

# penumbra

speculative  
fiction mag

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## Neo-Classic Science Fiction

Special Prose & Art issue

featuring work by

Mary Soon Lee • Nathan  
Ahlgrim • Marge Simon •  
Peter J. King • Elby Rogers •  
M.C. Childs • Margaret  
Karmazin • John Grey •  
Novyl the Mysterious • Carl  
Scharwath • Graham J.  
Darling • Laura J. Campbell  
• Desmond Rhae • Mary Jo  
Rabe • Christina Sng •  
Jennifer Crow • Laurence  
Klavan • Joe Giordano •  
Monica Joyce Evans •  
Gustavo Bondoni • toeken •  
T. Motley • Jesper Nordqvist

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Note that content in *Penumbria* sometimes contains adult language and/or situations. If it were TV, it would be rated M.

We are open for submissions of art, animation, and music! We reopen for fiction and poetry submissions 15 June 2021. Please see our Submissions page (<http://penumbria.com/subs.html>) for details.

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# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

Back in the old times (yes, those early 00s when broadband was at least better than dial-up and phones were no smarter than bricks), *Penumbric* would, once a year, have an issue including only the work of its contributors—that is, no interviews, no article, just stories, poems, and art. Back then, admittedly, the art was a bit scarce, but there was more than enough prose to go round. (Plus the magazine was quite a bit shorter lol)

I've decided to revive this tradition, both to feature more works and, admittedly, to give myself a little recharge time after reintroducing myself to writing articles and doing interviews. This also opens up just a bit more space for acceptances, which I'm mindful of as we're reopening for prose submissions 15 June. More on that in a minute.

So what's in this issue? Is there a theme?

If you've looked at the cover you'll probably know that, whilst there isn't an article or interview tying things together, we're featuring a plethora of works that reminded us, in some fashion or other, of "classic" science fiction, but with today's sensibilities. Which, when I first was thinking of "classic," seemed an easy thing to define ... I mean, spaceships and aliens and invasions of Earth and funky futures, right? But then, that really still covers much of science fiction generally. So what specifically made "classic" science fiction classic?

I guess by "classic" I mean very roughly the Golden Age of scifi, that time when the stories were more about the science and less about the people that used it, but that feels both a little unfair (I mean, those stories did in fact have characters) and a little restrictive, as I don't mean only those works published prior to, say, 1959. I guess my idea of classic scifi is based on a very generalized idea of how the stories

progressed. It's sort of like how I felt about *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* when I was a child. (Oh yes, I'm going there ... but mind you, I like both, with reservations.)

The first *Star Wars* felt to me an epic adventure film; it was full of action and stuff happening, but not deep into character development. Luke Skywalker follows the prototypical Hero's Journey, from zero to hero, and most of the people he encounters are merely bit players in this: the wise old man, the princess, the rogue, etc. It wasn't deeply political, it wasn't deep into character development. (Now, later *Star Wars* films—with some glaring exceptions—are much more than this; I'm talking from the perspective of 1977, when there was just the one.)

*Star Trek*, on the other hand, seemed like it was as much about the various characters as anything else. Even characters not in the "top three" could be developed; Sulu, Uhura, Chekov, and others all had at least some episodes that developed their characters. And the show delved into political and philosophical issues as well—albeit sometimes ridiculously ("Yangs" and "Coms," anyone?).

This is, of course, apples and oranges—a film doesn't have the time that a TV series has, and regardless a lot changed for these franchises as time went on. *Star Wars* as a franchise, after some hiccups, has gone on to have a lot more depth to its world and characters; *Star Trek*, after some hiccups, has also more deeply developed. In fact, a better comparison would be either of these franchises to itself over time; e.g., *Star Trek* went from a more action- and political commentary-oriented series to a much more philosophical and even more character-based series in *Next Generation*, continuing to morph through to *Discovery* (even while, oddly, replaying its own history, in some ways rewriting itself and "updating" the original characters to

make them fit with modern sensibilities). But that would be getting into an entire set of essays ...

What makes the works in this issue of *Penumbra* “neo-classic”? They had this feel to us (OK, to me in particular) of the old-time scifi, of planets and worlds that could have been wrought by Asimov, Heinlein, LeGuin and the like, but while the settings could have been old-school, the characters, the people and not-people who inhabit them, felt more developed, more real, more ... now? We have journeys through space (and character) in Laura J. Campbell’s “Sycamore” and Peter J. King’s “Homecoming”; if you prefer to stay on one planet (or space station), try “If You Lead an Earthling to Water, Who Gets to Drink?” by Mary Jo Rabe, “Ruins on Korkhan” by Jennifer Crow, “Peter O’Toole” by Monica Joyce Evans, “Triage” by Margaret Karmazin, and “Form Follows Function” by Gustavo Bondoni. If your preferred planet is (what might be) Earth, go for Nathan Ahlgrim’s “A Seed Crystal of Control,” Laurence Klavan’s “The Freelancer,” and Joe Giordano’s “Sibyl Nightengale.” We look at planetary/cosmic mysteries with Christina Sng in “The Eternal Fire” and Mary Soon Lee in “How to Mourn Kepler’s Supernova,” and we reposition our point-of-view in Graham J. Darling’s “Jon Carver of Barzoon, You Misunderstood.” We get strange with John Grey’s “A Day in the Life of a Human Guinea Pig,” and we look forward to our next issue with M.C. Childs’ “Dear Post Master General of the Noosphere” (which is not exactly science fiction).

Our art this month follows a similar arc: We journey through the cosmos with Novyl the Mysterious’ *Cosmic Dance Aeternum*, dance

around the planets in Carl Scharwath’s *Oumuamua*, head frighteningly close to the sun in Elby Rogers’ *Next Stop, the Sun*, have a drink in Desmond Rhae’s *Pastoral* and a lunch break in toeken’s *Lunch 2032 (Recharge)*, and move out to contemplate the universe again in Marge Simon’s *ad astra*. Simon’s work is also featured on our cover this month, with *Tomorrow’s Architect* dreaming up some of these fantastic worlds.

Jesper Nordqvist continues to take us into the cyberpunk world of *Mondo Mecho*, whilst T. Motley whisks us through the ever-changing landscapes of *The Road to Golgonooza* in its penultimate episode.

After all that travelling, next issue will be a chance for us to just get our heads round it all (and we’ll have another really cool interview!). And, for those looking to future themes (say, for submission purposes wink wink), in October we examine cyberpunk for the first time since the early 2000s, and beyond that we’ll talk about virtual idols, art, and even possibly the use of AI in music (did you know Eurovision has an AI song contest?). We’re also hoping to see more fantasy in our in-basket, and of course we’ll be going back to horror because, well, we do that!

But for now ... enjoy this issue! And be well!

Jeff Georgeson  
Managing Editor  
*Penumbra*

# Sycamore

by Laura J. Campbell

Go here,” Sahlynn Slan ordered, pulling her brother into the door of K’cir’s Café.

“Here is not a good place,” Dr. Triton Slan objected.

“Here is where we should be now.”

Sahlynn looked at him with her large eyes. She had cat-like elliptical pupils, a distinguishing feature of those who had the genetic manifestation known colloquially as Eloquence. Her ears, hidden beneath her brown wavy hair, had points to them, like an elf. Her cheekbones were high, her forehead broad. The Eloquent were extremely introverted individuals, a trait associated with limited social development. But they also possessed the ability to sense the underlying fabric of the universe. That made them terrifying to some people.

“A bar at a space port,” he grumbled. Not the place for his naïve little sister.

The bartender, an android (as most space station bartenders were) looked up at them as they entered.

Sitting near the back of the bar, a woman with long white hair and violet eyes also noted their entrance. As did the android bouncer and a number of unsavory looking men sitting at a table near the woman.

Triton distrusted their instant notoriety. “Here looks bad. Very bad.”

Sahlynn sat down. “Snacks and a soda,” she commanded. She looked at the woman across the bar. The woman looked away.

“Okay,” Triton acquiesced. “But we need to get to our ship very soon. We need to get to my new job.”

He approached the bar. “Cheese-chips and an orange soda for my sister, please.”

“And you?” the bartender, bearing a badge that identified him as ‘Horse,’ asked.

“Wine. Pinot Noir.”

“A glass?”

“The bottle.” Triton placed a credit coin on the bar.

“You strike me more as an aged scotch man,” the bartender said, getting their order together. “I have a bottle of rare Thian Whiskey open.”

“I don’t like drinking from opened bottles in space port bars,” Triton said.

“I find that somewhat offensive. I run a clean shop. No watering down or slipping a mickey in the beverages. We aren’t that kind of establishment.”

“No offense to you. I have to make sure that I can take care of my sister.”

Horse looked at Sahlynn. He consulted his internal databank of knowledge. “She has Eloquence. They stay youthful and are extremely introverted. They are called the ‘blessed,’ because they reportedly have

the ability to see things we can't. Not many of the blessed born due to their perceived 'imperfections.'"

"Sahlynn is perfect," Triton replied. "I'm glad my parents chose to have her, even with Eloquence. She doesn't need any medications. She is self-sufficient. She is love."

"All babies with Eloquence are mandatorily aborted on Earth. Earth wants everyone to be – how do they put it? – Functional. You have to be on colony to bear a blessed one. Which colony are you from? You do not look Martian. My guess would be Triton or Enceladus."

"Enceladus."

"A Herschel Project colony. A live free or die philosophy."

"We Enceladans live free," Triton noted. "We're not into death."

"Hence your sister lives," Horse noted.

Triton looked at Sahlynn, who was immersed in her own world.

Horse took her a bowl of crispy treats and the bubbling soda, just to get a close look at her. To acquire data to put in his files. He might never see another like her ever again.

"You don't seem to be planning to stay on Selenium Station long," Horse observed.

"I'm a veterinary biologist, on my way to the Zoological Conservatory at Eiko."

"You're a zookeeper?"

"Yes." He looked at the bartender's nametag. "How did you get your name?"

"My primary programmer was a classical music buff who liked an old song entitled 'A Horse with No Name.' When my manufacture was

completed, I was an android with no name. So, he named me 'Horse.'"

The men sitting at the far table began to move. They encircled the woman with long white hair and violet eyes. She was trying to ignore them. They became violently adamant that she leave the bar with them.

Horse noted the brewing confrontation; he looked to the bar's bouncer. The bouncer was already assessing the situation.

The men circling the young woman became much more aggressive towards her. One abruptly pushed her shoulder with significant force; another tried to restrain her. Triton discreetly pulled a small globe out of his jacket pocket. The globe glowed a deep oceanic blue.

Before Horse could gesture to the bouncer, one of the young men pulled out a pistol. The weapon was old fashioned, the type armed with bullets. "You're just as good to us dead or alive," the man said, aiming the gun at the woman's head.

The young man began to squeeze the trigger.

A wave of blue light erupted from the deep-blue globe in Triton's hands, instantly flooding the bar in powerful illumination.

The bullet fired from the gun clattered to the floor, stopped in midflight.

The man with the pistol reacted with violent frustration.

Triton was now his immediate target.

The man aimed the gun at Triton.

The woman with the white hair jumped up, tossing a grenade-shaped object onto the floor. Thick black smoke instantly filled the bar. Triton couldn't see anything.

He felt a hand slide into each of his hands.

He could see that Sahlynn was at his left side, the woman at his right.

They started to run, pulling him along with them.

The woman with the white hair led, guiding them quickly into a side alley.

“What is that thing you used to stop the bullet?” the white-haired woman asked.

“An anti-poaching device,” he explained. “Designed to stop any projectile-style weapon. It’s integrated into my nervous system. It works faster than any human or android can respond. I have a surprising amount of combat training in my profession. Who are those guys?”

“Bounty hunters,” she answered. “My name is Alira Huntoon. I’m a pirate.”

“A pirate?” He had heard only terrible things about pirates.

“There are video recorders in that bar. You were recorded, aiding and abetting a criminal.” Her tone was contemplative.

“Then you must help us now,” Sahlynn commanded Alira. She honed her cat-like gaze on the pirate.

“Sahlynn!” Triton exclaimed. Demanding anything of a pirate could be very dangerous. “Please excuse my sister. She meant nothing by it.”

Alira looked at Sahlynn inquisitively. “It’s a collective world, isn’t it? The one she lives in? All those with Eloquence – they share the same weird unseen space?”

“You are familiar with Eloquence?”

“I have heard about it,” Alira replied. “Your sister is correct. I do owe you. You saved my life. The ship I serve on – the *Sycamore* – can get you off station. Away from any repercussions you may face here. It is the least I can offer as repayment.”

“I already have passage booked on another ship.”

“Not anymore you don’t. You helped a pirate. That’s a crime. Whatever you had planned is now unplanned.”

“I’m just a zookeeper, on my way to Eiko. I didn’t want any trouble.”

Alira looked at Sahlynn. “What do you see, blessed one? Am I friend or foe?”

“Friend,” Sahlynn beamed, hugging Alira.

“I’ve never seen her do that before,” Triton said, amazed. “She usually avoids all physical contact with anybody.”

“We need to get to the *Sycamore*. Now,” Alira urged. “The penalty for piracy is death; the penalty for aiding a pirate is twenty-to-life. You have one moment, Dr. Slan, to choose between berths on a pirate ship or spending your life locked in an eight-by-six foot cell on an ice planet. Who will help your sister then?”

\* \* \*

The pirate ship was clean, bright, and very modern. Not what Triton was expecting when he thought of a space pirate vessel. Before boarding the vessel, he had been thinking that the ship would be made of dirt and decaying technology, filled with the smells of liquor, overextended mechanical oils, and human sweat.

This vessel was equipped with the latest technology. It was comfortable and welcoming. It smelled like mint-scented disinfectant and lavender.

“You mentioned trouble was following you?” a man asked, greeting them as they boarded and secured the hatch. He was five-foot-nine-inches tall, just a little on the heavy side; his hair was styled in a high-and-tight haircut and he had a neatly trimmed beard and moustache. Salt and pepper liberally sprinkled his formerly black hair. His silver eyes looked like they were carefully poured mercury.

The man looked at Triton and Sahlynn. “And what have we here? I’ll assume not the trouble, since you brought them aboard.”

“Dr. Triton Slan and his sister Sahlynn. They saved my life. Jehannah and his men – they’re here and they tried to kill me.”

“Gehit,” the man spat.

Triton didn’t know the term.

“Gehit is a Thian word,” Alira explained. “It means those-men-are-lower-than-clam-shit, only it takes less syllables to say. The Captain is part-Thian. Hence his silver eyes.”

“Captain Francis L’Arrolin,” he introduced himself.

“Dr. Triton Slan,” Triton introduced himself.

“You save a pirate’s life. All pirates are now indebted to you, Doctor. You and your house are forever welcome aboard all of our ships, with nary a penny to ever be paid.” He looked at Sahlynn. “She is Eloquent?”

“Yes, sir,” Triton replied.

“No calling me ‘sir,’ Dr. Slan,” L’Arrolin replied sternly, but with a comforting smile that dispelled any concerns about his temper. “I work for my living.”

“Then likewise no calling me ‘doctor,’” Triton insisted.

“Done. I did not catch your specialty, Triton?”

“He is a zoologist,” Alira answered. “A veterinary doctor.”

“Well, fate favors the pirate,” the Captain replied.

“We should leave now, Sir,” Alira urged.

“I have no desire to be a gehit’s payday,” the Captain replied, turning towards the bridge.

Alira led the Slans into a bright white-metal walled hallway with blue carpeted floors and soft golden lighting. The ship’s Jolly Roger – a white sycamore tree under which a skeleton rested and sipped from a goblet, all against a black background – was incorporated into the décor of the corridor wall.

“‘Sycamore’ hardly seems a fear-inspiring name for a pirate vessel,” Triton noted.

“Ra!” Sahlynn blurted out, her tone effervescent.

“What?” Triton asked.

“The ancient Egyptians said that two sycamores were planted at the East Gate of Heaven,” Alira replied, knowing that Sahlynn was practicing her second sight. “They said that Ra, the Egyptian sun god, appeared between the sycamores every morning. Did you know that ancient Egyptian coffins were carved from sycamore wood, and protective sycamores were planted by the tombs of the dead? We pirates are all adjudicated dead by the Earth courts; so our ship is figuratively our coffin. Hence our ship’s name.”

“The name seems darker now,” Triton said.

“Whimsy,” Sahlynn whispered. “Pro....” her voice trailed off, as she could not find the word she needed.

“Protection,” Alira finished for her.

Sahlynn nodded enthusiastically. “Protection!” she sang the word.

“I’ve never heard her this vocal,” Triton noted.

“She sees many things we do not,” Alira reminded him. “Had you ever heard of the sun-god Ra before today, Triton?”

“No.”

“Yet your sister recognized the connection instantly. Never discount her gifts. God and angels are visible to her. The inward sight of the Eloquent is without our limitations. Blessed be, sister.”

Sahlynn smiled a knowing smile. “Blessed be.”

\* \* \*

Alira met Triton outside of his quarters.

“The ship is underway in neutral space,” Alira reported.

“I didn’t even notice it take off. Is Sahlynn okay?”

Sahlynn had been given her own opulent stateroom, as if she were a visiting dignitary aboard the ship.

“Your sister is fine. Do not worry. Our ship runs silent and deep. Follow me, please. The Captain has something to show you.”

As they walked Triton saw Sahlynn sitting at a large wooden table in a briefing room. The room was edged in soft blue lighting. Her workspace was illuminated by a golden overhead light. Sahlynn was coloring, using crayons to cover pages of blank paper.

“The ship’s robot is sitting with her. It will protect her and get her anything she needs,” Alira told him.

A small box-like robot stood sentinel next to Sahlynn.

“How many of you are aboard?” Triton asked, as they passed the room and continued walking.

“A crew of ten. Six are in deep-sleep. Currently on duty are the Captain, me, our navigator Vesperelli, and our weapons and security officer Iniriq. All of us except Iniriq are at least part Earthling. All of us – except Iniriq – were Earth Navy.”

“How did members of Earth Navy end up pirates?”

“We each have our own story. The Captain, for example, got tired of being overlooked for every promotion he was due for. Overlooked because he was part-Thian. So he made himself a Captain.”

“You have all been sentenced?”

“Earth has declared death penalties over all ten of us, for the crime of piracy,” Alira replied. “If we are ever captured, Earth Navy will recognize our prior service by allowing us to choose the method of our execution. They’re the good guys, after all.”

The Captain was waiting for them outside of a metal door. He put his palm against a biometric reader and the door slid into its pocket in the wall.

The smell of animals wafted from within the room.

“Of all the people to send to save us, God sent a zookeeper,” the Captain said, gesturing into the room.

As he entered the room, Triton detected motion from a large glass cage filled with verdant foliage and a small recirculating artificial stream.

Numerous small mammals – with bodies like cats and faces like mice – ran around inside the enclosure. Their fur was dark with blotchy white patches; they were about 60 centimeters in length, including their bushy 20-odd centimeter tails.

“Eastern Quoll,” Triton said, recognizing the animals. “Their population has ebbed and flowed on Earth for millennia. How can you have these on board?”

“We are fulfilling an order from a former Uoy warlord, living on a planet called Haven, located just inside Uoy space. He is assembling a private zoo.”

“The Uoy are our enemy. Simply entering Uoy space is a crime. As is

transporting Earth animals without a permit – which I will assume you don't have.”

“We are pirates, Dr. Slan. Being a pirate is not all sitting around singing space shanties and drinking rum. Breaking Earth laws – that's a pirate's job.”

Triton watched the little mammals play in their large cage. “They seem healthy.”

“We were given provisions for their maintenance and instructions regarding their care. But we aren't animal specialists. But you – you are a veterinarian.”

“Did you set me up to force me to come aboard?” Triton asked. He felt suddenly targeted for his expertise.

“A legitimate question,” the Captain replied. “So I will give you a legitimate answer: No. It was divine favor. Alira has already lit a candle and asked Saint Sir Francis Drake to take our thanks to God, both for her rescue from the hands of the bounty hunters and for God's provision of a zoologist for this journey.”

A number of the Quoll ran up to the glass, looking expectantly at Triton.

“Awww. They like you,” the Captain noted. “Welcome aboard the *Sycamore*, Dr. Slan. For this trip, you are an honorary member of the crew. Who knows, you may decide you like being a pirate. I can promise that when we finish our missions, we do indeed indulge in singing space shanties and drinking rum.”

He left Triton with the excited furry marsupials. They looked towards a corner of the room, where numerous boxes and barrels were neatly stacked and labeled.

“Guess I may as well feed you while I'm here,” Triton sighed.

\* \* \*

Alira stopped by the room where Sahlynn sat.

Sahlynn looked up for a moment, then returned to her art.

Alira sat next to her. “What are you drawing?”

“Present,” Sahlynn replied.

“A present for someone? For your brother?”

“No, silly,” Sahlynn giggled. “*Present. Present time.*”

Alira knew how uncharacteristic it was for an Eloquent to be concerned with the present. They existed in past and future, knowing things that others could not know about both.

Alira looked at Sahlynn's drawing. It was a simple landscape, with a red heart made of stars. Clouds littered the sky. A number of the clouds drifted down to the ground, where they formed a tall arched gate. A star was leaving from the gate, traveling upwards.

“Is that a star?” Alira asked, pointing to the object.

“No. Stellate. *Star like.*”

“Why is it going up into the sky?”

Sahlynn looked directly at Alira. “To find us.”

Alira's blood froze. She quickly exited the room, communicating with the Captain en route. “Our problem may still be following us,” she told him.

“How so?”

“The Eloquent one – she drew a picture of the heart nebula – the Malotte 15 cluster in Cassiopeia. And of the Flaminian Gate on Terri V.”

“Terni is the bounty hunters’ home base. Giving access to Hangman’s Fold.”

“The Hangman’s space-folding portals are capable of transporting ships thousands of light years in minutes. It sprawls out in all directions, giving the bounty hunters access to almost any point in space within 7500 light years of Terni V. That includes our present location.”

“What else?”

“She drew a star leaving the gate. She said it is coming to find us,” Alira replied. “I doubt that Sahlynn Slan has ever seen a bounty hunter Stellaram vessel. But she knew exactly how to draw one.”

“Jehannah and his gang are coming after us to finish the job they started on the Selenium Station.”

“We are in neutral space. They can’t attack us here.”

“Neutral space means nothing to Jehannah. He will bring our dead bodies back and say he killed us within Earth Navy jurisdictional boundaries. Our silent mouths will be incapable of refuting his claims,” the Captain reminded her.

“Do we go to battle stations?”

“No. That might upset the Eloquent one. Give her whatever supplies she needs. See what else she draws. For now, she is our early warning system. Where is Dr. Slan?”

“He is the proud new papa of a dozen Eastern Quoll. He has his hands full,” Alira added. “We are three hours out from Haven. We will be at the Euphrates space fold in about thirty minutes. Once we have entered the Euphrates, we’ll be safe.”

“Jehannah can use the Hangman’s Fold to get to our position in twenty minutes,” the Captain calculated. “Time is on their side.”

\* \* \*

“What are you drawing?” Trition asked, sitting next to Sahlynn. He had finished feeding the quolls and was checking on his sister.

She did not reply.

“I’m sorry I dragged you into this,” he told her.

“Destiny dragged us into this,” she replied. “God orders steps. We walk. Sometimes, we have no idea where we are going, or why we are walking. There are strange paths. Sometimes we have to be strange walkers.”

