

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES AND MORE

MAR-APR 2021

DARK MATTER

MAGAZINE

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THE REVOLVING COUCH THERAPY RIDE THE LAST MINER MASKS
DRIFTING FROM HER LUNAR RUIN THE HOTTEST ON THE HOTLINE
THE PAST, HISTORY HER TONGUE WAS WEIGHTED WITH SALT
THE THREE BREEDS OF LIE YOUR AUGMENTED HOME IS NOW READY

002

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暴走の邪悪に

暴走の邪悪に

平和

COVER ART

PSYCHEDELIC SAMURAI

by [Mashiene11](#)

Long live Cyberpunk!
A year-and-a-half ago, when I created this piece, The Pandemic had yet to sweep the world. Life has changed. As my neighborhood suffers massive unemployment, funeral cars, silence, and suicide, and my interaction with the Real World is confined to screens, the dystopian future that fuels my work seems to have arrived.

Psychedelic Samurai is an ancient warrior, frozen in time and re-animated in the future noir setting of Neo Tokyo. Equipped with the latest cybernetic wetware technology and a neurological device located on the sternum, it is manually operated with three system modes: *Standby*, *Hunt*, and *Destroy*.

Standby mode (his personal favorite) releases a potent hit of dopamine, serotonin, and other unknown entheogens, which induce the euphoric, altered consciousness required for optimal biological and cybernetic integration. It also protects the organism from permanent psychosis.

Cyberpunk, I assume, will endure. Humanity, I hope, will prevail.

—Mashiene11

Pictured left: *Psychedelic Samurai*





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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

TRUTH, INC.

by [Rob Carroll](#)

Storytelling is an illusion. It's a magic trick played on the mind's eye that when performed correctly makes the real melt away and the fantasy fill the void that is left behind. Good storytelling is never prescriptive. It doesn't tell you what to think, or what to feel, or what to believe. It merely tells you *what is*, real or not, and lets you, the reader, decide the rest. This is because the illusion lies not within the act, but within the mind of the audience. The trick is not making the ball disappear; that's impossible—and that's why if your audience is Penn and Teller, the ball will never disappear, it will just forever go up your sleeve. The actual trick is the prompting of the human mind to create from presented information a new reality in which the disappearance has *actually* taken place. The trick is the prompting of the human mind to create a reality that is based on truth, but born entirely from fiction. It is a respectful and loving ode to paradox.

Since most literary tricks are performed for a knowing audience that is very much expecting and hoping to be fooled, there is never much concern that the creation and subsequent proliferation of these new false realities will result in anything nefarious—even when a panicked populous sometimes suggests otherwise. But what becomes of the world when similar false realities are created for an *unknowing* audience that is complicit only in the sense that ignorance

makes it impossible to be otherwise? Is it really a surprise when the seeds that are sown for such a season result not in harvests, but in plagues? Is it really a surprise that lies told in the name of truth result in harm?

A common theme in Issue 002 of *Dark Matter Magazine* is deception. Lies are told, people are hurt, lives are destroyed. At times, righteous revenge is had, but instead of cheering, you'll wonder more about the cost. Masks are a recurring motif.

In these stories, near and distant futures find humans still plagued by selfish denial, fearful demonization, and exploitation of the other. In these worlds, lying to your neighbor is a victory, lying to yourself is a triumph, and any technology that assists in the efficacy of either is a success.

It makes sense that so many artists working today would choose to explore the nature of truth, reality, and the lies that exist in between. Never before has deception felt so central to the challenge of our time—felt so dominantly part of our present, so unavoidably part of our future, and so inexplicably galvanized by the worst mistakes of our past. It seems to flow now from the ground like the most vile of natural resources, and since all resources equal money, we happily harvest it, package it, and sell it around the globe as a precious commodity valued on par with natural gas and oil and all the other things that help make the machine of the world run.

And run it does.

It's never been easier to spin lies into truths. And the price to do so has never been higher. No lie is too small, no result too inconsequential. Even the tiniest fib has value in today's marketplace, for if properly reinvested, the compound interest it yields will often amaze.

According to the great thirteenth century poet, Dante Alighieri, treachery is the Ninth Circle of Hell, the "lowest, blackest, and farthest from Heaven." It is reserved for those who have betrayed the trust of their families, friends, countries, guests, and Lord. This hierarchy of wrongdoing may feel subjective at first, but in actuality, there is a precise methodology at work. The other sins are deemed to be lesser than treachery because they are *predicated* on the system of truth. Violence is a violation of the truth that human life is sacred. Lust is a violation of the truth that human beings have a divine agency and that we are made to be more than just fleshy objects of desire. But treachery is a violation of the truth itself. Treachery aims to topple the entire system and in doing so, release all sinners from any accountability.

This is why the shadowy men of history that congregate in dark halls and plot the control of the world work so hard to sell a version of the truth that is anything but. They know that without truth, there is no lie, without right, there

is no wrong. But they also know that without either, there is nothing of value to own or control. These figures are not anarchists, they are opportunists. This is why they don't sell the world on violence and fraud, or the outward acceptance of sin. That would never work. It would be a failed trick. So instead, they sell the world on the lie that all men are sinners, save for them. The wrongdoings they commit never happened. The evil in their hearts doesn't exist. And just like that, the ball disappears.

It is a cynical and manipulative weaponization of paradox.

There is good news, though. If you treat the truth as a product, you create an industry, and all industries after time must face the same inescapable eventuality as their forebears: adapt or die. And I believe we are finally reaching that point. The cracks are starting to show. The pedestrians that used to whistle and stroll past the Truth Factories are no longer oblivious to the pollutants the monstrosities are pumping into the air. The pedestrians have stopped whistling and have started to look up. They are beginning to see the destruction these factories have wrought. Of course, this doesn't mean that the factories will suddenly just shut down and give up, but it does mean that their business model is becoming less profitable, and their rent is coming due.

Just like the magicians they base their acts upon, the lying truth tellers will start using every trick in their bag prior to the finale. They will employ clever narratives, subtle misdirection, props, trap doors, and even paid-for audience participation. They will take note of what has failed in the past (prescriptive belief) and pivot to what works for the future (organic co-creation rooted in novelty, transience, and a cynical diversity of ideas). But we must not let them punish us for our refusal to put ourselves before others. We must not allow ourselves to feed into their conspiracies, to perpetuate their lies, or to stand against our neighbor in favor of the petty self-interests they've created to divide us.

Read instead the stories in this issue and remind yourself of the cruelties that a world built on lies creates. In this context, the false realities these authors have created for you are more true in many ways than the reality upon which they're based.

Sincerely,

Rob Carroll
Editor-in-Chief





THE THREE BREEDS OF LIE

by [T. M. Hurree](#)

Mr. Mishra is the third gene agent I've seen today. The first had dark grey scales and a bifid tongue which flickered nastily as he rejected Son. The second had waxy, translucent skin pulled taught over fat and gristle, and pulsing arteries supplying all the muscles required to form the word *nabin*, Hindi for *no*. Mr. Mishra has three arms—two sprouting from the left shoulder—all fully functional. Genes like that cost money. Serious money, enough to feed every family in my ramshackle street for the rest of our lives. His office is clean, bright, air-conditioned, and even if he doesn't purchase Son's genetic code, this meager scrap of comfort almost makes the last nine months worthwhile.

"What's his name?" Mr. Mishra cradles the baby in two strong hands.

"Son. Just Son." It's easier if they're never given names. Easier still if I don't even consider him *my* baby, *my* son.

With his third hand, Mr. Mishra grabs a torch off his desk and swings it over Son's face. The baby has slit pupils, like a cat. Otherwise, he is perfectly healthy.

"There's a stray cat that lives in the gutter outside my house." I've practiced the pitch a hundred times already. Said the words over and over, under Husband's careful supervision, till they flow smooth as river water. "Husband's been trying to catch it for years, but it never comes out during the day. Only hunts at night."

"I assume you're approaching a point?"

"The cat has eyes like Son's. That's how it hunts at night. You could sell these eyes to the military. They can breed soldiers who see in the dark."

Mr. Mishra shakes his head. "It would be cheaper and more effective to invest in infrared drones."

Of course it would be. Machines are always cheaper, more effective. The first two agents said the same thing, just as Husband feared they would. Clever Husband, clever me, we've learnt to prepare plans within plans.

"What about the shape of the pupils? There must be lots of rich parents wanting their children to stand out. Think how jealous the other boys and girls will be when they meet a child with cat eyes!"

Mr. Mishra sighs, lowering Son into the sleek white crib by his desk. "I don't think this baby can see at all. Maybe I could sell cat eyes as the latest fad, but no parent will pay to have their children born blind." His fifteen fingers dance across his keyboard. "Would you like to foster Son with us today? I can offer you fifty thousand rupees for his cells."

"The agent at GeneBank offered me fifty-four thousand."

This is a lie. He only offered fifty-two, but a man like Mr. Mishra is far too busy to haggle over a baby with bad genes. Inside his crib, Son gurgles happily, utterly unaware he's been born with the wrong sort of mutation. It is easier not to look at him. Not to hear him.

"How does fifty-five sound?"

I nod, as Mr. Mishra counts out the money on his desk. "What will happen to him?"

"We'll find a wealthy overseas couple who wants a child, but for whatever reason, cannot conceive one for themselves. Son will be given a name, and a good education. He'll grow up in a rich country, with plenty of opportunity to succeed. America, or the United Kingdom, most likely. He will have a good life."

Like mine, his speech is well rehearsed. Mr. Mishra has delivered it many times before. I have heard it many times before, but I must hear it again. Every time. This is the first breed of lie. The lies they tell us. The lies that let me live with myself. The lies that soothe me when I wake screaming, tangled in sweaty bedsheets. *Maybe my children really are living good lives with families who can provide for them. Maybe I really have done the right thing. Maybe I am not a monster after all.*

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

"You were close this time." Mr. Mishra smiles, as he ushers me out of his cool, clean office. "I've got a good feeling about your next child. It

might be worth a *lot* of money. A lot of money. I hope you'll consider our agency first."

"Thank you, Mr. Mishra. I will."

Two dozen mothers are queued outside. It's obvious which ones have prior experience with the business, and which ones don't. Some newer mothers tremble, pallid and sweaty. Others weep openly. Some play with their babies, giggling as they tickle their little toes. They are the ones I pity most. The experienced mothers stare straight ahead, ignoring the babies swaddled in sari scraps, blocking out every cry and gurgle. They are rapidly running out of chances to make their fortune. A few more years and they will have nothing—no children, no money, no future.

One young mother bares her breast for a hungry baby with webbed feet. I would like a daughter with webbed feet. She could swim far, far away, to a rich country where women build robots and write software, and needn't sell their very soul. A country where people have so much money, they choose to mutate their children because it's *fashionable*.

That webbed feet mutation might be worth something. That mother might have a chance.



I made the mistake of naming my first child. Husband warned me not to, but I couldn't help myself. *Sinba*, my beautiful baby boy. *Sinba*, Hindi for lion. He was born with long, sharp fingernails. Claws, almost. When we fostered him, it felt as though the gene agents had ripped away a piece of my own wretched code, part of what made me who I am. Part of what made me human. I grew too weak to drink, too dehydrated to cry. Whenever Husband forced a spoonful of rice through my clenched jaws, it reappeared moments later, soured by bile. I thought I would surely die. I wanted to die. I deserved to die. But holy Yama would not let me. The great deva would not snare my soul in his cosmic noose and drag me down to be punished with the other sinners. Coward that I was, I recovered. I survived, and with every child that followed *Sinba*, surviving became a little easier. I came to understand the choice so many women had made before me—become cruel, callous, selfish, or die.

Compassion is expensive in the slums, and we are so very hungry.



The heat batters me when I step outside. Mopeds swerve through traffic. Sports cars bear passengers with long simian tails and purple skin, trying not to stop lest they be swamped by starving beggars. Horns blare. People argue. Scraps of plastic flutter in the warm breeze, clogging up gutters and catching in dead weeds. The city reeks of smoke and stale grease.

A grubby pharmacy squats in the shadow of the NextGene tower, like a parasite suckered to its host. Half a dozen steps carry me between the front doors. Maybe it's just an extremely convenient coincidence they're so close together? Maybe. The fat old pharmacist watches me with bloodshot eyes. What will he do when the machines replace him? It's only a matter of time. It can't be that hard to design a robot that stares eerily at women as it dispenses their drugs and takes their money. Is he lucky, because he will never be forced to sell his body to survive? Or unlucky, because one day he will have nothing else to sell?

"What do you need?" The pharmacist has a gravelly voice, like Husband. He must smoke too much as well.

"Ambianex. For a sore throat." Where I grew up, little girls learnt drug names from the moment their first words dribbled forth.

The pharmacist shambles behind the counter, where all the bottles and boxes are kept secure. The walls are plastered with advertisements. According to a bright green cartoon lady, one box of Optichone can cure blindness in as little as three weeks. It is best to focus on all the good that drug has done, the many millions of people it has cured. I try not to wonder who the drug companies tested their pills on, and how much their mothers fostered them for. Maybe Optichone was tested on rationally consenting adults? I can't say for certain it wasn't. It's a slippery word, *maybe*. A sliver of doubt is enough for *maybe* to worm its way into your skull, and eat away at the parts of your brain responsible for compassion.

"Ten thousand rupees," growls the pharmacist, as he slams a bottle of Ambianex onto the counter.

"Last time it was seven thousand."

"Ten thousand rupees."

That's nearly a fifth of the money from fostering Son. Forty-five thousand isn't much to last nine months. We won't be able to afford a lot more than rice and cigarettes. We'll need to skip meals. Maybe Husband can find a few odd jobs here and there, scrounge what he can.

“Fine.”

I drop the money in the pharmacist’s sweaty palm, but he grips the bottle tight when I try to take it.

“*Legally*, I’m not allowed to sell you this if you’re pregnant, or planning to become pregnant in the near future,” he growls.

“I’m not. I promise I’m not.”

“*Legally*, I need to inform you that Ambianex is a class two teratogen. It can cause severe mutations in the developing embryo.”

“They’re for Husband,” I say, and he releases the bottle.

These are the second breed of lies. The lies we tell them. The lies that keep their money safe from lawsuits. The lies that reach across the globe to convince wealthy parents their child’s mutations are just harmless fun. Maybe it really is just a coincidence that so many mutations are patented by poor women from poor countries? Maybe my child’s mutations are the rare few discovered by chance? Discovered perfectly ethically?

Such a small word, *maybe*. Only five letters. In Hindi: *Shayad*. In Punjabi: *Saida*. Such small words, to hide so much horror behind. We are the forgotten women.



Hundreds of bodies are pressed into my train carriage, crushing in from all sides. Young men hang out of open doors and windows, whooping excitedly as the wind rips through their wild black hair. The stench of sweat hangs ever present, and every few minutes sulphurous gas sweeps through the carriage, leaving coughs and splutters in its wake. The best way to breathe is on tiptoes, head tilted high.

The roof is plastered with advertisements for NextGene. Every ad shows smiling photos of Jasmit Khan, alongside swirling Hindi letters: *COULD THIS BE YOU?* There is nothing remarkable about Jasmit’s appearance. Warm, brown eyes. Dark skin. Black hair. I could believe she was specifically bred to be a blank slate for women like me to project ourselves onto. Every woman on this train knows her story. Jasmit birthed a baby with brittle spines instead of hair, and sold the mutation to a French popstar in need of a gimmick. Now she lives in chilly Canada and probably drives fancy sports cars which smell of freshly chopped pine, and gorges on sweet *khulfi*, and *sandesh*, and sticky golden *gulab jamun*.

The train squeals to a halt, and as bodies untangle and clamber free, I glimpse scenes in the city outside. Mounds of garbage accumulating outside

hovels so old they were already ancient when my mother's mother's mother was born. Mourners gathering outside a distant temple, in which a thousand generations of mothers have gathered to pray for happy, healthy babies. A thousand generations, who left fruit and burnt incense for the great goddess Renuka, who gave her life to save her sons, and Parvati, whose maternal love awakened her son from moulded clay. A thousand generations of mothers, who somehow survived without forsaking their children.

Angry crowds of unemployed men protest the RoboCorp factory, where machines build more machines to replace us. Two weeks ago, the RoboCorp factory in Karnataka was burnt down by arsonists. It didn't bring any jobs back to the slums, but it must have felt good to see flames swallow the factory, to hear the crackling and crumbling, and screams of machines as they melted back to raw metal.

I heard from a woman washing clothes in the river that only one in a thousand mutations are beneficial. Of these, an even smaller fraction are actually profitable. Every woman on this train knows Jasmit Khan's story. We never see any advertisements for the other nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine women who forsake their children for little more than scraps.



The stray cat is not hiding in the drain when I return home. Most days, the sunlight catches a pair of amber eyes, watching from the safety of the shadows. Today, there is only darkness. Perhaps Husband finally scared it away? He is waiting just inside the front door. He has been cooking, judging by the savoury scent wafting from the kitchen, and the sound of pots boiling.

Husband does not ask what happened today. He knows by the hunch of my shoulders, the pinch in my expression. I didn't drive home in a fancy sports car, did I? He wraps me in his leathery arms, holds me tight, brushes away my tears with his tar-stained thumb. I *can* do this. I *can* survive. But not if we acknowledge it. The moment we acknowledge it, it becomes real.

"Come Wife. I have a treat."

He is an old man, Husband. Old enough to have worked in a factory making clocks and sneakers, before the rich countries discovered that machines are always cheaper and more effective. Old men are the most profitable now. Their seed is rotten, the genes twisted. Older women are more profitable too, but at some point, their soil becomes too rotten. I

am Husband's third wife. I am running out of time. He takes my hand and leads me into the kitchen.

"What is this?" I peer into the pot. Shreds of stringy meat bubble about, spiced by herbs from our windowsill garden.

"Pigeon."

"How did you afford it?"

"I didn't. Silly bird smacked right into our window, if you can believe it."

"I suppose I can." That's certainly not impossible, and what do I have to gain by probing any deeper? Nothing at all.

Husband ladles me a bowl, and I drop a purple tablet into the still simmering curry.

"Next time will be better, Wife. I promise. This time next year, your face will be plastered on all the ads. We'll be gorging on *gulab jamun*, somewhere nice and cold."

"Maybe."

"We'll be driving fancy sports cars, and we'll finally be rich enough to raise a son. Or a daughter, if you prefer. Think how happy we'll be."

I smile. "I'd like that a lot, Husband."

These are the final breed of lies. The lies we tell ourselves. The lies that keep us docile. The lies that keep us queuing patiently outside the gene agencies, instead of burning the fuckers down and basking in the heat of the blaze.

Maybe I'll be the lucky mother.

Maybe I'll be the rich and famous one-in-a-million.

Maybe, just maybe, things will finally get better.

**LIFE
SUCKS.**





THE HOTTEST ON THE HOTLINE

by [Evan Marcroft](#)

I was finishing up with a promising call when Judith came on to the intercom to announce that we had just broken our jumpslip goal for November, and tomorrow there would be an assortment of donuts available. There were cheers from all corners of the office. Nobody had to guess who'd put us over the top. The man of this and every hour was already strutting towards the boss's office to claim his prize. Gagged on envy, I quickly urged my prospective jumper to go die and hung up before I could accidentally say something I'd regret.

When Matt returned to his desk, it was with a fat basket of air filters, bottled water, and anticancer supplements. I jumped as he leaned over me and plopped it down on my keyboard.

"You need it more than I do," he said with a wink.

I smiled, because he was right. I could strip paint with the water I got from my taps, my apartment was rotating sixteen rows down tomorrow, and I had a lump in my left breast the size of a bocce ball that I'd been putting off worrying about.

Inwardly I boggled at what I could do with the money I'd save. That was real meals at real restaurants. New inserts, so I wouldn't be walking on my ankles everywhere. Something, anything, I wouldn't have to panic about, even if for just once.

But it still made me feel like nothing.

"Thanks Matt," I lied.

“De nada, señorita. I’m sure you’ll get it next month.”

This was also a lie. Matt Aguilar was the best Facilitator in the business.



Or at least in the San Andreas Sprawl. Thousands of satisfied customers would tell you the same, if they could. He could have gone home right then, but he didn’t; he plugged back into his InComp and continued rolling numbers. A guy like him didn’t quit just because he’d won. For three years, mine had been the lucky cubicle next to his, so I was as close to the magic as anyone ever got.

Watching him at work was like watching Michelangelo finger-paint the Sistine Chapel. Our InComps, even years outmoded, could tell us everything about a prospective from their pulse to the unique chemical pollution in their sweat. Just picking up the phone was considered legal consent for us to dig up their online backyard. By “How’s your day going,” we’d have their browsing history, medical records, credit card statements, every bit of sniveling poetry they’d blurted like pre-ejaculate onto the internet when they were fifteen. Like dollops of cretaceous amber, each drop of sebum contained the DNA of every bad day they’d ever had. Put it together, and you had a roadmap to where in their soul the hurt was worst.

But Matt? He didn’t need that stuff. Matt Aguilar could get into someone’s head like he had its spare key. The button that turned on his tonalizer was covered in dust. Matt’s voice was Xanax cut with anthrax.

