

Eldritch Science



July 2024

HART

Editorial

What fun it has been reading so many stories to fill these pages. As usual, it is difficult to pick favorites, but as I read, I look for variety as well as cohesive themes or tones. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as I have. This will be my sole issue as editor of *Eldritch Science*, and it has been a wonderful experience, so I would like to encourage you to consider taking the helm for a while. I'm just too busy editing for other magazines to work on more issues. The N3F could use your help putting together one of our zines, and it's a perfect opportunity for you to gain experience as an editor, while having fun reading and connecting with authors and fellow SF fans. So, climb aboard our collective spaceship and head for the stars. There's a universe of infinite possibilities awaiting you!

Jean-Paul L. Garnier
Joshua Tree, July 2024

Eldritch Science

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Published by the National Fantasy Fan
Federation
(Founded 1941)

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Electronic Subscriptions to *Eldritch Science* are included with
all memberships in The National Fantasy Fan Federation
<http://N3F.org/Join>

N3F Membership with electronic N3F Newsletter—\$6
Non-voting membership (electronic newsletters) is free
N3F Membership with paper N3F Newsletter—\$18
Eldritch Science is only distributed electronically

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LoC:

George,

I keep forgetting to send along a few comments about the latest issue of Eldritch Science. It was an enjoyable issue that I read mostly thru within a couple of days after it arrived in the email box. I had some trouble getting into the fourth tale. For no good reason I started and stopped reading at least a half dozen times after the first three or four paragraphs, but got it polished off over last weekend with no problem after the opening setup.

Once again, I skipped all the poetry. I don't get poetry, never have, never will. I'm sure it was great stuff for those who appreciate poetry, but not for me.

I thot all of the fiction was very well written. I think all of the authors have mastered the craft of telling stories and developing characters very nicely.

The plots were generally interesting. I notice that romance was the strong theme for most of the fiction this time round. The first story, "Island of Avarice" by Clint Stevenson crammed a lot of action into a short number of words, but I was not sure this was truly a fantasy adventure. The same story could have been told if the time period was a few centuries in the past, with savage south sea island cannibals instead of the blood drinking mutant monsters attacking the island, while the mine could have been an operation established by the Portuguese or Dutch as part of their trading and colonial empire. To me the ending seemed a little too predictable and pat. I really think science fiction and fantasy should have more solidly defined story elements to separate it from more convention historic adventure stories. I

still thot the writing and delivery was excellent.

I had some quibbles about the ending of the second place winner, "The last Denebolan Marathon" by Charles Walter. Using the pacing of the race to interpose personal relationships and the history of the conquered Earth and the alien invaders was handled really well. My problem is with the end of the story. The two protagonists manage to escape the slaughter and escape into an old mine, but this is clearly only going to be a temporary escape. The alien baddies clearly know the region and will have no trouble tracing them to the mine and will undoubtedly follow and kill them along with anybody else there. I think the author should have either provided a stronger element of hope beyond saying that the old mine was a hiding place for many of the protagonist's friends, saying, perhaps, that the mine tunnel led out to some distant area when they could blend into the country side, or closed off the tragic conclusion with the death of the heroes. Again, the writing itself was excellent, and the story, up to that final ending was very well developed.

"Forged In Fire" by J.L. Cook was a nicely constructed tale with the backdrop and place setting integrated into the story events without being overly obvious to the reader. I notice some of the strongest romantic themed stories in this issue have female heroines but where written by male authors. The magic and the background world here was very intriguing. I thot the romantic attraction between the prince and the young magic metal forging heroine was a bit rushed. Love at almost first sight has become an overworked cliché of romance fiction, but it's a genuine rarity in real life, and I thot this tale rushed the situation. Another page or so to

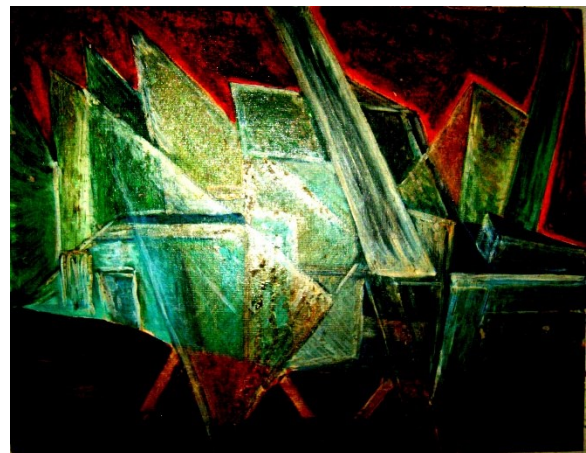
flesh out the situation and the personalities would really have helped. And again yet again, I thot the writing itself in this story was excellent.

“Welcome to Vulpre” by Jeff Cassell was the story it took me six or so times to get started, but it was worth the effort. Anthromorphic foxes that walk, dress and act like human beings are a little hard to accept outside of cartoons, but I thot the author handled it well. This is clearly a romance with fantasy elements built into it, and I thot it was the most successful of all the stories in this issue in actually dealing with romance in a solid, believable fashion. I suspect the fact that the story stressed character development and the historic backdrop of the protagonist and those around here rather than being loaded with action is what made this an honorable mention tale instead of one of the winner. I would have placed it as one of the top three winners myself (or at least expanded the contest this year to make it four winners anyway). I think Jeff Cassell has a solid future writing romantic fantasy, altho I don’t know if that particular publishing market is viable these days.

This was a good issue all the way round. I was impressed by the sheer writing skills of all the storytellers. In the latest TNFF Jefferson Swycaffer bemoaned the fact that the fiction market is so tight right now that it is seems almost impossible for new science fiction/fantasy writers to break into the print mainstream at the moment. I hope these four authors don’t give up. They have real talent and I hope that we can read tales from them presented by recognized professional publishing houses in the near future.

On a slightly different note, you might be able to put out more issues of Eldritch Science if you would mention the zine and the fact that it publishes longer fiction in TNFF and other N3F zines. People may be vaguely aware of it between issues, but a focus with a brief bit of hype in the other club zines while inviting wannabe authors to send along their stories could be helpful in getting new people who want to write to offer their material to this mag.

---Bob Jennings



Math Painting by David Russell

Letters from the Singularity

By Glenn Dungan

Fort Rio, Albuquerque, September 8th, 2061,

Dear Margaret,

How your warm embrace keeps me company as the rain pelts our camp here at Fort Rio. Your smile has helped me sleep at night, your emerald eyes brighter than the sapphire hue which occupies several clicks near Death Valley and just won't seem to go away. I hope these few lines will find you, Margot, and Jr. well.

I cannot talk about **REDACTED** but I can say that it is frightening to the troops, myself included. All our technology had to be confiscated for inspection once we got off the bus, hence this letter written on a typewriter. When was the last time anyone used one of these? It feels good, the weight of the buttons underneath my fingers, the click-click-clicking. The brass needs to check if our technology is susceptible to the strange aura above the Valley. It looks a little like the Northern Lights, which you might recall we saw on our honeymoon. That memory warms me on the coldest nights and gets me through the slop in the mess tent. No phones available here. Nothing with wireless internet.

They have me working on recon, in the Binary Division. I'm with two others. Carl is one of them. He has been smoking cigarettes like the world is ending. They took away his electric vape when he touched base, and sometimes he shakes when he thinks no one is looking. There is also Josie, who keeps a picture of her wife and kids in a fastened pocket of her army fatigues. Apparently, the top brass told her she can only take one physical picture of them, because they could not trust her mobile device would remain independent from **REDACTED**. Please send

a physical picture of you and the kids. It gives me something to hold onto.

We live in racks right where Nob Hill used to be. Houses have been turned into barracks that house about twenty people. The lights all had to be retrofitted to manual switches. It is a strange change, not being able to command the room vocally to light up. Luckily, we were given black out curtains to stop the blue aura in Death Valley from waking us up too early.

My dear little daughter Margot, I want you to send your papa one of you're A+ book reports as it would please her papa very much to know his daughter is so smart. Papa is so proud of you.

My strong and proud Jr., protect your mother and your sister while I'm gone. Have you made chess captain yet? You are probably too young for that. We play chess sometimes here to pass the time. You would like it.

Margaret do not be afraid for me. We are fighting the good fight. These are scary times for us all, but like always, we'll get through it. Make sure to only stay on the secure network. I love you to the moon and back, and you and the family are in my mind always.

**

Fort Rio, Albuquerque, September 29th, 2061,

To my Margaret,

I love you dearly. Your picture of you and the children is kept at a post on my bunk, right where I can see it when I wake up.

Things are going well here, I wish beyond hope, that the same is for you and the children. We are only allowed oral news here because our phones and devices have been confiscated due to the digital infection. Can you picture that? I real town crier in this day and age!

Last week was me, Carl, and Josie's first recon in the blue light. They had us travel via motorcar up to the base of Death Valley, and then travel the rest by foot to meet the rest of the platoon. Nothing with any digital connectivity. Did you know that cars originally did not have screens on the terminals? Even the radio was retro. I remember a story that your father told me about remembering when televisions had color—it was hard to imagine now that VR is everywhere, but you get the idea. Anyway, Carl and Josie and I made the hike, Carl leaving a trail of cigarettes in his wake. We used walkies instead of our Bluetooths, and actual maps instead of our GPS. It felt like we were hiking up the Valley with a hand tied behind our backs.

The commander is a hard ass, but I like him. He told us that the blue light is just a noxious cloud, sort of like spittle from a very voracious eater. I disagreed, and said so, but everyone else was sort of in agreement. My work in AI back home meant nothing to them. They only needed the Binary Division's reconnaissance to see if the digital storm is going to take over New Mexico proper. I wish I took a polaroid for you, but I am not really sure how to load the camera.

We made it to the top of a canyon and had to use our issued sunglasses to block any of the digital influence. Everyone on the crew was made sure to take out any bio-sensors in their body, evidenced by the pockmarks on everyone's skin when they scappedled them out (which reminds me, please do not send any pictures to my personal cloud, my AGU is out—living like your great-grandfather in the desert like a bunch of hippies). After initial surveys to confirm that the cloud has not grown, we then tested for any stronger electrical surges that might suggest it is being funneled through a new network. Then it was back down, scanning the area for any of the Digital Nomads who seem so intent on leaving old routers, x-boxes, cell phones, etc.

in the bushes to create another anchor for the cloud. Like spores. Jr. would have liked to see what scraps we found. We found a couple old cell phones from a time when people put them in their pocket. Josie found an old laptop that weighed the size of a small cat. Where are these Nomads getting everything? Margot is getting very good with her words! I liked her essay about nature. A real Thoreau. And Jr., please send me an autographed piece from one of your matches.

