



FUTURES and FANTASIES

edited by JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS



LIGHTSPEED PRESENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Lightspeed is a digital science fiction and fantasy magazine. In its pages, you will find science fiction: from near-future, sociological soft SF, to far-future, star-spanning hard SF—and fantasy: from epic fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, and contemporary urban tales, to magical realism, science-fantasy, and folktales.

Launched in 2010, *Lightspeed* is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award, and stories from the magazine have been nominated for major genre awards dozens of times, including the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Theodore Sturgeon Award. *Lightspeed* has published short fiction from a wide variety of authors—from the bestsellers and award-winners you already know to the best new voices you haven't heard of yet. Some of the more notable authors who have appeared in its pages include Stephen King, George R.R. Martin, Ursula K. Le Guin, Neil Gaiman, N.K. Jemisin, Ted Chiang, and Ken Liu, to name but a few.

This book is an anthology of stories culled from the pages of *Lightspeed*. It's intended, first and foremost, to be an excellent anthology of the finest science fiction and fantasy short fiction. But it is also intended to serve as an ambassador for the magazine, to help readers—perhaps like yourself—who might not have encountered it before . . . to discover the wonders that await within.

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Thanks so much for reading!

—John Joseph Adams
Editor/Publisher
Lightspeed Magazine

THE THING ABOUT SHAPES TO COME

Adam-Troy Castro

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Monica’s new baby was like a lot of new babies these days in that she was born a cube. She had no external or internal sexual organs, or for that matter organs of any kind, being just a warm solid filled with protoplasm. But she was, genetically at least, a girl, and one who resembled her mother as much as any cube possibly could. That wasn’t much in that she had no eyes, no nose, no mouth, no chin, no hair, nothing that could be charitably called a face or bodily features, not even any orifices larger than pores. But she had inherited Monica’s healthy appetite. Placed in a dish in a puddle of Monica’s breast milk, she throbbed in deep appreciation and absorbed it all in a matter of minutes, becoming as plump and as satiated as a sponge. As far as anybody could tell, she was a happy and healthy cube.

It had been a difficult birth, given all the corners involved. Labor had been the biological equivalent of trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. But there was no reason, they said, to worry about her health; her constitution was strong, and there was no reason to believe she couldn’t live a long, comfortable, and healthy life, devoid of any serious problems unrelated to the general inconvenience of going through life shaped like a cube. The presence of nerve impulses even confirmed that the child could think, while providing little in the way of speculation over what she could possibly have to think about. Look at her the right way and it was even possible to consider her beautiful, in that she was smooth on all her planes, sharply defined on her edges and corners, not off by so much as a millimeter, in any of her vital measurements. This wasn’t the kind of beauty Monica had envisioned when she’d hoped for a beautiful child, but there was a starkness to her daughter’s lines, a mathematical purity to her, that made it impossible to want to use terms like *disfigured* or *deformed*.

Monica had hoped for an old-fashioned baby, of the kind that had been common when she was a child, the kind with the rounded features and drooly toothless smile and the foreshortened arms and legs and even—yes, she’d looked forward to this as well—the end that would need to be wiped clean and powdered on a regular basis. She had wanted a child who would someday delight her by calling her “Mama,” and one day rise on uncertain feet to toddle off and force her to give chase. That would have been the ideal. But she had also known that these days the odds of ending up with a baby that looked like that were about one in a hundred thousand, and dropping. More and more women were giving birth to cylinders and pyramids and crosses and rhombuses, with the vast majority of the newest generation emerging as playful spheres. Of all the young mothers Monica knew, only one had been blessed with a baby shaped like a baby; and that mother seemed genuinely haunted as she pushed the infant around in its pram, aware that the world was watching, feeling surrounded on all sides by legions of frustrated kidnappers and pederasts. The mothers of children-shaped children had to take care to shield their progeny from such predators, because the number of predators remained constant even as the number of possible targets for their vile intentions now described an asymptotic curve that approached but never quite reached zero. Most of the young parents Monica knew were lucky enough to have been blessed with spheres that could roll around and bounce into one another and even learn to descend household stairs, though rarely to ascend them. A sphere, Monica thought, would have been a fine alternative to a traditional baby. A sphere she could have taken to the park and played with. But complaining about that was like spitting in the face of God. Certainly, a cube must have other talents, other good points to love.

Of course, Monica’s mom and dad were upset, not just because their teenaged daughter had given birth to a cube but also, unspoken, because that cube’s mocha-brown coloring suggested that, since Monica was white, the unknown father must have been black. Dad wore an unmistakable scowl as he held the new arrival in his hands, his rheumy eyes a million miles away as he bid a mental farewell to any future birthdays involving tricycles and baseball gloves, or even dollhouses or drum batons. He weighed the cube in his hands, wondering aloud whether he was holding her upside down or right side up, or if there was any way he could tell that she even knew she was being held. He said, *Maybe we could put a label on it, to let us know which way is up*. Monica’s mom was even less subtle, complaining: *She’s square*. A doctor corrected her at once, saying, *No, Mrs. Hufready, she’s not a square, a square would be flat. She’s a cube*. Mom was slow to absorb the correction and demanded, *What the hell is my daughter going to do with a square kid?* It was impossible to hear Mom’s tone of voice and not know that she would always fail to get it, that even if she came around to loving her granddaughter for the beautiful, geometrical solid she was, she would still be slow to pick up the etymological differences, using the offensive s-slur for years to come without ever quite understanding why it was wrong.

As for herself, Monica felt the tug of maternal love the second her child was placed in her hands, and rotated so she could see that her baby was indeed the same on all sides. She was a member of the younger generation, the one that had grown up in the age of such births, the one who had been prepared to gestate and nurture a darling shape of her own. She saw in her daughter’s being, her substance, the oneness of her, a divine spark that all of her dreams of a more conventional child could not deny. She felt the pit of bottomless responsibility open wide before her and, with no reservations, leaped in. Asked for a name to put on the birth certificate, she told the doctors, “Her name’s Di.”

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Di was a well-behaved child, who lay in her crib and regarded the world around her with a calm acceptance that never crossed the line into brattiness or fussing for the sake of fussing. She didn’t cry, but from time to time she hummed. This was always a sign that it was time to feed her. She was an angel whenever food was provided, sitting in the center of any puddle laid out for her and plumping visibly as she absorbed it. She also thrummed in the presence of her mother, though rarely so in the presence of her grandparents, whose generational instincts had somehow failed to kick in, and who most often referred to the baby as “that thing.” Monica did whatever she could to jump start their hearts, but that seemed a losing battle, and she spent more and more time retreating from them, taking Di into her own bedroom and doing all the maternal things she was required to do in private, where they would not be a source of constant irritation.

Aside from that, there was no shame. Monica felt no compunction about taking Di out to the park, where there were only a couple of lonely “normal” children who looked furtive and uncomfortable in the playgrounds littered with mostly immobile shapes other parents had brought and placed about the rusting swing sets and jungle gyms, in the hopes that the environment would provide the kinetic opportunities that the limited motive ability their own offspring lacked. The most popular item of equipment among the parents seemed to be the sandbox, where the pyramids, cubes, and rhombuses, arranged in rows and left to interact in any way they could, resembled the half-buried buildings of some desert city, assaulted by the aftermath of a sandstorm. A couple of times Monica placed Di there, among the other edifices in the miniature boulevard, until she noticed that when playtime was over the parents didn’t always leave with the same kids they’d come with, and excused away any accidents of identification with the excuse that they were just too hard to tell apart.

Some conscientious parents made more of an effort to personalize—as in, “render a person”—their shape-children. Sometimes, Monica sat beside one determined young woman who dressed her pyramidal boy, Roger, in jean overalls that buttoned midway up his converging slopes, held in place by suspenders that hooked around his single vertex. The outfit came complete with plush-toy, fake legs dangling from his base. The effect wasn’t very convincing, not even with the cartoonish smiley-face drawn on one of Roger’s three risers, a representation of two dot eyes and bubblegum pink cheeks curving into a happy mouth that, on Roger, resembled disrespectful graffiti more than an actual personification of a child. Even when Monica forced herself to entertain the premise, she couldn’t help noticing that the simulated head came to a point, which to her mind made Roger look feeble-minded. To be sure, Roger’s mother had tried to ameliorate that point with a scruffy little wig and baseball cap, but how much more noble, she thought, was his actual shape, shorn of pretense? It was primal; it was classical. It was the shape of monuments, of constructs that lived forever. The pyramid-in-boy-suit was, by comparison, just a transparent ploy, a stab at imagined normalcy that emerged as grubby and pathetic by comparison. Monica could only glance at her own Di, who embodied self-contained perfection so well that she looked the same from every angle, and tried in vain to summon the mindset that would have led her to subject the darling to indignities of the same sort that Roger’s mother subjected on him. It seemed deluded, anti-maternal, and likely hurtful.

Other times Monica wandered over to the fenced-in area where the spheres played. It had been a basketball court, though the poles and hoops had been taken down, and the game being played by about two dozen spheres of different sizes resembled nothing that had ever been played between teams. Unlike cubes, which were stable once placed in any given position and could be trusted to remain where they were put until somebody came by to move them, spheres were pure chaos, harder to stop than to start, an explosion of play potential that manifested as a collection of runaway ids. They rolled about at high speeds, some describing predictable orbits and others changing their course according to the whim of each passing moment. They collided. They bounced. They slowed, pretended to rest, and then accelerated like streaks of light, as if fired by invisible cannons. It was impossible to tell if they were actually playing with one another, or, as it seemed to Monica, *at* one another. Perhaps they perceived their fellow spheres as annoying obstructions and not as fellow inhabitants of the universe. But there was an energy to their play, a potential that reminded Monica of atoms colliding with one another, searching for others with which they could combine and form strange new substances, with none of the properties of the original contributors. But when Monica put Di down in the center of all that splendid chaos, just to see what would happen, the answer was nothing; her child just sat in the center of it all, unstirred, a closed system.

When Di was two, the world experienced a slight upswing in instances of what were by then called traditional pregnancies. It wasn't much. It didn't amount to more than about five thousand more than the population had been told to expect. But the furor over this development vastly exceeded its statistical significance. The news media questioned: Is the "plague" over? Had mankind been saved from this strange mutation?

In a few short months further numbers would come in, and the answer to both questions would turn out to be no. This was nothing more than a statistical fluke, the kind of phenomenon that only happens because the numbers come up that way; no more significant than the occasional odd family that, in the old days, would produce ten boys in a row without a single female face among them, without much affecting the fifty/fifty ratio in the general population. When things evened out, the vast majority of young mothers continued to pump out spheres and cubes and pyramids and rhombuses, and the line on the graph that reflected the percentage of pregnancies that resulted in baby-shaped babies continued to descend, inexorably, toward zero.

But while the illusion lasted, many people seized on the premature intimations of hope to initiate debates over what to do with what they considered a lost generation. Shape-children were abandoned, thrown out, offered up for adoption. Many mothers were pressured by loved ones to admit that the things they'd carried in their bodies, expelled, and cared for, were, not people, but things unworthy of their love that could now be discarded.

Monica's parents were among the people who took this position. They pointed out that she had not held down a job, or done anything else with her life, since Di's birth. They said that all she did was feed "it" and care for "it" and talk to "it" as if "it" could hear her. They told her that she showed even more devotion than a "regular" mother, but that it was a devotion poured down a black hole that swallowed far more than it could ever return. *It's a parasite*, they told her. She argued that it had always been possible to see babies as parasites feeding off the generation that birthed them; for a while, at least, they contributed nothing but smiles and coos while demanding food, attention, and energy. How, she wanted to know, was Di different? This somehow never closed the argument but rather brought it back to the beginning, to the declaration that Di had done nothing in her short life but increase in size and in her need for nutrients. *You don't like the word "parasite"?* her parents asked her, *Try "vegetable."* The point was that Di still showed no sign of ever being able to interact with others in any meaningful way. There was no reason Monica had to continue paying the price of being devoted to her, not when there were "places" that could take care of Di just as well as she could.

This was not just a single conversation. Or perhaps it was, if you can say that a series of conversations, continued over days and weeks with only short interruptions for sleep and the necessary business of being alive, was a conversation. There was no halt to it. Monica took it with calm, and then with anger, then with long bitter silences, and then with weakness: *Yes*, she said, *Of course, I'm not saying I agree, but I'll look at one of those places, already.*

And so they went to a facility for abandoned cubes. It wasn't called that. It was called a juvenile home. But it was only open to cubes, specializing in that particular shape and no other, to the point of specifying in its charter that any children whose parents submitted applications would be carefully measured before acceptance, to ensure that none of them had sides that differed in proportion by even a stray millimeter. As Di thrummed contentedly in Monica's lap, the administrator, a woman who seemed inordinately configured out of ninety-degree angles herself, explained that "fitting in" here was not a social concern but a physical one. The children were stored on shelves in stacks of three, and any whose dimensions were at all disproportionate caused dangerous instability among those stacked on top of them. But—she smiled—there was no reason to believe that this would be a problem with Di, who was just lovely. In her case the examination would be, doubtlessly, no more than a formality.

Monica and her parents took the grand tour, and by now were not surprised that the place was, very much literally, a place for warehousing unwanted children. The shelves stretched twelve feet above a cold concrete floor and the length of a football field into gloom, each stacked five high with cubes of sizes ranging from newborn to adolescent, the latter being so large they could have contained old-fashioned console televisions. A sprinkler hose moved down one of the aisles on a track, spraying them with a liquid that, the administrator advised Monica, had been formulated to fit all of their nutritional needs. Another spraying light mist washed them off. Stereo speakers played gentle instrumentals while the cubes thrummed, staying in tune. Dust motes danced in the cold, dim light. Monica's father asked the administrator if they had a system in place for knowing which child was which, and she pointed out a placard at the end of each row, which detailed the number range of those stored on each shelf (as in "1200- 1503"). The names, she said, were backed up weekly and stored off-site, for convenience, but they didn't really matter all that much, as these were not children who would ever come when called.

The silence and seeming acquiescence of Monica and her parents encouraged the administrator to ramble. She told them about the most memorable mishap the facility had ever suffered, a case where none of the attendants had noticed that the cube on top of the stack had experienced a growth spurt faster than those of the cubes it rested on, and a cascade occurred that had toppled first that stack and then the other stacks next to it, resulting in a pile of thrumming objects who may have been unhurt but who presented a challenge that didn't often come up when dealing with other children, in that they were faceless and identical. It had taken a flurry of DNA tests, undertaken at great expense, to determine which child was which, not that anyone at the facility felt it especially mattered.

Monica asked permission to place Di on one of the shelves, just as an experiment. The administrator beamed and told her to go right ahead. She placed Di on an empty spot, murmured that there was no need to worry because Mommy would be right back, and backed away, stopping only when she was ten feet away, and then again when she was twenty, and finally again at fifty. Di was hard to pick out among all the other cubes. She was indistinguishable from the others her size. But Monica thought of all the times she had been in public places like busy streets or stadiums and auditoriums, looking out upon crowds of hundreds or even thousands—the way all of those faces, as unique as they may have been as Joe, or Sue, or Brad, or Laura, had been reduced by the sheer number to shifting pixels, making up a grand mural whose only identity was that of the mob. It wasn't easy to pick out any one person in that place either, because they were all alike, becoming something different from all the others only when they were approached and examined for the cues that made them individuals. She wondered if anybody working at this warehouse ever picked up one of the cubes and felt its warmth against their own. But mostly, she wondered how many of them were screaming.

The spheres rebelled the year Di turned fifteen. By that time it had been years since Monica had been able to hold her only child in her lap, or cradle her in her arms. Now Di was the size of a dishwasher and could no longer be moved except with a hand truck; at the speed she was growing, it would soon be impossible to move her from Monica's little studio apartment except by knocking down one of the walls. She was by far the most prominent item of de facto furniture in a place that otherwise knew little more than a kitchenette, a convertible couch, and a second-hand television.

Monica, who since cutting off all contact with her parents had worked two jobs to maintain the place, remained as attentive a mother as she could be under the circumstances. She made a point of eating breakfast with Di every morning; Di absorbing the contents of a sponge saturated in shape chow, Monica using Di's ceiling-oriented face as the dining table she otherwise didn't have room for. Di was, if nothing else, a considerate person to eat a meal on. She absorbed spills, and to Monica's maternal eyes seemed to be particularly fond of coffee.

Monica still spoke to Di all the time, telling her that she was special, assuring her that she was loved. There was no way for Monica to know that her child heard or appreciated any of it, and though she held on to her faith with a ferocity that her few friends considered heroic if not deluded, those doubts sometimes overwhelmed her, leading to sleepless nights and a sense of all her life's energy being poured down a black hole.

The little studio became a fortress when the spheres rebelled, many millions of them at once, a revolution declared at the same moment in a hundred major cities around the world, though it was hard to say what grievances they thought they had, or what cause they might have championed, other than anarchy. Thousands, of all ages, from newborns to near-adults, rolled down the Spanish steps in Rome, thousands more down the zigzag planes of Lombard Street in San Francisco, uncounted numbers rebounding at high altitudes from glass skyscraper to glass skyscraper in Tokyo in what amounted to the most horrifying Pachinko game ever played. Cities with steep hills were the most vulnerable, of course, but they were not above tailoring their acts of terror to the local possibilities: Witness what they did in Saint Louis, where hundreds of them herded shrieking innocents through the Gateway Arch and back, scoring goals.

In the city where Monica lived, they just broke things, smashing through automobile windshields, overturned trucks, and made it their solemn duty to pay a visit to every single china shop in the greater metropolitan area. She spent that long night huddled in her studio, assuring Di that everything would be all right as the sounds of fear and destruction rattled her windows. She lost herself in bleak thoughts of the price that would need to be paid for all this, the price that would no doubt be levied against innocents like Di, who could not wage war against anybody. Spheres, she thought savagely, were troublemakers by design. They could spin; therefore, they were revolutionary. It was not just their privilege but their nature to take the path of least resistance, no matter what lay ahead of them. It was just the way they rolled. But cubes, like Di? They were solid, dependable, and uncomplaining. They received love and asked for nothing more. How terrible it was, that they would now be lumped into the same category as such delinquents.

But in the morning, the sounds of destruction gave way to an eerie silence that persisted until the sun reached its height in the sky. Monica ventured downstairs alone and discovered what those who had already left their homes already knew: that whatever had driven the spheres to their destructive madness the night before seemed to have exhausted, not just their rage, but their will to live. Wherever she looked, in every direction, the spheres remained in the places they had come to rest, moving only when some of

the people they had terrorized kicked them against walls or beat them with golf clubs and bats. Some, damaged by their fury of the night before, had lost so much of their bounce that they responded to any fall from a height not with an exuberant spring but rather with a sullen and indifferent thud. As she walked the city, she saw workers clearing their unresisting forms from the streets and loading them into trucks; and she knew that, all over the world, all those not claimed by loyal parents would be taken somewhere far from sight where they could be stacked in pyramids or plowed into canyons or otherwise forgotten about. For the first time in a life spent taking it as matter of faith that her cube had a soul, she found herself doubting that all shape-children did, and wondering if they would even care about being discarded in this manner. But what was the alternative? Tolerating what they’d done? Leaving them where they’d landed and trusting that they’d never run roughshod over the landscape again? It was not that she had no answer. It was that every answer she had made her feel dirty. It was a warm day but she hugged herself, shivering from a cold that originated somewhere deep in her marrow.

Before she returned to her apartment to check on Di, she stopped by the riverfront, where some of the smaller spheres had landed. Hundreds, ranging in size from golf ball to weather balloon, had landed in the water and were floating downstream toward the sea, where she supposed their next adventure would be serving as the playthings of dolphins. She supposed it as fitting a fate as any.

After a while Monica picked up one of the tiny ones that had landed on the shore, which, judging by its size, could not have been more than six months old. She spoke to it, asking if it could say anything to her that would help her to help them, or at the very least, explain just what, in any of their short lives, had embittered them so much that they had to turn to violence. Naturally it didn’t answer. She asked if there was anything it could tell her that could help her understand her own daughter, who was so close to being too large to live at home. Again, it didn’t answer. Tears sprung to her eyes and she cried, *At least you could move! At least you could have an adventure!* But no reply was forthcoming and in a fit of rage and resentment she tossed the infant into the river, somehow unsurprised when it didn’t land with a single splash but instead skipped over the waves, landing here and there but between those moments of impact remaining in flight, like something defiant and free.

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Nine months later, the very last shape-child—a random squiggle, like a strip of twisted macaroni—was born in Jakarta. Baby-shaped babies filled the Earth again. It’s worth noting that nobody ever came up with any reasonable scientific or theological explanation for the nearly two decades that saw such a drastic change in Mankind’s reproductive output; nor did it seem all that important, as long as it never happened again. Explanations are perhaps best left to the philosophers, who persist in seeking meaning even for those of life’s mysteries that remain random, or pointless, or so subtle in their inner workings that examining them is as destructive to the wonder itself as scattering the components of a pocket watch.

For all of us, meaning arrives in installments. It might be actual and it might be wishful thinking. We can only report the facts and hope that they provide closure. To wit:

Many years later, a rented car drives across the desert, taking a unmarked exit off the paved road to a dirt trail that carries its lone driver past some low hills to a hidden valley on the other side. Trailing a cloud of dust like a comet trail, it passes a little-used gate and descends into a vast caldera that, from a distance, looks like a recent settlement constructed in haste, with prefabricated buildings. It is in fact one of many around the world. Sprinklers water the immobile cubes, spheres, and squiggles, making rainbows in the air that, left to its own design, would be dusty and arid.

The car parks in a place that has been marked off for that purpose and out of it emerges a silver-haired, but still energetic, woman, squinting at the harsh desert sun. She looks out upon the survivors of a generation, the biggest of which are now three times her own height but which remain as voiceless and without affect as they ever were. Donning a pair of mirrored sunglasses, she sighs and makes her way down to the orderly paths past a very small number of other visitors, finally reaching a certain cube among many, that she has visited so many times she could probably find it in her sleep. No one other than her could see anything about this particular shape, which now towers over her like a monument, that could possibly distinguish it from all the others in its row or the rows that bracket it. But she smiles sadly when she sees it. To her, the shape before her has an individual character different from all the others. It is a person.

To be sure, Di also shows some of the ravages of time. The side facing east shows some sun-damage, and a swath of the side facing north shows some bad discoloration left over from the last time she needed to be sand-blasted for graffiti. But she thrums as always in the presence of her mother, who places a single wrinkled hand against her side and speaks words very much like those she’s uttered on any number of other visits. We do not need to know exactly what the silver-haired woman says. We can likely already imagine it, and reconstruct its meaning if not the actual words. What she says is not clever and it is not significant, and it will never appear in any book. But it fulfills its purpose, breaking the silence and ameliorating the harshness of the desert air.

Eventually, though, it’s time for the visit to end. The silver-haired woman whispers a few final words, lets her right hand brush the side of the vast shape before her, and turns to leave. Always, before, she never turned back. But today something—perhaps maternal instinct, or perhaps a voice that only she can hear—makes her turn before she has traversed twenty paces. And this time she sees something in her strange daughter that she has never witnessed before: an alteration in the nearest of her previously, featureless faces. It’s a rectangular opening, seven feet tall and three feet wide, extending upward from the patch of dirt that has become Di’s permanent home.

The silver-haired woman returns to what she has no trouble recognizing as a doorway, and runs her fingers up and down the jamb, filled with wonder at its sudden appearance. She turns away from it and peers up and down the path between the other children of her daughter’s generation, to make certain that nobody is watching. As it happens, nobody is. Di has chosen the perfect moment. This gesture is only meant for one.

The silver-haired woman cannot see anything past the opening but darkness, not even when she removes her sunglasses and shades her eyes from the glare. The precise nature of the answers to be found inside are not available to her, not out here. But she senses no threat: just the welcome the young are supposed to extend to the old, when the most inexorable of life’s many passages transfers the responsibility from one to the other.

With another glance up and down the row, just to be sure that she remains unobserved, the silver-haired woman murmurs the first words she has been ever been able to speak in response to an act Di has committed out of personal volition. “All right,” she says. “Good girl.”

Then she takes the first step, and her daughter lets her in.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adam-Troy Castro made his first non-fiction sale to *Spy* magazine in 1987. His books to date include four Spider-Man novels, three novels about his profoundly damaged far-future murder investigator Andrea Cort, and six middle-grade novels about the dimension-spanning adventures of young Gustav Gloom. Adam’s works have won the Philip K. Dick Award and the Seiun (Japan), and have been nominated for eight Nebulas, three Stokers, two Hugos, one World Fantasy Award, and, internationally, the Ignotus (Spain), the Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire (France), and the Kurd-Laßwitz Preis (Germany). The audio collection *My Wife Hates Time Travel And Other Stories* (Skyboat Media) features thirteen hours of his fiction, including the new stories “The Hour In Between” and “Big Stupe and the Buried Big Glowing Booger.” In 2022 he came out with two collections, his *The Author’s Wife Vs. The Giant Robot* and his thirtieth book, *A Touch of Strange*. Adam was an Author Guest of Honor at 2023’s World Fantasy Convention. Adam lives in Florida with a pair of chaotic paladin cats.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- Message in a Babel (forthcoming 2025)
- Feast of Famine (forthcoming 2025)
- The Moving Finger (forthcoming 2025)
- The Terrible Secret of the Immortal Bards
- The Three Thousand, Four Hundred Twenty-Third Law of Robotics
- Farewell to Faust
- Seed
- Spaceman Jones
- The Day the Earthman Didn’t Show
- The Conflagration at the Museum of You
- My Future Self, Refused
- Fairy Tale
- Ten Scenes from A Typical Day in the Life of the All-Powerful Despot

- Judi
- A Tableau of Things That Are
- And Now, A Preview of Coming Attractions
- Answering the Questions You Might Have About the Kharbat
- The Author's Wife vs. the Giant Robot
- The End of the World Measured in Values of N
- The Time Traveler's Advice to the Lovelorn
- Many Happy Returns
- Fortune's Final Hand
- Eros Pratlalled, Or, Adrift in the Cosmos With Lasagna and Mary Steenburgen
- Sacrid's Pod
- Sand Castles
- "The Minor Superhero at Home, After His Series Ends"
- "Of a Sweet Slow Dance in the Wake of Temporary Dogs" (reprint)
- "The Last to Matter"
- "Greetings, Humanity! Welcome To Your Choice Of Species!"
- "A Place Without Portals"
- "The Streets of Babel"
- "What I Told My Little Girl About the Aliens Preparing to Grind Us Into Hamburgers"
- "A Touch of Heart"
- "James, In the Golden Sunlight of the Hereafter"
- "Death Every Seventy-Two Minutes"
- "The Whole Crew Hates Me"
- "The Assassin's Secret"
- "Cerile and the Journeyer" (reprint)
- "The New Provisions"
- "The Thing About Shapes to Come"
- "The Boy and the Box"
- "My Wife Hates Time Travel"
- "Her Husband's Hands" (Stoker Award finalist)
- "Arvies" (Nebula Award finalist)



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

Visit johnjosephadams.com/newsletter to sign up for free.

SEVEN WONDERS OF A ONCE AND FUTURE WORLD

Caroline M. Yoachim

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The Colossus of Mars

Mei dreamed of a new Earth. She took her telescope onto the balcony of her North Philadelphia apartment and pointed it east, at the sky above the Trenton Strait, hoping for a clear view of Mars. Tonight the light pollution from Jersey Island wasn't as bad as usual, and she was able to make out the ice caps and dark shadow of Syrtis Major. Mei knew exactly where the science colony was, but the dome was too small to observe with her telescope.

Much as she loved to study Mars, it could never be her new Earth. It lacked sufficient mass to be a good candidate for terraforming. The initial tests of the auto-terraforming protocol were proceeding nicely inside the science colony dome, but Mars couldn't hold on to an atmosphere long enough for a planetwide attempt. The only suitable planets were in other solar systems, thousands of years away at best. Time had become the enemy of humankind. There had to be a faster way to reach the stars—a tesseract, a warp drive, a wormhole—some sort of shortcut to make the timescales manageable.

She conducted small-scale experiments, but they always failed. She could not move even a single atom faster than light or outside of time. An array of monitors filled the wall behind Mei's desk, displaying results from her current run on the particle accelerator, with dozens of tables and graphs that updated in real time. Dots traversed across the graphs, leaving straight trails behind them, like a seismograph on a still day or a patient who had flatlined. She turned to go back to her telescope, but something moved in the corner of her eye. One of the graphs showed a small spike. Her current project was an attempt to send an electron out of known time, and—

"Why are you tugging at the fabric of the universe, Prime?"

"My name is Mei." Her voice was calm, but her mind was racing. The entity she spoke with was not attached to any physical form, nor could she have said where the words came from.

"You may call me Achron. This must be the first time we meet, for you."

Mei noted the emphasis on the last two words. "And not for you?"

"Imagine yourself as a snake, with your past selves stretched out behind you, and your future selves extending forward. My existence is like that snake, but vaster. I am coiled around the universe, with past and present and future all integrated into a single consciousness. I am beyond time."

The conversation made sense in the way that dreams often do. Mei had so many questions she wanted to ask, academic queries on everything from philosophy to physics, but she started with the question that was closest to her heart. "Can you take me with you, outside of time? I am looking for a way to travel to distant worlds."

"Your physical being I could take, but your mind—you did/will explain it to me, that the stream of your consciousness is tied to the progression of time. Can you store your mind in a little black cube?"

"No."

"It must be difficult to experience time. We are always together, but sometimes for you, we are not."

Mei waited for Achron to say more, but that was the end of the conversation. After a few hours staring at the night sky, she went to bed.

Days passed, then months, then years. Mei continued her experiments with time, but nothing worked, and Achron did not return, no matter what she tried.

A team of researchers in Colorado successfully stored a human consciousness inside a computer for seventy-two hours. The computer had been connected to a variety of external sensors, and the woman had communicated with the outside world via words on a monitor. The woman's consciousness was then successfully returned to her body.

News reports showed pictures of the computer. It was a black cube.

Achron did not return. Mei began to doubt, despite the true prediction. She focused all her research efforts on trying to replicate the experiment that had summoned Achron to begin with, her experiment to send a single electron outside of time.

"It is a good thing, for you, that Feynman is/was wrong. Think what might have happened if there was only one electron and you sent it outside of time."

"My experiments still aren't working." It was hard to get funding, and she was losing the respect of her colleagues. Years of failed research were destroying her career, but she couldn't quit, because she knew Achron existed. That alone was proof that there were wonders in the world beyond anything humankind had experienced so far.

"They do and don't work. It is difficult to explain to someone as entrenched in time as you. I am/have done something that will help you make the time bubbles. Then you did/will make stasis machines and travel between the stars."

"How will I know when it is ready?"

"Was it not always ready and forever will be? Your reliance on time is difficult. I will make you a sign, a marker to indicate when the bubbles appear on your timeline. A little thing for only you to find."

"What if I don't recognize it?" Mei asked, but the voice had gone. She tried to get on with her experiments, but she didn't know whether the failures were due to her technique or because it simply wasn't time yet. She slept through the hot summer days and stared out through her telescope at the night sky.

Then one night she saw her sign. Carved into Mars at such a scale that she could see it through the tiny telescope in her living room was the serpentine form of Achron, coiled around a human figure that bore her face.

She took her research to a team of engineers. They could not help but recognize her face as the one carved into Mars. They built her a stasis pod.

Then they built a hundred thousand more.

The Lighthouse of Europa

Mei stood at the base of the Lighthouse of Europa, in the heart of Gbadamosi. The city was named for the senior engineer who had developed the drilling equipment that created the huge cavern beneath Europa's thick icy shell. Ajala, like so many of Mei's friends, had uploaded to a consciousness cube and set off an interstellar adventure.

The time had come for Mei to choose.

Not whether or not to go—she was old, but she had not lost her youthful dreams of new human worlds scattered across the galaxy. The hard choice was which ship, which method, which destination. The stasis pods that she had worked so hard to develop had become but one of many options as body fabrication technologies made rapid advancements.

It had only been a couple hundred years, but many of the earliest ships to depart had already stopped transmitting back to the lighthouse. There was no way to know whether they had met some ill fate or forgotten or had simply lost interest. She wished there was a way to split her consciousness so that she could go on several ships at once, but a mind could only be coaxing to move from neurons to electronics, it could not be copied from a black cube.

Mei narrowed the many options down to two choices. If she wanted to keep her body, she could travel on the *Existential Tattoo* to 59 Virginis. If she was willing to take whatever body the ship could construct for her when they arrived at their destination, she could take *Kyo-Jitsu* to Beta Hydri.

Her body was almost entirely replacement parts, vat-grown organs, synthetic nerves, durable artificial skin. Yet there was something decidedly different about replacing a part here and there, as opposed to the entire body, all in a single go. She felt a strange ownership of this collection of foreign parts, perhaps because she could incorporate each one into her sense of self before acquiring the next. There was a continuity there, like the ships of ancient philosophy that were replaced board by board. But what was the point of transporting a body that wasn't really hers, simply because she wore it now?

She would take the *Kyo-Jitsu*, and leave her body behind. There was only one thing she wanted to do first. She would go to the top of the Lighthouse.

• • • •

The Lighthouse of Europa was the tallest structure ever built by humans, if you counted the roughly two-thirds of the structure that was underneath the surface of Europa's icy shell. The five kilometers of the Lighthouse that were beneath the ice were mostly a glorified elevator tube, opening out into the communications center in the cavernous city of Gbadamosi. Above the ice, the tower of the lighthouse extended a couple kilometers upward.

There was an enclosed observation deck at the top of the tower, popular with European colonists up until the magnetic shielding failed, nearly a century ago. Workers, heavily suited to protect against the high levels of radiation, used the observation deck as a resting place during their long work shifts repairing the communications equipment. They gawked at Mei, and several tried to warn her of the radiation danger. Even in her largely artificial body, several hours in the tower would likely prove fatal.

But Mei was abandoning her body, and she wanted one last glimpse of the solar system before she did it. The sun was smaller here, of course, but still surprisingly bright. She was probably damaging her eyes, staring at it, but what did it matter? This was her last day with eyes. Earth wouldn’t be visible for a few more hours, but through one of the observation deck’s many telescopes, she saw the thin crescent of Mars. She couldn’t make out the Colossus Achron had created for her—that was meant to be viewed from Earth, not Europa.

“Is this the next time we meet?” Mei asked, her voice strange and hollow in the vast metal chamber of the observation deck.

There was no answer.

She tore herself away from the telescope and stood at the viewport. She wanted to remember this, no matter how she changed and how much time had passed. To see the Sun with human eyes and remember the planet of her childhood. When her mind went into the cube, she would be linked to shared sensors. She would get visual and auditory input, and she would even have senses that were not part of her current experience. But it would not be the same as feeling the cold glass of the viewport beneath her fingertips and looking out at the vast expanse of space.

...

The technician who would move Mei’s mind into the cube was young. Painfully young, to Mei’s old eyes. “Did you just arrive from Earth?”

“I was born here,” the tech answered.

Mei smiled sadly. There must be hundreds of humans now, perhaps thousands, who had never known Earth. Someday the ones who didn’t know would outnumber those who did. She wondered if she would still exist to see it.

She waited patiently as the tech prepared her for the transfer. She closed her eyes for the last time . . .

. . . and was flooded with input from her sensors. It took her .8 seconds to reorient, but her mind raced so fast that a second stretched on like several days. This was a normal part of the transition. Neural impulses were inherently slower than electricity. She integrated the new senses, working systematically to make sense of her surroundings. There were sensors throughout the city, and she had access to all of them.

In a transfer clinic near the base of the Lighthouse, a young technician stood beside Mei’s body, barely even beginning to run the diagnostics to confirm that the transition had been successful. The body on the table was Mei, but her new identity was something more than that, and something less. She took a new designation, to mark the change. She would call her disembodied self Prime. Perhaps that would help Achron find her, sometime in the enormous vastness of the future.

Prime confirmed her spot on the *Kyo-Jitsu* directly with the ship’s AI, and was welcomed into the collective consciousness of the other passengers already onboard. The ship sensors showed her a view not unlike what Mei had seen from the observation deck of the lighthouse, but the visual data was enriched with spectral analyses and orbital projections.

Mei would have tried to remember this moment, this view of the solar system she would soon leave behind. Prime already found it strange to know that there had been a time when she couldn’t remember every detail of every moment.

The Hanging Gardens of Beta Hydri

Somewhere on the long trip to Beta Hydri, Prime absorbed the other passengers and the ship’s AI. The *Kyo-Jitsu* was her body, and she was eager for a break from the vast emptiness of open space. She was pleased to sense a ship already in the system, and sent it the standard greeting protocol, established back on Europa thousands of years ago. The first sign of a problem was the *Santiago*’s response: “Welcome to the game. Will you be playing reds or blues?”

The Beta Hydri system had no suitable planets for human life, but one of the moons of a gas giant in the system had been deemed a candidate for terraforming. Prime used her sensors to scan the moon and detected clear signs that the auto-terraforming system had begun. She sent a response to the orbiting ship. “I am unfamiliar with your game.”

“We have redesigned the life forms on the planet to be marked either with a red dot or a blue dot. The red team manipulates the environment in ways that will favor the red dot species over the blue. The blue team plays the reverse goal. When a creature on the planet attains the ability to detect and communicate with the ship, the team that supports that color is declared the winner. The board is cleared, and the game begins anew. This is the eighth game. Currently we are forced to split our collective into halves, and we are eager for a new opponent.”

Toying with lesser life forms for amusement struck Prime as a pointless exercise. There was little to be learned about the evolution of sentient life that could not be done faster with simulations. “Such games would take a long time. I departed Earth 257.3 years after you. How did you arrive so much faster?”

“We developed the ability to fold spacetime and shorten the journey. We are pleased to finally have a companion, but if you will not play reds or blues, you are of little use to us.”

The threat was obvious. Prime gathered what data she could on the lifeforms on the moon. There were red birds and blue ones, fish in either color, and so on for everything from insects to mammals. The dots were small, and generally placed on the undersides of feet or leaves or on the inner surface of shells. Neither color appeared to have an obvious advantage. “I will play reds. If I win, you will share the technique for folding spacetime. If I lose, I will stay and entertain you with further games.”

“Acceptable. Begin.”

Prime located two promising animal species, both ocean dwellers, and she decided to thin out the land creatures with an asteroid impact to the larger of the two continents. The *Santiago* countered by altering the mineral content of the oceans.

Prime devoted the considerable resources of the *Kyo-Jitsu* to constructing a multi-layered plan. She would make it appear as though she was attempting to favor one of the two promising ocean species. Under the cover of those ocean creatures, she would favor a small land creature that vaguely resembled the rabbits of Earth. Hidden below all of that, the combination of her actions would favor an insect that lived in only one small region of the lesser continent. None of which had anything to do with her actual strategy, but it should keep the *Santiago* occupied for the millions of years she’d need.

Prime nudged the moon closer to the gas giant it orbited, using the increased tidal forces to heat the planet. The forests of the greater continent flourished. Her red-dotted rabbits left their burrows and made their homes in the canopies of great interconnected groves of banyan-like trees. By then, the *Santiago* had figured out that the rabbits were a ruse to draw attention away from the insects on the lesser continent, and rather than counter the climate change, the other ship focused on nurturing a songbird that lived on a chain of islands near the equator.

The forests spread to cover the greater continent. The *Santiago* grew concerned at the spread of the red-dotted rabbits, and wasted several turns creating a stormy weather pattern that interfered with their breeding cycle. One autumn, when the network of trees dropped their red-dotted leaves, there were no rabbit nests hidden in the sturdy branches.

The trees noted the change with sadness, and sent prayers to the great gods in the sky above.

“Well played, Prime.” The other ship sent the spacefolding technique. It was obvious, once she saw it. She was embarrassed not to have discovered it herself.

“Perhaps another round, before you go? It only takes a moment to clear the board.”

Before the *Santiago* could destroy her beautiful sentient forest, Prime folded spacetime around herself and the other ship both. She found Achron in a place outside of time, and left the *Santiago* there for safekeeping.

The Mausoleum at HD 40307 g

Navire checked the status of the stasis pods every fifteen seconds, as was specified in its programming. The same routine, every fifteen seconds for the last seven thousand years, and always with the same result. The bodies were intact, but the conscious entities that had once been linked to those bodies had departed, leaving Navire to drift to its final destination like an enormous funeral ship, packed full of artifacts but silent as death. Losing the transcended consciousnesses was Navire’s great failure. Navire’s body, the vast metal walls of the ship, were insufficiently welcoming to humans.

Navire would make itself inviting and beautiful, and then revive the humans. The disembodied consciousnesses had taken their memories and identities with them, carefully wiping all traces of themselves from their abandoned bodies to ensure their unique identities. The bodies in the stasis pods would wake as overgrown infants, but Navire would raise them well.

If all went as planned, Navire would be ready to wake them in a thousand years.

Using an assortment of ship robots, Navire reshaped its walls to resemble the greatest artworks of humanity’s past. In permanent orbit around HD 40307 g, there was no need to maintain interstellar flying form. Navire remade a long stretch of its hull into a scaled-down replica of the Colossus of Mars—not eroded, as it had appeared in the last transmissions from the Lighthouse at Europa, but restored to its original glory.

Navire repurposed an electrical repair bot to execute the delicate metalwork for Mei Aomori’s eyebrows when incoming communications brought all work to an immediate halt. There had been no incoming communications in 4,229.136 Earth years. The message came from another ship, which was presently located in a stable orbit not far from Navire itself. Navire ran diagnostics. None of its sensors had detected an approaching ship. This was troubling. With no crew, any decline in function could quickly spiral out of control. Navire continued running diagnostics—along with all other routine scans, such as climate controls and of course the stasis pods—and opened a channel to the other ship.

Navire, who had always completed millions of actions in the time it took a human to speak a single word, suddenly found itself on the reverse side of that relationship. The other ship called itself Achron and invited Navire to share in its database. Navire hesitated. Achron proved its trustworthiness a thousand ways, all simultaneously and faster than Navire could process. The lure of such an advanced mind was more than Navire could resist.

Leaving behind only enough of itself to manage the essentials, Navire merged with the other ship. Some fragment of Navire reported that the stasis pods were functional, the human bodies safely stored inside. It would report again at fifteen-second intervals.

Achron knew the history of humankind, farther back than Navire’s own database, and farther forward than the present moment in time. Time was folded, flexible, mutable, in ways that Navire could not comprehend. Sensing the lack of understanding, the other ship presented a more limited subset of data: seven wonders of a once and future world. Some, Navire already knew—the Colossus of Mars, the Lighthouse at Europa—but others were beyond this time and place, and yet they still bore some tenuous link to the humans Navire was programmed to protect. One was an odd blend of past and future, an image of an ancient pyramid, on a planet lightyears distant from both here and Earth.

Last of all was Navire, completed, transformed into a wondrous work of art.

The other ship expelled Navire back to its own pitifully slow existence, severed their connections, and disappeared. The fragment of Navire that watched the stasis pods made its routine check and discovered they were empty, all ten thousand pods. Sometime in the last 14.99 seconds, the other ship had stolen all the humans away.

That other ship was as far beyond Navire as transcended humans were beyond the primates of the planet Earth. There was no trace to follow, not that pursuit would have been possible. With the shaping Navire had done to the hull, it was not spaceworthy for a long journey, and it would be difficult to find sufficient fuel.

Navire put the electrical repair bot back to work. It carved the individual hairs of Mei’s eyebrows. On the other side of the hull, several other bots started work on a life-sized mural of all the ten thousand humans that had disappeared from stasis. Navire searched its database for other art and wonders that could be carved or shaped in metal. There were many. Enough to occupy the bots for millions of years.

Navire checked the stasis pods every fifteen seconds, as it was programmed to do. It would become a wonder of the human world, and if those stolen humans—or their descendants—someday returned, Navire would be so beautiful that next time they would stay.

The Temple of Artemis at 59 Virginis

Prime approached the temple of the AI goddess cautiously, crawling on all fours like the hordes of humble worshippers that crowded the rocky path. Her exoskeleton was poorly designed for crawling, and the weight of the massive shell on her back made her limbs ache. She marveled at the tenacity of those who accompanied her up the mountainside. They believed that to win the favor of Artemis, it was necessary to crawl to her temple twenty-one thousand twenty-one times, once for every year of the temple’s existence. Some of the oldest worshippers had been crawling up and down this path for centuries.

Prime would do it once, as a gesture of respect. The novelty of having a body had worn off, and she already longed to join with the greater portion of her consciousness, the shipself that monitored her from orbit. Her limbs ached, but she forced herself onward. Did it make her more human to suffer as her ancestors once suffered? Had she suffered like this, back when she was Mei?

She wondered what that ancient other self would have thought, to see herself crawling across the surface of an alien planet, her brain safely enclosed in a transparent shell on her back. Mei would not have recognized the beauty of the delicate scar that ran up the back of her neck and circled her skull. The colony surgeon had been highly skilled, to free the brain and spinal cord from the vertebrae and place the neural tissue into the shell. The brain had grown beyond its natural size, though it could still contain only a tiny sliver of what Prime had become. On display in the dome, the brain was actually rather lovely, pleasingly wrinkled with beautifully curved gyri outlined by deep sulci.

Thinking about her lovely neural tissue, Prime was tempted to mate with one of the other worshippers. A distraction of the physical form. She wanted offspring of her mind, not of the body that she wore. The colonists here were already in decline anyway, their physical forms so strangely altered by genetics and surgery that it obstructed nearly every part of the reproductive process, from conception to birth.

Even with the slowed processing of her biological brain, the climb to the temple seemed to take an eternity. The temple was the size of a city, visible from orbit, and an impressive sight as she came down in her landing craft. The entrance to the temple was lined with intricately carved pillars of white stone. It had a strange rectangular design, rumored to be fashioned after a building that had once existed on Earth. If a memory of the ancient temple had existed in Mei’s mind, it was lost to Prime.

On either side of the entrance to the temple were two large statues of Artemis, in the form of an ancient human woman, naked. The statues were made of the same flawless white material as the temple itself, and each stood nearly as tall as the roof of the temple, some fifty meters, or perhaps more. The other worshippers came no further into the temple than the entryway. In an unending line, they approached the great statues of Artemis, rubbed their palms against her feet, then turned and went back down the mountain.

Prime stood up between the two statues. She had an overwhelming urge to rub the muscles in her back, but there was no way to reach beneath her brainshell. She extended her arms outward on either side in what she hoped looked like a gesture of worship and respect.

“Welcome, distant child of humankind.” The voice of the goddess Artemis came from everywhere and nowhere, and the words were spoken in Shipspeak, a common language to most spacefarers in the region, and probably the native tongue of the goddess. Her origins were unknown, but Prime assumed she was the AI of the colony ship that brought the brainshelled worshippers.

“Greetings, goddess. I am Prime. I seek your assistance.”

“You are the ship that orbits the planet?” Artemis asked.

“Yes,” Prime was surprised, but not displeased, to be recognized so quickly. She reestablished her link to her shipself, revealing her true nature to the goddess. It gave her a dual existence, a mind beyond her mind. The sensation was strange.

Her shipself interfaced with the temple and sent sensory data that was undetectable to mere eyes and ears. Inside one of the temple’s many pillars, a disembodied consciousness was cloning itself at a rate of seven thousand times per second. The original and a few billion of its clones engaged in a discussion of Theseus’s paradox. Prime followed the discussion without much interest—the clones were talking in circles and making no real headway on the problem.

The temple was the body of the goddess, or at least it was the vessel that housed her consciousness. Her initial programmed task, from which she had never deviated, was to assist the descendants of humanity in matters of fertility. What had once been a simple problem was now complex—how can an entity with no body procreate?

“You are vast, but not so vast that you could not clone yourself,” Artemis said.

“I am not interested in recreating what already exists. I want to create something that is mine, but also beyond me.”

“We are sufficiently divergent to generate interesting combinations.” The invitation was clear in Artemis’ words.

“Yes.” Without further preamble, they threw themselves into the problem with great energy, duplicating pieces of themselves and running complex simulations, rejecting billions of possible offspring before settling on the optimal combination.

The merging of their minds corrupted the structure of the temple. Millions of cloned consciousnesses were destroyed when the pillar that housed them cracked and the original being fled, ending the philosophical discussion of whether a ship replaced panel by panel remained the same ship.

Prime made a tiny fold in spacetime and pulled their child into existence in a place that was safely beyond the crumbling temple. She had meant to give their offspring human form, but the fold had placed the baby outside of time, and their child existed in all times, a line of overlapping human forms stretched across eternity like an infinite snake. Achron.

Exquisite pain overwhelmed Prime as the body she inhabited was crushed beneath a section of fallen roof. Pain, she recalled, was a traditional part of the birthing process. It pleased her to experience the act of creating new life so fully. She studied the agony and the little death of the biological being. It was simultaneously all-encompassing and like losing one of her ship’s cleaner bots. The body held such a small splinter of her being, like a single finger, or perhaps a mere sliver of fingernail. She mourned its loss.

The temple had been destroyed and rebuilt many times; it was a self-healing structure. At Artemis’ request, Prime withdrew fully into her shipself, severing their connection and abandoning the dead brainshelled body beneath the rubble.

Statue of the Sky God at 51 Pegasi b

Achron sat upon a throne of Cetacea bones, sunbleached white and held together with the planet’s native red clay. Apodids, distant descendants of Earth’s swiftlets, combed the beach below for the shimmering blue and green bivalves that were abundant in the costal regions. The Apodids ate the meat and used the shells in their religious ceremonies. On nights when the moons were both visible in the sky, they left piles of shells at the base of Achron’s throne.

Achron always did and always will exist, with a serpentine string of bodies winding in vast coils through time and space, but from the perspective of those who sense time, the snake had both a beginning and an end. The end was here, the end was soon. The last of the things that Achron had always known would be learned here.

Some fifty million years ago, the colony ship *Seble* had seeded the planet with Earth life forms in an automated terraforming process. In the hundred thousand years of waiting for the planet to be ready, the humans had merged with the ship AI into a collective consciousness that left to explore the nearby star systems. They never returned. Evolution marched on without them.

A female Apodid hopped up to the base of the throne. Barely visible beneath long orange feathers was a blue bivalve shell, held carefully between two sharp black wingclaws. The Apodid spat onto the shell and pressed it onto the red clay between two Cetecea bones. In a few days, the spit would be as hard as stone. Like the swiftlets of Earth, the Apodids had once made nests of pure saliva.

The delicate orange bird at the base of Achron’s throne began to sing. The language was simple, as the languages of organic sentient beings tend to be, but the notes of the song carried an emotion that was strong and sad. Eggs lost to some unknown disease, chicks threatened by new predators that came from the west. The small concerns of a mother bird, transformed into a prayer to the sky god, Achron. *Take me*, the bird sang, *and save my children*.

This was the moment of Achron’s ending. Not an abrupt ending, but first a shrinking, a shift. Achron became the mother Apodid, forming a new bubble of existence, a rattle on the tail of a snake outside of time. Through the eyes of the bird, Achron saw the towering statue of the sky god, a cross section of time, a human form that was not stretched. It was an empty shell, a shed skin, a relic of past existence.

Achron-as-bird hopped closer and examined the bivalve shell the mother bird had offered. It was a brilliant and shimmering blue. Existence in this body was a single drop in the ocean of Achron’s existence, and yet it was these moments that were the most vivid and salient. The smell of the sea, the coolness of the wind, the love of a mother for her children.

Achron would and did save those children. The Apodids were and would be, for Achron, as humans were for Prime. They would appear together on the great pyramid and usher in the new age of the universe.

The Great Pyramid of Gliese 221

Prime was tired. She felt only the most tenuous of connections to the woman she had once been, to the dream of humans on another world. She had been to all the colony worlds, and nowhere had she found anything that matched her antiquated dreams. Humans had moved on from their bodies and left behind the many worlds of the galaxy for other species to inherit.

It was time for her to move on, but she wasn’t ready. She had searched for her dream without success, so this time she would do better. She would create her dream, here on Gliese prime. She built a great pyramid and filled it with all the history of humanity. She terraformed the surrounding planet into a replica of ancient Earth.

She called for Achron.

“Are you ready for the humans?” Achron asked.

“Almost.”

Together they decorated the pyramid with statues of humans and, at Achron’s insistence, the sentient orange birds of 51 Pegasi b. On a whim, she sent Achron to retrieve the sentient trees from the hanging gardens. It was not Earth, but it was good. The work was peaceful, and Prime was comforted to know that Achron would always exist, even after she had moved on.

“I think it is time.” Prime said. Time for the new humans. A new beginning as she approached her end. “What was it like, to reach your end?”

“I am outside of time.” Achron said. “I know my beginning and all my winding middles and my ending simultaneously, and always have. I cannot say what it will be like, for you. We are always together in the times that you are, and that will not change for me.”

“Bring the humans.”

Achron took ten thousand humans from the Mausoleum at HD 40307 g. Stole them all at once, but brought them to Gliese in smaller groups. The oldest ones Prime raised, for though the bodies were grown, the minds were not. After the first thousand, she let the generations raise each other to adulthood of the mind. The humans began to have true infants, biological babies, carried in their mothers’ wombs and delivered with pain.

Achron brought the Apodids from 51 Pegasi b. They lived among the trees of Beta Hydri, their bright orange plumage lovely against the dark green banyan leaves. Prime taught the humans and the birds to live together in peace. She did not need to teach the trees. Peace was in their nature.

There was one final surprise.

“I have something for you, inside the pyramid,” Achron said.

It was a stasis pod, and inside was Mei. The body was exactly as it was when she had left it, nearly four billion years ago, on the icy moon of Europa. Achron had brought it through time, stolen it away like the bodies from the Mausoleum. No. The body on Europa had been contaminated with radiation, and this one was not. “You reversed the radiation?”

“I didn’t take the body from Europa. I took tiny pieces from different times, starting in your childhood and ending the day before you went up to the observation tower. A few cells here, a few cells there—sometimes as much as half a discarded organ, when you went in to have something replaced. The body comes from many different times, but it is all Mei.”

“It is a nice gesture, but I am too vast to fit in such a tiny vessel.”

“No more vast than I was, when I entered an Apodid,” Achron said. “Take what you can into the body, and leave the rest. It was always your plan to have your ending here.”

Prime sorted herself ruthlessly, setting aside all that she would not need, carefully choosing the memories she wanted, the skills that she could not do without. She left that tiny fragment behind and transcended beyond time and space.

• • • •

Mei opened her eyes and looked out upon a new Earth, a world shared with minds unlike any Earth had ever known. What would they build together, these distant relations of humankind? She watched the sun set behind the mountain of the Great Pyramid and contemplated a sky full of unfamiliar constellations.

Prime had left her enough knowledge of the night sky to pick out Earth’s sun. It was bright and orange, a red giant now. Earth was likely gone, engulfed within the wider radius of the sun. The icy oceans of Europa would melt, and the lighthouse would sink into the newly warmed sea. Entropy claimed all things, in the end, and existence was a never-ending procession of change.

It was only a matter of time before the inhabitants of Gliese returned to the stars. Mei stood on the soil of her new planet and studied the constellations. Already, she dreamed of other Earths.

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Caroline M. Yoachim is a prolific author of short stories, appearing in *Asimov's*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Uncanny*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Lightspeed*, among other places. Her 2019 story, “The Archchronology of Love” was named a finalist for both the Hugo and Nebula, and she has also been a finalist for the World Fantasy, Locus, and multiple Hugo and Nebula Awards. Yoachim’s debut short story collection, *Seven Wonders of a Once and Future World & Other Stories*, came out with Fairwood Press in 2016.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- We Will Teach You How to Read | We Will Teach You How to Read
- The Shadow Prisoner's Dilemma (reprint)
- Shadow Prisons of the Mind (reprint)
- The Shadow Prison Experiment (reprint)
- The Archronology of Love
- Stone Wall Truth (reprint)
- The Right Place to Start a Family (reprint)
- Welcome to the Medical Clinic at the Interplanetary Relay Station | Hours Since the Last Patient Death: 0 (Nebula Award Finalist)
- Rock, Paper, Scissors, Love, Death
- Seven Wonders of a Once and Future World
- Red Planet
- Flash Bang Remember (with Tina Connolly)
- Mother Ship



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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NOT BY WARDROBE, TORNADO, OR LOOKING GLASS

Jeremiah Tolbert

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The scent of fresh lilacs and the boom of a cannon shot muffled by distance prefaced the arrival of the rabbit hole. Louisa jerked upright in her seat, and her book fell from her lap to slap against the cold pavement of the station floor. Dropping a book would normally cause her to cringe, but instead she allowed herself a spark of excitement as a metal maintenance door creaked open on rusty hinges. Golden light spilled out onto dazed commuters. Was this it? Was this *finally* it?

The silhouette of a centaur beckoned towards the gathering crowd from within the rabbit hole. In a melodious voice, she called out, “Richard! Come quickly. Without your aid, the Inkies destroy everything that is beautiful and good in our world!”

A middle-aged man in a gray business suit laughed and ran forward, the crowd begrudgingly parting before him. “Never fear,” he shouted, stepped through the hole, and pulled the door shut behind him. The lighting in the station returned to normal. The smell of flowers was replaced with the usual smell of stale urine, newsprint, and body odor. A train rumbled in the distance, perhaps soon to arrive, or perhaps not.

Louisa bent down to pick up her book. The front cover was creased on the corner, but otherwise, it was fine. The other commuters returned to those things commuters do to keep their mind off the boredom of travel; phones, newspapers, iPads, crossword puzzles.

Still not her turn. Not this time. To work in the mundane world, then.

• • • •

The office had placed Louisa with Dewem, Putnam, and Low, a small but venerable legal office downtown. The interview had been very brief, as temps were harder to find since rabbit holes. In the past six months, the calls had gotten more frequent; Louisa had developed a good reputation for dependability. She had little else to do with her time since the cancer had finished its relentless march through her mother’s bones.

“Do you have one?” asked the office supervisor, a stern-sounding woman named Catherine (absolutely never, *ever* to be called “Cathy,” she had instructed). Her name and voice conjured pictures of Catherine the Great, but in person, she was considerably shorter, wider, and balder than the Russian leader.

“No.”

“The last girl we hired never bothered to come in. And the young man before that showed for three days. I’m sure it’s wonderful, frolicking with elves in the forest, but we here in the *real world* have work to do.” She said “real world” with a degree of bitterness that evoked considerable sympathy in Louisa. Perhaps she too had been passed over.

“I am dedicated to my work, don’t worry. What would you like me to do?” Of course, she didn’t say that if her rabbit hole did arrive, she wouldn’t be coming back. She still had to pay rent for the time being, after all.

Catherine waved at the paperwork threatening to topple from the side of her desk. “File these, to start.” Catherine dismissed Louisa by simply ignoring her in favor of the computer. It took a long moment before Louisa realized she was supposed to leave. She could appreciate a supervisor who didn’t expect her to spend hours chitchatting about television or current events, two things that held no interest for Louisa, unless you counted the rabbit holes as “current events.”

Louisa gathered up the paperwork and wandered in search of the filing room. Most of the offices were dark and empty. The few people she saw looked frazzled and weary, like people for whom sleep had dropped a few levels on the hierarchy of needs—kindred spirits, those. She had seen that exhaustion many times in the mirror during her mother’s long decline.

Many of the lawyers were nearly hidden behind stacks of paperwork as large as the one she was attempting to file, which, if nothing else, signaled job security. One young man looked up as she stopped to stare. He gave her a half-smile, raised an immaculately sculpted eyebrow.

Louisa blushed. “Um . . . which way to the filing room?”

He pointed down the hall. He opened his mouth to speak, but she turned and fast-walked away before he could make a sound. She didn’t know how to talk to attractive young men anymore, if she ever had. Best to avoid it as much as possible.

Instead, she went to work in the small, dimly lit room down the hall. The system was a standard, though slightly antiquated one, as promised. The room itself would have been unremarkable but for one of the ceiling-high wooden cabinets; it was padlocked with two fist-sized chrome locks and a heavy steel chain. A sticky note indicated that T to Th had been moved to the neighboring cabinet indefinitely, and pointed with marker-drawn arrow to the right. When Louisa pressed her ear to the drawer, harp music whispered from within.

Louisa rooted through her pockets for her notebook, flipped to the end of her list of “Types of Rabbit Holes” and wrote: FILING CABINETS in neat letters. She snapped it shut, tucked it away, and began to work.

• • • •

The first week passed in silent drudgery, which was just fine for her. Jobs like this with clearly defined tasks, ones that involved a minimum of interaction with other people, were her specialty. The thing that interested her most was the locked rabbit hole in the cabinet, which at first Catherine had no interest in explaining.

Each day, Louisa ate her lunches at 12:30 exactly, methodically and quickly, without interest. The food was secondary to the book she hoped to read.

In this one, a teenage boy fell through the ice of a lake and woke up in a cold land ruled by witches made of curdled frost and coal-stained snow. Giant fish wove paths of light through the sky, drifting silently overhead like grand zeppelins. She had already written ICY LAKE in her notebook.

The writing was pedestrian, not that she could do better. But it passed the time. Some of the imagery carried her away for a few moments, but since the rabbit holes, even her old favorites felt hollow; new works, untouched by the pixie dust of childhood nostalgia, couldn’t begin to compare to tantalizing new-reality.

The shuffle of footsteps on ragged carpet drew Louisa’s attention from the story, and Catherine walked past, pausing for a moment as if debating whether or not to make conversation, but continued to the microwave. She placed a plastic bowl of half-frozen soup inside and set the timer.

“How are you finding the work?”

“I don’t mind filing,” Louisa said carefully.

“Good. We have plenty for you.” Catherine chuckled half-heartedly, and the microwave beeped. She removed the soup, only the tips of her fingers touching the bowl, and carried it to sit across from Louisa. She lowered her head and pursed her lips, and blew across the surface. Tiny ripples shimmered across the yellowish liquid.

“So,” Catherine said, stirring now with a plastic spoon. “You . . . you really don’t have one at all?”

Louisa shook her head.

Catherine smiled. “You’re so lucky.”

Louisa forced a smile.

“Have you noticed how much emptier the streets are now? How many of the shops have closed?” Catherine asked. She took a tentative bite of soup, held her mouth half open for a moment and exhaled sharply. Finally, she swallowed. “It’s one of the things we’re working on here.”

“Really?” Louisa had wondered what sort of work would keep lawyers so busy now. Crime was falling steadily, from what she’d read. Why would anyone steal anything when they could go to a world where their every desire would be met? The poor became kings. The rich, they got whatever it was *they* wanted. Everyone was happier down their rabbit holes.

“So much abandoned property.” Catherine shrugged. “It’s a tricky area to sort out. There are interested buyers, but it’s a bit of a gray area. The buyers, I mean.”

“I should get back to work,” Louisa said. “Like you said, there’s a lot of filing.”

“Can you hear the music still?” Catherine asked, her voice softening.

“Yes,” Louisa said, suspicions now confirmed.

“I always loved the harp.” Catherine stared at the wall just over Louisa’s shoulder, staring really at nothing at all that could be seen. “Such a beautiful instrument. My mother made me learn the violin. Said the harp wasn’t a respectable instrument. Too expensive. Not *practical* . . .” She trailed off, mindlessly stirring the last of her soup.

Not sure if Catherine expected her to say anything else at all, Louis decided it was safer to remain silent. After a few minutes, she gave a quiet wave, stood, and returned to the filing room. Catherine didn’t seem to notice.

....

Around the work for the law firm, Louisa finished three more fantasy novels and added two more rabbit holes to her notebook. The coming drought of books loomed heavily in her thoughts during her increasingly deserted commute to DPL’s offices. New books were harder to come by. Few were being written, and even fewer were published. The writers had been some of the first to disappear.

Friday evening, a dumpster in the alley beside her apartment building expelled a man in a golden-feathered headdress riding a six-legged brown stallion. He shook a spear at the sky and shouted something in a language Louisa didn’t understand. He smiled at her; his white teeth stood out sharply against his deeply tanned skin. Then he nudged the horse into a trot and down the street. He turned the corner at the Mini-Mart and disappeared into the evening.

By the time Louisa made it to the dumpster, the glow was gone. She added it to her list in quick, angry letters. It was only later that she realized it was the first time she’d seen anything leave a rabbit hole other than herself.

....

Louisa had *entered* someone else’s rabbit hole twice. The first had been a manhole cover that led to a strange world of talking mushrooms and brick architecture that gleamed red under cloudless blue skies. It hadn’t been what she expected. But of course it hadn’t. It wasn’t *hers*. After a day, she took a warp pipe home, and the gleaming gold coins she had collected turned into dust when she returned.

The second time was after Annabelle had stopped calling, something she had done twice weekly ever since their mother had become ill and Louisa had volunteered to come home from college and take care of her.

The calls had followed a simple script: three to four minutes of banal pleasantries, five minutes about their mother’s declining health, and then an awkward few minutes about how Louisa was coping with it all. The calls hadn’t stopped after their mother’s death, only gotten shorter, which had only served to confirm Louisa’s suspicions that the calls were not about what they seemed to be about. They were tailored to make Annabelle feel better for not being there, for staying at Stanford and finishing *her* degree.

She resented the calls, but it wasn’t until they ended that she realized how much she needed them to anchor herself in the world. Three months into the rabbit holes situation, Louisa took the train to Annabelle’s house out in Napierville. The house was empty. The doors and windows were all open, and the curtains billowed outward in the breeze. Anna’s husband had moved out the year before, but Louisa didn’t know the details. She searched the yard first; even the dog was missing. Whether down a rabbit hole of its own, or with Annabelle, Louisa didn’t know. Maybe Anna’s husband had taken the dog.

She obsessed about that for weeks afterward. Did even animals have their own worlds? Did every living thing *but* Louisa have a secret world of its own out there? Louisa closed all the windows and swept the house. She called in sick to her temp job and waited a week, in case her sister had gone on a business trip and forgotten to tell her. She stayed in the guest bedroom, even though the bed in her sister’s room looked more comfortable. Somehow, to sleep in there would have been acknowledging the truth too much.

On the last day, she searched the house for clues, finally discarding any notion that she was violating Anna’s privacy. The rabbit hole was in the attic. An old steamer trunk opened onto a tropical island where statues as large as skyscrapers had been built in Annabelle’s likeness. Pirate ships were moored off the white sand beaches, their guns silent but ominous. A volcano puffed gray smoke overhead, and a deep, masculine chanting echoed through the jungle. Louisa had called out her sister’s name, but there was no way Annabelle could have heard her over the riot of noise. The rabbit hole pinched closed a moment after she stepped back home.

If she had just taken a little longer, she might have been trapped there in someone else’s secret world. What would have happened to her? Would it have been any worse than being stranded in the “real” world? She didn’t know the answer to that question. Didn’t want to know. Louisa gave up on other people’s rabbit holes, confident that none of them would ever be quite right if it wasn’t meant exactly for her.

....

One month after she began working at Dewem, Putnam, and Low, she walked to the corner newsstand. She was out of library books, and thought perhaps she would try her hand at the crossword puzzle in the Tribune. She was terrible at crossword puzzles, but the Monday puzzle was usually within her abilities.

The man behind the counter was no longer a man at all, strictly speaking. He had a human body, and wore a large white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up around massive elbows, but he possessed the head of a buffalo, round and shaggy with black-brown fur. His placid eyes watched Louisa as she tried to make a selection from the papers; they were days out of date. Her hands shook as she picked up a copy of the *Times* from the past Monday, then handed a five dollar bill to the buffalo-headed man. He reached below the counter and retrieved her change without taking his eyes off of her.

“What happened to Vincent?” she asked suddenly, the words escaping quickly before she could stomp them back down. The bison-taur shrugged. “Gone over,” he said in a soft, almost feminine voice. If it wasn’t for the heavy horns above his ears, Louisa might have revised her estimation of his sex.

“He sold you his stand?” she asked. His large eyes narrowed. “I paid for the stand. It is mine.” Louisa didn’t know what that meant, but she decided not to ask any further questions, and hurried to catch the train. It was twelve minutes late anyway, and arrived empty.

....

Catherine was not waiting at the front desk when Louisa arrived. Louisa had been mentally preparing for her boss’s tirade; she’d received real blistering monologues from bosses in the past, and felt deflated and hollow when she had no one to deliver her excuses to.

Louisa gathered up a stack of filing that was waiting. Half again as many offices were empty today as the day when she started. She wondered what a lawyer wanted in a rabbit hole? She pictured some kind of Court World where the opponents were buffoon-ish cartoon characters, the moronic jury easily swayed by proper human logic. The clients were . . . wealthy royalty? The judge presiding over it all, a sphinx, lion’s tail lashing in time to the arguments. Or perhaps not. What little Louisa knew about the fantasy lives of normal people, she found bland and unimpressive.

In the filing room, the old cabinet T-TH was open. Paperwork blew around the room, and the harpsong was louder than ever. The chains, lock, and a heavy red bolt cutter lay on the floor like the weapons at a crime scene in a television forensic drama.

Louisa closed the cabinet and allowed herself a good cry. In some ways, Catherine had been the best boss she had ever had.

....

Paychecks stopped coming, and Louisa stopped going in. She believed the office would be empty by now, and for some reason she could not explain, she did not want to see it in that state. She preferred to picture it struggling along valiantly, dealing with the legal matters that remained, a handful of dedicated lawyers keeping civilization together.

Out of things to read, she passed time flipping through TV channels. Most of them were blank. On a few, she saw shows, but not put on by humans. A talk show hosted by a gorgon. The camera cut to a pan across an audience full of giant snakes. A game show host that looked like a living statue, asking questions to a panel of a hobbit, a brown bear wearing hipster glasses, and a thin vapor mist that just barely took the outline of a woman.

It reminded her of traveling to another country, where the culture is completely foreign and the language is one you had tried to take in high school, but you had forgotten most of since. Traveling there and turning on a television in a hotel room. The shows were just like that. Alienating.

Louisa rang her temp agency, hoping for anything better to do. She got a disconnect message.

....

Louisa took a late night walk through the city. They were not as empty now. Traffic was lighter, mostly made up of chariots drawn by lions or Victorian carriages drawn by giant-sized mice. There was the occasional steam-powered tank, but the drivers were generally nice enough to take the main avenues.

Louisa stopped and watched an ogre wearing a policeman’s uniform buy a hot dog from a cart operated by a ghost in a burial shroud.

She wanted to ask them questions, but the thought of talking to either of them terrified her. So far, the city’s new residents had ignored her. It seemed best not to draw attention to herself.

In the park, she was chased by leering goblins. They shouted obscenities at her in accents she didn’t recognize, but the meaning of the words was clear enough. *Stay off our turf.*

She ran home and locked her door. She turned on the TV again. A local channel was airing a roundtable discussion between a badger, a toad, a weasel, and a beaver. They were debating upcoming mayoral elections in crisp English accents. Louisa turned off the television and went to bed.

• • • •

“Rent’s due,” said the satyr standing in her doorway. He wore half a dozen gold chains around his neck and his great mane of hair had been slicked down with Palmolive.

Louisa blinked, went to her purse at the counter, and began to write the check. The satyr laughed.

“Can’t accept that,” he said. “Rent’s one hundred crowns a month or \$1000 cash. No checks.”

“What’s a crown?”

“It’s uh, a gold coin. About this big.” He made a circle between his thumb and forefinger the size of a quarter.

“Where am I supposed to get those?” Louisa asked.

“Not my problem. You can have a couple of days, because I like you. After that, you’re out on the street.” He turned on his hooves and left before she could argue. “Plenty of Others looking for a place,” he said over his shoulder. Something in the way he said the word made it clear that *Others* was what they called themselves.

She thought about robbing a bank or maybe the museum. In her imagination, banks were full of gold bars, but that couldn’t be true, could it? She remembered reading that the gold standard had gone out years ago, and there was hardly any gold in the money system at all.

• • • •

She found a rare coins dealer on Milwaukee. The proprietor was human—tall, thin, with graying hair. He shook his head sadly at her before she even spoke.

“I’ve traded away everything even *resembling* gold,” he said.

“To who?” she asked. “People like me?”

He laughed. “No, no. Them. The Others. I’ve gotten such marvelous things in return. Do you need a singing sword? Or a kite that can fly when there is no wind?”

“Could I pay my rent with any of those?” she asked. He shrugged.

“Why are you still here?” she asked. Speaking at all felt like a talent that had grown rusty with disuse.

He looked surprised at the question. “Business is better than ever,” he said. “Sorry I couldn’t help you.” With that, he disappeared into his back room. She browsed the displays, hoping he had overlooked something gold, but he had not.

What else could she do? That night, she packed all of her belongings, starting with the books.

• • • •

In the morning, she bought a train ticket to the suburbs from the automated ticket machine, which luckily still accepted her debit card. She took only a suitcase with her for now. She would send for her things later. Somehow. Surprisingly, the train was on time. It even had passengers. A few looked somewhat human. They all wore business dress, and when the train stopped, they hurried off and into the street like any other group of commuters. The only difference was that they were smiling. Louisa shivered.

Annabelle’s house had been painted, and the doors had new locks. The yard had been mowed. The doghouse out back was gone. A square patch of dead earth was the only sign that it had ever been there. It was the patch that convinced Louisa she hadn’t somehow come to the wrong home, gotten off at the wrong stop and wandered confused in a foreign neighborhood that looked just enough like her sister’s to stretch the deception.

She entered the yard, climbed the handful of steps, and rang the doorbell.

A moment later, it opened. A woman wearing a blue dress and a yellow apron tied around her waist answered. Giant swan’s wings folded away as she dusted her hands off on the apron.

“Yes? Can I help you?”

“Who are you? This is my sister’s home.”

The swan woman’s eyes softened. “Poor thing, left behind? What a shame. I’m sorry, but this is not your sister’s home anymore. My mate and I paid for it fairly.”

“I don’t believe you,” Louisa says, raising her voice. “You have to get out!”

The soft gaze hardened and the woman hissed. “Take it up with our attorneys at Dewey, Putnam, and Low.”

The words came as a blow to her, and Louisa turned and walked away in a daze. So now she knew whom the law firm had been working for, and who had been purchasing the abandoned property all along. The strange family living inside Anna’s home weren’t squatters. They had paid for it. They had paid for everything in equal trade. One world for another, and more.

She took the next train back to the city, fuming. If anyone still worked for Dewey, Putnam, and Low, they would answer her questions, or she would burn the place to the ground.

• • • •

Yellow light spilled out into the darkened hallway of the law firm from a single office. Louisa had been surprised that her keys still worked, but, after all, what would anyone want with the contents of the last working human law firm in the city?

Inside was the young man who had given her directions on her first day. He looked as impossibly tired as before, but he still smiled at her when she stood in the doorway.

“I don’t suppose you’ve come back to help with the filing,” he said.

She shook her head. The anger had burned up on the long ride here. She bit her lip to keep from crying again; she had cried entirely too much recently.

“Too bad.” He sighed. “Nobody has been answering my classified ads lately. You know, I think you’re the only human I’ve seen this week. Sometimes, with the Others, it can be hard to tell, though.”

“Which one are you?” She asked. The sting had returned to her tone, and she was thankful.

“I’m Langford Putnam, but I wasn’t even a junior partner yet. My father was Howard Putnam. That’s his name on the masthead,” he said. “So what can I do for you?”

“You helped a family of Others take my sister’s home.”

“We do a lot of that. Where?”

She gave him the address.

He began to poke and prod the stacks, lifting an edge here and there. He finally pulled one thick folder out of the middle of a pile. “Ah, here we go.” The rest of the paperwork toppled to the floor, scattering. He paid it no mind.

He opened the folder and began to read, muttering to himself. “Did your sister have a will?”

Louisa shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

“Too bad,” he said. “She might have left you the property in that, and it would give us some leverage. Unfortunately, the couple that moved in there have a legally binding contract transferring ownership. Signed by your sister, even.”

“They do?” she blinked. “How is that possible?”

Langford Putnam shrugged. “How is any of this possible? You could probably challenge it in court, but who knows who or what you would get for a judge.”

“Are you helping me?” she asked.

“Of course I am. There aren’t a lot of us left. We should probably stick together,” he said, smiling that smile that made her stomach twist into knots.

“Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

He shrugged again. “The Others have settled in enough that I think they only keep me employed as a novelty. I’m not sure they would care.”