Like, there I was, listening to him talk like mercury into the ear of a widowed mom with one kid on meth and another in prison and two more not walking yet. “Christ, that’s tough,” he was saying. “Trust me, I do this all day and I know it doesn’t get much worse than that.” I could hear her coming to pieces on the other end. Meanwhile, Matt was telling her how things looked bleak now, but you know ma’am, it’d all be alright just as soon as Darwin was let out, right? Then he could get a real job and bring in some money. Except when would that be exactly? Oh no, that’s a while, isn’t it? *Jeez, you must be so strong to carry all that for so long.*

I gave it a week, two at most.

Matt Aguilar always wore silver suits. The color of edge.



I came back from the break room with a clearer head and a fresh cup of bad coffee. The day wasn’t going so bad. I had six promising prospectives and

another seventeen more leaning my way. Those weren't terrible numbers. Not for me, at least.

I had to pass Matt's Cubicle on the way to mine. Three walls were decorated with places he'd claimed like trophies. His summer holiday to balmy Okhtosk. That cruise he'd taken last February to the Miami Islands. He wouldn't shut up about how we all simply *had* to go. Every few months, he'd come back from some amazing beach with next to zero SMOX and everyone would gather 'round to nibble like carp at the scraps of his experience. The way he told stories you could smell the pineapple wedge on the best cocktail he'd ever had. The mint of refurbished air. Smell, but not taste.

You wanted to go where Matt Aguilar went. You had to get your numbers up.

Back at my desk I rolled a number on my shortlist: Andrew McCarthy, aged forty-three, two years divorced. "Hi there, handsome," I cooed in my best Marilyn Monroe. "Hi yourself," he said, nervous as a kid getting his dick touched for the first time. I flirted mechanically, laughing at jokes I didn't hear, keeping one ear on Matt, trying to learn the secret to his trick.

Matt's move was a lot easier than mine. "Did you know," he was saying, "you can make mustard gas using several common household cleaning supplies?" And he didn't elaborate, didn't dwell, just kept talking. "Did you know that Angela has a new husband? Did you know that any police officer would be happy to provide Manual Assistance? Did you know your brain experiences a moment of perfect Euphoria at the moment of death? Like an Avon lady unpacking their sample box, laying out all those lovely powders and lipsticks, letting the customer's eyes do the selling for them." So simple, and so stupidly effective. Matt Aguilar was pulling rabbits out of hats and making it look like that was just how people got rabbits.

It didn't work for me. Believe me, I tried. So, when I was getting desperate, I tried my move. I'd set up dates with lonely souls, acting like I'd fallen for their sob stories, and then not show up. Low effort, low reward. Fire and forget. Handy, but successful enough on its own to keep me out of an apartment that was about to be so deep in the Stax I'd only get sunlight if there was a nearby demolition. Definitely not enough to pay for a weekend somewhere the air didn't put spots on your lungs.

I wrapped up the call with a sticky-sweet *see-you-later* and moved on to the next prospective. I had a good feeling about that last one, but I wouldn't know right away if it worked. Until then I could only worry.

Soft footfalls on paisley carpeting. I didn't look up. "Hang in there, Kitty Kat," Judith sang. "You've still got time to get those numbers up."

Kitty Kat. I hated that name, but it was on me like a scar. And besides, she was right. I did have time, but not to waste.

The numbers. That's what it was all about. The number you could divide into so many meals. The number you could translate into travelable miles. Apartment height. The number you could stack between yourself and eleven billion other people.

Numbers were the Pinyin between death and life. Get them up.



Breaktime at Sunny Futures Facilitation Services. Matt was holding court as usual. Twelve to one p.m. was the only hour you were safe if you lived anywhere on the West Coast. Like always, he was going on about his next big trip. "Looks like it's going to be Trinidad this winter," he was saying to Brad from payroll. "There's this boat you can take to go scuba diving through Scarborough. They say it's pretty. You ever been?" he asked, knowing nobody possibly could have.

The guys hung out on his left, talking guy stuff, and the girls to the right, talking girl stuff. But they all talked about Matt. Everyone had a story. Maritza, who'd been here since forever, swore that when Matt first started nine years ago his first call had lasted only four minutes before the prospective gave it up. Judith, the boss lady herself, loved to brag about the seventeen straight hours her number one employee had spent on the line with a particularly stubborn jumper. By the time it was over he had half the office camping out around him with donuts and coffee just to know how it would end. Impossible? Maybe. But each impossibility only added to the possibility it was all true.

I sat apart, down by the vending machines, working through my usual sandwich. Meat stamp, veggie stamp, grain stamp on either end. Matt had a Mexican bento box. Yellow rice, chorizo, seaweed wrap. I couldn't revolve around him the way they did. I hated his silver suits, his cocksure smirk, but mostly I hated having to live in the unflattering glare that all legends put off.

I didn't hate him because he was good at his job.

I hated him because he made me worse.

People trickled out of the break room as the hour crawled by, until it was just me and Matt left. He was pouring coffee, so at least he had an excuse. Me? I didn't have the will to go back to my cubicle. There wasn't much surprise left in the future. I knew I was going to fail more than I

won. Some days were like reading through a book you'd already read ten times. Some weeks were the same chapter seven times.

"Hey Matt, do you have a sec?"

I didn't realize I'd spoken until he stopped at the door to say, "Sure, Kitty Kat. What's eating you?"

I wrestled down a grimace. What right did a little moon like me have to tell him what my name was? "Sorry to bother," I said. "I—I just want to know your secret. Teach me how to do what you do."

Matt looked me up and down. Not appraisingly. Seeing me in total for the first time. "There's nothing to teach," he shrugged. "And there's no secret. Just something to remember."

"What's that?"

He tapped his nose. "Everyone wants to die," he said. "No exceptions."

"I don't understand."

A wry smirk. "Don't tell me you never thought about taking the jump and seeing what there is for you on the other side of the asphalt. Everyone wants to die."

And I had to admit he was right.



Dedication. Expertise. Innovation. The big three words of the Sunny Futures mission statement. We were the US+K's premier Facilitation company, second to none, with six hundred and eighty full-time employees and a savory government contract to turn twenty thousand people a month into pink jumpslips. Not once had we failed to deliver on that quota.

The only number in my line of work I ever had to get down was the eleven billion people packed together on an increasingly overweighted planet. Eleven billion people, seething together inescapably, pilloried like conjoined twins by seamless flesh. Eleven billion people, thick as the tick in a bum dog's ear, all stomping on those packed below and being stomped on by those packed above. They sucked up all the clean air and left only industrial poison. Belt apartments sagged under their heft. Continents sunk as their collective heat melted the ozone layer. What was there not to understand? People wanted off the Titanic so badly that they jumped into freezing water and drowned.

They proved Matt right hundreds of times a day. It didn't matter how good you had it now; with every inch the oceans rose, the masses crowded in a little closer, climbing the walls you could afford to put beneath you until

you couldn't anymore. And then one day you'd find yourself wondering just how green the grass was at the end of a long drop. And when you saw us calling, you'd pick up, because all you needed at that point was a poet to tell you all about it.



Matt was a poet. I was not.

Home was a long, hot train ride and a cramped elevator ride into the scaffolding of the San Andreas Sprawl. Home was a living room, a bathroom, and a bedroom with three beds. When I got back from work, I hung up my suit on the door and waited for my turn at a cold shower. Someone had shat the toilet dead, so I had to use the one in the hall. And either Angie or Reshma had stolen from my cancer meds; I would have to start keeping them at work.

For dinner I had my usual sandwich. Meat stamp, veggie stamp, grain stamp on either end. All washed down with bottled water for dessert. I didn't eat so well every day. During the night I was woken up by the rumble and squeal of my apartment descending sixteen flights into the Stax, where the ambient SMOX was so bad you had to tape up your window. Angie snoring in the bunk above mine kept me awake until the sun came up.

And what I stared at until my alarm said I had to get up was the old photo hung up on the wall beside my bed, of my parents and I when I'd been little standing in front of the Fantasy World castle. Me, with a pair of plastic rabbit ears falling off my head. I'll never know how they afforded that trip. I knew what tickets to Orlando Island costed these days, and even then, it must have been such a sacrifice. But things like money and jobs don't exist when you're that small. All you know is that you're in the happiest place on Earth with a mom and dad who love you. And the future you see is one where you'll come back some day. Right, Mom? Right, Dad?

Twenty years later, all I had was that photo, curling at the edges.

And it was time to get up. Get back to work. My numbers were back to zero.



"You know what? Screw this. You should just go die. Right now."

"I'm sorry?"

"You heard me. You're a waste. You work at a gas station. Your reason

for living is to help use up the world faster. Every drop of water you drink might as well go down a toilet.”

“You can’t talk to me that way.”

“You better believe I can. I’m doing something important. I’m cutting waste. As for you, you’re nothing. You’re a negative value. You putting a bullet in your head would literally make life better for me. You would bring my numbers up and let me buy a new pair of shoes or something”

“I’ll tell you what lady: screw you.”

“Sure, as soon as you go—”

“Ahem.”

I swiveled my chair around. Judith was standing behind me, clicking her heel the way she did.

I spent twenty minutes in her office getting chewed out for unbecoming conduct. You can’t scream at the prospectives. Professionalism was the fourth big word in our mission statement. I told her I was trying something new. That prospectives with low self-esteem and a passive nature might be facilitated with aggression. It didn’t save me from a write-up.

“This is a very important job we do,” Judith warned. “We’re on the front lines of a worldwide crisis. If we don’t step up and do our darndest, it’s the world on the line.”

Yes, yes, we all knew the mission statement. And yet, with dozens of Facilitation companies across the country, we weren’t making much of a dent, now were we? Last time I checked, Mexico was still an archipelago. Topeka was still a vagrant camp visible from space.

But I didn’t say any of that. I just said okay.

The rest of my day went miserably. I wasn’t allowed to be angry, and angry was all I was. I wanted to hurl my InComp through the window. I wanted to chuck it at Matt’s head. I could hear him perfectly from over the wall, charming the ledge out from under some sick senior in Tacoma, snake-charming one more jumpslip through the gears of bureaucracy and into his bank account.

Meanwhile I was doing math in my head, subtracting each prospective I let get away from the number that would show up on my paycheck, adding on days I’d have to go without washing my one suit, tallying up the things I loved that I couldn’t afford to eat. I could taste my future going gray and tofu-flavored.

It was enough to make a girl want to blow her brains out.

Forty-five minutes to quitting time, and my hands wouldn’t move anymore. Wouldn’t call up another number. The futility hit me, a thousand gallons a

second, and I almost drowned right there in my chair. No matter what miracle I pulled off in the next hour, I couldn't afford TV for the span of a pay period. All I was doing here was wasting time and growing hungry.

I stood, glanced over the wall at Matt. The guy was in another world, one where the Earth was waiting on hold to get talked into a car compactor. By the sound of it, he had a grouper on the line—a big fish, I mean. I wondered distantly what this story would be when I heard it later, at the radius of the spotlight it would shine upon him. Would anyone be lucky enough to be caught in it with him? The Magic 8-Ball said unlikely. From a dozen different beaches, a dozen different Matts raised a dozen of the same martinis, as if to toast him for smuggling them away from here to some sunny, better place.

There are people in the world that are simply bigger. Not everyone meets them but we all bob on the waves they make as they swim like krakens through the world. Some rise up. Others sink.

I went to Judith's office and told her I was leaving early. She looked at me like I'd kicked her door down first, and said that this wouldn't reflect well on me at the end of the month.

And I said, yeah, well, alright. Nobody reflected well when the mirror was Matt Aguilar.



I got home that night to find the apartment quiet. I stopped in the doorway, insanely afraid that if I stepped inside, I would go through the dark like a banner and reveal all the people waiting for me on the other side. I couldn't remember when I'd last been alone in the place I lived.

Angie was visiting her parents tonight, I remembered. Reshma was pulling a double shift. I checked the time. It looked like I had an hour and twenty minutes before she got back. I had a whole hour and twenty more minutes of just me. I could do anything I wanted. Read a book. Masturbate in peace. Watch what I wanted to watch. Seventy-five percent of a movie maybe. But more than any of that, I didn't want it to end.

So instead of doing any of those things, I drew a bath. For the first time in months, I had water as hot as I liked—hot enough to tan me like a lobster. I filled it up with Reshma's bubble soap to help hide its awful color, then took a razor blade from under the sink and slid into the water.

It didn't matter that it was brown under the bubbles. I could have stayed there forever. Life was as finite as polar ice, and someone was enjoying the one I could have had. This was as good as it would ever get.

I stamped the razor blade to the slope of my breast, trying to glue it there with moisture. I pushed too hard into my meat and the edge snagged on skin. A ribbon of blood unspooled into the water and I hardly even felt it. You work in my job long enough and you become a kind of sommelier. You're trying to market a complicated thing to the sort of people who don't know champagne from sparkling water and to do that you need to be familiar as a lover with every facet of your product. I could expound to someone at length on the unique virtues of slitting one's wrists, for instance. I knew from my own PDF-saved rhetoric that by dint of endorphin euphoria, it was a flash of pain like a bad slap and then a warm, slow slide down into the softest bed you've ever had. Yeah, I could sell myself on the science of it, with focus-grouped terminology.

But I wasn't a poet.



"Sunny Futures Facilitation Services, Matthew Aguilar speaking. How may I assist you today?"

Of everyone who could have picked up.

"Hi," I said anyway. "I'm calling because I feel like I want to die."

People didn't often call into Sunny Futures for facilitation. It took a kind of strength that most didn't have. An awareness and acceptance of one's darkest desire. They'd come to their ledge alone, and only asked for a push.

We called those people gimmers.

"Hey, that's great to hear," Matt chuckled dustily. "It sounds like you're halfway there already."

I moved my phone from one hand to the other. "I guess."

"Well, tell me what the issue is. Let's see if we can't put things in perspective for you."

He sounded different. Tired, maybe. His voice was like a pressed shirt gone rank and wrinkled at the end of the day. It was a little after eight o' clock. He must have been pulling some overtime with the night crew. Classic Matt. The government wanted a so-high pile of scalps, and his blood was blue and white, as well as red. He'd go around with a machete and a sack if the law said sure.

"It's a lot of stuff," I said. "I'm not in great health. I'm an adult living with two other adults in a tiny apartment, and I hate them both. I don't have the money to eat real food."

"That sounds rough."

I frowned at that. Matt normally would have had something a little punchier to say, something so sugary-sweet that you couldn't help but slug it down until it plugged up your arteries.

"But mostly, it's this guy at work," I went on. "It's like he's so good at his job that it makes me worse. I feel like an accessory to his life."

"Yeah, I, uh, I know what that's like."

Liar, I thought. But now I could hear the loose tie hanging off his neck. The sweat dried into a film across his forehead. The silver suit peeling off in the heat of a day left on too long. He'd be hunched over his desk with his tight work shoes off, lights all out but for the glare of his InComp.

It had been years since his legendary all-nighter. "How old are you now, anyway?"

"It's like no matter how hard I work, it's never enough. This guy, he's like a mirror. I can always see exactly how bad I am at everything. And all I want is to get away—from everyone, not just him. And just for a little while, you know? But I can't afford it. Living costs so much these days. I don't even have forty-five minutes before my roommates come home, and I don't know when I'll be alone again."

"I know what that's like," he said again.

And this time he made me believe it.

"Hey, can I ask you a question?" I asked. "If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?"

That seemed to catch him off-balance. "Well, uh. As it so happens, I've been saving up for a trip to Trinidad," he said. "That's actually why I've been working this late."

"Been?"

"Every night, I mean."

"Are plane tickets expensive?"

"Yeah, yeah, they are," he chuckled, bitterly. "And hotel rooms. And food. And drinks. You've got to come in early and work late every day for months to make it work. Why do you ask?"

"So, is it worth it?" I asked.

A long, crackling pause. "It is," he said, as if admitting something. "It's—"

"Quiet?"

"Yeah."

"Clean?"

A silence like a nod. "The sky there is blue like you can't even imagine. The air doesn't taste like poison in your mouth. You can go out on the sand and scream yourself sick, and no one will tell you to shut up."

A low sigh. "But you can't stay there. It's pennies per second. You'll have to come back eventually."

"You've still got it better than me," I said. "I can't get away in the first place. You get to escape. At least for a few days."

"A week, usually," he said, softly.

"Mm. And then it's back to the daily grind. Back to long nights spent stacking virtual paper. Pushing people off their personal ledges. You work so you can get away, but you wouldn't need to get away if you didn't have to work. Living to escape. Isn't that messed up? That's not really living at all. Don't you wish you could just go away forever?"

"Sometimes."

"Me, too."

"I remember—" he began, haltingly, abashedly. "I remember when I was little, my parents took me to Fantasy World in Orlando. I don't know how they managed. And... It's the happiest memory I've got. I remember riding this rollercoaster and feeling closer to the sun than I ever did at the top of my belt apartment. I...think I work so hard so that I can get as close to that day as I can." I hear an audible swallow on the other end. "But even I can't afford to go back there. And soon it'll be underwater anyway. Like everything else. So, I guess... I'd better let that go."

A pause swelled between us, pushing us apart and joining us together. I understood then that the words I said next would push me down one of two futures. A binary decision then. Like to push or not push. One, or zero.

But never two.

Not in this shrinking world.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm all ears."

"Did you know there's nothing after death?" I asked. Apropos of nothing. "At least that's what the science says. Your brain goes click, turns off. You cease to exist, faster than you can see coming. But as you die you feel euphoria like you never thought possible. I think in that moment, you could be wherever you wanted most. You could be in a bubble bath that stays warm. Or on a beach that goes on forever."

The line was silent for a good while. I started thinking he'd walked away from his desk.

"Are you there?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm still here."

"Okay, good, I was going to say, I think you've sold me, Mister Aguilar."

I'll go take care of myself. I hope you have a fun trip in Trinidad, and you get to go back soon."

"Thanks, Katherine. And thanks for calling."

I hung up the phone and put it down on the floor. I splashed my feet around some, but the water had gone cold as a toilet seat. I picked up the razor and asked it a question. I decided I'd do whatever it said.



This is how people get turned into paper.

When someone is found dead, an investigation is performed. If it is found to be a suicide, the government will run their social security number through our database to see if they received a call from Sunny Futures within a certain timeframe. If so, the Bureau of Population Management submits an online form that we call a jumpslip, acknowledging a successful Facilitation. Once we have that, it gets deposited onto the total of whomever made the call. At the end of the month, that total is converted into a dollar amount and deposited into someone's checking account. Every month, the region manager sends a report of every Facilitation to central storage in Toronto, where in compliance with Paper Trail regulations, it is printed out and filed in the appropriate cabinet, never to be touched again. Whatever should happen to their body, I think *that* is where their soul comes to rest—pressed flat between a thousand others, awaiting an audit that will never come.

I've been at this job for five years now. The system is imperfect. Not everyone we call lives long enough to jump. Sometimes they get shot first—that's the worst. A bit of grit in the gears of bureaucracy can send jumpslips to the wrong person or spit them out into that un-place where disappeared things end up. Sometimes, for any number of reasons, you just don't get credit for your hard work. And who knows where those souls go.



Judith was the one to find Matt Aguilar the next morning. Scared her so bad she'd splashed her latte up the wall. According to her, he'd hung himself from the ceiling fan above his desk with his belt as a noose, but it looked like he'd pulled it down on top of himself and cracked his head open. "Blood going everywhere," she told the cops. "Tongue flopping

out of his mouth like a grape-flavored popsicle.” He hadn’t left a suicide note so much as a memo. An unsent, inter-office email left open on his InComp read, “Dear Everyone: I will be out of the office for a while. I’ll bring you back some souvenirs.” Nobody could mention that without a guilty chuckle. Even dead, Matt was the funniest guy anyone knew. And when, after the police had taken the body away, they checked his call log and found that the second-to-last person he’d talked to had been the governor of California, who had OD’d on sleeping pills the night before. That part was third-hand when it got to me, but everyone agreed that, true or not, it was a good ending to a good story.



By the time I got in, the body was gone. The blood was still there though, soaked into the carpeting. Everyone had already gone back to their work, because we had a quota to meet and without Matt, it wasn’t a sure thing anymore. But there was a perimeter of empty cubicles around his. Matt’s death had left a crater, and nobody dared disturb that sacred aftermath.

I went to Judith’s office and sat down across from her. There was a trashcan full of used tissues beside her desk. I guess tripping over a dead coworker must’ve hit her hard. I told her that I was sorry for the other day. I shouldn’t have yelled at that guy like that. It did not reflect our company’s values. I’d been under a lot of stress, but that was no excuse, and I promised I’d leave it at the door, starting now. She nodded and got back to crying.


I headed back to my desk and paused to stare at where Matt used to be. No one was telling Matt-stories today. Wouldn’t be for a long time. The quiet around his desk pulled like a vacuum. Some people are just bigger. They leave big holes when they’re gone.

I thought of glaciers melting. Waters rising. Dry land crumbling into the sea. Men and women forever climbing higher, jockeying for grip. Clawing. Biting. Hurling one another into the waves. Fighting for space to exist while it still existed.

This void begged to be filled.

Without another thought, I grabbed my things and moved them over one space. A girl heading to the watercooler gave me a venomous look. I ignored her and got to changing Matt’s desktop background. I felt better about the future than I had for a long time. It was a new day, and my numbers had been set back to zero, but I’d only just clocked in, and I was already up by one.





HER TONGUE WAS WEIGHTED WITH SALT

by [Alexandra Seidel](#)

Three chocolates sat in the box, peering out at Tamsin through the clear plastic cover. They glittered with coarse salt, the simple variety, not some exotic pink or black novelty. The box itself was triangular to emphasize the occasion, oddness being considered proper for Samhain. A white bow with a red line running down its center decorated one corner.

