Lee Hallison

“They Make of You a Monster” by

Damien Walters Grintalis

“Trickster’s Bones, The” by Kenneth

S. Kao

“Twenty Ways the Desert Could Kill

You” by Sarah Pinsker

“Twenty-Seven Rules for Coping” by

Michael Haynes

“Unsuitable Job for a Human, An” by
Michael Haynes

“Until They Come” by Trina Marie
Phillips

“Watchmaker’s Gift, The” by Rich
Matrunick

“Widow, The” by Robert Dawson

“You Bet” by Alex Shvartsman

Some other stuff about
The John W.
Campbell Award for
Best New Writer



The John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer has been awarded every year, without interruption, since 1973. In that time, there has never (to the best of my knowledge) been a conscientious

effort to highlight all the writers eligible for the award. Although one can hardly argue with the results, the publishing era in which we now live makes it possible for new writers to meet the eligibility criteria at a rate faster than any single reader could evaluate.

A resource of this nature is not only needed, but overdue. Sadly though, assembling any anthology of this magnitude is still a time-consuming endeavor; you'll likely have noticed a few typographical

and/or spelling errors, because there simply wasn't time to proof read everything as it came in. I relied largely on material supplied by the writers themselves, and despite the fact that they were all careful about version tracking and edits, there is still a chance that some source or other might have differed slightly from the published canon. In such cases, please give the writers—and their original editors—the benefit of the doubt.

This volume was conceived a

mere seven weeks ago, and you will, at best, have only five weeks left in which to read before the deadline for submitting your 2013 Hugo/Campbell nomination ballot... assuming you were a member of [Chicon 7/Worldcon 70](#) last year, or became a member of either [LoneStarCon 3/Worldcon 71](#) or [Loncon III/Worldcon 72](#) prior to January 31, 2013.

I truly wish it could have been delivered sooner. February 1 was the absolute earliest the 2013

Campbellian

Pre-Reading

Anthology could be released, in order to still include a few of the stories you just read. Even at that late date, some of the inclusions only appeared by special permission of the editors and publishers of the original sources, and for those early exemptions I am especially grateful. If you were impressed by work(s) that first appeared in a magazine or anthology listed in these pages, my hope is that you will check out some of their other offerings. It is only

through the patronage of subscribers and supporters that publications are able to continue purchasing such treasures, and justify the time invested in finding new writers.

What if I missed the deadline
to join, in order to
nominate?

Believe it or not, even if you missed the deadline to join one of the existing or future Worldcons in order to nominate on the 2013 ballot, there are still some things you

can do. Talk with others about the stories you enjoyed, and the writers you noticed! My sincere wish is that every individual currently eligible for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer might enjoy a long, illustrious career. For that to happen though, every last one of them needs your support as a reader.

Express your opinions. You might not be able to nominate, but you can still talk about why you think any eligible writer should (or should not, as preference dictates)

receive the nomination. It might be that another reader, already largely familiar with the field, will discover someone they'd missed. Word of mouth is a very powerful force.

And then, there is one last option. You could... maybe... just possibly... write a story.

Who knows? If you do, there's a chance I'll be able to include your name in the 2014 Campbellian Pre-Reading Anthology. I'd like that, because I'm eager to see what you'll come up with.

Let's fill the sky with comets.

— M. David Blake, 1 February
2013

Spais Maureen's
Spaze M'Rienes
Spays Mo' Reens!
(and you can too...)