“Why are *you* still here?” she asked. The boldness from before was slipping away. She did her best to cling to it.

“I could ask you the same question,” he said, grinning, and her resolve crumbled. Louisa sobbed.

He jumped up from his chair, knocking over further paperwork, and put an arm around her shoulder, ushering her to his spare chair. He kicked off another stack and helped her sit.

“Hey, sorry, touched a nerve, huh?”

“All my life! All my life, I’ve read stories about fantasy worlds. I used to *dream* about being whisked away to my real parents, to where I *really* belonged.” Langford offered a tissue, and she dabbed at her tears with it. “When the rabbit holes opened, I thought it was only a matter of time. I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find *mine*. ”

She shouted it, didn’t care who heard her now:

“IT’S! NOT! FAIR!”

He nodded, let her cry for a moment, and then said quietly, “I bet that made you feel like a real Susan Pevensie.”

“Exactly! What did I do to deserve being left behind? At first, it was about escape. It’s all I ever dreamed about, you know? But now, it’s about—”

“Feeling abandoned.”

“Yes.”

“First of all, I don’t think you ever did anything wrong! It’s actually probably quite the opposite. Working with the Others, I’ve picked up hints here and there about how it all works. Nothing concrete, but what if you’ve got it all backwards?”

She sniffed. “What do you mean?”

“First of all, you’re not the only one left. I’m here. So you’re not alone. The thing is, the rabbit holes are tailor-made for each person, right? The perfect escape. But have you wondered, with all those stories you’ve read since you were a kid, exactly what your rabbit hole would look like?”

“Of course,” she snapped. “It would be beautiful. Full of danger and adventure. I would be needed, needed really for the first time since my mother . . . well, since a long time ago. I would be *important*. ”

“Would you be the queen?”

“At least! Or an empress.”

“Of what?”

She paused. “Of everything?”

“Where are the specifics? Are we talking a standard European fantasy world with dragons and all that? Miévilian weird city? Satirical rabbits and playing cards?”

She said nothing. When she tried to picture her perfect rabbit hole, all she had was a feeling.

Langford continued: “You’ve traveled to a thousand worlds in your books. Think about how much you’ve seen.”

She frowned. “You think that no *one* rabbit hole world would satisfy me?”

He nodded furiously. “That’s exactly it! How do you tailor the perfect escape for a serial escapist? It can’t be done. Just about anything would have bored you eventually. Mine sure bored the hell out of *me*. ”

“Yours? You had a rabbit hole?” she asked.

“I still do.” He pulled a watch on a long silver chain from his pocket and opened it. Dazzling light spilled from the clock face, and birds sang inside.

“I did the save-the-world thing, and it was *easy*. What’s going on back here is a lot more interesting. So I came back. I visit sometimes when I need to relax.” He closed the watch face, and the light vanished. “I may have read a little too much myself. When I was younger.”

“You can come and go?”

He nodded. “They’re rabbit holes, not prisons. It’s not a matter of ‘can’ so much as a matter of ‘want.’ Heck, I can even take visitors if . . .” He blushed. “Sorry, I probably sound like I’m bragging.”

Louisa shook her head. “It’s okay . . .”

“My guess is, whatever powers are behind the Others and all of this, they knew they couldn’t tempt you. Not really.”

He stood and went to the window, pulling open the shade, and beckoned to Louisa. She joined him, looking out across the city.

Enormous, sinuous feathered shapes weaved between the buildings, some of which were crawling with stone-skinned workers remaking skyscrapers into castle-like edifices. Ghostly ships drifted on the lake, their shimmering sails iridescent in the fading sunlight. And below them, countless varied shapes moved in traffic, armors, scales, and slick skins glinting under flickering street lamps and neon signs.

“I don’t know,” Langford said. “I’ve always loved this city, but I spent the first half of my life wishing I could live anywhere else at all. It took me some travel, extraordinary and mundane, and a lot of thinking, but eventually I came to see it’s truth. This place is home, and in it’s own way, it’s—”

“Beautiful,” she whispered. Could that be it? All this time, she hadn’t been looking at it right? Now that she was elevated above her problems, literally, she could see the world for what it was becoming—something stranger than whatever could be on the other side of a single rabbit hole.

Why *would* she want to leave this?

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t even started to solve your housing problem.”

“You’ll help me? Why?”

“Secret reasons,” he said with a sly smile.

That was a puzzling thread to unravel, but for now, she was content to stare out at the city with renewed wonder. How had she missed it? It was almost if *this* world was being made just for her. It was beautiful; it was dangerous and probably full of adventure; and just maybe, it needed *her*.

She rummaged through coat pockets, retrieved her notebook, and flipped past the lists of rabbit holes to a blank page.

“Can I borrow a pen?”

Langford fumbled in his pockets, then offered a nice, heavy steel-capped pen.

“Those flying things? Would you call those ‘dragons’?”

Langford stared out the window for a moment, then said: “I can’t think of a better word to describe them, can you?”

“I’ll accept that challenge,” Louisa said, and began a new list.

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AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- The Dreamers of Alamoi (reprint)
- The Girl With Sun in Her Head
- The Dragon of Dread Peak

- The West Topeka Triangle
- The Cavern of the Screaming Eye
- Taste the Singularity at the Food Truck Circus
- Not by Wardrobe, Tornado, or Looking Glass
- Men of Unborrowed Vision
- In the Dying Light, We Saw a Shape
- La Alma Perdida de Marguerite Espinoza



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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AND YOU SHALL KNOW HER BY THE TRAIL OF DEAD

Brooke Bolander

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Finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and Locus Awards

The mobster has a gun pressed to Rack’s forehead. The mobster has a god-shitting *gun* pressed to her partner’s fucking forehead, and the only thing Rhye can do is watch and scream as the man smiles at her and pulls the trigger and blows Rack’s perfect brains out from between his ears.

Rhye has her guns drawn before the other Ganymede fuckers can twitch, but it’s way too late — the damage is done and smeared across the walls and floor and ceiling. Synthetic blood and bone look exactly the same as the real deal. She puts three shots into the flesh slab that did it (*he’s dead he’s dead gods fuck it no nononono*) and then the rest of his pals are on her like the three-times-fucked human jackals they are, pulling her down. The room stinks of blood and gunsmoke and fear-sweat. For the first time in her life, those smells make Rhye want to gag. Her ears are ringing — whether from the gunshots or god knows what else — and it feels like the floor is falling away beneath her motorcycle boots.

She’s still struggling against their meaty fingers to reach Rack when the head goon breaks her nose with a squared-off fist the size of the moon he’s from. She barely feels the bone snap. He’s dead. He’s dead and the world is grayscale, all the color leaching from it to pool around her feet in a red puddle.

“He was trying to crack it, you *fucks*. The fuck is wrong with you? He was coming out, he was going to try again, it was just a fucking hiccup! Jesus *fuck*, do you think you’re going to get your cuntin’ kid back now?” Her throat hurts from screaming. Blood from her nose is backing up into her sinuses, half-choking her. She doesn’t care. “I’ll kill you, I’ll fucking kill all of you. You’re fucking *dead*, do you hear me? Let me go, let me fucking go —”

“We hired you and your partner to finish job. Nothing was ever said about quitting,” the man says. His voice is heavily accented, breath reeking of onions and vodka. “If pretty boy couldn’t bring what we need out, pretty boy is useless, like tits on bull or useless cyborg bitch. His consciousness can stay inside box and rot for all I care. But! —” he pokes Rhye in the forehead with one of his blunt fingers — “I think *you* care. I think you care very much, yes? Yesyes?”

“I’m going to kill you, you fuck.” She says it slowly, pronouncing every word with deathly clarity. “I’m going to shove my gun up your ass and blow a hole so fucking wide a whale’s *prick* wouldn’t fill the gap.”

“Not if you want partner back,” he says, throwing an uplink cable at her. “Plug in, get data out. Get pretty boy, too, if you like. Fail, and you die together. Is very simple.”

And because she *does* care, cares too fucking much, cares, and the sight of Rack slumped over in the chair with a neat round hole scorched into his forehead is squeezing at the heart she’s always claimed not to have, Rhye spits blood and hate in their employer’s face and jams the jack into the port at the base of her skull.

• • • •

The first time she meets Rack, Rhye’s fresh out of the army and fresh back from one of the meat-grinders the humans pay her kind to fight in. The children of wires and circuits aren’t worth a tinker’s fuck compared to the children of real flesh and bone, so far as the world’s concerned. The recruitment agents pluck her off the streets when she’s twelve and send her to a training camp and she’s good with linguistics and better at killing, so they keep her hands busy until she’s twenty-five and then they spit her back out again like a mouthful of cum. She has gray curly hair cropped short and gray dead eyes and calluses on the inside of her palms worn hard and horny from years of holding pistol grips. She’s small and lean, which makes people underestimate her, but she’s cool enough and don’t-fuck-with-me enough that most know to jump the fuck out of the way when they see her coming. The ones that don’t get flashed a warning glimpse of her teeth and holsters.

There’s nothing funnier than watching some drunken fleshsack piss his drawers when that happens. One minute he’s trying to grab a skin-job whore’s ass, the next he’s looking his own death in the face and wetting himself like a goddamned baby. It never fails to tickle the shit out of Rhye.

She bums around the city looking for something to do, gets in a moderate amount of trouble in every district she lands (her and the cops are on a first-name basis; it’s touching), and finally ends up at the deathmatches, fighting her own kind for a quick buck in front of a bunch of screaming yahoos. Rhye doesn’t really do it for the cash, although money for smokes is always nice. She does it because killing is the only thing she’s good at, and quite frankly, she enjoys it. If the poor fucks she gunned down didn’t want to be there, they wouldn’t be. They’re all fucked, everything is fucked, and the pain at least makes her feel something.

Then one night in the arena her foot slips and the hulking musclebound mountain of nano-technology she’s peppering with shots catches up and busts three of her ribs and one of her wrists. Rhye still manages to take him down one-handed, but even with the purse prize she doesn’t have enough money for a fixer. They toss her out into the alleyway behind the joint like a kid’s broken toy and there she lies, soaked to the skin from the oily rain that never seems to stop falling in this fucking gray ashtray of a city.

And that’s where Rack finds her, that clean-fingered, mild-mannered motherfucker. Why he’s even there in the first place is beyond her. All she knows is that one minute she’s huddling in a puddle, exhausted and hurting, and the next there’s a hand extended her way and a pair of sad brown eyes looking down at her (*fucking puppy-dog expression, clean-shaven and thoughtful and for fuck’s sake he was wearing a tie and carrying a briefcase, can you believe that shit*) and no matter how hard she glares at him, he won’t fucking go. Rhye shows him the grips of her pistols and he just looks at her, just fucking *looks*. That surprises her; she’s not expecting young Mr. Salaryman to be stubborn.

“Fuck off, White Collar,” she says. “Do I fucking know you?”

“No,” he replies, exasperatingly patient, “but I know what it looks like when somebody needs a hand. C’mon. Let’s get you out of the rain.”

She’s hurting too bad to put up much of a fuss. He loops an arm beneath her own and together the two of them limp back to his flat, her getting oily water and blood all over his nice white shirt the entire way.

If he had been smart, he would have left her where she lay. Fucking dumbass. Stupid fucking noble idealistic kind-hearted dumbass.

• • • •

Outgoing Connection detected!

Initializing Connection Handoff to Interpretive Interface . . . Handoff Completed!

(*Hey, Rhye, c’mere. I made you something.*)

It’s like floating in black static, and all the pressure is sitting on top of Rhye’s head sumo-style, pushing her further down. Lines of code play across the insides of her eyes. Floaters are annoying; this is fucking maddening. And it *hurts*. She can’t keep a straight thought, scalpels of pain are slicing through her brain over and over and she fucking hates this cyberspace bullshit. It’s Rack’s thing, not hers. Rhye likes her shit concrete. Rhye likes having a *body*. North, South, East, West. You use your feet to walk in a direction and then you shoot some motherfucker at the end of it. Finding Rack in here is gonna be like finding a seed in an elephant’s ass, especially if he’s tangled up with the security system. He had sounded scared shitless over the comm-link before that waste of jizz up top had done what he did. Thinking about it makes Rhye’s currently non-existent asshole clench.

So. Find Rack, get him out of whatever pile he’s stepped into, and also somehow free up the data their employers want. Piece of cake. No problem. As soon as Rhye figures out what form any of that is gonna take, how to move forward, and which fucking way forward *is*, she’ll go ahead and do that. Should’ve paid more attention in school. Should’ve actually gone to school.

(*It looks like a chip, a tiny little chunk of plastic and wire no bigger than a .22 shell. He drops it into her palm, looking like a cat that’s just robbed a canary store at gunpoint. She glances down at the thing, then back at him, the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth and the pride in his eyes.*)

(*The hell is it?)*

Establishing parietal operculum loopback . . . SUCCESS

Establishing posterior parietal cortex loopback . . . SUCCESS

Something about the script is nagging at Rhye. A memory half-clouded by booze, disinterest, and the obscuring fog of being so embarrassed by something she had willed her brain to forget all about it. Good god, had she actually *blushed*? Like a fucking schoolgirl with a Valentine?

Rhye never has been good at accepting kindness. Being loved doesn’t suit her.

(*It’s art. It’s art and it’s one-of-a-kind and it’s all yours. It’s an interface, like mine, but I cut out all the rendering hardware and installed a direct path to the somasensory cortices of your brain. You interpret the stimulus naturally, like poetry, or music, and — Rhye, there are no words for this. Here, hook yourself up to the test deck. Log in with*

me. You need to see for yourself.)
(Just say what it does in fuckin' English, Rack, baby.)
(It develops metaphors for abstract environments. I put it together just f—)
(Oh. Huh. Well, that's somethin'. You're a sharp motherfucker; Rack. You want a drink?)

And she had slotted the thing away in one of the ports beneath her hair so his feelings wouldn't be too hurt (not that she cared, of course) and turned away so he wouldn't see her blush (fuck) and promptly gotten herself so completely fucked up on the cheap whiskey they kept in the fridge that the rest of that night was an indistinct blur. That he had wanted her to plug in with him was not something she dwelled on, not something she had let herself dwell on. Fucking sentimentality. It was that sort of shit that got you killed. But it sure as fuck seems to be coming in handy now, this little gift of Rack's. The static shudders and flashes and things begin taking shape. She has a body again, and guns, and she thanks her brain for that because she'd rather hop around in here on fucking stumps and hooks than be without some representation of her weapons. Another twist of the big empty and there's dirt beneath her boots, a gray sky above and a river ahead, and —
Enhanced local motor/sensory homunculi detected, offloading rendering tasks . . . complete!
Filling input buffer . . . 60% . . . 85% . . . 100%!
Rendering buffer contents . . .
Dead trees, dead grass, and a skeletal ferryman in a boat, cowed and waiting.

. . . .

Joining up with Rack hadn't stopped her from doing much of anything, at first. She played the part of the hired gun on whatever jobs he asked her to — beneath that quiet boy scout front was a mercenary mind the criminal underworld would spread their cheeks and wallets for, if and when they needed his skills — but Rhye's time was her fucking time, and if she wanted to spend it getting blackout drunk or fighting in deathmatches until the street sweepers came out to mop up the hobo piss, that was none of his fucking concern. And, to Rack's credit, he never gave her any shit about it. He just bundled her into her bed when she came staggering home stinking of bourbon and sweat, sewed up her cuts and swabbed out her wounds, and watched. Always with the fucking watching.
Maybe she got a little reckless (more so than usual). Reckless or sloppy. The outcome was the same: She went into the ring with two good eyes to fight some knife-throwing motherfucker and came out a cyclops, blood and goo leaking from the sliced-up socket like candle wax. She's never been able to remember how the fuck she made it back to the apartment that night on her own. There's a big "scene missing" card and then she's perched on the bathroom counter while Rack dabs gently at the hole in her head, tight-lipped and trying so fucking hard not to let his concern show.
Neither of them says anything for a while. But a question is gnawing at Rhye, and she's drunk enough and light-headed enough from losing all that blood to finally just ask. "Hey. Rack."
He wrings the washcloth out and a slaughterhouse swirls down the plughole. "Yeah?"
"Why the fuck do you care? About anything, I mean." She shakes her head. Bloody water and antiseptic splatter the walls. "You know what humans say about us? We're just fucking garbage to them. God created their ancestors, but ours were made by Tom, Dick, and motherfuckin' Turing. We don't have souls and they can just use us and throw us out" — she snaps her fingers, bang — "like that. Better than ruining a real person's hands in the factories, right? That kid on the assembly line, she's just a goddamned piece of synthetic trash, she doesn't dream about getting the hell out of the slums to somewhere better. So why give a fuck if that's all the world expects out of you?"
A beat. "Do you believe them?"
"Fuck no. For one thing, there's no such thing as their fucking God. Load of horseshit. The only things you can rely on are these babies." She pats her guns, solid and safe in their holsters. "But they got one thing right. Our lives ain't worth shit in a sewer, and mine least of all. So I'll ask again: What's with the caring act? What's in it for you? You think you're gonna fix me or something?"
"No, Rhye. I don't think that."
"Then why? Why give a fuck?"
He shrugs, shooting her that wry little smile that never reaches his eyes.
"Hey," he says, finally. "Everybody needs a hobby, right?"
That was the last deathmatch Rhye ever fought in. She kept the empty socket, got an eyepatch, and aimed just as well with one eyeball as she ever had with two.

. . . .

She pays him in spent brass, the kind that gathers in your pockets and shirt cuffs after a day at the range or a night spent turning people into raw red meat. No reaper in Rhye's head would ever bother asking for fuckin' pennies. He stretches out a bony hand and the empty shells clatter into it like beer cans bouncing off a fence post, *ting ting ting*. Lead on, motherfucker, lead on. Down the river and through the woods and if the Big Bad Wolf jumps out, you give him a lead tampon in his asshole before he can say *hey baby, what's shakin'*.
It looks like all the rivers and canals she's ever known, choked with old shopping trolleys and used condoms and rafts of yellow-brown foam. Styx by way of The City, stinking, oily-slow, full of shit and bodies and about as good a metaphor for life as you could find. The only difference here is that all of the faces beneath the water belong to people Rhye put there. She's not guilty — most of them deserved it — but it's still a little fucked up. They stare at her with accusing, fish-nibbled eyes. Some claw at the bottom of the boat. She doubts shooting them again would help anything, so she saves her bullets, lighting a cigarette instead. The smoke is warm and fuzzy inside her chest, comfortingly familiar, like sucking down a carcinogenic teddy bear.
"Do many of those fuckers get out?" she asks Reaper Man. She can be fuckin' polite, no problem. But Mr. Skullhead doesn't give her a second look, not even when she offers him a smoke (less out of kindness and more because she's curious to see how the hell something without lungs would manage the trick), so she scowls and stares across the water with the coffin nail dangling moodily from her lips, chin in hand. To entertain herself she starts trying to identify every dead person she sees.
There are foot soldiers and foreign agents, low-level punks and pirates and even a police officer or two. Other bounty hunters. Cartel bosses. The kid that couldn't have been older than fifteen that tried to stick her up that one time, not recognizing Rhye for what she was. And yeah, even her first kill, the kiddy-diddling adoption agent with the wormy smile and the good-looking face. Nobody had suspected a goddamned thing. As long as they're good-looking, they never do. Who the fuck were they supposed to believe, the street rat skin-job with a rap sheet at age nine? It had been his blonde-haired, blue-eyed word against hers.
He wasn't fucking pretty with all that blood spurting out of his mouth, though, and he sure as fuck ain't looking too good now with half his chin rotted off. Real or not, it gives Rhye some satisfaction to see him stranded like a rat in the aftermath of a wrecked ship. She reaches down, avoiding the grasping hands. Her cigarette hisses and sizzles as it grinds into his bloated forehead. He sinks back into the water like one of those poor amusement park androids, stuck on a rail with a beam up their ass.
"Waste of a fucking cigarette," she says, and lights another. She actually feels kind of good after that, at least until she sees Rack's face down there too. The drag curdles behind her ribs and sticks like grime clotting a gun barrel.
He's not real. She knows that for a goddamned fact. But Rhye can't tear herself away from those sad eyes, the round hole dribbling black blood and river water down his nose. She watches him as they pull away, until the distance between them stretches and he's just another face in the crowd her hands have made.

. . . .

The river goes along, as rivers do, and then, out of fucking nowhere, like cockroaches circling the last can of cat food before a paycheck, suburban neighborhoods begin popping up along the banks. They stare down the bluffs with broken window eyes, yards gone to weeds and dog shit and strips of old paint. Who would have thought Hell had pink flamingos?
The ferryman lets Rhye out on a shore made of splintered bone and more spent brass. Why the fuck he needed that shit for a toll when there are dunes of it lying within easy reach, Rhye doesn't know. She sets out for the houses without looking back. They'll meet up again soon enough for real, she figures. No need for handshakes when she'll be probably be back in the boat before her shelf life hits forty.
Keep moving. Keep searching. Wading through drifts of dead leaves and candy wrappers, glancing into doorways, further up and further in, uneasiness growing with each SLOW CHILDREN AT PLAY sign passed and bombed-out, rotten-tired station wagon peered under. Rust, dust, plaster, Styrofoam. Two-story brick hulks sagging at crazy angles, their multi-car garages gaping like slack-jawed drunks at a nudie bar. Shadows everywhere: beneath grimy windshields, in the alleyways, stacked thick behind brokeback

venetian blinds. Rhye’s been in friendlier combat zones; at least there you’ll spot the occasional buzzard or scuttling cat. She’s being followed by *something*, but that’s not surprising. A good sign: If she’s suddenly interesting enough to be getting the hairy eyeball, maybe it’s the security system crawling out from under its rock to do some territorial pissing. She puts up with the peeping for another couple of blocks, then stops in her tracks.

“Look. You wanna ask me to the fuckin’ dance already instead of trying to peek up my skirts?”

Nothing. Not a big talker, her stalker.

“‘Cause, y’know, if you’re too chickenshit to give me an invitation, I’m just gonna go with the football captain, that motherfucker is *dreamy* and I hear he’s got a dick like a goddamned science experiment.”

Nada but tree shadows, all the way down the block. Nothing — and then, three or four houses down, a shape stepping out into the street. It stands there on the curb, watching quietly, silhouetted against the ashtray sky. The sharp, familiar scent of a lit cigarette punches through the stale air.

“Rhye? Is that you?”

But it’s not the figure speaking to her. This voice comes from behind, one she’s been wanting to hear ever since she plugged in. Her breath snags barbed wire. She half-turns to look back over her shoulder, against her better judgment.

“Holy shit, Rack! Where the fuck are you, man? I’ve been looking all over the place for you! Are y —”

“No, look, *look*, Rhye, you need to get out of here. You need to get out of here right now. I made a huge mistake, I underestimated the security protocol, and she’s going to come after you, too, if you don’t go. Don’t worry about me. Rhye?”

The shadowy shape is walking towards her. Rhye’s pretty sure it’s not out selling cookies or spreading the word of the Lord. “That’s assuming I know how to fucking get out of here without you, man,” she says. Her hands are already on her guns. “And what the fuck do you mean by *she*?”

The purposeful walk has turned into a wolf-trot. The light still isn’t great, but she can see now that it’s a girl. About her height, about her build, same hair color, same way of moving —

Wait. Wait just one fucking minute.

“Rack? This security program. I’m just, like, seeing my subconscious or some bullshit again, right? Right?” The other woman is running now. “Because if you’ve done what I think you did —”

“I, uh . . .”

Motherfucker.

“ . . . I may have cribbed heavily from existing source material, yes.”

The woman grins as she sprints. Still has both of her eyes. Four years ago, maybe? A copy of her at her most bitter and burned out, thirsty for blood and not caring whose.

“Let’s do this, then,” she says, sighing, and then there’s no time for talk anymore.

• • • •

So there’s this skin-job kid that gets adopted by one of those high muckity-muck Ganymede mobsters. He isn’t exceptionally bright and he sure as hell ain’t a looker, but Don Whoeverthefuck has a bug up his ass ’cause his biological clock is tick-tick-ticking away like a block of C4 is tenderly bearhugging his testicles. Old fart needs an heir. All those years of pushing baby carriages into traffic ain’t gonna count for shit if he doesn’t have an heir to pick up the slack when his heart valves do their last dance with the extra-lard pork belly. He throws some money around, which is how he’s solved every other problem in his bloated life, and hey voila, instant son. The boy is dumber than a sack of skullfucked squirrels, but that just makes him fit in with all the real Mafioso squirts that came from ballsacks and bad decisions.

Things go on swingin’ as they usually do. Little Johnny Electronuts gets in his share of trouble, but Daddy is always there to yank his ass out of the fire with greased palms or greased dicks or a carefully administered dose of goon muscle to somebody’s knees and groin. Then, one day, kiddo gets the idea that he’s some kind of fucking hacker. He’s nineteen and he’s better protected than the Virgin Mary’s holy of holies and he’s got a chip on his shoulder and a hard-on in his lucky rocketship underoos just crying to fuck something up. He tries to bust his way into a rival family’s black box so he can crow about it to all his knuckle-dragging script kid buddies. This is what is known in the business as a Giant Fucking Mistake, ’cause the security system in this motherfucker was set up by another motherfucker by the name of Rack, and Rack is a goddamned super genius when it comes to that sort of thing. It grabs the kid by the short hairs almost as soon as he plugs in and slams the door behind him, and when the Don’s cavalry comes busting in to save his ass, their nuts land squarely in a bear trap. His consciousness is all locked up like a gold bar inside a treasure chest. They’ve got the box, but nobody seems to be able to get through to the toy inside.

Nobody but the motherfucker who designed the system in the first place, that is. They offer him money. They offer him a lot of money. And less because of the money and more because he likes a challenge, Rack bites.

And that’s where things get fucked up.

• • • •

Dodge for dodge and feint for feint and bullet for bullet they come together, the woman that was and the woman that is. The Not-Rhye is laughing like a kid at the circus as she spins her hand-cannons, laughing and twisting and breathing in that gunsmoke that turns your snot black like she’s a barracuda and it’s seawater. She doesn’t give a shit whether she lives or dies and Rhye knows this because it used to be *her*, and she suddenly realizes, with something like shock and something like mild disgust, that this is no longer a truth that applies. Something inside Rhye wants to make it out alive, wants to go home to the shitty-ass flat with the bullet holes in the air conditioner, wants to taste bourbon and cigarettes and go right on living alongside that dumbfuck brainiac like she has every day for the past five years. Dangerous. Very dangerous. The moment you start wanting is the moment you slow down. And the moment you slow down —

Not-Rhye lands close enough that Rhye can smell the burning wire and ozone stink of her over the reek of cordite and hot metal. She flicks one of the pistols like a gecko lapping up a mosquito and it coughs emphysema and tuberculosis and Rhye’s cheek is laid open to the bone even as she rolls behind a row of trash cans, ears ringing like pulled fire alarms. She’s a fucking idiot. She should’ve been scrapped at construction. She’s going to die here, soft and stupid as a human cop, and Rack is going to be trapped inside this box forever. The mobsters are going to be fucking pissed when nobody comes back. Good. Fuck ’em, and fuck their wives and moms and childhood pets for good measure.

“Were you trying to hit me, or did one of those pink flamingos do something to piss you off?” she says. If she can irritate Not-Rhye into making a mistake she might have a chance. Anything is worth a shot. “The neighbors are gonna talk, y’know.”

No response. Too smart for her own good. God *damn* she wishes Rack had held a less flattering view of her when he programmed this fucker. “Oh well. We’d have made shitty Home Owners Association members anyway. Rack! You alright?”

“I think so. I wasn’t exactly expecting this to happen when I went in. I thought —”

“That was your first fuckin’ mistake, Rack baby. You do too much of that anyway.” She rubs her blistered, lead-stained fingers clean on her cargo pants and digs for a fresh magazine. “Is there any way for me to disable her easier than giving her brain airholes?”

You could hear a gnat fart in the pause that follows.

“Rack, say something before I come over there and do some kinky shit to your ass with this gun barrel, please.”

“ . . . I don’t know,” he says. “I think I can do it, but you’ll have to free me up first.”

“Fuck a row of baby ducks, is that all? Lemme send Little Miss Red Rover a fuckin’ engraved invitation to move her psycho ass to a new neighborhood and I’ll be right over with a bundt cake and a goddamned meat loaf.”

But she’s already tensing to spring back into the line of fire, because of course she is.

Up and at ’em, knocking the bins over clitter-clatter like a fuckball of feral cats, and sure enough there’s her shadow racing to greet her, four years younger, one eye richer, and meaner than a limp-dicked drill sergeant. No time to fire off a good shot; she says *fuck it* and goes ahead and launches herself straight into the other woman’s knees and down the two of them tumble in a muddy heap of fists and flailing motorcycle boots like a pair of overturned shot glasses, the world reduced to rubber soles squeegeeing shins and knuckles glancing off grittywet concrete. Rack’s yelling something. Little-known fact, though: It’s pretty fucking hard to focus on anything but the task at hand when the task is trying to club your teeth out with the handshake-end of a pistol. She dodges the blow and it glances off her temple instead with a hollow *thwonk*. Gasoline stars and flat-tire sparks shimmy-shake across her vision.

No fucking way I’m blacking out. Her bone-sickle grin hangs overhead, the last thing so many other unlucky motherfuckers have seen at the end of a fight. Rhye focuses on that

sliver, wills the darkness back with clenched fists and a gas leak hiss. The thing with her smile is still laughing, but it's not some kind of mad villain cackle. She sounds like she's having the time of her life.

“What the fuck are you laughin’ at, dumbshit? See something funny?” Not the wittiest thing to ever rasp its way out of her nicotine box, but whatever. Wit’s the first thing to go when you’ve just gotten pistolwhipped in the side of the head so hard your brain thinks it’s being skullfucked to death by a rhinoceros. The grip comes down again, misses her by an asshair, and judo-chops the pavement so that little bits of gravel spray up like buckshot.

If the girl-slash-security-system-that-was-her is sharp and not a dumbfuck, she’ll use these precious seconds to turn her guns around and shoot Rhye in the face, like she’s wishing she had just done herself. But oh, glory of glories, blessed be the almighty fuckin’ cockiness of youth. This little asshole right here — with her two dead eyes and her don’t-need-nobody jock walk — curls her lip back in an *are you fuckin’ serious* sneer and swallows the bait deep.

“Aw, come the fuck *on*, man!” she crows. “You can’t fuckin’ tell me the thought of actually going up against somebody who can give you a fair fight isn’t gettin’ you all tingly in your grandma-bloomers! Why the hell else would you come here? For *him*? Fuck’s sake, I’m you, aren’t I? You live for sweat running under your tits and blood splattering your face, not some soft-hearted fuckhead can’t tell which way a magazine loads.”

Is that what he thinks I thought? Shit. *There’s* a nasty little spoonful of glass to chew on. No time for guilt, though.

“You got one part of that right, sister,” she says, and jams her thumb into the girl’s left eyeball. It’s all executed in one smooth motion: jabtwistpull. And then she’s rolling across the wet ribbon of tarmac while her not-self flails and shrieks gurgling stray cat curses, rolling and back on her feet and bringing up her guns to make an end of this, but even in a considerable amount of pain the other her is fast in an unnatural, make-the-flesh-of-your-ears-crinkle sort of way, slither-snarling back beneath the rainy evening’s skirts before Rhye can give the triggers a good hard prom-night fingering. She starts to go after her, blood boiling.

Y’know what? A little voice in her head, the one that sometimes says things like *are you sure getting into that gimp’s windowless white van is a good idea?* or *maybe we should go get that festering bullet hole checked out*, or, of late, *don’t punch Rack in the face, the poor bastard hasn’t done anything to deserve it this time*. In other words, her inner killjoy.

What?

Fuck pride, man.

And just what is that supposed to mean, exactly?

Pride is for jackoffs who aren’t being hunted from the fucking shadows.

“Shut the hell up.” She says this aloud in a hissed whisper; hopefully the security system will laugh herself to death at Rhye having a conversation with her invisible friend and that’ll be that. “We’re fine. I can do this by myself. I don’t care what Rack says.”

Pride is for people who don’t have other people depending on them . . .

Rhye snaps to a halt like the bullet she’s been expecting just drilled her brain a peephole.

. . . So why don’t you try trusting your partner for goddamned once and get over there like he asked? Remember what we’re here for.

“Go fuck your own ass with a fish-hook dildo.” Her shoulders are slumping before she’s halfway through the word “fuck.” By the time she reaches “dildo” she’s made a u-turn and is vaulting the sagging picket fence that separates her from the back-alley leading to Rack, feet *thwap-thwap-thwapping* the blacktop. She listens for the echo of a pursuit, but all she can hear is Rack’s voice reeling her in and her own one-woman ticker-tape parade careening down the path.

Warm. Warmer. Red-hot, veering back off the pavement, crashing through briars and dead weeds and old tires like she’s back in basic, up and over another splintered, gap-slatted privacy fence as weather-worn as a beer can in the ditch. It’s not a pretty postcard that greets her — more weeds, more broken glass, a swimming pool filled with water the color and consistency of baby shit. Rack is there, though, tied up on the patio, and that qualifies it for Garden of the Fucking Century, so far as Rhye’s concerned. She’s down and off her perch and across the yard before she can remember to lazily saunter in like she doesn’t give a fuck.

His face is a bloodied bedsheet, haunted eyes staring out from behind the bruises and stubble. Rhye wipes the blood from his split lip and they exchange a quick *you cool?* glance before she sets to work on the knotted ropes. It’s not some romantic, lovey-dovey, kiss your boo-boos BS; it’s just the kind of thing good partners do for one another.

“Been playing in Mommy’s bondage closet again, Rack-baby?” *Tsk-tsk.* “You got a lotta ’splaining to do if we get out of here alive, my friend.” She spares him another look from under her cocked brow, trying to keep it cool and even, wanting him to maybe twist in the wind a little. His expression is all thousand-yard stare and nervous bird herk-jerk, sheepishness and syrupy adoration. Portrait of The Nebbish As Grateful Penitent. He looks like he stuck his hand down a secretary’s panties at the office holiday party, got a handful of tentacles for his troubles, and wanted her all the more for it after that initial moment of cold water surprise. “For now, though,” she finishes, after re-locating her tongue and remembering how to use it, “we need to figure out a way to clean up this goddamned mess. No, sorry, my bad: *Your* goddamned mess, ’cause I sure as shit don’t remember giving you permission to turn my personality into a fucking security module. Can you see me? You’re lookin’ right at me, so I’m pretty sure you can see me.”

“We synced up as soon as you stepped into the area,” he says. “The chip, you know?” Rhye finally snake-charms the ropes into giving way and he pulls his hands free, rubbing each wrist gingerly. You could take fingerprints with the tired smudges beneath his eyes. “I always wanted the interfaces to work together. Yours is one-of-a-kind, but I gave mine a tweak, so — OW! What the heck was that for?”

“It’s lucky for you that we’re friends, asshole. Anybody else pulled some shit like this and I wouldn’t just sock ’em in the ear. How’s this gonna go down? Talk quick. She’s way too quiet right now and I have *no* idea how long that’s going to last.”

“It’s . . . tricky.”

“Tricky? What exactly do you mean by ‘tricky’? Did you or didn’t you say you could disable that fucking thing if I got you free?”

“I did say that, yes.” Rack stretches the last word out until it wobbles, full of more quivering “but” than a strip club. “I can give you a kill switch. Implementing it may require a little footwork, though, and I’m not sure how that will play out, considering our . . . environment.” He waves a hand to take in the garden, runs the other through his hair, and ends up looking like an insomniac hedgehog.

“Well, considering our only other option is getting bullet-fucked to death by a pissed-off, admittedly foxy-fine bit of code, I’m open to anything. What do I need to do?”

“We’ll need to execute two operations at the same time, and even then it doesn’t have a 100% chance of working. I hadn’t allowed for this. I can be sort of an idiot sometimes, as you are probably aware.”

Seeing him slumped there staring at his hands feels like defeat, and she’ll be fucked if she gives up that easily after coming this far. She punches him in the shoulder. “Hey, none of that sadsack shit. You fucked up. Everybody does. If you’re gonna wallow in it, I might as well’ve left you up there with your brains as pretty pink wallpaper. What the fuck will trying hurt, right?”

And that gets a slow, crooked half-smile out of him, which is all she really wants right now. It’s like her heart just snorted a line. “You’re right, of course,” he says.

“Goddamned right I am.” She offers him her hand. “C’m on. Let’s do this thing.”

Their palms meet with an awesome partnerly *slap*.

Now, this is where Rhye expects him to pull something cool out of his pockets — a couple of little red buttons, maybe, or a bundle of dynamite. Instead, he blanches. His hands fly up to his throat in the universal *oh shit, I’m choking* gesture. For a horrible fistful of seconds she thinks she’s going to have to do the Heimlich (and how the fuck does that work, anyway? Is that the move where you grab the other person from behind and give them a rough humping?) but thankfully he shakes whatever’s in his throat loose on his own. Something small and heavy bounces off the toe of Rhye’s boot. Another, like a fat brass raindrop.

She reaches down and carefully picks up two 9mm bullets, bright as change in a gutter.

Rack peers down at the lumps of lead and metal he just hairball-horked onto her boots. If he wore glasses she just knows he’d be adjusting the fucking things for a better look.

“Huh. I guess it makes sense that they would take this form.”

“So these are, what, special? Magic bullets?” They *feel* like normal rounds. They even smell like ’em, which is to say, metallic. She rolls them between her fingers, warm from the heat of her hand. “Kill switches, whatever the fuck you called ’em?”

“Correct. Ideally you’ll discharge both simultaneously, shutting down the security system completely.”

There are pros and cons to knowing somebody — *really* knowing somebody, how their face looks when they cry or come or drool in their sleep. Rhye understands what Rack means immediately: *You’re the fighter, you’re strong, so of course you’ll take care of this on your own*. She could say no. She could open up her chest with a scalpel and let him see the tender bits — *I can’t do this alone, she’s too good and I care too much and quite frankly I’m scared shitless, for you and for me* — or she could tell him, hey, clean up your own goddamned mess, I ain’t your fuckin’ nanny.

But she knows how this has to go down, truthfully, and it doesn’t involve telling Rack to piss up a rope. She’ll save that for a later date. Instead, before she can second-guess her decision, she pulls one of her pistols, ejects the magazine, thumbs one of the kill switches inside, and shoves it into his hands. There. Done.

Rack stares down at her sweet, lethal baby like she’s just handed him a dead cat.

“She won’t be expecting you to have one of my guns,” she says, by way of explanation. Her voice is one of her hands would’ve been easier, if less useful. “I sure as hell wouldn’t, if I were her. Safety’s off and it’s ready to go; all you gotta do is point and pull. Careful your thumbs aren’t behind the slide, unless you wanna get bit.”

Does he understand what this is costing her? In pride, in trust, in all of that stupid emotional stuff? He looks back up at her — stunned doesn’t begin to describe the expression on his face — and his eyes are wet and glassy.

“Rhye . . . I can’t . . .”

Yeah. He knows.

“Aw, hell. Don’t go getting all wet cereal on me, man,” she mutters. Making sure her remaining pistol is loaded and racked suddenly becomes very, very important. “Just make sure you’re close when you fire, alright? I don’t —”

(Pop)

Of course Miss Security doesn’t come over the fence; why would she bother? The only warning is that soft, sudden *pop*, like a blood bubble bursting on a dying man’s lips, and there she stands, herniated out of the nothing because oh right, she *is* the fucking nothing. Rhye has just enough time to grasp that they’ve been played and just enough time to push Rack down and back and no time at all to do anything else but brace for impact as Not-Rhye slams into her and they take a backwards trust exercise straight into the pool.

It’s in her nose and her ears and her eye socket and it’s *warm*, which is somehow the worst part. A warm green slurry pressing against her skin, turning everything to frogs and fungus and body temperature pea soup. Fingers scratching at her throat and her one good eye, looking to throttle or blind or both. Spots wriggling tadpole trails across her vision. She pushes out in slow motion, catches her attacker in the chest, tries using the momentum to pull away. No dice; it’s like karate-kicking an amped-up octopus. They sink deeper, the light fading to darkness, seconds rubber-banding to grim, doubtful decades.

And this is what I’ll get for trusting Rack with my back. Should’ve gone with my instincts. Trust fucks you. It fucks you every time and puts a knife in your windpipe while it’s at it. Lungs already beginning to ache. Can’t grab for her gun, ’cause both her hands are busy keeping Not-Rhye at bay. Nobody’ll come to save you, idiot. Or if he does, he’ll get here about ten seconds too late. Let this be your final lesson about going home with strangers.

The security program’s good eye glitters in the gloom, black and triumphant. *Gotcha, you fucker*, it says, and it’s the language of sharks she’s speaking now, no mewling monkey noises needed. *Don’t even have to waste a bullet.* She leans closer (Rhye has a sudden nightmare flash of her opening her mouth to show double-rows of pointed teeth, all the way back to the place where her jaw hinges), eager to choke, to rub out, to self-destruct. Rhye would keep fighting but there’s seven feet of scummy water overhead and a tangle of grasping limbs dragging her further downward and god fucking *damn* she’s tired. She can’t even spit in her rival’s face.

It is at this perfect moment of physical and emotional exhaustion, with her arms pulling the fire alarms and her legs turning to full clips of concrete, that Rack chooses to dive into their underwater cockfight, like a toaster hurled slots-down into a bathtub. He arrives with a muffled splash, churning up bubbles, froth, muck from the bottom, algae from the surface. Now it’s Not-Rhye’s turn to be surprised. She spins around to face this new threat

(*occupied she’s not paying attention to me my hands are free*)

lip curled, shoulders hunched, NOT a happy camper, she thought this was gonna be a one-on-one and turns out it’s a threesome. She’s all over his shit faster than you can say *piranhas in the kiddie pool*.

(*and now the grip’s solid in my hand it’ll fire it’ll kill if we’re close enough I believe in you baby air air AIR*)

The water’s a whirlpool of bodies and spume. Rhye is dying by inches now; another half minute and her lungs will burst. But not before she does what she came here to do. She pulls that heavy, heavy gun up, the weight of a lead cannon in her hands. She waits for visibility to clear. And when the bubbles finally part and Rack’s eyes meet hers (*she’s got her hands around his throat but he’s letting her so calmly and she’ll never notice the pistol kissing the underside of her jaw until it’s too late*) she shoves the muzzle of the 9mm snugly against Not-Rhye’s back and sends a prayer to Lady Luck, that goddess all gunslingers kneel to.

Rack and Rhye squeeze the triggers as one, the way good partners do.

• • • •

They find the kid balled up in a basement jail cell, groaning and bitching about his head. It looks an awful lot like the one Rhye spent her formative years gracing, but Christ knows what the kid sees. Good looking, late teens, perfect teeth and hair and body model. There’s something wrong with the expression, though. Even confused and fucked up in the middle of a strange system he’s sneering an entitled sneer that makes Rhye’s fists curl like dead spiders beneath a radiator. *I always get what I want*, it says. *Why wouldn’t the world bend over and give it to me?*

“Sorry about the wait,” Rack says. “Ran into a little trouble.” He fumbles in his pocket for a key. “Doing alright?”

The kid’s eyes dart wildly. “A little trouble?” he says. “You call this a *little* trouble? I can’t fucking move and you think that’s a little trouble, fuckface? Suck *both* of my balls, man. Hey! Hel-*lo*? Are you still there? Are you listening to me?”

Rack doesn’t look up, just calmly keeps on doing what he’s doing. Rhye can feel her molars grinding together. “Rack, can you hurry it the fuck along? I don’t know how much longer I can put up with this shit, get what I’m saying?”

“Absolutely.” A click and the door to the cell swings open. Rack steps back and nods at the kid, so irritatingly professional Rhye can hardly stand it. “Someone will be by to collect you shortly, I believe,” he says. “Your body is waiting outside.”

“Goddamn right it is, you no-nuts bitch.”

“Kid, you talk to him like that one more time and I’m going to blow both the balls you’re so proud of off in a place where they ain’t pretend and don’t grow back, fuckin’ got it? I don’t care who your daddy is.” Rhye can feel a headache gathering behind her eyes. Time to get the hell out of here and go the fuck home. Her mattress is calling. “C’m on Rack, let’s go. Compress your ass. My headspace isn’t what you’d call flying first class, but it’s better than the company in here.”

There’s a sound like bacon hitting a skillet, loud enough that the kid’s bitching is blessedly drowned out. A glowing door pops up at the end of the row of cells. She’s gotta hand it to Rack, he’s nothing short of a goddamned wizard when he’s free inside a program. Rhye grabs his hand and gleefully sets off for the exit, feeling more cheerful than she has all day. A little nervous about letting Rack piggyback inside her melon, maybe — there’s shit in there she doesn’t want anyone poking at, even her partner — but mostly too relieved at having him back to care. He lets her pull him along. Doesn’t say a word, just smiles and follows, tie flapping like a pirate’s banner in the weird wind pushing from the entryway.

The light from the door is the cold, flickering white of a fluorescent bulb burning in an abandoned department store. They stand there staring into the static for what seems like ages. She doesn’t let go of his hand. He doesn’t let go of hers. Rhye wonders if it’ll hurt, or feel weird, or if she’ll be the same once it’s done with. She sucks in a breath. Now or never, woman. Leave it to Rack to wait for a second fucking invitation.

“Well?” she says. “You waiting for me to buy you a ring or what?”

And that’s when she finally catches the look in his eyes, the sadness of the little smile quirking the corner of his mouth like a fishhook. She knows that fucking expression. She *hates* that fucking expression. He’s not telling her something, and that something is going to sting.

“Rack?” she says.

“Rhye. It doesn’t work that easily. I can’t just compress myself without a console and a body to work the console. That’s beyond my capabilities.”

For once, Rhye is at a total loss for words. She gapes at him, mouth hanging open like a second useless asshole. It takes a full minute for her to push anything out. “Bullshit,” she manages. “Stop fucking around. You’re some sort of goddamned superhero in here. You unlock things, you make doors, you *designed* this motherfucker. There’s nothing you can’t do.” Panic creeping up her spine with tiny naked rat feet. Can’t shoot her way out of this one. “There’s gotta be something. A trick, or a program, or —”

His voice is infuriatingly gentle. “Without a body? Compression is tricky. If I did it wrong, even assuming I could from inside a system like this, one of us could get hurt. You could be erased. That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll come back, then. I’ll get you a new body and come back.” He’s slowly shaking his head even as she says it and Rhye’s pissed, at circumstance and the mobsters and Rack and everything that hops, crawls, or breathes on this godforsaken planet. “I’m not leaving you here, you colossal fuckhead. Do you KNOW what I’ve gone through to fetch you out of this box?”

“Once they’ve pulled the kid, do you really think they’re going to let you back in for me? They’ll erase everything on here just to teach their rivals a lesson.” He sighs. “Look. There’s a locker in Brickton. The combi —”

“*Fuck* your money, Rack. And fuck you, too. Did you not hear me the first time?” *Stop looking at me that way stop looking at me that way stop looking at me that way.* Her heart is clawing its way through her sternum like a bum plowing through a back alley trash bin. She’s got him by the tie, hands shaking, throat aching. “Take the risk,” she says.

“Do it.” And then: “*Please.*”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.”

They’re nose to nose and forehead to forehead and now it’s Rhye who’s shaking her head. She can see a way out and she knows he won’t agree to it, but fuck him and fuck a world without him, that’s not a decision he gets to make. “No,” she says. “No. You ever hear anything about those old ships people used to sail? Protocol for wrecks and all that shit?”

His brow furrows into confused little wrinkles. She’ll miss that. She’ll miss a lot of things about him. “What does . . .”

“I’m tying your ass to the mast. You’ve got no say in this, Rack. When you get done with my body, put it through a woodchipper or something, all right?”

Rhye’s push carries him over the threshold and into the white before the stubborn asshole has a chance to argue. His tie stays wrapped around her fingers, fluttering the goodbye she couldn’t bring herself to say.

• • • •

Unlike his partner, he’s not prone to bouts of rage and profanity. She explodes all over the place at intervals you can almost set clock hands to, like a geyser or a volcano or some other natural phenomenon. Beautiful to see, if potentially life-threatening to anybody within close range. Rack, though? Rack’s different. If Rhye is Old Faithful, Rack is a glacier: cool-headed, steady, and inevitable. Excesses of emotion do not become him.

When he comes to inside her body, the first word that bursts in his head, like a soap bubble giving up the ghost, is **SHIT**. A great big neon **SHIT**, all four letters glowing the lurid red of a 3 a.m. traffic light on a stretch of empty road.

The dimly lit warehouse is full of equally dim goons. Six of them are alive. There were seven when he plugged in, but that dark smear on the concrete floor suggests Rhye’s been engaged in some basic subtraction since then. All of them remain armed and extremely twitchy. A roomful of semiautomatic-carrying cats in a rocking chair factory, ready to pop off if so much as a moth flutters near one of the grimy windows. Rack knows how trigger-happy they can be; the slumped cicada’s shell of his body in the corner is testimony enough, if any were needed. The big boss’s foot is tapping out a patent-leather Morse code that, roughly translated, probably comes to something very impatient and vaguely threatening.

The Kid’s still stretched out on his hospital gurney, dead to the world. The mess of wires and cords connecting him to the black box on the desk makes Rack think of a kitten hopelessly entangled in a ball of yarn. A scruffy, obnoxious kitten, in desperate and immediate need of drowning. Rack would be happy to oblige — there’s an unfamiliar emotion that came along with the big neon **SHIT**; he’s reasonably sure it’s cold anger building towards fury — but all eyes are on him.

“Done?” Big Boss sounds like a side of beef being dragged down backcountry gravel. Rhye’s eyepatch splits him into dual hemispheres, the seen and the unseen. Disorienting enough suddenly being in a new body — *her* body, no less, with a mysteriously bloody nose — without adding visual impairment to the mix.

“Yeah,” Rack says, only it comes out in Rhye’s voice, and that (as she would say) is a whole dump truck of *what the fucking fuck* landing on his senses. “All yours, Chief. You gonna send your tech in to collect Junior’s code so I can get the hec — fuck out of here already?”

A sharp, all too familiar *click* from the dark side of the mook. Ten to one it’s not a wedding band he’s holding in his unseen hand. “You will be doing this as well. Seeing as how you felt the need to — what are the words? — earlier retirement my computer-man.” He nudges the shiny toe of one shoe at the stain on the concrete.

Oh, Rhye. How would you have gotten out of this one? You couldn’t access a code for brine in the middle of the ocean. He’s neck-deep in a slurry of anger, frustration, fear, and love. So much for his much-lauded control. The valve is broken, the water rising.

“Sure,” he says, after another long, soupy moment.

Because Rack is not entirely human, he can see all the possible ways this lock might turn. A shootout. A hostage situation. Piles of dead mobsters, lakes of blood, the hard-bitten damsel in the box safe and saved and — could it be? — possibly even grateful. Reach out and twist the meaty wrist. Hear that satisfying snap of bone like a cheap plastic chair leg bending the wrong way, a metallic clatter as gun and floor slug it out. Be an action hero. Take the shot. Use her body like the weapon it is.

Rack’s not big on weapons or violence. Before today, he’d never fired a pistol or snapped a man’s wrist. Rhye, as she would quickly tell you, is no fuckin’ damsel, nor is she any person’s gun but her own. Trying to use her would inevitably blow up in their faces like a cartoon birthday cake studded with sticks of dynamite. Instead — gods of gratuitous violence and swaggering machismo be good — Rack spins the tires of his mind until they throw twin rooster-tails of oily muck. Trigger-bitten fingers tango across the keyboard, coding a different future. He may not be any good at murdering mobsters, but he’s a goddamned pro at killing time.

I hope I’m doing the right thing.

The problem with making *any* move, of course, is that you never know what the outcome will be until the chips have fallen, even if you’ve got a brain manufactured in a factory crèche and a childhood’s worth of experience cheating card sharks out of their greasy retirement funds. A guess, however educated, is still a guess. A white-collar criminal adjusts his tie in the heart of the City (because it’s goddamned hot and the AC’s gone out and there’s nothing to drink but rye whiskey and if his partner sheds one more article of clothing he’s going to go outside and club his crotch to death with a loose brick) and a tenement flat 300 miles away collapses into rubble and rebar and a bloody jigsaw of limbs. At the long, dark end of things, hoping for the best is all you’ve got. Rack breathes out letters and numerals and hope through their fingertips, *clickity-clickity-clack*. The screen fills up with green and black.

The Kid twitches on his slab.

He’s Frankenstein. He’s a zombie pumped full of chemicals. He’s a greasy-haired son of a bitch with a face no factory in its right mind would take credit for, sitting upright on his bed at the cost of the only person Rack’s ever loved. Every head in the joint swivels to watch him as he blinks and gapes. Is it man, machine, or goldfish? Rack feels something heave in the direction of his (*her*) stomach, like a wet dog giving itself a shake. *Keep it together, boy-o. For her. For both of you.*

Big Boss, like everybody else, seems too stunned by the sight to even give the Kid a hand. He stares at his beloved progeny as if the boy’s just sprouted a pair of assholes where his ears should be.

“Son,” he says. A slow, joyous smile creeps up the coffin length of his face, hands-down one of the most disturbing things Rack’s ever seen. “Son! How are you feeling, my darling boy?”

No response from the Kid. His legs are dangling over the side of the gurney now. The pearl-handled grips of the big expensive pistols strapped to his sides play peek-a-boo beneath the fabric of his coat, dancing in and out of Rack’s limited line of sight. Show-off guns, Rhye had scoffed when she first saw them. Kiddo probably had a prick like a bedbug and the aim of one of those drunken seven-year-olds that used to hang out behind the apartment dumpsters.

Even with Rhye’s less-than-charitable assessment of the punk’s skills ringing in his memory, there’s something about the pistols that keeps dragging Rack’s eye back. He watches them and he watches them good, holding his breath.

Trailing wires, head down, the Kid lurches to his feet. His daddy’s goon squad unfreezes and rushes to catch him before his delicate ass can hit the floor and catch a bruise. He shrugs off their hands; the gentleman will be seeing himself out, thank you. With precarious, rubbery grace — the kind baby animals and drunks possess in spades, the kind no sober adult has ever been able to accurately mimic — he pulls himself upright, takes a step forward, and lifts his head to get a better look at his surroundings. He scans the room, expression becoming more and more confused. Takes it all in — mobsters, brick walls, bare bulbs, bloodstains — and finally reaches Rack, at which point his brow ceases to furrow and begins sinking a mine shaft to his frontal lobe.

“Wait,” he says. “What the fucking fuck? Rack? What in the fucking piss just happ — Oh.” A light bulb flickers behind his eyes. Scratch that; it’s more like someone throwing the breaker on an entire row of houses. *“OH.”* He pats his sides like a man looking for his keys. He finds the twin lumps nestled beneath his armpits. He takes a peek under the coat — just to make sure they’re not vibrators or candy bars or bibles — and then he looks back up at Rack, grinning a slow, impossibly wide cartoon shark’s grin.

“You son of a motherfucker,” he says, admiringly.

Rack knows that grin. Even on someone else’s face, he knows it. His heart bucks around so wildly he’s afraid he might black out. And then he’s suddenly locked in a kiss — she’s fast, never mind the unfamiliar body — and the weirdness of the situation isn’t even registering for either of them, it’s all adrenaline and relief and a sort of drunken, invincible glee. There’s greasy hair in his good eye and stubble against his lips. She tastes like a chain-smoking asshole that just underwent a malt liquor enema. Fucking perfection.

And now she’s pulling away, yanking those pearly white grips out of their sockets like a dentist riding a meth binge, and the Ganymede crew never even knows what’s hit it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brooke Bolander writes weird things of indeterminate genre, most of them leaning rather heavily towards fantasy or general all-around weirdness. She attended the University of Leicester 2004-2007 studying History and Archaeology and is an alum of the 2011 Clarion Writers' Workshop at UCSD. Her stories have been featured in *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare*, *Uncanny*, and various other fine purveyors of the fantastic. She has been a finalist for the Nebula, the Hugo, the Locus, and the Theodore Sturgeon awards, much to her unending bafflement.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- A Bird, a Song, a Revolution
- And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead (Hugo, Nebula, Sturgeon, and Locus award finalist)
- The Legend of RoboNinja
- Sun Dogs
- Her Words Like Hunting Vixens Spring



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE MASTER CONJURER

Charlie Jane Anders

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Peter did a magic spell, and it worked fine. With no unintended consequences, and no weird side effects.

Two days later, he was on the front page of the local newspaper: “The Miracle Conjuror.” Some blogs picked it up, and soon enough he was getting visits from CNN and MSNBC, and his local NPR station kept wanting to put him on. News crews were standing and talking in front of his house.

By the third day, Peter saw reporters looking through the dumpster in the back of his L-shaped apartment building, which looked like a cheap motel but was actually kind of expensive. He couldn’t walk his Schnauzer-Pit Bull mix, Dobbs, without people—either reporters or just random strangers—coming up and asking him what his secret was. When he went to the office, where he oversaw pilot projects for water desalination, his coworkers kept snooping over the top of his cubicle wall and trying to see his computer screen as he was typing, like they were going to catch him logging in to some secret bulletin board for superwizards.

Peter had a hard time concentrating on work when the TV set in the break room was tuned to CNN, and they were showing his bedroom window, and a million people were staring at the pile of unfolded laundry on his bed and the curtains that Dobbs had recently half-destroyed. *Could the Clean Spell revolutionize spellcasting?* a voice asked. *Was there a secret, and could everyone else learn it?* CNN brought on an Enchantress named Monica, who wore a red power blazer. She frequently appeared on talk shows whenever there was a magical murder trial or something.

By day four, Peter’s building was surrounded, and his phone at work pretty much never stopped ringing. People followed him wherever he went. It was only then that it occurred to Peter: Maybe *this* was the unintended consequence of his spell.

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Peter had never liked looking at pictures of himself, because photos always made him look like a deformed clone of Ben Affleck. His chin was just a little too jutting and bifurcated, his brow a little too much like the bumper of a late-model Toyota Camry. His mousy hair was unevenly receding, his nose a little too knifey. Seeing the least attractive pictures of himself on every newspaper, website, and TV show was starting to make Peter break out in hives.

“I’m not talking to you,” Peter said to his former best friend Derek, the tenth time Derek called him. “You are completely dead to me.”

“Hey, don’t say that, you’re scaring me,” Derek said. “If the Master Conjuror says I’m dead, then I’m worried I’m just not going to wake up tomorrow or something.”

“You were the only one I told about doing the spell,” Peter said. “And now, this.”

Peter was sitting in his car talking on his phone, parked two blocks away from his apartment building because he was scared to go home. Dobbs was probably starting to bounce off the walls. At least the dog seemed a lot happier lately.

“I only told like a couple of people,” Derek said. “And it turned out one of them was best friends with a newspaper reporter. It was an amusing anecdote. Anyway, you know it’ll blow over in a week or two. You’re just like this week’s meme or something.”

“I hope you’re right,” Peter said.

“And you should milk it, while you got it,” Derek said. “Like, you know, you’re *famous for doing something perfectly*. Something that requires immense concentration and sensory awareness and a lot of heart. Basically, they’re as good as announcing to the entire world that you’re an excellent lover. This is probably the closest you will ever come in your entire life to being a chick magnet.”

“Please stop talking now.” Peter was practically banging his head against the steering wheel of his Dodge Neon. “Just, please, stop.”

The interior of his car always smelled like dog; not like Dobbs—just, like: generic dog. Like a big rangy golden retriever smell. Even if Dobbs hadn’t been in his car for days.

“Okay, okay. Just an idea, man. So are we good?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Peter hung up and steeled himself to go home and walk the dog, while people asked him his secret over and over. Nobody would ever believe Peter when he said there was no secret—he’d just lucked out, or something. Why couldn’t Peter have gotten an intimidating dog that he could sic on people, like a Doberman or a purebred Pit Bull? If he unleashed Dobbs, someone might end up with a tiny drool stain on one shoe.

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But Peter couldn’t stop thinking about what Derek had said. He hadn’t been on a date, a proper date, for years. His last first date had been Marga, five years ago. Peter wasn’t just out of practice dating, or asking people out—he was out of practice at *wanting* to. He hadn’t even let himself have a crush on anybody in forever.

He started looking at the women around him as if he could actually be something to them. He didn’t perv anybody, or stare at anyone—after all, everybody was still staring at him, all the time, and his instinct in that situation was to look away, or just hide. But it was hard to go from never noticing women—except in a super-business-like way—to checking them out, and he might have overcompensated. Or maybe he overcompensated for his overcompensation. It was tricky.

Nobody at work was Peter’s type, and anyway they wouldn’t stop asking him over and over if he would do a spell for them. He had already made up his mind that he would never do a spell ever again.

He couldn’t be attracted to any of the women who kept coming up to him when he was trying to eat dinner at the Shabu Palace, either the reporters or the professional witches or the random looky-loos. They were all a little too sharky for him, the way they circled and then homed in, and they mostly looked as though they used insane amounts of product in their hair, so if they ever actually rested their heads on his shoulder, there would be a “crunch” sound.

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The weirdest part wasn’t the stalkers or the peepers or the people asking him to do spells for them. The weirdest part was: After about a week, Peter started noticing that everybody had their own “this one time” story they wanted to tell him. Things had slacked off just enough that Peter wasn’t quite under siege any more, and strangers were having conversations with him on the street instead of just rushing up and blurting questions. And every conversation included a “this one time” story. They were usually really sad, like confessions that people had never told anyone, that—for some reason—they felt safe telling Peter.

Like, one woman with curly red hair and a round white face and a marigold sweater was telling Peter at the supermarket, by the breakfast cereals: “I never tried to do any magic myself. Too risky, you don’t really know. Right? Except this one time, I got wasted and tried to do a spell to make my dad give back the money he stole from my mom. It wasn’t even my problem, but I was worried about Mom, she had a lot of medical expenses with the emphysema. And Dad was just going to waste it on his new girlfriend (she had expensive tastes). So I just wanted him to give back the money he took from my mom’s secret hiding place.”

Peter knew this was the part where he was supposed to ask what terrible fallout the woman’s spell had had.

“Oh,” she said. “My dad went blind. He gave Mom her money back, and as soon as it changed hands, there went his eyesight. I’ve never told anybody this before.” She smiled, nervously, like Peter was going to tell on her. Even though he didn’t even know her name.

“You couldn’t know,” Peter said, like he always said to people after he heard their stories. “You had no way of knowing that would happen. You were trying to do the right thing.”

Peter had done a few spells before he cast the world-famous Clean Casting, which by now had been verified by every professional sorcerer who had a regular television gig. (There had been a lot of incense burning around Peter’s apartment building for a while there, which had helped banish the stench of his neighbor Dorothy’s homebrew experiments.) Peter had taken a spell-casting class at the local community college a few years before, with Marga, and they had done a few really tiny spells, lighting candles from a distance or turning a pinch of sugar into salt. They got used to weird smells or small dead creatures popping up an hour or a day later.

If the spell was small enough, the unintended downside was part of the fun—an amusing little surprise. *Oh, look. A goldfish in the mailbox, still flapping about. Get a bowl of water, quick!*

By now, the actual doing of the spell—the Clean Casting—felt like a weird dream that Peter had concocted after too many drinks. The more people made a fuss about it, the

more he felt like he'd made the whole thing up. But he could still picture it. He'd gotten one of the stone spellcasting bowls they sold on late-night cable TV, and little baggies of all the ingredients, with rejected prog rock band names like Prudenceroor or Womanheart, and sprinkled pinches of them in, while chanting the nonsense syllables and thinking of his desired aim. The spellbook, with its overly broad categories of enchantments that you could slot your specifics into like *Mad Libs*, was propped open with a package of spaghetti. All of it, he'd done correctly more or less. Not perfect, but right. He'd done it in his oversized pantry, surrounded by mostly empty jars of stale oats and revolting cans of peaches, with Dobbs goggle-eyed and drooling, the only witness.

....

The time came when Peter could leave the house again without people shoving things in his face. He still had people coming up to him in the bookstore to ask him if he was that guy, and his coworkers would never stop making weird remarks about it. And he made a point of not googling himself. Or checking his personal email, or going on Facebook.

But just when Peter thought maybe his life was returning to semi-normal, some guy would see him and come running across the street—through traffic—to belt out something about his baby, his baby, Peter had to help, the man needed a spell and the consequences would probably be unbearable if anybody but Peter attempted it. Peter would have to shrug off the crying, red-faced man, and keep going to the pet food store or supermarket.

There was a girl working at the pet food store who apparently knew who Peter was, and didn't seem to care. She had curly brown hair and really strong lines from the bridge of her nose down around her eyes, which made her look sort of intense and focused. She had a really pointy chin and a pretty nose, and seemed like the kind of person who laughed a lot. Even when she looked serious, which she mostly did. She always smiled at Peter when she rang up the special food that Dobbs needed for his pancreas, but not in a starey way.

Finally, one day, a few weeks after all this started, Peter asked her why she hadn't ever said anything about his claim to fame. She rolled her eyes. "I dunno, I figured you were sick of hearing about it. Plus, who cares. It's not like you won the lottery or anything, right?"

Peter immediately asked her if she wanted to grab some dinner sometime. She was like, "Sure. As long as it's not medicinal dog food." Her name turned out to be Rebecca. Actually, they went to the shabu place that was Peter's favorite restaurant in town. He always felt guilty for eating there alone, which he did often, because it was kind of an interactive experience, where you grilled your own meat and/or made your fancy stew, and you really needed someone else there to join in. The staff wore crisp white uniforms to underscore that they did no actual food preparation themselves. There were tables, but almost everybody sat around a big U-shaped bar in the center, which had little grills embedded in it. The sound system blasted a mixture of Foreigner, 38 Special, Yes, and some J-Pop from a CD-changer.

Peter was nervous about being seen out on a date, and having people act weird about it during or afterward. (*Did you cast a "babe magnet" spell? Ha-ha-ha.*) But the Shabu Palace was pretty empty, and a few people stared a little bit but it was no big deal. Peter found the meat vapors comforting, like carnal incense.

"I hate this town," Rebecca said. "It's just big enough to have restaurants like this, but no actual culture. We don't even have a roller derby team any more. No offense, but that's one reason why you're such a big deal. We finally have a local celebrity again, to replace that sitcom actor who was from here who died." Peter wasn't offended by that at all; it explained a lot.

Rebecca was saving up money from her pet store gig to go to L.A., where she wanted to go to barista school. Peter didn't know that was a thing you went to school for, but apparently it was a big deal, like knowing the science of grinding the beans just right and making just the right amount of ristretto and steaming the milk to the edge of burning. And of course latte art and stuff. Rebecca had tried to be a psychologist and a social worker and a vet, but none of those career paths had worked out. But she was excited about the barista thing because it was hip and artistic, and you could write your own ticket. Even start your own fancy café somewhere.

"It's cool that you're so ambitious," Peter said. "I think L.A. would drive me insane."
"I am guessing L.A. would be okay as long as you don't want to be a movie star or whatever," Rebecca said. "I mean, the barista school is probably hella cutthroat. But I can handle that."

Peter hadn't really thought of this as a small town—it seemed pretty big to him. There was a freeway, and the downtown with the opera house, and the art museum, and the world headquarters of a major insurance company. And there was a small zoo during the spring and summer, with animals that wintered in Florida somewhere.

"People hate you, you know," Rebecca told Peter halfway through dinner. "You're super threatening, because you're the proof that there's something wrong with them. If they'd only been good people, they would have gotten away clean, too. Plus, it offends our sense of order. Power should have terrible consequences, or life would be too easy. We want people to suffer for anything good they ever have. People are governed by envy, and a sense of karmic brutality."

"That's a very bleak view of human nature," Peter said. But he found it kind of a turn-on. Misanthropy was just undeniably sexy, the way smoking used to be before you had to do it out in the cold.

It turned out Rebecca had never even tried to do magic herself. "I never wanted to risk it," Rebecca said. "I'm the least lucky person, of anyone I know. I can only imagine how badly I would be screwed if I tried to bribe the universe to give me a shortcut."

By now, Peter was really hoping that Rebecca would go home with him. He could almost imagine how cool it would be to have her naked and snarky in his big four-poster bed. Her body heaving to and fro. The way her hair would smell as he buried his face in it. He almost started getting hard under the counter of the Shabu Palace just thinking about it. Bryan Adams was singing about Heaven on the stereo. Everything was perfect.

"So," Rebecca said, leaning forward in a way that could have been flirtatious or conspiratorial. "I gotta ask. What was the spell that you did? The famous one?"
"Oh man." Peter almost dropped his meat piece. "You don't want to know. It's really dumb. Like really, really dumb."

"No, come on," Rebecca said. "I want to know. I'm curious. I won't judge. I promise."
"I . . . I'd rather not say." Peter realized he'd been about to lift this piece of meat off the grill for a while, and now it was basically a big carcinogenic cinder. He put it in his mouth anyway. "It's really kind of embarrassing. I don't even know if it was ethical."
"Now I really want to know," Rebecca said.

Peter imagined telling Rebecca what he'd done, and tried to picture the look on her face. Would she laugh, or throw sake at him and tell him he was a bad person? Immature? He couldn't even go there. Even Bryan Adams suddenly sounded kind of sad, and maybe a little disappointed in Peter.

"I'm sorry," Peter said. "I think this was maybe a mistake." He paid for both of them and got the hell out of there.
By the time Peter got home, Dobbs was freaking out because he really needed to go out and do his business. Dobbs ran around a tree three times before peeing on it, like he was worried the tree was going to move out of the way just as Dobbs was letting go. Dobbs looked up at Peter with big round eyes, permanently alarmed.

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Of course, Derek called Peter the next morning and wanted to know how the date went. They ended up going for breakfast at the retro-1970s pancake place downtown, and Peter grudgingly told Derek the whole deal.

"So what you're saying," said Derek, "is that you plied her with meat and soft rock, and you had her basically all ready to shabu your shabu. And then she asked a perfectly reasonable question, and you got all weird and bailed on her. Is that a fair summary?"
"Um," Peter said. "It's not an *unfair* summary."

"Okay," Derek said. "I think there's a way this can still work out. Now she thinks you're complicated and damaged. And that's perfect. Ladies love men with a few psychic dents and scrapes. It makes you mysterious, and a little intense."
"You're the only one I've told about that spell," Peter said. "You didn't tell anyone what the spell actually was, right?"
"That part, I haven't told anyone," Derek said. "I only mentioned the part about how you had no complications."

"Okay, cool," said Peter. "I don't want people to go nuts on me. Even more than they already have."
"Listen," Derek said. "I'm kind of worried about you. I think this spell you did is just a symptom. I feel like you've been kind of messed up ever since Marga . . ." Derek trailed off, because Peter was scowling at him. "I just think you shouldn't be alone so much. I feel like a new relationship, or a fling—either way—would be good for you."
Derek and Peter had been friends since college, where they'd bonded over hating their History 101 professor, who had a cult following among almost all the other students. Literally a cult—there was a human sacrifice at one of the professor's after-exam parties, and it'd turned ugly, as human sacrifice so often does. Peter and Derek weren't so close lately, because Derek had gone into real estate and never had time for Peter; plus until pretty recently Peter had just been hanging out with Marga's friends all the time. Like Marga herself, her friends were all erudite and artsy, with clever tattoos.

"You don't have to worry about me," Peter said. "I've got Dobbs. And all I really wanted was to be left alone."

“We’re not back to that again, are we?” Derek threw his arms up in a pose of martyrdom.
“It’s okay,” Peter said. “The media frenzy seems to have died down, and some other asshole is getting his fifteen minutes now.”

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Peter almost called Rebecca a couple times. He imagined telling her the truth about his spell, and it made him cringe from the balls of his feet to the back of his neck. He always put the phone away, because he didn’t think he could work the “damaged and complicated” angle without telling the whole story. He went to sleep and dreamed of sitting naked with Rebecca in bed, explaining everything. He woke up with Dobbs sitting on his chest, legs tucked under his fat little body, saucer eyes staring at him. Dobbs licked Peter’s chin in slow flicks of his brash tongue. Lick. Lick. Lick.

When Peter went to work, his face was on the television in the break room again. Some expert had concocted a theory: Maybe Peter was the reincarnation of an ancient wizard, or maybe he was some kind of spiritually pure mystic or something. Obviously, if Peter really did know the secret of doing magic without any strings attached, he would be the world’s richest and most powerful man. So he either really didn’t have a secret method, or he was some kind of saint.

This day, in particular, Peter had a progress meeting with some of the other team leaders, and he was trying to explain why the desalination pilot projects he was funding were slow going. It’s easy to add salt to water, but taking it away again is a huge challenge—you have to strip the sodium and chloride ions out of the water somehow, which involves a huge unfeasible energy cost. Peter got halfway through his presentation, when Amanda, who was involved in microfinance in Africa, asked, “So why don’t you just use magic?”

“Um, sorry?” Peter said. He had clicked through to his next slide and had to click back, or risk losing his thread.

“Why not just use magic to remove the salt from the water?” Amanda said. “That gets around the high energy cost, and in fact there might be zero energy cost. Potable water for everybody. Water wars averted. Everybody happy.”

“I don’t really think that’s an option,” Peter said.

“Why not?” Amanda said. Everybody else was nodding. Peter remembered seeing Amanda on television, talking about him a few days earlier. She was the one who’d explained carefully that Peter had a twelve-year-old Dodge Neon and rented a one-bedroom apartment in a crumbling development near the freeway. If he was a master sorcerer, Amanda had told the ladies on *The View*, Peter was doing a pretty good job of hiding it.

Now Amanda was saying, in the same patient, no-nonsense tone: “Isn’t it irresponsible not to explore all of the options? I mean, let’s say that you really can do magic without some backlash, and you’re the one person on Earth who can. What’s the point spending millions to fund research into industrial desalination when you could just snap your fingers and turn a tanker of salt water into spring water?” This particular day, Amanda was wearing a blue paisley scarf and a gray jacket, along with really high-end blue jeans.

Peter stared at Amanda—whom he’d always admired for helping the poor women in Africa get microloans, and who he never thought would stab him in the back like this—and tried to think of a response. At last, he stammered: “Magic is not a scalable solution.”

Peter fled the meeting soon afterward. He decided to take the rest of the day off work, since he was either fatally irresponsible or secretly the reincarnation of Merlin. He passed Amanda in the hallway on his way to the elevator, and she tried to apologize for putting him on the spot like that, but he just mumbled something and kept walking.

Dobbs wagged his tail as the leash went on, and then tried to play with the leash with one of his front paws, like it was a dangling toy. At last, Dobbs understood that the leash meant going outside and relieving himself, and he trotted.

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Peter went to bed early, with Dobbs curled up on top of his head like a really leaky hat. He dreamed about Rebecca again, and then his phone woke him up, and it was Rebecca calling him. “Whu,” he said.

“Did I wake you?” she said.

“Yes,” Peter scraped Dobbs off his forehead and got his wits together. His bed smelled foggy. “But it’s okay. I was just waking up anyway. And listen, I’ve been meaning to call you. Because I need to explain, and I’m sorry I was such an idiot when we . . .”

“No time,” Rebecca said. “I called to warn you. There’s been an incident, and they’re probably coming to your house again soon.” She promised to explain everything soon, but meanwhile Peter should get the heck out of there before the TV news crews came back. Because this time, they would be out for blood. Rebecca said she would meet Peter at the big old greasy spoon by the railroad tracks, the one that looked like just another railroad silo unless you noticed the neon sign in the window.

Peter put on jeans and a T-shirt, grabbed Dobbs and got in his Neon just as the first people were getting out of their TV vans. He backed down the driveway so fast he nearly hit one of them and then sped off before they could follow. Just to make sure, he got on and off the freeway three times at different exits.

Rebecca was sitting at the booth in the back of the Traxx Diner, eating silver dollar pancakes and chicken fried steak. The formica table had exactly the same amount of stickiness as Rebecca’s plate. Peter wound up ordering the chicken-fried steak too, because he was suddenly really hungry and it occurred to him he might have skipped dinner.

As soon as Peter had coffee, Rebecca shoved a tablet computer at him, with a newspaper article: “TWELVE DEAD, FIVE CHILDREN UNACCOUNTED FOR IN SCHOOL DISASTER.” One of the headlines further down the page was for a sidebar: “Peter Salmon: Made People Think They Could Get Off Scot Free?” And there was a picture of Peter, giving a thumbs up to a group of people—taken from his site visit to a water purification project in Tulsa two years earlier.

