

penumbria

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Darkness at Yule

Small bit o'
light included

Prose, Poetry, and Art Issue Featuring

Yuliia Vereta • Mike Morgan • Tim Hildebrandt • Ritiksha Sharma • Zary
Fekete • Denny E. Marshall • Simon Christiansen • Kasia Runté • Meg
O'Connor • Adele Gardner • Sonali Roy • Travis Corter • Deborah L. Davitt •
Gustavo Bondoni • Peter J. King • Hana Lee • Warren Muzak • Beth Cato •
Carl Scharwath • Larina Warnock • Emmie Christie • Irina Tall • Lynne
Sargent • Jaytham Firestar • Maureen Bowden

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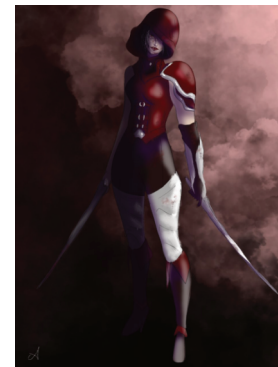
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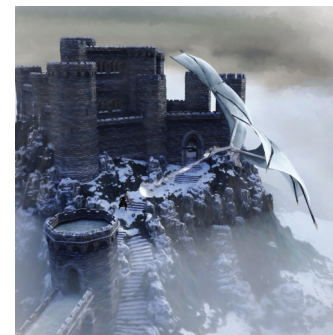
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Red Ridinghood: Assassin



The Trans Magic Within Me



From the Editor

by **Jeff Georgeson**

(the following is stated while clouded with disappointment, shrouded in sarcasm, cloaked in anger, shifting into depression and back again)

There's nothing more to say, now is there?

(Sorry, the promised "small bits o' light" come later in the issue, but not here ... not yet ...)

Jeffrey Georgeson
Managing Editor
Penumbra

Zero on the Kardashev scale

by Yuliia Vereta

Having accumulated enough
words for making a sentence,
you have embraced me tightly
with your biomechanical claw
and asked what made me laugh.

I was laughing because of big
sadness, flowing out my shell.

The night before, Centrodream
sent me a dream, where I saw
the ever-growing dark chasm
between what we all could be
and what we became in the end.

Hope at Wholesale Prices

by Mike Morgan

Aaron Vancil put down his pint glass on the pub's table with a louder thump than he'd intended. "God, I'm exhausted. The way I feel right now, I'm not sure I can work up the enthusiasm to finish my half of mild."

"That is serious," agreed his friend of many years, Ted Gardener. Aaron imagined the reply had been meant humorously. Ted's delivery was too leaden, though, to convey much in the way of hilarity.

In fact, now Aaron came to think on it, the pub in general had a funereal air. No one had selected any music on the computerized juke box, and the players at the pool table were standing around staring at the balls rather than potting them. Even the trivia machines, normally the focus of an excited hubbub of punters arguing over the answers, stood idle, reduced to mournful boops and beeps that were failing to entice anyone to try their luck.

"What is *up* with this place?" sighed Aaron. "The Flag and Lamb is hardly the most thrilling venue on the best of nights, but this is positively tragic."

Ted looked up from the beer mat he'd been studying. "Oh, you haven't heard."

"Heard? Heard what?" It was hard to summon the energy to ask the question.

"Everywhere's like this since Oliphant Industries' big launch last Thursday. That's what people are saying."

Aaron shook his head, not following. So, Ted showed him his beer mat. There were several identical cardboard coasters on the table, which thus far Aaron had completely failed to notice.

The advertising read: Oliphant Industries Brings You the Next Stage of Commerce – Freshly Harvested Hope, Available for Bulk Purchase at Very Reasonable Rates. Never Feel Hopeless Again!

"What kind of fresh hell is this, and how did I not hear about it until now? I'm a reporter, for crying out loud."

"Well," said Ted, "as you know, I'm not one for wild speculation. Just this once, I'll go out on a limb and say your general obliviousness is the result of you not being a very *good* reporter."

Aaron didn't have it in him to argue.

* * *

The next day, Aaron awoke feeling no better. Life, it seemed to him, was pointless. Much like he was pointless, he reflected.

Even his mum thought he'd never amount to anything. "Not a man destined to make a difference in the world," she said whenever people stopped long enough to listen, and sometimes when they didn't. "As short on talent as he is in height. He'll never amount to anything." She was perpetually astonished why months went by at a time without him visiting.

He spent an hour staring at the bedroom ceiling before deciding that,

as the *Milton Keynes Advertiser*'s crack (and, indeed, *only*) investigative journalist he should dig into this business with Oliphant Industries. He might work at a third-rate rag, but he would not shirk his responsibilities.

Besides, Ted's comment had stung. He *was* a good reporter. On occasion.

Another hour passed, and Aaron remembered his plan, finally hauling his aching bones out of bed. It then took him a mere three hours to work up the energy to do an online search for where the company was based.

Armed with the knowledge that their corporate HQ was, in fact, just six miles from where he lived, Aaron went into high gear. Laboring under a miasma of wretchedness, along with what seemed like every other driver on the roads, he completed the short drive in four hours. By three o'clock that afternoon, he was standing in their all glass-and-steel vestibule. A flicker of pride over being, as far as he could tell, the only reporter to make it all the way there fluttered in his chest for a second before expiring from melancholy.

He considered taking a nap in the reception area.

* * *

"Mr. Vancil?" asked the spokesperson. "You told the receptionist you were here to interview someone in charge?"

He mumbled an indistinct reply.

The sharply dressed middle-aged lady continued. "You don't have an appointment, and this is very irregular."

It looked like he was going to be out of luck. He would've felt upset; however, caring required a daunting degree of effort.

To his mild surprise, she instead said, "But Oliphant prides itself on maintaining excellent relations with the press. Even the traditional media. While our senior management are all terribly busy right now, I could spare you some time. Answer any questions you have, provide you with our marketing materials. If that's acceptable?"

He blinked and dredged up a lackluster nod. Whatever was going on, this pinstriped PR personage wasn't affected. She was full of vigor, almost aglow with it.

"I'm Maureen, by the way. Please come this way." She held out a hand, indicating the direction. Seconds passed as she waited for Aaron to finish the complicated business of dragging himself out of the reception area's couch.

"A little faster, if you don't mind," she requested, all smiles.

* * *

Maureen's office was big and had a window overlooking the concrete vista of the business park. Aaron wondered if the view was improved by closing the plastic blinds.

She bubbled, "Somewhat surprised to see you here today—the other reporters turned up last week. Still, you're here now. I'm sure you're full of questions about our exciting new venture."

He mustered "Um" as a reply.

"Of course, the technical challenges weren't easy to solve. That said, Oliphant employs the very best scientific researchers. And by combining that top-tier scientific know-how with our visionary approach to business, we were able to usher in a revolutionary new age of commerce. This is the dawn of something really quite special, I'm sure you agree."

She was gazing at him expectantly. He managed, "You, er, do some-

thing related to hope?”

A frown spoiled her perfect features. “You didn’t see our founder’s televised launch presentation?”

He confessed he’d missed it.

Maureen sucked in a long breath. “Well, I’d best start at the beginning.” She clapped her hands together once, as if to announce she was up to the challenge. “We have *commoditized* hope, Mr. Vancil. Our backroom boffins discovered that hope is an energy field that exists independently of human beings. Once we realized that people simply blunder into hope wavefronts buzzing through the ether, it became clear we were faced with a tremendously exciting new market. The opportunity of a lifetime! By developing hope harvesting technology, we were able to convert this essential human resource into something that can be distributed more rationally.”

“More rationally?”

She seemed surprised. “But of course. Tell me, Mr. Vancil, have you never noticed that sometimes life is going along just swimmingly and then, for no reason you can adequately identify, things just seem to lose their pizzazz?”

“Er, yeah, I suppose.”

“That’s the effect of you randomly exiting the high-hope field you were in and entering a low-hope zone. Lacking that insight, though, you undoubtedly ascribed that sense of joylessness you were suddenly experiencing to other causes. Your spouse’s deficiencies perhaps, or the unsatisfactory nature of your work-life balance. Your local football team’s poor showing on the weekend, the disappointing ending of the latest episode of *Doctor Who*, the prospect of another novel disease killing yet more family members, and so on.”

“It wasn’t any of those things?”

“No, naturally not. That would be absurd. Human beings are more resilient than that, Mr. Vancil. No, we suffer at the vagaries of invisible energy fields that, until very recently, we were entirely ignorant of. The universe didn’t make any sense to us, you see, because we weren’t aware of most of what was going on around us.”

“And now we are?”

“We are, indeed, Mr. Vancil! Exactly! I’m so glad you understand.”

“So, you collect up the hope. Store it.” He rubbed his chin, head swimming with tiredness. “There are no harmful effects to removing those natural energies from the environment?”

“I’m not following you.”

“Well, where do they come from, in the first place? Are they renewable or a finite resource? If you harvest too much, will you damage their ability to regenerate?”

“Research continues, Mr. Vancil. Our understanding of the natural world deepens every day.”

“You don’t know? What if your machines are contaminating the remaining energy fields of the ether as you extract the wavelengths you’re interested in? Industrial processes often cause pollution.”

She pushed a pamphlet across the desk. The pages were very glossy. “Expert opinion is that our harvesting techniques are environmentally friendly. There are full details in here. Please read our literature at your leisure.”

“I noticed a ... certain lethargy in town. It occurs to me that people, including myself, are not receiving the hope we’re used to.”

“There is no evidence to suggest such a phenomenon. Any energies we have harvested in this vicinity would barely make a difference. No,

any oddness you've noticed cannot be laid at our feet."

"You're sure?"

"I have complete confidence."

"People I've spoken to —" (he omitted that it was Ted down the pub) "—People in the know, they have the impression that Oliphant is the cause."

"Are these worthy individuals experts in the field?"

Aaron gave up rather than admit that, no, Ted wasn't. "And you've turned this breakthrough into, what? A profit-making scheme?"

"An industry," she corrected, an edge creeping into her voice. "A new frontier in entrepreneurship, with Britain at its forefront. Empires have always been built on hope. This time, that is literally the case." She smiled at him, displaying gleaming teeth. "Profits are only a side effect. We do this not for the money, Mr. Vancil, but to help the public."

He must have let an iota of incredulity slip into his expression because the spokesperson went on hurriedly, "We provide a vital service. We correct shortfalls in the natural distribution of hope by allowing customers to decide their own requirements. Before, people had no say in how much hope they encountered. The process was essentially random. Now, they can purchase as much hope as they need. It's a personal decision. Demand and supply, correcting inefficiencies through market forces."

"People can buy hope?"

She shrugged. "Absolutely. We currently allow purchases through our online storefront, with shipments going through the mail. The hope's stored in portable batteries, which consumers discharge into their foreheads. Shortly, we plan to sell in-home transmitters. Little boxes that

can sit on top of a TV, for example. They're almost through the government approval process. We'll soon be able to stream hope into every home, on demand."

"For a price." Good God, this was capitalism gone mad.

"You say that like it's a bad thing. We have to cover our costs, Mr. Vancil. That's only fair."

"You don't extract a profit?"

Her mouth twitched a little at that. "Merely an appropriate surcharge. To recompense us for our R&D costs. That is how progress is funded, after all."

He fought through his exhaustion, no, his hope deprivation. "Let me get this straight. You've taken something that was free, that everyone had equal access to, and you've turned it into a product we have to pay for?"

Maureen beamed at him. "Isn't it magnificent? It's the dream of every company, and Oliphant Industries made that dream a reality!" She paused, as if only now truly seeing him. "Oh, Mr. Vancil, you look bereft. Positively without hope." She reached into her desk drawer and placed a small cylinder on the desk. "Would you like a shot?"

He glared at it.

"You'll feel much better, trust me."

"I will, will I?"

"No need to hang around, waiting for a random hope-front to wash over you. Feel restored with purpose, be suffused with confidence in the future, right here and now."

"What will it cost me?"

“I wouldn’t charge you for a sample,” she protested. “The first time’s always on the house.”

He took it. Damn it, it *did* make him feel better. He hated that she was right.

As he left, with a spring in his step he realized, she called after him, “Remember to print nice things about us!” Somewhat quieter, she added, “The other ones did.”

* * *

The dose lasted a day. When it wore off, Aaron looked up Oliphant’s online store. It was research for his article, he told himself. Finding out the cost for a refill was part of his job.

How much?

That couldn’t be right. He checked again and saw that the price really did contain that many zeroes.

He phoned Oliphant’s offices and asked to be put through to Maureen.

“How can I help you, Mr. Vancil? Do you need another leaflet?”

“I can’t believe the price you’re charging.” His voice was shaking.

“I’m confused by your reaction. We provide a service that is, by its very nature, optional. No one is being forced to buy anything. No one will be harmed by not doing business with us.”

“You’re saying people can live without hope?”

He could almost hear her shrugging. “This is Milton Keynes. One might say doing without hope is a local tradition.”

“Not funny.”

“What’s the real problem here, Aaron? You can’t afford more?”

“Of course I can’t afford it! I’m a reporter.”

“No,” she agreed. “Journalism doesn’t pay very well.” The spokesperson paused for a moment. “I can’t make any promises. That said, I do have a friend in Oliphant’s Recruitment department. Have you considered transitioning to sales?”

“Sales?”

“Yes. I know it’s commission based, but our product line is a hit. Units are flying off the shelves. Hope positively sells itself, and we’re in dire need of new sales reps to handle the demand. If you were to come aboard with us, well, you could earn a packet. More than enough for a regular supply of your own.”

“I don’t know.”

Her next words clinched the deal. “Employees qualify for a discount. They get hope at wholesale prices.”

* * *

The phones in the call center never stopped ringing. Aaron answered his sixty-third call of the day and filled out the customer’s details on his terminal.

Scant months ago, he would never have believed he’d end up here. Then again, a few months ago he’d thought a newspaper article would make a difference. Newsflash: it hadn’t. The great British public had not only ignored his dire warnings, they’d jumped all over the new product from Oliphant. It was the largest sales success in British history. Dozens of companies around the world were racing to emulate its introduction of emotional-field products in their parts of the globe. In months, the entire human race would know the delights this new technology brought.

Understanding the genie could never be shoved back in its bottle, Aaron was faced with a choice. He could continue being the angry old man shouting at the world as it changed, or he could give in and join its madness. He held on longer than most people stripped of their hope.

Then, one particularly grim night, he'd finally admitted to himself that his refusal to phone about the job opening achieved nothing except his own hopelessness. And, unfair though it was, vocations didn't pay bills.

So, he'd caved, and here he was.

He told himself it wasn't so bad and, whenever he felt a twinge of angst, he pressed a battery-shaped hope infuser to his forehead. That solved any problem. For a few minutes. Then he remembered how the world was going along with this madness and how one not-very-good reporter could never have made a difference.

After starting at the call center, he'd watched even the good reporters struggle to get out coverage—which provided a small measure of bitter comfort, since it proved he really wouldn't have achieved anything if he'd kept at it. The lack of opposition was unsurprising—Oliphant had thrown its cash at TV channels and politicians with equal zeal, not to mention effectiveness.

He was saved from taking his sixty-fourth call by his supervisor calling their team together for a stand-up meeting. Their youthful leader was as unencumbered by introspection as he was by experience. Aaron wondered what the word relayed from management would be.

Were they issuing a statement on the epidemic of depression afflicting every corner of the United Kingdom or the skyrocketing suicide rates? Oliphant said subscribing to regular infuser shipments was the solution to all that, with a discount offered for those subscribing to a monthly plan. Far from it being a panacea, Aaron found reliance on manufactured hope induced something closer to bipolar disorder—from what he saw, it resulted in rapid transitions between feverish ac-

tivity and soul-crushing lethargy so severe mothers couldn't care for their infants, doctors couldn't care for patients, royals couldn't snap at servants. In fact, no one could do much of anything until the next infusion.

The supervisor's announcement was about none of those things. "Great news. Our routines are about to be spiced up. No more selling the same thing day in day out. We have a new product."

"Oh, yes?" asked Aaron.

The supervisor nodded. "R&D have found another type of energy field to harvest. We're not just selling hope now, oh no, we're ..." He drummed his hands on the low partition of the nearest cubicle for dramatic effect, and then finished with, "... selling love!"

His teammates seemed impressed. Cynthia said happily, "That'll help our bonuses."

Aaron blurted out, "That means people will only experience love if they buy it from us."

"No," replied his supervisor, "that means people will be able to obtain as much love as they can afford. Which is a wonderful breakthrough for society."

The young man waited for Aaron's agreement and frowned when it didn't materialize. "Aaron seems a bit downhearted. Does anyone know where his infuser is? A dose will fix him right up."

Aaron shook his head, as if emerging from a long and disturbing dream, and stared at his supervisor's childlike face. "The depressing thing is, you're most likely right. About the infuser. About how it'd make me forget anything was wrong. So, you see, I have to leave. Right now." He gave a little wave to his small group of colleagues. To Cynthia, he whispered, "You can have my stapler. I know you've been eyeing it."

The main room of the call center was long and wide, and it took Aaron several minutes to cross all the way to the exit. As his feet padded softly along the aisle between endless cubicles, he heard the plaintive cries of his former boss. “What does he mean he’s leaving? Where does he think he’s going?”

As Aaron swiped his ID card through the security reader, he dropped the infuser and let it roll away. Hope was great and all, but it was all too easy to let it be a substitute for action.

* * *

Aaron met the prospective donor in the foundation’s entrance hallway. “Welcome, welcome. Right this way. I have a whole tour planned. By the time I’ve finished with you, you’ll be begging us to take your money.”

“Will I indeed?” Kinsey, the owner of a successful pharmaceutical company, did not appear impressed. He forgave her reaction, understanding at least one of its causes wasn’t anything to do with him. “How long have you worked for the research foundation?” she asked.

“Not long enough to lose my enthusiasm.” Aaron led the wealthy benefactor of the sciences up the large staircase, feeling zippier than he had in months. “Recent career change. I searched for labs investigating emotional energy fields, the phenomena that Oliphant are exploiting, found this place, and volunteered my services, as well as some trivial ideas that struck me as potentially useful.”

“Ideas?”

“Yes. I’ve been known to have them. The lead researchers were quite interested. Already working along similar lines. Case of like minds coming together, and all that.” He opened a door and indicated she should peer through. “Main lab. Many dedicated experts working tirelessly, etcetera. Replicating what Oliphant did. Finding the fields, siphoning them off.”

Kinsey’s lips tightened.

“Not a fan of the new industrial revolution, eh?” He winked at her. “Neither are we.”

“You’ll forgive me for not believing you. I came here thinking you were doing something to stop all this nonsense. Instead, you’re every bit as bad as Oliphant, wreaking the same havoc they are.”

“Not the same havoc. No, I wouldn’t say it was the same flavor of mayhem at all.”

Exasperated, she shot back, “Tell me what you’re up to this second or I’m walking out.”

“Well, you do possess a very lovely bank account, so I’ll tell you. Oliphant have commoditized hope, yes? Plus love, let’s not forget that.”

“I am aware.” Her tone was acid.

“And yet no one opposes them. Because resistance without hope is a lackluster endeavor at best, once the anger fades away.”

“Speaking of anger, I’m experiencing a modicum of it myself. I’m warning you, if I don’t hear your great plan that so convinced the researchers, right now, I will not only leave without donating a penny, I will tell all my wealthy friends to likewise boycott you.”

“Researchers *and* management,” he clarified. Under her glare, he added, “Not that it matters. Tell me, why have people given up fighting Oliphant?”

“What an asinine question—you said it yourself. Anger cannot be sustained indefinitely, and in the absence of hope ... well, you simply quit after a while. And they bribe a lot of people.”

Aaron made a show of considering her words. “Ignoring the corrup-

tion angle just this second, why can't anger be sustained?"

"Because ... because ... I suppose we don't have the energy."

"It's the opposite, actually. We have too much energy, of the wrong sort."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Apathy." He gestured through the door at the busy researchers again. "The energy field I suggested they look for next."

Plenty of others had thought to exploit additional fields; it had taken him, though, to think of this one in particular. The idea of a lifetime. Even Aaron could, it seemed, make a difference when it counted. Then again, his mum always had said he was an apathetic little sod, so maybe it was inevitable he'd think of exploiting that particular field.

"Took some fiddling with the equipment, and it's terribly expensive to run, but the brains of our outfit got there in the end. We're siphoning off its invisible thunderclouds as I speak. Please excuse the side-effects." That was, of course, the reason why she was so irked with

him. Well, that and he was genuinely annoying.

She blinked, understanding dawning. "You're draining away the apathy?"

"All of it, yes."

"That means—"

Aaron nodded. "It does, you're right. Without apathy getting in the way, people will find themselves perfectly able to stand up to Oliphant. True, they'll lack the hope that inspires change. On the other hand, they will have a bottomless reservoir of irritation and an obvious target."

They smiled at each other. Kinsey pulled out her checkbook.

"I take your point, Mr. Vancil. When hope is nowhere to be found, fury is a most suitable replacement. I do hope the people at Oliphant have a safe place to hide, because I think they're going to need it."

Aaron could only agree.



Street Hand

by Tim Hildebrandt

The Science of Last Things

by Tim Hildebrandt

Eschatology. It seemed a perfect expression of man's inhumanity: a bit of surrealist theater would make it incarnate, a flippant rejection of man's brutality—screaming from war-torn streets everywhere.

Execution was as cursory as concept development—no pressure from perfection. Materials came together, sketches, masks, dirty clothes. We waited until dark. The location was notorious for its dreary aspect: windblown debris, potholes—dark creeping alleyways—ruined buildings, towering windowless to the dirty clouds.

At the corner, an iron-framed sewer grate descended into the bowels of the city. With a pickax, we dug until a deep asphalt fissure ran along the curb. Max ripped his clothing and took off his shoes. His feet were like shoes anyway. As hard as wood, he'd used his hands as tools for eighty years. Laying into the carved depression with one arm sticking above grade, Max lolling his head against the dull iron of the gutter. Poured concrete covered his arm to his wrist, filling shallow voids to

his neck—sprinkling gravel where he emerged from the street. Mixed grey paint matched the surrounding asphalt. Shuffled dirt and rocks with our feet to finish the texture. He had to pee. Feel free Max; it won't hurt a thing. We panned across with the lights and cameras until the footage lived and breathed.

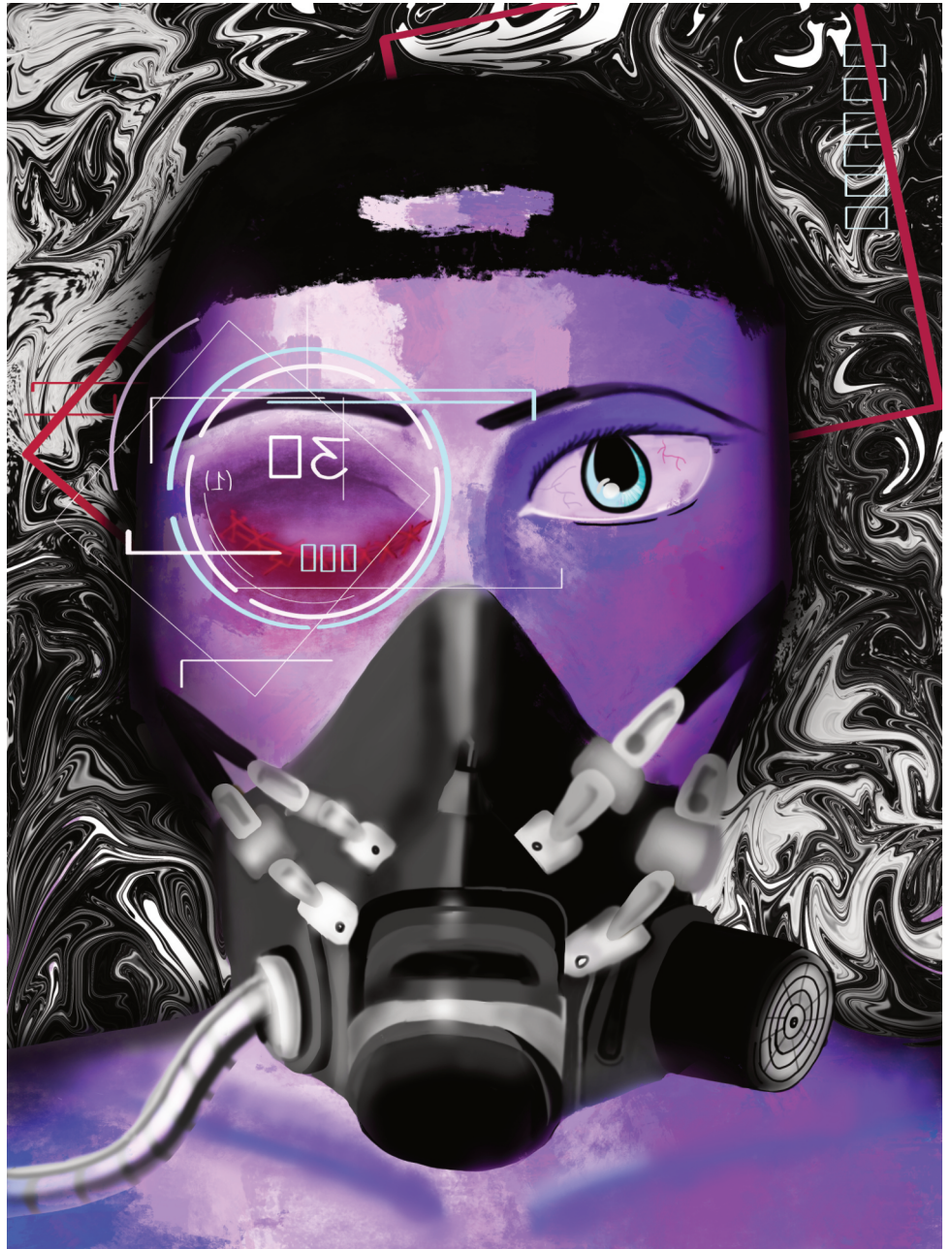
A cop car drove by, we doused the spots and threw the junk in the van. The cop did a slow turn and came back as we drove off down a side street with him hard on our ass. His lights in the rearview, we pulled over. Outstanding warrants, open bottles, and paraphernalia threw us all in jail. We didn't catch the street name. Three weeks later, I made bail and crisscrossed the wrong end of town, looking for the alley. Max was never intended to be a literal rendering.