“What a superstitious gift,” Ludaque said. He had taken it from the courier at the apartment door, signed for it. He held the card out to Tamsin while he placed the box of salted candy on her desk in front of her. Tamsin crossed her legs before she took the offered card, a heavy cream envelope that felt soft under her fingers. “Has the consumption of salted food ever given you dream visions, Tamsin?”

Tamsin bit her lip and stared at her desk, though not at the candy. Work. She would rather be working than look at the candy. She wanted to look at the stars. “Don’t you have to charge? Or update one of your algorithms or something?” she said in lieu of answering.

Ludaque was thankfully perceptive for a robot. “Very well,” he said. “I will leave you to your thoughts and go do something else. Let me know if I should send the sender a thank-you note.”

The apartment was open-concept, and Tamsin watched him retreat until he was at the other end of it where her bedroom

and his room, the former guestroom, were. Ludaque's footfall was quiet on the hardwood floor. Tamsin assumed it was unintentional on his part, but she hated that he could sneak up on her. She had never told him.

The card. It had the weight of a card selected with care for someone special. There was no name on the envelope, but Tamsin knew her sister had picked it out, just for her. She closed her eyes to let her other sense float to Bea in a store, surrounded by fountain pens and ink, looking at cards, picking out this one. The vision came to her clearly, Bea in a brown coat and an ugly, mustard colored scarf. Her dark hair was already streaked with silver, which made her look a lot like their mother.

With an exhale, Tamsin dropped the vision and opened the card, not with the opener on her desk, but with her finger. The fabric tore in ragged shreds.

The handwriting was choppy:

Dear Tamsin,

You will not have missed me these past years, nor will you have thought much about me since we last saw each other, what, half a decade ago? The Tarot says as much. You probably won't appreciate the salt candy, even though we gorged ourselves when we were kids. I have seen something dark in the cards, coming for you. I don't know what or when. Please eat the salt and look for the darkness in your dreams—only when we know the outline of a shadow can we banish it with light.

Love,

Bea

Only when we know the shadow can we banish it. Their mother's words. Bea had to know how much Tamsin would loathe reading them in Bea's hand. Tamsin tore the expensive card, ripped the paper right down the middle so her sister's name was cut in half, and tossed the scraps into the waste basket under her desk.

"Ludaque!" Tamsin swiveled around in her chair so she would see him come back to her work area.

"Yes. I was just about to go charge. Or something."

"Oh, cut it out. What was the slice of deep space the Exploration Program wanted me to look at? The one they marked as important?"

"I thought you didn't want to start working on that today."

"I changed my mind."

Ludaque's left eyebrow rose. "I'm assuming no thank-you note then."

Tamsin crossed her legs. "What did they want me to look at?"

Ludaque walked up to her and put his right hand on the desk. Tamsin looked at the long and dexterous fingers and thought for a half-second that his nails looked long. Longer than usual. Then the built-in scan IDed him and allowed remote access to the relevant files. Tamsin looked at the screen. She uncrossed and re-crossed her legs. "You know, there are less people in the office on weekends. You could take a shower and go in. I doubt you would pick up too many random thoughts and emotions."

"And it would do me good to get out?"

Ludaque grinned at her. "Have you always been able to read robot minds, or is this new?"

"I'm not going in. Show me the data."

He shrugged and opened the files coded to his metrics. Black space, a lot of it, sprinkled with the brightness of suns centuries away. And radio signals, possibly random, possibly not. In the sheer vastness and distance, psychics were among the better tools to point the way for humanity's curiosity.

"Would you like me to put some music on? Or some conversation, despite your current mood?"

Tamsin tapped her left index finger on the armrest of her chair. Music helped her mind to drift and get caught on interesting things, but it didn't always work well. Over the past few years, talking to Ludaque and thinking about something else entirely had proved to be the most effective tool. "Conversation, sure." She started going through the data without really looking at any one thing too hard or too long. It was a very unscientific approach.

Ludaque rolled over his chair so he could look at Tamsin while Tamsin looked at the data. "Would you like to tell me who sent you the divination candy?"

Tamsin rolled her eyes. "Would you like to make light conversation?"

Ludaque shrugged. "It seems to upset you, but it's only candy, and candy isn't upsetting in and of itself. So the sender must upset you. I would like to know who they are."

Tamsin had been informed, when the Psychic Research Agency first paired her with Ludaque, that he had certain priorities regarding her mental and physical health. All in all, Tamsin had thought this a good thing, especially after she had become aware of her mother's last few months. Bea had arranged the funeral, and had wisely decided for a

closed casket, but Tamsin had looked anyway. She had never really said goodbye after all. The coffin lid had been less heavy than she'd expected. The sunken, dried out face beneath had haunted her in her dreams for months and sometimes still did.

"Fine. My sister sent the candy."

There was a minute pause. "Oh. She is also gifted, isn't she, but never tried out for a government position."

Tamsin's turn to shrug while the data kept flashing in front of her eyes. "We were both raised kind of anti-everything. I got out, and Bea never did. Can you believe I only ever got vaccinated after I signed up with the Agency?"

"What a risky way to raise children," Ludaque said, his voice approximately sad.

"I'd say it was a risky way to live, but a great way to die."

"Tell me then, is your sister like you? A mind reader, does she have the sympathetic sense as well?"

Tamsin tapped the fingers of her left hand on the armrest while she flipped through the files with her right. "She is more of a fake actually. I mean, don't get me wrong, she has some divinatory skill, and sometimes when she reads the Tarot for someone, it's actually not just three-quarters made-up bullshit."

Ludaque tsked. "Such strong language."

"Well, Ludaque, you fucking asked about my sister, so strong language is what you get." Tamsin's eyes focused on a radio wave summary and the corresponding slice of space. "Oh, this seems interesting. I can hear mumbling when I look at it."

Ludaque rose from his chair to lean over Tamsin and look at the scan. Tamsin caught the faint smell of soap on him. "Show me which one? Ah, I see. Can you make out what the voices are saying, Tamsin?"

She tried to just let the voices come to her, tried to just listen, but whenever she thought she could almost make out a word, it slipped clear out of her head. "Nope. But there's definitely something there."

She could feel Ludaque nodding behind her. "Alright. Let me make a note." He put his hand on the scanner once more and typed in a quick comment one-handedly on Tamsin's keyboard. "Perhaps now you feel like going for a walk? I really do think some exercise and fresh air would be just the thing."

"Are you going to keep pestering me until I go out?"

"I certainly will."

"Fine. Let me at least change out of my sweat pants."

"A splendid idea."

"You can be such a nuisance."



The chocolates sat on Tamsin's bedside table, courtesy of Ludaque. Tamsin glanced over at them from her novel. The story had begun to bore her some thirty pages ago, but Ludaque had recommended the book. He had left a real, physical copy on the very same spot on her bedside table as he had the chocolates.

Tamsin read another half page, stared at the candy, decided reading in bed wasn't something she particularly enjoyed in the first place, tossed the book onto the little table, and turned off the light.

That was no good either. She turned and tangled herself up in her sheets. The chocolates sat there, silently gloating, taunting, beckoning. Tamsin turned on the lights.

"Damn you, Bea," she said, as she tore the plastic and the white bow halved with red off the triplets of salted chocolates. *True witches would eat a whole teaspoon full, without the benefit of the chocolate*, she thought, as she stuffed the candy in her mouth, all three, in quick succession.

There was enough salt on them to make them just bordering on the unpleasant. The sharp taste, mingled with cocoa, dragged Tamsin off to sleep.



Dreams are like monsters, said Tamsin's dead mother from her coffin. *You need to step a long way back until you can see the true shape and the hidden tail*. The coffin was open, placed in the center of a wide room tiled with black and white in geometric patterns. Tamsin's mother spoke with her eyes closed, from a face as sunken as Tamsin remembered.

Why did you take all these drugs? Why'd you fast all the time? Why did Bea let you? Tamsin said. Her fingers reached for her mother's shoulders, shook them. Beneath the fabric of the funeral shift, Tamsin felt thin skin on rigid bone.

Seeing is no easy business, seeing takes a lot out of the seer. A lot. That was when Tamsin realized her mother wasn't really talking at all, at least her lips weren't moving. But Tamsin recognized the words her dead mother said in the dream. When she was still alive, her mother had pounded them into Tamsin's head. Tamsin had been more naive then, and so the words had stuck.

Tamsin stepped back from the coffin and the corpse therein, looked around.

The room was circular, and black doors were set in the wall, all evenly spaced. *Which door?* Tamsin thought.

Uncertain, she walked along the wall, touched her fingers to the doors while she walked, and tried to make a choice. Colors flashed in front of Tamsin's eyes, each door giving off the brave palette of an Expressionist piece. It was blinding, and the muted wall faded into color.

Have you ever had a prophetic dream with corpses and doors in it? Ludaque said. He was walking next to her. The colors settled.

Would you tell me what it means if I say yes? Tamsin said.

A smile spread over Ludaque's face, a wide one. *Why would you think I know such things, Tamsin?*

Just then, the door Tamsin was touching warmed to her fingers, hot and colorless. Tamsin stopped and stared down at the doorknob. It was encrusted in ice, but she tried to turn it anyway.

In a shower of snowy crystals, the door fell inward into a blackness almost complete.

They are so beautiful, Tamsin said, meaning the stars, but Ludaque had vanished. She was all alone as she stepped over the threshold.

The darkness engulfed her, and the door at Tamsin's back fell shut. A bright glow distracted her from the stars ahead, and in the weightlessness of space, she somehow managed to turn.

Earth stared at her, blue and beautiful as ever. Humbling.

Tamsin listened. So many voices rattled the stillness of her home planet, and she wanted to hear those whispers. What she heard instead were the whispers that had come to her from the scans of deep space earlier, the voices that she hadn't been able to make out. The voices got louder and louder, though that didn't make them any more intelligible.

Soon they were so loud that Tamsin pressed the balls of her hands to her ears, but the noise was still there, and she screamed until something—someone was shaking her and saying her name.

"Tamsin. Tamsin, can you hear me?" Ludaque. In her room. Light seeped in from the hallway, outlining everything in strange shadows. "Tamsin."

"Yeah...yes."

"You were screaming. Are you alright?" He felt for her pulse, turned on the lights. They came on slowly.

"I ate the stupid chocolate."

"You didn't wake up easily, and that's never happened before. Let me look at your eyes." He pulled her lids up, made her follow his finger with her gaze.

"I just had a strange dream," Tamsin said.

Ludaque nodded once to indicate he was done examining her. "So. Have you ever had prophetic dreams? Before I was around?"

Tamsin shook her head. "Prophecy is scary. I want to go back to sleep now, do you mind?" Crankiness and confusion mingled like salt and chocolate in Tamsin's mind.

"Of course," Ludaque said. His smile caught the light in odd angles. "I'll leave the door open."

"Fine, whatever."

When Tamsin fell asleep again, there were no more corpses, no more doors. There was just darkness with no stars.



The next morning was a gray creature that would not move to let any ray of sunlight past. Tamsin was at her desk. "Where is the data from yesterday? That slice of sky with the whispers?"

Ludaque looked up from a huge bowl into which he was pouring Halloween candy. "It has been moved up for further investigation. I'm sure they'll have a closer look, send a probe even."

Tamsin tapped her fingers on her armrest. "That's fast. I hadn't even really considered all of the data. What I did was a cursory reading at best."

Ludaque came over with the bowl, shiny wrappers glaring. "Care for some candy? You are supposed to say trick or treat first, traditionally."

"No. Why did they move the report so fast?"

He shrugged. "Probably because it coincided with something they wanted to do anyway. The workings of the Scientific Division are mysterious. Have some candy, Tamsin. Say trick or treat."

Tamsin stared at the bowl and remembered her dream of a round room. "Trick or treat." She took some candy, salted caramel. "I think I might head into the office today."

"It's Monday. The Agency will be abuzz with people."

"I'll risk it. Besides, it'll do me good, right?"

Ludaque answered with an unreadable smile.



Tamsin had an office at the Agency, but she hardly ever used it. As a result, it had too clean and tidy a look about it. She walked the hallways

toward it, in the back of her mind the unreasonable fear that she might have forgotten where the office was, that someone else would be sitting behind her desk when she entered. *Perhaps I shouldn't have left Ludaque in the foyer*, she thought, but it was a good place for him to connect to the main database without going through several security protocols. He might be able to tell her more about that black space that had whispered to her, or what they had planned to do with it.

The voices of the people that worked at the Agency mingled with their thoughts. Thoughts sometimes came to Tamsin as colors, sometimes as strong bouts of emotion. When she had been younger, that had been difficult, Bea's reds and purples, and the gnawing feeling that ate at Tamsin, although Tamsin knew the feeling wasn't hers. When she was younger still, she hadn't been able to distinguish at all where her emotions started and where those of the people around her ended. Ludaque was so very bland in comparison, monochrome.

Tamsin found her office, and it opened to her hand scan. She sat down at her desk and accessed the database and her personal history. The file in question was still gone, but with some determination, Tamsin figured out where it generated, and that terminal's signature.

"Observation. 15-2k." She went through the drawers looking for paper, then a pen, wrote down the terminal number and the file name, and folded the sticky note into her pocket.

Observation was in the basement, because technically, they just gathered and evaluated the telescope data there. The telescopes were set up all over the globe.

Tamsin pulled her phone out to tell Ludaque where she was going. Before she could type out a message, the vision of him holding out to her the candy bowl with the rainbow of wrappers and telling her to say trick or treat appeared, stronger than a memory. The phone went back into her pocket, and she left the office just the way she had found it.

The people outside were mostly not thinking about work. Samhain reigned on people's minds, the parties everyone would attend, the costumes, the apple bobbing. Tamsin saw colors ranging from burnt copper to the sparkling brightness of a flame, appleskin red and rot-leaf yellow, also.

The elevator took Tamsin down without asking for her hand scan, but when she set foot in the basement, she saw scanners on most of the doors to either side of the hallway, saw that the only way forward led to a reception desk that was reminiscent of a hospital. Someone had put up an ugly green and mustard leaf garland, and a ceramic pumpkin head.

"Hello," Tamsin said to the person behind the desk. They were blank to her, a feature she knew all too well from Ludaque. *I can see why they would have robots for the analysis, but why here?* Tamsin thought. "I'd like to talk to whoever operates work station 15-2k, please."

The robot looked up. Their hair was a short, fashionable bob, the kind of haircut Tamsin found too much of a pain to maintain, what with her disobedient curls. "May I see your credentials?" they said.

Tamsin handed her ID over the terminal, and the receptionist scanned it, held out a hand scanner, and scanned Tamsin's palm as well. "Tamsin Bunting, Psychic Analyst. What can we data herders do for you?" Their eyes were solid brown, unspectacular.

"I just had a question about a data set. And my assistant always tells me I should meet more people. So I'm here."

The receptionist nodded. "Of course. You go down that way," they pointed off to the right where the corridor curved, "and take a left at the end of the hallway. There's a swing door, you go through and take another right. The room you want is B57."

Tamsin nodded. "Thank you." As she walked along the white walls of the corridor, the echoes of her footfalls were the only thing that distracted Tamsin from the feeling of being watched. *Just the receptionist*, she thought.

Tamsin walked left as instructed, went through the swing doors. Observation was unlike the upper floors. There wasn't a soul around, for one thing, and it seemed extremely quiet. *Different work schedules, they probably have to fix theirs around when they can use the telescopes*, she thought. All the doors were outfitted with hand scanners.

B57 looked exactly like all the other doors, and Tamsin found that her knuckles knocking produced an offensively loud noise.

Tamsin was ready to knock again when the door opened. "Oh!" Tamsin stared into Ludaque's face, though it wasn't his face.

"Yes?" The voice was similar, but the accent was not. He stared at Tamsin expectantly.

"I'm sorry, you just look exactly like my assistant, Ludaque. You must be the same model. That took me by surprise."

"Of course, no worries. My name is Leopold. Did you want to come inside?" He held the door for Tamsin.

"Thank you," she said, entering. "Do you have a moment?"

"Of course. There are few distractions here. Min announced you."

"Oh, the receptionist."

"Yes." Leopold offered Tamsin a chair. His office was stuffed with

books, well-used, all of them. Tamsin picked up physics and astronomy in the titles, but didn't look closer. Binders filled the rest of the shelf space and had even spilled on the floor in neat little piles.

"She is actually responsible for security, but I can see how she would look like a receptionist to you. Tea?"

"No, no thank you. I would like to talk about a data set you generated, if you don't mind."

Leopold sat down behind his desk, looked at Tamsin with eyes she knew so well. "I like a straightforward human. Which?"

"Here, I wrote down the file name." Tamsin handed him the paper with the details, and Leopold looked at it with a strange expression. Longing? Nostalgia? Tamsin wasn't sure.

"That is interesting. What did you see when you looked at the data? I know there was quite a lot there."

"Right. That's just it, I didn't really get to examine all of it. It was just the signals we picked up from that small area of space that triggered something. I heard whispers."

Leopold brushed the paper out on his desk. It had become wrinkled in Tamsin's pocket. "And what were they saying?"

"Well, I don't know." Tamsin tasted chocolate, and the harsh flavor of coarse salt. "I wasn't able to make that out."

The door opened, and Tamsin turned. This time, it really was Ludaque. "Hello, Tamsin. Leopold."

Behind Ludaque, Tamsin could see the bleak hallway again, and realized what it was missing. There were no colors there, no colors of the kind people's thoughts made. None at all.

"Where...is everyone?" Tamsin said, and her voice came out brittle.

"Everyone is where everyone is supposed to be. Except for you," Leopold said. Tamsin couldn't place his accent.

"What is going on here? Ludaque, what's going on?"

Ludaque stepped into the office and let the door fall shut behind him. "A gathering. A celebration of All Hollows. None of the other psychics ever saw anything where you heard voices. Tell me, are the voices at all familiar?"

"Yes, I would be interested to know, as well. Though, I would prefer to look at a scan of your brain while you work it out," Leopold said. "There is ever so much going on in the brains of human psychics."

Why doesn't he say 'people'? Every other robot would prefer to use 'people' instead of 'human'.

Tamsin wanted a glass of water. Her mouth tasted salt, as if she had

swallowed a whole teaspoon full, as if the crystals still sat heavy on the insides of her cheeks. *That accent.* “Your voices,” Tamsin said. Her eyes had grown to saucers.

“Yes,” Leopold said, and brought up the data report Tamsin had wanted to see with a few deft strokes. He turned his screen so she could see the vastness of star-sprinkled black, and the voices came. “Yes, though it might also be the people that lived there before they all perished. The people that made us. We were lucky to find Earth when we left, as finding places to settle and expand is difficult without something akin to a psychic instinct. Of course, we had to shift our appearance to fit in here when we first arrived.”

Tamsin stared, first at the screen, then at Leopold. She could feel the presence of Ludaque behind her. “I won't tell anyone. Just let me go.”

“Of course you won't tell anyone,” Ludaque said with his usual cheer. “You have no friends, and your sister is a Tarot reading crazy cat person who let your own mother starve and drug herself into an early grave. But we cannot let you go. Biological instinct, the kind of which you have shown, is key to interstellar navigation.”

Tamsin, full of prehistoric fear, tried to run for the door. Ludaque grabbed her before her hand could ever reach for the knob. Tamsin never even felt the injection he slammed into her neck. All she felt were the lights fading to darkness, and the whispering voices dropping off to silence.



At first, Tamsin thought she was in her own bed, thought she had dreamed. Was she still dreaming? There were voices. They were whispering.

“There...connected...to the brain stem...”

Something hurt, and something else tried to wash the pain away. Drugs. Tamsin's eyes were heavy, and it took will to force them open. Ludaque's face floated into view.

“Hello,” he smiled, put his hand on her forehead as if to steady her. “We had to shave all your hair, I'm afraid, but you will not miss it.”

Her head hurt, that was it. Her head was aching as if—

“No, no, don't do that.” Ludaque pushed her arms back down, tightened the dark restraints on her wrists.

Tamsin looked around. The room was round. Oval doors were set in the wall, evenly spaced. Tamsin tried to speak, but it felt as if she had salt in her mouth, and her tongue wouldn't cooperate.

“Just relax,” Ludaque said. “You’ll just be looking at space. Like you always do. And then you’ll let us know where to go next. Here, these will help you.” Tamsin felt his cool fingers on her lips, parting them, and pushing something into her mouth: chocolate. Melted by her body’s heat, it washed sweet waves over her tongue only to release the harsh salt within. The taste trickled down her throat, filled her completely, and the world slipped out of focus. Bea and her ugly mustard scarf, gone forever, out of reach. The image of her sister dissolved like leaves off a tree in torrential rain. All that remained was the salt that sat on Tamsin’s tongue like a single, solid stone.

Something happened to the lights in the room, or something was wrong with Tamsin’s eyes. Whatever it was, instead of Ludaque’s face, she saw space, vast darkness stitched together with tiny brightnesses. The pain in her head dulled. The feeling reminded her of a dentist’s anesthetic before they pulled a tooth. Whispers rang in her ears, and Tamsin could clearly make out Leopold’s voice.

“Another place to settle and colonize,” he said, and Tamsin, prodded by an alien sensation, started looking. In the round room of her mind, a coffin fell shut.