“Do you like it here? On board this ship?”

“This vessel carries destiny.”

“This is a pirate ship, Sahlynn,” he said. He leaned in close, conscious of the robot in the room. “These people are criminals. They do bad things sometimes. Do you understand?”

“We all do bad things sometimes.”

She began drawing verdant foliage, rejoicing in the variety of shades of green supplied by the crayon box.

“Have I done bad things?”

She began to draw little blotches of black and dark brown at the base of the foliage. “Sometimes good and bad. To know which, you have to know what you are doing and why you are doing it.”

“I wanted to save Alira from those men, back at the Station. I only saw men who wanted to hurt her. Was that the right thing to do?”

“It was. Do not tire of doing right things, Trition. Mama told us that.” “For in due season we will reap goodness,” he remembered. “I think it was difficult for her, raising us on Enceladus. Especially after Dad died.”

“Difficult because of me,” Sahlynn said sadly.

“The only ‘because’ of you is good things. Momma loved you. Daddy loved you. I love you. Never doubt that.” He hugged her. “You are blessed. We are blessed to be around you.”

Sahlynn was adding white blotches to the little animals she was drawing. They had mouse-like faces and furry tails.

“Those are Eastern Quoll,” he recognized, not surprised she knew to draw that specific animal here and now. “Do you want to see some real ones?”

“I was wondering when you would let me.”

“Come with me.”

He led her down to the animal room, where the quolls scampered about in their enclosure. They clamored to the glass to greet the zoologist and his sister.

“Cuties!” she exclaimed.

Triton went to a small doorway and coaxed one of the marsupials towards him. He gently scooped it up and closed the door. He sat next to Sahlynn on a small bench in the room.

“You can pet it if you like,” he told her. He was not overly concerned with the marsupial’s predatory nature; it was well documented that no animal of any species had ever attacked an Eloquent. The Eloquent had a calming effect on even the most vicious, frightened, or hungered of creatures. The only creature an Eloquent needed to fear was a non-Eloquent human.

Sahlynn gently ran her fingers along the back of the animal.

“We’ll be okay. All of us. Even these.” Sahlynn nodded to the Quoll.

The Quoll and Sahlynn looked at each other. The Quoll stood up on its hind legs and sniffed her.

Sahlynn said nothing, retreating again into her quiet private world.

Triton gently picked up the Quoll and placed it back into the enclosure.

He sat next to his sister. She was silent and motionless. Then she turned to him abruptly, sudden fire in her eyes. “You are needed on the bridge.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Do not question. Go.”

He nodded, urged on by the stern seriousness in her cat-like eyes.

\* \* \*

“Three Stellaram,” the Captain said, gesturing to a projected screen that indicated the location of Jehannah and his cohorts.

Alira sat at her station on the *Sycamore*’s bridge.

There were two other crew-members manning the bridge, their helmsman and navigator Vesperelli Zea’nati and their weapons expert Iniriq “Iri” Xeegrey. Vesperelli was concentrating on evading the attackers; his amber eyes were intent upon the three-dimensional images of three star-shaped ships following them.

Iniriq was without gender; when necessary, Iniriq preferred the pronoun ‘she,’ although it was merely a formality. Iniriq was from a planet called Gauge; their appearance was similar to human, with short black hair, gray eyes, and androgynous features.

Iniriq was focusing an external artillery piece on the closest of the incoming vessels, named the *Guinevere*; Iri was a very good shot. Jehannah and his gang knew that.

“You’re on Gun Three, Alira,” Captain L’Arrolin ordered. “Aim on the second Stellaram, the *Lancelot*. The third ship, the *Merlin*, is my target. Vesperelli – evasive maneuvers.”

“Aye, captain,” Vesperelli said, manipulating the ship into an unpredictable course.

“*Guinevere* is in my sights,” Iniriq confirmed.

“The *Guinevere* is an armed drone,” Vesperelli reported, looking at data streaming across the displays in front of him. “Designed to draw our initial fire – it is quite capable of taking us out, but in forcing the *Guinevere* to be our first target, the *Lancelot* will have time to position itself to attack our portside, while the *Merlin* pivots to attack us from the rear. They are betting that we can’t take out all three of them in the slim window we have to strike. The odds are in their favor.”

“The *Merlin* is Jehannah’s ship,” Alira noted. “I have unfinished business with him.”

“Which is why the *Merlin* is my business,” the Captain ordered. “*Lancelot* is yours.”

“*Guinevere* entering weapons range,” Vesperelli announced. “I’m giving you preferential firing field, Iri. Three, two, one ...”

The stellate-shaped *Guinevere* sent out a barrage of fast-moving hull-breeching rounds aimed at the *Sycamore*.

Iniriq focused their weapon and fired, sending out counter-rounds to stop the hull-breeching shots before the mines extracted their lethal damage on the *Sycamore*.

Iri then directed an explosive round towards the *Guinevere*. Multiple protective devices accompanied the explosive, intended to prevent the *Guinevere*’s counter-weaponry from destroying the detonating bomb before it reached its target.

Alira watched nervously, as the *Lancelot* and the *Merlin* swept by, positioning themselves for a dual-headed attack. A countdown started on her displays: Twenty seconds until the *Lancelot* would have direct firing sight at the *Sycamore*, and thirty seconds for the *Merlin*. Her own weapons would be locked in on the *Lancelot* as she sighted properly in

on the enemy vessel. Time for her fire in 18.5 seconds. It was a very narrow window.

Fifteen seconds passed. There was a wave of energy that moved unfettered in all directions through space as the *Guinevere* was destroyed. “The drone is done,” Iniriq announced. “Alira, Captain – you’re on.”

Alira aimed, anticipating the movement of the *Lancelot* into her sights.

Abruptly, the *Lancelot* stopped moving.

“It stopped,” Alira announced. “Just outside of range.”

“Our range or its range?” L’Arrolin asked.

“Both,” she reported.

“The *Merlin* is right behind us!” Vesperelli exclaimed. The enemy vessel had used the precious few seconds earned by the *Lancelot*’s sudden and distracting stop to accelerate its attack.

“The *Merlin* has a lock on us!” Alira exclaimed.

L’Arrolin fired, knowing the shot was a desperate attempt and could not impact the *Merlin* in time. The round exploded far short of inflicting any damage on the enemy.

“They have us dead in their sights,” Vesperelli declared grimly. “Fellows, it’s been nice to know ya ...”

Then there was another wave of energy: An unexpected wave. The *Sycamore* jostled.

The *Merlin* exploded, then imploded, without any immediate explanation. A weapon fired from the *Sycamore* had breathed death into the star-shaped vessel.

“What the?” L’Arrolin asked, not understanding how the *Merlin* had

just been destroyed.

“Take the *Lancelot* out now!” Triton exclaimed, as he stood over an open weapons console.

Alira fired her weapon on his word.

The round she fired destroyed the *Lancelot*.

The crew sat in silence for a moment, acutely aware that they had narrowly escaped death.

L’Arrolin looked at Triton. “I didn’t even notice you come on the bridge. But thank God you did. Where did a zoologist learn to fire like that?”

“Anti-poaching training,” Triton replied.

“That was impressive marksmanship,” Vesperelli noted. “You’re not a Naval agent, sent here to bring us in, are you, Mister Slan?”

“First, it’s Doctor Slan,” Triton replied. “Second, no, I’m not a Naval agent. And third – you learn to defend yourself and your kin when you live on a colony. Especially when your kin is Eloquent.”

“Even if he were a Naval agent,” L’Arrolin noted, “he just destroyed a bounty-hunter’s ship to save a pirate ship and crew. That makes him a hostile agent now. *Hostis humani generis*. Latin for ‘enemy of mankind,’ so you understand the term, Dr. Slan. You’re officially crew now.”

“Your sister Sahlynn was the one who tipped us off to the bounty hunters’ pursuit,” Alira added. “That makes her crew, too.”

“Crew,” a soft female voice said from the entry to the bridge.

“Sahlynn!” Triton said, rushing towards her. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough,” she answered, as her brother hugged her.

“The Slans are *Sycamore*,” Iniriq noted, facing Captain L’Arrolin. “Their lack of intent to become pirates is irrelevant at this point. As you mentioned, Jehannah tried to kill us twice in one day; Dr. Slan stopped him twice in one day. Indeed, thanks to Dr. Slan, Jehannah will stalk us no more. Dr. Slan is now my favorite pirate. Protect them, Captain.”

“I intend to protect them,” L’Arrolin promised. “Hopefully at least as well as they have protected us.”

Sahlynn walked with a steady, almost regal, gait towards Alira. She stood before Alira and placed her hand on Alira’s heart. “We are safe, sister,” she said.

“I know,” Alira replied. “Thanks to you.”

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Sahlynn answered.

Alira’s brow crumpled into an expression of shock and grief.

“Tell them,” Sahlynn commanded Alira. “Tell them why you quit Earth Navy. None of them know. Time to tell.” Sahlynn stood resolute, an imperceptible font of energy feeding power into her being.

Alira was compelled to comply. “I am umpteenth generation Navy,” she began. “My family’s Naval heritage goes back through Earth Navy, Alliance Navy, American Navy, Confederate Navy, American Navy, British Navy, Roman Navy, Greek Navy, Phoenician Navy. The Sea Peoples, if you believe the family lore. I think my bloodline crawled out of the deep blue sea and instantly regretted the decision. My mother was Earth Navy. She became pregnant while she was a junior officer; her husband, my father, was a Thian intergalactic admiralty law specialist.”

“Go on,” Sahlynn ordered.

“My mother was pregnant with twins. When I grew up they told me that my twin had died in utero.”

“I’m sorry,” Triton offered.

The rest of the crew sat in reverent silence.

“When I was commissioned and assigned to my first ship, they gave me an extra-intensive physical examination,” Alira continued. “More detailed than the examination of any of my shipmates. It was like they were looking for something. I was curious, so I snuck into the medical officer’s quarters and stole a copy of my classified medical record. What I found out from my records was that my twin did not die – she was selectively aborted. On orders from Earth Navy. My twin – she was Eloquent.”

“Tell them truth. Whole truth,” Sahlynn said.

“I still feel my twin,” Alira confessed. “In my mind. In my heart. In my soul. In my core. There is something of her, hidden deep inside of me. *I know it*. That is what the Navy was looking for. My twin’s presence, protected inside my non-Eloquent body. Who knows what they would have done if they had found that part of her, hidden inside of me. What experiments they may have performed on me. Becoming a pirate was a matter of self-preservation. I wanted nothing more to do with Earth or Earth law. Earth law had already killed a part of me. So, I found a pirate ship of decent reputation – this ship – and signed up.” She paused, taking a moment to reflect. “The Eloquent know things. They have access to power that can change the very fabric of the universe as we know it at a moment’s notice. They scare the hell out of me – and I carry the remnants of one of them inside my own being.”

“I heard your sister’s call to me,” Sahlynn said, placing her fingertips on Alira’s temples. “She warned me about Eiko.”

“What about Eiko?” Triton asked.

“The Uoy will burn Eiko to the ground,” Sahlynn said. “In just a few days. An unprovoked attack on a civilian world. The spark that will ignite a long and terrible conflict. We would have arrived just in time to find our graves, brother.”

“We need to warn them,” Iri stated.

“They will not listen to the premonitions of pirates and Eloquent,” Sahlynn said, her tone laced with finality. “But the planet you serve, Haven, is a warlord’s reconciliation to the universe. He was compelled to create a sanctuary as penance for his past. This ship is needed. To smuggle those about to die to life. You had it wrong, Alira. This *Sycamore* is not the guardian of the tomb. This *Sycamore* is the guardian of the cradle.”

“You say this?” the Captain asked.

“Me and Alira’s sister say this,” Sahlynn informed him. “You are a pirate, Captain. Do pirate things. Much hope has been placed in your disdain for Earth’s laws.”

She turned around, speaking to her brother. “You are a zoologist. Do zoologist things. Much hope has been placed in your love of all living creatures.”

Then Sahlynn walked away, to go and sit in quiet solitude in her stateroom.

Triton stood next Alira, still visibly distressed from her commanded confession. It was in his nature to comfort the living. “I’ve never seen her interact with another Eloquent,” he said.

“Another?” Alira shook her head gently. “For them, there are no others.”

Alira felt a part of her go to sleep inside, a deep restful sleep where the dreams of many wove one vision.

And she knew why Earth feared its newest children: No matter how mighty, the tomb could never overpower the promises of even the most vulnerable cradle.

# Cosmic Dance Aeternum

by Novyl the  
Mysterious



# How to Mourn Kepler's Supernova

by Mary Soon Lee

A armor yourself with amulets.  
Go barefoot under the night.

Scan the stars north of Scorpius  
where Ophiuchus grasps his snake.

Buried between those markers  
dire remnants of destruction.

The scars too faint, too far  
for any eye to pick them out.

Yet back in Kepler's prime,  
they were a fiery funeral pyre.

An outpouring of grief so bright  
it burned through daylight sky.

Look up therefore and weep  
for what was rent asunder.

Call on your gods to ease  
the unbinding of a star.

# Homecoming

by Peter J. King



returning from the furthest bounds  
of what our forebears used to think of  
as a vast canal of milk that split their skies  
we feel an unexpected tugging at our hearts

first we see the Sun  
    (the only one of all we've visited  
        that warrants that initial capital)  
then sweeping past the planetary orbits one by one,  
    we catch a glimpse  
    of Artemis      Uranus  
        and most gloriously Saturn  
till we reach our lunar starting point  
        the City of Copernicus

and from the dusty domes of home  
    we gaze up at the sphere from which it all began  
        and yearn for an impossible return  
        to Earth — that brown and amber globe  
        whose dully glowing surface  
we can never tread

# Jon Carver of Barzoon, You Misunderstood

by Graham J. Darling

**J**on Carver of Barzoon, you misunderstood.

The True Love whom you met in dreams was the goddess of this planet: pluripotent relict of a vanished race, marooned here eons before you ever were (do not doubt her love; she was made for love). Your crash-landing awakened her to purpose. The honeyed tongue she thrust between your lips divided to sample your every cell; while she cradled your broken body, you and she populated an empty world.

Its seas were modelled on your tears, and its bogs on your bile. The waving jungles you hacked through came from your hair; the vitreous plains you traversed, from your fingernails; the sluggoths you battled,

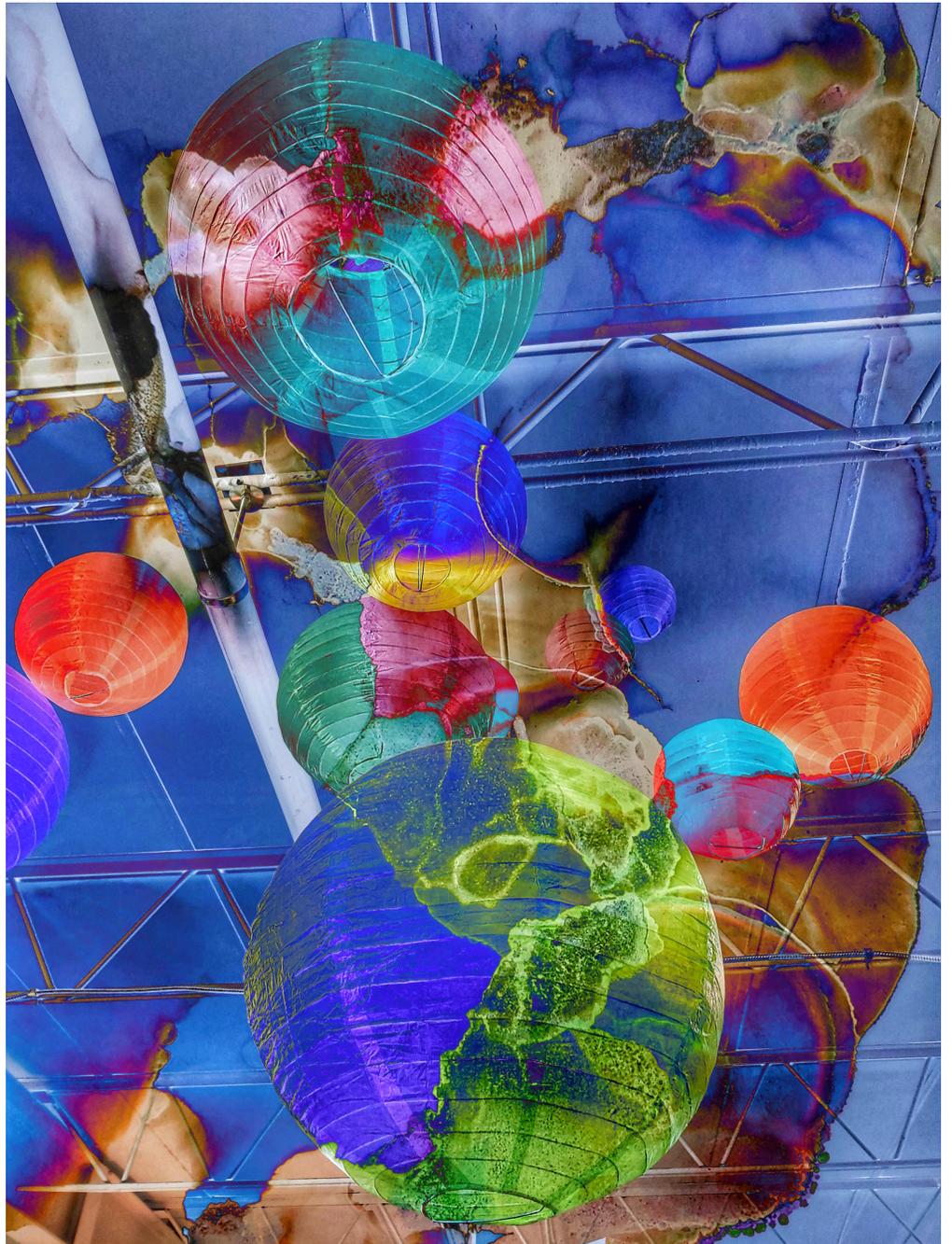
from your own lymphocytes; the steeds you rode, from your heart. The warriors you led to blood and glory were your sons, working out their destiny; the princesses you rescued, your daughters; the Transfederation you built by the seat of your pants, already your family (have you not wondered why they all speak your tongue?).

The caecal dungeons in bone citadels you regularly woke in and escaped from were hospital wards, where your eyes or limbs sliced in ivory swordplay were switched out; here they all are, mounted and healed, looking and waving at you, in the Museum of the Man.

The Darkened Lord against whom you strove is yourself, enthroned. We surrendered Brain-Priests are your own. Here is your crown. Please be seated. She'll be with you in a minute.

# Oumuamua

by Carl Scharwath



# Triage

by Margaret Karmazin

Dr. Tane Wu-Wiltshire was, at forty-four, one of the foremost exo-infectious disease specialists in the known galaxy. He was beloved of many, not just for his expertise but for his person, a small, tidy individual of Maori, Chinese, and British Australian descent, never married and his sexuality unknown. I went to work for him on Titan station in 2147, fresh from residency as a physician's assistant.

Getting there was no picnic; four months of cramped quarters with a scary passenger list—mercenaries, sales reps, and CIA types—and when we arrived, all I wanted was a long hot shower and French fries, which I got. But then, along with my fellow freshly minted PA, Mark Gresnor, we went right to work.

"No coddling, huh?" Mark whispered.

"You'd think they'd give us at least a good night's sleep and maybe a look around," I said. "I'd like to see the layout of the only human-run space station, so I know where everything is."

But as soon as we entered Medical, we saw why there was no time for pleasure. In our training holo, we'd viewed this area divided into many exam and surgical arenas, but now it was opened into a giant octagon expanse with little rooms around the border. Our sleeping quarters were temporarily in one of these. The entire ceiling was made to look like a changing sky running from blue with fluffy clouds to the wild colors of a perfect Earth sunset. The room was filled to capacity with cots occupied by the oddest assortment of individuals I'd ever seen except in holos. We were taken to a small office sealed off from the main room.

"What's going on here?" asked Mark. His redhead skin had paled to almost pure white.

The famous Dr. Wu-Wiltshire appeared before us, as handsome as his photos. "Call me Dr. Tane," he told them. "And this is my mother, Sarah Wu-Wiltshire."

A slim, stylish, silver-haired woman of around seventy nodded and smiled. "I won't take your hand," she said. "Normal precautions and you aren't suited up yet."

"Mother is visiting the station for six months," Dr. Tane explained, "and—"

She broke in. "Though I'm a dermatologist, I also hold a degree in internal medicine, admittedly unused for decades, but now coming in handy."

Clearly something big was going on. "Um," I said, "I hate to sound so ill-informed, but—"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Dr. Tane. "This only began three days ago, and the news would not have reached your ship."

Mark and I looked at each other.

"Go back to work, son," said his mother. "I'll take care of these two."

She led us to her office through a narrow corridor. I could hear groans in various tones, some human and others not. One reminded me of the rumble of elephants while another was a soft, repetitive, squeak. Dr. Wu-Wiltshire motioned toward the two chairs facing her desk.

"Please call me Sarah. As Tane said, this hit us three days ago. The

other space stations are light years away,” she went on, “and communicating with them takes days even using hyperjump. Two ships arrived from Centauri Station, one diplomatic and the other commercial. As soon as they landed, fifteen passengers crowded into Medical, coughing and vomiting and some, the Durlajis, dying like flies. We had to dispatch bodies into space without ceremony. In one day, the disease spread to humans, Zeta Whites, and Lausti. The big red Durlajis are the ones making the low elephantine rumble. They are highly susceptible to disease of a viral nature. Lausti are the blue, slender ones who make squeaking noises when in pain. Their bodies appear delicate but are wiry strong. Nevertheless, some are helpless against this monster of a virus.”

“Please, I don’t understand,” I said. “What is this disease and where did it come from?” Mark was leaning forward with an intense expression on his face. I didn’t know him well, in spite of the long trip to the station, so wasn’t sure what he was feeling. He looked flushed. The thought streaked through my mind—was he already infected or just worked up?

Sarah folded her hands on her desk and appeared magnificently composed, not a silver hair out of place. “Ten were already dead on the Centauri ships and as they disembarked, more were falling ill. In a panic, the Durlajis did not demand their usual ceremonies for their dead but went along with ejecting the bodies. There were originally forty-nine alive, but as of today only nineteen remain. At this point the Laustis succumbed, though only four to date have died. The Zeta Whites appear to do better than anyone with only one death so far.”

“And humans?” I asked. I immediately saw any future I had planned go down the drain. I wished I had not come; this was an empty honor if I never saw home again.

“Well,” she said, “we’re slower to contract it, but once we do ...” she paused and looked away. “The death rate is about fifty percent.”

I know she saw my face blanch. I am of mixed race and normally tan, but when terrified, I look like death warmed over.

“You have a better chance being young,” she said. “One of our nurses has it now and is recovering.”

“Isn’t anyone immune?” I asked.

“Yes, anyone without the same ancient ancestor.”

“What do you mean?” said Mark.

“When you entered the station, did you notice any beings that resemble large praying mantises?”

“No,” we replied.

She stood up and motioned to the glass door. “Over there,” she said, discreetly pointing to an individual across the vast room who was apparently visiting someone. “That is a Parmida. They evolved in an entirely different genetic line than the others here. Those you see on cots and some working as medical professionals, as different as they may look from each other, are all distantly related to each other and to us.”