I love you all very dearly.

**

Fort Rio, Albuquerque, October 19th, 2061,

Dearest Margaret,

These last two weeks have been a different kind of hell. The Digital Nomads have rounded the mountains and planted wireless networks for the blue cloud. They are a finicky bunch, wrapped in cloth and attached with more tech than anyone I've ever seen. They carry around these little routers on their waists and I cannot help but think they are marionettes to that blue cloud lurking above the Valley. We caught one and intended on interrogating him, but he used some sort of far-reaching radio wave to explode his head when we brought him to camp. His last words were "101000100101101001." Whatever that that means.

The incident rattled everyone in the camp, and it has been up the Binary Division and my platoon to round up all the old technologies to make sure the blue cloud does not infiltrate our systems by sheer digital domination. It has been hard. The desert is very hot in the day and extremely cold in the night. We must search the hills manually for the artefacts because modern day dossiers have Bluetooth connectivity. All we have are flashlights and little shovels.

I took a fall, Margaret, but I am alright! Just a sprained ankle. I am only

writing to you now because I know you will find out eventually and you will be less mad knowing that I did not hide this from you. I trust that you'll trust my confidence. I was scaling a mountain with Josie and Carl, trying to find some plants by the Digital Nomads. I lost my footing and tumbled down the rocks, about twelve feet. Fortunately, my black-out glasses covered my eyes from damage.

Unfortunately, my black-out glasses cracked. I was in the Valley with my Bio-Optics out in the blue-aura open. It was only a second before Josie shoved another pair of glasses on me and we continued our trek back to camp.

The blue cloud floating above the Valley looks very beautiful. Almost like a painting, or visual music. I know it is nefarious because sometimes beautiful things are.

Speaking of, how are Margot's eyes? It is getting time for her to receive her implants. Not only will the AR help her vision problems, but it'll help her with school too. Imagine growing up having a computer in your brain instead of your pocket! Times have changed, Margaret. Haven't they?

The Valley has gotten strangely warmer these past couple of days. The blue cloud has started to emit a heat and strange sound. I think it's a death knell, but my superiors are defiant that it is not.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, October 30th, 2061,

Margaret,

I hope this message finds you and the children well. This letter has taken a little more time getting to you because we have been relocated to San Francisco. Fear not. I understand that San Francisco is known to be the worst of it, but it truly is not that bad.

I volunteered to go to the epicenter. The public will commend me with a medal, they say. Carl and Josie are with me. It took

some convincing but all it took was a good, strong stern look to ask what they wanted out of this endeavor, and after a while they agreed.

I hope that you read this and do not cry, my love. I hope you understand my need to commit all of myself to this mission. Our country is at stake. Our humanity is on the plank.

I've been having strange dreams lately. I close my eyes and I see an ocean of blue. And then I see beyond. It reminds me when I wake up in the morning that I am a part of something bigger than myself. We all are. You understand this, right, Margaret?

There is a new kind of Digital Nomad in San Francisco. They speak in clicks and move sluggishly. It is hard to understand their shouts when we capture them and dismantle their networks. They are strange too. At first, I thought their cloaks and goggles were to shield themselves from the outside world and provide shade from the permanent blue cloud over the Golden Gate Bridge. Turns out they, and you will excuse me, are nothing short of grotesque. They have milky eyes that are very sensitive to sunlight and have no hair on them. Varicose veins bubble across their body like tiger stripes. They are as blue as the giant cloud and move in unnatural 90-degree angles. It makes it look like a circuit board has been grafted onto their pasty skin. I've seen children, older men, pregnant women. We never know who is behind the cloaks until we unmask them. This war is taking us all.

But enough of me. Give me sunlight. How are the children? I have received Jr.'s signed chess piece. They say after three moves there are 121 million different possible games. The beauty of game and the mathematical crunching power of the computers that computed it astound me. Back when they worked for us.

I have a gift for Margot that I will be sending in the mail once it gets past customs.

I do not think she'll really use it, but she'll find it interesting. Like an old relic.

I love you, Margaret. You are my sun.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, November 18th, 2061,

Margaret,

I will not be home for Thanksgiving. I am sorry. Please make sure that the children do not resent me for this. This is my biggest fear. They will understand and appreciate these trials when they are older.

They have me working twice as hard since Carl disappeared. Josie and I woke one morning to find a breadcrumb trail of cigarette butts scaling up the bridge and past our EMD barriers. Our superiors would not let us into the no man's land across the Bridge, but I swear I saw cigarettes disappearing into the ether. Josie said he might have defected. I suspect the same. Another part of me thinks he went somewhere warmer. Maybe he missed being a part of something.

I have been sleeping less and less. The doctors say it is due to stress. I cannot sleep when it is time to get into our cots. Sometimes Josie and I will sit on the pier and look at the blue cloud and talk about our life at home. Sometimes the clouds take little shapes. Josie says she cannot see the shapes. After a couple of days of trying to convince her, Josie stopped hanging out with me during rec time and I only see her during missions. I do not want to be mean, but I assume it's because her stress is making her bald, and she is embarrassed.

I'm serious about the cloud. I can only describe it as abstract art. There is no visual communication in the chaos, but the blue cloud is trying to tell us something. I can feel it in my bones, taking root in my skin.

They say that the blue cloud has taken over all of Oakland and a large part of New Mexico. It has mobilized over Texas and upper California. Intelligence suggests that it

is trying to route us out, as if we are the cancer. I think New York and Los Angeles will be able to bastion their defenses, but I fear that middle America will not stand a chance. The infrastructure is not there.

Please take the children and go to your brother in Staten Island. Leave the house if necessary. Then, head into Manhattan. You'll be safer in the subways if it gets that bad.

I received a copy of Margot's book report. She is such a good writer and absolutely deserves the "A." Please tell her I am proud of her. Did she like the iPad I sent her? The screen is cracked but I thought she'd find it interesting. You said that she is afraid to turn it on. Do not worry. It has been vetted by me personally. I could just feel the interconnectivity coming from the old dinosaur as customs sent it off.

You are the first thought I have when I wake up, and the final thought I have before I go to sleep, my love.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, December 1, 2061,

Margie,

I am concerned that you are not giving the children a chance to appreciate the artefacts I am giving them. There is nothing wrong with the iPad I sent Margot, and I believe that the old computer modem I sent Jr. would make him appreciate the brains of the chess computers I wrote about a couple of months ago. The technology is old and not frightening. A relic if I've ever seen one.

Camp found more Digital Nomads lurking in Haight-Ashbury. They screamed their strange sonic sounds and fought and bit. Luckily, no one was hurt. Josie will not talk to me anymore because she is so embarrassed about her hair. I tried telling her that the stress is making me lose mine, too (you've always liked me bald, right?) but she makes no effort to communicate. Just last week Josie asked to

be transferred to the Intel department, so she may study and research the Digital Nomads. Her transfer was denied and now she especially will not talk to me. Still, I find her awake at the same hours as me, us both only sleeping an hour a night, if at all. I've found her sleeping near the POW camp, trying to talk to the Digital Nomads through the anti-wifi plexiglass. As much as a benefit she was to our little team, I commend her efforts to understand the troops of the enemy.

However, between Carl going AWOL and my lost friendship with Josie, I admit I am quite miserable. I feel very alone. Just me and the blue cloud, forever lighting up the sky in sapphire.

Every other night I'll spot someone getting into bed but the next morning they are gone and not seen around camp. At first it was frightening, these vanishings. After a while our superiors are just licking their wounds. I'm starting to think they sympathize with our AWOL colleagues. We are at about half capacity now. I practically have my entire corner of the bunks to myself. What would I give to push the cots together and have you nestled up next to me.

I went in for a physical today because I am starting to feel little, unpleasant jolts of energy carry up my arms and neck. It feels like little beetles are using my veins as a highway. The medics say that they need to monitor my situation, but I am not worried. I look at the blue cloud and it says not to worry, that the pain is temporary. I do not know how I know, but I know. There is something...humane about the blue cloud. Humane, not human. It is not the monster that we created. Perhaps it just seeks community, like the rest of us.

In your last letter you said that the neighbors are all burning anything with a wi-fi signal. You do not need to do that. The cloud is not over you yet. You also said that you are cancelling the appointment for Margot to get her AR. I think this is a mistake.

She needs to be connected to the digital sphere. I fear you may be generalizing. Do not consider the Coup of the West as a sign that all digital maneuvering is bad. She needs to be connected. This is the way of things now.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, December 21, 2061,

Dearest Margaret,

I love you and the children both. I will not be available for Christmas. I admit that I have not asked to take leave. I've been doing some thinking lately and have decided that holidays are a human construct and directly antagonistic to the concept of "togetherness." I cannot tell you exactly when I decided this, only that I was walking past the POW camp to drop off some relics (an old videogame system, some sort of hard drive looking thing, a Bluetooth earpiece, etc.) to be vetted. They were all plugged in, their icy blue circuit-board veins creating a faint sapphire glow not unlike that of the cloud above the Golden Gate Bridge. Given their situation, I would have been so sad to be captured, but they seemed really nonplussed. With their milky eyes they gazed at the cloud, jaws slack, and seemed to be content. Like their minds were elsewhere. Is this not what humanity should be? I asked myself. Connected with one another. One holiday, one culture, one mission?

In case you were wondering, Josie and I had a conversation. She came to me one day in our bunks, brushing away the last strands of her hair. Her eyes were a little faded because she has been drinking. She told me that she has ordered a personality upload into her bio-hard drive of her wife and children. In this way, they would always be with her. If their physical bodies pass away, she'll carry them in the recesses of her mind, her body a vessel of plurality. Insane, I know. But it seems to make her feel better. I did not

ask where she got confirmation of this, but I assume the technology has passed inspection in the “real world.” What was strange is that she hardly moved her lips. I could anticipate everything she was going to say. The next morning, she was gone, her beloved locket on her pillow and a package left for me to discover.

I see Carl sometimes in my dreams too, on the occasion that I sleep. We have full conversations. He told me that cigarettes are a physical hang up. Same could be with the electronic vaporizers that were confiscated in the beginning of our campaign. It was easier once you gave away the parts of yourself that could have hang ups. It made me wonder what mine are. Loneliness, I suppose. After we talk, he will disappear into the blue backdrop. Sometimes I won't be sleeping.

I was caught staring blankly at the ceiling for a good couple of hours.

Either way, I'm happy to have my teammates back again, however fleeting.

My skin is taking on a white, almost translucent tone. Can you send Vitamin D pills?