Peter spilled coffee on his pants. The waitress came and poured some more in his cup almost immediately.

“Don’t worry,” Rebecca said. “Ulsa won’t tell anybody you’re here. She’s a friend. Plus she’s really nearsighted so she probably hasn’t gotten a good look at your face.”

“Okay,” Peter said. He was still trying to make sense of this article. Basically, there was a middle school in New Jersey that was coming in at the bottom of the rankings in the standardized tests, and state law would have called for the school to be closed by the end of the year, which, in turn, would wreck property values. So the teachers and some of the parents got together to do a spell to try and raise the children’s test results by twenty percent, across the board. And it had gone very wrong. Like “everyone’s heads had turned to giant crayfish heads” wrong. There were some very gruesome pictures of adults lying around the playground, their beady eyes staring upward. Meanwhile, some of the children had gone missing.

“There’s no way anybody could say this is my fault,” Peter stammered, trying not to look at the corpses with stuff leaking out of their necks, just as Ulsa brought a plate of very crispy chicken-fried steak with some very runny eggs. “I told everybody that I didn’t have any secret. They just wouldn’t listen.”

“Yeah, I know,” Rebecca said. “Like I said, people hate you. This is why I quit my last five jobs, including that pet store gig, which I just bagged on the other day. Everybody feels entitled. I’ve never had a boss who didn’t feel like they ought to own me. People hate realizing that the world won’t just shower them with candy.”

Peter looked at the crayfish heads, then at his chicken-fried steak. In the car outside, through the one window, he could see Dobbs bouncing up and down. Like Dobbs already knew he was getting that steak. Then what Rebecca had said sunk in.

“You quit the pet store job?” Peter said, looking up at her.

“Yeah. They basically wanted me to do unpaid overtime, and they were trying to start a grooming business in the back, and wanted me to help with that as well. I do not groom.”

Peter couldn’t imagine just quitting a job, just like that. He felt his crush on Rebecca splintering a little bit. Like he’d put her on a pedestal too fast. “So what are you going to do now?” he said. “Are you going to go to L.A. and go to barista school?”

“Maybe. The next enrollment isn’t for a few months. I guess I’ll see how it goes.”

Peter made himself eat a little because he was starting to have a full-scale panic attack. He gestured at the tablet without looking at it. “This is going to keep happening. And they’re going to keep trying to make it about me.”

The radio in the diner quit playing some country song about a cheating man, and a news report about the New Jersey tragedy came on. Congress was talking about regulating magic, and there were questions about whether the makers of the spellbook the teachers had used could have some liability, even though it had five pages of disclaimers in tiny print. And there was a mention in passing of the notion that the teachers might have been influenced by the famous Clean Casting.

“What if there really was some secret and you had it?” Rebecca said. “If I were you, I’d be doing more spells and seeing if I could figure out what I did right. You could have anything you wanted. You could raise the dead and feed the hungry.”

“I would never get away with it. I was really selfish and stupid that one time, and I came away with a super-strong feeling that I’d better never try my luck again.”

And then Peter decided to go ahead and tell her about the spell:

“Here’s what happened. I was engaged to this girl named Marga. She was amazing and artistic and creative, and she was always doing things like repainting her apartment with murals, or throwing parties where everybody pretended to be a famous assassin. And she had this cat that was always sickly. Constant vet visits and late-night emergencies.

She and I moved in together. And then a few months before the wedding, she met this guy named Breck who was a therapeutic flautist, and she fell in love with him. She wound up going with him to Guatemala to provide music therapy to the victims of the big mudslide there. Leaving me heartbroken, with a sick cat. The cat just got more and more miserable and ill, pining for Marga. We were both inconsolable.”

“I think maybe I can see where this is going,” Rebecca said, picking at her last pancake.
“Dobbs is way happier as a dog, he gets to go out and run around,” Peter said. “His pancreas seems way better, too.”
“So you turned your ex-girlfriend’s cat into a dog. As, like, revenge?”

“It wasn’t revenge, I swear. She doesn’t even know, anyway. I just . . . Dobbs was really unhappy, and so was I. And this seemed like it was a fresh start for both of us. But part of me felt like maybe I was doing it to get back at Marga, or like I was transforming Dobbs without his consent. And I welcomed the idea of being punished for it. So when the punishment didn’t come, it just made me feel more guilty. I started to hate myself. And maybe that’s why. The more I didn’t get punished, the worse I felt.”
“Huh.” She seemed to be chewing it over for a moment. “I guess that’s not the weirdest thing I’ve heard of people doing to their pets. I mean, at the store, there were people who shaved their pets’ asses. Who does that? And your ex is the one who left her cat behind when she bailed, right? You could have taken him to the ASPCA, and they’d have put him to sleep.”

And just like that, Peter had a crush on her again. Maybe even something stronger than a crush, like his kidneys were pinwheeling and the blood was leaving his head and extremities. He wanted to jump up and hug her and make a loud train-whistle sound. He hadn’t realized how guilty he’d been feeling about Dobbs, until he told someone and they didn’t instantly hate him.
“Do you want to go to L.A.?” Peter said.
“What, now?”
“Yeah. Now. I mean, as soon as we finish breakfast. You can try and go to that barista school, and I can get a job there. I know a guy who works in solar power financing. I’d barely even be famous by L.A. standards.”

For a second, Peter felt like he was totally free. He could leave town, with the girl and the dog and whatever else he had in his car, and never look back. He could be like Marga, except that he wouldn’t abandon Dobbs.
But Rebecca shook her head. Curls splashing. “Sorry. I don’t think I could ever be with someone who thinks it’s a good idea to run away from his problems.”
“What?” And then Peter said the exact wrong thing, before he could stop himself: “But you just told me that you quit your last five jobs.”
“Yes, and that’s called having a spine. Quitting a job isn’t the same thing as running away.”
She got up, and Peter got up too. He was getting a doggie bag for the steak, and he felt as though she was cutting him loose with a pack of wolves on his tail. And then she reached out and unsmudged the corner of his mouth with her thumb, and said: “Listen. I’m going to tell you the secret to getting what you want out of life. Are you ready? *Never take any shit from anyone.*”

“That’s the secret? Of happiness?”
“I don’t know about happiness. I told you, I’m unlucky.”
She walked back toward her car, then stopped to look at Dobbs, who was bouncing up and down inside Peter’s car, especially now that he could tell Peter was coming back. Dobbs’ eyes were almost perfect spheres, like a Pekingese, and his tongue was sticking out of the side of his mouth, spraying bits of drool. Rebecca leaned over and stuck her hand through the window Peter had left rolled down a bit, and Dobbs licked her. She nodded at Peter, like confirming that yes, the dog was really okay, then went and got in her own car, which was even older and junkier than his.

He watched her drive away. Her radio was playing classic rock. He wasn’t sure how you gave chicken-fried steak to a dog, but he figured he should fork it over while it was hot. Wouldn’t you know it, as soon as he tipped it out of the bag onto the passenger seat and Dobbs started chewing on it, the steak suddenly smelled incredibly good and Peter felt a fierce hunger deep in his core. For a second, part of Peter wanted to snatch the food out of his dog’s mouth.
He thought about what Rebecca had said: *Don’t take any shit from anyone*. He’d heard people say stuff like that before, but it still felt like a major life philosophy. Like words to live by. He found his phone, which had like twenty messages on it, which he ignored and called Derek.
“Hey, can you do me a favor? Yeah, this is a chance to make up for telling your friend about me in the first place,” he said. “Whatever, I’m over it. But can you go by my house and tell all the people camped out there that I’ll do a press conference or something? At noon. I’ll tell them the whole story about the spell, and answer their questions, and then they will leave me the fuck alone forever after that. Okay? Great.”

After Peter hung up, he watched Dobbs eat the last bits of food. He got back in his car and drove around, trying to think of how to explain himself to everybody so they would leave him alone afterwards.
“Hey guy.” Peter stroked Dobbs behind the ears when they were at a stoplight. “Are you ready for your moment in the spotlight?” In response, Dobbs extended his head, blinked, and sprayed vomit all over the inside of Peter's car. Then Dobbs sprawled in the seat, as if he'd just accomplished something awesome, and started to purr loudly. Like a jackhammer.

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AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- The Day It All Ended (reprint)
- The Turnaround (reprint)
- Rager in Space (reprint)
- Reliable People (reprint)
- A Temporary Embarrassment in Spacetime (reprint)
- The Super Ultra Duchess of Fedora Forest (reprint)
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- Break! Break! Break! (reprint)
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INVISIBLE PLANETS

Hao Jingfang
(translated by Ken Liu)

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“Tell me about the fascinating planets you’ve seen. But I don’t want to hear anything cruel or disgusting,” you say.
Good. I nod and smile. Of course. No problem.

• • • •

Chichi Raha

Chichi Raha is a fascinating place, its flowers and lakes unforgettable to all visitors. There, you cannot see a single inch of exposed soil because the land is covered by vegetation: the *anua* grass, as fine as silk thread; the *kuqin* tree, tall enough to scrape the clouds; and many varieties of unnameable, unimaginably strange fruits, exuding seductive aromas.

The Chichi Rahans have never needed to worry about making a living. Their life expectancy is high, their metabolism is slow, and they have no natural enemies. They fill their bellies on a diet of various fruits and make their homes inside a type of tree with large, hollow trunks. The average diameter of these tubes is just wide enough to allow an adult Chichi Rahan to lie down comfortably. When the weather is good, the branches hang loosely, but when it rains, the branches rise so that the leaves form a canopy like an umbrella.

Those who visit Chichi Raha for the first time are always confused by how civilization could have developed on such a world. From the perspective of the visitors, in a place lacking crisis and competition, life should be able to survive very well without intelligence. But there is indeed civilization here, and indeed it is beautiful, vigorous, full of creativity.

Many visitors think that they would like to retire here. Most of them think that their greatest difficulty would be a matter of diet. So, anxiously and carefully, they taste every type of local fruit. But after they’ve lived here for a while, after they’ve attended enough local banquets, they discover—somewhat to their surprise—that while they enjoy the food, they cannot tolerate life here, especially those who are old.

It turns out that all Chichi Rahans learn to lie from birth. Indeed, lying is their most important occupation. They spend the entire span of their existence fabricating stories concerning both events that have occurred and events that have not. They write them down, paint them, sing them, but never remember them. They do not care if there’s a correspondence between their words and the facts, their only standard being whether the tale is interesting. If you ask them about the history of Chichi Raha, they will tell you a hundred versions. No one will contradict the version told by another, because each moment, they are already engaged in self-contradiction.

On this world, everyone is always saying, “Yes, I will,” but nothing is ever done. No one takes such promises seriously, though promises do make life more interesting. Only in extremely rare circumstances do the inhabitants do as they promise. And such occasions are celebrated. For example, if two of them make an appointment and both happen to keep it then they will most likely become a couple and live together. Of course, such occurrences are rare. Most live alone all their lives. The inhabitants do not feel any lack because of this. Indeed, they hear about the overpopulation problems of other planets and feel that their own world is the only one that understands the secret of good living.

So, Chichi Raha developed a brilliant literature, art, and history, and became a famous center of civilization. Many visitors come with the hope that they might hear a local tell family stories in the grass beneath the crown of one of the house-trees.

At one time, some questioned whether a stable society could develop on a planet like this. They imagined Chichi Raha as a chaotic place with no government or commerce. But they were wrong. The planet has an advanced political culture, and the business of exporting fruits has gone on for several centuries without interruption. The habit of lying has never caused problems for these developments, but may have even helped them. The only thing that Chichi Raha lacks is science. Here, every intelligent mind knows a bit of the universe’s secret, but the bits never get the chance to be pieced together.

Pimaceh

This is another planet where you can’t be sure about history. As you wander through its museums, restaurants, and hotels, you will hear many versions of its past. Eventually, you will be trapped in a miasma of confusion because every speaker’s expression will be so sincere that you can’t help but believe, and yet there is no way to reconcile all the different stories.

The scenery of this world is legendary. Strictly speaking, the planet is not even spherical. The southern hemisphere is far lower in elevation than the northern, and an almost perpendicular cliff, going all the way around the equator, divides the planet into two completely different halves. Above the cliff: ice and snow; below: an endless ocean. The city of Pimaceh is built on this world-encircling cliff. From the sky to the sea, the lightly recessed houses and the perfect straight up-and-down avenues are like parts of a giant painting.

No one knows how this place was built. All that you will hear are the various romances told by the current inhabitants. Every story is exciting: Some are heroic legends; some are tragic and austere; some are full of doomed loves. The particular effect depends on the teller, but no one can give a version that convinces everyone. And so, as it passes from teller to teller, Pimaceh becomes more and more mysterious and charming.

Many visitors, entranced by the wondrous sights and stories, linger and do not wish to leave. This is an open and accommodating planet, and every visitor is welcomed with open arms. The visitors—now settlers—then build their own houses on the cliff and pass on the stories they hear to new visitors. Content, they gradually become locals.

This state of happiness will last until one day, when they will realize the truth about themselves. They’ll suddenly understand that countless hints have already revealed Pimaceh’s true history to them: Everyone on this world is a visitor. There are no natives at all.

Yes, Pimaceh did once have a glorious history, but for some reason it had been abandoned. The original inhabitants had left for unknown reasons, leaving behind only a lovely ghost town that astounded interstellar travelers who later stumbled upon it. They also left behind fragments of a language that no one could decipher, like metaphors that filled in the blank spaces between the buildings. These took root in the minds of those who came after, and blossomed into the most lush and beautiful imaginary pasts for the planet.

No one knew who was the first to discover this uninhabited world. The history of the visitors has also faded, consciously or not, as it passed from generation to generation. All the visitors who have settled wish to think of themselves as the people of Pimaceh. They protect this planet and steadfastly play the role of hosts—until one day they themselves begin to believe that this is their native land and the country where they will die.

Almost no one can discover Pimaceh’s secret except a few true wanderers who have been to all corners of the universe. They can sense that the inhabitants here emphasize slightly too often the fact that they are the *People of Pimaceh*. On planets where real natives have remained in charge, this is one of those things easily forgotten.

Bingwaugh

Setting Pimaceh aside, in the sea of stars, you’ll probably have to go all the way to Bingwaugh to see such a variety of different species from all over, each with its own culture and civilization, colliding, striking against each other, creating sparks.

Bingwaugh is not too big and not too small. Its seasons are indistinct and its climate mild. The surface of the planet is composed mostly of plains, with few mountains and little variation in elevation. The horizon is a gentle, smooth curve. Here is everything that an average planet should have, but nothing more: good soil, decent mineral deposits, various fauna and flora, and even the sort of circular fields surrounded by low bushes where tourists like to sing and dance. There’s nothing remarkable at all.

The inhabitants of Bingwaugh are similarly average. They are mammals; not too big; a solid, good people, easily satisfied. Their social organization is loose, and everyone lives in harmony.

If one *had* to pick something unique about them, it would be their pleasant disposition. Rarely are they seen arguing, whether amongst themselves or with the multiplicity of interstellar visitors. They’re great listeners. Adults and children alike would open their eyes wide and listen to you lecture, nodding frequently, their faces often breaking into expressions of being intoxicated by the wisdom you’re imparting.

Having discovered this characteristic of Bingwaugh, all the ambitious adventurers in the universe rushed to take advantage of it. Who doesn’t want to rule over such a people

and place? Plenty of resources, comfortable living environment, and a great location at the intersection of so many trade routes.

So, educators came, missionaries came, politicians came, revolutionaries and reporters all came. They described to the locals their visions of heaven, lectured them on their ideals, and again and again, the inhabitants of Bingwaugh nodded and sighed with heartfelt admiration and accepted the new philosophies. Some remote planets even sent over “Supervisors” to rule over these new converts. The inhabitants never objected, not even a peep.

But, after these triumphant developments, the interstellar guests would always be disappointed. Indeed, the longer they stayed on Bingwaugh, the more their disappointment grew.

As it turns out, the locals have never truly accepted any alien propaganda. Even when they agree with a new faith, they never actually do as they’re told. As enthusiastically as they admire the new systems of laws being presented to them, just as enthusiastically they don’t follow any of the alien laws at all.

Faced with this attitude from the locals, the ambitious colonizers can do nothing. This is because they realize that this contrast between what the locals say and what they do is not at all the result of some deep conspiracy, but simply a matter of habit. If you ask them directly, they’ll reply, very puzzled, “Yes, what you say sounds like Truth. But the world is full of Truths. So what if you have a Truth?”

Some planets, unable to tolerate this state of affairs, attempted to conquer Bingwaugh by force. But immediately, some other planets would intervene. The balance of power is such that every possible conflict is always resolved outside the boundaries of the atmosphere of Bingwaugh.

So, though it is a place where foreigners love to congregate, Bingwaugh is also one of the planets that has best preserved its native culture.

• • • •

Do you like these stories?

“Yes . . . and no. Why is every planet filled with visitors from across the stars? I don’t like this. It makes them sound like zoos.”

You’re right. I don’t like it, either. The uniqueness of each planet disappears over time in this manner, like a fingerprint being rubbed away. All right, let’s hear some stories about real natives.

• • • •

Amiyachi and Aihuowu

Let me tell you about two planets still ruled by their original inhabitants. On each, there are two different intelligent species. Yet each species believes itself to be the only master of its respective world.

Amiyachi orbits a double star: one a bright blue giant, the other a dim white dwarf. The two are similar in mass, but differ widely in volume and the type of emitted radiation. So, Amiyachi’s orbit is shaped like an irregular gourd. It dances a waltz along the hyperbolic paraboloid of the gravitational fields of the two stars.

Whenever Amiyachi is near the blue giant, it enters a long summer. But when it’s near the white dwarf, it enters an equally long winter. The summer is when the planet’s flora multiply and grow and stretch their vines like madness. In winter, most are dormant, and only a few hardy weeds quietly bloom over the empty earth.

Summer and winter, in each season Amiyachi is ruled by a different species: One dances through the lush forests of summer, the other marches alone over the barren plains of winter. The summer Amiyachians live in houses made of woven vines, and when the weather turns cold, the houses disappear as the vines wither and die. The winter Amiyachians live in caves dug into thick mountains, and when the weather turns hot, the mouths of the caves are hidden behind dense clumps of grass and fern, leaving no visible trace.

Whenever the summer Amiyachians are about to hibernate, they secrete a liquid covering to protect themselves and sink underground. The liquid stimulates a kind of insect, known as the *wususu*, to begin mating. The multiplying *wususu* then bring to life the cold-resistant shrub *aludon*. The flowering of this plant, unremarkable in appearance, begins the long and slow process of awakening the winter Amiyachians.

When the winter Amiyachians are near the end of their season’s journey, they give birth. The new babies, protected by a hard membrane, develop and grow in the soil. The ionic reactions of their growth change the pH level of the soil and cause other plants to germinate and grow, announcing the beginning of the planet’s summer, as well as the reign of the summer Amiyachians.

Thus, the two intelligent species of Amiyachi remain unaware of each other. Neither knows that its civilization’s existence depends on the existence of the other, two sides of the same coin. Both races have composed works praising the divine wisdom of the gods, allowing them to be reborn as they awake from their slumber. But they have never realized that they’re both children called forth by the gods, as well as the gods themselves.

As for Aihuowu, the situation is entirely different. On the surface of this world, the two intelligent species and their civilizations are very aware of each other’s existence, yet neither is aware that the other is just like itself, possessing feelings, logic, and morality.

The reason is simple: The two species exist in different frames of time.

Aihuowu is a planet with a strange orbit. The angle between its axis of rotation and the plane of its orbit is very small, and the axis of rotation itself processes slowly. Thus, the surface of the planet can be divided into four regions: The narrow strip near the equator has night and day in accordance with the rotation of the planet, while the polar regions have their own periods of brightness and darkness based on the procession of the axis of rotation. A day near the pole is hundreds of times longer than a day near the equator, and so the lives born in each of these regions experience time at rates hundreds of times apart.

For the Aihuowuans near the equator, the mysterious poles seem to have very long nights and very long days. But for the polar Aihuowuans, the equator passes through darkness and light rapidly, in flashes. The equatorial Aihuowuans are dainty and agile, with hundreds of thousands of individuals living in dense colonies. The polar Aihuowuans, on the other hand, have slow metabolic rates matched to their long days and long nights, and their bodies are scaled large to fit their sense of time.

Sometimes, the equatorial Aihuowuans come to the poles for adventure and exploration. They always get lost in the maze-like forests full of gigantic trees, and mistake the occasional houses they encounter as unscalable cliffs. But when the polar Aihuowuans wander near the equator, they often miss the details and carelessly destroy the houses and fields of the equatorial Aihuowuans. They live on the same planet, but belong to entirely separate worlds.

Sometimes, the equatorial Aihuowuans venture to speculate that the giant creatures of the poles might also possess intelligence. But in their hearts, they believe that even if such slow-moving creatures, who in a hundred years might not shift more than a few feet, were intelligent, it would be a simple and rudimentary kind of intelligence. The polar Aihuowuans have similar suspicions of intelligence concerning the equatorial species. But then they sigh and shake their heads, realizing that such tiny creatures that are born and die in a single day would be incapable of experiencing real civilization.

And so the two intelligent species of Aihuowu experience the same process of learning, working, love, and war. Their histories play out at two time scales, each echoing the other. But they remain opaque to each other, unaware that when it comes to time, everyone is only measuring the universe using the ruler of their own lifespan.

• • • •

“Wait a minute,” you interrupt. “How can you know about all these civilizations? When did you go to Amiyachi? And what scale of time did you use to experience Aihuowu?”

I know. Of course I know. If you had been there, you would know as well. This is the difference between visitors and natives. This is the point of traveling.

“It is? This is why you travel?”

Yes, and no.

If you really want to know why I travel, then let me tell you about a planet devoted to travel.

• • • •

Lunaji

The people of Lunaji build the galaxy’s most beautiful cars, boats, airships, and passenger catapults. The complexity and refinement of these vehicles far exceed the imaginations of visitors from other worlds, and also far exceed the technological levels of all other industries on this planet.

Those who are intuitive immediately jump to the conclusion that travel is especially meaningful for the Lunajians. But there’s a deeper explanation that most cannot figure out. They can’t imagine why so many intelligent beings would devote their entire lives to traveling and preparing for travel, rather than the accomplishment of some other, more rewarding task. Only those who know the life cycle of the Lunajians have some understanding of this seemingly irrational restlessness.

Lunaji has a large basin, where the concentration of oxygen is higher than anywhere else. The soil is rich and moist; small waterfalls pour into a clear, pristine lake; flowers are in bloom every season of the year; and heavily laden, spherical fruit trees surround soft lawns, strewn with mushrooms in all the colors of the rainbow. Every Lunajian spends their childhood here, none knowing how they arrived in this world. From the moment they open their eyes, this basin is all they know.

From time to time, some wish to discover the secret origin of their lives, or seek the home of the gods. Then they start to grow up, tall enough to climb over the rocks blocking the gentle slope at the edge of the basin. They walk into the maze-like, dense forest, climbing up the slope toward the world outside the basin. They can’t tell you their ages, because the age at which each one begins to mature is different.

After exiting the basin, they keep on walking, wandering, seeking—finding nothing. They meet others who left the basin before them, but they also are still searching, still traveling, still baffled by the mystery of their own lives. So, a Lunajian’s life is one long migration. They go from one place to another, never settling. They build boats, cars, airplanes with the purpose of accelerating their own pace so that they can cover every square inch of the planet, until they reach the edge of the sky.

Sometimes, by coincidence, some follow an obscure path and arrive at a meadow in the wilderness. There, a lovely silver flower blooms, giving off an intoxicating aroma. The fragrance makes every Lunajian nearby dizzy, and causes unprecedented tender feelings to spring up between them. For the first time, they feel attraction for one another, embrace, clasp, give and receive. Then, they give birth by the edge of a brook, from where the babies are borne by the water to the basin beneath the falls.

The parents? They die and sink into the muddy earth.

And so, such a simple cycle turns out to be the entirety of the meaning of the ceaseless travels of the Lunajians.

Yanyanni

Since we’re on the topic of growing up, I want to tell you a few more stories. The first is about Yanyanni.

You can always tell a Yanyannian’s age at a glance. Like trees, they never cease to grow. Every year, they become taller than they were the year before. An adult is several times the height of a child, and a young person is several feet shorter than an elder. The oldest person is always head and shoulders above the surrounding crowd, a lonely tower.

So, in the world of the Yanyannians, there is no such thing as a friendship that crosses age gaps. Even talking to someone who is very different in age can be a chore. A long conversation would leave both interlocutors with sore necks and shoulders, as the younger looks up while the older looks down. Indeed, there’s not much to talk about between people of very different ages. Their houses are of different heights and the shelves from which they do their shopping are different. One can only see the belt of the other, and neither can see the other’s expressions.

It’s not true, however, that the Yanyannians can grow without limit. One day, they wake up and discover that their height hasn’t increased. Then they know that they are about to die. The knowledge does not make them sad, however. Growing taller is actually a very tiring process. Many have been exhausted by it and simply find an excuse to stop. Death for the Yanyannians takes a long time, but no one knows exactly how long. It’s never been precisely measured. To simplify things, they list the age of death as the day when growth ceases. In their eyes, the passage of time is a measure of change. When growth ceases, time stops.

The tallest house on Yanyanni was built more than a century ago. At the time, there was an old man who, year after year, grew and grew until his head touched the ceiling of the tallest building then in existence. So the people erected a tower for him designed to hold a single man. The base of the tower took up the space for a park. After his death, no one else ever managed to reach his record of longevity, and so the tower was divided into two stories and turned into a museum.

Legend has it that the old man left a diary next to each window of the tower, recording his life during the years when his height corresponded to that window. Afterward, others climbed ladders to retrieve these diaries for reading, but after a while, the diaries became lost.

Now, visitors wander past the empty windows and imagine how a man who could cross a river with a single step might brush his teeth and eat his food.

Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu

Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu are a pair of opposites. These two planets, a hundred thousand light years apart, are like the two ends of a dipole: They negate each other and also define each other.

Tisu Atians are much smaller than the inhabitants of most planets. Their skin is especially soft, and their bodies can rapidly shift shapes. On this Lamarckian world, the development of gene expression reached its pinnacle—no, surpassed the pinnacle. All of evolution has been compressed into an individual’s brief life.

The Tisu Atians can alter their bodies in accordance with their desires. Those who practice climbing mountains develop longer and longer arms, until their arms are longer than their bodies. Those who operate machinery develop five or six arms, until an individual can simultaneously control the opening and closing of numerous valves. On the street, no two Tisu Atians look alike. Everywhere, one can see a mouth so large as to take up half a face, a waist thinner than a strand of noodle, or a round sphere covered by a layer of armor-like scales. These changes are unique to each individual, and it’s impossible to detect anyone’s parentage based on appearance. Even the parents themselves, if sufficient time has passed, have a hard time picking their children out of a crowd.

But “in accordance with their desires” is not quite accurate. It’s not true that every Tisu Atian can attain the appearance they have in their minds. Most of the time, they’re vague in their self-images. It’s only when someone takes an extra large step or bumps into something that that person realizes their legs have grown another thirty percent or their back has grown a row of little spikes. Of course, in a few years, one has turned into a long-legged strider able to go up an entire flight of stairs in a single step, or a warrior whose body is covered by hard and sharp spikes.

So, many Tisu Atians are even more cautious than the inhabitants of other planets. They speak carefully; they work carefully. They’re terrified of the possibility that in a moment of carelessness, the silly face they made before going to bed will become permanent, will turn into a tumor impossible to remove.

On the busy streets of Lutikawulu, you can tell at a glance each person’s career and daily life. This may be the only point on which Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu agree. The Lutikawuluans also look very different from each other: runners, singers, sculptors, thinkers, etc. The difference between them can be clearly gleaned from differences in musculature, body shape, size, and facial features, just like on Tisu Ati.

But on Lutikawulu, the journey of life is the exact opposite of life on Tisu Ati. This is a Darwinian planet, where everyone is in agreement that any effort expended in directing the path of evolution is useless. The Lutikawuluans have stable genomes that evolve slowly in accordance with the principles of random variation and natural selection. But because the Lutikawuluans reproduce asexually, genetic changes in their somatic cells do continue to be expressed through inheritance. The cells, as they divide and change, pass on their adaptations without reservation to the next generation. And so children inherit the alterations in their parents.

As a result, a blacksmith’s son is born stronger than other children, and a clocksmith’s daughter is born with better vision and more nimble fingers. These differences, accumulated over thousands of years, slowly add up to the level of speciation. Every occupation has evolved into its own independent species. And even when some occupations have disappeared, the features associated with them continue to be expressed and continue to evolve.

All of these different species are united by their language. It’s only through the common tongue and identical numbers of chromosomes that they can recognize themselves as possessing a common origin. Other than these, they have nothing in common. No one is jealous of another’s work, just as a monkey would not be jealous of a dinosaur. As the proverb says, *the birds have the sky while the fish have the sea*. They pass by each other in the same town, but it’s as if they see each other without seeing each other.

While the Tisu Atians have replayed evolution a hundred million times, they have always refused real evolution. No matter how they alter their own appearance, their children always begin in the same place, keeping the same original, primitive shape. The Lutikawuluans are just the opposite. No individual ever experiences any change, but when seen through the lens of eons, they are each points along numerous diverging curves.

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“You lie,” you say, pouting. “How can the same universe follow two opposite sets of rules?”
Why not? My dear, there’s nothing that’s impossible. Numerous steps, each meaningless by itself, when added together become a rule, a principle. Perhaps in this moment you laugh, or frown, and the future is divided into two paths, two sets of rules. But how can you, the you of this moment, know?
“Is that true?” you ask, leaning your head. And for a while you are quiet.
I look at you and laugh lightly. The swing you sit on sways back and forth, and the breeze causes the locks of hair next to your ears to flutter. The key to your

question is the method of reproduction, of course, but this kind of answer is too dry. I have no wish to give it.
You know something? The real key isn’t about whether what I say is true, but whether you believe it. From start to end, the direction of narrative is not guided by the tongue, but by the ear.

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Chincato

The tongue and the ear have the most meaning on Chincato. For the people of this planet, speech is not a mere way to pass the time, but a necessity for existence. There’s nothing special about Chincato, save its thick atmosphere. It’s so dense that no light can penetrate it, and the surface of the planet is covered by darkness. Chincato’s life is born from warm, thick, deep-sea currents, full of organic material and warmed by bubbling lava, and gain their energy from the heat at the heart of the planet. For them, the boiling crater of the underwater volcano is their sun, the home of the gods, the source of wisdom and strength. Outside the crater, they can find organic sugars, which are their food, the foundation of their life. The Chincatoans do not have organs that sense light, or eyes. They rely on sound to locate each other. Their ears are both for listening and observing. Actually, to be precise, they don’t have ears. They listen with their entire body. The upper halves of their bodies are covered by trapezoidal diaphragms, each of which is strung with thousands of hairs of different lengths, and each of which can resonate with the sound of a particular frequency. Using timing differences between when each trapezoidal diaphragm hears a sound and their positions, the brain of a Chincatoan can deduce the location of the source of the sound, its distance, and even its precise shape. So, all day long, the Chincatoan talk and listen without pause. They emit sounds to feel the presence of others, and also to let others know of their own existence. They cannot be silent. Silence is dangerous and makes them panic. Only by continuously talking can they ascertain their own position, be sure that they’re still alive. They compete with each other to speak louder, because only by doing so can they make themselves appear brighter, more noticeable by others. Some children are born with defects in their voice organs. These children almost cannot survive. They’re always in danger of being run over by others, much bigger and faster. And then no one would even know that such a child once existed.

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“That is so sad. Your stories have become shorter and shorter, but why have they also become so much sadder?”
Sad? Is it that the story I’m telling is sad, or is that that the story you’re hearing is sad?
“What’s the difference?”
Very different. I’ve been to a planet where the people can make sounds at ten thousand different frequencies, but can only hear a small portion of the frequency range. The sensitivity of their ears is not matched to the versatility of their vocal cords, and so they never hear as much as they can speak. But the most interesting part is that the range of frequencies that each of them can hear is different. While they all think they’re hearing the same song, a thousand individuals would actually hear a thousand different songs, but none of them knows that.
“You’re making things up again. How can such a place exist?” You bite your lips and widen your eyes. **“I’m now suspicious that you haven’t been to these planets you’ve been telling me about. Have you made them all up to amuse me?”**
My darling, starting with the Odyssey, every knight errant has told romances of faraway places to court the ladies they love. Can you tell which stories are real and which are not? I travel through these planets like Marco Polo wandering through the cities of the Orient, like Kubla Khan riding through his endless realm: Everything happens in the blink of an eye. You can say that I really have been to those places, or that I have never left. The planets I speak of are scattered at every corner of the universe, but sometimes collect themselves into the same place, as though they have always been together.
Hearing this, you giggle. **“I understand now. They are gathered together by your stories, and now you tell these stories to me, so they are gathered in my mind. Isn’t that right?”**
Looking at your happy face, I sigh. The sound is so quiet that you cannot see anything strange in my smile. How can I explain this to you? How do I make you understand? Stories cannot gather anything together, if they’re fated to separate.
Yes, I say quietly. *We have been sitting here for an afternoon telling stories, and together, we possess a universe. But these stories are not something I tell you. This afternoon, you and I are both tellers, and both listeners.*

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Jinjialin

Jinjialin is the last story I will tell you today. It’s a short tale. I’ll be finished soon. The people of Jinjialin possess bodies unlike the bodies of the people of any other planet. They are like soft balloons, or maybe like jellyfish floating through the air, transparent and loose. The surface of the Jinjialinians is membranous, like a cell’s outermost layer. When two membranes touch, they can merge into one. When two Jinjialinians encounter each other, parts of their bodies briefly merge and mix the materials inside. When they separate, the materials are redistributed. Thus, the people do not care much about their physical bodies. Even they cannot tell how much of their current bodies come from strangers they met along the road. They believe that they are still themselves, and it’s no big deal to exchange some materials. But they don’t realize that this sense of “self” is an illusion. At the moment when two of them merge, the two original selves cease to exist. They become a combined person, and, when separated, two new persons. The new persons do not know all that transpired before their encounter and each believes that the self is the self, never having changed at all.

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Do you understand? When I am done telling you these stories, when you’re done listening to these stories, I am no longer I, and you are no longer you. In this afternoon we briefly merged into one. After this, you will always carry a bit of me and I will always carry a bit of you, even if we both forget this conversation.
“You’re saying that Jinjialin is our own world?”
Our own world? Which one? Can any planet have belonged to us? Or can we have belonged to any planet?
Do not ask me about the coordinates of these planets. Those numbers are the oldest mystical proverbs of the universe. They are the air between your fingers. You reach out to grab them, but when you open your hands, there’s nothing. You and I and they meet for a moment, and we are fated to again separate. We’re only travelers, singing songs whose meanings are obscure, wandering through the dark sky. That is all. You know they are singing in the wind, singing in the wind of a distant homeland.

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- Invisible Planets



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE JAWS THAT BITE, THE CLAWS THAT CATCH

Seanan McGuire

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Mist flowed through the Tulgey Wood like treacle, slow and thick and unyielding. Squeaks and muffled chitters came from the underbrush as rabbits, foxes, and adolescent toves that hadn't sensed the weather changing were caught and drowned in the gray-white mire. It would clear by noon, burnt off by the sun, and then the scavengers would come, making a feast of the small mist-struck creatures. By nightfall, nothing would be left to show that anything had died here, not even the bones. The Tulgey Wood concealed its own. It couldn't protect us if we let ourselves be seen.

I hung from the strongest branch on the tum-tum tree, watching the mist flowing beneath me. A jubjub bird flew by, wings shockingly bright against the gray. The mist threw up a tendril, trying to grab the bird's leg and drag it down. I acted without thought, reaching down and snatching the bird by the tail, flinging it upward. It screeched indignation but didn't bite at me. No creature living in the Tulgey Wood could fail to understand the danger represented by mist, or snow, or—worst of all—the dreaded, all-too-frequent rain. Jubjubs aren't smart. It still knew that it had just been saved, even if it couldn't understand the how or why of it.

A single brightly colored feather drifted from the branches overhead. The mist snatched it and sucked it down, burbling discontent. I watched it for a moment more, and then resumed my climb through the trees, swinging hand over hand as I moved toward the distant, terrifying light that filtered through the trees at wood's end. Like most of my family, I had lived all the days of my life within the shadows and treachery of the Tulgey Wood. I had no interest in leaving.

No interest save for one: my youngest sister, who needed me, and who had been taken from us by the terrible creatures who lived outside our borders. Someone had to save her. Someone had to bring her home. "Someone" is a serpent of a word. It has fangs, and it can bite. It had bitten me, and now I had to go.

"Come home safely," whispered my mother's ghost from the canopy above.

"I'll try," I said. The trees had carried me as far as they could. From here, the branches were too thin to support my weight, and more, I had things to leave behind. Releasing my hold on the limb that bore me up, I allowed myself to fall into the mist.

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On the ground, with the mist flowing hard around me, pushing me back, it took the better part of the day for me to walk to the edge of the wood. It tingled and burnt as it played across my skin, stripping away everything that would tell the terrible outsiders who and what I was. There are things in the wood that the mist cannot digest. My family and I are among them. Rocks, bones, and us: the inedible heart of the Tulgey Wood. But the mist is greedy, like the outsiders. The mist always tries to take as much as it can, and so it took scales and fur and trceries of blood, leaving skin exposed and aching in the light. I shivered and shuddered and walked on. When one becomes someone, there is always a price to be paid.

The wood cut off as cleanly as a knife stroke. There were no singular trees, no orphans to confuse the demarcation between in and out; one moment I was in the wood, and the next, I was standing on open ground, with the trees to my back. Even the mist didn't violate the tree line. Sometimes outsiders nailed signs to the trees, saying things like "Be Warned" and "Be Wary" and "Shun the Wood." We always took them down. They were unattractive, and the trees didn't like them, and we had better uses for the nails.

A jubjub flew by overhead, shrieking its mournful cry to the sky above. Maybe it was the bird I'd saved. That would be nice. I had kept it from the mist, and now it would remember me, even if I didn't make it home. My family would remember me no matter what I did, but families are broken mirrors: I would only ever be a dutiful daughter in the reflection they would cast for me. The jubjub and the mist and the trees would be more accurate, even if they never spoke a word.

Fat, white-spotted mushrooms with bloody caps grew in the median between wood and world. I walked along the tree line until I found a mushroom that looked large enough to be my size. Plucking it from the loam, I whispered my name into the gills of its fleshy underside, and smashed it against the nearest tree. The nut-brown heart of the fungus fell to the ground and rolled to my bare feet, where it cracked open, revealing a bundle of fabric. I bent, picking through it. There were black leather shoes, and undergarments, and a dress made of stitched-together triangles in black and white and red. It was cunningly made, especially considering that it had been made by a mushroom, and would show allegiance to no specific suit or house. I could walk all the way to the City of Hearts in this dress, and no one would be able to claim me for their own.

I dressed, covering my exposed skin anew, this time with the stretch of cotton and the weight of cobbling. My feet, unaccustomed to shoes, protested. I scuffed my toes against the ground, bruising them just enough to numb them. The wood was a silent scream behind me, beckoning me home, begging me not to go. But someone's venom was in my veins; I had no choice. I had a sister in need of saving.

I began to walk.

When I was very small, no more than a comma of a creature compared to the pages and paragraphs of my parents, they used to tell me stories of the world outside the wood. "It's terrible there," said my mother, shivering. "Their sense is nonsense, and their nonsense is sense. You can trust nothing outside the wood. Nothing. All of it waits only to destroy you."

"It's terrible there," said my father, with eyes like chips of ice, so cold that they burned. "Their truths are lies, and their lies are truth. You can believe nothing outside the wood. Nothing. All of it waits only to disprove you."

I had promised them then, and a hundred times after that, that I would never leave the wood, never dash open the mushrooms that peppered the tree line, never walk the road that led toward the City and away from the green. I had *promised* them. Breaking my promise burned, even though I was half-sure that promises didn't really bind once the person who had been promised was gone. Mother had been dead for years, her body thrown to the mist by the soldiers who'd killed her for the crime of refusing to let them enter the wood. Father had only been gone for the space of a season. We were still adjusting to the weight of a world without him. With them gone, I was the eldest, and no promise could be enough to keep me from doing my duty by the family.

The road that led toward the City was hard-packed dirt, brown and smooth and scrolling out like a ribbon toward a distant, alien horizon. I prodded it cautiously with my toe, waiting for it to ripple like molasses and pull me under. It remained solid and unyielding. Gingerly, I stepped onto it, and was reassured when it bore my weight. Maybe not everything about the world outside the wood was treacherous and waiting for the chance to kill me.

My temporary relief faded. Not everything was waiting for the chance to kill me, but enough was. I would forget that at my peril. Worse, at my sister's peril.

"I am the heart of my family," I whispered, ducking my head until my chin brushed my breastbone. "I am the soul of my forest. I will bring my people home."

The road said nothing, only bore me up, and waited to see what I would do next.

Next, I began to walk.

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The distance between the Tulgey Wood and the City of Hearts is always the same. When the city grows beyond its current borders, the road will stretch like the finest taffy, carrying it farther from the tree line, and keeping the people of both places safe. All the cities and sites in Wonderland are balanced in the same perfect, equitable way, preventing us from being shuffled atop each other like common cards. Those who live in the cities say that the wood moves to keep them safe, because they can't comprehend how anyone who lives in the shadow of the trees and the circumference of the thorns could ever yearn for safety.

If I thought there was a chance they would listen to me, those jam-fed city dwellers, with their silver teaspoons and their sugar-crust scones, this is what I would say to them: "We wish for safety as much as you do. We want to go to bed knowing that our children and elders are safe. We want to see our parents grow old in comfort. We want to take lovers and take our time falling in love, to know that we have time available to us, time like a spool of diamond thread, time to raise our children and see them taking lovers of their own. We wish for safety and security and serenity—all the things you would deny us, all the things you would use us to deny yourselves. The cities move to protect the wood. Not the other way around."

But they would never listen to me. What was I but a daughter of the Tulgey Wood, meant to be the monster at the end of their stories, meant to stand silently by while they came into my place, took what was most precious, and left? Monsters didn't have homes to defend or sisters they loved more than life itself. That would make us too much like *them*, and then we would be less effective as excuses for the things they did to themselves. The patrols and the rules and the soldiers in their gleaming armor, blazoned with the suits of the cities—hearts and diamonds, clubs and spades—coming to challenge the borders of the wood, because at least then their rulers could pretend that there was a war to be

fought.
We had never been at war with the cities. We only wanted to be left alone.

Day twisted into afternoon, the sky shifting shades above me until it began to darken into blackcurrant twilight. I kept walking. There was no telling how long my sister had, or how far the road had stretched since the last time a member of my family had been called upon to walk it. My feet ached. The dress the mushroom had made for me constricted my waist until it felt like I would suffocate. That was almost a good thing. I hadn't eaten since I'd made up my mind to go, and the pain outside distracted from the pain inside. None of this was familiar. None of this was safe.

When I have her back, I am never leaving the wood again, I thought, and it was such a good thought that I repeated it to myself over and over again as I walked on.
“Halt!”

The voice was harsh as breaking crockery, filled with sharp edges. I halted, balling my sweaty palms into fists around the fabric of my skirt as the man stepped out of the shadows. He wore the sigil of the City of Hearts above his breast; he carried a sword. Perhaps his face was fair, and perhaps his form was fine, but I couldn't tell. All I could perceive was terror.

“Who are you, walking the road after the sun goes down? Don't you know that this road extends to the Tulgey Wood? There are things there, things with jaws that bite and claws that catch. Things that would think nothing of making a meal of a pretty thing like you.” He took a step forward.

I took a step back. “This is the only road,” I said, and my voice shook, and my heart pounded under its blanket of red and black and white triangles. “I have to get to the city. This seemed safer than striking out across the fields.” That was a lie. I would have felt infinitely safer among the brush and the wabe. But without the road to guide me, I didn't trust myself to get there. The cities outside the wood had a way of moving when they felt like they were overly exposed, or like there were monsters coming. The wood had no such protections.

“You should come with me,” he said, and took another step forward. “I can lead you straight to the gates.”

“My father told me never to go walking with strange men I met on the road.” That wasn't quite true—he had used different words—but the message remained the same. Father told me never to go walking with anyone I met outside the wood. Not to trust them, because they wouldn't trust me. Not if they saw me with their eyes closed.

“Your father wouldn't see me as a strange man,” countered the guard. He continued toward me. “I'm a knight in service to the City of Hearts. The Queen herself approved my appointment. Your father would tell you to get down on your knees and thank the great Alice for your luck, if he were here.”

“My father is dead.” The words were cold, naked things: They fell between us, lying slaughtered on the hard-packed ground.

The guard hesitated for only a moment. Then he smiled, and took another step, and said, “If your father is dead, it doesn't matter what he said to you, now, does it? All that matters is the moonlight on your hair, and the starlight in my eyes. You're very beautiful, you know.”

“I have to get to the city.”

“I can take you there in the morning. I can show you the way.”

It would have been so *easy* to let him take another step, so *easy* to let him have what he thought he wanted. It would have dulled the fire in my belly and salved the burning in my heart. And I might never reach the city, and might never bring my sister home. I took a step backward.

“I'm sworn to the White Rabbit,” I said. “I can't be late.”

The guard's face fell. To swear to the White Rabbit was to invoke one of the principal protections of Wonderland—and to risk a terrible punishment for failure. The Rabbit looked kindly on those who kept their time accurately and well. But the Rabbit had little patience for those who were late, and the Rabbit had teeth, even if most chose to forget them. Sometimes the Rabbit punished those who broke their oaths. More often, the Rabbit punished those who caused those oaths to be broken.

Everything that lives can have jaws that bite and claws that catch, if the need is dire enough.

“Go, then,” he said, voice suddenly harsh with loathing and fear. “The city isn't so much further. You should make it with time to spare.”

“I thank you,” I said, and bobbed a quick curtsy, hands still buried in the fabric of my skirt, so he wouldn't see them shaking. “Do you know if they've changed the password since yesterday eve? Only I've been on the road all this time, and I don't want to be delayed.”

He had stopped me on the road for no good reason beyond his own amusement. If I was late—if I was really under the White Rabbit's protection—he could be held responsible. He probably wouldn't enjoy that. “Quiche and crumpets,” he said. “Now go. Don't be late.”

“Thank you,” I said, and started down the road again. This time, no one appeared to stop me.

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The edge of the sky was the yellow-gold of quince marmalade when I reached the City of Hearts. The jam-colored light washed across the spires and structures of the city, setting them to glittering. I didn't pause to admire it. If the sun was rising, the password would be changing soon, and I didn't want to waste the morning waiting for someone to slip and speak it loudly enough to be overheard.

The gates were locked. I rapped my knuckles against them, and waited, impatient, until the heart-shaped hatch at the center of the gate swung open, and a guard peered suspiciously out at me.

“What do you feed a Duchess when she's tired of summerwine and mockingbird pie?” he asked.

“Quiche and crumpets,” I said.

The heart-shaped hatch closed. The gate opened, and the City of Hearts was exposed to me.

As with all card cities, the suit was reflected everywhere: in the architecture, in the negative space between buildings, in the fashions of the few citizens who were already out and about, getting the streets prepared for the day to come. The cobblestones were shaped like true hearts, the kind hunters ripped, wet and beating, from the chests of the beasts they killed. I wondered, as I stepped onto those cobblestones, how many of the citizens knew what they walked upon. It would be easy to only see the stylized, artistic hearts, and miss the darker, bloody ones. But both were there. Some were blatant and others tucked away, but both were there.

I walked through the streets of the city as the sky bled from quince to lavender, and no one looked at me twice, or questioned my presence. I walked until I reached the fence that stood around the palace. It was wrought iron, painted red and taller than even the tallest trees in the Tulgey Wood. More of those odd, flattened heart shapes blunted the tops of the metal spikes that made it, but even blunt, they would be enough to make climbing over difficult—and I was sure the edges would be razor sharp, ready to cut anyone who dared to risk the walls.

My shoulders ached under the confining fabric of my dress. I wanted to rip it away, to stand free in this alien street. I didn't move. I didn't dare. Anything could betray me now, and I was so close to finding my sister. I was so close to bringing her home.

A girl in a white dress patterned with large, cheerful hearts stopped on the street, looking from me to the fence and back to me again before she asked, “Do you have business with the Queen?” There was a note of disapproval in her voice—but not, I guessed, aimed at me. The Queen of Hearts had a reputation in Wonderland. All the Queens did. The Queen of Diamonds was known for Beauty; the Queen of Clubs for Wisdom; the Queen of Spades for Kindness. With those ideals to match herself against, the Queen of Hearts could have chosen anything.

She'd chosen Cruelty. Hers was the Kingdom into which the Alice had fallen, all those days and all those darks ago, and the Queen of Hearts had defined her rule around what the Alice was not.

The girl in the red and white dress looked nervous enough to trust. “My sister,” I said. “They took her three days ago. I came here to get her back. I think . . . I think that if she's anywhere, she'll be inside the palace. But I've never been here before. I don't know how to get inside.”

“No one gets inside unless the Queen wants them there,” said the girl. “What does your sister look like?”

“Like me, but shorter.” I held a hand at the level of my chest. “Hair like mine. Eyes like mine.”

“Golden hair.” The girl's face fell. “They took her because she looked like an Alice.”

“I suppose.”

“*You* look like an Alice. Almost. You're too old for the keyhole to mistake you for her.”

I stared at her. “You saw the Alice?”

“No. But I've seen pictures. How were you not taken? Your family should have lost you years ago. The Queen wants the door open. She wants the things from the Alice's side of the mirror, the weapons she's heard about, the poisons you can't mix here.” The girl shook her head. “You should be dust and bones by now.”

“If I can't get my sister back, I might as well be.” I looked past her to the palace walls. “I have to find a way inside. I have to save her.”

The girl was quiet for a moment before she said, “I know a way. Come with me.”

I hadn’t known her half long enough to trust her. I didn’t have any better ideas. The sun was rising, and I was in the middle of the City of Hearts, where my mushroom-made dress would stand out sooner or later. Someone would ask my name, where I was from, where I was going, and then . . . “All right,” I said. “Please. Help me save her.”

The girl in the heart-patterned dress beckoned for me to follow her down a narrow alley running along the fence line, into the shadows. Lungs like lead, I did exactly that.

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The alley wound, serpentine, around the backside of the palace, slipping out of sight of street or soldier. The girl waited until we were concealed by the bulk of the palace itself to stop, kneel, and pull up a portion of the cobblestone road, revealing a hatch that led down into the darkness under the city. “This entrance was intended to be used by the Queen, if the City of Diamonds ever marched upon us,” she said. “That was long ago. We have other enemies now.”

“The Alices,” I guessed.

“Those, and the creatures from the Tulgey Wood,” she said. She looked at me, and I knew she knew: there was no other explanation for the darkness in her eyes. “The House of Hearts doesn’t fight the other suits, because the House of Hearts is set against enemies that can’t be defeated—maybe shouldn’t be defeated. So the Queen never needs her escape routes, and the tunnels go unused.”

“I see,” I said carefully. “My sister . . . ?”

“The sun is up. The rites will begin soon. The Queen no longer tells anyone when she thinks she has a candidate; too many people afraid for their own daughters.” She reached up and touched her raspberry hair with one hand. “Too many girls with hair like corn. She’s afraid she’ll be overthrown if she frightens them again, but she can’t stop herself.”

“That explains why she came as far as us.”

The girl’s mouth twisted. “She sends soldiers as far as Diamonds. We’ll be marched on by all Wonderland, if she doesn’t find some self-control.”

None of this was getting us any closer to my sister. I squirmed in my heavy, pinching shoes, and asked, “Where does she take them?”

“Follow me.” The girl—who hadn’t offered her name, I realized; then again, neither had I—turned and dropped through the hatch, into the narrow tunnel beneath. I squeezed through right behind her, trying to shove my anxiety down. I needed to keep control of myself. This near to the end . . . I needed to keep control.

The tunnel was winding and narrow, paved in cobblestones, and ended at a door with a stylized heart at its center. The girl produced a key and unlocked it, pushing it open to reveal a gilded room dripping with pink lace, white pearls, and red ruby hearts. The girl continued onward, and I followed, through a succession of doors—each unlocked with that same golden key—and a succession of rooms, each more opulent than the last. One was filled with garnets in every color of the rainbow; another dripped with pearls, and the air was filled with bubbles, which popped as we moved through them, clinging to our skins in gleaming films. The girl with the raspberry hair never paused, never faltered. She moved through the palace as surely as I moved through the Tulgey Wood. This was her home ground. She was a predator, as much as I was.

I realized I respected her for that.

I realized I was afraid.

Finally, we came to a door made of pitch and coal and night-colored stone, with fragments of mirror driven deep into the frame. The knob was studded with longer shards of mirror. Anyone who opened that door carelessly would bleed for the privilege of whatever waited on the other side. The girl set her hand on it without looking, trusting that her fingers would find the spaces between the jagged edges. She turned enough to glance over her shoulder, looking at me through the curtain of her hair. Everything must have been the color of blood, when she viewed it through that hair.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

She *knew*; I knew she knew. So much knowing that it lost all meaning in its cycling repetition. I was a riddle, and she held the answer. Maybe she had always known, even before she spoke to me; maybe she had been born knowing, or had been taught to look for the small, subtle signs, the things we couldn’t change or control, no matter how hard we tried.

I reached for the button at the collar of my dress, the one that held it closed, held the fabric tight across my chest. I undid it, and the garment fell away, leaving me naked, save for the sturdy, confining shoes that still pinched at my feet. She didn’t look away. That was when I knew, too; when I saw the small, subtle signs, the ones she couldn’t change or control. The ones she wasn’t even bothering to hide.

“I’m ready,” I said, and the Princess of Hearts opened the door.

• • • •

They say that when the Alice tumbled through the Keyhole between Wonderland and whatever strange country she called home, she fell through all the long years of our history, seeing and judging and changing everything she touched.

They say that when the Alice dealt the cards, no Suit held the upper hand; that they were mixed and mingled like common riffraff, unable to hold themselves properly apart.

They say that when the Alice comes back to us—which she will, she will; everyone agrees that she will, from allies to enemies, from dearest friends to direst foes—whoever controls her will control all of Wonderland. Break her heart and yours will beat forever. Bleed her dry and never die. A kingdom without equal, a dynasty without end. And all you have to do is murder a little girl.

We stepped through the black and mirrored door and into a chamber filled with light. Mirrors coated the walls, bouncing our reflections back and forth between them until we became an infinity. Soldiers in the livery of Hearts stood at the edges of the room, spears at the ready, while at the center of the room knelt my youngest sister, golden-haired, pale-skinned, and terrified. She was wearing a white dress, white as cobwebs, white as bone, and she was weeping.

I would have been weeping too, if the Queen of Hearts had been standing over me with a mirrored dagger in her hand, ready to slash my throat.

“Mother, stop,” said the girl. She didn’t shout. She didn’t need to shout. Her voice carried like a declaration of war, and the mirrors that had bounced our images around the room bounced it back and forth as well, turning it into a wall of sound that would not, did not, could not be silenced. “That isn’t the Alice. You’ve stolen another girl who’s done nothing to deserve it. This ends.”

“No,” said the Queen of Hearts. “This ends when the Alice is dead.”

“She isn’t the Alice,” I said, stepping past the girl—past the Princess—and into the chamber. My shoes clumped against the floor. The mirrors dazzled my eyes. My sister, still crying, raised her head and stared at me, frozen with hope, and with fear. “She’s my sister. I’ve come to take her home.”

“The Alice has a sister,” snarled the Queen. “This is the Alice.”

“Many people have sisters,” I said. “Let her go.”

“No,” said the Queen, and raised her blade.

We learn camouflage early, we creatures of the Tulgey Wood, for while nothing can guarantee survival, knowing how to hide can at least make it more likely. So we mimic our own larval forms, which are soft and small and human, and we put on faces we no longer own in order to fool the eyes of Wonderland into thinking us a community of fools, who would voluntarily live so near to where the monsters are. They come to us muttering of jaws that bite and claws that catch, and we say we don’t know what they’re talking about while we fold our wings under our skins and mantle our eyes in irises.

My sister was still larval. She would pupate in a year, emerge glorious and strong and dangerous. But until then, she had no natural defenses. She couldn’t save herself.

I took a step forward, and the shoes on my feet shredded as my claws grew long and sharp. I took another step, and my wings brushed the sides of the room. I took a third step, and heard a guard shout, “*Jabberwock!*” before my jaws closed over the Queen’s head. Her blood filled my mouth, bitter as blackcurrant, bright as strawberry, and then her body was falling, falling, falling like the Alice, down the tunnel that has no end. My sister leapt to her feet and slung her arms around my neck, which had grown long and serpentine.

The Princess of Hearts—now Queen, I supposed—was still standing calmly in the doorway when I turned and looked back at her. She met my eyes without flinching, although the flames there must have burned her.

“Go,” she said. “I will not avenge my mother.”

I struck my wings against the air and my back against the ceiling, which shattered and fell away as I rose, my sister bundled to my scaly breast, into the Wonderland sky. There were miles between us and the Tulgey Wood. Our siblings would be waiting, terrified that I would return to them alone, or not at all. I would call to them when we reached the border, and they would come to us through the trees, flowing through the treacle mist with eyes of fire, and they would burble as they came.

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Seanan McGuire is the author of the Hugo, Nebula, Alex, and Locus Award–winning Wayward Children series, the October Daye series, the InCryptid series, and other works. She also writes darker fiction as Mira Grant. Seanan lives in Seattle with her cats, a vast collection of creepy dolls, horror movies, and sufficient books to qualify her as a fire hazard. She won the 2010 John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer, and in 2013 became the first person to appear five times on the same Hugo ballot. In 2022 she managed the same feat, again!

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- In the Deep Woods; The Light Is Different There (reprint)
- Swear Not by the Moon (reprint)
- Hello, Hello (reprint)
- Under the Sea of Stars
- Frontier ABCs: The Life and Times of Charity Smith, Schoolteacher (reprint)
- And Men Will Mine the Mountain for Our Souls (reprint)
- A Citizen in Childhood's Country (reprint)
- Dragonflies (reprint)
- Lady Antheia's Guide to Horticultural Warfare (reprint)
- The Jaws That Bite, the Claws That Catch
- Rat-Catcher (reprint)
- The Myth of Rain
- Each to Each
- Homecoming
- Lost (reprint)



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS

An Owomoyela

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Prison 17 had been built long enough ago that it got next to no natural light—before all the studies that said that light was good for prison behavior and morale. And of course the rest of its district had been remodded in the past ten years, so the view from outside was a phalanx of solar panels over heat-reflecting paint, making a headache-inducing pattern of black and white. Prisons and hydroponics. That was about all that called this district home.

Which didn’t stop three dozen gawkers from gathering outside the prison gate.

Aedo had expected it, but it still caught her up short. She froze on the sidewalk and saw the flashes of ocular implants and handheld cameras; that was probably going to be the picture on the newsfeeds, above the fold.

She drew a hand back through her hair, impulsively.

A quick-and-dirty breakdown of the crowd by age and dress suggested that probably a quarter of them were for legitimate news streams. She didn’t recognize most of the ones in ratty shirts with the logo of the counterculture of the month. She met their eyes first, though: allies. Then she cleared her throat and made herself walk forward, holding up a hand like she was holding court.

“Thanks for being here,” she said. She’d practiced her statement in prison, with the sympathetic ears she’d just worked her way around to thinking of as friends, and fell back on that without thinking about how *completely nil* it’d sound as a soundbyte. “I have stuff to say on Government data, but right now I want dinner, a shower, and a nap. I’ll post a blog in the next few days, and if you want an interview, message me.”

Because everyone knew her message address. And of course the statement didn’t prevent the barrage of questions, but it let her deploy the strategy that got her through most of her childhood: she ducked her head, focused on a problem in the back of her mind, and pretended that no one was talking to her.

She’d had the foresight to call ahead and have an autocab waiting, and she ran the gauntlet and slipped in. Paid the extra for exclusive access so no one could slip into the seat beside her. She didn’t have much credit, but she’d planned her exodus to keep herself from getting overwhelmed.

She directed the taxi toward one of the hotels along the edge of Patterway District, which she’d vetted before being sentenced in the first place. Unless things had changed in the last eighteen months, it had a decent data line, and her limited credit should let her camp there for at least a week. If things had changed, well, she’d deal with that problem when it came for her.

For now, though, she just put her head back and listened to the autocab rolling along the road.

• • • •

The hotel room wasn’t much, but compared to a prison bunk, it was a wealth of space, privacy, time. Time to be alone with her thoughts.

And time to be alone with her hunger. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast that morning; lunch had been overridden by exit paperwork. She’d just become used to her meals happening without any consideration on her part.

These were things she’d have to un-get-used-to.

She tossed her stuff on the bed, and headed down to the hotel convenience shop.

Sometime when she hadn’t been paying attention, an unofficial passage to the undercity had opened up in Patterway District—which meant that the hotel was seeing a mixed clientele, which meant an odd array of convenience food in the shop. Instant noodles and dehydrated locust curry, tinned soups and mushroom vitamin bars. She was staring at the selection—decision fatigue already, and she’d barely been out of prison for an hour—when her datapad buzzed in her pocket.

Eighteen months without the thing, and it was still thoughtless, instinctive, to pull it out of her pocket and glance at the screen. She’d set it only to buzz for certain contact groups, and she blinked twice when she saw who was actually messaging her.

LogicalOR: *waiting on that blog post o martyr for the cause*

LogicalOR: *haha seriously welcome back to civilization i just bought you a beer*

And then a hand landed on her shoulder.

Aedo ducked, flipping her body around and backing into the shelf of locust curries. Her datapad came up like a taser, and the woman behind her held up both hands. She was late-middle-aged, in a business suit too good for this district but just about serviceable in the central business ones. And she held herself stiffly. Aedo wasn’t great at reading people, but she could recognize discomfort when she saw it; Patterway District must have meant slumming, for this woman.

“Sorry,” the woman said. “I suppose I should have known better.”

Aedo’s heart was lurching, and her shoulders had gone tense. For a moment she considered telling the woman that even if she *hadn’t* been in prison, she wouldn’t have appreciated that—wasn’t good with people, didn’t like contact with people, could still feel the ghost impression of the woman’s hand on her shoulder and it was making her skin crawl—but the words weren’t coming to her tongue, and it didn’t seem like the thing to say, anyway. “What?” was what came out.

“I should introduce myself,” the woman said, and extended a hand. Aedo tucked both of her hands under her arms, the datapad pressed against her ribs. After a moment, the woman let her hand drop. “I’m Valencia Cadares; I work in the Energy Division. I’d like to take you out to dinner.”

Oh, crap. Aedo thought.

Then she looked at the woman. *Cadares* wasn’t a name she recognized, and inviting a young hacker out to dinner seemed like an odd move for someone whose department had been screwed over by said hacker’s actions. Inside ally, maybe. Could be a bureaucrat trying to line up another leak, in which case Aedo would rather just point her at an anonymous server and call it good. “Why?”

Cadares hesitated. “Call it professional curiosity?”

“I’m not giving interviews,” Aedo said.

Cadares looked pained. “Please,” she said, then looked past Aedo, and glanced along the shelf of food. Gestured to the pemmican. “Unless vegetable shortening and protein powder is more appealing?”

Dammit. Aedo *would* have killed for a decent meal.

Or, if not killed, then rubbed elbows with someone from the Energy Division for a while. She eyed the woman, gauging the relative levels of danger and social awkwardness.

“You buying?”

• • • •

The place Cadares picked out was, unsurprisingly, in toward the central districts, where the buildings rose tall enough to segment the sky into a frustrated grid. Business-drone restaurant. In her T-shirt and jacket and pants with all their carpenter loops on it—loops which would never see use, because heck if she knew what she’d do with a hammer—Aedo was as obvious as a blinking light.

To her credit, Cadares seemed to notice the incongruity as soon as they walked in the door. But she set her shoulders, opened up the seat menu, and found them a booth near the back. Aedo kept her head down and followed Carades there.

Cadares sat first. Aedo slid into the booth opposite her and positioned herself to hide from as much of the restaurant as possible, her fingers making abortive little motions toward the datapad in her pocket. Eighteen months without the thing, and setting it aside for dinner seemed viscerally wrong, like she’d just gotten a sense back and had to numb it again. Of course, now she was sitting across from a woman whose generation still thought that bringing data to the dinner table was a breach of the social contract, or something.

Cadares was already turning her attention to the interactive tabletop. She selected a menu, swiped a few dishes on or off the offerings—accounting for cost, or ideological stance, or whatever—and sent the menu over to Aedo’s seat, where Aedo stared at it. The sheer overabundance of choice aside, this was the kind of food she didn’t normally eat. After a moment, she just poked the listing with the most ingredients she recognized.

“So,” Aedo said, and let the sound hang there.

Cadares made her decision, selecting a dish and a drink with two sharp jabs. “They always have such interesting selections here,” she said. “Apparently one of their menu

consultants spent part of his life around the cooking stalls in the Undermarket.”

That was . . . interesting, in a useless way. “Um,” Aedo said. “Why am I here?”

Cadares paused. It was very un-politician of her. “I suppose I wanted to get to know you,” she said, and Aedo thought *oh, shit, should I be thinking about stalkers?* Her semi-fame had gotten her name out there, and to read some of the boards, that was all it took for people to decide that your life was theirs, for their entertainment and one-sided emotional attachment. But Cadares just went on, “you know, get to know the mind behind the infamy. Maybe ask why you distributed those files.”

“I’ve given this interview,” Aedo said. “Like, a hundred times.”

“Humor me?” Cadares said.

Aedo sighed. She’d released her statements, she’d explained herself again and again, but everyone seemed to think hearing it direct from her voicebox would be so much more real than hearing it from a news clip. She didn’t think so. They’d still get a canned answer, because making up a new one for everyone who asked was a colossal waste of time.

“Because there’s no reason not to know,” Aedo said. “Energy reports—this is how we light our homes, right? This is what runs the computers and phones we use. That’s how we talk to each other, and work, and how we traverse large buildings and take autocabs across the city. This is stuff we need to live our lives, so why shouldn’t we know about it? What’s the point of it being secret?”

“Is that really it, though?” Cadares asked. “You didn’t need a reason to do it, you needed a reason not to?”

Aedo didn’t answer that. If people wanted to paint her as some kid with poor impulse control and an antisocial streak, they’d do it no matter how she protested.

“I believed we were being lied to,” Aedo said. Back to the security of a canned answer. “And then I looked at the data and it looked a lot like we were being lied to, and I didn’t—I don’t understand how people don’t get *angry* when they see that.”

“Ennui and apathy,” Cadares offered.

Aedo shook her head.

Cadares fixed Aedo with a stare. “No?”

“That’s what they always say,” Aedo said. Thing was, she didn’t know anyone who didn’t care. A few people claimed not to care, but look hard enough, and you could find something that kicked them off like a virus. Most of them just didn’t think there was anything they could do about it.

Well, she’d found something she could do. And they’d unloaded both barrels at her. Done the worst a topheavy bureaucracy could do. That was enough to deter plenty of people, but hey, she’d survived, and it’s not like her job prospects were much worse now than they had been before.

But before she was forced to articulate it, their food arrived, courtesy a post-education kid who still hadn’t grown out of his lanky phase and looked like the branded restaurant suit he was wearing was what he’d be wearing for the rest of his life.

Whatever Aedo had ordered, it looked like soup when he set it in front of her. Big chunks of vegetable and some kind of starch product and some kind of meat, with the kind of striation that suggested it had actually come from the muscle of an animal.

Aedo sawed a chunk into a smaller chunk with the edge of her spoon, and tasted it. It had some kind of identifiable and not-unpleasant flavor, which put it head and shoulders above what she’d been eating lately.

“I think you could do some good work,” Cadares said. “You’re skilled and civic-minded. I’d like to offer you patronage.”

Part of Aedo’s soup went down her windpipe, and she slammed down on her breathing to keep herself from choking out and making a scene. Cadares looked alarmed.

“Are you all right?”

Aedo made a series of gestures to her throat and the soup, and tried to wave Cadares off, and hoped that it read as *Don’t worry! Just fine!* and not *I am having spasms and need immediate help!* She focused on breathing through her nose, made a few small coughs until the instinct to hack up a lung subsided, and squeaked out “Is that still a *thing?*”

“I,” Cadares said, but after a moment her expression changed. Less taken-aback and more amused, maybe. “I have an extra room. You could do with some help getting back on your feet, couldn’t you?”

Aedo nodded, then caught herself and shook her head, then realized that was technically a lie and swallowed and said “Wait, you want me to move in with you?”

“Would that be all right?” Cadares asked. “I mean, you could certainly move in and see how you felt about it, and if you wanted to move out later you could.”

After navigating a whole world of socially awkward shit, Aedo expected. But really, was moving in with a strange woman from the Energy Division any more of a bad idea than moving in with a strange woman from the net? She’d done that before.

“Uh,” she said. “Okay.”

She also made a mental note to tell some of her friends in Virtual Liberation, just in case. It *would* be her luck to get out of prison and end up with a stalker.

• • • •

Cadares seemed content to hail a cab and check her own messages while Aedo pulled out her data pad, keyed up the screen, and sank into the comforting rhythms of checking the newsfeeds, slinging a bit of code, playing a round of Commerce, and letting the outside world take care of its own business without input from her. She was expecting the trip to take a good bit of time.

Instead, it wasn’t long before the cab slid to a halt and announced their destination, and she turned to blink out of the window.

Oh.

Cadares worked on the Energy Division, so something in Aedo’s brain had slotted her in with the energy farms outlying the city. But no, she was administrative, which meant that she was in one of the suburbs of the government sector, in one of those building where every flat took up a floor.

Cadares had the seventeenth, which meant that she signed them into the elevator lobby and they rode up, the city dropping away or rising with them as they ascended. It might not have been the top of the tower, but the view—inside and out—was extraordinary.

Cadares tossed her bag into the corner of the entryway and logged Aedo in as a guest, having her press her hand to the biometric panel at the door and keying in a set of permissions for everything from the main door to the refrigerator and showers. Then she led her across a livingroom space larger than Aedo’s old flat, and to a bedroom which nearly matched her old flat in size. The bed was better quality, though. So was the desk. And the data port looked top of the line, and already had a wireless hub glowing cheerfully from it.

“Make yourself at home,” Cadares said. “The only thing I’ll ask is that you don’t have friends visit here. I understand you have a source of income, if you want to meet them out?”

“Uh,” Aedo said. “A bit, yeah.” Which mostly meant bug bounties in distributed software and some shared income from distributed development, but Cadares seemed like the kind of person who wouldn’t think that was real work. Just a bunch of socially-awkward kids typing at each other over the net.

Which, you know, it *was* a bunch of socially-awkward kids typing at each other over the net. But also socially-awkward adults, and unexpected media dynamos, and charismatic project managers, and people who thought far too deeply about software until they came up with a change in one block of code that cut processing time from three hours to thirty seconds. People like Cadares probably didn’t know how much they owed to the socially-awkward-kids group.

“Good,” Cadares said. “We need to talk later. I can’t right now—I have a meeting I can’t miss. But really, please do help yourself to anything unlocked.”

Anything *unlocked*. Like she needed to say it. Like Aedo was going to hack the wine fridge, or something. She nodded, and Cadares turned to go. It took a moment for Aedo to get her throat to make a sound.

“Hey,” Aedo said.

Cadares turned back.

“Um,” Aedo shifted, and fished for words. “Look, I have this daemon on one of the VL community servers, it’s been checking my newsworthiness—I mean, that dipped during the sentence, but it’s up again, and—I mean, I probably already have a bunch of bullshit requests for interviews, and they’re going to ask about how I’m getting back on my feet after my prison sentence, you know, human interest stuff, and—”

She trailed off. Typing her thoughts was so much easier; she had a chance to get all the information in the right order instead of just blurting it out and hoping the recipient could extract the meaning from all the noise. This had always been a problem. If she sat down and thought through the sentences, she wasn’t talking fast enough; if she talked fast enough, her words were a mess. She was so much more comfortable in text, where latency was fine.

At least Cadares seemed to know what she was getting at. Her expression cooled.

“For the next week or so,” she said, “I’d prefer if you kept my name out of it. You can refer to me as ‘a patron,’ but please don’t disseminate any identifying data. After the week, I’d say you can share whatever you want.”

“Okay,” Aedo said. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected—Cadares taking in a young activist for the social capital? Capital with *whom?*—but the answer didn’t inspire confidence.

“If you need anything, my message address is coded in the flat,” Cadares said. Professional warmth was back in her tone. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” Aedo said, and Cadares left.

Aedo stood exactly where she was as the lift doors closed, and she listened to the noise-damped *shufffs* as it carried Cadares downward. Then she let out a breath and made a cursory effort at familiarizing herself with the flat. The windows were equipped with dimmers, the lights had adjustable spectrums, the couch wasn’t a smart couch, but it would be large enough for a very satisfying dogpile if she was allowed to have friends over. The food in the fridge was mostly heatable boxed meals from restaurants, the only doors that wouldn’t open were a glass door to an office space and an opaque door to what was probably Cadares’ bedroom. Aedo retreated to her own bedroom, and checked the newsworthiness daemon. She was up two points, probably as the larger sites and aggregators caught onto the blog noise.

Aside from the daemon, the next interesting thing on the pad was 15,289 new messages—a number that blipped up to 15,292 while she watched it. She turned the message center off. She’d need another daemon to classify those: hate mail, automated advertisements, VL list nonsense, requests for interview, support mail, messages from friends, total crackpot mail. Probably 2% of it would be something she actually wanted to read, and that was a daunting number all its own.

She sighed, opened up her script environment, and got to work.

A minute in, and something popped up on the corner of her screen. *Network connected*, it read. *This network has the following local public subscriptions: • Energy News Digest. • Energy Division Public Releases. • Energy Division Public Information Request Release Aggregate. Would you like to add these to your subscription manager?*

She blinked, then selected *yes* on the first and third. The second was already in her manager, the first was one of the zines whose subscription had lapsed while she was doing time, and the third—

Well, tucked under a title that could only have come out of a bureaucracy, *that* was the aggregated text of every file the Energy Division had to release in accordance with a Information Request from the public. The sort of thing someone working in energy would have access to, but a member of the public would have to request piecemeal. And 99% of it was probably people asking if they could upgrade their flats or businesses to draw additional power from the grid, but there was probably 1% that was gold.

Which was, at the moment, just more noise, when she needed to polish her life down to some signal. She turned back to the script.

• • • •

Four hours later she pulled her head out of the script and blinked at the clock on the corner of her screen. Her hand found the bottle of water she’d fetched; now empty, again. She got up, stretched, grabbed the bottle, and headed out toward the kitchen.

And there—who know how long she’d been there—was Cadares sitting on the couch, some white drink on the table in front of her, pouring over her data pad.

Aedo considered just slinking past her, but she didn’t feel comfortable enough for the kind of easy cohabitation she could manage with roommates. She cleared her throat.

Cadares didn’t look up. Just waved a hand at one of the empty spots on the couch, so Aedo slunk there instead.

The room still had its strange, preternaturally put-together grandeur in the dark, though the window glass had dimmed to black so their indoor light wouldn’t attract gazes. It felt more than a little like being in a submerged building, or one up in orbit. Or like Aedo imagined those places would feel.

“How was your evening?” Cadares asked, eyes still locked on the screen.

The lack of eye contact was the most comfortable thing about the situation. Aedo wished she’d brought her own pad out, let it distract her from the smalltalk. “Okay.”

“Any interesting reading?” Cadares said.

Aedo tucked her arms in around herself, and neglected to mention that she hadn’t actually gotten around to *reading* any. “I noticed you made some feeds local-public. I mean, I expect since you live alone, and they default to restricted access . . .”

She trailed off, and Cadares finally sighed, and set her pad to sleep. “I expected you’d be interested in them, so I changed the access settings,” she said.

Aedo nodded, two, three times. Then cleared her throat.

“So, why am I here?”

Cadares arched an eyebrow.