I was ready to give up when there he was, like roadkill. One eye open.

Max, I whispered, I found you.

Beta 3.2.1 (a)

by Ritiksha Sharma



There Is No Software for the Heart

by Zary Fekete

The code danced in front of me on the screen. I typed a few more lines and hit enter.

```
-Select donor recipient.
```

I typed.

```
-Gabor Kovacs.
```

The computer thought to itself. The screen asked for another input.

```
-Input language code.
```

I had done this one often enough I knew it by heart. I typed.

```
-Gallo-Romance. Gaul. Frankish. 386.
```

The computer hummed for a moment. I glanced through the window to the operating room. Mr. Kovacs was under. Various wires and sensors dangled over his body. A scanning device clicked into place, ready for my final input. I typed my name and program authorization code:

```
-Sara Gresz, 23451
```

I looked back at the screen. I typed the final line.

```
-Upload voice.
```

The scanner revolved on its telescoping arm and slowly advanced to-

ward Mr. Kovacs's body. A moment later and it was hovering over his head. The screen steadily kicked back data. I had seen this often enough to know roughly what was happening, but much of it was above my pay level. Although it couldn't be seen with the naked eye, the monitors showed me the extra verbal sheen that was being added to Mr. Kovacs's vocal cords. It was a delicate covering, one hundredth of the width of a human hair wide. The sections of his brain that lit up when he produced words and sentences were being microscopically augmented with extra attachments. It was what our company, Voice Capture, specialized in. A vocal upgrade, all on a molecular level.

A few more moments of humming and the scanner retreated into its resting cradle. The lights in the operating room clicked from red to white and two nurses entered. One of them checked Mr. Kovacs's pulse. The other went to work on his blood pressure.

I checked the screen.

```
-Transfer complete.
```

I flipped the microphone switch.

“Once he's awake please bring him in to see me.”

The nurse looked at me through the window and nodded. I stood up and exited the operating theatre.

* * *

Mr. Kovacs sat across from me. He kept touching his throat as

though he was expecting there to be a scar or an incision.

“It’s remarkable,” he said. “I don’t feel anything.”

I smiled. “Yes, the tech has advanced quite a bit since the clinical trials a few years ago. Back then there was a brief operation involved with x-rays and scopes, but it isn’t necessary anymore. It all happens now on a subatomic level.”

He shook his head in amazement, twisting his neck from side to side.

“Let’s run through a couple of tests,” I said.

He nodded and sat back.

I typed a few commands on my desk monitor. A moment later and I could see the rotating image of Mr. Kovacs’s brain with another image of his vocal cords revolving next to it.

“Take a look at the screen on that wall,” I said.

He looked over at the blank screen and waited.

“I want you to read the text as it appears.”

A moment later and the screen flickered to life.

“*The rabbit hopped out of its hutch,*” Mr. Kovacs read.

“Good,” I said. “Now try this one.”

The screen flickered again. New text appeared.

He cleared his throat and spoke again. This time a woman’s voice appeared in the air as his mouth moved.

“*Le lapin a sauté de son clapier.*”

He gasped and clapped his hand against his mouth. I chuckled. He had a panicked look on his face. I held up my hands.

“Easy,” I said. “Hold on. Look back at the screen and read the English again.”

He slowly looked back at the screen. He cleared his throat and the sound of the air moving through his vocal cords adjusted through a noticeable shift from female to male. A second later and his regular, deeper voice said in English, “*The rabbit hopped out of its hutch.*”

He sat transfixed for a moment, massaging his throat. When he looked back at me his composure had returned, but he was still a bit shaken.

“The nurses told me it would be weird, but that was astonishing,” he said.

I nodded. “It will take some practice but soon you won’t need the text prompt. You’ll be able to switch back and forth automatically. The brain makes those adjustments quite quickly.”

“This probably is a stupid question, but why is the voice still female?”

“It’s not a stupid question,” I said. “The donor was female. You now have her voice. You received everything from her related to her speaking and language ability. That means when you received the upload your body began using her vocal patterns exactly as she used them. So, you aren’t just speaking her language knowledge. You are literally using her voice.”

He nodded, but I could tell he still didn’t fully understand.

I smiled at him. “That’s all for now,” I said. “You can come back in a week for a checkup, but as of…” I checked the clock on my computer. “...3:13PM Budapest time, that voice is now officially yours.”

Mr. Kovacs massaged his neck for a few moments. “Thank you, Ms. Gresz.” He said. He stood to leave. Then he said, “By the way, who is the donor?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “For legal reasons the donors are handled by a different department. I never met her. You’ll never meet her.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “She’ll never use her voice again, will she?”

I shook my head. “The donated voice is permanently yours. When she sold it to the company the process also involved the complete deactivation of the voice on her end. No redundancies. It is necessary for things like vocal identification programs.”

“How does she speak?” he asked.

I held up my hands. “Sometimes people who donate choose to go without a voice. Sometimes they just use a computer for communication. But you don’t need to worry about that. She sold it, and now it’s yours.”

Mr. Kovacs paused in thought. “That seems remarkable,” he said. “I’m obviously benefiting from her choice. But why would someone sell their voice?”

“It’s become a huge market,” I said with a smile. “It must be, otherwise I wouldn’t have a job.”

“Why do you think they sell?” he said.

I shrugged. “Lots of reasons. If they have a native language that is more expensive they can make a bit of money and then still buy themselves a cheaper language to replace it with. That’s what our company says happens most often. But sometimes, I expect, people just need the money, and they choose to be voiceless for the cash benefit.”

Mr. Kovacs nodded. He stood and extended his hand. I shook it.

“It’s been a pleasure,” I said. “Enjoy your new French.”

* * *

My father crept into the kitchen while I was putting the milk away. He moved so slowly I didn’t hear him. I turned just as he was about to stumble and quickly moved to his side. He was momentarily wracked with a coughing fit.

“Stop moving around!” I said. “Whatever you need, let me get it for you.” I took his arm and slowly helped him turn back around. We headed back to the living room window where his chair was.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Nothing to it.”

“Not true, and you know that. What did Dr. Greiner say?”

My father waved his hand at me and looked out the window. “What does she know?” he said. “Isn’t she Austrian?”

I chuckled. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Their physique is different. Who knows whether she’s telling me things that don’t apply?”

“Even if that were true,” I said, “Which it isn’t...she’s lived in Hungary for twenty years now. And it doesn’t help any matters for you to be going on and on about physique and nonsense like that. She cares about you. How long has she been your doctor? Fifteen years?”

I pulled out my phone and dialed Dr. Greiner’s number. A moment later she picked up. I hit her with a couple of questions about my father’s recent checkup.

“Yes,” she said, and I could hear the smile in her voice. “We had

quite a discussion when I was over there earlier.” I shook my head at my father and mouthed, “*You are so rude.*”

“The point is,” Dr. Greiner said, “He needs to not overexert himself. The new medicine he’s been given should start to attack the trouble cells. If it’s going to work he will feel it in the next few days. Lots of rest is what is best at this point.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll tell him. He’s convinced himself not to listen to you because of your dangerous Habsburg heritage.”

There was a laugh on the other end. “Take care of him,” she said. “Call me if you need anything.”

I hung up and then tucked in his blanket while he continued to stare out the window. “There *is* a difference,” he said with a jerk of his head. “What’s wrong with Hungarian doctors?”

Usually I let his words drift past me, but this time I was angry. “Stop it!” I said. “Do you know how many Hungarian workers from my company were just transferred to the England branch?” I gestured out the window. “It’s normal now. People live and work wherever they want. Why do you think so many people want to buy voices?”

I had touched a nerve. Father lapsed into silence and looked out the window. Then he reached for the photo on the shelf behind him but couldn’t quite reach it.

I put the framed picture in his hands. He looked down at the wedding couple in the faded paper.

“Where’s the other one?” he said.

I handed him the other photo from the shelf. He compared the two.

“She looks quite the same, doesn’t she?” he said.

I tapped Mother’s face in the newer photo. Her hair was grey, but her face was still youthful. “Do you remember this day?” I said. “This was just after I was hired.”

He nodded. “She worked too hard at the end,” he said.

I knelt down next to him. “Look at me,” I said. He finally did. “All of Mother’s work. All of what she earned. All of it put me at Voice Capture. It’s because of her I have this job. You forget that sometimes.”

He grumbled and waved the photos away. I replaced them on the shelf behind him. He stared out the window for a moment.

“Foreign companies,” he said with a grumble.

I stood. “That foreign company is paying for your medical bills.” I turned and went to the kitchen to make dinner, leaving him in silence.

* * *

I found a seat in the conference room and quickly reread the email from Dr. Greiner. She wasn’t optimistic about how Father was responding to the new medicine. He had been on it for two weeks. She mentioned a new medicine that was experimental but very expensive. I gave a silent sigh and had dialed up my bank account on my tablet when Mr. Levai came into the room.

He clapped his hands. The conference room grew silent. Everyone on staff was assembled for an announcement. “*It must be a big one,*” I thought. Usually it was just sales who were brought in for these sessions. Not this time. The entire workforce was here.

Mr. Levai ran through a few preliminary briefs related to his role as the company CEO. Then he rubbed his hands together with a smile and turned to the screen behind him showing a Power Point stack with several new line items. My attention perked up. When the com-

pany introduced new pricing structures it often presented a chance for advancement or at least for bonuses. I glanced again at Dr. Greiner's email...and at my account balance.

"This is the latest from New York," Mr. Levai said. "They're introducing something new. They're calling it 'Dialect Choice'."

"What is it?" someone asked.

Mr. Levai pointed at the screen and a new promotional video started to play. The narrator's voice was personable and soothing.

"The latest twist in Voice Capture, authentic dialect transmission."

The screen showed an image of the earth revolving in space. The narrator continued.

"With more than 6500 languages, the opportunity for growth is already sky-high, but our latest technology has provided an unexpected sales breakthrough."

The camera zoomed in on the rotating globe and centered in on the coast of Greece. Soon images of refugee camps filled the screen. People arrived in droves and were met by United Nations helpers. There were rows and rows of desks with doctors and nurses running this way and that. The refugee families were helped from one location to another. The narrator's voice gave way to a cacophony of different voices and languages, all being spoken at once.

The narrator continued, *"Psychiatrists and human rights experts agree that when someone hears words spoken in their native language their hearts respond. This benefit is compounded when the voice is pitched to reflect their specific dialect or accent. For example, it is one thing to hear Mandarin. It is quite different to hear the Fujian dialect."*

The screen now showed an orphanage in China. A care worker spoke to the baby in her arms and the tiny face broke into a shining smile.

"Voice Capture is rolling out a new, premiere package, priced to reflect the market standard for humanitarian aid items. We believe we can expect governments worldwide to seek out our services for a number of different career needs. Diplomats, aid workers, refugee care, and so on."

The screen flicked through several more places on the globe. One of them was the refugee camps in eastern Hungary and Romania. The camera zoomed out and showed the revolving earth again with the Voice Capture logo.

"There is no software to translate the human heart. Voice Capture: Real Voices. Real Change."

When the presentation was over I approached Mr. Levai. He snapped his laptop shut and smiled at me.

"What is it, Sara?" he said.

"Very inspiring presentation, sir," I said. "I would like to put my name forward to learn the protocols for the new dialect option."

"I assumed you would," he said, putting his laptop in his briefcase. "You're one of our best transfer technicians. I'm surprised you haven't received any offers from abroad."

"Well, truthfully, I have, sir. But I'm partial to staying in Budapest. It's just my father and me now since last year."

He stopped fidgeting with his case and looked at me. "I'll have the paperwork sent over to you. Your training can begin tomorrow if you are ready."

I smiled. "Thank you, sir. I am."

* * *

When I came home I heard my father in his bedroom. After putting away a few groceries I wandered in and found him surrounded by letters and photo albums.

“What’s all this?” I said. “You aren’t in your chair. We talked about this, Apa.”

“It’s Mrs. Bocskai from next door.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of the front door. “Her daughter needed something for a high school presentation. Photographs and newspaper clippings.” He twisted his mouth into a cynical smile. “Something *old* she said. They are covering the twentieth century.”

I sat down next to him on his bed and picked up a few of the faded photographs. I smiled in spite of myself.

“Who’s this?” I said, holding one up.

He peered at it through his bifocals. “That is me and your mother. Before you were born.”

I looked at the couple in the photo. They looked impossibly young. The smile on my father’s face was unlike anything I had seen in him recently.

I held it before him and pointed at his younger face. “What happened to him?” I said. “What happened to this eager young man?”

He waved me away. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “Since the funeral nothing has been the same.”

He stopped shuffling through the photos for a moment and held up a finger in my face. “I’m tired,” he said. “There’s nothing to be happy about. You saw what happened to her in the hospital. Nothing. And she just dried up and blew away.”

I sighed, but by now he was on a roll.

“Look at this!” he said, holding up another faded photo. “Do you know who that is?”

I squinted at the young man on the black-and-white paper. “No,” I said. “Who is it?”

“Him?” my father said. “Your great grandfather. That was the 60s. He was the only one from that generation of our family who received a government job. There was no work for Roma citizens in Transylvania.” He shook his head as he looked at the old picture. “Over a century ago. It was his salary that allowed us to eventually move to Budapest.”

He dropped the photograph and continued rummaging in the box. Finally, he piled the photos back into an uneasy stack. “Give this to Mrs. Bocskai, will you?” he said. “I’m going to bed.”

I picked up the box and closed his bedroom door. A moment later and I could hear his record player click on, and the familiar sounds of gypsy music drifted through the thin wall. He was very proud of his record collection and wouldn’t hear of it when I told him all of those songs could be accessed easily now online.

I carried the box across the hall and knocked on our neighbor’s door. A moment later and Mrs. Bocskai opened it with a smile.

“Well, that is quite a haul,” she said, looking at the overflowing photo box. “My daughter will be overjoyed. She’s preparing a presentation on the twentieth century for class and needed visual aids.”

“I hope it’s helpful,” I said.

“Oh, here,” she said, turning back into her kitchen. A moment later and she was pressing a plate of homemade palacsinta into my hands. “For you and your father.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but father can’t eat it. Dr. Greiner said he needs to be confined to liquids.”

Mrs. Bocskai’s face grew solemn. “I’m sorry,” she said. “There’s not much time left, is there?”

I shook my head.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Do you have gypsy music? He is always looking for new sounds from his homeland.”

“Where exactly was his hometown?” she said.

“Brassó,” I said. “Well, Brassov in Romanian on the maps. Actually, just outside of the city. A small village called Bácsfalu. Not so small anymore, actually. There is a refugee camp that just opened near there recently.”

She shook her head. “So much conflict. It never seems to end, does it? What does your father say when he hears the news?”

I shrugged. “He mostly ignores it. All he wants to do is remember what it used to be like. That’s why he likes the music so much.”

Mrs. Bocskai had a dreamy look on her face. “Oh, I can imagine what the music from there must have been like long ago. What was their dialect like? Don’t you know about these things with your work?”

“Completely unique,” I said. “Very few people speak it anymore.”

I thanked her for the palacsinta and went back to the apartment. I could hear the needle from the record player scratching at the end of the groove. Quietly I went into my father’s bedroom and put away the record. I stood at the foot of his bed and watched him for a mo-

ment. He was very thin. His breath raised and lowered his bony chest under the blanket.

After a long moment I left his room and shut the door.

* * *

My dialect transfer training began the next morning. Most of it was routine software training. But near the end of the first session there was an extended lecture on language theory. The lecture was specially included for our branch in Budapest.

It was mostly because of Hungarian. Hungarian was one of the harder languages to learn. We were given current learning estimates at the start of every month. Some languages had become easier to learn as the world became more connected; languages like English and Mandarin. But some were still difficult and Hungarian just about topped the list. The only languages that routinely beat Hungarian in difficulty level were Basque and Navajo, but those were not usually needed for international work. Hungarian was still highly in demand.

The current conditions across the border to the east were the main reason why dialect transfer was such a lucrative option for Voice Capture. Hungarian was already the highest priced item we sold. But once Hungarian was coupled with a local dialect the price was prohibitively expensive for most private citizens. Usually only well-funded government NGOs had that kind of cash. And because of the ongoing military conflict to the east, there were always refugees streaming across the borders, and that meant more need for relief workers who could genuinely communicate with refugees in their heart languages. Software translation could make concepts clear, but the hearts could only truly be understood when someone spoke the native language.

The instructor finished up the session and asked for questions. I raised my hand.

“How soon will these dialects be available for purchase?”

“They are up and running already,” he said. “You’ll probably be uploading them for clients this week.”

As the class packed up the instructor came over to my desk. “Your numbers for this session were very good. Did you come to Voice Capture through one of the advancement scholarships?”

“No, sir,” I said. “There were no scholarships available for Roma citizens. My path was paid for.”

His eyebrows went up. “Paid?! That’s an expensive way to advance. Few do that.”

I shrugged. “I had no alternatives. My mother worked for one of the government agencies that did linguistic work. She specialized in language revitalization cataloging. It’s a very painstaking process where smaller languages that face potential extinction are preserved. When some of the cataloging was computerized about twenty years ago, one of the brighter technicians realized there might be a way to merge it in the form of an upload into the human mind. This led to the creation of Voice Capture. My mother was well-positioned to be an influential voice before her department became obsolete when Voice Capture eventually absorbed it. She put in a few good words, but most of my advancement came through her overtime work.”

He nodded. “She must be a remarkable woman.”

I smiled. “She was. She died two years ago.”

The instructor looked at me. “I’m very sorry.”

“Thank you,” I said. “She would have been happy to see me here.”

* * *

When I arrived home, Father was back in his chair. The window was spotted with rain drops. He looked up at me.

“I just got off the phone with Dr. Greiner,” he said.

I sat down next to him. “What did she say?”

He didn’t answer. I pulled out my phone and pressed her number. A moment later she answered.

“I’m so sorry, Sara,” she said. “What he has is very vicious. We could try the new medicine, but as you know...” Her voice trailed off.

“...it’s very expensive,” I said, finishing her thought.

There was a pause on her end. Finally, she said, “Just let me know what you’d like to do. I can get you an advance on the dose if you want to try it. You can pay for it later.”

“Let me talk with him,” I said. I thanked her and hung up.

I looked at Father. His cheeks were more sunken than usual. There was a slight shake in his frame as he breathed.

I stood up. “Well,” I said. “Let’s try it. What can it hurt?”

He looked up at me. “How much is it?”

“Who cares?” I said. “Besides. I got a promotion.” I playfully nudged his shoulder. “Soon we’ll be swimming in money.”

“What is your promotion?” he said. I told him about the new dialect transfer system. He listened with more interest than he usually showed toward my work.

Later in the evening as I was tucking him into bed he said, “Why do

you want to stay here, Sari? Isn't there more for you somewhere else?"

I smiled down at him. "I like being here. It's where you are." He looked at me a moment longer and then turned toward the wall.

I kissed his temple and turned out the light.

* * *

A week had passed since my training. This was my first use of the dialect transfer system. I typed the last few lines.

-Select Donor Recipient.

I glanced through the glass at the young lady beneath the sheet in the operating room. I typed again.

-Dora Anderson

There was a hum from the system. This took longer than usual because the dialect transfer was going to happen simultaneously with the voice upload. I was excited in spite of myself. This donor dialect was brand new. It had just been uploaded an hour ago. I glanced at the screen.

-Input dialect code.

I wasn't used to this part yet. I looked up the corresponding code in the manual on my right. I typed.

-Uralic. Ugric. Csángó. 445.

The computer accepted the code. A moment later and the sensor was extending from its cradle toward Ms. Anderson on the table. The machine did its usual round of computations. A moment later and it was finished. I tapped on the glass and pointed in the direction of my

office. The nurse nodded at me.

An hour later Ms. Anderson was escorted into my office. She sat down, her eyes still hazy from the anesthesia.

"How do you feel?" I said.

She blinked a few times. "Good. Still getting used to being awake."

I smiled. "Let's run through a few tests." I typed a few words and pointed to the screen. "Please read what you see."

She looked up at the screen and read, "*The fox ran through the pasture.*"

"Good," I said. I typed a couple of notes. "Now try this one."

She cleared her throat and read. An elderly man's rasp appeared in the air as she read, "*A róka átfutott a fűvön.*"

I stared at her. My mouth dropped open. I leapt out of my chair and grabbed her shoulders. "Again!" I said. "Say that again!" A nurse appeared at the door with a look of alarm on her face.

Ms. Anderson cried out. "Ez fáj! Stop! Állj meg!" Her voice alternated between the rasp and her normal voice. The nurse ran in. My hands were pulled away from her. The room went black as I fainted.

* * *

I stared out the window. It was raining again. The window was covered with a thin sheen of water. I turned my head back into the room and looked at Dr. Greiner. She smiled at me with a look of sympathy. "I'm truly sorry," she said. "He was a caring man."

"No, he wasn't," I said. "You can be honest. I know you took plenty of grief from him."

She chuckled. “It’s true, perhaps,” she said. “But I can take it. I am from Austria.” She winked at me.

I gave a tired smile. “He didn’t like anybody,” I said.

“He adored you,” she said. “Every checkup I had with him he went on and on about how his daughter was working for an international company. Making real money.”

I looked down at my lap. “It sounds weak to say it. But I wish he had told me. He wasn’t sentimental. He never said ‘I love you.’ It would have been nice to hear just once before he was gone. And I wish he had told me he was going to do this.”

“Wouldn’t you have tried to stop him?” she said.

“Of course.”

“Well,” she said. “There’s your answer. He obviously knew what his chances for survival were. And he wanted to leave you with something going forward.”

I shook my head. “A lot. Do you know how much his dialect was worth? Hardly anyone can speak Csángó anymore. If I didn’t want to I’d never have to work again.”

“That reminds me,” she said. “I understand you’ve been promoted. Something about a new job in the Singapore branch? Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“It was certainly a magnificent gift he gave you,” she said. “And that was just before he died, right?”

“The same day,” I said. “I discovered later that he had worked it out

for a voice extraction technician to pay him a house visit. Father must have made the call after I left for work that morning. I found out about it at work because...” I didn’t finish the thought. “Anyway, I rushed home and found him on his bed. I had to hold my breath to get in. He must have turned the gas on just after the technician left the house. I didn’t find out that the money had been credited to my account until a few days later.”

She pursed her lips. “May I tell you something?” she said.

I looked at her.

“Doctors aren’t usually supposed to say this, but you and your father feel like family so I can tell you. If he hadn’t ended his life, it would have likely happened in the next weeks anyway. And it would have been painful for him.”

I looked out the window. The rain was stopping. A tiny slant of sunlight touched the glass and gave it a glow.

“I wish I could have said goodbye,” I said.

* * *

The plane was pulling back from the terminal. The safety announcements had just ended for my flight to Singapore.

I reread the email on my phone from Ms. Anderson:

No need to thank me, Ms. Gresz. I understand it is not protocol for Voice Capture to reach out to customers with personal requests. In your case, however, I understand why you asked for this recording. I can sincerely tell you it was a pleasure to make it. Best wishes. Dora Anderson.