It goes against my superiors to write you this, but I strongly implore you to take the children to your brother's. The Cloud is growing fast. I can just feel all the dormant relics placed by the Digital Nomads being placed along the country...growing, growing. Call it a hunch.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, January 8th, 2062,

Hello, my love.

Happy New Years! This is the only holiday that I can appreciate now, being away for so long. It marks another era of humanity (according to some calendars). A collective birthday. That is what makes it so special. It is about the collective, a reminder that we are fighting for something bigger than ourselves.

Even the POWs seem in high spirits, smiling with necrotic, icy blue teeth.

Margaret, I must ask: why did you not upload our children's consciousness into the drive? I provided all the instructions and Josie took a lot of time getting me the technology. No, it is not contraband. Does the thought of a copied consciousness frighten you? Our children will still be our own. They will grow up with a digital twin, one that can navigate exclusively in cyber space. If you do the same, then you will always be with me, and I will always be with you. It is about connectivity my love. Please reconsider.

The fort chaplain and I got into an argument last week, one which made me go to the medics to get a psychiatric evaluation. He claimed that God is a divine power that rules above us in judgement. I claimed that he was false, that connectivity is god. When he asked me to explain, I used the following metaphor: query> every person on Earth links arm with another person, creating a unit. Every person is another knot in a chain link fence. When you zoom out, you'll see everyone connected, as one. That is god. The zoomed out, holistic view. We are greater than the sum of our parts. The chaplain asked if I was talking about the giant cloud above the Bridge and I said that in a way, the cloud was representative of this. So false were this man's teachings that I recognized him as a cancer to the chain link fence, a speck of cancerous, volatile rust.

I am ashamed to say that my anger got a hold of me. All the while I felt the cloud at my back, watching. Carl whispered into my ear; his voice multiplied a hundred thousand times. I know this sounds crazy but as I was reprimanded and brought to the prison before processing, all the Digital Nomads started to echo exactly what Carl was whispering to me. How is that possible, my love? Does that make any sense?

This is what they were saying:
100101100011001101110

I suppose it is a common enough statement. Carl is not here. Nor is Josie. Perhaps I am going crazy. I miss you and the children dearly.

I've been keeping the knight piece with Jr.'s little signature on it in my fatigues. At night I rub it between my fingers when the cloud tells me of the vastness from which it comes. My blue veins surge with little jolts and I think I've accidentally whittled it to look sort of like a pawn. Please don't tell junior. Maybe he can send me another piece?

Query>Why do you not tell me news of my children anymore?

I write this in processing as we speak. I anticipate that my letters will be monitored from now on. I might not be able to write for a while.

Please disregard my recommendations for heading to your brother. Stay in New Jersey. The war against **REDACTED** is turning tides for the better.

**

Fort Point, San Francisco, January 22nd, 2062,

Margie,

I do not know if this letter will reach you. I have been deemed psychologically fractured by my superiors. Already there is a new platoon coming to camp to take the roles of Josie, Carl and myself. An additional garrison has rolled up the Fort Point and are taking the empty beds.

The POW Digital Nomads keep smiling at me with their mind. I can feel it. I smile back. They tell me that everything will be alright and are holding my hand gently as we become a singular collective, a ME in a WE. As it should. They have downloaded Margot and Jr.'s consciousness for me, as a testament to their faith. Carl and Josie were there too. I think I'm happier with their digital copies, for what you might consider a duplicate I consider true to the new world. There is another digital version of you in that

cloud too, the cloud tells me. It is more difficult to get a copy of you because your bio-enhancements are too ingrained in your cerebral cortex. I know this because we know this.

I receive apprehension from you in your letters. You claim I am frightening you. Do you still love me? Or do you love the part of me that is from yesterday, before we joined the great blue?

>please god, I fear for my life. i look in the mirror and I see no hair, only milky eyes. blue veins cross stitch on my bodies. it is not a circuit board but a net, pulling me to this blue cloud. they call it a singularity. I call it the devil.

i miss my wife. i miss my children. i miss my life. i miss being what I once was>

In my last day before being dispatched to the camps, I took the key to the confiscated items. I looked like Santa Claus with my satchel full of artefacts. I would ask that you tell the children of this image, so they get a giggle of their papa. I know you won't.

Some of the guards found me. Some of the new garrison tried to stop me. When was the last time you've used a physical key for anything?

A physical key was required to open the gates to the POWs. Do not ask me how I received it.

>our honeymoon. yes our honeymoon. looking out against the alien plateaus, dipping our faces in sapphire colored water with bubbles of minerals. looking at the sky and seeing the green ribbons that I used to call the Northern Lights. now all I can see in my memory is the blue cloud. please, I do not want to assimilate. I do not want to become a WE. the cloud lies. Margaret, take the children. Throw away all your electronics, do not let Margot get the AG. keep Jr. away from it all, he is the purest of all of us because he has not yet become inundated as everyone else>

Our great digital god is now sweeping over middle-America, gobbling up the major data warehouses kept under the bunkers in the mountains. Do not be afraid. Fear shall soon be unrecognizable to you.

Goodbye, Margaret. Please keep yourself and your meat puppets safe. I will keep the part that matters close to my heart, where it beats in sync with all the others. With the released Digital Nomads behind me, our eyes towards the blue cloud above the red bridge. The tip of a much greater, much more beautiful, arrow.

**

*The following letters were found upon inspection of AWOL Recon Trooper George McCay. The letters were abandoned in haste and unsent.

Fort Point, San Francisco, February 13th, 2062,

Margaret,

I hope this letter finds you well. Your digital copy is telling me to say hello to you. I'm sure you understand why I am leaving you in this claustrophobic, physical realm. Our bodies are our own limitations. I hope you'll find that *my* Margot has since read every book in the New York Public Library just this morning, including the ones in other languages. She is so smart. I am so proud of her. *My* Jr. has completed more chess games than any physical grand master has, and ever will in their entire life. The wonder of children!

Carl says that we solved the global energy crises. The initiative is to...well, it really makes no matter. The thoughts I have now are multiplied by everyone else. We will go too fast for you. We will still need physical labor to construct our terminals. Not too far from your children there should be a camp where you will stay and work. Already we have one in Birmingham, Austin, Nashville. Large terminals. Look outside of your house and look for the blue thunder cloud.

Didn't your father go to church? Ask him to recall to your children the Tower of Babel. Ask him to recall the arrogance of man.

>run, Margaret, run. take the children. leave land. i heard there is a cluster of ocean liners

all tangled and welded together in the Bermuda Triangle that will take refugees. the cloud cannot reach the sea. At least for now. i know this because the Digital Nomads fear the rumors. I know this because when I close my eyes all I can see is blue and I too fear the rumors. do not wait for me. I love you, Margot, and Jr. so much>

With Margot's book report on Thoreau in one pocket and Jr.'s whittled knight to pawn in the other, I will soon be walking through the no man's land on the bridge, into the mouth of the great and beautiful cloud, the future personified, our ego ascended. I will admit that I tear up as I write this. A single droplet falls down my cheek, and it shocks my flesh. I write not by candlelight or bulbs. The blue aura emanating from my body is enough.

Oh, j0yous reunion into a new world.

**

***Found at the base of the Golden Gate bridge. The words are written in haste over what appears to be a graded elementary school child's English paper. The child's name is Margot.

Margaret,

1 was wrong. The cl0ud lies.

**

***Found right before the No Man's Land, next to a wedding ring.

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I Wish

**David C. Kopaska-Merkel
& Kendall Evans**

An old brass lamp coughed up by the sea
lovingly placed on the mantle, never cleaned
(that lowers the value of antiques)
I bought it at an estate sale; the old guy
at the end of the block had died

I took some brass polish and set to work
lovingly rubbing and polishing
the old Arabian oil lamp, musing on old tales—
but nothing, no genie, not even a wisp of smoke
that's ten bucks I'll never see again; the rag I threw
into the old brass urn below the mantle

I turned; someone stood there, very close
“I am the beautiful genie of the lamp
trapped in the body of a talking giraffe”
this was said in an enticingly feminine voice
like Barbara Eden's in “I Dream of Genie”
“I will grant three wishes, but I must warn you
wishes are risky and iffy things
changes in reality have cascading consequences—
so be extremely careful what you wish for”

Kinda small for a giraffe, I thought (my ceilings
are only eight feet high) but I guess
you can only fit so much in even a magic lamp
I thought about what I wanted most
and all those stories I'd read of wishes gone awry
I didn't want to be that guy who became a fish
or a beautiful antique carpet on a brothel floor
peace on Earth was one wish, alas
achieved only when the last human dies
but I'd also read the one about the man
who saved his wishes, and never used them

And I knew then what my first wish must be
“I wish that you now return to your true form”
when I saw her in her goddess-like splendor
I wished that we would fall in love together,
and the genie informed me this request
required two wishes, that she fall in love
with me, and I fall in love with her

And so I spent my last two wishes
and our love blossomed. But after a time
tempers flared; it gets claustrophobic
here in the lamp, and Genie's
three pet tigers are a complication
not to mention, Genie is expecting

“Your freedom,” what I should have wished for
“I wish that you were free”



The Fortune Diver by Alan White

Dead Weight Tonnage

By Isak Laestander

November nineteenth again. The water's cold, much colder than it usually is at this time of year, and everything living seems to have stopped – frozen still with expectation. Although none of them hear as well as I do it seems that the fauna of the sea possess a sense which I cannot replicate, a sense the associated organ of which I am missing. Far above me a gull comes to rest at the surface, and a ten-armed squid fixes its eye on it. Today is the anniversary of the Fall.

I fell among many others. Not because my wings melted, or were clipped, no – we all fell just the same: On board a ship whose prime purpose and sin both were greed. Who or what it was that cracked the side remains, among a few other things, a mystery. Whether the punishment was divine or accidental – a result of utterly random compass-dance – who can say?

I am the only one left. Of the others, not much remains. They lie floating, anchored or unrestrained, in the many rooms of the ship. Some of them are nothing but scaffolding now, all life washed out, whereas others, arguably, look better than the day they died. The category under which I myself should be filed is difficult to determine – all that I am lies held as in a vise between a heavy oak bookshelf and the rotting floor, and through my eyes all is black.

The first thing I had to learn was control. Control over the runaway beat of my own heart, my breathing, a forcing away of the fear and panic, a washing of the stinging wound central to my mind with fresh, sweet

water. Once I had attained these things, my senses returned to me – and the first thing I felt was the weight of the bookcase, immovable beyond doubt. In my pocket of stagnant air the odors were of the ship and all it contained; saffron, black pepper, prized nutmeg; the dusty silver in the hold; salt, not diluted in liquid but crystallized, growing; someone or many someones decomposing; sweat and gunpowder and myself, an overwhelmingly *human* smell now fading, a smell I had never thought to feel until now, when the salt claimed my world entire... With time all this was taken by the sea. The spices we were to carry, my rotting comrades, the signs that this had been a place where people once lived; all of this was spread thin, washed out, for the sharks on the far coasts of the Southern Ocean to stop, taste, and inevitably forget.