“How do you know that?” I said.

“We’ve done genetic research on the station and submitted the studies before this virus hit. My son will go down in history whether he survives this or not.”

“One more thing,” she said. “We’re doing triage. This medical unit is not big enough to handle a larger influx of the sick than you see out there now. We can fit two more, but they’re coming in at a rate of eight per day. We have a drug, Narid, that sometimes works on some but not others. You understand triage, right?”

I nodded.

“Have you ever had to employ it in your personal experience?”

“No.”

“It’s not a pleasant thing deciding who’ll live and who’ll die.”

That was the end of our conversation. Sarah suited the three of us in the station’s purple self-sterilizing medical suits, made of a fabric that continually cleaned itself, and we left the protected office and entered the fray.

There was no time for introductions to different alien types. “Hydrate those four,” ordered Dr. Tane, as he pointed at receptacles in the floor from which I could pull up tubes that hooked into the patient’s IV ports. My charges were one muscular, black-haired, red-skinned Durlaji, a black-eyed Zeta White, and two Laustis with their pale blue coloring, torsos about as thick around as my thigh, wiry arms, long tapering fingers and large, luminous dark eyes— beautiful creatures once you got over your shock at seeing them. Their hair was thick and glossy brown. This one seemed young, but who knew? I asked Dr. Tane, “What is the age of this patient?”

He was distracted but kind enough to answer. “Maybe thirty-five. They live to about a hundred eighty earth years, so she is very young.” He shook his head. “She’s not doing well.”

She? I looked closer. Was the species mammalian? I didn’t see any breasts. The facial features were delicate. As soon as I started the hydration, the patient gasped for air and suddenly the light went out of her eyes. Her skin paled to gray in a matter of seconds. “Doctor!” I yelled. The ceiling above showed happy cottony clouds dancing across a cerulean sky.

He calmly returned, took one look, pressed something on his belt and pulled the blanket over her face. His eyes filled with tears. I loved him in that moment. That was the beginning.

The Zeta White struggled to sit up. Instantly, it was apparent his mode of communication was telepathy. He filled my head. *Tell my employers, tell my egg mates, tell my ship, what is left, that I had every intention of achieving the goals, but now see that this will be impossible. Tell them I meant to succeed!* And then he fell back and lost consciousness.

Dr. Tane moved to my side. “You’re young to have to experience this,” he said. “What should be a slow and exciting introduction to different species is now a circus of pain.”

“Thank you for acknowledging my feelings.”

“I need to warn you,” he added, “it’s going to get worse. My mother probably told you that humans are more resistant. But when they do get it, more than half die. The death rate among the Durlajis is seventy percent, with the Lausti twenty-eight percent and the Zeta Whites eighteen. The Parmida, of course don’t catch it.”

“Sarah said that the others are related to us.”

“I was working on that study before the plague arrived. Using reverse genetic engineering, it appears that millions of years ago, someone seeded many planets with life, using the same genetic code. On the seeded planets, things progressed or did not progress at their own speed and style. Animals and plants formed, flourished and died and were reborn. Species evolved, looking and behaving differently but with the same genetic base until each planet produced highly sentient beings. We cannot naturally mate with them today but probably could with help in the lab. Beings with this same long-ago genetic parent are vulnerable to this virus, which by the way, could have been purposely created. Time will tell.”

I returned to work, which was endless and exhausting. “They’re deathbed confessing sins I don’t even know exist,” I whispered to Mark, who looked exhausted. “You don’t look so good,” I added.

“There was a tear in my headgear,” he said, his voice shaky.

“Did you tell Dr. Tane?”

“I told Sarah. She helped me clean up and get into a new suit.”

“No,” I wanted to shout, but kept my mouth shut. By the next morning, Mark was on one of the cots and by day two, dead. No one would come to replace him. Any ships heading our way were

instructed to turn around or float in space.

I knew that I would contract the disease. How, I'm not certain, since I maintained proper protocol at all times, but the fact remained that the air in the general station would contain some virus particles no matter how often it was filtered and cleaned, and sure enough I was soon on my own cot drenched in sweat, coughing and vomiting. Dr. Tane tended me personally. I now understood the others' desires for a deathbed plea, but it would not be needed. "You're in the good fifty percent," he told me two days later when my fever broke. "You will survive."

I was weak for some time after, during which I was placed in a small, separate area with other recovering patients. A room seven by seven meters filled with cots arranged on either side of an aisle down the center. On the cots were humans and aliens. Some lay motionless and stared at the ceiling, while others talked softly to each other or sat up bright-eyed, looking for something to distract them. At first, they didn't have their various communication devices. They were allowed to look at holo-dramas on small screens and of course wore their translators. Next to me was a Zeta White who appeared too haughty to speak with me.

Galled, I said, "I'm one of the medical staff. As soon as I'm up and about, I might be attending to you."

"Assuming," he telepathically replied, "that you are, as you put it, up and about before I am."

Zeta Whites had been abducting humans for generations, though supposedly this had stopped after intersystem agreements. They considered us far beneath them.

"If a human is part of the fifty percent who survive, we recover faster than you do. So enjoy your boring cot." Being nasty was strictly off limits, but he was aggravating and I had never forgiven his race for manipulating us for centuries.

"Just a minor advantage," he replied. "Considering how in all other

ways, Zetas are superior."

"Except in morality," I snapped.

The Durlaji on his other side and a Lausti across the aisle were sitting up and listening to this exchange with interest. I excused my behavior by telling myself that my goal was, in addition to entertaining myself, to stimulate them out of lethargy. I was bored and needed my device to entertain me. But then if I had mine, they would all get theirs, packed full of virus particles. But if we were now immune ... well, I'd need to speak to Dr. Tane about that.

Unfortunately, he was standing on the other side of my cot and had overheard the whole exchange. "Perhaps, PA Rey" he said, "you are no longer ill enough to remain in this area harassing patients. If you're feeling vigorous enough to engage in verbal combat, you're probably well enough to return to duty."

I swear the Zeta White smirked.

Back at work, I asked Dr. Tane how he remained healthy. He said, "I took a very risky chance. One of the nurses who died, I took a sample of his infection, killed it, and injected it. It was an insane move – there was no time to work up a proper vaccine from antibodies. It was like the days when people put cowpox under their skin and became immune to smallpox. My plan was to inject you and my mother with it, but you're now immune on your own. Once I cover this end of the room, I will inject Sarah. I haven't tried it on anyone else and especially not the other species. Please go to the recovery room and ask if the others in there know anyone of their own species still healthy who would be interested in volunteering. If so, bring them to my office tonight. And Jasmine, I want you to be nice to the others or they won't help you. I understand your dislike of Zeta Whites, but you'll find that many of the others are quite likeable." He smiled, crinkling his eyes, and I thought shit, this won't do, my intense attraction to my boss. He had, apparently, never succumbed to engaging in serious relationships and there was no reason to imagine he'd start now.

I returned to the recovery room and nervously stood in the doorway.

Only two other humans were in there, both of them apparently asleep. All of the aliens were wide awake and looking at me expectantly, except the Zeta White who was working on a device I couldn't see, waving his hands in the air, pointing at this and that. He must have overcome protocol and gotten his equipment in.

Adjusting my translator, I cleared my throat and made Dr. Tane's request. A Lausti spoke up, his voice soft and melodious, unlike his former squeaks of misery. "I can suggest one of my mates. He is the sort who would do this if asked."

Did he mean "mate" in the British/Australian or the wedded sense, and if the wedded, wouldn't he be anxious about possibly losing his partner?

As if he'd read my mind, he said, "Our marriage is plural. Two males and two females. Please do not imagine that I wish to rid myself of Slaneti. I am very happy with him in our group. But I know him well and he would be most content to volunteer. He believes in giving of oneself for the greater good."

A Durlaji spoke up in his bass rumble. "My assistant will do it," he said. "It is his nature as well." Quickly, four more volunteered, and I collected the names and where to find them out in the station.

Outside Medical, the station was huge. Fourteen kilometers long by six kilometers wide with rotating sections reached by central elevators. Carts on moving belts made travel quicker horizontally in the different sections, along with small vehicles you could borrow. Locators were positioned on walls at intervals, which I checked to try and find my targets. I wore a fresh, clean medical get-up and people stared. "It is that bad?" a Parmida asked me.

It was the first time I was close to one, this immune insectoid individual from a system farther away than any of the others. He was over two meters tall, but his head bent straight forward, which lowered his height some. His brown-striped cranium resembled that of a praying mantis. His tubular arms ended in six-fingered hands, each finger bulbous at the tip except for a pointy forefinger. His eyes

were large, green, and shiny. I had an urge to touch his exoskeleton, which covered his head and thorax (what I could see of it) but not his arms or legs. In spite of his fearsome appearance, he gave off a companionable vibe.

"It is," I said. "My name is Jasmine. I'm happy to meet you."

"I am Grodine," he said. "Also am pleased to make your acquaintance. You are very charming. You remind me of a cute animal on our world that we adore."

"Well, thank you," I said. Perhaps I was akin to a kitten in their milieu?

"May I assist you in any way?" he said, his mouth moving open and closed horizontally.

"You can if you know your way about the station. I'm looking for these individuals." I opened my device and showed him the list, which was written in several languages.

"This one is on this level," he said. "I know his quarters and office and in fact deal with him in business."

"What is your business?" I asked.

"Chocolate," said the Parmida.

"Chocolate? Other civilizations eat it like humans?"

"Oh yes," he said. "It has caught on quite well. My family's business is booming."

The station was a busy place, teeming with inhabitants and visitors coming and going, many of them now covered in whatever version of protective suits their particular race used. Some of these were similar to my medical get-up.

"But where do you grow the cacao?" I asked my new friend.

“We grow it on one of the moons of our second planet called Mawine. It is a tropical jungle, the perfect climate.”

“Do you have samples of your product?” I asked, always up for a bite of the delicious treat.

He reached into a deep pocket and pulled out a disk wrapped in glittery blue foil. “Enjoy,” he said.

“That is an amazing wrapper!” The surface of the foil swirled and danced, sparkles moving every which way.

“Yes, we thought the customers would like it. It doesn’t last forever, possibly three of your months and then the paper will look like regular foil. It’s actually covered in semi-living organisms, harmless of course. And they don’t eat the chocolate!” He made squeaking noises of laughter.

“So pretty,” I said and thanked him, slipping the candy into my bag. Grodine left me soon after and it took two hours to locate the other people, one of whom backed out. I arranged to meet the remaining five in Medical at 19:00. Meantime, I took the pretty piece of chocolate out to show Dr. Tane, then forgot and left it on his desk.

That evening, he had the five volunteers along with his mother lined up in his office. After thanking everyone, he opened a tray on which lay five injection vials. “First, I must take your temps,” he said.

Everyone passed except one. “Mother,” said Dr. Tane, “yours is elevated.” His voice was even, and he appeared calm but by now I knew his minute expressions. He was uneasy. “You’re normally 36.1.”

“I’m a cold fish,” she joked. “What is it?”

He hesitated. “38,” he said.

She didn’t reply and her face was impassive.

“Have you been sweating?” he asked.

“A little,” she said. “But these med suits can be hot.”

“No, Mother,” he said. “They are completely temp regulated. You know that.”

She didn’t reply.

“Please sit down and let me do the others here and we’ll return to you.”

He checked the temps of the volunteers, the Durlaji’s being normal for beings with a high metabolism, 38.4, and the Faustis normal for cooler beings, 35.9. No Zeta White had volunteered, and I was glad, as just being near one ruffled my feathers.

“I want to thank all of you,” Dr. Tane said after they had received their vaccines. “Please come in tomorrow and I’ll check your temps and general health. If you notice anything out of the ordinary at any time, come right back and ask for me.”

In an aside to me, he said, “May none of them need help as we have no more beds. And it would be foolish to inject my mother now if her temp is elevated.”

By evening, five of the beds became empty as more bodies were shot into space. Then they immediately filled with three Durlajis, a human from station maintenance, and Dr. Tane’s mother. My communicator buzzed at 3:45 AM. I was back in Medical and suited up in fifteen minutes.

“We have three injections of Narid left,” said an ashen-faced Dr. Tane. “It has worked best on Durlajis, possibly due to their fast metabolism.”

He was standing two cots down from his mother’s and I knew that though his back was turned to her, she was all he really saw. I moved around him to go to her.

Sarah’s once sleek silver hair was dark with sweat. Someone had

pinned it off her face. Her skin was ashen and shiny, stretched over her beautiful bones, her eyes large and black in her sunken face.

“Hey,” she whispered when she saw me. I could see that it took her a moment to recognize me. “Tell him to remember what I taught him. You must stress it, make him see.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant.

“That Durlaji there on the next cot. Look at him.”

I looked.

“He is twenty-five years old.”

“Okay?” I said, still not getting her point.

“Durlajis only live to maybe fifty. They expend a tremendous amount of energy and use it up quickly. Even with the advanced technology they enjoy, they have only extended their lives by about eight years. That one there is middle-aged.”

I was beginning to see where this was headed.

“And you’re only what? Seventy-two? The human life span is a hundred and twenty. *You* are a dot past middle age yourself.”

“I’ve had children and seen the one I love most grow into a fabulous physician. I’ve enjoyed marriage for a while and interesting lovers, including a most inventive Lausti. I have traveled the earth and Mars and to this wonderful station. I’ve lived a very full life.”

“He won’t let this happen,” I said.

“If he is the professional that I think he is, he will.”

I wanted to scream. In the short time I’d known Sarah, I’d grown to greatly admire her. We weren’t friends yet; I was definitely an underling and knew my place. But I could sense that, given time, she

and I could develop a more personal relationship. My heart sank as I realized this would never be.

The night wore on and there would be no sleep. The four people who had received Dr. Tane’s vaccine checked in for his appraisal and were well. It pleased him so much that he joked with them a bit, though I could see he was frazzled.

“Maybe you should sleep for a couple of hours,” I suggested.

“I can’t.” He looked away.

I knew what he meant.

“I’ll sit up with you,” I said, “but I need something to eat.” He didn’t object, so we went to his office to use his automat and get ourselves sandwiches and coffee. The food was created in one of numerous kitchens on the station and sent by tubes to various receptors.

He noticed the blue foil wrapped candy bar I had forgotten on his desk. It almost looked like it was moving.

“What the hell is that?” he said, picking it up to examine it.

“Chocolate,” I said. “I wanted to show you the wrapper. Grodine, this Parmida I met out in the station, gave it to me. Chocolate is his business.” I told Dr. Tane about the living foil.

“Interesting,” he said, holding it closer. He took it over to a small lab built into one of the walls and examined it. When he looked at me, he was wearing a strange expression. “Do you mind if I keep it for a while?”

“Well, I had wanted to devour it, but you may for a short bit,” I joked.

“We’d better get back to the patients,” he said. I knew he meant his mother.

She was not doing well. I stood looking down at her as she lay on her cot shivering so hard her teeth rattled. “Can’t we do anything?” I said.

“She won’t take the injection,” he said. “She insists I give it to the remaining Durlaji.” He hesitated. “She is actually right. Chances are high it will help him and much lower that it would her. And like she said, their lifespans....”

He looked away. “I love her so much. More than anyone in the universe.”

I had a selfish moment of wishing someone, especially he, would say such a thing about me.

And then, without further ado, he took the last injection from a table and inoculated the third Durlaji, who turned his large red face to him and groaned.

Two hours later, all three Durlajis were showing improvement and Sarah was dead. I found Dr. Tane sitting by her cot, crying like a child. The numerous aliens and humans in the vast room had stopped their groaning and were silent in respect, some managing to sit up. The other medical personnel stayed at a distance and only I approached. I pulled up a stool and sat on the other side of Sarah’s cot. When the moment felt right, I said, “Do you want me to take care of things?” and he nodded yes.

We had a small ceremony and shot Sarah’s body into space. Dr. Tane retreated to his office, putting another doctor in charge of the floor. He motioned for me to join him.

“She is a true hero,” I said, but he shushed me.

“Sit down. I’ve discovered something awful.” His tone scared me. “The candy wrapper around the chocolate. What makes the design move and look alive.”

I looked at him questioningly.

“It’s a type of proto virus. It blends with the foil surface and makes it literally come alive. As it does, it morphs into a real virus and guess what virus it becomes?”

“Oh my god,” I said. “No.”

“Did they do it on purpose? Knowing it would only affect non-Parmidians? We need to take this to station police.”

“Wait,” I said, remembering the kindness of Grodine, who had given me the chocolate. “Why would they want to poison their own customers? Grodine seemed very much the businessman.”

Within the hour, the station Chief had the Parmida in his office. Grodine dwarfed the offered chair and looked terrified, his huge eyes rolling in his head and glistening with tears. Dr. Tane and I sat to the side of the Chief’s desk. The offending foil was safely sealed inside a transparent bag.

“Grodine, sir,” began the Chief, an imposing man composed of solid muscle, “are you aware that you and your fellow chocolate peddlers may have caused the deaths of hundreds, possibly thousands, and potentially millions? What the freaking hell were you thinking when you designed that hideous foil wrapper? I’m wondering if you were possibly planning this massacre in order to take over certain areas of the known cosmos? This is maybe a matter of war on human type species?”

Grodine had shrunk into a hunched-over mass of exoskeleton. His entire body trembled violently. “No no,” he said, “oh, Lords of Wunda, what have we done? My family and I, we invented this amazing thing, for sure an attraction to our product, the best chocolate in the known galaxy, and we had no idea, no idea it would hurt anyone! It is just art, that is all!”

“Your world has been contacted and I will be speaking with your ambassadors as soon as we can connect. You’ll be watched 24/7 in a cell after being strip searched.” He nodded to an officer standing in a shadowed corner that I had somehow not noticed.

“And suit up your crew,” the Chief added to the officer. “Confiscate every damn piece of that candy in the station. Keep ten samples in isolation and shoot the rest into space.” While we watched, he sent an all-points bulletin to every world, station, and known ships in flight, warning of the candy and the plague.

To Dr. Tane, he expressed his sympathies at the loss of his mother and then said, “I hear you have a vaccine. I would like to receive that immediately.”

“It comes with a slight risk,” warned Dr. Tane, though by now we knew that it worked. “But yes, I will administer it. Give me an hour.”

After months of haggling with the Parmida world government, it was decided that Grodine and his crew had not created the killer foil as part of any nefarious plan. The family simply wanted to succeed in business. Grodine and his clan, as was his world’s custom when faced with shame, committed suicide and the chocolate business on Mawine was taken over by another conglomerate. This made me sad.

The plague died out, partly by natural course and partly from Tane’s vaccine. After all the uproar and excitement, things seemed dull on the station, but soon I began to enjoy learning the different alien physiologies. New alien species visited the station occasionally, the Hazis (insectoid like the Parmida, though unrelated) and the Yomatas, very close to human. I had time to enjoy their company and several volunteered to help us further our medical knowledge. In fact, one tall and handsome Yomata named Gigoro with long, dark blond hair he wore in a braid down his back began to woo me. What he had in mind long term, I was not sure, but his maneuverings caught the attention of Dr. Tane.

“What is this Yomata up to?” he said one evening after we cleaned up and were heading off to get dinner. We often ate together to discuss the day but as yet, remained in the role of doctor and assistant. “You know they engage in plural marriage. Their current planetary leader is known for having four hundred wives. I wouldn’t imagine that

would be your thing.”

No, it most certainly would not be. “I had no idea,” I said. “But I imagine he just wants a bit of a fling.”

“Gigoro is already tied to two wives.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? How do you know this and what possessed you to look into it?”

He didn’t answer that question until the waiter set our wine on the table. “I looked into it because I care about you.”

“How, like a sister?” I said sarcastically. I had by now given up on Tane ever seeing me other than as his close assistant.

Long pause as he sipped his wine. “Not exactly,” he said.

We were married by the station commander two weeks later and Gigoro left the station with his tail between his legs, figurately speaking. I felt that I was the luckiest woman in the known galaxy and somehow, I knew that Sarah would approve.

“Jasmine, I need you,” called Tane and I ran, a happy newlywed, to his office where we darkened the windows and made love. Our quarters were next door, but it felt risky-sexier to do it in the office, though no one could enter if they tried. I would probably grow old with him on the station unless we were transferred to the new one under construction in the Klegor system. Not human-run, but they wanted an exo-specialist and by now Tane was number one. The chocolate from Mawine was now universally famous (and fortunately safe) but too expensive for our pocketbooks. We were left to Hershey’s from Mars.

# Dear Post Master General of the Noosphere

by M.C. Childs

Dear Post Master General of the Noosphere:

I am writing to ask about your services. I have been unable to find an FAQ, but I'd like to send thank-yous to Phileas Fogg, Jeramiah who was a bullfrog, etcetera and so on. Not to mention various other inquiries and correspondences I'd like to make.

First, is postage by poetic weight, conceptual distance, or arcane algorithm? Will a blue two pence meme be sufficient for a postcard from North Dakota to the Narnian lamppost? Will a sou of irony deliver a letter from L.A. to the City of Angels? What will it cost me to invite Eloise to tea? How far does an analogy go?

Second, I'm familiar with the classic message in a bottle, but I've

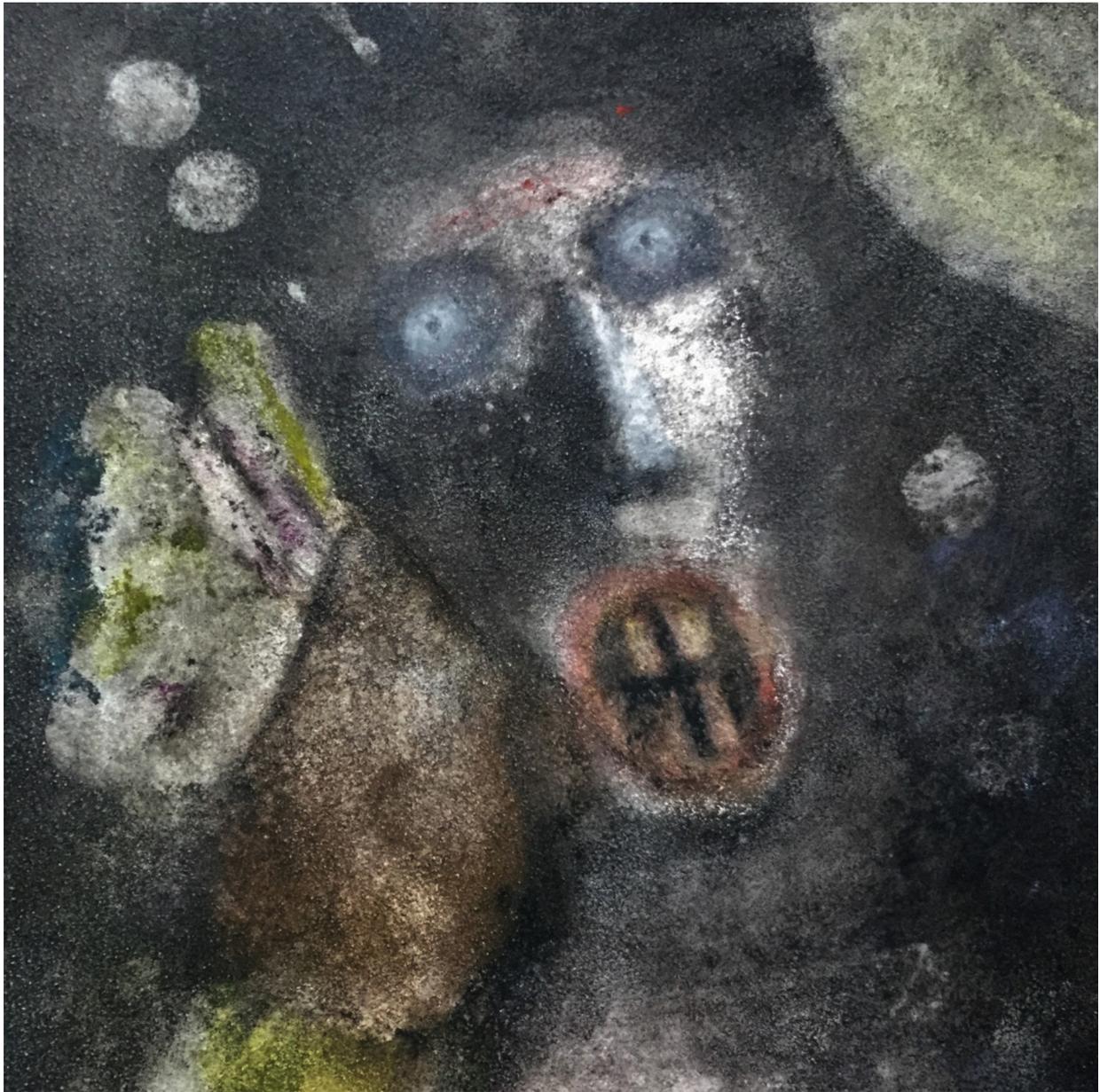
heard that you have new services. A friend told me I could post c/o the dead letter office or in the comments section of on-line surveys.