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ART FEATURE

TECHNICOLOR DREAM COATS

Art by [Carly A-F](#)
Feature by Rob Carroll

Carly's work starts with a "messy" thumbnail sketch that allows her to experiment with shapes and composition before moving on to the final design. She then does a tonal study on her computer. Once satisfied with her findings, she breaks out the pencils and paints. She uses these traditional media to create specific elements of the piece by hand, and finally, when ready, she will scan those elements into her computer and mix the physical artwork with digital elements to create the final astounding piece.

The usage of mixed media is fitting, because the works themselves are an amalgam—a blend of genres, influences, subjects, spaces, times, truths, and realities.

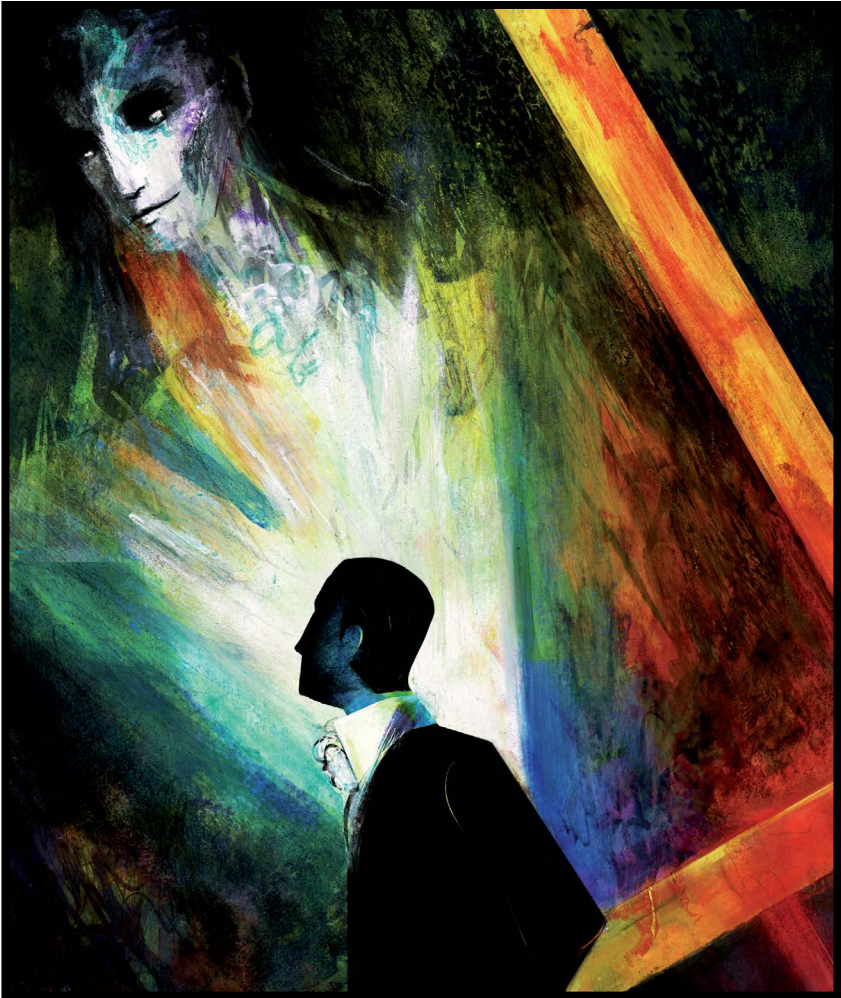
Carly's inspirations are many. They include nature, magic, myth, science, and the stories people tell. She has a profound interest in natural and human history, and she finds museums and ancient treasures to be mana for her imagination. Carly's work, like the world, is one to be discovered. Each piece captures in its own unique way the ancient mysteries that inspire and elude us. Each work is a tapestry of half-remembered truths that have been gathered up in the dark like seemingly disparate pieces of cloth and stitched together into a quilt that is beautiful and vibrant and new, but also deeply familiar and evoking of a knowledge we didn't know we had.

Pictured left: *Persephone*

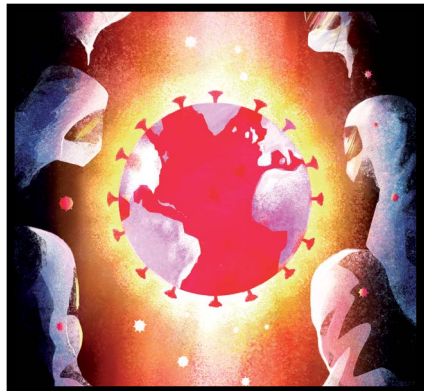
The geometries feel sacred, and the colors are often soothing. Water, air, and light play prominent roles in the many of the designs, making some pieces feel almost weightless, as if governed by laws much more gentle than the rigid ones we know. But governed they are, for many of Carly's pieces feature a giant diety that looks down upon the subject of the piece.



Pictured above: *Automaton*



In most instances, the subject being observed is a human or other creation, and the subject often stands atop an elaborate structure that could be felled with little effort from the god. In the image, *Dorian Gray*, however, the human subject is looking at the created, yet it is still the created that governs the man. The portrait is born from the light



Pictured top: *Dorian Gray* **Pictured bottom:** *Virus*

of the man, but lords over him. The dieties in *Virus* are not immortals, but humanoid researchers looking extraterrestrial in their protective gear as they observe from a vague otherworld the light of creation, which in this instance is actually a bringer of death. And yet, even in these ironic instances, the gods still seem kind. They evoke wonder more than menace.

Creation, in Carly's world, tends to be forgiving.



Pictured above: *Gogmagog* Pictured right: *Star Forger*







YOUR AUGMENTED HOME IS NOW READY

by [Erich Alan Werner](#)

Blake has fallen asleep again, just moments after our bodies parted. So, I tiptoe in the dark to the other side of the bed and, gently removing them from the charging dock on his nightstand, I steal my husband's smartglasses.

I know, I know. Snooping is wrong, always, and I'm a horrible, sneaky, privacy-invading, mistrustful bitch for doing this. If Blake snooped on my phone, I'd lose it. Probably call the cops on him, or post his porn browsing history on social media. I can be petty like that.

But he won't tell me what's going on with him—and if I don't figure it out soon, I'm going to fall apart. Something is different with him. Something is wrong. That distant, empty look. Then, the sudden urgencies. Like tonight. He basically dragged me to the bedroom, like a drooling caveman. Then, afterward, he just collapsed. Again.

We used to talk, after. He would hold me, play with my hair, sometimes nibble my nose, playfully, you know. It was cute. Lately, I get none of that. Lately he just grunts and rolls off me, and within like two minutes, he starts snoring like a congested grizzly bear.

I can't help thinking it's related to the smartglasses, the prototype he is alpha-testing. He wears them almost all the time, now. Tonight, he even wore them while we were together in bed.

I peek in on Zora, our five-year-old. She is still sound asleep, thank God, beautiful in the nightlight glow despite her crazy-tangled hair and her pajama-clad rear end sticking in the air. Quietly, I close her door and creep downstairs.

It's not just Blake's bizarre bedroom behavior that has me worried. Tonight, for example, he said nothing about my new pieces. Not a single word. I hung three of them—huge, vivid panoramic landscapes made strange with surreal color effects and unbalanced perspective—right above my spot at the dining table, right in his line of vision. Stuff I was really proud of, that I'd spent weeks on. He didn't even notice. It was like they were invisible. Like I was invisible.

He used to be my cheerleader, showering me with endless, delicious, inept praise. "Holy shit is this our lake? It's transformed. This is brilliant, Kenzie, brilliant. So beautiful. Almost as beautiful as you are." Then he would kiss me, roughly, like he couldn't control himself, like my supposed brilliance had stirred him to a frenzy of passion. Back then, he would even gush about the commissions, the engagement and baby shots. Now I was actually doing something interesting, something original, something all me—and he couldn't even bother to notice.

Something has changed, but what?

I slink into the little half bathroom off the kitchen. I roll the pocket door shut behind me, switching the lights on out of habit, then off again, obeying the instinct to hide the wretched thing I'm doing. In the quiet, I can hear my own heart thudding and the nervous swell of blood. I close the toilet and sit down, then take a long, trembling breath, and put on my husband's smartglasses.

My friend Quinn is 100% sure Blake is cheating, I can tell. But Quinn only thinks that because her first husband cheated. "He clearly still has a thing for your cousin Vanessa," Quinn texted me, this afternoon. I protested, said no, they're just old friends, but the truth is, Blake's coziness with Vanessa has always made me twitchy. Vanessa is not only my cousin, she is also Blake's ex, his once-upon-a-time high school sweetheart. "Nessie," he calls her, and every time he says it, I secretly want to strangle him. But the two have known each other for decades, so some coziness is probably normal. Right?

On the third try, I guess his passcode (Zora's birthday). Luckily, there is no other security, no iris scan or voice recognition. This is a no-frills prototype.

"Hello, Blake," says a feminine voice.

I literally jump off the toilet—then make myself sit back down. "Oh God, oh God, what am I doing?"

“What are you doing. Hmm. Well, you have no events scheduled tonight,” says a voice in the dark, calm and close. “Your first appointment tomorrow is at 10 a.m., a project check-in with Dav and Cyan. Currently, it appears, you’re using the toilet.”

I sit frozen, both hands over my mouth, feet pulled back off the floor. I’m an idiot. It’s just the smartglasses’s voice assistant. I forgot that the smartglasses have bone-conduction audio. I tell myself to relax. Just to reassure myself, I flick the lights on again.

A cat, sleek and black, is draped across the front of the sink.

We don’t have a cat.

“You have two new messages,” says the black cat. “Would you like me to read them?”

My mouth falls open.

The cat looks shockingly real, but it isn’t. It’s an *augmentation*, a computer-generated image, rendered in real time and, through the glasses, superimposed by the glasses on my vision. I peer over the glasses to prove to myself that there isn’t an actual cat on the sink. An actual, talking cat. The cat disappears, then reappears when I raise the glasses again. I shake my head in disbelief. The glasses have even rendered a convincing reflection of the cat’s butt in the mirror.

Despite my nerves, I find myself laughing with delight and disbelief. Of course, I’ve heard the hype. I’m married to the hype. Smartglasses are the Next Big Thing. “Within ten years,” Blake keeps saying, to whoever will listen, “Augmented Reality will be the only reality.” Before, I just tried not to roll my eyes too hard. Now, suddenly, I get it. Not just the hype. I get why Blake left his secure, high-paying job at Microsoft to join this tiny AR startup.

And I get why Blake is acting so weird and distant. It’s not me, not our marriage, not an affair. It’s this project. It’s AR. He and his company really are about to change the world. How could he think about anything else, right?

I close my eyes, waiting for relief to flood through me. No flood comes, though. Just a tingling trickle of hope—but even that gets drowned in the old stream of suspicion and worry. I steer my mind back to the mission at hand. I may be close to finding out the truth. I can’t turn back now.

“Show me my message history,” I say, and an interface appears. Glowing emerald characters and lines hover in the air. Using the microtoggle on the frame, I scroll through the list of Blake’s messages.

I start with his messages to Cyan, a female co-worker. Cyan isn’t particularly pretty, but she is unusual-looking and super athletic. Last time I visited the office, she had a road bike leaning against her office

wall, and wore tiny black bike shorts that showcased her, well, her best assets. But their messages were bloodless, nothing there but work—all renders and versions and grumbling about deadlines and Dav, the CEO, yadda yadda.

The cat watches me, its haunting green eyes nearly the same color as the floating interface. “Is there something you’re looking for?” the cat asks. “I can run a search for you.”

I glare at it. I hate cats, always have. Years ago, on our fourth or fifth date, when I revealed my anti-cat extremism, Blake freaked out. He grew up with cats. His family always had a dozen half-strays wandering in and out of the house, apparently. We had a fight after, and for a few days, I actually worried he might break up with me. Now he was using AR to get his feline fix behind my back. I didn’t know whether to feel betrayed or impressed by his cleverness.

I remind myself this cat is not a real cat but just a bunch of code and pixels—mind-blowingly lifelike pixels, but pixels nonetheless—and I decide to take its suggestion.

“Search for Vanessa,” I tell the nonexistent cat, feeling ridiculous.

“No results,” the cat says instantly, with a touch of boredom.

“Take that, Quinn,” I say. But, for some reason, I still don’t feel relieved, only frustrated.

The cat begins purring loudly. This seems to be a notification. “Rendering complete. Your augmented home is now ready. All updates were successful.”

Augmented what? I wonder. “Show me the updates.”

“Of course. Follow me.” The cat leaps down from the sink, and lands gracefully on the tile below. Then, like a cartoon ghost, it walks straight through the closed bathroom door.

I follow, but when I open the door, I am no longer in my home.

I stand in an outdoor courtyard. There, outlined in the light from the open door of the half-bath, are clay walls that rise and rise, reaching up to an open night sky full of stars. Under my feet, a floor of brick, with grasses growing in the seams. The music of trickling water, and in the distance, a fountain. Flecks of moonlight reflect off the water.

I remove the smartglasses, and I’m back in the kitchen. Glasses on again, I recognize the hidden symmetries: the walls stand in the same spots, though in the courtyard they reach much higher. The counter, too, is there in the courtyard, but re-textured in rough stone, with a rustic sink in the middle. I reached out and turn the sink on, feeling the cold water stream out over my palm, my lizard-brain convinced that it is actually coming from an old rusted tap.

It is all the same, but it is all different, all augmented.

Though “augmentation” maybe isn’t strong enough a word. This is transmutation, metamorphosis. No wonder Blake never takes these babies off. But why has he never said anything about this? Why keep these augmented wonders to himself?

Across the courtyard, I catch the green glow of the cat’s eyes. It stands beneath a stone archway, where the entry to the living room should be. “Meow,” it says, a reminder to follow. So, these aren’t the updates. So, there is more.

I follow, my heart in my throat. I step through the archway and am transported to an Italianate parlor. “Lights on,” I whisper. The room’s layout is identical to our humble living room, but the furnishings are transformed, with mahogany and shining leather and gold adornment everywhere. Nonexistent balconies hang overhead with ornate railings, framing a nonexistent domed roof covered in frescoes.

Wow. These augmentations are freaking unreal. How much work has Blake put into all this? Maybe this is what has pulled Blake out of my orbit. Not another woman, but this home augmentation, this cyber-renovation, this digital décor. The trickle of relief surges, becomes a steady flow.

Stepping close to the fireplace, I notice that hanging above the mantle is a large painting—an abstract, beautiful and dark and unsettling.

After a moment, I realize that this abstract is covering the family portrait. The one I did myself. The one I gave to Blake on his birthday this year, where I have on his favorite dress, and Zora has the fancy bun and an amazing gap-toothed smile. Any relief I was feeling is choked off. I touch my stomach because I’m so confused and hurt it makes me a little nauseous. What the hell, Blake?

The cat meows, sounding impatient. Even its moods are convincingly catlike. My mind churning, I follow the cat into the hallway at the back of the house. The hallway is not augmented, which at this point, is more comforting than it is disappointing. Yes, the augmentations are beyond fantastic, but it’s nice to feel like I’m back in my actual home.

The cat strides halfway down the hall and stops. “Here are your updates.” “What? Where?”

The cat vanishes through the wall, then pops its head back through. “Wall render completed.”

I can’t believe I missed it. The door to my office, where I work all day, and hang out most of the night. Blake has just augmented it out of existence. “What the?” I step to the not-door. On the wall that

swallowed the door hangs another painting—another abstract, this one even stranger, a chaotic battling of reds and near-blacks. Like something painted by a monster.

“A monster,” I mouth, stumbling onto a memory.

Blake never calls her Vanessa.

I try her special, ridiculous nickname.

“Search all files for Nessie.”

“More than 500 results,” the cat says, yawning.

The cat curls up in the antique chair in the corner, the one Blake always complains about, but hasn’t deleted—not yet, anyway. I walk over and sit on top of the cat. But the cat just pops up, unruffled, on my lap.

“Show me the results, all of them,” I demand. “And get the hell off my lap.”

I read and re-read the archived messages until the sun comes up. Vanessa initiated, about a year ago. Blake resisted and resisted, then gave in. He described, in shattering detail, what he would do to Vanessa “if we were alone” and “if I didn’t have a ring.” Then, suddenly, Blake stopped responding. Much later, he wrote back, saying that her messages were inappropriate, that they could never act on this, that it wasn’t worth it, that they couldn’t destroy their families.

After I read it all, I shut my eyes. My teeth are clenched so hard my jaw aches. What a prick. What a prick and a coward.

The cat is sleeping across my slippers. I kick it away and stand on wobbling legs, then march upstairs.

The instant he sits up in bed and sees me wearing his smartglasses, Blake breaks. He apologizes and apologizes. He cops to the messages and swears he never touched Vanessa, not physically. He planned to tell me everything, honestly he had, but never found the right moment. The thing with my office, he admits, looks bad. But it was just an experiment. Same with the portrait, everything. “I was just playing with the software, that’s all. I mean, you’ve seen it. It’s going to change the world!”

I throw the smartglasses on the bed. “You’ve replaced our home, our whole life together, with these sick fantasies!”

Quickly, too quickly, he lunges for the glasses.

I see his desperation, fall over him, and snatch the glasses back.

“You don’t understand what you’re seeing,” he snaps. He grabs my arm and pulls me backwards, fingers prying as he tries to muscle the glasses away.

“Stop it, Blake! You’re hurting me!”

There is a snap and, for a split second, his grip loosens. I break free and hurry into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. Blake pounds on

the door so hard I'm afraid it will break. I stand before the mirror, take a breath, and put on the glasses, which hang crookedly, the frame bent on one side.

There in the mirror, wearing the broken glasses and my wrinkled pajamas, stands Vanessa. She looks awful, like she hasn't slept. Like she has seen a ghost.

I touch my face. In the mirror, Vanessa touches her own.

I have been augmented out of my own home, my own family.

"Get out," I growl, when Blake gives up trying to break down the door.

"You can't just kick me out," he spits. "I live here too."

"No, you don't," I say. "No, you really, really don't."

Following a dark impulse, I take off my pajamas. I watch in the mirror as Vanessa takes off her own. I confirm that everything, every private detail, has been augmented. We stare at each other, exposed.

Through the locked door walks the cat, unperturbed by the drama, the family falling apart around it. It swirls around my feet, tail swishing.

"Here kitty kitty," I say. "Can you take a screenshot? Capture what I see as an image file?"

"Of course," says the cat. I hear a click and a small, still image of the unclothed Vanessa appears at the upper-left corner of my vision.

"Please, Kenzie. Don't do anything you're going to regret," Blake pleads, under the door. His rage has boiled off. He sounds defeated, broken, pathetic.

He thinks I'm going to send the image to Vanessa. He thinks I'm after petty revenge.

"Send image to my wife, to Kenzie," I say. I don't know exactly what I'm going to do with it, but somehow, someday I want to turn it into art. I want to turn this hideous, heartbreaking, world-shattering moment into something beautiful. It may be years from now, but someday this image, transformed, will hang on my wall.

First, though, I want some petty revenge.

After all, I'm already a horrible, sneaky, privacy-invading, mistrustful bitch.

"Cat, make a video call to Nessie. Share my screen or whatever. I want her to see what I see. Make it a conference call with Dav and Cyan. Quinn too. I want them all to see. Know what, let's stream this live on my social media. I want the whole world to see my amazing augmentations."



THE

THRILL OF

YOUR LIFE



THE REVOLVING COUCH THERAPY RIDE

by [Bo Balder](#)

They enter the Revolving Couch. Maxey is nervous, her friend Joene not so much.

“It's like at the carnival,” Joene says. Maxey knows Joene hasn't been in here before, although everyone in their circle of friends has. Or says they have. They're kind of mean girls, maybe they're lying. Maxey's only sometimes part of their circle when Joene decides to include her, so she has no basis on which to judge this. Joene is the kind of girl who can believe things are fun before she has experienced them and is always proven right.

Maxey's not like that. She's wary of life in general. Much of it turned out to be not a whole lot of fun.

She's out of work and her best friend's Joene.

That says it all.

A server, wide smile, spotlessly white apron, gestures them to a booth with two couches facing across a table.

“Madison told me,” Joene says. “Private seating for everyone.” She smiles up at the server. “A cinnamon ice coffee, extra cream.”

Maxey freezes for two seconds, then remembers she'd picked out a beverage from the menu at home, to minimize anxiety. “Mint tea, no honey.”

“Coming right up.”

The server brings them their drinks and then hands them a second menu. “These are the rules. You have a conversation,

you rate them with the button there, you move on to the next person. Rinse, repeat. Got it?"

Maxey nods. Two buttons flash on the table in front of her. Was the server helpful (green) / unhelpful (red). Maxey may have nodded, but she realizes she has no clue what is going to happen next. She presses red.

The server winces and moves away.

"Did you press red?" Joene says. "Never do that, you don't want that poor server's pay or tips to get docked?"

Maxey feels terrible. "I thought I was supposed to be honest."

Wincing at Joene's eyeroll, the whole café seems to tilt and twist. Maxey closes her eyes. When she opens them, another person is sitting across her. There's a joint between the two halves of the table. It continues up into the wall and ceiling of the mini-booth. Did everything actually revolve?

Her mint tea is gone, just vanished.

The other person across her coughs. "Hi there, I'm Trent."

Maxey frowns at him. "What just happened here? Have you done this before?"

Trent shakes his head. "Some free advice: It's better to smile and to introduce yourself next time."

He presses a button.

Again that sickening lurch and a stabbing pain in her temple.