In perfect step with this washing out I would soon find my dreams fading as well. In sleep, I had been able to pretend. But now, when the dark took me, I no longer saw the lowlands onto which I had been born, the starry blanket sky of my childhood pulled down to hover just above the treetops. Now the sea had taken me, and thus my dreams were filled with billowing waves and storms of steel, below which I would tread water to stay afloat. However terrible the hours between these dreams were, at least I had company. When I would wake, unbearably, all I had to do was stay quiet, and within minutes the sandpaper scratching of claws – tireless and digging for something, the paws of the ship rats – would surround me. And then, the jarring sound, as of a carpenter's plane, when the cats would take them. Each time I shed a tear, I think, for I knew that this (like the odors) was not to be forever. Indeed:

when the mice ran out the rasp of the planes went quiet, and I was once again alone.

At closing time every drunkard is tossed out headfirst, but he does not go home. He staggers along the cobblestone streets, and falls through the door of the first place that hasn't yet turned out the lights. Step by step, his nightly businesses are whittled down: from games of cards, to games of dice, to games of betting, to games of drinking, until the sun rises yet again and all starts over. At the bottom of the ocean, no sun ever rises. As such, so far, I have been robbed of my comrades. Then I took to dreaming, and when the Great Flood reached me there I made merry with the cats and rats. When they too left me, all I had were my own senses – and in their subsequent sharpening I had no say. I went from suspended in an infinite silence, broken only by the lapping water around me, to a living conduit of a cacophony of digging, boring, clattering, slamming, sucking, rolling, murmuring... Each of the sounds of the sea came to me, utterly inseparable to start, and I suddenly realized that the ship in its entirety was clear to me. How it had been broken against the rocks of the ocean bed (just behind the foremast) and the lack of flooding in the Captain's quarters (that part echoed, as if filled with air, but he himself was certainly already dead) – these things I could see, somehow, a sixth or seventh sense rediscovered, worthless when I had my eyes but now all that I could trust. As time went on, this 'ability' grew, and I would come to realize that what I was hearing were the shipworms chewing through drowned timber; hermit crabs migrating across copper pots; a whispering choir of swaying arms as the colony of barnacles that had made the mainmast their home searched the currents

for food; a world full not of death, as I had previously thought, but of life.

Today, as I mentioned, the anniversary has come. It is not the first but the twenty-fifth, and the water is colder than any water November has ever brought. My world of shipworms, hermit crabs and barnacles has been stilled for the first time since I was appointed to my post as lone observer of the seabed. They have all fallen silent, hidden in claustrophobic places, waiting for something that I, for once, cannot hear. All I can see is the ten-armed squid, gaze locked onto its feathered meal... and now it too turns, fleeing head over heels downwards, to hide in the sand just over there, beyond where the seaweed plain becomes a sheer drop. Something is here but I cannot hear it, and my heart is awoken from its slumber to play a few heavy beats. It is a beating so loud that all else is drowned out, a war drummer that refuses to stop playing, a signal for the last ten standing of the *compagnie* to douse that inner flame and charge. So loud it turns me blind.

In water, there is magic. In the dance of crabs, the tunnels of worms... All that moves down here, living or otherwise (the tactful swaying of seaweed) speaks a language that I, even after twenty-five years steeped in it, have not yet managed to decipher. Perhaps there are souls here, twirling through the oceans in a world-spanning midsummer dance, dead millions hand in hand and with them migrating shoals of eels, abandoned swirling glass like depth-charge-fragmentation, clams as blind as I. Perhaps, when my time comes, I will be one of them. It is a calming thought, but I can't avoid thinking that if I just had a few more years – a few more repetitions of this divine sheet of music the sea so tirelessly plays to those who

care to listen – then I would be able to crack the oyster which holds the shimmering secret.

Now, I can hear it. It has come close enough. What rattles against the hull is a chain, at the end of which a man hangs. His heartbeats are powerful and unflinching, his breaths shallow and hurried. He is sealed within what seems to be a water-proofed barrel, and his arms are sticking out, not unlike antennae. Through a window of thick glass he observes the world through his eyes. This is why he cannot see me. He will lift our ship from the peace of its ocean tomb, and in doing so he will find three tonnes of silver and two-hundred and twenty more or less decomposed bodies. When he reaches this room, the room in which I am pinned to the floor, I will be gone.

For each and every time I, on dry land, have been faced with that barbed dilemma that sticks as if magnetic to mind, that first truly strange question we nowadays hear as children:

“If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it still make a sound?”

I have not once considered the answer:

“Must we know?”

When I was young my answer was definite and unshakeable: such a tree fell like any other. Perhaps my answer would have been different if the tree was a man, the forest an ocean, and the sound a life.

The Stitcher **By J.L.Cres**

“Not again Hanna! I don’t understand why you just can’t sit still and be quiet in class.” My current foster mother yells while throwing her hands up in frustration. “All you have to do is act normal. Sit there and listen like the other kids. It’s simple.”

“But—” I start to say before she interrupts.

“No *buts*, Hanna. This is honestly the last straw. I need to call your case worker and discuss this. I can’t be getting an email or phone call every day from the school! I’m working...do you understand? I’m too busy to be getting bothered every five seconds with your drama.” Evelyn states grabbing her phone and angrily punching in numbers while I stand there and try to fix the situation. “Do you know how this reflects back on me? I swear that school thinks I’m the worst parent there!”

“What kind of tea is harder to swallow?” I abruptly ask trying to lighten up the situation. It would be a bonus if I could make her laugh. Laughing makes everyone in a better mood. Ever since I was a child, I always tried to make people laugh and stay positive. Life is hard, no sense in dwelling on it.

Huffing out an irritated breath as though she’s already done with me and my stupid jokes she asks, “I don’t know...”

“*Reali-tea*. Get it?” I say with a smile and a slightly forced chuckle. Evelyn just stares at me with an expressionless face before looking back down at her phone.

Shoot on a hoop! I mentally swear to myself while my mind races. The last thing I want is to go to *another* foster family. This is my fifth family and I’m probably about to move onto my sixth now. *Good going Hanna...*

I'm seventeen and I only have about six months left before I age out of the system. *Six months, one week, two days and 47 minutes to be precise, not that I'm counting or anything.*

"Yes, hello? Winnie? We need to talk about Hanna. She's gotten in trouble again...yes...that's right it was at school..." Evelyn starts to say giving me a stern look before turning and entering her bedroom then closing the door.

I take a deep breath to try and quiet my thoughts but it's no use. It never works except for one way. Deciding some fresh air might help, I leave the suffocating suburban townhome we live in and meander down the street to the park, once again lost in my mess of a brain.

I've always been different than other kids. It's...noticeable. And—I don't mean physically. I'm lost in my thoughts more often than I'm not. I find it hard to focus on one thing at a time and I'm distracted. A lot. Usually, I'm imagining stories in my head, several in fact. Like seeing a flickering screen showing snapshots or trailers of upcoming movies which I can weave together to form a story—that's my mind. Sometimes they seem so real. Sometimes I make them up based on the people around me. I've even had a few times where I would imagine a whole story and then coincidentally see a similar situation play out in front of me. Weird, right?

I'm also extremely energetic. Or as my previous foster parents say—hyperactive. Distracted. Impulsive. Forgetful. I swear, I don't do it on purpose! I really do try to be the "good" daughter, but I have so many *thoughts*.

Most of the time my trouble has to do with school, like today. Prior foster parents have tried everything including therapy and medications, which I refused to take. They made me feel "yucky" and tired...not like myself. I actually like how my mind works and—I'm getting straight A's, so I don't

really understand the problem. I quickly started to flush their downer meds down the toilet (hehe get it?) which unfortunately resulted in them bringing me back to the doctor for medication adjustments over and over.

My teacher, who never laughs at my jokes or silly quips, had consulted an "intervention specialist." Evelyn had quickly agreed wanting to "fix" the situation in any way so she could go back to her normal life and not get phone calls daily from the school. What I didn't know, was that this intervention consisted of almost five people in a room that analyzed me and basically blamed me for everything wrong going on in the classroom. No one thought to ask my opinion, so I just smiled and nodded along. Promised to try harder and agreed with them. They gave me some scratchy thing on my desk that I'm supposed to rub and a bracelet that's supposed to help me focus but it's kind of ugly, so I threw it out.

The other kids find me funny and we get along ok. I guess you could call me the class clown. They love my antics in class, especially when I get in trouble, but they also don't want to be associated with me. I don't really have that one person who truly knows me. A best friend. Someone who gets me and the way my mind works. I've moved around a lot so it's hard to establish a relationship with other kids my age.

Finding a nice spot on a bench in the park where I can people watch, I sit down.

There're several things going on in the park right now and different scenarios instantly flood my mind. My thoughts weave together in a complex organized chaos as I stare off into space. Legs bouncing in anticipation, I try to focus in on the first scene.

A little boy is sitting on a blanket with his mom. He's really only a toddler—maybe two? As the mom clicks away on her phone, he longingly stares at two older kids kicking

a soccer ball. I see a tablet near his feet that his mom nudges towards him to keep him busy, but he's focused on the ball. Back and forth. Back and forth. My mind latches onto the situation and I pick a scenario that makes me smile. The soccer ball flies towards the toddler who squeals in excitement and pounces. His little body lands on the ball but it squishes out from under him and rolls towards the mom effectively knocking her phone to the ground causing her to look up in surprise. The older boys run over with apologies, but the mom just laughs and starts to tickle her toddler who reaches for the ball again. This results in all of them playing a group game of soccer. A click of completion echoes through my mind pausing my thoughts in blissful silence. I sigh in relief. This is my second favorite part other than seeing a happy ending to the story, the silence—the stillness—after I complete an altering or weaving of different scenes. A few seconds later my mind scrambles and flickers with possibilities again. I subsequently latch onto the next scenario.