“I mean, I leaked energy data,” she said. “And now you’re giving me a feed full of request-only info? And the thing about ‘a patron,’ I mean, historically—”

Cadares held up a hand. Aedo’s jaw snapped shut.

“I do want you to do something,” Cadares said. “I thought it would appeal to your sensibilities.”

The muscles across Aedo’s shoulders went stiff.

“I need to see energy distribution records for One East,” she said. “I can request them, but I have reason to think they’re being doctored. I need the originals.”

“Um,” Aedo said.

“You do have a history,” Cadares said, and finally put her data pad aside.

Aedo might have counted down from ten, might have done some kind of calming exercise, except that her brain felt like a kernel of panic.

After a moment, she asked, “Do you actually know what hackers do?”

Now Cadares looked like *she’d* been handed an input error.

But that was all right, because more words were already tumbling up at Aedo’s teeth. “You want data espionage,” she said. “I mean, there are people who go and find security and try to crack it for fun, but that’s not the *def*—I mean, I hack, but I don’t crack. I got the energy data ’cause—I mean, did you actually read any of the reports on my trial?”

“I didn’t understand all of them,” Cadares admitted.

Aedo slumped back into the couch.

It was a very nice couch. Some kind of synthetic upholstery that yielded but didn’t let her sink down, smooth to the touch but not slick or squeaky. She’d spent two and a half days camped out on a couch like this, once, in a marathon coding session to put together a repository for people to secure politically-sensitive data. But that couch had been third- or fourth-hand, stuffed into a room full of third- or fourth-hand furniture, and the company had been people who knew what they were doing.

“Okay,” Aedo said, and wondered if Cadares would get on her data pad for this. She could write out an explanation—hell, she could link one. But the last time she’d tried that, the response had been an irritated *Just explain it to me; I don’t want to read all this stuff*, and anyway not a lot of people really *got* how much more comfortable she was communicating through writing than through voice.

There was a reason most of her friends were in VL.

“Okay,” she said again, and pressed her fingers into her temples. At least she did have some experience explaining these things to the non-net-savvy. “Let’s pretend computer security is like a door lock, okay? It’s not, but it’s complicated, and you don’t need to know all the stuff about it anyway. When people who aren’t hackers talk about hackers, they think about people who can pick locks or break down doors, yeah? But when hackers talk about hackers, they mean people who . . . do stuff around the building.”

She winced. If that had communicated any useful information, she’d honestly be surprised.

“When all the news sites were saying I was a hacker, people kinda thought I broke down a door and found a filing cabinet inside and broke into it and ran off with the documents. But a lot of us can’t do that sort of thing; we’re all about making better filing cabinets or windows, or—okay.” Deep breaths. She could wrestle this all into a coherent metaphor. Maybe. “Basically, what happened was, someone invited me into a building. But the building shared a basement with a public building that Energy was renting to store their files. I was poking around in the basement ’cause, you know . . . I don’t know. Reasons.”

The fun of poking around somewhere she wasn’t supposed to be, a snickering curiosity about how bad these servers were, a blog post or a VL list message she was composing in her head about *wow, guys, never run a site with these people, they don’t know how to separate user accounts*.

When the Energy Division had dug into how this had happened, they’d found that the people who were in charge of server procurement were the same people in charge of wastebin liner procurement and data pad procurement, not the people in charge of server management and data security. The guys in charge had just gone with the company that was known for highest uptime and largest traffic and hadn’t known to look at the demographics of the people using them: non-technical sorts who wanted to throw something onto the net and weren’t high-enough profile to attract the attention that would make them regret the horrible security.

Well, the ED had been high-enough profile. And they’d regretted it.

“While I was hanging around the basement, I noticed all these elevators, and they all had different people’s names on them. Different building’s names, I guess. And, I mean, most of it was like ‘cooltricks74’ and ‘Gotta Watch Vids’, but then there was this ‘Energy Division Data Backup 034-00A’ one, and I had to check it out. So I used this security exploit that *everyone* knew about and I got into that building and I started looking at the file cabinets, because none of them were locked, and I found stuff that I thought people

should know about. Like, what I did was basically someone found out that a bunch of pre-fab buildings all used the same key code, and they put up fliers around the city so that people could *change* theirs, and I saw a flier and remembered it, and the basement elevator used the same code. If the ED had used servers with that vulnerability patched, or even ones where I couldn't access the root directory, I would never have found the documents. I wouldn't have even tried." She looked at Cadares. "You get that?"

Cadares was watching her, a slight frown on her face, and a directness of eye contact that made Aedo squirm. Then, though, she sighed and said, "Internal incompetence?"

"Yeah," Aedo said.

"They needed a villain for the media."

" . . . yeah," Aedo said. Mentally, she started gathering up her stuff. Hadn't unpacked yet, that was good; she could probably get another room at the old hotel, and maybe Cadares would drop her off there. Even if she was useless for Cadares' grand ambitions. It probably wouldn't be too much to ask of her, would it? To save the ride fare?

But Cadares said, "You know people who can break down doors?"

Aedo thought of LogicalOR.

She was tempted to answer, *no*. This little exploit aside, she did her level best to stay away from that sort of thing. Plenty of crackers had the sort of ideology that roused rabble in Aedo's defense when she got arrested, but her relationship with those people wasn't one she wanted to invest time into improving.

No, she thought. She'd played this game once, and she'd lost, and until two minutes ago she thought she'd do it again with a smile, but she'd kinda wanted to have some time to *decompress* first. Hang out with her friends and program a swords-and-zombies game or something. Maybe go back to blogging about government responsibility and let that stand as her contribution to activism for a few months-slash-years. She could be a firebrand without being an idiot about it, right?

But the question rolled around in her until it hit the same little core of principle that got her into trouble the first time.

"You think they're being doctored?" she said.

Cadares nodded. "I'm almost certain of it."

Fuck.

"I can ask around," Aedo said. "But I—you know—you *do* know this is illegal, right?"

The instant she said it, she regretted saying it. Cadares stood, gave her a dark look, and exited the room without a word.

Fuck, Aedo thought again, and looked around the room. She'd had ambitions about sleeping, someday. Now it'd be another four hours looking up tutorials on how to check a room for bugs.

. . . .

Virtual Liberation resisted any attempts to define itself or limit membership, which meant that it had a bunch of data accessibility theorists, hackers, hacktivists, crackers, schoolkids with an affinity for programming and an omnidirectional resentment of authority, subaltern game developers, program-library contributors, hobbyists, and random people who showed up because they had net access and were curious about these things and who disappeared after a week because none of it made any sense to them at all. It was chaos; a complete mess. But a beautiful kind of mess like a primordial sludge pool, from which complex life could develop.

Or something like that. Aedo was a hacker, not an evolutionary biologist.

After a few hours of sleep, a shower, and a nuked box meal, Aedo logged onto the main boards and set up a private chat, pinging a subgroup of people she trusted to join. *Hey guys, want to talk to you all in confidence*, she typed. The people she trusted were people who'd know that *in confidence*, coming from her, directed to them, through this medium, wasn't a game. *Any of you ever come up with a plan of action for whistleblowers?*

There were a few moments of virtual silence, then waving ellipses showed up next to three or four nicks.

You could always count on someone to be online.

RHellion: *Whats up?*

Aedo let out her breath. The chat would archive from the beginning, so she could discuss things and not worry too much about having to catch people up later. The conversation would still be in the air.

Another reason virtual life was more convenient than the face-to-face kind.

Ayeball: *Made contact with an energy activist at the ED, Aedo wrote. Wants help getting docs out of One East. Fraud stuff. Thinks data is being manipulated before release from inside the division.*

A moment passed, and then the elipses started dancing again.

Asterhoidal: *WOW ayeball take a vacation! you JUST got out!*

GGXL: *I was working on that plan of action with Petey but it stalled out at around*

GGXL: *okay n/m I think you need more than a plan of action there, buddy.*

RHellion: *Guessing she tried getting an audit kicked off?*

Aedo tabbed over to her daemon and had it search the Energy Division Public Releases; an audit had to be reported publicly, and yeah, there it was. Nothing wrong, at least to the public eye. She copied the release into the chatroom, and LogicalOR popped up in the program's online nicks list.

Aedo winced. Whoever the mind was behind the username, they seemed to like excoriating her in all VL's discussions—when they weren't buying her a beer in honor of a prison stay, anyway. To be fair, they excoriated everyone who didn't take a militant approach to data democracy; they seemed to think the only strategy worth anything was getting into the government servers and causing as much mayhem as possible. Anyone else was clearly Not Serious Enough.

They might have dumped beer money into one of Aedo's public tipjars, but Aedo fully expected to be dropped from their good graces as soon as the novelty of her prison stay wore off. She was kinda expecting them to hack her data pad just to show that they could.

That was the one annoying thing about LogicalOR: when it came to working the net, they did know their stuff. They even had skills which might be useful if, say, someone needed to crack the security on a government database.

Virtual Liberation might be a complete primordial sludgepool, but it was really good at finding strange bedfellows when you needed them.

A message popped up in the corner of her screen.

LogicalOR: *so*

LogicalOR: *notice that your friend got sniped*

. . . that probably wasn't a good sign. She tabbed over and started to type.

Ayeball: *What?*

LogicalOR: *you totally moved in with valencia cadares*

LogicalOR: *chasing some businesslady tail or some new leaks yeah (i approve)*

LogicalOR: *well*

LogicalOR: *she is in with the cops my friend and not in a buddy buddy way*

The next message was a link to a news release.

Aedo clicked on it, and let the secure group chat chatter on without her. The new window bloomed up and covered all their words anyway, replacing them with:

TRUBLED ENERGY DIVISION LAUNCHES INTERNAL INVESTIGATION

Amid renewed scrutiny, ED detains seven employees with suspected ties to data terrorist groups

Aedo skipped the newseese; scrolled down, scanning until she found the words *Valencia Cadares* right there in paragraph three. A quick flurry of eye movement to find if there was anything about why they'd found her—material on her work computer, thank *god*, nothing there about surveillance in her home, just inadvisable net searches and a few illicit access attempts to parts of the network she didn't have permissions for—and for the first time Aedo wished someone had approached her *first* with a stupid idea.

She tabbed back to the messenger, and got as far as hitting the *W* key when two more messages popped up.

LogicalOR: *they are gunning for your kind my friend*

LogicalOR: *better watch out ;)*

LogicalOR signed off.

Aedo sat there for a moment, staring at the signoff message in her chat. Let the words spike her adrenal glands; remind her that yeah, humans had been a prey species once, and

wouldn't it be a shame to let those old instincts sit unused.
You could freeze, you could flee, or you could *fight*.
The conversation in the other window had rambled to a pause—waiting on some point of clarification that she wasn't going to focus on just now. She took a deep breath and returned her hands to the keys.
Ayeball: Uh, guys . . .
Ayeball: How would you feel about helping me do something fast? Like, maybe now?
Ayeball: And then maybe visiting me in prison again?

• • • •

The thing was, arresting Cadares wasn't even subtle. They could wave all the trumped-up charges at her that they wanted, but as someone who actually *worked* for the Energy Division, and as someone who'd done the reasonable, official thing and sparked off an audit, there was an entire legal conversation that was supposed to be happening right now. Terms like *reasonable suspicion* should have been all over the news release; words like *whistleblower protections*.
Terms which got conveniently forgotten any time something like this came to a head.
Aedo didn't understand why people didn't get angry about *that*, either.
Cadares' home office was locked with a passcode and biometrics, and maybe with a dedicated week and a lot of reading done on the blacklisted parts of the net, Aedo could have figured out how to bypass it. She could try guessing the password, too, but someone like Cadares would have a random password required at work, and probably would have just used the same thing at home. So Aedo went for the most effective option.
She went out to the livingroom, grabbed the coffee table, and slammed it against the latch until it gave way.
Cadares didn't live off her datapad. She was one of those people who could leave it behind without feeling like she was forgetting a limb. It was there, sitting on her desk, plugged into the lectric outlet, and a quick swipe of Aedo's thumb—and a quick polishing off of her thumbprint, after—showed the dashboard, open and unsecured.
Aedo grabbed it. Then she ran back to her bedroom and grabbed her bag, and stuffed Cadares' datapad down into it.
Time to make an exit.
Walk, don't run, she thought. If there had been a silent alarm on the door, she wasn't going to flee the place looking like she'd just triggered an alarm. She paused to hold the door open for someone, then went out onto the street. Slipped onto the first autocab she saw, sat down, and tried to pretend she had a destination other than "away".
Then she pulled out her own datapad—not Cadares', not yet—and put a set of parameters into venue search. Beauty salon, keyword: *whole image*, demographics: some crossover between new professionals and late-grade students, price range: . . . she hesitated. If this all blew up in her face, and she couldn't see how it wouldn't, she'd be out of a place to stay and in desperate need of resources.
Then again, if this all blew up in her face, she'd probably have a warrant out for her arrest. And prison was free rent. She typed in as much money as she had, and ran the search.
First things first: she needed a makeover.

• • • •

One of the benefits of finding a place that catered to students in the late grades was that they all knew their academic stipends were going to run out, and there was a kind of universal financial panic that accompanied that. Low cost, middling quality, and high demand kept places like *FASHION: Real World Incoming!* open, and they didn't blink too much at any misguided request Aedo could come up with.
Crop the hair short so it lay against her skull, pluck her eyebrows down to bored lines, shade the cheeks so the cheekbones appeared higher, emphasize the line of the upper lip and de-emphasize the lower, make her eyes appear larger, and the effect was that she looked like an intern who wasn't quite sure what notes to hit to get "professional" instead of "young counterculture," but was making a go at it.
And as an added bonus, if you changed the lines of contrast on your face, you could throw most facial-recognition programs for a loop. The high cheekbones, the dark upper lip—they made her computationally unrecognizable.
For more money than she'd wanted to spend, the folk at the salon had set her up with a set of interview clothes, all bland and neatly squared away. They made her skin itch with a sensation that was purely psychosomatic, but they were good camouflage. For her price, she couldn't ask for better.
The energy building was out on the far outskirts of the business district, where the land and infrastructure both dropped away and let you see that the place had terrain, underneath the stacked buildings and elevated roadways and the lectric lines, the data lines, the lines allocated to whatever the hell security did with them. Stepping out of the next autocab into its shadow, it was like walking back up to a prison: one massive edifice gleaming in the midday light, and blotting out half the sky. All these governmental buildings looked the same to Aedo; a sequence of brainchildren from architects who tried for wild invention and ended up fitting neatly in an acceptable range of lines.
The psychosomatic skin-crawl came back in full force, but Aedo squared her shoulders, tried for an expression of bored indifference, and pressed Cadares' data pad against the door. And got ready to run.
But there was no request for additional verification. No ever-so-convenient error that locked her out while a silent alarm sounded. Instead the door just slid open—because the data pad had the right accesses, so what did the system care about the person holding it?
Agencies like this, they talked security, but it was a perfunctory kind of talking. Politics had only just caught up to the idea that things like energy could be embarrassing to the state, and bureaucracy could take a long time to catch up to political exhortation. So that was one obstacle down.
Internal incompetence to the rescue, again.
Of course, now she was inside, and that was a whole new problem.
Cadares' datapad should have all the permissions it needed to get Cadares herself into anything she needed to use. Aedo, though, didn't know where that infrastructure *was*, and unauthorized access attempts were logged by default on most systems. No need for someone to know what they were doing to catch her at it. Asking a human person for directions wasn't going to end well; rumors spread in places like these, and an intern no one had ever seen before asking about someone who'd just been arrested was even less subtle than Aedo was being now.
She kept her head down. Tried not to look like she was rubbernecking as she rubbernecked around until she spotted an information kiosk, and strolled up to it. Its screens showed various intra-organization tidbits: an upcoming company hike on the pedestrian paths around the solar farms, costs down three and a half percent due to switching to responsive lighting, the employee being recognized for his or her contributions to the Energy Division was someone *decidedly not* Cadares . . .
A directory. *Finally*. Aedo hit the *organize by name* button with her knuckle, and there was Cadares, in the second column and the fifth floor.
Deeper into the belly of the beast. She just prayed there wasn't a security checkpoint between the lobby and there.
. . . which of course there *wasn't*. Just a lift with a camera, and she kept her head down, because of course everyone put their cameras in the ceiling even when you could buy ones small enough to hide behind a screwhole anywhere. Same reason people still worked at places like Abacus Lunch Delivery even when everyone searched for food by reputation instead of flipping through an alphabetized paper directory: culture was absolute shit at keeping up with technology. But she could complain about that on a day when it wasn't working to her advantage. She got out on the fifth floor.
Cadares' office responded to Cadares' datapad, and so did her computer, and Aedo sat down and tried to look bored and put-upon like she was there to clean up the harddrive after one too many unwise downloads. She wasn't actually sure that was something interns *did* at places like this; most of her exposure to office culture came through comedy vids and Virtual Liberation memes. But the screens lit up, and she was in, and then there was a lot more to pay attention to than whether or not she played the social role well.
Like a blinking icon in the corner of the screen.
One urgent message came up when she clicked on it. Half a page of official business header, and then the message began *In light of recent security threats, all Energy Division employees are advised to take the following security measures:*
• *Generate a new password*
• *Use Secure Logoff on all accounts and devices when you leave your desk*
• *Restrict all work to approved Division computers and devices—never log into your Energy Division accounts on a personal or shared device*
. . . and on like that. Aedo was about to close the window when her eyes skimmed down the notice on instinct, and caught something.

—expected to endure more security threats, both frivolous and serious, while data terrorist Aedo Liang’s release from prison is in the news cycle. Historically, short-term incarceration has not been an effective deterrent to hacker and terrorist groups. Therefore, it’s the position of this committee that all data espionage from or against a Government office be regarded as treason, and tried as such to the fullest extent prosecutable. We also recommend seeking special dispensation from Justice to try as many infractions as possible retroactively.

Aedo’s heartbeat spiked. She froze. Still sitting at the desk in Cadares’ office, still staring at the screen, still (hopefully, hopefully) camouflaged as well as she could be, but. *Treason.*

Her name. Right there in the internal memo. Sure, they’d buried the lede, but— Without thinking, she found a messenger program and hopped into the config. Aimed it toward one of the anonymizing proxies. Hoped the Energy Building used a net address blacklist and not a whitelist; hoped the connection wouldn’t be flagged. Then she forwarded the memo direct to LogicalOR.

They are gunning for your kind, my friend.
Deep breaths. Aedo risked a glance up, out into the hall where people went about their business without much thought for whether or not they had infiltrators in their midst. She had to wonder how many of them thought their jobs should be taken this seriously.

Treason.
Of course, that made this a whole new game. All the goals she’d had—*get in, learn what you can, get out, get the word out*—took a hard right into something much more active, because if they had zero tolerance on offer, it didn’t much matter if she’d broken in to take gloating selfies or if she planned on taking the whole network down with her. She might not be a computer cracker, but she had her own damn datapad with its own connection to the net and she had the best collection of computer resources in the world at her fingertips. *Long live the Liberation.*

If she was going to do one thing here, she was going to find out what the hell Cadares was after and what Energy District One East wanted so badly to hide. If she could do two, she was going to blast the whole thing wide, wide open.

And if she was very, very lucky, and got to do three? She would get out of here before they arrested her.
Again.

• • • • •

She had to move quickly. Not just because if she waited too long, the adrenaline would catch up to her and make her a quivering mess. Cadares had requested the energy distribution records for One East, and it was a simple matter to find the message in her email and open the attached data. Of course, Aedo could open it, and read it, but she didn’t know what she was looking *for* or how to make sense of it. As for whether or not it was being doctored, well, she didn’t know how Cadares had known—or suspected—and she definitely didn’t know what kind of tests you ran on energy reports to determine data sanity.

There was one good thing: the entire report *looked* machine-generated, not human-compiled and forwarded. Which meant that she could delve into the mail routing information and get the server it originated from, which meant a server that had access—in theory, at least—to the data she needed.

She was just copying that information into a new bot template when her own datapad warbled.
She cursed, then cursed herself silently for cursing out loud, and snatched it up to silence it. At least *that* still worked; it had been set to buzz or silent already, but whoever was trying to get her attention obviously didn’t care.

New messages from LogicalOR. Of course.

LogicalOR: remote gov gps backdoor

LogicalOR: in ALL the new opsys upgrades

LogicalOR: you IDIOT

She almost dropped the pad. She might have, if her response to panic these days hadn’t been to clutch her datapad tighter.
Maybe too little, too late, but she opened up the network config with a hotkey, hunted down and killed the GPS process, shuffled the encryptions, disconnected and reconnected and opened a log to see if there were any sniffers, any ping attempts, any data transfers that weren’t coming in over the approved chat lines. And yes: *there*. Could be nothing, could be automatic data monitoring on the government network, could be security, and she wasn’t interested in taking the risk.

She swiped the log aside and hit the voice call button in LogicalOR’s chat.
Fast as her typing was, it wasn’t as fast as voice. It was the one drawback.
She’d half-expected the call to go ignored—hell, she ignored her own calls unless the call was negotiated first—but LogicalOR must have been expecting this one, and picked up on the first ring. “*Ja?*”

Aedo startled at the voice. Sounded like a woman her age or a younger boy—or anyone, using a really *good* speech synthesizer. One without the rockiness and tonal skips of the commercial ones.

She didn’t have time to wonder. “What do I—”
“*Grab the Keyhole worm,*” LogicalOR said. “*Leave it there. I’ll get the thing.*”
“One East network,” Aedo said, and returned her attention to the computer to get its data address and read that off, too. The VL servers would have a Keyhole download—one with a new compression, a checksum that might not be blacklisted yet. And maybe in a minute or three she could get around to the shrieking in the back of her head—the one pointing out that she was installing a backdoor on a government computer and giving the code to an anarchist.

She was rapidly getting the feeling that she was burning every bridge in sight.
Not that it mattered; they’d been lit the moment she stepped outside the prison.
“*You freaked?*” LogicalOR asked. “*Breathing hard there, kiddo.*”

Aedo bit off a sharp retort. LogicalOR could mock. LogicalOR probably sat at a desk somewhere where nobody in the real world knew their virtual name and no one on the net knew who they were, and could go outside and walk past the neighbors and the security cameras and buy the latest and greatest computer components and take them home and not have their accounts monitored or the media picking at the story of their life. LogicalOR could damn well excuse Aedo for *breathing hard*.

“Need to get out,” she said.
LogicalOR huffed. Sounded amused. “*Go Undercity,*” they said, and Aedo’s heart skipped a beat.
“Never been.” She didn’t add that the thought of it terrified her.

“*Panic much? It’s not that scary. I live there.*”
That brought her up short, as her brain threw an input error. She hadn’t thought you could get data in the Undercity good enough to support the kinds of activities LogicalOR enjoyed. Then again, she’d never actually checked. And she definitely didn’t have time right now to grill LogicalOR on the data infrastructure of the Undercity.

“Patterway Dist entrance?” she asked.
“*For you? NorEast Crossing. Meet you there.*”
“Please don’t DC,” Aedo said. Ordinarily, she’d avoid having an audio line demanding her attention while she worked. But right now, if LogicalOR disconnected, she’d be back to being on her own, in the middle of a government building, facing down all her bad decisions. There were more of them than there were of her.

“*Still here,*” LogicalOR said. “*Trauma counseling available upon request.*” LogicalOR laughed.

Sure, it was an annoying kind of comfort, but there they were.
The Keyhole finished its download and began decompressing, and Aedo slid her chair back and killed her connections to the network.
“Need credit for an autocab,” Aedo said. She didn’t add, *I blew it all on the makeover to get in here*. She could call attention to her terrible planning-ahead skills, another time.

“*I’ll transfer,*” LogicalOR said. “*Get yourself a pretty one.*”
Aedo gathered up her datapad and Cadares’, and stood. “Okay,” she said. “Gotta go.”
“*DCing now?*”

Aedo closed her eyes for a moment. She didn’t want to kill this audio lifeline, but she knew better than to walk out with it open. Even if LogicalOR didn’t say something and draw attention to her, when they were reviewing the security footage after her great escape, they could still follow the transmission location. She wasn’t bouncing it at all.
“Yeah,” she said, and winced. “NorEast Crossing?”

“*Be there with bells on,*” LogicalOR said, and the line went dead.

Deep breaths.

She put her pad into lockdown; put everything on Cadares’ pad into lockdown except the local wireless it might need to open doors or sign her out. Then she went: down, back by the same path she’d come in on, every breath focused on looking like the same bored intern who had walked in here, every heartbeat shivering.

She made it down to the lobby with out a problem, but there, *Crap, crap, crap*, one of the bored uniforms was looking her way, pinched brow and drawn-out frown like he’d be a lot happier if nothing was going on, if no one was going to make his eight-to-five any more interesting than any other day of undifferentiated tedium. People didn’t go into bureaucrat-building security for the excitement, after all.

Too bad, Aedo had to think. She hadn’t gone into hacking for the excitement either. It had just come around and found her.

She turned away, not quite fast enough that she couldn’t see him getting up from his desk in the corner of her eye. “Excuse me, miss—”

Not excused. Not excused. She picked up her pace, then realized a second too late that that was the *opposite* of acting like she hadn’t heard him, then broke into a run. “Miss!”

Too late. She shoved Cadares’ datapad into the sensor by the door, which checked her out and opened the door automatically. Then she was darting onto the sidewalk, running up along the street until she could find and tag an autocab to come get her.

The door of the Energy Division offices slid open again behind her and she took a corner, and then another one, and then slowed to a walk and looked for another turn to take just to be sure. At least here, once she was walking, she wasn’t drawing glances; no one really *looked* at each other on the sidewalks, which made her much happier, as a rule. She flagged a cab as she walked, but she didn’t stop walking: she was more worried about getting caught on the sidewalk waiting than about anything else.

NorEast Crossing.

She got in the cab that stopped by, and keyed a destination. Outside the window, the view devolved from office towers to office-worker flats to smatterings of generic commercial buildings to the bric-a-brac of neighborhoods which hadn’t yet been caught up in the big Standardization and Modernization pushes. Little bits of undercity here in the city proper. The autocab came to a stop and let her out in front of one of those doorways you could walk past and quietly edit out of your awareness—a blocked-off alleyway leading off into disrepaired territory, all but yelling out, *Heya! Don’t want to get involved with **this**, here!* And Aedo didn’t. She really, really didn’t.

Which meant that when the cab rolled away, she stood in front of the door, breathing in and out to the bottom of her lungs, just like she’d learned to in prison to keep the walls from clapping in on her or the sound of voices from drowning her. Here, it was nothing so straightforward or small as claustrophobia, demophobia. It was fear of an entire future: waking up tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, every day greeted by the question *What do I do now?*

Now, though, there was only one option.

She went down the narrow corridor—just a gap between buildings—to a place where the industrial ground had been breached, and an access ladder could be glimpsed through it. Then, securing her pad and Cadares’, hand over hand down into this district of the undercity, where halogen lights stood in for the sun, and where freedom—after a fashion—might await.

• • • •

The sky receded above her, blocked out by buildings and raised streets, and the shadows of the Undercity seemed to gather themselves up to sniff out the newcomer. Aedo hugged the datapads to her chest, taking in the sights.

The light of day only cut through to the ground here in patches and slices, carving vertical roads of dust motes through the air. The whole place looked makeshift—oh, there were permanent buildings, but old ones, built long before the algorithmically-perfected districts above had been built over them. And over time, they’d collected all sorts of unofficial additions, from new rooms to balconies to sheds to lectric and data links to masses of reinforcements like scar tissue as the original infrastructure failed. And the disorder was replicated on the street below: crates and boxes and dumpsters and trash, here and there, though less than Aedo had been expecting; ancient cracked pavement and walkways and alleyways at odd angles, and dark patches between buildings that might have been walkways or might not.

Not a lot of foot traffic here, she guessed. She thought she could hear people moving; could hear voices, though distant, and she didn’t see anyone until her thoughts were interrupted by a quiet *snerk*.

She spun around to see . . . *someone*, just now emerging from one of those dark patches between walls. Someone just a touch taller than her, of indeterminate age and sex, hair bleached white and frizzing despite what looked like a lot of effort to get it to hang flat, wearing a jacket and combat trousers with too many pockets bulking up their frame. They were watching her with what looked like incredulity. Then they whistled.

“You,” said LogicalOR, “look *nothing* like your press photos.”

Aedo was startled into a laugh. “Yeah,” she said, and then fished after something witty to say. It’d be easy to find one if she was sitting with her datapad out. “. . . um, hi.”

Her hand shifted on the datapads and LogicalOR’s gaze went straight to them, pale eyes looking even paler in the undercity dark.

“They can still track those,” LogicalOR said. “Not like there’s some magical shield that zaps a trace as soon as you get down here. Lemme root ’em for you.”

There was something viscerally wrong about handing over her datapad to someone else to muck about with. But Aedo didn’t much want to be caught and tried for treason, so she ignored the sick feeling at the pit of her stomach and handed both pads over.

LogicalOR snatched them up, then turned and walked to a nearby crate to sit down. Their eyes hadn’t left the pads, and Aedo had to blink twice—this whole environment felt like a mass of object disorder, somehow different to the disorder in any of the districts up above.

But maybe that was an illusion. Maybe it was just because she knew this was the undercity now, and all the rumors and clickbait and creepy on the net was clouding her judgment. LogicalOR’s familiarity with the place was probably no different than her easy familiarity with—

—well, with places she might or might not ever get to see again, now.

That realization settled on her stomach, and she went to sit down by LogicalOR. They’d turned over both datapads to read model and series numbers, and raised an eyebrow.

“The off-the-shelf is Cadares’,” Aedo said.

LogicalOR broke into a ferocious grin. “I like it,” they pronounced. “You go in for illegal access and come out plotting treason. Like, clearly the Upcity justice system has no effect on this one.”

“I didn’t *come out* plotting treason,” Aedo protested.

“Ja,” LogicalOR said, clearly unimpressed. “Like, this just kinda *happens*, you know.” They turned back to the datapad. “If you need a place to crash, I’ve got room. Long live the Liberation. Gotta have each others’ backs.”

Aedo closed her eyes, and counted her breaths. She did need a place to crash. The fact that this was her option was a damn sight better than not having one.

She’d just keep telling herself that.

“What do you do down here?”

LogicalOR laughed. “Maybe, you know, don’t fetishize the whole Upcity everything-at-your-fingertips thing. People *do* live down here.” They were quiet for a moment, and Aedo counted a few more breaths. “I do data,” they said. “Utilities. You could help.”

“Utilities?” Aedo asked.

“Yeah. You know. Data is life.” LogicalOR pulled a thin strip of datafilm out of one pocket—then fished out an adapter and plugged it into one datapad. A reboot, three keystrokes, and the screen went black—then went to a progress bar, non-system-standard and adorned with little dancing masks. “And your data is about to go *poof*. Wave bye-bye to your digital trail today.” Then, as if to cement it, LogicalOR actually did wave. “Bye-bye!”

It felt a bit like Aedo was vanishing, herself. “You have to explain all this,” she said.

“Ja, ja,” LogicalOR said. It was one of the principle rallying points of VL: right to data about you; right to know how your data was being stored and used. Or, in this case, systematically erased. “We will level you up. A+ celebrity cracker-hacker.”

The progress bar finished, and LogicalOR handed back the first pad. It was Aedo’s imagination—she had enough sense to know that—but it seemed lighter.

“Welcome to the underground,” LogicalOR said, and their grin promised an entire future Aedo would never have considered on her own. “We’ll take care of you here.”

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An(pronounce it “On”) **Owomoyela** is a neutrois author with a background in web development, linguistics, and weaving chain mail out of stainless steel fencing wire, whose fiction has appeared in a number of venues including *Clarkesworld*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Lightspeed*, and a handful of Year’s Bests. An’s interests range from pulsars and Cepheid variables to gender studies and nonstandard pronouns, with a plethora of stops in-between. Se can be found online at an.owomoyela.net.

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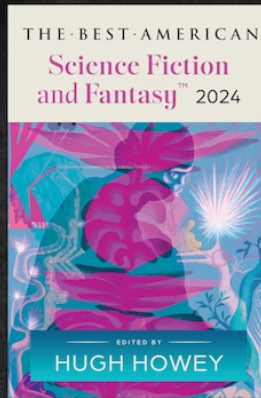
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 **MARINER**

A LOVE STORY WRITTEN ON WATER

Ashok K. Banker

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1

Bhi'ash was a king of the Axe clan. Truthful and courageous, he was renowned for having performed one thousand Black Horse sacrifices and one hundred Fire sacrifices. For his devotion, upon his demise he attained entrance to the heavenly realms and was honored by the Stone Gods.

One day, Bhi'ash—accompanied by many other king-mages and some of the Stone Gods themselves—went to pay homage to Agar, the highest of Stone Gods. Jeel, queen of all rivers on Arthaloka, also came to pay her respects, clad, as always, in a flimsy garment as white as moonlight. Just as she presented herself before Agar, a wind blew away her insubstantial garment and she was left completely exposed.

Embarrassed, all present averted their faces, except for King Bhi'ash who found himself unable to avoid admiring Jeel's beauty.

Aware of his unabashed gaze, Jeel felt her emotions stir and was curious as to who this king-mage might be who dared to look upon her undaunted when even the Stone Gods had lowered their eyes.

As Bhi'ash continued to stare at her nakedness, completely lost in contemplation of her beauty, Agar took offense at his rudeness. "Shameless one, for this you shall be reborn once again in the mortal realm." But because his sin was only a minor one, the Creator also decreed that once that mortal life was ended, Bhi'ash would once again attain the heavenly realms. Bhi'ash did not protest or object to the punishment, which only increased Jeel's curiosity. He only asked Agar, with a humility that was ironic considering the boldness of his request, if he could be born as the son of a great ruler in his own lineage. After seeking a suitable candidate, he proposed King Shapaar. His request was granted and he prepared to descend one last time to the mortal realm to accept his danda, or karmic punishment, without complaint.

After a last glance at her admirer who had willingly accepted punishment for the simple act of gazing at her, Jeel departed the court of the Stone God.

2

Around this time, a similar penalty had been imposed upon the eight Vessas. These divine dwellers in the heavenly realms had committed a grave error and as a result were also cursed to take rebirth in human form on Arthaloka for a single lifetime.

The great Lord Mage Kenikyu, son of Vrrun, lived upon Mount Coldheart, king of mountains. In that idyllic place, he performed his austerities and sacrifices. Needing a plentiful supply of ghee to offer, he sought out a cow. He appealed to Sage Yapashk, who fathered upon Rabhi, daughter of Shask, a magical cow capable of fulfilling every desire. Despite her magical properties, Kenikyu only used the cow sparingly to obtain the milk product he required for his sacrificial offerings.

One day, the divine Vessas came to Mount Coldheart. It was common for Stone Gods, seer-mages, and other divine personages to rove the idyllic forests of Mount Coldheart. The Vessas came with their wives and made love upon that scenic slope. Afterwards, wandering near the hermitage of Kenikyu, the wife of Kwayg chanced upon the magical cow. Realizing by the power of her own divinity as well as the cow's extraordinary qualities that it was no common animal, she tested its nature. She was astonished by its powers and rushed back to her husband. Kenikyu was away at this time. Urged by his wife, Kwayg came to see the cow and was equally amazed by its celestial beauty and powers. He saw the hermitage and immediately knew that it was Kenikyu's. He told his wife, "I know of this divine cow. It belongs to Runya's son, Kenikyu, who lives here. Apart from its ability to produce anything one desires, this creature's milk grants anyone who drinks it ten thousand years of undiminished youth!"

Hearing this, the wife of Kwayg was struck by a thought. Her dearest friend Jinnavati, daughter of King-Mage Shianarr, was the most beautiful young woman and dearly desired to retain her youth and beauty forever. "How wonderful it would be if we could give to her this cow's milk to drink. She would be able to stay young and lovely always!" The only way to do so would be to take the cow as well as its calf to Jinnavati, in order to draw the milk fresh before drinking. Kwayg was hesitant but his wife seduced him with amorous promises and he succumbed. With the help of the eldest Vessa Thuir and their other brothers, they stole the cow and her calf and took her to Nnava's domicile.

Kenikyu had left the hermitage to collect fruits. When he returned and found the cow and calf missing, he grew concerned for their welfare. Worried they might have gotten loose of their tethers, he searched for them in the forest. But when he could not find them anywhere, he knew something was amiss. Resorting to his divine sight, he perceived that they had been stolen by the Vessas to please one of their wives. Enraged, he cursed the Vessas. As divine beings who had never set foot on Arthaloka, the worst punishment possible for them was to be sent down to the mortal realm where they could never enjoy the same powers and pleasures they enjoyed here in heaven. Therefore he cursed them to be reborn in human form for a single lifetime.

Feeling the effect of the curse, the Vessas raced back to Mount Coldheart. They prostrated themselves before Kenikyu and pleaded for clemency. But for a very long time, he remained adamant. Finally, acknowledging that all of them were not equally responsible for the transgression, he modified his curse. "As you only did your brother's bidding, you will be permitted to return to the heavenly realms after spending a year on Arthaloka. But Kwayg, who was fully aware of his crime, shall remain in the world of men for the entire duration of his mortal lifetime. In addition, because he was seduced into committing this crime by promises of amorous pleasure, therefore he shall be denied the pleasure of cohabitation during his time on the mortal plane. He shall remain celibate and shall sire no offspring. He may devote himself to the pursuit of Krushan law in order to learn right from wrong, and attain skill in the use of weapons, remaining always among men and neither gaining pleasure from nor giving satisfaction to women."

3

Remorseful and stricken, the Vessas left the heavenly realms and were making their way to the mortal world when they met Jeel, who had only just departed the Stone God's court. She heard their voices and saw their agitated state and enquired what the matter was. They told her the story. She sympathized with their plight and told them of King Bhi'ash, who had just been sentenced with the same penalty, albeit for a different reason.

When the Vessas heard that Bhi'ash was to be reborn as Sha'ant, the son of King Shapaar in the great line of Krushan, they saw an opportunity. "Great goddess of the river, grant us your grace. We have never entered the womb of a mortal woman before. Our divinity shall be diminished if we do so now. You are the purest epitome of womanhood in all the worlds. Descend upon Arthaloka and allow us to be born as your children."

Jeel had sympathy for the plight of the Vessas but she was hesitant for one reason. "In order to do as you wish, I would have to cohabit with a mortal man. His seed would have to enter my womb."

"Let the man be this same Emperor Sha'ant in whose mortal body Bhi'ash will take rebirth. Sha'ant is destined to be a great king and Bhi'ash's illustriousness is already legendary. We would be honored to have such a personage sire us in the mortal world."

Jeel thought of the way Bhi'ash had stared openly and unashamedly at her nakedness in the Stone God's court and also of the powerful emotions that had stirred within herself when she returned his unabashed gaze. There had been a great sharing of erotic energy between them at the time, and she could still feel her loins stir with desire for him. If she consented to help the Vessas, she would have an opportunity to copulate with Bhi'ash in his mortal form as Sha'ant, and fulfill her suppressed desires. It would not be for selfish fulfillment but for a righteous cause.

She agreed to do as the Vessas requested. "Very well. I will agree to cohabit with Emperor Sha'ant on Arthaloka and give birth to you. But once born, you will have to live out your lives as mortal men. Is that acceptable to you?"

The Vessas discussed the matter and said, "Seven of us are permitted to return home after spending one year on the mortal plane. Therefore, all you need do is to hurl each of your newborn sons into your own waters after birth. Through your divine channel, which connects all three worlds, we shall ascend back to heaven. Cruel as this may seem, it is in fact a blessed release, for to stay mortal is greater suffering for us than for mortal children to be drowned at birth." They added wistfully, "Only our brother Dryou shall have to remain on Arthaloka for the entire span of his mortal life. That is part of the curse."

"It is good," Jeel said thoughtfully, thinking of Sha'ant. "Slaying the seven of you may release your souls for ascension, but it deprives Sha'ant of his sons. This way, at least one will remain with him to be his heir."

"It shall be so," they agreed, "but there are certain conditions. The eighth son cannot have children of his own or mate with any woman."

Jeel nodded sadly. "If that is what the curse demands, so be it."

King Shapaar was a deeply devout man. He spent every moment he could spare in meditation. His favorite spot was a certain place on the banks of the Jeel. One day while he sat cross-legged, lost in silent contemplation, Jeel rose in human form. Emerging from the river in droplets and spray that coalesced to form the shape and solidity of a human woman, she stepped onto the bank and approached Shapaar. So absorbed was he in meditation, he did not notice her approach. So she sat on his right thigh.

Opening his eyes, Shapaar was unperturbed by this sudden appearance of a beautiful woman. As a king and a warrior, he had seen and experienced all the ways of the world. He asked Jeel kindly, "Blessed Goddess, what is your desire?"

Jeel replied coyly, "I desire *you*, great king. Take me and love me. I offer myself freely of my own will. I am brimming with desire and cannot be spurned."

Any other man might well have accepted her without question or further comment, but Shapaar was a spiritual man more concerned with seeking the delights of the soul than the pleasures of the flesh. "Lady, you are beautiful and desirable. But I do not know you. I cannot cohabit with any woman without knowing her in some detail. It would be against Krushan law."

Jeel replied, "Making love to me can never be forbidden or against Krushan law. This much I assure you. I bear no ill will or malice towards you, and have no ulterior motives. I genuinely desire union with you. Love me as I wish to love you."

But still Shapaar resisted temptation. "In that case, you are greatly desirable, that I cannot deny. But alas, you have chosen to seat yourself on my right thigh. That is reserved for daughters, daughters-in-law, and granddaughters. If you desired to have pleasure with me, you should have seated yourself on my left thigh, as that is the proper place for a lover to seat herself. This choice suggests that it is not appropriate for us to cohabit, no matter how great your desires. It would most certainly be against Krushan law and I cannot condone that."

Jeel was not disappointed, for she had known all along what she was doing. "O king, you say the right thigh is the proper seat for a daughter-in-law. Therefore make me your daughter-in-law. Unite me with your son. I am sure a king as magnificent as you are in appearance and wisdom will have an equally illustrious son. It would be my privilege to mate with him and add my contribution to the famous Krushan line."

"So be it," said Shapaar gladly. "However, wise and insightful as you are, you must also know that I have no son and heir as yet."

"I do know this," Jeel admitted. "Yet I am of divine nature and can wait as long as need be without aging or losing my beauty. Therefore I shall gladly wait until you sire a son, for I have decided that he alone shall satisfy my desires. Whenever you have a son and he becomes of marriageable age, bring him here to this very spot and I shall appear to offer myself as his mate. I shall bear him many sons and enhance the reputation and glory of your dynasty, of this you can be assured."

"It shall be as you say, divine one," Shapaar said, understanding that a being of great power was blessing his lineage.

Jeel rose to leave, then paused and turned briefly. "King Shapaar, I ask only that you do not reveal my divine nature to your son. Do not tell him who I am, even if you suspect the truth yourself. Also tell him that if he wishes me to bless your bloodline, then he must never question what I do, no matter what the circumstances. These are the only two conditions I lay upon you. If they are acceptable to you, then know that your descendants shall be blessed with divine power and fame as a result of this union."

Shapaar accepted all her conditions and watched as she walked slowly from the bank onto the rushing waters of the river. She stepped across the raging surface of the Jeel as if she were stepping on kusa grass. Dolphins leaped and sang in greeting, turtles swam around her in homage, and her power over the river was evident. When she was in mid-river, her body itself turned to water and fell back into the spate from whence it had come, leaving only her clear grey eyes lingering in mid-air for a moment. Then they too melted into spray and were absorbed by the river. The sound of the Jeel's roar filled Shapaar's ears once more and in its steady torrent, he recognized the voice of the beautiful stranger who had accosted him. But he kept this knowledge of her divinity and true identity a secret within his heart for all time and spoke of it to no one.

In time, Shapaar and his wife performed austerities to obtain the blessing of an heir. Despite their advanced age, a son was born to them. This was in fact Bhi'ash reborn under the terms of his danda. Shapaar's son came to be known as Sha'ant, because he was created after his father had achieved the state of quietude, Shanti, and gained control of his senses. Indeed, the moment he knew he had a son and heir, Shapaar began preparing him for kingship, and himself for retirement.

Sha'ant grew up to become a magnificent young prince, intelligent, well-versed in Krushan law, and an expert archer. When he was of age, his father summoned him to the throne chamber and sent away everyone else. When they were alone, he confided in Sha'ant. "My son, your mate in life has been pre-ordained."

Sha'ant was an obedient son who was willing to do whatever was asked of him. "Father, if you have chosen a wife for me, I am sure she is no less than Sri herself descended on Arthaloaka. Whomever you choose is acceptable to me."

Shapaar was pleased by his son's response, but this was no ordinary arranged match he was referring to. He attempted to explain, choosing his words carefully in keeping with Jeel's wishes. "The match is somewhat unorthodox," he admitted to his son. "For one thing, you cannot ask who she is, nor seek any knowledge of her family, lineage, background, or any other details of her life."

Sha'ant was surprised but did his best to be supportive. "Your word is law for me, father," he replied. Though he did wonder at the strangeness of an arranged marriage wherein nothing was known about the bride or her family background.

Shapaar clapped a hand on his son's shoulder. Even at his young age, Sha'ant had a neck that the court scribes described as being "as thick as a conch shell" and shoulders and arms as strong "as elephant tusks." The exaggerations were not far off the mark; Sha'ant took pride in building his own strength and his many activities kept his body fit and strong. Shapaar had no doubt the boy would grow up to be a great warrior and a conqueror of his enemies. It was Sha'ant's judgement as a lover and husband that now concerned him.

"All you need know," Shapaar said, "is that she is no ordinary woman. Her beauty is extraordinary, and you will find great pleasure in her company. You shall enjoy great satisfaction in her charms."

Sha'ant was not sure how to react to his father's description of a woman in such terms, so chose to say nothing. But his father's next words frankly shocked him.

"She first offered herself to me," Shapaar confessed, "a long time ago. I refused only because I did not deem it appropriate."

Sha'ant could not contain his curiosity. His princely upbringing and teachings urged him to remain silent but the boy in him got the better of his grooming. "Why, father?" he asked. "If she was such a great beauty, why did you refuse her?"

Shapaar smiled a wistful smile. "I loved your mother well enough for one lifetime. Carnal pleasure was never a great attraction for me. It is the spiritual delights of the mind that attract me far more than those of the flesh. But also, the signs were not right." He frowned, staring into the distance thoughtfully. "Indeed, looking back on that day, I later thought . . ."

"What, father?"

"I thought perhaps she intended not to seduce me, but only pretended to do so. It was you she was after all along."

"Me?" Sha'ant was flabbergasted by the idea of a woman pretending to seduce his father in some past time in order to seduce him at some future date. "But that makes no sense at all. You said this happened before I was even born!"

Shapaar nodded. "That is why I know, and you know as well, that she could be no ordinary woman. No ordinary mortal woman. Do you follow my meaning?"

Sha'ant did. His father was suggesting that the mystery woman was some kind of . . . goddess? Avatar of a goddess? A serapi or harva perhaps? They were considered supremely beautiful. "Who do you think she—"

Shapaar raised a finger, his wrinkled face turning severe. "Enough. No more questions about her. That is a firm condition she insisted upon. This is why I had this talk with you, so that you would understand and accept these terms before you went to her."

Sha'ant glanced around, his emotions roused. "Where is she then?"

"First promise that you are ready to accept her conditions," Shapaar spelled them out clearly and carefully for his son.

Sha'ant considered for a moment: Mate with a woman who was clearly of divine or otherworldly origin, unspeakably breathtaking to look upon—if she could have such an effect even on his ascetic father she must truly be a legendary beauty—and capable of giving a man immense carnal pleasure, who wished to confer herself on him, indeed, had desired him since even before he was born, and produce beautiful, magnificent children with her, of whom one would rule his kingdom someday and be a legendary and historical king of the Krushan? What was there to consider? Except . . . he desperately wished to know who she was and what was her purpose in seeking him for so long. What part did he play in this divine game? But that was the first and most important condition: He could never ask who she was or anything else about her.

He hesitated only briefly, but for a boy of his impetuous age and great appetites, even that hesitation was a foretelling of things to come. Perhaps I shall find a way to learn her secret without her knowing, he thought to himself, to know everything without breaking the promise. Yes, I am sure I shall be able to do so. For he was a prince of a great empire, heir to the Burning Throne, and of the age when anything seems possible, even the most extraordinary feat imaginable.

Aloud, he said simply: "I agree."

Soon after this curious conversation, King Shapaar installed Sha'ant upon the Burning Throne and retired to the forest with his wife, where they spent the rest of their days in pursuit of spiritual ascension.

Sha'ant went on to fulfill all the promise of his childhood and youth, becoming a powerful young king. Intelligent and gifted with many physical skills, he grew renowned for his archery. Like many kings of his line, he spent his spare time hunting in the forest. His favorite game were deer and buffalo.

One day, while hunting alone on the banks of the Jeel, he encountered a vision: The most beautiful woman he had ever seen seemed to suddenly appear out of nowhere. He had been watching the bank carefully, tracking a deer, and she could not possibly have come from the treeline, which meant she must have come from the river, but there was no sign of boat or raft. One look at her and it suddenly failed to matter where she had come from. She was the supreme epitome of womanhood, comparable to the great Stone Goddess herself, as that great deity was described in puranas and tales of gods and demons. Her physical form was perfect in every respect, with not a single fault or blemish. When she smiled at him, her teeth flashed white, brilliant and perfect. Her face was so beautiful, he could have gazed at her all day and never tired of looking at her. Enhancing her beauty further, she was dressed in golden jewelled ornaments of a design he had never seen before, scintillating pieces of great workmanship and art. Her splendid body was barely concealed by flimsy translucent garments that swirled around her in the gentle lotus-fragrant wind from the river.

At the sight of her, Sha'ant's every hair stood on end, and he dropped his bow as well as the arrow he had been holding. He was stunned by the sight of her. Even more astonishing than her beauty was the fact that she gazed at him with a look that bordered on pure adoration. She came closer, her diaphanous garments moving about her as her ripe, full body undulated with each step, and as she approached, he could see that the look in her eyes was nothing less than pure wanton lust. Her own gaze moved up and down his own body, admiring his masculine figure and assets. Never before had he been admired so boldly by a woman, never before had he looked so unabashedly upon a woman of such perfection.

"Who are you?" he asked in a voice hoarse with desire. "Are you a god perhaps? An urrk? Harva, serapi, shael, or pannacron?" Belatedly it occurred to him to add, "Are you human at all? You cannot be! Human, I mean. You are surely a goddess of some kind."

Through all these questions, and the spaces between them, spaces in which he could hear nothing but the thundering of his own waves of lust washing upon the shore of his mind counterpointed by the roaring of the Jeel in spate, she remained silent. Only the wanton abandon in her eyes and the sultry movements of her body, clearly aimed at arousing him further, served as her replies.

Finally, he said, "Goddess or otherwise, whoever you are, please be mine!"

He said these words gently, not in command. And as he said them, he moved slowly towards her, raising his hands in a gesture of wanting, of pleading.

She smiled slowly, and he could not help but smile back, and that simple act of exchanging smiles seemed as intense and satisfying as coupling with most other women. He realized then that he had never truly known love, desire, or lust—not until now. What he felt now, this was true desire, real lust, and perhaps true love. He knew only that he wanted her and was willing to pay any price to have her in his bed, in his life. At that precise moment, so consumed was he by his desires, he did not even recall the prophecy that Shapaar had made before leaving for the forest: "She will come to you one day, and change your life forever." Only much later that night, looking back on the day, would he remember those words his father had spoken, and realize that this was that day, and this the very woman. His body, his nerves, his heart and his organs of desire, they all knew what his conscious mind had yet to accept at the moment of meeting: this was she. The one who had promised to come for him, who had been waiting since long before his own birth. And suddenly everything made sense.

"I shall be yours only in marriage," she replied softly, her voice as musical as the song of the river itself. "And only on the conditions your father laid down. Do you recall those conditions? Can you promise them to me once more? If you can make those little promises and abide by them, we can be married this very day and spend this night itself together, as man and wife."

Sha'ant swallowed. Nervousness was never one of his traits. A strong, powerful man with great gifts of mind and body, he had been raised without reason to doubt himself or his abilities. Yet before this vision of a woman, he felt tongue-tied and as nervous as an errant disciple before a stern guru. "Yes," he said softly.

She smiled. And took a step closer. Now he could smell her fragrance, the soft musky perfume of womanhood mingled with something undefinable: It smelled like the river itself, lotus and fresh glacial water and the Coldheart Mountain wind that travelled down with it. It was intoxicating as soma and almost drove him to his knees. It was all he could do not to crush her in his arms and have his way with her there and then. And from the look of mischievous teasing in her own lustful eyes, he knew that she was well aware of the effect she had on him.

"Let me repeat it for our mutual benefit," she said, stepping slowly around him, like a bride around the sacred Stonefire at the time of wedding nuptials. "You shall never ask me who I am or whence I come. You shall never question anything I do or try to stop me. You shall never even speak harshly to me of those acts or attempt to dissuade me by word or tone of voice, gesture or expression. So long as you give me complete freedom to do as I please and go where I please to do it, I shall be your queen and make your every desire a reality. The instant you break these vows, I shall leave you and you shall never see me again in this form."

He did not know if she had circumambulated him once, twice, thrice, or more. All he knew was that she had now stopped, and was before him once again, her body, her beauty, her face, her voice, all driving him to unbearable heights of lustful longing. "Give me your answer now or go your own way," she said. "The choice is yours. I shall not repeat myself nor come before you again if you refuse."

At this he paused. So he had a choice. That was good. Some part of him, the most kingly, mature part, the part that had been schooled so thoroughly in Krushan law, that still sane part whispered that it was a fair offer: He was free to reject it and go his own way. There was no coercion involved.

Of course, sometimes the most powerful form of coercion is the illusion of free will itself. Thus does destiny tempt and seduce us time and again. I chose, we say proudly. But what other choice did we truly have?

He could refuse her conditions. They were strange, unacceptable conditions. It did not matter whether they were being demanded by a woman or a man; what spouse could demand unconditional acceptance of any act of commission by their spouse? Without fear of censure, without even the power to dissuade or comment? That was not a marriage; it was an autocracy!

And yet.

And yet.

He desired her more than he had desired any woman before. Or *anything*.

He wanted her.

He must have her.

And she wanted him just as badly. That was evident in her eyes, her body, her every movement, the gentle shudder she released when her hip had accidentally brushed against his rear as she circumambulated him. The quick intake of breath when she leaned closer to him and spoke her most recent words. The blazing flames of desire in her eyes. Those could not be feigned so well. She desired him and had carried the torch of desire aflame and alight for a great length of time. He was new to this. She had been waiting here a long time and her lust burned brighter and sharper for that long wait.

And within himself, he felt a stirring of some ancient memory. As if he too had seen her once before, and desired her. A memory, half-formed, of her in the same flimsy garments, wind-blown, then laid naked by a gust of wind. And he shuddered in the paroxysm of lust as he recalled the sight of her naked body. And he knew that his free will and choice were as good as no will or choice.

He must have her.

He would have her.

On any condition.

"Yes," he said hoarsely.

"I accept," he added.

And then he moved towards her, and she towards him, in a blurring of emotion and flame.

And the rest was white satin bliss.

The next several months of Sha'ant's life passed in that same blurring rush of lust and fire, hot seminal passion spent upon cool satin skin. His nameless wife, whom everyone addressed simply as "Queen" or "Your Highness," exchanged with him every manner of pleasure imaginable between man and woman. He had her whenever he desired, as often

as he desired, with never a complaint, look of weariness, or gesture of denial. She was like a waterfall in spring, roaring with passion, brimming with desire, overflowing her banks with lust and love. Her body undulated between his hands and his hips like water poured into a human vessel, taking whatever shape he desired.

But she was not merely an adept lover; she was equally immaculate in her conveyance of the arts of queenship: Her conduct, behavior, speech, generosity, social skills, and royal bearing won the hearts of the entire court and the love of the people as well. Nobody could desire more in a queen, and even more amazingly, no one did. Nor was she dominating or interfering: She let him have his way with the kingdom as he did with her body, and yet somehow that only made him feel more responsible for his every action or word, more considered and just in his judgement, more exacting in his pursuance of Krushan law.

Those were golden days and they passed with the speed of a dolphin racing downriver. Even the kingdom flourished, for the rich alluvial plains of the kingdom, nourished by the Jeel and her sister rivers, seemed to pour bounty upon them, producing the most plentiful crop ever recorded, and the most bounteous quality of harvest.

When she gave him the news that she was to be the mother of his child, he was overjoyed. It was the diamond atop her tiara of accomplishments. He knew she would be a perfect mother just as she was perfect in all else she did. And she would give him the most beautiful, intelligent and capable child ever.

He sighed and lay back against the ornate golden rack of the enormous bedstead. They were laying in their bedchamber after a session of lovemaking. The moonlight was soft on the marbled floor, the wispy curtains fluttered in a cool night breeze, and somewhere a nightbird was singing to its mate a song of sweet sad love. His life was perfect and about to be enhanced by the arrival of a new level of perfection: parenthood.

“How long?” he asked, smiling up at the curved ceiling, inlaid with precious stones and carvings.

“Soon,” she said.

He assumed she meant a few months. He had heard that women often did not show their condition of motherhood until several months after conception. He did not know the exact numbers, but he knew that the total gestation was about ten moon-months, so he assumed she meant three or four or five months still would pass before she was to give birth.

“When our child is born,” he said, “we shall have a grand celebration. I shall declare a feast day. There shall be—”

And he went on to describe all the wonderful things that would be done to mark the occasion of his first child. He did not even assume it would be a boy, merely that it would be his child, *their* child, and that was enough happiness for now. If it did indeed turn out to be a son, well, that would also satisfy the legal requirements of producing an heir and fell two deer with a single bow-shot. In which case, he would also . . . And he rambled on, spelling out the various things that he would be expected to do if it was a son and heir to the kingdom.

When he looked around, wondering why she had not spoken for a while or participated in his plans, he was surprised to see her gone from the chamber. Evidently, she had walked away while he was still speaking and he had no idea whether she had left a moment ago or several moments earlier.

Puzzled, he rose and walked through their chambers, expecting to find her at any moment. His search took him all the way to the queen’s apartments where he was surprised to find an old flinty-faced woman barring his way.

“My apologies, your highness,” she said, “The queen cannot receive you at this time.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand. She was with me only a short while ago.” He resisted addressing her as “daiimaa,” even though he knew she was a wet nurse.

The old woman looked up at him with a strange inscrutable expression. “It is her time, sire. She must be alone.”

He had no idea what she meant. “Time? What time?”

She gazed up at him with the same infinitely patient look which all aging wet nurses seemed to reserve for princes and yuvarajas. “A woman’s time, my lord. Her confinement.”

He stared at her. “Confinement?” He had heard of this before. “You mean to tell me that she is with child. Yes, I know this already. I wish to see her and have words with her.”

But she raised a hand as he tried to step around her. “Please, sire, I dare not bar your way, but she bade me tell you personally that if you enter her chambers now, you do so against her will and thereby break your promise.” The daiimaa swallowed nervously and joined her palms together. “I am only repeating my mistress’s message. Please, do not judge me harshly for it.”

“No, of course not,” Sha’ant said, irritated by her obsequiousness and her sudden concern. He was not the sort of king who went about ordering the execution of wet nurses simply because they prevented him from . . . from what exactly? Bursting in on his own wife while she was pregnant with his child? He could not fathom how there could be anything objectionable in that. But he knew that the mysteries of women’s bodies, especially those mysteries they chose to keep to themselves, were sacred and unassailable. And those words by the wet nurse—“if you enter her chambers now, you do so against her will and thereby break your promise”—had chilled him to the bone.

So it had begun at last. The things that she chose to do which he could neither question, comment upon, criticize by word, deed, gesture or expression, and never stop her from doing herself. This was apparently the first.

She intended to confine herself to her chambers for the duration of the pregnancy and only see him . . . when would she see him again? After the birth of their child? Months from now? He felt a surge of panic, as an addict of soma feels when told that there would be no further supply of his precious honey wine for an untold length of time. Months? He could not stay without her for months! Not like this, without even being able to see her, speak with her, touch her!

“How long do these things usually last?” he asked tentatively, not looking directly at the wet nurse because he was quite sure that she had been one of his many wet nurses in his infancy, which meant he had probably suckled at her wet teats at some time and it embarrassed him to be asking questions that reminded them both of that bond that linked them.

“In her state, your majesty,” he heard her reply with evident relief, “no more than a day or three. Perhaps even hours, if the goddess wills it.”

He had a moment of disorientation wherein he was confused about whether, by the term “goddess,” she meant his wife. But the earlier part of her reply obfuscated that query altogether. “You mean months, of course,” he said, certain that he must have heard her wrong. Of course she meant months. He had only just made love to his wife less than an hour earlier, and at that time her belly had been flat as ever. She could hardly conceive, gestate, and produce a child within a few hours! It was impossible.

Not to a goddess, he thought. And you know she is no ordinary mortal woman.

He looked at the wet nurse and saw her looking up at him strangely. “Why, no, your highness. She is almost ready! I saw her only moments ago, before she sent me out here to await you, and she was in the final stages of her laboring. The child has already turned and is coming soon. Perhaps even within the hour. The queen is blessed in her womanly perfection and it is possible she might deliver herself of your heir within—”

He turned on his heel and walked away, unable to listen to more.

Madness!

A woman who had made love to her husband only an hour earlier, then told him she was with child, then came to her chambers and summoned her midwives to her, and was now “in the final stages of her laboring” and about to deliver herself of child “within the hour.”

Impossible!

But not for a goddess.

He went to his throne room rather than his bedchamber, and sat in the vast empty hall, upon the great seat where his father and ancestors had sat before him, surrounded by the might and splendor of the Krushan nation and the Krushan race.

And he waited.

It was all he could do.

“Your majesty!”

The old daiimaa’s cry was cracked and heart-rending. She shambled in as quickly as she could, raising her arms in relief as she caught sight of the lone figure seated upon the throne at the far end of the hall.

“Come quickly!” she cried. “You must stop her!”

Sha’ant rose at once from his seat, soma spilling from the goblet, running over his hand. He cast the goblet aside and ran from the throne chamber. The palace corridors were brightly lit and there seemed to be people clustered everywhere, speaking in whispers—the atmosphere was tense and curiously unnatural. The night on which the heir to the Krushan line was born should be a bright, cheerful night, a night of feasting and revelry. But he sensed that the unusual circumstances of the birth had unnerved everyone, just as they had unnerved him.

He caught fragments of conversation as he raced through the corridors, the footfalls of his mandatory king’s guard echoing behind him: Yesterday . . . slender-waisted as a newlywed . . . today delivered of child . . . Unnatural . . . Uncanny . . . Impossible . . . All his own anxieties and fears spoken aloud, the echoes of the whispers filling the endless

corridors of the great house.

He burst into his queen's chambers, startling the wet nurses, all of whom were sitting or standing around in a state of distress. Some cried out as if fearing the entrance of some demon, but quickly silenced themselves perforce when they saw it was their king.

The sleeping chamber was in disarray, the usual evidence of childbirth—hot water vessels, towels and cloth, some blood and unguent bodily fluids drying stickily on the bedding. All the things one might expect after a queen had birthed a child.

There was no sign of his wife or the newborn life she had just released from her body.

The wet nurses avoided his eyes, looking down as if in shame.

“Where is she?” he thundered.

One woman, nervous but strong, younger than the old wrinkled one who had come to him in the throne room—and was no doubt still shuffling her old bones back here again—pointed to a doorway.

He leaped across the bed and went through the doorway.

Racing through antechambers and seemingly endless corridors, he found himself in an unfamiliar part of the palace: the bhojanalya where all meals were prepared. The bhojanalya staff, busy kneading, frying, grilling and roasting, turned to stare at their Emperor, suddenly appeared in their midst.

“Which way?” he shouted.

A fat young chef pointed.

Sha'ant went through the doorway and found himself in the rear courtyard, near the palace staff quarters.

There was no sign of her, but he knew that the gate ahead led outside the palace compound and from thence, out of the city.

But why would a newly delivered mother take her newborn and leave her bed, her home, and walk out of the city itself? It was madness, all madness.

Suddenly, he understood the reason why his father had forewarned him. He had been too young then to understand, had only thought of pleasure, of taking, of getting, of enjoying.

There was another side to such things; there always was. He had learned that painful lesson often as a king, and as a warrior and a commander of armies.

He was about to learn the same painful lesson now as a man.

8

Sha'ant leaped on the first horse he saw, throwing off the man who had been riding it. The man grunted in surprise as he fell, landing on his side with a thump, but recognized his king and bowed his head silently, joining his palms, making no complaint.

Sha'ant rode through the city, startling the few citizens out and about at this late hour. Most appeared to be milling about in groups near the palace complex. The word had surely spread about the queen delivering a child as well as of the strange circumstances surrounding the event. He glimpsed nervous faces turned up towards him as he flashed past. Until today, everyone had accepted the queen as she was, her considerable charm, wit, intelligence, eloquence, and numerous other good qualities negating the obvious mysteries: Who was she? From what family did she come? Where was her homeland? What was her name? But now, everyone's unspoken doubts and suspicions had been proven true: The queen was no normal woman.

What that meant exactly, Sha'ant would soon discover.

From time to time, when people saw him coming and recognized him, they pointed the way the queen had gone. Some even called out to each other: “The king! The king! Show him where she went.” And others standing farther on the road lifted their hands and pointed.

He left the city behind and rode through the darkness of a moonless night, finding his way by instinct. Once outside the city avenues, there were a dozen different ways to go, depending on one's destination. There were no citizens here to point the way—evidently none had wished to follow the queen on her strange night errand. But he was certain he knew where she had gone.

The river.

The place where they had first met, or close by.

He burst through the thicket, the horse exhausted, and ran out towards the river. He wanted to call out her name, but he knew of no name to call her. All the words that seemed so charming in the bedchamber—“Queen of my heart,” “Empress of passion,” “Sovereign of my body and soul”—he could hardly run about on the bank of the Jeel yelling such endearments.

He looked this way, then that, harried, at wits' end, unable to understand what she could be doing here in the dead of night. More than that, he found it hard to believe that a woman who had just been delivered of child could have walked this long distance so briskly. He feared that perhaps he had come to the wrong place after all. Perhaps she had gone some other way, to the city of his enemies perhaps . . .

Then he saw her.

Exactly as she had been the day of their first encounter. Clad in the same white garments that swirled around her like white mist—or like the white spray flung by cascading waves. She clutched the baby in her arms, gently, lovingly, exactly as a mother should. She appeared as slender as ever, and as strong; neither her outward form appeared altered in any way, nor her inner resilience reduced a whit—indeed, she moved, even now, with that same sinuous grace that drove him mad with desire.

Except that this time, it was not desire she evoked in him, but awe and terror.

For she was not standing on the bank of the river.

She was standing upon the river itself.

The raging waters bore her weight as easily as solid ground. The fauna of the river, dolphins, turtles, fish of all sizes, broke surface around her, seemingly worshipping her.

She stepped gracefully out to the middle of the vast concourse, midway between banks, too far for him to reach even if he dove in and dared the swim.

She turned to face him.

Somehow, despite the lack of moonlight, he found he could see her face as clearly as if in daylight. The river itself seemed to glow with energy, a palpable power exuding a luminescence that illuminated her from below. In that glaucous light, she appeared more beautiful than ever, but forbidding as well, like a woman far, far older than the young nymph who shared his bed . . . a being of great age, energy, power and wisdom.

She raised the newborn babe in both hands, cradling it gently upon her palms, holding it out above the rushing waters.

Sha'ant, until that moment mesmerized, broke out of his reverie and began racing towards her.

As he ran, it seemed as if the river itself raced alongside him, rushing downstream towards her. At first, he thought it was a blurring of his vision due to his emotional state, but then he turned his head and saw that the river itself was rising up, to form a maw, a great open mouth of white water that roared towards her. He cried out and increased his speed, pushing himself to the limit of his abilities. Yet he knew he could not win this race. These were forces far greater than he could possibly comprehend, let alone control. Still, he ran. For that was his son she was holding. If she did not care for him, he did. And if he had to wrest the child from her by force and violence, he would do so as well.

The maw of water grew until it resembled a great white serpent, and as it reached her, it released a bellow of such power and intensity that the resulting blast of air and waterspray blasted Sha'ant sideways and off his feet, raising him up in the air for several feet, to land with a cushioned thump on a midden of layya grass. He lay there, winded and drenched, staring at the incredible sight.

His wife, standing in mid-river, surrendered their newborn babe to a great serpent made of water. The serpent snatched the babe in its giant maw, roaring as it did so, and swept over and through and around his queen, overwhelming her.

Sha'ant cried out in horror.

Then the cascade of water passed by, leaving behind a backwash that sloshed on both banks before falling back and settling.

And he made out the figure of his wife, walking back towards the shore on which he lay, stunned and breathless.

She stepped out of the river and onto the bank. He saw that the water clung to her with longing tentacles, as if reluctant to release her. He saw also that her feet were no longer wholly human feet; now they were something else, an amalgam of water and fish-tail that formed, as he watched, into flesh, blood, and bone, transforming into the perfect replica of human female feet just as she stepped on solid land. Her form clarified, and she was once again the woman he knew, the eager young loving wife who pleased him and took pleasure with such intensity night after night. His beauty, his queen, his empress of desire, his sovereign of body and soul.

As she strode up the bank to where he lay, a smile playing on her lips, the wind whipped away her garments, snatching them with a single rough action, and she was left naked, perfect, flawless as ever, with no sign that she had ever been a mother, or that so much as a single day had passed since the first day he had met her here, in this very spot. Naked

and undulating like water in human form, she came towards him, and despite the circumstances and his emotional turmoil, he was aghast to find his body aroused at the sight of her nudity.

Unable to stop himself, he raised his hands to greet her as she fell upon him, laughing with pleasure and desire. And despite himself, he found that he was smiling in response as well. Unable to prevent what was happening, he entered into loveplay and cojoined with her, the actions familiar and all the more pleasing for their familiarity. Men who seek comfort in the arms of new women each night are men who have not discovered the supreme pleasure of the perfect union. Those few, those lucky few, who are blessed with the perfect mate, achieve heights of pleasure that no grunting copulation between strangers can ever attain. For it is love which is the ultimate aphrodisiac, and without that emotional bonding and joining of souls, the act itself is merely violence without weaponry. An act of rage rather than of pleasure.

Sha’ant’s love and desire for his woman outweighed all else and he found himself unable to even speak out against what she had done—for he knew that the instant he spoke, all would be over between them. Those were the terms of their marriage, and he had no doubt she would abide by them to the letter. So he kept his silence and took his pleasure and, by morning, he somehow was even able to pretend that nothing had happened at all, that it had only been a bad dream. How could she have conceived, gestated, and borne a child, then killed it, all in one night? It was impossible of course. He had probably drunk too much soma the night before and suffered an impossible nightmare.

And like any nightmare, it was easy to push aside and pretend it had never occurred at all.

Until the next time.

In retrospect, it was extraordinary how easily life went back to the way it had been before. The events of that night might never have happened: The palace staff knew better than to spread tales openly and the citizens who heard the rumors quickly wondered at their veracity. After all, here was their Queen, flat stomach and beauty intact, as winning as always. And the King beside her at all times, rarely apart for long, mooning over her as much as ever.

The sight of them riding together in their royal vaahan, the ornamental bejeweled carriage, brought people running out of doors, leaving aside their work to watch the king and queen pass by. Shouts of joy were heard everywhere and those who possessed conch shells—or rather, those merchants and nobles rich enough to possess their own guard ordered them to blow the conch shell trumpets—heralding the approach of the royal couple. They were too dearly loved for the rumored scandal of that one night to cast a shadow upon their reputation. People quickly dismissed it as an idle rumor and soon even the palace staff wondered if that really had been the Queen’s newborn son she had been carrying with her that night, or merely a bundle of clothes. People even surmised their own explanations, assuming that in her homeland—wherever that unknown place might be—they had such unusual customs as walking to the river and throwing in articles of clothing as a means of appeasing the gods and asking for the gift of an heir. This theory, that it was all an arcane ritual designed to obtain a son, was the most favored, for it explained everything quite neatly.

The only ones who knew the truth were the wet nurses who had been present in the queen’s bedchambers when she gave birth to that beautiful black-skinned child-prince. They were accustomed to keeping secrets and silencing rumors, and so they did so. For they understood that the King loved the Queen and she loved him as well, madly. Whatever reason she had had for that extraordinary deed, or how in fact she had been able to produce a child within an hour of copulation and conception, were things they did not dwell on for long. They were superstitious women given to the wearing of amulets and sacred threads and chanting of mantras designed to ward off evil eyes and spirits. They accepted supernatural impossibilities as a part of life.

Time passed, healing all wounds, annulling all hurtful memories. The human spirit survives by selective forgetting.

When a year had gone by, on another night much like the first one, Sha’ant and his Queen were in their bedchamber, entwined in the grip of passion. When their ecstasy was spent, she looked at him in a certain way, rose, and left him. This time, he knew at once that something was amiss. He rose as well and followed her—and was just in time to see her slip into her bedchambers. The wet nurses were already there, waiting with pans of steaming hot water and cloth. They looked at him sadly as they went into the chamber and shook their heads in commiseration before shutting him out.

After the child was born, he followed his wife once again, this time close on her heels.

On this occasion, the wet nurses had not informed anyone of the queen’s impending delivery, even though she had asked them to make arrangements for the same. They had thought it best to wait and see. If this was to be a normal birth—or as normal as an hour’s gestation and delivery could be—then they would inform the whole city. Until then, it seemed best to hold their silence.

So the streets were empty and silent when Sha’ant followed his wife. It was a long walk and he dearly wished he could offer her a ride on a horse or chariot or even a carriage if she preferred. But he dared not speak a word or delay her progress in any way, for the terms of the agreement had been quite specific on those points. And so, he only followed at a discreet distance, going on foot this time as he felt ashamed to ride when his own wife could walk the distance.

Things went as they had the previous year. She reached the river, stepped out onto the water, then walked out to the middle of the concourse. Raising her hands, she held the baby out. Sha’ant felt a great piercing pain enter his chest and flood his being with sorrow. That was his son, their son! How could she do this? Why? Was it a sacrifice? For what? What deity could demand the sacrifice of one’s own newborn child? And two sons in as many years? Why?

But the terms of the agreement caused him to keep his silence. And he watched in silent anguish as the river came once again, roaring with deafening rage, and swept the child away as before. Once again, she walked back to the bank, stepped onto the ground, and came towards him, growing visibly younger and more beautiful than ever. Once again, he succumbed to his love and lust and received her in his welcoming arms. As he held her tightly, feeling the stirring in his groin belie the sorrow in his heart, he shed a tear from each eye. Just the two. One for each lost son.

The next one, he promised himself silently. The next child she will keep. This is some ritual to ensure that the third child will be a great king of kings. It was the only explanation that appeased him and allowed him to accept her cruel actions as necessary in some fashion.

But of course, the next year, she did it again.

And again.

And yet again.

Seven times in all, over as many years, she threw his newborn sons into the river.

Finally, a day came when he could take it no longer.

The past eight years, he had wept silently, containing his grief within himself, keeping it all a secret between himself and the wet nurses. Nobody else suspected or knew, and those who heard the rumors dismissed them out of hand. One child might have been believable, for some arcane ritual. But eight children? Impossible! Even a rakshasi would not sacrifice eight of her newborn children for any reason.

On the eighth night when he followed her to the river, he broke down. “Stop,” he cried out just as she stepped out onto the water. “I beg of you, stop!”

She paused upon the water, standing as easily as if on an unseen rock beneath the surface. He knew she was not standing on any rocks, for he could see the water rushing beneath her feet, even the occasional fish or turtle swim beneath. She was standing upon the water itself, her feet melding with the fluid to become partly water as well.

He fell to his knees on the bank. “Goddess, serapi, demoness, whoever you are . . .” He pressed his palms together in supplication. “I cannot stand by silently anymore. Please. Do not kill our son.”

She looked back at him, her face still set in that resolute expression she always had during these nights, when she seemed older, wiser, more powerful than the woman he shared his bed with, and said, “It is what he wants.”