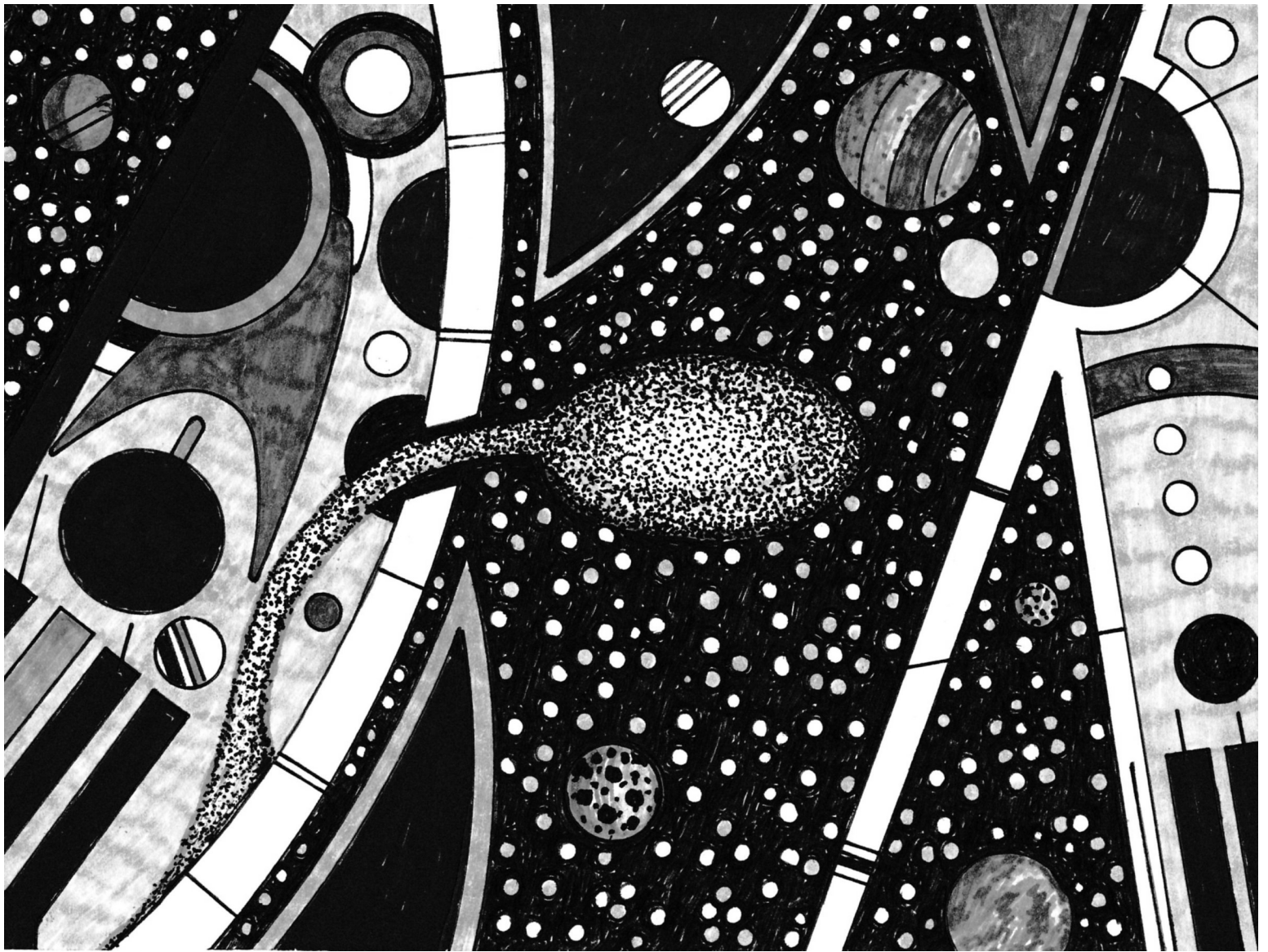
I leaned back in the chair. The plane slowly made its turn onto the

runway. On my phone I scrolled to the voice recordings. I selected the one from the top of the list. It pulled up Ms. Anderson's profile.

Dora Anderson, UN relief worker. Location: Transylvania. Aiding relief efforts for displaced Roma citizens.

The plane accelerated and was airborne a moment later. Trails of

cloud skimmed past the wings as we climbed. I clicked the play button on my phone. I leaned back and listened to Dora Anderson's new voice, with the familiar rasp. A tear strayed down my face. I heard for the first time in my life, "*Sara, you have made me so proud. Apa loves you.*"



Leaking Galaxy

by Denny E. Marshall

Anaximancy

by Simon Christiansen

“We choose to go through the Moon!”

The speaker’s voice came loud and clear from the sound system, audible over the roar of the engines. Every citizen had to hear the speech, even the crew.

“We choose to go through the Moon and do other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard. When Columbus sailed over the edge of the top of the cylinder, he taught humanity that there is no ‘new world’ waiting out there; we have only the one, and we must fight to keep it!”

The acceleration pushed Sophia against the back of the seat. On the viewscreen, the city of Athens stretched out beneath them, towers of steel standing side by side with temples of ancient marble. The city shrunk, turning into a toy model; tiny dots of moving vehicles barely visible, then not visible at all.

“Scientists say that the length of the cylinder is one-third the diameter of the habitable top. What was Columbus thinking as he fell, I wonder?”

The metal frame of the ship groaned. Sophia looked at the viewscreen again and gasped. The entire top of the cylinder was visible. The three continents of Europa, Asia, and Libya, separated by the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the river Nile, like three slices of a giant pizza. The Edge Ocean surrounded the continents, bounded by the edge of the top. Those foolish enough to doubt this basic fact of geography had followed Columbus down the side.

“The earth rests in space due to the principle of indifference: There is no reason for it to move in any direction rather than any other, so it remains where it has always been.”

She idly wondered if there was a different civilization on the opposite base of the cylinder. Answering that question would be the goal of a different expedition. Since early childhood, she had been mesmerized by the moon. She would be the first to uncover its mysteries.

“We, however, must not be indifferent. We must MOVE, move towards progress and victory. Only through this movement can we secure the future for the children of Europa.”

“Hell of a view, eh cap?” Neferu’s voice cut through the engine’s rumble, the creaking of the metal, and the speaker’s voice.

Fighting against the acceleration, Sophia turned her head towards Neferu, who met her gaze with eyes wide with wonder, her sharp nose vibrating with the ship. Her lithe arms grabbed the edges of her seat as if she was afraid to fall, though she was strapped in. As delicate as she was lovely.

“In the past, many believed the moon to be merely a big rock floating in the sky. The great scientist Anaximander demonstrated its true nature: A massive hole in one of the hollow rings of bark surrounding the earth, through which the primeval fire shines upon us. In this fire, we will forge the future of humanity!”

Minutes of applause followed before the sound system finally cut off.

The rumble of the engines subsided, turning into a low murmur emerging from the floor and the walls. The creaking of the metal stopped. Sophia exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath.

She unbuckled herself and slid from the chair, landing on the carpeted floor beneath them. The friction of the carpet kept her standing against the gentle swaying of the ship. She had told the committee that a bare metal floor would be too slippery.

Neferu landed on the floor next to her. Control panels and data machines surrounded them in the circular room. The main viewscreen still showed the cylinder below, quickly receding.

“Gravity feels normal,” said Neferu.

“Of course,” said Sophia. “The natural place of human beings is on the top of the cylinder. As long as the rocket points upwards, our bodies will try to reach the top and stop at the floor.”

Neferu stood perfectly still, transfixed by the image on the viewscreen. “We are the first people to see the entire top,” she said.

Sophia glanced at the screen again. “Make sure to get all the details. After all, you are the artist.”

They hugged and cheered.

“What are you two turtledoves doing down there?” Sophia looked up to see Valeria peek down from the hatch in the ceiling, slick black hair spilling from her shoulders. “Come and join us!” The ladder unfolded from the hatch, new segments extending from the end until it reached the floor.

On the floor above, four bunks unfolded from the wall, equipped with firm mattresses. Next to each bunk stood a small table with a single drawer for personal items. Valeria stood by one of her tables, inspecting her uniform with a hand mirror. She flicked away a speck

of dust, and the uniform was spotless.

Reza sat on the neighboring bunk, adjusting his prosthetic arm with a screwdriver. The scars on his face made it hard to judge his emotions; his right eye was milky white; the left sky-blue. “Captain,” he said and rose from the bunk.

“Good,” she said. “We all survived the launch. Reza, will you accompany me to the lab?”

He nodded curtly and pushed a button on the wall. A hatch opened in the ceiling, and a ladder unfolded.

“Valeria, you have the ship while I’m gone.”

The lab shone with polished tables and shining beakers. The glass cabinets adorning the wall displayed every scientific instrument known to man. The machines on the tables slept, awaiting material for analysis.

“Everything is in flawless condition, Captain,” said Reza. “I cleaned and inspected the place three times before launch.”

“And you are confident that the machinery will be up to the task?”

He shrugged. “As confident as any human can be when it concerns the unknown. So far, Apeiron has only been hypothesized by physicists. We will be the first to study an actual sample. If we can find one.”

“The gods smile upon us,” said Sophia. She pushed another button, and another ladder fell from the ceiling, leading to the final segment of the ship, the one they jokingly referred to as the space attic: a dark room with a conical roof at the end of the vessel, containing the airlock. When she had satisfied herself that everything was in order, she returned to rejoin her crew.

In the control room, Neferu was painting. Her easel stood in front of

the viewscreen, and the brush danced across the canvas, on which a birds-eye view of the earth gradually came into focus, seemingly accumulating details all by itself.

“It’s beautiful,” said Sophia.

Neferu laughed. “Indeed, but that’s not the point. The ecclesia wants something humbling, to remind us of how small we are.”

* * *

“Captain,” said Valeria. “We are approaching the first star ring.”

Sophia looked at the viewscreen. They were now close enough to the stars to see the contours of the ring – a gnarly bark-like substance somehow strong enough to contain the endless conflagration inside. Through holes in the surface, white light shone upon the ship and the earth below. Uncountable numbers of such hollow rings surrounded them at different angles, accounting for every star in the sky.

“Do you want me to go through one of the stars, cap?” asked Valeria with a roguish smile.

“Tempting, but let’s wait for the moon. Those star holes are a bit too small for my taste, and scientists believe that the fire in the moon ring is cooler.”

When they had passed the rings, there were no longer any stars in the sky. Only the moon shone through endless darkness. The sun was hidden behind the earth.

“No holes on the other side of the star rings,” said Reza. “That knowledge alone makes the trip worth it.”

“The priests are right,” said Neferu. “They are made for us.”

“What do you think, Reza? Does this mean that there will be no

moon on the other side of the moon ring either?”

He shrugged, and his mechanical shoulder whirred. “No point in hypothesizing. If there isn’t, we will exit through the same moon through which we entered.”

They retired to sleep in the endless night. They rose to see the moon filling the entire viewscreen, incandescent through the portholes. This close, they could see the billowing flames of the white fire through the enormous hole. The light from the portholes made droplets of sweat run down Sophia’s arms.

“You think the ship will hold?” said Sophia.

Reza raised an eyebrow in reply. “If it doesn’t, it won’t take long.”

“Valeria, take us in.”

“Aye, captain.” The hum of the engine increased; the glass in the portholes dimmed. White fire now filled the entire viewscreen. The whole ship groaned and creaked, and the floor shifted between Sophia’s feet. Even through the dimmed portholes, the Moonfire shone.

The ship sighed a final time and then calmed. They were through.

Sophia thought the room felt hotter, but not by much.

“It holds,” said Reza in a tone that brooked no argument.

Sophia collapsed into the command chair and wiped her forehead. “Start a continuous scan of our surroundings. We don’t want to miss anything.”

Neferu had already set up her easel and was busy smearing white paint all over the canvas. In the density and the texture of the pigment, Sophia thought she saw billowing flames.

* * *

She woke to the sound of the alarm. A dull, repetitive beeping. She jerked upright in bed, and the sweat fell into her eyes, covering her vision with blurry prisms. She wiped her eyes and blinked. She licked her lips and tasted salt. Why am I so hot? she thought.

Neferu, Valeria, and Reza were awake as well. Reza had jumped straight out of bed and was already nearly into his uniform. The two others were still awakening.

Sophia grabbed for her uniform on her dresser. “What’s going on?”

“It shouldn’t be this hot,” said Reza, now fully dressed. “Something is wrong.” He climbed down the ladder with the speed of an athlete.

Sophia met him in the control room, where he was inspecting the wires behind one of the control panels. The panel had been torn off and thrown to the floor, where it still wobbled.

“The cooling system is down,” he said without looking in her direction. “We are going to get cooked.”

“How is that possible? Everything was fine yesterday!”

“I have my suspicions,” he said. “But there is no time.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I don’t know. The damage is extensive.”

Valeria slid down the ladder and dropped into the pilot’s chair. “What’s the sitch?”

“How fast can you get us back to the hole?” said Sophia.

“We’ve been moving forward for nearly a full day. Even at maximum thrust, it will be four to five hours, at least.”

Reza slammed his bionic arm into the wall, leaving a dent. “We have about an hour before we faint from the heat. The suits will sustain us for maybe another hour. Running is not an option.”

“Well, can you fix it in less than two hours?”

Reza looked at the wires and slowly shook his head. “Even if I manage to fix this, it will be too late. There is only one option: Someone must go outside and access the mechanism through the external hatch.”

“Very well, then. We would need to test the suits sooner or later. As captain, it falls to me to lead the way. Valeria, you have the ship.”

* * *

The airlock door in the attic opened with a hiss, and Sophia stepped into the liminal chamber between the dark interior and dazzling surroundings. The darkened glass of the helmet made it hard to see as she moved through the airlock. The door closed behind her, and it was dark and quiet for a moment. Then the outer airlock door opened, and white flames rushed into the metal chamber.

She shut her eyes and held her breath instinctively as the flames filled the room and light burned her face. Even through the darkened, polarized glass, it was like standing in bright sunlight. She felt the heat rise and prayed that the suit would hold.

After a few seconds, she opened her eyes and blinked. Her eyes watered, but the filter glass made the light endurable. Through the roaring flames, she could make out the walls of the airlock and the open doorway at the other end. She walked through the door and into the fires of the moon.

The suction devices kept her attached to the hull's exterior as she climbed the ship's length. The flames were just cool enough to be

manageable by the suit. Not for the first time, she wondered how long it would take before humanity was ready to explore the sun.

Reza's voice crackled in her ear: "You are getting close. How is the suit holding up?"

"Fine," she replied. "It's like a sauna in here, but nothing I can't handle."

A few minutes later: "You are there. Try to find the access panel labeled 'krúos.'"

The filter glass allowed her to read the letters etched onto the panel. "I have it."

"Good. You must drill a hole straight through the center without letting the flames penetrate."

The suit's maintenance drill whirred, a faint tingling in her arm. She felt it go through and kept the arm steady. Drilling too deep could destroy the delicate hydraulics.

The display in her helmet showed her the view of the camera tube, now snaking its way into the hull from the tip of the drill. She felt like she floated through a jumble of wires, tubes, and circuitry board.

"I have the image feed," said Reza. "Here is what you need to do."

She followed instructions, untangling wires and reestablishing connections, while she felt the heat inside the suit increasing.

"The flow has been reenabled," said Reza. "I should be able to fix the rest from the inside."

Sophia breathed a sigh of relief and retracted the camera tube, sealing the hole in the plate with self-hardening foam. She started climb-

ing towards the top of the ship, idly wondering why they couldn't have added airlock doors at both ends.

An alarm on her heads-up display started blinking. The heat was increasing fast. How? Why? A leak?

"Something's wrong with your suit," said Reza. "Get back ASAP."

She rolled her eyes. "I wasn't planning on taking a vacation."

She felt sweat tickling her eyes and running down her arms. She wondered if her sweaty hands would lose their grip, cursed herself for being silly, and wondered about her mental state. The air burned her lips when she breathed.

The tip of the ship was impossibly distant and not getting any closer. Was she even climbing in the right direction? She blinked for a few seconds – was it only a few seconds? – and blacked out for an indeterminate moment.

Her destination seemed even farther away than before. She tried to keep climbing, but her hand stuck to the hull; she was too weak to remove it. She looked at the suction cup as if willing it to let go, but it ignored her. She licked her lips and tasted blood in the cracks.

She looked around her as if someone nearby might be able to assist her, and then she saw it: hiding behind the flames, indescribable and unbounded by any concept in her mind, it beckoned. She passed out.

* * *

She felt cool water trickling between her lips. The air no longer burned her skin. "I think she is awake," someone said, but the voice sounded fuzzy and far away. She coughed and swallowed the remaining water.

She blinked, and the worried faces of the crew came into focus above her. The bunk felt firm beneath her.

“What happened?” she asked and winced. Her lips were so dry that it hurt to talk.

“There was a leak in your suit,” said Reza. “Neferu insisted on going out there for you. We would be recovering a charred corpse by now if she hadn't.”

“With all due respect,” said Valeria. “isn't it your responsibility to check the suits?”

“I checked everything yesterday. There were no leaks.”

“Could you have missed something?” asked Neferu.

“No.”

Sophia pushed herself upright on the bunk and greedily drank from the canteen that Neferu handed her. The minerals gave the water a salty taste. Her lips burned, and the surroundings wobbled. She grabbed the edge of the bunk and things fell into place.

“What are you suggesting?” she asked Reza.

“Sabotage,” he said.

There was an awkward silence as everyone looked at the others.

“I didn't want to kill myself,” said Sophia. “So, you say Neferu or Valeria tried to kill me?”

Reza shrugged. “The coolant system failure didn't happen by itself either. Whoever did this was willing to risk their own life. I wouldn't rule you out.”

“What about you?” said Neferu. “Aren't you the obvious suspect? You are responsible for technical maintenance and equipment. We have only your word that you inspected the suit yesterday.”

“True. If I were in your position, I wouldn't rule me out either.”

Sophia jumped from the bunk and threw up her arms. “Great. So, we are all potential saboteurs. Spreading that suspicion is itself a form of sabotage. How can we continue the mission if we can't trust each other? This must be the Asians. They wanted to be the first through the moon.”

“We need to find the spy,” said Valeria, studying each of them with hungry eyes.

“I am the captain,” said Sophia. “Leading this mission has been my life's dream. I have a doctorate in cosmology and have wanted to know what was inside the moon since I was a child. No reward would convince me to sabotage my mission so someone else could be first.”

“I am an artist,” said Neferu. “It is a great privilege to be the first to immortalize the cosmos in my art. I will be famous for the rest of human history. Why would I give that up?”

“I fought the Asians in a privateer vessel during both wars,” said Valeria. “I sunk dozens of their ships but lost most of my friends. I know how devious they can be. I would never trust them.”

“Asians took my arm and my good looks,” said Reza. “Still, don't blame them; did the same to several of them. As mentioned, I am also in a perfect position to sabotage the ship. Then again, maybe I only say that to appear trustworthy, eh?”

“We are not getting anywhere like this,” said Sophia. “Everyone, resume your normal duties. From now on, we sleep in shifts. Two peo-

ple must always be awake until we figure out what is happening.”

A memory bubbled up from her subconsciousness. “That reminds me ... Something behind the flames. I couldn’t get a clear view. It’s like my eyes slid right over it.”

Reza leaned forward. “Something ... indescribable?”

Sophia nodded. “Could be. Valeria, slow the ship. Reza, perform a full scan of the surroundings.”

Valeria saluted. Reza jumped to his feet and climbed the ladder to the lab above.

“I think you are right,” he said when Sophia joined him at the scanner shortly afterward. “There is an area nearby where the instruments go crazy. They change between showing nothing at all and every possible measurement simultaneously. Unless there has been more sabotage, this could be it.”

“We can’t wait until we have found the saboteur. Send out the probe.”

“Aye, captain.”

* * *

Reza carried the cylindrical probe in asbestos gloves from the airlock to the lab, put it down on the largest table, and took a deep breath. Everyone was gathered in the lab. Neferu was setting up her easel.

“Put on your protective glasses,” said Reza. “We don’t know what kind of radiation this could produce.”

A small hatch in the side of the probe slid open with a pneumatic hiss; Reza reached inside with a large tong and retrieved a small

glass vial.

There was no mistaking the content; it was like seeing nothing and everything all at once; the mind raced to replace boundless potentiality with infinite actualities. Sophia steadied herself against the wall; Neferu dropped her brush on the floor.

Apeiron. The hypothesized proto matter from which everything else had formed at the dawn of the world. Unbounded, infinite, eternal. No longer merely a hypothesis.

Reza lowered the vial back into the probe and shut the hatch. The room returned to normal solidity. “We’ve got it,” he said.

Neferu picked up her brush from the floor. “I am going to need another look,” she said.

“When will you be ready to start the experiments?” said Sophia.

Reza carried the probe to a cabinet by the wall, placed it on a shelf, and locked the fortified glass doors. “We should wait until the saboteur has been found. The experiments must be performed with the utmost care. If current scientific theories are correct, the slightest disturbance could destroy the ship.”

* * *

Sophia spent the rest of the day interviewing the crew, meticulously noting down their daily routine and actions in the days since launch, hoping that the saboteur would give something away. As she studied her notes at the end of the day, an idea came to her.

She switched on the comm system. “Reza. Neferu. Please join us in the control room.”

* * *

Sophia sat in the captain's chair in the circular control room. Valeria reclined in her chair near the instruments on the wall, idly inspecting the panels from the corner of her eye. Neferu sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor. Reza leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

Sophia rose from her chair and leaned against the armrest, inspecting the room. "As you may have noticed, I have spent the day interviewing you all and charting your actions since launch. This has allowed me to form a full picture of the happenings on the ship. While I could not count on all of you telling the truth, I counted on the fact that cross-referencing all our stories would make any lie stand out from the whole."

"When I compared the different stories, one thing became clear to me ..." She paused dramatically.

"That's enough," said Valeria. She stood on the floor, holding a knife in her raised right hand. "One more word, and I'll put this knife in your lovely neck."

Sophia froze in place like a statue. For a moment, all four people formed a dramatic tableau, like a still from a suspense movie.

Reza was the first to break the silence. "I should have known it was you."

She sneered at him. "Really? I thought my cover was pretty good."

He slowly raised his mechanical arm, pointing right at her. "Precisely. You are too obviously not a spy to not be the spy. Always going on about how you fought the Asians, they killed so many of your friends, blablabla."

"Too bad you didn't figure it out sooner, then. The people who killed my friends are the ones who used them as cannon fodder on the battlefield. I don't blame the Asians. I blame both of our governments. Neither side should have this power for themselves." She turned

back to Sophia. "Here is what happens next. You are going to turn this ship around and return to earth. I'll use one of the emergency chutes to bail out before we land."

"That's not going to happen," said Reza, still pointing at her.

"What are you going to do about it, old man? Rush me from across the room?"

A high-pitched whine emerged from Reza's general location, and a shimmering wave shot from the palm of his mechanical arm. Valeria barely had time to change the expression on her face before the wave struck her in the solar plexus. She collapsed in a pile on the carpet as if someone had turned off a switch; the knife fell from her hands.

Sophia's hair had risen on her head, and her skin tingled. The air smelled of ozone. "What the hell was that? There are no weapons allowed on my ship!"

Reza retrieved a small card from his pocket and brandished it in her direction. "Calm down, Captain. I am a duly appointed agent of the ecclesia, charged with ensuring the security of this mission."

Sophia inspected the card and threw it on the floor. "Why was I not informed of this? This is my ship, dammit! I need to know what's going on."

"Don't be silly," said Reza. "Agents always operate incognito until the time is right to reveal ourselves. You should be grateful I was here to fix this mess."

"Fine," said Sophia. "Cuff her to her bed. I want to talk to her when she wakes up."

* * *

Valeria blinked, groaned, and looked at Reza and Sophia, who sat at

the edge of her bed. She pulled the cuffs a few times, and they jangled against the side. Neferu was painting the scene from the other side. “This is so great,” she said. “The story told by these paintings will outlive the Illiad.”

Valeria ran her free hand through her hair and sighed. “I gotta admit I did not see that coming. She caught Sophia’s eyes with a penetrating glare. “I am impressed by your detective work, Captain. I didn’t think you would figure things out so quickly.”

“Oh, I had no idea it was you,” said Sophia. “All of you gave me page after page of boring daily routines. I thought if I pretended to have everything figured out, the saboteur might get nervous and expose themselves.”

“What? You didn’t notice that my testimony had me doing work in the attic at a time when Neferu claimed she was there alone?”

Sophia produced a stack of papers and leafed through them, dropping several pages haphazardly on the floor. “Oh, right! Here it is. I was so bored that I didn’t notice. Too bad no one thought to put a master detective on a moon mission. Anyway, my plan worked beyond my wildest expectations. I figured the saboteur might get nervous and give me something to work with, not expose themselves completely.”

“So, what happens, now?” asked Valeria. “You gonna keep me chained to the bed for the rest of the mission?”

“Pretty much. I will let you walk around and assist with minor tasks, under strict supervision. I will have to handle all the piloting by myself. It will be awkward but doable. You will watch us complete the mission you tried to destroy.”

“We will see about that,” said Valeria, a faint smile on her face. “I only need to get lucky once.”

* * *

Sophia woke from a restless dream in which she chased a spy through a ship that went on forever, climbing a never-ending series of ladders. She checked the chronometer on the side table: The sleep cycle was less than halfway over. Neferu slept soundly on her bunk, but Reza and Valeria were gone. The ladder extended from the ceiling to the floor, and light flowed down from the open hatch like sunlight through a hole in a forest canopy.

She swore, grabbed her uniform, and climbed the ladder.

The lab was empty but fully lit, and the open hatch formed a dark rectangle in the ceiling. She heard sounds of movement from the attic. The probe containing Apeiron watched her from the glass cabinet.

The attic at the top of the ship was dark and filled with a random assortment of equipment and suits. By the airlock, Reza was securing the door. Through the window in the massive airlock door, Valeria looked out. She noticed Sophia and gave her a small wave. Reza followed her gaze and turned.

“Reza! What the hell are you doing?”

“I didn’t expect you to wake up so soon,” said Reza. “You must have one hell of a metabolism. This is for the greater good. She cannot be allowed to jeopardize the mission.”

“Let her out! That is an order.”

He did not move. “As I said, the ecclesia put me in charge of mission security.”

Valeria’s muffled voice penetrated the glass: “You should be grateful that he has more guts than you. Let’s end this.”

Reza pushed a button, a red lamp lit above the door, and the pneumatic sound of moving pistons filled the room. Sophia ran to the

door in time to see Valeria flip her the bird. White flames swallowed the offending hand, and for a moment, a ghostly after-image of the middle finger floated in the center of Sophia's vision.

The outer airlock closed again, the flames disappeared, and pitch blackness descended upon the room. The only sensory impression remaining was the steady breathing of Reza close by her side.

"I will see to it that you are punished for this," said Sophia.

"You can try," said Reza. "Let's complete the mission first, shall we?"

* * *

"Goddammit," said Reza, pounding his unenhanced hand on the bur-nished lab table. A petri dish of Apeiron jumped half an inch into the air, and its contents flowed like quicksilver, forming tendrils and lakes of potential. Sophia couldn't tell if it reflected light or shone by itself.

"Don't paint that," Reza sneered.

"Don't worry," said Neferu from her easel by the wall. "I am not that fast."