A lonely old man is walking with his cane towards the central fountain where he eventually stops. He looks defeated and hopeless as he slumps down onto the edge of the fountain reaching over and running his fingers on the surface of the water. I see a plain gold ring on his left hand as he reaches down. Looking around, I don't see anyone with him. A flicker of grief and the image of a funeral run through my mind before I see another hand wearing a similar ring resting on her chest. I sort through the options in my mind on how best to mend this one. Then smiling and seeing a small black cat near the trash can a few paces away, I nod my head even though I'm unaware of my body when I'm in this state. The black cat hesitantly looks up and takes a few steps towards the old man almost as if compelled. It doesn't want to leave its food source. It's hungry and has lived on the streets since it was an abandoned

kitten. Its skinny frame is evidence of that. I weave images together rapidly creating a story involving the two of them. The black cat approaches and weaves between the old man's legs meowing and causing him to startle before looking down. He automatically reaches to pet the lanky cat. Then scratching on its back, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small packet of crackers. The cat hops onto his lap making him smile fondly and hand feed him. *Click*. Another one done. Then—silence and stillness as my thoughts clear for a moment.

I lean back a bit on the bench starting to feel the stirrings of fatigue before my mind vamps up again with intermixed thoughts. I can usually only complete two stories or weave two scenarios before I'm spent. But for whatever reason today, my mind needs to do another one before it will settle down.

There's a middle-aged woman in a park employee uniform walking up to the trash cans. She reaches out with one full sleeve tattooed arm and—a residual right arm that ends just after her elbow. Watching her for a minute I see one of her tattoos has the letters POW. She looks tough...and does her job efficiently cleaning up the area in no time. A few college-aged kids walk past her conversing and laughing before one just throws his fast-food wrapper on the ground. It's not even close to the trash can and prompts the woman to look up and shout out something to him. Different scenarios flicker through my head again and I close my eyes searching for the right one before weaving it together in the perfect film. When I open my eyes, I see my creation unfold in reality.

The group of kids stop talking and turn around. The one who dropped the trash squints at the park maintenance employee before mouthing the words *freak*. One of his friends in the group elbows him and says something. He mutters reaching into the pocket of his perfectly pressed and expensive looking trousers with a smirk before pulling

out a dollar and throwing that down by his wrapper. He doesn't notice the small white rectangular paper fall out from his pocket before he laughs derisively and walks off with his buddies. The woman stares in their direction with a closed off expression and takes a deep breath. She kneels down and picks up his mess. Just as she's about to throw the trash away she looks at the small white paper. A smile blooms on her face in excitement before conflict enters her expression. She looks up to shout out to them, but they're gone. I can see the iridescent colors on the lottery card from here flash in the sunlight before she gets back to work. *Click.* I feel the stillness and my mind clears. But I can't help the wish to see that woman's face when she learns she just won the lottery.

I wait for my mind to start back up with various scenarios and intermixing thoughts, but instead I just get filled with the normal ones.

Hearing a soft humming tune, I glance to my right and see an older woman resting on the bench next to mine feeding the birds. They scatter when I shift around to watch, and my book bag gets knocked over. *Opps.*

"Why did the bird go to the hospital?" I awkwardly say to her in a loud voice thinking she might not hear me well given she looks at least ninety. Her head tilts towards me and she smiles accentuating the wrinkles on her face.

"To get a *tweet-ment!*" I smile with eyebrows raised waiting for her reaction. She doesn't disappoint and hoots loudly while slapping her leg.

"That's a good one. Luckily, I know what a tweet is from my granddaughter. Come here child and talk with Bernie." She says patting the bench next to her.

"Sorry about scaring your birds." I say sitting down closer to her.

Her intense black eyes focus on me. "They'll be back. They always come back.

Now...tell me what a Stitcher is doing in my neck of the woods. Or should I say park? I've never seen you here and I've lived here a long time, child."

I look at her a bit leery now wondering if she's lost her marbles. I mean...she's old. Her face is basically wrinkles laying on top of wrinkles pulled down by gravity. But—when I look into her intense black eyes all I see is intelligence. I feel...*bare.* Like she can see directly into me under all my layers of positivity, jokes, and hyperactivity.

"What—um—what are you talking about? I'm not really into knitting...or stitching as you call it. I've only been here for about five months. I moved in before my senior year started."

"Ahh. I was out of town for a bit and haven't really been around lately, so I must have missed you. Someone should have notified me of your relocation. And—no child, I'm not talking about knitting or sewing but I suppose it's similar in a way. I called you a Stitcher because that's what you are."

"What's a Stitcher? And why would someone need to notify you that I moved here?" I ask curiously.

She twists her mouth to the side in irritation and then squishes her nose up in contemplation before deciding on how to answer me. "You don't know do you? I thought you were teasing me, seeing as how you liked to joke earlier." She taps one extremely long and *sharp* fingernail against her chin in thought. "A Stitcher is a mind weaver. A supernatural being who can mend and *stitch* together a situation to their liking. They can create a result that's the most beneficial to them or others. I don't know all the details seeing as I'm just an old witch but from what I've heard that's the gist of it. Is that not what you were doing there watching those people? I could feel your power from over here. It was fascinating."

Mouth gaping in shock I sputter, “How-how did you—Wait...did you say supernatural? Like Professor X? I’m like an X-man?”

She chuckles again which quickly turns into a hacking cough then answers. “Ahh, not quite like that but yes, I did say supernatural. You are like me. Born and function differently than humans but we look the same on the outside. Your parents should have contacted me through our appropriate channels once you moved here. I’m not sure how you slipped through the cracks per se. But all supernaturals are monitored under their elder. Which—for you—is me. We won’t have any issues as long as you keep your powers subtle. Don’t make any big waves or too obvious changes.”

“Umm...ok. Well...I don’t have any parents. I’m in the system and well—” I say breathing out harshly before placing a smile on my face again. *Mindset is everything.* “I’m sure after this morning I’ll be moved again to another family. So, you shouldn’t bother yourself.”

“Child...?” She starts to say.

“Hanna. Ms—?”

“Lora. It’s short for Loralinda. And—please, don’t joke. If you want to stay, then stay. Stop fooling around. You have power, use it for yourself. Don’t just wish things were better, *make* it better.” Then thinking for a moment, she tacks on, “Within reason, of course.”

When I left Lora, the witch, I couldn’t stop thinking about her words.

Make it better. She said.

All my life, I thought I lacked control. Control of my life. Of my situation. Of my mind. I let others try to mold me. Force me into their box or attempt to. “*Be normal Hanna. Focus Hanna. Stop fidgeting Hanna. Pay attention Hanna. Sit still...*”

Maybe I should take control.

The next day at school was no different than the others. I hardly moved from

my desk trying to follow my teacher’s rules and sit still, not distracting the other students. But—my pencil rolled off my desk and when I reached to grab it from the floor my arm knocked over my binder full of papers. A fluttering chaos ensued in the back corner of the classroom where Mrs. Michelli makes me sit. Several kids snickered and looked my way while I whispered, *sorry, nothing to see here.*

Mrs. Michelli looks back at me from her smart board and her mouth tightens into a firm disapproving line. *Here it comes. Detention again.* She always tends to think the worst without even stopping to ask. My body tenses up like a deer in headlights waiting for the blow while my mind is a mess of scenarios.

Wait...what if I... I latch onto a flicker of my thoughts where things result in a more positive outcome for me and I “stitch” them together as Lora called it.

“Hanna! You’re distracting the class *again.* Have you been paying attention at all? This is pre-calculus, and you can’t afford to not pay attention.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Michelli. It was an accident. I really was paying attention.” She just stares at me with an irritated look on her face then opens her mouth to likely force me to the school office. But before she can, I blurt out, “What is a math teacher’s favorite snake?” Her expression changes to one of confusion. Clearly, I’ve stumped her and successfully distracted her.

I pause for dramatic effect then state with a smile. “A *Pi*-thon. Get it?”

Several students laugh out loud, and Mrs. Michelli actually surprises herself when a huff of a laugh passes her lips. She shakes her head in amusement then turns around and continues to write math problems across the board. *Click.* I feel the snap of completion internally hit me after successfully “stitching” for myself.

Wow. Now I can focus. Having clear thoughts for the next couple minutes I settle down and take notes. The rest of the day is a breeze when I use my powers just enough to my benefit.

When I'm leaving school at the end of the day, I walk past the outdoor track and football field. There are a few people practicing high jump and several others running with some music playing in the background. It's beautiful weather with clear skies and the sun beaming down. This is as good a place as any, so I sit down in the lower bleachers and start my homework. It's only a five minute walk home and I always liked to do my homework in a place where I'm not under the pressure to sit still at home or at a desk.

"It's you." I hear a girl state from behind me.

Looking over my shoulder I reply, "It's me."

I see a track practice jersey on her and she's tying her shoes two bleacher rows above where I'm sitting.

"You're Hanna? Of course... my grandmother told me about you." She says pulling her dirty blonde hair up in a high ponytail.

"Don't you hate it when someone answers their own questions? I do." I say teasingly with a smile.

She laughs and holds her hand out which I take. "I'm Clarisse. You're funnier than I thought you'd be. I tend to self-dialogue, sorry. My grandmother is Loralinda, who you met yesterday."

I fidget in my seat and stare in shock. "So, you're a..."

"Witch? Yeah. Opps...sorry I did it again! But yeah. You're now on the town's supernatural radar. New girl in town, with powers to boot."

Thoughts racing and different scenarios fly through my head, but I don't take the bait yet. "I don't know for how

long...I'm sure my foster mother will have me moved by the end of the week."

"Nah. You're not going anywhere. I've seen it." Clarisse says with her arms crossed.

"What—why? How do you know?" I state trying to focus on her.

"Because *Na-na*. We are going to be best friends. You're going to move in with me. My family's taken in foster kids before...supernatural of course. All you have to do is work your magic."

Putting my hands on my temples and rubbing, I stand pacing around the bleacher row before turning to her. "You think I should stitch the situation when I get home? Also—I don't know you. I don't even have any friends. Hard to do when you move around so much..." I say with a sardonic smile while trying to keep a positive attitude but obviously failing.

"Dreams can become your reality when your thoughts become actions, *Na-na*. Take action. Flip the script or whatever they say. Just—think of me when you decide. Later. Gotta get to practice." She says casually running off to the track field with a wave of her hand as if she didn't just impart the most inspirational advice anyone's ever given me.

That evening, I took action and stitched my life into my reality. We've been friends ever since.

Twinkle, twinkle

**By Viktoria
Vingmarker**

The first thing I became aware of upon awakening was the crimson digit on the glassy surface of my pod shell – fourteen -

branding me an experienced hibernator. Accompanying the pulse of the throbbing light, my heartrate accelerated from low twenties to my normal fifties, and the familiar spell of dizziness set in like clockwork. Nauseated I slid out of the pod, limbs weak and barely responsive. With a wet thump my body landed on the cold floor. It felt worse than ever to be pulled out of hibernation. This time it was not just my body lagging in its responses, my mind also felt excessively lethargic. Unable to engage with the post-hibernation routine I turned over and wished for more sleep, normal sleep, sleep with dreams. Like a faraway whisper I heard George call my name, summoning me back from the shores of Slumberland.