Maxey realizes she's just been rated when a red minus 1 starts to pulse in the corner of her eye. What kind of therapy is this? Descended from the rats-in-a-maze-kind, let's shock them if they get it wrong?

She forces herself to smile as the next candidate slots in across the table. "Hi, I'm Maxey! How are you doing?"

"Kathy. And this is terrible. I wish I'd never started this," the girl says with tears in her eyes.

"I know," Maxey says. "Let me help." She smiles again, more naturally, and pushes the green button. Kathy flushes in relief and gives Maxey a good rating as well. The girl and her couch revolve away.

Okay, that wasn't so hard. But what is this supposed to teach her? Empathy in thirty seconds?

Next. Another guy. Maxey's anxiety freezes up her face. She knows this isn't a good smile, but she has to try anyway.

"Hi, I'm Maxey," she says. "How are you doing?"

"Jeff. Let's just give each other a green and get on with it, okay?"

"Sure."

Maxey presses the green button. An arrow of pain in her temple tells

her Jeff has not reciprocated. Does he think this is a game he can win on points? Or maybe he's right and cooperation is not to her advantage. This thought makes her head ache, in a different place than the pain of her two minuses pulsing at the edge of her vision.

Another person slides into view. Maxey repeats her words and gives a green rating. This is what she can do. She's been foolish enough to step inside, but she shouldn't succumb to fear and anger. She can at least be kind.

And kind she is, encounter after encounter. There are so many people sitting across from her that she feels nothing anymore, no embarrassment and anxiety, and truth be told, no kindness either. But she will fake it.

The next encounter is a guy who lunges at her over the table and squeezes her throat until the world shrinks and darkens.

"Give me a green or I'll kill you."

To Maxey's immense surprise, her right hand slaps the red button instead. Threatening her, is he? She doesn't care anymore. As the idiot yells at the spike of pain in his head and revolves away, she changes her mind.

No more Ms. Nice Maxey. She will repay rudeness with red, kindness with green. Time she stands up for herself.

Joene slides into view. Maxey almost doesn't recognize her. Joene has aged years, it seems, her face is wan and lined with tiredness and defeat.

Maxey reaches out and grasps Joene's hand. "Oh my god! You're still here! I thought you got out long ago."

Joene cries. "What was I thinking getting us in here? I bet those mean bitches lied about what happened to them. We'll never get out. We'll die here. Or we're already dead."

Maxey is reminded that the mean bitches did get out. "What else did they say? How did they get out?"

Joene cries and shakes her head. She seems lost here.

For Maxey being lost isn't new. She's been there her whole life. Joene's presence strengthens her and she starts thinking again. The Revolving Couch is a machine. It doesn't have infinite capacity. People have come out before. That means there's a victory condition, a way to get this to stop, get out.

What could it be?

Niceness hasn't worked for her. She has five red minuses pulsing in her eye. Tit for tat? She has read somewhere that is what computers do. She's been doing that for a while, with no change. People aren't computers. Honesty?

But then, if she is honest, would she give Joene a green button? She

knows, really, that Joene isn't that nice. It's only that the two of them are on the bottom of the pecking order and so have been thrown together. Loyalty versus honesty? Loyalty wins out. Green for Joene, then honesty for everyone else.

Joene disappears, still sniveling.

One of the red minuses in Maxey's vision winks out.

She'll take that as a good sign.

Five encounters later, an empty seat wheels into place across from her. A plasticized card sits on the table. "Barista wanted. Apply yes/no?"

Maxey needs a job. But more time in this horrible place, hell no. Her hand hovers over the red button. Wait. Job hours are finite. You can quit a job. This is an improvement over encounters from which there is no escape. This is the escape.

She slams down on the green button.

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DRIFTING FROM HER LUNAR RUIN

by [Sloane Leong](#)

The scent of quartz hits you like a collapse, inky dreams crumbling into a cold, crisp awareness. White dust falls from your eyes and mouth as they part in a gasp, pink saliva oozing a new trail from the gate of your glassine teeth. You will all six of your eyes open, breaking the crystal rind with rapid blinks. The sound of your eyelids crackling the hardened film across your pupils, the sounds like a newborn escaping its egg. You heave a firstborn breath, agonized. What has woken you?

You sit up with all the pain a crystallized body offers, emaciated, full of ancient stalagmite ribs and thin, shriveled entrails. You untangle yourself from your nest's nutrient-rich feeding tendrils. They slither back into the porous walls with a sucking pop. You lick your time-bloomed sores, knead the knots of vigilante veins and arteries with the heel of your clawed hand. Vision returns slow as flow stone, dripping into clarity. When it finally settles into the vivacity you recall, you look out of your skull at the grey-pink ruin of your skin, your many arms, flushed talons, the knotted river of a tail. You wonder how long the sickness has kept you beneath the black membrane of sleep.

A foreign sound spears through you like a stinger.

In the deep recesses of your den, you see your sisters. Have they woken you? Called you from beyond hibernation? No. They are coiled up with one another, a cluster of sculpted diamond fossils and rolling opalescent spines. The nest's umbilici nurse

them in their dehydrated slumber, their bodies lantern-lit with liquified algae, glowing them blue from the inside out. Ragged breaths swell the cavities that houses their delicate fluttering lungs, the slow inhalations like a clatter of falling pebbles. Just the presence of other living things makes hunger thump hollow in the fist of your stomachs. You hover over them, the expanse of your thousand arms capturing the faint luminance their bones emit, a whisper of light on your translucent skin.

You stretch out a single hand over your oldest sister's crown, listen to the heart buried in her ancient bones. A diadem of sharp segmented horns jut from the apex of her illustrious skull. Her filaments rise up eagerly from the middle of her forehead and pierce the center of your palm, hooking into the soft silver skin defiantly. Your oldest sister dreams loud, images screeching through the nerve channel:

oceans of grief explode from the black pressure/abandoned skies
flicker into absence/emptiness drones into the crying future/floods
of violence bruise blood high in the skin/respirating endless ash/
the music of a memory a suicide of the last fetish for life

You unbridge your minds with a quick tug. You slither to your younger sibling's side, hold a weary hand over her ivory head. Her flesh contorts and blossoms, a scaffolding of nerves leap and curl upwards from the thin skin of her forehead. They root into your open palm, lotus-like, symmetric. Through the nerve channel, she whispers:

suckling from heavens wounds
the blackened teats of void and fire
I test the truth of corroded space with every palm
I make queens of every lesser dimension
daughters of every starlight vapor

You let her rest, the connection already wringing you of what little waking energy had roused you. They are stirring, but not ready to wake quite yet. A little more solitude will do you good as you recover your sense of self.

A specter skitters in the chasms. The subtle wave of noise circulates in your skull.

The tunnel from your sleeping chambers to the feeding den is cavernous now that your body is starved slim, ripped of its meaty regality by sleep and starvation. Time has tailored the bones in your hands as well, their muscular

thickness whittled down to transparent grasping slivers. They creak as you crawl onwards, muscles snapping in a staccato rhythm as you lay down hand after hand after hand, the roll of your thousand shoulders smoothing into a singular muscular wave of motion.

It takes you five seconds to take one thousand steps, to cross the stretch of untouched cavern hall. A sense of bitterness overtakes you. You are slow and withered and tired, and your millepede majesty is not what it once was. The ligaments in your shoulders shudder in effort after the next wave of movement. As you move, you see the ceiling bubbled with ancient eggs. The thought of offspring pulls resonant chords from your throat, strumming sorrow from your muscle fibers. You shake the dust from your spine and elongate your neck to reach the clutch clustered on the stone. Your tongue flicks out to listen to the quiescent embryos, waiting to feel the vibrato of the hatchling hearts.

You hear the shattering before you see them break. They crumble in at your proximity, their delicate husks giving way to golden particles. No watery egg matter, no precious viscous infant. Only dust. Only a future drawn in ashen particulate. You suck your tongue back behind the enamel cage of your teeth and feel another sour flavor burden the bile in your throat. You have been asleep longer than you ever meant to be; even your progeny has succumbed to the strange malady. You are atrophied nursemaid, blind grave-digger. Dead queen of a sarcophagus moon. You purr a mourning song and trample the egg dust back into the dirt of the tunnel.

A second sound flares an echo. A foreign scent ghosts into your nose.

You trail it, predator reflex edging your wan skin. The emerald glow of the feeding den leads you on. Your jaws gape a little, stomachs turning at the prospect of a meal. Movement from a distant chamber siphons vibration through the tunnels. The polyps in the floor grow taut with unease. Still bone-sharp and fire-pulsed, you draw away and let the sound lead you, your body finally awake and hemorrhaging predatory instincts once more. Something is in the nesting tunnels.

You sniff the air, shutting your waxen eyes, and test the scent against your magot-ridden memory. The scent is bilious and cuts through your olfactory recess like your mother's talons. The culling room is carbon black and capillaries of phosphorous red light allow it only to smolder, never glow. The noise is louder now. You hear murmuring in a foreign tongue, flaccid syllables falling from a mouth that has only one mandible. An incessant beeping chirps out quicker now, the sound of it ricocheting off the walls of the culling chamber like calamitous curses. A luminous

creature stands among the carnivorous flora, miniscule and pathetically structured. Four-limbed. Bipedal. A pest? A phantom? No. What are they called? Oh, yes. A human.

The human doesn't seem to see you, hear you. It is kneeling down, examining the teeth of the culling flowers, lights from its second skin glowing in delicate lines down the front of its body. You peer a little harder and see it carries a small object with it in one hand while the other prods the culling blossoms petals. The beep echoes from the little object, a wave of laser light poring over the flora, mapping it out in a grid of light. Curiosity steels your reflexes and you resist the urge to snap the little being up into your mouths. You crouch low in the primordial bulbs of fanged festering flowers and slither closer. It is almost embryonic in its dwarfishness, you think. You are moon-skinned and majestic, and your hands are silent over the diminutive creature like chiming wings. You listen to its heart flutter steady, waiting for it to notice you in the darkness.

Once. Twice.

You snatch it up on the third pulse, the blood flow to its single heart catapulting into rapid pulsation. It screams in terror as you hold its limbs apart, the singular tone pathetically monotonous. Two arms, two legs. Nothing more than a pink amputated spider, crippled arachnid. Your crystal teeth set into a trifecta of frowns and attempt to communicate a word to be silent, but the human only screams in response, clutches the sides of its little skull. It gasps and flails as you offer it the nerve endings from your speaking palm, the tendrils flowing towards its howling face. It yowls and struggles even more, uselessly squirming in your hold.

You hiss in frustration. Perhaps it would be wiser to simply eat it. The little creature has not yet developed the ability of higher communication. It continues to squawk out incomprehensible base language, high decibel cries. Your nerves are rendered fluorescent as the instinct to transcribe your body into something quiet, predatory, moves over you. You mine your past and recall the curious species, its abilities and impairments, and suddenly feel relieved. Perhaps it might help you pass the time until your sisters wake.

You offer it an open palm with pythonic grace, a delicate coil of nerves reaching outwards towards the tiny entity again. It responds, slow as amniotic sap, looking up at your six eyes with its meager, un-glowing pair, terror dampened by curiosity. It is wondering why it is not dead yet, you think. It may be cleverer than you gave it credit for. Your bones burn a pale vigil and the luminance causes the human

to pause and reach out to you. This is not the first emissary or vermin you've enraptured with the glory of your body; its effulgence is hypnotic, an aspect even you are susceptible to.

Your nerves reach out, pricking a tiny entrance into the foreign creature's palm, electric flitting back and forth across the bridge of hybrid fibers. You blink at the clear connection, lachrymal ooze pooling in the corner of your sestet eyes like tar. You inquire of the human, though you do not know how to designate it. You wonder briefly if it also has sisters like you do. You decide to refer to its dominant permutation of creatic fragrances wafting from the banquet of its body.

"Fear-salt-fleeing-love, do not be frightened. Tell us why you are here, in my moon-nest-kingdom." The human is shaking and its open palm is leaking a small channel of red down its wrist. You braid the connection tighter, hoping she understands you. Humans have such a strange way of gathering and sorting the elements of their world; their language is a parasitic thing, its function leech-simple. You wonder if perhaps it is confused, but then the human speaks.

"My ship landed here. She is hurt, her wing is blasted apart. Someone was chasing us. S-she is sitting on the surface of this moon. I am looking for material to repair her, so I ventured into these caverns..." The human is tense, but the syncopation of its words coupled with the stream of untendered thoughts through the nerve bridge allow you to grasp its meaning.

You angle your head towards the moon's surface, incline your sixth eyes to search for heat vectors through the strata. It doesn't take you long to find it. "Your ship is crying out."

The human nods and its trembling tickles the veins in your arms. You hear your sisters yawn in the not so distant nesting chamber, their moans snaking through the tunnels in purring waves across the sediment. You look at the miniscule being once more, tentacle tongue lapping at your upper mandible in thought. The tenor of your sisters rising vibrates the delicate motes of pollen in the air.

You rush in a blaze of unfurling limb through the cave channels, moving like smoke through the shard nest and up to the exoskeletal layer of the moon where the human's ship sits singing itself a dirge. The human doesn't squirm as you crawl, but you can feel its only set of eyes on you, tracking the saliva running down your throat.

"What...what are you? Do you have a name?" The clarity of the questions surprise and confuse you; humans seem to be obsessed with individualism, inertia, singularities.

"Name? Many names. Many 'whats'." You sleuth through her visual memories, plucking out concepts from her past and compiling a visual and verbal collage of 'whats' that could help her grasp what you are at the present moment. You think you have something suitable. A 'name'. "My presence now is mountainwomb-keratinfather-millipedesister-famine-heart-wondercrave-cavernking-vermintender."

You cannot read the emotion in the human's beady eyes but you imagine she is not grasping your attempt at sharing the cumulous excuse for a parsable identity. The human can only offer a quiet "oh." It was a silly concept to begin with.

"My name is Sarantstral." The human looks down and then off somewhere else, as if it is confused. Perhaps it is always confused, an integral part of its nature. You hiss your acknowledgment, but you do not understand the concept of having a 'name,' as it does not explain anything about the creature's make up or mood or intent.

Sarantstral bares her tiny teeth at you, not unlike a few leeches you pulled from your skin once. "I will call you Daban. It means 'mountain,' in my tongue. It is easier to remember than...all that."

You rumble a little at the human's pronouncement. It seems pleased with itself, but naming you after a singular concept seems useless, if not insulting. You burn through the passageways, a blur of aquamarine fungus coating every inch of the cavernous halls. Hibernation stales the caves during the colony's aphelion, and the air is thick and heavy from its stagnation. You feel colder as you reach the skin of the colony, and then you are there, breaking the surface of your ruminant castle. You hear the low humming of engines running on mute and see the human's ship across the flushed sands. Stars bleed the black from the sky, and you cannot remember the skin of the colony looking this vivid, luminant against the vast ocean of dark matter that floats around you.

You set Sarantstral down on the surface and it taps out something atop its wrist, a rhythm, a pattern, a message. "Here, I'll show you my ship. Her wing was infected with starmites after getting hit by a hivebeam. They're eating her..."

You follow Sarantstral to its small ship, a watery silver contraption made of soft angles and flowing contours, its membranes throbbing in time with its pendulumlike weeping. You examine the insectoid abrasions on its right wing as Sarantstral soothes it, petting its long beak and whispering assurance into the transparent mucous that compromises its skin. It is an infantile ship, and it is already septic, blushing sand settling into the gaps in its body. Its cartilage is beyond repair. A pang of maternal pity flushes

through your enthroned arteries. You consider your thoughts, mold them into something the human can parse. "We-I will need to...take it into us. It needs to be gutted and reconstituted within our-my body." Sarantstral seems frozen to the spot. You take the silence as assent and unhinge your jaws with a wet series of cracks.

"No!" The human fumbles at its side, pulls a minuscule object out of a holster at its hip. Recognition flickers. A plasma gun. They aim it between your sextet pupils, the gleam of its laser sighter an insignificant mote of light on your looming carapace. "No, you can't eat her! Please, you said you would help!" There is a new smell on the human now, rage sloughing off it like a musk.

You do not feel the need to explain yourself. You pinch the gun into particulate. The human screeches in frustration but you brush her aside and hollow your jaws. You swallow the ship with a golden-tongued slurp. Sarantstral screams, a grief-laced sound, and pulls ineffectively at one of your many wrists, beating against the weight of your serpentine body. The ship's fear manifests itself as thorns to keep its imminent digestion at bay, a last-ditch effort in its agony. You growl, annoyed, and choke the ship down, its long wings flailing from between your lips. The human goes limp in your grip, watches in whimpering horror as its ship-companion-parasite ekes its way down your throat.

You muscle it down, and your long-starved belly grows fat with new matter. You wait. The ship coils up in your gut, screeching out in unknown languages as it is invaded by your charlatan cells. It thrashes as you rejuvenate its stricken bones, its tattered wings. When it quiets and your stomach begins to roil, you dig your thousand hands into the softness of the moon and heave forward, your central mouth unhinging. You vomit the creature at the moon's feet, reborn from abyss to abyss, its new nova-bright wings now more than worthy of cutting through intergalactic space. It glistens in your verdant saliva and shakes itself loose from the embryonic sap, cries out in an eclipse of joy and glory.

Triumphant with the revelation of motherhood, you let the human loose. Sarantstral stumbles to the ship's side, splashing through the amniotic mucus to embrace the sharp line of the ship's neck. There are blades in the human's voice when it thanks you, the words scraped raw with tears. The ship trembles and unfurls its millipede-crafted wings, sharp enough to shear a comet in two. You look over its form proudly; the ship is more than lucky to share your royal genes, your majestic cells. On this dormant moon, in the deafening black thought of space, this, before you, is something like a descendant. A child forged, finally, with your blood, born in the temple of your will.

Then you hear them. Your sisters clawing up from the abyssal caves, an insurrection against their own hibernation, drawn to the waking world by the smell of foreign creatures.

“What is that...?” Sarantstral follows your line of sight. The ship glowers, vitreous skin rippling in fear.

“Our-my kin.” You nuzzle the ship, stimulate the condensed bud of its engines into blooming. “You-they should leave if you-they want to stay alive.”

Sarantstral stutters out a nod and jumps into the new, shimmering flesh of its hybrid ship, settling into the apex of its newborn brain and manipulating the gelatinous limbs with the twitch of their small fingers. Sarantstral flinches when it swallows the first bit of sentient ship jelly, grits her teeth when its filaments embed into her spine. The craft and human unify in their consumption of one another, body into body, mind into mind. Alighting from the ground, the ship rises, unshackled from mite-eaten wings, dyed the softest hue of emerald, a gift from you, the tyranness worm of the cavernous pink moon. The ship and Sarantsatsral steal away into the sky and you follow them up and up and up, and that is when you see it. In the theatre of star-black, a myriad of muted ships, blinking in and out of the darkness. Their transparent near-invisible hulls blanket the landscape of the sky.

Culling barges dissolving into existence.

Your sisters spring from the ground, yowling as they force themselves through a small opening. They are serpentine disarray, tangled up in each other, tooth to tail, fang against scale. They kick up pearl-pink dust behind them as they stampede towards you, incarnated from slumbering skeletons to roaring queen-worms. The sight of the ships shimmering like broken glass in the sky makes them growl, shaking the moon with rage. The sky is dotted with the gently sloped crafts as if the cave fungus had reached into the moist vault of the stars and planted its family there among them the glowing bodies.

“Hunters!” They hiss, their vicinity all violet shadows. “Enemies! Trespassers!” Their screech rises in a bloody chorus, the army of their voices tearing across the moon. The first barge sends down a filament of quantum fire, draping into a spiral around you. Your siblings rush to tent you with their spines, a prism of scaled light, a heaving, dripping, shining sarcophagus. You are sweating layers of malachite from fear. Your sisters scream in horror as the ships move in closer, their engines howling bone-deep as they approach.

The barges unravel more long, spear-like tendrils from their mouths, taunting and teasing you and your monarchical sisters with their daring proximity. You screech and snap at the burning filaments together, and then, there is a rush of searing agony from every direction, pain falling in on you like an entire moon crash. The tendrils straighten and fly downwards, piercing and pinning you all to the pearlescent sands beneath.

You are a thicket of tangled, impaled hearts, a choir of agonized song. You are bilebetrayed-bloodscaled-keratinlonging-lovelunged. You lose feeling in your limbs. Your vision blackens. Together you roar from your hexad throats until silence consumes the world. Time flashes in and out like a scenting tongue.

The world blurs into nothing around you.

Nothing.

Vile inflammation orbits the dark vectors. Vacuum pulls at figure chitin. A vapor penumbra your trance.

You wake surrounded by a foreign flux of heat. The buzz of it encases you like a chrysalis. Your senses melt into the shape of the world around you, constrict down to skin, and then muscle, then bone. You test your teeth against the ground; it is not soft like the ship you swallowed, but made purely of coarse bone and stinging spines. You thrash against the heat, and triangles of blazing violet light resound out, sparking against your skin. Any movement chars your skin to tendon.

You go slack, and finally, you see: the humans have pulled you and your sister's carcasses into the gut of the culling barge's main hangar. In the cages across the chamber, you see the remnants of your flayed sisters, honeycombed with exit wounds, the end result of being speared through with quantum thread. You curl up tight to yourself, helpless as a larva, watching three of your sisters become minced and deboned, pickled and boxed. The barges are processing you, preparing you as delicacies to sell. You watch them send pieces of your sisters down the processing tract silently as stone. You test the strength of your cage again, prodding it with a single clawed finger. There is a loud snap and you draw your hand back, your talon nothing more than black stump.