Reza collapsed into a fold-out chair. "No matter what I do, this stuff refuses to do anything except flow around. What's the point of boundless potential if you can't make anything actual?"

"You are one person," said Sophia. "We will bring it back to Athens, and the scientists at the Academy will figure it out."

Reza looked at the slowly moving silvery substance in the petri dish. "It's hypnotic to look at, but what does that benefit the state? I was hoping to bring at least some useful data back with us."

Neferu yawned. "This scene would make for a terrible painting. Do something picturesque!"

Reza glowered in her direction but said nothing. He strode to the hatch in the floor and disappeared without a word.

The Apeiron formed strange, undulating patterns in the petri dish. Whenever Sophia tried to look at it, her eyes slid across it to focus on nearby items instead.

Neferu was painting a close-up of the petri dish, using reflective sil-vern paint.

"You can see that stuff clearly?" asked Sophia.

"Sure. You need to look at it without focusing, like one of those pic-tures that form a three dee image when you cross your eyes."

"Huh. I guess bringing an artist has practical uses after all." Sophia smiled.

Neferu tilted her head and looked at the dish. "It looks like a little octopus, doesn't it? Woah!"

Sophia followed her gaze and gasped. The Apeiron hung in the air sev-eral inches above the petri dish. She blinked and could make out eight silver tentacles extending from a central mass, lazily waving in the air.

"Now it looks even more like an octopus!" said Neferu.

Suction cups formed on the tentacles. Eyes opened on the central mass. The creature now hovered nearly a yard above the dish.

Sophia's eyes watered from the effort of trying to stay focused on the creature. "It's reacting to your comments! Try to describe it as some-thing else."

“Uh, Ibis!”

The mass assumed a birdish shape. Weird patterns adorned the wings, but Sophia could not make out any details.

“Maybe you need to be more specific? Let me try. Uh, watermelon!”

The birdlike shape wobbled in the air but did not change.

“Papyrus plant!” said Neferu.

The shape extended, forming a long reed-like stem, nearly touching the ground. Thin sprays of foliage grew from the top.

Reza poked his head up through the hatch. “What the hell are you two doing up here?”

His eyes grew wide, and he jumped onto the lab floor from the hatch.

“What happened? How did you make it do that?”

“It’s reacting to Neferu’s suggestions,” said Sophia.

The Apeiron collapsed back into the petri dish, forming a shimmering puddle.

“Dammit!” said Reza. “I wanted to get some measurements.”

“Sorry,” said Neferu. “You startled me.”

Reza fixed her with his gaze. “That implies it was reacting to your thoughts, not your statements. Try to think of something.”

Neferu laughed. “Never tell an artist to ‘think of something.’ Creativity needs constraints.”

Sophia looked at the puddle in the dish. “Strange, how it takes up so

much less space now.”

“It is unbounded,” said Reza. “That’s what makes it so valuable. If we could unlock its secrets, we could potentially create anything from the smallest amount. Try to think of a pebble.”

Neferu furrowed her brows. In the dish, the shimmer contracted into a tiny ball, rolling gently from side to side.

Reza leaned forward, studying the ball. “Someone could smuggle this thing inside of a ballpoint pen ... Now think of a fire.”

“What?”

“Don’t play stupid. Do it!”

The ball rose into the air and unfolded into silver flames, a ball of fire hanging in the center of the lab, throwing flickering light onto the walls.

Sophia felt the heat on her face. “Perhaps this is how it began,” she said. “Someone wanted light, and there it was.”

“That’s more of a bonfire than an explosion,” said Reza. “But it’s a start. Note the heat; it’s not only the shape that is malleable. If we can unlock its full potential, the sky is the limit. We could wipe the entire Asian continent off the map with a thimble-full of this stuff!”

The fire abruptly ceased, and a small amorphous blob fell into the dish.

“What!?” said Neferu.

“This is a scientific expedition,” said Sophia. “Our results should benefit humanity!”

“European supremacy will benefit humanity!” said Reza. “How are

we supposed to make any progress with the Asians at our doorstep, forcing us to focus our resources on defending our way of life? Only once our enemies have been neutralized will there be peace and prosperity. You did not seriously think we would share this stuff with them, did you?”

Neferu waved her paintbrush in his face. “Well, you are not getting my help! I am a creator, not a destroyer. If you need me for anything else, I will be downstairs.”

She wrapped the canvas, folded the easel, and climbed down the ladder.

An hour later, Reza still stared at the blob in the petri dish. He had shouted himself hoarse, trying out different words as if increasing the volume would cause a more significant response. The Apeiron had been utterly unmoved.

“I guess you need an artist after all,” said Sophia, sitting on a chair by the wall. She had no intention of helping Reza but felt it was a good idea to keep an eye on him.

“Art is two steps removed from reality,” said Reza with a voice like sandpaper. “Science alone sees Being as it truly is. We will figure this out.”

Sophia yawned. “It’s getting late. How about we call it a day?”

Reza ignored her.

Neferu was already sleeping soundly on her bunk in the darkened room; no doubt lost in the realms of her imagination. Sophia envied her. She collapsed onto her bunk and curled up under her blanket. The subdued sound of Reza’s swearing from above lulled her to sleep like white noise.

* * *

The louder sound of Reza swearing nearby woke her. “Get up,” he said. “The state needs your patriotic services.”

“Let go of me, you big oaf,” said Neferu.

His biomechanical arm had grabbed hold of her right shoulder and was pulling her to her feet. “We cannot afford to waste any more time. You will show me how it’s done, and then you can go back to sleep.”

Sophia jumped from her bunk. “Stop it, this instant! That’s an order.”

Reza looked at her unimpressed and did not let go. “As I said, I am in charge of security on the ship. This is a matter of national security.”

“By that argument, you can take charge of anything!”

“Indeed.”

He dragged Neferu towards the ladder and pushed her up the steps through the open hatch above. Sophia followed close behind them.

Reza put Neferu down next to the lab table and relinquished his grip. Neferu rubbed her shoulder and winced. “Let’s get to work,” he said.

“This is mutiny, Reza,” said Sophia. “I will have you in front of the magistrate when we return.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

A larger dish containing a larger sample of Apeiron rested on the table.

“I’ve been poking at this all night,” said Reza. “Make it do something.”

“Like what?” said Neferu. “Be specific!”

“You did plenty of artsy stuff yesterday. Try to make a weapon.”

Neferu rolled her eyes. “Infinite, unbounded potential and you want weapons. Fine.”

The sample wobbled and rose from the disk, spinning around and extending along the vertical axis until it formed a stately longsword with a curvy handguard. The blade of the sword seemed to catch the sun, although the light in the lab was uniform.

Reza scratched his facial scars. “A bit primitive. I was thinking more along the line of ... Ow!”

The longsword had toppled and hit him on the head with the blunt side of the blade, a sound like a shovel hitting a rock.

“That felt surprisingly solid ... Ow! Stop it, you bitch!”

“You want weapons!” cried Neferu. “This is what weapons feel like, asshole!”

BONK

Reza’s mechanical arm struck the Apeiron sword, shattering it into hundreds of tiny droplets, flying and bouncing off the walls. Little balls of nothing and everything cutting paths through the air.

Reza stumbled against the lab table, swatting away droplets with his natural arm. “Look what you have done! Control it!”

“Behold, my weapon!” said Neferu. “The explodo-sword! I am done here.”

She strode towards the hatch. “Where do you think you are going?” said Reza, taking a step forward and grabbing for Neferu with his metal arm.

Several droplets struck him in the face; he cried out, lost his footing, and stumbled into Neferu. “Look out!” she yelled, and they both went through the hatch together. A sickening crash below.

Sophia ran to the hatch. Reza was lying on top of Neferu on the floor below. He rolled over and assumed a sitting position. Sophia slid down the ladder, jumped off at the last second, and landed next to Neferu. She wasn’t moving.

“I am sorry, I ...” said Reza.

Sophia wanted to scream, but no sound would come.

* * *

Neferu lay on her back in the airlock, hands folded on her chest and her eyes closed. Her nose was broken, but they had managed to cover the rest of the damage, working together in silence. She was supposed to look like she was sleeping, but she didn’t.

“This is the only way,” said Reza. “We do not have the facilities to store a body for any significant period.”

Sophia had not said a word since Neferu had died on her bunk, her final act being to squeeze Sophia’s hand.

“I don’t like the way she looks,” said Sophia. “The folded hands are way too cliché. She wouldn’t have liked that. Put them by her side.”

Reza shrugged but did as she said. “Is that bet ... Hey!”

Sophia pushed the airlock door with all her strength, and it shut with a metallic bang that reverberated through her bones and into her feet. She turned the handle to secure the lock.

Reza’s face at the window. “OPEN THE DOOR.” His muffled voice.

It sounded far away. Everything felt far away. Was this happening? Maybe she would wake up soon, and Neferu would still be alive. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING!” The sound of his enhanced arm slamming against the inside of the door.

“YOU KNOW THE PENALTY FOR MUTINY!” she shouted at the door. “I’LL TAKE MY CHANCES WITH THE MAGISTRATE.”

She pushed the button and watched the moon consume them both.

She did not wake up, and Neferu remained dead.

She collapsed on her bunk and fell into a dreamless sleep.

She woke in an empty room with only the hum of the cooling system for company.

An alarm was going off in the control room. She slid down the ladder without much urgency and inspected the instruments. The ship was approaching the other end of the tube; the sensors could now detect the rough bark-like surface that contained the lunar flames. She adjusted the scanners, and there it was: A round hole in the bark, roughly the same size as the one they had entered; another moon, invisible from earth.

Would the other moon have another earth, she wondered, or would there only be darkness? She was not supposed to find out. They had found the Apeiron and explored the interior of the tube. Her objective now was to return to the earth with the spoils; someone else could continue the exploration of the cosmos later.

She did not much care; she adjusted the ship’s course, heading straight for the nega-moon, as she decided to call it. Whatever was on the other side could not be worse than the world she came from. She slumped in the captain’s chair, a queen who no longer had any subjects, sighing with relief at her decision.

The ship passed through the hole, and the viewscreens and sensors showed darkness ahead; the black void swallowed the light of the nega-moon from behind her. Only the solar ring remained, the edge of the known universe, the sun itself still hidden behind the earth.

Past the solar ring, there was nothing but more darkness—no more rings. If anything was left to discover, it was beyond sensor range and provided no measurable radiation.

The lesson of Columbus remained true, even here; there was no new world to welcome her.

* * *

Drops of Apeiron still drifted through the lab, bouncing from the walls, floor, and ceiling, showing no signs of losing momentum. She slumped against the wall, exhaled, and watched the drifting droplets forming patterns in the air. As her eyes filled with tears, blurring her vision, she finally saw them clearly. The laboratory and everything in it receded into the blurry background, and the droplets came into focus, spheres of pure potential hovering in front of her.

With a single thought, she caused them all to collapse into a ball the size of a melon. Through the surface, she saw possibility and hope. She remembered Reza’s words: A thimble-full could wipe out a continent. Could it create a continent as well?

“Come,” she said to the ball hovering in the lab. To her surprise, it worked. As she walked to the ladder and climbed into the attic, the ball hovered behind her.

The window at the outer airlock door showed only blackness, like a square of obsidian set into the metal. Was it even transparent?

A hissing sound as the airlock depressurized. She could hear her breathing inside the suit. She pushed the button on the wall, and the

outer airlock door swung open, revealing inky blackness outside. She stepped out, grabbing the side of the ship with the suction gloves.

The ball floated past her, glowing in the dark like a luminescent jellyfish, the light reflecting from the ship's surface. She let her eyes go out of focus, and as the ship turned into a metallic blur at the edge of her vision, the ball became a glowing hole in the void, through which indefinable shapes and colors moved.

Time to see how big this thing could get. The ball started to grow, losing its spherical shape, becoming an amorphous tear in the black velvet of the void.

Would it be possible to create an entire new world? One in which

humanity would not be confined to the top of a tiny cylinder; in which new worlds could be discovered; in which there would be plenty of resources for everyone; no reason for endless conflict.

The ball split into a multitude of smaller pieces, forming cylinders, spheres, wheels, and shapes of every other conceivable type, moving among each other in an intricate dance.

What to make first? When creating a new world, where does one start?

She inspected the boundless night.

“Light.”

Red Ridinghood: Assassin

by Kasia Runté



Dear Eleanor

by Meg O'Connor

Dear Eleanor:

It's me, Ingrid. I'm writing from my cell in Rothsfield. I'm sorry I haven't been able to give you a call, but they restrict our phone access. And to be honest, I don't even know where to start. I don't know how to explain to someone like you how something like this could have happened to someone like me. You've been my best friend since we were five. You've known me longer than anyone but Mom. I hope that you—of all people—were shocked by the news that I'm capable of murder. Or maybe you—of all people—will be the least surprised, since you're one of the only people who's always known what it's like inside my head.

I remember exactly when you first found out I could hear others' thoughts. Or at least yours. We were six. Your Uncle Rodney had just taught us how to play Battleship, and I didn't see the point of it. What kind of stupid game was this? So I kept sinking your ships with freakish precision, not yet aware that what happened in my own head—the onslaught of voices and feelings and stories—was just silence for everyone else. And when I told you I could read minds, you believed me, Eleanor. You believed me even though every adult started panic-reading about juvenile schizophrenia.

And then, when we were in high school and the fear of being different from others felt like a nail gun constantly poised at our temples, you were the one who helped me plan for the future. By that point, we'd both realized I was maybe the only one like me out there. Sometimes this depressed me. Sometimes the alienation and the suspicion of how others would treat me if they knew made my chest burn with rage. At fifteen I was diagnosed with panic attacks, but you and I knew these

spells weren't a manifestation of anxiety. There's little to be anxious about when the world can't get the slip on you. Instead, this was the first time I realized that the world was deeply unfair, and the more I tried to bury that understanding deep in my ribs, the more my chest burned.

I stayed afloat through high school with your help, by reframing the problem of my telepathy as an opportunity. I wanted to help people and do some good in the world. At first, we came up with the idea of me being a detective. You thought a mind-reading interrogator was just about the coolest career path a person could choose. But the problem was, how could I bring that evidence to court? How could I explain to the world what I knew? *How* I knew? There's a reason Arthur Conan Doyle didn't make Sherlock Holmes a mind-reading detective. It's an impossible sell.

So instead, you reconnected me to your Uncle Rodney—ol' Battleship Rodney, the bleeding-heart defense attorney who had an unrivaled passion for exonerating the innocent. We told him the truth about my telepathy skills. He demanded proof. We played a dumb animal guessing game, and I got so tired of it, by the end I'd just say the animal noise instead of the animal name. *Quack*, I'd say with a blasé bravado and a sip from Rodney's hallmark gin and tonic. *Quack, motherfuckers*.

You know what happened next. He hired me. I'd sit in as a paralegal on his interviews with his potential clients. They all claimed innocence, but usually, it was obvious to me within minutes if they'd done it or not. Most lawyers care about money. Not Battleship Rodney. He cared about *scruples*. He wanted to defend genuinely innocent clients.

All I had to do was shake or nod my head at Rodney, and for a decade, we all went to sleep with clean consciences, knowing we were helping the people no one else believed. Just like no one (except you) believed me when I swore the lady next door was a rampant racist. You know how it was.

There was only one time, towards the beginning of my career, when Rodney doubted me. I was present for his meeting with a potential client—a man named Jose, accused of killing two children down the street.

It was the first time I had no idea what was happening inside a client's mind. Jose's mind was like a radio dial caught between two stations. There were frenetic bursts of nothing in particular, separated by the steadfast repetition of a single phrase: "Wretch like me, wretch like me, wretch like me. ..." There were so many track marks on his arms that he looked like a human dartboard.

Rodney exchanged a look with me, waiting for me to do my usual nod or shake. All I did was shrug. He dismissed Jose and waited for my explanation. "I didn't get a clear read on this one," I said. "If I had to guess, I'd say 'guilty.' Most innocent people wouldn't describe themselves as a 'wretch,' would they?"

Rodney's expression landed somewhere between confused and angry. "Don't tell me you're slipping," he said, raising his eyebrows at me.

Please, Lord, let me be slipping, I thought.

Sure enough, Jose *was* found guilty during his trial, but you'll hear more about that later.

* * *

The turning point in all this was when I was rear-ended in traffic on my way to work by some asshole without auto insurance. I made it to work the next day in a rental vehicle I didn't have the money for—never

mind the auto repairs if the insurance companies couldn't work something out. I was physically at work, but mentally, I was ruminating about how to get the money to fix the car.

It was a Tuesday. I was at work in my little repurposed closet of an office when a man came down the hallway. We rarely had visitors, and this one seemed nervous. I 'heard' him fretting about how to tell me he knew about my powers even before I heard his loafers squeak on the tile floor.

The word *telepathic* made my shoulders jolt up a few inches. I slowly swiveled in my office chair and waited for the man to enter. He was a black man in a worn, red plaid suit. I tried to quickly come up with a way to preempt this guy and deny everything, but he jumped in before I had the plan straight in my head. "I'm friends with Rodney," he said quickly, all in one breath. "Old college friends. We had some beers last night and I told him a sob story, and I got him to spill the beans about you. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." A bead of sweat formed on his brow like he really *was* sorry to butt in like this.

I leaned forward in the office chair, trying to act nonchalant, but somehow my knees were trembling. My *knees*. Quack, motherfucker. "What kind of sob story?" I asked, voice wavering. "Who are you?"

"I'm Stewart Daniels. I work for a human rights nonprofit currently examining the consequences of capital punishment. We're trying to push for a stay in executions in Texas, but we need something to bring to the governor. We have a few clients on death row right now. If we can prove that executions are inhumane—if we can document the suffering—we might be able to stave off future deaths."

The blood drained from my face. A knot twisted in my stomach as I realized what Stewart might want from me. "And you're here because ...?"

"We want you to watch," said Stewart, looking away uncomfortably. A bead of sweat now fell onto his collar. "Rather—listen. Take notes."

“Executions? Of people who were never even my clients?” I clarified like he’d just suggested I gouge my own eyes out with broken eggshells.

He nodded. He knew I knew exactly what he’d meant.

“No,” I said emphatically. “Absolutely, unequivocally—no.”

He raised one eyebrow higher than the other, plaintively. “You could make a real difference. You could help us prevent so much suffering. Just name your price.”

At the word *price*, I thought about my wrecked car. At the words *real difference*, I thought about you, Eleanor. I thought of the career paths we envisioned for me when we were fourteen. And I—stupidly—thought maybe I was brave enough.

* * *

I honestly cannot tell you the next bit coherently. My memories of the four months that followed are fragments like a kaleidoscope of nightmare images.

The very first execution I witnessed was by *firing squad*. Yeah, firing squad. Any prisoner in Utah sentenced before 2004 can request it.

They seated the serial killer Edgar Stovell in a chair in the prison courtyard, hands bound behind his back. He had a black hood over his head. I trembled in the wings, terrified to witness a man die, to witness a man kill. Terrified to hear the sound of the shots, the sound of Edgar’s thoughts, the sound of the bullets slicing through September mist. As the hood shrouded his face, Edgar spoke to me. I know that’s not the right way to put it. He didn’t know he was speaking to me. But when you’re the only one who can hear, you don’t take that lightly.

Do you know what Edgar said to me, Eleanor? “*I’m sorry, Dad. I’m sorry, Dad. Please be there to meet me. On the other side. Please be*

there. I’ve been all alone for twenty years, Pa.”

One of the guards said to himself: *I have the blank. I know I have the blank. God promised to give me the blank.*

“*All alone for twenty years, Pa. I don’t want to die alone.*” The bullet met his heart. For the first time, I didn’t hear thoughts. I heard an explosion. Edgar slumped, and I pitched forward, off balance, like someone had pushed me.

Died too quick in my opinion, thought the guy next to me, chewing on some tobacco dip. *Shoulda missed by a couple a inches. Let him bleed out.*

* * *

As it turns out, a firing squad was nothing. Try getting electrocuted. I witnessed it in Florida during a Midazolam shortage.

Spunky Bogart murdered his wife by tying her up and putting her in the oven. Spunky trembled when they strapped him into the chair. His fingers opened and closed around air. He thought about nothingness—his prediction of what the “afterlife” would be. *Nothingness will be okay*, thought Spunky, fingers twitching. *I love to sleep. Nothingness will be the best sleep of my life.*

But Spunky’s body betrayed his real feelings as he vomited down his front, fingers still grasping at air, arms strapped down and shaking. *Jesus—just die with some dignity, man*, he said harshly to himself. But at the same moment, tears streamed down his cheeks behind his blindfold.

I can’t even meet someone’s eyes. I can’t even meet another human’s eyes one last time. And I won’t see it coming.

The technician pulled the lever. The smell of burning flesh still haunts my memories. I think it always will.

There was smoke in the execution chamber.

* * *

And now, you'll see where this whole story is going. Do you remember Jose? *Wretch like me* Jose, who I advised Rodney not to take on if he wanted to keep his conscience clean?

Jose ended up with a state-appointed lawyer and a needle in the arm. And I was there to watch.

No one knows whether the sedative dose—the first drug in the three-drug lethal cocktail—is adequate.

Or at least no one *knew*.

Jose was strapped to a gurney and a nurse struggled to find his vein when inserting the IV.

Wretch like me, wretch like me, wretch like me, thought Jose.

They gave Jose his chance to say his last words, and with his eyes darting around the chamber, he said, “I shouldn’t have stopped to help. If it wasn’t for the cocaine, maybe I would have known not to stop at a crime scene. I know some of you are like me—you want to help people—but people, they don’t want to be helped. I don’t mean those kids. I mean everyone else. I mean everyone grown.” They waited for him to say more, but he didn’t. His toes twitched in the little disposable slippers they’d put him in.

A technician in scrubs—like some kind of doctor—like someone who’d taken an oath—approached a blinking machine. He pressed a button, and liquid began to flow through the tube connected to Jose’s arm.

A funnel of light appeared between me and Jose, and it wasn’t like anything I’d ever experienced before. Through that funnel, I saw the

memory he held in his mind’s eye. He was riding his bike down a dirt road when he came upon two dying children—the children who were attacked by someone else. He hopped off the bike and cradled the dying boy, who was clutching his dead sister’s hand. And as he died, Jose—high on cocaine—held him and sang. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.*

The sodium thiopental didn’t knock Jose out, but in his mind, he clutched to the young boy’s hand. As the pancuronium bromide paralyzed his muscles and collapsed his lungs, he thought of his own child, nearly grown now.

I’m burning, thought Jose as the potassium chloride finally hit his veins. *Burning*.

I squeezed my eyes shut. My stomach churned and my throat tightened like the hangman had tied a noose there. Then the terror gave way to anger, and my chest burned with rage, just like it always had, just like Jose’s fiery veins. Rage that we are all stuck living in a world like this. My ribs threatened to cave in like a sinkhole.

In the name of self-preservation, I had to try to block out Jose. But the second I drowned out his screams, the thoughts of the others in the execution chamber came to my mind. It was then I was aware of the cheering inside the others’ heads. The victory. The perceived triumph of good over evil.

The guy sitting next to me in the witness theater worked for the media. He had a clipboard and he looked rich. His loafers were perfectly shiny. I looked over at him, desperate for an ally. Desperate for the eye contact that blindfolded prisoners don’t get. But instead, I saw his mouth curve up in a brief smirk. *He lived like an animal, and now he gets to die like one.*

I heard an explosion like the day Edgar Stovell died, and the heat in my chest roared like a raging fire. I’m told I swung my purse at the reporter, and once he was on the ground, my stiletto heel came down

on his throat.

All I remember is the pool of blood beneath his head.

As Jose’s slow, tortuous death on the gurney dragged on, he distracted himself from the fire in his veins by silently singing “Amazing Grace.” As I watched the reporter die, with hands pulling me away from him, I joined in—out loud. I gave life to a dying man’s song. For a fleeting moment, Jose and I sang together: his internal, a voice only I could hear, mine filled with a righteousness no one would ever understand. Then suddenly, it all went silent.

Jose’s chest stopped moving up and down.

And now I write to you from Rothsfield. I wonder if I may end up on

Death Row myself soon. I wonder if I may even have the chance to pick my execution method.

I am equipped to pick the least painful, but I wonder if it isn’t time for us to atone. All of us. Or like Jose said—all the grown folks who don’t want to be helped. I’ve seen what lies within us all, and maybe it’s time to refuse to turn away.

I may choose the chair.

I may let the flames burst forth from my head.

I will love you forever, this wretch like me—

Ingrid

Not as Cruel as They'd Have You Believe

The forgotten fairy speaks to her slumbering child

by Adele Gardner

I never had a daughter. Never found a soulmate.
No kin left to share my grief
when the granny who raised me died.
I held her lore sacred, secret recipes to cure or curse,
to mend or steal—the magic always useful,
always possible to apply it for good or ill.
A curse can stop a ravager of children;
a stolen heart, find a lifetime of happiness.
Just as seriously, to cure again and again
an aged king who has become more enmeshed
in his own spectacle than the good of his people,
can be a perilous thing.
And mending a toy that a frightened child hurled into a ravine
is simply cruel.
True, I have no family, but I have this baby girl—
not entrusted to me, no,
but part of my circle.
They left me out of the invitation to her christening,
probably thinking to be kind, not saddle me with such responsibility—
perhaps out of consideration for my many years on this planet
(they know not just how many years,
nor how many yet stretch ahead).