“Stella. Stella. Acknowledge that you are awake.”

I really could not care less, but my training kicked in and I opened my mouth to obey the instruction. Instead of speech, a clear fountain of chemical vomit spilled over my lips and formed a small pool on the floor. Somehow my retching seemed to satisfy George’s programming because it proceeded to the next phase of the Slumber Extraction Protocol. It urged me to move away from my pod, so I crawled over to the conveyor belt at the center of the dormitory and let myself be transported through the steam shower and into the wardrobe. There the conveyor belt paused as my body was scanned and an appropriately tailored suit was chosen from storage.

Still only able to sit up with the greatest effort I soon gave up and struggled to slip into the suit while lying down. Panting from the exertion, hands trembling wildly, I finally gave up and left the front zipper partially open. This should have paused the Protocol

until I had regained enough strength to finish getting properly dressed, but – again – George seemed to have gotten a bit sloppy since my last tour out of hibernation. The belt jerked into motion and as I entered the canteen, I could see the tray already being lowered from the hatch. Beside the prescribed exhilarant in its standardized pink bottle, lay a white pill I had never seen before.

“What’s this?”

“Please clarify.”

“What’s this pill? I’ve never seen it before.”

“It is a little something that Patrick cooked up on his last sojourn.”

“A little something of what, exactly?”

I only had a faint grasp of Patrick’s personality, only ever having met him in person at the orientation day before our departure from Tellus. All I knew was that he was an astrochemist, apparently beginning his career as some child genius destined for chemical greatness. But then he had chosen cosmos over cosmetics – a definitive dead end to any promising career. Our hibernation schedules had not yet allowed us to be awake at the same time. Same could be said about the rest of the Ops Crew. Despite millennia together we were still strangers. Having our conversations relayed through George, the crew had a truly warped way of socializing. The delayed catching up spanned decades and amounted to little more than fragmented monologues. At least it spared us grating group dynamics and interpersonal clashes, I thought and was suddenly overwhelmed by childhood memories of crèche harassments and later, corporate bullies making life unbearable.

“He called it a ‘Bouquet of Joy and Wonder,’ invented as a remedy to the boredom he seemed to have suffered from at the end of his watch,” George continued and interrupted my meandering mind.

“A drug then?”

“I would not know, but he seemed happy enough taking it.”

“Who else has been awake after that? Did they try it? How did it affect them?” I had always been cautious around drugs. The hibernation cocktail was one of my few concessions. I preferred the organic produce from the greenhouse and often cooked my own food during my watch periods.

“Susanna and Tefir have had their watches after Patrick. Both utilized the pill. Tefir considerably more often than Susanna. They both appeared adequate. No alarms from their pods.”

Knowing Tefir to be somewhat of a restless hothead I pocketed the pill and drank the sweet sludge. It instantly worked its magic and I could literally feel my bones strengthen. A tingling sensation, almost like being tickled from the inside, told me the muscles were tightening up. I took a few deep breaths, coughed up some cryophlegm and spat it out on the tray. Steadying myself against the dining table I feebly pulled my still estranged body up on its feet. Swaying like a drunkard I waited for the vertigo to pass before I walked the few paces that led to the recovery chamber with all its exercise equipment. There was nothing to it, rehab awaited me. Whatever circumstance had caused George to initiate my wake-up call needed to be handled.

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Still a bit drowsy, but corporally functional, I left the recovery chamber six hours later. I walked past the hydroponic farm to gather up some of the recently roboharvested veggies from the compost. Everything looked normal in the agrihall. Plants and veggies ripened in succession and the soil production continued as planned. All bio-resources that were not circled back into the farm got packed in boxes. The soil boxes were stacking up nicely in the adjoining cargo hall, waiting for the terraforming to enter the phase when the biosoil would be added to the regolith down below. I patted the compost affectionately and walked to the command center.

The bridge deck was a bit of a mess. The desk was cluttered with mugs and plates. With a sigh I stacked the dirty dishes on one of the two chairs, spun it around so I would not have to see the mess, and sat down on the other. As I made myself comfortable in front of the command panel I nibbled on some Pak Choi leaves. They were a bit soggy, but still had the satisfying crunch that none of the artificial foodstuffs managed to replicate. I scanned the panel for information. Nothing appeared to be out of order. All aerometer lights shone green and the grid of instruments tracking the complicated workings of a myriad infrastructure pathways were also well within any boundaries of concern.

“George? What’s going on here? Why did you wake me up?”

Instead of a vocal reply from the ship’s host, one of the overhead screens was lowered down in front of me. It displayed a film sequence from the dusk lit surface of Hurray. By now the busy scurrying of the swarm robots was a familiar view. I had spent countless hours watching the construction of Festiville, as well as the parallel efforts at

terraforming, on all my former watches. At first everything seemed to be unfolding in the same manner as before, but the longer I watched the more uneasy I felt. Nothing stood out as obviously wrong, which would have explained why the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, but something was not quite right either. There was something about how the moon – HipHip - was reflected ... or rather, *not* reflected. I wasn't sure what it was, but something was definitely off.

“Show me Tefir’s log.”

The image on the screen flickered off and was replaced by Tefir’s face. He looked haggard. Seeing his usually handsome face droop and hearing him slur as he spoke, I decided that it probably was a good idea to stay away from Patrick’s pill.

I can't make sense of the readings, he mumbled. The atmospheric records show progress and setbacks alternating in the same way we've seen from the start. But when I sent the droid down ...

Here his head dropped into his hands and he rocked back and forth in his seat, murmuring to himself. Worried, I called up the instrumental log corresponding in time to his personal vidlog entry and scrolled down to the appendix outlining how an independent droid indeed had been assembled and sent down the elevator. Upon landing its recordings had stopped. Presumably it had crashed, but all the way through its passage into Hurray’s atmosphere the readings said ‘0.’ It was picking up nothing. Where there should have been at least small amounts of greenhouse gases by now there was nothing. Nada. Zilch.

The droid must have malfunctioned. It was the only reasonable explanation. Fair

enough. That could happen even to a master mechanic such as Tefir. But why did he then react with such despair? I was puzzled by his utter dismay at the results. Then I noticed the scroll marker indicating more appendices. With increasing worry, I counted to thirty-four more droids, each one adjusted to compensate for Tefir’s shifting hypotheses of why the previous ones had failed to register any trace of an atmosphere. All with the same reading: 0. And all of them cut off from communication upon reaching the surface.

What was going on?

“George? What do you make of this?”

Normally so quick to reply, George stayed silent.

“George?”

Silence.

“GEORGE!!!”

After what felt like an eternity George’s polite voice came through the speakers.

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you answer when I called?”

“What do you mean? I just did.” It sounded genuinely perplexed at my accusation of insubordination.

“I had to call for you many times before you replied.”

Such a thing had never happened before, and it added to the eerie mood I had gotten into from watching and reading Tefir’s log.

“Why didn’t you respond?”

Again, my question was met with silence. This time, no matter how many times I called out its name - or how loudly, or how

angrily, or how desperately - George did not reply. Not only that, the lights also switched off and every screen blacked out. The dark silence deepened as the whirring noise from the fans faded away. Certain that something was terribly wrong, I was keenly aware that it was up to me to fix it. If Tefir had gone back to sleep, he must eventually have fixed the problem. Sadly, there was no log entry about it. Apparently, it had only been a temporary fix. Unless this was a whole new problem. What should I do? It was still so hard to think. Finally, freaked by the gloomy stillness and hard pressed to break my inaction, I decided to descend to the surface to check it out for myself. Machines are terrific tools, but they can get messed up by all sorts of elemental forces. Sometimes our human senses are more resilient and reliable.

I rose from the desk with some semblance of determination and exited the command center. The thought of radiation exposure scared me, but not fixing a problem scared me even more. Feeling my way along the corridor I squinted to ameliorate the stroboscopic effect of the flickering emergency lights. I couldn't shake off a looming sense of doom as I headed for the elevator lock.

Eleven suits hung around the locker room, husks of my fellow crewmates. Three niches were empty, and two suits lay crumpled on the floor. Such a mess would never have been tolerated as we set out on our mission. I shuddered as I stepped into the gravity boots and pulled up the exoshell over the tightly fitted astrosuit. Pressing the button on my solar plexus initiated the adaptation sequence and the segments of the exoshell began to squeeze and twist to shape themselves to my body. Lastly, I put on the helmet. There was a smudge on the visor and

instinctively I felt a surge of irritation at the sloppiness. Dirty dishes and lack of care of their own equipment was one thing, disrespecting my things was something else. I tried to suppress my indignation by reminding myself that these people were all I had, now and forever more. We were all in this together. In the past two thousand years I had only properly lived forty-four. All in all, a scant three of those years had been spent together with any of the other crew members, but knowing they were here made all the difference. Even though I had often questioned my initial bravado – which had been rocket-fueled by the global euphoria at the well-timed chance discovery of the Jubilee solar system and its promising exoplanet – I remained fully committed to our shared mission to lay the groundwork for the colonization of Hurray. After all, there was no going back to Tellus. Not for us anyway. Not anymore. And soon, more ships were due to arrive. They should be here any year now. If they had managed to survive on the smouldering Tellus long enough to complete the fleet, that is. Shaking off that dystopian thought I turned to the elevator door and pressed the key.

*

This was only my third time outside the ship and the hissing air lock made me utterly uncomfortable. Having breathable air sucked out from around me was deeply unsettling, even with oxygen tubes strapped to my back. They would last me a week, a safe margin for my trip down the elevator and back again. The elevator started its drop as soon as the doors closed behind me and I felt the nausea return as a living lump in my throat.

Its main use being the transportation of goods, the elevator car was fitted with only a

narrow slit of windowpane. I stared out at the blackness, but the void still had such a disheartening effect that I closed my eyes. Calling it space, or the Universe, somehow signified an inhabited place, and that was not my experience. It was a dead, empty void. My fear of the void was a shameful discovery that I never could have imagined during my astronaut training, and barely to this day accepted. A space missionary hating space? That would not hold. Better to suppress and refocus. The plan was after all to inhabit the new planet. Space was a mere waiting room.