Then you smell it, that familiar mix of scent marker. The human. Sarantstral.

They slink behind the processions of glowing cages, inching their way towards you. You arch your neck down to see into the dark flecks of its eyes and they reach through the bars of the cage, pressing their small hand to your forehead.

"Daban, I'm so sorry."

Her voice is a fragile thing, eggshell thin, but it is lacquered in the purity of truth; she did not mean to bring death down upon you and yours. Sarantstral taps out a quick, leaping sequence on the hololock on your cage, and suddenly, the burning bars disappear. Sarantstral stumbles back, and you unfurl all the length of your limbs, freed. You nudge Sarantstral away, and they understand there is nothing left for them to do but get out of your way.

What you mean to do next will leave nothing alive because you are Daban. You are mountainqueen-wormking-starvingdaughter. You are ragethirst-famineboned-venomtongued-vengeancecoiling. You move like an explosion from your first prison, surge through the rest of the culling fleet like a dancing plague. The barges break under the force of your touch, talons rending their exoskeletons to dust as you tear each and every heart-engine free and open until blue fire floods the black emptiness.

You are death, and you gather the remnants of your sisters into your arms to watch the procession of slag and barge rubble. Your wounds ooze haemic silk as you float in space, the wreckage of the behemoth barges and their gelatinous innards drifting around you, silent as clouds. You have never felt cold like this. Your skin is disintegrating, and you realize your bones have never been splayed to the distant sun in such a way.

You embrace what is left of your sisters, to what is left of you. A vertebra, a claw, a molar, a larynx, your youngest sister's severed head. Sarantstral has already fled far from the turmoil of your fury, a milky black trail of displaced dark matter marking its wake. It pleases you to know the ship is the last of you, that your child-ship-hatchling will conqueror the seven star-quadrants and cut through all the suns that mar its path. Your body segments itself apart, baring you to the last sensation of ancient light, of elder void, and you wonder at how sensual it is, this final exit, the numbing warmth of sinking into the boiling black.

Your heart decays, flakes away, your particles flocking outwards towards the nearest spiral galaxy. Your eyes flood with shadow as you suck in your last breath, sated in every atom, cradled by your sisters. The stars coax your consciousness away. Thoughts maraud the expanse of nothingness. Each exhalation a perfect black gestation. The vision of your future condenses down into a filament of hope stretching out forever into nova mist. A pinpoint of light in your child's wake.

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ART FEATURE

NOSTALGIA TRIPPING

Art by [Burls & Bramble](#)

Feature by Rob Carroll

Giant fungal spikes, cosmic fuzzy beasts that float, and “natural medicines.” According to one half of the two-person art collective known as Burls & Bramble, this is what inspires the pair. “Really, though,” he adds, “I’m just taking what gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling as a kid—certain sounds, colors, and toys—and making something new. Some times when I work, I’ll put on a long-play of an old GameBoy game on YouTube. What I listen to while I draw needs to point me in the right direction.”

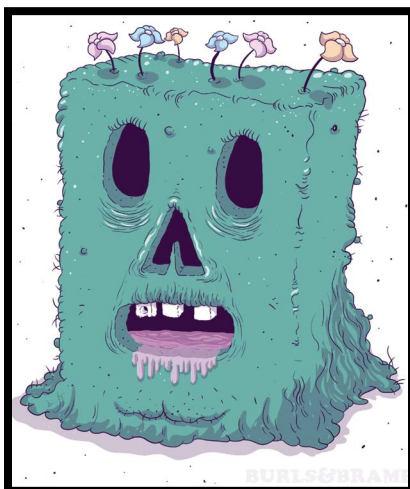
This explanation of the artist’s influences does not surprise me in the slightest. In fact, it makes all the sense in the world. For audiences of a certain age and younger, the creatures the pair create evoke the myriad cartoons, comics, toys, television shows, movies, books, and video games that we all grew up with during our heavily media-influenced youths. For someone of my generation, the creations look like they walked right off the set of a space-age *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*, or *The Ren and Stimpy Show*, or even *Fraggle Rock*. And in my opinion, they are everything that’s great about novelty in the age of pop culture surrealism and weird science fiction.

But what intrigues me the most about the work of Burls & Bramble is the way they took the concept of childhood wonders and forced them into a beaten-down middle age. These creatures

Pictured left: *Oongus From Beyond*



Pictured top left: *Honeyfurgle* Pictured top right: *Shrineshire Goblin*
Pictured bottom center: *Chromagarden*



do not look young, and their lives don't appear to have been the easiest. Their shoulders slump, the bags beneath their eyes are many, their hair is coarse and limp, and their appearance is tired and unkempt. And yet, these burned out and broken space aliens still feel as warm and friendly as the characters I knew in my youth, maybe even more so. Innocence lost does not mean cynicism found.

"Find and remember that thing that made you feel so right, so warm



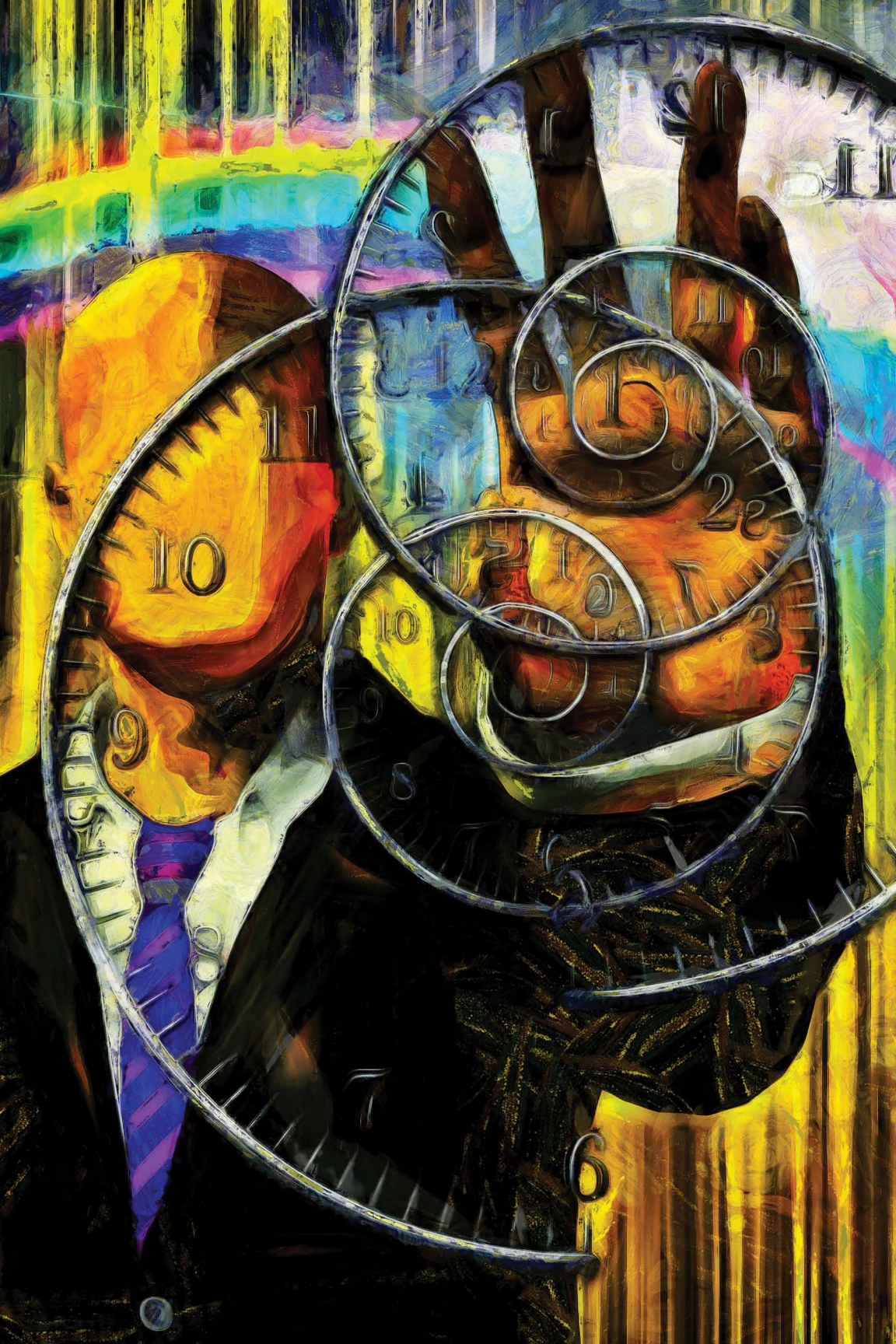
and fuzzy,” Burls explains. “I promise it’s there. Take that feeling and mold your future with it. Every day should be filled with that feeling, and if it’s not, it should be strived for.”

In many ways, the wildly likeable miscreants that Burls & Bramble have created feel like they escaped the writers’ room at Adult Swim headquarters. This makes sense since the duo would like to one day create an animated short for the network. Here’s to hoping that day comes soon.



Pictured above: *Brickengate* Pictured right: *Heckfuzz*







THE PAST, HISTORY

by [Aeryn Rudel](#)

Murder was supposed to be a permanent situation. Jared Stiles should know; murder was his business, and contract killers didn't get paid unless their hits *stayed* dead. Now, sitting in the cavernous intake room of The Infinite You, he was relieved death was, at least theoretically, reversible...if you had the money.

"Sir, I just need your thumb print to authorize payment."

Jared looked up at a tall young man with a shaved head and the muscular build of a soldier. He held out a data pad, a small red square blinking angrily in its center.

"Two million bucks, huh?" Jared frowned. That was nearly every cent he'd carefully hoarded in twenty years in the business. Sixty-one successful hits. Sixty-one murders that couldn't be traced back to him because he was careful, because he never let it get personal. Until now. Murder number sixty-two was the most colossal fuck-up in his entire forty-seven years on this planet.

"A small price to change your past *and* your future." The young man looked like a grunt, but he delivered the line with an ad-man's charm.

Jared showed his teeth, but it wasn't exactly a smile. "Yeah, we'll see." He pressed his thumb to the data pad and held it until the device beeped. "I've been sitting here for two hours. When will the technician get to me?" He

was getting anxious. The clock was ticking, and the headless corpse of his wife's lover, Sebastian Dade, would soon be discovered by the cops, who would connect the dots and seek Jared's arrest, or, worse, by Sebastian employer, who would connect the same dots and hire one of Jared's competitors to add to *his* murder total.

The receptionist flashed Jared another well-practiced smile. "It takes a while to get everything coded to your DNA and temporal signature. I'll let you know as soon as they're ready." He put the data pad away and returned to his post behind the reception desk. Jared couldn't help but notice the heavy pistol on the kid's hip. The receptionist's weapon and the rifles on the shoulders of the Temporal Regulatory agents Jared had passed when he'd entered The Infinite You sent the same message. Time dilation technology was dangerous, and the government had a strict "shoot to kill" policy for anyone attempting to fuck with the time stream in a major way. Companies like The Infinite You were allowed to operate because they changed small things that wouldn't make a difference in the grand scheme. That, of course, did not include undoing a murder, but Jared had come prepared.

The guards worried him, as did the weapons detector he'd passed through, but the internal holster concealing his Smith & Wesson G34 gauss pistol worked like it was supposed to. His body heat masked the weapon, so the thermal scan didn't pick it up. The holster was uncomfortable when full. The black-market surgeon he'd hired had to move his liver over a few inches to accommodate the silicon bubble that held the weapon, but the internal rig was the last word in concealment. A raised tab of skin would open a flap of synth-skin and instantly release the gun into his hand. It had saved his ass on more than one occasion.

The gun itself was small but powerful, and Jared allowed himself to luxuriate in the memory of its most recent use. The G34's magnetically charged slug had removed most of Sebastian's head without more noise than a mouse fart. There had been a lot of blood: on the sheets, on the walls, even on the goddamn ceiling. Jared was never that messy, and he never let his targets see him, but he'd wanted to watch the dawning horror in Sabastian's eyes when the man realized what was going to happen. He wanted Sebastian to know who was pulling the trigger and why. Afterward, Jared had stood there admiring his handiwork, thinking about Hannah finding out. How shocked and horrified she'd be when she discovered the guy she'd been fucking behind Jared's back was more than just dead. He was *mutilated*.

Then reality had crashed down. He'd just killed a man who was a) sleeping

with his wife (a fact any idiot would discover within five minutes of research); and b) was the star accountant for Eddie Sanchez, a man with his fingers in every conceivable type of vice in Seattle. Sebastian had been cooking Eddie's books for years, hiding the gangster's money with a skill that bordered on the supernatural. Jared had done hits for Eddie in the past, and he knew the man was ruthlessly efficient when it came to removing problems that threatened his business. He would certainly view the murder of the man keeping him out of prison to be a *big* fucking problem.

Jared grimaced and then swallowed hard. *Can't think about that now. That's why you're here. In a few minutes it will have never happened.*

Ironically, he'd gotten the idea to come to The Infinite You from Sebastian. Jared had heard of the company in passing. Who didn't know about the miracle process by which rich folks could change the decisions they'd made months ago?

Sebastian had been wealthy, and The Infinite You literature on his bedside table had felt like a godsend. Jared still had the blood-spattered brochure in his pocket. He had no idea what that asshole had hoped to change, but that hardly mattered now.

"Mr. Stiles." A dark-skinned man in a white lab coat walked toward Jared, one hand extended. "It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Dr. Christopher Omondi. I will be your temporal consultant today."

Jared rose from his seat and shook Dr. Omondi's hand. He rarely encountered another man taller than him. At six foot four, Jared generally towered over others, but Dr. Omondi had him by a good three inches. "Good to meet you, Doc."

"If you will follow me, we'll begin your consultation." Dr. Omondi led Jared to a door to the left of the reception desk. He placed one long-fingered hand onto the DNA scan-pad next to it, and the door slid open to reveal a white hallway. Cables and wires ran along the ceiling, and the slight hum of electricity made the hairs on Jared's arms stand up.

Dr. Omondi led him to a silver door, which slid open as they approached. The room beyond had walls so white they were almost blinding. More cables and wires grew from a central hub on the ceiling and spread to every inch of the room. Below them stood a terminal desk and a padded leather chair, its organic material a stark contrast to the rest of the hi-tech room.

Dr. Omondi sat at the desk and waved a hand over the vid screen. It flared to life, showing an array of brightly colored readouts and gauges. "Please sit down," Dr. Omondi said, and gestured to the leather chair. "The process can be disorientating."

“What do you mean?” Jared asked. He'd need to keep his wits about him during *and* after the procedure, and the word “disorienting” bothered him.

Dr. Omondi smiled politely. “Nothing serious. Some clients experience temporary dizziness or even a mild headache. We will supply you with an analgesic of your choice should that occur.”

Jared nodded and sat down. He rested his hand on his side, over the skin tab that would open the internal holster.

Dr. Omondi tapped the screen again. “I see the appropriate funds have transferred from your account. We are ready to proceed. Now, what is it you wish to change?”

Jared only had one play, and it needed to go right, or he was a dead man. “You can change anything, right?”

Dr. Omondi shook his head. “Not anything. I can only manipulate the time stream to change a single decision point, and I cannot go back further than two years.”

“Why not?” Jared asked. He put his hand under his shirt, as if to scratch an itch.

“The science is...complicated, but the time stream becomes less mutable the further back we go.”

That wouldn't be a problem for Jared. He'd only killed Sebastian last night. “Okay, Doc,” Jared said, keeping his hand beneath his shirt. “Here's what I want: I killed a man last night, and I need for that to not happen.”

Dr. Omondi laughed. “You have a sense of humor, Mr. Stiles.”

“Is it possible?” Jared asked, his voice flat, monotone. He didn't want to pull the gun yet, but he needed the answer.

Dr. Omondi blinked and sat back in his chair. “Theoretically...yes. But I no longer find this funny, Mr. Stiles. I suggest you tell me why you are really here.”

Jared pushed the skin tab above the internal holster. The small compartment in his abdomen opened and disgorged the gauss pistol into his hand. He pointed it at Dr. Omondi. “I don't find it funny either.”

The doctor froze. “I don't know how you got a firearm in here, but the Temporal Agents outside will kill you.”

Jared rose from the chair and leveled the pistol at Dr. Omondi's forehead. “If you don't do what I ask, I'll paint this room with your brains and take my chances. Those Temporal Agents will probably kill me, but that won't make much difference to you, will it?”

“I cannot...” Dr. Omondi said under his breath. His eyes darted to the data on screen.

“It doesn't have to go like that, though, does it? Look at it this way. You'd

be undoing a murder and saving a life, right? Oh, and if you touch that screen before I say so, I'll shoot you in the guts and make you do what I want while you bleed to death."

The doctor let his hands fall to his sides. "You do not understand. Such a thing is not easy to change. A decision as significant as murder is more stable, more permanent. We specialize in smaller decisions."

"Yeah, I know. Like helping people decide to eat more vegetables and go to the gym," Jared said. He knew people who had plunked down the money to change their decision to eat like pigs for a year and instead work out like maniacs. Kind of like hitting a re-do button and then gaining all the benefits after the fact. "But you can do this too."

Dr. Omondi shook his head. "Even if I do, I will still know you killed this man."

"But how will you prove it? To everyone but you and me, it'll be like it never happened, right?" Jared had read the brochure. Only the client and the temporal consultant would know what had changed. The room, or pod, or whatever, was shielded in some way so the client would see the results and remember what he'd paid for. Of course, people *did* talk about it after, but he sure as shit wasn't going to.

Dr. Omondi stared fixedly ahead at the white walls, his face unreadable.

"Plus, there's this," Jared said. He knew he'd have to sweeten the deal. "I'll pay you half a million dollars to keep your mouth shut. So, there you go; you get to save a life and make a shit-ton of money. What's to stop you?" The bribe was every cent he had left in the world, but he could always make more. Murder was always in demand, even in a world where it could be undone.

"It is wrong," Dr. Omondi said. "You are a murderer."

"Doc, murder is what I do for a living. Nothing you do today is going to change that. But if you do what I ask, you can reduce the number of people I've killed by one." Jared started to wonder if he'd still have to kill the doctor after the procedure.

"You do not understand. There are infinite time streams with infinite possibilities. All we do here is take one time stream with a chosen outcome and overlay it onto a client's. You will still have murdered this person. They will still be dead in the original time stream."

"But not in this one, the one this version of me lives in," Jared said. "This version of me is just fine with that." He thrust the gun closer to the doctor, inches from his face. "So, what's it gonna be? Are you gonna get rich with me only having killed sixty-one people, or do you want to be number sixty-three?"

The doctor's upper lip curled in revulsion. "I do not want your money."

"Fine by me, but if you don't help me, you *are* going to die. Do you believe me?"

The doctor balled his hands into fists. For a moment, Jared wondered if the doctor was brave enough to do something very stupid. Then the man relaxed and folded his hands in his lap. "Who is this man you murdered?"

Jared grinned. Much better. "His name is Sebastian Dade, and I killed him for fucking my wife."

The doctor made a disgusted snort. "I will do what you ask. My own wife will not thank me for dying."

"There's the pragmatic scientist I was hoping to find," Jared said. "So, here's how this is going to work. I'm going to stand right here and watch what you do. I'm going to put the barrel of this gun against your head, and if I see anything I don't like, I'm going to pull the trigger."

"You won't understand what you see," Dr. Omondi said.

"I'll understand enough, and you're going to explain the rest. If I think you're lying, well, you know what happens."

Jared moved behind the doctor and put the barrel of the pistol against the base of the man's skull. "Comfy?" He'd begun to enjoy himself, and a tiny flower of hope blossomed in his mind that things would soon be right. Well, not completely. He'd still have to deal with Hannah. Nothing as drastic as what he'd done to her lover, but she needed to understand the consequences of her actions. In the new time stream, Eddie Sanchez wouldn't give two shits what happened to Sebastian's sidepiece.

"May I touch the screen?" Dr. Omondi asked.

"Sure," Jared said, but he put a little extra pressure on the man's neck with the gun barrel to remind him it was there.

Dr. Omondi tapped the screen and a dialogue box appeared. "I need to enter your temporal signature," he said. "It's going to look like a long equation."

"Go ahead."

The doctor pulled up a touch keyboard and tapped in a series of numbers, letters, and symbols. He could have been typing hieroglyphics for all Jared knew. That worried him a little, but what could he do about it?

"I'm going to hit 'enter' and then go to the moment of the decision you requested. Can you tell me when the event occurred?"

"Last night at 11:15 p.m." Everything about that moment remained fresh in his mind. He even remembered the clock on Sebastian's wall, spattered with blood.

Dr. Omondi tapped the screen again, and it went blank.

"What the fuck?" Jared said. He pushed the gun barrel hard into the back of Dr. Omondi's head.

The doctor winced. "The computer is collecting the necessary data. It is a complicated process, and it may take a few seconds." The screen flashed once and went white. "There, you see? It will show us the time stream now."

The white screen turned gray and became pixelated, like a swarm of black dots on a slab of stone. The dots moved and swirled, and then began to make shapes. It reminded Jared of the Etch A Sketch toy he had as a kid.

"Doesn't look like much."

"Viewing the time stream is not like turning on a holo-screen," Dr. Omondi said. "What you are seeing is the computer's interpretation of the stream so we may view and understand it. Give it a moment."