But I won't hold that against this child,
whose talent already touches me
when she holds my finger, as does her sunny smile.
Her baby spellcraft soars—
my natural successor—like magic calling to like.
But she's a princess, so one day she'll be lost
to a wise woman's ways, forced to bear children again and again
if she doesn't die,
her free hours always wanting,
someone else always coming first,
no necessary attic of her own in which to work her spells.
So I craft a way to warn her—
flee the pricks, for they'll kill your soul
as sure as spindles.
A wise woman has a freer path.
Be happy, child, you laughing soul.
Follow your bliss, your magic,
even if right now you can only pursue it in dreams.
Soul daughter, I'll keep you safe with me,
even if it takes a hundred years or more
for this world to change enough
to welcome your joyous mind and golden strength.



Headless Spirit and the Witch

by Sonali Roy

The Crimson Penny

by Travis Corter

Drew Barnes could almost smell his grandpa's famous hickory-smoked barbecue when the old mall rose from the horizon, a tired husk hiding in a too-bright summer. The thought of Joe Morgan's barbecue was replaced by the sudden scent of Apple Orchard Cotton Candy.

Golden Hills Mall. The cotton candy scent almost arrived ahead of the memory. The side of Drew's mouth lifted in recognition. He first tasted that sugary sweetness fifteen years ago, when he was nine years old. He could still see the wonder on his little brother's face when Drew offered him a bite. It was one of their good days. One of the few.

Drew thought they'd torn the mall down years ago. If there were good memories beyond the fleeting nostalgia for a sugary treat, they were lost to the dark rumors that emerged once the mall shut its doors for good.

Still, his own memories of Golden Hills weren't all bad.

Drew checked the dashboard clock. Half past ten. The party wasn't until three; he had plenty of time. His grandma didn't even know he was coming, but how often did someone who raised you celebrate their retirement? Despite the occasional friction between them, Drew couldn't miss the big day. They'd been through too much.

He thought briefly about the amateur photography contest he was missing. He could really use that money, with his bank account hovering in the double digits. But his grandma was worth it. Of course, if Clay was there...

The cornfield snuck up on the side of the road and Drew cursed. Gripped the wheel so hard his fingers burned. He knew where he was, there was no forgetting it, but something about the dry and dying stalks drove the point home like a punch to the gut. Drew grasped for his old mantra like a sleepwalker startled awake in the middle of the night, flailing for the lightswitch. Found it. "There were birds. You're still you," he whispered. The words were a heavy blanket, smothering the flames of anxiety before the fire could spread.

He focused on his breathing. Did his counting: three beats on the inhale, five beats on the exhale. *You're doing fine. See? Almost past the cornfield already.*

Thunder split the air despite the clear blue sky and Drew jerked the wheel on instinct. Shit, he was jumpy. *Calm down. All good.* Then a speeding truck emerged ahead of him. What was this guy's hurry? It happened in a flash: the truck jumped into Drew's lane, racing straight toward Drew's front bumper.

"What the hell?" His heart leapt into his throat, pounding like mad. Then he saw a head on the road, rolling out from the field. Terror took him. Was that—? No. Just a scarecrow's head.

Drew yanked the wheel hard. Back tires slid over gravel before grabbing the old asphalt lane. Sweat turned his hands slick and he pulled one off the wheel, swatted it on his pant leg. Ragged breaths slowly settled, but his pulse was still going like a rabbit's when it's hunting season and the bullet goes wide. The back tires skipped a little. The Neon kicked out to the right, but Drew quickly got it back on the level.

He eased off the gas. Let out a nervous laugh and unclenched his hands from their death grip on the wheel. He checked the rearview. There was no sign of the pickup that almost killed him, and the scarecrow head was either gone or too far back for Drew to make out.

Why did he take this route, anyway? The backroads would have taken twice as long, but at least he could have avoided the memory of that cursed cornfield. Of the mall.

The mall.

Golden Hills didn't rise above the dense trees beside the lane; it sat back and waited, baking in the indifferent sun. *Why haven't I turned around yet?* The danger had passed; there was no need to keep driving down this side road, no lurking scarecrow waiting to jump from the dying field and pull Drew into the stalks. So why was he still driving toward the abandoned mall?

Drew's mental scrapbook was filled with carousel rides, weekend meals at the Johnny Rockets by the cell phone kiosk, and his favorite: the Apple Orchard Cotton Candy stall. But there were also heated arguments with Clay, and more than one memory of a night that ended with Grandpa Morgan swearing he'd never take the brothers there again.

Then there were the deaths.

Six months after Golden Hills went dark, two high school sophomores went missing. They were last seen running along the road by the cornfield. A few of their friends claimed they dared them to break into the abandoned mall. Police searched every inch of the building, the trees, the field across the road. They never found the bodies.

They did find the hands. Four of them: two belonging to each of the missing teens.

After that, police tape and barricades went up all around the mall's

perimeter. For a while, the whole lane from the mall to the cornfield was shut down.

Six more Golden Hills unfortunates were presumed dead in the months that followed. As far as Drew knew, the strangeness finally stopped two years ago, long after he'd outgrown the mall that seemed to somehow give so much and take even more.

Now Drew pulled into the old potholed parking lot, washed-out letters welcoming him to the ghost of the Slick Beatz music store. He turned the car off and stared through the windshield.

He didn't like the silence that greeted him when he closed the car door. He scratched his arm. Cleared his throat. Maybe it was the weight of the deaths that made him uneasy. Or that damn field. But it felt like more than that. Age-tattered police tape waved to him from the music store's entrance. Its sound did not reach his ears.

Something about the way the light bounced off the siding, as if repelled the moment it got too close, made Drew think, *Camera*. He opened his door and retrieved the Canon EOS Rebel from the front passenger seat. Even if he couldn't get inside, the mall was creepy enough to warrant a dozen or so exterior shots. He might not be able to enter them in today's contest, but why not get a head start on his next exhibit? Maybe he could finally quit his job at the bank and go pro.

The roaring quiet reigned over the forgotten lot. Treetops swayed tentatively in the distance, but no crickets or other wildlife sounds felt like keeping Drew company. The highway was just down the old road, but it might as well have been a hundred miles away—no car horns or rushing slipstreams reached him. It was as if he'd driven straight into another world, some parallel plane that existed for the mall and the mall alone. Even his breathing sounded loud here.

Drew scratched his arm and fumbled the camera, caught it by the strap and caught his breath. This was crazy. They were just rumors. Scary stories to tell in the dark. Even if someone *had* been killed here, the

place had been quiet for years.

Yet he found himself walking slowly, almost tiptoeing toward the sleeping structure. He stopped in front of the old welcome sign, its faded etching of a serene hillside now more rust than bronze. Steadied his camera. Took a breath, held it.

Metal shrieked through the silence and Drew ducked on instinct. What kind of—

A gate. Drew peered around the side of the sign for confirmation. Thirty yards off, the Slick Beatz security gate was rising. Impossible. The place had been abandoned for years, even the police didn't bother with it anymore. How...?

A voice cut through the hazy air: "Hey, you lost?"

Drew squinted. A lanky young man—looked to be around Drew's age, mid-20s—waved at him from the open Slick Beatz entrance. Not a cop. *At least there's that.* Drew came out from behind the sign, made his way to the stranger. The stranger who had somehow come from *inside* the mall.

Drew's sneakers slapped the pavement and he winced. Somehow his footsteps sounded too loud out here.

The young man's features seemed to emerge as Drew approached. A few steps, and he saw a beige polo shirt. Another, and close-cropped brown hair appeared. The tattoos showed up last. The guy looked to be about Drew's age, maybe a little older, late-twenties.

"Hey, do you ..." Drew was going to say *work here*, but that was ridiculous. All of this was. Instead he said, "You been in there long?" Something alarmingly like fear traced its way across his shoulders. Who hung out in abandoned malls?

"I'm Brooks." The guy nodded for a second, then stuck out his hand

as an afterthought.

Drew looped his camera around his neck and shook the man's hand. "Drew. You look ... familiar." Drew yanked his hand back like he'd touched a hot stove. He had no idea why.

"You all right? What happened?" Brooks ran a thumb behind a necklace Drew didn't realize the guy had been wearing. It flashed in the sun; Drew shielded his eyes.

For a moment, both men stopped dead. Like this had been just a bit too much for their brains to handle and they were resetting. When the spots from the sun-flash faded, Drew felt substantially lighter. "I'm surprised you made it," he said.

"What, you thought I'd end up changing my mind?"

"I thought you'd end up in Shamokin."

Brooks laughed. "That was one time."

Drew pulled his old friend in for a one-armed bro-hug. "So how'd you get in?" Drew nodded at the mall.

"Someone left a door unlocked back by the side entrance." But as Brooks spoke, doubt creased his eyebrows.

"Cool. So when did you get here?"

"About ten minutes ago. Didn't beat you by much."

Drew grinned. "Ready to do this thing? You really think she'll say yes?"

"She better. I'm not vandalizing this place for nothing."

Then: a humming in Drew's ears. They stared at each other then, a

couple of temporary mannequins stuck in the sun with nowhere to go and no reason to be there. Silence, while whoever was directing this little film switched reels.

Drew woke first: “Come on, I want to get some shots before we hit the carousel.”

The two walked into Slick Beatz and Brooks slid the security gate back down behind them. “Yeah, I thought you said something about getting back into photography.”

“When was I ever *not* into it?” Drew looked around. Lonely music stands wore their dust with shame. A wall of guitars slept back by the empty counters where registers used to sing out transactions. It was weird how fast things died when you weren’t around to watch them. “Well this is depressing,” Drew said.

Drew turned on his phone flashlight and Brooks hissed. “Damn, warn a guy, will ya?”

A piano by the back caught Drew’s eye. The effect was immediate; a warm memory relaxed his shoulders. “You think you still know ‘Crocodile Rock’?” He grinned.

Brooks returned the smile, making his way to the piano in the eerie too-bright light from Drew’s phone. He lifted the cover and cracked his knuckles. The sound made Drew uneasy. He had the sudden feeling they were not alone. And they were not welcome.

Brooks’s fingers crashed down on the keys, testing the waters. “That can’t be in tune,” Drew said. “Not after all this time.”

Brooks played a few chords and an arpeggio. “Good enough to jam. Now we just need someone to sing.”

There it was again. That *off* feeling. Like the uneasy quiet in the pot-holed lot outside, or the way the scarecrow head was there one minute,

gone the next. A memory popped up like a lottery ball: Drew saw a younger Brooks sitting at the same piano, head bobbing side to side, fingers dancing while Drew sang along.

Which was all kinds of wrong. Drew didn’t sing. Ever.

The sound of the cobwebbed piano in its dusty mausoleum yanked Drew out of the memory. “Crocodile Rock” shouted off the sleeping walls. Drew took a photo, then threw a look back over his shoulder. He could have sworn someone was watching him.

Brooks stopped playing, the last notes swallowed up by silence. “I feel it too.” Brooks got up, scanned the store.

Drew pointed at the back of the store, where another gate connected Slick Beatz to the rest of Golden Hills. “Was that open when you got here?”

“No, but—huh.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just thought I locked that behind me when I came in.” Brooks punched Drew’s shoulder. “So what do you say, ready to grab that brass ring?”

“I thought I was just here for emotional support. Now you’re making me an accomplice.”

“I want to stop by the jewelry place, see if anyone left anything behind. Come on, it won’t take long. You can take some photos on the way.”

It was even darker in the mall. Shadows seemed to reach out from every corner, every forgotten pizza place, abandoned shoe store. They passed the movie theater, its lobby like a yawning mouth. Drew bumped the flashlight brightness up.

“This place smells like mothballs,” Brooks said.

Drew murmured in agreement, setting up a shot with the Canon Rebel and immediately knowing it wasn’t good enough. Four years studying picture composition and lighting and he still felt like an amateur.

“So how’s the hospital?” Drew asked.

“It’s even better than I imagined. I barely get any sleep, and half the senior doctors already hate me, but the patients make up for it. It still feels weird, though. This whole *being an adult* thing. I swear graduation was a week ago.”

“I know the feeling.”

Brooks stopped. “Thank God they didn’t tear the carousel down before they closed the place. Wait. Is that?” Brooks leaned over a horse whose mouth was painted open in an eternal cry. He wiped a finger over the saddle, showed it to Drew. “Give me the light.” Drew moved his phone closer. “That look like blood to you?”

Drew swallowed. What was he doing here again? “Probably just ketchup,” he said. They looked at each other, wondering if either of them bought it.

Something clattered in the distance. Past the photo booth.

Brooks tried a nervous laugh that turned into a dry cough. “Whose idea was this, anyway?”

Drew smiled. Then he realized he didn’t remember.

“Right. I’m gonna hit up Gordon’s, you find the brass ring and meet me at the food court.” Brooks took off.

Drew set his camera down on a bench and approached the carousel. The contraption that dispensed rings looked somehow sinister in the

low light, a too-long arm reaching to pet the plastic whose galloping days were behind it.

He wove his way through the horses. Cut across a carriage with chipped paint. Tried to ignore his loud footsteps. He was reaching toward the ring dispenser when a metal door fell shut somewhere in the darkness. “*Shit!*” Drew dropped his phone. Fumbled around for it. Finally got the damn flashlight on again. He aimed it toward the sound. But all he saw was the cold gray light of a long-dead mall.

He had to focus. His friend was depending on him. Drew was still waiting to hear if Brooks wanted him to be best man for the wedding, but knowing Brooks, he’d torture him right up until the rehearsal dinner.

He pulled four rings from the rusted device before the brass ring slid into place. But that one held fast. Drew tried using a horse for leverage. No use. Drew felt like he was being watched again. He gritted his teeth, took a deep breath, and *pulled*.

This time the ring came loose, but his finger slipped, and a hot lance cut across his right index knuckles.

“Fuck!”

He wrapped the end of his shirt around his finger, pressing hard to make it clot faster. “Brooks, any luck?” he yelled, just to take his mind off the pain. And that door.

Nothing.

Drew made his way to the food court. At least it was farther away from the unexplained noises. Thunder drummed the rooftop and rain whipped across the milky gray skylight in sheets. A flash of lightning caught the edge of something silver deep in the food court.

Drew’s blood froze. He stopped walking.

It took him a few paralyzing seconds to recognize Brooks sitting at a table across from Apple Orchard Cotton Candy—the silver flash had come from his necklace. The shop’s large painted tree, complete with aggressively orange and purple and red cotton candy poofs where apples might otherwise be, looked lost in the forgotten food court.

“You’re trying to give your Best Man a heart attack,” Drew said, steadying his nerves. “I see how it is.”

“Who said I was picking you?” Brooks tossed a small box in the air and caught it. Drew grabbed a couple of napkins—tried not to think of the germs they’d collected over the years—and joined his friend at the table. Brooks messed with his necklace. “Man, this place used to feel so different. I still remember that time you tried to disown me over a Granny Smith Cotton Cone. Didn’t see you again for a month.”

The memory made Brooks frown, like he just found out two plus two did not equal four.

Drew slapped him on the back. “And yet the second you entered that wing competition, there I was. Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

But that wasn’t quite right. Parts of the memory checked out, but every time Drew tried picturing Brooks’s face, fog kept him from seeing it. Because it wasn’t Brooks who belonged in that memory.

It was Drew’s brother, Clay.

Drew stood up. Backed away from the table. Something was very. Very. Wrong.

Brooks must have felt it, too; he dashed to the other side of the court, grabbed an old tip tray off the cotton candy counter like he was going to throw it. Something shiny clinked to the floor. “Don’t come any closer, man.” His voice was shaky. Drew wasn’t ready for that. Whatever spooked Drew had spooked Brooks, too.

The silence was a sound that itched. Drew had to move, had to *do* something. Why had he come here anyway? For photos? Of the *murder mall*?

A shout echoed down the mall from the photo booth. Dunked Drew’s head in cold water. He heard the car horn again. Saw the crows streaking across his windshield. Blinding him. The thump of tires over a sandbag. *There were birds, you’re still you, there were birds, you’re still you therewerebirdsyou’re still you therewere—*

“What?” Brooks stared at him. Had Drew said that out loud?

Another scream. Drew looked over his shoulder, careful to keep Brooks in his peripheral. A silhouette came flying down the concourse. Weaving around ancient kiosks. The shadow tripped, bounced off the side of a gate like a demented pinball. “Run! *Run! It’s coming!*” the shape shouted.

Brooks cursed, turned, and ran like a pack of wolves was after him. Drew turned back to the shouting shadow, who was now close enough for him to see more details. It was a man: one arm pumping, one arm just hanging there at his side, like it had already resigned to the runner’s inevitable fate. A shock of clown-red hair.

Drew didn’t see the blonde under that redness until it was too late.

Didn’t clock it as blood until Dead-Arm was up in the air.

One second, sneakers stumbling past the carousel; the next, the stranger was swept up off his feet like a giant was picking up a toy. Drew couldn’t see the monster. But he could smell it: rotting apples, a trace of vinegar. Black smoke shot straight through Dead-Arm’s chest. Skewering him like a marshmallow.

Something fell from above as the dense fog rocketed the guy toward the skylight—changed course—and pitched him up into the ceiling, plaster raining down with the stringy mess of the man’s insides.

Screams pierced Drew's ears, rising in pitch until the black tendrils whipped the body back to the tile floor. Then the man stopped screaming. He stopped doing anything.

And Drew ran.

He followed the route Brooks had taken. He didn't trust him, but he also hadn't watched him mutilate a stranger. Drew's teeth ground together as he pumped his legs. A low hum began to crescendo. He wasn't dumb enough to look back, but he also didn't need to. Whatever just snuffed out that life was still hungry.

His lungs burned, pushing for oxygen but screaming for relief. Something brushed his ankle—he cried out before he could stop himself. Pushed harder.

Back in tenth grade, trying out for track and field, he and his brother once raced each other so hard they each had cramps for weeks. Drew was in it for the run; Clay seemed to be chasing something else, he'd always been like that—running after some unnamed oppressor to whom he'd given Drew's face.

It didn't help when their parents said they could only afford to send one of them to college. "But I'm a *chef*, Mom. All Drew does is take pictures." "We'll do what we can. You can always get a part-time job." "Oh, but *Drew* doesn't have to?"

Now acid poisoned Drew's legs as he raced after Brooks's swinging hair. Both of them running from some unseen terror. And for what? To help Brooks propose to his girlfriend?

Drew caught up to Brooks at the gated-shut game store. Brooks rammed his shoulder into the steel in frustration. "It won't budge. Its jammed."

"Probably locked."

"No, there's a little clearance by the floor there, the thing's just stub-

born. Give me a hand."

Drew slipped his fingers under the bottom of the gate and pulled with everything he had. His back winced in protest. No give. They were running out of time. The fog, the shadow, the—*whatever!*—would surely be dismantling his two new play toys in seconds.

Brooks cursed. Mumbled something, shook his head. Then he cleared his throat, turned toward the food court, and said, "It's okay. He's with me."

Drew froze. "Who are you talking to?"

The humming stopped. That feeling that death itself was racing to claim them vanished, as quickly as a nightmare upon waking. Drew risked a look back the way they came.

The black mist was nowhere to be seen, and even the shadows were retreating, slinking back to the corners from which the creature had no doubt emerged. "It's getting brighter," Drew said. And it was. Unnaturally brighter; he no longer needed the flashlight, but more than that, it now looked nearly as bright in here as it had outside.

The reality of seeing a man murdered caught up with Drew then and he doubled over, dry heaving. He hadn't felt this unmoored since—

No. *You're still you.*

Brooks sat on a bench and sighed. "I never remember at first. Every time I meet someone new, the mall does this to us, to me. It tricks me in a way. But trick's not the right word."

Drew tried to swallow. Couldn't. His brain tried in vain to piece the fractured bits of his sanity back together. When the truth came, it was cold and clear. That clarity was almost as jarring as the lie had been.

"We're not friends. We were never friends," Drew said.

“We never even met before today.”

But that felt wrong, too.

Brooks took his necklace off now, looked sidelong down the mall, squinting as too-bright light bounced off the carousel in the distance. “Have you ever done something so dark ... that it defined you?”

Drew scratched his arms. Fought the urge to start running and not stop for a very long time. The sounds found him before he could hide: Car horn. Flock of birds. Someone stepping out from the stalks. Shattered windshield. *There were birds you're still you. You're still—*

FUCK!

Panic threw him into a sprint, blood thundering in his ears. No matter how hard Drew ran, shame ran faster. *What are you doing? Running from your problems again?*

He'd spent the past five years running. Never there for his grandpa when he needed him. Indifferent to his brother's passive-aggressive texts about catching up sometime.

His leg gave out—a cramp. He went down, the tile floor skinning his hands raw. Shouting from behind him. Brooks. His heart beat so hard he wondered if it might actually betray him, leave him to die in a murder mall he had no business coming back to—but that never fully left him.

That's when he made the choice. The choice to stop running.

Not out of some altruistic need to be better. Not because he was finally ready to face the consequences for his unforgivable actions. In the end it came down to something far simpler. He was just really tired of running.

So he massaged his calf, worked his fingers into his leg muscles.

Breathed through the pain. And then he made his way back to Brooks, who winced when he noticed Drew's limp. “You should sit down. Food court?”

How could he trust this stranger who was already here when Drew arrived? Who'd almost been *waiting* for him? The pain made the choice for him, and Drew let Brooks help him to a table by Apple Orchard.

“You're dead, aren't you?” Drew didn't believe it; his brain just needed to hear the answer.

Brooks pointed at the corner of the table, pressed his arm against the sharp edge, and sawed down in one quick motion. A thin red line thickened as blood began to seep out.

“I'll take that as a no.”

Brooks nodded at the Orchard. “Napkin?” Drew tossed him a few.

Brooks glanced up as he wiped the blood away. “I'm shocked you came back. Most people just keep running. Well, for a while.”

“Until the mall kills them.”

A warning flashed in Brooks's eyes. As if on cue, the light seeped back up through the skylight and a dense layer of darkness settled on them. “Careful. The mall doesn't like that kind of talk.”

The last ounce of resistance to the insane idea that an old building was *alive* snapped its tether and floated into the void at the memory of Dead-Arm and the smoke creature.

Drew sighed. “So why doesn't it try to kill you?”

“My memory comes back in waves, never all at once. But I do remember that. The reason it doesn't—the reason it likes me,” Brooks corrected.

“And why’s that?”

Brooks looked around. Gave a quick, sharp shake of the head. *Not here. Not now.*

“So you’re in no hurry to get out of here? You’ve tried?” Drew knew this line of discussion was reckless, but he didn’t care. The smoke thing hadn’t chased him when he tore off running earlier. Maybe the mall liked him, too.

Or maybe it’s measuring you up. Playing with its food.

The thought sent a chill down Drew’s spine.

Brooks threw the bloody napkins into an overflowing trashcan. “I’ve seen things that never leave me. I’ve done things that either keep me awake or wake me up screaming. We’re all running from something.” He clapped his hands. “Right! I gotta go clean up that dead guy. Can you help?”

Drew began to question his choice to stop running. But denying Brooks might make the mall mad, and Drew did not like what happened when the mall got mad. He nodded and followed Brooks to what was left of Dead-Arm.

Drew’s stomach clenched as he picked up the dead man’s legs and pulled. Brooks lifted the dead man’s shoulders and pushed, guiding Drew. “Sometimes the mall cleans up after itself. Sometimes it doesn’t.” Brooks shrugged, forcing Drew to glance down at the corpse’s shoulders, at the unnatural tilt of a neck thoroughly snapped. Something wet flopped against Drew’s shoe, and he turned his head and retched.

“Yeah, that smell is pretty rough. It means well, though. The mall.”

Sure.

This guy was certifiably insane.

No he’s not.

Because something about Brooks still winked at Drew: *Does he have to tell you, or should I?*

Every step they took smeared drying blood onto the tiles. Drew held his breath, trying to keep the smell out. He wondered how much farther it would take before a dislodged kidney or some other organ would smack lifelessly to the floor. Drew was not coming back to mop that up. Then he had a crazy thought. *Might as well, something to pass the time.*

“We’re almost there. See that metal door behind you? That goes to the staff hall. Throw your back into it, the lights should be on.”

“This place still gets power?”

“When it wants to.”

That’s right: sentient mall.

Drew backed into the door as carefully as possible, his back still tender from trying to pull up that gate. Once they were all through, the door crashed shut with a deafening *slam*. Drew rounded a corner to find what looked like an old break room: two old vending machines, a coffee maker, and a forgotten cake covered in flies on the table.

And, oddly enough, the smell of pickles.

“Keep going,” Brooks said. “Back and to your right there’s another room. Used to be employee lockers back there. Door’s open a crack.” The pickle smell swept over Drew like a wave. Reached up his nostrils, clawing greedily down his throat. The gas assaulted his eyes. His throat went raw.

He backed into the small room, hip crashing into the metal of an old employee locker. His foot caught on something then and he almost

went down. “We can drop it here,” Brooks said, casually letting the man’s head smack off the floor as it hit.

Drew couldn’t stop coughing. He dropped the legs, stepped past Dead-Arm. “Don’t you smell that?” He ran an arm across his eyes. Tried to hold his breath, but the odor was too strong.

“Oh, the pickle stuff, right? You get used to it.”

Drew remembered the name of that odor the instant before he turned to look at the small room: formaldehyde. His breath caught, heart panicking. Just off the break room of the Golden Hills Mall, a stack of dead bodies waited for a burial that would never come.

More than a stack, Drew realized as his eyes adjusted to the dim space. A pair of men sat propped in a corner. A few men and women lay against the wall under an old bulletin board. Most of the bodies looked alarmingly lifelike.

“Who did this?” Drew asked once he found his voice.

“Batteries,” Brooks said. “The mall needs power. These people provide. It’s ugly, but it’s ... effective.” Something like shame turned Brooks’s head away and he picked up a chair, threw it across the break room. His shoulders heaved. Drew’s mouth went dry.