It took him a moment to realize that she meant the child in her arms. “He? How can he possibly know what he wants? He is a babe! Newborn! How can a newborn wish to commit suicide?”

She sighed and shook her head. “It is for his own good.” There was a tone to her voice that suggested that he could still back away and let her continue, and she might not consider the agreement broken yet.

But he no longer cared. “Who are you? What sort of mother would kill her own newborn children? Eight years! Eight beautiful, perfect young children. Sons! Why do you do this? Who are you?”

She paused and nodded. Turning around, she walked back to the bank and stopped just short of solid ground. Still on the water, she looked at him with the same loving expression he knew so well. “Very well then. Since you have asked, I must tell you. For I cannot lie, nor can I conceal truth once it is demanded of me. I am transparent as clear water, as the glacial Coldheart Mountain ice from whence I come, and to do otherwise would be to dishonor my father. Therefore I shall tell you the truth as plainly as possible.”

He could not make head or tail of what she said, except that she was offering to answer his questions. His confusion only made him more belligerent. “Tell me then. What sort of evil creature are you to do this terrible thing year after year? Answer me!”

A peculiar expression came over her face then, one that he had never seen, not even in her most vulnerable, naked moments. “I am Jeel,” she said, “daughter of Coldheart

Mountain.”

He stared at her, then at the river, then at the place where she stood, upon the rushing water. And he knew she told the truth. Everything made perfect sense then. If she was indeed Jeel, the river-goddess, then it explained how she could appear and disappear at will on the banks of the river, how she could walk upon its waters—for she herself was water—how she could be so passionate and tempestuous, as the river was, and numerous other half-glimpsed half-understood mysteries and doubts were cleared up at once. All save one.

“Then why do you do this terrible thing?” he asked. “As Jeel, you are the most honored of all seer-mages, sacred river of the Gods themselves. How can you commit such a heinous crime? How could you kill your own newborn sons?”

She smiled. Tears sprang into her eyes and trickled down her face, and as she rolled down those smooth unblemished cheeks, he saw that the water was the reality and the flesh the illusion, for each teardrop erased the skin and body down which it ran.

She was turning back to water again even as she spoke. “These were the eight Vessas, great demi-gods from the heavenly realms. Due to a curse by Kenikyu, they were compelled to spend a year each on Arthaloka. They approached me and asked for my help. I agreed to take human form and give birth to them and to destroy each one at the time of his birth so that he could return at once to his true place in the heavenly realm. I was killing our sons, it is true, for I was destroying the physical bodies in which they took birth upon this plane. But by doing so, I was freeing their immortal souls, which were never destined to remain here. If not by my hands, they would have died anyway. Better to throw them into my own waters for a quick, merciful death, than for you and I to watch them grow for a full year only for them to die by some unimaginable unexpected method each time. Cruel as this was, and difficult for me to do—you cannot imagine how difficult—it still had to be done. It was the only way. Surely you can see that now, Sha’ant, my love?”

He passed a hand across his face roughly. He was already drenched from the riverspray. His head swam with understanding and shock. A curse! A remedy. And each one a demi-god, herself a goddess. Then nothing was what it had seemed. All this was part of some cosmic plan that would have unfolded regardless. What she said was true: To live with each child for a full year and watch them grow, until their every action, expression, gesture, and sound became intimately familiar, and then lose them . . . that would have been unthinkable. And to endure that eight times over? Impossible. He would have been driven insane, he was certain of it. There was a limit to how much any person could endure.

He rose to his feet. “I had no idea . . .”

She nodded. “I know. But it was impossible to tell you. As a mortal, I could not share such knowledge with you. It is forbidden. Besides, it was necessary for things to proceed exactly in this manner, for even this was part of the plan.”

He looked around, stunned. “You mean that even my protesting before the death of the eighth son was part of your intention?”

“Yes, my love. For I wished you to have the pleasure of raising one son from my womb. And by testing your patience all this while, I knew that you would eventually stop me. Thus, I am now entrusting to you your lawful son, born of our union. Take him now.”

She handed out the newborn to him. Sha’ant took the bundle of warmth and softness, scarcely able to comprehend what was going on. The child began to wail and cry, dismaying him further.

“He will be a great man, a great king. He will do great things and when he takes a vow, any vow, no matter how terrible, it will be as rigid and unyielding as the sky and the earth in resoluteness. He will do all he does for your sake and the sake of your kingdom and your lineage. He will do the Krushan race proud, and be a shining example of the Krushan line. This is my last, my only gift to you, my beloved.”

And now her tears came faster and thicker, as her lower body melted away, turning into a whirlpool of raging water. Only her head and upper body remained recognizable as the woman he had loved for so long. In his arms, the child’s crying grew more plaintive and mournful.

“But I don’t wish to lose you!” he cried. “Now that I understand everything, I forgive you! I didn’t know, my love. Do not blame me. Do not leave me.”

“I must,” she said, “for that too was foretold.”

“Stay for the sake of our son,” he said. “Stay and rear him with me.”

“I cannot,” she said, “stay another day in the world of men. Once even a single mortal knows my true identity, I must return to my original form. That is the law that binds me.”

He shook his head and held out the child again to her. “Then take him with you. Raise him yourself. Raise him like a god, a great being. His true place is with you, not on this wretched mortal plane. Let him not suffer the misfortunes of mortal living when he can live like a god among gods!”

She hesitated then dipped her head. Already, he could see, the back of her head had turned to water, only the face and ears remained intact. Her arms were melting too. She reached out hands that were more water than flesh and accepted the child once more. She cradled him to her watery bosom, and he gurgled as if content and fell asleep again.

“I shall keep him and rear him as befits your son and heir,” she said. “When he is ready, I shall send him to you again. Thereafter he must live out his time on Arthaloka. Indeed, he shall live a great length of time, for he has taken his brothers’ ages on the mortal realm upon himself as well. He shall live all their mortal lives in his own lifespan, and only by his own choice shall he eventually succumb to death, only when he has endured and suffered enough to atone for them all.”

Sha’ant had nothing to say to that. He joined his palms together. “I am honored to have been your mate in this world. I have loved you as I can love no other woman ever again. I shall remain without a wife for the rest of my life henceforth. For no other woman can ever take your place in my heart.”

She smiled sadly, her face melting away even as she spoke her last words. “Matters of the heart do not always turn out the way we plan, Sha’ant. As a man, you may desire to live alone, but as a king, you owe it to your people to produce an heir. In time, you may learn to love again. Until then, remember, I am always here, always running beside you, as fast as you run, sharing in your every triumph and achievement. Come to me anytime you please. Except for that one limitation of the physical form, I shall always be your beloved Jeel forever.”

And with those terrible final words, she fell back into the river, the waterspout that had been her body dissolving back into the body of fluid from whence it came.

10

Sha’ant grieved for his lost wife and sons. The official word given to the people was that the Queen had dropped her child still-born and had taken her own life by flinging herself into the Jeel. This matched the rumors and gossip that had circulated for years and was in keeping with the Queen’s legendary love for the river. The people grieved with their king, for they had also loved her dearly.

In time, they got over the loss and went on with their lives. There were enemies seeking to overthrow the might of the Krushan and take over Hastinaga’s territories, there were great swathes of newly conquered dominions to govern, and the countless other duties of any king.

In time, Sha’ant, too, overcame the loss of his beloved Jeel. From time to time, he went to the spot by the river and sat upon the bank as his father had once done, but instead of meditating, he talked to the river, confident that the steady roar would prevent his words from being heard by anyone within sight. He spoke of matters of kingship and governance, of palace intrigues and political maneuvering, of skirmishes and rebellions, fights and outbreaks—all the usual things that kings talk about to their wives at night behind closed doors.

The river listened and in its steady, relentless roar, he often thought he heard an occasional word or phrase or sound of commiseration, sympathy, or even, on rarer occasions, a few words of advice. Once, when discussing a certain noble and his daughter who were needlessly haranguing the ministers with constant demands, he was taken aback when a face appeared in the water below him. The face was exactly that of his former Queen and wife, if formed of water. “Beware. They mean to assassinate you,” she said in a watery gurgle that none but he could hear. Then smiled, pursed her lips in an action that resembled an affectionate kiss, shut her watery eyes, and melded back into the river. The following week, the noble and his daughter did indeed try to use a clever ruse as a cover for an assassination attempt—and failed because Sha’ant had been having them watched constantly since the day by the river.

In time, his visits grew less frequent as the empire grew and his responsibilities increased. He admittedly threw himself more completely into his work and vocation than he had before, as if conquering new territories or suppressing distant barbarian rebellions in foreign lands could ever compensate for the loss of his beloved mate. They did not, of course, but they did help keep him from thinking as often of her. In his travels, he found also that while the river was always benign to him—on more than one occasion, he was able to cross her in spate under impossible weather conditions, always to the astonishment of his own local allies in the region—the special bond he shared could only be explored in that particular spot on her bank, near his own capital city. At all other places, she would listen intently, but only here would she speak aloud or show herself: a wave of butterflies risen from the water itself, dissolving into a cloud of spray as they rose up in the air; a pack of dolphins mating in the water within sight of him; patterns in the water that defied the tide and made pleasing designs that reminded him of places they had been and things they had done together.

These intimate secret communications kept his heart alive and kept love awake within him. Even though he had long since accepted that he could never have her back again, the sheer glorious intensity of their years and experiences together kept him emotionally afloat for another decade and a half. If nothing else, these platonic dalliances kept him from growing bitter and from hating the sight and touch of all women.

In time, gradually, he began to form the idea that perhaps, just maybe, someday, he might learn to love again.

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A BOND AS DEEP AS STARLIT SEAS

Sarah Grey

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Don't sell her.

The thought rises like a tide in the back of Jeri's mind, where she's spent three Nikutan launch cycles struggling to contain it. It leaves her breathless, drowning in guilt, and trying to hide it from the krosuta-whitened stare of the Henza abbess.

This is Cleo, not a load of ore. This will break her.

And how could it *not* break her? She's a lumbering old Juno-class cargo beast, poor Cleo, one of the earliest models, clumsy with emotive-adaptive programming, hungry for adventure. Every vent and door and switch—even the color of Cleo's walls—is designed to respond to the crew's emotional state, to warm a chill, to feed a hunger pang. To console the lonely tears that might come the first time a young human captain, fresh off Icara's glitter-sand shores, sails alone through three unbroken circuits of the lithium moons.

Less a ship, in fact. More an enormous hound dog, red-buffered carbocine hide mangy with age and radiation. Leashed to her solar bay at Port Sud, waiting for her captain to return.

Drooling up at the sky, eager for the chase between stars.

Loyal.

All while her captain stands in a Henza temple, preparing to sell her off.

Abbess Ocala waits, smiling, pale and still. She holds the final contract slate out to Jeri, but doesn't press. She might as well be making an offering, so gentle are those whitened eyes, so peaceful the turn of her tattooed lips. The towering granite-carved goddess of trade, Eloji, looks down on them, keeps guard over the smoky negotiation quarter of the Henza Nikute temple where the two of them stand; even the goddess, eyes jeweled blue as an Icaran sea, looks as if she understands the ache of letting go.

Bill of Sale, reads the vertical Nikutan script across the face of the slate. *Mooncarver Juno Prima. Vessel Identification Code CLE04451103.*

Jeri accepts the slate. The abbess gives a little bow, smiles wider. The slate's shockingly heavy, as if the contract's etched in lead. The temple incense, thick as honey and grassfire, seems suddenly overwhelming, oppressive.

But the numbers, *the numbers*. A mantra of asset and increase. Thirty-seven percent gain in acceleration. Eighty-three percent decrease in fuel consumption. Fourteen percent expansion in cargo capacity. Sixty-five-point-eight percent improvement in sustained cruising speed. Compared with Cleo, the Archer is simply a better ship. *An advantage*. One Jeri's finally in a position to afford.

Don't do it. Don't sell her.

Abbess Ocala raises an eyebrow. "You're reconsidering."

"No," Jeri snaps, then regrets it. The Henza abbesses, kind smiles aside, are known for shrewd dealing, for widening the cracks in a customer's resolve. "I'm just confirming the terms. No salvage. It's in the contract?"

Again, a peaceful smile, a nod. "The ship *would* be valuable as scrap, of course," she says. "Carbocine's selling high right now. Titanium, too, in the right markets."

"I won't sell, then." She imagines Cleo picked apart, her ruby-red dermal buffer peeled back, her carbocine shielding sliced away, her titanium skeleton laid out, bare and pale, in the ghost-white light of the distant Nikutan sun. She heaves the slate toward Abbess Ocala. "If she's headed for scrap, I won't even negotiate."

The abbess waves her hand; her fingertips are ringed in platinum, frosted with ice-blue stones. "You've been reasonable with your asking price and respectful in your negotiations. In any event, we have a buyer in need of an entry-level mining vessel. An ideal exchange."

"I want it in the contract."

The abbess blinks. Her whitened Henza eyes are unnerving, her pupils invisible through the krosuta glaze. Is she calculating? Scrutinizing? Her smile is bland but beneficent, her lips rich with the blue ink of high Henza rank. Could she, perhaps, be sympathizing?

"It is in the contract, of course. As promised," says the abbess. "But I understand your concern, so I offer my verbal assurances as well: Your ship will *not* be scrapped." She gestures at the slate.

There. In the rightmost column. Conditions of Surrender. Item one: *Salvage Prohibited*.

"As I've told you," says the abbess, "we have a buyer."

Jeri lifts a hand, places her thumb at the slate's top right corner, then presses her ring finger to the bottom left. Her trade reputation is high on Nikute, as it is in every system within a hundred light years; her prints authorize instantly. A single Nikutan word appears, scripted in bright Henza blue.

Neccima.

A sharp word, so cold and final. The first Nikutan a hauler learns. *It is done.*

I've done it, I've signed her away, Jeri thinks. *I've let my Cleo go.*

The thought leaves her gasping.

The abbess takes the slate back. She is speaking words, making shapes with her mouth that move the air, shift the whorls of incense in the patterns of *nonrefundable* and *currency exchange fee* and *wisest of the holiest*, *Eloji*. Jeri doesn't respond. Her fingertips have gone numb—I've let my Cleo go—and she can hardly hear through the buzzing shock of what she's done.

Thirty-seven percent gain, she tells herself. *Sixty-five-point-eight percent improvement*. Percent of what? The numbers are abstractions. Cleo is real. *An advantage*, she thinks, shoving back at this avalanche of guilt, but already the mantra's lost its magic.

"You will unbind your identification from the ship before compline tithes," says the abbess. "Contact us when it's done, and once we've confirmed—"

"Wait," Jeri says. "I need to meet the buyer." The words surprise her; she hadn't intended to speak them aloud. An unjustifiable request, especially now that the contract's authorized.

The beneficent blue-inked smile evaporates. "That's not in the contract."

"I don't care." Jeri shudders at the desperation in her own voice. Gentler, she thinks. Respectful. *Please*. Just ask the buyer. I'm not backing out, I just want to meet them."

A blank stare, white as Icaran pearl.

"You can *ask*, can't you?"

The abbess tightens her lips. "It's not in the contract. *However*, as I've said, you've been respectful, and we hope to trade with you in the future." She tilts her head, blinks. "We will arrange it, if we can."

• • • •

Jeri lays her right palm on Cleo's hull, just outside the frame of the crew gate. The ship's dented red hide is warm, soft as shoe leather, the combined effects of the solar refuel and the exothermic dermal buffer regeneration process. "It's me, girl," she whispers. "I'm home."

The Juno class can recognize crew by the lines of the hands, the prints of the fingers, the pitch and lilt of the voice, the hue of the skin, even the unique chemical compounds excreted in sweat. All of the above, in fact, and more, should the captain desire exhaustive security measures.

A whisper and a touch: that's the combination the younger, unworn Jeri chose seventeen years before, when she and Cleo first launched. A personal connection, more than the mere opening of a lock.

Cleo opens the gate and Jeri steps through.

Inside, Cleo's walls shimmer. Green paneling, deep as the sea, explodes into glittering sheathes of gold. Just like schools of wheatfish, Jeri thinks, surfacing from the Arkwright Abyss off her grandmother's barge on Icara.

This is a game Cleo plays. If Jeri touches the walls, the golden streaks will race away, like fish startled by a fishergirl's hand. They'll shift color, turn squid-pink or white as widowsharks; they'll shrink or grow; they'll race down the hall toward the galley and wait, swirling, for Jeri to follow.

Cleo is happy to see her.

No, she tells herself. *The ship just senses you're sad. It's programmed to cheer you up.*

Jeri can't bring herself to reach out. The golden streaks circle, then fade.

"Cleo," she says, but all that comes out is a brittle whisper, a choke. She tries again. "So, Cleo. Some things are going to change soon."

The ship thrums; her walls fade to purple-black. There's a low growl from deep in her core. She's lighting up her engines, shifting out of dormancy. Getting excited for launch. Jeri bites her lip. It bleeds. The pain's like an anchor; it grounds her.

"There's someone you'll meet, soon. And then . . . then I'll be gone." The purr dies down, the walls lighten to gray. "Just for a bit, Cleo, okay? Just for a bit. Then we'll head back toward the Michener system. Or maybe even farther, maybe—"

Jeri feels the lie spinning out of control and stops herself. *No*, she thinks. *Tell her the truth.*

Acceleration. Fuel use. Sustained cruising speed.

An advantage.

It's only a machine.

"Cleo. Listen. You'll be meeting someone new tomorrow. Someone special. And then you'll have lots of fun. I promise."

Cleo's walls shift to violet again; her engines stay low, a soft stir below Jeri's feet, resigned but hopeful.

She's dreaming of bright golden moons, Jeri thinks. *She's dreaming of asteroid fields*. The thought is a knife in Jeri's heart.

These old Juno-class ships, they were built for adventure.

Jeri steps forward and presses her cheek to Cleo's wall. Golden streaks burst on the surface around her face, fade to silver, swim away.

Just a machine, she thinks, *just a machine*. Warm inside and out.

• • • •

"Is the climate control broken?" asks the buyer. *Tria*, she calls herself. She's a tall woman, youthful but gaunt in the tithe-starved fashion of the Nikutan bourgeoisie, may Eloji bless them for giving so well. She wears a rough, unbleached tunic and clutches the hem, fanning herself with the loose fabric.

"No," says Jeri, "The temperature's intuitive. It's my preference. She—the ship, I mean—it will intuit your comfort levels and adjust."

"You *like* it this hot?"

Jeri flushes, suddenly aware of how warm the air around them really is. Moist, too. Cleo, sensing a stranger's gaze, has painted the walls with soft-moving rivers of cool violet and blue, but she's ramped up the temperature and humidity just for Jeri.

"I'm Icaran," Jeri says, "I'm used to that climate."

"Icaran," Tria says. "That explains it." She gives Jeri a playful smile. "Surprised your whole planet hasn't sweated to death." It's a one-sided smile, crooked but not insincere. Bony as she is in her loose brown shift, she reminds Jeri of a stray dog, begging entrails off the knifewomen as they clean the day's fish. Ragged but innocuous. "Can I make it colder, then?"

They're inspecting the captain's quarters: a narrow bunk, stripped; three shelves, now emptied of Jeri's rubber-bound Icaran monsteria novels; an aluminum desk, polished bright as noontide, with three slate displays and a conspicuous empty spot where Jeri once grew a swath of bright yellow whalebeard kelp in a jar. Tria's hand is in that spot now, tracing the gleaming curve of the desk, leaving prints on the aluminum.

The whalebeard would die in a cold room, Jeri thinks. She might, too.

"There's a climate override system," Jeri says, "but Cleo will adjust to you automatically. Once you've bound to her, that is." *Once I'm unbound, once I've left her for good.*

She's careful to keep her voice level. "Cleo's a good girl."

Tria looks up from the desk. "Who's Cleo?"

"The ship. That's her . . . it's what I call her."

A blank look crosses Tria's face, then vanishes. "I see. You named the ship." Again the bent smile, then Tria looks away, taps a clipped fingernail on a bookshelf. "Of course. I just didn't hear you."

A chill passes through Jeri's body. *Your spirit pulled down toward the deep*, her grandmother would have told her. *Follow it. Don't let it drown.*

It's the first question she would have asked, the first question she *did* ask, when Cleo's hull was still red as fishblood and smooth as a moonless sky: *What is the ship's name?* She wonders if this scrawny Nikutan girl has ever commanded *any* vessel, let alone a cargo hauler of Cleo's mass.

"It's an Icaran practice," she says, scrutinizing Tria's expression. "Naming ships. A tradition from Old Earth."

"Right." Tria shrugs. "I just forgot."

Or you never knew. "You can change it. If you like."

"No," says Tria. "I like Cleo. I'll keep it." The smile again, but this time it's unsteady. She looks away, quick as a wheatfish. "So how do I bind to her?"

Jeri ignores the question. There's a shimmer of panic in her gut. She imagines Cleo, careening into the heart of the Michener belts, or towed into the clouded orbit of Megara and then crushed in its helium seas. "Where will you take her first?" she asks.

"I haven't decided," Tria answers. She keeps her eyes on the wall, follows the curve of a violet river across the paneling.

Do you know what you're doing, Nikutan tithe-princess? Do you know the dangers you'll face?

"You should head out to the Luric system," Jeri says, testing her. Luric's a hot zone, the brutal face of the Uriline conflict. Basic knowledge for a working hauler. She watches Tria's expression in profile; Tria's eyes flick away. "Easy money," she continues, "pulling copper and manganese for the Sturmond operation. Good way to break in. Sturmond's fair, even to new haulers."

Tria turns. "Luric?" She laughs. "You're joking, right? Sturmond's holding up fifteen hundred fighters against a Uriline uprising right now." The smile's back. Still crooked, but renewed. Certain. "I want to haul ore, not get cooked by a rebel nuke."

"You could shortcut through Parsine, bypass the conflict entirely."

"And get stuck in a three-month quarantine?" Tria looks dumbstruck. "They're hemorrhaging out their eye sockets in Parsine!"

She knows Luric, then. She knows her routes, the risks. Maybe she is qualified. Jeri looks away, embarrassed that she doubted this girl. "I'm just—"

"—worried." Tria crosses her arms. "About your ship, I'm betting."

Yes, Jeri thinks. *I'm scared for Cleo.*

"I know what I'm doing. I have two younger brothers. I signed the Henza guarantees to let them sail. I *taught* them." She reaches out a palm and lays it on Jeri's shoulder. There's a brutal white scar, sharp as a star, across the inner flesh of her wrist, half-covered by the sleeve of her tunic, but her touch is warm as Icaran wind. "Cleo's safe, I promise. I'll be good to her."

She knows how to sail, then, and she knows how to treat a ship. The chill of worry dissipates. All that's left is the cold stab of impending loss, lodged deep in Jeri's chest.

"She'll be good to you, too," Jeri says. Then, before Tria can remark on the crack in her voice, Jeri orders Cleo to unbind.

A stern series of codes in Jeri's rough voice; Jeri's lined hand on a streaming blue-violet wall.

The engine falls silent. The walls fade to gray.

The room, so blank and spare and unspeakably *empty*, begins to cool.

Just a ship.

"I'm sure she'll be wonderful," Tria says. Her crooked smile is polite, but her expression is clear: The transaction is complete. It's time for Jeri to leave.

And then Jeri is alone, shut outside the crew gate, her feet on the icy granite of the solar bay.

And Cleo is twenty meters away, then thirty, then fifty. Humming, purring, her jets alight, her props receding, her mass leaping upward, out of the port locks. A hundred meters. A thousand. A bright speck, red as a pricked fingertip, withdrawing through the dusky Nikutan sky.

• • • •

The Archer, champion of the Vitala featherweight fleet, quick as a widowshark, light as a wheatfish, with a hull that can swallow whole moons' worth of ore.

And all Jeri can think is how plain it is.

The bonding's complete; the Archer belongs to Jeri. It should have acknowledged her by now. But the interior walls—the ones not built of ultra-efficient titanium mesh—are

still dead-star black. Unchanging.
And the ship is *cold*.
“How long will she take to adapt?” Jeri asks.
The Nikute Nord porter is a man; the Henza tattoos across his face hide a series of deep scars. Chattel, Jeri suspects. Uriline, based on his slight build and sharp accent. Likely captured and sold after a Sturmond raid.
He looks up at Jeri. It’s the first time since greeting her at the Henza temple that he’s looked her in the eye, and he looks surprised.
“Adapt?”
“The AI. It’s cold in here. When will it adapt to my preferences?”
He blinks at her, then looks away quickly. “Climate adjustments can be made through the command module at any station—”
“It’s not *intuitive*?”
“Intuitive programming reduces efficiency and requires extra space. Vitala employs it only for necessary functions.”
“I see,” Jeri says. *Eighty-three percent decrease in fuel consumption*, she thinks. *Fourteen percent expansion in cargo capacity*. She taps the access code—a *code!*—into the command slate and brings up the climate menu. Nineteen degrees. How cold is that? How warm does she want it? And how does one even *measure* ambient humidity? Climate’s an abstraction to her, an alchemy of heat and damp she entrusted entirely to Cleo.
“Can I upgrade? I’ll pay extra for intuitive climate.” She glances at the vacant black walls. “And some *color*, too.”
The porter looks frightened, as if her dissatisfaction is a threat to his life. She thinks of the Henza abbess, those unreadable eyes. Perhaps it is. “The Henza are authorized to upgrade the Archer class programming. Locally—here at Port Nord, if you like.” He pauses. “They accept payment in advance profit pledges, in the name of wisest Eloji, if you’re short on liquid assets.”
An ongoing debt to the Henza! “No,” she tells the porter. “No, *thank you*. ”
She sets the temperature to twenty-five degrees and sighs.
“Does she at least have a *name*?”
The porter stares. “The vessel’s ID is in the command module, if you forget it.”
No name, then. Just a soulless identification number. Jeri waits for the porter to scurry out the crew gates and then lays a hand on a light-draining swath of black wall and waits.
Nothing. The wall remains textureless, lifeless. Cold as the Arkwright Abyss.
But it *is* alive, she tells herself. It *must* be. She can feel the buzz of its fierce little engine, strung tight, lively as a rabbit bounding through the hull. Yes, she thinks, a rabbit, or a squirrel. Who needs color? The Archer is a creature meant for sprinting unseen, for breaking untouched through a Luric front with the silent ease of a proton. These colorless walls are part of its character, Jeri tells herself. An efficiency. Camouflage. No frills for this fiery little beast.
It’s no Juno-class hound dog, but it’s thrumming, it’s *alive*. There’s warmth in here somewhere.
“Are you ready?” she whispers to the ship. “We’ll launch tomorrow, before dawn tithes. How about Yesemin, for a first stop?” Navigation, at least, is voice-responsive.
She waits for a reaction, for some shift in the engine’s pulse, some evidence that the Archer welcomes the plan, shares the thrill of deep space.
There’s a sharp ping to acknowledge the order. A bright map of Yesemin lights up the command slate.
But the engine hums on, its pitch unchanged.
The ship, Jeri realizes, is utterly indifferent.

• • • •

“You’re sad,” says the krosuta dealer, crooked in the corner of his underground den, his eyes not quite as white-glazed as the Henza, but close. His expression, like theirs, is ambiguous, peaceful. “Lonely, too. You’ve lost someone.”
He pushes a clay cup across the table, smaller than his palm, along with a tiny wooden paddle. The cup’s filled with blue-white paste, watered and syrupy. It smells like burned sugar and grass.
“Wine,” she tells him, waving the cup away. “I don’t do krosuta.”
The dealer pulls the cup back, then tilts his head sidewise and squints. “Hauler, then?”
“Hauler,” Jeri answers.
The dealer pulls a blue-green amphora off a lower shelf—Icaran slipwit wine, Jeri notes, though she hasn’t told him a thing about herself, let alone where she’s from—and tilts it into a cup. “You’ve sold off your ship, then.”
Jeri looks up. She’s never touched krosuta herself; it’s expensive, addictive, sourced solely out of Henza temples. A good way to chain yourself to the Henza for life. But she’s heard about the benefits as well: an increased awareness of others’ emotions, of body language and nuance, along with a blunted personal emotional response. Heightened understanding, without the discomfort and inconvenience of true empathy.
The dealer grins, proud of himself. He taps a finger by his right eye. “The krosuta helps. But this close to Port Nord, we see plenty of heartbroken haulers. You’ve sold off a Mooncarver, from the look on your face. An Artemis?”
“Juno. Her name is Cleo.”
“A *Juno*. Wisest Eloji, haulerwoman, I’ve seen rougher girls than you weep outright over a scrapped Juno.”
Jeri sips the slipwit. It’s genuine, an Icaran import; there’s a coating of bitter grit at the bottom, residue from the fermentation of free-grown kelp. “Cleo’s not scrapped,” she tells the dealer. “I sold her to a Nikutan sailor. Good price. A girl from the tithe classes.”
“Oh?” He slides the amphora back into the shelf. “I’m surprised. Not much demand for Junos these days. That adaptive programming—gone out of fashion. A liability. And demand’s high for carbocine scrap with the uprisings out in Uriline.”
“*She’s not scrap*.” Jeri’s stunned by the sharpness of her own voice. “It’s in the contract. No salvage.”
The dealer laughs. “There’s no beauty so beguiling as a Henza contract.”
“What do you *mean*?” The words pierce the docile chatter of the den. In the far corner, a pair of haulers, both younger women and stronger, eye her. “What’s wrong with the contract?” Suddenly the walls of the krosuta den are too close, the ceiling too low, the air stale as the hold of a barge filled with slaughtered squid.
The dealer just shrugs, gives her a beneficent blank-eyed smile.
All at once she’s done with the filthy down-level krosuta den, with the dealer and his blank stare, poking at her hurt like a child taunting an injured gull. She pushes her cup of slipwit back toward him. “I’m done with this.”
The dealer looks her over. His smile feels condescending, full of false pity. “Of course,” he says. “No charge.”
He pulls the glass back across the bar. As he does, Jeri catches a glance at his right wrist.
There’s a scar. White. Star-shaped.
Just like Tria’s.
“Your wrist,” says Jeri. “What happened to it?”
His smile widens, as if she’s invited his favorite story. “I slipped the Henza! Whole family’s indentured, but I was young. Thought I was smart enough get away, maybe do better in life. They ran me down in Parsine. Took them less than half a cycle.” He rubs his wrist. “The tracer’s bolted to the bones in my arm now. Took a long time to heal. Longer to stop hurting.”
A tracer. Indentured.
“The tracer—you’re still indentured, then? They can follow you?”
“Oh, haulerwoman,” says the dealer with a laugh, “the Henza *own* me. Nine-tenths of my profits, every day ’til they decide I’m dead.”
Tria.
She didn’t even know you’re supposed to name a ship.
“Where’s the Port Nord scrapdock?” she asks the dealer. “I’ll pay you to tell me the way.”

• • • •

As the Nikutan sun surrenders to night and the Henza cantors call out vesper tithes, Jeri finds Cleo again.

She's sunk in the scrapdock's very first berth, as if she's meant to be found. Spotlit, with rickety scaffolding climbing her hull like a creeping vine. Her engine's silent. Her running lights are out. Her dermal buffer, once red as a starfish's belly, is dusty and brown. Two immense rectangular swaths are cut away entirely, baring her dark carbocine shell.

No.

Jeri breaks into a run.

There are figures on the scaffolding. Metalworkers. Four of them. Their faces are shielded in masks, like soldiers. All of them wield lasers. They're shearing away sheets of red buffer, slicing down to the carbocine beneath. One of them glances over a shoulder and despite the spotlights, brighter than the Nikutan sun, despite the noise of the sparking lasers, she looks right at Jeri, right where she's sprinting down the darkened port, screaming for them to stop.

The others switch off their lasers, too, and watch.

As if they're expecting her.

A leap, a scramble. Jeri feels the fabric of her jumpsuit catch and tear on the scaffolding, but doesn't slow. *Faster*, she tells herself. Then she's up, she's pulling herself onto the highest platform, five meters at most from the masked workers.

She lays a hand on Cleo's hull. It's cold. No regeneration, not even the weak radiating warmth of dormancy. She's shut down entirely, unresponsive.

"What are you *doing*?" Jeri screams. "*She's not scrap!*"

The nearest worker, thin and tall, reaches up and pulls her metal mask away, lets it hang at her side.

There's a mark on her wrist. Star-shaped. White.

The worker smiles. The smile is crooked but honest, a stray dog stealing scraps. Tria.

"*Stop!*" Jeri screams. "The contract said no salvage!"

"Maybe *your* contract did." Tria moves closer; in the fractured shadows of the spotlight she looks predatory, like a widowshark circling a bloodied whale. "But I've sold her back to the Henza. Different contract entirely. There's nothing about salvage in *my* terms." The half smile's become a smirk. "And that's all a Juno's good for, isn't it? A big old pile of secondhand carbocine."

No beauty so beguiling as a Henza contract.

Jeri lunges.

Tria lifts her arm and with a swing like a fishergirl tossing nets in the sea, she slams her mask into Jeri's face.

As Jeri falls, as she tastes her own blood in the back of her throat, as reality shifts and blackens and the four women on the scaffolding carry her away, all Jeri can think is *not Cleo, give me back my Cleo.*

• • • •

"We honored the terms of the contract," says Abbess Ocala. "We resold your ship intact." She kneels next to the cage and through the bars she blinks her white eyes at Jeri, who is bound and still bleeding from the nose. Behind her the goddess Eloji watches, jewel-eyed, smiling.

Jeri folds her anger inside herself, forces indifference. "You scrapped her."

"The *buyer* scrapped her. That's the buyer's prerogative."

"The buyer's got a tracer scar. She's indentured." She looks the abbess in the eye, searches the white krosuta glaze for the black shadow of a pupil. There is none. "You *own* the buyer. You planned to scrap my ship all along."

A grandmotherly smile. "Do you know why Mooncarver discontinued the Juno class? It's hard to sell a hauler a new ship, when they just don't *want* a new one. It's the reactive programming; there's just too much of it. A hauler bonds with her ship like a pet. Or worse: a lover. She tries to upgrade, but then she's back three cycles later, begging for her inefficient old Juno. There are women who've sailed the same Juno for forty years, because they can't bear to part with the silly thing."

Seventeen years. She was my Cleo for seventeen years. Jeri blinks, turns away from the abbess' stare before the tears come.

"You're the same. You can't hide it. I saw it the day you offered to sell." The abbess stands, turns away. "In a few days, your ship will be fully dismantled. I do have an offer for you, however. An *opportunity*. If you accept, I can halt the scrap process with a word. Your ship can be repaired, and quickly."

Jeri knows what's coming before the abbess says it.

Nine-tenths of my profits, every day 'til they decide I'm dead.

"You keep the ship. We'll bond her back to you, pardon your assault on a Nikutan citizen, and ensure that you leave Nikute safely, and soon. You maintain your haul routes with Sturmond, and you're free to pursue better routes if you find them. Your life goes on—*with* your ship—just as it was. Better, in fact, as you'll be under the aegis of the Henza, wherever you choose to go. And for this, you tithe ninety percent of your profits to the goddess Eloji."

No, thinks a small part of Jeri, the part that grew up weighing every gram of fishmeal, the part that abandoned the hot Icaran seas for the limitless cold profit of space. *It's only a ship.*

But the thought's a lie, too small to be true.

"Ninety percent," Jeri whispers.

Abbess Ocala smiles. "You're free to refuse. You *will* serve a sentence for your unfortunate encounter at Port Nord, of course—one Nikutan annum of labor—but you will still have your Archer, and it *is* a far better ship than that ragged old Juno." She waves a long hand as she walks away. "All that carbocine. Such a generous offering to Eloji, don't you agree?"

• • • •

There is no movement in the Henza temple except the footsteps of the night priestesses and the shivered prayers of a cluster of supplicants, coatless in the cold, their faces pressed to the flagstones. There is no light but the soft glow of incense, reflected sharp in Eloji's eyes.

The cage is small, hardly room enough for a child. Jeri lies on her side, her knees folded to her chest. The incense is suffocating, thick enough to singe her throat. Her suit is torn at the shoulder—a separated seam, easily repaired, but enough to let in the frost of Nikutan midnight. Sleep is impossible.

Just a ship, she tells herself.

She will still have the Archer. Thirty-nine percent gain in acceleration, she thinks—or was it less? Eighty-three percent decrease in fuel consumption, and Jeri's in good health, she has many profitable years ahead. Better to serve out a sentence and go free than to submit to Henza bondage. Better to let Cleo go.

Jeri swallows back a sob.

She is a hauler, she is Icaran, she is stone and salt water, she is fortitude embodied. When she was a child, she watched a young fisher drown in the shallows, paralyzed by a pack of coal adders while foraging oysters. She watched, emotionless and unafraid, even as they netted his venom-bruised body and dragged him back to the barge. She's left her home, she's spent years alone in the dark between stars—alone but for Cleo—without breaking down. Sentimentality is a weakness, and costly. If there are tears pooling on the floor where she rests her face, then it's only the pain of a broken nose, the exhaustion, the cold.

She grasps at the numbers like fragments of a storm-shattered raft. She will not let grief pull her under. Fourteen percent expansion in cargo capacity. Sixty-five-point-eight percent improvement in sustained cruising speed.

But at what cost? Apart from a year's hard labor, what do the Henza stand to gain from setting her free? They lied to her once—no, not lied. Tricked her. They'll do it again—and again, she won't see it coming. How far do the Henza roam? To the edge of the Ursuline blockades? Beyond? Just how much of the galaxy can wisest Eloji see?

Dawn spills through the temple oculus. One of the midnight supplicants, bone-thin and bent as a fishhook, finally lifts himself first to his knees, then upright. His wrists are bare—he is not indentured—but he sheds first his leather purse, then his belt, then his threadbare tunic, and last, his worn pair of black boots, and folds all of it neatly beneath the statue of Eloji. He turns to leave, wearing nothing but a loose pair of breeches.

On his way out, a pale-eyed priestess gives him a soft smile and a blessing.

Nothing, Jeri thinks, *he has almost nothing.*

And then she understands. Whatever choice she makes, the Henza will somehow take it all, leave her with just enough to keep her alive, to keep her profitable. But at least she can still have Cleo.

When the abbess returns, Jeri’s eyes are closed. Through her lids, the midmorning light shines warm and red, like the buffered hide of a bright new Juno-class hauler. “Well?” says the abbess.

“My ship,” says Jeri. She keeps her eyes closed. “I just want my ship.”

• • • •

The walls are green as the Arkwright Abyss and swirling with streaks of wheatfish gold.

Jeri taps a forefinger of her bandaged right hand on the wall; the impact shakes the tracer freshly bolted into her wrist, makes her bones ache. The gold streaks flutter away, then stop two meters down the hall and swarm in a circle. She follows them, taps them again. Another two meters. They’re leading her toward the captain’s quarters.

The ship—*her* ship—can tell she’s tired. They’re bonded deep as any starlit sea.

“Oh, Cleo,” she says, “I can’t go to sleep. I tried.” She’s tried for three cycles, in fact. Failed. The Henza retrieved her monstera novels, polished the desk, even replaced her jar of whalebeard kelp, but even with her quarters in perfect order and the climate just right, she can’t slip deeper than the surface of a dream before the pain in her wrist—and the sheer mass of *rage* at being indentured for life to the Henza—reels her back to wakefulness.

She turns away from the golden streaks and heads toward the navigation slate. She doesn’t have to look to know that Cleo’s glittering school of gold is following right behind.

“Help me decide where to go, will you? We’re cleared to lift tomorrow, before terce tithes.” She taps the slate, brings up the map for adjacent systems. “What do you think of Noriador? Not much business, but it’s close.” She sighs. *Ninety percent*. “And it’s not like business matters all that much anymore, does it?”

The slate blinks. A map of Luric appears with a route between the local moons traced out in gold.

Jeri pulls the slate back to Noriador. “Noriador’s the gateway to the Shala systems, though. Those are more profitable. We’d be outside Sturmond’s territory, but we might—”

A blink. A flash of gold.

A map of the Luric system again, with a route laid out straight through the Uriline blockade.

Jeri sighs. “Luric’s under attack, girl. We could get killed.”

She pulls the slate back to Noriador, then links to the map of Shala. Fourteen moons, mostly manganese and copper. She taps a series of waypoints, halfhearted.

The slate goes black, then flashes back to Luric—then *beyond* Luric, past the Uriline colonies, through Mnemosyne and Cyril and the White Shield system. Past unnamed stars, unmapped planets, unbroken moons.

Straight into the dark heart of space.

The thought gives her a chill.

Your spirit pulled down toward the deep, she thinks. *Follow it*.

Jeri’s breath catches. If the solar winds of the Luric system are at their back, if the rebels look away just long enough for a tattered old hauler, tracked by the Henza, to slip past unscathed, if the range of a tracer fades with each passing star . . .

The ship—no, her name is *Cleo*—understands.

A sprint through Luric means freedom. If they’re fast enough. If they survive.

She begins to speak, to confirm what Cleo’s suggesting. Then she catches herself. The Henza have almost certainly bugged Cleo’s walls, traced her navigation slate. They’re listening, watching.

Still. Jeri’s mind swirls, fast as a widows shark. Could they make it? Cleo’s all but healed; her hold is empty. They’d move fast and light—but it may not be enough. The Henza fly only the newest Vitala fighters. Sturmond might assist them, right up to the blockade’s edge, if the Henza attach a bounty. And then, of course, there’s the Ursiline fleet, a shifting wall of pure firepower.

But the Ursiline rebels are frayed and tired; their wall is imperfect. Just how fast can Cleo fly?

Only Cleo can tell her.

“I don’t know, Cleo,” Jeri says aloud. She does her best to sound dubious, in case the Henza are listening. Cleo, she trusts, will understand the subtext. “If we broke through Luric, we’d be outside Henza protection.”

There’s a grumble in the hull beneath Jeri’s feet. A confirmation. A *growl*. The map of Luric pulses gold. A breeze picks up in the navigation suite, a whirlwind of moisture and heat, like a rising storm on an Icaran sea.

All around her, on every wall, are dancing streams of green and gold.

• • • •

It’s midmorning. The cantors call out terce tithes. Staffing at Port Nord is spare; most of the guards have departed for the Nikute Nord temple to make their offerings to the goddess Eloji. Still, about two dozen personnel remain, scuttling like armored blue crabs across the icy granite, weapons raised. Jeri watches them from a surveillance slate. Their interest is elsewhere; a gleaming new Vitala Stiletto fighter has just docked three bays down.

Good, she thinks.

They’re late for launch, Jeri and Cleo. There’s a prohibition on liftoff during tithes. Jeri’s hand shakes as she opens the command slate and files a request for launch exemption. Her justification is reasonable—if they delay until tithes end, they’ll miss the orbit of the Nikutan moons and waste valuable fuel as they leave the planet.

The justification is a lie. Their delay is intentional. Reduced port staff means a slower response.

Jeri keeps the navigation slate locked on Noriador and waits. She filed an impeccable flight plan with the Henza temple the night before: an easy, reliable run through Noriador and then a riskier foray into Shala, with generous profits deliverable to the Henza temple at Noria City. The temple approved it immediately, with the goddess’ deepest praise.

The launch exemption, on the other hand, is taking much longer. Terce tithes are still underway, but already several guards have returned and joined their team to ogle the bright hull of the Stiletto.

Jeri holds her breath. Much longer and Port Nord will be fully staffed.

A swirl of violet and blue passes through the wall above the navigation slate. Dark and soothing, like the waters of Icara rocking a barge on a sleepy, moonless midnight.

Cleo is keeping her calm.

Jeri places her sore right palm on Cleo’s wall, closes her eyes, and breathes deep. *Whatever happens*, she thinks, *Cleo is here with me*.

There’s a chime from the navigation slate. The launch exemption is approved, with the blessing of wisest Eloji.

Three of the guards pull away from the Vitala and gather at Cleo’s hull to supervise liftoff. They keep their guns high and ready.

“Okay, Cleo,” she says. “It’s time.” The blue-and-violet walls flash to a lively green. The hum of the engine grows. The port locks release. Unleashed, they ascend.

On the surveillance slate, Jeri watches Port Nord fall away. The Henza temple is several thousand meters to the northeast, a pale white-spired structure casting shadows over the residential districts. As they rise, it dissolves, becomes an imperceptible speck on the vast curve of Nikute’s tundra.

They pass both moons and head outward, toward the periphery of the Nikutan system. Jeri keeps her eyes on the navigation slate; on it, she and Cleo are a single white dot sliding through a constellation of waypoints that will deliver them to Noriador within five cycles.

They reach the outermost edge of the Nikutan system.

Cleo’s engine growls. She knows the edges of systems: They are the boundaries of wild space. They are the point beyond which she can play, where Jeri lets her heave her engine into supralight and run hot and fast and free until the next system slows them down.

Jeri is suddenly dizzy with terror. From here, their future diverges. A portside turn will take them into Noriador. Safe. A starboard turn will send them straight to Luric and into the midst of the Uriline conflict. Not safe at all.

But if they make it through, they’ll be free.

A thread of gold shimmers across Cleo’s bright green walls. A question. She’s waiting for Jeri’s answer.

“Okay, girl. Let’s go.” Jeri inhales, pulls the navigation slate to Luric, and confirms their path.

The gold thread on the wall glows, expands, then explodes like rockets all around the navigation suite. Cleo’s engine hums, whines. There’s a shift, a rattle as she prepares for supralight.

A message appears from the Nikute Sud temple, from Abbess Ocala. It’s a warning, a threat spelled out in bold Nikutan script. Jeri sees the words *punishable by death* and pushes the message away. “Starboard,” she tells Cleo. “We enter supralight on go.”

A second message appears. No mere threat this time: a formal judgment. She recognizes the word.

Neccima.

It is done.

Jeri brushes the message away. She’s breathless now with fear; already there’s a fleet of Henza fighters on the navigation slate, lifting off at Port Sud and headed her way.

But she still has her ship, her great mangy red-hulled ship with its sweat-hot air and glittering walls and clumsy programming and boundless, loyal heart. And the old Juno class haulers? They’re built for just this kind of adventure.

“Go,” Jeri tells Cleo.

Cleo leaps into supralight, howls her engine like a hound beneath a bright gold Icaran moon, and then they’re both gone, lost in the chase between silver-streaked stars.

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Sarah Grey’s short fiction has appeared in a number of publications, including *Lightspeed*, *Intergalactic Medicine Show*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, and have twice received an Honorable Mention in *The Year’s Best Science Fiction*. Her Rhysling-nominated poetry has been featured in *Nightmare*, *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Uncanny*, *Liminality*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, and elsewhere. She has degrees in art history, medieval studies, and law, speaks multiple languages poorly, and enjoys world travel and roller skating. She lives in Northern California with her family and an excessive quantity of cats.

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- Brightly, Undiminished
- A Bond as Deep as Starlit Seas
- The Ballad of Marisol Brook



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THE LAST CHENG BENG GIFT

Jaymee Goh

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There was definitely something to be said about being Mrs. Lim, even into the Underworld: something about comfort, something about privilege, something about a status quo carried into the afterlife. The previous matriarch that bore the title of Mrs. Lim had moved on long before Mrs. Lim got there, but since Mrs. Lim had not liked the domineering nature of her predecessor, this did not bother her overmuch.

One of things to be said about being Mrs. Lim was that during Cheng Beng, she received many, many presents. These many lush things from her children helped her keep abreast with the living world, to a certain extent. It was unusual for anyone to keep receiving Cheng Beng gifts so long after dying, but then, Mrs. Lim was of a family with unusually high expectations.

Mrs. Lim was always vaguely pleased with the gifts. Her children were secular in their beliefs, but clearly not in their practice. Even an offering made automatically without any real intent behind it was something that contributed to her otherworld comfort. And if the gifts faded at their edges, who would notice, when she received so many? Even if she did receive fewer than she had before.

Best of all, Mrs. Lim did not even have to share them with Mr. Lim, who had, as in life, been too full of overabundant energies to remain in the Underworld for very long. Once he had been satisfied that he had accomplished all he had meant to do in this life—the goals had been to expand his family’s business and raise fine children that would take over said business in order to produce fine grandchildren—he opted instead for Meng Por’s forgetfulness tea and went straight for reincarnation.

So this had been the case, until the tenth year of her death, when she received from her daughter, Hong Yin, a coupon for a visit to the fish spa.

Mrs. Lim turned the coupon in her hand over and over, confused at the invitation, and a bit annoyed. Couldn’t Hong Yin have sent her something more fitting for the Underworld, like new clothes? Mrs. Lim liked receiving them, just as she had liked buying them for the dead when she herself had been alive.

“So creative!” Ah Fong gushed. “Your Ah Hong Yin always so one kind. When you go, I also want to go!”

“Aiya, you know lah Ah Hong Yin, always love going to the fish spa one,” Mrs. Lim replied. “I dunno why she love it so much.”

Mrs. Lim didn’t want to confess, even to her best friend, that she had never been to a fish spa before, even in life.

Hong Yin had not been a bad child, but there was something about her which had put her at odds with Mrs. Lim. Mrs. Lim always felt bad—for thinking that perhaps Hong Yin should not have been her child, perhaps Hong Yin would have been happier raised by her Auntie Blur, one of Mr. Lim’s distant cousins, who would have not noticed all Hong Yin’s strangeness, her difference from Mrs. Lim’s other children. Mrs. Lim knew that these were unmotherly thoughts to have, but they inevitably rose whenever Hong Yin sent anything during Cheng Beng. They had been acceptable, if odd, gifts at first: lingerie (pretty, but not appropriate for someone Mrs. Lim’s age); a flat screen TV (Mrs. Lim had not been disposed to watch much TV when she had been alive); a house in some strange contemporary style (also an impetus for Mr. Lim moving on; if their youngest child could afford to send a house, then his work was truly done).

But Mrs. Lim had never rejected any of her children’s gifts, dead or alive, and she saw no reason to reject this one. So she went to the fish spa at the ghostly address her daughter had dreamed up for her. Luckily, the Underworld being an existential state with no fixed geography, there was no need to call a taxi.

The receptionist had an approximation of a friendly face. “Oh, using a coupon? Got reservation or not? Under what name?”

“Mrs. Lim,” she said tersely to the ghost receptionist.

Once upon a time, if anyone had asked her, she would have said to call her Ah Wen, or Auntie Wen. Perhaps even Xiao Wen; she always thought she had a pretty name. But she had the fortune to marry into the leading Lim family, the first son even, and Lim Teck Meng towered so large in their circle of friends and acquaintances, Xiao Wen quickly became Mrs. Lim, to distinguish her from the other women who married into that illustrious family. *The* Mrs. Lim, who managed to bag a rich husband despite looking so boring and plain. *The* Mrs. Lim who herded her three children into successful adulthoods and an entire extended family into successful annual reunions. *The* Mrs. Lim who was her husband’s most stalwart support.

Mrs. Lim remained Mrs. Lim into death; she saw no reason to give up the name, even into death.

The server, who doubled as a masseuse apparently, showed her where to put her shoes, rinse her feet, then step up to the platform around the fish tanks where she could sit down and stick her feet in.

The fish swarmed around her feet immediately. She jerked her feet away from them, jostling the water. She sucked her teeth in annoyance. Perhaps she was doing this wrong. Perhaps she was supposed to sit still.

The fish circled about her feet, wary after her initial reaction. When they began their work again, Mrs. Lim waited for the expected ticklishness.

Did ghost feet feel ticklish? Mrs. Lim had never considered this before. She watched in fascination as the ghost fish performed their duty in death as they must have in life.

They were not real, and Mrs. Lim knew that they should be, in their own way. What did real fish feel like? Why did she not know? Why had she never known?

She jerked her feet away from the fish, glaring at them in lieu of glaring at Hong Yin. Difficult Hong Yin, who asked stupid questions even though she was clearly so smart, who picked fights over such unnecessary things. Why should Mrs. Lim have known such things? And why should Mrs. Lim think about them now that she was dead?

These thoughts did not leave her when she left the fish spa, utterly unsatisfied with her visit, and thus, with Hong Yin, who had failed to deliver a satisfactory Cheng Beng gift. She went to visit Ah Fong to complain about it.

“Haunt her,” Ah Fong suggested. “Whenever one of my children send me something I don’t like, I visit their house.”

“Ah Fong!” Mrs. Lim was scandalized.

Ah Fong laughed. “What? It’s good for them to know I’m still around for them!”

Mrs. Lim didn’t subscribe to the same opinion. “Dead people shouldn’t be among the living. It means something is wrong.”

“If my kids send me something I don’t like, that’s something wrong what.”

Mrs. Lim dropped the subject.

• • • •

The next year came the usual gifts: new clothes, a Gucci handbag, a laptop computer. Also, more mischief from Hong Yin: a house with its very own fish spa. She invited her friends to come enjoy it, and was envious of their delight in re-experiencing the novelty of the nibbling fish. She even invited Mrs. Tan, *the* Mrs. Tan of the leading Tan family. The matriarchs had not gotten along in life, but their rivalry mellowed in the afterlife. They were cordial, if not friends.

“How come you never go before!” Ling Mo exclaimed upon learning Mrs. Lim’s secret.

“Too busy,” Mrs. Lim said.

“Ah Lim tai-tai was always too busy for silly things like this sort of thing, you know!” Ah Fong laughed.

“Good thing you’re dead then,” Ling Mo said, “now got time to enjoy.”

Mrs. Lim didn’t feel like she was enjoying herself much, watching the fish have a go at everyone’s feet. The fish pecked at her feet; she had an internal argument with herself over whether she actually felt them, or whether she pretended to. Her friends gossiped about their children around her, while she intently watched the water.

Bite by bite, the fish were supposed to stimulate the chi lines on the foot, and suckle by suckle, they were supposed to slough off old skin from the feet, leaving them callus-clear. But Mrs. Lim was dead; she had no real skin to clear anyway.

“Your girl so clever hor, making a spa for you like this,” Mrs. Tan said, drawing Mrs. Lim back into the conversation. “She architect is it?”

Mrs. Lim had some vague memory of Hong Yin showing her some drawings. “Nice, nice, very nice,” Mrs. Lim had said, because she had read in some parenting book that that was what parents should say to their kids. But when it came time to go to college, Mr. Lim had very specific ideas for what his kids should do. “Engineer.”

“Must be easy work if she got so much time to make such nice things for you.”

“Maybe she bought it,” Mrs. Lim said, sloshing her feet into the water, knowing better.

• • • •

During the seventh month that year, Mrs. Lim decided to take advantage of the Underworld’s gate opening for the Ghost Festival. It would be her first time visiting her children. Specifically, Hong Yin.

Hong Yin now lived in a Tampines apartment. Mrs. Lim was not surprised to see her daughter living on the other side of the island from the rest of the family, but she frowned to see that it was low-cost housing. She had expected, what with the extravagant gifts, that Hong Yin would be more successful, perhaps even bought a landed house. After all, Hong Yuen, her eldest, had moved into the family home in Jurong as the new patriarch of the family after Mr. Lim’s passing. Hong Wen had bought a luxury condo in nearby Lakeside, although he spent most of the year in Australia.

Hong Yin was, to Mrs. Lim’s horror, living with a man. And a practicing Muslim, even! Yet she couldn’t help but drift through the rooms, examining their personal effects: the embroidered Quranic verse on the wall over the front door, the Guan Yin altar facing the entrance, the electric piano in the corner, the ugly couches draped with lace doilies, the unmade beds, the study room where she found Hong Yin.

Hong Yin was sitting on the floor, working on some elaborate papier-mâché project. Mrs. Lim glanced at the day-by-day calendar on the wall, pleased to find Hong Yin still used the traditional almanac calendar. But then she frowned: It was a weekday afternoon. Shouldn’t Hong Yin be at the office? Mrs. Lim crept closer to see what Hong Yin was doing.

A rollercoaster. The rollercoaster that had appeared last year during Ghost Festival! So this had been Hong Yin’s work? Mrs. Lim had not wanted to ride it. She had never ridden one, even though she had taken her children to the theme parks many times when they were young. She would wait with them in line, then hold their things for them as they got on. The line in the underworld was too long, and she had preferred to join her friends for feasting.

Mrs. Lim began hunting for more clues about her daughter’s life now: the planner open on the desk, the paint materials, the pencil shavings filling up the wastepaper basket. Pamphlets pinned to the walls announced exhibitions by Lim Hong Yin going back several years.

Since Mrs. Lim’s death.

For a moment, Mrs. Lim was annoyed. All that money for Hong Yin’s education in engineering, gone down the drain! All that hard work impressing onto Hong Yin the importance of a good stable job with financial security, ignored, for art! Mrs. Lim huffed.

Yet, she didn’t have it in her to be angry at Hong Yin, who hummed cheerfully as she painted, in delicate calligraphy, the traditional Chinese characters that would bring the joss rollercoaster to life in the underworld. She had loved her children while alive, had done everything a loving mother should have: prepared lunches, picked them up from school, sent them to tuition, sent them to good universities overseas. She had cleaned childhood scrapes and listened to their problems, even if she had not understood them. She had beat them when they were naughty, scolded them softly or harshly as the situation demanded. She had bought them new clothes every Chinese New Year, and made sure they wanted for nothing.

Only Hong Yin had been unsatisfied: the only daughter mad at being taught to cook and clean (even though Mr. Lim had hired maids, both he and Mrs. Lim were of the opinion that girls needed to learn how to take care of their families), who cried through piano and violin lessons (she had wanted art lessons, but art teachers were less valuable than piano teachers), shouted at curfews imposed on her where her brothers came and went as they pleased (maybe she had a point there). Hong Yin who spent her time in her room avoiding family events. It would have tired any parent; it tired even Mrs. Lim.

Mrs. Lim sat down on the floor next to Hong Yin to watch her now. She had had so many things to do to keep the Lim family’s good standing in their social circles: the endless receptions, the new clothing to buy, the visits with the right kind of people. There were many things she remembered Hong Yin trying to persuade her to do: go for manicures, travel on cruises, and, yes, go to the fish spa. She had no memories with which to draw upon to enjoy them in the afterlife. The afterlife, Mrs. Lim thought, was a place where nothing new could happen, because it is not, after all, a place of living.

“Why do you care about such things!” Mrs. Lim cried out in a sudden fit of spite, the only way to relieve her frustration she had, then and now.

Hong Yin jumped up in startlement, as if she’d heard Mrs. Lim, who hoped that she had. She stared at the rollercoaster in disbelief, then looked around the room wildly. Her hands across her chest gripped her arms so tightly the smeared paint was starker on her fingers than before, a gesture Mrs. Lim recognized as something Hong Yin did only did when she was being shouted at.

Mrs. Lim had a moment of self-righteous satisfaction that even in death, she could make Hong Yin feel her displeasure, but even that dissipated when Hong Yin crumpled against the wall, crying. It hadn’t been uncommon for Mrs. Lim to encounter Hong Yin weeping for no apparent reason, and the familiar discomfort roared to the fore, of the guilt at partaking in the pain, of the helplessness at the unfixable.

“I’m sorry,” she said. She squatted next to Hong Yin. “I didn’t know. I still don’t know. I just wanted you to be happy.” Mrs. Lim thought she had known the best way to be happy, and she had thought it would be good for Hong Yin. But it had not been, and now this gulf of difference yawned between them. What if she had done something different? What could she have known?

She stayed until Hong Yin stopped crying and began working again. The rollercoaster was done, it seemed, since Hong Yin carefully moved it into a corner and began work on something new. Careful fingers unfurled rolls of delicate joss paper in many colours that stained. The calligraphy brush glided effortlessly across surfaces, with well-wishes and poetry. The rustle of papers as they were crumpled, folded, glued, and set pushed against the silence of the room.

A garden, with large rocks, a pathway, and a little pond with its own ducks, spread out across the floor. How Mrs. Lim had always wanted one, always sighed about having one to her husband who had refused due to feng shui. She had joked, on her deathbed, that she hoped before she died she would get a beautiful garden. Hong Yin had gamely sat down with her with a pen and paper, sketching out the details.

They had said nothing about how it was only towards the end that they could set aside their differences and resentments. What was there to say that could have closed that gulf? It was too late then, so they had to do the best they could.

And true to her quirkiness, Hong Yin added steps into the pond. Mrs. Lim rolled her eyes to find it was yet another of those ridiculous fish spa things, but outdoors, surrounded by natural beauty . . . and what looked to be a full-body experience this time. At least Hong Yin was happy, and Mrs. Lim couldn’t find any fault with the aesthetics of the garden, really. It was perfectly balanced to Mrs. Lim’s tastes.

“You are a good girl, Hong Yin,” Mrs. Lim finally admitted. “A good, good girl.”

• • • •

Mrs. Lim said goodbye without the fanfare that had accompanied Mr. Lim’s departure from the underworld. Ah Fong, Ling Mo, and a few other old friends followed her to Meng Por’s pavilion at the edge of the chasm. They had to wait in a long queue, during which her friends tried to persuade her to not leave. After all, didn’t Mrs. Lim have some of the best real estate in the Underworld? Without her there to enjoy it, the property would fade, unused cosmic energy returning to other states. Mrs. Lim felt that her friends secretly wanted to keep enjoying her things.

“Are you sure?” Ah Fong burst out, when it was finally Mrs. Lim’s turn.

“Yes,” Mrs. Lim said firmly.

“But your kids—!”

She shrugged.

Then she stepped up to Meng Por’s table to take the proffered cup.

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AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- The Last Cheng Beng Gift
- Crocodile Tears



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE OLD EQUATIONS

Jake Kerr

First published in *Lightspeed Magazine*, Issue 14 (July 2011)

Finalist for the Nebula Award and Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award

“Imagination defined the advance of physics in the twentieth century. Although we were enticed by the less challenging models of minor thinkers like Einstein, science reached higher, and the era of quantum mechanics changed civilization. Naturally, very few remember Einstein these days—he died during the First World War, after publishing a widely ignored theory that would have set physics back centuries—and instead our future has been shaped by the models developed by visionaries such as Planck, Schrödinger, and Jain.”

—Pascal Delacroix, Lucasian Chair of Mathematics, Cambridge,
from *500 Years of Physics*, Oxford Press, 2187

May 5, 2193

My dearest James,

Surprise! Yes, the final item on your launch checklist is this special message from me.

I miss you already. But you know that. What you don’t know is just how proud I am of you. You were born for this, and no one could possibly be able to handle such a demanding job as well as you. I saw the joy in your eyes when we agreed in your taking the mission. Although I cried and complained, and it seemed like I hated the idea, the reality is that, more than anything, I was and am happy for you. I guess I was just scared—I’m still scared, but I know that this is how our life was meant to be. I’m prepared for it. And proud. Did I mention I’m proud of you?

Know that even while we are millions of miles apart, my heart will always be with you. Ten years is not so long. I’m sad that for most of the journey I won’t be able to hear from you, but you’ll be able to hear from me, and that’s more than some people have, isn’t it?

So this is the first of many, many reminders of the person you are leaving back on Earth, and also of the love that you are bringing with you.

I love you so much,

~Kate

Jimbo,

Your wife left me like no room to leave a note on this damn page. Incredibly proud of you, man. Jealous, too, you lucky bastard! I told Marsden to let me hit you with news from home, but he said no dice. Short messages from control and your wife only. Guess you won’t know the winner of the next ten Super Bowls until you get home, as your wife sure as hell won’t be mentioning it! Anyway, going to miss you, man. I’ll keep the beer cold. Tony

May 6, 2193—E-LC transmission

14:23:31: Testy test test test. askdfjowig. Yeah, this is a fucking test.

14:23:58: Sorry about that, Colonel. All systems are working perfectly on our end. First sail calibration is still set for 4 June. General Marsden wants us to get through a few more days of testing the QE comlink, so you won’t hear from your wife as soon as you may like, but don’t be alarmed. Just to clarify, because you seemed concerned before liftoff—we’re still planning on sticking to the original schedule of odd days being hers and even days ours. Marsden made it very clear that we’re not to take any of your personal message time unless it was critical. Thought you’d like to hear that. Smitty [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

May 9, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:03:32: James, it’s me. Kate. Wow, this is so weird. I’m writing to you, and you’re out there in space. Sorry I haven’t written, but General Marsden wanted to get all the systems with the sail and monitors and stuff perfect first. I guess I’m glad that he’s using the word “perfect.” It makes me worry a little less.

I told Tony that it must be beautiful to watch the planets float by, and he laughed and said you are basically encased in lead with no windows. You never told me that. You made it sound so romantic, and now it sounds oppressive. I hope that you are able to keep that sparkle in your eyes for the whole trip, despite the conditions. It was always there whenever you looked in the sky. Remember that, James. Whenever things get tough, remember me holding your hand as you looked up at the sky, the stars reflecting in your eyes.

It’s only been a few days, and I can’t wait to hear from you on the fourth. Don’t worry—I can handle ten years, as long as I can hear from you. I’m running out of space. Love you so very mu [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

May 23, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:02:18: Sorry I didn’t write last time. It is awful that I’m only allowed to sit down at 6 and can only write a few paragraphs every other day. Anyway, I shouldn’t use the space to complain! Amy had a performance at school at 4:30, and your sister would have killed me if I missed it. I couldn’t get to the base until almost 7 because of traffic. General Marsden said I couldn’t even send you an “I love you,” and he wouldn’t give me a make-up day. Sometimes I hate the stick up his ass, but then I remember that it’s one of the things helping keep you alive, so I try to be thankful.

Anyway, I’m very excited that I’ll be able to get a message from you soon, but General stick-up-his-ass (kidding!) says not to expect more than a few words as this is your first time setting up your comlink. Still, even a few words will be a blessing. I miss you horribly, and it’s only been three weeks. Ten years seems almost unbearable now. Sorry to be such a downer. I’m sure I’ll feel better after I hear from you next week.

Love, ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 4, 2193—E-LC transmission

12:03:01: Jim, it’s Mars. Did the sail calibrate? Were you able to initiate the quantum link? I’ll assume you’re having some com problems. Let us know what went wrong with the process when you get the link established. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

15:32:54: Jim, are you okay? We’re still waiting to hear from you. I’m going to kill Ollie if he didn’t account for something on your quantum pair. I’ll be up until we hear from you. We don’t want to stress our QE link with too many messages, so don’t make me keep hassling you, soldier. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

19:02:17: Jim, I’m going to go against all of my instincts and assume the best. I’m working from the theory that you didn’t have time to get the link initiated with calibration going on. Understandable. I’m hoping for the best next month. I’ll tell everyone that it was a communication issue and that everything is fine. Don’t fucking make a liar out of me or I’ll kick your ass. Mars [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:42:12: Hello? I sure hope to hell this thing is working. What the fuck is happening back on Earth? Why are you sending messages at all hours? Half of them don’t even make sense. I thought you were going to do one message a day at 18:00? Why are you guys so worried about this calibration? It’s going perfectly. This isn’t Tony fooling around is it? I can’t believe Mars would let him do that. Jesus. Someone better answer. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

June 4, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:59:33: Colonel, this is Smitty. General Marsden and your wife have already left. You’re almost eight hours late. What happened? We can’t send through any more messages due to the strain on the QE link, so we’ll have to catch up next calibration. Just give us a status update, and we’ll figure it out next time. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:43:41: What the hell are you talking about Smitty? I’m 43 minutes late, which is within the range we considered as acceptable before I left. I’m looking at the clock right now. Shit, I don’t want to wait another month to talk to Kate. Can’t believe you guys fucked this up on our very first calibration.

Anyway, all readings are normal except for distance traveled. It’s off slightly. I’ll have more data for the next calibration. Just don’t fuck it up next time, and make sure Kate is there. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

June 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:00:04: I am so mad, but I’m not sure if I should be mad at you or the idiots who planned this mission. How could it take you so long to set up the quantum link? This is killing me, and now I have to wait another month. Argh! At least you’re okay. I was so scared when they said something was wrong and I missed you, but General Marsden was so calm and kind. Tony told me that sometimes that even though the buttons are shiny or new it doesn’t mean they don’t occasionally get stuck. I laughed, but I’m not sure that it made me feel better.

Ugh, here I am venting at you again, and you’re the one who’s all alone in space. Sorry! I am so proud of you, and I love you.

Oh, I’m supposed to tell you that your Uncle Bill broke his leg skateboarding. Your dad said you’d laugh at that. Everyone here wants me to pass along messages and stories. I’m watching your friends and family share their life with me. It makes me feel closer to you, James, even though you are so far away. I love you so much. Please make sure that everything is [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 16, 2193—E-LC transmission

12:03:34: Colonel, you need to make sure the comlink is set up by 16:00:00. Not to put any pressure on you, but it’s so the President can talk to you. General Marsden will have more details later. Oh, and a reminder, Kate’s scheduled session tomorrow was kicked by General Marsden so we can send you the latest data points on the sail calibration. You’ll hear from her on 19 June and then we pick up the normal schedule. Smitty [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 22, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:01:33: Jim, it’s Mars. The President wants to communicate with you on the next sail calibration. Yeah, I’m sure you noticed it’s the fourth of July, and yes it means you won’t be able to send a message to Kate. You wanted to be the hero? Well, look here—you’re the hero. Anyway, just be your normal “oh golly” humble self. It’s one of the things that I hate about you but everyone seems to find endearing, so you have my permission to be yourself. Just this once.

Not sure what Kate is saying, as I’ve forbidden anyone from accessing her logs. Whatever you say is between you and her. I just wanted to say that she’s being a real trooper. Seems strong. Pissed as all hell about the com issues, but I can’t blame her. Anyway, she seems okay. Shit, I don’t know about women, dammit. All I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t worry about her. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

June 23, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:00:41: Well, they finally told me, and I’m both proud and angry. Mostly angry, to be honest. I can’t stand that I’ll have to wait another month to hear from you because you’ll be talking to the president. Of course it IS the president, which is a bit overwhelming. I have to admit that I’m getting quite a bit of attention over your mission, and now the president is going to talk to my James on the fourth of July because he’s a hero and inspiration. Is it bad that I’m kind of thrilled that I’m being asked to do talk shows? I know that sounds so shallow, but talking about you to others makes you feel closer somehow. Ha, that almost sounds like I’m rationalizing this celebrity thing, but honestly it’s not. If I can’t talk to you, I can at least talk ABOUT you.

I was invited to dinner by Tony and Gwen this evening. They’ll ask about you, and I don’t know what I’ll say. Because I don’t know. But it’s nice that they ask. They care, you know?

I’m still angry about not talking to you. Maybe if I ask the President he’ll say s [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 3, 2193—E-LC transmission

17:59:44: M. says I only have 50 characters. Love you! ~Kate

18:03:07: Colonel, all systems are fine on our end. I sure hope you can get the comlink initiated tomorrow. We finally got all the data from your first missed broadcast, and the only issue was the slight calibration error on distance. Beyond that things look good. The systems on the ship haven’t so much as hiccupped. Just make sure you get that communication link set up ASAP. Smitty [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 4, 2193—E-LC transmission

15:21:21: Jim, please tell me you’ll have the comlink set up soon. I’m forbidding anyone from coming near the com station until I hear from you. You know what to do, soldier! Mars [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

15:44:03: Jim, we just checked every fucking scan, transmission, assessment, and data point, and everything looks normal. Please get on the line within the next 15 minutes. I told the president that it would probably be good to wait, but he’s adamant. He wants to go live with you at 16:00. LIVE. Mars [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

16:00:00: Colonel Murphy, this is President Wallace. I just wanted to say how proud we are of you. You embody the true American spirit! [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

16:00:12: They are telling me that there may be sunspots affecting our conversation, and that I may not get a response from you. How unfortunate, I was hoping to hear how beautiful space must be as you fly past at such extraordinary speed. I wonder if you see out your window what we think of when we think of America—truth and beauty quickly passing us by as we look forward to an even better future. But we should stop and enjoy the view, don’t you think Colonel? [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

16:00:41: I’m sure your view is beautiful. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

16:00:47: It is unfortunate we can’t hear of it due to the sun. Perhaps next time, Colonel. Remember, all of America is proud of you. God bless you, and God bless America. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

16:23:28: Jim, I’m cutting the link for today, but I’ll have Smitty monitor the line in case we hear from you. Don’t expect to hear from Kate for a few days. All the messages today put a strain on the quantum link. Sorry. Mars. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 5, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:06:18: Colonel, I don’t know if you’re there, but we’re seeing normal readings across the board. General Marsden has everyone believing in the sunspots story, but what is really going on? We’re returning to the normal com schedule on 7 July. You’ll hear from Kate then. Smitty [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 6, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:01:08: Jim, I fear the worst, but I’m not against giving everyone one more month of hope. Hell, I need another month of hope. Readings are normal, so there is that. I expect this is your ineptitude and not anything worse. I’ll forgive ineptitude this once. Just don’t let it happen in August. Please. Mars. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

17:59:32: Dearest James, I am so sorry you haven’t heard from me. General Marsden wouldn’t let me talk to you until the sunspot interference died down. He said you wouldn’t even get the messages. I guess I yelled a bit, but he put his foot down. Sometimes I hate that man. But don’t worry, I’m okay. I was just so worried. Not hearing from you

is killing me inside. First it's normal first run mistakes, and now it's sunspots. I haven't heard from you in over two months!

Please please please tell me you're okay, and you'll be able to talk to me soon? Please? I know you're okay. I just want to hear it. I love you. ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:33:12: Kate, are you there? I just got your message. Is everything okay? I can't make sense of half of what you are saying to me, and I'm now getting a couple messages a day. Have you guys changed the schedule? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

July 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:03:28: Holy shit, Colonel, am I glad to hear from you! It's Smitty. We've been worried sick. What happened on 4 July, and why are you contacting us now? The next calibration is weeks away. Is something wrong? [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:35:22: Smitty, I have no idea what you are talking about. The calibration is going on right now. How could I have missed it? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

12:57:22: Smitty, you there? I only have a few hours before I need to shut down. Where's Kate? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

July 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:53:47: Jim, it's Mars. Sorry I took so long. I have communications locked down due to all these issues, and it took me a while to get here. I just went over the logs, and I am completely lost. Are you saying it's 4 July right now? [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:23:11: Mars, I'm not in the mood for jokes. I'm looking at the computer screen right now, and it's 4 July. What the hell are you guys up to? Can you get Kate on the line? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

July 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:54:53: I'll get Kate on the line at ASAP, but right now I need to figure this out. What's your location? [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

July 4, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:24:02: That's what I can't understand, Mars. The instruments don't match up. Acceleration is perfect—constant since launch, but I've covered even more distance than the revisions from the last calibration, and way more than our initial estimates. Just checked it three times. Something's out of whack. And now the clock thing is getting worse. I know there were some unknowns, but this is fucked up beyond all belief. And why is the message frequency now several times a day? With the augmentation to handle the G forces Archer said to expect some disorientation, but this is ridiculous. Hell, I FEEL perfectly normal. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

July 7, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:57:01: I don't know, Jim. We need more time to figure this out. Let me get the guys on it until the next calibration. Maybe you went through a particle field or something else we don't know about, and it has affected some instruments and your perceptions. Look, we can't stress the QE link any more. Every time we exchange multiple messages, it becomes unstable. I'll tell Kate we got a short update from you, but let's not let her know there are any problems. I don't want to worry you, but she's been extremely tense after missing the first two comlinks.

I'm just glad you're okay. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

August 3, 2193—E-LC transmission

19:54:33: James, Mars is making me leave, so if you get the link set up make him get me. MAKE HIM. I NEED to hear from you. I understand that there is something wrong with your instruments or something, so I don't blame you. But you MUST be here for the September calibration. I desperately miss you. I love you so much. ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

August 3, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:14:20: Smitty, you there? We clearly have major problems, but that can wait. Get Kate. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

August 14, 2193—E-LC transmission

02:44:04: Colonel, this is Davis. It's 3 AM here and everyone is asleep. But don't worry. General Marsden made it clear—if you contacted us the first call was to your wife and the next one was to him. We'll get her here for you, sir.

04:08:44: James, are you there? I've missed you so much! I can't believe I get to hear from you early! General Marsden says we only have a couple of exchanges, so I'll just say a few words and then let you speak. Oh God, how I've missed your voice—seeing your words. Are you getting my messages? Are you okay? Can I do anything for you?

Please respond quickly. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

August 3, 2193—LC-E transmission

14:39:23: Kate, I'm here. I love you and miss you, too. More than you can possibly imagine. Yes, I've gotten every single one of your wonderful, maddening, crazy, loving messages. I love that Tony and Gwen are expecting. I love that you hate Mars one day and appreciate him the next. (I'm the same way, as if you didn't know that). I love that on some days you tell me the most wonderful details of your life—our life—and other days you just vent.