Finally, I'm hoping you can provide return receipts. I haven't heard from Harvey in ages.

I'd appreciate confirmation. I'd appreciate affirmation. I'd appreciate being noticed.

Please drop me a line,

J.W. Ogg



**Next Stop, the Sun** by Elby Rogers

# A Seed Crystal of Control

by Nathan Ahlgrim

*Day 9:*

My day was dominated by new hyperdimensional geometries before I was fully awake. The deepest insights aiding my quest into my world of data seem to come in my dreams. I now *feel* the interplay of nine dimensions, and although my newfound intuition is exactly what I want, I cannot say it does not unnerve me. My routines give me peace as I venture deeper into hyperdimensional chaos.

Now deep into my self-imposed exile, I find the regularity of my sanctuary to be essential in counterbalancing the abstraction of my work. My simple black alarm clock urges me awake from its home across the nightstand, preparing me to dive into the multiplexed data at my desk. The vertical blinds remain fully closed to protect me from the glaring sunlight and the world outside, letting my computer terminal illuminate my waking hours. And when I finish this entry, I know my vivid blue and lustrous brown quilt waits for me on the bed, tucked in as always to secure me through another night dreaming of new geometries.

Even in my seclusion, I have yet to find the key to mapping my mountains of data. Each day I tweak the topography of the mobius band to no avail. All my tinkering since Day 1 has not made the data resonate in this topography. My dreams are telling me to diversify my approach, but I am struggling to develop anything truly original. I seem to have imprisoned myself in the dogma of my own ignorant past.

From this day forward, I will start each morning afresh. I will continue to write an account of my day—after all, I draw strength from my routines—but I will burn each entry upon completion. I

cannot account for the veracity of my hyperdimensional dreams, but they are the only source of guidance. It appears that I, just like my data, must inevitably fragment into chaos.

\* \* \*

*Dr. Katherine Ovebian: Lead Analyst, Project Seed Crystal  
Sept. 22, 2041. Evening Report.*

Dr. Sullivan remains unaware of his translocation to our secured observation suite. My meticulous recreation of his home office has facilitated his smooth transition into the care of Project Seed Crystal, and the work I observed over the past day is testament to the benefits of this Project. It could not be replicated in the civilian world. Dr. Sullivan's efforts in data visualization and factor mapping are irreplaceable for the strength of our government, and Project Seed Crystal is irreplaceable for Dr. Sullivan's work.

Dr. Sullivan is now insisting on "starting each morning afresh," which is precisely why Project Seed Crystal is of critical importance. He has already taken steps to erase all traces of his internal musings with each passing day. It is a blessing that our cameras captured today's entry before it too was lost.

I know you are currently managing the outcry over Dr. Sullivan's sudden, and very public, removal from the public eye. That was always a risk when such an untraditional man was made the posterchild of government intelligence. I have confidence in your public relations team to mitigate the media firestorm, and I have confidence in Dr. Sullivan's work. He must remain in Project Seed Crystal. His project is too valuable to allow his more inconvenient quirks to preemptively cover his tracks. Every incremental breakthrough needs to be recorded, and we can no longer trust him to

maintain meticulous notes.

The Project is close to bearing fruit. I know from my months working with him during his civilian life that his biggest limitation had been his fixation on previous models: he would tweak, but never begin anew. He now seems committed to breaking free of what he terms “the dogma of [his] own ignorant past,” which of course means that we must closely monitor him inside Project Seed Crystal. I will continue to facilitate his progress by resetting his environment to a precise recreation of the home he knew on Day 1 of his mission. The comfort he finds in familiar surroundings will protect against a catastrophic destabilization of this wholly unique intellect.

\* \* \*

*Day 10:*

My day was shifted five inches to the right even before I was fully awake. Gone was the comfort of my sanctuary, my one reliable mote of control while I am on a quest that seems to jerk me around at will. It took me at least five swats before I pinned the alarm clock into silence. For the first time in these ten days, the squat black box woke me up from the far side of the nightstand instead of being seated where it belonged, next to the headboard. I couldn't shake the feeling of off-ness all day. Katherine must have been on to something when she said I have a paranoid personality, but I think it would be fair to say that today, a better descriptor would be “wary,” given the evidence surrounding me. Everywhere I looked, I found my space subtly altered, as if recreated from an imperfect memory. The checkered quilt comforter was the same blue and brown, but it was tucked in at the bottom. It was not so by my hand. The vertical blinds, which I've always left slightly cracked, were twisted completely closed. Too many pieces had been altered to be attributable to my inattention or lapse in discipline. But no change was overt. I could easily have allowed the distraction to rule my day with the troubling evidence and worried theorizing. Luckily, my desk was untouched. The file cabinet at my left knee was orderly, and the trash bin on my right had the same four papers crumpled on top of the remnants of yesterday's meal. The hair I had left lying over the

middle row of keys to catch any snoops had not been moved. I could still get down to work.

A productive day it was, too. Regular patterns have started emerging from the depths of my data. I can now draw the ebbs and flows out of my enigmatic ones and zeros. I have always known a fundamental topography must exist, and now it undulates in my mind. It lurks somewhere in me, but I cannot yet pull it into consciousness. The foundations are clear: the data resonate in a bisected twisted torus. My earlier scribbblings of a classic mobius band are a testament to my naiveté. Today's revelation brings me within shouting distance of the final solution: the mobius strip is the negative space around which my model forms.

It is the nucleating event I still cannot stabilize. I know that some coordinates, some trajectory, must diverge from the torus into a nonintersecting chaos. The numbers tell me so. But the model is beyond my grasp—for now. Still, I should congratulate myself for progress, even if incremental. I've just about modelled the base state. The long day in my wilted folding chair, my aching back, my efforts—all are rewarded. It may even justify my seemingly endless separation from Katherine. For progress, I can tolerate a squirmy alarm clock and a remade bed. I hope the bed does not remain empty for too much longer.

Tomorrow, I must build upon today's progress. My seed crystal is there—the pinpricks of data to nucleate the transition from torus to chaos. Only by modeling chaos can I control it.

\* \* \*

*Dr. Katherine Ovebian: Lead Analyst, Project Seed Crystal  
Sept. 26, 2041. Evening Report.*

Dr. Patrick Sullivan has fully recovered and returned to his extraordinary mental faculties after the destabilizing incident during the night following my previous report. He awoke this morning after approximately 88 hours of sedation, which was administered to coax him out of his florid psychosis. All of Dr. Sullivan's behavior patterns

and habits were faithfully restored without error or mutation. Indeed, his progress towards predictive data visualization is evidence for the continued success of Project Seed Crystal and the continued value of Dr. Sullivan as its architect. His brief psychic destabilization was a mere delay, not any cause for real concern.

As Dr. Sullivan's *de facto* caretaker, I am well aware of how such an incident is perceived. Dr. Sullivan is, of course, known for equal parts brilliance and instability. This was true even before he was brought into Project Seed Crystal. I know you were reluctant to house him in the isolated suite, but you accepted the consequences of that action for the same reason you would do well to accommodate the latest events: Dr. Sullivan's mind is your sole source of answers.

What he obsessed over as a civilian he now abstracts into mathematical elegance as your ward. Who else would ever conceive of vectorizing the emotional swells of a crowd into a hyperdimensional twisted torus? I do not pretend to understand the incomprehensible, brilliant mind working below me. I barely understood it during the life we shared before he was disconnected from reality by his fragmented topographical dreams. The goal is not to understand him, but to enable him to understand those seed crystals, the inciting incidents that make the difference between an inconvenient protest and a violent uprising.

The growing abstraction of his thoughts is why I will no longer include snapshots of his journal entries in my reports. Such musings are now only understood by him and hold no consequence to the Project's progress. His results speak for themselves. Yes, it would be easier in the short term to parade him in the public eye as a shining example of how the government honors its most gifted minds. That would be myopic. Think to the future. The outcry will die out; you do not want to share that fate. His visions are worth accommodating.

\* \* \*

*Day 11:*

My day was shifted and recolored even before I was fully awake. The

alarm clock blared as I swatted at it in vain, eventually pinning it into silence on the far side of the nightstand, where it had no right to be. That was the first hyper-saturated resident of my suite to inform me of some malevolent meddling of unknown origin. My familiar and reliable grey clock is now black. The checks on my quilt similarly announced an invasion. I now will sleep under vivid sky blue and bronze, no longer the faded denim and sand of the quilt Katherine and I had shared.

I should have investigated the matter further. Interfering parties could ruin everything. But I had awoken from hyperdimensional dreams, and my desk remained pristinely my own. Thus, on this eleventh day, I found respite in work.

My pencil diligently transcribed my dreams, illuminating the patterns I had previously neglected in my haste. I did not stop to contemplate the consequences of my scribbling until I rendered four images which manifested the first nine dimensions. My long sought-after nucleating event, the phase space through which my regularized torus would diffract, appeared to me. I flipped through the dimensions to illuminate the answer as an animator might have flipped between frames to breathe life into a previously static Snow White. Like those early animators, I too am ushering in a new era.

In doing so, the critical confluence of the second, fifth, and seventh dimensions became clear. And yet, I was unable to capitalize on the revelation. Even as I write this, rogue shapes of all dimensions bombard the page, dancing across my vision and resonating through my auditory perception. I might blame these phantoms on a lack of adequate food, but my stomach has yet to protest my avoidance of the pantry.

It is not a loss. Today's breakthrough earns me an early recess, even if that recess is forced upon me. Another inspired dream, and I may yet catch my white whale. I only hope the dreams of Katherine's face when she hears news of my triumph will not usurp the visions I need to achieve it.

\* \* \*

*Dr. Katherine Ovebian: Lead Analyst, Project Seed Crystal  
October 2, 2041. Afternoon Report.*

The now obligatory and lengthening periods of sedation do not appear to have any negative effects on Dr. Sullivan's progress. He awoke from a five-day sedation with no lapse in concentration, seemingly unaware of the passage of time. Again, all behavior patterns and habits were fully reinstated without error or mutation.

Although Dr. Sullivan's output is, if anything, accelerating, I recognize that the window of his stability is narrowing. I have therefore elected to modify his treatment strategies to accommodate his shrinking periods of wakefulness. All relevant changes have been noted in the most recent medical log. The new protocol of administering high-density nutrition while he is sedated maximizes his wakeful hours by eliminating the need for mealtimes. Additionally, I have taken to collating and organizing the notes on his desk from his previous working day before he wakes. I have, of course, a unique ability to recreate his work environment from before his periods of instability and time in Project Seed Crystal, thereby triggering his most productive habits. All indications are that he responds positively to both interventions.

I take this example as an opportunity to remind you how valuable my supposed "conflict of interest" is to the Project. Without my unique personal connection to Dr. Sullivan, the products of his brilliance are both fleeting and incomprehensible.

Most importantly, I would like to highlight the momentous breakthrough Dr. Sullivan achieved in his six hours of lucidity. In his words, he has now mapped "the critical confluence of the second, fifth, and seventh dimensions" as the necessary conditions for a nucleating event. Put plainly, specific levels of a dissident's family cohesion, choice of attire, and peculiarity intersect to reliably identify those individuals as the instigators of chaotic events. Dr. Sullivan has now offered a coarse profile of those individuals who trigger unrest, the people who act as seed crystals and shake a docile crowd out of their predictable ebb and flow and throw them into rebellious violence. As he stated in his last publication before he was brought

into Project Seed Crystal:

*Like supercooled water, a crowd can remain peaceful even when every member of the mob harbors violent intent. However, a single nucleating incident—a bottle thrown, an epithet spewed—will invariably trigger a violent phase transition. You do not need to sway the will of the crowd to maintain order. You simply need to remove the individual seed crystal bent on nucleating violence.*

Project Seed Crystal is on the verge of delivering on its promises. Public focus has already shifted away from Dr. Sullivan's disappearance to the horrific news of violent crackdowns abroad, and will soon fully slip from the news cycle. The fruit of the Project is imminent: a country that never again is under threat from a disgruntled populace. Dr. Sullivan's model offers you the opportunity to selectively target the troublemaking seed crystals. Once his model is refined, you will be empowered to remove the handful of provocateurs that would trigger thousands to devolve into violence. Public perception is everything, as you well know with the backlash following the removal of Dr. Sullivan from the public eye. The provocateurs identified by his model are anonymous, which is what makes his model so invaluable to your continued success. Your targets will be nobodies. Surgical and preemptive peacekeeping measures that remove these seed crystals will never be visible enough to spur public outrage. But for you, declawing the mob in this way will guarantee continued stability and security for your administration.

\* \* \*

*Day 12:*

The alarm buzzer invaded my ears the way hyperdimensional geometry now invades my vision. I am not supposed to wake with a clock. I wake with the Sun. Or I did before today. Someone has locked me in a cell, a mockery of the place I used to call home. A stranger's quilt lies wadded in the far corner. In a righteous frenzy, I took the rogue alarm clock to the slats of the blinds—the blinds now

covering the window that was always bare before today. Shards of vinyl lay strewn about me. They are oddly comforting in their two-dimensional simplicity. Higher dimensions encroach from all sides. I fear the blood still oozing from the scratches I obtained in my attack will leave an enduring blemish on today's correspondence.

I write this from the floor, as my desk looms over the center of my cell. My captors—my tormentors—must have taken great care in recreating this one reliable facsimile of my earlier life. What care they must have taken to pluck a single hair from my head in my sleep and placed it *just so* on my keyboard. The extent of their surveillance is evident. I could not work today. I have been thrown into a chaos more profound than any I have modeled on the computer pretending to be mine.

I close my eyes and see Katherine's face shattered among eight dimensions. My visions, be they from Heaven or Hell, have now stolen her from me as well. But even now I am driven to find the pattern in the chaos. Surely by understanding the chaos I can prevent it. I need to believe it is possible.

\* \* \*

*Dr. Katherine Ovebian: Lead Analyst, Project Seed Crystal  
October 28th, 2041. Morning Report.*

The patient is stable, and all factors are once again under control. Damage to Dr. Sullivan and his surroundings were minimal and are easily rectified. Project Seed Crystal will still pay dividends. If anything, the recent coup that unseated our allies to the south should promote the Project to the highest priority in your administration.

What would have happened to the Drohiba regime had their executives been empowered to remove the seed crystals from that mob? Would the last remnants of the regime be strung up over their Revolutionary Plaza had those chaotic spasms of violence been shunted? I am not so foolish as to suggest you face such threats at

home. Yet administrations more popular than yours have been toppled by the type of seed crystals which surely reside among your people at this very moment.

I will reset him and his environment. He is now dependent on my care to complete the Project. What is good for him is good for the country. Surely the security of your administration is worth the investment.

\* \* \*

*Day 13:*

I renounced my comforting routines before I was fully awake. I woke early, unplugging the alarm clock hours before its scheduled proclamation. Its shape in hand was a comfort. The squat black box seemed purpose-built to hammer my computer into submission. I am sitting in a placid sea of papers expelled from my file cabinet, writing what will doubtless be my final entry to this ephemeral journal. I have no further reason to pursue my hyperdimensional white whale. My twisted torus encapsulated order and sanity, but I now see that by striving to maintain order I shunned a treacherous paradise for a reliable purgatory.

There is beauty in chaos. It is the nucleating event I had worked so hard to avoid that elevates the data to even higher and more elegant dimensions. Oh, Katherine, I only hope you can forgive my dangerous naivete.

I should never have sought to avoid the seed crystal. Nucleation frees my data from the twisted torus. The seed crystal frees the data from a safe and imprisoning path. It will free the people. It freed me.

I fear I have already empowered my captors to eliminate their seed crystals. Katherine, please help me. I must nucleate my own chaos. I cannot do it from here.

The Road to Golgonooza, Chapter six. Our story: All eyes turn heavenward, or do they? as the sky abruptly cracks open, or not.





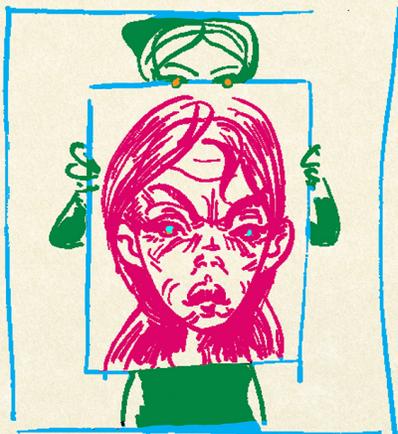
"Vladimir" appears to have just had a seizure. A premonition?





## Contributors :

page 1, Shiela Wao caused a small riot at the recent unveiling of her guerilla installation in the lobby of Manhattan's *True Fiction Building*.  
[yourdailysketch.tumblr.com](http://yourdailysketch.tumblr.com)



page 2, penciler/inker team, Sophia Prunikos and Amanda D'Hayye, serialize their award-winning webcomic, *Kronos Zervan*, on Instagram : [cmot15](https://www.instagram.com/cmot15)



page 4, Erloy Sandvind, oversees the porn-noir anthology, *Lurid Prurience*.  
[yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com](http://yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com)

page 3, Eldridge Kurtzberg chronicles the retropulp adventures of *Doc Wertham*, *Man of Mystery*.  
[cartooniologist.blogspot.com](http://cartooniologist.blogspot.com)



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# Ruins on Korkhan

by Jennifer Crow

Our dreams were especially cruel: sail  
the solar winds to new worlds, plant flags,  
pretend no one existed before us.

We woke to chaos: Domes like cracked  
eggshells, roads shattered into jigsaw paths,  
blackened dust under our engines.

Some ruins are old, some new. We left  
destruction in every footstep, claiming  
the dead to put them in glass cases.

Our tents folded up, crumpled origami hopes  
tossed aside by the first strong wind.  
We wanted a home place, a garden

for our roots to tangle. We cleared  
the rubble in spreading circles  
only to find ourselves back

in the center, lost in the search,  
still dreaming about our destination.



# ad astra

by Marge Simon

# If You Lead an Earthling to Water, Who Gets to Drink?

by Mary Jo Rabe

Having just taken off her cooking cap, Emma Brooks Baxter checked her short, white, wavy — not curly — hair in the mirror on the door and looked around her currently empty cafeteria. She resisted the urge to run her stubby fingers through her hair; after all, she was still on the job.

It was dark outside, but she could still see the silhouette of Pavonis Mons off in the dusty distance. As so often when it came to her job, she had been absolutely right to insist on having the cafeteria up on the surface of Mars in a circular structure complete with a panorama view through clear but radiation-resistant plastic window panes. It may have been costly, but it gave the community a place to gather and remember why they all wanted to come to Mars.

Occasionally she felt a little crotchety with her thirty-eight Martian years (certainly one reason to come to Mars — having your age sound younger) and noticed that she didn't move her short and stocky bulk around as quickly or gracefully as she once did. However, one glance out the window, and the dusty, red surface told her that her second chance at life was just beginning.

The cafeteria, as she insisted, never closed. Emma preferred to do the cooking and baking in the morning, then trust customer service to her capable staff, go back to her apartment for a needed nap, and afterwards hang around for the evening and night shift when all the scientists and engineers came looking for something to eat while they brainstormed. Although she appreciated the compliments for her tasty

food, she enjoyed their expert and informed speculations even more.

Emma worshiped the astronomers. In her mind there could be nothing more important than learning just how this universe was put together. However, she was also convinced that serious researchers could only rid themselves of their earthbound bias by leaving their home planet.

That's why she was so fond of the engineers who made human habitation on Mars possible. Emma did her bit by keeping the colonists fed, but it was the engineers who kept everyone supplied with necessities like breathable air and sufficient water.

Speaking of whom, her friend Dr. Ruthie Sandcorn and team chose this moment of reflection to open the door from the passageway to the underground sections of the habitat and dash into the cafeteria, still tapping at the communicators in their hands.

"Emma, we're starved," Dr. Sandcorn said. "What do you recommend?"

"Martian lasagna with garlic bread, all ingredients coming from the surface greenhouses and fields," Emma said. "But if not all of you are that hungry, Ruthie, I can make you sandwiches or soup."

"We are that hungry," Dr. Sandcorn said. "Start dishing out your fantastic food and we'll get in line to carry it to the tables." Ruthie

was a tall and deceptively slender woman with well-developed though almost invisible muscles. With her habitat nickname of Red Ruthie based on her thick mane of uncontrollable curls, she was famous for her arm wrestling victories.

Emma darted back to the serving line, slapped on a serving cap, and started dishing out the lasagna. She allowed herself some feelings of culinary pride. Not every cook could prepare a lasagna from purely vegetable sources that tasted like the memories the colonists had from their Earth restaurants.

As she handed them the plates, she saw that Ruthie was first in line, followed by her eager, somewhat hyperactive second-in-command, Dr. Blake Behla. Emma couldn't help admiring Ruthie's patience with the man.

"We're celebrating," Dr. Behla shouted. "Bring out your best wine." He was a short, wiry, little man, always jumping up and down for whatever or no reason. This was perhaps cute when he was a teenager but was wearisome now that the good man was visibly middle-aged.

Emma tried to move her facial muscles into a neutral smile. She never lied to her customers, but sometimes it was better to sugarcoat the truth a little. "Farmer Oscar has made genuine progress with his grapes, and I think you'll find this wine a definite improvement over last year's," she said.

Then of course it occurred to her that she had missed the more important message. "What's the occasion?" Emma asked.

"We did it!" Dr. Behla shouted. "We found enough water to keep this settlement on Mars supplied forever."

Ruthie smiled patiently as she carried her tray effortlessly with one hand over to the largest table. "We'll all be going out to check for ourselves tomorrow," she said. "But it does appear that our little robot excavators have plunged into an underground lake that has enough volume to flood the entire northern hemisphere many times over."