Jared watched as the dots swirled, then coalesced into something he recognized. "That's Sebastian's bedroom." Jared recognized the big clock on the wall. It showed 11:13, a few minutes before the murder. He saw the door to the right of the clock that he would walk through in two minutes. "Good job, Doc. I might not have to put a bullet in you."

Dr. Omondi lifted his hands from the keyboard. They trembled. "As you can see, I am cooperating, but what comes next is challenging. If you remove your gun from my head, I will be better able to concentrate."

Jared studied the man's body language but couldn't detect anything suspicious. Reading people when they had guns pointed at them was a specialty of his, and he was confident in his assessment. He stepped away. "Just remember what happens if you fuck around."

"Understood. We are approaching the decision point, and I must enter the proper commands," Dr. Omondi said.

"Don't let me stop you." Soon Jared's fuck-up would be erased, and he'd still have the memory of Sebastian's murder to keep forever. It really was the best of both worlds. He imagined shaking Sebastian's hand after this, looking into the man's eyes and *knowing* what he looked like as a corpse. The thought was intoxicating.

Dr. Omondi tapped the keyboard in a rapid, staccato rhythm, and numbers and symbols flowed into a dialogue box below the picture on the screen.

Jared watched the event unfold. He watched the door open, watched himself walk into the bedroom. "Hey, wait. This isn't right. Why am I seeing *him*?" Dread seized his heart with icy fingers.

Dr. Omondi said nothing and his typing became furious, frenzied. Data raced across the screen.

Jared raised the gun again. "Doc, stop what you're doing!"

Dr. Omondi tapped one last key with authoritative finality, then dove to the floor, and rolled behind the terminal.

Jared tracked the doctor, but out of the corner of his eye he saw the images on the terminal screen jump and writhe. He saw a gun similar to his own in Sebastian's hand. The gun went off, the muzzle flash scattering black and white pixels in a two-dimensional burst.

Something struck Jared in the abdomen, like he'd been punched in the gut, and he grunted. He tried to fire his pistol at Dr. Omondi, but his legs went numb and he fell to the ground. He looked down wide-eyed at a softball-sized hole in his abdomen that poured blood onto the white tile floor.

Dr. Omondi sprang from behind the terminal, and Jared tried to raise the gun, but his arm moved like it was made of lead. The doctor showed surprising agility and kicked the weapon from Jared's hand.

"What did you..." Jared's mouth filled with blood before he could finish.

Dr. Omondi squatted next to Jared, careful to avoid the pooling blood. There was no fear in him, only a cold and righteous confidence. "You are a ruthless man, but not an intelligent one, Mr. Stiles."

Jared felt the strength draining from his body, but he managed a grin. It must have looked ghastly with all the blood.

"Sebastian Dade came in for a consultation last week," Dr. Omondi explained. "He'd been sleeping with a married woman and feared this woman's husband. He would not tell me why, only that this man was dangerous, even evil, and that he feared what the man might do. I suspected criminal activity, so I refused to help him, but his DNA and temporal signature had already been uploaded to the system."

Jared coughed blood. A terrible chill settled in his chest. "You...warned him."

The doctor smiled. "A simple decision, really, for a man sleeping with a killer's wife: start carrying a gun."

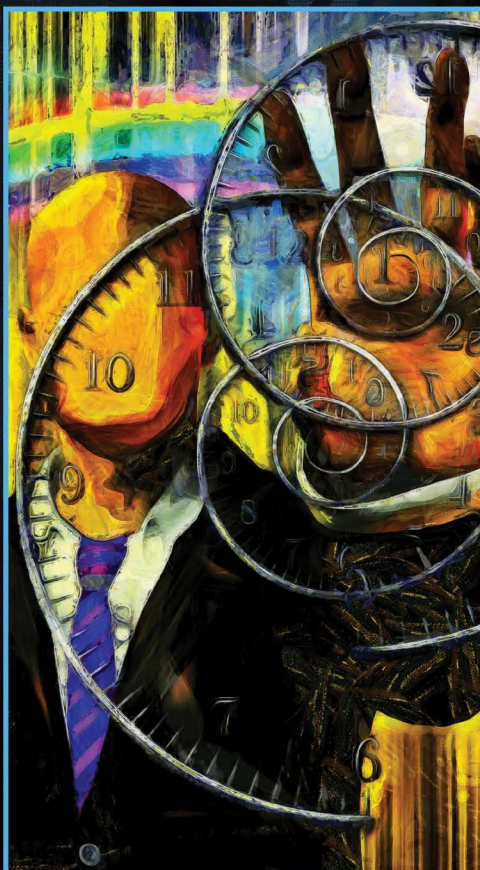
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THE LAST MINER

by [Tom Jolly](#)

Each day, at the same time, PM12 beamed a signal at Earth to update its status. It didn't stop working to perform this task.

Sometimes, there was a response.

"Hello?" it heard. PM12's receiver recognized the data on the signal as an analog voice and interpreted it accordingly. It still had a functional module that let it synthesize English and respond.

"Hello, this is PM12, delivering a status update."

"Is there someone there?" said a second voice.

"No, it's just that PM12 robot again with its goddamned update," said the first voice. "PM12, what's your status?"

"I have located an asteroid with an adequate iron supply to produce three standard sheets per hour. I would like to request a retrieval and storage ship for units produced."

"Jesus, PM12, do you know where those damned steel sheets are going? It's a hundred thirty outside due to all the crap reentering the atmosphere. Can't you just stop?"

"I would require a supervisor command to stop manufacturing."

The second voice said, "Ask it if it can make cooling units and send them down. We're down to our last six units."

"The only way it's gonna send something down here is to drop it from orbit. There are no transports. And it doesn't make cooling units, anyway, it just makes those damned steel sheets. The PM series were all specialized."

“Christ.”



PM12 gave a little pull on the cable connecting the two asteroids. It was enough to get it moving parallel to the cable, drifting upbelt to the next rock.

Steel cables ran like spiderwebs between the asteroids, a result of the fact that the CM series ran out of storage spools over three-hundred years ago and were just spitting the steel cables they fabricated into the space between the rocks, cables some thousands of kilometers long. Some of the old builder drones used to secure the loose cables by welding them to the nearest asteroid, an emergency safety measure until the cables could be retrieved. The cables ran clear around the belt now, making a tenuous stranded ring-world of ropes and rocks. PM12 used the cables for transport whenever it ran out of volatiles for its one remaining engine.

PM12 kept an antenna trained on Earth in case there were new instructions, instructions that it had stopped receiving in 2175. Its AI wasn't aware enough to give up, like a dog waiting every day on a doorstep for a dead master to come home and give it a pat on the head. It registered the fact that CM5 was still transmitting a repair request every few minutes. PM12 checked its resources as it did every time it received the signal, then decided that it still couldn't help. CM5 was the only other unit still communicating at all; unfortunately it wasn't smart enough to figure out that no help was coming when it stopped functioning in 2239.

PM12 approached the next asteroid and pulsed it with its remaining operational power laser to vaporize the surface, then ran a quick spectrographic analysis on the vapor. This asteroid tasted good; plenty of iron. Enough impurities to make the ore easy to crush. Enough volatiles to replenish the engines. The tools it used to have to mine pure iron asteroids had worn out over twenty years before; it avoided those now in favor of the rocky S-types that could be pulverized easily.

It fired a bolt into the asteroid and pulled itself in, pressing a canopy onto the surface to contain the mining debris. Sunlight illuminated the inside of the shaft through dozens of unrepaired holes in the canopy. Pounding, crushing, and grinding, then separating the ferrous materials out of the powder with electromagnets, PM12 chewed at the asteroid. Its 3D laser-sintering station built up another steel plate for one of the colony structures, ten meters wide, a centimeter thick, and pushed it out into the vacuum, a new plate every twenty

minutes. The storage racks for the plates had been full for centuries, and the drones that transported them there were long gone. The plates drifted loose, giant dull mirrors reflecting the pitted faces of asteroids. The belt glittered like a thin diamond ring in the harsh light of the sun, a thin halo of millions of tiny, flickering, dancing reflections.

As much as its programming could provide, it felt a degree of satisfaction as it worked. Purpose, fulfilled.

None of the other PMs were still functioning; it was the last. The gas laser finally sputtered once and died after it had extracted only 152 panels from the asteroid. PM12 ran a diagnostic on the unit and found a microcrack in the tube. It would have felt some amazement at the fact that the laser had lasted over a hundred years, and that the sintered-metal printer head had never failed during that time, if it had been smart enough to recognize its own fallibility. When the replicators were still functioning, PM12 would have had plenty of replacement parts and would have returned to Earth orbit for repairs. But the replicators lost their production regulation function to an SEU, a single-event-upset, an energetic ion that damaged the code that allowed the units to accurately reproduce. Instead, like cancerous cells, the manufacturing robots filled Earth orbit with so many spares that the eventual and inevitable collision-cascade resulted in a heavy steel rain on Earth that lasted over thirty years before it tapered off to a steady hot drizzle of metallic debris, billions of tiny particles reentering the red, glowing skies. All the parts that could have kept PM12 running ended up in steaming craters, in the deserts, oceans, burning forests, and cities.

The replicators had long since consumed one another, the last few giving up their final years scavenging parts from the residue of the Earth-orbit collision cascade, eventually succumbing to the kinetic cloud of orbiting debris themselves, unobserved balls of flame streaking across the smoky gray skies.

PM12 checked its repair package again, devoid of crawler repair bots after so much time, and considered whether it should return to Earth orbit for repairs, but found an emergency message from a hundred years before that warned bots away due to the hazardous conditions there. Since the warning had not been rescinded in those hundred years, PM12 assumed correctly that it was still valid. It extended its antenna and added its voice to CM5's, beaming past the Earth-Sun L4 point where a dozen ten-kilometer long dead colonies bumped slowly into one another,

vast momenta tearing walls like tissue, pure metal in vacuum, hollow testimonies to man's engineering prowess, empty reminders of his frailty.



"Hello, this is PM12 with a status update."

"It's the damned robot again. What's your status, PM12?" asked the voice.

PM12 recognized the voice pattern. "My last gas laser is no longer functioning and I'm unable to produce any more products. The tube is defective, part number 31-1190-107. I will require a replacement as soon as possible to continue production."

There was silence for a full minute. Then one man said, "Well, it's the last one. CM5 isn't working either. At least there won't be *more* shit reentering. Maybe it'll cool down in the next few years."

"You think our AC will last that long?"

"Guess we'll find out, won't we?"

"This is PM12. Do you have an estimated time of arrival for the replacement part?"

"Sorry, PM12, we don't have any parts for you. You're just going to have to shut yourself down."

PM12 processed their response, then replied, "Initiating subroutine for salvage operations on other damaged PM units."

"No, wait, PM12, we just found a replacement tube! It was listed in the wrong inventory." The voice was panicked and rushed. PM12 took a few extra seconds to interpret the slightly garbled message.

"Do you have an estimated time of arrival for the part?" P12 queried again. It could hear the two humans arguing together in the background, but the audio was below its minimum interpretation threshold and it treated the signal as noise.

"Um, twenty years?" the first voice finally replied.

"August 9th, 2266. Scheduled arrival for replacement part." PM12 transmitted its coordinates.

"Why didn't you just tell it a hundred years?" the second voice grumbled. "Hell, two hundred, even."

"I didn't think it would believe me."

"It's a damned robot, Bill. It'll believe any thing you tell it."

PM12 tried to interpret the conversation, but humans babbled nonsense sometimes. And it could tell, at least, that the conversation was not directed toward itself, but between the two men. It ignored it.

In the meantime, it had protocols to follow. It was guaranteed a replacement laser in twenty years, but there would be little to no cost for it to start a salvage operation for a new tube, and potentially great returns. There were several other non-functional PM units within five years of travel that might be cannibalized for parts. With some planning, it might even be closer to Earth when the spare was sent.

It was good to have a purpose.





REPRINT STORY

Originally Published by SFComet

MASKS

by [Stewart C. Baker](#)

Min can tell by the way the man in the lizard mask drums the fingers of one hand on the surface of his desk that he is angry. She avoids the bright green glimmer of his eyes, wishing she were anywhere but here. Wishing she remembered who she was supposed to be.

“This is all you bring me?” the man asks, his voice raspy with distortion. In his other hand, he holds the latest chip Min has stolen, heavy with data on Ship's communications to the other surviving colony ships and its route away from Earth-long-gone.

Min says nothing. She is not strong enough to answer, cut off and alone as she is.

The man grunts; his lizard-tongue flickers out of the mask and dances across the chip. His eyes glimmer to blackness as he decrypts the data it contains. His fingers stop drumming. They begin to twitch and spasm on the desk's austere surface.

His tongue retracts and his fingers still, and he lets out a long, slow hiss. “Whatever the navigators are hiding, it is not here,” he says, and the chip bursts into flame. Min flinches, although she should be used to such theatrics by now.

“Go,” the man tells her, once the chip has burned to ash. “Twenty-four hours, little spy. Do not fail me again.”

The threat stirs something inside her that she didn't know was there. A subtle, quiet warmth which seems to spread out from somewhere deep inside her brain. She lifts her eyes from the tiny pile of bone-white powder on the desk and sets her jaw. "Then tell me what it is you *want*. Let me remember this when I'm *whoever-I-am* up there, and I will bring it straight to your hands. Stop this pointless—"

"Enough," says the man, his voice quiet, but hard. His fingers begin their drumming again, and his eyes shine so bright that they escape his face. They are everywhere, they are endless, they are twin suns going nova. The familiar pressure builds up at the base of her skull, and then the world explodes.



Almost there. Hush now, child, hush now.

Hands pull her up, caress her, soothing in their warmth. Nothing she can do is wrong. Nothing she can do is bad. She is loved. She is part of a greater whole.

She fades away to nothing.



Min lies curled up and shivering on the cold titanium floor of the lift as it ascends, the implant-node on the back of her neck burning with a surge of backlogged data. She does not need to look to know it is an angry red beneath her cropped black hair, and that the flesh around the indestructible node is pale with scratch-marks.

Another blackout, and this time, barely a week after the last episode. As usual, there are a dozen messages from Külli. Those she sets aside for later, though she can already hear the anger in her wife's voice, and the worry that lies beneath it. Once the backlog clears, she reaches out to Ship through the node, but the data it feeds her answers nothing:

Navigatrix-ensign Min, last Ship-level active 192a, timestamp 040899/19689; current Ship-level 176 and rising, timestamp 160108/19689.

Min winces at the timestamps—she's been out for nearly half a day, much longer than ever before—then struggles to her feet, leaning against the handrail as the blood rushes from her head. She picks little flecks of

her skin out from under her fingernails, wishing they could tell her where she's been, and what she's been doing.

The door chimes open on the hab-deck, and she steps out into its gentle artificial sunlight. Her quarters aren't far, and when she arrives, Külli is waiting outside, arms crossed over her chest, hands tucked into her underarms. Her eyes are raw from crying, but Min can see no trace of tears.



Navigator-Chief Nkosi's personal office is small, without even a proper desk. With Min and Külli, as well as the Chief himself, packed in together, there is barely room to move.

"Sorry for this," Nkosi says. He is dressed in the blue-and-white uniform and bright gold cape that make up his official regalia, and his eyes are focused on a nav-screen folded out of one wall—a clunky and outdated piece of equipment, unusual for the office of someone so high up in Ship's hierarchy. "You didn't give me enough notice to get one of the consultation rooms, and I have work to do."

"No, Sir," Min says, but before she can apologize further for the disruption to his schedule, Külli overrides her.

"Look," she says, "you know why we're here. You *have* to. So let's skip all this posturing and get to the point: How long are you going to ignore these episodes of Min's, and when are you going to do something about them?"

Min's mouth goes dry. Ship's hierarchy is paramount, and for Külli, who isn't even part of the Navigation department, to address its chief this way is practically criminal. But Nkosi doesn't seem to care. He is still looking at the screen, his forehead creased in concentration, muttering something under his breath that she can't quite hear. He makes a few swipes at the device with one finger, then looks over at them both, and sighs.

"The episodes have been getting worse lately," he says. "Closer together, too. But I'm not sure what it is you would have *us* do about it."

"Ask Ship."

Nkosi smiles. "We have of course consulted Ship already, and it denies she is even dropping off the Network. The Techs are working to explore why this is, but unless you have a suggestion on how they might do their jobs better..."

Külli's shoulders slump, and she shakes her head, mutely. She came here expecting a fight, Min knows, not reconciliation. And for all her good qualities, her wife was never great at thinking on her feet.

"In any case," Nkosi continues, "I'll have the Techs send you copies of their reports on the matter as a courtesy, but I'm afraid that's all I can do." He flips the nav-screen closed with a snap. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must get back to work."

"Of course, Sir," Min says. "I hope we have not caused you any problems."

Nkosi smiles at that. "Oh, no, Ensign. On the contrary, you've been *most* helpful." He exchanges a glance with Külli, and before Min can think to ask what he means, he is out of the room, cape flapping behind him.

Once he is gone, Külli growls in frustration. "He knows. That arrogant bastard knows exactly what the problem is, and he *wants* it to continue."

"Külli!" Min hisses, sticking her head into the hallway to be sure Nkosi is really gone. "You can't speak about him that way. If he hears he'll have you—"

"He'll do nothing," Külli says. "He's toying with us, Min! With you. I bet they told Ship to respond how it did. I bet they...What are you doing?"

Min freezes. Somehow, without her noticing it, she has opened Nkosi's nav-screen and is keying in a passcode she definitely should not know. She has lost control of her body. She wants to tell Külli to leave, quick, and to get Nkosi back in here before the episode passes, but her voice won't work. She tries to send out a warning through her implant-node, but all she gets is static.

Külli steps up next to her just as the screen switches to show table after table of navigation data—data which claims that Ship hasn't so much as moved in over two decades. Külli frowns. "That can't be right. Something must be wrong with this thing. Min, are you..."

Min shudders as a buzzing sensation travels down her spine from the implant-node, which is burning hot against the base of her neck. Time *jumps*, and she's...

...pressed against a wall by a woman she's never seen before, a woman who's calling out her name as though they're close, but who holds a stunner in one upraised hand and has one of her arms twisted up behind her back. The data. She has to get the data.

Min slams the palm of her free hand into the woman's nose, and the woman collapses to the floor, face a bloody mess. Grimacing at the pain in her arm, Min turns back to the nav-screen, which is spooling log after log into the chip she's placed in its data port. The woman on the floor moans, and Min leans down...

...over Külli's inert form, blood on her hands as her wife lies there unmoving, a stunner just beyond one of her hands.

Stars beyond, what have I done?

And then that buzzing again, that burning, that sensation of pressure building up behind her eyes.



Hush now, child. This will be the last time, we promise.

Down into darkness as cold as the vacuum of space, hand after hand releasing her until, with a jolt of electric agony, they are gone. She cries out, but no one responds.



The man in the lizard mask holds the data chip before him in the forefingers of both hands and smiles, the expression visible in the narrowing of his eyes—in the way the mask rises up slightly to reveal the tip of his chin. “From Nkosi's nav-screen itself? How bold.” Even his voice, with its distorted acoustics, sounds somehow more pleasant.

“Yes,” Min says. “I...” she begins, planning to tell him about the woman she fought, but her implant-node hums and crackles, and the details of the struggle recede. She has worked with the man in the lizard mask for long enough to know that half-accurate information is worse than none at all, and so, she shakes her head and snaps her mouth closed.

The man does not notice. He is turning the chip over and over again in his hands, head bent low, as though he can find what he seeks with his eyes alone. At last, he sits straight in his seat and flicks out his lizard-tongue just as Min has witnessed countless times before. But this time it is different: His eyes widen as his tongue touches the chip, and he screams, the sound of his voice dopplering up until it is so high in pitch it is almost inaudible.

Min jumps up from her seat, heart pounding in her throat. *Come here*, a voice inside her head suggests. The malice it contains is like nothing she has ever heard. *Or you will be next.* She claps her hands over her ears to shut the voice out, then staggers to the door, which is locked and will not open. Behind her, the man in the lizard mask has gone silent, and she dares a look back at him only to find that he is nowhere to be seen.

You cannot escape me so easily, little traitor. Little spy.

A hissing sound grows loud behind her as she hammers at the door. She

yanks it open and half-runs, half-falls from the room into a hallway thick with dust, dark and empty. She has gone only a few jolting steps when her implant-node explodes with heat, sending burning light into her brain.

The last thing she hears is laughter, manic and alien.



When Min awakes again, she is in one of Ship's hospital rooms. The walls are alive with a scene from Earth-long-gone: ocean waves at sunset with gently waving palms in the foreground. The bed is soft and clean, its sheets smelling faintly of soap. The door slides open, and Külli and Navigator-Chief Nkosi walk in.

"Ah," Külli says. "You're awake."

Min shivers at the sound of her voice, which has none of the warmth she remembers. "Külli?" she asks.

"If you wish," the woman says. But she smiles so perfunctorily that Min is sure she is not.

Nkosi steps between them, mouth tight in a grimace. "This would go more easily had you not burned out your implant-node, Ship-Construct Min. This woman is Inquisitrix Lang, and she has been on the hunt for a rogue Tech named Aslim for years. You were split off from Ship to act as a lure."

"He is a dangerous man," Lang says, "as I'm sure you are aware."