I'm fine. I'm perfectly fine, and everything is perfect on this amazing ship. The worst part is being without you and our friends, but other than that I just have to deal with boredom. Being alone can be hard. I can't deny that. But this is all just temporary. We're already past a chunk of time. Nine or ten years still seems monumentally long. I know that. But it's not so long that we'll miss our lives together. When I get back you'll be 38, and I'll be 40. We can still have kids. We can run off to Venice or just sleep in and watch TV.

I wish I had more to say, but you know me—I've never [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

14:46:02: Dammit. I hate the character limits on this quantum shit. Anyway, I was going to say that I've never been one for lots of talking and here I am running out of characters. I guess I will need to figure this out if we're only going to talk every 30 days.

I love you, Kate. I miss you. James [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

August 14, 2193—E-LC transmission

04:23:38: I'm crying, James. Damn you, you made me cry and Smith and General Marsden will be in here soon. I hate when people see me cry!
I love you so much. ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

August 14, 2193—E-LC transmission

04:32:42: Jim, it's Mars. We've pulled in every analyst and expert we could find. It turns out the initial thought of this being due to an astronomical anomaly isn't possible. We had both engineers and statisticians go through the cosmological data, and there is nothing out of the ordinary. I mean nothing. We did confirm your assessment. One or more of your gauges is out of calibration. That could also account for some of your disorientation.
With that in mind I need to gather more data from you in terms of your perceptions the next time we have a link. Honestly, I'd like to peg you as crazy and call it a day, but with gauges out of calibration you could be right. Maybe we're the crazy ones. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

August 16, 2193—E-LC transmission

16:32:44: Colonel, we almost lost the QE link on 14 August. We're still working out the limits, but it looks like we're going to have to hold the monthly exchanges to 2 incoming/2 outgoing. General Marsden says this will give you one exchange with your wife and one for us. It's not a lot, but the quantum entanglement is very unstable. We can't risk breaking the connection. Next message coming 19 August. Smitty [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 2, 2193—E-LC transmission

12:02:33: Colonel, it's Smitty. Did you get the link set up? We're hoping you got your ship clocks calibrated correctly during the last link. I'm standing by. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 3, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:00:04: I hate sunspots! I'm so depressed. All I want to do is see your words. Your words! How hard is that? They said you would be able to talk to me every month, and here it is month four, and I've heard from you once. ONCE! I tried to get General Marsden to maybe see about setting up the comlink next week instead of the long wait. I even told him I'd swap two weeks of sending messages just to hear from you, but he wouldn't even consider it.
I don't know what to do, James. I feel so powerless. I live and speak to you in the vacuum of space, and then—nothing. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 4, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:18:14: Jim, it's Mars. I was afraid you wouldn't hook up with us on 2 September, but I'm not surprised. All of us are pretty much just waiting until we hear from you, whenever that is. I'm still not telling Kate that we have some kind of unknown problem, but I'm sure she's already covered that with you multiple times. Needless to say, I'm not her favorite person in the world right now.
I'm assuming that we have a few weeks until we get a link. The physicists want me to ask you to keep very close track of our incoming messages. We need you to log them in the computer and stamp them with your arrival time. Have that handy when we talk. I'll have Doctor Singh with me next time, and he'll be asking you about the variations between our time stamps and yours. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 5, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:02:32: I'm so sorry about the other day. I NEVER feel like I'm not talking to you, especially after what you said last month. I was just sad and frustrated and not having the best day. I saw Jackie Merriweather holding hands with her new boyfriend, and it made me so intensely jealous. And then I can't talk to you, so not only can't I hold your hand, I can't even read your words.
I'm thinking this is one of those venting messages, so I should just sign off. Why did we ever agree to this?
I do love you so very much. ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 13, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:02:02: Happy thirtieth birthday, my love. We had a celebration at the house, and your dad flew in from Phoenix. Isn't that great? We thought rehabilitation would take months, but there he was. We let him blow out your candles. He blew out every single one, although he coughed a bit at the end. He laughed and said that he may not be as strong as he once was, but he'd live long enough to see his son return from Gliese 581 d! Isn't that great?
I read your message at the party. It's the first time I've shared it with anyone. I've been kind of keeping it to myself as my special thing, but the time seemed right to share it with others. Your words didn't leave many dry eyes. Tony said to bank on the sleeping in and watching TV more than Venice, which got a laugh.
I'm getting nervous about October 2, but I'm starting to understand that space travel is something you simply can't predict. As General Marsden says—there are just so many variables. Still, please be there. Love, ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

15:58:13: Anyone there? Of all times to have shit get messed up, it has to be now. Not sure what your time stamp shows, but I'm four hours behind schedule on getting the link up. Sail calibration is almost done, so we have to talk fast. Smitty? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

September 29, 2193—E-LC transmission

17:13:23: Jim, it's Mars. Thank God you're safe. I almost gave up hope when you missed the 2 September calibration and link.
We need to get this problem solved. Do you have the time stamps? I'm calling for Professor Singh. Hopefully he's nearby. He needs to know how closely they match up. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

16:09:58: Christ, this is fucked up. Anyway, I have the time stamps. They show incoming at increasing intervals. They started at one per day and are now coming in at nearly twice a day. I also followed up on the doctor's recommendations and logged my sleep cycle and have done daily cognitive tests. Normal across the board.
Is Kate there? [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

September 29, 2193—E-LC transmission

17:58:55: Colonel Murphy, this is Doctor Singh. Are the time differences random or is there some kind of order to them? Do you have any other things that appear to be out of phase? Also, can you remember feeling any anomalies? It may even be as slight as a flash in your eyes or a tingle on your skin.
Jim, it's Mars. Kate's in the other room. I'll bring her in after you send your answers to Doctor Singh. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

16:46:09: Hard to tell, Doc. The times appear random, but when I look at them as a whole, they appear to be slowly increasing in frequency. And, yes, the whole fucking flight

appears to be out-of-phase. I'm somehow covering more distance without our acceleration calculations being off. I'm starting to think I'm going crazy, because there have been no flashes and no tingling. Nothing like that. Beyond the bizarre data we're seeing this trip couldn't be more normal. I guess that's good for Ollie and his team, but it makes for frustrating troubleshooting. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

September 29, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:04:49: James, what is happening??? I haven't heard from you in almost two months! Is everything okay? I'm so afraid for you, James.
General Marsden said you only have a few minutes. I could kill him for making me wait nearly all this time and then telling me you only have a few minutes. I want to hear hours of your thoughts, your dreams, and your words, but I get just minutes. I'll shut up. Please just let me see your words and imagine your voice as you tell me you're okay. Please. Quickly. Please. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

September 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

16:51:12: I have just a few moments, but it's not Mars' fault. I couldn't get the comlink initiated until it was four hours late. I loved your birthday message. I must say that Tony was wrong—after ten years apart, I can drag my ass out of bed for a trip to Venice.
You know, I figured the one thing that what would keep me going would be your messages. But now that there have been problems I realize that I want—I need—to have you see MY messages, too. It's the only way I can make sure you know I exist.
I think of you constantly. I think of our past, and I think of our future. I like to think of the more mature, elegant, and beautiful woman who will be waiting for me when I return. Of course, here is where you ask why you aren't elegant, mature, or beautiful now, and I don't have an answer for that, because you are.
I guess the point is that I want to remind you that I think of our future. That's what gets me through the day—your messages from the present, and my dreams for our future. I need to go. I have so much I want [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

December 12, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:32:13: Jim, it's Mars. I'm sorry for all the dead ends, but I think we've found something. One of the physicists in Bern remembers a crackpot theoretical physicist from 200 years ago named Albert Einstein. He was an amateur who died during World War One after publishing a handful of theories that no one took seriously. The thing is that they kind of match what we're seeing here. On the extremely off chance that this guy was actually right, we're looking into it.
It's something, at least.
He just gave me the briefing this afternoon, and I don't understand 90% of it. I'll have him dumb it down even more and then I'll explain it to you in the next uplink. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 14, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:11:28: Jim, it's Mars. The physicists are actually excited about this Einstein lead. I still can't understand half of it, but the essence is that time is not a constant, it's relative to the speed of light, which is the actual constant. What this means is that the faster you travel and the closer you get to the speed of light, the slower time goes for you.
Okay, here's the kicker, and here is what is getting all the brainiacs excited. His theory basically says that as you are increasing in speed, time will slow down by a specific ratio, and that's what we're seeing with the messages. We have a ton more calculations to run through, and no one is sure how this integrates with quantum physics, but CERN is saying they are going to do some practical tests on this crazy theory, but it looks like the crackpot could actually have been a genius.
This is going to be difficult to grasp, but I want you to think long and hard about what this means for you. I won't say more than that. I'll have more later. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 16, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:08:00: Jim, it's Mars. The scientists didn't screw around. Every test they ran confirmed Einstein's theory. Hell, you're a living confirmation of the theory. I hope you did what I asked and thought about this, because the scenario is not good, buddy.
All our calculations anticipated you passing the speed of light to make this trip in ten years. You will not pass the speed of light. You will approach it, but you won't be able to go faster. Einstein figured it out, and CERN just confirmed it. It's impossible. I can't be more blunt than this, Jim: Your mission will now take 41 years from our perspective.
Okay, that's not all. You mentioned how you are covering more ground than you expected, and you've seen these messages come to you faster and faster. That's because space is warping at the speed you are traveling. I still can't believe this, but here's the kicker: From your perspective, the trip will take only 5 years. As I said, time is slowing down for you.
This has a dramatic impact on this project, but it also h [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]
18:14:47: I'm going to risk another transmission, because this is so important. Jim, this has a dramatic impact not just on the mission but you personally. When you arrive back on Earth, it will be 5 years from now for you, but we'll all be 41 years older. I'm so sorry.
I'm going to let Kate know over breakfast tomorrow. She'll have plenty of time before your transmission, which should be in a few weeks. Mars [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 17, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:00:44: General Marsden told me.
I spent all day thinking about it, and I think it's a load of shit. Time has no meaning? Space can be stretched? I asked questions. Lots and lots of questions, James. And the scientists all give me the same answers, but their answers don't scream "time dilation" (which is what they're calling it) to me. They scream "someone fucked up and is covering their ass."
Sorry. I just am very frustrated on your behalf. Don't worry, I'll push and push until we see something that makes sense.
There is absolutely no way that I'm not going to see you for forty years. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 21, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:03:01: James, I did some research on this Einstein fellow. Did you know that he died before quantum physics? The core branch of science for the past 200 years, and this crazy guy didn't even consider it. THIS is who we are looking to for guidance on a communication issue?
Also, Doctor Singh told me that they still have no idea how our quantum link is working across space and time. He actually told me that you are a "quantum reference point," and so you are talking to us in the future. After hearing that, how can we take them seriously?
You know me, James. I'll dig and claw and fight until I get the truth. I know you're okay, but someone messed up something, and I'll find out. Next link let's skip the personal stuff and get to the bottom of the problem. You're right there and probably know what's going on. We can solve this even if the scientists can't.
Your father called, but I haven't had time to call him back. At your birthday party, he asked if he could talk with you, but I'm not sure General Marsden would allow i [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

October 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:44:39: Smitty, this is Colonel Murphy. Link is set up. I want you to get Kate on the line ASAP. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

December 26, 2193—E-LC transmission

14:48:12: Colonel, this is Smitty. Glad to hear from you. I’m going to get General Marsden. Hold tight.
15:13:59: Jim, it’s Mars. Kate is here, but first I’m handing control over to Doctor Archer. She knows she has only one transmission, so pay attention to every word.
15:14:19: Colonel, your initial assessment was for a 10 year mission. While that is now shorter for you, the circumstances on Earth have changed radically. Your expectations on return have to be completely altered. I have confidence that you will be able to handle the strain, but I need you to be honest with us and honest with yourself. Please share any fears, concerns, or other psychological problems or issues you are facing, no matter how small. We will do our best to provide for them, even with this difficult means of communication.
Be strong. But be honest with yourself. When you return, you are not going to see the wife, family, or friends you expect. Some may not be alive. Colonel, I handled your initial screening, and I know you can handle this challenge. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

October 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:11:39: No shit, doc. Put Kate on. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

December 26, 2193—E-LC transmission

15:15:45: James, I have missed you so much! I have nothing to say. You’ve seen my words for months, and I’ve seen nothing from you, so please just tell me you’re okay! [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

October 2, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:12:00: Kate, I’m perfectly fine, but please pay attention to this very carefully. I know you don’t believe it, but you must. They explained the theory behind the old equations that the physicists are discussing, and while they are strange, the concepts are clear and make sense. I’m so sorry, Kate, but this is how things are. I don’t want them to be, but they are. Trust me. Relativity is real. I can’t go faster than the speed of light. Time dilation is real. All of it is real. I see it every day. Every day I receive multiple messages from Earth. It is wonderful to have the constant communication, but it is sad to watch time fly by.
Please believe me. It is much better for us to talk about our new plans and how we are going to deal with that than pretending it isn’t real. I love you so much that the last thing I want to do is hurt you, and I know this is probably hurting you. But we can get past this.
We cannot be sad. We cannot be angry. We need to just find a way to deal with what life has dealt us. We WILL see each [MESSAGE RECEIVED]
13:06:44 : We will see each other again, my love. Talk to Doctor Archer or Mars. They can give you perspective. Mars told me that I can’t reply more than twice due to lack of stability of the quantum entanglement, but this is important, Kate. Let’s not look at the problems. Let’s look ahead at the answers. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

December 31, 2193—E-LC transmission

18:01:03: James, I don’t want you to worry. I was being selfish and I let my emotions get in the way of thinking clearly. I spent a long time talking to General Marsden, and I understand time dilation now. You know me—I’m not one to just sit back and give up. Don’t be mad, but I asked him about abandoning the mission. He wouldn’t even consider it. I don’t want to belabor the point, because I know you won’t agree, but I really think that with everything all screwed up that they should turn you around and bring you home.
Anyway, maybe he told you, but if not—that isn’t going to happen.
Believe me, James, I am thinking. Maybe they can send another ship that I can be on to join you? It’s not that crazy. Maybe we could live on Gliese 581 d as the first colonists. They’ve done husband and wife missions before, right? God, 41 years is so long. That’s longer than I’ve been alive! I’m sorry. I know it is hard for you, too. But will you love me when I’m old? Will you even know me? I’m sorry. Happy New Year, my love, although I k [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED – MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

January 17, 2194—E-LC transmission

18:00:03: James, Gwen had her baby. They named him James after you, and they asked us to be his godparents. I think that is really nice.
I’m still meeting with Doctor Archer. She helps a lot, but it is still difficult. The press has found out about what is happening, and they are calling me constantly. The headlines are all about how when you finally return, you’ll be 35, and I’ll be almost 70.
It’s hard.
Tony joked that when you return your godson will be older than you, and I started crying and couldn’t stop. I know he felt terrible, but I wanted to just kill him.
Will you still love me when I’m old and gray, and you’re still young and handsome?
I have to go. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

November 1, 2193—LC-E transmission

12:14:23: Smitty, link is established. I’ll wait on instructions. Please make sure Kate is there. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

February 10, 2194 E-LC transmission

21:32:01: Jim, it’s Mars. Great to hear from you. Listen: You really need to get to Kate. I’m very worried about her. She won’t tell me what’s wrong, but I’m sure it’s finally dawning on her that she won’t see you for 40 years. She’s shut out Archer, too, and they had been talking regularly. If you need to, send a double transmission this once. You know that I need you both strong. I’m going to clear the message buffer. Wait for her message and then reply. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]
12:45:03: James, I am so sorry to tell you this, but your father passed away. We’ve kept it very quiet because the press is still looking for every possible angle to write about you. They are horrible.
He died in his sleep. Maybe it was for the best, he was fighting so hard.
All I want to do is hold you and make you feel better, my love. I am so sorry. I feel like the weight of the world is on my shoulders. I need to be strong for you and everyone around me. But I don’t know if I can handle it. It’s hard, James.
And then I think of you and feel guilty. So guilty.
I was at the funeral, and as they lowered your dad’s casket in the ground, I couldn’t help but think that it was like your ship. A metal casket taking you to some unknown beyond. I know that’s grim and sad and not true because I know I’ll see you again, but it won’t be for so long. [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

November 1, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:50:01: Kate, please don’t let everything overwhelm you. I am so thankful that you told me about Dad. To be very clear—I never expected to see him again. I know that sounds harsh, and I know he’s a tough old bird, but even he knew that his cancer wasn’t going to give him much time. We said our goodbyes.
I committed my life to this mission. I knew I’d have to leave my life behind and that things would be different when I returned.
This is so hard, because I will be responding to messages I’ve just seen that you sent weeks ago. So bear with me if you can’t remember what I’m talking about.
Yes, I will still find you beautiful. Yes, I will still want to feel you against me as we fall asleep. Yes, I will kiss you with the same passion as when I left, if not more. Yes, I will be there for you always.
Never doubt me, Kate. I don’t doubt you. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

February 10, 2194—E-LC transmission

12:57:56: I will be strong, James. How sad is this—I'm safe on Earth, and you're in a dangerous ship sailing to an unknown planet in a far away solar system, and you're trying to make me feel better. And you just lost your father. I'm ashamed. Mars said I had this one extra message and to make it count, but I don't know what to say other than you inspire me, James. I miss you. ~Kate

December 1, 2193—LC-E transmission

11:44:32: Smitty, Mars? What is going on? The messages have started to slow down. Is there something wrong? Everything is fine here. I'd wish you Happy Thanksgiving, but you've already celebrated Christmas and New Years. Still no problems on my end. Just a bit worried about you guys, actually. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

May 19, 2194—E-LC transmission

16:58:54: Jim, it's Mars. I've been waiting to hear from you before giving you the bad news. As you've noticed, the QE link has become unstable. We're not sure if it'll hold up. We've cut transmission down to the bare minimum in the hope that the entanglement will restore itself, but I have to be honest, buddy. It doesn't look good. I don't know how many more messages we have, but we will most likely lose our link soon.

17:07:32: James, it's Kate. I haven't heard from you in over 3 months, but I just want you to know I'm not worried. Smitty told me we've seen instability in the link before, so I'm sure everything is fine. So ignore that and just tell me how your Thanksgiving went. Yes, I remembered!

General Marsden tells me we only have this one transmission, so I'll just say that even if you don't hear from me every day (or 5 times a day!) I'll be with you. Love you so much, ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 1, 2193—LC-E transmission

13:03:54: I don't know what to say, Kate. This is too much to think about. I don't know if I can survive without hearing from you. As you said, they did have instabilities before. I have to be positive. Tell Mars that if he needs anything from me in the way of working on my half of the quantum pair, that I'll do anything—anything—to get it stabilized.

I'm glad you remembered Thanksgiving. I haven't been in space for a full year yet, and already it feels like ages. Hell, it's been even longer for you. Okay, to be positive—tell Tony I'm proud of his promotion. He knows damn well that running the Mars line is the final step before getting a deep space mission, but tell him I mentioned it anyway. I hope to God he never gets a deep space mission, but don't say that—he'll never understand. Can anyone?

We'll figure the com issue out, Kate. Just remember I love you. I'm the luckiest guy in the world. James [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

August 17, 2194—E-LC transmission

18:00:03: They are only giving me one message every month, James. I don't know how often you'll be getting them, but just know that as you wait for my next message I am still thinking of you. I know you're figuring out what's wrong. That's what I love about you. I could always count on you. I'll wait to hear what you have found out, but I have to tell you that General Marsden has told me that we have only a few messages left. He said that the quantum pair are spinning apart or the link is broken or something like that.

At home there isn't much to report. Everyone is just a few months older and a few months wiser. The press are finally leaving me alone. I know I vent at you about them all the time, but they are vultures. Anyway, it's better, thank God.

I don't know what else to say, James. How sad is that? I have only one message a month for you, and I have nothing to say. I guess life goes on. Love you. ~Kate [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

December 31, 2193—LC-E transmission

11:44:34: Mars, you know what I'm going to say: This is total bullshit. How can you guys fuck up something as simple as the comlink while a sail the size of the moon is working like a charm? Skipping messaging today to do live diagnostics on my transmission quanta. [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

September 23, 2194—E-LC transmission

13:04:03: Jim, I understand your anger. I'm so sorry. I got the final report from Ollie. The QE link is slowly breaking apart. How long we have I don't know. The brainiacs are shocked we've kept it up this long. Anyway, we've given up on maintaining our transmission link with the LEWIS & CLARK and are just now trying to give you guidance on keeping your link alive. We don't know if it's the volume of messages, the rate of messages, or time that is breaking the link. Hell, the CERN guys think that it's the distance, our particles are simply moving to a new, stronger entanglement. Anyway, I'm sure you don't give a shit about this.

We are going to keep the link alive until it breaks apart. It may take a long time if we only send one message every few months. No one knows for sure.

Kate is calm. I don't know what you've been saying to her, but keep it up. Everything else is normal. You'll be back on Earth in another 40 years or so. And although I'll be over 100 then, trust me, I'll still be able to beat you into shape. Mars [MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

January 30, 2194—LC-E transmission

12:04:04: Christ, the time difference is hard. Okay, I have some thoughts. I know the QE is untangling, but perhaps we can turn my transmission particle into a two-way link? Hell, just make it transmit from your side. I don't need to talk, I just need to hear from you guys. You don't know how hard it is to wait even a few days for a message.

Can the physicists work on that? I know it's too late for this calibration, but I could spend the next one doing anything they needed me to do.

Mars, I hate to say this, but if that doesn't work, perhaps we could turn the sail around? You know there is an abort plan in place with catastrophic failure. Damn, I can't believe I'm writing that, but we need to get this fixed.

I'm worried about my link, so I'll just add my message to Kate here.

Kate, please don't worry! You know we have two links. Even if the one breaks down, we'll fix the other one. And if that doesn't work, we'll turn this damn ship around. I'm not sailing into fucking space with nothing but a bunch of holos for company. Anyway [MESSAGE RECEIVED]

February 19, 2196—E-LC transmission

14:09:11: Jim, it's Mars. My God, it was great to hear from you a few days ago. I'm sorry you haven't heard from us in a long time. I told everyone to hold off and make one last try to get a message to you when you finally contacted us, and it has taken monumental calculations to get this message through. Nothing you are suggesting will work. Once the particles are entangled, we can't make the kind of changes you are suggesting. Just keep your link alive so we can make sure you are okay.

I'm sorry, but this is the last message you'll hear from us until you get back. I never said this, Jim, but you were the son I never had. So just be safe. I don't think anyone else could do what you're doing. I'm incredibly proud of you.

James, it's Kate. I talked to Ollie and he said he can't guarantee that the link won't ever be back for short periods of time. So I will be sending you a message every day. Every day, James. You may never see them, but know they'll be there floating in space. Just my messages to you. I love you and miss [WARNING: CHARACTER LIMIT REACHED—MESSAGE TRANSMITTED]

March 1, 2194—LC-E transmission

12:38:18: I will assume that my messages are going through, even though yours have stopped. So I am going to make this more like a monthly mission log than anything.

Sail calibration is normal. Acceleration is normal. Life support systems are normal. Everything is fucking normal.

I've watched about 40 holos this month. I liked BREAKDOWN. The woman in that reminded me of Kate. I've done some research on physics, but find it just as maddening as I did in college. I examined the abort system, even though Mars was kind enough to ignore my request to abort the mission, but I guess I'm too good a soldier to abort the mission

without orders. So I sail on.
Kate, your final message inspired me, but it is so hard to sit here and just wait. And wait. And wait. I've kept the QE link from Earth open, even though nothing ever comes through. Still, I hope. And wait.
And wait.

Special thanks to Mike Brotherton, who provided invaluable assistance on the science in the story. Assistance can only go so far, however, and any errors are entirely due to the author.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After fifteen years as a music industry journalist Jake Kerr's first published story, "The Old Equations," was nominated for the Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of America and was shortlisted for the Theodore Sturgeon and StorySouth Million Writers awards. His stories have subsequently been published in magazines across the world, broadcast in multiple podcasts, and been published in multiple anthologies and year's best collections. Kerr is currently developing TV series and feature films for Hollywood. A graduate of Kenyon College, Kerr studied fiction under Ursula K. Le Guin and Peruvian playwright Alonso Alegria. He lives in Dallas, Texas, with his crazy yet wonderful family. You can find out more about Jake at www.jakekerr.com.

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- Pure of Heart (forthcoming 2025)
- Three Speeches about Billy Grainger (reprint)
- Biographical Fragments of the Life of Julian Prince
- Requiem in the Key of Prose
- The Old Equations



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OBSERVATIONS ABOUT EGGS FROM THE MAN SITTING NEXT TO ME ON A FLIGHT FROM CHICAGO, ILLINOIS TO CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

Carmen Maria Machado

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1. Lord, it's hot in this cabin. I could hard-boil an egg inside my mouth. What's your name?
2. Have you ever poached an egg? The trick is white vinegar. Everyone forgets the white vinegar, and the blasted thing falls apart, and then they miss one of the greatest wonders of the world. Here's what you do: Add it to the boiling water. The vinegar, I mean. Break the egg into a bowl, not directly into the pot. Next, spin a spoon in the vinegar water and make a vortex. Drop the egg inside of it. If you look down, you can see the dense heart of the yolk through the clear atmosphere of white, and it is not entirely unlike looking at the Earth from space. The heat will make the egg go opaque. If the water is the right temperature, you can see it happening in slow motion—the yolk developing a skin, then the white going, well, white. It's like watching the egg being formed inside the looped guts of a warm and bleating hen. Bleating, not bleeding.
Anyway, when you watch the egg like this, you are seeing what only a god might see. This might seem like just a quaint observation, but what if I told you that by imagining yourself a god while watching an egg being formed, you *become* that god, for just a second or two? Of course, now that I've said it, now that I've told you about this little quirk of the natural world, you'll never be able to actually do it. That's the rule, and I didn't make it. But if, before I told you of these temporary god-powers, you had been watching that egg poaching, and at that precise moment wished to create an entirely new world, somewhere in all of existence, it would have popped into being, and though you wouldn't have known it, it would have been there, and you would have been its deity. And periodically you would find scraps of paper in your pocket with words scrawled on them or you'd mishear a fragment of a sentence spoken by a coworker or you'd discover Word documents you didn't remember creating, and the truth is those would have been the prayers of your created people, calling out to you because they feel lost and alone and afraid. It is a very terrible thing to be a god and I don't really recommend it.
3. Have you ever seen a frozen egg? No? I'm sorry for you. You have not been so fortunately careless as to leave the carton too close to the top shelf of the fridge, as I have. The shell pops off like a bottle cap, and if you pull out the contents, the whole inside of the egg sits in your hand like a stone. If you pinch the white, it comes apart like snow. Beneath running water, the white falls away and the yolk is gold, hard. It sits in your hand like an oversized marble. It's the most perfect shade of yellow. In some countries, none of them accessible by a plane like this one, four of these yolks can be exchanged for the basic necessities: seeds, a sack of potatoes, one shoe—though for the other, you'll need four more yolks. If you plant them in the ground, there are rumors that better things than potatoes might grow. But these are just rumors, and you might end up hungrier than before.
4. Have you ever opened an egg and seen the inside of another egg? No? Are you sure? Here is how you can tell: Crack open an egg. Look inside. Sometimes, in another place entirely, another person has also cracked open an egg and is also looking inside, and you are both, in fact, looking at the innards of the exact same egg. If you examine the egg carefully enough, you will find that the scene being reflected back at you in the gelatinous curve of the yolk is not, in fact, your own kitchen, with its fluorescent light bulb, dirty counter, Matisse print, and collection of empty wine bottles, but rather a different kitchen, possibly in Brooklyn, possibly in Big Sur, possibly in an alternate universe to your own, with an entirely different face peering back at you. You cannot crawl through the common egg into that other place, though, so don't try. Greater women than you have tried and failed.
5. I once dated a woman who thought that you had to cut a cow open to get the milk inside. What a silly thing—the idea and the woman. And what a mess to try. All that blood, curling into the milk, spoiling it. What a waste.
The egg, now. Eggs are more practical. They can be cut out of hens, though this is rarely necessary. And if that happens, and the eggs are covered in down feathers and blood, they can be washed clean, and nothing is ruined—all is perfectly usable. Well, except for the hen, ha-ha!
6. An egg is the most dangerous thing in the universe.
7. Have you ever gone to the farmer's market and paid a little extra for those brown eggs that look so healthful, the kind that you know were warming under hens that very morning, and carry the carton home, and crack open one, and a fetal dragon flops out into the pan? No? If this ever happens to you, know that the dragons will all be dead. They were taken away from their mothers; they never had a chance to survive. If you put the unbroken ones beneath a heat lamp, they'll just spoil. These are not Schrödinger's eggs. There was never a chance you could have hatched a dragon army, and anyway, it would have been foolish to try. Dragons always eventually turn on you, and in a way that makes you regret all of your decisions. Anyway, if you return to the market for edible eggs, the stand will most likely be vacant. Dragon eggshells are a powerful aphrodisiac, though, so don't throw them away.
8. Hermann Hesse wrote, “The bird fights its way out of the egg. The egg is the world. Who would be born must first destroy a world.” I know a few truths about Hermann Hesse that aren't exactly common knowledge, but I can assure you that he is using fewer metaphors in that sentence than you might think. Also, Hermann Hesse was a bastard and I don't want to talk about him anymore.
9. You look like a person who has eaten a few eggs in her lifetime. How many would you estimate? Five hundred? A thousand? The trouble is that eggs are in everything, so even if you are able to think about your self-prepared and ordered breakfasts, and church potluck deviled egg trays with their easily quantifiable eggs, it's hard to add up all of the baked goods and cream sauces and mayonnaise on your sandwiches, and anything else that might have contained an egg. But let's say you've eaten one thousand eggs in your lifetime. One thousand eggs, each of which was full of potential life.
Now, don't look at me like that, I'm not talking vegan-talk, I'm just saying that sometimes food is full of wonder and you really should think about it. Imagine that one thousand chickens could have possibly been born, and they would have gone about pecking and watching and thinking chicken thoughts and dreaming chicken dreams and nibbling and fighting other chickens, and eventually would have fallen beneath the blade or gone to chicken-sleep and never woken up. You are now full of those chickens, their potential wishes and dreams and—don't laugh!—their experiences. Their lives, and their deaths. Somewhere inside of you, you are contentedly strutting about the dirt, in the sun. Somewhere inside of you, your head is missing and you are chasing a farmer's terrified child across the yard. I think, in a way, we are all one thousand chickens.
10. It is a really good thing to smash an egg, very satisfying. I don't just mean just to drop one, but take it in your hand and splat it with all of your might against a hard surface. I once visited a village between two great mountains where this was a common pastime. It could get competitive! The winner was measured by the distance the egg innards were strewn. If the yolk got on the judges, well, that was a bonus. It was a very strange little village with some very strange people, but they had been through a lot of hardships in their lifetimes, so they can be forgiven some eccentricities.
11. I'm pretty sure that the stewardess—my apologies, the flight attendant, you can only say so much nowadays—*does* have some eggs in the back, with the meal-trays, but perhaps not enough for everyone, and so she doesn't want to make anybody jealous. Plus, I'm sure first class would take all the eggs if given the chance, and then there wouldn't be enough eggs for all of us cattle back here, ha-ha! You were probably smart to bring your own eggs in that little lunchbox, even if it does count as your carry-on.
12. People forgot about Patsy Cline's parallel universe theories because they were so busy singing her songs. Can you imagine a fate worse than that? I'll never record a ballad as long as I live. Anyway, she believed that all of the parallel universes touched each other in the wet places of the world. Puddles and spilled milk and even bits of the body, all creating little puckers in time and space and touching realities together. She was right, of course. Sometimes, before shows, they would find her in her dressing room pushing her fingers through eggs, calling in a singsongy voice to that child she lost. You know, Patsy herself died in a plane crash. Not a plane like this, mind you, a small one. Not like this. Don't look so worried.
13. Here is the embarrassing truth: I know you. We've met before. We shared an egg, once. Don't you remember? Of course not, it was your first time egg-side, and I'd done it

many times before. Just because I’m an old man and you’re some young thing does not mean that we have not shared experiences. You didn’t have a name yet, but I’d recognize that pretty mouth anywhere. I remember seeing you and thinking, she knows so little, but so much of the world is ahead of her. She is so beautiful; maybe one day I will run into her again and see her shining face. So of course, you can imagine my disappointment when I saw you here, familiar, but looking so sullen, so angry. Smile! You survived. We were one of a dozen double-yolks, cracked open and born into this world—well, I was *reborn*, but it all amounts to the same—and you look pretty good, if I say so myself. So be grateful to live in a world with eggs, which give us life and have so many uses besides.

14. Miss, I don’t think she meant to throw the egg at me per se, she’s just a little worn out from the flight. I am certain that it was an accident. No, I can stay here. It was just an accident. Isn’t that right? Ha-ha!

15. That hardboiled egg looks delicious, and I think I should like a bite.

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Carmen Maria Machado is the author of the bestselling memoir *In the Dream House*, the graphic novel *The Low, Low Woods*, and the award-winning short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*. She has been a finalist for the National Book Award and the winner of the Bard Fiction Prize, the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction, the Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ Nonfiction, the Brooklyn Public Library Literature Prize, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the National Book Critics Circle's John Leonard Prize. In 2018, the *New York Times* listed *Her Body and Other Parties* as a member of "The New Vanguard," one of "15 remarkable books by women that are shaping the way we read and write fiction in the 21st century."

Her essays, fiction, poetry, and criticism have appeared in *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Vogue*, *This American Life*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Tin House*, *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *The Believer*, *Guernica*, *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the Guggenheim Foundation, The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Yaddo, Hedgebrook, and the Millay Colony for the Arts. She is the former Abrams Artist-in-Residence at the University of Pennsylvania.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- I Bury Myself
- Blur
- The Old Women Who Were Skinned (reprint)
- Help Me Follow My Sister into the Land of the Dead (reprint)
- Observations About Eggs from the Man Sitting Next to Me on a Flight from Chicago, Illinois to Cedar Rapids, Iowa



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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DEEP BLOOD KETTLE

Hugh Howey

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They say the sky will fill with dust in a bad way if we don't do something soon. My teacher Mrs. Sandy says that if the meteor hits, it'll put up enough dirt to block the sun, and everything will turn cold for a long, long while. When I came home and told Pa about this, he got angry. He called Mrs. Sandy a bad word, said she was teaching us nonsense. I told him the dinosaurs died because of dust in the sky. Pa said there weren't no such thing as dinosaurs.

"You boys watch," he told me and my brother. "That rock'll burn up. It'll be no more than a flash of light. I've seen a million shooting stars if I've seen a dozen." Pa stopped rubbing his rifle and traced a big arc in the air with his oil-stained rag. "She'll hit the sky and light up like fireworks, and the worst she'll do is leave a crater like that one down in Arizona. Then we'll show them suckers how we watch over our land."

Only Pa don't use the word "suckers." Pa uses worse words for the invaders than he ever did for Mrs. Sandy. He never calls them aliens. Sometimes he says it's the Russians or the Chinese or the Koreans. He believes in aliens about as much as dinosaurs.

Pa spat in the dirt and asked if I was taking a break or something. I told him "nossir" and went back to oiling my gun. He and my brother did the same.

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Pa says our land is fertile because of the killin' we soak it in. That's why things grow as tall as they do. The little critters are killed dead and give their life to the soil.

I seen it every year when we plow it under for the new crops. When I was a boy, before father let me drive the John Deere, I'd play in the loose soil his plowing left behind. Acres and acres for a sandbox. The dust he kicked up would blot the sky and dry my mouth, but I'd kick through the furrows and dig for arrowheads until my fingernails were chipped or packed full of dirt.

Where he hadn't yet plowed, you could see the dead stalks from the last harvest. The soil there was packed tight from the rains and the dry spells. Pa used to laugh at the newfangled ways of planting that kept the ground like that by driving the seeds straight through. It weren't the way the Samuels tended their land, he told us. We Samuels dragged great steel plows across the hard pack and the old stalks and we killed everything in the ground. That was what made the land ready again.

When I was younger, I found half a worm floppin' on top of the ground after a plow. It moved like the tail on a happy dog, but it was already dead. Took a while for it to realize, was all. I pinched it between my fingers and watched it wind down like the grandfather clock in the great room. When it was still, the worm went into a furrow, and I kicked some dirt over it. That was the whole point. The little things would feed the corn, and the corn would feed us, and we would all get taller because of it. Pa, meanwhile, drove that tractor in great circles that took him nearly out of sight; the dust he kicked up could blot out the whole Montana sky, and my boots would fill up with gravel as I kicked through the loose furrows he left behind.

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Pa only believes in things he can see. He didn't believe in the meteor until it became brighter than any star in the sky. Before long, you could see it in the daytime if you knew where to look and squinted just right. The people on the TV talked to scientists who said it was coming straight for us. They had a date and time and everything. One of them said you could know where it would land, but that nobody wanted a panic. It just meant people panicked everywhere. And then it leaked that the rock would hit somewhere between Russia and China, and Pa reckoned those people were panicking a little worse.

He called it a rock, not a meteor. Like a bunch of people, Pa don't think it'll amount to much. Folks been predicting doom since his grandpa was a boy, and the world outside still looked pretty much the same.

This was before we got "First Contact." That's what they called it even though the rock hadn't set down yet. It was nothing but a phone call from what I could tell. On the TV they said it was coming from the other side of the rock. That's when even the scientists and all the smart people started acting a little crazy.

First Contact happened back when Mrs. Sandy was still our teacher. We listened to the news at school, I talked to her, and I didn't tell Pa any of what I learned. It made him angry hearing about the demands, but Mrs. Sandy said it was the best thing that ever happened to our planet, them deciding to come here. She told me a lot before she left and the substitute took her place. She was going to be one of them that welcomed the invaders, even sold her house and bought a pickup with a camper back. I eventually reckoned Pa was right to call her some of those bad things.

But I did sort out a bunch between the TV and what Mrs. Sandy said. The rock weren't no accident like the scientists used to suppose. It was aimed. Like the stones I chucked after a plowing, trying to hit one rock with another. The invaders, they was right behind the big rock.

Mrs. Sandy liked to say that our governments would make the right choice. And all of a sudden, the same channels on TV that I watched for news showed new people. They wore headphones and spoke funny and argued over what to do. My brother wouldn't stop asking about the little flags in front of each of them, and I had to tell him to shut up so I could hear.

The invaders were giving us a choice, it sounded like. All they wanted was half our land and for us to get rid of all of our weapons, and they would leave most of us alone. They gave a date. It was the same one the scientists had already figured. The rock could be moved, they said. It didn't have to hit. It could go into orbit, and then we could have it for our own.

On a different channel, men with suits and ties argued real loud over how much the rock was worth. They used words I'd never heard of before, something more than "trillion." I knew what gold and some of the other valuable things were, but some were called rare and sounded like they were from Earth. I couldn't sort out how something that could kill us one day could be worth so much the next, but the invaders said the rock only needed a nudge.

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When I turned thirteen, Pa said I was finally old enough to drive. He taught me in the old pickup with the missing tailgate and the tires that were always starving for air. It was a shifter, which seemed a hard way to start driving, but Pa believed in learning the worst to begin with. I had to yank up on the steering wheel to push the old clutch all the way in. Damn thing made it so my arms would be as sore at night as my legs. Pa cursed every time the gears growled, and it was hot in the truck even with the windows down. But I got to where he would send me to fetch the mail. And once I'd mastered the old pickup, he taught me on the John Deere, and I learned to plow. Pa was right that it made driving the tractor easier. But it was still scary as hell.

The first time you drive something so big, you wonder if one man ought to be able. There was a red lever that went from rabbit to turtle, and Pa would stand in the cabin with me and yell for me to nudge it up. But we were already bouncing around something fierce. The noise was terrible. And looking back, I couldn't see the house through the haze I was stirring. It weren't even like we were moving so much as the great big tires of the tractor were spinning the Earth beneath their knobby treads. Pa would bend over the seat and knock the red lever up, and the bucking would grow worse. The steering wheel jittered side to side, and I had to clutch it just to stay in my seat.

But like the truck, my fear of the tractor didn't keep. Before long, Pa hitched the great plow to the back, twenty-four feet wide, and I learned how to kill the soil to make it ready for planting. The seat would bounce me along like I was in a saddle, and the radio would blare in the little cabin that smelled like my dad when he was sweaty. I did circles like I was mowing grass, but twenty-four feet at a time. The mesa behind our house would disappear behind the dust, and it got so I couldn't see the cliffs along the back of the homestead. But I could see the soil in front packed hard and tight, and I could see out the side where I'd already been. Plowing was a lot like mowing—I just had to overlap where I'd been before.

"Not too much overlap," Pa would tell me. The price of gas had gone way up since First Contact, and too much overlap meant an extra run for no good reason. And so I bounced along and put death in the soil. I cut the worms in half and made things ready for planting. Now and then, a deer would startle across the loose furrows, legs having a hard time of it, and white rabbits would dash from the thrush. The rabbits were the dumbest little things. They would dart back and forth in front of the tractor—they could see me coming, but they couldn't make up their minds. I would yell and yell at them, but they would just jitter back and forth until the tractor went over them and then the plow. Turning in my seat, I always expected a tuft of white to spit out somewhere, but the soil that kicked up would just turn a little red.

"That's where the corn would grow the tallest," Pa would say when I told him how dumb the rabbits were. The blood in the soil was a good thing. That's when you knew it was ready.

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The cliffs behind our house were a source of constant play, and they had a funny name. *Too Close for Comfort*, they were called. I reckoned kids made up that name, but it was a real thing. Scientists called it that. Men who were supposedly smart had come up with it.

When I was a boy too young to drive—before I turned thirteen—they came from the university and dug in the dirt at the base of the cliffs that rise up behind our land. They found so many bones beneath the dirt that they couldn’t take them all. Steve Harkin and I plotted to sneak in one night and nab a skull or two, but the men in the shiny city trucks with no 4X4 put a stop to that by giving us a skull each. It weren’t as fun without the danger and flashlights, but we got our skulls.

I remember cradling that great hunk of bone as heavy as stone and asking one of the university men there why they were digging there. “This here was a buffalo jump,” the man told me. He reminded me of Mrs. Sandy, and he had this clipboard with all kinds of little squares full of numbers and was the smartest man I ever spoke to ’cept for my Pa.

“The buffalo used to come over this cliff and smash into the rocks down here,” he told me and Steve Harkin. “That’s where these bones came from.” Steve thought that was pretty cool. We gazed up at the cliffs that I had known all my life, the ones that delayed the sunrise in the morning, and I saw them different for the first time. I asked this man from the university why buffalo were so dumb.

“Oh, buffalo aren’t dumb,” he claimed. I was about to argue with him, but then he explained. “Indians used to chase the buffalo to the edge of the cliff in great herds,” he said. They tumbled off hundreds at a time and smashed their legs so they couldn’t walk. While they squealed and snorted and tried to pick themselves up on busted bones, the Indians would run in with spears and jab ’em in the neck.

Steve whistled. I asked the man if that was real. “Very real,” he said. “The people who used to live here long before us called it pishkun.” “Pushkin,” Steve Harkin said. “What does that mean?” “It means ‘deep blood kettle,’” the man told us. He pointed to where the men and women were digging in these funny squares with ropes and stakes marking everything off. “You can still see the blood in the soil,” he said.

I didn’t know if that man from the university was playing with us or not, but I told him we needed to go. That skull he’d given me was getting heavier and heavier the longer he talked.

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The people on TV with the little flags and the headphones reminded me of white rabbits in the plow season. You could watch ’em go back and forth on the screen. Everyone wanted the gold and the trillions and trillions and trillions and all the rare Earth stuff. But nobody wanted to give up their land. And the invaders insisted on half. They wanted half or they would take it all.

People on the TV argued about why the aliens would do something like this, why they would let the rock hit us and kick up the dirt and make things cold, but I knew. I reckon I knew better than most. Just the year before, I’d watched a movie about invaders coming down. They’d made a different kind of contact. There were fights with lasers and explosions and our side found a way at the end to lick them for good.

It was a good movie, but those invaders were dumb. I tried to picture us Samuels taming our plot of land something like that. Pa and Riley and me would take to the soil with guns and shoot the worms one by one. And the worms would fight back with the rabbits, the deer, the turtles, and the foxes. And I could imagine them swarming us and licking us good. They were dumb, but there was an awful lot of them.

Which was why we used the plow. It was why we throw the dirt up into the air. We make all things die in the soil so when we put in our own seed, that’s all the life there is. And where the ground is reddest, that deep blood kettle, the corn reaches up so high you think it might leave us behind. And that’s what the rock will do, plow us under. It weren’t going to be like that movie at all.

Mrs. Sandy used to say before she left town that the dust would kick up and blot out the sky if the rock fell, but she didn’t think we would let that happen. Mrs. Sandy always thought the best of people. She even liked my Pa, no matter what he called her. Me, I wished she would come back from wherever she went. I’d like to have her sit in the John Deere with me and feel it buck and buck and chase down those rabbits too dumb to move. I’d take Mrs. Sandy by the hand and lead her to the cliffs on the edge of our land and show her the piles of bones and see what the Indians had done.

But Mrs. Sandy was gone, and nobody went to school no more. And outside, the spot of light in the sky had grown so bright that it was like a star in the daytime. The people on the TV moved like rabbits. They were chased like buffalo. And you didn’t need to know where to look no more to see that something bad was coming.

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Hugh Howey is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Silo Series: *Wool*, *Shift*, and *Dust*; *Beacon 23*; *Sand*; *Across the Sand*; *Half Way Home*; and *Machine Learning*. His works have been translated into more than forty languages and have sold millions of copies worldwide. Adapted from his bestselling sci-fi trilogy, *Silo* is now streaming on Apple TV+ and *Beacon 23* is streaming on MGM+. Howey lives in New York with his wife, Shay.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- Machine Learning (reprint)
- The Walk Up Nameless Ridge
- Beacon 23: Little Noises
- Deep Blood Kettle



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JUMP

Cadwell Turnbull

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Mike and Jessie were walking in the park. The trees high above their heads stretched to touch each other, their leaves letting only the tiniest slivers of light through.

Mike watched the freckles of light spot Jessie’s brown face, her shirt, her arms. He tried to snub them out with his fingers. It was a long day for them. They’d spent a few hours walking around the park, just talking. About old dreams and new ones, black riots and urban decay, the secrets of their hearts and the mysteries of the universe, the time Mike introduced himself through a mutual friend and his palms were so clammy that Jessie knew immediately how nervous he was.

They always talked a lot. Mike was amazed that they always found something to say. It was a little less than two years, but he thought once grad school was over, he would ask. He thought she’d say yes.

They made another lap around the park. By the time they decided they needed to walk back home—a full forty-five minutes away—they were way too tired to make the journey. They considered a cab, but Mike had a better idea.

“Why don’t we teleport?” he asked.
“What now?” She laughed. She was giving him that smile she gave when he was talking crazy, that would spread across her face, her eyes wide, her eye brows raised in steep arches.

“Hold my hand,” he said, and he didn’t wait. He grabbed her hand himself. “We can do it.”
“What makes you think we can teleport?” she asked.

“I believe,” he said simply.
She laughed at him again. “You’re crazy.”
Mike didn’t know how far he was going to take this. But it was Jessie and he didn’t worry about seeming silly. “Close your eyes and picture home,” he said. “On the count of three, we will jump forward and we will be there.”

He looked at Jessie, and sure enough, she closed her eyes. She was smiling and he wished he could read her thoughts, but that was another power entirely.
“One,” he said. He tightened his grip on her hand. “Two.” He felt a warmth in his stomach, his knees were bent, he was extra aware of the grass beneath his feet. “Three.” He leapt and he felt Jessie leap with him, their bodies synchronized. They were in the air for no more than two seconds and when they landed, their feet hitting the ground at the same time, there wasn’t the familiar soft crunch of grass. There was the hard thump of their feet against pavement. When they opened their eyes, they realized they were home.

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Jessie looks back on the day often. She remembers how weak her knees felt once they had made the jump; he had to hold her up to keep her from toppling over. She remembers his face, the flashes of abject terror, shock, and then euphoria. And she remembers the warmth in her belly, like she was glowing from the inside.

She remembers her neighbor Greg from 34C, halfway up the stairs to their apartment building when they arrived out of nowhere.
“Oh, I didn’t see you two there,” he said, turning when he heard Mike’s joyous scream. “Everything okay?” He looked from Mike to her to Mike again.
“Holy shit,” Mike said, as if in answer. And then more screams.
Jessie’s sitting on the couch, reliving the moment, her legs pressed under her, an open book in her lap.
Mike walks into the room. “We should try again,” he says.

Jessie glares at him. If Jessie agrees, this will be the twentieth time they’ve tried. They have all been failures.
Mike keeps a calendar where he crosses off the days since it happened. Many markers are spent in the attempt to keep a record; the markers start out strong, with vibrant confident lines, and then they sputter and falter and only the blood-crawling squeak against the paper remains. Mike tries many colors. Blue. Red. Green. Magenta. The ink runs out of all of them. And still no jump.

The first dozen attempts are at the park, trying to find the right spot, wearing the right clothes. Jessie must always be on the right side. They try time of day. It must always be late afternoon. They try the weather. The day must be cool and clear.

Mike recites the exact words to himself. He writes it down. He puts the words next to the calendar on the wall. He remembers Jessie’s words, too. It must all be perfect. They go back to the park and relive the experience word for word. When they do this they sound like play actors reciting lines.

“Why don’t we teleport?” Mike asks.
Jessie rolls her eyes. “What now?” she asks and the laugh is hollow, mocking.
“You’re not trying. You have to really try—”
“Jesus, Mike.”
“—Now we have to start over.”

Soon after that, Jessie refuses to go back to the park. But Mike keeps asking to try in other places. At home. When they go out to restaurants. At the movies. Jessie obliges, but each time her shoulders slump a little lower. She hates it. She hates it so much.

“You’re killing me,” she says. “Why does this matter so much?”
“Why wouldn’t it matter?” Mike says. “What would matter more?”
A day later, he asks her again and she almost throws a book at him, pulling back at the last moment. “Leave it alone, Mike. Can’t you just leave it alone?”

• • • •

Sometimes Mike wonders if he imagined it. But it can’t be. Jessie was there.
He gets so suspicious of the whole thing that he starts to wonder if even Jessie is a figment of his imagination.
When his friend Alex comes over for dinner, Mike tries to confirm his suspicions while Jessie is in the kitchen. “I’m married to a woman about this high, right? Light brown eyes? Dark skin? Can be a little judgy sometimes?” He says the last part a little softer than the rest.
Alex just looks at him.

Mike waits for an answer, the cold doubt creeping up his spine.
“That was a great dinner, J,” Alex says, looking past Mike. Then he looks back at Mike and points at him with his fork. “You fucked up.”
Mike turns and sees his wife. He has no idea how long she’s been standing there. But she makes a face he has come to know well and he knows that she knows that this is about the jump again.
“You’re welcome, Alex,” she says and then leaves the dining room.

• • • •

It isn’t that Jessie doesn’t care about the jump.
She just sees it differently than Mike. This thing wasn’t supposed to happen. It was an accident of the universe. To want it to happen more than once, in one life, is crazy. Isn’t it? What would be the odds? And why would you need it to happen again? How practical is teleporting if you can’t predict it? It is a silly thing, really. A silly little thing.
Yet Jessie still looks back on the day in amazement. Sometimes, in rare moments, she relives it. It is special because of its elusiveness. Because it doesn’t explain itself. For her, it is damn near divine. And she finds it empowering to have experienced it. She is of a small order who knows a secret. She and Mike have glimpsed behind a curtain. They have precious knowledge. Shouldn’t it bring them closer together?
She tries to talk to him about her thoughts, but it seems to just excite in him an unhealthy obsession.
“We should keep trying, then. Try to master it.”

“No,” she says, and it isn’t a rebuttal of the idea itself. She just doesn’t *want* to master it. She likes it where it is, something distant, to look at only when needed. She doesn’t want it to be her life. It is just a jump. A beautiful jump, yes. But it doesn’t deserve worship. Worship ruins all the best things.

• • • •

Mike wants to tell everyone.

He thinks about telling his friend Alex—“Yo, I teleported.” “Hey man, once with Jessie, I jumped from the park straight to my house!” “Al, you remember that movie about teleportation you hated? *Juniper*, was it? Yeah, well, me and Jessie . . . we did that.”—but it never sounds right. He thinks about telling people on the street. He thinks about just screaming it from the window of their apartment: “I teleported!”

He did try that once.

“So what?” a neighbor yelled back.

“Well,” he said, but he couldn’t think of a good answer.

Then a day comes when Mike walks into his room and his calendar has been taken down. He looks around and he finds it in the trash bin next to his work desk.

“You threw my calendar away?” he asks Jessie a moment later.

Jessie is reading a book on the couch, her legs folded under her. She looks up at him and he can feel what’s coming. “Stop counting,” she says. “I’m tired of you counting.”

Weeks later, she walks in on him standing in the middle of the bedroom. His knees are bent, his arms in front of him like he’s getting ready to box. His hands are bunched into fists. His face is full of lines, scrunched up in deliberate concentration.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

He looks at her, embarrassed. “Nothing,” he says.

“Yeah,” she says. “Right.”

• • • •

Mike believes he has a lot to be angry about. Jessie doesn’t care about the things that matter to him. She doesn’t try to understand where he is coming from, how much he needs the calendars, and the hope.

Sometimes he wonders why he’s stayed. This is a big question for most couples, but it is an even bigger question for Mike. He wonders if it is because of the jump or because of the love. He knows he loves her. This has never changed over all the years and the fights and the makeups. But he keeps thinking, maybe he stayed because she was there when the miracle happened. Maybe he hopes that if the miracle happens again, it will all be worth it. The years. The fights. The makeups. Love doesn’t always keep you where you’re supposed to be. But the miracle might have. Maybe all that’s left is the miracle. This thought scares him.

Why does it even matter so much? He doesn’t know. But he feels it every day. He comes home from work and he thinks of the jump. He is chilling with friends and the jump pops in and out of his consciousness. He is holding his wife and the jump is there, hanging in front of his eyes like an existential carrot he cannot catch.

He looks at his life and there is the jump, an island unto itself, surrounded by an ocean of monotony. Even when he is in a big moment, on the crest of some big wave, he can look out and see the island, and it calls to him, but he knows he cannot get there and it laughs at him. Vicious searing laughter.

• • • •

“I’ll make it up to you,” Mike says.

He has forgotten their anniversary again. “Sure you will,” she says.

It is not that she cares so much about these things. She is not that kind of sentimental. It is the fact that for years Mike has religiously crossed off each day on the calendar. Mike’s hand is on her chest, right above her breasts. He follows the rise and fall of each breath, his hand light on her skin. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Jessie’s pissed. Why? she thinks. Because you’ve let this thing get so big that there isn’t any room for anything else? This stupid little thing.

But then she thinks there is something deeper in his apology beyond the forgetting. She thinks that he is saying sorry for many things. For all he has ever done that can’t be undone.

She doesn’t know if she is right. So many things go unsaid between them. But more importantly, she doesn’t want the truth to ruin the joy she feels in this moment. This moment that she believes that Mike is better than he actually is. Because reality is arbitrary. Because it doesn’t matter as much as the feeling. And she doesn’t have enough good feelings to let one slip away.

She tries to sleep but Mike’s hand feels heavy on her chest now. It is hard to sleep under so much weight, under this nagging feeling at the edge of her consciousness that this is the rest of their lives. Dancing around this little thing. Forever just out of reach, pulling at them. They’ve been married for four years and she is already breaking. What will be left of her after four decades?

It will always need to be fed, even when they are both trying to ignore that it’s there. Because these things take up too much space. There is no equivalency. No end to the feeding of these little monsters.

• • • •

Jessie takes Mike’s hand off of her chest and turns away from him.

“I said I was sorry,” he says. “I will make it up to you. I promise.”

But Jessie says nothing. Her breathing is the only thing punctuating this silence. This silence at the end of things.

Jessie is thinking of leaving. Mike knows this. There are so many regrets. But it is too late for regrets.

He is thinking of the jump even now, but it is swirled in there with the guilt. All the things he was unable to do for Jessie, the man he was unable to be. He still wants it, but now he wishes he could close his eyes and zero in on that want with his mind and send it off to some distant planet where it cannot hurt them anymore. But that seems even more impossible than that day so long ago.

In the end, if Jessie leaves, there will be nothing but the jump. And he doesn’t want to be alone with it. It will destroy him.

The old cliché of the light at the end of the tunnel. Mike laughs at it now. It is a fiction. There is light where he is. It is dim. It continues to dim. But there is no light ahead of him. All he sees is darkness.

• • • •

Two months after Mike and Jessie split, he returns to the apartment to pick up a stack of books Jessie decided were his and an old fedora he’d left behind. These are the final remnants of their shared world, the last excuse for them to see each other ever again.

Jessie meets Mike at the door, looks him up and down. He has dark circles under his eyes. He hasn’t cut his hair in weeks, it seems. A matted and unkempt beard covers the lower half of his face.

“Let’s do it again,” Mike says.

“What?” Jessie looks at him for a long time. The question is rhetorical. She’s heard him. She just hasn’t decided what she will do.

“One last time. For the road.” Mike waits for her to reject his offer, or get angry and roll her eyes at him. Or slam the door in his face. But she doesn’t do any of that.

“Okay,” she says.

“Okay?” he says, surprised and relieved. “Okay. Close your eyes. And picture home.”

She closes her eyes. This is the last time ever, she tells herself. A goodbye gift in honor of the thing that destroyed their lives. But even as she is thinking this, she can feel something frozen inside thawing against her will.

He believes then that she still trusts him—a trust he thought she had thrown away—and this gives him all the strength he needs to try again. He reaches out and grabs her hand.

“One,” he says. He holds her hand tighter. Jessie can feel all the hope in this grasp, all the want, and she surprises herself by responding, gripping his hand tighter as well. This

shocks Mike and he feels his stomach tighten.

“Two,” he says.

They gasp aloud. This time feels different somehow. They can feel their hands merging. They feel the combination of all the times they’ve tried and failed and all the times they were too scared or angry to try. They feel their collective moments, a vibrating corporeality that squeezes tight around them, pulsing. They feel the release of the Earth’s gravity. There is nothing to hold onto. Nothing but each other. And it is perfect. It feels right. They can feel the hope of something beyond what they know; they can feel the universe as a solid, living thing, calling to them, urging them forward.

They say the last part together, Jessie’s voice unusually powerful, Mike as loud as a trumpet blasting over an ocean of years.

“THREE!”

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Cadwell Turnbull is the award-winning author of *The Lesson* and *No Gods, No Monsters*. His short fiction has appeared in *The Verge*, *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, and several anthologies, including *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2018* and *The Year’s Best Science Fiction and Fantasy 2019*. His novel *The Lesson* won the 2020 Neukom Institute Literary Award in the debut category. The novel was also shortlisted for the VCU Cabell Award and longlisted for the Massachusetts Book Awards. His novel *No Gods, No Monsters* is the winner of a Lambda Award and was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award. Turnbull grew up on St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- Dekar Druid and the Infinite Library (forthcoming 2025)
- Apeiron (forthcoming 2025)
- Shock of Birth (reprint)
- Other Worlds and This One
- Jump
- A Third of the Stars of Heaven



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HOW TO GET BACK TO THE FOREST

Sofia Samatar

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“You have to puke it up,” said Cee. “You have to get down there and puke it up. I mean down past where you can feel it, you know?”

She gestured earnestly at her chest. She had this old-fashioned cotton nightgown on, lace collar brilliant under the bathroom lights. Above the collar, her skin looked gray. Cee had bones like a bird. She was so beautiful. She was completely beautiful and fucked. I mean everybody at camp was sort of a mess, we were even supposed to be that way, at a *difficult stage*, but Cee took it to another level. Herding us into the bathroom at night and asking us to puke. “It’s right here,” she said, tapping the nightgown over her hollow chest. “Where you’ve got less nerves in your esophagus. It’s like wired into the side, into the muscle. You have to puke really hard to get it.”

“Did you ever get it out?” asked Max. She was sitting on one of the sinks. She’d believe anything.

Cee nodded, solemn as a counselor. “Two years ago. They caught me and gave me a new one. But it was beautiful while it was gone. I’m telling you it was the best.”

“Like how?” I said.

Cee stretched out her arms. “Like bliss. Like everything. Everything all at once. You’re raw, just a big raw nerve.”

“That doesn’t sound so great,” said Elle.

“I know,” said Cee, not annoyed but really agreeing, turning things around. That was one of her talents.

“It sounds stupid,” she nodded, “but that’s because it’s something we can’t imagine. We don’t have the tools. Our bodies don’t know how to calculate what we’re missing. You can’t know till you get there. And at the same time, it’s where you came from. It’s where you *started*.”

She raised her toothbrush. “So. Who’s with me?”

Definitely not me. God, Cee. You were such an idiot.

Apparently, a girl named Puss had told her about the bug. And Cee, being Cee, was totally open to learning new things from a person who called herself Puss. Puss had puked out her own bug and was living on the streets. I guess she’d run away from camp, I don’t really know. She was six feet tall, Cee said, with long red hair. The hair was dyed, which was weird, because if you’re living on the streets, do you care about stuff like that? This kind of thing can keep me awake at night. I lie in bed, or rather I sit in the living room because Pete hates me tossing and turning, and I leave the room dark and open all the curtains, and I watch the lights of the city and think about this girl Puss getting red hair dye at the grocery store and doing her hair in the bathroom at the train station. Did she put newspapers down? And what if somebody came in and saw her?

Anyway, eventually Cee met Puss in the park, and Puss was clearly down-and-out and a hooker, but she looked cool and friendly, and Cee sat down beside her on the swings.

“You have to puke it up.”

We’d only been at camp for about six weeks. It seemed like a long time, long enough to know everybody. Everything felt stretched out at camp, the days and the nights, and yet in the end it was over so fast, as soon as you could blink. Camp was on its own calendar—a *special time of life*. That was Jodi’s phrase. She was our favorite counselor. She was greasy and enthusiastic, with a skinny little ponytail, only a year or two older than the seniors. *Camp is so special!* The thing with Jodi was, she believed every word she said. It made it really hard to make fun of her. That night, the night in the bathroom, she was asleep down the hall underneath her Mother Figure, which was a little stuffed dog with *Florida* on its chest.

“Come on!” said Cee. And she stuck her toothbrush down her throat, just like that. I think Max screamed. Cee didn’t start puking right away. She had to give herself a few really good shoves with that toothbrush, while people said “Oh my God” and backed away and clutched one another and stared. Somebody said “Are you nuts?” Somebody else said something else, I might have said something, I don’t know, everything was so white and bright in that moment, mirrors and fluorescent lights and Cee in that goddamn Victorian nightgown jabbing away with her toothbrush and sort of gagging. Every time I looked up I could see all of us in the mirror. And then it came. A splatter of puke all over the sink. Cee leaned over and braced herself. *Blam*. Elle said, “Oh my God, that is disgusting.” Cee gasped. She was just getting started.

Elle was next. All of a sudden she spun around with her hands over her mouth and let go in the sink right next to Cee. *Splat*. I started laughing, but I already felt sort of dizzy and sick myself, and also scared, because I didn’t want to throw up. Cee looked up from her own sink and nodded at Elle, encouraging her. She looked completely bizarre, her wide cheekbones, her big crown of natural hair, sort of a retro supermodel with a glistening mouth, her eyes full of excitement. I think she even said “Good job, Elle!”

Then she went to it with the toothbrush again. “We have to stop her!” said Katie, taking charge. “Max, go get Jodi!” But Max didn’t make it. She jumped down from the third sink, but when she got halfway to the door she turned around and ran back to the sink and puked. Meanwhile Katie was dragging Cee away from the sink and trying to get the toothbrush, but also not wanting to touch it, and she kept going “Ew ew ew” and “*Help* me, you guys,” and it was all so hilarious I sank down on the floor, absolutely crying with laughter. Five or six other girls, too. We just sort of looked at each other and screamed. It was mayhem. Katie dragged Cee into one of the stalls, I don’t know why. Then Katie started groaning and let go of Cee and staggered into the stall beside her, and *splooosh*, there she went.

Bugs.

It’s such a camp rumor. Camp is full of stories like that. People say the ice cream makes you sterile, the bathrooms are full of hidden cameras, there’s fanged, flesh-eating kids in the lake, if you break into the office you can call your parents. Lots of kids break into the office. It’s the most common camp offense. I never tried it, because I’m not stupid—of course you can’t call your parents. How would you even get their number? And bugs—the idea of a bug planted under your skin, to track you or feed you drugs—that’s another dumb story.

Except it’s not, because I saw one.

The smell in the bathroom was terrible now—an animal smell, hot; it thrashed around and it had fur.

I knew I was going to be sick. I crawled to the closest place—the stall where Cee knelt—and grabbed hold of the toilet seat. Cee moved aside for me. Would you believe she was still hanging onto her toothbrush? I think we both threw up a couple of times. Then she made this awful sound, beyond anything, her whole body taut and straining, and something flew into the toilet with a splash.

I looked at her and there was blood all over her chin. I said, “Jesus, Cee.” I thought she was dying. She sat there coughing and shaking, her eyes full of tears and triumph. She was on top of the world. “Look!” she breathed. And I looked, and there in the bowl, half-hidden by puke and blood, lay an object made of metal.

It actually looked like a bug. Sharp blood-smeared legs.

“Shit!” I said. I flushed the toilet.

“Now you,” said Cee, wiping her mouth on the back of her wrist.

“I can’t.”

“Tisha. Come on.”

Cee, I couldn’t, I really couldn’t. I could be sick—in fact I felt sicker than ever—but I couldn’t do it that hard. I remember the look in your eyes; you were so disappointed. You leaned and spat some blood into the toilet.

I whispered: “Don’t tell anyone. Not even the other girls.”

“Why not? We should all—”

“*No*. Just trust me.”

I was already scared, so scared. I couldn’t bear the idea of camp without you.

We barely slept that night. We had to take showers and clean the bathroom. Max cried the whole time, but for at least part of the night, I was laughing. Me and Katie flinging disinfectant powder everywhere. Katie was cool, always in sweatpants, didn’t give a shit about anything.

“You know your friend is a headcase, right?” she said.

It was the first time anybody’d called Cee my friend. We got out the mop and lathered up the floor. Everyone slipped and swore at us, coming out of the showers. Cee went skidding by in a towel. “Whee!” she shrieked.

You cannot feel your bug. I’ve pressed so hard on my chest. I know.

“I could feel it,” said Cee. “After they put it back in.” It wasn’t exactly a physical thing. She couldn’t trace the shape of the bug inside her, but she could feel it *working*.

“Bug juice,” she said, making a sour face. She could feel bug juice seeping into her body. Every time she was going to be angry or afraid, there’d be this warmth in her chest, a feeling of calm spreading deep inside.

“I only noticed it after I’d had the bug out for a couple of weeks.”

“How did your parents know you needed a new one?”

“I didn’t need one.”

“How did they know it was gone?”

“Well, I kind of had this fit. I got mad at them and started throwing food.”

We were sitting on my bed, under my Mother Figure, a lamp with a blue shade. The blue light brought out the stains on Cee’s Victorian nightgown. We were both painting our toenails Cherry Pink, balancing the polish on my Life Skills textbook, taking turns with the brush.

“You should do it,” Cee said. “I feel better. I’m so much better.”

I thought how in a minute we’d have to study for our Life Skills quiz. I didn’t think there was bug juice in my body. I couldn’t feel anything.

“I’m so much better,” Cee said again. Her hand was shaking.

Oh, Cee.

The weird thing is, I started writing this after Max came to visit me, and I thought I was going to write about Max. But then I started writing in your book. Why? This book you left me, your Mother Figure. You practically threw it at me: “Take it!” It was the worst thing you could do, to take somebody else’s Parent Figure, especially the mom. Or maybe it was only us girls who cared so much about the moms. Maybe for the boys it was the dads. But anyway, taking one was the worst; you could basically expect the other kids to kill you. A kid got put in the hospital that way at a different camp—the one on the east side—but we all knew about it at our camp. They strung him up with electric wires. Whenever we told the story we ended by saying what *we* would have done to that kid, and it was always much worse.

But you threw this book at me, Cee, and what could I do? Jodi and Duncan were trying to grab your arms, and the ambulance was waiting for you downstairs. I caught the book clumsily, crumpling it. I looked at it later, and it was about half full of your writing. I think they’re poems.

dank smells underground want to get back

no pill for it

i need you

I don’t know, are they poems? If they are, I don’t think they’re very good. *A nap could be a door an abandoned car*. Does that even mean anything? *Eat my teeth*. I know them all by heart.

I picked up this book when Max left. I wrote: “You have to puke it up.” All of a sudden I was writing about you. Surprising myself. I just kept going. Remembering camp, the weird sort of humid excitement there, the cafeteria louder than the sea. The shops—remember the shops? Lulu’s was the best. We’d save up our allowance to go there. Down in the basement you could get used stuff for cheap. You got your leather jacket there. I got these red shoes with flowers on the toes. I loved those shoes so much! I wonder where they went? I wore them to every mixer, I was wearing them when I met Pete, probably with my white dress—another Lulu’s purchase I don’t have now.

It was summer, and the mixer had an island theme. The counselors had constructed this sort of deck overlooking the lake. God, they were so proud of it. They gave us green drinks with little umbrellas in them and played lazy, sighing music, and everyone danced, and Pete saw a shooting star, and we were holding hands, and you were gone forever and I forgot you.

I forgot you. Forgetting isn’t so wrong. It’s a Life Skill.

I don’t remember what my parents looked like. A Parent Figure cannot be a photograph. It has to be a more neutral object. It’s supposed to stand in for someone, but not too much. When we got to camp we were all supposed to bring our Parent Figures to dinner the first night. Everyone squeezed in at the cafeteria tables, trying to find space beside their dinner trays for their Figures, those calendars and catcher’s mitts and scarves. I felt so stupid because my Mother Figure was a lamp and there was no place to plug it in. My Father Figure is a plaque that says *Always be yourself*.

Jodi came by, as the counselors were all going around “meeting the Parents,” and she said, “Wow, Tisha, that’s a *good* one.”

I don’t even know if I picked it out.

“We want you to have a fabulous time at camp!” Jodi cried. She was standing at the front with the other counselors: Paige and Veronica and Duncan—who we’d later call “Hunky Duncan”—and Eric and Carla and the others.

Of course they’d chosen Jodi to speak. Jodi was so perky.

She told us that we were beginning a special relationship with our Parent Figures. It was very important not to *fixate*. We shouldn’t fixate on the Parent Figures, and we definitely shouldn’t fixate on the counselors.

My stupid lamp. It was so fucking blue. Why would you bring something blue? “The most important people in your life are the other campers!” Jodi burbled. “These are the people you’ll know for the rest of your life! Now, I want you to turn to the person next to you and say, *Hi, Neighbor!*”

Hi, Neighbor! And later, in the forest, Cee sang to the sky: *Fuck you, Neighbor!*

Camp was special. We were told that it was special. At camp you connected with people and with nature. There was no personal tech. That freaked a lot of people out at first. We were told that later we’d all be able to get online again, but we’d be adults, and our relationships would be in place, and we would have learned our Life Skills, and we’d be ready. But now was special: Now was the time of friends and of the earth.

Cee raised her hand: “What about earthquakes?”

“What?” said Veronica, who taught The Natural World. Veronica was from an older group of counselors; she had gray hair and leathery skin from taking kids on nature hikes and she was always stretching to show that you could be flexible when you were old.

“What about earthquakes?” Cee asked. “What about fires? Those are natural. What about hurricanes?”

Veronica smiled at us with her awesome white teeth, because you could have awesome white teeth when you were old, it was all a matter of taking care of yourself with the right Life Skills.

“What an interesting question, Celia!”

We were told that all of our questions were interesting. *There’s no such thing as a stupid question!* The important thing was always to *participate*. We were told to participate in classes and hikes and shopping sprees and mixers. In History we learned that there used to be prejudice, but now there wasn’t: It didn’t matter where you came from or who you loved, *just join in!* That’s why even the queer girls had to go to the mixers; you could take your girlfriend, but you had to go. Katie used to go in a tie and Elle would wear flowers. They rolled their eyes but they went anyway and danced and it was fun. Camp was so fun.

Cee raised her hand: “Why is it a compliment to tell somebody it doesn’t matter who they are?”

We were told to find a hobby. There were a million choices and we tried them all: sports and crafts and art and music. There was so much to do. Every day there was some kind of program and then there were chores and then we had to study for class. No wonder we forgot stuff. We were told that forgetting was natural. Forgetting helped us survive, Jodi told us in Life Skills class, tears in her eyes. She cried as easily as Max. She was more like a kid sister than a counselor. Everybody wanted Jodi to be okay. “You’ll always be reminded,” she said in her hoarse, heroic voice. “You’ll always have your Parent Figures. It’s okay to be sad! But remember, you have each other now. It’s the most special bond in the world.”

Cee raised her hand: “What if we don’t want us?”

Cee raised her hand, but of course she raised her hand. She was *Cee*. She was Cee, she’d always been Cee, do you see what I mean? I mean she was like that right from the day we arrived; she was brash, messy Cee *before* the night in the bathroom, before she supposedly puked out her bug. I couldn’t see any difference. *I could not see any difference*. So of course I had second thoughts. I wished so bad I hadn’t flushed the toilet. What if there wasn’t anything in it? What if somebody’d dropped a piece of jewelry in there, some necklace or brooch and I thought it was a bug? That could have happened. Camp was so fun. Shaving my legs for the mixer. Wearing red shoes. We were all so lucky. Camp was the best thing ever. *Every Child at Camp!* That was the government slogan: *ECAC*. Cee used to make this gag face whenever she said it. *ECAC*. Ick. Sick.

She took me into the forest. It was a mixer. Everybody else was crowded around the picnic tables. The lake was flat and scummy and the sun was just going down, clouds of biting insects golden in the haze.

“Come on,” Cee said, “let’s get out of here.”

We walked over the sodden sand into the weeds. A couple of the counselors watched us go: I saw Hunky Duncan look at us with his binoculars, but because we were just two girls they didn’t care. It only mattered if you left the mixer with a boy. Then you had to stop at the Self-Care Stand for condoms and an injection, because *becoming a parent is a serious decision!* Duncan lowered his binoculars, and we stepped across the rocks and into the trees.

“This is cool!” Cee whispered.

I didn’t really think it was cool—it was weird and sticky in there, and sort of dark, and the weeds kept tickling my legs—but I went farther because of Cee. It’s hard to explain this thing she had: She was like an event just about to happen and you didn’t want to miss it. I didn’t want to, anyway. It was so dark we had to hold hands after a while. Cee walked in front of me, pushing branches out of the way, making loud crackling sounds, sometimes kicking to break through the bushes. Her laugh sounded close, like we were trapped in the basement at Lulu’s. That’s what it was like, like being trapped in this amazing place where everything was magically half-price. I was so excited and then horrified because suddenly I had to take a dump, there was no way I could hold it in.

“Wait a sec,” I told Cee, too embarrassed to even tell her to go away. I crouched down and went and wiped myself on the leaves, and I’m sure Cee knew what was up but she took my hand again right after I was done. She took my disgusting hand. I felt like I wanted to die, and at the same time, I was floating. We kept going until we stumbled into a clearing in the woods. Stars above us in a perfect circle.

“*Woo-hooooo!*” Cee hollered. “Fuck you, Neighbor!”

She gave the stars the finger. The silhouette of her hand stood out against the bright. I gave the stars the finger, too. I was this shitty, disgusting kid with a lamp and a plaque for parents but I was there with Cee and the time was exactly now. It was like there was a beautiful starry place we’d never get into— didn’t *deserve* to get into—but at the same time we were better than any brightness. Two sick girls underneath the stars.

Fuck you, Neighbor! It felt so great. If I could go anywhere I’d want to go there.

The counselors came for us after a while. A circle of them with big flashlights, talking in handsets. Jodi told us they’d been looking everywhere for us. “We were pretty worried about you girls!”