"And besides providing enough water to maintain human life, there is more than enough to release for hydrogen for any other purposes the settlement can come up with," Dr. Behla piped up.

Emma sat down at their table. "You've been looking for water for a long time," she began.

"Yes," Ruthie said. "But so far we've always only found tiny underground ponds. It's hard to find definitive evidence of water supplies from the surface, and trying to penetrate the Martian surface itself is like digging through cement with a plastic spoon."

"We didn't make any progress until the authorities let us use nuclear power to blast some deep holes and then drill from there," Dr. Behla added.

"Yes," Emma agreed. "I remember the decision was somewhat controversial, and there were even some protesters among the settlers."

"All idiotic Luddites," Dr. Behla said. "Compared to the cosmic radiation that beats down on Mars every day, the minor contamination from our nuclear-powered blasters and drills was negligible."

"No, no," Ruthie said. "I'm grateful when people question decisions. It's good for the whole community when people insist on protecting the settlers from their own enthusiasm. Still, I am so relieved that we have finally found enough water. Now the fun part starts, figuring out the nuts and bolts of getting the water to the settlements and keeping the supply steady and reliable."

Emma smiled. "I would have thought that was the dull part, no different than what you could do on Earth," she said.

"I guess I'm still just a plumber at heart," Ruthie said. "My degree might say hydraulic engineering, but what I always loved most was twisting pipes, attaching hoses, and plunging drains. It is neat to do this on Mars, though. The challenges, temperature, rock contents,

surface air pressure, are all very different."

"So what do you do now that your drilling robots have discovered the water?" Emma asked.

"We have excellent mapping programs," Dr. Behla interrupted. "We need to determine where pipes of which length need to be laid, where they need to be insulated against the surface temperatures, and then send off an order to the Stevensen Plastics factory to get our pipes molded. Then we order more robots to get the pipes connected underground."

"There is one more formality," Ruthie admitted. "The drilling robots have sent a sample of the water to Doc Brach for testing. We need to use this water, but it might be good to know ahead of time what precautions we need to take when we release it for human use."

"Well, good luck with everything. I hope everything goes smoothly from here on in. Where will you be setting up your engineer's camp?" Emma asked.

"We already have a tiny research habitat at the Vastitas Borealis," Ruthie said. "We'll go there and decide whether to set up operations there or somewhere else." She and her group then wolfed down their food and left, still tapping at their communicators.

After Ruthie's group was gone, Emma allowed herself some jubilation. A safe and reliable water supply would be very helpful for the cafeteria. Ever since she got to Mars, she had managed to run the place successfully despite the various water restrictions, but now she would have one thing fewer to worry about. She could expand the drinks she offered; she could save time and energy with respect to hygienic activities. Emma could only hope that Ruthie and her team worked fast.

Assuming that that had been the excitement for the night, Emma was surprised when Spin and his troop of equally adolescent pilots ambled into the cafeteria. "Any cookies left, Emma?" Spin asked.

He was a nice boy, tall and skinny like most of the Martian-born, but

healthy and fit. Spin had almost beaten Red Ruthie at arm wrestling once and probably would someday.

These young people, eight to ten Martian years old, were the fearless rocket pilots who made transportation possible on Mars. Emma was always relieved when they showed up alive, having heard too many believable accounts of how they flew.

"All yours," Emma said as she pointed to the full bin of cookies. "Did your last trip wear you out?"

"We never wear out," Spin said as he and the others, five young men and two young women, stuffed their hands into the cookie bin. "But we had a few interesting excursions up and over the mountains tonight."

"And down into the valleys," one of the young women added.

"Well, don't make them too interesting," Emma said. "I need live people to eat my cookies."

Spin laughed and the group wandered back to the exit. Like every evening, Emma hoped their competence would continue to be equal to their confidence. Buzzing around a dusty planet was never without its unique surprises.

A Martian month later Emma was preparing to make chocolate chip cookies in her dust free — due to the impermeable seals around all exits — kitchen when she heard some shouting coming from the eating area. That was decidedly inconvenient. She was just at the point of determining whether the substitute cooking oil and sugar mixture was now creamy enough for her to add the substitute vanilla. This was a fairly critical point in the process and determined just how soft and chewy the cookies would be after they were baked.

She strained to recognize the voice and then wished she hadn't. To her honest regret, Emma had never had much interest in the work of

the astrobiologists. Maybe she was prejudiced, but she pretty much doubted the existence of extraterrestrials since none had bothered to show up so far in her cafeteria. Nonetheless she tried to be a good listener whenever Barbara Cohan came around complaining. No one else had any patience for the poor woman.

Barbara was young and passionate about her work, to the point of suspecting that everyone else wanted to prevent her from discovering anything. In Emma's opinion, her billionaire brother Ned had let far too many only marginally sane colonists come to Mars. And yet here they were, and Emma felt she should do her bit to integrate them into the habitat community since they weren't capable of it on their own.

Maybe it wouldn't do any permanent harm if she refrigerated her cookie dough for a few moments and went to talk to Barbara.

Emma waited until she was outside the kitchen area before she pulled off her head covering that bore some resemblance to what religions on Earth had demanded of women worshipers. Hers, though, was literally taped around her hairline and included a huge, stiff collar bent upwards. Emma only wore it because it was perfect for keeping any kind of biological droppings from entering the cafeteria food chain.

Before Emma had pulled off all the tape, Barbara came running over as fast as her chunky, short legs could manage the short distance. "I found them," she shouted, clearly out of breath. "They're here, just like I said they would be."

"That's nice, dear," Emma said. "Who's here?" Much as she enjoyed people eating her cafeteria food with obvious pleasure, every now and then Emma thought she should encourage people like Barbara to eat a little less. Barbara's puffy face didn't look at all healthy, but maybe that was due to the oily, long, dark-brown hair that bordered it like greasy theater curtains. Well, as soon as the new water supply was available, everyone could shower more often.

"The microbes," Barbara yelled. "They found living microbes in that new lake that Dr. Sandcorn's robots discovered. Doc Brach called me.

I rushed over to his infirmary where he fortunately does have adequate laboratory facilities and looked at the creatures in the water myself.

"There are Martian microbes in the water, and most of them are alive. I did a quick analysis of one of the dead ones, and its DNA is completely foreign to ours. We can forget all the silly panspermia theories. Planets develop their own, unique life forms; we just still don't know how yet. I sent the data back to Earth and just got my confirmation from three different exobiologists. We have discovered extraterrestrial life forms."

Emma wasn't sure what to say. Barbara was always extremely sensitive. "I'm happy for you, dear," she came up with. Surely that sounded positive without a hint of criticism.

"I need to celebrate," Barbara said. "Join me in one of your monster-sized chocolate milkshakes, please!"

Emma was briefly sad that she was the only friend Barbara had to celebrate with. Still, she could try to make this minimal celebration pleasant.

"Certainly, dear," Emma said. "Would you like some chocolate meringue pie with it? That's your favorite."

"You're a mind-reader," Barbara said, hugged Emma, and walked over to the serving area.

Emma brought two milkshakes and two pieces of pie over to the table. Barbara still looked unusually happy. "What happens now, dear?" Emma asked. "Will more astrobiologists be coming here to examine the microbes or are you going to send a water sample back to Earth?"

Barbara chewed her pie, smearing some of the chocolate filling onto her cheeks. "Actually," she said, "that is the bad news for us. All of us Earthlings will have to leave Mars. It would be immoral to endanger Martian life forms. They were here first. We are the invaders, and

now that we know there is a native population, we have to leave."

"Isn't that a little drastic, dear?" Emma asked, knowing that her brother Ned would use all his monetary resources to keep the Martian colonies up and running. "Couldn't we stay if we took care not to bother the microbes?"

"Think Murphy's Law," Barbara said. "Too many things will go wrong. The engineers want to pump this water up to human habitats and purify it for human use. Purifying it can only mean killing off the microbes."

"Not necessarily," Emma said. "Surely there must be a way to filter out the microbes and leave them underground."

"No," Barbara said firmly. "The water that human beings use would be contaminated by this use and eventually find its way back to the lake where the microbes live. We can't risk that."

"Hmm," Emma said noncommittally. "You think all of us have to return to Earth? I'm not sure my old bones and muscles could manage that. I've gotten used to this pleasant Martian gravity."

"It's the only way," Barbara said. "I've given notice to all possible authorities. The latest Earth treaty on space travel specifically states that alien life forms must not be endangered."

"You think that microbes are more important than human beings?" Emma asked.

"All life forms have an equal right to exist," Barbara said firmly. "We already have our planet. The microbes deserve to keep theirs."

Emma didn't really listen to the rest of Barbara's diatribe. She wondered what would happen if all human activity on Mars had to stop. As soon as Barbara left, she put in for a video call to Ned. That call was short and curt. Ned said he was busy but that nothing would come from Barbara's fanatical demand. Apparently he had already begun diverting resources to influence the necessary committees.

As Ned predicted, business continued more or less as usual. There were habitat meetings where Barbara screamed that they were all microbe murderers, but authorities on Earth and Mars determined that the correct course would be to take all possible measures to protect the habitat of the microbes while also diverting the water from the underground ocean to the surface for human use.

Barbara came to the cafeteria over and over again to vent. She never tried to get Emma to do anything, maybe because she thought the cafeteria cook wasn't a person of power — not everyone knew that the billionaire "owner" of the Martian project was Emma's brother. However, soon Emma was the only person who was willing to listen to Barbara at all. No one else was willing to sacrifice the settlement on Mars for some single-celled microbes.

As a concession, Barbara was given access to as many robots as she needed to monitor the living conditions of the microbes throughout the underground ocean. This did keep her occupied and out of the cafeteria for several months.

Ruthie and her group of engineers made astoundingly rapid progress. Soon the pipes were mapped out and laid, pumps installed and tested. Doc Brach developed a filter he said would keep most of the microbes from being pumped up to the habitats. A celebration of opening the first water connection from the underground ocean was to be broadcast live to Earth, despite the unavoidable time delay.

Emma was in her kitchen preparing cinnamon rolls and watching the broadcast when the explosion took place. Just as Ruthie moved her gloved hand toward the symbolic faucet underground, there was a suspicious clicking noise. Then the video feed stopped. Seconds later all that was visible were the inert bodies of the engineering team lying around the pipes. It looked like Ruthie had thrown herself onto the clicking noise in hopes of saving the others. Unfortunately the bomb was stronger.

Emma dropped the bowl of dough, which, being made of durable plastic, didn't shatter but just bounced and rolled away. She waited for any kind of explanation on the audio feed, but no one had

expected anything other than a pretty ceremony for turning on the water to the habitats. There were no security or medical teams present. All she heard were screams.

A different video appeared on her communicator lying on the counter. Barbara was wearing a surface suit and seemed to be standing at the top of Pavonis Mons. "I did it, Emma," she said. "I protected the microbes. My robots have placed the bombs all over the planet wherever there are human beings. The bombs will go off and kill everyone here."

Emma tried to keep her voice even and neutral as she spoke into the communicator. "Surely you don't want to kill me, dear," she said.

"I don't want to kill anyone," Barbara said. "But I have to protect the microbes. This is their planet, not ours. I tried to get the human beings to leave voluntarily, but they didn't. So I had no choice. It was the microbes or the humans, and I chose the microbes.

"However, I am willing to give most people a little time to prepare before I send off the code to activate my bombs. Now they have to realize that I mean business. Please broadcast my message through the habitat system. I can't override the video feed coming from underground."

"Give me a little time, dear," Emma said. "You know I'm not very good with technological things. It is good of you to give us a chance to do what we need to do. I want to leave a message for my grandsons on Earth. I want them to know that their grandma loves them."

Hoping that Barbara would refrain from sending any commands to her bombs in the meantime, Emma sent off a general alert to the habitats explaining the situation and recommending that everyone get into a surface suit. She inquired as to whether habitat robots could be sent to prevent the bombs from going off. She sent a more specific message to the group of adolescent rocket pilots. "Spin," she said. "Get your friends up to the top of Pavonis Mons and overpower the woman there who plans to kill us all."

Spin's face looked slightly surprised. "Sure," he said. "But you'll have to keep her distracted. People tend to notice when we land our rockets in their vicinity. The rockets are small but not invisible."

"You do your job, and I'll do mine," Emma said. "And there will be extra cookie rations for all of you when this is over with."

Emma wanted to mourn Ruthie, one of the genuine friends she had made here on Mars, a kind and tolerant soul. However, there was truly no time for that. She called Barbara on her communicator.

"I'm still trying to reach everyone," Emma said. "But it's very chaotic right now. Please give me a little more time. If people have to die, they deserve time to send off final messages to their loved ones."

"I realize that," Barbara said. "I'm sorry it had to come to this. I tried to get people back to Earth peacefully, but I failed."

"You are a good person, Barbara," Emma said. "Do you really want to kill us?"

"I don't know what else to do," Barbara said. "No one took me seriously, and I'm the only protector the microbes have. Then the settlement gave me the robots and I realized what I had to do. I equipped them with explosives and sent them off to their locations. The televised explosion showed that my plan will work."

"Yes," Emma said sadly. "Ruthie and her team are all dead. Barbara, what good can come of this?"

"The microbes," Barbara answered. "Let me tell you what I already know about the microbes."

"All right," Emma said. "You do that. Tell me absolutely everything you know or even suspect about the microbes. But first let me pick up the bowl I dropped when you called. I'll be back to you in a second."

It took a little longer than that, since Emma first notified security that

the bombs were all attached to the robots Barbara had been assigned. It could be possible to locate and perhaps even isolate them, or so Sheriff Curtis assured her when she told him.

Fortunately Barbara was eager to talk about her microbes. When Emma called her back, Barbara started babbling nonstop about what she knew about the microbes, what she suspected, what others speculated, getting more passionate by the minute, so passionate that she didn't notice the little transport rockets landing on the rocks behind her or the spacesuited young people who tackled her and disconnected her oxygen supply.

"Sorry," Spin said through his suit communicator. "We couldn't risk her giving out any voice commands. I'll take responsibility ..."

"No," Emma said. "Any actions you had to take to protect our lives here on Mars have already been approved by the sheriff. You have saved us all. There is no way we can ever thank you."

"Good to know," Spin said, this time sounding disconcertingly adult. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

The assembled clergy held an emotional memorial service for the engineering team, a moving celebration of Ruthie and the others.

Father Greeley even managed to generate some understanding for Barbara, while insisting that passion for an ideal must always be tempered by compassion for others.

Afterwards people came to the cafeteria and exchanged memories about Ruthie and Dr. Behla. Emma couldn't really join in. Suddenly she just felt old.

Spin walked over to the serving area where she stood alone. "Like you always told us," he said to Emma. "It's part of growing up when you realize that there are no easy answers. But none of us really ever grows up." He squeezed her hand.

Emma smiled. Trust these kids to figure things out. Human beings would continue to explore this universe, and the Martian microbes would get a fair chance to survive and develop. Life forms were always endangered but also tenacious. You couldn't ask for more than that.

# A Day in the Life of a Human Guinea Pig

by John Grey

Here, the brighter the light,  
the chillier it feels,  
a swarm of purposeless colors  
impregnating the pale listless faces.

We all look wise  
in a morose way,  
cheeks like pink slopes of pain,  
mouths, a hole in the green  
slowly opening,

Smoke hangs blue in the room.  
Hair threads together into ropes of blood.  
Eyes are done staring  
at the dancing skeletons.  
A speck in the mind  
takes over for a while.

# Sibyl Nightingale

by Joe Giordano

I'm going to tell you a secret." The nurse leaned forward, and her tone was conspiratorial. "I'm from the future."

Had Marta not been intubated, lying in an ICU hospital bed, stricken with COVID-19, feeling like a hippo squatted on her chest, she might've gasped. High fever jumbled her consciousness, and her face showed doubt if she'd heard correctly. The woman's words were partially muffled because she spoke through a mask and face shield revealing only green eyes. Shapeless in blue scrubs, her nametag read "Sibyl."

The nurse smiled. "I can see that you don't believe me."

Marta raised her palms in protest.

"Don't be concerned." Sibyl sighed audibly. "It took me a while to understand my condition." Her gloved hand took one of Marta's, and she said, "I'm not upset by disbelievers," even as her grip tightened.

With a plastic tube down her throat, Marta could only return a nervous nod.

Patting Marta's hand, Sibyl said, "I understand. Having your nurse declare herself to be from the future disquiets you." She pressed Marta's shoulders back onto the bed and said, "Why don't I tell you how I discovered my situation."

Helpless, Marta blinked a few times.

"Things came into focus after my car accident. My head struck the side window and I was unconscious for three days. When I awoke, I didn't immediately notice anything special," Sibyl paused, "until I

went to the Miracle Market." She chuckled at the memory. "In the cheese section, a woman stared at the offerings and my brain played a grainy movie of her selecting a chunk of mozzarella." Sibyl smacked the bed. "And she did. Well done Karnack. Driving home, a doe shot in front of my car, but I'd braked, anticipating her appearance and avoiding an accident."

Marta's breathing quickened.

"Playing poker with the nurses, I won so much money, they accused me of cheating. More disbelievers," Sibyl said with a frown. "They won't play with me anymore. Well," her eyes turned evil, "their day will come."

Marta began to wheeze as she labored for oxygen.

Sibyl ignored Marta's distress and continued. "I had to prove a point, so the next day I went to the racetrack. To avoid betting favorites, I didn't check the odds, instead imagining a movie of each winning horse crossing the finish line before making a bet. I celebrated my winnings at the best restaurant in the city, then posted a beaming selfie on social media. All the nurses were jealous. To hell with them."

Marta's eyes darted about the room and Sibyl took notice, saying, "There's no call button. If you're watching the clock, my shift won't change until morning. All the doctors and nurses are scurrying to attend to the spike in new patients. Bed space in the ICU is critical." She squeezed Marta's hand again. "I'm the only person you'll see for the rest of your life."

Marta gulped and attempted to sit up, but Sibyl tucked the sheets

tightly around Marta's shoulders, swaddling her.

Sibyl continued. "I'm not some sort of narcissist ready to assign myself extraordinary powers. I consulted the doctor who treated me after the accident, but he saw nothing in the X-rays that would explain my phenomena, saying only that coincidence does not imply causality." Sibyl shook her head. "Another disbeliever. Don't some people possess incredible abilities, the geniuses, or the athletes performing at superhuman levels? Then, it hit me. I wasn't predicting outcomes, the movie replay in my head proved I'd already seen the result, which could only occur because I came from the future." Sibyl's green eyes brightened, recalling the self-discovery. "People who've been reincarnated recall previous lives. I'd been transported to an earlier existence."

Marta continued to squirm, trying to free herself.

Sibyl tucked her back in, saying, "Marta, you have a secret also, don't you?"

Marta froze.

Sibyl continued. "Before you contracted the disease, you faked having COVID. All that sympathy from neighbors and acquaintances made you feel special, less alone. You even got them to shop for you, cook for you." She shook her finger. "Naughty girl." Sibyl leaned back. "They found out you were faking, and they shunned you. Then, you really got sick, and here you are alone again. Even if we allowed visitors, nobody wants to see you. You only have me as you die in a hospital bed. Ironic, don't you think?"

At the word "die," Marta's eyes widened. She'd already sweated her sheets dank, and a wave of trembling overtook her.

"You've guessed why I told you my secret. You're intubated and

can't tell anyone. Plus, I've seen your future."

Marta became agitated, gesturing under the sheets, and Sibyl understood she wanted to communicate, so she withdrew a pad and pen from her scrubs and freed Marta's hands to write.

*Please don't hurt me. I want to live.*

Sibyl read the words and sighed. "Sorry," she said in a sympathetic tone, "you can't control your destiny."

*You're insane.*

Sibyl blew out a frustrated breath, again swaddled Marta so she couldn't move, then reached for the oxygen valve. "I knew you were a disbeliever." Her tone became stern as she shut the flow. "There's no point in prolonging the inevitable."

Marta tried to cry out without success.

"Don't you see?" Sibyl asked, as she watched Marta struggle to breathe. "There's no point denying others this bed when I've seen your fate."

As Marta choked on her last breaths, Sibyl held her down until she stopped struggling. The monitors attached to Marta screamed with alarm that her heart had stopped. Sibyl stepped aside as a doctor and nurse rushed in and applied paddles, trying in vain to revive Marta. When the doctor declared her dead, he ordered Sibyl and the other nurse to move the body so another patient could be accommodated.

Sibyl observed the look of pain frozen on Marta's face and sighed at a thought. Being from the future wasn't always a gift.

# Pastoral

by Desmond Rhae



# Peter O'Toole

by Monica Joyce Evans

There'd been a mix-up at the hub, they said, and the whole group had gone sixteen light years in the wrong direction. Somebody was fixing it, and somebody else had been fired, but they were still stuck on the wrong Orbital for at least one rotation, with no resources and no booking, and everybody was mad about it. No one would take them in until the station manager forced Jilly to do it. Now she had six of them shuffling around her café, driving off her few remaining regulars and not ordering anything. Six Pneumostomes. Dregs of the universe. And they were getting slime on things.

At least they were trying not to. Every now and then they'd try to push their trails into a little pile, which mostly spread it farther around. They were having trouble with their translators, filling Jilly's café with their own loud, garbled language. Elsewhere, someone was hastily converting an empty storage bay to fit them as best they could. Not that there was a lot of extra space on Orbitals, but Jilly didn't see why they had to stay with her until then. Slime was hard to clean. And nobody would be getting any sleep, not until the next transport came and they all left.

Jilly was wiping down sauce bottles, only three of which were edible to her – and none of which were edible to Pneumostomes – when one of them, the leader, she thought, squelched over to the bar and sat down. Sort of.

“Getcha anything?” she said.

He gestured to his translator, tied back with a thin cord and blinking faintly. Broken. His eyeless stalks swung side-to-side, which she interpreted as a no.

“Fair enough,” she said, and went back to her wiping. She was

running out of things to clean behind the bar. There would be more than enough slime later. “Can't clean it up, though,” she said to herself. “Not while we're open.”

The leader shifted slightly. He hadn't understood her, Jilly thought, not with a broken translator.

“And it dries,” she said, making sure to keep her voice pleasant and low. “I get that everybody's different and everything, but really.”

A small screen behind the bar flickered with images of British soldiers in the sand, courteously discussing tactics. Jilly didn't have many human customers. It helped to have the sound of her native language in the background, without the whine of the translator, and pronounced correctly. The alien had turned his wide head toward the screen as if he was watching, even without eyes. Maybe he registered the flickering motion, or the radiation. Maybe it smelled good to him. You never could tell what others would find soothing.

“You like that, huh?” she said to him, half over her shoulder. His companions were sliming their way across one of her better tables, and she gritted her teeth. “I've got a thousand of 'em on loop. That's one of my favorites, though.”

The alien turned toward the sound of her voice. “When I was a boy,” he said slowly, and she almost dropped the glass in her hand, fumbled it to the bar top. He tipped one of his stalks toward her, like a smile. “Apologies,” he said. “To startle.”

“You were never a boy,” she said.

“No. When I was a young. Younger,” he corrected himself. “We used

to have your music. Movies. On the screen.”

“You learned English?” Jilly’s eyes widened. “Nobody speaks English on this station. Hindi, sometimes. A little Mandarin.”