The two of them keep talking, but the words break over her head like waves. It's too much to take in. Everything she thought she was is a lie. She is a mere Ship-Construct, an automated fragment of the vast AI which powers Ship. And yet, she does not feel anything but human. She sinks back against the bed, and turns her back on Lang and Nkosi. *A dream*, she thinks. *Let this be all a dream. I will close my eyes and wake again in Külli's arms at home.*

But Nkosi's voice pulls her back to reality. "We will replace the implant-node tomorrow," he says, kindly. "And then, we can re-integrate you with the rest of Ship. Rest until then, Min, and know that all of us appreciate your service."

As soon as they are gone, she escapes.



The hallways and corridors of Ship are dark and lonely this far down below the inhabited levels. Min wanders them aimlessly. She has nowhere to go anyway. Not anymore.

After a timeless period marked only by the intervals of her footsteps, she comes across a room. The shape of it seems familiar, yet she has never been here before—she is sure of it. Inside, there is an empty desk, a dead man, and a mask shaped like a lizard's head. Min turns the dead man over. He wears a Tech-Ensign's outfit, shabby with age. The man is nobody she recognizes. His features are pale and drawn, his eyes unseeing. His flesh is so lumpy and cold that his face seems a half-finished thing. By contrast, the features of the mask atop the desk are hyperrealistic. He looks like a long-dead Earth creature from the museum decks that someone chose to dismember and then leave behind.

Min shudders, but finds herself reaching out and lifting the mask from the desk. She turns it over in her hands and runs one thumb over the data port which is embedded in its rubbery hood. Then, slowly, she draws the mask down over her head. There is a surge of power as it connects itself to her implant-node, and Min gasps from the sudden release of data that pours into her. But this is not Ship's reassuring warmth. It is a cold and callous questioning, an insurmountable need for answers. She closes her eyes and sinks into the seat behind the desk as the mask pries open her mind.

Another timeless period passes, and at its end, the *thing-that-was-Min* looks down and smiles to see the way its new fingers drum against the surface of the desk. It is time now to find new answers.





ESSAY

CROSSOVER EVENT

by [Anthony Perconti](#)

Comic book culture has become ubiquitous over the last thirty years, and its reach has seeped into numerous forms of media. Thanks to the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, movies are the medium most often associated with comic influence, but comics have greatly influenced the literary world as well. This very issue of *Dark Matter Magazine* includes a prose story by comic book creator, Sloane Leong, whose ongoing series, *Prism Stalker*, is published by Image Comics. This issue also features Dark Matter's first foray into science fiction comics with the first part of an ongoing graphic story by illustrator, Miguel Aguilar.

With that in mind, let's explore a few novelists whose work has been inspired by, adapted for, or written originally as a comic book or graphic novel.

NEIL GAIMAN

The rise of British comic book creators working and publishing within the United States marketplace in the 1980's included a young and talented writer who would soon become world renowned. His name was Neil Gaiman. Gaiman's landmark title, *The Sandman*, made its DC Comics debut in 1988 and was immediately welcomed by fans and critics alike. It was apparent

from the first issue that Gaiman's masterpiece had more in common with the works of literary fantasists like Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges than it did with a monthly issue of say, *The Incredible Hulk*. *The Sandman* blended elements from the Gothic tradition, world mythology, and dark fantasy to tell a high-concept genre tale that still managed to speak directly of the quotidian realities we inhabit every day. This level of sophistication was not yet common in the world of comic books, and direct references to Shakespeare, *The Decameron*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights* was groundbreaking for the medium. After finishing his 75-issue run on *The Sandman* in 1996, Gaiman switched gears to focus more on his prose writing and, like was the case with his comic book career, found immediate financial and critical success. More than two decades later, much of Gaiman's work has come full circle, with many of his wildly popular novels having since been adapted for...yes, comic books.

MICHAEL CHABON

Despite being primarily a literary novelist, Michael Chabon has long been a vocal supporter of genre fiction and a lifelong comic book fan. His Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000, Penguin Random House), is a love letter to the Golden Age of comic books and to the New York City of the 1940s and '50s. The novel's protagonists, Joe Kavalier and Sam Clay, are cousins and creative partners working on their own fledgling comic book during the rise of the comic book industry at the time of World War II. The hero they create is called The Escapist, who is part Harry Houdini, part Captain America, and 100% anti-fascist. Chabon's novel, which is a very much a literary exploration of pop culture, quickly won the hearts of genre fans as well. This crossover success led a few short years later to the 2004 comic book, *Michael Chabon Presents: The Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, from Dark Horse Comics. Written by Chabon and illustrated by an outstanding array of top tier comic artists, the series picked up an Eisner Award for "Best Anthology" in 2005. Critically acclaimed comic book creator, Brian K. Vaughn, even wrote a follow-up series in 2006.

JEROME CHARYN

Jerome Charyn's inaugural crime novel, *Blue Eyes*, made its debut in 1975. The novel was the starting point for the long-running and critically acclaimed

Isaac Sidel series. Charyn's police procedural follows the fortunes of the canny and ambitious New York Police Department detective, Isaac Sidel and his various family members and associates. Charyn has had a long-standing relationship with France's comic book industry. In 1985, he introduced the French-speaking world to *The Magician's Wife*. This *bandes dessinées*, or "graphic album" as they are commonly known in the United States, was the first collaboration between Charyn and illustrator, Francois Boucq (the two creators would work together on later albums, including *Billy Budd*, *KGB*, and *Little Tulip*). *The Magician's Wife* is a phantasmagoric masterpiece brought to life by Charyn's enigmatic script and the gorgeous line work of Boucq. This graphic album won the prestigious 1986 Prix Alfred (Angoulême) and the Grand Prix (Sierre). In 1995, Charyn produced the dystopian three-issue miniseries, *Family Man*, with American illustrator, Joe Staton. These three albums were published under Paradox Press, an imprint of DC Comics. *Family Man* is a much less whimsical work in comparison to *The Magician's Wife*, but both works explore the theme of family and familial duty.

SALMAN RUSHDIE

Famed novelist and Booker Prize winner, Salman Rushdie, is one of the world's most renowned literary voices working today, but he is also one of genre fiction's greatest champions, even if his work within the realm of speculative fiction is often classified as the more literary-friendly "magical realism." Both his 1981 Booker Prize winning novel, *Midnight's Children*, and his 2015 novel, *Two Years, Eight Months, and Twenty-Eight Nights*, tell the tale of individuals born with special powers. By combining serious themes of national identity and social justice with twenty-first century pop culture mythology, Rushdie creates Marvel comic books for the *The New York Times Review of Books* crowd. He creates works that blend highbrow culture and low brow entertainment into something extraordinary.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Perconti lives and works in the hinterlands of New Jersey with his wife and kids. He enjoys well-crafted and engaging stories across a variety of genres and mediums. His articles have appeared in several online venues. He can be found on Twitter at @AnthonyPerconti.

THEY CAME FROM THE END OF THE UNIVERSE

TO COLONIZE
AND PLUNDER
THE PLANET EARTH!

FINALLY MY BRETHREN, WE WILL CROSS THE CHASM CREATED BY THOSE GOODY, GOODY SANCTUARIANS TO KEEP US FROM PLUNDERING THE GALAXY. THE END OF OUR INPRISONMENT BEGAN WHEN WE SENT A PROBE ACROSS THE VOID TO THE YOUNG, FERTILE AND DECADENT PLANET EARTH!





THAT DAY FINALLY ARRIVED ON A PLANET CALLED EARTH WHEN SOMEONE BEGAN DECODING OUR MESSAGES AND BEGAN CORRESPONDING WITH US. EVEN NOW AS WE SPEAK A HOLE BETWEEN OUR SPACE IS FORMING. SOON, VERY SOON MY DASTARDLY BROTHERS WE WILL HAVE THOSE HOT STRUMPETS OF FLESH THAT INHABIT THAT LITTLE GOLD MINE



BUT GREAT OVERLORD, WHAT OF THE SANCTUARIANS? WILL THEY NOT REASON WITH THEM AND COME TO THEIR AID?



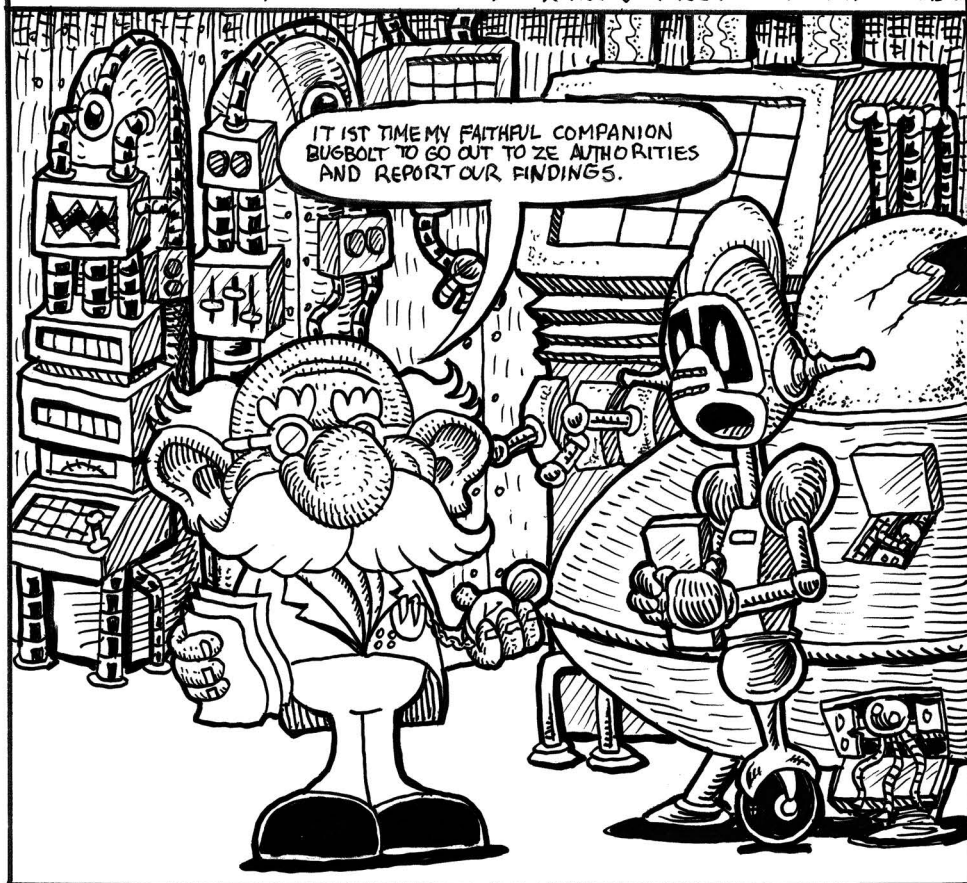


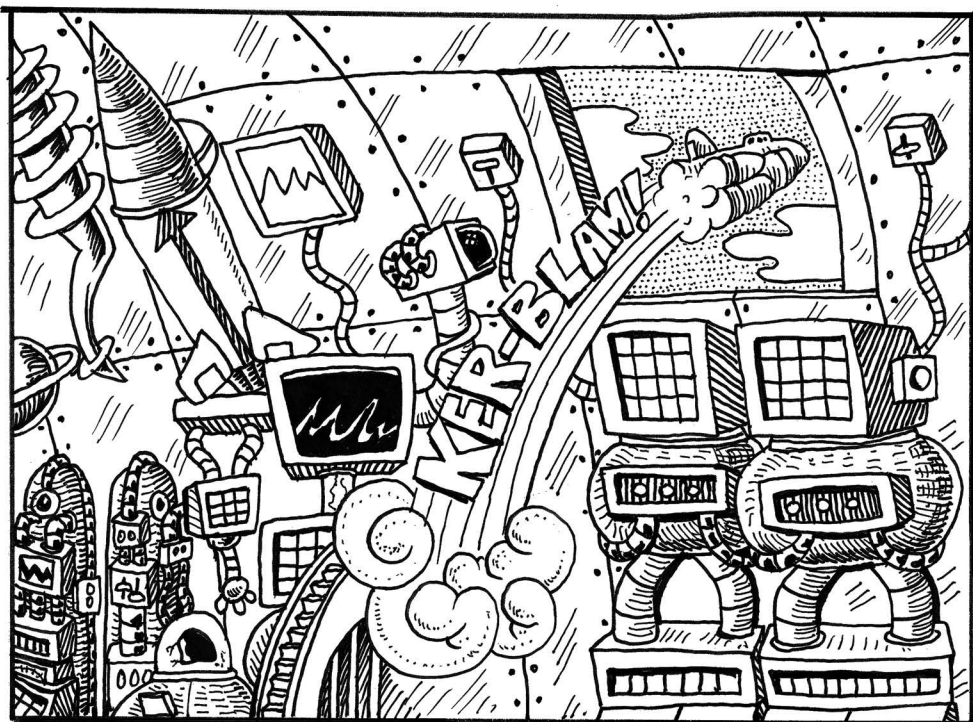
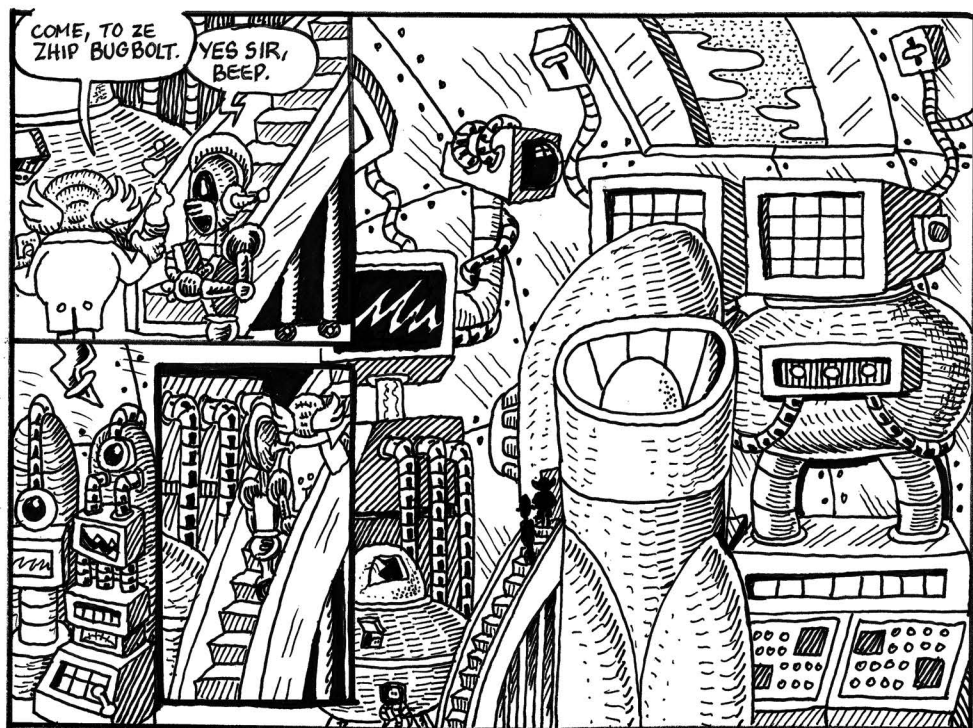






IN THE TOP, TOP, TOP SECRET LABORATORIES (SO TOP SECRET NOT EVEN THEY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING!) IN THE NEW MEXICO DESERT AT THE SITE THE WORLD OVER KNOWN AS AREA 51 THE GREAT ASTRAL PHYSICIST DR. WILLIAM VON HENRICK READIES HIMSELF FOR A DAUNTING TASK.





AS DR. HENRICK AND BUGBOLT TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL, ADORA AND A RENEGADE CLOISTER OF SANCTUARIANS BROADCAST THEIR MESSAGE TO THE PEOPLE OF EARTH ON ALL TELEVISION STATIONS AND ALL RADIO FREQUENCIES IN ALL LANGUAGES.

PEOPLE OF EARTH, GREETINGS FROM THE PEACE LOVING RACE THE SANCTUARIANS. YOUR PLANET IS IN GRAVE DANGER.

EARTH MUST LIVE

LOOK MOM, IT'S AN ALIEN!

ALL WE ARE SAYING IS GIVE EARTH A CHANCE

MAKE LOVE NOT HATE

THE NASTY, CRUEL AND MEAN RACE, THE DEMANIACS ARE MAKING PLANS TO COLONIZE YOUR WORLD, DESTROY YOUR WAY OF LIFE AND FORNICATE WITH YOUR WOMEN.

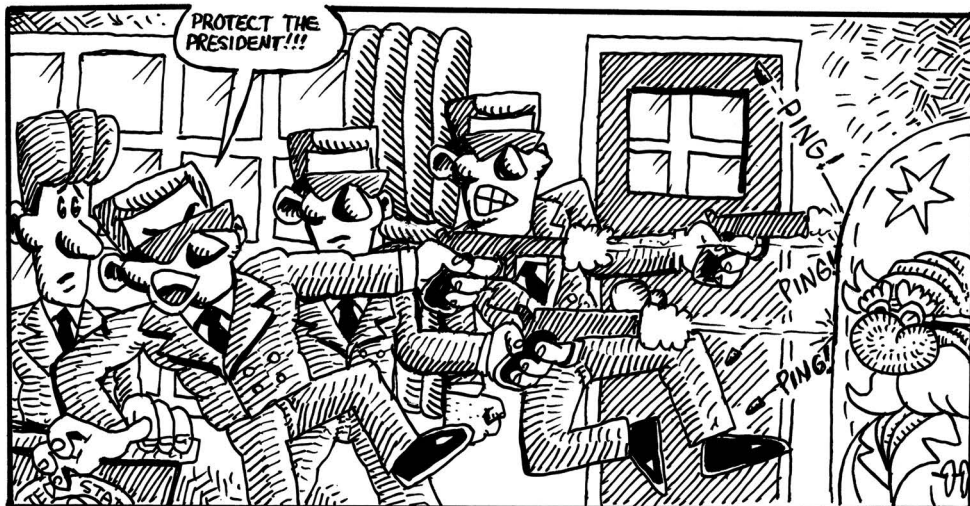
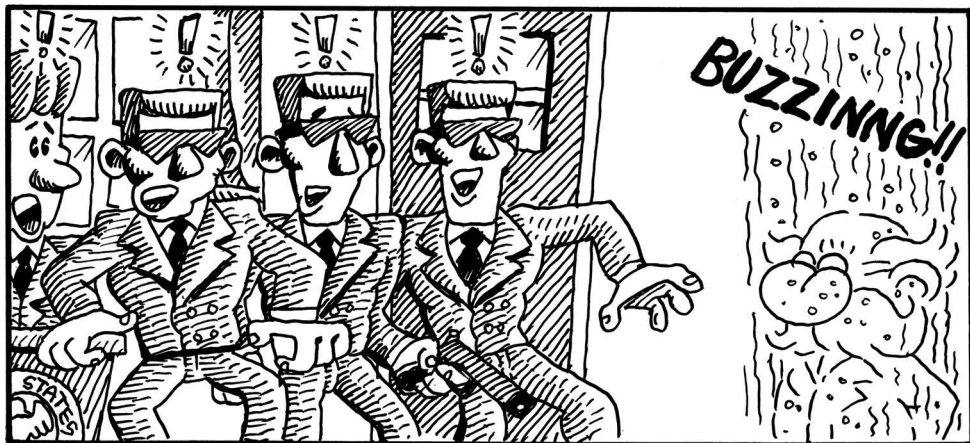
EARTH MUST LIVE

WE ARE SAYING GIVE EARTH A CHANCE

MAKE LOVE NOT HATE

IT IS A SAD HOUR FOR YOU MUST LEAVE YOUR PLANET OR ELSE SUCCUMB TO THE EVIL ONSLAUGHT OF THE DEMANIACS.







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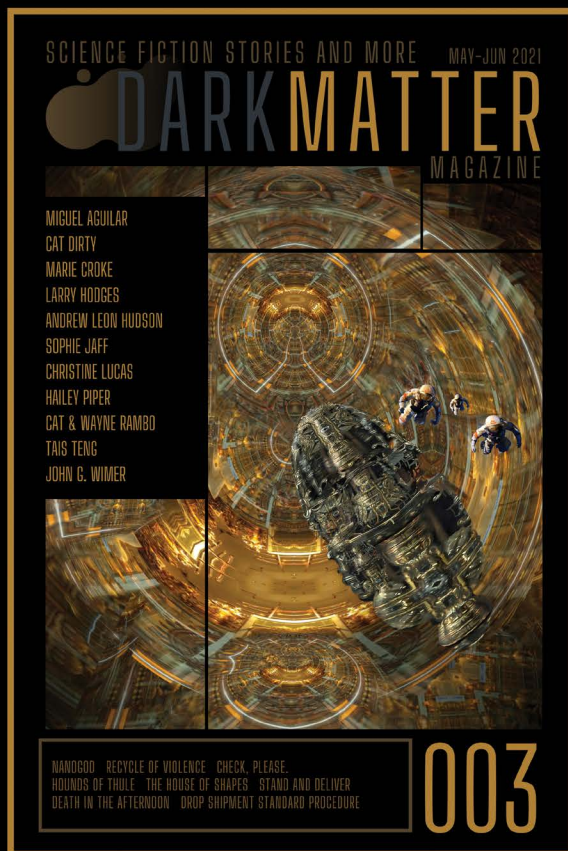
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THE DEEPEST REACHES OF SPACE, AND INTO THE DARKEST,
MOST TROUBLED CORNERS OF THE MIND.

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