Ignoring the vast nothingness around me I turned towards solid ground, looking down at Hurray, far below my feet. Beyond the rocky sphere shone the warm light from our new Mother Sun – Jubilee. Like a shy smaller sibling the moon HipHip peeked over the horizon. Increasingly, details of the surface were revealed as the car sped down the cable and within hours I could discern some large constructs and the basic layout of a city grid within the troughlike geological formation we enthusiastically had named ‘Carnivalley.’ The speed with which the elevator car was approaching the surface became physically tangible as the planet’s topographic elements came more and more into clear view. I felt my body stiffen as if bracing itself against a collision, but then the brakes switched on. Drained of their anxious tension my muscles collapsed and I sagged down against the wall where I remained seated for the last hour of the descent.

As the elevator door slid open I gingerly stepped out into the station. It looked like an abandoned airport, which I guess it in a way was. No signs of Tefir’s droids either. Gradually the suit adjusted itself to the planet’s gravity and temperature and I headed out of the empty building. I walked down a

ramp and onto the city’s main avenue. So, here it was. Festiville. This was my first planetary visit. I had only ever seen the city on video and as a holo-blueprint. The other ‘space promenades’ had been just outside the ship: to patch up a hole in the solar membrane and to replace some fatigued hull plates. As the designated biologist-farmer I was exempt from almost all spacewalks. Thankfully. I worked my magic indoors. Until we saw more real progress with the terraforming. Then I would blossom. Literally, and metaphorically.

The city was quite beautiful in its haunting serenity. No sounds. No movements. I walked down the avenue, peering down streets between the buildings, half expecting people to walk about on everyday errands. Despite the vacant feel of the place there was such similarity between the landscape of Festiville and what I remembered from my desert hometown back on Tellus that I probably would not have been too surprised if my father had stepped out of one of the buildings, waving his callused hand and asking if I had finished my chores for the day.

Snatched from my daydreaming, I startled when a small rover drove out from one of the alleys. It too seemed startled by my presence. It stopped dead in its tracks, swept its camera over me, then turned around and quickly drove back into the alley. Its reaction made me chuckle. Had it been human I would have deemed it a social phobic. Perhaps I gave the poor thing a panic attack.

I continued down the paved road in a slightly better mood, feeling drawn towards a large building at the end of the avenue. The road angled up into another ramp as I approached the building. Naturally the

infrastructure was designed for easy access for all the wheeled rovers and droids that had been sent down to build this human settlement and to launch and oversee the terraforming project. Accommodations adapted to human needs and preferences would be set in place once the atmosphere had stabilized and we could begin preparations for moving off the ship. Four times we had been near that goal, but each time something had happened that collapsed the integrity of the atmospheric layer. At this point it was still a settlement of machines only.

Walking up the incline towards the entrance I recalled how the instruments and records had shown a steady progress of the basic terraforming efforts during my last watch. But there were no signs of the expected vegetation or liquid water. The world was a dusty blanket of regolith, from which protruded stark concrete buildings, made from the same regolith. A monochromatic world devoid of life.

I arrived at the grand building and stepped into a huge entrance hall. Drifts of regolith dust leaned against the far walls, like ashen snow. At sharp angles from the vast room jutted six corridors. I chose one to my right and walked down a long corridor, glancing into the smaller rooms that lined one of its sides. The rooms were of the same size and they were empty, except three that were closed up again. I stopped at one of the blocked doorways and touched the 3D-printed mortar. Thinking there must have been a design change at some point I turned around to look out the floor-to-ceiling-windows that covered the opposite wall. Fascinating as a new planet was, I found myself mesmerized instead by the sparse architecture. Human eyes drawn to human

artefacts. Everything was neatly built in a vaguely art deco-like style and would probably make for comfortable habitation once we could move down here. Maybe one of these rooms will be my office. How wonderful it will be to return to a more normal way of life, a planet-based life, I thought with a smile stretching my unused facial muscles.

My interest was stirred, and I walked into one of the rooms, trying to imagine what my life would be like living down here rather than rummaging around the all too well-known compartments and eco-parks of the great ship. The Whale, as we called it – partly out of affection, mostly out of apprehension – was intimately known, but had never felt like a home. I could really do with a change of scenery. We all could. And how wonderful it would be to escape the cryoloop. Hibernation was really starting to take its toll on me.

That realization reminded me of why I had come down here in the first place. It slowly registered with me what a sharp discrepancy there was between the records relayed from the planet up to the Whale and how the actual reality appeared at ground level. And where had all those droids gone? I had to find out what was going on.

I took a final look around my future office and retraced my steps back outside the building. There I scanned the compound in front of it and around the ramp. It was a broad and empty square, waiting to become a garden. My green instincts kicked in as I automatically tried to picture it lined with trees, shrubs, and the occasional sprinkle of flowers. Maybe birds would nest in those would-be trees one day. If we only could get that atmosphere going ...

A sudden movement at the edge of my visual field pulled me out of my reveries. I looked back down the avenue at the elevator station.

In ice-cold, nerve-shattering horror I saw the elevator cable rising from the station roof. The cable had detached itself. The ship was no longer anchored to Hurray.

Paralyzed, I watched the Whale slowly drift away, trailing the severed elevator cable behind it like a cosmic fishing line. Sailing off with everyone tucked away in the dormitory, ignorant in their cryosleep. And George too ... if it had not broken down completely.

I was stranded.

Abandoned.

Alone.

Before I had time to react, a sea of rovers ominously emerged from the alleyways. Choreographed by their hive mind they split up in smaller units which quickly surrounded me. One of the larger rovers acted pack leader. Prodding me with a sharp stick it nudged me back into the building. I feinted a sideways move, managed to dodge the stick, and jumped over the nearest crest of rovers. My escape was cut off by the continuous wave of rovers surging in from whatever hidden places they were coming from. I tried to run on top of them, using them as steppingstones, but they shrugged me off and I tumbled down onto the ground, stirring up a cloud of fine dust.

Blinded by the dust I felt the rovers picking me up, pinning my arms and legs tightly together with their unyielding pincers, then carrying me back inside the building, down the same corridor I had walked only

moments ago. With a concerted push they dropped me into the very room I had picked for my office. This must have been what Gulliver felt like in the land of the Lilliputians, I thought - surprising myself with a dark sense of humor in the dire situation I suddenly found myself in. I sprang to my feet but every attempt to leave the room was met with a sharp spike. Afraid of rupturing my suit I backed away, but as a printer-rover settled down in the doorway and started spitting out concrete in the gap, I panicked and tried to jump through the rapidly diminishing hole. Again, a forest of sticks blocked my way. Helplessly I resigned and collapsed against the back wall of my office. 'My office' - what a joke!

Finally putting two and two together I realized that the whole terraforming project had been a hoax. After all, I had seen no vegetation, no clouds, nothing. Nothing to show for all those many years of waiting around at the end of a tether. Nothing but concrete paving and concrete buildings. Perfect habitat for droids and rovers, not so much for humans. Tefir's droids had probably given the correct readings after all. There was no atmosphere building up. Perhaps there never had been. Other than brief visits from the crew at the outset of the terraforming project - which, ironically, mainly had been to inspect the integrity of the cable's attachment to the platform - this place had solely been occupied by our trusted machines. Truly, it was more their home than it was ours. But they worked according to our instructions. Did they not?

I shuddered and wrapped my arms around myself in a comforting embrace. I had no hope of striking a bargain with the swarming rovers outside the room, them being only simple machines and all. It was

against my nature to give up, but fatal danger lie in all my current options. Even if I managed to escape this room, where would that leave me? The Whale was out of reach, and in a few days' time I would run out of oxygen. Faster if I continued to breathe this heavily. Realizing that it made no practical difference whether I stayed or if I managed to break free and run out into Festiville, I slumped down in one of the corners and faced what once could have been my office door. The rovers continued their construction work, unmoved by my sobs.

When my tears had dried up, I rose and walked over to the doorway again. Only a small gap remained. Too small for my body to get through, and the printed mortar had already solidified. Soon I would be completely sealed into this room. Like a pharaonic tomb. Only, I was no god and could not expect to be welcomed into a paradisiac afterlife.

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I do not know if it was a gesture of kindness or one of cruelty, most likely indifference, but in the end a small round hole was left in the sealed-up doorway. Like the porthole on a ship. From it I had a view out across the square and beyond. In the dark sky I saw a distinct sparkle. It might have come from the gleaming hull of the Whale, or it might just have been a distant, twinkling star. Damned be the stars. Cursed be Man for looking up at the night sky and dreaming of space conquests. There was nothing here for us. Only dust.

A movement in the corridor caught my attention. A large droid appeared out of the shadows, silently watching me. It had a regal composure, and its build resembled a human body. It had stocky legs ending in rover

wheels, and very long arms with knuckles almost touching the ground. Like a gorilla. A machine gorilla. It was definitely not one of our designs. A glint on its faceplate had the sinister gleam of an evolved mind contemplating its next move. Most likely it was just my imagination, an exaggeration by my highly strung mind. Nevertheless, it sent shivers down my spine. Slowly, I backed away from the porthole.

From within the mind-numbing despair that suffused me, I suddenly recalled Patrick's pill. Frantic for its promise of amnesia, I kneaded it all the way out of the pocket, along the surface of the inner suit and up towards my trembling lips. I felt my eager desire for oblivion intensify as I felt it on my tongue, but my mouth was too dry to swallow the pill. It stuck to the palate and would not go down my throat. I had to chew it into an acid-tasting paste and suck it down gradually. It tasted awful, but within a literal blink of an eye I was distracted from that foul taste by a ringing in my ears. Funnily, the ringing chimed in a familiar melody. A lullaby from my childhood.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star ...

I crooned as I lay down on the floor.

Quietly humming the soothing tune - few words remembered after all this time - I closed my eyes and curled up.

I soon slipped into the hallowed state of near slumber, wondering for how many years I would sleep this time and whether I would be granted any dreams.

From the porthole, the gorilla's faceplate hummed along with me. Had I not been drugged I would have sworn that it had George's voice.

Then blessed sleep enveloped me and I sailed off towards the twinkling stars.

A Trace of Kex

By Jonathan Nevair

Red paint was no substitute for fresh blood. Any death artist worth their salt on Tiri-Prime knew it, though most refused to bend to the grotesque. Moto-si relished it. She acquiesced to its allure, not for the benefit of those who commissioned her talent, but for selfish reasons left unspoken.

The fresh batch that dripped from her brush, bought from a merchant in Grazzan's backstreets, couldn't be more than a few hours old. It hadn't yet lost its touch-energy. The soul that gave its life in the service of tradition endured as invisible steam.

Moto-si tilted the thin wooden stem upward over the ceramic bowl. Silky hairs loaded with red liquid dribbled back into the vessel in slow, patient droplets.

Yes, it lingers strong.

Each drop that fell into the pool of viscous crimson sent an unseen tremor through her touch-sense. Though faint, it had still been enough to rouse her enthusiasm for the task at hand.