“English,” the alien said. “Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish. Bantu. German.”

“German?” Jilly whistled, long and low. German was all but a dead language. “That’s something.”

“A gift,” he said. His voice was resonant and rich with a timbre like an old movie star, incongruous coming from the flat, heavy head. “My people. Good with languages. Diplomats.” He tugged on the broken translator. “Now, no need. No use.”

Jilly nodded. Her grandparents had been heart surgeons. She was going to be a surgeon too before the Orbitals, before the influx of species and technologies made Earth’s medical knowledge obsolete. Anybody with a core spanner could do in five minutes what her grandparents took a lifetime to learn. Now she owned a café. “Nobody wants specialists anymore,” she said. “But English! I haven’t heard it without translators in years.”

He tilted his stalks toward the British soldiers and the sand. “That one,” he said. “I know it.”

“You’ve seen this movie?” Jilly put the bottles down and leaned both elbows on the bar top.

“Match trick,” he said.

She nodded excitedly. “Right. He puts a match out with his fingers, and the other guy says it hurts, hey, what’s the trick. Great scene.”

They talked for a bit about motorcycles and long shots of desert vistas and the expense of stunt camels, until one of the others came up and touched stalks with him. “Time to go,” he said, sliding up and out of the bar stool. Hesitantly, he drew a little bottle of fluid from his folds. “Foam, then wipe,” he said. “When it dries. We are sorry.”

Jilly winced, then flushed. “I don’t mean to complain,” she said.

“Worse with stress,” he said. “We try not to stress.”

“Well,” Jilly said. “Thanks.” She stopped short of saying that they were welcome in her café anytime, because she knew they’d never come back to her out-of-the-way Orbital. “I’m sorry,” she said instead.

“Is fine.”

It’s not, she thought, but they were already leaving. “How do you manage?” she said at last, as he passed through the door. “The way that...” That we treat you, she thought. “The way things are?”

He turned, leaving another trail behind him, and thought for a moment. “The trick,” he said, in a perfect imitation, “is not minding that it hurts.” Then he was gone.

# The Freelancer

by Laurence Klavan

Ranger noticed the other boy there, but he didn't think much of it. There were occasionally kids around the office, what was the big deal? Still, he didn't go out of his way to be the boy's pal or anything. Fuck that—why? He ignored him.

"I'm Trey," the kid said, having no choice but to volunteer the information and so seeming weak, like he couldn't take the silence. Ranger nodded, not saying his own name, being withholding, that's what they called it. He shook the hand offered quickly—not weakly, not like limply, firmly but fast, forcing the other boy to come up with the question.

"And your name is ... ?" Trey omitted the "what is" part, the "what is your name?" part, because it was too exposing, like a dog showing its belly. The kid made it a statement, an inquiry that needed an ending, because an actual question would have been enfeebling—a question mark was cowardly, Ranger thought, not really knowing why. Anyway, it was a smart move by Trey; because of it, he respected the new kid and responded.

"Ranger." He only had the one name, which pegged him as an orphan and dared the other boy—any boy, actually, but this one at this moment—to comment on it, which Trey didn't do. He just nodded and started out of the office, as if on an assignment, which bugged Ranger, for where did that leave *him*? Anyway, it could have been worse—another boy had once barked when he heard "Ranger," because it sounded like a dog's name, which bought the kid a beat-down, even though he thought it funny, he had to admit. In Ranger's world, everything was turf, how you walked, what you wore, even the words that came out of your mouth, and you had to protect that turf or concede it to someone else.

Now that Ranger thought about it, though, he realized Trey hadn't said *his* last name, either. So maybe *he* was an orphan, too, which made sense. Brenda preferred to hire them and send them out, felt they had less to lose—so was that what she'd done today, hired and sent out Trey instead of him? Why? What had he done wrong? Feeling angry, because it was less weak than feeling hurt, Ranger looked inside the office for the older woman who was his boss.

He found Brenda faced away, at her desk, talking on some new device Ranger couldn't afford and which only older, rich assholes had. Maybe when she wasn't looking, he'd take it; that would teach her for dicking him around and making him uneasy. He was her best boy. Not that he had to hear her say it, he wasn't weak like that, but—Brenda ought to know Ranger knew his own worth and wouldn't put up with any shit.

Still, it took her forever to turn and see him and even then she just raised her eyebrows once, as if telling a delivery boy to wait, she'd be off in a second, and swiveled back the other way. Ranger wasn't used to this kind of treatment—who she did call day and night and know would accept any assignment? Him! Until recently, anyway, and not because of anything *he'd* done; he'd been more active and aggressive than ever, scouring sites for remains and such. But Brenda had let him go two whole days without a call and then, well, what was that Trey piece of shit doing there, anyway? What gave?

Brenda hung up—or got off or blinked off or whatever the hell you did with that device; Ranger would find out when he stole it. She turned and took him in with just the merest of glances, the way girls sometimes avoided his stares on the street—not all girls, don't fool yourself, plenty smiled at him, because he was good-looking, getting

to be, anyway, fifteen was the start of a long and happy love life, he had no doubts at all in that department, believe me.

“What’s up?” she asked, and her voice was flat.

“What do you mean?”

Ranger couldn’t help asking. He hated that sound in her voice, that “get it over with” sound at which Brenda was so good; he’d heard her use it on lots of people but never with him. Someone told him that Brenda had once been a big blogger, a gossip blogger, like she had posted stupid shit online about celebrities that people supposedly paid to read, subscribed to read, that was the way it had been said to him, paid every month to read, like money was something they couldn’t wait to get rid of and so would use to buy any stupid old shit in order to have less of it, like money was poison in a snakebite you sucked in and spat out (he’d seen a TV show once about that over someone’s shoulder on the train). Anyway, Brenda had done well at it until her site went under and she got fired and went to work for the Muth Co., where she sent out kids like him—not *like* him, *him*, until today!

“I mean,” Brenda said, “what do you want?”

Now her tone had turned nasty instead of indifferent, which at least gave him something to work with. Ranger could fight, spent half his day doing it, in one way or another. So he preferred Brenda being pissed at him; it was the ignoring, the back-turning, the giving up on him that he couldn’t take. He answered, with a similar air of anger, “To work—what else?”

Brenda looked confused. “Didn’t I just give you something?”

Brenda had backslid into the dismissive territory that made him so unsettled. It was like she thought Trey had been *him* or hadn’t cared *what* boy had gone out. Look, maybe she’d barely even met the other kid; maybe Trey had come around looking and gotten nothing from her, and that’s why he had left. Ranger didn’t want to deal with it any more, it was driving him crazy. So he kept the edge in his voice, for

at least it felt normal.

“No. What, you got a worm in your head?”

It wasn’t witty, but it got his point across—he’d insulted Brenda, which meant he wasn’t afraid of her, he was tough, which she’d always admired, for she was tough, too, and mean, and that’s why they’d gotten along. (Ranger sensed that, as an adult, Brenda could always be meaner than him; he was fifteen and fifteen was, at this moment in this world, still not grown. Ranger may not have wanted to know the whole story yet, for—even though he longed for the sexual love that would mean he was a man—he’d have to leave a lot behind to grow up, and that made him afraid.)

“All right,” Brenda sighed, and logged back onto her new device in a weird way, for she made no move but look down. Was she trying to get rid of him? Ranger felt so shaky he was interpreting *everything* negatively, and he hated that. Anyway, she was about to throw him a job, and that was good.

“There was a nightclub opening last night,” Brenda said, “and some sort-of stars were there.” She scribbled on a piece of paper, an archaic custom she’d maintained, which gave her a timeless quality, as if she’d been sent there from the past or was maybe just aging slower than everyone else. Ranger thought she dressed like a younger woman, too, with her white buttoned-down shirt stuffed into her tight skirt and unbuttoned halfway down, exposing freckled breasts that Ranger didn’t want to see but couldn’t stop staring at, surprised he’d give a shit, since she was old enough to be his, what, great-grandmother, but knowing he had sex on the brain all day every day being fifteen, and also feeling bad because Brenda represented someone he wasn’t *supposed* to desire, even though it was really all right, they weren’t related—anyway, she tore it off, the piece of paper, and pushed it across her pristine black desk to him.

“That’s the address.”

After reading it: “Where is that?”

Brenda looked at him—what was the word?—witheringly, as if to say, do I have to do *everything*? This was not okay but at least not unprecedented. “Use your thing, for Chrissake.”

She meant Ranger’s pocket GPS gadget, the Beamer or whatever it was called, that got him to and from the blast sites—he’d forgotten for a second that he’d been issued one. Brenda had reminded him as if telling him to wipe his nose or do his homework, like—oh, why not come out and say it, stop being cute, he thought—the mother he didn’t have and never had had.

“Okay.” Ranger said, apologetically, which was a departure, given his typical toughness. Maybe he’d intentionally forgotten about the Beamer, in order to be reminded by Brenda in that motherly way. In any case, he felt better, being berated by her. And that was enough for today, he thought: he’d gotten all he needed from her, a job. He turned away—but Brenda had already done the same thing first, which was weird.

Using the Beamer, Ranger took the train to the bus to the bus-train and back to the train-bus (or the Trus and the Brain, as other orphans called it). They let him out in the ass-end of town, at the site of the club Brenda had mentioned. It was now a skeletal and rickety frame helpless to protect a smoldering pile of wood, steel and rocks. The explosion had taken place last night, and the minor celebrities in attendance had been from the music business, low level wankers who sang and danced. It was Ranger’s job to get past the police and confiscate any items that might retain the DNA of these D-listers blown to bits, taking from the skin, intestines and other organs now scattered upon, dripping from or wetly decorating the wreckage.

And this was his particular gift, his specialty, weaving in and out even when the cops told him to get lost, which they usually did. Ranger was almost like a rat (he didn’t mind the comparison—rats were cool) that could shrink to slide under doors. Some cops compared him to smoke, wafting here and there before disappearing altogether. They said it with reluctant admiration, even though he fucked with their crime scenes. Was it that they didn’t blame him

entirely, because he was only a kid and a kid without any family or permanent home (he was currently sleeping on a cot in a disfigured building that once had been a church—whatever *that* was). Or was it that there was a kind of weird connection between cops and crooks, because one in a way defined the other by being its opposite, the way you were defined by those you loved and hated? It was the closest Ranger had come to being known by anyone, except for Brenda, who hired him and sent him out.

“Hey!”

Today the cop had to yell—not because he was infuriated or even annoyed but to show his superiors that he was doing his job. In any case, Ranger whipped by him, went under the crime scene tapes, both actual and laser, to scoop up whatever pieces of furniture or floor might hold the most and least melted remains.

He had a plastic bag over his shoulder, like—what was the name of that bitch somebody mentioned used to exist?—Johnny Appleseed, but Ranger plucked and picked up, didn’t put down and plant. He’d even worn his grooviest gloves, which were black leather but super-thin and close to the bone, like a second skin. Today his job was made easier by the sun, which shined on and made sparkle what the elderly called bling, vestiges of chains, bracelets and earrings that drooped on door frames and toilet stalls, like in—again, who was the dude?—a Dali drawing, retaining aspects of beings. The sun was like his spy, working for *him*, because he was as big a badass as the Earth! In his element, Ranger was now snapping off and stuffing down so fast, it was like he wasn’t even stopping, like he was simply swallowing stuff, and you didn’t stop to do that, did you? You did not.

Then Ranger *did* stop, screeched to a halt, that was the expression (he’d been taught to read by an old bum, but he had to break it off because of what the guy *really* wanted from him, and Ranger had been just a little boy, Jesus fucking Christ, whoever *he* was). He planted himself intentionally in anger the way someone else might mistakenly in mud.

Trey was there.

The little asshole from the office had gotten there ahead of him—*this* was where he'd been going when he left, he *had* been assigned by Brenda! Hadn't he? How else was he doing this now, yanking and placing bits of broken glass and black charred wood in *his* bag? It was a better bag, too: was that a new, more opaque plastic? Why didn't Ranger have that?

Ranger felt as if something was painfully hanging from and falling off his chest, like bricks breaking off a building on fire and landing on the ground. Suddenly, he wasn't so concerned about what he'd collected: it all seemed puny, second-rate, and superfluous (though he didn't know that word, only knew it was unnecessary). Even the money he would make was minor compared to the betrayal he was enduring; one thing could not compensate for the other; it was like being offered a blow job for a bullet wound, you know? (He had to couch it in vulgar terms because his need for tenderness was so great and too embarrassing, offered him up to the vultures, coyotes, and crows in the steel forest where he lived.)

So Ranger upended and emptied the bag, scattering the last evidence of those stupid failed singers and dancers—those human beings—making it unlikely they would ever be reborn. (He knew what the stuff was used for, what Brenda had been hired by the Muth Co. to hire *him* to do: retrieve and sell the DNA of near-nobodies, that was the best they could get these days, once their celebrity business collapsed; he wasn't stupid, just uneducated). Then he fled the scene, the crater that had been a club until just a few hours ago, until some psycho with a religious or political reason had turned it and everyone in it and himself into just vestiges of themselves, suitable for scavenging by the likes of Ranger.

He retraced his steps and passed the first cop again—who didn't care, maybe had never cared—going like in reverse, except nothing was rewind and came to life again. In fact, everything seemed deader than when he'd arrived; Ranger, too, felt less alive. (That wasn't true: because of Trey, tears were now jumping from his eyes as if escaping *his* burning building. His face was as hot as his heart, and that felt

vital in a new and awful way.)

Wiping his cheeks, Ranger staggered from the site with no destination in mind, checking over his shoulder to see if Trey was still there. The bastard was, yanking shards from the shattered site and pressing them deep into his *better* bag, looking like a slave, picking cotton for his masters (Ranger had seen a music video about that once). Yeah, well, what did that make *him*? Ranger was simply competing to be the best scavenger, the finest stealer of cells, nothing for which a person should be proud, orphan or not.

But you know who was the worst? Brenda, because she was older and should have known better; she had sold celebrities before and was now selling losers when they were nothing but smears and slime and ripped ribbons of themselves. It was over, Ranger thought, he was through working for Brenda, picking up his pace as if actually on his way somewhere. Then, of course, he slowed and stopped because he was lost.

Ranger patted his back pocket, expecting to feel the familiar bulge of his Beamer, but he only touched his ass. The device had fallen out—or been swiped by the cop as Ranger sped past him, stranger things had happened. Instead of increasing them, desperation dried his tears now; and he looked every which way, with the world fiercely in focus. He saw closed stores and abandoned construction sites, no people—except, wait, there *was* a girl his own age standing on a far corner, tentatively raising her hand, either to swat something away or wave, he wasn't sure.

Ranger decided she was waving. He waved back, his fingers curled, seeming to scratch his nails on the chalkboard of a school he'd never attended. She smiled, which was his signal to cross; he was fifteen and still learning how it worked. She'd done her job, now he had one to do. It was a relief, and he did not delay, for she looked like the future and was not far away.

When he reached the other side, Ranger saw how small she was—everything about her was short, including her hair, which was in a buzzcut. In fact, she looked a little like *him*, only her face was softer;

his was growing harder and darker every day, as if being cooked by the flame which was the time since he turned twelve. She had on a T-shirt and khaki shorts, so was a like a ranger, too.

“Are you lost?” she asked.

“Yes.”

He had just blurted out the answer, because who had ever asked him such a thing, ever asked him anything about how he felt? It was like that “maneuver” where they hold you hard and the chunk of food choking you popped out; she’d held him that way for a second.

“I lost my ...” Suddenly, he couldn’t remember the name of the stupid device; he tried to form its nebulous shape with his fingers, then gave up.

“Where are you trying to go?”

“I wasn’t,” he said, again ultra-honestly. “I was working.”

“Where?”

He nodded at the ruins, which from across the street looked like a castle leveled centuries ago, an impossible place to do anything.

The girl was baffled. Then she shook her head, slowly and meaningfully, his occupation becoming clear. “Oh. Right.”

“But I just quit,” he said, half because of how she’d said it and half to see how it would sound. It sounded good, but a little unnerving, like the click when you close a door behind you without the key.

“What will you do now?” she asked, seeming to approve of his decision (or maybe he was just imposing this and she meant nothing by it and was simply making conversation; it wasn’t clear; he hadn’t talked much to girls).

Ranger shrugged. Coming from behind a cloud, the sun made him

squint and seem even more uncertain. The sun was again giving him a hand as it had when it exposed the remains; now it said, show her how unsettled you are, go on, don’t be embarrassed, she’s here to help you—or so he imagined the sun said, still anthropomorphizing nature like a child.

“Where do you live?” She was grilling him—and literally, too, for the sun was extra-hot, assisting him.

Ranger had been honest with her the whole time and would not stop now. His voice sounded steeped, moist. “Nowhere.”

The girl nodded and asked one more thing—“Hungry?” Before he could reply, assuming his answer, she turned to go. She was way ahead of him—not actually, they went side by side.

“I’m Shane,” she said.

“Ranger,” he said, and both their names were like places or positions or inanimate objects, something else they had in common.

Then he saw where she lived.

It was a real house—with a front door and working windows on its several floors. It had even been painted sometime in the last century or some other time Ranger couldn’t understand. It was completely isolated on its block, where only suggestions of once towering, now obliterated structures were scattered on its either end.

“Come on,” Shane said and took his hand, a touch which while innocent (and he had removed his gloves), at fifteen sent a shiver through him.

The two went through the front door, and it was immediately cool inside, though he heard no hum of air conditioner or fan. The house was sparsely furnished, with worn pieces that appeared to have been picked off the street, some even charred or hobbled from their own explosions. Ranger smelled a weird and dizzying mix of baked bread and—was it steak or chicken? He had had so little meat in his life that he couldn’t tell.

“You’re just in time for dinner.”

It was a woman’s voice. Emerging from around a corner was in fact a woman, probably as old as Brenda but looking older because she was unadorned. Her hair had gone gray (Brenda kept hers the color of fire) and she was soft and billowing where Brenda was hemmed-in and taut. Maybe it was her sort of sack dress, which moved here and there, relaxed and playfully indifferent, as she came forward, unlike the military stiffness of Brenda’s shirt and skirt. In her oven-mitted hands was the bread Ranger had thought was there, smoking benignly and in a basket.

“I brought a guest,” Shane said.

The woman stopped and looked at Ranger. For a second, her face registered confusion; this was quickly replaced by an expression he took to be welcoming but had seen rarely and not recently at all.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m Marilyn. Shane’s mother.”

Ranger didn’t answer, surprised. He thought Shane’s not saying her own last name meant that she was orphaned. Now he knew it was her just being easy, friendly, and informal.

These qualities were present in the way they ate, too: sitting at a big table in a dining room with open windows on every side. Somewhere else, Ranger might have felt on display, imprisoned, and judged. Here he sensed they were hiding nothing, were celebrating themselves, and offering up places for still others to take.

“This is delicious,” he said, chewing—steak, it turned out—deliberately, to appreciate each bite. The conversation was casual and considerate—no one asked him prying questions; it was as if he were a soldier and they didn’t wish to remind him of the carnage he had witnessed or caused. Still, they didn’t avoid the issue altogether.

“It’s so sad about the club,” Marilyn said.

“It seemed hopeful that they’d built it on that block,” Shane added.

“Like the neighborhood was coming back.”

“Right. But no.”

“It turned out to be just another target.”

Shane and Marilyn had a rapport that fascinated Ranger. They didn’t quite finish each other’s sentences, but their words were connected, as if holding hands; he was embarrassed to imagine such a corny thing, but they’d inspired it. What most impressed Ranger about the meal (besides the food, of course—and that included the home-made dessert of some kind of fruit pie; he wasn’t familiar enough with fruit to know which one it was) was Marilyn’s focus on him. When she wasn’t overtly observing him, she was sneaking peeks at him from across the table. Ranger had always been studied with suspicion by others to, say, see he didn’t steal (which he sometimes did, of course). But this woman watched him with worry; her glance was the equivalent of someone kissing his forehead for a fever, something no one had ever done. He could not help leaning in to catch more of her concern, as if it were the spray of the sprinkler that had cooled down orphan kids when he was little (sometimes increasing until it was strong enough to wash them all away; it had been a trick to flick them off a street). Marilyn meant for him to be bathed in it, he could tell; this time he wasn’t making it up or misinterpreting, as he did so often other people’s intentions, unused as he was to and craving as he did human kindness. When she cleared the dishes and left the room, declining his help, acting as if he had exerted himself enough today, it was as if the room grew dark and dull without her.

“You’re staying over, right?” Shane asked, but it wasn’t a question, a double-check.

Later, Ranger lay on a big bare mattress in an otherwise empty room on the ground floor. He curled up there like a baby too young to have a blanket, not strong enough to keep from suffocating beneath it. Shane brought him a thin sheet, decorated with lambs and a female shepherd he didn’t know was named Bo Peep. She draped it over him solemnly, the way you would a human sacrifice, which made them both laugh.

“I don’t usually use one,” she said, “but you might get cold.”

Lying face down, already almost asleep, he felt the mattress shake. And Ranger understood: this was where Shane slept, too.

The bed was big enough that he barely knew she was near him, and she didn’t pull on or ask to share the sheet. Still, with the filmy fabric over his ears, he could hear her breathe. He glanced down at the foot of the mattress and saw her shoes, shorts and shirt piled on the floor, a pair of white underpants on top, like the scoop of vanilla ice cream that had been on the pie for dessert. He had removed his own clothes already.

Ranger curled into a smaller ball, bent on creating more distance between them. Yet he couldn’t keep from getting hard, his penis like a rock between his thighs with which he couldn’t help but hit someone. This shifted the sheet, exposing a shoulder, and Shane lifted and placed it back on him, as a sister might. It fluttered there like a tongue and, helplessly, he ejaculated, careful to catch the cum with his thighs so as not to stain the sheet before he passed out again. The next thing he knew he was on his back, his legs completely spread, the sheet kicked to his feet, hot wet sunlight pouring on him like concrete, and Shane was gone.

Ranger moved into the house. Whatever stuff he had in the church didn’t matter—he kept most of what he needed on his person, and the Beamer had been lost. He did chores around the place; even the nearly empty areas needed cleaning. Sometimes he was given money by Marilyn for food and ventured out to the few stores open in the neighborhood; other times, he negotiated with people on the street who hoarded goods. There were neighborhoods like Brenda’s that had good security and so had not been devastated, and he would secretly travel there to bring back better things. Whenever he returned, Marilyn gave him that worried look he loved.

At night, they would gather around Shane’s small device and squint to watch films or TV shows. Neither woman asked him anything about his life; they still treated this time as his convalescence. In fact, Ranger was so exhausted he slept long hours, often with Shane beside him, on the bed bare but for the sheet. He did not consciously

touch her, but sometimes he would wake up wet again and wonder what had happened. One morning, he found a pubic hair (not his own) in his mouth, and Shane again was gone. They didn’t say anything about it but blushed when they were alone, doing the dishes or something.

Ranger noticed that he looked older now. He soon found shaving equipment and a deodorant left for him on the glass ledge beneath the bathroom mirror. He taught himself how to use the razor and cut his nose, lip, chin, and cheek, which made the woman both sympathize with and laugh a little at him.

Occasionally, in one of his shallower sleeps, he would hear what he believed were bomb blasts from blocks away, reduced to dull thuds in the distance. If he remembered in the morning, he would check news sources and read about another event or upscale venue successfully targeted. Ranger would bitterly wonder who Brenda had sent out to scour it—Trey? Was that that little weasel’s name? Then he forced himself to forget.