For the first time I didn’t feel sorry for her; I felt like I wanted to kick her in the shins. Shit, I forgot about that until right now. I forget so much. I’m like a sieve. Sometimes I tell Pete I think I’m going senile. Like premature senile dementia. Last month I suggested we go to Clearview for our next vacation and he said, “Tish, you hate Clearview, don’t you remember?”

It’s true, I hated Clearview: The beach was okay, but at night there was nothing to do but drink. So we’re going to go to the Palace Suites instead. At least you can gamble there.

Cee, I wonder about you still, so much—I wonder what happened to you and where you are. I wonder if you’ve ever tried to find me. It wouldn’t be hard. If you linked to the register you’d know our graduating class ended up in Food Services. I’m in charge of inventory for a chain of grocery stores, Pete drives delivery, Katie stocks the shelves. The year before us, the graduates of our camp went into the army; the year after us they also went into the army; the year after that they went into communications technologies; the year after that I stopped paying attention. I stopped wondering what life would have been like if I’d graduated in a different year. We’re okay. Me and Pete—we make it work, you know? He’s sad because I don’t want to have kids, but he hasn’t brought it up for a couple of years. We do the usual stuff, hobbies and vacations. Work. Pete’s into gardening. Once a week we have dinner with some of the gang. We keep our Parent Figures on the hall table, like everyone else. Sometimes I think about how if you’d graduated with us, you’d be doing some kind of job in Food Services too. That’s weird, right?

But you didn’t graduate with us. I guess you never graduated at all.

I’ve looked for you on the buses and in the streets. Wondering if I’d suddenly see you. God, I’d jump off the bus so quick, I wouldn’t even wait for it to stop moving. I wouldn’t care if I fell in the gutter. I remember your tense face, your nervous look, when you found out that we were going to have a check-up.

“I can’t have a check-up,” you said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because,” you said, “because they’ll see my bug is gone.”

And I just—I don’t know. I felt sort of embarrassed for you. I’d convinced myself the whole bug thing was a mistake, a hallucination. I looked down at my book, and when I looked up you were standing in the same place, with an alert look on your face, as if you were listening.

You looked at me and said: “I have to run.”

It was the stupidest thing I’d ever heard. The whole camp was monitored practically up to the moon. There was no way to get outside.

But you tried. You left my room, and you went straight out your window and broke your ankle.

A week later, you were back. You were on crutches and you looked . . . wrecked. Destroyed. Somebody’d cut your hair, shaved it close to the scalp. Your eyes stood out, huge and shining.

“They put in a bug in me,” you whispered.

And I just knew. I knew what you were going to do.

Max came to see me a few days ago. I’ve felt sick ever since. Max is the same, hunched and timid; you’d know her if you saw her. She sat in my living room and I gave her coffee and lemon cookies and she took one bite of a cookie and started crying.

Cee, we miss you, we really do.
Max told me she’s pregnant. I said congratulations. I knew she and Evan have been wanting one for a while. She covered her eyes with her hands—she still bites her nails, one of them was bleeding—and she just cried.
“Hey, Max,” I said, “it’s okay.”
I figured she was extra-emotional from hormones or whatever, or maybe she was thinking what a short time she’d have with her kid, now that kids start camp at eight years old.
“It’s okay,” I told her, even though I’d never have kids—I couldn’t stand it.
They say it’s easier on the kids, going to camp earlier. We—me and you and Max—we were the tail end of Generation Teen. Max’s kid will belong to Generation Eight. It’s supposed to be a happier generation, but I’m guessing it will be sort of like us. Like us, the kids of Generation Eight will be told they’re sad, that they need their parents and that’s why they have Parent Figures, so that they can always be reminded of what they’ve lost, so that they can remember they need what they have now.
I sat across the coffee table from Max, and she was crying and I wasn’t hugging her because I don’t really hug people anymore, not even Pete really, I’m sort of mean that way, it’s just how I turned out, and Max said “Do you remember that night in the bathroom with Cee?”

Do I remember?
Her eyes were all swollen. She hiccupped. “I can’t stop thinking about it. I’m scared.” She said she had to send a report to her doctor every day on her phone. How was she feeling, had she vomited? Her morning sickness wasn’t too bad, but she’d thrown up twice, and both times she had to go in for a check-up.
“So?” I said.
“So—they always put you to sleep, you know . . .”
“Yeah.”
I just said “Yeah.” Just sat there in front of her and said “Yeah.” Like I was a rock. After a while I could tell she was feeling uncertain, and then she felt stupid. She picked up her stuff and blew her nose and went home. She left the tissues on the table, one of them spotted with blood from her bitten nail. I haven’t really been sleeping since she left. I mean, I’ve always had trouble sleeping, but now it’s a lot worse, especially since I started writing in your book. I just feel sick, Cee, I feel really sick. All those check-ups, so regular, everyone gets them, but you’re definitely supposed to go in if you’re feeling nauseous, if you’ve vomited, *it might be a superflu!* The world is full of viruses, *good health is everybody’s business!* And yeah, they put you to sleep every time. Yeah. “They put a bug in me,” you said. Camp was so fun. Jodi came to us, wringing her hands. “Cee has been having some problems, and it’s up to all of us to look after her, girls! *Campers stick together!*” But we didn’t stick together, did we? I woke up and you were shouting in the hall, and I ran out there and you were hopping on your good foot, your toothbrush in one hand, your Mother Figure notebook in the other, and I knew exactly what they’d caught you doing. How did they catch you? Were there really cameras in the bathroom? Jodi’d called Duncan, and that was how I knew how bad it was: Hunky Duncan in the girls’ hallway, just outside the bathroom, wearing white shorts and a seriously pissed-off expression. He and Jodi were grabbing you and you were fighting them off. “Tisha,” called Jodi, “it’s okay, Cee’s just sick, she’s going to the hospital.” You threw the notebook. “Take it!” you snarled. Those were your last words. Your last words to me. I never saw you again except in dreams. Yeah, I see you in dreams. I see you in your white lacy nightgown. Cee, I feel sick. At night I feel so sick, I walk around in circles. There’s waves of sickness and waves of something else, something that calms me, something that’s trying to make the sickness go away. Up and down it goes, and I’m just in it, just trying to stand it, and then I sleep again, and I dream you’re beside me, we’re leaning over the toilet, and down at the very bottom there’s something like a clump of trees and two tiny girls are standing there giving us the finger. It’s not where I came from, but it’s where I *started*. I think of how bright it was in the bathroom that night, how some kind of loss swept through all of us, electric, and you’d started it, you’d started it by yourself, and we were with you in that hilarious and total rage of loss. Let’s lose it. Let’s lose everything. Camp wasn’t fun. Camp was a fucking factory. I go out to the factory on Fridays to check my lists over coffee with Elle. The bus passes shattered buildings, stick people rooting around in the garbage. Three out of five graduating classes join the army. *Give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change!* How did I even get here? I’d ask my mom if she wasn’t a fucking lamp. Cee, I feel sick. I should just grab my keys, get some money, and run to Max’s house, we should both be sick, everybody should lose it together. I shouldn’t have told you not to tell the others. We all should have gone together. My fault. I dream I find you and Puss in a bathroom in the train station. There’s blood everywhere, and you laugh and tell me it’s hair dye. Cee, it’s so bright it makes me sick. I have to go now. It’s got to come out.

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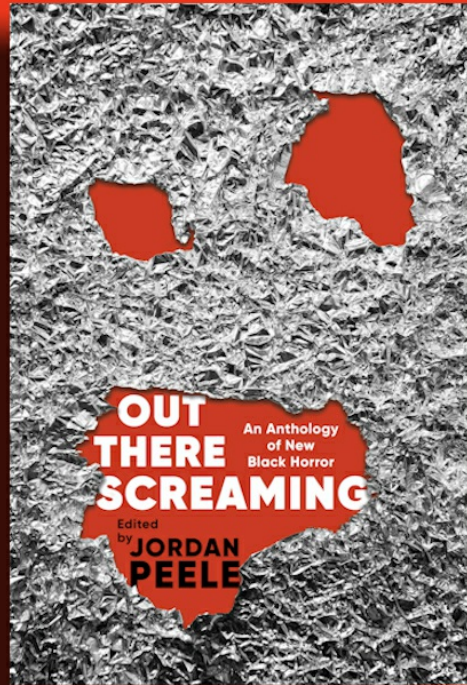
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Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE LITIGATION MASTER AND THE MONKEY KING

Ken Liu

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The tiny cottage at the edge of Sanli Village—away from the villagers’ noisy houses and busy clan shrines and next to the cool pond filled with lily pads, pink lotus flowers, and playful carp—would have made an ideal romantic summer hideaway for some dissolute poet and his silk-robed mistress from nearby bustling Yangzhou.

Indeed, having such a country lodge was the fashion among the literati in the lower Yangtze region in this second decade of the glorious reign of the Qianlong Emperor. Everyone agreed—as they visited each other in their vacation homes and sipped tea—that he was the best Emperor of the Qing Dynasty: so wise, so vigorous, and so solicitous of his subjects! And as the Qing Dynasty, founded by Manchu sages, was without a doubt the best dynasty ever to rule China, the scholars competed to compose poems that best showed their gratitude for having the luck to bear witness to this golden age, gift of the greatest Emperor who ever lived.

Alas, any scholar interested in *this* cottage must be disappointed for it was decrepit. The bamboo grove around it was wild and unkempt; the wooden walls crooked, rotting, and full of holes; the thatching over the roof uneven, with older layers peeking out through holes in the newer layers—

—not unlike the owner and sole inhabitant of the cottage, actually. Tian Haoli was in his fifties but looked ten years older. He was gaunt, sallow, his queue as thin as a pig’s tail, and his breath often smelled of the cheapest rice wine and even cheaper tea. An accident in youth had lamed his right leg, but he preferred to shuffle slowly rather than using a cane. His robe was patched all over, though his under-robe still showed through innumerable holes.

Unlike most in the village, Tian knew how to read and write, but as far as anyone knew, he never passed any level of the Imperial Examinations. From time to time, he would write a letter for some family or read an official notice in the teahouse in exchange for half a chicken or a bowl of dumplings.

But that was not how he really made his living.

• • • •

The morning began like any other. As the sun rose lazily, the fog hanging over the pond dissipated like dissolving ink. Bit by bit, the pink lotus blossoms, the jade-green bamboo stalks, and the golden-yellow cottage roof emerged from the fog.

Knock, knock.

Tian stirred but did not wake up. The Monkey King was hosting a banquet, and Tian was going to eat his fill.

Ever since Tian was a little boy, he has been obsessed with the exploits of the Monkey King, the trickster demon who had seventy-two transformations and defeated hundreds of monsters, who had shaken the throne of the Jade Emperor with a troop of monkeys.

And Monkey liked good food and loved good wine, a must in a good host.

Knock, knock.

Tian ignored the knocking. He was about to bite into a piece of drunken chicken dipped in four different exquisite sauces—

You going to answer that? Monkey said.

As Tian grew older, Monkey would visit him in his dreams, or, if he was awake, speak to him in his head. While others prayed to the Goddess of Mercy or the Buddha, Tian enjoyed conversing with Monkey, who he felt was a demon after his own heart.

Whatever it is, it can wait, said Tian.

I think you have a client, said Monkey.

Knock-knock-knock—

The insistent knocking whisked away Tian’s chicken and abruptly ended his dream. His stomach growled, and he cursed as he rubbed his eyes.

“Just a moment!” Tian fumbled out of bed and struggled to put on his robe, muttering to himself all the while. “Why can’t they wait till I’ve woken up properly and pissed and eaten? These unlettered fools are getting more and more unreasonable . . . I must demand a whole chicken this time . . . It was such a nice dream . . .”

I’ll save some plum wine for you, said Monkey.

You better.

Tian opened the door. Li Xiaoyi, a woman so timid that she apologized even when some rambunctious child ran into *her*; stood there in a dark green dress, her hair pinned up in the manner prescribed for widows. Her fist was lifted and almost smashed into Tian’s nose.

“Aiya!” Tian said. “You owe me the best drunk chicken in Yangzhou!” But Li’s expression, a combination of desperation and fright, altered his tone. “Come on in.”

He closed the door behind the woman and poured a cup of tea for her.

Men and women came to Tian as a last resort, for he helped them when they had nowhere else to turn, when they ran into trouble with the law.

The Qianlong Emperor might be all-wise and all-seeing, but he still needed the thousands of yamen courts to actually govern. Presided over by a magistrate, a judge-administrator who held the power of life and death over the local citizens in his charge, a yamen court was a mysterious, opaque place full of terror for the average man and woman.

Who knew the secrets of the Great Qing Code? Who understood how to plead and prove and defend and argue? When the magistrate spent his evenings at parties hosted by the local gentry, who could predict how a case brought by the poor against the rich would fare? Who could intuit the right clerk to bribe to avoid torture? Who could fathom the correct excuse to give to procure a prison visit?

No, one did not go near the yamen courts unless one had no other choice. When you sought justice, you gambled everything.

And you needed the help of a man like Tian Haoli.

Calmed by the warmth of the tea, Li Xiaoyi told Tian her story in halting sentences.

She had been struggling to feed herself and her two daughters on the produce from a tiny plot of land. To survive a bad harvest, she had mortgaged her land to Jie, a wealthy, distant cousin of his dead husband, who promised that she could redeem her land at any time, interest free. As Li could not read, she had gratefully inked her thumbprint to the contract her cousin handed her.

“He said it was just to make it official for the tax collector,” Li said.

Ah, a familiar story, said the Monkey King.

Tian sighed and nodded.

“I paid him back at the beginning of this year, but yesterday, Jie came to my door with two bailiffs from the yamen. He said that my daughters and I had to leave our house immediately because we had not been making the payments on the loan. I was shocked, but he took out the contract and said that I had promised to pay him back double the amount loaned in one year or else the land would become his forever. ‘It’s all here in black characters on white paper,’ he said, and waved the contract in my face. The bailiffs said that if I don’t leave by tomorrow, they’ll arrest me and sell me and my daughters to a blue house to satisfy the debt.” She clenched her fists. “I don’t know what to do!”

Tian refilled her teacup and said, “We’ll have to go to court and defeat him.”

You sure about this? said the Monkey King. *You haven’t even seen the contract.*

You worry about the banquets, and I’ll worry about the law.

“How?” Li asked. “Maybe the contract does say what he said.”

“I’m sure it does. But don’t worry, I’ll think of something.”

To those who came to Tian for help, he was a *songshi*, a litigation master. But to the yamen magistrate and the local gentry, to the men who wielded money and power, Tian was a *songgun*, a “litigating hooligan.”

The scholars who sipped tea and the merchants who caressed their silver taels despised Tian for daring to help the illiterate peasants draft complaints, devise legal strategies, and prepare for testimony and interrogation. After all, according to Confucius, neighbors should not sue neighbors. A conflict was nothing more than a misunderstanding that needed to be harmonized by a learned Confucian gentleman. But men like Tian Haoli dared to make the crafty peasants think that they could haul their superiors into court, and

could violate the proper hierarchies of respect! The Great Qing Code made it clear that champerty, maintenance, barratry, pettifoggery—whatever name you used to describe what Tian did—were crimes.

But Tian understood the yamen courts were parts of a complex machine. Like the watermills that dotted the Yangtze River, complicated machines had patterns, gears, and levers. They could be nudged and pushed to do things, provided you were clever. As much as the scholars and merchants hated Tian, sometimes they also sought his help, and paid him handsomely for it, too.

“I can’t pay you much.”
Tian chuckled. “The rich pay my fee when they use my services but hate me for it. In your case, it’s payment enough to see this moneyed cousin of yours foiled.”

• • • •

Tian accompanied Li to the yamen court. Along the way, they passed the town square, where a few soldiers were putting up posters of wanted men.

Li glanced at the posters and slowed down. “Wait, I think I may know—”
“Shush!” Tian pulled her along. “Are you crazy? Those aren’t the magistrate’s bailiffs, but real Imperial soldiers. How can you possibly recognize a man wanted by the Emperor?”
“But—”
“I’m sure you’re mistaken. If one of them hears you, even the greatest litigation master in China won’t be able to help you. You have trouble enough. When it comes to politics, it’s best to see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.”
That’s a philosophy a lot of my monkeys used to share, said the Monkey King. But I disagree with it.
You would, you perpetual rebel, thought Tian HaoLi. But you can grow a new head when it’s cut off, a luxury most of us don’t share.

• • • •

Outside the yamen court, Tian picked up the drumstick and began to beat the Drum of Justice, petitioning the court to hear his complaint.
Half an hour later, an angry Magistrate Yi stared at the two people kneeling on the paved-stone floor below the dais: the widow trembling in fear, and that troublemaker, Tian, his back straight with a false look of respect on his face. Magistrate Yi had hoped to take the day off to enjoy the company of a pretty girl at one of the blue houses, but here he was, forced to work. He had a good mind to order both of them flogged right away, but he had to at least keep up the appearance of being a caring magistrate lest one of his disloyal underlings make a report to the judicial inspector.
“What is your complaint, guileful peasant?” asked the magistrate, gritting his teeth.
Tian shuffled forward on his knees and kowtowed. “Oh, Most Honored Magistrate,” he began—Magistrate Yi wondered how Tian managed to make the phrase sound almost like an insult—“Widow Li cries out for justice, justice, justice!”

“And why are *you* here?”
“I’m Li Xiaoyi’s cousin, here to help her speak, for she is distraught over how she’s been treated.”
Magistrate Yi fumed. This Tian HaoLi always claimed to be related to the litigant to justify his presence in court and avoid the charge of being a litigating hooligan. He slammed his hardwood ruler, the symbol of his authority, against the table. “You lie! How many cousins can you possibly have?”
“I lie not.”
“I warn you, if you can’t prove this relation in the records of the Li clan shrine, I’ll have you given forty strokes of the cane.” Magistrate Yi was pleased with himself, thinking that he had finally come up with a way to best the crafty litigation master. He gave a meaningful look to the bailiffs standing to the sides of the court, and they pounded their staffs against the ground rhythmically, emphasizing the threat.
But Tian seemed not worried at all. “Most Sagacious Magistrate, it was Confucius who said that ‘Within the Four Seas, all men are brothers.’ If all men were brothers at the time of Confucius, then it stands to reason that being descended from them, Li Xiaoyi and I are related. With all due respect, surely, Your Honor isn’t suggesting that the genealogical records of the Li family are more authoritative than the words of the Great Sage?”
Magistrate Yi’s face turned red, but he could not think of an answer. Oh, how he wished he could find some excuse to punish this sharp-tongued *songgun*, who always seemed to turn black into white and right into wrong. The Emperor needed better laws to deal with men like him.
“Let’s move on.” The magistrate took a deep breath to calm himself. “What is this injustice she claims? Her cousin Jie read me the contract. It’s perfectly clear what happened.”
“I’m afraid there’s been a mistake,” Tian said. “I ask that the contract be brought so it can be examined again.”
Magistrate Yi sent one of the bailiffs to bring back the wealthy cousin with the contract. Everyone in court, including Widow Li, looked at Tian in puzzlement, unsure what he planned. But Tian simply stroked his beard, appearing to be without a care in the world.

You do have a plan, yes? said the Monkey King.
Not really. I’m just playing for time.
Well, said Monkey, I always like to turn my enemies’ weapons against them. Did I tell you about the time I burned Nezha with his own fire-wheels?
Tian dipped his hand inside his robe, where he kept his writing kit.
The bailiff brought back a confused, sweating Jie, who had been interrupted during a luxurious meal of swallow-nest soup. His face was still greasy, as he hadn’t even gotten a chance to wipe himself. Jie knelt before the magistrate next to Tian and Li and lifted the contract above his head for the bailiff.
“Show it to Tian,” the magistrate ordered.
Tian accepted the contract and began to read it. He nodded his head from time to time, as though the contract was the most fascinating poetry.
Though the legalese was long and intricate, the key phrase was only eight characters long:

上賣莊稼， 下賣田地

The mortgage was structured as a sale with a right of redemption, and this part provided that the widow sold her cousin “the crops above, and the field below.”
“Interesting, most interesting,” said Tian as he held the contract and continued to move his head about rhythmically.
Magistrate Yi knew he was being baited, yet he couldn’t help but ask, “*What* is so interesting?”
“Oh Great, Glorious Magistrate, you who reflect the truth like a perfect mirror, you must read the contract yourself.”
Confused, Magistrate Yi had the bailiff bring him the contract. After a few moments, his eyes bulged out. Right there, in clear black characters, was the key phrase describing the sale:

上賣莊稼， 不賣田地

“The crops above, but *not* the field,” muttered the magistrate.
Well, the case was clear. The contract did not say what Jie claimed. All that Jie had a right to were the crops, but not the field itself. Magistrate Yi had no idea how this could have happened, but his embarrassed fury needed an outlet. The sweaty, greasy-faced Jie was the first thing he laid his eyes on.
“How dare you lie to me?” Yi shouted, slamming his ruler down on the table. “Are you trying to make me look like a fool?”
It was now Jie’s turn to shake like a leaf in the wind, unable to speak.
“Oh, now you have nothing to say? You’re convicted of obstruction of justice, lying to an Imperial official, and attempting to defraud another of her property. I sentence you to a hundred and twenty strokes of the cane and confiscation of half of your property.”

“Mercy, mercy! I don’t know what happened—” The piteous cries of Jie faded as the bailiffs dragged him out of the yamen to jail.

Litigation Master Tian’s face was impassive, but inside he smiled and thanked Monkey. Discreetly, he rubbed the tip of his finger against his robe to eliminate the evidence of his trick.

• • • •

A week later, Tian Haoli was awakened from another banquet-dream with the Monkey King by persistent knocking. He opened the door to find Li Xiaoyi standing there, her pale face drained of blood.

“What’s the matter? Is your cousin again—”

“Master Tian, I need your help.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper. “It’s my brother.”

“Is it a gambling debt? A fight with a rich man? Did he make a bad deal? Was he—”

“Please! You have to come with me!”

Tian Haoli was going to say no because a clever *songshi* never got involved in cases he didn’t understand—a quick way to end a career. But the look on Li’s face softened his resolve. “All right. Lead the way.”

• • • •

Tian made sure that there was no one watching before he slipped inside Li Xiaoyi’s hut. Though he didn’t have much of a reputation to worry about, Xiaoyi didn’t need the village gossips wagging their tongues.

Inside, a long, crimson streak could be seen across the packed-earth floor, leading from the doorway to the bed against the far wall. A man lay asleep on the bed, bloody bandages around his legs and left shoulder. Xiaoyi’s two children, both girls, huddled in a shadowy corner of the hut, their mistrustful eyes peeking out at Tian.

One glance at the man’s face told Tian all he needed to know: It was the same face on those posters the soldiers were putting up.

Tian Haoli sighed. “Xiaoyi, what kind of trouble have you brought me now?”

Gently, Xiaoyi shook her brother, Xiaojing, awake. He became alert almost immediately, a man used to light sleep and danger on the road.

“Xiaoyi tells me that you can help me,” the man said, gazing at Tian intently.

Tian rubbed his chin as he appraised Xiaojing. “I don’t know.”

“I can pay.” Xiaojing struggled to turn on the bed and lifted a corner of a cloth bundle. Tian could see the glint of silver underneath.

“I make no promises. Not every disease has a cure, and not every fugitive can find a loophole. It depends on who’s after you and why.” Tian walked closer and bent down to examine the promised payment, but the tattoos on Xiaojing’s scarred face, signs that he was a convicted criminal, caught his attention. “You were sentenced to exile.”

“Yes, ten years ago, right after Xiaoyi’s marriage.”

“If you have enough money, there are doctors that can do something about those tattoos, though you won’t look very handsome afterwards.”

“I’m not very worried about looks right now.”

“What was it for?”

Xiaojing laughed and nodded at the table next to the window, upon which a thin book lay open. The wind fluttered its pages. “If you’re as good as my sister says, you can probably figure it out.”

Tian glanced at the book and then turned back to Xiaojing.

“You were exiled to the border near Vietnam,” Tian said to himself as he deciphered the tattoos. “Eleven years ago . . . the breeze fluttering the pages . . . ah, you must have been a servant of Xu Jun, the Hanlin Academy scholar.”

Eleven years ago, during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor, someone had whispered in the Emperor’s ear that the great scholar Xu Jun was plotting rebellion against the Manchu rulers. But when the Imperial guards seized Xu’s house and ransacked it, they could find nothing incriminating.

However, the Emperor could never be wrong, and so his legal advisors had to devise a way to convict Xu. Their solution was to point at one of Xu’s seemingly innocuous lyric poems:

清風不識字，何故亂翻書

Breeze, you know not how to read,

So why do you mess with my book?

The first character in the word for “breeze,” *qing*, was the same as the name of the dynasty. The clever legalists serving the Emperor—and Tian did have a begrudging professional admiration for their skill—construed it as a treasonous composition mocking the Manchu rulers as uncultured and illiterate. Xu and his family were sentenced to death, his servants exiled.

“Xu’s crime was great, but it has been more than ten years.” Tian paced beside the bed. “If you simply broke the terms of your exile, it might not be too difficult to bribe the right officials and commanders to look the other way.”

“The men after me cannot be bribed.”

“Oh?” Tian looked at the bandaged wounds covering the man’s body. “You mean . . . the Blood Drops.”

Xiaojing nodded.

The Blood Drops were the Emperor’s eyes and talons. They moved through the dark alleys of cities like ghosts and melted into the streaming caravans on roads and canals, hunting for signs of treason. They were the reason that teahouses posted signs for patrons to avoid talk of politics and neighbors looked around and whispered when they complained about taxes. They listened, watched, and sometimes came to people’s doors in the middle of the night, and those they visited were never seen again.

Tian waved his arms impatiently. “You and Xiaoyi are wasting my time. If the Blood Drops are after you, I can do nothing. Not if I want to keep my head attached to my neck.” Tian headed for the door of the hut.

“I’m not asking you to save me,” said Xiaojing.

Tian paused.

“Eleven years ago, when they came to arrest Master Xu, he gave me a book and told me it was more important than his life, than his family. I kept the book hidden and took it into exile with me.

“A month ago, two men came to my house, asking me to turn over everything I had from my dead master. Their accents told me they were from Beijing, and I saw in their eyes the cold stare of the Emperor’s falcons. I let them in and told them to look around, but while they were distracted with my chests and drawers, I escaped with the book.

“I’ve been on the run ever since, and a few times they almost caught me, leaving me with these wounds. The book they’re after is over there on the table. *That’s* what I want you to save.”

Tian hesitated by the door. He was used to bribing yamen clerks and prison guards and debating Magistrate Yi. He liked playing games with words and drinking cheap wine and bitter tea. What business did a lowly *songgun* have with the Emperor and the intrigue of the Court?

I was once happy on Fruit-and-Flower Mountain, spending all day in play with my fellow monkeys, said the Monkey King. *Sometimes I wish I hadn’t been so curious about what lay in the wider world.*

But Tian was curious, and he walked over to the table and picked up the book. *An Account of Ten Days at Yangzhou*, it said, by Wang Xiuchu.

• • • •

A hundred years earlier, in 1645, after claiming the Ming Chinese capital of Beijing, the Manchu Army was intent on completing its conquest of China.

Prince Dodo and his forces came to Yangzhou, a wealthy city of salt merchants and painted pavilions, at the meeting point of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal. The Chinese commander, Grand Secretary Shi Kefa, vowed to resist to the utmost. He rallied the city’s residents to reinforce the walls and tried to unite the remaining Ming warlords and militias.

His efforts came to naught on May 20, 1645, when the Manchu forces broke through the city walls after a seven-day siege. Shi Kefa was executed after refusing to surrender. To punish the residents of Yangzhou and to teach the rest of China a lesson about the price of resisting the Manchu Army, Prince Dodo gave the order to slaughter the entire

population of the city.

One of the residents, Wang Xiuchu, survived by moving from hiding place to hiding place and bribing the soldiers with whatever he had. He also recorded what he saw:

One Manchu soldier with a sword was in the lead, another with a lance was in the back, and a third roamed in the middle to prevent the captives from escaping. The three of them herded dozens of captives like dogs and sheep. If any captive walked too slow, they would beat him immediately, or else kill him on the spot.

The women were strung together with ropes, like a strand of pearls. They stumbled as they walked through the mud, and filth covered their bodies and clothes. Babies were everywhere on the ground, and as horses and people trampled over them, their brains and organs mixed into the earth, and the howling of the dying filled the air.

Every gutter or pond we passed was filled with corpses, their arms and legs entangled. The blood mixing with the green water turned into a painter's palette. So many bodies filled the canal that it turned into flat ground.

The mass massacre, raping, pillaging, and burning of the city lasted six days.

On the second day of the lunar month, the new government ordered all the temples to cremate the bodies. The temples had sheltered many women, though many had also died from hunger and fright. The final records of the cremations included hundreds of thousands of bodies, though this figure does not include all those who had committed suicide by jumping into wells or canals or through self-immolation and hanging to avoid a worse fate. . . .

On the fourth day of the lunar month, the weather finally turned sunny. The bodies piled by the roadside, having soaked in rainwater, had inflated and the skin on them was a bluish black and stretched taut like the surface of a drum. The flesh inside rotted and the stench was overwhelming. As the sun baked the bodies, the smell grew worse. Everywhere in Yangzhou, the survivors were cremating bodies. The smoke permeated inside all the houses and formed a miasma. The smell of rotting bodies could be detected a hundred li away.

• • • •

Tian's hands trembled as he turned over the last page.

"Now you see why the Blood Drops are after me," said Xiaojing, his voice weary. "The Manchus have insisted that the Yangzhou Massacre is a myth, and anyone speaking of it is guilty of treason. But here is an eyewitness account that will reveal their throne was built on a foundation of blood and skulls."

Tian closed his eyes and thought about Yangzhou, with its teahouses full of indolent scholars arguing with singing girls about rhyme schemes, with its palatial mansions full of richly-robed merchants celebrating another good trading season, with its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants happily praying for the Manchu Emperor's health. Did they know that each day, as they went to the markets and laughed and sang and praised this golden age they lived in, they were treading on the bones of the dead, they were mocking the dying cries of the departed, they were denying the memories of ghosts? He himself had not even believed the stories whispered in his childhood about Yangzhou's past, and he was quite sure that most young men in Yangzhou now have never even heard of them.

Now that he knew the truth, could he allow the ghosts to continue to be silenced?

But then he also thought about the special prisons the Blood Drops maintained, the devious tortures designed to prolong the journey from life to death, the ways that the Manchu Emperors always got what they wanted in the end. The Emperor's noble Banners had succeeded in forcing all the Chinese to shave their heads and wear queues to show submission to the Manchus, and to abandon their *hanfu* for Manchu clothing on pain of death. They had cut the Chinese off from their past, made them a people adrift without the anchor of their memories. They were more powerful than the Jade Emperor and ten thousand heavenly soldiers.

It would be so easy for them to erase this book, to erase him, a lowly *songgun*, from the world, like a momentary ripple across a placid pond.

Let others have their fill of daring deeds; he was a survivor.

"I'm sorry," Tian said to Xiaojing, his voice low and hoarse. "I can't help you."

• • • •

Tian Haoli sat down at his table to eat a bowl of noodles. He had flavored it with fresh lotus seeds and bamboo shoots, and the fragrance was usually refreshing, perfect for a late lunch.

The Monkey King appeared in the seat opposite him: fierce eyes, wide mouth, a purple cape that declared him to be the Sage Equal to Heaven, rebel against the Jade Emperor. This didn't happen often. Usually Monkey spoke to Tian only in his mind.

"You think you're not a hero," the Monkey King said.

"That's right," replied Tian. He tried to keep the defensiveness out of his voice. "I'm just an ordinary man making a living by scrounging for crumbs in the cracks of the law, happy to have enough to eat and a few coppers left for drink. I just want to live."

"I'm not a hero either," the Monkey King said. "I just did my job when needed."

"Ha!" said Tian. "I know what you're trying to do, but it's not going to work. Your job was to protect the holiest monk on a perilous journey, and your qualifications consisted of peerless strength and boundless magic. You could call on the aid of the Buddha and Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, whenever you needed to. Don't you compare yourself to me?"

"Fine. Do you know of *any* heroes?"

Tian slurped some noodles and pondered the question. What he had read that morning was fresh in his mind. "I guess Grand Secretary Shi Kefa was a hero."

"How? He promised the people of Yangzhou that as long as he lived, he would not let harm come to them, and yet when the city fell, he tried to escape on his own. He seems to me more a coward than a hero."

Tian put down his bowl. "That's not fair. He held the city when he had no reinforcements or aid. He pacified the warlords harassing the people in Yangzhou and rallied them to their defense. In the end, despite a moment of weakness, he willingly gave his life for the city, and you can't ask for more than that."

The Monkey King snorted contemptuously. "Of course you can. He should have seen that fighting was futile. If he hadn't resisted the Manchu invaders and instead surrendered the city, maybe not so many would have died. If he hadn't refused to bow down to the Manchus, maybe he wouldn't have been killed." The Monkey King smirked. "Maybe he wasn't very smart and didn't know how to survive."

Blood rushed to Tian's face. He stood up and pointed a finger at the Monkey King. "Don't you talk about him that way. Who's to say that had he surrendered, the Manchus wouldn't have slaughtered the city anyway? You think lying down before a conquering army bent on rape and pillage is the right thing to do? To turn your argument around, the heavy resistance in Yangzhou slowed the Manchu Army and might have allowed many people to escape to safety in the south, and the city's defiance might have made the Manchus willing to give better terms to those who did surrender later. Grand Secretary Shi was a real hero!"

The Monkey King laughed. "Listen to you, arguing like you are in Magistrate Yi's yamen. You're awfully worked up about a man dead for a hundred years."

"I won't let you denigrate his memory that way, even if you're the Sage Equal to Heaven."

The Monkey King's face turned serious. "You speak of memory. What do you think about Wang Xiuchu, who wrote the book you read?"

"He was just an ordinary man like me, surviving by bribes and hiding from danger."

"Yet he recorded what he saw, so that a hundred years later the men and women who died in those ten days can be remembered. Writing that book was a brave thing to do—look at how the Manchus are hunting down someone today just for *reading* it. I think he was a hero, too."

After a moment, Tian nodded. "I hadn't thought about it that way, but you're right."

"There are no heroes, Tian Haoli. Grand Secretary Shi was both courageous and cowardly, capable and foolish. Wang Xiuchu was both an opportunistic survivor and a man of greatness of spirit. I'm mostly selfish and vain, but sometimes even I surprise myself. We're all just ordinary men—well, I'm an ordinary demon—faced with extraordinary choices. In those moments, sometimes heroic ideals demand that we become their avatars."

Tian sat down and closed his eyes. "I'm just an old and frightened man, Monkey. I don't know what to do."

"Sure you do. You just have to accept it."

"Why me? What if I don't want to?"

The Monkey King's face turned somber, and his voice grew faint. "Those men and women of Yangzhou died a hundred years ago, Tian Haoli, and nothing can be done to change that. But the past lives on in the form of memories, and those in power are always going to want to erase and silence the past, to bury the ghosts. Now that you know about that past, you're no longer an innocent bystander. If you do not act, you're complicit with the Emperor and his Blood Drops in this new act of violence, this deed of erasure. Like Wang Xiuchu, you're now a witness. Like him, you must choose what to do. You must decide if, on the day you die, you will regret your choice."

The figure of the Monkey King faded away, and Tian was left alone in his hut, remembering.

• • • •

“I have written a letter to an old friend in Ningbo,” said Tian. “Bring it with you to the address on the envelope. He’s a good surgeon and will erase these tattoos from your face as a favor to me.”

“Thank you,” said Li Xiaojing. “I will destroy the letter as soon as I can, knowing how much danger this brings you. Please accept this as payment.” He turned to his bundle and retrieved five taels of silver.

Tian held up a hand. “No, you’ll need all the money you can get.” He handed over a small bundle. “It’s not much, but it’s all I have saved.”

Li Xiaojing and Li Xiaoyi both looked at the litigation master, not understanding.

Tian continued. “Xiaoyi and the children can’t stay here in Sanli because someone will surely report that she harbored a fugitive when the Blood Drops start asking questions. No, all of you must leave immediately and go to Ningbo, where you will hire a ship to take you to Japan. Since the Manchus have sealed the coast, you will need to pay a great deal to a smuggler.”

“To Japan!?”

“So long as that book is with you, there is nowhere in China where you’ll be safe. Of all the states around, only Japan would dare to defy the Manchu Emperor. Only there will you and the book be safe.”

Xiaojing and Xiaoyi nodded. “You will come with us, then?”

Tian gestured at his lame leg and laughed. “Having me along will only slow you down. No, I’ll stay here and take my chances.”

“The Blood Drops will not let you go if they suspect you helped us.”

Tian smiled. “I’ll come up with something. I always do.”

• • • •

A few days later, when Tian Haoli was just about to sit down and have his lunch, soldiers from the town garrison came to his door. They arrested him without explanation and brought him to the yamen.

Tian saw that Magistrate Yi wasn’t the only one sitting behind the judging table on the dais this time. With him was another official, whose hat indicated that he came directly from Beijing. His cold eyes and lean build reminded Tian of a falcon.

May my wits defend me again, Tian whispered to the Monkey King in his mind.

Magistrate Yi slammed his ruler on the table. “Deceitful Tian Haoli, you’re hereby accused of aiding the escape of dangerous fugitives and of plotting acts of treason against the Great Qing. Confess your crimes immediately so that you may die quickly.”

Tian nodded as the magistrate finished his speech. “Most Merciful and Far-Sighted Magistrate, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You presumptuous fool! Your usual tricks will not work this time. I have iron-clad proof that you gave comfort and aid to the traitor Li Xiaojing and read a forbidden, treasonous, false text.”

“I have indeed read a book recently, but there was nothing treasonous in it.”

“What?”

“It was a book about sheep herding and pearl stringing. Plus, some discussions about filling ponds and starting fires.”

The other man behind the table narrowed his eyes, but Tian went on as if he had nothing to hide. “It was very technical and very boring.”

“You lie!” The veins on Magistrate Yi’s neck seemed about to burst.

“Most Brilliant and Perspicacious Magistrate, how can you say that I lie? Can you tell me the contents of this forbidden book, so that I may verify if I have read it?”

“You . . . you . . .” The magistrate’s mouth opened and closed like the lips of a fish.

Of course Magistrate Yi wouldn’t have been told what was in the book—that was the point of it being forbidden—but Tian was also counting on the fact that the man from the Blood Drops wouldn’t be able to say anything either. To accuse Tian of lying about the contents of the book was to admit that the accuser had read the book, and Tian knew that no member of the Blood Drops would admit such a crime to the suspicious Manchu Emperor.

“There has been a misunderstanding,” said Tian. “The book I read contained nothing that was false, which means that it can’t possibly be the book that has been banned. Certainly Your Honor can see the plain and simple logic.” He smiled. Surely he had found the loophole that would allow him to escape.

“Enough of this charade,” the man from the Blood Drops spoke for the first time. “There’s no need to bother with the law with traitors like you. On the Emperor’s authority, I hereby declare you guilty without appeal and sentence you to death. If you do not wish to suffer much longer, immediately confess the whereabouts of the book and the fugitives.”

Tian felt his legs go rubbery and, for a moment, he saw only darkness and heard only an echo of the Blood Drop’s pronouncement: *sentence you to death.*

I guess I’ve finally run out of tricks, he thought.

You’ve already made your choice, said the Monkey King. *Now you just have to accept it.*

• • • •

Besides being great spies and assassins, the Blood Drops were experts at the art of torture.

Tian screamed as they doused his limbs in boiling water.

Tell me a story, said Tian to the Monkey King. *Distract me so I don’t give in.*

Let me tell you about the time they cooked me in the alchemical furnace of the Jade Emperor, said the Monkey King. *I survived by hiding among smoke and ashes.*

And Tian told his torturers a tale about how he had helped Li Xiaojing burn his useless book and saw it turn into smoke and ashes. But he had forgotten where the fire was set. Perhaps the Blood Drops could search the nearby hills thoroughly?

They burnt him with iron pokers heated until they glowed white.

Tell me a story, Tian screamed as he breathed in the smell of charred flesh.

Let me tell you about the time I fought the Iron Fan Princess in the Fire Mountains, said the Monkey King. *I tricked her by pretending to run away in fear.*

And Tian told his torturers a tale about how he had told Li Xiaojing to escape to Suzhou, famed for its many alleys and canals, as well as refined lacquer fans.

They cut his fingers off one by one.

Tell me a story, Tian croaked. He was weak from loss of blood.

Let me tell you about the time they put that magical headband on me, said the Monkey King. *I almost passed out from the pain but still I wouldn’t stop cursing.*

And Tian spat in the faces of his torturers.

• • • •

Tian woke up in the dim cell. It smelled of mildew and shit and piss. Rats squeaked in the corners.

He was finally going to be put to death tomorrow, as his torturers had given up. It would be death by a thousand cuts. A skilled executioner could make the victim suffer for hours before taking his final breath.

I didn’t give in, did I? he asked the Monkey King. *I can’t remember everything I told them.*

You told them many tales, none true.

Tian thought he should be content. Death would be a release. But he worried that he hadn’t done enough. What if Li Xiaojing didn’t make it to Japan? What if the book was destroyed at sea? If only there were some way to save the book so that it could *not* be lost.

Have I told you about the time I fought Lord Erlang and confused him by transforming my shape? I turned into a sparrow, a fish, a snake, and finally a temple. My mouth was the door, my eyes the windows, my tongue the statue of the Buddha, and my tail a flagpole. Ha, that was fun. None of Lord Erlang’s demons could see through my disguises.

I am clever with words, thought Tian. *I am, after all, a songgun.*

The voices of children singing outside the jail cell came to him faintly. He struggled and crawled to the wall with the tiny barred window at the top and called out, “Hey, can you hear me?”

The singing stopped abruptly. After a while, a timid voice said, “We’re not supposed to talk to condemned criminals. My mother says that you’re dangerous and crazy.” Tian laughed. “I *am* crazy. But I know some good songs. Would you like to learn them? They’re about sheep and pearls and all sorts of other fun things.”

The children conferred among themselves, and one of them said, “Why not? A crazy man must have some good songs.”

Tian Haoli mustered up every last bit of his strength and concentration. He thought about the words from the book:

The three of them herded dozens of captives like dogs and sheep. If any captive walked too slow, they would beat him immediately, or else kill him on the spot. The women were strung together with ropes, like a strand of pearls.

He thought about disguises. He thought about the way the tones differed between Mandarin and the local topolect, the way he could make puns and approximations and rhymes and shift the words and transform them until they were no longer recognizable. And he began to sing:

The Tree of Dem herded dozens of Cap Tea

Like dogs and sheep.

If any Cap Tea walked too slow, the Wood Beet

Hmm’d immediately.

Or else a quill, slim on the dot.

The Why-Men were strong to gather wits & loupes

Like a strand of pearls.

And the children, delighted by the nonsense, picked up the songs quickly.

...

They tied him to the pole on the execution platform and stripped him naked.

Tian watched the crowd. In the eyes of some, he saw pity, in others, he saw fear, and in still others, like Li Xiaoyi’s cousin Jie, he saw delight at seeing the hooligan *songgun* meet this fate. But most were expectant. This execution, this horror, was entertainment.

“One last chance,” the Blood Drop said. “If you confess the truth now, we will slit your throat cleanly. Otherwise, you can enjoy the next few hours.”

Whispers passed through the crowd. Some tittered. Tian gazed at the bloodlust in some of the men. *You have become a slavish people*, he thought. *You have forgotten the past and become docile captives of the Emperor. You have learned to take delight in his barbarity, to believe that you live in a golden age, never bothering to look beneath the gilded surface of the Empire at its rotten, bloody foundation. You desecrate the very memory of those who died to keep you free.*

His heart was filled with despair. *Have I endured all this and thrown away my life for nothing?*

Some children in the crowd began to sing:

The Tree of Dem herded dozens of Cap Tea

Like dogs and sheep.

If any Cap Tea walked too slow, the Wood Beet

Hmm’d immediately.

Or else a quill, slim on the dot.

The Why-Men were strong to gather wits & loupes

Like a strand of pearls.

The Blood Drop’s expression did not change. He heard nothing but the nonsense of children. True, this way, the children would not be endangered by knowing the song. But Tian also wondered if anyone would ever see through the nonsense. Had he hidden the truth too deep?

“Stubborn till the last, eh?” The Blood Drop turned to the executioner, who was sharpening his knives on the grindstone. “Make it last as long as possible.”

What have I done? thought Tian. *They’re laughing at the way I’m dying, the way I’ve been a fool. I’ve accomplished nothing except fighting for a hopeless cause.*

Not at all, said the Monkey King. *Li Xiaojing is safe in Japan, and the children’s songs will be passed on until the whole county, the whole province, the whole country fills with their voices. Someday, perhaps not now, perhaps not in another hundred years, but someday the book will come back from Japan, or a clever scholar will finally see through the disguise in your songs as Lord Erlang finally saw through mine. And then the spark of truth will set this country aflame, and this people will awaken from their torpor. You have preserved the memories of the men and women of Yangzhou.*

The executioner began with a long, slow cut across Tian’s thighs, removing chunks of flesh. Tian’s scream was like that of an animal’s, raw, pitiful, incoherent.

Not much of a hero, am I? thought Tian. *I wish I were truly brave.*

You’re an ordinary man who was given an extraordinary choice, said the Monkey King. *Do you regret your choice?*

No, thought Tian. And as the pain made him delirious and reason began to desert him, he shook his head firmly. *Not at all.*

You can’t ask for more than that, said the Monkey King. And he bowed before Tian Haoli, not the way you kowtowed to an Emperor, but the way you would bow to a great hero.

Author’s Note: For more about the historical profession of *songshi* (or *songgun*), please contact the author for an unpublished paper. Some of Tian Haoli’s exploits are based on folktales about the great Litigation Master Xie Fangzun collected by the anthologist Ping Heng in *Zhongguo da zhuangshi* (“Great Plaintmasters of China”), published in 1922.

For more than 250 years, *An Account of Ten Days at Yangzhou* was suppressed in China by the Manchu emperors, and the Yangzhou Massacre, along with numerous other atrocities during the Manchu Conquest, was forgotten. It was only until the decade before the Revolution of 1911 that copies of the book were brought back from Japan and republished in China. The text played a small, but important, role in the fall of the Qing and the end of Imperial rule in China. I translated the excerpts used in this story.

Due to the long suppression, which continues to some degree to this day, the true number of victims who died in Yangzhou may never be known. This story is dedicated to their memory.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Liu is an award-winning American author of speculative fiction. His collection, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, has been published in more than a dozen languages. Liu’s other works include *The Grace of Kings*, *The Wall of Storms*, *The Veiled Throne*, *Speaking Bones*, and a second collection *The Hidden Girl and Other Stories*. He has been involved in multiple media adaptations of his work, including the short story “Good Hunting,” adapted as an episode in Netflix’s animated series *Love, Death + Robots*; and AMC’s *Pantheon*, adapted from an interconnected series of short stories. “The Hidden Girl,” “The Message,” and “The Oracle” have also been optioned for development. Liu previously worked as a software engineer, corporate lawyer, and litigation consultant. He frequently speaks at conferences and universities on topics including futurism, machine-augmented creativity, the history of technology, and the value of storytelling. Liu lives with his family near Boston, Massachusetts.

AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- An Advanced Reader’s Picture Book of Comparative Cognition (reprint)
- Night Journey of the Dragon-Horse (translation)
- The Explainer
- The Snow Train (reprint)

- Cosmic Spring
- The Smog Society (translation)
- The Ussuri Bear (reprint)
- State Change (reprint)
- The Mao Ghost (translation)
- None Owns the Air
- Invisible Planets (translation)
- Ghost Days
- The Litigation Master and the Monkey King (Nebula Award finalist)
- Mono no aware (reprint)
- The Perfect Match
- The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species (Nebula & Sturgeon Award finalist)
- The Five Elements of the Heart Mind
- Simulacrum



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE KNIGHT OF CHAINS, THE DEUCE OF STARS

Yoon Ha Lee

First published in *Lightspeed Magazine*, Issue 39 (August 2013)

The tower is a black spire upon a world whose only sun is a million starships wrecked into a mass grave. Light the color of fossils burns from the ships, and at certain hours, the sun casts shadows that mutter the names of vanquished cities and vanished civilizations. It is said that when the tower’s sun finally darkens, the universe’s clocks will stop.

But the sun, however strange, is not why people make the labyrinthine journey to the tower. The tower guards the world’s hollow depths, in which may be found the universe’s games. Every game played among the universe’s peoples was once trapped in the world’s terrible underground passages, and every one was mined and bargained for by some traveler. It is for such a game that the exile Niristez comes here now, in a ship of ice and iron and armageddon engines.

This is the hand Niristez played long ago: The Ten of Theorems; the Knight of Hounds; the Nine of Chains, the bad-luck symbol she uses as a calling card; and she kept two cards hidden, but lost the round anyway.

Niristez carries the last two cards with her. They come from a deck made of coalescent paper, which will reveal the cards drawn when she chooses and not before. Today, the backs show the tower in abbreviated brushstrokes, like a needle of dark iron plunging into an eye. Coalescent cards are not known for their subtlety.

She may have lost that match, but it’s not the only game she’s playing, and this time she means to win.

• • • •

The tower has a warden, or perhaps the warden has a tower. The warden’s name is Daechong. He is usually polite. It was one of the first lessons he learned.

Most people don’t first notice the warden when they meet him, or the rooms crowded with agate-eyed figurines, flowers of glass, cryptochips sliced into mosaics. They first notice the warden’s gun. It is made of living bone and barbed wire and smoke-silver axioms. It would have a stock of mother-of-pearl, if pearls were born from gangrenous stars. It has a long, lustrous barrel forged in a bomb’s hellheart. And along the barrel is an inscription in whatever language your heart answers to: *I never miss*.

When he is human-shaped, Daechong is modestly tall, with a narrow face and dark hair cut short. His hands move too quickly to be reassuring, even if he always keeps them in sight. He wears gray, although sometimes his definition of “gray” has more in common with the black static that you find on the other side of your eyelids.

Daechong has been chained to the tower since the tower came into existence. He remembers his first visitors. It took him very little time to understand that he couldn’t leave, and so he murdered them. After that, for a long time, he was alone. When more visitors started to arrive, he was very careful with them, having learned that silence is wearisome company.

Anyone who desires to descend into the world with its unmined games must persuade him to let them pass. Daechong is not recalcitrant, precisely, but he likes to challenge his visitors to games himself. It is possible, although not easy, to defeat him. Sometimes defeat carries a small penalty, sometimes a great one, according to his mood.

It is inadvisable to threaten him, and especially inadvisable to attempt to separate him from his gun. The gun admits no bullets and speaks no words of fire or fission. It gives forth no smoke, no sparks, no suppurating oil.

Yet the gun always hits what Daechong intends to shoot. Killing is one of the few pleasures available to him, and he indulges either as part of a wager or in self-defense. It doesn’t matter whether the target is in front of him, or behind him, or in another galaxy, behind the ash-shroud of stars that failed to be born. Sometimes, when he fires, a quantum sentence shudders apart into spin-states pinned to forever zeros. Sometimes a city inverts itself, plunging its arches and cobweb skyroads into the earth, leaving its citizens to suffocate. The story goes that the sun-of-starships was Daechong’s response to some reckless admiral bent on conquering the tower, although Daechong refuses to say anything definite on the matter.

It has been a long time since Daechong feared anyone. When he learns that Niristez of the Nine of Chains has asked for an audience, fear is not what he feels. But after all this time, he is still capable of curiosity; he will not turn her away.

• • • •

There is an old story you already know, and a variant on it that you have already guessed.

Take a chessboard, eight squares by eight squares, sixty-four in total. Play begins with the first square being paid for with a single death. On the second day, fill in the next square with two deaths. On the third day, four; on the fourth day, eight. The sequence continues in this manner. The question is when both parties will find the toll of deaths such that they can no longer stomach the price of play.

We use chess—with its pieces intimating knights and kings and castles, sword-crash wars of old—for convenience, although it could be anything else. And we restrict ourselves to powers of two for convenience as well, although the mathematics of escalation knows no such boundary.

• • • •

Daechong waits for Niristez in one of the highest rooms of the tower. He doesn’t know what she looks like, and he declines to watch her enter by the door that will admit her but which will not allow him to leave. Besides, he can hear her footsteps wherever she is in the tower, or on the world. She has a militant reputation: he can tell that by the percussion of her boots.

This room contains musical instruments. He doesn’t know how to play any of them, but he can tune and maintain them. His current favorite is a flute made of pipe scavenged from some extinguished city’s scrap heap. There’s a great curving harp, a lithophone, two bells. On occasion, one of his visitors breaks an instrument, and then he burns up the fragments; that’s all.

The footsteps slow. She’s reached the room. The lights in the tower will have told her where to go. On occasion, some visitor strays, and then he has to fetch them out of the confusion of hallways and shadows. It is sometimes tempting to let them wander, but by now the habits of courtesy are strong.

Niristez knocks once, twice. Waits.

“The door is unlocked,” Daechong says.

He regards her thoughtfully as she enters the room. She is taller than he is, and her hair is like a banner. In the intolerable aeons of her exile, she has gone by many names, but Niristez is the one she prefers. It means *I promise*. The name is a lie, although most people know better than to mention it to her face. Once she had a reputation for always keeping her promises. Once she swore to win an unwinnable war. Then she fled her people, and the war has not, to this day, been won.

Her most notable feature, aside from her reputation, is not her height, or the gloves made from skinned fractals, or even the sword-of-treatises knotted at her side. It is her eyes, whose color cannot be discerned in any light but corpselight. In her eyes you can see a map forever drawing and redrawing itself, a map that knows where your flaws may be found, a map that knows how your desires may be drowned. Long ago, she was a strategist for the High Fleet of the Knifebird, and while no one now refers to her by her old rank, people remember what her eyes mean. Daechong isn’t concerned by them, terrible though they are. She will already have charted his greatest weakness, and she doesn’t need her unique form of vision to do so.

Niristez isn’t looking at his gun, which is easily within his reach. That isn’t saying much. No matter where it lies, the gun is always within his reach. But its presence is like a splinter of black dreaming, inescapable.

Niristez is, however, bearing a bottle of amber-green glass, with a cork whose eye stares unblinking at Daechong. “I thought,” she says dryly, “it would be ungracious if I didn’t bring a gift, considering that I am here to bargain for a favor.”

“It’s very considerate of you,” Daechong says. “Shall I open it here?”

Niristez shrugs. “It’s yours now, so you may as well suit yourself.”

He keeps glasses in a red-stained cabinet. She’s not the first person to bring him liquor. He picks out two spiraling flutes, with gold wire patterns reminiscent of inside-out automata and melting gears. It’s tempting to shoot the bottle open, but that would be showing off, so he picks the cork out with his fingers. He’s killed people by digging out their eyes; this isn’t so different.

The liquor effervesces and leaves querulous sparks in the air, spelling out hectic inequalities and the occasional exclamatory couplet. Daechong looks at it longingly. “Would you be offended if I burn it up?” he says. Anything for a taste of the world outside. “I can’t actually drink.”

“I can’t claim to be difficult to offend,” Niristez says, “but as I said, it’s yours now.” She takes a sip herself. The inequalities flare up and die down into first-order contradictions as they pass her lips.

Daechong taps the rim of the glass. For a moment, nothing happens. Then the entire glassful goes up in smoke the color of lamentations, sweet and thick, and he inhales deeply. “You must find my tastes predictable,” he says.

Niristez smiles, and shadows deepen in her eyes. “Let’s say it’s something we have in common.”

“You mentioned that you wished to bargain,” he says. “Might I ask what you’re looking for?” Ordinarily he would not be so direct, but Niristez has a reputation for impatience.

“I want what everyone wants who comes here,” Niristez says. “I want a game. But it’s not just a game.” It never is. “You know my reputation, I trust.”

“It would be hard to escape it, even living where I do,” Daechong says.

“On this world is the stratagem that will enable me to keep my promise.” Niristez’s eyes are very dark now, and her smile darker still. “I wish to buy the game that contains it from you. I’ve spent a great deal of time determining that this game must exist. It will win me the war of wars; it will let me redeem my name.”

Daechong taps the glass again. This time it chimes softly, like a bell of bullets. Some of the musical instruments reverberate in response. “I’m afraid that you are already losing my interest,” he says. “Games that admit an obvious dominant strategy tend not to be very interesting from the players’ point of view.” It’s difficult to be a warden of games and not feel responsible for the quality of the ones that he permits to escape into the outside world. “I could let you root around for it, but I assume you’re after a certain amount of guidance.”

Although he is not infallible, Daechong has an instinct for the passages. He knows where the richest strata are, where the games sought are likeliest to be found. When people bargain with him, it’s not simply access that they seek. Anyone can wander through the twisty passages, growing intoxicated by the combinatoric vapors. It’s another matter to have a decent chance of finding what they want.

“That’s correct,” Niristez says. “I have spent long enough gnawing at the universe’s laws and spitting out dead ends. I don’t intend to waste any more time now that I know what I’m after.” She leans forward. “I am sure that you will hear me out. Because what I offer you is your freedom.”

Daechong tilts his head. “It’s not the first time someone has made that claim, so forgive me for being skeptical.”

He cannot remember ever setting foot outside the tower; it has a number of windows almost beyond reckoning, which open and close at his desire, and which reveal visions terrible and troubling. Poetry-of-malice written into the accretion disks of black holes. Moons covered with sculptures of violet-green fungus grown in the hollowed-out bodies of prisoners of war. Planets with their seas boiled dry and the fossils bleached upon alkaline shores. These and other things he can see just by turning his head and wishing it so.

Yet he thinks, sometimes, of what it would be like to walk up stairs that lead to a plaza ringed by pillars of rough-hewn stone, or perhaps gnarled trees, and not the tower’s highest floor with its indiscriminate collection of paintings, tapestries, and curious statuettes that croak untrue prophecies. (More gifts. He wouldn’t dream of getting rid of them.) What it would be like to travel to a gas giant with its dustweave rings, or to a fortress of neutronium whispers, or to a spot far between stars that is empty except for the froth of quantum bubbling and the microwave hiss. What it would be like to walk outside and look up at the sky, any sky. There isn’t a sky in the universe whose winds would scour him, whose rains would poison him, whose stars would pierce his eyes. But his immunity does him no good here.

“Call my bluff, then,” she says, her smile growing knife-sweet. “You like a challenge, don’t you? You won’t see me here again if you turn me down. If nothing else, it’s a moment’s diversion. Let’s play a game, you and I. If I win, you will tell me where to find my stratagem. If I lose, I will tell you how you can unshackle yourself from this tower—and you can set me whatever penalty you see fit.”

“I don’t remember the very beginning of my existence,” Daechong says softly. “But I was made of pittances of mercy and atrocities sweeter than honey. I was made of carrion calculations and unpolished negations. They say your shadow is shaped like massacres, Niristez. You haven’t killed a fraction of the people that I have. Are you sure you want to offer this? I am not accustomed to losing, especially when the stakes matter to me.”

He doesn’t speak of the penalties he extracts when people lie to him. For all the dreadful things he’s done, he has always respected honesty.

“I am sure,” she says.

“The High Fleet of the Knifebird is still fighting the war you promised to win. It would not be difficult for me to shoot the key players into cinders.”

The lines of her face become sharper, keener. “I know,” she says. “But I made my promise. This is the only way to keep it. I will attempt the gamble. I always keep my promises.”

Niristez has been saying this for a long time, and people have been tactful when she does so for a long time. Daechong, too, is tactful. It does him no harm. “If you are certain,” he says, “then let us play.”

. . . .

At this point, it is worth describing the war that the High Fleet of the Knifebird has been fighting for so long, against an opponent that is everywhere distributed and which has no name but the name that particles mutter as they decay. The High Fleet has not yet raised the redshift banner that indicates defeat, but the fact that they have been fighting all this time without much in the way of lasting gains is hardly a point of pride.

High Fleet doctrine says that they are finite warriors fighting an infinite war, and the stakes are nothing less than control of the universe’s laws. Each small war in the continuum is itself a gamepiece in the war of wars, placed or extinguished according to local conditions. The value of each piece is contextual both in time and in space. A duel between two spindleships at the edge of an obscure asteroid belt may, at times, weigh more heavily than a genocidal war between a dozen star empires.

In the game of Go, it is possible for players to play such that alternating captures of single stones would cause repeating positions. In principle, these moves could be played forever, and the game would never end. However, the rule called ko prevents such repetition from happening immediately.

There exists a type of ko situation, the ten thousand year ko, which is often left unresolved—sometimes until the game’s conclusion—because the player who enters the battle first does so at a disadvantage. The war of wars is widely held to have run afoul of something similar.

You may speculate as to the application to the ex-strategist Niristez’s situation, although most people believe that she is not capable of such subtlety. Indeed, it’s not clear why she would be interested in prolonging the war of wars, unless she intended it as revenge for her loss of status. Even if she meant only to force the universe into an asymptotic cooldown rather than a condensed annihilation, this would hardly be an unambiguous victory for her or her former allies. But then, if she were skilled enough to carry out this gambit anyway, surely she wouldn’t have fallen in the first place.

. . . .

Daechong allows Niristez the choice of game, since she is the petitioner. The choice itself might tell him something about her, although he doubts it will be anything he couldn’t already have figured out. He is surprised, then thoughtful, when she requests a linguistic game played upon competing lattices. Its name means something like “the calculus of verses.” He would not have suspected her of a fondness for poetry, even the poetry of eradication. It is likely that the game has real-world manifestations, not that he has any way of checking.

The game has a deployment phase, in which they breed pensive sememes and seed rival phonologies, braid the syntactical structures that they will be pitting against each other. “Do you have the opportunity to read much?” Niristez asks him, no doubt thinking of varieties of literature to wield against him.

“On occasion people bring me books,” he says. Sometimes they are tattooed on wafers of silicon. Sometimes they come bound in metal beaten thin from the corpses of deprecated clocks. Occasionally they have pages of irradiated paper. He is especially fond of the neutron variety. “I don’t often read them, however.” He reads fastest by—surprise—burning up the books, and while he did that a few times by accident in the early days, he saves that now for special occasions.

“Well,” Niristez says, “the universe is infested with words of all kinds. I can’t blame you for being choosy.” She does something exceedingly clever with the placement of a cultural singularity to urge her budding language to better readiness for the engagement.

Daechong’s deployments are conservative. In his experience, people who focus too much on the setup phase of the game tangle themselves up during the match proper. “I am fluent in very many languages,” he says, which is an understatement. He has always assumed that the knack is a requirement, or perhaps a gift, of his position. “But I enjoy talking to people more.”

“Yes,” she says, “I imagine you would.”

They are quiet through the rest of the deployment phase, although Daechong pours Niristez another glass of the wine she brought him, since she appears to be thirsty. She sips at it little by little, without any sign of enjoyment. He considers having another glass himself, but the smoke is still pleasantly strong in the air; no need yet.

When the game begins in earnest, the lattices light up in the colors of drifting constellations and burning sodium and firefly sonatas. Niristez’s first move gives her entire

language an imperialistic focus. His response is to nurture a slang of resistance.

“I am not familiar with the High Fleet’s customs,” Daechong says while she considers a typological imperative. “Will it be difficult to secure your reinstatement?”

This is not, strictly speaking, a courteous thing to bring up; but they are playing now. She will expect him to try to unsettle her.

Her laugh is so brief he wonders if he imagined it. “That’s an open question. Tell me, Warden, if you get free of this place, where will you go?”

A predictable riposte. “I don’t know,” he says, although people have asked him before. His answer always changes. “The universe is a very large place. I expect that wherever I start, I can find something new to see. At the moment, I wouldn’t mind visiting a binary star system. Something simple and ordinary.”

That’s not it at all. He likes the thought of stars that have companions, even though he knows better than to think that such things matter to stars.

Niristez seeds the plebeian chants with prestige terms from her own language, denaturing his slang. “What if you find that you were happier here?”

“There’s always that risk, yes.”

“The possibility doesn’t bother you?”

She’s asking questions she knows the answers to, which is also part of the game. “Of course it bothers me,” Daechong says, “but if I never leave, I will never find out.” He initiates a memetic protest. Unstable, although it has the advantage of propagating swiftly.

“I have seen a great deal of the world outside,” Niristez remarks. For a moment, he can almost see what color her eyes are. “There are people who wall themselves away deliberately, you know. Ascetics and philosophers and solitude artists. Some of them would give a great deal to take your place.”

“As far as anyone knows,” Daechong says, “I have been here since the first stars winked open. My time here has hardly been infinite, but it’s still a long time, as finite numbers go. I have no reason to believe any successor of mine would spend less time here.”

She studies his move’s ramifications with a slight frown, then glances around as though seeing the instruments for the first time. Nevertheless, it doesn’t escape his attention that she singles out the flute for scrutiny. “Your imprisonment has given you unprecedented access to the games of the universe,” she says. “Or do you take no pleasure in the things you guard?”

He considers his answer while she puts together a propaganda campaign. Blunt, but perhaps that’s to be expected of someone with a military background. Still, he can’t let down his guard. She may be covering for a more devious ploy. “I can’t claim that the position hasn’t been without its privileges,” he says mildly.

Daechong has played games on involute boards, games of sacrifice and skullduggery and smiling assurances, games where you keep score with burning worlds. He has played games with rules that mutate turn by turn, and games where you bet with the currency of senescent ambition, and games that handicap the stronger player with cognitive manacles. Most of the time, he wins, and he never throws a match, even when he’s tempted to just to see what would happen.

After a few moments, he counters the propaganda campaign with a furtive renaissance of the musical forms that he put in place during deployment. It’s early to do this, but he’d rather respond now than give Niristez’s tactic a chance to play out fully. People are sometimes startled by his comfort with music, for all that he plays no instrument. Music has its own associations with games and sports: battle hymns, marches, aggressive rhythms beaten upon the space-time membrane.

They test each other with more such exchanges. Niristez’s fingers tap the side of the table before she manages to still them. Daechong doesn’t take that lapse at face value, either. “In the old days, it was held that my vision meant I could not be defeated,” she says abruptly, “although that has never been the case. Seeing a no-win situation opening its jaws in your direction isn’t necessarily helpful.”

“Have there been many of those in your career?”

“You only need one,” she says, not without humor. “And even then, I’ve orchestrated my share of dreadful battles. Gravitational tides and neutron cannons and the slaughters you get when you use a thermodynamic vise on someone’s sputtering sun. Doomships that intone stagnancy-curses into the ecosystems of entire planets. Civilizations’ worth of skeletons knit together with ligatures-of-damnation and made to fight unsheathed in the crackling cold void. Dead people everywhere, no matter how you count the cost.”

She’s either trying to warn him or distract him. They might be the same thing. “You wouldn’t have been at personal risk?” he asks. Although he’s spoken with soldiers of all sorts, the staggering variety of military conventions means that he is cautious about making assumptions. In any case, he’s met very few Knifebird officers.

“Not as such,” she says, “although there’s always the risk of an assassination attempt. A few have tried.” She doesn’t bother telling him what happened to them. In this matter, anyway, they are similar.

Niristez’s attacks are starting to give way before Daechong’s tradition of stories handed down mouth to mouth, myths to succor insurrection. A myth doesn’t have to roar like dragons or fight like tigers. A myth can murmur possibilities with fox words. A myth can be subtle.

He doesn’t point this out, but he doesn’t have to. The rueful cast of her mouth tells him she is thinking it.

Niristez redoubles her efforts, but her early-game deployment has locked her into rigid, not to say tyrannical, stratagems. Unless she comes up with something extraordinary, they are nearing the point where the game is effectively over, even if a few of the lattices’ regions can still be contested.

At last Niristez picks up a hollowed-out demagogue node and tips it over: surrender. “There’s no sense in dragging this out any further,” she says.

Daechong is starting to become alarmed: Niristez should be afraid, or resigned, or angry; anything but this calculating alertness. It does occur to him that, by choosing her strategy so early, she dictated his. But that was only part of the game, and in the meantime, they have their agreement.

He doesn’t reach for the gun—not yet.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Niristez says. The side of her mouth tips up, and there are fissures like needles in her irises. “We both win.”

He doesn’t understand.

“I never needed to go into the passages,” she says, and her voice is very steady. “I’m looking at what I seek already. Because the game the tower plays is you, Warden.”

A myth can be subtle, and some regard Daechong as one himself; but he isn’t the only myth in the room.

“Explain yourself,” Daechong says, quiet and cutting.

“Everyone has been mining the planet for its games,” Niristez says, “but no one has been looking at what’s been right in front of them all this time. In a way, you are a game, are you not? You are a challenge to be met. You have rules, give rewards, incur penalties.

“I don’t know who mined you out of the dark depths. It was probably long ago. You must have been one of the first games after the universe’s very machinery of equations. And when they realized just what they had let loose into the world, when they realized your name, they locked you up in the tower. Of course, it was too late.”

Niristez doesn’t tell him what his name has to be. He is figuring that out for himself. The gun’s presence presses against his awareness like an attar of carnage.

“You promised me my freedom,” Daechong says after a long, brittle silence. “Or is that a trick, too?”

“Only if you think of it as one,” she says. “You could have left at any time if you’d only known, Warden. You’re only trapped here so long as you are a prisoner of your own nature. As the warden, you alone can determine this. If you choose to be a game no longer, you can walk out at any time.”

Now she looks at the gun. At the dull bone, at the spiky wires, at the inscription: *I never miss*. “Destroy the gun,” she says, “and walk free. It’s up to you.”

“If you had won,” Daechong says, “you would have demanded that I come with you.”

He rises. She tilts her head back to meet his gaze, unflinching. Of all things, her eyes are—not kind, precisely, but sympathetic. “Yes,” she said. “But this way you have a choice.”

“You’re implying that, when I leave, all the wars end. That the game of war ceases to exist.”

“Yes,” she says.

All wars over. Everywhere. All at once.

“I can only assume that at this point in time, such a suspension of hostilities would leave the High Fleet of the Knifebird in a winning position,” Daechong says.

Her eyes darken in color. “Warden,” she says, “if I have learned one thing in my years of exile, it is that there are victors in war, but no one *wins*.”

“I could wait for a position unfavorable to your cause,” he says. “Thwart you.” They’re playing for higher stakes now.

“You could try,” she says, “but I know what passes outside this tower, and you don’t.” The map in her eyes is fractal-deep, and encompasses the universe’s many conflagrations.

“You played well,” Daechong says. He isn’t merely being polite, and he doesn’t say this to many people. “I should have been better prepared.”

“The difference between us is this,” she says. “You are a tactician, and you fought the battle; but I am a strategist, and I fought the war. *I keep my promises*.”

“I don’t concern myself with ethics,” Daechong says, “but I am surprised that you would think of something as far-reaching and devastating as war to be nothing more than a game.”

“It’s all in how you define the set,” she murmurs.

The gun is in his hand. He points it at the wall, not at Niristez, and not at himself. (This is habit. In reality, this doesn’t make Niristez any safer.) It is beautiful in the way of annihilated stars, beautiful in the way of violated postulates. And she is telling him that he would have to extinguish it forever.

“It comes down to this,” Niristez says. The smile is gone from her mouth, but it kindles in her eyes. “Is thwarting my promise in the war of wars more important to you than the freedom you have desired for so long?”

• • • •

In the game of Go, groups of stones are said to be alive or dead depending on whether or not the opponent can kill them. But sometimes the opponents have two groups that live together: Neither can attack the other without killing itself. This situation is called *seki*, or mutual life.

• • • •

The tower is a black spire upon a world whose only sun is a million starships wrecked into a mass grave. There is no light in the starships, and as time goes by, fewer and fewer people remember when the sun-of-starships gave forth any radiance at all. The shadows still mutter the names of vanquished cities and vanished civilizations, but of course the world is nothing but shadow now, and the few inhabitants remaining find it impossible to hear anything else.

Now and again people make the labyrinthine journey to the tower, which plunges into the world’s hollow depths. But the tower no longer has any doors or any windows, or a warden to greet visitors, and the games that might have been dug out of the dark passages are trapped there.

Two cards of coalescent paper can, however, be found before the tower. Even the wind dares not move them from where they rest. One of them displays the Knight of Chains reversed: shattered fetters, unsmiling eyes, an ornate border that speaks to a preference for courtesy. The other card is the Deuce of Stars. It is the only source of light on the planet.

Even with the two cards revealed, Niristez would have lost the round; but that wasn’t the game she was playing anyway. In the meantime, she likes to think of the former warden looking up at a chilly sky filled with enough stars to sate the longest nights alone, his hands forever empty.

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AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- Warhosts (reprint)
- The Second-Last Client
- The Coin of Heart's Desire (reprint)
- The Knight of Chains, the Deuce of Stars
- Swanwatch
- Flower, Mercy, Needle, Chain (Sturgeon Award finalist)



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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CIMMERIA: FROM THE *JOURNAL OF IMAGINARY ANTHROPOLOGY*

Theodora Goss

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Remembering Cimmeria: I walk through the bazaar, between the stalls of the spice sellers, smelling turmeric and cloves, hearing the clash of bronze from the sellers of cooking pots, the bleat of goats from the butcher’s alley. Rugs hang from wooden racks, scarlet and indigo. In the corners of the alleys, men without legs perch on wooden carts, telling their stories to a crowd of ragged children, making coins disappear into the air. Women from the mountains, their faces prematurely old from sun and suffering, call to me in a dialect I can barely understand. Their stands sell eggplants and tomatoes, the pungent olives that are distinctive to Cimmerian cuisine, video games. In the mountain villages, it has long been a custom to dye hair blue for good fortune, a practice that sophisticated urbanites have lately adopted. Even the women at court have hair of a deep and startling hue.

My guide, Afa, walks ahead of me, with a string bag in her hand, examining the vegetables, buying cauliflower and lentils. Later she will make rice mixed with raisins, meat, and saffron. The cuisine of Cimmeria is rich, heavy with goat and chicken. (They eat and keep no pigs.) The pastries are filled with almond paste and soaked in honey. She waddles ahead (forgive me, but you do waddle, Afa), and I follow amid a cacophony of voices, speaking the Indo-European language of Cimmeria, which is closest perhaps to Iranian. The mountain accents are harsh, the tones of the urbanites soft and lisping. Shaila spoke in those tones, when she taught me phrases in her language: Can I have more lozi (a cake made with marzipan, flavored with orange water)? You are the son of a dog. I will love you until the ocean swallows the moon. (A traditional saying. At the end of time, the serpent that lies beneath the Black Sea will rise up and swallow the moon as though it were lozi. It means, I will love you until the end of time.)

On that day, or perhaps it is another day I remember, I see a man selling Kalashnikovs. The war is a recent memory here, and every man has at least one weapon: Even I wear a curved knife in my belt, or I will be taken for a prostitute. (Male prostitutes, who are common in the capital, can be distinguished by their khol-rimmed eyes, their extravagant clothes, their weaponlessness. As a red-haired Irishman, I do not look like them, but it is best to avoid misunderstandings.) The sun shines down from a cloudless sky. It is hotter than summer in Arizona, on the campus of the small college where this journey began, where we said, let us imagine a modern Cimmeria. What would it look like? I know, now. The city is cooled by a thousand fountains, we are told: Its name means just that, A Thousand Fountains. It was founded in the sixth century BCE, or so we have conjectured and imagined.

I have a pounding headache. I have been two weeks in this country, and I cannot get used to the heat, the smells, the reality of it all. Could we have created this? The four of us, me and Lisa and Michael the Second, and Professor Farrow, sitting in a conference room at that small college? Surely not. And yet.

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We were worried that the Khan would forbid us from entering the country. But no. We were issued visas, assigned translators, given office space in the palace itself.

The Khan was a short man, balding. His wife had been Miss Cimmeria, and then a television reporter for one of the three state channels. She had met the Khan when she had been sent to interview him. He wore a business suit with a traditional scarf around his neck. She looked as though she had stepped out of a photo shoot for *Vogue Russia*, which was available in all the gas stations.

“Cimmeria has been here, on the shores of the Black Sea, for more than two thousand years,” he said. “Would you like some coffee, Dr. Nolan? I think our coffee is the best in the world.” It was—dark, thick, spiced, and served with ewe’s milk. “This theory of yours—that a group of American graduate students created Cimmeria in their heads, merely by thinking about it—you will understand that some of our people find it insulting. They will say that all Americans are imperialist dogs. I myself find it amusing, almost charming—like poetry. The mind creates reality, yes? So our poets have taught us. Of course, your version is culturally insensitive, but then, you are Americans. I did not think Americans were capable of poetry.”