Brooks let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not a monster.”

Those four words sounded like a single sound: a starter’s pistol. Every neuron in Drew’s brain urged him to *run run RUN!* But the signal couldn’t reach his legs; terror trapped his feet in cement, one foot in the break room, one foot still in that pickled Death Room.

Brooks turned to face him, eyes dark. Hollow. “Have you ever done something so dark, it defined you?”

Why the hell are you just standing there? You’ve seen what happens

next.

“Everyone has,” Drew whispered.

“It needed food.” Brooks spread his hands. “The mall provides for me, so I provide for it.”

Drew flashed on the victims by the break room, lives snuffed out simply for being in the wrong place when the mall got hungry. He imagined his grandparents among them, then realized a few of those bodies *had* been someone’s grandparents. Rage hurled him forward; he went for Brooks’s throat. Drew leapt at the murderer, flew straight at him, and crashed hard into the countertop directly behind him.

His ribs groaned. What?

He spun around to see Brooks right where he’d been. But—

“You *are* dead.”

“Not entirely. Look, let me explain.”

“You’re a fucking killer!”

“It’s called survival, Drew! You want me to just roll over and die? Is that what you hoped would happen that day by the cornfield?”

A high-pitched hum started ringing in Drew’s ears. He fought like hell to keep his brain from telling him the truth he couldn’t bear to face. Drew scrambled to his feet. Edged toward the door, wide eyes locked on Brooks.

“Run if you can, coward. You Barnes guys are all alike.”

“What?”

“Your brother says hi.”

Drew blinked.

“By the way, *friend*. There were no birds that day. I was three months from getting married, did you know that? It was such a nice day, I thought I’d go for a run. Stacy loved to run, I thought I’d surprise her and meet her at her place. Then I cut back through the cornfield and this old fucking beat-up Neon just—*WHAM!*”

Scalding shame swept through Drew’s body. Burning his blood as he stood there staring at the face he’d only glimpsed years before—one that refused to ever fully leave his mind.

“It doesn’t have to be like this—*we can be friends!*”

But Drew barely heard him. He was already running. Down the hall. Tugging the door open. The thunder roared as denial and fear took full control. Racing like a speeding car was bearing down on him.

There were birds—

No, there weren’t

You’re still you.

Not even a little.

Somewhere deep in the mall, thunder rolled. The rain started when he hit the carousel. In seconds he was drenched. *Don’t slip, keep going.* Drew wrestled control of his thoughts away from the adrenaline’s grip. Where was he going? He was a rat in a cage. Trapped with a mad scientist. *Trapped with the person you hit out there on the road that day.*

Torrents pummeled the metal roof, turning the whole place into a macabre drum Drew was swiftly realizing was about to become his coffin. Lightning flashed.

Drew never reported the hit-and-run. Fear had driven him then, and

shame became his close companion all the days after. His memory still insisted that a flock of birds had burst from the corn the instant before it happened, obscuring his vision. Or maybe he was just zoned out, the way you get when you’re driving a familiar road for the umpteenth time.

He had to get out of this godforsaken murder mall ...

Slick Beatz! Hadn’t he left the security gate up?

A puddle grabbed his feet and he went down. His hands stung as they slapped the wet floor next to Apple Orchard Cotton Candy. Another flash of lightning. Something shined by the bench where the tip tray had fallen. Drew grabbed it. And stared in disbelief.

The copper was worn, but he could still make out the grinning squirrel face stamped into the pressed penny. The words *Welcome to Loopyland, Go Nuts!* framed the critter’s portrait. The date on the penny was 2055: the same year Clay went to an amusement park with his friends and said he fell in love for the first time.

But this couldn’t be Clay’s—when was the last time he was even at the mall? Brooks’s words came back to him. *You Barnes guys are all alike.* He didn’t realize how hard he was gripping the coin until the blood from his sliced finger began to pool around its edges.

Darkness deep and black rolled toward Drew. The same smoke that claimed Dead-Arm swallowed up kiosks and You Are Here signs as it came for him. He scrambled to his feet, slipped, grabbed the edge of a table to keep from going down again. Something sticky. He brought it to his face and stared. Brooks’s blood, from where he sliced his arm. Only this wasn’t blood; it smelled like stale ketchup, left there from the days before the mall shut down and its evil grew restless.

Wind whipped through Drew’s hair. Trash cans flew across the food court; one clipped Drew on the arm. And still the dark fog rolled—it was hunting him, greedy, hungry, and longing to make Drew pay for

the mistakes of his seedy past.

He pumped his legs, pushed past the stiffness threatening to grip them in a vice. A deafening hum assaulted his ears. Blackness closed in at the corners of his vision. He could feel the shadow reaching its tentacles toward him ...

There—Slick Beatz. Was that—*yes*. Relief administered a fresh surge of adrenaline. Drew pounded through the store, *sloshing* through puddles, his feet so wet he might as well have been barefoot. The water wasn't cold—it was hot, almost to the point of boiling. Drew pushed on, eyes fixed on the only gate now standing between him and the cloudless summer sky.

It was down but not latched. He slid over soggy, drowning carpet, got his fingers underneath—hissing at the freshly opened finger wound—and pulled up. A miracle: the gate rolled easily.

It was just up to his shoulders when he stopped. Instinct made him turn back for one last look at the haunted store, the killing shadows now so close he could just make out unintelligible whispers undulating through the tar-black waves. He couldn't see the mall entrance anymore. Couldn't see past thirty feet in front of him. His breath hitched.

Then he remembered “Crocodile Rock.” The joy on Brooks's face as he pounded those piano keys. Was he lying to Drew even then? He wasn't sure. But something about the memory, false though its foundation had proven, made it just a little easier to breathe as Drew Barnes faced the end.

And suddenly the shadows split, pushed to the sides of the store like a parting of the seas. The shadows still churned, but now they gave him some room, almost like they were clearing a path. As if to say, *Go on, Drew. Go meet your friend.*

He could see into the mall again now. The rain had stopped. Like Golden Hills Mall had turned off a faucet. The last roll of thunder

faded away. Slick Beatz itself even seemed to get a little brighter. Drew thought about roads not taken, and the shameful road he had. He thought about Grandpa Joe's barbecue and the time he failed to visit the man when Joe had a heart attack, because the thing happened just a week after the hit-and-run and he didn't want to risk being implicated.

But Drew was done running.

He stepped away from the gate. Headed back through the store, conviction steadying his heartbeat as fear fell to conviction. He found Brooks sitting in front of the carousel, shoulders slumped. His head snapped up when he heard Drew's footsteps.

“Hey, look. Sorry about being a dick back there. I know it was an accident. The car. The ... birds.” Brooks extended a hand. “No hard feelings?” He swallowed. “Friends?”

Drew already felt gone. Like he was watching everything from outside his body. The shadow monster had followed him here; he felt it more than saw it. He took a breath to steel himself. Then he said, “I'm sorry for what I did, Brooks. I took away your fiancée, your wife, your family. Your future. I can never make that right. All I can do is pay the price.”

Brooks kept his hand out, tears in the dead man's eyes. “Friends?” he whispered, almost pleading now.

Drew brought the Canon Rebel up to his eye. “Nope.”

The shadows surged, anger pulsing as they lashed out to claim the infidel. Black mist reached from the floor surrounding the carousel, seething from corners and walls and ceiling tiles. It grabbed, squeezed, blackness swallowing up Drew even as he took one last picture.

Drew accepted his fate. His last thought was how he'd never get to taste Grandpa Joe's barbecue again. The camera fell to the floor. The

lens shattered.

* * *

Wafts of sugary-sweet hickory filled the backyard. The party guests laughed and gossiped. A few had started up a volleyball game with an old net and a bright new ball. Joe Morgan clapped Clay on the back. “How are those ribs coming?”

“Pretty good, but I still think they could use some extra cayenne.”

Grandpa Joe shook his head and laughed. “You’d make a good chef, you know that?”

“Tell that to my parents,” Clay mumbled.

A cold sensation pressed against the bottom of his sock. He dropped into a lawn chair and took off his shoe, peered inside it. Something

small and oval-shaped was sitting in the sole. It hadn’t been there when he got dressed this morning.

A penny. Clay pulled it from his shoe and relief spread through him at the sight of the old, familiar squirrel. A crimson border ran around the edge, dried and flaky. Ketchup? Somehow he knew it wasn’t. He scraped it off and squeezed the pressed penny, eyes welling with emotion as the world stood still. And in that moment, Clay determined to make the most of this fresh start. His debt was paid.

Grandpa Joe came through the sliding patio door, glanced over his shoulder to make sure he was alone. “Hey, your brother said he was planning on coming up and surprising Gram. I thought he’d be here by now. He didn’t call you by chance, did he?”

“Sorry, Grams.” Clay turned the coin over in the midday sun, smiling as it winked off the copper. “I don’t think he’ll make it.”

To Love Too Much

by Deborah L. Davitt

(*chueh-chu*, or Chinese “cut sonnet” form)

We intergrade, we fade, we shade;
each intransigent to another, made
whole as we gorge, Moebius-
like, on each other. No more maid!

We're Ouroborous and we're one;
we delight in the flesh we've preyed,
devouring flesh, skin, and bone—
in our gluttony, we're unmade.

The Pain of Duty

by Gustavo Bondoni

The king and queen scowled down on her from their thrones and Singura knew she was beaten. Her parents often disagreed, and could be played against each other, but when they spoke as one, there was no arguing: Int Sideat itself spoke through them.

“So, it’s agreed,” her father said. “You will lead the delegation to Int Mara. Karsus will act as Protector.”

Singura bowed. “Understood,” she said. “I won’t fail you. I won’t enjoy it, but I won’t fail you.”

Her mother smiled. “We know.”

Yes, they knew. And they were sending her anyway. It felt like they were teaching her a lesson, for her own good.

But she was twenty-two. They didn’t have to treat her like a child anymore.

Then she laughed at herself. Would they send a child across the Night of Ice?

“I’ll go prepare my gear,” Singura said.

She emerged from the throne room to find Karsus waiting for her. *Of course*, she thought bitterly, *they’d told him first*.

He matched her stride. “Is there anything you need from me, princess?”

“I’m pretty sure you have everything prepared.” Her words sounded bitter even to her ears.

“Yes. But I’m not the leader of this expedition. You are. Therefore, I’d need to know what logistical support you require, and what equipment you’re bringing. Are we taking gifts? That would mean extra weight that we’ll need to plan around.” His dark black beard made it difficult to read his expression, and he wore his equally dark hair tied back in a knot.

Singura stopped in her tracks. “I’ll need to think about that.”

“When are you planning to leave?”

“I was thinking as soon as possible. After the mid-cycle meal?”

Karsus made a face, leaving no doubt he wanted to say something.

“What?” she asked.

“I would prefer to set out after the long sleep. We will be rested and we can get a good distance in. That way, we might avoid spending an additional sleep period within the Night of Ice.”

“Ah. That sounds wise,” Singura said. The anger she’d been feeling at what her parents had foisted on her was simmering down enough to think clearly again. “Could you help me with the planning?”

“I can help, but you need to decide what we’re going to do.”

“We’re going to cure that conceited little vixen, even though I would much prefer that she died horribly,” Singura replied.

“That’s not what I meant. A royal visit to another of the Spell Cities is a major event, for us and for them. No royal has been to Int Mara since the wedding. We need to think about what we’ll take them, and who needs to write messages.”

“I’m a Healer, I don’t know how to be a diplomat.”

“You are a grown princess. It might be about time you learned,” Karsus said.

Had it been anyone else, she would have stormed off to plot a royal revenge for the insult to her person. But Karsus had earned the right to speak his mind. Several members of her family would have joined the ancestors if his wise council hadn’t prevailed out in the Night.

“All right. Let’s get this over with.”

* * *

Tiny shards of ice, too small to see, but big enough to sting if they hit a patch of unprotected skin, filled the air. Singura ignored them; the Night of Ice was always cold and windy. And despite the best efforts of the armies of royal nannies and caretakers, every child in the palace had made it out onto the Ice at least once.

Only now did it occur to her that her childish adventure, responding to a dare from her brothers, might have been allowed by the adults. It was just too convenient that everyone happened to be looking the other way on the day the garden gates had been unguarded.

That experience served her well. She knew that being outside the Spell that embraced Int Sideat wouldn’t kill her, that people had survived without spells for countless generations, finding what shelter they could and scratching a living from the broken landscape.

But that knowledge didn’t keep her from looking back at the city in which she’d lived her entire life.

Int Sideat rose out of the dark plain of jagged and broken ice like a faceted beacon in the eternal night, illuminated from within. The palace rose, a central spire in the center, the globe of the city below with the gardens, the life-giving gardens, warmed by magic, radiating out like the petals of a flower.

It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen; the city cast its warm glow for miles across the ice, illuminating the caravan and its shaggy beasts of burden.

She would not have wanted to leave it for all the magic in the world, but even less to save the life of the woman who’d stolen the man she’d loved since childhood.

Singura turned west. She had a long ride ahead, and delaying it wouldn’t make the pain at the end of it any easier to bear.

* * *

Karsus pulled his tigercat up in front of her. The mottled white beasts were ideally suited to the task of carrying people and supplies across the Night of Ice. They could see for miles in the cold light of the stars and their thick fur kept the icy wind at bay.

“Trouble,” Karsus said.

“Where?” Singura asked.

“Behind the caravan. Banshees. An entire tribe by the looks of it.”

“So what do we do? Can we outrun them?”

The edge of the Night of Ice was in sight. Just west of them, perhaps half a day away over the broken ice, she could see the ruddy glow of

the Illuminated Wasteland. Banshees never left the Night.

Karsus stroked his beard. “We could try. But they might catch up. I think it’s better to face them.”

“Face banshees?”

He shrugged. “I’ve done it more times than I care to count. They lie in wait beside the paths through the ice. The banshee attack is a sign that we’re underway, the ceremonial baptism of every journey.”

“What can I do?”

“Stay out of our way, and if any of them get near you, scream.” He rode off with a loud laugh and she glared at him. No one would hear a scream in the midst of a banshee strike.

The wind suddenly picked up, its sound evolving from a soft moan in the background into a high-pitched howl.

Singura braced herself against the stirrups ... but the noise wasn’t accompanied by the volume of air that should have come with the colossal sound, and the stinging ice was just the same as it had always been.

The banshees were upon them.

Karsus wheeled his mount around and galloped back the way he’d come, four Underlings in his wake. About a hundred paces behind the caravan, the guards fanned out in a wide semicircle and pulled their staffs from the scabbards on their backs. In the distance, Singura recognized Vina’s red hair, tied back with endless rings, bright even in the darkness: a true child of fire.

And the banshees were upon them.

They came like wisps of mist out of the dark night. Perhaps they

were particles of ice animated by the spirits of the wind. Maybe they were the ghosts of mages that had perished when their private war shattered the very nature of reality. Maybe they were something else, something that the humans who shared their world could never comprehend.

An Underling on the left of the formation was the first to engage, his staff discharging into the darkness, a green lance of fire.

“Save your energy!” Karsus shouted, barely audible in the howl. “Wait until you can feel them in your bones!”

But his troops were young, too young to have such patience in the face of a terrifying enemy. Within moments, every one of them had chosen a target and blasted out into the night in a rainbow of destruction. Someone must have hit something because Singura heard a thin wail, different from the war cries, softer, which faded into the distance like a dirge.

The staffs all smoked with use, except for the Protector’s. Karsus waited in the center of the semicircle, glaring intently into the night.

He knew exactly where to look. Even at a distance, she could see his eyes trained on one specific part of the night sky, a place where a milkier section of cloud appeared to be inching closer. Singura wanted to shout out, to warn them, but she kept silent. She felt that the clouds would hear and the banshees would come for her. Unlike Karsus, her own magic would do little to hold them at bay.

Then, when it seemed like the cloud would engulf him, Karsus allowed the magic to stream from his staff. The light burned into the cloud, and again Singura heard the keening cry of banshee pain, except this time it was multiplied three or four times.

The mist exploded into life. No longer moving slowly, tendrils shot out of the night to strike at the caravan’s five defenders. It looked like the wind was enraged, pushing ice into the faces of the people

standing in its way.

Now, it was impossible to mistake the formation for a cloud. The mist separated into a dozen clearly defined figures, each vaguely man-shaped, but thrice the height of even the tallest Longwalker. Torrents of icy cloud flew from their arms, tearing at the tiny figures in front of them.

The guardians held their ground, slamming colored light into the figures. For a moment, it seemed like the banshee charge would break at the first hurdle.

But then the fury of the storm redoubled and the Protector and his Underlings disappeared behind a shroud of fog. The only sign that they were still alive was given by their power lighting the banshee clouds from within and the occasional banshee death scream.

The battle seemed to go on forever. Singura watched with held breath—if the guardians failed, the caravan was doomed. None of the drivers or lower diplomats had any attack magic. They'd all die, swallowed up by the Night of Ice like so many others before.

Then the fight subsided. The mist dwindled until there was only one figure, accosted by the combined light of the magicians. Finally, it, too, keened out its last and disappeared.

Singura could now see the guardians. Dark cloaks had replaced the flying mist as the figures trudged slowly back.

There were only four of them approaching. Singura ran to meet Karsus, who was carrying a limp figure.

The Protector lay the unmoving boy, the youngest of the assigned guardians, at her feet. “Is there anything you can do?” he asked.

Wordlessly, she placed her hand on his forehead. “There’s a spark. Yes. I can hold it, but I need you to tell me what the banshees did to him.”

“They sucked the warmth out of his soul. That’s what banshees do. They spend their entire existence suffering, yearning for the heat trapped in our bodies. If the Spell around Int Sideat ever fails, we’ll know the cold touch of their lips.”

“Warmth. All right.”

Singura concentrated on the spark of life in the fallen boy. She fed her magic into it, warming the tiny trace of life—she felt it as a sputtering flame around the heart—so that it expanded, grew to take the chest, the neck, the head. Into the legs.

She was stretched too thin. The boy wasn’t yet fully cured. If she left him like this, he would take days to recover fully. But she had no more to give; she’d never felt anyone quite this drained, not even men on the edge of death. In those cases, she could weave the body back together, then strengthen the spirit, but here, the body hadn’t been touched. It was like Karsus said: the spirit had been frozen, locked away from the body’s strength.

“That’s all I can do,” she said, opening her eyes.

The boy looked up at her. His skin felt ice-cold on her hand.

But he smiled. “Thank you,” he whispered. Then his eyes closed.

“Is he ...” Karsus asked.

“He’s sleeping,” Singura replied. “He’ll be exhausted for some days.”

The dark-bearded man, a man who’d always been someone she’d respected and even feared a little, nodded once and wiped his eye. “I’ve never seen healing like that,” he said. “I was certain Inugu would die. Now I understand why your parents selected you for this mission.”

The praise was more than she expected, more than she felt she

deserved. “I saw what you had to fight out there. My own part is minor. I just ensured we’ll have an experienced warrior who is already a hero when we need one.”

“I see more than one hero here,” Karsus replied. He turned away to speak to the rest of his troops. When he finished, each of the Underlings walked up to Singura and placed their hand on her shoulder.

Vina and Karsus lifted the boy onto a Tigercat and lashed him down, creating a makeshift bed from the animal’s back.

Singura also rose and realized just how much the Healing had drained her. She stumbled once, but caught herself and, with an effort, climbed onto her own mount. She wanted nothing more than to sleep for days.

But that wasn’t possible. Spending more time than necessary on the open Ice was suicide.

Onward, then.

* * *

At least there’s light, Singura thought as she wiped the sweat from her brow. The wasteland was where the magical war had done the most damage.

The blasted landscape, red in the glow of the sun above, seemed to be built of ridges and crevasses that led straight to the molten rock in the center of the world. One false step and she would be beyond the magic or Healing.

Her tigercat wouldn’t make that misstep, however, unless she allowed it to become exhausted. Its coat was soaked in sweat, just like Singura herself, but the animal had been created precisely to be able to survive a wide range of conditions. Mage armies had ridden

tigercats into hells more inhospitable than this one.

But this one was bad enough for her. She nearly collapsed with relief when Karsus called a rest halt.

Vina strode along the caravan. As a child of fire, this had been her playground when she was young, but her home had been the inhabited desert far to the south of the blasted wasteland. Nothing lived on the battlefield, and they only crossed it because going around would add weeks to the journey.

Singura smiled when she saw that the guardian was dripping in sweat and had stripped down to little but a thin shirt. None of them wore the black cloaks of their office any longer.

“I can’t wait to get back into a Spell,” Vina said as she handed up a skin full of their carefully rationed water, “even if it’s the one around those tyrants in Int Mara.”

Singura drank deeply and gratefully. “I thought you’d be happy out here. The magic of this land flows through you.”

Vina snorted. “If it does, it certainly isn’t helping me stay cool,” she replied. “It’s hot as a demon’s ... well, you know what I mean,” the red-haired woman finished lamely.

“I know exactly what you mean,” Singura replied with a laugh. “You don’t need to be so careful around me. I don’t bite.”

Now it was Vina’s turn to laugh. “Oh, I’m not afraid of you. But if Karsus hears me swearing around a member of the royal family, he’ll toss me in the nearest hole and watch me cook.” She continued down the caravan, taking water to the exhausted riders.

The break was much too short. Mere minutes later, they were on the move again, the feeling of the water coursing blessedly down her throat a fading memory. Soon, even the memory was gone and

reality reverted to the monotonous up-and-down motion of her mount as it trudged over the wasteland.

They stopped again, and Singura thought it was too soon. She craned her head around the guardians in front of her to see Karsus, on foot, inspecting his mount's left rear leg. She could hear him cursing, even in the distance ... and he didn't seem to be too concerned about what she might hear. He used words that no one in the palace would have dared say in the presence of royalty.

Singura slipped from her tigercat and walked up to him.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"It's Ferri. He's gone lame."

"Can't he rest a little?"

"I don't think he'll recover in the next hour or so. It will take days ... and he'll die out here before that leg gets better."

"Can't he walk?"

"No."

Karsus stared at the ground for a moment before turning back to her. "May I ask a boon?"

"Anything."

"I'd like to take a few moments, alone, to say goodbye to him. We've been together for many years, and I can't just leave him without parting words."

"No," Singura replied. "I cannot grant that boon."

Karsus' head snapped up, but he only said, "Very well. We move on."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm going to Heal him."

Now the Protector showed emotion. Horror, in this case. "You can't do that."

"Of course I can."

"You'll disgrace the throne of Int Sideat, contaminate the bloodline with animal spirit."

"I'm seventeenth in line for the throne, Karsus. I don't think my bloodline will make much difference."

He gritted his teeth. "No one will want to marry you."

She smiled sadly. "The only man I ever wanted is lost to me. I've been resigned to being alone for a long time. Now be quiet."

She put her hand on the tigercat's nose, which, had Karsus not been there to reassure it, would have been a quick way to lose a few fingers.

The spirit she found within was alien, but not that alien, and in no way did it feel unclean ... just innocent, in a way that not even the youngest of humans ever felt. She quickly pinpointed the problem area, a tear in the ligament connecting a hip to a leg. She soon fixed that and realized the animal was now fine. She didn't even feel tired.

"There. He should be good for more years than you, now."

Karsus nodded once, and then turned away to hide the tears in his eyes.

* * *

In much the same way that Int Sideat shone like a beacon of light and

warmth over the Night of Ice, Int Mara could be seen for leagues across the wasteland. Concentric cylinders of bright white stone stacked taller than seemed possible, bigger ones at the bottom, taller ones at the top, created a delicate pyramid that reached high into the dusty yellow sky. Water cascaded down from each of the levels. While Int Sideat looked warm from a distance, Int Mara looked cool.

“It makes me thirsty just to look at it,” Singura said.

Vina just sighed. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. There’s still a half-day’s journey to get there. Maybe more.”

“It looks close enough to touch. Is it really so far?”

“You’ll see.”

Singura gazed at the city for a few more moments, then lowered her head back to the path ahead of her tigerscat. The beasts were sure-footed, but four eyes still saw better than two.

Besides, she didn’t want to think of the spire, to consider what lay ahead of her. The woman she’d spent the last five years of her life hating with every fiber of her being, the one whose conquest of a heart Singura had been certain of had sent her to take refuge in study, driving herself hard—perhaps too hard—until she bested her masters to become the best Healer anyone had ever heard of, awaited.

That was the woman she’d been sent to heal, the princess of Int Mara whose life depended on the learning she’d driven Singura to get. It was at once a colossal jest, unfair to the core, yet somehow also fitting in an ironic way.

They got going again and Vina turned out to be exactly right. They crested ridges and trudged over depressions in the blasted landscape, skirting bottomless pits and treading gingerly over broken rock, but Int Mara never seemed to get any closer. The sweat still poured and

the sun still baked them.

Until, coming out of a shallow bowl of sand, Singura looked up to see the city towering over her.

Relief warred with dread for a confusing moment as she stood just outside the Spell’s bubble. Just within, she could see a grassy meadow where butterflies flitted around flowers.

Relief won. “We made it,” she said to Karsus, who was waiting for her to enter first, as protocol demanded.

He nodded. “And we didn’t lose a single person or even an animal on the way. Thanks to you. I ... I’ve only been part of very few expeditions that arrived intact.”

“It’s a difficult journey. My respect for anyone who does this often is even greater than before.”

Karsus smiled. “You see? You’re already starting to talk like a diplomat.”

She responded with some undiplomatic words and spurred her mount forward, sighing in pleasure as she left the wasteland and felt the cool, humid breeze of the Spell’s interior embrace her skin. She dismounted, stretched her legs, and headed over to the nearest pool. Just as in Int Sideat, the fountains stood at the boundaries to welcome weary travelers.