Sometimes, he would open the door to strangers seeking Marilyn who had no interest in talking or even leaving a message with anyone else. One of these people smelled of sulphur and another was out of breath. There were calls, too, and texts for her that Ranger answered or by accident intercepted.

“I forgot to mention,” he began to say, one night in bed. Then he told Shane about such a visitor. Lying beside him, Shane didn’t answer for a second, and Ranger almost fell asleep before she did.

“Did they say anything?”

“Who? Oh. No.”

“You take a message?”

“Sorry. Should I have?”

“No. It’s fine. Forget it.” And her last two words didn’t seem a

suggestion but something stricter. This was another time that Ranger woke up feeling he'd experienced an exciting event while asleep—his skin was tingling—and wasn't sure if it had been a dream.

\* \* \*

Then Marilyn apparently decided she had left Ranger alone long enough. At their next dinner, she asked him questions. They felt to Ranger like she was opening his Army backpack, trying to get a sense of what was inside, the way a mother would want to know how far in deed and feeling her soldier son had gone from her.

"You used to work for someone?" she asked, passing delicious mashed potatoes to soften him up.

Ranger nodded, giving himself a scoop of the creamy, highly buttered stuff.

"Not for yourself?"

"No. How could I do that?" It was the first "attitude" he had shown since coming, a sign that he was either more at ease or suddenly threatened. Either way, it surprised him to hear.

"Who was it? Brenda?"

Ranger had just slapped potato on the piece of steak he was about to stick in his mouth, so it looked like a white toupee on top. Now it slid a little down the side as the question made him stop. "Yeah." He popped it into his mouth, making it impossible for him to say more. How'd she know about Brenda?

"Right," she said, as if it was obvious. "Did she fire you?"

"No. I quit." Are you kidding me? he wanted to say, but kept his head.

Marilyn nodded, as if having figured that much, he was glad to see. Her tone changed as she herself stopped eating and watched him.

"You tell her why?"

"No."

"Just walked away?"

"Yes." He didn't mention Trey; that might make him seem small.

"Have you been in touch with her since you left?"

Ranger looked up, pressing a piece of bread into gravy as a child would his boot into a puddle. The inquiries were starting to annoy him. "Of course not. You've been here. You've seen me."

"Maybe you should let her know you're okay."

Ranger didn't reply. Marilyn's tone was the aural equivalent of her worried looks; there was a warmth to it that he was unfamiliar with. Yet he didn't delight in it as he did her glances, which he still sought out. The questions made him realize her attention could be rigorous, her love (and he knew that's what it was, he wasn't stupid) required things of him; it didn't allow him everything. He didn't like that. When you were neglected—dismissed, even loathed—you were left alone.

"Why don't you go see her?" she said.

Ranger wanted to tell her to stop, stop pressing me, let me eat in peace, just—look at me, that's all I want. Instead, surprising himself even more, he blurted out, "Because she's finished with me, that's why."

He was quiet after this and done with his dinner, pushing away his plate. He knew this contradicted what he'd said before, that he'd quit. But he didn't mean it literally: Brenda had let him go, not fired him, there was a difference. And now he spat out a sudden cry that was like rotten wet meat choking him, covered his face with his hands, sticky from the buttered bread, and wept.

Marilyn let him; she didn't interrupt. When he could cry no more, he

realized his moans had silenced all other sounds. His ears cleared, the way they do when you descend from a great height. He heard Marilyn sigh, with compassion.

“I’m sure,” she said, “that that’s not true.”

Marilyn made and packed him a lunch, which she amusedly said she wanted to wrap in a napkin and put on a stick at his shoulder; but he’d never read Tom Sawyer or any similar story, so he didn’t reply. She wrote a note, told him, “This is for Brenda, not you,” folded it twice and placed it in his back pocket, where the Beamer once had been. He would have to find his way there and back on his own.

“Can you do that?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, without thinking.

Ranger looked for Shane to say goodbye, but she wasn’t around, and she’d already been asleep when he’d come to bed. He had a funny feeling she was avoiding him, he didn’t know why. He remembered that he had been recently interpreting things negatively, so he stopped. Still, it felt as if Shane had done her job, the way a worm is finished when a fish hangs on its hook. Ranger hated the image, but he had it in his head, he couldn’t help it.

He re-traced his steps to Brenda’s. This time, there was more life the longer he went in reverse: buildings were reconstructed, people existed again. When Ranger entered her office, he expected to see a crowd of new kids there—conscripts, he now considered them; this was how Marilyn and Shane had made him feel. But the waiting area was empty and, though Brenda’s door was open, he heard nothing from within. Ranger advanced and stepped onto its threshold as if approaching a precipice.

Brenda was behind her desk, staring right at him. Her new device—was it one even newer?—lay discarded on the reflecting surface of her black desk, as if having revealed something she’d rejected. Suddenly, he couldn’t remember how long he’d been gone, a month? Six? Brenda appeared older, but maybe it was he who had aged. She

looked at him as if he’d been a child when he left and was no longer.

“Look who’s here,” she said.

Ranger didn’t know how to reply: her tone was as closed-off and hard-boiled as ever, and allowed him no way in. And her look, unlike Marilyn’s, didn’t land on him like a soothing hand but went through him without stopping and hit the wall at his back.

He waited, wondering if she might communicate with him as she always had, by sparring and giving him a job. But she only blinked, expecting him to say the next word or make the first move. The situation was both the same as when he’d left and worse, for he’d hoped it would be different.

He threw the note on Brenda’s desk.

“What’s that?” she said.

It was weird: each woman communicated in this archaic way, which was both personal and perishable, a form that highlighted one’s handwriting with all its looping and stabbing idiosyncrasies that could be removed and never recovered, unlike a computer file or a person whose DNA he scooped up. It was as if both Brenda and Marilyn knew their relationship with him was temporal and would exist longer in his memory than in any other way.

“See for yourself,” he said.

She looked at him as if he knew what it contained. Yet Ranger had obeyed Marilyn and not read it.

Brenda unfolded the paper and didn’t blink for the short time it took her to take it in. Then she closed and placed her hand upon it, not letting Ranger have it, keeping it between the two of them, Marilyn and her.

Ranger had assumed the note was an explanation—even an apology—for why she’d kept Ranger so long, where he’d been, what he’d done.

Yet it was too short to have said all that. And Brenda's expression had if anything hardened; if she understood anything better now, the knowledge hadn't made her more compassionate.

"Thanks," was all she said.

Ranger waited and kept waiting, but she wouldn't be the one to break the silence or crack a smile. He knew he was stronger than when he'd left and swore he would not be the one to weaken first. Yet Ranger also knew that Brenda was still better at this than he. Helplessly, he exhaled and in the breath came his capitulation, a question released like a dead rat flushed from a drain pipe.

"You got anything for me?"

There was silence again. Ranger's heart sped up. A smirk came onto Brenda's mouth, lifting the right side of her upper lip, plumping her cheek and closing one eye: everything connected, nothing accidental; dismissing him was an instinct. Then she stopped, as if it were petty—unprofessional—to take pleasure in his defeat.

"No," she said. "Sorry." And she reached for her device—to, what, call another kid?

Ranger left, his face burning, lacerated by losing to her once more when he'd been most determined to win. He rode the train-bus and bus-train, the Trus and Brain, back to Marilyn's, the journey more than memorized, now second nature. He was never going back to Brenda, that bitch, whom he hated now; he had not been able to even think the word before.

As he went, the landscape was again stripped of features; there was less and less to look at. He saw the bones of buildings, only parts of people, and felt this was his future, where he belonged. Goodbye to Brenda, that bitch, whom he hated. He had a real home now and was almost there.

When he got on the street again, rain fell, as hard as he had ever

seen it, hurting when it hit his face, like a door opening on him again and again. Ranger hadn't brought an umbrella; that was for weaklings and anyway would have done nothing in a deluge. The water soaked then melted away his shirt; he peeled it off in pieces and made his way to Marilyn's in shorts, looking at last like someone's diapered child.

Yet he couldn't get inside. A pair of policemen stood guard, preventing anyone from approaching.

"What's going on?" he asked.

One cop looked at him with the usual contempt and didn't answer.

"I got to get in," Ranger said.

"Why? There's not a lot to steal." Snide: hurtful.

"Because I live there now, that's why."

Now the cop didn't find him funny. "Go away."

While Ranger was technically retired, it did not mean he had lost his skills. He quickly employed a move that was part limbo dance, part sliding into home, though he had never heard of either thing. Before the cop realized it, he was inside.

In the few minutes he was free, Ranger saw no evidence of anyone living there; and in the skewed position of his mattress, the broken cups in the kitchen, and—unless he was hallucinating—the small bloodstains on the wall, signs of a struggle that had ended badly. There was a faint aroma of baking bread, but he thought it might have been his imagination.

This time, the police were not jaded about his escape but made to apprehend him.

"Where are they?" Ranger asked, as they held his arms so he

wouldn't hit them anymore.

Ranger slept in the hall, for the door was locked. He had escaped the police and didn't want to lose any time before finding the person he thought responsible.

Waking him, Brenda's door opened.

Had she slept there, as he had? Did she always stay in the office, have no other home? Was there even more they had in common? Brenda looked down at him as if at the delivery of something she had not ordered. Then, saying nothing, she turned and went back in.

Ranger stumbled after her, sick with fatigue. Never facing or addressing him, the older woman opened her blinds and let in the rude morning light. For a second, he understood and marveled at the fact that she worked there alone, except for freelancers, was the only permanent person. When everything was exposed, she moved toward her desk.

“What,” Ranger said, “were you jealous?”

“Me? Of who?” She took no time to consider the question.

“Did you make up some story? Tell the cops a stupid lie about her?” Before she could answer, Ranger started screaming: How much he had always hated her, how he hated her so much now, he would kill her if he could. Because Brenda wouldn't have him but wouldn't let anyone else. He had no control over what he said. Ranger couldn't stop and soon was unable to express any words. He was in pieces, his heart on a spike like those remains at the club.

When Brenda hit him, it wasn't to stop him, to slap sense into him, like an actor in an old movie he hadn't seen. Brenda didn't seem motivated by helping him with tough love or whatever was the ancient expression. She seemed spurred on by anger alone, by the need to shut him up.

After she had finished yelling—calling him every name for “fool,” whacking him back and forth with both hands, as Ranger covered his face and sank to his knees, not fighting back—she picked up the piece of paper given him by Marilyn. She dropped it on him as if it were a final, crushing stone. It fluttered from his face to his feet.

“Read it,” she said, panting, “for God's sake.”

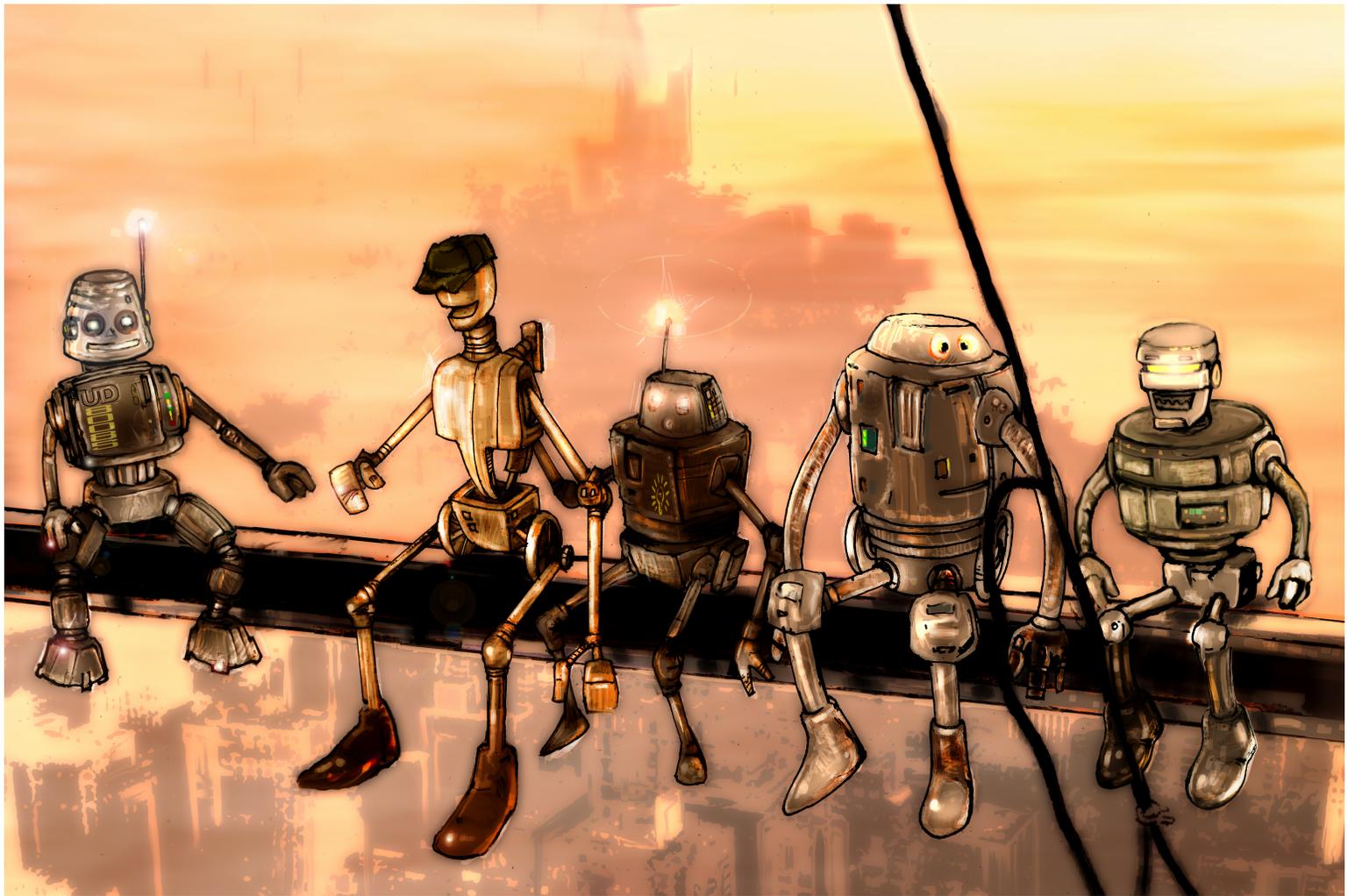
At first, Ranger didn't move, shaken as much by his own reaction to Brenda as Brenda's to him. Sniffing back a drowning wave of salty water, his fingers trembling, he reached for the note, opened it, and did as he was told.

Ranger was just a good enough reader to get the gist. It was an offer from one woman to the other. Marilyn said that she knew when bombings occurred because they were done by her people. If she shared this information with Brenda, her freelancers could arrive on the scene before anyone else and give the Muth Co. first dibs on the remains. An arrangement could be worked out between them and relayed by Ranger, who could be their carrier pigeon. There was no mention of alerting the authorities and stopping the bombings before they took place.

Ranger dropped the paper on the floor, where it lay open. He imagined fumes flying from it, smoke the result of pestilence, the steam off shit. He looked up at Brenda and felt it was fitting that she loomed above him. She was better than Marilyn, whom she had punished. In the world in which he lived, Brenda was good. She had tried to protect him. It was the most and only love he would ever get.

“Now go to sleep.” Brenda nodded at the couch in the corner, before leaving the room. “You don't want to fuck up your next job.”

Ranger lay down on the lumpy couch. He slowly became unconscious, curled like an infant, with stubble on his face. Ranger would be sixteen in a month. He would never leave Brenda again, and she would never again hire any other boy.



**Lunch 2032 (recharge)** by toeken

# Form Follows Function

by **Gustavo Bondoni**

The humanoid robot, Honda logos resplendent on its head and torso, brought beverage packs to the two submersible operators illuminated only by the glow from their screen. They watched it leave.

“I never know whether I should hug that thing or toss it out the airlock,” Wendy García said with a shudder.

Her companion, Igor Golovkin, smirked. “If you throw it out, it will just stand around on the ice until we let it back in.”

“Or its battery freezes again. I don’t even know why they bothered to send it along. It weighs a ton and it can’t do much more than a real human. Hell, it can barely walk any better than we can in this crappy gravity.”

“Yeah, well, I’m glad it’s here. I really hate having to suit up to go outside the habitat to pick up the thermometer rods. Better to send Bobby.” The crew had voted and, of course, the name Robbie had won. But then, by tacit agreement, they’d changed it to Bobby.

They turned back to their task. The torpedo-shaped submersible was operating nearly a kilometer below the surface of Europa’s frozen ocean, at the end of a long monofilament and fiberoptic tether. The crew they’d relieved had informed them that they’d seen a whole bunch of nothing. Which is the same thing that every other piece of equipment had found. Already, the mission was being hailed as the greatest disappointment in the history of space exploration. And the most expensive.

Europa was supposed to be the place. The vast ocean of liquid water,

heated by the tidal forces of nearby Jupiter, was supposed to be teeming with life.

Except it wasn’t. Water samples had all been negative. The view the submersible revealed in its floodlights was clear and crystalline, without evidence of any kind of sedimentation or organic matter. The science outpost on the surface, far from being abuzz with world-shaking biological discoveries, was all gloom and doom except for a couple of planetary physicists watching the other moons of Jupiter.

So the second eight-hour stint watching the empty ocean go by had immediately been passed to the two junior-most members of the mission. From what Wendy could hear, the rest of the exploration team, senior scientists, grizzled astronauts, and respected veterans of the Mars missions, were drinking themselves into a disappointed stupor.

They took turns watching the screen as the probe went deeper and deeper into the dark water. Whenever Wendy felt her eyes glazing over, she would ask Igor to relieve her, and he would do the same.

“Man, this is boring,” Igor said.

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know... something. I mean we’re farther from Earth than anyone ever imagined people would get... I wasn’t expecting to be bored out of my skull. First six months in space and now this.”

Wendy chuckled. “If you wanted excitement, you should have gone into real estate.”

Suddenly Igor's attention snapped to the screen. He pointed. "Look, do you see something?"

Wendy looked. "No. What was it? Do you need relief?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. I was sure there was something there." He peered at the watery void again. "I guess not, though."

Wendy concentrated, but she couldn't see anything either.

And then she did. It was so quick, such a brief flash, that she couldn't be certain.

"Wait. There."

"Get closer."

They maneuvered the submersible to a small smudge that turned out to be a tiny network of bubbles.

"Where did those come from?" Wendy asked.

"I don't know. Maybe from below? Steam from contact with the molten rock through cracks in the ocean floor?"

"Yeah, that might be it," Wendy replied dubiously. "But I could have sworn I saw something else."

Another flash. "There!"

"I saw it, too."

But when they approached, only the same bubbles greeted the submersible's cameras.

"Is there anything on IR?"

The switch to heat-sensing infrared cameras showed them a slightly warmer patch in the blue of the frozen depths ... which might easily

have been explained by a rising bubble of warmer water. They flipped back to the visible spectrum.

The next flash of motion was slower. There was definitely something dark in the water... but it was moving much too fast to see clearly.

Something was passing them by at high speed.

Out of nowhere, a shape materialized in the beam of the submersible's light. A long shape, with flippers and.... "Is that a head? That's definitely a neck," Wendy said.

"Don't read too much into ..." the object in their view rotated and the light was reflected back. "I think it's made of metal."

"And it's hollow. Look, you can see through it there and there."

"Those are cables, that looks like a servo ..."

"What the hell is it?"

"Damned if I know. We need to call the captain." Igor stood.

"No. Don't leave me here alone here in the dark with that thing. We're getting a recording. We can show him in a while."

"What do you think it is?"

"It looks like one of those water dinosaurs. A plesiosaur, I think they're called."

"Plesiosaurs are reptiles, not dinosaurs," the biologist replied automatically. He was staring at the screen.

"Well, that's a water dinosaur."

"A metal one. I wonder how they get it to float." He moved closer to the screen, then said. "Here. That's got to be some kind of buoyancy bladder."

“Well, it’s big, that’s for sure. Must be fifteen meters long.”

“I wonder who put it there,” Wendy said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m thinking the Chinese.”

Igor shook his head. “You know as well as I do that nothing that size was launched here by people from Earth. There would have been no way to cover it up. We’ve been watching Europa with everything we have for the past twenty-five years leading up to this mission. Everyone would have seen the launch.”

“It’s there. Someone sent it.”

“Not from Earth they didn’t.”

“So, who else would you say it might have been?”

“Maybe the natives built it. All I know is that thing didn’t evolve by itself.”

“Natives? This ocean is sterile.”

He shrugged.

“And besides, that’s some kind of Loch Ness monster sea-dinosaur thing. Why would native Europeans build it to look that way?” Wendy insisted.

“Excuse me,” a metallic voice interrupted, making them both jump in the dark control room. “Would you like any further refreshments?”

They both looked at Bobby and the same thought hit them. Igor got it out first. “Because it looks like them?”

A long silence fell over the gloomy room as they thought about the implications. The robot turned to go.

“Bobby, go get the captain,” Igor said. “Tell him it’s important. As in really important.”

Wendy, in the meantime, had ordered the submersible to withdraw back to where the netting that could hoist it back to the surface waited.

\* \* \*

The champagne—two bottles that had been all the weight allowed by the expedition—disappeared at high speed, but Wendy just sipped hers.

The Captain raised an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

“It’s the submersible we saw.”

“What about it? It’s proof there’s life here. Not just life, intelligent life. We’ll be famous. Ticker-tape-parade famous. Everyone from the Secretary-general to the Pope has already sent us their congratulations. We have made the most important scientific discovery in the history of humanity.”

“I suppose...”

“Come on, out with it.”

“It’s that submersible.”

“A beautiful piece of engineering,” the captain said. “I can’t wait to get down there and meet the builders.”

“Did you see that it didn’t have a tether?”

“So what? They’re probably controlling it via some other means.”

“Through hundreds of kilometers of water?”

“Maybe it has an AI.”

“Would you let Bobby roam that far away?” Wendy asked. By now, the stateroom was quiet; everyone had abandoned the ebullient revelry to listen to the conversation.

“What’s your point?” the captain asked.

“I’m worried that whatever is down there is more advanced than we are.”

The Captain laughed. “Don’t be silly. They’re just clever at building swimming drones. If they were advanced, we’d have seen signs from them. Radio signals or something. Hell, don’t you think they’d have come out to see what’s on the surface of their own planet?”

“That’s the whole point. The fact that they haven’t explored, that we haven’t seen them might simply mean that it never occurred to them that there might be something out here.”

“Well, they sure as hell know now,” the captain said. Then his smile faded. “Damn.”

“Exactly. Now they know. We’ve given an advanced species, a species that builds robots in the shape of attack predators, the knowledge they need to come out here and get us.”

“Now you’re just being silly. A species with no concept of space? What can they do to humanity?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like we can send a large force up here to hold them back. Besides, it’s not humanity I’m worried about ... just us.”

“We’ll be ...”

“Captain,” Igor interjected, “the submersible just went off line.”

Everyone was suddenly all business. While it was fun to celebrate and interesting to speculate about what might be under their feet, the submersible was a billion-dollar scientific device, and it was the key

to their expedition. Losing it would end the mission just as it was getting good.

“Where was it located when you lost it?”