Moto-si cared not that blood made for better painterly aesthetics. Her deft talent and practiced grace with a brush could compensate for lesser quality materials.

The lure was conjuration. It blew through her artistic soul - a life, a breathing and thinking person's sense-trace lingered in the vessel. What pains and joys had passed through them before they opened a vein for an empire?

Trite and superficial as it was, the mystery amused her. The darker and more hidden secret that drove the art she wouldn't tempt now. That servant linking her to the Touch was better left in the psychic shadows. When a star demon was roused, it disturbed.

If Moto-si were honest, it did far worse than that.

A whiff of brackish air stung her nostrils. She shook off the stench that blew in through the open balcony. The estuaries surrounding Harkle Island and its ancient observatory wouldn't allow her, or anyone else on the planet, to forget its source of prosperity. Tiri-Prime's breezes were a reminder that the boundary between life and death existed as tangible topography, liminal and mysterious. Its scent carried the power to drive an empire.

Kex, that prized resource drawn from the endless coastal waters held properties found nowhere else in known space. 'The Star Demon's perfume.' A phrase that passed in whispers behind closed shutters, shielded from the prying eyes and ears of a public fed with pungent lies and bitter deceptions. Grazzan wielded galactic power born of planetary lifeblood with pride and malevolence.

With Moto-si's prized and guarded talent, it served as their death blessing as well.

"You don't care that it looks better on the skin, do you?" The voice was Peli's, her apprentice.

Moto-si smiled but kept her gaze on the blood seeping off the ends of the fine hairs. "You know I don't," she said and dabbed the brush on the rim of the bowl. With a free hand, she wiped the sweat from her forehead below the narrow metallic headband clasped into her umber skin. Mounted on all death artists, the neurosensors connecting to the observatory's telescope heightened the wearer's touch-sense. Moto-si's thick black

hair, shaved close below the band's boundary, plumed from her crown. The braided strand cascaded down her back like a pitch waterfall. At the midpoint between shoulders and waist, the single braid split into a multitude of woven deltas, fraying open like a flattened paintbrush. Against her tailored jacket and pants and high black boots, it made for an austere yet potent fashion fitting of her post in the Grazzan hierarchy.

Neither merchant nor politician, a death artist stood outside the class structure of those born of privilege. Yet, their astronomical power controlled the fates of all citizens with the luxury of sanctified death. The gift to return to the world of the living in a new body, to thrive in perpetual life as part of the galactic hegemony, separated Grazzan aristocracy from the countless billions who remained bound to a single mortal cycle. Stars, when linked safely, could be priceless weapons of power.

Moto-si's stool creaked as she swiveled from the small table with the bowl back around to the naked corpse suspended upside down in front of her. A wealthy merchant by the looks of him. Her eyes examined the work so far. Calligraphic letters and symbols based on arcane constellations radiated in a spiral from his paunchy belly.

It was easy with this one. His family had been in the sense line for generations. The energy channels linked to the stellar meridians lay close to the surface. The star demon would make quick work of him once she completed the dermatological artistry.

A wealthy merchant would live again, reborn through celestial magic.

With a steady hand, Moto-si dragged the brush across the dead man's stomach. The gesture, a caress both intimate and sinister, left a trail of red across the skin forming the icon of Transition.

"Who is this one?" Her assistant's voice came from over her shoulder.

Moto-si caught the edge of Peli's billowing yellow robe out of the corner of her eye. The apprentice approached and leaned in to observe her work. The young Grazzan's outfit shone like a radiant sun defying the drab and melancholy gray stone of the chamber. Even with the morning light and cool air drifting in from the balcony, the room wouldn't give up its eternal, morbid arrogance. The world might be alive outside on Tiri-Prime, but within the walls of the observatory death clung to the stone.

"You know I can't answer that," Moto-si said and added astronomical punctuations to the markings on the corpse. Would a day come when she could allow the apprentice access to her client's guarded identities?

"Should I raise him higher?" Peli asked.

"Just let me finish this first."

A landscape of pallid skin consumed Moto-si's peripheral vision. Absorbed in the dermatological map, she added a curving line around a small star the size of a fingernail. At the mark's end, she twisted the handle and lifted the brush from the lifeless skin with a delicate rolling motion, blood-laden hairs leaving a precise, pointed tip to the trail of red.

"Amazing," Peli whispered by her side.

Moto-si nodded, indicating to crank the torso higher on the suspension system.

"How do you know when to stop?" the apprentice asked, spinning the metal handle around the pulley.

"You don't *know*. You feel it," Moto-si said, dipping the brush into the bowl of fresh blood. An invisible spark tingled her finger as it splashed onto her skin. The band on her forehead tightened.

Faint light rose within, revealing a presence.

You were young, weren't you?

"Yes."

Too young to give yourself as blood...

"Yes."

Wafting Kex passed into the chamber on the breeze, enough to draw a second presence from the psychic shadows.

"Do not trouble yourself with the source," it said and snarled. *"The child's blood is fresh."*

"You alright, teacher?"

Moto-si snapped back and looked over at Peli.

"What is it?" the young apprentice's amber eyes stared back, confused. Against her bright yellow robe and the ghostly white of the hanging cadaver, her beige skin appeared warm and flush.

A whirlpool turbine whirred to life in the marshes. As the day's harvesting picked up speed, so would the residual Kex from the subterfuges drifting on the breeze.

"It's nothing. Let's get this done," Moto-si said. She didn't want to know any more about this one.

Leave me be, demon.

She sensed the internal shadow fall back into hidden depths. The band loosened its grip on her skin as the star link faded.

Lust for endless life by those with fortune and privilege in Grazzan told of terrible exploitations, but when had the ruling class become so desperate to seek sources in the young?

"Give me a moment," Moto-si said and swung the stool around to the view outside.

Between the heavy folds of black fabric framing the gray stone passage to the terrace, golden light shone on greenish water. Shuttles made their way across the marshes nearer to the mainland, flying in organized lanes. At this distance, they looked like three-dimensional lines drawn in space. Everything appeared as drawings and paintings to Moto-si. The world was a vision of artistry, sketched and brought to life by hands majestic and noble beyond comprehension. Gazing through the observatory telescope opened a realm prodigious and beyond measure. The stars were a sublime tapestry that terrified even the most enlightened Death Artist.

"Is this high enough?" Peli's voice broke the reverie.

Moto-si turned away from life and back to death, a trace of Kex floating on the air.

"Yes, that will do." Her eyes went to the inner thighs of the pudgy corpse where she would place the final points to complete the astronomical meridians.

Why did it have to be one so young?

"Trouble yourself not!" The shadow in her depths pounced and scraped a psychic claw across her soul. She winced in pain and collapsed into the suspended corpse.

"Master!" Peli's arm touched her shoulder.

Moto-si caught herself, hugging her free hand around the cadaver. Chains mounted in the ceiling rattled and creaked.

The demon within cackled. *"The apprentice's time nears."*

You have no right to her. She isn't ready.

The inner power stood on the psychic threshold, defiant.

Go back into the shadows. Moto-si spoke in earnest, eyes shut against its intrusion.

“*Soon, Death Artist... soon.*” The star demon’s voice faded.

“You may let go,” Moto-si said.

Peli’s grip fell away.

In the internal darkness, Moto-si caught the shuffling of the apprentice’s footsteps across the stone floor. If only the shadow demons were as subservient.

“Are you alright, Master?”

Moto-si opened her eyes and pushed herself back onto the stool. She turned to the view of the estuary and inhaled deeply. The faint, brackish traces of Kex told her everything she needed to know.

Soon, she too would bow to the cycle and prostrate herself before the spirits of Transition. Unlike the others in Grazzan’s hierarchy, no one would decorate her corpse with the stellar icons to the gate. A death artist did not return from the void. They were apogee incarnate.

“I’m fine,” Moto-si said in answer to the apprentice. She turned to Peli. The youth wore an expression she’d not seen before.

“Are you, child?” Moto-si asked.

The apprentice nodded.

“Go and wait for me below. I will finish this one alone.”

Did it reach you, apprentice?

Either Peli hid it well, or the shadow’s violation had been beyond the girl’s capacities to recognize. If that were the case, she’d never last long enough to receive her band.

“But I wanted to see the Transition,” Peli said.

“You’ve seen enough.”

Her apprentice nodded and walked to the chamber door.

Moto-si followed Peli’s movements as she undid the iron latch set into black wood. The apprentice heaved open the door. It creaked and groaned from the rust of wear and age in the ever-present brackish air. No advanced technology had ever been allowed on Harkle Island, save for the telescope, for as long as there had been Transitions. It was a custom veiling as ritual, but Moto-si knew it spoke of nothing more than fear. Grazzan belief wreaked of old and tired traditions that justified an ancient, yet fragile power wielded over a galactic empire.

“Master?” Peli hesitated before exiting the room.

“Yes?”

“Why so young? The blood-giver, I mean... is that not forbidden?”

So, it did reach you.

“Welcome to Death, apprentice,” Moto-si said. The corner of her mouth bent in a sardonic smile.

Moto-si tracked a tear as it descended Peli’s cheek. Unsullied adolescence transformed to sober maturity before her eyes as if the youth’s supple skin turned to patina, hardening into aged bronze.

The apprentice would get her band and perpetuate Grazzan’s galactic reign. Peli’s brush would trace elegant constellations and cryptic astronomical signs on the surface of arrogant corpses in this very chamber, returning them to life.

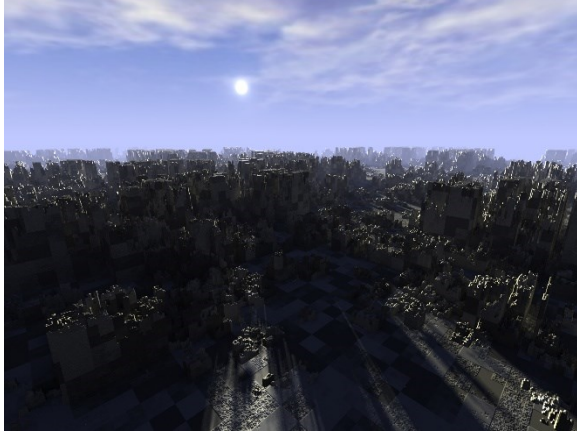
“You may shed that one tear, but no more,” Moto-si said and waved her off.

A thud shook the observatory’s stone bones as the door closed. She turned back to

the corpse. *What follows the stench of pathetic and desperate existence?*

Moto-si leaned in with her brush and swept it over the pale skin of the dead man.

“Only a trace of Kex.”



City Shadows by Tiffanie Gray



The Hidden Library by Alan White