A red-faced page, huffing and panting, arrived moments later. “Princess Singura,” he huffed. “We weren’t expecting you so soon. My queen will be down shortly.”

“Tell her that, with her permission, we’ll await her inside. Our steeds are tired and my people are hungry.”

“Of course. She suspected you’d say that, so she instructed me to

lead you to the small banquet hall.”

Singura smiled when she saw the size of the small banquet hall. She didn't even want to imagine what the large banquet hall might be like if this was the small one. Nevertheless, the size wasn't what shocked her the most, but the fact that the furniture was all made of reflective surfaces that caught the light. It was dazzling in the glow of the sun.

Such a contrast to the way things were back home where the milky stone furniture glowed from within with a soft light that allowed one to see while never forgetting that night ruled eternal outside the walls. Here, things were designed to highlight the red sun.

The queen arrived before they could finish admiring their surroundings. She swept through the grand door ensconced within a flock of courtiers which spread out so that she stood face to face with Singura. Silence reigned as everyone waited for the ruler to speak first, as was the protocol.

Singura studied the queen. An aquiline nose and grey eyes would have made her regal even if she'd been a serving woman, and her deeply lined skin seemed to be bronze-colored in the ruddy glow.

“I formally welcome this delegation from Int Sideat to our city,” the queen began formally. Then her features softened. “You have our eternal thanks for coming so quickly.” Finally, her features broke into a smile that turned wrinkles into deep chasms. “I especially thank you for coming in person, Princess. Your reputation as a Healer precedes you and, more importantly, my son has told me much about you. Perhaps more than is proper, but enough to let me know the caliber of the jewel who now walks among us.”

The queen actually bowed her head in her direction and, for a moment, Singura nearly panicked while trying to think of the protocol for such a huge gesture during a welcoming ceremony. Finally, not being able to think of a precedent, she simply bowed

deeply and held it for the formal maximum of three seconds before looking back up to see a quick smile of approval on the monarch's features. Apparently, she'd just passed some kind of test.

“You must be tired from the journey. My chamberlain has prepared rooms for all of you.”

It was the queen's way of saying how much they appreciated this. Normally, rooms would have been made ready in the palace for Singura and Karsus, while the rest would have been led away to barracks in the city. Even so, Singura hesitated, the healer getting the better of the diplomat. “Shouldn't I see the patient?” she said.

“The Princessa will be fine for a few more hours. Our own healers assure me that she is still a few days away from any crisis, and that she is in no pain. You can sleep and see her tomorrow.”

But again, the queen's expression made it seem as if Singura had passed a test.

Before she could say anything else, the queen nodded and the chamberlain was bowing in front of her. “Princess,” he said. “If you'll follow me ...”

The corridors were as cool and breezy as those of her city were warm and comforting: the Spell was working perfectly. When the wizards of old had stopped throwing energy at each other they'd done a fantastic job of making the cities livable. A job that no one alive in her age would ever be able to match.

Admiring the mage-built palace around her, Singura thought about the old magic, so diminished in the people of her day, until she reached her suite of rooms. After that, she thought about nothing more; the bed called to her irresistibly and she collapsed, fully clothed, onto it. She was asleep in moments.

* * *

Singura woke to find the man she loved beside her. She went through her duties as Princessa of Int Mara, stopping to share the midday meal with her husband, the love of her life, Princeps Nurel, before taking a relaxed afternoon walk with her ladies-in-waiting, looking out over the vast blasted plains of the west. Later, she went into the royal burial garden, searching for a little quiet, away from the bustle of court and the chattering of her handmaids.

She wandered alone, smelling the rich scent of the flowers in the woods and glades that made up the burial ground. She was drawn irresistibly to a small glade near the outer wall of the city, where a single monument stood alone, far from the dead of the city's royal family.

Singura stood before the tomb, a collection of willowy glass spires that yearned for the sky. Within its base, woven of magic, were the words "In memory of Princessa Dilandra, Taken Much Too Soon."

That hated name, illuminated in rainbow colors inside the beautiful monument, caused her to suck in her breath. She no longer felt soothed by the burial ground. The shaded glades promised not cool peace but rather seemed the abode of vengeful spirits.

She wanted to return to her husband, to the safety of her court, but she couldn't turn away from the mesmerizing vision before her: palpable proof of the death of her rival.

No. Not proof. Premonition. She understood now.

Singura woke, drenched in sweat, the scream on her lips struggling to escape. She knew enough about how magic worked to know that what she'd seen was a true vision, a vision of the happiness she could have if she failed at her task.

Her own power might be that of a Healer, but sometimes the magic could manifest in other forms. This was one of those times.

She tried to get back to sleep, to think of other things. She failed.

* * *

An honor guard led her to the door, an aperture fit for the chamber of the woman who'd married the man who would be king after the current queen. It was metallic and enormous, with a subtle golden sheen, crossed by steel-colored bands. A guard pushed it open and bowed.

The room beyond was equally impressive, with the roof lost up above innumerable sheets of diaphanous cloth that shimmered gently in the breeze, illuminated from behind by lights unseen, visible only through the filter of colored cloth. The furniture seemed to have been spun of the stuff of clouds.

Singura had no eyes for the opulence. Her only concern was the tiny figure of a woman lost in the colossal bed. She approached slowly, unwilling to believe her eyes. Was this the imposing red-haired woman everyone had spoken of so admiringly? The witch who'd stolen her true love's heart?

Propped against the pillows watching her approach with eyes that seemed too big to belong in her head was an emaciated figure who looked like she was starving. Singura felt herself being watched intensely as she came to the side of the bed.

"They sent you?" the woman said.

Again, Singura was surprised. The voice held all the strength that the body lacked. Deep and resonant, there was no sign of illness there.

"You know who I am?" Singura replied.

"You are Singura of Int Sideat, the greatest Healer to have been born

since the time of mages, the most amazing princess remaining on this blasted world and the perfect woman in all regards.” The words weren’t bitter in the least. The woman seemed to be studying Singura, apparently measuring the reality of the girl beside the bed with the colossus she’d just described.

“Who said that?”

“Nurel, of course. He’s the only one in Int Mara who’s seen you in the flesh.”

A lump formed in Singura’s throat. “He said that about me? I’m just a girl from the Ice. Nothing special. And my sisters are all better princesses than I am.”

Dilandra laughed. “Anyone who’s ever met my husband knows exactly who you are. Your false modesty won’t work on us. They should have told me it was you they were sending. I might have clung to hope.”

Singura remained silent for some moments. *Hope*. The emotion that the woman on this bed had dashed for her. The feeling she’d lost when the messengers arrived announcing the royal wedding between the houses of Mara and Hieriat.

This woman spoke to her of hope.

Worse, the desperation in her features appeared to soften, a certain light returned to her eyes. Was her patient looking at the world with more interest than before, or was Singura imagining it?

The best Healers in Int Mara had pronounced her case hopeless ... and she was suddenly convinced that a young woman leaving her home for the first time would be able to help? She supposed it was understandable; a death sentence was not an easy thing to accept.

Singura began to feel the weight of the burden that was on her

shoulders: the hopes of an entire city for their new Pincessa, the hopes of the woman herself who seemed in awe of Singura and showed no suspicion of the depth of the hatred that her Healer had for her.

“Isn’t Nurel here?” Singura asked.

“He’s in Int Hieriat, speaking to my father. He wanted to speak to him personally in time to return for ... for the end.”

Singura suspected it had more to do with avoiding her. He’d known how Singura felt about him; she’d never concealed her emotions. She thought he’d felt the same. He’d find it difficult to face the woman he’d betrayed.

Dilandra seemed to guess what Singura was thinking, or at least the lines along which her thoughts went. The weakened woman reached out a hand and said: “I think he might be a little frightened of you. I’ve always gotten the feeling that he spoke of you with a reverence bordering on worship.”

Singura couldn’t reply. This woman had no idea, no inkling of the times they’d spent staring out into the Night of Ice, of making promises that had been blown away as if by a winter gale. And she could never know.

She wasn’t certain what Nurel might feel for her, but she never suspected fear or awe.

There was one way to keep the confusion and the emotions at bay. “Let’s see what we’re dealing with here,” Singura said, as she pulled back the sheets to reveal a body that matched the skin-and-skull look of the woman’s head. She placed her hand on Dilandra’s stomach and let her magic take over.

Now that she was a Healer, she understood her poor teachers, the men and women who’d told her once and again that there was no

way to explain what she would feel, that she had to sense everything for herself. How right they'd been. Only when she finally understood what she was feeling, sensations that couldn't be described in words discovered by mankind, could those feelings guide her actions. Once she crossed that threshold, she learned quickly, surpassing her masters in months, opening new channels of healing that she, in turn, couldn't explain in words.

She let her magic roam through the stricken body and report back when it had pinpointed the issue.

It wasn't hard to find. Pockets of wrongness, which she felt as a bad taste or empty holes or ... it was impossible to explain, but she knew it when she felt it. The wrongness was scattered across Dilandra's body.

Singura opened her eyes and frowned. "How long have your Healers known about this?"

"Two seasons."

"Two seasons ago they could have halted the spread easily."

"They told me that they would have had to remove my womb. I told them I would rather die than become a barren princess." Dilandra held her gaze. "You know the fate of princesses unable to bear children."

"You'd rather die than be set aside?"

"Both are death, but only one has dignity."

"Your Healers just stood aside to let you die?" Singura said. "They knowingly let the cancer spread this far, to where they can't help you?"

"In Int Mara, no one argues with the royal family, not even if one is

only royal by marriage."

Furious, Singura turned to the people who'd walked into the room with her. She said, "Bring me the Healers who treated her." Then, without looking to see if her request was being followed, she turned back to Dilandra and placed her hands gently on her womb. She could feel the lumps of the tumors through her thin body like little bony protrusions.

In her rage, she began to blast indiscriminately at the lumps, dissolving them with more magic than necessary. The sickness invading the lungs was the most dangerous, and Singura eliminated two of the biggest, the ones that would have killed her within weeks. Immediately, she felt Dilandra's breathing become easier, and she managed to find the tether that kept the Princessa's spirit bound to her body. It was a weak, frayed thing that she could have severed with a negligent thought. It was so tempting, perhaps even a kindness. She could save the woman an enormous amount of suffering. Because any Healer could take out a few lumps ... but none would stop them from reforming in other places and kill her even more slowly, over months instead of weeks. Yes, letting her die could be a kindness.

And Singura could take what was rightly hers.

Singura pulled her hand from Dilandra's womb and pushed away the temptation. Two grey-haired Healers, a man and a woman, deep lines attesting to their enormous age, stood behind her.

"You were going to let her die," Singura said, accusingly.

"It was what she wanted," the male healer replied calmly. "We tend to the patient's spirit as well as her body. It's useless to save one while destroying the other."

Singura wanted to slap the smug bastard, to tell him that her age was no excuse to be pontificated to by an imbecile who had had the

chance to save a life and had let it pass. “Why wasn’t I called sooner?”

The man raised an eyebrow. He didn’t even have to say what he was thinking: if the two great and experienced healers had failed, then a mere girl would have no chance. Rumors of great power were not to be believed when they spoke of royalty. Mere flattery in most cases. Remembering her rank, however, the man forbore from speaking, and the woman stepped forward. “Our skills are not inconsequential. We considered the case hopeless.”

The chamberlain spoke. “It was the Princeps who insisted you come. He seems to think you’re a miracle worker, that you can do anything.”

“You should have called me sooner.”

The woman with grey hair spoke. “We know the limits of the magic. We only accepted you to humor an anguished husband. In fact, we just heard that you healed ... a lesser beast ... we must ask you to—”

“You know nothing,” Singura replied coldly. Ignoring any further protestations, she turned back to the frail body on the bed.

She placed a hand on Dilandra’s womb and began to work, letting the magic lead her in directions she’d never explored. It soon became apparent that the healers were correct in one thing: the cancer was interwoven with the Pricessa’s uterus. It had originated there, and to remove it with traditional Healing would have left the patient barren.

But traditional methods weren’t the only ones. They were just the safest.

Singura began to pour magic into Dilandra, not simple energy to burn away malicious growths, but something other, the very magic of life, inverted on itself. What had grown was now reverting to its original, innocuous form.

It wasn’t easy. The process took a lot out of patient and Healer alike. Most of Singura’s energy was focused, by necessity, on keeping Dilandra—who’d lost consciousness with the first probings of true power—alive long enough to finish the job. She absently noted someone wiping the sweat off her brow, but never saw who it was; her entire being was lost in the magic.

Little by little the disease faded. Singura’s exhaustion turned to pain, pain to agony, but if she let go of the magic now Dilandra would die, so she continued. Finally, when she had done everything she could for the womb, she blasted the tumors in her chest and, with a final burst of strength, sent a stream of magic to strengthen Dilandra’s body.

Then Singura collapsed onto the floor. She was aware of the two grey-robed Healers rushing past to check on Dilandra while everyone else crowded around her.

The last thing she heard before she lost consciousness was the male Healer’s horrified voice. “Impossible,” the man whispered. “Monstrous.”

Then darkness overcame her.

* * *

The large banquet hall was as grotesque as she’d suspected it would be. Columns of bronze held up a domed and gilded roof. The room probably would have been able to seat four or five hundred people.

Singura sat at a table, alone by her own choice in the colossal, empty chamber. Even the servants who’d brought her food and candle had faded into the shadows.

“Midnight snack?” a man’s voice said.

Singura jumped. She hadn’t heard anyone approach. Then she saw

the figure in the shadows and her heart matched the fluttering of the candle.

Could it be?

As her eyes adjusted, she realized it wasn't Nurel. This man's hair was darker, his eyes were set wider apart in his face. The mouth was curled in a half-smile that the serious Nurel would never have permitted himself. A brother then. Or a cousin.

She sighed. "Here to ogle the witch? To see the monster everyone is afraid of?" she asked. She was too exhausted to care if the guy was part of the royal family. If he took offense, so be it ... nothing she did could tarnish her reputation further. Vina had kept her abreast of the things being said about her while the Princessa slept on her road to complete recovery.

The man sat down and his smile widened. "Witches, monsters, animal healers ... any black sheep is fine by me." He held out his hand. "I'm Ganior."

Though she tried not to, and immediately after doing so understood the irony, Singura stared.

The man laughed. "Yes, that one. The black sheep."

"But you're here ..."

"My mother, in her infinite compassion, has allowed me to return to the city of my birth." He winked. "Just between you and me, she's probably afraid I'll embarrass the family if I'm out of her sight for too long."

Singura's eyes dropped back to the table. So the famous libertine was back to see if he could expand his collection of forbidden fruit. She sighed. "Well, you've seen me. You can run along now."

"I didn't come here to stare at you like a strange creature from a cabinet of curiosities. I came to tell you that I understand and that it will be all right."

She hit the table with her fist. "How can it possibly be all right? It's bad enough that I'll be shunned by all Healers for saving that poor tigercat. Now, I'll also live under the cloud of having magic too strong. Dangerously strong. Strong like before ..." She sighed. "And who can blame them? The magicians nearly killed everyone. We barely survived."

"Living in fear is no way to live." He held her gaze. "These rules they're always going on about are old. It's about time we threw them out. Even our bodies are rebelling; that's why you've got the strongest magic for a hundred generations. And you might not be the first. An exile hears things. The world is about to change." He looked at the gilded roof of the chamber. "And if you ask me, it's about time."

But Singura had only been listening with half her attention. The rest had been focused on the way the man's brow wrinkled when he made a point, the way his lips moved when he spoke. It was the mirror image of his brother.

But where Nurel was cool as the Night of Ice, this was a man of the fiery plains. He was like Nurel but somehow less perfect. More human.

She had to force herself to look away.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," she replied.

The look of shock on his face was worth being thought forward. His mouth stopped midsentence, and he completely lost his thread.

Then he laughed. "No wonder my brother was too afraid to marry you."

It was her turn to be shocked. But perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised. If there was one man who would speak an uncomfortable truth, it would be Ganior. He was infamous for precisely that kind of thing.

One thing he wasn't known for was lying or exaggerating. He was an adventurer and a philanderer and a man who hated society as it stood. But even the harshest of the rumors held him as ruthlessly devoted to the truth as he knew it.

"And why would that be?" she asked. Her heart fluttered in a way she thought she'd left behind forever.

"Because anyone who would challenge the entire world to *save* her rival is a formidable woman. My brother knows he's not enough of

a man for someone like that."

"And you are?"

"Would you like to find out?"

Singura looked him up and down. "Honestly, I'm not sure. We'll have to think about it."

He chuckled. "I'm starting to think my brother was right."

And Singura laughed, truly laughed with joy, for the first time in a long time.

It felt good.

Lost in Translation

by Peter J. King

Even in this little Cotswold town,
 where tourists swarm to browse antiques,
 to sit and chat in Tea Shoppes,
 gastro-pubs, and hotel restaurants —
even here the night is bleak in back streets
 and in alleyways.
 The dustbins overflow
 with untied, lumpy
 plastic bags,
 and shadows shift in ways
 that don't quite match the sparse, dim lights.
 The rats have little fear:
 the soft and well-born cats who sit in cottage windows
while the sun is up don't venture far in moonlight,
 huddling in groups
 beneath the ornamental street lamps
 in the central square,
 silent, watchful.

There's a slightly shabby shop
 whose maze of rooms and corridors
 is stuffed with dusty books
 on shelves, on tables,
piled in heaps that totter
 on the floors and stairs. At the rear,
 the bins are almost empty —
 and perhaps that's why the alley
 is so silent in the slanted night;
 even the rats steer clear.

Tonight the moon is new,
and clouds drift thinly,
veiling stars and planets intermittently.
In the bookshop, on the second floor,
there is a change —
but not a movement, more a shift of darkness
in a clump of shadows
in between twin towers of musty books.

There's little light outside,
and what there is can't penetrate the filthy windowpanes;
the darkness in the room, then,
should be perfect, featureless —
yet there are places
where it has a deeper quality,
and it's in one of these the shadows shift.

There is a sound.
Again, it's not a stirring of the air —
there's nothing that would register
on microphones —
but if there had been listeners,
then ears would certainly have pricked
and hairs have raised on arms.

The room grows cooler,
and the scent of something sour and sickly
settles with the dust.

In the square, a solitary tourist, sleepless, strolls;
the mediæval church, the crooked house,
the buttercross on limestone stilts —
the night transforms them, even in the street lamps'
orange glare; the wrought-iron curlicues
cast complex shadows.

Now the lone insomniac
(despite the gloom, despite the dirty cobblestones)
is drawn towards the twisting, narrow sidestreets.
Though he doesn't understand the fascination that he feels,
he doesn't fight it; he just buttons up his jacket,
rubs his hands together, shivers.

At the bookshop,
in the second-storey room,
the patch of bitterness,
of cold, is motionless,
though as the moments pulse
it changes its position
till it's at the window
where the grime of decades
seems by contrast
wholesome, normal, clean.

The silver sliver of the moon

cannot be seen from where
the errant tourist shuffles,
captivated by the dismal alley,
fuzzily bewildered.

Backs of businesses
loom left and right,
and there – a few yards distant – undistinguished,
indistinguishable from its neighbours,
is the bookshop. He can vaguely sense
that it's the locus of the force
that reels him in.

The sourness of spilt milk;
the chill of mortuary slab;
at the bookshop window (though the preposition "at"
is too precise)
time and space are puzzled —
then the puzzlement is suddenly outside,
then down among
(or by, or in, or near)
the dustbins at the kerb.

The summoned tourist
and the something that is nearly
(or is less than)
nothing
meet.

There is a greasy feeling for a moment,
then the night becomes less crowded,
loses mass — the alleyway is empty,
undisturbed.

* * *

There is blood in his nostrils,
caked hard and dark.
He's walking unsteadily
by a river, beneath trees.
The sun flickers
through palmate
leathery leaves,
occasionally blinding him;
the dazzle makes the shade seem deeper.

He doesn't know how he came to be here.
He doesn't know where here might be.
The trees continue.
The river continues.
He continues walking,
knows that if he falls
he'll not get up again.

The sky, the water, and the trees
aren't quite the colour he'd expect;

he has no sense of smell, and both his ears
seem stuffed with wax.

He doesn't hear his footsteps,
but he feels
the crispness of the dry, dead
leaves beneath his shoes.

He's not sure who he is,
but has a memory of darkness,
of stone cobbles, of compulsion,
something sharp
and cold,
and sudden.

He continues walking,
and the trees continue,
and the river,
and no scents or sounds.

* * *

By the back door of the bookshop,
by the bins,
the shadows shimmer indefinably,
but then are still;
the cats beneath the street lamps in the square
prick up their ears,
then yawn and stretch
and fail to meet each others' eyes.

Aconite

by Hana Lee

he who hunts me carries in his teeth
the knife he used to cut his children from
the body of their mother.

she who haunts me speaks not in words
but in one long, rattling scream.

I killed her under a swollen moon ripe with promises
like the one you made to end her curse
knowing this was not within your power.

this vow you made, a lie
from a peddler of rat placentas and wolfsbane
to a mother who would eat her pups and wake
with kinblood on her lips,
was it mercy or a supplication?

*come, fates,
make a cure from this poison
make a healer from this killer
make a dawn from this nightmare*

to beg is not my way,
nor was it hers.

he carries his love like a blade
and I carry mine like a ghost
but neither can undo what was done
unspeak the curse
unbury the seed
unspoil the moonlit glade

my only vow
to make a song from this death
hear it now,
blooming beneath the shriveled moon.

Five Nights in the Castle

by Beth Cato

the first night in the castle
is the hardest, as you've
never encountered an actual monster before
the hairy, horned lord of the manor
won't let you leave, and his servants
are all ghosts who regard you with
malevolence even as they attend
to your every need
in a guest room with a bed bigger and plusher
than any you have known, your heartbeat
continues to thunder like the storm outside

the second night, you're tired enough from
the previous sleepless night and
from reading books in his lordship's library
that you slumber until the ghosts
seize you up and scream that you
don't belong here, that you shouldn't
have gotten lost in the woods, that
their cursed lord has been fine here
for centuries without the distraction
of a living woman on the premises.
only the arrival of their lord
causes them to retreat, chastened

the third night, you're restless
after hours of arguing with his lordship
about why you should be let free
he's taken it into his head that you

are his possession to be protected
he doesn't understand that you have
a black belt in karate, a college degree,
that you've traveled solo around the globe
he has no comprehension of the modern world
at all, and no desire to change his ways
you readily understand why he's been cursed
to the form of a monster and bound within
this chateau and grounds

the fourth night his lordship swoops upon you
as you attempt escape through the woods
his cloaked embrace is icier than winter
as he drags you, screaming, back inside
where the ghosts snarl about
your lack of gratitude
you dismiss them along with
any inclination toward Stockholm Syndrome

the fifth night is the brightest
courtesy of the fire you set in the curtains
ceiling timbers alight within minutes
the crackling flames even louder than
the howls of ghosts, still bound inside
likely clustered around the corpse
of their lord in the great hall
the guy may have been cursed for centuries
but that didn't mean he was immortal
you trudge into the woods determined
that your next night will be in a hotel



Demon Vampire

by Warren Muzak

A Room in Atlantis

by Carl Scharwath



Ghostly Memory

by Larina Warnock

That night, I sat upon the shore,
regret wrapped round me like a cloak.
Distantly, a ship unmoored,
and in my hand, a fraying rope
I'd dragged across the sand from sea
to send her far away from me.

The tide was out. The waves were small,
and in the sky, a crescent moon
hanging, caring not at all
for broken hearts or morals hewn
by what I'd seen the night before
when I'd come early through my door.

Along the beach, a creeping fog
began to seep through skin and time.
The tide pulled in a driftwood log,
and I, not knowing what I'd find,
stood and ambled 'cross the sand
to see what branch resembled hands.

In the distance, on the sea,
a raging fire I'd set myself.
The ship cried out a curse at me,
echoed on the Eastward shelf.
I paused to watch her sink below
and did not see the other glow

creeping from the log ashore,
until upon my shoulder felt
the hand of she who night before
a stroke of vengeance I had dealt.
The ship, now buried neath the sea,
had sent some vengeance just for me.

I turned too slowly to be sure
of what exactly I then saw.
A ghost? A spirit? Something more?
A figment of a heart still raw
from sight of she I called my lover
lying naked with my brother?

A bitter cold seeped through my clothes
and froze the air inside my chest.
I choked and gasped as water rose
from somewhere deep within my breast.
I struggled there upon the sand,
my face held down by spectral hand.

The tide advanced upon the shore
where I lay dying through the night,
still thinking of the ship unmoored,
when suddenly, the air grew light.
The fog retreated cross the sea,
and now I walk these sands with she.

Kisa and the Bits of Darkness

by Emmie Christie

Kisa wrapped her scarf around herself and folded her knees up against the window. The daytime roared outside like an endless fire, but the lights were coming soon.

The black lights.

That's what she called them, the fuzzy bits of darkness that popped in and out outside by the rose bush. She couldn't go out in the daytime, her mother said (none of them did, because of the burning), but Kisa hoped and prayed to the nighttime, and it had answered.

What did they feel like? What whisper-y nocturnal things did they say to the gleaming, sunlit bikes that the children rode down the street past her house?

One of the bits of night drifted close. She wanted to hear its words, to speak to it. Kisa glanced down the hall. Her mother and her uncles and her great, great, great, great grandfather Yivk slept at this time. She'd never even seen Yivk, though she'd heard his voice through the coffin. They would not know.