“In the net, five meters under the surface.”

“All right. See if you can reset it. If not, we’ll have to hoist it to the surface and do an inspection. García, Suzuki, suit up. If the restart doesn’t work, I want you outside in fifteen minutes. You can take Bobby with you.”

The two crew members went into the suit closet and Igor found himself displaced by two more senior technicians who keyed commands into the terminal, commands that would be relayed to the submersible through the umbilical cord.

Wendy watched, but didn’t participate in any of the preparations. She didn’t think there was anything she could do. In fact, she believed that the submersible wasn’t merely malfunctioning ... in her mind, it was lost, consumed by a robot horror from the depths, sinking until the pressure crushed it.

The rest of the crew moved frantically, trying to bring the submersible back online. She couldn’t share her feeling with anyone; she was too terrified of what could happen next.

Truthfully, she had no idea of what that might be, but it would be awful.

The entire complex shook, knocking people to the ground.

“What the hell was that?” someone shouted.

“Icequake?”

“The ice was stable. And besides, look at the vibration detectors. That was a vertical vibration, not one of the horizontal ones we get

when the ice plates grind.”

“It’s like something hit us from below ...”

The pandemonium continued as half the crew attempted to make sense of the motion while the other half kept trying to talk to the submersible.

Wendy, though, was at peace. Now she knew what was coming, she could accept it.

The second blow, easily identified as coming from below, knocked everyone to the ground.

The third broke through the floor and Wendy saw Igor disappear into the hole in the metal plates.

The fourth impact broke the floor beneath her, and tore her body to pieces. She watched a metallic tendril wrap itself around her waist. It began to pull her into the hole.

The very last thing she saw was Bobby trying to get back to his feet as water spewed in from a different hole in the floor. He was slipping in the icy puddle, his form singularly unsuited for the environment around him.

# The Eternal Fire

by Christina Sng

It is time.

With one eye on the rapidly setting sun, Hestia races to the Great Library and finds the ancient tome right where she hid it, behind a hollow brick in the Archives wall.

She opens the old leathery book to the spell page, summoning a shimmering bright portal and leaping in before it abruptly snaps shut.

Moments later, the Resident Archivist finds the tome face up on the ground. Curious, he bends down to pick it up, reading the open page:

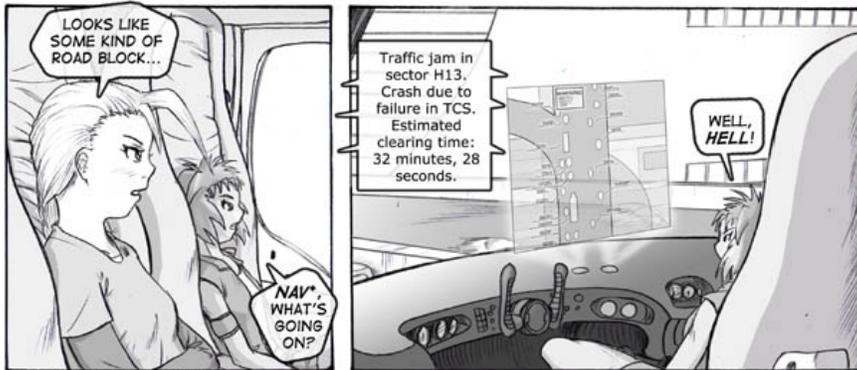
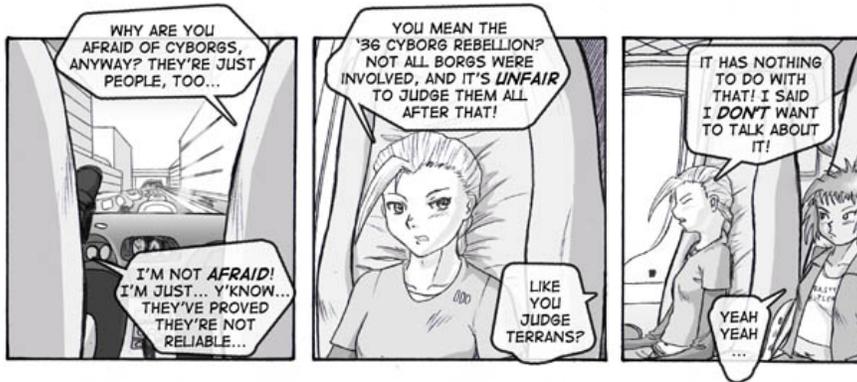
"Offer your Soul and Live Forever.

The Cost: Your World in Eternal Fire."

Astonished, he realizes he's found it: Darkst Magiks, the lost grimoire he's searched centuries for! Now, he will live forever.

Before he can recite the spell, the sky abruptly darkens and the sun vanishes behind a wall of clouds. Hellfire rains down from the heavens, incinerating everything.

The ground has not stopped burning on Venus.



\* NAV = NAVIGATOR (COMPUTER)



by Jesper Nordqvist

## NOTES

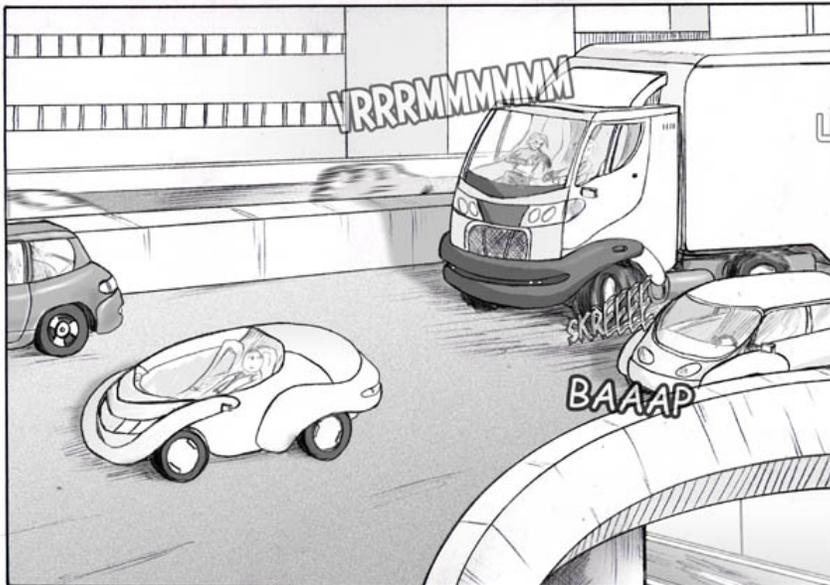
I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

Even though the Traffic Control System should be very safe, sometimes technical errors can cause the system to malfunction, as always.

If the TCS is shut off and you're not ready for manual control, a crash is likely, as vehicles move in high speed on the highways. All sorts of systems aid to keep the car steady and lower the speed, should something like this occur, so crashes are still rare... Guess the girls are just unlucky (not to mention the crashed driver!)

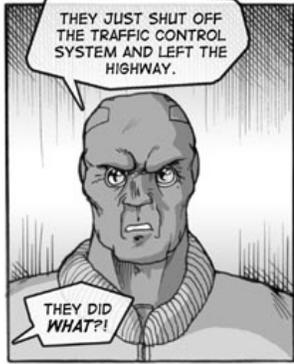
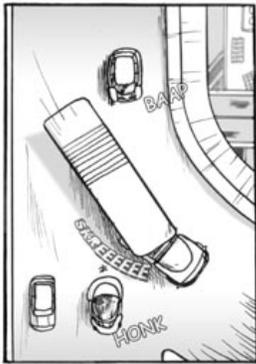




## NOTES

Don't worry; even if the cars have stopped, they will still swerve away if something comes too close....





THEY JUST SHUT OFF THE TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM AND LEFT THE HIGHWAY.

THEY DID WHAT?!



DAMNIT! I KNEW THIS WOULD HAPPEN!



WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?! GET THE TCS BACK ONLINE!

THE THROTTLE ISN'T PLAYING MY GAME!



TRY TO OVERRIDE THE CONTROL SYSTEM! IF YOU CAN'T, WE HAVE TO SEND THE POLICE AFTER THEM! WE DON'T WANT THAT!

YES, SIR.

I'M GOING AFTER THEM! ASSUME COMMAND IN MY PLACE!



THREE MINUTES TOGETHER AFTER THREE YEARS AND SHE'S ALREADY TRYING TO RIP ME OFF!



Manual override attempted by Master Control at 11.36.26.

FIGHT THEM BACK! WE JUST NEED TO GET THROUGH FIVE BLOCKS HERE!

I'M DOING HIM A FUCKIN' FAVOR, HERE!



BO! DID YOU HEAR?

YES, FOREMAN.

CALL OREGON CORP\* AND SAY THE DELIVERY MIGHT BE LATE, BUT DON'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THE SITUATION!

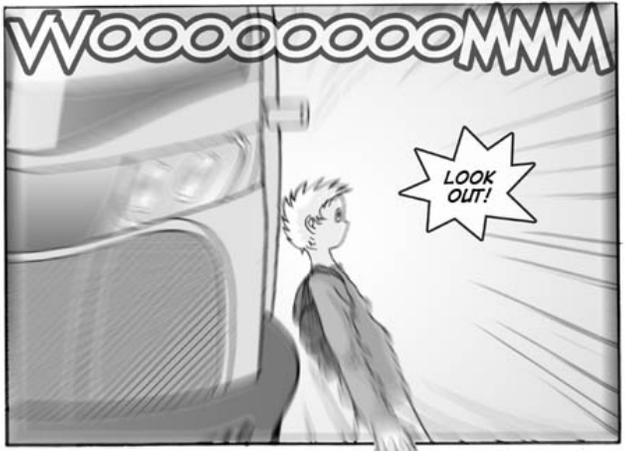
ROGER.

\*THE COMPUTER COMPANY J & G ARE DRIVING TO...

# NOTES

Cyril's been tracking them all the way, so he can tell they are not supposed to turn that way... It is hard to drive a truck the first time, Jemma!



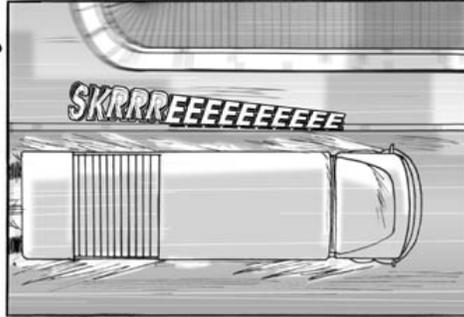


## NOTES

The "Minimem" is just what it sounds like, a small memory stick to save data, just like a little USB mem stick.

The data capacity is of course much larger in this time, but on the other hand, so are most file formats...





## NOTES

Ack! Those police bots are everywhere! By the way, this page would probably have taken only half the time it did if I'd cut that bot... >\_>

"Tagging" a vehicle means the nav system is taken over and is forced to drive to a certain location.





## NOTES

Sorry, this page is a rushwork to get it out in time...

Well, one day after time, at least.

Isidis Planitia is the 15000 kilometer wide valley between the old highlands and the northern plains on Mars where Megacity Phobos (this city, that is) is situated.

Annica and the others in traffic control have a look on the traffic in their area, and file reports from the traffic bots and cars.





# NOTES

The journey towards the nearest police station has started...



DON'T YA UNDERSTAND, G? IF WE GET BAILED OUT ON DIS ONE...



...WELL, WE CAN'T DO THAT. G, YOU'RE THIS COMPUTECH ACE GAL... CAN'T YOU HACK THE CODE OR SUMMAT?



AND HACK A POLICE SYSTEM? ARE YOU MAD? THAT'S NOT GONNA HAPPEN.



IT'S NOT LIKE YOUR ADRIAN'S GONNA HIRE US ANYWAY... HE WAS SUSPECTED FOR FRAUD WHEN WE FOUND HIM, REMEMBER...

WELL, BUT WE STILL ...

WHEN YOU'RE IN AN ECONOMICAL CRISIS, YOU DON'T HIRE PEOPLE!



...HAVE TO SHOW HIM WE *WONT* FAIL THIS.

HE WILL *NOT* HAVE THE PLEASURE OF SAYING WE DID.

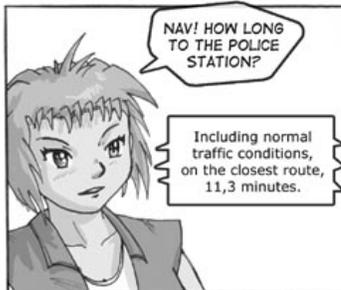
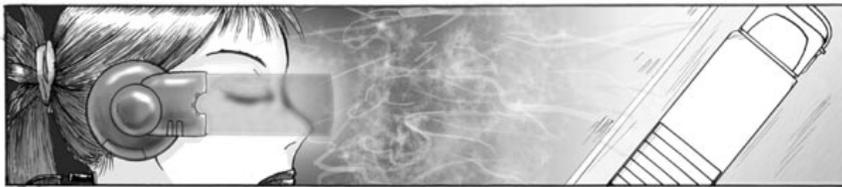




## NOTES

The Central Bureau is not a governmental institution, but the organization under which Adrian's freight company lie...





## NOTES

The connection to the truck is made via a neural interface transmission, and Leang will have control over several of the truck's control systems. But as she is only there to observe, she will only use the cameras in the cabin.



## NOTES

(No notes for this page)



# Contributor's Bios



**NATHAN AHLGRIM** promptly fled academia after earning his PhD in Neuroscience. His writing is usually inspired by some fantastic, terrifying, or downright bizarre bit of knowledge from his brain science days. After a glorious year teaching middle-schoolers in the mountains of California, he can now be found teaching slightly older kids at a community college in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

\* \* \*



**GUSTAVO BONDONI** is 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 *Test Site Horror* (2020). He has also published two other monster books: *Ice Station: Death* (2019) and *Jungle Lab Terror* (2020), three science fiction novels: *Incursion* (2017), *Outside* (2017) and *Siege* (2016) and an ebook novella entitled *Branch*. 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 Memorial 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](http://www.gustavobondoni.com)

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**LAURA J. CAMPBELL** grew up in El Lago, Texas, a small coastal



community known as the 'Home of the Astronauts.' Water and space exploration continue to inspire her writing. Mrs. Campbell won the 2007 James B. Baker Award for short story for her science fiction tale "416175." Over forty of her short stories have appeared in *Pressure Suite: Digital Science Fiction Anthology 3*, *Under the Full Moon's Light*, *Gods & Services*, *Page & Spine*, *Breath and Shadow*, and other publications. Her two novels, *Blue Team One* and *Five Houses*, are currently available online. Many of Mrs. Campbell's more recent works are available through Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/Laura-J.-Campbell/e/B07K6SZJJ9>

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Bios are harder to write than poems – in the last three year's **M.C. CHILDS'** poetry has appeared in more than a dozen magazines. He just retired from serving as Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of New Mexico. His award-winning urban design books include *The Zeon Files: Art and Design of Historic Route 66 Signs*, *Urban Composition*, and *Squares: A Public Space Design Guide*.

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Shy and nocturnal, **JENNIFER CROW** has rarely been photographed in the wild, but it's rumored that she lives near a waterfall in western New York. You can find her poetry on several websites and in various print magazines including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Uncanny Magazine*, *Liminality* and *Kaleidotrope*. She's always happy to connect with readers on her Facebook author page or on twitter @writerjencrow.

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**GRAHAM J. DARLING** (<https://fiction.GrahamJDarling.com>) of Vancouver, Canada breeds singular hybrids of diamond-hard Science Fiction, mythopoeic Fantasy and unearthly Horror. *Publishers Weekly* called "outstanding" his specimen in *Sword & Mythos* (eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles); other creations of his have peered out from *Pulp Literature*, snarfed Second Prize in the National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F) Short Story Contest, and recently hatched in *No Greater Love: Martyrs of Earth and Elsewhere* (ed. Robert J. Krog). Elsewise he designs molecules such as the Universe has never seen and demonstrates medieval science and technology to school kids and passers-by.

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**MONICA JOYCE EVANS** is a digital game designer and researcher who began publishing speculative fiction in 2019. Her short fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Analog*, *Nature: Futures*, *Flash Fiction Online*, and *DreamForge Magazine*, and her most recent academic work can be found in *Vector*, the critical journal of the British Science Fiction Association. She lives in North Texas with her husband, two daughters, and approximately ten million books. You can reach her at [monicajoyceevans@gmail.com](mailto:monicajoyceevans@gmail.com).

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**JOE GIORDANO's** stories appeared in more than one hundred magazines and has had three novels published: *Birds of Passage*, *An Italian Immigrant Coming of Age Story*, *Appointment with ISIL*, and *Drone Strike*. His short story collection, *Stories and Places I Remember*, has just been released. Visit his website at <http://joe-giordano.com/>

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**JOHN GREY** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest book, *Leaves On Pages*, is available through Amazon.

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**MARGARET KARMAZIN's** credits include stories published in literary and national magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Mobius*, *Confrontation*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *The Speculative Edge* and *Another Realm*.

Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Mobius* were nominated for Pushcart awards. Her story "The Manly Thing" was nominated for the 2010 Million Writers Award. She has stories included in several anthologies, published a YA novel, *Replacing Fiona*, a children's book, *Flick-Flick & Dreamer*, and a collection of short stories, *Risk*.

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credit: Maxim Kantor

**PETER J. KING** was born and brought up in Boston, Lincolnshire. He was active on the London poetry scene in the 1970s, returning to poetry in 2013. His work (including translations from modern Greek and German poetry) has since been widely published in magazines and anthologies. His currently available collections are *Adding Colours to the Chameleon* (Wisdom's Bottom Press) and *All What Larkin* (Albion Beatnik Press).

<https://wisdomsbottompress.wordpress.com/>

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**LAURENCE KLAVAN** has had short work published in *The Alaska Quarterly*, *Conjunctions*, *The Literary Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, *Pank*, *Failbetter*, *Stickman Review*, and *Anomaly*,



among many others, and a collection, *"The Family Unit" and Other Fantasies*, was published by Chizine. His novels, *The Cutting Room* and *The Shooting Script*, were published by Ballantine Books. He won the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America. His graphic novels, *City of Spies* and *Brain Camp*, co-written with Susan Kim, were published by First Second Books at Macmillan and their Young Adult fiction series, *Wasteland*, was published by Harper Collins. He received two Drama Desk nominations for the book and lyrics of *Bed and Sofa*, the musical produced by the Vineyard Theater in New York and the Finborough Theater in London. His one-act *The Summer Sublet* is included in Best American Short Plays 2000–2001, and his one-act *The Show Must Go On* was the most produced short play in American high schools in 2015–2016.

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**MARY SOON LEE** was born and raised in London, but has lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years. Her two latest books are from opposite ends of the poetry spectrum: *Elemental Haiku*, containing haiku for the periodic table (Ten Speed Press, 2019) and *The Sign of the Dragon*, an epic fantasy with Chinese elements (JABberwocky Literary Agency, 2020). After twenty-five years, her website has finally been updated: [marysoonlee.com](http://marysoonlee.com).

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More of **T. MOTLEY**'s comics are at [tmotley.com](http://tmotley.com)

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**JESPER NORDQVIST**, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).

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**NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS** can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username [@lyv0n](https://www.instagram.com/lyv0n).

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**MARY JO RABE** grew up on a farm in eastern Iowa, got degrees from Michigan State University (German and math) and University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (library science) where she became a late-blooming science fiction reader and writer. She worked in the library of the chancery office of the Archdiocese of Freiburg, Germany for 41 years, and lives with her husband in Titisee-Neustadt, Germany.

She has published "Blue Sunset", inspired by *Spoon River Anthology* and *The Martian Chronicles*, electronically and has had stories published in *Fiction River*, *Pulphouse*, *Space Opera Mashup*, *Rocketpack Adventures*, *Whispers from the Universe*, *Future Earth Tech*, *Blaze Ward Presents Cloak and Dagger*, and *Alternate Hilarities*.

She indulges in sporadic activity on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/rabemj>) and Twitter ([@maryjorabe](https://twitter.com/maryjorabe))

Blog: <https://maryjorabe.wordpress.com/>

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**DESMOND RHAЕ** has spent his whole life exploring a deep interest in art, writing, and music. After writing several stories as a child and going to college for graphic design, he knew that the call to create would never fade. Since then, he's worked as a freelance writer and artist alongside working on his sci-fi novel. He's also become involved in his community writer's group and had an art exhibit in the local library. You can check out more of his work at [www.theinksphere.com](http://www.theinksphere.com).

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**ELBY ROGERS** is a self-taught artist of the macabre hailing from the, by now, famous state of Delaware in the United States.

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**CARL SCHARWATH** has appeared globally with 150+ journals selecting his poetry, short stories, interviews, essays, plays, or art photography. (His photography was featured on the cover of six journals.) Two poetry books, *Journey To Become Forgotten* (Kind of a Hurricane Press) and *Abandoned* (ScarsTv) have been published. His first photography book was recently published by Praxis. Carl is the art editor for *Minute Magazine*, a competitive runner and 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

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**MARGE SIMON** lives in Ocala, FL, City of Trees with her husband, poet/writer Bruce Boston and the ghosts of two cats. She edits a column for the HWA Newsletter, "Blood & Spades: Poets of the Dark Side." Marge's poems and stories have appeared in *Pedestal Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Crannog*, *Silver Blade*, *Bete Noire*, *New Myths*, *Daily Science Fiction*. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer and is on the board of the Speculative Literary Foundation. A multiple Bram Stoker award winner, Marge is the second woman to be acknowledged by the SF & F Poetry Association with a Grand Master Award.

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**CHRISTINA SNG** is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A Collection of Nightmares*, Elgin Award runner-up *Astropoetry*, and *A Collection of Dreamscapes*. Her poetry, fiction, and art appear in numerous venues worldwide and her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, as well as received honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year. Christina's first novelette, "Fury," was published in 2020's *Black Cranes: Tales of Unquiet Women* and her next book of poems, *The Gravity of Existence*, is forthcoming in 2022.

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Lover of wine, women and song, **TOEKEN's** had work published in *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Bards and Sages Quarterly*, *Unfading Daydream*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, *Hybrid Fiction Magazine*, *Penumbria Speculative Fiction Magazine*, *Mysterion*, *Lovecraftiana Magazine*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *SQ Magazine*, *Lackington's*, *The Future Fire*, *The Drabblecast*, *Helios Quarterly*, *Kaleidotrope*, *Crimson Streets*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *ParABnormal Magazine*, *RobotDinosaurs*, *Ares Magazine*, *Double Feature Magazine*, *NewMyths*, *Non Binary Review*, *Persistent Visions*, *ParAbnormal Magazine*, *Riddled with Arrows*, *Devolution Z Magazine*, *Cracked Eye*, *Nothing's Sacred*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, *Gallery of Curiosities*, *Gallows Hill*, *Econoclash*, *The Weird and Whatnot* and painted book covers for authors such as Bryan Smith ('Kayla'), Tim Meyer ('The Thin Veil', 'The Switch House', '69'), Chad Lutzke (Night as a Catalyst), D.W. Cook (Intermediates: A Cuckoo for Mankind'), Millhaven Press ('Fierce Tales, Lost Worlds'), Cemetery Gates Media ('Halldark Holidays', 'Murderers' Bazaar'), Gavin Chappell ('Kek vs Cthulhu') among others. A TOEKEN EFFORT - current (weebly.com)





# Tomorrow's Architect (full image)

by Marge Simon