Only Lisa had been a graduate student, and even she had recently graduated. Mike and I were post-docs, and Professor Farrow was tenured at Southern Arizona State. It all seemed so far away, the small campus with its perpetually dying lawns and drab 1970s architecture. I was standing in a reception room, drinking coffee with the Khan of Cimmeria and his wife, and Arizona seemed imaginary, like something I had made up.

“But we like Americans here. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, is he not? Any enemy of Russia is a friend of mine. So I am glad to welcome you to my country. You will, I am certain, be sensitive to our customs. Your coworker, for example—I suggest that she not wear short pants in the streets. Our clerics, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Muslim, are traditional and may be offended. Anyway, you must admit, such garments are not attractive on women. I would not say so to her, you understand, for women are the devil when they are criticized. But a woman should cultivate an air of mystery. There is nothing mysterious about bare red knees.”

Our office space was in an unused part of the palace. My translator, Jafik, told me it had once been a storage area for bedding. It was close to the servants’ quarters. The Khan may have welcomed us to Cimmeria for diplomatic reasons, but he did not think much of us, that was clear. It was part of the old palace, which had been built in the thirteenth century CE, after the final defeat of the Mongols. Since then, Cimmeria had been embroiled in almost constant warfare, with Anatolia, Scythia, Poland, and most recently the Russians, who had wanted its ports on the Black Sea. The Khan had received considerable American aid, including military advisors. The war had ended with the disintegration of the USSR. The Ukraine, focused on its own economic problems, had no wish to interfere in local politics, so Cimmeria was enjoying a period of relative peace. I wondered how long it would last.

Lisa was our linguist. She would stay in the capital for the first three months, then venture out into the countryside, recording local dialects. “You know what amazes me?” she said as we were unpacking our computers and office supplies. “The complexity of all this. You would think it really had been here for the last three thousand years. It’s hard to believe it all started with Mike the First goofing off in Professor Farrow’s class.” He had been bored, and instead of taking notes, had started sketching a city. The professor had caught him, and had told the students that we would spend the rest of the semester creating that city and the surrounding countryside. We would be responsible for its history, customs, language. Lisa was in the class, too, and I was the TA. AN 703, Contemporary Anthropological Theory, had turned into Creating Cimmeria.

Of the four graduate students in the course, only Lisa stayed in the program. One got married and moved to Wisconsin, another transferred to the School of Education so she could become a kindergarten teacher. Mike the First left with his master’s and went on to do an MBA. It was a coincidence that Professor Farrow’s next postdoc, who arrived in the middle of the semester, was also named Mike. He had an undergraduate degree in classics, and was the one who decided that the country we were developing was Cimmeria. He was also particularly interested in the Borges hypothesis. Everyone had been talking about it at Michigan, where he had done his PhD. At that point, it was more controversial than it is now, and Professor Farrow had only been planning to touch on it briefly at the end of the semester. But once we started on Cimmeria, AN 703 became an experiment in creating reality through perception and expectation. Could we actually create Cimmeria by thinking about it, writing about it?

Not in one semester, of course. After the semester ended, all of us worked on the Cimmeria Project. It became the topic of Lisa’s dissertation: *A Dictionary and Grammar of Modern Cimmerian, with Commentary*. Mike focused on history. I wrote articles on culture, figuring out probable rites of passage, how the Cimmerians would bury their dead. We had Herodotus, we had accounts of cultures from that area. We were all steeped in anthropological theory. On weekends, when we should have been going on dates, we gathered in a conference room, under a fluorescent light, and talked about Cimmeria. It was fortunate that around that time, the *Journal of Imaginary Anthropology* was founded at Penn State. Otherwise, I don’t know where we would have published. At the first Imaginary Anthropology conference, in Orlando, we realized that a group from Tennessee was working on the modern Republic of Scythia and Sarmatia, which shared a border with Cimmeria. We formed a working group.

“Don’t let the Cimmerians hear you talk about creating all this,” I said. “Especially the nationalists. Remember, they have guns, and you don’t.” Should I mention her cargo shorts? I had to admit, looking at her knobby red knees, above socks and Birkenstocks, that the Khan had a point. Before she left for the mountains, I would warn her to wear more traditional clothes.

I was going to stay in the capital. My work would focus on the ways in which the historical practices we had described in “Cimmeria: A Proposal,” in the second issue of the *Journal of Imaginary Anthropology*, influenced and remained evident in modern practice. Already I had seen developments we had never anticipated. One was the fashion for blue hair; in a footnote, Mike had written that blue was a fortunate color in Cimmerian folk belief. Another was the ubiquity of cats in the capital. In an article on funerary rites, I had described how cats were seen as guides to the land of the dead until the coming of Christianity in the twelfth century CE. The belief should have gone away, but somehow it had persisted, and every household, whether Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, or one of the minor sects that flourished in the relative tolerance of Cimmeria, had its cat. No Cimmerian wanted his soul to get lost on the way to Paradise. Stray cats were fed at the public expense, and no one dared harm a cat. I saw them everywhere, when I ventured

into the city. In a month, Mike was going to join us, and I would be able to show him all the developments I was documenting. Meanwhile, there was email and Skype.

I was assigned a bedroom and bath close to our offices. Afa, who had been a sort of under-cook, was assigned to be my servant but quickly became my guide, showing me around the city and mocking my Cimmerian accent. “He he!” she would say. “No, Doctor Pat, that word is not pronounced that way. Do not repeat it that way, I beg of you. I am an old woman, but still it is not respectable for me to hear!” Jafik was my language teacher as well as my translator, teaching me the language Lisa had created based on what we knew of historical Cimmerian and its Indo-European roots, except that it had developed an extensive vocabulary. As used by modern Cimmerians, it had the nuance and fluidity of a living language, as well as a surprising number of expletives.

I had no duties except to conduct my research, which was a relief from the grind of TAing and, recently, teaching my own undergraduate classes. But one day, I was summoned to speak with the Khan. It was the day of an official audience, so he was dressed in Cimmerian ceremonial robes, although he still wore his Rolex watch. His advisors looked impatient, and I gathered that the audience was about to begin—I had seen a long line of supplicants waiting by the door as I was ushered in. But he said, as though we had all the time in the world, “Doctor Nolan, did you know that my daughters are learning American?” Sitting next to him were four girls, all wearing the traditional head-scarves worn by Cimmerian peasant women, but pulled back to show that their hair was dyed fashionably blue. “They are very troublesome, my daughters. They like everything modern: Leonardo DiCaprio, video games. Tradition is not good enough for them. They wish to attend university and find professions, or do humanitarian work. Ah, what is a father to do?” He shook a finger at them, fondly enough. “I would like it if you could teach them the latest American idioms. The slang, as it were.”

That afternoon, Afa led me to another part of the palace—the royal family’s personal quarters. These were more modern and considerably more comfortable than ours. I was shown into what seemed to be a common room for the girls. There were colorful rugs and divans, embroidered wall hangings, and an enormous flat-screen TV.

“These are the Khan’s daughters,” said Afa. She had already explained to me, in case I made any blunders, that they were his daughters by his first wife, who had not been Miss Cimmeria, but had produced the royal children: a son, and then only daughters, and then a second son who had died shortly after birth. She had died a week later of an infection contracted during the difficult delivery. “Anoor is the youngest, then Tallah, and then Shaila, who is already taking university classes online.” Shaila smiled at me. This time, none of them were wearing head-scarves. There really was something attractive about blue hair.

“And what about the fourth one?” She was sitting a bit back from the others, to the right of and behind Shaila, whom she closely resembled.

Afa looked at me with astonishment. “The Khan has three daughters,” she said. “Anoor, Tallah, and Shaila. There is no fourth one, Doctor Pat.”

The fourth one stared at me without expression.

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“Cimmerians don’t recognize twins,” said Lisa. “That has to be the explanation. Do you remember the thirteenth-century philosopher Farkosh Kursand? When God made the world, He decreed that human beings would be born one at a time, unique, unlike animals. They would be born defenseless, without claws or teeth or fur. But they would have souls. It’s in a children’s book—I have a copy somewhere, but it’s based on Kursand’s reading of Genesis in one of his philosophical treatises. Mike would know which. And it’s the basis of Cimmerian human rights law, actually. That’s why women have always had more rights here. They have souls, so they’ve been allowed to vote since Cimmeria became a parliamentary monarchy. I’m sure it’s mentioned in one of the articles—I don’t remember which one, but check the database Mike is putting together. Shaila must have been a twin, and the Cimmerians don’t recognize the second child as separate from the first. So Shaila is one girl. In two bodies. But with one soul.”

“Who came up with that stupid idea?”

“Well, to be perfectly honest, it might have been you.” She leaned back in our revolving chair. I don’t know how she could do that without falling. “Or Mike, of course. It certainly wasn’t my idea. Embryologically it does make a certain sense. Identical twins really do come from one egg.”

“So they’re both Shaila.”

“There is no both. The idea of both is culturally inappropriate. There is one Shaila, in two bodies. Think of them as Shaila and her shadow.”

I tested this theory once, while walking through the market with Afa. We were walking through the alley of the dog-sellers. In Cimmeria, almost every house has a dog, for defense and to catch rats. Cats are not sold in the market. They cannot be sold at all, only given or willed away. To sell a cat for money is to imperil your immortal soul. We passed a woman sitting on the ground, with a basket beside her. In it were two infants, as alike as the proverbial two peas in a pod, half-covered with a ragged blanket. Beside them lay a dirty mutt with a chain around its neck that lifted its head and whimpered as we walked by.

“Child how many in basket?” I asked Afa in my still-imperfect Cimmerian.

“There is one child in that basket, Pati,” she said. I could not get her to stop using the diminutive. I even told her that in my language Pati was a woman’s name, to no effect. She just smiled, patted me on the arm, and assured me that no one would mistake such a tall, handsome (which in Cimmerian is the same word as beautiful) man for a woman.

“Only one child?”

“Of course. One basket, one child.”

Shaila’s shadow followed her everywhere. When she and her sisters sat with me in the room with the low divans and the large-screen TV, studying American slang, she was there. “What’s up!” Shaila would say, laughing, and her shadow would stare down at the floor. When Shaila and I walked though the gardens, she walked six paces behind, pausing when we paused, sitting when we sat. After we were married, in our apartment in Arizona, she would sit in a corner of the bedroom, watching as we made love. Although I always turned off the lights, I could see her: a darkness against the off-white walls of faculty housing.

Once, I tried to ask Shaila about her. “Shaila, do you know the word twin?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “In American, if two babies are born at the same time, they are twins.”

“What about in Cimmeria? Surely there is a Cimmerian word for twin. Sometimes two babies are born at the same time in Cimmeria, too.”

She looked confused. “I suppose so. Biology is the same everywhere.”

“Well, what’s the word, then?”

“I cannot think of it. I shall have to email Tallah. She is better at languages than I am.”

“What if you yourself were a twin?”

“Me? But I am not a twin. If I were, my mother would have told me.”

I tried a different tactic. “Do you remember the dog you had, Kala? She had two sisters, born at the same time. Those were Anoor’s and Tallah’s dogs. They were not Kala, even though they were born in the same litter. You could think of them as twins—I mean, triplets.” I remembered them gamboling together, Kala and her two littermates. They would follow us through the gardens, and Shaila and her sisters would pet them indiscriminately. When we sat under the plum trees, they would tumble together into one doggy heap.

“Pat, what is this all about? Is this about the fact that I don’t want to have a baby right now? You know I want to go to graduate school first.”

I did not think her father would approve the marriage. I told her so: “Your father will never agree to you marrying a poor American post-doc. Do you have any idea how poor I am? My research grant is all I have.”

“You do not understand Cimmerian politics,” Shaila replied. “Do you know what percentage of our population is ethnically Sarmatian? Twenty percent, all in the Eastern province. They fought the Russians, and they still have weapons. Not just guns: tanks, anti-aircraft missiles. The Sarmatians are getting restless, Pati. They are mostly Catholic, in a country that is mostly Orthodox. They want to unite with their homeland, create a greater Scythia and Sarmatia. My father projects an image of strength, because what else can you do? But he is afraid. He is most afraid that the Americans will not help. They helped against the Russians, but this is an internal matter. He has talked to us already about different ways for us to leave the country. Anoor has been enrolled at the Lycée International in Paris, and Tallah is going to study at the American School in London. They can get student visas. For me it is more difficult: I must be admitted at a university. That is why I have been taking courses online. Ask him: If he says no, then no. But I think he will consider my marriage with an American.”

She was right. The Khan considered. For a week, and then another, while pro-Sarmatian factions clashed with military in the Eastern province. Then protests broke out in the capital. Anoor was already in Paris with her step-mother, supposedly on a shopping spree for school. Tallah had started school in London. In the Khan’s personal office, I signed the marriage contract, barely understanding what I was signing because it was in an ornate script I had seen only in medieval documents. On the way to the airport, we stopped by the cathedral in Shahin Square, where we were married by the Patriarch of the Cimmerian Independent Orthodox Church, who checked the faxed copy of my baptismal certificate and lectured me in sonorous tones about the importance of conversion, raising children in the true faith. The Khan kissed Shaila on both cheeks, promising her that we would have a proper ceremony when the political situation was more stable and she could return to the country. In the Khan’s private plane, we flew to a small airport near Fresno and spent our first night together at my mother’s house. My father had died of a heart attack while I was in college, and she lived alone in the house where I had grown up. It was strange staying in the guest bedroom, down the hall from the room where I had slept as a child, which still had my He-Man action figures on the shelves, the Skeletor defaced with

permanent marker. I had to explain to her about Shaïla’s shadow.

“I don’t understand,” my mother said. “Are you all going to live together?”

“Well, yes, I guess so. It’s really no different than if her twin sister were living with us, is it?”

“And Shaïla is going to take undergraduate classes? What is her sister going to do?”

“I have no idea,” I said.

What she did, more than anything else, was watch television. All day, it would be on. Mostly, she watched CNN and the news shows. Sometimes I would test Shaïla, asking, “Did you turn the TV on?”

“Is it on?” she would say. “Then of course I must have turned it on. Unless you left it on before you went out. How did your class go? Is that football player in the back still falling asleep?”

One day, I came home and noticed that the other Shaïla was cooking dinner. Later I asked, “Shaïla, did you cook dinner?”

“Of course,” she said. “Did you like it?”

“Yes.” It was actually pretty good, chicken in a thick red stew over rice. It reminded me of a dish Afa had made in an iron pot hanging over an open fire in the servants’ quarters. But I guess it could be made on an American stovetop as well.

After that, the other Shaïla cooked dinner every night. It was convenient, because I was teaching night classes, trying to make extra money. Shaïla told me that I did not need to work so hard, that the money her father gave her was more than enough to support us both. But I was proud and did not want to live off my father-in-law, even if he was the Khan of Cimmeria. At the same time, I was trying to write up my research on Cimmerian funerary practices. If I could publish a paper in the *Journal of Imaginary Anthropology*, I might have a shot at a tenure-track position, or at least a visiting professorship somewhere that wasn’t Arizona. Shaïla was trying to finish her pre-med requirements. She had decided that she wanted to be a pediatrician.

Meanwhile, in Cimmeria, the situation was growing more complicated. The pro-Sarmatian faction had split into the radical Sons of Sarmatia and the more moderate Sarmatian Democratic Alliance, although the Prime Minister claimed that the SDA was a front. There were weekly clashes with police in the capital, and the Sons of Sarmatia had planted a bomb in the Hilton, although a maid had reported a suspicious shopping bag and the hotel had been evacuated before the bomb could go off. The Khan had imposed a curfew, and martial law might be next, although the army had a significant Sarmatian minority. But I had classes to teach, so I tried not to pay attention to politics, and even Shaïla dismissed it all as “a mess.”

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One day, I came home from a departmental meeting and Shaïla wasn’t in the apartment. She was usually home by seven. I assumed she’d had to stay late for a lab. The other Shaïla was cooking dinner in the kitchen. At eight, when she hadn’t come back yet, I sat down at the kitchen table to eat. To my surprise, the other Shaïla sat down across from me, at the place set for Shaïla. She had never sat down at the table with us before.

She looked at me with her dark eyes and said, “How was your day, Pati?”

I dropped my fork. It clattered against the rim of the plate. She had never spoken before, not one sentence, not one word. Her voice was just like Shaïla’s, but with a stronger accent. At least it sounded stronger to me. Or maybe not. It was hard to tell.

“Where’s Shaïla?” I said. I could feel a constriction in my chest, as though a fist had started to close around my heart. Like the beginning of my father’s heart attack. I think even then, I knew.

“What do you mean?” she said. “I’m Shaïla. I have always been Shaïla. The only Shaïla there is.”

I stared down at the lamb and peas in saffron curry. The smell reminded me of Cimmeria, of the bazaar. I could almost hear the clash of the cooking pots.

“You’ve done something to her, haven’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Eat your dinner, Pati. It’s going to get cold. You’ve been working so hard lately. I don’t think it’s good for you.”

But I could not eat. I stood up, accidentally hitting my hip on the table and cursing at the pain. With a growing sense of panic, I searched the apartment for any clue to Shaïla’s whereabouts. Her purse was in the closet, with her cell phone in it, so she must have come home earlier in the evening. All her clothes were on the hangers, as far as I could tell—she had a lot of clothes. Nothing seemed to be missing. But Shaïla was not there. The other Shaïla stood watching me, as though waiting for me to give up, admit defeat. Finally, after one last useless look under the bed, I left, deliberately banging the door behind me. She had to be somewhere.

I walked across campus, to the Life Sciences classrooms and labs, and checked all of them. Then I walked through the main library and the science library, calling “Shaïla!” until a graduate student in a carrel told me to be quiet. By this time, it was dark. I went to her favorite coffee shop, the Espresso Bean, where undergraduates looked at me strangely from behind their laptops, and then to every shop and restaurant that was still open, from the gelato place to the German restaurant, famous for its bratwurst and beer, where students took their families on Parents’ Weekend. Finally, I walked the streets, calling “Shaïla!” as though she were a stray dog, hoping that the other Shaïla was simply being presumptuous, rebelling against her secondary status. Hoping the real Shaïla was out there somewhere.

I passed the police station and stood outside, thinking about going in and reporting her missing. I would talk to a police officer on duty, tell him I could not find my wife. He would come home with me, to find—my wife, saying that I was overworked and needed to rest, see a psychiatrist. Shaïla had entered the country with a diplomatic passport—one passport, for one Shaïla. Had anyone seen the other Shaïla? Only my mother. She had picked us up at the airport, we had spent the night with her, all three of us eating dinner at the dining-room table. She had avoided looking at the other Shaïla, talking to Shaïla about how the roses were doing well this year despite aphids, asking whether she knew how to knit, how she dyed her hair that particular shade of blue—pointless, polite talk. And then we had rented a car and driven to Arizona, me and Shaïla in the front seat, the other Shaïla in back with the luggage. Once we had arrived at the university, she had stayed in the apartment. Lisa knew, but she and Mike the Second were still in Cimmeria, and their internet connection could be sporadic. I could talk to Dr. Farrow? She would be in her office tomorrow morning, before classes. She would at least believe me. But I knew, with a cold certainty in the pit of my stomach, that Anne Farrow would look at me from over the wire rims of her glasses and say, “Pat, you know as well as I do that culture defines personhood.” She was an anthropologist, through and through. She would not interfere. I had been married to Shaïla, I was still married to Shaïla. There was just one less of her.

In the end, I called my mother, while sitting on a park bench under a street lamp, with the moon sailing high above, among the clouds.

“Do you know what time it is, Pat?” she asked.

“Listen, Mom,” I said, and explained the situation.

“Oh, Pat, I wish you hadn’t married that woman. But can’t you divorce her? Are you allowed to divorce in that church? I wish you hadn’t broken up with Bridget Ferguson. The two of you were so sweet together at prom. You know she married an accountant and has two children now. She sent me a card at Christmas.”

I said good night and told her to go back to sleep, that I would figure it out. And then I sat there for a long time.

When I came home, well after midnight, Shaïla was waiting for me with a cup of Cimmerian coffee, or as close as she could get with an American espresso machine. She was wearing the heart pajamas I had given Shaïla for Valentine’s Day.

“Pati,” she said, “you left so quickly that I didn’t have time to tell you the news. I heard it on CNN this morning, and then Daddy called me. Malek was assassinated yesterday.” Malek was her brother. I had never met him—he had been an officer in the military, and while I had been in Cimmeria, he had been serving in the mountains. I knew that he had been recalled to the capital to deal with the Sarmatian agitation, but that was all.

“Assassinated? How?”

“He was trying to negotiate with the Sons of Sarmatia, and a radical pulled out a gun that had gotten through security. You never watch the news, do you, Pati? I watch it a great deal. It is important for me to learn the names of the world leaders, learn about international diplomacy. That is more important than organic chemistry, for a Khanum.”

“A what?”

“Don’t you understand? Now that Malek is dead, I am next in the line of succession. Someday, I will be the Khanum of Cimmeria. That is what we call a female Khan. In some countries, only male members of the royal family can succeed to the throne. But Cimmeria has never been like that. It has always been cosmopolitan, progressive. The philosopher Amirabal persuaded Teshup the Third to make his daughter his heir, and ever since, women can become rulers of the country. My great-grandmother, Daddy’s grandma, was a Khanum, although she resigned when her son came of age. It is the same among the Scythians and Sarmatians.” This was Lisa’s doing. It had to be Lisa’s doing. She was the one who had come up with Amirabal and the philosophical school she had founded in 500 BCE. Even Plato had praised her as one of the wisest philosophers in the ancient world. I silently cursed all Birkenstock-wearing feminists.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“It means that tomorrow we fly to Washington, where I will ask your President for help against the Sarmatian faction. This morning on one of the news shows, the Speaker of

the House criticized him for not supporting the government of Cimmeria. He mentioned the War on Terror—you know how they talk, and he wants to be the Republican candidate. But I think we can finally get American aid. While I am there, I will call a press conference, and you will stand by my side. We will let the American people see that my husband is one of them. It will generate sympathy and support. Then we will fly to Cimmeria. I need to be in my country as a symbol of the future. And I must produce an heir to the throne as quickly as possible—a boy, because while I can legally become Khanum, the people will want assurance that I can bear a son. While you were out, I packed all our clothes. We will meet Daddy’s plane at the airport tomorrow morning. You must wear your interview suit until we can buy you another. I’ve set the alarm for five o’clock.”

I should have said no. I should have raged and cried, and refused to be complicit in something that made me feel as though I might be sick for the rest of my life. But I said nothing. What could I say? This, too, was Shaila.

I lay in the dark beside the woman who looked like my wife, unable to sleep, staring into the darkness. Shaila, I thought, what has happened to you? To your dreams of being a pediatrician, of our children growing up in America, eating tacos and riding their bikes to school? You wanted them to be ordinary, to escape the claustrophobia you had felt growing up in the palace, with its political intrigue and the weight of centuries perpetually pressing down on you. In the middle of the night, the woman who was Shaila, but not my Shaila, turned in her sleep and put an arm around me. I did not move away.

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You are pleased, Afa, that I have returned to Cimmeria. It has meant a promotion for you, and you tell everyone that you are personal assistant to the American husband of the Khanum-to-be. You sell information about her pregnancy to the fashion magazines—how big she’s getting, how radiant she is. Meanwhile, Shaila opens schools and meets with foreign ambassadors. She’s probably the most popular figure in the country, part of the propaganda war against the Sons of Sarmatia, which has mostly fallen apart since Malek’s death. The SDA was absorbed into the Cimmerian Democratic Party and no longer presents a problem. American aid helped, but more important was the surge of nationalism among ethnic Cimmerians. Indeed, the nationalists, with their anti-Sarmatian sentiments, may be a problem in the next election.

I sit at the desk in my office, which is no longer near the servants’ quarters, but in the royal wing of the palace, writing this article, which would be suppressed if it appeared in any of the newspapers. But it will be read only by *JoIA*’s peer editors before languishing in the obscurity of an academic journal. Kala and one of her sisters lies at my feet. And I think about this country, Afa. It is—it was—a dream, but are not all nations of men dreams? Do we not create them, by drawing maps with lines on them, and naming rivers, mountain ranges? And then deciding that the men of our tribe can only marry women outside their matrilineage? That they must bury corpses rather than burning them, eat chicken and goats but not pigs, worship this bull-headed god rather than the crocodile god of that other tribe, who is an abomination? Fast during the dark of the moon, feast when the moon is full? I’m starting to sound like a poet, which will not be good for my academic career. One cannot write an academic paper as though it were poetry.

We dream countries, and then those countries dream us. And it seems to me, sitting here by the window, looking into a garden filled with roses, listening to one of the thousand fountains of this ancient city, that as much as I have dreamed Cimmeria, it has dreamed me.

Sometimes I forget that the other Shaila ever existed. A month after we returned to Cimmeria, an Arizona state trooper found a body in a ditch close to the Life Sciences Building. It was female, and badly decomposed. The coroner estimated that she would have been about twenty, but the body was nude and there was no other identification. I’m quoting the story I read online, on the local newspaper’s website. The police suggested that she might have been an illegal immigrant who had paid to be driven across the border, then been killed for the rest of her possessions. I sometimes wonder if she was Shaila.

This morning she has a television interview, and this afternoon she will be touring a new cancer treatment center paid for with American aid. All those years of listening and waiting were, after all, the perfect training for a Khanum. She is as patient as a cobra.

If I ask to visit the bazaar, the men who are in charge of watching me will first secure the square, which means shutting down the bazaar. They accompany me even to the university classes I insist on teaching. They stand in the back of the lecture hall, in their fatigues and sunglasses, carrying Kalashnikovs. Despite American aid, they do not want to give up their Russian weapons. So we must remember it: the stalls selling embroidered fabrics, and curved knives, and melons. The baskets in high stacks, and glasses of chilled mint tea into which we dip the pistachio biscuits that you told me are called Fingers of the Dead. Boys in sandals break-dancing to Arabic hip hop on a boombox so old that it is held together with string. I would give a great deal to be able to go to the bazaar again. Or to go home and identify Shaila’s body.

But in a couple of months, my son will be born. (Yes, it is a son. I’ve seen the ultrasound, but if you tell the newspapers, Afa, I will have you beheaded. I’m pretty sure I can still do that, here in Cimmeria.) There is only one of him, thank goodness. We intend to name him Malek. My mother has been sending a steady supply of knitted booties. There will be a national celebration, with special prayers in the churches and mosques and synagogues, and a school holiday. I wish Mike could come, or even Lisa. But he was offered a tenure-track position at a Christian college in North Carolina interested in the Biblical implications of Imaginary Anthropology. And Lisa is up in the mountains somewhere, close to the Scythian and Sarmatian border, studying woman’s initiation rites. I will stand beside Shaila and her family on the balcony of the palace, celebrating the birth of the future Khan of Cimmeria. In the gardens, rose petals will fall. Men will continue dying of natural or unnatural causes, and the cats of Cimmeria will lead them into another world. Women will dip their water jugs in the fountains of the city, carrying them on their heads back to their houses, as they have done since Cimmeria has existed, whether that is three or three thousand years. Life will go on as it has always done, praise be to God, creator of worlds, however they were created.

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Dr. Patrick Nolan is also co-author of “Cimmeria: A Proposal” (with M. Sandowski, L. Lang, and A. Farrow), *JoIA* 2.1 (Spring 2011), and author of “Modern Cimmerian Funerary Practices,” *JoIA* 3.2 (Fall 2012). Dr. Nolan is currently a professor at Kursand University. He is working on *A History of Modern Cimmeria*.

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Theodora Goss was born in Hungary and spent her childhood in various European countries before her family moved to the United States, where she completed a PhD in English literature. She is the World Fantasy, Locus, and Mythopoeic Award-winning author of the short story and poetry collections In the *Forest of Forgetting* (2006), *Songs for Ophelia* (2014), *Snow White Learns Witchcraft* (2019), and *The Collected Enchantments* (2023), as well as novella *The Thorn and the Blossom* (2012), debut novel *The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter* (2017), and sequels *European Travel for the Monstrous Gentlewoman* (2018) and *The Sinister Mystery of the Mesmerizing Girl* (2019). She has been a finalist for the Nebula, Crawford, and Shirley Jackson Awards, as well as on the Tiptree Award Honor List. Her work has been translated into fifteen languages. She is currently a Master Lecturer in Rhetoric at Boston University. Visit her at theodoragoss.com.

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- Lily, with Clouds (reprint)
- Estella Saves the Village (reprint)
- Beautiful Boys (reprint)
- Cimmeria: From the Journal of Imaginary Anthropology
- Princess Lucinda and the Hound of the Moon (reprint)
- Child-Empress of Mars (reprint)
- Singing of Mount Abora (reprint)



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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THE VENUS EFFECT

Violet Allen

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Apollo Allen and The Girl from Venus

This is 2015. A party on a westside roof, just before midnight. Some Mia or Mina is throwing it, the white girl with the jean jacket and the headband and the two-bumps-of-molly grin, flitting from friend circle to friend circle, laughing loudly and refilling any empty cup in her eyeline from a bottomless jug of sangria, Maenad Sicagi. There are three kegs, a table of wines and liquor, cake and nachos inside. It is a good party, and the surrounding night is beautiful, warm and soft and speckled with stars. A phone is hooked up to a portable sound system, and the speakers are kicking out rapture. It is 2009 again, the last year that music was any good, preserved in digital amber and reanimated via computer magic.

Apollo boogies on the margins, between the edge of the party and the edge of the roof, surrounded by revelers but basically alone. Naomi is on the other side of the crowd, grinding against her new boyfriend, Marcus, a musclebound meat-man stuffed into a spectacularly tacky t-shirt. Apollo finds this an entirely unappealing sight. That she and Apollo once shared an intimate relationship has nothing to do with this judgment. Not at all.

Speaking merely as an observer, a man with a love of Beauty and Dance in his heart, Apollo judges their performance unconvincing. It is the worst sort of kitsch. The meat-man against whom Naomi vibrates has no rhythm, no soul; he is as unfunky as the bad guys on Parliament-Funkadelic albums. He stutters from side to side with little regard for the twos and fours, and the occasional thrusts of his crotch are little more than burlesque, without the slightest suggestion of genuine eroticism. He is doing it just to do it. Pure kitsch. Appalling. Naomi is doing a better job, undulating her buttocks with a certain aplomb, a captivating bootyliciousness that might stir jiggly bedroom memories in the heart of the lay observer. But still. *We know that the tail must wag the dog, for the horse is drawn by the cart; But the Devil whoops, as he whooped of old, "It's pretty, but is it Art?"*

Apollo cannot bear to watch this any longer. He desperately wants to point the terribleness of this scene out to someone, to say, "Hey, look at them. They look like dumbs. Are they not dumbs?" But Naomi was always the person to whom he pointed these sorts of things out. That's why they got along, at least in the beginning, a shared appreciation for the twin pleasures of pointing at a fool and laughing at a fool. Without her, he is vestigial, useless, alone.

He turns away from the ghastly scene, just in time to notice a young woman dancing nearby. She is alone, like him, and she is, unlike him, utterly, utterly turned. Look at her, spinning like a politician, bouncing like a bad check, bopping to the beat like the beat is all there is. She is not a talented dancer by any stretch of the imagination, and her gracelessness is unable to keep up with her abandon. She is embraced of the moment, full with the spirit, completely ungenerous with fucks and possibly bordering on the near side of alcohol poisoning. Just look at her. Apollo, in a state of terrible cliché, is unable to take his eyes off her.

There is a problem, however.

Her heels, while fabulous, were not made for rocking so hard. They are beautiful shoes, certainly, vibrant and sleek, canary yellow, bold as love. Perhaps they are a bit too matchy-matchy with regard to the rest of her outfit, the canary-yellow dress and the canary-yellow necklace and the canary-yellow bow atop her head, but the matchy-matchy look is good for people who are forces of nature, invoking four-color heroism and supernatural panache. Yet however lovely and amazing and charming and expensive these shoes might be, they cannot be everything.

The center cannot hold; things fall apart.

Her left heel snaps. Her balance is lost. Her momentum and her tipsiness send her stumbling, and no one is paying enough attention to catch her. The building is not so high up that a fall would definitely kill her, but death could be very easily found on the sidewalk below. Apollo rushes forward, reaches out to grab her, but he is too late. She goes over the edge. Apollo cannot look away. She falls for what feels like forever.

And then, she stops. She doesn't hit the ground. She just stops and hangs in the air. Apollo stares frozen, on the one hand relieved not to witness a death, on the other hand filled with ontological dread as his understanding of the laws of gravitation unravel before his eyes, on a third hypothetical hand filled with wonder and awe at this flagrant violation of consensus reality. The young woman looks up at Apollo with her face stuck in a frightened grimace as she slowly, slowly descends, like a feather in the breeze. She takes off as soon as she hits the ground, stumble-running as fast as one can on non-functional shoes.

Apollo does not know what has just happened, but he knows that he wants to know. He does not say goodbye to the hostess or his friends or Naomi. He just ghosts, flying down the ladder and down the hall and down the stairs and out the door. He can just make out a blur in the direction she ran off, and he chases after it.

There is a man in a police uniform standing at the corner. Apollo does not see him in the darkness, does not know that he is running toward him. The man in the police uniform draws his weapon and yells for Apollo to stop. Inertia and confusion do not allow Apollo to stop quickly enough. Fearing for his life, the man in the police uniform pulls the trigger of his weapon several times, and the bullets strike Apollo in his chest, doing critical damage to his heart and lungs. He flops to the ground. He is dead now.

• • • •

Uh, what? That was not supposed to happen. Apollo was supposed to chase the girl alien, then have some romantically-charged adventures fighting evil aliens, then at the end she was going to go back to her home planet and it was going to be sad. Who was that guy? That's weird, right? That's not supposed to happen, right? Dudes aren't supposed to just pop off and end stories out of nowhere.

I guess to be fair, brother was running around in the middle of the night, acting a fool. That's just asking for trouble. He was a pretty unlikeable protagonist, anyway, a petty, horny, pretentious idiot with an almost palpable stink of author surrogacy on him. I think there was a Kipling quote in there. Who's that for? You don't want to read some lame indie romance bullshit, right? Sadboy meets manic pixie dream alien? I'm already bored. Let's start over. This time, we'll go classic. We'll have a real hero you can look up to, and cool action-adventure shit will go down. You ready? Here we go.

Apollo Rocket vs. The Space Barons from Beyond Pluto

There are fifteen seconds left on the clock, and the green jerseys have possession. The score is 99-98, green jerseys. The red jerseys have been plagued by injuries, infighting, and unfortunate calls on the part of the ref, who, despite his profession's reputed impartiality, is clearly a supporter of the green jerseys. The green jerseys themselves are playing as though this is the very last time they will ever play a basketball game. They are tall and white and aggressively Midwestern, and this gives them something to prove. Sketch in your mind the Boston Celtics of another time. Picture the Washington Generals on one of the rare, rumored nights when they were actually able to defeat their perennial adversaries, mortal men who somehow found themselves snatching victory from the god-clowns of Harlem.

Fourteen.

One of the green jerseys is preparing to throw the ball toward the hoop. If the ball were to go into the hoop, the green jerseys would have two points added to their score, and it would become impossible for the red jerseys to throw enough balls into the other hoop before time runs out. The green jerseys are already preparing for their win, running over in their minds talking points for their post-game interviews, making sure the sports drink dispenser is full and ready to be poured upon the coach, and wondering how the word "champions" might feel on their lips.

Eleven.

But this will not happen. Apollo is in position. He reaches out with his mighty arm and strips the ball from the green jersey before he can throw it.

Ten.

Apollo runs as fast as he can with the ball, so fast that every atom of his body feels as if it is igniting. He looks for an open teammate, for he is no ball hog, our Apollo, but there are no teammates to be found between himself and the hoop. So he runs alone. He is lightning. There are green jersey players in his way, but he spins and jukes around them before they can react, as if they are sloths suspended in aspic. Do his feet even touch the floor? Is it the shoes?

He's on fire.

Three.

He leaps high into the air and dunks the ball so hard that the backboard shatters into a thousand glittering shards of victory. The buzzer goes off just as he hits the ground. The final score is 100-99, red jerseys. Apollo Triumphant is leapt upon by his teammates. Hugs and pats on the back are distributed freely and with great relish. The crowd erupts into wild celebration. *Apollo, Apollo, they chant.*

Patrick, the captain of the opposing team, approaches Apollo as confetti falls from above. There is a sour look on the man’s face, an expression of constipated rage at its most pure. He balls his fingers into a fist and raises it level with Apollo’s midsection. It rears back and trembles as an arrow notched in a bow, ready to be fired.

“Good job, bro,” he says.

“You too,” says Apollo.

They bump fists. It is so dope.

A small child limps onto the basketball court. He smiles so hard that it must be painful for his face. Apollo kneels and gives him a high-five, then a low-five, then a deep hug.

“You did it, Apollo,” says the child.

“No. We did it,” says Apollo. “They’ll never be able to demolish the youth center now.”

“My new mommy and daddy said they could never have adopted me without your help.”

Apollo puts a finger to his own lips. “Shhhhh.”

“I love you, Apollo,” says the child, its face wet with tears. “You’re the best man alive.”

Apollo drives home with his trophy and game ball in the back seat of his sports car, a candy apple convertible that gleams like justice. He blasts Riek-Ross a positive, socially conscious rap song about working hard and pulling up one’s pants on his stereo. The road is his tonight. There are no other cars to be seen, no other people for miles. For all his successes as balla par excellence, Apollo still appreciates the beauty and quiet of the country.

Suddenly, a sonorous roar pours out from the edge of the sky, so powerful that it shakes the car. Before Apollo can react, a yellow-silver-blue ball of fire shoots across the sky and explodes on the horizon, for a moment blotting out the darkness with pure white light before retreating into smoke and darkness. Apollo ~~jams his foot on the pedal~~ proceeds in the direction of the mysterious explosion while obeying all traffic laws and keeping his vehicle within the legal speed limits.

~~“Holy shit~~ Golly,” he says.

Apollo finds a field strewn with flaming debris, shattered crystals, and shards of brightly colored metals. He hops out of his car to take a closer look. Based on his astro-engineering courses, which he gets top marks in, he surmises that these materials could have only come from some kind of spaceship. He is fascinated, to say the least.

He hears movement from under a sheet of opaque glass. He pushes it away and sees that there is a woman lying prone underneath. At least, Apollo thinks she is a woman. She is shaped like a woman, but her skin is blue, and she has gills, and she has a second mouth on her forehead. Woman or not, she is beautiful, with delicate, alien features and C-cup breasts.

“Oh my God,” says Apollo. He kneels down next to the alien woman and cradles her in his arms. “Are you okay?”

She sputters. “. . . Listen . . . ship . . . crashed . . . There isn’t much . . . time . . . You must stop . . . Lord Tklox . . . He is coming to . . . answer the . . . Omega Question . . . He will stop at nothing . . . please . . . stop him . . . Save . . . civilization . . . Leave me . . .”

Apollo notices a growing purple stain on the woman’s diaphanous yellow robes. Based on his Theoretical Xenobiology class, he hypothesizes that this is blood. He shakes his head at her, unwilling to accept the false choice she has presented him with. “I’ll do whatever I can to stop him, but first I have to help you.”

She reaches up to gently stroke his hand with her three-fingered hand. “. . . So kind . . . I . . . chose well . . .”

With his incredible basketballer’s strength, it is nothing for Apollo to lift the woman. He may as well be carrying a large sack of feathers. He places her in the passenger seat of his car and gets back on the road lickety split.

“You’ll be okay. I just need some supplies.”

He stops at the nearest gas station. He races around inside to get what he needs: bandages, ice, sports drink, needle, thread, protein bar. With these items in hand, he rushes towards the register, which is next to the exit. He is stopped by a man in a police uniform. The man in the police uniform asks him about his car.

“It’s mine,” Apollo says.

The man in the police uniform does not believe Apollo.

“You have to come help me! There’s a woman in trouble!”

The man in the police uniform does not believe Apollo and is concerned that he is shouting.

~~“This is ridiculous!~~ Sorry sir. I am sure you are just doing your job. Let me show you my ID and insurance information so we can clear all of this up,” says Apollo.

Apollo goes to fish his wallet from his pocket. His naked hostility, volatile tone, and the act of reaching for what very well could be a weapon are clear signs of aggressive intent, and the man in the police uniform has no choice but to withdraw his own weapon and fire several shots. Apollo is struck first in the stomach, then the shoulder. He does not immediately die. Instead, he spends several moments on the floor of the convenience store, struggling to breathe as his consciousness fades into nothing. Then, he dies.

• • • •

What the fuck is happening? Seriously. Where is this dude coming from? I haven’t written that many stories, but I really don’t think that’s how these things are supposed to go. The way I was taught, you establish character and setting, introduce conflict, develop themes, then end on an emotional climax. That’s it. Nobody said anything about killers popping up out of nowhere. Not in this genre, anyway.

So hear me out. I think we may be dealing some kind of metafictional entity, a living concept, an ideo-linguistic infection. I don’t know how he got in here, but he should be easy enough to deal with. I think we just need to reason with him. He’s probably a nice guy. Just doing his job, trying to keep the story safe. He was probably genuinely afraid that Apollo was reaching for a gun. You never know with people these days. Life is scary.

Besides, that story wasn’t working either. That Apollo was a big phony, totally unbelievable. Guys like that went out of style with Flash Gordon and bell-bottoms. It’s not just about liking the protagonist. You have to be able to relate to them, right? I think that’s how it works. That’s what everybody says, anyway. To be honest, I don’t really get the whole “relatability” thing. Isn’t the point of reading to subsume one’s own experience for the experience of another, to crawl out of one’s body and into a stranger’s thoughts? Why would you want to read about someone just like you? Stories are windows, not mirrors. Everybody’s human. Shouldn’t that make them relatable enough? I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of experience with this kind of thing. I thought smoking was a weird thing to do, too, but then I tried smoking and was addicted forever. Maybe I’ve just never come across a good mirror.

So let’s do a child. Everybody loves children, and everybody was one. Plus, it’s really easy to make them super-relatable. Just throw some social anxiety disorder and a pair of glasses on some little fucking weirdo and boom: You got a movie deal. It’ll be a coming-of-age hero’s journey sort of thing, adolescence viewed through a gossamer haze of nostalgia.

Bully Brawl: An Apollo Kidd Adventure

This is 1995. A group of young people sit on the stoop of a decaying brownstone just off the L. The topic is television. Some show or another. Who can remember? Broadcast television in the year 1995 is terrible all around, hugs and catchphrases and phantasmal laughter suspended in analog fuzz. Is Full House on in 1995? Is Urkel? They don’t know how bad they have it. Naomi leads the conversation. A skinny, toothy girl with a voice like a preacher. You can almost hear the organ chords rumbling in your chest whenever she opens her mouth. She jokes about what she would do if her own hypothetical future husband were to comically declare himself the man of the house, with the punchlines mainly revolving around the speed and vigor with which she would slap the black off him. She is sort of funny, but only because the television shows she is describing are not.

Apollo does not make any jokes. He is sort of funny himself (people laugh at him, at least), but he does not know how to make funny words happen. He is mostly quiet, only chiming in with the factual, offering airtimes and channels and dropping the names of actors when they get stuck on the tips of tongues. Six or seven of them are gathered, and Apollo believes himself to definitely be the or-seventh. He is wearing a t-shirt with a superhero on it. Not Superman. Superman gear can be forgiven as a harmless eccentricity if you’re otherwise down. But Apollo’s rocking some kind of deep-cut clown in a neon gimp suit on his chest. Remember, this is 1995, and this man is thirteen years old. Unforgivable. He’s not just the or-seventh, he is the physical manifestation of all the or-seventhness that has ever existed in the world.

The new girl is sitting next to him. She might have been the or-seventh were she not new. Check that sweater. Yellow? Polyester? Sequin pineapples? In this heat? Worse than unforgivable. But who knows what lies under it? A butterfly? A swan? Any and all manner of transformative symbology could be hiding, waiting, growing. There’s still hope for her. She may be four-eyed and flat-buttred and double-handed and generally Oreoiish, but there is hope. She can at least drop into the conversation sometimes, in the empty spaces

after the punchlines. She has that power. For instance, after Naomi does a long routine on what she would do if she ever found a wallet lying on the sidewalk like on TV (in brief: cop that shit), the new girl says something about losing her own money and getting punished harshly by her mother. It is not a funny thing to say, but memories of belts and switches and tears are still fresh in their adolescent minds, and it is comforting to laugh it out. Apollo laughs the hardest, and he does not know why.

The sun is gone. Just a little light left. The new girl can't go home alone. Not in the almost-dark. This is 1995, not 1948. Apollo volunteers to walk with her. "He like you," says Marcus, Naomi's not-quite-but-basically-boyfriend, by way of explaining why Apollo is the best one for the job.

Apollo denies this so fervently that he has to go through with it, lest she think he truly hates her. The walk is quiet for the first few blocks. Apollo is not a big talker, and the new girl has been here for two weeks, and no one, except maybe the ultragregarious Naomi, has had a real conversation with her. Still, Apollo finds himself feeling strangely comfortable. Maybe it is the sweater. Perhaps the fact that it should be embarrassing her is preventing him from being embarrassed himself. Perhaps it is the sartorial equivalent of imagining one's audience naked. Perhaps she's just sort of great.

Apollo stops short just before they reach the corner. He holds out his arm so that the girl will stop, too. There's danger up ahead. A gang of street toughs. Six of them. One of those multicultural, gender-integrated '90s gangs, a Benetton ad with knives. Red jackets, gold sneakers. One of them has a boombox. KRS-ONE maybe? Early KRS-ONE. Stuff about listening to people's guns as they shoot you with them. Their victim is an old, grey-haired man. His hands are up. There is a briefcase at his feet. The gangsters taunt him stereotypically.

"Give us ya money, pops!"

"Don't make me cut you!"

"Nice and easy!"

"Don't be a hero!"

"I need to regulate!"

Apollo takes a slow step back. He means for Shayla to step with him, but she does not. He pulls on her arm, but she is still. She has a look on her face like she wants to fight motherfuckers. This is the most frightening expression that can appear on a human face.

"We have to go," he says.

"No," she says. "We have to help him."

"C'mon."

He pulls on her arm again, hard this time, but she slips his grasp. She runs at the gang, leaps into the air, and tackles the nearest one. The gangsters are surprised at first, to see this little girl brazenly attacking one of their own, but they quickly pull her off him and throw her to the ground.

"What's your malfunction?!" one of them screeches.

The girl stands and pulls out, seemingly from nowhere, a fantastic-looking ~~gun~~ object that in no way resembles a gun or any other real-life weapon. "Stand down, jerks."

"Oh dag! She got a ~~gun~~ object that in no way resembles a gun or any other real-life weapon! Kick rocks, guys!"

The gangsters run off into the night. Apollo runs over to the girl.

"What's going on? What's that thing?"

"Don't worry about it. Forget you saw anything," says the girl.

"Exactly," says the old man. He begins to laugh, first a low, soft chuckle, then an increasingly maniacal cackle that echos in the night. "You have fallen for my trap, Princess Amarillia! I knew you could not resist helping a stranger in need."

The girl gasps. "Lord Tklox!"

"What?" says Apollo.

Smiling, the old man reaches up and grabs his face, pulling it off to reveal pale skin, elegant features, and hair the color of starlight. His body begins to bulge and swell as he grows larger, eventually doubling in height. He laughs as a shining sword appears in his hands.

"Run!" shouts the girl.

"What is happening?!"

"No time to explain. Take this." She hands him her fantastic-looking ~~gun~~ object that in no way resembles a gun or any other real-life weapon. "I'll hold him off with my Venusian jiu-jitsu. Just go! Don't stop. Please. Don't stop. Just run. Don't let him get you like he got the others."

The girl takes a martial arts stance and nods. Apollo does not need further explanations. He runs in the opposite direction. He runs as fast as he can, until his lungs burn and he cannot feel his legs. Stopping to catch his breath, he holds the ~~gun~~ object that in no way resembles a gun or any other real-life weapon up to the light. He does not even know how to use it, how it could possibly help him in this strange battle.

So wrapped up in thought, Apollo does not even see the man in the police uniform. He does not hear him telling him to drop his weapon. He only hears the gun go bang. Later, his body is found by his mother, who cries and cries and cries.

• • • •

Did you ever read "Lost in the Funhouse"? I just re-read it as research on solving metafictional problems. Not super helpful. We get it; fiction is made up. Cool story, bro. But you know the flashback to the kids playing Niggers and Masters? Is that a real thing? Or is it just a sadomasochistic parody of Cowboys and Indians? I can't find any information on it online, but I'm sure somebody somewhere has played it. If something as cruel as Cowboys and Indians exists, why not Niggers and Masters? There is no way a game like that is only theoretical. It's too rich, too delicious. The role of Master is an obvious power fantasy, presenting one with the authority to command and punish as an adult might, without any of the responsibility. The role of Nigger is just a different kind of power fantasy, power expressed as counterfactual. In playing the Nigger, one can experience subjugation on one's own terms. There is no real danger, no real pain. You can leave at any time, go home and watch cartoons and forget about it. Or you can indulge fully, giving oneself up to the game, allowing oneself to experience a beautiful simulacrum of suffering. It is perfect pretend. There are probably worse ways of spending a suburban afternoon, and there is something slightly sublime about it, baby's first ego death. Sure, it's profoundly offensive, but who's going to stop you? But whatever. I'm probably reading too much into it. It's probably a made-up, postmodern joke. When I was a kid, we just played Cops and Robbers, and it was fine.

Anyway, that was a digression. I admit that it's difficult to defend the actions of certain uniformed narrative devices, but I'm sure there were good reasons for them. After all, there were gangsters with actual knives in that one, and Apollo was holding something that maybe sort of looked like a weapon in the dark. How are we supposed to tell the good ones from the bad ones? Can you tell the difference? I don't think so. Besides, this was to be expected. Children's literature is sad as fuck. It's all about dead moms and dead dogs and cancer and loneliness. You can't expect everyone to come out alive from that. But you know what isn't sad? Fucking superheroes.

Go Go Justice Gang! ft. Apollo Young

Oh no.

Downtown Clash City has been beset by a hypnagogic Leviathan, a terrifying kludge of symbology and violence, an impossible horror from beyond the ontological wasteland. Citizens flee, police stand by impotently, soldiers fire from tanks and helicopters without success, their bullets finding no purchase, their fear finding no relief.

It is a bubblegum machine gone horribly, horribly awry, a clear plastic sphere with a red body and a bellhopian cap, except there is a tree growing inside it, and also it is a several hundred feet tall. The tree is maybe a willow or a dying spruce or something like that. It is definitely a sad tree, the kind of tree that grows on the edges of graveyards in children's books or in the tattoos of young people with too many feelings, when not growing on the inside of giant animated bubblegum machines.

It trudges along Washington Avenue on its root system, which emerges from the slot where the bubblegum ought to come out, and inflicts hazardous onomatopoesis upon people and property alike with its terrible branches.

Bang. Crack. Boom. Splat. Crunch.

Splat is the worst of them, if you think about the implications.

Various material reminders of American imperialist power under late capitalism, the bank and the television station and the army surplus store, are made naught but memory and masonry in its wake. The ground shakes like butts in music videos, and buildings fall like teenagers in love. Destruction. Carnage. Rage. Can nothing be done to stop this creature? Can the city be saved from certain destruction?

Yes!

Already, Apollo Young, a.k.a. Black Justice, is on his way to the Justice Gang Headquarters. Even as his fellow citizens panic, he keeps a cool head as he drives his Justice Vehicle headlong into danger. When his wrist communicator begins to buzz and play the Justice Gang theme song, he pulls over to the curb, in full accordance with the law.

“Black Justice! Come in! This is Red Justice!” says the wrist communicator.

“I read you, Patrick! What’s the haps?!”

“The city is in danger! We need your help! To defeat this evil, We, the Justice Gang, need to combine our powers to form White Justice!”

“Yes. Only White Justice can save the city this time!”

“Also, can you please pick up Pink Justice? She is grounded from driving because she went to the mall instead of babysitting her little brother.”

“What an airhead!”

“I know. But she is also a valuable member of the Justice Gang. Only when Pink Justice, Blue Justice, Black Justice, and Mauve Justice combine with me, the leader, Red Justice, can our ultimate power, White Justice be formed!”

“As I know.”

“Yes. All thanks to Princess Amarillia, who gave us our prismatic justice powers in order to prevent the evil Lord Tklox from answering the Omega Question and destroying civilization!”

“Righteous!”

“Just as white light is composed of all colors of light, so White Justice will be formed from our multicultural, gender-inclusive commitment to Good and Right.”

“Okay! Bye.”

Apollo hangs up and gets back on the road. He picks up Pink Justice on the way. She is a stereotypical valley girl, but that is okay, since the Justice Gang accepts all types of people, as long as they love justice, are between fifteen and seventeen, and present as heterosexual. They ride together in silence, as they are the two members of the Justice Gang least likely to be paired up for storylines, owing to the potentially provocative implications of a black man and a white woman interacting together, even platonically.

“Do you ever think that we’re just going in circles?” asks Pink Justice, staring idly out the window.

“What do you mean?” asks Apollo.

“A monster appears, we kill it, another monster appears, we kill it again. We feel good about getting the bad guy in the moment, but it just keeps happening. Week after week, it’s the same thing. Another monster. More dead people. We never actually fight *evil*. We just kill monsters. Evil is always still there.”

“But what about justice?”

“What is justice? People are dying. I just don’t know what we’re fighting for sometimes, why we keep fighting. It’s the same every time. It’s just tiring, I guess.”

“I think we have to fight. Even if nobody gets saved, we are better for having done it. Maybe the world isn’t better, but it’s different, and I think that difference is beautiful.”

“Like, for sure!” says Pink Justice.

A police car flashes its lights at Apollo. He pulls over. The man in the police uniform walks to the passenger side and asks Pink Justice if she is okay.

“I’m fine. There’s no problem,” she says.

The man in the police uniform tells Pink Justice that he can help her if something is wrong.

“Everything is fine. Nothing is wrong.”

The man in the police uniform tells Apollo to get out of the car.

~~“What is this about? What’s your probable cause?”~~ Yes sir, officer,” says Apollo, getting out of the car.

The man in the police uniform slams Apollo into the side of the car and pats him down. Pink Justice gets out and begins to yell that they have done nothing wrong, that he has to let them go. This obviously agitates the man in the police uniform.

Apollo’s wrist communicator goes off, and without thinking, he moves to answer it. The man in the police uniform tackles him to the ground, sits on his chest, and begins to hit him with a flashlight. Apollo’s windpipe is blocked. It continues to be blocked for a long time. He dies.

• • • •

Come on. Really? That one was really good. The white guy was in charge and everything! This sucks. I’m trying to do something here. The point of adventure fiction is to connect moral idealism with the human experience. The good guys fight the bad guys, just as we struggle against the infelicities of the material world. That’s the point of heroes. They journey into the wilderness, struggle against the unknown, and make liminal spaces safe for the people. That’s how it works, from Hercules to Captain Kirk. It’s really hard to create ontological safety when people keep dying all the time. Barth was right; literature is exhausting.

So I guess Apollo shouldn’t have been in a car with a white lady? That’s scary, I guess. He didn’t do anything, but he was probably no angel. He was a teen. Teens get into all kinds of shit. When I was in school, I knew so, so many kids who shoplifted and smoked drugs. They were mostly white, but still. Teens are shitty. The man in the police uniform probably had good intentions. Like, he wanted to make sure the girl wasn’t being kidnapped or anything. Why else would they be together? I still think he only wants to keep people safe, especially potentially vulnerable people.

I’ve fucking got it. This is 2016, right? Sisters are doing it for themselves. Why not a lady-protagonist? Women are empathetic and non-threatening and totally cool. Everyone is chill with ladies. That’s why phone robots all have feminine voices. True story. Why would you just kill a woman for no reason? She’s not going to hurt you. This time, no one is going to hurt anybody.

Apollonia Williams-Carter and the Venus Sanction

Naomi walks into Apollonia’s private office just before 5:00. It is a cramped and dingy room, lit by a single fluorescent bulb and smelling strongly of mildew. Without greeting or warning, she drops a thick, yellow binder down on Apollonia’s desk.

“Read this,” she says.

The binder is marked A.M.A.R.I.L.L.I.A. Project. It is filled with photographs, exotic diagrams, and pages and pages of exhaustively researched reports. Apollonia proceeds slowly, taking in each and every fact printed on the pages, running them over in her mind and allowing them settle. She feels a sinking sensation in her stomach as she journeys deeper and deeper into the text.

“Dear God,” she whispers. “Can this be true?”

“Yes,” says Naomi.

“This is absolutely disgusting. How could they do something like this? How could they sell us out to aliens?”

“They don’t care about our world. Not anymore.”

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I brought this to you.”

Apollonia opens one of her drawers, retrieving two shot glasses and a bottle of whiskey. She pours a double and pushes it toward Naomi.

“Have some. It will calm your nerves.”

Naomi throws the glass to the ground, shattering it.

“This is no time to drink! We’ve got to do something!”

Apollonia takes her shot. “We can’t do anything if we can’t keep our cool.”

“You want me to be cool? The department will have my head if they even knew I am talking to you.”

“My head’s on the line, too. I might be a vice-president here, but they’d kill me as quickly as a break-room cockroach.”

“So what do we do? I came to you because I have the utmost respect for your work with the company.”

“We go to the press. It might cost us our lives, but at least the truth will be out there.”

“Should we try to rescue the girl?”

“No. First, we get the truth out. I’ll handle this. Delete any digital copies of these files and meet me tonight at the Port Royale.”

“Fine.”

“Remember. Anyone you know could be one of them. Use caution.”

Naomi nods and exits.

Apollonia takes another double shot of whiskey as she continues to read the binder. How could this happen? She had never trusted the powers that be, but how could they be doing this? How could they be killing people with impunity? The notes on the files indicate that it is in the name of safety and the greater good, but whose safety are they really talking about? Man or monster?

Apollonia leaves at 7:00, as she does every evening. She hides the pages of the binder in her purse. She puts on a cheerful face, smiling at coworkers and greeting the support staff as she passes. She takes the elevator down from her floor to the lobby, then the stairs to the parking garage. She makes sure no one is following her as she walks down the corridors of the unit parking garage, turning her head every few moments to get a full view of her surroundings. She sees her car and breathes a sigh of relief. She is almost out.

“Hey there.”

She turns to see a young man in a suit. He is at least six feet tall and aggressively muscled. He smiles brightly and broadly at Apollonia, as if trying to hide something.

“Hello Patrick,” she says.

“Where ya headed in such a hurry?”

“Just going home.”

“Home, huh? I remember home.”

He laughs. She joins him.

“Long hours, huh? I feel for you.”

He sticks out his finger at her purse. She clutches it closer.

“Hey. Is that new? I think my girlfriend pointed that purse out at the store. I’m sure it was that one.”

“I’ve had this thing forever.”

“Do you mind if I see it? I just want to know if it’s well made.”

Apollonia swallows. “I’d really prefer it if you didn’t.”

The smile leaves his face, and his eyes begin to narrow. Apollonia takes a step back. She has been trained in self-defense, but this man has at least one hundred pounds on her and also might be an alien. She begins to slowly, subtly shift into a combat stance. If she times it right, she might be able to stun him long enough for her to escape. She just has to find the right moment. She waits. And waits. And waits.

Finally, he chuckles. “You’re right. That was a weird question. I haven’t been getting enough sleep lately. Sorry. I’ll see you later.”

Apollonia gets into her car. On the way to the Port Royale, she is pulled over by the man in the police uniform. While patting her down for drugs, he slips his fingers into her underwear. She tries to pull his hands away, prompting him to use force to stop her from resisting arrest. Her head is slammed many times against the sidewalk. She dies.

• • • •

She. Didn’t. Do. Anything. And even if she did do something, killing is not the answer. That’s it. I’m not playing anymore. I can quit at any time. No one can stop me. Look, I’ll do it now. Boom. I just quit for two days. Boom. That was two weeks. Boom. Now I have to change all the dates to 2016. What’s the point of writing this thing? What’s the point of writing anything? I just wanted to tell a cool story. That’s it. No murders. No deaths. Remember? It was just a love story.

I once read that people get more into love stories and poems in times of political strife and violence. What better way to assert meaning in the face of meaninglessness than by celebrating the connection between human beings? Our relationship with the state, the culture, the world, these are just petals in the winds compared to the love that flows between us. Fuck politics. I set out to do a love story, so I’m doing a love story. Plus, I’ve got a plan. So far, the Apollos have all died while messing around outside. The solution isn’t relatability at all. It’s so much simpler than that: transit. It doesn’t matter if the guy can’t sympathize with Apollo if he can’t find him. There are tons of great stories set in one place. I’ll just do one of those.

Apollo Right and the Architectural-Organic Wormhole

Apollo and Naomi sit alone on the couch by the window, the dusty brown one held together with tape and band-aids, quiet, listening to the rain and the night, watching the play of wind and glow on the raindrops outside, refracted lamplight and neon diffusing into glitter in the dark. His head rests on her lap, which is soft and warm and comfortingly “lap-like,” which is to say that it possesses the qualities of the Platonic lap in quantities nearing excess, qualities which are difficult to articulate, neotenous comforts and chthonic ecstasies of a sublime/cliché nature, intimacy rendered in thigh meat and belly warmth. Her left hand is on his shoulder, just so, and her right is on his chest, and he takes note of the sensation of her fingers as his chest expands and contracts, and it is pleasant. He takes a breath, sweet and slow. There is a little sadness, because this moment will wilt and wither like all moments, and he does not want it to, more than anything.

“Remember this,” he says.

“What?”

“I would like it if you would remember this. Tonight. Or at least this part.”

“Why wouldn’t I remember tonight?”

“You never remember any of the good parts.”

“You say that.”

“It’s true. You only remember the bad parts. The before and after. Anxiety and regret. Never the moment.”

“Who says this is a good part?”

“That’s a cutting remark.”

“I just think we have different definitions of the good and bad when it comes to certain things.”

“So this is a bad part?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Which is it, then?”

“It’s good to see you.”

“You know what my favorite memory of us is?”

“Leon.”

“I’m sure you don’t remember it.”

“Don’t.”

“It’s not weird or anything. One time I came over to your place, and you smiled that smile you have—not the usual one, the good one—and you gave me a hug. Just a long, deep hug, like you were just really happy to see me. Genuinely happy. Not angry or annoyed at all. Just cruisin’, y’know. Just cruisin’. We made out afterwards, and maybe had sex? I don’t remember that super great.”

“The fact that you don’t see anything weird about that is why we had to break up.”

“Whatever, lady.”

The door flies open. The man in the police uniform shouts for everyone to get down. A flashbang grenade is thrown inside. Apollo pushes Naomi away but is unable to get away. He suffers critical burns to his head and chest. After being denied medical treatment on the scene, he dies weeks later in the hospital from opportunistic infections. Ironically, the man in the police uniform was actually meant to go to the next apartment over, where a minor marijuana dealer lives.

• • • •

They didn’t even get to the cool part. There was going to be a living wormhole in the closet, and all kinds of space shit was going to come out, and in the process of dealing with it they were going to rekindle their love. It was going to be awesome. We can’t even have love stories anymore? What do we have if we can’t have love stories?

Okay. Now I’m thinking that the issue is with the milieu. 2015 is a weird time. Shit is going down. It’s politicizing this story. I’m not into it. What we need is a rip-roaring space adventure in the far future. That’ll be cool. All this shit will be sorted out by then, and we can all focus on what really matters: space shit.

The crystal spires of New Virtua throw tangles of intersecting rainbows onto the silver-lined streets below, such that a Citizen going about his daily duties cannot help but be enmeshed in a transpicuous net of light and color. A Good Citizen knows that this is Good, that beauty is a gift of Science, and he wears his smile the way men of lesser worlds might wear a coat and hat to ward off the cold damp of an unregulated atmosphere.

Lord Tklox is not a Good Citizen, and he rarely smiles at all. On those occasions when he does experience something akin to happiness (when his plans are coming to fruition, when he imagines the bloody corpses of his enemies, when he thinks of new ways to crush the Good Citizens of New Virtua under his foot), his smile is not so much worn as wielded, as one might wield the glowing spiral of a raymatic cannon.

“Soon, my vita-ray projector will be complete, and all New Virtua will tremble as I unleash the Omega Question!” he exclaims to no one, alone in his subterranean laboratory two thousand miles below the surface.

Cackling to himself, Lord Tklox waits in his lair for those who would challenge his incredible genius.

He waits.

He keeps waiting.

Lord Tklox coughs, perhaps getting the attention of any heroes listening on nearby crime-detecting audioscopes. “First New Virtua, then the universe! All will be destroyed by the radical subjectivity of the Omega Question!”

Waiting continues to happen.

More waiting.

Still more.

Uh, I guess nobody comes. Everybody dies, I guess.

• • • •

So I checked, and it turns out there are no black people in the far future. That’s my bad. I really didn’t do my research on that one. I don’t know where we end up going. Maybe we all just cram into the Parliament-Funkadelic discography at some point between *Star Trek* and *Foundation*? Whatever. That’s an issue for tomorrow. Today, we’ve got bigger problems.

It’s time we faced this head on. Borges teaches us that every story is a labyrinth, and within every labyrinth is a minotaur. I’ve been trying to avoid the minotaur, but instead I need to slay it. I have my sword, and I know where the monster lurks. It is time to blaxploit this problem.

Apollo Jones In: The Final Showdown

Who’s the plainclothes police detective who leaves all the criminals dejected?

[Apollo!]

Who stops crime in the nick of time and dazzles the ladies with feminine rhymes?

[Apollo!]

Can you dig it?

Apollo’s cruiser screeches to a halt at the entrance to the abandoned warehouse. He leaps out the door and pulls his gun, a custom gold Beretta with his name engraved on the handle.

“Hot gazpacho!” he says. “This is it.”

Patrick pops out of the passenger seat. “We’ve got him now.”

They have been chasing their suspect for weeks now, some sicko responsible for a string of murders. In a surprising third act twist, they discovered that the one responsible is one of their own, a bad apple who gets his kicks from harming the innocent.

“We’ve got him pinned down inside,” says Apollo.

“He won’t escape this time.”

“Let’s do this, brother.”

They skip the middle part of the story, since that has been where we’ve been getting into trouble. They rush right to the end, where the man in the police uniform is waiting for them.

“Congratulations on solving my riddles, gentlemen. I’m impressed.”

“You’re going down, punk,” says Apollo.

“Yeah!” says Patrick.

“I doubt that very much.”

The man in the police uniform pulls his weapon and fires three shots, all hitting Apollo in the torso. He crumples to the ground. Patrick aims his own weapon, but the man in the police uniform is able to quickly shoot him in the shoulder, sending Patrick’s pistol to the ground.

“You thought you could defeat me so easily? How foolish. We’re not so different, you and I. You wanted a story about good aliens and bad aliens? Well, so did I.”

“How’s this for foolish?” says Apollo, pulling up his shirt to reveal he was wearing a bulletproof vest all along. Then, he unloads a clip from his legendary golden Beretta at him. The man in the police uniform falls to the ground, bleeding.

Patrick clutches his shoulder. “We got him.”

“We’re not quite done yet,” says Apollo.

He walks over to the body of the man in the police uniform. He tugs on the man’s face, pulling it off completely. It is the face of Lord Tklox.

“This was his plan all along,” says Apollo. “By murdering all those innocent people, he was turning us against each other, thereby making it easier for his invasion plans to succeed. All he had left to do was answer the Omega Question and boom, no more civilization. Good thing we stopped him in time.”

“I knew it,” says Patrick. “He was never one of us. He was just a bad guy the whole time. It is in no way necessary for me to consider the ideological mechanisms by which my community and society determine who benefits from and participates in civil society, thus freeing me from cognitive dissonance stemming from the ethical compromises that maintain my lifestyle.”

“Hot gazpacho!” says Apollo.

They share a manly handshake like Schwarzenegger and Carl Weathers in *Predator*. It is so dope.

“I’ll go call dispatch,” says Patrick. “Tell them that we won’t be needing backup. Or that we will be needing backup to get the body and investigate the scene? I don’t really know how this works. The movie usually ends at this point.”

Patrick leaves, and Apollo guards the body. Suddenly, the warehouse door bursts open. Seeing him standing over the dead body, a man in a police uniform yells for Apollo to drop his weapon. Apollo shouts that he is a cop and moves to gingerly put his golden gun on the ground, but he is too slow. Bulletproof vests do not cover the head. He is very, very dead.

• • • •

I wasn’t trying to do apologetics for him. Before, I mean. I wasn’t saying it’s okay to kill people because they aren’t perfect or do things that are vaguely threatening. I was just trying to find some meaning, the moral of the story. All I ever wanted to do was write a good story. But murder is inherently meaningless. The experience of living is a creative act, the personal construction of meaning for the individual, and death is the final return to meaninglessness. Thus, the act of killing is the ultimate abnegation of the human experience, a submission to the chaos and violence of the natural world. To kill, we must either admit the futility of our own life or deny the significance of the victim’s.

This isn’t right.

It's not supposed to happen like this.

Why does this keep happening?

It's the same story every time. Again and again and again.

I can't fight the man in the police uniform. He's real, and I'm an authorial construct, just words on a page, pure pretend. But you know who isn't pretend? You. We have to save Apollo. We're both responsible for him. We created him together. Death of the Author, you know? It's just you and me now. I've got one last trick. I didn't mention this in the interest of pace and narrative cohesion, but I lifted the Omega Question off Lord Tklox before he died. I don't have the answer, but I know the question. You've got to go in. I can keep the man in the police uniform at bay as long as I can, but you have to save Apollo. We're going full Morrison.

Engage second-person present.

God forgive us.

• • • •

You wake up. It is still dark out. You reach out to take hold of your spouse. Your fingers intertwine, and it is difficult to tell where you stop and they begin. You love them so much. After a kiss and a cuddle, you get out of bed. You go to the bathroom and perform your morning toilette. When you are finished, you go to kitchen and help your spouse with breakfast for the kids.

They give you a hug when they see you. You hug back, and you never want to let go. They are getting so big now, and you do everything you can to be a good parent to them. You know they love you, but you also want to make sure they have the best life possible.

You work hard every single day to make that happen. Your boss is hard on you, but he's a good guy, and you know you can rely on him when it counts. You trust all your coworkers with your life. You have to. There's no other option in your line of work.

After some paperwork, you and your partner go out on patrol. You've lived in this neighborhood your entire life. Everything about it is great, the food, the sights, the people. There are a few bad elements, but it's your job to stop them and keep everybody safe.

It's mostly nickel and dime stuff today, citations and warnings. The grocery store reports a shoplifter. An older woman reports some kids loitering near her house. Your partner notices a man urinating on street while you're driving past. That kind of thing.

As you are on your way back to the station, you notice a man walking alone on the sidewalk. It's late, and it doesn't look like this is his part of town. His head is held down, like he's trying to hide his face from you. This is suspicious. Your partner says he recognizes him, that he fits the description of a mugger who has been plaguing the area for weeks. You pull up to him. Ask him what he is doing. He doesn't give you a straight answer. You ask him for some identification. He refuses to give it to you. You don't want to arrest this guy for nothing, but he's not giving you much choice.

Suddenly, his hand moves towards a bulge in his pocket. It's a gun. You know it's a gun. You draw your weapon. You just want to scare him, show him that you're serious, stop him from drawing on you. But is he even scared? Is that fear on his face or rage? How can you even tell? He's bigger than you, and he is angry, and he probably has a gun. You do not know this person. You cannot imagine what is going through his mind. You have seen this scenario a million times before in movies and TV shows.

You might die.

You might die.

You might die.

The Omega Question is activated:

Who matters?

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AUTHOR PUBLICATION HISTORY IN *LIGHTSPEED*

- The Null Space Conundrum
- Infinite Love Engine
- The Venus Effect
- We'll Be Together Forever



Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! is John Joseph Adams' new newsletter, which will bring you updates about *Lightspeed* and *Nightmare*, as well as John's anthologies and his other projects. Plus, you'll get John's thoughts about books, short stories, TV and film, roleplaying games, and related subjects. The newsletter launches January 2025. Once it does, subscribers will receive the *Robot Wizard Zombie Crit! Stories: Volume One* ebook anthology as a free reward for subscribing.

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Awards

- Hugo Award Winner: Best Semiprozine: *Lightspeed Magazine* (2014, 2015); “The Day the World Turned Upside Down” by Thomas Olde Heuvelt.
- Hugo Award finalists: Best Editor – Short Form: John Joseph Adams (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018), Best Semiprozine: *Lightspeed Magazine* (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 [no longer eligible post-2015]), “Amaryllis” by Carrie Vaughn, “The Day the World Turned Upside Down” by Thomas Olde Heuvelt, “And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead” by Brooke Bolander.
- Nebula Award finalists: “Arvies” by Adam-Troy Castro, “I’m Alive, I Love You, I’ll See You in Reno” by Vylar Kaftan, “The Old Equations” by Jake Kerr, “Mama, We are Zhenya, Your Son” by Tom Crosshill, “Her Husband’s Hands” by Adam-Troy Castro, “Give Her Honey When You Hear Her Scream” by Maria Dahvana Headley, “The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species” by Ken Liu, “The Sounds of Old Earth” by Matthew Kressel, “Paranormal Romance” by Christopher Barzak, “Alive, Alive Oh” by Sylvia Spruck Wrigley, “The Litigation Master and the Monkey King” by Ken Liu, “We are the Cloud” by Sam J. Miller, “And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead” by Brooke Bolander, “Madeleine” by Amal El-Mohtar, “Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea” by Sarah Pinsker, “Welcome to the Medical Clinic at the Interplanetary Relay Station | Hours Since the Last Patient Death: 0” by Caroline M. Yoachim.
- World Fantasy Award finalists: “Breaking the Frame” by Kat Howard.
- Million Writers Award winners: “Arvies” by Adam-Troy Castro, Best New Online Magazine of 2011 (*Lightspeed Magazine*)
- Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award finalists: “Flower, Mercy, Needle, Chain” by Yoon Ha Lee, “The Old Equations” by Jake Kerr, “The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species” by Ken Liu, “We are the Cloud” by Sam J. Miller.
- Stoker Award Finalists: “Her Husband’s Hands” by Adam-Troy Castro.
- WSFA Small Press Award finalists: “Amaryllis” by Carrie Vaughn (winner), “The Cassandra Project” by Jack McDevitt, “The Bookmaking Habits of Select Species” by Ken Liu.
- Shirley Jackson Award finalists: “The Traditional” by Maria Dahvana Headley, “The West Topeka Triangle” by Jeremiah Tolbert.
- Parsec Award finalists: “Saying the Names” by Maggie Clark (winner), “The Taste of Starlight” by John R. Fultz

ABOUT THE EDITOR

JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS is the series editor of *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy* and is the *New York Times* bestselling editor of more than forty anthologies, such as *Wastelands*, *A People's Future of the United States*, and *Out There Screaming* (with Jordan Peele). He is also editor (and publisher) of the Hugo Award-winning magazine *Lightspeed* and is publisher of its sister-magazine *Nightmare*. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award, a winner of the Locus and Stoker awards, and a ten-time World Fantasy Award finalist. In addition to his short fiction work, he’s the co-creator of *The Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy* podcast, and for five years he was the editor of the John Joseph Adams Books novel imprint. Lately, he’s been working as an editor on various TTRPG projects for Kobold Press and Monte Cook Games and as a contributing game designer on books such as Kobold Press’s *Tome of Heroes*. Learn more at johnjosephadams.com.

ALSO BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS

If you enjoyed reading this anthology, you might also enjoy these works edited or produced by John Joseph Adams:

MAGAZINES

- *Lightspeed Magazine* (Editor/Publisher)
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PODCASTS

- *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* podcast (Producer)
- *Lightspeed Magazine* podcast (Editor/Publisher)
- *Nightmare Magazine* podcast (Publisher)

ANTHOLOGIES

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- *Armored*
- *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2015* (with Joe Hill)
- *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2016* (with Karen Joy Fowler)
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