She slid the window up a bit, just a fraction. She tucked her scarf over her hands to avoid any stray beams of sun.

The darkness bobbed as if in answer. "Hey," Kisa said. "Hey."

"Where . . . am . . . I?"

"You're in the day," Kisa said, through the tiniest opening of her lips. "It's daytime."

"Scared."

"Oh," Kisa said. "You're okay. I'm here. I'm a night creature."

The little darkness blipped in and out. "Lost. I'm lost. The sun. It will find me!"

Kisa bit her lip. She looked back down the hall. Did she dare? The serenade of danger played inside her, a little thrill. "I'll help you," she said. "Here. Hop on the scarf."

She opened the window a little higher, high enough to play the long bit of fabric through the small opening, and the darkness blotted onto it. She pulled the scarf back in, and the little fuzzy sphere slid off and back into the air.

The daylight had touched the scarf, and the warmth of it heated her hands to a sweat. Did the children's bikes hold this heat? Did the humans laugh because of such fire?

"Oh!" the darkness said, and it sounded familiar now. Like a voice she'd only ever heard through a coffin. "Oh. I know where I am!"

"Yivk!" her mother's voice said, from behind her.

Kisa shut the window.

The darkness formed into a flimsy outline of an ancient, great, great, great, great old man, with sparkling eyes like lost blips of darkness.

“Yivk, what’ve I told you about going outside?”

Kisa stared at the outline—Yivk. Though insubstantial, he didn’t seem frail. His form bobbed like a dance, like he had just come back from a night out. “You were—you were the darkness? And the rest of you is—” she pointed at the other drifting spheres, still out in that fiery sun-scape.

“And you!” Her mother turned on Kisa. “I can’t believe you opened that window! What if you had burned your hands?”

“But he was out there,” Kisa said. “He was out in the day.”

Her mother took in a slow, deep breath. “Yes. Well. Yivk is foolhardier

than most.”

“I’m so old, the sun doesn’t want me no more!” Yivk said. “When you’re my age, you’re too bony for it. Stay alive as long as I have, and you can do what I do.” He patted her on the head, his hand passing through her scalp. “But till then, you stay out of the sun, like your mother says, you hear?”

Kisa grinned. She wrapped her scarf around herself again. Someday, she’d be able to go out there. In the day. In the fire and the sun. She just had to wait.

“I promise.”

Caregivers

by Lynne Sargent

Gnomes tend to phoenix eggs
that they have carefully shaped,
papier-mâché from the ashes.

They whisper stories
with soft, hot breath,
speaking of bountiful gardens,
flowers blooming in sun.

Their words are like the rustling of wings,
giving the gift of visualization
to those too tired to begin
again, just yet.

The voices softly crooning
let the eggs pretend
that their parents are not themselves,

and tell them that there will be comfort
when they finally crack open
give in to *being* again.



Afternoon fantasy

by Irina Tall

The Trans Magic Within Me

by Jaytham Firestar



Yuletide in the Land of the Dancing Donkey

by Maureen Bowden

The winter solstice was drawing near and the staff members of Monks' Chapel Primary School in Colwyn Bay were planning the forthcoming Nativity play. The subject under discussion was which of the little darlings should be cast in the starring roles. The mood in the staff room was tense.

Miss Laura Lawson, PE and Drama, said, "I won't tolerate a repeat of last year's fiasco and I don't care who we upset, so let's look through the list of suggestions and make appropriate choices without fear or favour." Laura was dramatic by nature.

While she was distributing copies of the list, new staff member George Jeffers, Geography, whispered to Rita Reece, Maths, English, and Welsh, "What happened last year?"

She rolled her eyes, "How long have you got?"

"As long as it takes. Spill."

Rita spilled. "Bribery and corruption all round. Mary was played by a young lady built like a female wrestler and twice the size of Joseph. She got the part because her mother was having a clandestine affair with one of the school governors."

"Nothing new there," he said. "Couldn't you find a more robust Joseph to match? I've only been here a few weeks, but I've spotted plenty of

possible candidates."

"True enough, but wee Joseph's dad was the local loan shark and the Head Teacher had a gambling problem and owed him a packet, so he had to keep him sweet."

Laura was watching the conversation taking place. "There's no need to whisper, Rita," she said. "We all need reminding of what happened." She turned to George. "The problem started a week before the play, when the selected Mary beat up the innkeeper and he bore a grudge."

The sorry tale unfolded: When Joseph had knocked on the flimsy cardboard door representing the inn, the innkeeper told him in language unbecoming in one so young, to go away and do something physically impossible. Mary broke the fourth wall in more ways than one by kicking down the door and giving him a slap before stomping offstage with Joseph's head in a stranglehold under one arm, leaving the donkey alone on centre stage. Making the most of the opportunity, the twin boys who provided the donkey's limbs and innards performed the tap dance they'd been practising at home for weeks. The audience applauded with enthusiasm and made their way home smiling but somewhat confused.

Laura concluded her tale and with purposeful intent picked up her list of candidates.

George said, "We'd better get the twins back in the donkey just in case."

* * *

Meanwhile, Gwynn ap Nudd, king of the Otherworld, was sitting on a layer of stratus above his domain with his one-time-human wife Creiddylad. She was peeling a tangerine and he was trimming his toenails. Their trusty hound Dormarch lay between them, snoring.

Gwynn said, “Yuletide’s approaching, Dyl. It’s time we started planning the Wild Hunt, look you.”

Dyl groaned. “Oh, not again, Gwynn. It’s the same old thing by yur. Couldn’t we go away for Yuletide for a change, like? You knows I gets the urge to visit my old home town occasionally.”

He raised his eyebrows. “And it doesn’t escape my notice that you comes back with a neck covered in hickies, isn’t it?”

She scowled. “Get over yourself, big man, you’re in dangerous waters there. We had a pact. You has your secrets, I has mine, and we don’t stick our noses in.”

Gwynn knew when it was in his best interest to tread carefully. “Fair enough, Dyl, my nose is staying well out, but what about Dormarch? He’ll not want to miss the hunt.”

She glanced at the sleeping hound. “Seems to me he’s more in favour of a quiet life.”

Gwynn shook his head, nudged the hound with his pedicured foot, and said. “You loves the thrill of the chase and tearing the catch to pieces, doesn’t you boyo?”

Dormarch opened one eye, looked from Gwynn to Dyl, and responded with a noncommittal shrug, which isn’t easy for a hound, but this one had considerable talents.

Gwynn saw he’d get no support from that quarter. “You win Dyl. We’ll

give the Wild Hunt a miss this year. What’s occurring in Colwyn Bay?”

“I knows where there’ll be a crackin’ party. You up for it?”

“I’m up for it.”

She passed him a segment of her tangerine. “Tidy.”

* * *

Gwynn ap Nudd and Creiddylad passed through a portal into the mortal realm, emerging in Meini Hirion, a stone circle situated on the granite slopes behind the town of Penmaenmawr. Gwynn summoned a wisp of Cirrus from the darkening winter sky. They grasped its tail and it carried them along the coast to Colwyn Bay. Following Dyl’s directions the cloud dropped them off outside a long-abandoned army barracks now in use as a community hall for wedding receptions, wakes, and other festivities. A sign on the door read, “Rock You Sinners” and the unmistakable boom of Bo Diddley rattled the windows.

Gwynn said, “What’s ‘Rock You Sinners’?”

“It’s a rock ‘n’ roll club. Been goin’ since the fifties. Most of the members are in their dotage but they refuses to lie down and die.”

They entered the premises and while their ears were adjusting to the onslaught of sound waves, they surveyed the jiving “sinners.” Octogenarian Teddy boys had taken their drapes and drainpipes out of mothballs and completed the ensemble with bootlace ties and beetle crushers. The ladies had tied up their thinning locks into ponytails and were resplendent in flared skirts, waspie belts, and shirt-waster blouses with the collars turned up. The DJ, who Dyl informed Gwynn was Whiplash Wilson, known as Whip, followed Mr. Diddley with Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Jerry Lee, great on the piano but best avoided on a dark night.

The “sinners” rocked and bopped, assisted by surgically augmented hips

and knees. Dyl said, “Come on, Gwynn, I’ll teach you how to jive.”

“No need,” he said. “I’ve got the gist.” He swirled her onto the dance floor as Dion Dimucci, the reprobate from The Bronx, belted out his forgotten gem “Hey Suzie” (immortalised on YouTube).

After they stopped for breath, the barmaid, wearing calf-length jeans and Bobbie socks, handed them each a bottle of Newcastle Brown. “From Whip,” she said. “He knows your poison, Dyl, and he figured your man would like the same.” She fluttered her eyelashes at Gwynn and sashayed back behind the bar.

He turned to Dyl. “Don’t we get glasses with it?”

“No, Newky Brown tastes better straight from the bottle.” She nodded to Whip, who saluted them.

Gwynn’s eyes were on the barmaid and Dyl sensed someone else’s eyes were on her. She scanned the floor and found him. He wore Levi’s and a black tee shirt with “Bop Till Ya Drop” emblazoned across the front. She said to Gwynn, “I’m off to say hello to an old friend.” She winked. “The barmaid’s name is Sharon. Have fun.”

She approached the black tee shirt. He said, “It’s been a long time, Dyl. You look as beltin’ as ever.”

“Good to see you, Eddie. You look – old.”

He nodded. “Side affect of being human. I was young and fit at the Yuletide bash 1958, as I remember.”

“Spot on.” She gave a husky laugh. “That was a night not to be forgotten.”

“Yeah, but you kinda took the edge off by tellin’ me Buddy Holly only had six weeks to live.”

She nodded. “Sorry about that. It was insensitive, I grants you.”

“You’re forgiven. Lotta sewage under the bridge since then.”

“Thanks. How is you been, boyo? What’s occurin’?”

“Life, Dyl. I married a good lady. We’ve got children, grandchildren and two great-grandsons, Aragorn and Theon.” He sighed. “Daft names they give kids in these times. Back in my day we were Eddie, Ronnie, and Mick if we were Scousers and Mancs, or Tegwyn and Llewellyn if we were of the Welsh persuasion.”

She closed her eyes. “I sees them in your mind, Eddie. Crackin’ little lads. Gotta theatrical bent, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, they get picked for the school nativity play every year. They always get the same parts though, front and back end of the donkey. They have good co-ordination with being identical twins. When the other kids try it they have the front and back legs headin’ in different directions.”

“You’ll be goin’ to cheer them on?”

He shook his head. “It was earlier this evening. We only get four tickets for the family. That’s for Mam, Dad, Granny, and Granddad. No room at the inn for Great Granddad Eddie.”

She saw the sadness in his eyes. “No problem. I can take a peek back in time and send it into your mind, isn’t it? Close your eyes and you’ll see what was occurring.”

“Dyl, you’re a star.”

He closed his eyes and they watched together. A fight had broken out on stage. Mary was swinging the plastic baby by its leg and beating Joseph over the head with it. Joseph, heftier than the previous year’s specimen, was retaliating with flying fists. The shepherds and the three wise men were pulverising each other while the angel stood between them trying to stem the violence and getting the worst of it. The donkey trotted clear of the line of fire and began executing a perfectly co-ordinated tap

dance. Pre-pubescent voices from the donkey's innards piped out in close harmony Brenda Lee's perennial classic "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." The audience clapped and sang along.

"I taught the twins that one," Eddie said.

Out of curiosity Dyl peeked backstage. The teaching staff, surrounded by empty vodka bottles, were sprawled in various stages of unconsciousness across a heap of demolished theatrical props and backdrops. The only responsible adults left standing were George Jeffers and Rita Reece, who were furthering their acquaintance under the mistletoe.

Dyl broke the psychic link and she and Eddie opened their eyes. She said, "I think we calls that ten points to the donkey, nil points everyone else."

Eddie said, "I hope they're always so lucky. It's a tough world we've left those kids, Dyl."

"I knows that, boyo. I keeps an eye on the mortal realm and I won't lie to you, it's not lookin' good. I think the twins will be okay though. They shows initiative."

"Could you take a peek into their future, just to make sure?"

"No problem." She closed her eyes for a few seconds, then opened them and smiled. "By the time they're twenty-five they'll be darlings of stage and screen, and when they're forty-five they'll be millionaires with their own dance academy. Tidy."

"That's good to know. Pity I won't live to see it."

"I could grant you the extra years, Eddie," she said, "but you is on the slippery side of eighty now. Would you really want to grow that much older, like?"

He shook his head. "When you put it that way I'd rather not. I suppose that means tonight is the last time we'll see each other."

"Not necessarily. Human souls are recyclable. One day you'll come back in a new, fit, virile body."

"Now there's a thought to hang on to. Thanks, Dyl."

"You're welcome. Now I'd better get back to my other half before he makes a right twonk of himself with the barmaid."

At her approach Sharon leapt off Gwynn's lap. "All right, Dyl," she said.

"All right Shaz. Off you goes, then." Sharon picked up the empty Newky Brown bottles and fled.

Gwynn said, "The old folks is on their last legs, Dyl. It's time they were tucked up in bed. You ready to go home yet?"

"Almost," she said. "Just one more thing. It's traditional." She attracted Whip's attention and pointed to the door, indicating they'd soon be leaving.

He gave her a thumbs up and selected an old shellac disc from his collection: Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill." The "sinners" stopped rockin' and everyone sang along.

After the renowned Fat Man had brought tears to all eyes, Gwynn and Dyl rose to their feet. Gwynn called, "Have a good one, everyone."

The "sinners" called back, "See ya later Alligator."

Eddie caught Dyl's eye. He waved. She waved back and sent a silent farewell into his mind. "In a while Crocodile."

Contributors



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His art has graced the pages of *Aurealis Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine*, *BYU's Leading Edge Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine*, *New Myths E-Zine*, *Electric Spec Magazine*, *Expanded Horizons Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Hyphenpunk*, *Penumbra Speculative Fiction Magazine*, and *The British Fantasy Society's Horizons Magazine*. As well as several renowned roleplaying, tabletop gaming, and publishing companies, including New Comet Games, Vermin Games, Blasphemy Press, Jester's Hand Publishing, Kelestia Games, Lostlorn Games, and Legendary Games.

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GUSTAVO BONDONI is a novelist and short story writer with over three hundred stories published in fifteen countries, in seven languages. He is a member of Codex and an Active Member of SFWA. His latest novel is a dark historic fantasy entitled *The Swords of Rasna* (2022). He has also published five science fiction novels, four monster books and a thriller entitled *Timeless*. His short fiction is collected in *Pale Reflection* (2020), *Off the Beaten Path* (2019), *Tenth Orbit and Other Faraway Places* (2010) and *Virtuoso and Other Stories* (2011).

In 2019, Gustavo was awarded second place in the Jim Baen Memo-

rial Contest and in 2018 he received a Judges Commendation (and second place) in The James White Award. He was also a 2019 finalist in the Writers of the Future Contest.

His website is at www.gustavobondoni.com

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MAUREEN BOWDEN is a Liverpoolian, living with her musician husband in North Wales. She has had 204 stories and poems accepted by paying markets including Third Flatiron, Water Dragon Publishing, The First Line and many others. She was nominated for the 2015 international Pushcart Prize and in 2019 Hiraeth Books published an anthology of her stories, *Whispers of Magic*. They plan to publish an anthology of her poetry in the near future. She also writes song lyrics, mostly comic political satire, set to traditional melodies and her husband has performed them in folk music clubs throughout the UK. She loves her family and friends, rock 'n' roll, Shakespeare, and cats.

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Nebula Award-nominated Beth Cato is the author of *A Thousand Recipes for Revenge* and *A Feast for Starving Stone* from 47North plus two fantasy series from Harper Voyager. She's a Hanford, California native now moored in the Driftless Area. She usually has one or two cats in close orbit. Her website is BethCato.com; follow her on Instagram at [@catocat-sandcheese](https://www.instagram.com/catocat-sandcheese) and Blue Sky at [@BethCato](https://www.instagram.com/BethCato).

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SIMON CHRISTIANSEN is a writer, poet, and game designer living in Denmark. His stories have been published in a variety of literary journals, and he has written award-winning works of interactive fiction. He is the recipient of three Xyzzy awards for interactive fiction and has been shortlisted for the Niels Klim award for best Danish science fiction novelette.

When not writing, he enjoys reading, juggling, and walking. Visit his website at www.sichris.com.

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EMMIE CHRISTIE's work includes practical subjects, like feminism and mental health, and speculative subjects, like unicorns and affordable healthcare. Her novel *A Caged and Restless Magic* debuted February 2024. She has been published in *Factor Four Magazine*, *Small Wonders*, and *Flash Fiction Online*, among others. She also narrates short stories and loves bringing stories to life out loud as well as on the page. Find her at www.emmiechristie.com, her monthly newsletter, or BlueSky (@emmiechristie33.bsky.social).

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TRAVIS CORTIER works as a Copywriter in Dubois-town, PA. Growing up on *Goosebumps* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* helped foster his love of chilling tales. Through his writing, he hopes to find the humanity hidden in the horror. His favorite writers include Sam Rebelein, Christopher Golden, and Stephen King.

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DEBORAH L. DAVITT was raised in Nevada, but currently lives in Houston, Texas with her husband and son. Her award-winning poetry and prose has appeared in over seventy journals, including *F&SF*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, and *Lightspeed*. For more about her work, including her Elgin-nominated poetry collections, *The Gates of Never*, *Bounded by Eternity*, and *From Voyages Unreturning*, see www.deborahldavitt.com. She also has a new poetry chapbook out in 2024 (*Xenofarming*), as well as a TTRPG and novel coming to Kickstarter later the same year: *Mists & Memory* and *In Memory's Shadow*, respectively.

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ZARY FEKETE grew up in Hungary. He has a debut novella (*Words on the Page*) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (*To Accept the Things I Cannot Change: Writing My Way Out of Addiction*) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter and

Instagram: @ZaryFekete

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JAYTHAM FIRESTAR is a Chicago-based fantasy artist specializing in colorful and whimsical 2D illustrations. Jaytham is driven to combine their innate passion for justice with their artistic talents to create inspirational spaces that uplift the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized voices. They currently run the YouTube channel Queer Aesthetics, a new channel dedicated to supporting artists and exposing LGBTQ+ art history. Jaytham hopes to speak through their vibrant and affirming art to convey messages of radical love, mutual aid, and decolonization. Learn more about Jaytham at <https://artbyfirestar.carrd.co/>, and follow @ArtByFirestar on Twitter, Instagram, Threads, and Bluesky to see project updates.

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ADELE GARDNER (they/them, Mx., <https://gardnercastle.com/>) has a poetry collection, *Halloween Hearts*, released by Jackanapes Press (<https://www.jackanapespress.com/product/halloween-hearts>) and over 500 stories, poems, art, and articles published in *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Clarksworld*, *Strange Horizons*, *PodCastle*, *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and more. A member of SFWA, HWA, SFPA, and the Poetry Society of Virginia, and graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop, Adele coedited SFPA's short poetry anthology *Dwarf Stars 2022* with Greer Woodward (<https://sfpoetry.com/ds/22dwarfstars.html>) and guest-edited the Arthuriana issue of SFPA's poetry journal *Eye to the Telescope* (Issue 27, January 2018, <https://eyetothetelescope.com/intros/027intro.html>). Twelve of Adele's poems won or placed in the Poetry Society of Virginia Awards, Rhysling Award, and Balticon Poetry Contest. Adele serves as literary executor for father, mentor, and namesake Delbert R. Gardner.

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TIM HILDEBRANDT is a writer in Indianapolis, Indiana. His short stories have appeared in *Consequence Forum*, the *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Pandemic Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Corvus Review*, and others. You can see his work at: https://www.instagram.com/ax_beckett

Tim has a bootless BFA, he lived in San Francisco in '68, traveled Europe from Amsterdam to Africa, and survived combat in Vietnam. hildebrandt343@icloud.com

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PETER J. KING was active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s,

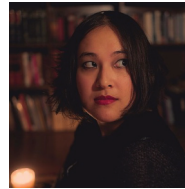


as poet, publisher, editor, performer, broadcaster, and events organiser; returning to poetry in 2013 after an absence of about thirty years, he's since been widely published in journals and anthologies. He also translates, mainly from Greek (with Andrea Christofidou) and German, writes short prose, and paints. His most recent poetry collection is *Ghost Webs* (The Calliope Script, 2022).

<https://wisdomsbottompress.wordpress.com/peter-j-king/>

(thumbnail credit: Maxim Kantor)

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HANA LEE is the author of *Road to Ruin* (Saga Press, 2024) and its forthcoming sequel, *Flight of the Fallen*. She is a biracial Korean American fantasy author. By day, she makes her living as a software engineer. She's always loved the dark, the gothic, and the occult, so there's usually a picturesque ruin of some kind lurking in the background of her novels. She lives in California with her partner and two fluffy cats. Her writing has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine* and *Fantasy Magazine*, and you can find her on Twitter and Instagram at [@K_Hana_Lee](https://twitter.com/K_Hana_Lee).

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DENNY E. MARSHALL has had art, poetry, and fiction published. Some recent credits include cover art for *Typehouse Magazine* Jan. 2022 and interior art in *Dreams & Nightmares Magazine* Jan. 2022 as well as poetry in *Page & Spine* April 2022. Website is www.dennymarshall.com.

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WARREN MUZAK is a self-taught Canadian illustrator with a love for creating horror, and sci fi illustrations.

I am impacted by stories. Spoken or written, real or imagined. Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Bernie

Wrightson, Arthur Rackham, and John Buscema are the visual storytellers whose work I am heavily inspired by.

As a seasoned independent freelance illustrator who realizes other people's ideas, I want to set myself apart from this commercial work by exhibiting my uniqueness and being recognized by my own special style.

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MIKE MORGAN was born in London, but not in any of the interesting parts. He moved to Japan at the age of 30 and lived there for many years. Nowadays, he's based in Iowa, and enjoys family life with his wife, two young children, and two even younger kittens. If you like his writing, be sure to follow him on Twitter where he goes by @CultTVMike or check out his website: <https://PerpetualStateofMildPanic.wordpress.com>.

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MEG O'CONNOR is a writer and data analyst based in Slidell, Louisiana. Her work has previously appeared in *Lit Nerds*, *Bright Flash*, *Last Girls Club*, and *Horror Tree*. Additionally, she writes about Louisiana as a freelance travel writer for *Travel Lemming*. She is currently working on a mystery novel set in Key West and can be found on Instagram at @megcathlinwrites.

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A freelance journalist and photographer, **SONALI ROY** wears several other hats including painter, 3-D art designer, music composer, and singer though the sudden demise of her 8-yr old canine friend Fuchoo baffled her. Devoted to vegan diet, Sonali enjoys brainstorming healthy recipes in the kitchen. She also loves creative writing.

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KASIA RUNTÉ is in her third year at the University of Lethbridge in the Indigenous Health program. She loves art, but resists making it her career because she not interested in compromising her art to be commercial. Instead, she wants art to be the passion that keeps her balanced at the end of the workday in a field such as palliative care. She is often drawn to darker themes and images, partly as a form of catharsis, and partly to balance her super-cheerful pieces.

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LYNNE SARGENT is a queer writer, aerialist, and holds a Ph.D in Applied Philosophy. They are the poetry editor at *Utopia Science Fiction* magazine. Their work has been nominated for Rhysling, Elgin, and Aurora Awards, and has appeared in venues such as *Augur Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Daily Science Fiction*. Their work has also been supported through the Ontario Arts Council. To find out more visit them at scribledshadows.wordpress.com.

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CARL SCHARWATH has appeared globally with 180+ journals selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry books and his latest book is *The World Went Dark*, published by Alien Buddha Press. Carl has four photography books, published with Praxis and CreatiVingenuity. His photography was exhibited in the Mount Dora and Leesburg Centers for the Arts. Carl is currently an art editor at *Glitterati* and former editor for *Minute Magazine*. He was nominated for four The Best of the Net Awards (2022–25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.

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RITIKSHA SHARMA is a person. She enjoys scribbling and doodling. Her work has appeared in *The Col-lidescope*, *Penumbic Speculative Fiction Magazine* and *Illustrated Worlds Magazine*.

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IRINA TALL (NOVIKOVA) is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design.

The first personal exhibition "My soul is like a wild hawk" (2002) was held in the museum of Maxim Bagdanovich. In her works, she raises themes of ecology, in 2005 she devoted a series of works to the Chernobyl disaster, draws on anti-war topics. The first big series she drew was *The Red Book*, dedicated to rare and endangered species of animals and birds. Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: uni-

corns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week. Her work has been published in magazines: *Gupsophila*, *Harpy Hybrid Review*, *Little Literary Living Room* and others. In 2022, her short story was included in the collection *The 50 Best Short Stories*, and her poem was published in the collection of poetry *The wonders of winter*.

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YULIA VERETA (she/her) is a Polish writer of Ukrainian origin who is now living her third life in Katowice, where she works as a translator and is a poet on a good day and a disaster-maker on a bad one. Her speculative works have been published in print and online, among others in *Star*Line*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Leading Edge*, *Penumbic*, *Kaleidotrope*, and *ParSec*. She is a 2022 Best of the Net Nominee.

When she isn't working, writing or cooking, she tries to remake her stationary time machine into a smaller portable model, since the one she currently owns does not fit into the elevator of the 12-story building where she lives and constantly becomes the source of strange questions at airport customs.

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A one-time teen mother and high school dropout, Dr. **LARINA WARNOCK** serves a large school district in Southern Oregon. She lives with her husband, three dogs, and a turtle older than she is. Her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *MetaStellar*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Space & Time Magazine*, and others. She can be found on Substack at lari-nawrites.substack.com.



Winter Dragon

by Joel Bisailon

(full image)